

Chapter 8

Reading, UK, October 1984

"Are you new as well?" asked a Welsh accent. His black, curly hair looked like a wig.

Simon studied the Reading University notice board.

"Yes, which course are you doing?"

A man wearing heavy horn-rimmed glasses peered up at him. "English and journalism. Are you going to the freshman's dinner? David Bellamy is always interesting. I'm Wally the Welsh, by the way."

Simon's pulse quickened at the name Bellamy.

"That's extraordinary, he's the reason I'm here."

"Oh?" Wally seemed rather intense.

"He came to our school when I was twelve. I'd joined the Botany Club, mostly to escape the bullies. I was small then." Simon grinned sheepishly. "He gave me his book, *Bellamy on Botany*. It's been a kind of Bible to me ever since, so I'm doing agricultural botany. Want to do something useful, you know?"

They sat together at the freshman's dinner. Bellamy's talk was funny and inspirational, especially on the dangers of nuclear power.

"We've got to do something, Wally," Simon said.

"Why not start an action group?"

Simon and Wally met with ten other like-minds in the students' bar. Simon raised his glass. "As half of us are called Anthony, I propose we call ourselves The Green Ants." Everyone nodded. "Wally, didn't you say you had some news?"

Wally lit a cigarette and puffed a cloud. "I've done a bit of digging, see. There's a group of businessmen who want to build not one but six nuclear power stations along the south coast, including Shoreham, in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There's an old cement works there. I mean, it's desperate. Apparently, the idea is to lay cables across the Channel and sell electricity to the French and Germans. It's all about money, see." Wally sucked on his cigarette and tapped the ash. "You wouldn't believe it. They're a nuclear accident waiting to happen. Like I said, it's diabolical. We have to fight it!"

"Yes, Wally, but how?" Simon pressed.

Wally argued like a machine gun—rapid fire in all directions.

"Well, I have an idea, see. There are only six power lines feeding the whole country, running north to south. We take out all six one night. That would stop them. Easy as pie."

In the stunned silence, Simon held up his hands.

"You can't be serious? The lights go out. Hospitals shut down. People on life support die. People are trapped in lifts. Wally, are we trying to prevent a disaster or cause one?"

Everyone talked at once.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please." Simon shouted. "Before we get carried away, who are these businessmen? Perhaps we can lobby them instead. Get public support."

"Well, it's nothing compared to the IRA." Wally stubbed out his butt. "We're not going to blow people up, now, are we?"

Simon swore and took a deep breath. "Who are these planners?"

Wally calmed down. "Faceless businesses, but they have a wealthy politician in their pockets. Favor in high places, see. He stood at the election last year, but didn't get in. He's a hot property, and next time they'll give him a safe seat."

"Who is this man?" Simon shook his head. How did Wally discover all this?

"His name is Morrison Henley. Lives at a place in Gloucester called Dursley."

"Dursley?" Simon raised his eyebrows. "That's near Stroud, where I live. Surely I could talk to him?"

"Is that such a good idea?" Wally asked. "Dangerous, I call it. It'll give the game away, won't it?"

"It'll be a lot safer than blowing up power lines."

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Morrison Henley sat with three others in comfortable chairs in the study of Dursley Park. Three walls were lined with books. Henley had read most of them. A log fire crackled in the large, stone fireplace. He stood and took a decanter to Lord Longborough.

“Good whisky, Morris.” Ernest Longborough held up his tumbler.

Henley smiled. “You can’t go wrong with an old malt.” He felt sorry for the old man—his tweeds were tight at the waist and baggy at the shoulders.

Next to him Vijay Pathak shook his head. “Not for me. I’ll stick to my water.”

“Hmm?” Longborough said. “Don’t know what you’re missing, Vijay.”

Vijay smiled. “Family, you know. We have never taken wine.” His balding head gleamed in the firelight.

Tom Harper, had bulgy eyes, a beaky nose, and wore an emerald jacket with broad lapels. “Ta, guv, don’ mind if I do.” He slurped a draught of the liquor and swallowed. “Aaahhh.”

