THE BRIGHT FISH

A NOVEL

in thirteen chapters

"You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art."

ALDOUS HUXLEY, *BRAVE NEW WORLD*

"A face is not a fact."

EVIDENCE, PARISH HALL, OCTOBER

He was a good man, which is not the same as a wise one.

CONTENTS

ONE	*Ben A., of Marlbrook*	4
TWO	*The Bright Fish*	13
THREE	*Things Written in Small Print*	20
FOUR	*The Man Who Was Not There*	30
FIVE	*Gone in Thirty Minutes*	38
SIX	*The Woman Who Said No*	46
SEVEN	*The Garden of Dead Actors*	55
EIGHT	*What Tilda Knew*	63
NINE	*A Room Full of Receipts*	69
TEN	*The Hearing*	76
ELEVEN	*The Long Gallery*	84
TWELVE	*The Cost of Knowing*	92
THIRTEEN	*The Name in Full*	99

CHAPTER ONE

Ben A., of Marlbrook

. . .

The stage is dark. A single chair. A man enters, sits, and prepares to be looked at.

. . .

The trouble with the self-tape, Ben had decided by six o'clock that morning, was that it required you to be two people at once. The first was the character, who was supposed to be a grieving father of forty-six standing in a Norfolk garden in 1974. The second was a technician — a person who owned a tripod, who understood apertures, who could make a telephone talk to the internet.

Ben A. was a very good first person and no second person at all.

He had set the phone on the ironing board, propped against a copy of *Spotlight* and a jar of Marmite, because the ironing board was the only object in the flat of the correct height and the flat did not run to anything so grand as a tripod. The ring light — bought in a fit of optimism from a shop on the high street that also sold phone cases and vapes — leaned out over the phone like a curious sunflower. Behind him, the wall was the colour of weak tea, and in the corner the damp had spread into a shape his sister said was Portugal and his mother said was a dog.

He pressed the little red circle. Nothing happened.

He pressed it again, and this time something happened, which was worse: a white box appeared, containing a sentence in a language of pure accusation.

Storage is almost full.

"Right," said Ben, to the phone. "Sorry."

He said sorry to machines. He had said sorry to a parking meter once, in front of witnesses. He was the sort of man who apologised to a self-service till for taking too long, and he had never in his life succeeded in feeling that this was a flaw, because it had never once cost him anything.

It was about to cost him everything, but not yet, and not on this grey Tuesday.

. . .

Marlbrook, in the north of England, was not a town that appeared in films. It had a church with a crooked spire, a market on Thursdays, a river the colour of green glass, and a Playhouse of two hundred and twelve seats that had been saved from demolition in 1974 by a committee of women, three of whom were still alive and all of whom still wrote letters. Ben's mother had been one of the signatories. She had also been, for thirty-one years, its wardrobe mistress — which is to say she had made kings out of curtains and had once sewn a bishop's mitre at four in the morning because the bishop had grown.

The flat above *The Alderman's Thrift* had two rooms and a window that looked down onto the charity shop's window, so that Ben's mornings were conducted to the sound of a till and the smell of other people's donated wool. He had lived there for nine years. He was thirty-

four. He had, in that time, been in eleven plays, four television programmes in which he had between one and three lines, and one advertisement for a bathroom firm in which he had worn a dressing gown and said the word *sanctuary* with such sincerity that men had stopped him in the street about it.

He was, by the estimation of everyone who had ever worked with him, a lovely man, and by the estimation of the bank, a poor one.

In the charity shop's window, under a strip light that never stopped buzzing, there had been for six weeks a pair of goggles on a stand, with a handwritten card that said: GAMING HEADSET, AS NEW, £12.99, UNWANTED GIFT. They were the sort of thing that within a few years would not be sold in shops at all but prescribed, and they were in the window because nobody in Marlbrook had yet worked out what they were for. Ben looked at them every morning on his way out and thought, as he thought about most machines, that they were probably for somebody cleverer than him, and that this was quite all right, because he could learn a part in a week, and that was his contribution to the arrangement.

At half past six, having failed to film himself, he went out to buy milk. The morning was the kind of cold that gets in at the wrists, and at the bus stop by the viaduct a boy of about fifteen was standing in a school blazer with no coat on, holding a phone with a cracked screen and staring at it as though it had insulted his mother.

Ben stopped. He was not a man who could walk past a cold child; it simply wasn't available to him.

"You all right?"

The boy looked up. His eyes were red at the rims. "Bus hasn't come."

"It's the seven-oh-four," said Ben. "It's always late. It's late by design. It's the only reliable thing about it." He looked at the blazer. "Where's your coat?"

"Someone took it."

"Took it?"

"At school." The boy said it the way you say a thing you have already said in three offices and been told to be quiet about. "It's fine."

Ben took off his own coat — a good coat, a grey wool overcoat his mother had bought him for an audition eight years before, with a lining she had replaced twice — and held it out.

"I can't."

"You can. It's not a favour, it's a loan. My name's on the label inside, so you'll have to give it back, and that means I'll see you again, which will be nice." He smiled, and the smile was the thing people remembered about him: it arrived all at once and in full, like weather. "I'm Ben. I'm an actor. That's not a boast, it's a warning. If I start doing a voice, tell me to stop."

The boy put the coat on. It came down past his knuckles.

"What's your name?" said Ben.

"Tobias."

"Tobias." Ben said it carefully, as though it were a line he might be asked to do something with. "Right. Well. Here's the bus, and here's your coat, and here —" he dug in his pocket and produced a crumpled five-pound note, which was most of what he had until Friday "— here's for a proper one. A coat. Not sweets. I'll know."

The bus came. Tobias got on it, and at the back window he turned round and lifted one hand, and Ben lifted one back, standing coatless in the cold with the milk going warm in his bag, and he did not think about it again for a long time.

. . .

The call came at eleven, while he was in the kitchen attempting to make the phone forget things so that it would let him film himself.

His agent was Verity Kell, of Fennick & Kell, and she did not ring at eleven in the morning, because at eleven in the morning she was in meetings, and Ben knew this the way one knows the habits of a slightly alarming aunt.

"Ben. Are you sitting down?"

"I'm standing on a chair."

"Get down." There was a pause, and in it he could hear Verity doing the thing she did, which was decide how much to tell him. "Delphine Okoro is casting *The Long Gallery*."

Ben sat down on the chair.

The Long Gallery was the play everyone in the country was pretending not to talk about. It had opened at a small theatre in Sheffield three years before and had been the sort of success that makes producers go quiet and reach for their cheque books. Hester Vowles had written it — her first play, at fifty-one, after a life of schoolteaching — and it was about a house in 1913 with no light in it, and a family who would not admit the light had gone, and a daughter who kept opening doors. It had three acts and no interval music and a part in it that every actor in England of a certain age had been quietly rehearsing in their kitchen.

Edmund. The father. The one who keeps the lamps lit for a reason he will not say.

"Delphine saw your tape," said Verity.

"I haven't sent a tape."

"You sent one in March. For the Beckett. She watched it forty times."

"Nobody watches the Beckett forty times. It was six minutes long and I had a cold."

"She watched it forty times," said Verity, "because you did the thing where you listen. Nobody listens on tape, Ben. They *act* listening. You sat there and let a woman you couldn't see finish a sentence, and you looked like a man who had decided to be kind about it. She wants you to read on Friday. Ten o'clock. The Old Vic rehearsal rooms, which is not the Old Vic, it's a room behind a dry cleaner's with delusions."

Ben stood up. He sat down again. His hands had gone cold, which was ridiculous, because he was a professional, he had done this four hundred times, he had once played Laertes in a production so underfunded that the swords were broom handles, and he had been magnificent, and nobody had come.

"Is it Edmund?"

"It's Edmund."

He looked out of the window at the charity shop, where a woman was turning over a lamp with the cautious expression of someone weighing a life.

"Verity," he said. "Why me?"

"Because you're cheap," said Verity, kindly, "and because Delphine Okoro has never once in twenty years cast the person everyone expected. Also she asked whether you could grow a beard and I said you could grow anything, you're practically a hedgerow. Friday. Ten. Don't wear the grey coat."

"I gave the grey coat away."

There was a silence on the line of a specific texture. "You gave it away."

"There was a boy. It was cold. It's a loan, he's giving it back."

"Ben," said Verity, in the voice of a woman who had done this a hundred times, "you have got to stop being—" and then she stopped herself, and said, instead, "Friday. Ten. Learn the speech where he talks about the lamps."

. . .

He rang his mother from the landing, where the signal was best.

"Oh," said Margo, when he had told her. "Oh, Ben." He could hear her sitting down, the particular creak of the chair by the sewing machine. "Edmund. That's the one who —"

"Don't say it."

"— who keeps lighting the lamps though there's no oil in them. Yes. Well." She was quiet a moment. Then, in a different voice, brisk, a wardrobe mistress's voice: "Your father would have been unbearable about this. He'd have told everybody in the pub and then said it was nothing to do with him. You've got his face for it. You've got the face of a man who's just realised something and is going to keep it to himself."

"Mum."

"Take the grey coat."

"I gave it away."

"Of course you did," said his mother, and he could hear that she was smiling, and also that she was not entirely smiling. "Ben. Listen to me. When you're in London on Friday, and people are being lovely to you — and they will be, they're lovely to everybody at that stage, it's the easiest thing in the world to be lovely to somebody you haven't hired yet — you mind what you put your name to. Your dad never read anything. He bought a car once with no wheels on it. Read it, Ben."

"It's an audition, Mum. Nobody's going to sell me a car."

"Nobody ever thinks they're selling you a car," said Margo.

. . .

On Thursday, a photograph of Ben from the Beckett tape, in a bad light, was entered into a casting database by an assistant at Fennick & Kell who was being paid £11.40 an hour and had four hundred actors to process before lunch.

The database was old. Its designers had, in 2009, decided that actors should be listed by surname and initial, so that the Bens of England would not be confused with one another, and they had given the surname field a width of one character — one — because in 2009 somebody in an office had typed *just the initial, nobody reads the surname, they read the face.*

Ben's surname was longer than one character. It was a good, solid, ordinary English surname, with a market town in it and a grandfather who had been proud of it, and it is on the record, in the contracts and the certificates and the brass plate on a shed in Marlbrook, if you care to look.

This book is going to keep calling him Ben A.

Not to be clever. Because that is what the world called him. A field one character wide, decided by a man who never met him, and after that nobody typed the rest, and after a few years nobody said it either. He answered to two letters and a full stop and had stopped noticing that he did.

A., BEN — the fortieth of forty-two Bens on the list.

The assistant did not look at the photograph for long. It was a good face; she noticed that; she noticed, too, that it was the face of a man who had been photographed while listening to somebody else, and she thought, vaguely and without malice, *that'll do*, and moved on to Ben C.

Nobody had said Ben's surname out loud to him in four years.

. . .

End of Chapter One.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bright Fish

. . .

The stage is a room with too much carpet. Somewhere off, a kettle is being overworked. Enter, an actor, carrying his own coffee because nobody offered him one yet.

. . .

The room behind the dry cleaner's smelled of steam and other people's nerves, and Ben, who had been in four hundred such rooms, found it as comforting as a church.

There were eleven people sitting along a trestle table. This was not normal. Normally there were three, one of whom was reading a newspaper. Eleven meant money, and money meant that the person at the end of the table — small, silver-haired, in a shirt the colour of a wet slate roof, with reading glasses on a cord and the settled expression of a woman who has already made up her mind and is now merely establishing the terms — was Delphine Okoro.

"Ben A.," she said. "You look like a man who's been up since five."

"I was. I was trying to film myself. The phone wouldn't have it."

"Good," said Delphine. "I distrust actors who can film themselves. They start to direct." She pushed a page across the table. "Edmund. Act Two. From *I have kept every one of them alight*."

He had learned it in the kitchen, over the damp, out loud, to a jar of Marmite, for four days.

And here was the thing about Ben A., the thing that Verity had been unable to explain to a producer in eleven years and that Margo had recognised when he was nine and standing on a kitchen chair reciting the shipping forecast: when he began to act, something in him opened like a window, and light came out of it, and people put down their newspapers.

He did not do anything with his hands. He did not walk about. He sat on the chair they had given him, put his script face down on his knee, and became a man in a house in 1913 who was lying to his daughter about the oil.

"I have kept every one of them alight," he said, "and I will go on keeping them alight, because a house with the lamps out is not a house, it is a —" a pause, exactly the length of a man deciding not to say the word he means "— it is a building. And I will not have my daughter living in a building."

At the end of it, Delphine took her glasses off and let them drop on the cord.

"Thank you," she said. "You're very good, and I expect people tell you that and you do a little face."

"I do a little face," Ben admitted.

"Yes. Don't do that face in my rehearsal room." She looked down at her notes, and then up again, quickly, as though she had decided something and wanted to get it over with. "There's a girl reading after you. She's twenty-two and she's better than all of us. Do you want to stay

and watch? It's not a trap. It's a genuine invitation. You'll learn something."

Ben stayed.

. . .

Tilda Wren came in with her coat still on and did not take it off for the whole hour, as though she might be asked to leave at any moment and did not intend to be caught unprepared.

She read Ada — the daughter, the one who keeps opening doors. She read her with a stillness that was almost insolent. Where Ben had opened like a window, Tilda was a locked door that you could hear somebody breathing behind, and when she got to the line about the garden — *There is nothing in the garden, Father, that is what I keep telling you* — the eleven people at the table stopped being eleven people and became an audience, which is a different animal.

Afterwards, in the corridor, Ben found her sitting on a plastic chair with her hands between her knees.

"You were —" he began.

"Don't," she said, not unkindly. "I can't. Not after. I go to pieces after." She looked up. "You're Ben."

"I'm Ben."

"Delphine's been talking about you for a month. She says you're the only man in England who can be quiet for eleven seconds on camera." Tilda pulled her coat tighter. "I've been told to be careful of you."

"Careful of *me*?"

"Not like that." She smiled, briefly, and it changed her whole face — she looked about fifteen. "She means you're nice. She means nice men are a hazard, because you get fond of them and then you stop watching." She stood, hitched her bag up. "Nice to meet you, Ben. I hope you get it. Genuinely. It's rarer than you'd think, a man hoping another man gets it."

He watched her go down the stairs, and he thought, with the simple, uncomplicated admiration of a man who has never had to be afraid in a corridor: *she's going to be enormous*, and he was right, though not in the way he meant.

. . .

The reception was at a hotel in Bloomsbury, on the fourth floor, in a room with a chandelier and a quantity of small brown food, and Ben attended it because Verity told him to, wearing a suit he had last worn to a wedding.

This is where he met Crispin Hale.

