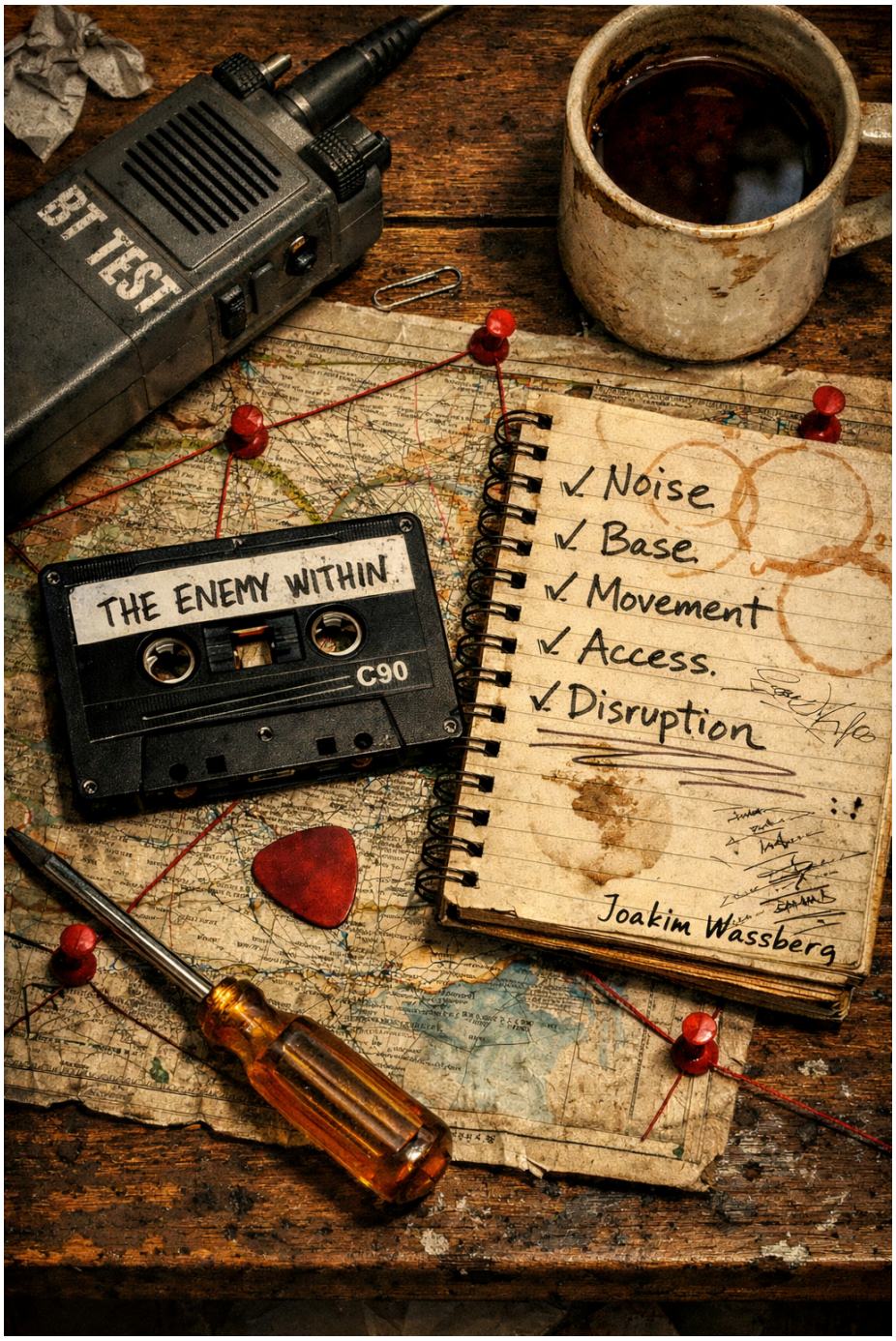
The Enemy Within

Joakim Wassberg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THE ENEMY WITHIN
C90
✓ Noise
✓ Base
✓ Movement
✓ Access
✓ Disruption
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About the author

Joakim Wassberg writes historically grounded fiction with a bias towards lived detail: the small routines, the local language, the awkward jokes, the practical problems, the private compromises. His work is driven by research, first-hand testimony, and an interest in how ordinary people experience events that later get flattened into headlines.

Alongside fiction, he builds tools and workflows for long-form creative projects, and he is drawn to the overlap between story, memory, and technology: how we record what happened, how we retell it, and how those retellings shape what comes next.

Preface

There are places in this novel that are not mine.

I have borrowed names—towns and villages and streets that hold real lives, real memories, and real griefs and joys. If, in doing so, I have caused offence or hurt—if the shape of my fiction brushes up against your home and feels like trespass—then I am truly sorry. I have tried to write with respect, but respect does not erase the fact that these are living places, and that a name on a page can carry weight.

I grew up far from the coalfields. In 1984–85 I was in Sweden, and yet the miners' strike reached me anyway. It travelled through radio reports and newspaper photographs, through the tone of adult conversations, through the sense that something was being decided—publicly, brutally—about what kind of society people would be allowed to build.

Even from a distance, it was impossible not to feel the human scale of it: communities holding together under pressure, families reorganising their whole lives around solidarity, and the sharp line that forms when power chooses to treat neighbours as enemies.

This book is my attempt to honour what that period still asks of us.

Not in slogans, but in the texture of it: the meetings that run late, the cups of tea gone cold, the small humiliations and the private courage, the infrastructure of care that doesn't make the headlines but makes survival possible.

I wanted to write a story that shows what we can do—and what we can achieve—if we come together and decide that it is worth standing on the good side. The side where we stop looking at each other as enemies within anything, and start seeing each other as human beings: people who should look after one another, and help.

Boge/Åmål, November 2025

Joakim Wassberg

Prologue – November 2025, London

The cardboard box gave up halfway between the bedroom and the living room. The side split with a tired sigh and everything tumbled out across the rug: tapes, photographs, folded leaflets, envelopes with the glue long since dead.

I sat down on the floor before my back could complain about it and let the mess settle around me. C90s and C60s skidded to a halt against the coffee table, some in their cracked plastic cases, some bare with only the handwriting on the inlays to tell them apart. COALFACE – DEMO, one said in my early block capitals. ORGREAVE – SHELL/NUM WOMEN, another. POLL TAX DEF PACK – DRAFT. The ink on some had faded to the colour of an old bruise, but the grooves were still there if you knew how to read them.

Underneath the tapes were photographs, curled at the corners where damp had got in. One of Shell in The Furnace office with a biro behind her ear and three phones wedged into whatever bit of shoulder and cheek she could spare. One of my dad, Bill, outside Grimethorpe Colliery in his donkey jacket, hand up to his brow against a winter sun, the slag heap rising grey behind him. One of a packed hall, fists in the air, a banner half-visible along the top edge of the frame. NO POLL TAX. I remembered the heat of that night like it was something I could still step into if I closed my eyes and leaned the right way.

None of it was an accident. That was the part people never believed.

'You all right down there?'

The voice came from the doorway. I looked up. Keira was leaning on the frame, one hand hooked into the strap of her rucksack, the other cupping a cardboard coffee from the place on the corner. She was twenty-two, or twenty-three, somewhere in that age where the years don't stick yet. Journalism student, neighbour in the flat upstairs, occasional cat-feeder when I went north. She was finishing a dissertation on something to do with 'counter-narratives in British protest movements' – I had read the title once on a printout she left in the hallway and understood about half of it.

She had her own battles, too. I had seen her come back from gig shifts with that particular kind of exhaustion that reminded me of my mam after a late at the supermarket. Different uniform, same empty eyes. She had helped organise a rent strike in our block last year, spreadsheets and WhatsApp groups instead of phone trees and photocopied leaflets, but the principle was familiar enough.

'Fine,' I said. 'Box surrendered. I won the war.'

She stepped over a small drift of cassette inlays and perched on the arm of the sofa, peering down.

'Wow,' she said. 'Ancient artefacts.'

On the television, the sound was turned low but the captions marched along faithfully. THIRTY-FIVE YEARS SINCE FALL OF THATCHER, the headline

said. Grainy footage of a younger Margaret in a blue suit flashed on screen, then a cut to some professor with tidy hair in front of a bookcase. That was what had set me off this morning – seeing the date on the news, remembering I had a box somewhere with her name on it.

'Careful,' I said, nodding at the tapes. 'Those ancient artefacts were built as weapons.'

'What, mysterious brown plastic rectangles?' she said.

'Among other things,' I said. 'They kept some people awake at night, put it that way.'

I picked one tape out of the pile and held it up to the light. The plastic was cloudy, the screw heads inside dull. In my handwriting across the inlay: COAL-FACE – LIVE AT 100 CLUB.

'They're saying it was inevitable,' I said. 'Demographic shifts. Europe. Cabinet fatigue. All that. He just said "the street protest element was significant but not decisive".'

'That's what they always say,' Keira said. 'If it doesn't happen in a committee room, it doesn't count.' She paused. 'It is the same with the rent stuff. We got the council to back down on evictions, but the papers made it sound like a policy review. Nothing about the sixty families who refused to leave.'

She slid off the arm and crouched properly, picking up one of the photographs. It was the one of The Furnace from the back of the main hall: lights, bodies, the band a small blur of movement at the far end. You could not see my face, just a silhouette with a guitar and a microphone stand.

'This was here?' she asked. 'In this bit of London?'

'Round the corner from my place in Dalston, East London,' I said. 'Building's a yoga studio now. You can still see where we painted the sign if the sun hits it right, under the new logo. THE FURNACE. We did not think it would last a year. It nearly lasted ten.'

'And this is you shouting at people?' She tilted the photo.

'That's me shouting at people,' I agreed. 'We were very good at that. The shouting, I mean.'

She sat back on her heels and looked about the room. It was nothing special: two-seater sofa that had seen better days, cheap bookcases holding the things I had not quite got round to throwing away, a small stereo with speakers that were older than she was, a portable record deck I'd bought in a fit of nostalgia a few years back. The kitchen was separated by a half-wall, a pair of mugs in the sink, a loaf of bread in a paper bag, a jar of marmalade with the lid not quite on.

Only the walls gave anything away. Band posters, most of them ours or someone's we'd played with. A black-and-white photograph of a march, people pouring over a bridge like a human river.

On the floor by the sofa, another box. This one held videotapes, labelled in Shell's neat hand. POLL TAX – COACH GRID MEETING, read one. STEWARD TRAINING. COURT DAY. FINCHLEY FACES – MASTER.

Keira nudged it with her foot. 'How many of these have you got?'

'Of the VHS?' I said. 'Dozens. Somewhere in the boxes in the bedroom. Charlotte kept the negatives of the stills. I suppose the university or someone has them now. Or a skip. Hard to tell with universities.'

There was a brief silence. On the television the professor was replaced by a clip of Trafalgar Square in chaos: smoke, police lines, young faces twisted in anger or fear. I could not hear the commentary, but I did not need it. I had heard every version they'd ever written.

'You know,' Keira said, 'we're doing a thing on this for the student station. Thatcher. The miners' strike. Poll Tax. All that. "Lives behind the headlines", they're calling it. Very BBC.'

'Catchy,' I said.

'We've got politicians and academics and a former chief constable. Couple of talking heads from think tanks. My tutor keeps going on about "structural factors".' She picked up another tape, turned it over. 'I said we should get someone who was actually there.'

'Plenty of us were there,' I said.

'Yeah, but you live downstairs,' she said. 'And you have…' She gestured to the sprawl of cardboard and plastic. 'Evidence. Everyone else just has opinions.'

'Evidence,' I repeated. The word sat heavy on my tongue. We had not called it that when we were stuffing it into boxes, back when the ink was still wet. Proof, maybe. Back-up. Insurance for the day they lied.

I pushed a pile of photographs aside to clear space on the carpet and sat back, legs stretched out. My knees complained in a way that would have made my twenty-year-old self laugh.

'You don't keep forty years of this lot by accident,' I said. 'We did not just forget to throw it out. Every tape, every leaflet, every summons – someone made a choice to keep it. We thought: one day they'll say we imagined it, so we'd better make it hard for them.'

She finished her coffee and put the empty cup on the table. For a moment she watched the television. The footage had moved on to a shot of Thatcher leaving Number Ten for the last time, cheeks wet but spine rigid, Denis's hand at her elbow.

‘Do you think you brought her down?’ Keira asked, as if she were asking whether I wanted sugar in my tea. ‘You lot. The “enemy within” and all that.’

I had mentioned the phrase to her once before, weeks back, when she had asked why I kept a box labelled ENEMY WITHIN under my bed. She had laughed at the time, thought I was joking. Now she was not laughing.

The phrase hung in the room like smoke.

In my head, I could hear other phrases layered underneath: riot. Thugs. Scum. Responsible citizens. We had been all of those, depending on who you asked and what they wanted to prove.

I leaned over and turned the television off. The room lost its flicker and went oddly lopsided without it. Outside, a bus pulled away from the stop with a long exhale, tyres rolling through last night’s rain.

‘I can’t prove anything,’ I said. ‘That’s the short answer. There is not a graph you can point to with “Danny Ashcroft” on one axis and “Prime Ministerial stability” on the other. No neat line going down.’

She smiled at that, then sobered. ‘And the long answer?’

‘The long answer,’ I said, ‘is in those boxes.’

I put the tape I’d been holding on the coffee table and reached for another, one of Shell’s. POLL TAX DEF PACK – MASTER in her neat capitals. Next to it I set the Finchley tape, and one of the early Coalface demos.

‘They’ll tell you the big things,’ I said. ‘The letters to Europe. The argument in the back of a car. The day a few very calm men walked down a corridor to tell her she was finished. They like that bit, because it happens indoors, in rooms they’re allowed to film. It looks like control. It looks tidy.’

I tapped each spine in turn.

‘They won’t tell you about this,’ I said. ‘They might mention “grass-roots protest”, like it’s a sort of weather system. Background noise. But they won’t sit you down and say: there were five things, five fingerprints, that our lot left on that woman’s downfall. Noise. Base. Movement. Access. Disruption. If you trace them, one after the other, you can feel where the cracks started.’

Keira shifted on the sofa, shoes off now, feet tucked up under her.

‘Five fingerprints?’ she said.

‘We first wrote those five words down at Mam’s kitchen table in ’85,’ I said. ‘Trying to name what we were building. First one was noise – songs on C90s that went further than we ever could. Second was base: a place built out of nothing, where people could meet and plan. Third was movement – coaches, stewarding, all the dull bits that get bodies safely from A to B. Fourth was access – getting inside the worlds that did not want us there. And the fifth was disruption: films and court packs and all the paper and pressure that stopped

them rewriting what they did and carried the fight into places they thought were safe.'

I nudged the Finchley tape towards her.

'That one sits mostly in the fourth,' I said. 'Influence. Finchley Faces. But they all bleed into each other if you look closely enough.'

She watched my hands as if the tapes might shift under their own weight.

'Do you ever…' She hesitated. 'Do you ever worry you're giving yourself too much credit?'

'Every day,' I said. 'That's why it's taken me this long to open these boxes. You don't want to be the ageing bore in the corner telling anyone who'll listen that he, personally, changed history by shouting into a stolen microphone.'

'You did shout into microphones, though,' she said.

'Oh, I shouted plenty,' I said. 'We all did. But shouting's just weather. What interested me, later on, was the infrastructure underneath it. The phone trees. The coach grids. The boring bits you never see in the documentaries. That's where we stopped just being loud and started getting in the way.'

She picked up the Coal Not Dole poster from where it had slipped down behind the sofa and propped it back on the windowsill.

'I can't prove I helped take a Prime Minister down,' I said, hearing the words as much as speaking them. 'But I know where some of the cracks started, because I was there with a chisel. And I can show you the grooves we left if you like. They're all here.'

She considered that, then glanced towards the silent television.

'My lot will say it's anecdotal,' she said. 'My tutor loves that word.'

'Course he does,' I said. 'It lets him file people away and get back to his graphs. Thing is, these aren't just anecdotes. They're exhibits. We kept them for you. For whoever turned up one day wanting a different version of events.'

Her head snapped back to me. 'For me?'

'Not you personally,' I said. 'We did not know your name. But we knew there'd be some kid, forty years on, trying to write their way through the official story. We talked about it, you know. Back then. After the worst bits. "They'll say it did not happen like this," Shell said. "So we best make sure we've got proof."'

Keira's fingers tightened on the edge of the coffee table.

'You talked about that at the time?' she asked. 'Not just afterwards?'

'At the time,' I said. 'Orgreave. Chernobyl. Hillsborough. Trafalgar. Every time the telly lied about what we'd just watched with our own eyes, somebody

in the room said: “Keep the tapes. Keep the summons. One day some poor sod will need them.”’ I shrugged. ‘Looks like that poor sod turned up.’

She laughed, a quick, startled sound, and pushed her hair back from her face.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘Say I am that poor sod. What do I do?’

‘You listen,’ I said. ‘You watch. You write it down in a way they can’t ignore. That’s your end. Mine is to make sure you don’t have to take my word for it.’

I got to my feet with more care than I once would have needed.

‘First rule of all this,’ I added. ‘You can’t talk about Thatcher on an empty stomach. That’s one other thing the structural analysts never mention. I’ll make tea. You start a list.’

‘A list?’ she said.

‘Tapes we need to get digitised,’ I said, nodding at the sprawl. ‘Photographs that have not seen daylight since nineteen ninety. Names you’ll have to change for legal reasons. If we’re doing this, we’re doing it properly. No one gets to say it all vanished because we could not be bothered to label a box.’

In the kitchen, I filled the kettle and spooned tea into the pot. Through the half-wall I could see her arranging tapes and photographs on the table in rough chronological piles, lips moving a little as she tried to sound out my old handwriting. She had already drawn two columns on a fresh page: THEN and NOW.

I poured hot water over the leaves and let the steam curl up into my face.

Brown plastic, curled photographs, a tally disc, and a kettle that took an age to boil. That was the arsenal.

‘All right?’ Keira called.

I picked up the teapot and two mugs and carried them back through, careful not to tread on anything important.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘You wanted lives behind the headlines. Let’s see if you can keep up.’

She grinned and uncapped her pen. On the table, she had started a second list under the first. Five numbers, evenly spaced down the page.

‘Noise, base, movement, access, disruption,’ she read out, brow furrowed. ‘Is that right?’

‘Close enough,’ I said. ‘We’ll argue about the labels later. For now, they’re just fingerprints. Places where we pressed ourselves into the story so they could not scrape us off without leaving marks.’

The tape on the table, the one about the Square, caught the light as I sat down, the title flashing up for a second before it dulled again.

I wrapped my hands round the mug and let the heat sink into stiff fingers.

‘So,’ I said. ‘There’s this lad. Seventeen. Coal dust under his nails, guitar he bought off his cousin, a dad who thinks music is what you put on in the pub after a shift. One morning – not that morning, but later, after things got worse – he hears a phrase on the radio he’s never forgotten. “The enemy within.”’

Keira’s pen moved.

‘I should warn you,’ I added. ‘He grows up painfully slowly. He shouts before he listens. He thinks tapes can topple governments.’

‘Does he?’ she said.

‘He finds out tapes can do something,’ I said. ‘You can decide for yourself how much. That’s your job now. Mine was to make sure you’d have something to measure your theories against.’

Outside, a siren rose and fell. Somewhere, a bus stop display ticked over to a new number.

On my table, the boxes waited.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Grimethorpe. 1984. Before any of this lot existed. Before we knew how small and how big we were. You ready?’

‘Always,’ she said.

So I started.

Chapter One – Saturday, 10 March 1984, Grimethorpe, South Yorkshire

When I think back to where it began, it was not Orgreave or marches in London or some speech in Parliament. It was this kitchen. My dad at the sink, Saturday morning, no coal on his shoulders for once. Mam in her nightdress with an apron tied over the top. The little radio on the shelf trying to drag the world in from somewhere far off and important.

It was still dark outside, just a thin strip of grey over the rooftops. The little radio did its best with the Today programme, voices arriving through static like they had had to walk all the way from London to get here.

The kitchen smelled of bacon ends, hot fat and steam, and the permanent background note of coal that clung to everything round here. Saturday breakfast, but no one was relaxed. The welfare meeting was at half ten and everyone knew what it meant.

I sat at the table in my decent trousers – not work clothes, Mam had insisted – watching Dad stand by the sink in his vest, pale skin powdery grey where the coal never fully washed out. He was rolling a cigarette and listening to the radio with that tight, flat expression he got when they were talking about the union.

'…fresh calls this morning for Arthur Scargill to put the National Union of Mineworkers' strike plans to a national ballot,' the presenter was saying. 'The government insists it will not give in to what ministers described as "industrial blackmail" by a minority of militant unions, determined, in the words of one Cabinet source, to "hold the country to ransom."'

Mam half-turned from the stove. 'That will be us, then. Militants.' She said it lightly, but there was a crease between her eyebrows.

The reporter droned on about uneconomic pits, energy policy, law and order. There was a snatch of some minister – not her, not yet – talking about 'facing down extremists' and 'defending democracy'. He sounded very calm. They always did. You could hear the shape of something worse crouched just behind the words, like he was practising a phrase for later.

Dad's hand jerked. Tobacco spilled across the draining board.

'Extremists now, are we,' he muttered. 'Last year they were glad enough of lights turning on.'

He did not raise his voice. Somehow that made it worse. He just stood there, Saturday morning when he should have been reading the paper or fixing something in the yard, listening to his life being folded into a word that fit in someone else's mouth.

Mam reached past him and turned the gas down under the pan so the bacon would not burn.

'They have been calling Scargill owt they can think of for months,' she said. 'You know what she is like, Thatcher.'

'He can take it,' Dad said. 'He is thick-skinned. It is the lads she is talking about now, whether she says it or not. Anyone says no is a problem that needs sorting.'

He brushed the spilled tobacco back into his palm, fingertips shaking a bit, and tipped it into the Rizla.

I looked from him to the radio and back again. I had seen Thatcher on the telly enough times: hair like a helmet, pearls, that calm schoolmistress tone. Holding the country to ransom, extremists, blackmail. It sounded like something from the front of a comic. Bad guys in balaclavas hijacking a train.

'That us, then?' I said, before I could stop myself. 'Ransomers. Extremists.'

Dad glanced at me, eyes tired but sharp.

'You go down there and put your back into it day after day,' he said, 'and the country runs on what comes back up. Soon as it is not convenient, you are an extremist. That is how it works.'

Mam put a plate in front of him. Two rashers, one egg, a fried slice cut in half so it looked like more. There were three of us at the table those days – Mam,

Dad, me. My older brothers had moved out years back, one to a factory over in Barnsley, one to the army down south. The house felt emptier without them, like there were draughts where they used to sit.

'Eat that before it gets cold,' Mam said. She poured me tea, strong enough to fix leather, and slid the sugar bowl over. 'Both of you need your strength for this morning.'

The word extremist went round in my head as I picked up my fork. It did not match the man opposite me with the coal ingrained in his knuckles, or the woman who cut fried bread into two neat triangles so it looked like twice as much. It did not match the little run of terrace houses outside, leaning into one another so the wind did not get in. Whoever they meant on the radio, they had not walked down our street. If we were really some danger hidden inside the country, we were doing a good job of disguising it as Saturday breakfast and neat trousers for the welfare.

They moved on to interest rates and something about the Americans. Dad reached over and turned the volume down until it was just hiss.

'Meeting's at half ten,' he said, still not looking at either of us. 'Ken Handley called it yesterday. Every man at Grimethorpe pit.'

Mam wiped her hands on the tea towel, the corner already grey from use.

'And what do you reckon they will decide?' she asked quietly.

He scraped his fork across the plate, collecting the last bit of egg.

'Cortonwood walked out Monday,' he said. 'Bullcliffe Wood the same. Yorkshire Area's already voted to back them. Now it is our turn.'

'To vote,' Mam said.

'Aye. To vote.' He pushed his chair back. The legs made a sound on the lino I had heard every morning of my life. 'But we all know which way it will go. Can't let Cortonwood stand alone. If they close one pit, they will close them all. It is just a matter of when.'

He looked at me properly then.

'You coming?' he asked.

I hesitated. 'Can I? I have only just started.'

'You are down there with us, are you not?' Dad said. 'Your vote is as good as anyone's. That is how it works.'

For a second I just stared at the table. Toast crumbs, a smear of egg, the ring of his mug on the cloth. In a few hours we would be at the welfare with every other miner in Grimethorpe, deciding whether to walk away from our wages for something that might last weeks. Or months. Or longer.

'Aye,' I said. 'I am coming.'

Mam made a soft noise, halfway between approval and worry.

'Right then,' Dad said. 'Best get yourselves ready. It is not every day you vote to stop the world.'

•

We left the house just after ten. The street was already moving – men in their Saturday best, clean shirts and pressed trousers, walking in twos and threes toward the centre of the village. You could feel it in the air, that tightness, like everyone was holding their breath at once.

The March morning was wet and cold, the kind of damp that got into your bones. Streetlights were still on, yellow against the grey. A few curtains twitched as we passed – women watching their men go to decide the future.

The slag heap squatted to the east, a grey mountain against the lightening sky. Every windowsill we passed had its coating of coal dust, black on the white paint like a signature.

'Morning, Bill,' someone called from across the road.

'Morning, Ron.'

'All right, Danny?'

'Aye,' I said, dipping my chin. With Dad beside me I stood a bit taller. It was automatic, like checking your lamp battery before you went down.

We were not the only ones heading to the welfare. The flow of men increased as we got closer – older blokes in flat caps, younger lads barely out of school, deputies and face workers all mixed together. Nobody was talking much. Just the sound of boots on pavement and the odd cough.

The welfare club sat at the edge of the village, a squat brick building with small windows and a sign that had been repainted so many times you could see the ghosts of old letters underneath. It was where we held union meetings, where the band practised, where kids had birthday parties in the back room. The heart of Grimethorpe, if a place like ours could be said to have one.

By the time we got there, the car park was already full. Men were streaming through the double doors, stamping their feet, shaking rain off their shoulders. Inside, the main hall was packed.

It was not like a normal union meeting. This felt different. Heavier. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and tension, bodies pressed close, the smell of damp wool and cheap soap and something sharper underneath – fear, maybe, or anger that had not worked out what shape to take yet.

At the front, on the little raised platform where the band usually set up, Ken Handley stood with a clipboard. Branch Secretary, grey-haired, solid as a pit prop. Next to him was Jack Wade, younger, angrier, the kind of bloke who could make a room listen just by standing still.

I squeezed in next to Dad, shoulder to shoulder with men I had known all my life. Terry Barker from down our street. Frank who worked maintenance. Old Jim who had been underground since before I was born. Every face I knew, every voice familiar.

Someone passed round mugs of tea. I took one, hands grateful for the warmth.

Ken Handley cleared his throat. The room did not go quiet immediately – it took a few seconds for the message to spread, for men to nudge each other and turn toward the front.

'Right, lads,' Ken said. His voice was steady, the kind that had practice over machinery and wind. 'You know why we are here. Let us not waste time pretending otherwise.'

A low murmur ran through the room.

'Thursday, first of March, NCB told Cortonwood they are shutting in five weeks. Five weeks, after promising them five years. That pit's been there over a century. More than a thousand men. Gone, just like that.'

Someone swore under their breath.

'Monday, fifth of March, Cortonwood lads walked out. Held their own vote, same as we are doing today. Unanimous. Every man.'

Ken paused, let that sit.

'Bullcliffe Wood followed. Then Kellingley. Then pits across Yorkshire. Wednesday, the area met. Yorkshire NUM voted to back the walkouts, to make it official. We already had the mandate from eighty-one – any pit threatened with closure for economic reasons, we strike to defend it.'

He held up a piece of paper.

'This morning I got word from the area office. Arthur Scargill is calling it a national dispute on Monday. Yorkshire's out. Scotland's moving. Durham, South Wales, Kent – they are all deciding this weekend, same as us.'

Another murmur, louder this time.

'But it has to be our decision,' Ken went on. 'Not Arthur's. Not the area's. Ours. Every man in this room needs to say whether Grimethorpe Colliery stands with Cortonwood, or whether we go in Monday like nowt's happened.'

He looked out across the packed hall.

'I will tell you straight: Coal Board's got a list. Twenty pits, they say, but we all know it is more. Grimethorpe's on it. We have heard the rumours. Seventeenth, someone said. Could be higher, could be lower. Does not matter. If we let them close Cortonwood without a fight, we are next. And after us, every other pit in this country they decide is not making enough profit.'

Dad's jaw was tight beside me. I could feel the tension radiating off him.

Jack Wade stepped forward. His voice came out rougher, angrier.

'Government's been planning this for years,' he said. 'Stockpiling coal. Getting the laws changed. They want to break us, same as they broke the steelworkers. Thatcher said it herself – she wants rid of the unions, wants rid of anyone who says no. Well, we are saying no. Yorkshire's saying no. The question is, does Grimethorpe?'

'Too bloody right we do,' someone shouted from the back.

There was a ripple of agreement, but Ken held up his hand.

'We do this proper,' he said. 'This is not a rally. This is a vote. Every man gets to decide for himself. Cortonwood and Bullcliffe sent delegates this morning to tell us what they have seen, what they know about the closure programme. You lot need to hear it, then we vote.'

A bloke I did not recognise stepped up. Cortonwood badge on his jacket. He looked tired, hollowed out.

'I am Dave,' he said simply. 'From Cortonwood. We were told our pit had five years left, minimum. Invested in new equipment, did everything they asked. Then Monday, manager calls us in and says we are done in five weeks. No warning. No consultation. Just "you are finished, off you go."'

He swallowed hard.

'We walked out that afternoon. We had no choice. You let them do this without a fight, there is no point having a union at all. They will pick you off one by one, pit by pit, and you will wake up one morning and there will be nowt left.'

The room was completely silent now.

'I know what I am asking,' the Cortonwood bloke went on. 'I know you lot have families, bills, kids to feed. So do we. But if we do not stand together now, there will not be owt left to stand for.'

He stepped back. Ken nodded his thanks.

'Right,' he said. 'You have heard it. Cortonwood's out. Bullcliffe Wood's out. Yorkshire's backing them. Arthur's calling it national on Monday. The question before this branch is: does Grimethorpe Colliery join the strike, effective Monday morning, or do we go to work?'

He paused.

'This is not a secret ballot. We are doing it the old way – a show of hands. Anyone who wants to can speak first, say their piece. Then we vote.'

For a moment no one moved. Then Old Jim stood up, wheezing a bit.

'I have worked that pit forty-two years,' he said. 'My dad worked it before me. His dad before him. If we let them close Cortonwood, we are saying it was all for nowt. I am voting to stand with them.'

He sat down. There was a murmur of approval.

A younger lad – couldn't have been more than twenty – stood up, nervous.

'What if it lasts months?' he asked. 'What if they do not back down? I have a baby coming in June. How do we live with no wages?'

'Same way Cortonwood's living,' someone called out. 'Same way miners have always done. We look after our own.'

The lad sat down, not looking convinced but not arguing.

Dad stood up. My stomach clenched.

'I have been here twenty-three years,' he said. His voice was quiet but it carried. 'I have breathed that dust, crawled through them seams, watched good men get hurt for coal that keeps this country running. And now they are telling us we are not worth keeping. That we are uneconomic. That we are extremists for wanting to keep our jobs.'

He looked round the room.

'I have got a son just started at the pit. Seventeen. I do not want him spending his life underground, truth be told. But if there is no pit, there is nowt for him here at all. No work, no future, no village. Because that is what happens when the pit closes – the whole place dies.'

He paused.

'So I am voting to strike. Not because I think we will win. I do not know if we will. But because if we do not fight now, we have already lost.'

He sat down. I realised I had been holding my breath.

Ken scanned the room.

'Anyone else?'

Silence. Men shifted, looked at each other, but no one else stood.

'Right then,' Ken said. 'Time to vote. This is a resolution of the Grimethorpe NUM branch to join the national strike called by the Yorkshire Area, effective Monday twelfth of March, nineteen eighty-four. All in favour, raise your hand.'

There was a second – just one – where the room hung suspended. Then, like a wave, hands went up.

I looked round. Every hand. Every single one. Men young and old, married and single, those with kids and those without. A sea of raised arms, defiant and afraid and determined all at once.

I put my hand up too. Dad's was already raised beside me.

'Against?' Ken said.

Silence. Not a single hand.

‘Abstentions?’

Nothing.

Ken looked out at the forest of raised hands, and something shifted in his face.

‘Carried unanimously,’ he said, and his voice cracked just slightly. ‘Grimethorpe Colliery is on strike.’

The room erupted. Not cheering – it was too serious for that – but a low roar of voices, men turning to each other, shaking hands, clapping shoulders. Relief and dread mixed together.

‘Every hand in that room went up,’ Jack Wade said, loud enough to cut through the noise. ‘Near enough every man. That is Grimethorpe. We stand together.’

Someone started singing – ‘The Internationale’, rough and off-key – and others joined in. I did not know all the words but I hummed along, feeling the sound vibrate through the packed bodies around me.

Dad put his hand on my shoulder, squeezed once, said nothing.

Ken was calling for quiet again, trying to get the room’s attention.

‘Right, listen up,’ he shouted. ‘We have work to do. No one down the pit Monday. Pickets at the gates from four a.m. Monday morning, rotating shifts. We need rotas, we need organisation, we need to make sure every family’s looked after. Meeting tomorrow afternoon, two o’clock, back here. Bring your wives, bring anyone who wants to help. This is not just the men’s fight now. It is all of us.’

Men were already moving toward the doors, spilling out into the car park, lighting cigarettes, talking in clusters. The tension had broken into something else – not quite relief, but purpose. We had decided. Now it was real.

Outside, the rain had stopped but the sky was still grey. Men stood in groups, talking quietly, making plans. Some headed straight home to tell their families. Others went to the pub – the one that would give tick when the strike fund ran dry.

Dad and I walked back in silence for a while. The streets felt different now, like something had shifted in the foundations.

‘You all right?’ Dad asked eventually.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘I think so.’

‘It is done, then. Come Monday, we are out.’

I nodded. My hand was still tingling from being raised, from being counted. From being part of that unanimous sea.

‘What happens now?’ I asked.

Dad lit a cigarette, cupped his hand round the flame against the wind.

‘Now?’ he said. ‘Now we tell your mam, and then we work out how we are going to eat for the next however long this lasts. And come Monday morning, we stand at those gates and we do not let anyone through who is not meant to be there.’

He blew smoke into the cold air.

‘And we hope to God that when this is over, there is still a pit left to go back to.’

We turned the corner onto our street. Mrs Barlow was already on her step, arms folded, hair sticking up, waiting.

‘Well?’ she called as we got close. ‘What did you decide?’

‘We are out,’ Dad said simply.

She nodded, like she had known all along.

‘About bloody time,’ she said. ‘Letting them close pits without a fight. What kind of country would we be then?’

She went back inside. Dad and I kept walking.

At our door, Dad paused, hand on the latch.

‘You know this will not be easy,’ he said. ‘Could last weeks. Months, even. No wages. Police on the streets. You saw what they are saying on the radio – extremists, militants. It will get worse before it gets better.’

‘I know,’ I said.

‘And you still put your hand up.’

‘Aye.’

He nodded, something like pride flickering across his tired face.

‘Right then,’ he said. ‘Let us go tell your mam.’

Mam was at the kitchen table when we came in, hands wrapped round a mug, waiting.

‘Well?’ she said, though her face told me she already knew.

‘Unanimous,’ Dad said. ‘Every hand went up. We are out Monday.’

Mam closed her eyes for a second, then opened them and looked at me.

‘You voted too?’

‘Aye.’

She stood up, came over, pulled me into a hug that was fiercer than I expected.

‘Then we will make it work,’ she said into my shoulder. ‘Same as we always do.’

She let me go, turned to Dad.

‘I will ring Shell,’ she said. ‘And Mrs Kaur. We will need to organise. Meals, money, childcare. If the men are going to be on picket lines, the women will need to keep everything else running.’

‘Aye,’ Dad said quietly. ‘Aye, you will.’

Outside, the afternoon was drawing in. Soon it would be dark. Monday would come, and with it the strike. A year of hardship we could not yet imagine. Orgreave and police horses and empty cupboards and soup kitchens and everything else that came after.

But for now, in that kitchen, the three of us stood together. The decision made. The die cast.

Grimethorpe had voted. One hundred percent. And come Monday morning, the pit would be silent.

Chapter Two – April 1984, Grimethorpe to London

The first thing to go was the bacon.

By April the strike money, the brown envelopes from the union and the solidarity tins on the bar could just about stretch to bread, marg and whatever tins Mam could coax out of the cupboard. On good days there was jam. On Sundays there was sometimes a bit of corned beef if someone’s cousin in Doncaster had brought a tin from work. Shell had dropped off a bag of potatoes the day before – someone’s cousin had got them cheap at Barnsley market – and there was talk of the women organizing a communal kitchen at the welfare for anyone who was struggling.

That morning it was tea, toast and the sound of the letterbox.

Mam froze with the butter knife in her hand.

‘Bill?’ she called through to the front room. ‘Post.’

No answer. Dad had taken to letting the telly talk for him those days – morning news, then horses, then snooker, anything that was not reporters stood outside a pit with their voices pitched just a bit too bright.

She wiped her hands on her pinny and went to fetch the post. When she came back she had three envelopes – one brown, fat with windows, one thin white, and one that had my name written across the front in block capitals.

‘Daniel,’ she said, putting it down by my plate. ‘London.’

My stomach did a daft little lurch that had nowt to do with hunger. I knew the writing. Alex never did joined-up. Said it was a political statement against the

tyranny of cursive. Really it was because his handwriting looked like a spider after a pint if he tried.

I held the letter for a second without opening it. The paper was thicker than we ever had in the house. You could tell he had nicked it from somewhere proper.

'Go on then,' Mam said, trying for casual and not quite managing it. 'Let us see what your famous London friend has got to say.'

I slit it open with my thumb and unfolded the pages. Two sheets, covered both sides. Alex had never learned the meaning of keep it short.

I will not bore you with all of it. There was the usual nonsense about bands I had never heard of yet and how Camden was 'the new Manchester except with better shoes'. He described his attic room – sloping ceiling, mattress on the floor, mould creeping up one corner – like it was a palace. He had got a job a couple of evenings a week stacking shelves in a record shop, which he claimed was 'basically getting paid in vinyl fumes'. He had joined a band who were called, at the time of writing, either Static Decline or The Wired, depending on which member you asked.

And then, about halfway down the second page:

You should come.

He had underlined it twice.

Crash on our floor, see a bit of what is happening. There are squats, there are benefit gigs every other night, there are students chucking money in buckets like they have just discovered their conscience. We could get our stuff heard, Danny. Not just in the King's Head. Proper. I can probably sort you a few shifts at the shop if you do not mind being paid in cash and records.

I read it twice before I realised Mam was still standing there, wiping the same invisible crumb off the table.

'What does he want, then?' she said.

'Me to go down,' I said.

The words felt like they had been waiting in my mouth for days.

She sank into the chair opposite me, the knife still in her hand.

'To London?'

'Aye.'

I slid the letter across. She read it slowly, lips moving on the longer words. Every now and then she made a small sound – not quite a laugh, not quite a sniff – at one of Alex's lines.

When she reached the bit about me coming, she stopped, went back, read it again.

‘And what do you think?’ she said, finally.

The kettle clicked off behind her. The house felt very small.

‘I think…’ I started, then stopped. The answer lived in my chest like a tune you had not quite worked out yet, there but not smooth.

‘I think I do not want to be crawling round at the bottom of a hole when I am forty,’ I said, eventually. ‘And I think standing on a picket line here while the papers call us scum and nobody hears owt but Thatcher on the telly is not helping. Alex reckons there are people down there who would listen. Students. Bands. People who can write stuff in papers that do not hate us on sight.’

Years later I would recognise this as the moment Movement became real to me: not just going from Grimethorpe to London, but understanding that ideas and people had to travel if they were going to matter. That a tape in a jiffy bag could cross the distance between a welfare club and a squat. That you built the network by being part of it.

Mam put the letter down and folded her hands round her mug.

‘Your dad is not going to like it,’ she said.

‘I know.’

‘And you would be leaving in the middle of strike.’

‘I know that as well.’

She looked at me for a long time, taking me in like I was someone she had not quite met before.

‘You have always had your head in songs,’ she said, not unkindly. ‘Even when you were little, tapping your fingers on the table like you were counting summat only you could hear. I thought it was just a phase.’

‘So did I,’ I said. ‘Then Cortonwood shut.’

She smiled, quick and sad.

‘Finish your toast,’ she said. ‘Then you can go tell your father before someone else does.’

•

The picket line that afternoon felt like holding your ground against the tide.

They had been bringing more police in day by day – vans from out of county, lads who did not know anyone’s name. This time there was a coach as well, parked up along the road, its windows dark, METROPOLITAN POLICE on the side like something off the news.

‘What are they sending London coppers for?’ Frank muttered, shifting from foot to foot to keep the cold out of his toes. ‘They think we are some foreign country.’

‘Might be we are, to them,’ Shell said.

She was there with her clipboard and her scarf knotted tight, hair escaping from under a bobble hat. Shell had been in my life so long I could not remember not knowing her. She had babysat me when I was little, bossed me about when I was older, and somewhere along the way I had stopped thinking of her as Shell-from-down-the-road and started thinking of her more like an older sister. Now she was married, with Lily at Eddie’s mam’s while she spent half her time down here organising, and still somehow on every committee going – school, chapel, wherever women were trying to keep things running. She had been the one to bully Mam into speaking at the Barnsley rally the week before.

‘I have done a rota for tomorrow,’ she said, flicking through her papers. ‘Victoria is down for sandwiches, I have got Mrs Kaur on tea, and I am chasing men to carry urns because none of you can be trusted not to scald yourselves.’

‘Bossy cow,’ Frank said fondly.

‘Takes one to know one,’ she shot back.

We were all laughing when the coach doors opened.

It was not just the number of them. It was the way they moved: like they were one thing, not fifty. Helmets, shields, batons tucked neat at their hips. They formed a line without anyone seeming to say anything, just a shared understanding. I had seen lines like that on the telly, in Northern Ireland. It was different when they were looking at you.

‘Just remember,’ one of the union lads said under his breath. ‘They are not your friends. But they are not your target either. You keep your eyes on each other.’

Shouts went up. Some of ours jeered, some held their arms out wide, palms showing. The first shove came from somewhere in the middle, like a ripple. A shield pushed forward, a shoulder answered, boots shifted on tarmac.

Then it went sharp.

A lad I knew from two streets over – skinny, always first up the pit headrace – was on the floor, blood coming from his eyebrow in a bright line. Someone lobbed a stone. It clattered off a shield with a flat, useless sound.

For a second I bent and my fingers closed round cold rock.

In my head I saw the photograph that would appear in the paper: miner’s son, arm cocked back, ‘thug’, ‘mob’, ‘extremist’. That other phrase, the one she had not said in public yet, sat there anyway like a caption waiting to be written.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Shell.

She had pushed through the knot of men and was kneeling in the road, one hand on the lad’s shoulder, the other checking his eyebrow with a practised

gentleness. Blood had splashed on her scarf. She was talking to him low and steady, her face set.

The stone in my hand suddenly felt childish.

I dropped it. I will not pretend it was some grand moral revelation. It was more a feeling that if I threw it, I would be playing the part they had written for me, and I would never get to write anything of my own.

'Danny!' Frank barked, catching my sleeve as another line of police surged forward. 'Back, lad. You are no use to us with your head split.'

We shuffled back a step, then another, the air thick with breath and anger and the metallic taste of adrenaline.

Later, when it settled enough for the police to pile back into their coach and our lot to limp home, I found Shell at the edge of the car park, rubbing at the bloodstain on her scarf with spit.

'You all right?' I said.

'Fine,' she said. 'He will need a stitch or two, that is all. I have seen worse.' She glanced up at me. 'You were going to throw that stone.'

'Aye.'

'And you did not.'

'No.'

She nodded, as if that settled something.

'There will be plenty of time for you to get yourself arrested when it is actually worth it,' she said. 'In meantime, I could do with someone who can carry urns without dropping them.'

'You make everything sound glamorous,' I said.

She smiled, tired but bright.

'You thought any more about that letter from London?' she asked.

'Mam told you?'

'Mam tells me everything,' she said. 'You know that. You going?'

'I do not know.'

She studied me, then glanced back towards the pit head, black against the sky.

'You have never belonged down the pit,' she said, flicking her chin towards the headgear. 'Not really. You have always had one foot onstage in your own head. That is not an insult, by the way. We need people like you. Someone has to tell the story. Might as well be you.'

'What if it is running away, though?' I said.

‘Running towards something is not the same as running away,’ she said. ‘Go, do not go. Just do not spend the next forty years telling everyone what you might have done if you had had the bottle.’

She tucked the stained scarf into her coat and headed towards the women’s table, where Mam and Mrs Kaur were already lining up sandwiches.

I watched her go, feeling stretched between them all like a bit of elastic that might snap whichever way I chose.

•

We had the row after tea.

It started the way these things always do – a small remark that caught fire.

‘I saw you talking to Shell,’ Mam said casually, scraping plates. ‘You tell her about London?’

‘News travels fast,’ I muttered.

Dad looked up from the paper, eyes narrowing.

‘London?’

There was no point dodging.

‘Alex has written,’ I said. ‘He reckons I could go down, crash on his floor, play some gigs. Maybe get summat going with the students, labels, that sort of thing. He can get me shifts at a record shop to help out.’

‘Record shop,’ Dad repeated, as if I had said brothel. ‘So while we are stood out there in freezing rain, you will be in some attic with your daft friends, playing songs while your mother is counting pennies to put tea on table.’

‘She is already doing that,’ I said, sharper than I meant. ‘And me standing on a picket line here does not magically make more money appear. If I can help bring more in from London—’

‘You think they care down there?’ he snapped. ‘You think anyone in them fancy bars gives a toss about us? They are not listening, lad. They never have.’

‘Then maybe we make them listen,’ I said. ‘Alex says there are bands, labels, students, all sorts. People writing things, printing things. We get our story into their hands, maybe it moves summat.’

He shook his head, more in weary disbelief than fury now.

‘Always songs with you,’ he said softly. ‘Always stories. This is not a record, Danny. It is our lives.’

‘I know that,’ I said, and for the first time I felt angry at him for thinking I did not. ‘I have been down there with you. I have seen the roof over my head creak when someone sets a charge wrong. I have watched you cough your lungs up at night. I am not playing at it.’

Mam reached across and put her hand over his.

‘Bill,’ she said. ‘He is not turning his back. He is trying to find a way through. Same as you.’

He pulled his hand away, gently but firmly.

‘You do what you want,’ he said to me. ‘You always have. Just do not pretend it is for us when it is for you.’

He got up and went out without slamming the door that time. That was somehow worse.

Mam and I did the washing up in silence. The plate in my hands might as well have been made of glass the way I held it, careful not to drop anything else.

‘He will calm down,’ she said eventually. ‘He just… he sees you leaving and he thinks that is how the story ends. Him here, you there, no way back.’

‘Is it?’ I asked.

She dried her hands and turned to face me.

‘Only if you make it,’ she said. ‘If you go, you write. You ring when you can. You send tapes if you make them. You do not disappear and then come back when it suits you, all big city and ashamed of us. Can you promise me that?’

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘I can promise that.’

She nodded, as if she had been weighing that answer before I even gave it.

‘Then we will manage,’ she said. ‘We always have.’

•

I lay awake for a long time that night, staring at the cracks in the ceiling. The house settled round me – pipes ticking, someone’s dog barking two streets away, the occasional car on the main road.

The more I thought about London, the more it felt like one of those places you see on telly that might as well be another planet. Red buses, crowds, neon. How was a lad with one decent shirt and a cheap guitar supposed to fit there? What if Alex was wrong? What if I went and made a fool of myself, then had to come back with my tail between my legs and everyone saying they had known it all along?

At some point I must have drifted off, because the next thing I knew there was a soft tap at my bedroom door.

‘Come in,’ I said, voice rough.

Dad stepped inside, shutting the door behind him with the care of a man who did not want to wake anyone who was not already awake.

He had his dressing gown over his vest and pants, belt pulled tight. In his hand he held a small wooden box I recognised from the mantelpiece – the one that normally sat behind the clock, half-hidden.

'Shift up,' he said.

I moved my legs so he could sit on the edge of the bed. The mattress dipped under his weight.

He opened the box and tipped something small and metal into his palm. It caught the streetlight coming through the curtain – a round disc, punched through the top, stamped with numbers.

His tally. The pit gave you one on your first day: you handed it in when you went on shift, got it back when you came up. If they had owt left of you to bring up at all. I had my own, still sat on my bedside table. We all did.

He turned it over between thumb and forefinger.

'Your mam wanted me to put this away when the strike started,' he went on. 'Out of sight. Said it was just making things harder, having it there on the mantelpiece. I told her no. Not because I love the place. But because…' He shrugged. 'Because it is mine. It is where I have spent most of my waking hours. It is who I am.'

He closed his fingers round the disc, then opened them and held it out to me.

My throat tightened.

'I kept this one at home,' he said. 'Got another in my pocket for when… if we go back. But this one stayed here. Reminder of what I was fighting for.' He paused. 'You take it.'

'I cannot,' I said automatically. 'It is yours.'

He shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'It is ours. It is what put a roof over your head. It is what has wrecked my lungs. It is the thing we are fighting over with that woman in London.' He gave a short laugh with no humour in it. 'If you are going to her city, you might as well take a reminder of what you are there for.'

I took the disc. It was cold from his hand and the night air. The number stamped into it – his number – sat proud under my thumb.

'Do not forget where you came from,' he said. 'That is all I am asking. Go down there, play your songs, do your tapes, whatever half-mad scheme Alex has got you into. Just… do not come back talking like they do and thinking we are all daft for staying.'

'I would not,' I said, stung.

'You say that now,' he said gently. 'World is bigger than this street, lad. It can turn your head if you are not careful.'

He reached out and squeezed the back of my neck in the same way he used to when I was little and had done something stupid but survivable.

'I was wrong earlier,' he added, looking at the floor. 'About you doing it for yourself. Of course you are. You would be daft not to think of yourself. But you were right as well. We need people telling our side where they will never hear of Grimethorpe otherwise.' He blew out a breath. 'It does my head in, but there it is.'

He stood up, joints clicking.

'Train is at eight-oh-six,' he said. 'Your mam has set the alarm. She is making you sandwiches for the journey, though God knows what will be in them. Get some sleep.'

When he had gone, I lay there in the dark, the disc pressed into my palm, its edge biting a half-moon into my skin. Eventually I threaded it onto a bit of bootlace and tied it round my neck. It felt like carrying a small, solid piece of home.

•

The morning I left, the village looked the same as it always had – low grey sky, terraced houses, washing lines like flags of surrender. Only the bags at my feet made any difference.

Mam had packed my old army surplus duffel with two pairs of jeans, three shirts, underwear, a jumper and the thickest socks she could find. My guitar case leaned against the wall, its handle taped where it had cracked the previous winter. In my pocket I had twenty quid in notes and some loose change. Round my neck, under my shirt, the tally disc lay cold against my chest.

'You are sure you have got Alex's address?' Mam said for the third time, fussing with the collar of my jacket.

'Aye,' I said. 'He drew a little map and everything. Even I cannot get lost with that.'

'You underestimate yourself,' she said, managing a half-smile.

Dad was quieter. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets, jaw working. Frank had offered to drive us to Doncaster station, which I took as a good sign – Dad could have sent me on the bus alone.

Shell turned up just as Dad was loading my bag into the boot of Frank's car, breathless, Lily in tow in her nursery jumper.

'I would have been here sooner if someone had not poured porridge down her jumper,' she said, nudging Lily with her elbow. 'I brought you this.'

She shoved a small packet into my hand – a bundle of letter-and-number badge pins and a biro that still had the price sticker on.

‘For when you are famous,’ she said. ‘You can sign things. And if some posh lot asks where you are from, you can stick one of these on them and tell them to look it up on a map.’

‘You are daft,’ I said, though my eyes prickled.

‘Absolutely,’ she said. ‘Now get in that car before I change my mind and chain you to the gate.’

Frank’s Cortina smelled of cigarettes and damp. I squeezed into the back with my guitar case. Mam sat up front, twisting round to look at me. Dad got in beside me, silent.

I hugged Shell through the window, then watched as Frank pulled away from the kerb. Shell waved both arms, juggling bags. Mrs Barlow was on her step, hand raised. The street rolled past – terraces, the shop, the welfare club.

They were still there when we turned the corner.

•

Doncaster station had a modest art deco entrance, all brick and clean lines. Frank pulled up outside, engine idling.

‘Right then,’ he said. ‘Do not do owt I would not do.’

‘That leaves me a lot of room,’ I said.

He grinned and clapped my shoulder.

On the platform, Mam fussed with my collar one last time. Dad stood with his hands in his coat pockets, jaw working.

‘Remember,’ he said quietly. ‘You are going to tell our story. Not forget it.’

‘I know,’ I said.

I hugged Mam, then – after a hesitation that lasted only a heartbeat – Dad. He held on a fraction longer than he usually did, his chin digging into my shoulder.

The train pulled in with a hiss of brakes and a metallic squeal. I climbed aboard, dragging my bag and guitar case through the narrow door.

Through the window I could see them on the platform – Mam with her hand up, Dad standing solid in his coat, not waving but not moving either.

They were still there when the train pulled away.

•

By the time the train pulled out of Doncaster towards London, my nerves had settled into a kind of fizz under the skin that no amount of tea from the buffet trolley could smooth.

In the seat opposite, a man in a suit read the *Financial Times*, all salmon-pink and graphs. Down the carriage a kid my age with spiky hair and a leather

jacket slept with his mouth open and a Walkman clamped over his ears, the sound faintly tinny in the air when the train slowed.

Out the window the landscape shifted from slag heaps and terraced streets to fields, motorways, then the first concrete outskirts of the city. Graffiti-covered walls. Billboards with faces I recognised from the news. Somewhere someone had painted COAL NOT DOLE in letters six feet high.

I pressed my fingers to the tally disc under my shirt and thought of the picket line, of Shell with blood on her scarf, of Mam's hands red from washing up, of Dad handing me the little box in the dark.

I did not know then what would come – the gigs, the tapes, the nights in cramped rooms that would change how I thought about power. All I knew was that I was hurtling towards a place where people made noise that mattered, and I was carrying a small, stubborn piece of Grimethorpe with me like a promise.

When the tannoy crackled to life and the guard announced we were approaching King's Cross, my mouth went dry.

'Next stop, London,' he said.

As if there were only ever going to be the one.

Chapter Three – June–July 1984, London Bedsit and Orgreave / "Enemy Within"

Summer did not so much arrive in London as settle in and refuse to leave.

By June the bedsit had a permanent sheen to it – sweat on necks, condensation on the inside of the single window, a damp shine on the patch of wall above the gas fire that never quite dried out. The carpet kept the imprint of every footstep, ground-in dirt in the shape of our lives.

Mornings were always the same.

Whoever woke up first put the pan on for tea and crossed the minefield of sleeping bodies to force the window open a crack. You had to haul it with both hands; the frame had swollen with some forgotten winter and never got the message that the season had changed.

'Feels like breathing through a jumper in here,' Rowan said one Tuesday, shoving his fringe out of his eyes. He had fallen asleep in yesterday's shirt, half a political pamphlet stuck to his cheek.

'Compost heap, mate,' Riz said, not looking up from the jiffy bag he was addressing. 'Layer of rubbish, layer of scraps, bit of heat, something useful might grow if we do not all suffocate first.'

Riz was always writing. Addresses, lists, slogans, headlines for the next issue of his zine. His fingers were permanently smudged with ink; he left little black half-moons on everything he touched.

Alex surfaced from under a blanket near the door, hair stuck up in all directions, T-shirt twisted halfway round his torso.

'Speak for yourself,' he said. 'I am blooming.'

He sniffed, pulled a face.

'All right, maybe I am wilting a bit.'

Pete, who had claimed the corner by the wardrobe as his bit of floor, sat up slowly. His hair fell to his shoulders, dark and straight. He had a careful way of moving, like someone who had grown up round breakable things.

'Has anyone seen my other sock?' he asked. 'The one without the hole.'

'Ask Tommy,' Rowan said. 'He is probably using it as a drum muffler.'

Tommy appeared in the doorway at that moment, rubbing sleep out of his eyes with the back of one hand, drumsticks already in the other like he had been born with them.

'I do not need your scabby sock,' he said. 'My kit sounds tragic enough on its own.'

He grinned as he said it. Tommy grinned at most things, still with those rugby arms Alex had joked about in his letter. He hit everything too hard and apologised afterwards.

We had three Rich Tea biscuits between six of us and no milk.

'Breakfast of champions,' Alex said, tipping the tin up and shaking the crumbs onto his palm. 'Half each and Danny can lick the tin, on account of being from a designated disaster area.'

'You are from Doncaster,' I said. 'That is hardly Chelsea.'

'My mam says it is if you squint,' he said.

We shared the biscuits, dunked them in strong tea and pretended it was enough.

•

Coalface began the way most bands do: someone got bored of talking about starting one.

We had been circling it for a couple of weeks. Playing each other records. Alex pushing Gang of Four and The Pop Group, bands that turned rhythm into a weapon. Me bringing in The Clash, early Jam, a bit of Stiff Little Fingers. Pete arguing for Joy Division and anything with a bassline that made your ribs rattle. Tommy saying he did not care what we played as long as he got to hit things.

‘We have got four instruments and a room,’ Alex said one afternoon, hands on hips. ‘That is more than half the bands in Camden. We either form something or admit we only moved here for the damp.’

We pushed the mattresses to one wall, stacked milk crates against the window and carved a rehearsal space out of the mess.

My guitar – the battered Tele copy I had bought off my cousin – went through an amp that buzzed if you stood too close to the fridge. Alex’s Rickenbacker had paint on the neck where he had used it as a brush handle for a college project. Pete’s bass was a second-hand Fender copy with a crack in the headstock and a tone that could have knocked bricks out of the wall. Tommy’s kit was a patchwork of borrowed drums and scrounged cymbals, wedged into the corner so tightly he had to angle his elbows like a bird folding its wings.

‘Right,’ Alex said. ‘We need a name before we inflict ourselves on anyone else. Rowan, go.’

Rowan, perched on a crate with a notebook on his knee and a pencil behind his ear, looked up.

‘Why me?’

‘You work in a bookshop,’ Alex said. ‘You are basically the intellectual wing.’

Rowan’s bookshop was a radical place on the Holloway Road – shelves of Marx and Angela Davis, pamphlets about everything from nuclear disarmament to lesbian mothers’ rights. He spent his days recommending books to students and old communists and his nights bringing the leftovers home in his rucksack.

‘Names are a trap,’ he said. ‘You pick one and spend the rest of your life explaining why it is not ironic.’

‘Someone suggest something that does not sound like a plumbing firm,’ I said.

We went through a list. Most of it was rubbish. Anything with “Red” in it sounded like a student union theatre group. Anything with “Rebel” sounded like an advert. Tommy suggested The Pitmen and we all vetoed it on the spot.

‘What about Coalface?’ I said, when the argument had circled round for the third time.

They looked at me.

‘That is where we are from,’ I said. ‘Me and Alex, anyway. The bit that actually gets cut away. The place where everything starts. And it sounds like something you would not want to meet in an alley.’

Riz thought about the letters.

‘Looks good written down,’ he said. ‘All sharp lines. Could do something with a pit head for the logo.’

Rowan tried it out under his breath.

‘Coalface,’ he said. ‘Coalface. Yes. That will scan on a flyer.’

Alex grinned.

‘Coalface it is,’ he said. ‘Congratulations. We officially exist.’

We started with a song about the strike vote, because everything did.

I had a riff I had been messing around with since before I left Grimethorpe – E, G, A, nothing complicated, something you could shout over. Alex added a second guitar line that hung above it like wire. Pete dropped in a bass part that made the floorboards feel less stable. Tommy slammed straight fours on the kick and snare until the walls rattled.

‘What is it called?’ Tommy shouted, over the din.

‘Coal Not Dole,’ I shouted back.

‘Bit on the nose, innit?’ he yelled.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘People are tired.’

The first time we got through it without anyone dropping out, we all stood there, breathing hard, sweat sticking shirts to backs. For a second there was no bedsit, no damp, no unpaid rent. Just the adrenaline after a thing exists that did not an hour ago.

Then Mrs Palmer knocked on the ceiling with her broom.

‘You lot!’ she yelled, voice coming up through the plaster. ‘Some of us are trying to listen to the news!’

‘Sorry, Mrs P!’ Alex yelled back. ‘World-historical events up here!’

‘World-historical max volume five!’ she shouted. ‘Turn down!’

We laughed, turned the amps down a notch, started again.

•

The first gig came quicker than I expected.

We had played Coal Not Dole into the ground, added another couple of songs – one nicked shamelessly from an old pub-rock number Alex’s dad liked, lyrics changed to be about dole queues; another that grew out of a bassline Pete had brought in, all tension and release.

Lewis, a bloke Alex knew from art college, ran nights in the back rooms of Camden pubs and printed a free listings sheet that pretended to be a zine when it was in the mood.

He came up to the bedsit one Friday with a plastic carrier bag full of flyers and a cigarette permanently attached to his bottom lip.

‘Heard there is a band,’ he said, peering round the door. ‘I bring beer, you make noise?’

We played the three songs we had. Twice. By the end his cigarette had burned down to the filter.

‘You are messy,’ he said. ‘Half your lyrics are guesses. But there is something there. You can have second slot on Thursday. Back room at The Fox and Firkin. Twenty minutes. Do not get me barred.’

The Fox and Firkin smelled of spilt bitter, bleach and undercooked chips. The “back room” was a low-ceilinged space with brown walls and a stage that was really just the end of the floor where someone had given up putting tables.

We were second on a bill of three. First up were a band who sounded like the Jam’s less motivated cousins. Headliners were Alex’s mates from college, who had a saxophone and a lot of opinions about Italian cinema.

There were maybe twenty people in the room when we went on. Punks with patches on their jackets, students in jumpers their mums had probably knitted, two older blokes in flat caps who might have wandered in looking for darts and stayed for lack of anything better to do. A girl at the back with a camera round her neck, expression serious. A lad in a smart coat near the door, collar turned up, hands in his pockets, looking like he had taken a wrong turning out of an A-level revision class and ended up somewhere he was not sure was safe.

‘Evening,’ I said into the microphone. It squealed once and settled. ‘We are Coalface. This one is called Coal Not Dole.’

We played too fast. Tommy dropped a stick in the middle eight. I came in a bar early on the last chorus and had to repeat a line to make it fit. But halfway through, the lad in the Clash T-shirt at the front started shouting the title back at us before we hit it, which meant he had learned it on the spot. I held onto that.

Afterwards, in the cramped space between the stage and the wall where we pretended was a backstage, we were giddy.

‘We did not actually die,’ Pete said, eyes wide.

‘My snare nearly did,’ Tommy said. ‘But yes. That will do.’

Alex was already halfway back into the room, talking to anyone who would listen.

A bloke in a denim jacket came over, pint in hand.

‘You lot Coalface?’ he asked.

‘Depends who is asking,’ Alex said.

‘Lewis said you had something,’ the bloke said. ‘He is usually wrong, but this time he might be right. I put nights on round here, little label, bit of a tape series. You got anything recorded?’

‘Not yet,’ Alex said. ‘We have got songs, though.’

‘Everyone has got songs,’ the bloke said. ‘Thing that travels is tape. I have got a Portastudio you can borrow, if you promise to bring it back in one piece and do not record your mate’s metal band over my masters.’

He dug in his pocket, pulled out a card with L. HARRIS and a phone number on it.

‘Ring me when you are ready,’ he said. ‘Kids are bored of London boys singing about their hair. You lot sound like you have actually seen owt.’

As he walked away, Alex turned to me.

‘Portastudio,’ he said reverently. ‘Four tracks. Two cassettes. That is practically Abbey Road.’

I thought about tapes as objects. I had grown up round them – Top 40 taped off the radio with the DJ talking over the intro, compilation tapes in the welfare club jukebox, C90s passed between mates at school. I had never thought of them as something you could use to push back.

‘We can get stuff back home on tape,’ I said slowly. ‘Real stuff. Not just what the newsreader decides to say.’

‘Exactly,’ Alex said. ‘Imagine one of your dad’s lot hearing your song while they are sat in the welfare. That is worth more than a Camden crowd of twenty, any day.’

I liked the idea enough that I did not say the obvious: that my dad did not have much time for my songs in any form.

•

Orgreave landed like a punch from a distance.

It was one of those heavy June days when the air sticks. We had been arguing about a new song – whether the middle bit needed a key change or whether that was “too Queen”, according to Rowan – and we had given up for a tea break before Mrs Palmer came up with handcuffs.

The portable telly in the corner lived on a crate and got two channels on a good day. I flipped it on more out of habit than hope.

The news cut from some report about overseas tariffs to a field under a flat Yorkshire sky.

‘…clashes between striking miners and police at the Orgreave coking plant…’

The pictures juddered. Men in work jackets, NUM badges on their chests, some with scarves over their mouths. Lines of police in helmets and shields. For a second it was just the usual – shouting, gesturing, the tense standoff we had seen every night since March.

Then the line broke.

Horses. A whole rank of them, looming into the frame. Officers leaning forward in the saddle, batons out. They came in hard. Men scattered. One went down. The camera lurched, catching a glimpse of hooves and flailing limbs before swinging away.

‘Jesus,’ Alex breathed, halfway through pouring hot water into the teapot. He missed and scalded his hand; did not seem to notice.

