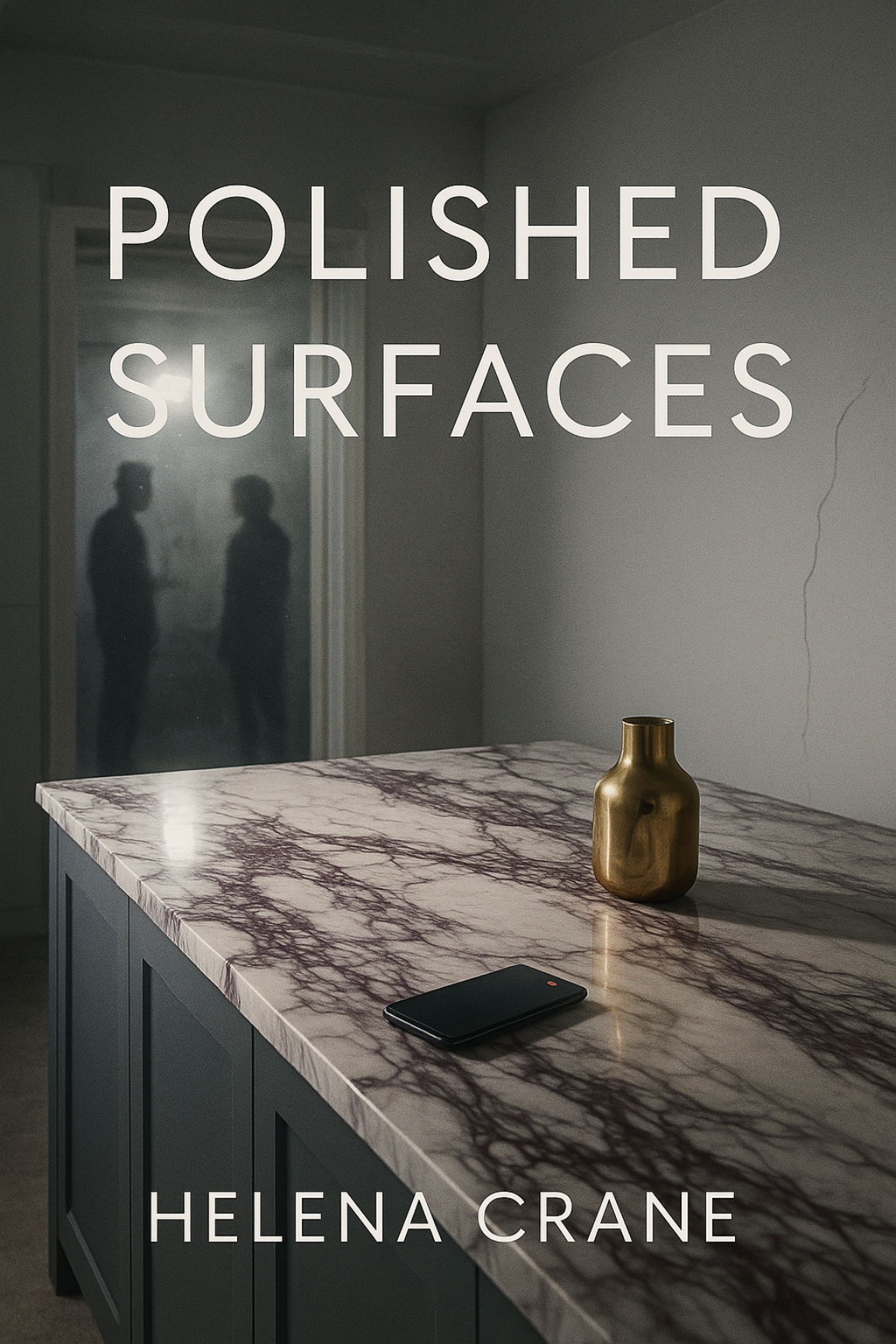


POLISHED SURFACES

A photograph of a modern interior scene. In the foreground, a dark wooden table with a thick, polished marble top is shown. The marble has a complex pattern of dark veins. On the table, a black smartphone lies flat, and a small, rounded brass vase stands upright. The background is dimly lit, showing the silhouettes of two people standing in a doorway or hallway. The overall mood is sophisticated and minimalist.

