

# THE RESIDENT

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# The Resident

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# Chapter 1

## The Instruction Manual

Rain ran down the windscreen in flat sheets, and June drove with both hands on the wheel because the private spur was narrow and the hedge at one side had been cut badly enough to leave stiff stubs. Her wipers made a clean arc that lasted a second, then the view went milky again.

She had the address printed because the postcodes were unreliable out here. Oakhaven had been built in stages, each with its own idea of what a street ought to look like. The older brick houses sat on a cul-de-sac with small front lawns and low walls. The Miller place was different; a separate spur, a gate, and then a long drive that ran alongside hedging and fencing before opening onto the house.

The gate was open.

June slowed and looked for the little black box on the post, the camera that people bought to reassure themselves. It was there. The motor was silent. Water slid along the metal and dropped onto the concrete in a steady run.

She didn't stop outside to stare, because stopping outside someone's gate looked like casing. She drove through, careful not to splash up the gravel, and pulled into the space she'd been told to use, beside a garage door that didn't have a handle.

Her own car ticked as it cooled. She sat for a moment with her hands still on the wheel and watched the gate behind her. It stayed open. No movement, no sound, no one appearing to close it by hand.

June got out, pulled her hood up, and took her bag from the passenger seat. She had learned not to arrive looking like she meant to

spread out, even when that was exactly what she was paid to do. Clients liked their things left in place.

The house was lit up and all glass. Inside, bright eye-level reflections came back at her in the wet. She could see enough to make out a kitchen island, a sofa, and a set of steps that ran up the side of the wall with a thin rail.

She walked up to the front door, wiped her shoes on the mat because there were cameras, and rang the bell.

The door opened almost at once.

Simon Miller stood there in a thin jumper that probably cost more than June's winter coat. His hair had been cut recently. The line at his jaw looked tight, the kind of face that came from going too long without deciding.

"June. Right. Come in," he said, already stepping back.

June crossed the threshold. Her wet coat brushed the edge of the doorframe and left a smear of water. She caught herself before she reached for a cloth, because she'd been inside ten seconds and that wasn't the point.

"Afternoon," she said. "I came straight over. The traffic, "

"Gate's on a timer," Simon said, without waiting for a question. He shut the door behind her and pressed something on a slim panel by the wall. A soft beep followed. "I've armed the perimeter already. You'll see it on the app. I've sent you the link."

June had received a cluster of messages half an hour ago: a code, a Wi-Fi password, two PDFs with filenames in clipped capitals. She'd had them on the passenger seat, face down, because she didn't like looking at other people's lives while she drove.

Simon didn't wait for her to respond. He walked through into the open-plan space, and June followed because that's what you did when the person paying you moved fast and expected you to keep up.

There was a smell of cleaning spray in the hall. It sat under the warmer smell of something cooked earlier and then packed away. The floor under her boots was tiled and cold. She'd been told to take shoes off, but he hadn't, so she didn't.

He stopped by the kitchen island and picked up a set of keys from a bowl. The bowl was ceramic and plain, set square to the counter's edge. The keys were on two rings, each with a small plastic tag. Among them lay one key without a tag. The metal looked older, darker at the edges where a thumb had worried it.

June clocked it and put it away in her mind, because she'd be back in front of the bowl later and she didn't need to look too long now.

"Right," Simon said, laying the keys out on the counter. "This set is for internal doors. This is for the pantry lock. This one opens the front door if the smart lock fails. This is the gate fob."

He held up a small black remote, then set it down, then picked it up again.

June stood with her bag strap tight in her fist. She kept her face neutral. People took that as calm.

"You'll have done this a lot," Simon said, and the way he said it didn't sound like praise. It sounded like a warning.

"I have," June said. "I follow whatever system you want. If you've got anything written down, I'll go over it after you go."

"I've got it written down. And it's in the manual. It's on the counter," he said, pointing without looking. "The main thing: don't let anyone in. Not neighbours, not deliveries, not anyone saying they've forgotten something. If anything comes to the door, you don't open it. Use the intercom. If they insist, you call me. If you can't reach me, you call Elena."

He said Elena's name as if it should settle the matter.

June's eyes flicked to the glass front. Through it, she could see a car on the drive, parked at an angle that suggested it hadn't been meant to be

there long. A woman sat in the passenger seat. Sunglasses on, though the sky was grey and the rain made the world flat. The phone in her hand was held upright, close to her face.

Elena didn't look up.

"Is Elena not...?" June began, and stopped because she didn't know what she was asking for without making it rude.

"She's on a call," Simon said. "She's got a few things to do before we leave."

June nodded as if that answered it.

Simon picked up the gate fob again. "Gate stays closed unless you're leaving in the car. If you're walking to the bins, you don't open it. You use the side path. It's in the manual. If it's open when you arrive back, you close it. You don't leave it open. We've had people trying it."

"Trying it," June repeated, keeping her voice light.

Simon's mouth moved. Not quite a smile.

"We're not in the middle of nowhere," he said. "This is still a village. People get curious. And with the glass..." He waved his hand, taking in the house as a whole. "It looks exposed. So. Lock everything. Alarm stays armed. If you need to change zones, use the app. Don't do it from the panel unless you have to."

June looked at the panel by the door. A small screen with a code pad. It wasn't difficult, but it was loud when it complained, and she'd learned to respect systems that were designed to make a fuss.

"And Leo?" she asked, because he hadn't said it yet and she didn't like an empty space left on purpose.

Simon's gaze flicked to her face. He didn't blink. "Sorted. He's up at a revision camp in Scotland. He's been there since Sunday. We're picking him up from the airport when we get back."

He said it all in one run. The edges were too neat.

“That’s good,” June said, because arguing about someone else’s parenting in their kitchen did not pay her rent.

Simon exhaled through his nose, quick. “He won’t be here. No one will be here. It’s just you. That’s what you agreed to.”

June didn’t like being reminded of what she’d agreed to. She liked a job to be a job.

“Just me,” she said.

Simon gathered the keys into one ring and slid them across the counter to her, then the fob. His fingers were long and clean, nails trimmed flat.

June took them and felt the weight. More than her own set at home. She put them straight into the inside pocket of her waterproof and zipped it. She had seen keys go missing from open bags, and then everyone pretended to laugh about it.

“Wi-Fi password is there,” Simon said, pointing to the printed note again. “The manual’s a QR code. There’s an alarm map. The cleaners have been. The plants are on a schedule. Don’t change it.”

“I won’t,” June said.

“Heating is set,” he continued. “If you change it, change it back. The underfloor’s on a timer. If you leave it on full, it costs a fortune.”

June looked at him then. He didn’t look like a man who needed anyone to save him from a heating bill.

Simon checked his phone. His thumb moved fast over the screen. “Taxi’s outside. I need to go.”

He said it and already turned, heading for the front door with the same urgency he’d opened it with.

June followed because she didn’t want him to think she’d missed anything important. The thing about people like Simon was that they expected obedience to cover for clarity.

At the door, Simon stopped and looked back at her. “If anything happens, you call. Don’t handle it yourself. Do you understand?”

June held his gaze for a beat, then nodded. “I understand.”

He opened the door. The cold air came in and lifted the damp smell from June’s coat.

Elena still didn’t come to the door. Simon walked out to the drive, raised a hand at the taxi beyond the gate line, and went to the car. He leaned into the passenger side window. Elena turned her head a fraction, enough to show she’d heard him. She didn’t take the sunglasses off.

June stood just inside, because stepping outside made it look like she wanted company.

Simon got into the car, started it, and reversed in a neat line. The tyres ran over wet gravel with a low crunch. The car stopped at the open gate. The motor sound from the gate didn’t start. The gate didn’t move. Simon drove through anyway, leaving it open behind him.

June watched until the car was out of sight and the taxi had followed, the brake lights dimming into the rain.

The gate stayed open.

June closed the front door and listened. The house sounded the way a big modern house did: a low hum from somewhere, likely the fridge or a plant room. No voices. No radio. No footfall except her own.

She took out her phone and looked at Simon’s messages. There was a number, and an email address, and a line that said, Any issues call me. There was no, I’ll pick up. No, I’m in meetings but text. No, Elena will answer if I don’t.

June put the phone down on the counter, beside the printed note she hadn’t read yet, and stared at the open gate through the glass front.

If something went wrong, she could call. That was true.

Whether anyone would answer was different.

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Water came off June's sleeves when she pushed them up. She went back to the front door first, because she couldn't stop thinking about the open gate. She found the gate control on the app, a clean interface with a green button and a red one. She pressed close, watched the small spinning icon, and waited.

The gate motor started. The metal panels moved inward at a steady speed. Rain slid off them. When they met in the middle, the app showed a small padlock symbol.

June exhaled slowly, then turned away from the glass.

There were shoes by the front bench. Three pairs. One pair of women's boots, narrow at the ankle, clean despite the weather. One pair of men's trainers that looked almost new. One pair of trainers that were scuffed at the toes.

June didn't pick them up. She had been paid to mind the house, but she didn't rearrange other people's lives on the first hour.

She walked the ground floor slowly, not because she was frightened, but because she was learning the place. New builds often had odd angles and unexpected corners.

The living area ran straight off the kitchen, separated by a rug and a low sofa. Everything was pale. The glass wall at the back looked out onto a small lawn and a terrace. The terrace tiles were wet and slick. A single chair sat out there, pushed up to a table. No cushions. No sign that anyone had sat down with a drink and stayed a while.

June went to the kitchen. The island was spotless. A fruit bowl held three lemons and a lime, placed so each faced outward. She didn't touch them.

The pantry door had a small keypad lock. Simon had given her a key for it. A pantry with a lock was new to June.

June opened the pantry with the key and switched the light on. Shelves ran up the walls with tins and packets lined up at equal distances. Labels were turned to the front. Staples had been decanted into clear tubs. Everything sealed.

She found tea and coffee without moving much, then checked the fridge for milk. It had the same neat arrangement: labels forward, bottles in line.

June closed it carefully.

She went into the utility space off the kitchen. Washing machine and dryer stacked. A sink with a drying rack beside it, empty. Cupboard doors that closed with soft catches. On the wall, a row of hooks held one mop and two cloths, hung so they didn't touch.

She checked the bin cupboard. Two bins, both lined. No smell.

The place had been left in a ready state, the way houses were when someone expected a photo.

On the counter by the kettle sat a printed sheet of paper. June picked it up.

WELCOME JUNE, it said at the top in block capitals. Under that, a QR code. Beneath that, a list:

- Alarm zones: see digital manual. - Do not disarm perimeter. - No visitors. - Parcel deliveries: refuse. - Street Drinks: see note.

June read it twice. The first time because she had to. The second time because she didn't like being told not to do things she already didn't want to do.

On the far edge of the counter sat a small folded card. She opened it.

Street Drinks Thursday 7pm. Please have out: crisps, olives, wine, soft drinks. Neighbours will pop round.

Underneath, a list of names.

June scanned them and then stopped. She didn't like reading names of strangers as if she'd invited them. She refolded the card and put it back where it had been.

She put the printed WELCOME sheet down next to it.

June went to the back door. It was glass again, with a heavy handle in brushed metal. A slim sensor sat at the top corner.

She put her hand on the handle and turned it slightly. A beep sounded from the alarm panel in the hall, loud enough to carry through the open-plan space.

June froze, then let go. The beep stopped.

"All right," June said to herself, too quietly for anyone else to hear. "Good to know."

She didn't test it again.

Any mistake on a door handle would set it off. That was the point.

She went to the mudroom off the hall. It was a narrow space with a bench and more hooks. A tiled floor with a drain. A place designed for wet coats and muddy shoes.

Most of the hooks were empty. One held a man's coat, dark and still damp at the hem. Another held a woman's long padded coat, pale and clean. On a hook by itself hung a school blazer.

It was navy with a school badge stitched to the pocket. The badge was not one June recognised.

The blazer hung apart from the coats, not touching. Someone had left a gap.

If Leo was at a revision camp in Scotland, his blazer would be packed or in his room. It wouldn't be here, hanging alone.

June stepped closer and put two fingers on the sleeve to move it along, making space for her own coat. The fabric was damp.

Not soaked. Not just cold from the room. Damp in the way clothes got when they'd been out in weather and then brought in and hung up in a warm house that didn't quite dry things.

She lifted the sleeve to her face before she could stop herself. The smell was faint but there: sweat under deodorant, the sourness of a teenager's day, rainwater and fabric.

June lowered the sleeve and stared at the blazer. She could hear Simon again: Sorted. Revision camp.

There were explanations. A blazer could be left behind by mistake. A neighbour's child might have taken it off and left it there. It might have been brought home and forgotten.

But the damp was recent.

June hung her coat on a hook two spaces away and stepped back. She didn't move the blazer again. She smoothed the shoulder where her fingers had creased it and left it exactly where it had been.

In the hall, she took her boots off and lined them with the others. She put her bag down by the bench and stood still for a moment.

"Tea first," she said under her breath, then didn't move.

Tea would come. What she needed first was to stop herself from deciding too quickly.

June went through the house once more, checking windows and internal doors. She didn't want to be the person who rang a client on day one because a teenager's blazer had been left in the wrong room.

Upstairs, she found the main bedroom and two other rooms: one set up as an office, one as a guest room that looked unused. The main bedroom had a bed with tight corners and a smooth duvet.

She didn't go through drawers. She checked the windows were locked and left it at that.

Downstairs again, she went back to the mudroom, took her coat off its hook, and hung it over the back of the chair by the island instead. She didn't want damp by the door. She didn't want it near the blazer.

By late afternoon the light was already low. Rain kept the kitchen bright but flat.

June made herself a cup of tea using the Miller mugs, because she hadn't unpacked her own. She chose a plain white one. It was too thin for her liking.

She stood by the island and drank. The tea was weak.

She took the mug to the sink, washed it, and put it back exactly where she'd found it.

When she finished, she went to the front door and checked the lock. She checked the alarm panel. The small screen showed the perimeter armed. She didn't want to press anything else.

She walked to the glass wall at the back and looked out at the terrace and lawn. The garden lights came on automatically, bright spots on wet tiles.

June turned away from the glass.

In the kitchen, she picked up her phone and looked at the Street Drinks note again. She read the names properly this time.

She didn't know any of them. She would by Thursday.

June put the phone down and spoke aloud, because sometimes it stopped her from repeating the same line in her head.

"I'm here to mind the house," she said. "Not to mind their marriage."

The words sounded thin in the open-plan kitchen. She made herself nod once, then went to fetch her bag.

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From the mudroom she crossed the utility corridor to the small staff room at the back.

June chose the small staff bedroom off the utility corridor because it was the only place where she couldn't see the whole house from one angle. The corridor ran behind the utility, narrower than the rest.

The staff room had a single bed with plain bedding and a small wardrobe. A narrow window looked onto the side path. The glass was spotted with rain.

June put her bag on the bed and unzipped it. She took out her wash bag, her pyjamas, and a spare jumper. She set her reading glasses on the bedside table. She placed her phone charger by the socket.

The room smelled clean. Too clean. No hint of someone sleeping there often.

June left her coat on a hook by the door and went back into the main house to check locks and alarms.

She did it once.

The front door was locked, the gate closed, the perimeter still armed.

Her hand paused above the panel before she pulled it back and folded her arms tight, as if pressure alone could keep her from pressing buttons.

Once was enough. Twice was repeating it.

June returned to the kitchen and opened the fridge. She took out a sealed container of leftovers. The label on it was written in neat block letters: TUESDAY.

It was Monday.

She looked at the container and then at the rest. Each one had a day, each one stacked with its label facing out.

June took out MONDAY and closed the fridge. She put the container on the counter and found the microwave, integrated behind a cabinet

door.

She heated the food, ate standing at the island, and put the empty container in the sink. Then she washed it, dried it, and put it back in the fridge where it had come from.

Someone had planned meals by day.

June found bread in the pantry and a jar of jam. She made herself a slice of toast and ate it with her tea.

She cleaned the crumbs from the counter with a damp cloth and hung the cloth back on its hook in the utility. She wiped the sink after washing the mug, because water marks on a black composite sink looked like carelessness.

Her own habits in other people's houses were a mixture of pride and survival. A client didn't have to like her, but they had to trust her. A single smear on a tile could become a story in someone's head.

She went back to the staff room, closed the door, and sat on the edge of the bed to take her socks off.

The house had gone quiet in the way a big empty place did. The hum from the appliances was constant. A faint whirr came on and off from somewhere, likely the heating system.

June got into bed with a book, read two pages, and then put it down because she'd read the same paragraph twice.

She picked up her phone and checked the time. Not late.

A sound came from above.

Not a crash. Not a bang. A low thud and then a scrape, something shifting along a surface.

June sat up. She held still, the way she did when she thought she'd heard a noise in her own flat and didn't want to admit it.

The sound didn't come again.

Her mind offered options. The roof space. Heating pipes. A loose vent cover. A piece of furniture settling.

The house was new enough that it shouldn't settle, but she'd seen enough new builds to know they were often rushed and then dressed.

June lay back down.

"Not today," she said, not loud. "Not on day one."

She reached for her phone and typed a message to Maureen.

All good. Arrived. They've gone. Rain.

She stared at the screen a moment, then sent it.

Maureen would reply with something that sounded blunt and meant kind. June didn't need it right now.

On the bedside table, the phone lay face up once she plugged it in.

The staff room door had a simple lock. June didn't lock it.

She turned the light off and lay in the dark, eyes open.

Her body wanted sleep. Her mind wanted to walk the house again. She kept her hands on top of the duvet, fingers spread, feeling the fabric under them because it gave her something to do.

At some point she slept.

She woke once in the night.

The clock display on her phone showed 02:18 when she turned her head. Her breathing was quick and shallow. The hum from downstairs was steady.

June heard a soft movement downstairs.

Not footsteps on stairs. Not a door. A shift, a small knock, then quiet.

Her breath caught, and she held it for a second before letting it out through her nose. The phone was within reach.

June stayed still.

In her head, she put the sound next to the damp blazer and kept them apart.

“I’ll check in the morning,” she said under her breath.

She fell asleep again with her hand still near the phone.

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In the morning, rain still ran down the glass walls. The garden looked darker than it should at that time, because the sky was low and the water on the panes blurred the view.

June woke before her alarm. She lay still for a moment and listened.

The house sounded normal. Hum. Occasional click from a relay or a thermostat. Nothing else.

She got up, put on her slippers, and went into the corridor. The tile under her feet was cold. She liked that; it made her pay attention.

In the kitchen, she went straight to the cupboards. The one above the kettle was open by a few inches.

June stopped at the threshold and looked at it.

She remembered closing it, because she’d taken out a mug and she didn’t leave cupboard doors open in other people’s kitchens.

She crossed the kitchen and closed it gently. The door met the frame with a soft catch.

She opened it again and closed it again, then pressed the hinge side; the soft-close held.

June turned to the sink.

A cereal bowl sat in it, with a ring of milk residue dried to the inside. A spoon lay beside it.

June stared at the bowl.

She hadn't eaten cereal. She hadn't used that bowl. She hadn't left anything in the sink overnight.

She picked up the spoon by the handle and held it up. The bowl had a faint smear of something sweet at the bottom.

It wasn't old. The residue was dry, but it wasn't the chalky dry of days.

June set the spoon down again.

She washed her hands and dried them on a clean tea towel. Her fingers stayed steady, but she watched them anyway.

She went to the front door and checked the lock. Still locked.

She checked the back door without touching the handle. The sensor at the top corner sat in place. The door frame showed no marks.

She checked windows. No scratches at the latches. No smears on the outside glass that suggested someone had pressed their hands there.

June went back to the alarm panel and looked at the screen. It showed the perimeter armed. No alerts.

She opened the app on her phone and scrolled. It showed the same: armed, no triggers. Log: Events 0 since 22:14.

If someone had moved around downstairs, they'd done it without setting anything off.

June's first thought was: someone has the code.

Her second was: or someone has a key.

She went to the key bowl on the counter and looked at it without touching. The keys lay in the bowl in a loose pile. The older key sat half under one ring.

June didn't take it out. Not yet.

She looked around the kitchen again, scanning for anything else out of place. A chair slightly off line. A cupboard not flush.

Everything else looked as it had the night before.

The bowl in the sink was the first thing that didn't allow an excuse.

June took her phone from her pocket and scrolled to Simon's number.

Her thumb hovered.

She could picture his voice. Not loud. Controlled. A small pause that made other people rush to fill it. He'd ask what she'd done. He'd ask if she'd disarmed the system. He'd ask if she'd left a door unlocked.

June lowered the phone.

She didn't put it away. She set it on the counter, screen up, and went to fetch a cloth from the utility.

She cleaned nothing. She held the cloth in her hand because it kept her hands busy.

June picked up the cereal bowl by the rim and turned it slightly. There were no chips. The porcelain was smooth. The spoon was one from a set, plain and heavy.

She set the bowl back down in the sink and took out her phone again.

This time she opened the camera and took a photo of the cupboard door, the bowl, and the spoon in the sink. Then she took another photo of the cupboard catch, close up.

It wasn't evidence in any official sense. It was a way of keeping her own memory straight. She'd learned that people like Simon had strong opinions about what had happened, and those opinions often replaced facts.

June set the phone down and stared at it. A photo of a cereal bowl in a sink looked ridiculous.

She carried the bowl to the counter and set it down on a tea towel. She didn't wash it yet.

June walked to the mudroom.

The blazer still hung on the hook by itself, but it had shifted. The sleeve sat differently, twisted slightly so the cuff pointed inward rather than straight down. A corner of the pocket stuck out.

June stood in the doorway and looked at it.

She had hung it straight. She had smoothed it. It hadn't looked like that.

She touched the shoulder seam. Still damp, faintly. Not as damp as yesterday, but not dry.

June stepped back and looked at the other coats. Simon's coat was gone. Elena's coat was gone.

Of course they were. They'd left.

The blazer stayed.

June walked back into the kitchen and stood by the kettle. She filled it with water and switched it on. The kettle made a low rumble and then a click as it started to heat.

Tea first, then the problem.

While it boiled, she opened the pantry and took out a tin of tea and a mug. She didn't take the white one this time. She chose a heavier mug with a thicker handle. It had a small chip at the base.

The kettle clicked off. June poured water and watched the teabag darken the cup.

She took the mug to the island and sat on the stool, not because she wanted comfort, but because sitting kept her in place.

She had planned to drive out today and buy her own food. She didn't like using client supplies unless it was part of the agreement.

Her eyes went back to the cereal bowl.

June set her mug down and spoke quietly.

“Say what you saw,” she said, “not what you think.”

She drank the tea while it was still hot enough to matter. When she put it down again, she turned her stool slightly so she could see the hall and the line to the front door.

She stayed there until the tea had cooled and her phone screen went dark.

Then she picked it up, opened the photos again, and zoomed in on the cupboard catch, checking for any sign she’d missed.

Nothing.

June didn’t ring Simon.

Not yet.

She took the cereal bowl and spoon and set them back in the sink, carefully, as if she might need to see them again in the same position.

After that, she washed her mug and put it back in the cupboard, closing the door until it caught.

She stood for a moment with her hand still on the handle, then let go.

The bowl and the cupboard door were all she could think about.

She went to the utility corridor, opened the small cupboard where the Hoover was kept, and pulled it out. She didn’t need to Hoover. The floors were spotless.

She wanted a reason to move around the ground floor without making it obvious.

June plugged the Hoover in and started with the rug by the sofa, pulling the head across the fibres in slow lines while she watched the hall in the reflection of the glass.

The Hoover noise was loud enough to cover smaller sounds.

That, she decided, was practical.

She switched it off again after two passes and stood still, listening.

No movement.

June rolled the cord back up and put the Hoover away.

She went back to the kitchen, opened the Street Drinks note, and read the names again.

Thursday. People coming in and out. People expecting to be welcomed.

Simon had told her not to let anyone in.

The note told her to have crisps and olives out.

June refolded the card, set it down, and ran her thumb along the edge.

She took her phone, opened a new note, and typed two lines:

Cupboard door open. Cereal bowl in sink.

She saved it and locked her screen.

Then she walked to the mudroom and stood in front of the blazer again, without touching it.

She didn't take it down. She didn't bag it up. She didn't call anyone.

She looked at the damp line along the sleeve and the way the pocket sat slightly pulled, and she stayed there until her feet went cold through her slippers.

June turned away and went back into the kitchen, where she could see the whole ground floor in one glance.

The place had been designed for display. That meant there were fewer places for someone to stand without being seen.

Or so people liked to believe.

# Chapter 2

## The Ghost in the Machine

Rain still ran down the glass at the back of the house, but the wind had dropped, and that made the place feel louder. The fridge compressor cut in. A relay clicked. The underfloor heating ticked faintly through the tiles.

June stood at the kitchen island with her mug cupped in both hands, not drinking. She was looking at the bowl of fruit again.

Three lemons and a lime. Neat. Turned so the best sides faced out.

She hadn't thought much of it when she arrived. People arranged things. People liked counters set up for photos. Now it sat in her eye-line every time she tried to do something normal.

Behind her, the cereal bowl and spoon still sat in the sink. She had put them back exactly where she'd found them and then, without cleaning, she'd moved them to the counter on a tea towel and photographed them. She'd put them back again.

It wasn't evidence for anyone else. It was something for her. A way of keeping her thoughts in order.

June picked up her phone, unlocked it, and checked the app again. Perimeter armed. No alarm triggers. No messages. Simon's last text stayed where it had been yesterday, the same clipped availability that meant nothing.

She set the phone down face up on the island.

Tea first, then the problem. The tea sat there, cooling.

She walked the ground floor, not in a sweep, not in a dramatic way. She moved the way she did when she was checking a holiday let after a

family had gone out for the day: slow, ordinary, with her eyes on the edges.

The sofa cushions were straight. The rug sat square against the tiles. The chair by the terrace door sat with one front leg turned a fraction out.

June stopped and looked at it.

It might have been nothing. A careless nudge yesterday when she hoovered, or when she passed through with the laundry basket.

But she'd hoovered in two passes, and she'd done it by the lines in the pile. She didn't bump furniture without noticing.

She put her hand on the chair back, not pushing, just touching, and her palm met a faint tackiness on the wood. Cleaning spray, drying.

The cleaners had been, Simon had said. They'd wiped everything to the point where nothing felt lived-in.

June took her hand away and went back to the kitchen.

A cupboard door above the kettle sat closed. Flush. She still checked it with her fingertips, light pressure at the edge.

The soft-close held.

She opened the cupboard, took out a mug, and put it down on the counter. Then she stood there, looking at the row of mugs behind it.

They were arranged by height. Handles all pointing the same way.

Yesterday the chipped mug had been on the left. It was on the right now.

June didn't move it back. She didn't even touch it.

She shut the cupboard.

There were reasons. A different mug used and returned by mistake, without thinking. Her own hand, half asleep, reaching for the thicker handle.

Except she'd only used the one she was holding.

June took the mug to the island and made tea, letting the kettle boil fully and click off before she poured. She watched the bag darken the water.

Half the cup went down, then she washed her hands and went to the utility for her cloth. Keeping her hands busy helped.

The Street Drinks card sat beside the printed WELCOME sheet, both in the same place, the corners aligned with the counter edge. June could have moved them to the drawer and no one would have known.

She left them.

By late morning she had decided not to drive out for food.

It wasn't that she was frightened of leaving the house empty. If this was a break-in, it was already done. If it was a neighbour with a spare key, leaving might be the sensible option.

But the rules were clear: don't let anyone in. The perimeter stays armed. Call him if anything happens.

If June left and something went missing, she'd be the first story told. She had keys in her pocket. She had access to the app. She was the only person who should be here.

Simon's face came to her, not angry exactly, but flat. A man used to being believed.

Where were you, June?

It didn't matter if she said she'd gone to buy bread. The question would sit there anyway.

June put her phone in her pocket and checked the mudroom again.

The navy blazer still hung alone on its hook. It looked drier, but the sleeve still held a faint dampness when she brushed the fabric with her knuckles. The pocket corner still stuck out.

She didn't lift it this time. She didn't need to.

Stepping back, June looked at the empty hooks beside it, the tiled floor with the drain, her own coat hanging two spaces away. Nothing else had shifted.

Back in the kitchen, she used the pantry key and opened the door.

The pantry light came on at the switch. The shelves were as they'd been yesterday: tins in straight rows, packets upright, clear tubs with labels in block capitals.

June didn't want to touch anything. Touching meant changing. Changing meant later doubt.

She leaned in and looked along the line of tubs.

One of them, a tall one labelled CEREAL, had a strip of clear tape across the lid.

She hadn't noticed tape yesterday. That didn't mean it wasn't there. It meant she hadn't been looking for it.

She stepped closer.

The tape had a small air bubble trapped under it on one end, a cloudy patch that caught the pantry light. The other end sat smooth.

A bubble didn't prove anything. Tape bubbled when people did it in a hurry.

June didn't remember a bubble.

She brought her face nearer, careful not to breathe on the plastic, and saw where the tape edge had lifted. A faint line of dust clung to the adhesive, then it had been pressed back down.

Someone had opened it.

Someone had tried to close it back so it looked untouched, but they hadn't managed it perfectly.

June stood there for a long moment with her hands at her sides.

If she peeled the tape back and checked the cereal level, she'd be doing what the other person had done.

She closed the pantry door and put the key back in her pocket.

Her first instinct was to make tea, but she opened the note on her phone instead and added another line.

Pantry tub seal disturbed.

She didn't specify which tub. If she specified it and got it wrong later, she'd have given herself a problem.

June went to the back door.

She didn't turn the handle this time. The warning beep would add another moment to account for.

June checked the frame and the sensor at the top corner. The sensor sat square. No marks on the paint. No scratches at the latch.

She checked the side window by the terrace door. The latch was clean. The outside glass was wet with rain, but there were no hand smears, no drag marks in the water.

She checked the small window above the sink. Same.

No sign of forced entry.

Which left keys. Codes. Someone who knew where not to touch.

In the hall, June looked at the alarm panel.

Simon had told her to use the app, not the panel. He'd made it sound like convenience, but it was also control. The app could be watched from anywhere.

June didn't press anything. She didn't want to be the reason a log entry appeared.

Lunch came from the fridge, eaten standing up, because sitting down slowed her down.

Afterwards she washed her plate and dried it, and her hands stayed busy as she wiped the sink and then stopped.

Cleaning was what she did when she needed steadiness. Cleaning also erased.

She left the sink damp.

In the afternoon she checked her photos again and made herself look at them carefully, keeping her face still. A cupboard door slightly ajar. A cereal bowl in a sink.

It was ridiculous, and it wasn't.

June took the Hoover out again and did a slow pass down the corridor behind the pantry and through the open-plan space, not because the floor needed it, but because it gave her an excuse to be everywhere.

She paused at the utility corridor door and listened.

Nothing.

At four she texted Maureen.

"All right. Strange though. Little things moved. Keeping an eye."

Maureen replied a few minutes later.

"Ring him. Don't be a martyr."

June read it twice, then locked the phone and put it in her pocket.

Martyr made it sound grand. It wasn't grand. It was a job, and it was her name on it.

Late afternoon faded into early evening. The garden lights came on again, bright against wet tiles. The sky stayed low.

June tried to open the digital manual from the QR code on the WELCOME sheet, partly because she wanted to see what else the system could tell her, and partly because she needed something normal to do.

The page loaded, then stalled.

A spinning icon sat on the screen longer than it should.

With Wi-Fi off, the manual loaded on mobile data; back on Wi-Fi it stalled again.

June set the phone down.

Odd.

That was the word. She wrote it in her head as if she'd be asked later.

Odd Wi-Fi at dusk.

She didn't know what it meant. She didn't have to decide what it meant. She just had to notice it.

June washed her mug and put it back, then stood looking at the fruit bowl.

She reached out and picked up the lime.

It was heavier than she expected. Cold from the room.

