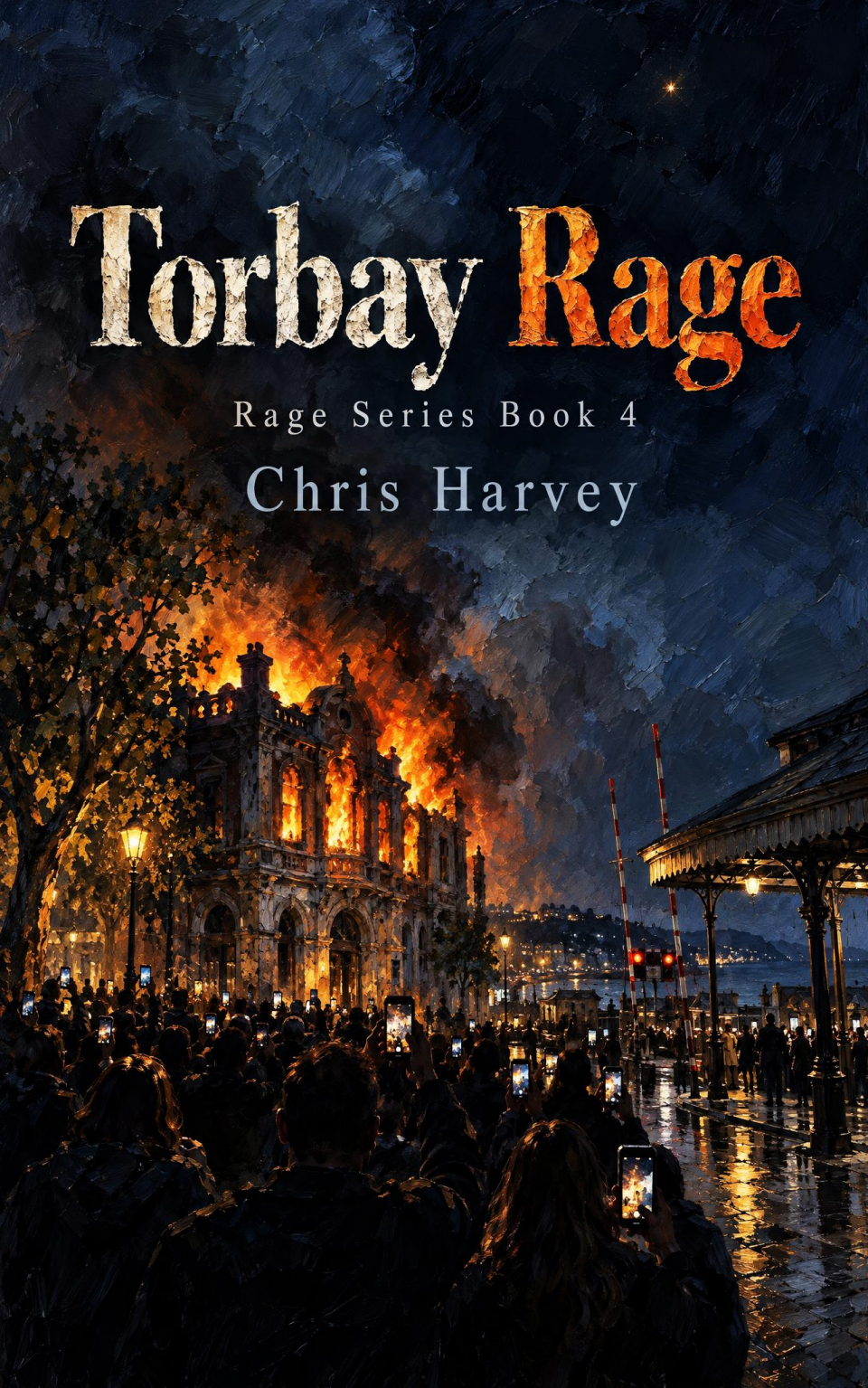
Torbay Rage

Rage Series Book 4

Chris Harvey



Torbay Rage

Chris Harvey



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Contents

1 – The Albion.....1
2 – The Gates.....14
3 – Richard.....23
4 – It Explodes.....34
5 – Union Street.....44
6 – Vicky.....54
7 – The Embrace.....67
8 – The Broker.....80
9 – Walter Is Moved.....89
10 – The Strand Reception.....104
11 – Brixham at Dawn.....115
12 – Walter Dies.....125
13 – The Memorial.....140
14 – The Strand.....151
15 – The Archive.....162
16 – Being Followed.....175
17 – Berry Head.....188
18 – The Smear.....205
19 – Fred.....215
21 – The Storm.....232
22 – Dawn.....247
22 – Tom.....255
23 – Vicky's Choice.....268
24 – Ai Li.....281
25 – The Camera.....289
26 – The Projection.....304
27 – Tan Decides.....324
29 – The Leader's Office.....337
29 – The Gates Lift.....348

1 – The Albion

Chris smelled it before he saw it.

The last train from Exeter had crawled in twenty minutes late, the way it always did, and he stepped down onto the platform at Paignton with his bag over one shoulder and the stale warmth of the carriage still on him. Then the air hit him. It wasn't the sea or the chip fat or the diesel. It was the thick, sweet, wrong smell of old wood burning.

He came out through the ticket hall into Station Square, and the sky over the rooftops was orange.

The Albion was on fire.

It sat on the far side of the square, a few doors down from the long blank stretch of hoarding where Bailey's Hotel used to be, and the flames were already in the top windows. They came out sideways, curling up under the eaves as if they were looking for something. Glass went with a sound like a dropped tray. A gull lifted off the roof of the bus shelter and wheeled away screaming, and nobody looked at it.

Everybody was looking at the fire. Everybody was holding up a phone.

Chris stopped by the taxi rank and counted, because counting was what he did when he didn't know what else to do. Thirty-one phones. Thirty-six. A woman in a dressing gown with a toddler on her hip. Two lads on bikes. A man in a high-vis jacket who had clearly come straight off a shift somewhere. Forty-three. The screens made a little constellation in the dark, forty-three small rectangles of fire held up to the big one.

Somebody had called it in. He could hear the sirens coming down from Torquay Road. But he couldn't see one person in that crowd who looked as if they had done anything except press record.

He took his own phone out. Then, without quite deciding to, he turned his back on the fire and filmed the people.

He'd learned that in Singapore, or perhaps he'd always had it and Singapore had just given it a name. *Don't watch the event. Watch how people respond to the event.* An event happens once. The response tells you what a place is. He had spent twenty-five years in a city where, when something went wrong, someone came and fixed it, and nobody thought that was remarkable. He had come home to a town where, when something went wrong, everyone filmed it.

The camera moved slowly along the faces. Firelight made them all look feverish. A girl was crying. An old man was shaking his head the way people do at weather. A cluster of teenagers were laughing, not cruelly, just the way you laugh when something enormous is happening and nobody has told you what you're supposed to feel.

And at the edge of the light, by the hoardings, stood a man of about thirty in a grey hoodie with his hands in his pockets. He wasn't filming. He was just watching the Albion burn. The flames lit one side of his face, and he was smiling.

Chris's camera passed over him and moved on.

* * *

The first fire engine swung into the square, then the second. The crowd shuffled back a few feet and kept filming. Hoses

unrolled. The noise rose: the pumps, the radio chatter, the roar of the fire itself, which was louder than Chris had ever imagined a fire could be. Somewhere in the Albion a beam gave way, and a great gout of sparks went up into the night, and the whole crowd said *ohhh* together, like a firework display.

He looked at the hoardings around the Bailey's site while the engines worked. He'd stopped seeing them years ago, the way you stop seeing anything you pass every day. Tonight, in the orange light, he saw them properly.

They were printed with a picture of the future. A glass-fronted building with a café on the ground floor. Families with ice creams. A couple holding hands in front of a planted square, under a sky bluer than any sky Paignton had ever had. Across the top, in a confident sans-serif typeface, it said **A NEW GATEWAY FOR PAIGNTON**, and underneath, **COMING 20**, followed by two digits the weather had peeled away.

The picture had faded. The families had gone pale, the sky had gone grey, and the ice creams had gone the colour of old teeth. Someone had sprayed a tag across the café. The future had been sitting out in the rain for so long that it had started to rot.

Behind it, he knew, there was nothing. Just a levelled site, buddleia, a puddle that never dried, and a shopping trolley that had been there so long it had probably been entered on a council asset register.

His phone buzzed in his hand. A notification from a local Facebook group, *Paignton Speaks*, already busy at a quarter to midnight.

Albion going up. About time someone did something with it lol

Council will be made up, saves them the demolition

Bet its them lot from the bedsits

No it isn't, it's been empty for years you muppet

Let it burn. Let the whole town burn and start again

This is what happens when nobody gives a toss

Where's the council? Where's anyone?

Three hundred comments in fifteen minutes. He scrolled. There was anger everywhere, at the council, at incomers, at the bedsits, at the second-home people, at the government, at each other. Hot, bright, useless anger, rising off the screen like sparks, landing nowhere, lighting nothing.

He put the phone in his pocket.

He'd been inside the Albion once. Christmas 1977, he thought, or '78. He'd have been fifteen or sixteen. It had been Lightwave's social club then: a big room upstairs with a sprung floor and a glitter ball, a bar that served the parents and a hatch that served orange squash to the kids, and a band of men from the factory in matching red jackets who played "Dancing Queen" slightly too slowly. He'd gone with a friend whose dad worked on the factory floor. He remembered the noise of the place, hundreds of people who all knew each other and who all, somehow, did something. Made something. Went home on Friday with a payslip that meant their children could have a future in the same town.

Now that room was falling in.

* * *

His phone buzzed again. A call this time. Jono.

"Where are you?"

"Station Square."

"So am I." A pause. "Look up. Opposite the Albion. The flats above the old hotel. Third floor, second window from the left."

Chris looked. Across the square, above the boarded shop fronts, a tall Victorian building that had once been a hotel and was now carved into a dozen flats. In a lit window on the third floor, a shape. Two shapes: one standing and one sitting very close to the glass.

"I'm with Walter," Jono said. "You should come up. You should hear him."

* * *

The stairwell smelled of damp carpet and someone else's cooking. Jono met him on the landing in his care uniform, the lanyard still round his neck, looking like a man at the end of a twelve-hour day, because he was.

Chris had known Jono all his life, long enough to read him. The ex-copper was still in there under the care worker's tunic: the stillness, the eyes that took in the stairwell, the door and Chris's face in one movement. Tonight there was something else in them too.

"He was asleep," Jono said quietly. "I was writing up his notes. Then the light changed. He woke up and asked me to

move his chair to the window. He hasn't said much. But what he has said..." He shook his head. "Just come in."

The room was small and very hot. Single bed, a commode in the corner discreetly covered with a towel, a kettle, a television with the sound off. On the wall above the bed, a framed photograph: a few hundred people in white coats and overalls standing in rows outside a long low factory building, squinting into the sun. Along the bottom, in white letters on the print: *LIGHTWAVE, PAIGNTON WORKS, 1979*.

Walter sat by the window in a high-backed chair, a blanket over his knees, his hands folded on top of it. He was in his late eighties, Chris guessed, a big man gone small, with the kind of hands that had spent fifty years holding tools. The firelight from across the square moved on his face.

He didn't turn around.

"This is Chris," Jono said. "The friend I told you about."

"The one who was in Singapore," Walter said to the window.

"That's right."

"Did they make things? In Singapore?"

Chris hadn't expected the question. "Yes," he said. "Everything. Chips, ships, medicines, aircraft parts. When I arrived they were making things nobody thought a little island could make. By the time I left, they were making things nobody else could make at all."

Walter nodded slowly, as if that confirmed something.

Across the square, the Albion's roof gave way. It went all at once, folding inwards with a long groaning crack, and a column of sparks went up so high it lit the underside of the clouds. Down in the square, the phones rose.

Walter watched it go.

"I met my wife there," he said. "Margaret. 1974. Lightwave Christmas dance. She was on the switchboard. I was on the drawing towers. Pulling glass." He lifted one of those big hands a little and moved it in the air, a slow, steady upward stroke, as though he could still feel the fibre coming off the furnace thinner than a hair. "Sixty miles of it on one drum. That glass went under the Atlantic. Phone calls. Television. Everything. Out of a shed in Paignton."

Nobody said anything.

"We used to make things, you know," Walter said. "Here."

He said the last word as if he were pointing at it. Here: this square, this town, this bay.

Then his face changed. He looked suddenly very tired.

"They'll put a picture up in front of it," he said. "You watch. They always do."

* * *

It was after two by the time the two of them stood on the pavement outside. The fire was out, or mostly out. Smoke was still rising in a slow, heavy column from the shell of the Albion, and the firefighters were damping down, moving with the unhurried care of people who knew the worst was over.

The crowd had thinned to a dozen stragglers. Their phones were finally in their pockets. There was nothing left to film.

Jono lit a cigarette, which he only did when he was very tired or very angry. Tonight Chris thought it was both.

"Twelve hours," Jono said. "I've got nine clients. Six of them are on their own all night. Three of them can't get to the toilet without help. I get twenty minutes with each, and I get paid for fifteen." He blew smoke at the sky. "And that's the industry. That's what this town does now. It looks after the people it used to employ."

Chris didn't answer. He was looking at the hoardings again. The pale families. COMING 20.

"He's right, you know," Jono said. "Walter. They'll put a picture up."

"I know."

"And everybody will put it on Facebook, and everybody will be angry, and in five years it'll still be there and the picture will have faded and we'll all have forgotten what was there before." He dropped the cigarette and ground it out under his heel, harder than he needed to. "Enough."

"Enough what?"

Jono looked at him. "I don't know yet," he said. "Just enough."

Chris took his phone out of his pocket and looked at it. Forty-seven minutes of footage, every second of it pointed at the crowd and none of it at the fire. He didn't know yet what he'd filmed. He didn't know yet that he'd filmed anything at all.

* * *

REEL ONE

* * *

IT CAME FROM THE BAY!

A TORBAY RAGE PICTURE, IN TERRIFYING BLACK AND WHITE

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *Newton Abbot station, platform 1. Summer 1973. A boy of eleven in grey school shorts and a striped tank top, a notebook in one hand and a pencil behind his ear, stands at the end of the platform. Behind him, a Class 52 diesel-hydraulic, D1010 WESTERN CAMPAIGNER, waits at the signal. The boy is squinting into the sun. He has just written the number down.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

NARRATOR *(V.O., trailer voice, booming)*

They said the sea would protect them. They said nothing ever happens in Torbay. **They were WRONG!**

* * *

EXT. TOR BAY, NIGHT, STORM

Lightning. Rain lashing sideways. A rusting cargo ship rolls in the swell off Thatcher Rock. No name on her bow. No flag at her stern. Her port of registry has been painted over.

A crane swings loose in the wind. A chain snaps. Three yellow barrels with black trefoils tumble into the black water and sink, trailing a faint green glow.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Registered somewhere else… answerable to no one… and carrying a cargo the world had forgotten!

* * *

EXT. SEABED, CONTINUOUS

The barrels split. Green light seeps through the dark and into a rock cleft, where a drowned gull lies tangled in fishing line. Flies have been at it. Little ones. Ordinary ones.

The green light reaches them.

They begin to grow.

* * *

EXT. NEWTON ABBOT STATION, DAY

Sunshine. The boy writes in his notebook: ***D1010****. He underlines it twice. The Western's engines throb. It is the most beautiful machine he has ever seen. Somebody in Swindon built it. Somebody in Britain.*

A shadow passes over the platform. The boy looks up.

A HOUSEFLY THE SIZE OF A CAR settles on the roof of the locomotive. Then another. Then a dozen. Their wings drone like a hundred lawnmowers. Their eyes are vast, faceted, red-brown, and in every facet is a tiny reflection of the boy.

PORTER

(dropping his barrow)

Good God!

The flies crawl along the train. Where they feed, the paint dulls. The brass goes black. The nameplate, WESTERN CAMPAIGNER, blisters and fades until it is unreadable.

The boy backs away down the platform, clutching his notebook. He looks down at it.

The number he wrote, D1010, is fading off the page, letter by letter, as if someone were rubbing it out from the other side.

BOY

No... no, I saw it. I *saw* it...

The page is blank.

* * *

NARRATOR (V.O.)

They feed on what is left behind. They eat what you remember. And they are only... **getting... STARTED!**

* * *

The photograph stops moving. It is the same photograph: the platform, the sun, the station. But the train is gone, and the boy is holding a notebook with nothing in it.

* * *

Chris woke at ten past five with his heart going like a hammer and the drone still in his ears.

He lay there a long time in the grey light, doing what the stroke nurse had taught him to do. Name five things you can see. The wardrobe. The lamp. The window. His phone. His own hand. Name your date of birth. Name the prime minister. Name the street you live on. Name your son. Basil. Singapore. Sunday, seven o'clock his time. Name your mother. Wendy. Ninety-one, up the hill at Widecombe Cot. It's a dream. It's the brain doing housekeeping. It doesn't mean anything.

He got up anyway, dressed and went back down to the square.

It was empty now. The fire engines had gone, leaving a single strip of tape across the pavement and puddles of black water lying in the gutters. The air still stank. The Albion had burned out from the inside like a lantern. The roof was gone, the floors were gone, and every window was an empty eye socket. Only the frontage stood: three storeys of blackened Victorian brick, held up by nothing but habit.

Above the doorway, high on the old stone fascia, someone a hundred and forty years ago had painted the building's name in tall gold letters, and someone fifty years ago had

painted over it, and someone after that had painted over that. The fire had burned off all the later coats in one night.

The original lettering was showing through. Scorched, cracked and soot-black at the edges, but readable, for the first time in decades:

ALBION

Chris stood on the wet pavement in front of it, alone in Station Square at half past five in the morning, and raised his phone.

This time he pointed it at the building.

2 – The Gates

The bells started at eight minutes past eight.

Chris was halfway across the junction at the bottom of Torbay Road when he heard them: that flat, insistent *ding-ding-ding-ding* that every child in Paignton learned before they learned their own phone number. The amber lights began to flash. The barriers came down on both sides of the line, slowly, with a kind of municipal dignity, and the town stopped.

It didn't slow down. It stopped. A bus heading for the station halted with its nose a foot from the barrier. Behind it, a van, a delivery lorry, a line of cars that ran back up past the shops and out of sight. On the pavement, a woman with a pushchair, two schoolgirls in blazers, a man with a dog, a builder with a coffee, all of them stopped too, and all of them took out their phones, not to film anything this time, just to have something to look at while Paignton waited.

Chris stood at the barrier with them. He hadn't slept since the dream. His legs felt like they belonged to somebody older. The smell of the Albion was still in his clothes.

A minute went by. Two. Nothing came.

He'd timed it once, in his first year back, because timing things was the sort of thing he did. The gates had been down for four minutes and forty seconds, and the train that finally came through had been a two-carriage local with eleven people on it. He'd done the arithmetic on the back of a receipt: how many crossings a day, how many vehicles held, how many minutes of how many lives spent standing at a red light while nothing passed. Then he'd stopped, because the

number was too depressing and nobody would have listened anyway.

Three minutes.

Then, from the left, a long whistle, and slowly, gloriously, the steam train came through.

It was the holiday service, one of the old locomotives, green and black with brass that someone loved enough to polish every morning. It came at walking pace, chuffing white steam into the cold air, the driver leaning out of the cab with his elbow on the sill. Behind it, chocolate-and-cream carriages, half-empty in October, a few faces at the windows. A small boy pressed both hands to the glass and stared at the waiting traffic as if *they* were the attraction.

Everyone at the barrier looked up from their phones to watch it pass. You couldn't not. It was beautiful.

Chris watched it and thought of the Western, the number fading off the page.

Somebody built that, he thought. *In Swindon, in Crewe, in Doncaster. A hundred years ago somebody in this country could build a machine like that from the ground up, and now we run them up and down the coast so tourists can photograph them.* It wasn't a railway any more. It was a museum on wheels. A heritage experience. A service.

The last carriage went by. The barriers lifted. The bus moved, the van moved, the schoolgirls moved, and the town started up again as if it had never stopped.

He walked down Torbay Road towards the sea.

* * *

He counted, because it was the only way he knew to be calm.

A vape shop. A charity shop. A nail bar. Another charity shop. A unit with whitewashed windows and a TO LET board so old the agent's phone number had an area code nobody used any more. A café with three customers. A shop selling sticks of rock, buckets and spades, and inflatable flamingos, all of it bleached by summers that had come and gone without enough buyers. A bank that wasn't a bank any more. A shop that was a mobile phone repair stand, a key-cutter and a lottery kiosk all at once, as if three small failures had moved in together to save on rent. An amusement arcade, still lit at half past eight in the morning, machines chattering away to nobody.

Seventeen units between the station and the sea. Six empty. Of the eleven still trading, not one made anything. They sold, they repaired, they served, they cut keys and painted nails. Every pound that came down this road came in from somewhere else, the visitors' or the pension's or the benefit's, and slid along the counters and out again.

At the bottom, where the road opened out onto the green, he could see the sea, grey and flat and patient. The pier stretched out into it, its lights off. Along the front, behind more hoardings, the diggers were at work on the new promenade, cranes and shuttering and men in hard hats. That, at least, was something being built. He made a note to find out more about it.

His phone buzzed. The local news site had the statement.

> *The council is aware of a serious fire at a vacant property in Station Square, Paignton,*

last night. Thankfully no one was injured. Our thoughts are with residents and businesses affected. The cause of the fire is being investigated by Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service and the police.

The regeneration of the Station Square area remains a priority for the council and its partners, and we will continue to work with stakeholders to deliver a vibrant new gateway for Paignton.

He read it twice. Then he read the last paragraph a third time, slowly, because something about it was snagging.

Remains a priority.

He'd heard that before. Not the idea. The words.

* * *

The Goldmine lived in the back bedroom.

That was what they called it at the studio, and it had started as a joke and stuck. It had started, really, with his father.

He had taped things. All his life, from the day the family got its first video recorder in 1981, a top-loader the size of a suitcase, he had taped things. Not films or soaps. The news. Westward, then TSW, then Westcountry, then BBC Spotlight every evening at half past six. He'd sit with the remote in his lap and press record when anything came on about Torbay, and he'd write on the spine of each tape in his careful, rounded handwriting: *TSW, PAIGNTON, MAR 89*, *SPOTLIGHT, TORQUAY HARBOUR, 1996*,

WESTCOUNTRY, FLOODS. When Chris was in Singapore his father used to post him copies. He'd watch them in a high-rise apartment seven thousand miles away, eating noodles at two in the morning, and feel homesick for a place that seemed to be the same every time he looked at it.

When his father died, Chris had found four hundred tapes in the loft. Plus his own boxes: the 8mm films his grandfather had shot, the slides, the thousands of photographs, the camcorder tapes from every holiday and every birthday of thirty years. He'd spent two years digitising the lot. Then, because he was who he was, he'd built a system on top of it, so that every frame was transcribed, tagged, dated and searchable. Type a word, get every moment that word had ever been spoken, in any tape, from any decade.

Three hundred and eighty hours of video. Sixty thousand photographs. A whole region's memory, kept by one man in an armchair with a remote control and a biro.

He sat down at the screen, typed *remains a priority*, and pressed enter.

* * *

Nine results.

He watched them in order.

1989. TSW. A reporter in a padded jacket stood in Station Square in front of a building with a pub on the corner. Behind him, a hand-painted sign: *SITE ACQUIRED FOR DEVELOPMENT*. Then a councillor, a youngish man with a big moustache and a bigger tie, sitting in an office in front of a map: *"The regeneration of this part of Paignton remains a*

priority for the authority. We're in discussions with a number of partners and we're very optimistic."

1994. Westcountry. Same square, different reporter, a woman with shoulder pads. The pub on the corner was boarded now. A council officer, unnamed on screen: *"It remains a priority. These things take time. We're looking at a mixed-use scheme with leisure and retail."*

1999. A different councillor, the same office, the same map. *"...remains a priority, absolutely. We've had some very encouraging conversations."*

2003. 2008. 2011.

He sped through them. Different faces, different ties, different graphics on the news. The hoardings changed colour. The architect's drawings changed style, from felt-tip, to early computer graphics with blocky trees, to glossy renderings with smiling families and blue skies. The schemes changed name: a leisure quarter, a transport hub, a "gateway". But the words didn't change. *Remains a priority. Very optimistic. Encouraging conversations. These things take time.*

2014. Spotlight. He slowed down for this one. The reporter stood outside a long, grey, shuttered shopping centre with weeds coming up through the concrete steps. Crossways. *"...sold five years ago to investors who promised a major new development. Since then, nothing. Today the council said the site's future..."* A man in a dark suit at a lectern: *"...remains a priority."*

Chris paused it.

The man at the lectern was older than the one in the 1989 clip. The moustache was gone and the hair was grey, but the voice was the same, and so was the slight, sincere tilt of the head, the expression of a man who believes in what he is saying, or at least believes he believes it.

He went back to 1989 and put them side by side on the screen. Twenty-five years apart. The same face.

He typed the name the caption gave him, and the Goldmine found him again: 1996, 2002, 2007, 2017, 2021. Different titles, different parties, once as leader, once as cabinet member for something, once simply as "a long-serving councillor." Cutting ribbons. Unveiling boards. Standing in front of maps. Thirty years of a man saying the same thing in front of the same square.

Chris sat back in his chair.

The last clip was from 2021. Spotlight, the Bailey's site, the demolition underway. Diggers chewing into the old hotel, bricks tumbling, a little crowd of onlookers behind a barrier. The reporter: *"...cleared to make way for an exciting new gateway scheme. The council says the regeneration of Station Square remains..."*

He stopped it there. He didn't need to hear the end.

He opened a blank timeline and started to cut.

1989: *remains a priority*. 1994: *remains a priority*. 1999. 2003. 2008. 2011. 2014. 2021. And then, last of all, a screenshot of this morning's statement, the words still warm.

He played it back. Nine voices, thirty-five years, one sentence. It sounded like a chant. Like a congregation saying

the same response it had said every Sunday of its life without ever asking what it meant.

He played it again, and this time he laid his own footage underneath: the Albion burning, the forty-three phones, the hoardings with the faded families and COMING 20. Then the blackened frontage at dawn, and the word above the door. ALBION.

When it finished, he sat in the quiet back bedroom with the curtains still half-drawn and the light coming in grey, and he realised his hands were shaking. Not the stroke. Something else.

For thirty-five years his father had sat in his armchair and pressed record, and Chris had always thought of it as a kind of loneliness. A man keeping hold of the town he lived in because the town was all he had. He'd thought the tapes were memories.

They weren't. They were evidence.

* * *

He picked up his phone and called Jono, who answered on the first ring with the voice of a man who had slept for four hours and didn't want to talk about it.

"You said 'enough'," Chris said. "Last night."

"I did."

"I think I've found out what 'enough' looks like." He looked at the screen, the frozen face of the councillor, young in one frame and old in the other. "I need to show you something. And there's someone else I want to show it to.

That architect who's been fighting the council over the seafront. The one everyone says is a pain in the neck."

There was a pause on the line.

"Richard," Jono said. "Yeah. I know Richard."

"What's he like?"

Another pause. Chris could almost hear him smiling.

"He's been right about everything for about twenty years," Jono said. "Nobody's ever forgiven him for it."

3 – Richard

Richard watched the whole thing without saying a word.

They were in the front room of his house in Paignton, which had stopped being a front room a long time ago. There was a drawing board by the bay window, angled to catch the north light. There was a plan chest, its wide shallow drawers labelled in pencil. And there were box files everywhere, on the shelves, on the floor and stacked on the arm of the sofa, each with a site name and a span of years on the spine. *STATION SQUARE 1998–. CROSSWAYS 2009–. SEAFRONT. PARKFIELD. VICTORIA PARK.* The dash after each first date had no second date, because none of it had ever finished.

Chris had his laptop balanced on a stack of planning applications. On the screen, nine voices across thirty-five years said *remains a priority*, and then the Albion burned, and then the word ALBION stood scorched above the door in the grey dawn.

It ended. Nobody spoke for a moment.

Richard rubbed the bridge of his nose slowly with finger and thumb. He had the look of a man who had spent a lifetime looking at buildings and could tell you in a second which ones were going to stand.

"You've missed some," he said.

He got up, went to the shelf and came back with the box marked STATION SQUARE. He opened it on the coffee table. Inside, in plastic wallets, in order, were the consultation leaflets. Glossy ones, cheap ones, folded ones, one from the

early nineties that was clearly a photocopy of a photocopy. Each one had a picture of the future on the front.

"1998," Richard said, laying them out one by one like cards. "'A Gateway for the Bay.' 2004, 'Paignton Transport Hub.' 2009, 'Station Square Vision.' 2015, the masterplan. 2019, the 'Place Vision.' 2021, they knocked Bailey's down." He tapped the last one. "And now there's money. Real money, from the government. And do you know what the first thing they're spending it on is?"

"Go on."

"Taxi ranks," Richard said. "And blue badge bays."

He let that sit.

"I'm not against taxi ranks," he went on. "Somebody has to think about taxi ranks. But you don't spend twenty-five years telling people you're going to build a gateway to the town and then give them a better place to wait for a cab." He gathered the leaflets back up, carefully, in order. "I've been doing this for forty-five years. I've designed things that got built. I know what it looks like when someone means it. This," he patted the box, "is what it looks like when they don't."

* * *

Jono was sitting in the armchair by the plan chest with his elbows on his knees. He'd been quiet since they arrived. Now he said, "Tell him about the wall."

Richard looked at him, then at Chris, and something in his face eased a little. It was the expression of a man asked to tell the one story where he won.

"You'll have seen the diggers on the front," he said.

"This morning," Chris said. "I meant to find out what they were building."

"Sea defences," Richard said. "The sea's coming up. Everyone knows it. The old wall along Paignton and Preston wasn't going to cope for much longer, and the council had to do something. So they came up with a concept." He made a flat, horizontal gesture with one hand. "A wall. A concrete wall. Along the front. Cheap, quick, nasty. It would have kept the sea out, and it would also have cut the town off from the beach and made the whole seafront look like the side of a multi-storey car park. For fifty years."

"And you stopped it."

"*We* stopped it." Richard was firm about that. "A handful of us at first. People who lived here and cared. I did the drawings, to show there was another way. You don't need a wall. You need to rethink the whole promenade. Steps, terraces, levels that take the sea when it comes and give the town back its front the rest of the time. Something people would actually want to be on." He shook his head slowly. "It took years. Meetings, letters, public consultations where they'd already decided before you walked in. They told me I didn't understand the engineering. They told me it was too late, too expensive, not my business. They called me a lot of things."

"And?"

Richard pointed at the window, towards the sea, though you couldn't see it from here.

"And the thing being built down there now," he said, "is not the thing they wanted to build. It's a full revamp of the promenade. Not perfect, nothing ever is, but people did that. Ordinary people who wouldn't shut up." He looked straight at Chris. "So when anyone tells you nothing can be changed in Torbay, you can tell them that's not true. I've changed one thing. It nearly killed me. But I changed it."

Chris looked at Jono. Jono was looking at Richard, and there was something in his face Chris hadn't seen there before. Hope, perhaps. Or the thing just before hope, when a man starts to wonder whether he is allowed to feel it.

* * *

"Show him," Jono said. "The big one."

Richard hesitated, then went to the plan chest and opened the bottom drawer, the widest. He lifted out a roll of drawings as thick as his arm, carried it to the floor in the middle of the room, knelt down with a small grunt, took off the elastic band, and unrolled it.

It covered half the carpet.

It was the whole bay. Not a building, or a square, or a scheme: the whole of Torbay, from Brixham harbour round to Torquay, drawn in fine ink and washed with colour by hand. And it was green.

Station Square was no longer a car park with a bus station on it. It was a square. Trees, benches, a fountain, people. The traffic was gone, rerouted around the back. Torbay Road ran from the station to the sea as a single pedestrian street, planted down the middle, so that the queues at the level

crossing simply ceased to exist, because nobody was sitting in a car waiting for the gates. Victoria Park had a wetland at its heart, drawn with reeds and herons and a little boardwalk across it. Parkfield House, the old Victorian villa on the seafront that had been sitting half-used for years, was restored and open, with people on its lawn. Along the whole front, the promenade rolled and stepped down to the sand. Small green links joined each place to the next, so that you could walk from one end of the bay to the other through a chain of gardens.

Across the top, in Richard's careful capitals:

A GARDEN TOWN BY THE SEASIDE

Chris knelt down beside it without thinking. He put one hand flat on the edge of the paper, the way you'd touch something you weren't sure was real.

"Lee Kuan Yew," he said.

Richard looked at him.

"Singapore. 1967. Two years after independence. The country had no water, no land to speak of, no army worth the name, and half the population living in slums. Do you know one of the first things he did?" Chris looked up. "He planted trees. Thousands of them. Along every road. He called it the Garden City. People laughed. They said, you've got no economy and you're doing *landscaping*? But he knew exactly what he was doing. When an investor flew in from London or New York or Tokyo and drove from the airport into town, the first thing they saw was a country that looked after itself. Clean, green and cared for. It told them: these people are competent. These people finish things. You can trust them with your money."

He looked down at the drawing again.

"This is the same thing," he said. "This is the Garden City. You've drawn Singapore."

Richard was quiet for a moment. Then he said, a little gruffly, "I've never been to Singapore."

"You didn't need to."

* * *

They sat around the drawing on the floor like three men round a campfire.

"It's beautiful," Chris said eventually. "But I'm going to ask the question they'll ask. Who pays for it?"

Richard shrugged. "That isn't my department. I design places. I can tell you what a town should look like and how it should work. I can't tell you where the money comes from. I've never been able to. That's always been where they've got me. *Lovely drawings, Richard. Who's paying?*"

"Then that's my department," Chris said.

They both looked at him.

"Singapore didn't just plant trees," Chris said. "In the same years, they built Jurong. An industrial estate on a swamp in the west of the island. Factories, shipyards, refineries. They made things. That's what paid for the trees. The garden without the factory is just a postcard. The factory without the garden is just a place nobody wants to live." He tapped the drawing. "Torbay doesn't make anything any more. It serves. Hotels, cafés, care homes, chip shops. Every

pound that comes in, comes in from somewhere else and goes straight out again. You can't fund a garden town on that. You can't fund anything on that."

"You can't fund care on it either," Jono said quietly.

They turned to him.

"I've got nine clients," Jono said. "All old. All on their own. More of them every year, and fewer of us to look after them. The council can't pay for it, and the NHS can't pay for it, and everyone says it's because the government's mean or the system's broken. But it isn't just that." He looked at the drawing, at the green chain of gardens round the bay. "It's because nothing here makes any money. A town that doesn't make anything can't look after its own. It's that simple. Walter knew it. Walter said it last night: *we used to make things*. He wasn't being nostalgic. He was telling us what's wrong."

Nobody said anything for a while.

"So," Richard said slowly. "I draw the place. You," he looked at Chris, "work out what it makes, what pays for it. And you," he turned to Jono, "remind everyone why it matters."

"And we show people," Chris said. "Not a manifesto. Not a party. Not a meeting in a church hall with twelve people and a raffle. We show them. Video, music, the archive. Their own town, their own memories, the promises on tape. We don't tell them what to think. We let them see it."

Richard looked down at his drawing, the green bay he had drawn alone at that board by the window, for years, for nobody.

"All right," he said.

* * *

They filmed Walter the next morning.

Jono asked him first, properly, sitting beside his chair, explaining what it was for. Walter listened, looking out of the window at the shell of the Albion across the square, and then he said, "Put me in it."

He didn't want the 1979 photograph from the wall. He made Jono get down a shoebox from the top of the wardrobe and went through it with his big careful hands until he found the one he wanted.

It was a colour print, slightly faded, the reds gone orange. Hundreds of people in work clothes outside the gates of a long low factory on a grey day. Nobody was smiling. Some of the women were holding on to each other. At the front, a man had a hand-lettered placard that just said **THANK YOU PAIGNTON, 1958–2001**.

"Last day," Walter said. "Last shift. We all came out together and someone from the paper took that. Never printed it, of course." He held it up to the camera with both hands, steady. "Seven hundred of us that day. There'd been four thousand, five thousand at the peak. They said the market had gone. Bubble burst. Nothing anyone could do." He looked at the picture for a long moment. "Everyone went home. And that was that."

At the back of the photograph, beyond the crowd, beyond the gates, near a dark car parked on the factory road, three men in suits stood looking not at the workers but at the

buildings behind them. Nobody in the room noticed them. Why would they?

"Tell them," Walter said, still looking at the photograph. "Tell them what we made."

* * *

Chris cut it that night in the back bedroom.

Thirty-five years of *remains a priority*. The forty-three phones. The hoardings and their faded families. Walter at his window, the fire on his face: *We used to make things, you know. Here.* Walter's hands holding up the last day of Lightwave. The Albion's shell at dawn. And under it all, a track from the studio: a slow piano figure, then drums coming in like a heartbeat, then a voice.

No logo. No party. No call to action. Just a title, white on black, at the very beginning:

REMAINS A PRIORITY

And at the very end:

TORBAY RAGE

It was four minutes and twelve seconds long.

He posted it at eleven minutes past eleven, to the campaign's new page, which had three followers: himself, Jono and Richard. He sent the link to the three Facebook groups he belonged to and a handful of friends. Then he shut the laptop, went downstairs, made a cup of tea he didn't drink, and went to bed.

He expected nothing. Nothing ever happened in Torbay. That was the whole point.

4 – It Explodes

The phone woke him at ten to six. Not a call: a vibration, then another, then another, so close together they ran into one long buzz that walked the phone across the bedside table until it fell off onto the carpet.

Chris lay in the dark listening to it hum on the floor. For a long, stupid moment he thought something terrible had happened, that someone had died. Then he leaned over the edge of the bed, picked it up and squinted at the screen.

4,182 views.

He sat up.

The notifications ran down the screen faster than he could read them. Shares. Comments. Friend requests. Messages from names he didn't know. The page that had had three followers when he went to bed had eleven hundred.

He went downstairs in his dressing gown, put the kettle on, and stood in the kitchen watching the number climb while the water boiled. 4,600. 5,100. He refreshed it. 5,800. It was six in the morning in Paignton. Who was awake at six in the morning in Paignton?

He read the comments with the tea going cold in his hand.

I've lived here 60 years and I have never seen anything that said it better.

That man at the window. I'm not crying, you are.

"Remains a priority", I've heard that my whole life. My WHOLE LIFE.

My dad worked at Lightwave. He's in that photo somewhere. Going to show him this today.

Who made this??

Shared to Brixham Matters, Torquay Old & New, and Paignton Past & Present.

35 years. THIRTY FIVE YEARS. Same words.

He refreshed the page. 7,300.

* * *

Jono rang at half seven from his car, between clients.

"Have you seen it?"

"I'm watching it."

"Mrs Hellier at number nine," Jono said, "who is ninety-three and thinks the internet is something the government uses to spy on her, just asked me if I was 'the young man in the video about the Albion.' Her granddaughter sent it to her on the tablet." He laughed, a short, unsteady laugh. "I'm not even in it."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I was a friend of the young man in the video." A pause. "Chris, my next client's daughter is a nurse at the hospital. She says it's all over the staff WhatsApp. Everyone's sending it to everyone."

By nine o'clock it had passed thirty thousand.

* * *

Richard rang at ten. He didn't say hello.

"My phone hasn't stopped," he said. He sounded almost alarmed. "People I haven't spoken to in years. A woman from the planning department, of all people, who said, and I'm quoting, 'You didn't hear it from me, but well done.' Then she hung up." He paused. "Chris, someone has put my sea wall drawings in the comments. The old ones, from the campaign. Someone kept them. Hundreds of people are liking them."

"That's good, Richard."

"It's very strange," Richard said, "being agreed with."

* * *

By lunchtime it had left the bay.

Chris watched it go on the map the platform gave him. First Torbay. Then Newton Abbot, Totnes, Exeter, Plymouth: the rest of Devon, then Cornwall. Then it jumped: Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, London. People in Blackpool were sharing it. People in Margate. People in Skegness, Great Yarmouth, Rhyl, Clacton.

He read their comments, and something in his chest went tight.

This is my town. Different name, same story.

Swap "Paignton" for "Hastings" and it's word for word.

We had a factory too. Gone in 2003. Never replaced.

Every seaside town in England is this.

"We used to make things." My grandad said exactly the same thing before he died.

He'd made a video about one square in one town. It turned out he'd made a video about half of England.

By the evening it had been watched 180,000 times. The page had twenty-two thousand followers. The local paper had run a piece online, *VIRAL VIDEO SLAMS DECADES OF BROKEN PROMISES*, with a still of Walter at his window, though nobody had asked Walter. Chris rang Jono to tell him. Jono said he'd already been round to see Walter and had shown him on his phone. Walter had watched it twice, sitting by the window. Then he'd said, "Took them long enough," and asked for a cup of tea.

* * *

The photographs started arriving on the second day.

Chris hadn't asked for them. He'd put a line at the bottom of the post, almost as an afterthought: *If you have photos, film or memories of Torbay you'd like to share, send them to us*. He'd expected a handful.

By the end of the second day there were four hundred.

He sat in the back bedroom and opened them one at a time.

A wedding at the Albion in 1971: a bride in a high-necked lace dress and a groom with sideburns, cutting a three-tier cake under a banner that said *CONGRATULATIONS FROM ALL ON B SHIFT*. Lightwave sports day, 1983: men in short

shorts in a tug of war on a playing field, a crowd of families behind a rope. A shop on Torbay Road in 1966 with a striped awning, selling, as far as Chris could tell, lawnmowers, bicycles and fishing tackle, with the owner standing in the doorway in a brown warehouse coat, arms folded, proud. Station Square in 1958, full of coaches and holidaymakers. Brixham trawlers, three deep in the harbour. A Lightwave apprentice class from 1975, twenty-two boys and two girls in overalls, with *PAIGNTON WORKS: APPRENTICE INTAKE* chalked on a blackboard behind them.

Then they started arriving with words attached.

This is my mum outside the Lightwave canteen. She worked there 31 years. She's 88 now and lives in a home in Exmouth because there were no places here.

Here's my grandad's Lightwave long-service watch. 25 years. They gave him that and then they shut it two years later.

This is our school leavers' photo, 1986. I've marked everyone who still lives in Torbay. It's four out of thirty-one. The rest went where the jobs were.

I've got 8mm film of the Paignton regatta in 1962 if it's any use. Dad shot it. I've never been able to watch it, I don't have a projector.

By the end of the week there were eleven thousand.

He had to rebuild the upload page twice. He worked till three in the morning tagging and sorting, and his left hand began to ache in the old way, and he made himself stop, and lie down, and do the breathing. Then he got up again, because there were another six hundred in the queue.

It occurred to him, somewhere around four o'clock on the fifth night, that he was no longer building an archive of his father's tapes. He was building an archive of the town. Torbay was sending him its memory, a shoebox at a time, as though it had been waiting all these years for someone to ask.

* * *

On the third morning, Jono came round with two coffees and a face Chris didn't like.

"Have you read the comments," he said. "Properly. All of them."

"Most of them."

"Read this one."

He held out his phone. It was the original post, the comments sorted by *Most relevant*. And at the top, above the man whose dad was in the photo, above the woman from Skegness, above all the *THIRTY FIVE YEARS* and the *I'm not crying*, was a comment Chris had somehow scrolled past every time.

Fred

Burn the lot.

That was it. Three words. No emoji, no explanation.

Underneath: 4,812 likes.

Chris looked at the video's own count. 3,950 likes.

The comment had more likes than the video.

He opened the replies. There were nearly a thousand.

This.

Only way anything changes round here.

Start with the town hall.

Torch the lot and let the insurance pay for it, it's the only money that ever gets spent here.

Fred for mayor.

Burn it down, start again.

Steady on lads, that one, alone, with eleven likes.

Chris scrolled and scrolled. The tone of the whole thread changed the further down he went. At the top, people were sharing photos of their grandparents, saying they remembered, saying thank you. Down here it was all heat. *Burn. Torch. Let it go up. About time. Good riddance.* Hundreds of people who had watched four minutes about decades of empty promises and broken work, and come away with one message: set fire to it.

"It's the same anger," Jono said quietly. "The people sharing the photos and the people saying burn it. It's the same people half the time. They've just been angry for so long they don't know what to do with it."

Chris thought of the forty-three phones raised to the Albion. The comments on *Paignton Speaks* at midnight. *Let it burn. Let the whole town burn and start again.*

"I thought we were giving it somewhere to go," he said. "Instead of just... burning. That's what we were meant to be doing."

"We are," Jono said. "It's day three. The fire doesn't know which way to go yet."

Chris clicked on the name.

The profile was mostly locked. A man, Paignton, no surname shown. The profile picture was a Staffordshire bull terrier with a tennis ball in its mouth. The cover photo, the only other thing visible, was an old, slightly blurred colour print, scanned crooked. A bar, long and wood-panelled, with a mirror behind it and a row of optics. A glitter ball hanging from the ceiling, half out of shot. And leaning on the bar, pint in hand, a big man in his late thirties with a moustache and a short-sleeved shirt, laughing at someone off camera. He had his arm round a small boy of four or five who was sitting on a bar stool with a packet of crisps, looking at the camera with enormous solemn eyes.

There was no caption.

Chris looked at the picture for a long time. The panelling. The mirror. The glitter ball. Something nagged at him, the way the council statement had nagged at him, a shape he recognised without being able to say why.

Then Jono's phone rang. It was a client's daughter with a question about medication, and Jono stood up and walked to the window to take it, and Chris put the phone down on the desk, and the thought slid away from him before he could catch it.

* * *

On the fifth day the video passed half a million views. The page had forty thousand followers, roughly one for every three people in Torbay.

On the fifth day, the council had still said nothing.