The reporter’s voiceover came on, smooth as if nothing in the world was out of place.

‘There were ugly scenes today as pickets attacked police lines with bricks and bottles. Officers responded with mounted charges. Several miners and police officers have been taken to hospital. NUM leader Arthur Scargill has accused the government of deliberate provocation.’

Attacked police lines. Mounted charges. I felt something twist.

‘They never show how it starts,’ I said. ‘They never show who pushes first.’

Rowan came in from the hallway, wiping ink off his fingers on his jeans.

‘What is this?’ he asked.

‘Orgreave,’ Alex said. ‘Government’s idea of crowd control.’

We watched in silence, the three of us wedged in that little room while somewhere, in a field two hundred miles north, men we knew or nearly knew were running for their lives.

When the bulletin moved on to something about a royal opening a hospital, I turned the set off so hard the dial slipped.

‘I need to ring home,’ I said.

The phone box at the end of the street had a door that did not quite shut and a floor that had never seen a mop. I fed coins into the slot with hands that felt clumsy.

The line rang and rang. Just as I was about to give up, someone picked up.

‘Ashcroft residence,’ Shell said. Her voice was steady in a way that made me think she had been practising.

‘Shell, it is me.’

There was a pause. In the background I heard her little one shouting and the clatter of pots.

‘You have seen it?’ she said.

‘The telly,’ I said. ‘Not… I mean, not there. But…’

‘It is worse in real life,’ she said. The steadiness cracked. ‘Hours of nowt. Just lads stood around, cups of tea, jokes, waiting. Then all of a sudden lines of them.

More police than you would think through all of Yorkshire. Horses ready. Like they had been sat in their vans waiting for someone to give them the go-ahead.'

'Is my dad—'

'He is home,' she said quickly. 'Shoulder is a mess. Doctor says no break, just big bruising. He will milk it. Your mam is already threatening to wrap him in a duvet and nail him to the sofa.'

I let out a breath I had not realised I was holding.

'And the rest?' I asked.

'Lads with heads split like eggs,' she said. 'Ribs gone. One from over at Silverwood, they reckon his leg is never going to be right again. And every reporter down here talking about "violent pickets" like we just woke up and fancied a fight.'

Her anger travelled down the line and set up camp in my chest.

'Mam there?' I asked.

'She is,' Shell said. 'She has been telling anyone who will listen that if they had sent half as many police to shut down tax dodgers as they have to shut down pits, we would be rolling in it by now.'

I could hear Mam in the background, telling someone to get their feet off the table.

'Put her on?' I said.

There was a shuffle, a muffled exchange, then Mam's voice, closer, frayed at the edges.

'Daniel?'

'You all right?' I asked, throat thick.

'I am,' she said. 'Your dad is in one piece, mostly. The telly is lying. Again. You seen it?'

'Yes,' I said. 'They are making it look like the lads started it.'

'Of course they are,' she said. 'That is the game. They swing the first punch, then bring their own cameras to film you bleeding and call it balance. Do not you ever forget they are picking which bits you see.'

'I will not,' I said.

There was a pause.

'Are you staying safe?' she asked. 'Eating? Sleeping? Not letting Alex talk you into anything daft?'

'I am in a room with five lads and one frying pan,' I said. 'Define safe.'

She made a sound that might have been a laugh.

‘Your dad wants a word,’ she said. ‘He is pretending he does not, but he does.’

Another shuffle. I could picture the scene: Shell with her little one, Mam at the table, Dad in his chair with his arm in a sling, the telly muttering in the corner.

‘Danny,’ he said.

‘All right?’ I said.

‘Been better,’ he said. He cleared his throat. ‘You seen that mess?’

‘On the news,’ I said. ‘Does not look right.’

‘It is not,’ he said. ‘They lined us up like cattle. You know when it is going to go. You can feel it. All those vans, all those horses, officers with numbers covered. They wanted a show. We gave them one, I suppose.’

He did not sound proud.

‘I should be there,’ I blurted.

‘No,’ he said, sharp enough to cut. ‘You would add one more body to the pile, that is all. You are where you are meant to be. Watching how they tell it. That is important. We need someone paying attention.’

‘Does not feel like enough,’ I said.

‘It never does,’ he said. ‘But if you lot down there can find a way to keep a proper record — not just their version of it — you will be doing more than I can with this shoulder.’

The beeps started in my ear – last of the coins.

‘Tell Mam I—’

‘I will,’ he said. ‘And Danny?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do not let them decide who you are with a headline. And do not throw their lies away when they send them, neither. Keep clippings. Names. Dates. One day someone will need to see they said it.’

The line went dead.

I stood there in the reek of old chips and damp coats, receiver still in my hand, his last words settling in.

One day someone will need to see they said it.

•

I did not plan to write that night. It came out anyway.

Back in the bedsit, the others drifted off – Pete to his evening shift at the off-licence, Tommy to chase a girl in Holloway, Riz to the kitchen table with a stack of leaflets. Rowan claimed the armchair with a book and was asleep before the second paragraph.

I sat on my mattress with the guitar across my knees, fingers finding shapes without asking permission.

A minor chord, then another. Something that felt like running at something bigger than you are. A rhythm that sounded like boots hitting tarmac, like batons on shields, like a heart that had not caught up with what it had just seen.

The words came in bits. Not slogans. I was sick of slogans. Everyone shouting the same four phrases into the air, trying to make them mean something, while the cameras took what they wanted.

I thought of Mam saying do not you ever forget they are picking which bits you see. Of Shell's lists, her fury. Of Dad's voice, tired and certain, telling me my job was to look through the glass and not throw anything away.

I wrote about cameras pointed the wrong way. About men on horses with their numbers hidden. About being told you were the danger when the only thing you had done was stand where you were not supposed to. About being turned into a threat so someone in an office could sleep at night.

Lines went down, got scratched out, came back with different words. By two in the morning my fingers hurt and my throat was rough from half-sung phrases.

Alex rolled over on the floor, hair in his face.

'You going to play that or keep torturing it on your own?' he muttered.

'You were asleep,' I said.

'I am in a room with a man playing three chords like they have personally offended him,' he said. 'Nobody is asleep.'

I played it through for him. Just guitar and voice, the words still half-formed but the shape there.

When I finished, he lay on his back staring at the ceiling.

'That is it,' he said. 'That is the one that hurts.'

'I do not know what to call it,' I said. 'Cannot just call it Orgreave. Feels… wrong. Like sticking a label on someone's scar.'

'Leave it for now,' he said. 'The right name will turn up. Probably when you are trying to think about something else.'

He was right, as it turned out.

•

The phrase came a few weeks later, in July, from the same little radio that had been lying to us since March.

It was a sticky evening. The bedsit smelled of hot plaster and chip fat from the takeaway downstairs. We had just finished running the set for a benefit gig – Coal Not Dole, the Orgreave song, two others that still did not quite know what they wanted to be.

Riz turned the radio on for background while he laid out pages for the next zine. The newsreader's voice cut through half a tune.

'…speaking at a private meeting of the 1922 Committee, the Prime Minister is reported to have warned Conservative MPs about what she described as 'the enemy within' – a reference understood to mean militant miners' leaders and certain left-wing councils…'

The rest of the sentence blurred.

Enemy within.

It lodged like a stone.

Alex looked up from restringing his guitar.

'Well, that is us told,' he said. 'Nice to have our status clarified.'

Rowan snorted.

'Enemy within what?' he said. 'Within her idea of Britain, I suppose. Anything that does not fit gets called treason these days.'

I just sat there, the words going round like someone had written them on the inside of my eyelids.

Enemy within.

I could see my dad's tally disc, heavy against my chest. The picket line. Shell's kitchen full of her little one, other people's kids and lists. Mam at the sink. Me in this room, guitar in hand, tape decks stacked on the floor.

Enemy, to her.

Within, to them.

'You all right?' Alex asked quietly.

'She is talking about my dad,' I said. 'And Mam. And Shell. Like they are some disease she has got to cut out.'

'She is talking about a story she can sell her lot,' he said. 'You do not have to buy it.'

I went to pick the guitar up and then did not. Instead I picked up my notebook and wrote the phrase at the top of the page.

ENEMY WITHIN.

The letters sat there, black against blue lines.

‘That is the title,’ I said.

‘For the Orgreave one?’ Alex asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘She can have it in her mouth one way. We will spit it back another. And we will make sure there is proof she said it in the first place.’

He nodded, eyes on the radio.

‘Then we keep the clipping,’ he said. ‘Date, page, exact words. Riz, you hearing this? That is your next zine cover.’

Riz, who had already torn the news item out of the Evening Standard and was flattening it with his palm, looked up.

‘On it,’ he said. ‘Headline, quote, who they are calling enemy this week. I will start a folder. Lies they told out loud.’

‘Good,’ I said, surprising myself with how hard the word came out. ‘We will need it.’

I did not know who “we” meant yet.

But the feeling that had been gnawing at me since Orgreave – that watching and shouting was not enough – shifted slightly. The phrase on the page. The clipping on the table. My dad’s voice in my ear telling me to keep names and dates. It felt like the beginning of something that was not just reaction.

•

Harris kept his word about the Portastudio.

He turned up two days after the “enemy within” bulletin with a holdall that looked like it had been round the world twice and a battered four-track machine inside.

‘Handle her gently,’ he said, patting the top. ‘She is more temperamental than half the singers I know. Levels low, no banging about, and if you drop her I will tell your union you are a scab.’

We cleared the kitchen table, which meant piling everything we owned on the floor. The Portastudio took up all the space and most of the electricity. Four little faders. A cluster of knobs that did things we only half understood. A big red record button Alex kept eyeing like it might bite.

We did not have enough microphones, so we improvised. My guitar went straight in. We stuck the one decent mic we had in front of Alex’s amp and another in the middle of the room to catch drums and voices. It looked ridiculous. It sounded… honest.

‘Right,’ Alex said, headphones on one ear. ‘We will do Coal Not Dole first. If it all goes wrong, at least we will have ruined the one we have played most.’

‘Comforting,’ Tommy said, twirling a stick.

We counted in and went for it.

We played tighter than we ever had. Fear of wasting tape will do that. When we hit the last chord, nobody spoke until the sound stopped bouncing round the room.

Harris rewound, pressed play.

Our song came back at us, squashed and tinny and somehow bigger. The drums sat in the wrong place, the guitar clipped once where I had dug in too hard, the vocal wobbled on a line I had sung a hundred times, but under all that was us. Not a version of us through someone else’s lens. Just us.

‘Again,’ I said.

We did it twice more. The third take held.

Then we did the new one.

By then it had verses. A bridge. A line in the last chorus that I knew would make Shell swear and cry at the same time. I sang it with the bit of my throat that still had the television footage in it, the dust of watching something you cannot stop.

When we listened back, the room was quiet.

‘That is the one,’ Harris said softly. ‘You put that in the post and someone who was there will know you have been listening.’

Mrs Palmer came up halfway through the playback. She leaned in the doorway, arms folded, wooden spoon still in her hand.

‘So this is what you have been shaking my ceiling with,’ she said.

‘We are making a tape,’ I said. ‘About Orgreave. About… all of it.’

She narrowed her eyes.

‘My brother was at Brixton when it kicked off there,’ she said. ‘News said it was hooligans. Never showed the stops, the searching, the way they would line you up for no reason and take pleasure over it. You make sure you put that sort of thing in your little song, not just your shouting. And keep that report. They cannot say they did not call him a hooligan if you have it in a folder.’

‘We tried,’ I said. ‘With the song, I mean. Riz is on the folder.’

She sniffed.

‘Just mind you wash them mugs before something grows legs and walks out,’ she added, and went back downstairs.

We bounced the three songs we liked best onto a single master cassette and wrote COALFACE – DEMO on the label in block capitals.

‘What now?’ Pete asked.

‘Now we copy it,’ Alex said.

‘Onto what?’ Tommy said. ‘We have got one tape.’

‘Onto whatever C90s we can lay our hands on,’ Alex said. ‘We have all got old ones. We will tape over the rubbish. If there is a great lost album under your bed, now is the time to weep for it.’

Between us we found six blanks and four tapes we were willing to sacrifice. Top 40s taped off the radio, an old live Jam bootleg, a terrible synth-pop album someone had bought by mistake.

We rigged up two tape decks – ours and the house one that ate tapes if you looked at it wrong. One as player, one as recorder. Play. Record. Stop. Flip. Repeat. Slow, clumsy, miraculous.

By the end of the night we had ten cassettes with our songs on and whatever ghosts lay underneath.

We did not have inlays yet – that came later, with scissors and glue and Riz’s stolen Letraset – but we had enough to start.

‘Who gets the first one?’ Tommy asked, turning a tape over in his hands like it might bite.

‘Shell,’ I said. ‘Welfare club. Kitchen. Anywhere she thinks it will do the most damage.’

‘So that is Grimethorpe,’ Alex said. ‘Where else?’

Names came: lads we knew on committees, women from WAPC groups who had written letters, a youth club in Doncaster where Shell said the kids were restless and bored.

As I sat down to write the first note – Dear Shell – the words that had been nagging at the edge of my brain since the Portastudio arrived finally lined up.

Our tapes can go where we cannot.

I wrote it at the bottom of the page, then underlined it once.

It sounded like showing off. It was also true.

I could not stand on the line at Orgreave. I could not be in every welfare club, every kitchen, every cramped front room where people huddled round the telly and watched themselves turned into villains over tea.

But I could make something that travelled. Something small enough to fit in a pocket or a jiffy bag, cheap enough to copy, stubborn enough to last.

But a cassette could be put in a pocket, a bag, a jacket. It could travel up a motorway in the glove compartment of a clapped-out Escort, sit on a shelf in a

support group's office, end up in the tape deck of a kid in a bedroom who had never seen a pit but knew what it was to be told he was trouble.

Later on, when people with tidy haircuts and smarter degrees than mine would talk about narrative and counter-hegemony and all the rest, they would make it sound like a plan.

It was not. Not then.

It was just four lads in a hot room with a borrowed Portastudio and a handful of C90s, trying to answer back – and, because of a phone call in a filthy box and a folded clipping on our table, trying to leave a record that somebody else could use when they came looking.

They had their phrase now – enemy within – written in newspapers and whispered at party meetings.

We had ours, on plastic and ferric oxide, scratched onto labels in biro, stuffed into jiffy bags addressed in Riz's careful hand, with crumpled headlines and dates tucked in alongside.

We could not prove any of it would matter.

But for the first time since March it felt like we were not just surviving the story. We were storing it.

Chapter Four – July–October 1984, London – Getting It Out

We turned the bedsit into a factory by accident.

It started with ten tapes on the windowsill – our first batch – lined up like soldiers waiting for inspection. By the middle of July there were stacks of them: some in cases, some bare, all with our fingerprints pressed into plastic shells. The cassettes in cases had cardboard spines with our inlays wedged in, the kind that made the whole thing look more official than it had any right to.

The room changed shape to fit the work. My mattress became the finished goods department. The kitchen table turned into the cutting and folding station. The bit of floor near the plug socket became duplication central, a tangle of leads that would probably have given a fire inspector nightmares.

'We need a health and safety officer,' Alex said one afternoon, stepping over a pile of jiffy bags with a mug of tea in each hand. 'Preferably one who will work for tea and admiration.'

'You are the one who did a year at college,' Riz said, lips pursed as he hand-lettered another inlay card. 'You can be management. We will overthrow you later.'

Rowan sat cross-legged on the floor with Shell's Orgreave sheet in his lap, frowning at the typewriter copy like it had personally offended him.

'Comma after "horses",' he murmured. 'Otherwise it sounds like the horses did the charging and the shouting and the crying on the way home.'

'They did more thinking than some of the coppers,' Tommy said from the corner, where he was sticking address labels on padded envelopes as if they were drum skins. 'Leave them their crying.'

Pete, perched on the one chair that did not wobble, was in charge of levels. He had the master tape in one deck, a blank C90 in the other, headphones clamped over his hair, eyes half-closed.

'Side A is running a bit hot,' he said. 'If we send this up north they will think we recorded it in a jet engine.'

'We practically did,' I said. 'Turn it down a notch. I want them to hear the words, not just our equipment dying.'

We had scavenged two more tape decks from wherever we could. One came from a junk shop off Kentish Town Road, its lid held on with gaffer tape. The other was a loan from the bloke who ran the second-hand record stall at Camden Market, on the understanding we would make him a copy of anything that passed through our hands.

Once we had four machines, we stopped pretending we were a proper studio and started thinking like people with rent overdue. We ran the master tape out of Pete's deck and split the lead so it could feed three recorders at once — one signal, three blanks, three copies per run. It was not like we were working with pristine studio sound to begin with; the trick was keeping the three decks behaving the same. Pete sat there with his headphones like a surgeon, riding the levels by ear because we did not have proper meters, nudging one deck down, another up, swearing at the cheap one that kept making the cymbals spit and the hiss jump.

Press play on the master, press record on three machines in a row, wait, flip, repeat. By the end of a shift my thumb knew the feel of those buttons better than it knew my own name.

'This is ridiculous,' Rowan said one evening, rubbing his eyes. 'We are going to go cross-eyed and deaf and we will still not have enough done.'

'It is not ridiculous,' I said. 'It is work.'

On the table, next to the pile of inlays, lay the typed sheet headed:

WHAT HAPPENED AT ORGREAVE – SHELL, WOMEN AGAINST PIT CLOSURES, GRIMETHORPE.

Rowan had neatened it up from Shell's letter, tightening the sentences without losing her voice. It started with the early start, the waiting, the heat. Then the

lines of police, the horses, the first charge. The sound of batons on bone. The silence in the car on the way back.

At the bottom she had written: Do not let them tell you we started it. Do not let them tell you it did not matter.

We folded one of those sheets into every envelope.

'You sure she is all right with this?' Alex asked, tapping the stack.

'She insisted,' I said. 'Said if London is going to listen to anyone, it might as well be her.'

He nodded, then held the sheet up to the light.

'Her words,' he said. 'That is what cuts through. Not just slogans.'

In 2025 I will explain to Keira that this was Disruption before we knew the word: putting Shell's eyewitness account where the official story said 'miners attacked first'. Every envelope was a small grenade of truth lobbed into someone's letterbox. Not violence, but interference. Making their lies cost them something.

•

The post office on Camden High Street became the next link in the chain. The woman behind the counter wore blue eye-shadow and an expression that suggested she had seen all human folly and most of the postal system.

'Back again, love?' she said, weighing another bundle of padded bags. 'You starting your own record label or something?'

'Or something,' I said.

She glanced at the addresses – Barnsley, Doncaster, Sheffield, Nottingham, Sunderland, a student union in York, a women's centre in Leeds, a miners' support group in South London.

'You are costing me a fortune in brown paper,' she said. 'At least tell me it is not more Betamax tapes.'

'Cassettes,' I said, offended on their behalf. 'Music. And other things.'

'Well, make sure it is worth the postage,' she said, thumping the stamp down. 'World has got enough rubbish in it already.'

On the way out Riz slipped a copy into the slot marked INTERNAL MAIL: STAFF ONLY.

'What was that for?' I asked.

'Posties are people too,' he said. 'Might be one of them wants something loud in their van.'

Back at the bedsit, the biscuit tin under my mattress filled up with replies. Crumpled envelopes, neat ones, postcards with sunsets or seagulls on the front, all squashed together with loose badges and the odd pound coin taped to a bit of card.

Shell's handwriting appeared every couple of weeks, marching across the page like it was in a hurry to get somewhere.

Your tapes are doing the rounds, she wrote in one. Welfare's ancient machine tried to eat one but Mrs Briggs thumped it and it spat it back out. Bill says he can hear you from the street when he comes out for a fag.

At the end she had added: PS – I am not saying I am jealous, but if London does not appreciate you I will come down and drag you home by your ear, understand?

Dad's letters were shorter. Hope you are eating. Money is tight. Do not lose that tally. Sometimes just: Still out. Still standing.

I read those twice, three times, then folded them along the old creases and put them back in the tin with the tally disc on top, like a paperweight.

•

In August, we went to a big London demo for the strike – NUM banners from across the country bobbing above the crowd, Durham, Kent, South Wales, Yorkshire, Fife.

'It is like a cup final for people with principles,' Rowan said, looking round as we set off from the Embankment. Men in flat caps and lads in denim walked shoulder to shoulder with women in headscarves and kids riding on shoulders, cardboard placards propped against their legs.

We walked past Parliament where police lined the pavement in helmets and high-vis jackets, faces set. Someone started singing Which Side Are You On? and it travelled up the march like a tide. We joined in without talking about it.

On a side street a couple of men in suits watched from a doorway, cigarettes glowing. One of them shook his head, said something to the other that made him laugh. I met his gaze for a second as we passed. He looked away.

It should not have got under my skin, but it did. All that heat and noise and banners, and they could stand there like it was a pantomime.

'We will,' Alex said. 'Give us time.'

At Trafalgar Square, speakers took turns on a small stage – MPs, union leaders, women from Women Against Pit Closures groups, a vicar with his sleeves rolled up. We could not get close enough to see their faces properly; we caught their words in snatches as the wind dragged the sound away and dropped it back again.

'…we are not asking for charity – we are demanding justice…'

‘…they call us the enemy within because they are afraid…’

‘…from the coalfields to the classrooms, we stand together…’

Somewhere in the press pen, someone was counting heads for tomorrow’s papers. Large crowd, moderate crowd, disappointing turnout – those were the phrases they would use to fold all this into a neat paragraph.

We went home with aching feet and sun-reddened necks and the sense that we had stood inside something bigger than we could properly see.

That night, back in the bedsit, we spread all the day’s leaflets and badges across the floor.

‘We need our own,’ Alex said. ‘Not just tapes.’

‘Badges?’ Tommy suggested. ‘Everyone loves badges.’

‘Badges are fine,’ Alex said. ‘But I was thinking…’

He fished Shell’s Orgreave sheet out of the biscuit tin, smoothed it with his hands.

‘These,’ he said. ‘Stories. People’s own words. Not just ours.’

We started collecting them properly after that.

A woman in a headscarf outside the march’s crèche tent telling Alex about the time she had chained herself to pit gates. A lad from Kent talking to Pete about being the only miner in his village and the looks he got in the Co-op. A nurse in a faded uniform explaining to Riz how they were fighting hospital cuts and what that did to her patients. A Greenham woman with mud on her boots and a CND badge on her jacket describing bailiffs cutting the fence at dawn while women linked arms and sang, and how the papers called them hysterical when all they had done was refuse to move.

Alex wrote on whatever paper he could find – napkins, the backs of flyers, his own hands. Back at the bedsit we turned those notes into one-page testimonies. We put the person’s name at the top if they let us. If they did not, we used initials and a town.

We slipped those sheets into envelopes with tapes. We sent copies back to the people who had given us the stories where we could.

‘You are running an archive,’ Rowan said one night, kneeling in the middle of the floor surrounded by stacks of paper. ‘This is what libraries will want in fifty years.’

‘In fifty years they will all be telling each other it was inevitable,’ I said. ‘Might as well give them something awkward to trip over.’

•

The zine girl turned up in September.

We were halfway through a duplication shift when there was a knock that rattled the paint off the door. Tommy opened it with a tea towel over his shoulder, like we were a café.

She was small and sharp, with hair shaved close on one side and falling over the other eye on the other, denim jacket covered in badges for bands I had never heard of.

‘Which one of you is Danny?’ she asked, peering past Tommy’s shoulder as if we were a display.

‘Depends who is asking,’ I said from the mattress.

She stepped inside without waiting to be invited, lifting her feet carefully between the tape piles.

‘Mo,’ she said. ‘Short for Maureen but do not call me that. I do a zine. Gutter Press. I got your tape off a bloke at the market. I liked the song about Orgreave. Less so the one where you rhyme “Thatcher” with “atcher”, but we will work on that.’

Alex barked a laugh.

‘We have got our own critic now,’ he said. ‘We are moving up in the world.’

She swung a canvas bag off her shoulder and dumped a pile of photocopied booklets on the table. Black and white, stapled at the corner, titles hand-slashed across the top.

‘Trade,’ she said. ‘You get a page. Interview, photo if you do not crack the camera. In return, you give me ten tapes to flog at gigs. I keep a quid a tape, you get the rest for your strike fund or whatever you are doing.’

‘How many people read your zine?’ Rowan asked.

‘Enough,’ she said. ‘And the right sort. Kids who nick flyers off lampposts and read them on the bus. You want the next lot of bands and writers and weirdos to know your name, you talk to them.’

That got my attention.

‘What do you need from us?’ I asked.

‘Half an hour and a kettle that works,’ she said. ‘I will do the rest.’

We gave her tea and the biscuit crumbs and she sat on the mattress with a tape on in the background, asking questions that went beyond the usual what are your influences and why is your singer so angry.

‘Why tapes?’ she said. ‘Why not just play gigs and stick lyrics on a flyer like everyone else?’

‘Because gigs disappeared,’ I said. ‘They were great while they were happening, then everyone went home and forgot half of what was said. Tapes can go places we cannot. Miners’ welfares. Student unions. Hospital staff rooms. Someone can press play on their dinner break and hear they are not on their own.’

She made a note, nodding.

‘And the sheets?’ she asked, picking up Shell’s Orgreave testimony. ‘These are heavy. Most bands just send lists of tour dates.’

‘This is the point,’ I said. ‘We are noise attached to something solid.’

She looked up at me for a long moment, then smiled, quick and fierce.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘You are not just another Clash tribute act. I will write something decent.’

On her way out she stuck one of her zines in my hand.

‘Read the bit at the back,’ she said. ‘The listings. There are a couple of folk who will stock your stuff if I say you are all right.’

After she had gone, Tommy whistled low.

‘She is terrifying,’ he said. ‘I love her.’

‘Mo is good people,’ Alex said. ‘She knows everyone and everything. If she likes us, doors open.’

I leafed to the back of the zine later and found the listings page. Amid the tiny print and photocopied logos were names of squats, youth clubs, co-ops, radical bookshops. The city’s skeleton, traced in cheap toner.

I circled a couple of addresses in biro.

•

By September, we were not the only ones in London doing this kind of work. There were other bands whose songs named pits and picket lines. Poets, theatre groups, photographers, painters. A whole loose gaggle of people who had decided their art was not separate from the strike.

We started to recognise each other.

At the Princess Louise pub off High Holborn, where miners and their families stayed when they were down for meetings, we stood outside with pints talking to lads from Scotland about the differences in police tactics there. At the Hackney Empire we watched a benefit where a comic did twenty minutes on Thatcher’s hair and followed it with five quiet minutes on Orgreave that left the room silent. At a tiny gallery in Soho we saw paintings of horses and helmets and eyes behind scarves; the artist, a quiet woman in a denim dress, said her brother had not spoken since June.

Somewhere in that web, someone mentioned the 100 Club.

‘Basement on Oxford Street,’ Lewis said, twisting his cigarette between his fingers. ‘Legendary. Pistols played there. So did the Clash. They have been doing these under-the-radar nights for strike support. Someone I know knows someone who knows the bloke who does bookings.’

‘That is a lot of someones,’ I said.

‘Welcome to London,’ he said. ‘That is how anything happens.’

We were in the back room of a pub in Islington, our gear pushed up against a wall while another band soundchecked. The air was thick with stale beer and nerves.

‘You get us a night there,’ Alex said, ‘I will name my first-born after you.’

‘Please do not,’ Lewis said. ‘But I will make a call.’

•

The wobble came at a benefit in a community centre in Brixton.

The hall had a low stage at one end, strip lighting that made everyone look slightly ill, and a bar that sold warm lager in plastic cups. Posters for the strike curled at the corners on the walls. Every second person seemed to have a union badge or a CND symbol pinned somewhere.

We went on second. The kids at the front threw themselves about in the way of kids everywhere, and when we hit the first chords of Enemy Within a roar went up that felt bigger than the room.

‘You lot are on fire tonight,’ Alex said afterwards, collapsing in a chair backstage, shirt stuck to his back. ‘You see that bloke with glasses? He knew every word and we have only played it twice.’

I nodded, but something in me was snagged.

I had spent most of the set scanning faces between verses. There had been miners in borrowed suits and women in Strike Support T-shirts; students with badges running up their bags. When I looked for someone in a sharp suit, someone who might have walked past that march in July laughing with a cigarette, there was no one.

Just us. Our people. Shouting back what they already believed.

An older woman with a NUM Women’s Support Group badge came over as we were packing up. She had kind eyes and hands that looked like they had scrubbed a lot of floors.

‘That last one,’ she said, nodding at my guitar. ‘Enemy Within. My son is out on the picket line in Durham. He rang last week, said he felt like giving up. I am going to send him your tape.’

‘I hope it helps,’ I said.

‘It will,’ she said. ‘Knowing someone else is angry helps. Even if it is just a lad in a basement two hundred miles away.’

She pressed a pound coin into my hand and went to help stack chairs.

On the bus back to Camden, the others argued happily about whether we should add another chorus to one of the new songs. I sat by the window, watching the city slide past in streaks of orange and black.

Our tapes can go where we cannot, I had written to Shell. It was a good line. But what if all the places they went were just different versions of this hall? Different carpets, same opinions?

Somewhere out there were people in polished shoes, with keys to doors we would never even see. People whose signatures had more power than any chant. At Orgreave, they had sat in rooms and decided how many police to send. At Brixton, they had been wherever the real decisions were being made while we sweated under strip lights.

I did not know how to reach them yet.

•

Two days later, Mrs Palmer knocked on our door.

‘Phone,’ she said, jerking her thumb towards the stairs. ‘Some lad called Lewis. Says it is urgent.’

I followed her down to her hallway, where the receiver lay off the hook on the little phone on her hallway table.

‘Cheers, Mrs P,’ I said, picking it up. ‘Lewis?’

‘Right,’ he said, no preamble. ‘Friday the twelfth. 100 Club. You are on at nine. Do not be late, do not be rubbish, and if you break anything expensive I will tell everyone you are scabs.’

‘We got it?’ I said, loud enough that Mrs Palmer looked up from her ironing.

‘You got it,’ Lewis confirmed. ‘My mate says they have been doing strike benefits down there. Crowd will be half solidarity types, half people who just want to see a band. You lot fit both, apparently.’

‘Cheers, Lewis,’ I said. ‘We will not let you down.’

‘Course you will not,’ he said. ‘You are too scared of me.’

He hung up before I could answer.

I put the receiver down carefully. Mrs Palmer was watching me with one eyebrow raised.

‘Good news, I take it?’ she said.

‘The 100 Club,’ I said. ‘We got a gig.’

‘About time,’ she said. ‘Now get out of my house before you track rehearsal sweat on my clean floor.’

Back upstairs, Alex was already pulling his guitar out, grinning like someone had just told him Christmas was coming early.

‘100 Club,’ he said. ‘Pistols. Clash. And now us.’

‘Do not get ahead of yourself,’ I said. But I was grinning too.

We had nine days. Nine days to get tight, get our set right, and work out what we were trying to say to a room that might actually be listening.

Chapter Five – October 1984, London – Brighton Bombing and 100 Club

By October we had moved out of the single-room bedsit and into rooms in a slightly less miserable house — still small, still damp, but with actual doors you could close, and a landlady downstairs who guarded her hallway phone like it was crown jewels.

The radio came on at half six like someone snapping a switch in my skull.

‘…exploded at the Grand Hotel in Brighton, where the Conservative Party Conference is taking place. The Prime Minister is safe, but there are reports of casualties…’

Conference. Hotel. Bomb.

It took a second for the words to arrange themselves into anything that meant something. I pushed myself up on my elbows in the narrow bed and fumbled for the dial, trying to clear the static from the presenter’s voice. Through the thin wall I could hear Alex moving about, his alarm no doubt tuned to the same programme.

As the details filtered in – early hours, load-bearing walls gone, whole floors opened to the air like a dolls’ house – a cold weight settled behind my ribs. Thatcher had been in the hotel and somehow walked away. Other people had not.

The kettle started to boil. I stumbled into the kitchenette, slopped instant coffee granules into a mug and missed half the time, hands clumsy. The bulletin moved on to eyewitness reports and the first trickle of numbers. Four dead, maybe more. Norman Tebbit pulled from the rubble, his wife badly hurt.

I crossed the corridor and knocked on Alex’s door. He opened it in his boxers with the radio pressed to his ear, face set in a way that told me he had been listening long enough.

‘You hearing this?’

He held the radio away from his head. ‘Aye. You reckon it is the Provos?’

‘No one has claimed it yet.’ I felt my jaw tightening. ‘They had a bloody go, though.’

We stood side by side in his doorway as the bulletin rolled on, the cheap carpet rough under my bare feet. Someone had pushed a bomb behind the plaster of a Brighton hotel so that it went off when nearly the entire Cabinet was asleep in their beds. The commentator said it like an item on a shopping list.

Thatcher’s statement came on. ‘This attack has failed. All attempts to destroy democracy by terrorism will fail.’ She sounded furious and oddly triumphant, as if the bomb had given her something she had secretly wanted all along.

A small, shameful spark lit up inside me at the thought that someone had tried to put real fear in her. Let her feel for once what our lot felt when horses came at them in the dark with batons swinging.

The spark died almost as soon as it flared. Four people dead, and none of them her. Tory delegates, MPs, wives. People whose worst crime had been going to sleep in the wrong building. Whatever satisfaction I thought I would feel tasted sour, like metal.

Alex clicked the radio off. The sudden silence made the flat feel even smaller.

‘You still up for tonight?’ he asked. ‘We can ring Lewis and pull it if you like.’

The gig. Nine days of rehearsals, Pete finally locking the bass line for Enemy Within into place, Tommy learning to play just behind the beat so the songs did not gallop away from us. The thought of plugging into an amp and pretending the world had not shifted overnight felt absurd.

‘No,’ I said. ‘We do it. More than ever.’

•

By the time we had dressed, the others had surfaced. The kitchen was thick with steam from cheap tea and the smell of toast on the edge of burning. Rowan sat at the table, bare chest, tattoo ink disappearing under the waistband of his jeans, cigarette already on the go. Riz leaned against the counter stirring sugar into a chipped mug as if it had personally offended him.

‘You hear about Brighton?’ Rowan said, eyes bright in a way that made my stomach twist.

‘Hard to miss,’ I said.

‘About time someone took a proper swing at them,’ he went on. ‘She has had lads’ heads cracked open all year. See how she likes it when—’

‘Rowan.’ Alex’s voice came out sharper than usual.

‘What? I am not crying for them. Tories in a posh hotel, boo-bloody-hoo.’

Riz shrugged, not quite looking at either of them. ‘Course it was going to happen sooner or later. You squeeze people hard enough, something goes bang. That is history.’

‘That is four people dead,’ I said. ‘And whoever they were, they are dead now. That is not a win.’

Rowan blew smoke towards the ceiling. ‘Collateral damage. They invented that phrase, not us.’

‘Aye, and they are welcome to keep it,’ I said. ‘I want her out, not in bits. And whoever died in there did not deserve it just because they were in the wrong hotel.’

The room tightened round it. The kettle boiled dry with a little tick, unnoticed.

Alex set his mug down carefully. ‘Violence like that just writes their speeches for them,’ he said. ‘They get to stand in front of cameras and talk about “democracy under attack”, and anything we say about pits and police and hunger sounds like background static. Static we are providing for free, by the way.’

‘So what then?’ Rowan demanded. ‘Songs? Do not think she is scared of your guitar, Danny.’

‘I know she is not,’ I said. ‘But the bomb did not scare her either. It just made her harder.’

Riz gave a low whistle. ‘You are both wrong,’ he said. ‘Guitars and bombs. All it ever does is give journalists a story. They love blood and feedback. What they cannot photograph is slow grinding down of an entire county.’

He tipped the last of the tea into his mouth, made a face and put the mug down.

‘You lot argue about tactics. I am going to have a wash before the hot water goes.’

He left us there, three knots of anger pointing in different directions.

Alex picked up his mug again. ‘Art is slow,’ he said quietly. ‘Takes time to get under the skin. Bombs are fast. They blow everything up and then people rush in to tell you what it meant. I know which job I would rather do, even if it feels pointless half the time.’

I thought of Dad’s tally disc, heavy under my shirt, of Shell’s words, of the spools of tape stacked on the windowsill.

In 2025, when Keira asks me when it stopped just being anger, when it became something more, I will point to this morning. Not the strike itself, but this moment: realising that art was slow, bombs were fast, and we needed something in between. Something loud enough to cut through but stubborn enough to last. That was the first fingerprint, though we did not call it that yet. Noise.

‘Then let us make sure the slow thing actually does something,’ I said.

•

By late afternoon I was on Oxford Street, killing time before the 100 Club, walking without purpose except the one I refused to name. Traffic crawled, buses threw out grey exhaust into the damp air, shoppers flowed around me in thick autumn coats with branded carrier bags hooked over their wrists as if it were any other Friday.

Outside a newsagent, tabloids were stacked in a shouting wall of type – IRON LADY DEFIES BOMB, TERROR STRIKE ON TORIES. A photograph of the Grand Hotel with its guts hanging out dominated every front page. In one picture, firemen in yellow helmets picked through rubble that had been someone's room an hour before.

A builder in paint-splattered overalls leaned against the door of a café, yawning, too knackered to bother with the papers. Somewhere, someone had come off a night shift and gone straight to bed without knowing the country had shifted shape while they worked.

For a second I imagined a different headline: PRIME MINISTER KILLED IN BLAST. Tried it on like a shirt. My stomach turned. It was not righteousness, what I felt. It was the sick curiosity you get slowing past a crash.

I folded the paper under my arm and kept walking.

The 100 Club entrance sat under street level, exactly where it always had, a red sign glowing above the stairs down into the dark. From the pavement, you would never know half the bands that had changed people's lives had sweated under that ceiling. That night it looked more than ever like a shelter.

Inside, the air was thick with cigarette smoke and the faint tang of damp brick. Near the entrance end there was a little green room, the kind of place that pretended privacy with a door and failed. Two battered chairs, a cracked mirror that made you look like you'd been in a fight, a sink, and a toilet door that did not quite catch.

We were all crammed in there with our cases and nerves. Alex sat with his Rickenbacker across his lap, fingers moving soundlessly. Pete crouched by his bass, turning the volume knob back and forth like he could dial his fear down with it. Tommy rolled his shoulders and tapped his sticks against his thigh, eyes closed.

'You look like you have swallowed the shipping forecast,' Alex said, glancing up.

'I have swallowed the news,' I said. 'We are going on in an hour and someone has tried to blow up the government.'

He nodded, a quick tilt of the chin. 'So what do we say?'

That was the question that had been chewing on me since six-thirty. It felt childish now, scribbling lyrics about pit closures and scabs when someone had wired real explosives into a hotel wall. Our three chords had not stopped a

single closure. A bomb had not toppled her either. Somewhere between those two failures was this – shouting in a basement club, strings and spit and sweat.

'We say what we were going to say,' I said eventually. 'But we do not pretend this did not happen. We are not in a different world just because we have a soundcheck.'

Alex plucked a few notes, listening to how they bounced off the low ceiling.

'Fine by me,' he said. 'Just remember I cannot play a manifesto solo.'

The MC stuck his head round the green-room door to check we were alive, then vanished again. I leaned out into the club for a second, letting the room hit me.

When we stepped onto the stage, you could read a whole sociology of London in thirty seconds.

Down at the front, as close to the monitors as they could get, were the familiars – kids from squats and council blocks, leather jackets with the sleeves coming away at the seams, battered boots, DIY tattoos, hair held up with more hope than product. Badges clustered on lapels – CND, Rock Against Racism, Coal Not Dole badges like mine on a surprising number of chests.

To the left of the bar, a knot of art school types lounged with their pints, in black polo necks and carefully tousled hair, cigarettes held just so. They looked like they had come straight from a seminar on Brecht.

Near the back, almost in their own weather system, was a little island of polish. Clean boots, wool overcoats cut to look casual, scarves that matched gloves, glossy hair that had seen a proper hairdresser. A couple of laminated passes still hanging round necks – a local free paper, a radio station, something with the BBC logo in the corner. They stood with that slight lean of people who were used to having room, even in crowded places.

Threading between them all was a young woman with a camera slung round her neck, strap cutting across a navy duffel coat that looked like it had never seen a washing line. Dark hair twisted up with a scarf, eyeliner neat even in the low red light. Every so often she lifted the camera, caught a face or a cluster of badges, then moved on, utterly at ease.

Down near the front, by one of the pillars, a lad in a denim jacket stood holding another boy's hand, thumb rubbing slow circles over the back of it. They had matching quiffs and matching nervous smiles, the sort you wore when you knew the world still thought you were a joke at best and a threat at worst. Each time the house music kicked up, they moved a little closer together.

The MC's voice came over the PA. 'All right, you lot. Give a welcome to Coalface!'

We walked out to the small stir of applause and the scrape of glasses set down on sticky tables. I slung my guitar strap over my shoulder, checked the mic height, tried not to look like my hands were shaking.

‘Evening,’ I said. ‘We are Coalface. This first one is for anyone whose morning started with bad news and just kept going. It is called Coal Not Dole.’

Tommy counted us in and we hit it. Pete’s bass line locked with the kick drum, Alex’s guitar cutting in jagged, clear phrases. The song felt bigger now with the full band behind it, words I had scribbled in our kitchen suddenly filling a room lined with faces.

By the second chorus, the front row were shouting the title back at me. A pint slopped over someone’s sleeve and nobody cared. The two lads by the pillar were moving in time now, shoulders bumping with every beat.

We ran straight into Lines on a Map, then a new one Alex had bullied me into finishing about the lads still going in at non-striking pits. The more we played, the easier it was to forget my own doubts and let the noise carry me.

Three songs in, sweat prickling at my collar, I stepped up to the microphone again.

‘You all seen the front pages?’ I asked. ‘Brighton?’

A murmur rolled round the room, the kind that was half agreement, half waiting to see where you were going.

‘Some bastard thought the best way to deal with this lot was to knock a hole in a hotel,’ I went on. ‘Four dead, and it is none of the ones who closed the pits.’

Someone at the back shouted something I did not catch. Another voice nearer the front yelled, ‘Should have finished the job!’ A few people cheered, too loud.

I felt my throat tighten. ‘Yes, I am angry,’ I said. ‘I have been angry since March. But if we start cheering when people we have never met get blown up in their beds, we are not on the side I thought we were on.’

It came out harsher than I meant, but I did not take it back.

‘They call us the enemy within,’ I said, hearing my own song title as I spoke. ‘Fine. This next one is about what that feels like when you are on a picket line instead of in a hotel.’

Pete hit the opening note of Enemy Within and the room rose to meet it. Whatever they thought of my little speech, the riff landed. I sang about lines of police and cameras and the moment you realised your own government thought you were a threat to be managed rather than a citizen to be listened to. In the middle eight, I caught the eye of the young lad by the pillar. He was yelling every word, face lit up, hand still wrapped in his boyfriend’s. For a second it felt like the song belonged to him as much as to any miner.

We finished with Furnace Town, the one about the village as an engine, heat stored in every terrace and club and band room. By the last chorus it felt like the whole place was singing it at me rather than with me.

Then it was done. The cheer went up, louder than I had expected. We left a skid of feedback hanging in the air and came off the stage on shaking legs, weaving back down the length of the room to the green room by the entrance, hearts thumping, ears ringing.

Lewis, appeared with four damp pint glasses.

'Good set, lads,' he said, handing them out. 'Proper stuff.'

Behind him, another man hovered, late forties maybe, in an old work jacket with a battered NUM badge on the lapel. He had the look of someone who had been around enough marches to know where the toilets were before he found the bar.

'You are Danny, right?' he asked.

'Yes.'

He shook my hand, grip like a shovel. 'Name is Colin. I help run the miners' support group round here. We have had your tapes at our meetings. Solid work.'

'Cheers,' I said, feeling a ridiculous flush of pride.

He took a sip of his beer, then jerked his chin towards the closed door that led back to the club.

'You know everyone in that room already hates her, do you not?'

I blinked. 'What?'

'Thatcher,' he said. 'You could set fire to a portrait of her on stage and they would just clap louder. You are preaching to a choir that has been singing since seventy-nine.'

The words landed with an accuracy that made my skin prickle. Somewhere behind him, someone laughed; someone else dropped an empty glass in a crate.

'So what do we do instead?' I asked, more sharply than I meant.

He shrugged. 'I am not saying do not play the gigs. We need the money and morale. Just… do not fool yourself that this is where the real fight is. The ones who matter are at home watching the telly, or in offices deciding what goes on the telly. Those are the heads you have got to get into.'

He clapped my shoulder and slipped back out through the green-room door before I could answer, leaving the thought sitting there, heavy as an amp in the middle of the floor.

Alex handed me my pint. 'You look like someone has just told you Santa is a cop,' he said.

‘Maybe he is,’ I muttered, but my mind was still on the room beyond the thin wall. On the little island of polish near the back. On the camera strap across the duffel coat.

When we went out to the bar area, the air hit us like a warm wet cloth. People came up in ones and twos to say they liked the set, to ask about tapes, to shove crumpled fivers into my hand for strike funds. Mo, the zine girl, appeared, cheeks flushed, waving a new issue with a rough photocopy of our name on the back page.

‘You lot are on page three,’ she said proudly. ‘I will drop some copies at your place.’

I promised I would read every word. She grinned, then vanished back into the crowd.

And then the girl with the camera was in front of us.

‘Sorry,’ she said, pushing a strand of hair back with her wrist. ‘Could I steal thirty seconds for a couple of shots? You were… well. Worth photographing.’

She sounded south of the river but south of my class as well. Proper vowels, the kind that had been ironed flat at expensive schools.

Alex, being Alex, grinned immediately. ‘Steal away.’

She stepped back, lifted the camera and took us in quickly: a tight shot of the four of us, then singles, then a close-up on my Coal Not Dole badge. The flash scraped white across my eyes and left the room washed in momentary after-images.

‘Who is it for?’ I asked, when she lowered the camera.

‘Freelance piece,’ she said. ‘I do bits for a student paper and a couple of little magazines. The conference coverage is going to be wall-to-wall suits and speeches after today. I thought it might be interesting to see what the other side of the country’s mood looks like.’

‘The angry, sweaty side?’ Alex said.

She smiled. ‘Exactly.’

‘You from round here?’ I asked.

‘London, yes,’ she said. ‘I was supposed to be doing photos around the conference — delegates coming and going, protesters outside, the fringe bits they pretend are not the story — but after this morning I knew I did not want to spend the night watching men in blue suits tell the nation what to think about what had just happened.’

‘So you came to watch some lads in black jeans instead,’ Alex said.

‘A girl has to have her vices,’ she said lightly. Then, to me: ‘I am Charlotte, by the way. Charlotte Haversham.’

The surname tugged at something. I had seen it in print, I was sure of it, but London was full of Havershams in my imagination – they lived in the big houses you cycled past on the way to the bus stop.

'Danny,' I said. 'This is Alex, Pete, Tommy.'

We shook hands. Her fingers were cool and ink-smudged, like she had been handling type rather than people.

Over her shoulder, I could see the little island of polish at the back of the room – one of the blokes with the BBC logo on his pass laughing at something, coat shrugged off, shirt cuffs rolled. They were talking about us, I realised, without being able to hear a word. We were their story for the night. They would go back to their offices and decide what, if anything, it meant.

I leaned closer to Alex, keeping my voice low.

'Colin is right,' I said. 'We are shouting at the wrong people. Those lot—' I jerked my chin towards the passes and perfect hair '—they are the ones who go back to BBC offices and Parliament internships. We need some of them on our side if we want this to travel further than basement clubs and pit villages.'

I had not meant her to hear, but Charlotte's eyebrows rose a fraction.

'Dangerous thing to say in front of a walking press pass,' she said, not offended so much as interested.

'You one of them, then?' I asked. 'The enemy without?'

'That is Argentina,' Alex put in. 'Keep up.'

She laughed, quick and bright, then sobered. 'No. I am sort of… parallel,' she said. 'My father is an MP. Conservative backbencher. He thinks I am covering the conference for my journalism course. In a way I am — the bits outside the ballroom — just not his version of it.'

'Christ,' Alex said. 'You are one of them and you are one of us.'

'Or neither,' she said. 'Depends who you ask.'

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out one of the cassettes we had brought to sell. Hand-drawn cover, our name in my careful block letters, a folded insert with a typed account of Orgreave that Shell had sent down from Grimethorpe.

'Here,' I said. 'This has our songs and a first-hand account of Orgreave from someone who was there. Might give you something for your article that is not Tebbit's plaster cast.'

Charlotte turned the tape over in her hands, reading the label. 'Orgreave: The Real Story,' she read aloud. 'Ambitious.'

‘It is just our songs and a written account tucked inside the case,’ I said. ‘But she was there. That is more than most of the people who get to talk about it on telly.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, and slipped the cassette into her camera bag as if it were another lens. ‘I will listen. And I might come and find you for a quote or two if that is all right.’

‘As long as you do not make us sound cleverer than we are,’ Alex said. ‘It will ruin our street cred.’

She smiled. ‘I promise to make you sound exactly as clever as you are. Which, for the record, is more than you think.’

•

We ended up outside together later, after the load-out. The rain had stopped but the pavement was still slick, catching reflections from traffic lights and shop windows. Alex disappeared up the street with Tommy to find a kebab place that would still serve at that hour. Pete had found someone to talk about bass guitars with and was not likely to reappear for an hour.

Charlotte lingered by the club door, camera bag at her feet, hands tucked into her duffel pockets.

‘Do you want a coffee?’ she asked, a little abruptly. ‘There is a place round the corner that does dreadful espresso and halfway decent cake. My treat. Consider it payment for the tape.’

Everything in me wanted chips with the lads and then my bed. Another part – the part that had been watching the little island of polish and thinking about Colin’s words – pricked its ears up.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘As long as you do not mind me smelling like a brewery and a wet dog.’

‘I have just been in the same room,’ she said. ‘I am acclimatised.’

The café was one of those narrow jobs with steamed-up windows and chrome stools, trying hard to look continental and almost succeeding. A Smiths song played faintly from a radio in the back. I felt scruffy just walking in, aware of the rips in my jeans and the ink ground into my fingernails.

Charlotte ordered in the easy way of someone used to having their choices written down in front of them. Two coffees, one slice of something that turned out to be orange and almond cake. She paid without looking at the coins.

We sat opposite each other in a booth near the back. The coffee was as advertised – dreadful – but it was hot and it woke my brain up.

‘Do you always give away your work that easily?’ she asked, nodding at my empty pocket.

‘We sell most of them,’ I said. ‘But some need to go to the right people. If you can get Shell’s voice into a place my dad has never been, that is worth more than a quid fifty.’

She considered that. ‘You talk in networks,’ she said. ‘You know that?’

‘What?’

‘Nodes and connections. Tapes going here, people going there. Most bands I write about talk about themselves. You talk about routes.’

I shrugged, embarrassed. ‘I just do not want it all stuck in one room,’ I said. ‘A man at the club tonight told me we are brilliant at shouting at people who already agree. If we are going to call ourselves the enemy within, we may as well actually get inside somewhere that matters.’

She smiled, but there was something serious sitting behind it.

‘My father sits on committees,’ she said. ‘He has lunch with people who decide which stories go on which page. I grew up listening to them talk about miners and unions like they were weather systems. Storms that would pass.’

‘And what do you think we are?’ I asked.

She traced a circle on the tabletop with her finger, as if drawing something only she could see.

‘I think you are heat,’ she said. ‘Not a storm. Heat under things. If you find somewhere to keep it contained and focused, it could power something. If you just let it flare up and die down, it will warm a few nights and that is it.’

I thought about that. Heat contained and focused. A place where all of it – the tapes, the bands, the support groups, people like her who could slip through doors we could not – could come together instead of scattering into the dark.

‘We need somewhere,’ I said slowly. ‘Not just gigs. Somewhere people can plug in. Bands, support groups, anyone who is sick of being told they are fringe.’

Her eyes lit. ‘Then find it,’ she said. ‘And let me know when you do. I can get people there who would not normally go near a picket line.’

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Why would you risk that? Your dad, your… everything.’

She looked at me steadily over the rim of her cup.

‘Because one day I would like to write about something other than the slow collapse of a country my father says is being saved,’ she said. ‘And because when you sang Enemy Within tonight, the boy by the pillar looked like someone had finally said out loud what has been living behind his eyes for years. That feels… important.’

I thought of the lad’s hand wrapped in his boyfriend’s, the way his voice had cracked on the chorus.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘When we have found a room and a way to pay the rent, you will be first to know.’

She tore the cake in half and pushed a piece across to me.

‘Deal,’ she said.

•

Alex and I walked back to Camden later, our breath clouding in the cold, guitar cases pulling at our shoulders. The streets were quieter now, shop fronts dark, buses half empty.

‘So,’ he said eventually. ‘Charlotte.’

‘What about her?’

‘Her dad is a Tory MP. She has got a camera and a press pass. She listens when you talk about networks instead of solos. That is either a gift from the gods or the set-up to a terrible joke.’

‘Maybe both,’ I said. ‘Feels like something is starting, though.’

‘The tapes-and-gigs thing?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Tapes. Gigs. People like her who can slip through doors we cannot. Shell if she comes down. It is all bits at the minute, but… I do not know. Tonight felt like… not just noise.’

Alex nodded, considering it. ‘Music alone is not enough,’ he said quietly. ‘But it is a good excuse to get the right people in the same room.’

By the time we reached our building, my legs ached and my head was full. Above us, a scrap of paper pinned to our wall read HOUSE RULES? in my handwriting. Guitar cases leaned under the window, and a frayed amp lead lay taped and ready for tomorrow’s rehearsal.

‘I am going to ring home,’ I said. ‘After today… I just need to hear a familiar voice.’

‘Tell your dad we played a historic gig,’ Alex said, fumbling for his keys. ‘Leave out the bit where we nearly started a fight about terrorism.’

The phone box near the tube still had a working receiver, though the directory hung in tatters. I fed coins into the slot and dialled home, suddenly desperate to bridge the miles between Oxford Street and the terraces.

The tone purred twice, then clicked.

‘Hello?’ Dad’s voice, thick with sleep. Of course – it was past midnight.

‘Dad, it is me. Danny.’

‘Danny? Christ, lad, what time is it? Are you all right?’

The pips started immediately – three sharp bleeps demanding more coins. I fumbled in my pockets, panic rising. Two ten-pence pieces and a fifty. I fed them in quickly, knowing we had seconds before the line went dead.

'Yes, I am… I played a gig tonight. At the 100 Club.'

Silence. Then: 'That is good, son. I think.'

'I heard about Brighton,' I said. 'You all right there? Any bother?'

'We are fine,' he said. 'It is them down there that will be rattled. Do not like to think of bombs going off in hotels, mind. World has gone mad enough without that.'

I leaned my forehead against the cool glass of the booth.

'Aye,' I said. 'That is sort of what I wanted to say. I am angry, Dad. All the time. But I do not want it to be that.'

'No,' he said. 'Nor me. There is enough widows up here as it is.'

The pips started again, insistent. I shoved the last coin in.

'We are trying something else,' I said quickly. 'Me and some mates. Tapes, gigs, maybe… maybe more, if we can pull it off. Something that tells our side without… you know.'

'You do what you think is right,' he said. 'Just do not get yourself locked up. Your mam would kill me if I let that happen.'

We both laughed, and for a moment the distance shrank.

'All right,' I said. 'Night, Dad.'

'Night, lad. And Danny?'

'Yes?'

'If you were on telly singing tonight instead of them in Brighton talking, I would have left the set on for once.'

The line clicked and went dead. I stood there for a second, staring at my own reflection in the smeared glass. A miner's son in a leather jacket with a guitar callus on his thumb. One foot in a pit village, the other in a London basement, somewhere between bombs and ballads trying to find a way of fighting that did not make me sick.

•

Three days later I was still thinking about it – bombs and violence and the distance between what I wanted to happen and what I could live with – when someone knocked on our door. It was Martin, one of the lads who helped out at the solidarity centre, pale under his fringe.

'You heard about Grimethorpe?' he said.

My stomach dropped. ‘What about Grimethorpe?’

‘Riots. Police arrested twenty-odd people for picking coal off the slag heap. It is all over the NUM grapevine.’

I was down the stairs before he had finished the sentence.

The landlord was downstairs in her hallway. I rapped on the doorframe, breathless.

‘I need to use the phone,’ I said. ‘Emergency. I will put coins in after.’

She looked at me, at whatever was in my face, and nodded. She stepped aside from the little phone on her hallway table. ‘Make it quick.’

My hands shook as I dialled. The tone rang and rang, long enough for every terrible thought to crowd in – Dad arrested, Bobby arrested, someone hurt in the riot, police batons, cells, courts.

Then Mam’s voice, flat with exhaustion.

‘Daniel?’

‘Is Dad all right? Bobby? Who did they arrest?’

A pause. I could hear her shifting the receiver, the scrape of a chair as she sat down at the kitchen table.

‘Your dad’s fine. Bobby’s fine. They arrested twenty-two for picking coal off the slag heap. Women and men both, Danny. Mrs Kaur from down the road. Frank’s youngest lad. Old Jim who’s seventy if he’s a day.’

‘For picking coal?’

‘They said it was theft. Sent in fifty coppers like it was Orgreave all over again. There were bairns there, Danny. Families just trying to keep warm.’

I pressed my forehead against the wall.

‘What is happening now?’

‘I have been at the welfare all night. We are getting them solicitors, organizing bail. Shell’s doing a rota for court support.’ Her voice cracked, just for a second. ‘They are arresting people for trying not to freeze, love. That is where we are now.’

I heard a sound in the background – voices, someone calling Mam’s name.

‘I have to go,’ she said. ‘Arthur Holden is about to speak and I am meant to be taking notes for the press.’

‘Arthur Holden?’

‘From the union. He came to the cemetery this morning – where the old miners are buried – and he said…’ She paused, gathering the words. ‘“This is a mining area. These people depend upon coal. If it is there and they have to pick it

to keep their families warm, then they are going to do that and I do not think anybody should object." He said it right to the cameras, Danny. Right to the coppers' faces.'

Something fierce and proud swelled in my chest.

'Tell him he is brilliant,' I said.

'I will tell him you rang,' she said. 'Now I really do have to go. Stay safe, love.'

The line went dead.

I stood there in the landlord's hallway, receiver still in my hand. Mrs Kaur, who always had barley sugars in her pocket for the kids. Frank's youngest, who could not be more than eighteen. Old Jim, who had worked thirty years underground and now needed coal to survive the winter.

Twenty-two arrests. In a village of six thousand.

When I got back upstairs, Alex was waiting.

'You all right?'

I told him. All of it. The arrests, the riot, Arthur Holden at the cemetery, the Deputy Chief Constable who had apparently gone on television the next day to apologize – an almost unheard-of admission that the police had gone too far.

Alex sat back, jaw tight.

'They arrested them for picking coal,' he said slowly. 'In a mining village. During a miners' strike.'

'Aye,' I said. 'That is where we are.'

We looked at each other for a long moment. Brighton had been state violence from one side – bombs and blood and people pulled from rubble. This was state violence from the other – fifty coppers sent to arrest grandmothers and teenagers for trying to keep warm.

'This needs to be in the next tape,' Alex said. 'People need to know.'

I nodded, already reaching for the phone list.

'I will get to the phone box and ring Shell,' I said. 'Get her to talk it through. Names, details, what Arthur said. We will get it down and get it out.'

'Good,' Alex said. 'Because this – this is the story. Not the one they are telling on the news. The real one.'

Outside, the city went on being itself. Somewhere in a hotel room, the Prime Minister slept with a police guard outside her door. Somewhere in Grimethorpe, my dad turned over and went back to sleep, and twenty-two people waited for their court dates.

And in our flat, on a windowsill above Camden Road, twenty-odd cassettes cooled in their cases, waiting for the next pair of hands to pick them up and carry them somewhere we could not yet see.

Chapter Six – November 1984–February 1985, London – Building Networks

By November the cold had moved into the flat and refused to leave.

You could see your breath if you stood too close to the window. The landlord claimed the ancient gas fire was 'perfectly adequate' for the size of the room, which was true if you sat directly in front of it and never moved. The rest of the flat lived in a permanent state of grey chill, mugs of tea doing as much for morale as for temperature.

We were halfway through a morning dubbing shift when the phone rang downstairs. Riz was on the floor by the window folding flyers and licking envelopes, his fingertips stained faintly with ink. I could hear the landlord's muffled shout up through the floor.

'Ashcroft!'

I thundered down, still in socks. The landlord stood by the little phone on her hallway table, receiver held out like it might bite.

'Tell your mates,' she said, 'that this is not a bloody answering service. One ring, you pick up. Otherwise they can write.'

I took it, nodded my thanks and waited till she shut herself in the kitchen.

'All right?'

'All right?' Shell echoed on the other end. 'I am at Doncaster station, you pillock. Coach dropped me here. Catching the train. I told you last week I was coming.'

I sat down hard on the bottom step of the stairs. 'You what?'

'London,' she said. 'Should be at King's Cross half twelve if this thing does not give up. I have got one suitcase, a bag of leaflets and a tin of biscuits Mam made for you. Try and look pleased.'

'You moving down or just visiting?'

There was a pause, full of diesel fumes and the crackle of a bad payphone line.

'Let us call it an extended stay,' she said. 'See you at the barrier.'

The line clicked dead.

Alex was watching me, tape paused with his finger still on the button.

‘Shell?’ he said.

‘She is coming,’ I said. ‘Today.’

He grinned. ‘About time someone responsible joined this outfit.’

•

King’s Cross at lunchtime smelled of chips and diesel and wet coats. People moved through the concourse in thick lines, some with proper cases on wheels, others with plastic bags that had once held duvets and now held everything.

I spotted her before she saw me. Denim jacket under a too-thin parka, scarf in Grimethorpe Welfare colours knotted round her neck, hair scraped back in a way that meant business. She had a battered suitcase in one hand and a canvas bag over the other shoulder, which looked like it contained paper more than clothes.

When her eyes found me, her whole face shifted. The tiredness did not go away, it just made space for a smile.

‘All right, London,’ she said, when we were close enough. ‘You look rough.’

‘You look like you have wrestled that case all the way from Barnsley,’ I said. ‘What have you got in there, coal?’

‘Leaflets,’ she said. ‘And jumpers. And half a food parcel from Mrs Briggs. She says if you have gone vegetarian down here she will have to come and slap some sense into you.’

We hugged, awkward for all of three seconds and then not awkward at all. She smelled of cigarette smoke and washing powder and the inside of the Women’s Centre, which had always been caretakers’ polish and strong tea.

‘Does your husband know you are doing this?’ I asked as we headed for the tube.

‘He knows I am not much use sitting at home wringing my hands,’ she said. ‘He also knows I will come back if things get desperate. Until then, London can have me on loan.’

On the platform she dug in her pocket and produced a folded sheet.

‘Victoria says if you are not eating proper I am to put you over my knee,’ she said, handing it over. ‘She wrote it down so I would not forget.’

It was a list in Mam’s careful handwriting: vegetables, pulses, things you could afford if you went to the right market stalls at the right time. At the bottom she had added: Tell him I said music does not count as a food group.

I swallowed round the lump that rose in my throat.

‘I will put it on the wall,’ I said.

‘Good,’ Shell said. ‘And I will make you actually follow it. We are doing this properly now.’

•

We did not have a spare room, so Shell ended up two streets away in a squat that had once been a solicitor’s office. The council had forgotten it long enough for someone to prise the back door, and now it housed eight people, three cats and a permanent smell of damp.

‘It is fine,’ she said, when I pulled a face at the cracked window in what was now her bedroom. ‘Roof is mostly sound, and there is a lock on the door that works. You have been in some of the houses back home. This is luxury.’

She put her suitcase down, then immediately started rearranging the furniture like she owned the place.

‘We will need hooks here for coats,’ she said. ‘And a board somewhere with who is cooking when. You cannot have eight of you all deciding to make beans at different times. You will never get off the toilet.’

‘You have been here ten minutes,’ I said. ‘Do you not want to sit down first?’

‘I sat for four hours on trains and platforms,’ she said. ‘If I sit now I will fall asleep, and there is too much to do.’

That became her rhythm. Within a week she had a rota on the kitchen wall, a list of local support groups pinned next to it, and a notebook with names and phone numbers of anyone who had ever expressed the slightest interest in helping.

‘You are supposed to be resting,’ I said one night, as she drew lines between names on a page like she was mapping a constellation.

‘I will rest when Thatcher does – which is never – so I will take catnaps,’ she said.

She looked up, pen tapping her lip.

‘You lot need a better system for your tapes,’ she added. ‘That biscuit tin method will not do when we double output.’

‘Double?’ I said.

She grinned. ‘You have got me now. We are doing phone trees. You and Alex can be the rock stars. I will be the telephone exchange.’

•

The solidarity meeting that week was in a church hall off Euston Road. From the outside it looked like anywhere else on the street – soot-dark stone, big wooden doors – but inside the noticeboard was plastered with posters: COAL NOT DOLE, AIDS: GET THE FACTS, GREENHAM WOMEN FOR PEACE. Someone had drawn a peace sign over a picture of cruise missiles.

The hall itself was a patchwork of activity. At one end, trestle tables with foil trays of stew and trays of bread. At the other, folding chairs in ragged rows facing a makeshift stage of pallets and a microphone stand. Between the two, a strip of lino where kids ran in circles, weaving between adult legs and piles of leaflets.

At the donations table near the door, two men in leather jackets were counting change into an old biscuit tin. One had a pink triangle badge on his lapel next to an NUM sticker. The other caught Shell looking and grinned.

'Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners,' he said, like it was obvious. 'We're on your side, love. Thatcher hates us almost as much as she hates you lot.'