She turned it so the small stalk end pointed toward the wall instead of outward, then placed it back where it had been.

A harmless object. A marker.

If someone touched that bowl again, she'd know.

Her eyelids dragged. June rubbed her thumb against the mug handle once, then went to the mudroom and checked the blazer again.

It still hung there, the damp line along the sleeve almost gone now. The fabric held a faint curve at the elbow.

June stepped back, closed the mudroom door, then opened it and checked the latch. She didn't want to be the one leaving doors ajar.

Dinner came from the labelled leftovers. The container went back in the fridge with the label facing out.

By the time she finished, it was fully dark outside. The inside lights made the glass walls too exposing.

June turned off the lights in the living area and left the kitchen on. Moving through a stranger's house in the dark brought its own mistakes, and she didn't want to miss small changes.

She carried her phone to the staff room and put it on charge, then took it off again.

Charging meant it stayed in one place. She wanted it with her.

June went back to the kitchen and opened the drawer by the sink, checking the cutlery tray. Everything sat in its compartment.

She shut the drawer.

A dull thud came from above.

June froze with her hand still on the drawer handle.

It wasn't the sound of a door closing. It wasn't the sound of pipes. It was a single impact, followed by a faint scrape, then nothing.

June listened, breath held until her chest tightened.

No second sound.

She let out the breath slowly and pulled her hand away from the drawer.

What she'd been doing still needed doing. June took a clean tea towel from the hook and folded it, then folded it again.

When her hands steadied, she left the kitchen and walked along the corridor behind the pantry toward the utility, following the line she'd traced in her head all day.

The plant room door sat along there, plain and closed, with a sign on it in small print. June didn't open it. She'd been told not to touch the schedules and the systems.

But above the corridor, in the ceiling, she saw the outline she hadn't registered properly before.

A loft hatch.

It was a square panel with a small recessed pull. White against white.

June stood under it.

The tiles under her slippers were cold enough to sting.

She went back to the kitchen, dragged a chair over, and positioned it under the hatch.

June didn't climb.

Not yet.

She stood there, looking at the chair, and did nothing.

June took her phone out and turned the sound up one notch. Not loud. Just enough.

Then she walked back to the staff bedroom, took the spare jumper from her bag, and laid it on the bed.

Her phone went on the bedside table within reach. She kept her eyes on the door handle.

June didn't lock it.

The light went off.

In the dark, the appliances hummed through the walls. The corridor lights outside the room stayed on low, enough to show the edge of the door.

June lay on her side and listened.

\*\*\*

Hours passed with small tasks. Then it was late.

June got up once to use the downstairs cloakroom, because she didn't want to move about upstairs. She washed her hands with cold water and dried them, and she stood looking at the tiled floor.

It was dry then.

Back in the kitchen she turned off the last light and left only the small under-cabinet strip on, enough to see the floor.

She sat at the island with her mug and her phone, not scrolling, not reading.

At some point she went to bed.

She didn't remember falling asleep. She remembered hearing a distant motor from somewhere on the estate and then nothing.

A sound in the corridor woke her.

June opened her eyes and looked at her phone. 01:47.

She listened.

A small shift of fabric or a foot on tile, too soft to place. Then quiet.

June got out of bed and stepped into the corridor.

The door from the hall into the utility corridor sat slightly open.

June had closed that earlier.

June stared at the narrow gap, the sliver of corridor light visible through it.

Someone could stand there and listen to her in the staff room. Someone could hear her phone buzz, her footstep on the tile, the rustle of her duvet.

June walked to the door and pushed it closed, gently, until the latch engaged. She didn't slam it. She didn't want to announce herself.

Her hand stayed on the door for a beat.

Then she went to the alarm panel in the hall.

June hadn't wanted to touch it. She still didn't.

But she needed something that wasn't her own memory.

June pressed the button to wake the screen. The panel lit up with a menu. The perimeter status sat at the top.

She scrolled through the interface carefully, reading each label once, then again.

There was a section for event history.

June opened it.

A list appeared, timestamps down the left.

Most of it was nothing. System armed. System status check. The sort of thing that happened when she opened the app.

Then a line near the bottom.

01:46: Cloakroom Door Open/Close.

June looked at it until her eyes blurred.

Cloakroom. The downstairs loo.

She hadn't been in there at quarter to two. She had been in bed with her eyes open, listening for movement.

An internal door sensor. A contact. Not enough to set off the perimeter.

Enough to log.

June swallowed once. Her jaw tightened.

She locked the screen and turned away from the panel.

Her slippers made no sound on the tile if she walked slowly.

June went to the cloakroom.

The light switch sat by the door. She didn't flick it on. Hall light spilled in.

The cloakroom floor tile by the sink was damp.

A patch, not a spill.

June crouched, careful of her knees, and put her fingertips near it.

Cold water. Recent.

She had been in there earlier, and it had been dry.

June shifted her head slightly and saw it.

A wet footprint on the tile.

Not a full shoe tread. Just the front half, as if someone had stepped in from outside or from wet socks and then paused. The edge was clear, a sharp line where the water ended.

June watched as the centre dulled, the water sinking into the tile surface and leaving the outline a shade darker for a moment.

It was a fresh mark. It was not from yesterday.

June stood and backed out of the cloakroom.

She went to the utility and took a clean towel from the shelf.

Returning, June laid it down beside the footprint, not over it.

The towel was for her own safety, so she didn't slip later in the dark. The footprint stayed visible.

June stood in the hall, breathing shallowly.

Her phone sat in her pocket.

Calling the police would mean saying, out loud, that she thought someone was in the house.

Not seen. Not heard clearly. Thought.

She could describe the bowl and the cupboard and the damp blazer and the pantry tape and the footprint.

June could also hear the questions.

Have you checked all the doors are locked?

Are you sure it wasn't you?

Do you have the owner's number?

And if they came, what then. She'd be the woman house-sitting for wealthy people who had decided a cupboard door meant an intruder.

June pressed her lips together.

Maureen would tell her to ring anyway. To be loud before someone else got louder.

June looked down the corridor to where the chair sat under the loft hatch.

Not now.

Not in the dark.

The thought came in, quick and flat. June looked away and set her teeth.

There was a difference between taking a risk and walking into something blind. She had no idea who might be up there, or down here, or whether she'd corner herself.

June walked back to the staff bedroom.

She left the door open a few inches.

It felt wrong. It brought the corridor noise closer.

But she needed to hear.

June lay on the bed with her phone beside her and stared at the ceiling.

After a while, a sound came again from above.

Not a thud this time. A soft scrape, then a pause.

June counted under her breath.

One. Two. Three. Four.

Another scrape, further along.

The timing wasn't regular. It didn't match pipes. It didn't match the house settling.

June rubbed her forearm once and kept listening.

The movement had direction.

It went from the corridor toward the back, then stopped.

June didn't move.

Her hand stayed on her phone.

June did not call anyone.

Not yet.

She waited for light.

\*\*\*

Morning came grey.

June had slept in short stretches. Each time her eyes closed, they opened again at small changes in the house noise.

When she finally got up, she moved carefully, testing each step.

June checked her phone. No missed calls. No texts.

In the kitchen, the lime's stalk end pointed outward again.

June stared at it.

She didn't touch it. She didn't fix it.

She went to the mudroom.

The blazer still hung there.

June let out one short breath, then stopped.

The blazer hung there, but the sleeve sat different again, the pocket flattened now, as if someone had smoothed it.

June turned her head at a sound outside. Footsteps on wet pavement beyond the glass.

She went to the front door and looked through the side panel.

Penelope Gable walked past the spur entrance, under a big coat with pockets that made her shape square. Her keyring swung from her hand, loud even from inside. She slowed as she reached the gatepost, and she turned her head to peer in.

June watched her for a moment.

Penelope didn't knock. She didn't call out.

She just looked.

June opened the front door and stepped onto the drive, keeping herself inside the boundary of the gate.

"Morning," she called.

Penelope's head snapped round.

"Oh!" Penelope said, as if she hadn't been looking. She smiled wide, lipstick sharp against pale skin. "Morning. Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I saw the lights on and I thought, "

"What did you think?" June asked. Her voice came out calm.

Penelope walked closer to the gate, stopping just short of it. She looked at June's face, then past her, taking in the glass front and the pale interior.

"I thought the Millers had gone away," Penelope said. "They said they were off, didn't they? Elena's always off, isn't she. I mean, good for her." She gave a short laugh. "Are the cleaners in? I was wondering if I should tell them about the bin day because last time, "

"No cleaners," June said.

Penelope's eyebrows lifted. The look held for a second too long.

"Just you then," Penelope said, and the tone shifted.

"Just me," June said. "I'm house-sitting." She didn't add professional. In this sort of conversation, it came out wrong.

Penelope nodded, as if she'd known all along.

"They do that," Penelope said. "Away all the time. Work, trips, all sorts. Lovely house though." She shifted her tote bag higher on her shoulder. It had labels stuck to it, the kind used for freezer tubs.

June kept her hands still at her sides.

"Penelope, can I ask you something?" June said.

Penelope leaned in.

"Of course."

June chose her words.

"Have you seen anyone coming in at night? Or during the day, when they shouldn't?"

Penelope's smile stayed, but her eyes narrowed slightly, concentrating.

"No," Penelope said at first. Then she frowned. "Well. I heard the gate go, I think. Once. After dark. It did that little beep and then the motor. I remember because I said to my husband, I said, 'That'll be Simon forgetting something again,' and he said, 'Don't be nosy,' and I said, 'I'm not being nosy, I'm being aware.'"

June's fingers tightened once against her palm.

"What time?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know." Penelope waved her hand. "Eightish? Nineish? It was properly dark. I was putting bottles in the recycling and I heard it. Could've been earlier. Could've been later."

June nodded once.

Penelope's gaze sharpened.

"Why? Has something happened?"

June kept her face still.

"Just a few odd alarms," she said lightly. "And a couple of things not where they should be."

Penelope made a small sound.

"Oh, well," she said. "You know what it'll be. Teenagers. Or delivery drivers trying the gate."

"The instructions say refuse parcels," June said.

"Oh, Simon and his rules," Penelope said, rolling her eyes. "He likes control, doesn't he. Everything in its place. Always has." She leaned in again. "If you see anything else, will you tell me?"

June let that pass.

"If you see anyone," June said, "or anything looks off, ring me."

"I'll keep an eye out," Penelope said at once. "Of course I will. That's what neighbours do. No offence."

"None taken," June said.

Penelope leaned closer to the bars.

"Have you rung them?" she asked.

June hesitated.

"Not yet."

Penelope's mouth tightened, then eased back into neighbourly concern.

"Well," she said, "you don't want to make a fuss. But you also don't want to be responsible if something's going on. You know."

June did know.

Penelope took a step back.

"I won't keep you," she said. "If you need anything. I'm just along there. Number twelve. Penelope Gable."

"Thank you," June said.

Penelope gave another smile and turned away, her keys clinking with each step.

June watched until she reached the end of the spur and disappeared back toward the older brick houses.

People on the street already watched the Millers' place.

June went back inside and shut the door.

She stood in the hall for a moment, listening. No new sounds. Just the steady background hum.

June walked straight to the mudroom.

The hook where the blazer had hung was empty.

June stared at it.

The hook beside it was empty too. Her own coat still hung two spaces away, exactly where she'd left it.

Her mouth went dry.

It wasn't a shifted sleeve. It wasn't a pocket corner sticking out.

Someone had taken it.

June put her hand out and touched the empty hook.

Cold metal.

She pulled her hand back.

Now it was urgent.

\*\*\*

June searched the ground floor first, because it was what she could do without making a bigger mess.

She started in the open-plan space, moving room by room, but not opening drawers. The back of chairs got checked, then the sofa, then the bottom of the stairwell.

Nothing.

Next came the utility corridor. The staff room door sat where she'd left it. The hooks held her coat and nothing else.

June checked the pantry corridor. The plant room door stayed closed.

In the downstairs cloakroom, the towel still lay beside the footprint. The footprint had faded to a darker patch, and the tile had dried.

No blazer.

June went back to the kitchen and opened the bin cupboard, because she didn't want to but she had to. Both bins were lined. There was rubbish, but nothing stuffed in the top.

She shut it.

Her fingers shook, slight and steady.

The kettle went on, not for tea, but for noise.

While it boiled, June stood in the corridor and listened again.

A scrape came from above, near the plant room.

Not loud. Not a crash.

A drag along a surface, then a pause.

June kept still.

Another scrape, further along.

It was close to the spot she'd heard last night, close to the chair she'd dragged under the loft hatch.

June walked into the corridor.

The chair sat under the hatch as she'd left it. The hatch panel above looked the same at first glance.

Stepping in close, June tilted her head.

One edge of the panel sat slightly proud. Before she moved away, she pressed a fingertip to the edge; it shifted a fraction, then held.

June knew she hadn't touched it. She hadn't climbed the chair. She hadn't put her fingers on the pull.

She stood under it, looking up.

If she left the house now, went outside the gate, called someone from the street, what then.

The person inside could move. They could hide. They could leave by a door that didn't show marks.

They'd already taken the blazer.

And if June left, there would be time when she wasn't looking.

June went back to the kitchen.

She opened the drawer of knives.

Her hand went to the handle of a small kitchen knife, not the largest. A plain blade.

June held it for a moment.

Then she put it down on the counter instead, blade turned inward, handle toward her.

She didn't want a weapon situation. She didn't want to be the person who made this worse.

June took a breath.

Back under the hatch, she called out.

"Hello?" she said.

Her voice sounded small against the hard surfaces.

June tried again, steadier.

"Is anyone there?"

No answer.

June rubbed the heel of her hand along her thigh once.

An answer would at least have placed the person somewhere. A voice would have given her an age, a mood, a direction.

Nothing meant someone was listening and choosing not to speak.

June went to the utility and pulled out a step stool, the small folding one tucked beside the mop.

She carried it into the corridor and set it under the hatch, replacing the chair.

The stool felt more stable.

June stood with one hand on it and looked up at the pull.

If she climbed now, in the morning, with grey light still filling the house, she would have the advantage of seeing.

But seeing wasn't everything.

If someone was up there, they had been up there long enough to move around without leaving obvious marks. They had used the cloakroom. They had touched her marker. They had taken the blazer.

They were not panicking.

June stepped back from the stool.

She walked to the kitchen, picked up her phone, and checked the Wi-Fi again.

The app opened, slowly. The manual link still lagged.

June locked the phone.

She went to the living area and turned on more lights, then closed the curtains where she could. There weren't many, because the place was

designed to look open.

The corridor light stayed on.

If someone moved, she wanted the shadows to fall the same way.

June went back to the corridor and sat on the bottom step of the stool, not climbing, just taking up space under the hatch.

Nothing.

Her phone buzzed once with a notification that didn't load properly.

June left it.

A circuit of the ground floor followed, slower now, doors checked by habit and stopped short of drawers.

She returned to the corridor and looked up.

The hatch panel still sat slightly proud.

June stepped into the kitchen, then stopped.

She could go outside now. She could walk to Penelope's house and ask her to stand at the gate while June checked the loft. A witness. Another adult.

Penelope would talk.

If June was wrong, it would still be talked about.

June stayed where she was.

A bottle of water came out of the fridge and was set on the counter within reach.

June checked the time on her phone, then set it down.

In the staff bedroom she sat on the edge of the bed, hands on her knees.

Her jaw set.

June stood and went back out.

She set the step stool squarely under the hatch again, aligning it by the tile edges so she'd know if it was moved.

A chair from the kitchen went into the corridor too, not under the hatch.

June opened the cutlery drawer, put the knife back, and shut it.

No weapons.

If she needed help, she needed a phone and a door.

June returned to the corridor and sat on the chair.

Her eyes stayed on the hatch.

Outside, the sky darkened early, as it did in late October. The garden lights came on. The glass reflected the interior.

June switched off the living room lights so the corridor stayed brighter than the open-plan space.

She kept still.

Time passed in small changes: the clock on her phone read 18:12, then 19:03; her calf cramped and she shifted without taking her eyes off the ceiling panel; a brief sound came from above, one soft scrape, then silence.

The fridge compressor started. A relay clicked. A pipe ticked once.

June stayed in the chair, watching the slight misalignment at the hatch edge and waiting for the next sound.

# Chapter 3

## The Loft

The stool sat square to the grout lines, two tiles from the wall, the legs placed so June could tell with one glance if it had shifted. She had set it like that twice already, adjusted and re-adjusted without moving it more than a finger's width. It was early evening, the kind where it went dark early, and the garden lights had come on outside while she sat in the corridor and watched the edge of the loft hatch.

June kept her phone face up on the corridor chair, screen dark, volume turned up enough that she'd hear it if it did anything useful. Beside it, on the seat, a bottle of water stood upright. The bottle had been in the fridge, label clean, cap tight. She'd taken it out and put it there because she could not stand the idea of finding someone and then leaving them without the simplest thing.

She had thought about a torch, then remembered she had a phone.

She had thought about a weapon, then remembered the knife she'd put back.

Instead she had brought what she knew how to bring: water, a packet of biscuits from the kitchen cupboard, and her own steadiness, which wasn't a thing you could put on a chair but was the only part of her that had ever been any use in other people's crises.

The open-plan area behind her was darker now. She had turned off the living lights so the glass did not show her own reflection back at her as sharply. The corridor light remained on. If someone moved, she wanted to see it.

The hatch edge still sat slightly proud. It had sat that way all afternoon. She had pressed it once, felt the small shift, and then stopped touching it. Touching things was how you ended up arguing about whether you'd imagined them.

June stood and put her hand on the stool, feeling the plastic top under her palm. She listened.

No scraping or thuds, nothing from the utility corridor, and nothing from the kitchen except the low running noise from appliances in a large house.

Her mouth tasted of tea that had gone cold.

She picked up the bottle of water and tucked the biscuits under her arm. The packet crinkled; she paused until it stopped, then set both back on the chair within reach.

A burglar would not eat cereal in a house, wash nothing up, then slip into a loft. A burglar would not take a navy school blazer off a hook and leave June's coat untouched. That was where her thoughts kept going, because it was the point where the details stopped matching.

She stepped onto the stool.

The ceiling was closer than she expected. The recessed pull on the hatch sat within easy reach, shallow enough that it didn't snag on anything. She put two fingers into it and lifted.

The hatch stuck for a second. Not locked, not jammed, just seated. June shifted her grip and pushed upward.

The panel moved.

There was a line of darker space above the white edge. June stopped with the hatch only an inch open.

Her heart beat fast and light, the way it had when she'd slipped on a wet pavement once and caught herself at the last second.

She pushed again, steady, and the hatch swung down on hinges.

Air came down from the loft. It smelled of insulation and stored cardboard, and something else underneath it that made June's nose pinch. It smelled of a person who had been breathing in a closed space.

June held the hatch open with one hand and raised her phone with the other, turning on the light.

The phone light showed pale insulation rolls and silver ducting. The loft space was not finished. There were joists, boards laid across them, wiring tucked back, and quilted insulation pushed aside in places.

Boxes sat in stacks. The kind of boxes you bought from a storage place, all the same size, some with marker pen on the side. Christmas. Files. Kitchen.

And then, slightly further along, a space.

Someone had cleared a patch of boards, enough for a body to lie down. The insulation was pushed back neatly rather than ripped. A sleeping bag lay rolled out along the boards, and beside it a folded fleece. A plastic carrier bag sat tucked under a joist.

June swallowed once.

This was not a place someone had ducked into for ten minutes.

She shifted the phone light, careful not to move it too fast, and saw more of the cleared area: a bottle cap on a board, a wrapper flattened, the corner of a paper towel.

A game controller lay on top of a box, thumbsticks worn to a dull shine. Near it, half tucked behind the sleeping bag, a school bag, black with a strip of reflective tape, the zip pulled to one side as if it had been opened and closed one-handed.

June's hand tightened on the hatch edge.

A sound came from the far end.

Not a scrape. Not a thud.

A breath.

Sharp and pulled in too fast.

June held still, phone light fixed on the cleared space.

Someone was close enough to hear the hatch open. Close enough to breathe wrong.

June did not climb into the loft. She stayed on the stool, her knees level with the ceiling line, one hand still holding the hatch.

"Hello," she said.

Her voice sounded different with the loft above her, thinner.

No reply.

June kept her eyes on the cleared patch.

"I'm not the owners," she said. "My name's June. I'm house-sitting. Simon and Elena are away."

She listened for any movement that matched those names.

Nothing.

June swallowed once and kept her voice level.

"I'm not coming up," she said. "I'm staying here."

She let the sentence sit there, because it was a promise she could keep.

"I've got water," she added.

The phone light showed no movement. The breath stopped.

She did not reach for the water yet. She did not want to drop anything and turn this into a scramble.

"If you're hurt," she said, "tell me."

A small movement came, not from the cleared patch but from behind a stack of boxes to the right. The phone light caught a sliver of fabric,

dark, then nothing.

June kept the light steady.

"All right," she said. "I'm staying here."

Another breath, more controlled this time.

A face appeared, half in shadow, half in the phone light.

A boy.

Not small. Not an adult. A teenage boy, hair dark and uneven as if it had been cut with bad scissors or tugged at. His skin looked dry. His eyes were wide and steady. He barely blinked.

He wore a hoodie, the hood down, and he had socks on, no shoes.

June's hand tightened on the hatch edge again, and she made herself loosen it.

"Don't," the boy said, then stopped.

His voice had been too loud even in that one syllable. He shut his mouth and looked behind him, deeper into the loft.

June kept her voice low.

"I won't," she said. "I'm not grabbing you."

He shifted back a few inches, his shoulders scraping a box.

June moved her phone light slightly away from his face. She did not want him to feel pinned.

"What's your name?" she asked.

He stared at her.

June waited.

He did not answer.

June could see his hands now. Fingers thin, nails bitten. His right hand trembled once and then went still.

June looked past him again, more carefully.

The game controller. The school bag.

The kind of set-up someone made when they thought they might be there for a while.

She had been told there was no one.

Simon's voice came back to her from the first day, quick and certain. Leo is sorted.

June's gaze went back to the boy.

The height. The age.

The way the hoodie hung on him, as if it had been borrowed or worn too long.

She had not met Leo, but she had been in enough houses with family photographs to know how people left proof of themselves in rooms.

"I'm not the police," she said. "I'm not your dad."

The boy's jaw clenched on the word dad.

"Your lips are cracked," June said. "Drink some water."

He shifted again, back into the darker part of the loft. He moved toward the insulation, trying to get out of the phone light.

June kept still.

"You can stay where you are," she said. "I'm going to pass you a bottle."

She reached down, picked up the water, and held it up so he could see it.

He watched it, eyes flicking between the bottle and her hand.

June unscrewed the cap slowly. The plastic made a small crackle. She stopped. He flinched at the sound.

"Sorry," June said.

She twisted again, quieter. The cap came off.

She tipped a little water out onto her finger and let it run back into the bottle, to show it was plain water.

"I'm going to put it down," she said.

She leaned forward and set the open bottle on the board just inside the hatch opening, within the loft but still close to her. Then she drew her hand back.

"Biscuits too," she added.

She reached down for the packet and slid it beside the bottle.

The boy stared at the packet. His nostrils moved once, a small intake.

June put her hands flat on the edge of the hatch, palms visible.

"Take it if you want," she said. "If you don't want it, don't."

The phone light remained on, angled away. June watched his feet. His toes shifted on the boards. He edged forward.

He did it in slow increments, then in one quick movement, he lunged and grabbed the bottle.

Water sloshed up the neck. He held it tight with both hands.

June did not move.

The boy brought the bottle to his mouth and drank.

Not a sip. Not polite. A long pull that made his throat move hard. He swallowed too fast and coughed once, turning his head away, water dribbling down his chin.

June kept her eyes down.

"Easy," she said.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and drank again.

His hands shook while he held the bottle.

June swallowed, then kept her voice steady.

"How long have you been up there?" she asked.

The boy froze with the bottle still at his mouth.

He looked at her, then away.

June waited.

He did not answer.

June did not ask again.

She looked at the biscuits packet, still unopened. She did not want to push food if he would choke on it from trying to eat too quickly.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked.

He stared at her. His mouth worked once, as if he had words ready and could not find the correct order.

"You're..." he said quietly.

June waited.

"You're here," he finished.

"Yes," June said. "I'm here."

She let the silence sit for a beat, then tried again.

"Are you Leo?" she asked.

The boy's eyes narrowed.

He did not say yes.

He did not say no.

His shoulders lifted once, then dropped.

It was enough.

June breathed out through her nose.

"All right," she said. "Leo."

He flinched at his own name.

June kept her voice low.

"I'm not doing anything fast," she said.

Leo's gaze flicked to her phone, still in her hand.

June turned the phone so the screen faced her and set it down on the hatch edge.

"Light only," she said.

Leo drank again, smaller this time, and his shoulders began to shake as well as his hands.

He lowered the bottle and swallowed once, hard.

He tried to speak and stopped.

"You can come down," June said. "If you want. It's warmer downstairs."

Leo shook his head quickly.

His eyes went past her, down into the corridor.

June understood. He did not want to be seen in the open part of the house. He did not want to be on the floor where doors and glass made everything visible.

"We can do it quietly," June said. "We can go straight to the back corridor."

Leo's breathing was uneven. He took the biscuits packet and held it without opening it.

June shifted her weight on the stool, careful not to wobble it.

"I'm going to stay right here," she said again. "You don't have to come close."

Leo's eyes moved, measuring. He looked at the hatch opening and the drop, then at June's hands.

June kept her hands open.

He took one more drink, then set the bottle down, and for a moment his hands hovered as if they had forgotten where to go.

The shake got worse.

June's jaw tightened.

She had a flash of the cereal bowl in the sink, the sweet smear in the bottom, the cupboard door ajar. She had been annoyed by it, then frightened by it, then careful with it.

Now she could see the person who had made it.

"Leo," she said. "Can you climb down?"

Leo looked at her again. His lips parted.

"If," he started.

He stopped.

June waited.

"If he comes back," Leo said finally.

June's stomach tightened.

"He's meant to be away," she said.

Leo's mouth tightened in refusal.

"He can come back," Leo said.

June did not contradict him. She had been in enough houses to know that adults said they were away while still controlling things at a distance.

She had already watched the gate and heard about it moving.

June shifted her gaze to the hatch edge.

"Come down now," she said. "Quiet. No sudden noise."

Leo swallowed. He nodded once, small.

June climbed down one step on the stool so her head was no longer level with the hatch opening. It felt wrong to turn away, but it gave him space.

"I'm going to step back," she said.

She moved off the stool and stood to the side, leaving the stool in place under the hatch, hatch still open.

Leo's face appeared again above, cautious. He pulled himself forward with both hands, elbows trembling.

June watched his hands.

His fingers were scraped, small raw patches at the knuckles.

Leo swung one leg down, foot searching for the stool top. His socked foot found it and pressed, testing.

June kept her hands near her sides.

"I'm here," she said, quietly. "I'm not touching you unless you fall."

Leo's other foot came down. He crouched at the hatch, body tight, then lowered himself onto the stool top.

June stayed still.

He moved down one step, then another, using the stool's side to steady himself.

When he reached the floor, his knees buckled slightly. He grabbed the stool edge and held on.

June took half a step forward, then stopped.

"Sit," she said.

Leo didn't sit. He looked at the corridor, then at the hall, then at the kitchen beyond.

The corridor was bright. The hall was darker. The open-plan space was a black reflection on glass.

Leo's breathing sped.

June lifted the bottle of water from the chair and held it out.

Leo took it and drank again, smaller now but still urgent.

"Come with me," June said. "Back way. Not through the front."

Leo's eyes stayed wide.

June walked first, slow, so he could follow or not. She did not reach behind her for his wrist. She let him choose.

His footsteps were nearly silent in socks on tile.

They moved along the corridor behind the pantry, away from the glass and the open space, toward the utility door.

June reached the door and paused, hand on the handle.

"This is the staff corridor," she said. "It's quieter."

Leo nodded once.

June opened the door and stepped through.

The utility smelled of detergent and damp cloth. June could see her own coat on the hook where she'd moved it, the mop handles aligned, the folded towel she'd taken in the night still missing from the stack.

Leo hovered in the doorway.

"In here," June said.

He came in.

June closed the door carefully until the latch caught.

Leo stood in the utility room, blinking. The ordinary room did not match where he had been sleeping.

June turned the light down to the lower setting. She had found the switch earlier; there were too many settings in this house and she hated all of them.

"Come on," she said.

The staff bedroom door was a few steps away. June opened it.

The room was small, plain, a bed with a white cover, a narrow wardrobe, a small window with a blind.

June had slept in that room for two nights. It felt suddenly wrong to bring him into it.

Then she remembered the loft.

"Sit down," she said.

Leo sat on the edge of the bed, still holding the water bottle. His shoulders hunched. He took one more drink and then held the bottle with both hands in his lap.

June stayed by the door.

"How old are you?" she asked.

Leo blinked.

"Fifteen," he said.

June nodded.

Simon had said revision camp. Fifteen made that plausible. It also made his lying worse.

June's gaze went to Leo's hands. The shake had eased slightly now that he was sitting, but it was still there, in the small movements.

"You can talk when you're ready," June said. "Or you can eat."

She went to the cupboard in the utility corridor where cleaning supplies were kept and pulled out nothing, then shut it again, because she had no idea why she had gone there except that her hands needed somewhere to be.

She walked back to the kitchen instead.

The open-plan space looked the same. The fruit bowl sat with its lemons and lime.

June stood at the island and pulled a plate from the cupboard. She opened the fridge and took out one of the labelled containers.

She chose one that looked bland.

She put it in the microwave and set it for a short time.

While it ran, she took two slices of bread and made a sandwich with cheese, because bread did not make much noise and did not require a pan.

The microwave beeped. She pressed cancel and opened it before it could beep again.

June carried the plate and sandwich back down the corridor.

Leo looked up sharply when she opened the door.

"It's just me," June said.

She set the plate and the sandwich on the bed beside him.

"Eat what you want," she said.

Leo stared at the food.

"I don't," he started.

His voice cracked. He stopped.

June did not soften her expression into something false.

"You don't have to explain," she said. "Just eat."

Leo picked up the sandwich and took a bite. He chewed fast, swallowed, took another bite.

June watched him for a second, then looked away.

"Can you shower?" June asked.

Leo shook his head instantly.

"No," he said.

"All right," June said.

June sat on the chair in the corner of the staff room.

"Leo," she said, once he had swallowed again. "You didn't go to Scotland, did you."

Leo's jaw tightened.

"No," he said.

The word was flat.

June swallowed.

"When did you come back?" she asked.

Leo's eyes went to the door.

"After they left," he said.

June nodded.

"So Simon told me you were away," she said. "He told me it'd just be me in the house."

Leo's mouth twisted.

"He would," he said, quiet, looking down at the sandwich.

June watched him, and she made herself ask the next question plainly.

"Does anyone else know you're here?" she asked.

Leo stopped chewing. He swallowed, then shook his head.

"No. Nobody."

June waited.

Leo's gaze dropped to his hands.

"Not..." he started, then stopped.

June kept still.

"Not your mum?" June asked, carefully.

Leo's shoulders lifted, sharp.

"Don't," he said.

It came out more frightened than angry.

June nodded once.

"All right," she said. "I won't say her name."

Leo took another bite of sandwich, chewing too fast again.

A sound came from outside.

A car, not on the drive but close enough that the tyres on wet road were clear through the small staff window.

Leo froze.

His head snapped toward the window.

His hand went to the edge of the bed, gripping.

June watched him.

"It's outside," June said quietly. "Just a car passing."

Leo didn't move.

June listened.

The sound went on, then faded. No gate motor. No beep. No crunch of tyres on the driveway gravel.

Leo's breathing eased slightly, but he kept his eyes on the window.

June felt cold down her back.

