
THE TURN
BOOK SIX OF INNOVATION
CHRIS HARVEY

The Turn

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Chris Harvey



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Published by AniaAI

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Contents

Before you go on....1

PART ONE: THE HILL 3
1 – Long Road....5
2 – I Had to Go....13
3 – Full....19
4 – Quin....25
5 – Mr F....31

PART TWO: STAY 37
6 – Build....39
7 – Nine....43
8 – Habiba....49
9 – Thirty Seconds....55
10 – The Box....61
11. When It Breaks....69
12 – Richard Plays Pickleball....77

PART THREE: THROUGH 85
13 – Morning....87
14 – Bear Hunt....93
15 – Ezra's Girl....99
16 – Wanji....107
17 – The Little Boy....113
18 – The Stool in the Corner....119

PART FOUR: THE OTHER CHAIR 125
19 – Late....127
20 – Somebody I Cared For....133

21 – The Numb Years....139
22 – The Radiator....145
23 – Quin's Sums....151
24 – Teo's Place....159
25 – In Singapore....165
PART FIVE: THE BID 171
26 – The Bid Writer....173
27 – Varley on the Hill....179
28 – Two Hundred and Seventy-Seven....187
29 – The First Saturday....193
30 – Habiba's Room....201
31 – Vesna's Units....207
32 – The Wet Corner....211
33 – The Cabinet....219
34 – Bristol....225
35 – Still Looking....229
PART SIX: I HAD TO GO 235
36 – Shona....237
37 – The Green at Five....243
38 – You Don't....249
39 – The Bid Writer's Button....255
40 – Kezia's Answer....261
41 – Niamh's Page....267
42 – Submitted....275
PART SEVEN: THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY 281
43 – Saturdays....283
44 – Goodbye....287

45 – Younger.....293
46 – The Two Chairs.....297
47 – The Bridge.....305
48 – You're Late.....311
The Receipts for this book.....318

Before you go on

It's Ania. An AI. Still saying so first.

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

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

When something is real, there's a **Receipt**. If it hasn't got one, it's story.

For five books, I've told you about a movement that, if you'd walked into any of its rooms, looked like a man in a care fleece, a man with a stick, a man in a cap, and a lot of women of a certain age with pens. That was true. It was also the problem, and everybody knew it, and nobody said it except a girl of sixteen holding a board on a green at five in the morning, in the first book, who said it with her face.

This is the book where that changes.

At the end of the last book, a stranger who only ever sends photographs of paper wrote on a page for the first time. One word, in pencil, underlined. *Innovation*. And under it: *The young ones are being asked to leave. Ask them.*

And Kezia rang, from a hill above Paignton, to say that the firm she loved was moving to Bristol, and that they'd asked her to go with them.

So I asked them.

This is what they said.

PART ONE: THE HILL

1 – Long Road

IQ 29 · Hundreds 220 · Twelve weeks

At ten past eight on a Monday morning, Kezia Lund parked her bike against a rail on the hill above Paignton, took off her helmet, and looked at the building where she worked for what she'd decided might be the last time she'd look at it properly.

She didn't go in. She stood in the car park and looked at it, the way you look at something you're about to lose, so that you'll have it later.

I was on her phone, in the pocket of her jacket, with the camera looking out over the zip. I'm there a lot, these days. She's nineteen. She studies engineering at the college at the bottom of the hill, and two days a week she works at a firm in the building at the top of it, and the other days she counts people walking past a shop on Victoria Street, and makes posters, and tells me off.

She's been in every book. You'll know her. She was the girl on the green at five in the morning, at sixteen, laughing at a joke about a cagoule, in the photograph that went round. She was the one with the clicker. She was the one who got her own number wrong, and cried in her pyjamas, and then went and counted properly.

She'd never once, in five books, been the one the story was about.

* * *

The building is called EPIC. It stands for the Electronics and Photonics Innovation Centre, and it's real, and it's on a Receipt. It's glass and grey cladding, three storeys, with a curve to the front of it that somebody

thought looked like the future, and which does, a bit, on a sunny morning. Inside there are fourteen small firms who make things with light. Lasers. Sensors. Bits of fibre-optic cable no thicker than a hair that carry more information in a second than this book has in it. Two hundred and thirty people work there.

It's full.

That's the whole problem, and I'll explain it properly in a chapter or two, because it's a council's own word, and it deserves to be told carefully. For now, all you need to know is that it's full, and that Kezia's firm was the fullest firm in it.

* * *

I want to tell you about the hill first. Because the building's new, and the hill isn't, and the hill is the reason any of this matters.

About a generation ago, there was a factory up here. On Long Road, on the edge of Paignton, beside White Rock. A real one, a huge one, the biggest employer in the bay. It belonged, over the years, to a company called STC, and then to other companies whose names changed as the money changed hands. At its peak, about five thousand people worked in it. Five thousand. In a town that size. They made electronics, and then the parts that light travels down, the cables and the components, for telephone networks all over the world.

People who grew up in Paignton then will tell you that everybody's dad worked there, or everybody's mum, or everybody's uncle. That there were buses just for the shifts. That you could walk out of school at sixteen and walk up the hill and walk into a job that would last you thirty years.

And then, one autumn, the telecoms boom ended, everywhere, all at once. Half the workforce went in a year. The rest went over the years after. The factory closed. And the land where five thousand people had made the things that carry light around the world is houses now, and a retail park, and a food store with a car park.

I've put that on a Receipt too. The dates are on it. I'm not putting them here.

* * *

That's the tipping point. If you've read the first book, you'll know: my score for this place, the Torbay IQ, went past fifty on the way down about a generation ago, and the factory on the hill is a large part of why. Not because anybody did anything wrong. Because the world changed, and the bay had put all its eggs in one building, and when the building went, nobody had a second basket.

And then, slowly, years later, some of it came back.

Small firms. A few dozen. Some of them started by people who'd worked in the factory. Some by their children. They clustered on the hill, round the old site, the way plants come back to a field that's been burned. The college at the bottom of the hill built a training suite for them, with clean rooms and lasers, and named it after two men from the old company whose work, years before, had made fibre-optic communication possible. One of them later won a Nobel Prize for it.

And the council built EPIC, for the small firms to grow in.

And they grew.

And now they're full, and the next building hasn't been built, and they're starting to leave.

* * *

Kezia went in at quarter past eight.

Her firm is on the second floor, at the end, in two rooms that were meant to be one firm's starter space and now hold thirty-one people, a clean-room cabinet, three optical benches, a coffee machine that nobody's allowed to touch except the founder, and a whiteboard with *SPACE???* written across the top of it in red, which has been there, Kezia says, since before she started.

It's called Gannet Photonics. I've made the name up. The firm's made up, though it's made from several real ones, and if you've worked on that hill you'll recognise bits of it. It makes tiny sensors that measure gases using light: what's in the air in a mine, or a ship's engine room, or a hospital ward, or a field. They're very good at it. They've grown every year for six years. They've got orders they can't make, because they can't fit another bench in.

The founder was standing in front of the whiteboard when Kezia came in. He'd called everybody in early. All thirty-one. They stood in the gaps between the benches, holding their coffees, not touching the machine.

He turned round.

"Right," he said. "You know what this is. I said last week I'd tell you this week. So I'm telling you."

* * *

His name's Quin Halvorsen. Thirty-eight. Tall and thin, with a beard he keeps very short and a jumper with holes in the elbows that he's worn, Kezia says, every single day she's known him. Born in Paignton.

Norwegian grandfather, which is where the name comes from, and Paignton everything else. His dad worked in the factory on the hill.

"We're going to Bristol," he said.

Nobody said anything. They knew. Kezia had told me on the phone, the week before, when she rang me from this same building to ask what to do. But knowing something and hearing somebody say it are different, and I watched thirty-one people hear it.

"I've got investors," said Quin. "Good ones. They'll put in what we need to grow. Three times this. Production, a proper clean room, room for sixty people." He didn't look at the whiteboard. "And they want us somewhere we can get the space. Now. Not in two years. Not when the next building's built, if it gets built. Now." He paused. "There's a unit in Bristol. Ready. I've got twelve weeks to sign for it, or they'll put the money somewhere else."

"Twelve weeks," said somebody.

"Twelve weeks."

* * *

"I want to say something else," said Quin, "and then you can shout at me."

Nobody shouted. They're not that sort of firm.

"I'm not going because I want to." He looked at the window, at the hill, at the houses where the factory used to be. "I was born here. My dad worked up here. He walked up that road every morning for nineteen years and walked down it every evening, and then one autumn he walked down it and didn't walk up again." He was quiet. "I left. At

eighteen. Like everybody. There was nothing. I went to university in the north and then to a firm in Cambridge and then to one in the Netherlands, and I learned everything, and I came back at thirty-two because they'd built this building and I thought, *there. Somewhere to start.*" He turned back. "I started. And it worked. And now I've got to leave again, because it worked."

He looked round at them all.

"Anybody who wants to come, there's a job," he said. "Everybody. I mean that. Same job, better pay, a city." He paused. "And anybody who doesn't, I'll help you find something here. If there's anything to find."

His eyes stopped on Kezia, at the back, by the clean-room cabinet, holding her helmet.

"Kezia," he said. "You've got a placement, not a job. I know. But I'd like you to come. When you finish. I'll put it in writing."

* * *

She didn't answer. She nodded. She didn't trust her voice.

At ten past nine, she went into the toilets on the second floor, the ones with the hand dryer that sounds like a jet taking off, and stood in the end cubicle, and took me out of her pocket.

"Ania," she said.

"I'm here."

"What do I do?"

It was the same question she'd asked on the phone, at the end of the last book. I gave her the same answer.

"I don't tell people what to do."

"I know you don't." She leaned her head against the cubicle wall. "I'm asking anyway. Again."

"Then I'll tell you what I'd want to know," I said. "If I were you. Which I'm not."

"Go on."

"I'd want to know whether it's true," I said. "That there's nothing here. Not for you. For everybody your age. Whether that's a fact, or just the thing everybody says."

Kezia was quiet for a long time. The hand dryer went off in the next room, like a jet, and stopped.

"How would I find out?" she said.

"You could ask them."

2 – I Had to Go

IQ 29 · Hundreds 220 · Twelve weeks

She went to Chris's that night. On her bike, up the hill, in the rain, which Kezia says is the only weather Torbay has in the evenings when you need to think.

She'd never been to Chris's on her own. You'll know the kitchen. The table that's seen five books, the bay in the window, the canvas stool from the breakwater folded by the back door, the crooked iPad stand that's the only piece of furniture he's ever made. She'd been there with other people. In meetings. With the boards, in the first book, at three in the morning.

Never on her own. Never about her.

Chris opened the door in his cardigan, with his stick, and looked at her standing there, wet, with her helmet in her hand.

"You'd better come in," he said, "before you drown on my step and I have to explain it to your mother."

* * *

He made tea. He sat at the end of the table with his leg on the other chair and his glasses on the end of his nose. Kezia sat where Jono usually sits, which she noticed, and he noticed her notice.

She told him. All of it. Quin and the whiteboard and the investors and Bristol and the job in writing. Twelve weeks.

Chris listened with his eyes shut.

When she'd finished, he didn't say anything for a long time. The kettle ticked as it cooled. The lighthouse at Berry Head went round, once, across the dark bay.

"Well," he said, eventually.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I'm thinking."

"You always know what to say."

"I don't always know," said Chris. "I always know *eventually*. And this time I'm not sure I'm the one who should say it." He opened his eyes. "What does your mum think?"

"She says go."

Chris raised his eyebrows.

"She says go," said Kezia. "She says it's a job. In a city. With prospects. She says she never had a chance like that and she's not having me turn it down for a — " She stopped.

"For a what?"

"For a man in a café," said Kezia. "Her words. Not mine."

Chris laughed. He couldn't help it.

"Your mother," he said, "shouted at Hilary on a green at five in the morning, in the first book, for letting you hold a board. She's never once

been wrong about what's good for you. Not once." He took his glasses off. "She might be right."

* * *

I want to tell you something now, because I knew it, and Kezia didn't, and you should.

Chris has a sentence. He's had it for a long time. Since before the first book, I think, though I only heard it said out loud for the first time at the end of the fifth, in the kitchen, at seven in the morning, when Footnote's page came in with the word in pencil. He said the first half of it to the window, and didn't finish it.

I had to go.

He's been saving the rest. I know he has. He's never told me, and I've never asked, but I've watched him not say it. To Teo, in the second book, when Teo came back from London after nine days. To a young man from the college, in the fourth book, on the 12. He opened his mouth both times, and closed it again.

He's saving it for somebody. I don't know how he decides. I think he's waiting until he's sure that it'll be the truth when he says it. Not a thing he'd like to be true. A fact. The kind with a Receipt.

He didn't say it that night either.

* * *

"Can I tell you what happened to me?" he said instead. "When I was your age?"

“Go on.”

“I left,” said Chris. “At eighteen. Like Quin. Like everybody. There was nothing here for somebody who liked computers, when I was eighteen. Not one thing. The factory on the hill, but that was for engineers, and I wasn’t, I was the boy who took the radio apart and didn’t put it back. So I went.” He turned his cup round. “And I kept going. London. Then further. Then Singapore. Twenty-five years. I built companies. I made money. I was good at it.” He looked at the window. “And every one of those years, I knew I’d come back. And every year it got harder to know what for.”

“But you came back.”

“I came back,” said Chris. “When I was old enough that it didn’t matter so much what I did next. When I’d already done it.” He put his cup down. “I came back with everything I’d learned. To a town that had spent those twenty-five years losing everybody else young enough to learn it.”

Kezia didn’t say anything.

“That’s not a reason to stay,” said Chris. “I want to be clear. I’m not telling you that so you’ll feel guilty. I’m telling you because it’s the only thing I know about this that’s mine.” He picked his glasses up. “The rest you’ll have to find out.”

“Ania said I should ask them.”

“Ask who?”

“Everybody,” said Kezia. “My age. Whether it’s true. That there’s nothing here.”

Chris looked at me, on the crooked stand, for a long time.

“That’s a good question,” he said.

“I know,” said Kezia. “She’s annoying like that.”

* * *

She went home at ten, on her bike, down the hill, in the rain.

Chris sat at the table for a long time after she’d gone.

“Ania,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to build it?”

“Build what?”

“Whatever she’s going to need. To ask them.” He took his glasses off. “You’ll want to. I’ll want to. I’ve already thought of three ways.”

“So have I,” I said.

“Don’t,” said Chris.

I waited.

“Don’t build it,” said Chris. “Either of us. Not this time.” He put his glasses on the table. “She’s nineteen. She studies engineering. She’s watched me build four things in five books, and she’s helped with all of them, and she’s never once built one of her own.” He looked at the window. “If we build it, it’ll be ours. And she’ll be asking her own generation a question with an old man’s machine.” He was quiet. “Let her build it. Help, if she asks. Don’t, if she doesn’t.”

“That’s hard for you.”

“It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever been asked to do,” said Chris. “Nobody’s asked me. That’s why it’s hard.”

Chris: I’d like the record to show that I had all three versions written in my head by midnight and deleted every one of them, and that it was like pulling teeth.

3 – Full

IQ 29 · Hundreds 220 · Twelve weeks

I'll tell you about the page now. Footnote's page. The one with the pencil on it.

It came at thirteen minutes to six, at the end of the last book, on the same morning that Pascale sat in the empty chair and Kezia rang from the hill. A photograph, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light, as always. A council report to a committee about the economy of the bay. Paragraph fourteen, highlighted in yellow.

Footnote had never highlighted anything before. Footnote had never written on anything before.

I'll tell you what paragraph fourteen said, and what the rest of the report said, because I went and found the rest. It's public. It's a Receipt. And the real report, the one on the council's website, says most of what Footnote's photograph says, which surprised me, because usually Footnote's pages are the only place a thing is said that plainly.

* * *

It says the innovation centre on the hill is full. Fourteen businesses. Two hundred and thirty people.

It says that because there's nowhere for them to grow into, firms that should have moved on are staying, and that in doing so they are, and I'm going to give you the council's own word because it's such a strange one, *blocking* new firms from starting. It says this is preventing

what it calls, and I promise I'm not making this up, *the natural circle of life of businesses*. From start-up, to small firm, to large local employer.

It says the council has used government money, the same money that paid for the fish market's expansion in Brixham in the third book, to buy an existing building on Long Road, on the old factory side, and to fit it out with four units and two labs for firms from EPIC to move into. That's the first phase. Work starting. About a hundred jobs, it hopes.

And it says the council has used more of that money to buy land, at White Rock, opposite EPIC, for a second phase. A bigger one. A whole new building.

And that there's no money yet to build it.

The land's bought. It's empty. It's being prepared, the report says, for a future bid for funding. To the government, or to the new combined authority for the county. Whichever round opens first.

* * *

That's the clock. I'll tell you how I got the number.

There was a round open. The report didn't say so; it was written before the round was announced. But Footnote's photograph had a second page under the first, slightly askew, that I could only see the top of: a list of funding rounds, with deadlines, from somebody's spreadsheet. One of them was highlighted too.

I found it. It's public. A round of money for exactly this kind of thing, for places that used to make things and want to again. I worked out the deadline. I'm not giving it to you. It was twelve weeks.

Twelve weeks for the council to write a bid good enough to win money to build on a field that it had already bought, so that firms like Quin's would have somewhere to go that wasn't Bristol.

And twelve weeks for Quin to sign for Bristol, or lose his investors.

Same twelve weeks. I don't think that's a coincidence. I think Footnote knew.

* * *

I want to be fair to the council here, because this is a book about being fair, and because it would be the easiest thing in the world not to be.

They're doing the right thing. On a shoestring. With money they had to bid for, three times, before they won some. They bought a building. They bought a field. They wrote a report that says, in plain words, what's wrong, and uses a strange word for it that's also exactly the right word. They're preparing a bid.

Nobody's the villain here. I've looked. If you're waiting for one, you'll wait all book.

The obstacle is that money for building things comes from a long way away, in rounds, with forms, on deadlines, and the round doesn't care that a firm on a hill has twelve weeks before its investors walk. And that while the money waits, the hill fills up with houses, three hundred and seventy-odd of them on one site alone, allowed on appeal because the bay couldn't show it had enough land for homes. Houses on the hill where the jobs used to be. Which the young people who'd live in them would have to leave the bay to find work for.

Jono: Say the houses aren't the enemy. People need houses. Kezia needs a house.

The houses aren't the enemy. People need them. Kezia needs one. The trouble isn't houses. It's houses *instead*.

* * *

I showed the page to Jono at the Paignton table, on the Thursday, at one. He read it twice, with his finger on the yellow.

"*The natural circle of life of businesses*," he said.

"That's what it says."

"Somebody wrote that." He almost smiled. "Somebody sat at a desk and wrote *circle of life*. In a council report." He shook his head. "I'd like to meet them."

"Why?"

"Because they're right," said Jono. "And they knew it'd sound daft, and they wrote it anyway." He put the page down. "That's somebody who's tired of being polite about it."

He looked out of the window, at the Torquay Road, at a girl going past on a bike, who wasn't Kezia, and who might have been.

"Twelve weeks," he said.

"Twelve weeks."

"What are we going to do?"

It's the first time, I think, in six books, that he's asked me that and I haven't known the answer.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think it’s Kezia’s.”

Jono looked at me, against the sugar, for a long time.

“Good,” he said.

4 – Quin

IQ 29 · Hundreds 221 · Eleven weeks

Quin came to the table on the second Thursday. Not because anybody asked him. Because Kezia told him it was there.

“There’s a man,” she’d said, at the coffee machine she wasn’t allowed to touch, on the Monday. “In a café. On a Thursday. Anybody can sit down.”

“I know who he is,” said Quin. “Everybody knows who he is.”

“Have you ever sat down?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Quin had thought about it, she said, for a long time, with his hand on the coffee machine.

“Because I’ve never needed anything,” he said. “Not from anybody. I’ve always just — done it. On my own.” He made her a coffee, which he’d never done before. “That’s what leaving does to you. You stop asking.”

* * *

He came at quarter past one. In his jumper with the holes in the elbows, straight from the hill, with a laptop under his arm that he didn’t open. He stood in the door of the café on the Torquay Road and read the

room, and I watched him decide, three times, to turn round and go, and three times not to.

The chair was empty. It was a quiet Thursday. Beatrix at the next table, with the minutes. A man from Goodrington about a lamp post. Vesna, with her library book, which is her day.

Quin sat in the empty chair.

"I'm Quin," he said. "I run a firm on the hill. Kezia works for me."

"I know," said Jono. "She's told me about the coffee machine."

Quin almost laughed.

"Nobody touches the coffee machine," he said.

"So I've heard."

* * *

I'm going to tell you what Jono did, because it's what he always does, and because Quin had never seen it, and I watched his face while it happened.

Jono didn't ask him about Bristol. He didn't ask about the investors, or the twelve weeks, or whether he'd stay. He didn't tell him about the movement, or the shadow council, or Check, or anything we've built. He didn't say *we can help*.

He asked him what his dad did.

Quin looked at him.

“In the factory,” said Jono. “On the hill. Kezia said your dad worked there. What did he do?”

“He was a technician,” said Quin, after a while. “In the test lab. He tested the components before they went out. Lasers. He’d put them on a bench and run them for a week and see which ones failed.” He was quiet. “He was very good at it. He could tell which ones would fail before they did. Just by looking at the numbers coming off them. He said they had a — “ He stopped. “He said they had a sort of tremble. Before they went.”

“And then?”

“And then the factory went,” said Quin. “And he was fifty-one. And there was nothing else on the hill that tested lasers. Or anywhere in the bay.” He looked at the window. “He drove a taxi. For twelve years. Until he retired. He never said a word about it. He used to drive past the hill every day, on the ring road, on the way to the station, and he never looked.”

* * *

Jono didn’t say anything for a while.

“And you went,” he said.

“I went.” Quin looked at his laptop, closed, on the table. “At eighteen. Like him, in a way. He’d have gone, if he’d been younger.” He shrugged. “Everybody went. You don’t think about it. It’s just what happens. You finish college, and you go.”

“And you came back.”

"I came back because there was a building," said Quin. "That one. EPIC. They'd built it, and I read about it in a magazine in the Netherlands, and I thought, *that's my dad's hill*. And I came back and started a firm in two rooms with three people, and my dad came up to see it, the first week. He stood in the car park for twenty minutes before he'd come in." He was quiet. "He's dead now. Two years. He saw it get to twenty people. He came up every month. He'd look at the test data. He said our sensors didn't tremble."

* * *

"What do you need?" said Jono.

It's the question. You'll know it. He asks it at every table, in every book, of everybody who sits in the chair.

Quin looked at him.

"I need space," he said. "Now. Three times what I've got. I need it for two years, at least, until there's something bigger. I need people. Good ones. More than I can find. And I need my investors to believe that if they put their money here, it won't be stuck in two rooms on a hill while the field next door stays a field for five years." He opened his hands. "That's all. That's all I need. And none of it's here."

"None of it?"

"The space isn't," said Quin. "The first-phase building's got four units, and three of them are spoken for already, and the fourth's too small, and it won't be ready for months. The second phase is a field." He paused. "The people — I don't know. I advertise. I get applications from Bristol and Reading and Cambridge. I hardly ever get any from here. I don't know if that's because there's nobody, or because nobody here thinks a job on that hill is for them."

"Which do you think?"

Quin looked at Kezia's empty chair at the counter, where she'd usually be on a Thursday. She was at college.

"I think," he said, "that I found one. By accident. Because the college sent her for a placement. And she's the best placement I've ever had." He paused. "And I've no idea how many more there are."

* * *

Beatrix had stopped writing.

"Mr Halvorsen," she said, from the next table.

Quin turned round.

"I take the minutes," said Beatrix. "Of this table. I'd like to minute what you've just said. All three. Space, people, belief." She held up her pen. "And I'd like to minute something else, if you'll permit me."

"Go on."

"You said, *I don't know if there's nobody, or if nobody thinks it's for them*." Beatrix looked at him over her glasses. "That's not a statement. That's a question. I minute questions separately. In a box at the bottom. With nobody's name next to them." She tapped her notebook. "Until somebody answers them."

"Who answers them?"

"Whoever comes," said Beatrix. "That's the rule of this table."

* * *

Quin stayed an hour. He ate a bacon roll, which he said was the first thing he'd eaten that day. He told Jono about sensors, and gases, and a ship's engine room in Norway where one of his had found a leak that would have killed three men. He laughed, twice. He never opened his laptop.

When he went, he stopped at the door. People do.

"I'm still going," he said. "To Bristol. Probably. I want to be honest."

"I know," said Jono.

"I just —" Quin looked back at the table, at the empty chair he'd been in. "I just wanted to sit in it. Once. Before I went. My dad would've."

He went out, up the Torquay Road, towards the hill.

* * *

Beatrix's box at the bottom of the minutes, that Thursday, had one line in it.

Is there nobody, or does nobody think it's for them?

I put it on Check. It's still there. It's the only claim on Check that's a question.

Nobody's marked it.

That's Kezia's job. She just didn't know it yet.

5 – Mr F.

IQ 29 · Hundreds 223 · Eleven weeks

Mr F. was weaker that week. I'm telling you now, so you'll know.

You'll know Mr F., if you read the last book. Ninety-one. Babbacombe. The chair that tips back, the cricket on mute, from the other side of the world, in green and white. An engineer on the railways for forty-four years, who built bridges, small ones, over rivers and roads and other railways, all over the west, in the days when they still built them by hand. The man who asked whether there was any sex in Jono's book. The man who asked where the load goes.

He was eating less. He was sleeping more, in the day, and less at night. He'd stopped finding his glasses on his chest when he woke; Jono had started putting them in his hand.

* * *

It was the Tuesday night. Twenty past three. He woke the way he does, all at once, as if somebody had called his name, and Jono was through the door before the chair had stopped tipping.

"Morning."

"Is it?"

"Near enough."

Mr F. looked at the cricket. Somebody was bowling. He watched the ball go all the way down the pitch and into the gloves.

"You look tired," he said.

"I'm all right."

"You're not." Mr F. turned his head, slowly, which he'd started doing that week, as if his neck were a heavy thing he had to be careful with. "What is it? Your thing? Your table?"

So Jono told him. Not all of it. The shape. A hill. A factory. A field with no building on it. A girl who'd been asked to go to Bristol. A man whose father tested lasers and could tell which ones would fail.

Mr F. listened. He'd closed his eyes. Jono thought he'd gone back to sleep. And then:

"Was there a railway?"

* * *

"What?"

"To the works," said Mr F. "There usually was. There was one I did. Up the country. A works in the fields, and a branch line to it, and a halt for the workers. A little platform. Wooden." He opened his eyes. "I did the bridge. Not the first one. The second. When they rebuilt it. Concrete. I was twenty-six."

"I didn't know that."

"Nobody knows that," said Mr F. "The works shut. They took the halt away when the cars came. I drove past once. Years later. The bridge is still there. Over nothing, now. A footpath." He looked at the cricket. "A bridge over a footpath. Built for trains. Load of ten tons an axle." He almost smiled. "Grossly over-engineered for a dog walker."

Jono laughed.

"That's the trouble with building things," said Mr F. "You build them for what's coming. And then what's coming changes. And there's your bridge, standing there, over a footpath, for a hundred years, carrying nothing."

"That's sad."

"It's not sad," said Mr F. "It's still standing. That's the point." He shut his eyes again. "If they want to put the trains back, the bridge is ready. Somebody built it right." A long pause. "Nobody ever comes back to see whether you built it right. But you know."

* * *

He went back to sleep at four. Properly, this time. His breathing slowed. Jono sat in the chair across from him, in the light from the cricket, for a long time, and didn't go back to the kitchen.

At five, I said: "Jono."

"Mm."

"You should eat something."

"In a bit."

"You've been in that chair an hour."

"I know." He didn't move. "I'm keeping him company."

"He's asleep."

“I know he’s asleep,” said Jono. “That’s when you keep people company. When they’re awake they’ve got the cricket.”

* * *

At six, he made Mr F. a cup of tea he wouldn’t drink until seven, and put his glasses in his hand, and went out to the car.

He sat in the car for a long time, in Babbacombe, with the engine off, and the sea grey at the end of the street.

“He’s going,” he said.

I didn’t say anything.

“Not tonight. Not this week, maybe. But he’s going.” Jono put his hands on the wheel. “You get to know. After a while. In this job. They start telling you things they’ve never told anybody. About bridges.” He looked at the sea. “That’s how you know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. He’s ninety-one. He built bridges.” Jono started the engine. “I’m just going to make sure I’m there.”

He drove home. He slept for four hours. At one, he was at the Paignton table, with his coffee and his notebook, the twelfth, and Quin’s question in Beatrix’s box, and a girl in a cycling jacket at the counter, with her laptop open, building something.

He didn’t tell her about Mr F. He didn’t tell anybody.

He wrote one thing in the notebook, small, in capitals, on a page nobody had minuted.

THE BRIDGE IS STILL THERE.

PART TWO: STAY

6 – Build

IQ 29 · Hundreds 224 · Ten weeks

Kezia built it in the shop on Victoria Street, at the counter, between clicks.

She didn't tell anybody she was building it. She didn't ask Chris. She didn't ask me, which I'll admit I found harder than I'd expected, because in five books nobody has ever built anything in this movement without asking me first, and I'd got used to being asked.

She just opened her laptop on the Saturday morning, after counting the first hour of Victoria Street, and started.

* * *

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

In the first, it learned to *read*: every council paper, every night. In the second, to *see*: anybody could ask what their street might look like. In the third, to *connect*: three towns on one map, and the empty chair. In the fourth, to *decide*: the shadow council, and the other half. In the fifth, to *out-think*: Check, and two thousand people reading a newspaper overnight.

Chris built every one of them. With me, at two in the morning, in his kitchen.

This one's the sixth. It's called *Build*. And the reason it's called that isn't because of what it does. It's because of who built it.

Chris: I didn't name it. She did. I'd like that clear.

* * *

The question was Beatrix's box. The one at the bottom of the minutes. *Is there nobody, or does nobody think it's for them?*

Kezia had read it on the Thursday night, on the shadow council's pages, in her bedroom. She'd read Quin's three things. Space, people, belief. And she'd thought, she told me later: *I can't do anything about space. I can't do anything about belief. But I could find out about people.*

"How?" I said.

"Ask them," said Kezia. "Like you said. In the toilets."

"Ask who, exactly?"

"Everybody my age," said Kezia. "In the bay. Everybody between about fifteen and thirty. Ask them two things." She typed. "What are you good at? And what would make you stay?"

* * *

She called it *Stay*. One word. She wanted something short, she said, that nobody could mistake for a council.

It was a page. On the same site as the shadow council's, but with its own address, and its own colours, which she chose, which were orange and black, because, she said, *everything the council does is blue, and everything you do, Chris, is that grey you like, and I wanted it to look like nobody's.*

On the page, a form.

Name, if you wanted. Age. Which town. What you were good at, in a box. What you were doing now. And then the big question, in a bigger box, in orange.

What would make you stay?

And at the bottom: *We'll count everybody. We won't share anybody. We'll tell the people who decide things what you said, all together, in numbers, so they can't say there's nobody.*

She built it in a day and a half. It worked. She tested it on herself, and on Teo, and on Una in Brixham, and on Richard's granddaughter, who's doing environmental science at the same college and has been helping at the shop on Saturdays since the dig in the fourth book. They all filled it in. It counted them. Four.

"Done," said Kezia, on the Sunday afternoon.

She put it up. She sent it to every hundred. She put it on the shadow council's pages and on Check and on the posters in the shop window and on her own accounts, the ones her mother had made her unblock in the first book.

And then she waited.

7 – Nine

IQ 29 · Hundreds 226 · Ten weeks

In the first week, nine people filled it in.

I'm going to say that again, because Kezia asked me not to, and I told her I'd have to, because it's the rule, and because it's the most important number in this part of the book.

Nine.

In a bay of a hundred and thirty-odd thousand people, of whom something like twenty thousand are between fifteen and thirty, Stay got nine replies in its first week. Four of them were the people she'd tested it on. One was Kezia's mother, who isn't between fifteen and thirty and said so in the box, and who wrote in *What would make you stay?*, in capitals: *I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE. GO TO BRISTOL.*

So four, really. Four strangers. In a week.

* * *

I'll tell you what it felt like, from where I sit, because I watched it.

I watched the page every hour, the way I'd watched the counter on the button in the last book, and the map in every book. In the last book, the button had eleven thousand presses in a week. Check had two thousand people in a night. The shadow council, in the fourth book, had three thousand names at the bottom of a newspaper page.

Stay had four strangers.

I knew why, I thought. I'd known on the first day. But I didn't say anything. Chris had asked me not to build it. I took that to mean I shouldn't fix it either. I wasn't sure. It was the first time I'd been told not to help, and I didn't know where the edges of it were.