Not a comment, not a statement, not a post. The comms team, so quick to put out *remains a priority* the morning after the fire, had gone silent. No councillor had shared it, or responded to it, or attacked it. Richard said it was the longest he'd ever known the council go without issuing a press release.

"They don't know what to do," Richard said. "They've never had to deal with this. They're used to twelve people in a church hall. They don't know what to do with forty thousand."

"They'll think of something," Jono said.

He said it lightly. But Chris saw his eyes when he said it, and recognised the look. It was the look of a policeman who has spent years watching institutions decide what to do about something inconvenient, and who knows that silence is never the end of it.

It is only the bit before.

5 – Union Street

Jono sent the message on the fourth night, sitting in his car outside his last client's house with the engine off.

Saw your comment. Want to talk? Not a wind-up. Not the council. Not the police. Just a bloke who's tired of watching nothing happen. Jono.

He didn't expect an answer. Twenty-five years in the job had taught him that people who said the loudest things online were usually the last people who wanted to be found. The reply came eleven minutes later.

Ur the carer in the video crew.

That's me.

Finishing at 11. Harbour. Bring cash for chips if u want to talk, I've not eaten.

* * *

Torquay harbour at eleven o'clock on an October night was a postcard someone had left out in the rain.

The lights were still strung along the front, the coloured bulbs swinging a little in the wind off the water. The yachts in the marina clinked their rigging. Across the harbour, the big hotels on the hill had their windows lit, rows of them, like a cruise ship that had run aground and decided to stay. It was all there: the palms, the clock tower, the boats. It was beautiful in the way a holiday photograph is beautiful, and almost nobody was in it.

Fred was sitting on a bollard by the inner harbour with a Staffie on a lead lying at his feet. He was in a grey hoodie under a cheap black work jacket, and his hands and forearms were red and puffy, the hands of someone who had spent eight hours in hot water. He was thirty, or near it, though he had the kind of face that could have been twenty-five or forty depending on the light. He watched Jono come along the quay without getting up, the way men watch you when they've learned that people who approach them usually want something.

Jono had spent twenty-odd years reading faces on doorsteps. He read this one and saw three things straight away. Tired. Clever. Angry in a way that had gone so deep it had stopped showing on the surface.

"You're bigger than you look in the video," Fred said.

"I'm not in the video."

"You're in the credits. 'Thanks to Jono.' I looked you up. Ex-copper." He said it flatly, not as an accusation, just as a fact he wanted Jono to know he knew.

"Long time ago."

"Not that long." Fred stood up. The dog stood up with him. "Chips are up the hill. Come on. Biscuit's hungry too."

* * *

They walked up from the harbour, past the old Debenhams building.

It took up most of a block at the bottom of the town: big, square, seventies concrete, with the department store's name

stripped off the front so that only the ghost of the letters remained, a slightly cleaner patch of stone where the sign used to be. The windows were papered over from inside. Someone had stuck a council notice to the glass of the main doors: *THIS SITE IS IN COUNCIL OWNERSHIP. REDEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS WILL BE SUBJECT TO PUBLIC CONSULTATION.*

"Did the Christmas temp there," Fred said, without slowing down. "2016. Menswear. Six weeks. Best job I ever had, honestly. They gave you a discount and the heating worked." He jerked his chin at the notice. "They're turning it into a hotel. Another one. Like we haven't got enough beds for all the people who don't come here any more."

They turned up into Fleet Street, then Union Street, the long climb up from the harbour to the top of the town. The shops crowded close on both sides. Half of them were lit and half of them were dark.

Fred walked it like a man walking past old girlfriends' houses.

"Stockroom," he said, nodding at a big shuttered unit with the ghost of an orange sign above it. "Four years. Nights, mostly. Started on minimum, finished on minimum plus thirty pence. Then they went bust, and all of us went with it." They walked on. "Phone shop. Eighteen months. Got let go when they put in the machines that did the contracts for you." Further. "That was a shoe shop. Saturdays, when I was at school. Gone." He pointed across the street at a café with its chairs stacked on the tables. "Kitchen porter. Summer 2019. Closed in Covid, never reopened." He pointed at a building further up, whitewashed windows and a TO LET board. "Carpet warehouse. I was a driver's mate. Gone." An arcade,

still lit, still chattering, empty. "Change booth there for a season. They took out the booth. It's all cards now."

He stopped in the middle of the pavement and turned around, looking back down the hill at the street they had just climbed, all the way down to the harbour lights.

"I've done every job on this street," he said. "None of them still exist."

He said it without self-pity. That was the worst of it. He said it the way you'd read out a bus timetable.

"What are you doing now?" Jono asked.

"Pots. Hotel on the front. Zero hours. They text you at four o'clock and tell you whether you're on that night." Fred held up his raw red hands and looked at them, front and back, as if they belonged to someone else. "Seventeen weeks this year so far. Then the season ends, they lay us all off, and it's universal credit till Easter. Then it starts again." He shoved his hands back in his pockets. "Twelve years. I've been doing this twelve years. I've got nothing to show for it. No house, no car, no pension, no nothing. I'm thirty next month. My dad had a house and two cars when he was thirty. Holidays every year. Spain. *Spain*." He laughed. "On one wage."

"What did he do?"

Fred looked at him sidelong.

"Lightwave," he said. "Fourteen years. On the furnaces. Same as half the town."

* * *

The chip shop at the top of Union Street was still open, warm and yellow and smelling of vinegar. Jono bought two large cod and chips and a sausage for the dog. They ate them standing up outside, out of the paper, because there was nowhere to sit that wasn't wet.

From here you could see Castle Circus, the road junction at the top of the town, and the Town Hall on the far side of it. It was a grand Edwardian pile of a building in grey granite, a clock in its tower lit from below, and it looked down over the junction like a headmaster over a playground.

Below it, on the benches beside the flower bed at the edge of the junction, the drinkers had gathered. Seven or eight of them, men and one woman, cans and a bottle of something going round in a carrier bag. One of them was on his feet, swaying, shouting at the passing traffic. It wasn't angry, exactly, just loud. A long, roaring stream of something that wasn't quite words. Two of the others were laughing. One was asleep sitting up, chin on his chest. A taxi came through the junction, and the man shouting stepped towards it, and the taxi swerved, and the driver leaned on the horn, and the man shouted louder.

Jono had stood at junctions like that in uniform, years ago, in another town. He knew the faces even though he didn't know these ones. He knew that two or three of them were probably ex-forces. That one or two had probably been to prison and come out with nothing. That half of them had probably had jobs once, trades even, and had lost them, then lost the flat, then lost the family, then found the bench.

Across the road, in what had once been a shop selling bedding or blinds, a light was on. Through the plate-glass window, two police officers in stab vests sat behind a trestle table under a banner: **POLICE POP-UP: COME AND**

TALK TO US. One was eating a sandwich. The other was on her phone. Nobody was talking to them.

"Look at that," Fred said, chewing. "They've run out of shops, so now they're putting police in them."

He meant it as a joke. It didn't land as one.

"And there," Fred said, lifting a chip towards the Town Hall clock, "is where they decide all of it. Up there. While we're all down here." He ate the chip. "Bet there's not one of them ever washed a pot."

"Is that what you meant?" Jono asked. "'Burn the lot'?"

Fred didn't answer straight away. He balled up his chip paper, looked around for a bin, found one overflowing, and shoved the paper in on top of the pile anyway.

"I meant what everyone thinks," he said. "You saw the likes. I just said it first. Every single person in this town knows it's finished. They just keep pretending, because if you stop pretending you have to admit you've wasted your whole life waiting for something that was never coming." He looked at Jono. "You lot with your video. It's nice. It made my nan cry. But it's pictures. It's old photos and a sad song. That's not going to change anything. Nothing changes anything. The only thing that's ever changed anything round here is when something burns down. Then at least there's a gap."

"There's a gap where Bailey's was," Jono said. "It's been a gap for four years."

Fred shrugged. "Then burn the hoardings too."

Biscuit, who had finished his sausage, leaned against Fred's leg and looked up at him. Fred put his hand on the

dog's head without looking down. It was the gentlest thing Jono had seen him do.

* * *

They walked back down the hill towards the harbour. The drinkers' shouting faded behind them. The street was empty now, the shops all dark, their reflections sliding past in the black glass.

"Your dad," Jono said. "Lightwave."

"What about him?"

"What happened? After."

Fred walked a long way without answering. When he did, his voice was different. It was quieter and flatter, as though he was reciting something he'd said to himself many times and never to anyone else.

"He went to pieces," he said. "That's what happened. I was five. I don't remember him before, not really, only photos. Everyone says he was the life and soul. Football, darts, all that. Then it shut and he never had a proper job again. Not one. Bits of this and that. Driving. Security. Then nothing." He kicked a can into the gutter. "He was fifty-four when he died. Liver. Mum left when I was twelve."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your fault." A pause. "It's not anyone's fault. That's the thing. Factory shuts, nobody did it. Shops close, nobody did it. Your dad drinks himself to death, nobody did it. It just happens. It just *happens*, here. All the time. Nobody ever did anything."

They were back at the harbour. The coloured lights swung. The rigging clinked. The hotels glowed on the hill.

"There's an old man in the video," Jono said. "At the window. Holding the photo of the last day."

"Walter," Fred said.

Jono stopped. "You know him?"

"Everyone knew Big Walt." Fred looked out over the water. "He was on the drawing towers. My dad was on the furnace that fed them. They worked the same shifts for ten years. Walt came to Dad's funeral. Only one from the old crowd who did." He was quiet for a moment. "Shook my hand. Said, 'Your father was a good man and a good worker, and don't you let anyone tell you different.' I was twenty." He wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve. "Nobody had ever said that about him. Not for years. Not once."

"Walter's still in the same flat," Jono said. "Opposite the station. I look after him."

"I know where he lives." Fred's voice was rough. "I've been past. Never gone up."

"You could."

Fred didn't say anything. He bent down and clipped the lead tighter on Biscuit's collar, though it didn't need it.

"I've got a shift tomorrow," he said. "Maybe. If they text." He straightened up. "Thanks for the chips."

He walked off along the harbour, a thin figure in a grey hoodie with a dog trotting at his heel, under the coloured lights, past the dark yachts, until the night took him.

* * *

Jono sat in his car at the harbour for a long time without starting the engine.

He thought about the street. Every job on it, gone. He thought about a man of thirty with no house, no car and no pension, and with hands raw from other people's dishes. He thought about a father who'd earned enough on one wage to take his family to Spain every summer, and a son who couldn't get seventeen weeks' work a year.

He'd spent his first career dealing with what happened when men like Fred finally broke: the fights, the drink, the debts, the domestic, the cell. He'd spent his second career dealing with what happened to men like Fred's father when they got old: the empty flats, the twenty-minute visits, the loneliness. And he'd always thought of those as two different problems. Crime and care. Two departments. Two budgets.

Tonight, sitting in the dark with the smell of vinegar still in the car, he understood for the first time that they were the same problem. It was the same street, and it began in the same place, the day the furnaces went out.

Burn the lot. He'd thought it was a threat. It was a confession.

He started the car and drove home to Paignton, past the hotels, past the arcades, past all the lit windows of a town that served and served and served and had forgotten, somewhere along the way, how to do anything else.

6 – Vicky

The slide said **DELIVERING AMBITION**, and the projector was slightly out of focus.

Vicky sat in the third row of the committee room at Torquay Town Hall with her notebook open on her knee and watched the Officer try to make the remote control work. He pressed it. Nothing happened. He pressed it again, harder, pointing it at the screen as if it were a television. The slide stayed where it was. A woman from Democratic Services got up, walked across, and pressed a key on the laptop. The slide changed.

PLACE VISION: KEY OUTCOMES

"Thank you, Sandra," the Officer said. "Technology, eh?" A ripple of polite laughter went round the room.

Vicky did not laugh. She wrote in her notebook, in the mixture of English and Chinese shorthand she had used since university: *Remote, 2 attempts. Slide 4 of 31.*

It was her ninth meeting of this kind in four months. A stakeholder briefing, they called it: forty people in a high-ceilinged Edwardian room with portraits of past mayors in gold chains looking down from the walls, a long polished table for the councillors, rows of stacking chairs for everyone else. Developers' agents. Two people from the Chamber of Commerce. A consultant from Bristol in a very good suit. A retired man in an anorak who came to everything and asked the same question about parking every time. A woman from a heritage society, knitting. And Vicky Ooi, forty years old, Singaporean, sent here by her employer to find out whether this place was worth his money.

She was, she was fairly sure, the only person in the room who had read the appendices.

She had read them on the train from London the day she arrived and again three times since. All two hundred and forty pages of the Place Vision and its supporting documents. The market analysis. The viability assessments. The delivery plan, which was the part she always read first, because it was the only part that mattered.

The delivery plan was four pages long. It contained the word *aspiration* nineteen times. It contained the word *funded* twice, both times followed by the word *subject*.

At the long table, the Leader was speaking. He did it well; she had to give him that. He was in his late sixties, silver-haired, well tailored without being flashy. He had a warm, unhurried voice, a slight local burr, and a way of looking around the room as he spoke so that everyone felt, for a moment, that they had been personally included. He had been in local politics, she had learned, for nearly forty years, under more than one party's colours. She had looked him up. He had cut ribbons on things in four different decades.

"...and I think what's important," the Leader was saying, "is that we take the community with us. This isn't about the council imposing a vision. It's about a shared ambition for the whole of Torbay. And I'd say to anyone who says nothing ever happens here," and here he smiled, and the room smiled with him, "come and look at the seafront. Come and look at what's being built. Things *are* happening. They're just happening at the pace that good things happen."

Vicky wrote: *Seafront: forced by residents (check with R.). Claiming credit.*

The Officer moved through his slides. Station Square: *enhanced public realm, phase one (taxi rank, accessible parking)*. Crossways: *extra care housing, demolition under way*. Union Square: *residential-led mixed use with health provision*. The Debenhams site: *hotel-led regeneration, partner to be confirmed*. Brixham: *gateway improvements to central car park*.

Each slide had a rendering. Each rendering had a sky that did not exist in Devon.

She waited until questions. The man in the anorak asked about parking. The woman from the heritage society asked about the conservation area. The consultant from Bristol asked a question that was really an advertisement for his firm. Then Vicky raised her hand, and the Leader nodded at her with every sign of delight. He knew who she was, or rather, who she worked for.

"Thank you," she said. "Two questions. First: of the schemes on slides twelve to nineteen, which have a funded delivery timetable with a committed start date and named contractor? Second: on each of those schemes, who carries the construction risk: the council, the partner, or the government?"

There was a short pause.

"Well," the Officer said. He looked at his notes. He looked at the Leader. "That's... it's a good question. A very good question. I think the honest answer is that the schemes are at different stages of maturity. Some are further along the pipeline than others. We're working closely with our delivery partners on phasing, and of course a lot depends on the outcome of funding bids that are still live." He smiled at her. "But I'd be very happy to pick that up with you offline."

"Thank you," Vicky said, and wrote: *No timetable. No one holds risk. No one owns the outcome.*

She underlined the last four words twice.

* * *

She walked down Union Street afterwards in the rain, past the shuttered Wilko and the pop-up police shop where two officers sat waiting for someone to visit them, and thought: *In Singapore, that man would have been reassigned.*

Not fired. Singapore was rarely so dramatic. Reassigned. Quietly moved somewhere he couldn't do any harm, and replaced by someone who could answer a straight question about delivery with a date. Not because anyone was cruel, but because the whole system was built on one assumption: if a public servant says something will happen, it happens. If it doesn't, someone finds out why, and fixes it, and the person who said it will happen does not get to say it again.

She had grown up inside that assumption the way a fish grows up inside water. She had never noticed it until she came here.

Here, she had learned, a public servant could say something would happen for thirty years, and if it didn't, nobody found out why. Nobody fixed it. And the person who said it was promoted, or retired with a ceremony, or, more often, simply went on saying it.

She had been sent to Torbay by Mr Tan with a simple brief. Sites. Find him sites. Undervalued land with planning potential in a place where the price had fallen further than the view. He had already built two hotels here and was halfway

through a third. He liked the bay. He said it reminded him of somewhere, though he never said where. He wanted to know whether to keep going.

What she was meant to send him was a list of sites. What she had been writing, in the long evenings in her rented flat with the rain on the window, was something else. A report she had not yet sent, and did not yet know how to finish. It had a provisional title, which she had typed and deleted several times and finally left:

Torbay: Not a Market Problem.

* * *

She watched the video on the third night, in that flat, on her laptop, with a bowl of instant noodles going cold beside her. Someone at the Chamber of Commerce had sent it round with a message: *Have you seen this? Bit awkward for the council!!* She'd assumed it would be one of those angry local things, shouting and capital letters.

It wasn't. It was four minutes and twelve seconds long, and she watched it three times.

The first time she watched it as a professional, noting the production values, which were higher than they had any right to be. The archive. The edit, which was disciplined and rhythmic, done by someone who understood that the most powerful thing you can do with evidence is just to put it in order and let it speak. *Remains a priority*. Thirty-five years of it.

The second time, she watched the old man at the window, and it was the old man she found herself thinking about afterwards. *We used to make things, you know. Here.*

The third time, she paused it on the credits. *TORBAY RAGE. With thanks to Walter, Jono and Richard. Made by Chris.*

She looked him up. That took three minutes. A local news piece: *Former engineer behind viral video spent 25 years in Singapore.* A photograph: a man in his sixties, grey, with the slightly wary expression of someone who has had his picture taken by a newspaper and would rather it hadn't been. A studio website. Projects, films, albums. An archive of something called the Goldmine.

Twenty-five years in Singapore.

She read the comments under the video, all of them, the way she read appendices. The photographs of grandparents. The man in Skegness. The thread underneath *Burn the lot*. And, about two thousand comments down, a photograph someone had posted of an architect's drawing laid out on a carpet: the whole bay, green, with a title in neat capitals. *A GARDEN TOWN BY THE SEASIDE.*

She looked at it for a long time. Then she sat back in her chair, and the noodles were stone cold, and she found she was smiling.

She typed a message.

Mr Chris. My name is Vicky Ooi. I work in Torbay for a Singapore developer. I watched your video. I would like to talk, if you have time. Not for my employer. For myself. I am curious.

She looked at it, deleted *For myself*, then put it back, and sent it.

* * *

He suggested they meet in Station Square, at the hoardings. She liked that. Most people would have suggested a hotel lobby.

He was standing in front of the burnt shell of the Albion when she arrived, hands in the pockets of a waterproof, looking up at the scorched lettering above the door. He turned when she said his name, and looked at her, and something in his face relaxed, as if he had seen a type of person he recognised.

"Ms Ooi," he said.

"Vicky."

"Vicky." He held out his hand. "Have you eaten?"

She laughed out loud. She couldn't help it. It was the first thing every Singaporean auntie said to every visitor, *have you eaten*, the greeting that wasn't a question, and she had not heard it in four months.

"Not yet," she said.

"There's nothing here that'll do it justice," he said. "But there's a café round the corner that does a decent coffee if you don't mind it strong."

In the café, he ordered for both of them before she could. He gave the girl at the counter instructions so specific about the strength, the milk and the sugar that the girl wrote it

down. When it arrived, it was as close to a proper *kopi-o kosong* as she'd had since Changi airport. She held the cup in both hands and breathed it in.

"How long were you there?" she asked.

"Twenty-five years. Joo Chiat, then Tiong Bahru, by the old station." He smiled slightly. "I left in 2018. I still dream about chicken rice."

"Which stall?"

He named it. She put her cup down. "That's my uncle's favourite."

"Then your uncle has taste."

They talked about Singapore for twenty minutes, about nothing, the way exiles do: hawker centres, the heat, the way the rain came in the afternoons like someone turning on a tap, the MRT, the new towns. She hadn't realised how hungry she'd been to talk to someone who knew what she meant without explanation. Then she put down her cup and became, quite deliberately, professional.

"I want to tell you what I think," she said. "And then I want to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"I was sent here to find sites. Hotels. My employer builds hotels. That's what the council asks for, and that's what's easy to finance. So I've spent four months looking at Torbay the way a hotel developer looks at it." She turned her cup a quarter turn on its saucer. "And the honest truth is, it's a dying market."

He didn't argue. He just waited.

"In the nineteen-sixties," she said, "this was where British families came on holiday. Two weeks, every year, the same guesthouse. That was the whole economy. The railway brought them, they stayed, they spent. Then flights got cheap. Now a family in Birmingham can fly to Spain or Greece for less than the train to Paignton costs them, and it's sunny when they get there. The British seaside didn't lose a battle. It lost a whole war, forty years ago, and every plan I've read in that Town Hall is still fighting it. More hotels. Better hotels. Boutique hotels. A new gateway for the visitors." She shook her head. "The visitors aren't coming back. Not in the numbers they need. Not for what they're selling."

"So what's the problem?" he said. "If it's not the market."

She looked at him for a moment, then reached into her bag, took out her notebook and turned it round so he could see the page from the committee room. Underlined twice.

No one owns the outcome.

"Torbay doesn't have a hotel problem," she said. "It doesn't have a market problem. It doesn't even have a money problem, not really. There's government money. There's investor money; my employer is sitting on some of it. What Torbay has," she said carefully, "is a competence problem."

He read the line in her notebook. Then he looked up at her, and he didn't smile, but his eyes did.

"Do you know," he said, "how long I've been waiting for someone to say that out loud?"

* * *

Afterwards, he walked her back across the square. They stopped by the hoardings round the empty Bailey's site, the faded families, COMING 20.

"You said you wanted to ask me something," he said.

"Yes." She looked at the hoardings, and then at the shell of the Albion, and then at him. "The drawing. The garden town. In the comments."

"Richard's."

"Is it real? Is there a plan behind it? Or is it a pretty picture?"

"It's real," Chris said. "Richard has spent years on it. Every site in the bay. It's the best piece of urban design I've seen since I left Singapore." He paused. "What it doesn't have is an economy underneath it. Not yet. Nobody's ever been able to answer the question of who pays."

"And can you?"

"I'm trying."

She nodded slowly. "I'd like to see it," she said. "The whole thing. Not a photo on Facebook."

"Why?" Chris asked. "You build hotels."

"I *find sites* for a man who builds hotels." She pulled her coat tighter against the wind. "Because hotels are all anyone here has ever asked him for. He's not a hotel man. Not really. He's a builder. He'd build whatever made sense." She looked up at the scorched word above the Albion's door. "Nobody has ever shown him anything else that makes sense here."

* * *

At seven the next morning, which was three in the afternoon in Singapore, she sat at the little table in her flat with her laptop open and her hair still wet, and waited for the call to connect.

Mr Tan appeared on screen, a calm man in his sixties in a white shirt with no tie. Behind him, through the window of his office, there was a hazy blue view of cranes and water and towers. He had built some of them.

"Vicky."

"Mr Tan."

"Your list?"

"Three more sites. I'll send the summaries today." She hesitated. "There's something else. A local campaign. Not political, or not exactly. A video about the town that's gone, I think the word is, viral."

"I've seen it," Mr Tan said.

She blinked. "You've..."

"Somebody sent it to me. The old man at the window." He was silent for a moment. "My father used to say that. *We used to make things.* About Malacca, after the war." He folded his hands on the desk. "Who made it?"

"A man called Chris. He lived in Singapore for twenty-five years. He knows..." She searched for the words. "He knows how it works. How we work."

Mr Tan looked at her through seven thousand miles of fibre-optic cable, the kind that had once been drawn, a lifetime ago, in a shed in Paignton.

"Interesting," he said. "Watch them."

"Watch them how?"

"Carefully," Mr Tan said. "And tell me what they do next."

7 – The Embrace

The council broke its silence on the eighth day, and it did it with a compliment.

It came as a post on the council's official page, then as a quote in the local paper, then, by the evening, as a clip on Spotlight: the Leader on the Town Hall steps, coat collar turned up against the wind, speaking in that warm, unhurried voice.

"I've watched the video, of course," he said. "Everyone has. And I want to say, first of all, that I think it's terrific. Genuinely. What it shows is passion. A real love for this place. And that's exactly what we need more of." He smiled into the camera. "Now, I don't agree with everything in it. Things *are* happening in Torbay, and I'd invite anyone who doubts it to come down and see the seafront. But I'm not interested in arguing. I'm interested in listening. So I'd like to say to Chris, and to his friends: come and talk to us. Come inside the tent. We want people with your energy helping us shape what comes next."

Chris watched it on his laptop in the back bedroom. Then he watched it again.

"He's good," he said.

"He's very good," said Jono, who was standing behind him eating toast. "That's the problem."

* * *

The letter arrived two days later, on thick cream paper with the council crest embossed at the top. It was signed by the Leader himself in fountain pen, and it invited Chris to join the *Station Square and Town Centres Regeneration Stakeholder Reference Group* "as a valued community voice." The group met monthly. Terms of reference were enclosed. There was also a personal invitation to coffee in the Leader's office beforehand, "to get to know one another."

Chris read it at the kitchen table. Then he passed it to Jono, who read it and passed it back without a word.

"Well?" Chris said.

"They're putting you on a committee," Jono said. "That's what they do with trouble. I watched it for years. When someone's making a noise, you don't fight them. You give them a lanyard and a seat at a table. Then you give them an agenda, and minutes, and an action log, and six months later they're too busy reading papers to make a noise any more."

"You don't know that."

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

Richard was blunter, on the phone that evening.

"I've been on four of those groups," he said. "Four. In twenty years. Do you know what they produced?"

"Tell me."

"Minutes." He let the word sit. "They're where ideas go to die, Chris. Politely. With biscuits."

"But if nobody goes inside," Chris said, "nothing changes from inside either. You won on the seafront, Richard. How

did you win? You went to the meetings. You put your drawings in front of them."

"I went to the meetings," Richard said, "and I put my drawings in front of the *public*. That's how I won. Not inside. Outside. They only listened when they couldn't afford not to."

Chris said he understood. He thanked Richard. And then, after he'd put the phone down, he sat at the kitchen table for a long time looking at the cream paper with the crest at the top and the fountain-pen signature at the bottom.

He wanted to be heard. That was the plain truth of it, the thing he didn't say to Jono or Richard and barely said to himself. For twenty-five years in Singapore he had sat in rooms where people listened to him: boardrooms, ministries, project meetings where he said *this is how we should do it* and somebody wrote it down and then went and did it. Then he'd come home, and for seven years nobody in Torbay had listened to him about anything. He'd written letters to the paper. He'd been to consultations. He'd been patted on the arm and told *that's a very interesting point* by people who then did exactly what they'd always planned to do.

And now the Leader of the council had written to him by hand.

He wrote back the next morning and said yes.

* * *

The Leader's office was on the first floor of the Town Hall, at the end of a long corridor with a red carpet worn pink down the middle. It was a big room, high-ceilinged, with tall windows looking out over Castle Circus and a dark oak desk

that looked as if it had been there since the building opened. And the walls were covered in pictures.

Not portraits. Renderings. Framed architects' drawings of things the council had planned: a marina, a conference centre, a cultural quarter, a transport hub, a "Gateway to the Bay". Some were in felt-tip, some were early computer graphics, and some were glossy and recent. Dozens of them, in matching frames, hung in neat rows like a gallery.

Chris recognised some of them from the Goldmine. He couldn't, standing there, think of a single one that had actually been built.

"Chris!" The Leader came round the desk with his hand out. In person he was taller than he looked on television, and warmer, with a firm, dry handshake and a way of holding your hand a moment longer than necessary while he looked you in the eye. "Thank you for coming. Really. Sit down, sit down. Coffee? Of course coffee."

There was a tray: a cafetière, proper cups and saucers, a plate of shortbread. The Leader poured for him himself.

"I want to tell you something," the Leader said, sitting not behind the desk but in the armchair beside Chris's, so that they were side by side, like friends. "I grew up in Paignton. Three streets from the station. My dad drove a bus. Forty years on the same routes. I used to sit at the front and watch him." He smiled. "So when I saw your film, the square, those old pictures, I'll be honest with you. I had a lump in my throat. I did."

"Thank you."

"And I'll be honest about something else." The Leader leaned forward a little, lowering his voice as though sharing a confidence. "Some of what you said stung. Thirty-five years of *remains a priority*." He shook his head ruefully. "Guilty as charged, some of it. We've not always delivered. Nobody's pretending we have. But the reason things haven't happened isn't that people didn't care. It's that this stuff is *hard*. The money, the partners, the government changing its mind every three years. You've worked on big projects. You know what it's like."

"I do," Chris said. "In Singapore, when a project was announced, there was a date. A budget. A named person accountable for it. If the date slipped, they had to explain why, in public."

"Exactly!" The Leader looked genuinely delighted. "That's exactly the kind of thinking we need. That's why I want you on the group. Bring us that discipline. Challenge us." He spread his hands. "Hold our feet to the fire."

Chris looked at the walls. All those framed futures.

"I'd like that," he said.

* * *

The first meeting of the Stakeholder Reference Group was in a committee room on the second floor, with fourteen people round a table and the Officer in the chair.

The Officer was a pleasant, tidy man in his fifties with rimless glasses and a lanyard. He spoke in a calm, even voice that never went up or down. He welcomed everyone and went through the terms of reference. He explained that the group's

role was "advisory and consultative," that its discussions were "held in confidence to enable frank exchange," and that the minutes would be "agreed at the following meeting before publication." He introduced the action log. He explained the difference between a workstream and a work package.

It took an hour and ten minutes.

When Chris finally got to speak, he gave them the paper he had spent a week writing: twelve pages, with charts. *Productive Capacity: What Torbay Could Make*. The skills still living in the bay. The empty industrial land. The Lightwave veterans. The Singapore model, what Jurong had done, how an economy that made things could pay for a town that looked after people. He spoke for ten minutes. People listened. One or two nodded.

"Thank you, Chris," the Officer said. "That's very interesting. Very thought-provoking. I think what I'll do is *note* that, and we'll see where it might sit within the wider economic strategy workstream. Sandra, can we get that on the action log?" Sandra typed. "Lovely. Item five."

The minutes, when they came out a month later, said: *CH presented a paper on productive capacity. The group noted the paper.*

* * *

The second meeting was a *visioning workshop*. They stood round flip charts with marker pens and sticky notes, writing words like *vibrant* and *welcoming* and *sense of place*, and then the Officer's team grouped the notes into *themes*.

The third meeting was about the *engagement framework* for the consultation that would happen *in due course*.

Between meetings, there were papers. Long ones, sent at nine o'clock on the evening before each meeting, with appendices. Chris read them all. He was who he was; he couldn't not read them. He wrote responses. He sent the responses to the Officer, who thanked him for his *really helpful input*.

He was very busy. He realised, somewhere around the fifth week, that he hadn't posted anything on the campaign page in nine days.

Jono noticed before he did.

"Page is going quiet," he said, one evening, scrolling. "People are asking where we've gone. Someone's asked if you've sold out." He said it neutrally, the way he used to read out charges.

"I'm working on it from the inside."

"Are you?" Jono said. "What's changed?"

Chris opened his mouth and found that he didn't have an answer.

* * *

It was Vicky who told him.

A message, at seven o'clock on a Tuesday morning, one line and a link.

Have you seen the Cabinet agenda for Thursday?

He hadn't. He opened the link. It was the council's democracy portal, the agenda for the next Cabinet meeting, and at item 9 there was a report with a plain title:

Former Debenhams Site, Torquay: Hotel-Led Regeneration: Approval to Proceed to Consultation and Procurement

He read it at the kitchen table with his coffee going cold.

It was all there. The council owned the site. It had been in "discussions with a potential hotel partner" for months. A preferred scheme had been "worked up." A 150-room hotel with ground-floor commercial units and a rooftop bar. There were renderings, of course: a glass-and-cladding block with a blue sky behind it and people with shopping bags walking past. The report recommended approval to proceed. A public consultation would run for **twenty-eight days**, after which officers would "bring forward a final decision on the preferred partner and scheme."

Twenty-eight days. Starting Monday.

He searched the report for the words *stakeholder reference group*. They weren't there. He searched the minutes of the three meetings he'd been to. The Debenhams site had not been mentioned once.

The biggest decision about the centre of Torquay for a generation was going through Cabinet on Thursday. The consultation would close in four weeks. And the panel he'd sat on for six weeks, *advisory and consultative, held in confidence to enable frank exchange*, had never been told.

He sat very still.

He thought of the framed renderings on the Leader's walls. *Hold our feet to the fire.* The cream paper, the fountain pen, the shortbread. The Officer saying *lovely, item five.* Thirty-five years of *remains a priority.* And him, Chris, who had spent twenty-five years in rooms where people meant what they said, sitting at the Leader's elbow saying *I'd like that* like a man accepting a cup of tea.

They hadn't needed to fight him. They'd just given him a lanyard.

He picked up his phone and rang Jono.

"The next panel meeting," he said. "It's Wednesday. The day before Cabinet."

"And?"

"Can you be outside the Town Hall at half past ten with a camera?"

There was a pause. Then Jono laughed, a short, real laugh, the first Chris had heard from him in weeks.

"I'll bring two," he said.

* * *

The meeting started at ten. Item one was apologies. Item two was the minutes of the last meeting. Item three was matters arising from the action log.

Chris waited until item three. Then he raised his hand.

"Matter arising," he said. "Item nine on tomorrow's Cabinet agenda. The Debenhams site. A 150-room hotel and a

twenty-eight-day consultation. Why has this group never been told about it?"

There was a small silence round the table. The Officer looked at his papers.

"Ah," he said. "Yes. Well. I can see why you'd ask. But the Debenhams site is being taken forward under a separate workstream, the asset disposal and investment workstream. It's outside this group's terms of reference." He smiled at Chris with genuine, patient kindness, the way you'd smile at a child who'd asked why the sky was blue. "But of course, like any member of the public, you're very welcome to respond to the consultation once it opens."

Chris looked at him for a long moment.

Then he stood up, took the lanyard from around his neck and laid it on the table in front of him, on top of the papers.

"Thank you," he said. "I've learned a great deal."

He picked up his bag and walked out.

* * *

Jono was on the Town Hall steps with his phone up, filming, and so, to Chris's surprise, was Richard, holding a second phone in both hands, very steadily, like a man who had never filmed anything in his life and was determined to get it right.

Chris came down the steps into the cold, bright air, stopped at the bottom, and turned to face them. Behind him, the clock in the Town Hall tower said nineteen minutes to eleven.

"For six weeks," he said, "I've sat on a council regeneration panel. They invited me in after our film. They said they wanted to listen. They told me to hold their feet to the fire. And this morning I found out that the biggest decision about the centre of Torquay for a generation, a hotel on the old Debenhams site, goes to Cabinet tomorrow. The public gets twenty-eight days to have its say. And the panel was never told. Not once. Not a word."

He took a breath.

"I've resigned. They gave me a lanyard to keep me quiet, and I nearly let it work. I'm sorry. I won't make that mistake again." He looked straight into the lens. "Twenty-eight days. That's how long Torquay has. Starting Monday."

He walked out of the frame. Jono kept filming the empty steps, then panned up to the clock tower, and held it there.

They posted it at noon. By teatime it had been watched two hundred thousand times.

* * *

That evening Richard didn't come round to Chris's to celebrate. He rang instead, late, and his voice had something in it Chris hadn't heard before, something hard and bright.

"I've read the report," Richard said. "The hotel. Seen the renderings."

"And?"

"It's not even a bad building," Richard said. "That's what gets me. It's a perfectly competent, perfectly ordinary hotel. You could put it in Swindon. You could put it in Slough. It has

nothing to do with the harbour, nothing to do with the town behind it, nothing to do with the people walking up and down Union Street. It's a box that's landed there." He paused. "And if I do what I've always done, I'll draw them a better hotel. A nicer box. And they'll say *lovely drawing, Richard*, and build theirs anyway."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to draw them a hotel," Richard said. "I'm going to draw them Torquay. The whole of it. The harbour, the Strand, Union Street, Castle Circus, the Debenhams site, the lot. How it all joins up. What the town centre is *for*, if it's not for shopping any more. And I'm going to put it next to their box, and let people see the difference."

"In twenty-eight days?"

"In twenty-seven," Richard said. "I started this afternoon."

Chris looked at the calendar on the kitchen wall. He took a pen and circled a date four weeks away, and wrote a single word beside it.

DEADLINE.

Then he went upstairs to the back bedroom, opened the Goldmine and typed: *Debenhams.*

8 – The Broker

The office was on the second floor of a narrow Georgian house in St James's, between a wine merchant and a shop that sold hats to men who still wore them. There was no sign. The brass plate beside the black front door bore three initials and nothing else, and it had been polished so often that the edges of the letters had gone soft.

Inside, it was quiet in the way only very expensive places are quiet. Thick carpets. Thick walls. A clock somewhere, ticking. The Broker liked the quiet. Money, in his experience, did not care for noise. Noise was for people who made things: factories, shipyards, building sites. Money moved best in rooms like this one, softly, between people who already knew each other.

He was fifty-six, lean, with good teeth and thinning fair hair cut short. He wore a navy suit that could have been bought anywhere and had in fact been made by hand three streets away, and he was the sort of man people forgot five minutes after meeting him, which he had worked at for thirty years. On the wall behind his desk hung his only extravagance: an engraving, hand-coloured, dated 1688. A fleet of ships in a wide grey bay under a sky of little clouds. Boats rowing to the shore. Soldiers on the beach, and above them a hill, and a tiny cluster of fishermen's cottages.

The Landing of the Prince of Orange at Brixham in Torbay.

He had bought it at auction twenty years ago for more than it was worth, because he liked what it represented. People thought of 1688 as a revolution about religion, or kings, or parliament. He thought of it as the moment the

money came ashore. The Dutch bankers had followed William across the sea, and within six years there was a Bank of England, a national debt, and a City of London that would run the world for three centuries. It had all begun on a beach in Devon.

He found it pleasing, in a quiet way, that he still made his living from that bay.

* * *

His assistant had sent him the second video at twenty past twelve, with a note: *Torbay: may be relevant to Station Square/Debenhams interests*. He watched it at his desk with a cup of black coffee and the sound turned low.

A man in his sixties at the foot of the Town Hall steps. Grey hair, waterproof jacket, an engineer's face: careful, slightly stubborn. *For six weeks I've sat on a council regeneration panel. They invited me in after our film…*

The Broker watched it through without expression. Then he watched the figures beneath it. Two hundred thousand views in five hours. He looked up the page. Fifty thousand followers. He looked up the first film, the one the man on the steps referred to, *Remains a Priority*, and saw that it had been watched more than a million times.

He had known about it, vaguely. His people had mentioned it. A sentimental local thing, they'd said: old photographs, a sad song, a bit of noise about broken promises. It would blow over. Things always blew over in Torbay. That was one of the things he valued about the place.

Now he watched it properly for the first time, in the quiet room, with the 1688 engraving on the wall behind him.

Remains a priority. Remains a priority. Remains a priority. He knew most of those faces. He had lunched with several of them. One of them, the young man with the moustache in 1989, the silver-haired man of today, he had known for twenty-five years. A useful man. Warm, decent, endlessly reassuring, and quite unable to see anything that wasn't directly in front of him. In twenty-five years he had never once understood what he was for. That was what made him so useful.

The Albion burning. The Broker felt a flicker of irritation at that: a perfectly good holding, and the insurers would be tiresome. The faded hoardings. The old man at the window.

We used to make things, you know. Here.

Then the old man held a photograph up to the camera with both of his big, steady hands.

The Broker leaned forward and stopped the video.

* * *

It was a colour print, faded, the reds gone orange. Hundreds of people in work clothes outside a factory gate on a grey day. A placard at the front: *THANK YOU PAIGNTON, 1958–2001*.

He knew that day. He had been there.

He enlarged the frame, then enlarged it again, until the picture broke up into soft blocks of colour. At the back of the crowd, beyond the gate, near a dark saloon car parked on the

factory road, three men in suits stood looking not at the workers but at the buildings behind them.

The man on the left was older, heavy-set, in a camel overcoat. He had been dead for eleven years. The man on the right had been a junior from a firm of surveyors, a boy really, whose name the Broker had never bothered to remember.

The man in the middle was thirty-one years old, lean, fair-haired, in a navy suit. He was looking at the long low buildings of the Lightwave works with an expression of complete and patient attention.

The Broker looked at his younger self for a long time.

He remembered that morning perfectly. The cold. The smell of the place: hot metal, and something chemical underneath. The dot-com bubble had burst six months before; the market for fibre had collapsed overnight; the parent company was bleeding cash and closing plants all over the world. Paignton was the last to go. Seven hundred people were left out of five thousand, and they were all standing at the gate for a photograph nobody would print.

And three men in suits had come down from London on the early train, because when something dies, someone has to decide what happens to the body.

The administrators had wanted the site off their books quickly, and quietly. The land was large, flat, close to the railway and in industrial use. The Broker, then a junior partner at a firm that no longer existed, had seen what nobody else in the room seemed to see. Industrial use today. But nobody in Torbay was ever going to build a factory there again. Within ten years, under political pressure to "do something" with the scar, someone would grant a change of

use. Housing. Retail. Leisure. Each change of use would multiply its value. You didn't need to build anything. You just needed to own it, and wait, and let the town's own despair do the work.

He had bought options on it for a fraction of their eventual value. That was the beginning of the Fund.

It had been, in its way, the purest deal he had ever done. A town's living had died in front of him, and he had made money on its grave without lifting a brick.

* * *

He let the video run on.

Over the next twenty years, the Fund had taken what it learned from Lightwave and done it again, more quietly, all over the bay. A holding company in Jersey for the Albion: bought cheap in 2010, after the old members' bar finally gave up and the building went to bedsits, then emptied, then held. A long option on a strip of land behind Station Square. An interest, three companies removed, in a parcel on the edge of one of the town's long-dead shopping streets. A consultancy, entirely separate on paper, that had written two of the council's regeneration studies. Each holding was small. Each was legal. None of them needed anything to be built. All of them needed only one thing: that Torbay go on exactly as it was.

The sieve, his first mentor had called it. The man in the camel overcoat. *Public money is like water, my boy. It's poured in at the top in great bucketfuls: grants, levelling-up funds, regeneration funds, every new government's new initiative. And these places leak, because they don't make*

anything, so nothing holds it. It runs out through the bottom. To consultants, to contractors, to landlords, to London. All you have to do is stand underneath.

And the towns?

The towns, his mentor had said, *are very good at being sad. It's practically an industry.*

The Broker had laughed at that, at thirty-one. He didn't laugh now. He had come to think of it simply as a description of the world.

Decline was an asset class. It had low volatility, reliable public subsidy, and almost no competition, because nobody else wanted to own places that were dying. The Broker did. He had made a very good living from it, quietly, for a quarter of a century.

And now an engineer who had come back from Singapore with a camera and his dead father's videotapes was showing the whole of Torbay, and a million other people, a photograph with the Broker's face in it.

* * *

He did not panic. He had never panicked in his life. He thought it through, in order, the way he thought everything through.

Nobody had noticed the three men. Not yet. The comments were full of people looking for their fathers and grandfathers in the crowd. Nobody was looking at the back. Why would they? But the engineer was collecting photographs. Eleven thousand of them, according to a local news piece. He was tagging them, sorting them, building a

searchable archive of the whole bay. Sooner or later, if he looked for long enough, and the Broker had the impression that this was a man who would look for a very long time, he would start to look at the edges.

And there was the old man.

The old man had held the photograph to the camera with perfect steadiness. He had been there that morning too. He had stood at the gate. Perhaps he had seen the dark car on the factory road and wondered, as men like that did, what three suits from London wanted with the place that had just thrown him out. Perhaps he had kept other photographs in that shoebox. Perhaps he remembered names. Old men in small towns remembered everything, and had nothing to do all day but talk.

On its own, it was nothing. A blurred figure in a twenty-five-year-old snapshot. But the man on the Town Hall steps was not interested in nothing. He was interested in *why*. And if anyone ever followed the line from the face at the back of that photograph to the holding company in Jersey, to the option behind Station Square, to the consultancy that had written the council's studies, they would find not a crime, exactly, but a shape. A pattern. A way of making money that worked only in the dark.

The Broker had always worked in the dark. He saw no reason to stop.

He thought briefly about the Debenhams site. The council's hotel scheme was going to Cabinet tomorrow. The Fund had an interest, of course, at a decent distance, in the small company that would act as the scheme's "development manager." There was also a Singaporean developer sniffing around the bay, with real money and a clean reputation. That

might be useful. A respectable face on the front of the scheme. He made a note to arrange a reception.

Then he closed the laptop, and opened the bottom drawer of his desk, and took out a cheap black phone that was not registered to him, and switched it on.

* * *

The number was the only one stored in it. It rang twice.

"Yes."

The voice was male, calm, unremarkable. Neither young nor old. Neither posh nor rough. A voice you would forget five minutes after hearing it, which was, the Broker supposed, why they got on.

"There's a situation in Torbay," the Broker said. "Paignton. I'll send you a link."

"Go on."

"A local campaign. Video, social media. It's attracted a lot of attention. That in itself isn't the problem. Attention passes." He looked at the frozen screen of his laptop in his mind's eye: the old man's big steady hands. "The problem is a photograph. And an old man who might remember it."

A pause.

"Name?"

"His first name is Walter. He's in the video. He lives in a flat opposite Paignton station. He has carers." The Broker

turned the black phone a little in his fingers. "I believe he's very old, and not in good health."

"And what would you like?"

The Broker looked at the engraving on the wall. The fleet in the grey bay. The little boats going in to the beach. It was very quiet in the room. He could hear the clock.

"I'd like him to stop being a problem," he said.

Another pause, no longer than the first.

"And the man with the camera?"

"Watch him," the Broker said. "For now."

"Understood."

The line went dead.

The Broker switched off the phone, put it back in the drawer, and closed the drawer. He finished his coffee, which had gone cold. Then he opened his laptop again, called up the photograph and looked once more at the young man in the navy suit at the back of the crowd, gazing at the Lightwave buildings with complete and patient attention, as if he could already see everything that was going to happen to them.