"I'm not ringing him," she said.

Leo swallowed.

"I can't," he said.

June nodded.

"You can lie down," she said.

He looked at the bed.

June stood.

"I'll get you another blanket," she said.

She went to the linen cupboard in the corridor and took out a spare throw, plain grey. She brought it back and set it beside him.

Leo glanced at it, then pulled it onto his lap.

"Thank you," he said, and the words sounded unused.

June sat again.

"Tell me one thing," she said. "Just one."

Leo's shoulders tightened.

June kept her voice flat.

"What happened that made you hide?" she asked.

Leo stared at the wall.

He swallowed.

His fingers tightened on the water bottle.

"It was the car," he said.

June waited.

Leo's jaw clenched. He shook his head once, sharp.

"That's it," he said. "That's all."

June did not push.

After he said it, the room went quiet.

June thought of Simon's precise hands on the keys, the gate fob rubbed between thumb and forefinger. Thought of the way he had said

Leo is sorted, without looking toward the stairs.

June looked at Leo again, at the thinness, the way his eyes kept going to the door.

"All right," she said. "We'll keep to the small things for now."

Leo's eyes flicked to her, then down.

June stood.

"If you need the loo," she said, "tell me. I'll show you which one keeps you out of view."

Leo nodded once.

June opened the door.

"I'm going to shut this," she said. "Not lock. Shut."

Leo's hand tightened on the bottle again.

"Don't lock it," he said.

"I won't," June said.

She shut it until it latched, leaving it fully closed but not turning any lock.

An hour passed.

June walked back into the kitchen.

The island lights were still on. The glass wall showed dark garden beyond and a faint reflection of the kitchen. June could see her own outline in it.

She washed the plate she had used and put it on the rack. She rinsed her hands, then dried them on a tea towel and folded it once, then again.

She leaned on the counter and looked at her phone.

Calling the police would mean saying: a missing teenage boy was here, in the loft of his own house, and his parents were away.

It would mean police arriving at a gate controlled by someone else.

It would mean Simon getting a call from an unknown number and coming back fast.

June picked up the phone, unlocked it, then locked it again without opening anything.

She went to the front glass and looked out at the gate.

The panels were closed. The camera box sat on the post.

June opened the app and checked the gate status. A padlock icon showed closed.

June thought about Maureen.

Maureen would say ring the police, June.

June's thumb hovered over Maureen's name.

She locked the phone again.

She went to the drawer by the kettle and pulled out a scrap of paper, the back of a grocery list someone had left, neat handwriting and a ticked box by lemons.

June took a pen from the pot by the phone charger.

She wrote three lines, slow enough that her hand did not shake.

Leo is here.

Parents lied.

Car.

She read it once.

Then she folded the paper and put it in her jeans pocket.

If anyone questioned her later, she wanted the truth on her.

June looked at the kitchen counter where the WELCOME sheet lay, aligned with the edge, and next to it the Street Drinks card.

Thursday 7 pm.

Crisps, olives, wine, soft drinks.

A list of names.

June picked it up.

She read the names again.

People in this street watched the Millers. Penelope had watched, keys clinking, eyes sharp.

A group of neighbours in the house would mean witnesses.

Not now.

But soon.

June put the card back down exactly where it had been.

She breathed in through her nose and let it out slowly.

Say what you saw, not what you think.

What she had seen was a boy in the loft. She had seen a sleeping bag and a school bag. She had seen shaking hands on a water bottle.

June turned and walked back down the corridor.

At the hall, she paused and listened again.

No footsteps upstairs. No door sensors beeping. No new noises.

June went into the staff corridor and looked at the sightline from the hall into the utility area.

If someone opened the hall door and looked in, they would see straight down the corridor. They would see the utility door, the hooks, the staff bedroom door.

June did not like that.

She took a chair from the small breakfast table near the kitchen, carried it into the corridor, and placed it at an angle, not blocking the

path but interrupting the direct view.

She tested it by standing in the hall and looking.

Now the chair back cut across the line. A person would have to step in to see properly.

June left it there.

She walked to the staff bedroom door and put her hand on it. She did not open it.

"Leo," she said softly.

A pause.

"Yeah," came the reply, quiet.

"Food's there. Water's there. I'm in the next room," June said.

"Are you going to call him?" Leo asked.

His voice came through the wood, thin.

June kept her hand on the door.

"No," she said.

Silence, then a short breath.

"Don't send me back," Leo said.

June shut her eyes for a second.

He spoke like he had heard those words used about him at a door.

"Not tonight," she said.

"Okay," Leo said.

June went into the utility room and shut the door behind her. She turned on the small light, not the bright one.

She took her phone from her pocket and set it on the counter. She did not plug it in.

She filled the kettle and set it on the base without switching it on.

She sat on the edge of the staff bed.

She did not take her shoes off.

The laces stayed tied.

June's feet were cold. Her hands were warm from carrying plates and chairs.

She listened.

A house in the daytime had one set of sounds. At night, it was different. Pipes clicked. The fridge ran. A relay in the alarm panel made a small noise that could be mistaken for a footstep if you were already listening for footsteps.

June kept her eyes on the staff bedroom door.

June's phone stayed dark.

She did not expect rest.

She expected decisions.

\*\*\*

June woke without remembering falling asleep, sitting upright on the bed with her shoes still on and her hands folded in her lap.

She checked the time on her phone. Not late. Just later than she'd meant it to be.

The utility corridor light outside the door was still on.

June stood and stretched her fingers once, then went to the staff bedroom door.

"Leo," she said.

A pause, then a quiet shuffle.

"Yeah," he said.

"You all right?" June asked.

"I'm..." Leo started.

He stopped.

"Okay," he said, finally.

June did not ask for a better word.

"If you need the loo," she said, "tap once. Don't come out without telling me."

"All right," Leo said.

June stepped back.

She returned to the kitchen.

The open-plan space looked arranged, even at night. The lemons and lime sat in their bowl. The counter edges were clean. The chairs were in place. The sofa cushions looked untouched.

June stood at the island and felt exposed. The glass walls showed darkness outside. Inside, she could see her own outline reflected faintly.

She looked out toward the drive.

Nothing moved.

She checked the gate status again on the app. Still closed.

June imagined stepping out and walking down the spur to the older brick houses, knocking on Penelope's door and asking for help.

She imagined Penelope's face, the sharp lipstick and the eyes that did not miss things.

Penelope would talk. She would call. She would take over.

Tonight that would be dangerous.

June put the phone down.

She went to the counter and glanced at the Street Drinks card where she'd left it.

June went back to the staff corridor.

The chair she had placed to break the sightline remained where she'd put it.

She checked the staff bedroom door again.

No sound.

June sat on the edge of her bed once more, shoes still on.

Her body wanted to lie down properly. Her mind refused.

She thought about Simon, away, supposedly.

She thought about Elena, in the car with sunglasses on, not coming to the door.

She thought about the cereal bowl, the cupboard door, the damp blazer, the footprint, the loft hatch edge.

All the small things had been true.

June kept her eyes open.

She listened for a car on the drive, for the gate beep, for footsteps in the hall.

None came.

The fridge motor clicked off, and the silence held.

The night continued with June sitting ready to move, and a fifteen-year-old boy in the next room trying to stay quiet in his own house.

# Chapter 4

## The Hit

The kettle clicked off.

June poured tea into a mug and set a second slice of toast on a small plate. She added butter because it went down even when nothing else did. She carried both along the staff corridor and pushed the door with her shoulder.

"It's me," she said.

Leo sat on the bed where she had left him, blanket across his lap, eyes on the door as if he had not stopped watching it. He straightened when he saw the mug.

June set the tea and toast on the bedside table. "Drink."

He wrapped his hands round the mug. The heat made his knuckles flush.

June took the chair in the corner and angled it so she could see the doorway and him. "Tell me why you ran."

Leo's mouth tightened. He looked at the mug, then at the window blind, then back at the mug. He took a sip and winced at the heat.

"I was in the car," he said. The words came out flat.

June did not move.

"With him," Leo said. He did not say the name.

June kept quiet.

"He'd been drinking," Leo said. "Wine at home. Then a bottle at the... at the place with the glass bar. He said it was fine. He said it was a short

drive." He swallowed and put the mug down so carefully the spoon did not tap.

"Where?" June asked.

"Near the airport lane," Leo said. "The long bit with no lights. He sped up." His fingers pressed on his knees.

He breathed once, shallow.

"We hit a cyclist," he said.

June's hands stayed still on her lap.

"He didn't stop," Leo said. "He swore. He said it was nothing. Then he swore again and pulled over a bit further on where it was dark. He got out. He told me to get out."

Leo lifted his hands as if he still held the cold air from that night.

"He dragged the bike. It was bent. He told me to help. We pulled it into the ditch. He said we couldn't leave it in the road. He kept saying that."

"Did you see the cyclist move?" June asked.

Leo shook his head. His face went tight. "I don't know. I can't say. It was dark. There was rain on the screen and the lights kept bouncing on the wet. I didn't see... I don't know."

June let him stop there.

"After," Leo said, voice lower, "he drove to the airport hotel and went in. He checked in. He talked to the man like it was any other night. He said he had an early flight. He told me to keep my head down and sit still. He left me in the car for a bit and then came back with a key card and said we were staying. He slept."

The tea steam thinned. Leo stared at it.

"Does your mum know?" June asked.

Leo's jaw moved. He kept his eyes on the mug. "She doesn't ask."

June watched his hands. They had gone steady again but only because he held the mug tight.

"You came back here," June said. "Not to camp."

Leo nodded once.

"All right," June said. "Eat the toast."

He picked it up and ate without looking up. He chewed fast, then slowed when the dry caught in his mouth. He took a small sip of tea and went on.

"He said if anyone found out," Leo said, "he'd go to prison. He said Mum would lose the house. He said I'd end up in care." He swallowed. "He said it was my fault anyway because I made him go out that night."

June set her elbows on her knees and kept her voice even. "Did he hurt you?"

Leo's shoulders lifted and dropped. "He didn't hit me. He stands in the doorway. He doesn't let me past. He talks until I say yes."

"Did he take your phone?" June asked.

Leo nodded. "At the hotel. He said it needed charging and then he kept it. He keeps it. He checks the Wi-Fi. He changes the password. He says it's because of security."

Leo glanced at the door again. He had done it three times while he spoke. June counted it without writing anything down.

"I believe you," June said. "I'm not putting you in a room alone with him."

Leo's head tipped, the smallest movement. He looked at her, then away.

"Are you going to call the police?" he asked.

June did not answer at once. She stood, took the mug, and set it on the table to pour more from the small pot she had brought in a thermos.

"Tea first, then the problem."

His mouth twitched, not a smile. He took the refilled mug back.

June sat again. "I need more than your word because people talk over boys your age. I'll look for something that doesn't argue back. While I do that, you stay where I know you are."

Leo nodded. He rubbed his thumb along the mug handle.

June went to the kitchen. She checked the gate app, not just the icon this time. She tapped Open. From the glass she saw the panels start to move. The motor sounded and then the short beep came. She tapped Close at once. The panels slid back. Another beep.

She watched the icon change to closed and held the phone steady. The app showed local control. That did not stop a person with another login.

She put the phone down and went to the key bowl by the front. She sorted the keys by touch, quick, then slower. The set for the house doors. A fob. A brass key that did not match the modern locks. She took the brass key and tried it on the side gate by the bins. It did not fit. She tried the small lock on the garden store. It did not turn there either.

Back inside, she checked the utility for a garage door switch. There was a button with a light. She pressed it. Nothing. The internal door to the garage had a simple lock. No key hung on the hook beside it. The cupboard by the mops held cleaning bottles, spare sponges, light bulbs in a box. No keys.

June washed her hands at the small sink and dried them on the towel she had folded last night. She called Elena. Voicemail. She listened to the message tone and ended the call before the beep. She scrolled to Maureen and stopped. Not yet.

She went back to the staff room and set two bananas and a sealed yoghurt on the dresser. "There's food here. I'm going to look for a safe adult if we need one."

"My aunt," Leo said. "Dad's sister. Manchester. I don't have her number."

"Because of the phone," June said.

Leo looked at the blanket and gave one quick nod.

June stepped out and checked the study drawer where people sometimes kept manuals. Nothing for the car. No dashcam box. In the kitchen, the folder with appliance guides sat in a neat stack. Nothing else.

On the island, the Street Drinks card lay where she had left it. Thursday 7 pm. She picked it up and slid it under the corner of the WELCOME sheet, then brought it out again and set it back on top. She read the names once more and put it down in the same spot.

She returned to Leo. "Rule. You don't leave this corridor without telling me."

He nodded. "What if he comes back?"

"I'll keep you out of sight first," June said. "Then I'll decide about the police."

She opened the utility door and pointed to the narrow run behind the pantry. "This is the back way. He forgets rooms like this. If you hear steps in the hall, go in there. Close the door and wait."

Leo stood and walked to the doorway. He took in the line of hooks, the washer, the cupboard that hid the meters. He looked along the corridor to the pantry door. He nodded again.

"Do you think the cyclist is dead?" he asked.

June kept her eyes on his face. "I don't know. I won't guess."

He breathed out and looked at the floor.

"If he calls," June said, "you don't answer. You don't speak."

"I can do that," Leo said. He said it like he was used to not being the one who spoke.

June went back to the kitchen and made a tray with rolls, apples, packets of crisps, bottles of water. She put it on the counter in the utility, easy to reach without walking into the main space. She checked the chair she had used last night to break the sightline, then left it where it was.

When she returned to the staff room, Leo had the blanket pulled up to his waist. He had eaten one banana and left the skin folded tidy on the plate.

"There's something," he said without looking up. "From the car. From that night. I saved it."

June kept her voice steady. "What kind of something?"

"On my console," Leo said. "In my account. It's backed up. If he takes the console, it's still there."

June let that sit. "All right. We'll get to it when you can manage it."

She checked the time on her phone. The day had started and would not slow down for them. She looked at the small bed and at the chair in the corner.

"We'll rest in turns tonight," she said. "I'll sit first. You sleep. Then we'll swap if you wake."

Leo pulled the blanket higher and nodded.

"One more thing," June said. She waited until he looked at her. "I won't send you back upstairs to him. Not today."

Leo's fingers eased on the edge of the blanket. He nodded again, once, and his eyes went to the door and back to her.

"I'll tell you everything," he said. "When I can say it without shaking."

"All right," June said. "We'll keep to the small things until they're not small."

She stood in the doorway for a moment and listened to the house. The hum of the fridge. The soft tick of the hot water system. No car on the

drive. No beep at the gate. She stayed there until her breathing matched the ordinary sounds, then moved back into the kitchen to start looking for what would not argue back.

# Chapter 5

## The Phone Call

June stood at the kitchen island with her phone in her hand and did not unlock it.

The morning light was the wrong sort for this house. It came in grey through the glass, and the garden beyond looked wet and dark even though it was late October and meant to be getting on. The under-cabinet strip was still on because she had left it on, and the strip light made a bright line across the worktop that made everything look arranged.

The fruit bowl sat where it always sat, the three lemons and the lime turned with their clean sides out. June did not touch them.

From the corridor, from behind the pantry door and then the utility door and then the staff bedroom door, she could hear nothing from Leo. That did not mean he was asleep. It meant he was doing what she had told him.

June put the phone down, face up, and watched it for a moment.

If she rang the police she would have to say the basics, and she did not have them in a tidy shape.

A fifteen-year-old boy was in the house. He was the owners' son. He had been hiding in the loft.

They would ask where he was and whether he was safe, and whether his parents knew. They would ask why she had not rung sooner.

June could manage one lie. She had found she could do that. She did not want to build a structure out of it.

She lifted the phone again and, this time, unlocked it.

Her thumb hovered where the call button would be.

Her mouth went dry.

She tried to draft what she would say without moving her lips.

Hello. My name is June Hargreaves. I'm house-sitting for the Millers in Oakhaven and I need advice.

No, I'm not the family.

Yes, I have keys.

Yes, he is here.

No, I can't give you his parents' permission.

No, I don't know if he is safe because safe did not mean anything simple, not when his father was the danger.

She pressed her lips together.

There was also the question she did not want to say out loud at all.

Is he injured.

June had seen scraped knuckles, cracked lips, the hollow look that came from days eating whatever he could manage. She had not seen bruises on his face. She had not seen him flinch away from a raised hand, not yet, but she had seen him watch doorways and keep his shoulders tight, ready.

June's thumb stayed still.

She could ring and say: I found him. He's here. You need to come.

And then the police would come to the gate.

The gate was not hers.

She pictured the officers at the end of the spur, in rain and hi-vis, facing a shut gate. She pictured the camera box on the post. She pictured Simon's phone lighting up on the other side of Europe, a call from a number he did not recognise.

June locked her phone and put it down again.

At the sink, she turned the tap on, then off again without running water. Her hands rested on the counter edge as her eyes went to the WELCOME sheet.

WELCOME JUNE.

The letters were bold enough to look friendly. The rules underneath were not.

She did not need to read them again.

No visitors.

Perimeter armed.

Use the app.

Do not disarm.

She thought, briefly, about tea.

Tea first, then the problem.

She filled the kettle because the act of filling it stopped her staring at the phone.

The kettle had barely begun when the landline rang.

It rang once and then again, loud in the open-plan space, a hard sound that bounced off glass and tile.

June froze with the kettle still in her hand.

The third ring came.

She set the kettle down, picked up the receiver, and answered without checking the display.

"Hello?"

"June." Simon's voice came through clean, as if he was calling from his study rather than from another country. There was a slight delay, enough to notice, not enough to make him sound distant. "It's Simon. Are

you all right?"

June's throat tightened. She kept her voice level.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Good." He breathed out once, slow, and she listened for any wobble or rush.

There wasn't one.

"I've just had a call," Simon said. "From the camp. Leo hasn't arrived. They say he never arrived."

June's fingers tightened round the receiver.

The camp had reported Leo missing; the story no longer held. It was no longer private.

June swallowed.

"Right," she said.

There was a pause. June could hear faint background noise on his end, the kind of sound you got in an airport lounge or a hotel lobby: voices kept low, footsteps, something being wheeled over hard flooring.

"Have you seen him?" Simon asked.

June looked, without meaning to, toward the corridor that led to the staff area.

The chair she had placed to break the sightline still sat in the hall, angled wrong, a domestic obstruction that would have looked careless in a house like this.

She focused back on the receiver.

"No," she said. She kept it plain. She did not add anything. Not yet.

Another pause.

"You're certain?" Simon asked.

June did not like the question. It left you either looking stupid or looking like you were lying.

"I haven't seen him," she said.

A small silence on the line. Then Simon spoke again, and the tone stayed the same.

"All right." He said it as if they were agreeing on a paint colour. "Have you noticed anything unusual? Any doors open? Windows?"

Her fingers went cold on the receiver.

He was not asking where his son was in a rush, not asking her to go room to room. He was measuring what she had noticed.

June kept her voice as neutral as she could.

"Nothing's been forced," she said.

"I didn't ask that," Simon replied. He did not raise his voice. He did not sound annoyed. He sounded patient.

June's mouth went dry.

"The alarm," Simon said. "Any beeps? Any notifications?"

June held the receiver tighter.

The cloakroom event log flashed in her mind. 01:46. Cloakroom Door Open/Close.

The wet footprint, the towel beside it.

The cereal bowl.

The lime turned.

The missing blazer.

She heard Leo's voice from yesterday, flat and tired: He would.

June kept her answer narrow.

"The perimeter's been armed," she said. "The app shows it."

"And you haven't changed any settings?" Simon asked.

"No," June said.

"Good." There was another breath, and then his voice shifted slightly, the same calm, but now more precise. "June, you understand that this is a safeguarding situation. People will ask questions. People will look for someone to blame."

June's grip tightened.

"I'm trying to get a handle on what's happened," Simon said. "So I need you to tell me if you've seen anything. Anything at all. A bag. A coat. Food out of place."

June stared at the fruit bowl. The lime sat with its stalk end pointing outward.

"The house is in order," June said.

She heard, in the silence after her words, the risk she had taken. If Simon came back and found one thing out of place, he would have that sentence ready.

Simon did not challenge it.

"Right," he said. "And you've not let anyone in."

"No," June said.

"No neighbours. No deliveries."

"No," June said.

"Fine." His voice stayed even. "Have you called the police?"

June's eyes went to the phone on the island.

"Have you?" she asked.

"I'll handle it," Simon said.

June's heart hit harder.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean I'll handle it," Simon said. "I'm going to make some calls."

June heard another faint sound on his end, a voice saying something in a language she did not know. He answered it with a short word, then returned to her without apology.

"I'm flying back," he said. "Client emergency."

June did not answer at once. That was not the tone of a client emergency.

"If anyone comes to the door," he said, "do not engage. Do you understand?"

June kept her eyes open and her voice flat.

"Yes," she said.

"And do not disarm the perimeter," Simon added.

June did not respond quickly enough, because her brain caught on the word perimeter and pictured Leo moving through the house.

"June," Simon said.

"Yes," she said.

"Good."

The line went dead.

June did not put the receiver down at once.

She listened to the hum behind the silence: the underfloor system's faint ticking, the refrigerator motor starting and then settling. She listened to nothing else.

Her hand stayed on the receiver until the plastic warmed slightly against her palm.

She put it back in the cradle.

Her throat hurt.

After a few seconds she walked to the staff corridor, not fast, not slow.

She tapped the staff bedroom door with two knuckles.

"Leo," she said quietly.

A pause.

"Yeah," he said, close to the door.

June kept her voice low.

"It was your dad," she said.

The door did not move. Leo did not open it. June heard his breathing change.

"What did he say?" Leo asked.

"He asked if I'd seen you," June said. "He said the camp rang. They say you never arrived."

A quiet sound, not a word.

"He's coming back," June said.

Leo's voice came thin.

"When?"

June's stomach turned again. She had no answer. Not a good one.

"Soon," she said.

There was a brief thud inside the room, like he had sat down too hard on the bed.

"He can't," Leo said. "He can't just..."

"He can," June said. "He's already on it."

She took a breath.

"Stay there," she said. "Don't come out."

"I'm not," Leo said. His voice carried panic now, and it was not loud, but it was immediate. "I'm not going anywhere."

June kept her hand on the door for a second.

"I'm going to ring the police," she said, and the words did not sound true when she said them. She did not let herself stop there. "No. I'm going to try and get you out first."

The pause after that was short.

"Out where?" Leo asked.

June stepped back from the door.

"Through the gate," she said. "We get down the spur and into the street and we get seen by the right person. That's better than you being here when he arrives."

"He'll stop it," Leo said at once.

June did not argue.

"Maybe," she said. "But we try. Within the hour. We try before he gets here."

She heard Leo swallow.

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

June walked back into the kitchen. Her hands went to familiar tasks because she needed to keep moving.

She fetched her waterproof from the hook in the utility and checked the pockets. Tissues, a linty receipt, her own keys from her flat, useless here.

A bottle of water came off the tray she had set up in the utility. She put it in her coat pocket.

The hall clock clicked twice.

June went to the staff bedroom and pushed the door open just enough to see Leo.

"It's me," she said.

Leo sat on the bed with the blanket still around his waist. He had put his trainers on without tying them properly. The laces lay loose, and one end trailed over the side of the bed.

June's throat tightened at the sight of that loose lace.

"Shoes," June said.

Leo looked down, then up.

"I did," he said.

"Tie them," June said.

He stared at her, eyes wide in his tired face, then bent down and began tying them, hands moving too fast.

June watched his hands and kept her voice steady.

"We do this once," she said. "We go quiet. We go quick. If it doesn't work, we come straight back and you do exactly what you've been doing. You hear me?"

Leo nodded without looking up.

"Yeah," he said.

June lifted her own trainers from beside the bed and put them on, tied them tight.

She checked her phone, then put it in her jeans pocket. She checked the gate fob on the key ring and closed her fingers round it.

In the corridor she stood still and listened.

No voices outside.

No footsteps upstairs.

No beep from the alarm panel.

June went back to the staff corridor door and opened it.

Leo stepped out in his trainers, moving on his toes to keep them quiet.

June nodded once.

"This way," she said.

They moved along the service corridor behind the pantry first, the route Simon forgot, the narrow passage with cupboards and utility doors that did not show off the house.

June kept her eyes on the ceiling corners where sensors sat, small and white against pale walls.

She walked at a normal pace, not creeping.

She listened for a warning beep.

Nothing.

Leo followed close behind, his steps quiet on tile.

At the end of the corridor they reached the open-plan area.

Leo stopped.

The space was too bright and too exposed, even in the grey morning, with glass walls and reflections that made it hard to tell what was inside and what was outside.

His eyes went to the terrace door, then to the kitchen island, then to the front hall.

June did not grab him. She stepped half in front of him.

"Stay behind the island," she said. "Keep low."

Leo's face tightened.

"There's cameras," he said.

"There's a camera at the gate," June said. "Inside, it's sensors. Don't wave. Don't run."

Leo's mouth opened and shut again.

June chose the route that kept him out of the straight lines.

They moved behind the kitchen cabinetry, close to the counters, using the island as cover from the glass and from any view through the terrace door.

June glanced through the glass toward the drive.

No car.

No taxi.

No person by the gate.

The wet gravel looked dark and empty.

They had a window. It might be ten minutes. It might be two.

June reached the hall and stopped at the front door.

Her hand went to the handle as she listened.

She listened for Penelope's loud keyring on pavement.

She listened for voices on the street.

She listened for the sound of a van door sliding shut.

Nothing.

June opened the door.

Cold air came in, damp and clean and sharp.

"Now," she said.

She stepped out first, pulling the door mostly shut behind her, not latching it fully yet.

Leo followed, in his trainers.

June did not like that. She did not have time to argue again.

They moved across the small front area toward the gate post.

June kept her posture normal. She did not hunch. She did not look around too fast.

She pressed the gate fob.

Nothing happened.

No motor.

No beep.

The gate panels did not move.

On the post, the camera's red LED stayed steady.

June pressed it again, harder.

Still nothing.

Leo made a small sound behind her, a sharp intake, and the sound turned into a word.

"No," he said.

June looked at the gate. She watched the join between the panels and the post. She watched the camera box.

The gate stayed shut.

She pressed the fob again.

No beep. No motor. The gate stayed shut.

She took her phone out and opened the gate app. The icon still showed closed. She tapped Open. No beep. Nothing moved.

June's stomach turned over.

Leo's breathing sped up.

"He's done it," Leo said. "He's locked it. He's..."

"Inside," June said.

Leo stepped back, looking toward the street, toward the older brick houses, toward any person who might appear.

June reached back and took his sleeve, not yanking, just guiding.

"Inside," she repeated.

Leo's eyes were too wide. His face looked grey under the outdoor light.

"I can't," he said.

"You can," June said. "Because you have to."

She pulled him back toward the door.

From somewhere on the street came a distant car door shutting. Not on the drive. Not close.

June shoved the front door open and pushed Leo through the gap before anyone could see his face.

She followed and shut the door.

This time she turned the lock.

The click sounded loud to her.

Leo stared at the door.

June kept her hand on the key for a second, then took it out and put it in her pocket.

They stood in the hall with their coats damp at the cuffs and their breath slightly faster.

June listened for the alarm beep.

Nothing.

She listened for the gate motor starting at last.

Nothing.

Leo's shoulders shook once.

June did not tell him to calm down.

"Back," June said. "Same way."

Leo nodded once, hard.

They moved back through the house, using the island again, the back corridor again, the service route again.

June's mind kept returning to the gate.

The fob had worked yesterday. She had heard the beep. She had heard the motor.

Now there had been nothing.

By the time they reached the staff corridor again, June had it clear: with the gate locked and no panel beep, there was no way out.

It was still morning. The light outside was still grey.

June shut the utility door behind them and slid the latch across.

Leo stood in the corridor, breath quick.

"Tie them properly," June said.

Leo sat on the edge of the bed in the staff room and retied the laces with shaking hands. He tied them properly this time.

June stood in the doorway and watched him.

The lie she had told sat dry in her mouth.

No, I haven't seen him.

She had seen him.

She had just tried to take him out through a gate his father had disabled from abroad.

June shut the door to the staff room until it latched.

She did not lock it.

Back in the kitchen, she moved the chair in the hall a fraction more into the sightline, then checked her phone.

No missed calls.

No messages.

The screen reflected the kitchen lights and her own face, plain and still.

June put the phone down and stood with her hands on the counter.

Simon had called.

Simon was coming.

And the gate had not opened.

June looked at the WELCOME sheet and did not touch it.

On the counter, beside it, the Street Drinks card sat where it had always sat.

Thursday 7pm.

Names.

People who noticed things.

June did not make a plan yet.

She poured the water from the kettle down the sink, slowly, because she needed to do something quiet.

When the kettle was empty, she set it back on its base.

She dried her hands on a tea towel.

Then she went back toward the staff corridor, listening for footsteps upstairs that did not come.

Inside the small staff room, a boy waited in his own house while his father flew back.

June kept her voice low through the door.

"Leo," she said.

"Yeah," he answered.

"We're staying inside," she said.

There was a pause.

"He's going to come straight here," Leo said.

June rested her forehead against the doorframe for a second.

"Yes," she said. "And we're going to be ready."

She did not say what ready meant.

Not yet.

# Chapter 6

## The Lockdown

The phone sat on the kitchen counter where June had left it, and it would have been easy to pretend it was a settings issue.

She picked it up anyway.

The app took a moment to load on the house Wi-Fi, so she turned Wi-Fi off and watched the signal change. She had already done this for the manual link, and the fact that she was doing it again, with a boy hidden behind a pantry wall, made her want to throw the phone into the sink.

She did not.

The gate icon showed CLOSED. A small padlock symbol sat beside it.

June stood at the glass and looked out at the wet gravel and the shut panels.

She pressed Open.

Nothing moved. There was no beep, no motor sound, no pause before a delayed response. The panels stayed flush against the post.

June waited until impatience could not be blamed.

She pressed Close, because it had been her mistake before to assume buttons only did what they said.

The app showed a brief spinning circle and then returned to CLOSED.

She put the phone down, took the fob off the key ring, and walked to the front door.

In the hall, the chair she had moved still sat at a slight angle. It looked wrong in this house, where everything sat square and deliberate. She did not fix it yet.

She opened the front door a crack and let damp air in.

The gate post stood at the end of the drive with its camera box and its intercom plate. The small red LED remained lit.

June pressed the fob.

She kept her eyes on the join between the panels and listened for the first mechanical click.

Nothing.

She shut the front door and locked it, because that click at least came from her hand.

Leo waited in the staff corridor behind the pantry. She could picture him without looking. He would be standing, shoulders up, eyes on the door line, trying not to move.

June walked back through the open-plan kitchen without letting her pace show urgency. The under-cabinet strip light still made a bright line across the worktop. The fruit bowl sat in its place with the lime turned the way she had seen it this morning.

She did not touch it.

She went instead to the WELCOME sheet and slid it toward her.

The QR code sat in one corner. The heading looked cheerful from a distance; close up, the rules were strict.

No visitors. Do not disarm perimeter. Use the app.

There was a line further down about the gate system and intercom. She had skimmed it on day one and forgotten it because she had a fob and a working app.

She followed it now.

The digital manual link loaded slowly, then opened into a plain page with headings. Gate. Intercom. Support.

A phone number sat under it.

June called.

It rang twice, and for a moment she pictured an actual person in an office, someone who would say, Yes, sometimes the module needs resetting, have you tried turning it off and on again, and she would be able to do that because she had keys.

A recorded voice answered.

“Thank you for calling Oakhaven Access Systems. Our office hours are Monday to Friday, eight-thirty to five. If this is an emergency...”

June waited for the emergency option.

“...please email support@...”

The voice carried on, then returned to the start.

June ended the call.

She stared at the screen, waiting for it to change.

Behind her, through the pantry wall, there was no sound.