Shell blinked, recovered. 'Right then,' she said. 'You'll want tea, I expect?'

'Thought you'd never ask.'

Shell walked in like she owned the place, and within twenty minutes was up to her elbows in pans in the kitchen.

'They are trying to do three different kinds of soup with one hob,' she muttered to me over her shoulder. 'No wonder people are queuing halfway down the corridor.'

'They are volunteers,' I said. 'They are doing their best.'

'And I am helping them do better,' she said briskly. 'Pass me that ladle. And those bowls. And tell Mrs Briggs her recipe travels.'

The kids' corner was a pile of donated toys and a few plastic chairs. Someone had laid an old blanket on the floor and stuck crayons and paper in the middle. A little girl was lining up our cassette cases like tiny bricks, making a wall. A boy with a runny nose was using a zine to make a paper aeroplane.

'Careful with that,' I said automatically. 'It is first edition.'

He peered at me suspiciously and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

'Any good?' he asked.

I thought about it. About the interviews, the lists of strike funds, the badly reproduced photo of a pit head.

'Yes,' I said. 'It is.'

On the stage, a woman from South Wales was telling a story about standing between her husband and the police line, arms out, heart going like a drum. Her youngest sat at her feet with a biscuit in each hand, crumbs spreading.

Shell appeared beside me with a bowl and a look.

'There are three kids over there whose mums are in the meeting and who have not eaten since breakfast,' she said. 'You are on biscuit duty. I will do plates.'

'I am a guitarist,' I said. 'Important work to be done, you know.'

She handed me the tin. ‘Consider it outreach.’

We moved through the hall, topping up cups of tea, making sure no cup of soup left the kitchen without bread. It was nothing glamorous. No speeches, no chanting, just the slow daily work of keeping people upright.

Later, as we stacked chairs, I watched a group of women swap numbers, writing them on the backs of receipts.

‘That is your phone tree,’ I said, nodding at them.

‘Exactly,’ Shell said. ‘Now imagine it neat, on proper sheets, with who to call when something happens. That is what we are going to build.’

‘We?’

‘You have got London,’ she said. ‘I have got Yorkshire. The women’s centre in Grimethorpe has become the nerve centre – lists on every wall, phones ringing, kids doing homework in corners while their mams organize. We stitch them together.’

The way she said it made it sound inevitable.

•

I had told Charlotte I would be at the solidarity hall that night in case she wanted photos. She turned up halfway through, camera already in hand, hair damp from the drizzle outside.

She hesitated at the door, taking in the scene: Women Against Pit Closures banners, kids underfoot, men with worn faces and new badges.

‘You all right?’ I asked, going to meet her.

‘I was not sure if it was right for me to be here,’ she said quietly. ‘Felt like turning up with a camera might be… intrusive.’

‘Depends what you do with the pictures,’ I said. ‘And whether you get in the way when someone is carrying three bowls of stew.’

Her mouth quirked.

‘Noted.’

She started on the edges, at first – the hands washing up in plastic bowls, the kids asleep on coats in the corner, the pile of donation tins on the table by the door. Then she moved closer to the stage, lens catching faces as women spoke.

Shell came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a tea towel and stopped when she clocked Charlotte.

‘And you are?’ she said, eyes narrowed just enough to be a warning.

‘Charlotte Haversham,’ Charlotte said, stepping forward. ‘I am… I take photographs. I was at the 100 Club.’

‘I heard about you,’ Shell said. ‘The one with the posh coat who nicked our singer afterwards.’

‘I bought him coffee,’ Charlotte said. ‘Nicking implies there was resistance.’

I coughed. ‘This is Shell. She can organise an army with three sheets of A4 and a blunt pencil.’

Shell ignored me.

‘Where are these pictures going?’ she asked.

‘A couple for a London student paper, maybe,’ Charlotte said. ‘If I am lucky, a few to *Spare Rib* or one of the other women’s magazines. They do not usually put miners’ wives on their covers unless they look tragic. I thought it might be useful to show them looking furious and competent instead.’

Shell looked at her for a long moment, weighing something.

‘You grew up with cutlery that matches, did you not?’ she said finally.

‘Yes,’ Charlotte said evenly. ‘And a father who thinks cuts are unfortunate but necessary.’

‘And now you are here.’

‘Yes.’

Shell nodded once.

‘Right then,’ she said. ‘No pictures of anyone who does not want one. You ask. And if any of the papers try to make us look pathetic, we will come and find you.’

‘I would expect nothing less,’ Charlotte said.

She lifted the camera again, and Shell went back to the kitchen.

‘That went well,’ I murmured.

‘On a scale of one to being thrown out, yes,’ Charlotte said. ‘Your friend is terrifying.’

‘She is the reason my dad eats anything other than chip butties,’ I said. ‘Terrifying is useful.’

Later that night, I found them at the back of the hall talking like they had known each other for years. Shell was describing the system they had worked out in Grimethorpe for sharing out food parcels so nobody got left out. Charlotte was asking questions, writing notes with one hand while the other steadied a camera on her knee.

‘The thing about all this,’ Shell was saying, ‘is nobody ever sees the hours that go into the banners and the sandwiches. They see the march, the confrontation,

the bit where the cameras show up. It is like the washing-up fairy, but with politics.'

'I want to photograph the washing up,' Charlotte said. 'The fairy is where the power is.'

Shell glanced at me over Charlotte's shoulder, a rare softness in her eyes.

'Keep her,' she mouthed.

•

December blurred into a pattern of meetings, gigs and letters.

Coalface played anywhere that would have us – church halls, co-ops, pubs whose landlords wanted to look generous for the price of a few pints and an electric socket. Sometimes the room was half full and you could see your own breath between the notes. Sometimes people stood shoulder to shoulder and the floor felt like it might give way.

Our set tightened. The ragged edges smoothed off without losing their bite. We added a new song Shell had bullied me into writing about the women running the strike kitchens. It landed harder than I expected; at one gig in Kilburn, a woman wearing both a 'Grimethorpe WAPC' badge and several Greenham Common peace badges stood at the back with tears on her face and did not wipe them away. One of the Greenham women who had come to show solidarity, I reckoned, given a WAPC badge as a token of thanks.

Charlotte turned up with her camera more often than not. Sometimes she brought friends – a lanky journalist from a listings magazine, a quiet woman who worked at a gallery, once a bloke who turned out to be a junior producer at Channel 4.

After one gig, we sat on milk crates in a loading bay sharing chips out of newspaper. The rest of the band argued about whether we should cover a Jam song. Charlotte sat with her knees drawn up, scarf wrapped round her twice.

'Do they know?' I asked her quietly.

'Who?'

'Your parents. Where you are when you are not in Brighton hotels with them.'

She picked a chip apart thoughtfully.

'They know some of it,' she said. 'Mum knows I care. Dad knows I am… troublesome.' A small smile. 'He likes to think I will grow out of it.'

'And will you?' I asked.

She looked at me steadily.

'Does your dad think you will grow out of this?' she asked.

I thought of Dad, standing on picket lines with his back straight even when horses came at him.

‘He thinks I will get a proper job at some point,’ I said. ‘But he also thinks what we are doing matters. Even if he does not quite know what it is.’

‘Then we are even,’ she said.

She leaned her head briefly on my shoulder, just long enough for me to realise all the ways this could go wrong.

•

In January, Shell went back to Yorkshire for a week.

‘Welfare needs extra hands,’ she said. ‘And there is talk of some big consultation meeting for the union. They want women there as well, for once. Can you imagine?’

‘Mam?’ I said, both hopeful and doubtful.

‘She is on the list,’ Shell said. ‘She will say she is not up to it, then she will write three pages of notes for whoever does go, and then we will bully her into coming herself.’

‘I wish I could be there,’ I said.

‘You have got work here,’ she said. ‘Tapes, gigs, posh girls to corrupt. I will ring you.’

London felt smaller without her. Before she left, she had taped a rota above our sink in her neat handwriting – soak beans, ring Leeds, ring Sheffield – as if she could bully order into existence by sheer organisation. I tried to stick to it. Without Shell there, the system went soft at the edges: tapes unlabelled, envelopes addressed twice and then not at all, missed calls that would have been followed up if her notebook had been here, names sliding off the page before they ever reached the right person.

‘We need to recruit more Shells,’ he said, staring at the mess. ‘We cannot build a revolution on wishful thinking and a biro that has run out.’

‘One Shell is enough trouble,’ I said. ‘Any more and there will be a coup.’

She rang on the Thursday night. I was half asleep on the mattress, the room lit by the street lamp outside, when I heard the landlord’s shout from downstairs.

‘Ashcroft! Phone!’

I stumbled down in my socks, the lino cold under my feet.

My thumb found the tally disc in my pocket without thinking.

‘Grimethorpe three-six-four,’ I said, out of habit, then realised it was not 1982 and I was in Camden.

‘Do not be daft,’ Shell said. ‘We are not that posh. It is me.’

‘How did it go?’ I asked, perching on the bottom step.

‘You know that consultation?’ she said. ‘They held it in Barnsley. Proper job, big hall, loads of people from all over. Men in suits and women in their best coats. You would have hated the acoustics.’

‘And?’

‘And your mam stood up,’ Shell said. ‘You would have loved that.’

I gripped the receiver tighter.

‘What did she do?’

‘She did what she always does, but louder,’ Shell said. ‘Talked about the kids going without, about the lads going back to work with their heads held high or not at all. And when they asked for someone to speak for the Grimethorpe women at the next meeting, they picked her.’

She let that hang there, satisfaction crackling down the line.

‘She said it was only because nobody else wanted to do it,’ Shell added. ‘But that is rubbish and you know it.’

I could see it, as clearly as if I had been in the hall: Mam in her best coat that smelt of mothballs and fried onions, hands shaking at first and then not shaking at all, her voice filling all the gaps between the official speeches.

‘They are sending her to another meeting?’ I said.

‘Leeds,’ Shell said. ‘Proper NUM job, all regions. She wanted to ring you herself but the phone at Welfare is knackered and I got here first. Ring home tomorrow. Your dad practically burst his buttons when they announced it.’

We chatted a bit longer – who was ill, who had had a baby, who had finally got their benefit sorted after three weeks of fighting – and then the coins ran out and the line cut with the blunt little click that always felt like an insult.

I sat in the quiet for a long time after.

My mam, Victoria Ashcroft, who had once been too shy to send food back in a café, was going to stand in a room full of union men and tell them how it was. The strike had been tearing us to bits for nearly a year. Somehow, in the middle of that, it had built her into someone new.

The next day, I fed coins into the phone box at the end of our street until the machine practically sighed.

Dad answered.

‘Ashcroft residence,’ he said, in the posh voice he used when he thought it might be someone official.

‘All right, Dad.’

There was a beat, then a warmth that did not need anything as daft as words.

‘Danny,’ he said. ‘To what do we owe the honour?’

‘I heard about Mam,’ I said.

‘News travels fast,’ he said. I could hear grim delight in his voice. ‘She is mortified, you know. Says she will make a fool of herself.’

‘She will not,’ I said. ‘She never does.’

He grunted agreement.

‘You proud?’ I asked.

‘Do not be daft,’ he said. ‘Course I am. I have always known she had more sense than half the blokes at those meetings. Nice to see them catching up.’

There was a rustle, and then Mam came on the line.

‘Is that our Daniel?’

‘Apparently,’ I said. ‘I hear you are getting ideas above your station.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ she said, but she was laughing. ‘Shell is a gossip. It is just a meeting. I will probably trip on the step and make a show of myself.’

‘You will be brilliant,’ I said. ‘They are lucky to have you.’

There was a pause.

‘What are you doing, down there?’ she asked. ‘Apart from freezing and living on toast.’

‘Playing,’ I said. ‘Writing. Sending tapes out. We are talking to people who talk to other people. Charlotte is getting pictures into papers. Shell says we have got to build a proper network. It is… it feels like something. Not enough yet, but something.’

‘It all counts,’ she said. ‘That is what I keep telling the women here. The meetings, the leaflets, the casseroles, your tapes. It all adds up, even if we cannot see the sum yet.’

The pips started up, greedy little sounds.

‘I wish I could be there when you speak,’ I said quickly.

‘So do I,’ she said. ‘But you are where you need to be. Someone has got to shout from the city while we shout from the pits.’

‘Enemy within on two fronts,’ I said.

She made a tutting noise.

‘I do not like that phrase,’ she said. ‘But if you are going to use it, at least be the right sort of enemy.’

‘We are working on it,’ I said.

After I hung up, I walked back to the flat with my collar up against the wind. The windowsill was full of tapes again, ready for posting. On the wall above my mattress were pinned three things: Mam’s shopping list, a photocopy of Shell’s latest phone tree chart, and one of Charlotte’s black-and-white prints of a picket line, faces half-obscured by scarves.

We had started as a noise in a small room. Now, slowly, the room was developing corridors.

It was not much, not yet. But it was a beginning.

Chapter Seven – March 1985, Grimethorpe, South Yorkshire

The first train out of King’s Cross pulled into Doncaster just after dawn, breath clouding in front of everyone as we spilled onto the platform with our bags and our hangovers and that half-stunned quiet you get when you have dozed in snatches under carriage lights that never quite dim.

The art deco entrance looked the same as when Frank had dropped me off months before, brick and clean lines holding up against the grey morning. I made my way through to the bus station, where a poster was peeling off the shelter glass: a Sun headline from the week before, something about SCARGILL’S LAST STAND, the ink running where the rain had got at it. Someone had drawn horns on his head in biro. Underneath, another hand had added a little halo.

I hitched my rucksack higher on my shoulder and waited for the bus to Grimethorpe. The air tasted like home – coal dust far down under everything, damp stone, chip fat from last night hanging around the pavements.

A lad in a bomber jacket stood a few yards away with a sheaf of leaflets. He could not have been much older than me, shaved head, boots laced tight. He held one out as I passed.

‘Keep Britain British,’ he said, like he was asking the time.

I glanced down. Union Jack, clenched fist, a name I recognised from rumours and pub arguments. National Front.

‘No ta,’ I said, shaking my head.

He looked like he wanted to say summat, then clocked my accent properly, my duffel bag with COALFACE scratched into the canvas in biro and Tippex. He took a step back, like the word might be catching.

‘Suit yourself,’ he muttered, turning to the next person.

I shoved my hands deep into my pockets until I felt the folded envelope there, the one with the money from the last run of gigs. I pressed my knuckles into it and waited for the bus.

•

The road out to the village had not changed. Same sagging fences, same patch of waste ground where we used to play football, same half-finished house where the bloke had done a moonlight flit in ’81 and no one had moved in since. But everything felt… thinner. Like the colour had been turned down a notch while I had been away.

Mam opened the door before I got my key in the lock.

‘Daniel,’ she said, and for a second she was just my mother again, not the woman whose name was on banners and WAPC leaflets all over South Yorkshire.

She pulled me in, arms tight round my ribs. I could feel how much weight she had lost.

‘You look like you have been living on crisps and beer,’ she said into my shoulder.

‘Mostly toast,’ I said. ‘Sometimes with beans, if we are celebrating.’

She pushed me back by the shoulders to get a proper look.

‘You have gone pale,’ she said. ‘City pallor. We will get some decent stew into you, set you right.’

There was a sound from the front room, chair legs scraping back. When I stepped through, Dad was at the window in his shirt sleeves, mug in hand, watching the street.

He did not turn straight away.

‘You made it, then,’ he said, voice flat.

‘Train was on time for once,’ I said. ‘Morning, Dad.’

He nodded without looking round, eyes still on the road. I could see the collar of his shirt was frayed. His hair had more grey in it than when I left.

‘You staying long?’ he asked.

‘Couple of days,’ I said. ‘For the march back in. Thought I should be here.’

That got a reaction. His shoulders went up, then down, like something heavy had rolled over them.

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘Suppose that is summat.’

Mam shot me a look over his shoulder that said: leave it. Then she clapped her hands once.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Kettle is on. Shell is already at the welfare making sandwiches. We will have a brew and then we are off down with them. They are marching in together, brass band and all. They are not slinking, Daniel, they are going in stood up straight.’

Her chin lifted a fraction as she said it. I thought: she is doing that for him as much as for me.

•

By half eight the street was filling up.

Men in work jackets and flat caps, some with the NUM badges on their lapels polished specially, some with scarves up round their faces more out of habit than need now the worst of winter had passed. Kids in anoraks fidgeted round their legs. Women in thick cardigans and sensible shoes shepherded everyone along, making sure no one got left behind.

Further down, the Grimethorpe Colliery Band had assembled near the welfare. Brass caught the weak morning light, valves clacking as they warmed up on snatches of ‘Gresford’ and ‘Abide With Me’. They were famous beyond Yorkshire – competition winners, recording artists – but today they were just ours, playing us home.

‘You all right, love?’

Shell slid into place beside me like she had always been there. She had her hair tied up in a scarf, WAPC badge pinned to her coat, a thermos tucked under one arm.

‘Welcome back to Grimey, then,’ she said, bumping her shoulder against mine. ‘Still standing, just about.’

‘Too grand for us now?’ I asked.

‘Too grand?’ She snorted. ‘I have seen the letters, Mister Not-Ridiculous-At-All. “Dear Coalface, your tape made the welfare cry.”’ She put on a posh voice that sounded exactly like no one I had ever met. ‘“Enclosed please find cheque for five pounds…”’

I felt myself going red.

‘They are not all like that,’ I said. ‘We got one from a lad in Sunderland who just wrote: “Sound. Cheers.”’

‘That your favourite?’ she asked.

‘Maybe,’ I said.

Up by the corner, Mam was talking to a cluster of women with prams. Her voice carried in little bursts, the way it did when she was organising summat. I watched her hands moving – counting, emphasising, inviting – and thought

about the first time I had seen her stand at the front of the Miners' Welfare with a microphone. She had shaken then, but she had done it.

Dad came out of the house with his jacket on and his pit helmet under his arm. He looked like he always had on work days, except for the lines at the corners of his mouth pulling down. My brother Bobby walked behind him, cap pulled low, jaw set hard enough to crack teeth. He had been working at the engineering works over in Barnsley – making parts for pit machinery – but he had been down on the line with Dad through the whole strike. Our other brother was still down south with the army, writing postcards that said very little and meant even less.

'You all right, our kid?' I said, falling in step with him as the line began to move.

He shrugged without looking at me.

'Fine,' he said. 'We lost, that is all. Nothing to say about losing.'

'There is plenty to say about it,' Shell put in, uncompromising. 'You lot stood out a year. That is summat no one can take away.'

Bobby's mouth twitched.

'You writ that on one of your leaflets?' he asked.

'We have written worse,' she said. 'And better. Here.'

She dug in her pocket and shoved a folded sheet into his hand. On the top in her block capitals: WHERE HAS IT LEFT US? Below that, bullet points about hardship funds and appeal rights and the next WAPC meeting.

He glanced at it, then tucked it away inside his jacket.

The march gathered itself without anyone shouting instructions. It was muscle memory by now: families falling in along the pavement, men bunching into twos and threes in the road. Someone passed a banner forward – GRIMETHORPE NUM – the cloth patched and re-stitched where it had been torn at one rally or another. Two lads took the poles, shoulders squaring.

The band struck up "The Red Flag" as they took the first steps. It wobbled at the start, then settled, low brass and cornets pushing the tune between the houses. People joined in, voices rough from winter colds and too much shouting, but they sang.

Dad moved with the men, helmet tucked in the crook of his arm like a strange kind of shield. He did not look back at us.

I walked on the pavement with Mam and Shell, feeling the rhythm of the boots on the tarmac in my chest. The houses they passed had curtains twitching, faces at upstairs windows. At one door an old woman stood with her dressing gown pulled tight, tears on her cheeks. She lifted her hand as the line went by.

A bloke behind Dad stepped out of formation just enough to squeeze her fingers, then fell back in again.

The closer we got to the pit, the heavier the air felt. Not just the usual tang from the slag heaps, but something else – like a room after an argument that has not been cleared by opening a window yet.

There were cameras at the gates, of course. Men in long coats with microphones, BBC and ITV logos, notebooks out. A van with a satellite dish on top idled near the car park. Police too, but not like at Orgreave. No shields up, no lines of horses. Just fluorescent jackets and notebooks, observing.

'Like undertakers at a funeral they did not believe in,' Shell said under her breath.

We stopped a little way back, letting the miners go the last stretch on their own. This was their bit. It felt wrong to crowd it.

I watched women lined up along the road watching their husbands march back. Some stood at garden gates, arms folded tight across their chests. Others held onto kids who did not quite understand why Mam was crying. One woman I recognised from the welfare – Beryl, married to one of Dad's mates – stood at the end of her road with her hand over her mouth, shoulders shaking. Pride and grief all mixed up together, no way to separate them.

Dad's shoulders squared as he reached the yard. The band switched to 'Gresford' properly now, that slow, mournful march they always played for pit disasters. The melody floated over the heads of the crowd, full of every man who had ever gone down and not come back up.

One by one they filed through the gates.

Heads up. Backs straight. No one slouched.

They had lost, but they would not slink. That much they still had.

I saw Dad hand his new tally disc over – issued that morning because the old one was still round my neck – and I felt something twist in my chest. He closed his fingers as if they did not want to let go, then forced them open and dropped it into the man's hand.

That was it. Strike over. No deal. No victory.

Just a gate swallowing men again, the same way it had been swallowing them for generations. Only now the camaraderie that used to meet them down there would be different. Broken. They had believed in their hearts it was the right thing to do, going out on strike. But they had lost, and that feeling – Shell told me later – would last for a long, long time.

•

Much later, after Dad's first shift back, the kettle worked overtime. People dropped in and out, leaving coats on the banister, mugs blooming across every

flat surface. Mam pinballed between them all with plates of sandwiches, the last of the good cheese sliced thinner than I had ever seen it.

'We will do stew tonight,' she said to me in the quiet bit after dinner. 'Got some shin from Mrs Hargreaves, she says her nephew can get it cheap from the market. Potatoes from the allotment. We will be all right a bit yet.'

She said it like a spell.

By tea time the house had emptied. Bobby had gone to the club with his mates. Mam headed to a WAPC meeting about what came next – because of course there was a meeting; there was always a meeting. That left me and Dad at the kitchen table, the stew pot simmering gently on the stove.

He lit a cigarette and kept his eyes on the grain of the table.

'You will be off back to London tomorrow, then,' he said.

'Train is mid-morning,' I said. 'Alex will have kittens if I am not back in time for rehearsal. We have got a slot next week in Hackney.'

He snorted.

'Rehearsal,' he said. 'At least someone has got work.'

It was not said cruelly, exactly. Just edged.

'We get paid sometimes,' I said. 'Not much. Enough.'

'Enough for what?' he asked, flicking ash into the saucer Mam used as an ashtray. 'Enough for beer and strings?'

'Enough to help,' I said.

He finally looked up then. His eyes were bloodshot, not from drink but from something older.

'Help,' he repeated. 'Help how? I know you have been doing what you can down there – I do. It is just hard, looking at that gate swallowing men and knowing it did not change a thing.'

'I was getting the story out,' I said quietly. 'Shell's story. From Orgreave. We got it on tape, got it into people's hands.'

'Aye,' he said, the bitterness coming back like a reflex. 'And you cannot eat a tape. Not when you have got nowt in the cupboard and the leccy is on its last token.'

I swallowed, kept my voice level. 'I know. But we have been playing benefits, Dad. For the strike. For WAPC. For food banks. We have been sending money back. And tapes. And—'

'Tapes,' he cut in, the word still edged. 'Aye.'

We stared at each other.

The stew bubbled. Somewhere down the street a dog barked twice and shut up again.

I took a breath, pushed my chair back, and reached into my jacket.

The envelope looked smaller out of my pocket than it had in the bus station earlier. Just cheap white paper, corners softening. I slid it across the table.

'Open it,' I said.

He hesitated, then peeled it open with nicotine-stained fingers.

Twenties, tens, a handful of fivers. The notes looked wrong in this kitchen, like something from a different country. There was not a fortune there – not London money – but it was several gigs' worth, scraped and saved instead of spent.

'Where is this from?' he asked, frowning.

'Coalface,' I said. 'Last few months. After rent and food and postage and keeping the drums held together with gaffer tape. We said we would send summat home when we could. That is it.'

He thumbed through the notes, more slowly this time.

'I was going to give it to Mam tonight after the meeting,' I said. 'For the food fund or the leccy or whatever you think. It is not wages, Dad. It is—'

'It is work,' he said, so quietly I almost missed it.

He put the money back in the envelope and set it down very carefully.

His shoulders sagged, and for a heartbeat he looked ancient.

'I know you were not swanning about down there,' he said. 'I have seen her letters. She writes about what you are doing – the gigs, the tapes, getting Shell's story out there.' The corner of his mouth twitched. 'She were proud as owt. I just…'

He trailed off, staring past me at the calendar on the wall. March 1985 hung there in bright pictures of lakes in the Lake District, as if that had owt to do with us.

'I just wanted you to be safe,' he said at last. 'Safe and steady. Pit is not safe, I know, before you say it. But it were ours. Something you could point at and say: that is my work, under your feet. Then it all goes and you are in London shouting into a microphone and I do not know what that is. Do not know how to picture you.'

I felt something loosen in my chest.

'It is still work,' I said. 'Different tools. Same fight.'

He gave a short laugh that sounded like it hurt.

'That what you tell yourself, is it?'

‘That is what I tell myself when I am lugging amps up three flights of stairs,’ I said. ‘Look, you taught me not to just take things. To stand up when summat is not right. That is all I am doing. Only way I know how.’

He was quiet for a long moment.

Then he reached across the table and put his hand over mine. His palm was rough, the skin thicker than I remembered.

‘You have got my hands,’ he said. ‘You notice that? Same knuckles. Same bloody scar there from when you trapped it in the shed door.’

I looked down. He was right. Same shape, just less ground-in coal.

‘Cannot force you into the pit,’ he said. ‘Would not, even if I could. You have chosen your road. I do not have to like it, but I can respect it.’

He squeezed once, then let go, clearing his throat.

‘We will give this to your Mam,’ he said, tapping the envelope. ‘She will make it stretch. She could make a fiver last longer than most blokes’ wages.’

He stood, went to the stove, and lifted the lid on the stew. The smell of beef and onions and carrots rolled into the room, heavy and comforting.

‘Get some bowls out, lad,’ he said. ‘If we are going to be beaten, we are not going to be beaten on empty stomachs.’

•

Later, after they had both gone to bed – Mam with her head full of minutes from the meeting, Dad with his exhaustion finally dragging him under – I sat at the kitchen table with Shell.

She had come straight from the welfare, hair escaping her scarf, hands ink-stained from the duplicator at the church hall.

‘If anyone ever tells you those machines are ‘labour-saving’,’ she said, flexing her fingers, ‘I will personally send them to collate four hundred leaflets in a cold room with no heating.’

She pushed a stack of papers towards me.

‘What is this lot?’ I asked.

‘Information,’ she said. ‘What benefits people can claim now the strike is over. How to appeal if they get turned down. Where the food parcels will be, when. What nights the kids’ club is on so their Mams can go to meetings.’

The pages were crowded with type, headings underlined, little hand-drawn arrows linking related bits.

‘You did all this?’

‘Me, Jean from down the road, and Mrs Khan’s lad on the typewriter,’ she said. ‘We nicked half the wording off Citizens Advice leaflets and made it make sense. You should have seen Jean’s face when she realised half the lads did not know they had a right to an appeal. ‘We have been letting them say no on first go for years,’ she said. ‘Years.’ She were livid.’

She sat back, cupping her mug of tea in both hands.

‘It is daft, really,’ she went on. ‘They have got all these rules and procedures, and half the battle is just knowing they exist. Once folk know what questions to ask, it is different. They go in there with their shoulders straight. Do not feel like they are begging.’

I thought of the biscuit tin under my bed in Camden, full of letters from all over the country. People asking questions, telling stories, wanting to know what to do next.

‘What if you could do it bigger?’ I said slowly.

‘Bigger how?’

‘Not just here. Imagine a booklet, like…’ I searched for the words. ‘Like a guide. For people who do not speak bureaucrat. Plain language. Steps. ‘If they send you this, you do that.’ Not just about benefits. About all of it. Law, housing, their bloody taxes. Like a rulebook for our side.’

She watched me over the rim of her mug, eyes sharp.

‘You and your schemes,’ she said, but there was no mockery in it. ‘You will be writing in your little notebook in a minute.’

I grinned and did exactly that, flipping to a blank page in the battered pad I carried everywhere.

RIGHTS GUIDE? I wrote. STEP-BY-STEP. PEOPLE’S RULEBOOK. GET POSH KIDS TO HELP TRANSLATE?

‘You are laughing,’ I said, as she snorted.

‘I am not,’ she said. ‘I think it is brilliant. Annoying, but brilliant. You lot in London, you have got all them students and lawyers and busybodies floating about.’ She tapped the page. ‘You get them to put their brains into something like this instead of arguing about Trotsky in the pub all night, and we might actually get somewhere.’

‘You would use it?’ I asked.

She looked at the pile of leaflets on the table, then back at me.

‘In a heartbeat,’ she said. ‘Women at the meetings would, anyway. Half the men will pretend they do not need it and then ask their wives to read it out when no one is looking.’

We both laughed, tired and a bit giddy.

Then the laughter faded and we sat in the quiet kitchen, listening to the pipes creak and the faint rush of a car on the main road.

'Did I tell you about the lads from London?' Shell said suddenly. 'Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. Turned up in February with a minibus full of donations and a banner. Half the village didn't know where to look at first, but they were sound. Proper sound. Your mam said it was the first time she'd ever talked to a gay man in her life, and he taught her how to do a phone tree. Raised more than some of the trade unions put together.'

I thought about that. The village I'd grown up in, and a London I was just beginning to understand, finding common ground in the fight.

'That's what I mean about London,' I said. 'It's where all these threads cross. Students, gay rights lot, peace camp women from Greenham, everyone who's got their own fight with her. We need to be where they all meet.'

'And that's what you're building,' Shell said. 'That's what we're building.'

'What now, then?' I asked. 'Strike is over. Pit is still here – for now. Government is still there. Thatcher is still in Number Ten. What do we do with all this?'

Shell rubbed her thumb along the rim of her mug.

'We carry on,' she said. 'Different fronts, same war. You go back to London and make people feel summat with your noise and your tapes. I will be back and forth – here when they need me, London when you lot need organising. Your mam will keep shouting at anyone who will listen. We do not get to clock off, Danny. We just change shifts.'

The image lodged in my head: a relay, folk passing each other battered batons in the half-dark, some running, some walking, none of them alone.

I closed the notebook.

'All right,' I said. 'We change shifts.'

She leaned over and bumped her shoulder against mine again, gentler this time.

'And one day,' she said, 'we will see that woman off her throne. Might not be this year. Might not even be this decade. But when it happens, I want to be able to say we helped. That we were one of the cracks.'

I thought of the cameras at the pit gate, the NF lad at the bus station, the envelope of gig money on the sideboard, the stack of leaflets ready for letterboxes. Dad's new tally disc sat on the sideboard like a little full stop at the end of a sentence. Under my shirt, the old one pressed against my skin.

'We will,' I said.

We sat there until the tea went cold, the stew pot empty on the stove, two knackered young people in a little terraced kitchen in a battered village, planning

how to bring down a government with paper and ink and sound.

•

Looking back from 2025, I can see that night clearer than some of the marches and the gigs. Not because owt dramatic happened – no police line, no headline, no camera crew – but because that was when the shape of it all first turned solid in my head.

We had thought in ones till then. One tape. One benefit. One leaflet. One march. If you are lucky, one decent article in the local paper that does not call you a thug.

At that table, with Shell's ink on her fingers and Mam's minutes drying on the radiator and Dad's tally disc sitting on the sideboard like a little full stop at the end of a sentence, I started to see fives instead.

Not that we called them "fingerprints" yet. That name came later, with beer mats and Rupert's posh pen and everyone piling in with suggestions. But the bones of it were there.

'Noise,' I said to Shell that night, tapping my notebook where I had scribbled HEADINGS? and left them blank.

'Eh?' she said.

'What we do in London,' I said. 'Tapes. Gigs. Songs folk can remember after two pints. That is one thing. One… layer, like.'

'Noise,' she repeated, rolling the word round her mouth. 'All right.'

'Then there is this,' I went on, nodding at her leaflets. 'Base. Places and routines. Kitchens, halls, kids' clubs. Somewhere folk know they can come and not be alone.'

She snorted.

'You making us a diagram, Ashcroft?'

'Maybe,' I said. 'Humour us. So. Noise. Base. Then movement, I reckon.' I drew a little arrow between towns. 'How we actually get folk from one place to another without relying on her coaches and her telly to decide who sees what.'

'My beloved phone trees,' she said. 'My coach lists.'

'Our coach lists,' I said. 'You think those Scottish lads just turned up by magic?'

She made a face that admitted the point.

'All right,' she said. 'Noise, base, movement.'

'And access,' I said, surprising myself with the word. 'Bridges. People like Charlotte, and that young reporter from Sheffield, and the vicar who lets us use the hall without telling the bishop everything. Folk who can get us into rooms we are not meant to see.'

‘Traitors to their class,’ Shell said, half admiring, half wary.

‘Traitors in the best way,’ I said. ‘And then…’

I let the pen hover over the page.

Back then we did not have the VHS tapes or the court packs or the Finchley posters. We did not know about Trafalgar Square. We just had a sense that, sooner or later, there would have to be something more than holding actions and leaflets. Something that jammed the gears instead of just shouting at the engine.

‘Something that costs them,’ I said slowly. ‘Not just money. Reputation. Legitimacy. Some way of pulling the curtain back so folk can see how much they lie.’

Shell watched the pen come down.

‘Disruption,’ she said.

The word sat there between us, big as the teapot.

‘Noise, base, movement, access, disruption,’ I said, underlining each one. ‘Five things. If we get all of them pointing the same way, we might not win every time, but we will not be just flailing.’

She leaned over to read, her hair brushing my arm.

‘You planning on doing all that yourself?’ she asked.

‘Course not,’ I said. ‘I am barely holding the guitar part together as it is. But between us, between London and here and wherever else this lot ends up…’

I gestured at the leaflets, the money, the minutes, the imaginary lines on my notebook connecting all the kitchens and squats and halls we had ever played.

‘Between us,’ I said again, ‘we could. And if we are going to go on, we might as well go on with a plan.’

Shell reached across and took the notebook out of my hand.

‘Sign it,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘This.’ She tapped the page where the five words sat. ‘Put your name on it. So when some clever sod in thirty years tries to write a book about it, we can wave this under their nose and say: no, love. We knew what we were doing. It were not an accident.’

I laughed, but there was something serious in her eyes that made me pick the pen back up.

D. ASHCROFT, I wrote at the bottom. 7 March 1985.

‘There,’ she said. ‘Exhibit A.’

If you pull that notebook out of a cardboard box now, the ink is faded and the paper smells of damp and Fry's Chocolate Cream. But the words are still there. Noise. Base. Movement. Access. Disruption.

Back then it was just two knackered young people in a kitchen giving names to the shapes of what we were already doing. We did not know it would end up as a whole framework, or that some girl who was not even born yet would stand in my flat forty years on and say, 'Right. Talk me through these fingerprints, then.'

But we knew, even that night, that we were not just getting through the week.

We were building something that would leave marks.

Chapter Eight – July 1985, London – Live Aid and New Alliances

The day of Live Aid did not start with the telly. It started with Shell in the doorway of our room in the house just after ten, canvas bag on her shoulder, face that had done four hours on a train and thirty years in a mining village. She was back for a few days, making the rounds between Yorkshire and London like she had promised.

'You look knackered,' I said, taking the bag from her.

'Thanks, love,' she said. 'Good to see you too.'

She hugged me hard enough to hurt, then stepped back and looked round the room. Same stack of tapes, same mattress on the floor, but now there was a door you could close and a partition that almost counted as privacy. New poster for a band she had never heard of.

'You have not got any tidier,' she said.

'It is an aesthetic,' Alex called from the kitchenette. 'Controlled chaos.'

He stuck his head round the partition, hair tied back, frying pan in hand.

'Tea?' he said. 'I have gone all out. There is bread.'

'Posh,' Shell said, dropping onto the edge of the mattress. 'I remember when you two were living on crisps and other people's leftovers.'

'I still am,' I said. 'He has moved up in the world. Got a bar job. Sometimes he brings back actual food.'

'It is not a bar job,' Alex said. 'It is curating beverages. Get it right.'

Shell laughed, then caught sight of the telly in the corner, perched on a crate with a bit of cloth thrown over it to hide the worst of the splinters. On screen,

a presenter in too much make-up stood in an empty Wembley, talking about history while crew in high-vis jackets hurried around behind her.

'They have been on about it all week,' Shell said. 'Kids had a map at school. Teacher kept going on about how we are all part of it. Half of them have not got shoes that fit, but we are all part of it.'

She said it lightly, but there was a strain round her mouth I recognised from the kitchen at home. If you pushed, something would spill that neither of you wanted to mop up in front of other people.

'You still glad you came?' I said.

'Ask me after Queen,' she said. 'Eddie wanted me to shout myself hoarse to 'We Are the Champions' on his behalf. We are still married, still mates, still co-parents. Just not… the other bit any more.'

She said it matter-of-factly, like reporting the weather.

'We can manage the shouting,' Alex said. 'I have been practising my stadium arms.'

He lifted his hands above his head in a slow wave, nearly knocking a mug off the counter. Shell shook her head, but she was smiling now.

Riz waved at us from the kitchenette doorway with a bundle of flyers tucked under his arm, muttering that he'd rather get them dropped off at the solidarity centre before the telly swallowed the whole city.

•

We headed into town just before midday, the three of us squeezed along a Victoria line carriage with half of London. Band Aid T-shirts, homemade badges, kids clutching cardboard guitars, women with prams wedged into the doorways. Snatches of "Do They Know It Is Christmas?" leaked from a tinny cassette player every time the train lurched.

Shell stood with one hand on the rail above, the other curled round her bag strap. Her NUM badge was pinned to her denim jacket, the red and gold dulled by a year of marches and weather. Under it she had clipped a small enamel Africa outline someone had given her at a solidarity meeting. Two worlds on one lapel.

'How are things at home?' I asked, not quite looking at her.

'Quiet,' she said. 'Too quiet, some days. Then the telly is loud and Eddie is loud and Lily is loud and I would kill for half an hour of quiet. Make of that what you will.'

'He all right about you coming down?'

'He said, 'What is London going to do for our gas bill?' ' she said. 'Then he put a tenner on the table and said if you are going, you are not going without

money. So yes and no.'

She looked at me.

'He is scared,' she said. 'We all are. Strike is over, pits are still closing, nobody knows what is coming. This' – she nodded at a Tube advert with the Live Aid logo on it – 'this is something that is not about us losing for once. Even if it is daft, I wanted to see it with you.'

My throat tightened.

'We are not done,' I said. 'Not with this. Not with anything.'

'I know,' she said. 'That is why I am here.'

•

The Soho pub was already heaving when we pushed the door open, heat slapping us in the face. Someone had dragged a big colour telly onto a shelf above the bar, screen tilted down over the crowd like a blessed object. The landlord had taped a hand-written sign underneath: NO FOOTBALL TODAY. FEED THE WORLD INSTEAD.

Alex fought his way to the bar, doing that London thing of muttering sorry without sounding sorry. Shell and I wedged ourselves against a wall under a framed photo of some forgotten crooner. The air smelled of beer, fried onions from the street, perfume and cigarette smoke.

Alex came back with two pints and a ginger beer and handed the soft drink to Shell without comment, like it was the most normal thing in the world. She'd been on the soft stuff since she'd found out she was pregnant. She raised the bottle in a small salute, jaw tight for a heartbeat, then let it go.

On the screen, Status Quo bounced, denim flashing. The whole pub joined in with "Rockin All Over the World", pints slopping, elbows knocking ribs. Shell rolled her eyes and sang anyway.

'Thought you hated this lot,' I said.

'Course I do,' she shouted back. 'That is not the point.'

She threw an arm round my shoulders for the chorus. For a second I was twelve again, Mam's records on the Dansette, one of my brothers dancing in his socks.

When the camera cut to the BBC commentator, smiling too hard with Wembley yawning behind him, the volume in the pub dipped. He talked about a global jukebox, about the world joining hands through music. They threw to the studio, where a man in a suit said something about ordinary people making a difference.

'Where were they in March?' a bloke near us said, voice flat. 'Where were they when we were rattling tins in Barnsley high street?'

His friend shushed him, glancing at the bar, but Shell nodded once, sharp.

Near the back, where the light from the doorway still reached, a little group had set up a folding card table with leaflets and a bucket on it. ETHIOPIA SOLIDARITY – LOCAL GROUP, the hand-painted sign said. A woman with short hair and a knitted waistcoat was talking intently to a couple clutching lagers.

'It is not just famine,' she was saying. 'It is debt, it is trade, it is what our government does with their government. If we do not talk about that, we will be doing this again in ten years.'

I saw Shell watching her.

'Friend of yours?' I said.

'Met her at a solidarity night back in winter,' Shell said. 'She came up to Barnsley with leaflets after. Knows more about the World Bank than half the blokes in Westminster.'

'You two should swap files,' I said.

'We did,' Shell said. 'She has got the pensions stuff, I have got the eviction cases.'

She said it with the same pride other people used when they talked about record collections.

'Danny.'

Charlotte was a few feet away, coat already off, dark hair clipped back from her face. White shirt with the sleeves rolled, black trousers, boots that had never seen pit sludge but looked sturdy enough. A camera hung from her neck, silver catching the low light.

'You made it,' I said, suddenly breathless.

'Would not miss it,' she said. 'If the end of the world is being televised, I would like a decent view.'

She stepped in and brushed her cheek against mine, London fashion. My skin prickled.

'Charlotte,' I said.

'The one with the posh coat,' Charlotte said, offering her hand again. 'London owes you a lot of casseroles.'

Shell took it without hesitation.

Shell snorted.

'London can keep its casseroles,' she said. 'Tell it to send us its lawyers.'

'Working on it,' Charlotte said. 'I brought some journalists, will that do for today?'

Behind her were two blokes and another woman, all too well dressed for the place, collars neat, hair cut sharp. One of the men was already scanning the room like it was layout for a feature.

‘Friends from college,’ Charlotte said quietly. ‘They write things people who like to feel informed read. That all right?’

‘Depends what they write,’ I said.

‘Ask me again later,’ she said, and smiled.

•

The day unfolded in waves. Bands I had never cared about suddenly had the whole pub swaying. Women cried at songs they had danced to in discos without thinking about starving children. Men who had called us layabouts six months earlier stuffed notes into the Ethiopia bucket and declared that something must be done.

Shell sat through one glossy American act with her jaw clenched.

‘They are using it, love,’ she said in my ear. ‘Every one of them. For what, I do not know. Record sales. Image. Maybe some of them mean it. I cannot tell.’

‘Does it matter if the money gets there?’ I said.

She thought about it.

‘Matters if people think that is all it takes,’ she said. ‘A song and a cheque and you are absolved.’

When Queen came on, the room changed shape. People surged closer, the landlord turned the volume up so far the speakers crackled. Freddie Mercury strutted across the stage like he had invented stadiums, white vest bright as a flare. The call and response rolled across Wembley and into Soho; the crowd in the pub answered back as if he could hear them. Ay-oh. Ay-oh.

I looked at the screen and saw one man with a piano making seventy thousand people move like he was pulling a string. It was beautiful and infuriating. All that power, no picket line in sight.

‘Imagine if we had had that for the strike,’ Alex said into my ear. ‘She would have had to nationalise us out of sheer embarrassment.’

‘She would have called it the Enemy Within Telethon,’ I said.

Shell laughed once, then pressed her fingers hard into her eyes.

‘You all right?’ I asked.

‘I am fine,’ she said thickly. ‘Just thinking of kids at home who went to bed hungry while this lot were booking hotels.’

•

Later, after yet another earnest studio speech, the air got too thick. Charlotte caught my sleeve.

‘Still not smoking? Care to join me for some air anyway?’ she said.

‘Fresh air sounds good,’ I said.

She was already pushing towards the door.

Outside, the street felt like something had washed over it and left a film. Live Aid leaked from every open window and doorway, the same commentary in different throats. Cars crawled past with radios up. A couple of lads sold knock-off T-shirts out of a bin liner.

We stood under the pub sign, metal creaking whenever the alley breathed. Charlotte lit a cigarette, cupping her hand round the match.

‘You really do not smoke?’ she said.

‘Dad would have killed me,’ I said. ‘Did not want me breathing coal dust and smoke. He said pick one poison.’

‘And you picked guitars,’ she said.

‘Seemed reasonable.’

She blew out a long stream of smoke, eyes half closed.

‘So,’ she said. ‘What do you think?’

‘About?’

She jerked her head at the noise from inside.

‘All this,’ she said.

I looked up and down the street. Posters for gigs, for strip clubs, for language courses. A man sleeping in a doorway with a charity leaflet under his head.

‘I think it is big and clever and moving,’ I said. ‘And I think the government will love it, because it lets them act like this is a natural disaster, not a political one.’

‘You are not wrong,’ she said.

‘They froze our union money,’ I said, heat rising. ‘Called us thugs. Now they get to sit on sofas and feel virtuous because they have sent a tenner to Addis. Nobody on that stage is talking about that.’

‘Some of them are,’ she said. ‘In interviews, on local radio. It is not all in the big broadcast.’

‘But the broadcast is what counts,’ I said. ‘That is what will sit in people’s memories. The big shots and the big songs. No scabby details about the IMF or British policy. Just feelings.’

I heard my own tone and winced. Jealous of a concert.

'You do not trust feelings?' she said.

'I do not trust feelings on their own,' I said. 'Feelings are what you get when 'enemy within' comes over the news and half the country nods along.'

Charlotte leaned back against the wall, looking straight at me.

'You know how many people I have seen switch off when you start talking about legislation?' she said. 'Or Orgreave reports? Their eyes glaze. But if they hear one song that gets under their skin, they might stay in the room long enough for the rest.'

'That is what I am doing in damp basements for twenty people,' I said. 'No cameras, no helicopter shots. Just sweat and cheap lager and a battered PA.'

'And that matters,' she said. 'It is the same thing, just smaller. You think half the kids who will write essays about Live Aid in fifteen years will have been anywhere near Wembley?'

'You are very sure of the essays,' I said.

'I am a snob,' she said, shrugging. 'We measure things in footnotes where I come from.'

She flicked ash into the gutter.

'Look,' she said. 'Is it messy? Of course. Are some of them doing it for their image? Yes. Will the Tories try and ride on it? Obviously. But for millions of people today, the biggest stars they know are saying 'this is not okay'. That shifts something. Maybe only a little. Enough that when you lot put out a tape or organise a gig, there is a crack to pour into.'

I thought of the Ethiopia woman in the pub; of Shell's files stacked on her kitchen table next to homework; of Geldof yelling at the camera.

'You are very optimistic for someone who spends so much time in darkrooms,' I said.

'I am pragmatic,' she said. 'Spectacle gets you attention. Then you decide what to do with it.'

She stepped closer, close enough that I could see the coal flecks of mascara at the ends of her lashes.

'Besides,' she said softly. 'You are just annoyed you are not on that stage.'

'Maybe,' I said. 'Maybe I think it would have done people good to see a miner's lad up there calling her out.'

'You are calling her out,' Charlotte said. 'You just have not got your stadium yet.'

She reached up, fingertip brushing the tally disc under my T-shirt.

‘You carry a pit round your neck every day,’ she said. ‘There is no way you are not going to build something with that.’

Something slow and deliberate flipped in my chest. Her face was inches away now, smoke and mint on her breath, Live Aid’s echo pressing at our backs.

‘Charlotte—’ I started.

She kissed me. Or I kissed her. It met in the middle, mouths finding each other with the ease of something that had been waiting its turn. For a moment the rest of it fell away – cameras, stadium, slogans. Just her hand in my hair, the rough brick at my back, the knowledge that if the world was watching anything, it was not this.

When we broke apart, we both laughed, a bit startled.

‘Sorry,’ I said, out of habit.

‘You really are,’ she said, amused. ‘We will work on that.’

She stubbed her cigarette out on the step, then picked the butt up and put it in her pocket.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘If I have just snogged the enemy within, I had better go back in and take some photographs. Otherwise no one will believe me.’

•

We stayed until the light outside turned the colour of old beer and the telly people started talking about Philadelphia. People drifted off in clumps – to night shifts, babysitters, other pubs for the second half of the world-saving.

Shell, Charlotte and I peeled away down a side street towards Dalston Junction. Alex had gone off with a boy who had smiled at him during U2, promising to catch us up. The Ethiopia group were packing their table, counting notes, faces tired but pleased.

‘You should have seen Mam’s face when they said it was going on till eleven,’ Shell said. ‘She thought music stopped at Top of the Pops.’

She walked between us, one hand lightly on Charlotte’s elbow to keep her from stepping into the road. Her other hand trailed along the railings, fingertips catching on peeling paint.

‘How is everything really?’ I asked quietly.

She took a breath.

‘Victoria is doing miracles with nowt,’ she said. ‘Lily is… a kid. She bounces. Then she does not. Then she does again. Eddie is…’ She searched for the words. ‘He is proud. And he is angry. And he is there, which is more than I can say for some.’

‘And you?’ Charlotte asked gently.

‘I am somewhere between here and there,’ Shell said. ‘When I am home, I miss this. When I am here, I miss them. Sometimes I think I am just the bit of rope everyone is pulling on from both ends.’

She tipped her head back, looking at the thin strip of sky between buildings.

‘I keep telling myself it is better to be stretched than to lie flat,’ she said. ‘But it does get tiring.’

‘We are going to need you,’ I said. ‘Whatever we build. Whatever comes next.’

‘You will have me,’ she said easily. ‘Question is whether my knees will hold out.’

We turned a corner and almost walked straight into it.

A warehouse, or what had been one. Three storeys of soot-stained brick, windows boarded. Old metal letters traced a faint company name over the main door, most of them fallen. A TO LET sign hung at an angle, corners curling. Someone had spray-painted a rude word across it in thick black.

‘This used to be a printers,’ Charlotte said. ‘School trips. Ink everywhere. You would go home with it on your hands for days.’

‘What is it now?’ Shell asked.

‘Nothing,’ Charlotte said. ‘Been empty a year at least.’

We stood on the pavement, looking up.

‘You could fit a lot of people in there,’ I said.

‘And a stage,’ Shell said.

‘And rooms,’ Charlotte said. ‘Workshops. Offices. A studio.’

‘A crèche,’ Shell added. ‘If we are dreaming, we are dreaming properly.’

I pictured it with the boards off, windows lit. A hall where you could play loud enough to rattle glass without a landlord banging on the ceiling. A side room with a battered table where people could spread out papers about housing benefit and bail. Another with a tape deck whirring, someone copying cassettes to send who knew where. Posters not just for gigs but for meetings, for strikes, for whatever came next.

‘We could have our own cameras,’ I said slowly. ‘Our own mics. Our own… everything. No waiting for the BBC to turn up if they feel like it.’

‘A place people know they can come,’ Shell said. ‘Not just for music. For advice. For a bit of warmth.’

‘Like a community centre,’ Charlotte said, ‘but noisier.’

A taxi blared; we stepped back, but none of us walked away.

‘I keep thinking about today,’ I said. ‘Every telly, every radio, every pub. They have filled the country with this. You cannot get away from it even if you want to.’

‘That is the idea,’ Charlotte said.

‘What if we did that on our own scale?’ I said. ‘Not global. But a place where things start and go out. Tapes, gigs, leaflets. Somewhere that throws out heat instead of just soaking it up.’

I looked at Charlotte.

‘You remember what you told me after the 100 Club gig? About heat. You said if we find somewhere to keep it contained and focused, it could power something.’

She nodded slowly, eyes brightening with recognition.

Shell looked at me.

‘You mean like a furnace,’ she said.

The word landed between us, obvious and perfect.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Like a furnace.’

Charlotte smiled slowly.

‘The Furnace,’ she said. ‘Sounds like a band, or a threat.’

‘Bit of both,’ I said.

We stood there, three specks on a London pavement, staring at an empty building and seeing it full.

‘We have not got money,’ Shell said eventually.

‘We did not have money for food last winter,’ I said. ‘Still fed people.’

‘We would need permits, licences, someone to sign the lease, people who can talk bank without being sick in their own mouths,’ Charlotte said.

‘You know some of those,’ I said.

She nodded, eyes on the blank windows.

‘I do,’ she said. ‘They would hate it. Which makes it all the more appealing.’

We started walking again, but my head stayed in there, in the echo. I could hear drums on a soundcheck, the scrape of chairs for a tenants’ meeting, kids’ feet thudding down a corridor. Shell at a table with a pile of forms. Charlotte with a camera. Alex on stage messing about with levels. Me in all of it, not just trying to catch up with history but building a place it had to pass through.

Back at the house, much later – Alex snoring on the mattress, Shell half-asleep on spare blankets – I sat on the floor with a tape in my hands. The telly showed the end of the American leg, presenters hoarse, crowd lit up like a new galaxy.

I took a pen and wrote on the label: LIVE AID – THOUGHTS.

Underneath, in smaller letters, I added one word: FURNACE.

It looked ridiculous and important at the same time.

The words felt like the start of a chord, the first grip on a fretboard. I turned the tape over, feeling its weight, imagining it multiplied by hundreds, spooling out through letterboxes and into battered machines in living rooms and union offices and pubs.

Someone on the telly said history had been made. Maybe it had. All I knew was that something had shifted in me, something that looked less like a dream of a record deal and more like brick, mortar and cables.

A furnace, I thought, and for the first time it did not just mean the pit.

Chapter Nine – October 1985–February 1986, East London – Securing The Furnace

If you had told me, the night we watched Live Aid in that heaving Soho pub, that three months later I would be arguing about damp with a man called Terry in a draughty little office at the front of a soot-stained warehouse in East London, I would have laughed in your face.

But there we were.

Riz sat on the radiator in the corner with a stack of flyers on his lap, quiet but alert, as if he could spot the trap clauses before Charlotte did.

‘The roof is sound,’ Terry kept saying, stabbing his biro at the ceiling tiles as if that proved anything. ‘It is just cosmetic. Bit of water staining.’

I glanced at Shell. Arms folded, good coat buttoned to the throat, scarf tucked in. Her fringe was stuck to her forehead with sweat from the journey across town. She did not bother looking at the ceiling.

The coat pulled a little where it had not needed to in July.

‘Floor is not cosmetic,’ she said. ‘You could lose a bairn down some of those gaps.’

Terry pulled a face like she was being unreasonable. He looked like every small landlord I had ever met: cheap suit, gold chain, fingernails too clean for anyone who claimed to be “hands-on”.

‘You said you wanted somewhere cheap,’ he said. ‘Well, this is cheap. You are not getting the Barbican for this money, love.’

I felt Shell’s shoulders go tight beside me. I stepped in before she told him where to stick the Barbican.

‘We are not saying no,’ I said. ‘We just cannot sign anything till our, er…’

I glanced at Charlotte, perched on the windowsill behind us with a notebook on her knee. Jeans, battered boots, hair scraped up, but she still looked like she belonged in a different film to Terry and his biro. Her pen hovered like she was taking minutes at some committee we had not been invited to.

‘…till our adviser has looked it over,’ I finished.

Terry’s eyes flicked to her. You could see him re-calibrating.

‘Your adviser,’ he repeated.

Charlotte gave him a small, polite smile that was somehow more devastating than Shell’s full scowl.

‘We just need to make sure the repairing obligations are proportionate,’ she said lightly. ‘Given the current state of the premises.’

‘The what?’ he said.

‘Who fixes what,’ she said. ‘Given…’ She gestured at the air, at everything.

We had already been through the building once that morning. Old light-industrial unit at the end of a row of terraces, brick soot-blackened, windows patched with plywood and tape. Inside, it smelled of damp plaster, old oil, pigeon droppings and something sweet and rotten I tried not to name. The ground floor was one big rectangle with a row of metal pillars, concrete cracked like dried river mud. A half-finished mezzanine jutted at one end, a spiderweb of bare joists. A little room off to the side could, if you squinted, pass for an office.

Shell had taken one look and said, ‘This is it.’

I had seen it too – stage where the loading bay was, crowd under the beams, walls painted, sound bouncing back off brick. Tables for meetings, chairs in circles, kettles and tea urns and a crèche corner. A furnace, she had said back in July. A place where we could make our own heat, not just stand outside someone else’s fire.

Terry saw something else: a way to rinse a handful of idealists for the privilege of stopping the roof caving in on his insurance.

‘Look,’ he said now, spreading his hands. ‘I am giving you a good deal because it is not exactly Mayfair, is it. Six months, rolling, minimal deposit. You said you are a… what is it… arts charity?’

I could feel Shell physically bristle. We had spent a whole evening arguing about what we were so Charlotte could draft something plausible enough for an estate agent. Community arts and education project was where we landed, somewhere between truth and what gets you in the door.

‘We work with communities affected by the strike,’ Charlotte said smoothly. ‘Music, training, legal support. That sort of thing.’

Terry looked at me, not at her. ‘And you are in a band, yeah?’

‘Coalface,’ I said. ‘We do benefit gigs. This would be rehearsal space, recording, workshops…’

‘And a drop-in,’ Shell cut in. ‘And a place to get a cup of tea where no one will be trying to sell you owt. And a crèche. And a kitchen.’

Terry’s eyes flicked back to Charlotte. She inclined her head like she was noting it in a file.

‘You do understand,’ he said carefully, ‘that if you start serving food you are in a different regulatory category?’

He said regulatory like he was proud he knew the word. Shell gave him a look that would strip paint.

‘We will worry about that bit,’ she said.

We ended up with a compromise hammered out over cold instant coffee in paper cups. Six months at a rent that made Shell blanch and Charlotte say, quietly, that it was not bad for Zone 2. A clause about repairs that Charlotte insisted on rewriting in biro on the spot while Terry sighed and tapped his watch. A promise that we would not “cause nuisance to neighbours”, which we all silently agreed meant we would not get caught.

By the time we stepped back onto the street, the sky was the flat, featureless grey London excels at. A bus roared past, spraying dirty water. Shell took the folded lease from Charlotte like it was a live thing.

‘You sure we are not walking into a trap?’ she said.

Charlotte tucked hair behind her ear.

‘Every contract is a trap,’ she said. ‘This one has just got fewer teeth than most.’

Shell snorted, unwillingly amused.

‘We could have squatted it,’ I said, watching an old woman shuffle by with shopping bags in both hands. ‘Like the last place.’

‘And been out on our arses the minute anyone noticed,’ Shell said. ‘This time I want them to have to go through the courts to get rid of us.’

She lifted the papers a little.

‘Paper is a weapon too, Danny,’ she said. ‘They have been using it on us long enough.’

Charlotte looked at her with that tilted, intent expression she got when someone said something that did not quite fit the picture in her head.

‘You should have been a lawyer,’ she said.

Shell laughed so sharply a passer-by turned.

‘Aye. Cannot you just see me in a wig.’

‘You would be terrifying,’ I said.

She grinned. ‘Exactly.’

•

The first time we opened the padlock on the shutter with our own key, it felt faintly illegal even though it was not. The corrugated metal rattled as we hauled it up, daylight spilling in under the edge in a long white strip that widened and widened, revealing the inside like a stage being slowly lit.

The air was cold enough to see your breath. Pigeons flapped up, wings beating dust into little storms. Old tyre marks scored the floor. A rusted metal shelving unit clung to one wall, laden with chipped plastic crates. A broken swivel chair sat in the middle like a sad throne.

‘Beautiful,’ I said, deadpan.

Shell and Charlotte stood side by side, hands in pockets, looking out at the space like they were seeing a different building.

‘It will be,’ Shell said.

Charlotte nodded. ‘We will need the electrics checked. There is probably asbestos in that insulation. And you should definitely get rid of that chair.’

She sounded brisk, almost businesslike, but then she stepped into the middle and spun once on her heel, testing the echo, and I saw the grin break through.

‘Listen,’ she said. ‘It sounds like possibility.’

•

We worked out early that The Furnace – we called it that before the first coat of paint – would eat every spare hour. Days were for gigs, temp jobs, Shell’s endless meetings in draughty halls and the odd appointment she did not put on the rota. Nights and weekends were for scraping, painting, wiring, cleaning.

We started with the roof. Terry was right that the main structure was sound, but there were leaks at every gutter and a patch in the far corner where you could see daylight through broken tiles. Shell climbed the ladder like she had been working at heights all her life, even though I could see the extra care in how she placed her foot on each rung. I trailed after, trying not to look down at the cracked concrete.

From up there the city stretched in all directions – cranes, chimney stacks, the bruise-coloured ribbon of the river a few streets over. Traffic was a constant

wash somewhere beneath. We worked in gloves stiff with cold, passing tarred felt and buckets of bitumen back and forth.

'You could have married a nice lad who works in an office,' I said, prising up a strip of rotten felt.

Shell snorted. 'Eddie works in an office now. Foreman. Fills in forms and shouts at lads instead of freezing his knackers off at the face. Says it is promotion.'

'And you?'

She wiped her forehead with her wrist, leaving a black smear.

'And me what?'

'How does that feel, him moving up while you are clambering about on strange roofs in London?'

She went quiet, looking over towards the terrace opposite. In one window, a kid pressed his face to the glass, watching us like a stunt show.

'Feels like we are still married on paper,' she said eventually, 'still care about each other, still share Lily – but we stopped being that kind of couple a while back. We just have not said it out loud where anyone else can hear.'

I did not know what to say, so I handed her another strip of felt.

•

The electrics were another matter. The first time we flicked the ancient metal switch by the door, there was a crack, a smell of scorched dust and nothing else. I voted for calling an actual electrician. Shell said we could not afford it.

That was when Imran appeared.

Strictly speaking he did not appear; he was dragged in by Alex, who turned up one Saturday with paint flecks on his glasses and a man in a work jacket in tow.

'This is Imran,' Alex announced, like he was introducing a new band member rather than a stocky bloke with a toolbox. 'He can make dead things live again.'

Imran rolled his eyes. 'Only if they were meant to be alive in the first place.'

He was East End born and bred, parents from Lahore, accent stretched between Stepney and somewhere further out. He worked, he told us, 'in communications' – which turned out to be installing phone lines and fixing exchange boxes for BT.

'You are not meant to be doing this,' he said cheerfully, crouching to peer into the fuse box. 'But then I am not meant to be nicking this much cable, so we will call it even.'

Shell eyed him.

'You sure you know what you are doing?'

He grinned without turning.

‘Do you want it safe or legal?’ he said. ‘Because you cannot have both on your budget.’

Within an hour he had the place mapped in his head: where the cables ran, what needed replacing, which ancient porcelain fittings could be coaxed back to life and which were death sentences. He talked as he worked, a BT test handset clipped to a pair of wires he had temporarily bridged in from next door, calling in favours from mates in other depots.

‘We will get you a line in here as well,’ he said. ‘Proper one. Not just payphones and shouting out of windows. One line, one list – you can turn twenty people into two hundred. Trust me.’

I watched his hands move, turning chaos into something purposeful. It was like watching Shell with a rota, or Charlotte with a draft contract. Different tools, same brain.

‘What is the list?’ I asked.

He glanced up.

‘Whatever you need it to be. People who came to last week’s gig. People who will support your court case. People who will be on a coach when you say ‘coach’. You start small and, if you are clever, it gets out of hand.’

I looked around at bare walls, paint tins, ladders. Out of hand sounded like exactly what I wanted.

•

The carpenter arrived a week later.

His name was Ben. He looked permanently dusted in fine sawdust, hair and beard trimmed close, quiet hands that knew their way round timber. He came recommended by a woman from one of Shell’s London committees who owed her a favour.

‘I cannot pay you much,’ Shell said straight off, when he came to look at the half-built mezzanine. ‘If we ever make owt it will go back into the place.’

Ben ran a hand over the supporting beam, checking for rot.

‘I am not doing it for the money,’ he said. ‘Cannot stand bad joinery. Whoever started this did not know what they were doing.’

He looked at her properly then, and something eased in his face.

‘Besides,’ he said, ‘I like the idea of building a stage more than another bloody kitchen extension in Muswell Hill.’

He started turning up every evening after his day job, thermos under one arm, radio under the other. Shell brought him tea and digestives in the office while

they pored over rough sketches – where to put the stair, how wide the balcony should be, how low they could hang the front and still get a drum kit underneath.

'You will want a decent rail,' he said, standing on bare joists, arms spread. 'If you lot are going to be leaning over yelling into microphones, I would rather you did not break your necks.'

'We do not yell,' I said. 'We project.'

'You yell,' Shell said. 'That is why they like you.'

Some nights I came in late from a gig or temp shift and found them still there, sawdust in the air, an old strip light casting everything in chalky blue. They would be sat on the edge of the platform, boots swinging, talking in low voices between knocks and scrapes. A different ease had started to settle between them – the kind that meant you could hand someone a screwdriver without asking and they would know which one you needed.

I told myself the twist in my chest was worry – for what people would say back home, for how complicated things already were – but then I would see how Shell stood a bit straighter when Ben was in the room, and I would think: maybe people get to decide what their own life looks like, even when it does not fit neat patterns.

'Do not start,' she said when I ventured something half-formed about Eddie on the phone. 'He gets his nights with his mates and his own life back home. I am allowed mine down here. We are still married, still look after Lily together – but the rest of it has not been true for a while. We both know it.'

And I thought, not for the first time, that the revolution we were building was not just about bills and ballots. It was about who got to feel entitled to be in a room after dark with people who saw them.

•

During the days, when the lads were at work and Shell was at meetings, I was often at the unit alone. I scraped ancient paint off window frames until my arm ached. I swept up glass and mouse droppings into piles that kept reappearing, like the building was growing new filth when my back was turned.