HELENA CRANE

Polished Surfaces

by Helena Crane

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Chapter 1

The Aspirant Object

She pressed record. The red dot sat in the corner of the screen, small and absolute, and Chloe lifted her phone the way she had taught herself to lift it, high angle, elbow tucked in, chin tilted to produce the impression of candour without the reality of it. The corridor ahead was long and narrow; the floorboards dipped slightly near the radiator; the paint on the skirting had bubbled to a texture that resisted the word patina and insisted on damp. She moved anyway, panning slowly, her hand steady from practice and caffeine, the lens skimming across the closed front room (don't show the wallpaper, it would look like dereliction rather than character), then down the corridor toward the rectangle of greyish light at the rear where the garden would eventually be. She said, in the tone she used for disclosure that was technically accurate but strategically vague, Potential.

The smell reached her on the second step toward the kitchen, the sour, earthy rot she could forgive in a cellar but not in a place that would eventually contain a stone island, and it sat in her throat until she exhaled and named it 'old house' for the benefit of the story. She wiped her phone screen with the cuff of her jumper and checked the framing again. Her free hand found the estate agent's leaflet folded in her tote, the paper soft from handling; it offered 'good bones', 'scope to extend', 'transitional area' in bullet points that had the aggressive confidence of a gym class. Behind her, Elliot said something about the meter box and she cut his voice off with a small angle change, a movement she had perfected in restaurants and showrooms and marriages.

'You've got to admire the proportions,' she said to the camera, which was to say to the people who would tell her, later, that they could imagine themselves living here if only someone showed them how. 'Original cornices. Tall ceilings. Light at both ends. This could be something.' She let the last word hang for a beat, like a promise without a contract.

The agent hovered in the doorway to the front room, adding a grin that did not move his eyes. 'These houses have good bones,' he said, as if it was a diagnosis and not a sales pitch. 'You've seen the neighbourhood? It's an area in transition, lots of young families, creatives.' He gestured past them to the street, where a skip and an artisanal coffee place coexisted at an uneasy angle. 'You can get in at the sweet spot.'

'Good bones,' she repeated into the phone as if agreeing with herself in the future. 'Transitional. I like that.' She disliked the words; she used them anyway. Behind the phone's glossy surface, Elliot stepped into frame for a second and stepped out again, tall and careful not to knock against any part of the building. He had learned to move as if his body was negotiable space.

'Can you smell that?' he said, low enough that it presented as intimacy and not panic.

'Old house,' she said, still filming, because there were only so many admissions a brand could survive before it turned into a confessional nobody paid for. She followed the corridor into the kitchen: a tiled floor laid without conviction tilting toward the drain, a window patched with old plastic where glass had cracked, a lean-to attached by hope and screws. The cold in here was a fact rather than an atmosphere. She could feel it through the soles of her trainers. She tilted the phone upward to catch the light through the polycarbonate roof; the panel edges were browned and brittle at the seals. 'Imagine this all opened up,' she said. 'A garden that reads from the kitchen like another room. A long table. A corner banquette. Built-in storage all the way to the ceiling.' She heard the velocity in her voice, the way specifics covered a lack, and did nothing to slow it.

Elliot crouched near a damp patch that had developed its own ecology. 'We'd need to strip it back to brick,' he said. 'Sort the joists. New electrics. New everything. That's not a lick of paint.'

'We'll manage logistics,' she said, which meant there would be a spreadsheet and meetings with men who would call her 'love' while quoting for items she didn't understand and then pretending the numbers were a personality test. 'It's sequencing. Demolition, first fix, second fix, finishing. We do this properly, there's a world in it.'

The agent smiled wider. 'This is a classic. And with your... what is it you do again? Content? You'll have the right eye. I can see it. You'll make it sing.'

'I style spaces that help people breathe,' Chloe said, automatically, and Elliot's head turned as if to say, We agreed not to do the elevator pitch in front of men with clipboards. She ignored him. 'Six months,' she told her phone. 'We could do it in six. A transformation series. From wreck to rest. We'll share everything.' The last two words made her tongue catch hard against her teeth. Everything was not a feasible category.