June turned and walked into the corridor that ran behind the pantry and utility. She opened the pantry-side door, stepped in, and closed it behind her.

Leo stood with his trainers still on, laces tied too tight now. His hands were at his sides, but his fingers flexed and curled.

June kept her voice low.

“It’s not the app,” she said.

Leo blinked.

“What?”

“It’s not me pressing it wrong,” June said. “It’s not a dead battery. It’s not the Wi-Fi. It’s not the fob.”

Leo’s mouth opened and shut.

“He’s locked it,” he said.

June nodded once. “Yes.”

Leo took a step toward the pantry door and stopped.

“Then we break something,” he said. His voice came out thin and too quick. “We go out the back. We, there’s glass. You can,”

June held up her hand, palm out, not dramatic, just clear.

“No,” she said.

Leo stared at her, waiting.

“Why not?”

“Because if you cut yourself on a window,” June said, “you’ll bleed on the tiles and you’ll leave a trail and you’ll slow down. If you climb out and fall, you’ll break something that doesn’t heal in a day. And if we smash a door, he comes in angry, and you’re still here.”

Leo’s jaw set.

“He can’t keep us here,” he said.

June kept her voice even. “He can for long enough.”

Leo’s eyes flicked toward the utility end of the corridor, toward the door that led into the rest of the house.

“What about the side gate?” he asked.

June had already thought of it. There were only so many ideas.

She opened the pantry-side door again and led the way back into the kitchen. Leo stayed a step behind her, close enough that she could have reached back and caught his sleeve, but she did not touch him.

She went through the utility and out to the side path.

The path ran between the house and the fence line toward the bins. Damp leaves stuck to the paving. The fence panels were clean and new, no gaps.

The side gate sat at the end with its lock and a neat handle. June had tried the older key there before, and it had not turned.

She tried the handle anyway.

It did not move.

She tried the lock with the key ring key that looked as if it belonged to outside doors.

It did not fit.

She tried the older brass key.

It slid in but did not turn.

June pulled it out and looked at it in her palm. It was an ordinary key, slightly dulled, the kind you might keep in a drawer because you were not sure what it did and you didn't want to throw it away.

Leo made a small sound behind her.

"So that's it," he said.

June turned back toward him.

"It's not just the gate," she said. "It's the whole perimeter."

Leo's eyes went to the fence top and then to the side of the house.

"We could climb," he said.

June followed his gaze. The fence was high and smooth. The top edge had no easy grip. Even if he got over, he would drop into a neighbour's garden, and then what. Wet grass, a stranger's patio, a dog, a camera.

"You're fifteen," June said. "You'll go over and you'll land hard and you'll swear. Or you'll get stuck and shout. Or you'll make it and someone will see you and ring your dad. We don't do that."

Leo's shoulders rose and fell. His face had gone pale in a way that showed the tiredness under it.

June walked him back inside.

In the kitchen, the house looked the way it always did: arranged, wiped, labelled, bright. It was the sort of place where things looked normal unless someone had left a mess in the open.

June set the key ring down by the bowl near the entry and looked at the collection of keys and tags.

"I keep thinking I've got access," she said.

Leo stared at the floor.

June heard her own words again and corrected them.

"I've got the keys," she said. "But the keys aren't the control. Not really."

Leo's head lifted.

"He can do it from his phone," he said.

June nodded. "Yes."

She remembered Simon's voice on the landline, even, patient, asking about alarm beeps, asking about settings. He had not been panicked. He had been measuring.

June's throat tightened at the memory.

She picked up the keys and moved them back into the bowl, not because it mattered, but because leaving them scattered would have been a concession.

She turned to Leo.

"We stop trying the doors," she said.

Leo's eyes widened. "So what do we do?"

June looked through the glass at the wet drive and the shut gate.

“We stay inside,” she said. “And we stay where you can’t be seen.”

Leo’s mouth tightened.

June did not soften it.

She walked him back toward the service corridor behind the pantry.

The house was full of sightlines. From the terrace you could see into the kitchen. From the kitchen you could see into the hall. From the hall you could see down the corridor toward the utility door, if the chair was not there.

The corridor behind the pantry was different. It was narrow and dull. It had doors that opened onto storage and utilities and spaces made for staff movement, not for showing off.

June stopped and looked up and down it.

“This is the only place you can move,” she said.

Leo glanced along it and then back at her.

“It’s like being back in the loft,” he said.

June kept her voice steady. “It’s not the loft. You can stand up. You can drink water without it dripping onto insulation. You can use the loo if we plan it.”

Leo swallowed.

June looked at his feet.

“Take your shoes off,” she said.

Leo blinked. “What?”

“Socks,” June said. “No trainers on tile. Too loud.”

He hesitated, then bent down and untied them. His fingers shook, and he swore once under his breath when a lace snagged.

June did not comment. She waited.

Leo slid his trainers off and held them.

“Where do I put them?” he asked.

June opened a cupboard door inside the service corridor and pointed to a low shelf behind cleaning supplies.

“Back there,” she said. “Not where you’ll trip on them.”

He put them in, carefully.

June watched him straighten.

She led him to the pantry-side door and closed it.

The click sounded small, but June’s breath caught.

Hiding was the plan now.

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June carried the blankets one at a time, folded tight against her chest. She chose the thinner blanket first, because it would be less visible if she had to carry it through the open-plan space, and then a thicker throw from the staff room. She added two bottles of water and a stack of packaged food: crisps, a couple of cereal bars, the plain rolls in their sealed bag.

She did not take anything that needed plates.

She laid everything in the service corridor on the utility counter where it could be reached without stepping out into the main space.

Leo stood close to the pantry door with his back to the wall. In socks, he looked younger. The trainers had added height and a shape that read as teenager. Socks on tile made him look like a boy who had been told to stay quiet in someone else’s house.

June stopped on that thought and returned to the practical.

“This isn’t a den,” she said.

Leo looked at her.

“It’s a shelter,” she said. “You eat when I say you can. You drink water even if you don’t feel thirsty. And you tell me if you need the loo. No surprises.”

Leo nodded once.

June walked the length of the corridor again, checking it with new eyes.

The corridor had always been a back route to her: cupboards, a door to the plant room, the utility, the staff bedroom. She had thought of it as a way to avoid being seen. Now she needed to know what else it did.

Halfway along, there was a tall panel door that looked like a utility cupboard. June opened it.

Inside were meters and cables arranged with the same neatness as the pantry. A laminated sheet sat on a clip. “Do not touch” in capital letters.

June touched only the edge of the panel.

At the back, behind the meter box, she saw a second, narrower door line. It was the kind you missed because you didn’t expect a door inside a cupboard inside a corridor.

A small latch sat at knee height.

June crouched and looked closer.

There was a handle on the other side of the narrow line, or the shape of one, and a strip of rubber seal. The air back there carried a faint rubber smell.

Leo stepped closer.

“What’s that?” he whispered.

June held up a finger.

“No whispering,” she said, not angry, just sharp. “Not unless I ask you something.”

Leo's mouth shut.

June stood again and closed the utility cupboard.

She did not open the second door. She did not try the latch.

But she had seen it, and that was enough to add it to the list in her head.

A route, a connection. Something near the garage, perhaps, because that end of the house backed onto the garage block.

She went back to Leo.

"One rule," she said. "You speak only if I ask you something direct."

Leo frowned.

"What if," he started.

June raised her hand again.

"I asked you something," she said. "Do you understand the rule?"

Leo nodded. "Yes."

"Good," June said. "Sound carries. This place is glass and hard floors. You can hear the landline ring from the other end of the house. You can hear the kettle switch off in the corridor. So we keep your voice for when it matters."

Leo's eyes flicked toward the pantry door.

"Can he see us?" he asked.

June's jaw set.

"Cameras," Leo added. "He's got cameras."

June shook her head once.

"There's one at the gate," she said. "And there's the doorbell. Inside, I've not seen cameras."

Leo watched her face for hesitation.

June kept it plain.

She walked into the open-plan space and looked, properly, not just with a quick scan.

Corners. Shelves. The television. The smoke alarm. The white sensor units that sat where Simon had wanted them, small and clean.

She did not see a lens.

She checked the study doorway and the hall.

Nothing.

Back in the corridor, she kept her voice low.

“I can’t promise there isn’t something hidden,” she said. “But I’ve not seen it. And this house is too neat. If he had cameras in here, he’d have them where he can show them off.”

Leo’s shoulders dropped a fraction.

It was a small relief. It was not safety.

June opened the pantry-side door.

“Watch,” she said.

She stepped through into the pantry, then back, showing him how it worked, how the door could be opened without a bang if you held the handle and guided it.

Leo watched her hands.

“If I tell you pantry,” June said, “you go into the pantry. Not the kitchen. Not the hall. Pantry.”

Leo nodded.

June waited.

“Say it,” she said.

“Pantry,” Leo said.

“Good,” June said. “Now you do it once.”

Leo stepped forward, opened the door with care, slid into the pantry, and came back out.

June nodded again.

“One rehearsal,” she said. “Not ten. We don’t make it a routine. You just know it.”

Leo leaned back against the wall.

June watched his face.

“What did you save?” she asked.

Leo’s eyes moved to the floor and then back up.

“The dashcam,” he said.

He held his breath for a second, then let it out.

June’s fingers went cold.

Leo kept his voice level, as if he had practised saying it without his throat closing.

“It uploads,” he said. “If you save it. I saved it to my account. Cloud. He can take stuff, but it’s there.”

June nodded slowly.

“Can you show me?” she asked.

Leo’s mouth tightened.

“Not right now,” he said.

June did not push.

“Later,” she said. “When it’s safe. When we’ve got time and we’re not listening for tyres on gravel.”

Leo nodded.

June stepped out of the corridor and stood still in the kitchen.

She listened.

There was the hum of the fridge. A faint tick from the underfloor system. Rain against the glass.

No gate beep.

No car.

She waited in short bursts, checking for the gate sound between each.

June went to the key bowl again.

The older key lay among the newer ones, out of place. She had already tried it outside and got nowhere. She had put it back because it had seemed like the sort of thing that would lead her into wasting time.

Time was all she had now, and she did not like how that sat in her hands.

She picked it up.

The key was heavier than the others. It had no tag.

She walked to the internal door that led into the garage from the house side, the one she had found locked and keyless.

Earlier, she had pressed the lit utility button and got nothing. She had stood in front of this same door and been stopped by it.

Now she slid the key into the lock.

It went in smoothly.

June turned it.

The lock turned. That gave her another route.

June froze with her hand on the key.

She did not open the door. Not yet.

Someone, at some point, had expected staff to come through here. Someone had wanted there to be a way that did not rely on the app.

June took the key back out and held it in her palm.

She returned to the service corridor.

Leo looked at her as she came in.

June closed her hand around the key.

“I’ve got one thing,” she said.

Leo’s eyes went to her fist.

June did not show him yet.

She slipped the key into her jeans pocket.

“You stay here,” she said.

Leo nodded.

June left him there with the blankets folded and the water in a row.

The house remained bright and too orderly around her.

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June opened the front door and stepped out onto the drive with her shoulders square, not because she felt brave, but because she did not want to look like someone sneaking around.

The gate panels remained shut. The camera LED remained lit.

She stood where anyone walking past the end of the spur could see a person in the drive.

A few minutes passed.

Then she heard a familiar, clattering sound: keys on a loud ring.

Penelope Gable appeared beyond the gate, on the street side, in a clean coat with her tote bag hooked over her arm. She slowed when she saw June.

“Ah,” Penelope called. Her voice carried. “You’re still there.”

June walked toward the gate but stopped short of it.

“Yes,” she said.

Penelope came closer, right up to the bars, and peered through the narrow gap.

“Are they back?” she asked.

“No,” June said.

Penelope’s lipstick made her mouth look sharper when she frowned.

“Then why are you on the drive?”

June kept her hands visible, not because Penelope would accuse her of anything, but because she needed her own body to stay calm.

“I wanted to check something,” June said.

Penelope leaned in.

“Well?” she said.

June did not say Leo. She did not say the gate doesn’t open. She did not say Simon is flying back.

She chose a smaller truth.

“There’s something in the garage,” she said. “A car issue. It’s... it doesn’t look right.”

Penelope’s eyes widened.

“A car issue,” she repeated. “What kind of car issue?”

June shook her head once.

“I’m not saying more at the gate,” she said.

Penelope’s gaze flicked to the camera box.

“Oh,” she said. Her tone shifted. “Yes. Fair enough.”

Then, because Penelope could not help herself, she carried on.

“It’ll be burglars,” she said. “Or it’ll be a lover. They’re always having someone over. Not that you’d know, you’re not here to mind their marriage.”

June pressed her tongue to her teeth and let it go.

Penelope watched her face.

“Or,” Penelope continued, “it’ll be one of those young lads with their balaclavas. They come in, they have a look round, they take a car. Not that Simon would let them. He’s got all this.” She waved her hand toward the gate, the camera, the sleek panels.

June said nothing.

Penelope filled the gap.

“Or,” she said, “it’ll be Elena. She’ll have clipped something. She drives too fast down the spur.”

June kept her expression plain.

Penelope’s eyes narrowed.

“You haven’t rung the police, have you?” she asked.

June gave a small shake of her head.

“Not yet,” she said.

Penelope sucked in a breath.

“Good,” she said. “You don’t ring the police in this street unless you know what you’re ringing them for. You get questions. People talk.”

June looked at her.

“Yes,” she said.

Penelope smiled, pleased to be understood.

June leaned closer to the bars.

“I might need you later,” she said.

Penelope’s eyebrows lifted.

“Need me for what?”

June kept it practical.

“If I text you,” she said, “can you come over?”

Penelope did not hesitate.

“Of course,” she said. “Any time. You’ve got my number?”

“I don’t,” June said.

Penelope looked offended, then rummaged in her coat pocket and produced her phone.

She tapped quickly.

“Give me yours,” she said.

June recited her number.

Penelope saved it under a name, then showed June the screen.

JUNE H. HOUSE.

June resisted the urge to correct it.

Penelope’s attention slid sideways, away from June, to the road.

“I did hear something,” she said, lowering her voice without lowering it enough. “Sirens the other night. People are on edge. Everyone’s got a theory. They’re saying a cyclist was hit near the airport road.”

June kept her face still.

Penelope nodded, enjoying the chance to pass it on.

“Well, you know what it’s like,” she said. “One noise and then everyone’s an expert. I’m just saying, people talk.”

June’s throat felt tight.

She nodded once.

“All right,” she said.

Penelope’s mouth turned up.

“So,” she said, “text me. I’ll be ready. I’m in all day. I’ve got the shopping delivery between two and four, but they’re always late anyway.”

June said, “Thank you.”

Penelope looked pleased by the gratitude. It made June’s skin crawl, because Penelope thought she was being included in drama, not in danger.

June stepped back.

“I’d better go,” she said.

Penelope nodded, then lifted her chin.

“And don’t open up for anyone you don’t know,” she said. “You hear?”

June’s mouth tightened.

“Yes,” she said.

She walked back up the drive and into the house.

She locked the door behind her.

The click sounded loud in the hall.

She turned and saw Leo through the pantry-side door window panel, a pale face set back from the glass.

He had heard something.

June went into the service corridor and closed the pantry door behind her.

Leo’s shoulders were tight.

“Voices,” he said, and stopped, remembering the rule.

June nodded.

“Stay quiet,” she said. “Stay back.”

Leo took a step further into the corridor without arguing.

June went back into the kitchen and picked up the Street Drinks note card.

Thursday 7 pm.

A list of names. A checklist that assumed crisps and olives mattered.

June ran her thumb along the edge of the card.

She had thought of cancelling it before. She had thought of how easy it would be to say the Millers were away and she was under instructions.

Now she thought of Simon in the house alone with Leo, of doorways, of quiet threats, of a boy trained to go silent.

June put the card down.

She would not cancel.

She took her phone out and texted Maureen.

“If I don’t answer later, call me.”

She stared at the message before sending it, then sent it.

She did not add anything else.

She put the phone back in her pocket.

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June walked through the house as if she was checking for leaks.

She started in the hall, then the living area, then the corridor that led to the stairs. She kept her steps ordinary.

If Simon came in and found her crouched behind furniture, he would know at once that she had been hiding something. If he found her wiping down a counter, he would still know, but he would have to prove it.

June looked at the stairs.

Leo's room was upstairs. It was the obvious place for a father to start, because it was a place where he could say, See, I'm looking, I'm trying.

The loft hatch sat in the corridor near the plant room, and June remembered the way Leo had appeared from a gap in insulation with a face that looked half-lit and thirsty.

The garage door was downstairs, behind an internal lock.

If Simon searched, he would start upstairs in Leo's room, then the loft, then the locked garage door.

June went into the kitchen.

There was a mug on the counter that Leo had held. June had washed it already, but now she looked at the cupboard it belonged in, at the line of identical mugs, and slid it into place so the handles matched.

She checked the sink for any stray crumbs.

She wiped the utility counter where she had put the packaged food and then moved the food into the corridor again, out of sight.

She picked up the bottle of water Leo had drunk from earlier and checked the cap.

She could not leave it in the staff corridor where Simon might see it, and she could not throw it away because the bin system here was arranged in clean categories and Simon would notice extra plastic.

June rinsed it, dried it, and put it back among the other sealed bottles.

Her hands moved without shaking, but she wiped her palms on her jeans every time she had to make something look normal.

She went to the staff corridor door and looked at it from the hall.

The chair still broke the sightline. It looked careless in a way that made June's skin prickle.

She shifted it, just a fraction, so it still blocked the view but did not look like someone had shoved it in a hurry.

Then she opened the staff corridor door and checked the light level.

She lowered it.

She shut the door again until it latched.

No slam. No click that sounded like panic.

June went into the corridor behind the pantry.

Leo sat on the floor now with his knees drawn up. The blankets were folded beside him. He looked like he had tried standing and found it made the waiting worse.

June crouched, not beside him, but near enough to speak quietly.

"Where will he look?" she asked.

Leo's eyes flicked to her and then to the pantry door.

"The loft," he said, barely audible.

June held her gaze.

"Why?" she asked.

Leo swallowed.

"It's... he uses it," he said. "It's his project space. He goes up there."

June kept her face still.

Simon had built a house with hidden routes and controlled access.

"He'll look where he spends time," June said.

Leo nodded once.

June stood.

“When he comes in,” she said, “I act like I believe the camp story.”

Leo’s mouth tightened.

June raised a hand.

“It’s not because I believe it,” she said. “It’s because if I argue with him straight away, he shuts it down. He controls the room. If I let him perform the search, I get to watch what he does. I get to see what he checks first.”

Leo stared at her.

“He’ll know,” he said.

June kept her voice flat.

“He already thinks he knows everything,” she said.

She left Leo there and went back into the kitchen.

She made tea first, then dealt with the rest.

It was not comfort. It was a tool.

She filled the kettle and set it on its base.

She took out two mugs and set them on the counter with space between them. She put a small plate of biscuits out, because biscuits were quiet and did not require knives.

She placed the tea caddy where she could reach it.

Everything looked as it should: a working woman in a rich house, getting on with it.

A sound came from outside.

Not the gate motor. Not the beep.

A vehicle on the private spur.

June’s hands stopped.

She stood still with the tea caddy in her fingers.

The sound passed, then faded toward the street, not the gate.

June did not move for long enough that her arm began to ache.

She heard nothing else.

No door. No footsteps.

She let her breath out and took her phone.

She texted Penelope.

“He’s coming back today. Keep your phone on.”

She stared at it and sent it.

Then she walked back into the corridor and opened the pantry door.

Leo looked up fast.

June kept her voice low.

“No moving unless I say,” she told him. “Not for a sound outside, not for my phone. Only when I tell you.”

Leo swallowed and nodded once.

June shut the pantry door.

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June sat on the edge of the staff bed for the first time since the morning and let her hands rest on her thighs.

The small room smelled faintly of laundry powder and the damp waterproof she had hung on the back of the door.

She felt the pull of her old habit: to wait, to keep tidy, to let it pass. She sat with it for a second, then got up.

June looked at the window and the narrow strip of grey sky.

It would not pass. Not without someone paying for it.

She stood again.

She pictured Simon's voice on the landline, calm and even, using the word safeguarding in that same tone.

He had not asked if Leo was hurt. He had not asked what Leo had said. He had asked about settings. He had asked about logs.

He wanted time.

He wanted silence.

June took her phone out and checked the battery.

It was not low, but she had been leaving it on counters as if it was part of the kitchen.

She slid it into her jeans pocket and felt its weight there.

She listened.

No gate sound.

No footsteps upstairs.

No car at the drive.

Only the hum and tick.

June went back into the kitchen.

She took the older key out of her pocket.

She looked at it for a moment.

She did not put it back in the key bowl.

Instead she opened the tea caddy, lifted the tin, and set the key beside it where it would look like something dropped while making tea.

June did not like how easily the cover story came.

She shut the tea caddy.

Her phone buzzed once.

A message from Penelope.

“OOH. OK. Shall I tell the others? We’re doing Thursday aren’t we? I’ll put it on the group.”

June stared at the screen.

The group.

Of course there was a group.

June had avoided group chats her whole life when she could. Too many people typing at once, and too much room for misreading.

But she needed it now.

She typed back.

“Yes. Keep Thursday. Don’t make it sound urgent. Just normal.”

Penelope responded almost immediately.

“Already done. You’re in now.”

A notification appeared: Penelope had added June to Street Drinks.

June exhaled through her nose and swallowed it.

She opened the thread.

Names she did not know appeared with profile pictures of dogs, gardens, wedding shots. Messages about crisps, wine, who had spare folding chairs.

June typed.

“Hi all. I’m June, looking after the Millers’ house while they’re away. Thursday still on as per the note. Just checking what people are bringing so I don’t double up. I can do crisps and soft drinks.”

She read it twice before sending.

It sounded normal. It sounded like someone doing a job.

She sent it.

Replies came in.

“Hi June! I’ll bring olives.”

“I can bring wine.”

“Hope Simon’s all ok.”

June did not answer the last one.

She put the phone back in her pocket and stood still by the island.

This was the cost.

People would talk about the Millers even if June did nothing. People would talk about June too if she put herself in the middle.

Her reputation was built on short recommendations and polite texts. One bad report could undo years of them.

June could cope with gossip. She had lived through it before. She had lived through being called difficult and dramatic because she had asked for her wages on time.

She was less sure she could cope with standing in this kitchen while a boy got dragged back upstairs.

A car door slammed outside; the noise carried into the kitchen.

June stood by the island, facing the hall, so fast her chair scraped the tile.

She froze, listening.

She set herself to the next five minutes.

Her phone pressed against her hip in her pocket.

The tea things sat on the counter, ready.

June turned her head toward the hall and the front door and waited for the next sound to tell her what she had to do first.

# Chapter 7

## The Return

June had just stepped away from the living-area window when she filled the kettle again, not because she needed another drink but because a full kettle made the kitchen look as it usually did. She stood at the island with the tea caddy open, the older key lying beside it among the tea things. Her phone sat in her jeans pocket, warm against her hip.

A sound came from outside that wasn't part of the usual house noise. Tyres on the gravel of the spur, slower than a neighbour's car, then the pause while the driver waited for the gate motor.

June did not rush to the glass. She moved at her usual pace and stopped by the living-area window where the angle gave her a sightline down the drive.

A taxi sat at the gate post. Its headlights lit the wet bars. The red LED on the camera stayed steady.

The rear door opened and Simon Miller got out.

He carried only his phone.

He spoke briefly to the driver through the open window. The phone stayed in his hand as he looked down at it, thumb moving once, then again.

A beep sounded at the gate. The motor followed, a low whine through the rain, and the LED shifted from red to green. The bars slid back into the hedge line.

Simon shut the taxi door and walked through the opening. He slowed near the corner before turning to the front door. His coat was

unbuttoned. Rain speckled his shoulders. He looked up once, straight at the house.

June stepped back from the glass. She checked the position of the chair in the hall that broke the sightline into the staff corridor. It was still where she'd left it, casual enough to pass as careless.

She went to the hall and stood where she could see the front door and still keep her body between it and the kitchen. The floor under her trainers felt colder than it had earlier.

Keys rattled at the lock. The door opened without the pause of someone trying the wrong key first.

The alarm panel chirped once.

Simon came in with his phone still in his hand. His thumb tapped the screen; the chirp cut off.

"June." His voice came out loud. "Thank God. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said.

He shut the door and turned the lock. His hand stayed on it for a beat.

"Have you seen Leo?" he asked, still loud.

June looked at his face. His hair had been cut recently, the same neat line at the nape. His eyes scanned past her shoulder into the open-plan space.

"No," she said. Her tongue stuck to her teeth before the word came. "I haven't seen him."

His mouth tightened, then he nodded once, quick and final.

"Right." He kept standing in the hall. He didn't hang his coat or check his shoes. "Has anyone come to the house?"

"No," June said.

"Anyone knocked?"

“No.”

“Any neighbours?”

June kept her face flat. “No.”

He held her gaze for too long for it to be concern. His eyes went to her hands, then to her pockets.

“Okay,” he said carefully, and paused.

He walked past her toward the stairs.

June followed at a sensible distance. It kept her in his sight without pressing close.

On the first step he turned his head.

“Have you spoken to anyone?” he asked.

“No,” June said.

“Not even Penelope?” His lips formed the name neatly.

June kept her tone neutral. “I haven’t spoken to anyone.”

He nodded again, satisfied and not satisfied at the same time.

Upstairs, he went straight to Leo’s room. The door opened. He stepped inside without taking his coat off and without switching on the main light. The curtains were half-drawn from Leo’s last attempt at privacy. Simon shoved them open with one hand and looked out at the wet garden.

June stayed in the doorway.

“Where are his devices?” Simon asked, not looking at her.

June did not answer that. It wasn’t hers to know.

He opened one drawer, then another. In the wardrobe, he pushed hangers aside and checked behind them, fingers finding the gaps between shirts. When he came out again, his eyes were sharp.

“Tea?” June offered, because it was what she did and because it gave her something to hold.

Simon shook his head once.

“No time.” He walked past her and down the stairs.

June followed.

In the kitchen, the under-cabinet strip light made a bright line along the counter. The biscuits sat on a plate. Two mugs waited. The older key lay beside the tea caddy.

Simon saw it.

He didn’t pick it up, but his gaze rested there briefly, then moved away.

He ran a hand over the edge of the island, not cleaning, just checking the smoothness. He sat on the stool nearest the hall, the one that gave him the clearest view of the front door and the corridor.

He exhaled, then looked up.

“Actually,” he said. “Tea. Yes.”

June did not react too fast.

“All right,” she said.

She filled the kettle. The water level had dropped from her earlier top-up. She watched Simon’s face in the glass of the microwave door while she did it, because he watched her in the open space with no need for reflections.

“Talk me through yesterday,” he said.

June set two mugs out again. She put tea bags in.

“I arrived in the afternoon,” she said. “You and your wife left by taxi. I shut the gate. I did the walk-through. I ate the leftovers you labelled.”

Simon’s eyes stayed on her hands.

“And last night?” he asked.

“I slept,” June said. “I did one check of doors and windows before bed, as per the instructions. The alarm was set. I didn’t change anything.”

“And this morning?”

June poured water, steady.

“I got up,” she said. “I made tea. I cleaned up after myself. I stayed in. I didn’t let anyone in. I haven’t been out.”

The kettle clicked off. June made the tea.

Simon watched her take the mugs and set one in front of him.

He didn’t touch it.

“You didn’t hear anything?” he asked.

June set her mug down and leaned a hip against the counter, close enough to reach the sink if she needed to, not close enough to look like she was edging away.

“There was one alarm beep when I checked the back door handle on the first day,” she said. “I stopped. I didn’t disarm anything.”

His eyes narrowed. “Back door?”

“I tested it,” June said. “A quick check. It beeped, and I left it.”

Simon’s mouth shifted. His jaw tightened and released.

“Anything else,” he said. “Any notifications.”

June chose her words. “Minor ones. A door sensor logged in the panel history. The cloakroom door opened and shut in the night.”

He sat very still.

June kept her hands on the counter where he could see them.

“And you didn’t ring me,” he said.

“You told me to call if there was trouble,” June said.

“And you decided there wasn’t trouble.”

June did not answer that. She said, “I didn’t see anyone.”

Simon lifted the mug then and took a sip, slow.

“Right,” he said.

He set the mug down carefully, centred on the coaster.

“Do you understand how this would sound?” he asked.

June’s throat tightened. She kept her voice plain. “A missing boy.”

Simon’s lips pressed together. “A missing boy in a house with a sitter who didn’t call anyone and didn’t speak to neighbours and didn’t write anything down.”

Heat rose in June’s face. She kept her hands still.

“I wrote down what I saw,” she said.

Simon looked at her sharply.

June added, “For my own record. Nothing official.”

He nodded once, tidy, and June’s grip on the counter tightened; she kept her face still.

“Good,” he said. “Good. Because if this goes past the house, people will ask what you did. They will ask what I did. They will ask what Elena did. They will ask why I hired you.”

June held his gaze.

He went on, voice still shaped to sound reasonable.

“So,” he said. “No talking to the neighbours. Not yet. If they hear it like this, they’ll start their little group chat theories and then it spreads.”

June’s fingers pressed into the edge of the counter.

“All right,” she said.

Simon watched her for a second longer, then stood.

“I’m going to look again,” he said. “Upstairs. Loft. Everywhere.”

He walked out of the kitchen and toward the stairs still wearing his coat.

June stayed by the island and listened to his steps on the wood.

Behind the pantry, Leo would be sitting in socks with his knees drawn up, waiting for the point where his father stopped speaking loud.

June kept her face calm until the sound of Simon’s footsteps moved out of the ground-floor space.

Then she picked up her mug, because she needed something in her hands that did not show.

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Simon’s footsteps moved overhead in quick runs, not the careful pace of someone trying to hear a boy in a cupboard. June stood at the bottom of the stairs with her mug, listening, because it was safer than following too close and easier to explain than hovering by the pantry door.

A drawer opened upstairs. Another. Something soft hit the floor and stayed there.

June waited until the sounds shifted along the landing before she went up.

The upstairs corridor smelled of clean paint and whatever plug-in Elena liked. The motion sensor clicked; the lights came on as she reached the top.

Simon was in Leo’s room again. The wardrobe doors were open now. A rucksack lay on the bed, unzipped. Simon’s hands moved through it fast, not searching for a jumper, searching for something small. He pulled out a pencil case and shook it once. Pencils clattered inside.

June stayed in the doorway.

“Do you want me to,” she began.

“Just stay there,” Simon said.

He opened the desk drawers and looked at the back corners, fingers going straight to the places people used to hide things.

June watched his hands.

He checked the bedside table, then the space under it, then the drawers. He did not look at the pillow. He did not lift the duvet.

He moved to the chest of drawers and opened each one. Socks, folded T-shirts, a stack of school papers. He flicked through the papers, eyes scanning headings.

“Has his school contacted you?” Simon asked.

“No,” June said.

“Nothing at all.”

“No,” June repeated.

He closed the last drawer too hard. The runners rattled.

He stepped back and looked round the room, then looked again.

“Did you notice anything moved?” he asked.

June kept her words narrow. “A cupboard door downstairs was open one morning. That was all.”

Simon’s gaze snapped to her.

“What cupboard?”

“A kitchen cupboard,” she said. “I shut it. I took a photo.”

“Right,” he said. “Right. Of course you did.”

He left the room. June moved back to let him pass. He didn’t brush her, but he passed close enough that she caught the cold smell of rain on his coat.

He went along the corridor toward the plant room and the loft hatch.

June followed.

The loft hatch was flush with the ceiling panel. The step stool June had used earlier had been folded and put away.

Simon stopped beneath the hatch and stared up.