Sometimes local kids wandered in, curious. The first week we had the door open, a gang of them turned up – skinny boys in school jumpers, a couple of girls in too-big coats – and planted themselves just inside the threshold, staring.

'You lot moving in?' one of them asked, hands deep in his pockets like he was protecting something valuable.

'Depends what you mean by moving,' I said. 'We are going to be doing music and meetings and that. Maybe a youth club if we can stop it falling down.'

A girl with plaits, maybe ten, pointed at the half-finished mezzanine.

'That a stage?'

‘It will be.’

She nodded, satisfied. ‘My uncle had a band once. They got on the telly.’

The others looked at her with new respect. I could not tell if it was true and decided it did not matter.

We gave them jobs: carrying rubble to the skip, rolling paint onto the lower walls, fishing ancient screws out of tins and sorting them into piles. They took to it like it was the best game they had ever been offered.

Imran turned up one afternoon with a cardboard box under his arm.

‘Got something for your new stewards,’ he said, setting it down and flipping the flaps back.

Inside lay four walkie-talkies, battered but serviceable, each with a strip of tape round the aerial where someone had written BT TEST in faded marker.

‘Borrowed these from work permanently,’ he said. ‘Figured you are going to need a way to talk once this place is full.’

The kids were on him before I could blink.

‘Can we try them?’

‘What is your call sign?’

‘Do they work from upstairs?’

Imran handed them out with priestly solemnity.

‘You can help me test them,’ he said. ‘But they stay here. No taking them home to play spies in the tower block. Got it?’

They nodded, eyes huge.

For the next hour the space filled with crackly voices, bursts of laughter, thumps of feet on the stairs as they raced up and down, reporting imaginary emergencies.

‘Base, this is Door,’ one boy said, chest puffed out by the entrance. ‘There are two mums and a buggy approaching, over.’

‘Door, this is Kitchen,’ a girl replied from the far corner where the sink would be. ‘Offer them a cuppa, over.’

It was ridiculous and lovely and, for a moment, I could see it – queues at the door, stewards in hi-vis we had not bought yet, the feel of this bare concrete covered in people who did not know they needed a place like this until it existed.

•

We found the café by accident.

Next street over, fading turquoise frontage, steamed-up windows, a sign so old the letters were almost worn away. From outside you saw tables crowded close, a counter with glass jars, a tiny television in the corner showing football.

We only went in because Shell had hit the point where, if she did not get food, she would start eating plasterboard. That, and because the smell of paint and dust had started turning her stomach in a way she did not want to explain to blokes like Terry.

The warmth hit first. Then the smell: fried plantain, coffee, spices I did not know the names of. A woman behind the counter looked up as we came in, wiping her hands on her apron.

'You lot from the warehouse,' she said before we had opened our mouths.

Shell froze. 'What is it to you?'

The woman laughed, big and easy.

'My youngest says there are people living with the pigeons now,' she said. 'I told him not to be rude, but I had to see.'

We ended up at a table with plates of curry goat, rice and peas, fried dumplings that could solve most problems on their own. The woman introduced herself as Gloria. Her husband, David, came out from the kitchen to say hello, wiping sweat from his brow with a tea towel. Their eldest sat in the corner doing homework, pen moving in tight strokes.

'This place used to be busy,' Gloria said, topping up our glasses with ginger beer. 'Workshops on the estate, men coming in on break, mums after the school run. Now they close one factory after another and everyone has got no money and no time. You open something, it stays open six months, then it is gone.'

She looked at Shell.

'You planning to stay?'

Shell glanced at me, then back.

'That is the idea,' she said. 'We have had enough of things disappearing on us.'

Gloria nodded once.

'Then you make sure you put your flyers in here,' she said. 'People might not go looking for you. They will come looking for my patties.'

After that, the café became our unofficial office. We had meetings there when the warehouse was too cold to think. We borrowed their phone when ours died because Imran had "borrowed" a bit too much from the line to run to the new extension upstairs. Gloria slipped plates of food in front of us even when we insisted we could not afford it, saying she would rather feed troublemakers than tax inspectors.

One January evening, when the wind outside felt like it was coming straight off the North Sea, we were crammed around a table at the back – me, Shell, Imran, Alex, two estate mums Shell had recruited from playgroup. A4 sheets were spread between us, scribbled lists and crude floor-plan diagrams.

Shell sat carefully, coat unbuttoned despite the cold, one hand braced against her lower back and the other resting on the curve of her belly as if she could keep the whole project steady by touch alone. She had been "fine" for months in that way organisers are fine, all sharp edges and lists, but the baby was no longer something you could pretend was just tiredness.

'We will need chairs that stack,' Debbie said. 'So we can move them out the way for gigs. And somewhere for prams. Cannot have people tripping over pram wheels in the dark.'

'And a proper kettle that does not take half an hour,' Lin added. 'If you want people to stay for meetings you need tea in them before they change their mind.'

Imran tapped the paper with his pen.

'And sockets,' he said. 'Here, here, here. You need to think about where the power flows, not just the bodies.'

I sat back, watching them, and felt something shift.

This was different to the early days. Back then it had been gigs that ended in shouting and someone punching a poster. This was quieter and, somehow, more dangerous. We were not just making noise now. We were drawing the shape of something that might outlast all of us.

Gloria came over with a new pot of coffee balancing on one hip.

'You look serious,' she said to me.

'Just thinking,' I said.

'Careful with that,' she said. 'Dangerous habit.'

I smiled.

'We used to go into rooms and yell at people who already agreed with us,' I said. 'Now we are planning sockets.'

She laughed.

'Revolution is ninety per cent sockets,' she said. 'Do not let anyone tell you different.'

•

Shell went back up north a few days after that meeting.

She tried to make it sound like a practical decision – nearer her mam, nearer Eddie for Lily, a proper bed instead of a mattress in a half-finished office at the warehouse. But when she hugged me goodbye outside King's Cross, she held on

too long and I felt her shake once, like something inside her had finally admitted it was frightened.

‘Do not do anything stupid while I am gone,’ she said into my shoulder.

‘That is a big ask,’ I said, and tried to make it a joke.

She pulled back and stared at me.

‘I mean it, Danny,’ she said. ‘No heroics. No trying to prove you can carry the whole bloody building on your back because I am not here to tell you off.’

‘All right,’ I said. ‘No heroics.’

She snorted, because we both knew that was a lie we would try to honour anyway.

For a week we did the work without her. We scraped and swept and swore, we chased kids out of the way of stray nails, we argued about paint shades and where the stage edge ought to sit. Ben kept showing up with his thermos, Imran kept turning chaos into circuits, and I kept thinking of Shell’s handwriting on paper like it was another kind of scaffolding.

Then the phone rang.

It was late, after midnight, the kind of time when London went quiet enough you could hear the building settle. The handset was one of Imran’s temporary miracles, clipped to a wire like a dare. I snatched it up before the second ring.

‘Hello?’

There was a pause and then a voice I did not recognise – brisk, tired, professional.

‘Is this Daniel Ashcroft?’

My stomach dropped at the sound of my full name.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Who is this?’

‘Barnsley District General,’ she said, and the words turned the air to ice. ‘Your friend Michelle has asked us to ring. She’s in labour. We’ve got a message for you about trains.’

I was already scrabbling for paper, knocking over a tin of screws, fingers clumsy with panic. The only thing to hand was an old envelope with a council stamp on it. I flattened it on the desk with my palm.

‘Go on,’ I said. My voice sounded wrong.

She read numbers at me – times, platforms, the shape of a route I had taken often enough for gigs but never with this in my chest. I wrote them down in thick, shaking biro. A train time scribbled on the back of an envelope. Like it was just another errand.

When I hung up, the room was too small. I stood there with the receiver still in my hand, listening to the dial tone, then to my own breath.

Riz, sleeping on the floor with his coat as a pillow, blinked awake.

'What's happened?' he mumbled.

'Shell,' I said. 'It's… it's now.'

He sat up so fast he smacked his head on the desk.

Alex appeared in the doorway in his socks, hair standing up.

'You're white,' he said.

'Barnsley hospital,' I said, and watched him understand.

We moved like we were on a timetable we hadn't rehearsed. Bag, coat, keys. Riz shoved a fiver into my hand and told me not to be a martyr about food. Alex insisted on coming to King's Cross with me even though I told him it was daft and he told me to shut up.

The station smelled of frying and diesel and last night's rain. The departure board clicked over with indifferent calm. I kept touching the envelope in my pocket, as if the biro could smudge and make the whole thing untrue.

On the train north I did not read. I did not sleep. I watched the dark press against the windows and tried not to imagine all the ways bodies can go wrong.

By the time I got to Barnsley the sky had gone that pale washed-out colour it gets just before proper morning. The hospital corridors were lit too bright. Plastic chairs in rows. Signs telling you not to smoke. A vending machine humming like an insect.

Eddie was there, sitting forward with his elbows on his knees like he was about to go underground. He stood when he saw me, face doing something I couldn't read.

'All right?' I said, because I had no better words.

'Aye,' he said, and his voice cracked on the vowel. 'She's… she's tough. You know that.'

Lily was asleep with her head on his jacket, thumb in her mouth, curls stuck to her cheek. Seeing her there – not on a picket line, not at a meeting, but in a hospital waiting room – made me want to punch something.

Hours passed in a blur of bad coffee and footsteps and doors that opened and closed. At some point a midwife with kind eyes said my name and nodded us through.

Shell looked wrecked and incandescent at the same time. Hair plastered to her forehead, hospital gown twisted, a fist clenched in the sheet like she was holding on to the world by fabric.

When she saw me, she tried to smile and ended up swearing.

‘Took you long enough,’ she rasped.

‘You rang at midnight,’ I said, and my throat tightened so hard the words came out thin.

‘That’s no excuse,’ she said, and then a sound tore out of her that wasn’t a joke at all.

I will not pretend I was brave. I held her hand and tried not to shake. Eddie stood on the other side, face grey, murmuring nonsense. A midwife told Shell to breathe and Shell told the midwife where she could put her breathing exercises.

And then – sometime after a long stretch where time stopped behaving like time – there was a cry.

Small, furious, alive.

The room shifted. Air came back into my lungs like it had been withheld on purpose. Shell went slack against the pillow, blinking in stunned disbelief.

They laid him on her chest and he wriggled like he was offended by the whole arrangement.

‘Hello,’ Shell whispered, and her voice cracked in a way I had never heard. ‘Hello, love.’

Eddie made a sound that might have been a laugh and might have been a sob.

Shell looked at me.

‘We did it,’ she said, fierce through tears. ‘Tell them down there we did it.’

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘We did it.’

She kissed the baby’s head, then glared at me as if she had remembered something important.

‘Lucas,’ she said suddenly. ‘We’re calling him Lucas. Don’t let anyone argue. I am not having some committee meeting about it.’

I laughed and the sound came out broken.

‘No committees,’ I promised.

On the way back south, the envelope with the train time stayed in my pocket, creased now, damp from my sweat. I kept thinking about how absurd it was – that you could build a life on scribbles and luck and a woman who refused to lie down when the world told her to.

•

By the first week of February the space had changed so much it hardly felt like the same building.

Walls painted off-white, the lower halves dark to hide the scuffs we knew were coming. The mezzanine finished, solid underfoot, with a rough bannister you could lean on without getting splinters. The stage at the far end barely more than pallets and ply, but ours. The office corner had a door that closed, a second-hand filing cabinet, a battered desk with a typewriter.

On top of the cabinet sat a cardboard box with SUMMONS, LEAFLETS, PRESS CLIPPINGS written across the side in Shell's careful hand.

'We are keeping all of it,' she said, dropping another folded sheet in one afternoon – a letter from a housing officer threatening eviction for arrears no one could cover. 'Every letter, every poster, every nasty little note. One day we will need to show someone what they did.'

'We have not even opened,' I said. 'Bit early to be starting an archive.'

She looked at me like I had missed something obvious.

'We have been living inside their bloody archive for years,' she said. 'Court records, newspaper lies, police reports. This is ours.'

I looked at the scuffed cardboard, the neat stack inside. It did not seem like much – scraps, really. Then I pictured some kid like Keira, forty years on, tapping a recorder on a table, and felt a shiver at the back of my neck.

'Fine,' I said. 'But when the room fills, I am not sleeping next to that box. Gives me the creeps.'

She grinned.

'You will be grateful for it when some bastard magistrate says 'prove it',' she said.

•

The first unofficial gathering was on a Sunday in the first week of February.

We did not call it an opening; that felt like tempting fate. We called it "a few people coming round to see the place". Riz and Gloria between them produced enough stew and patties to feed an army. Someone brought a bag of plastic beakers and a catering-sized jar of instant coffee. Someone else brought a pack of nappies like it was a contribution to the bar.

By two o'clock there were already more people than I had dared hope: friends from Camden, the miners' support lot, kids from the street, mums with babies on hips, a couple of older union men who stood by the wall, arms folded, wary but interested.

Imran had strung coloured fairy lights across the beams and wired a temporary PA – nothing fancy, just enough that, if you stood in the doorway, you could not pretend nothing was happening inside. The concrete floor was still bare, but mismatched chairs dotted around, and a few old sofas someone had found in a skip and covered with blankets.

Charlotte arrived late, as always, bringing a gust of cold air. She had two women with her I did not recognise, both in neat coats and scarves, one with a camera, the other with a reporter's notebook. Bridges, I thought automatically. Satisfaction flickered that they were here, in this part of town, not at some West End gallery.

'You made it,' I said, taking her coat.

She looked round, eyes wide.

'You did this,' she said.

'We did this,' I said. 'You filled in the bits on the form where we did not know what we were signing.'

She laughed.

'I underlined the trapdoors,' she said. 'You are the ones who decided to walk across.'

Shell appeared at my elbow with Lucas bundled against her chest, his face a small red frown above the blanket.

'Get a bowl in your hand if you are near the kitchen,' she said. 'No one gets away without eating. And if anyone asks if he is "good as gold", tell them he is a newborn, not a sovereign.'

Charlotte took the stew with both hands.

'Bossy,' she said, admiring.

'Organised,' I said. 'There is a difference.'

People kept drifting over to look at Lucas and then catching themselves, as if they weren't sure they were allowed to be soft in a building full of politics. Shell handled it the way she handled everything: she made it part of the plan. She put him in Debbie's arms for five minutes so she could shout instructions across the hall. She let Gloria kiss his forehead. She watched Imran hover like he wanted to build the baby a fuse box.

At some point someone – Lin, I think – banged a spoon against a mug and said, 'Right. Welcome then.'

We raised plastic beakers of tea and cheap lager and ginger beer.

'To Lucas,' Lin said, eyes bright.

'To Shell,' Gloria corrected.

'To The Furnace,' Imran added, grinning.

I watched the two of them talk – Shell in her second-hand jumper, hair pinned any old way; Charlotte in a jumper that probably cost more than our monthly rent but with sleeves pushed up, unbothered about paint. Once I would have

tried to keep those worlds apart. Now I could not imagine this place existing without both.

Later, someone produced a guitar. I ended up on the stage almost by accident, Imran fiddling with the makeshift PA while the kids with walkie-talkies patrolled the edges, solemn as if guarding a royal visit.

'You going to sing us the one about the Cabinet Office again?' one of the estate mums called. 'My Lin has been humming it all week.'

I grimaced.

'We are working on new ones,' I said. 'I promise.'

But when I started playing, my hands went to the familiar shapes. Songs about picket lines and buses that did not come and policemen who pushed us into ditches. Songs scribbled in cramped bedrooms when I thought we were fighting one battle. They sounded different here, in a stripped-out warehouse with kids' drawings taped in one corner and a box of summons forming in the office.

Between songs I talked. Not the polished patter we had for benefit gigs, but something else – slower, more practical. What we wanted this place to be. Why we needed rotas, childcare, drop-ins. How we were going to get words into the hands of people who never picked up a political pamphlet but would read something if it was shoved into their shopping bag with a flyer for cheap tea.

I could feel them listening differently. Not as an audience, but as co-conspirators.

When I stepped down, Shell was by the office door, arms folded, eyebrows raised.

'You enjoyed that,' she said.

'You did not?'

She hesitated, then shook her head.

'I did,' she said. 'I just…'

She looked out at the room. Debbie sorting a squabble over whose turn it was with the walkie-talkies. Gloria clearing plates. An older union man talking to Charlotte's journalist friend, stabbing the air for emphasis.

'I thought we were finished after the march back to work,' she said quietly. 'Thought that was it. Then I came down here and you lot were still making a racket and I thought, right, maybe there is another way. But this…'

She gestured at walls, rafters, the cobbled-together miracle of it.

'This feels like we are not just shouting any more,' she said. 'Feels like we are building something that will not blow away next time she opens her gob.'

I looked at her, at the smear of stew on her sleeve, the tiredness around her eyes that had not quite been erased by the day.

‘We would not have done it without you,’ I said. ‘Left to me and Alex we would still be arguing about what colour to paint the stage.’

She snorted.

‘Red,’ she said. ‘Obviously.’

‘Black,’ I said. ‘Shows less dirt.’

‘See?’ she said. ‘This is why someone sensible had to come and take charge.’

There was warmth in her tone, but something still nudged.

‘I am not in charge?’ I said, half-joking.

She gave me a look that was part affection, part exasperation, part something else.

‘You are the one with the guitar and the big mouth, Ashcroft,’ she said. ‘You point at the sky and shout. People need that. But when it comes to who remembers to buy loo roll and who knows which form you send to the council so they do not shut you down for having too many chairs, that is not you, is it?’

I opened my mouth to protest, then shut it again. She was right, and I could feel it like a bruise.

‘So what does that make you?’ I asked.

She looked out at the room again – kids with walkie-talkies, Imran showing someone how to plug a cable in without a shock, Charlotte leaning against a pillar talking to Gloria, hands moving as she tried to explain something about media coverage.

‘It makes me the one who keeps the fire going,’ she said. ‘You can be the bloke who runs outside and tells everyone to come warm their hands. That is fine. Just do not forget who is putting coal in.’

I followed her gaze and, suddenly, I saw it her way: the invisible network of lists and letters and rotas, the way all these people were connected not just by songs and slogans but by someone making sure there was tea and chairs and a phone that worked.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘You are organiser, I am front man. We will put it on the letterhead.’

She laughed.

‘You can have your name in big letters later when you are giving evidence to some inquiry,’ she said. ‘For now, just remember to turn the lights off when you are last out.’

‘That is Imran’s department now,’ I said, but I nodded, because I knew she meant more than electricity.

•

When everyone had gone and the place was finally quiet, we stood in the middle of the floor – me, Shell, Imran, Alex, Charlotte – and turned in a slow circle, taking it in.

Cups on every flat surface, paint chips underfoot, a rogue balloon bobbing near the ceiling. The air smelled of stew and sweat and cheap coffee and damp plaster and something else, something new that did not have a word yet.

'So,' Imran said, shoving his hands in his pockets. 'You lot still think this is just a rehearsal room?'

'It is an infrastructure project,' Charlotte said.

'It is a community centre,' Alex said, yawning.

Shell looked at the cardboard box on the filing cabinet.

'It is evidence,' she said.

I looked at the stage, the fairy lights, the cables snaking like roots across the floor, and thought of Live Aid on the pub telly, of cameras and power and who gets to tell the story.

'It is a fuse box,' I said. 'We have just wired it up to things they do not know about yet.'

They all looked at me. For once, no one laughed.

'Then we had better make sure they cannot just flick it off at the wall,' Shell said.

She reached over, turned out the lights herself, and we walked out together into the East London night, locking the shutter behind us.

Chapter Ten – April 1986, London – Chernobyl and The Furnace Opens

News sat wrong in the air.

You could feel it before you knew what it was.

It started on the radio in the kitchen, that thin, clipped voice they wheeled out whenever something serious had happened somewhere foreign. We were all half doing other things – Shell chopping onions, Riz rummaging through a cardboard box of phone lists and flyers, me wrestling with a roll of gaffer tape – but the room tilted a little when the presenter said the word 'nuclear'.

'…an incident at a power station in the Soviet Union. Western experts suggest there may have been… significant release of radiation…'

Shell stopped mid-chop. The knife stayed in her hand but her other hand went to Lucas in his bouncer, palm on his belly like she could shield him from whatever was coming down the line.

He had been born three months earlier, in January, with no more ceremony than a phone call from Barnsley hospital and a train time scribbled on the back of an envelope. Lily had come down in the autumn after the strike ended, old enough for school, young enough to think London was an adventure. Lucas followed in the first week of February, when Shell finally admitted she could not keep doing the Yorkshire-London split with a baby. One minute we were trying to work out how to feed a roomful of adults on lentils; the next we were at King's Cross with a pram, two bags and a baby who had decided London air was an insult. Shell had moved out of the solicitor's squat by then – too many stairs, too much draught – into a damp but solid two-bed on the estate round the corner. 'If I am going to be building an empire,' she had said, shoving a chest of drawers into place while Lily solemnly handed her screws, 'I need walls that do not fall down when he sneezes.' The flat was never quiet after that. There were toys under every chair, rota sheets blu-tacked at kid height, casseroles cooling next to sterilising bottles. Shell handled it the only way she knew: lists on the fridge, kids bundled to meetings with crayons and biscuits, one arm always free for a pan or a phone.

'Turn it up,' Riz said, already crossing the tiles in his socks.

He nudged the dial, trying to find that one notch where the interference dropped away. The voice cleared.

'…authorities insist the situation is under control, though Swedish monitoring stations have reported elevated radiation levels…'

I looked at Shell.

'Sweden?' I said. 'That is miles away.'

'Which means whatever it is has already gone for a walk,' Riz muttered.

Lucas kicked his heels against the bouncer frame, delighted with the noise he was making. The smell of frying onions and garlic filled the kitchen, thick and homely, at odds with the words coming out of the radio.

'…no cause for alarm in the United Kingdom at this stage. Government sources stress there is no immediate danger to public health…'

I could feel my shoulders coming up even before I knew I was doing it.

There it was again, I thought. The phrase they used when you ought to be worried.

Shell turned the gas down under the saucepan like that would help, then caught herself and snorted.

'Listen to them,' she said. 'They do not even sound like they believe themselves.'

I imagined the studio – suit, tie, papers in hand – staring at a script, waiting for the producer to nod. No immediate danger. I had heard versions of it for picket lines and rubber bullets and mounted police. No immediate danger as long as you were not poor, or in uniform, or in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Riz was still close to the radio, one hand braced on the wall.

'Where is the station?' I asked him.

'Chernobyl,' he said carefully, trying the shape of the foreign word. 'Somewhere in Ukraine. Reactor is on fire by the sound of it.'

The presenter moved on to the markets, like you could slide from fallout to share prices without taking a breath.

Shell stirred the pot, the wooden spoon clacking against the side.

'Do we… need to do anything?' she said quietly.

'What, like put Lucas in a bin bag?' I said, and wished I had picked any other words as soon as they were out.

She shot me a look.

'Do not be a prat.'

'I just mean… we do not know anything yet, do we,' I backtracked. 'All rumour and blokes in white coats guessing through a telescope.'

Riz scratched at his jaw.

'They will minimise it,' he said. 'They always do. They will be more worried about panic than cancer rates. "No immediate danger" is code for "we have not finished the lying yet".'

Shell blew out a breath and turned back to the sauce. Chopped peppers went in next, the colours bright against the brown pan.

'And we are opening The Furnace on Saturday,' she said. 'Perfect timing.'

We called an emergency meeting that evening.

The main hall still smelled of paint and dust and the old life the building had had before we got our hands on it – a print works, or maybe a little factory, it had never been completely clear. Mismatched chairs – some from a church clear-out, some liberated from a council storeroom, one or two that must have fallen off the back of a van years ago – were dragged into a rough circle. There was a hand-painted banner drying across the far wall, 'THE FURNACE' in stencilled black letters on a sheet that used to be somebody's duvet cover.

There were a dozen of us, maybe fifteen. Core crew, band, a few regulars from the estate who had shown up so often they were basically staff.

Imran was there too, perched on the edge of a chair like he was waiting for a bus, jacket still on. He had the calm, practical face of someone who fixed problems for a living, the sort who could look at a tangle of wires and see, not a mess, but an answer.

'So,' Shell said, hands on her hips. 'We need to decide whether we go ahead.'

'You cannot cancel,' Alex said straight away, leaning back on two legs of his chair. 'We have spent weeks telling every bugger we know this place is opening. Got bands lined up, got a big pot of curry on the go in my head, got people excited. You cancel and they will forget you even exist.'

'That is one way of viewing nuclear fallout,' Riz said dryly. 'As bad PR.'

Alex dropped the chair forward with a thud.

'I did not mean it like that,' he said. 'I just mean… what are we actually cancelling for? A fire in a reactor half a continent away?'

'They are saying the cloud is drifting across Europe,' said a woman near the back – Anna, from the tenants' group. She had got her youngest on her lap, sleepy and heavy, thumb in his mouth. 'My neighbour reckons we should not let the kids out if it rains. She rang her sister in Germany and they are all keeping their windows shut.'

'There is a lot of "reckons" in that sentence,' Alex said.

'Easy for you,' she shot back. 'You have not got a toddler who eats mud for pleasure.'

The room muttered. I could feel the tightness again, that knot between shoulder blades you got when you knew something was wrong but could not see it.

'We do not have the full story,' Riz said. 'We have got Soviet secrecy on one side and British calm-down-dear on the other. Somewhere in between is the truth.'

'We are not going to get the truth before Saturday,' Shell said.

Everyone looked at me. I did not quite know when I had become the bloke people looked at, but there it was.

'If we cancel,' I said slowly, 'what are we saying? That we do not trust them and we are scared. Which is fair enough. If we go ahead, what are we saying?'

'That it is safe,' Anna said.

'Not necessarily,' I said. 'We could say… we are not ignoring it. We are not pretending it is fine. We can make the night about it. About how they treat us like kids who cannot handle the facts. About invisible things they do not want to talk about.'

'Then make the invisible noisy,' I said, and heard how odd it sounded even as it landed.

Alex blinked at me.

‘Go on then, Oppenheimer,’ he said.

‘A Geiger counter,’ I said. ‘Not for a lecture. As a statement. Put the sensor up on the roof where the rain hits, run a cable down, and feed the clicks through the PA under everything. Not loud. Just there. A background clock, counting while the radio tells us not to worry.’

There was a small, shifting pause as people tried the idea in their heads.

‘Can we even get one of those?’ Anna said.

Imran rubbed his thumb along the seam of his lighter.

‘We can rig something,’ he said. ‘Don’t ask me to swear it’s calibrated like a lab. But a tube that clicks when it’s meant to click, yes. If you want it on the roof, we’ll keep the electronics inside and just run the probe out. Weatherproof it. Tape it down. I can make it behave.’

Riz’s mouth twitched.

‘“No immediate danger,”’ he said. ‘Fine. We measure ourselves.’

‘You want a Chernobyl launch party?’ Alex said, eyebrows up.

‘I want a night where we do not pretend this is not happening,’ I said. ‘Where we talk about it between songs instead of letting the BBC talk at us. Where people can come together in a room and admit they are scared and angry instead of dealing with it on their own in front of the telly.’

Shell folded her arms.

‘Can we do that,’ she said, ‘without putting people at actual risk?’

We all glanced at the high windows, grey evening light pressing in. There had been sunshine all day, that thin London kind that tricked you into leaving your jacket at home, but it had clouded over now. I pictured the air above us like a big invisible puddle with the edges climbing.

‘We can keep the kids indoors,’ I said. ‘We have got the back room set up with crayons and that knackered telly that only shows cartoons if you kick it. We can tell people if they are worried about the weather not to come. We are not forcing anyone.’

‘It is an old building,’ Riz said. ‘Thick walls, high ceiling. If it becomes an issue, this is probably safer than half the damp flats on the estate.’

Anna kissed the top of her son’s head.

‘I would rather be here,’ she said quietly, ‘with you lot, than sitting at home listening to them say it is nothing. If we are all going to glow in the dark we might as well do it together.’

There was a ripple of grim laughter.

Shell looked round the circle, weighing it up.

'Okay,' she said eventually. 'We go ahead. We put notices up: "If you are worried, stay home, we will tell you what was said". We keep the kids inside. We make food so people are not going out for chips in the rain. And we talk about it properly.'

'And we do not call it a Chernobyl party,' Riz added.

Alex raised a finger.

'Can we at least play "Two Tribes"?'

'Wrong war,' I said. 'Right feeling.'

The day of the opening, I woke to rain on the window and that old miner's superstition that rain was bad news.

It had rained at Orgreave. It had rained the day Dad went down for the first time. It had rained the morning we buried Auntie Jean.

I lay there for a bit, listening to it pattering on the glass, counting heartbeats, trying not to imagine what was mixed in with it.

Downstairs, the kettle clicked off and on again, overworked already. Someone had left a note on the kitchen table in Shell's neat block capitals:

REMEMBER – KEEP KIDS INSIDE, DOOR STAFF TELL PEOPLE WHY. CURRY – STIR EVERY 20 MINUTES. DO NOT LET ALEX NEAR THE TILL.

Beneath that, in different handwriting:

DO NOT LET DANNY DO "JUST ONE MORE SPEECH" – A.

I made tea, then went to The Furnace.

The hall looked like itself for the first time.

The banner was up, straight enough if you did not stare at it too long. The stage – two pallets, some planks, and a sheet of thick board robbed from a skip – had a sort of dignity under the coloured lights we had borrowed from a youth club. The PA was strung together from odds and ends but it worked; we had tested every cable twice, kicked every stand, shouted through every microphone. The walls were still raw brick in places, plaster in others, white where we had run out of cream and swapped to whatever was in the reduced bin at B&Q.

Imran had been in since lunchtime, running an extra line down from a high window like it was just another speaker lead. The little box he had cobbled together sat under the tea table, out of the way of feet and spilled milk, a hand-lettered strip of masking tape on it: COUNTER.

'Probe's up under the guttering,' he said when he caught me looking. 'It's not science. It's listening. You wanted the roof, you've got the roof.'

He flicked a switch and, under the hum of the system, a dry, patient clicking came through the PA. Not loud enough to spook people. Loud enough that, once you noticed it, you couldn't un-notice it.

'We'll run it for the night,' he said. 'Long enough that no one can pretend they didn't hear it. If it starts to drown anything else, we kill it. I am not trying to make the place unliveable.'

Rows of chairs at the back, space at the front for people to dance or stand or sway in that way Londoners did when they were pretending not to dance. Along one side, a trestle table with a huge metal pot of veggie curry, another of rice, stacks of chipped plates and mismatched bowls, sliced bread in plastic bags. Someone – Shell's neighbour, I thought – had made a tray of fairy cakes with red and yellow icing, the sort of thing you got at school fairs. There were big catering tins of tea bags, a couple of plastic barrels of cheap lager on loan from the pub round the corner, and a battered sugar jar that had seen more communal kitchens than I had.

At the door, we had a little table for flyers and zines. Anti-apartheid, tenants' rights, a hand-stapled pamphlet on policing at demonstrations. In the corner, by the fire exit, the kids' corner: donated toys, second-hand picture books, a rolled-up poster of a rainbow someone had thought was appropriate. The television was already on, sound low, a cartoon cat mouthing silent meows.

When I tell Keira about the five headings in 2025 – what I later called fingerprints – this is what I mean by Base: not just four walls and a roof, but a place people could come back to. Where you could bring your kids and know someone would watch them while you stuffed envelopes. Where the kettle was always on even if we were broke. The Furnace was Noise made solid, Movement's anchor point, Access's training ground, Disruption's factory floor. Everything else radiated from here.

Around six, people started arriving.

The first were always the ones who worried they would be turned away – older faces from the estate, miners who had drifted south after the pits closed, students who still felt like they were sneaking into the grown-ups' room. They came in shaking water from their coats, stamping their feet, laughing a bit too loud at nothing as they adjusted to the light.

'Oi, you lot, shoes off if you are going in the kids' room,' Shell called, without turning round from the stove. 'Radio has been on all day, I am not letting you track whatever is in the rain across the floor.'

'Thought you said there were no immediate dangers, love,' said one bloke, dropping his trainers by the door.

'That is why I am taking precautions,' she said. 'When have you ever known me to trust a government spokesman?'

People chuckled and queued automatically for tea. It was muscle memory. Queues for soup kitchens, for union kettles, for strike pay. Same shape of body, different building.

I was halfway through helping Alex carry an amp up onto the stage when I noticed the camera.

It arrived attached to a bloke in an army surplus jacket and a grin. The camera was one of those chunky VHS beasts I had only ever seen in shop windows and on news reports – grey casing, fat shoulder pad, lens that looked like it could see round corners. It was ridiculous and beautiful at the same time.

'Blimey,' I said. 'Who died and left you a film crew?'

He patted the camera like a pet.

'Uncle in Canada,' he said. 'Sent it over last year. I am Paul. Anna said you might want something like this.'

Anna, the tenants' group woman, rolled her eyes.

'I said do not point that thing at me when I am serving rice,' she said. 'But yes, he has got it, might as well use it.'

I stepped down off the stage and ran my hand along the side of the camera. It felt like an instrument more than a gadget, heavy and full of potential.

'You know how to work it?' I asked.

'More or less,' Paul said. 'Red button is record, other red button is stop. The rest is showing off.'

'We can tape the sets,' Alex said behind me, suddenly interested. 'Send them out with the cassettes.'

'We can tape the speeches,' I said, the idea arriving fully formed. 'Not just the noise. The talking in between. Keep a record of what was actually said before the papers turn it into something else.'

Paul shrugged.

'Point me at what matters and I will roll,' he said. 'As long as someone changes the tape when it runs out. And as long as no one drops it, because my uncle will murder me from across the Atlantic.'

By eight, the place was full.

The bands we had roped in – a local ska outfit with a trombone player who always looked surprised to find himself making that much sound, a duo of poets who sometimes remembered their lines, us – hovered at the side, tuning, checking lists, re-checking set times that were never really fixed to begin with.

Posh kids had found us too. You could see them instantly – the haircuts a bit too considered, the clothes that managed to be ripped in all the correct places

and none of the cold ones, the way they handled their cigarettes. Some of them were straight from the 100 Club nights, recognisable as much by attitude as by face. They stood near the back at first, trying to look like they were slumming it, then were gradually drawn forward by the energy, the smell of sweat and curry and stale paint.

Charlotte slipped in a little late, rain on her coat shoulders, camera hanging from her neck. She kissed Shell on the cheek – Shell who looked thinner than she had in the summer, that vein pulsing at her temple when she frowned – waved at Lucas, who was painting something unspeakable on a piece of paper in the kids' corner, then came over to me.

'Is this it?' she said, sweeping her arm round the hall.

'Sort of,' I said. 'Ours. Hers. Everyone's. It is a bit like the strike kitchen but with better speakers.'

'It is beautiful,' she said simply. 'Properly beautiful.'

She lifted the camera and started working the room, looking through the viewfinder, framing. Shell at the stove, brow furrowed in concentration; Anna leaning down to whisper to her kid; Riz taping a notice about children and rain to the door; two punks from the estate arguing about whether the Clash counted as punk or not.

The radio was in the corner behind the tea table, turned up just enough that you could hear if there was an emergency announcement, turned down enough that it did not compete with the band line checks. Every now and then a word drifted over: 'fallout', 'precautionary', 'monitoring'.

Under that, the counter clicked on. A second clock in the room.

'Still "no immediate danger"?' I asked Riz as I passed.

'Still,' he said. 'Though apparently we are not to drink rainwater off the ground, which frankly had never been one of my hobbies.'

We went on third.

The first band loosened the place up; people danced, or whatever passed for dancing when you had only ever really done it at weddings and picket line socials. The poets did a set that had half the room roaring and the other half staring like they had walked in on someone's therapy session. There was a short break for more curry. The pot was half-empty, streaked red and brown, the smell of cumin and chilli hanging around like an extra guest.

Then it was us. Coalface.

I stepped up onto the pallets. The lights threw heat at my face. For a second I saw not the room in front of me but the yard at Orgreave, the glare off riot shields. Then I blinked and it was gone, and it was just us again – Alex to my left, guitar strap digging into his shoulder; Pete on bass that night, solid as a

pillar; Tommy behind the kit, sticks tapping lightly on his knees; Shell at the side of the stage, arms folded, watching everything, always.

Paul crouched at the edge with the camcorder, the red light winking.

I gripped the microphone.

'Evening,' I said. My voice came back to me from the speakers, slightly delayed, slightly stranger. 'Welcome to The Furnace.'

There was a cheer, small at first, then bigger when people realised they were allowed to make noise.

'We were going to do a nice simple opening night,' I went on. 'Bit of music, bit of shouting about the Tories, you know the drill. Then… current events decided otherwise.'

A murmur ran through the hall. The word was there without me saying it yet: Chernobyl.

'So,' I said, 'before we make any racket, we need to talk about the thing in the air. Literally.'

The clicking was there under my voice, steady as breath.

I paused. You could have balanced a glass on the silence.

'They are telling us,' I said slowly, 'that a nuclear power station has had a little… mishap. That some radioactivity has escaped. That there is "no immediate danger" to us here.'

I let the phrase hang. There were a few hollow laughs.

'You recognise that one?' I said. 'Same line they use when they want you to keep shopping. When they send police horses into a crowd and tell you it was a measured response. When they tell you men in uniforms are protecting you from… well, from you.'

I thought of Thatcher in that room in July, calling us an enemy within, safe from cameras because she thought it was just her and her own. I thought of horses at Orgreave and the photographs that never made it to the front page.

'Here is what I know,' I said. 'When someone who has never done a day's graft down a pit tells me there is "no immediate danger", I look where they are not pointing. When they say the air is fine, I check the rain. When they say the miners were violent, I check who has got the bruises.'

There was a growl of agreement now, a low sound from chests rather than throats. I leaned in.

'Radiation is awkward for them,' I said. 'You cannot baton it. You cannot arrest it. You cannot put it in a headline about thugs and scroungers. It is just there. Invisible. Like the debt they owe you for thirty years of coal. Like the

lies in the papers. Like the fear they do not want to mention because it does not look good on the six o'clock news.'

Alex glanced at me, half a grin starting. He could tell I was off script, but the good kind.

'So here is what we are going to do,' I said. 'We are going to stay in this room, where the walls are thick and the company is honest. We are going to eat the curry Shell has been stirring since dawn. We are going to let the kids play where we can see them. And in between songs, we are going to talk about what they are not saying. We are going to share information, not rumours. We are going to remember who benefits when they tell us not to worry.'

I swallowed, feeling my own pulse in my throat.

'At Orgreave,' I said, 'the danger was visible. Horses, shields, batons. You could see it coming, even if you could not get out of the way. This—' I gestured upwards '—is different. But the people making the decisions are the same. The ones who wrote "enemy within" in their notebooks and then denied saying it. The ones who sent you down holes in the ground and shut the pits when it suited them. If they can lie about your lungs, they can lie about your bones. If they can lie about the miners, they can lie about the cloud.'

I looked out over the room. Faces I knew, faces I did not. Old men with arms like tree trunks, young women with babies on their hips, students with badges, punks with safety pins, posh kids with their hair just so.

'So tonight,' I said, 'this is our reactor. Our control room. The place where we decide how we are going to talk about this. Where we remember that information is a kind of power as well. We are Coalface. This is The Furnace. Let us make some heat they cannot spin.'

The cheer that time was real and ragged and filled every corner.

Tommy counted us in.

We went.

We played harder than we had ever played.

Old songs sharpened by the context – "Orgreave Morning" with a new line about clouds, "Enemy Within" retooled to nod at power stations as well as police lines. A new one we had barely rehearsed, chords scrawled on a scrap of paper at soundcheck, lyrics about fallout and lies and invisible dust that I half-made up on the spot.

Between songs, I kept talking. Not for ages – just fragments, little hooks.

'They tell you you will be fine if you keep calm. I say you will be fine if you keep receipts, if you remember who said what, when.'

'They say it is too complicated for you to understand. I say if you can balance a house budget on strike pay, you can understand half-lives and prevailing wind.'

‘They say the danger is out there, somewhere foreign. I say the danger is in the room where they write the statements.’

Each time, I saw people’s faces shift. Some laughed, some nodded, some looked angry, some scared. A few of the posh kids were mouthing the lines along by the third repetition, which was both ridiculous and exactly what I was aiming for.

Paul moved round the edge of the crowd, camera on his shoulder, capturing bits of everything. A child asleep on a chair with noise all around him. Shell refilling plates with a practised scoop and scrape. Riz in the corner between numbers, explaining to a young bloke in a denim jacket what a ‘becquerel’ was, in words small enough you could write them on the back of a fag packet.

In the break after our set, I stepped down and stumbled off the pallets, shirt sticking to my back. I was handed a mug of tea by someone anonymous; I drank half of it without tasting.

‘That was…’ Charlotte appeared at my elbow, cheeks flushed, camera bumping against her chest. ‘That was something.’

‘Too much?’ I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

‘Not enough,’ she said. ‘I am… I have been making notes as well as pictures. I think there might be a piece in this. “From Coal to Cloud” or something less terrible.’

‘Do not you lot have an embargo on anything that makes us look human?’ I said.

She pulled a face.

‘I will pitch it,’ she said. ‘They will probably say no. “Too political”, “our readers do not want to think about Ukrainians in boiler suits”. But I have to try.’

She glanced over at a group near the bar – three of the posh kids, one I recognised from a gig in town. They were arguing about something, hands drawing shapes in the air.

‘Listen,’ she said. ‘When you were talking about invisible danger and lies, they were hanging on every word. Roger there has got an uncle at the Ministry of Agriculture. Emma’s dad sits on some committee about nuclear policy. They are going to carry that language back into rooms you cannot go near.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘That is the idea. Trojan horse with a decent fringe.’

She smiled.

‘Give me the phrases you want them to repeat,’ she said. ‘The exact ones. I will put them in the captions if they let me.’

I thought back over what I had said, which bits had felt right in my mouth.

‘“If they can lie about your lungs, they can lie about your bones”,’ I said. ‘That one felt solid. “The danger is in the room where they write the statements.” And… “information is power too, so stop letting them own the words”.’

She nodded, the journalist in her already carving them into type.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Okay. Let me see what I can do.’

Later, in the quieter back room, a young mum sat on a plastic chair with her coat still on, Lucas asleep in her lap now, her own child dozing on a blanket at her feet. She was staring at the poster we had stuck to the wall – a photocopy of some foreign news report with a map of Europe and contour lines of radiation.

Next to her, a bloke with wild hair and a duffel coat was sketching on a paper plate with a biro.

‘So,’ he said, ‘this is Sweden, right? And here is us. The wind was coming like this…’ He drew arrows, his plate a tiny world. ‘The worst of it looks like it has gone over the North Sea, but we will get some. Not enough to drop you dead in the street. Enough that it will matter if you are already fragile. Kids. Pregnant women. People with rubbish lungs.’

‘How do you know?’ she asked, voice tight.

‘I work at the Polytechnic,’ he said. ‘Physics department. They have been ringing round trying to get proper figures. Government are not exactly rushing to share.’

‘So what do I do?’ she said. ‘Tell him not to ever go outside again?’

He hesitated.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You… choose your battles. Keep him inside in the rain for a while. Maybe do not let him eat vegetables that grew right by a road this week. But mostly… you push for the truth. You do not let them make you into a folk tale. “Remember when everyone panicked for no reason”. You make sure the record shows you had reason.’

She looked at him like she was not sure whether to thank him or slap him.

‘And in the meantime?’ she said.

He gestured towards the hall.

‘In the meantime,’ he said, ‘you come to places like this, where you are not being treated like an idiot. You eat curry with people who will help you if the worst happens. You do not sit alone with the television.’

Shell appeared in the doorway, tea towel over her shoulder.

‘We are not charging for seconds,’ she said. ‘If you are worrying yourself sick, you might as well do it with a full plate.’

The woman laughed, sudden and wet, tears in it. She took her plate to the kitchen.

The night ended the way good nights always did – too fast and in a tangle.

People drifted out into the drizzle in little groups, coats hauled tight, voices low and buzzing with everything they had seen and heard. There was talk of other meetings, of leaflets, of petitions. Someone started a half-hearted chant about radiation and the Tories that did not quite scan but had the right spirit.

Inside, we stacked chairs, scraped plates, tipped the last sludgy inch of curry into the bin. Paul helped Riz coil cables, the camcorder now tucked safely back in its padded bag.

'Got some good bits,' he said. 'You kept saying that thing about lungs and bones. Crowd liked it.'

'Good,' I said, tiredness crashing in now the adrenaline had gone. 'I want it stuck in their heads in the morning when they are making toast.'

Shell slumped on a chair, kicked off her boots, flexed her toes.

'We did it,' she said. 'We actually opened the bloody place.'

'During a nuclear accident,' Alex said. 'Trust us to pick our moment.'

She looked round, at the banner, at the scuffed floor, at the empty cups.

'I kept thinking,' she said softly, 'about the strike kitchen. About that room in Grimethorpe. The big pans, the steam, the kids underfoot. Only this time, we built it somewhere they do not own. No pit managers, no council committee. Just… us.'

Riz sat on the stage edge, swinging his legs.

'Not just us,' he said. 'All the people who turned up. That scientist, what is his name, Mark? Anna and her lot. The students. The posh kids. It is like… we have built a room where the streams cross.'

'A reactor,' I said, remembering my own words, feeling them settle in my chest. 'Only this one is meant to blow up.'

Shell threw a balled-up napkin at me.

'Do not say "blow up" in this context,' she said. 'You will jinx us.'

Charlotte came back in from a phone call in the corridor, her face tight.

'Well?' I asked.

'My editor says it is not "quite right" for the feature section,' she said, mimicking his voice. '"Our readers are a bit… fatigued with miners and nuclear scares, Charlotte. Can you find something lighter? Perhaps a profile of that young actress in the West End?"'

She let out a breath somewhere between a laugh and a groan.

'He said, and I quote, "this sounds like agitprop".'

'Is not that what you write for them anyway?' Alex said.

'Apparently the wrong kind,' she said. 'He did say the photos were "atmospheric", which is code for "we might stick one in a collage about youth culture and not tell anyone where it is".'

'So that is a no,' I said.

'That is a no,' she said. 'Unless I can sell it somewhere else. I will try the smaller papers, the weeklies. Someone must want to know what happens when you put miners, mums and Marxists in a room with a reactor cloud overhead.'

She leaned against the wall, staring at the banner.

'Sometimes I feel like I am the one with fallout on me,' she said. 'Too political for the arts pages, too arty for news. Contaminated.'

I walked over, stood next to her.

'They can say no,' I said. 'But they cannot un-hear it. Your editor knows now that places like this exist. Those kids know. Their parents will know when they get home and try to explain why they smell of curry and cheap beer and certainty.'

She looked at me, a little smile breaking through.

'You always talk like you are designing a blueprint,' she said. 'Lines and arrows. What goes where after tonight.'

'Someone has to,' I said. 'Otherwise it is just noise, is not it.'

Out by the bar, I heard someone repeating one of my lines, trying it out on their tongue for size.

'If they can lie about your lungs, they can lie about your bones,' they said to their mate, who nodded, serious now.

I felt something click into place, the same way it had the first time I saw one of our tapes on a stranger's shelf. The words were leaving me already, mutating, attaching themselves to other conversations, other rooms.

Not just noise.

Blueprints.

Markers.

Whatever you wanted to call them.

We locked up late. Shell did a last sweep of the kids' corner, lifting a sleeping Lucas into her arms, turning off the cartoon cat mid-adventure. I switched off

the lights one by one, leaving the hall in darkness except for the glow from the street outside.

For a moment I stood there, feeling the size of it. Four walls, a roof, a stage. A room full of echoes of things said and sung.

Somewhere far away, a reactor core was still burning. Here, in that old warehouse, another kind of reaction had started.

Invisible as fallout, but ours.

Chapter Eleven – October 1986, London – Big Bang and Broken Pieces

They called it the Big Bang.

On the telly it came dressed in fireworks graphics and breathless men in suits talking about deregulation and "opportunity", that word said like it belonged only to them. In the streets it looked like the same men spilling out of wine bars near Liverpool Street at half five, ties loose, braces bright red, shouting into mobile phones the size of bricks and waving tickets I would never own.

I watched them from the top deck of the 48, holdall of cassettes wedged against my chest. The bus slid past new glass where old brick had been, steel frames rising out of gaps in the city like teeth. Every other advert was for a bank, promising growth and freedom in small print no one would ever read.

Down here, we were still arguing over who had bought the last tea bags.

The bus rattled away from the City and back into our part of east London, where pavements were cracked and the only gleam came from a row of silver kegs outside a pub. When I got off near the warehouse, a group of office lads in rolled-up shirts were singing snatches of Pet Shop Boys outside a wine bar, swaying on the spot. One of them shouted something after me about my hair and my boots. I did not bother answering. It was not worth wasting spit.

Around the corner, The Furnace sat in its usual patch of shadow, brick stained, windows patched with plywood and old posters. We had stencilled the name on the shutters three times now, because some joker kept painting over it with "NOISE POLLUTION" and a crudely drawn skull. Alex thought it was funny. I thought it was a warning.

Inside, the air had the usual mix: dust, stale beer from the last show, and whatever Riz had most recently spilled on the office floor. Today it was sweet and sour sauce from the Chinese across the road, congealed in its tin. The main room was a maze of folding chairs, milk crates and trailing cables because we were getting ready for the big all-dayer at the weekend – twelve bands, doors at noon, finish when the council said we had to or when the last bus went, whichever came first.

‘Finally,’ Shell said from behind the trestle table we called the office. ‘Thought you had fallen into Thatcher’s champagne fountain.’

She had Lucas on her hip and the phone receiver wedged between shoulder and ear. The table was buried in flyers, a jam jar of pens, a biscuit tin Lucas kept trying to reach, and a mug of coffee that had gone cold an hour ago. There was a smudge of printer ink on Shell’s cheek. Eddie was due down at the weekend to take the kids back for a fortnight – they had worked out a rhythm by now, careful and practical, the marriage still on paper but their lives increasingly their own.

‘If she had offered, I would have brought a bottle back,’ I said, dropping the holdall gently by her feet. ‘Duplication place did us a deal.’

‘Course they did,’ she muttered, covering the mouthpiece with her hand. ‘They know you will stand there looking wounded Yorkshire until they knock ten per cent off.’

She went back to the call, voice hardening as she dealt with some licensing officer who had suddenly remembered we existed. I picked Lucas up from her hip so Shell could wave both arms around properly while she argued. The phone cord swung with every point she stabbed into the air.

Lucas tucked his head under my chin, thumb in his mouth. He smelled of baby shampoo and tomato sauce. There was a small sticky handprint on my black shirt within seconds.

‘Yes, we are a community arts space,’ Shell said into the phone. ‘Yes, that does count. We have got childcare provision and everything. You want to come down and see the attendance figures?’ She paused, listening. ‘Well, if you are that worried about safety, perhaps fix the street lighting out front like we asked six months ago.’

She slammed the phone down a fraction too hard, then winced, in case it broke and we had to pay.

‘What did they want?’ I asked.

‘A pound of flesh,’ she said. ‘And a copy of our public liability insurance, which we do not have because we cannot afford it.’ She rubbed her forehead. ‘It is all right. Charlotte is checking if there is some scheme for ‘emerging spaces’. Apparently there is a brochure for everything now if you have got the right surname.’

Lucas patted my cheek, then grabbed my earring. I detached his hand gently.

‘Tell Charlotte to bring a stack of brochures,’ I said. ‘We can use them to soak up the leaks.’

Shell smiled, tired but real. ‘How bad is it out there?’

‘The City?’ I shrugged. ‘They are drunk on their own reflection. Whole world as bonus scheme.’

‘Well, they can keep their bubbles,’ she said. ‘We have got our own crisis.’

She nodded towards the rehearsal room at the back. Through the open door I could hear Pete’s bass – not the notes, just the distant thud – and Alex’s guitar twisting over the top. Tommy was probably messing about on the kit already, playing fills I had not agreed to. The sound – not quite music, not just noise – bounced off the bare walls.

‘They started without me?’ I said.

‘They started arguing without you,’ Shell corrected. ‘You might want to get in there before someone throws something that is not a drumstick.’

I kissed Lucas’s hair, handed him back, and went to face the rest of my so-called band.

•

We had drawn a crude calendar on the rehearsal room wall in chalk. Every square that had a gig was coloured in red. There were not many blank spaces anymore.

Coalface – or Glass Saints, depending on who you asked – had become the default house band of The Furnace, and word had spread further than we had expected. People rang from Bristol and Manchester asking us to play all-day benefits and then their mates heard about it. We had even had a letter from someone in Hamburg who had got hold of one of our live tapes and wanted to come over.

It was everything I thought I wanted.

And yet.

‘Just listen with open ears for once,’ Alex was saying as I walked in. ‘You do not have to be frightened of a chorus, Danny. It will not infect your principles.’

His guitar was slung low, strap patched with black tape. He had grown his hair longer, fringe falling into his eyes when he leaned over the amp. Pete was sitting on a flight case, rolling a cigarette. Tommy had a drumstick in each hand and was spinning them like batons.

‘What am I supposed to be frightened of now?’ I asked, leaning on the door-frame.

‘Success,’ Alex said promptly. ‘Any sort of structure. Melody that does not sound like falling masonry.’

‘We like falling masonry,’ Pete put in. ‘It is our sound.’

‘What is all this about Glass Saints?’ Pete asked lazily, as if he did not already know. ‘Bloke at the bar last night wanted to know if Coalface were playing or

'that new band'. I told him they were both us and he looked at me like I had tried to sell him two tickets for the same seat.'

Alex sighed. 'We talked about this.'

'You talked about this,' I said. 'That is different.'

He set his guitar down carefully – always carefully, no matter how angry he was – and turned to face me.

'Look,' he said. 'Coalface was you in the pit. Coalface was the strike. That fight has moved on. We are in London now. We have got The Furnace. We have got an actual following. Glass Saints fits better. It sounds like something that belongs in the reviews pages instead of the letters column.'

'Because that is what this is for you, is it not?' I said. 'Reviews.'

'That is not fair,' he snapped. 'I have been in this with you from the start. I have taken the same punches. I have slept on the same floors. I just do not want us trapped in one story forever. We can say things in more than one way.'

'We are saying things,' I said. 'Or did you miss Shell pulling another all-nighter with the phone tree and Charlotte getting pitches knocked back because we are 'too political'?'

'I did not miss any of it,' he said quietly. 'I was there. I saw that Chernobyl night. I saw what you did with that speech. I have never seen a room go that quiet and then that loud. I am not asking you to stop talking. I am asking you to stop shouting the same sentence every time.'

Pete blew a line of smoke towards the ceiling. 'For what it is worth,' he said, 'I quite like Glass Saints as a name. Sounds mysterious. Coalface sounds like a disease.'

'Coalface sounds like where we came from,' I said.

'We know where we came from,' Alex said. 'You remind us at every rehearsal.'

'And you would rather we talked about, what, texture?' I shot back. 'Layers? 'This song is about the ineffable grief of the urban night'?'

Pete laughed until he realised no one else had joined in.

Alex's jaw tightened. 'You think that is all I care about? You honestly think I am stood here plotting my escape route to some record label's guest list? I care about this place. I care about what we are building. But we are on the edge of something. The all-dayer is already sold out and we have not finished the poster. Journalists are sniffing. Even Charlotte's editor has stopped pretending we do not exist. We could use that. We could get into rooms where decisions are made. We could… I do not know… make enough money to fix the toilets before Christmas.'

I thought of the City traders I had just passed, pockets already swollen with money they had not earned. I thought of Charlotte's friends who drifted in on certain nights, effortlessly well-dressed, always able to hail a cab no matter what estate they were near. I thought of the posh suburbs as shorthand for all the addresses we had started to collect – journalists, lawyers, civil servants, kids of MPs who came "slumming it" at The Furnace because it made them feel real for an evening.

'We are using that,' I said. 'Every time one of Charlotte's mates actually listens instead of treating us like background, that is a crack in something that used to be solid. Every time they take our tapes into their world instead of the other way round, that is a win.'

'It is not enough,' Alex said. 'You know it is not. You talk about long games all the time. Well, this is part of it. If we do not adapt, they will get bored and go back to their wine bars and Pet Shop Boys and we will be here in ten years' time playing the same three chords to the same thirty people who cannot afford to put the heater on.'

The picture he painted landed too close to something I had woken up from more than once.

'So what is your plan?' I asked. 'Change the name, soften the edges, smile nicely for the A&R men and hope they let us keep one angry song per side as a treat?'

'My plan,' Alex said, 'is to write songs so good they cannot ignore what we are saying even when they want to. To get us into spaces where 'enemy within' is not just a line they throw around in private. To make us harder to shut up.'

'And in the meantime?' I said. 'Who are we for? The lads from our estate who saved for the train fare, or the ones who already own half the city?'

'For both,' he said simply. 'That is the point. Bridges, remember?'

That stung, because it was my word. I was the one who had started mentally tagging Charlotte's posh mates as bridges in my notebook. Bridges between here and their dining rooms, between the pit villages and the policy documents. I had watched the way a throwaway comment at the bar became a phone number, then a quiet word, then a form signed faster than it would have been otherwise. I had told myself I was only noticing the flows.

Alex was right. I did not have a monopoly on strategy.

'I am not scared of a chorus,' I said, more quietly now. 'I am scared of waking up one day and realising all we are is background noise to someone else's night out. I am scared we will end up as a footnote in a scene write-up, squeezed between the haircuts and the designer heroin.'

Pete stubbed his cigarette out on the sole of his boot. Tommy said, 'We are going to rehearse at some point, right? Before we break up and write solo

albums?'

'Too late,' Pete said. 'I have already written my memoirs. They are mostly about bass strings and pasties.'

Alex looked over, something like truce flickering there.

'Just try the new one,' he said. 'If it still feels like betrayal afterwards, we will bin it. Deal?'

I hesitated, then nodded. 'Deal. But we are not changing the name before Saturday. Not mid-poster. My mam will get confused.'

He allowed himself a tiny smile. 'Would not want to upset your fan club.'

We plugged in. For a while the fight went quiet, replaced by early stumbles as the song found its legs. The new one had a cleaner verse than I was used to, almost pretty in places, but the chorus had teeth. When I hit the line about the City lights never going out even when the dole queue did, something shifted in my chest.

Maybe he had a point. I was not going to admit it to his face yet. But it lodged there.

•

The all-dayer was called Heat Under Glass, mostly because it made me laugh to imagine some banker reading the listings and thinking it was about greenhouses. We scrawled the title on the poster in thick black, bands listed underneath in cramped handwriting: Coalface, Kropotkin's Beard, Sister Mercy, a reggae crew from Hackney whose name changed weekly, an earnest folk duo who kept turning up with a fiddle and a battered guitar, plus a handful of others Shell had squeezed in without collapsing the timetable.

By Saturday morning, the queue outside The Furnace ran past the café on the corner and halfway down the next street. Gloria and David had put a sign in their window: ALL-DAYER SPECIAL – RICE & PEAS, CURRY, 50P FOR KIDS. The smell drifted to our doorway, mixing with cigarette smoke and damp concrete.

Inside, the main room was already hot when the first band went on. Kids sat cross-legged on the floor at the front, soft drink cans lined up like soldiers. The makeshift crèche space near the back had a pile of donated toys and three teenagers on rota keeping an eye on them. Karen and Gareth were working their way through the jobs list, nudging people into stewarding shifts and tea duty with the calm authority of the already-indispensable. Posters for Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge peeled slightly where the paste had not quite taken.

Shell moved through it all with a clipboard like a general, Lucas strapped to her front in a fabric sling someone from the women's group had given her. She had been up until three, hand-numbering tickets because the printer had run out of ink and we could not afford more before the takings came in. Now her eyes

were ringed, but she kept going, ticking off bands as they arrived, redirecting lost punters, confiscating a bottle of something stronger than cider from a lad who looked about twelve.

Mid-afternoon I found her in the tiny office, slumped over the table with the phone cradled in her hand, fast asleep. Lucas was dozing too, cheeks flushed. There was a faint damp patch where Shell's tears had fallen on the flyer that said ALL-DAYER – BENEFIT FOR LEGAL FUNDS.

For a second I just stood there, throat tight. The phone started ringing again, loud in the cramped space. Shell did not stir.

I picked it up.

'Furnace,' I said quietly.

'You are not supposed to answer like that,' the voice on the other end said. 'You are meant to say good afternoon, community arts space, how can we help you, this is—'

'Afternoon, Charlotte,' I interrupted.

She laughed. 'You recognised my sarcasm. I am proud.'

'Where are you?' I asked, keeping my voice low.

'On my way,' she said. 'Had to file something first. You would not believe how many column inches the Big Bang gets if you work for a paper that thinks the miners' strike was just a temper tantrum.'

'Oh, I believe it,' I said. 'I have seen the suits. They are using champagne as hair gel.'

'I will be there in twenty minutes,' she said. 'Tell Shell I have got the number for that solicitor I mentioned. Just in case today gets… interesting.'

'Why would it get interesting?' I asked.

She was quiet for a beat. 'Because I overheard something in the newsroom. Apparently there have been 'concerns' raised about unlicensed venues in certain boroughs. Noise, safety, moral decay, you know the drill. Your postcode came up like a footnote. I do not want to scare you but—'

'Too late,' I said, glancing at Shell. 'We will be ready.'

'Try not to get raided before I arrive,' she said. 'I would like at least one dance.'

I eased the phone from under Shell's hand. She stirred, blinking.

'Did I…?' she muttered.

'You won,' I said. 'Go home.'

She shook her head slowly. 'No chance. Who was that?'

'Charlotte,' I said. 'She is bringing legal backup. There might be a visit later.'

Shell swore under her breath, then pushed herself upright, rubbing her eyes.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘No point hiding. We will have stewards on the doors, keep the fire exits clear. Riz can stash anything dodgy. Lily can charm them if they are human.’

As she stood, the flyers she had been lying on slipped to the floor. One had a damp ring from a mug. I smoothed it out and dropped it into the box in the corner labelled SUMMONS, LEAFLETS, PRESS CUTTINGS. The archive. Our paper trail. Our future evidence.

Lucas blinked at me from the sling, then grinned, sudden and fierce. For a second I saw Shell’s face in miniature, and the weight of what we were trying to build pressed on my chest like a second child.

‘Come on,’ Shell said. ‘Band number four is overrunning and the folk duo are sulking.’

•

By early evening, the room was a living thing. Sweat on the walls, people packed shoulder to shoulder, singing along to choruses they had only heard twice. Pet Shop Boys floated faintly from a passing car, clashing with our racket through the open fire door. Someone had daubed HEAT UNDER GLASS on a sheet and hung it behind the stage. Every time the drums hit, it trembled.

Between sets, we served food. Cheap stew, bread rolls, tea in chipped mugs, lager if people managed to look the right side of eighteen. The café on the corner sent over extra rice when we ran out, no questions asked. A kid from the estate – skinny, maybe thirteen, hair shaved at the sides – had appointed himself crate manager, darting back and forth with cases of soft drinks, eyes shining like stage lights.

‘What is your name again?’ I asked when he nearly tripped over my boots.

‘Mick,’ he said. ‘Mickey. Mick if I am carrying stuff, Michael if I have done something wrong.’

‘You have done something good,’ I said. ‘Keep going. We will make a steward of you yet.’

He straightened, chest puffing. ‘Like security?’

‘Like the opposite of the police,’ I said. ‘People who make sure it is safe for everyone else to have a good time.’

He nodded solemnly, then ran off dragging another crate, the bottom scraping because it weighed more than he did.

We went on third from last. Outside, the streetlights had come on; inside, we had killed a couple to stop everything overheating. The crowd moved like weather when we took the stage.

‘Evening,’ I said into the mic. ‘Welcome to our experiment in staying alive.’

There was a cheer, a whistle from the back.

‘You have all seen the news,’ I went on. ‘City boys celebrating like they won a war we were not invited to. They call it the Big Bang. I call it someone else setting off fireworks over our roof and not warning us about the sparks. So tonight we are going to make our own noise. For everyone who walked back to work with heads held high, and everyone still being told they are the enemy for asking for a fair share.’

Alex shot me a quick look, not disapproving this time, just measuring how far I would go.

‘And if there is anyone here from, I do not know, Finchley,’ I added, drawing the word out, ‘or anywhere else where champagne flows, you are very welcome. You are not the enemy. You are the bridge. You get to decide what you carry back across the river when you leave. Just remember who was standing next to you when you heard this.’

That got a ripple, a few nervous laughs, someone shouting “I am from Hendon, does that count?” I gave them a thumbs up and counted us in.

We played the new song first. The chorus Alex had fought for landed better than I wanted to admit. People picked it up on the second round, voices rough but certain. When we hit the line about the lights in the City never going out, there was a hush in the gaps between words, like everyone was listening for something beyond the amps.

Halfway through the set I glanced down and saw Charlotte near the front, camera strap across her chest, hair pulled up in a rough knot. She held my gaze for a second, then lifted the camera and framed me, the flash briefly turning the room white.

Behind her I could see one of her friends – Jonathan, the one with the expensive coat and permanently surprised eyebrows. He looked awkward, hands stuffed in his pockets, but he was not checking his watch. He was watching us.

I filed that away under Bridges.

We finished with the old Coalface anthem, because no matter what we changed, some things were non-negotiable. When I hit the bit about marching and not breaking, a knot of lads near the front – too young to be miners, city kids of some kind – shouted the words back. The peculiar thrill of that tangled with something like grief.

Maybe Alex was right. Maybe the long game did not look exactly how I had first imagined.