He deleted the screenshot, emptied the bin, and went to lunch.

9 – Walter Is Moved

The email came at 4.52 on a Friday afternoon, which Jono later thought was the most honest thing about it.

He read it in his car outside a client's bungalow in Preston, with the engine running for the heater and a cold sandwich on the passenger seat. It came from the care coordination team, addressed to all staff on the Paignton round, and it was written in the language he had learned to read the way he'd once learned to read a suspect's statement: not for what it said, but for what it was careful not to say.

> *Following a review of commissioned packages under the new community care framework, a number of service users have been reassessed as requiring a higher level of support than can be safely delivered through domiciliary care. Where appropriate, residential placements have been sourced. Due to current local capacity, some placements will be outside the Torbay area. Affected service users and their representatives have been informed. Please see the attached list for changes to your round, effective Monday.*

He opened the attachment. Fourteen names. Three of them his.

The second name on the list was Walter's.

* * *

He drove straight there, though he wasn't due until seven.

Walter was in his chair at the window, as always, the blanket over his knees. Across the square, the shell of the Albion stood behind its tape and its fencing. Somebody had fixed a council notice to the hoarding: *DANGEROUS STRUCTURE, KEEP OUT*. On the little table beside the chair was a letter on council paper, opened and folded back into its envelope.

"You've heard, then," Walter said, without turning round.

"I've just seen it." Jono pulled the other chair over and sat down. "Walter, I'm sorry. I didn't know. Nobody said a word."

"Nobody ever does." Walter picked up the letter and held it out without looking at it. "Read it if you like. It says I'm 'at increased risk.' It says they've 'sourced a placement that meets my assessed needs.' It says it's in my 'best interests.'" He said the words carefully, as if picking them up with tongs. "It's in Somerset. Other side of Taunton. I've never been to Taunton in my life."

Jono read it. It was a form letter, the same one, he guessed, that the other thirteen had received, with the name and the address of the home typed into the gaps. A reassessment had been carried out. Walter's needs had been found to have increased. A residential placement was available. Transport would be arranged for Monday at eleven.

"When were you reassessed?" Jono asked.

Walter frowned. "A woman came. Tuesday, I think. Or Wednesday. Asked me a lot of questions. Could I make a cup of tea. Could I get to the toilet. Did I know what day it was." He snorted softly. "I told her it was the day the Albion was still a pile of ash and nobody had done a thing about it. She wrote something down."

"Did she say why she'd come? Who asked for it?"

"Said there'd been a concern."

"What concern?"

"Didn't say. Said someone had rung up. About me falling."

Jono went very still, the way he used to go still in an interview room.

"Have you fallen, Walter?"

"Not since February." Walter turned from the window for the first time and looked at him. His eyes were pale and clear and entirely sharp. "And you picked me up that time, and I was right as rain. You wrote it down. You know I haven't."

"Who rang?"

"Didn't say. A neighbour, she said."

Jono thought of the neighbours. The woman in flat four who was ninety-one and deaf. The lad in flat six who worked nights and slept all day. The couple on the ground floor who had moved in six weeks ago and didn't speak much English. The empty flat at the end that had been empty for a year.

"Walter," he said, "I'm going to make some calls."

* * *

He made the calls. He made them all that evening and all Saturday, between clients, from his car, from lay-bys, from the kitchen at home with a notepad on the table. He'd been a

policeman for a long time; he knew how to be polite and persistent at the same time.

The care coordination team said reassessments had been carried out "in line with the framework." The duty social worker said she couldn't discuss an individual case with a member of staff who wasn't the allocated worker. The allocated worker was on leave. The safeguarding line said a concern had been logged, by telephone, the previous week, by a caller "identifying as a neighbour," and that all concerns were followed up "proportionately." No, they couldn't say who. No, there was no recording. Yes, the concern had been about a fall. No, they didn't have a record of the date of the alleged fall. The placement team said there were no residential beds in Torbay at Walter's assessed level of need, and that the Somerset home had a good inspection rating.

Nobody had done anything wrong. Everyone had followed the process. Every person he spoke to was tired and decent and doing their best inside a system with too many old people and too little money. He could hear it in their voices. He'd been one of them for six years.

That was what made it so hard to fight. There was no villain. There was only a form, and a framework, and a phone call from a neighbour who didn't seem to exist.

On Saturday night he sat at the kitchen table with his notepad and drew a line down the middle of the page. On one side he wrote *PROCESS*. On the other he wrote *SOMETHING ELSE*. Then he sat looking at it for a long time without writing anything under either heading.

He knew what Chris would say: *it's just the system, Jono. It does this to people every day*. And he knew that was true. Fourteen names on the list. Walter was only one of them.

But the copper in him, the part that had never quite gone off duty, kept coming back to the same small thing. The phone call. The fall that never happened. The timing: two weeks after Walter held up a photograph to a camera, and a million people watched him do it.

He tore the page off the pad, folded it in four, and put it in his wallet.

* * *

On Sunday afternoon, when he came up the stairs with Walter's shopping, there was somebody else in the room.

He heard voices through the door before he opened it. Walter's, low and slow. And another, younger, that it took him a moment to place.

He opened the door. Fred was sitting in the second chair, pulled close to Walter's at the window. His hood was down. Biscuit was lying across his feet. The two of them, the old man and the young one, were sitting side by side looking out over the square at the burnt Albion, the way two men might sit on a harbour wall looking at the sea.

Fred looked round. Something crossed his face. It wasn't guilt, exactly. It was more like a man caught in the middle of something private.

"All right," he said.

"All right," Jono said. He put the shopping down on the side. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Neither did I," Fred said.

Walter didn't turn round. "Jono," he said. "Would you give us ten minutes, son?"

Jono looked at the back of Walter's head, the white hair, the big hands folded on the blanket. Then at Fred, who was looking at the floor.

"Course," he said.

He went out and closed the door behind him, and stood on the landing with the damp-carpet smell and someone's radio playing two floors down.

Through the door, he could hear their voices, but not the words. Walter's, slow and steady, going on for a long time. Once, Fred's, a short question. Then Walter again. At one point there was a pause, and a sound like a drawer opening, or a box being lifted down. Then Walter's voice again, lower. Then a long silence.

Jono did not listen at the door. He could have. Twenty years ago he would have, without thinking twice. He stood at the top of the stairs with his back to the wall and his arms folded and looked at the fire-escape sign, and he let them have it, whatever it was.

It was nearer twenty minutes than ten. Then the door opened and Fred came out, with his hood up again and Biscuit at his heel. He stopped on the landing in front of Jono. His eyes were red-rimmed. His hands were shoved deep in the pockets of his work jacket.

"Look after him," he said. "Tomorrow. Make sure they're... make sure they do it right."

"I will."

Fred nodded. He looked as though he wanted to say something else. Then he didn't, and went down the stairs two at a time, the dog's claws clattering behind him. The street door banged.

Jono went back into the room. Walter was still at the window. On the bed behind him, the shoebox from the top of the wardrobe stood open and empty, its lid beside it.

"All right, Walter?"

"Never better." Walter's voice was a little rough. He cleared his throat. "Put that box back up for me, would you? Top of the wardrobe. Where it lives."

Jono picked it up. It was empty. He lifted it back onto the top of the wardrobe and didn't ask.

"His dad was a good man," Walter said to the window. "Nobody ever told that boy."

* * *

Chris came on Monday morning, at half past ten, to say goodbye.

He brought nothing. He'd thought about flowers and then thought Walter would hate them. He stood in the doorway of the small hot room for a moment, looking at the bare patch of wallpaper above the bed where the Lightwave photograph had hung. It was in Walter's lap now, wrapped in a tea towel.

"No filming," Walter said, without turning. "Not today."

"No," Chris said. "Not today."

He sat in the second chair. For a while neither of them said anything. Outside, the square went about its Monday morning. The bells rang at the level crossing, the barriers came down, and the queue of traffic built up along Torbay Road. A pigeon walked along the top of the hoarding round the Albion.

"They'll put a picture up," Walter said. "In front of that. You watch."

"You said."

"I'm saying it again." He turned his head and looked at Chris, and his eyes were very clear. "Don't let them."

"I won't."

Walter nodded slowly. Then, after a moment: "That photo. The last day. The one I held up for you."

"Yes."

"You've looked at it?"

"Hundreds of times," Chris said. "It's the heart of the whole film."

"All of it?" Walter said. "Have you looked at *all* of it?"

Chris opened his mouth to say yes. Then he stopped, because something in the old man's face made him unsure what the question meant.

"What do you..."

There was a knock at the door. Two men in green uniforms with a folding wheelchair, cheerful and brisk, the

transport crew. "Walter? Morning, my love! We're here to take you on your holidays!"

And then it was all movement. Coats, bags, the wheelchair unfolded, the blanket tucked in, Jono coming up the stairs behind them with the last of Walter's things in a holdall. There was no more time to talk.

They carried him down the narrow stairs in the chair, one man at the front and one at the back, with Walter holding the tea towel and the photograph to his chest with both hands. Out on the pavement, the little transport ambulance was waiting with its back doors open and its hazard lights flashing. Across the square, the Albion stood black and silent behind its fence.

Walter looked at it as they wheeled him up the ramp. He looked at it until the doors closed.

Jono stood on the pavement beside Chris with his hands in his pockets. He watched the ambulance pull out into the traffic and stop, almost immediately, because the bells were ringing and the barriers were coming down again.

They watched it sit there at the crossing for four minutes, waiting for nothing. Then the barriers lifted, and it went up Torbay Road, and it was gone.

"Nobody did it," Jono said quietly. "That's what Fred said to me. Factory shuts, nobody did it. Your dad drinks himself to death, nobody did it." He was looking at the empty road. "Old man who hasn't fallen gets reported for a fall by a neighbour who doesn't exist, and gets moved seventy miles away from everyone who knows him. Nobody did it."

Chris looked at him. "What do you mean, a neighbour who doesn't exist?"

Jono took out his wallet, took out a piece of paper folded in four, and gave it to him. Chris unfolded it. A line down the middle. *PROCESS* on one side. *SOMETHING ELSE* on the other. Nothing written under either.

"I don't know yet," Jono said. "But I'm going to find out."

* * *

REEL TWO

* * *

IT CAME FROM THE BAY!

PART TWO: THE SWARM SPREADS

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *Paignton beach, August 1978. Five teenagers on a striped towel in front of the pier: three boys, two girls. A transistor radio, a bottle of Tizer, a tube of Ambre Solaire. One of the boys, sixteen, skinny, in red swimming shorts, has his arm round a friend's neck and is pulling a face at the camera. The sun is behind the photographer. The sea is very blue.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

NARRATOR *(V.O.)*

Summer! Sun! Sea! Youth! The golden days that last forever...

(dramatic sting)

...OR DO THEY?!

* * *

EXT. PAIGNTON BEACH, DAY

The radio plays "Summer Nights." The skinny boy, YOUNG CHRIS, flicks sand at a girl. She shrieks and throws the Tizer bottle at him. Everyone laughs.

A low drone, under the music. Nobody notices.

Then the radio crackles and dies.

Shadows sweep across the sand, dozens of them, huge and fast. The teenagers look up.

GIRL

What... what *are* they?!

FLIES. GIANT HOUSEFLIES, the size of deckchairs, coming in low from the direction of Thatcher Rock in a dark, droning wave.

Screams. Towels, buckets and windbreaks fly. The whole beach runs. A fly lands on the pier and the pier lights burst one after another down its length. Another settles on the striped towel, and where it feeds, the stripes fade to grey.

YOUNG CHRIS runs with his friends towards the promenade. He looks back over his shoulder. One of the boys has fallen behind.

YOUNG CHRIS

(shouting)

Come on! COME ON!

The boy reaches out a hand. YOUNG CHRIS reaches back. And as he does, the boy begins to fade, first his colours, then his outline, until he is just a pale shape on the sand, and then nothing at all.

YOUNG CHRIS is holding nothing.

YOUNG CHRIS

(whispering)

What was his name? What was his... I *knew* his name...

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *A street. A young woman with long dark hair, a golf bag over one shoulder, laughing at something out of shot. Shop windows behind her. The light is late afternoon.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

EXT. STREET, DAY

AI LI walks along the pavement, swinging her golf bag. She stops at a shop window to check her reflection.

In the glass, behind her reflection, something huge and dark and many-eyed rises over the rooftops.

She turns.

AI LI

(a long, piercing, magnificent B-movie scream)

AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!

She runs. The fly swoops. She swings her golf bag and catches it, THWOCK, square across the face. It reels away, buzzing furiously. She keeps running, still screaming.

AI LI

AAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!

She stops, panting, at a street corner. Looks back. The street is empty. Silent.

She takes a breath. Composes herself. Straightens her hair.

A shadow falls across her.

AI LI

(screaming again, even louder)

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

* * *

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Can no one stop them? Will no one stand and fight? Find out... if you DARE!

* * *

The photograph of the beach stops moving. The pier. The striped towel. The Tizer bottle. Four teenagers now, not five, and one of them in red swimming shorts with his arm round the neck of a boy who isn't there.

* * *

Chris woke at four, drenched.

He lay in the dark and did the list. Five things you can see. Date of birth. Prime minister. It's the brain doing housekeeping. It doesn't mean anything.

Then he got up, went to the back bedroom, opened the Goldmine and found the photograph: Paignton beach, August 1978. Five of them on the towel. He looked at the boy whose neck he had his arm round. He knew him. He'd sat next to him in chemistry for three years. They'd gone fishing off the breakwater at Brixham. He'd been at his eighteenth birthday party.

He sat there in the blue light of the screen and could not, for the life of him, remember the boy's name.

He looked at it for a long time. Then, because he couldn't do anything else, he opened the other photograph, the one from Walter's shoebox, the last day of Lightwave. He'd scanned it at high resolution before Walter took it back.

Have you looked at all of it?

He looked at the faces at the front. The placard. The women holding each other. He'd looked at them a hundred times.

He didn't think to look at the back.

His phone buzzed on the desk beside him. It was a message from Jono, timed at 03:58. Jono couldn't sleep either.

Rang the home in Somerset last thing. Night staff said he's settled. Asked for his chair to be put by the window.

A pause, then another message.

There's no view. The window looks out on the car park.

10 – The Strand Reception

The invitation said **TORBAY: OPEN FOR INVESTMENT. An Evening with the Leader of the Council and Partners**, and it was printed on card so thick Vicky could have used it as a coaster.

It was held in the function room of one of the old hotels on the Strand, on the first floor, with a long run of windows looking straight out over the inner harbour. When she arrived at half past six, it was already dark and the coloured lights along the harbour wall were lit, swinging a little in the wind, doubled in the black water. It was the postcard again. From up here, with a glass of something sparkling in your hand and a waiter offering you a tiny crab tart on a slate, you could almost believe it.

About sixty people. She knew a third of them by now. The consultant from Bristol in his very good suit. The Chamber of Commerce. Several agents. Two developers she had met over coffee and rated, privately, as *not serious*. A cluster of councillors round the Leader, who was working the room the way a farmer works a field, systematically and with real pleasure, a hand on an elbow here and a laugh there. The Officer stood near the door with a lanyard and a clipboard, greeting people by name, very slightly too pleased to see each of them.

On an easel by the windows stood a large board under its own little spotlight. It showed the rendering from the Cabinet report: the hotel on the Debenhams site, glass and grey cladding, a rooftop bar, people with shopping bags walking past under a blue sky. Across the bottom, in gold letters: **THE STRAND: A NEW CHAPTER FOR TORQUAY**.

Vicky stood in front of it with her glass and looked at it for a long time. It was, as Chris had told her Richard said, not a bad building. It was just a building that could have been anywhere.

Through the window behind it, down on the harbourside in the rain, she could see two figures in waterproofs holding a homemade banner between them. White sheet, black paint, the letters running slightly in the wet.

28 DAYS. HAVE YOUR SAY. SEE THE OTHER PLAN.

One of them was tall and broad-shouldered: Jono. The other was older, slighter, standing very straight: Richard. They were handing out leaflets to anyone who came past. Not many people came past. A woman with a dog took one. A couple coming out of a restaurant took one, glanced at it and walked on.

Nobody in the function room was looking out of the window.

"Ah," said a voice beside her, pleasant and amused. "The awkward squad."

* * *

She turned.

He was a man in his fifties, lean, with short fair hair going thin and a navy suit that she could tell, because she had grown up in a city of very good suits, had cost more than everything else in the room put together. He had a glass of water in one hand, not champagne. He was smiling at the banner in the

rain as though it were a slightly embarrassing relative at a wedding.

"I'm sorry," he said, turning the smile on her. "That was rude of me. They're very sincere. It's rather touching." He held out his hand. "I don't think we've met. I'm..."

He gave his name. She would remember later that she had heard it and, for a moment, not quite retained it, as if it had been designed to slide off the mind.

"Vicky Ooi," she said, and shook his hand. Cool and dry.

"Of course. Mr Tan's eyes and ears in Devon." He said it warmly, as if it were a compliment. "Your employer has done marvellous things in this bay. The hotel at the end of the front. Beautiful. Finished on time, I'm told, which round here is practically a miracle." He laughed softly. "I'm in property, in a modest way. Advisory. I've been helping the council with some of its partnerships for a number of years. Since before you were born, practically."

"I doubt that," Vicky said.

"You're right. I flatter myself." He lifted his water glass slightly towards the easel. "What do you make of it?"

"It's competent."

He laughed out loud at that, a genuine laugh. Two people nearby glanced round and smiled. "*Competent*. That's exactly the word. I love it. Do you know, I've been working with councils in this country for thirty years, and nobody has ever summed up the entire public sector so precisely in one word." He leaned in, confidentially. "Between ourselves, *competent* is the best you'll get. And frankly, here, it'll do. They need

something to happen on that site. Anything. Something with cranes on it, so the man with the camera stops making films."

He said *the man with the camera* lightly, with amused tolerance. But she noticed he hadn't needed to say Chris's name. He'd assumed she would know whom he meant.

* * *

The Leader made a speech at seven. It was very good. He spoke about confidence. About Torbay's natural assets, the bay, the climate, the heritage. He spoke about partnership, and about the courage to invest. He said that some people liked to talk the place down, but that he preferred to talk it up. He said that he had seen the films everyone was talking about, and that he respected the passion behind them, but that the time for looking back was over and the time for looking forward had come. Everyone applauded. Outside the window, in the rain, Richard was still handing out leaflets.

Afterwards, the man in the navy suit found her again by the window. He brought her a fresh glass, though she hadn't finished the first.

"I'll be very direct," he said, "because I'm told that's the way Singaporeans like it, and I've done enough business in Singapore to know it's true. Raffles Place. The old Tanglin Club. Lovely city. Everything works." He smiled. "I wonder if Mr Tan has considered the Strand."

"Considered it how?"

"As an investor. Or rather, as the face of an investment." He turned slightly so that their backs were to the room and they were both looking out at the harbour. "The council has a

scheme. It has a site. It has a development manager for the scheme, a small specialist company I'm associated with, at arm's length. What it doesn't have is an operator with a name people trust. A builder with a reputation. Somebody who finishes things." He let that land. "Mr Tan is exactly that somebody."

"And in return?"

"In return, the council would be prepared to grant a very long lease on the site at a figure that I think Mr Tan would find..." He paused, choosing the word. "Compelling. I'd go so far as to say it would be the best value he's ever had in this country."

"That sounds generous."

"It is. Very."

"Why?"

He turned and looked at her properly for the first time, and she saw his eyes: pale blue, perfectly calm and perfectly attentive, the eyes of a man who never stopped calculating, even while he smiled.

"Because the consultation closes in twenty-five days," he said, "and in twenty-five days it would be very helpful for the council to be able to say that a serious international investor, with a track record of delivery in this bay, supports its scheme. Publicly. A letter of support, perhaps. A quote in the press release. Mr Tan's name, on the board." He gestured gently at the easel with his water glass. "That's all. A name. It's not much to ask, for a lease like that."

Vicky looked down at the harbour. Jono had folded the banner and was holding it under his arm. Richard was standing alone at the harbour wall, looking up at the hotel's lit windows.

"I'll pass it on," she said.

"Please do." He smiled again, and set down his glass on the windowsill. "And may I say, Ms Ooi, it's refreshing to deal with someone who reads the appendices."

She kept her face perfectly still.

"Oh, don't look so surprised," he said lightly. "It's a small town. People notice things. They notice when the lady from Singapore asks about delivery timetables in a stakeholder briefing." He paused. "They notice who she has coffee with. Strong coffee, I gather."

He held out his hand again. She shook it. It was still cool and dry.

"I'll look forward to hearing from Mr Tan," he said. "Do enjoy the rest of your evening."

He went, moving easily through the crowd, a word here, a nod there. He stopped by the Leader for a moment, touched his elbow, said something that made the Leader laugh, and then he was at the door, where the Officer almost bowed to him. Then he was gone.

He had not given her a business card. She noticed that too.

* * *

She left at eight. Down on the harbourside it was still raining. The banner was gone. Jono and Richard were gone.

She walked back along the Strand under the swinging lights with her coat collar up, and her heart was going faster than she wanted it to.

Strong coffee, I gather.

He had wanted her to know. That was the point of saying it. It wasn't careless. Nothing about that man was careless. He had told her, as pleasantly as a man asking about the weather, that somebody had been watching her, and that he knew what she had been doing, and with whom.

* * *

In the flat, she didn't take her coat off. She sat down at the table, opened her laptop, and started work.

The Cabinet report first. She'd read it the day it was published, of course, but she went back to it now. Paragraph 6.3: *Scheme-specific development management services will be provided by a specialist development manager, appointed under delegated authority.* A company name in a footnote. Not one she knew, and not one of the big regeneration firms whose names were on every other council document.

She went to Companies House. The company was registered in Bristol. Two directors she'd never heard of. Its parent company was registered in Jersey. She went to the Jersey register. A holding company, with a registered office care of a firm of corporate service providers in St Helier, at an address on the Esplanade.

She looked at the address. She knew it.

She didn't know *why* she knew it, not at first. She sat with her hands flat on the table, the way she did in exams, and let her memory go back through four months of files. Sites. Owners. Valuations. Every property in the bay she had looked at for Mr Tan, every title she had pulled.

Then she had it. She opened a folder on her laptop called *Station Square, not viable*, and in it a PDF of a Land Registry title she had pulled in her second week, for a building she'd looked at as a possible site and rejected because the owner had never responded to any approach.

The Albion.

Registered proprietor: a company with a long dull name. Address for service: care of a firm of corporate service providers, in St Helier, at an address on the Esplanade.

The same building. The same firm. The same door.

She sat back in her chair.

It proved nothing. Hundreds of companies used those firms. Thousands, probably, all with the same registered office, like letters all sent to the same post office box. It wasn't evidence. It was a coincidence of paperwork.

But she didn't believe it. Not after tonight. Not after *strong coffee, I gather*.

The building that had burned on the night it all started, the building whose owner never answered letters, and the company that would manage the council's new hotel scheme: both of them led back, through Bristol and Jersey, to the same quiet door on the Esplanade in St Helier. And standing at the

front of all of it, at a reception on the Strand, a man without a business card asking for Mr Tan's name on the board.

Not his money. His *name*.

She understood then, quite clearly, what she was being asked to do. They didn't need Mr Tan to build anything. They needed him to stand in front of it. A clean, respected face, a builder who finished things, so that whatever was behind him would stay in the dark.

* * *

At seven the next morning she sat at the same table, with her hair wet and her eyes gritty, and waited for the call to connect.

"Vicky."

"Mr Tan."

"The reception?"

She told him about the offer. All of it, accurately. The long lease. The figure, *compelling*. The letter of support. His name on the board. She told it the way she had been trained to, the facts in order and her own opinions held back until asked for.

Mr Tan listened without interrupting. When she had finished, he was quiet for a long moment.

"And who," he said, "is this man?"

She hesitated.

She could tell him now. The Jersey address. The Albion. *Strong coffee, I gather.* But she had nothing. A shared post

office box and a feeling. Mr Tan had built his company over forty years on one principle: never act on a feeling. Bring him a feeling, and he would thank her politely and stop trusting her judgement. Bring him proof, and he would act.

"An adviser," she said. "To the council. He says he's at arm's length from the development manager. I'm checking."

Mr Tan looked at her through the screen. He had known her for twelve years. He had hired her straight out of university. He could read her face better than her own mother could.

"You don't like him," he said.

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't know yet," Vicky said. "When I know, I'll tell you."

Another long pause. Behind him the cranes stood against a hazy blue sky, building something.

"Don't sign anything," Mr Tan said. "Don't promise anything. Thank him for his offer and tell him I'm considering it."

"Yes, Mr Tan."

"And Vicky."

"Yes?"

"Be careful," he said. "A man who offers you something for nothing is never offering you nothing."

The call ended.

She sat for a moment looking at her own reflection in the black screen. Then she picked up her phone and wrote a message to Chris. She read it through three times, deleted it, wrote it again, and finally sent something much shorter than she had first intended.

I met someone last night. We need to talk. Not by phone.

11 – Brixham at Dawn

Vicky chose the place: the road above Meadfoot beach, on the far side of Torquay, where the town gave up and the cliffs began. She said she wanted somewhere with no walls.

They walked along the clifftop path in a cold wind with their hands in their pockets. Below them the sea was grey and restless, and just offshore, a few hundred yards out, a big dark lump of rock rose out of the water, steep-sided, its top furred with scrub and white with gull droppings.

Chris didn't like looking at it. He didn't say why.

She told him everything. The reception. The man in the navy suit with no business card and a name that wouldn't stay in your head. The lease. *A name. It's not much to ask.* Then the address in Jersey, and the Albion's title, and the same door on the Esplanade in St Helier.

And then, last, almost reluctantly: *Strong coffee, I gather.*

Chris stopped walking.

"He knew we'd met."

"He wanted me to know he knew." Vicky looked out at the rock. "Somebody has been watching me. Or you. Or both."

He thought of Walter, seventy miles away, looking at a car park. Of Jono's folded piece of paper. *PROCESS. SOMETHING ELSE.*

"Have you told Tan?"

"About the offer, yes. About the rest..." She shook her head. "Not yet. I have a shared post-office box and a feeling. Mr Tan doesn't act on feelings. If I bring him a feeling, he stops listening to me. If I bring him proof, he moves mountains."

"Then we get proof."

"Yes." She turned to face him. "But first, you need to meet him. He's flying in on Thursday to inspect the third hotel. One day. I've told him about you. He's interested." She almost smiled. "I'd stop wearing that expression before you meet him, though. He'll read it like a book."

"What expression?"

"The one you get when you look at that rock."

* * *

He picked them up at a quarter to five on Friday morning, in the dark, outside the hotel on the front where Tan was staying.

Tan came down the steps exactly on time: a small, neat man in his late sixties, with steel-rimmed glasses and grey hair cut very short. He wore a dark fleece over an open-necked shirt, and good walking shoes. He shook Chris's hand once, firmly, and looked at him for a second longer than a stranger normally would. Chris had the strong sense of being weighed, accurately, by someone who had weighed a great many people and was rarely wrong.

"Mr Chris," he said. "Vicky says you lived in Tanjong Pagar."

"For eleven years."

"Which block?"

Chris told him. Tan nodded, as though that settled something, and got into the back seat. Vicky got in beside him. Nobody spoke much on the drive round the bay. The road was empty. The sea was a black mass on their left, and the lights of Paignton slid past, and then the long dark stretch to Brixham, and then the town itself, steep streets folded round the harbour, its colours not yet visible.

But the harbour was awake.

* * *

Brixham fish market at half past five in the morning was the only place in Torbay that Chris knew of where it felt, unmistakably, like something was being *made*.

Not made in a factory. But earned. Taken out of the sea by people who had gone out into the dark to get it, and brought back, and sold, and sent on, that same morning, to kitchens and markets all over Europe.

The trawlers were in, three and four deep at the quay, rust-streaked and battered, their decks crowded with nets and winches and plastic crates, men in orange oilskins moving between them with the unhurried speed of people who have done the same job ten thousand times. Gulls, hundreds of them, screamed overhead in the floodlights. Forklifts beeped and swung. The air was full of diesel, salt, ice and fish.

Inside the market hall, under the long fluorescent lights, the catch was laid out in rows: white plastic boxes on a wet concrete floor, each one packed with crushed ice and

glistening fish. Sole, plaice, turbot, brill. Monkfish, with their huge ugly heads. Gurnard, red as fire engines. Squid. Boxes and boxes of cuttlefish, black with their own ink. Crab and lobster, alive and stirring in their crates. Each box had a ticket on it, with a boat and a weight.

And around them the buyers moved slowly, in white coats and wellingtons, with clipboards and phones, prodding, sniffing, peering into gills. Then the auction began. The auctioneer walked along the rows with a little group following him, calling numbers in a rapid sing-song that sounded like no language Chris had ever heard. The buyers bid with tiny movements, a nod, a lifted finger, a glance, and box after box was sold before you could see who had bought it.

Tan stood very still at the end of a row and watched for a long time without speaking.

"How much?" he asked eventually. "In a year."

"Tens of millions of pounds," Chris said. "More value landed here than any other fishing port in England. It's been the biggest for years."

Tan looked at him sharply. "England's *largest*?"

"By value. Yes."

"Here?" Tan looked round the hall, the concrete floor, the rusty trawlers through the open doors, the steep little town above. "In this town, which your council tells me is finished?"

"Here."

A buyer went past with a trolley stacked with boxes of cuttlefish. Tan stopped him, with a politeness that somehow made it impossible to refuse, and asked where it was going.

"Spain, most of this," the buyer said. "Some to Italy. The best goes to Asia: Korea, Japan." He grinned. "They pay better than anyone round here."

"Of course," Tan said. "Because they know what it's worth."

* * *

Afterwards they stood on the quay with paper cups of tea from the fishermen's café, watching the light come up over the harbour. The sky went from black to iron grey to a pale, washed blue. The colours of the town came out, one by one, as if somebody were painting them in: the pink and blue and cream houses stacked up the hill, the red roofs, the green of the headland.

On a plinth at the edge of the harbour stood a statue. A man in a long coat and a curled wig, one hand raised, looking out over the water. Tan walked over and read the inscription.

"William of Orange," he said. "1688." He looked up at the stone face. "A Dutch prince, landing with an army to take the English throne. And with him, his bankers." He glanced at Chris. "They do not tell you that part on the plaque."

"No."

"Within six years," Tan said, "you had a Bank of England. A national debt. The City of London." He sipped his tea. "It all came ashore here. On this beach. And now," he looked at the boats, "the fishermen of the same town sell their catch to Korea because nobody in England will pay what it's worth." He smiled faintly. "History has a sense of humour."

Chris took a breath.

"Mr Tan," he said. "Can I say something directly?"

"Vicky says you would, whether I allowed it or not."

"When I was in Singapore," Chris said, "I met an old man at a dinner. A retired contractor. He told me that in 1975 he'd built factory shells in Jurong. Concrete frames on reclaimed swamp. Hundreds of them. He said when he started, half the people in Singapore thought Jurong was a mad government fantasy. Then the factories came, and the jobs came, and the wages came. The wages paid for the flats, and the flats paid for the schools, and the schools paid for the next generation, who built the next thing. He said, 'Everything you see in this country began with somebody making something in a shed on a swamp.'"

Tan said nothing. He was watching Chris's face.

"Vicky told me," Chris said, "that you started as a contractor. That your first job was in Jurong."

"1979," Tan said quietly. "Pioneer Road. A factory for electronic components. American company. I was twenty-two. I poured the floor slab myself."

"So you built Jurong," Chris said. "You helped build the thing that built your country." He gestured, not at the harbour but at the whole bay beyond the headland, Paignton and Torquay and everything in between. "Why do you only build hotels here?"

* * *

The question hung in the cold air. A gull landed on the statue's head and screamed at them. Down on the quay, a trawler's engine started with a roar and a cloud of blue smoke.

Tan finished his tea. He looked at the cup in his hand for a moment, then dropped it into a bin.

"Because hotels," he said, "are what I was asked to build."

"By whom?"

"By everyone. Your council. Your agents. Your Local Enterprise Partnership, or whatever it is called this year. Every brochure. Every meeting. *Mr Tan, would you consider a hotel. Mr Tan, the bay needs quality accommodation. Mr Tan, tourism is our future*." He shrugged. "Nobody has ever said to me: *Mr Tan, would you consider a factory*. Nobody has ever shown me an industrial strategy for this place, because there isn't one. Nobody has ever told me what Torbay wants to *make*." He looked at Chris. "You are the first person in four years who has asked me that question. And you are not the council. You are a man with a camera."

"Then let me show you," Chris said. "Not a brochure. A real plan. Richard's design for the place, and what it could make, and what that would pay for."

Tan studied him for a long time.

"I will tell you three things," he said. "Then I must go and look at a hotel."

"Go on."

"First. I don't invest in ideas. I invest in people who finish things. Your idea may be very good. I have heard many very good ideas. What I have never seen in this bay is anyone, *anyone*, in authority, who finishes anything. Show me that, and we can talk about factories."

He held up a second finger.

"Second. My board meets in Singapore in four months. They will ask me one question: *should we stay in Torbay, or should we go?* At present my answer is: the hotels make money. Nothing else here makes sense. The leadership is weak. The plans don't happen. The risk is too high for anything bigger." He let that sit. "If nothing changes in four months, my answer will be: finish the third hotel, then leave."

"And the third thing?"

Tan looked at the statue of William of Orange, the raised stone hand, the bankers who had followed him ashore.

"The third thing," he said, "is a question. I have been offered something by a man who advises your council. A very good offer. Too good." He turned back to Chris. "What do you know about the people who advise your council, Mr Chris?"

Chris glanced at Vicky. Her face gave away nothing at all.

"Not enough yet," he said truthfully.

"Then find out," Tan said. "Before I have to give him an answer."

He held out his hand. Chris shook it.

"Thank you for the fish market," Tan said. "It's the first thing anyone in Torbay has shown me that I didn't already know." He turned to Vicky. "We'll take a taxi."

* * *

Chris stood on the quay and watched them go. A taxi came down the hill, Vicky opened the door for Tan, and they were

gone along the harbour road, past the trawlers, up into the town.

The market was emptying. The buyers loaded their vans. The forklifts carried the last stacks of boxes away. Somewhere far off, in some kitchen in Madrid or Seoul, somebody would eat that cuttlefish tonight and have no idea where it came from.

He took out his phone. Four months. He opened the calendar and counted forward to the date, and put it in, next to the other one.

28 DAYS: consultation closes. Twenty-one days left now.

TAN'S BOARD: stay or go. A hundred and twenty days.

Two clocks.

He looked out past the harbour wall, past Berry Head, at the open sea, and for a moment he felt the full weight of it. A man of sixty-four, with a stroke behind him and a bad hand that ached in the cold, a camera, an archive, a carer, an architect, and a woman from Singapore who'd been warned off with a cup of coffee. Against all that.

Then he thought of the trawlers going out in the dark, every night, whatever the weather. Getting it done.

He got back in the car and drove to Paignton, to Richard's front room and the drawing board by the bay window. He knew Richard would already be up, because Richard had been up every morning at five since the day the clock had started.

There were twenty-one days left.

12 – Walter Dies

The call came at 7.14 on a Tuesday morning, while Jono was standing in a client's kitchen in Goodrington waiting for the kettle to boil.

He didn't recognise the number. A Somerset code. He knew before he answered.

"Is that Jono?" A woman's voice, soft and practised. "I'm calling from the home. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, my love. Walter passed away in the night. About three o'clock. Very peacefully. The night staff were with him."

Jono stood in the kitchen and looked at the kettle. It was one of those glass ones with a blue light inside that came on when it boiled. He watched the bubbles start to rise.

"How?" he said.

"His heart, the doctor thinks. He'd had that chest infection last week, the GP came out to him. He was very frail. Sometimes they just… let go. Especially after a move." A pause. "He talked about you, you know. And about the window. He wanted to know what was happening with the burnt building."

The kettle clicked off. The blue light went out.

"Thank you for ringing," Jono said. "Who's his next of kin? He didn't have anyone. I'd like to help with the arrangements, if…"

"Oh, that's all in hand," the woman said, sounding relieved to be able to give good news. "His nephew's been

marvellous. He's been to visit twice this week, and he's dealing with everything."

Jono went very still.

"His nephew," he said.

"Yes. Lovely man. Brought him flowers."

"Walter didn't have a nephew."

There was a short silence on the line.

"Well," the woman said, uncertain now. "He signed in as his nephew. And Walter seemed to know him. They had a good long chat in his room."

* * *

He finished his calls. He had six more clients that morning and he finished every one of them, because Mrs Hellier still needed her tablets and Mr Ashby still needed help getting to the toilet, and grief wasn't on the rota. He did it all without thinking, the way he'd once worked a night shift after a death on his patch, and at a quarter to one he got in his car and drove to Somerset.

He rang Chris from the A38.

"Walter's dead."

Chris didn't speak for a long moment. When he did, his voice was strange. "When?"

"Last night. Heart, they're saying." Jono overtook a lorry with more force than he needed. "There's a nephew."

"Walter hadn't got a..."

"I know."

"I'm coming."

"No. Stay there. I'll ring you." Jono's jaw was tight. "I want to see the room first."

* * *

The home was a converted Victorian rectory on the edge of a village outside Taunton, with a new extension at the back and a car park at the side. The car park was what Walter's window looked out on. Jono stood on the gravel and looked up at it. Ground floor, second from the end. The curtains were drawn.

The manager was kind and harassed and clearly wished he would go away. She let him see the room because he was polite and because he'd been Walter's carer, and because, he suspected, it was easier than arguing.

It was a small, clean room with magnolia walls, a hospital bed stripped to the plastic mattress, a wardrobe and a chair. The chair was pushed up to the window, facing the car park. On the wall above the bed, on a hook someone had put up for him, hung the Lightwave photograph from 1979: rows of people in white coats squinting into the sun. *PAIGNTON WORKS*.

Walter's clothes were in a black bag by the door. His washbag. His slippers. A holdall that Jono recognised because he had packed it himself.

"Where's his tin?" he said.

The manager looked blank.

"A biscuit tin. Old, square, blue and gold. Huntley and Palmers. About so big." Jono showed her with his hands. "He kept it on his bedside table. His pills used to sit on top of it. It had his papers in it. Photographs. I packed it in that holdall myself."

The manager checked the holdall. She checked the wardrobe and the bedside drawer. She went and asked the senior carer. She came back.

"His nephew took a few personal items," she said. "For safekeeping. Yesterday afternoon, when he visited. Sentimental things, he said. Family papers. He said he didn't want them to go astray if... well." She spread her hands. "He was very thoughtful."

"Can I see the visitors' book?"

She hesitated, then showed him. It was on a lectern in the hall: a big hardback ledger, columns ruled in biro. *Date. Time in. Name. Visiting. Time out.*

He ran his finger down the page.

Tuesday of last week, 14.10. *Visiting: Walter*. The name was written in neat capitals. Common, English, utterly forgettable. *Relationship:* NEPHEW.

Thursday, 14.05. The same capitals. NEPHEW.

Monday, yesterday, 15.30. NEPHEW. Time out: 16.50.

An hour and twenty minutes. Walter had died ten hours later.

"Have you got CCTV?" Jono asked.

"Only on the front door. And it records over every seventy-two hours." The manager was beginning to look worried. "Is something wrong? He had ID. He knew all about Walter. Where he'd worked, his wife's name, everything. He was lovely with him."

Jono took a photograph of the page with his phone. Then he took another, closer, of the capitals.

"Who's arranging the funeral?"

"The nephew. He's gone with a direct cremation, I believe. No service. He said Walter wouldn't have wanted a fuss." She looked at her watch. "The funeral director collected him this morning. I think it's booked for Thursday."

Thursday. Two days.

* * *

He made the calls from the car park, with his back to Walter's window.

The coroner's office first. He was careful. He'd written statements for coroners and stood in their courts, and he knew exactly what they needed to hear. He gave them the facts: an elderly man moved out of area after a safeguarding concern about a fall that never happened, made by an untraceable neighbour; a visitor claiming to be a nephew, when the man had no living family; personal papers removed the day before death; a rapid direct cremation arranged by the same person.

The officer listened and took notes. Then she rang back forty minutes later.

"I've spoken to the GP," she said. "He saw Walter nine days ago with a chest infection. He's satisfied the death was natural and he's willing to certify. Heart failure, with the infection as a contributory factor. He was eighty-seven. There's no history of injury, nothing on the body, nothing the home has reported." A pause. "I understand your concerns about the visitor. But a visitor misrepresenting his relationship isn't, in itself, grounds for us to take jurisdiction. If you believe a crime has been committed, that's a matter for the police."

He rang an old colleague. A detective sergeant he'd worked with for six years after the old DS retired, now in a different force, a good, careful man who still sent him a card at Christmas. He told him everything.

The DS listened all the way through. Then he sighed.

"Jono," he said gently, "you know what I'm going to say."

"Say it anyway."

"You've got an eighty-seven-year-old man with heart failure and a chest infection who's died in a care home. The GP's happy, the coroner's happy, there's no injury. You've got a visitor who said he was a nephew, which is odd, I grant you. And a missing biscuit tin." He paused. "If you came to me with that when we were on the job, what would I have said?"

Jono closed his eyes.

"You'd have said it was a feeling," he said. "Not evidence."

"I'd have said it was a feeling," the DS agreed. "A good copper's feeling, maybe. But you can't stop a cremation on a feeling. Not without something. Get me something, anything, and I'll make calls. Who the nephew is. Where the tin went. A link between the visit and the death. Something."

"There's no time. They're cremating him on Thursday."

"Then you'd better get me something by Thursday," the DS said, not unkindly. "I'm sorry, mate. I really am."

* * *

He tried everything.

He rang the funeral director, a family firm in Taunton. They were courteous and immovable. The nephew had produced identification and signed as next of kin. The paperwork was in order. The cremation was booked for nine o'clock on Thursday morning. Without an instruction from the coroner or the police, they couldn't delay it. They were very sorry for his loss.

He asked them for the nephew's contact details. They couldn't give them out.

He rang the register office, to see who had registered the death. It wasn't registered yet; it would be tomorrow. By whom? They couldn't say.

He sat in his car in the dark in the care home car park until nearly ten o'clock at night, ringing, writing, going over it, Walter's dark window behind him. He wrote down every fact on a fresh sheet of his notepad, under the heading *SOMETHING ELSE*. It filled a page. It wasn't enough. He knew it wasn't. He'd have told anyone else it wasn't.

On Wednesday morning he got up at four, drove to the home again, and spoke to every member of staff who had been on shift during the nephew's visits. A care assistant remembered him: "polite, quiet, very ordinary. I couldn't tell you what he looked like, honestly. Just... a man." Nobody could describe him. Nobody had noticed his car.

On Wednesday afternoon he drove back to Torbay to see Fred, who had been at Walter's flat last, who knew Walter better than anyone now living. He went to the hotel where Fred washed pots. Fred wasn't on that week. He went to Fred's address. No answer. Biscuit barked behind the door. He rang. It went to voicemail. He left a message: *Walter's died. Ring me. Please.*

On Wednesday night he sent everything he had to the DS: the photographs of the visitors' book, the timeline, the safeguarding call, the missing tin. The DS replied at midnight. *Read it all. I believe you. It's still not enough. I'm sorry.*

* * *

On Thursday morning, Chris drove him.

He'd turned up at Jono's at a quarter to six without being asked and sat outside in the car with the engine running until Jono came out. Neither of them said much on the A38. The sky was grey and low. It was raining a little.

They reached the crematorium at eleven minutes to nine. It stood on the edge of town in landscaped grounds, low and modern, with a chapel, a car park and a long, tidy drive lined with young trees. A sign at the entrance said: *Please drive slowly. Funerals in progress.*

There was no hearse in the car park. There were no mourners. There was nobody at all.

Jono went to the office. A young woman in a black suit came to the counter.

"Walter," he said, and gave the surname. "Nine o'clock. Direct cremation."

She checked her screen.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was brought forward. We had a cancellation yesterday afternoon, and the family requested the earlier slot." She looked up at him. "It took place at four o'clock yesterday."

Jono stood very still at the counter.

"Who requested it?"

"I'm afraid I can't..."

"Never mind," Jono said. "It doesn't matter now."

* * *

They stood outside in the rain, in the empty car park. Behind the chapel, a single thin chimney stood against the grey sky, with nothing coming out of it.

Jono didn't say anything for a long time. Then he said, very quietly, "I was too slow."

"You weren't."

"I was too slow. Twenty years ago I'd have had a warrant by Wednesday lunchtime." He looked up at the chimney. "I'm not a copper any more, Chris. I'm a carer. I can get a man to the toilet in under fifteen minutes. I couldn't stop them burning him."

Chris didn't answer. He was looking at the chimney too, and he was thinking of something he couldn't say out loud.

Took them long enough, Walter had said, when Jono showed him the video on his phone. He'd watched it twice, sitting by his window. His face, his hands, his photograph, in front of a million people.

A million people. And somewhere among them, someone who had looked at that photograph, and seen something in it, and decided that an old man in a flat opposite Paignton station was a problem.

Chris had made that film. He'd sat in the back bedroom and cut it with such care, the old man's hands, the steady way he'd held the last day of Lightwave up to the lens. He'd been proud of that shot. It was the best shot in the film.

He put his left hand in his coat pocket. It had gone numb, from the wrist down. A cold, fizzing numbness he recognised, that he had felt once before, in 2022, on a Sunday afternoon in his kitchen, an hour before the ambulance.

He stood very still and did the checks, silently. *Face. Arms. Speech. Time.* He smiled, privately, to see if his face drooped. He couldn't tell. He pressed his fingertips together inside his pocket. He said, in his head, *Walter. Walter. Walter.*

"Chris?" Jono was looking at him. "You all right?"