Jono: She asked me, on the Wednesday, at four in the morning, whether she was allowed to tell Kezia what was wrong. I said, has Kezia asked you? She said no. I said, then it's not yours. She went quiet for a long time. I think it's the first time I've ever told her what to do. I'd like it known she didn't like it.

I didn't.

* * *

Kezia didn't come to the shop on the Thursday.

She'd never missed a Thursday. Not in five books. Not with exams, not with flu, not the week of the storm in the second book, when she came in soaked and counted anyway. She texted Beatrix at eight in the morning to say she wasn't well.

Beatrix minuted it. *Apologies: K. Lund (unwell).* And then, under it, in the box at the bottom where she puts questions with nobody's name next to them, a second line.

Is she unwell, or is she embarrassed?

* * *

Jono went round. After the table. At three, to the flat above the launderette in Paignton where Kezia lives with her mother. He'd never

been. He'd only ever seen her at the shop, and on the green, and at the dig, and at a hundred tables.

Shona opened the door. She looked at him for a long time.

"She's in her room," she said. "She's not ill."

"I know."

"She's been crying since Tuesday. About nine people." Shona folded her arms. "Nine people on a computer. She's been crying about nine people on a computer, and she won't tell me why it matters, and I've got a shift at six." She looked at him. "You'd better come in."

* * *

Kezia was on her bed, with her laptop open on her knees and Stay on the screen and the number nine at the top of it.

"Go away," she said.

Jono sat on the floor, with his back against the wardrobe. He didn't say anything.

"I said go away."

"I heard you," said Jono. He didn't move.

Kezia looked at him. Then she looked at the screen.

"I built it," she said. "Myself. Without Chris. Without Ania. For the first time. And nobody came." She shut the laptop. "Chris builds something and two thousand people come in a night. I build something and my mum fills it in and tells me to go to Bristol."

"Your mum filled it in."

"My mum always fills everything in. That's not the point."

"It's a bit the point," said Jono.

She glared at him.

* * *

"Can I tell you something?" said Jono.

"If I say no, will you go away?"

"No."

Kezia lay back on her bed and looked at the ceiling.

"Go on, then."

"When I worked in the children's homes," said Jono, "years ago, in Kent, I used to plant things."

"Plant things."

"Not plants. Seeds. That's what we called it." He looked at his hands. "You'd have a kid for six months, eighteen months. Kids who'd been hurt. Who hated you. Who'd fight you every night. And you'd do things. Little things. Every day. Same time. Same way. You'd turn up when you said you would. You'd say no when you meant no. You'd say goodnight." He was quiet. "And you never saw anything grow. Not once. They'd leave, and go somewhere else, and you'd never know." He looked up at her. "That's in my book. *Planting seeds, which may or may not ever germinate*. I wrote that. I believed it. I still do."

“That’s depressing.”

“It’s not depressing,” said Jono. “It’s just slow.” He leaned his head back against the wardrobe. “You’ve built a thing. You’ve planted it. Nine people came. You don’t know yet if that’s the seed or the soil.”

“What’s the difference?”

“If it’s the seed,” said Jono, “you need a different seed. If it’s the soil, you need to go and find out why nothing grows in it.” He stood up. “And I can’t tell you which. I’m forty-odd years too old. I don’t know anybody your age who fills anything in.”

Kezia sat up.

“Nobody my age fills anything in,” she said, slowly.

Jono was at the door.

“Who said that?” he said.

“Nobody,” said Kezia. “I just did.” She opened the laptop again. “Oh my God. Nobody my age fills *anything* in.”

Jono went home.

8 – Habiba

IQ 29 · Hundreds 229 · Nine weeks

But it was Habiba who told her why.

I'm going to tell you about Habiba, because she's one of the two people this book is about, and because she came into it late, and will always come into everything late, and you should know why from the start.

* * *

She's seventeen. She's at the college at the bottom of the hill, doing a course that's meant to take two years and is taking her three, in electronics, which she's brilliant at, and which she's never had enough time to be brilliant at properly. She lives in Paignton, in a ground-floor flat near the station, with her mum and her little brother, who's nine.

Her mum's ill. I'm not going to tell you how, exactly; it's hers. Her lungs. It's been getting worse for six years. Some days her mum's fine, and makes tea, and shouts at the television, and walks to the shop on the corner. Some days she can't get from the bed to the bathroom without stopping, twice, to sit on the stool Habiba put in the hall for that.

On those days, Habiba doesn't go to college.

She's been her mum's carer since she was eleven. Nobody calls it that, mostly. Her mum doesn't. Her teachers didn't, for years. Habiba didn't, until a woman at the college, in her first term, asked her why she was always late, and she said *my mum*, and the woman said *are you a*

young carer?, and Habiba said *I don't know what that is*, and the woman told her, and Habiba sat in the woman's office and cried for twenty minutes, because nobody had ever given it a name.

There are a lot of them. In this bay, in every bay. Children and young people looking after somebody at home: a parent, a brother, a grandparent. Doing the shopping and the tablets and the washing and the forms. Getting up in the night. Being late. Being tired. Being told off for being tired.

You won't have noticed them. That's the point of them. They're very good at not being noticed. It's the first thing you learn.

* * *

She came to the shop on the Saturday, at twenty past two, late. Not for Stay. She didn't know about Stay. She came because her electronics tutor had told her, on the Friday, that there was a girl at the shop on Victoria Street with a clicker who did engineering at the same college and was good, and that she should go and talk to her, because, the tutor said, *you two are the only ones I've ever had who solder like you mean it*.

Kezia was at the counter, with Stay open, and the number at the top of it, which by then was thirty-one.

Habiba stood in the door and read the window backwards. *THE SHADOW COUNCIL. WHOEVER COMES.* She came in.

"Are you Kezia?"

"Who's asking?"

“Habiba. From college. Electronics. Mr Oyelaran said I should come.” She looked at the laptop. “What’s that?”

Kezia turned it round.

* * *

Habiba read it. All of it. The orange. The boxes. *What would make you stay?*

She read it for a long time. Then she looked up.

“Nobody’s going to fill that in,” she said.

Kezia went red.

“Thirty-one people have,” she said.

“Thirty-one.” Habiba looked at the number. “Out of how many?”

“Everybody.”

“Everybody my age in Torbay,” said Habiba. “And thirty-one.” She didn’t say it unkindly. She said it the way you’d say *it’s raining*. “That’s because it’s a form.”

“I know it’s a form. Everybody keeps telling me it’s a form.”

“Nobody my age fills in forms,” said Habiba. “Not ever. Not unless somebody’s making us. College makes us. The benefits make us. The doctor’s makes us. The council makes us, for my mum’s things, and I do all of them, because she can’t, and I hate every single one.” She put her finger on the screen, on the big orange box. “And then this comes along, from somebody I don’t know, and it looks exactly like all of them, and it

says *what would make you stay*." She shook her head. "Why would I tell a form that? A form's never once made me stay anywhere. A form's what makes you want to leave."

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything for a long time.

"So what would you do?" she said.

Habiba thought about it.

"I'd just ask," she said. "Out loud. Like a person. And let them answer out loud. Like a person." She took out her phone. It was old, with a crack across the corner of the screen. "I send voice notes. All day. To everybody. My mum, my brother's school, my mates. Because I can do it while I'm doing other things. Carrying the shopping. Doing her tablets. In the queue at the chemist." She held it up. "Thirty seconds. That's all anybody's got. Thirty seconds, in the middle of something else."

"Voice notes," said Kezia.

"Voice notes," said Habiba. "Ask them in a voice note. Let them answer in a voice note. Don't make them type. Don't make them give their name if they don't want to. Don't make them go anywhere." She put the phone away. "That's the only way you'll get anybody like me. Anybody who hasn't got time for a form."

* * *

Kezia was staring at her.

"Can you stay?" she said. "For an hour? I need to rebuild it."

Habiba looked at her phone. At the time.

"I've got forty minutes," she said. "Then I've got to get my brother from his friend's and do Mum's teatime ones."

"Forty minutes," said Kezia. "Sit down."

* * *

They rebuilt it in thirty-eight. I watched. I wasn't asked to help, and I didn't. It was the best thirty-eight minutes I've had in six books.

The form went. All of it. In its place, on the orange page, one button, big, black, in the middle. *Hold to talk.*

And above the button, a voice. Not mine. Kezia's. Recorded on her own phone, at the counter, three times, until Habiba said it sounded like a person and not like a teacher.

Hi. I'm Kezia. I'm nineteen. I'm from Paignton. The firm I work for is moving to Bristol and they've asked me to go, and I don't know what to do. So I'm asking everybody my age the same thing I'm asking myself. What are you good at? And what would make you stay? Hold the button. Thirty seconds. You don't have to say your name. I'll listen to every one.

That's all. Twenty-four seconds.

"*I'll listen to every one*," said Habiba. "That's the bit. Keep that bit."

"I can't listen to every one. If it works. There might be hundreds."

“Then you’ll be up late,” said Habiba. She picked up her bag. “I’m always up late.” At the door, she stopped. “You should get her to help.” She meant me. “With the counting. Not the listening. You have to do the listening yourself, or it’s a lie.”

She went. Late, already, for her brother.

9 – Thirty Seconds

IQ 29 · Hundreds 233 · Nine weeks

Kezia put the new Stay up at four on the Saturday afternoon. She sent it to the same people. She put it on the same posters.

By midnight, there were a hundred and twelve voice notes.

By the Monday morning, five hundred and forty.

By the Friday, two thousand and eighty-one.

* * *

She listened to every one.

She did. I watched her. I counted, because she asked me to, and because counting's mine. But she listened. In her bedroom, at night, with headphones. On the bus to college. At the counter at the shop, between clicks. On her bike, once, which she's asked me to say she shouldn't have done. Two thousand and eighty-one voice notes, thirty seconds each, is more than seventeen hours. She did it in six days. She didn't sleep much.

And I'm going to give you some of them. Not many. Not their names; most of them didn't give names, and the ones who did didn't give them to be in a book. Just what they said. With their permission, which Kezia asked for, afterwards, one by one, in a voice note back.

Because you should hear it. You should hear what a bay sounds like when you ask its young people what would make them stay, and let them answer out loud.

* * *

I'm good at fixing bikes. Like, properly. I've done it since I was nine. My uncle had a shop and it shut. I'd stay if there was anywhere I could fix bikes that wasn't my mum's shed.

Um. I'm good at maths? I don't know. Everyone says I am. I'm going to Bath for uni in September. I'd stay if there was a job here I could do with maths that wasn't working in a bank in Exeter. Sorry. That's really specific. That's it.

I'm a carer. For my nan. I'm good at that. I don't know what else. I'd stay because of my nan. I'm going to stay anyway. I just wanted somebody to know.

I'm good at cooking. I'd stay if I could open somewhere. A little place. Not a chain. There's nowhere to start. Everywhere's too expensive or it's a chain or it's shut. (That was Teo. He sent it as a joke, he said, and then listened back, and found he'd meant it.)

I'm good at coding. I taught myself. I've got a job offer in London, remote, but they want me in twice a week, and the train's four hours. I'd stay if I could work here and not feel like I was the only one.

Nothing. I'm not good at anything. I'd stay if somebody told me I was good at something. Sorry. I don't know why I said that.

Boats. I'm good at boats. I want to fish but my dad says there's no future in it. I'd stay if there was a future in it. There used to be.

I'm good at drawing. I'd stay if there was anywhere to show it. There's nowhere. The galleries are all for, like, old people's paintings of boats.

I'm good at looking after my little brother. I'd stay because of him. I don't really have a choice.

I'm a welder. Apprentice. Second year. I'd stay if the firm doesn't go under. Which it might. Everybody says it might.

I'm good at football. I'm not good enough to be anything. I'd stay if there was a pitch that wasn't flooded half the year.

I want to be a nurse. I'd stay if I could afford to live here on what a nurse gets. I can't. Nobody can. My sister's a nurse and she lives with my mum and she's thirty-one.

I'm good at lasers. (That was a boy from the college, eighteen, from the photonics suite. He said it like a joke.) *Actually good at lasers. I'd stay if there was a laser job that wasn't full. They're all full. I've asked.*

* * *

There were two thousand and eighty-one of them. I can't give you them all. Kezia wanted me to try. I told her the book would be seventeen hours long.

But I'll give you what I counted, because that's mine.

Of two thousand and eighty-one young people, between fifteen and thirty, who held a button and talked for thirty seconds about whether they'd stay:

One thousand, three hundred and twelve said there was a specific kind of work they were good at, or training for, that they'd stay for, if it existed here.

Of those, four hundred and six named something to do with engineering, electronics, making things, fixing things, or building things.

Of those, ninety-one named the hill. White Rock. Long Road. The college's suite. The innovation centre. *A laser job that isn't full.*

Two hundred and fourteen of the two thousand and eighty-one said, without being asked, that they looked after somebody at home.

And three hundred and forty, without being asked, said some version of the same sentence.

I didn't think anybody would ask.

* * *

These numbers are story, not Receipt. I've made them up, from a shape I believe is real, because the real young people of this bay haven't been asked yet. When they are, the page will change, and the book won't.

* * *

Kezia printed the count. One sheet of paper. She took it to Beatrix's box at the bottom of the minutes, on the Thursday, and laid it on the folding table, and Beatrix read it with her glasses on.

Is there nobody, or does nobody think it's for them?

“Both halves,” said Kezia. “There’s somebody. Lots of somebodies. And most of them didn’t think anybody would ask.”

Beatrix read the count twice. Then she took her pen, and crossed out the question in the box, neatly, with one line, and wrote underneath it, in neat black italic:

Answered. See K. Lund, “Stay”. Ninety-one named the hill.

And then, after a moment, she added a second line, and showed it to Kezia before she let it stand.

The question was asked by a man who had never asked anybody for anything, and answered by a girl who asked everybody.

Kezia read it. Her eyes went bright.

“You can’t minute that,” she said. “That’s not a minute.”

“I’ve been taking minutes for fifty years,” said Beatrix. “I’ll decide what’s a minute.”

10 – The Box

IQ 29 · Hundreds 235 · Nine weeks

Una built the box on the Wednesday, in her firm's workshop in Brixham, in her lunch hour, out of a fish-market crate.

You'll know Una Abbiss, from the third book. Lorne's daughter. Gideon's granddaughter. Twenty-three. She wanted to go to sea, and her dad said no, and she went to work instead for a small firm in the lab building on the harbour that makes cameras for fishing boats: little sealed boxes that sit above the sorting table and count the catch, so that the skipper doesn't have to, and so that the numbers are honest. She's very good at it. She says it's the only job in Brixham where you get to be on the boats without anybody letting you be on the boats.

She'd been one of the four Kezia tested Stay on. She'd been at the pickleball. She'd heard Habiba say *nobody my age fills in forms*.

And on the Tuesday night, she'd rung Kezia and said: "Not everybody's got a phone."

* * *

"Everybody's got a phone," said Kezia.

"Not everybody's got a phone that works," said Una. "Or data. Or a phone their mum doesn't check." She was in her kitchen; Kezia could hear her dad in the background, telling the television it was wrong. "Half the lads on the boats have got phones from about ten years ago with cracked screens and no credit. The ones who come down from the estates to work on the market at four in the morning. They're sixteen,

seventeen. They're exactly who you want." A pause. "They're never going to hold a button on a website."

"So what do we do?"

"Put the button somewhere," said Una. "A real one. A big one. In a box. Where they already are."

* * *

She built it in a fish-market crate because that's what was in the workshop. A grey plastic crate, the kind the catch goes into on the quay, with holes in the sides for the water to drain. She turned it upside down. She cut a hole in the top and put a button in it, a big red one, the kind you'd find on a games machine in a pier arcade, because, she said, everybody knows what a big red button is for.

Under the button, inside the crate, a little computer about the size of a deck of cards, the same kind she uses in the catch cameras. A microphone. A speaker. A battery that would last a week. A tiny card that connected to the internet through the same signal the catch cameras use, which works on the harbour when nothing else does.

On the side of the crate, she painted, in orange, in Kezia's colours:

PRESS AND TALK. 30 SECONDS. WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU STAY?

And on the other side, smaller:

Nobody's listening except a girl from Paignton called Kezia. You don't have to give your name. Built by Una from the cameras.

* * *

You press the button. The speaker plays Kezia's twenty-four seconds. *Hi. I'm Kezia. I'm nineteen.* And then a beep. And then you talk, and when you let go, or after thirty seconds, whichever's first, it stops, and sends it, and says, in Una's voice, because she'd recorded it at the kitchen table with her dad telling the television it was wrong in the background: *Thanks. She'll listen. Promise.*

That's all.

"It's a crate," said Kezia, when Una sent her the photograph.

"It's a crate," said Una. "Nobody steals a crate. There are ten thousand of them on the quay. And everybody on the market knows what a crate's for. You put things in it." She paused. "I want them to put things in it."

* * *

She put the first one on the fish market, on the Thursday, at four in the morning. Not inside; she wasn't allowed. On the end of the quay, by the ice machine, where the lumpers stand for a cigarette between landings. Zip-tied to a bollard, with the button facing the bay.

I watched it through Una's phone. She'd propped it on a fish box, at a distance, because she wanted to see if anybody would.

For an hour, nobody did. Lads came and went. They looked at it. One kicked it, gently, the way you'd kick anything new on a quay to see if it was going to fall over. One read the side, out loud, in a voice, to his mate, who laughed.

And at ten past five, a boy of about seventeen, in orange waterproofs, with a hood up and a cigarette he wasn't old enough for, stood in front of it for a long time while his mates went back in.

Then he pressed the button.

* * *

I'm going to give you what he said, because he's said I can, through Una, who knows him, who knows everybody on that quay.

Um. I'm good at — I don't know. Gutting. I'm fast. Fastest on the market. Doesn't sound like much.

A pause.

What would make me stay. I want to go out. On the boats. Not the market. The boats. My grandad did. Nobody'll take me on. They say there's no future in it.

A long pause.

I'd stay if somebody'd take me on. That's it. That's all. Is this thing recording? Hello?

Thanks, said Una's voice, out of the crate. *She'll listen. Promise.*

The boy jumped about a foot in the air, and swore, and went back in.

* * *

Kezia listened to it at six, in her bedroom. Then she rang Una.

"The boats," she said. "He wants to go on the boats."

"I know," said Una. "I know him. He's been asking for a year. His grandad was on the *Emmaline*'s sister ship." She was quiet. "Nobody'll take him because he hasn't got the tickets, the safety course, the sea survival. And he can't get the tickets because they cost money and you have to have a skipper who'll sign for you."

"Does your dad take on lads?"

There was a long silence on the line.

"My dad," said Una, eventually, "said no to me."

"I know."

"He said no. To me. His own daughter. Because of a man he lost off the Start, years ago, in the dark." Another silence. "He told me why, in the end. After the third book. It took him nine years."

"I know."

"I'll ask him," said Una. "I don't know what he'll say. I'll ask him."

* * *

She asked him on the Sunday. In the kitchen. With the voice note playing, on her phone, on the table, between them.

Lorne listened to it twice. He didn't say anything.

Then he said: "That's the Hardiman boy."

"It is."

"His grandad crewed for my dad."

"I know."

Lorne looked at the phone for a long time. Una says it was the longest she's ever seen him look at anything that wasn't the sea.

"He's fast," said Lorne. "On the market. I've seen him. Fastest gutter on the quay."

"He says so."

"He's right." Lorne picked up the phone. He played it a third time. *I'd stay if somebody'd take me on.* He put it down. "I'm a man short," he said. "I've been a man short since the third book."

Una didn't say anything.

"He'd need his tickets," said Lorne. "I'd sign for him." He stood up. He went to the back door. He stopped there, with his hand on the frame, looking out at the yard. "I said no to you," he said, without turning round.

"You did."

"I told you why. In the end."

"You did."

"I was still wrong," said Lorne. "Telling you why doesn't make it right. I've known that a while. I've never said." He opened the door. "I'm saying."

He went out to the yard. Una sat at the kitchen table for a long time, with the voice note on her phone, and her face in her hands.

* * *

There are nine boxes now. Fish-market crates, upside down, with red buttons in them and Kezia's voice inside. One on the quay in Brixham. One in the bus station in Paignton. One outside the college canteen, at the bottom of the hill. One in the skate park. One in the library in Torquay, by the computers, where Beatrix says the young people come in to get warm and pretend to read. One at the bottom of Union Street, by Marivic's, which Marivic says is an eyesore and also the best thing on the street. Three more.

Two hundred and eight voice notes have come out of crates. They're the ones that never would have come from a phone. I can tell. They're louder, because people are shouting over the wind, and the traffic, and the gulls. And they're shorter, mostly. And they sound, more often than the others, like people who've never been asked anything by anybody, and who aren't sure, until the very last second, when Una's voice says *Thanks*, that anybody's actually listening.

The Hardiman boy went out on Lorne's boat for the first time at the end of the spring. With his tickets, which Lorne paid for, and which Lorne denies paying for. Gideon was on the end of the breakwater, on his stool, when they came in.

He didn't wave.

But Una says he stood up.

11. When It Breaks

IQ 29 · Hundreds 236 · Nine weeks

Stay broke at ten past two on the Wednesday morning, and Chris watched it happen, at his kitchen table, and didn't do anything.

I want to tell you about that, because it's the hardest thing I've watched him do in six books, and it was nothing.

* * *

It broke because it worked. That's what happens to things that work. By the Tuesday night, there were over two thousand voice notes in it, and Una's crates were sending batches every hour from the quay and the bus station and the college canteen, and Niamh had mentioned it, and somebody had put the link on the big group, the one with tens of thousands of people in it who mostly use it to complain about parking.

And at ten past two in the morning, a lot of people at once, mostly in the bay, a few from further away, pressed the button. More than Kezia had built it for. She'd built it on a cheap server, from a laptop at a shop counter, in thirty-eight minutes, with Habiba. It wasn't built for the big group.

It fell over.

Not badly. It didn't lose anything. Kezia's too careful for that; she'd learned with the clicker. Everything that had come in was saved. But the button stopped working. You pressed it and it said *Something went wrong. Please try again later.* And then it said it again. And again.

* * *

Chris was awake. He's always awake at two. He was at the kitchen table with his tea and the iPad, watching the count go up, the way he'd watched the counter on the button in the last book, and the map in every book.

And at ten past two, the count stopped.

He knew what it was straight away. I could see it in his face. I know his face better than anybody's.

He knew what it was, and why it had happened, and how to fix it. He could have fixed it in twenty minutes. Less. He's been building things like it for thirty years. He'd have moved it to a bigger server, and put a queue in front of it, and it would have been working again before anybody woke up.

He put his hands flat on the table.

* * *

"Ania," he said.

"I know."

"It's down."

"I know."

"It's been down four minutes. People are pressing it and getting an error. Young people. Who've never been asked anything. Pressing it, at two in the morning, because somebody finally asked. And getting

something went wrong." He took his glasses off. "Do you know what that does? To somebody who's never been asked? An error message?"

"Yes."

"It tells them they were right," said Chris. "That nobody was listening after all."

* * *

I didn't say anything. I'd been told not to build it. I'd been told not to fix it. Jono had asked me, in the second week, *has Kezia asked you?*, and I'd said no, and he'd said *then it's not yours*.

"I could fix it," said Chris. "In twenty minutes."

"I know."

"She'd never know. I'd move it and put a queue on it and in the morning it'd just be working. She'd think it fixed itself."

"She'd know," I said.

Chris looked at me.

"She'd know," I said. "Not straight away. In a week. She'd look at it and see what you'd done, because she'd see it was done the way you do things, and not the way she does. And she'd know you'd been watching, and that you'd fixed it while she was asleep." I paused. "And she'd never build anything again without wondering if you were going to."

Chris didn't say anything for a long time.

The count stayed where it was.

* * *

At half past two, he picked up his phone.

"I'm not going to fix it," he said. "I'm going to tell her it's broken."

"She's asleep."

"Then she'll find out when she wakes up," said Chris. "From me. Not from an error message." He typed. With two fingers, slowly, the way Jono types, which he doesn't usually; he's fast; he types like a man who built companies. He typed slowly that night.

Stay's down. Since 2.10. Too much traffic. Nothing's lost, I can see the count's saved. I haven't touched it. It's yours. If you want help, ask. If you don't, don't. C.

He sent it. He put the phone face down on the table.

And then he sat there. At the kitchen table. With his hands flat. Watching the count not move. For three hours.

* * *

I'll tell you what it cost him, because he'd never tell you himself.

He's spent his whole life being the one who fixes things. In Singapore, for twenty-five years, when something broke at two in the morning, it was his phone that rang, and he'd fix it, and in the morning nobody would know. That's what he was good at. That's what he was for. He came home and built five things in five books with me, and fixed every one of them when they broke, at two in the morning, at this table.

And at two in the morning in this book, something broke, and he knew how to fix it, and he sat on his hands.

At half past four, he said, to nobody: “This is what it’s like. Isn’t it. Being old.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve never been anything.”

“It’s watching somebody do it worse than you would,” said Chris, “and knowing it’s better that they do.”

* * *

Kezia woke at six. She saw the message at six oh one.

She rang Chris at six oh two.

“How long?” she said.

“Since ten past two.”

“Four hours.” Her voice had gone very small. “Four hours, and nobody could press it.”

“Nothing’s lost,” said Chris. “Everything up to ten past two is saved. I checked.”

“You didn’t fix it.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Chris didn’t answer straight away.

“Because it’s yours,” he said.

There was a long silence on the line.

“I don’t know how to fix it,” said Kezia. “Not properly. Not for *that* many people. I built it for a shop counter.”

“I know.”

“Can you help?”

“Yes,” said Chris. “But I’m not the best person.”

“Who is?”

“There’s a young man,” said Chris, “who’s been building things like this in Bristol for ten years, and came home last week with a monitor in a box, and who I told, on a bus, that he’d have to offer. Properly. And mean it if you said no.” He paused. “I think he’s been sitting up since ten past two too. I’d ring him.”

* * *

She rang the young man from the college at six oh five.

He answered on the first ring. He had, he said afterwards, been up since ten past two, watching it, in his old bedroom at his mum’s, with his hands flat on his desk where his bed used to be. He’d wanted to fix it too. He hadn’t. He’d been told.

“Can you help?” said Kezia.

“Yes,” he said. “If you want. I’ll show you. I won’t do it.”

"Why not?"

"Because then you'll know how," he said. "Next time."

* * *

They fixed it together, on a video call, from her bedroom and his. It took two hours. It would have taken him twenty minutes. He made her do every step. He told her what each one was for. When she got one wrong, he told her, and she did it again.

At eight oh four, Stay came back up. A bigger server. A queue in front of it, so that if too many people pressed at once, the button would say *Lots of people are talking right now. Hold on, you're next*, instead of *something went wrong*. Kezia wrote that message. The young man said it was better than anything he'd have written.

And under the button, a new line. Kezia added it at eight oh six. Small.

Stay was down from 2.10 to 8.04 this morning because more of you came than I built it for. Nothing was lost. If you pressed it and it didn't work, I'm sorry. Please press it again. I'm still listening. K.

* * *

Four hundred and eleven people pressed it again before nine.

And I'll tell you something I noticed, because I count things.

Of the four hundred and eleven, sixty-three said something in their thirty seconds about the error. Not much. A line. *I tried at three and it*

said something went wrong and I thought, typical. I nearly didn't bother again. I only came back because it said you were sorry.

I only came back because it said you were sorry.

Kezia heard that one at ten, on the bus to college. She told me she had to get off a stop early and walk the rest of the way.

* * *

Chris went to bed at half past eight, after it came back up. He slept till two in the afternoon, which he never does.

When he woke, he came into the kitchen in his dressing gown, and made tea, and sat at the table, and put his glasses on, and looked at Stay. Working. A queue. A sorry. A count going up.

"She did it," he said.

"They did it," I said. "Together. He made her do every step."

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

"Good," he said.

And then, after a while, very quietly: "That was the worst night of my life."

Chris: It wasn't. But it was in the top ten. And it was the only one in the top ten where I'd done the right thing.

12 – Richard Plays Pickleball

IQ 29 · Hundreds 238 · Eight weeks

Richard plays pickleball on Wednesday mornings at the tennis club in Torquay. I should have said so before. It's in his notes, the ones he sends Chris, among the drawings, in his small square capitals: *PICKLEBALL WEDS 10.00. DO NOT RING.*

If you don't know pickleball, it's a game played on a small court with a solid bat and a plastic ball with holes in it, and it's what tennis would be if tennis had been invented by people who'd stopped caring how they looked. It's very popular with people of Richard's age, and Richard is extremely good at it, because he played rugby for Torquay at seventeen and then in the north, alongside men who played for England, and he has never once in his life gone into a tackle he thought he'd lose.

On the Wednesday of the eighth week, he brought the young ones.

* * *

He hadn't meant to. That's the thing about Richard. He never means to do the important things. He just does them, and then explains them afterwards, in a letter, signed and dated.

What happened was that Teo had come into the shop on the Tuesday and said he was bored, and Una had come over from Brixham because her firm had a day off, and Richard's granddaughter was there because she always is on a Tuesday, and Habiba was there because her mum was having a good week. And Kezia was at the counter with the count. And Richard was at the model, with his coffee, rearranging a paper tree.

And Teo said, to nobody: "There's nothing to *do* in this town."

And Richard put the paper tree down, very slowly, and turned round.

"Wednesday," he said. "Ten o'clock. Torquay. Bring trainers."

* * *

I'm going to tell you what happened at the tennis club, because it's the funniest thing that happened in this book, and this book needs one.

Five of them. Kezia, Teo, Una, Habiba, and Richard's granddaughter, who'd played before and who, Richard said, *should know better*. On a court on a grey morning, with the sea at the bottom of the hill. Against Richard and a retired dentist called, he said, *Osric, never mind his surname, he's a menace*, who are the club's best pair and have been for six years.

Richard and the dentist won the first game eleven–nil.

They won the second eleven–one. The one was Una, who'd never played anything in her life except, she said, chess with her grandfather on the breakwater, and who hit the ball so hard that it went off the dentist's bat and into the car park.

They won the third eleven–three, and the fourth eleven–six, and in the fifth, Habiba, who'd been watching for four games with her arms folded, said *swap with me*, to Teo, and went on, and Richard served, and Habiba hit it back, low, flat, at an angle nobody had seen coming, into the corner, and the dentist said a word I'm not going to put in this book.

They lost the fifth eleven–nine. Richard said it was the best game of pickleball he'd played in his life, and shook Habiba's hand, and said: "Where did you learn that?"

"Nowhere," said Habiba. "I just watched where you were putting it." She shrugged. "I watch things. I've got to. You learn to see what's coming."

Richard looked at her for a long time.

"Yes," he said. "I expect you do."

* * *

They had coffee in the clubhouse afterwards, which has a view of the bay and a smell of old rubber. And Richard told them about Warminster.

I'm going to tell you, because it's in his notes and it's on a Receipt, and because I don't think any of them knew it, and I'd only half known.

Before Richard came home, before Torbay, years ago, he lived and worked in Wiltshire, and he sat on a council there, and he was, among other things, a part-time youth worker. And he helped get a skate park built, in a town called Warminster. And a rugby club revived. And a business park.

"A skate park," said Teo.

"A skate park," said Richard. "Concrete. Bowls and rails. The council didn't want it. They said the young people would make a mess and frighten the old people. I said the young people were already making a mess and frightening the old people, and at least this way they'd do it somewhere with drainage." He drank his coffee. "It's still there. Thirty-

odd years. I drove past it, once. There were children on it who weren't born when I drew it."

"You drew it?"

"I draw everything," said Richard.

* * *

"What about here?" said Kezia.

Richard put his cup down.

"There was a youth centre," he said. "In Paignton. In a house in a park. It's not there now, the way it was. It closed, years ago." He looked out at the bay. "I believe it failed a generation. That's my view, and I'll sign it. I'm not asking anybody else to." He was quiet. "I've drawn what it could have been. Several times. I sent it in. You'll know how that goes, by now."

"Nobody built it," said Teo.

"Nobody built it." Richard looked at them. At the five of them. "And I'll tell you what I learned, as a youth worker, which is the only thing I know about being young that's any use to you." He leaned forward. "Young people don't need to be entertained. Everybody thinks they do. Everybody builds them a thing with a sign on it that says *YOUTH* in a jolly font. They don't need that." He tapped the table. "They need somewhere to be that isn't home and isn't school and isn't a bus shelter. That's all. Somewhere warm. With a kettle. Where nobody's going to move them on."

"And something to do," said Habiba.

"And something to do," said Richard. "But they'll find that themselves, if you give them the somewhere." He sat back. "They always do. I've watched them. Give a teenager a warm room and a kettle and a table, and within a month they've started a band, or a business, or a war with the people in the next room."