Elliot tapped the pipework emerging from the wall; it gave a hollow reply against the old plaster. 'We should get a proper survey. A real one. Not the cheap bundle with the mortgage in principle. I'd want a second viewing at least.'

'If we pause they'll take another offer,' she said, still in the tone she used for weddings and collaborations and other events where consent, once filmed, became non-refundable. 'Momentum is everything. It's a chain reaction. We're ready; we can move. There's no chain.' The last part came out too fast; they were not chain-free, they were two people with an overdraft and an audience and a tolerance for ambiguity that varied by morning.

She moved past him into the lean-to, which was more skin than structure, and stepped carefully onto a patch of plywood that gave under

her weight. Elliot followed, because that was who he was, cautious and present, even when his caution was not welcome. She turned the phone inward for a second and let her face occupy the frame: neutrals, clean lines, light; everything about her said: trust me. Then she lowered the device and put a hand on his sleeve. It was a good sleeve. Merino, in a colour that described money without naming it. 'This will make us,' she said, and watched him. He looked at the roof and smoothed his cuff.

'Will the brand carry that risk, or will we spend eighteen months living in a corridor?' He was not combative; he was working something out and doing the work out loud.

'It's fine,' she said (not fine), and corrected herself. 'It's just logistics.' She let the agent wander away toward the garden to give them 'space' (as if space were an object he could loan), then added, softer, 'The brand needs this. And we, ' She did not finish the sentence. The rest of it was a question that had not delivered returns recently. 'We'll be fine. Sponsors will want in. Everyone wants before-and-after. We've done it with rented flats. We can do it with a house. This scale is what moves people.' She didn't say moves money, although that was the content of the thought.

He studied the edges of the polycarbonate and the problem of rain. 'You're saying it's worth the risk.'

'I'm saying risk is a way to collapse the distance between now and the thing we keep not doing.' She smiled, the smile she used when she was too close to admission and needed to make it look like a choice. 'Let's make an offer. This afternoon. Before anyone else does.'

The agent reappeared with the smile of a man who had made a career from delivering inevitabilities. 'So, thoughts? It won't be here next week.'

'We'll be in touch this afternoon,' Chloe said, and let her phone catch their joined silhouettes against the cold glass, two people who liked to think they looked like a plan.

The cafe stood inside a showroom that priced reassurance at a rate she would not admit on camera. The tables were plywood, deliberate plywood, sanded and sealed to look like the idea of utility, and the counter was a pale stone so smooth it felt synthetic. Scented candles burned along a ledge, expensive citrus attempting to bully the smell of another building out of her nose. She sat with her laptop open because that was what adults did when they wanted to turn anxiety into a task. Elliot queued for coffees and a pastry; he was good at purchasing gestures.

She drafted the email to the agent first, because gratification. Subject line: Offer, [Street Name] Terrace. She typed their number, the one they had said to each other in the Uber as if it were a weather forecast, not an act of faith. 'We are absolutely thrilled to proceed,' she wrote, which sounded like commitment; 'We are in a strong position and can move quickly,' which was less so; 'Proof of funds can be provided upon request,' which assumed a future in which they had more proof than faith. She added a line about respecting the seller's timeline. Polite. Controlled. She checked the body for adjectives; too many made her sound insecure; too few made her sound arrogant. She reduced one 'very'. She signed off with her full name and the title she sometimes left off, Design Consultant, because titles created shape where substance was not yet available.

Then she opened a new draft to their bank contact. 'Following up on our decision in principle,' she wrote. 'We're looking to revise the upper limit in light of a strategic opportunity, ' she paused, tried 'brand-aligned opportunity', then deleted 'brand'. It sounded like she was trying to sell resilience. 'This project presents significant content value with demonstrable audience engagement, which will support ancillary income streams.' The words worked like bubble wrap; they protected and distanced. 'Given our capacity and timeline, we'd appreciate expedited processing.' She added a smiley her agent friend had once called 'charm without liability', then removed it. Too eager.

Elliot slid into the bench opposite, balancing two cups and the pastry. 'Your drip thing,' he said, because he would not call it an Americano now that the barista had called it that. 'They had the almond.' He set the plate down and looked at her screen. He set his phone beside the laptop. 'Show me.'

She turned the laptop and watched his eyes track the text. His index finger moved to a line. 'Maybe not 'strategic opportunity'. It reads like a deck.'