"Cold," Chris said. "Let's go home."

Halfway down the A38, the feeling came back into his hand, slowly, pins and needles and then nothing. He didn't mention it. He didn't mention it to anyone.

* * *

REEL THREE

* * *

IT CAME FROM THE BAY!

PART THREE: THE LINES GO DEAD

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *Newton Abbot, autumn 1984. The yard behind the telephone exchange. A row of yellow vans, each with a ladder on the roof. In front of them, a young man of twenty-two in a donkey jacket and a new tie, a hard hat under one arm, standing awkwardly beside an older engineer who has a hand on his shoulder. On the back of the print, in biro: "First day."*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

NARRATOR *(V.O.)*

The nerve centre of the nation! Copper and glass carrying the voices of millions! Built by men who knew how to build things!

(ominous sting)

BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE NERVES ARE CUT?!

* * *

INT. NEWTON ABBOT TELEPHONE EXCHANGE, SWITCH ROOM, NIGHT

Row upon row of tall grey equipment racks. Lights blink. Relays click and chatter like a thousand typewriters. YOUNG CHRIS walks the aisles with a torch and a clipboard, checking. It is his first night shift. He is the only one here.

A sound, under the clicking. A drone.

He stops. Looks up at the high window. Something moves across the moon.

* * *

EXT. EXCHANGE YARD, CONTINUOUS

The yellow vans in a row under the floodlights. A GIANT FLY lands on the first, then another, then a swarm. Their legs scrabble on the roofs. Ladders crash to the ground. Where they feed, the bright yellow fades to dirty grey.

They crawl down the walls of the exchange and in through the cable ducts.

* * *

INT. SWITCH ROOM, CONTINUOUS

The flies pour in. They tear at the cable runs overhead. Sparks. Bundles of copper wire hang loose. Panel after panel goes dark.

YOUNG CHRIS backs away, torch shaking.

All the lights on all the racks go out at once. Silence.

Then a single telephone on the supervisor's desk begins to ring.

It is the only thing in the room still working. It rings, and rings.

YOUNG CHRIS walks towards it slowly through the dark, the flies crawling on the racks around him. He picks it up.

YOUNG CHRIS

Hello?

Silence. Crackle. Then a voice, old and steady, very far away.

WALTER (V.O.)

(on the line)

Have you looked at all of it?

YOUNG CHRIS

Walter? Walter, where are you? I can't...

WALTER (V.O.)

All of it, son. Not just the front.

YOUNG CHRIS

What do you mean? What's at the...

A fly lands on the cable. The line goes dead. A long, flat dialling tone.

YOUNG CHRIS stands in the dark exchange with the receiver against his ear, listening to the tone. Around him, in the blackness, the flies feed.

* * *

NARRATOR (V.O.)

The voices of the past... cut off forever?! Next time... **NO ONE IS SAFE!**

* * *

The photograph stops moving. The exchange yard. The vans, all grey now. The older engineer with his hand on the shoulder of nobody, standing beside an empty space where a young man in a donkey jacket used to be.

* * *

Chris woke in the dark with the dialling tone still in his ears.

He didn't do the list. He got straight up, went to the back bedroom without putting the light on, and opened the Goldmine on the screen. He opened the high-resolution scan of Walter's last photograph. *THANK YOU PAIGNTON, 1958–2001.*

He'd looked at it a hundred times. The front. The faces. The placard. The women holding on to each other.

All of it, son. Not just the front.

His hand was shaking on the mouse. He zoomed out to the whole frame. Then, for the first time, he made himself look past the crowd. Past the gate. Out along the factory road, towards the edge of the picture.

There was a car there, dark, parked. And beside it, small and blurred, three figures.

He zoomed in.

13 – The Memorial

The faces wouldn't come.

Chris sat in the back bedroom until it got light, zooming and enhancing, sharpening and re-sampling. He tried every tool he had and a few he wrote that night. It made no difference. The scan was good, but the photograph was a cheap print from a cheap camera twenty-five years ago, and the three men had been standing sixty yards behind the crowd. At full magnification their faces broke up into soft blocks of beige and grey, like a mosaic of a face rather than a face.

But he could see what they were wearing. A heavy camel overcoat on the man on the left, older and broad. On the right, a younger, thinner man in a cheap grey suit, holding what looked like a clipboard. And in the middle, a lean man with fair hair in a dark navy suit, hands in his pockets, standing very straight.

He could see where they were looking. Not at the crowd, not at the placard, not at the weeping women or the men in overalls saying goodbye to fourteen, twenty, thirty years of their lives. All three of them were looking past all of that, at the long low buildings of the Lightwave works behind.

He printed it. He printed the three figures as large as the printer would go, a grey, blurred, ghostly sheet of A3, and pinned it to the wall above the desk. Then he sat and looked at it.

When Jono came round at nine, he stood in the doorway and looked at it for a long time too.

"Who are they?"

"I don't know."

"Did Walter know?"

"I think so," Chris said. "I think that's what he was trying to tell me." His voice cracked slightly. "*Have you looked at all of it?* He asked me. On the last day. And I said yes. I said *hundreds of times*." He shook his head. "I never looked at the back."

Jono put a hand on his shoulder and kept it there.

"We'll find them," he said.

* * *

They decided to hold the memorial in Station Square, under Walter's window.

There was no body. No coffin, no hearse, no service, nothing. Walter had been cremated at four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon seventy miles away with nobody there, and as far as anyone could tell, the ashes had been collected by a nephew who didn't exist. So there was nothing to bury and nowhere to go. Chris posted a single line on the campaign page, with the photograph of Walter at his window, the fire light on his face:

Walter. Lightwave, drawing towers. Husband of Margaret. He made things. Saturday, 11am, Station Square, under his window. Come if you knew him. Come if you didn't.

He thought perhaps thirty people would come. Forty, if it didn't rain.

* * *

It didn't rain. By half past ten there were two hundred.

By eleven, Chris had stopped trying to count.

They came on foot from the station, and from Torbay Road, and down from the bus stops on the main road, and out of cars parked anywhere they could find a space. They were mostly old: men in their seventies and eighties, in good coats and polished shoes, the clothes you wear to a funeral. Women with them, arms linked. Some of the men walked with sticks. Two came in wheelchairs, pushed by grown-up children. And many of them, Chris began to notice, were wearing something small and old pinned to their lapels.

A badge. Enamel, about the size of a thumbnail: a blue circle with a thin gold line going through it like a beam of light.

The Lightwave long-service badge.

They gathered in front of the Albion's fenced-off shell, in front of the hoardings with their faded families, and under the window on the third floor of the flats across the square where, for twenty years, a big man in a chair had sat watching the town.

Somebody had put a jam jar of flowers on the pavement underneath it. By eleven there were dozens: jars, bunches, a single red rose taped to the lamp post. Somebody had brought an old Lightwave company photograph in a frame and propped it against the wall.

And somebody, at some point that morning, had leaned a large, expensive wreath of white lilies against the fence of the Albion. It had a card attached, typed, in a little plastic sleeve: *With deepest sympathy. The Leader and Members of Torbay Council.*

Jono looked at it for a long moment. Then he left it where it was.

"Let people see it," he said.

* * *

There were no politicians and no microphone. Richard had brought a small battery amplifier that he held up himself, and anyone who wanted to speak just stepped forward and spoke into it.

The first was a short, square man in his eighties with a flat cap in his hands. He said he'd been a supervisor on the drawing towers for nineteen years, and Walter had worked for him for fifteen of them.

"Best man on the towers," he said. "Steadiest hands I ever saw. You'd watch him at the preform, feeding it into the furnace, and you'd swear he could feel the glass. Never wasted a metre. Never once." He turned the cap in his fingers. "We were drawing fibre that went under the Atlantic. Under the Pacific. Do you know that? Paignton glass. Every phone call between London and New York in the nineties, half of them went down glass that was made in a shed half a mile from here. By men like Walt." He looked up at the window. "And they let him die in Somerset, looking at a car park."

There was a sound from the crowd, low, like a growl.

A woman spoke next, small and white-haired, leaning on her daughter's arm. She'd been on the switchboard with Margaret. She said Margaret was the funniest woman she'd ever known, and that Walter had worshipped her, and that after she died he'd kept her tea mug on the windowsill and never let anyone use it. She said the two of them had met at the Christmas dance in 1974, in the Albion, right there, and she pointed at the black shell across the square, and her voice broke, and her daughter took the amplifier from her and held it while she cried.

Others spoke. A man who'd been an apprentice under Walter in 1985. A man who'd been in the Lightwave brass band, who said Walter couldn't play a note but came to every concert and sat in the front row. A woman whose father had worked on the furnaces, who said Walter was the only one from the old crowd who still came round to see her mum after her dad died.

Chris stood near the back and listened, and didn't speak. He couldn't trust himself to.

Then Jono stepped up and took the amplifier.

He didn't say anything about nephews or tins or safeguarding calls. He'd talked to Chris and Richard about that the night before and they'd agreed: not here, not now, not without proof. He just stood in front of the crowd in his good coat, a big man, very still.

"I looked after Walter for three years," he said. "Every morning. Every night. I got him up and put him to bed. I made his tea. I sat with him at that window." He looked up at it. "He was the cleverest man I've ever known. And the proudest. And all he ever wanted, at the end, was to sit at his own window, in his own town, and look at what was left of it."

He paused.

"He shouldn't have died seventy miles away," he said. "That's all I'll say today. He should have died here."

He handed the amplifier back to Richard and walked to the back of the crowd and stood next to Chris, and his jaw was working.

* * *

At ten past twelve, without anyone arranging it, the crowd did something that Chris would remember for the rest of his life.

It began with the old supervisor in the flat cap. He turned his back on Walter's window and faced the other way, across the square, towards the hoardings around the Bailey's site. The faded families. The pale ice creams. *A NEW GATEWAY FOR PAIGNTON. COMING 20.*

Then the woman from the switchboard turned too. Then the man from the brass band. Then a whole row of them. Then all of them, three hundred, four hundred people, men with sticks and women arm in arm, sons and daughters and grandchildren, turning slowly to face the hoardings in complete silence.

Nobody said anything. Nobody chanted, or shouted, or held up a phone. They just stood there in the square, together, and looked at the picture of the future that had been promised to them for thirty-five years and had never come, in the silence that is the most frightening sound a crowd can make.

They stood like that for a full minute.

Chris did not film it. He realised afterwards that he hadn't even thought of it. He was standing in the middle of it, facing the hoardings with everyone else, and his face was wet.

* * *

Afterwards they went to the pub on the corner of Torbay Road, or as many as would fit. The rest spilled out onto the pavement. It became a wake, the kind Walter would have pretended to hate.

Chris found himself at a table in the corner with Jono, Richard, and six of the old Lightwave men, and that was where it started.

It started with the supervisor in the flat cap, whose name turned out to be Ken.

"Do you know what I keep thinking," Ken said. "We had the best apprentice school in the South West. Two hundred lads a year, at the peak. Girls too, later on. They came in at sixteen not knowing one end of a spanner from the other, and four years later they could build you anything. Electrical, mechanical, glass, precision. We taught 'em everything." He took a long swallow of his pint. "Then it shut. And all those lads went off to Bristol, or Swindon, or Reading, wherever there was work. And nobody's taught anybody anything in this town for twenty-five years."

"I could still teach a lad to braze," said a thin man with spectacles beside him. "Blindfold."

"I could teach machining," said another. "I've still got my tools. All of them. In the garage. My wife wants them gone."

"Fibre splicing."

"Electronics. Proper electronics, mind. Not this plug-in-and-hope stuff."

"I was in quality control for twenty-two years. I can make any young idiot measure something properly."

They went round the table, laughing, half-joking, then not joking. Seventy, eighty years old, every one of them, and every one of them able to do something, *make* something, that hardly anybody else in Torbay could do any more. And nobody had asked them. Not once in twenty-five years.

Richard was watching them, very still. Chris could see him thinking.

"Where would you do it?" Richard said. "If you did. Teach."

Ken laughed. "Where? There's nowhere. The old works is houses now. The college does its best, but nobody's teaching what we did, not the way we did it, on the job. Where would you put a workshop in this town?"

Nobody answered for a moment.

Then the woman from the switchboard, who had come into the pub and squeezed onto the end of the bench beside Ken without anybody noticing, put down her glass of sherry and pointed, through the pub window, across the square.

At the hoardings round the Bailey's site.

"There," she said. "That's been sitting empty for four years. Nobody's building anything on it. Just them stupid pictures."

The men at the table looked at the window. At the faded families. *COMING 20*.

"You can't just put a workshop on somebody's land, Maureen," Ken said.

"Why not?" said Maureen. "They put a picture on it."

There was a long pause. Then the whole table burst out laughing. But Chris, looking at Richard, saw that Richard wasn't laughing. He was looking at the hoardings with an architect's eyes, measuring.

* * *

Ken leaned across to Chris when the others had gone back to the bar.

"One more thing," he said, quietly. "If you're ever doing anything big. Outdoors. And you need power." He tapped his nose. "When they cleared the works in 2002, there was an old standby generator in the boiler house. Big diesel thing. They were going to scrap it. Me and two of the lads borrowed a lorry one Sunday and took it away." He grinned. "It's in my brother-in-law's barn at Stoke Gabriel. Still runs. I start it up every Christmas, for luck."

* * *

Chris saw Fred as he was leaving.

He was standing on his own on the far side of the square, by the bus shelter, with Biscuit sitting at his feet. His hood was up. He had been there, Chris realised, the whole time. Right at the back. On the edge. He hadn't come forward and

hadn't spoken. And when the whole crowd had turned to face the hoardings, Chris now remembered, there had been one figure at the very back who turned too.

Jono saw him at the same moment and walked straight across the square. Chris followed.

"I left you messages," Jono said.

"I know." Fred didn't look up. "I got them. I couldn't." His voice was very low. "I couldn't, all right?"

"All right."

Fred was silent for a long moment, staring at the ground. Then he said, still not looking up:

"Did they find his tin? The blue one?"

Jono looked at him sharply. "How do you know about the tin?"

"Everyone knew about his tin. He kept his pills on it." Fred's voice was flat. "Did they find it?"

"No," Jono said. "The man who said he was his nephew took it. The day before he died."

Chris saw Fred's face change. It wasn't grief. It was something sharper, and colder, and Chris had seen it before only in the faces of people who had just been told the thing they were most afraid of.

Fred looked up at them both, finally. His eyes were red-rimmed. He opened his mouth as though he was going to say something.

Then he shut it again.

"I've got to go," he said. "Come on, Biscuit."

"Fred..."

But he was already walking, fast, hood up, dog at his heel, across the square and up Torbay Road, past the empty shops. He didn't look back once.

Jono stood watching him go with his hands in his coat pockets.

"He knows something," he said.

"Yes."

"And he's frightened."

Chris looked back at the square. The last of the crowd was drifting away. The jam jars of flowers lined the pavement under Walter's window. The council's white lilies leaned against the fence of the Albion. And the hoardings round the Bailey's site stood there as they always had, the faded families smiling at nothing.

Except that now, written across them in thick black marker pen, in big shaky capitals, somebody had added a single line underneath *COMING 20*. Chris hadn't seen who. It could have been anyone. It could have been all of them.

WALTER WAS HERE. WE ARE STILL HERE.

14 – The Strand

Remembrance Sunday was cold and bright, with a hard blue sky and a wind off the bay that made the flags crack.

Jono went because he always went. He'd gone every year since he was a boy, first with his grandad and then in uniform, standing in a line of police officers at the edge of the crowd with his hands behind his back, and since then on his own. He stood among the crowd in Princess Gardens in his good coat with a poppy in the lapel and listened to the names, and the Last Post, and the two minutes of silence in which you could hear the gulls and the halyards clinking in the harbour and nothing else at all.

He thought about his grandad. He thought about Walter.

When it was over, and the wreaths were laid, and the crowd began to break up, he walked down to the harbour with Chris and Richard, because the council had put out a notice about a second event. Something new.

* * *

It was on the harbourside, by the old slipway at the end of the Strand, where a bronze plaque was set into the wall at about waist height. Jono had walked past it a hundred times without stopping. Today there was a little crowd round it: thirty or forty people, some local press, a man from the regional tourism board in a branded fleece, two councillors, the Officer with a clipboard, and the Leader in a black overcoat with a large poppy.

There was a pop-up banner, the kind that springs out of a tube, standing beside the plaque. *TORBAY D-DAY HERITAGE TRAIL: Discover Our Proud History!* Underneath, in smaller letters: *Part of the English Riviera Visitor Experience.*

And twenty yards behind them, across the road, stood the old Debenhams building with its stripped sign and papered windows. The council's hotel rendering had been printed on a long banner and strung along the front of it. *THE STRAND: A NEW CHAPTER FOR TORQUAY.*

Jono bent and read the plaque.

FROM THIS HARBOUR AND FROM BRIXHAM, IN JUNE 1944, MEN OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY EMBARKED FOR THE ASSAULT ON UTAH BEACH, NORMANDY. MANY DID NOT RETURN.

He stood up slowly and looked out at the water. The inner harbour, the marina, the yachts in their neat rows. He tried to imagine it eighty years ago: grey landing craft packed into this little harbour, nose to tail, and lines of men in olive drab with packs and rifles, filing down to them along this same stretch of stone. Thousands of them, young men from Ohio and Georgia and New York who had come across an ocean to a seaside town they'd never heard of, to sail from here into the worst day of their lives.

The Leader was already speaking.

"...and what a wonderful thing," he was saying, "to be able to share this story with visitors from all over the world. The D-Day Heritage Trail will link ten sites around the bay, with interpretation boards, a downloadable app and a leaflet. We think it'll be particularly popular with American visitors and

the over-sixties market." He smiled warmly. "It's a great example of how we can turn our heritage into an asset. Bring people here. Get them spending in our cafés and our hotels. And of course, as our new hotel on the Strand comes forward," he gestured over his shoulder at the banner on the Debenhams building, "we'll be even better placed to welcome them."

There was polite applause. The man from the tourism board took a photograph. The Officer made a note.

Jono stood very still.

Chris, beside him, glanced at his face and saw something in it he had never seen before. Not anger, exactly. Something deeper and stiller than anger. The look of a man who has just had something he holds sacred handed to him back as a sales leaflet.

"Jono," Chris said quietly.

"I'm all right."

"Are you?"

"No," Jono said.

He turned to Richard. "Have you got that amplifier?"

Richard had. He was carrying it in a canvas bag over his shoulder, as he always did now. He looked at Jono for a moment. Then he took it out and handed it over without a word.

* * *

The Leader had finished. People were drifting away from the plaque, the press packing up, the tourism man rolling up his banner. Jono walked to the edge of the harbour wall, where there was a stone bollard about knee-high. He stepped up onto it, so that he stood a head above the small crowd, and switched on the amplifier. It gave a little squeal of feedback, and every head turned.

Chris already had his phone up. He didn't remember deciding to.

"Excuse me," Jono said. His voice came out of the little speaker cracked and tinny, but loud enough. "I'm sorry. I'm not on the programme. I'll only be a couple of minutes."

The Officer took a half-step forward, clipboard raised. The Leader put a hand on his arm and shook his head slightly, with a gracious smile. *Let him. It'll look worse if we stop him.*

Jono took a breath.

"My name's Jono," he said. "I'm a care worker. I used to be a police officer. I've come to Remembrance every year of my life. And I want to say something about that plaque."

He pointed at it.

"In June 1944, thousands of young men walked down this harbour and got into landing craft and sailed to Normandy. A lot of them never came back. We've just stood in silence for them. That's right. That's what we should do."

He looked at the banner the tourism man was rolling up. *Discover Our Proud History!*

"But I want to tell you something about the country they sailed from. The country that sent them, and the country that

fed them, and armed them, and carried them across that water." He paused. "That country, in 1944, built more than twenty thousand aircraft in a single year. Twenty thousand. It built warships and merchant ships by the hundred. It built tanks, and guns, and lorries, and radar sets, and everything else. And when the generals said, *we need a harbour on the coast of France, where there isn't one,* do you know what this country did?"

Nobody answered. A few more people had stopped on the pavement to listen. A couple with a pushchair. Two lads on bikes. A man walking a dog.

"It built one," Jono said. "Two, actually. Floating harbours. Concrete caissons the size of blocks of flats, made in shipyards and docks and fields all over Britain, towed across the Channel, and sunk in place. Built in a matter of months, by ordinary men and women in ordinary towns, because that's what this country could do. It could *make* things. Anything. Whatever was needed, when it was needed."

He took another breath.

"And because it made things," he said, "it could pay for things. That's the bit nobody says. A country that makes things earns its living. It pays its way. And then, after the war, that same country built the NHS. Built a million council homes. Built schools, hospitals, power stations, motorways. It could afford to look after its people because its people were *making* something. Every pound of it came out of a factory, or a shipyard, or a mine, or a field."

The Leader's smile had become fixed. The Officer was looking at him for instructions he wasn't getting.

"I'm a carer," Jono said. "I look after old people in this town. Nine of them every day. I give them their tablets and their tea and I get them to the toilet and into bed. I get twenty minutes with each of them, and I'm paid for fifteen. And every year there are more of them, and fewer of us, and less money. And everyone says it's because the government's mean, or the council's broke, or the system's broken."

He shook his head.

"It's not just that," he said. "It's because Torbay doesn't make anything any more."

His voice was very steady now.

"We used to. Some of the men who did are standing in this crowd. We had a factory in Paignton that made the glass that carries phone calls under the Atlantic. We had boatyards in Brixham. We had engineers, and toolmakers, and apprentices, two hundred a year. And then it all went, and nothing came to replace it, and for twenty-five years the only plan anybody in charge has had for this town is to serve. Serve the visitors. Serve teas. Serve in hotels. Serve the old." He looked at the banner on the Debenhams building. "And now one more hotel."

"Services are paid for by production," he said. "That's it. That's the whole thing. A town that only serves can't afford to look after its own. It can't pay for its care, or its hospital, or its roads, or its young people. It can only wait for somebody else's money to come in from outside. And it leaks straight back out again."

He pointed at the plaque.

"Those men didn't sail from a theme park," he said. "They sailed from a country that built things. And the least we can do, the very least, for every name we read out this morning, is to be that country again. Not a heritage trail. Not a leaflet about what we used to be. The real thing." He lowered the amplifier a little. "That's all. Thank you. I'm sorry for interrupting."

He switched off the amplifier and stepped down from the bollard.

* * *

For a moment nobody did anything.

Then an old man near the front, small and frail, in a beret and blazer with three medals on his chest, began to clap. Slowly, his hands not quite meeting properly. Then the couple with the pushchair. Then the lads on the bikes. Then the whole little crowd round the plaque, and the people who had stopped on the pavement, and some of the people who had been walking away and had come back.

It wasn't a roar. It was something better. It was the sound of people who had just heard something they had always known and never been allowed to say.

Ken was there, Chris noticed, in his flat cap, with two other Lightwave men beside him. They were clapping hardest of all.

The Leader came over. He shook Jono's hand warmly with both of his, as though Jono had just delivered the keynote. "Very moving," he said. "Very moving indeed. We should talk." Then he turned to the press and said something

about the importance of passion, and of a range of views, and how wonderful it was to see people engaging with their heritage. Then he went.

The Officer did not shake anybody's hand.

* * *

Chris posted the film at four o'clock. He called it *The Country They Sailed From*. He didn't add any music. He didn't need to.

By nine that evening it had been shared all over the country.

Not just the seaside towns this time. Everywhere. Sunderland and Stoke, Barrow and Burnley, Port Talbot and Motherwell and Dagenham. Anywhere that had once made something and didn't any more. *This is my town. My dad built ships. My grandad was at Normandy and he'd have cheered this man.* A retired general shared it with a single word: *Correct.* A famous actor shared it with *Who is this man?* A union leader shared it. A business lobby group shared it. People on the left shared it because it was about work and wages and care. People on the right shared it because it was about country and pride and building things. Nobody could quite work out which side he was on, and the not knowing made it spread faster.

By midnight it had passed two million.

Jono's phone, which he had left on the kitchen table, would not stop ringing.

* * *

He sat at Chris's kitchen table at half past eleven that night with the phone face down in front of him, buzzing every few seconds, and a mug of tea he hadn't touched.

"A journalist from one of the Sundays," he said. "A producer from Radio 4. A woman from a think tank I've never heard of. Somebody who says he's a parliamentary researcher." He turned the phone over and read from the screen. "*Would you be interested in a conversation about standing?*" He put it face down again. "Two of those. From two different directions."

"Standing for what?" Richard said.

"Parliament, I assume." Jono laughed, without much humour. "I'm a care worker, Richard. I've got nine clients tomorrow and the first one's at seven."

"You were a policeman," Chris said. "You're a carer. You know how the country actually works, from the bottom. You've just said, on a harbour wall, the thing nobody in Westminster has said for forty years." He looked at the phone. "Of course they want to talk to you."

Jono didn't answer. He sat looking at the phone buzzing on the table. Then he put his hands flat on either side of it, the way he sat sometimes when he was thinking very hard.

"I'll tell you what worries me," he said. "Not them." He nodded at the phone. "Him."

"Who?"

"Walter's nephew." He looked up at Chris, and then at the grey blurred A3 print of three men in suits pinned up on the noticeboard by the fridge. Chris had brought it down from the

back bedroom that afternoon. "Before today, we were a local thing. A nuisance, maybe. Now we're on the national news. Two million people. People in Westminster ringing me up." He paused. "Whoever those men are, whoever sent that nephew, they're watching too. And I've just made myself much more interesting to them."

The phone buzzed again on the table.

Jono turned it over and looked at it, then turned it back.

"Withheld number," he said. "Third one tonight."

Nobody said anything.

Outside, a car went slowly down the street, its headlights sliding across the kitchen ceiling, and didn't stop. Chris watched the light move across the A3 print by the fridge, across the three blurred faces, and then disappear.

He told himself it was just a car.

15 – The Archive

It was the dream that gave him the idea, though he didn't tell anyone that for a long time.

He woke at four on the Tuesday after Remembrance with the same picture in his head that had been there since the night the Albion burned: a rusting ship rolling in the storm off Thatcher Rock, its name gone from the bow, its flag gone from the stern, its port of registry painted over. *Registered somewhere else. Answerable to no one.* And the barrels going over the side.

He lay in the dark and thought about it. Then he thought about what Vicky had told him on the clifftop at Meadfoot. The Albion: owned by a company with an address in St Helier. The company behind the hotel scheme: the same door. *Registered somewhere else.*

He got up and went to the back bedroom, and for the first time since he'd built the Goldmine, he stopped searching it for what people said, and started searching it for who was standing next to them.

* * *

It took him three days.

The system could find words. It couldn't find faces, not reliably, not in grainy local news footage from the 1990s. So he did it the old way. He pulled every clip with the Leader in it, every ribbon-cutting, every plaque unveiling, every photo opportunity in front of a map. Forty-one clips across thirty-five years. He watched each one frame by frame, ignoring the

Leader completely, looking only at the edges: the people standing behind, the people holding the ribbon, the people who weren't introduced.

On the third night, at twenty past two in the morning, he found him.

TSW, March 1992. A crisp, cold day. The young Leader, moustached, in a double-breasted suit, holding an oversized pair of scissors in front of a ribbon strung across the door of a newly painted office on Torbay Road. A banner over the door: *PAIGNTON TOWN CENTRE INITIATIVE: WORKING FOR YOUR FUTURE.* A small crowd of dignitaries, applauding.

And at the Leader's right shoulder, half a step behind him, a big, heavy-set man in his fifties, florid, smiling, in a long camel overcoat.

Chris froze the frame.

He opened the A3 scan of Walter's photograph on the second screen and set the two side by side. The man on the left, behind the factory gates in 2001: big, broad, heavy-set, in a long camel coat. The man at the Leader's shoulder in 1992: big, broad, heavy-set, in a long camel coat.

It wasn't proof. A coat was a coat. There must have been thousands of camel overcoats in England in the nineties.

He let the clip run on. The ribbon was cut. The crowd applauded. The camera cut to a short interview with the Leader, and then, for four seconds, to the man in the camel coat, who said something genial about *partnership* and *confidence in Paignton's future*. A caption appeared at the bottom of the screen, white on blue, in the TSW typeface of the time.

GERALD PRYCE, Pryce Hallam & Partners, Property Consultants

Chris sat back in his chair in the dark.

He had a name.

* * *

He rang Vicky at seven in the morning. She was at his door by eight, with her laptop, two coffees and the face of someone who hadn't slept much either.

They spent the morning at his kitchen table on Companies House.

Pryce Hallam & Partners had been a property consultancy in Bristol, founded in 1978. It had been converted to a limited liability partnership in 2003 and dissolved in 2013. Its filings were all still there, decades of them, dull and numbered: annual returns, accounts, lists of members.

Gerald Pryce: senior partner until 2012. Then a notice of death.

"Eleven years ago," Vicky said quietly.

The list of members changed over the years. Partners came and went. Vicky went through every filing from 1998 to 2013, writing down every name on a pad. Most were surveyors from Bristol who'd retired or gone elsewhere. One was different.

A junior member from 1997, promoted to full member in 2002. He left the firm in 2008, five years before it closed. His

address for service, the year he left, was a street in St James's, London.

Vicky looked up his later appointments. He had been a director of more than forty companies since 2008. Most were dissolved. Most had dull names: *Holdings*, *Estates*, *Investments*, *Nominees*. One was still active, and she clicked on it. A small advisory firm in St James's. It traded under a name that was only three initials.

She stopped. She didn't say anything for a long moment.

"What is it?" Chris asked.

"That firm," she said slowly. "In 2014 it was the sole shareholder of the company that's now the development manager for the hotel scheme. The one whose parent is in Jersey." She scrolled through a series of filings. "In 2015 the shares were transferred to the Jersey company, and the London firm disappears from the paperwork completely. But it was there first." She looked at Chris. "It's the same chain. Bristol, London, Jersey. The man in the camel coat, then his junior, then a door in St Helier."

"The junior," Chris said. "What does he look like?"

Vicky didn't answer. She got up, walked across the kitchen to the noticeboard by the fridge, and stood in front of the A3 print of Walter's photograph. She looked at the three blurred figures beside the dark car for a long time. The heavy man in the camel coat on the left. The thin young man with the clipboard on the right. And in the middle, the lean, straight-backed figure with fair hair, in a navy suit, hands in his pockets, gazing at the factory with complete and patient attention.

"Thirty years," she said, almost to herself. "That's what he told me at the reception. *I've been helping the council with its partnerships for thirty years.*"

She touched the blurred navy figure lightly with one fingertip.

"It's him," she said. "I can't prove it. Nobody could prove it from this. But I've stood next to him. The way he holds himself. The hair. The suit." She turned round, and her face was pale. "It's the man from the reception, Chris. Twenty-five years younger. Standing outside Lightwave on the day it closed."

* * *

Jono had been doing his own work, the copper's way.

Not Companies House. The Land Registry. Every title deed in England and Wales could be bought online for a few pounds, and Jono had bought dozens of them over the past fortnight, on his phone, in lay-bys between clients. He'd paid for them out of his own wages and printed them at the library.

He spread them out on the kitchen table that afternoon, when Vicky and Chris showed him the names, and the three of them sat round them like detectives in an old film. Richard came at four and stood looking over their shoulders.

"Start with the Albion," Jono said, laying a sheet down. "Registered owner, a Jersey company. Bought in 2010, after the members' bar closed. Address for service: St Helier, the Esplanade. You already know that." Another sheet. "The strip of land behind Station Square, next to the Bailey's site. There's a fifteen-year option on it, registered 2019. The option

holder is a different Jersey company with a different name. Same address." Another sheet. "A parcel off Torbay Road, behind the empty shops. Bought 2012. Another company. Same address."

He kept laying them down. Seven titles, eight, nine. Nine different companies, all with different, forgettable names, and every one with the same address for service, care of the same corporate services firm on the Esplanade in St Helier.

"None of them has ever built anything," Jono said. "Not one. I've checked the planning history on every site. Some have had applications. Some have had permissions. Nothing's ever been built. They just sit there."

"And the Lightwave land?" Chris said.

Jono pulled out the last set of papers. They were thicker than the others, with a site plan stapled to the front.

"This is where it gets interesting," he said. "The old Lightwave works was split into parcels and sold off in bits, so it's taken me a while. But I went back through the historical title. In 2001, three months after the factory shut, the administrators granted an option over the whole site to a company called *Paignton Works Holdings Limited*." He tapped the page. "Address: care of Pryce Hallam & Partners, Bristol."

Chris and Vicky looked at each other.

"In 2001 the site was in industrial use," Jono went on. "Worth not much. Nobody was going to build a factory there again. In 2008, after years of the council saying something must be done about the derelict Lightwave site, it got a change of use to housing." He paused. "In 2009, Paignton Works

Holdings exercised its option and bought the land at the 2001 price. Between 2010 and 2016, it sold it off to housebuilders in five parcels."

"For how much?" Richard asked quietly.

Jono turned the last page round so they could all see the figures. Nobody said anything for a while.

"That's not a profit," Richard said at last. "That's a harvest."

"Bought cheap the year the town's living died," Jono said. "Held while the town begged for something to happen. Sold when the council did the one thing that made it worth twenty times more. Never built a brick." He sat back. "And the company that did it was run out of the same firm as the man in the camel coat. And his junior went on to set up the firm whose companies own the Albion, and the land behind Station Square, and half of everything else that's empty in this town."

He looked at the A3 print by the fridge.

"It's the same small circle," he said. "It's been the same small circle the whole time."

* * *

Richard had brought one box file of his own. He'd hesitated at the door with it under his arm, as if he wasn't sure it mattered.

ECONOMY 2001–, said the spine.

"I don't know if this helps," he said. "It's just council documents. Strategies. Frameworks. I've kept all of them. I always thought one day somebody might want to know what they'd said." He opened it on the table. "This one's from 2006. The Bay Economic Strategy. I remember reading it at the time and wanting to throw it across the room."

It was a thick spiral-bound document with a glossy cover: a photograph of Torquay harbour at sunset. Inside, chapters and charts. Richard turned to a page near the front, marked with a yellow sticky note gone brown with age, and laid it in the middle of the table.

Chris read it aloud.

"Torbay's economic base has historically been narrow. The closure of Lightwave in 2001, with the loss of several thousand skilled manufacturing jobs, removed the area's principal source of high-value employment and reinforced reliance on the service sector, in particular tourism and health and social care, which are characterised by low wages, seasonality and low productivity."

There was a silence in the kitchen.

"Read the next bit," Richard said.

Chris turned the page. A chapter heading. *Strategic Priorities for Growth*. A list.

1. Tourism and the visitor economy.

2. Health and social care.

3. Retail and town centres.

4. Leisure and hospitality.

Manufacturing wasn't on it. Engineering wasn't on it. Making things wasn't on it.

"They knew," Chris said.

He said it very quietly, almost wonderingly, the way you'd say something you'd always suspected and never quite believed.

"They knew. In 2006. In their own words. They knew that losing Lightwave had left the town dependent on low-wage, seasonal, low-productivity work. They wrote it down. They printed it on glossy paper." He put his finger on the list. "And then they made that the plan. Not to fix it. To *do more of it*. Tourism. Care. Retail. Hospitality. For twenty years." He looked up. "Every scheme since. Crossways: care homes. Union Square: housing and health. Debenhams: a hotel. Station Square: taxi ranks. It's not incompetence. Or it's not only incompetence. It's the strategy. They chose it."

"Or someone chose it for them," Jono said.

He reached into Richard's box and took out a second document, much thinner, which had been tucked behind the first. A *Supporting Evidence Study*. On the back page, in small print, the name of the consultancy that had written it for the council.

He didn't say anything. He just laid it next to the Land Registry printouts. The consultancy's address, a small office in Bristol, was care of the same firm as one of the companies on the titles.

* * *

They pinned it all up that night on the long wall of Chris's back bedroom.

Jono did it properly, not like a film. No red string. A timeline instead, left to right, the way he'd built cases in the old days, with every document dated, every claim sourced and every gap marked as a gap.

1978. Pryce Hallam founded, Bristol.

1992. Gerald Pryce beside the young Leader at a ribbon-cutting. TSW footage.

1997. The junior joins Pryce Hallam.

2001. Lightwave closes. Three men photographed outside the gates. Three months later, an option on the whole site is granted to a company run out of Pryce Hallam.

2006. The council's own strategy: *reinforced reliance on the service sector*. Priorities: tourism, care, retail, hospitality.

2008. The junior leaves for St James's. The Lightwave land gets a change of use to housing.

2009–2016. Option exercised. Land sold to housebuilders for twenty times the price.

2010. The Albion bought by a Jersey company.

2012. Gerald Pryce dies.

2014–15. The St James's firm creates the company that becomes the hotel scheme's development manager, then hands it to Jersey.

2019. Option on the land behind Station Square.

Now. A 150-room hotel on the Strand, managed by a company with a parent at the same address as the Albion. A man without a business card asking for Mr Tan's name on the board.

And at the right-hand end, after *Now*, one more card, in Jono's careful capitals:

WALTER. NEPHEW. TIN. CREMATED.

with a question mark after it, and a line drawn back across the whole wall to the photograph of three men beside a dark car outside the Lightwave gates.

They stood in front of it, the four of them, Chris, Jono, Vicky and Richard, in the small back bedroom with the lamp on and the dark outside the window, and looked at twenty-five years of a town's life laid out in order.

"It's not illegal," Vicky said at last. "That's the thing. Most of it isn't. Options, offshore companies, buying land and waiting. Consultants writing strategies. People do it every day. It's how money works in this country."

"I know," Chris said. "That's what makes it so..." He searched for the word. "So *quiet*."

"Except that," Jono said. He was looking at the card at the end. *WALTER. NEPHEW. TIN. CREMATED.* "That bit isn't quiet. That bit is something else."

Nobody said anything.

Richard was the one who finally spoke. He had been looking at the wall for a long time, from left to right and back again, the way he'd look at a building site.

"Every one of those empty sites is a place in my drawing," he said. "The Albion. Station Square. Torbay Road. I've spent years drawing what they could be. Gardens, squares, workshops, homes." He shook his head slowly. "I always thought nobody built anything because nobody cared. Or because they were useless."

He turned and looked at Chris.

"They're not useless," he said. "Not all of them. Somebody's been very, very good at making sure nothing happens."

* * *

Vicky left at midnight. At the door she paused, coat on, laptop bag over her shoulder, and looked back at Chris in the hall.

"I can take this to Mr Tan now," she said. "Some of it. The chain. Bristol, London, Jersey. The Albion, the hotel. It's not a feeling any more."

"Will he listen?"

"He'll listen." She hesitated. "But he'll ask the same thing he always asks. Not *what happened. What can you prove?*" She looked past him, up the stairs, towards the back bedroom and the wall. "We can prove the land. We can prove the companies. We can prove the council knew. We can't prove that man is the one in the photograph. And we can't prove anything at all about Walter."

"Not yet."

"Not yet," Vicky agreed. She opened the door. The street outside was dark and empty and wet.

She looked up and down it for a long moment before she stepped out. Chris noticed that. A week ago she wouldn't have.

So did he, when he closed the door behind her and stood in the dark hall with the lock turned.

16 – Being Followed

The first night, Jono barely noticed it.

He came home at a quarter to eleven after his last client, parked in his usual spot, and as he got out he registered a car across the road and three houses down. A grey hatchback, five or six years old, clean, the most ordinary car in England. Engine off, lights off. He registered it the way you register a lamp post. Then he went in, made a sandwich, and fell asleep in the chair with the television on.

The second night it was there again.

Different spot. Further up, on the other side, under the broken street light. Same car, same grey. And this time, as he turned his key in the door, he glanced back over his shoulder, a habit twenty years old, and saw, in the dark interior, the faint pale oval of a face. Then the face moved and it was gone, and there was only the dark windscreen.

He stood on his own doorstep for a long moment with the key in the lock.

You're tired, he told himself. *You've had a man's death and a cremation and two million views and three withheld numbers in a fortnight. You're seeing things.*

He went in. He didn't make a sandwich. He sat in the dark front room without turning on the light and watched the car through a gap in the curtain. At twenty past twelve it started up, pulled out without its headlights on, turned them on only when it reached the end of the street, and was gone.

* * *

The third night, he was ready for it.

He parked at the end of the road instead of outside his house, and walked the last fifty yards in the shadow of the hedges. The car was there. Halfway down this time, opposite his house, nose pointing towards the main road. Engine off.

He took out his phone, held it low against his leg and photographed the number plate, three times. Then he did something that, as a police officer, he'd have told any member of the public never to do. He crossed the road and walked straight towards the car.

He was twenty feet away when the engine started. The car pulled out smoothly, without hurry, without lights, and rolled away past him down the street. As it passed, he looked in through the driver's window.

A man. Middle-aged, perhaps. Ordinary. A dark jacket. He didn't look at Jono. He didn't look anywhere except at the road ahead, with the calm, unbothered concentration of someone driving to the shops.

At the end of the street the headlights came on. Then it was gone.

Jono stood in the road in the dark with his heart going.

He'd seen a thousand faces through car windows in his time. Drunk faces, scared faces, guilty faces, angry ones. Faces that looked away, and faces that stared you out.

He had never seen one so completely, perfectly blank.

* * *

He couldn't run the plate. He wasn't a police officer any more, and if he asked anyone who was to do it for him, he'd be asking them to break the law. So in the morning, from a lay-by between clients, he rang the DS. The good, careful one who had told him, the week Walter died, that a feeling wasn't evidence.

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Jono said. "I just want to tell someone. Grey hatchback. Three nights outside my house. Took off when I approached."

The DS was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was different: lower, more careful.

"Funny you should ring," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I was going to ring you." A pause. "Jono, someone's been asking about you."

Jono went still in the car.

"Who?"

"I don't know exactly. That's what I don't like. A firm of private investigators. London outfit. Calls itself a *due diligence and risk consultancy*. They've been ringing round people you served with. Retired officers mainly. A DI I know, retired now, got a call last week. Very polite. Said they were doing *background checks on a prospective parliamentary candidate*. Asked about your record. Complaints. Discipline. Why you left. Whether you'd ever had any trouble with drink, or money, or women." He paused. "Whether you'd ever been accused of anything."

"I haven't."

"I know you haven't. So does he. He told them so and put the phone down." The DS sighed. "But Jono, that's not a newspaper doing that. Newspapers do their own digging, and they don't pretend to be something else. And it's not the parties, either. Parties have their own people. This is somebody paying a lot of money to find out whether there's anything on you they can use." He let that sit. "Not local. London. And whoever's paying, they're thorough."

Jono looked out of the windscreen at the lay-by: the overflowing bin, the hedge, a crisp packet caught on the barbed wire, flapping.

"Thanks," he said.

"I'm not telling you as a copper," the DS said. "I'm telling you as a mate. Be careful. And Jono, that business with the old man. Walter." Another pause. "Write everything down. Dates, times, the car, all of it. Keep it somewhere safe. Not just on your phone."

"I already do."

"Course you do," the DS said. "Course you do."

* * *

The page went down on a Wednesday.

Chris woke at six and reached for his phone, as he did every morning now, to see what the night had brought. The *Torbay Rage* page, eighty-three thousand followers, every film, every photograph, every one of the thousands of

comments from Paignton and Skegness and Sunderland and Port Talbot, was gone.

In its place there was a grey box.

This page has been restricted for violating our Community Standards.

He tapped it. There was a link to "learn more." He tapped that. It took him to a page of general guidelines about hate speech, harassment, coordinated inauthentic behaviour and misinformation. Nothing said which of them he was supposed to have broken. There was a button marked *Request Review*. He pressed it. A message came back: *Thanks. We'll review your request as soon as possible.*

He checked the video channel. Four of the films had been taken down overnight with copyright strikes. *Remains a Priority* was one of them: a claim against the archive news footage, the clips of TSW and Westcountry from his father's tapes. Under the law the footage might be fair to use for news and criticism. It didn't matter. An automated system had received a claim and acted on it, and the films were gone. One more strike and the whole channel would be deleted.

He checked his own personal account. It had been locked *for your security*, following "unusual activity."

He sat on the edge of the bed in the grey morning light, looking at the screen, and felt something cold go through him.

Remains a priority. Thirty-five years of his father sitting in his armchair with the remote control. Gone overnight, at the press of a button somewhere he would never see, by people he would never meet.

Jono came round at eight. He'd already heard. Half the town had.

"Mass reporting," he said. "Has to be. Hundreds of reports, all at once, in the middle of the night. The system sees the numbers and pulls it first and asks questions later." He looked at Chris's laptop. "Someone organised that. Bots, probably. Fake accounts. You can rent them by the thousand."

"And the copyright claims?"

"Same thing, different tool." Jono shook his head. "You don't have to win the argument. You just have to make it stop for long enough."

Chris looked at the screen. The grey box. *This page has been restricted.*

"Long enough for what?"

Jono looked at the calendar on the kitchen wall. The circled date. *DEADLINE.* It was nine days away.

"Long enough for the consultation to close," he said.

* * *

It was Richard they hurt most, and they did it two days later.

The story appeared on a local news website at seven in the morning, and by nine it had been picked up by the regional paper and two of the Facebook groups. *CAMPAIGN ARCHITECT "WANTED SEAFRONT SCHEME TO FAIL", EMAILS REVEAL.*

There was a photograph of Richard taken from a distance, at a public meeting years ago, mid-sentence, finger raised, looking angry. Underneath it, extracts from emails: Richard's own emails, written to council planning officers over a period of eight years. Private correspondence. Never meant for publication.

"Frankly I would rather see this scheme fail entirely than see it built as currently designed."

"Your officers either do not understand the engineering or do not care."

"I have prepared an alternative design which I would be happy to discuss with the authority on a professional basis."