We came off stage drenched, bodies buzzing with whatever mix of adrenaline and stubbornness kept us upright these days. I could feel the thin circle of my tally disc against my chest, metal warm from my skin.

‘That was… good,’ Alex said in the little side room we used as a dressing area. He hesitated over the adjective and landed there.

‘Do not sound too pleased,’ I said, wiping my face on a towel.

He laughed. ‘You did not flinch in the chorus. I was watching.’

‘Shut up,’ I said. ‘Let me have my moment of integrity.’

We were still catching our breath when the mood changed.

It started as a ripple near the door, a tightening in the air that had nothing to do with heat. One of the stewards stuck his head in.

‘Danny,’ he said. ‘We have got visitors.’

•

There were two policemen and a man with a council badge in the entrance when I pushed through the crowd. The officers had that particular posture – not quite aggressive, not relaxed either, hands near their belts in case anything justified escalation. The council man was older, cheap suit trying to look expensive, clipboard tucked under his arm. They always had clipboards.

‘Evening,’ I said, doing my best impression of reasonable. ‘Can I help?’

‘Is this your place?’ the council man asked, looking past me at the mass of bodies, the posters, the crèche corner, the café family standing with their arms folded.

‘Mine and a few others’,’ I said. ‘It is a community space. We are running a benefit.’

‘We have had complaints,’ he said, checking his papers. ‘Noise. Obstruction. Concerns about capacity and fire safety. It has been brought to our attention you may not have the correct licences for—’

‘Who complained?’ Shell cut in, appearing at my shoulder like she had been summoned. Her hair had escaped its clip, tendrils plastered to her forehead. Lily was nowhere in sight; I hoped that meant she was with someone sensible.

‘I am not at liberty to discuss that,’ he said primly. ‘All I can say is we are within our rights to conduct an inspection and, if necessary, shut this event down on public safety grounds.’

The word shut dropped between us like a brick.

‘Everything is safe,’ Shell said, voice steady but tight. ‘We have stewards on the doors, fire exits clear, no overcrowding. We can show you the rota. Kids are supervised, no glass in the main room, no open flames. The only dangerous thing in this room is the government and you are late enforcing any regulations on them.’

One of the policemen smirked, then looked away.

‘Be that as it may,’ the council man said, ‘we have a duty—’

‘Of care,’ came Charlotte’s voice behind him. ‘You also have a duty not to misuse your powers to harass a lawful community venue.’

She stepped forward, heels clicking on the worn floor, hair now down round her shoulders. Jonathan hovered behind her, uncomfortable but composed, like he was about to sit an exam.

‘And you are?’ the council man asked, faint irritation in his tone.

‘Charlotte Haversham,’ she said, offering a card. ‘Freelance journalist. I write about licensed venues in this borough. I am thinking of writing about this one. If it is being treated unfairly, that would be… interesting. For my editor.’

He took the card reluctantly. His eyes flicked over the name, reading something there I would never be able to carry in my back pocket.

‘And this is Jonathan Finch,’ she went on. ‘From Colson, Finch & Rowe. They do plenty of work on arts and community licensing. Pro bono, sometimes.’ She gave him a sweet, loaded smile. ‘We were just saying how much spare capacity they have at the moment.’

Jonathan cleared his throat. ‘No promises,’ he said quickly, then seemed to remember which side he was on. ‘But yes, we would be happy to look over any paperwork if there has been a misunderstanding. You do have temporary events notices, do you not, Mr…?’

He looked at the council man expectantly, flipping open a leather folder.

For a second everything held. The music from inside, the murmur of people wondering if they were about to be turfed out, the smell of curry and sweat and damp brick.

The council man shifted, something like doubt crossing his face.

‘I am sure there is no need to escalate,’ he said stiffly. ‘We just had concerns. If you can produce the relevant documents, we can—’

‘We can,’ Shell said firmly. ‘They are in the office. Organised. We are very good at keeping records.’

He did not look like he believed her, but he also did not look like he wanted to spend his Saturday night arguing in front of a hundred people and a journalist with a notebook. The policemen glanced at one another, silently weighing the work of dragging anyone out.

‘Fine,’ he said at last. ‘We will conduct a brief inspection. If anything is amiss, we will be in touch in writing.’

‘We like writing,’ I said. ‘We file it carefully. In case we ever need to show someone what happened.’

His mouth tightened.

They did a half-hearted tour, poking their heads into corners and checking the fire exit was not blocked by amps. It was not; we had learned that lesson early. Riz, who had been hovering near the mixer, exhaled loudly when they left.

Charlotte leaned against the wall, hands shaking slightly now the moment had passed.

'That was,' I said, 'terrifying.'

'You are welcome,' she said, trying to sound breezy. 'I told you. Bridges.'

Jonathan gave me a quick, embarrassed nod. 'I will drop by the office on Monday,' he said to Shell. 'We can go through your paperwork. Make sure you are covered. There are some grant schemes you might qualify for, given the childcare and the… community cohesion aspect.'

'Community cohesion,' Shell repeated, smiling oddly. 'Is that what we are?'

'On a good night,' I said. 'On a bad one we are a riot waiting to happen.'

Jonathan looked like he was not sure whether I was joking.

When they had gone, the room relaxed again, tension slipping out of shoulders one by one. Someone put Depeche Mode on low at the bar. You could feel the mood trying to tip back into celebration, but there was a crack in it now where fear had wedged itself.

'We cannot do this forever,' Shell said quietly, watching Lucas haul himself up against the chair legs, chewing a sticky cup. 'Fighting for every licence, every inspection, every noise complaint. One mistake, one bad night, and they shut us down.'

'Then we do not make mistakes,' I said, too fast.

She gave me a look that said she loved me too much to let that sort of bravado stand.

'No,' she said. 'We make plans.'

•

Later, long after the last band had packed up and the last punter had stumbled out, we sat in the main room surrounded by chairs and empty cups. The only light came from the bare bulb over the stage and the orange wash from the street.

My ears rang in the usual way after a long day of noise, but under it I could hear something else: the building breathing. Pipes ticking as they cooled, a drip in the corner where the roof still leaked, the faint scurry of a rat or two in the wall. It was not romantic. It was real.

'What are we to them?' I asked, half to myself.

'Tired,' Shell said. 'Hungry. In need of a bath.'

‘I mean this place,’ I said. ‘To them.’ I gestured vaguely in the direction of the city. ‘To the ones with clipboards and the ones with champagne. A venue? A nuisance? A footnote?’

‘We are a problem,’ Shell said. ‘The good kind. We are where people go when they have nowhere else. Where messages get written, kids get fed, bands learn they are better than they thought. Where Charlotte’s posh mates get to feel like they have done something without actually doing much. Yet.’

She smiled, just a little.

‘We are also a switchboard,’ she went on. ‘People call here when they are in trouble. They meet here when they need to plan. We have got phone lines, a photocopier, a crèche, a kitchen. That makes us more than a stage. It makes us dangerous.’

Dangerous. The word sat in my stomach like a stone and a spark at the same time.

‘If they shut us down,’ I said slowly, feeling the thought form properly for the first time, ‘we do not just lose a gig. We lose the switchboard. The kitchen. The nursery. The printing press. The bit of infrastructure we actually own.’

‘Exactly,’ she said. ‘So we build more. Or we make this one harder to knock down. Or both.’

I leaned back against the wall, the plaster cold through my shirt. In my mind I saw the City boys again, laughing under neon, celebrating their Big Bang in restaurants we would never set foot in. Their infrastructure was invisibles – wires under streets, screens in offices, deals in boardrooms. Ours was here, under our feet and over our heads, held together with borrowed drills, favours and sheer bloody-mindedness.

‘You could always go back to just being the singer,’ Shell said lightly. ‘Let someone else worry about the paperwork.’

‘You wish,’ I said. ‘Front men are ten a penny. Organisers are the enemy within.’

She laughed, worn out but genuine. ‘Do not push it.’

Mick appeared at the doorway, hair damp with sweat and a grin so wide it might have fallen off.

‘Can I help tidy up?’ he asked.

‘You have helped enough,’ I said. ‘Go home before your mum thinks we have kidnapped you.’

‘She knows where I am,’ he said. ‘Says it is better than the arcade.’

Shell handed him a bin bag. ‘You can do one more round of cups, then off. Steward training starts next month, mind. We will need someone who can shout at people kindly.’

He saluted, then darted into the room, bag rustling.

I watched him go – small but determined, weaving between the chairs like he had been born to it.

‘This is it, is it not,’ I said. ‘The long game. Not just shouting at the people who already agree with us. Not just playing gigs and hoping someone important is listening. This. Building something they cannot quite categorise and therefore cannot quite crush.’

‘Now you are getting it,’ Shell said.

Despite the ache in my bones and the worry sitting heavy in my chest, I felt almost calm. Out there, the City was reinventing itself overnight. In here, we were doing the same, just slower and with less champagne. Piece by piece, cable by cable, kid by kid.

If I could not prove I had helped bring down a Prime Minister, maybe I could at least say I had helped wire up the room where sparks flew.

Chapter Twelve – June 1987, London – Glass Saints and Growing Networks

By June the newspapers were full of two stories that did not seem to belong to the same country.

On one page, the Tories were grinning in front of blue backdrops, holding up three fingers for three terms, telling everyone that Britain was booming, modern, strong. On the next, there were pictures of shuttered pits and boarded-up shops, a footnote about another factory closing in the North East.

In between all that, there was a three-paragraph review in a free paper that someone had left on the bus.

‘The Glass Saints,’ it said, ‘have finally released their EP, proving the move from Coalface was no fluke. Still angry, but with more to lose.’

Alex cut it out and blu-tacked it to the wall of the rehearsal room.

‘We have re-emerged,’ he said, savouring the word. ‘Very biblical.’

‘We did not die,’ I pointed out. ‘We just repainted the banner.’

‘Same thing, in rock press,’ he said. ‘You only matter again when you change shape.’

He had a point. Coalface had belonged to the strike. Glass Saints belonged to what came after; the fights that did not have clear picket lines.

We were back in the little studio above the carpet warehouse in Hackney, making what we were stubbornly calling our first proper EP. The tapes and live cassettes

and demos we had churned out in bedrooms and back rooms had got us this far. Now we wanted something that felt like a small stake in the world. Four songs, seven inches of vinyl if we could afford it, tapes for everyone else.

The title Alex had scrawled on his notebook was “Cracks in Glass Houses”.

‘Subtle,’ I said.

‘More subtle than calling it ‘Thatcher Out’,’ he replied. ‘And it gives us room for metaphors. You like metaphors.’

He was not wrong.

The songs we had chosen were different to the early Coalface stuff. Still loud, still full of names and dates and finger pointing, but there were new lines creeping in among the old slogans, questions about who heard what and how stories travelled. I had written one where the chorus went:

Whispers up the staircase, lists under plates, They think their houses solid, but we are learning all the weights.

I was not sure if anyone outside our circle would get it. I was not even sure half the band did. But it felt right on my tongue.

Jules, the engineer, sat behind the desk, chewing the end of a biro.

‘Right, saints,’ he said, tapping the reel-to-reel machine. ‘Let us see if we can make you sound like you mean it without blowing the heads off my mics this time.’

He had upgraded since we last came – a couple of new outboard boxes, a second-hand compressor, a kettle that did not need sweet-talking to boil.

‘Levels first,’ he said. ‘One at a time.’

Pete rattled through a few bars, then Tommy, then Alex. When it was my turn, I stepped up to the microphone, headphones on, the small world of the vocal booth settling over me. Outside, through the glass, I could see Alex mouthing along with the words, even though we were not recording yet.

‘Give me the first verse,’ Jules said in my ear.

I did. The song was about the Big Bang and The Furnace in the same breath, about champagne towers and leaking roofs, about glass houses of Parliament and the cracks that started in places with mould on the walls.

When I finished the verse, there was a moment’s quiet. Then Jules clicked the talkback.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘We can work with that.’

We spent the day laying down drums and bass, guitars folded in around them, vocals last. It was the usual mix of arguments and breakthroughs – Alex wanting

an extra harmony here, me digging my heels in about keeping a line bare, Pete sneakily adding little flourishes when he thought we were not listening.

At one point, we broke for tea. The studio kitchen was a narrow corridor with a single window and a view over the carpet warehouse roof. Far below, men in overalls were dragging rolls of patterned carpet into a van, the designs bright even from up here.

'Imagine having that on your floor,' I said, peering down. 'Whole living room covered in fake Persian.'

Alex shrugged. 'If you grow up with it, you do not see it. Same as we do not notice the coal dust until someone from London comes up and starts coughing.'

'Or the damp here,' I said, nodding at the patch by the ceiling. 'Our kids will think mould is a design choice.'

'Ours?' he said, eyebrow raised.

'Figure of speech,' I said quickly. 'Theirs, then. Whoever grows up under our roof.'

He poured tea into mismatched mugs.

'You have started saying 'our roof' a lot,' he observed.

'It is ours, is it not?' I said. 'The Furnace. The phone lines. The filing cabinets. The rota sheets. The pan of stew on the stove. We built them. Shell built them. They are not just a borrowed stage anymore.'

He looked at me over the rim of his mug.

'I like it when you talk logistics,' he said. 'Very un-rock'n'roll.'

'I contain multitudes,' I said.

He snorted.

When we went back in, I sang the lines again with the picture of The Furnace in my head instead of the Houses of Parliament – the scuffed floor, the noticeboard, the kids' corner, the crate we used as a step for the short ones to see the stage.

It made the song better.

•

If the studio showed one side of what we had become, The Furnace showed the other.

By midsummer, the place had stopped being an experiment and started being a machine. Not a sleek one, more like something built from parts rescued out of skips and wired together with swear words and tea bags – but it worked.

The whiteboard in the office was covered in scrawled rectangles, each a night or an afternoon. The names inside were a mixture that would have baffled anyone in the council office who still thought of us as a "youth music venue".

Monday: Tenants' Association / Youth drama. Tuesday: Women's group / Lesbian discussion circle. Wednesday: Anti-apartheid / Band rehearsals. Thursday: Queer youth / Legal advice drop-in. Friday: Gigs. Saturday: Gigs, film nights, fundraisers. Sunday: Meetings when we were meant to be resting.

Shell stood in front of the board with a marker in her hand like a conductor. The phone cradled to her shoulder rang and rang; she had learned to write one-handed weeks ago.

'No, you cannot have every Thursday,' she said into the receiver. 'Because the queer youth group will have my head and rightly so. You can have second and fourth. Or you can have a Saturday afternoon once a month and I will get the drama kids to do your publicity. Yes. Yes, I know your cause is important. So is theirs. That is why I am trying to make room for both.'

She clicked the phone down, rubbed her temple with the back of her hand and turned to me.

'If one more absolutely essential group calls,' she said, 'I am going to start making them arm wrestle in the bar for space.'

'Put them on a rota,' I said. 'Everything else is.'

'I have got three rotas already,' she said. 'Stewards, café, childcare. If I start doing arm-wrestling schedules I will never leave this room.'

Lily, now six, was sitting cross-legged under the table with a pile of felt tips and a stack of scrap paper, drawing her own version of the whiteboard.

'This one is for the cats,' she said, holding up a page covered in loops. 'They have meetings as well.'

'I believe it,' Shell said. 'They are certainly plotting something.'

I had come in to talk about the EP launch – date, ticket price, what food we could afford, which local acts to put on the bill with us. Within five minutes I had been roped into helping staple leaflets for the tenants' association and chasing Lucas, now a toddler, away from the phone wires.

'You know,' I said, watching Shell tick half a dozen things off a list I had not realised existed, 'someone should be paying you for this.'

'They are,' she said. 'In heartburn and sarcasm.'

She said it lightly, but she was pale under the freckles. The circles under her eyes were getting darker; the cough she had picked up over winter had not quite left. The cardigan hanging over the back of her chair looked too big, as if she had shrunk inside it.

‘You all right?’ I asked. ‘Properly, I mean.’

‘I am fine,’ she said at once. ‘Just tired. We had someone from the council in earlier asking about fire certificates and I had to pretend I did not want to throttle him. That takes it out of you.’

‘You are shaking,’ I said.

She looked down at her hands in surprise. They were, ever so slightly.

‘Caffeine,’ she said. ‘Too much tea.’

Before I could say anything else, the phone rang again. She snatched it up, voice brisk, the way she did when she needed to snap herself out of something.

‘The Furnace,’ she said. ‘Shell speaking. No, I am not interested in a new electricity tariff, thank you, unless you are offering it free to everyone on the estate as compensation for the eighties.’

She hung up, smiled tightly and reached for her mug. The smile slipped as soon as her fingers closed around the handle; the mug rattled against the saucer.

‘Sit down,’ I said.

‘I am sitting,’ she said. Then she frowned. ‘No, I am… all right, maybe not.’

She took a step towards the chair and missed it completely, knees buckling. I got to her in time, catching her under the arms and easing her down before she hit the floor.

‘Shell,’ I said, heart thumping. ‘Hey. Look at me.’

Her eyes were wide for a second, then she squeezed them shut, breathing shallowly.

‘It is all right,’ she said through her teeth. ‘Just went a bit light-headed. I am fine.’

‘You keeled over,’ I said. ‘That is not fine.’

‘Do not make a fuss,’ she whispered. ‘If anyone sees, I will be on the sick list and then what will you all do when the fire certificate man comes back?’

I wanted to shout at her. Instead I got a cushion from the bench and slid it behind her back.

‘Stay put,’ I said. ‘I will get you some water.’

‘Tea,’ she murmured.

‘Water first,’ I said. ‘Then tea. You cannot negotiate your way out of gravity.’

By the time I came back from the kitchen with a glass, the colour was creeping back into her cheeks. Lily had crawled out from under the table and was patting her mum’s knee.

‘Are you broken?’ she asked solemnly.

‘Bit of a loose screw,’ Shell said weakly. ‘Nothing serious.’

‘You need a screwdriver,’ Lily said. ‘Daddy has got one.’

I passed Shell the glass. Her hand was steadier now.

‘You are doing too much,’ I said quietly.

She took a sip, then glared at me over the rim.

‘If you say I should slow down for my own good,’ she said, ‘I will pour this in your lap and then you will have a real problem.’

‘I was going to say for everyone’s good,’ I said. ‘If you fall over properly, this place falls over with you. And that is not how we are meant to be building things. Remember?’

She thought about that, eyes flicking to the whiteboard, the filing cabinet, the stack of envelopes on the table.

‘You are right,’ she said, voice quieter now. ‘Back in May I went light-headed at that whiteboard. Nearly keeled over. Told myself it was just one bad day. This is twice now. That is a pattern, not an accident.’

‘Twice?’ I said, alarm rising. ‘Shell, you never said—’

‘Because I knew what everyone would say,’ she said, irritated. ‘That I am overdoing it. That I should ease off. But there is too much to do and not enough hands.’

‘Then everyone better learn how to hold a pen,’ I said, echoing her own logic back at her. ‘Because you are not a martyr. You are an organiser. And organisers build systems that work when they are not in the room.’

We redistributed some tasks that afternoon. Riz took over the phone for an hour while Shell lay on the office floor with her feet up on a chair, cursing softly at the ceiling. I went through the bookings with her and wrote them out in a way that made sense to more than one person.

‘You know what we need,’ Riz said, appearing in the doorway with the phone still wedged under his ear. ‘A computer. One of those little ones. You can put all this lot in there and it will spit out rotas and mailing lists and whatnot.’

‘With what money?’ Shell said. ‘We barely pay the phone bill as it is.’

‘Give it a couple of years,’ he said. ‘They will be everywhere. We will get one second-hand from some office that is upgrading. I will teach it to swear in three languages and you will not have to write the same phone number out twenty times a week.’

I pictured a machine somewhere quietly working with all our names in it, all the numbers and notes and warnings. The idea scared me a bit. It also thrilled me.

'If anyone is putting our lives into a box,' I said, 'it should be you, Riz. Not some man in a suit.'

'Exactly,' he said, returning to his call. 'Yes, Mrs Patel, we can move the tenants' meeting to Wednesday. No, we will not let your neighbour talk over you this time. I will sit on him if I have to.'

Shell closed her eyes, a tiny smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

'See,' she murmured. 'Invisible empire. Expanding.'

•

The EP launch was, on paper, a simple thing. A Friday night at The Furnace. Three bands, a table at the back with a box of records and tapes, a hand-lettered sign: GLASS SAINTS – CRACKS IN GLASS HOUSES – £3 VINYL / £2 TAPE.

In reality it felt like a small proof that we existed beyond our four walls.

We had managed to scrape together enough money for a short run of seven-inches – plain white labels, sleeves hand-stamped in red with our name and the EP title. A local print shop had owed Shell a favour; she had spent a day in their back room with Lily perched beside her, pressing the stamp down again and again until her wrist ached.

By six o'clock there was already a queue outside that bent round the corner to the café. The family who ran it had put out a sign: SAINTS SPECIAL – CURRY & RICE + TEA £1. Kids stood on the kerb craning their necks to see who was playing; some of them had our old Coalface logos scrawled on their jackets in marker pen.

Inside, we had cleared the centre of the room to make space. Banners from past campaigns hung on the walls, fading slightly at the edges. The PA had been coaxed back into behaving after a week of sulking. The smell of sweat, spice and hairspray settled into the brick.

Shell worked the door with a roll of tickets and a metal tin.

'Pay what you can,' she told people. 'Minimum two quid, more if you have got it, free if you have not and you are honest about it.'

Charlotte hovered nearby with her camera, catching the faces as they stepped over the threshold. There were familiar ones – estate kids, old miners, women from the support groups – and new ones. Art students in carefully frayed clothes. A pair of men in shirts that looked too expensive for our part of town, their ties loosened, eyes bright with curiosity. One of them, I realised, was Jonathan from

the Big Bang night a few months back. He had come again without a journalist in tow.

‘Friends of yours?’ I murmured to Charlotte.

‘Colleagues,’ she said. ‘Sort of. They like to think they are dangerous for coming east.’

‘Let us give them value for money,’ I said.

The support acts went on first – a local band with a drum machine and a singer who had a voice like a cracked bell, then a reggae three-piece who had started using The Furnace as a rehearsal space and had agreed to play in exchange for a permanent slot on the noticeboard.

Between bands, Shell darted from bar to door to the EP table, somehow keeping everything afloat. At one point I saw Ben – the carpenter who had built our stage and then kept turning up – slip behind the bar to pull pints, his hand resting briefly on Shell’s back as she passed. It was not a grand gesture, but it spoke volumes.

‘You seeing that?’ Alex murmured in my ear.

‘About time,’ I said. ‘He has been carrying her boxes for months.’

‘You jealous?’ he teased.

‘Of the boxes? Always,’ I said. ‘Of Ben? No. She deserves someone who knows the difference between a Phillips head and a politics degree.’

He laughed, then sobered.

‘You do know we are standing on his work every night,’ he said, nodding at the stage.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘And on hers. And on Riz’s. We are the bit people clap at, but we are not the bit that keeps the lights on.’

When it was our turn, I felt calmer than I had at any other show. Something about having a piece of vinyl with our name on it – however scrappy – made me feel less like we were just shouting into the air and more like we were adding a small square tile to a bigger pattern.

‘Evening,’ I said into the mic. ‘Thank you for coming to the christening of our midlife crisis.’

Laughter.

‘We are Glass Saints,’ I went on. ‘Formerly Coalface, for those of you who liked us before we got ideas above our station. This is ‘Cracks in Glass Houses’. It is about everyone who has ever told you their world is unshakeable.’

We played the EP songs, then some older ones. The new material felt different under my feet, like the floor had been reinforced. When I sang the line about

lists under plates, I saw Shell in the crowd, her notebook in her hand even now. I saw the whiteboard, the phone tree, the boxes in the office.

Halfway through, I saw something else. In the middle of the room, those two posh lads – Jonathan and his mate – were not just nodding along; they were listening. One of them had his eyes closed. Behind them, a couple of teachers I recognised from the No Gagging meeting sang quietly. At the back, the café family swayed together, arms looped.

This room, these circuits.

After the set, I made my usual little speech, but it had shifted.

'Thanks for listening,' I said. 'If you have got a copy of the EP in your hand, that is not just four songs and some crackle. That is a little bundle of instructions. You can play it loud where someone who does not think like you might overhear it. You can give it to your aunt in Finchley who thinks all protests are about hooligans. You can tape over the adverts on the telly with it. Our voices do not stop at these walls unless you let them.'

It was not poetry. It did not need to be. People nodded, some made faces like they were tucking the idea away for later.

At the back, Charlotte raised her camera again. I knew that somewhere on that roll of film would be a narrow room, our banner, the EP stack, Shell's ink-stained hands, Ben's quiet grin. Evidence.

•

The weeks after the launch blurred: day jobs, meetings, late-night trains, a map of Britain on the office wall acquiring more pins and bits of wool.

We had just started talking to a small independent label about maybe, possibly, doing something more with the EP when the radio thing landed.

Alex burst into The Furnace office waving a scrap of paper like a mad postman.

'You are not going to believe this,' he said.

Shell looked up from a stack of defence pack drafts, biro leaking blue into the pad of her thumb.

'Is it the council finally agreeing to fix the roof?' she asked. 'Because that I will not believe.'

'Better,' he said, slapping the paper down on the table in front of me. 'Radio. One. Session.'

The words took a second to settle.

'What?' I said.

‘John sodding Peel,’ Alex said. ‘Well, his producer. They got sent the EP via that lad from the Manchester nurses’ gig, they liked it, they want us in for a session next Thursday. Four tracks live to tape, interview, the whole thing.’

For a moment the room narrowed to the size of that scrap of paper. My heart was suddenly everywhere.

‘You are serious,’ I said.

‘I am not that good an actor,’ Alex said. ‘They want the full band. They want you doing your earnest Northern bit between songs. This is…’ He broke off, actually lost for words.

Shell let out a low whistle.

‘That is… big,’ she said. ‘Even I know that.’

We all stood there, staring at the paper like it might sprout legs and run away.

‘Thursday,’ I said, half to myself. ‘Next Thursday.’

‘We will have to shift rehearsal,’ Alex said, already planning. ‘Borrow a van that does not leak. Get time off. You will need to not lose your voice shouting at the tenants on Wednesday. We can do at least one new song. ‘Cracks’, obviously. And maybe—’

‘Hang on,’ Shell said.

She pushed her hair off her face with ink-stained fingers and reached for the wall calendar. Dates were circled, underlined, annotated in her tight capitals.

‘Next Thursday,’ she said slowly. ‘That date is familiar for a reason that is not just Peel.’

My stomach sank before she even found it.

‘Coach grid,’ she said, tapping the square. ‘First full test run. You remember? We agreed that was the only night we could get stewards, coach leads and tenants’ reps in the same room before summer. Seventy-odd people. All the routes we have built in one place.’

She looked up at me.

‘You are running that night, Danny,’ she said. ‘You and Riz. We planned it round your tour dates and shift patterns for months.’

For a second I tried to hold both pictures in my head at once.

Picture one: BBC studios, bright but dingy, the smell of old coffee in plastic cups, John Peel in his jumper nodding along while we played. My dad at the kitchen table in Grimethorpe hearing his lad on the radio between The Fall and some band from New Zealand. Every person we had ever known being able to tune in and hear we existed.

Picture two: The Furnace main hall with chairs in a horseshoe, maps on the wall. Coach leads from Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, Bristol. Tenants' reps from three boroughs. Shell at the front with her clipboard. Riz at the side table with his lists. Me with the big map, drawing lines as they called out routes. The first time we tried to turn the scribbles in my notebook into an actual machine that could move thousands of people when we needed it.

It was not a fair fight. The first picture glittered. The second hummed.

'We can move it,' Alex said quickly, hearing the silence. 'The coach thing. Or get someone else to do it. It does not have to be you.'

'Who else knows all the routes off by heart?' Shell asked, not unkindly. 'Who else did all the weird little follow-up calls after Glasgow, Bristol, Manchester? Who has the stupid scribbles in his stupid notebook?'

'You do, you clever sod,' she added, looking at me. 'The whole point of Thursday is getting the web in your head out into theirs.'

'You can take your notebook to the BBC as well,' Alex said. 'Imagine it. Northern lad with a map of Britain on Radio One talking about coach grids and tenants' rights between songs. That is better than any press release.'

He was not wrong. None of them were wrong. That was the problem.

In my chest, something was tearing itself in two. I had wanted a moment like that Peel session since the first time I put on a record and saw a northern band's name on the label. Not for money – though that would have been nice – but for that feeling of being part of the story, not just shouting from the wings.

The other thing… we had built that. Night after night in draughty halls and back rooms, collecting phone numbers on scraps of paper, persuading people that writing your name down on our lists was not a waste of time. If we messed the test run up, if the leads went home unconvinced, if the grid looked as shambolic as it did in the margins of my notebook instead of like a plan – we would not get another chance before the Community Charge became the main front.

'You could do the first half, then leg it across town,' Alex said desperately. 'Session is late, right? Peel is a night thing. We do soundcheck in the afternoon, nip back for your boring spreadsheet party, then come back for the actual recording. Two tubes, a taxi at worst.'

'And if British Rail hiccups?' Shell said. 'If there is a signal failure? If a steward from Leeds has sat on a coach for four hours to get here and the man who convinced him to come is not in the room?'

She was not pleading. She was doing what she always did: laying out the columns. Risk, reward. Cost, benefit.

Alex turned on her.

‘You cannot ask him to give this up,’ he said. ‘Do you know how many bands get offered this? Do you know what it could do for all of us? For the venue, even? If more people hear us, more people come here. More money. More—’

‘I am not asking him to do anything,’ she snapped. ‘I am telling you what the numbers are. That is my job. His is to decide.’

They both looked at me.

Forty years later, I can still feel that moment behind my ribs. Not a grand crossroads, no swelling strings. Just a grubby office, fluorescent tube flickering, three tired people and a calendar.

I thought of our five headings on the faded notebook page from ’85. Noise. Base. Movement. Access. Disruption.

Peel was access and noise in one. The coach grid was movement. If I had learned owt in the last few years, it was that noise without movement is just catharsis. Good for the soul, not much for the ledger.

I took a breath.

‘Alex,’ I said. ‘You can do the session without me.’

He stared.

‘Do not be daft,’ he said. ‘You are the singer.’

‘So be the singer,’ I said. ‘You wrote half this lot anyway. You can do the talking. Take Tommy, Pete, get someone in to stand at the back and hit a tambourine if you need four bodies. Say I have got the flu. Say I have been arrested for nicking a microphone. Make summat up.’

‘It will not be the same,’ he said. His voice had gone quiet and dangerous.

‘No,’ I said. ‘It will not. But if I mess up Thursday here, the next time we have to get ten thousand people from A to B without them getting kettled or stranded, we will not be ready. And that is not just our egos on the line.’

I looked at Shell.

‘You always said logistics beat glamour,’ I said. ‘This is me proving I listened.’

She did not smile. Her eyes were shining a bit, but she nodded once.

‘You are sure,’ Alex said. ‘Really sure. Because if we say no, they might not ask again.’

‘They might not anyway,’ I said. ‘They might stick the tape on a shelf and forget about us. But these people…’ I gestured at the wall where the map was, the pins and wool and scribbled names. ‘They are not going anywhere. Unless we get them somewhere.’

He sank into the chair opposite me, all the air going out of him.

‘We started this band in a bedsit,’ he said. ‘Do you remember?’

‘Course I do,’ I said. ‘I also remember saying our tapes could go where we could not. This is just that, again, but backwards. You go into that studio and let our songs do what they can. I will be here making sure that when the time comes, there is somewhere for the people who hear them to go.’

There was a long silence. Somewhere in the building a child laughed, then started crying, then laughed again. The phone rang and went to the answering machine because Shell had forgotten to flick it back.

‘You are a stubborn bastard,’ Alex said at last.

‘Takes one to know one,’ I said.

He scrubbed his hands over his face.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘We do it. I will tell them it is just scheduling. No one needs to know you chose a meeting over the BBC.’

‘He will,’ Shell said.

I swallowed.

‘I will,’ I said.

•

Thursday came. I watched the clock all day, feeling like a traitor to myself. Every time I pictured the BBC studio, I forced myself to picture the hall instead.

By seven, The Furnace was so full it felt like it had grown. Coach leads from Glasgow, Leeds, Newcastle, Bristol, Sheffield, Nottingham, Leicester. Tenants’ reps from estates I had only ever seen as names on petition sheets. People from unions, churches, youth clubs. Some had brought their own maps.

We stuck ours on the wall with blue tack and string.

‘Right,’ I said, standing at the front with my notebook. ‘Let us see if we can turn all these scribbles into summat that will not fall apart the first time a copper looks at it.’

For three hours we worked through routes, pick-up points, steward ratios, what to do if a coach broke down, where the phone trees would sit if the police cut lines in one area, which MPs might complain if main roads got blocked. People argued, interrupted, took notes, came up afterwards with questions.

At one point I caught Shell watching me from the back, arms folded, a look on her face I had not seen before. Pride, yes, but also something like relief. Like she had put a heavy box down and found someone else had picked up the other handle without being asked.

Afterwards, when the last steward had been bundled into a spare room with a sleeping bag and half a pan of stew, I went into the dark office and pressed the button on the answering machine.

‘Hi,’ Alex’s voice said, faint and tinny. ‘It worked. He played us. All four. Said we were ‘quite something’.’ There was a pause, then a laugh. ‘You daft sod. You missed it.’

I sat down very carefully.

‘He said,’ Alex went on, ‘that he liked the song about the lists. Said it sounded like you had been taking notes in interesting meetings. I told him he had no idea. Anyway. They want us back in a few months if we keep our noses clean. I will tell you everything tomorrow. Try not to schedule a revolution for then.’

The machine clicked off.

In the quiet that followed, I could hear my own heart and the low hum of the fridge in the corner.

I will not lie. It hurt. There was a small, petty part of me that wanted to throw something, to ring him back and say I had changed my mind, that we could surely rearrange the whole movement round a radio show.

But the bigger part… the bigger part could still feel the weight of seventy-odd pairs of eyes on me from earlier, could still hear the scrape of chairs and the rustle of maps as people realised they were not just isolated pockets of anger but part of a plan.

In the long run, that night did more for us than any single broadcast would have on its own. The coach grid that came out of it – tested, argued over, refined – is the one that gets us safely to Trafalgar Square in 1990 and mostly home again.

And Peel played the record anyway. Our noise got out without me standing in front of the microphone.

If there is a moral, it is not that glamour is bad and spreadsheets are holy. It is just that someone has to stay in the back room with the maps while the lights are on elsewhere. That night, for once, I chose to be that someone on purpose.

When Keira read that bit in my notebook for the first time – ‘Turned down Peel for coach grid test’ – she looked up at me like she was waiting for the punchline.

‘You really did that?’ she said.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘I moaned about it for a week, mind. But I did it.’

She shook her head, half admiring, half appalled.

‘You are an idiot,’ she said.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘But I am our idiot.’

And in terms of the fingerprints, that is the night I stopped thinking of myself as the lad with the guitar and started admitting that, for my sins, I was one of the ones holding the movement together with lists.

Noise still mattered. It always did. But it was the movement column on that faded page from '85 that I chose, just that once, over the noise column. And we are still living with the consequences, good and bad, every time someone gets on a coach to a protest and somehow finds themselves not lost.

Chapter Thirteen – December 1987 – London / Oxfordshire – Glass Saints and Country House

It started with men in suits on the telly pretending the world was suddenly safe.

The kitchen at The Furnace smelled of curry, instant coffee and photocopier toner from the room down the hall. Someone had left the little portable TV propped on a crate, aerial crooked, picture washed-out. Reagan and Gorbachev shook hands in Washington, flags behind them, translators hovering like chaperones.

'See?' Riz said, leaning back against the counter with a mug between his hands. 'We have done our job. No more nuclear war. Call it off. Go home.'

'World peace brought to you by two blokes who would sell their own nans,' Shell said, flicking through a pile of flyers with CLAUSE 28 in heavy type across the top – the one about banning councils from 'promoting' homosexuality. 'I will start knitting them a banner.'

On screen, the newsreader used that light, hopeful tone they kept for weddings and royal babies. Historic step. Safer Europe. They cut to Greenham Common, where a woman with a weathered face and a CND badge was crying as she spoke, saying it had all been worth it.

I should have felt relief. I had grown up with sirens tested and the idea that one day we would all go up in a white flash that made the strike and the dole and everything else feel small. Instead I found myself watching mouths, not words. The way the anchors leaned in when they mentioned Kremlin hardliners, how they relaxed when they turned to house prices.

'It is all theatre,' I said. 'They are not scared of the missiles. They are scared of headlines.'

'Which is exactly why you, Mister Long Game, need to be on this train.'

Shell slapped an envelope in front of me. My name was on it in neat, looping ink. A London address I recognised from the back of a Christmas card: Haversham House, some Belgravia street that sounded like it came with doormen in the bricks. Inside, on paper thick enough to make my fingers feel grubby, was the real destination.

Deerbrook Hall, Oxfordshire.

'You are sure this is not a trap?' I said, even as my thumb ran over the embossed crest at the top – small shield, crossed keys, Latin motto that might as well have said *remember your place*.

'If it is, it is a very pretty one,' Shell said. 'Free food, central heating and a chance to poke a Tory in his natural habitat. I am not missing that.'

Charlotte had written the letter but I could hear her voice. Dad wants to hear what you are up to. He has finally listened to the EP. There is a sort of listening thing at the house tonight. Come, if you can bear it. Bring Shell if you like. I would feel better with you both there.

'Listening thing,' I muttered. 'Posh code for we sit in a drawing room and make faces at your little record.'

'You wanted the posh kids,' Shell said. 'Well, this is their dad. The original model. If you are serious about getting inside their heads, you go and have dinner with one.'

I thought of the woman at Greenham on the screen, years of her life camped in the rain outside bases they had promised were essential, only to call them surplus once the photo opportunities lined up. I thought of the tapes still going out from our little post room, jiffy bags addressed in Shell's tidy capitals, stories pressed into plastic and ferried through letterboxes we would never see.

'What if I make an idiot of myself?' I said.

'You will,' Shell said. 'That is a given. But you will not be alone. I will tell you which fork to use.'

Riz, who had been quiet at his corner of the table, piling leaflets into envelopes, looked up with that flat expression he got when he was about to say something we would not enjoy.

'So that is the play now, is it?' he said. 'Nice dinners with Tory daddies. Networking.'

'It is intelligence gathering,' Shell said carefully. 'Know your enemy.'

'Know your enemy.' Riz put his stack down. 'That is what we said about the benefit circuit. 'Let the posh kids come to us, they will learn something.' Now we are going to them. In their country houses. With our best shoes on.'

'It is one dinner,' I said.

'It is never one dinner.' He stood, stretching. His back probably hurt; he had been hunched over that table for hours. 'First it is dinner. Then it is a favour. Then you owe them something and call it strategy.'

'Charlotte is not asking for favours,' Shell said. 'She is giving us access.'

‘Charlotte is all right,’ Riz said – and it sounded like a concession dragged out of him. ‘But her old man is a Tory MP. He voted for everything. The strike. The closures. And he will vote for CLAUSE 28. And you are going to sit in his dining room and let him feel good about himself for listening to your little record?’

On the telly behind him, Reagan and Gorbachev were still shaking hands, the same loop over and over.

‘I am going to find out what scares him,’ I said quietly. ‘And then I am going to use it.’

Riz looked at me for a long moment.

‘That is what they say too,’ he said. ‘Right before they turn into them.’

He grabbed his jacket from the back of a chair.

‘I will be on the radio if anyone needs me,’ he said. ‘Talking to people who do not need a train ticket to hear us.’

The door swung shut behind him.

‘He is not wrong,’ Shell said at last. ‘Not entirely.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘But he is not right either. We cannot keep shouting at each other and call it a movement. Sooner or later we have to get inside the rooms where decisions happen.’

‘And if you get comfortable there?’ she said.

‘Then you tell me,’ I said. ‘That is your job.’

She picked up the envelope, turned it over.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘But if I have to curtsey, I am blaming you for the rest of my life.’

•

We met Charlotte at Paddington under the big destination board, the letters flipping over with that mechanical rattle that sounded like a hundred small decisions. People in Christmas coats hurried past with department store bags. A busker in fingerless gloves played *Fairytale of New York* on a battered guitar, the words swallowed by the echo.

Charlotte was wrapped in a dark wool coat that managed to look expensive without bragging. Camera bag across her body, hair twisted under a beret with a small rip at the side.

‘You came,’ she said, shoulders loosening for a second. ‘I was not sure.’

‘We flipped a coin,’ Shell said. ‘It landed on ‘tell Thatcher to get stuffed’, which was both options, so here we are.’

Charlotte smiled, but her eyes kept sliding up to the board and back, measuring how long it would be before there was no turning back.

'I should warn you,' she said. 'Dad is… interested. That is the word he used. Which is worse than hostile. Hostile means he has decided. Interested means he is working out where to put you on his map.'

'And your mum?' I asked.

'My mother will treat you like an avant-garde charity project,' Charlotte said. 'Kindly. She is very kind when she is patronising.'

On the train we found backwards-facing seats at a table. Shell claimed the window, pressing her forehead to the cold glass as the suburbs slid by – terraced houses with tangled Christmas lights, back gardens separated by fences too flimsy to keep anything real out.

'What is the plan?' she said once the ticket inspector had gone.

'Plan?' I said, fiddling with the corner of the EP sleeve sticking out of my rucksack. We had brought the record and a cassette, in case the Haversham sound system was not built for us. I imagined their hi-fi being able to play formats that did not exist yet.

'You do have one,' Shell said. 'Do not you? You have been banging on about posh leverage for months. 'We cannot just shout at people who already agree, Shell,' ' she mimicked, cruelly accurate.

'I thought I would listen,' I said. 'See what makes him uncomfortable. What makes him change the subject.'

Charlotte turned her tea cup between her hands, plastic flexing.

'He will test you,' she said. 'He will want to know what you have read, not just what you have felt. He will quote Burke and toss in a bit of Disraeli for flavour. You do not need to spar with that. Just be honest. He cannot stand bullshit. He is blind to his own.'

'Helpful,' Shell said. 'So: do not fake Eton, do not forget which side you are on, do not drink so much wine you tell him the strategy.'

'I am not going to tell him our strategy,' I said.

'You will tell him more than you mean to,' Charlotte said quietly. 'He is very good at making people talk. I wanted you to know that before we go through the gates.'

It was the first time she had sounded like a daughter, not a photographer or comrade.

'What about you?' I asked. 'What is your plan?'

'Try very hard not to regress to twelve,' she said. 'Fail. You can watch.'

•

Deerbrook Hall appeared at the end of a long, curving drive designed purely to make visitors feel small before they even got out of the car. Gravel whispered under the tyres. The house was red brick with stone dressings, big bay windows, a central doorway with columns and a fanlight. If you asked a child to draw "rich people's house", this was what they would sketch.

'It is like a National Trust place,' Shell muttered as we climbed out. 'Do we get an audio guide?'

A man in a dark overcoat came down the steps. Not a butler – younger than that, with a haircut that suggested army or strict school. He took our bags like they weighed nothing.

'Miss Haversham,' he said. 'Good to have you home. Mr Haversham is in the drawing room. Mrs Haversham is with the caterers.'

'Of course she is,' Charlotte said. 'Thank you, Tom.'

Inside, the hall was tiled in black and white squares. Hunting prints climbed the staircase – men in red jackets on horses, hounds coiled at their feet. Between them, portraits watched us: stern men in high collars, women with pearls and impossible waists. The air smelled of beeswax and something richer from the kitchen – meat, herbs, wine.

'Coats, please, miss,' said a woman in a crisp apron, appearing from a side door. She was about my mam's age, hair pinned back, eyes sharp. When my scarf tangled she reached up and helped, hands quick.

'You are with Miss Charlotte?' she said.

'That obvious?' I said.

'Do not worry,' she replied. 'We have all been there.' Then, lower, with a hint of a smile: 'Kitchens through there, if it gets too much. The kettle belongs to us.'

Shell's grin flashed. She had found a back entrance.

We were shown into the drawing room, where Charlotte's father stood with his back to the fireplace as if he had been designed for it. Rupert Haversham was taller than I had imagined, grey hair neatly parted, the sort of face that probably looked the same on a ballot paper as it did in person – steady, reassuring if you did not look at the details.

He came forward with both hands extended, one for me, one for Shell.

'Daniel,' he said. 'And Michelle, is it? Charlotte has spoken of you both.' His grip was firm, the handshake of a man used to agreements in rooms like this.

'Shell,' she said. 'Only my mam calls me Michelle. When she is angry.'

‘Shell,’ he repeated, as if filing it. ‘You are very welcome. You find us on a hopeful day.’

He nodded at the television in the corner, sound off, treaty still looping.

‘Historic,’ he said. ‘We must give credit where it is due. Not everyone on my benches agrees.’

‘Your benches?’ I said, before I could stop myself.

‘Rupert is an MP, Danny,’ Charlotte said, in that tone she used when she was pretending to be casual on my behalf.

‘One-nation Conservative,’ he added. ‘The old-fashioned kind, before the branding people got involved. We try to make sure the country does not eat itself. We do not always succeed.’

On the low table at the centre of the room lay our EP, next to a decanter – the white sleeve with Shell’s lino-cut of a pithead tower cracking like glass. Someone had been careful not to spill on it.

‘I have been listening,’ Rupert said. ‘Charlotte has been very insistent. I thought we might give it a spin on something better than a car cassette.’

‘You have a car cassette?’ Shell said. ‘I thought you would have a man who sings Latin summaries at you.’

Rupert laughed, unexpectedly genuine.

‘Oh, I like you,’ he said. ‘Miss… Shell. I hope you are hungry. Cook has outdone herself. We could feed the Soviet delegation twice.’

•

Dinner was in a room long enough for your footsteps to echo back. A table ran almost the full length, polished wood buried under a white cloth and more cutlery than I had seen outside a shop. Candles burned in silver sticks. A painting of a stag being brought down by hounds loomed over one end, as if to remind us what happened to anything that strayed.

‘Start at the outside and work your way in,’ Shell whispered. ‘If you do not know what something is, do not ask. Eat it and hope.’

Mrs Haversham was all soft edges and pearls, hair set just so, voice as smooth as the soup they put in front of us. She asked polite questions about the band – where we rehearsed, whether our parents worried. When I said my dad was on the sick and my mam did shifts at the supermarket, she nodded sympathetically, then launched into a story about how terribly hard it had been when Rupert was away on parliamentary business when the children were small.

‘You must have the most extraordinary material for your songs,’ she said. ‘Charlotte says you write about… what was it, dear? The miners?’

‘The miners’ strike, yes,’ I said.

‘Such an unfortunate business,’ she replied. ‘All that trouble. Still, one cannot hold back progress.’

Rupert cleared his throat, in that way that meant he thought his wife was about to say something he would have to tidy later.

‘It was an industrial dispute, Margaret,’ he said. ‘Not trouble. Words matter.’

‘Oh, they always do for you, dearest,’ she said, patting his hand. ‘That is what we adore about you.’

I concentrated on not spilling soup down my shirt. The spoon felt wrong in my hand, heavy and alien. Shell saw and casually mirrored how I held mine, giving me something to copy without making a show of it.

Between courses, footmen – actual footmen, though I was fairly sure they hated the title – topped up glasses. The red wine was smoother than anything we drank at The Furnace. It went to my head differently – not the loose-limbed warmth of cheap plonk, but a creeping fuzziness that made my tongue feel thick and my thoughts half a beat behind.

‘So,’ Rupert said, once plates had been cleared and lamb arrived with rosemary and potatoes that would have made Mam cry with envy. ‘Tell me about Glass Saints. Why not keep Coalface? A perfectly good, honest word.’

‘Coalface was the band that shouted,’ I said, surprised at how clear my voice sounded over the clink of cutlery. ‘Glass Saints tries to say something useful after the shouting is done.’

He tilted his head.

‘Useful how?’ he said. ‘Useful to whom?’

‘To people who listened back then and went home and nothing changed,’ I said. ‘We realised we were making them feel less alone, which matters, but we were not giving them anything to do. Now we try to. Directions. Names. Places to turn up.’

‘And do they?’ he asked.

‘Some,’ I said. ‘More than before. We have got a warehouse that fills on Thursdays because Shell here knows how to get people in and out without anyone dying.’

‘High praise indeed,’ Shell said, stabbing a potato.

‘And these directions,’ he went on, ‘do they include breaking the law? Or merely standing in the street and shouting at me?’

‘Depends which law,’ I said. ‘And which you.’

Mrs Haversham made a little sound, somewhere between a laugh and a warning. Charlotte’s foot brushed mine under the table – not to stop me, but to anchor me.

‘We tell them where to send letters, for a start,’ Shell said lightly. ‘Keeps your postbag interesting.’

‘Ah yes,’ he said. ‘The letters. I do read them, you know. Contrary to popular belief, we do not burn missives from the provinces for warmth.’

He turned back to me.

‘Daniel, forgive a blunt question,’ he said. ‘What is it you actually want? Not in a slogan. In a sentence you would defend in a room full of people who disagree.’

I felt the weight of eyes. Mrs Haversham paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. Charlotte watched me with a look that said: you do not owe him anything, but if you speak, make it count.

‘I do not want anyone choosing between heat and food,’ I said slowly. ‘I do not want a kid coming home to bailiffs and an empty space where the sofa was. I do not want anyone dying at work because someone decided profit mattered more than a safety rail. I want those decisions made by people who have lived it, not just read it in briefing notes.’

Rupert chewed, swallowed, dabbed his lips.

‘And you think that is not the current state of affairs?’ he said. ‘You think your country is run entirely by ghouls who have never set foot in a pit or a council flat?’

‘I think when you sleep in places like this most nights,’ I said, ‘it is easy to forget what mould smells like.’

Shell’s hand tightened round her napkin. Under the table, Charlotte’s foot pressed harder on mine, not to silence me but to keep me steady.

Rupert’s eyes sharpened for a second. Then he smiled – a politician’s smile that never quite reached his pupils.

‘Point taken,’ he said. ‘I grew up in a semi in Romford, for what it is worth. Father was a clerk in the Post Office. We did not have stags on the walls.’

‘Now you have three,’ Shell said, nodding at the paintings. ‘Looks like you have caught up.’

He laughed again, but it was clipped.

‘We saved,’ he said. ‘We worked. We made choices. That is all. And we have a duty to ensure others have the chance to do the same, not to promise them the earth and deliver bankruptcy. That is what I mean by one-nation Conservatism. Not pity. Responsibility.’

He raised his glass.

‘To responsibility,’ he said.

Mrs Haversham dutifully echoed. Charlotte touched her glass to mine but did not drink.

•

After dinner there was coffee and something sweet in the drawing room, a change of pace that felt rehearsed long before we were invited. Someone had put our EP on the turntable, wired into speakers big enough to shift the foundations if they felt like it.

'Side A,' Rupert said. 'Let us hear your… what is it called? *Cracks in Glass Houses*?'

'*Cracks in Glass Houses*,' I corrected automatically.

The needle dropped with a faint scratch. The first riff crept in – Alex's guitar, clean and tense, then Pete's bass putting a low line under it, the drums giving a heartbeat. My own voice followed, younger than I felt sat here in borrowed blazer, singing about windows and watchers and men who talked about "stability" while rattling locks on other people's doors.

I watched faces instead of listening to lyrics. Mrs Haversham looked politely interested, head tilting in time, listening to rhythm more than words. Rupert's jaw flickered once as I sang about cameras in stairwells and letters that went unanswered.

'Good diction,' he said when it ended. 'You can hear the words. Not that dreadful shredded shouting thing.'

'Thrash,' Shell suggested.

'Yes. That. I cannot abide it. Colleagues' children inflict it on them. They sit blinking behind their *Telegraphs* pretending to keep up. This, at least, sounds like music.'

'It is music,' Shell said. 'That is the point.'

'It is also,' he went on, 'slightly unfair. But that is music's job. To be unfair in an interesting way.'

'Unfair how?' I asked.

'All this 'we see you, we know your names',' he said. 'You make it sound like a shadowy cabal pulling strings, rather than hundreds of relatively dull men and women trying to keep the lights on without being lynched by whichever faction is howling loudest.'

'That is not how it feels on the receiving end,' I said.

'And that disconnect,' he said, 'is what keeps people like you in work. I do not begrudge you it.'

The second track began. I let it run. I was too conscious now of my own recorded voice in this room, caught before this conversation, before this house.

It felt like a version of me who had not yet smelt these curtains or seen these shelves of Hansard with Rupert's name on brass plaques.

Charlotte slipped out at some point, camera in hand. I saw the flash once in the doorway, catching the curve of her mother's hand on her father's sleeve, the way his head tipped towards mine as if we were already debating when we were just listening.

When the record clicked off, Rupert replaced it carefully in its sleeve, as if it were a document.

'Thank you,' he said. 'For trusting us with this.'

That was when I saw how Charlotte would shoot him – light from the lamp on the lines round his eyes, faint sheen on his forehead from wine and central heating and holding his selves in place.

'Would you walk with me, Daniel?' he said, standing. 'Just for a moment. There is a study where we can talk without upsetting the china.'

Shell shot me a look that translated as: ten minutes or I break in. I followed.

•

The study was smaller than I expected, cluttered rather than grand. Bookshelves ran from floor to ceiling, stuffed not only with Hansard, Burke and biographies of men in the same tie as Rupert, but detective novels, military histories, atlases. On the desk, a green-shaded lamp lit stacks of paper held with elastic bands. Photographs lined one wall – black-and-white shots of Labour leaders and Tory grandees, all shaking hands the same careful way, each framed like a hunting trophy.

Rupert poured something dark from a decanter into two small glasses.

'Port,' he said. 'It will either settle your stomach or finish you off. Either way, we will get honesty.'

I took a sip. It was sweet and heavy, sticking to my teeth.

'You intimidate me,' I said, before I could varnish it. 'Not in a boo-hiss way. In a you-know-how-these-rooms-work-and-I-do-not way.'

'Good,' he said. 'Fear is useful. So is admitting it. Most of my colleagues have never done the latter.'

He perched on the arm of a leather chair, not quite relaxed, not quite on parade.

'You are angry,' he said. 'I understand why. Your world has been upended by forces outside your control. People have lied to you, or not told you the whole truth. In that respect, we are not so different.'

'What is your excuse?' I asked.

‘In my case,’ he said, ‘the lies come shrink-wrapped as policy papers. We call something a community charge instead of a poll tax and pretend that changes the nature. We talk about incentivising work when we mean removing a safety net.’

He set his glass down, fingers tapping the stem.

‘You ask why we vote for things,’ he went on. ‘Because we believe – or choose to believe – that the alternative would be worse. Because the state cannot do everything without collapsing under its own weight. Because I have seen governments promise too much and deliver nothing. Chaos. Inflation. Empty shelves. The sort of thing that makes coups feel attractive.’

He looked at me.

‘You think we are afraid of you because you shout and march and throw paint,’ he said. ‘We are not. We have handled that since before you were born. What we fear is unworkability. Systems seizing. Courts that cannot process cases. Councils that cannot collect. The appearance of incompetence. That, more than moral argument, is what brings governments down.’

I watched him. Certain words soured in his mouth – unworkable, collapse, incompetence.

‘So if something looks manageable on paper,’ I said, ‘if the books balance, you do not much care who gets hurt at the margins.’

‘I would not put it that crudely,’ he said. ‘But yes, the numbers must add up. The centre must hold. My constituents – small business owners, pensioners, the mythical man in the middle – fear chaos more than they fear a little unfairness. They accept a degree of pain if they think it ends in stability.’

‘And if they stop accepting it?’ I said.

He smiled, thinly.

‘Then we have a problem,’ he said. ‘Not when you riot. That is containable. Messy for a weekend, then we sweep the glass and the tabloids have their pictures. The real problem is when decent, quiet people – the ones who pay their bills and tut at the news and vote out of habit – decide something is intolerable. When Mrs Jenkins on the corner, who has voted Conservative since Churchill, refuses to pay her charge. When the local vicar preaches about injustice instead of charity. When the queue outside the magistrates’ court is full of people who look like my brother, not caricatures from a cartoon.’

He stared into his glass.

‘You show me that,’ he said softly, ‘and I will show you a policy wobbling on the edge.’

I did not write any of this down at the time, but I never forgot it. Years later, when Charlotte and I stood on a street in Finchley with a camera and

a clipboard, I thought about unworkability and quiet respectables. Access and movement, married together: ordinary folk refusing to stay in their lanes, the gears seizing because the parts would not fit where they were supposed to.

‘You realise that sounds like instructions,’ I said.

‘Call it civic education,’ he replied. ‘If you did not work it out on your own, you are not as clever as Charlotte claims.’

There it was, tucked in the compliment – a small jab, a reminder that his daughter’s belief in me was another column in his ledger.

‘Do you worry,’ I said, ‘that she will end up on the other side of one of your votes?’

‘She already is,’ he said. ‘Have you met her friends?’ There was fondness in it, and exasperation. ‘I tell myself it is healthy. A family should be a small version of the country. If you cannot argue at the dinner table, there is no hope for Parliament.’

‘And when she photographs someone whose life has been wrecked by your decisions?’ I asked.

‘Then I hope she shows me the prints,’ he said. ‘And I hope I have the decency to feel uncomfortable. But I also hope she understands that governing is not the same as protesting. Sometimes you choose the least bad option and spend the rest of your career defending it.’

‘Do you ever admit you got it wrong?’ I said.

He looked as if I had asked whether he flew to work.

‘Not in public,’ he said. ‘That is suicide. In private? More than you would think. We keep lists in our heads of votes we regret. We just do not write them down.’

‘Maybe someone should,’ I said.

He studied me, then nodded once.

‘Perhaps,’ he said. ‘Now. I have spoken more frankly than is wise. You may tell your comrades the enemy is human. They can pin my face up and throw darts with a clear conscience.’

‘The enemy,’ I said slowly, ‘is not exactly you.’

‘Flattering,’ he said. ‘And inaccurate. I am part of a system you despise. Own it.’

‘The enemy,’ I said, feeling the words arrange themselves, ‘is the story you tell yourselves that lets you sleep. The one where the people who suffer are either faceless or guilty. If we can break that story, maybe the rest moves.’

He lifted his glass in a small salute, as if I had passed a test.

‘Then that is your job, Mr Ashcroft,’ he said. ‘Mine is to keep enough of the system running that we still have something to argue about.’

•

On my way back I ducked into the kitchen.

The air was warm, steamed windows, radio low with yet another bulletin about treaties. The cook – broad-shouldered woman in an apron – spooned gravy into a jug, movements practised. The housekeeper who had taken our coats dried glasses.

‘There you are,’ Shell said, perched on a stool by the back door, cigarette between her fingers, one leg tucked under. ‘I was about to organise a search party with napkins for flags.’

‘Got cornered,’ I said. ‘In an oak-panel confession box.’

‘How was His Lordship?’ she asked.

‘Human,’ I said. ‘Which is irritating.’

The cook snorted.

‘They usually are,’ she said. ‘Makes it harder to hate them while they are being a pain.’

‘Do you live in?’ I asked her. It felt wrong to pretend the food had appeared by magic.

‘God, no,’ she said. ‘Flat in the village. Kids at the comp. This is just where I perform miracles for the honourable gentleman and his lady wife. You lot are a nice change. How is the lamb?’

‘Perfect,’ I said. ‘My mam would want the recipe.’

‘Tell her it is butter and lies,’ she said. ‘That is what holds this place together.’

Mrs Dean – the housekeeper – passed me a slice of something from a tray.

‘You look like your blood sugar is falling,’ she said. ‘Eat before you keel over and we have to explain why there is a punk in the pantry.’

Shell devoured her slice in two bites.

‘You lot always watch,’ she said, licking crumbs from her thumb. ‘Every little drama.’

‘That is our job,’ Mrs Dean said. ‘We are the witnesses. We know whose shoes get left in the hall and who cries in the cloakroom. We know when there are cameras coming and when the good china comes out. We see the ladies practising their concerned faces in the mirror.’

‘You ever tempted to swap the wine for vinegar?’ Shell asked.

‘Only on Budget Day,’ the cook said.

We all laughed. For a moment it was just people in a warm room sharing a joke, not two sides of a class line borrowing each other's air.

'I grew up on a council estate,' Mrs Dean said suddenly. 'Dad was a postman. Mum did nights at the old folks' home. We watched Parliament on the telly and shouted. Now I iron the shirts that go on the blokes in the pictures. Funny old world, is it not?'

'It is,' I said. 'Do you think they listen? When people shout?'

She shrugged.

'Sometimes,' she said. 'If the right people are doing the shouting. That is the trick, love. Never mind the volume. It is who they recognise in the crowd that scares them.'

Something clicked into place at that. It was what Rupert had been saying, in more expensive words.

'Thanks,' I said.

'For the cake?' she asked.

'For the translation,' I said.

Shell slid off the stool and stubbed her cigarette in a saucer.

'Come on,' she said. 'Before Charlotte's mum decides we have ruined the silver by looking at it.'

•

On the train back to London the carriage was quieter. People dozed under coats or read paperbacks. The man opposite had *The Times* folded open on his lap, front page showing Reagan and Gorbachev again, headline using words like peace and era.

Charlotte leaned her head on the window, watching our reflections flicker over the black smear of countryside.

'I hate that house,' she said quietly. 'I love it too. Which is worse.'

'Your dad is not a monster,' Shell said. 'He is… I do not know. A very clever brick in a wall.'

'He is brilliant,' Charlotte said. 'And stubborn. He taught me to argue. He just did not expect me to use it on him.'

'He said something useful,' I said. 'By accident.'

'I doubt it was an accident,' she replied. 'He knows exactly what he is doing when he opens his mouth.'

I told them about the study, the way he had framed it. Not right and wrong, not rich and poor. Unworkable. Chaos. The quiet people at the magistrates' court

in good shoes and Sunday coats, saying no. Mrs Jenkins burning the council leaflet about the Community Charge for the local paper.

'He does not care about right or wrong,' I said. 'He cares about what looks unworkable. What frightens his own lot. So we show him that.'

Charlotte turned from the glass, eyes catching mine.

'Finchley,' she said.

'What?' Shell asked.

'Not his constituency,' Charlotte said. 'Hendon is Rupert's. Finchley is *hers* – Thatcher's. That is where her "own lot" live. All those Mrs Jenkinses who have always voted for her because she fixed the village hall roof and sent a wreath when their husbands died.'

'And if suddenly they are the ones at the front of the picture, not us,' I said, 'what then?'

'Then he has to choose,' she said. 'Between his story about responsibility and the faces he cannot file under troublemakers any more.'

Shell frowned.

'You are talking about using people,' she said.

'We are talking about listening to them,' I said. 'Taking their stories where they do the most damage. Like we do with miners and nurses and queers, except this time it is people Tory papers think look respectable. We do not write their lines. We give them a stage.'

'And if they do not want it?' Shell said. 'If they are happy to pay and tut at us from armchairs?'

'Then we keep doing what we are doing,' I said. 'But after tonight, I do not think they all are. We just have not met them yet.'

Charlotte pulled her knees up on the seat.

'I can get commissions in Finchley,' she said slowly. 'Local colour pieces. 'How ordinary voters feel about the new charge.' Editors love that. They think it is safe. They do not realise what they put in my hands when they send me there.'

'And the posh kids at the gigs,' I added. 'The ones in your world and ours. They have parents, uncles, godparents who are councillors, magistrates, association chairs. We get them listening in the right direction.'

Shell sighed.

'I wanted December for teaching kids to write angry carols,' she said. 'Instead I am going to end up running some cross-class intelligence operation, am I not?'

'You are very good at lists,' I said.

'Do not compliment me into a breakdown,' she replied, but there was a small smile.

Outside, the lights of the city started to string themselves along the horizon. In a few minutes we would pull into Paddington and be back in our world of cold flats, shared chips and late meetings under strip lights. The treaty would be on front pages tomorrow, telling everyone the big dangers were under control.

We knew better, even if we could not yet put it neatly. The danger was not just in the missiles being dismantled in some distant silo. It was in the calculations in rooms like Rupert's study. In the way fear of chaos could be turned into obedience. Into a quiet shrug when a neighbour went under.

Later, when people said no one could have foreseen the scale of the Poll Tax revolt, I thought of that evening – of port in cut glass, of a man in a tailored suit calmly admitting the shape of the thing that scared him.

We had time to build towards it. A few years, if we were lucky. Long enough to find the faces we needed in places like Finchley. Long enough to take the tales from kitchens and back doors and magistrates' waiting rooms and lay them out in photographs and songs.

Long enough, just, to make the story unworkable.

Chapter Fourteen – May 1988, London – SECTION 28 and Saints Rising

I was trying to decide whether egg or beans should go on the toast first when I saw the headline.

The *Standard* was open on someone else's table in the café – one of those copies left behind, folded to the inside page – but the words snagged in the corner of my eye and would not let go.

SECTION 28.

We had been talking about it for months – CLAUSE 28 on Shell's flyers, a threat made into a slogan. But there was something different about seeing it here, promoted into law, sitting between adverts for double glazing and second-hand cars.

'*Local authorities shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality… or promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a* ***pretended family relationship***.'

I read it again.

Pretended.

The knife in my hand dripped marmalade onto the table. I did not notice.

'You all right, mate?'

Someone from behind the counter. I blinked and forced my fingers to unclench.

'Yes. Sorry. Yes.'

I sat down without quite deciding to, still holding the knife, still staring at the page as if staring hard enough might force it to say something else. It did not. It said *pretended*.

I thought about Karen – sharp, dry Karen, who organised half the Furnace rotas with Gareth and who had told me once, laughing, that she would not be needing my matchmaking services because she had all the family she needed, thank you very much.