'Everything reads like a deck,' she said, but she deleted 'strategic' and replaced it with 'time-sensitive'. He nodded. He was editing, not contesting. A relief and not a relief. His finger went to 'absolutely' first. He changed 'absolutely thrilled' to 'keen', and she watched how careful he was not to be the man who took the keyboard. He was good at not being that man. He was good at several men.

Her phone lit up next to the laptop with the story she had posted from the viewing. Heart icons blinked; comments assembled into a column that told her she was brave for showing something raw and that the house had 'so much potential' and that they couldn't wait to follow along. 'I had twenty thousand story views in two hours,' she said, which meant: the audience is here; the audience is a god.

He blew on his coffee and watched the steam rise. His face stayed blank. 'Views aren't a deposit.'

'No,' she said, 'but momentum is a strategy.' She did not fully believe the sentence; belief was a flex, performed until the muscle existed. She hovered over the send button on the agent email, felt prickling heat at the base of her neck, and pressed send. The haptic tap registered under her thumb. The wheel held for a beat, then the outbox cleared. The screen flashed. The email left. Flakes fell onto the napkin, not the table. She did not breathe for a count of two because she liked to perform control for her own body.

'You sent it,' he said, as if this were news.

'We sent it,' she corrected, and lifted her phone to add a coy story, 'Big news soon; staying calm', a line that collapsed into the smallest possible promise and still felt like a contract. She used her left hand to angle the coffee cup into the shot; she published the image; she put the phone face down; she turned it over again within seconds, because she was not a monk.

Elliot's work phone buzzed against the table. He glanced at the screen and his mouth changed shape. 'I have to take this. It's ten minutes.' He stood, already halfway toward the door, and added, 'Just, don't send anything else. Yet.' It was not unkind. It was not exactly a joke. He disappeared into the hall between the showroom and the lavatories, the acoustics of which gave every voice the same competent distance.

A notification from the agent arrived before the pastry settled. 'Thanks for your offer. Can you send proof of funds and solicitor details? The vendor is open to a quick sale.' The agent included a winking face she hated for its assumption of complicity. She replied: 'Funds confirmation incoming today from broker; solicitor details by end of day. We can proceed at pace.' She copied her bank contact into a separate, more aggressive follow-up. The dot appeared beside their name; read; no reply. She felt the adrenalin convert to a kind of hunger and took a bite of the pastry, which tasted like almond and the pasty mouthfeel of decision.

She texted Jas: 'Calmly excited. Tell me which emojis say sane adult with vision.' She added the head-exploding one and deleted it. She typed the tiny house and the sparkle and deleted both. She sent nothing but the words and watched the typing bubble appear and disappear and appear and disappear like chest compressions.

Elliot returned, the air colder around him from outside or tone. He sat and set his phone back by the laptop. He gripped the table edge; his knuckles pale. He nudged it until it sat flush, then turned it face up again, because he was not a monk either. 'They want proof of funds,' she said.

'Of course they do,' he said. 'We'll get it to them.' He looked at her laptop with the same expression he had used for a waterfall in Iceland: nice in theory, impractical in reality, worth it for the photo.

She wiped her phone screen, smearing the faint dust halo left by the viewing into a cleaner shine. The citrus candle on the ledge stuttered and recovered. She did not like that it made her think of the lean-to roof. The emails were sent; waiting started.

The call came as they climbed the stairs to their flat with a bag that made them look like people who could make simple decisions about dinner. Chloe answered on the third ring. The agent spoke briskly, delivering details in a practiced rhythm. 'Good news. The vendor likes your position. They're accepting, subject to survey. They want a quick exchange, four weeks if possible, completion two weeks after. Can you proceed on that basis?'

She looked at Elliot, who had stopped with the key still in his hand as if he could pause a building. The numbers in the sentence were not numbers but accelerants. Her grip on the bag shifted; her palm cold. 'Yes,' she said, feeling the shape of the word settle in her mouth. 'We can do that.'

'Brilliant. Send through the solicitor details and proof of funds when you can. I'll circulate the memorandum of sale tomorrow morning.' The agent's 'brilliant' had already moved on to the next person.