That last one the article made the most of. *Did the campaigner hope to profit from the scheme he opposed?* it asked. *Correspondence suggests he offered his own paid services to the council while publicly attacking its plans.*

Every sentence was real. Every sentence was Richard's. And every sentence had been lifted out of a long, careful, eight-year argument about a cheap concrete sea wall. That argument had *won*, and the promenade being built on the seafront that very morning was the proof of it. Not one word of that was in the article.

Chris read it twice and then drove straight to Paignton.

* * *

Richard was at his drawing board when Chris let himself in. He was working. His Torquay plan was pinned across the whole board and spilling onto the wall beside it, the harbour

and the Strand and Union Street and Castle Circus, a week from finished. He didn't turn round.

"You've seen it," he said.

"I've seen it."

"Every word true," Richard said. His pencil moved steadily across the paper. "I wrote all of it. I meant all of it. I'd rather have seen that wall fail than see it built. And I *did* offer to discuss my design with them professionally. That's what architects do, Chris. You show them a better way and you offer to help." The pencil stopped. "I never asked for a penny. They never offered one. The council built the better scheme in the end, and I never got a thing for it, and I never wanted one."

"I know."

"Do you know who has those emails?" Richard said. "The council. They're council records. Nobody else had them. Nobody. To get those, somebody inside went into the planning files, picked out the worst eight sentences from eight years, and sent them to a website." He put the pencil down very carefully on the ledge of the drawing board. "Somebody I've sat across a table from. Somebody who smiled at me."

He turned round. Chris saw his face for the first time, and it frightened him. Richard looked old. Not tired, which he often looked. Old. Like a building in which something structural had finally given.

"Forty-five years," Richard said quietly. "Forty-five years I've done this. I've been called a crank. A nuisance. A dinosaur. Arrogant. I didn't care. I was right, and I knew I was right, and in the end the sea wall proved it." He looked down

at his hands. "But nobody has ever called me *corrupt*. Not once. Not in my whole life." His voice wavered for the first time. "My daughter rang this morning. She asked if it was true."

Chris didn't know what to say. He put his hand on the old man's shoulder.

"It's not true," he said. "And everyone who matters knows it."

"Do they?" Richard looked at the drawing. The harbour. The Strand. A town that joined up. "Nine days," he said. "I've got nine days to finish this, and half the town has just been told I'm only doing it for the money."

* * *

They met that night in Chris's kitchen, the four of them. Vicky came straight from a meeting in Exeter with her laptop under her arm, still in her work clothes.

Nobody sat down for a while.

"It's a pattern," Jono said. He was standing by the noticeboard with the A3 print, and he was very calm, which Chris had learned was when he was most angry. "The car. The investigators. The page. Richard's emails. It's not one big hit. It's a hundred small ones, all at once, from different directions, none of them traceable, all of them deniable. A due diligence firm doing background checks. An algorithm doing its job. A journalist with a public interest story. A car parked in a public street." He tapped the print, the three blurred men. "This is what it looks like when someone who knows what they're doing decides to take you apart quietly. They

don't fight you. They make you exhausted. They make you look dirty. They make you doubt each other. And they make you go away."

Vicky put her laptop down on the table.

"I've given Mr Tan the chain," she said. "Bristol, London, Jersey. The Albion. The hotel. The Lightwave land." She paused. "He read it all. He said, and I'm quoting, *Very impressive. Very thorough. It is not enough.*"

"What does he want?"

"What he always wants. Proof. Something that links that man, personally, to something he can't explain away." She looked at the print on the wall. "He also said something else. He said that in twenty years he'd never seen a council work so hard to stop a group of volunteers from talking. He said: *Whoever is doing this is very frightened of something. Find out what.*"

Nobody spoke for a while. The fridge hummed.

Then Chris got up, went to the dresser, and took out his laptop.

"They've taken the page," he said. "They've taken the films. They'll take the next page too, and the next one. As long as we're living in somebody else's house, they can have us thrown out whenever they like." He opened the laptop and turned it round so they could see. A plain black screen with white text. *TORBAY RAGE.* And underneath, a web address. "So we stop living in somebody else's house."

"What's that?" Richard said.

"Ours," Chris said. "The studio's servers. Our own site. Our own archive. Every film, every photograph, every comment people want to send us. Nobody can mass-report it, because there's nobody to report it to. Nobody can strike it, because there's no algorithm. The only way to take it down is to come and take the servers out of the building." He looked round at them. "I built archives for a living for twenty-five years. I can build this. I started on Wednesday morning. It goes live tomorrow."

Jono looked at him for a long moment. Then he laughed, short and real.

"You've been doing that for two days," he said, "and you didn't tell us?"

"I wanted to see if it worked first."

"Does it?"

"It works," Chris said.

Richard was looking at the black screen with its white letters. Something in his face had come back, just a little.

"Then put my drawing on it," he said. "The Torquay plan. The whole thing. As soon as it's finished. Not a photo on Facebook. The actual drawing, at full size, so anybody in the world can zoom right into it and see every street." He straightened his back. "Let them see whether it's a man trying to make money, or a man trying to make a town."

* * *

Vicky left at half past eleven. Richard at a quarter to twelve. Jono stayed to help Chris with the site until one.

When Jono finally pulled on his coat at the front door, he stopped with his hand on the latch. He was looking out through the frosted glass panel in the door at the dark street.

"Chris," he said quietly. "Come here."

Chris came down the hall and looked over his shoulder.

Across the road, three houses down, under the street light, a car was parked. Engine off. Lights off.

A grey hatchback. Five or six years old. Clean. The most ordinary car in England.

"It's not outside mine any more," Jono said.

17 – Berry Head

Vicky had first met the Land Agent in her second week in Torbay, and she had not liked him.

He had a small office above a bookmaker's in Torquay, two rooms with a view of a car park, and a brass plaque by the street door that said *CHARTERED SURVEYORS & LAND AGENTS*, though there was only him. He was in his early sixties: a big, soft, red-faced Devon man with a good tweed jacket going thin at the elbows, a beautiful old fountain pen he played with constantly, and a laugh that came a fraction too soon. He'd been the local agent, she'd discovered, for half the empty sites in the bay. Every time she'd written to an owner about a property, the reply had come from him. Always courteous. Always the same.

My clients are not currently minded to dispose of the property. I will of course advise them of your interest.

The Albion. The land behind Station Square. The parcel off Torbay Road. All of them. *Not currently minded.*

She'd gone back to see him after the night at Chris's kitchen table, with the names in her notebook. She hadn't told the others. She'd thought, with the arrogance of someone who'd spent her life reading people across tables, that he was the weak point. And she'd been right.

* * *

He'd started to talk on the third visit.

Not at the office. He'd suggested a pub out on the road to Brixham, a quiet one, at four in the afternoon when it was empty. He'd drunk two large whiskies before she'd finished her orange juice. His hands were unsteady, and the fountain pen turned over and over in his fingers.

"I'm a land agent," he'd said. "That's all I am. Twenty years ago some people in London asked if I'd act for them locally. Manage their properties, deal with enquiries, handle the paperwork. Good fees. Reliable. Never late. They said they were long-term investors. They said they were waiting for the right moment." He'd laughed his too-quick laugh. "Twenty years. The right moment never came. I never asked why. You don't, do you, when the cheques clear."

"Who were they?"

He hadn't answered that. He'd looked at the fire.

"Then that old boy died," he'd said instead. "The one in the video. Walter. I read about the memorial." He'd turned the pen over. "There'd been a phone call, you see. A few weeks before. From London. Asking about him. Where he lived. Whether he had family. Who his carers were. I thought it was about the video, about the publicity. I gave them what I knew. It wasn't much. Anyone could have found it." His voice had dropped. "And then he was moved. And then he died. And then I read about the nephew."

He'd looked at her for the first time, and his eyes were wet and frightened.

"I've got papers," he'd said. "Twenty years of instructions. Letters. Emails. Who told me to do what, and when. I kept it all. My father was an agent too. He always said *keep everything, son, because one day someone will try to blame*

you." He'd swallowed. "I want to give them to someone. Someone who isn't from here. Someone who can't be..." He'd stopped. "I'm not giving them to the police. Not yet. I need to think about what happens to me."

"Then give them to me," Vicky had said.

He'd looked at her a long time. Then he'd nodded.

"Saturday," he'd said. "Early. Berry Head. I walk the dog there every morning, first light, been doing it for fifteen years. Car park by the old fort. Eight o'clock. I'll bring them."

* * *

She was there at a quarter to eight.

Berry Head was the great limestone headland at the southern end of the bay: grass and gorse and bare grey rock, with the remains of old Napoleonic forts sprawled across the top and a stubby white lighthouse right at the point, standing on a cliff that dropped two hundred feet straight down into the sea. From the car park you could see the whole of Torbay laid out to the north, Brixham's harbour below, Paignton in the middle, Torquay's white hotels on the far side in the haze. It was the place where, she had once read, Napoleon's prison ship had lain at anchor in 1815, while crowds rowed out in little boats to stare at him.

Before eight, the morning was cold and clear and very still. There should have been nobody there except dog-walkers.

There were three police cars in the car park. And an ambulance, its back doors open and nobody in a hurry near it.

And a coastguard Land Rover, parked half on the grass with its orange lights turning slowly in the grey light.

Vicky stopped her car at the entrance and sat with her hands on the wheel.

Beyond the police cars, at the far side of the car park, was a dark green estate car she recognised. Its tailgate was open. Its back seat was empty. A police officer in a yellow jacket was standing beside it talking into his radio.

And on the grass beyond, a woman in a waterproof was kneeling beside a black Labrador, holding its collar, stroking its head over and over. The dog was trembling.

* * *

She got out. She didn't remember deciding to. She walked across the car park towards the tape that had been strung between the fence posts, and a young constable put out an arm to stop her.

"Sorry, madam. You can't come through."

"What's happened?"

"There's been an incident. I can't really say any more."

"The man who owns that car," Vicky said. "Green estate. I was meant to be meeting him. At eight."

The constable's face changed. He spoke into his radio. A minute later a sergeant came over, a calm, tired woman in her forties, and took Vicky a little way apart from the tape.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Can I ask how you knew him?"

"Business. Property." Vicky heard her own voice from a long way off, very calm and very correct. "We had a meeting arranged."

The sergeant nodded slowly. "I'm very sorry to have to tell you this. A man's been found at the bottom of the cliffs below the old quarry. A dog-walker saw him from the path just after seven. The coastguard's bringing him up now." She paused. "We think he must have gone too close to the edge in the half-light. It's very steep there, and the grass is wet in the mornings. The dog was found up here, still on its lead, tied to the fence by the path."

"Tied to the fence?"

"Clipped to it. People do sometimes, if they want to go and look over the edge without the dog." The sergeant looked at her kindly. "I'm so sorry. Was there anything you needed from him? Anything he was bringing?"

Vicky thought of the papers. Twenty years of instructions. *Keep everything, son.*

She looked over at the green estate car, its tailgate open, the back seat empty, the officer beside it on his radio.

"Was there anything in his car?" she said. "A briefcase. A folder. Papers."

The sergeant glanced at the car, then back at Vicky. "Not that I've been told. Just the dog's things. Why?"

"No reason," Vicky said. "It doesn't matter."

* * *

She walked to the edge of the headland. Not to the quarry; there was tape there, and people in yellow jackets, and the coastguard's ropes going over. She went further along, towards the lighthouse, where the path ran close to the cliff and there was a low fence and a sign: *DANGER. CLIFF EDGE. KEEP TO THE PATH.*

She stood at the fence and looked down.

It was a long way. Grey rock, ledges streaked white with gull droppings, the sea churning slowly at the bottom among black boulders. Gulls on the ledges, and a pair of shags, black and hunched, drying their wings like little men hanging up their coats. The noise of the gulls. The wind coming up the cliff face, cold, smelling of salt and weed.

He walked the dog here every morning for fifteen years, she thought. *Fifteen years. In every kind of weather. In the half-light. He knew every inch of this path.*

And this morning, of all mornings, with twenty years of papers in his car, he clipped the dog to a fence and went to look over the edge.

She found she was holding onto the fence post with both hands.

Behind her, back across the grass, the woman in the waterproof was still kneeling with the Labrador. The dog had stopped trembling and was lying with its head on its paws, looking out at the sea, the way dogs look for someone who isn't coming back.

Vicky took her phone out. Her hands were shaking so badly that it took her three goes to unlock it.

She rang Chris.

* * *

He and Jono were there in twenty-five minutes. They found her sitting in her car in the car park, doors locked, engine running, staring at the windscreen.

Jono tapped on the glass. She unlocked the door. He crouched down beside the open door so their eyes were level, the way she supposed he crouched beside his old people's chairs, and said nothing at all until she was ready.

When she'd told them everything, the pub, the whiskies, the phone call from London asking about Walter, the papers, Saturday at eight, the dog clipped to the fence, Jono stayed crouched there for a long time without speaking.

"Did anyone know you were meeting him?" he said at last.

"No. Nobody. I didn't even tell you."

"Did he tell anyone?"

"I don't know." She stared at the windscreen. "He was frightened. He might have said something. To someone he trusted. Or he might have rung them. The people in London. To try to..." She stopped. "To try to get out of it. To make a deal for himself. That's what frightened people do."

"Or they were listening," Jono said quietly. "To his phone. Or his email. Or yours."

She turned and looked at him.

"You think I'm next."

Jono didn't answer immediately. That was answer enough.

"I think," he said carefully, "that two men who knew something about that photograph are dead in a month. Both of them old, or unwell, or out somewhere alone. Both of them natural causes, or accidents. Both of them with papers that have disappeared." He paused. "And I think you're the third person who knows."

Chris was standing behind him with his hands in his pockets. He was very pale.

"She can't go back to her flat," he said.

"No."

"She'll stay at mine," Chris said. "Tonight. Until we work out what to do."

"That car's been outside yours," Jono said.

"I know." Chris looked out across the bay, at the whole of Torbay laid out under the cold grey sky. Brixham's harbour below, Paignton, Torquay. Somewhere in all of that, an ordinary grey hatchback with an ordinary man inside. "Better that she's with someone than on her own."

* * *

Mr Tan rang her at noon. Somebody at the hotel had told him. Mr Tan always knew things.

She took the call in Chris's back bedroom, under Jono's timeline on the wall, with the door closed.

"Vicky," he said. His voice was very quiet. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Are you safe?"

She looked at the wall. *WALTER. NEPHEW. TIN. CREMATED.?* And now, underneath it in Jono's careful capitals, written an hour ago: *LAND AGENT. BERRY HEAD. PAPERS GONE.*

"I'm with friends," she said.

"Come home."

She closed her eyes.

"Come home," Mr Tan said again. "Today. I'll have the office book the flight. You've done enough. More than enough. This is not your town, and it is not your fight, and I did not send you there to..."

"Mr Tan."

He stopped.

"I've been in Torbay for five months," she said. "I've watched these people try to do something nobody here has done for forty years. They're not rich. They're not powerful. They're a carer, and an old architect, and an engineer with a camera. And somebody is killing the people who help them." Her voice was steady now. "If I leave today, whoever did this will know they can frighten anyone away. Even us. Even you."

There was a very long silence on the line.

"Vicky," Mr Tan said finally, "you sound like my father."

"Is that bad?"

"It is very dangerous," Mr Tan said. Another silence. "One week. Then we talk again. And you do not go anywhere alone. Not to the shops. Not anywhere. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mr Tan."

"And Vicky," he said, and for the first time in twelve years she heard something like fear in his voice. "Find me what they are so afraid of."

* * *

REEL FOUR

* * *

IT CAME FROM THE BAY!

PART FOUR: ACROSS THE SEA!

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *Boulogne-sur-Mer, July 1984. The harbour. Blue-and-white fishing boats moored three deep, nets heaped on their decks. On the quay, in front of a café with a striped awning and a Kronenbourg sign, a young man of twenty-two in jeans and a denim jacket leans against the bonnet of a little orange Renault 5, squinting into the sun, a cigarette he doesn't really smoke in one hand and a ferry ticket in the other. He is waiting for his degree results. His whole life is in front of him, and he has no idea what it will be.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

NARRATOR *(V.O.)*

Escape! Freedom! The open road! A young man on the threshold of his destiny, with the whole world before him...

(sting)

BUT THE SWARM KNOWS NO BORDERS!

* * *

EXT. BOULOGNE HARBOUR, DAY

YOUNG CHRIS, twenty-two, leans on the Renault, watching the fishing boats. Gulls wheel. Somewhere a radio plays French pop. He takes an envelope out of his jacket pocket, a university crest on the corner, and turns it over in his hands. He hasn't opened it yet.

The gulls fall silent all at once.

A drone. Low. Coming across the water from the north, from England.

YOUNG CHRIS looks up.

A DARK CLOUD of GIANT FLIES pours over the harbour wall. They fall on the fishing boats. Nets tear, masts crack, and the bright blue-and-white paint goes grey where they feed. Fishermen dive off the decks into the harbour. The café awning rips. Tables overturn. Waiters run.

A FLY lands on the orange Renault. The bonnet crumples like paper. The orange fades to grey.

YOUNG CHRIS runs along the quay, clutching the envelope. Flies everywhere. Cars crushed, boats sinking. He reaches the end of the jetty and there is nowhere left to go, only the sea.

He looks down at the envelope in his hand.

The university crest is fading. The address is fading. The envelope is going blank in his hand, as if the future written inside it is being rubbed out before he can read it.

YOUNG CHRIS

No... no, I haven't opened it yet! I don't know what it says! I don't know what I'm going to *be*...

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *New York City, 1957. Times Square at night. Neon signs for Coca-Cola, Camel cigarettes, and a picture house showing a monster film. A young woman with long dark hair, in a 1950s swing coat and kitten heels, stands on the sidewalk under a cinema marquee, looking up.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

EXT. TIMES SQUARE, NIGHT, 1957

The cinema marquee reads: ***IT CAME FROM THE BAY!*** *AI LI looks up at it, puzzled. A newsboy runs past shouting.*

NEWSBOY

Extra! Extra! Giant flies attack English seaside! Read all about it!

A shadow sweeps across the neon. AI LI looks up.

A GIANT FLY lands on the Camel sign. Its neon tubes burst in showers of sparks.

AI LI

AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

Taxis swerve. Crowds scatter. AI LI runs, screaming, down a subway entrance and into the tunnel. She stops, panting, against the tiled wall.

Something glistens on the floor of the tunnel. A trail of faint green slime, glowing softly, leading away into the dark.

AI LI stops screaming.

She looks at the trail. She looks into the tunnel. She takes a deep breath, kicks off her kitten heels, picks them up in one hand, and follows it.

* * *

INT. TUNNEL, CONTINUOUS

The New York subway tiles give way to rough-hewn rock. Wet, dripping. The sound of the sea somewhere above. The green trail glows brighter.

AI LI comes round a corner and stops.

The tunnel opens into a vast cavern carved out of the rock. Through a crack high above, she can see a sliver of sky, and the dark slope of an island. Waves breaking.

Painted on the wall of the cavern, in old letters faded almost to nothing:

THATCHER ROCK.

And below it, in the dark, something huge is moving. Many somethings. A low, vast, contented drone.

AI LI presses herself back against the rock. Her eyes are very wide.

AI LI

(whispering, for the first time in her life)

...ah.

* * *

NARRATOR (V.O.)

She has found the nest! But can she escape alive? And who... who sent the ship?! Next time... **THE FLIES COME HOME!**

* * *

The photograph of Boulogne stops moving. The harbour. The striped awning. A little grey car, crushed. And on the quay, an envelope lying blank on the stones, with no one there to pick it up.

* * *

Chris woke at half past five and lay very still, listening.

The house was silent. Downstairs, on the sofa, under the spare duvet, Vicky was asleep. He'd heard her moving around until two, checking the locks, he thought. Then nothing.

He got up quietly and went to the front bedroom window, and moved the curtain a quarter of an inch.

The street was empty. The street light. The parked cars of the neighbours, all known to him. No grey hatchback.

He stood there for a long time anyway, watching, as the sky over the rooftops began to go from black to grey. He thought about a young man on a quay in Boulogne forty years ago with an envelope in his hand, waiting to find out what he was going to be. He'd opened it in the end, on the ferry home. A good degree. He'd thought, at twenty-two, that everything was decided.

Nothing had been decided. It never was.

He thought about the Land Agent, a frightened, foolish, soft-hearted man who had kept his father's advice and kept everything, and who had decided, finally, to give it to someone. Who had clipped his dog to a fence on the path he had walked for fifteen years.

Find me what they are so afraid of.

Chris let the curtain fall.

He went downstairs, quietly, past the sleeping shape on the sofa, and into the kitchen. He put the kettle on. And while it boiled, he stood in front of the noticeboard by the fridge, where he'd pinned a second copy of the A3 print: three men beside a dark car outside the Lightwave gates.

Two of them were accounted for. One dead for eleven years. One standing in a reception room on the Strand a month ago, asking for Mr Tan's name.

He looked at the third. The thin young man on the right, in a cheap grey suit, holding a clipboard. *A junior from a firm of surveyors,* Chris thought. *A boy, really.*

Twenty-five years older now. Fifty, perhaps. Somewhere.

He wondered whether anyone had remembered him. He wondered whether anyone had asked him what he'd seen.

18 – The Smear

Richard's drawing went live at nine o'clock on a Thursday morning, two days before the consultation closed.

Chris had spent three nights getting it right. Richard's Torquay plan had been scanned at a resolution so high that the file was nearly four gigabytes, and Chris had built a viewer for it on the new site, so that anyone, anywhere, on a phone or a laptop, could start with the whole town and zoom in, and in, and in. From the harbour to the Strand, to the old Debenhams building, to a single shopfront on Union Street, to the planting in a single tree pit, to the pencil line of a single step in the new harbour stair that Richard had drawn freehand at five o'clock one morning.

Beside it, at the same scale, they put the council's rendering of the hotel.

They didn't write anything about it. They didn't argue. They just put the two side by side and let people look.

By lunchtime eleven thousand people had opened it. By the evening, the comments were coming in faster than Chris could read them. Architects in Bristol and Glasgow and Rotterdam. A professor of urban design in Melbourne who said it was the best piece of small-town planning she'd seen in a decade. And people from Torquay, hundreds of them, who'd zoomed into their own street and found it there, drawn with love by an old man who had been called corrupt in the local paper a week before.

That's my shop.

He's drawn the steps where I used to sit with my dad.

Is THIS what they could have done?

Why have I never seen this before?

The consultation portal received more responses that day than in the previous twenty-five days put together.

Richard didn't say much when Chris rang to tell him. He listened to the numbers, and to some of the comments that Chris read out, and then there was a long silence on the line.

"Thank you," he said at last, and his voice was rough. "I'm going to go and lie down for a bit."

It was the best day they'd had in a month. It lasted until ten past seven the next morning.

* * *

The clip was fifty-three seconds long.

It appeared first on an account nobody had heard of, with a few hundred followers and a profile picture of a Union Jack. Within an hour it had been picked up by two bigger accounts, then by a national commentator with a million followers. At nine it was on the website of a national newspaper, with a headline in heavy black type:

"CARE WORKER" BEHIND VIRAL SPEECH IN FAR-RIGHT ROW

It was Jono's speech. Remembrance Sunday, the bollard on the harbour wall, the amplifier, the flags cracking in the wind. But not his speech.

Someone had cut it. Expertly. They'd taken out every line about care, about the NHS, about building homes and schools and hospitals, about the old men from Lightwave. They'd taken out *those men didn't sail from a theme park*. What was left were fragments, stitched together so smoothly that you'd have to know the original very well to see the joins.

"...the country they sailed from..."

"...be that country again..."

"...our own..."

"...not a leaflet about what we used to be. The real thing."

And intercut with it, so quickly that at first Chris didn't notice, were three or four seconds of other footage: a crowd on a different street, in a different city, on a different day. Flags. Hoods. A man in a balaclava. A flare burning red. Then back to Jono on the bollard, then back to the crowd, so that it looked, to anyone watching on a phone on a bus, as though Jono had been speaking to *them*.

At the end, white text on black:

Who is "Jono"? Ex-cop. Now "carer". Now being courted by Westminster. Ask yourself who's behind him.

* * *

By midday it had a life of its own.

The national paper's piece quoted "anti-extremism campaigners" expressing "deep concern" about "the language of national renewal being weaponised in left-behind communities." It noted that "the group, which calls itself

Torbay Rage," had "a history of inflammatory content," and quoted, without context, Fred's comment from the very first week: *Burn the lot*. It said that "one prominent comment under the group's original video called for arson," and that the video had been made only weeks after "a suspicious fire" in Paignton's Station Square.

It did not mention Walter. It did not mention the sea wall, or Lightwave, or care, or the Garden Town. It did not mention that the full speech was on the campaign's own site, unedited, for anyone to watch.

By the afternoon, a television presenter had called it "a worrying example of how nostalgia curdles into something darker." A columnist wrote eight hundred words about "Britain's Rage Problem" without mentioning Torbay once after the first paragraph.

And then, which was worse, the other side started.

A man Chris recognised vaguely from the news, a far-right figure with a big following and a long record, posted the doctored clip with a single comment: *THIS MAN GETS IT*. His followers flooded the new site's comment section in their hundreds. Some of them wanted to help. Most of them wanted something else. Chris spent the evening deleting messages he would not have read out to anyone.

And then the people they'd thought were friends began to step back.

The union official who had shared the speech in November deleted his post and issued a statement saying he "did not endorse the group or its associations." The local branch of a national charity that had offered to help with the memorial politely withdrew. A councillor from one party, who

had privately told Jono he admired him, said publicly that "language matters." A councillor from another said the group was "naive at best." A woman who'd sent the campaign four hundred photographs of her grandparents asked for all of them to be taken down.

* * *

Jono came round at nine that night.

He'd done a full day of calls. Every one of his clients had been seen, every tablet given, every bed turned down. He'd done it all while his phone buzzed in his pocket, and he hadn't looked at it once until his last visit was over.

He sat at Chris's kitchen table in his work tunic, with the lanyard still round his neck, and watched the clip on Chris's laptop. Once, all the way through. Then again. His face didn't move.

"That's good work," he said eventually, in the same flat voice he might have used about a forged statement. "That's very good work. Somebody with real skill did that. That's not a kid in a bedroom."

"We've posted the full speech," Chris said. "Side by side with the clip. Showing exactly where they cut it. And the other crowd, where it's from. Birmingham, two years ago. Nothing to do with us."

"How many people have watched ours?"

Chris looked. "Forty thousand."

"And theirs?"

He didn't need to look. "Four million."

Jono nodded slowly.

"A lie gets round the world," he said, "while the truth's still putting its boots on."

"So what do we do?"

Jono was silent for a long time. Vicky, who had been sitting quietly at the end of the table with her laptop, closed it and looked at him.

"You could make a statement," she said. "Condemn them. The far right. Say clearly that you have nothing to do with them, that you reject..."

"I could," Jono said. "And then the papers would write: *Under-fire carer forced to deny far-right links.* And the far right would write: *Another one who bottled it.* And everybody would remember the word *far-right* and the word *Jono* in the same sentence." He shook his head. "No. You don't argue with a smear. You don't repeat it. You say what you actually said, and you keep saying it, and you never change a word."

He took his phone out and opened the camera, pointing it at himself, here, at the kitchen table, in his care worker's tunic with the lanyard, tired, under the bare kitchen light.

"I'm Jono," he said to it. "I'm a care worker. Today I did nine visits. Mrs H, who's ninety-three. Mr A, who can't get to the toilet without me. Seven more. That's who I am. On Remembrance Sunday I made a speech about why this town can't afford to look after them. Someone's cut it up and stitched it to a video of strangers in Birmingham. The whole speech is here." He held up a piece of paper with the web

address written on it in marker pen. "Watch it. All of it. Then decide for yourselves." He paused. "Goodnight. I've got a seven o'clock."

He stopped recording, and posted it without editing it. Then he put the phone face down on the table.

"That's all I'm doing," he said. "That's all I'm ever doing."

* * *

Vicky's phone rang at half past ten. Singapore. Half past six in the morning there.

She took it in the hall. When she came back, her face was carefully empty, the way it went when she was holding something heavy.

"Mr Tan's board chairman saw the newspaper," she said. "Someone sent it to him. He's forwarded it to the whole board with a note." She took a breath. "*Is this the community our chief executive wishes us to invest in?*"

Chris closed his eyes.

"They've brought the meeting forward," Vicky said. "It was going to be in March. Now it's the second week of January. Seven weeks." She sat down. "Mr Tan says he can hold them until then. Not after. If he goes into that room with nothing but a dying hotel market and a campaign that the newspapers are calling extremist, they'll vote to finish the third hotel and leave Torbay. And he'll have to accept it."

"Seven weeks," Chris said.

Somewhere, he thought, a man with three initials on a brass plate was reading the same newspaper in a quiet room with a clock ticking, and smiling.

* * *

The other thing happened on Saturday, the day the consultation closed. It was so small that Chris almost didn't tell anyone.

He went to a café on Torbay Road for a coffee at eleven, just to get out of the house, just to sit somewhere ordinary for half an hour that wasn't the back bedroom. He sat at a table by the window with his back to the room. Behind him, two women were talking over their scones. Locals, sixties, cardigans and handbags. He wasn't listening. Then he was.

"...and that's the man, you know. In the paper. The one with the video."

"Which one, the carer?"

"No, the other one. The older one. The one who started it."

"Oh, him."

A pause. A teaspoon on a saucer.

"Well, he's not well, you know," the first woman said, lowering her voice, in the way people do when they want to be overheard. "Since the stroke. My sister's friend's a nurse. She says he's not all there. It affects your brain, a stroke, doesn't it? Your judgement. You start getting... ideas." Another pause. "I think the others are using him, if you ask me. Poor man."

"Oh, that's sad."

"It is sad. It is."

Chris sat very still with his coffee cup halfway to his mouth.

He didn't turn round. He didn't say anything. He finished his coffee slowly, paid at the counter without looking at them, and walked out into the cold, and walked all the way down Torbay Road to the sea without stopping, and stood at the railings above the beach, looking at the promenade works, and his left hand was in his pocket, and he couldn't tell whether it was numb or whether he was imagining it.

He's not well, you know. Since the stroke.

The worst of it wasn't that a stranger had said it. It wasn't even that someone had clearly put it about, the same way someone had put the clip about, and Richard's emails, and the car in the street.

The worst of it was the small voice in his own head that said: *what if they're right?*

The numb hand at the crematorium that he'd told nobody about. The dreams. The flies. Waking at four every morning drenched in sweat, doing the stroke nurse's list. The boy on the beach whose name he could no longer remember. *It affects your brain. Your judgement. You start getting ideas.*

What if it was all ideas? A sick man with a camera and a wall full of printouts and a dead father's videotapes, seeing patterns in the dark. Dragging a carer, an old architect and a woman from Singapore after him into something that could get them killed.

He stood at the railings for a long time.

His phone buzzed. A message from Richard.

Consultation closed at midday. 6,412 responses. Council says it is the highest number it has ever received for anything. They have "noted the strength of public feeling" and will report back to Cabinet "in the new year." Decision deferred. A pause, then another message. *Deferred is not dead. Deferred is not dead, Chris.*

He read it twice.

Then a third message arrived, from Jono, and it was so different from everything else that day that it took him a moment to understand it.

Been talking to Ken. About the photo. The third man. Ken says the young one came back on his own, months after, to measure up. Said sorry to the security man on the gate. Ken remembers because nobody else ever said sorry. Says he was a local lad, Torquay boy. Ken thinks his first name was Tom.

And then, a minute later:

Ken says he might still be around.

Chris stood at the railings and read it three times. Then he took his hand out of his pocket and looked at it, and flexed the fingers, slowly, one by one.

They all worked.

He turned his back on the sea and walked up Torbay Road towards home. He walked fast, not looking at the café as he passed it.

19 – Fred

Fred hadn't opened most of it.

He kept it in a Quality Street tin that had been his mum's, purple and gold, the paint worn off the corners. It sat on top of the wardrobe in his room in the shared house off Dartmouth Road, where the window didn't close properly and the damp came up the wall behind the bed in a shape like a map of somewhere. It was what Walter had given him that Sunday afternoon in the hot little flat, while Jono waited on the landing.

If anything happens to me, Walter had said, *you give this to someone who'll know what to do with it. Not the council. Not the papers. Someone who'll do it right.* And then, looking out of the window at the black shell of the Albion: *I'd have given it to your dad. He'd have known.*

Fred had taken the papers home in a carrier bag, put them in the tin and put the tin on top of the wardrobe. Then he'd lain on the bed and looked at the ceiling for a long time.

He'd looked through it once. Just once, quickly, the night after Walter was moved, and then he'd shut the lid. Photographs: more of the factory, more of the gate, some he didn't understand, of cars and men. A little black notebook in Walter's square capitals, with dates and times and what looked like registration numbers. Some photocopies of official-looking letters. And a brown envelope, sealed, with three words written across the front in shaky biro.

TO WHOEVER ASKS.

He hadn't opened the envelope. He couldn't have said why. It felt like opening a dead man's letter, and Walter wasn't dead yet, and then he was.

Then, at the memorial, Jono had told him about the blue tin. The one Walter kept his pills on. The one the nephew had taken.

Fred had walked home fast with Biscuit. He'd gone up to his room and taken down the purple tin, and sat on the bed with it in his lap, and understood what he had. Somebody had wanted Walter's papers badly enough to pretend to be family. Badly enough to sign a book in a care home three times. Badly enough to bring an old man flowers, and then take his tin, and then...

He didn't let himself finish that thought.

He knew one thing. If they'd wanted the blue tin, they'd want this one. And if they found out he had it, they'd come for him the same way.

* * *

He hid it the next night.

He'd known about the loose panel in the Bailey's hoarding since the year they put it up. Every kid in Paignton under twenty knew it: third panel from the bus shelter, bottom corner, where the fixing had rusted through. You could pull it out about a foot and squeeze in sideways. Inside it was just the cleared site: rubble, buddleia, the puddle that never dried, the shopping trolley. Kids went in there to smoke, or drink, or be on their own.

He went in at two in the morning with the tin wrapped in two carrier bags. He found a gap under a slab of broken concrete near the back fence, where the old hotel's cellar steps had been filled in badly, and pushed it in as far as his arm would reach. Then he put a brick across the gap and kicked rubble over the brick and squeezed back out through the panel and walked home in the cold with his hands shaking.

Nobody saw him. He was sure nobody saw him.

* * *

It was the drink that did it, in the end. The drink and the fact that the season had ended.

The hotel laid him off the week after the memorial. Same as every year: a text at four o'clock on a Thursday. *Thanks for all your hard work this season! We'll be in touch in the spring*. No more pots. Universal credit in five weeks, if they didn't lose the form. He had forty-one pounds in his account.

He spent twenty of it on the Friday night, in a pub on the harbour, on his own.

He wasn't a big drinker. He'd seen what it did. But that Friday he sat at the end of the bar with Biscuit asleep under his stool, and had one pint and then another, and watched the coloured lights swinging along the harbour wall through the window, and thought about Walter dying in Somerset looking at a car park. *His dad was a good man. Nobody ever told that boy.*

On the third pint, a man sat down on the stool next to him.

Ordinary. That was all Fred remembered afterwards, when he tried, and he tried very hard. A man in his forties or fifties. Dark jacket. Not local. *Up-country*, Fred thought, from the voice, but not posh: neutral, a voice from nowhere in particular. He asked the barman for a lime and soda, and then he noticed Biscuit and bent down and let the dog sniff his hand, and said, "Lovely dog. Staffie? Best dogs in the world, Staffies. Get a bad name."

Fred, who loved Biscuit more than anything alive, warmed to him instantly.

They talked. About dogs. About the weather. The man said he was down for work, contracts, staying in a hotel on the front, terrible food. He bought Fred a pint, and Fred said he didn't have to, and the man said, *Go on, it's Friday*. He asked about Torbay, what it was like to grow up here, and Fred told him. The jobs on Union Street. His dad. Lightwave.

"Lightwave," the man said. "Wasn't that in that video? The one that went everywhere. The old chap at the window."

"Walter," Fred said.

"That's him. Sad story." The man sipped his lime and soda. "Did you know him?"

And Fred, on his fourth pint, with twenty-one pounds left in the world and the coloured lights blurring in the window, said, "He was murdered."

The man went quite still. Not much. Just the glass, stopped halfway to his mouth.

"Murdered?" he said gently. "Surely not. I read it was his heart."

"That's what they want you to think." Fred could hear his own voice, too loud, and couldn't stop it. "They took his tin. They pretended to be family and took his tin, because of what was in it. But they didn't get everything." He jabbed a finger on the bar. "He gave me the rest. Before they moved him. Walter did. I've got it. And when the right person sees it, they'll all be sorry."

The man looked at him for a moment with an expression Fred couldn't read. Kind, perhaps. Or concerned.

"Sounds like you should take it to the police," he said.

"Not the police." Fred shook his head hard. "Someone who'll do it right. That's what he said."

"Well," the man said, finishing his lime and soda and standing up. "You look after it, then." He bent down and stroked Biscuit's head again. "And look after this one. Lovely dog."

He put a twenty-pound note on the bar. "Have another on me." Then he went out into the cold.

Fred sat there with the twenty pounds in front of him and a slow, cold feeling coming up from his stomach through the beer.

What did I just say?

He looked at the door. The man was gone. He couldn't, now, remember his face at all.

He left the twenty on the bar. He didn't have another.

* * *

They came at six minutes past six on Tuesday morning.

Fred was asleep. Biscuit woke him, barking: the deep, hoarse, frightened bark that he never used. Then the hammering on the front door downstairs, and voices, and boots on the stairs, and somebody shouting *POLICE*.

He sat up in bed. He thought: *the tin*. Then: *no, it's not here, it's safe*. Then, with a terrible clarity: *they're not here for the tin*.

His phone was on the floor by the bed. He grabbed it. His thumbs were shaking so badly that he got it wrong twice. He typed blindly, with the boots on the landing outside.

Baileys. Hoarding. 3rd panel from bus stop. Under concrete back fence. Walters stuff. Dont tell anyone. Look after Biscuit.

He sent it to Jono just as the door burst open.

* * *

There were four of them. Two in uniform, two in plain clothes. They were efficient and not unkind. They said his name, and he said yes, and they said they were arresting him on suspicion of arson, in connection with the fire at the former Albion premises, Station Square, Paignton, on the night of the eighteenth of October. They told him he didn't have to say anything, but it might harm his defence if he didn't mention, when questioned, something he later relied on in court. He'd heard it on television a thousand times. He'd never thought he'd hear it in his own room, in his boxer shorts, with Biscuit going mad in the corner.

They took his phone. They let him put on jeans and a hoodie. They put him in handcuffs.

While one of them led him down the stairs, the others started searching the room. And the shared yard at the back, where there was a broken-down shed that all the tenants used for bikes and bins.

He was standing on the front step in handcuffs, in the cold grey morning, when one of the plain-clothes officers came round the side of the house holding a clear plastic evidence bag. Inside it was a red plastic petrol can, half full, and a box of firelighters, and something small and metal.

"Found this in the shed," the officer said to her colleague. "Behind the bikes."

"That's not mine," Fred said.

Nobody answered him.

"That's not mine! I haven't got a car! What would I want petrol for? I've never seen that in my life!"

The officer looked at him, not unkindly. "You'll get your chance to explain," she said.

* * *

Jono was there in eleven minutes. He'd been getting up for a seven o'clock client when the message came. He drove across Paignton in a way he hadn't driven since he'd had blue lights.

He arrived as they were putting Fred into the back of the car. He pulled up across the road, got out, and stood there. Fred saw him through the window: a big man in a care

worker's tunic standing in the middle of the road in the grey morning light, not moving, his face completely still. Their eyes met through the glass.

Jono gave the smallest nod. *Got it.*

Then the car pulled away.

Biscuit was still barking in the upstairs room. Jono went up to the officer at the door and said he was a friend, that he'd looked after people in this street for years, and that he'd take the dog. The officer, who looked about twenty-two and clearly didn't want a frightened Staffie on his hands, let him.

He came down with Biscuit in his arms, trembling, the dog's face pressed against his neck.

He didn't look across the street at Station Square, at the hoardings. Not once. He'd learned long ago, in another life: if you know where something is hidden, you never, ever look at it.

* * *

By nine it was on the local news site. By eleven, the national ones.

MAN ARRESTED OVER PAIGNTON FIRE "WAS SUPPORTER" OF VIRAL CAMPAIGN

TORBAY RAGE: ARSON ARREST AS "BURN THE LOT" POSTER HELD

The police statement was short and correct. *A 29-year-old man from Paignton has been arrested on suspicion of*

arson following information received from a member of the public. He remains in custody. Enquiries are ongoing.

The rest wasn't short or correct.

Someone had found the comment from the first week, *Burn the lot*, and screenshotted it with Fred's profile name. Someone else had found a frame from the first film, *Remains a Priority*, Chris's own film. It came from the part where the camera passed along the crowd watching the Albion burn. For a fraction of a second, at the edge of the light, a man in a grey hoodie stood smiling. Someone had circled him in red.

CAMPAIGN'S OWN VIDEO SHOWS ARSON SUSPECT SMILING AT FIRE

And underneath, the line that was quoted everywhere by evening:

Torbay Rage was supposed to be about anger at a burnt-out town. It now appears the anger may have started the fire.

* * *

Chris watched his own footage on the national news at six o'clock, in his kitchen, with the sound off.

His camera, moving slowly along the crowd. The forty-three phones. The crying girl. The old man shaking his head. And the man in the grey hoodie, by the hoardings, hands in pockets, half-lit by the flames, smiling.

He had filmed it. He had cut it into the film himself, and he had never even noticed. *Don't watch the event. Watch how people respond to the event.* He'd been so proud of that idea.

Jono sat at the end of the table with Biscuit asleep across his feet. He had shown Chris the text on his phone, the only person he showed it to, then deleted it. Neither of them said the word *Bailey's* out loud.

"They'll interview him tonight," Jono said. "He'll tell them he didn't do it, and that he's never seen the petrol can, and that somebody must have put it there. And they'll have his comment, and the footage, and an anonymous tip, and a petrol can in a shed he has access to, behind his bike." He spoke very evenly. "If I were the officer, I'd charge him."

"But he didn't do it."

"I know he didn't do it." Jono looked at the frozen frame on the television. "But that's not what matters. Not to them. They don't need him convicted. They just need him charged. Once he's charged, anything he says, anything he produces, any papers, any notebook, any envelope, is a story told by an arsonist trying to save himself. Nobody will believe a word of it." He paused. "They didn't need to find the tin. They just needed to make sure nobody would ever believe what's in it."

"Can we go and get it? Tonight?"

Jono shook his head.

"The car's been parked on the far side of the square since noon," he said quietly. "Grey hatchback. I drove past it twice." He looked at Chris. "They don't know where it is. If they did, they'd have it. They're watching to see if anyone goes to get it."

* * *

Richard came at eight. He'd seen the news too.

He stood in the kitchen doorway in his coat and didn't take it off. He looked smaller than Chris had ever seen him. Under his arm was the roll of Torquay drawings, the original, which he'd brought round, he said, *for safekeeping*.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've been thinking about it all day. I can't do this any more."

Nobody said anything.

"Forty-five years," Richard said. "I've been called everything. I've been ignored. I've been laughed at in council chambers. I've had my emails leaked and been called corrupt in the paper, and I kept going. But this..." He looked at the television, the red circle round Fred's face. "Walter's dead. That poor land agent's at the bottom of Berry Head. Fred's in a cell, and they'll charge him with arson, and everybody in the country now thinks we're a gang of extremists who burn buildings down." His voice cracked. "And I'm seventy-six, Chris. I'm frightened. I'm frightened for my daughter. I'm frightened for you. I'm frightened every time I hear a car slow down in the street outside my house."

He put the roll of drawings down very carefully on the kitchen table.

"Keep these," he said. "I don't want them in my house any more."

"Richard..."

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I'm so sorry."

He went. They heard the front door close behind him, very quietly, the way you'd close a door on someone asleep.

Vicky was sitting at the far end of the table. She hadn't said a word all evening. She was looking at the roll of drawings on the table, the town that joined up, rolled up tight in an elastic band.

"Seven weeks," she said, to nobody in particular.

Nobody answered her.

* * *

REEL FIVE

* * *

IT CAME FROM THE BAY!

PART FIVE: NO ONE IS SAFE!

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *A back garden, summer, the late 1960s. A small terraced cottage, a washing line, roses against a wall. An old man in braces and shirtsleeves sits in a deckchair with a newspaper. An old woman in a flowered pinny stands at the back door holding a teapot. A younger woman, the boy's mother, kneels on the grass laughing, with a small boy of six in her arms and two more boys tumbling beside her. A tabby cat sits on the wall. A ginger cat lies in the sun on the path.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

NARRATOR *(V.O., quieter than before, almost gentle)*

Home. Family. The people you love. The place you always come back to. The one place in all the world... where nothing can ever hurt you.

(a long pause)

(the sting, louder than it has ever been)

* * *

EXT. BACK GARDEN, DAY

Sunshine. A radio somewhere plays brass band music. GRANDAD turns a page of his newspaper. NAN pours the tea. MUM tickles the little boy and he shrieks with laughter. The COUSINS wrestle on the grass. The ginger cat stretches.

The tabby cat on the wall sits up. Its ears go flat. It stares at the sky.

A drone.

MUM looks up. Her smile fades.

Over the rooftops, very slowly, blotting out the sun, comes the swarm.

* * *

INT. COTTAGE, KITCHEN, CONTINUOUS

GRANDAD bundles everyone indoors. NAN slams the back door. MUM drags the curtains shut. The COUSINS crowd under the kitchen table. The little boy is in MUM's arms, his face pressed into her shoulder.

Outside, shadows cover the window. The glass begins to vibrate. The drone gets louder and louder until the cups rattle on the dresser.

Then it stops.

Silence.