He reached up and ran his fingertips along the edge, checking the fit. His thumb tracked the seam until it found a spot that sat a fraction proud.

“It’s closed,” he said.

“It is,” June replied.

Simon looked at her.

“Have you been up there?”

“No,” June said.

“You haven’t opened it. You haven’t looked.”

“No.”

His jaw tightened. He pressed the recessed pull and let the hatch drop a few inches, just enough to see the dark gap above. He didn’t climb. He didn’t fetch a stool. He held it and looked up.

He shut it again with a controlled push.

The latch clicked.

June watched his face. His eyes stayed on the latch, not the gap above.

Simon walked back down the corridor.

“Did you hear anything in the night?” he asked.

“There were noises,” June said. “The house makes noises. The underfloor system ticks. There was that door sensor log.”

“And footsteps.”

“I can’t say footsteps,” June said. “I didn’t see anyone.”

Simon held her gaze for a second.

He walked on, down the stairs.

June followed, keeping the space between them.

Downstairs, Simon moved through the open-plan area with short turns. At the back door, he tried the handle and touched the door contact with his thumb, eyes flicking to the alarm panel LEDs in the hall. From there he went to the side door and did the same check, then crossed to the front door.

“Everything locked,” he said.

June said nothing.

“We’ll keep this between us,” he said. “No neighbours. No calls. We’ll find him.”

He didn’t say police.

He still hadn’t said police.

Simon walked toward the hall chair that blocked the sightline into the staff corridor. He stopped, eyes on the gap. His gaze slid over the chair legs and the sliver beyond. He leaned a fraction, then straightened.

June’s grip on the mug tightened.

“Garage next,” he said, and walked back to the kitchen.

June’s lungs eased and then tightened again.

He sat at the island again.

“Stay here,” he said. “Talk it through with me.”

June nodded.

“All right,” she said.

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Simon stayed at the island. The open-plan space meant there were no corners to retreat into without being obvious.

June took a packet of ham from the fridge, then put it back. Butter came out next, then went back too.

Simon watched her.

“Sit down,” he said.

“There’s a lot to do,” she said.

“There’s nothing you can do by walking around,” Simon replied. He nodded to the stool opposite him. “Sit.”

June shut the fridge and sat.

Simon put his phone face down on the counter.

“How long have you been doing this?” he asked.

“House-sitting?” June said.

“Yes,” he said. “This. Being in other people’s homes.”

“A few years,” June said.

“And before that?”

“Cleaning,” she said.

Simon nodded.

“Any trouble,” he asked, “on any of your sits?”

“No,” June said.

“Never,” he said.

“Nothing serious,” she said.

“It’s an odd week for you to have your first,” he said.

“It’s an odd week for your son to go missing,” June said.

Simon’s lips twitched.

“The gates are on Holiday Mode,” he said.

He turned his phone so the screen faced him. The gate app was open; a padlock icon sat over the controls, and the words HOLIDAY MODE showed at the top. He tapped once anyway. Nothing changed.

“It keeps everything inside the perimeter,” he went on. “It stops opportunists.”

“You left me here,” June said. “If you’re worried about your son, why would you lock the gates and keep the perimeter locked?”

“For safety,” he said.

“And you don’t want anyone else wandering onto the property either,” June said.

Simon smiled without changing his eyes.

“Has Leo contacted you?” he asked.

June swallowed.

“No,” she said.

“No messages,” he said. “No note. No phone call.”

“No,” June said.

“If I have to,” Simon said, “I’ll search every cupboard and drawer.”

June pictured cupboard doors yanked open and Leo dragged out.

“What do you want me to do,” she asked, “right now?”

“Keep doing what you were doing,” he said. “Food. Tea. As usual.”

“Do you want something to eat?” June asked.

“Yes,” Simon said.

June stood and made sandwiches, neat and practical.

“Where’s Elena?” June asked.

“She’s dealing with things,” Simon said.

June set the plate on the island.

Simon picked up his phone, tapped something, then put it down.

His eyes went to the mugs, then to the plate, then back to June. He glanced at the clock on the oven, checked his screen again, and set the phone down with its edge aligned to the grout line in the worktop.

She could move between the sink and the fridge, and he could see every step.

“You’ll stay close,” he said. “No more wandering.”

“All right,” June said.

She ran water at the sink.

Her thumb pressed against the outline of her phone through her pocket. If Penelope came, Simon would keep his voice down.

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He checked his phone, then went upstairs again.

“I’m going to make calls,” he said.

His voice carried from the stairs, loud enough to be heard downstairs.

June moved to the pantry.

She opened the door with care, stepped inside, and went straight to the inner door.

Leo sat where she’d left him.

“It’s me,” June said.

He looked past her toward the pantry door.

“Can you hear him?” June asked.

Leo nodded.

“What’s he going to do next?” June asked.

“Garage,” Leo whispered.

“Why do you think that?”

“He always checks his stuff,” Leo said. “He checks his car.”

A sound came from the stairs.

June stood.

“Pantry,” she said.

She slipped back through and shut the corridor door.

She heard Simon’s shoes on the bottom step.

She pulled the pantry door shut faster than she meant to. The door sat a fraction off its frame.

Simon came into the kitchen.

He looked at the pantry door.

“It doesn’t sit right,” he said.

“It sticks sometimes,” June said. “Ventilation. The seal jams.” She picked up the tea towel and wiped the counter once, slow.

Simon reached out and pressed the door until it clicked into place.

“There,” he said.

“I’ll check outside,” Simon said. “Garden, terrace, fence line.”

“All right,” June said.

He went out through the rear door.

The panel chirped again as it registered the opening.

June pulled her phone from her pocket and typed one line to Penelope.

“If you see a taxi outside mine, come over.”

A door opened somewhere toward the garage end. A heavier click followed.

June's hands stopped over the counter.

She listened.

If the garage door motor started, it would mean he was moving the car.

If it stayed quiet, it would mean he was looking.

Either way, he was about to touch the car.

A low vibration came through the tiles under her feet, faint and steady, then eased back.

# Chapter 8

## The Garage

The vibration came up through the tiles and into June's feet, faint and steady, the sort of thing she'd normally notice only because a glass in the draining rack started a small rattle. The glass did not move. The rack stayed firm. She noticed it anyway.

She stood at the kitchen counter with the tea towel in her hands, and kept wiping a patch of worktop that had already been wiped.

Simon had said garden, terrace, fence line. He had gone out through the rear door. The alarm panel chirped when it registered the opening and went quiet again when he tapped his phone. June had watched him through the glass for long enough to see that he didn't take the path along the terrace, didn't pause by the fence, didn't look for a broken panel or a shoe mark on wet stone. His head went straight towards the garage end.

A door had opened somewhere in that direction, heavier than the pantry and not the back door. Then the vibration.

June moved to the edge of the open-plan space without rushing, because rushing was a signal. Glass on two sides and the oven door reflected her; no corner to hide a face. She stopped where she could look out without putting her face in the glass.

Beyond the sliding doors the terrace looked slick with rain. The lawn beyond it was too neat, no football nets, no toys left out. The garden lights were already on, small circles on wet stone. A figure moved at the side of the house.

Simon was not walking the line of the fence.

He stood at the garage door.

June did not know, from this distance, whether it was a separate door inset into the garage or the main panel itself. She saw him lean towards the wall where the control would be, shoulder slightly forward, then the panel rose with a motor sound that carried through the spur gravel and into the house. The sound dulled indoors. She heard it anyway.

He did not step aside to look in for a boy behind bikes.

He stepped in and turned his body.

From where June stood she had a view into the garage that lasted two seconds and then became a view of Simon's back.

He blocked it. Not with a fuss, not with a dramatic move, just a careful placement of his feet. He held the opening with his body, head angled toward the interior, and made small turns as he checked the space. There was no one.

June kept her hands on the counter edge, tea towel folded between them, and watched.

Inside the garage was too dark for detail at this distance, but it was not empty. The shape of a car was parked inside, higher than a hatchback, with a rear light catching on the wet in the opening. A plastic storage shelf stood along one wall. A bike wheel hung near the ceiling.

At the front of the car there was something pale draped over a section that didn't match the rest. It was not a dust sheet over a whole vehicle. It covered only the front corner, and it had been tucked in along a seam.

June watched Simon reach for it.

He pulled the fabric back, only a little.

His head dipped as he looked. The movement was measured.

He held the fabric in his hand, then replaced it. Not thrown back. Put back.

The fold lines matched. He was checking for disturbance.

June had cleaned enough kitchens and stripped enough beds to know the difference between a person trying to tidy and a person trying to leave no trace of their hands.

Simon stepped closer to the driver side of the car. He opened the door and leaned in. He did not sit. His arm moved towards the glovebox area and the light inside the cabin came on briefly, a warm rectangle in the garage gloom. He came back out with something small in his hand.

It might have been a key. It might have been a phone. It might have been a memory stick for a presentation, because he was that kind of man and kept that sort of thing close.

He shut the car door with care.

Then he paused at the threshold of the garage and turned his head towards the house.

It was not a slow look. It was a scan. A habit.

June stepped back from the glass so quickly she felt the cold tile shift under her trainers. She moved until she could no longer see the garage opening at all and stood beside the tall cabinet that held the microwave, her face angled toward the oven clock.

She listened.

The garage door motor sounded again as the panel lowered. The vibration through the floor came back, then stopped.

Footsteps on the terrace. The rear door opened and the panel chirped. Simon came into the open-plan space, rain on his hair and the shoulders of his coat. He did not look at June at first. He looked through the house, checking what was where.

June picked up the tea towel and shook it once, a motion that said nothing. She folded it, slow.

Simon went to the kitchen island and placed his phone down near his mug, face down. His eyes flicked to June's pocket where the outline of her phone pressed against the fabric.

"Right," he said. "So."

"Do you want another tea?" June asked.

"No," he said, then changed it immediately. "Actually, yes. Make one."

June turned to the kettle. She did not like the way it gave her something to do with her back to him, but she needed the movement to look normal.

She filled the kettle from the cold tap. Water ran and stopped.

"Did you check outside at all?" June asked, in her practical tone.

"Of course," Simon said.

He had not.

The kettle began to heat.

June thought of the fabric in the garage. A cover on a front end. A choice.

She did not go to the key bowl in the hall. She did not go near it with Simon in the open-plan space watching her hands.

She glanced at the tea caddy. The older key still lay beside it. She did not touch it yet.

Simon stood and walked towards the hall, then stopped. He looked up the stairs, then at June.

"I need to get changed," he said, in the tone used for a schedule.

"All right," June said.

He went up. His shoes made a firm sound on the first two steps and a softer one as the stair carpet began.

June waited until he was halfway up before she moved.

Not running. Not sneaking. Just a shift in pace, the pace she used when she'd forgotten bin liners.

The kettle clicked off.

June poured boiling water into a mug, stirred, and left it to draw. She did not carry it upstairs. It stayed on the counter, untouched.

Upstairs, a door shut. A drawer slid.

June set her mug down without drinking.

She wiped her palms on her jeans and moved.

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Upstairs, water ran, steady, then changed pitch as it hit a shower tray.

June crossed to the counter by the tea caddy and closed her fingers around the older key. Brass. Worn. Cooler than the worktop. It slid into her pocket, and the weight pressed against her thigh.

The door to the internal garage access was at the far end of the corridor near the utility, plain and white, matching the other service doors, with a handle that didn't match the ones in the open-plan space. June had noticed it on the first day and forgotten it because Simon had told her what to look at and what not to touch.

Now she stood in front of it with the older key in her hand.

She kept her ear tuned to the house. Water still ran upstairs. No footsteps on the stairs.

The key slid into the lock smoothly. It turned with a soft, even motion that made her jaw tighten.

She opened the door.

The garage air smelled of rubber and damp. Cold concrete. A trace of petrol that didn't belong in an electric village where everything was meant to look clean.

June stepped inside and pulled the door nearly closed behind her, leaving it on the latch not the lock. A quick exit mattered.

The garage lights were on. She did not touch the switch. The light stayed exactly as Simon had left it.

The SUV was parked inside: dark, angled rather than square to the door, the front end tucked into the shadowed corner where shelving and stored items broke the lines. If the main garage door rose and someone stood at the threshold, the first thing they'd see was the rear and side. The front would be hidden by the stack of boxes.

It was a choice.

Keeping clear of shelves and the bin, June walked towards the front without touching anything else. Her trainers made a quiet scrape on the concrete, a different sound to tile, and she tracked it in her head, in case she needed to match it on the way back.

A fabric lay over the front bumper. It wasn't a tailored car cover. It was a piece of cloth, pale, possibly a decorator's dust sheet or an old towel. It had been folded along the edge of the grille and tucked under.

June looked at it for two seconds, then reached.

She pulled it back.

The damage was there. Not a scratch. A break in the plastic. A section of bumper pushed in and split, with a bracket beneath bent so it sat at an angle.

The smear across the edge was dark and thick. It had dried in ridges where the cloth had pressed against it and lifted away. Dirt dried flat and dusty. This had dried glossy in parts, with a brownness at the edge.

June did not touch it. She did not need to.

Her stomach turned before she finished thinking the word blood.

June took her phone from her pocket.

She held it low, screen turned down, and woke it with her thumb. She had already turned off most notifications. The screen still lit. In the garage, it looked too bright.

She opened the camera and raised the phone, keeping her elbows close so she could move fast if the internal door opened.

One photo. The full bumper section with the cloth pulled back.

Another photo closer on the split and the smear.

A third of the bracket and the underside where paint had transferred, a pale streak against dark plastic. It looked like it had come off something light-coloured.

Her framing was not neat. She did not care.

A dull scrape showed on one corner, and beside it a fleck of paint, pale, caught in a crack. Not decorative. Not a scuff from a parking post. Transfer.

June moved her phone again and took another image.

The bracket under the bumper was bent. Metal that should have lain flat now angled.

June let the cloth fall back into place for a moment, then pulled it back again with her fingertips at a clean edge, keeping her touch away from the smear.

Her eyes went to the driver side.

Simon had leaned into the car. Opened the glovebox. Taken something.

June did not open the car door. The interior light was linked to the door, and she didn't know what else was tied to it.

Backing away from the bumper, she looked around the garage.

The storage shelf held paint tins, folded tarpaulin, a box of bulbs. A broom leaned against the wall. A helmet hung from a hook. All placed with space between items.

A black bin stood near the shelf, lid open. Not the main house bin. A garage one.

At the bin, June looked down.

Inside were bits of packaging, a torn envelope, and something that caught the light in sharp edges.

Phone fragments.

A screen broken into small pieces. A corner of casing. A battery pack half exposed. A SIM tray on its own.

June stared at it for a beat too long.

Leo had said Simon took his phone at the hotel. Leo had said he kept it, controlled it.

June looked at the fragments and her mouth dried. This had not been sudden. He had broken it and binned it.

A door sound came from the house side.

June froze with her hand still hovering over the bin edge.

She heard the shower upstairs and the hum of the garage light. No footsteps came into the corridor. The sound could have been a cupboard, or a bedroom door, or the shower screen.

She stayed still anyway.

Then the sounds shifted upstairs: a tap turning, the water pressure changing. The shower still ran.

June exhaled through her nose, slow.

She took one photo of the smashed phone parts in the bin, quick and not neat.

Then she shut the camera app.

The cloth had been pulled back; it needed to look the way Simon had left it.

June lifted the fabric and laid it back over the bumper, matching the fold lines she'd seen. She tucked the edge in where it had been tucked, making sure the corner lay the same.

Her hands moved carefully, not because she wanted to be gentle with the evidence, but because she did not want to leave an obvious new crease.

She stepped back.

The front end looked covered again.

June crossed to the internal garage door and listened. The shower sound continued. No footfall on the stairs.

Her hand rested on the latch.

Upstairs, the plumbing surged and the water note shifted.

June eased the latch open on that sound, stepped into the corridor, and pulled the door to behind her until it caught. The light in the garage stayed on. She did not touch the switch.

She turned the key and locked it, then put the key back in her pocket.

She stood with her back to the door and waited for her breathing to slow.

It did not slow much.

June walked back to the kitchen at her usual pace.

The mug of tea remained on the counter where she'd left it. A skin had formed on the surface.

She did not drink it. She poured it down the sink, ran a short burst of water to wash it away, and rinsed the mug.

Her phone pressed heavy in her pocket now, not because it weighed more but because she knew what was on it.

Upstairs, the shower stopped.

\*\*\*

Simon came down a few minutes later in different clothes. The coat was gone. He wore a clean jumper and jeans. His hair looked damp and set.

June was at the sink with warm water running, washing a plate that did not need washing yet. She let her hands stay in view.

Simon stepped into the kitchen and glanced at the counter first, then at June, then at the hall.

“There you are,” he said.

June made a small noise that could count as agreement.

He walked to the island and sat on the stool he’d chosen earlier, the one with the sightline.

“I found his phone,” Simon said.

June kept her eyes on the plate.

“In the car,” Simon went on. “It’s useless now.”

He said it without pause or sympathy.

June turned the tap off and put the plate on the draining rack.

“Useless,” she repeated, and waited.

Simon did not soften it.

“Screen was smashed,” he said. “It’s done.”

June took the tea towel and dried her hands.

He wanted her to know.

Simon leaned forward and rested his forearms on the island.

“You’ve not been into the garage,” he said.

June looked at him.

“No,” she said.

Simon watched her pupils and counted a beat after she answered.

June held his gaze.

He blinked once, then smiled in a way that showed teeth but not warmth.

“Good,” he said. “Because things get said. People make things into stories. And then you’re in the middle of something you didn’t ask for.”

June kept her voice even. “I’m already in the middle.”

Simon’s smile shifted.

“You’re doing a job,” he said. “That’s all.”

June turned to the fridge, opened it, and took out the plate of sandwiches she’d made earlier. She set it on the island.

“Do you want these?” she asked.

Simon reached out and took one, bit into it, chewed slowly. He set the half-sandwich down, then picked it up again.

June did not sit. She stood by the counter with the tea towel in her hand, folded it once, then laid it flat.

“I’ll handle the school,” Simon said around the mouthful. “They log a concern and start ringing. It becomes a chain. It’s not helpful.”

June said nothing.

“And you’re not to speak to anyone,” he added, tone turning casual again. “Not the neighbours. Not your sister. Not anyone. Let me do it.”

He did not say why he needed silence. He did not need to.

June's phone pressed against her hip. Her hand stayed away from it.

Simon took another bite.

"You know how this works," he said. "Bad press ruins reputations."

June watched his mouth as he chewed the word reputations.

"Reputations," Simon repeated. "My wife. My business. Even you."

He put the sandwich down, wiped his fingers on a napkin, and glanced at June's face.

"Staff get dragged into it," he said. "People assume you knew something. They assume you did something. They assume you were negligent."

June kept her jaw still when he called her staff.

"All right," she said.

Simon nodded, satisfied with the sound of compliance even if it was only sound.

June picked up a plate and scraped the crumbs into the bin. The movement gave her a reason to turn.

"Have you contacted the police?" she asked, lightly.

Simon's eyes flicked to hers, a quick check for intent.

"We're not there yet," he said.

June nodded once.

He ate again, controlled.

June stood at the counter and watched the reflection of her own hands in the microwave door. The phone in her pocket was not visible in the reflection, but she could feel it.

Simon put the rest of the sandwich down and took his phone, turning it over in his hand. He did not open it. He did not need to. It was there as a reminder.

“Make something for later,” he said. “Something simple. If Elena comes back.”

June set the plate in the sink and ran water over it.

“Do you think she’s coming back tonight?” June asked.

Simon’s mouth tightened and released.

“She’ll do what she’s told,” he said.

June did not respond. She dried her hands again, slow.

She had photos of the bumper. She had a photo of the smashed phone parts.

Simon had just told her, without raising his voice, that he broke phones.

June pressed her palm against her pocket once, feeling the shape of her phone, then let her hand fall back to the counter.

Simon finished chewing and swallowed.

“Right,” he said. “I’m going to make calls.”

June watched him stand.

He did not go to the study. There was no study in the open-plan layout.

He went towards the stairs.

June stayed where she was, a plate in her hands, water running.

She listened to his steps until they softened on the carpet.

Then she turned the tap off.

\*\*\*

June went to the pantry door to fetch something from a shelf. Her movements stayed within routine: food, washing up, putting things away.

She opened the pantry and stepped inside. Shelves stood in neat rows with labels facing out. The cereal tub was where it always was.

June did not touch it.

She went to the inner door and opened it.

Leo sat in the corridor, knees drawn up, socks on his feet, his hoodie pulled tight. His face looked pale under the corridor light.

His eyes went to June's hands immediately.

"He's upstairs," June said quietly.

Leo nodded, a small jerk.

June shut the inner door behind her, leaving it on the latch so she could move fast.

"He smashed your phone," she said.

Leo's mouth opened slightly and then shut. His gaze held on the floor, fixed.

"It's gone," June added. "I saw it."

Leo swallowed. His throat moved.

"In the bin?" he whispered.

"In the garage bin," June said. "Pieces."

Leo stared at the corridor floor.

His hands were clasped together, fingers tight.

"Did you get proof?" he asked.

June took her phone out of her pocket and kept it low between them.

"Quick look," she said.

She opened the gallery and angled the screen towards him, keeping it out of the corridor line.

The thumbnails showed the bumper, the split, the smear, the bent bracket. She flipped to the photo of the bin with broken phone parts.

Leo leaned forward, shoulders shifting. His eyes moved fast and he licked his lips once.

“Okay,” he said, the word coming out thin.

June shut the phone screen and put it back in her pocket.

“That stays with me,” she said.

Leo nodded.

“The dashcam,” he whispered. “It’s still in my cloud. He can smash whatever he wants. It’s not on the phone.”

June kept her voice low. “You can get it from your console.”

Leo nodded again.

“If the Wi-Fi stays,” he said. “If he doesn’t cut it.”

June looked at Leo.

“We act before he thinks to,” she said.

Leo’s eyes flicked to the pantry door, then back.

“How,” he said.

June kept her words plain.

“Street Drinks,” she said.

Leo blinked. “What.”

“That note card,” June said. “Thursday. Tonight. People coming round. Penelope’s got people primed.”

Leo’s face tightened.

“Strangers,” he whispered.

“Neighbours,” June said. “People who notice things. People who’ll remember what they saw.”

Leo shook his head once.

“He’ll stop it,” he said.

“He’ll try,” June replied. “That’s why it matters.”

Leo stared at her.

June kept her face still. “He cares what they think.”

Leo’s throat moved again. “What do I do.”

June looked down the corridor, listening.

“We don’t do one big escape,” she said. “We do smaller ones.”

Leo waited.

“Penelope has a car,” June said. “She parks outside her house. If the gate opens at any point, and she’s here, you go to her car.”

Leo frowned. “Go.”

“Not now,” June said. “Only if I say. Only if you see her. Straight to the passenger door. Keep moving. Stay on the near side of the parked cars.”

Leo stared at her, breath shallow.

“And if he catches me,” he said.

June held his gaze.

“Then he catches you where people can see,” she said.

Leo’s eyes shone but did not spill.

“He can’t do what he does in private when people are watching,” June added.

Leo pressed his lips together and nodded once.

A sound came from upstairs: a footfall, then another. Not a run, a change of place. Simon moving.

June lifted a finger.

“Back from the pantry door,” she whispered.

Leo shifted further into the corridor, tucking his feet under him.

June listened. The footfall stopped. A door clicked. A drawer slid.

June looked at Leo.

“Whatever you hear,” she said, “you don’t come to the pantry door. Not even if he calls your name. Not even if he sounds calm.”

Leo nodded, eyes fixed.

June took her phone out and adjusted settings with her thumb, turning off the kind of notifications that lit a screen.

She turned down brightness. She turned off the sound.

Her hands moved fast and then stopped.

She put the phone back in her pocket and felt for the older key there too, the cold metal.

“Tea first,” June said, keeping her voice steady, “then the problem.”

Leo looked at her. One corner of his mouth lifted, then flattened.

“There’s no tea,” he whispered.

“There’s tea,” June said.

She stepped back through the pantry and closed the inner door.

In the pantry she took two items from a shelf she did not need: a packet of biscuits and a box of crisps. It made her return to the kitchen make sense.

She opened the pantry door and walked out.

The kitchen was empty. Simon was upstairs. The open-plan space looked the same as it had ten minutes earlier.

June set the biscuits and crisps on the counter near the Street Drinks card. She nudged the card so it lay square.

She rinsed a mug and set it on the draining rack, then took three clean glasses from the cupboard and placed them by the card.

She aligned the card with the counter edge and checked the oven clock.

Her fingers closed around the older key in her pocket, confirming it was there, then she let it go.

June wiped the counter again, slower this time, keeping her hands busy and her ears open for the stairs.

# Chapter 9

## The Standoff

Rain tapped the glass. June kept her hands in the sink and worked at a plate that was already clean.

Simon stood at the wine rack by the wall units, the one that was more display than storage. He ran a finger along the necks, checking them, then chose a bottle without looking at the label. He did not ask June if she wanted any.

June stayed by the sink with warm water and a sponge. Standing with nothing in her hands made Simon look at her face.

The cork came out clean. Simon poured himself a glass and took a mouthful standing up.

It was late enough that the garden lights had already been on for hours. The terrace outside looked wet. The gate camera's red light could not be seen from here, but June knew the position of it anyway.

“You’ve been doing this a long time, haven’t you,” Simon said.

June rinsed the plate and set it on the rack. “A few years.”

“A few years.” He repeated her words. “So you know how it works. You know what’s expected.”

June dried her hands on the tea towel and folded it once. She did not put it down. The movement kept her hands busy.

Simon walked back to the island and sat on the stool he had chosen earlier, the one that gave him a straight view of the hall and the corridor run. His wine glass sat on the surface in front of him, stem between his fingers.

June did not sit.

His gaze dropped to the bulge of her phone in her pocket. It had happened more than once already. He did not reach for it. Not yet.

“You understand,” he said, “that this isn’t just some little domestic.”

June kept her eyes on the counter. The biscuits she’d put out earlier still sat by the Street Drinks card, unopened. The clean glasses stood beside it, three in a line.

“It’s your son,” June said.

He gave a short laugh, and the sound had no warmth.

“Yes. Exactly.” He leaned forward, elbows on the island. “It’s my son. My family. And I come home and find... this. A stranger in my house. A woman I’ve paid to keep things safe, and now I’m dealing with this.”

He stopped, waiting.

June did not fill it in.

Simon took another drink. Wine on a Thursday night. The day did not matter to him in the same way it mattered to June.

“Responsibility,” he said, after a pause. “That’s the word. Everyone wants to talk about rights. No one wants to talk about responsibility. Families have responsibility to each other.”

June wiped the counter where there was no spill. “Families also have responsibility not to frighten their children.”

Simon’s jaw tightened.

“You don’t get to tell me about my family,” he said.

“All right.” June kept wiping.

His eyes stayed on her hands. “You have no idea what he’s put us through.”

Leo came to mind with his knees up in the corridor, socks on cold tile, swallowing biscuit crumbs because chewing was loud. The smashed phone pieces in the bin.

“You told me he was in Scotland,” June said.

Simon’s eyes flicked up. “That’s not the point.”

“It’s a point,” June said.

He put his glass down and centred it on the edge of a grout line, then moved it again by a fraction.

“You want to make it about me lying,” he said. “You want to make it into a moral issue. That’s easy for you. That’s the sort of thing people do when they don’t have to live with the consequences.”

June swallowed. Dryness pulled at the back of her throat, but she didn’t reach for water.

“You’ve asked me if I’ve seen him,” she said. “I haven’t.”

Simon’s stare stayed on her. “You’re still saying that.”

June flattened the tea towel along the counter edge and folded it again.

“You’ve been in this house,” Simon said. “For days. You’ve said you didn’t go out. You’ve said you didn’t let anyone in. You’ve said you heard odd things. And now you’re telling me you haven’t seen him.”

June kept her voice level. “That’s right.”

He held her gaze for a beat too long.

Heat rose to June’s face. She kept her mouth set and her shoulders square.

“And what else have you done in those days?” he asked.

June did not answer the wider question. She answered the narrow one that existed on paper.

“I’ve done the job,” she said.

His eyes dropped into his wine.

“You know,” he said quietly, “that I can make you unemployable.”

June did not move.

Simon went on, with the same careful tone he used when explaining his house systems, the same tone he used when he wanted to sound reasonable.

“I can ring the agency. I can ring whoever I need to ring. I can make it clear that you are not reliable. That you make decisions you shouldn’t make. That you don’t report issues. That you get involved.”

June’s fingers clenched on the tea towel. She opened her hand again and laid the cloth flat.

“People talk,” Simon added. “It’s a small world. These houses. These streets. The school parents. The builders. The dog walkers. The cleaners. You think you can come in and do whatever you like and then leave with your little reputation intact.”

June looked at him. “That’s what you’re worried about.”

Simon smiled with his mouth and not his eyes.

“I’m worried about my son,” he said.

June did not agree. She did not contradict him either. She kept to facts.

“You haven’t called the police,” she said.

Simon’s smile stayed. “We’ve been through this.”

June heard the way he said we. He wanted her inside his version of the story.

June kept her voice plain. “I’m not the one who’s meant to call the police.”

Simon's hand tightened on the glass stem.

"You think this is some kind of game," he said. "You think you can outsmart me. You think you can hide behind playing the servant."

June didn't answer the insult. She had cleaned too many houses where people used the word servant like a joke.

She turned back to the sink and ran the tap. Water struck stainless steel and gave them noise.

Simon watched her back.

"You don't understand what you're doing," he said.

June squeezed dish soap into the sponge and went over the pan once, enough to keep her hands moving.

The underfloor heating clicked once somewhere under the tile. A normal noise in this house.

Simon spoke again, closer.

"You saw him," he said.

June kept her eyes on the pan. "No."

"You spoke to him."

"No."

"You let him in."

"I haven't let anyone in," June said.

Simon gave a short laugh.

"You keep saying it the same way," he said. "Like you've practised."

June rinsed the pan and set it down. Her reflection sat in the microwave door: shoulders set, hands wet, face calm.

Simon took another drink of wine.

"I've been more than fair," he said.

June did not move.

“It’s my house,” Simon went on. “My son. My wife. My business. And you walk in and” He stopped and tried again, softer. “June. I’m asking you to be sensible. I’m asking you to help. And if you don’t, you’re choosing a side.”

June turned off the tap.

“Which side is that,” she asked.

Simon’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t play stupid.”

June didn’t answer. She went back to the counter and wiped around the hob.

The house had enough open sightlines that Simon could see most of what she did without following her. That meant June could see him too. She stayed in the kitchen on purpose. She did not let him draw her into the hallway or the downstairs cloakroom or the utility. Smaller rooms meant doors. Doors meant being blocked.

Simon’s phone lay on the island face down, next to his glass. His fingers touched it now and again.

“You’re aware,” he said, “that I can say you stole. I can say you went through our things. I can say you disabled the alarm. I can say you invited someone into the house. I can say whatever I need to say, and people will believe it because I’m the homeowner and you’re the hired help.”

June kept her voice even. “You can say it. It won’t make it true.”

Simon’s eyes flicked toward the glass walls, the dark garden beyond.

“You think truth is what matters,” he said. “Truth is what gets packaged. It’s what gets told. It’s what gets repeated. You don’t want to be the woman who was in my house when my son went missing.”

June wiped a mark from the splashback.

“You’re already trying to make it my fault,” she said.

Simon's mouth tightened.

"It will be," he said. "If you keep obstructing."

Obstructing. A word from planning meetings. A word that sounded clean.

June's hands slowed. She set the cloth down and straightened.

"I've told you what I've seen," she said. "I've told you what I haven't."

Simon leaned back on the stool.

"And you think that will save you," he said.

A small sound came then, very faint, from the direction of the pantry.

It could have been a floorboard settling. It could have been a fridge noise. It could have been a foot shifting on tile.