Pretended.

I thought about Mo, who ran the legal drop-in on Tuesday nights and barely spoke about herself, but who was there, solid and careful, when the SECTION 28 protests started to get nastier, telling people calmly what their rights were if the coppers came.

Pretended.

My hand tightened on the knife.

•

At The Furnace, Shell was already in the kitchen. Gareth sat at the table facing her, the same article spread out between them. Karen stood by the kettle, back to both of them, shoulders so still they might have been carved.

'Morning,' I said, unsure whether to speak at all.

Karen turned. Her eyes were red but she was not crying.

'Have you seen it?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Right.' She nodded once, sharply, like someone accepting a fight they had not wanted but would not walk away from. 'So. We organise.'

Shell pulled out a chair.

'Sit.'

I sat. Gareth slid the paper over. I did not need to read it again – the words were already burned into my head – but I did anyway, because it felt like the only way to believe it was real.

'It is real, is it not,' I said quietly. 'Law now.'

Shell nodded. ‘Royal Assent two days ago.’

Karen sat between us.

‘They cannot use it directly on us,’ she said. ‘We are not a school. We are not a council department. But it is not about what they can do on paper. It is about what they make people think is allowed.’

‘Like permission,’ Gareth said.

‘Exactly that,’ Karen said. ‘They can write it into their Act. But I have seen your breakfasts, I have heard your arguments, I know who makes this place work. This is not pretend. This is real. If they think a bit of legal window-dressing is going to scare people back into cupboards, they do not know who they have picked a fight with.’

Shell’s hand moved across the table and found Karen’s.

‘No,’ she said. ‘They do not.’

I looked at the three of them in that small kitchen that smelled of burnt toast, spilled tea and the faint ghost of yesterday’s samosas, and felt something shift inside my chest. Anger, yes. But something larger under it. Resolve.

‘What do we need?’ I asked.

•

No Gagging, they called it.

It started that same week: a meeting at The Furnace, packed to the walls, standing room only. Teachers, librarians, youth workers, LGSM comrades, a scattering of union people who had clocked the pattern before most. Someone had painted a banner overnight – EDUCATION NOT ERASURE – and hung it behind the stage.

Riz had set up by the door with a donations tin and a pile of handouts, taking names and numbers like it was a union list.

Shell stood at the front. She was not a natural speech-maker, not like I was. But she was steady, and when she spoke, people listened.

‘I am not going to pretend,’ she said – and there was a grim little ripple at the word – ‘that I know what it is like to be told your family is not real. That is not my fight to claim. But I do know what it is like to be called a liar by your own government. I know what it feels like when they say your experience does not count. When they dress up cruelty as concern. When they turn your neighbours against you by convincing them you are dangerous.’

The room was completely still.

‘SECTION 28 is not new tactics,’ she went on. ‘It is the same playbook they used on us during the strike. Tell people we were violent. Tell people we were the problem. Make it illegal to tell the truth. Hope fear does the rest.’

She looked out – at teachers, librarians, the young lad in the corner who was eighteen and shaking and trying very hard not to cry.

'So here is what we do,' Shell said. 'We do not pretend we are not here. We do not pretend this is not happening. We tell the truth. We look after each other. And we make enough noise that they cannot pretend we do not exist.'

The applause was not loud. It was something quieter. Something fiercer.

Afterwards, Karen found me by the tea urn.

'We need a song,' she said.

'What?'

'For Saturday. The march. We need something people can carry with them. Something that says what Shell just said, but shorter. Catchier. You know.'

'Karen, I cannot just—'

'Yes, you can.' She smiled – small, tired, completely certain. 'You have done it before. Do it again.'

•

I wrote it in three days.

Not wrote, exactly. It came in pieces: a line scribbled on the back of a flyer, a chorus murmured into my pocket recorder at two in the morning, a bridge that arrived fully formed while I was walking back from the chippy. By Thursday I had something close. By Friday it felt right.

'Pretend Family.'

The chorus was simple enough to learn on the move:

They can write it in their books,
They can write it in the law,
But we know what family looks like –
We have seen it all before.

The verses were sharper, angrier, specific:

You can strike our name from the register,
You can tell our kids to look away,
But you cannot make us vanish,
And you cannot make us stay afraid.

I played it for Shell and Karen that night, just the three of us in The Furnace after everyone else had gone. Karen cried. Shell did not, but her hand stayed on Karen's shoulder the whole time.

'It is good,' Karen said.

'It is not enough,' I said.

‘It is exactly enough,’ Shell said. ‘Now we get it out.’

•

We recorded it on Saturday morning. Not in a real studio – we could not afford that – but Jules knew someone in Hackney with a four-track above a carpet warehouse. The room smelled of dust and glue and something vaguely chemical, but the sound was clean enough.

Jules played guitar. I sang. Gareth, who turned up uninvited but with a tambourine, added percussion. We did three takes. The second one was the one.

By lunchtime we had thirty tapes dubbed and labelled. By the time the first coaches started arriving for the march, we had a hundred.

•

The march was loud and messy and enormous. Banners everywhere – rainbow flags, union colours, hand-painted signs: MY FAMILY IS NOT YOUR WEAPON; LOVE IS NOT A PRETENCE; TEACHERS AGAINST THE GAG. Someone had a sound system on wheels, the kind you usually saw at football matches, and they played everything from Bronski Beat and The Communards to, eventually, a crackly copy of my new song.

I stood at the edge of the crowd, watching.

People were singing along. Not many – not yet – but some. A group of students near the front had already learned the chorus and were chanting it like a football song. A teacher I did not recognise was writing the lyrics down in a notebook.

Charlotte appeared beside me, camera in hand.

‘You all right?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, though my throat ached. ‘Do you think it will change anything?’

She lowered the camera and looked properly.

‘I think it already has,’ she said.

She nodded towards a woman near the back – middle-aged, grey-haired, holding a banner that said TEACHER. MOTHER. NOT YOUR SCAPEGOAT.

‘Her,’ Charlotte said. ‘The students with the notebook. That lad over there filming on his mum’s camcorder. They are going to take this home. They are going to play it in classrooms, in unions, in their kitchens. Some kid twenty years from now is going to write a dissertation about how a song written in a room above a carpet warehouse ended up being sung in council chambers and school halls and places you do not even know exist.’

I looked at her.

‘You are taking notes again,’ I said.

‘Always.’ She smiled – small, tired, certain. ‘Someone has to. For the researchers. For the grandchildren. For the kid who wants to know how we got from here to wherever we end up.’

She raised the camera again, took a shot, lowered it.

‘Besides,’ she added. ‘You lot never write anything down.’

‘Shell does.’

‘Shell writes lists. I write context.’

I laughed despite myself.

•

By the time we got back to The Furnace that night, my voice was gone and my legs felt like jelly. Someone had made stew. Someone else had brought crisps. The room was full of people too tired to stand but too wired to go home.

Karen stood by the noticeboard, pinning up photos from the march. Gareth sat beside her, nursing a cup of tea that had gone cold.

Shell appeared at my shoulder.

‘You look knackered,’ she said.

‘I am knackered.’

She smiled. ‘Good day, though.’

‘Yes.’ I looked round the room – at banners, tired faces, the stack of tapes still by the door waiting to be pressed into hands. ‘Good day.’

She nudged my shoulder.

‘They thought SECTION 28 would scare everyone back into corners,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘But look at this.’ She gestured. ‘Does this look like corners to you?’

I smiled.

‘No,’ I said. ‘It looks like they wired us together.’

•

Later, in my flat, I sat at the little desk and pulled out the notebook I had started keeping – not lyrics this time, not exactly. Something closer to a map. Names. Connections. Ideas.

At the top of a fresh page I wrote: Five Headings.

Underneath:

1. Noise – the racket we make, songs and chants and kids who refuse to shut up.

2. Base – rooms like this, strike kitchens and warehouses turned into furnaces.
3. Movement – the routes between us, marches, coach lists, phone trees, the way news jumps boroughs overnight.
4. Access – bridges into their spaces, from a borrowed press pass to a mate at the council switchboard.
5. Disruption – all the ways we throw grit in their smooth little stories so the machine judders instead of gliding.

I stared at the list for a long time. The words themselves were not new – Shell and I had written them down at Mam's kitchen table three years ago, back when we were trying to name the shapes of what we were already doing. But now they felt sharper, more tested. What had been a scribbled attempt at pattern recognition in March 1985 was starting to look like a framework that worked across campaigns, across years.

At the bottom of the page I added another line.

SECTION 28 was meant to divide us. On a good day, it looks like they wired us together instead.

I closed the notebook, turned off the light and went to bed. Tomorrow there would be more work. There always was.

But that night, for the first time in a while, I felt like we were winning, if only on paper.

Chapter Fifteen – April 1989, Leeds and London – Hillsborough and the Next Front

The motorway up to Leeds felt like any other spring run. Grey sky, patches of yellow gorse on the embankments, service stations that all smelled the same. We were in the back of a borrowed Transit, knees up under our chins, amps and drum cases rattling every time the driver hit a pothole he swore had not been there last week.

Riz had the radio balanced on his knees, long aerial stretched up between the seats. It was a Saturday, so the football coverage was wall to wall. Half the band had scarves tied to their wrists or stuffed in coat pockets – not for Leeds or Forest or Liverpool specifically, just from the habit of lads who had grown up with grounds as their cathedrals.

'You realise if this festival overruns we are missing the second half,' Tommy said.

'Consider it spiritual discipline,' Alex replied. 'Abstaining for political reasons.'

'We are not boycotting football,' I said. 'We are boycotting the Premier League, which has not been invented yet. Keep up.'

We were due on mid-afternoon at a civic anti-racism and anti-Poll Tax event, the sort of broad-front business The Furnace loved. Bands, speakers, stalls, leaflets. The Scots had promised to send someone down to talk about what was already hitting them. It felt like reconnaissance.

We rolled into Leeds just after kick-off at Hillsborough. The streets round the venue were quieter than I had expected. Most of the noise seemed to be coming from pubs with televisions. As we lugged gear through the side door of the town hall, the caretaker shook his head.

'Big match,' he said. 'You will be competing with it.'

'We are used to competing with bigger things than that,' I said, resting the flight case on my foot. 'Thatcher, for a start.'

He snorted.

'Good luck, lad,' he said. 'You will need more than loud guitars for that one.'

We had just about finished the most half-hearted soundcheck in history when someone stuck their head round the door.

'You lot need to see this,' the promoter said. 'Come to the bar.'

•

The bar was already full but not in the way we were used to. No gig punters yet, just men and women in shirtsleeves and jackets pressed shoulder to shoulder, all facing the television in the corner. The usual low roar of chat had dropped. You could hear the commentary clearly over the clink of glasses.

The image on the screen did not look like a football match at first glance. The pitch was mostly covered in people, and not in any celebratory way. One pen behind the goal was a mass of bodies pressed up against fencing. Police in fluorescent jackets ran along the touchline, waving frantically. The sound from the crowd came through the speakers as a single strained note.

'What has happened?' I asked no one in particular.

'Cup semi,' said a bloke with a red scarf looped round his wrist, eyes fixed. 'Liverpool–Forest. They opened the gates or something. Too many in the Leppings Lane end. They are saying overcrowding.'

On screen, the camera cut from the packed terrace to fans tearing up advertising hoardings, passing them overhead to make makeshift stretchers. A man in a Liverpool shirt pumped at someone's chest, hands moving in sharp, desperate bursts. Another held a woman's hand while a police officer bent over her, his face caught somewhere between training and panic.

'Jesus,' Alex murmured. 'They are using pitchside as triage.'

The commentator stumbled. The familiar Saturday voice stripped of its usual patter.

‘We have been told there have been some injuries… possibly more serious than that… the situation is still unclear…’

It was never unclear if you could see. There was nothing unclear about people’s faces when they knew they were losing someone they loved on a piece of grass that was supposed to be for celebration.

The bloke in the red scarf had stopped blinking. His hand had closed round the edge of the bar so hard his knuckles were white.

‘You all right, mate?’ I said, because I did not know what else to say.

He did not look at me. His voice came from somewhere far away.

‘I was there last year,’ he said. ‘Same pen. You could not move your arms. We said it was a death trap. We said.’

He swallowed.

‘They laughed,’ he added. ‘Said if you did not like it you could stay home.’

On screen, they were carrying bodies now. Some covered, some not.

‘I cannot watch this,’ Tommy said suddenly, turning away, hand over his mouth.

‘Yes you can,’ I said quietly. ‘We have to. They will tell this back to us wrong otherwise.’

He made a strangled sound that might have been agreement.

We stayed until the commentator’s voice cracked and they cut back to the studio, where men in suits tried to talk about “order” and “control” and “regrettable scenes”. Somebody turned the set off with more force than necessary. The moment the screen went black, the bar felt smaller.

‘What now?’ the promoter asked. ‘Do we carry on?’

The man with the red scarf finally looked up. His eyes were wet, but anger sat under it.

‘What do you think?’ he said. ‘You cannot sing that away. But you can talk about it.’

•

The festival did not cancel. It shifted. Instead of opening with a cheery ska band, they brought forward one of the local speakers – a Hillsborough survivor who had driven from Sheffield as soon as he heard.

He was not the sort of “speaker” we usually had. No prepared notes, no jokes, no slogans. Early thirties, jeans, jacket, scarf still knotted. Hands that would not behave. He gripped the mic with one and kept dropping the other to clench it at his side, as if trying to remember his body went below the throat.

‘I am not here as an organiser,’ he said, voice shaking. ‘I am here because I stood in a pen at that ground and felt men’s ribs against my back. I am here because my mate Paul did not make it and I do not know yet whether he is one of them or in a hospital. I am here because on the way over I stopped for petrol and the radio was already talking about drunken fans and ticketless louts.’

He swallowed hard.

‘We queued for hours,’ he said. ‘We went where they told us. It was their job to keep us safe. They built cages and then blamed us when we could not breathe in them. Remember that when you read your papers tomorrow.’

He pointed vaguely in the direction of everywhere.

‘They did it to the miners at Orgreave,’ he said. ‘They will do it to anyone who scares them. Football fans, black lads, queers, pickets. Anyone who makes them feel outnumbered. They have always got a story ready that makes us the problem.’

My stomach lurched. Two memories tried to sit in the same space – horses at Orgreave; footage of police and stewards at Hillsborough trying to haul kids over fences. The metal looked the same.

‘Look after each other,’ he finished hoarsely. ‘Do not let them divide you. And if you were there and you are having… pictures you cannot shake, talk to someone. Do not swallow it. It will swallow you.’

The applause was not a cheer. More like a collective decision to send something back because we had nothing else.

When our turn came, I walked to the mic with my setlist crumpled in my hand. The songs about the strike suddenly felt small and tidy compared to what was still unfolding up the motorway.

‘We are not going to pretend we can follow that,’ I said. ‘We are Glass Saints, from London. We were meant to shout about the Poll Tax and the usual. We still will. But first—’

I glanced at the page, crossed out two titles, wrote HILLSBOROUGH in the margin like naming the wound would help.

‘First I just want to say,’ I went on, ‘if you read tomorrow that people died in Sheffield because they were drunk or stupid or violent, that is a lie. We have seen this film. They said the miners attacked first at Orgreave. I saw the footage. I heard the stories. I know who was swinging batons and who was holding placards.’

I could feel my voice thinning, that tightness where crying and shouting occupy the same space.

‘They build cages then blame the people inside,’ I said. ‘They crowd stadiums with fences then talk about hooligans. Next year they will bring in a tax that

lands on every one of us and call it fair. When people say no, they will call us scroungers, yobs, vandals. Remember this feeling. Remember who did what today. It is going to matter.'

We played like we were trying to scrub something off the air. The guitars were sharper, the drums more relentless. When I hit the line about "names thrown up on the back page wall", it felt less like a metaphor than a threat.

Afterwards, the man with the red scarf came over. We stood at the side of the hall, half in shadow.

'You from Liverpool?' he asked.

'Yorkshire,' I said. 'Coalfield, not council houses by the Mersey.'

'Same difference,' he said. 'They will treat you like scum when it suits.'

He took a breath.

'What you said,' he added. 'About the tax. We have already got it, you know. In Scotland. They tried it on us first. Like we were test rats.'

'I have heard,' I said. 'We have some of your lot coming down soon. The Furnace. Big concrete box with a heart in it.'

His mouth twitched.

'Good,' he said. 'You will need us. We will need you. That wall they build between 'respectable taxpayers' and 'rabble'? That is coming down whether they like it or not.'

He looked like he might say more, then stopped.

'Anyway,' he said. 'Thanks for saying it. About the cages.'

He walked away before I could answer.

That night, in the squat we were kipping in, I dreamt I was in the pen at Hillsborough and on the field at Orgreave at the same time. The fences were the same metal. The shouting sounded identical.

•

Back in London, the papers hit the doormat like accusations.

'THE TRUTH,' screamed one front page over a photo of a man stepping over bodies. Underneath, a vomit of claims about drunk fans urinating on police, robbing the dead, fighting each other. Anonymous 'sources' and statements presented as gospel. No mention of overcrowding or locked exits. Nothing about cages.

I stood at the bar in The Furnace with three papers laid out: the tabloid filth, a broadsheet politely parroting police lines, and one solitary column in the *Guardian* asking careful questions about numbers, gates, crowd control.

Charlotte had ringed certain phrases in biro – little angry circles round “allegedly drunken” and “it is understood that”.

‘This is exactly what they did with us,’ Shell said, leaning on her elbow. ‘Smear first, investigate later. By the time anybody gets near the truth, the damage is done. People have picked a side.’

She flicked the tabloid with two fingers as if it were something rotten.

‘They called us thugs and terrorists at Orgreave,’ she said. ‘Now it is football fans. Next year it will be anybody who does not pay this tax.’

Riz joined us, wiping photocopier toner off his fingers.

‘Early warning from Dundee,’ he said. ‘Fax just came. Bills have barely landed and already folk are talking about summary warrants, sheriff officers, all this “diligence” stuff. Whole streets out blocking them. It is kicking off up there already.’

He dropped a sheaf of paper on the bar. The text was smudged but legible: community charge, non-payment, summary warrant, sheriff officer. Words that meant nothing to most English ears yet. They would.

‘Read,’ he said. ‘It is all there. How they are doing it. Who is fighting back. We have been saying the Poll Tax is the next front. This puts it in ink.’

I scanned the leaflet. The language was plain, almost blunt. No rhetoric. Just sentences like: If we all refuse, they cannot jail us all. If we stand together, they cannot take our goods.

‘They are writing their own defence packs,’ Shell said, impressed. ‘We were still working out banners at that point in the strike.’

Charlotte came in from the office, camera bag over one shoulder, ink from the fax on the other.

‘Picture desks do not want Hillsborough from my angle,’ she said, sinking onto a stool. ‘They want ‘fans’ climbing fences, not police waving people back. They want crying women and ‘our brave boys’ doing their best. Anything that matches the headline.’

‘Surprised?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said, almost angrily. ‘I thought after Orgreave they would be more careful. I thought… I do not know what I thought. That people had learned the first story is always the state’s.’

She rubbed her eyes.

‘Then the editor says, ‘we must not inflame things, Charlotte, families are grieving’,’ she added. ‘As if telling the truth is the same as throwing petrol.’

Riz poured her tea and slid it across.

‘So we do what we always do,’ he said. ‘We tell it ourselves. We get the Scottish stuff out. We put Hillsborough next to Orgreave next to Poll Tax leaflets and say: see the pattern.’

‘We have not got wall space for a pattern that big,’ Shell muttered, already reaching for drawing pins.

•

The Scots arrived on a damp evening in late April, a small delegation who looked like they had walked out of a John Byrne painting: duffel coats, chewed biro ends, eyes mixing mischief with fury.

There were four: Mags, who did most of the talking and had hair like a battle standard; Dougie, quiet, glasses, notebook always open; Iain, who laughed too loud until Mags said ‘serious now’; and Ailsa, who wore a CND badge next to her anti-Poll Tax one and had a knack for slipping into the kitchen and washing up without being told.

They had come down on a night coach with sandwiches, flasks and a carrier bag full of leaflets. When we sat them at a table in The Furnace café, they emptied it in a colourful drift: photocopies, cartoons, mock poll tax bills with WE WILL NOT PAY stamped in red.

‘It is not theory now,’ Mags said, wrapping her hands round a mug that actually smelled of decent coffee. ‘We have got the thing. Brown envelopes, sheriff officers, arrest warrants. People you would never see at a demo in their lives are furious. Wee old wifies, shop owners. You name it.’

‘Who is refusing?’ Shell asked.

‘Everybody,’ Mags said, with unhidden satisfaction. ‘Well, not everybody. You have got your cowards and your ‘we must pay our way’ brigade. But there are schemes where ninety per cent have said not a penny. Councils are panicking. Sheriffs are drowning. We had a day last week where a hundred cases were due in one court and they postponed the lot.’

Dougie pushed his glasses up his nose.

‘We are learning,’ he said. ‘How to pack a court so full of non-payers they cannot process anyone. How to surround a van without giving them an excuse to call it a riot. It is a steep curve, but we are climbing.’

Something familiar unfolded in my chest at that: a version of the feeling I had had watching lads at Orgreave dig in after each charge, of miners walking back to work with banners raised a year later. Except this time there was also opportunity. Not just defence. Strategy.

‘And the papers?’ I asked. ‘What are they calling you?’

Mags rolled her eyes.

‘Irresponsible, unpatriotic, selfish,’ she said. ‘Apparently by not paying the poll tax we are depriving kittens and pensioners of vital services. Funny how they never showed that much concern for kittens and pensioners when they were closing everything.’

She leaned in.

‘They will do the same to you,’ she said. ‘Down here. As soon as folk start saying no. They will pick the worst-looking marchers and make them the story. They will talk about vandalism and louts and forget the single mothers and grannies. So think ahead. About how you look. Who is at the front. Who speaks.’

‘Already on it,’ Shell said under her breath.

Riz scribbled on his pad.

‘Coach grid,’ he muttered. ‘Stewards. Briefings. Mix of faces.’

It did not have a name yet. But sitting there with whisky someone had produced in chipped mugs, listening to Mags explain how they had turned sheriff’s vans back with bodies and refusal, I could see it starting to grow like a photograph in developer.

Ailsa pulled out a small cassette.

‘Also,’ she said quietly, sliding it over, ‘we recorded a wee tape. Talking through what we did at one warrant sale. Dodgy sound, but you get the idea. Thought you might play it down here.’

On the label, in her neat hand: DUNDEE DOORSTEP – SHERIFF GOES HOME.

‘Tapes again,’ I said. ‘Feels like coming full circle.’

‘We learned from you,’ she said. ‘From Coalface. From your stuff about Orgreave. Do not get modest now.’

We listened that night over the PA in the hall. The sound was rough – wind, voices peaking when people shouted – but the bones were clear. Sheriff reading names, voice formal and bored. Locals answering back, calm and firm. A car horn as signal. Someone calling, ‘We are all on the same side here, you do not have to do this job.’ Applause when the van door shut and the engine revved in retreat, not advance.

When it clicked off there was a moment of silence. Then the tenants’ association woman let out a low whistle.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘They have got some nerve up there.’

‘No more than you,’ Shell said. ‘You just have not had chance yet.’

I looked round. Miners’ wives, queer kids, dockers, nurses, students, the café family, Scottish comrades who looked knackered and alive. Hillsborough still

sat like a stone in my stomach. But round it, over it, was something else: the sense we were being handed a map from the future.

'You realise what this is,' I said to Charlotte later, when most people had gone and she was standing on a chair photographing the notices we had pinned – Poll Tax leaflets, Hillsborough clippings, Orgreave shots, Dundee cartoons.

'A wall of depressing paper,' she said.

'A pattern,' I said. 'Stage directions.'

'For who?' she asked.

'For us,' I said. 'For them.' I nodded, vaguely, at the invisible them – MPs, editors, anyone who had ever called themselves the decent majority while sitting on someone's neck. 'Hillsborough shows us how they will lie. Scotland shows us how to jam their systems. Poll Tax is where it meets.'

She tilted her head.

'You know none of this will make the six o'clock news,' she said. 'They will show riots, not warrant sales. Burning cars, not knitting on a coach.'

'That is why we have to remember,' I said. 'And record. Not just our bruises but their tells. When they flinch. What they fear. That bloke in Leeds, Rupert in his study, these four from Dundee. It is all connected.'

She smirked.

'You are going to give it a name,' she said. 'You always do.'

'Not yet,' I said. 'Too soon. For now it is just the bit on the tape I cannot forget.'

Later, when Keira sat at my table in 2025 with her notebook and questions, I would draw one of my little diagrams and label this Hillsborough / Scotland: the day the pattern snapped into focus – state lies, class blame and a tax that would finally make quiet people step into frame. In 1989, all I knew was my jaw ached from clenching and my hand hurt from writing.

We went home that night with pockets full of Scottish leaflets and heads full of images from a ground three hours up the road. Behind my eyes, as sleep finally dragged at me, I saw fences pulled down, not built. I saw sheriff officers with hands up, backed away by neighbours. I saw, for a split second, a Prime Minister at the dispatch box whose voice was not the last word any more.

I could not prove any of that would happen. But I knew, as surely as I had known anything, that Hillsborough had changed something. Not because the government would grow a conscience, but because too many had watched ordinary fans crushed and been told it was their fault. That kind of lie leaves a mark.

Next time they tried to slap “enemy within” on a crowd, there were going to be more of us ready to say: we have heard this song. And we have brought our own recording equipment.

Chapter Sixteen – November 1989, London and Berlin – Wall Falls, Finchley Rises

The night the Wall came down, the telly in The Furnace looked like it was about to slide off its bracket.

We had never really meant the bar to have a television. It had arrived one week from some union office clear-out, a heavy old thing with rounded corners and fake-wood casing, and we had stuck it up on a shelf near the optics so we could keep an eye on the news when something kicked off. Most of the time it showed snooker or regional weather with the sound turned off. That Thursday in November it had a crowd as if the Clash themselves were playing above the bar.

‘They are actually letting them through,’ Alex muttered, elbows braced on the counter, eyes not moving.

On the screen people climbed the top of a concrete wall I had only ever seen in photographs, swinging their legs over as if it were the low fence round a back garden. Men with sledgehammers chipped away at the surface, bits of grey flying like chunks of dried mud. Someone had a champagne bottle. Someone else had a spray can. There were security police hanging around at the checkpoints, but they were just watching, their posture all wrong for proper repression.

‘It is a trick,’ someone behind us said. ‘They will roll tanks in any minute.’

Shell shushed him. ‘Just let it be what it is for a minute, will you?’

Her forearms were folded on the counter, a bar towel bunched under her hands. Her hair had grown out, softer than the tight crop she had had when I had first come to London, and there were faint lines at the corners of her eyes that had not been there before. Years of rota charts and worrying had etched themselves into her face, but just then she looked young again, gaze fixed on the images from Berlin.

The bar smelt of spilt beer and cheap aftershave, of curry from the fundraiser in the back room and cloves from the roll-ups someone had brought. Every seat was taken; people were perched on stools, on crates, on the windowsills. Kids from the queer youth group were cross-legged on the floor under the dartboard; old trade unionists leaned on walking sticks and pint glasses. The jukebox was silent for once. All the noise was human: breath, muttered commentary, the occasional swear word when the camera cut away at the wrong moment.

‘Look at them,’ Charlotte said, half to herself.

She had climbed on the lower shelf under the optics so she could get a better angle, camera strap looped round her wrist just in case. The television light flickered over her face, blue-grey, picking out the cheekbones. The BBC commentator was saying something about history in the making, East Germans crossing into the West for the first time, checkpoints "overwhelmed by numbers".

'Imagine being that lad,' I said, nodding at a young man in a wool coat with a guitar case on his back, standing on the wall itself, hands lifted. 'One minute you are in a dingy flat in the East, moaning about work, next minute you are part of… whatever this is.'

'Watch how they tell it,' Charlotte said. 'Forty-five minutes ago they were calling them 'citizens fleeing to freedom'. Give it a week and they will be talking about 'a flood' and 'pressure on housing stock'.'

I grinned, though my stomach felt strange. 'You never relax, do you?'

'You taught me not to.' She elbowed me gently. 'Enemy within, remember?'

On the screen, a young woman hugged a stranger so hard his glasses fell off. At the bottom of the picture, in that neat BBC font, the caption said: LIVE – BERLIN.

'Christ,' whispered one of the older men from the printshop, his hand shaking just slightly on his glass. 'Never thought I would live to see it. Iron curtain, my arse.'

Riz, wedged in beside the pinball machine, raised his voice. 'Right, everybody. Official poll. Who thinks this means Thatcher is done for?'

A few arms shot up. A few stayed firmly down. Most people glanced sideways, weighing the question like a bet on a horse that might have its leg shot out at the first fence.

'If they can pull bricks out of that, we can pull votes out from under her,' one of the Scottish lads said, already half drunk. 'Mark my words.'

'You are mixing metaphors again,' Shell told him, but she smiled.

Someone passed a tray of samosas round. It bumped into my shoulder, the smell of pastry and spiced potatoes cutting through the minor-key drone of the news theme. I took one automatically, burning my fingers, eyes still fixed on that absurd, joyous line of people in Berlin.

The camera cut to a studio, then to some British politician talking about "the triumph of our values". The room groaned in unison.

'Oh, here we go,' Alex said. 'Every time something good happens, a Tory finds a way to make it a hymn to the market.'

'Should put a swear box under the telly,' Shell said. 'Every time one of them says 'freedom' we would have enough to fix the boiler.'

The coverage rolled on. Clips repeated. A series of experts explained, in measured tones, why this did not mean everything would change overnight. None of it mattered. The important thing was the concrete and the hammers, the way the border guards had simply stepped back.

I felt that step-back in my chest. A regime, in my head, had always meant tanks and men in peaked caps and files in grey metal cabinets. Here it seemed to come down to a handful of men deciding they were not going to shoot their neighbours.

If they can do that, I thought, someone in Finchley can decide not to back the poll tax.

The idea slid into place as smoothly as a cassette into a Walkman. In twenty-five years' time I would tell Keira it was one of my fingerprints, that night. Not the cheering crowd on the wall, but the moment in a smoky London bar when my brain went: right, if cracks exist, you find the bit that is already under strain and give it a nudge.

'You are thinking,' Charlotte said quietly, as the BBC cut to shots of people dancing on the top of the wall. 'I can tell. Your jaw is doing that thing.'

'What thing?'

She mimed clenching her jaw. 'That thing. What is going on in there?'

I wiped my hands on a bar towel, more to buy time than because they needed wiping. 'I am thinking,' I said slowly, 'that if walls can fall, iron ladies cannot be as untouchable as they like to pretend.'

Shell snorted. 'She is not going to resign because a bunch of Berliners got happy with a chisel, Danny.'

'I know.' I stared at the screen. 'But those lads on the wall? They were not thinking about NATO or five-year plans. They were thinking about seeing their cousins again. Getting oranges in the shops. Staying out past eleven without dear leader breathing down their necks. This lot' – I jerked my head towards the politicians on the screen – 'will talk about it as some great ideological victory, but it is all concrete in the end. Concrete and paperwork. People can chip through both.'

Shell leaned back against the optics, watching me.

'Go on then,' she said. 'Translate that to Finchley.'

I swallowed the last bit of samosa. 'We have been talking faces, have we not? Faces Rupert Haversham and his mates cannot ignore. Maybe this is the moment. While everyone is waffling about freedom, we show them what their freedom looks like in Thatcher's own back yard. Finchley. Rupert's patch is Hendon, but he knows how to get things in front of the right eyes.'

Charlotte's eyes narrowed, interested. 'Finchley Faces.'

She had written the phrase in her notebook on the way back from her parents' place, after that strange dinner with the cutlery and the Latin motto. We had been kicking it around ever since – a portfolio, we thought, of people in Finchley who had never been near a picket line and still found themselves knotted up in poll tax bills and arrears letters. Not radicals. Not the usual suspects. Curtains-and-garden folk whose bins got collected on time and whose kids wore blazers.

'It makes sense,' I said. 'The poll tax is her big project. Everyone from the hairdresser to the vicar's wife has to register. That is the weak point. You can dodge a scandal about a coalfield if you live in Surrey. It is harder to dodge a tax bill with your name on it.'

'You are suggesting we knock on doors in Finchley and ask people to slag off the Prime Minister to a camera,' Shell said. 'Bold.'

'We do not ask them to slag off anyone,' Charlotte said. Her voice had gone professional, that tone she used when she was talking to picture editors or recalcitrant printers. 'We ask them to tell us what is happening. How much. How often. What they had to cut back on. Then we show that, account by account.'

'And we make sure they are the right sort of accounts,' I added. 'The kind that keep Rupert awake at three in the morning. Pensioners. Shopkeepers. People who have voted Conservative since Churchill and thought that meant being taken care of. Not anarchists in Doc Martens.'

'Oi,' Alex said. 'Watch it.'

'You know what I mean.' I flicked a beer mat at him. 'We are already written off. They need to see their own reflected back at them.'

The footage from Berlin looped again. This time the BBC had found a shot of a young woman crying and laughing at the same time, clutching a paper bag to her chest. The commentator said something tired about "pent-up emotion".

'She will be terrified as well,' a voice said from the doorway. 'Do not forget that.'

We turned. Katja stood in the archway between the bar and the corridor, coat still buttoned up to her throat, hair damp from the drizzle outside. I had seen her around The Furnace before at exhibitions and meetings – a printmaker, I thought, or some sort of graphic designer. She had done a poster for one of our gigs, a stark black-and-red thing that Shell had put up in the office.

Charlotte's face lit. 'You saw it?'

'Everyone saw it,' Katja said. 'You could not cross the road without being dragged into someone's living room. I missed my bus because I got stuck behind three separate television sets.'

Her voice still carried the rhythms of German, flattened by a couple of years in London. She stepped closer to the bar, eyes on the screen.

‘You are from the West,’ Alex said, realising he had never actually asked.

‘East,’ she said absently. ‘I came over in ’87. Scholarship. Stayed.’ She shrugged one shoulder. ‘No one sensible goes back when they have a choice.’

On the screen the crowd in Berlin chanted something we could not quite hear. The camera panned over graffiti: words in German, English, French.

‘So?’ Shell asked softly. ‘How does it feel?’

Katja pulled off her gloves with short, sharp tugs. For a moment I thought she was going to cry. Instead she let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh.

‘Like I have lost a country and got my family back on the same night,’ she said. ‘Like I should be there, but I am here. Like I am watching a home video of strangers.’

We were quiet. Every now and then you get handed a sentence that does not need anyone piling commentary on top.

‘My mother will be furious,’ Katja went on. ‘She always said the Party would last forever, that I was foolish not to come back after the scholarship. My little brother will probably be in the West by tomorrow pretending he never liked Lenin. And me…’ She spread her hands. ‘I am here. Drawing posters in Hackney. Making prints about coal and tape decks while the world turns over.’

‘Those prints matter,’ Shell said, with a firmness that sounded like she was telling herself as much as anyone.

Katja gave her a faint smile. ‘Maybe. Maybe not. It is strange. All those years our teachers told us the Wall was the permanent fact, the sky we lived under, and then –’ She nodded at the screen, where another slab of concrete was being carried away like a trophy. ‘It turns out to be plasterboard. Makes you wonder what else is less solid than it pretends.’

‘Poll tax,’ I said, before I could stop myself.

Katja’s mouth twisted. ‘You and your poll tax.’

‘It is all the same machine,’ I said. ‘Different cogs. Our bit of the wall is a letter with a red stamp telling you to pay what you cannot afford, and a line in Hansard where a man in a suit says it is the only fair way. If people like you can decide not to go back, people like Rupert Haversham can decide this experiment is not worth their seat.’

‘Which people like me?’ Katja asked dryly. ‘East Germans or Hackney poster designers?’

‘Both,’ I said. ‘Everyone who can see the cracks from the inside.’

She shook her head, but there was a glint in her eye now. ‘You are very sure of your metaphors, Ashcroft.’

‘I grew up under ground,’ I said. ‘You get good at spotting where the roof might fall.’

The room laughed, the spell broken, just enough. People drifted away to the toilets, to the back room, to the smoking area by the fire door. The telly kept showing Berlin, different angles on the same story. By midnight, the images were starting to blur – not because they were any less extraordinary, but because the numbness of tiredness was creeping in.

Shell topped up the teapot and set it down on the bar with a clink. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘If we are going to change the world on the back of this, can we at least do it sitting down?’

We ended up at the big table by the flyers board, the one that usually held toddlers’ crayons and leftover minutes from meetings. Tonight it held a road atlas of London opened at North, a pile of pizza boxes, a sheaf of electoral roll photocopies Shell had begged from a sympathetic council worker, and Charlotte’s notebooks.

‘So,’ Charlotte said, pulling out a fresh page and writing FINCHLEY FACES at the top in neat black capitals. ‘Let us map this properly.’

Riz slid a pepperoni slice onto my plate. ‘I thought you lot already had a plan.’

‘We had a slogan,’ I said. ‘Now we need the scaffolding.’

We spread the Finchley map out, pinning the corners under pint glasses. It was smaller than the London I carried in my head – just a patch of suburbia at the top of the Northern Line. Little green blobs for parks, yellow for main roads. The sort of place my mum would have approved of if she had ever made it down to see it. Safe. Respectable.

‘Right,’ Shell said. ‘Who have we got?’

Out came the list. The union contacts who had cousins in Finchley. The Women Against Pit Closures lady who had moved south for her husband’s job. The church group Shell had met at a conference, the bloke at the CAB who had “clients all over the place, love”. Each name got an initial on the map with Charlotte’s thumbnail pressing down.

‘We are not writing ‘organiser’ or ‘activist’ next to any of these,’ I said. ‘We are writing ‘housewife’, ‘retired’, ‘small business owner’.’

‘We are not writing any of that next to them either,’ Shell said. ‘This goes nowhere near a police kettle.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I am thinking ahead. For when it lands on Rupert’s desk.’

She shot me a look. ‘You are very sure it will.’

I met her eyes. ‘If you aim low, you will hit low. I am done being grateful just to get a letter in the New Statesman.’

Charlotte gave a small, fierce nod. ‘We do not even need him to admit anything. We just need him to feel that sick little twist in his stomach when he sees Mrs So-and-So who has always voted blue saying, ‘I cannot pay this, Mr Haversham, and I thought you were on our side.’ ’

‘You think he will care?’ Riz asked. There was an edge to it, but softer than the night he had walked out over the Finchley dinner. We had not talked about it since – not directly – but I had noticed him watching me more carefully, as if checking for signs of rot.

‘He will care if he thinks she represents five hundred people in his constituency,’ Charlotte said. ‘That is the calculus. Do not look at me like that, Shell, I am not defending it. I am telling you how their minds work.’

Riz was quiet for a moment, then shrugged. ‘Fine. But if we are going to play their game, we play it our way. Not dinners and port and making nice. We put the faces in front of him and let them do the work.’

‘That is the plan,’ I said. ‘No schmoozing. Just evidence.’

He met my eyes, and something passed between us – not quite forgiveness, but a truce. We were still arguing about the route, but at least we were walking in the same direction.

Katja had pulled a chair up at the corner of the table, arms folded, watching us with that same mixture of amusement and sadness.

‘Where do you fit in?’ I asked her.

‘Do I?’ she said. ‘I cannot vote. I am not a taxpayer yet by their reckoning, my income is patchy at best.’

‘You have got a brother in the East,’ Charlotte said. ‘And a mother who thinks the Party will last forever. Maybe we do not put you on the map, but we put you on a page. One column of text about someone who knows what it looks like when a system pretends it is inevitable and then… is not.’

Katja tilted her head, considering. ‘Photograph of the Wall coming down?’

‘No,’ Charlotte said. ‘Everyone will have that. We use the television glow on your face.’

Katja’s lips parted, just for a second. ‘You are good,’ she murmured.

‘I have had practice,’ Charlotte said. ‘Now, Danny, talk me through what a Tory backbencher hears when we say ‘finances are stretched’. What words make them sweat?’

‘ ‘Orderly households pushed into arrears,’ ’ I said without thinking. ‘ ‘People who did everything right.’ They love that. They have spent a decade telling us miners we did everything wrong, so the phrase will rattle.’

Charlotte wrote, the pen moving quickly. ‘Good. More.’

We went on like that until the pizza congealed in the boxes and the ashtrays overflowed. Shell made tea and then more tea. Alex nodded off for a bit with his cheek on his folded arms, waking every time someone thumped the table to make a point. Outside, the drizzle turned to proper rain, tapping against the high windows.

'You sure about this?' Shell asked eventually, when the map was studded with initials and Charlotte's notes made a small tower. 'Door-knocking in Finchley? This is not your turf, Danny. They are not going to invite you in for a cuppa when they clock the accent.'

'They invited me in at your mother's,' I pointed out.

'That is because Charlotte's mum threatened to disown anyone who was rude,' Shell said. 'Different mechanism.'

'I will dress properly,' I said. 'No band T-shirts. A decent shirt Charlotte had picked out for me, maybe. I can pass for respectable if I try.'

'You will hate it,' she said.

'Probably,' I said. 'But I hated crawling round in coal dust, and that did not stop me. Besides, if we are serious about long game, this is it. We have sung to our own side until the paint peeled. Time to knock on someone else's door.'

She looked at me for a long moment, then nodded, slow.

'Every crack matters,' she said quietly.

It was the same thing she had said to Katja earlier about the prints. You could see she was turning it over in her head, trying to make the words fit not just Berlin and Finchley and whatever came next, but this little world we had built between them – the crèche and the gig room and the bar with the telly on the wall.

'Every crack matters,' I repeated.

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Two weeks later I found myself standing on a neat street in Finchley, holding a clipboard and trying not to kick the privet hedge.

The air smelt of wet leaves and car exhaust. It was one of those thin November days where the sky never quite commits to daylight. The houses all had front gardens of roughly the same size. Some had stone lions guarding the paths; others had ornaments shaped like ducks. A few still had "Vote Conservative" stickers in the corners of their front windows from the last election. They were fading now, edges curling.

Charlotte stood next to me in a navy coat that made her look like she worked for the BBC, camera tucked unobtrusively under her arm. She had put her hair up and worn the wool skirt her mother approved of. If you did not know better, you would assume she was collecting for the church roof.

‘You ready?’ she asked.

I checked the name on the top of the form. MRS E. CARTWRIGHT, 68. WIDOW. CONSERVATIVE VOTER (EVERY ELECTION).

‘As I will ever be,’ I said.

She rang the bell.

For a long moment nothing happened. I heard a television somewhere inside – a game show, by the sound of it, cheerful music and canned laughter. Then footsteps, a chain sliding back, and the door opened a cautious few inches.

‘Yes?’ said a voice.

‘Mrs Cartwright?’ Charlotte put on her best neutral smile. ‘Sorry to bother you. My name is Charlotte, this is Danny. We are doing some research about how the new community charge is affecting people in the area.’

The word “research” worked like a key. The chain came off. The door opened wider. Mrs Cartwright was small and pale, her hair set in the kind of curls my mum used to come back from the salon with at Christmas. She wore a cardigan that looked hand-knitted and an expression that said she had sore knees and did not have the time or patience for nonsense.

‘Oh, that thing,’ she said. ‘Well, someone ought to be looking. You had better come in, you will catch your death on the step.’

She led us into a living room that smelt of talcum powder and lavender polish. The gas fire was on low. Ornamental plates lined the walls – royal weddings, silver jubilees, that sort of thing. A photograph of a man in an army uniform sat on the mantelpiece, next to one of a young woman in a wedding dress I recognised as Mrs Cartwright in a previous decade.

‘Can I make you tea?’ she asked automatically, already halfway to the kitchen.

‘Please do not go to any trouble,’ Charlotte said, but Mrs Cartwright waved her off.

‘Trouble is that bloody bill,’ she called from the doorway. ‘Two sugars?’

‘None for me, thank you,’ I said, taking the opportunity to look around.

There it was, half-buried under the Radio Times and the parish magazine on the coffee table: the brown envelope with the council logo. Community Charge Notification. The way it lay there, ordinary as a gas bill, made my stomach tighten.

‘You do the talking,’ Charlotte murmured. ‘I will pick moments to ask for the photograph.’

When Mrs Cartwright came back with the tea on a tray, she set it down with a clink and sat opposite us in her armchair. The television in the corner showed

footage of Berlin again, though with less urgency now. Commentators were already starting to use phrases like "new challenges".

'So,' she said, stirring her tea. 'What do you want to know?'

I took a breath. 'We are trying to understand what the new charge means in practice,' I said. 'You have lived here a long time?'

'Forty-two years,' she said. 'Bought this house with my late husband in '47. He worked all his life, never took a day off unless he was half dead. We paid our rates, never made a fuss.'

'And you have always voted…?'

'Conservative,' she said promptly. 'My father did, and his father before him. They kept things steady. I do not like all this shouting on the news. People on picket lines. It upsets me.' She peered at me more closely, as if suddenly remembering that I might be one of those shouters. 'No offence.'

'None taken,' I said. 'I grew up round miners, Mrs Cartwright. I am used to shouting.'

'My nephew worked at a pit up north,' she said. 'Lost his job. He is very bitter. I tell him it does not help.'

She reached for the brown envelope, as if dragged to it by some invisible thread.

'They sent me this,' she said, pulling out the letter. 'I thought they had made a mistake. It is nearly double what I was paying in rates, and there is only me now.'

Her hand trembled just enough for the paper to rustle. Charlotte adjusted her camera settings without lifting it; she had a way of making the movement look like nothing at all.

'Have you spoken to anyone at the council?' I asked gently.

'Young man on the phone said it is fairer this way,' she said. 'Said why should people in big houses pay more than people in little ones just because of where they live. I said, 'Because people in big houses can afford it.' ' Her voice sharpened. 'My Albert never had a big house, but he paid his way. Now they want twice as much for half a person.'

There it was. Twice as much for half a person. I felt the phrase lodge itself in my mind like a peg in a board.

'That is the sort of thing we are trying to record,' I said. 'What you just said. Would you be comfortable if we noted that down? We will not use your full name anywhere. It is more to show the sort of people this is affecting.'

'They know the sort of people,' she said. 'They are just not interested.' She glanced at the mantelpiece, at the army photograph. 'Mrs Cartwright of Finchley does not matter unless she is on a leaflet with a blue logo every four years.'

‘We would like to change that,’ Charlotte said softly. ‘One of the people who will see this is an MP. A Conservative MP.’

Mrs Cartwright’s eyes flicked between us. ‘Is he one of the good ones?’ she asked, sounding as if she thought that might still be a category.

‘He is one who worries about his majority,’ Charlotte said. ‘And he listens when people who look like his voters speak.’

‘Well then.’ She straightened in her chair. ‘You tell him from me that I feel cheated. I did what I was told all my life, I believed what they said about being prudent and paying your way, and now they have come for what little I have got. That is not what I voted for.’

Charlotte lifted the camera. ‘Would it be all right if I took a photograph of you?’ she asked. ‘Just here, as you are. It helps people remember there is a person behind the numbers.’

Mrs Cartwright hesitated, smoothing her skirt. Then she squared her shoulders, as if for a school picture.

‘Go on, then,’ she said. ‘Get my good side. If I have got one.’

The shutter clicked. Once. Twice. No flash. The room stayed warm, familiar. It felt indecently intimate, putting that much of a life in a frame. But this was the point, was it not? Faces, not statistics.

On the way out Mrs Cartwright pressed a packet of biscuits into my hand.

‘I do not want charity,’ she said gruffly. ‘But you cannot do your research on an empty stomach. And you make sure that man knows exactly what he has done, will you not?’

‘I will,’ I said, and meant it more than she could know.

We did three more visits that afternoon. A newsagent who showed us the books he had had to cook to keep the lights on. A young couple with a baby, both working shifts, juggling rent and nappies and now this. A retired police sergeant who lowered his voice when he told us he had seriously considered not registering, then laughed bitterly at himself.

‘I spent thirty years telling people they had to obey the law,’ he said. ‘Hard to unlearn that at fifty-eight.’

‘Would you say you feel… let down?’ Charlotte asked, pen poised.

He snorted. ‘I would say I feel bloody stupid. Thought they would look after people like me. Turns out we are just numbers on a page unless we are convenient.’

By the time we collapsed onto a Tube carriage heading back into town, my head felt full of anecdotes and amounts.

‘You all right?’ Charlotte asked, sliding the strap of her camera bag off her shoulder.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Just… angry in a different register, that is all.’

‘Different how?’

‘At Orgreave, it was us versus them,’ I said. ‘Lines on a field. Truncheons. You know where you stand. This…’ I tapped the side of my head. ‘This is people finding out that the ‘us’ they thought they belonged to never really existed. Not in the way they were promised.’

Charlotte nodded. ‘That is the crack. That is what we photograph.’

‘And write,’ I said. ‘We will give you words as well as faces this time. Proper casework.’

‘You are getting very professional about this,’ she said, a faint smile tugging at her mouth.

‘Do not tell twelve-year-old me,’ I said. ‘He would think I had sold out and gone middle management.’

She laughed, then sobered. ‘My father rang last night.’

‘Oh?’

‘He wanted to know if I had seen the Wall on the news. He was in the tea room when it started coming in. Apparently there were jokes about who had inherited the wrong Germany in the divorce settlement.’ Her mouth tightened. ‘He said it like it was all a great game. I told him I had been with people who grew up behind that wall. He did not really know what to say to that.’

‘Wait till he sees Mrs Cartwright,’ I said.

She looked at me sideways. ‘Danny… you know this might not work, right? He might shrug it off. File it away under ‘civil society grumbling’ and move on.’

‘I know.’ I watched the advertisements on the wall of the tunnel slide past: sparkly Christmas things, a car no one I knew could afford, a grinning family round a roast. ‘But when he is lying awake at three in the morning wondering if he has backed the wrong horse, I want our faces in the room.’

She studied me, then nodded once.

‘We will pick the best ones tonight,’ she said. ‘Stories, not just statistics.’

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Back at The Furnace, the big table turned into a studio. We spread contact sheets and notes and a tape recorder across the surface, pushing aside the crayons and the remains of somebody’s lunch. The kids from the queer group drifted through on their way to a meeting; someone put the kettle on; someone else cut slices of leftover lentil bake.

Katja came in halfway through, wiping ink from her hands on an old T-shirt.

‘How was your little expedition behind enemy hedges?’ she asked.

‘Productive,’ Charlotte said, flipping through the contact sheet with Mrs Cartwright’s portrait. ‘We have four strong cases already.’

I dug through the notes, found the line I had written in block capitals. ‘Twice as much for half a person,’ I read aloud.

Katja winced. ‘Ouch.’

‘Exactly,’ I said. ‘These are the phrases we lead with. Not ‘tax injustice’ or ‘regressive burden’. Those are for pamphlets. For people like Rupert, we give them Mrs Cartwright telling him she feels cheated.’

‘Are you writing a manifesto or a script?’ Katja asked.

‘Bit of both,’ I said. ‘We are not lying. We are just… arranging the truth in a way that rattles the right cages.’

Shell, who had been hovering in the doorway with a stack of rota sheets, came over and laid them down.

‘Is that how you see it now?’ she asked quietly. ‘Arranging truth?’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

She picked up the contact sheet, thumb tracing the outline of Mrs Cartwright’s face.

‘When we started,’ she said, ‘it was ‘tell the truth and shame the devil’. Tape the testimonies, put them out uncut, let people hear unfiltered voices. Now we are talking about choosing who we put on the page based on what will make an MP twitch. I am not saying it is wrong,’ she added quickly. ‘I am just… trying to work out where the line is between strategy and manipulation.’

I thought of the Wall again, the little figures on top of it swinging their feet.

‘Those people in Berlin did not just wander onto the Wall by accident,’ I said. ‘Someone, at some point, made a call, opened a gate, misread an order or chose to. We will never know exactly who. But somewhere in that mess, someone acted strategically. It does not make the joy any less real.’

Shell sighed, pushing a hand through her hair. ‘I know. It is just…’ She gestured at the hall beyond, where a kids’ laughter class was spilling out of the crèche room. ‘Some days I feel like we are painting banners on the Titanic. Berlin, Tiananmen, all that lot. Big history. And we are in a draughty building in East London, worrying about bus fares and photocopier toner.’

‘Every crack matters,’ I said again.

She gave a short, self-conscious laugh. ‘I did say that, did I not.’

‘You were right the first time.’ I reached out, resting my hand briefly over hers on the table. ‘When all they talk about is big things – markets, blocs, treaties – someone has to point at the old woman in Finchley and say, ‘Her. Start with her.’ ’

She nodded, eyes a little too bright, then busied herself with the rota sheets.

In twenty-five years’ time, sitting across from Keira in my little flat, I would pull out the thin manila folder marked FINCHLEY FACES. The photographs had yellowed at the edges. The typed case histories were on paper that no longer matched any printer in the world. Mrs Cartwright’s line about ‘twice as much for half a person’ still made my throat tighten.

‘This was the fourth one,’ I would tell her. ‘We did not call it a fingerprint then. We just knew that if you wanted to make someone like Rupert twitch, you had to show him his own people. Not our side. His.’

Keira would look at the faces, at the neat living rooms and the tired eyes, and say, ‘You weaponised respectability.’

‘We tried,’ I would say. ‘We made a gallery and slid it under the door of power. Whether it made the difference or not, I cannot prove. But I know this much.’ I would tap the folder, the edges faintly soft from being carried to so many meetings. ‘When the cracks started running under Finchley, we were ready to press. And that is not nothing.’

She would sit back, hands over her notebook, and for a moment the telly in the corner of my 2025 flat in East London would show Berlin again, grainier now, and somewhere between the concrete dust and the privet hedges the line would run clear: every wall pretends to be eternal until the first hand finds a way in.

Chapter Seventeen – February 1990, London – Coach Grid and Phone Tree

By February 1990, The Furnace looked less like a venue and more like the inside of somebody’s head when they had too many ideas and not enough hours.

We had dragged the pool table into a corner and buried it under folders. The stage was half-blocked by trestle tables covered in phone lists, teapots and coach brochures nicked from a travel agent in Brixton who turned out to be one of us. Riz had commandeered the far wall for what he called “central command”: a sheet of hardboard almost as big as the pit baths wall back in Grimethorpe, painted off-white and bolted to the bricks.

On it, the country was being rebuilt in drawing pins.

Not the neat, politically correct map you got on election night. This was our version. Scotland squashed so we could fit more Highland towns, Wales stretched so its valleys did not sit on top of each other, London blown up until half of

south-east England disappeared into it. Black marker for motorways, blue for routes we had already used on tour, little arrows where we knew there was a half-decent café open late.

‘Do not you dare say it is not to scale,’ Riz told me that first morning, pin held between his teeth and red ink up his arms. ‘This is emotional geography. Different discipline.’

He pressed the first red pin into Southwark and attached a scrap of paper with a number scrawled across it: 1.

‘That is the Dalston run. Our home turf,’ I said.

‘That,’ he corrected, ‘is the first nail in Thatcher’s coffin. Pass me yellow for Lambeth.’

Shell chalked the date across the blackboard we had dragged down from the rehearsal room.

10 FEBRUARY 1990
COACHES CONFIRMED: 3

She underlined it twice, then turned with the look she had when a list had just been born and the world did not yet know it belonged to her.

‘Give it an hour,’ she said. ‘We will be in double figures.’

We had been talking about the march for weeks by then. The All-Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation had finally put a date in ink: 31 March, London, national demo. Scotland had already been on the front line for a year. Courts jammed, sheriffs drowning in paperwork, non-payment letters flying like confetti. England and Wales were next. The thing about a tax that landed on your own doorstep with your name on it was that you did not have to explain it. It explained itself every time the post hit the mat.

The phone rang before I could finish my tea.

‘Furnace,’ I said, clamping the receiver between shoulder and jaw and reaching for a pen. ‘Danny speaking.’

‘Is this where I book the revolution?’ A woman, laughing underneath the impatience. Yorkshire. Leeds or nearby.

‘You are not the first to say that,’ I replied. ‘Which is either encouraging or worrying. Where are you calling from?’

‘Chapeltown Anti-Poll Tax Union. We have had a whip-round. We reckon two coaches, maybe three if you let us bring the kids.’

‘Kids are the point,’ I said. ‘We are not doing a lads’ away day to Wembley. Give me names for the contact list.’

As she listed them – Lorna, Dev, Mrs Harris from the corner shop who was "fierce as anything when she is crossed" – I wrote them in block capitals on the sheet labelled NORTH, then shouted over my shoulder.

'Riz. Leeds. Two confirmed, one probable.'

He walked to the map, chose a red pin and stabbed it into the city with more flourish than necessary, sticking three tiny strips of paper beside it: 2 + 1?

'Do not tease them with question marks,' Shell called. 'Bad for morale.'

'That is for me,' he said. 'Motivation. We will get them the third.'

I read the Leeds woman the rough timetable and told her where in London they would land. She sounded surprised there was already a plan.

'Thought you lot were all just punks and hippies with loudspeakers,' she said.

'Some of us learned spreadsheets by accident,' I said. 'Do not tell the lads at home. They will disown me.'

When I put the phone down the chalk squeaked again.

COACHES CONFIRMED: 5

It was barely ten in the morning.

•

By midday we were four mugs of tea in, the ashtray looked like a sculpture, and the wall was sprouting more colour than an eighties album cover.

South London pins clustered like a rash. Brixton, Peckham, Lewisham, an early call from Bromley. North London was slower, though Charlotte assured me by lunchtime that "Finchley will come. They are just British about it. They will say 'I do not like to make a fuss' all the way to the coach door."

She sat on a flight case near the map, camera round her neck, clicking occasionally. Not dramatic Berlin shots this time. Small things: Shell's hand steadying the chalk; the creased corners of old coach charts; Riz's tongue poking out as he tried to get two pins level.

'Why do you want photos of this?' I asked when she dropped the camera to her chest.

'Because this is the bit nobody notices,' she said. 'If Trafalgar Square goes off, they will print burning cars and kids in scarves. They will not print tea stains and phone bills. But this is how it happens.'

I thought of the ledger in Grimethorpe union office tracking shifts, and Mam's notebook with tally marks for tins and potatoes in 1984. History in biro, tucked in drawers.

'You are making our mess look heroic,' I said.

‘It is heroic,’ she said. ‘It just does not feel like it because you have not had lunch.’

She was right about that. Shell had sworn she would do a proper rota for food, but somewhere between Lambeth and Haringey she ended up eating dry toast over the bin while the rest of us survived on biscuits and the last of the Christmas chocolates.

‘You are going to fall over,’ I told her, as she darted between table and phone. ‘Sit for five minutes.’

‘Five minutes is a whole coach,’ she said. ‘Sit down yourself.’

Her hair was darker now than in the early Coalface days, cut shorter so it did not fall in her eyes over paperwork. A vein pulsed at her temple. I recognised it from school when she would do three people’s homework because she could not bear for them to fail.

The phone rang again. Then the other one. Then the little red light on the fax in the office flashed like an irritated eye.

‘Right,’ Shell said, clapping once like a teacher. ‘We are going to pilot the phone tree properly this afternoon. No more ad hoc calls. Order, comrades.’

There were groans from the volunteers, but not serious ones. A dozen extra bodies had appeared by now, people we had seen at gigs or meetings who drifted in once word spread that The Furnace was “where it was happening”: students with peace badges on denim jackets, an older woman from the tenants’ association who sat in the corner knitting between calls, a skinny lad from the estate up the road who had once tried to bunk into a gig and was now, somehow, responsible for half of Southwark.

She handed out little cards, each printed with ten names and numbers in her uncompromising hand.

‘These are yours,’ she said. ‘Guard them with your lives. If we need to get word out fast – change of route, police roadblocks, anything – we ring the top line. Those people ring the ten below, and so on. No improvising your own versions, no deciding you would rather ring a mate instead. Discipline is the point.’

‘Like a pyramid scheme,’ the tenants’ woman said approvingly. ‘Only morally sound.’

‘Exactly.’ Shell smiled. ‘Except instead of flogging dodgy saucepans, we are redistributing information.’

The estate lad squinted at his card.

‘What if they do not pick up?’ he asked. ‘Half of these are my aunties. They never answer till the third try.’

‘You try three times,’ she said. ‘Then you ring me. Next time I see your aunties I will have a word.’

There was laughter. Under it I heard the quiet click of people realising how serious this was. The march had gone from a date in the paper to something they were personally threaded into.

‘Think of it like stewarding,’ I said. ‘We keep saying this is not a consumer event. You do not just turn up and wait to be entertained. You take responsibility. This is the communications version.’

‘Yeah,’ the lad said. ‘Like the moshpit. If someone goes down, you pick them up.’

I nodded. ‘Exactly that.’

He grinned and thumped the table. I saw him a second later on the map in my head, not as a vague ‘youth’ but as a pin in our own grid.

•

In the afternoon, the older generation arrived to inspect the chaos.

Len from the old miners’ support group turned up with a box of tea bags and a face like he had walked into a teenager’s bedroom.

‘What is all this then?’ he said, staring at the map. ‘We organising a demo or invading Normandy?’

‘Basic logistics, Len,’ Shell said, not looking up from her clipboard. ‘You know, that thing you lot always said the other side did better.’

He harrumphed but did not contradict her.

‘I am not saying it is not impressive,’ he said, stepping closer. ‘I am saying in my day we had a committee, a newsletter and a coach sheet pinned in the welfare. This looks like a record label exploded.’

Riz beamed. ‘Best compliment I have had for weeks.’

Len peered at the colours.

‘What are those ones?’ he asked, pointing at a Midlands cluster.

‘Yellow is confirmed,’ I said. ‘Blue is about two-thirds full but waiting on money. Red is people who swear they are coming and will definitely forget unless we nag.’

‘And green?’ He tapped a lone dot near Norwich.

‘Aspirational,’ I said. ‘Bloke rang, very keen, no one else yet. We have put him down as seed. See what he sprouts by the weekend.’

Len grunted, but there was a hint of respect now.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘If you had had this lot in ’84, we might have stood a better chance.’

He caught himself, as if he had said too much, and busied himself unpacking tea.

'Anyway,' he added. 'Watch you do not get carried away with your new toys. It is not pins on a wall that matter. It is what people will do when they get here. A march is not a day out. It is a battle of wills.'

'We know,' I said, thinking of Orgreave. 'That is why we are building more than transport. This is about keeping our side knitted, so we do not end up scattered and easy to pick off.'

He nodded slowly.

'Good answer,' he said. 'I will shut up and make tea.'

He did not shut up, of course. Len never did. But he stopped needling and started telling stories instead, about marches that had gone wrong because organisers thought getting bodies to a park and shouting a few slogans was enough.

'You are doing good work,' he said later, quietly, when we found ourselves side by side at the map. 'I do not always understand your music and your… 'phone tree'. But you are learning from our mistakes. That is what matters.'

Some small boy part of me, still wanting nods from the older men who had stood with my dad, tugged in my chest. I tried not to show it.

'Cheers, Len,' I said. 'We are making it up as we go, if I am honest.'

'Course you are,' he said. 'That is the job.'

•

Shell went down just after four.

It was not dramatic at first. She just stopped mid-sentence, one hand on the back of a chair, the other on the table edge, and shut her eyes.

'…and you will have Hackney ring Walthamstow and Walthamstow ring—'

'Shell?' I said.

She opened her eyes, but the room had gone out of focus in them, like the way a picture blurs when the tape judders.

'Need air,' she said. 'Bit stuffy.'

'It is February,' I said. 'We could hang meat in here, it is that cold.'

She tried to laugh. It came out wrong. The knitting woman was on her feet in a second, brisk as a nurse.

'Sit,' she ordered. 'Now.'

'I cannot, I have got Lambeth coming back at six,' Shell protested, but her knees buckled even as she said it. I got an arm round her and steered her to the sofa

we kept for late-night crashers, shocked by how little she weighed. Once she sat she pressed her fingers to her temples.

‘How long since you ate anything that was not a biscuit?’ the woman asked.

Shell squinted, doing the maths.

‘Yesterday?’ she guessed.

‘Idiot,’ I said, unable to keep it light. ‘You shout at everyone else about looking after themselves.’

‘I am fine,’ she said. ‘Head is just—’

She stopped herself at “ringing”.

The knitting woman disappeared and came back with a thick slice of bread spread with margarine and a mug of tea you could have stood a spoon in.

‘You sit,’ she told Shell. ‘You eat. If you stand up before that is gone, I am telling the movement you fainted because you were too busy conquering London to remember your stomach. We will put it on a leaflet.’

Shell gave a weak chuckle.

‘You are brutal,’ she said.

‘I have raised four kids and two husbands,’ the woman said. ‘You lot are a doddle.’

I knelt in front of Shell.

‘You do not have to carry all this,’ I said. ‘We have people now. Let us pick some of it up.’

‘If I put it down,’ she whispered, ‘I am scared it will all fall apart.’

‘It will not,’ I said. ‘That is the point of the tree. No single branch holding everything.’

She looked past me at the boards and lists.

‘This is what we dreamed of,’ she said so quietly I barely heard. ‘Back in Grimethorpe. Something bigger than the pit. A proper network.’

‘And networks do not depend on one person not fainting on a Thursday,’ I said. ‘We are not that daft.’

She stared another moment, then let her shoulders drop.

‘Alright,’ she said. ‘Half an hour.’

‘An hour,’ I said. ‘Non-negotiable. I will forge your signature on any forms.’

‘That is not how signatures work.’

‘Trust me,’ I said. ‘Forgery is underrated in the underground.’

She smiled properly then and bit into the bread.

For the next hour I banned her from the phones. People came over to ask questions and we answered them instead. It felt strange at first, like playing a gig without your best guitarist, but then I realised how much of the system she had already put in place. The lists were clear. The map made sense. The rhythm of calls and confirmations had its own momentum.