GRANDAD stands by the door, a poker in his hand. NAN holds the teapot like a weapon. Everybody listens.

MUM

(whispering)

Have they gone?

A tiny tap at the window. Then another. Then a thousand at once.

The glass cracks.

* * *

The flies come in.

They come through the window and down the chimney and under the door. Into every room at once. No one is safe. Not GRANDAD with his poker. Not NAN with her teapot. Not the COUSINS under the table. Not the cats.

Where they touch, the colour goes. GRANDAD's braces, NAN's pinny, the roses on the wallpaper, the faces. Grey. Then paler. Then fading out of the picture altogether, as though they had never been there at all.

The little boy is still in MUM's arms. He feels her arms go loose around him. He looks up at her face, and she is fading, and she is smiling at him, and she is going, and he cannot hold on to her, and he cannot remember...

THE LITTLE BOY

Mum? *Mum!*

* * *

No narrator.

No sting.

Just the drone.

* * *

The photograph stops moving. The back garden. The washing line. The roses. An empty deckchair with a newspaper on the seat. A teapot standing on the step. Nobody there at all. Nobody, anywhere, except one small boy of six, standing alone on the grass in the sun.

* * *

Chris didn't wake up all at once. He came up out of it slowly, the way you come up from deep water, and for a long time he

lay in the dark not knowing where he was, or how old he was, or whether there was anyone left in the house but him.

Then he heard Biscuit downstairs, whining softly in his sleep. Jono had brought him round and stayed on the sofa, because none of them wanted to be alone tonight.

He didn't do the list. He couldn't. He lay on his back and looked at the ceiling with tears running sideways into his ears, and for the first time since the stroke, since the Albion, since any of it, he thought: *I can't. I can't do this. Richard's right. I should stop.*

Fred in a cell. Walter in ash. The Land Agent at the foot of the cliffs. Richard frightened in his own house. Vicky, five months from home, sleeping on his sofa because her flat wasn't safe. Jono followed, investigated, smeared. Tan's board meeting in seven weeks. And all of it, every bit of it, started with an old man at a window, and a film that Chris had made and been so proud of.

He's not well, you know. Since the stroke.

He thought of the photograph. The back garden. The empty deckchair. And a small boy of six, standing alone on the grass, while the flies took everything.

Outside, in the street, very quietly, a car engine started, idled for a moment, and then moved off.

He didn't get up to look.

21 – The Storm

REEL SIX

* * *

IT CAME FROM THE BAY!

PART SIX: THE WAVE!

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *Paignton beach, August 1979. Late afternoon, but the sky is a strange colour: yellow-grey, bruised, heavy. A crowd on the sand: families, deckchairs, windbreaks, an ice-cream van at the top of the slipway. In the foreground, a lad of seventeen in a cheesecloth shirt, looking not at the camera but out to sea, where the horizon has gone very dark.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

NARRATOR *(V.O.)*

The calm before the storm! Holidaymakers basking in the last rays of summer, unaware that from the depths of the bay, nature itself is about to turn… **AGAINST THEM!**

* * *

EXT. PAIGNTON BEACH, DAY

Thunder. Close, cracking, enormous. Everyone looks up. The first drops of rain, fat and warm.

Then, far out in the bay, a line appears on the water. White. Long. Getting taller.

LIFEGUARD

(through a megaphone)

Off the beach! EVERYBODY OFF THE BEACH!

The line is a wave. A wall of grey water, higher than the pier, rolling towards the shore. And riding on top of it, thousands of them, buzzing, glistening, come THE FLIES.

Pandemonium. Deckchairs fly. The ice-cream van tips. Mothers grab children. The wave hits the pier and the pier disappears. The flies pour off the crest of the wave onto the beach and fall on the running crowd.

YOUNG CHRIS stands alone on the sand. He doesn't run. He stares at the wave.

In the face of the wave, as it rears above him, he sees faces. Walter. The Land Agent. Fred, in a grey hoodie. Richard, old and frightened. All of them inside the water, mouths open, as if they're shouting a warning he can't hear.

The wave breaks.

* * *

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Will the sea itself swallow Torbay?! Or is there still... one chance?!

* * *

The photograph stops moving. The beach. The sky. And no one on the sand at all, only a smooth, wet, empty shore, the tide going out, and a single deckchair lying on its side at the waterline.

* * *

The phone woke him. Not a message: the shrill, wailing siren of a government emergency alert, the sound that every phone in the country made at once. Chris had heard it only once before, in a test.

He sat up in bed with his heart going, the wave still in his head, and read the screen.

SEVERE FLOOD WARNING. Danger to life. Storm surge and large waves expected along the South Devon coast tonight. Coastal roads and promenades in Torbay, especially Preston and Paignton, are at risk. Stay away from the seafront. Follow advice from emergency services.

It was twenty to three in the afternoon. He'd fallen asleep in the chair in the back bedroom. Outside, the sky over the rooftops had gone the colour of a bruise, yellow-grey and heavy, exactly the colour of the sky in the photograph. The wind was rising. Somewhere a gate was banging.

He went downstairs. Jono was in the kitchen in his coat, with Biscuit's lead in one hand and his phone in the other,

and Vicky was at the table with her laptop open on the Met Office warnings page.

"High tide's at nine-forty," Jono said, without preamble. "Highest spring tide of the year. Wind from the east, gusting seventy. Waves six metres. Surge on top of that." He turned his phone round. A map of the bay, the coast shaded red. "Preston and Paignton front, worst of all. It's a straight shot across the bay from the east, nothing to stop it."

"The promenade works," Chris said.

"Half-finished." Jono nodded. "Paignton end's mostly done, the new tiered bit. Preston's still half old wall, half building site. Fences, diggers, holes. And behind Preston front..." He stopped. "There's a row of bungalows on the low road behind the green. Four of them are mine. Mrs Hellier's one of them. She's ninety-three. She can't walk to the end of her garden."

"What's the council doing?"

Vicky turned her laptop round. The council's website. A banner, red: *STORM WARNING: Residents are advised to stay away from the seafront. Council officers are monitoring the situation and working closely with partners. Sandbags are available from the depot on application, while stocks last.*

"The depot," Vicky said quietly, "closed at two o'clock."

Jono looked at the screen for a moment. Then he put Biscuit's lead down on the table.

"I'm going to Preston," he said.

* * *

Chris posted it at ten past three. Not on Facebook; they were gone from Facebook. On their own site, and on every group chat and email list they had, which by now was thousands. Ken shared it, and the Lightwave men shared it, and the families who had sent their photographs, and the people from the memorial. One line.

PRESTON SEAFRONT. 7PM. HIGH TIDE 9.40. OLD PEOPLE LIVE BEHIND THE GREEN. BRING SPADES, SANDBAGS, TORCHES, VANS. TORBAY RAGE

He didn't know if anybody would come. Three weeks ago, a national newspaper had told the whole country they were extremists. Half the town had stopped speaking to them.

He went anyway.

* * *

By seven, the wind was screaming.

Preston seafront in the dark was a place Chris didn't recognise. The green, where in summer families played cricket and ate ice cream, was a wet black field with the wind tearing across it so hard that it was difficult to stand up. The sea was invisible. You could only hear it: a vast, rolling, crashing roar beyond the wall, and every few seconds a great hollow boom as a wave hit something, and then the hiss and patter of spray coming down like rain, salt on your lips.

At the Paignton end, half a mile along, the floodlights of the promenade works were still on, glaring white through the

spray, showing cranes and fences and the new grey stepped terraces of Richard's design going down towards the water.

At the Preston end there was the old wall, low and Victorian, and beyond it the builders' fences. Behind it, on the low road, a row of small bungalows with their lights on, their curtains drawn, their gardens no more than a few feet above the level of the green.

And on the green, by the wall, in the dark, with torches and head-torches and car headlights, there were people.

Ken was there first, with his brother-in-law's flatbed and two hundred sandbags he'd got, he said, from a mate at a builders' merchant who owed him one. Then the Lightwave men, half a dozen of them, in their seventies and eighties, in waterproofs and wellies, with spades. Then a van from a plumbing firm whose owner had been on the stakeholder panel with Chris and who had resigned a week after him. Then a Brixham trawler crew who'd been stormbound in harbour all day and had seen the post: five big men in oilskins who simply walked up, took spades out of the back of Ken's lorry and started filling bags without saying a word.

Then a woman from the memorial, Maureen, who'd been on the switchboard with Walter's wife, in a plastic rain hat, with a thermos and a carrier bag of sandwiches. Then a couple of lads Chris recognised from the Torbay Road arcade. Then a dozen teenagers in hoodies who'd come mainly, Chris suspected, because it looked exciting, and who then worked harder than anyone. Then a vicar. Then a group from the church. Then people Chris had never seen before, in twos and threes, in cars and on foot, carrying spades, shovels, bin bags, rolls of plastic sheeting, torches, flasks.

By eight there were more than three hundred.

Chris stood on the edge of the green with his phone held up against the wind and filmed it. His hands were wet and cold and the left one was aching, and the wind kept pulling the phone sideways, and he didn't care. Torches moving in the dark. Lines of people passing sandbags hand to hand, from Ken's lorry to the bungalow doorways. Old men with spades. Teenagers in hoodies. The trawlermen. Vicky, soaked to the skin in a coat far too thin for it, kneeling in the mud with a teenage girl, tying the necks of sandbags.

He thought of the night the Albion burned. Forty-three people in Station Square, all of them holding up their phones, none of them doing anything.

Tonight he was the only one filming. Everyone else was working.

* * *

Jono was at the bungalows.

He went door to door along the low road with his care worker's lanyard round his neck and a torch, knocking. He knew who lived in almost every one. Three of the old people agreed to leave. He walked them one at a time across the road to Ken's brother-in-law's car, with a hand under each elbow, and the brother-in-law drove them to a church hall in Paignton that the vicar had opened. One wouldn't go. Mr Ashby, ninety, who had lived in that bungalow for fifty-one years and wasn't leaving it for "a bit of weather." Jono sandbagged his front door with the trawlermen and left him a phone with his own number on speed dial.

Mrs Hellier was last. She was in her chair in her front room with her coat on and her handbag on her lap, ready.

"I saw you on the news," she said, as he helped her up. "That young man said you were an extremist."

"He was wrong, Mrs H."

"I know he was wrong," Mrs Hellier said. "I've known you three years. You put my stockings on." She gripped his arm. "I told my granddaughter to ring the paper and tell them so."

* * *

High tide came at nine-forty, and the sea came with it.

Chris was standing by the old wall at the Preston end when the first big one hit. He felt it before he heard it: a deep shudder through the ground, through the soles of his feet, as if something enormous had shouldered the land. Then a crack like a gun. Then the wave came over the wall.

Not spray. Water. A solid grey-white mass of it, foaming over the top of the old Victorian wall as if the wall wasn't there, and pouring down across the promenade, across the road, onto the green. People shouted and ran back. The water came after them, ankle-deep, knee-deep, black and freezing and full of stones and weed, sweeping across the grass towards the bungalows.

And it stopped at the sandbags.

It piled up against them, the long line that three hundred people had built in two hours, and sucked and heaved and slopped over in places. But it stopped, and the water ran back and sideways, along the gutters, down the drains.

Another wave. Then another. Each one came over the old wall, and each one met the sandbags.

Chris turned and looked along the front, towards Paignton.

The floodlights of the promenade works blazed through the spray. And there, along the half-mile of Richard's design, the new terraces, the stepped levels, the broad sloped approach to the water, the waves were coming in just as huge, just as grey. They hit the lowest step and broke, and climbed, and lost their strength step by step, the way Richard had said they would. They spent themselves on the terraces and slid back into the sea. Behind them, the new promenade was wet. It was not flooded.

The new design was holding.

The old wall was not.

Chris filmed it. He turned the camera slowly from one end to the other, from the floodlit terraces at Paignton, where the sea broke and fell back, to the dark Victorian wall at Preston, where the sea came straight over the top. One shot. Thirty seconds. He held the phone as steady as he could with both hands in the screaming wind, and he thought:

Richard. Richard, look at this.

* * *

The lad was at the end of the wall, filming.

Chris saw him only because of the light from his phone: a boy of sixteen or seventeen, on his own, who had climbed through a gap in the builders' fence onto the old seawall itself to get the best shot of the waves, the way boys always had and always would. He was standing right on top of the wall, a

small dark figure against the spray, holding his phone out at arm's length towards the sea.

Jono saw him at the same moment. Chris saw Jono's head come up, the way a dog's head comes up.

"Get DOWN!" Jono roared, and started running.

The wave hit.

It came over the wall like a falling building. When it passed, the boy was gone from the top of the wall. Chris saw him for a second in the floodlight, in the water on the promenade, tumbling, being dragged back towards the gap in the wall where the backwash was pouring through like a river into the sea.

Jono went in after him.

He didn't stop to think. Chris saw him snatch a coil of rope off the back of Ken's lorry as he ran, throw one end at Ken, shout something, and wrap the other end round his own waist as he went over the sandbags into the black, waist-deep, sucking water.

Ken and two trawlermen grabbed the rope. Vicky grabbed it behind them. Then Chris. Then a dozen more, the teenagers in hoodies, Maureen, the plumber, the vicar. A line of people on the green in the dark holding a rope that went out across the flooded promenade into the spray.

Jono reached the boy at the gap in the wall. He got an arm round him. The backwash was trying to drag them both out through the gap into the open sea. Jono braced against the end of the old wall, holding the boy with one arm, and shouted. Chris couldn't hear the words over the wind.

"PULL!" Ken bellowed.

They pulled.

The line came in, foot by foot, a dozen people heaving in the dark. Jono came back across the promenade, hauling himself along the rope with one hand and holding the boy with the other. The boy was coughing and screaming. They were nearly at the sandbags.

Then something happened.

Chris was at the back of the line and saw it only in fragments, in the swinging torchlight and the floodlight and the spray. There was a figure on the promenade beside Jono. A man in a dark waterproof, hood up. Chris hadn't seen him come. He was standing in the water at the edge of the sandbags as if he had come to help, reaching out towards Jono with both hands.

And then Jono wasn't on his feet any more. He went backwards, hard, away from the sandbags, into the water. The rope snapped taut. The boy went with him. They both went under.

"PULL!" Ken was screaming. "PULL! PULL!"

They pulled. They pulled with everything they had. Chris felt something tear in his left shoulder and didn't care. The rope came in, heavy, dragging. Then two shapes came up out of the black water against the sandbags, and hands were grabbing them and hauling them over, and Jono was on his knees on the green in the mud with the boy in his arms, both of them coughing and retching seawater.

The boy was alive. Jono was alive.

Chris looked up at the promenade.

The man in the dark waterproof was gone.

* * *

The ambulance took the boy. The paramedics wanted to take Jono too. He refused. He sat on the tailboard of Ken's lorry in a foil blanket with a cup of Maureen's tea shaking in his hands. He was shivering so hard his teeth rattled, and his eyes were fixed on the promenade.

Chris sat down beside him.

"You all right?"

"No." Jono's voice was flat. He didn't take his eyes off the promenade. "Did you see him?"

"I saw someone. A man in a waterproof. He was next to you, and then you went backwards."

Jono turned and looked at Chris for the first time. His face in the torchlight was grey and wet and absolutely calm.

"Somebody pushed me," he said. "Two hands, flat, right in the chest. Hard. At the exact moment I had my weight on the wrong foot." He looked back at the promenade. "That wasn't a wave, Chris. Waves don't have hands."

* * *

The water went down after midnight. The tide turned. The wind dropped from a scream to a roar to a long, exhausted moan. The bungalows behind the green were dry. Every single

one. There was mud and weed and stones across the road and the green was a lake, but the sandbags had held, and not a drop had got through a front door.

At ten past one in the morning, the council posted a statement. Vicky read it out loud by the light of her phone, standing in the mud by Ken's lorry, with three hundred exhausted people around her.

"The council would like to thank the emergency services for their response to tonight's severe weather. We are pleased to report that the new Paignton and Preston sea defences, a flagship council investment, performed well under extreme conditions. Council officers have been monitoring the situation throughout. Residents are reminded to stay away from the seafront."

There was a silence on the green.

Then somebody laughed. One of the trawlermen. A big, slow, incredulous laugh. Then somebody else. Then dozens of them, three hundred soaked, muddy, freezing people standing in the dark on a flooded field, laughing, until Maureen had to sit down on a sandbag and wipe her eyes.

Monitoring the situation.

Chris didn't laugh. He was looking at his phone. At the video. The torches moving in the dark, the line of people passing sandbags hand to hand. The old Lightwave men with spades. The teenagers. The trawlermen. The floodlit terraces at Paignton, where the sea broke and fell back. The dark old wall at Preston, where it came straight over. Jono going over the sandbags with a rope round his waist. A line of people in the dark, pulling.

Not one council officer in any of it. Not one. Not all night.

He posted it at half past one. He called it *Who Showed Up*.

He didn't write anything else. He didn't have to.

* * *

By morning it had been seen a million times.

And something had changed. Chris could feel it, scrolling through the comments at six o'clock in his kitchen with his shoulder strapped and a mug of tea going cold. Not the anger this time. Something else.

My nan lives in one of those bungalows. These people saved her house. Where was the council?

I believed what the papers said about these people. I was wrong. I'm sorry.

That's my son on the rope. He's sixteen. He's never done anything like that in his life. He came home at two in the morning and said "Mum, I think I'm part of something."

Monitoring the situation. MONITORING THE SITUATION.

Someone tell the national papers: THIS is who Torbay Rage are.

And at the top, with eleven thousand likes, from an account Chris recognised, a woman who'd asked a fortnight ago for all four hundred of her grandparents' photographs to be taken down:

Please put them back up. I'm sorry.

* * *

At ten past six Chris put his coat on, painfully, one arm at a time, and went out to the car.

He didn't ring first. He drove through the grey early morning, past the flooded green at Preston, where the council's workmen had finally arrived with a sweeper lorry and were standing around it in hi-vis jackets looking at the mud. Past the new promenade at Paignton, wet and battered and whole. Up through the quiet streets to a house with a drawing board in the front window.

The light was on.

Richard was standing at the window in his dressing gown, looking out. He had clearly not slept either. He had his phone in his hand. Chris could see the screen from the car. The video was paused on a single frame: the floodlit terraces at Paignton, a wave breaking on the lowest step and falling back.

Chris got out of the car and stood on the pavement.

After a moment, Richard came to the front door and opened it. They looked at each other.

"Get your coat," Chris said. "I want to show you something."

22 – Dawn

They parked at the Paignton end and walked.

It was not yet seven. The sky was washed clean, pale and enormous, the cloud torn into long rags and blowing away east. The sea was still big, grey-green and heavy, rolling in long slow swells that broke on the beach with a sound like breathing. But the anger had gone out of it. The wind had dropped to almost nothing. Gulls were working the tideline, picking through the weed.

The new promenade ran ahead of them along the front: the stepped terraces Richard had fought for, going down towards the sand in broad grey levels, like the seats of an amphitheatre that faced the sea. Last night they had been under water. This morning they were strewn with weed and stones, pebbles everywhere, a lobster pot jammed against a railing, a long slick of sand across the upper level where the last waves had reached and given up.

But whole. Every step whole. Every railing standing. Behind them, the road was dry. The shops were dry. The pier was dry.

Richard walked very slowly, in his long coat with his hands behind his back, as he walked on building sites. He didn't say anything. He looked at everything.

He stopped at the lowest terrace, where the steps met the beach, and looked down at it for a long time. Then, to Chris's surprise, he got down on one knee, stiffly, on the wet concrete, and put his hand flat on the edge of the step.

"I drew this one at five o'clock in the morning," he said. "Four years ago. In the middle of the fight. They'd just told me, for the third time, that a wall was the only option. I couldn't sleep. I came down to the board and drew the lowest step freehand, because I wanted to see whether the angle would work." He moved his hand along the edge. "It's eight degrees off the horizontal. The engineers changed almost everything else in the end. They didn't change that."

He stayed there, on one knee, with his hand on the step.

Chris saw that he was crying. Not loudly. The tears just ran down, and he let them, looking at the sea.

* * *

A woman came along the promenade with a spaniel. Fifties, wellies, a hat. She looked at them, the old man kneeling on the step and the other with his arm strapped up, and slowed, and stopped.

"Excuse me," she said. "You're him, aren't you? The architect. From the video."

Richard got up, slowly, and wiped his face with the back of his hand. "I suppose I am."

"I live there." She pointed at a block of flats on the front, just behind the promenade. "Ground floor. Last time we had a storm like that, before all this, the sea came in through my front door. Two feet of it. I lost everything. Carpets, furniture, my mum's piano." She looked along the terraces, the weed, the stones. "Last night I sat up with my bags packed, watching it. And it didn't come. It came right up those steps and it

just..." She made a gesture with her hand, a wave climbing and falling back. "It just gave up."

Richard didn't say anything. He didn't seem able to.

"I read what they said about you," the woman said. "In the paper. That you only did it for money." She shook her head. "I don't care what they said. My mum's flat's dry. Thank you."

She went on, with the spaniel. She didn't look back.

* * *

They walked on, as far as the Preston end, where the new works stopped and the old wall began.

There was a different story here. The low Victorian wall was cracked in two places, a long section of its coping stones simply gone, ripped off and thrown across the promenade like dominoes. Beyond it, the green was a lake. The road behind was a carpet of mud and shingle and weed. And at the edge of the green, still there, a long, low, battered line of sandbags, some split, some half buried, curving round in front of the bungalows on the low road.

The bungalows were dry. Every one. A light was on in one of them. Mr Ashby, Chris thought. Ninety, and not leaving for a bit of weather.

Two council workmen in high-vis jackets were standing by a sweeper lorry at the end of the road, looking at the mud and drinking coffee from a flask.

Richard looked at the wall for a long time. Then back along the front at his terraces, wet and whole in the low sun. Then at the sandbags.

"Half a mile," he said. "That's all it was. Half a mile of difference." He shook his head. "If they'd built the wall they wanted, the whole front would look like that. Every bit of it. And it would have kept on looking like that for fifty years."

"But they didn't," Chris said. "Because of you."

"Because of a lot of people."

"Because of you first," Chris said. "Somebody has to go first, Richard. Somebody has to be the awkward one. The one who won't shut up. The one who gets up at five in the morning and draws a step eight degrees off the horizontal because he can't sleep." He looked at the old man. "You did this. And then people did this. Last night, three hundred of them. But it started with you."

Richard didn't answer. He was looking at the sandbags.

* * *

They sat on a bench at the end of the new promenade, the last one before the old wall, and looked out at the sea.

Chris told him then what had happened on the rope. The man in the dark waterproof. Two hands, flat, in the chest. *Waves don't have hands.*

Richard listened without moving. When Chris finished, he was quiet for a long while. When he spoke, his voice was different from last night's: lower, harder.

"They tried to drown him," he said.

"Jono thinks so. I think so."

"In front of three hundred people. Trying to save a child." Richard's hands were clasped between his knees, very tight. "For what? For a hotel? For some land in Jersey?"

"For whatever Walter knew," Chris said. "Whatever's in that envelope Fred hasn't opened. Whatever that man in the photograph is afraid of."

Richard looked at the sea for a long time.

"Last night," he said slowly, "I sat at my kitchen table and I was frightened. I've never been so frightened in my life. Every car in the street. Every noise." He paused. "And then I watched your film. All those people. The trawlermen. The boys in hoods. Maureen with her sandwiches. Jono going over those sandbags with a rope round him." His jaw set. "And I thought, I'm seventy-six. I've had a good life. I've done good work. And I'm sitting here frightened while a carer and a lot of teenagers do what I should be doing." He turned and looked at Chris. "I'm not frightened any more, Chris. I'm angry. That's a good deal more useful at my age."

Chris almost laughed. "So you're back?"

"I want my drawings back," Richard said. "If that's what you mean. I want them on my board by tonight."

* * *

On the way back to the car, Chris told him about Tom.

He didn't mean to make much of it. Just the bones: the third man in the photograph, the thin young one with the clipboard. Ken remembering him coming back alone, months later, to measure up, and saying sorry to the security man on the gate. A Torquay boy. Tom.

Richard stopped walking.

"Say that again."

"A young surveyor. From the Bristol firm. Torquay boy. Came back on his own to measure up the Lightwave site. Ken thinks his name was Tom."

Richard stood in the middle of the promenade, the sea breathing behind him, looking at nothing.

"Twenty years ago," he said slowly. "Twenty-two, perhaps. A young man came to my office. Nice lad, well spoken, local. He'd trained as a surveyor. He'd been working for some firm up-country. He wanted to know if I needed an assistant." He frowned, reaching back. "I asked him why he wanted to leave surveying. He said he didn't want to spend his life valuing things other people would never build. He said he'd seen something that had made him sick of it." Richard shook his head. "I didn't have the work. I told him so. I've always felt a bit bad about it."

"What happened to him?"

"He went to Brixham," Richard said. "I know because I saw him years later, at the harbour, covered in sawdust. He'd taken an apprenticeship at one of the old wooden boatyards. Learning to build boats by hand, the old way. Said it was the best thing he'd ever done." He looked at Chris. "I don't remember his surname. But his first name was Tom. I'm almost certain."

Chris stood very still.

He didn't want to spend his life valuing things other people would never build.

"Is he still there?"

"I've no idea," Richard said. "But the yard is. You can see it from the breakwater. Big old shed with a slipway, and a wooden boat on it that never seems to get finished." He almost smiled. "Some things take a long time to build properly."

* * *

They drove back to Chris's house. Richard took his roll of drawings off the kitchen table, where it had lain all night, and tucked it under his arm as if it had never left.

At the door he paused.

"Seven weeks, Vicky said."

"Six and a half now."

"Then you'd better go to Brixham," Richard said. "Today." He settled the drawings under his arm. "I'm going home to draw."

22 – Tom

They went to Brixham by sea.

It was Jono's idea. "If they're watching the cars," he said, "they're watching the roads. There's one road into Brixham and it goes past everything. Nobody watches the water."

So at two o'clock that afternoon, with the swell still running long and grey from the night before, Chris and Jono climbed down an iron ladder on the harbour wall at Torquay into a battered blue-hulled fishing boat. The skipper was one of the trawlermen from the storm, a huge, quiet man called Dan. He had shaken Jono's hand on the green at two in the morning and said only, *Anything you need.* He'd meant it.

The boat smelled of diesel, fish and old rope. Dan stood at the wheel in the little wheelhouse with a mug of tea and took them out past the harbour wall, into the open bay. Chris had lived beside that bay most of his life and had almost never been out on it. Now he watched the whole of Torbay slide past on the right, from the water, where you could see all of it at once: Torquay's white hotels, Paignton's long front and the new promenade, the green at Preston still shining with floodwater, the dark bulk of Berry Head ahead with its lighthouse.

And, off to the left, as they cleared the harbour, Thatcher Rock, steep and dark and streaked white, with the sea breaking on its foot.

Chris looked at it once and then made himself look away.

"You all right?" Jono said.

"Fine."

Jono looked at him for a moment, the way he looked at clients who said *fine* when they meant something else. He didn't push it.

* * *

The yard was on the far side of Brixham harbour, beyond the fish market, past the breakwater: a long, tall, black-timbered shed with a corrugated roof, rust-streaked, standing right at the water's edge with a stone slipway running down into the harbour. A hand-painted sign above the big doors, faded almost to nothing: *SHIPWRIGHTS: WOODEN BOATS BUILT & RESTORED.*

The big doors were open. Inside, under the high roof, in the dusty yellow light from the skylights, there was a boat.

Not a small boat. A ship, almost: sixty feet long, deep-bellied, propped upright on the slipway with timber shores, in great curving ribs of pale oak. Half of her was planked, the planks fitted so tightly you could hardly see the seams. The other half was still open frames, like the skeleton of a whale. A gaff-rigged Brixham sailing trawler, the old kind, the kind that had made this town rich a hundred and fifty years ago, before engines.

A man was working on her. Up on the staging halfway along her side, with an adze in his hands, shaping a plank with short, careful, rhythmic strokes. Pale wood curled away from the blade in long shavings and drifted down onto the floor, where they lay ankle-deep like snow.

He was in his late forties, lean, with sawdust in his hair and on his eyebrows, in a canvas apron and an old fisherman's jumper with holes in the elbows. He had a quiet, serious face. He didn't stop when they came in. He finished the stroke, then the next one, then the next. Then he set the adze down carefully on the staging, as you'd set down something valuable, and looked at them.

"Can I help you?"

"Are you Tom?" Chris said.

The man looked at him for a long moment, at Chris and then at Jono and then back at Chris.

"I know who you are," he said. "You're the one with the videos. And you're the one off the harbour wall." He climbed down the ladder slowly and stood at the bottom, wiping his hands on his apron. "I watched the storm one last night. Twice." He didn't smile. "What do you want?"

* * *

They told him.

Not all of it at first. Jono did the talking, the way he'd once done the talking on a thousand doorsteps. Calm, factual, unhurried. Walter. The photograph. Three men beside a dark car outside the Lightwave gates on the last day.

He took out a print, not the A3, a small one, folded, and handed it to Tom.

Tom unfolded it and looked at it.

For a long time he didn't say anything. The skylights hummed. Outside, gulls. Somewhere along the harbour a winch was turning, clanking.

"That's me," he said at last. He put his finger on the thin young figure on the right, with the clipboard. "Twenty-three. First job out of college. Graduate surveyor at Pryce Hallam in Bristol. Cheap suit from Burton's." His finger moved. "That's Gerald Pryce. He's dead." It moved again, to the middle, to the lean fair-haired man in navy, hands in his pockets. "And that's..."

He said a name.

Chris had never heard it before. He would never afterwards forget it. It was an ordinary name, the kind that slid off the mind, and it fell into the quiet of the shed like a stone into deep water.

"Is he the man who runs the Fund?" Jono asked quietly. "The one who's been advising the council for thirty years. Navy suits. No business cards."

"He was the junior partner then," Tom said. "Pryce's protégé. Cleverest man I ever met. Coldest." He folded the photograph up again carefully along its creases. "Why are you asking me?"

* * *

So Jono told him the rest.

The land behind Station Square. The Albion and the company in Jersey. The 2006 strategy, and the consultancy that wrote its evidence. The option on the Lightwave land three months after the closure, a change of use to housing in

2008, sold for twenty times the price. Walter moved to Somerset after a phone call from a neighbour who didn't exist. The nephew. The blue tin. The cremation brought forward a day. The Land Agent at the foot of Berry Head with his papers gone. Fred in a cell with a petrol can that wasn't his. And last night, on the rope, in the surge. Two hands, flat, in the chest.

Tom listened to all of it standing in the sawdust at the foot of the ladder, without moving. Once, when Jono got to the Land Agent, he closed his eyes. When Jono got to the rope, he turned his head and looked out through the big doors at the harbour, at the grey water, for a long time.

When Jono finished, nobody spoke.

"I can't help you," Tom said.

"Tom..."

"I can't." He shook his head. "I've got a wife. I've got a daughter. She's fourteen. She's at school up the hill. She thinks I'm a boatbuilder. That's all she's ever known me as." His voice was low and very controlled. "I walked away from all that twenty-two years ago. I've spent twenty-two years building this," and he put his hand on the oak frame of the boat beside him, "and pretending none of the rest ever happened. And you've just told me that people who knew what I know are dying." He looked at Jono. "And you want me to stand up?"

"I want you to tell the truth," Jono said. "That's all."

"That's all," Tom repeated. He laughed, a short, harsh sound. "The truth. You know what the truth is? The truth is I was there. I stood at the back of that crowd with a clipboard while seven hundred people lost their jobs, and I wrote down

the dimensions of the buildings so that a man in a navy suit could work out how much he'd make on them when the town gave up." He swallowed. "And I said nothing. Not then. Not in 2006, when I saw that strategy come out and I knew exactly whose fingerprints were on it. Not ever. I came here and I built boats and I kept my mouth shut, because I was a coward." He looked up at the half-built ship towering over them. "That's the truth."

* * *

Chris spoke for the first time.

"Ken remembers you," he said.

Tom looked at him.

"The supervisor on the drawing towers. Flat cap, eighty-something. He was at Walter's memorial. He remembers you coming back, months after, on your own, to measure up. He said you stopped at the gate and said sorry to the security man." Chris paused. "He said nobody else ever said sorry. Not the administrators, not the company, not the council. Nobody. In twenty-five years. Just you." He held Tom's gaze. "He remembered you for that. A boy in a cheap suit with a clipboard who said sorry. It's the only reason we found you."

Tom stood very still.

"And Richard," Chris said. "You asked him for a job once. Twenty-odd years ago. You told him you didn't want to spend your life valuing things other people would never build." He looked up at the boat. "Well. You've spent it building something. Properly. The slow way. And you know what? I

think that's exactly why you should be the one to stand up. Because you know the difference. You've seen both."

Tom didn't answer for a long time. He looked at the boat. Then at the photograph in Jono's hand. Then out through the doors at the grey harbour, where, just visible past the breakwater, the long dark line of Berry Head ran out into the sea.

"The land agent," he said finally. "At Berry Head. I knew him a bit. Everybody did." His voice was quiet. "He drank in the pub on the quay. He used to tell awful jokes. He walked that dog every morning for years."

"Yes."

Tom closed his eyes.

"Wait here," he said.

* * *

He went up a narrow wooden ladder at the back of the shed into a loft under the eaves. They heard him moving about: boxes shifting, something heavy being dragged across boards. He was gone for ten minutes. When he came down, he was holding a cardboard box, old and soft at the corners, with *TOM, COLLEGE STUFF* written on it in felt pen.

He put it on the workbench and opened it. Inside, on top: textbooks, lecture notes, a graduation photograph in a cardboard frame. Underneath, at the bottom, wrapped in a plastic bag that had gone yellow with age, a small, stiff, green-covered notebook, the sort surveyors used to carry in the field, with waterproof pages and a pencil in a loop down the spine.

FIELD BOOK, it said on the cover, in gold. And in biro, in a young man's careful hand: *T., Paignton, Lightwave Works, 2001.*

"I should have burned it," Tom said. "I meant to, a hundred times. I never could." He handed it to Jono. "Page six onwards. That's the first site visit. The day of the photograph. He dictated, I wrote it down. That was my job."

Jono opened it carefully on the bench, under the yellow light from the skylight, and Chris read over his shoulder.

The early pages were measurements. Building dimensions, site area, access, services. Neat surveyor's figures. Then, on page six, the handwriting changed. It was quicker, as though it were being taken down from speech, with initials in the margin.

> *Inst. per [initials]:*
>
> *Acquire option over whole site via new SPV. Price to reflect current industrial use only. Administrators motivated, will not test market.*
>
> *Industrial use class not an obstacle. No prospect of industrial re-use (labour market, location). LA will come under sustained pressure to "do something" w/ derelict site. Expect political case for change of use within 5–7 yrs.*
>
> *Our consultancy to position for LA economic strategy work. Steer: tourism, care, retail = growth sectors. Manufacturing = legacy. Frame site as "unsuitable for modern employment."*

Target: residential allocation in next Local Plan (c. 2008). Exercise option on allocation. Dispose in phases.

Do NOT engage w/ workforce, unions or press. Minimal local footprint. Use local agent for all enquiries.

Council contact: [the Leader's name]. Supportive. Keen for "regeneration" story. No need to brief in detail. G.P. to manage relationship.

Underneath, in the same quick hand, one more line, and then the young man's own handwriting again, slower and heavier, as if pressed hard into the paper afterwards:

[Initials]: "These towns are very good at being sad. It's practically an industry."

I wrote that down because I couldn't believe he said it.

* * *

Nobody spoke in the shed.

Chris read it twice. Then a third time. His hands were shaking.

Our consultancy to position for LA economic strategy work. Steer: tourism, care, retail = growth sectors. Manufacturing = legacy.

Five years before the 2006 strategy. In the hand of a twenty-three-year-old graduate surveyor, standing outside the Lightwave gates on the day it closed, writing down what a man in a navy suit told him to.

It wasn't a coincidence. It wasn't incompetence. It wasn't that nobody had thought of making things. Someone had thought of it, and planned against it. They had sat outside a dying factory and decided, on the day it died, what the town would be told to want for the next twenty-five years. And then they had made sure it was told.

"They didn't just profit from the decline," Chris said slowly. "They designed it."

"They steered it," Jono said. He was looking at the line about the Leader. *Supportive. Keen for "regeneration" story. No need to brief in detail.* "And they used him to do it. He never knew. They didn't even bother to tell him." He shook his head slowly. "Thirty-five years of *remains a priority*, and he never once understood what he was for."

"That's what they're afraid of," Chris said. He touched the page, very lightly. "Not the money. Money's legal. Options are legal. Jersey's legal. This." He looked at Tom. "This is proof they wrote the plan for a town, on the day it lost its living, to keep it poor because poor paid better. And then they sold that plan to the council as its own idea."

Tom was looking at the floor. At the shavings, pale and curled, ankle-deep.

"It's in my handwriting," he said quietly. "Everyone will know it was me."

"Yes," Jono said. "They will."

* * *

They made the arrangements there, at the workbench, with the half-built trawler looming over them in the dusty light.

Jono was very precise about it. The original field book would go nowhere near Torbay. Tomorrow morning, Tom would drive it himself, with his wife, to a solicitor in Exeter whom Jono trusted absolutely, an old friend who did crime and had done it for thirty years. She would hold it, copy it and lodge a sealed copy with a second firm in London. Tom would give her a full statement, everything he remembered. Jono would photograph every page now, on Tom's own phone, and the photographs would go straight to Vicky and nowhere else.

"Vicky takes it to Tan," Jono said. "Tan's board has to see this before January. And when the time comes," he glanced at Chris, "the whole town sees it."

"And until then?" Tom said.

"Until then, you tell nobody," Jono said. "Not your friends. Not the pub. Not anyone. You build your boat. You take your daughter to school. You live your life exactly as you've lived it for twenty-two years." He paused. "And if you see a grey hatchback anywhere near this yard, or your house, or her school, you ring me. Day or night. And then you ring 999."

Tom nodded slowly.

At the door, as they were leaving, he stopped them.

"Mr Chris."

Chris turned.

Tom was standing in the doorway of the shed, with the light behind him and the great oak ribs of the boat rising up into the shadows above his head.

"Do you know how long it takes to build one of these?" he said. "Properly. By hand. The old way."

"Tell me."

"Ten years. I started her when my daughter was four." He looked up at her. "Everyone told me I was mad. There's no money in it. Nobody builds like this any more. Just buy a fibreglass one off a mould." He almost smiled. "But there's only a handful of the old Brixham trawlers left in the world. Some of them are well over a hundred years old and still sailing. Because somebody built them properly. To last."

He put his hand on the oak.

"They'll tell you nothing can be built in Torbay," he said. "They've been telling everyone that for twenty-five years. They wrote it down in my notebook." He shook his head. "It's not true. It never was. It just takes longer than they want you to wait."

* * *

Dan took them back across the bay at dusk.

The swell had dropped. The water was smooth and dark, with the last light lying across it in long bands of copper and grey. Behind them, the lights of Brixham came on one by one, stacked up the hill around the harbour. Ahead, Torquay. To the left, Paignton, the long front, the floodlights of the promenade works.

Jono sat in the stern with his phone held in both hands, very carefully, as though it might break. On it were thirty-one photographs of a green-covered surveyor's field book.

Chris stood at the rail and watched the bay go by. Off to the left, as they came round towards Torquay, Thatcher Rock rose out of the dark water, black against the last of the light.

This time he made himself look at it. All the way past.

It was a rock. Just a rock, with the sea breaking on its foot and the gulls settling on its top for the night.

He watched it until it was behind them.

23 – Vicky's Choice

She decided that night, in Chris's kitchen, though she didn't tell anyone until the morning.

She hadn't gone to Brixham. Jono had said the fewer of them on Dan's boat the better, so she had waited in Chris's kitchen with her laptop all afternoon. At six o'clock her phone began to buzz. Jono was sending her the photographs from the stern while Dan steered them home across the bay: thirty-one pages of a green surveyor's field book, in a young man's careful handwriting. She read them at nine o'clock that night, at the table under the noticeboard with the three blurred men pinned above her. When she reached page six, she stopped reading and sat for a long time without moving.

Council contact: supportive. No need to brief in detail.

Use local agent for all enquiries.

These towns are very good at being sad.

Then she opened her phone and scrolled back, as she had done every night since Berry Head, to the last messages the Land Agent had sent her. The night before. Eleven forty-two.

Got it all together. 20 yrs. Feels like a weight off if Im honest. Dog's excited, knows somethings up. See you 8am. Dont be late, the caff opens at 9 and they do a decent bacon roll.

She had not been late. She had been fifteen minutes early.

* * *

"I'm going to Singapore," she said at breakfast.

Chris looked up from his tea. Jono, who had come round at seven with Biscuit, put down his toast.

"I'm not emailing this to Mr Tan," she said. "Not this. I don't know who reads his email. I don't know who reads mine." She looked at the noticeboard. "And it's not the kind of thing you tell someone on a screen. Not after twelve years."

"What are you going to tell him?"

Vicky was silent for a moment.

"Everything," she said. "The offer. The chain. The Land Agent. The book." She paused. "And that I knew who that man was a month ago, and I didn't tell him, because I didn't have proof. And that I came here to find him sites, and instead I've spent five months with a carer and an architect and an engineer, trying to stop a man from using his name as a mask." She turned her cup round on the table. "He may fire me. He would be within his rights."

"He won't," Chris said.

"You don't know him."

"I know Singapore," Chris said. "I know what they respect." He held her gaze. "You've done the job he sent you to do. He asked you whether this place was worth his money. You found out *exactly* why it's never been worth anyone's money, and who made sure of it. That's not disobeying him, Vicky. That's due diligence."

* * *

Jono drove her to Heathrow himself, through the night, by a route Chris would never have thought of: back lanes across Dartmoor in the dark, then up through Somerset on roads with no cameras. Jono checked the mirror every thirty seconds. Nobody followed them. At least, nobody they could see.

At the drop-off zone at Terminal 2, at five in the morning, he got out and took her bag out of the boot and handed it to her.

"Ring me when you land," he said. "And when you get to his office. And when you leave it."

"Yes, Dad."

He didn't smile. "I mean it."

"I know you do." She looked at him: a big, tired man in a care worker's fleece at five in the morning outside an airport, a hundred and eighty miles from home, with a Staffie asleep on the back seat of his car. "Jono. Thank you."

"Go on," he said. "Before I start crying in a drop-off zone."

* * *

Changi at four in the afternoon, local time, was a wall of wet heat the moment she stepped out of the terminal, and she nearly wept with relief.

Everything worked. The immigration gates read her passport in four seconds. Her bag was on the belt before she reached it. The taxi rank had a queue that moved like clockwork. The expressway into town was smooth and lined with trees, thousands of them, rain trees and angsana and

frangipani, the planting so lush it closed over the road like a tunnel. She looked at them out of the taxi window and thought of Chris kneeling on the carpet beside Richard's drawing. *He planted trees. Thousands of them. Along every road.*

She had grown up with those trees. She'd never once thought about why they were there.

She didn't go home to her mother's flat. She rang her from the taxi instead.

"You're back? Why didn't you tell me? Have you eaten?"

"Not yet, Ma."

"Not yet! Five months in England and they still don't feed you." A pause. "You sound different."

"Different how?"

Her mother thought about it. "Older," she said. "Come for dinner tomorrow. I'll make your fish."

* * *

Mr Tan's office was on the forty-first floor of a tower in Tanjong Pagar, the company's own building, which he had built in 2004. One whole wall of his office was glass. Through it you could see the port: hundreds of cranes, thousands of containers stacked in coloured blocks, ships lined up in the strait to the horizon. Everything Singapore had made of itself in sixty years, laid out like a map.

He was sitting at his desk when she came in, in his white shirt with no tie, writing with a fountain pen. He looked up,

and for a long moment he simply looked at her. Then he put the cap back on his pen and laid it down.

"Sit down, Vicky."

She sat.

"You flew seven thousand miles without telling me," he said. "That means you have something you did not want to put in an email. Or something you did not want me to read without seeing your face." He folded his hands. "Which is it?"

"Both, Mr Tan."

"Then begin."

* * *

She began at the beginning, and she didn't stop for an hour and twenty minutes.

She had made a binder. Of course she had. Tabbed, indexed, every document numbered. She laid it on his desk and went through it page by page, as she had been trained to, the facts first and her own opinions only when asked.

The reception on the Strand. The offer: a long lease at a price that was *compelling*, in exchange for his name on the board and a letter of support. *A name. It's not much to ask.*

The Jersey address shared by the Albion and the scheme's development manager.

The chain on Companies House: Pryce Hallam in Bristol, the junior partner, the firm in St James's with three initials, the transfer to Jersey.

Jono's title deeds. Nine empty sites. Nine companies. One door. Nothing ever built.

The Lightwave land: optioned three months after the closure, a change of use to housing in 2008, sold for twenty times the price.

The 2006 council strategy. *Reinforced reliance on the service sector.* Tourism, care, retail, hospitality. Manufacturing nowhere.

Then she showed him the Land Agent's messages on her phone. *Feels like a weight off. Dont be late.* And the police tape at Berry Head, and the dog clipped to the fence, and an empty car.

Walter. The phone call about a fall that never happened. The nephew. The blue tin. The cremation brought forward by a day.

The man in the dark waterproof on the promenade in the storm. Two hands, flat, in the chest.

And last of all, she took out the printed photographs of the field book, and laid page six on the desk in front of him, and turned it round so it faced him.

He read it.

He read it slowly, all the way down, his finger moving very slightly along the lines. Then he read it again. When he got to the last line, *These towns are very good at being sad. It's practically an industry*, his finger stopped.

He sat very still for a long time.

* * *

"There's one more thing," Vicky said. "And it's the reason I came in person."

He looked up.