Hale was fifty-one and looked forty-one and had the careful manners of a man who has learned that the best way to make people like you is to be interested in them for exactly as long as it takes. He was tall, silver at the temples, in a good grey suit, and when Ben was introduced to him as "the new Edmund," he did not say *congratulations*. He said:

"Oh — Ben A. Are you the man who did the Beckett?" And then, before Ben could answer: "The listening. That's what did it, isn't it. Delphine's always cast for listening. She says you can teach anything but that." He smiled. "I know her terribly well. I've been trying to get her to direct something for me for six years and she keeps saying she's busy, which is a polite way of saying she doesn't like my company."

"She's very busy," said Ben, who was incapable of a colder answer.

"She is." Hale took a glass from a tray and did not drink from it. "Do you know Arthur Pemberton?"

"Know him? I've —" Ben's voice did something embarrassing. "I saw him do Lear at the Playhouse in Marlbrook when I was nine. My mother made my costume. I played a soldier. He came out at the curtain call and he — he looked at the balcony, at the cheap seats, at us, for about four seconds. I've never forgotten it. It's the reason I do this."

Something happened in Crispin Hale's face then, and Ben, who could read a face better than any man alive, could not read that one. It might have been pleasure. It might have been appetite.

"He's not well," said Hale. "Arthur. He's not well at all. I'm working with him on something — a way of keeping him. Not keeping him alive, nobody can do that, I'm not a magician. Keeping the work. It's the only immortality we've got, the work, and it's the only kind anyone should want." He turned the glass slowly in his fingers. "It's a strange thing to be in the business of memory. But somebody has to be. Tell me — do you know how many performances are lost every year? Not recorded. Lost. A hundred years of theatre, gone, because nobody thought to point a camera at it. My company exists to point the camera."

"What's it called?"

"Echoform," said Hale, and offered his hand. "I'll see you on the first day, Ben. I'm putting money into the production. But don't tell Delphine I said so — she'd only spend it."

. . .

Ben rang his mother from the steps of the hotel, in the cold, with the chandelier behind him.

"There was a man," he said. "Crispin Hale. He's putting money in. He's going to — Mum, he's got Arthur Pemberton. He says there's a way to keep the work."

There was a long pause on the line.

"Margo?"

"I'm here." She sounded as though she were choosing a word from a box and rejecting several. "Ben, love. That man came to the Playhouse in 2019 with a camera crew and asked to film Fenella's production of *The Cherry Orchard*, and when she said she'd need to talk to the actors about it, he said —" her voice went flat and careful, which was how she sounded when she was properly angry "— he said, *they'll say yes, Margo, they always say yes, they're actors, they want to be seen*."

"Maybe he meant it kindly."

"He had decided what we were worth before he'd met us," said Margo. "That's not unkind, that's worse than unkind. Ben — will you promise me something?"

"What?"

"When they put a piece of paper in front of you, whatever paper it is, at whatever lovely party, in whatever lovely room — you read all of it. Every word. Out loud, if you have to. Because I know you, and you get — you get *lit up*, and when you're lit up you'd sign anything anyone gave you."

"I'm not a child, Mum."

"No," said Margo. "You're a good man. Which is not the same as a wise one, and it's the good ones that get taken."

. . .

End of Chapter Two.

CHAPTER THREE

Things Written in Small Print

. . .

The stage is a rehearsal room with a strip light that will not stop humming. On the table: eleven cups, one of which is a vase. The company is assembled. One of them is about to be flattered.

. . .

The first day of rehearsal, Delphine Okoro stood in the middle of the room and laid down the law like a woman setting a table.

"Rules. There are four. One: nobody in this room is brave for turning up. You are paid to turn up. Bravery is for people with something to lose, and you have a job." She looked around at them, one by one, and did not hurry. "Two: if you have a problem with something I have asked you to do, you say so in the room, not in the corridor, not in the group chat that I know exists, and not to your agent at midnight. Three: no one is to be made to feel stupid for asking a question. That is a rule about me as much as about you. If I make you feel stupid, tell me, and I will be mortified, and then I will do it again next week, and you will tell me again."

"What's four?" said the boy playing the under-gardener.

"Four," said Delphine, "is that we are doing a play about a family who will not say the true thing, and the way you make that play is by saying the true thing in this room for six weeks. That's it. That's the

whole method. Anyone who tells you there's more is selling a book." She clapped her hands once. "Right. Edmund and Ada. From the top of the second scene. Ben, Tilda, don't be good. Be honest. They're different and one of them is harder."

. . .

They were honest for six weeks, and it was the happiest Ben had ever been in a room, and he would remember that later with a kind of bewildered grief, the way you remember the last ordinary day before a house fire.

There was a difficulty, of course, and the difficulty was called Marianne Cotter.

Maz was the stage manager. She had been Ben's partner for six years, and eighteen months ago she had sat on the end of the bed in the flat above *The Alderman's Thrift* and said, in a voice so tired it had gone quiet, *Ben, I can't be the only grown-up in this house any more*, and had gone. He had not argued. That was the thing he was most ashamed of, in the years afterwards: he had not argued, he had said *I understand*, and had meant it, and had helped her carry the boxes down, and had stood in the street waving, and had gone upstairs and learned his lines.

She was very good at her job. She was better at it than anyone in that building except Delphine. She ran the room with a stopwatch and a first-aid kit and an encyclopaedic knowledge of which of them had eaten.

"Right," she said, on the first morning, in the flat voice of a woman drawing a line in wet cement. "Here's how it is. I'm not going to be weird if you're not going to be weird. Are you going to be weird?"

"I'm going to be extremely weird," said Ben. "I've already been weird twice this morning."

"Good," said Maz. "Then we're fine."

And they were, mostly, and sometimes in the tea break she would tell him a thing about the flat — the damp, the neighbour's dog — and he would feel the old floor tilt, and then she would say *Ben, focus*, and he would focus, and the tilt would pass.

. . .

The contract arrived on the Thursday of the third week, at a party.

The party was at Crispin Hale's house, which was in Hampstead and had a hallway you could have rehearsed a small musical in. There were forty people, good wine, and a string quartet playing something Ben privately thought was far too good for a party. Hale moved through it all with the unhurried courtesy of a man who has never been in a hurry to get anywhere in his life.

"Ben. You're drinking the white, excellent, my wife chose it." He steered Ben towards a window seat with the light pressure of a man steering a boat. "How's it going? Delphine happy?"

"Delphine's never happy. She says it's a waste of everyone's time."

Hale laughed, properly, and for a moment he was almost likeable. "That's her. God, that's her exactly." He looked out of the window at the garden. "I wanted a word, and I want to be honest with you, because people aren't, and you strike me as a man who'd rather have the truth than a compliment, although I've got compliments too, don't worry."

"Go on."

"Echoform's doing a piece of work with the production. It's not about the play. It's about afterwards." He turned. "Ben, in a hundred years' time, when people ask what it was like to be an actor in 2025, what will they look at? A handful of photographs. Three films that happened to survive. Nothing of the stage. Nothing. And when you're old, and you can't remember the part any more, there'll be nothing to show your children except — what, a review? A poster?"

"I haven't got children."

"You might." Hale smiled. "The work goes, Ben. That's what nobody tells you at drama school. It doesn't go with a bang. It goes a bit at a time, and you don't notice, and then one day you're seventy-eight and Arthur Pemberton is sitting in a chair in his own garden saying *I don't remember the part, dear*."

Ben felt his throat do something. He had been nine years old, in a soldier's tunic, and Arthur Pemberton had looked up at the balcony for four seconds.

"What's the work?" he said.

"Nothing sinister. I want to record you. Properly, once, in a studio, in a form a machine can understand — face, voice, movement. And then your likeness sits in an archive, safely, and if a producer in fifty years wants to put Ben A. in a film, they licence it from you, or from your estate, and the family get something out of it. That's all." He spread his hands. "You'd be amazed how many people say yes. Arthur said yes. Tilda's reading hers now."

"Tilda's — she's twenty-two."

"She's twenty-two and she asked me eleven questions about it, which I respected enormously," said Hale, and there was something in

his voice, a flicker of genuine feeling, quickly folded away. "But she's frightened of the future, you see. Everybody is. And they think the future's going to be full of machines. It isn't. Do you know what it's actually going to be full of? *Audiences.* More people watching more things than at any point in the history of the species — and every one of them wanting what you want, Ben, which is not to watch a man being sad in a nice shirt. They want to be *in* the sad. They want to put something on their head on a Tuesday night in February, in a town like this one, and be Edmund for an hour, and take it off, and have their tea. Is that wicked? I don't think it's wicked. I think it's the most generous thing anyone has ever offered anybody."

"But then —" said Ben, and found he had no sentence.

"Say it."

"If they can be Edmund whenever they like in February," said Ben, "why would they come and watch me be Edmund in a parish hall in October?"

"They wouldn't," said Hale, pleasantly. "Or very few of them would, and the ones who did would be the sort of people who make theatre what it is, which is a small, lovely, subsidised thing for people with good coats. And you'd teach, and you'd do the feelies, and you'd be very well paid and rather more famous than you are now, and everybody would be happy." He turned the tablet over in his hand. "Everybody happy, Ben. There are worse programmes."

Then he took out a tablet.

There is a detail here that matters more than any other detail in this book, and it is simply this: the contract was on a screen. Not on paper. Paper has weight, paper has margins you can scribble in, paper gets folded and put in a drawer and looked at again. A screen shows you a

page, and then you scroll, and the page you scrolled past is gone, and nothing in the world tells your body that there was a thing there.

Hale held it out. "It's twelve clauses. It's the standard Arkwright form, everyone's on it, Verity's seen it."

"I'll take it home and read it."

"Of course. Absolutely." Hale's face did something small and complicated. "Although — I should say, the Arkwright fee is banded to this week. That's not me being difficult, it's the board, they close the round on Monday, and after that the offer's at the lower figure. Which is still generous, but it's half." He turned the tablet slightly. "You can read it here. The light's better in this window than anywhere in your flat, I should think."

Ben laughed, because it was a joke, and because he was tired, and because the wine had been very good and he had spent six weeks being told, eleven times a day, that he was excellent.

He scrolled.

. . .

Reader, he did not read it.

I want to be careful here, because it would be easy to make this a story about a stupid man. Ben A. was not a stupid man. He could hold four hundred lines in his head and find the one word in them that was false. He could walk into a room of strangers and tell you, within a minute, which two of them were unhappy and which one was in love. He had spent thirty-four years learning how human beings lie to one another, and he was better at it than anyone he knew.

But the contract was not written by a human being. It was written by lawyers, in a language that had been designed — genuinely, carefully, by decent people, in an office, over many months — to describe a thing that did not exist yet. It used words like *derivative works* and *in perpetuity* and *sublicensable*, and it did not use the words *permanent*, or *everywhere*, or *forever*, because those words had been removed by men whose job it was to remove them.

And Ben, at that moment, wanted so badly to be the sort of man who was wanted. That is the part that people who have never been actors do not always understand. You spend years being a shape that other people have decided not to need. And then one evening a rich man holds out a tablet in a good window and tells you that he does not want you to be lost.

He read the first three clauses.

The first was definitions. The second was fee. The third said that the Artist consents to the creation of synthetic performances of the Artist's likeness, voice and mannerisms, and to their use *in any media now known or hereafter devised*.

Ben read that one twice, and then a third time, and then he asked the question.

"Does this mean you can make me say things?"

Crispin Hale did not flinch. That is the thing Ben thought about, later, in the small hours, for months: that he did not flinch.

"It means," said Hale, gently, "that when you're dead, your granddaughter can see you in *Hamlet*, and it will be true, because it will be the things you chose to give. It means they can't make you say anything. There are safeguards — clause nine, look — no political endorse-

ment, no advertising for gambling, no adult material. It's all there. I wrote it myself." He put a hand briefly on Ben's sleeve. "I'm not in the business of putting words in the mouths of the dead. I'm in the business of taking them out of the mouths of the forgotten."

Ben signed with his fingertip.

It took four seconds. There was a soft chime. Somewhere behind them the string quartet came to the end of something and the room applauded, and Ben turned, and there was Verity Kell coming across the carpet with two glasses and a face of enormous relief.

"Good," she said. "Good. That's the grown-up thing. I signed mine in February."

"You signed yours?"

"Everyone signs theirs, darling. It's a hundred and forty thousand pounds and a clause about gambling." She clinked his glass. "Now go and be brilliant, and don't tell your mother."

. . .

Tilda did not sign hers.

Ben heard about it three days later, in the corridor, from Delphine, who reported it the way she reported everything: as a fact, without comment, and then with a great deal of comment.

"She's asked for it in paper form and she's asked for the arbitration clause to be struck and she's asked what happens to her face if a director twenty years from now wants to put it in a scene she'd never have agreed to shoot." Delphine was eating an apple. "She's twenty-two. When I was twenty-two I signed a contract for a shampoo commercial

in a language I couldn't read and I had to have my hair cut off for a year."

"What did Hale say?"

"He said he admired her and would think about it. Which means he's already thought about it." Delphine looked at Ben sideways. "And you?"

"I signed mine."

"Yes," said Delphine. "I heard the chime."

"Is she — is she being difficult?"

Delphine stopped walking.

"Ben," she said. "Ben, love. Listen to me for a second, because I'm only going to say this nicely once. When a young woman asks what will be done with her body, that is not a difficulty. That is the entire history of the world, and the answer has been *no* for so long that the asking still sounds like a fire alarm." She took a bite of the apple. "You signed because a man was kind to you in a nice house and it was easier to be wanted than to be careful. Which is fine. We've all done it. But don't you dare call her difficult for not doing it."

She went off down the corridor, and Ben stood there with his script under his arm and a strange, hot feeling in his chest, which he would not have been able to name at the time but which was, in fact, the first small movement of a thing that would take him two years to finish.

That night the email from Echoform arrived at 11.52 with the signed contract attached as a fourteen-page document.

He saw it on the landing, where the signal was best.

He thought: *I'll read it tomorrow.*

He went to bed.

. . .

End of Chapter Three.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man Who Was Not There

. . .

The stage is a studio, white, with six cameras and a chair in the middle of it. The man in the chair has been asked to be still for forty minutes. He is very good at being still. That is, in the end, the problem.

. . .

The recording took two days in November, in a hangar of a building in Park Royal with blackout curtains and a floor so clean it made Ben want to apologise to it.

They asked him to sit in a chair and do things. Smile, but not at anyone. Read a list of six hundred sentences — some of them ordinary, some of them strange, some of them vile, because, the technician explained kindly, *we need the shapes, sir, we need the sounds, and the ugly ones are the hard ones to fake.* They put dots on his face and asked him to look at them. They asked him to be angry at a wall. They asked him to be sad at a wall. They asked him to walk up and down.

By four o'clock on the second day he had a headache and had said the word *consent* two hundred and forty times into a microphone, because it was in the list, and it was the longest word on the list, and they needed it from every angle.

"Nearly done," said the technician. "Just the laugh."

"Whose laugh?"

"Yours, sir."

He didn't know how to laugh on request, so he thought of the boy at the bus stop lifting his hand at the back window, and he laughed, and behind the glass a woman he had never met wrote a note in a folder that said *good, warm, high in the register, use for comedy but probably not cruelty.*

. . .