Longborough winced. Vijay glanced at Henley.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming.” Henley settled back in his chair. “Let me fill you in on the current state of play. First, Richard sends apologies. As you know, he’s been rather preoccupied with the striking miners.” He shifted in his seat. “Of course, if the country depends on nuclear power, the unions will never again

hold the country to ransom. Anyway, coal is a fuel of the past. All this is good news for—”

“Morris,” Vijay flicked a speck of dust from his immaculate suit, “are we sure Richard is onside? He promised to be here today. He’s not being directed from above?”

“Richard was shooting with us last week,” Longborough said. “He gave me no reason to believe the Prime Minister might have changed her mind.”

“Nevertheless, it is frustrating.” Vijay spoke with quiet authority. “We took a year to bring him round, and if the Cabinet is not on board, nothing happens. We have a great deal invested. It cannot fail.”

“Vijay . . .” Henley pushed hair from his face. “Everyone knows nuclear power is the fuel of the future. North Sea oil will run out early in the next century. The government cannot afford to change its mind.”

“It makes me nervous, and I don’t like being nervous.”

“I’m sure you have no reason to be, Vijay. Our plans are coming together very nicely. They were on the

Cabinet agenda after the party conference at Brighton. But the IRA bomb there forced its delay." Henley swore and took another draught of whisky.

"What about the councils?" Vijay asked. "Are they giving trouble?"

Henley nodded. "We expected resistance, especially Shoreham. However, with the Cabinet supporting us, they'll toe the line. Tom, how is the land progressing?"

"Right." Harper leaned forward and saluted the company. "I've bought all the property we're goin' to need. We formed six companies and dissolved all but one." He grinned. "The land's all tucked away, tickety-boo. Except Shoreham, o' course. Bureaucracy always takes longer." He rubbed his fingers and thumb and winked. "You know how it is."

Henley turned to Vijay. "What about the cabling?"

Vijay folded his hands and smiled. "Over the last few months we have gained a controlling share in the main supplier. We are negotiating with its only major UK competitor. Whichever way the contracts go, we will win."

Henley frowned. "What if it goes offshore?"

Longborough shook his head. "The Cabinet is determined to buy British."

They continued for an hour before emerging onto the gravel drive. Lord Longborough climbed into his Range Rover.

Harper flung his jacket into an old Ford Cortina. He donned a flat cap and Guernsey pullover smelling of fish. He saluted Longborough and said in broad cockney, "Ben Cobbler at your service, milord. Fancy a bi' ov 'addock for tea?" He cackled and roared off down the driveway.

Vijay shook his head. "I hope that idiot knows what he's doing. I confess, I never worked with anyone like him." His chauffeur held open the door of his Mercedes.

"There is no one like him." Henley smiled. "But he's a genius. You see how he's already acquired the land? Anyone else would've taken years."

"He's dangerous, Morrison."

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In the Reading University student bar, the Green Ants gathered for their first meeting of 1985. Simon smiled over his beer at Wally. "Any news during the holidays?"

Wally waved a cigarette. "Well, as it happens, I ran into a bit of luck, you see. I met a friend whose dad is on Shoreham Council. A consortium is trying to buy a piece of land on the edge of town, but it's earmarked for rubbish, so they won't sell it."

"Wally, do get to the point."

"This is the point. It's the same businessmen we're after. I did a bit of digging, and would you believe it, the land for five of the six proposed nuclear plants has just been sold. So there is a conspiracy."

"Who are they?"

"Clever, these people." Wally breathed out smoke. "The companies that bought the land have gone out of business. All of them. Funny that."

How is it rich businessmen could play their games without a care for the rest of the country? Simon looked around at the Green Ants and took a deep breath. "They must be stopped. I suppose we will have to call

on Mr. Morrison Henley.”

* * *

Simon and three Green Ants drove between drifts of golden daffodils down the avenue of Dursley Park. Wally's pre-war Ford looked like a knob of coal before the grand frontage.

They climbed out and walked to the entrance. Simon's mouth was cardboard. What should he say? And what would happen once Henley knew they were after him?

Henley opened the great door himself. “This is good of you to come all this way. Do come in. How was your journey?” He led them through two long halls into the study and the aroma of fresh coffee.

“Please do sit down.” Henley served them. “So you are the Green Ants from Reading University? How interesting. It's good for agriculture, I believe.”

“Sir,” Simon said, “We are—”

“Please, do call me Morrison.”

“Oh . . . thank you. We are here because we feel very strongly about the environment.”

Henley smiled. "Don't we all? And it's high time we did something about it."