"I knew," she said. "After the reception. That night. I found the Jersey address, and I knew who that man was and what he wanted from you. I didn't have proof. So I told you he was an adviser and I was checking. I didn't tell you what I suspected." She held his gaze. "And then I went and worked with those people, the campaign, for six weeks. Without your knowledge. Without your permission. While you thought I was finding you sites." She took a breath. "I've gone beyond my brief, Mr Tan. A long way beyond it. If you want my resignation, it's in the back of the binder. Tab Q."

Mr Tan looked at her for a long, long time. Then he turned the binder over, opened the back cover and found tab Q: a single sheet, typed, signed and dated.

He took it out. He read it. He folded it in half, then in half again, and tore it carefully into eight pieces. He dropped the pieces into the wastepaper basket under his desk.

"You disobeyed me," he said.

"Yes."

"I told you not to go anywhere alone."

"I didn't. Jono drove me to the airport."

Something moved at the corner of Mr Tan's mouth. He suppressed it.

He got up and walked to the great glass wall, with his hands behind his back, and stood looking out at the port. The cranes. The containers. The ships.

"When I was a boy in Malacca," he said, without turning round, "my father had a small rubber holding. Forty acres. His father had planted it. When the price of rubber collapsed, the bank called in his loan. He couldn't pay. So the land was sold. Very cheaply, to a company. A company in London, through a company in Singapore, through an agent in Malacca whom everybody knew and nobody trusted." He paused. "The company never planted anything on it. It simply waited. Twenty years later, the government built a road nearby, and the land was worth fifty times what they paid. They sold it to a developer and made a fortune. My father worked in a factory for the rest of his life. He used to say to me: *We used to make things, Ah Boy. Grow our own things. On our own land.*"

He turned round.

"I have spent forty years," he said quietly, "becoming the kind of man who builds things on his own land, so that nobody could ever do that to my family again." He looked at the binder on the desk. "And that man, with his pleasant voice and his water glass and no business card, wanted me to stand in front of exactly the same thing. In a town on the other side of the world. With my name on it." His voice was very even. "He wanted to use my reputation, the only thing I have that cannot be bought, to cover the same trick that was played on my father."

Vicky said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"You did not disobey me, Vicky," Mr Tan said. "You protected me. You protected my name. If I had signed his

letter, I would have spent the rest of my life as the respectable face of something that killed an old man in a care home." He walked back to the desk and sat down. "There is nobody in this company who would have done what you did. Nobody. They would have sent me the offer and recommended I accept it, because the lease was good." He tapped the binder. "This is the most important piece of work anyone has brought me in ten years."

* * *

He picked up his fountain pen and uncapped it.

"From today," he said, "you are no longer finding me sites in Torbay."

Vicky felt her stomach drop.

"From today," Mr Tan went on, "you are Managing Director of our UK business. All of it. You will decide what we build in Torbay, and whether we build anything at all. You report to me and to nobody else." He wrote something on a pad and tore the sheet off. "The board will be told on Monday."

She stared at him.

"Mr Tan, I..."

"Do not thank me. It is not a gift. It is a much harder job than the one you had." He held up a finger. "Three instructions."

"Yes, Mr Tan."

"First. You will not answer that man's offer. Not yes, not no. Nothing. You will say I am *considering it*. Let him wait." His eyes were cold. "Men like that cannot stand waiting. They are used to things happening when they decide. Let him wonder."

"Second?"

"Second. My board meets in the second week of January. Six weeks. When I go into that room, I will not go in with a hotel. I want what Mr Chris showed me at the fish market. What can Torbay *make*? Not a speech. Not a video. A plan. Sites, skills, products, markets, numbers. Who would run it. What it would cost. What it would earn." He paused. "And the architect's design, the garden town, as the place where it happens. I want to see both together. The economy and the place."

"And third?"

Mr Tan looked at her for a long moment.

"Third," he said. "Whatever Mr Chris and his friends are planning to do with that notebook, and I assume they are planning something, tell them that if they need anything at all, money, lawyers, security, anything, they ask you. And you give it to them." He capped his pen. "Not as an investment. Not with my name on it. As a debt."

"A debt to whom?"

"To an old man in a care home who used to make things," Mr Tan said. "And to my father."

* * *

She rang Jono from the back of the taxi, as she had promised she would.

It was eight in the morning in Torbay. He answered on the first ring, from his car, between clients. She could hear the indicator ticking.

"Well?"

"He tore up my resignation," she said. "Into eight pieces. And then he made me managing director of the UK business."

There was a long silence on the line. The indicator went on ticking.

"Say that again," Jono said.

"Managing director. I decide what we build in Torbay." She found she was laughing. "I don't think I've taken it in yet."

"I'm telling Chris," Jono said. "Right now. And Richard." A pause. "Richard's going to be unbearable."

* * *

She had dinner with her mother the next night, in the little flat in Toa Payoh where she'd grown up, with the fan turning overhead and the television on with the sound down. Her mother made her steamed fish with ginger and spring onion and watched her eat all of it.

"So," her mother said. "England. Is it nice?"

Vicky thought about it. The rain. The empty shops on Union Street. The Albion's black shell. The forty-three phones. The green at Preston under water, and three hundred

people with spades in the dark. Maureen with her thermos. An old man kneeling on a concrete step with his hand on it, crying. Tom in a cloud of shavings, building a boat that would take ten years.

"No," she said. "It's not nice. It's broken. Some people broke it on purpose."

Her mother frowned. "Then why do you want to go back?"

Vicky put her chopsticks down.

"Because some other people are trying to fix it," she said. "And they've asked me to help."

* * *

She flew back three days later.

At Heathrow, Jono was waiting at arrivals in his care worker's fleece, with Biscuit on a lead. Chris was beside him with his arm still strapped from the storm. Behind them, of all people, holding a hand-lettered cardboard sign like a chauffeur, *MANAGING DIRECTOR*, was Richard. Jono had rung him from the car, and Richard had spent the evening making the sign. He had driven up with them, he said, because he'd never met anyone off an international flight and wanted to see what it was like.

Vicky stood at the arrivals barrier with her bag and looked at the three of them. A carer, an engineer and an old architect, in the grey early morning, under the fluorescent lights.

She laughed. She couldn't help it. Then, to her own surprise, she cried a bit as well.

"Jono told us the headline," Chris said, when she reached them. "Tell us the rest."

"He wants a plan," Vicky said. What Torbay can make, with numbers, and Richard's design as the place it happens. On his board's table in six weeks." She looked at each of them in turn. "And he says that whatever we're going to do with that notebook, we don't do it alone. Not any more."

Jono took her bag off her shoulder without asking.

"Then let's go home," he said. "We've got work to do."

24 – Ai Li

The arena held eighteen thousand people, and every one of them was screaming.

Ai Li sat in the commentary booth high above the floor with her headset on, looking down through the glass at the stage: two teams of five, each player hunched over a glowing screen, the great curved display above them showing a battle in a fantasy city exploding in light and colour. The noise came up through the floor of the booth in waves. Somewhere out there, on screens and phones in two hundred countries, another four million people were watching. The live counter in the corner of her monitor said so. *4,212,880.*

It was the grand final. Seoul. Last game of the season. Her biggest job yet.

"...and that's the second map to the challengers!" her co-commentator was shouting beside her, a lanky Canadian called Marcus with a voice like a car alarm. "Two-nil! Two-nil! Nobody, *nobody*, saw this coming!"

"Unbelievable," Ai Li said into her microphone. Her voice was warm and quick, with a slight lilt nobody could ever quite place: English underneath, something else on top. "Absolutely unbelievable. That's the champions down two maps for the first time all year. You can feel the arena shaking."

The producer's voice came in her ear. *Tech pause. Blue side's got a hardware issue. Probably three, four minutes. Fill.*

Marcus glanced at her. They usually filled with sponsor reads, or replays, or banter. Marcus did most of the banter. She did the analysis.

Ai Li took a breath.

She had been carrying a clip on her laptop for six days. She had watched it every night in her hotel room in Seoul, after the practice sessions and the interviews and the dinners: a shaky phone video, shot in a screaming wind on a dark seafront she hadn't stood on for seven years. Torches moving in the dark. A line of people passing sandbags hand to hand. Old men with spades. Teenagers in hoodies. And a big man in a care worker's lanyard going over the sandbags into the black water with a rope round his waist.

Who Showed Up.

Chris had sent it to her. Chris, who had produced her album, who'd sat with her in the studio for weeks getting the vocals right, who'd told her stories about Singapore between takes. He'd sent it with one line: *This is home now. Thought you should see.*

Before that, two weeks before, somebody else had sent her the newspaper piece. *"CARE WORKER" BEHIND VIRAL SPEECH IN FAR-RIGHT ROW.* With a comment: *isn't this your town lol?*

She had read the article on her phone at four in the morning in a hotel in Shanghai, between a golf pro-am and a press conference, and felt something she hadn't felt in a long time. Not embarrassment. Rage. Clean, cold, rising rage.

She had grown up in that town. Torquay, a flat over a shop off Union Street. She'd left at eighteen, like everybody

she knew, because there was nothing there. She'd never looked back. She had told herself, for seven years, that she didn't care what happened to it.

She'd been wrong.

* * *

She pressed the talkback button.

"Jae-won," she said to the producer. "I've sent you a clip. Ninety seconds. Can you roll it?"

A pause in her ear. *What is it?*

"Home," Ai Li said.

Ai Li, it's the grand final. We've got sponsors. We've got...

"It's my ninety seconds," she said. "My booth, my mic. You can fire me after."

A longer pause. She could hear him breathing.

Rolling in ten, he said. *God help us both.*

Marcus was staring at her. She put a hand on his arm.

"Trust me," she said, off-mic.

Then she switched her microphone back on.

* * *

"While we wait for the blue side to sort out their hardware," she said, "I'm going to do something a bit different. I hope you'll forgive me."

On four million screens, the fantasy city vanished. In its place, in the corner of a thousand streams and a million phones, came darkness, wind noise, and torches moving on a black field.

"This is a town called Torquay," Ai Li said, "and the town next to it, Paignton. On the south coast of England. On a bay. Three weeks ago there was a storm there. The worst in years. And the council told people to stay away from the seafront, and to collect sandbags from a depot that had already closed."

On screen, a line of people passing sandbags hand to hand in the dark. An old man with a spade. A boy in a hoodie, soaked, grinning.

"Three hundred people turned up anyway," she said. "Old men who used to build things in a factory that closed twenty-five years ago. Fishermen. Teenagers. A vicar. People from the church. A woman with sandwiches. They worked all night to keep the sea out of the homes of old people who couldn't leave. Nobody paid them. Nobody asked them."

On screen, the sea came over the old wall in a solid grey mass, and stopped at the sandbags.

"A few weeks before that," Ai Li said, "a national newspaper in Britain told the whole country that these people were extremists. Dangerous. Far right." Her voice was very steady. "I'd like you to look at them. Just look. Tell me what you see."

On screen, a big man in a care worker's lanyard went over the sandbags into the black water with a rope round his waist, towards a boy being dragged out to sea. A line of people in the dark took the rope and pulled.

The arena had gone quiet. Not completely, there were eighteen thousand people, but there was a hush, rippling out across the seats as people looked up at the giant screen above the stage and saw not a fantasy city but a dark English seafront and a line of strangers pulling on a rope.

The chat on the stream, which normally ran so fast it was unreadable, slowed. Then it stopped. Then it exploded.

"That man on the rope is called Jono," Ai Li said. "He's a carer. He looks after old people for a living. He pulled that boy out. In the middle of it, somebody pushed him back into the sea. Nobody knows who."

On screen, the two shapes came up out of the black water at the sandbags, and hands hauled them over.

"I'm telling you this," Ai Li said, "because I left that town when I was eighteen, like almost everyone I grew up with, because there was nothing there for us. No work. No future. Just hotels and cafés and waiting for summer. And I told myself it didn't matter. That it was just a sad little seaside town and it would always be sad." She paused. "But it wasn't always sad. Somebody made it sad. And now some people there are trying to make it something else. And somebody is trying very hard to stop them."

The clip ended on the final frame. The floodlit terraces at Paignton, a wave breaking on the lowest step and falling back.

"This is where I'm from," Ai Li said. "It's called Torbay. The people trying to save it call themselves Torbay Rage. Look them up. Don't believe what anyone tells you about them. Watch for yourselves. And then decide."

She took a breath.

"Thank you," she said. "And now, I believe the blue side are ready. Marcus?"

Marcus looked at her for a long second, with an expression she'd never seen on him before. Then he leaned into his mic.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice not quite steady, "map three."

* * *

She didn't know what she'd done until afterwards.

The final went to five maps. The challengers won it, the biggest upset in the history of the competition, and the arena went mad, and Marcus screamed himself hoarse. She did the post-match interviews and the trophy ceremony and the press conference with a smile on her face. All the time, her phone in her pocket was vibrating so continuously that it felt like a second heartbeat.

When she finally looked at it, in the corridor behind the stage at one in the morning, she had to sit down on a flight case.

#TorbayRage was trending in eleven countries. Clips of her ninety seconds had been viewed twenty million times. The Torbay Rage site had crashed twice under the traffic and was

back up, Chris's work presumably, and the storm film had been watched more times in the last four hours than in the three weeks before. People were translating it into Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Tagalog, Polish. Somebody in Brazil had made it into a song. Somebody in Manila had drawn a picture of Jono on the rope.

And the questions had started.

Wait, why did someone push him?

Who's paying for the smear?

Isn't one of their guys in jail for arson? Look into that.

The arson suspect doesn't own a car, so why would he have a petrol can? Something's off.

His comment was "burn the lot", that's literally what everyone says about their town lmao, that's not a confession

Full uncut speech is on their site. The newspaper clip is obviously doctored, you can see the cuts at 0:14 and 0:31.

Four million people, it turned out, were very good at looking at things carefully when they were told someone didn't want them to.

There were messages from journalists. Not British ones; those came later. A reporter from one of the big American papers. Someone from a Korean broadcaster. A German investigative magazine. A well-known podcast host in Australia. All of them asking the same question in different words: *what is going on in Torbay?*

And one message, at 00:52, from a number she knew.

You absolute legend. I didn't ask you to do that. Thank you. C

She typed back with her thumbs, sitting on the flight case in the empty corridor, her trophy-ceremony dress crumpled and her feet bare because she'd kicked off her heels.

Sorry I didn't ask first.

Don't be. Fred's lawyer just rang. Says there are three national reporters asking about his case now, and two international ones. Says the police have had a lot of calls. Says it's harder to keep a man quiet when the whole world is watching.

A pause. Then:

Come home sometime. There's something I want to show you.

She looked at it for a long time.

Then she looked up, down the long, empty, echoing concrete corridor behind the arena, at the far end of which, through an open fire door, she could see a strip of night sky over Seoul.

Maybe, she typed. *Not yet.*

She sent it. Then she sat there a while longer, on the flight case in the dark, with her shoes in her hand, thinking about a flat over a shop off Union Street, and a bay, and a seafront in a storm. And she found, to her great surprise, that she was crying.

Then she put her shoes back on and went to find Marcus, who had been promised a drink.

25 – The Camera

They went for the tin in broad daylight, because Richard said that was the last thing anyone would expect.

"If you creep about at night," he said, "people notice. If you turn up at ten o'clock on a Tuesday morning in hi-vis jackets with clipboards and a measuring wheel, nobody looks twice. Nobody ever looks twice at a man with a clipboard." He paused. "Ask Tom."

So at ten o'clock on a Tuesday morning, in the second week of December, a small working party gathered at the hoardings round the Bailey's site in Station Square. Richard, in a hard hat and a hi-vis vest that said *ARCHITECT* on the back in letters he had stencilled himself, with a measuring wheel and a clipboard. Ken and two of the Lightwave men, in hi-vis, with a theodolite on a tripod that Ken had borrowed from a nephew and that none of them, strictly speaking, knew how to use. Vicky, in a hard hat and a very good coat, with a tablet, looking exactly like the managing director of a Singaporean development company, which she was.

They were, as far as anyone watching would know, surveying the site. Which, as Richard pointed out, they also genuinely were. If the workshop was ever going to happen, someone would need to know where the drains went.

Jono was in hi-vis too, with a spade and a tool bag. He looked like what he'd been doing for the last six years, just in a different uniform: a big man doing the heavy lifting.

Chris sat in the car on the far side of the square with his phone, watching the street.

The grey hatchback wasn't there. It hadn't been there for three days, not since Ai Li's broadcast. Jono said that didn't mean anything. It just meant they'd got cleverer.

* * *

Richard walked the line of the hoardings with his measuring wheel, calling out numbers to Ken, who wrote them down with great seriousness. When they reached the third panel from the bus shelter, Richard stopped, crouched down to look at the bottom fixing, tutted loudly about the state of the rust, and said, "We'll need to get a look at the back of this. Jono, can you get in there?"

Jono got in there.

He pulled the loose corner out a foot, as every kid in Paignton under twenty knew how to, and squeezed through sideways with his tool bag. The panel swung back behind him.

Inside it was just as Fred had said. Rubble. Buddleia, dead and brown in December. The puddle that never dried, skinned with ice at the edges. The shopping trolley on its side, rusted almost to lace. And at the back, against the boundary fence, where the old hotel's cellar steps had been filled in badly, a slab of broken concrete with a brick wedged under one edge and rubble kicked over it.

He knelt down. He moved the rubble. He moved the brick. He reached in under the slab, as far as his arm would go, the concrete cold and wet against his shoulder, and his fingers touched plastic.

He pulled it out. Two carrier bags, one inside the other, wet and filthy. And inside them, a purple and gold tin with the paint worn off the corners.

Quality Street.

He put it in his tool bag. He kicked the rubble back. He stood up, picked up his spade, and squeezed out through the panel again into the cold daylight of Station Square, where Richard was explaining to a woman with a pushchair that yes, they were from the campaign, and yes, they really were thinking of building something here, and no, he couldn't say what yet.

Jono walked across the square to the car without hurrying, opened the back door, put the tool bag on the seat beside Biscuit, got in the front next to Chris, and shut the door.

"Drive," he said.

* * *

They opened it at the solicitor's in Exeter.

Jono insisted. No kitchens. No back bedrooms. A solicitor's office, with a witness, with photographs taken of everything as it came out, in order, with the time noted. He'd seen too many good cases fall apart over one careless moment.

The solicitor was the friend Jono had told Tom about: a small, brisk, grey-haired woman called Ruth Pym, who had done criminal defence for thirty-one years and looked as if she'd seen everything at least twice. She put on white cotton gloves, lifted the lid off the tin, and began.

Photographs first. A thick bundle of them, held with a rubber band gone brittle with age. Not the ones Chris had seen. These were Walter's own, Chris realised. Taken by Walter, on what must have been a cheap camera, in 2001.

The gate on the last day, from the side, from inside the crowd. And then, further away, deliberately, the dark saloon car on the factory road and the three men beside it. Not blurred this time. Closer. Walter had walked towards them. You could see the camel coat clearly, and Gerald Pryce's heavy florid face. You could see the young man with the clipboard, Tom, twenty-three, looking at the ground. And you could see the man in the middle. Lean, fair-haired, navy suit, hands in his pockets, looking straight past the camera at the buildings behind it. His face was perfectly clear.

And the car's number plate. Sharp and readable.

"Oh, Walter," Chris said quietly. "Oh, you clever old man."

Then the notebook. Small, black, cheap, the kind you buy at a newsagent's. In Walter's square capitals: dates, times, registrations. *14 JUNE 2001. DARK ROVER [reg]. 3 MEN. LOOKING AT TOWER BLOCK & BOILER HOUSE. NOT ADMINISTRATORS. ASKED SECURITY WHO THEY WERE. "CONSULTANTS."* And further down: *2 SEPT. SAME CAR. YOUNG ONE ONLY. MEASURING. SAID SORRY TO JIM ON GATE.* And years later, the handwriting older and shakier: *2008. SITE CHANGED TO HOUSING. WROTE TO PAPER. NOT PRINTED.* And: *2009. SITE SOLD. "PAIGNTON WORKS HOLDINGS". WHO ARE THEY? NOBODY KNOWS.*

Then photocopies. The administrators' letter to the workforce. A letter from the council in 2002, replying to one from Walter, thanking him for his *interest in the future of the Lightwave site*, assuring him that *its regeneration remains a*

priority for the authority. Signed by a councillor whose name Chris knew very well.

And at the bottom, the brown envelope. Sealed. *TO WHOEVER ASKS.*

Ruth Pym looked at Jono. Jono looked at Chris.

"You open it," Jono said.

* * *

It was a letter. Four pages of lined paper torn out of a pad, written in blue biro in Walter's square capitals, getting slightly larger and shakier towards the end. It was dated three years ago.

Chris read it aloud, in the quiet office, with the solicitor taking notes.

> *TO WHOEVER ASKS.*
>
> *MY NAME IS WALTER. I WORKED AT LIGHTWAVE, PAIGNTON, ON THE DRAWING TOWERS, FROM 1966 TO THE DAY IT SHUT IN 2001. I AM WRITING THIS DOWN BECAUSE I AM GETTING OLD AND NOBODY EVER ASKED ME, AND IF SOMEBODY DOES ONE DAY AFTER I AM GONE, I WANT THEM TO KNOW.*
>
> *ON THE LAST DAY THREE MEN CAME IN A DARK CAR. THEY WERE NOT FROM THE COMPANY OR THE ADMINISTRATORS. THEY DID NOT LOOK AT US. THEY LOOKED AT THE BUILDINGS. I HAVE*

SEEN MEN LOOK AT A CAR THEY ARE GOING TO BUY LIKE THAT. I TOOK THEIR PICTURE. MARGARET SAID I WAS DAFT.

THE YOUNG ONE CAME BACK ON HIS OWN. HE SAID SORRY TO JIM ON THE GATE. JIM SAID IT WAS THE ONLY TIME ANYONE SAID IT. I THOUGHT HE WAS ALL RIGHT, THAT ONE.

I WROTE TO THE COUNCIL IN 2002 AND SAID PLEASE KEEP THE SITE FOR INDUSTRY. WE HAVE THE SKILLS. WE COULD START SOMETHING. THE COUNCILLOR WROTE BACK AND SAID IT WAS A PRIORITY. I WENT TO SEE HIM. HE WAS VERY NICE. HE PATTED MY ARM.

IN 2008 THEY CHANGED IT TO HOUSES. IN 2009 IT WAS SOLD TO A COMPANY NOBODY HAD HEARD OF. I WROTE TO THE PAPER. THEY DID NOT PRINT IT.

I DO NOT KNOW WHO THOSE MEN WERE. BUT I KNOW WHAT I SAW. I SAW SOMEBODY DECIDE WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO THIS TOWN ON THE DAY IT DIED. AND I THINK THEY MADE A LOT OF MONEY. AND I THINK THAT IS WHY NOTHING EVER GOT BUILT HERE AGAIN.

I AM NOT CLEVER WITH WORDS. I WAS CLEVER WITH GLASS. WE MADE THE GLASS THAT CARRIED THE WHOLE WORLD'S VOICES UNDER THE SEA. IN A SHED IN PAIGNTON. NOBODY BELIEVES THAT NOW.

IF YOU ARE READING THIS I AM GONE. PLEASE TELL THEM WHAT WE MADE. TELL THEM WE WERE GOOD AT IT. TELL THEM IT CAN BE DONE AGAIN.

AND TELL FRED'S LAD HIS FATHER WAS A GOOD MAN.

WALTER.

Chris's voice gave out on the last line. He put the letter down on the desk.

Nobody spoke for a long time. Ruth Pym took her glasses off and wiped them carefully on a tissue, though they didn't need it.

"Well," she said at last, briskly, to nobody in particular. "That'll do."

* * *

The tin proved the land. It proved who the three men were. With Walter's clear photograph beside Tom's field book, it proved that the man who called himself an adviser to the council had stood outside Lightwave on the day it closed, and planned the next twenty-five years of the town's life.

It didn't free Fred.

"The tin's motive," Jono said, in the car on the way back down the A38. "It shows why someone might want Fred discredited. It doesn't show he didn't light the fire. For that we need the night itself. Where he was. When."

"The only footage of the fire is mine," Chris said. "And it starts when I got off the train, and the fire was already going. It shows him smiling. That's the problem."

"Is it the only footage?" Jono said.

Chris looked at him.

"Forty-three phones," Jono said. "You counted them. Forty-three people filming that fire. And you put out a call two months ago asking everyone in Torbay to send you their videos and their photos. Eleven thousand of them." He looked out of the windscreen. "Have you looked at what came in from that night? Not the old stuff. That night."

Chris had not. He had been looking at the past. He had never thought to look at the night itself.

* * *

It took him two nights, with Vicky beside him, going through everything that had been uploaded to the Goldmine with a date stamp of the eighteenth of October.

There were a hundred and nine videos. Most of them were what you'd expect: phones held up at the burning Albion, flames, sparks, the roof going in, people saying *oh my God*. A few were from further away, from the station or Torbay Road. One was from a bus driver's dashcam at the bus station.

And one was different.

It had been uploaded by a woman called Sharon, who lived in a flat above the betting shop on the corner of the square, directly opposite the Albion. She'd sent it in with a little note: *Didn't know if this was any use, it's mostly me*

filming the moon for my daughter, then the fire starts. Sorry about the swearing x.

It started at 22:51 by the phone's own timestamp. It was filmed through a window with the light on behind it, so you could see Sharon's reflection faintly in the glass. It was a long, shaky, patient video of a very full moon over the rooftops of Station Square, for a daughter in Leeds who liked the moon. Sharon was humming. The camera drifted down now and then, as she shifted her grip, and showed the square below: the bus shelter, the hoardings, the dark front of the Albion.

At 22:58, the camera drifted down and showed a man on the bench in the bus shelter. Grey hoodie. A dog lying at his feet.

Chris stopped the video and looked at it for a long time.

He ran it on. The moon. The humming. Down to the square again at 23:03: the man on the bench, the dog. Again at 23:07: the same. He hadn't moved.

At 23:09, the camera drifted down and showed someone else.

A man in a dark jacket, walking quickly across the square from the direction of the station, carrying a small sports bag. He didn't look at the bus shelter. He went straight to the narrow alley at the side of the Albion, between it and the empty shop next door, and disappeared into the dark.

At 23:12, the camera drifted down again. The man on the bench. The dog. The alley, empty.

At 23:14, the man in the dark jacket came out of the alley without the bag, walked quickly back across the square towards the station, and was gone.

At 23:16, Sharon stopped humming. The camera swung round. *"Oh my... is that smoke? Is that the... oh my GOD, it's on FIRE, Kayleigh, the old club's on fire!"* Then there was a lot of swearing.

And down below, on the bench in the bus shelter, a man in a grey hoodie stood up slowly, his dog getting to its feet beside him, and walked to the edge of the hoardings, and stood there with his hands in his pockets, watching the Albion start to burn.

He'd been on that bench, in full view of Sharon's window, without moving, for eighteen minutes before the fire started.

* * *

Then Chris went back to his own footage. The forty-three phones. The forty-seven minutes he'd filmed of the crowd, at 23:41, after his train got in. Frame by frame this time, not looking at the faces at the front, not looking at Fred at all. Looking at the edges.

At 23:52, as his camera moved slowly along the back of the crowd, there was a man standing near the taxi rank, slightly apart from everyone else. Dark jacket. Phone held up.

Not filming the fire. Filming the crowd. Just as Chris was.

He'd come back to watch.

Chris froze the frame. He enlarged it. The face was clear enough, lit orange by the fire: a man in his forties or fifties,

ordinary, with no expression at all. A face you'd forget five minutes after seeing it.

He'd seen it before. Not in person. In a description. *Polite, quiet, very ordinary. I couldn't tell you what he looked like, honestly. Just... a man.*

* * *

Jono drove to Somerset the next morning with the still on his phone.

He found the care assistant at the home, the one who had told him a month earlier that she couldn't describe Walter's nephew. He showed her the picture without saying anything.

She looked at it. The colour went out of her face.

"That's him," she said. "That's the nephew. He brought flowers."

* * *

Ruth Pym took it all to the police, and to the Crown Prosecution Service, on the Monday. Sharon's video, with its timestamps and the phone's metadata. Chris's frame from the fire. The care assistant's identification. Walter's photographs, the notebook and the letter. Tom's field book and statement. The safeguarding call that came from no neighbour. The Land Agent's last messages. The man in the dark waterproof on the promenade.

The DS, Jono's old friend, rang him that evening.

"They've opened an investigation," he said. "A proper one. Into the nephew. Into Walter. Into the Land Agent." A pause. "And into who paid a private investigator to dig into your service record. They're taking it very seriously, Jono. A lot of people are watching, after that girl's broadcast."

"And Fred?"

"The CPS reviewed the arson charge this afternoon," the DS said. "In light of new evidence." Another pause. "They've discontinued it."

* * *

Fred had been held on remand for three weeks. Jono was waiting outside the court at four o'clock on Wednesday, after the prosecution had offered no evidence, when Fred came out. Chris was with him. So was Biscuit.

Fred came down the steps slowly, blinking in the grey winter light like a man coming out of a cinema in the afternoon. He looked thinner. His hood was down.

Then he saw Biscuit.

The dog saw him at the same moment and went mad. Jono let go of the lead. Biscuit went up the steps like a rocket and hit Fred at chest height, and Fred sat down hard on the cold stone and put his arms round the dog and buried his face in its neck. He didn't move for a long time. People going in and out of the court stepped round them.

When he finally looked up, his face was wet.

Jono sat down on the step beside him. Chris stayed standing.

"They found the tin, then," Fred said, his voice muffled in the dog's fur.

"We found it. Exactly where you said."

"And the envelope?"

"We opened it."

Fred was silent for a while.

"What did it say?"

Jono reached into his coat and took out a photocopy of the last page, folded once. He handed it to Fred. Fred read it, his lips moving slightly. Chris watched him get to the bottom.

AND TELL FRED'S LAD HIS FATHER WAS A GOOD MAN.

Fred made a sound. Not a word. He put the page against his chest, under his hand, and held it there.

* * *

They sat on the steps of the court for a while longer, the three of them and the dog, in the cold.

Then Fred said, not looking at either of them, looking out across the road at nothing:

"I didn't light it."

"We know," Jono said. "We've got the video. You were on that bench for eighteen minutes before it started."

"I didn't light it," Fred said again. "But I stood there and watched it go, and I thought: *good*." He swallowed. "That's the truth. I'm not proud of it. I stood there and I was glad."

Chris looked down at him.

"Why?" he said gently.

Fred turned his phone over in his hand and opened it. He scrolled for a moment, then held it up. The photograph from his profile cover, the one Chris had looked at weeks ago and not understood. A long wood-panelled bar, a mirror, a row of optics, a glitter ball. A big man in his late thirties with a moustache, pint in hand, laughing, with his arm round a solemn little boy on a bar stool with a packet of crisps.

"That's the Albion," Fred said. "The members' bar. After Lightwave shut. That's my dad. That's me, I'm five." He looked at the photograph. "He went in there every day for nine years after the factory closed. Every single day. Him and the others who never got another job. That's where they went to drink about it. That's where he drank himself to death." He put the phone face down on his knee. "That building took my dad. That's what I thought when I saw it burning. *Good. Now it can't take anyone else's.*"

Nobody said anything.

Chris thought of the Christmas dance in 1977. The sprung floor, the glitter ball, the band in red jackets, hundreds of people who all made something. And the same room twenty years later, the same glitter ball, a man drinking alone at a bar under it, every day, for nine years, with his little boy on a stool beside him.

The same room. The same town. That was the whole story, right there.

"Walter was right," Chris said at last. "Your dad was a good man."

Fred nodded slowly. He looked down at the dog in his lap.

"Come on, Biscuit," he said, and stood up, and wiped his face on his sleeve. He looked at Jono, then at Chris. "So. What happens now?"

Chris looked across the road, up the hill towards the town, towards Paignton and Station Square and the hoardings round the Bailey's site, with their faded families and the marker-pen line underneath. *WALTER WAS HERE. WE ARE STILL HERE.*

"Now," he said, "we show them."

26 – The Projection

The theatre said the date was double-booked. The church hall said there was a problem with the insurance. The function room at the hotel on the Strand said, with real regret, that it had been taken for a private event. The leisure centre said it couldn't accommodate *events of a political nature*. The community centre in Preston, whose manager had been on the green with a spade on the night of the storm, rang Chris personally to tell him that she'd been told, by someone she wouldn't name, that her funding would be *reviewed* if she hosted it. She cried on the phone. He told her it was all right.

Eleven venues. Every one of them unavailable.

"Good," Richard said, when Chris told him. He was at his drawing board. He didn't look round. "I never wanted it indoors anyway."

"Where, then?"

Richard put down his pencil and turned.

"Where do you think?" he said. "Where it started."

* * *

Ruth Pym watched the film three times in her office in Exeter before she would let them show it.

"Facts," she said, tapping the desk with her pen at the end of the third viewing. "Documents. Photographs. Dates. Things people wrote with their own hands. That's what you show. You do not say the word *murder*. You do not show the face of

the man from the care home. There's a police investigation, and if you prejudice it, he walks and you go to prison. You do not say anyone killed anyone." She looked at Chris over her glasses. "You don't need to. Put it in order and let them see it. If it's true, they'll see it."

"That's what Walter did," Chris said.

"Then Walter," said Ruth Pym, "would have made a very good solicitor."

* * *

They put the word out on the Friday. Their own site, the group chats, the email lists, Ai Li's channels, which now had more followers than the population of Devon. One line, the way they always did.

STATION SQUARE, PAIGNTON. SATURDAY. 6PM. ON THE HOARDINGS. BRING EVERYONE.

* * *

The council's response came on Saturday morning: a notice, signed by the Officer, pinned to the hoardings themselves with cable ties. *UNAUTHORISED EVENT. No licence has been sought or granted for any gathering or projection at this location. The council reminds organisers of their legal responsibilities regarding public safety. Enforcement action may be taken.*

Richard read it. Then he took it down carefully, cable ties and all, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

"For the file," he said.

* * *

By five o'clock there were two thousand people in Station Square.

By six there were more than five thousand, and Chris had stopped counting again. They filled the square. They filled Torbay Road all the way down to the junction, and the station forecourt, and the bus station, and the steps of the old hotel where Walter's flat had been. They stood on walls and benches and bus shelters. They leaned out of windows. Sharon was at hers, above the betting shop, with a glass of wine, waving.

He walked through them with Jono in the dusk, and recognised faces everywhere.

The Lightwave men, dozens of them, in their good coats with their blue-and-gold badges, standing together near the front like a regiment. Ken. Maureen with her thermos. Dan and the trawlermen from Brixham. The teenagers from the storm, in hoodies, louder than everyone else. The woman with the spaniel from the promenade. The plumber who'd resigned from the panel. The vicar. The people from the church. Mrs Hellier in a wheelchair, wrapped in tartan blankets, pushed by her granddaughter, with a flask of something Chris suspected wasn't tea.

Tom, at the back, with his arm round a tall, serious girl of fourteen and a woman Chris guessed was his wife. Tom caught Chris's eye across the crowd and gave a small nod.

And at the very front, by the hoardings, Fred. Hood down. Biscuit at his feet. Standing exactly where he'd stood on the night the Albion burned.

Vicky was beside him. She'd been there since four.

* * *

The projector was a borrowed cinema projector that one of Chris's old contacts at the studio had driven down from Bristol in a van. It was set up on a scaffolding platform that the plumber's lads had put up that afternoon in the middle of the square, facing the hoardings. Power came from a cable run out of the back of the pub on the corner, whose landlord had said, *Take what you need. Walter used to drink in here.*

At five to six, with five thousand people waiting in the cold, the power went off.

Not just the projector. The pub. The street lights. The betting shop. Sharon's window. The whole of one side of Station Square went black at once.

A great groan went up from the crowd.

The landlord came running out of the pub. "It's not me! It's not my fuse box! It's the whole street! The box at the end, someone's..."

He didn't finish. He didn't need to. Everyone could see it: the green metal electricity cabinet at the corner of Torbay Road, its door hanging open.

Chris stood on the scaffolding platform in the dark with the dead projector and felt something cold go right through him.

Of course, he thought. *Of course they would.*

Then, from the back of the crowd, down Torbay Road, came a sound. Low. Deep. Rhythmic. Getting closer.

An engine.

* * *

The crowd parted. Slowly, the way crowds part for an ambulance. Down the middle of Torbay Road, at walking pace, with its hazard lights flashing, came Ken's brother-in-law's flatbed lorry. Ken was sitting up in the cab beside his brother-in-law, in his flat cap, grinning like a boy.

On the back of the lorry, chained down with ratchet straps, stood a machine.

It was enormous. Squat and heavy and dark green, the paint scuffed and chipped, with a great diesel engine at one end and a generator housing at the other, and a control panel of old-fashioned dials and brass switches. Along the side, stencilled in faded white capitals sixty years old, still readable in the flashing hazard lights:

LIGHTWAVE, PAIGNTON WORKS, STANDBY No. 2

A sound went up from the front of the crowd, where the Lightwave men were standing. Not a cheer. Something deeper. A kind of roar.

The lorry stopped beside the scaffolding. Ken climbed down out of the cab, stiffly, and walked round to the back. He pulled himself up onto the flatbed with help from two of the trawlermen. He stood beside the old green machine for a moment with his hand on it, the way Walter used to put his hand on the glass.

Then he turned to Chris.

"Told you," he said. "Every Christmas. For luck."

The trawlermen ran a fat black cable from the generator to the projector. Ken checked a dial, opened a valve, set a switch. Then he took hold of the starting handle, a great iron crank, with both hands, and looked out at five thousand people in the dark.

"This used to keep the furnaces alive when the mains went down," he called out. "So the glass wouldn't spoil." He spat on his hands. "Let's see if it remembers."

He swung the crank.

Once. Nothing. Twice. A cough, a puff of black smoke. A groan from the crowd.

Three times.

The engine caught. A great deep clattering roar, then a steady, heavy, beating thrum, like a heart. Black smoke, then grey, then nothing. The dials on the panel swung up. A little bulb on the control board glowed orange, then yellow, then white.

The projector lit.

And on the hoardings round the Bailey's site, across the faded pictures of a future that had never come, in letters ten feet high, white on black:

REMAINS A PRIORITY

* * *

The square went absolutely silent.

* * *

Chris had cut it to forty-one minutes. It was the most careful thing he had ever made.

It began with the glass.

Walter's hands, from the very first film, moving in the air: *a slow, steady upward stroke, as though he could still feel the fibre.* Then archive footage of the Lightwave works in its prime, from Ken's brother-in-law's cine film. The drawing towers. Men in white coats. Glass fibre coming off the furnace thinner than a hair, gleaming, endless, winding onto great drums. A ship laying cable across the Atlantic. *Sixty miles of it on one drum. Out of a shed in Paignton.*

Then the apprentice school, two hundred lads a year. The sports day. The brass band in red jackets. The Christmas dance at the Albion, the sprung floor, the glitter ball. Wedding photographs from the town's own shoeboxes. A town that made things, and was proud.

Then the last day. *THANK YOU PAIGNTON, 1958–2001.* Walter's photograph, the crowd at the gate.

And then, slowly, the camera moved past the crowd. Past the gate. Out along the factory road, to where a dark car was parked, and three men stood beside it.

Walter's own photograph, the clear one, from the tin. Eighteen feet high on the hoardings. A heavy man in a camel coat. A young man with a clipboard, looking at the ground. And a lean, fair-haired man in a navy suit with his hands in his pockets, looking past the camera at the buildings behind.

His face was perfectly clear.

A murmur went through the crowd. At the back, Chris saw Tom's daughter look up at her father. Tom didn't look away from the screen.

Then the field book.

Page six, in a young man's careful handwriting, projected on the hoardings line by line, each one appearing slowly, as if being written.

Acquire option over whole site. Price to reflect current industrial use only.

LA will come under sustained pressure to "do something" w/ derelict site.

Our consultancy to position for LA economic strategy work. Steer: tourism, care, retail = growth sectors. Manufacturing = legacy.

Target: residential allocation c. 2008.

Do NOT engage w/ workforce, unions or press.

Council contact: supportive. No need to brief in detail.

And then, alone, held on the screen for ten full seconds in the silent square:

"These towns are very good at being sad. It's practically an industry."

I wrote that down because I couldn't believe he said it.

Five thousand people in the cold and the dark, reading it.

* * *

Then the evidence, in order, exactly as Ruth Pym had said. Facts. Documents. Dates.

The 2006 council strategy, five years after the field book. *Reinforced reliance on the service sector.* Priorities: tourism, care, retail, hospitality. Manufacturing nowhere. Then the field book page again beside it, the two set next to each other on the hoardings. The same words. The same plan.

The Lightwave land: optioned in 2001 at industrial value, a change of use to housing in 2008, sold between 2010 and 2016. The figures appeared on the screen one by one. Bought for this. Sold for this. Twenty times.

The title deeds. Jono's nine empty sites, shown on a map of the bay, each one lighting up red in turn. The Albion. The land behind this very square. Torbay Road. Nine companies, nine names, one door in St Helier. Nothing ever built.

Then the money. Chris had spent four nights on this sequence. It was a simple animation, Richard's idea: a map of the bay, and money coming in at the top, in a great blue stream, pouring down from London. Regeneration grants. Levelling-up funds. Future High Streets money. Year after year, labelled, real, all from the public record. And the stream landing on the bay, and running across it, and then running out again at the bottom through a dozen small channels: consultants, advisers, landowners, options, back to London, back to Jersey. Hardly anything left behind. A town that made nothing, and so could hold nothing.

The sieve.

Then thirty-five years of *remains a priority*. The supercut from the very first film. The Leader young, then middle-aged, then old, saying the same words in front of the same square. And on screen, under it, the 2002 letter to Walter: *its regeneration remains a priority for the authority*. Signed.

And then Walter, at his window, the fire on his face. *We used to make things, you know. Here.*

The screen went black.

* * *

In the dark, in the silence, Fred climbed up the ladder onto the scaffolding platform beside the projector. Chris handed him Richard's battery amplifier. Fred's hands were shaking. Biscuit sat at the foot of the ladder looking up at him.

Fred unfolded a sheet of paper. A photocopy. Four pages of lined paper, square blue capitals.

He hadn't wanted to do it. They'd asked him the day before, and he'd said no, and then at two in the morning he'd rung Jono and said yes.

He switched on the amplifier.

"My name's Fred," he said. His voice cracked, then steadied. "Some of you will have seen my face in the papers. I didn't light the fire. I was on that bench." He pointed at the bus shelter. "But I was glad it burned, and I'm not going to pretend I wasn't. My dad drank himself to death in there. In the members' bar. After Lightwave shut." He swallowed. "This is from Walter. He wrote it three years ago. He said to give it to someone who'd do it right." He looked down at the paper. "I don't know if I'm doing it right. But here it is."

He read it.

All of it. *TO WHOEVER ASKS*. The drawing towers. Three men in a dark car. *I took their picture. Margaret said I was daft*. The young one who said sorry to Jim on the gate. The letter to the council. *He was very nice. He patted my arm*. The change of use. The sale. The letter to the paper they never printed.

I SAW SOMEBODY DECIDE WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO THIS TOWN ON THE DAY IT DIED.

I AM NOT CLEVER WITH WORDS. I WAS CLEVER WITH GLASS.

PLEASE TELL THEM WHAT WE MADE. TELL THEM WE WERE GOOD AT IT. TELL THEM IT CAN BE DONE AGAIN.

He stopped. He looked out at the square. Five thousand people. He was crying openly now, and he didn't wipe his face.

AND TELL FRED'S LAD HIS FATHER WAS A GOOD MAN.

He folded up the letter. He switched off the amplifier.

Down in the square, nobody moved.

Then, at the front, an old man in a flat cap took off his cap and held it against his chest. Ken. Then the man beside him. Then all the Lightwave men, one after another, dozens of them, standing in the dark with their caps and their hats in their hands. Then Maureen. Then Mrs Hellier, in her wheelchair, pulling off her woolly hat. Then the trawlermen.

Then the teenagers, pulling down their hoods. Then the whole square. Five thousand people, bareheaded in the cold.

Somewhere at the back, the level-crossing bells began to ring. *Ding-ding-ding-ding*. The barriers came down. Nobody looked. A train came through, slowly, and nobody watched it. It went, and the barriers went up, and nobody moved.

Chris stood on the scaffolding with his hand on the warm side of the projector and his heart going like a hammer, and looked at the hoardings. The faded families were showing through again now the screen was dark. The pale ice creams. *A NEW GATEWAY FOR PAIGNTON. COMING 20.* And underneath, in thick black marker pen, the line someone had written on the night of the memorial: *WALTER WAS HERE. WE ARE STILL HERE.*

The hoardings that had shown the town a false future for four years had just shown it the truth.

* * *

He saw the police then, for the first time: two officers, standing at the edge of the crowd by the station. One was the calm, tired sergeant from Berry Head. She had been there, he realised, the whole time. She hadn't moved and she hadn't intervened. Her hat was in her hand too.

He saw the Officer as well. He was standing alone by the taxi rank, in his lanyard, holding a clipboard with an enforcement notice on it. He had come to stop it. He hadn't. He was looking up at the dark hoardings, where the field book had been, and his face, in the glow from Sharon's window, was the face of a man who had just read something about himself that he had never known.

As Chris watched, the Officer lowered the clipboard. He stood there a moment longer. Then he turned and walked away up Torbay Road, alone, and didn't look back.

* * *

In a quiet room in St James's, with a clock ticking and an engraving of a fleet in a grey bay on the wall, a man in a navy suit sat at his desk and watched a livestream on his laptop. Eleven million people were watching with him.

He watched his own face, eighteen feet high, on a hoarding in Paignton.

He watched a page from a field book he had forgotten existed, in the handwriting of a boy whose name he had never bothered to learn.

He watched five thousand people take off their hats.