The Long Gallery was to open at the Lyttelton in February. The money had come in, the posters were up, and Ben's face — Ben's face, above a dry cleaner's, Ben's face that had been in a bathroom-firm advert saying *sanctuary* — was on a wall on the South Bank, four foot high, next to Tilda's.

Margo came down on the train and stood in front of it for eleven minutes without speaking.

"There's a crease in your collar," she said at last.

"It's a poster, Mum."

"I can see it's a poster. There's a crease in the collar." She put her hand flat against the wall next to his ear, as though checking for heat. "Your dad would have"—she stopped, and started again—"your dad would have taken a photograph of this and put it in his wallet and told everyone it was a bus ticket so they'd ask him about it. He'd have done the whole thing. Bold as brass." She turned. "Now take me for a cup of tea that costs less than four pounds, because I refuse to believe this city charges four pounds for a cup of tea."

They found a café. She asked him, twice, whether he had read the contract. He said he had. The first time, she let it go. The second time, she looked at him for a while and then said, "All right," in a voice that meant *not all right*, and put sugar in her tea, which she had not done since 1987.

. . .

On the third of November, at twenty past nine in the evening, Ben was in his kitchen in Marlbrook eating scrambled eggs out of the pan, because it was three days before previews and he was not sleeping and there was no point pretending otherwise.

His phone, face up on the table, began to make a noise he did not recognise.

He picked it up. On the screen was a message from a number he did not know, containing a single line:

Is this you?

And beneath it, a link.

Now: Ben was a man who knew better than to click a link from a stranger. Everybody knows better than to click a link from a stranger. It is one of the small pieces of folk wisdom, like *don't get in a car with someone you've just met* and *don't take out a loan in a shop that also sells fireworks*, that we all agree to know and then all of us, at some point, at nine twenty in the evening, with a mouthful of egg, fail to observe.

But this is not that click. He would be blamed for that click afterwards, by people who did not read past the headline, and it was not even that link.

The link opened his own face.

There he was — his kitchen, actually *his* kitchen, the tile behind the hob, the yellowing corner of the ceiling, the calendar with the picture of Whitby on it — and there he was, sitting where he was sitting, in the shirt he had worn that day, and talking. Ben watched himself talk for eleven seconds with a feeling of enormous, stupid pride, thinking, *somebody's filmed me in my kitchen, somebody's made something* — and then he heard what he was saying.

He was saying, in a voice that was exactly his, with a warmth that was exactly his, that he was glad a certain young woman had been frightened. He was saying, with a little laugh, the warm one, the one used for comedy, that she had asked for it, and that he'd have done worse if he'd had the chance.

The video was two minutes and forty seconds long. Four million people had watched it.

Ben sat where he was for a very long time. The eggs went cold. The heating clicked off. His own face went on talking above the calendar, and he kept watching it because there was, in his whole body, an enormous animal certainty that if he simply looked hard enough, he would find the join. He would see the edge of the mask. He would catch the thing at the corner of the mouth where the technology had been unable to keep up.

He watched it nine times. He could not find the join. There was no join. It was him. It was, and this is the part he could never make anyone understand, *the best work of his life.*

His phone rang. It was Verity.

"Don't look at it," she said, before he could speak. "Ben. Whatever you've seen, don't look at any more of it. Have you looked at it?"

"I can't see the join."

"Ben."

"Verity, I *can't see the join.* It's — the thing he does with his hand when he's lying, in the second one, that thing, I do that, I do that, I did it in the Beckett and Delphine wrote *watch this* in her notes, and it's —" his voice went somewhere strange "— it's in the video. It's in the video, Verity. It's in the video and I didn't put it there."

"Ben. Listen to me very carefully." Verity's voice was flat and controlled, the voice of a woman who had been on the phone for forty minutes already. "That is called a synthetic. There'll be more. Do not— I'll come up tomorrow. Have you got anyone there?"

"I've got the eggs."

"Have you got a bottle of anything?"

"Yes."

"Then don't." A pause. "Ben, I've got to say something and I'd rather say it now than at nine tomorrow. Crispin's people have rung me. Twice. They're saying —" a breath "— they're asking if there's a *possibility* the recording's genuine. From a story point of view."

From a story point of view.

He put the phone down on the table, because his arm had gone numb.

. . .

The video had a name by the morning. It was called the Kitchen.

By the morning it had eleven million views, and a campaign, and a hashtag, and a Member of Parliament who had been asked about it on

the radio and had said that the public had a right to know the character of those we put on a stage.

By the morning, three people had written to Delphine Okoro.

By eleven o'clock, Delphine had rung Ben, and she had not asked him whether it was true. That was the first thing he noticed, and he thought about it for the rest of his life: she had not asked him.

What she said was: "I'm coming to you. Don't come to London. Don't answer your phone to anyone. Put the kettle on and put the news off, because they'll run it, and the way they run it will be worse than the thing itself. I'll be there in four hours."

She arrived in three, in a grey coat with the collar up, and stood in his kitchen looking at the corner where the damp was shaped like a dog.

"I'm going to ask you one question," she said, "and it is not a trick, and you must not answer it the way you'd answer a journalist. You must answer it the way you'd answer me in a rehearsal room."

"All right."

"Have you ever said those words? Not to that girl. Not in that kitchen. Anywhere, at any point in your life, to anyone, in any voice at all."

Ben, who had been holding himself together — quite well, he thought, considering — found that he could not answer, because the answer was not *no*.

Delphine saw it. She did not move.

"There was a —" he said. "Eight years ago. There was a girl, she was — she was being thrown out of her flat by her landlord, and she came

to me, and she was eighteen and she was drunk and she was — and I said something, I don't remember it, it was stupid, I said something to try to — it was a joke, it was a *joke*, it was a stupid joke to make her laugh so she'd stop crying and go home —"

"Say it."

"I can't."

"Say it, Ben, because whatever you said eight years ago is not what's in that video, and if you can't tell the difference between them in your own mouth, nobody else will ever be able to tell the difference for you."

He put his hands over his face and said the thing he had said, which had been stupid, and small, and about her landlord's face.

Delphine let out a long breath through her nose.

"Right," she said. "So you're a man who once made a bad joke to a crying girl. So is every man who ever lived. So am I, in my own way." She sat down at his table. "That is not what is on that video. What's on that video is a man who enjoys somebody being frightened. You do not have that in you. I would have seen it. I have been looking at you for ten weeks like a cat at a hole in a hedge, and you do not have that in you. Now." She put her bag on the table and took out a notebook. "Tell me what you did, in order, from the beginning, including anything you think is stupid, and especially the stupid things, because I promise you the stupid things are where the truth is."

And Ben opened his mouth to answer, and his phone, face up on the table, lit up, and a message appeared on it from a number he did not recognise, and the message said: *Next one's the mother.*

. . .

End of Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gone in Thirty Minutes

. . .

The stage is a kitchen at seven in the morning. The man at the table is holding a telephone the way you hold a bird that has stopped moving.

. . .

The phone died at ten past six in the morning, and Ben did not think anything of it, because the phone was four years old and its battery had been dying at ten past six in the morning for most of a year, like a relative.

He put it on charge and went to make tea. When he came back it was on, and it had no signal, and it had never had no signal in that kitchen in nine years, because the mast was on the roof of the church.

He went out onto the landing, where the signal was best. Nothing.

He walked down to the corner. Nothing. He walked as far as the bus stop by the viaduct, in his coat, in the rain, holding his phone up in front of him like a man dowsing, and there, at last, one bar, and a message from his bank.

Your new SIM has been activated. If you did not request this, call us.

He rang the bank from the call box outside the off-licence, which took coins, which he had, because he was the only man in England who still kept coins in a tin.

The woman at the bank was called Precious and she was very calm and very kind, and she told him, in the way that people tell you things they have told two hundred people before, that a new SIM had been issued at a shop in Leeds the previous afternoon, in his name, with identification that had his name and face on it, and that between 5.40 and 6.10 that morning, £8,314.60 had left his account in nine transactions.

"All of it," said Ben.

"Not quite all, Ben. Sorry — I'm going to call you Ben, because the system's got your name down as one letter and a full stop, and I can't say it out loud without feeling like an idiot. There's forty-one pounds left. That's why the card stopped, actually — there's a limit on—"

"I had that money for —" He stopped. He was standing in the rain outside an off-licence and he could not think what he had that money for. "It's my mum's roof. It's — some of it's for my mum's roof."

"I'm so sorry," said Precious, and she was, you could hear it. "I've frozen everything. You'll need to come into a branch with photo identification. Are you all right?"

"Yes," said Ben. "Thank you. Sorry."

He rang off. He stood in the rain.

And then, because he was an actor, and because he had spent three weeks being a man in a house with no light in it, he did the thing he had been trained to do in a crisis, which was to locate the smallest, most concrete fact and hold on to it.

My photo is on a fake driving licence somewhere in Leeds.

. . .

The second thing was the email.

He got into the library at ten, because the library had computers, and he had not used a computer with a keyboard in three years and had to be shown how to log into his own email by a librarian called Denise who was twenty-three and did not laugh at him, which he was grateful for.

There were four hundred and eleven emails.

Most of them he could not read. Not would not — could not, in the sense that his eyes slid off them.

But there were three he read, because they were from his mother.

The first said, *Ben, love, your sister says somebody's been on your email. Ring me.*

The second said, *Ben, ring me.*

The third said, *Ben, I got a message from you this morning and I don't understand it, and I want you to know that whatever it says, I know you didn't mean it, but I've read it eleven times now and I can't stop, so please ring me.*

He read the third one twice. Then he scrolled down to the sent folder, and found, at 5.44 that morning, an email from his own account to his own mother, four hundred words long, in which he told Margo — in a voice that was roughly his, though nobody who knew him well would have called it good — that she had ruined his life with her fussing and her superstition and her sewing, that she was a silly old woman who had never understood him, and that he was ashamed to be her son.

The library had a strip light that hummed, exactly like the one in the rehearsal room.

Ben put his head on the desk.

Denise came over after a minute and asked if he was all right, and he said yes, thank you, sorry, and she said, "You're that fella off the poster, aren't you," not unkindly, and he said, "Not any more," and she said, "Well, my Nan says don't believe anything you read on a phone," which was the single most useful sentence anyone said to him that week.

. . .

The second video arrived that evening: Ben, in a hotel room that he had not been in, with a woman who was not his partner, saying things. The third arrived on the Thursday: Ben in a car, in a voice he only used for his mother, telling somebody that he was going to *sort out the girl.*

That one had a caption. The caption gave Tilda Wren's name.

Ben had not spoken to Tilda in eleven days. He rang her eleven times and she did not answer, which he understood and which did not help, and on the twelfth attempt he got her voicemail, and he said, standing in the rain at the bus stop by the viaduct, "Tilda. It's Ben. I know — I know what's happening and I want you to know that whatever you've seen I didn't say it and I'm going to — I'm going to find out how and I'm going to stop it. And you don't have to ring me back. But I —" and then, because his voice had gone, "— I'm sorry. That's all. I'm sorry it's got your name on it. That's not fair."

The voicemail was leaked to a newspaper within forty-eight hours. The newspaper described it as "an actor's emotional confession."

. . .

The production suspended him on the Friday, which is to say they stopped paying him, which is to say that within eight days Ben A. had lost his savings, his name, his phone number and one hundred and forty thousand pounds, and had not yet lost the thing that mattered most, which was coming.

He learned afterwards, in dribs and drabs, over years, how thin the pressure had been. Two of the Lyttelton's board had said they couldn't stand behind it while the allegations were unresolved. One had said that if it transpired the recordings were genuine, they'd look like fools, and if they weren't, they'd look like fools who'd hung a man out to dry. Deirdre, the woman who had run the theatre's front of house for twenty-six years, had argued for him for forty minutes and been thanked for her input.

None of it was malice. That was the thing he could not explain to people who asked him about it for the rest of his life. It was not malice. It was risk. There were eight hundred people's wages in that show. There was a young woman with his name in her mouth. There was, at every point, a perfectly reasonable case for waiting a week, and there was no one at any point in the chain whose job it was to wait a week on behalf of Ben A..

In December, the money was pulled and the show was postponed. The word used, in the letters, was *postponed*, and everybody in the business knew what it meant.

Hester Vowles, who had written the play when she was fifty-one and never written another, wrote to Ben in January. She sent a postcard from Whitby.

I have seen the work you had done by the Thursday of the second week. I want you to know that I don't believe the movie. Keep the lamps lit. — H.V.

He pinned it above the hob, where the tile was yellowing, and he looked at it on some days ten times.

. . .

And here is the part of the story where Ben A. did the stupidest thing he has ever done, and it was not signing the paper.

On the eleventh of December, three weeks after the Kitchen, he googled — on Denise's computer, in the library, badly — the phrase *how do I make them stop.*

The first four results were law firms offering a free consultation. The fifth was an advertisement with a telephone number, and a picture of a shield.

DIGITAL SHIELD SOLUTIONS — *We get it taken down. No win, no fee. Recover your reputation.*

He rang the number. A man answered, warm, in the north, calling him Ben before he had said his own name, and he said all the right things and one wrong one, and the wrong one was this: he said, "It's not fair, is it."

Ben paid £4,000 by bank transfer — borrowed from his mother, from the roof money, which he was told would be returned inside the month, along with £7,000 in damages.

Two days later a man with a very good telephone manner talked him through something called a remote session, so that Digital Shield Solutions could get onto his laptop and find the things that had been done to him. Ben, who did not fully understand what was happening, watched his own cursor move around his own screen for forty minutes whilst a stranger in another part of England looked through everything he had.

At the end the man said, "Right, Ben, I've got the whole lot. It's worse than we thought. I'm going to need another three thousand to get the girls online."

Ben said, "I haven't got three thousand."

"Your mother's got a roof," said the man, and hung up.

That was the thing that made him understand, at last, in his body and not in his head, the shape of what was happening. Not the money. Not even his mother. The fact that the man had said *the girls* — the way you say it about a horse, about a car, about a thing that is not a person but has a value.

. . .

Nell arrived on the fourteenth of December with two carrier bags and a hot water bottle, having driven for two hours in the rain after a twelve-hour shift.

His sister was thirty-one, a community nurse, and built along the lines of a gatepost. She stood in the kitchen and looked at the pan with the eggs in it and the pan with the beans in it and the pan that had evidently been used for something else and had not been washed, and then she put the kettle on and started opening the cupboards, twice, as though hoping the second time would be better.

"Mum hasn't slept," she said. "She's been reading it. She reads it every night, in bed, on that tablet I got her, and then she lies awake."

"Mum shouldn't read it."

"No, well, done, Ben, we'll put that in the newsletter." Nell banged a pan down. "Right. Cards on the table. Mum's roof can wait. That's the

first thing. That's not a problem. This is now a problem and it's going to be the only problem until it's sorted, and *you* are not sorting it."