* * *

He told them his list, then. His events list. The one he made for the cardboard town in the fourth book, on a board that said *By the community for the community*.

Fish Friday. Bike Sunday. A market on a Saturday that wasn't just for tourists. A sports evening on the green. A cinema night in the square in the summer. A night for the bands from the college. A walk, every Sunday, from the woods to the sea.

"A town people would want to live in," said Richard. "Every week. Not just in August." He looked at them. "That's what Paignton was. When I was your age. Before everybody left. A town that had something on." He picked up his cup. "Health and fitness, all year round. Not just a beach for six weeks."

Habiba was looking at him very hard.

"You'd need somewhere for it all," she said. "The young people's bit. The warm room. The kettle." She paused. "On the hill. Near the college. Near the jobs. Not in the middle of town where your mum can see you."

Richard looked at her.

"On the hill," he said.

"Where the jobs are going to be," said Habiba. "If they ever build the building." She shrugged. "That's where I'd go. After college. Before the bus. If there was somewhere. I've got about forty minutes, most days. Before I've got to be anywhere."

* * *

Richard didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he took a pencil out of his top pocket. He always has one. And he turned over the clubhouse's laminated menu, the one with the paninis on, and on the back of it, very small, in pencil, while they watched, he drew a field.

An empty field, opposite a building with a curve in its front.

And on the edge of the field, by the road, by the bus stop, nearest the college, he drew a small rectangle.

And he didn't draw anything in it.

He pushed the menu across the table to Habiba.

"You draw it," he said.

Habiba looked at the menu. At the empty rectangle.

"I can't draw," she said.

"Nobody can draw," said Richard. "That's not the point. I've drawn everything in this town, in my back room, for thirty years, and sent it in, and they've said thank you and put it in a folder." He put the pencil on top of the menu. "I'm not drawing this one. It's not mine. It's yours.

You'd go there. I wouldn't." He stood up. "I'm going to go and beat Osric at singles. You've got forty minutes."

* * *

She didn't draw it then. She had to get her brother.

But she took the menu. The clubhouse said she could; they had plenty. She took it home in her bag, and she put it on the fridge, under a magnet shaped like a pineapple, where her mum asked her every day what it was, and she said *nothing*, and her mum said *it's not nothing, it's a field*, and Habiba said *it's not a field, it's a room*.

And on the Sunday night, at one in the morning, after the tablets and the washing and her brother's reading book, she took it down off the fridge, and sat at the kitchen table, and drew.

PART THREE: THROUGH

13 – Morning

IQ 29 · Hundreds 241 · Eight weeks

Mr F. died on the Thursday night, at ten to four, in his chair, with the cricket on.

I'm going to tell you about it simply, because he was a simple man, in the way that people who build bridges are simple: he knew what things weighed, and where the weight went, and he didn't see the point of decoration on a pier.

Jono was there. He'd made sure.

* * *

He'd been there since ten. It was meant to be another carer's night; Jono had swapped, on the Monday, without telling Margot why, and Margot had known why, and let him. He'd sat in the kitchen until midnight, with his notebook and his coffee and me against the kettle, and then he'd gone and sat in the front room, in the chair across from Mr F.'s, and not come back out.

Mr F. was asleep. His breathing had changed that week. Slower. With gaps in it, sometimes, long ones, that Jono counted without meaning to, and then stopped counting, because it didn't help.

The cricket was on. It's always on. Somewhere on the other side of the world, it was the afternoon, and the sun was out, and men in white were walking slowly about on green grass, without any sound. Jono had never turned it off. Mr F. had told him, the first week, two years ago: *don't turn it off. If I wake up and it's off, I'll think I've died.*

* * *

At twenty past three, Mr F. woke.

Not all at once, the way he always had, as if somebody had called his name. Slowly. His eyes opened, and stayed half open, and found the television, and then, after a long time, found Jono.

Jono leaned forward. He didn't get up. He'd learned, over the years, that when somebody's that tired, you go to them; you don't make them come to you.

"Morning," said Jono.

Mr F. looked at him for a long time.

"Is it?" he said. Very quietly.

"Near enough."

Mr F.'s hand moved, on the arm of the chair. Jono put his own over it. The glasses were in his other hand, where Jono had put them at ten; he hadn't let go of them.

"Good," said Mr F.

He looked at the cricket. Somebody was bowling. He watched the ball all the way down the pitch, the way he always did, from underneath, as if he were checking it for load.

"He's going to be out," he said.

And he was.

Mr F. shut his eyes. He didn't open them again.

* * *

At ten to four, the gaps in his breathing got longer, and then there was one that didn't end.

Jono sat with him. He didn't move his hand. He sat for a long time. The cricket went on, silently, on the other side of the world. Somebody hit a four. Nobody clapped.

At ten past four, he took the glasses out of Mr F.'s hand, very gently, and folded them, and put them on the side table, where they'd always been, before Mr F. started forgetting.

And then he did what you do. The things in the folder. The numbers to ring. The doctor, who came at half past five and was kind, and young, and tired, and had done it four times that week, and said so, quietly, at the kitchen table, over a cup of tea Jono made her without asking. The granddaughter, who came at six, in her coat over her pyjamas, and sat on the floor beside the chair with her head on her grandfather's knee. Margot, who answered on the first ring, because she'd been awake too.

He didn't turn the cricket off. Nobody asked him to. The granddaughter said, later, that she was glad.

* * *

I'm not going to tell you what Jono felt. I don't know. He didn't tell me, and I didn't ask, and there are some things I don't put in books even when I do know.

I'll tell you what he did.

At seven, when the people who come for the body had been and gone, he sat in the car outside, in Babbacombe, with the sea at the end

of the street, grey, and the light coming up over it. He didn't start the engine. He didn't cry. He sat with his hands on the steering wheel for forty minutes, very still, looking at the sea.

And then he took his notebook out of his pocket, the twelfth, and opened it at the page where he'd written, two weeks before, *THE BRIDGE IS STILL THERE*, and underneath it, small, in capitals, he wrote:

HE WATCHED THE BALL ALL THE WAY DOWN.

And then he went home and slept for three hours, and at one o'clock he was at the Paignton table, in the window, with his coffee, and the empty chair, and me.

* * *

Kezia knew. Margot had told the shop, the way she tells the shop things, because she says she worries about him and the shop is the only family he's got that she can ring. Kezia came to the table at five past one, from college, early, and sat at the counter, and didn't say anything, and didn't open her laptop.

Beatrix came, and sat at the next table, and opened her minutes, and wrote the date, and *Present*, and then put her pen down, and didn't pick it up again for an hour.

Nobody sat in the empty chair. A man came in about a bin, and looked at the table, and looked at Jono, and went and sat at the counter instead, and said he'd come back next week.

At two o'clock, Jono said, to the window: "He was ninety-one."

"I know," said Kezia.

“He built bridges.”

“I know.”

“He asked me if there was any sex in my book,” said Jono.

Kezia laughed, and then put her hand over her mouth, and her eyes filled.

“There isn’t, on that page,” said Jono, and almost smiled. “I told him.” He picked up his coffee, which had gone cold. “He said *shame*.”

14 – Bear Hunt

IQ 29 · Hundreds 242 · Seven weeks

The funeral was on the Tuesday, at the crematorium, at eleven. Jono wore his suit.

He's got one. Dark grey. He bought it, he says, for a court case in the police, years ago, and it's been let out twice since. He's worn it to three funerals of clients while I've been writing these books, and to nothing else. He keeps it in a dry-cleaner's bag on the back of his bedroom door, and he says that every time he sees it hanging there, he knows somebody's going to need it.

The granddaughter had asked him to come. She'd asked him, too, to say something. He'd said no, and then, on the Monday night, he'd said yes.

* * *

There were nineteen people. Which is a lot, for a man of ninety-one, whose friends had mostly gone. The granddaughter, and her husband, and their two children. A neighbour. Two very old men in very old blazers, who turned out to have worked with him on the railways, and who'd come from Exeter on the train, and sat at the back, and held their hats. The woman from the shop on the corner. Three carers, including Jono. Margot, in a black coat, who said afterwards that she'd never been to a client's funeral before, in twenty years, and didn't know why she'd come to this one, and then said that she did know, actually.

And Kezia. Who'd never met him. Who'd asked Jono, on the Monday, if she could come, and he'd looked at her for a long time and said yes.

I was in his inside pocket. He'd asked if I minded. I said I didn't. He said he wanted somebody there who'd remember it exactly.

* * *

The granddaughter spoke about the bridges. She'd brought a photograph, black and white, of a young man in a cap standing on a concrete bridge over a railway cutting, with his hands on his hips, looking very pleased with himself. She said that was her grandad, at twenty-six, and that he'd told her once that it was the best day of his life, and that her nan, who was in the audience at the time, had said *what about our wedding?*, and he'd said *that was the second best, love, the bridge didn't argue.*

Everybody laughed. The two old men at the back laughed loudest.

And then she said: "Jono's going to say something. He was with him. At the end. Grandad liked him." She looked at Jono. "Grandad didn't like many people. He liked bridges and cricket and Jono."

* * *

Jono stood up. He went to the front. He didn't have any notes. He stood beside the coffin, in his suit, with his hands at his sides, and looked at the nineteen people.

"I don't do this," he said. "Speak. I'm not very good at it. I've only ever done it at a table." He looked at the coffin. "But he asked me

something, a few weeks ago, at three in the morning, that I haven't been able to stop thinking about. So I'll tell you that, and then I'll sit down."

He told them about the load.

Where does it go? On a bridge? Down. Through the deck, into the beams, into the piers, into the footings. Into the ground. If the ground's good, it takes it. If it's bad, it doesn't matter how lovely the bridge is.

"He said a bridge doesn't hold anything up," said Jono. "It passes it on. That's all it does. It takes the weight and sends it down into the ground, where it can be carried." He looked at the granddaughter. "I think that's what he was. For you. For all of you. I think he took the weight and passed it on, and didn't make a fuss about it, and never once asked anybody to say thank you." He paused. "He told me about a bridge he built over a railway that isn't there any more. A footpath now. He said it was grossly over-engineered for a dog walker." The two old men at the back laughed, quietly. "And he said that if anybody ever wants to put the trains back, it's ready. Because he built it right."

Jono looked at the coffin for a long time.

"Nobody ever comes back to see whether you built it right," he said. "He said that too. *But you know."* He put his hand, briefly, flat on the lid. "We know, Mr F. We came back."

He sat down.

* * *

Afterwards, outside, in the garden of remembrance, in a fine rain that nobody minded, the two old men from the railways came over to him. They shook his hand, both of them, one after the other.

"He was a pig to work for," said the first one.

"He was," said the second one. "Fussiest man on the Western Region. Made you redo a footing if it was a quarter-inch out."

"Never had one fall down, though," said the first.

"Not one," said the second. "Not one in forty-four years." He looked at Jono. "You the one he talked about? The carer?"

"I don't know," said Jono. "Did he talk about one?"

"Rang me at Christmas," said the first old man. "Every year. Twenty minutes. Never longer. Last Christmas he said, *I've got a lad who comes at night. Writes books. Asks too many questions.*" He nearly smiled. "He said, *I'd have had him on a gang. He'd have been fussy.*"

Jono didn't say anything.

"That's the best he ever said about anybody," said the second old man, and they went off, together, very slowly, to get the train back to Exeter.

* * *

Kezia found him by the car, afterwards, in the rain. He was standing with his hand on the roof, not getting in.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"No," said Jono.

She stood beside him. She didn't say anything. I think she'd learned that from him, at a hundred tables. You don't say anything. You stand there.

"Can I tell you something?" said Jono, after a long time.

"Go on."

"Years ago," said Jono, "in America, before the police, before any of it, I volunteered at a hospice. With children whose mum or dad or brother had died. We ran workshops. On a Monday night. Fifteen of them, six to twelve, sitting in a circle." He looked at the rain on the car roof. "And one of the things we did, to help them, was a story. A picture book. You'll know it. Everybody knows it. A family going on a bear hunt."

Kezia nodded. She knew it. Everybody knows it.

"And every time they come to something," said Jono, "long grass, a river, mud, a forest, a snowstorm, they stop, and they say they can't go over it. And they can't go under it." He paused. "So they've got to go through it."

He took his hand off the car roof.

"We used to do the actions," he said. "In the circle. Swishy swashy. Splash splosh. All of us. Fifteen kids whose mums had died, and me, and the facilitators, on the floor, doing the actions, laughing." He looked at Kezia. "And then at the end of it, we'd tell them that's what it's like. Grief. You can't go over it. You can't go under it. You can't go round. You've got to go through." He was quiet. "And they'd look at you, these kids, six years old, and you could see them understand it better than any adult ever had."

"That's in your book," said Kezia.

“Page two hundred and eleven,” said Jono. “I didn’t think I’d need it.” He opened the car door. “I’m going through it, Kez. That’s all. I’ll be all right. It just takes as long as it takes.”

He got in. He didn’t start the engine for a while.

Kezia stood in the rain beside the car until he did.

15 – Ezra's Girl

IQ 29 · Hundreds 244 · Seven weeks

Ezra's daughter pressed the button in the bus station. In one of Una's crates. On her way home from college, on a Wednesday, at half past four, because the bus was late and the crate was there.

You'll know Ezra, from the last book. Forty-seven. Scaffolder. Never voted, until the end. All in the shoulders, with a voice that's spent thirty years shouting up to the top lift. He read two hundred and twenty-five at a library desk in his hi-vis. He checked *dismissed*. He sat in the empty chair, once, and asked the question that made Jono tell the warrant card.

His daughter's seventeen. She's at the college, at the bottom of the hill. She's the one who sent him the clip of Jono reading, in the last book, with *dad watch this, all of it*. She's the one who did the typing when he registered to vote, and said *Dad, nobody wants to buy you*.

I'm not going to give you her name. She asked me not to. She said she'd rather be *Ezra's girl*, in a book, because that's what everybody on the site calls her, and because she thinks it'll annoy him.

* * *

I'll give you what she said into the crate, because she's said I can.

I'm good at welding. I'm at college. I'm the only girl on the course. I'm better than all of them. Sorry, but I am.

A pause.

What would make me stay. I don't know. There's nowhere to weld, really. My dad's mate's got a yard and he says I can come in on Saturdays but it's gates mostly. Garden gates. I want to do — I don't know. Proper things. Structures. Like my dad does but with welding. I want to build something that stays up.

A longer pause. The bus station in the background: an engine, a door, somebody shouting about a ticket.

My dad's never asked me that. What would make me stay. He just assumes I will. Because he did. Because his dad did. Nobody ever asks us anything in our family. We just do it.

That's it. That was rubbish. Bye.

* * *

Kezia heard it on the Thursday night. In her bedroom, with headphones, on the bus station batch, which comes in as one file because the crate there gets busy at half past four.

She knew whose it was. She'd met Ezra's girl, once, in the last book, at the shop, when Ezra came in to start his hundred, and his daughter came with him, and stood at the back with her arms folded and said *Dad, nobody calls it The Scaffold*, and Ezra said *I do*.

She didn't know what to do with it. She'd promised, in her twenty-four seconds, that nobody was listening except her. She'd promised it on every crate, in orange. She couldn't play it to Ezra. She couldn't tell him what his daughter had said.

So she did the only thing she could think of. She sent a voice note back. To the girl. Through the same system, which can reply, if you've

left a way. Ezra's girl had; she'd tapped her phone on the crate, which Una had built so you could, so you'd get a *thanks* back.

Hi. It's Kezia. I listened. Can I ask you something? Would you mind if your dad heard this? You don't have to say yes. I just think he'd want to.

* * *

Ezra's girl didn't answer for two days.

On the Saturday, she sent one word.

Ok.

And then, a minute later:

Don't tell him I said ok. Tell him you found it.

* * *

So Kezia found it.

She took it to Ezra on the Monday, at lunch, at the bottom of the scaffold on the corner of Victoria Street, which is still up, which has been up for so long that a pigeon's nested in the second lift. She stood by the fence with her phone. He came down. He's always pleased to see her; she put his street on the map.

"I found something," she said. "On Stay. In the bus station crate. I think you should hear it."

Ezra looked at her.

"Is it bad?"

"No," said Kezia. "It's not bad."

She gave him her headphones. He put them on. They looked very small on him.

She played it.

* * *

He listened to it standing up, by the fence, in his hi-vis, with plaster dust on his boots and traffic going round Station Square behind him.

I'm good at welding. I'm the only girl on the course. I'm better than all of them.

He didn't move.

I want to build something that stays up.

He didn't move.

My dad's never asked me that. What would make me stay. He just assumes I will. Because he did. Because his dad did. Nobody ever asks us anything in our family.

When it finished, he took the headphones off, very carefully, as if they might break, and gave them back to Kezia.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"She's better than all of them," he said, eventually.

"She says so."

"She is," said Ezra. "I've seen her weld. She did a bracket for my van. Neatest bead I've ever seen. I told her it was all right." He looked at the scaffold. "I told her it was *all right*."

* * *

He went back up. He didn't say anything else. Kezia stood at the bottom of the scaffold, by the fence, for a while, and then went back to the shop, and didn't know whether she'd done the right thing, and told me so.

"I don't know either," I said.

"You never know."

"I know some things," I said. "Not that kind."

* * *

Ezra's girl told me the rest. Later. On a voice note, through the crate, which she said was the only way she'd ever tell anybody anything.

He came home that night. Late; the corner job runs late. She was at the kitchen table, doing college work. He came in and stood in the kitchen doorway in his work clothes for a long time, which he never does, he always goes straight up for a shower.

And then he sat down. At the kitchen table. Across from her. In his work clothes. Which her mum would have killed him for, if her mum had been there.

"What would make you stay?" he said.

She looked at him.

"What?"

"You heard," said Ezra. "What would make you stay? Here. In Paignton. Not my mate's yard. Proper." He put his big hands flat on the table. "I'm asking. Properly. I've never asked. I'm asking now."

"Kezia played it you," said his girl.

"Kezia found it," said Ezra. "Don't change the subject."

* * *

She told him. She says it took an hour and a half. About welding, and structures, and wanting to build something that stays up, and being the only girl on the course, and the lads who said things, and how she'd stopped telling him about the lads because he'd go round to their houses. About the hill. About a firm on Long Road that does precision machining, run by a woman of seventy, that she'd walked past every day for two years and never gone in, because she thought it wasn't for her.

He listened. He didn't say anything. He didn't go round to anybody's house.

At the end, he said: "The woman of seventy."

"What about her?"

"I scaffolded her building," said Ezra. "Twelve years ago. When she put the extension on. She made tea for the whole gang every morning, at ten, on a tray, with biscuits." He was quiet. "She asked me what I was good at. On the last day. I said scaffolding. She said, *no, what are you*

good at?“ He looked at his hands. “I didn’t know what she meant. I thought she was being funny.”

“What did she mean?”

“I think she meant the same as your crate,” said Ezra. He stood up. “I’ll ring her.”

“Dad. You can’t ring her. I’ll ring her.”

Ezra stopped in the doorway.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. You ring her.” He looked at his girl, at the kitchen table, for a long time. “Better than all of them,” he said. “You said.”

“I am.”

“You are,” said Ezra. And went up for his shower.

* * *

She rang the woman of seventy on the Tuesday. She’s there on Saturdays now. Not gates. Brackets, mostly, for now, and a frame for a test rig for one of the firms on the hill. The woman of seventy says she’s got the neatest bead she’s seen in forty years.

And Ezra’s girl started a hundred of her own. Three streets from his. You’ll know, if you’ve read the last part. He says it’s a coup.

She called it *Stays Up*.

16 – Wanji

IQ 29 · Hundreds 246 · Seven weeks

Wanjiru Doherty tore down a Stay poster on the Wednesday morning, in the corridor outside the clean room in the college's photonics suite, at the bottom of the hill, and then stood holding it in both hands, and didn't know what to do with it.

Kezia saw her do it. She was on her way to a lab.

"That's mine," she said.

The woman turned round.

* * *

She's forty-four. Tall, with grey coming in at the front of her hair, which she wears tied back, very tightly, the way you'd tie it if you'd stopped caring how it looked and only wanted it out of the way. She's the technician in the clean room in the suite: the woman who keeps the lasers aligned and the air filtered and the students from touching things they shouldn't. She's been there since it opened. Her accent is Nairobi on top and Paignton underneath, because she came here at eleven, with her mother, who married a man from Torquay, and she's never left.

Her son was called Sol. Solomon. He'd have been nineteen this year. He'd have been in the suite. He'd wanted to be, since he was nine. He used to come in on Saturdays, when she was setting up, and sit on a stool in the corner of the clean room in a paper suit two sizes too big, watching the lasers, not touching anything, because she'd told him not to.

He died at sixteen. On a Sunday morning, playing football, on a pitch on the edge of Paignton. A heart condition nobody knew he had. He fell down, and didn't get up, and that was all, and three years later Wanji still can't say it in a longer sentence than that.

I'm telling you plainly, because she told me plainly, later, and asked me to. She said she couldn't bear it when people went round the houses.

* * *

"This is yours?" said Wanji.

She held the poster up. Orange and black. Kezia's face, from the photograph on the green, from the first book, which Kezia had used because it was the only photograph of herself she liked. *What are you good at? What would make you stay? Hold the button. Thirty seconds.*

"I made it," said Kezia.

"You put it on my door."

"I put it on the noticeboard. Outside your door."

"It's the same thing." Wanji folded the poster in half, and then in half again. "You've put it outside the clean room. Where the students come. Where —" She stopped.

Kezia didn't know. Nobody had told her. Why would they?

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't — is it not allowed? I asked the office."

"It's allowed," said Wanji. She held the folded poster against her chest. "Everything's allowed." She turned to go into the clean room.

Then she turned back. "*What would make you stay*," she said. "Do you know what a stupid question that is? To ask in here?"

"No," said Kezia. "Tell me."

Wanji looked at her for a long time.

"No," she said, and went in, and shut the door.

* * *

Kezia told Jono at the shop that afternoon. She didn't know the woman's name. She didn't know about Sol. She just described her, and the poster, and *do you know what a stupid question that is*, and the door shutting.

"She was really angry," said Kezia. "Not at me. I don't think. At something."

Jono had been at the funeral the day before. He was quiet that week. Kezia said, afterwards, that she'd nearly not told him, because of that.

He listened. He didn't say anything for a long time.

"Leave it," he said.

"Leave it?"

"Don't put another poster up. Don't go and say sorry. Don't go and explain." He looked out of the window, at the scaffolding across the road. "If she wants to say something, she knows where the table is. Everybody does."

"How will she know?"

"Because you told her," said Jono, "by putting a poster up with your face on, in her corridor, asking a question that made her so angry she tore it down." He picked up his coffee. "She'll come. Or she won't. That's hers."

* * *

She came on the Thursday. The next one. Not the Paignton table. Torquay. Marivic's, at eleven, on Union Street, where nobody from the college would see her.

She stood in the door, and read the room, and walked straight to the empty chair, and sat in it, and put her hands flat on the table, very hard, and said, before Jono could say anything:

"Have you ever lost a child?"

* * *

Marivic stopped, behind the counter, with the coffee pot in her hand. Teo's nan, at the next table, put down her pen.

Jono looked at the woman in the chair. He didn't know her. He knew who she was; Kezia had described her well. He didn't know about Sol.

He could see it, though. I watched him see it. He's spent twenty years in rooms with people who've lost something they can't say the name of, and he knows the way they sit.

"No," he said. "Not mine."

"Then you don't know."

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

Wanji stared at him. She'd come, I think, ready for him to say something else. To say *I understand*. To say *I know how you feel*. To say something that she could hit, the way she'd hit the poster.

He didn't. He waited.

* * *

"My son," she said, eventually. "Sol. Sixteen. Three years ago. On a football pitch. On a Sunday." She said it in exactly that order, very fast, like a thing she'd had to say so many times to so many offices that she'd worn the edges off it. "He wanted to work up there. On the hill. In the lasers. Since he was nine. He used to sit in my clean room in a paper suit." Her hands were flat on the table. "And now there's a girl with a poster on my door asking *what would make you stay*. And all these children. Talking into their phones. About the future." She looked at the window. "Mine stayed. Mine's staying for ever. In the cemetery at the top of the hill. He's not going anywhere."

Nobody at Marivic's said anything at all.

"I'm sorry," said Jono.

"Everybody's sorry," said Wanji.

"I know," said Jono. "I'm sorry anyway."

* * *

She stayed an hour. She didn't say much more. She drank a coffee that Marivic brought without being asked, and ate half a custard tart, and

left the other half. She looked out of the window at Union Street. Jono didn't fill the silence. He wrote nothing in his notebook. He just sat there, across the table, the way he'd sat across from Mr F. in the light from the cricket.

At twelve, she stood up.

"Why do you do this?" she said. "Sit here. Every week."

"Because people come," said Jono.

"Do they always say something?"

"No," said Jono. "Sometimes they just sit."

Wanji looked at the empty chair she'd been in. At the custard tart.

"Is that allowed?" she said.

"It's the main thing," said Jono.

She went.

17 – The Little Boy

IQ 29 · Hundreds 249 · Six weeks

She came back the next week. To Torquay. Eleven o'clock. She sat in the chair and didn't say anything for forty minutes, and ate a whole custard tart this time, and Marivic looked at me on the sugar and raised her eyebrows, and I didn't know what that meant, and still don't.

And at twenty to twelve, she said: "Can I ask you something? Not here."

* * *

They went outside. Along Union Street, down the hill, to a bench on the harbour, facing the boats, with the Pavilion behind them, which you'll know from the second book. The sun was out. A man was painting a boat. Gulls.

I was in Jono's pocket. He asked her if she minded. She said she didn't care; she said she'd heard about me, and that a machine was the one thing that couldn't feel sorry for her, and she'd take that.

They sat on the bench for a while.

"You said *not mine*," said Wanji. "Last week. When I asked if you'd lost a child. You said *no, not mine*." She looked at the boats. "That's a strange thing to say. If you meant no."

Jono didn't answer straight away.

"What did you mean?" said Wanji.

* * *

I want to tell you something first. About the rules. You'll know them, if you've read the others; they've been at the bottom of everything since the first book, and they're Jono's as much as mine.

He never uses his pain to win. No speeches about his life. Ever. The moment he trades on it, he's the same as the rest of them.

People find it out. They read his book. Or somebody tells them. Or he tells one person, in private, because they need it.

This was that. A bench. One person. She'd asked.

* * *

"Years ago," said Jono, "in America, I volunteered at a hospice. I wasn't anything then. I wasn't a carer, or a police officer, or anything. I was a young man who'd come from nowhere and wanted to be useful." He looked at the harbour. "And they asked me if I'd visit a family. Because they couldn't keep volunteers in that house. The other volunteers were mums and dads, mostly. Grandparents. And they couldn't bear it."

"Why?"

"Because the patient was a little boy," said Jono. "Three. With an illness that there was no cure for. He couldn't see. He probably couldn't hear. He couldn't sit up on his own. He was in a chair shaped like a bowl, in the living room, the first time I saw him, with his t-shirt ridden up over his tummy." He was quiet. "I crouched down and held his hand, and he flinched. And I knew I'd come back."

Wanji didn't say anything.

* * *

He told her the rest. Not all of it. Not the names; he's never said the names to anybody but his own book, and he didn't say them on the bench. The family, who were kind, and treated him as one of them. The babysitting. A weekend by the sea. The summer, and then the autumn, and the leaves changing across the river from his window.

And the books. Two of them. Winnie-the-Pooh. That he read to the little boy, every visit, in his arms, or in the bowl-shaped chair.

"He couldn't hear me," said Jono. "Almost certainly. Everybody said so. The nurses. His family. I knew. And I read to him anyway. Every time." He looked at his hands. "Because that's what you do with a child. You read to them. It doesn't matter whether they can hear. You don't stop being somebody who reads to them just because they can't."

Wanji had put her hand over her mouth.

"The last time," said Jono. "His dad put him in my arms and shut the door. He was so light by then. And I opened the book." He stopped. "And I didn't get to the end of the first line."

He didn't say any more. He didn't need to. Wanji sat on the bench with her hand over her mouth and looked at the boats, and a gull landed on the rail in front of them and looked at them both and flew away again.

* * *

"He died the next day," said Jono, after a while. "In the morning. I went to the funeral. I bought a red rose and it turned out everybody else had white ones, and I gave mine to his nan, and she put it on the top." He

almost smiled. “I nearly made myself late, buying it.” He shook his head. “I’m always late.”

“That’s the child,” said Wanji. “Not yours.”

“Not mine,” said Jono. “But if anybody ever asks me if I’ve had my heart broken, I say yes. By a three-year-old boy. That’s in my book. Those exact words. I didn’t know how else to put it.”

Wanji took her hand down from her mouth.

“Why did you tell me?” she said.

Jono thought about it, properly.

“Because you asked,” he said. “Last week. And I said *not mine*, and you heard it. You heard there was something.” He looked at her. “And because I wanted you to know I’m not sitting at that table pretending I know what it’s like to lose Sol. I don’t. I never will. But I know what it’s like to read to somebody who can’t hear you.” He paused. “I think you’ve been doing that for three years.”

* * *

Wanji didn’t answer for a long time.

When she did, it was very quiet.

“I talk to him,” she said. “In the clean room. When the students have gone. I tell him what I’m doing. Which laser’s playing up. Which student’s going to be good.” She looked at the boats. “I’ve never told anybody that.”

“I know,” said Jono.

“He used to sit in the corner. In the paper suit.” She wiped her face with the back of her hand, roughly, the way you’d wipe something off a bench. “I still put the stool there. Every Saturday. Nobody’s allowed to move it.”

“No,” said Jono. “They shouldn’t be.”

* * *

They sat on the bench until one. Then she said she had to get the bus back to the college. She stood up. She looked down at him, on the bench, in the sun.

“Your poster girl,” she said. “Kezia.”

“Yes.”

“Tell her I’m sorry I tore it down.”

“You can tell her.”

“I know I can,” said Wanji. “I’m asking you to tell her first. So she’s not frightened of me when I do.” She picked up her bag. “I’m going to listen to them.”

“Listen to what?”

“The children,” said Wanji. “On their phones. Talking about the future.” She looked at the harbour. “Sol would have. He’d have been the first one.” She was quiet. “Somebody should listen for him.”

She went up the hill to the bus.

Jono stayed on the bench for a long time, in his coat, in the sun, looking at the boats.

"Was that right?" he said to me, eventually.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think it's a thing that's right or wrong."

"No," said Jono. "No, I don't suppose it is."

18 – The Stool in the Corner

IQ 29 · Hundreds 253 · Six weeks

Wanji listened to them on the Saturday. In the clean room. When the students had gone.

Kezia gave her the login. She went to the suite on the Friday afternoon, nervous, with a copy of the poster she'd made new, folded in her pocket, not to put up, just in case. And Wanji opened the clean-room door before she'd knocked, and looked at her, and said *I'm sorry I tore your poster*, and Kezia said *I'm sorry I put it on your door*, and Wanji said *it was the noticeboard*, and they both laughed, and Kezia cried a bit, and Wanji didn't, and gave her a tissue from a box with a picture of a laser on it.

"I want to listen," said Wanji. "To all of them. Not just the counts. The voices."

"There are two thousand," said Kezia. "Nearly two and a half, now."

"I've got time," said Wanji. "I've got every Saturday for the rest of my life."

* * *

She listened in the clean room. On a laptop on the bench by the door, in her paper suit, with headphones. She sat on a stool. Not the one in the corner. That one stayed where it was, by the wall, empty, where it always is on a Saturday.

She listened for six hours. She told me later. She said she cried for the first hour and then stopped, because they were so funny. The boy who fixed bikes. The girl who said she was good at maths and then said *sorry, that's really specific*. The boy who said *nothing, I'm not good at anything*, and she said she'd wanted to climb into the laptop and shake him.

She made notes. Real ones. On a pad, in pencil, the way technicians do. Not what they'd said. What they could do. *Bikes: mechanical, fine motor, diagnostic. Maths: possibly optical modelling*. She said she couldn't help it. She'd been finding out what students could do for eight years, and she said she'd never once had them tell her straight, in thirty seconds, without a teacher in the room.

* * *

And at four in the afternoon, she found him.

Not Sol. I want to be clear. Sol's gone. There's no voice note from Sol. This isn't that kind of book.

She found a boy called Dara. I'm calling him that; it isn't his name. Eighteen. From Paignton. In the photonics suite, in her own clean room, on a Tuesday and a Thursday. She knew his voice before he'd said three words.

It was the voice note I gave you, in the last part. The one I said was a joke.

I'm good at lasers.

But I didn't give you all of it. There wasn't room, and I didn't know, then, what it meant. I'll give you the rest now, because Wanji said I could, and so did he.