June's body went still before she chose anything.

Simon's head tipped a fraction.

Two nights ago, toast had set the smoke alarm chirping and the panel had logged it. June reached for the extractor fan switch and turned it on.

The fan made a steady, hard noise above the hob. It filled the kitchen and pushed into the open-plan space, enough to cover a small scrape.

Simon looked at her. "What's that for."

June did not look apologetic. "Cleaning."

"We're not cooking," Simon said.

"I'm cleaning," June repeated.

Simon's eyes stayed on her for too long. "Turn it off."

June kept her hand on the counter. "The oven's smoky when it's been used. It sets the alarm off if I'm not careful. I'd rather not add to your logs."

She used the word logs on purpose. He cared about logs. He cared about what the system said.

Simon's jaw tightened.

"You don't get to decide what I care about," he said.

With the extractor still running, June wiped along the edge of the hob, slow. Plain work, in plain sight.

Simon took another drink and then set the glass down harder than before.

"Right," he said. "So. We're doing this."

June looked up.

Simon's eyes had that narrowed focus again, the one that came before a demand.

June stayed where she was, in the kitchen, with the extractor fan running. She kept one shoulder angled so she could see the hallway and the stairs. She did not step back into the narrow space near the pantry.

Her hand went under the sink for the oven cleaner and a cloth. The sharp smell rose as she wet the cloth, and Simon's steps shifted closer to the cooker.

She waited.

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The oven cleaner smell was sharp. June had sprayed it onto a cloth instead of directly onto the door, so she could control where it went. If the smoke alarm went off, Simon would have another excuse to do whatever he wanted with his phone.

Simon came up behind her at the oven, too close.

June scrubbed at the corner of the oven door and kept her arm moving.

“You know where he is,” Simon said.

It was not a question. It was not spoken loudly. It came out as a flat statement.

June did not answer.

She bent slightly and wiped the lower edge of the oven door.

Simon stepped closer so that his hip was near her elbow.

“Don’t ignore me,” he said.

June kept her eyes on the glass, on the cleaner smears, on her reflection. She did not look up at him.

“Grease catches,” she said. “It smokes. You’ve got a sensitive system.”

Simon let out a breath.

“What are you doing,” he demanded.

“Cleaning,” June said.

He raised his voice then. The sound carried through the open-plan room.

“Stop it. Stop with the bloody cleaning. This is not about the oven.”

June kept scrubbing. Her shoulders stayed level.

“It is about the oven if it sets the alarm off,” she said. “And it will if I don’t do it properly.”

Simon’s breathing was audible now. June kept her movements steady and dull.

“You think you’re clever,” Simon said.

June didn’t answer.

“You think if you keep doing housework you can make me look unreasonable.”

June wiped along the hinge edge, then switched back to the first cloth without fuss.

“The cleaner needs wiping off,” she said. “Otherwise it leaves a film.”

Simon swore under his breath.

The extractor fan still ran. The noise sat over the kitchen and made it harder to hear a small movement.

Simon stepped back a half step and then leaned forward again.

“You’re hiding him,” he said.

June’s mouth stayed shut.

Simon’s hand moved, not to her, but toward the counter where her phone had been for a moment earlier when she’d checked the time.

June shifted without hurry. She slid the phone off the counter and into her pocket. Her fingers stayed steady.

Simon saw it.

He smiled, quick and sharp. “What’s on there.”

June kept wiping the oven door. “Shopping list.”

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t lie to me.”

June looked at him. Her face stayed calm.

“I’m not leaving my phone on the counter,” she said. “You keep reaching.”

Simon’s eyes narrowed. “I’m your employer.”

June’s voice stayed even. “You’re the homeowner.”

He took a step forward.

June did not step back. She stood square in front of the oven and kept one hand on the cloth.

“If you carry on,” June said, “I’ll ring Elena.”

Simon’s face changed. It was small, but June saw it. His eyes flicked up toward the landing.

“You don’t need to involve her,” he said.

June kept her voice level. “Then you don’t need to shout at me in the kitchen.”

Simon held her gaze.

“You don’t get to threaten me,” he said.

June didn’t correct him.

“It’s her house too,” June said. “She can tell me what she wants me to do.”

Simon’s mouth opened and shut again. He stepped back.

He did not apologise.

June turned back to the oven and kept wiping until the cleaner smell dulled.

Simon stayed behind her for a moment longer, breathing controlled again. Then he moved away.

June heard his footsteps cross the tile and then soften on the first stair.

She counted the steps in her head.

One. Two. Three.

He went up.

June kept the cloth moving for another ten seconds. Then she stopped.

She stood at the oven, cloth in hand, listening.

The upstairs landing had carpet. His steps there were softer. She listened for the direction of them, for the turn toward Leo's room, for the pause at the loft hatch, for the heavier step that meant he was going down toward the corridor end.

She listened for the pantry door.

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The landline did not ring.

June's phone did.

It vibrated in her pocket with a small, contained buzz because she had turned sound off earlier. She did not take it out at once. She held still and listened for movement upstairs.

Nothing.

She pulled the phone out and looked at the screen. Elena.

June's thumb hovered for a beat.

She answered.

"Hello," June said.

Elena's voice came down the line with a slight delay and a sound behind it, traffic or a television.

"What is going on," Elena said.

She did not say Leo's name.

June kept her voice low. "You rang me."

There was a pause. Elena breathed out.

"Simon said you've been... difficult," Elena said.

June's face went still.

"I'm house-sitting," June said.

Elena made a noise that could have been a laugh if it had warmth.

“I don’t need your job title,” Elena said. “I need to know whether you’ve done what you were told.”

June shifted her weight and kept her gaze on the stairs.

“What I was told,” June said, “was that Leo was in Scotland.”

Elena was quiet for a beat.

“Of course he was,” Elena said.

June’s grip on the phone tightened.

“No,” June said. “He wasn’t.”

Elena inhaled sharply.

“What do you mean he wasn’t,” Elena said.

June kept it as a fact, as she had promised herself.

“He did not go to Scotland,” June said. “He was here.”

Elena didn’t speak for a moment.

June could hear a small sound at Elena’s end, a car indicator clicking, or a finger tapping.

“You can’t possibly know that,” Elena said.

June kept her voice steady. “I know what I saw.”

Elena’s tone sharpened. “You’re a house-sitter. You’re not family. You’re not... you’re not anyone who gets to say that sentence.”

June watched the shadow line on the stairs.

“I’m saying it,” she said.

Elena’s next words came out fast, clipped.

“Simon gets like this under stress,” Elena said. “He’s been flying, he’s been dealing with things, and then he comes home and there’s a woman in our kitchen telling him what’s true and what isn’t. It’s not on.”

June cut in, still quiet. “This isn’t stress.”

Elena made a sound of irritation.

“You don’t know him,” Elena said.

June’s hand went tight on the phone again.

“I know what he’s doing,” June said.

Elena did not respond.

June kept her eyes on the stairs. Her body stayed angled toward the pantry door without turning fully.

“Elena,” June said, “Leo was in the car when your husband hit a cyclist.”

June heard her own words, flat and plain. Elena didn’t answer.

June could hear Elena breathing. The background noise stayed the same.

“I can’t talk about that,” Elena said finally.

June’s jaw tightened.

“It happened,” June said.

Elena’s voice stayed calm, in the way it stayed calm when people wanted to end a conversation.

“This is not the time,” Elena said.

June did not raise her voice. “When is the time.”

Elena did not answer.

June’s eyes lifted.

Simon was at the top of the stairs.

He stood with one hand on the rail, head slightly angled down, watching June in the kitchen. His face was still. He was not pretending not to listen.

June kept her face neutral. She did not turn away from him.

“Elena,” June said, “has Simon contacted the police.”

Elena’s voice came back quick, defensive.

“He will handle it,” Elena said.

June closed her eyes for half a second and opened them again.

“That’s what he says,” June replied.

“That’s what will happen,” Elena said.

June’s voice stayed level. “And Leo.”

Elena exhaled. “You do not get to talk to me about my son.”

June did not say sorry. “I’m talking about his safety.”

Elena’s tone hardened. “Do your job.”

June stared at Simon on the stairs. He stared back.

“All right,” June said.

She ended the call.

For a moment the phone sat in her hand, screen dark.

June’s fingers tightened around it. Her breath stayed slow.

Simon did not come down the stairs. He stayed where he was, one hand on the rail, watching.

June slid the phone back into her pocket.

Simon’s eyes tracked the movement.

“Who was that,” he called down.

June kept her voice plain. “Elena.”

“And,” Simon said.

June looked at him. “You can ask her.”

Simon’s mouth tightened.

He came down two steps and stopped.

June did not move.

“You don’t go calling my wife to stir things up,” Simon said.

June’s voice stayed level. “She called me.”

Simon’s eyes narrowed.

June looked at the glass wall to her left, the dark garden beyond. Light and movement would show through the front windows.

June took her phone out again.

She opened the Street Drinks group chat and went straight to Penelope.

She typed.

“If you hear anything about the cyclist, ring 999. Don’t wait.”

She sent it.

June put the phone back in her pocket and looked up.

Simon was still on the stairs.

His eyes were fixed on her pocket.

June stayed by the island and kept her hands on the counter edge, in view.

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Simon came down fully after that. He walked into the kitchen without looking at the counter where June had been cleaning. He had wine in his hand again.

“From now on,” he said, “you don’t leave this room.”

June blinked once. “I need to.”

“No,” Simon said. “You don’t.”

June kept her voice even. “I need cleaning supplies. I need to get the bins. I need to do laundry. I need to keep the house in order.”

Simon’s mouth tightened.

“You need to do as you’re told,” he said.

June stared at him. “If you want me to do the job, you can’t lock me into one room.”

Simon’s gaze flicked to the hallway, to the corridor run.

“I can lock internal doors,” he said.

June did not move. “You can.”

“Don’t challenge me,” he said.

June’s voice stayed practical. “I’m telling you what I need to do.”

Simon took a drink, then put the glass down.

“Go on then,” he said. “Show me.”

June did not like the way he said it.

She turned and walked toward the corridor at her normal pace.

Simon followed.

The chair June had moved earlier still sat at a slight angle in the hall, the one that interrupted the sightline into the staff corridor. Simon stepped around it and then stopped near the pantry door.

June stopped too.

She did not touch him. She stood so that the pantry door was behind her shoulder and Simon was in front of her.

Simon’s eyes narrowed.

“There,” he said.

June waited.

Simon's gaze went to the pantry handle.

"You're protecting him," he said.

June kept her voice small. "I'm doing my job."

Simon smiled, sharp. "Your job is to follow instructions."

June shook her head once. "My job is to keep the property safe."

Simon's hand moved toward the pantry handle.

June's voice lifted, louder than she had spoken all night, and a car's headlights swept across the front glass.

"Simon."

His hand stopped.

June kept her eyes on his face.

"Don't," she said.

Simon's head turned a fraction, toward the glass wall, toward the front of the house.

June stayed planted in the hallway.

Simon's fingers touched the handle, then released it.

He stepped back.

His face had not softened. He had simply made a choice about what could be seen.

June turned away before he could change his mind.

She walked down the corridor to the utility. She kept her pace steady.

In the utility room, she opened the cupboard where the cleaning sprays sat. She took a bottle of surface cleaner and a fresh cloth.

She also took a packet of biscuits.

June opened the pantry door and slipped inside.

The shelves stood in neat lines. Labels faced forward. The cereal tub sat where it always sat. June did not touch it.

She opened the inner door.

Leo sat further back than usual, pressed into the corridor space where the shelving blocked him from the doorway. His knees were drawn up. His socks looked grey at the toes from the tile.

His face was pale. His hands shook.

June held out the biscuit packet.

He took one without speaking, then looked up at her.

“Stay back,” June said quietly. “Not near the door.”

Leo nodded, quick.

June watched him chew. He chewed slowly, mouth closed.

“You heard,” he whispered.

June did not pretend otherwise. “Yes.”

Leo swallowed. “She knows.”

June kept her words plain. “She doesn’t want to.”

Leo’s eyes went wet. He rubbed his thumb across his knuckle and looked away.

June kept her voice low. “You stay back. You keep still. If you have to move, you wait for my word.”

Leo nodded.

June shut the inner door and stepped back into the pantry. She held the cloth and cleaner the way she’d brought them in.

Back in the kitchen, Simon stood by the island watching her.

June set the cleaner down and wiped the counter once, slow, keeping her shoulders relaxed.

Simon's gaze stayed on her face.

Something had shifted. She had stopped him at the pantry.

He knew it.

He could not prove why.

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It took longer than June expected for Simon to go to bed.

He stayed downstairs, moving between the island stool and the glass wall by the living area, phone in hand, wine glass in the other. He made one call and spoke quietly. June could not hear the words. He did not take it to another room.

He wanted June to see that he could call people.

June stayed near the kitchen and kept busy with the surfaces that faced the open-plan space.

Eventually Simon went upstairs.

June heard the bedroom door close.

She waited for the sound of a lock and did not hear one.

She stayed up.

The house was quieter without Simon's voice in it. The underfloor heating clicked once. The fridge hummed. The extractor fan was off now.

June checked what she could for Street Drinks.

The glasses were in the cupboard. She took out six and set them on a tray, then put the tray back on the counter behind the kettle so it would not be seen from the hallway.

She checked the crisps and olives on the shelf. She checked the soft drinks. She did not open anything.

She looked at the Street Drinks card and the list of names.

Penelope's name was there. Penelope Gable.

June's phone stayed in her pocket. She did not set it down.

She took it out only when she was tucked in close to the fridge so her body blocked the view from the hall.

She opened the chat with Penelope.

"Still on for Thurs 7pm. I'll have glasses and snacks. See you then."

She sent it.

Nothing in the message looked urgent. It read like normal.

June put the phone back into her pocket.

She went to the pantry and slipped in.

Leo looked up at her, eyes wide.

June kept her voice low. "Morning will be rough. He'll try again."

Leo did not ask who.

"And the evening," June added. "People will come."

Leo's mouth tightened. "If he lets them."

June did not promise what she could not guarantee.

"He'll care what they think," she said.

Leo looked down at his hands.

June took a tray from the pantry shelf, one that was kept for serving. She took two glasses and set them on it.

She carried it through the inner door and set it on the corridor counter near the stacked water bottles and cereal bars.

Leo watched her. "Why here?"

"So I can move fast," June said. "So you can see it happen."

Leo nodded once.

June looked at his face, then at his hands.

“Drink,” she said.

Leo reached for the water bottle, unscrewed it carefully, and drank in small swallows.

June watched him because it was something she could do without making a promise.

She shut the inner door and stood in the pantry for a moment.

The thought returned: take the phone, take the photos, take the evidence, walk out.

June pictured the gate.

The padlock icon. The fob that did nothing. The side gate that would not turn.

She could not leave.

June checked her phone’s silent setting again and kept it in her pocket.

At the kitchen table, she took out a scrap of paper and a pen.

She wrote, carefully, because her handwriting got worse when she was tired.

Penelope Gable. Number 12.

She added Oakhaven in case she needed to say it out loud on a call.

She wrote it the way she would write an address for a parcel.

When it was done, she folded the paper and put it in her pocket with the other note she had written days ago.

Leo is here. Parents lied. Car.

June did not go upstairs to sleep.

She went to the staff bedroom near the corridor. She kept her jeans on. She kept her phone in her pocket.

She lay on the bed without pulling the covers up fully. The room smelled of laundry detergent and damp wool from her waterproof drying badly on a hook.

Her eyes stayed open.

Upstairs, a floorboard creaked. A drawer slid. A tap ran for a few seconds.

June kept her breathing slow.

She listened for footsteps on the stairs.

She listened for the pantry door.

When a footfall came upstairs, she tracked it by the direction of the creak and the softer carpeted step.

Before dawn, she swung her feet to the floor and set her trainers by the bedroom door, laces loose. The gate fob and the older key went into her pocket with the paper.

# Chapter 10

## The Party Reminder

The bathroom tap upstairs ran for a short burst and then stopped.

June lay on the staff bed with her jeans on and her phone against her thigh inside her pocket. The room had a thin smell of damp from her waterproof, drying badly on its hook, and the air was cool enough that the pillowcase felt cold when she turned her face.

No footsteps came down. She heard a drawer slide, then a softer sound that could have been clothes moved from one place to another. Simon did not rush this morning. That was the first change.

Up before he could decide to come down and find her still in bed, June stood and shoved her feet into her trainers. The laces stayed loose because tying them took her eyes down for too long. After a quick wash at the utility sink, she held her gaze on her own face in the mirror above it. Plain. Awake. Nothing given.

The older brass key came out of her pocket for a check and went back in.

Kitchen lights sat on bright day mode. Beyond the glass, the wet garden looked darker by comparison.

Two mugs went on the counter. One was hers. One was the Miller one with the clean line and heavy base. Sugar stayed in the cupboard. Sugar gave people a reason to keep standing up.

Simon came down at last in a clean jumper and jeans, hair set, face shaved. He looked like someone who had slept, or who wanted other people to think he had.

Phone in hand, he glanced once around the kitchen, the island, the hallway beyond. His eyes stopped on June and did not soften.

“Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” June said.

The island stool that gave him the hall sightline scraped softly as he pulled it out. He sat as if it was his office, not his kitchen. The mug waited in front of him. He did not touch it.

“We need to be sensible today,” he said, voice level. He spoke as if last night had been a discussion about oven cleaner and not about a pantry door handle.

June kept her hands on the counter edge. Cold stone under her fingertips helped.

“All right,” she said.

A single nod, as if the word had done what he wanted.

“First thing,” he said, “we cancel this Street Drinks thing.”

June kept her eyes steady.

“It’s not appropriate,” Simon went on. “My son is missing.”

He said it neatly, with the right sorrow worked into the sentence, as if he had practised it while the shower ran.

June kept her voice neutral. “It’s on the card.”

“I know it’s on the card,” Simon said. “And we’re cancelling it.”

His gaze dipped to her hands, then to her pocket, then back to her face.

“You’ll message the group and say we’re not doing it,” he said. “Say we’re dealing with... family stuff.”

Family stuff. Another clean phrase.

June let her chin lower a fraction. “All right.”

Simon's shoulders dropped by a small amount.

June had no intention of cancelling.

Not now. Not after last night.

A full day inside the perimeter with no neighbours on the drive, no casual knocking, no eyes through glass, he would use it.

Simon tapped his phone screen without opening anything. The gesture was for her.

"I'm going to be on calls," he said. "A lot of calls."

The pause after that was deliberate.

"You stay available. Don't go wandering. If I need you, I need you."

"I've got things to do," June said, mild.

"Do them here," Simon said.

Logistics would be a lever if she gave him room. June waited a beat and asked the question she needed said out loud.

"Have you called the police?"

The stare he gave her was flat.

"Not yet," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because you don't start with the police," Simon said, and a clipped edge showed under the calm. "Not when you don't have all the facts. It turns into an overreaction. It becomes a thing. People talk."

Order of priorities, clear as print.

"He's a child," June said.

Simon's jaw tightened.

"He's fifteen," he said, as if that was the same as being safe.

From the counter June could see the pantry door and the chair in the hall that cut the view down the corridor.

A faint sound came from the pantry direction. Not a voice. Not a footstep. A small scrape, as if something had shifted against a shelf.

June didn't look.

The kettle became her reason to turn away.

"Tea," she said, and filled it at the tap.

Water ran. It covered their voices and gave her a moment with her back turned. She clicked the kettle on.

Simon watched her hands.

"You always do that," he said.

"Make tea?" June said.

"Start making tea when there's a problem," Simon said.

June set two teabags beside the mugs. "Tea first," she said. "Then the problem."

His mouth moved, not quite a smile.

"That's your little motto."

June didn't answer.

Simon's gaze stayed on her back, then shifted to the pantry door as if he had heard it too. For a second his body looked ready to rise.

He stayed seated. The open kitchen gave him what he wanted.

The kettle switched off.

Instant coffee came out of the cupboard and went on the counter. The jar stayed closed. Patterns mattered.

On the memo tray by the landline sat a spare card Simon used for household purchases. June had seen him point at it on day one and say, flat, "If you need milk or bulbs, use that. Keep the receipts."

Simon spoke without turning his phone over.

“You messaged Penelope last night.”

It wasn't a question.

June set the coffee jar down and turned. “You saw me use my phone.”

His eyes went to her pocket.

“Stop making this worse,” he said.

“I told her if she heard anything about the cyclist, to ring,” June said.

Simon's face tightened.

“We're not talking about that.”

June didn't argue. Steam rose from the mugs.

“Cancel the drinks,” he said again.

Heat from her own mug pressed into her palms.

“If I cancel,” June said, “they'll ask why.”

“So,” Simon said. “They ask.”

“They won't just ask,” June said. “They'll repeat it.”

His eyes flicked to the glass wall, then to the front windows.

“It's on a list,” June went on before he could cut her off. “People have planned. They'll have bought things. If it's cancelled last minute, they'll be at each other's doors and it'll come back here.”

“If there aren't any police, they'll call it odd,” June said, light.

“They don't need to know,” Simon said.

Simon's fingers tightened around his phone.

“The reason is my son is missing.”

“Then they'll come and ask you what's happening,” June said. “Right here. They'll knock. They'll stand on the drive. They'll see the gate. They'll

see the cameras.”

A small shift of his gaze, the quick check toward the hall, the hold.

Privacy, or the right kind of attention. He wanted both.

Simon picked up his mug at last and took a mouthful. He watched her over the rim as he drank.

“Fine,” he said.

June didn’t move.

“But you keep it short,” Simon added. “You keep it on the drive. You don’t invite anyone inside. You don’t start chatting. You don’t overstep.”

“All right,” June said.

The mug went down and got centred on the coaster.

“I’m making calls,” Simon said. “You’re here.”

Phone already lifted, he walked out toward the stairs.

June stayed where she was until his feet hit the first carpeted step.

Only then did she angle her head toward the pantry door.

Nothing from it now.

After his head vanished from view, June moved, not quickly, but with purpose, toward the corridor end of the kitchen where the sightline broke.

On the landing his footfalls crossed left to right. Carpet softened them, but his rhythm gave him away. Quick when he was angry. Steady when he was choosing words.

In the utility room June set her mug by the sink and pulled her phone out, screen dimmed. Leaning on the door would look like listening, so she stood off it.

The Street Drinks group chat sat near the top of her messages. Penelope’s name was just above.

June typed to the group first.

“Still on for tonight. Same time. I’ll put a few bits out.”

No apology. No explanation.

Penelope next.

“Can you bring extra cups and come early? 6.30 if you can. Ta.”

A second read, then send.

Her thumb hovered over Maureen’s number and moved away. Maureen would ask why, and June couldn’t have that conversation with Simon in the house.

A visible sign outside would help. Something that made the evening harder to shut down without questions.

Penelope had mentioned, in her sharp way, that the street sometimes hired a little canopy. June had half listened at the time while watching the gate.

Search terms, then a small local business: a landline, a mobile, a basic website with too many pictures of bunting.

June called the mobile.

A man answered on the third ring. “Hello, Oakhaven Marquees.”

“Hello,” June said. “I need a small canopy for a driveway, tonight, if you can.”

There was a pause.

“Tonight,” he repeated.

“Yes,” June said.

“Bit short notice.”

“I know,” June replied. “It’s a last-minute thing. It’ll be on a private drive behind a gate. I can meet you inside.”

“Whereabouts?”

June gave the address as best she could. Oakhaven, private spur, the house behind the remote gate with the glass front.

“We’ve done that street,” the man said. “If it’s the one I’m thinking of.”

“Probably,” June said.

“We’ve got a three by three pop-up,” he said. “Not a full marquee. It’s just a canopy.”

“That’s fine.”

“Delivery and set-up is extra.”

“I can set it up,” June said. “If you can drop it. I’ll sign.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“We can drop around five,” he said. “Maybe half five.”

“Fine. I’ll be here.”

“Card on delivery.”

“All right.”

Call ended. June held the phone for a second longer, thumb still against the glass.

He would see the delivery. He would ask. That was the point.

Phone back into her pocket, June stood still and listened.

No stairs. No door upstairs.

The pantry door opened without a sound. June stepped inside and pulled the inner door.

Leo sat further back than he had yesterday, on the tile with his knees up, hoodie tight, socks pulled high. His eyes went to her hands first.

“He’s upstairs,” June said.

Leo nodded.

“Tonight’s still happening,” June said. “People will come.”

Leo’s mouth tightened.

“Can I just run,” he whispered.

June kept her voice low and practical. “Not unless you have to.”

“But, ” Leo shifted forward, hands on his shins, fingers white at the knuckles. “If I get out the gate, I can, I can get to Penelope’s. Or the shops. Anywhere.”

“You’d have to cross the hall and the kitchen,” June said. “He’d hear you. If he gets to you first, he gets to decide where you end up.”

Leo dragged a breath in through his mouth. “He’s right there.”

“I know.”

“If I get out,” Leo said, “he’ll say I’m lying.”

“He’ll say that anyway,” June said. “If you run alone and he catches you, he catches you where nobody can see.”

Leo’s jaw moved once. He didn’t answer.

“So I have to wait,” he said.

“You wait unless it’s forced,” June said. “And you drink.”

A water bottle went into his hands.

“Slow,” she said.

Leo drank in small swallows, stopping to breathe through his nose.

June’s gaze dropped to the handheld console by his school bag.

“Keep that charged,” she said.

“I’ve got a plug,” Leo said.

“Good. If the Wi-Fi drops, keep it on battery. Don’t let it die.”

Leo's eyes stayed on her. "You're going to watch it."

"Later," June said. "When I can."

The inner door closed. June stepped back into the pantry.

Crisps and napkins came off the shelf. She didn't need them yet. She needed a reason to be in there.

In the kitchen she started moving things into place, slow enough to look routine.

A small stack of plates went by the island. Glasses got split between the sink area and the sideboard by the living space. Each move set up an excuse for later.

Before she'd finished, Simon came down again. The phone was still in his hand.

"Who was that?" he asked, too quick.

June didn't turn from the drawer at once. Cutlery clicked softly as she set it back. "A neighbour."

"Which neighbour?" Simon asked.

June looked up then, one hand on the drawer front. "Penelope. Number twelve."

"What did she want?"

"She's doing quiches," June said. "She asked if I'd got eggs in. Said she was starting about four."

Simon's eyes held on her face, then went past her to the hall.

"I don't want you discussing... anything," he said.

"I didn't," June said. "It was quiches."

His mouth tightened. The pause stretched long enough for him to pick a safer line.

"Just keep it light," he said.

June shut the drawer. “That’s what I’m doing.”

Mid-afternoon he tried again, this time at the island. He had set himself on the stool with the hall in view, knee bouncing once before he stopped it.

“Say it,” Simon said.

June stayed standing by the counter so he couldn’t angle his body between her and the pantry door.

“Say what?”

“The line,” Simon said, and forced the right softness into his face. His voice lifted, warmer than it had been all day. “If anyone asks, Leo’s unwell upstairs. He’s resting. We don’t want to make a fuss.”

He glanced toward the hall as if checking an audience that wasn’t there.

June kept her face still. The wording was too tidy, and he’d chosen “unwell” because it sounded concerned without inviting questions.

“And if they ask why they haven’t seen him,” June said.

“He’s a teenager,” Simon replied at once. “They don’t come down for anything unless they want food.”

A smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

June let her mug sit untouched on the counter. “All right.”

His gaze slid over her pocket again.

He kept his voice easy. “Anything in the garage I should know about? Seen anyone near it?”

“No,” June said. She swallowed. “Nothing.”

A few minutes later he tried to take control of that too.

“Leave it on the counter,” Simon said, nodding at her phone.

His hand came out, palm down, a small reach toward where the memo tray sat.

June's fingers closed around the phone inside her pocket.

"No," she said.

Simon stopped, hand still half raised. "June."

"I'm expecting deliveries," June said. "Canopy. Food."

"Then you check it and put it down."

June didn't move. "I need it on me."

For a moment he stood too close to the island, as if he might step into her space.

The hall sightline pulled him back. He dropped his hand and stepped away, phone tight in his own grip.

"Don't overstep," he said.

June nodded once and went back to the plates.

Just after five the intercom beeped from the entry panel. June heard the gate motor start up outside, then the pause while someone waited at the spur.

Simon came into the kitchen fast, phone to his ear, and stopped when he saw June already moving toward the front.

"What is this?" he asked, low.

"Canopy," June said. "For the drive. Keeps people outside."

His jaw worked once.

"You ordered it," he said.

"It's paid on delivery," June said. "I'll use the household card."

The spare card sat on the memo tray where it always had.

Simon didn't pick it up. He didn't want to touch anything that made it look planned.

June took it and walked to the entry without looking back.

At the glass she could see a white van edging in. Simon came behind her, close enough that she could feel his presence without turning.

The gate beeped again. Outside, tyres crunched on gravel.

June opened the door before Simon could decide to make it harder. A man in a hi-vis jacket stood on the step with a clipboard.

"Afternoon," he said. "Pop-up canopy?"

"Yes," June said.

He looked past her into the hallway. "Need a signature and card."

June held the card out.

Simon stayed in the hall with his phone in his hand, face set, watching the exchange as if he could control it by staring.

The driver's machine beeped. "Receipt?"

"Yes," June said.

He tore it off and handed it over. "We'll drop it by the drive. You said you'd set it up?"

"Yes," June said.

The driver nodded once and carried the canopy bag through. He didn't speak to Simon at all.

When the door shut, Simon spoke without moving.

"Don't make this a spectacle."

"It's a canopy," June said.

His eyes went to the glass, then away.

Back in the pantry, June gave Leo the line.

“Tonight he’ll say you’re unwell upstairs,” she said.

Leo’s face tightened. He brought his hand up to his mouth and dragged it down over his chin.

“He can sound normal,” Leo said, voice thin. “He can do that thing where people think he’s... fine.”

June kept her voice flat. “That’s why we don’t do this alone.”

The tray signal got checked again with a few quiet words. June kept it short.

She gave him Penelope’s car. “Small blue hatchback, plate ending KDN. Look for that if you have to move. She’ll park tight to the kerb.”

He nodded once.

Leo reached for the handheld console.

“Can we, now?” he asked.

“Show me,” June said.

Leo logged into his cloud account. His hands shook as he pressed the buttons.

The clip loaded.

Rain on the windscreen, headlights, then the edge of a bicycle in the beam.

The jolt.

June’s breath caught. Her fingers tightened on the counter in the pantry until the tile edge pressed into her skin.

The sound from the clip stopped. Leo kept staring at the screen.

June held her mouth closed for a second, then let air out through her nose.

“It’s there,” she said.

Leo looked up at her, eyes bright.

“Can we send it to someone?”

“Not privately,” June said. “If you give it to one person, he can get to them. We do it with witnesses.”

Leo swallowed and nodded once.

June shifted the water bottle nearer to him.

“Drink,” she said.

The pantry door closed behind her.

Back in the bright main rooms, June kept the glasses where they were and the plates by the island. From the island stool Simon would be able to see her. That was fine.

When the doorbell went later, she wanted him in his sightline and out in front.

June checked her pocket for her phone and the older brass key, then went to set out the napkins as if it was only hosting.

Nothing in the room looked like an argument.

# Chapter 11

## The Guests Arrive

June kept the plan in her head and off paper. Check the gate status on the app. Keep the fob in her pocket. Keep the kitchen crowded, and keep someone by the stairs. Keep Leo back from the pantry door, whatever he heard. Put food in people's hands so they stopped wandering. Keep her phone on her body and the screen dim. Make the truth public where it could not be folded away.

The canopy bag sat where the driver had left it, a long black roll of fabric and metal, propped against the wall by the front hall. June had set it up with the instructions open on her phone and the rain already on her sleeves. The frame had clicked into place with a sound that carried through the glass, and she'd stopped twice to listen for Simon coming down.