We were no longer a scrappy band of mates improvising. We were a machine built out of human beings and plastic phones and drawing pins and cheap biro, and it carried on even when one of the main cogs had to sit and breathe.

That, I realised later, was one of Shell's real achievements. Not that she could juggle twenty things at once, but that she had designed it so we did not have to rely on that forever.

•

By early evening, the place had shifted again. The daytime volunteers drifted off to childcare, shifts, classes. A second wave came in: the night crew. Bar staff from nearby pubs who came after closing to help tally numbers; students who had skipped seminars; two nurses still in uniform, stethoscopes swinging as they leaned over lists.

Riz vanished upstairs and reappeared with his radio face on.

'Furnace FM special,' he announced, waving a cassette. 'Coach call-out edition. Who is up for an impromptu broadcast?'

We had rigged a little pirate set-up months before, sending our signal across a few square miles if the wind cooperated and the neighbours did not complain. That night we plugged straight into the whole operation.

'Alright, south London,' his voice crackled from the speakers as he began, 'this is Riz on Furnace FM and we are building the biggest day trip your council has ever seen. If you are skint, angry and sick of a tax that charges your nan more than a banker, listen up…'

People cheered as if he were in a club, even though he was only across the hall. Between tracks – The Jam, The Specials, a scratchy live recording of us – he read out contact numbers for unions, estate groups, tenants' associations. He named the knitting woman, the estate lad, Shell's phone tree. It was publicity, morale and admin at once.

A knot of younger volunteers clustered round the speaker, nodding. One girl in a denim jacket covered in hand-drawn symbols turned to me.

'I had your Coalface tape,' she said. 'Our big brother brought it back from some gig in London. We played it when Mam was out. That is how I knew about this place. When they said there were coaches going from here, I thought… right. Time to move from listening to doing.'

I tried to picture her at twelve, sitting on a bedroom floor in some northern town, headphones on, hearing my younger voice shout over a guitar we could barely keep in tune.

‘How old are you now?’ I asked.

‘Seventeen,’ she said. ‘Eighteen by the march. Do not worry, I have cleared it with Mam.’

She grinned, steel under it.

‘She says if I get arrested she will be furious,’ the girl added. ‘But she also says if we do not stand up now, I will be paying this tax for the rest of my life, so she is baking pies for the coach.’

‘Pies,’ I said. ‘From tape to pies. That is a trajectory.’

‘From tapes to coaches,’ she said. ‘Full circle, is it not?’

I looked at the map again. She was right. The C90s we had made out of desperation now sat like little ghosts under everything: in how people had heard of us, trusted us enough to ring, felt part of something before they ever set foot in London.

That was one of the moments when I first consciously thought of it as a pattern, not a set of accidents. We had always found ways to move sounds and stories through gaps – tapes hand to hand, radio broadcasts slipping between frequencies, photographs pushed into the right hands. The shapes had changed but the principle was the same.

Later, sitting with Keira in 2025, I would call it the Coach Grid fingerprint: the map with its pins and lines, the lists and cards and numbers that showed we were not just shouting in one warehouse any more. We had built routes and commitments from Brighton to Bradford, Glasgow down to Kent. Even if someone had wiped every other trace of us, that board, photographed the way Charlotte did that day, would have proved we had reached far beyond one postcode.

•

Around nine, Mam rang.

‘You sound like you are in a betting shop,’ she said after a burst of background noise hit the line.

‘Phones,’ I said. ‘We are doing the big tally. What is up?’

‘What is up is your father has seen the thing in the paper,’ she said. ‘About the march. He has got his stoic face on but I can tell he wants to come.’

‘What, to London?’ My mind did a little somersault. Bill Ashcroft in Trafalgar Square.

‘He says he is too old for traipsing up and down streets getting shoved by horses,’ she went on. ‘But he has been on the phone to lads all afternoon asking who else is going. He thinks I cannot hear.’

‘Tell him there will be a coach from Barnsley,’ I said. ‘We are working on it. We will make sure he is with people who know what they are doing.’

‘So there is a coach?’ she asked, sharpening.

‘There will be,’ I said. ‘We have got a green pin there. Aspirational.’

‘I do not know what that means,’ she said. ‘But it sounds like not yet.’

‘It means get him to the union office,’ I replied. ‘If they commit numbers, we will help with the rest. And Mam?’

‘Yes, love?’

‘If he does decide to come, make sure he is near someone steady. For my sake.’

‘He is steadier than you sometimes,’ she said. ‘But I know what you mean.’

There was a pause, softer.

‘I am proud of you,’ she added. ‘Seeing your names in print, hearing about this place. It is like the strike never really ended. You have just changed battlegrounds.’

‘It is not just me,’ I said, looking at Shell now back on her feet, pale but upright; at Riz in his makeshift studio; at Charlotte lining up another shot of the map. ‘If it was just me we would still be arguing about what font to use.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘But you are in the thick of it. That is what matters. Your dad pretends not to care about your punk nonsense, but he keeps that tape next to his records. Plays it when he thinks I am at bingo.’

I swallowed.

‘Tell him he is a soft sod,’ I said. ‘And that I will see him in March if he rediscovers his inner hooligan.’

‘There is life in the old dog,’ she said. ‘I will put pies in the freezer.’

We hung up. I went back into the hall with my chest tighter and my shoulders a little straighter.

‘Everything all right?’ Charlotte asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Mam says my dad is thinking of coming on one of the coaches.’

She raised her eyebrows.

‘That is big,’ she said.

‘Feels like closing a circle,’ I said. ‘We started because of people like him. Be good to have him there when it comes to a head.’

She slipped her hand into mine for a second, squeezed, let go.

‘Let us make sure we give him a day worth travelling for,’ she said.

•

By ten, the blackboard read:

COACHES CONFIRMED: 38

A smudge of chalk over the eight made it look like it was still moving.

‘We will have forty by the weekend,’ Shell announced, now upright, pale but defiant. ‘More once the Scottish lot firm up their second wave. And that is just what has come through us. Imagine what is happening in every other little hub like this.’

‘It is like away fixtures,’ I said suddenly. ‘When we went to see Barnsley, there would be coaches from every estate, every club. This is the same, except the match is at Trafalgar and the away team is the government.’

‘That is awful,’ Riz said. ‘You are going to use it in a song, are you not?’

‘Probably,’ I said. ‘If it scans.’

The room laughed, tired but genuine.

We stood there, the core of us, looking at what we had built in a single long day. Pins and chalk and paper. Names and numbers. Stories of parents baking pies, teenagers stepping into politics, old militants learning new tricks.

I felt that particular kind of exhaustion that carries a charge, the sense you have nudged something heavy a few inches and it is now rolling under its own weight.

‘We are not generals,’ I said, half to myself. ‘We are just fans organising an away day.’

Shell glanced at me.

‘Fans with a phone tree and a very complicated wall chart,’ she said. ‘Do not undersell us.’

‘No danger,’ I said. ‘Not after today.’

We turned the lights down one by one, leaving the map under a single anglepoise so Charlotte could get her last shots. In the half-light, the pins glinted like stars, each one tied to a spare chair on a coach, to a lunchbox packed, to a decision at a kitchen table.

I went home with the pattern stamped behind my eyes. Close them and you would have seen it too: a network of lines converging on a square in central London, each drawn by hands like ours, each stubborn in its own small way.

You do not topple a government with a song. I had learned that. But you might help crack a flagship policy with a map, a phone and enough people willing to

spend a Saturday on a coach because some miner's lad in London and his friends had made it easy – and necessary – to do so.

Chapter Eighteen – March 1990, London – Steward School

It started with a whistle and three people falling over each other in the middle of The Furnace.

'Stop, stop, stop,' Shell said, pinching the bridge of her nose. 'If you lot do that in Trafalgar, we will be peeling you off the pavement.'

We were in a rough circle in the main hall, chairs pushed back, stage lost behind banners and flipcharts. The air carried that particular mix you only got in a busy community space: stale beer from last night, fresh coffee from the café, the faint tang of marker pens. Someone had dragged in a mat from the kids' room for the first aid bit later. It looked small against all that wood.

In the centre, three volunteers were trying to demonstrate "linking arms and moving as one". So far the result looked more like "drunken conga at a wedding".

'You are not holding hands at a school disco,' Shell said. 'You are a human rope. Strong but flexible. Try again.'

She stepped in between two of them, hooking her arm neatly through theirs, wrists low, elbows relaxed. When she moved, they had to adjust with her.

'Feel that?' she asked. 'You want to be able to give without snapping. You are not a barricade. You are a guide. Your job is not to fight police. Your job is to stop the people behind you panicking.'

The fifteen or so trainees watched with varying levels of focus. Some scribbled notes. Some stole glances at the big calendar Shell had taped to the wall. The date circled in red so thick it looked almost torn: 31 MARCH – NATIONAL DEMO.

We were three weeks out.

'Right,' Shell said. 'Swap. New middle three.'

I caught her eye.

'You are enjoying yourself,' I murmured.

'I enjoy people not dying,' she replied. 'This is the closest I get in advance.'

•

We had called it Steward School as a joke at first. Someone scrawled it on scrap paper and pinned it to the board: STEWARD SCHOOL – ENROL HERE. Like most jokes at The Furnace that stuck, it turned serious fast.

The federation had sent round basic guidance – keep routes clear, do not provoke, identify yourselves with armbands – but most of it assumed tidy, polite marches where the worst that happened was somebody stepping on your heel. None of it accounted for Orgreave, or VHS tapes from Tottenham, or the footage from Northern Ireland you only got late at night.

'We cannot control the police,' Shell had said at the planning meeting. 'We cannot control what every angry twenty-year-old with a scarf does, especially when he has just seen his mate get batoned. What we can do is make sure that the people in armbands are not just the tallest blokes in the room.'

So we advertised. Not on posters – we did not want the cops sending their own "volunteers" – but through the grapevine: tenants' associations, women's groups, the queer youth project, old union stewards whose knees were not up to marching but whose brains were still sharp. We asked for people who could stay calm when everyone else lost their heads.

'You are not bouncers,' I told them at the first session. 'You are translators. You stand in the gap between what organisers want and what bodies are actually doing and try to stop the two colliding at speed.'

'Sounds like my shift on the ward,' muttered a middle-aged nurse from Homerton.

'Exactly,' I said. 'We will pair you with someone whose first instinct is to run towards trouble. You stop them getting themselves arrested in the first five minutes.'

Which was how Jase from the estate up the road ended up linked arm in arm with Lisa the nurse, trying not to tread on her toes.

'Gently,' she told him, as they practised. 'You are not dragging me to the bar. You are walking your gran across a busy road.'

'My gran can drink me under the table,' he said.

'Even more reason not to drop her,' she replied.

Off to one side, Len, our resident elder statesman, took "front line etiquette". He had turned up in a flat cap and a tweed jacket that had probably seen more picket lines than most of us had hot dinners.

'First rule,' he said, pacing in front of a row of volunteers, 'you do not talk to police on your own. Ever. You are not here as private citizens. You are here as part of an organising group. If they want to change the route or demand something, you say: 'I will consult my fellow stewards.' Then you come and find one of us. No heroic solos. That is how they wedge you.'

A young woman with a shaved head and an enormous leather jacket put her hand up.

‘What if they grab someone near you?’ she asked. ‘We cannot just leave them, can we?’

Len sighed.

‘You will want to go in swinging,’ he said. ‘That is human. That is solidarity. But I have seen too many lads face down in the mud that way. Your first job is to clock it. Who grabbed them. What they wore. Which way they went. Then you shout. Make sure others clock it too. Get a witness circle round the arrest. That way, when it gets to court, it is not just some copper’s word against a poor sod who cannot remember where was up.’

He glanced at me.

‘Is that not right, Danny?’ he said. ‘Tell them about that tape from Orgreave.’

I cleared my throat.

‘We had one,’ I said. ‘Some bloke with a borrowed camcorder filmed a line of cops charging. Not the BBC lot. Showed them hitting people already on the ground. In the first trials the prosecution pretended it did not exist. When the defence finally got it, half the case collapsed. It did not save everyone, but it made a crack.’

‘Theirs or yours?’ Jase asked.

‘Theirs,’ I said. ‘And ours. Once you have seen them lie that cleanly, something in your head moves.’

I realised my jaw was clenched and made myself ease it.

‘Anyway,’ I said. ‘Point is: you are two things. A buffer on the day. A witness afterwards. That is why we are doing memory drills.’

‘Memory drills,’ the shaved-headed girl groaned. ‘What is this, school?’

‘Pretty much,’ Riz said from the back. ‘We will have you chanting dates of uprisings if you muck about.’

He was in charge of communications, partly because of the radio show, mostly because he loved the idea of a human network.

‘No walkie-talkies?’ someone asked him later, stacking chairs.

‘We have two and one belongs to the café,’ he said. ‘We are doing this old school. Rendezvous points. Runners. Phone boxes. The phone tree. Drill it, and we can get word round the whole march in half an hour.’

He tapped the laminated sheet Shell had drawn: a simple diagram of nodes and branches, names in tiny ink. It looked harmless until you imagined each one representing forty or fifty people and a coach parked in a side street.

‘Information is a weapon,’ Riz said. ‘So is confusion. We choose our side.’

•

The first aid session was led by a woman called Pat who worked in A&E and had the kind of manner that could silence a room faster than any slogan.

She laid a line of volunteers on the mat and made us practise checking airways, rolling bodies into recovery position, valuing "not making things worse" over heroics.

'You are not paramedics,' she said. 'You are not surgeons. If someone is properly hurt, your job is get them breathing and not crushed, then get them to an ambulance. If there is one. If there is not…' She paused. 'You improvise. You do not leave them on their own. You make space. You shout until someone with more letters after their name arrives.'

She showed us how to tell someone who had fainted from someone whose chest was not moving. How to look for signs of concussion. How to talk to someone having a panic attack.

'You would be amazed,' she said, 'how many bruised ribs I see that are not from batons at all. Friendly fire. People piling on each other when they run. If you do nothing else as stewards, do this: stop people running in blind waves. Walk them. Spread them. Use your voices.'

Her eyes flicked to me.

'You were at Orgreave, were you not?' she said, matter-of-fact.

I nodded.

'Was it like this?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'It was worse. We had none of this. No steward school. Just lads in scarves and union banners and hope.'

I could still see it if I let myself; the horse lines, the ground shuddering, the sound of wood on bone. The way the official story had turned up clean and pressed before bruises had come up.

'What we are doing now,' I added, 'is what I wish we had had.'

Pat looked round the room.

'Listen to him,' she said.

•

Between sessions, The Furnace felt like a school between lessons. The café was full of people comparing notes, swapping rumours, drinking tea in that solemn way you only really saw at wakes and after long meetings.

'They are going to bring the horses,' someone said. 'My cousin is in the Met. He says they have been practising in Hyde Park.'

'They will try kettling,' another said. 'Like Broadwater. Box you in, then pick you off or let you stew.'

‘They will not kettle with this many people,’ Shell said, sliding past with a tray. ‘They do not want pictures of old ladies penned in. That does not mean they will not charge. Different trick, same stick.’

The Scottish warnings ran under everything. Mags had sent a briefing from Dundee after one particularly ugly warrant sale where the police decided to “send a message”. We had adapted it, translated the Scottish legal bits, stapled it into our steward packs.

‘It is not just the day,’ Shell kept reminding us. ‘It is everything after. Arrests. Press. Courts. We are not just trying to get people home in one piece. We are trying to make sure if they do not get home, someone meets them in the system.’

‘Cheery,’ Riz muttered, but he was the one who sat up till two typing the ‘if you see someone nicked’ checklist.

In the evenings, after the last trainees had gone, we sat in the café with the big windows fogged, scribbling revisions on the steward handbook. It had started as bullet points on the back of a flyer. By the second week it was a document: twenty pages of plain English on everything from crowd dynamics to talking to journalists.

Lily was with her nan more often now, which freed Shell for late sessions but left a hollow under her eyes that had nothing to do with paperwork.

‘She asked what a steward was,’ Shell said one night. ‘I told her it was like being a lollipop lady for grown-ups. She said grown-ups should know how to cross a road by now.’

‘Look at us,’ Alex said, slumping into a chair with a mug. ‘We have become the thing we used to take the piss out of.’

‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘Professionals,’ he said. ‘Next you will be applying for EU grants and buying matching tabards.’

‘Stewards in coordinated outfits,’ Riz mused. ‘There is an idea.’

‘No tabards,’ Shell said firmly. ‘Armbands only. We are not unpaid police. We are shepherds.’

‘Is there a difference?’ Alex asked.

She gave him a look.

‘Police work for the state,’ she said. ‘Shepherds work for the flock.’

‘Very biblical,’ he said.

‘Shut up and quarter these,’ she replied, dumping a stack of photocopies on him.

Katja was in the corner carving a lino block for the steward armband design. She had sketched it on tracing paper: two linked wrists with a small star above them.

‘Too cheesy?’ she had asked.

‘It works,’ I had said. ‘Just do not make the star too Soviet. You will start rumours.’

Now she was bent over the block, shavings curling.

‘When I was in Leipzig in ‘89,’ she said, not looking up, ‘we had stewards on the Monday demos. Church people, youth groups. Their job was to stand between march and Stasi and to shout ’Keine Gewalt!’ until their voices died.’

‘No violence,’ I translated.

She nodded.

‘It was not just for the police,’ she said. ‘It was for us. Reminding everyone that if we threw stones, they would have everything they needed.’

‘Did it work?’ Alex asked.

‘Mostly,’ she said. ‘Enough.’ She glanced up. ‘You cannot control everyone. There is always someone who throws first. You just have to make sure they are not the whole story.’

Shell pointed with her pen.

‘That,’ she said, ‘is the crux. We cannot stop every window going in. We can stop that being all anyone remembers.’

She turned to me.

‘Which is where your tapes come in, Mister Ashcroft.’

•

The tapes had been waiting in the cupboard under the stairs like a half-forgotten species. Old C90s in cracked cases, a couple of VHS cassettes from early gigs, the odd reel from a four-track.

‘We need to upgrade,’ Charlotte had said. ‘No offence, Danny, but if we turn up in Trafalgar with audio cassettes and a borrowed Super 8, we will miss half of it.’

So we begged and borrowed. A camcorder from a sympathetic freelance who remembered Charlotte from Berlin. Another from the bloke who had filmed our Chernobyl night. A third, less reliable, from a neighbour who used it for weddings and christenings.

‘We sign them out,’ Shell said, treating them like library books. ‘We pair each camera with a steward. You do not wave it like a toy. You film from height when you can. You keep rolling when it gets ugly. Especially then.’

One night, after most had gone, Charlotte gave an impromptu lesson on how to film in a crowd without losing your head.

'Think like a dancer,' she said, standing on a chair, camera to her eye. 'You do not plant and hope. You sway with the movement. And you do not zoom unless you must. Zooms make people seasick and they are useless in court. Keep it wide, keep it steady, keep it long.'

'Like marriage,' Alex muttered.

She ignored him.

'And you are not just filming police,' she added. 'You are filming stewards doing their job. Lines held. People calmed. So when the papers say 'anarchists ran amok', we can say: here is Mrs So-and-So from Lambeth telling people to walk, not run.'

She caught my eye.

'And you,' she said, 'will be on the megaphone. So for once in your life, enunciate.'

'I always enunciate,' I said.

'Danny, half your old tapes sound like a man falling down a mine shaft with a mouth full of gravel,' she said. 'Project. Distinct consonants. The future of the narrative depends on it.'

I gave her a salute.

She stepped down, serious again.

'I mean it,' she said quietly. 'There will be cameras there only interested in fire. We need some looking at the water.'

•

The closer we got, the more Steward School felt like both shield and dare. Each session filled a gap we had not known we had – what to do if someone went under a horse, how to spot a snatch squad, how to get lost kids back to coaches – but it also made the stakes more real.

'Do you ever wish we had just stuck to gigs?' Alex asked one night as we walked home, breath pale in the cold.

'Sometimes,' I said. 'Then I remember all the nights we shouted ourselves hoarse in tiny clubs to the same people and I think… this is what it was for.'

'To get you a whistle and an armband?' he said.

'Armband, yes,' I said. 'Whistle, reluctantly.'

He shoved his hands deeper in his pockets.

'You are scared,' he said.

‘Of course I am,’ I replied. ‘You would have to be thick not to be. We are inviting tens of thousands into a city where the police are rattled and the government has dug in. You have seen Scotland. You have seen Hillsborough. You have seen Brixton and Tottenham. Fear is rational.’

‘What scares you most?’ he asked.

I thought about it. There were the obvious things – truncheons, horses, kettles, headlines. Underneath that, something less cinematic.

‘Losing someone because we missed something,’ I said. ‘Because we did not spot a bottleneck. Because we put the wrong person at the front. Every time I look at a map I see those pens at Hillsborough.’

He nodded.

‘You cannot control everything,’ he said.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘But we can control some. That bit keeps me up. All the variables we have not met yet.’

We walked on in silence past shuttered shops and the odd kebab place. Somewhere a siren rose and fell. It sounded ordinary. That was the strangest part: how ordinary everything was until it was not.

‘I keep thinking about the ones who come after,’ I said suddenly.

‘After what?’ he frowned.

‘After all this,’ I said. ‘Some kid years from now, sat at a kitchen table with a mug of tea, asking why we bothered. Why we did not just stay home and let it blow over.’

He snorted.

‘You are a long way from quiet retirements,’ he said.

‘Not really,’ I said. ‘That is how I stop spiralling. I imagine having to explain it later. Where the cracks were. Why we stood where we did. Why we told people to walk, not run. Not the romance – the boring bits.’

I shoved my hands deeper into my coat pockets.

‘Because the fight keeps changing shape,’ I went on. ‘Strike, closures, Clause 28, this. Next time it will be something else with a new name and the same old hand on your throat. But it will still be somebody trying to make ordinary people feel alone. And some other lot trying to teach each other not to run.’

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded once.

‘You and your fingerprints,’ he said. ‘You going to add Steward School to the collection?’

‘Probably,’ I said. ‘Coach Grid was the map. This is the muscle memory. The bit where we try to make sure that when someone writes ‘riot’ under a picture, we have got receipts.’

He grinned.

‘You know what I will tell your hypothetical kid?’ he said. ‘That you were the first person I saw turn a punk band into a training programme.’

‘Terrible legacy,’ I said.

‘No,’ he said. ‘It is the only kind that lasts.’

•

On the last Friday before the march we did a full drill. No theory. Walk-through.

We marked an imaginary route on the floor with tape and chairs. We simulated bottlenecks, sudden stops, surges from the back. We practised peeling a small group off a larger one without making them feel abandoned. We ran through hand signals Riz had filched from an industrial safety pamphlet: slow, stop, back.

By the end everyone was sweating and short of breath.

‘Now imagine doing that six hours straight with twenty times the people,’ Shell said. ‘And cameras. And police.’

‘Cheers,’ Jase said, wiping his forehead on his sleeve.

We handed out the steward packs: maps, handbooks, emergency numbers, a wallet card with IF ARRESTED on it in big black letters, and a cheap whistle.

‘You only blow this if you have to,’ Shell said, as if addressing a class full of children with fireworks. ‘We are not turning the march into a referees’ convention.’

‘What about armbands?’ someone asked.

Katja stepped up with a cardboard box. Inside were strips of cloth printed with her linked-hands design, the star subtle enough to pass unnoticed.

‘Tie it like this,’ she said, looping one round her arm. ‘Not so tight you lose feeling, not so loose it falls off. And you do not give it to a mate because he thinks it looks cool. If you wear this, you are taking responsibility for the people around you. If you do not want that, that is fine. March without it.’

There was a small shift in the room as weight settled. Some hesitated, then reached into the box. Others stepped back, relief on their faces.

‘That is alright,’ Shell said to them. ‘We need marchers as much as stewards. Just know who is who on the day.’

When it was my turn, I ran my fingers over the print before tying it. The ink was still faintly tacky. The hands looked small and stubborn.

‘This is it, then,’ I said.

‘This is it,’ Shell said. ‘School is out.’

We looked at each other with armbands in place. Young, old, tired, wired. Some had been fighting for a decade. Some had only just arrived. All of us were about to step into a story we would not get to edit in real time.

Later, in my flat, I emptied my pockets on the table: steward card, map, whistle, folded coach contacts, a packet of Polos half full. The armband lay on top, ink dark on cheap cotton.

I thought of Orgreave, of Hillsborough, of the Wall coming down. Of Mrs Cartwright in Finchley and the Scots on their doorsteps. Of every time we had watched someone else tell our story wrong on purpose.

‘Not this time,’ I said, to nobody.

Steward School was not a guarantee. It was barely a shield. But it was a choice. To step forward, not back. To be, in Mam’s hymn phrase, our brother’s keeper.

If you close your eyes and look at that year from above, three marks show: a grid of pins, a hall full of people learning how to stand and how to fall, and a square in central London where everything spilled over. Coach Grid, Steward School, Trafalgar. You do not get the last without the first two.

That, in the end, is what I tell people now: that nobody ever topples anything on their own. That before the battle comes the homework. And that somewhere in the mess there we were, in a cold hall in East London, practising how not to run.

Chapter Nineteen – 31 March 1990, London – Battle of Trafalgar Square

The first thing I remember about that morning is the steam on the coach windows and the way people had written messages in it with their fingers.

NO POLL TAX. CANNOT PAY, WILL NOT PAY. TORIES OUT.

Little slogans traced in water, vanishing as quickly as they appeared.

We were stood in the cold behind The Furnace, watching the first wave of coaches reverse gingerly into whatever space Riz had wrung out of the council. It was barely eight and London felt like it had been dragged out of bed too early. Grey sky, breath hanging in front of faces, those quiet Saturday streets that had not worked out yet they were about to be famous.

Shell had the clipboard. Of course she did.

‘Pontefract,’ she called, ticking off a number plate as a coach door hissed open. ‘Right, you lot, welcome to East London. Toilets are through the side door, tea

inside, do not forget your placards when you get off later. Stewards, over here for armbands.'

People spilled out, stiff from the journey, stamping feeling back into their feet. There were miners, of course – you could spot them in any crowd, something in the way they carried their shoulders – but also pensioners in their best coats, young mums with kids strapped to their fronts, students in long coats and Doc Martens, a church group with home-made banners neatly rolled and tied.

Riz was in his element, weaving between them with his ledger and his map.

'Coach seven, you are with me,' he said to a cluster from Newcastle. 'We will walk you down to the assembly point once you have had a brew. Keep your steward in sight at all times,' he added, jerking his thumb towards a lad in an armband who looked like he had barely finished school.

It was one of our estate kids from early on, Jase, hair cropped short, eyes wide but steady.

'You alright?' I asked him quietly, checking his armband knot.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Sort of. It is mad, this. My mum is on the next coach, you know. She says if I get nicked she is not cooking Sunday dinner for a month.'

'That is a powerful deterrent,' I said. 'Stick with your partner. Remember what we practised. Walk, do not run. Watch the edges.'

He nodded like he was about to sit an exam. I gave his shoulder a squeeze and moved on.

Inside the hall the café was overflowing. Someone had set up a long trestle table covered in foil trays: sandwiches, sausage rolls, a vat of pasta that steamed gently when they lifted the lid. It smelled of starch, onions and tea. A volunteer from the tenants' association was guarding a biscuit tin as if it contained state secrets.

'Hands off the Chocolate Hobnobs, Ashcroft,' she said when she saw me. 'They are for the stewards.'

'Stewards are the backbone of democracy,' I replied, palming two into my pocket. 'They need sugar.'

On the stage, Katja had rigged up a sheet and a borrowed projector. A simple slide in big letters:

WELCOME TO LONDON. WELCOME TO THE RESISTANCE.

Underneath, in smaller text:

IF LOST: FIND A STEWARD.

I climbed onto one of the chairs at the front, megaphone in hand, and waited till the murmuring died down.

‘Morning,’ I said, voice echoing off the high ceiling. ‘If this is your first time in The Furnace, welcome. If it is your fiftieth, you know where the loos are and where we hide the decent biscuits. Listen up for a couple of minutes, then we will get you to the assembly point.’

I went through the basics: where we were marching from, where we were headed, who to follow, what to do if separated, the legal support number written on scraps of paper and arms in black marker. People shouted back town names when I asked where they had come from. Barnsley. Cardiff. Aberdeen. A cheer went up for “Grimethorpe,” which made something twist in my chest.

‘We have got stewards along the whole route,’ I said. ‘If you are worried, talk to them. If you are scared, talk to them. If you see trouble brewing, talk to them. They are not police, they are not bouncers, they are your own people trained to keep you safe.’

I glanced over at Shell and caught her eye. She gave me a small nod. Armband on, hair pinned back, lines under her eyes you would not see if you did not know her.

‘And remember,’ I finished, ‘today is ours. They will have their cameras and their headlines. We have got our own. So smile when you can and stick together when you cannot.’

•

On the walk down to Kennington the city changed. Side streets fed into the main route like tributaries, each bringing its own flavour of rage and hope. A brass band from some union further north. A samba drumming group with rainbow flags. Kids hanging out of upstairs windows, waving.

Stewards walked along the flanks, armbands visible, doing all the small, unnoticed tasks that make a crowd work: slowing over-keen sections, nudging gaps closed, checking people at the back were not being squeezed.

Lisa the nurse walked beside a group of pensioners, rucksack heavy with first aid supplies. Every so often she would pause to adjust someone’s scarf or check the straps on a pushchair.

‘You are mothering them,’ I muttered as I came alongside.

‘Someone has to,’ she said. ‘You lot are too busy playing toy soldiers.’

‘Harsh but fair,’ I replied.

The mood near the front was almost light. Chants rolled up and down the road – ‘NO POLL TAX!’, ‘THERE IS ONLY ONE SOLUTION – ORGANISE AND STRIKE!’ – and banners bobbed like bright ships in a slow tide. For a little while, if you squinted, it looked like a carnival. A very angry carnival.

Charlotte appeared at my elbow with a camera round her neck, hair pulled back under a wool hat.

‘Your radio star is over there,’ she said, jerking her head towards Riz, who was trying to coordinate a group of Scots who had arrived late and were arguing over where they should slot in.

‘I am surprised he has not tried to host a live show from the embankment,’ I said.

‘Give him time,’ she replied.

‘Where is the video lot?’ I asked.

She nodded ahead. One of our borrowed camcorders was perched on the shoulder of a tall woman standing on a low wall, slowly panning across the march. Another was further back, filmers walking backwards in front of the banners with an ease that made my ankles ache just looking.

‘Remember,’ Charlotte said, as if reading my mind. ‘Wide shots. Long takes. No fancy zooms. We are not making a pop video.’

‘Tragic,’ I said. ‘Our artistic vision, crushed.’

She snorted, then grew serious.

‘If anything goes wrong,’ she added, ‘we need at least one camera on it from beginning to end. No cutting away because you are scared. Keep rolling. That is the rule.’

‘And if they come for the tapes?’ I asked.

‘We have got duplicates going out with different coaches as soon as they are dubbed,’ she said. ‘You taught me that. Never leave the story in one place.’

I thought of the old Coalface tapes, the way we had smuggled them past pit gates and factory toilets. Same instinct, different decade.

•

We reached Trafalgar Square in early afternoon, the column of people spilling into the open space like water finding its level. Nelson stared down at the lot of us with his usual stone disdain, pigeons sulking round his boots.

The stage at the top of the steps was already crowded: speakers, union banners, photographers leaning in at dangerous angles. Sound spilled out over the square – slogans, speeches, the odd burst of music – bouncing off the stone.

From our vantage point halfway up the slope, the scale was dizzying. People as far as I could see: packed under the trees, pressed against the fountains, clustered at the mouths of side streets where the police lines held.

‘Christ,’ Alex breathed beside me. ‘It is like somebody shook the whole country and poured it into one place.’

‘Not bad for a day trip,’ I said, but my mouth was dry.

Stewards moved in small knots, checking edges, making sure the elderly and kids were not stuck in the tightest spots. Our hand signals – practised in the hall until we felt ridiculous – now made urgent sense. Slow. Stop. Back. Spread.

At first, the police presence felt like a background fact. Lines of blue at the edges, horses further back, vans parked in side streets. You always noticed them – the helmets, the rigid stance – but they were part of the furniture of protest by then.

It shifted in tiny ways. A van repositioned so it blocked an exit. A line of officers stepping forward in formation, then back again, as if testing the ground. A gap that had been open suddenly filled by mounted police, big animals pawing at the tarmac.

'They are tightening it,' Shell said quietly, appearing at my side. 'Look.'

She pointed towards the top end of the square, where Whitehall opened out. There were more helmets there now, more shields. The route we had been told would be kept clear seemed narrower, as if someone had quietly drawn the lines closer.

'Can we get people out along the sides?' I asked.

'Some,' she said. 'Not all. The coaches are nowhere near here. If they start pushing, we have got nowhere to flow to.'

'Maybe they will not,' I said, trying to make it sound more confident than I felt.

She gave me a look that said we both knew better.

Somewhere to our left, there was a crack of something hard on something hollow, followed by a roar. At first I thought it was just another chant, until I saw the ripple in the crowd – a sudden surge, people turning their heads.

'What was that?' Alex asked.

'Could be anything,' I said. 'Bottle. Barrier. Do not jump at shadows.'

But shadows were thickening. Another sound – the deep, unmistakable thud of mounted hooves when they hit the ground in unison. The line of horses at the top of the square shifted, bodies bunching.

'Here we go,' Len muttered, coming up behind us. He had swapped his flat cap for a hard hat someone had pressed into his hands. 'Get your front line ready.'

Our stewards moved on instinct. Those nearest the horses spread out, forming a loose barrier between the mounted line and the densest part of the crowd. Hands went up: slow, slow, keep moving, do not crush.

The police charge did not come all at once. It came in pulses – a step forward, batons up, then a sudden drive into the crowd that sent people scrambling sideways. Screams, the sound of metal barriers tipping, that awful noise when a body hits stone.

‘Hold the line!’ Shell shouted, voice cutting across the chaos. ‘Walk, do not run! Make space at the back!’

Someone behind us panicked and pushed. The force travelled through the crowd like a shudder. For a second my feet were not fully under my control, carried by the sheer mass of bodies. The fountains flashed by on my right, water slopping at their edges as people climbed up to escape the crush.

Ahead, I saw Lisa go down under a wave of people, armband disappearing.

‘Lisa!’ I bellowed, forcing my way towards where she had vanished.

Two blokes between us had locked arms and were trying to push back gently, creating a pocket of space. I shoved between them, dropping to my knees in a gap they had opened. Lisa was half-squashed against the base of a lamppost, face pale, glasses askew.

‘Can you breathe?’ I shouted over the din.

She nodded, but her eyes were wild.

‘Up you get,’ I said. ‘You are First Aid, remember? People need you vertical.’

The two blokes used their arms like levers, easing people sideways just enough for us to haul her up. Once she was standing, she shook herself like a dog out of a river.

‘I am fine,’ she gasped. ‘See to that lad.’

Behind her, a young man was pressed against the stone, chest heaving too fast. His eyes were glassy; he was making little grabbing motions with his hands.

‘Panic attack,’ she said automatically, shifting into nurse mode. ‘In through your nose, out through your mouth. Look at me. What is your name?’

The world narrowed to that tiny patch for a moment: Lisa’s steady voice, the lad’s ragged breathing, the thump of boots around us. Then a scream from the other side of the square dragged me back.

‘Danny!’ someone yelled. ‘They have got one!’

I turned to see a snatch squad moving in – half a dozen officers in visored helmets pushing through the crowd with a single figure trapped in their centre. It was one of our stewards, the shaved-headed girl from training, armband twisted up round her bicep.

She looked small between them, feet barely finding purchase as they hauled her towards a waiting van.

‘Do not go,’ Len said, hand on my arm. ‘You cannot get her out. Watch. Remember.’

I wanted to barrel after them, every muscle in me straining to close the distance. Instead I dragged my eyes to the details. The numbers on the helmets. The

angle of approach. The way one officer swung his baton almost lazily at someone who shouted too close.

'They came from the left,' I said aloud, forcing the words out. 'Six of them. No warning. She was not doing anything except holding the line.'

'Good,' Len said grimly. 'Keep going.'

Around us, cameras were up. One of the camcorders had found higher ground on the plinth of a statue, its operator braced against the stone as if in a storm. I cupped my hands round my mouth and shouted upwards.

'Keep rolling!' I yelled. 'This is the bit they will lie about!'

The operator – a lad from one of the art schools – stuck his hand up in acknowledgement and panned to follow the squad.

•

As the afternoon wore on, the square became a series of pockets. Calm here, chaos there. People dancing round a drum next to others crouched over someone with a head wound. A line of families trying to get out past a wall of shields.

At one point I saw a police van stranded in the thick of the crowd, its windows spidered with cracks. Someone had set a small fire beneath it – a pile of placards shoved under the chassis, flames licking at the metal. People were cheering, throwing whatever they could find.

For a heartbeat the temptation was there – hot and simple – to join in. To pick up a bit of broken masonry and add my own arc to the air. Years of bitterness, from Orgreave to Mrs Cartwright in Finchley, surging up my arm.

Then I saw, in the same frame, a woman with two kids trying to edge their way past the burning van, eyes wide. There was nowhere for them to go except under the horse line or back into more bodies.

'Stewards!' I shouted, voice raw. 'We need a corridor here!'

Jase appeared out of nowhere, arm linked with another steward, sweat shining at his temples.

'Here,' he said. 'We have got you.'

We formed a chain, bodies angled to create a thin channel between the worst of the crush and the fire. It was not much, but it was enough for the woman and her kids to slip through, clutching each other's hands like lifelines.

'Thank you,' she mouthed as they passed.

'Tell your kids this is why we do not leave it to the politicians,' I said, not sure she heard me over the noise.

On the far side of the van, a group of police advanced, shields up, batons ready. They moved in that slow, implacable way that meant they were not stopping for conversation.

‘Back, back,’ Shell’s voice cut across the square. ‘Walk away! Do not give them a reason!’

Not everyone listened. A bottle flew. A stone. One of the cops swung his baton at a bloke in a leather jacket who had got too close, catching him high on the cheek. Blood spattered the pavement.

Before I could move, one of our queer comrades – Gav, from the youth project, small and wiry – darted in, dragging the injured man back by his collar just as a horse’s hooves crashed down where his legs had been.

‘Stupid bastard,’ Gav shouted in his ear as they stumbled into the relative shelter of a doorway. ‘You want to be a martyr, do it somewhere that does not get the rest of us killed.’

He looked up at me, eyes blazing.

‘Got any bandages?’ he demanded.

‘Lisa!’ I called, and she was there again, hands already reaching for her bag.

•

Somewhere between one surge and the next, time seemed to stutter. I found myself jammed against the side of a building with Shell, coming up for air in a pocket of stillness. Her hair had worked itself loose, sticking damply to her forehead. There was a smear of someone else’s blood on her sleeve.

‘How are we doing?’ I asked, throat shredded.

She let out a sharp laugh that was halfway to a sob.

‘I have lost count of who is where,’ she said. ‘We have got stewards trapped all over the place. The phone tree is useless in this mess. The cops are cutting off exits. It is like someone designed the square for this.’

‘They kind of did,’ I said. ‘Empire loves its staging.’

She leaned her head back against the stone and closed her eyes for a second.

‘I keep thinking, if we had not done Steward School, how much worse would this be?’ she said. ‘Then I think: if we had twice as many stewards, would it be better, or just twice as many people for them to hit?’

‘We cannot do their job,’ I said. ‘We can only try to stop them doing the worst version of it.’

She opened her eyes and looked at me. In them I could see the same equation I had been turning over for weeks: risk versus impact, cost versus crack.

‘If something happens to you today,’ she said suddenly, ‘I will never forgive you.’

‘That is not how forgiveness works,’ I said.

‘It is now,’ she replied.

Before I could answer, there was a sudden push at the mouth of the alley. A line of officers had moved across it, blocking our little pocket. One of them stepped forward, hand reaching out, fingers closing round Shell’s arm.

‘Right, you,’ he said. ‘You are coming with—’

He did not finish. Shell twisted like she had rehearsed it, dropping her weight and slipping her arm free so neatly it was almost elegant. His hand closed on nothing. For a split second he looked surprised, then another surge of bodies knocked him sideways and broke the moment.

‘Move!’ she yelled, grabbing my wrist and pulling me deeper into the alley before the gap closed entirely.

We slammed up against a locked service door, chests heaving.

‘That was tidy,’ I managed.

‘Thanks, Steward School,’ she said, breathless. ‘Also ballet classes when I was seven.’

Without thinking about it, I reached out and pressed my hand briefly to her shoulder, steadying her, then wiped the streak of blood from her cheek with the edge of my sleeve. She blinked hard once, then opened her eyes again, something fierce and unguarded there.

‘We are not dying in a bin alley,’ she said. ‘If we are going out, it is somewhere with better lighting.’

‘Deal,’ I said.

We looked at each other for a second too long, the chaos outside receding just enough for me to feel the space between us. Then someone crashed into the other end of the alley and the spell broke.

‘Later,’ she said.

‘Later,’ I echoed, not sure what I meant by it.

•

By early evening the square was a war zone. Fires burned in corners, sending smoke up to mix with the exhaust from hovering helicopters. Shop windows along the Strand were smashed in, shards glittering on the pavement. Sirens wove a thin, constant thread through everything.

Our stewards were scattered, herding who they could towards buses, tube stations, any exit that was not blocked. Legal observers, fluorescent jackets dulled with grime, scribbled frantically in notebooks as arrests piled up.

I found Jase near Charing Cross, standing stock still while a torrent of people flowed past him on either side. His face had gone grey under the dirt.

‘Oi,’ I said gently, putting a hand on his shoulder. ‘Come back.’

He blinked and focused on me as if from very far away.

‘I froze,’ he said. ‘They charged and I just… I could not move. I could see them coming and I did not shift. People were pushing and I just stood there. I am supposed to be a steward.’

‘You are a steward,’ I said. ‘You are also human. Did you see where they came from?’

He nodded, swallowing hard.

‘From the side street by the bookshop,’ he said. ‘There were six. No, seven. One of them tripped over the kerb. I laughed. Then I thought he would probably kill me.’

‘There you go,’ I said. ‘You have just given me more detail than most people will manage in a year. That is going in the report. That is what you do if you freeze. You turn into a witness.’

He took a shuddering breath.

‘I thought I was going to die,’ he said.

‘Me too,’ I replied. ‘Couple of times today. Does not mean we will. Not if we can help it.’

I squeezed his shoulder.

‘Get on a coach if you can,’ I said. ‘Tell your mum you did alright. Tell her you will take the bins out all week. She will forgive you for not being Superman.’

He let out a strangled laugh and nodded.

As he turned away, I saw the tape on his arm – the steward armband – was half torn. I straightened it without thinking, smoothing the cloth over his sleeve.

‘There,’ I said. ‘Still on duty till you are home.’

•

By the time we finally made it back to The Furnace, the sky was black and the square felt like a bad dream someone else had had. The bar was rammed with people talking too loudly, as if volume alone could keep the images at bay.

Charlotte had already claimed a corner table and was spreading out notes, everyone who came through the door being dragged over for a quick “tell me what you saw”. The camcorders were stacked beside her, tapes carefully labelled in her neat hand.

‘How bad?’ I asked, voice raw.

‘Bad,’ she said. ‘Good, in a perverse way. We have seen enough to know they lost control. We have got multiple angles on at least three unprovoked charges. We have got footage of that van, before and after. We have got arrests that look like kidnappings.’

‘And us?’ I said. ‘How many down?’

‘Eight definite arrests from our lot that we know of,’ she said. ‘Could be more. A dozen injured enough to need hospital. Lisa has gone with them. She is already giving statements about police tactics in A&E, apparently.’

‘Of course she is,’ I said.

Shell appeared with two mugs of tea and sank into the chair opposite, moving like someone twice her age.

‘Any word from Scotland?’ she asked.

‘Phone lines are a mess,’ Riz said, dropping into a seat. ‘But from what I have heard, Edinburgh was not pretty either. They tried to kettle them on the bridge. Did not work. Scots are slippery.’

‘We will know more tomorrow,’ Charlotte said. ‘Tonight we get down what we can while it is fresh.’

She slid a notebook towards me.

‘Start with where you were when you first saw the horses move,’ she said. ‘Give me timestamp approximations if you can. Anything distinctive – banners, shop signs, the smell of petrol – all of it.’

‘The smell of petrol is going to be a recurring motif,’ I said.

‘Good,’ she replied. ‘It will annoy the censors.’

I took the pen and the noise of the room fell away. In my head, the day replayed: steam on coach windows, Shell’s hand slipping out of a copper’s grip, Gav dragging that bloke from under the horse, Lisa’s calm voice in the crush.

When you look back at it on the news, the footage cuts and jumps. Van burns. Window breaks. Horse rears. Neat captions laid over the top: RIOT, CHAOS, ANARCHY. No faces, no names, no lines of people quietly locking arms so someone else can get through.

We had the raw version. Smeared, shaky, amateur, but ours.

Later, when Keira sat at my kitchen table in 2025 and asked, ‘Were you there?’, this is the day I thought of. Not as a single image, but as a sequence of choices. Coach lists. Armbands. A whistle between my teeth. A hand on a kid’s shoulder telling him he had done enough.

If Coach Grid was the map and Steward School was the muscle memory, Trafalgar was the moment everything collided. State power. Street anger. History

coming down for a look. And us, in the middle, trying to keep people on their feet and the camera running.

'You alright?' Shell asked, bringing me back.

'Not really,' I said. 'You?'

'Ask me in thirty-five years,' she replied.

I looked down at the notebook, at the first words I had managed to get onto the page.

31 MARCH 1990. TRAFALGAR SQUARE. WE WERE THERE.

It would take months, years, for the ripples to reach the places they needed to go. Finchley. Newsrooms. Cabinet rooms. Polling booths. But sitting there with my tea going cold and my hand cramping round the pen, I knew this much: whatever story they told about "the Poll Tax riot", ours started here, in the bodies and tapes we had kept out of the fire.

Chapter Twenty – April 1990, London – The Square: What Really Happened

The first week after Trafalgar went on much longer than seven days.

Sleep came in snatches. I would close my eyes and be back in the square: horses bearing down, the sound of metal on bone, the smell of burning plastic and petrol. Then I would be jerked awake by the phone, or the door, or Shell standing over the bed saying, 'Danny, they have nicked another one, get up.'

For a while it was nothing but that: bruises, nightmares, phone calls from A&E and custody desks. We did not have a plan, we just had people bleeding on our sofas and ringing from police stations.

By the time we hit April, The Furnace did not feel like a venue. It felt like a triage centre someone had disguised as a youth club.

There were bodies everywhere. Not dead – though it was a close thing for a couple – but draped over mismatched chairs and sagging sofas, arms in slings, bruises in slow, ugly bloom. Kids from the estate, pensioners from Barnsley, students with broken specs. A lad from Glasgow with his arm in plaster, trying to roll a cigarette with his good hand while telling anyone who would listen that "ours was way worse than your riot".

Shell moved through them all with her clipboard and a mug that may once have contained tea. She had divided the room into rough areas with scraps of paper blu-tacked to the walls.

TRAFALGAR – WITNESSES. TRAFALGAR – ARRESTED. MEDICAL. LEGAL.

‘You are not supposed to triage a march like an accident and emergency,’ I said, watching her juggle a solicitor’s phone number, a packet of painkillers and a plate of toast.

‘It was an accident and an emergency,’ she replied. ‘Now it is a caseload. Where are the tapes?’

‘In Charlotte’s lair,’ I said.

She tilted her head towards the stairs.

‘Go help,’ she said. ‘If you stay down here you will start trying to fix people’s bruises with speeches.’

•

Charlotte had colonised the upstairs rehearsal room. When I opened the door, it felt like walking into the inside of a machine.

Cables snaked across the floor between battered tellies, VHS players and the two camcorders we still had custody of. A trestle table groaned under the weight of neatly stacked tapes, each with a strip of white label along its spine in Charlotte’s tidy hand.

TSQ–NORTH–A. TSQ–NORTH–B. TSQ–SOUTH–WIDE. TSQ–VAN–CLOSE. ARRESTS–EAST. HORSES–WEST.

In the corner, one of the estate kids – Mickey, now officially too tall to pretend he was thirteen – was sitting cross-legged with a notebook, rewinding and fast-forwarding tapes on command.

‘Pause at the charge,’ Charlotte said, not looking up as I came in. ‘Now back ten seconds. Keep it going. No, do not stop when it gets messy.’

On the small screen, a familiar scene played and re-played. The mounted line at the top of the square. A banner reading NO POLL TAX bobbing in the middle distance. The ripple through the crowd as the horses surged.

‘Again,’ she said. ‘Slower. Freeze when the baton goes up.’

Mickey’s tongue stuck out as he concentrated. The tape whined obediently.

‘You are going to wear it out,’ I said.

‘We will dub it before it snaps,’ Charlotte replied. ‘Anyway, better to break it in here than have it seized in court with something we have not seen on it. Come in, or stand there narrating?’

I stepped round the cables and perched on the edge of the table.

‘How bad is it?’ I asked.

She paused the tape and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

‘Depends what you mean by bad,’ she said. ‘In terms of human suffering: bad. In terms of evidential value: worse. For them.’

She jerked her chin towards the wall. She had covered it with sheets of paper, each headed with a simple question.

WHEN DID THEY CHARGE? FROM WHERE? WHO WAS HIT FIRST? WHO WAS ARRESTED? WHAT WERE THEY DOING?

Under each, she was building lists in different coloured pens. Timestamps. Descriptions. Names where we had them. Next to some of the entries a small asterisk and, in the margin, a scribbled note: TAPE REF: TSQ–VAN–CLOSE, 00:13:24–00:14:02.

‘You took my ‘lies they told out loud’ folder and built a cathedral round it,’ I said.

‘Do not get romantic,’ she replied. ‘This is a factory. We are not making art, we are making a product.’

The word factory landed in my chest like a weight. We had had days of shock. This was something else. Shock was what they did to you. A factory was what you built.

‘Product?’ I said, wounded.

‘A single ninety-minute tape,’ she said crisply. ‘Title: ‘The Square: What Really Happened.’ It needs to be clear enough for someone’s nan to follow and boring enough that a magistrate has to watch it all before they sign another warrant.’

‘Boring?’ I protested. ‘We nearly died.’

‘Exactly,’ she said. ‘If we cut it like a pop video, they can say we have glamorised the trouble. If we jump about too much, they can claim we have taken things out of context. So we do not. We show them the whole thing: people arriving, kids on shoulders, banners, speeches, then the charges, the burns, the batons. Very slow. Very clear. Very dull.’

‘You are describing my speaking style,’ I said.

She ignored me.

‘We intercut it with stills of injuries and the names of those arrested,’ she went on. ‘We put the legal support number on the screen at the beginning and the end. We add subtitles for the worst audio so they cannot pretend not to hear someone say ‘Stop hitting me, I am trying to get out.’ ’

‘Subtitles?’ I said. ‘We are not exactly the BBC.’

‘We have got a typewriter and Letraset,’ she replied. ‘And about twenty kids who think this is more fun than homework. We will manage.’

Mickey looked up from the VCR.

‘We could do title cards,’ he said shyly. ‘Like in old films. ‘BEFORE.’ ‘AFTER.’ ‘UNPROVOKED.’ ’

Charlotte’s mouth twitched.

‘Maybe not that last one,’ she said. ‘But the first two, yes. Good. That gives you a job when your wrists give out from rewinding.’

He grinned and bent back over the tape.

‘Where did all these come from?’ I asked, gesturing at the stacks.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘And Scotland. And Manchester. And a lad from Bristol who filmed his telly and the bit outside his front door when people kicked off there too. Word went round pretty fast after the first couple of nights. ‘Send your tapes to The Furnace, they will know what to do.’ I do not know whether to be flattered or terrified.’

‘Both,’ I said.

‘I put the call out at the debrief,’ she added. ‘And Shell stuck a notice up next to the kettle: ‘HAVE YOU GOT FOOTAGE FROM 31 MARCH? BRING IT HERE. WE WILL PAY POSTAGE.’ We are up to forty-seven tapes and counting.’

‘Forty-seven?’ I said, swallowing.

‘And that is just the ones who could bear to watch it again,’ she said. ‘Some people rang and said they had taped the news coverage but could not bring themselves to look at it yet. We told them: leave it on top of the telly, we will be here when you are ready.’

She pressed play again. On-screen, a line of officers advanced, shields up. A woman with a pushchair tried to get past them, mouth moving soundlessly.

‘We have seen this one,’ I said, jaw clenching.

‘We watch it again,’ she replied.

•

There is a particular kind of nausea that comes from rewinding the worst day of your life in slow motion.

We watched people we loved get hit from half a dozen angles. We saw our own bodies from outside, tiny moving pieces in a crowd shot from the top of a plinth. At one point Mickey pressed pause and I found myself frozen mid-shout, mouth wide, hand outstretched, looking like someone I did not entirely recognise.

‘That is you,’ he said unnecessarily.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘You look…’ He frowned, searching for a word.

‘Old?’ I suggested.

‘Organised,’ he said.

I did not know what to do with that, so I pretended a great interest in the tracking.

For every sequence we flagged, Charlotte made us write a short, precise description.

HORSES – WEST, 00:10:03–00:11:45. Mounted officers charge into crowd where no missiles visible. No warning given. Banner “BARNSLEY AGAINST THE POLL TAX” in foreground. Elderly man with stick knocked down. Steward (female, shaved head) trying to hold line; is later seen being snatched in ARRESTS–EAST.

‘It is like doing a gig setlist with added blood,’ I muttered.

‘It is like doing a war crimes docket with fewer resources,’ Charlotte replied.

Every so often someone would bring more material.

‘Tape from Manchester,’ Shell would say, appearing in the doorway. ‘They blocked the road by the Arndale. It went bad. They want to know if we can use any of it.’

‘We will log it under ‘Other Cities’,’ Charlotte said, taking it like a midwife receiving a newborn. ‘We can use snippets at the beginning to show this was not just London.’

Or: “Photos from Leeds. Broken arm, head stitches, bruises like maps.”

We spread them on the floor and matched them to timecodes where we could. A lad with a Nikon had caught the moment just after a baton hit – not the strike itself, but the expression on the officer’s face, half glee, half shock at his own strength.

‘We will use that one,’ Charlotte said quietly. ‘Freeze frame.’

‘Is that not cruel?’ I asked.

‘He is wearing a helmet and a number,’ she replied. ‘He can sue if we have got it wrong.’

•

Once we had watched enough to feel like we were drowning in it, we started to build the tape.

It was not glamorous. It was hours of Mickey pressing buttons on three different VHS decks while someone else shouted, ‘Now!’ and ‘Stop!’ at the right time.

We began with arrival footage. Coaches pulling in by the river. People unloading banners. Kids on shoulders. Someone with a home-made placard that simply read I CANNOT AFFORD THIS in careful joined-up writing.

‘Slow,’ Charlotte insisted. ‘Give them time to see it. This is the bit they never show on the news.’

Over it, we laid a simple typed card: 31 MARCH 1990 – TRAFALGAR SQUARE DEMONSTRATION.

Then the speeches, but not too many. Enough to show the range – trade unionists, community groups, a nurse talking about hospital cuts. We left in the bit where someone fluffed their line and laughed, because it made the crowd human.

After that, the tightening.

From three different angles you could see it: lines of officers in the background at first, then nearer. Vans edging closer. Horses moving into position.

‘Do we put narration on it?’ I asked. ‘Like a voiceover?’

‘No,’ Charlotte said. ‘If you talk over it, they can say you are telling people what to see. We trust their eyes. We add subtitles for clarity, not spin.’

So instead of my voice, we used text.

WHITEHALL, 15:22 – POLICE LINE MOVES FORWARD. NO ANNOUNCEMENT.

TSQ WEST, 15:24 – HORSES ENTER CROWD. NO EVIDENCE OF MISSILES.

We wrote it like we were filing a report to someone who would not believe us unless we described everything.

The worst bits we did not cut away from. There was a sequence where a man went down under a horse’s hooves and did not get up for a long time. We showed the moment before, the moment of impact, the scramble to pull him clear, the paramedics pushing through. It felt obscene to linger, but cutting would have felt like lying by omission.

‘People can look away if they need to,’ Charlotte said. ‘But they cannot say it did not happen.’

When we had enough of the square, we moved to the aftermath.

Hospital corridors. Waiting rooms. Close-ups of plaster, stitches, bruises. We filmed them here, in The Furnace, against the same white wall we used for band photos. Each person said their name and where they had been when they were hit or arrested.

‘Claire,’ said a young woman with a cut above her eye. ‘I was near the fountains, trying to get my little brother out.’

‘Fred,’ said an older man from our tenants’ association. ‘I was standing still, holding my stick up so people did not run into me.’

‘Jason,’ said Jase, voice shaking just a fraction. ‘I was a steward on the south side. I froze. Then they came.’

‘Are you sure you want that in?’ I asked him afterwards.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘If I cannot be brave in the moment, I can be honest now.’

We added their names as simple subtitles. No music. Just the sound of their breathing and, in some cases, the faint murmur of the bar downstairs.

At the end we put up a final card.

IF YOU WERE THERE AND HAVE NOT GIVEN A STATEMENT, CONTACT: and the legal support number in big black letters, twice.

‘That is it,’ Charlotte said at last, fingers ink-smudged. ‘Master done.’

We all sat for a moment, listening to the quiet mechanical churn as the VHS deck finished whirring.

‘You know this is going to be used in court,’ I said.

‘Good,’ she replied. ‘That is what it is for.’

‘They will say it is biased,’ I said.

‘It is biased towards the truth,’ she said. ‘They have got the BBC. We have got a bank of tellies and Mickey’s fast-forward thumb. That will have to do.’

•

Once the master was done, the real work began.

We had one decent VHS deck, a temperamental second-hand one, and an ancient machine Riz had found in a skip and coaxed back to life. We rigged them all up, looped them together with a spider’s web of cables and started dubbing.

The duplication room was a sauna of warm plastic and concentration. Tapes piled up like a new kind of coal seam.

‘How many do we need?’ I asked.

‘As many as we can get before the heads wear out,’ Shell said from the doorway. ‘We have got a list.’ She waved a sheet of paper.

The list had its own columns.

UNIONS. COUNCIL ESTATES. CHURCHES. COMMUNITY CENTRES. LIBRARIES. SAFE TORIES.

‘Safe Tories?’ I said.

‘The ones who might be persuadable,’ she replied. ‘Ones with a conscience or an eye on the next election. We will courier tapes to a few offices where we know a secretary who owes us a favour.’

‘You have got a column for that?’ I asked.

‘Finchley Faces was not a one-off,’ she said. ‘Access is not just about Rupert. It is about anyone who can get a tape onto the right desk.’

I thought of the old kitchen table in Grimethorpe, the night we wrote NOISE, BASE, MOVEMENT, ACCESS, DISRUPTION across a page and signed it. This was the Disruption column made plastic.

‘We will keep one here,’ Charlotte said, labelling the first copy carefully as MASTER 1/KEEP. ‘Under lock and key. One goes to the lawyers. One to the unions. One to the press people we still half-trust. After that, we spray.’

‘Spray?’ I said.

‘Like graffiti,’ she said. ‘Everywhere at once, where they cannot quite scrub it all off.’

We set up shifts. Kids from the estate took turns sitting with the machines, checking for glitches. Riz rigged a crude log on the wall where we ticked off each successful copy.

‘You lot used to sneak cassettes into pits,’ Mickey said, feeding another blank tape into the hungry mouth of the deck. ‘Now we are doing it with telly.’

‘Progress,’ I said. ‘Of a sort.’

At night the room glowed blue from the screens, flickering images of the square playing silently on a loop as the machines did their work. Sometimes I would stand in the doorway and watch the same horse rear, the same banner fall, over and over, until the edges blurred and I could almost believe we had dreamt it.

‘Come to bed,’ Shell would say eventually, finding me there.

‘In a bit,’ I would reply. ‘Just one more batch.’

She would snort and say something about me turning into my dad, falling asleep in a chair with the telly on and a report in my lap.

‘At least his reports did not show him nearly getting flattened by mounted police,’ I said once.

‘No,’ she said. ‘They showed his mates getting sacked instead. Go to bed.’

•

Getting the tapes out was its own operation.

We had learnt from Coalface and from the strike. Never move everything in one go. Never send all the copies to one place.

Coach drivers who had brought people to London left a tape on the dashboard to take back to their branch. A teacher who used The Furnace youth room on Thursdays took one in a padded envelope and promised to “show it to a few colleagues, off the record”. A vicar in a brown jumper tucked one under his arm as if it was just another hymn book.

‘What if they confiscate them?’ one of the kids asked as we handed over another stack.

‘Then they have to write down that they have done it,’ Shell said. ‘Which gives us more evidence.’

‘It is all evidence with you,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘That is the point.’

We sent one to Rupert in Finchley, of course.

‘He was there,’ Charlotte said. ‘He does not need a tape.’

‘He needs something on his desk,’ Shell replied. ‘Something he has to either watch or put in a drawer and feel guilty about every time he opens it.’

She wrote the label herself: RUPERT HAVERSHAM – PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL.

‘Do you think he will watch it?’ I asked.

‘He watched the miners,’ she said. ‘He watched Mrs Cartwright. He will watch this.’

In my head, I pictured him in some wood-panelled office, the tape machine whirring as our square flickered on his television. I imagined him pausing at the bit where the steward with the shaved head was taken and wondering if she had been on one of his lists once.

•

In 2025, when Keira asked, ‘How did it go from a bad day out to them scrapping the tax?’, this is one of the things I tried to explain.

Not just the march itself, not just the anger and the broken glass, but the weeks after: the tapes, the labels, the kids with cramped hands, the lists on the wall. The way we sat in that overheated room and watched it again and again until we could bear to do something with it.

‘It was like a factory,’ I told her, pointing to the faded log sheet I had kept for some reason. ‘Raw material in, finished product out. But the product was proof.’

She frowned at the words on the page.

‘TSQ–VAN–CLOSE, 00:13:24–00:14:02,’ she read aloud. ‘You kept timecodes?’

‘Of course we did,’ I said. ‘It is no good just saying ‘they went mad’. You have to be able to say, ‘At sixteen twenty-two, at the west side of the square, a mounted officer hit a man who was walking away.’ That is how you shift it from story to evidence.’

‘And the tape was the Fifth Fingerprint?’ she asked.

‘Part of it,’ I said. ‘Disruption and Legacy. It made it harder for them to pretend it had been a jolly day out ruined by a few bad apples. It gave cover to councillors who wanted to break ranks. It clogged up court time. It travelled in ways we could not.’

‘Did you think about who would watch it in the future?’ she said. ‘Like you thought about me with the boxes?’

‘Not in those words,’ I said. ‘We thought about magistrates and juries and union branches. We thought about kids born later, being told it was all hooligans and looters, and their mum or dad being able to say, ‘No, look. I was there. That is me. That is what they did.’ ’

She looked back down at the log sheet.

‘And did it work?’ she asked.

‘Not on its own,’ I said. ‘It never does. You need marches and strikes and councillors resigning and a Prime Minister cornered. But without this,’ I tapped the paper, ‘they could have written any story they wanted about that day. With it, they had to work a bit harder to lie. Sometimes that is all you get.’

She nodded slowly.

‘It must have been hard, watching it over and over,’ she said.

‘It was,’ I said. ‘But it was harder for the people on it. The least we could do was sit with them while the tape ran.’

The VHS machine that had churned out those copies sat in the corner of my flat now, dusty and inert. We had not been able to bring ourselves to throw it away. It had been obsolete for twenty years, but somewhere inside it there was probably still a flake of plastic carrying an image of a lad from Glasgow insisting his riot was worse.

‘You kept the machine?’ Keira said when she noticed it.

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘You do not get rid of the tools that built your case.’

She smiled and wrote that down.

Chapter Twenty-One – June 1990, London – Court-Clog Day

The first summons arrived on a Wednesday, buried between a gas bill and a pizza leaflet.

‘They could at least have the decency to send it in a black-edged envelope,’ Shell said, turning the thick paper over in her hands. ‘So you know it is a bereavement.’

By the end of the week, The Furnace office looked like the Registry of Death and Taxes had emptied itself onto the in-tray.

Pink, white, off-yellow. Different fonts, same tone. The state speaking in block capitals.

YOU ARE SUMMONED TO APPEAR… FAILURE TO ATTEND MAY RESULT…

They were not all for Trafalgar – some were old arrears cases, some council tax disputes – but a good chunk had the same date stamped on them in the same thick red ink.

JUNE 22.

'It is like they booked the theatre,' Riz said, flipping through a stack. 'One night only. Featuring: us.'

'More like a matinee and an evening performance,' Shell replied. 'Look at the times. Nine-thirty, eleven, two o'clock, three o'clock. They are trying to process a whole movement before close of business.'

She spread the summonses across the big table and started sorting.

'Borough,' she said. 'Offence. Vulnerability.' She glanced up at me. 'You can tell I have been doing this a while when I use it like a column heading.'

'We could just tell everyone to plead guilty and not pay,' someone muttered from the doorway.

'We could,' Shell said. 'If we wanted them bankrupted and scared off the streets. Or' – she straightened, eyes hard – 'we could finally use that defence pack we have been talking about since '85. The one we swore no one would stand in front of a bench blind again if we could help it.'

The word "pack" set something fizzing under my ribs. It took me straight back to the cramped kitchen in Grimethorpe the night we wrote NOISE, BASE, MOVEMENT, ACCESS, DISRUPTION on a notebook page and I had said, 'Plain English guide to your rights.'