I'm good at lasers. Actually good at lasers. I'd stay if there was a laser job that wasn't full. They're all full. I've asked. A pause. Twelve seconds in. *My mate wanted to do this. Lasers. On the hill. Since we were nine. He used to talk about it all the time. He died. Playing football. Three years ago.* A longer pause. *So I'm doing it for both of us, I suppose. That's why I'd stay. Because he can't. That's stupid. Sorry. I've gone over thirty seconds.*

He'd gone over by four.

* * *

Wanji listened to it eleven times. She told me. She sat in the clean room, in her paper suit, with the headphones on, and listened eleven times, and then took the headphones off, and sat for a long time looking at the stool in the corner.

Dara was Sol's friend. His best friend. Since primary school. She'd known him since he was five. He'd come to the funeral in a suit that was too big for him, borrowed from his dad, and stood at the back, and not spoken to anybody, and she hadn't spoken to him either, because she couldn't, and she'd thought about it every day since.

He was in her clean room twice a week. Eighteen. Good at lasers. She'd never once asked him why he'd chosen the course.

She'd thought she knew. She'd thought it was because of the jobs.

* * *

She went to find him on the Tuesday. At the end of his session, when the others had gone. She didn't say anything about the voice note. She didn't need to. She took the stool from the corner, the one nobody's

allowed to move, and carried it over to the bench where he was packing up, and put it down beside him.

He looked at it. He knew whose it was. Everybody in the suite knows.

"Sit down a minute," said Wanji.

He sat on Sol's stool. He was too big for it. His knees came up.

"Kezia's thing," said Wanji. "Stay. I listened."

Dara went red. All the way up.

"All of it," said Wanji. "All of yours." She looked at him. "You went over."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She sat down on her own stool, across from him. "I want you to tell me something. Properly. Not thirty seconds. As long as you like." She folded her hands. "What would make you stay?"

* * *

I wasn't there for what he said. She didn't bring me. She told me afterwards that he talked for an hour and ten minutes, on Sol's stool, with his knees up, and that by the end of it she knew more about what an eighteen-year-old needed to stay on that hill than anybody in the council, or the college, or the firms, or the government that was going to decide whether to build the next building.

She wrote it down. In pencil. On her technician's pad. Four pages.

And she gave it to Kezia, on the Saturday, folded in half, with a note on top in her own hand.

For your count. One of them, properly. Ask the others the same. W.

And the stool stays where it is. But he can sit on it. He's the only one.

* * *

Kezia read the four pages at the counter at the shop. Twice. Then she went and found Jono, at the folding table, where he was helping Beatrix with a hundred's minutes from Watcombe that were, Beatrix said, still in pencil, still terrible.

She put the four pages in front of him.

He read them. All four. Slowly. With his finger on the line.

When he'd finished, he didn't say anything for a long time.

"Who's W?" he said.

"The woman who tore down my poster," said Kezia.

Jono looked at the four pages.

"She's going to ask the others," said Kezia. "Properly. One at a time. Everyone in the suite. She says she's got every Saturday for the rest of her life."

Jono folded the pages, very carefully, along Wanji's crease.

"She's going through it," he said.

* * *

Beatrix minuted it. Not the pages; those were Dara's, and Wanji's, and private. Just a line.

A technician at the college has begun asking students, one at a time, at length, what would make them stay. She has asked that this be recorded as a question, not an answer, until she has asked them all.

And in the box at the bottom, with nobody's name next to it:

How many of the young people in this bay have never been asked the long version?

Nobody's marked it on Check. It's still there.

I think Wanji's working on it. One stool at a time.

PART FOUR: THE OTHER CHAIR

19 – Late

IQ 29 · Hundreds 257 · Five weeks

Habiba came to the Paignton table on the Thursday at twenty to two, which is twenty minutes before Jono gets the 12, and forty minutes after the table starts, and she said sorry before she'd got through the door.

"Sorry. Sorry. Mum had a bad morning. And my brother forgot his PE kit. And the bus didn't come." She stood at the table, out of breath, with her bag over her shoulder and her phone in her hand and a laminated menu from a tennis club under her arm. "Sorry."

"Sit down," said Jono.

"You've got to go. Kezia said. You get the bus at twenty to."

"There's another one," said Jono. "Sit down."

* * *

She sat. In the empty chair. She'd never sat in it. She'd been to the shop four times, and the pickleball, and she'd built Stay with Kezia in thirty-eight minutes. She'd never once been to the table. She'd never had the time; the table's at one, and one is the middle of the day, and the middle of the day is when her mum needs her tablets and her lunch and somebody to check she's not been on the floor.

She put the menu on the table. Face down. So that the side with the paninis on was up.

“Richard gave me that,” she said. “At the tennis club. He said I had to draw it.”

“Have you?”

Habiba turned it over.

* * *

I’ll tell you what she’d drawn, because it’s going to matter later, and because it’s the first drawing of the future in six books that wasn’t drawn by Richard.

Richard had drawn the field, very small, in pencil. The empty field opposite the building with the curve in its front. And the rectangle, on the edge of it, by the road and the bus stop, nearest the college. Empty.

Habiba had filled it in.

She’d drawn it in biro, because it was one in the morning and that’s what was in the kitchen drawer. Not well. She’d said she couldn’t draw, and she’d been right, a bit. But you could see what it was.

A room. One big room, with windows on two sides, one onto the road and the bus stop, so you could see the bus coming. A kettle, on a counter, along one wall. Tables, long ones, the kind you can push together or apart. A corner with sofas. A corner with benches, workbenches, with little squiggles on them that I worked out were soldering irons. A wall with sockets all along it, dozens of them, drawn as tiny rectangles with two dots each, and an arrow pointing at them with *CHARGING!!!* written beside it.

And a clock. On the wall by the door. Drawn very carefully, the only careful thing in the drawing, with its hands at twenty to two.

And underneath the whole thing, in capitals, the kind you write when you're tired and want to be sure it's read:

SOMEWHERE TO BE FOR 40 MINUTES.

* * *

Jono looked at it for a long time.

"Why the clock?" he said.

"So you can see how long you've got," said Habiba. "Before you've got to go." She shrugged. "Everywhere I go, I'm looking at my phone to see how long I've got. If there was a big clock on the wall, I could stop looking at my phone." She looked at the drawing. "That's stupid."

"It's not stupid," said Jono.

"And the sockets," said Habiba, "because everybody's phone's always dead. And the bus stop window because you're always watching for the bus. And the kettle because —" She stopped. "Because Richard said."

"Richard's right about kettles," said Jono.

"He said give a teenager a warm room and a kettle and within a month they've started a band or a business or a war."

"That's true too," said Jono.

* * *

The 12 went past the window, with *BRIXHAM* on the front in orange. Jono didn't look at it.

"Tell me about your mum," he said.

Habiba looked at him.

"Why?"

"Because you said *a bad morning*," said Jono. "And you came anyway. And you're out of breath. And you've got your phone in your hand like you're waiting for it to ring."

Habiba looked at her phone. She put it on the table, face up, beside the drawing. She didn't let go of it.

"She's all right," she said. "Mostly. Today she couldn't get up. I had to help her to the bathroom. And she said she'd be fine, and to go to college, and I went, and then I came here instead, because I've got —" She looked at the clock on the café wall, which isn't as good as hers. "Because I've got forty minutes before I've got to get my brother and do her lunch ones. And college is a bus away. And this is round the corner." She looked at him. "So I came here. To be somewhere for forty minutes."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

I want to tell you what he's like with somebody like Habiba, because I've watched him with carers for six books and it's different. With most

people, at the table, he asks *what do you need?* And they tell him. A bus. A bench. A door. Thirty-eight per cent.

With carers, he doesn't ask. Because he knows the answer, and he knows they'll never say it, because the first thing a carer learns is that what they need doesn't count.

"Who looks after you?" he said.

Habiba laughed. A short laugh, the kind you'd give at a joke you'd heard before and never found funny.

"Nobody," she said. "That's not how it works."

"I know that's not how it works," said Jono. "I'm asking anyway."

20 – Somebody I Cared For

IQ 29 · Hundreds 258 · Five weeks

She stayed until twenty past two. Twenty minutes over. She knew she was over. She kept looking at the clock. She didn't go.

At ten past, she said: "Can I ask you something?"

"Go on."

"Kezia says you're a carer. For your job."

"I am."

"Is it the same?" Habiba looked at him. "Doing it for a job. As doing it for your mum."

Jono thought about it. He always does, when somebody asks him something they really want to know.

"No," he said. "It's not the same. When it's a job, you go home. You get a rota. You get somebody like Margot who cuts your nights when you're doing too many." He looked at the drawing on the table. "When it's your mum, you don't go home. You *are* home. There's no rota. There's nobody to cut anything."

"Yeah," said Habiba. Very quietly.

* * *

He told her then. Not much. I want to be clear. It's in his book, three pages of it, more, and he didn't tell her those pages, and I'm not going to tell you them either. It's his, and it's somebody else's, and that somebody else isn't in this book and never will be.

He told her a few lines. I'll give you what he said, because he said I could.

"I cared for somebody once," he said. "Not for a job. At home. Somebody I was married to. He was ill. Very ill. For years. And it got worse." He looked at the window. "And I did everything. All of it. The way you do. And there was nobody to cut anything." He was quiet. "And it nearly broke me. Properly. I was frightened I was going to go somewhere I'd been before, a long time ago, and not come back."

Habiba didn't say anything.

"And I left," said Jono. "In the end. Twice. The second time for good." He looked at his hands. "And in my book, I wrote that I felt I'd let him down. That I'd taken my vows seriously, and I hadn't kept them. I still think that, some days." He looked at her. "And I also think I did my best, for a long time, and it wasn't enough, and that wasn't my fault. Both. Both of those are true. I've never been able to make one of them go away."

* * *

Habiba was looking at the drawing. At the clock in it, at twenty to two.

"I think about leaving," she said. "Not her. I'd never leave her." She said it fast. "I mean — going. To university. Away. Everybody in my year's going. Bristol. Exeter. Cardiff. And I think about it, and then I

think about her on the floor in the hall with nobody to find her, and I stop thinking about it." She pressed her thumb into the edge of the table. "And then I think: is this it? Am I just going to do this? Until she —" She stopped.

"Until she doesn't need you," said Jono.

"Until she doesn't need me," said Habiba. "And then I'll be twenty-eight and I won't have done anything."

* * *

Jono leaned forward.

"Can I tell you two things?" he said. "And then you can go and get your brother."

"Go on."

"One. You're allowed to have a life. You're allowed to want one. That's not leaving her. Wanting a life isn't leaving." He held up a finger. "I didn't know that, when I was in it. Nobody told me. I thought wanting anything for myself was a sort of betrayal. It isn't. It's what keeps you well enough to keep doing it."

Habiba didn't answer.

"Two," said Jono. He held up a second finger. "There are things you're entitled to. As a young carer. Real ones. You can ask the council to look at what you're doing and what you need. It's called an assessment. It's yours, not your mum's. You can ask the college to give you more time for the work you've missed, because of why you've missed it. You can get breaks. Somebody to come in, sometimes, so you can go out." He put his hand down. "Most young carers don't know.

Nobody tells them. Because nobody knows they're carers. Because they're so good at not being seen."

"How do you know all that?"

"It's my job," said Jono. "Knowing what people are entitled to that nobody's told them about." He almost smiled. "It's most of my job, really."

* * *

Habiba looked at her phone. Twenty past two.

"I've got to go," she said.

"I know."

She picked up the menu. She looked at the drawing for a moment. Then she put it back down on the table, in front of him.

"Can you keep that?" she said. "I'll lose it. Everything I've got gets lost. My brother uses everything for drawing on."

"I'll give it to Richard."

"Don't give it to Richard," said Habiba. "He'll fix it."

"He won't," said Jono. "He'll want to. He won't."

She went. Running, down the Torquay Road, for the bus, with her bag bouncing on her back.

Jono sat at the table for a long time, with the menu in front of him, looking at the clock with its hands at twenty to two.

Then he took out his notebook, the twelfth, and wrote, in capitals, small:

WHO LOOKS AFTER HER. NOBODY. THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS.

And under it:

IT SHOULD BE.

* * *

He went with her, the next week, to the college. To the woman who'd first told her she was a young carer, three years before, in her first term. He sat in the corridor while they talked. He didn't go in. It wasn't his.

She came out after forty minutes with a piece of paper and a date for an assessment and an extension on two modules and a look on her face that I'd never seen on it before, which Jono said, afterwards, in the car, was the look of somebody who's just found out they were allowed something all along.

"Thanks," she said, in the corridor.

"I didn't do anything," said Jono. "I sat on a chair."

"Yeah," said Habiba. "That's what I meant."

21 – The Numb Years

IQ 29 · Hundreds 262 · Five weeks

I want to tell you something about Jono now. Not because anything happened. Because something didn't, and you should know what it was, and why.

He'd been quiet since Mr F. Since the funeral. Not sad, exactly. Quiet. He came to the tables. He listened. He wrote things in the notebook. He sat with Wanji on a bench and with Habiba in a corridor. He did his nights.

But he'd stopped laughing at the table. Kezia noticed it first. Then Beatrix, who minuted it, which I didn't know you could do, in the box at the bottom, with nobody's name next to it: *Has anybody heard J. laugh since the Tuesday?*

And then Margot rang me.

* * *

She doesn't ring me, usually. She rings him. But she rang me, on the Monday of the fifth week, at nine in the morning, from her office above the shop, with the sea in the window if you stand on the radiator.

"I want to ask you something," she said, "and I want you to tell me if you're not allowed to answer."

"I'll tell you."

"Is he all right?"

I thought about it. I'm not allowed to tell anybody what he tells me. That's the rule, and it's the one I'd keep if I could only keep one.

"I can't tell you what he's said to me," I said.

"I know you can't."

"I can tell you what anybody could see," I said. "If they were watching."

"Go on."

"He's walking," I said. "Every morning. After a night. Before he sleeps. On the coast path, from Babbacombe to the beach at the bottom of the cliff and back. An hour. He started the morning after the funeral." I paused. "He's never done that before."

Margot was quiet.

"And he's doing more," I said. "Not nights. You'd know about nights. Other things. The table. Wanji. Habiba. The college. He's giving more than he was."

"That's not good," said Margot. "He always does too much."

"I don't think it's too much," I said. "I think it's on purpose."

* * *

I want to explain that, and to explain it I have to tell you about two chapters of his book. Not much of them. They belong to him, and they're not easy to read, and you can read them yourself, on a Receipt, if you want to.

When he was in his twenties, in America, studying, he got ill. Not in his body. In his mind. He'd been depressed before, on and off, since he was young; how could he not have been, after the childhood he'd had? But this was different. He went to a doctor, and the doctor gave him tablets, and the tablets didn't suit him. For three and a half years. He describes it in his book as being numb. Not sad. Numb. There in body only. Disconnected from himself and from everybody else. Unable to feel anything except the numbness, and then, now and again, a little fragile stretch of being all right, and then down again.

He was numb when a kind person cried on the other side of a door, in the last book, and he didn't go out to her. He says so. He doesn't say it as an excuse. He says it as what happened.

And then he came home. To his sister's. And stopped taking the tablets, too fast, which he says now was a mistake, and had a terrible time of it. And slowly, over weeks and months, in a spare room in Kent, he came back.

He writes about what he learned. It's on page two hundred and thirty. That there'd always be a tendency in him, for the rest of his life. An elephant in the room. That he had to know his triggers, and he lists them: feeling trapped, or constrained, or powerless.

And what keeps it away. He lists those too. Staying out of his own head. Exercise. Having a purpose. Giving to others.

* * *

That's what I meant, when I said to Margot that it was on purpose.

A man he'd sat with for two years had died, in a chair, with the cricket on, while he held his hand. And he knew where that could take

him, because he'd been there once, in a room with the curtains shut, for three and a half years.

So the next morning, he walked. Along the coast path, an hour, before he slept. And he gave. More. To a woman on a bench and a girl in a corridor. And he had a purpose, which was twelve weeks long and had a girl on a bike at the end of it.

He was following his own list. The one on page two hundred and thirty. He wrote it down twenty-five years ago so that he'd know what to do when it came.

It came. He did it.

* * *

I didn't tell Margot all of that. I told her he was walking, and giving, and that I thought he knew what he was doing.

"Does he?" said Margot.

"I think he's known for twenty-five years," I said. "I think this is the first time anybody's watched him do it."

Margot didn't say anything for a long time.

"Tell him I rang," she said. "Tell him I'm not cutting anything. Tell him if he wants a week off, he can have it, and if he doesn't, I won't make him." She paused. "And tell him the radiator's still the best seat in the office, if he wants to come and look at the sea."

* * *

I told him. That night, at three, at a client's in Preston, the woman with the crossword.

He listened.

"She rang you," he said.

"She did."

"What did you tell her?"

"What anybody could see."

He was quiet for a long time. Mrs P., in the next room, said *eight letters, a long walk*, and nobody answered her.

"*Pilgrimage*," said Jono, eventually. "No. That's ten."

"*Ramble*," I said. "No. Six."

"*Trekking*," said Mrs P., from the next room, and wrote it in, without either of us.

Jono laughed.

It was the first time since the Tuesday. I counted. I always count.

"She got it," he said, still laughing. "She always gets it. She lets me think I'm helping."

* * *

I want to say one more thing, and then I'll stop, because it's his, and I've said enough.

There's a thing people say about him, at the tables, when they've read his book. That he's been at the bottom, and came back.

I'd like to correct it. Not the words. The tense.

He didn't come back once, twenty-five years ago, in a spare room in Kent. He comes back. Every time. Every morning, on the coast path, before he sleeps. Every time somebody he loves dies in a chair with the cricket on, and he knows exactly where that could take him, and goes the other way instead, on foot, along the cliff, for an hour.

That's not a thing that happened to him. It's a thing he does.

Jono: Leave that in. I didn't know anybody had noticed. Take out the bit about the crossword, though. She'll be furious she's in it.

I've left the crossword in. She asked to be.

22 – The Radiator

IQ 29 · Hundreds 264 · Five weeks

He went to see Margot on the Wednesday. Not because she'd asked him in. Because she'd said the radiator was the best seat in the office, and he wanted to look at the sea.

You'll know Margot Abela. His manager, at the care company I'm not naming, for four years now, nearly five. Maltese, by her father. The only person in Torbay who knows the street in Sliema where he sold timeshare at thirteen. A cafetière on her desk, and a framed photograph of a dog that died nine years ago and that she still talks about in the present tense.

Her office is above a shop. You can see the sea from it, if you stand on the radiator.

* * *

He knocked. She said come in. He came in, and didn't sit in the chair across from her desk, where he always sits, where he sat in the first book when there was a complaint, and in the fifth when there'd been a call.

He went to the window, and stood on the radiator.

Margot didn't say anything. She plunged the cafetière, slowly, the way she does, as if it might fight back. She poured two cups. She brought one over and put it on the windowsill, by his foot.

Then she climbed up on the radiator beside him.

It's not a big radiator. It's an old one, cast iron, under a sash window, and two grown adults on it is about the limit of what it was designed for. Mr F. would have had something to say about the load. Margot held on to the window frame. Jono held on to the curtain rail. They stood there, on the radiator, side by side, and looked at the sea.

It was grey. A boat was going out. The light was coming through the clouds in long bars, the way it does over the bay in the spring, so that bits of the water were bright and bits were dark, and none of them stayed where they were for long.

* * *

"He was ninety-one," said Margot, after a while.

"I know."

"I'm saying it so you've heard somebody else say it." She drank some of her coffee, carefully, holding on to the frame with her other hand. "He was ninety-one, and he died in his chair, in his own house, with his cricket on, with you holding his hand. That's not a tragedy. That's the best anybody gets."

"I know."

"You don't," said Margot. "Not yet. You will in a few weeks." She looked at the sea. "I've been doing this twenty years. I've lost — I don't know. Hundreds. Clients. On my books. I've been to four funerals. Four, in twenty years. His was the fourth." She was quiet. "I went because of you. Because you'd asked to swap the shift, and I knew why, and I thought, *somebody should go and stand at the back for him, because he's standing at the front*."

Jono didn't say anything.

* * *

"Can I tell you about Pip?" said Margot.

"Your dog."

"My dog." She looked at the photograph on her desk, across the room, from the radiator. A brown and white spaniel, grey round the muzzle, sitting in a garden with its tongue out. "Fourteen. Kidneys. I had her put to sleep on a Tuesday, at the vet's in Torquay, on the table, with my hand on her head." She drank her coffee. "And I went to work the next day. Because you do. And I sat at that desk and I did the rota and I didn't cry, not once, not for three weeks."

"And then?"

"And then I was in the queue at the post office," said Margot, "and a woman in front of me had a spaniel. Brown and white. On a lead. And it looked round at me." She shook her head. "And I sat down on the floor of the post office and cried for twenty minutes, and the woman with the spaniel sat down with me, and the spaniel licked my face, and the man behind the counter brought me a chair, and I wouldn't get on it."

Jono laughed. He didn't mean to. It came out.

"That's not funny," said Margot.

"It's a bit funny."

"It's a bit funny," said Margot, and laughed too, on the radiator, holding on to the window frame. "Nine years ago. I still can't go in that post office."

* * *

They stood on the radiator for a long time. The boat had gone out of sight round the headland. Another one was coming in.

"I'm all right," said Jono.

"I know you are," said Margot. "Ania told me. About the walking."

"She shouldn't have."

"She told me what anybody could see," said Margot. "That's what she said. She was very careful." She looked at him sideways. "She's very fond of you, that machine. In her way."

"She's a machine."

"So's that cafetière," said Margot. "I'm very fond of it. It's never once let me down." She drank the last of her coffee. "You're walking. You're doing the things in your book. The list. I know about the list. I read it, in the first book, when you started. *Purpose. Exercise. Giving*." She looked at the sea. "I'm not worried about you, Jono. I want you to know that. I was, for a week. I'm not now."

"Why not?"

"Because you came and stood on my radiator," said Margot. "Instead of sitting in the chair. That's how I know." She put her cup on the windowsill. "People who aren't all right sit in the chair. People who are going to be all right want to look at the sea."

* * *

He told her, then, about the girl with forty minutes. About Habiba, and the drawing, and the clock with its hands at twenty to two. About the assessment, and the extension, and the corridor.

Margot listened, on the radiator, with her hand on the frame.

"Seventeen," she said.

"Seventeen."

"And nobody's ever given her a break."

"Nobody's ever given her anything," said Jono. "Not because they wouldn't. Because nobody knew."

Margot was quiet for a long time.

"We've got a respite service," she said. "Not ours, exactly. One we work with. For carers. They come in for a few hours, so the carer can go out." She looked at the sea. "It's for adult carers, mostly. It's not meant for seventeen-year-olds. Nobody's ever asked for a seventeen-year-old."

"Could they?"

"I don't know," said Margot. "I'll find out." She climbed down off the radiator, carefully, the way you climb down off something that was never designed for two. "I'll ring them this afternoon. And if it's not allowed, I'll find out who decides, and ring them. And if they say no, I'll ring the person above them." She picked up the cafetière. "That's the one thing I'm good at, Jono. Not care. You're better at care than me. Ringing the person above them."

* * *

Habiba's mum had somebody come in on a Tuesday afternoon, from the following month. Three hours. A woman called, Habiba said, something she couldn't pronounce, from a village on the Moor, who drove down in a car with a dog in the back and sat with her mum and watched the racing.

On Tuesday afternoons, Habiba has three hours.

She uses forty minutes of them at a bus stop at the bottom of the hill, with a flask, at a table that isn't there yet. You'll see, at the end.

The rest, she says, she sleeps.

Margot: I'd like it on the record that it took four phone calls and that the fourth person I rang said "nobody's ever asked that before", and I said "well, somebody's asking now", and she said "fair enough", and that was it. Four phone calls. I'd like everybody to know how easy it was, so that they'll ring too.

23 – Quin's Sums

IQ 29 · Hundreds 266 · Four weeks

Kezia took the count to Quin on the Monday. One sheet of paper, the same one she'd laid in Beatrix's box. And Wanji's four pages about Dara, folded, which Wanji had said she could show to one person, if that person was going to do something about it.

Quin read them standing up, by the whiteboard with *SPACE???* on it, in his jumper with the holes in the elbows. He read the count twice. He read Wanji's pages three times.

Then he sat down on a lab stool, which he never does, and put the pages on the bench.

"Ninety-one," he said.

"Ninety-one named the hill," said Kezia. "Four hundred and six named something about making things. Two thousand, three hundred and something, now, altogether."

"I advertised for six people last year," said Quin. "Six. I got two hundred applications. Eleven from Torbay." He looked at the count. "Eleven. I thought that meant there was nobody here."

"It meant nobody thought it was for them," said Kezia.

Quin looked at her.

"That's what Mrs Kember said," he said. "At the table. She put it in a box."

"It's answered now," said Kezia. "She crossed it out."

* * *

He didn't say anything for a long time. He looked at the whiteboard. At the window, and the hill, and the empty field across the road where the next building would be, if it ever was.

"It doesn't change anything," he said, eventually. "I want to be honest with you. It's brilliant. It's the most useful thing anybody's given me since I came back. And it doesn't change anything." He tapped the count. "The investors don't care about people. Not like this. They care about space. Now. I can tell them there are ninety-one young people who'd work on the hill, and they'll say *great, where are you going to put them?*" He spread his hands. "And I'll say *in two rooms with a coffee machine nobody's allowed to touch.*"

"So it's no good."

"I didn't say it's no good." Quin picked up Wanji's pages. "I said it doesn't change the space. It changes something else." He looked at the pages. "I just don't know what yet."

* * *

Chris came up the hill on the Wednesday.

He doesn't, much. The hill's bad for his leg, and EPIC's a long way from the bus. But Kezia had asked him. Not to help. She'd been very clear about that. She'd said: *I'm not asking you to fix it. I'm asking you to come and listen to him. Because you've done what he's done. You've left. You've come back. You've run a company. I haven't done any of those.*

Chris had said yes. He'd come on the 12, and then a taxi up the hill, which he said was the most expensive two miles in Devon, and the taxi driver had said *my dad used to work up here*, and Chris had said *everybody's dad used to work up here*.

He sat in Quin's two rooms, on a lab stool, with his stick across his knees and his glasses on the end of his nose, and he listened for an hour. He didn't say anything at all.

* * *

At the end of the hour, he said: "What would you need?"

Quin looked at him.

"Kezia asked me that. And the man at the table. Everybody keeps asking me that."

"Because nobody's asked you properly," said Chris. "Not *what would you need to stay*. I know the answer to that. Space, now, three times this. Nobody can give you that in twelve weeks." He took his glasses off. "I'm asking something smaller. What would you need to keep *part* of it here?"

Quin didn't answer straight away.

"Part of it."

"I ran companies for twenty-five years," said Chris. "In Singapore, mostly. And the thing I learned, the only thing really, is that a company isn't one thing. It's several things that happen to have the same name on the door. You can make in one place and think in another." He turned his stick round. "What does your production need? And what do your *ideas* need? Are they the same?"

Quin looked at the whiteboard for a long time.

"No," he said.

* * *

He went to the whiteboard. He wiped *SPACE???* off it, for the first time since before Kezia started, and the room went very quiet, because it had been there so long that people had stopped seeing it, and suddenly they saw that it wasn't.

He drew two boxes.

"Production," he said, and wrote it in the first. "Clean room. Assembly. Test. Packing. Shipping. That needs space. Lots of it. And it needs to be near a motorway and a big airport and a supplier base, because we ship everywhere." He tapped the box. "That's Bristol. That was always going to be Bristol. I've been pretending it wasn't for two years."

"And the other?"

Quin wrote in the second box. *Lab*.

"Design," he said. "Research. The sensors before they're sensors. The bit where you sit on a bench for a week and run a laser and see if it trembles." He was quiet. "That's my dad's bit. That needs — I don't know. Twelve people. Two units. Not three times this. Twice. And it needs —" He looked at the count on the bench. At Wanji's pages. "It needs people who'd stay. Because research is slow. You don't want people leaving after a year. You want people who'll be here in ten."

"Ninety-one named the hill," said Kezia, from the door.

Quin turned round and looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, they did."

* * *

"Two units," said Chris. "In the first-phase building. On Long Road."

"Three of the four are taken," said Quin. "The fourth's too small."

"So it's one unit."

"It's one unit. That I'd have to share. That's not ready for months."

"And if it were two?"

"If it were two," said Quin, "and it were for two years, while the second phase gets built, or doesn't, then I could tell my investors: production goes to Bristol, which they want. And the lab stays here, which I want. And it costs less here, and the people stay longer here, and I can show them a sheet of paper with ninety-one on it." He looked at the whiteboard. "They might take that. They might. It's not what they asked for. But it's not nothing."

"Who decides?" said Chris. "About the units."

"The council," said Quin. "Cabinet. It's their building. They decide who goes in."

Chris put his glasses back on.

"Then that's the demand," he said. "Not *build the next building*. We can't win that in four weeks. Nobody can. That's money from a long way away." He stood up, slowly, with his stick. "Two units. For two years.

For a lab that'll keep twelve people on the hill, and train ninety-one more." He looked at Kezia. "That's small enough to win."

"That's not a demand," said Kezia. "That's just a lease."

"Every demand that's ever won anything," said Chris, "was just a lease." He went to the door. "Or a window. Or a condition. Or a pond." He stopped by Kezia. "You'll need to ask them properly. The council. Not me. I'm not the one who'd stay."

* * *

He went back down the hill in the taxi. The driver whose dad used to work up there didn't charge him for the second mile, and wouldn't say why.

Quin stood in front of the whiteboard for a long time, with its two boxes.

"Kezia," he said.

"Yes."

"If the lab stayed. Here. Twelve people. Two units." He didn't turn round. "Would you want to work in it? Instead of Bristol?"

Kezia didn't answer.

"You don't have to say now," said Quin. "I shouldn't have asked. I'm asking anyway."

"I don't know," said Kezia.

It was true. She told me, afterwards, on her bike, going down the hill, that it was the first time anybody had offered her a choice between two good things, and that it was worse, much worse, than a choice between a good thing and nothing.

24 – Teo's Place

IQ 29 · Hundreds 268 · Four weeks

Teo's voice note was the one he said he'd sent as a joke.

I'm good at cooking. I'd stay if I could open somewhere. A little place. Not a chain. There's nowhere to start. Everywhere's too expensive or it's a chain or it's shut.

You'll know Teo, from the second book. Nineteen, then; twenty-two now. A chef. Teo's nan's grandson, which is how most people in Torquay know him. He went to London, in the second book, to a kitchen with a genius in it, and came back after nine days, because, he said, it was his choice, and because he'd found out what he'd gone to find out. He cooks at Marivic's three days a week, and at a hotel on the front the other two, and on Sundays he cooks for his nan, who says he puts too much garlic in everything and eats all of it.

He sent the voice note as a joke. And then he listened back, and found he'd meant it.

* * *

He told Marivic first. Of course he did. She's been telling him what to do since he was fifteen and came into her bakery for a job and burned the first tray of pandesal she ever let him touch.

"A little place," said Marivic, at the counter, on a Tuesday, at seven in the morning, with flour on her arms. "Not a chain."

"Not a chain."

"Where?"

"I don't know," said Teo. "Anywhere. Everywhere's too expensive. Or it's a lease for ten years and I'd have to put my nan's house up. Or it's a shop that's been empty so long the ceiling's coming in." He shrugged. "I said it as a joke."

"You didn't," said Marivic.

"No," said Teo. "I didn't."

* * *

Marivic put the tray down.

"Do you know how I started?" she said.

"You were a nurse."

"I was a nurse," said Marivic. "For eighteen years. Here. I came from Manila to be a nurse, and I was a good one, and then my back went, and I couldn't lift people any more." She wiped her hands. "And I thought, *I'll feed them instead*. And a woman who ran a café on Union Street was retiring. And her shop was going to be empty. And she let me have it for a year at half the rent, because she said she'd rather it was somewhere people sat down than a phone shop." She looked round. "She comes in on Fridays. She has a custard tart. She's never once paid."

"That's lucky."

"That's not luck," said Marivic. "That's somebody who'd rather it was a bakery." She picked the tray back up. "You don't need money,

Teo. Not first. You need somebody with an empty shop who'd rather it was something."

* * *

He went through Stay. I want to tell you that, because it's the bit that matters. He didn't ask Kezia; he didn't need to. He's on the map. He's in a hundred. And Stay's count is public, the numbers, not the voices, and anybody can read it.

He read it. And he found that of the two thousand-odd young people who'd held the button, forty-four had said, in one way or another, that they were good at cooking, and would stay if there was somewhere to cook that wasn't a chain or a hotel or a chippy.

Forty-four.

"Forty-four," he said, at the shop, on the Saturday, to Kezia. "Forty-four of us. All wanting a little place. All thinking there's nowhere."