She ended the call and caught Elliot's eye. 'Accepted,' she said, and for a second they were two people on a boxy staircase holding a bag and a future. 'Subject to survey.'

'Which we haven't booked,' he said. He unlocked the door and pushed with his shoulder, a habit from a past rental with a swollen frame. Their flat smelled of laundry and last night's garlic. It was, by any

measure, fine.

'I'll book someone,' she said. 'I've got names.' Names were her currency; she had made a living from accumulating them. She set the bag on the counter and opened a cupboard for two glasses, the everyday ones that had survived five moves by being neither good nor bad. She pulled a bottle of prosecco from the fridge door where it had been waiting for an occasion to become a situation and eased the cap off with a twist that let out a small, apologetic pop.

'We haven't discussed the timeline,' he said, which was accurate; they had named a schedule without examining its joints.

'We've discussed it,' she said, filling both glasses to the same line because fairness was a muscle. 'We just haven't argued about it. Survey will be fine. People buy with worse. The agent said they want quick.' She did not say: quick is the content; the arc hates delays.

He took his phone into the hallway to answer a message. He spoke in the low, efficient tone he used to contain urgency. She heard fragments that could have belonged to any respectable conversation: 'end of week,' 'small amount,' 'liquidate,' 'yes, broker, not a problem.' She didn't follow him. He returned with his expression reset to neutral. He put his phone beside his glass and lined the long edge with the worktop until it sat square. 'We should call your solicitor tonight.'

'Already emailed her.' She lifted her glass. 'To good bones.'

He lifted his reluctantly, because he knew she would read reluctance as disloyalty. 'To bones.' They drank. First mouthful: relief. Second: the particular metallic tang of cheap bubbles when they met the back of the tongue. She set her glass down and felt the small click on the counter travel up into her teeth.

She should have left it then, the soft moment, but there were narratives to braid. She took out her phone and angled herself against the least untidy corner of the kitchen: a clean cutting board, a bowl of lemons that had never seen zest, an arrangement of cooking utensils that

suggested use. She recorded her face and a measured portion of the background. 'We have some news,' she said, trying to keep the shake out of her breath because people heard it even if they couldn't name it. 'We've had an offer accepted, subject to survey. We're going to take you on a fully transparent journey from wreck to rest.' If it was on the grid, it was already done. 'We're setting a date for the housewarming in, ' she paused, counted, smiled, ', six months.' She hit stop. She watched it back twice, once for tone and once for wallpaper. She posted.

The comments arrived immediately, like rain she hadn't predicted because she had removed the weather app years ago out of spite. 'Queen of calm,' someone wrote. 'I'd trust you with my life,' wrote another, which was the kind of sentence that should make both parties uncomfortable. 'Brave. Needed this today,' another. Brave was a word people used when they wanted someone else to risk something.

A message from Jas came through, belated and honest. 'Proud of you if you're okay. Are you okay?' The second sentence had weight. Chloe read the whole thing and made a decision that had nothing to do with honesty. 'Yes,' she typed. 'So ready.' Then she added: 'It's fine.' She did not add a question mark because questions were oxygen to the wrong parts of the conversation.

She opened her calendar and booked an introductory meeting with a builder whose name had arrived via a friend who used phrases like 'reliable' and 'not a cowboy' in ways that were meant to reassure. Early next week. It slotted into the grid like an item bought in the wrong size. She sent the agent the name of the solicitor she knew would answer emails at seven in the evening because boundary issues were a service in this economy. She followed up with the bank contact again and received a response that said, essentially, 'We're on it' in a tone that implied they were on other things first.

Elliot came back into the kitchen and leaned against the counter in a way that was supposed to read as relaxed. 'We should cost it properly.'

'We will,' she said. 'Tomorrow.' She poured the rest of the prosecco into their glasses because throwing it away felt like the wrong metaphor. They clinked the thin rims together in the kind of toast that assumed but did not guarantee. The bubbles fizzed without enthusiasm.

She watched Elliot check his watch and then his phone and then the watch again. He didn't say he was worried. He didn't need to. She took another sip and waited for the taste to improve. It didn't.

They stood for a while without the kind of talking that sorted anything. Cars went along the road outside with the constant sound that never quite stopped in this part of the city. She wiped her phone screen and set it down, screen facing up because she didn't trust herself not to look otherwise. A new comment came in: 'We should do this more often.' It was meant to be about content. She felt it as a threat.