Ben watched his sister, moving around his kitchen as though she were being paid by the hour, and he said the thing he had been holding since the ninth of November.

"I don't know how to."

"I know you don't." Her voice went quieter, which was worse than the banging. "That's not a failure of character, Ben, it's a *gap in your training.* I've got patients who can't read, and I don't shout at them, and I do not go, oh well, you should have learned. I get them someone." She put the kettle down. "So I'm getting you someone. She's coming tomorrow."

"Who?"

"Her name's Iola. She's my oldest friend. She's —" Nell considered her brother for a moment, and then chose the words with care, which for Nell meant choosing two of them and stopping. "Be nicer than you feel like being. And take the phone."

"I need the phone."

"You need to sleep." Nell took the phone out of his hand — took it, the way a nurse takes something off a small child — and put it in the biscuit tin and put the lid on the biscuit tin. "There. Iola'll tell you what to do with it. That's what she does."

. . .

End of Chapter Five.

CHAPTER SIX

The Woman Who Said No

. . .

The stage is the same kitchen, one day later. On the table: one notebook, one pencil, and a woman who is not going to fix anything.

. . .

Iola Pryce arrived at half past nine in the morning, in a coat that had seen weather, carrying a canvas bag that clinked, and she did not hug him, or smile at him, or say that she was sorry for his trouble.

She looked at him for a moment in the doorway.

"You look terrible," she said.

"Thanks."

"That's not a criticism, it's a status report. I'm Iola. I'm going to be here for four hours." She came in, put the bag down, took her coat off and hung it on the back of the door without being asked, and sat down at the table. "Sit."

Ben sat.

"First thing," said Iola Pryce. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to fix it."

She nodded slowly, as though he had said something she'd had in a document. "Right. And when you say fix it — do you mean you want me to find the men who did this and destroy them? Or do you mean you want me to go in there and *make it stop*, and make it like it was?"

"Both."

"The second thing is impossible. There is no version of this where it goes back." She said it flatly, without cruelty, the way a doctor says *it is broken and will not unbreak.* "The first thing — the destroying — I won't do. Partly because I can't. Partly because that's not what this is for."

"Then what are you for?"

Iola Pryce took a notebook out of her bag and put it on the table, and a pencil beside it, squared up with the edge, and Ben, who had spent his whole adult life being looked at, found himself being looked at in a way no one had looked at him before: not as a performer, not as a victim, but as a job.

"I'm for teaching you how to be a grown-up," she said. "Which you are not. You are thirty-four years old and you are the most powerful person who's ever sat at this table, and you are being taken apart by a man in an office in Leeds with a laptop and a fake driving licence, because you have never in your life read a piece of paper. So: we're going to do this properly. Four hours. No phones, no crying, no acting."

"I wasn't going to act."

Iola let a silence sit there. It was a very good silence. It was, Ben thought later, the silence of a woman who had heard a great deal of acting.

. . .

"Get the contract," she said. "The one you signed. The fourteen pages."

"The email's — I can't get into my email, my email's—"

"Where else would it be?"

He found it eventually, in the Downloads folder of the old laptop, where it had sat for a year and four months, unopened. The file was called *BEN_A_Arkwright_FINAL_2_v4_DS (1).pdf*.

Iola opened it, printed it on paper he did not know he had in the printer, and put the fourteen pages in front of him.

"Read it out loud. All of it. From the top. If you don't understand a word, stop and say so."

It took ninety minutes.

He read it the way a man reads a script — with attention, in the voice, finding the rhythm. And somewhere around the third page, something happened, which was that Ben A. met his own signature as a piece of evidence, and it changed the temperature of the room.

"Clause seven," he said. "The Artist irrevocably waives all moral rights in respect of any synthetic performance created under this Agreement, and consents to the creation of synthetic performances depicting the Artist in fictional scenarios, including scenarios to which the Artist has not consented at the time of creation, provided that no such performance shall depict the Artist in an act of a sexual, political or defamatory nature. So they —" he looked up "— they can't say I'm a sex criminal. That's the rule. They can't."

"Keep reading," said Iola.

"Clause eight. The Artist acknowledges that the licence granted in clause three is perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide, and sublicensable." He stopped. "I don't know what sublicensable means."

"It means they can sell it on. To someone whose name you don't know. Who is then bound by different rules. Keep reading."

"Clause nine, safeguards." He read the list: no political endorsement, no advertising of gambling, no adult material, and a whole paragraph that said the Licensor shall in its absolute discretion determine whether a use is a prohibited use.

"In its absolute discretion," said Iola. "So they decide whether they've broken their own rule. Go on."

"Clause eleven." He read it. Then he read it again, and his voice went, and he had to start over. "Clause eleven. The Artist waives any claim in defamation, false light, passing off, or breach of confidence arising out of any synthetic performance created under this Agreement. And acknowledges that the Licensor is not a publisher for the purposes of any such claim."

He put the paper down.

"That's the whole thing, isn't it," he said.

"That's the whole thing," said Iola Pryce. "That's what you signed. And you signed it because the fee was banded and the window was nice and a man said *you won't be lost*, and everyone else was signing. Do you know how much of my job is just reading that, out loud, to men who are surprised?"

"Men?"

"Mostly men," she said. "Not because they're stupider. Because nobody ever told them they had to. There's a whole class of people who've been brought up to think the safety of their own body is somebody else's department, and they are, in my experience, always the most surprised." She squared the pages up. "All right. That's the diagnosis. Now the treatment."

. . .

The treatment, as it turned out, consisted of ten unglamorous things.

"One. We freeze what you have. Not the links. Links die. Not the videos — say it back to me."

"Not the videos."

"Because?"

"Because a video on a platform can be deleted by the platform and then there's nothing. I need the page and the date on the page at the same time."

"And how do you do that?"

Ben had no idea, and said so, and she showed him: three things at once on the screen — the video, the web address, the clock on the computer, and the date in the newspaper held up beside it. "Ugly and unprofessional," she said, "and it will hold up in a hearing, and it will work in six years when the platform's gone bust." She made him do it forty times, until he could do it without thinking.

"Two. New telephone, new number, new email address, and you don't touch the old ones. Not to look, not to check, not to see what they're saying about you at two in the morning. You break the habit on

a device that has never been in a room with the old one. What's the point?"

"Because the old ones are — bled? Like, they know things?"

"Because the old ones are *known*. They know the recovery questions, the pet's name, the town you were born in, the day you registered. If a man can answer three questions about you, he can be you." She slid a small object across the table: a grey plastic key the size of a thumbnail. "This is a security key. It's sixty pounds. It is the single most effective thing you will ever buy and it looks like a piece of Lego. When you press it, it says —"

"*Yes, it's me.*"

"When you don't press it, it says no. Not *twenty minutes to think about it*, just no. Give one to your mother."

"Three. The recovery codes go on paper, in a drawer, not on the telephone." She watched him write them out. "Your hands are shaking."

"I'm fine."

"You're writing them down with your tongue sticking out like a six-year-old. That's not a criticism. That's how it's supposed to look. This is what it looks like when a man takes care of himself. It's not a montage. It's a tongue sticking out."

"Four: tell the truth, in writing, once, badly, and don't change it later. Five: tell the police, even if they laugh, and get the crime number, because the crime number is the only thing in the world that makes a bank move. Six: do not reply to anything. Seven: log every contact in this notebook, the time, the platform, the exact words, even at three in the morning, even when you're crying, especially then. Eight: don't delete. Nine: change every password you have to a phrase only you

would know and nobody could guess from your life — not your dog, not the town, not the play. Ten: don't pay anyone anything, ever again, for anything."

. . .

At the end of the fourth hour, Ben's head was aching and he had written eleven pages, and his handwriting had gone from actor to child to actor again.

"Why are you doing this?" he said. "Nell said she asked you. But she says people owe her things all the time, and — you're not being paid. Are you?"

"I'm on leave."

"Why?"

Iola Pryce looked at the notebook for a moment.

"When I was nineteen," she said, "there was a video. It wasn't my body. I was at a party in the background of someone's phone, I was drinking a Coke and pulling a face at a boy, and somebody took my face off that and put it on somebody else's body and sent it to everyone in my hall. Two hundred people. It was very good, actually. Technically. I remember thinking that it was the most *accurate* thing anyone had ever made about me."

Ben did not say anything.

"Fifteen years ago it took a man three weeks to make one of those. It costs eleven pounds now and it takes forty minutes, and there are apps that do it for free, and my fourteen-year-old niece could do it in her lunch hour." She stacked the pages. "It went round my university for a year. Nobody ever apologised to me. Three people apologised to my

boyfriend for what he must be going through. I left in the second year and I did a different degree somewhere else and I have never put a photograph of myself on the internet since, and I'm thirty-nine and I have no pictures of my own twenties, and that is a small, stupid thing to have lost."

"It's not small."

"No," said Iola. "It's not." She put the lid on the pencil, even though pencils don't have lids, because she was the sort of woman who did that. "When it happened to me, there was nobody to ask. There were forums. There was a man in a thread at two in the morning who called me darling and explained about hashes. I promised myself that if I ever met one of us who didn't know where to start, I'd sit down with them for four hours and I wouldn't hug them and I wouldn't tell them it was going to be all right. So. That's why."

Ben looked at her. "I'm going to say thank you."

"You can say it once, in a card, in six months, and then we're square. Say it now and I'll feel like a vending machine."

"All right." He looked down. Then, in a completely different voice, the one he used in the second act of a Chekhov when a man has decided to bear something: "Iola. There's a video with Tilda Wren's name on it. It says I threatened her. I didn't. And she isn't answering me, and she's twenty-two, and everybody's talking about her face now, and I can't — I can't do anything."

Iola Pryce sat up slightly.

"Then that," she said, "is the first real thing you've said all day, and it took you four hours to get to it. Because everything you've asked me for until now was about getting your name back." She pulled the note-

book towards her and turned to a fresh page. "This one's about somebody else's. Write it down. Date, time, name. *Thirty minutes ago, the subject first mentioned the Wren girl.*" She clicked the pencil. "Good. Now we've started."

. . .

End of Chapter Six.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Garden of Dead Actors

. . .

The stage is a garden in winter: a bench, a rug over a thin man's knees, and a camera on a tripod that nobody has explained.

. . .

January came, and with it a thing Ben had not expected, which was boredom.

He had thought that the end of the world would be dramatic. Instead it was admin. He got up. He wrote in the notebook. He read what Iola sent him, which was long and dry and full of sentences like *the persistence of an identifier across platforms significantly reduces the effectiveness of takedown*. He learned what a hash was. He learned that a photograph of a screen showing a date was called *contemporaneous capture*, and that saying those two words in a bank made people get a manager.

He learned that you can demand things. That was the great revelation of that winter, and it was so simple that he was angry about it for a fortnight.

"There's a form," said Iola, on the phone, on the ninth of January. "Actually there isn't a form. That's the problem. Everybody thinks there's a form. There's a right, and the right is that a company holding information about you has to tell you what it's got and where it came

from and who they've given it to. It's thirty days. It's free. It's the most powerful weapon in the English language and it's called a subject access request."

"Can they say no?"

"They can try. Then they're in contempt of a regulator, and nobody wants that in quarter one." There was a pause, and the sound of a spoon in a mug. "Ben. Do you understand what I'm telling you? You don't need to break into a building. You need to send an email, correctly, and then wait thirty days, and then read what comes back."

"I'm not —" He stopped himself, because he was about to say *I'm not clever enough for that*, and he had begun, that winter, to notice how often he said that, and how much of it was a way of asking somebody else to do it.

"Say it," said Iola.

"I'm not going to say it. I'm going to write the email."

"Good. Send it to me first."

. . .

The email took four days to write and two hundred words.

Ben had never written anything that was not a line in somebody else's mouth, and he discovered, at thirty-four, the peculiar horror of writing as yourself. He wrote it in the third person, then the first, then the third again. Iola sent back versions with comments in the margin, and the comments were things like *this is an apology, they don't want an apology, they want a date* and *you've said "as you know" three times, stop it* and, at the end of one, simply: *you are not asking a favour. delete the word "please" from paragraph two.*

On the fourteenth of January, Ben printed it, signed it, scanned it on the printer at the library with Denise's help, and sent it recorded delivery to the registered office of Echoform Holdings Limited, because Iola said that emails could be denied and paper could not.

Then he waited thirty days, which is a long time when you have lost your job.

. . .

The thirty-first day was a Thursday, and the reply was a link to a locked file and a covering letter from a firm of solicitors with four names on the letterhead and no warmth in any of them.

In the file were two hundred and eleven pages, and among them, on page one hundred and forty, was a table.

It listed, in a grey sans-serif that made everything in it look like an invoice, the thirty-one times somebody at Echoform had looked at the thing they had made of Ben.

Talent Archive — Subject: A., BEN — Access Log.

Most of the entries were dull, and Ben came to love the dull ones: an automated backup; a quality review by a technician at 04.12; a "consent verification run" on the eighth of March.

Then there were four entries that were not dull at all.

12 October, 14.22 — ACCESS: External Contractor — SORRELL, C. (Kit Sorrell) — Purpose: technical review — Duration: 41 min — Export: NONE

12 October, 15.04 — ACCESS: External Contractor — SORRELL, C. — Purpose: technical review — Duration: 6 min — Export:

PARTIAL — *Face mesh, blend weights, 600-sentence corpus, sample rate map*

2 November, 21.15 — ACCESS: External Contractor — SORRELL, C. — Export: FULL

3 November, 04.58 — ACCESS: Automated — Rule: SYNDICATION_DEMO — Licence: LEGACY-OPEN-003 — Export: FULL

He read them eleven times. Then he took a photograph of the screen with the newspaper and the clock beside it, the way Iola had made him practise forty times, and then he rang her.

"It's in there," he said. "It's all in there. It's got a *name* in it."

"Read me the whole page. Slowly. Don't summarise."

He read it slowly.

When he had finished there was a long silence on the line, and then Iola said, in a voice that had gone very quiet and very cold, "Ben. Read me the line at four fifty-eight again."

"'Access: automated. Rule: SYNDICATION_DEMO. Licence: LEGACY-OPEN-003. Export: full.'"

"That's four hours before the Kitchen went up on a forum in Leicester." A breath. "That's not a hacker. A hacker doesn't come in through a rule called SYNDICATION_DEMO with a licence number. That's a *product feature.*"

. . .

They worked it out over three weeks, on a table in Marlbrook, with a printer that kept jamming, and it was Iola who said the sentence that Ben would repeat, in one form or another, for the rest of his life.

"It's not about you," she said. "That's the worst part. You're not the target. You're the *brochure*."

Here is what they found, and it was not in a vault, and no one broke a single law to get it: Echoform had published a case study. A single page on its own website, in the "Solutions" section, aimed at studios and estate lawyers, with the confident prose of a company that has never once been sued.