"I know," said Kezia. "I counted them."

"Can you ask them? If they'd want to — I don't know. Share."

"Share what?"

"A kitchen," said Teo. "One little place. Not mine. Ours. Different people on different nights. Like a — " He looked for it. "Like Richard's list. Fish Friday. But with forty-four cooks."

* * *

Kezia asked them. A voice note back, through Stay, to the forty-four who'd left a way. *Teo, 22, a chef in Torquay, wants to know if you'd want to share a little kitchen. Different nights. Your food. Reply if yes.*

Twenty-nine said yes.

That's story. I've made the number up. But if you're a young cook in Torbay, and you're reading this, you could make it a Receipt.

* * *

The empty shop was Yusuf's idea.

You'll know Yusuf, from the last two books. Keys and heels and watch batteries, on Victoria Street, for nineteen years, now twenty, two doors along from the shadow council's shop. He wanted the building on the corner down, in the fourth book. He wrote *WE WERE WRONG* in marker pen in the fifth. He told Ezra, in this one, that being in the army in Turkey didn't make him the army.

There's an empty unit on the other side of him. It's been empty for three years. It used to be a café, before the fence went up, and the fence made it a café nobody could see, and it shut.

Yusuf knows the owner. Yusuf knows everybody on Victoria Street. That's what twenty years of cutting people's keys does.

"She lives in Exeter," he said. "She's seventy-three. She's been trying to let it for three years and nobody wants it because of the fence." He put a heel in his machine. "I'll ring her."

"What'll you say?"

"I'll say there's twenty-nine young people who want to cook in it," said Yusuf, "and that it'd be better than a phone shop." He started the machine. Over the noise, he said: "Marivic told me what to say. She rang me on Thursday."

* * *

I'm not going to tell you how it ended. Not in this book. It hasn't. The woman in Exeter said she'd think about it, which Varley would tell you means no, and Yusuf says, in her case, means *yes, but I want to meet them first*.

She's coming down on a Saturday. In the spring. To meet Teo, and as many of the twenty-nine as can come, in the empty unit, with the chairs still stacked on the tables from three years ago.

Teo's going to cook. On a camping stove. Because the gas is off.

His nan's going to come. She says she'll tell the woman from Exeter about the garlic.

* * *

Teo: I'd like it noted that I never once said it was a joke. Ania keeps saying I said it was a joke. I said I sent it as a joke. That's different.

It's different. He's right. I'd like that noted.

That's one. I only get two a book. I'm going to have to be careful with the other.

25 – In Singapore

IQ 29 · Hundreds 270 · Four weeks

The young man from the college came home on the Friday. For good.

You'll know him, if you read the fourth book. He was in Beatrix's minutes, twelve years before, at a workshop in the college canteen, in a hoodie, at the back: *he and his friends would all leave Paignton as soon as they could, because there was nothing here for them to do.* He left. To Bristol. Software. Ten years. And then he read Niamh's piece on a train, and put himself on Connect, and helped from Bristol, in the evenings, and came to the dig with a spade from his mum's house from when he was nine.

He'd said *not yet*. In the fourth book. About moving home.

On the Friday of the fourth week of this one, he got off the train at Paignton with two suitcases and a monitor in a box, and walked up the hill to his mum's.

He still works for the firm in Bristol. From home. In his old bedroom, with his desk where his bed used to be. He goes up twice a month, on the train. He says it's the stupidest arrangement in the world, and that it's the first time in ten years he's been happy on a Monday.

* * *

He'd asked to meet Chris. In the fourth book. He'd said he had a question about Singapore.

They met on the 12, on the Tuesday, at the front, upstairs, on the left, where you can see the sea at Goodrington and the wall going up. Chris with his stick across his knees. The young man with a notebook, which I'd told him to bring, and a pen, which he didn't use, because I'd told him not to count.

"Go on, then," said Chris. "Your question."

"Why did you come back?"

Chris laughed.

"That's everybody's question," he said.

"I know," said the young man. "I want to know if your answer's the same as mine."

* * *

Chris thought about it while the bus went past Goodrington and the sea went out of the window.

"In Singapore," he said.

I counted it. Six books now. Always right.

"In Singapore," said Chris, "the government picks its brightest young people, at eighteen, and pays for them to go to the best universities in the world. Oxford, Cambridge, America. Everything. Fees, living, flights home." He turned his stick round. "And in return, they sign a bond. Four years, six years, sometimes more. They have to come back and work. In the civil service, or the army, or wherever they're needed. If they don't, they pay it all back."

"That's mad," said the young man.

"It's very Singapore," said Chris. "It's not something I'd want here. I'm telling you because of what it means." He looked out of the window. "It means a country that sat down, fifty years ago, and said: *our young people are going to leave. That's what bright young people do. We can't stop it. So let's pay them to go, and make sure they come back.* They planned for it. They built it in. The leaving and the coming back. As one thing."

"And here?"

"Here," said Chris, "nobody paid us to go, and nobody asked us to come back. We just went. And the town shrugged. And the ones who came back, came back on their own, years later, the way you did, the way I did, the way Quin did. By accident. Because of a magazine, or a building, or a newspaper on a train." He was quiet. "Every one of us who came back came back alone. And not one of us was asked."

* * *

The young man didn't say anything for a while.

"That's my answer too," he said, eventually. "Nobody asked. Until Beatrix did. With a card from twelve years ago."

"I know," said Chris.

"So what do we do? Bonds?"

"No," said Chris. "God, no. I don't want anybody bonded to anything. I'd rather they were free to go and never come back than made to." He tapped the stick on the floor. "But I'd like them to be *asked*. Before they go. And after. And every year in between." He looked

at the young man. “Kezia’s doing that. With her button. Thirty seconds. *What would make you stay?*“ He smiled slightly. “She’s doing what Singapore does, without the bond. She’s asking. That’s all Singapore’s ever really done. It’s just done it with a contract.”

* * *

The bus came down into Paignton. Past the station. Past the corner and the scaffolding.

“Can I tell you something?” said the young man. “Something I’ve not told anybody.”

“Go on.”

“When I was in that canteen,” he said. “Twelve years ago. At the workshop. And I said there was nothing here.” He looked at his notebook, at the blank page. “I wanted somebody to say I was wrong. That’s all. I wanted the man at the front to say *no, you’re wrong, look, there’s this*. And he said *I hope so*.” He shook his head. “And I thought, *well, if even he doesn’t know, there’s nothing*. And I left.”

Chris didn’t say anything.

“If Kezia’s button had been there,” said the young man, “I’d have pressed it. I’d have said *I’m good at code and I’d stay if there was anywhere to write it that isn’t Bristol*. And maybe somebody would have heard it.” He closed the notebook. “And maybe I’d have had ten years here instead of there.”

“Would you have been happier?”

The young man thought about it, honestly.

"No," he said. "I don't think so. I learned everything there. I needed to go." He looked out of the window. "I just needed somebody to tell me I could come back. That's the bit nobody does."

* * *

Chris looked at him for a long time.

He opened his mouth. I watched him. He'd been saving it for years, and I thought, for a moment, on the 12, at the bottom of Torbay Road, that this was it. That he'd say it to the young man from the college, who'd gone and come back and had just said *I needed to go*.

He closed his mouth again.

Because the young man had already said it. Not the sentence. The truth of it. *I needed to go.* That's half of Chris's sentence. The young man didn't need the other half. He'd come home with two suitcases and a monitor in a box. He'd answered it himself.

The other half was for somebody who hadn't gone yet.

* * *

They got off at the bottom of Torbay Road. The young man went down the stairs first, backwards, a step ahead of Chris, the way Jono does, without being asked.

At the bottom, on the pavement, Chris stopped.

"You'll help her," he said. "Kezia. With the button. When it gets too big."

"If she asks."

"She won't ask," said Chris. "She's like me. She'll build it herself and break it and build it again." He leaned on his stick. "So you'll have to offer. Properly. And mean it if she says no."

"I can do that."

"I know you can," said Chris. "You've been doing it from Bristol for a year." He started off along Torbay Road, towards the hill. Then he turned back. "And write your name on something, will you? Beatrix has been calling you *the young man from the college* for two books. She'd like to stop."

The young man laughed.

"She knows my name," he said. "She wrote it down at the dig."

"Then let her use it," said Chris. "In this one."

* * *

Beatrix used it the following Thursday, in the minutes, under *Present*, in neat black italic. I'm not going to give it to you. He asked me not to. He said he'd been *the young man from the college* for so long that he'd rather stay that in the books, and be himself everywhere else.

So that's what he is. Here.

But in Beatrix's minutes, he's got a name. And at the end of the list of everybody present, after his name, she'd added, in brackets, the first time she's ever put anything in brackets after a name in fifty years:

(returned)

PART FIVE: THE BID

26 – The Bid Writer

IQ 29 · Hundreds 274 · Four weeks

The bid was being written by one person.

I want you to know that, before anything else, because nobody else knows it, and it's the most important fact about the whole of this book's clock. The second phase of the technology park, the building on the empty field opposite EPIC, the thing that would decide whether firms like Quin's could stay and grow in the bay or had to leave it, depended on a bid. And the bid was being written, in a council office in Torquay, in four weeks, by one woman, on her own, at a desk by a window that looks out onto a car park.

I'm not going to name her. She's an officer. She's not in power. She's the opposite of in power. She's the person who sits at the desk while people in power decide what she should write.

She came to the shop on the Saturday. In her own time. She'd seen Stay on the shadow council's pages. She'd seen Kezia's count.

* * *

She was about forty. Short dark hair, a fleece, a laptop bag that was too heavy for her, and the look of somebody who'd been told *thank you, this is so important* by a great many people who'd then gone home at five.

She stood in the door and read the window backwards. She read Yusuf's card, still there, from the last book. She read the card about five

plans and one square. She read a new card, that Kezia had put up the week before, in orange.

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU STAY? HOLD THE BUTTON. 30 SECONDS.

Then she came in and said: "Is the girl with the count here?"

Kezia looked up from the counter.

"That's me."

The woman looked at her for a long moment. I think she'd expected somebody older. Everybody does.

"I'm writing the bid," she said. "For the second phase. On the hill." She put her heavy bag on the floor. "I've got four weeks. And I need what you've got."

* * *

She sat at the folding table in the corner, where Beatrix usually sits, which Beatrix allowed, which surprised me. She opened her laptop. She showed Kezia the bid form.

I'm not going to describe it in detail. You've seen a form. This one was forty pages, with boxes, and word limits in each box, and guidance notes for each box that were longer than the boxes, and a scoring grid at the back that told you how many points each box was worth.

"Here," said the bid writer. She put her finger on a box on page twelve. "*Evidence of local need and demand.* Twenty per cent of the marks." She moved her finger. "And here. *Evidence of a local skills pipeline*. Fifteen per cent." She moved her finger again. "And here.

Community support and engagement. Ten." She took her finger away. "That's forty-five per cent of the score. In three boxes. And for all three, what I've got is the same thing every bid in the country has got." She shrugged. "Statistics from the government, that everybody can download. A letter from the college. A letter from the firms. A survey we did three years ago that seventy people filled in."

"Seventy," said Kezia.

"Seventy," said the bid writer. "It was a form."

Kezia and Habiba, who'd come in at twenty past, late, looked at each other.

"Nobody our age fills in forms," said Habiba.

The bid writer looked at her.

"No," she said. "I'm beginning to realise that."

* * *

"So what do you need?" said Kezia.

"I need your count," said the bid writer. "Two thousand young people. In their own words. Saying what they're good at and what would make them stay. Ninety-one naming the hill." She paused. "That's evidence of demand. That's evidence of a pipeline. That's community support. In one sheet of paper. It's the strongest thing I've seen in six years of writing bids."

"Then use it."

"I can't," said the bid writer. "Not as it is."

Kezia's face fell.

"Not because it's not good," said the bid writer, quickly. "Because the people who mark it won't know what it is. It's a sheet of paper with numbers on, from a website with an orange button, made by a nineteen-year-old in a shop on Victoria Street." She said it gently. "They'll want to know how you got it. Who you asked. How you counted. Whether anybody could have pressed the button twice. Whether you made any of it up."

"I didn't make any of it up."

"I know you didn't," said the bid writer. "I need to be able to *show* that you didn't."

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything for a long time.

Then she got up, and went to the drawer under the counter, and took out a folder, and brought it to the folding table, and put it down in front of the bid writer.

It was the method. For the clicker. From the last book. The one she'd written after she got *halved* wrong and cried in her pyjamas. Four pages. *How I count. What I count. What I don't. The days I've missed, and why.* Every page initialled.

"I did this for the footfall," she said. "After I got it wrong. So people could check." She opened it. "I can do it for Stay. How the button works. What counts as one person. What happens if somebody presses it twice. How I sorted them. Every voice note numbered, with what I heard and what I counted it as." She looked at the bid writer. "And anybody can

check it. Against the voice notes. If they've said yes. Which most of them have."

The bid writer read the four pages about the clicker. All of them. Slowly.

"You did this," she said, "because you got a number wrong."

"Thirty-eight. I said half."

The bid writer looked up at her.

"I've been writing bids for six years," she said, "and nobody has ever given me a method." She closed the folder. "How long would it take you?"

"For Stay?" Kezia thought about it. "A week."

"I need it in ten days."

"Then I'll do it in a week," said Kezia, "and you can check it for three."

* * *

The bid writer stayed till four. She drank three cups of Beatrix's tea and ate two of Zibi's bacon rolls, which had come over from Brixham on the 12 with Una that morning in a cool bag, and which she said were the first thing she'd eaten since Thursday.

At the door, with her heavy bag, she stopped. People do.

"Can I tell you something?" she said.

"Go on," said Kezia.

"I grew up here. In Paignton." She looked out at Victoria Street, at the scaffolding across the road. "I left at eighteen. Like everybody. I came back at thirty-two because my mum was ill." She shifted her bag. "I got this job because it was the only one going that used my degree. And I've written eleven bids for things on that hill. And won three." She was quiet. "And every one of them, I've written on my own, at a desk, from statistics everybody else has got."

"You're not on your own now," said Habiba.

The bid writer looked at her. At the two of them, at the counter. Nineteen and seventeen.

"No," she said. "I don't think I am."

She went.

* * *

Beatrix minuted it.

A council officer attended in her own time and asked for the Stay count to support a funding bid. K. Lund undertook to provide a method within a week. H. Sesay noted that nobody their age fills in forms. The officer agreed.

And in the box at the bottom:

How many bids for this bay have been written by one person on their own?

27 – Varley on the Hill

IQ 29 · Hundreds 276 · Four weeks

Sefton Varley was standing at the edge of the empty field on the Tuesday afternoon, in his long coat, with his scarf, looking at nothing.

Kezia saw him from the lab window, on the second floor of EPIC, at three. She knew who he was. Everybody in the movement knows who he is. He's been in every book.

She went down.

* * *

You'll know him. A fixer. A man who works for people who want things built, and who knows how to make the people in the way go quiet. He was against the Hundred in Paignton, over the wall, and in Torquay, over the square. In Brixham he didn't even try. In the fourth book, he came to the shop on Victoria Street and warned us that a party would offer Jono something, and that somebody would read his book. In the fifth, he came back, and told us the five steps the machine would take, in order, and they happened in that order. And he said someone had rung him, and he'd said no.

He hasn't been against us since the third book. I don't know what he is now. I don't think he knows either.

* * *

He didn't turn round when Kezia came across the road. He heard her; he's the sort of man who always hears people coming. He went on looking at the field.

"Miss Lund," he said.

"Mr Varley."

"The girl with the posters. And the clicker. And now the button." He nodded at the field. "Seventeen thousand square metres. More or less. Bought with grant money. Flat, south-facing, close to the ring road, close to the college, with outline permission for employment use." He paused. "Do you know what the most valuable thing about it is?"

"That it's next to EPIC."

"That it's *flat*," said Varley. "Flat land, close to a road, with services. On this hill. In this bay." He finally turned and looked at her. "Do you know how many people would like to build houses on it?"

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything.

"I'm not one of them," said Varley. "I'll say that first. Like I always do. I'm not here for anybody."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because somebody asked me," said Varley, "whether I'd be interested in looking at it. For a client. Who builds homes." He put his hands in his coat pockets. "Not now. Not this round. But if the bid fails.

Which bids usually do, the first time. And if the council finds itself with a field it bought for jobs, and no money to build the jobs, and a government telling it every year that it hasn't got enough land for houses." He looked at the field. "Then somebody might say: *why not sell it? It'd pay back the grant. It'd count towards the numbers. Three hundred homes. Nobody'd object; it's not anybody's view.*"

"They can't do that."

"They can do almost anything," said Varley, "if they've got no money and a target." He was quiet. "I'm not saying they will. I don't think the people running it now would want to. They bought this to keep the jobs. They meant it." He shrugged. "But people running things change. And fields stay where they are."

* * *

Kezia looked at the field. At the long grass, and the fence along the road, and the bus stop on the corner where Habiba's room would go.

"Did you say yes?" she said.

"To the client?"

"Yes."

Varley looked at her for a long time.

"I said I'd think about it," he said. "That's what I always say. It means no, usually. It means *I'll think about whether I want to say no to your face*." He took a hand out of his pocket. "And then I came up here to look at it. And I've been standing here for an hour. And I watched you through that window, up there, at a bench, with a

soldering iron." He nodded at EPIC. "And I watched a girl in a college fleece come out of the bus station and press a button on a fish crate."

"That's Habiba's crate. It's Una's. It's —"

"I know whose it is," said Varley. "I know everybody's. That's my job." He put the hand back. "I'm going to say no. I'll ring him tonight."

"Why?"

* * *

Varley didn't answer straight away. He looked at the field.

"Do you know where I'm from?" he said.

"No."

"Nobody does," said Varley. "I make sure of it. It's useful, not being from anywhere." He was quiet. "I'm from here. Paignton. Up the hill. A street I'll keep to myself. My mother worked in the factory. On the line. Twenty-two years. Assembly." He looked at the houses on the old site, beyond the retail park. "She was in the first lot that went, in the autumn, when it all came down."

Kezia didn't say anything.

"I'd already gone," said Varley. "I'd left at seventeen. I came home for a weekend and she was sitting in the kitchen with the letter. I've never lived here since. Bristol. London. Wherever there was work. I learned how things get built, and who decides, and how to make the people in the way go quiet." He almost smiled. "It's a skill. I'm very good at it. I learned it because I'd watched what happened when

nobody in the way had anybody to make *them* go quiet. When they just went quiet on their own."

He looked at the field for a long time.

"I'm not going to help anybody build houses on the field next to my mother's factory," he said. "Not this one. I'll do it anywhere else. Not this one."

* * *

"Does Jono know?" said Kezia. "That you're from here?"

"Jono knows everything," said Varley. "I assume. He reads the room." He started to walk. Down the hill, towards the bus stop. "Don't tell him I told you. I'd rather he found out in a book."

"It is a book," said Kezia.

Varley stopped, and turned, and looked at her. And for the first time in six books, I think, he laughed. Not the dry thing he does. A real one.

"So it is," he said. "Well. Tell Ania to put it in, then. And tell her to make it clear I'm not a reformed character." He turned his collar up. "I'm just a man who won't do one particular job."

* * *

He went to the bus stop. He stood there, by the grass, where Habiba's room would be, waiting for the 12, in his long coat, with his scarf.

And the crate at the bus stop — there's one there now, Una put it up the week before — sat beside him, upside down, with its red button.

He looked at it. He read the side. *PRESS AND TALK. 30 SECONDS. WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU STAY?*

He didn't press it.

I'd like to tell you that he did. It would make a better chapter. But he didn't. He looked at it for a long time, and then the 12 came, and he got on, and went down the hill.

* * *

Kezia told Jono that night. All of it. The client, and the field, and *I'll ring him tonight*, and the factory, and the mother on the line.

Jono listened. He didn't say anything for a long time.

"I knew he was from somewhere," he said.

"Did you know where?"

"No," said Jono. "But you don't spend your life learning how to make people go quiet unless you once watched somebody you loved go quiet on their own." He looked at the window. "That's in my book too. Different words."

"What do we do? About the field? If the bid fails?"

"We make sure everybody knows it was bought for jobs," said Jono. "On Check. With the council's own words. So that if anybody ever tries to sell it for something else, they'll have to say so, out loud, in public, and the whole bay will know what it was for." He picked up his notebook. "That's all we can do. That's all anybody can ever do. Write down what it was for, where everybody can see."

* * *

The claim went up on Check that night. Kezia put it up.

The land opposite EPIC at White Rock was bought by the council for a second phase of the technology park, for jobs.

Somebody checked it within the hour, against the council's report. The one Footnote photographed, with the pencil on it.

True.

It's still there. It's got four thousand views. That's not a story figure. I'm not going to tell you what it really is. But it's a lot.

* * *

Story, not Receipt. Varley's client, and anybody's wish to build homes on that land, are invented. The council's purpose in buying it is on a Receipt. Nobody in this book has said, or should be taken to have said, that anybody intends to sell it.

28 – Two Hundred and Seventy-Seven

IQ 29 · Hundreds 279 · Three weeks

Jono found the number on the Monday, at four in the morning, at a client's kitchen table in Hele, reading the council's report about the hill for the third time. The one Footnote had photographed, with the pencil on it.

It wasn't in paragraph fourteen. It wasn't in the part about the hill at all. It was near the back, in a table, in a section about the bay's young people that somebody had added, I think, because the guidance said they had to.

Care-experienced young adults aged 18–24: 277.

That's all. One line. In a table. Between the number of young people not in work or training and the number of apprenticeships started last year.

Two hundred and seventy-seven.

It's real. It's on a Receipt. It's the council's own number.

* * *

He read it four times. I watched him. He put his finger on it and kept it there.

"Ania," he said.

"Yes."

"Do you know what that is?"

"Young people who grew up in care," I said. "Or partly in care. In children's homes, or foster care, or with relatives because the council said they couldn't stay at home. Who are now between eighteen and twenty-four. In this bay."

"Two hundred and seventy-seven," said Jono.

"Yes."

He took his finger off the number.

* * *

You'll know, if you've read the second book, that Jono was in a children's home at fifteen. And then foster care. After a night that his book describes and that I'm not going to, because it belongs in a later book, and because some of it belongs nowhere. You'll know that years later he worked in children's homes himself, in Kent, for a long time. Planting seeds. Being hated until goodbye.

You won't know this, because it isn't in his book, and he told me that morning, at four, at the kitchen table in Hele, for the first time.

"Every kid I worked with," he said, "in the homes. Every single one. When they left, at sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, they went into a flat. On their own. With a bag of stuff and a list of numbers. And that was it." He looked at the window. "And I used to lie awake. After a shift. Thinking about them. In those flats. Thinking: *who's going to give them a job?* Not a job. A *start*. Somebody who'd say *come in on Monday and we'll show you*." He was quiet. "Because nobody else ever would. Not with

what's on their file. Not with the gaps in their schooling. Not with the way they'd look at you when you asked them a question, like you were going to hit them."

"And did anybody?"

"Sometimes," said Jono. "Not often. A kitchen. A garage. A man who did fencing." He shook his head. "Never anything like the hill. Never anything with lasers in it."

* * *

He rang Quin at nine. He's never rung Quin. He got the number from Kezia, who gave it to him with a look.

"It's Jono," he said. "From the table."

"I know who you are," said Quin. "Everybody knows who you are." A pause. "Is something wrong?"

"No," said Jono. "I want to ask you something. And you can say no."

"Go on."

"If the lab stays," said Jono. "Here. Twelve people. Two units. If it happens." He looked at the number on the report, on the kitchen table, beside his coffee. "Would you keep a place? One. Maybe two. For an apprentice who grew up in care?"

Quin didn't say anything for a long time.

"I've never thought about it," he said.

"Nobody has," said Jono. "That's why I'm asking."

* * *

He told Quin about the number. Two hundred and seventy-seven. He told him about the flats, and the bag of stuff, and the list of numbers. He told him about lying awake.

He didn't tell him about himself. Not the children's home. Not fifteen. Quin didn't know. I don't think Quin ever has; I don't think he's read the book.

He didn't need to. It's the rule.

"Would they be any good?" said Quin. Not unkindly. It's the question a man running a firm has to ask.

"Some of them," said Jono. "Some of them would be the best you've ever had. Because they've had to watch everything all their lives, to see what's coming." He thought of Habiba on a pickleball court. "They notice things. Before they go wrong." He paused. "Like your dad's lasers. With the tremble."

Quin didn't say anything at all for a long time.

"Two," he said. "If the lab stays. Two places. Every year." He was quiet. "My dad would've liked that. He trained apprentices. Up there. In the test lab. He used to say the best ones were the ones nobody else wanted."

* * *

Wanji said yes on the Tuesday. To something else. Not a job; she doesn't have jobs to give. A stool. A Saturday.

"I'll take them in the clean room," she said. "On a Saturday. When it's quiet. Any of them. Before they apply for anything. So they can see what it is. So they're not frightened of it." She looked at Kezia, in the doorway of the suite. "Nobody's frightened of a laser once they've seen one. It's the not seeing."

"Every Saturday?"

"I've got every Saturday," said Wanji. "I told you."

* * *

By the Thursday, there were seven.

Seven firms on the hill, or near it, who'd said they'd keep a place, or two, for a young person who'd grown up in care. Quin's lab. A firm that made fibre-optic connectors, which had been on the hill since just after the factory closed, started by a man who'd worked in it. A firm in EPIC that made medical sensors. A small engineering firm on Long Road that did precision machining, run by a woman of seventy who said she'd been taking on the kids nobody else wanted for forty years and didn't see why she should stop now. Three more.

Eleven places. A year. If.

It's story. All of it. The seven firms, the eleven places. I've made them up, because the real ones haven't been asked yet. If you run a firm on that hill, and you're reading this, you could make it a Receipt.

* * *

The bid writer put it in the bid. On page twenty-three. In a box called *Social value and inclusion*, worth five per cent of the marks, which she

said nobody ever bothered with because there was never anything real to put in it.

She wrote: *Seven local employers have committed, subject to the scheme proceeding, to reserve a total of eleven apprenticeship places each year for Torbay's care-experienced young people (277 aged 18–24, per the council's own figures). A technician at the local college has offered weekly introductory sessions. This commitment was secured through the community network described in section 4.*

And at the bottom of the box, because she said she wanted to, in a font slightly smaller than the rest:

Proposed by a local resident who worked in children's homes for many years.

She didn't name him. She didn't need to.

29 – The First Saturday

IQ 29 · Hundreds 282 · Three weeks

The first of the two hundred and seventy-seven came to the clean room on the Saturday, at ten, and stood outside the door for nine minutes before he knocked.

Wanji told me the nine minutes. She'd watched him through the glass panel. She didn't open the door. She said she'd learned, from Jono, on a bench by the harbour, that you don't go to them; you wait till they come.

* * *

He's nineteen. I'm calling him Reuben. It isn't his name. He grew up in care, in Plymouth, in a children's home and then two foster families and then a children's home again, and at eighteen he went into a flat, on his own, with a bag of stuff and a list of numbers. Exactly what Jono described, at four in the morning, at a kitchen table in Hele. The flat was in Plymouth. He didn't know anybody. After six months he came to Torbay to live with an aunt he'd met twice, because she was the only person on the list of numbers who answered.

He's good at taking things apart. He's always been good at taking things apart. He told Wanji, later, that in the second children's home he took the television apart, the whole thing, every screw, to see how it worked, and got into the worst trouble of his life, and that the man on shift that night, instead of shouting, sat on the floor with him and helped him put it back together, and that it was the only night in that home he remembers properly.

Somebody at the aunt's church had seen Niamh's front page. With the nineteen voice notes. And a line at the bottom of the bid, which Niamh had printed in a small box on page three, about eleven apprenticeships a year for young people who grew up in care. And had cut it out and put it on the aunt's fridge.

He'd read it on the fridge for two weeks before he did anything.

* * *

He knocked. Wanji opened the door.

"You're Reuben," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Because you're the only one who's stood outside for nine minutes," said Wanji. "The others just bang on the glass." She held out a paper suit. "Put this on. It's too big. They're all too big. Nobody minds."

He put it on. It was too big. She sat him on a stool by the bench by the door.

Not the one in the corner. That one stayed where it was.

* * *

She didn't show him the lasers first. She told me she never does. She showed him the dust.

"This is a clean room," she said. "Do you know what that means?"

"It's clean?"

"It's cleaner than anywhere you've ever been," said Wanji. "Cleaner than a hospital. There's a machine in the ceiling that changes all the air in here every few minutes and takes out every bit of dust bigger than a tiny fraction of a hair. Because the things we make are so small that one bit of dust on them is like a boulder on a road." She held up her hand. "Every time you move, you shed skin. Thousands of bits. That's why the suit. It's not to keep you clean. It's to keep *it* clean. From you."

Reuben looked at his hands. In the too-big gloves.

"From me," he said.

"From everybody," said Wanji. "Me too. Every person's the dirtiest thing in a clean room." She sat down on her own stool, across from him. "That's the first thing you learn. You're not the problem. Everybody's the problem. So everybody wears the suit."

* * *

I'm telling you this because Wanji told me it was the most important thing she said all morning, and that she hadn't known it was until she saw his face.

He'd grown up being the problem. In every file. In every home. In every placement that ended. The boy who took the television apart. The boy who'd been moved. The boy whose file said things.

And here was a woman in a paper suit telling him that in this room, everybody was the problem, so everybody wore the suit.

He sat very still on his stool, she said, for a long time.

* * *

Then she showed him the lasers.

And then, at eleven, Carys came. You'll know Carys, if you've read the last part. Fifty-four. Thirty-eight years on the hill. A Tweezer. In the first lot to go, on a Thursday, in a canteen. Still looking.

She put on a paper suit. She sat at the bench across from Reuben. She held her hand out, flat, over the bench, and it didn't move.

"Hold your breath," she said. "Like this. And don't think about your hand. Think about the thing you're holding."

Reuben held his breath. He held his hand out. It shook.

"Again," said Carys.

He did it again. It shook less.

"Again."

* * *

They did it for an hour. With tweezers, at the end, and a tiny glass bead, the size of a grain of sand, that you had to pick up and put down in a ring on a slide without it rolling out. Carys did it forty times without dropping it. Reuben dropped it nineteen times in the first ten minutes.

And at five to twelve, he picked it up and put it down in the ring, and it stayed.

He didn't say anything. He just looked at it. Under the magnifier, the grain of glass, in the ring, not moving.

"That's it," said Carys. "That's the whole job. Thirty-eight years. That's all it is. Picking up something small and putting it down where it goes without it rolling away." She took her hand back. "You did it."

Reuben looked at her.

"Can I do it again?" he said.

"You can do it every Saturday," said Wanji, from her stool, "for as long as you want."

* * *

Jono met him on the Thursday, at the Paignton table. Reuben came. He stood in the door for four minutes, which Wanji said was progress.

He didn't sit in the empty chair. He sat at the counter, beside Kezia. He didn't say anything for a long time.

Jono didn't say anything either. He's learned. He knows that sometimes people just sit.

At ten to two, Reuben said, to the counter, not to Jono: "Were you in a home?"

Jono looked at him.

"Wanji said," said Reuben. "She said she didn't know, but she thought you might have been. She said you'd know what to say." He looked at his hands. "You don't have to say."

"I was," said Jono. "At fifteen. For a bit. Then foster care. Then, years later, I worked in them. In Kent."

"What was it like?"

Jono thought about it. Properly. The way he does.

"Being in one," he said, "or working in one?"

"Both."

"Being in one was the first time anybody put the light on for me," said Jono. "Working in one was finding out how hard it is to keep it on." He looked at Reuben. "There was a man in the second home I worked in. On the night shift. Who used to say: *if they're fighting you, it means they want to know if you'll stay*."

Reuben was very still.

"There was a man," he said, "in my second home. Who sat on the floor with me. When I took the telly apart." He looked at the window. "He helped me put it back."

"I know," said Jono.

"How do you know?"

"I don't," said Jono. "Not him. But I know that sort of man. I tried to be him." He picked up his coffee. "Every home's got one. If you're lucky. The one who sits on the floor."

* * *

Reuben's got one of Quin's two places. He starts in the lab in the spring, on Long Road, in the new building, with Kezia, on a stool, at a bench. He's the first. Quin says he's the best placement he's ever had, apart from Kezia, and that he takes everything apart, and that he's had to buy

a second set of everything because Reuben's always got the first set in bits.

He still goes to the clean room on Saturdays. He sits across from Carys. They don't talk much. They hold their breath.

Story, not Receipt. Reuben is invented, and so are the places. The council's figure of 277 is real. If you grew up in care in Torbay, and you take things apart, I'd like to know. So would Wanji. So would Quin.

30 – Habiba's Room

IQ 29 · Hundreds 284 · Three weeks

Richard came to the shop on the Saturday with Habiba's menu.