He had come down eventually, slow enough to make it a choice. He watched through the front glass for a full minute, hands empty, face set, measuring what she'd changed.

"Don't," he'd said.

"It's already paid for," June had replied, keeping her voice level. She hadn't looked at him while she pulled the last corner strap tight. A simple thing, but it had mattered. She wasn't asking.

Now it was early evening and the paving was dark and reflective. Water beaded along the canopy edge. The canopy covered the first stretch of paving and the edge of the gravel. Under it, June had put a folding table she'd taken out before six and left by the hall door, and set bowls on it, crisps, olives, the sort of supermarket nibbles that made people stop

drifting.

The garden lights had been on for hours, and the wet lawn beyond them looked unlit. Rainwater pooled on the terrace chair. The gate stayed closed.

Inside, a tea towel brushed across her palms though they weren't wet. Her phone stayed on silent and dim. The older brass key pressed against her thigh, a hard outline through denim.

The kitchen smelled of cleaning spray and warm cheese from the little pastries Penelope had said she was bringing. June had left the oven off. She didn't need smoke alarms or a log she couldn't explain.

Simon stood on the far side of the island with a bottle of white wine in his hand, glass already poured. He hadn't offered her one.

"You've overdone it," he said, eyes on the glass wall.

"It's Street Drinks," June said.

"It was Street Drinks," Simon corrected.

A packet of napkins went onto a tray with six glasses, something to hold while she crossed the room. "It's on the card. People are coming."

He watched her hands. "We said short. On the drive. No one inside."

"We did," June said.

"And you've put up a canopy. It makes it look like an event."

"It makes it usable," June said. "It's raining."

His jaw moved once, the way it did when he stopped himself saying the first thing.

The pantry door stayed out of her path while he was in the kitchen. Open-plan space, nothing to hide behind. The tray went behind the kettle, then onto the sideboard by the living area. If anyone asked, it was just easier there.

A little before seven, her phone buzzed once in her pocket, a short vibration against denim. She didn't look at it until her body turned enough that Simon couldn't see the screen.

Penelope: Here.

Her throat tightened. Two words back.

Come round.

No more needed. Penelope would come.

The first knock came a few minutes later. Not the doorbell, knuckles on the glass panel, steady and familiar.

Coolness ran into June's hands. Usual pace to the door, because rushing showed too much.

Simon came behind her and stopped half a step back.

June opened the door.

Two neighbours stood there in coats with rain on the shoulders and damp hair from hoods pushed back. One of them held a bottle in a paper bag. The other held a tin of mince pies, the supermarket kind with a plastic window.

"Evening," the woman said. Her voice had that careful cheer people used when they thought they might be intruding. "We weren't sure if you were still doing it, with everything."

A small smile held on June's mouth. "Evening. It's on, yes. Come through. Mind the mat."

Their shoes left dark marks on the pale tile. June watched it happen and let it happen.

Simon stepped forward. His expression softened in under a second, the smile set in place.

"Hi," he said. "Thanks for coming. It's been... a day."

The woman's eyes widened. The man gave a sympathetic nod.

Fingertips pressed to the doorframe while he spoke, a brief check at the edge.

The tin of mince pies changed hands. “Kitchen’s through there,” June said. “Drinks on the table under the canopy. There’s wine and soft drinks.”

“Lovely,” the man said.

His gaze went past June into the open-plan space, then held a fraction on the hallway.

June stepped aside and let them move in.

Simon said, “We’re keeping it simple. Just a quick hello.”

“We won’t keep you,” the woman said, but she didn’t move toward the door again.

Out to the drive first, because Simon had insisted, and because bodies outside under the canopy kept the house visible from the street. Even behind the gate.

Drinks were poured. People said, “This is lovely,” about the canopy, and “Shame about the weather,” because those sentences filled the gaps.

June was moving back inside with empty glasses when Penelope arrived.

Not a knock. The bell went twice, then Penelope stood there with her tote bag on her elbow and a foil tray balanced on one hand.

June opened the door and Penelope walked in with the ease of someone who had already decided she belonged.

“June,” she said. “I’ve brought cups. Proper ones. Not those thin things.”

Her keyring clacked as she moved, and June’s shoulders dropped a fraction.

Penelope's coat was clean and buttoned, lipstick sharp. Her tote bag had a label stitched to the side that said BAKING in black marker.

"Thank you," June said.

Penelope looked past her into the kitchen. "Is he down?"

"Yes."

"And you're all right?"

"I'm managing," June said.

Penelope nodded and walked into the kitchen without waiting for more.

The foil tray landed on the island. Cups came out of the tote, stacked in twos, each wrapped in a tea towel.

Simon stood by the sink, watching her with a fixed smile.

"Penelope," he said, too warmly. "Thanks for coming."

"Wouldn't miss it," Penelope said. "Not when it's my turn next month and I want people to remember they actually like the idea." Her head tipped toward June. "You've got any kitchen towel? I've brought sausage rolls and I don't trust the foil."

June opened the drawer and handed her a roll.

Cool, dry fingers closed over it.

"Where do you want these?" Penelope asked, already unwrapping the tray.

"On the counter by the living area," June said.

Penelope made a small noise that could have been agreement or judgement, then lifted the tray and carried it herself.

A second pair of neighbours arrived while Penelope was in motion, then another. Coats got draped over the hall chair. Shoes made more damp marks. Someone apologised for it. June told them it was fine.

The house filled in a way that made the air feel less tight and Simon's reach less complete.

Crowd the kitchen. Keep them busy.

"Would you mind," June said to the woman with the mince pies, "putting those on a plate? Just there."

"Of course," the woman said, pleased to be useful.

A corkscrew went into the man's hand. "Can you open that? I've got no hands."

He laughed and did it.

Penelope took up position at the island stool Simon usually used, without sitting down. She stood behind it, leaning slightly on the back, so her presence filled that line. Simon didn't comment. His eyes flicked to the stool, then away.

A faint scrape came from the corridor behind the pantry. Not loud, not dramatic. Something shifted against tile, then a soft knock of plastic.

Leo. Voices in the house. Movement he couldn't see.

The remote lay on the sideboard. June picked it up and turned on the living room music. Sound came through the ceiling speakers, thin for a moment, then steady. Two clicks up.

Simon's head turned. "What's that?"

"Music," June said. "So no one hears every little thing."

His stare held for a beat, then he smiled at someone who'd just walked in.

"Come in," he said. "Get a drink. No trouble."

June carried a tray of glasses out under the canopy. The rain had eased to drizzle that still got into people's hair and down their collars.

Neighbours stood in small clusters, backs to the garden, faces angled toward the light spilling from the house. The gate stayed visible from

where June stood. The camera box on the post sat there, its small light steady.

Penelope followed her out and started talking loudly to a man in a waxed jacket about council tax.

Back inside for more drinks.

A man with grey at his temples, holding a beer bottle, stood by the island and said, "Where's Leo then? Poor lad. Elena all right?"

Simon moved before June could.

That tired-father smile, set and gentle. "Leo's unwell," he said, voice soft. "He's upstairs. Resting. We don't want to make a fuss."

"Oh," the man said. "Oh, sorry. Of course."

"Bless him," a woman said, and started talking about the cold going round.

Reactions split. Some accepted it instantly. Others let their eyes go to the stairs, quick and careful, then away.

One woman, coat buttoned to the throat, hair clipped back, held the look a second too long. "He's not gone back to that camp thing then?"

Simon's eyelids narrowed. "We're sorting it," he said. "It's all being handled."

A bowl of crisps landed between them.

"There's plenty," June said. "Help yourself."

The woman took a handful, still frowning, then got pulled into another conversation.

Wine poured. Simon offered it with a generous hand. He made jokes about the canopy being June's doing, as if it was a harmless extra rather than a line he couldn't cross.

"June's very organised," he said. "She runs a tight ship."

Penelope's laugh cut through. "You need someone to. Otherwise you lot would live on olives and smugness."

A couple of short laughs overlapped. Simon's mouth tightened for half a second, then relaxed.

Past the pantry door without looking. Normal movement. Trays in hand. Counter wiped. Outside and back again.

No alone time.

When he drifted toward her at the sink, June shifted away and asked someone if they wanted ice.

When he came to the sideboard where she was refilling bowls, she handed him a tray. "Can you take these out?"

At the stairs, he lingered too long, blocking the route with his body. June moved close enough to be heard and started talking to Penelope about where to plug in the fairy lights. There were no fairy lights. Penelope didn't blink.

The doorbell kept going.

Noise rose with the crowd. More coats piled on the hall chair. Someone opened the front door without asking and shouted to someone outside, and June's skin went cold until she realised it was a neighbour calling her partner in.

Full room, voices, damp fabric, perfume, the smell of wine and crisps. Small sounds from behind the pantry disappeared into it.

Wandering got easier too.

A woman in a green scarf said, "I'll just nip to the loo," and started toward the hall.

"It's just there," June said, stepping in by half a pace. "Downstairs cloakroom. First door on the left."

The woman smiled. "Thanks."

Simon stood by the stair rail, one hand on it, body angled to intercept.

Soup arrived. A well-meaning neighbour held the container with both hands and said, "I made this earlier. Thought Leo might take a bit. Shall I run it up?"

Simon's answer came too fast.

"No," he said.

The neighbour blinked. "Oh. I only meant."

"We don't want him disturbed," Simon added, smoothing it over. "He's asleep. But thank you. That's kind."

June stepped in before the neighbour could stiffen.

"That's lovely of you," she said, hands out. "If you pop it there, we'll do it later."

The neighbour looked toward the stairs again and lifted one foot onto the first step.

June shifted into the gap with a stack of bowls. "Could you do me a favour instead? Everyone's decided they're starving. Just put these on the counter by the living room."

The foot came back down. "Oh. Yes, of course."

"Thank you," June said. "Just there."

Simon stayed by the stairs.

Penelope raised her voice from under the canopy. "You never know if they're revising or hiding somewhere," she said. "Fifteen-year-olds."

Several short laughs overlapped, then talk resumed.

June heard the cover in it, and the edge. Penelope could make a point without sounding like she'd made one.

A packet of napkins gave June an excuse. She slipped into the pantry. No one questioned it. She'd been moving in and out all night.

Cooler air inside. Neat shelves. Labels forward. The cereal tub sat where it always had, tape still imperfect.

The inner door opened a fraction.

Leo was further back, crouched on the tile, knees drawn up. His hoodie was pulled close. Low light from the pantry gap left his face washed out.

June lifted her hand, palm down. Stay.

Leo nodded once.

Breath held tight in his chest, not loud but close.

“Stay back,” June said. “Don’t move.”

His eyes flicked to the pantry door. Another nod.

“Drink,” June said.

Two small swallows from the bottle, eyes on her over the rim.

The inner door closed, then the pantry door. June stepped back into the kitchen.

Simon waited near the stairs. His attention stayed on her as she came out.

“What are you doing?” he asked, smiling at someone else so it could pass as light.

“Napkins,” June said. “Someone spilled by the sink.”

Penelope had moved inside and stood at the recycling corner, collecting empties with brisk efficiency. A glass in each hand and a bottle tucked at her elbow.

“You want me to take these out?” she asked.

“Go on,” June said.

Glass dropped into the bin. The clink repeated, loud enough to turn heads and cover smaller sounds.

Another neighbour arrived and asked Simon, “How was Italy then? Elena put pictures up. Looked lovely.”

Simon’s shoulders loosened. He started at once.

“Oh, it was brilliant,” he said. “We did Rome properly, not just the tourist bits. We ate at Roscioli one night, late booking, and the taxi queue at Fiumicino was a mess on the way back. Honestly, we nearly missed the gate.”

Someone laughed and kept him going. “Did you do the Vatican?”

“Of course,” Simon said, already leaning into it. “And the hotel upgrade, you wouldn’t believe it.”

People leaned in because travel talk gave them a clean subject. It filled the room.

At the sink, June rinsed a glass that didn’t need it and set it on the drainer.

Rome talk while his son stayed behind a pantry door.

June carried a tray of pastries out to the drive.

Under the canopy, shoulders had dropped. Hands stayed busy with cups. A few glances went through the glass toward the stairs.

The empty bowl went back onto the counter.

Inside, the talk shifted. Not because June forced it, just the way gossip moved when enough people had phones.

A glass was topped up near the sofa. Someone lifted a phone screen toward the light.

A woman with her phone in hand said, “Did you see that appeal? About the cyclist near the airport road?”

People stopped mid-sentence.

“Oh God, yes,” someone said. “That was awful.”

“They said it was hit and run, didn’t they?”

The woman nodded. “There was a picture of the bike. Well, not the bike, but.” She stopped, made a face. “Anyway. Police have asked for dashcam footage. It was late. In the rain.”

Simon held a wine glass. His fingers tightened around the stem for a second. Jaw set. His attention fixed on the woman’s mouth, not her face.

“Terrible,” Simon said at once, too quick. “Just terrible. People drive badly on that road. No lights, no sense.”

A small laugh came out, meant to be shared. It didn’t travel.

The woman looked surprised by the speed of his answer, then nodded along. “They said it was around eleven, didn’t they? Maybe later.”

Composed face, but the tightness stayed around his mouth.

A hard squeeze hit June’s stomach, then steadied. Photos in her pocket. Leo’s clip on the console. Now the room was already saying the words out loud.

Penelope stepped closer, wine in one hand.

“They were saying it might’ve been one of those big SUVs,” Penelope said, voice pitched loud enough to carry. “You know, the ones that sit high.”

Heads turned toward the glass wall, then toward the far end of the house where the garage sat out of view.

One man said, “Did they say SUV?”

Penelope shrugged. “Rumours. You know how it goes. Someone said their cousin heard.”

Simon cut in with a joke.

“Half this street would have you arrested just for not putting the bin out,” he said, smiling. “Penelope runs a tighter ship than the council.”

A few laughs, thin.

Penelope smiled. "Oh, I do my best."

Simon moved through the group refilling drinks, bottle out, chatter offered. He kept it going so no one had silence to sit with what they'd just said.

Timing mattered. People already had the appeal in their heads. They'd already heard "dashcam." They'd already heard "SUV."

June slipped into the pantry again, not for crisps. For Leo.

Same crouch, but his eyes had changed. Wide. Fixed on her.

"They're talking," June said.

His mouth opened slightly. Swallow.

"About the cyclist," she went on, voice steady. "They've seen an appeal. They're saying it out loud."

Colour drained from his face. His hand went to his mouth and stayed there.

The same look from the staff bedroom when he'd said, It was the car. Guilt that pushed him toward the wrong move.

"Don't," June said.

"I can tell them," he whispered.

"You don't," June said.

His brow pinched. "But."

"You stay," June said. "I'll handle the room."

He stared at her, then nodded once. Shoulders eased by a small amount.

Hand on the pantry shelf, June waited a second longer and listened.

Music played on. Voices blurred together.

Back into the party.

Simon was near the stairs again. His attention snapped to her as she came out of the pantry.

He moved.

Not fast, not obvious, just a drift into her path in the hallway beyond the kitchen where the light dropped.

“What have you been doing?” he asked, voice polite enough for public. His eyes weren’t.

A packet of napkins sat in June’s hand.

“Napkins,” she said. “Spill by the sink.”

His smile tightened. “You’ve been disappearing.”

“I’ve been in the kitchen,” June said.

He took a step closer, angling his body so the utility corridor stayed behind him.

“You’re making this worse,” he said softly. “You’re risking people’s jobs. People talk. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

June didn’t step back.

“People talk anyway,” she said.

Eyelids narrowed again. “Don’t.”

June turned into the kitchen, where Penelope stood by the island with two other neighbours. All three looked up.

Simon followed by half a pace and stopped.

Penelope’s eyebrows lifted. “All right?”

“Fine,” June said.

Simon smiled. “All good. Just checking we’ve got enough ice.”

Penelope looked at him, then at June. “Ice is in the freezer. I saw it. Unless you’ve moved that too.”

A laugh from someone else. Simon’s smile stayed put.

Fingers in June’s pocket found her phone, then the older key, then the paper note.

Simon leaned closer, just enough for her to hear.

“You’re not alone in this house,” he said.

June looked at him. “If your son is missing, you should call the police.”

His eyes flickered. No answer.

Across the room a woman called, “Simon! Where did you get the canopy from? We’ve been thinking of getting one for the summer do.”

Relief and irritation crossed his face in one movement.

Public smile back in place. “Oh, it’s just a local place,” he said, stepping away. “Oakhaven Marquees. They’re great.”

He walked toward the woman.

June pulled her phone out and kept it low, near her hip, body blocking the screen.

Photos.

The bumper image sat there, bright and ugly, split plastic, a bent bracket, a dark smear under the cloth line. Quick and close. Enough.

A swipe to the smashed phone pieces in the bin.

Then out of photos and into casting.

A list came up, devices nearby. The TV in the living room showed as available.

Phone back into her pocket.

Not yet.

For a second, her eyes went to the hall and the tray she'd set up days ago as an escape signal. Drop it. Crash it. Let Leo run to Penelope's car.

It could work.

But she'd heard Simon say "unwell upstairs" to three different people, calm and steady. If Leo burst out now, soaked and shaking, the first story the room would hear would be Simon's. Runaway. Difficult boy. House-sitter meddling.

No.

Evidence first.

A platter of sausage rolls moved toward the living room. Food let her cross any line without questions. People stepped out of the way.

The TV sat on the wall opposite the sofa, black screen reflecting the room's light and movement. The coffee table was covered in glasses and bowls.

"Help yourselves," June said as she set the platter down.

Hands reached at once.

Back toward the kitchen, then a pause at the pantry door. Not fully in, only cracked open enough to see the shadowed gap of the inner door.

Leo's outline was there. His face appeared at the gap, eyes fixed on her.

June lifted her hand slightly, palm down.

Stay.

Leo nodded, but his knees were bent, weight forward.

The pantry door closed.

Penelope was at the recycling again, collecting empties with brisk movements.

“Honestly,” she said loudly, holding up a bottle. “People treat a driveway like a pub and then act surprised there’s clearing up. I’m not your mother.”

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Noise filled the kitchen and ran into the hall.

A woman by the sideboard said to June, “So where does Leo go to school again? My nephew’s in year ten and he’s doing my head in.”

June kept it short. “Local. Not far. He’s not up for visitors right now.”

The woman nodded, already distracted by someone offering her a drink.

Behind the sofa, June moved toward the TV area with a glass in her hand so it looked like collecting. She didn’t pick up anything. She just held it.

Phone out again. Thumb over the screen. Casting.

The device list came up.

TV.

Her thumb hovered.

Simon’s voice carried from the kitchen, Rome again, a street market, a hotel upgrade. People laughed at the right places.

June tapped the TV name.

A small spinning symbol appeared.

Phone stayed low behind the sofa back, hidden by bodies leaning in to talk.

Simon’s steps changed. Too alert. His head turned toward the living room, attention fixed on hands, not faces.

He started moving toward her.

June stepped out from behind the sofa and lifted her voice, not loud, but clear enough.

“Simon.”

He stopped half a step too late, then smiled for the group.

“Yes?”

June looked at him and asked, in front of everyone, “Have you contacted the police?”

A pause.

Conversation slowed. Eyes moved to Simon. A couple of glasses stopped mid-air.

Simon’s smile stayed. Eyelids narrowed.

“We’re waiting for more information,” he said.

“What information?” someone asked, too quick.

“But if he’s missing,” another person said.

A small laugh came out of Simon that didn’t fit the room. “He’s not missing,” he said. “He’s unwell. We’re handling it.”

“Unwell upstairs,” Penelope repeated from the kitchen, voice neutral. “But you’ve not called anyone.”

Simon’s head snapped toward her, then back.

Near the front door, a man glanced at the handle, then at his partner.

If they left, Simon got privacy back. He got control back.

June’s phone buzzed once in her hand, the casting connection still spinning.

Her face stayed still. Hand steady.

Eyes went to the hall again, to the front-door route, to the tray.

No.

If Leo ran now, Simon still owned the first story.

Work ran through June in a tight sequence: keys handed over with trust, notes left on counters, clients who said, You're a lifesaver, then forgot her name. Her agency's number in the phone. Simon's threat, unemployable, said with a smile.

Doing this could cost her work.

Then Leo's face behind the pantry door came up, fifteen, trapped, trying to stay quiet because the adults had taught him to.

Better a lost job than a lost child.

June took two steps into the centre of the living room, where most of the guests could see her without her calling for attention. Arms stayed down. No demand for quiet. Just a spot where eyes could land.

Simon stepped closer.

"June," he said, voice low now.

June didn't answer him directly. She lifted her phone slightly, screen facing her, thumb poised.

The room had changed. Chatter dropped to a murmur. Someone set a glass down on the coffee table too hard, then went still.

Once, June looked toward the pantry door. In the thin gap under it, a darker line showed where someone stood behind the inner door.

Leo stayed hidden.

Her thumb pressed the last prompt.

Connect.

The phone vibrated lightly as the casting handshake began.

Simon's hand lifted, not touching her.

June held steady.

On the TV, the blank screen shifted as the connection started.

June did not wait for permission.

# Chapter 12

## The Reveal

June's thumb stayed on the glass of her phone. The vibration had stopped, and the little spinning symbol had been there long enough that two people near the sofa started talking again, their voices too bright.

A platter sat on the sideboard under the television, sausage rolls that had been picked over on the edges. One roll lay split, the sausage showing, pastry soggy where someone had held it and thought better.

June lifted the platter and set it down again, more squarely, with the kind of attention that made it look like she was tidying rather than positioning herself. The sideboard wood had a ring where a glass had been put down without a coaster. She put the platter over it.

Simon was a step closer than he had been. His wine glass was in his hand and the stem sat between two fingers. He watched June's phone, then her face.

The music from the ceiling speakers carried on. A track ended, another started. People were still under the canopy outside, but enough had drifted in to make the room full, damp coats touching, perfume mixing with the smell of crisps.

On the wall, the TV screen shifted. Black went to a grey cast screen with a line of text that nobody read properly, then to a bright rectangle as the phone's image took over.

Heads turned toward the screen. Even people halfway through a sentence stopped, because the screen was new information and it was in the centre of the room.

June's grip on her phone didn't change. She kept it low at her waist where it looked like a remote.

Simon moved to the left, aiming to get between June and the screen. He did it with a casual step, the way he drifted toward the stairs when someone looked like they might go up.

June stepped a half pace the other way and let the back of her shoulder touch the sideboard. If Simon wanted to block her view now he would have to come close enough that people would notice it as a choice, not an accident.

He stopped. His jaw tightened. The smile he'd had for guests was gone.

June didn't look at him. She looked at the television, then at the nearest faces.

"Just," she said, and kept it light enough that it could have been about dessert. "Before anyone heads off, can you have a look at this. Two seconds."

Someone gave a small laugh, uncertain, waiting for a punchline.

"June," Simon said, low.

June didn't answer him.

The image on the TV resolved into a photo, close, slightly off-level, taken under harsh garage strip lighting. The front of a dark SUV filled the screen, cloth tucked along the grille line. Below the cloth, the bumper plastic was split and pushed in. A bracket sat bent underneath. There was a dark smear on the plastic, dried and ridged, with a brown edge. In the crack by the split, pale paint transfer showed in flecks.

The photo wasn't artful. It was too quick to be. It had the flat clarity of something taken to prove a point.

A woman who'd been holding a wine glass close to her chest brought it down slowly to the coffee table. Her hand shook enough that the base

tapped the glass top.

“Oh,” someone said. It wasn’t loud.

A man by the kitchen island leaned forward and then stopped. Leaning in didn’t make the image any better.

“That’s a car,” said another, and then added, like it helped, “That’s... damage.”

Nobody laughed.

Penelope stood at the edge of the kitchen area, cups in front of her on the counter, her labelled tote open. She put one finger up at a neighbour who had started to talk, a small gesture that said, hold on. Her eyes stayed on Simon.

Simon’s gaze went to the screen and away again, quick and sharp. His hand tightened on the wine glass stem.

“Turn that off,” he said.

June didn’t say no. She didn’t say anything at all. She kept her mouth shut and her body still.

People moved without coordinating. Half steps, a shuffle of shoes, gaps closing in places and opening in others. Someone who’d been laughing a minute ago moved closer to the doorway and glanced at the lock. Two people under the canopy came in, pulled by the pause, and their damp shoes left dark marks on the tile.

“Simon?” the grey-templed man asked, the one who’d first asked after Leo. His voice had lost its friendly tone. “What’s that?”

Simon put the polite smile back. The muscles around his mouth were too tight.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “June, stop. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

The photo stayed on the screen. The dark smear didn’t look like mud. It didn’t have the dull texture. It looked like something that had dried

there because it hadn't been cleaned properly.

The woman in the green scarf, who'd used the downstairs cloakroom earlier, brought her hand to her mouth and kept it there.

June could have spoken then. She could have given them the whole chain of it, loft hatch, cereal bowl, phone call, gate that wouldn't open, cloth on the bumper, smashed phone pieces in the bin, Leo crouched behind a pantry door.

It would give Simon something to fight. He'd take each word, twist it, offer alternate explanations, ask why she didn't call, why she lied, why she got involved, why she was in his garage.

She didn't give him words.

She moved her thumb once on her phone screen.

The photo changed.

It cut to video.

Rain on a windscreen. Headlights washing out the lane ahead. The view low from the dash. A stretch of road with no street lamps, just wet tarmac and reflective signs sliding past. The audio caught the hum of tyres and the faint rattle of something in the car.

A bicycle edge appeared at the far left of frame, a flash of reflective strip.

Then the jolt.

A sharp movement of the camera and a dull sound, not a bang but a heavy hit, followed by a breathy exclamation caught close to the mic.

Headlights tracked along the lane. The car did not slow enough. There was no pull-in, no stopping.

Someone let out a short, hard breath.

"Oh my God," a woman said, louder now.

A man swore, short and ugly, then looked around, embarrassed.

Chairs didn't scrape because no one sat. But bodies moved. People stepped back from Simon, not as a group, just each person deciding that being close to him was no longer comfortable. A gap opened around him where there hadn't been one before. The wine glass in his hand was suddenly too visible.

"That's," the grey-templed man started. He stopped.

Penelope's lips parted. She didn't cover her mouth. Her eyes stayed on the screen.

Simon shook his head once, fast.

"That could be anything," he said, voice raised slightly, using volume to settle the room. "June, what is this? That's not..."

The video showed the lane continuing. Rain streaks on the glass. Headlights cutting through. The car stayed steady, not braking hard.

"It's an animal," Simon said, too quick. "People hit badgers, deer, all sorts down there. You don't know what you're looking at."

"An animal?" a woman repeated, and the way she said it made it clear she didn't believe it.

June didn't look at Simon. She watched the screen, because the footage was clear.

The clip went on long enough for everyone to see there was no stopping. It wasn't a startled swerve and a pull-over. It was continuing.

Penelope spoke into the pause.

"That's that cyclist," she said. Not loud, not gossipy. Flat. "That's the one they've been talking about. Airport road. It was raining."

A man by the kitchen, the one with the corkscrew earlier, said, "They said dashcam. They said they needed dashcam."

Someone's phone lit up in their hand as they unlocked it. Then another.

June turned her head at last and met Simon's eyes.

He was breathing through his nose. His jaw moved as if his teeth were clenched.

"You've stolen footage from my car," he said. "You've gone through private property. You've broken into my garage."

His gaze flicked past June, toward the kitchen and the pantry door line.

June saw it. She shifted, small, and put her body between Simon and the route that led to the pantry. It passed as hosting. It passed as stepping aside for someone.

"It isn't from your phone," June said.

"Don't," Simon snapped.

June kept her voice level. "I was protecting a child."

A woman near the sofa blinked hard and said, "A child?"

June didn't answer that. She didn't point. She didn't say Leo's name.

The video still played. Rain. Headlights. Road.

A guest's voice came, thin with shock. "Did they... did the cyclist survive?"

June turned her head toward the sound. She could see the woman's face clearly, pale under the bright house lights. Her hand held her phone but she wasn't recording; she wasn't thinking of that yet.

"I don't know," June said.

After she spoke, nobody filled the gap. No one offered a comforting rumour. No one said, I'm sure they're fine.

Simon's shoulders rose and fell. He put the wine glass down on the island, too sharply, and then realised everyone had watched him do it.

“This is completely out of order,” he said. “This is my home. You’re all in my home. You’ve had your drinks. Now you can leave.”

Nobody moved.

June ended the clip. Not with a flourish. Just a tap.

She stopped it there. Enough.

The TV froze on a wet lane and a smear of light.

She didn’t replay it. She didn’t add commentary.

Simon took a step forward.

“Where is he?” he demanded.

His voice was louder now. The host tone had dropped away completely.

June didn’t answer.

A neighbour, a woman June recognised only by her coat, tan, belted, always looked expensive, started toward the stairs with purpose.

“I’ll just check,” the woman said. Not unkindly. More as if she was volunteering.

June moved before the woman got a foot on the first step.

“No,” June said.

The woman blinked. “What?”

“He’s not a spectacle,” June said.

Simon’s mouth opened. “Don’t you.”

June didn’t look at him. She kept her eyes on the neighbour.

“You don’t go up there,” June said. “You don’t go hunting through the house. You stay where you are.”

“But if he’s hurt,” the woman began.

“If anyone’s worried,” June said, “we get the right people here.”

Penelope made herself useful in a way that also made her present. She picked up two plates, then three, and slid between Simon and the pantry side without asking. She didn't run. She didn't stare at the pantry door. She kept her tone about plates and pastry flakes.

"Plates," she said, brisk.

Simon tried to shift around her.

The crowd shifted too.

Not coordinated. No one said, Block him. People simply stopped stepping out of his way.

A man by the kitchen doorway held his drink with both hands and stood in the gap, staring at Simon, planted there.

A woman near the hall chair, where coats had been piled, took a step sideways, and it put her directly in Simon's path.

Simon stopped, forced into stillness by bodies that had decided not to treat him as the automatic centre.

"This is insane," Simon said, more to the room than to June now. "You're all making assumptions. You're being, Penelope, for God's sake."

Penelope didn't flinch at her name. She kept collecting empties and setting them by the sink.

June's pocket still held the older brass key, the paper with Penelope's address, the folded note with three lines.

She didn't want to look at the pantry door. She didn't want her eyes to point anyone toward it.

A small sound came from deep in the house, not from the living room. It was faint. Plastic on tile, perhaps. A breath caught.

June turned her head toward the kitchen sink.

She reached out and turned the cold tap on.

Water hit the basin, loud and ordinary.

A couple of guests glanced at her, confused by the domesticity of it.

June let the water run for a few seconds, then turned it off.

Penelope's eyes met hers for a moment over the island.

June's thumb moved on her phone, quick, hidden by the angle of her body.

She opened the message thread with Penelope.

One word. Nothing else.

Now.

She sent it.

She didn't wait for a reply.

A woman by the sofa looked at June, didn't blink, then looked away.

"Who are you?" the woman asked. "Sorry, but who are you to do this? You're..."

"The house-sitter," June said.

"Right," the woman said. That answered some things and made others worse. "So you're staff."

June kept her voice calm. "I'm the person who was here when it happened."

Simon laughed, short and bitter. "When what happened? You've got one blurry video, you've got a picture of, of a scrape. Cars get scraped. People reverse into posts. You're making stories."

"Not that scrape," someone said.

Simon turned his head sharply toward the voice. "Don't."

The man who'd spoken swallowed and looked down at his beer bottle.

Simon's polite smile tried to return. He straightened his shoulders and smoothed his tone.

“Everyone,” he said, “this has got completely out of hand. I’ve had a stressful week. My son is unwell. June has misunderstood something and now...”

A woman under the canopy came in, face wet, and blurted, “The police appeal. They said if anyone’s got footage, you send it. That’s what they said.”