The case study was called **The Garden**, and it described, in cheerful and entirely public detail, the company's flagship service: *the licensing of a fully synthetic, performance-grade actor likeness, cleared for use without the presence, availability, or consent of the performer.*

Halfway down the page, in a box headed **ROADMAP — 2027**, was this:

Q3: LEGACY FELT. Client-side sensory deployment. The audience does not watch the performance; the audience is licensed the performance, and wears it. Initial trials in three regional venues reported a 91% preference for the felt experience over live attendance, with a corresponding fall in complaints about ticket pricing, sightlines, and the behaviour of other members of the audience.

Ben read *the behaviour of other members of the audience* four times. It was the only line in two hundred pages that frightened him on his own account rather than somebody else's.

And it named three of them.

One was a woman who had died in 1974 and whose estate was run by a nephew in Canada.

One was Arthur Pemberton.

And the third was described, in the case study, as *a contemporary mid-career stage performer, licensed on the Arkwright form, retained as a proof-of-concept for the continuity of character across production cycles.*

Ben read it four times and then went and stood in the hall for a while.

"That's me," he said, when he came back. "That's me. I'm the *example*. I'm the —" he looked at the page "— *proof of concept for the continuity of character.*"

"Keep reading," said Iola. "Page three. The paragraph about adversarial verification."

Ben read page three. The paragraph about adversarial verification said:

In Q4, Echoform undertook an unannounced field test of the LEGACY pipeline. A synthetic asset was released into the public domain without attribution. Within eleven hours it had been viewed 4.1 million times, cited by two national broadcasters, and generated 19,000 pieces of editorial comment, with no more than a 6% rate of public scepticism. Independent auditors concluded that the asset was indistinguishable from authentic footage in 94% of viewer tests. Echoform regards this result as a validation of the LEGACY standard and now offers a certified authentication service to studios.

"They tested it," said Ben.

"They tested it on the public. With you in it." Iola took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes, and for the first time since he had met her she looked tired rather than precise. "Ben, listen to me. This is the thing that matters, and everything else is decoration. They can say Sorrell did it. They can say he went off the rails. But look at the licence number — LEGACY-OPEN-003. There are at least two before it. They did it twice

before you and nobody noticed, because the first two weren't famous enough to notice." She put her glasses back on. "And there is a sentence on this page that says, in writing, on the internet, that the reason they could do it to you is that you signed clause three."

. . .

The visit to Arthur Pemberton was on the nineteenth of February, and Ben nearly did not go.

Arthur lived in a house in Hertfordshire with a garden he had once described, in an interview in 1994, as *the only thing I've ever made that hasn't been reviewed.* There was a nurse called Bridget, and a daughter called Rosalind, and in the sitting room a camera on a tripod, which had been there so long that the rug had a dent in it.

Arthur Pemberton was seventy-eight and had been, in his day, the finest actor of his generation, and there is no way of saying what dementia had done to him that is not either sentimental or obscene, so: he was a thin man in a chair with a rug over his knees, looking politely at a stranger, waiting to be told who the stranger was.

"Mr Pemberton," said Ben. "My name's Ben. I saw you do Lear in Marlbrook when I was nine. You looked up at the balcony."

The old man's eyes moved. "The balcony," he said. "Yes. They never —" and then he stopped, and lost it, and found something else: "Are you here about the recording?"

"No," said Ben. "I'm here about the recording."

"They want me to say the lines for the —" a hand moved, vaguely, at the room "— for the thing. The garden. They're very good to me. They come on Tuesdays. Bridget says they're very good to me." He looked at Ben with great courtesy. "Do you know, I can't remember *Lear*

at all now. Isn't that funny. I can remember the balcony. I can't remember a word of it."

"They've got it," said Ben. "They've got all of it. They've had it since before —"

"Yes," said Arthur Pemberton, comfortably. "That's what it's for."

Rosalind showed him out, and in the hall, under a photograph of her father at thirty-five, she said, quietly, "He signed something in 2021. I asked him about it in September and he thought I was asking about the boiler." She looked at the door of the sitting room. "I'm not a stupid woman, Mr A. I'm a solicitor. And I have spent a year being told that the agreement is valid because he signed it, and I keep saying, *he signs things now that he would not have signed then*, and they keep saying, *that's not for us to judge.*" She opened the front door. "Who judges it? That's my question. Who is it that judges?"

Ben went out into the garden, where the tripod stood in the wet grass, and he stood there for a while in the cold, and then he took out his notebook — which had become, over four months, the most disciplined object in his life — and he wrote on a fresh page:

19 Feb. Arthur P. does not know what he signed. Camera in the sitting room. Rosalind asked who judges. Nobody has answered her.

Then, underneath, because he had learned in five months what he had not learned in thirty-four years:

Ask Iola how to answer her.

. . .

End of Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What Tilda Knew

. . .

The stage is a café with two exits and no music. A young woman sits with her back to the wall, which is not an accident.

. . .

She texted him on the second of March, four months after the Kitchen, three words and no punctuation:

coffee then?

They met at eleven in a café near the station in Marlbrook, because Tilda would not come to London and Ben could not afford it. She came in with a hat on and her shoulders up and she chose the seat with her back to the wall and her coat on the chair beside her, and Ben, who had spent five months learning to look at people properly, noticed that she did not take her gloves off for eleven minutes.

"You look better," she said.

"I look like a man who does his own washing."

"That's what I mean." She wrapped both hands round the cup. "I've been wanting to ring you since November. I didn't, because —" she turned the cup round "— because my agent said don't. And because I was frightened you'd think I'd started it. And because I was angry with

you, which wasn't fair, and I knew it wasn't fair, and knowing a thing isn't fair doesn't make it stop."

"Angry with me for what?"

"Because when it happened to you," said Tilda Wren, "everybody said *oh, poor man, what a terrible thing, imagine*." She looked up. "Three years ago it happened to me. Not the same. Not as good. Mine was — you could tell, if you looked, there was a flicker at the throat. But it was good enough for a Thursday. And when it happened to me, everybody said —"

She stopped.

"Say it," said Ben, and it was Iola's phrase, and it came out of him without his deciding to use it, which is how you know a thing has got into your bones.

"Everybody said *well, what was she doing in that photograph in the first place?*" Tilda said it in a bright, social voice, imitating somebody. "That was DS-level. That was a detective. And that was my own —" she stopped again, and drank some coffee, and started somewhere else entirely. "I was nineteen. I was in a series, I was in the *Radio Times*, and one morning there were pictures of my face on things I have never done. My mum found them before I did. She rang me at half six in the morning and she couldn't speak."

"I didn't know," said Ben.

"No. Well." Tilda's mouth did something. "You weren't supposed to. Nobody was. That was the entire point of it, actually, from their side — the reason it worked. It went round for nine days and then it stopped, and I did a press thing where I said I was fine, and I *wasn't* fine, and I went back to work on the eleventh day and learned my lines,

and the man who plays my father in that series said —" she did the voice again, the bright one "— he said, *well, if you lie down with dogs, love.*"

The café had a strip light that hummed. Everything in this story would seem to have a strip light that hummed.

"I didn't know," said Ben again, and then, because he had begun to suspect himself, "Tilda. Did I say anything? At the read-through, or in the pub, or — anything about you, or about — did I ever—"

"No," said Tilda. "You were lovely. You were the only one who asked me what I thought Ada was frightened of, instead of telling me." She let out a breath. "That's what I'm trying to explain. You were lovely, and it still nearly killed me, and I'm sitting here in a hat because there are men in vans outside my flat and I have done nothing wrong, and I'm still —" she pushed her cup away "— I'm still the one who has to be careful about her tone."

. . .

They were in that café for three hours, and Ben got worse before he got better.

The first thing he did wrong was consolation. He said that it must have been awful, and that he was so sorry, and that nobody should have to go through it — and he watched Tilda's face close, and he kept talking, and it closed further, and he had the specific sensation of being on a stage in the second act and knowing with absolute certainty that the play has gone.

The second thing he did wrong was ask why she hadn't told anyone.

"I mean," he said, "not that you — I just mean, if it had been in a newspaper, or if you'd—"

"I did," said Tilda. "I told the production. I told my agent. I told the police, who wrote it down, which is not the same as listening. I told the *Radio Times*, who printed the word *claims*. I told everyone, Ben. Everyone. Do you know what it costs to be the girl who says it happened? Every single person I told was kinder to me afterwards for exactly six weeks, and then they were tired of me." She looked at him. "You've had four months and you're already exhausted, and you're allowed to be exhausted. But don't ask me why I didn't tell anyone. I told everyone I have ever met. That's the reason I'm like this."

Ben sat with that. And then, because he had spent thirty-four years learning to read a room and had only just started using it on himself, he did the thing that saved them.

He said: "I've been getting told it's not my fault for four months. Everybody says it. My agent, my mother, the woman at the bank. *It's not your fault, Ben.* And it helped. Every time it helped." He pushed his cup away, mirroring her, and noticed himself doing it, and stopped. "Nobody has said that to me once about you. Not once, in five months, has a single person said to me, *and it's not Tilda's fault either.*" He looked up. "I didn't say it because I didn't think of it. That's the whole of it. I had a good man's sympathy and it went out sideways to nobody but me."

Tilda Wren looked at him for a long, level moment.

"See," she said, "that. That's why I came. Because you're the only person in this that anyone would listen to now, and I thought if I could get you for an hour, I could —" she stopped, and her eyes went bright and furious, and she pressed the heel of her hand against one of them. "Sorry. Sorry. I don't cry. It's a whole thing."

"Nobody in my family cries either," said Ben. "We do this." And he made a small, appalled noise in the back of his throat, and Tilda laughed, once, wetly, and put her gloves on and took them off again.

. . .

She had kept things.

She had kept, for three years, in a folder on a laptop, everything: thirty-one screenshots with the date visible, eleven emails, a recording of a phone call with a man from Echoform's "talent partnerships" team in September 2021, and a printed copy of her own contract, unsigned, with seventeen questions written in the margin in a schoolgirl's handwriting that made Ben want to put his head down on the table.

"I asked for the contract in paper," she said. "They said nobody's ever asked for paper. I asked them to strike clause eleven and they said nobody's ever asked for that either. And I said, well, now two nobodies have." She shrugged. "They withdrew the offer. And then the thing happened to me three months later, and I've never known — I've *never known*, Ben, whether that was a coincidence. And I can't say that to anyone, because it sounds mad, and if it sounds mad then everything I say sounds mad."

"Do you think they did it?"

"I think," said Tilda slowly, "that a man who has decided you are a nuisance has a hundred legal ways to make you tired. And that most of them aren't crimes. And that this is why everybody acts like the law is a wall, when actually it's a net, and the people who tell you it's a wall are all on the outside with a pair of scissors."

Ben wrote it down, verbatim, because that was now what he did.

"Will you talk to the woman who's been teaching me?" he said. "She's — she won't be kind, exactly. She'll be accurate."

"God," said Tilda. "Yes. Please. Accurate."

"Oh — and Tilda. One thing, and then I'll shut up, and it's your call." He turned the notebook round so she could see it wasn't a script. "I've got a subject access request in with them. It produced a log. There's a contractor's name in it, and there's a rule, and there's a licence number. If we do anything with it — anything — your name will be on it too, and my name is worth nothing, and yours is worth less, and that is a fact and I'm not going to dress it up." He closed the notebook. "So you get to choose. Not now. Soon. And if you choose no, then I'll go and stand in the rain about it somewhere else."

Tilda Wren put her gloves on, both of them, properly, the way Margo put on her coat before a funeral.

"Ask me on Sunday," she said. "I want to be a person who got asked twice."

. . .

End of Chapter Eight.

CHAPTER NINE

A Room Full of Receipts

The stage is a front room with a table in it, and on the table two hundred pages, and on the two hundred pages a coffee ring, because the woman in charge has said that a bundle you are frightened to put a cup down on is a bundle you have not read.

By April the front room of 14 Wick Lane had become an office, and the office had a system, and the system had a name, and the name was *the bundle.*

"You're going to hate this," Iola had said in March, "and then you're going to love it, and then you're going to hate it again in June, and that's the whole emotional life of a case. Exhibits are numbered. Exhibits are never renumbered. If you find something in April that should have been exhibit eleven, it becomes exhibit two hundred and six, and everyone in the room knows you found it late, and nobody cares, because late is better than lost."

"How many have you done?"

"Forty-one. Two of them worked."

They built it over nine weeks. Ben did the labour — the printing, the tabbing, the ringing of people who did not want to be rung — and

Iola did the structure, and every evening at six they had a phone call in which she made him explain, out loud, in three sentences, what each exhibit proved. It was the same exercise, Ben realised in the fourth week, that Delphine had made him do with a scene: *say what it's for, or it's decoration.*

The exhibits, when they were done, were these.

Exhibit 3: the Arkwright form, signed 12 September, clause three highlighted.

Exhibit 14: a photograph of the capture studio on 4 and 5 November, taken by a technician for a birthday, in which Ben can be seen sitting in a chair with dots on his face, laughing at a wall.

Exhibit 22: the subject access bundle, page one hundred and forty, with the four access entries.

Exhibit 31: a printed page from Echoform's own website, archived on 19 December, describing the field test — downloaded, dated, and signed on the back in Ben's own hand: *this was me. I did not know.*

Exhibit 44: a call sheet.

That one came from Maz.

. . .

She came round on the eleventh of April with a shoebox and stood in the doorway of the front room looking at the walls, which had a chronology on them, pinned up, four months of it in Iola's small square capitals.

"You've got a wall," she said.

"I've got a wall."

"God help us." She put the shoebox on the table. "I kept the production file. Stage managers keep everything, because every stage manager has been blamed for something that was in a piece of paper in a box." She took the lid off. "Call sheets, rehearsal reports, the daily movement sheet, and the invoices the production office copied me on because I did the floats."

"Why?"

"Because when the show got pulled, I didn't trust anybody to file it properly, and I was right, because it's all gone, it went to a storage unit in Croydon and then it went to a skip." She pushed the box across. "It's yours. Don't thank me. Thank me by being less of an idiot."

"Maz—"

"No. I mean it." She stood with her hands on the back of a chair. "I spent six years being the person who remembered things for you, Ben, and I left because I was tired, and then this happens and I find out that I am *still* the person who remembers things for you, only now I'm doing it from a different postcode." Her voice was steady and her eyes were not. "So here's the box, and here's the deal. From now on, you remember your own things. I'll be nice to you at Christmas. That's it. That's the whole offer."

"That's fair," said Ben.

"I know it's fair. I'm not asking for fair, I'm asking for *done*."

He looked in the shoebox. In the shoebox, in a plastic wallet, was the movement sheet for the second of November, and on the second of November, at 14.05, in Maz's round handwriting, was a note:

Studio walk-round. CH + 2 (Echoform) + estate lawyer? CH asked for the Arkwright originals to be taken to the archive. Told him they're digital. He said, then take the device. Joke, I think.

Ben read it four times.

"CH," he said. "Crispin Hale."