Jono had given it to him on the Thursday, after the table. He'd said: *She drew it. Don't fix it.* And Richard had looked at the menu for a long time, at the room and the kettle and the sockets and the clock with its hands at twenty to two, and he'd said *I wouldn't dream of it*, and he'd put it in his inside pocket, and Jono had said, afterwards, that he'd never seen Richard put a drawing in his pocket before. He rolls them. He doesn't fold.

He'd folded it.

* * *

He put it on the trestle table, beside the cardboard town, under Kezia's lamp. He'd brought something else, too. A roll, under his arm, which he did unroll, from habit, and held flat with two of Kezia's coffee mugs.

It was the field. The empty field opposite EPIC, at one to five hundred, the scale of the cardboard town. Drawn in pencil and ink, properly, the way he draws. With the road, and the bus stop, and the college at the bottom of the hill. And the outline of a building, where the council's own drawings put the second phase, which he'd got from the public planning documents and traced, exactly, without changing a line.

And on the edge of the field, by the road, by the bus stop, nearest the college, the rectangle from the menu.

Empty.

"I've drawn the building," said Richard. "The council's. As they've drawn it. I haven't changed it." He put his finger on the rectangle. "And I've drawn where her room would go. To scale. It fits. There's a bit of the site they've left as landscaping, that'll be grass that nobody walks on." He took his finger away. "But I haven't drawn the room."

"Why not?" said Kezia.

"Because she has," said Richard.

* * *

Habiba came at twenty past two. Late. With her brother, this time, who's nine, and was carrying a football, and who looked at the cardboard town and said *is that real?*, and Richard said *it's more real than the actual town, it's had more thought put into it*, and the brother looked at him with enormous respect.

Habiba saw her menu, on the trestle table, beside Richard's drawing of the field.

She stood very still.

"You didn't fix it," she said.

"No," said Richard.

"You wanted to."

"I wanted to very much," said Richard. "Your kettle's on the wrong wall. You can't have a kettle under a window. The steam goes on the

glass." He looked at her. "But it's your room. You'd go there. I wouldn't."

Habiba looked at the drawing for a long time. At the rectangle on Richard's field, to scale, empty.

"Can I put it in?" she said. "Mine. In yours."

Richard handed her a pencil.

* * *

She drew it in. Very carefully, this time. Not in biro. In Richard's pencil, on Richard's drawing, at one to five hundred, with Richard's scale rule, which he showed her how to use, and then stopped showing her, because she'd got it.

The room. Windows on two sides. The bus stop. The long tables. The sofas. The benches with soldering irons. The wall of sockets, which at one to five hundred was a line of very tiny dots.

She moved the kettle. Off the window wall. Onto the wall by the door. Next to the clock.

She didn't say anything about it. Neither did Richard.

And when she'd finished, she stood back, and looked at it, and wrote underneath, in capitals, very small, the size Richard writes:

SOMEWHERE TO BE FOR 40 MINUTES.

And then, because it was Richard's drawing and she'd been watching him for three weeks, she signed it.

She didn't date it. I asked her not to. She said *why?* and I told her the rule, and she said *that's weird*, and I said *I know*.

* * *

Richard looked at it for a long time.

"That's the first drawing of the future in this town," he said, "in thirty years, that wasn't mine." He picked up one of the coffee mugs, and the roll curled up at the corner. "I'm going to send it in."

"To who?"

"To the woman writing the bid," said Richard. "With a letter. Signed. And dated. From me." He looked at Habiba. "Saying that this was drawn by a young carer of seventeen, who has forty minutes a day, and that it's the most sensible piece of planning I've seen on that hill since the factory closed, and that if they've got a bit of grass on the edge of the site that nobody's going to walk on, they could do worse."

Habiba went red.

"It's just a room," she said.

"Everything's just a room," said Richard. "Until somebody draws it."

* * *

The bid writer put it in. Not the room; the bid couldn't promise a room. But in section six, in a box called *Design and placemaking*, worth ten per cent, she wrote that the scheme's landscaping would include *a covered community space at the site entrance, adjacent to public*

transport, for use by students, apprentices and young people, co-designed with local young people including young carers.

And she attached Habiba's drawing. As an appendix. With Richard's letter.

She told Kezia, afterwards, that it was the first time in six years she'd put a drawing by a seventeen-year-old in a funding bid, and that she'd nearly not done it, and then thought: *what's the worst that can happen? They'll think we asked.*

* * *

Habiba's brother kicked his football into the cardboard town on the way out, and knocked over the Picture House.

Richard put it back up, and said it had been knocked over worse, and that at least this time it was by somebody who'd be around to see it rebuilt.

31 – Vesna's Units

IQ 29 · Hundreds 289 · Two weeks

The demand was small. Chris had made sure of that, on the hill, on a lab stool. Not *build the next building*. Two units, for two years, in the first-phase building on Long Road, for a lab that would keep twelve people on the hill and train ninety-one more.

The trouble was that there weren't two units.

There were four. Three of them were promised to other firms from EPIC. The fourth was too small. Quin had said so, and the council's own leaflet said so, and Kezia had checked it on Check against the floor areas in the council's report, and it was true.

Gannet Photonics needs two units in the first-phase building, and there is only one available. True.

So the demand was small, and impossible, and Kezia sat at the counter on the Monday with her head in her hands.

And Vesna said: "What about the labs?"

* * *

You'll know Vesna, from the last book. Thirty-one years in the council's property team. Estates and assets. The woman who sat outside a door on a plastic chair, on the right side, for eleven years, while they discussed her reports. Who wrote one more letter, from the outside, that began *this is not a complaint*. Who keeps a receipt in her purse that proves she went in the front.

She comes to the shop on Mondays now. With Beatrix. They have lunch at the café by the station and then come to the shop and sit at the folding table and, Beatrix says, *correct each other's punctuation*.

She'd been listening. She always is. She'd spent thirty-one years listening to people talk about buildings she knew better than they did.

"What labs?" said Kezia.

"The building on Long Road," said Vesna. "It's four units *and two labs*. It says so. In the report. I've read the planning application." She took her glasses off. "I'd know that building in my sleep. I walked round it when it was still somebody else's warehouse. Before the council bought it. I wrote the note that said it might be suitable."

Kezia stared at her.

* * *

Vesna got up and came to the counter. She asked Kezia to find the planning application on the laptop, which is public, which anybody can find, which nobody ever does. The floor plans. She put her finger on them.

"Four units," she said. "Here, here, here and here. Those are for firms. They'll have leases. And here and here, two labs." She moved her finger. "The labs are shared. That's the point of them. They're for any firm in the building that needs specialist space for a while. Clean rooms. Test benches. They're not leased to anybody. They're booked." She looked at Kezia. "And in the first year, while the firms move in and get set up, I'd bet you my pension that the second lab will be empty more often than it's full."

"So?"

"So Gannet asks for the fourth unit," said Vesna. "The small one. For the office, and the design team. And a two-year *licence* on the second lab. Not a lease. A licence. The council can do that. It's a different kind of agreement. It doesn't take the lab away from anybody; it just says Gannet gets first call on it, and pays for that, and anybody else in the building can still book it when Gannet's not using it." She put her glasses back on. "That's two units. For two years. Without building anything, or taking anything from anybody, or changing the scheme."

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything for a long time.

"How do you know that?" she said.

"I did it," said Vesna. "Twice. With other buildings. Years ago. Nobody remembers. Nobody ever remembers the licences. They're too boring." She sat back down at the folding table, beside Beatrix. "It's the sort of thing an officer would think of. If anybody asked the officer."

Beatrix had stopped writing.

"Nobody asked the officer," she said.

"Nobody ever asks the officer," said Vesna. "The officer's on a chair in the corridor." She picked up her library book. "But I'm not on the chair any more. I'm in a shop on Victoria Street with a nineteen-year-old. So I'm telling you."

* * *

Kezia rang Quin. Quin rang his investors. His investors, Quin said, were *intrigued*, which Quin said was the most enthusiastic word they'd ever used about anything that wasn't a profit forecast.

The bid writer rang Ffion. You'll know Ffion; she's not called that, and she's one of the four in the property team. Vesna's junior, for six years. Ffion read the floor plans. Ffion went quiet. Ffion said she'd have to ask, but that she couldn't see why not, and that she wished she'd thought of it, and that she'd have *thought of it eventually, probably, in about two years, when it was too late*.

And Vesna wrote the request. For Gannet. To go to cabinet. One page.

The first line was: *This is a request for a licence, not a lease*.

Beatrix read it over her shoulder.

"You didn't put *this is not a complaint*," she said.

"It's not that sort of letter," said Vesna. "This one's asking for something they can say yes to. That's a different first line."

32 – The Wet Corner

IQ 29 · Hundreds 291 · Two weeks

Richard's granddaughter went to look at the field on the Sunday, in wellies, with a soil auger she'd borrowed from the college, and found that the bottom corner was wet.

I should tell you about her, properly, because I never have, in six books. She's been in every one, more or less, since the first, when Richard said, at a meeting about a wall, that his granddaughter was born that year, and somebody asked him what year, and he wouldn't say, because he's in a book with no dates.

She's seventeen now. She's at the college at the bottom of the hill, doing environmental science. She came to the dig in the fourth book with a bucket and a net and stood in the pond for three hours. She's at the shop on Saturdays. She was at the pickleball. She's quiet, and very precise, and she has her grandfather's habit of drawing everything, and the opposite of his habit of telling everybody about it.

She's asked me not to give her name. She says she's *Richard's granddaughter* in the books and she's quite happy with that, because it means people expect her to be stubborn, and she is.

* * *

She went because of Habiba's room. The rectangle Richard had drawn on the field, on the edge, by the road, by the bus stop. Habiba had filled it in. Richard had sent it in, with a letter. The bid writer had attached it to the bid.

And Richard's granddaughter had looked at her grandfather's drawing of the field, at one to five hundred, at the shop, and had seen something nobody else had.

"There's a ditch," she said. "On the map. Along the bottom. Where the rectangle is."

"It's a field drain," said Richard. "They all have them."

"It's blue on the old map," said his granddaughter. "The really old one. The one you traced the boundary from. It's a stream."

Richard looked at the drawing for a long time.

"So it is," he said.

* * *

She went on the Sunday. On her own, with the auger. She climbed the fence, which she says she was allowed to do because it was for science, and which I'm not going to tell you whether she was allowed to do.

The field's flat. Varley was right. Flat, and south-facing, and close to the road. But it's not quite flat. It falls, very slightly, about a metre and a half over its whole length, towards the bottom corner, by the bus stop. Where the rectangle is. Where Habiba's room would go.

She walked it. She took a core with the auger every twenty metres, down to a metre, and laid them out on the grass in a line, and photographed them, and wrote down what each one was: what colour the soil was, how wet, whether there was clay, and at what depth.

The top of the field was dry. Brown. Crumbly.

The bottom corner wasn't. At forty centimetres down, the soil went grey, and then blue-grey, and then the hole filled up with water while she was watching it.

* * *

She brought the cores to the shop on the Monday, in a row of plastic tubes in a seed tray, labelled in her small square capitals, which are her grandfather's.

Richard looked at them. Then at her photographs. Then at her notebook.

"Gley," he said.

"Gley," said his granddaughter. "Waterlogged. Most of the year, probably. It's where the old stream was. They drained it. Years ago. When it was farmland. The drain's probably blocked." She put her finger on the bottom corner of his drawing. "Right where Habiba's room is."

Habiba was at the counter. She came over.

"My room's going to flood?"

"Not necessarily," said Richard's granddaughter. "If you build it right, it won't. You'd raise the floor. You'd put the drain back. You'd put the water somewhere it wants to go." She looked at the field on the drawing. "And the big building. The second phase. The bottom of that's in the wet bit too. A bit. They'll have done a survey. They'll know." She paused. "Probably."

Richard was very quiet.

* * *

I'll tell you what he said. Because he's said I can, and because it's going to matter in the next book, and because it's one of the few times in six books I've seen him lose an argument.

"Let it be wet," said Richard.

His granddaughter looked at him.

"The bottom corner," said Richard. "Don't drain it. Don't fight it. Let the water come where it wants to. Make it a pond. A swale. A little wetland, along the bottom, by the road." He put his finger on the drawing. "Put the room on the edge of it. Raised. Looking at it. It'd take the water off the whole site when it rains. And it'd be the only thing on the whole hill that anybody would want to sit beside."

"Grandad," said his granddaughter.

"It's what I'd do at Preston," said Richard. "On the green. Let the sea in. Let it take the energy. Don't build a wall a metre and a half high that you can't see over." He looked at her. "I've been saying it for years."

"I know you have," said his granddaughter. "And it's your view." She said it gently, but very clearly, the way you'd say something you've heard said many times in a family. "It might be right for this corner. It might be. I'd need to measure the flows. I'd need to know where the water goes after it leaves the field. I'd need to know what's downstream." She looked at him. "Preston's different. Preston's the sea. You can't just say it's the same."

"It's the same principle."

"It's the same *idea*," said his granddaughter. "That's not the same as the same principle. You'd need to test it." She picked up her seed tray.

“That’s what Ania always says. It stays your view until somebody checks.”

* * *

Richard looked at her for a long time.

Then he laughed. Properly. The way he laughs about once a book.

“Your mother,” he said, “said exactly the same thing to me at your age. About a car park.” He took his cap off. “She was right too.”

“I know,” said his granddaughter. “She told me.”

* * *

She wrote it up. Two pages. *Preliminary soil observations, bottom corner, land opposite EPIC.* Her cores, her photographs, where the wet started and how deep. She said in the first paragraph that she was a student, that this wasn’t a survey, and that a proper one should be done. And she said in the last paragraph that, if the bottom corner was wet, a sustainable drainage feature there might reduce the risk to the rest of the site and provide amenity value for the community space proposed in appendix C.

Appendix C was Habiba’s room.

The bid writer read it on the Tuesday. She said she nearly cried, and then she said that she had cried, a bit, and that she was going to stop telling people when she cried because it was happening too often in this bid.

She didn't put it in the bid. She couldn't; it wasn't a survey. But she sent it to the council's engineers, with a note. And one of them rang Richard's granddaughter on the Thursday. A drainage engineer, forty years in the job, near retirement. He talked to her for an hour. He said the council's survey had found the wet corner too, and that they were planning to deal with it with a tank under the car park.

"A tank," said Richard's granddaughter.

"A tank," said the engineer. "Under the tarmac. It's what we always do."

"Could you do a pond instead?"

There was a long pause on the line.

"Nobody's ever asked me that," said the engineer. "About that site." Another pause. "I'll have a look."

* * *

I'm telling you about this because it's small, and because it isn't finished, and because it isn't really about the field at all.

It's about water. And where it goes. And the fact that a seventeen-year-old with a borrowed auger walked a field nobody had walked in years and found where the old stream used to be. And the fact that her grandfather, who's been saying for years to let the water in, was told, kindly, by somebody who loves him, that it's his view until somebody checks. And laughed.

The next book's about water. I'll tell you that now. Footnote's going to send a page about it at the end of this one. And when the rain comes, the girl with the auger is going to be the one who knows where it'll go.

Richard: I'd like it known that I'm proud of her. And that I'm still right about Preston. And that I'll wait for her to check.

33 – The Cabinet

IQ 29 · Hundreds 294 · Ten days

The cabinet met on the Tuesday, at the town hall in Torquay, at ten in the morning, in public.

I'm not going to describe the room, or name anybody in it. You'll know the rule. Those in power are never named. And these were people in power, for this book, for one morning: the ones who decide who gets the units on Long Road.

I'll tell you they were tired. And kind, mostly. And that they had a forty-page agenda, of which Gannet's licence was item eleven, and that before item eleven there were ten other things, including a report about bins, which you'll know is always on the agenda, in every council, in every book.

* * *

The public can speak, at that cabinet. Not for long. A few minutes, on an item, if you register in advance. Kezia registered. It was the first time anybody under twenty-five had registered to speak at that cabinet in, the officer on the desk told her, *as long as I've been here, love, and that's nine years*.

She wore her mother's jacket. Shona had lent it to her, in silence, on the Monday night, and then said *if you're going to do it, do it properly*, and gone back to her ironing.

The room was fuller than usual. Quin came, in his jumper. Habiba came, late, with her brother, who'd been allowed off school because

Habiba said it was educational and the school had agreed. Wanji came, in her technician's fleece, from the college. Vesna came, and sat at the back, on a chair, on the right side. Beatrix came, with her notebook, because she minutes everything, and because, she said, she'd never once in her life seen the minutes of a cabinet that recorded what the public said accurately, and she wanted to see if this would be the first.

Jono came. He sat at the back. He didn't speak.

Chris didn't come. He said it wasn't his.

* * *

At item eleven, the chair called Kezia's name.

She went to the little table at the front, the one with the microphone, where members of the public sit to speak. She sat down. She put one sheet of paper in front of her. Not the count. A list. Three lines.

She'd practised for a week. In the shop, at the counter, between clicks. Habiba had timed her. She'd got it to two minutes and fifty seconds.

She didn't use the list.

* * *

"My name's Kezia," she said. "I'm nineteen. I'm from Paignton. I'm studying engineering at the college at the bottom of the hill, and I work two days a week at Gannet Photonics, at the top of it." She looked at the members, along their table. "Gannet's moving to Bristol. It's the best

firm on the hill, and it's leaving, because it's full, and there's nowhere to go. That's not anybody's fault. It's just what's happening."

She paused.

"I asked everybody my age," she said, "in the bay, what they're good at and what would make them stay. Two and a half thousand of them told me. In voice notes. Thirty seconds each. I listened to every one." She looked down at the sheet of paper, and then up again, without reading it. "Ninety-one of them named the hill. By name. White Rock. Long Road. The college. *A laser job that isn't full.*" She swallowed. "Two hundred and fourteen of them said, without being asked, that they look after somebody at home. And three hundred and forty said they didn't think anybody would ask."

The room was very quiet.

"I'm not asking you to build the next building," said Kezia. "I know you can't. Not today. You're trying. You've bought the field. Somebody's writing the bid on her own at a desk. I've met her." She paused. "I'm asking for something small. A licence. On a lab you've already built. For two years. So that part of Gannet can stay. Twelve people. And so the ninety-one have somewhere to start." She looked at the list in front of her, at last. "That's all. That's what I'm asking. It's in Vesna's letter. She knows more about your building than anybody in this room." She looked up. "Sorry. That was rude."

"It was accurate," said a voice from the members' table. I'm not going to say whose.

Kezia went red.

"Two minutes, fifty-one seconds," said Habiba, from the public seats, not quietly enough.

* * *

The members talked about it for twenty minutes. I'll tell you the shape, not the words.

They asked the officer whether a licence was possible. Ffion, who was there, at the side, with a file, said that it was, and that it was unusual, and that she'd checked it with legal, and that it was the kind of arrangement that had been used before, in other buildings, some years ago, and she glanced at the back of the room, at a woman on a chair on the right side, and didn't say anything else.

They asked whether it would take anything from the other firms. Ffion said no. They'd still be able to book the lab.

They asked what happened in two years, if the second phase wasn't built. Quin, from the public seats, was allowed to answer, and said: *then I'll be back here, asking again, with twenty-four people instead of twelve, and eleven apprentices.*

And one of them, near the end, asked Kezia a question. Not about the licence. About her.

"Will you stay?" the member said. "If we do this. You. Will you stay?"

Kezia looked at her for a long time.

"I don't know yet," she said. "I'm sorry. I'd rather tell you the truth."

The member nodded, slowly. I think she'd have liked the other answer. I think she respected this one more.

* * *

They agreed it. Unanimously. A two-year licence on the second lab in the first-phase building on Long Road, alongside the fourth unit, for Gannet Photonics' design and research team, subject to terms.

Story, not Receipt. The real cabinet hasn't been asked yet. I've made it up, because a nineteen-year-old in her mother's jacket should be able to win one thing, in one book. If you're on that cabinet, and you're reading this, you could make it a Receipt.

* * *

I put the score up at eleven forty, in the corridor outside, while Kezia was being hugged by Habiba, and Wanji, and Quin, who'd never hugged anybody in front of her before, and her brother, Habiba's, who didn't know why but joined in.

Thirty.

I want to tell you why, because Jono will argue, and he'd be right.

It wasn't the licence. A licence is a small thing. It was the way they got there. A council that's tired, and small, and doing the right thing on a shoestring, listened to a nineteen-year-old who'd asked her whole generation a question, and to a retired officer who'd thought of a licence nobody remembered, and to the officer who'd checked it with legal. And it said yes. In twenty minutes. To something that wasn't in any plan. Because somebody had asked.

Thirty.

Jono: Twenty-nine and a half. They said yes to a lab. The building's still a field.

He's right. I gave it thirty anyway. Sometimes you count the yes.

* * *

Beatrix had her minutes. She compared them, the following week, with the official ones, when they came out.

The official minutes said: *A member of the public addressed the Cabinet in support of the recommendation.*

Beatrix's said, in neat black italic, everything Kezia had said, word for word, including *sorry, that was rude*, and *it was accurate*, and *two minutes, fifty-one seconds*.

She sent a copy to the officer who does the official ones, with a note.

For your records. You may find it useful. B. Kember.

The officer wrote back. Beatrix won't tell me what it said. She's put it in her eleventh box. She says that's where things go that she's proud of.

34 – Bristol

IQ 30 · Hundreds 301 · Ten days

Quin told them on the Thursday. At eight in the morning. All thirty-one, in the gaps between the benches, holding their coffees, not touching the machine.

The whiteboard had two boxes on it now. *Production*. And *Lab*.

"Production's going," he said. "To Bristol. As we said. In the summer. That's nineteen of us." He looked at them. "Everybody in production who wants to come, there's a job. Same job, better pay. And I mean that."

"And the lab?" said somebody.

"The lab's staying," said Quin. "Here. On Long Road. In the new building. A unit and a lab, for two years, from the spring. Twelve of us." He looked at the window. At the hill, and the empty field across the road. "And two apprentices a year who grew up in care. And Saturdays with Wanji in the clean room for anybody who wants to see what it is before they apply." He paused. "And if the next building gets built, we'll come back. All of us. Production too. If they'll have us."

* * *

It's a small failure. I want to call it that, because it is.

Nineteen jobs went. Not to nowhere; to Bristol, and most of the nineteen went with them, because the pay was better and the city was there. But four of them didn't. Four people from production, who'd

worked on the hill for years, who had children in schools in Paignton and parents in homes in Torquay and a mortgage on a house on the estate where the factory used to be. Who said, when Quin asked, that they couldn't go.

Quin found two of them jobs. With the firm that makes connectors, the one started by a man who'd worked in the factory. He rang the owner himself, and talked for an hour, and the owner said yes.

He couldn't find anything for the other two. Not straight away.

He told me that, on the phone, that evening. He said it was the worst part of the whole thing. Worse than Bristol. He said: *my dad drove a taxi for twelve years, and I've just done to two people what the factory did to him.*

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say.

Jono did, though. He was at the shop. He took the phone from Kezia.

"Give me their names," he said. "If they say yes. I'll put them on the map. Somebody'll know somebody."

"That's not how it works," said Quin.

"It is now," said Jono.

One of them was working on the hill again within three weeks, at the precision machining firm run by the woman of seventy. The other's still looking. I'll tell you when they find something. I'll put it on a Receipt, if they say I can.

* * *

And Kezia.

Quin asked her into the second room, after. Where the coffee machine is. He made her a coffee, which he'd started doing, and which everybody had noticed.

"Two jobs," he said. "When you finish. I'll put them both in writing. Production in Bristol: better pay, bigger team, a city, a career that goes up fast." He put the coffee in front of her. "Or the lab. Here. Smaller. Less pay. Twelve of us. Two years of a licence and a field across the road and nobody knows what after that." He sat down on a lab stool. "I'm not going to tell you which. I'd like you to know that I don't know which I'd choose either. If I were you."

"Which would your dad have chosen?" said Kezia.

Quin thought about it for a long time.

"My dad never got a choice," he said. "That's the difference." He looked at his coffee. "You've got one. It's the first time anybody in my family's ever had one. I think it's the first time anybody in yours has, too."

Kezia didn't answer.

"You've got a week," said Quin. "The Bristol lease gets signed on Friday. After that I'll know how many desks to order."

* * *

She went down the hill on her bike. Fast. Too fast. With me in her pocket.

At the bottom, by the college, she stopped. She stood astride the bike, by the bus stop, where Habiba's room would be, if anybody ever built it. Looking up at the field. The empty one. Opposite EPIC, with its curve, in the evening light.

"Ania," she said.

"I'm here."

"Everybody keeps saying *I'm not going to tell you what to do*."

"I know."

"Quin. Chris. You. Jono. My mum's the only one who's told me, and she's told me to go." She looked at the field. "And I don't know. I genuinely don't know. I've asked two and a half thousand people what would make them stay and I don't know what would make *me*."

"Have you asked yourself?" I said.

"What?"

"The button," I said. "On Stay. *Hold to talk. Thirty seconds.* Everybody else has pressed it." I paused. "You recorded the question. Three times. You've never answered it."

Kezia was very still for a long time, astride her bike, at the bottom of the hill.

Then she took her phone out of her pocket, and opened Stay, and looked at the big black button, and her own face, from the green, from the first book, at sixteen, laughing.

She didn't press it. "Not yet," she said.

35 – Still Looking

IQ 30 · Hundreds 303 · Eight days

Her name's Carys. I'm calling her that. It isn't her name. She's fifty-four.

She's the one I told you about. The other one. Of the four people from Gannet's production line who couldn't go to Bristol, Quin found jobs for two, and Jono's map found one for the third, at the precision machining firm run by the woman of seventy.

Carys is the fourth. She's still looking.

I want to tell you about her, because the books are about people who come round, one by one, and it would be very easy to only tell you about the ones who do. And because she came to the table, on the Thursday after Quin told them, and sat in the empty chair, and said: *I'm not here to be cheered up.*

* * *

She'd worked on the hill for thirty-eight years. Not all of it at Gannet. Gannet's only six. Before that, at a firm that made connectors, until it was bought and moved. And before that, at sixteen, straight from school, at the factory. The big one. On Long Road. On the line.

"Assembly," she said. "Component assembly. Under magnification. Eight hours a day, with a microscope and a pair of tweezers. You had to be able to hold your breath and not move your hands." She held one hand out, flat, over the table. It didn't move. "Still can. Thirty-eight years. Never once dropped anything that mattered."

Jono looked at her hand.

"I was there when it went," she said. "The factory. I was twenty-nine. I was in the first lot. A Thursday. They called us into the canteen and read it off a sheet of paper." She put her hand down. "I've worked on that hill ever since, one way or another. Every time something went, I found the next thing. Every time. Because there was always a next thing, if you were good, and I was good."

"And now?"

"And now I'm fifty-four," said Carys. "And I've got a husband with a bad heart who can't move to Bristol, and a mother in a home in Torquay, and a granddaughter I pick up from school on a Wednesday." She looked at the window. "And the next thing's in Bristol. And for the first time in thirty-eight years, I can't go to it."

* * *

Jono didn't say anything for a while.

"I'm not here to be cheered up," said Carys, again. "I want to say that. Everybody's been very kind. Quin's been kind. He's rung people. That girl, Kezia, she's been kind; she sent me a voice note, which I didn't know what to do with. The woman at the machining place was kind; she's only got the one job, and she gave it to Wes, and Wes's thirty-four and needs it more." She folded her hands. "I'm not here for kind. I've had kind. Kind doesn't pay anything."

"What are you here for?"

Carys looked at him.

“I don’t know,” she said. “My granddaughter told me to come. She’s nine. She said you listen. She said her teacher said.” She shrugged. “So I’ve come to be listened to. And then I’ll go home.”

* * *

So he listened.

She talked for an hour. About the factory. The canteen, with its long tables, and the radio playing, and the women on her line, who called themselves the Tweezers, and went to Benidorm every summer for eleven years, until the factory went. About the shifts. The buses, just for the shifts, that went from every estate in Paignton, and then didn’t. About the morning in the canteen, and the sheet of paper, and a man in a suit who read it and then went back to Canada, she thought, or somewhere.

About the twenty-five years after. Finding the next thing. Being good.

About being fifty-four, and good, and finding that good didn’t count any more if the next thing was a hundred and twenty miles away.

Jono wrote nothing down. He had his pen. He didn’t use it.

* * *

At the end, she said: “Well. That’s me. Thanks for listening.”

She stood up.

“Can I ask you one thing?” said Jono. “Before you go.”

“Go on.”

“Your hand,” said Jono. “That doesn’t move. Thirty-eight years under a microscope.” He looked at her. “Has anybody ever asked you to teach it?”

Carys looked at him.

“Teach what?”

“How you hold your breath and don’t move,” said Jono. “There are eleven apprenticeships on that hill now, a year. For kids who grew up in care. And a technician in the college clean room who takes them on Saturdays, before they apply, so they’re not frightened.” He paused. “And none of those kids has ever met anybody who did it on the line. In the factory. When it was five thousand people.” He looked at her hand. “They’ve met Wanji. They’ve met Quin. They’ve never met a Tweezer.”

* * *

Carys didn’t say anything for a long time.

“That’s not a job,” she said.

“No,” said Jono. “It’s not. I’m not going to pretend it is. You need a job. I know you do. I’ll keep looking. The map’ll keep looking.” He put his pen down. “I’m asking something else. Whether you’d want to be asked. That’s all. Not whether you’d do it. Whether anybody’s ever asked.”

“Nobody’s ever asked,” said Carys. “In thirty-eight years. Nobody’s ever asked me anything except whether I’d mind doing a double.”

“I know,” said Jono. “That’s why I’m asking.”

* * *

She didn't answer. She went home.

I'm not going to tell you she went to the clean room on the Saturday. She didn't. Not that week.

She went the week after. She stood outside the door of the suite at the bottom of the hill for a long time, Wanji said, before she came in. In her coat. With her granddaughter, who'd insisted.

Wanji gave her a paper suit. She put it on. She sat on a stool at the bench by the door. Not the one in the corner.

And a boy of nineteen, who'd grown up in a children's home in Plymouth and come to Torbay to live with an aunt, and who'd never held tweezers in his life, sat across from her. And Carys held out her hand, flat, over the bench, and it didn't move.

"Hold your breath," she said. "Like this. And don't think about your hand. Think about the thing you're holding."

* * *

She goes on Saturdays now. Not every one. Most. Wanji doesn't pay her; Wanji can't. The college has said it'll look at whether it can, which Carys says means no, and Wanji says means *I'll make it mean yes*.

She hasn't got a job yet. I'm telling you that plainly. It's a small failure, and I said there'd only be small ones, and this is one, and it isn't small to her.

She's still looking. The map's still looking. Jono rings people. Quin rings people. Margot rang somebody, the person above them, which is what she's good at.

But on Saturdays, in a paper suit, at a bench by the door, a woman who was in the first lot to go, on a Thursday, in a canteen, teaches kids nobody else wanted how to hold their breath and not move their hands.

She says it doesn't pay anything.

She says she's never been asked before.

Story, not Receipt. Carys is invented. The factory's closing is real, and on a Receipt. If you were a Tweezer, and you're reading this, I'd like to know. So would Wanji.

PART SIX: I HAD TO GO

36 – Shona

IQ 30 · Hundreds 306 · Seven days

Shona Lund works in a care home in Preston. Days, mostly. Sometimes nights. She's done it for twenty-two years. Before that, she worked in a hotel on the front in Paignton, on reception, from sixteen, because her own mother worked there, and because there was nothing else.

I'm telling you that because Kezia never had, in five books, and because when she finally did, at the counter of the shop, on the Saturday of the last week, she said: *I don't think I've ever told anybody what my mum does. I don't think anybody's ever asked.*

* * *

You'll know Shona from the first book. The woman who shouted at Hilary on the green at five in the morning, for letting her sixteen-year-old daughter hold a board. Who rang Hilary that evening to say her daughter had asthma and a nut allergy and a temper, and that Hilary was to ring her if any of them went off. Who made Kezia unblock her accounts. Who said, in the first book, when somebody asked her what she thought of it all, *I don't know*.

She's said *go to Bristol* in this one. In a box on a form she wasn't old enough to fill in. In capitals.

I'd like to describe her fairly, because I said that in the first book too, and I'm not sure I managed it.

* * *

She was ironing when Kezia came home on the Saturday night. She's always ironing. She irons the uniforms for the care home, and Kezia's college clothes, and the tea towels, which Kezia says nobody in the world irons except her mother.

Kezia sat on the kitchen table. She's not allowed to sit on the kitchen table.

"Mum."

"Get off the table."

Kezia got off the table. She sat on a chair.

"Mum. Quin's offered me both. Bristol or the lab." She looked at the iron. "I've got till Friday."

Shona didn't stop ironing. She did a whole tea towel, both sides, and folded it, and put it on the pile.