Simon wasn't expecting such complicity. "Exactly. I mean, we are very concerned about the development of nuclear power in this country. We feel . . . we feel it's—"

Henley raised his eyebrows. "Yes? You feel it is?"

Simon refused to be bullied. "We've heard there's a proposal to build nuclear power stations on the south coast. They'll be in populated areas, and the risk of cancer is great. Nuclear power is simply too dangerous. We don't even know how to manage the waste."

"Thank God you people are concerned." Henley nodded. "That's just as it should be. Our government is not idle on this matter, gentlemen. I admire the work of the current minister in cleaning up our rivers. There's a long way to go, but we're making progress. There are fish in the Thames again. Our Prime Minister is passionate about England remaining a green and pleasant land. But why come to me? How can I help your cause?"

"If these stations are built, sir," said another Green

Ant, “thousands are at risk. That isn’t right or fair. The people should be consulted before a power station is planted on their doorstep.”

“I couldn’t agree more. That’s why we live in a democracy.” Henley smiled at the four in turn. “We already have sixteen nuclear power plants and we need more.”

“Surely there are better alternatives?” Simon felt increasingly frustrated.

“Simon, miners die in coal mines. Many have perished on the rigs in the North Sea. Energy production is dangerous. All existing nuclear plants are in safe locations.”

“Mr. Henley,” Wally leaned forward, his face reddening. “You haven’t answered our questions, have you? Is it true that you have six nuclear stations planned for the south coast? And is it true they are close to cities? Is it true you already have the land, and you personally are part of this dangerous scheme? That is what we want to know.”

Henley didn’t flicker. “Wally, is it? I didn’t catch your second name. Forgive me. It is, and has been for

years, British government policy to develop nuclear power for this country. We are endeavoring to make it as safe as possible, and a great deal safer than the alternatives. Are there risks? Of course. We are well aware of them. Each year they become safe—.”

“Thousands are dying from their leaks, isn't it?”

“Not here in England, Wally.” Henley shook his head. “Let me give a simple example. If you stand next to a fire, you will get burnt. If you wear clothing, you are less likely to be burnt. If you wear a space suit, you could stand in the fire and not be burned. Technology changes daily, gentlemen. The British government is proud to be using the latest technology available.”

“I don't believe it,” Wally muttered.

Henley stood. “I want to congratulate you for your willingness to take action. Thank God for young men passionate about our country and environment. Thank you for taking the trouble to come. I promise that your concerns will be passed to the appropriate authorities. If I can help in any other way, please don't hesitate to call.” He led them out the door and waved.

The four Green Ants crept into Wally's car.

As the car scuttled down the drive, Simon seethed. "Perhaps he'll issue us all with space suits."

"Perhaps we should blow up the power lines after all," said Wally.

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Simon and the Green Ants spent the summer holidays canvassing Shoreham and nearby villages. Nervous, Simon knocked on the first door. An old woman answered.

Simon smiled his best smile. "Did you know the government plans to build a nuclear power station just a few miles from your house?"

The woman shook her head. "Well, I never. They would have told us."

"Would you join a sit-in on the proposed site?"

"Me?" The woman cackled. "Too old for that, ducks. Anyway, that's against the law, isn't it?"

Simon and the Green Ants pressed on, asking the same questions over and over again. Some wished them luck. Others shook their head and closed the door.

On the day of the sit-in, Simon counted a hundred souls gathered by the derelict cement works. A new padlock and chain secured the rusty wire gates. They stood outside the entrance in the rain.

One or two waved home-made banners: *NUCLEAR MEANS CANCER*, and *NO POWER HERE*. Several people dusted off ban-the-bomb signs.

Simon's parents had driven down from Stroud. They sat in the car with a thermos of tea. Simon walked over. "Thanks for coming."

"It's just like old times," Jan said. "Nice to be out doing something again. But there's not many here. Don't people care anymore?"

Alan shook his head. "Tea's a bit cold."

Wally raised his arms and stamped the ground. "We won't even get in the papers."

Simon nodded.

Wally recruited two youngsters to find a hole through the fence and Wally and the four Green Ants wriggled through. Their photo did make the local newspaper after all with a statement from Shoreham Council. "There are no immediate government plans to

build a power station here." The Green Ants were fined fifty pounds for trespass.