'You have still got that notebook?' Shell asked.

'Of course,' I said. 'I keep it with the tally disc.'

'Good,' she said. 'We do not throw away exhibits, remember?'

She cleared half the table with a sweep of her arm.

'Right,' she said. 'If they want a show, we will give them one. But it will be in our language.'

•

Shell's kitchen became the war room.

We dragged in an extra table from upstairs, wedged it against the worktop and covered both with paper. Old leaflets, press clippings, copies of the Community Charge regulations Riz had charmed out of a bored clerk. A photocopy of a photocopy of a legal aid leaflet, now so faint you had to squint to make out the text.

On the fridge, between Lily's school drawings and a postcard of Durham Cathedral, Shell stuck a fresh sheet of A4.

DEFENCE PACK – TO DO.

Underneath she made a list.

WHAT IS A SUMMONS? WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DO NOT GO? WHAT CAN THEY ASK? WHAT CAN YOU SAY? WHO CAN HELP?

'We keep it to four pages,' she said, tapping her pen. 'Maybe six if we have to. Big print. No Latin. No 'heretofore'.'

'You do know some of us quite like Latin,' Riz objected mildly.

'You can do the footnotes,' she said.

We divided the work.

Riz took the regulations and translated them into English. Every time he tried to sneak in a "notwithstanding" Shell crossed it out.

'If my Auntie Dor can not read it while she is stirring a pan of stew, it is no use to us,' she said.

Charlotte went through her archives and pulled every clipping we had on poll tax court cases so far. Most of them were from Scotland: grainy pictures of long queues outside sheriff courts, quotes from pensioners talking about "criminalising poverty".

'We cherry-pick examples that show people answering back and winning adjournments,' she said. 'Otherwise it just reads like a list of defeats and no one will turn up.'

I took charge of tone.

'We do not promise miracles,' I said. 'We do not say 'you will win'. We say, 'you will not be alone and this is what to expect'.'

Shell nodded.

'And we emphasise that if you go and speak, you make it harder for them to rush through the list,' she said. 'Clogging the court is not a side effect, it is the point.'

'Disruption,' I said softly.

She gave me a bleak little smile.

‘Finally,’ she said. ‘The fifth heading gets its day out.’

We worked till late. Lily fell asleep on the sofa with a felt-tip pen still in her hand, a streak of blue across her cheek.

‘I feel like a cross between a social worker and a propagandist,’ Riz said, massaging his cramped fingers.

‘Welcome to adulthood under Thatcher,’ Charlotte replied.

By the time we were done, the “DEFENCE PACK” was real: four double-sided sheets, stapled at the top left, written in plain English. Boxed sections explained how to ask for an adjournment, what to do if you did not understand a question, how to say, ‘I cannot afford this,’ without sounding like you were apologising for existing.

On the back page we put a simple line in bold.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Underneath, a phone number for The Furnace.

‘We are going to regret that bit,’ I said.

‘We are already regretting everything else,’ Shell replied. ‘Might as well be consistent.’

•

Court day dawned grey and muggy. By eight, the pavement outside the magistrates’ court was already crowded.

People held their summonses like talismans. Some clutched plastic bags with documents in, others had nothing but the stiff envelope in their pocket. A few wore their best clothes, as if for a job interview or a funeral.

Shell moved through the crowd with a canvas bag full of defence packs, pressing one into any hand that looked empty.

‘Have a read while you are waiting,’ she said. ‘If you have got questions, we will try to answer them. We can not do it for you, but we can stand near you.’

‘Will it help?’ an older woman asked, voice tight.

‘It will not make it worse,’ Shell said. ‘And it might slow them down.’

The police presence was low-key: a few constables at the door, trying to look bored. Inside, the air smelled of polish and anxiety.

We had split our people into teams.

‘Observers,’ I said, ticking off a list. ‘Defendants. Support. Floaters.’

‘I still think ‘floaters’ sounds like something you skim off a pond,’ Riz muttered.

‘Then do not write it on your badge,’ I replied.

Jonathan Finch, the solicitor who had once scared a council official into backing down over a housing case, was waiting for us in the foyer, tie slightly askew.

‘You understand I can not represent all of them,’ he said, sweeping a hand at the mass of people. ‘Legal aid is not a magic pudding.’

‘We know,’ Shell said. ‘But you can brief them. Tell them what to say. Tell them they are allowed to ask questions. They listen to you more than they listen to us.’

He sighed, then nodded.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Get them into the side room in tens. I will do my best.’

We commandeered a small interview room and turned it into an impromptu classroom. Ten people at a time shuffled in and perched on plastic chairs while Finch ran through the basics.

‘You are not criminals,’ he said, voice firm. ‘You are citizens in dispute with your council over a tax. Hold your head up. Speak clearly. If you do not understand a question, say so. If you need more time, ask for an adjournment. If they will not give you one, that is on the record.’

He held up one of the defence packs.

‘These are good,’ he said. ‘They will not save your life, but they might save your nerves.’

Shell shot me a quick, tired grin.

•

The list outside Courtroom 3 went on for pages. Names and case numbers marched down the clipboard like a roll call of the borough.

‘They have overbooked,’ Riz said, running his finger down the columns. ‘They are hoping half of them will not turn up.’

‘They misjudged the biscuits,’ I said, nodding towards the side table where someone from the court service had set out a small plate of custard creams. It was already under siege from children.

Once the magistrate took her seat, things moved fast.

‘Case of X vs Y Council,’ the clerk intoned. ‘Non-payment of Community Charge.’

People went in, people came out, clutching bits of paper.

‘Adjourned,’ one man said, eyes bright. ‘She said I had to bring proof of my income. I told her I could not read half the forms they sent. She looked embarrassed. It was great.’

‘They gave me an order,’ a woman in her fifties said, lip trembling. ‘But it is less than they wanted. And he said if I keep paying what I can they will not send the bailiffs.’

‘They told me if I did not sign something they would put me in prison,’ a teenager said, furious. ‘So I told them about my mum and they backed off.’

Every story got noted down. Observers scribbled details on clipboards: how long each case took, what questions were asked, which magistrates were dismissive and which at least pretended to listen.

‘We are doing time-and-motion on injustice,’ Riz said under his breath.

‘We are clogging the pipes,’ I replied.

At one point, Shell came out of Courtroom 2, face flushed.

‘They are trying to herd people through three at a time,’ she said. ‘Standing them in front of the bench like a school assembly.’

‘Can they do that?’ I asked.

‘They can try,’ she said. ‘We can tell people to insist on their own hearing. It says ‘you’ on the summons, not ‘you and two strangers’.’

We started passing the word down the queue.

‘If they call you in as a group, ask politely to be heard alone,’ I said. ‘If they huff, all the better. It goes on the record that you asked.’

It slowed things down beautifully.

By mid-afternoon, the clerk’s hand was cramping. The magistrate’s patience was visibly fraying.

‘We will have to adjourn the rest to another date,’ she said at last, rubbing her temples. ‘We can not sit all night.’

There was a murmur in the courtroom that might almost have been called smug.

Outside, on the pavement, Shell exhaled a long, shaky breath.

‘That,’ she said, ‘is the sound of us being a stone in their pipe.’

‘They will just list them again,’ someone objected.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘We will come back. And in the meantime, more people will have the pack.’

•

Not every story that day was a small victory.

There was Sarah, for starters.

She was the young mum from the estate who had once cried in our office because she could not work out how to fill in a form about her rent. Now she sat on a hard bench outside Courtroom 4, clutching her summons with white knuckles.

‘You do not have to do this,’ I said quietly.

‘I know,’ she replied. ‘But if I do not, they win, do they not?’

When her case was called, Shell and I went in with her, sitting on the hard wooden seats at the back. Finch stood beside her at the front.

The clerk read out the accusation as if it was a shopping list. The magistrate peered over her glasses.

‘Do you accept that you have not paid the amount due?’ she asked.

‘I could not pay it,’ Sarah said, voice shaking but audible. ‘I am not refusing. I just do not have it. I have got two kids. My husband is out of work. We are already behind on the rent.’

The magistrate made a face that might have been meant to look sympathetic.

‘We hear that a lot,’ she said. ‘The law is the law.’

Finch stepped in.

‘My client has not received clear information about her entitlement to benefits,’ he said. ‘She has difficulty with written forms. She has come today in good faith and is trying to resolve matters.’

He gestured towards the defence pack in her hand.

‘She had to get advice from a community centre because the council’s own letters are incomprehensible,’ he added.

The magistrate tutted at the word “incomprehensible” as if it were a personal insult.

‘This is not a forum for criticism of council communications,’ she said sharply.

‘Perhaps it should be,’ he replied.

There was a tiny intake of breath from the clerk.

In the end, Sarah walked out with an order she would struggle to pay. It was not a story you could put in a leaflet under “success”.

Outside, she leant against the wall and slid slowly down until she was sitting on the pavement.

‘I knew it,’ she said flatly. ‘I knew they would not care.’

‘They had to listen to you for ten minutes,’ Shell said, crouching beside her. ‘They had to hear your name and your kids’ names. They had to write you into their book. You clogged up their morning. That is not nothing.’

‘It does not pay the bill,’ Sarah said.

‘No,’ Shell replied softly. ‘It does not. We will see what we can find from the solidarity fund for the worst of it. But you came. That matters.’

Later, when we went back through the observers’ notes, Sarah’s case was there: time taken, questions asked, magistrate’s exact phrasing when she said, ‘the law is the law’. It went into the growing folder labelled COURT – STORIES.

Evidence, of a sort.

•

Towards the end of the day, a man in a cheap suit appeared in the corridor and hovered near our group.

‘Can I help you?’ Shell asked, wary.

He shifted from foot to foot.

‘I work upstairs,’ he said, dropping his voice. ‘Clerical.’

‘Congratulations,’ Riz said. ‘It is always nice to put a face to the handwriting.’

The man flushed.

‘I just wanted to say,’ he said, ‘you are not the only ones who think this is wrong. We get told to process so many of these, there is barely time to check if they have even spelt people’s names right.’

‘That is the least of their sins,’ Shell said.

‘I know,’ he said quickly. ‘I can not…’ He glanced towards a nearby door. ‘I can not say too much. But there are forms people can fill in to write off arrears in cases of hardship. They do not advertise them. You have to know what to ask for.’

‘And what do you ask for?’ I said.

He took a breath.

‘Discretionary remission,’ he said, as if the words tasted odd in his mouth. ‘If they look blank, ask them where to get the form. If they still look blank, mention you will be writing to the Ombudsman.’

Riz’s pen was already moving.

‘And you are telling us this because…?’ Shell asked.

‘Because I am not allowed to tell them,’ he said, nodding towards the people clutching their summonses. ‘Not without getting hauled in for a chat about my ‘attitude’. You are noisy enough to get away with it.’

He looked at his watch.

‘I have to get back,’ he said. ‘Good luck.’

‘Thank you,’ Shell said quietly.

After he had gone, she added a new line to the next batch of defence packs.

IF YOU ARE IN GENUINE HARDSHIP, ASK ABOUT ‘DISCRETIONARY REMISSION’. DO NOT LET THEM FROWN YOU OUT OF IT.

‘Access is not always a bishop and a back room,’ she said to me. ‘Sometimes it is a bored clerk with a conscience and a stack of forms.’

•

By the time the court cleared for the day, everyone was frayed.

The magistrates looked tired. The clerks’ hands were stained with ink. Our people had that peculiar drained look you get when you have had to be brave in small, sustained ways for hours.

On the pavement outside, we gathered in a loose circle.

‘Raise your hand if you got an adjournment,’ I called.

Hands went up. Not all, but enough to be a forest rather than a lonely tree.

‘Raise your hand if you said something you were proud of,’ Shell added.

More hands. A few rueful smiles.

‘Raise your hand if you feel sick and want to go home and never see a summons again,’ Riz said.

Every hand.

We laughed, which helped.

‘We will put together what we have learned today,’ I said. ‘The pack will get better. Next time it will be harder for them to rush. This is not a one-off stunt. It is a process.’

‘Everything is a process with you,’ someone grumbled, not unkindly.

‘That is how you outlast them,’ I replied.

•

In 2025, when Keira picked up the COURT – STORIES folder from the floor and asked why on earth I had kept what looked like minutes of a particularly depressing parish council meeting, this is what I tried to tell her.

‘You can not see the effect from one day,’ I said. ‘You have to stack it. Summons by summons, adjournment by adjournment. Every time they had to re-list a case, that was another little crack. Every time someone like Sarah said ‘I can not pay’ on the record, it made it harder for them to pretend we were all just chancers and thugs.’

She flipped through the pages.

‘You even wrote down how many minutes each case took,’ she said.

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘Disruption is not just throwing bricks. It is wasting time. Their time. Making bureaucracy feel its own weight for once.’

‘It reads like…’ She hesitated.

‘Like what?’ I prompted.

‘Like the dullest thing in the world,’ she said. ‘And also like the bit that actually made a difference.’

‘That is infrastructure for you,’ I said. ‘Boring and vital. The fifth heading was never going to be glamorous. It was always going to look like this: people with leaflets in queues, someone in a cheap suit whispering about a form, magistrates sighing as they realise they will have to come back next week.’

She held up one of the defence packs, its staple rusted, edges thumbed soft.

‘And you kept these,’ she said.

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Exhibits. Proof we did not take it lying down. Proof that when they tried to turn us into case numbers, we turned up and clogged their nice neat docket instead.’

She smiled, small and fierce.

‘I wish I had been there,’ she said.

‘No, you do not,’ I replied. ‘You are exactly where we were aiming at.’

Chapter Twenty-Two – November 1990, London – Thatcher Falls

It was a wet, grey Thursday that did not look like history.

London does that. The big days arrive in the same colour as the small ones. You still have to find your socks, still spill tea on the kitchen counter, still argue with Shell about the rota for the bar.

I was in The Furnace office when the phone went.

I was going through a box of VHS returns from Glasgow and Dundee, making a rough tally of “copied and passed on” notes people had scribbled on torn envelopes. Shell was downstairs with a group planning winter benefit gigs – anti-Poll Tax, anti-evictions, anti-every-bloody-thing that year had thrown at us – and I could hear Riz’s voice in the mix, dry as ever, arguing about whose turn it was to do the door list. The window was cracked open, letting in the smell of damp brick and the distant rush of the main road.

The phone rang its sharp, old-fashioned ring. I wiped my hands on my jeans and picked it up.

‘Ashcroft.’

‘Danny. It is Rupert.’

I straightened instinctively, like a kid called to the head teacher’s office. Even after all these years I never quite shook the feeling that speaking to an MP meant using your best manners.

‘All right, Rupert?’

‘As all right as one can be,’ he said, voice dry as paper. ‘Are you near Westminster this lunchtime?’

‘Not exactly. East End. Why?’

‘Because I think you might wish to be. Red Lion, half twelve. Bring Charlotte if she can manage it. And perhaps Shell, if she is not barricading anything.’

‘Is this about…?’ I did not quite know how to phrase it. You could feel something moving under the surface that week: the news about the leadership challenge, the talk of letters going in, Heseltine hovering like a posh crow.

Rupert cleared his throat.

‘I have reason to believe today may… interest you,’ he said. ‘Let us say that. I would like you to see it with your own eyes, not hear it on the evening news.’

He did not sound triumphant. He sounded tired.

‘Right,’ I said slowly. ‘We will see what we can do.’

‘You have earned that much, at least,’ he added, then said goodbye in that clipped way and rang off.

I stood there with the receiver still in my hand, listening to the silence on the line, then to my own heart giving a little kick. Something was happening. And if Rupert – old Finchley Tory Rupert Haversham – was suggesting I come down to Westminster, it was not going to be small.

Shell appeared in the doorway, clipboard tucked under her arm, hair pulled back in a bandana.

‘Who was that?’ she said. ‘You look like you have seen a ghost. Or the bar bill.’

‘Rupert,’ I said. ‘He wants us at the Red Lion for half twelve.’

She raised an eyebrow.

‘The posh pub where he wants us to meet him?’

‘Same one.’

‘What for?’

‘He did not say outright, but…’ I spread my hands. ‘You have seen the headlines.’

A slow grin started to form on her face, then faltered. She did not want to jinx it.

'If this is one of those days,' she said quietly, 'we cannot just watch it in a room full of suits.'

'He said bring you. Charlotte too, if she can get away.'

'Charlotte is at the paper,' Shell said. 'She is probably already hovering round a television. I will ring her.'

She turned to go, then looked back.

'If this is it, Danny…'

'I know,' I said. 'I know.'

•

Charlotte met us outside Westminster tube, breath clouding in the November air, camera bag slung across her body. She wore her usual uniform for days like this: boots, dark jeans, long coat, scarf wound tight like she was heading into a storm.

'Newsroom is a madhouse,' she said, kissing my cheek quickly. 'They will have feeds going in every bar from here to St James's. They said if I can get some colour, some reaction shots, they will take whatever I can file.' She glanced at Shell. 'If it happens.'

'If,' Shell echoed. 'Feels like waiting for the result after the strike vote, this.'

We walked up Whitehall together, past the Cenotaph, past the ministries. There were more press vans than usual parked along the street, cables snaking into doorways, satellite dishes turning lazily on rooftops. A group of tourists stood near Downing Street's black railings, pointing at the line of police with machine-like interest.

Outside the Red Lion there was already a cluster of people. You could tell who worked in which building by the cut of their clothes and the shape of their lanyards. Civil servants in plain suits smoking quick cigarettes. Researchers with folders under their arms. A couple of lobby journalists comparing notes. Everyone pretending this was just another lunchtime, but the way they checked their watches told a different story.

Inside, the pub was heaving. Coats draped over every chair, steam lifting off wet scarves. There was a faint smell of wet wool and gravy and whatever cheap cleaner they used after last night's session. The televisions – one above the bar, another on a shelf at the far end – were tuned to the news channels, sound turned up for once.

Rupert was at a small table near the back, tie slightly loosened, a half-drunk pint of bitter in front of him. He got to his feet as we pushed through the crowd.

‘Ashcroft.’ He shook my hand warmly. ‘Shell. Charlotte. You made good time.’

He looked different from the last time I had seen him in Oxfordshire. The easy countryside sheen was gone. There were deeper lines round his eyes, and his hair, while still carefully combed, had surrendered more fully to grey. He looked like a man who had spent too many nights in meetings that went on too long and said too little.

‘Thought you might be imagining things,’ Shell said. ‘Or that we would come all this way to watch her survive again.’

‘Believe me, Mrs Walker, I had much the same thought,’ Rupert replied. ‘But word is firm. The writing has been on the wall for some time. Today they will read it aloud.’

He gestured for us to sit. Charlotte slipped her camera from its bag, checking the battery.

‘You will want to be ready,’ he said to her. ‘I suspect there will be some expressions worth capturing.’

‘If she cries, I want it on film,’ Charlotte muttered.

Rupert gave her a look that was half reproach, half resigned amusement.

‘Have you eaten?’ he asked. ‘They do a decent pie, if you do not mind waiting.’

‘We will eat later,’ I said. ‘Already got enough in my stomach.’

He nodded, as if that made perfect sense.

On the television above the bar, the newsreader talked through the leadership challenge: the failed first ballot, the shock, the ‘iron’ suddenly looking more brittle. They cut to shots of Downing Street, the black door closed, a hint of movement behind net curtains. Somewhere not far from where we sat, history was being drafted in careful civil service words.

‘I remember the first time I saw her in person,’ Rupert said quietly, eyes on the screen. ‘Maiden speech. Determined. Sharp as a tack.’ He shook his head. ‘I never thought…’

‘That you would live to see the back of her?’ Shell said.

‘That she would do so much damage to the country she professed to love,’ he replied. ‘One does not like to think that of one’s own side. But facts are stubborn.’

Charlotte lifted her camera and took a shot of him, profile against the gloomy pub light.

‘For the private collection,’ she said.

He smiled faintly.

‘I would rather you saved your film for the lady of the hour.’

The volume on the television nudged up. A reporter outside Number Ten was speaking in that hushed, excited tone they reserve for wars and royal births.

'…expected any minute now to come to the microphones and make a statement…'

The pub quietened. Conversation thinned, glasses were set down rather than slammed, people turned their heads towards the screens.

My palms felt damp. It was ridiculous. I was not about to go on stage. I was just another face in a crowded pub. But under the nerves there was something else – a long, slow ache that had started six years earlier on a cold morning in South Yorkshire.

For a moment I was back there: the half-light of dawn, the huddle of men at the pit gates, the police lines, my dad's body hitting the ground. The smell of coal dust and sweat and fear. His hand on my shoulder later, fingers trembling, as he said, 'Do not let them get away with this, lad. Not entirely.'

I swallowed hard and focused on the television.

The door on the screen opened. She stepped out: Margaret Hilda Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the woman who had called my dad's union leaders the enemy within, who had broken communities like ours over her knee and told us it was for our own good.

She looked smaller than in my memory. Not physically; she was still that compact, determined figure in the tailored suit and pearls. But there was a tightness around her mouth, a strain at the edge of her eyes. The famous helmet of hair held, but the face beneath it no longer looked carved from certainty. It looked, for the first time, like a face that understood defeat.

The pub held its breath.

'Having consulted with my Cabinet colleagues…' she began.

Her voice was the same – that precise, schoolmistress tone that had rung out over my mam's quiet kitchen radio and in every clip they ever showed of her in the Commons. I had heard it announce pit closures, police funding increases, new laws that would make our lives harder. It had become the sound of a certain kind of power, one that never expected to be challenged from below.

As she spoke, I glanced around the room.

At the bar, a couple of young researchers in shirtsleeves stood with pints in hand, mouths slightly open. An older woman in a sensible skirt suit had tears in her eyes. Near the door, two lads in leather jackets with Anti Poll Tax badges pressed close, their expressions combative but wary, like they could not quite trust what they were seeing.

'…I have concluded that the interests of the Party and the country would be best served if I were to resign as Leader of the Conservative Party…'

The words hung in the air like smoke.

There was a second of stunned silence. Even the television seemed to hesitate.

Then the pub erupted.

Cheers, shouts, applause, whistles. Someone whooped so loudly the glasses rattled. A chair scraped back, someone clapped someone else on the back hard enough to make them choke on their beer. The two lads at the door started up "Maggie, Maggie, Maggie – out, out, out!" at the top of their lungs. A barmaid cried, then laughed at herself for crying.

Shell gripped my hand so tightly it hurt.

'Did she actually say it?' she gasped, half laughing, half incredulous. 'Did she actually say resign?'

'She did,' Charlotte said, raising her camera and snapping again and again – the television, the crowd, Rupert's face as he sat very still, eyes bright. 'God, I never thought I would see this.'

On the screen, Thatcher's voice wobbled just slightly as she spoke about "the proudest moment of my life" and "the will of the people". It was the closest she had ever come to an apology, and it was not one, not really. But there, in the corner of the Red Lion, with Shell's fingers digging into mine and Charlotte clicking away, I watched the woman who had seemed untouchable begin to step down.

The landlord, who had spent the eighties pretending to be neutral while serving Newcastle Brown to half the unions in Britain, let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a bark.

'About bloody time,' he said, loud and deliberate.

That seemed to tip the room into something more than shock. A man in a grey jumper came round with a tray of hastily poured shots – whisky, mostly, a few random spirits grabbed off the shelf.

'On the house,' he called. 'To the end of her. And to everyone she tried to break.'

Glasses were taken, raised, clinked. Rupert accepted one, eyeing the amber liquid warily.

'Not exactly House of Commons Merlot,' he muttered.

'Better for the soul,' Shell said, downing hers in one and grimacing.

I lifted mine.

'To Bill,' I said quietly. 'And Victoria. And everyone at Grimethorpe.'

Shell's face softened.

'To Grimethorpe,' she echoed. 'And to all the pits. Even if they shut every last one, they will never erase us.'

Charlotte added, ‘To Hillsborough. To all the people they tried to blame. To every name they turned into a headline and then tried to forget.’

Rupert raised his glass more formally.

‘To everyone who believed this country could be more just than it was told to be,’ he said. ‘Even when it was inconvenient.’

We drank. The whisky burned on the way down, bright and sharp.

On the television, the caption did the work of history in a line: PRIME MINISTER TO RESIGN AFTER FAILING TO WIN FIRST ROUND OF LEADERSHIP ELECTION. A smaller strip underneath reminded everyone: POLL TAX CONTROVERSY “MAJOR FACTOR” IN LOSS OF SUPPORT.

‘They have actually put it on the ticker,’ Charlotte muttered. ‘They have said it out loud.’

The camera cut to footage of the march in March – our march, our square – except from some BBC crane angle that made it look tidy and far away. You could not see the fear in people’s eyes from up there. You could not see smashed teeth, the old woman with the broken wrist, Bobby’s bruised ribs. But you could see the smoke, the lines, the horses. For half a second a banner flickered into view: The Furnace logo, sketched in marker on an old bed sheet.

It was gone before anyone else noticed, but my stomach flipped.

‘That is ours,’ Charlotte said. ‘Even if they do not know it. That is ours.’

They rolled other footage: miners’ strike, Wapping, West Belfast, Europe rows. It all blurred for a moment. My eyes were not on the screen any more; they were back in a different kitchen, in a different year. Bill at the sink, shoulders sagging as the radio told him he was an extremist. Coal dust in the crease of his neck. The tally disc in my pocket, pressing against my thigh as I promised myself I would not still be crawling round the bottom of a hole when I was forty.

I had sworn I would get out. Sworn I would make noise. That was as far as the plan went.

Now I was here, twenty-four years old in a Westminster pub, watching the woman who did her best to break my village step down.

‘Oi!’

Shell was still there beside me, her fingers locked round mine, but her free hand grabbed my sleeve like she was anchoring herself.

‘Is it really happening?’ she breathed, half laughing, half disbelieving. ‘I rang The Furnace earlier and told them to get a telly on – and they are already screaming down the line…’

Charlotte jerked her chin at the television. They were showing a shot of the door of Number Ten, a garden of microphones waiting like vultures.

‘It is happening,’ I said. My voice came out hoarse. ‘She is packing her bags.’

Shell slapped her palm on the table, leaned over and kissed my cheek so hard it stung.

‘We actually did it,’ she said, laughing in a way I do not think I had ever heard before – no edge, no bitterness, just disbelief. ‘We actually did it.’

‘Steady on,’ I said, though I was grinning now, could not help it. ‘There were a few others involved.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she waved a hand. ‘Heseltine’s bouffant, Geoffrey bloody Howe’s resignation, blah blah. But you know what I mean.’

She collapsed into the spare chair, grabbed my pint without asking and drained half of it.

‘They are already spilling out onto Whitehall,’ she said. ‘Someone has dragged a sound system out of some office, they are playing ‘Ghost Town’ too loud. The council lot are heading down from County Hall. We should go.’

The idea of cheering outside Number Ten, chanting while civil servants peered through net curtains, had its appeal. But the thought of pushing through that crowd made my legs feel like sandbags.

‘In a bit,’ I said. ‘Let us just… take this in.’

She studied my face, then nodded.

‘Alright, old man,’ she said, softer. ‘Five minutes. Then we go and annoy some Tories.’

The landlord appeared with three fresh pints without being asked, set them down like a priest putting out candles.

‘On the house,’ he said gruffly. ‘Do not get used to it.’

‘Cheers, Mick,’ Charlotte said.

He glanced up at the telly again, tenderness flickering in his eyes.

‘Never thought I would see the day,’ he murmured. ‘Thought she would outlive us all out of spite.’

We raised the glasses, but no simple toast felt equal to it.

‘To every march, every leaflet, every late night,’ Charlotte said dryly. ‘And to seeing them say it out loud for once.’

We drank.

•

A little while later, Rupert shifted in his seat, loosened his tie another notch and let out a long breath through his nose.

Shell slapped her palm on the table.

'Come to gloat, Haversham?' she said. 'Some new horror lined up as a replacement?'

Rupert looked between her hand and her face.

'If I were gloating in this room, Mrs Walker,' he said mildly, 'I would deserve whatever you threw at me.'

He gave her a weary look.

'Hardly,' he said. 'I have just endured a steady stream of grown men weeping into their pints and swearing they will never forgive Michael. I needed air. And a drink. And you lot.'

'Flattered,' I said.

He sat, unbuttoned his coat, signalled to the bar with a small lift of his hand. Someone brought him a whisky without being asked. He cradled it for a second, then raised it, not to the television, but to us.

'Well done,' he said simply.

Shell blinked.

'Come again?'

'You won,' he said. 'You and a great many others. You forced a reckoning. The Poll Tax has become untenable. My constituency surgeries have been… instructive, let us say. Your material,' he nodded at Charlotte, 'your maddeningly well-prepared briefings, the footage from the square – they have all had their effect. Do not let anyone persuade you this was just palace intrigue.'

He was not sentimental. He was still Rupert, still a Tory, still believing in the party like a religion. But for once there was no attempt to soften or spin.

I thought of Charlotte's Finchley Faces series spread out on our battered table, all those tired eyes and unpaid bills, little captions noting how many times they had written to their MP. I thought of the packet we had sent in Rupert's name to a handful of wavering backbenchers. I thought of the phone calls, the late-night typing, Charlotte's ink-stained fingers.

'You are saying a few photographs changed government policy,' I said, testing him.

'I am saying,' he replied, 'that when men who have never queued for a giro in their lives started facing rooms full of people who now could not pay, some of them listened. And when certain of us' – he gave me a sideways look – 'provided evidence those people were being misrepresented as thugs and anarchists, it made it easier for those same men to rebel.'

Shell folded her arms.

‘So what now?’ she said. ‘You lot swap one bastard for another and carry on? Or does something actually change?’

Rupert stared into his glass.

‘I honestly do not know,’ he said. ‘But the tax will go. You have my word on that. They will rebadge it, fidget with the levers, pretend it was always the plan. You will still have to fight them. But this particular weapon is blunted.’

The television had moved on to pundits, the usual faces in studio light explaining what we had just seen like we were too thick to grasp it unaided. One of them talked about how the “community charge fiasco” had alienated core supporters.

No mention of the nights people spent stuffing envelopes. No mention of the women who kept kitchen tables full of paperwork, babysat kids while others went canvassing. No mention of the VCRs overheating in the back room of The Furnace, of Shell’s hoarse voice after a week of phoning every estate on our lists. No mention of the court queue in Greenwich, prams and pensioners and punks raising their hands in unison.

‘Do you remember that first Coalface tape run?’ Charlotte said suddenly.

Shell laughed.

‘When we photocopied the covers in Mrs Palmer’s office and thought we were some kind of underground resistance because we hid them under packets of paper?’

‘And now we have got five whole schemes under our belt,’ Charlotte went on, counting on her fingers. ‘Cassette network. Furnace. Coaches and stewards. Finchley Faces. VHS and court packs. That is quite a CV, lads.’

‘Fingerprints,’ I said. ‘That is what I will call them – the schemes that grew out of the old headings in my notebook. Ashcroft Fingerprints. Sounds daft, but it will do.’

Shell pulled a face.

‘They are not just yours,’ she said. ‘Half of them were my idea and the rest belong to about three hundred people who will never get their name in a book.’

‘Ours, then,’ I said. ‘Ashcroft is just the one holding the pen.’

‘Better,’ she replied.

I took a beer mat and started jotting, because my hands needed something to do.

One: the cassette and gig network, a map of sympathy built out of basements and youth clubs, a snake of C90s across the country.

Two: The Furnace, bricks and mortar, a place where people could meet and plan and make mistakes together.

Three: coaches and stewards – the invisible skeleton of a march, all those bodies moved safely from A to B.

Four: Finchley Faces and Rupert's awkward question in some oak-panelled committee room.

Five: the VHS cascade and that ridiculous day in court when a judge gave up in the face of prams and pensioners.

I did not read them out like a manifesto. I just tapped each one with my thumb and let the pictures run in my head: a tape being pushed into a church hall machine; Shell falling asleep over a form; Jase in a steward's bib; Mrs Cartwright at Rupert's surgery; Sarah on a hard bench outside Courtroom 4. The words looked small on the cardboard, scruffy in my handwriting. They did not come close to capturing the hours, the fear, the arguments, the cups of tea gone cold between stacks of papers.

'Go on then,' Shell said. 'If we are naming them, we might as well toast them.'

Mick noticed before we even lifted our glasses. He grabbed a bottle of cheap cava from somewhere behind the bar and eased the cork out, foam spilling over his fingers. People cheered again, just because they needed an excuse.

'Right,' I said, standing up without thinking. My knees wobbled a bit but no one laughed. 'First one. To the tapes and the gigs. To every back room that let a bunch of miners' kids shout at their regulars.'

We drank.

'Second,' Charlotte said, rising too. 'To The Furnace. For existing at all, for staying open when we thought the bailiffs would close it, for every kid who found a sofa there instead of a police cell.'

We drank again. A few people nearby who did not know us joined in.

'Third,' Shell declared, voice clear. 'To the coach grids and the stewards who kept people from getting trampled while the Met did their worst. To the ones who froze but stayed anyway. To Bobby, who is probably watching this from a sofa and laughing his head off.'

There were murmurs of "Bobby!" from our lot in the corner who knew him. A few glasses clinked.

Rupert raised his whisky for the fourth.

'To truth,' he said. 'However unfashionable. To photographs that told stories better than any speech. And to having one's nose shoved in those stories until one can no longer pretend they are isolated incidents.'

'Finchley Faces,' Charlotte said under her breath. 'Never thought I would drink to Finchley.'

Finally, I took a breath for the fifth.

‘To the VHS and court packs,’ I said. ‘To every person who pressed play in a church hall or a union office and saw what really happened instead of what the papers told them. To every pensioner who walked into a court with a leaflet in their hand and refused to be cowed. To prams and pushchairs and sore feet. To Cannot Pay, Will Not Pay.’

The cheer that followed that one felt different. Less pub, more picket line. A chant started somewhere near the bar and rolled round the room, ragged and joyful.

‘Cannot pay—’

‘Will not pay!’

‘Cannot pay—’

‘Will not pay!’

I did not join in straight away. I watched instead. Charlotte’s cheeks were flushed, eyes bright. Shell was wiping at her face with her sleeve, laughing at herself. Rupert looked like a man who had wandered into church on the wrong holy day and was trying to work out the liturgy.

In the middle of it all, something loosened in my chest.

Was it us?

The question had been there since the first headline floated the idea of a leadership challenge. It was a whisper that did not go away. Was it really the tapes, the gigs, the endless meetings? Or were we just background noise to a story that was always going to end here, with some internal squabble over Europe and tax bands and personal rivalries?

I could not stand the not-knowing. I slipped out of the corner, shouldered my way to the bar and caught Mick’s eye.

‘Phone,’ I said.

He looked at me for a second, then jerked his chin towards the little hatch behind the bar.

‘Go on,’ he said. ‘Quick. And do not start ordering pizzas.’

The receiver was slick with years of other people’s panic. I dialled home from memory, finger stuttering on the buttons.

Mam answered on the second ring, breathless.

‘Daniel?’

‘Is Dad there?’ I said. ‘Have you got the telly on?’

‘It is on,’ she said, voice thick with it. ‘Your dad’s in front of it like it’s the bloody Cup Final. We heard—’

‘She said it?’ I asked.

‘Aye,’ came Dad’s voice in the background, and then he was on the line, rough and pleased all at once. ‘She said it. Resign. Right out of her own mouth.’

I shut my eyes for a second.

‘Good,’ I said.

‘Good,’ he echoed, and I could hear the smile in it. ‘Proud of you, lad. All of you.’

I swallowed.

‘Love you,’ I managed.

‘Aye. Get yourself home safe,’ he said, and then, softer, like he was speaking to me across a kitchen table: ‘And do not let them tell you it was nothing to do with you.’

‘Yeah,’ I said quietly.

I put the receiver back in its cradle and stood for a second with my hand still on it, letting the noise of the pub wash back in. Then I shouldered my way to our corner.

Charlotte looked up at me.

‘Yeah?’ she said.

‘It was us,’ I replied. ‘Not just us, not only us. But we were there in the gears. A bit of grit.’

She smiled.

‘That will be your book title one day,’ she said. ‘Grit in the Gears.’

‘Too poetic,’ I said. ‘I have already got one, remember.’

She tilted her head.

‘The Enemy Within?’

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Seems to fit.’

Outside, faint through the walls, you could hear the start of something – car horns, singing, a drum. London doing what London does when it does not know what to do with itself other than pour into the streets.

Shell drained her glass.

‘Come on then,’ she said. ‘We cannot sit in here all day. There is a Prime Minister’s leaving do and we are late.’

Rupert grimaced.

‘You are not—’

‘Oh, you are coming too,’ she told him. ‘You can practise being on the right side of history for once. Do not worry, we will stand between you and any flying cans.’

He hesitated, then stood.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘But if anyone asks, I am there to observe constituent reaction.’

We pulled on coats and scarves. The door opened and the cold bit in, sharp and clean. As we stepped out onto Whitehall, the grey sky above London felt a shade lighter. Not clear – it never is – but something had shifted.

Years from now, some historian will write a neat paragraph about that day. They will mention the letters, the ballots, the shadow cabinet manoeuvres, the calculations of men in suits who never once had to queue at a magistrates’ court. They might give a line or two to the Poll Tax riots, to the marches, to the non-payment campaigns.

They will not know about the biscuit tin under my bed, or the tapes that rattled their way up and down the country in the post, or the way The Furnace’s lights stayed on because someone’s mam fed the meter out of her pension. They will not see the ink stains on Charlotte’s hands, the blisters on Shell’s feet, the tally disc in my pocket.

That is alright. That is what I am here for.

We stepped into the flow of people, heading towards Downing Street, towards songs and banners and whatever came next. I tucked the beer mat with my five fingerprints into my wallet.

One woman had fallen. The system that made her was still standing. I knew that. We all did.

But for that messy, smoky lunchtime in November 1990, it felt like we had reached the end of the verse we had been singing since ’84. The chorus was still to come, the bridge unwritten, but the first part – the loud and furious part – had finally resolved into something like a chord.

Epilogue– November 2025, London – Enemy Within, Once More

By the time I ran out of words the light outside had gone that flat city grey you get just before the street lamps blinked on. My throat felt raw in a way that had nothing to do with shouting into microphones. Keira’s notebook looked like it had been through a minor war – pages bent, loops and arrows everywhere, one biro abandoned on the table and another drafted in from her bag as reinforcement.

The television had moved on. Thatcher's face was gone, replaced first by a cooking show and then by some panel debating rail fares. The caption about thirty-five years since her fall had marched off the edge of the screen. In here, tapes and photographs were spread over the table like we had been planning a heist.

Keira sat back, stretching her shoulders until they clicked. Her phone lay face down beside the mug she had long since emptied, the screen smeared with thumbprints.

'All right,' she said softly. 'That was… a lot.'

'That is the edited version,' I said. 'You should see the director's cut.'

She snorted, but the laugh broke into something else halfway through. She rubbed the heel of her hand under one eye, quick and annoyed with herself.

'Sorry,' she said. 'It is just… you talk about it like it is… I do not know. Like it is a gig that overran. 'We opened this place, we did these things, some of us got battered, some of us got arrested, anyway, next track.' Then I look at the dates and it is court cases and people going to prison and—'

She hesitated, glanced down at Dad's photograph, then back up.

'And then I look up what happened after,' she said, quieter, 'and your dad is gone and…'

She trailed off. One of the photographs had ended up near her elbow: Dad outside the pit, hand shading his eyes, colliery headgear behind him. She turned it so it was square in front of her and studied his face like she could read the missing bits.

'You have been googling,' I said.

'Obviously,' she said. 'I am not a monster.'

She flipped the phone over and woke it with her thumb. The glare lit her face from below. She slid and tapped, then pushed it across the table so it rested between the tapes.

On the screen was a grainy still from a VHS transfer: The Furnace stage, cables taped down any old how, banner crooked at the back. A band mid-song. The audio bar along the bottom said GLASS SAINTS – LIVE, 1989 (RARE).

'This is you,' she said. 'Someone uploaded it five years ago. Two comments. One of them is 'my mum said she met my dad at this gig'.'

I leaned in. The image was terrible – streaks, static, a faint line along the bottom where the tape had stretched – but it was us. Me with hair and a shirt I would not be caught dead in now. Alex sideways to the mic, mouth open mid-yell. A row of kids at the front, arms up. I could hear the song in my head even before she turned the volume up enough for the tiny speaker to cope.

It sounded thinner than I remembered, but there it was – Shell's hand-painted banner just visible at the side, COAL NOT DOLE, a white smudge of text in a black rectangle. At the edge of frame, someone's placard jammed between monitor and scaffold pole: THATCHER OUT.

'There are a couple of bits on here about The Furnace,' Keira went on. 'Blog posts from people who came to gigs, a zine someone has scanned. One of the Poll Tax defence pack leaflets is in an archive in Manchester. There is a quote from Shell in an oral history thing about Orgreave. She is just 'Michelle W., Furnace organiser'.'

Her finger moved, scrolling. It all looked very clean and small like that, boxed in and sanitised. A line about 'riot footage distributed via activist networks'. A paragraph on the Poll Tax boiled down to two sentences and a footnote.

'There is nothing,' she added, 'about you lot printing Rupert's briefing papers in the back room and feeding them to the right people at the right time.'

'It was more complicated than that,' I said automatically.

'Yeah, but still.' She looked up at me. 'You can see the corners where you were, if you know where to look. It is like someone has photoshopped you almost out and left a shadow.'

I picked up one of the old C90s and turned it over. The screws were faintly rusted, the plastic ridged where the mould had not been perfect. On the label, in my younger self's careful scrawl, I had written GLASS SAINTS – DEMO (PLEASE PLAY).

'You are the first person who has ever wanted to look that closely,' I said.

'That cannot be true.'

'Journalists do not count,' I said. 'Present company excepted, obviously.'

She made a face, then let it go. When she spoke again her voice had lost the joking edge.

'So,' she said. 'I have to ask you the thing my tutor will ask me. Was it worth it? All of it. Strike, The Furnace, the coach grids and the Square. Being called the enemy within for half your adult life.'

There it was. No decorations.

I sat back. The question had been there all afternoon, crouched behind every memory. In the Square, on the coach grid, in Finchley, in the VHS room, in the court corridors. In Dad's kitchen. In the welfare club when we voted. In the quiet after the march back to work.

'Depends what you mean by 'it',' I said eventually. 'And what you mean by 'worth'.'

‘You know what I mean,’ she said. ‘The strike, The Furnace, all of it. You lost your pit anyway. Thatcherism carried on. There was Major, then Blair, then austerity. You moved south and shouted in basements for a decade. Now there is a yoga studio where your venue was and the government are still cutting things. So…’

She let the end of the sentence hang.

Out in the street a bus sighed past and the flat settled round it. The little room felt very full.

‘My dad,’ I said, ‘died with his head up. Not everyone got that. Some lads drank themselves into the ground when the pits shut. Some did not make it past fifty. Dad went out knowing he had fought, and knowing I had not just taken the first job that came along in some warehouse. If we are doing a balance sheet, that goes in the ‘worth it’ column.’

I set the tape down and tapped a photograph of the march: a river of bodies, banners held high, faces tiny but fierce.

‘We learned things,’ I said. ‘How to stand in front of a line of police without flinching. How to organise bail. How to get someone out of a cell at three in the morning without begging. How to make councillors nervous. How to get a bunch of teenagers from three estates to see themselves as allies instead of rivals because there is a bigger enemy over the bridge. You cannot unlearn that. Some of them fought hospital closures. Some fought Clause 28. Some just knew, when their landlord tried to bully them, that they did not have to roll over.’

Faces came with it. Shell on three phones, eyes red from no sleep. Riz pacing The Furnace foyer with a list of kids who needed safe places and a stack of tokens for the late buses home. Alex arguing with a sound engineer twice his size because the queer support band were getting the same soundcheck we were, or we were not playing.

‘We kept queer kids alive,’ I said quietly. ‘You do not see that on Radio 4. You do not put it on a graph. But there are people in their fifties now who got through those years because there was somewhere they could go on a Friday night where nobody took the piss out of how they dressed or who they held hands with, and there were posters on the wall about safe sex instead of silence.’

Keira’s pen was idle now. She was just looking at me.

‘And Thatcher?’ she asked.

‘A Prime Minister fell,’ I said. ‘And I know, I absolutely know, that part of the reason she fell when she did and how she did is because thousands of people like us shoved from angles that do not show up in tidy narratives. We got people into rooms they were not supposed to be in. We put different pictures in front of people’s eyes. We made it harder to pretend none of it was happening.’

I shrugged.

‘Can I prove that?’ I said. ‘Can I draw a straight line from a badly recorded gig at The Furnace to some backbench Tory deciding to sign a letter instead of stay loyal? Of course not. History does not work like that. But I can point to five things we did – five fingerprints we left – and I can see where they line up with the cracks. Sometimes that has to be enough.’

Keira chewed the inside of her cheek. The phone screen had gone dark again; in its blank surface I could see a warped reflection of the tapes between us.

‘So… yes?’ she said. ‘Worth it?’

‘Ask me on a bad day and I might say no,’ I said. ‘Ask Shell and you will get a different answer depending on whether she has just come back from a protest or from the doctor. Her daughter Lily runs a housing rights charity in Manchester now – learned the trade young, that one. Her son Lucas teaches carpentry at a community college now, builds sets for the local theatre on weekends. Ask Charlotte and she will tell you she loves this country and hates it in equal measure. Ask Riz and he will say it was worth it if the kids he works with do not have to fight the exact same battles. Ben will tell you it was worth it the first time he realised the kids upstairs knew Shell as something other than a cautionary tale. It is not maths.’

I poured the dregs from the pot into my mug. It came out dark and strong.

‘Today,’ I said, ‘sitting here with my knees complaining and my old life on the table and the telly saying it was all demographics and Europe, I would say yes. It was worth it. Not because it fixed everything. Because we chose not to sit still.’

For a moment there was nothing but the faint rush of traffic outside and the ticking of the cheap wall clock.

Then Keira leaned forward and flicked one of the tapes with her fingernail.

‘So what happens to these?’ she said. ‘Because if you die and your landlord gets a clearance company in, this lot is gone. Then all the men in suits are left alone with the story.’

‘Cheery,’ I said.

‘I am serious,’ she said. ‘This is primary source material. You have got VHS of court days, for God’s sake. You cannot just leave it in a cardboard box.’

‘I do not keep them under the bed,’ I said. ‘I am not a monster either.’

She rolled her eyes, then rummaged in her bag.

‘Our library have got a digitisation project,’ she said. ‘Oral histories, community archives, that kind of thing. There will be a queue, but if I tell my supervisor I have got a living, breathing ex–enemy within with tapes in his front room, they will bite my hand off. We could get them cleaned up. Upload the bits people

can see. Put the rest somewhere safe. Get the Poll Tax defence pack into a catalogue instead of a cardboard box.'

'We?'

'You do not get to complain about how they tell your story on telly and then leave your version in a cardboard box,' she said. 'That is not allowed. There is probably a clause about it in the journalist's handbook.'

I thought of strangers listening to Shell's voice, seeing Dad's face on some archive website. Of academics picking over flyers and setlists. The idea made me itch. It also loosened a small, unexpected knot in my chest.

'All right,' I said slowly. 'We can… look into it.'

' 'Look into it',' she repeated with deep scepticism. 'Classic old man answer.'

'Watch it,' I said. 'I know where you live.'

'Upstairs from you,' she said. 'Where the Wi-Fi actually reaches the bedroom.'

She grinned, but there was something fierce underneath.

'We will start with three tapes,' she said. 'One gig, one meeting, one of the Square. I will bring the uni recorder next week. You can sit here making tea and tutting while we capture them. Then we will see who wants them.'

I could picture it: the whirr of the machine, the blue bar crawling across a screen, Shell's voice moving from magnetic tape to however many servers you need now. The thought made me oddly tired and oddly hopeful.

'You realise,' I said, 'that means other people will get to argue about whether it was worth it.'

'Good,' she said. 'That is the point, is it not? You lot did not do all this so nobody would talk about it.'

She looked down at Dad's photograph again, then back up.

'Will you take me?' she asked suddenly.

'Where?'

'Grimethorpe,' she said. 'The pit. Or what is left of it. For the ending of the piece. 'Our correspondent travels north with her source to see where it all began.' ' She pulled a mock-serious face. 'We can stand in a business park car park and you can point at a B&M Bargains and say 'This used to be a way of life.' And maybe I can meet Shell properly somewhere that is not a crackly VHS tape.'

'Might be a Tesco,' I said. 'Do not libel B&M.'

'Whatever,' she said. 'You know what I mean.'

I thought of the last time I had been back. Estates thinning out. Pit lane blocked, headgear gone, new houses and an office block where the winding gear had been. The little memorial garden with plaques. Dad stamping his feet in the cold outside the gates, snow catching in his hair.

'Yeah,' I said. 'All right. We can go.'

She shut her notebook with a soft slap.

'Deal,' she said. 'In return, I will not quote you directly calling yourself 'the enemy within' unless you want me to.'

'Oh, leave it in,' I said. 'We earned it.'

She laughed, and the weight in the room shifted a fraction. She gathered her pens back into their case and stood, stretching until her back clicked again.

'Right,' she said. 'I am going to write this before my brain loses it. Text me when you have checked your calendar for a Grimethorpe field trip.'

'You think I need a calendar these days?' I said. 'My social life is appointment letters and two-for-one cinema vouchers.'

'Then it will not be hard to find a free day, will it?' she said.

At the door she hesitated, hand on the frame much as she had that morning.

'Danny?'

'Mm?'

'Thanks,' she said. 'For… you know. Letting me in.'

'You lot opened the door,' I said. 'We just kept jamming it with bits of wood. This is your story now as much as mine.'

She rolled her eyes at the sentiment, but she was smiling when she went.

•

We went north a fortnight later, after I had rung Shell and Ben and promised to stop pretending I would sort the tapes 'one day'. Shell said she would get Lily to bully a friendly archivist in Manchester into sending links to forms. Ben, in his steady way, just said 'About time'.

The train out of King's Cross was full of people heading for meetings and family visits and football matches. Keira kept up a steady commentary about the snacks trolley and the price of tea, fingers flying over her laptop keys in between. Every so often she glanced up to ask something – a name, a date, the layout of The Furnace – then dived back into whatever she was writing.

The closer we got, the more the view shifted from terraces and light industrial units to fields and the ghosts of old workings. You cannot always see where a pit was if you do not know how to read the land, but once someone has pointed it out, you start spotting the scars – an odd rise where there should not be one,

a stand of trees planted to cover something, a road that kinks for no obvious reason.

At Doncaster we followed the signs out to the bus stand for the last leg. Grimethorpe was only a name on a board to most of the people milling around, but the word still did something to me.

As the bus rolled past the welfare building – still standing, miraculously, though the windows were new and the sign said COMMUNITY CENTRE now – I could hear brass drifting faintly from inside. Sunday morning rehearsal.

'The Grimethorpe Colliery Band,' I said to Keira. 'Still going. They outlasted the pit by forty years and counting.'

She tilted her head, listening. The sound was muffled but unmistakable – cornets warming up, someone running scales on euphonium.

'I thought…' she began.

'Everyone does,' I said. 'But they kept at it. Competitions, recordings, tours. Still one of the best in the country. You can close a pit but you cannot silence brass if the players refuse to put their instruments down.'

Grimethorpe itself was both familiar and not. The high street had different shopfronts, the pub names had changed, but the slope of the road and the wind that came down it were exactly the same. There was a café now where the old hardware shop had been – Libbi's, all exposed brick and flat whites, the kind of place that would have been science fiction in 1984. The library had been rebuilt with lottery money, bright and clean with a children's section that looked like someone had actually thought about it. A flower shop occupied what used to be Mrs Kaur's front room, baskets hanging outside, pastel paint on the door.

The village had been scrubbed, renovated, made fit for commuters and young families priced out of Barnsley. But walk three streets over and you could still see the other Grimethorpe: boarded-up fronts, lads on corners with nowt to do, houses where nobody had had a steady job since the pit closed. The investment had been real – a hundred million quid between 1996 and 2008, five hundred new homes on the edges of the village – but it had not reached everywhere.

We walked past the estate where we had lived, past the bus stop where I had waited with my guitar case, to the lane that used to run to the pit.

There was a metal barrier across it now, the kind you see in trading estates. Beyond, a neat sign with a logo announced GRIMETHORPE BUSINESS PARK. The only coal was a memory in cracks in the tarmac.

'God,' Keira said softly.

'You were expecting a shaft straight to Hell?' I said.

'Kind of,' she admitted. 'This is… I do not know. Worse.'

The ASOS distribution center dominated the site, a vast shed of corrugated metal and glass where the winding gear used to be. You could see it from the motorway – massive, clean-edged, the kind of building that could have been anywhere. Thousands worked there now, more than the pit ever employed at its peak, but it was warehouse work: picking and packing, scanning barcodes, moving boxes on conveyor belts. Not the same, everyone said. Steady money, though, which was more than some places had.

We ducked round the barrier like we were not supposed to, just for old time's sake. The air smelled of nothing much: wet concrete, distant takeaway, the faint tang of a diesel engine. Past the ASOS gates there were smaller units with shutters, a gym with posters of people lifting weights, a car valeting place. The memorial garden sat in one corner, a neat rectangle of grass and stone with a metal bench.

I had brought two things in my bag. One was the tally disc Dad had pressed into my hand the night before I first went to London, during the strike – a reminder of what we were fighting for, and who was paying the price. The other was a Coalface tape, one of the ones we had run off in someone's bedroom in 1984 with the levels all wrong and the backing vocals too loud – the same set we had played at the 100 Club, the night that kept coming back every time I thought about where the noise had started.

At the edge of the garden there was a little bed of gravel with a few larger stones arranged in it. I knelt, my knees protesting, and laid the tally disc there among them. Next to it I set the tape, label down so the plastic caught the pale winter light.

'Is that… allowed?' Keira asked quietly.

'There are no rules,' I said. 'We used to be quite good at ignoring them.'

We sat on the bench. The wind tugged at her hair and at my scarf. For a while neither of us said anything. There did not seem much point.

'You know,' she said eventually, 'when we get back, the programme will be online. The one with the tidy-haired professor.'

'Of course it will,' I said.

'They will still be talking about internal party dynamics,' she said. 'Still saying 'significant but not decisive'.'

'That is their job,' I said. 'Cannot have them admitting a bunch of kids with C90s helped. It would ruin the mystique.'

She turned to look at me.

'You going to watch it?' she said.

'Maybe,' I said. 'After we have had a proper tea. And after I have finished labelling boxes so nobody can say it all vanished because we forgot to write our

names on the spine.'

She smiled, then sobered.

'When I write this,' she said, 'I am not going to be able to prove any of it either. Not the way they like. I will have your tapes and your memories and a couple of footnotes. There will be people who say I am romanticising it. Or making it up.'

'Let them,' I said. 'They called us liars at the time. 'Rent-a-mob'. 'Enemies of democracy'. You get used to it.'

She leaned back, hands deep in her coat pockets, eyes on the little patch of ground where the pit had been.

'What will you call it?' I asked.

'The piece?' she said. 'No idea. Probably something boring my editor insists on, like 'Voices from The Furnace' or 'Memories of the Enemy Within'. He will want her name in the title for search engines.'

'Of course he will,' I said. 'Tell him to call it 'Significant but not decisive'.'

She laughed, then shivered.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let us find somewhere that still does a decent pie and chips. You can show me where your band first murdered a Buzzcocks cover.'

We walked back towards the main road, past the sign for the business park, past the bus stop. In the gravel bed where I had left them, the tape and the tally disc sat side by side, two small, stubborn objects in a landscaped corner of what used to be a way of life.

•

If you take the bus out of Grimethorpe now and stay on until the stop near the old estate where we used to live, you can walk up a side street that kinks for no good reason and find a neat semi with a square of gravel where the front garden ought to be. There is a hand-painted sign in the window – MEETING TONIGHT, 7PM, COMMUNITY HALL – and another, smaller one taped to the glass at eye height that says NO TRANSPHOBIA, NO RACISM, NO TORIES.

That is Shell and Ben's place.

We did not go there straight away. The first time I took Keira up, we did the official things: pit, memorial, pub, the lane where I used to wait for the bus with a guitar case and a head full of noise. Only after that did we walk up to the house where the curtains never quite shut properly because there is always someone looking out for who has turned up.

Ben opened the door, wiping his hands on a tea towel. He has gone grey at the temples, the way some men do that makes them look more solid, not less. He

gave me the kind of hug that lifts you slightly off your feet and knocks the air out of you.

‘All right, old man,’ he said into my shoulder. ‘You took your time.’

‘Busy schedule,’ I said. ‘You know how it is.’

He let go and turned to Keira.

‘You must be Keira,’ he said. ‘She has told us about you.’

‘Kitchen’s this way,’ he said. ‘If we stand in the hall Shell will start fretting about draughts.’

The house smelled of curry and printer ink and the faint metallic tang of the radiators trying their best. Every surface seemed to be doing two jobs at once. The kitchen table was half-cleared from someone’s late lunch and half-covered in flyers for a tenants’ meeting. On the fridge were photographs of kids and grandkids and other people’s kids, held up with magnets from trade union conferences. A notebook lay open by the kettle with a list that read CALL COUNCIL – MARY / PRINTER / LILY – ZOOM / BEN – HALL KEYS.

Shell was at the sink, sleeves rolled up, rinsing mugs. She had her reading glasses pushed up into her hair and a pen behind one ear. When she turned and saw me she did not fuss, just wiped her hands and came at me with a fierce, economical hug that said more than any speech.

‘You look knackered,’ she said.

‘Likewise,’ I said.

‘Do not start,’ she said. ‘We are officially retired, remember?’ She made the word sound like a private joke. ‘This must be Keira.’

Keira stuck her hand out, then seemed to think better of it and went for a half-hug instead. Shell accommodated both without missing a beat.

‘Thank you for looking after this daft sod’s tapes,’ Shell said.

‘He is looking after them,’ Keira said. ‘I am just trying to bully him into sharing.’

‘Good,’ Shell said. ‘We spent long enough bullying him into getting them out of cardboard boxes.’

We sat at the table. Ben made tea the proper Yorkshire way, strong enough to stand a spoon in, and put a plate of biscuits in the middle that he pretended were for us but demolished a good third of himself. From the front room came the sound of the six o’clock news turned down low.

‘Lily would have loved to be here,’ Shell said, pouring. ‘She is stuck in Manchester fighting some bastard housing association who think fire regulations are optional. She says hello and that if you misquote her in your article she will set her volunteers on you.’

‘Duly noted,’ Keira said, scribbling.

‘Charlotte is in London this week,’ Shell went on. ‘Some photo thing with refugees. She sent a text this morning: ‘Tell the journalist I am not dead, just knackered.’ That is her review of the last forty years.’

She said it lightly, but there was a fondness in it that sat somewhere between pride and exasperation.

‘Everyone ended up where they were always going,’ I said. ‘Just with more bruises.’

‘You included,’ Ben said. ‘Mister ‘I will just go down for a bit and play some gigs’, now with a living-room archive and a student journalist on retainer.’

Keira looked from one to the other.

‘You two have been doing this a long time,’ she said.

‘We have been arguing a long time,’ Shell said. ‘Everything else is decoration.’

She reached across and squeezed Ben’s wrist without looking at him. It was such an unshowy, ordinary gesture that it said more about them than any grand declaration could have. All those years of separate lives – him above the venue with the kids, her holding everything else together – had settled into this: two people in a small kitchen in Grimethorpe, joint owners of a kettle and a stack of minutes from the last tenants’ association meeting.

‘For the record,’ I said to Keira, ‘in case your editor gets ideas: there was never anything like this between me and Shell.’

Shell snorted.

‘God, no,’ she said. ‘Love him to bits, would kill for him, have occasionally wanted to kill him. But not like that.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Glad we have that on tape.’

‘Somebody has to squash the myths before they start,’ she said. ‘They will make us all sleep together if you let them.’

Ben grinned.

‘I got the good end of the deal,’ he said. ‘I got Shell and I did not have to pretend to like his guitar solos.’

‘Rude,’ I said.

Keira’s pen scratched. Outside, a car went past somewhere, tyres hissing on damp tarmac.

‘So,’ Shell said, turning back to Keira. ‘What do you want from us, then? Apart from tea and free quotes.’

‘I want to see how it lands,’ Keira said. ‘All the stuff he has been talking about. The Square, the tapes, Finchley. What it looks like from here now.’

‘It lands like the gas bill,’ Shell said. ‘You still have to pay it, even if you were right at the time.’ She smiled, softer. ‘But also… Lily says the kids who come into the advice centre now are not starting from scratch. They have heard of Clause 28, even if they were not born then. They know landlords can be challenged. They come in already angry instead of ashamed. So maybe some of it stuck.’

Ben nodded.

‘There are lads on this estate,’ he said, ‘who come round here with their mates and borrow books about the strike and the Poll Tax and Black Lives Matter and all sorts. They stand in this kitchen and tell Shell what they are organising on TikTok. That is your answer, is it not? If they have got more tools than we did, then it was worth getting our heads kicked in.’

Keira looked at me.

‘Significant but not decisive,’ she said.

‘Story of my life,’ I said.

We stayed until it was properly dark, listening to them bicker about who had first suggested what in 1988 and whether it had been my idea to put Rupert’s draft on that particular desk. At some point Lily rang from a train and shouted down the line about a landlord who had tried to evict a whole stairwell and failed. Charlotte sent a picture of a rain-slicked protest somewhere in central London with the caption STILL HERE in capital letters. The past and the present sat down together at Shell and Ben’s table and helped themselves to biscuits.

On the way back to the station Keira walked a few paces ahead, coat pulled tight, eyes moving from the business park sign to the boarded-up shops to the terrace where we had lived.

‘It is going to sound made up,’ she said eventually. ‘All of it.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘If it sounded tidy it would be a lie.’

She nodded, more to herself than to me.

‘Noise, base, movement, access, disruption,’ she said under her breath, as if testing how the words fitted together. ‘Five fingerprints.’

‘Write them down before you forget,’ I said.

‘Already have,’ she said, patting her bag. ‘Twice.’

Later, back in London, there would be laptops and digitising rigs and university forms. There would be arguments with archivists about context and consent. There would be emails from people who found their younger selves on a grainy

video and wanted to tell me where they had ended up. There would be nights when I sat in this same flat listening to Shell's voice come out of headphones through twenty-first-century speakers, as sharp as the day we recorded her, and messages from Lily and Charlotte and kids whose names I did not yet know telling me what they were building now.

And somewhere – Grimethorpe, Glasgow, a housing estate further south – there would be a lad or a lass scrolling past an old clip of a band in a hall and a crowd chanting, thinking: if they could do that then, what can we do now?

They called us the enemy within. Fair enough. We were. We learned to walk through side doors – through gigs and posh kids and one nervous Tory with a conscience. We threaded ourselves through gaps, left tapes in glove compartments and dossiers on desks and footprints in places no one expected us. Noise, base, movement, access, disruption: five fingerprints on a story they still keep trying to file down. Maybe that is all history is in the end: a thousand small acts that no one can prove added up to a fall.

This is just my page of it.

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Keira asked me, later, what we were doing now. Not the big, abstract we – History, the Movement, the enemy within – but the lot of us as people. Where all that energy went when the pits were shut and the coaches stopped running and you could not keep living like every week might be the week you toppled someone.

The boring answer is: it went into work and rent and knees that do not like cold mornings. It went into kids and grandkids and caring for people who could not care for themselves any more. It went into paperwork. It went into arguing with councils about damp and arguing with doctors about waiting lists and arguing with employers about shifts.

The real answer is: it never went away. It just changed its clothes.

Me, I still play. Not Coalface – that band belongs to a particular set of years, a particular kind of anger – but I never learned how to stop needing a room and a rhythm and a chorus you can shout without thinking. These days it is a ska band called Beat Assembly. We play when we can, for whoever turns up, and the strange miracle of it is that you can find us on Spotify and the other platforms like we have always been there. Same impulse, different tempo.

Shell is still Shell. Even when she says she is retired there is a notebook open somewhere, there are flyers in a neat stack, there is someone being gently but firmly bullied into showing up. Ben keeps the kettle going, keeps the doors open, keeps noticing the kids who hover on the edge of things and making it clear they are allowed in.

Riz still does the work that never gets put on the timeline. He finds a way to get a teenager through a bad week. He knows which forms to tick, which doors to

knock, which lies to call out. When he says “worth it”, he is not talking about Thatcher. He is talking about survival.

Charlotte never stopped moving either. She is still in London more often than not, still turning up where the story is and pointing her camera at the bit everyone else would rather crop out. She sends the same kind of messages she always did – blunt, funny, half a swear word and half a blessing – and every so often, when the weather is foul and the world feels like it is going backwards, a picture lands in the group chat: rain on a banner, police lights, faces turned to the wind. STILL HERE.

Alex and Pete turned the skills we learned into different kinds of craft. They are still fussy about soundchecks. They still care about who gets heard. If you need a room rigged, a tape rescued, a story copied before it disappears, they are the ones who show up with the right cable and the right stubbornness.

And my mam – Victoria Ashcroft, who used to apologise for taking up space in her own kitchen – never went back to what she had been before the strike. None of the women did. You cannot spend a year feeding whole villages, running rotas, facing police lines, speaking in rooms full of men who have never had to listen to you, and then quietly fold yourself up again when the men go back to work. The pits shut and the old world tried to set itself back in place, but the shape had changed. The women had changed it. They did not hand that power back.

That is the bit people still miss when they want a tidy ending. They want to believe everything went back to normal once the strike was over. It did not. Not for the men. Not for the women. Not for any of us.