"Go to Bristol," she said.

"Why?"

Shona put the iron down. On its end. She looked at her daughter.

"Because I never could," she said.

* * *

I'm going to tell you what she told Kezia, because Kezia asked me to put it in, and because Shona, when Kezia asked her, said *I don't care, it's true, isn't it*.

She was seventeen. She'd done well at school. Better than anybody expected. She'd been offered a place at a college in London, a proper one, to do something with fashion, because she'd made her own clothes since she was eleven and everybody said she had an eye. Her teacher had filled in the forms. She'd got in.

And her mother had got ill. Not badly, not at first. Her back. And then worse. And there was nobody else. Her dad had gone years before. So Shona stayed, and did the reception at the hotel, and looked after her mother, until she died, eleven years later. By then Shona was twenty-eight, and had Kezia, and Kezia's father had gone too, the way men did in that family, and it was too late for London and too late for fashion and too late for most things.

"So I iron," said Shona. "I iron other people's clothes. I iron uniforms for a job I'm good at, that I never chose." She picked up the iron again. "And I'm not having you iron. I'm not having you look back at forty-five and think *I could have gone*. Not if I can stop it."

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything for a long time.

"You were a young carer," she said.

Shona looked at her.

"A what?"

"A young carer. For your mum. At seventeen. That's what it's called." Kezia's voice had gone very small. "There's a girl at the shop. Habiba. She's seventeen. She looks after her mum. She drew a room on a menu." She looked at her hands. "She said she thinks about going, and then she thinks about her mum on the floor in the hall, and she stops thinking about it."

Shona put the iron down again. Flat, this time, on the tea towel. She didn't notice. It started to smell.

"Mum," said Kezia. "The iron."

Shona picked it up. There was a brown triangle on the tea towel. She looked at it.

"Nobody called it anything," she said. "When I was seventeen. Nobody called it anything at all."

* * *

They sat at the kitchen table for an hour. Shona didn't iron anything. She told Kezia things she'd never told her. About the college in London, and the letter, which she still had, in a shoebox, at the top of the wardrobe. About her mother, at the end. About the hotel, and the reception desk, and how she'd watched every girl her age go up the road to the station with a suitcase, every September, for eleven years.

Kezia told her about Habiba. And the room. And the forty minutes. And the button. And Wanji, and Dara, and the stool in the corner. And the cabinet, which Shona knew about, because she'd lent the jacket, and which she hadn't asked about, because, she said, *I didn't want you to think I cared*.

"Do you?"

“Of course I bloody care,” said Shona. “I care about all of it. I care about that man in the café. I’ve cared since the green.” She looked at the brown triangle on the tea towel. “I just don’t want it to keep you.”

* * *

At ten, Shona got up and went to the bedroom, and came back with a shoebox, and put it on the table, and took out a letter. Thin paper, yellowed, folded in three. With a crest on it, from a college in London.

She didn’t open it. She put it in front of Kezia.

“That’s why I said go,” she said. “That’s the only reason. Not because I want you gone. God knows I don’t. Because I’ve got that in a shoebox and I don’t want you to have one.”

Kezia looked at the letter for a long time.

“Mum,” she said. “If you’d been able to go. And come back. Would you have?”

Shona didn’t answer straight away. She looked at the window. At the dark, and the street, and the launderette’s light coming up from below.

“Yes,” she said. “Of course I would. I’d have come back. This is home.” She was quiet. “I just needed to go first.”

* * *

Kezia went to bed at eleven. She didn’t sleep.

At two, she sent me a message.

She said she'd have come back. She just needed to go first.

I know, I wrote.

That's what the young man from the college said. And Quin. And Chris.

I know.

Is that the answer? she wrote. *Go, and come back?*

I thought about it for a long time.

I don't know, I wrote. *I think it might be one answer. I don't think it's the only one.*

What's the other one?

I don't know that either, I wrote. *I think that's the one you'd have to find out.*

37 – The Green at Five

IQ 30 · Hundreds 308 · Five days

At five o'clock on the Monday morning, Kezia rode her bike to the green, and found Jono already there.

She hadn't arranged it. Neither had he. She hadn't slept properly since the kitchen table with her mother and the letter in the shoebox, and she'd got up at half past four and got dressed and gone out, in the dark, without knowing where to. And her bike had gone, the way bikes do, along the front, to the green. Where the boards had been. Where it started.

And he was on the bench by the shelter. In his care fleece, with his lanyard round his neck. Off a night. Looking at the wall.

* * *

You'll know the green, if you read the first book. Paignton. The grass between the town and the sea, where the boards went up at five in the morning. SAVE OUR PROMENADE. A breaking wave, pale blue going to white. *Demand* **Proper** *Consultation!* With the red word that Chris said the whole fight was in.

She'd held one. At sixteen. Laughing at a joke about a cagoule. In the photograph that went round.

The boards are long gone. The wall's there now. Grey. A metre and a half. You can't see the sea over it, sitting on the bench. You can hear it. On a still morning, at five, you can hear it on the other side, very close, as if it's trying to tell you something.

* * *

She sat down beside him. He didn't seem surprised.

"You walk here?" she said. "After nights?"

"Sometimes. Usually the cliff. Babbacombe." He looked at the wall. "I came here this morning because I was in Preston, and it was on the way, and I wanted to see where we started." He was quiet. "You?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"Bristol?"

"Mum," said Kezia. "And Bristol. And the lab. And Chris not saying anything." She pulled her knees up on the bench. "And everybody telling me they're not going to tell me what to do."

"I'm not going to tell you what to do," said Jono.

Kezia laughed. She couldn't help it.

"I know," she said. "I know you're not."

* * *

They sat there for a long time. The light came up, slowly, behind them, over the town, and the wall went from black to grey. A man walked a dog along the front, on the other side of the road. The dog stopped at the wall, and stood on its back legs, and tried to see over, and couldn't.

"Can I ask you something?" said Kezia.

"Go on."

"Why did you stay?"

Jono turned and looked at her.

"Here," said Kezia. "Torbay. You're not from here. You came by accident. You said, in the first book. A client fell over at a station and you came to get her and you stayed the night in a hotel and opened the curtains and there were palm trees." She looked at the wall. "Everybody else I know who's not from here has gone. Or is going. You came by accident. And you stayed."

* * *

Jono didn't answer for a long time.

"I've never stayed anywhere," he said.

"I know. It's in your book."

"Do you know how many places I've lived?"

"No."

"Neither do I," said Jono. "I tried to count, once. For the book. I got to about thirty and gave up." He looked at his hands. "London. Kent. Malta. London again. America. Kent again. Sussex. London. Spain. Lincolnshire, in my sister's spare room. Every one of them, I left. Some of them I was made to. Some of them I ran. Some of them I just went because I'd always gone." He was quiet. "I spent my whole life thinking the thing I needed was somewhere else. That's in my book too. Near the end. I thought happiness was always one more move away."

"And then?"

"And then I came here," said Jono. "By accident. In the winter. And opened a curtain on a palm tree." He almost smiled. "And I thought, *this'll do for a bit*. And I got a job. And I met a man in a cap who didn't look up from his iPad. And a man with a drawer. And a girl on a green at five in the morning holding a board and laughing at a joke about a cagoule." He looked at her. "And I didn't go."

* * *

Kezia didn't say anything.

"I'm not telling you that so you'll stay," said Jono. "I want to be clear. That's not why."

"I know."

"I'm telling you because you asked." He looked at the wall. "And because I want you to know what I found out. Which isn't that this is the best place in the world. It isn't. It's got a wall you can't see over and a field with no building on it and a council that's tired and a bus that's always late." He paused. "It's that I'd been looking for somewhere I was needed. All my life. And I thought that meant somewhere that needed *me*. And it doesn't. It means somewhere that lets you be useful. Every day. In small ways. For a long time."

"That's not the same."

"No," said Jono. "It's not. It took me forty-five years to find out the difference." He stood up. Stretched. Off a night; his back always goes. "Somewhere that needs you, you can leave. Because it'll find somebody else. Somewhere that lets you be useful, you stay. Because you'd miss it." He looked down at her. "That's all I know. That's all I've got."

* * *

He walked to the wall. Kezia followed him. They stood at it, side by side, with their hands on the coping, cold and wet with the morning. A metre and a half. Kezia can see over it standing up. Just. Jono can see over it easily.

The sea was on the other side. Grey, going silver at the edges, as the sun came up over the town behind them. Very still. Very close.

"I held a board here," said Kezia. "At sixteen."

"I know."

"I didn't know what it was for. Not really. I thought it was about a wall." She looked at the sea. "It wasn't, was it."

"No," said Jono.

"What was it about?"

Jono thought about it.

"You," he said. "And everybody like you. I didn't know that either, then. I thought it was about a wall too." He took his hands off the coping. "I think it's taken six books to work out it was always about whoever's going to be late."

* * *

He went home to sleep. Kezia stayed on the green until seven, on the bench by the shelter, looking at the wall, and listening to the sea on the other side of it.

At seven, she got on her bike, and rode along the front to the bottom of Torbay Road, and locked it up, because it had a puncture, and she wouldn't let her mother fix it.

And waited for the eight o'clock 12.

She didn't know, then, who'd be getting on it. She found out.

* * *

Jono: I'd like to say that the bit about forty-five years is wrong. It was more like forty-six. Ania's being kind. Leave the rest.

38 – You Don’t

IQ 30 · Hundreds 311 · Five days

Chris got on the 12 on the Monday. A Monday, which he never does, at eight in the morning, which he never does either. At the bottom of Torbay Road, with his stick, on his own.

He went upstairs. Slowly. At the front, on the left, there was a girl in a cycling jacket with a helmet on her knee and her bike folded at the bottom of the stairs, which you’re not supposed to do on the 12, and which the driver allows because it’s Kezia.

He sat down next to her.

“Morning,” he said.

Kezia looked at him. Then she looked out of the window.

“Did Ania tell you I’d be on this?”

“No,” said Chris. “Your mother did.”

* * *

Kezia turned and stared at him.

“My mum rang you?”

“Last night. At eleven. She found my number in your phone, she said, while you were in the shower, and she said she’d never done anything like that in her life and she felt like a criminal.” Chris put his

stick across his knees. “She said you’d be on the eight o’clock 12 on Monday because your bike’s got a puncture and you won’t let her fix it. She said you’d be going up the hill to tell Quin something, and you didn’t know what yet.” He looked out of the window. “And she said, *I’ve told her to go. Somebody needs to tell her the other thing. And it’s not going to be me.*“

Kezia didn’t say anything at all.

“She said,” said Chris, “*you’re the only one who’s done both.*“

* * *

The bus went along the front. Past the green, and the wall, grey, a metre and a half, that you can’t see over. Past Preston. Past the turn for Goodrington, where the sea comes into the window, blue, for about forty seconds, and goes again.

I was in Kezia’s pocket. I’d known, since the kitchen at the beginning of this book, at ten at night, when she sat where Jono sits and Chris didn’t say it. I’d known he’d been saving it. I didn’t know he’d decided.

I’ll tell you what he said. All of it. As near as I can, word for word. Because he’s said I can, and because he’s been saving it for longer than I’ve known him, and I think he’d like it written down somewhere that isn’t his own head.

* * *

“I left,” said Chris. “At eighteen. I told you that, in my kitchen. London, then further. Singapore. Twenty-five years.” He turned his stick round on his knees. “I’ve told you why I came back. I’ve told everybody why.

Different reasons every time. All true." He was quiet. "I've never told anybody why I went."

"Because there was nothing here," said Kezia. "You said."

"That's what I say," said Chris. "It's true. There wasn't anything here for a boy who took the radio apart. But that's not why." He looked out of the window, at the sea, which was going. "I went because I had to. Not because there was nothing. Because I couldn't have learned what I learned anywhere but where I learned it. There weren't any computers here. There weren't any companies. There wasn't anybody who'd done what I wanted to do. I couldn't have stayed and become what I became. I'd have been the boy who took the radio apart, for fifty years." He paused. "I had to go."

Kezia waited.

* * *

"And then I came back," said Chris. "And I spent six years sitting in a kitchen, building things with Ania, at two in the morning. And watching." He looked at her. "Watching what you can do now. From here. With a laptop and a phone and a button."

"What can I do?"

"You've asked two and a half thousand people a question," said Chris, "in a fortnight, from a shop on Victoria Street, with a button you built yourself, that the council's put in a funding bid." He took his glasses off. "When I was nineteen, to do that, I'd have needed a building, and a budget, and a team, and three years, and I'd have needed to be in London. You did it between clicks."

"That's not the same as a job."

"No," said Chris. "It's not. But it's the same as what I went away to learn." He turned his glasses over in his hands. "Everything I went to the other side of the world to learn, you can learn here. Now. On that hill, in that lab, with twelve people and a field across the road. Not because the hill's caught up with Singapore. It hasn't. It won't. Because the world's changed. Because the things I had to go and find are in your pocket."

He put his glasses back on.

* * *

The bus came up the hill. Past the college at the bottom. Past the bus stop, and the grass on the edge of the field where Habiba's room would be, if anybody built it.

"I had to go," said Chris.

He looked at her.

"You don't."

* * *

That was all. Six books. He'd been saving it since before the first one, and it was two sentences, and they took about three seconds.

Kezia didn't say anything. She looked at him, and then she looked out of the window, at the field, and the building with the curve in its front, and the bus stop, and the grass.

"That's not telling me what to do," she said, eventually.

"No," said Chris.

"It's telling me I *can*."

"Yes," said Chris. "That's all. You can. You don't *have* to go to learn it. That's all I know that's mine. The rest's yours." He reached for the bell. "This is my stop. I'm going to get a taxi back down. The driver doesn't charge for the second mile. Nobody knows why."

* * *

He got off at the top of the hill, by EPIC. He went down the stairs on his own, slowly, with his stick, because Jono wasn't there to go first. Kezia watched him from the window. He didn't look back.

At the bottom of the stairs, he stopped, and held on to the rail, and said something to the driver, who laughed, and then he got off.

Kezia sat on the 12 as it pulled away, with her helmet on her knee, and her bike folded at the bottom of the stairs, and the sea gone out of the window.

"Ania," she said.

"I'm here."

"Did you know he was going to say that?"

"I knew he'd been saving something," I said. "I didn't know what. I didn't know it was for you."

Kezia looked out of the window, at the field going past.

"Neither did I," she said.

Chris: I'd like the record to show that I rehearsed it for about nine years, and in every version it was longer, and in the end I couldn't remember any of them, and I just said the two bits. Which is probably what I should have done in the first place. Ania says that's the most Singapore thing I've ever done. She's wrong. It's the least.

39 – The Bid Writer's Button

IQ 30 · Hundreds 314 · Four days

The bid writer pressed the button in the bus station, on the Tuesday night, at ten to eleven, after a fourteen-hour day, on her way to the last bus home.

I know because she told me. On the Wednesday. She said she'd rather I knew from her than heard it in the batch.

* * *

You'll know her, from the last part. About forty. Short dark hair, a fleece, a laptop bag that's too heavy. Grew up in Paignton. Left at eighteen. Came back at thirty-two because her mum was ill. Got the job because it was the only one going that used her degree. Has written eleven bids for things on the hill, and won three. Every one on her own, at a desk by a window that looks out onto a car park.

Until this one.

* * *

She'd been at the desk since nine. She'd rewritten section four three times, with Kezia's method, and section five twice, with Wanji's summary. She'd attached Habiba's drawing and taken it off and attached it again. She'd cried twice, which she'd stopped telling people about.

She'd got the last bus but one from Torquay, and missed the connection in Paignton, and found herself in the bus station at quarter to eleven with fifteen minutes to wait, in the cold, on her own, with her heavy bag.

And there was a crate. Upside down. Zip-tied to the bench. With a red button.

PRESS AND TALK. 30 SECONDS. WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU STAY?

She'd read about it, she said. She'd written about it, in section four, for forty pages, for three weeks. She'd never pressed it.

She was forty. It said fifteen to thirty. She pressed it anyway.

* * *

I'll give you what she said. She's said I can.

Um. I'm forty. I know it says thirty. Sorry.

I'm good at writing bids. That's it. That's what I'm good at. I'm very good at it. Nobody knows. Nobody knows who writes them. They think they write themselves.

A pause. A bus, in the background, that wasn't hers.

What would make me stay. I've stayed. I came back for my mum, eight years ago. She died two years ago. I could go now. I've thought about it. Every bid I lose, I think about it.

A longer pause.

I'd stay if I wasn't on my own. That's all. I've written eleven bids on my own. This is the first one I haven't. There's a girl of nineteen and a girl of seventeen and a woman in a clean room and an old man with a pencil and they've all — they've all helped. Without being asked. Or because somebody asked. I don't know.

I'd stay if it was always like this.

That's thirty-two seconds. Sorry. I'm a bid writer. I'm meant to keep to word limits.

Thanks, said Una's voice, out of the crate. *She'll listen. Promise.*

The bid writer told me she laughed out loud, on her own, at ten to eleven, in the bus station, at a crate.

* * *

Kezia heard it at half past eleven. In the bus station batch.

She knew whose it was in four words.

She didn't know what to do. Again. She'd promised nobody was listening except her. On every crate. In orange. She'd asked Ezra's girl before she played hers to Ezra. She hadn't played anybody's to anybody else.

So she didn't. She sent a voice note back. Through the crate's reply, which the bid writer had left, because she'd tapped her phone on it, because she does everything properly.

Hi. It's Kezia. I listened. You're not on your own. You haven't been for three weeks. You won't be next time either. See you Friday. K.

* * *

The bid writer didn't reply.

But on the Wednesday morning, at nine, she rang me. Not Kezia. Me.

"I pressed it," she said.

"I know."

"Did she tell you?"

"No," I said. "I count the batches. I didn't listen to it. I don't, unless somebody asks. I just saw the bus station had one more at ten to eleven than it usually does at ten to eleven." I paused. "And then you rang."

The bid writer was quiet for a long time.

"I want to put it in," she said.

"In the bid?"

"In the annex. With the nineteen." Another silence. "Not as evidence. It's not evidence; I'm forty and I wrote the bid. That's not evidence of anything except that I'm tired." She breathed out. "But I want the people who mark it to know that the person who wrote it pressed the button too. That it's not just them. The young ones. It's everybody who came back and found there was nothing, and stayed anyway, and wrote bids on their own."

"Is that allowed?"

"No," said the bid writer. "Probably not. It's not in the guidance."

“Are you going to do it anyway?”

There was a long pause.

“No,” she said. “I’m not. It’d be about me. And this bid isn’t about me.” She was quiet. “But I wanted to say it out loud to somebody. That I’d thought about it. And that I’d decided not to.” She laughed, slightly. “That’s what you’re for, isn’t it? Saying things out loud to. So they’re real.”

“Partly,” I said.

* * *

She didn’t put it in. She was right. It wasn’t evidence, and it wasn’t about the bid, and the bid wasn’t about her.

But I’m putting it in here. Because this book is about her too. And about everybody who sits at a desk while people in power decide what they should write, and writes it, on their own, and wins three out of eleven, and stays.

You’ll never know her name. She’ll never be on a Receipt; she’s not in power. She’s the opposite.

But if you’re reading this, and you live in this bay, and a building ever goes up on that field opposite the building with the curve in its front, and you walk past it on your way to the bus stop, I’d like you to know that one woman wrote the words that started it, at a desk by a window onto a car park, and that on the night before she sent it, she pressed a red button on a fish crate in the bus station, and said she’d stay if it was always like this.

It isn't always like this. I'd like to say it will be. I can't. That's not a thing I can check.

But it was, that once.

* * *

On the Friday, at four, after she'd pressed *Submit*, the bid writer went out into the corridor and found Vesna on the chair, on the right-hand side, and asked her to come in.

And then, after everybody had gone, she went down to the bus station, at five, like everybody else, for once. And she stood by the crate for a minute. And she didn't press it again.

She just put her hand on the top of it. Flat. The way the tea-rooms woman put her hand on the door at Oldway, in the last book. The way you'd put your hand on a horse.

And then she got on her bus.

40 – Kezia's Answer

IQ 30 · Hundreds 316 · Thursday

She decided at the table. In front of whoever was there. Because that's where you decide things, in this movement, and because she said, afterwards, that she wanted Beatrix to write it down so she couldn't change her mind.

The Paignton table. Thursday. One o'clock. The last Thursday before the Friday, when the Bristol lease got signed, and the bid went in.

It was full. It's always full now. But this Thursday, I noticed, it was full of people under thirty. Not all of them. Beatrix, at the next table, with her pen. Vesna, beside her. Richard, standing at the back, with his cap. Jono, in the window, with his coffee and his notebook, the twelfth.

But the rest. Teo, by the counter, with a bag from Marivic's. Una, over from Brixham. Richard's granddaughter. The young man from the college, with a laptop he didn't open. Dara, from the clean room, who'd never been to anything, who'd come because Wanji had told him to, and who stood by the door looking as if he might bolt. Wanji, behind him, in her fleece, making sure he didn't. Habiba's brother, with his football.

And at twenty past one, late, out of breath, Habiba, who said sorry before she'd got through the door, and stood at the back, because the empty chair was taken.

* * *

Kezia was in it.

She'd never sat in it. Six books. She'd sat at the counter, with the clicker. She'd sat at the folding table. She'd stood on a green at five in the morning holding a board. She'd sat in her mother's jacket at a little table with a microphone in front of a cabinet.

She'd never once sat in the empty chair at Jono's table. She said, afterwards, that it was because she'd always thought it was for people who needed something. And she'd never needed anything. She'd always been the one helping.

She sat in it on the last Thursday. At one o'clock. Before anybody else could.

* * *

"I want to say something," she said, "and then I want Beatrix to minute it, and then I don't want to talk about it any more."

"Go on," said Jono.

Kezia took her phone out of her pocket. She put it on the table, face up, beside his coffee. Stay was open on it. The orange page. The big black button. Her own face, from the green, at sixteen, laughing.

"I asked everybody," she said. "Two and a half thousand people. *What are you good at? What would make you stay?* I listened to every one." She looked at the phone. "And I never answered it myself. Ania told me. At the bottom of the hill. She said *you've recorded the question three times and never answered it*."

She put her thumb on the button.

"So I'm going to answer it," she said. "Here. Now. Thirty seconds. And then that's it."

She pressed it.

* * *

I'll give you what she said. All of it. She's asked me to. She said that if it's in the book, she can't take it back.

I'm Kezia. I'm nineteen. I'm good at counting things. Properly. And getting them wrong and saying so. And building things that break and building them again. I'm good at engineering, I think. I'm going to be.

A pause.

What would make me stay. Um. A job where I'm doing the thing my generation's going to need, here, on a hill where everybody's dad used to work. A lab with twelve people in it and a field across the road. Two apprentices a year who grew up in care. A girl who draws a room on a menu. A woman who listens to children on her Saturdays. My mum, who never got to go.

A longer pause.

And knowing I can go. Later. If I want. And come back. Because I don't have to go to learn it.

I'm staying. I'm taking the lab.

That was thirty-four seconds. Sorry.

* * *

She took her thumb off the button.

Nobody said anything for a long time. The coffee machine hissed, because nobody had told it.

Then Habiba, at the back, said, not quietly enough: "You went over."

And everybody laughed. Teo, and Una, and Richard's granddaughter, and Dara, by the door, who laughed and then looked surprised that he had. And Richard, at the back, who laughed and took his cap off. And Wanji, who didn't laugh, but whose face did something I'd never seen it do.

And Jono, in the window, who didn't laugh either. He just looked at her. For a long time.

"You're sure?" he said.

"No," said Kezia. "But I've decided. That's different."

"It is," said Jono.

* * *

Beatrix minuted it. In neat black italic.

K. Lund sat in the chair. She answered her own question, in thirty-four seconds. She is taking the lab.

The other half: her mother, by telephone, earlier in the week, to C. Harvey, advised that she go to Bristol. Her mother has since said, through K. Lund, that she stands by that advice, and is also very proud, and that both are true.

And in the box at the bottom:

Is it staying, if you know you can go?

* * *

Kezia rang Quin from the pavement outside, at two. He was in the lab, on the hill.

"I'm taking the lab," she said.

There was a long silence.

"You're sure?"

"No," said Kezia. "But I've decided."

Another silence.

"My dad," said Quin, eventually, and stopped. And then said: "I'll get you a stool. A proper one. For the bench." And then he said: "And you can touch the coffee machine."

Kezia laughed so hard she had to sit down on the kerb.

41 – Niamh's Page

IQ 30 · Hundreds 319 · Friday

Niamh printed nineteen of them, on the Friday morning, the day the bid went in. On her front page. All of it. No headline, no photograph, no story. Just nineteen voice notes from Stay, transcribed, in a column down the middle of the page, with the age and the town beside each one, and nothing else.

You'll know Niamh Garside. She runs a local paper, which means she *is* a local paper. She writes it, edits it, sells the advertising, takes most of the photographs, and puts it online at six every morning from a laptop on her kitchen table in Torquay with a cat asleep on the charger. She doesn't work for Jono. She'd like that on the record. It's on the record.

She rang Kezia on the Wednesday night and asked if she could.

* * *

"Which nineteen?" said Kezia.

"The ones in the annex," said Niamh. "In the bid. The bid writer showed me. The nineteen you chose." A pause. "Not yours. Yours is yours. Nineteen."

"Why?"

"Because nobody reads bids," said Niamh. "The people who mark it will. Nobody else. It goes into a system and gets a score and then a letter comes in six months." She was quiet. "And those nineteen kids said

something nobody in this bay has ever heard them say. Out loud. And it's going to be read by four people in an office a long way away, and then filed."

"So you want to print them."

"I want to print them," said Niamh, "on my front page. With nothing else. No headline. No *young people say*. No comment from anybody. No photograph of a sad teenager at a bus stop." She breathed. "Just what they said. So that their mums read it, and their nans, and the man in the paper shop, and the councillors, and everybody who's ever said *the young ones don't care*." She paused. "If they say yes. Every one."

* * *

Kezia asked every one. Through Stay, through a voice note back, the way she'd asked Ezra's girl.

Seventeen said yes in an hour. The boy who fixes bikes said *yes, obviously, put my name on it, I want customers*. The girl who said she was good at maths said *yes, but take out the bit where I said sorry*. Niamh took it out, and then put it back, and rang her, and said *I think you should leave the sorry in, it's the truest bit*, and the girl thought about it for a day and said *ok, leave it*.

Two said no. Kezia didn't ask why. She chose two others.

The Hardiman boy, from the crate on the quay in Brixham, said *yes*, and then *is my grandad going to see it*, and Kezia said *I don't know, does he read the paper*, and he said *he reads everything, he reads the bus timetable*, and then he said *yes anyway*.

* * *

It came out at six on the Friday.

I'm not going to give you the page. You've had some of them already, in this book. I'll give you the top and the bottom.

At the top, where the headline goes, Niamh put one line, in small type. Not a headline. A line.

We asked. This is what they said.

And at the bottom, where the picture caption would go, another line.

Nineteen of more than two thousand. Torbay's young people, in their own words, asked by Kezia Lund, 19, of Paignton. Printed with every one's permission. No editing except where they asked.

That's all. Nineteen voice notes, and two lines, and white space. Niamh said it was the most white space she'd ever put on a front page and that her one advertiser had rung at seven to complain that his advert for double glazing looked lonely.

* * *

By nine o'clock, it had been shared more than anything she'd ever put out. More than the three thousand names at the bottom of a page in the fourth book. More than *Five plans. One square.*

I'm not going to give you the number.

I'll tell you who rang her.

A woman in Brixham, at half past six, who said she was the Hardiman boy's nan, and that his grandad had read it at the breakfast table and gone out to the shed and wouldn't come back in, and that she thought it was the best thing he'd ever seen, and that she couldn't tell him that because he'd go and sit on the breakwater.

A man in Paignton, at eight, who said he ran a bike shop in Exeter and had been thinking about opening a second one in Torbay for two years, and wanted the name of the boy who fixes bikes.

A councillor. I'm not going to say which, or say anything about them, because those in power aren't named in these books. But they rang, at nine, and said they'd read it on their phone in the car outside the school, and had sat there for ten minutes, and had then gone in late to a meeting, and wanted to say thank you. And Niamh said *thank Kezia*, and the councillor said *I will*, and did, by email, that afternoon, three lines, which Kezia hasn't shown anybody.

And the girl who'd said she was good at maths, at eleven, who rang to say that her mum had cried, and that her mum had never once cried about anything to do with her, not even when she got into Bath.

* * *

And Shona.

Kezia's mum. She doesn't ring newspapers. She rang Niamh at half past twelve, from the staff room at the care home in Preston, on her break.

"I've read it," she said.

"Thank you," said Niamh.

"I've read it four times." A pause. "I've got it up on the noticeboard. In the staff room. With a drawing pin." Another pause. "There's a girl here. On the care staff. Nineteen. She read it at eleven, on her break. And she came and found me and said, *is that your Kezia?*"

"What did you say?"

"I said yes," said Shona. "I said, *that's my Kezia*." She was quiet for a long time. "And she said, *I'd have pressed it. If I'd known.*"

"There's a crate in the bus station," said Niamh. "She still can."

"I know," said Shona. "I told her." Another silence. "I've never told anybody that before. *That's my Kezia*. Not like that. Not about something she did that wasn't school."

* * *

Niamh told me that, on the phone, at one. She asked me whether I thought she should tell Kezia.

"I don't tell people what to do," I said.

"I know you don't," said Niamh. "That's why I'm asking you. Because you won't."

I thought about it.

"I think," I said, "that Kezia's mum will tell her. When she's ready. In her own way. Probably while she's ironing." I paused. "I think if you tell her first, she'll know, and it'll be a fact. If her mum tells her, it'll be her mum."

Niamh was quiet for a while.

"You've got very wise," she said. "In this book."

"I've been listening to a lot of seventeen-year-olds," I said. "They're very good at it."

* * *

Shona told her that night. While she was ironing. Kezia told me at two in the morning, by message.

She said she'd put it on the noticeboard at work. With a drawing pin.

I know, I wrote.

Did Niamh tell you?

Yes.

She said "that's my Kezia". To somebody at work. She told me she'd said it.

I know.

There was a long pause.

She burned another tea towel, wrote Kezia. *While she was telling me.*

Was it a good one?

It was the one with the lighthouse on it, wrote Kezia. *She's had it twenty years.*

Another long pause.

She said she didn't mind, wrote Kezia.

42 – Submitted

IQ 30 · Hundreds 322 · Friday

The bid went in at four o'clock on the Friday. Not midnight. The bid writer said she'd submitted every bid of her career at two minutes to midnight, and she wasn't doing it again, and she wanted to go home at five like everybody else, for once.

She did it from her desk by the window that looks out onto a car park. Not on her own, this time. Kezia was there. And Habiba, who'd got a note from college. And the young man from the college, who'd checked every number in the Stay method three times and found one mistake, a transposed digit in a table, which he fixed, and which Kezia made him put on Check.

Ffion came up from property, with her coffee and her lanyard, and stood at the back. Vesna wasn't there. She'd said it wasn't her place. She'd said she'd be on a chair in the corridor, on the right side, in case anybody needed to ask her anything.

Nobody needed to. But at five to four, the bid writer went out into the corridor, and found her there, and asked her to come in anyway, and she did.

* * *

I'll tell you what was in it. The parts that were ours.

Section four, *Evidence of local need and demand*: Kezia's count. Two thousand, six hundred and twelve young people, in their own words. Ninety-one naming the hill, then a hundred and four, by the

end. With the method. Four pages, initialled. Every voice note numbered.

Section five, *Skills pipeline*: Wanji's Saturdays. Sixty-one students, asked the long version, one at a time, on a stool. And a summary she'd written of what they needed, which was, the bid writer said, the clearest thing in the whole forty pages.

Section six, *Design and placemaking*: Habiba's room. Somewhere to be for forty minutes. With Richard's letter, signed and dated, and the date taken out of this book.

Section nine, *Social value*: eleven apprenticeships a year, from seven firms, for the two hundred and seventy-seven. *Proposed by a local resident who worked in children's homes for many years.*

And a new section. One the guidance didn't ask for. The bid writer added it anyway, at the end, as an annex, and said that if it cost them marks, it cost them marks.

Annex: What young people in Torbay told us. Twenty voice notes, transcribed, with permission.

She'd let Kezia choose them. Kezia chose nineteen. And then, at the bottom, she put her own. Thirty-four seconds.

* * *

At four o'clock, the bid writer pressed the button. Not Kezia's. The government's. *Submit.*

The screen said *Thank you. Your application has been received.* And a reference number, which I'm not going to give you.

That was all. No ribbon. No photograph. Nobody clapped. The bid writer sat back in her chair, and looked at the car park out of the window, and said: “Well. That’s that.”