'We're really doing this,' Elliot said, which was the declarative mood she had asked for.

'We are,' she said. The word settled between them, heavy and exact.

This was happening.

Chapter 2

The Performance of Demolition

By the time access was sorted, the house was colder than the street.

She held the sledgehammer the way people held a mic at a wedding, careful wrist, thumb and forefinger meeting like a rehearsal for control. The head of the thing marked the cuff of her jumper with a grey smear she should have minded and didn't. The corridor of the terrace took the three of them in a single file: Chloe, Elliot behind her, then the bag with water bottles and a packet of dust masks nobody would actually wear. The hallway was cold. The plaster dust on the skirting had drawn a faint line where someone's hip had brushed past.

"We're bringing her back," she said into the phone, the lens on wide because tight angles made everything look worse, and pressed record. She kept the frame on her face for two seconds, then moved it to the corridor and the patchwork of previous owners' attempts: paint in five shades of beige, a thermostat crooked by a centimetre that made her jaw tighten. "Day one. Demo day. Professional team only for structural, obviously." She put the last word where it belonged, clipped and calm. The camera showed the sledgehammer in her hand. It was borrowed from a neighbour who had said "Try not to hit anything load-bearing" and laughed. She had laughed too.

Elliot stood by the arch into the front room with the second hammer, cradling it like a prop that shouldn't be allowed near furniture. He glanced at her screen to check if he was visible. He adjusted his jumper and moved into the sliver of space she had left for him. He looked good, tidy, controlled, a person a contractor would send a proper invoice to

without adding a percentage for chaos.

A van door closed outside. Footfall came up the path, a weight that matched the tools. Milos, the recommendation from her friend, stepped into the corridor without ceremony, the kind of entrance that reminded everyone who was about to make decisions matter. His jacket had been on many jobs. His boots left mottled traces against the hall tiles. He saw the hammers and kept his face still.

“We’ll get some content and then we’re out of your way,” Chloe said, as if he had asked.

“You are in my way if you swing that,” Milos said. He nodded at the hammer in her hand and then at the wall where the plaster had already buckled. “You film. My lads will do the work.” He took in the corridor’s hairline cracks, the architrave with two coats too many, the plugged holes from old wires that had not been made good. He lifted a hand and pressed the plaster with his thumb. It sank a fraction. No comment.

She lowered the hammer and let Elliot take it. It felt like a relief disguised as compliance. “We want to start at the back,” she said, leading him toward the kitchen. “Get the lean-to off, open sightlines, check the joists.” She could hear herself. She sounded like a template printed on card.

The kitchen floor tilted toward the drain and announced it in the way her ankles adjusted to stand straight. The window had been patched with a rectangle of brittle plastic; the edges had browned. On the internal corner by the back door a tide mark of damp ran to the height of her knee; it made a boundary line on the old paint. Milos bent and pressed a moisture meter to the plaster. The numbers lit up. She didn’t need translation. He slid the probe into the timber lining the door and withdrew it wet.

“You have ingress from three points,” he said. He held up three fingers. “Roof, gutter, ground. The roof is wrong material. The downpipe does nothing. The ground levels outside are high to the threshold.” He

looked up and traced the lean-to roof where the polycarbonate panels overlapped with no conviction. He flicked the light switch. The bulb worked and then didn't. He opened the old consumer unit and looked at the fuses without touching them. "Electrics are old and wrong. That's a full rewire."

Chloe filmed his hand near the meter, then turned the camera to the back wall and the line of rot at the skirting. She kept the phone steady, the way she had taught herself to do when she didn't like what the world had put in the frame. "So we'll strip back to brick," she said, offering his conclusion before he had to produce it.

"If you want it safe," he said. He ran a hand across the ceiling and brought it down flecked with old plaster. "Load-bearing wall here," he added, touching the span between kitchen and lean-to, a stub of wall with a patinated steel angle that hinted at an old intervention. "We need a structural engineer to do calcs for a proper beam. We cannot just make a hole because Instagram likes a big opening." He said Instagram in the way people said a city they didn't trust.