"On site. Two days before the Kitchen. Asking for the originals." Maz picked up her bag. "I didn't think anything of it at the time, because he was always on site, he was paying for it, he was the man who bought the biscuits." She got as far as the door and then stopped, and said, without turning round, "Ben. When it happened, I didn't ring you. I want you to know that I nearly did, and I didn't, and I've thought about it every week since. That's not a confession and it's not an apology. It's just a fact in a box."

. . .

The setback came on the twenty-ninth of April and it came from Ben himself, which was the worst part.

He had, in November, filled in a takedown form. He had done it in the first week, before Iola, when he was still a man in a kitchen with a phone in a biscuit tin, and he had asked a large platform to remove the Kitchen video, and the platform had, that same evening, sent him a cheerful automated email saying that his request had been *actioned*.

In April the platform sent him another email, because the platform had a new system, and the new system had reviewed his case, and had concluded that the material he had asked to be removed — his face, his voice, his kitchen — had been removed once, and had been reposted 340 times, and that under its rules it would now remove *all* versions.

Including the ones in his bundle.

Including the ones with the timestamps and the dates and the newspaper.

He discovered this on a Tuesday morning when he clicked a link in exhibit thirty-eight and got a grey page with a small sad face on it.

He sat in the front room for two hours and did not ring Iola, and then he rang Iola, and she said, "Right," in a flat voice, and then she said, "How many?"

"Nine."

"Nine of the forty." A pause. "Where's the local copy?"

And that was the moment — Ben thought about it for years — that was the moment the whole thing turned, and it turned on four words: *where's the local copy.*

Because he had one. He had done the stupid, tedious, tongue-sticking-out thing on a wet afternoon in December, forty times, with a newspaper held up next to a screen, because a woman with a grey plastic key had told him to. He had it all in a folder called, with the total absence of imagination that characterises the truly competent, **COPIES 2 (DO NOT DELETE)**.

"It's here," he said. "It's all here. I've got it twice."

"Say that again."

"I've got it twice."

There was a silence on the line, and then a sound that Ben had never heard before and heard three times in the rest of his life, which was Iola Pryce laughing.

"Good," she said. "Good. Ben — this is the whole job. This is the entire job. Everything else is paperwork. Somebody deletes a thing and you say: *I have the copy, and here is the date on it.* That's it. That's the sword." She blew out a breath. "Now ring the platform and ask them for the removal log, because every removal is a record, and their record is now exhibit forty-nine."

. . .

DS Rupa Vane worked out of a police station in a town Ben had never been to, in a room with eleven desks and one plant.

She gave him forty minutes and did not laugh at him, and she did not lean forward sympathetically either, which he was grateful for.

"Right," she said. "Before you start, three things, and I want you to hear all three, because I only say them once." She counted on her fingers. "One: what's happened to you is a crime. Several crimes. There's a real chance — a strong chance — that no one is ever convicted of any of them. That's not me being cruel, it's me being honest, because the clearance rate for this kind of thing is appalling and I'm not going to sit here and let you think we're going to arrest a man on Tuesday. Two: the thing you've built in that box is worth more than the average case I get. Do you know how rare it is that a victim brings a chronology?"

"No."

"Very." She held up the third finger. "Three: if you do this, it will take three years, and at the end of it you will know more about how it works than you ever wanted to, and you will never get the four months back. So. Do you want to make a complaint?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go through it properly, from the beginning, and don't skip the bits where you were stupid, because the bits where you were stupid are the bits that will make somebody believe you." She pulled a form towards her, and then paused, and looked up. "And Mr A. — one more thing, off the record. The select committee's taking evidence on the synthetic media bill in June. They've had eleven witnesses from the industry and one from a charity. They haven't had anybody who's actually been through it."

"I don't want to be the poster."

"No," said Rupa Vane, writing. "Nobody ever does. That's why I always ask the ones who don't."

. . .

End of Chapter Nine.

CHAPTER TEN

The Hearing

. . .

The stage is a committee room. Green baize. Water in plastic. Eleven people who are late, and one man who has been early for two hours.

. . .

Ben had expected a court. He had dressed for a court: the suit, the shoes, a tie that had belonged to his father and that Margo had pressed in the kitchen at seven in the morning with the iron set too high, so that there was a small shine on it near the knot.

What he got was a room with a long table and fourteen chairs and a portrait of a man on the wall, and a window that looked onto a car park.

"Mr A.," said the clerk. "You're third. The committee will be running late. They're always late."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's neither. It just means you've got longer to sit in the corridor."

. . .

The corridor was where the whole thing happened, in the end, and it happened in eleven minutes, and there were no lawyers in it.

Tilda was in the corridor. She had come alone. She was wearing a grey dress and no gloves and her hands were folded and she was doing, Ben noticed, the exercise: breathing in for four, out for six. The same thing she did before a matinee.

"You all right?" he said.

"No. You?"

"No."

"Good." She looked at the closed door. "Ben. Whatever they ask me — I'm going to answer it exactly. Not cleverly, not the way my agent wrote it down. Exactly. Because the minute I start performing, they win, and they'll do it for an hour."

She went in at a quarter past ten and Ben listened through the door, which was not what you were supposed to do, and did not care.

The first forty minutes were fine. She was extraordinary: dry, precise, funny without meaning to be, and she answered the question about her own earlier images in the same voice she answered everything else, which was the bravest thing he had ever heard anyone do.

And then Gareth Pyle MP leaned into his microphone and changed the temperature of the room.

"Miss Wren, if I might — you said a moment ago that you kept screenshots. That's very diligent. But I want to take you back to 2021. You'd been in the public eye, you'd done a certain amount of — and I'm not being unkind, I'm trying to establish a pattern of behaviour here — you'd done a certain amount of, shall we say, *promotional* photography."

"There was a photoshoot for a magazine."

"Yes. And a matter of months later, images began circulating. And now, three years on, you're here, and a man who has never had any such photograph taken of him is also here, and I'm simply asking whether we are comparing like with like."

There was a silence in the committee room of a specific length. Ben knew the length; it was the silence in a rehearsal room when an actor has dropped a line and the audience has not yet decided to be kind.

"Sir," said Tilda Wren, "I was nineteen and I did a photoshoot in a *jumper*, and somebody put my face on a body, and your question is whether I asked for it. Is that the question? Because I want to be certain, because I'll be asked about it for a week."

The chairwoman said, "Mr Pyle, I think that's—"

"No, no, I'm happy to withdraw the *implication*," said Pyle, comfortably. "I'm simply saying that the public will draw a distinction between different categories of victim, and this committee should not be seen to flatten that distinction."

"Then let me help the committee," said Tilda. "There is no distinction. That's the whole thing. That's the entire thing I came here to say and I've been trying to say it for forty minutes and I keep getting asked about a jumper." Her voice was absolutely level. "I did not consent to a man making a film of me. Neither did he. Neither did Arthur Pemberton, who is seventy-eight and has dementia, and neither did a woman who died in 1974 and whose nephew in Canada has been receiving letters from a company that says she has agreed to something. There is no distinction between us. There's only a difference in how long it took anybody to believe us."

. . .

Ben went in at twenty past eleven and was, by every measure, a worse witness than she had been.

He was slow. He said *sorry* nine times. Asked what the words *in perpetuity* meant when he signed, he began a long, truthful, fatal answer about a party in Hampstead and a string quartet, and the chairwoman had to ask him twice to come to the point.

But something happened in the last ten minutes, and Ben could never afterwards describe it except in the language he had been given at nine years old by a man on a stage in Marlbrook, which was that he stopped acting.

"Mr A.," said Alison Crayle MP. "You've been described in the press as — and I'm quoting an Echoform submission to this committee, so I'd like you to hear it — as *a mature consenting professional who understood the commercial arrangement he entered into.* Is that a fair description of you?"

Ben thought about it. He thought about it for a long time, and the room, which had been shuffling, stopped.

"I understood it the way you understand a thing at a party," he said. "I understand that that's not a defence. I'm not going to stand here and say I was tricked, because I wasn't. Nobody lied to me. A man in a good suit said *you won't be lost*, and I wanted to be wanted, and I signed a thing I hadn't read, and if I'd read it I'd still have signed it, and that's the bit that took me six months to admit." He looked at the green baize. "But I want to say something about the word consent, if that's all right. Because they keep using it, and every time they use it, it does a lot of work that it isn't entitled to do."

"Go on."

"Consent isn't a signature. I can sign a form that says I agree to be operated on by a particular surgeon, but if I sign it at a party, in a room where everybody's signing, and the form's on a screen and the screen moves, and the man's told me the fee's banded to this week —" he stopped, and started again, more slowly "— that's not consent. That's a signature. It's a signature and a receipt. And I'm not saying it's the same as —" he looked up at the committee, at Tilda's empty chair, at the eleven faces "— I'm not saying it's the same as what happened to Miss Wren, because I chose to be in that room, and nobody has ever had to choose to be in a room with me. But I am saying that if the whole of the law rests on a signature, then the law is only protecting the people who were paying attention at the party. And the people who weren't paying attention at the party are, in my experience, mostly the same people who never get believed anywhere else."

There was a silence in the committee room, and it was the good kind.

"Mr A.," said Alison Crayle, "if I asked you to write down, in one sentence, what you want this committee to do, what would it say?"

"Read it to me out loud," said Ben. "That's all. Whatever they put in front of me. If a company wants my face, and they can't read the paper to me, in a room, with the clock stopped and nobody in a hurry — then they don't get my face." He shrugged. "It's not a very clever sentence."

"It's not supposed to be clever," said Alison Crayle MP. "It's supposed to be law."

. . .

Crispin Hale gave evidence after lunch, and he was, of course, superb.

He came in without a tie, which was a decision, and he was courteous to the committee and generous about his competitors and devastating about his own industry, and he said, at one point, "I think what we heard this morning is the sound of a technology arriving faster than the law can walk, and it is not the fault of any company in this room that Parliament legislates in five-year cycles."

Asked about the field test, he said, "I have already apologised publicly for the way that project was conducted, and I'll apologise again, without reservation, to Mr A. It was a failure of governance. It was not a failure of the technology, and I will not pretend otherwise, because the country needs this technology, and pretending otherwise would be a disservice to the people who are dying without leaving anything behind."

Asked about Arthur Pemberton, he said, "Arthur is very fond of the work. It has given him enormous pleasure in a difficult time."

Alison Crayle MP asked whether he accepted that a performance made without the performer — and preferred by audiences to the performer — was a thing that would eventually put performers out of work.

"Put them out of work," said Crispin Hale, "or free them from it? Those are the same sentence with a different adjective, and I notice the committee has decided which one it prefers." He was not defensive; he was, as ever, reasonable. "You are asking me to protect the public from something the public has already chosen. This country spends eleven billion pounds a year on tickets and subscriptions, and an enormous amount of it goes to people who would rather have been somewhere else. We can give them the somewhere else. We can give it to a woman in Hartlepool who will never in her life afford a stalls seat, in a form that costs less than a cinema ticket, without asking a single actor to turn

up." He folded his hands. "I understand why that sounds like an ending to this committee. To me it sounds like a beginning. The trouble with people who work in the arts is that they have spent four hundred years insisting the audience needs them. The audience has never needed us. It has needed the *night*, and it has always paid for the night, and we are simply the last people to find out."

There was a small silence. Somebody's pen stopped.

"Mr Hale," said Alison Crayle, "have you ever stood in a parish hall on a wet Thursday and watched eighty people decide to believe a man?"

"I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure."

"No," she said. "I thought not."

Asked whether Ben had consented to the making of the Kitchen, he said, "Mr A. consented, in writing, in a contract drafted by his own agent's preferred lawyers, to the creation of synthetic performances of himself. That is the plain fact, and I understand it's an uncomfortable one."

And asked, finally, by Alison Crayle, "Would you do it again?" he was silent for exactly two seconds — Ben counted them, because counting things was now what he did — and then said, "I would run it better."

. . .

The committee reported in July. There were forty-one recommendations, of which, by the following spring, four had become law.

Nobody was prosecuted. The contractor, Kit Sorrell, had gone to Portugal in January; the extradition request was described in one newspaper as *ongoing* and in another, two years later, as *dormant*.

Echoform was fined £180,000, which was, as Iola pointed out, less than the fee Ben had been paid for the capture.

Ben's name was not cleared, because there is no mechanism in England for clearing a name. There is only the slow accretion of facts, which is like cleaning a window with a cloth the size of a stamp.

He got the train home from St Pancras that evening and sat in the quiet carriage, and a man opposite him looked at him for a while over the top of a newspaper, and then said, "You're him, aren't you. The actor." And Ben said, "Yes." And the man said, "I never believed it, mate. My missus didn't either." And Ben said thank you, and then had to go and stand in the corridor by the doors for a while with his hands on the glass, because that, in the end, was the thing that broke him: not the committee, not Hale, not four months. One man on a train saying *I never believed it.*

Margo met him at the station with a flask.

"Did you read it to them?" she said.

"I did, Mum."

"Good." She poured the tea into the lid. "Now come home and have something that isn't a sandwich."

. . .

End of Chapter Ten.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Long Gallery

. . .

The stage is a parish hall in Marlbrook with ninety chairs in it and a sheet pinned to the wall. It is October. It is raining. Nobody in this room is being paid.

. . .

The play opened at eight o'clock on a Thursday in a hall that smelled of floor polish and other people's funerals, and it opened, in the end, because Delphine Okoro had made three telephone calls in July.

The first was to the Lyttelton, to ask whether they would consider a reading. The second was to a woman at the Arts Council who said the word *unfortunate* four times. The third was to Margo, in Marlbrook, at half past nine at night, and lasted forty minutes, and at the end of it Margo said, "Well, the parish hall's free on Thursdays and I'll do the curtains," and that was how it was decided.

Delphine directed it for nothing. The set was four chairs, seven lamps, a door on a frame, and a sheet pinned to the back wall by Margo with her own drawing pins, because the hall's projector screen had been broken since 2018 and the committee had voted against replacing it.

Maz came back as stage manager for the one night, and stood in the middle of the hall with a stopwatch and said, "I'll do it, but I'm not carrying anything I can't put down," and then carried everything.

Iola Pryce, who had never in her life been inside a theatre, ran the box office in the porch with a cash tin and a list of names, and took £743, and found that she was rather good at it.

Tilda Wren came up on the train with a bag and no agent and said, "I'm doing Ada. I know it's one night and there's no money. I don't care. I want to finish the second act. I've been carrying that second act around for a year and a half like a suitcase."

They rehearsed for eleven days.

. . .

On the night, there were eighty-one people in ninety chairs.

That is a fact worth stopping on. Eighty-one people came out in the rain to a parish hall in Marlbrook to see a play that had been cancelled by a national theatre, performed by an actor who, if you searched his name that evening, would have returned fourteen thousand results and almost none of them pleasant. Some of them were there out of loyalty. Some of them were there because they were curious about the scandal. Most of them, Ben thought afterwards, were there because it was raining and it cost eight pounds and there was nothing else on.