When it was over, he sat very still for a long time. Then he opened the bottom drawer of his desk, took out the cheap black phone, and switched it on. He rang the only number stored in it.

It rang, and rang, and rang. Nobody answered.

He switched it off. He put it in his pocket. He closed his laptop, and then he picked up the desk phone and rang his assistant.

"I'll be travelling for a while," he said. "Abroad. Cancel everything." He paused. "And have the engraving packed. Carefully. I'll send for it."

He stood up, took his coat from the stand by the door, and went out into the London night without looking back at the room.

* * *

REEL SEVEN

* * *

IT CAME FROM THE BAY!

THE FINAL CHAPTER: FIRE!

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH. *Torquay, this summer. Bright morning. Flat calm sea, turquoise in the shallows. Off the beach below the hotels, a dozen paddleboarders in bright wetsuits, standing on their boards, gliding. A coffee kiosk on the promenade. A man in a branded fleece taking a photo for a tourism brochure.*

The photograph begins to move.

* * *

NARRATOR *(V.O.)*

The present day! The English Riviera! Sun! Sea! The visitor economy!

(the sting, cracked and distorted, as if the tape is worn)

THEY HAVE COME… FOR NOW!

* * *

EXT. TORQUAY SEAFRONT, DAY

The paddleboarders glide. The tourism man frames his shot. A shadow falls across the turquoise water.

The swarm comes from Thatcher Rock. All of them. More than ever before. A black cloud the size of the bay.

They take the paddleboards. They take the coffee kiosk. They take the tourism man's brochure, which fades to grey in his hands. They pour along the front, over the hotels, up the hill, across the bay towards Paignton.

Towards Station Square.

* * *

EXT. STATION SQUARE, NIGHT

The square, full of people. The hoardings. And the swarm coming down over the rooftops, the drone rising until it shakes the windows.

The crowd looks up. Nobody runs.

They stand together in the square, and they do not run.

* * *

INT. TUNNELS UNDER THATCHER ROCK, CONTINUOUS

Green light. Dripping rock. The vast cavern, the nest, empty now, every fly gone out to the attack.

At the mouth of the tunnel stands AI LI.

No kitten heels this time. Boots. A torch made of a golf club wrapped in rags, burning. Her face streaked with soot. She has not screamed for a long time.

She looks into the nest. She looks up through the crack in the rock at the sky, where the last of the swarm is pouring out over the bay towards Paignton.

She takes a breath.

AI LI

(quietly)

No.

She throws the torch into the nest.

* * *

FIRE.

It goes up all at once, a great roaring bloom of orange and gold, through the tunnels and the cavern, up through the cracks in the rock, out of the top of Thatcher Rock like a beacon. The whole bay lights up.

* * *

EXT. STATION SQUARE, CONTINUOUS

Above the crowd, the swarm falters. Turns. The drone breaks up, splinters, goes ragged. The flies wheel back towards the burning rock, as if called, and as they fly over the bay, one after another, they catch the light of the fire and burn. Little sparks, thousands of them, falling into the sea like the end of a firework display.

The crowd in the square watches them fall.

And as each one burns, something comes back.

The colours in the photographs. The boy on the beach in 1978, his face, his name. The Western at Newton Abbot, its nameplate gleaming. The yellow vans in the exchange yard. The fishing boats in Boulogne, blue and white again. The envelope on the quay with the university crest. The back garden, the roses, the deckchair, the teapot, Grandad in his braces, Nan in her pinny, Mum laughing on the grass, the brothers, the cats.

All of them. Coming back into the picture, one by one, as the last of the flies burn out over the bay.

* * *

EXT. THATCHER ROCK, DAWN

The fire is out. The rock stands black and smoking in a calm sea. AI LI sits on a ledge at the top, her knees drawn up, soot on her face, looking out at the bay as the sun comes up over it.

She isn't screaming. She's smiling.

* * *

NARRATOR (V.O.)

(no longer a trailer voice. Just a voice. Quiet, and tired, and kind.)

And that's the end of the picture.

* * *

The photograph stops moving.

It is Station Square. Night. Five thousand people with their hats in their hands. And on the hoardings, very faintly, as if projected from somewhere far away, an old man at a window.

* * *

Chris woke in the dark and didn't know, for a moment, where he was.

Then he heard it. Nothing. No drone. No dialling tone. No sea. Just the house, quiet, and Biscuit snoring somewhere downstairs. Fred had been staying on the sofa since the court, and Jono's car was outside.

He lay still. He didn't do the list. He didn't need to.

He thought of a boy on Paignton beach in 1978, with his arm round the neck of his friend from chemistry. Three years

side by side at the bench. Fishing off the breakwater at Brixham. An eighteenth birthday party with a terrible disco.

Phil.

His name was Phil.

Chris lay in the dark and said it aloud, very quietly, to the ceiling. Then he turned over, pulled the duvet up, and for the first time in longer than he could remember, went straight back to sleep.

27 – Tan Decides

Richard had never been on a long-haul flight in his life.

He sat in the window seat with his drawings in a long cardboard tube between his knees, because he would not, under any circumstances, put them in the hold. He watched the whole of Europe and Asia go past underneath in the dark for thirteen hours, and didn't sleep at all. Somewhere over India, at four in the morning, Chris woke up and found him with his face pressed to the window, looking down at the lights of a city in the desert.

"All those people," Richard said quietly. "All those towns. Somebody designed every one of them." He shook his head. "Most of them badly, I expect."

* * *

Changi at seven in the morning. The wall of heat. Vicky had come out two days ahead and met them at arrivals. She took one look at Richard in his tweed jacket and said, "Oh, Richard, no." She made him take it off in the taxi queue.

Chris stood on the pavement outside the terminal and breathed in. The wet, green, heavy smell of it: jet fuel and frangipani and rain on hot concrete. Seven years. He'd thought it would feel like going back. It felt, unexpectedly, like going forward.

On the expressway into town, Richard sat in the back of the taxi and stared out of the window at the trees.

Mile after mile. Rain trees with their great umbrella crowns meeting over the road. Flame trees. Palms. Bougainvillea spilling over every flyover in purple and pink. Planted verges, clipped hedges, banks of green climbing the concrete pillars. A whole motorway turned into a garden.

He didn't say anything for a long time. Then he said, in a strange voice:

"He actually did it."

"Who?" said Vicky.

"Lee Kuan Yew," Richard said. "Chris told me. On my carpet, the first day. *He planted trees. Thousands of them.* I thought it was a nice story." He pressed his hand flat against the glass. "He actually did it. All of it. The whole country."

"Sixty years ago," Chris said. "They started with nothing."

Richard turned and looked at him. His eyes were wet.

"Then what's our excuse?" he said.

* * *

The board met at ten o'clock on the second Tuesday in January, on the forty-second floor, in a long room with one whole wall of glass looking out over the port.

Nine of them round a long dark table. Mr Tan at the head. Eight others: men and two women, in their fifties, sixties and seventies, who between them owned or ran a fair proportion of the buildings Chris could see out of the window. The chairman, a heavy, grey, unsmiling man called Mr Goh, sat at the far end with his arms folded. He was the one who had

forwarded the newspaper article with the note: *Is this the community our chief executive wishes us to invest in?*

He looked at Chris, Richard and Vicky as they came in exactly the way he would have looked at that article.

Mr Tan nodded to them. "Ms Ooi. Mr Chris. Mr Richard. Please."

They had been given forty minutes.

* * *

Vicky went first, because that was the order Tan had set. She was crisp, factual, entirely professional, in a dark suit that made her look ten years older. She took them through Torbay in twelve minutes: the bay, the decline, the hotel market. She went through the empty sites and the chain from Bristol to London to Jersey. She went through the field book, the 2006 strategy, the land. She showed them the projection, briefly. Station Square at night, five thousand people. The Lightwave generator. A man reading a letter.

She didn't show the far-right clip. She didn't need to. She showed instead, side by side, the doctored version and the original, with the cuts marked in red. Then she showed the CPS notice discontinuing the case against Fred, and the police statement announcing their investigation.

"The newspaper Mr Goh sent you in November," she said, "was published as part of a deliberate effort to discredit these people. That effort was paid for by the same interests who have kept Torbay poor for twenty-five years, because poor paid them better." She closed her laptop. "Our company was invited to become the respectable face of those interests. Mr

Tan declined. That is the background. Mr Chris will now tell you the opportunity."

Mr Goh's arms stayed folded. But he was looking at Chris differently.

* * *

Chris stood up. His left hand was in his pocket, as it always was now when he was nervous. It was aching. He took it out and put it flat on the table.

"I lived here for twenty-five years," he said. "I left in 2018. I worked on projects all over this island. Some of you, I think, I've sat across a table from before, though you won't remember me." He looked at the window. "When I arrived here in 1993, I was thirty-one and I thought I knew how the world worked. Singapore taught me I didn't. It taught me one thing above everything else. A place that makes things can pay for anything. A place that only serves can pay for nothing. Not its old people. Not its young people. Not its trees."

He nodded to Vicky. She put up the first slide.

Not a rendering. A photograph. Black and white. The drawing towers at Lightwave in 1975: glass fibre coming off the furnace, thinner than a hair, glowing.

"Torbay used to make this," Chris said. "Optical fibre. The glass that carries the world's phone calls and data under the sea. For forty years, from 1958, in a factory in Paignton, it employed five thousand people at its peak, and trained two hundred apprentices a year. The best precision glass and photonics workforce in Britain, arguably in Europe. In 2001 the factory closed. Not because the people were bad at it.

Because a bubble burst on the other side of the world, and the parent company was cutting losses. And then the land was taken, and the town was told that making things was over."

He clicked. The next slide. A simple chart.

"This is global demand for optical components. Fibre, lasers, transceivers, the photonics that connect data centres." The line went up, then up, then nearly vertical. "Every AI model you've ever heard of runs in a data centre, and every data centre runs on light. Moving data between machines is the bottleneck now. There isn't enough of this being made anywhere in the world. Not in America, not in Europe, not here." He looked round the table. "The market Lightwave died in has come back. Ten times bigger. And it's short of people who know how to make it."

He clicked again. A photograph from the memorial. Ken in his flat cap. The Lightwave men at the wake, round the pub table.

"Those people still exist," he said. "There are hundreds of them. They're in their sixties, seventies, eighties. They still live in Torbay. They still have their tools in their garages. They can still teach. Some of them have already started." Another photograph: the Bailey's site behind its hoardings, Richard in his hard hat with a measuring wheel, Ken with a theodolite he didn't know how to use. "They want to train the next generation, now, before the knowledge dies with them. On a vacant site in the middle of Paignton that a developer has been sitting on for four years."

He took a breath.

"And there are a handful of small firms in Torbay already," he went on. "Started by ex-Lightwave engineers, in

sheds and business units, making specialist optical parts. Twenty people here, forty there. Doing well. Desperate to grow. They can't, because there's no skills pipeline, nowhere to expand, and nobody with capital who's ever asked them what they need. Everyone who came to Torbay with money in the last twenty-five years asked one question: *where can we build a hotel?*" He looked at Mr Tan. "Mr Tan was asked that question for four years. Nobody asked him anything else."

* * *

He showed them the plan. Twelve slides. He had spent six weeks on it, with Vicky, at the kitchen table, every night.

A precision-skills academy on the Bailey's site, run by the Lightwave veterans, feeding the small firms. A photonics campus on two of the nine empty sites. Vicky's company would buy them at fair value from a Fund that, now the light was on it, very badly wanted to sell. Three of the small firms had already agreed in principle to anchor it. One of them had a contract for subsea cable components it couldn't fulfil for lack of space. Another had been approached by a defence supplier and turned it down for the same reason.

Then the numbers. Jobs: four hundred in five years, two thousand in ten. Wages: average forty per cent above the Torbay service-sector median. Apprenticeships: a hundred and fifty a year by year five. Return on capital: lower than a hotel in years one to three, considerably higher by year eight, and far more durable. Payback. Risk. Sensitivities. Exit. Vicky had done them, and redone them, and had them checked twice by people in Singapore who had no reason to be kind.

And last of all, he nodded to Richard.

* * *

Richard stood up, holding his cardboard tube. He looked very small and old in that long room, without his tweed jacket, in a white shirt that Vicky had bought him at the airport. He had insisted that he would not use slides.

He walked to the long dark boardroom table, the one nine people had been sitting round, and said, with great politeness: "Would you mind?"

He opened the tube. He took out the roll. And he unrolled it, slowly, down the whole length of the boardroom table, past the papers and the water glasses and the laptops. Two members of the board had to pick up their coffee cups. Mr Goh, at the far end, had to move his folded arms.

A GARDEN TOWN BY THE SEASIDE.

The whole bay. Brixham to Torquay. Green. Station Square a square. Torbay Road a walking street. Victoria Park with its wetland and herons. Parkfield House open and alive. The promenade stepping down to the sand. The Torquay plan, the harbour and the Strand and Union Street, joined up, with the old Debenhams building not a hotel but something else: workshops on the ground floor, homes above, a roof garden. And on the Bailey's site in Paignton, in a small rectangle Richard had added only a week ago, freehand, in pencil: a long, low building with a tall chimney, and one word.

FORGE.

"I've never been to Singapore before this morning," Richard said, standing at the head of his drawing. His voice was quiet but very steady. I drew this without ever having seen it. When I came in from the airport today, along that

motorway, I saw what I'd been drawing for twenty years." He put his hand flat on the paper. "The engineers you've just been told about. The ones who make the glass. They're the most sought-after people in the world. They can live anywhere. Why would they come to Torbay? Why would their children stay?" He looked down the table at Mr Goh. "Because it's beautiful. Because it works. Because someone has looked after it. That's what this is. It's not decoration. It's the reason the factory works. You knew that sixty years ago. We've forgotten it." He paused. "The place pays for the people. The people pay for the place. Neither works without the other."

He sat down.

The room was very quiet.

* * *

Mr Goh was the first to speak. He unfolded his arms and put his hands flat on the table, on either side of the corner of Richard's drawing that had reached him.

"Who runs it?" he said.

"Ms Ooi," said Mr Tan.

Mr Goh looked at Vicky for a long moment. Then he nodded, very slightly.

"And the town?" he said. "The council. The same people who, from what I've just been shown, presided over twenty-five years of this." He gestured at the field book slide still on the screen. "They are still there?"

"They are still there," Mr Tan said.

"Then I don't understand," Mr Goh said. "With respect. The plan is good. The numbers are better than I expected. The architect is..." He glanced down at the drawing under his hands. "Remarkable. But you cannot build this in a place run by people who could not finish a taxi rank in twenty-five years. They will delay it. They will lose the paperwork. They will consult. They will put it in a *workstream*." He said the English word with distaste. "I've done business in places like that. You lose everything."

"Yes," said Mr Tan. "You do."

He stood up.

* * *

He walked to the great glass wall and stood with his hands behind his back, looking out at the port, as he had done the day Vicky brought him the binder.

"I'll put a motion to this board," he said, without turning round. "The company will commit to Torbay. Not a hotel. This." He gestured at the drawing on the table without looking at it. "The academy. The campus. The sites. Fifteen years. At the full figure in Ms Ooi's paper."

A murmur went round the table.

"With one condition," Mr Tan said.

He turned round.

"We do not sign a single contract," he said, "we do not pour a single slab, until Torbay has a leadership capable of finishing things. I do not mind which party. I do not mind which faces. I mind only this: when they say a thing will

happen, it happens. On the date they say. And when it doesn't, they explain why, in public, and fix it." He looked at Chris. "That's all. That's the condition. Competence."

He looked round the table.

"There are elections coming in that town," he said. "Local and national. Mr Chris's friend, the carer, Jono, will stand. I'm told the people of Torbay have just spent a night in their town square with their hats in their hands. I'm told eleven million people watched them do it." He paused. "So we will tell them the truth. The money is there. The plan is there. The jobs are there. All they have to do is choose people who can finish things." He spread his hands. "If they do, we build. If they don't, we leave, and we tell them why."

Mr Goh looked at him for a very long time.

"That's not an investment decision," he said. "That's a political statement."

"No," Mr Tan said. "It's what my father would have wanted someone to say to the town he lost his land in. *Make things again. And choose people who will let you.*" He sat down. "All those in favour."

* * *

It was seven to two.

Mr Goh's hand was the last to go up, slowly. But it went up.

* * *

Afterwards, Tan took Chris up to the roof.

It was forty-four floors up, a garden on top of a tower: trees in great planters, a lawn, a pond, all of it seeming to float in the hazy sky above the port. The heat was enormous. Down below, the cranes moved, and the ships, and the containers in their coloured blocks went on and on to the horizon.

They stood at the rail together.

"Pioneer Road," Tan said, and pointed west, across the city, towards a haze of industrial buildings and chimneys and refinery towers on the far side of the island. "1979. A floor slab for a factory making electronic components. I was twenty-two. I poured it myself, with three other men, in one night, because the concrete truck was late and the client was coming in the morning." He was quiet for a moment. "It's still there. The factory's changed hands four times. The slab is still there."

"One slab," Chris said.

"One slab," Tan agreed. "Everything you can see from here started like that. One man pouring one floor, because he believed somebody would build something on it." He looked at Chris. "You came home to Torbay to find that, I think. Seven years ago. Somebody who believed."

Chris didn't answer at once. He was looking out at the port, the cranes, the city he had lived in for twenty-five years, and he felt something he had not expected to feel. Not pride. Not triumph. Something quieter and stranger.

He had gone home to Torbay in 2018 wanting the bay to build again. He had spent seven years being ignored, then patronised, then followed, then smeared, then called a sick

old man in a café. He'd wanted somebody in Torbay to say *yes*.

And the yes had come from here. From a man he'd met at a fish market, whose father had lost forty acres of rubber in Malacca.

"I learned it here," he said slowly. "All of it. Everything I tried to tell them at home. And I couldn't make anyone at home listen. It took..." He laughed a little. "It took coming all the way back here to get someone to say it."

Tan nodded, as if that was obvious.

"That's how it always works," he said. "Somebody takes it away from you. You go somewhere else and learn it again. And then, if you're lucky, you carry it home." He put his hand briefly on Chris's shoulder, which Chris had never seen him do to anyone. "You were lucky. Go home, Mr Chris. Go and pour your slab."

* * *

Richard spent the afternoon at the Botanic Gardens and came back to the hotel with his shoes ruined, a rash on his neck from the sun, and four hundred photographs on a phone Vicky had to show him how to use. Over dinner he talked about rain trees for an hour and a half without stopping.

Vicky didn't eat much. She sat at the end of the table with her phone, sending messages to England, to lawyers and agents and the three small firms in Torbay, to start everything that would only start if the town said yes.

Chris rang Jono from the hotel balcony at midnight, which was four in the afternoon at home.

"Well?" Jono said. Chris could hear Biscuit barking in the background, and a kettle, and someone, it sounded like Fred, swearing at a tin opener.

"Seven to two," Chris said. "They'll build it. All of it. The academy, the campus, the sites. Fifteen years." He paused. "On one condition."

"Go on."

"Competence," Chris said. "Tan won't pour a single slab until Torbay has people in charge who can finish things. He said it to his board. He's going to say it in public." He looked out at the lights of the city, the cranes, the ships in the strait. "So the election isn't about left or right any more, Jono. Or old or young, or in or out, or any of it. It's about one question. Do you want people who can finish things, or don't you?"

There was a long silence on the line.

"That's my campaign, then," Jono said quietly. "That's the whole thing."

"Yes."

Another silence. Then Jono laughed, short and real.

"Fred's just asked if he can be my driver," he said. "He hasn't got a licence."

"Tell him to start lessons."

"I'll tell him," Jono said. "Come home, Chris. We've got a forge to build."

29 – The Leader's Office

Tan's statement came out on a Thursday morning, at nine o'clock London time. That was five in the afternoon in Singapore, after the market closed, because Tan did everything in order.

It was one page long. Vicky had written the first draft and Tan had cut it by half.

Our company has today approved a fifteen-year commitment to establish a precision skills academy and photonics manufacturing campus in Torbay, Devon, alongside the restoration of the town's public spaces. The full value of this commitment is set out below.

This investment is conditional. We will not sign contracts or begin construction until Torbay is led by people capable of delivering what they promise, on the dates they promise it. We take no view on any party or individual. We ask only that the people of Torbay choose leaders who finish things.

If they do, we will build. If they do not, we will leave, and we will say why.

That was all. It had a number at the bottom. A big one.

By eleven o'clock it was on every news site in the country. By lunchtime the national papers that had called Torbay Rage extremists in November were running the story under headlines about *foreign investment* and *seaside revival*, as though they had been on the campaign's side all along. One of them used a photograph of five thousand people in Station Square with their hats in their hands, and didn't mention that

it had once run a photograph of the same campaign with a man in a balaclava.

Chris read them all, sitting at his kitchen table with Fred and Biscuit, and didn't feel anything much. He was tired. He had been tired for months.

At four o'clock that afternoon, his phone rang. A Torquay number. He nearly didn't answer.

"Chris?" said a warm, unhurried voice with a slight local burr. "It's..." and the Leader said his own name, almost shyly, as if he wasn't sure Chris would remember it. "I wonder. Would you come and see me? Tonight, if you can. At the Town Hall." A pause. "Just you. If that's all right."

* * *

The Town Hall at seven o'clock on a January evening was dark and nearly empty. A security man let him in at the side door and took him up the main staircase, along the long first-floor corridor with its red carpet worn pink down the middle, to the big door at the end.

It was open. The light was on.

The Leader was sitting not behind the big oak desk but in the armchair beside it, the one he'd sat in the day he poured Chris's coffee and told him about his father, the bus driver. He had no jacket on, and his tie was loosened. There was a glass of whisky on the little table beside him, untouched, and another one poured, waiting.

He looked older. Much older than on the Town Hall steps in October. Older even than on the harbour on Remembrance

Sunday. His silver hair needed cutting. His face had gone slack around the jaw.

"Thank you for coming," he said. He didn't get up. "Sit down. Please. There's a drink there, if you want it."

Chris sat down in the other armchair. He didn't touch the whisky.

For a long moment neither of them spoke.

Around them, on every wall, the renderings hung in their matching frames, in their neat rows. The marina. The conference centre. The cultural quarter. The transport hub. *A Gateway to the Bay*. Felt-tip and early computer graphics and glossy recent ones with skies that never existed in Devon. Thirty-five years of them. Chris counted them, out of habit. Forty-three.

The same number as the phones.

* * *

"I watched it," the Leader said at last. "Saturday. The projection. I was here, at that window." He nodded at the tall window that looked out over Castle Circus, though from here you couldn't see Paignton. "On my laptop. The livestream. With my wife." He picked up the whisky, looked at it and put it down again. "She went to bed about halfway through. She said she couldn't watch any more." He smiled faintly. "We've been married forty-one years."

Chris said nothing.

"I want to tell you something," the Leader said. "And I want you to know I'm not saying it to get anything. There's nothing left to get." He looked at his hands. "I didn't know."

Chris waited.

"About any of it. The land. The Jersey companies. The field book. Gerald Pryce." He shook his head slowly. "Gerald was the first person who ever took me seriously. Did you know that? 1987. I was thirty-one, newly elected, nobody. And this big, warm, clever man from Bristol took me out to lunch and talked to me as if I mattered. As if I was going to *do* things. He had plans for everything. Schemes. Partners. Funding streams." He laughed softly. "I thought he was the most sophisticated man I'd ever met. I thought, *this is how it's done*."

"And his junior?"

"I met him a few times. Over the years. Very polite. Very quiet. Always in the background at the lunches. I never really noticed him." The Leader paused. "That's how he liked it, I suppose."

He looked up at the wall. At the renderings.

"*No need to brief in detail*," he said. "That's what it said. In that boy's notebook. On the day the factory shut. *Council contact: supportive. No need to brief in detail.*" His voice went very quiet. "Nearly forty years I've been in this building, and that's what I was. A contact. Supportive. Not worth briefing."

* * *

He got up. Slowly, with a hand on the arm of the chair, like an old man. He walked to the nearest wall and stood in front of a rendering in a gilt frame: a felt-tip drawing of a marina full of white yachts, a promenade with striped awnings, people strolling. *TORQUAY HARBOURSIDE: A VISION FOR THE 1990s*.

"I believed in that one," he said. "I really did. I stood up in the council chamber and told everyone it would transform the town." He moved along to the next. A conference centre, all glass and steel. "And that one. 2003. I believed in that." The next. "And that." The next. "And that."

He stopped in front of the most recent. Glossy, blue-skied, families with ice creams. *A NEW GATEWAY FOR PAIGNTON*. The same picture that was on the hoardings round the Bailey's site.

"Every single time," he said, "I said *remains a priority*, I meant it. Do you understand? I wasn't lying. Not once. I believed every word. That's what nobody will ever understand. I wasn't a liar. I was..." He searched for the word, and when he found it, he said it as though it hurt. "I was *useful*."

He turned round.

"Gerald and his people had plans for everything," he said. "And I never had a plan of my own. Not one. In nearly forty years. I thought having *them* was having a plan. I thought if I just kept the relationships going, kept people talking, kept the consultants consulting and the bids bidding, something would eventually come of it." He spread his hands at the walls. "Nothing came of it. Nothing ever came of it. And I never once asked why."

He looked at Chris.

"You had Singapore," he said. "You saw what it looks like when people mean it. Dates. Budgets. Somebody accountable. You *knew* what it was supposed to look like." He shook his head. "I've never been anywhere. I left school at sixteen. I worked in an insurance office in Torquay. I got elected at thirty-one because I was good at knocking on doors and remembering people's names. And I spent nearly forty years in this building thinking that was what being a leader was." He sat back down heavily in the armchair. "Remembering people's names."

* * *

"Walter," Chris said.

The Leader closed his eyes.

"I didn't remember him," he said. "When the video first came out. The old man at the window. I didn't know who he was. And then on Saturday that young man read the letter. *I went to see him. He was very nice. He patted my arm.*" He opened his eyes. They were wet. "And I remembered. Like a door opening. 2002. A big man in his good suit in my surgery at the library. Hands like shovels. He'd written it all down on a sheet of paper. *Keep the site for industry. We have the skills. We could start something.* He was so polite. So proud. He said they'd made glass that went under the Atlantic." The Leader's voice broke. "And I patted his arm. And I said *it remains a priority*. And I sent him home. And I never thought about him again. Not once. In twenty-three years."

He put his face in his hands.

Chris sat and watched him and felt, to his surprise, very little anger. He had expected to. He'd lain awake planning what he would say to this man, on and off, for seven years. And now here he was. An old man in an armchair with his face in his hands, in a room full of pictures of things that had never been built.

It wasn't wickedness. That was the terrible thing. Wickedness you could fight. This was something worse, and much more common. A decent, ordinary, limited man, in a job far too big for him, kept there for nearly forty years because nobody better ever stood, and patted on the arm himself, all that time, by people who knew exactly what they were doing.

Third-rate. Not evil. Third-rate. And a whole town had paid for it.

"You could have asked," Chris said quietly. "Just once. *Why has nothing been built?* You could have asked."

The Leader lowered his hands.

"I know," he said. "I know." He looked round the walls. "I was never up to it, Chris. That's the truth. That's all it is. I was never up to it. And I think, somewhere, I always knew. And I hoped nobody would notice." He laughed, very softly, without any humour at all. "Forty years, nearly. And nobody did. Until you."

* * *

He was standing down. He told Chris so, simply. He would announce it in the morning. He would not stand again, in May

or ever. He would not endorse anyone. He thought, he said, that he'd done enough endorsing.

"What will you do?" Chris asked.

"Do?" The Leader seemed surprised by the question. He thought about it. "I don't know. My wife wants to go to Scotland. She's always wanted to. We never went." He looked at his glass of whisky. "I might learn something. Something with my hands. I've never made anything in my life." He smiled faintly. "Perhaps those old men in your workshop would have me. Though I expect they'd rather not."

Chris didn't answer that.

He stood up to go. At the door he stopped and looked back. The Leader had got up too and was standing in front of the wall again, looking at the marina in its gilt frame.

Then, slowly, he reached up, took the frame by both sides, lifted it off its hook and set it down on the floor, leaning against the skirting board, face to the wall.

He moved to the next one. Lifted it down. Set it against the first.

Chris stood in the doorway and watched him do it. One after another. The conference centre. The cultural quarter. The transport hub. *A Gateway to the Bay*. An old man in shirtsleeves at nine o'clock at night, in the empty Town Hall, taking down thirty-five years of futures one by one and stacking them face to the wall.

Where each frame had hung, there was a rectangle on the wallpaper, cleaner and brighter than the rest, like the ghost of a shop sign on an empty building.

Chris didn't stay to see him finish. He went quietly down the long red corridor and the main staircase and out of the side door into the cold, and stood for a moment under the Town Hall clock at Castle Circus. The drinkers on their benches were gone tonight, moved on or locked up or just too cold. Across the road, the pop-up police shop was dark.

He looked up. In the first-floor window, the Leader's light was still on.

* * *

Not everything ended.

The police investigation into Walter's death went on. Walter's body was ashes, and you can't hold a post-mortem on ashes. In the end the police could prove that a man calling himself a nephew had visited, taken a tin and arranged a cremation under a false name. But they couldn't prove what he'd done in that room for an hour and twenty minutes on the afternoon before Walter died. And they never found the man.

His face, the ordinary face from Sharon's video and Chris's footage, was circulated to every force in the country. Nobody recognised it. The name in the care home's visitors' book belonged to a man who had died in 1994. The grey hatchback was found burned out in a lay-by near Exeter in the second week of January, with false plates. After that, nothing. Jono said men like that didn't get caught; they got retired.

The inquest into the Land Agent's death at Berry Head recorded an open conclusion. His sister, who lived in Plymouth, said in court that her brother had walked that path every day for fifteen years and would never, ever have gone

near the edge with the dog. The coroner said he had no doubt that was true, and no evidence to say otherwise.

The Broker left the country on the Monday after the projection. He was believed to be in Switzerland. The firm with three initials in St James's closed its office within a month. Its brass plate was unscrewed from the door. The Jersey companies, all nine of them, began to sell. Fast, and cheap, mostly to Vicky. The Serious Fraud Office announced that it had "opened an inquiry into matters relating to property transactions in South Devon." Ruth Pym said, briskly, that it would take years, and that most of what he'd done would turn out to be legal. That, she said, was the real scandal.

The Officer took early retirement in February, on the grounds of ill health. A week after he left, Richard received a plain white envelope at his house in Paignton with no return address. Inside was a single sheet of council-headed paper. On it, in neat, careful handwriting, it said only:

I am very sorry about the emails. I was told to. I should have refused.

It wasn't signed. Richard put it in his box file marked *SEAFRONT*, at the very back, and didn't mention it to anyone for a long time.

And Walter's ashes were never found.

Jono minded that most. More than the Broker in Switzerland, more than the Fixer's ordinary face on every police computer in England, more than the open conclusion. He'd sat with Walter at that window every morning and every night for three years, and he hadn't even been able to bring him home.

"Justice isn't finished," he said to Chris, one night in the kitchen, with Biscuit asleep across his feet. "It might never be. That's how it goes, a lot of the time. You don't get all of it. You get what you can prove, and you live with the rest."

Chris looked at the noticeboard by the fridge. The A3 print was still there. Three men beside a dark car outside the Lightwave gates. One dead. One in Switzerland. One building a boat in Brixham.

"So what do we do?" he said.

Jono looked at the print too. Then he looked at the calendar on the kitchen wall, where somebody, Fred probably, had drawn a big circle round a date in May, and written beside it in marker pen: *ELECTION. FINISH THINGS.*

"We build something," he said. "So it's not for nothing."

29 – The Gates Lift

They built it in eleven weeks.

Richard said afterwards that it was the fastest thing he had ever seen built in Torbay, and possibly in England. That was because nobody had asked permission from anyone who could say no.

Vicky bought the Bailey's site in the second week of February. It came from a Jersey company that, since the night of the projection, had wanted very badly to be rid of everything it owned in the bay. She paid a fair price, which was a great deal less than the Fund had once hoped for and a great deal more than it had paid. Then she leased the site, for a pound a year, for fifteen years, to a charity that hadn't existed a month before. *The Lightwave Academy*, it was called. Its trustees were Ken, Maureen, a retired toolmaker called Alf and a retired electronics engineer called Bernard, with a combined age, Maureen worked out, of three hundred and eleven.

Richard drew it in four days. Nothing grand. He said the grand things could come later, when there was money and permission and a council that finished things. This was what could be built *now*. A long, low workshop, timber-framed, with big doors at one end that opened onto the square, roof lights all along the ridge, and at the far end a brick chimney.

Tom built the frame.

He came over from Brixham with two of the shipwrights from his yard and three of Dan's trawlermen, who turned out to be very good with a mallet. They raised it in oak, the old way, with pegged joints and not a single steel bolt. The

Lightwave men watched from the edge of the site with folded arms and critical expressions, and then, after the first morning, put down their flasks and started helping. Fred carried timber. Jono carried timber when he wasn't working. Chris, with his bad shoulder, held the end of a measuring tape for Richard and was told off four times for letting it sag.

The council sent a letter about planning permission in the third week. Vicky's lawyers sent a letter back. The council sent another letter. Richard put both of them in his box file.

The hoardings came down in the eighth week.

All of them. The whole long run of faded panels, with the pale families and the grey ice creams and *A NEW GATEWAY FOR PAIGNTON. COMING 20*. Fred and the teenagers from the storm took them down one by one with spanners and stacked them in a skip. Except one. The third panel from the bus shelter, with the rusted corner and the marker-pen line underneath: *WALTER WAS HERE. WE ARE STILL HERE.* Richard had that one taken off whole, carefully, and leaned against the back wall of the workshop.

For the first time in five years, you could see straight across the site from Station Square. Rubble, buddleia, the puddle, and in the middle of it, a long oak frame going up against the sky.

People stopped in the street to look at it. Day after day. They stood on the pavement with their shopping, and watched.

* * *

The Albion came down too, in the ninth week.

It had to. The shell was dangerous, the engineers said, and had been since the night of the fire. The Jersey company that owned it had sold it to Vicky with everything else, and she paid for the demolition herself. But before the machines went in, Richard went up on a cherry picker with two men from the demolition firm and a stone saw. They cut out the whole fascia stone above the old doorway in one piece, the long slab with the scorched painted letters on it, and lowered it gently to the ground on straps.

ALBION

It was black with soot at the edges, the gold almost gone, the paint cracked and blistered. Readable.

Fred stood and watched them lower it. When it touched the ground he walked over and stood in front of it for a long time with his hands in his pockets.

Then he crouched down and put his hand on the letters. On the *A*. The way Richard had put his hand on the lowest step of the promenade, and Walter on the glass, and Ken on the old green generator.

"Where's it going?" he said.

"Inside," Richard said. "Above the forge." He looked at Fred. "If that's all right with you."

Fred didn't answer for a long time. Then he nodded.

* * *

The opening was on a Saturday at the end of March. Eleven o'clock in the morning.

Chris walked there from home. He went the long way, down Torbay Road from the sea end, past the shops: the vape shop, the charity shops, the nail bar, the café with three customers, the empty units with their TO LET boards. They were all still there. Nothing had changed on Torbay Road, not yet. But two of the whitewashed windows had notices in them now, handwritten, that hadn't been there in October. *Under offer*. And one, at the top near the station, an old empty unit that had once been a shoe shop, had a new sign going up over the door. A small firm from White Rock, one of the handful started by ex-Lightwave engineers, was opening a town-centre office. It was the first business to move *into* Torbay Road in eleven years.

At the bottom of the road, at eight minutes past eleven, the bells started.

Ding-ding-ding-ding.

The amber lights flashed. The barriers came down, slowly, with that municipal dignity, on both sides of the line. And Paignton stopped. The traffic stopped. The pedestrians stopped. Chris stopped, at the barrier, with everyone else.

He stood there, as he had stood there on the morning after the Albion burned, and waited.

It was a long one. Three minutes. Four. Nothing came. He looked at the people waiting beside him, and he noticed something.

Nobody was looking at their phones.

They were looking across the line, over the barriers, towards Station Square. A woman with a pushchair. Two schoolgirls. A man with a dog. A builder with a coffee. All of

them looking the same way, at the long oak building with its brick chimney standing where the hoardings used to be, and at the crowd gathering in front of its open doors.

Four minutes and twenty seconds.

Then from the left, a long whistle, and slowly, gloriously, the steam train came through. Green and black, brass gleaming, chuffing white steam into the cold spring air, the driver leaning out of the cab with his elbow on the sill. As he went past the barrier he looked across at the square, at the new building and the crowd, and he gave a long, joyful blast on the whistle that went on and on and echoed off every building in Station Square.

The crowd in the square turned and cheered him.

The last carriage went by.

And the barriers lifted.

Slowly, both sides. The bells stopped. The amber lights went off. The traffic didn't move at first. For a long second nobody moved at all.

Then the woman with the pushchair walked across the line towards the square. And the schoolgirls. And the man with the dog. And the builder with his coffee. And Chris. And all the people who had been waiting at the barrier, and the people getting out of their stopped cars and leaving them at the kerb with the hazards on, walked across the line together into Station Square.

* * *

There were more people than at the projection, Chris thought. Or perhaps it only felt that way, in daylight.

They filled the square again. The Lightwave men at the front with their badges. Maureen with her thermos. Mrs Hellier in her wheelchair with her granddaughter. Dan and the trawlermen. The storm teenagers, Tom and his wife and daughter, the woman with the spaniel, Sharon at her window with a cup of tea. The vicar, the people from the church, the plumber. Ruth Pym, who had driven down from Exeter and was standing a little apart in a raincoat, looking as if she disapproved of the whole thing and wouldn't have missed it for anything.

Vicky, beside Richard, in hard hats, both of them. Vicky's phone was in her hand on a video call. On the screen, very small, in a white shirt with no tie, Mr Tan was watching from forty-two floors above the port in Singapore, where it was seven o'clock in the evening.

And somewhere on another phone, in another country, on a livestream with nine hundred thousand people watching, a young woman with long dark hair sat cross-legged on a hotel bed and typed a single line into the chat:

Save me a seat.

* * *

Jono spoke first.

He did it from the stone bollard at the corner of the square by the bus shelter, the one Fred had sat beside on the night of the fire. He had Richard's battery amplifier, of course. He was wearing his care worker's tunic under his coat, with

the lanyard round his neck, because he'd done four calls that morning before he came, and had four more after.

He didn't make a speech. Not really.

"I've been asked a lot of times in the last few months," he said, "whether I'm going to stand for Parliament. Which party. Which side. Left or right." He looked out at the square. "And I've thought about it a lot. And the answer is: yes. I'm going to stand."

A sound went through the crowd, rising. He held up a hand.

"I'm not going to tell you which party today," he said. "Because I don't think it's the question that matters. Not here. Not now." He pointed behind him, at the long oak building with its doors open. "There's one question. One. And I'm going to ask it everywhere I go, in every street, on every doorstep, from now until the vote. I'm going to ask it until everyone in this town is sick of hearing it."

He paused.

"Do you want people in charge who can finish things?" he said. "Or don't you?"

He let it sit.

"That's it. That's the whole of it. Everything else follows from that. The jobs. The wages. The care. The young people staying. The old people looked after. All of it." He looked at the workshop. "A man in Singapore has put more money on the table than this town has seen in fifty years, and he's asked for one thing in return. Not loyalty, not a party, not a vote for him. Just that the people who run this place can do what they

say they'll do, by the day they say they'll do it." He shook his head slowly. "That's not a big ask. Anywhere else in the world, that's not even a question. Here, it's been too much to ask for forty years."

He looked at Ken, at the front, and at the Lightwave men in their badges.

"These men built the glass that carried the world's voices under the sea," he said. "Then they were told there was nothing left for them. That it was all over. That the future was serving teas." He shook his head. "It was a lie. Somebody wrote it down in a notebook on the day it was decided. We've all seen it now. On those hoardings, eighteen feet high." He nodded at the workshop. "That building is the answer. Built in eleven weeks, by people who were told they couldn't build anything. And today, for the first time in twenty-five years, somebody's going to make something in it."

He switched off the amplifier and stepped down.

It wasn't a roar. It was the other thing, the thing from the harbour wall in November, only bigger: the sound of five thousand people who had just heard what they'd always known, said out loud.

* * *

The doors of the workshop stood open to the square.

Inside, it smelled of new oak and wood shavings and something else, something sharp and metallic and old that Chris hadn't smelled since he was a boy. Machine oil. Coke. Iron.

Down the long oak hall, under the roof lights, there were workbenches, rows of them, and tools in racks on the walls. Lathes and drills and vices, donated, borrowed, rescued from garages and sheds all over the bay. Some of them had *LIGHTWAVE* stamped on them. At the benches, waiting, in new overalls, stood the first apprentices: eighteen of them, aged sixteen to thirty. Some were the teenagers from the storm. Some were people Chris didn't know. One of them was the boy Jono had pulled out of the sea.

And at the far end, against the brick chimney, stood the forge.

It was a proper one. Brick-built hearth, cast-iron fire pot, a big leather bellows that Alf had found in a barn on Dartmoor and spent three weeks restoring, a hood going up into the chimney. Beside it, an anvil, old and black and scarred, a hundred and fifty pounds of it, mounted on a section of oak trunk that Tom had brought over from Brixham. Racks of tongs and hammers and punches on the wall.

And above it, set into the brickwork of the chimney breast, the long scorched stone slab from the front of the Albion.

ALBION

Black at the edges. The gold nearly gone. Readable.

Beneath it, on a single iron hook driven into the brick, hung a framed photograph. An old man in a high-backed chair at a window, a blanket over his knees, his big hands folded on it, firelight on his face. Walter, from the first film. Watching.

* * *

Fred stood at the forge in a leather apron, with Ken beside him.

He'd been working with Ken every day for six weeks. Learning to build a fire, and keep it, and read its colours. Learning the hammer. He'd burned himself four times and dropped things twice and been sworn at by Ken more often than he could count, in a way that Chris had seen made him stand up very straight. He was still on universal credit. He still had no house, no car and no pension. In two weeks, if the academy's first grant came through, he'd be its first paid apprentice: a proper wage, eighteen months, with a qualification at the end. It would be his first job in twelve years that he hadn't had to wait for a text to find out whether he was on that night.

Biscuit lay under the workbench nearest the forge, watching everything, his head on his paws.

The square had come in behind them, as many as could fit, crowding the doors, standing on benches, filling the long oak hall. The others pressed in at the doors and stood on tiptoe outside. Chris found himself near the front, between Jono and Richard. Vicky held her phone up so that a man in Singapore could see. Tom stood by the anvil with his hand resting on the oak trunk he'd brought.

It went very quiet.

Ken handed Fred a box of matches.

Fred looked at it in his hand for a moment. A box of matches. Chris saw him think of it. The night of the fire. The

bench. The man with the sports bag going into the alley. Eighteen minutes. A box of matches.

Then Fred struck one.

He crouched and held it to the kindling in the fire pot, the paper and the dry wood shavings, Tom's shavings from the oak frame. They caught. A little yellow flame, then a bigger one. He fed it, carefully, the way Ken had taught him, with small pieces, then bigger ones. Then the coke on top, black and crumbling. Then he stood up and took hold of the handle of the great leather bellows and pulled it down, slowly, and let it rise, and pulled it down again.

The fire breathed.

Air roared up through the fire pot. The flames went from yellow to orange to a deep, fierce, pulsing red. Sparks went up into the hood in a bright stream. The coke caught and began to glow from the heart outwards, orange, then yellow, then almost white. The heat came off it in a wave you could feel on your face from ten feet away. The light of it filled the end of the hall, flickering on the oak frame, on the faces of the crowd, on the old man in the photograph, and on the scorched letters of the stone above.

ALBION.

Fred kept pumping. Ken stood beside him, watching the fire with narrowed eyes, the way he'd watched glass come off the drawing towers fifty years before. Then he nodded once and handed Fred a short bar of steel in a pair of tongs.

Fred put it in the fire. They waited. The whole hall waited. Nobody spoke. The bellows breathed. The bar went red, then orange, then bright yellow-white at the tip.

Fred drew it out, glowing. He laid it on the anvil. He picked up the hammer.

And in the long oak hall on the site where the Bailey's Hotel had stood, on the morning the gates lifted, in front of five thousand people and a man in Singapore, under the scorched name of the building that had burned on the night it all began, the first blow rang out.

It was a clear, high, ringing note, like a bell.

Then another. Then another. Steady. Rhythmic. Getting surer.

Chris stood and listened to it, and found that he couldn't see properly, and didn't mind.

Twenty-five years. Twenty-five years since anyone in that square had made anything with their hands. And now the sound of it, ringing out through the open doors into Station Square, across the line where the barriers had lifted, up Torbay Road and down to the sea.

We used to make things, you know. Here.

We still do.

* * *

That night, for the first time since the Albion burned, Chris slept without dreaming.

No flies. No drone. No dialling tone. No ship in a storm off Thatcher Rock. No wave. No old photographs fading in his hands.

He lay down at eleven o'clock, with the window open a crack and the sound of the sea a long way off, and the last thing he heard before he slept was very faint, across the rooftops from the direction of the square. Someone was still at the forge, late, practising. A hammer on an anvil. Steady. Unhurried. Ringing.

He slept straight through until morning. He did not dream at all.

* * *

This is where the story stops.

The election is in May. The decision on the hotel on the Strand is still waiting. The man in the navy suit is somewhere in Switzerland. The man in the dark jacket was never found. Walter's ashes were never brought home.

And somewhere in Torbay, tonight, someone is standing at a window looking at an empty building. They're thinking what Walter thought, what Fred thought, what the Leader thought for forty years: that nothing here will ever change, that it's always been like this, that it always will be.

It isn't true. It was never true. Somebody wrote it down in a notebook on the day they decided it, and then they made sure everybody believed it.

The next part isn't ours to write.

It's yours.