Simon’s mouth tightened.

June didn’t let herself look pleased. There was no pleasure in it.

Penelope’s phone was in her hand now. She didn’t hide it.

“I’ve called them,” Penelope said.

After she spoke, people went still. Not because it was dramatic, but because it was a fact.

Simon’s head snapped round. “You what?”

Penelope didn’t flinch. “I called the police. I’m not standing in your kitchen watching a dashcam clip and then going home to watch the news tomorrow and pretend it’s got nothing to do with us.”

Simon’s voice rose. “Get out.”

A silence followed that consisted of people not speaking. Someone coughed.

“Everyone,” Simon said, louder. “Get out of my house.”

A man near the hall chair shook his head. “No. Not yet.”

Simon stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“We’re staying,” the man said. His voice shook a bit, but he said it anyway. “As witnesses.”

Another woman, older, coat still on, said, “I’m not leaving her alone with you.”

June didn't look at the woman, because gratitude would make her soften and this wasn't the moment.

Outside, near the front glass, voices carried from the gate. Two voices. One lower, one higher, both controlled.

Heads turned toward the windows.

The front door stood closed. The smart lock panel sat by it, small and neat.

June walked to the hall at an ordinary pace. She didn't run. She didn't announce she was going.

Simon moved after her.

He was quicker than the guests, and he had the instinct of someone used to controlling thresholds.

June got there first.

She put her hand on the door handle and paused.

Simon said her name. "June."

His voice dropped; the last word came softer.

June didn't look at him.

She opened the front door.

The air smelled of rain. Damp and cold.

The canopy outside made the drive look like an event still, but the people under it had shifted closer to the house, drawn by the change in the sound inside.

At the gate line, visible through the glass and the gap between posts, two uniformed officers stood with a third figure slightly behind, possibly another neighbour who'd wandered up to watch. The gate remained closed.

June stepped onto the mat and lifted her hand, palm out, not waving, just signalling.

She pointed to herself, then angled her hand toward the gate.

She would come to them.

No rush inside. No crowding at the door.

Behind her, Simon took a step forward, reaching for the doorway.

A man in a wet coat stepped sideways into Simon's path, not touching him, simply occupying the space.

Another woman, the one with the green scarf, moved closer too, her phone up now, thumb hovering.

Simon's hands opened and closed once at his sides.

"Everyone out," he said again, voice sharp.

"No," Penelope said, from just behind June's shoulder. "We're not."

June turned her head slightly so she could see Simon without moving her feet.

"You should step back," she said.

Simon stared at her.

"You should wait," June added.

The tone was the one she used when a dog had tracked mud across a tiled floor and the owner was apologising too much. Practical. Final.

Simon's mouth worked. He looked at the faces around him. He looked at phones in hands. He looked at the open door and the officers at the gate.

He didn't move.

June angled her body so that anyone looking in through the open doorway saw the hall and the edge of the living room, but not the kitchen line that led to the pantry. It was a small adjustment.

The officers waited. One of them lifted their chin slightly, acknowledging June's signal.

June took one more step forward, onto the threshold proper, half in and half out.

Behind her, Simon stood under the bright living room lights, in front of his neighbours, without a glass in his hand and without a story that worked.

June kept her phone in her palm and her voice ready.

She stepped out.

# Chapter 13

## The Exit

The canopy edge dripped in a steady line onto the paving. June stepped under it and the water ran off her sleeve onto her wrist, cold through the knit.

At the gate, two officers stood on the outside of the bars, hats darkened by rain. The street beyond them looked ordinary: wet tarmac, a parked car with its lights off, the edge of a hedge. A neighbour's porch light lit part of the spur and left the rest in shadow.

A hand's width from the metal, June stopped. Close enough to be heard, not close enough to look like she was asking permission.

"Evening," one of the officers said. He sounded younger than she expected. His gaze went past her shoulder, up the drive, toward the house.

June kept her voice at the level she used when trades were late and there was nothing to be gained from fury.

"It's all inside," she said. "There's video and photos on the TV. There are witnesses in the house. The man you're looking for is inside. There's a child inside as well. He's safe, but he needs you in properly before I bring him out."

The other officer, a woman with her collar up, nodded once. "All right. Tell me your name."

"June Hargreaves. I'm the house-sitter."

The younger one's eyes flicked, quick. "House-sitter. You called?"

“No,” June said. “Penelope Gable called. Number twelve on the street. She’s inside. I asked her to.”

The woman officer leaned in slightly, not moving her feet. “What happened here tonight?”

June chose the small facts first.

“There was a Street Drinks gathering. People were in the house. He told them his son was ill upstairs. He hasn’t called the police about anything. I put the footage on the TV because I didn’t want it to be me against him. It shows a hit. A cyclist on the airport road. No stopping. And there’s damage on the front of his car in the garage. I’ve got photos of that on my phone.”

The younger officer’s mouth tightened. “The airport road appeal, yes.” He glanced again toward the house. “The suspect is... the homeowner?”

“Yes.”

“And the child witness?”

June did not look back at the house. The pantry line stayed where it needed to, out of their sight.

“He’s inside. He’s safe. He’s not visible. I’m not saying where until you’re through the door and he can’t get to him.”

The woman officer didn’t push. “Is he injured?”

“No. Tired. Scared.”

The younger officer put his hand on the gate bar and tested it. It didn’t move. His fingers came away wet.

“We need to get in,” he said.

“The gate is locked,” June told them. “Remotely. I can’t open it with the fob or my app. He can. He’s been keeping it locked so no one leaves.”

“Can you let us in another way?” the woman officer asked.

“There’s a front door,” June said, and kept her tone even. “If he opens the gate for you, come that way. The front door. Not round the side, not through the garage if you can help it. Everyone’s in the open-plan. If you come through the front, everyone sees you come in. It keeps it calm.”

The younger officer looked at his colleague, then back at June. “You’re saying the suspect has control of the gate.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re currently inside the property, behind the gate.”

June nodded. “I can’t leave. I didn’t have a way out earlier.”

He didn’t ask how she’d discovered that, which helped. He lifted his radio to his shoulder, spoke into it low. June caught only a few words. “Locked gate ... suspect inside ... witnesses.”

The woman officer said, “You said you have footage shown to witnesses. What exactly did you show?”

June kept to what she saw. “A photo of front-end damage. A clip from a dashcam showing the impact. People saw it. Some of them recorded it off the screen.”

The younger officer’s eyes flicked again toward the house. “Is the suspect aware we’re here?”

“He can see you from the front window if he looks,” June said. “He knows you’re here.”

The woman officer’s jaw moved as she pressed her tongue against a tooth. She lifted her chin slightly, in the direction of the house.

“Go back,” she said. “We’ll get him to open the gate. Keep everyone inside, keep them away from the door. We don’t want a crowd at the threshold.”

June’s feet were cold through her trainers. She turned and walked back up the drive under the canopy. Voices carried behind the glass of the house, low now, and a single sharper sound followed, a laugh cut off too

quickly.

The front door stood open a crack from when she had stepped out earlier. A wet line marked where shoes had crossed the mat too many times.

Inside, the light was too bright. The television still showed the paused frame of the wet lane, headlight flare on rain.

Penelope stood at the edge of the kitchen with her tote still open on the counter. Her cheeks were blotched. She looked pleased and horrified at the same time, which was a particular skill.

Simon stood in the living area, not by the stairs now. He was closer to the kitchen than June wanted, shoulders set toward the pantry line. One of the neighbours had shifted to stand between him and that route, a man June didn't know well, holding a bottle at his hip.

Simon's face turned to June as she came in. He tried to speak before she'd crossed the mat.

"Finally," he said, too loud. "You've, "

June didn't answer him. She turned her head enough to find Penelope's eyes.

"They're at the gate," she said. "They want him to open it."

Penelope's lips parted. "Well, he will then, won't he."

Simon heard the line and smiled at Penelope in a way that had worked on people for years.

"Can we not do this in front of everyone," he said. "There's no need for, "

"No," June said, and her voice carried more than she expected. She lowered it immediately. "There is."

The neighbours did not fill the silence. A few phones stayed up. Others were held down at chest height, screens lit.

At the sideboard under the TV, June picked up her phone, screen still open on Photos. She didn't wave it. She held it the way she held a screwdriver.

The bell at the gate didn't ring. There was a short chime from somewhere near the hall, a clean electronic sound. June didn't look at it, and she didn't give anyone the satisfaction of seeing her anticipate the next move.

Simon did look. His eyes went toward the front.

"Don't," June said, not to him exactly, more to the room.

Simon's jaw tightened. He took a step toward the hall.

The man with the bottle shifted half a step, not blocking, just occupying.

Penelope said, loudly, "He can open the gate on his phone. I've seen him do it. When the taxis come."

"Penelope," June said, warning in her tone.

"I'm only saying," Penelope replied, and her hands went to the tote handles like she might pick it up and leave, then she didn't.

Simon's mouth opened. "This is completely out of, "

From outside, a short double-beep sounded, followed by the grind of a motor. A beat later the front door moved, pushed from the outside, and damp air came in.

June's stomach tightened, then eased a fraction.

Two uniformed officers stepped into the hall, water beading on their jackets. They did not barge. They came in at a measured pace.

"Evening," the woman officer said. Her eyes swept the room and took in the coats on the hall chair, the canopy visible through the front glass, the television with the paused road.

The younger officer stood beside her and looked at Simon, then at June.

“Mr Miller?” he asked.

Simon’s shoulders rose slightly, then dropped. He did not lift his hands. He used his voice.

“Yes. That’s me. Can we, ”

“Stay where you are,” the woman officer said.

It was not shouted. It didn’t need to be.

Simon’s eyes widened briefly, then narrowed.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, and turned his head, scanning the neighbours’ faces. “This is my house. These people have been invited in. She has, ”

“Mr Miller,” the younger officer said, and his voice had hardened a fraction, “stop talking for a moment. You’ve been asked to remain still.”

Simon’s mouth closed. His fingers flexed once at his sides.

A fine tremor started in June’s hands. She kept her phone tight to her palm and shifted one step so she stood between the hall and the kitchen line.

The woman officer looked at June. “June Hargreaves?”

“Yes.”

“You said there’s a child in the house.”

“He’s safe,” June said again, and did not add more.

The woman officer nodded once. “All right. We’ll come to that. First.” She turned her head back to Simon. “Mr Miller, we’re here in relation to the hit-and-run on the airport road. We have reports of video evidence shown to a group of witnesses here. Do you understand?”

Simon's laugh came out, short. He tried to pull it into something friendlier.

"This is absurd," he said. "That footage could be anything. It's been, "

"Mr Miller," the woman officer repeated. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," Simon said, and it sounded like he had bitten the word.

The younger officer took out a notebook. His gaze dropped to June's phone.

"You said you have photos," he said.

June held it out. "Yes. In the garage."

Simon snapped his head toward her. "You went into my garage."

The younger officer's eyes moved to Simon, then back to June. "Show me."

June scrolled to the bumper image: split plastic, a dark smear. She didn't try to explain. The image did the work.

The younger officer leaned in to look. "All right."

"And you said the phone," he said.

June swiped to the photo of the bin, screen shards, casing, battery, SIM tray.

Simon stepped forward without thinking.

"Don't you dare," he said.

The woman officer moved one step, not toward June, toward Simon.

"Stay back," she said.

Simon stopped. He looked at the officer, and the look that came back did not shift. No one spoke. Several people watched the officer's hand.

Penelope cleared her throat, loud in the quiet. "We all saw it on the telly," she said. "We were here. It was on. And I called. I called because, "

“Thank you,” the woman officer said. Her voice stopped the chatter. “We’ll take names in a moment. For now, please don’t all speak at once.”

The neighbours went still. A few phones dipped. A few stayed up.

June’s eyes went, against her will, toward the pantry door. It sat flush. The gap under it showed only shadow. The inner corridor door stayed shut.

She moved half a step so her shoulder would be in Simon’s path if he tried to cut across. It looked like nothing. Her body stayed set.

The younger officer took out his work phone. “Hold it there.”

June kept the screen still while he photographed it, then he handed her phone back.

“We need to see the garage,” he said.

“It’s through the internal door,” June told him. “In the hall. There’s a door by the utility corridor. The key that opens it is,”

She stopped. The older brass key had been in her pocket for days.

“It’s an old key,” she said. “Brass. It’s on me.”

Simon’s head turned sharply. “You’ve been taking keys.”

June didn’t look at him. “It’s from the key bowl. It was there. I used it because I needed to know what you were hiding.”

The woman officer’s eyes flicked toward Simon. “Mr Miller, you’re going to remain where you are. Officer.” She nodded to her colleague. “Go with Ms Hargreaves. Check the garage.”

The younger officer nodded.

June took the brass key out of her pocket. It was wet from her hand. She held it by the bow and offered it.

He took it carefully, by the end.

June led him into the hall. Police boots on the tiles changed the sound of the place; every movement carried. Behind them, the neighbours stayed where they were.

The internal garage door was where it had always been. He unlocked it with the brass key and pushed it open. June stood to the side of the frame while he went in first.

Rubber and cold air hit her. Something faint came from the bin. The overhead strip light buzzed at the edge of hearing.

The SUV sat angled, nose tucked toward the far wall. The pale cloth still covered the front corner.

The younger officer moved to the front and lifted the cloth without ceremony.

There it was. The split bumper. The bent bracket. The dark smear, dried and ridged.

He leaned closer. He didn't touch it.

"Okay," he said quietly.

From the house, Simon's voice carried faintly, louder now.

"This is ridiculous. She's staff. She's disgruntled. She's, "

June blinked once, hard, and watched the officer move to the black bin. He pulled the lid back and looked down.

Even from the doorway, June could see the screen shards.

He looked at her. "This your photo?"

"Yes."

"Any idea why a teenager's phone is in pieces in here?"

June kept her voice plain. "His father smashed it."

"His father," the officer repeated.

June nodded once.

They went back into the house.

The living area had gone quiet enough that the ceiling music sounded too loud for it. June crossed to the wall panel and turned it off. The track stopped mid-beat. No one complained.

The woman officer looked up as June returned. Her gaze took in the way June kept herself between Simon and the kitchen line.

The younger officer spoke first.

“We’ve seen the vehicle damage,” he said.

Simon’s mouth tightened. “That proves nothing.”

“It proves damage,” the younger officer said. “And it’s consistent with the incident we’re investigating.”

Simon lifted his hands slightly, palms out, as if they should all calm down.

“This is what happens when you let people like her run your house,” he said, and turned to the neighbours. “She’s gone through my private things. She’s lied to me. She’s invaded my family, ”

A woman by the sofa made a face and looked away. The man with the bottle stared at the floor.

Penelope said, too quickly, “Well, you locked the gate, didn’t you.”

Simon snapped his head at her. “Shut up.”

Penelope’s chin lifted. “Don’t speak to me like that in front of police.”

The woman officer held up a hand. “Enough. Mr Miller, we’re going to ask you some direct questions. You will answer them, or you will tell us you’re not answering them. You will not address this group as if they’re here to help you.”

Simon’s eyes flicked over the faces. He tried to smile. It didn’t take.

“Do we have to do this in front of them,” he said. “This is humiliating. You can take me into another room. You can, ”

“There’s no privacy,” the woman officer said. “Not right now.”

The younger officer opened his notebook.

“Where were you on the night of the incident?” he asked.

Simon laughed, and it sounded forced.

“This is mad,” he said. “I’ve been abroad. I’ve been, ”

“You returned,” the younger officer said.

Simon’s gaze snapped to June. “She’s made up a story.”

June didn’t speak. She held her phone in her hand and watched.

The woman officer said, “Mr Miller, we’re detaining you on suspicion in relation to the hit-and-run. You are not free to leave.”

Simon stared at her.

“What?” he said.

“This can’t be right,” Simon said, voice rising. “In front of my neighbours. You can’t, ”

The woman officer stepped closer. “Mr Miller, turn around.”

Simon looked at the neighbours, eyes wide, searching for help.

No one moved.

The man by the hall chair shifted his feet and did not step aside.

A woman with her coat still on took a slow step backwards, away from Simon.

Simon’s face changed. His eyes moved, judging space, judging people. His head turned toward the kitchen, toward the pantry line.

June moved first, a fraction, shoulder squared. Not touching. Not blocking with hands. Just present.

The younger officer took Simon’s arm.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Simon pulled back once, small. “This is my home.”

The woman officer’s voice stayed level. “Not like this.”

They guided him toward the front door. The neighbours stepped back, not all at once, but enough that a clear path opened.

June followed at a distance. She didn’t want to be the one pressing him toward the door.

At the threshold, rain blew in and spotted the tiles. The canopy outside shone wet under the garden lights.

Simon’s shoes touched the mat and he looked over his shoulder.

“I’ll make sure your agency hears about this,” he said.

June met his eyes. She didn’t answer.

Penelope’s voice came from behind June, too loud, too eager to fill the space.

“We’ve all got it on our phones,” she said. “Just so you know.”

Simon’s jaw tightened. He looked at Penelope as if he could still frighten her. It didn’t work.

They took him out into the wet night. The drive lights made the rain visible in the air. Under the canopy, neighbours shifted, watching. Someone coughed, muffled, and the cold air pushed in again.

June stayed inside. She waited until Simon was off the mat, out of the doorway, and the officers had him.

Then she closed the front door.

Not a slam. Just the lock catching.

The sound cut down the noise from outside. It also cut down the chance of someone wandering in or out and deciding to go looking.

Plates sat on the sideboard. A bowl of olives still had a spoon in it. Wet coats touched on the chair. A lipstick mark stayed on a glass.

The woman officer turned to June.

“Now,” she said. “The child.”

June nodded. She didn’t speak until she was at the pantry. She didn’t want the room’s eyes fixed on that door. She moved as if she was going to fetch kitchen towel.

Penelope, behind her, said, “Do you want me to, ”

“No,” June said, and it came out sharper than she intended.

Penelope shut her mouth.

June opened the pantry door.

Inside, the shelves were still neat. Labels faced forward. The cereal tub sat where it had always sat, tape edge catching the light. The inner door was shut.

June put her hand on it and paused. Her fingers shook. She pressed them flat against the surface until they steadied.

“Leo,” she said, softly. “It’s June.”

No answer at first. Then a movement, faint. A breath.

“It’s safe now,” June said. “He’s gone. Police are here. You can come out.”

The inner door opened a fraction. Leo’s face appeared, pale under the pantry light. His eyes darted past June, taking in what he could without stepping out.

June stepped back to give him space. She did not reach for him.

“You don’t have to come all the way into the room,” she said. “Just come to me. All right?”

Leo nodded once. His mouth opened and shut. He swallowed.

He stepped out of the corridor. He had his hoodie on. His arms were bare below the sleeves, thin. His hair stuck up in places where he’d run

his hands through it too many times.

The open-plan room was full of faces.

Leo stopped.

A neighbour near the island shifted aside and kept back.

June stood beside him, close enough that he could lean into her if he chose. He didn't.

The woman officer approached slowly, hands visible.

"Hi," she said. "I'm one of the officers who's here to help. What's your name?"

Leo's eyes flicked to June and back.

"Leo," he said.

"All right, Leo," the officer said. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Leo shook his head.

"Have you eaten today?"

Leo hesitated, then nodded, small.

"Do you feel safe right now?"

Leo looked at June. Then he looked toward the front hall, as if Simon might still be there.

"Yes," he said, but his voice didn't match the word.

June watched his hands. His fingers kept opening and closing against the side seam of his hoodie.

The younger officer stood a little back, looking at Leo carefully without staring.

The woman officer said, "Okay. We're going to take you somewhere quieter in a minute. We need to ask a few questions first, just basics. Is your mum here?"

Leo's mouth tightened.

"No," he said.

June kept her eyes on the officer and didn't step into that gap.

The officer nodded. "Okay. We'll deal with that. June said there's video evidence. Can you tell me about that?"

Leo's eyes moved to the TV, still paused. He flinched slightly.

"It's on my account," he said.

"What account?" the officer asked.

June stepped in before Leo could be pushed into explaining a system he barely cared about.

"He saved it to cloud storage through his handheld console," June said. "He showed me earlier. That's what I cast to the TV. It's not just on the car. It's in his account. The device is in the corridor."

The younger officer nodded. "Okay. We can secure that properly. Leo, you don't need to show it again to this room."

Leo's shoulders dropped slightly, then tensed again.

Behind them, the neighbours shifted. Some looked away.

Penelope's voice came again, softer this time. "I knew something was off," she said.

June didn't look at her.

Leo's head turned quickly, then he stopped and stared at the floor.

June's phone buzzed in her hand.

Her breathing caught. It wasn't Maureen. Maureen wouldn't call now. Maureen would text, blunt, then ring if she had to.

June glanced at the screen.

ELENA.

Her thumb hovered. The first impulse was to ignore it.

The woman officer's face stayed patient, but waiting.

June answered. She tapped Speaker before she lifted it.

"Hello," June said.

Elena's voice came through, sharp with static. "June. What is happening in my house."

June kept her voice level. "Police are here."

A pause.

Elena said, "Why."

The woman officer stepped a half pace closer, close enough to hear clearly.

"Simon has been arrested," June said. "And Leo is with the police."

A noise came down the line, a short inhale.

Elena's voice rose. "Arrested. For what. What have you done."

June closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, Leo's face had gone still. His eyes were on the floor, but his jaw was tight.

"I didn't do it," June said. "There's dashcam footage. People saw it. Penelope called the police."

Elena's laugh came out, brittle. "Penelope. Of course she did. And you let her. This is, June, you were paid to look after the house. To keep it safe. You've invited the whole street in. You've, "

"I kept a child safe," June said.

Elena spoke over her. "You are staff. You do not get to decide what happens to my family."

June's grip tightened on the phone.

"The police are in your kitchen," June said. "You can speak to them. You can come home. But you don't get to turn this into a complaint about

work.”

Elena went quiet.

June didn't fill it.

After a moment Elena said, lower, “Put Simon on.”

June looked at the officer. The woman officer shook her head once.

“He's not here,” June said.

Elena's breath came faster. “Where is he.”

“With police,” June said.

Elena said, “And Leo?”

June glanced at Leo before she answered. “He's here. He's safe. He's with police.”

Leo turned his head away from the phone then. Not dramatically. Just a small movement, shoulder angling away from Elena's voice.

Elena said, “Leo, darling, ”

Leo didn't respond.

June spoke into the phone. “He's not talking to you right now.”

Elena's voice snapped. “You don't tell me, ”

The woman officer stepped in. “Ms Miller?” she said into the speaker. “This is the police. We need you to return to the address, or to tell us where you are. We will be contacting you formally. Do you understand?”

Elena didn't answer at first. June could hear her breathing.

“Yes,” Elena said finally.

The woman officer said, “Thank you. We'll be in touch.”

June ended the call.

Leo's eyes lifted briefly, met June's for a second, then dropped again.

The younger officer said, “Leo, we’re going to take you out to our car in a minute, okay? You’ll sit in the warm. We’ll call someone from safeguarding to talk to you. You’re not in trouble.”

Leo nodded once. “Okay.”

June saw his hands shaking now, properly. His whole forearm.

She wanted to put her hand on his shoulder. She didn’t. She waited until he looked at her.

“Do you want your shoes?” she asked quietly.

Leo blinked. “They’re... I’ve got them.”

He had been in socks for quiet. June looked down and saw he had trainers on now, laces loose.

“Tie them,” she said, and it came out soft.

Leo crouched and fumbled at the laces. June watched his fingers struggle, then settle.

Behind them, the neighbours began to move again, not toward the pantry line, but toward the door.

A woman by the hall chair lifted her coat and said, to no one in particular, “Well.”

Her partner nodded, face tight. “We should go.”

They went.

Others followed in small groups. Not in a rush. Just a quiet pulling away.

Some people avoided June’s eyes. Some looked at her as if she’d made a mess in a clean house that they now couldn’t ignore. One man gave her a short nod. Not friendly, not unfriendly.

Penelope lingered.

She stood by the island and picked up a plate, then put it down again.

“You’ll want help clearing up,” Penelope said.

June didn’t answer at once. Her attention stayed on Leo and the officers moving him toward the hall.

The woman officer held the front door open. Cold air came in and made Leo flinch.

June heard the younger officer say, “Step down, mind the mat,” as they went.

Leo went out.

June stood in the hall and watched him cross the threshold. She didn’t follow him outside. She didn’t want the street to see Leo’s face longer than they had to.

The door shut. The lock caught.

With fewer bodies, the house sounded different. The hum of an appliance came through now, steady. The air smelled of warm pastry.

June looked at the sideboard. The platter of sausage rolls was still there, hardly touched. A few had been taken and set back down.

Penelope moved beside June, closer than she’d been all evening.

“I can stay,” she said. “If you want. Just for a bit.”

June heard the pause before the offer.

“Yes,” she said. “If you can. Help me clear. Then go.”

Penelope nodded quickly.

They started with the glasses.

June took two at a time. Penelope took three, then four, then decided she was fine and carried five, which was unnecessary. One glass clinked against another and made a sharp sound in the quiet kitchen.

June stacked them on the counter by the sink. She ran water and rinsed lipstick marks off rims with her thumb, not because she had to

right now, but because the action kept her hands from shaking.

Penelope opened her tote and began putting her labelled cups back inside, muttering as she went.

“Honestly,” she said. “Olives. Who brings olives. I brought cups. Proper cups. And then, ”

June didn’t answer.

Penelope stopped talking when she noticed June wasn’t giving her anything.

June gathered plates from the sideboard and carried them to the counter, then tipped used napkins into the bin. Penelope picked up the bowl of crisps and the foil tray of sausage rolls, hesitated, and set them down again.

June lifted the half bottle of white wine and put it in the fridge. The fridge light came on and showed labelled leftovers stacked in sealed containers.

She shut the door.

Penelope said, “He’ll have to sell, won’t he. After all this.”

“Penelope,” June said, and her voice was tired rather than sharp. “Not now.”

Penelope flushed. “Sorry. I’m only saying.”

June went to the pantry door. Not to open it. To check the floor.

Near the threshold, on the tile, lay a pair of socks. Grey. Slightly balled. Leo’s.

June picked them up.

They smelled of sweat and detergent from someone else’s washing.

She took them to the counter and folded them into a small square.

Penelope watched her do it and went quiet.

The doorbell didn't ring. No more arrivals.

June checked her phone. No new calls. No new texts. The screen was smeared with fingerprints.

The woman officer returned inside after a moment, rain on her shoulders. She had taken her hat off and her hair stuck to her forehead.

"June," she said. "We're taking Leo with us now. Social services will be contacted. We'll also need a statement from you. Not tonight, unless you want to give one. But we will take your details and arrange it properly."

June nodded. "All right."

"And your phone," the officer said. "We'll need those photos and the footage details."

June held it out. "Everything I have is on there. The photos, and messages to Penelope. The casting was from my phone to the TV."

The officer nodded. "We'll take it briefly to capture the images. You'll get it back. Do you have any other evidence?"

June thought of the damp blazer that vanished, the cereal bowl, the lime turned, the towel by the cloakroom footprint.

Small things. All of it true.

"The dashcam footage is from Leo's account," June said. "On his handheld console. He can show you if he wants. Please don't make him do it in front of people."

"We won't," the officer said.

June swallowed. Her throat hurt.

"Is the cyclist alive," June said.

The officer's face held steady. "We can't discuss details. There are injuries. An investigation is ongoing."

June nodded.

“And the gate,” June said. “It’s been locked. Remotely. For days. I couldn’t open it with the app or fob.”

The officer looked at her. “Can you open it now?”

June took her fob from her pocket. She pressed it.

A beep sounded from outside, faint through the glass. Then the gate motor started, a steady mechanical sound.

June stared at the front window.

The gate opened.

Her hands went still around the fob.

Penelope made a noise under her breath. “So he could have opened it the whole time.”

June didn’t answer.

The officer said, “It’s open now. We’ll secure it as part of the scene, but you’re no longer trapped here.”

June nodded again. Her shoulders stayed tight; her hands didn’t stop shaking.

“Do you need somewhere to go tonight?” the officer asked.

June shook her head. “I’ve got the staff room. I’m meant to be here.”

The officer’s expression eased, a fraction. “That’s not your job now. But I understand. We’ll be in touch.”

She handed June a card with a name and number.

June took it carefully and put it on the counter by the landline, beside the memo tray where the household card had sat earlier.

The officer went.

June stood still for a moment, listening. Footsteps on the drive. A car door closing. Voices low. Then the gate motor again as it closed behind them.

Penelope looked at June as if waiting to be told what to do next.

“Go home,” June said.

Penelope blinked. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” June said. “I’m sure.”

Penelope picked up her tote and keys. The keyring clacked, too loud in the quiet kitchen.

At the door, Penelope paused.

“You did the right thing,” she said.

June didn’t know what face she made. Her throat tightened.

Penelope added, quickly, “Even if it’s a bit... you know. It’ll be a thing now.”

“Yes,” June said.

Penelope went.

June shut the door behind her. She stood with her hand on the handle until the latch clicked fully.

Then she walked back to the kitchen, not fast, and sat at the table.

The chair was cold through her jeans.

Mugs sat on the counter, one with a teabag still in it, grey-brown and forgotten. June picked it up and tipped it into the sink. The teabag fell with a wet slap.

She filled the kettle. The water ran and splashed against stainless steel. Her hands shook more now. No audience. No need to keep them still.

When the kettle clicked off, she poured water over a teabag and watched the colour spread through the mug. She added milk by habit and set the bottle back.

June carried the mug to the table. She didn’t take a biscuit.

Her phone buzzed once on the table. A text.

MAUREEN: You alive? You ok?

June stared at it for a second too long.

Her fingers moved slowly. She typed.

June: I will be.

She sent it.

The words sat there on the screen, plain and not entirely true yet.

She took a sip of tea. It was hot enough to sting her tongue.

The house around her was back to its baseline sounds: fridge hum, a faint whirr from something in the utility, the quiet tick of the clock over the oven. The TV was black now.

June looked at the stacked glassware on the counter and the plates waiting by the sink. They could wait until morning.

But she knew what would happen if she went to bed without writing anything down.

Simon would have a solicitor. Elena would have friends. There would be a story about a house-sitter who overstepped, who brought the street in, who used a child, who stole footage.

Money bought smoother versions of events.

June stood, went to the drawer by the island, and took out a notepad and a pen. She chose the cheap biro that worked, not the nice pen that sometimes didn't.

Back at the table, she put the mug to one side.

At the top of the page, she wrote the date.

Then she wrote, in plain lines:

Arrived. Gate open.

Rules. No visitors.

Blazer damp in mudroom.

Night noises.

Cupboard ajar. Cereal bowl.

Loft hatch.

Leo found.

Hit cyclist. Airport road. Rain. No stop.

Gate locked. Could not open.

Simon returned. Holiday Mode.

Garage. Cloth on bumper. Damage. Dark smear.

Phone fragments in bin.

Street Drinks. Witnesses.

TV cast. Photo then video.

Police called.

Simon detained.

Leo safe.

She kept the lines short. No guesses.

Her hand cramped. She flexed her fingers, then added the names she knew: Penelope Gable. Maureen texted. Elena call.

Outside, the rain eased to a lighter fall. June could hear it on the glass by the terrace.

The gate, now, would open if she pressed the fob. The fob edge pressed into her palm, and her chest ached with the fact of it.

She took another sip of tea, then wrote again, careful to keep her handwriting legible.

After a while, she read the page back and saw the night in the same order it had happened.

When she paused, pen tip hovering, nothing changed around her. The table stayed under her forearms. The mug cooled. Glassware waited on the counter, and the folded socks sat beside it.

June put the pen down next to the notepad and held the mug with both hands until the shaking eased.

She stayed at the table, shoulders heavy, eyes on the page, while the night carried on outside the bright, exposed house.