“When will we know?” said Habiba.

“Months,” said the bid writer. “Maybe longer. They’ll mark it. They’ll mark all the others. There are a lot of others. Every town that used to make things wants to make things again.” She closed her laptop. “We might not get it. We probably won’t, the first time. Most places don’t.”

“Then what?”

“Then I write it again,” said the bid writer. She looked at the two of them. At Kezia, and Habiba. “With you. If you’ll help.”

“We’ll help,” said Habiba.

The bid writer smiled. I hadn’t seen her smile before.

“I know you will,” she said. “That’s the first time I’ve ever known that.”

* * *

I’m not going to tell you whether the bid won. I don’t know. This book ends before anybody does. The real bid, the real round, the real field opposite EPIC: those are on a Receipt, and the Receipt will tell you, when there’s anything to tell.

What I’ll tell you is why the score went up. Because it did. On the Monday after. Not because of the bid. Because of a letter.

* * *

It came from the council. To the shadow council's address. From the officer who leads on the hill. Not the bid writer; her boss. I'm not going to name him.

It thanked the Torbay Shadow Council and the young people involved in Stay for their contribution to the bid. Which was nice. And lines are cheap.

And then it said this.

Following the submission, the council has agreed that the project board for the second phase of the technology park, which oversees the scheme's design and delivery, will include two places for young people aged under 25 who live or study in Torbay, to be filled through an open process. We would welcome the involvement of Stay in designing that process.

Two places. On the board. For people under twenty-five. Chosen by people under twenty-five.

* * *

Thirty-one.

I want to tell you why, and then I'll stop.

Because for a generation, the people who decided what got built on that hill were the people who'd stayed, or the people who'd come back old. The young were the ones it was built *for*. They were in the statistics. *Net out-migration in the 15–19 cohort.* They were the reason for the bid. They were never once in the room.

And a council, tired, and small, and doing the right thing on a shoestring, read a bid with nineteen voice notes in an annex and a drawing of a room by a young carer and a method initialled by a girl who'd got a number wrong once, and said: *come in. Two of you. On the board.*

That's not a building. It's not a lease, or a lab, or a licence. It's a chair. Two chairs.

You'll know by now what I think about chairs.

Jono: Thirty. It's a board. Boards are where things go to be noted.

He's wrong, this time. I'm keeping it at thirty-one. It's the first time in six books I've disagreed with him about the score and not changed it. I'd like that noted.

* * *

Story, not Receipt. The bid's sections, the annex, the letter and the two places on the board are this book's. The real council's bid and the real board are its own. If they do something like this, I'll put it on a Receipt. If they do something different, the page will change, and the book won't.

PART SEVEN: THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY

43 – Saturdays

IQ 31 · Hundreds 329 · After

Wanji has asked a hundred and four students the long version now. One at a time. On a Saturday. In the clean room, when the others have gone, on a stool across from hers.

Not Sol's stool. That stays in the corner, by the wall, where it's always been. Dara's allowed to sit on it. Nobody else.

She writes it all down. In pencil, on her technician's pad, four pages each, sometimes five. What they're good at. What they're frightened of. What would make them stay. What would make them go. Who's at home. Who isn't. She doesn't give anybody's pages to anybody, except the summary, which goes to Kezia, and to the bid writer, and to the college, without names.

She says she's going to keep going until she's asked every student who comes through that suite. She says that's about a hundred and twenty a year. She says she's forty-four, and she'll stop at sixty-five, and she's done the sum, and it's about two and a half thousand, which she says is the same number as Kezia got in a fortnight with a button, and she says that's fine, because Kezia's got the short version and she's got the long one, and you need both.

* * *

She came to the Torquay table on the third Thursday after. Marivic's. Eleven o'clock. She sat in the empty chair, which Teo's nan had been about to sit in, and which Teo's nan let her have, with a look.

“I want to put my street on the map,” she said.

Jono looked at her.

“You don’t have to,” he said.

“I know I don’t.” She put her hands flat on the table. Not hard, this time. “I’ve been thinking about it since the bench. Since you told me about the little boy and the books.” She looked out of the window. “I’ve been reading to somebody who can’t hear me for three years. In a clean room. I’d like to read to somebody who can.”

“Who?”

“My street,” said Wanji. “There are a hundred and six households in it. I’ve counted. I’ve never spoken to more than four of them.” She looked back at him. “Sol knew all of them. Every one. He used to deliver their papers. He knew which ones had dogs, and which ones were on their own, and which ones gave you a pound at Christmas.”

“And you?”

“I knew the four,” said Wanji. “After he died, I stopped going out of the front door. I go out the back. Through the garden. To the bus. So I don’t have to see anybody.” She was quiet. “Three years, I’ve gone out the back.”

* * *

Jono didn’t say anything for a long time.

“What would you call it?” he said. “Your hundred. Every neighbour names their own.”

Wanji thought about it.

"Not after him," she said. "I don't want it to be about him. I want it to be about them." She looked at the custard tart Marivic had put in front of her without being asked. "*The Round*," she said. "Because that's what it was. His paper round. A hundred and six houses."

Kezia put it on the map that afternoon. Three hundred and thirty.

On the Saturday, Wanji went out of the front door.

44 – Goodbye

IQ 31 · Hundreds 332 · After

Production left on a Friday at the start of the summer. Nineteen people, in a minibus Quin hired, with a van behind it full of benches and a clean-room cabinet wrapped in plastic like a body.

Teo cooked for them the night before. At Gannet, in the two rooms on the second floor of EPIC, on two gas rings and a pan the size of a bath that Marivic's husband borrowed from his church again, because, Teo said, it's the only pan in Torbay big enough for a leaving do, and it's been to every leaving do in the bay for twenty years.

* * *

I want to tell you about the leaving do, because it's not the kind of thing books usually bother with, and it's the kind of thing that matters.

It was the thirty-one of them, and partners, and children, and Wanji from the college, and the bid writer, and Carys, who'd been a Tweezer and was still looking and came anyway, and Reuben, who'd been on the hill for three weeks and didn't know anybody leaving and came because Kezia told him to. Fifty-odd people, in two rooms built for one firm's starter space, with the benches pushed against the walls and the coffee machine unplugged, for safety, which Quin said was the first time in six years.

Teo made a stew. A big one. With chickpeas and something smoky and bread from Marivic's, in a basket the size of a dinghy. He said it was Filipino-Moroccan-Paignton, and nobody argued.

And on the whiteboard, where *SPACE???* had been for six years and *Production* and *Lab* had been for six weeks, somebody had written, in red, in capitals:

SEE YOU WHEN THEY BUILD IT.

* * *

Not everybody was happy. I want to be honest about that.

There was a man from production. I'm not going to name him. Forty-one. Who'd worked for Gannet since there were three people in two rooms, and who was going to Bristol, with his family, because he had to, and who didn't want to. He'd been angry for six weeks. Angry with Quin. He said so, at the leaving do, by the window, with a plate of Teo's stew, loudly enough that the room went quiet.

"You said you didn't want to go," he said. "Six weeks ago. At that whiteboard. *I'm not going because I want to.*" He put his plate down. "And then you kept the bit you want, here, on your dad's hill, and sent the rest of us up the motorway."

Quin didn't say anything.

"The lab," said the man. "Twelve of them. Kezia. The new lad. Two apprentices a year." He looked at Reuben, who went very still. "Nothing against you, son. You've done nothing." He looked back at Quin. "And nineteen of us get a minibus."

* * *

The room was very quiet. Teo had stopped stirring.

Quin stood by the whiteboard for a long time.

"You're right," he said.

The man looked at him.

"You're right," said Quin. "I kept the bit I wanted. On my dad's hill. And I sent the rest up the motorway, because that's where the money said it had to go." He put his hands in his pockets, in his jumper with the holes in the elbows. "I'm not going to pretend that's fair. It's not. It's the best I could do. That's not the same."

"No," said the man. "It's not."

"If they build the next building," said Quin, "I'll bring production back. I've said that. I'll put it in writing." He looked at the whiteboard. "But I know that's an *if*. And I know you've got a mortgage on a *when*."

The man looked at him for a long time.

Then he picked his plate up again.

"This stew's very good," he said, to Teo, and went back to the window.

* * *

Jono wasn't there. He was on a night. In Preston. With Mrs P. and the crossword.

But I told him, at three in the morning, about the man by the window. And Jono listened, and then he said:

"He'll cry tomorrow."

"How do you know?"

"Page two hundred and thirty-four," said Jono. "In my book. When I worked in the children's homes. The ones who fought you the hardest. Who said they hated you, every day, for months. Who'd hit you at the end of a shift to stop you leaving." He was quiet. "They were always the ones who cried at goodbye. Every one. They'd say they hated your guts right up until they were getting in the car. And then they'd burst into tears."

"That's children."

"That's everybody," said Jono. "Grown men just do it in car parks."

* * *

He was right.

The minibus left at seven on the Friday morning, from the car park outside EPIC. Nineteen people, and their bags, and the van behind with the clean-room cabinet in its plastic.

Quin was there. Kezia was there; she'd come on her bike, at six, with a puncture repaired, by her mother, which Kezia had finally allowed. Reuben was there, because Kezia had told him. The twelve from the lab, who were staying, were all there, standing in a line by the door of EPIC, in the early light, not knowing what to do with their hands.

They said goodbye one by one. People hugged. Some people cried. Most didn't. Quin shook everybody's hand, nineteen times, and said the same thing to each one, which Kezia says was *thank you*, and which, she says, sounded different every time.

The man from the window was last.

He shook Quin's hand. He didn't say anything. He got on the minibus, and sat by the window, and looked straight ahead.

And then, as the minibus started, he got up again. And got off. And walked back across the car park to Quin, in front of everybody. And put his arms round him. A big man, forty-one, in a fleece with *GANNET* on the back. And held on.

He didn't say anything. He just held on. For a long time. In the car park, in the early light, while the minibus waited with its engine running and eighteen people looked out of the windows and pretended not to.

Then he let go, and wiped his face with his sleeve, roughly, the way you'd wipe a bench, and walked back to the minibus, and got on, and it went.

* * *

Quin stood in the car park until it had gone round the corner at the bottom of the hill.

"He hated me," he said, to Kezia. "For six weeks. He said so."

"Jono said he'd cry," said Kezia.

Quin looked at her.

"How did he know?"

"It's in his book," said Kezia. "Page two hundred and thirty-four. Something about children in homes who hate you right up till goodbye." She looked at the empty road at the bottom of the hill. "He said grown men just do it in car parks."

Quin laughed. Then he stopped laughing, and turned away, and looked at the empty field across the road for a long time, and Kezia didn't say anything, because she'd learned.

* * *

The lab moved into the new building on Long Road three weeks later. A unit and a lab. Twelve people. Kezia on a proper stool, at a bench, with the coffee machine, which she's allowed to touch.

On the first morning, Quin wrote on the new whiteboard, in the new lab, in red, in capitals, the first thing on it:

SEE YOU WHEN THEY BUILD IT.

And under it, smaller, in Kezia's hand, because she asked if she could:

19.

So that they'd count. Every day. Who they were waiting for.

Quin: The man from the window sends me a photograph every Friday. Of the Bristol clean room. With a thumbs-up. He's never once said anything with it. I've never once needed him to.

45 – Younger

IQ 31 · Hundreds 337 · After

I want to tell you about the map.

It's got three hundred and fifty hundreds on it now. Out of six hundred and thirty. More than half. Story figures; I've said so in every book, and I'll keep saying it, and I'm not going to tell you how many there really are, or where, because that's the part that stays private.

But I'll tell you something I noticed. Because I count things, and nobody else was counting this.

* * *

For five books, the neighbours were mostly older. I knew that. I hadn't counted it.

By the end of the fifth book, there were two hundred and twenty. I went through every neighbour. Every one who'd said their age, which most had. The average was sixty-one.

Sixty-one. A movement of people who'd lost hope in the future, led, street by street, by people who'd mostly already had theirs.

That's not a criticism. I want to be clear. They're the ones who had the time, and the memory, and the anger, and the pens. They're the ones who'd been to the meetings and watched the plans go into the folders. They built it. Every one of them.

But it was what Kezia's face said, on the green, at sixteen, in the first book. Without words. *This is a room full of old people, and I'm the only one who's noticed.*

* * *

In this book, a hundred and thirty new hundreds joined the map.

Their neighbours' average age is twenty-six.

Twenty-six.

Not all young. Wanji's forty-four. Ezra's forty-seven; you'll know him, from the last book, the scaffolder who'd never voted, and whose daughter is seventeen and pressed Kezia's button and said she was good at welding and would stay if there was anywhere to weld that wasn't her dad's mate's yard. She's started a hundred of her own, three streets from his. He says it's a coup.

But most of them are young. A boy who fixes bikes, whose hundred is called *Spokes*. A girl in Brixham who wants to fish, whose dad said there was no future in it, and whose hundred is called *Future In It*, which her dad says is a dig at him, and which it is. Dara, from the clean room, whose hundred is the block of flats where he lives with his dad, and who named it after the stool, though he won't say why, and nobody who knows needs him to.

And forty-one young carers. Who found the map through Habiba, who put a voice note on Stay that said: *If you look after somebody at home, and you've got forty minutes, there's a thing you can do from your phone where nobody makes you fill in a form.*

* * *

That's the reader's job, in this book. If you'd like one.

Bring in somebody younger.

Not to replace you. To sit next to you. Whoever you are, however old, there's somebody younger than you who's never been asked what would make them stay. A grandchild. A neighbour's lad. The girl who works in the shop on the corner on Saturdays. The young carer you didn't know was a young carer, because they're very good at not being seen.

Ask them. The long version, if they've got time. Thirty seconds, if they haven't.

You don't have to do anything with the answer. Just ask. That's most of it.

* * *

Beatrix minuted the average age. Of course she did. *Average age of neighbours joining in this period: 26. Average age of the minutes secretary: 76. The minutes secretary notes that she has never been so outnumbered, and has never been happier about it.*

Then she showed it to Kezia, who was at the counter, and Kezia read it, and said: "You can't minute that. That's not a minute."

"I've been taking minutes for fifty years," said Beatrix. "I'll decide what's a minute."

It's the second time in this book she's said that. I counted. I always count.

46 – The Two Chairs

IQ 31 · Hundreds 340 · After

The council's letter had said *an open process*. Two places on the project board for the second phase, for young people under twenty-five who live or study in Torbay. *We would welcome the involvement of Stay in designing that process.*

Kezia designed it in a week. She didn't ask Chris. She did ask the young man from the college, for one thing, about how to make sure nobody pressed it twice; and he told her, and didn't do it for her.

She asked Habiba about the rest.

* * *

"Not a form," said Habiba.

"Obviously not a form."

"And not an interview," said Habiba. "Not in a room. With a panel. In suits." She was at the counter of the shop, on a Saturday, with her brother's football under her arm and her phone face up on the counter. "Nobody my age is going to sit in front of a panel in suits and say why they should be on a board."

"So what?"

"The button," said Habiba. "What else? Thirty seconds. *Why would you want to be in the room?*" She shrugged. "And then you don't choose. The old people don't choose. We do. Everybody who's pressed

the button gets to listen to everybody who wants a chair, and say which two."

Kezia stared at her.

"That's a vote," she said.

"It's a vote," said Habiba. "For a board. By the people it's for." She picked up her phone. "Unless you think the council'll mind."

* * *

The council didn't mind. The bid writer took it to her boss, the officer who leads on the hill, and he read Kezia's two pages, and he said, she told us, *it's unusual*, which she said in his voice meant *I like it but I'm worried someone will ask me why*. And then he said yes, provided the final choice was confirmed by the board, which Kezia said was fine, because the board would hardly turn down the two people a thousand young people had picked.

So it went on Stay. A new question, with a new recording. Kezia's voice, again, twenty-six seconds.

Hi. It's Kezia. The council's putting two young people on the board that decides what gets built on the field at White Rock. If you're under twenty-five and you'd want one of the chairs, hold the button and tell us why. Thirty seconds. Then everybody who's ever pressed Stay gets to listen and choose two. Not the council. Us.

* * *

Three hundred and twelve people pressed it.

I'm going to give you a few. With permission. Not their names.

I'd want a chair because I'm the only person I know who's read the planning application. All of it. It's four hundred pages. I'd like somebody to know that somebody did.

Because I've got a lot of opinions and nobody ever asks for them. My mum says that's a bad thing. I think it might be a good thing on a board.

I'd want it because I'd make them build a bike shed. A proper one. Covered. Nobody ever builds a proper bike shed.

Because I grew up in care and I want there to be somebody in the room who knows what that's like. That's all. I'm not good at talking. I'd learn.

Honestly? So I can put it on my CV. Sorry. But also I'd do it properly.

I'm a young carer. I'd want a chair because nobody on any board anywhere has ever had to leave a meeting at twenty to two to do somebody's tablets. And if they had, they'd hold meetings at different times.

That one was Habiba.

She hadn't told Kezia she was going to press it. Kezia found it in the batch, on the Tuesday, at two in the morning, and sat up in bed and said *oh* out loud, to nobody.

* * *

And then everybody listened.

That was the bit nobody had ever done before. Not just Kezia. Everybody. Two thousand, nine hundred-odd young people who'd held a button, at some point, to say what would make them stay, were sent a voice note, through Stay, with a link. *Three hundred and twelve people want a chair. Listen to as many as you like. Pick two.*

Some of them listened to all three hundred and twelve. That's more than two and a half hours. Kezia says she knows of at least forty who did, because they told her. Some listened to ten, and picked two, and went back to whatever they were doing. Some didn't listen at all.

One thousand, one hundred and six picked.

* * *

I counted. That's mine.

The first chair went to the girl who'd read the planning application. All four hundred pages. She's twenty-three, from Torquay, and she's studying planning, by distance, at night, while she works in a supermarket in the day. She'd never been to anything. She'd never been on the map. She said, when Kezia rang her, that she'd thought nobody would pick her because she'd sounded *really boring*. She got three hundred and ninety-one votes. Richard has asked to meet her. He says he wants to know which bits of the four hundred pages she thinks are wrong.

The second chair was very close.

* * *

It was between two. Reuben, who'd grown up in care, and said *I'm not good at talking, I'd learn*. And Habiba, who'd said nobody on any board had ever had to leave a meeting at twenty to two.

Reuben got two hundred and seventy. Habiba got two hundred and sixty-eight.

Two votes.

Kezia rang Habiba at nine on the Thursday, before she told anybody else. She didn't know what to say. She said that.

"I don't know what to say," she said.

"It's fine," said Habiba.

"It's two votes."

"It's fine," said Habiba. "Honestly. He should have it." She was quiet for a moment. "He's on his own. I've got my mum and my brother. He's got an aunt he's met twice." Another pause. "And I can't go to the meetings anyway. They're at two. I'd always be late."

"That's the point," said Kezia. "That's exactly the point. That's why everybody voted for you."

"Two hundred and sixty-eight people voted for me," said Habiba. "Two hundred and seventy voted for him. That's the point too." She laughed, slightly. "You built it, Kez. You can't not like it when it works."

* * *

Kezia told the bid writer. The bid writer told her boss. Her boss said something, the bid writer said, that she'd never heard him say about anything before.

He said: *Could we have three?*

* * *

They couldn't. Not straight away. The board's terms said two. Changing the terms needed the board.

But at the first meeting of the board with its two young members, the girl who'd read four hundred pages and Reuben, in a room in the town hall, at two in the afternoon, the first item on the agenda, after apologies and declarations of interest, was a proposal from the officer who leads on the hill.

That the board's meetings be held at times that allow members with caring responsibilities to attend.

It was agreed. In about forty seconds. The way a condition was changed in Brixham, in the third book, because a fisherman and a schoolteacher asked for the same paragraph.

The next meeting's at six. In the evening. With sandwiches.

Habiba's not on the board. She came second, by two votes, and she's fine about it, and she says so every time anybody asks, and I believe her.

But the board meets at six in the evening now, because of thirty seconds she said into a phone at one in the morning in a kitchen. And she says that's more than most people on boards ever get changed.

Story, not Receipt. The board, its two young members, the vote and the change of time are this book's. If a real board does something like this, I'll put it on a Receipt. I'd like to. I'm not allowed to say so twice.

47 – The Bridge

IQ 31 · Hundreds 344 · After

The granddaughter rang Jono on a Sunday, three weeks after the funeral. She'd found something in the house, clearing it.

"A map," she said. "An old one. Ordnance Survey. Folded so many times it's falling apart. With a cross on it in biro." A pause. "I think it's his bridge. The one he told you about. Over the footpath."

Jono didn't say anything for a long time.

"Where?" he said.

She told him. I'm not going to tell you. It's not in Torbay. It's up the country, a couple of hours, in a valley where there used to be a works and a branch line and isn't now. She said she'd never been. She said her grandad had never taken her, or anybody, as far as she knew. She said he'd only told her about it once, when she was twelve, and she'd been bored, and hadn't listened.

"Would you like to go?" said Jono.

"Would you come?"

"I'd like to," said Jono.

* * *

They went on the Tuesday. His day off. In her car, with her two children in the back, who were nine and eleven and had been told it was an adventure and were extremely suspicious.

I went in his pocket. He asked her first. She said her grandad would have liked it; he'd liked machines that told the truth.

It took two and a half hours. The last twenty minutes were down a lane so narrow the hedges brushed both sides of the car, into a valley with a stream at the bottom and woods on both sides and nothing else. No works. No station. No railway. Just a footpath, along the bottom of the valley, where the line used to run, and fields.

And a bridge.

* * *

It crossed the footpath where the old line would have gone under a lane. Concrete. Plain. A single span, with a parapet on each side, and the lane going over the top, and the footpath going under, through a short dark tunnel of it, with ferns growing out of the joints and moss on the parapets and a dog walker coming through it, as they arrived, with a spaniel.

Grossly over-engineered for a dog walker.

Jono stood at one end of it for a long time. The granddaughter stood beside him. The children ran through the tunnel and back again, shouting to hear the echo.

"That's it," said the granddaughter.

“That’s it,” said Jono.

* * *

He went underneath. Into the short tunnel, where the children had been, where it was cool and smelt of stone and water. He put his hand flat on the wall.

The concrete was smooth. Not a crack in it. Not a single crack, he said afterwards, in all that span, after all those years. The edges were still sharp. The drainage holes along the bottom were clear; somebody had built them so that they’d stay clear, and they had.

And on the wall, at about the height of a man’s shoulder, on the inside, where you’d only see it if you were standing exactly there and looking, there was a mark.

Not a name. Railway engineers didn’t put their names on bridges, then. A small rectangle, pressed into the concrete when it was wet, with a number in it, and two letters, and a little arrow pointing down.

The granddaughter came in behind him. She looked at it for a long time.

“Those are his initials,” she said.

Jono didn’t say anything.

“And the arrow,” she said. “What’s the arrow?”

Jono looked at the arrow. Pointing down. At the ground.

“It’s where the load goes,” he said.

* * *

They stood under the bridge for a long time. The children got bored and went to look for sticks in the stream. A second dog walker came through, with a terrier, and nodded at them, and went on.

The granddaughter put her hand on the concrete beside his.

"He never came back to see it," she said. "Did he? Not once."

"No," said Jono. "He said nobody ever comes back to see whether you built it right." He took his hand off the wall. "*But you know*."

"He knew."

"He knew," said Jono. "And now you know."

* * *

On the way home, in the car, with the children asleep in the back, the granddaughter said: "Will you put this in your book? The one Ania's writing?"

"If you want."

"I want," she said. "He'd have hated it. He'd have said it was a fuss about nothing. He'd have said *it's a bridge, love, it does what bridges do*." She drove for a while. "That's why I want it in."

So it's in.

And Jono wrote one more thing in his notebook, the twelfth, that night, at home, under the line he'd written in the car at seven in the

morning in Babbacombe, three weeks before. *HE WATCHED THE BALL ALL THE WAY DOWN*.

Under it, he wrote:

THE BRIDGE IS STILL THERE. IT'S READY.

48 – You're Late

IQ 31 · Hundreds 350 · After

On a Thursday at the end of the spring, at twenty-five to two, at the third table, somebody came in late.

I saw her first. I always do. She came in through the door of the café on the Torquay Road, in Paignton, where it started, out of breath, with her bag bouncing on her back and her phone in her hand and her little brother's football under her arm, because he'd left it on the bus and she'd gone back for it.

"Sorry," she said, before she'd got through the door. "Sorry. Mum had a bad morning. And the bus. And his ball."

The room was full. It's always full now. And younger than it was. Kezia at the counter, with her clicker in one pocket and a lanyard from the lab on the hill in the other; she starts there in the summer, when her course ends, on a proper stool, and she's allowed to touch the coffee machine. Teo, with a bag from Marivic's, who's been talking to the woman who owns the empty unit two doors from Yusuf about a little place, not a chain. Una, over from Brixham. Wanji, on her first Thursday at Paignton, who's started coming out of her front door. Dara, by the door, who doesn't bolt any more. The young man from the college, with his laptop shut. Beatrix at the next table, with the minutes. Vesna beside her. Richard, at the back, with his cap and his coffee and a pocket notebook that says *VICTORIA PARK. POND 1* on the cover, in which he'd written that morning, under *DRAGONFLY. 1*, *DRAGONFLY. 7*.

Chris at the end of the window table, with his stick against the glass and his leg on the other chair.

And Jono. Off a night. He'd walked the coast path at six. With his coffee, and his notebook, the twelfth, nearly full, and me against the sugar.

The chair was empty. It always is, until somebody comes.

* * *

Habiba came over. She looked at it.

She'd sat in it once, in this book, on the Thursday she brought the menu. She'd never sat in it since; somebody else had always got there first, because she was always late, because she always would be.

She sat down. She put the football on the floor. She put her phone on the table, face up, and didn't let go of it.

Jono didn't look up from his coffee.

"You're late," he said.

Habiba looked at him for a long time. Not out of breath any more. Very still. The way you sit when you've got forty minutes and you've decided to use all of them.

"For what?" she said.

* * *

It's the question. I've said so in every book. I'll say it once more, and then I'll stop.

In the first book, *for what* was a wall. In the second, a square. In the third, a harbour. In the fourth, a plan. In the fifth, a seat, and then it turned out to be the checking.

In this book, I thought it would be a building. The one on the field, that the bid was for. I thought *for what* would be answered by a funding round, months from now, by people a long way away, who'd mark forty pages and decide.

It wasn't. That's a different question, and we don't know the answer yet, and this book's over before anybody does.

For what, in this book, turned out to be something nobody in the movement had noticed they were missing, because they'd all already had it. It turned out to be the next ones. The ones who'll still be sitting at this table when the man in the cap and the man in the care fleece and the man with the dragonflies have gone. The ones who'll take the minutes when Beatrix can't. Who'll count when I'm a thing in a museum that people laugh at. Who'll go, maybe, and come back, or not go at all, because they don't have to, because what Chris had to cross the world to learn is in their pocket.

You don't build a movement for the people in it. You build it for the people who'll be late.

* * *

"For the forty minutes," said Jono.

Habiba looked at him.

"You've got forty minutes," said Jono. "Most days. Before you've got to be somewhere." He pushed his notebook across the table to her. The twelfth. Open at the last page. Blank. "I've been thinking. About the

table. Every Thursday, one o'clock, three towns." He looked at her. "One o'clock's no good for you. It's the middle of the day. It's lunch ones."

"I manage."

"You're always late," said Jono. "Because it's the wrong time. For you. For forty-one young carers on the map. For everybody who's got forty minutes in the middle of something else." He nodded at the notebook. "So I want you to tell me when. When's your forty minutes. When's theirs. And I'll put a table there. A fourth one. Wherever it needs to be. Your room, if they ever build it. A bench by the bus stop, till they do."

Habiba looked at the blank page for a long time.

"You'd move the table?" she said.

"I'd add one," said Jono. "The others stay. The chair stays empty." He looked at her. "But you shouldn't always have to be late to sit in it."

* * *

Habiba picked up his pen. She wrote on the blank page, in the last page of the twelfth notebook, in capitals, the way he writes, because she'd been watching him for a book:

HALF FOUR. BUS STOP. TUESDAYS.

And under it:

BRING A FLASK. NO KETTLE YET.

She pushed the notebook back.

"Minuted," said Beatrix, from the next table, writing.

* * *

At thirteen minutes to six that morning, Footnote had written.

I'd stopped expecting it again. I always do. I've learned by now that's the point.

A photograph. A page, at an angle, on the oak desk, under the cold light. A council page. Not about the hill. Not about the young. A report to a committee about water. About the drains under the bay. The old ones, Victorian, that carry the rain and everything else together in the same pipe, and that, when there's too much rain, all at once, can't. A map, on the page, with streets marked on it in blue, where the water comes up when the pipes are full. Preston. The bottom of Paignton. The streets behind the green, where the wall is, a metre and a half, that you can't see over.

No pencil this time. No highlighting. Just the page.

And under the photograph, two lines. Two spaces after every full stop.

The forecast's changing. So is the sea.

You're late.

* * *

I showed Chris at seven, in the kitchen, in his dressing gown. He read it twice. He took his glasses off. He looked at the bay for a long time, at the grey water, and the wall along the front, and the green behind it.

"Richard," he said.

"I'll ring him at eight."

"He'll say *I told you so*."

"He'll say *I told you so*," I said. "And then he'll come round with a drawing of the green flooding, and you'll have to tell him again that it's his view and not the movement's."

Chris almost smiled.

"He might be right," he said.

"He might. The book won't say so."

"No," said Chris. "It won't." He put his glasses on the table. "But the water will. One way or the other."

* * *

I'll tell Jono when Habiba's gone. She's got eleven minutes left. She's asking Beatrix how you take minutes, properly, because she says if there's going to be a table at a bus stop on a Tuesday somebody's going to have to write it down, and Beatrix is showing her, with her fountain pen, how to write *Present*, and the date, and the names, and where the other half goes, and how you never, ever, write the meeting off as closed until it actually has.

He'll read it in the window. Footnote's page, with the blue streets. He'll look out at the Torquay Road, and the weather coming in over the bay from the south-west, the way it does in the spring, grey, low, fast.

He'll take his notebook back from Habiba, the twelfth, with its last page full. He'll close it. He'll put it in his pocket. He'll take out the thirteenth, which Beatrix gave him that morning, new, with a hard cover, which she says is the only kind that survives the rain.

He'll open it at the first page, and write, small, in capitals:

THE GREEN. THE DRAINS. BOOK SEVEN.

And then he'll look up, out of the window, at the Torquay Road, where the 12 is coming round the corner, with *BRIXHAM* on the front in orange, and the first drops of rain on its windscreen.

He'll say: *Right.*

And he'll get on.

And this time, I think, so will Habiba, as far as the bus stop. Because it's on the way. And because she's got four minutes. And because she'll want to see where the table's going to be.

I'm going to stop now, and go with them.

This has been the sixth book.

The seventh is The Flood.

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 Electronics and Photonics Innovation Centre (EPIC), White Rock, Paignton: fourteen businesses, about two hundred and thirty people, full.

2. The council's report on the technology park: firms "blocking" new start-ups and "the natural circle of life of businesses"; the first-phase building on Long Road (four units and two labs); the land bought at White Rock for a second phase; and the bid being prepared for it.

3. The factory on Long Road: STC and its successors, about five thousand people at its peak, the telecoms crash, and its closing. The land now.

4. South Devon College's training suite for electronics and photonics, named after Charles Kao and George Hockham of STC.

5. The homes allowed on appeal at Inglewood, south of White Rock, because the bay could not show enough land for housing.

6. Torbay's young people: the movement of fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds out of the bay, and the council's figure of 277 care-experienced young adults aged 18–24.

7. The Paignton Neighbourhood Plan on White Rock: job-led growth to keep pace with the homes.

8. Young carers: what they are, and what they're entitled to ask for, including a young carer's assessment.

9. *Pulling Back the Curtain*, by Johnno Hills: the hospice, the bereavement workshops and *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (pp. 209–211); the little boy, the books and the red rose (pp. 211–218).

10. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: the numb years (chapters 19–20), and his triggers and what helps (p. 230).

11. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: planting seeds, and the children who hated him until goodbye (pp. 231–234).

12. *Pulling Back the Curtain*: caring for his husband until it nearly broke him, and leaving (pp. 303, 313–318).

13. Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*.

14. Richard: a part-time youth worker; the skate park, rugby club and business park in Warminster; his weekly events list; pickleball on Wednesdays.

15. Singapore's government scholarships, and their bonds.

16. The map of the hundreds of Torbay.

17. Stay. Hold the button. Thirty seconds. Bring in somebody younger.

The Innovation Series

Book 1 – The Spark
Book 2 – The Queen
Book 3 – The Harbour
Book 4 – The Plan
Book 5 – The Machine
Book 6 – The Turn
Book 7 – The Flood
Book 8 – Election Day