Delphine spoke to them before curtain, which was not usual, standing in the middle of the room with her arms folded.

"There's no interval. It's ninety minutes. The door's at the back and it doesn't lock. If you need to leave, leave, but I'd ask you to leave quietly, because we're doing it properly and it's taken us a while to get here." She looked around the room. "And one thing. There are tele-

phones in this room and I'm not going to ask you to turn them off, because you're grown-ups and I'm not your mother. But I'll say this. The play is about a family who are so frightened of what's in the dark that they keep lighting lamps for a house with no oil in it. If you spend the evening watching it through a screen, you'll be doing the exact thing the play is about, and I'll see you, and I'll be disappointed."

Then she sat down in the third row and the lights went out.

. . .

Ben had never been better, and he knew it about eleven minutes in, with the strange doubled consciousness of the good nights: he could feel the room breathing with him. The eighty-one people leaned in. Somewhere in the fourth row a woman was crying quietly.

It was the second act — the long one, the one where Edmund has to admit what he has done with the lamps — when the projector came on.

The projector was on a table near the door. Nobody had asked for a projector. There was a laptop beside it, closed, plugged in, with a black cable running under the chairs; Maz had walked past it twice during the get-in and assumed it belonged to the hall, and the hall's caretaker had assumed it belonged to the company, and that is how it is always done.

The sheet at the back of the hall — Margo's sheet, with her drawing pins — went white, and then went grey, and then filled.

Ben felt it before he saw it: the room turned. Eighty-one heads moved at once, away from him, towards the wall behind their own chairs, and there is no feeling in an actor's body like the feeling of the room leaving.

He turned round.

On the sheet was himself. Larger than life, close-framed, in a warm kitchen with a tile behind him that was yellowing at the corner. And the face on the sheet was doing Edmund. It was doing the second act of *The Long Gallery*. It was doing it beautifully — no, that was the thing, that was the thing he would spend years trying to explain — it was doing it **better**. It found things in the lines he had never found. It had the little pause before *a building* that he had worked on for four weeks, and it had it in the exact place, and it had something else as well, something he had never once managed, which was the impression of a man who genuinely did not know what was going to happen next.

Somebody in the fourth row laughed. It was a terrible laugh, a shocked one.

"That's the fake one," said a man near the back, quite loudly. "That's him. That's the—"

"Yes," said Tilda Wren.

She had not stopped. She was standing in the middle of the room in Ada's grey dress with her hands at her sides, and she was *still in the play*, and she turned to the sheet on the wall as though it were a scene partner — which it was, Ben realised, it was exactly that, that was the whole ambition of the men who had designed it — and she said, into the room, in Ada's voice:

"There is nothing in the garden, Father, that is what I keep telling you."

The face on the sheet said, in Ben's voice, with Ben's warmth:

"Then why do you keep opening the door."

And the room made a sound, because it was *good*, because it was better than good, because it was the best acting any of them had ever

seen and it had been made in a room somewhere by people who were not in the building.

Delphine stood up.

"Sit down," said Ben.

He said it across the room in his own voice, and it stopped her, and it stopped everyone, and he heard himself do it and thought, distantly and with a kind of grief, *that was a good cue.*

"It's all right," he said. "I'm not going to have it turned off. That's what they want, isn't it. They want me to have it turned off." He turned and looked at the sheet, at his own face, at the ceiling light in his own kitchen, and then he turned back to the eighty-one people and stepped out of Edmund, which is a thing actors do not do, and which felt like stepping off a kerb.

"Evening," he said. "I'm Ben. That —" he nodded at the wall "— that's not me, and it's not him either, it's not Edmund. It's a very clever piece of work and it's about to do something that I have watched it do before, which is to be flawless at you for another forty minutes and then go to black. And I want to say one thing about it, and then I'd like to finish the play, if you'll have me."

The rain went on hitting the hall roof. Nobody moved. Somewhere a phone came up, and the man next to it said, "Put it down, Derek," and Derek put it down.

"It can say anything," said Ben. "That's the trick. It can say the line better than I can — you've just heard it. It's got the words. It's got *my* words, actually, I gave them away in a studio in Park Royal for a hundred and forty thousand pounds, and I didn't read the form." He put his hands in his pockets and then took them out again, because

Delphine had once told him that he fidgeted when he was lying and he had believed her. "But it can't do the other thing. It can't hear you. That's all. I've been watching it for a year and the only thing it can't do is the thing Tilda's been doing for four minutes, which is *waiting* for an answer that might not come, and being changed by it when it does." He let that sit. "That's the whole of my evidence. I'm sorry it's come out on a Thursday in a parish hall. I'd have liked it to be cleverer."

The sheet said: *"I have kept every one of them alight."*

Ben looked at it.

"Yes," he said. "That's my line. That's a good line. I'm going to do it now, and I'm going to do it worse than that, and you're going to have to decide what you came for."

. . .

He did the last forty minutes of the play, and he did it, by his own later reckoning, at about seventy per cent.

The sheet did not go to black. It stayed on, doing Edmund, in perfect counterpoint, so that the room held two of him at once: one in the middle of the floor, sweating, thickening the lines, getting it wrong twice and once getting it so wrong that he stopped and said, "No — sorry — the line's gone," and had to be given it by a woman in the third row, who said it out loud, and then said, "Sorry," and then said, "Go on, love."

That was the play, in the end. Not the good performance. The one with the man in it.

And in the last five minutes, Iola Pryce came down the side aisle with a small torch between her teeth, and knelt by the table at the back, and did not turn the projector off — she unplugged the laptop, pho-

tographed the screen, the serial number, the ports and the cable with her own phone, then closed the lid, wrapped it in her coat, and carried it out of the hall like a woman carrying a baby through a crowd.

Tilda, still on stage, still Ada, watched her go, and then said her last line to Ben instead of to the sheet, and Ben said his, and the play ended the way Hester Vowles had written it, which was with a door being opened and no light in the room behind it.

There was a silence of about four seconds, and then eighty-one people stood up at once and made a noise that could be heard from the bus stop by the viaduct.

Margo, in the back row, with the drawing pins still in her hand, did not clap. She stood there with her chin up and her mouth working, and when Ben came off the floor she took hold of his sleeve and said, "Your father would have been unbearable about this," and then had to go and see to the tea.

. . .

Crispin Hale had been in the audience. He had come up on the train and sat in the fifth row in a good coat and he had left at the moment Tilda turned to the wall, without a word, and the man in the porch had said, "Not staying, sir?" and Hale had said, "No. I think I've seen it."

The laptop had a service tag on the underside. It matched, Iola said later, three others in a registered stock allocation, all of them owned by Echoform Holdings Limited, all of them signed out to a project room at the company's London office in the second week of September.

"Live rendering over a domestic connection," she said, at one in the morning, at the kitchen table, with the notebook between them.

"They'd have needed someone in the hall with a foot pedal. It's not impressive. It's a laptop and a cheap projector and someone with a bag."

"Who?"

"A man with a bag," said Iola. "There's always a man with a bag. Nobody in this story has ever been a genius."

Ben wrote it down. Then he sat back.

"I said it wrong," he said. "On the floor. I said it badly."

"You said it in front of eighty-one people with a version of yourself looking over your shoulder and saying it better." Iola capped her pen. "It's not a monologue, Ben. Nobody's scoring it. That's what the machine's for, that's what it's *for*, and you've just spent ten minutes showing a room what it costs to be a person instead. Go to bed."

. . .

End of Chapter Eleven.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Cost of Knowing

. . .

The stage is a kitchen eleven months later. The kettle is on. There is a ring-binder on the table with a label on the spine, and the label says: 2.2.

. . .

The laptop was the easiest thing they ever did and it changed almost nothing.

It went to DS Vane, who logged it, and to the platform's trust team, who suspended eleven accounts, and to a solicitor in Leeds who wrote a letter with the words *strictly without prejudice* in it, and in the end it produced a settlement of forty-one thousand pounds, which Ben gave half of to his mother for the roof and half of to a charity that Iola had chosen and which he had to be talked through twice.

Echoform was fined. It was fined £180,000 in the July for the data failures, and £2.4 million in the December, in a different forum, for the Pemberton matter, and in the March it restructured, changed its name to a word made of two other words, laid off a third of its staff, and was acquired by a company that made scheduling software for regional theatres.

Crispin Hale resigned. He was not charged with anything. He gave one interview, in the spring, to a magazine for people who buy yachts,

in which he said that he had been *ahead of the law and behind the culture*, which was the truest thing he ever said in public. He kept his house in Hampstead. He kept his reputation among the people who mattered to him, which was a smaller group than he had imagined and more expensive.

It is a fact of English life, and possibly of human life, that the things which take your freedom away do not arrive looking like tyrants. They arrive looking like a subscription. They are cheap, they are convenient, they are beautifully designed, and they are explained to you by somebody kind in a good room, who honestly believes he is doing you a service, and who is, in a narrow and technical sense, correct. Nobody in this story was cruel to Ben A. Nobody shouted at him. He was not dragged anywhere. He was given a nice drink in a nice window and told that he would not be lost. The last century liked to imagine it would be enslaved by men in boots. This one has found that it can be done politely, by preference, in the form of a small improvement to your evening — and that a man will hand over his own face for a hundred and forty thousand pounds and a feeling of being wanted, and thank you for the opportunity, and mean it. Aldous Huxley saw most of this coming in 1931 and was called a pessimist for it, which is what we always call the people who describe the weather before it arrives.

The contractor, Kit Sorrell, was arrested in Faro in the September, on an unrelated matter involving a hire car, and extradited, and eventually pleaded guilty to four offences, and was sentenced to two years and four months, of which he served fourteen. He was thirty-one. In his flat in Leeds there had been a whiteboard with the words *NOBODY WILL EVER KNOW* on it in marker, and Ben, when he heard about the whiteboard, went and sat in his mother's garden for an hour.

The law changed, a little.

Four of the forty-one recommendations became law in the spring: a duty to read the material terms aloud in certain transactions, a right to revoke a likeness licence within fourteen days, a criminal offence of creating a synthetic image of a person for the purpose of causing distress, and a requirement that any licence of a deceased performer's likeness be countersigned by every living person with a beneficial interest. The last one was Rosalind Pemberton's, in its entirety, drafted in a kitchen in Hertfordshire and sent to a junior minister by a woman who had asked, in a hall, *who judges it?*, and who had then gone and found out.

There was a fifth thing, and it was the one that mattered most to Ben, and it was the one the industry ate for breakfast.

The law now required that the material terms of a likeness licence be read aloud to the person signing them — in a room, by another human being, with the clock stopped and nobody in a hurry. It was, on paper, exactly what he had asked for in a committee room in June, and he had asked for it while his hands shook.

The industry complied within four months. It complied by commissioning an animated application called **The Little Agreement**, in which a friendly badger explained your rights to you in rhyming couplets, at a reading age of six, in a voice that children found soothing, and which came pre-installed on the tablets issued to every state school in the country. By its second year it had eleven million users. Parents said it was lovely. Teachers said it was the only thing that kept the class quiet on a Friday. There was a plush badger. There was a song.

Nobody had broken a single promise made in a committee room. Every promise had been kept, exactly, to the letter — read aloud, in a room, to the person signing — and turned into a nursery rhyme, and

sold, and sung in playgrounds by children who could not yet read the word *perpetual* but could hum the tune that went with it.

Arthur Pemberton died in the February, before any of it passed. The obituaries were long and good. One of them said that his last performance would be seen next year, in a film he had not been well enough to make, and Ben read that sentence eleven times and then went and stood in the garden.

. . .

Nell came at half term, on a Tuesday, with a bag of shopping and a ring-binder she had not been asked to bring.

"What's that?" said Ben.

"It's you." She put it on the table. "I've been keeping it since November. I didn't show you because you'd have performed it."

"I don't perform."

"You perform, Ben. It's what you do. It's your —" she waved a hand "— it's your toolkit. You do a lovely face and everybody's all right." She sat down. "Open it."

The ring-binder was a nurse's ring-binder. There were blood pressures and medication times in it and a night-shift rota, and behind that, in a plastic wallet, a printout of an article from a newspaper dated the ninth of November, and a screenshot of a comment, and a page in Nell's handwriting headed *things people said to me at work.*

"I want you to read the article," she said. "It's the one where the woman from the charity says — and I've put a line under it — she says *victims of this kind of abuse frequently report a sense of shame that is entirely*

disproportionate to the event. And then I want you to read the fourth page, which is what I wrote."

The fourth page said:

He has never in his life been ashamed of anything. That's not a boast about him, it's a diagnosis. He broke his arm at nine falling off a wall he'd been told not to climb and he told Mum it was the wall's fault and he believed it. He has been ashamed for eleven months now and he does not know what to do with it, and he is doing what he always does, which is being nice to everybody so nobody worries, and it is going to kill him if he doesn't stop.

He isn't naive. I've been thinking about this for a year and I want to say it properly. He isn't naive. He's obedient. Dad used to say you were good as gold and it meant don't make a fuss. Mum has never in her life made a fuss, she's sewed things instead. He learned that if he was lovely enough and lit up enough, nothing would be taken from him. That's not innocence, that's a bargain. And a bargain is different, because you can renegotiate a bargain.

Ben read it twice and then put his hand over his eyes and sat there for a while, and Nell did not get up and did not say *don't cry,* which he was grateful for, because of everything he had lost in the last year the thing he had missed most was being allowed to be bad at something.

"I'm not naive," he said, eventually, from behind his hand.

"You're a bit naive."

"I'm a bit naive." He wiped his face. "I'm going to be a bit naive for the rest of my life. It's not — Nell, it's not something you cure. I'm not going to come out of this as a man who reads contracts for fun. I've read two contracts this year and both of them took me a week and I hated every minute and I'd rather learn a part in Russian." He put the page down. "But I can do it now. That's the difference. It's not that I got

clever. It's that I know what it costs not to, and I know a woman called Iola, and I know that being lovable isn't a form of insurance."

Nell got up and made two cups of tea and put one in front of him without a saucer, the way he liked it, which she had never once done before.

"Good," she said. "Then you can come to my work and do a thing."

"What thing?"

"The girls at the clinic. There's a group on Thursdays. Fourteen, fifteen. They're getting —" she turned her cup round "— one of them had a picture made of her in the summer. She's fifteen. She won't come to the group any more because she thinks they've all seen it, and they haven't, and it doesn't matter, because she thinks they have." Nell looked up. "I can talk to her about the law. I can talk to her about her body and her rights and what she can do, and I do, and she goes away and she's back the next month. But she's fifteen, and I'm a nurse, and you're —"

"I'm a washed-up actor."

"You're on the internet being lied about and you weren't destroyed," said Nell. "She's seen that. They've all seen that. You're the only grown-up any of those girls have ever seen say *it happened to me and it was not my fault and I am still here*, and you did it on the news, and you did it badly, which is much better than doing it well."

. . .

He went back to the committee in the November, and to another one in the March, and to a conference in Glasgow in the June at which he was not paid and at which he sat next to a woman from Estonia who

had done the same thing three years earlier for four hundred girls in a school in Tallinn, and had never been asked onto a panel before.

He learned to say the thing in ninety seconds instead of eleven minutes. He learned that the ninety-second version was worse and that the ninety-second version was the one that went on the radio.

He learns, still. That is the part of the story that does not end, and he would be embarrassed by a book that pretended it did: he gets things wrong every month. In the March he said, in an interview, that a woman should *just ask* a company to remove a picture, and he was very justly taken apart for it by a journalist called Suki Bhatt, who wrote a column under the headline *THE MAN WHO FORGOT IT COSTS £400 AND ELEVEN HOURS*, and Ben read it, and put his head in his hands, and rang her, and said, "You're right, I'm sorry, will you come on the panel with me," and she did, and she was better on it than he was.

Two years on there is still no picture of Ben A. on the internet that he has put there himself.

Iola says this is a professional courtesy. Ben says it is because he still can't work out how to upload one, and they have been having this argument for a long time now and neither of them intends to resolve it.

. . .

End of Chapter Twelve.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Name in Full

. . .

The stage is a parish hall on a Saturday morning with the chairs out. There are nine teenagers in it, three of whom do not want to be there, and one man who cannot work the projector.

. . .

Two years and some months after the committee room, on a wet Saturday in October, Ben A. stood in front of nine teenagers in the parish hall in Marlbrook and said:

"Right. I'm going to teach you the most boring thing you will ever learn, and it will take four hours, and at the end of it you'll be able to do something none of your parents can do, which is look after yourselves."

The workshop was called, at Ben's insistence, **THE UNGLAMOROUS HOURS**, because he had been on four panels by then and had noticed that the panels were all called things like *Digital Futures* and were all attended by people who had never had a photograph of their own body used against them. It ran on the first Saturday of the month, it was free, it was funded by a whip-round and a small grant from the county council, and it had been designed — every exercise, every handout, every humiliating role-play — by Iola Pryce, who had refused, four times, to be credited on any of the paperwork.

"Four hours," said the boy at the back, whose name was Deacon and who had been brought by his mother.

"Four hours, and then there's sandwiches, and then you can go."

"Can we do the deepfake thing?"

"We'll do the deepfake thing."

"Yeah but can we do the *proper* deepfake thing, like the one you—"

"Yes," said Ben, "we'll do the one I had done to me. It's on a memory stick. I've got about nine of them. It's not a secret, it's a document, and I'd rather you saw it in a room with me in it than on your phone at midnight."

The projector would not connect. It never connected. Ben had been doing this for eleven months and it had never once connected on the first attempt, and he had come to think of it as a small, friendly conspiracy between himself and the machine, in which the machine agreed to be defeated by a fifteen-year-old and everyone learned something.

Kacey Dunne fixed it. She was fifteen, she had been in Nell's clinic in the summer, she had not spoken for the first two workshops and had spoken for most of the third, and she fixed the projector in nine seconds without being asked, and then sat back down with her arms folded as though she had not done anything at all.

"Right," said Ben. "Thank you. Now. Rule one."

"Write it on a line from a play," said the nine of them, in a ragged chant, because he made them chant it.

"Which means?"

"Nobody can guess it from your life."

"Rule two."

"Two of everything."

"Which means?"

"Two emails. One for the bank and your mother. One for everything else. And the everything-else one is allowed to be a mess."

He went through the ten. He always went through the ten. He had begun to understand, somewhere in the second year, that this was his actual job now — not the panels, not the radio, not the ninety-second version; this. Nine teenagers, a broken projector, a whistle-stop tour of what a grown-up does with a face.

"Rule six. What is rule six?"

"Don't reply."

"Don't reply to what?"

"Anything that's making you feel like you have to reply."

"Say the rest of it."

"If somebody's making you feel like you have to reply," said a girl called Amara, in the tone of somebody reciting a thing they have memorised and do not entirely believe, "that's not a conversation, that's a hook. And you can put the hook down."

"Good. Rule ten."

"Don't pay anybody anything, ever again, for anything," said the room.

"Ever again?"

"*Ever again.*"

. . .

At eleven o'clock Iola came in with a box of security keys and a laptop and stood at the back looking as though she had been asked to a party.

She did not teach the class. She had explained, the first time, why: "You'll listen to him because he went through it. You'd listen to me because I'm frightening, and then you'd do what I said and you wouldn't know why, and when you're nineteen you'd stop." So she stood at the back and connected things and answered questions about hashes with an economy that reduced grown men to silence, and at half past eleven her phone went off.

It did not ring. It said, in a calm, clear, American voice: **Attention. Here and now.**

She silenced it.

"What's that?" said Deacon.

"An alarm."

"It's weird."

"Yes," said Iola Pryce. "It's from a book by a man who thought the future might be nice. It goes off every hour. It's very annoying and it's the only reason I'm still sane." She put the phone away. "Right. Rule three. Who wants to explain rule three to the boy who thinks the projector's interesting?"

. . .

At one o'clock, with the sandwiches out and the rain coming on properly, Ben took Kacey to one side by the tea urn.

"I hear you've been back at the clinic," he said.

"Once."

"Good. That's — that's not nothing, that's once."

She turned a sandwich round in her fingers. She was wearing a coat that was too big for her, which is a thing that fifteen-year-olds do, and she had her hair up with a biro through it.

"Did you get used to it?" she said. "Being — people looking at you. Knowing."

"No."

"No?"

"It's not a thing you get used to, it's a thing you get *good at*, and it's not the same." He put his cup down. "I'll tell you the true thing, and then I'll stop talking, because I've noticed I talk a lot when I'm nervous and I've been doing it since half nine. I'm not braver than I was. I'm just better resourced. I've got a woman at the end of a phone and a notebook in my coat and a list of things to do and I know how long it takes and who answers and what the words mean. The fear's still the same size. The room around it got bigger."

Kacey looked at the floor for a while.

"They said at school it was my fault for having the picture up."

"When?"

"September. The head of year."

"Do you want me to come in?"

"No," she said. "I want to know what to say."

Ben thought about it. He thought about Hester Vowles and the door and the lamps with no oil. He thought about his mother saying *nobody ever thinks they're selling you a car.* He thought about a man on a train saying *I never believed it, mate*, and about Iola's notebook and the words *in its absolute discretion*.

"You say," he said, "'which picture, sir, and who put my face on it?'" He said it quietly. "That's all. Don't argue, don't cry, don't be impressive. Ask him which picture. Because there isn't one. There's a photograph of you in a jumper and there's a crime somebody did with it, and the two things are not the same article, and if you make him say the difference out loud in a corridor with a witness, he'll never say it to you again."

Kacey Dunne looked at him with an expression he had, by then, learned to recognise in the faces of people much younger than himself, and which he had come to think of as the whole point of the last two and a half years.

"All right," she said. "I'll ask him which picture."

. . .

Crispin Hale was in Leeds in the November, at a breakfast, and Ben was there too, because he was now the sort of person who was invited to breakfasts, which he found funny in a way he could not explain to anyone who had not been, two years earlier, in a kitchen with the eggs going cold.

Hale was fifty-three and looked forty-three and had a new company, and the new company did something with museums and estates and "the ethical curation of performance heritage", and he had, by every account, been scrupulous about it. He came over with two cups of coffee and said, "Ben," and gave him one, and sat down as though

they were old colleagues, which, in a sense that neither of them could say out loud, they were.

"I've read your file," said Hale. "I read it properly, in the spring. All of it. Not the version my lawyers gave me — the actual one, the two hundred and eleven pages, I got it through the tribunal disclosure in the Pemberton matter." He turned his cup round. "There's a page in it that I'd forgotten. The capture studio, the technician's photograph, the birthday. You're laughing at a wall." He looked up. "I want you to understand something, and then I'll leave you alone, because you've been very decent about the breakfasts and I know it costs you something. I could have done it properly, with you. One conversation, in a room, in 2023, with your agent there and your mother if you wanted her, in which I explained exactly what it was and what it would do and who would own it, and I would have paid you twice what I paid you, and you would have said yes. You'd have said yes, Ben. You'd have said yes to anything in 2023, and I knew that, and I used it, and the difference between me and a decent man is not that I knew. It's that a decent man would have minded."

Ben drank the coffee. It was very good; it was always very good.

"You'd have made me immortal," he said.

"I'd have made you *available*," said Hale. "It's not the same, and it's the only thing in the world I've ever been good at, and I've been wondering for two years whether it was worth what it cost you, and what it cost Arthur, and what it'll cost the girl who does the thing in the parish hall." He smiled, and for a moment he was almost the man in the window in Hampstead. "Go on. Say the parish-hall thing. You always say the parish-hall thing."

"I wasn't going to."

"Say it, and I'll go, and we won't do this again, because I find it uncomfortable and you find it worse."

Ben put the cup down.

"All right," he said. "It's not very good and it's not clever. In October, in the hall, there were eighty-one people, and nine of them were under eighteen, and one of them was a woman in the fourth row who was crying, and I don't know what her name is and I never will. And the machine on the wall behind them was better than me. It was better than me, Crispin. It found things in the part I never found. And it will be better than the next man and the one after that, and in twenty years it'll be better than anybody, and the audiences will prefer it, and you'll be right, and I'll be a hobby for people with good coats." He picked the cup up again. "But there was a moment, at about a quarter to nine, when I didn't know whether the woman in the fourth row was going to stay. She had her coat on her knee. She was going to go, and I could see her deciding. And that is the thing your machine cannot do and will never do, not because it isn't clever enough but because there's nobody there to do it: it cannot be *unfinished* in front of a room and let the room choose what happens next. That's what the eighty-one people were paying eight pounds for in the rain, Crispin. Not the performance. The risk."

Hale looked at him for a moment. Then he stood, and did up his coat, and said, "That's better than I expected," and went off to be talked to by a woman from a heritage body, and Ben never spoke to him again.

. . .

The play that October was Hester Vowles's second, which she had written at fifty-five after saying for four years that she would not, and it

was about a woman who kept receipts, and it was rather good, and it ran for two nights in the parish hall and a third for schools.

Ben had a part in it. Nothing enormous; the part was a neighbour, and there were eleven of them.

On the Thursday afternoon before the first night, the cast list went up on the door of the hall on a sheet of A4, with a biro beside it on a string, because the printing had gone wrong and Delphine had said that a printed cast list was a piece of theatre that nobody had ever paid to see anyway.

The list said:

> THE RECEIPTS — a play by Hester Vowles **>** Marlbrook Parish Hall, 14–16 October **> >** Margaret ..... Ellery Foy **>** The Daughter ... Tilda Wren **>** The Neighbour .. Ben A. **>** ...

Kacey Dunne was doing the box office, because she had asked to, and because Iola had made her do the cash tin and the list of names, and because a fifteen-year-old with a clipboard in a hall porch on a wet Thursday is the most powerful thing in English civic life.

She looked at the list for a while. Then she picked up the biro.

"Your name's wrong," she said.

"It's what it says."

"No, it isn't." She tapped the paper. "That's what the machine put up. The machine's got you down as two letters."

Ben stood in the porch with his coat on and the rain coming off the roof behind him, and he thought about a strip light and a database and a field one character wide, decided in 2009 by a man who had never met him, and about the fact that in thirty-six years and eleven months,

nobody had ever said his surname out loud to him in a room where he could hear it, except twice: once by a woman at a bank who told him she was going to call him Ben because she couldn't say it without feeling like an idiot, and once, in the second year, by his mother, at the kitchen table, at the end of a very long evening.

"Go on then," he said.

So Kacey Dunne crossed the A out, and wrote the whole thing, in her own hand, in biro, in letters that got bigger as they went on because she lost confidence at the fourth one and then found it again at the fifth.

And she looked up and said, "That right?"

Ben read it.

"That's right," he said, and had to go and stand by the door for a moment with his hands in his pockets, looking at the wet street.

. . .

Margo came to both nights. She was seventy-one and had made the costumes, which is to say she had taken the receipts woman's costume apart and put it back together, because she did not believe in hire.

Afterwards, in the hall, with the chairs being stacked, she sat in the corner with the sewing box open on her knee — the old one, the tin one, the one with the darning mushroom and the brass thimble that had been her mother's — and she was mending a hem that had come down in the second act, and she did not look up when Ben sat down next to her.

"Well," she said. "That's the second play in three years. You'll be getting ideas."

"It was all right, wasn't it."

"It was all right." She bit off the thread. "You did the thing you do in the third act."

"What thing?"

"The thing where you listen." She held the hem up to the light. "The machine can't do that. I've seen the machine. Tilda showed me on her telephone." She folded the costume neatly and put it in the box, and closed the lid, and put her hand flat on the lid, and then said the thing that Ben would carry for the rest of his life, which she had said once before in a kitchen two years earlier and had been right both times.

"You're still a good man, Ben. You're still not quite a wise one." She stood up, with the box under her arm. "But you read things now. And I've decided that's enough. If a woman who's made seven hundred costumes can't call that enough, then there's no hope for any of us."

. . .

Reader, that is the end of the plot.

He is thirty-seven. He is not famous, exactly; he is known, which is different and much less useful and much more tiring. He has a small part in a play in October and gives a workshop on the first Saturday of the month, and he cannot work the projector unaided, and he has stopped apologising to it, mostly. He still says sorry to machines. It costs him nothing now, because he has read the form, and knows what he is worth, and keeps a notebook in his coat.

The light still comes off him when he acts. Delphine said once, in a rehearsal room, that a man who has been truly looked at and not destroyed acquires a second brightness underneath the first one, and that you can cast for it and you can't teach it, and that she'd seen it in about

six people in forty years. She said it in front of a room of eleven and then told them all that she'd only said it to keep him quiet.

And on the door of the parish hall on the sixteenth of October there was a cast list on a sheet of A4, and the neighbour's name on it was written out in full, by a girl of fifteen, in biro.

She had to borrow a second pen to finish it, because the first one ran out at the fifth letter, and the second one was blue where the first had been black, so that the name on the door was two colours, like a thing that had been mended.

And the rain got in at the corner of the sheet during the second night and made a grey bloom at the end of it, so that by the Saturday morning it read **Ben Alder** — and then a wet grey nothing, through which you could still make out the shape of the rest of it, if you already knew that it was there.

Reader, I have called him Ben A. for thirteen chapters and I am not going to stop now; that would be a different book, and a cleverer one, and I have never been able to work the projector.

What I will tell you is this. On the sixteenth of October, in a porch in Marlbrook, with the rain coming off the roof, a girl of fifteen wrote the whole of it down without being asked, and it took her two pens, and nobody in that story ever took it off him again.

If you want to know what it looked like — the name, the porch, the moment — then go and stand in a parish hall on a wet Thursday and watch eighty people decide to believe a man. That's what it looked like. That's the whole of it.

. . .

The end.