Elliot held his arms across his chest for a second and then placed his hands flat on the worktop, which had the grain of a laminate pretending to be oak. "And timeline for this stage?" he asked, polite, a man who could accept bad news if it came in bullet points.

Milos shrugged in a way that always preceded numbers. "Demo, strip-out, waste away, scaffolding, engineer, beam, first fix electrics and plumbing, DPC, insulation, plaster, second fix. If everything smooth, you are at six months when you are putting skirtings." He looked at Chloe when he said the last word.

She felt heat rise at the base of her neck and suppressed a cough. Dust had already found the soft places. "We set a date," she said, light and throwaway, "for a housewarming in six." She added a smile that felt practised.

“I will not sign my name to unsafe work to hit a party,” Milos said. He put his tape measure away with a snap that sounded definitive without being theatrical. “You want fast? We can run more men for demo and first fix. But you cannot cure plaster in two days. You cannot put floor before screed is dry. You cannot test electrics early. Building control will not come because you do stories. You can’t schedule a drying time around a reel.”

“Of course,” Chloe said. “We’re totally aligned on safety.” (they weren’t). She swallowed. She didn’t say the rest. She held out her hand for his paperwork. He gave her a sheaf of printed pages held with a bulldog clip. The font was small, the numbers at the bottom dense. She ran her eyes down the columns and saw the total before her brain presented the rest. Her grip tightened on the bulldog clip; the edge pressed into her thumb. Her number was half this. She kept her face still. “Okay,” she said, because people with budgets said okay first and swore later.

Elliot glanced over her shoulder. He was good at this angle; he could absorb without appearing to intrude. His throat moved. “Is there anything in finishes we can pull back to offset the structural?” he said, aiming for practical. “We’re flexible on the kitchen spec. We can save there.”

“Structure first,” Milos said. “Or you don’t do it. Finishes are last money. If there is no money by then, you keep the old kitchen and it will be safe. If you put new kitchen on bad floor with damp, you will change it again.” He looked at Chloe as if to check she had heard a version for the camera and a version for herself.

She nodded and kept her mouth at an angle that read as receptive. “We totally agree,” she said into the phone with the record light now off. She flicked it on again by habit and filmed the bulldog clip in her hand, the back wall, the line where paint met rot. “We’re listening and learning,” she said (she was, selectively) to the camera, and then, to Milos alone, “We want to do this properly.” She lowered the phone. “Off camera: talk me through your sequencing, and what’s realistic with

additional crew.”

He ran through it again; the order didn’t change. “If I start Monday with strip-out, I need deposit now to book skip, scaffold, and lads. Materials we buy in week one are insulation, boards, some timber. Your back wall is coming down. We need temporary support. That is not quick content. That is messy. People think nothing is happening because they cannot see tiles.”

“Messy is content, actually,” Chloe said, the sentence emerging before she remembered she meant to be deferential. She added, softer, “We’re not trying to get in your way.” She pressed the smudge on her cuff with her thumb and then stopped because the smear spread.

“Deposit,” Milos repeated. He checked the hook on his tape measure with a thumbnail. “Today. We start. Or I put the lads on another job and you wait three weeks.”

“We’ll sort it now,” Chloe said. She looked at Elliot. He was watching the back door. His face had gone to that expression that meant he was counting and already somewhere else. “It’s fine,” she added, in the tone that had gotten them across several thresholds. “It’s just logistics.”

He blinked, returned to the room, nodded. “Yes. We’ll transfer today.” He didn’t meet Milos’s eye when he said it. Milos noticed. He did not comment.

A second van pulled up with two men in overalls and masks looped at their wrists. They carried in sheets for protection and a stack of rubble sacks. The sound of plastic tape being pulled from a roll cut through the room. The smell of wet timber intensified when the back door opened. Chloe stepped back into the corridor to get a long shot and caught her own reflection in the dark glass of the old oven. Her hair looked placed. Her jumper looked intentional. She looked like a person doing a renovation.

She recorded another piece to camera, a minute that said nothing and implied commitment: “We’ve met our team. We’re doing this right. Safety

first, structure first. We're so excited to show the progress." She kept her voice low and warm. She ended the video with a pan to the back wall. She angled the pan to keep the old consumer unit out of frame. Off-camera, Milos asked one of his men to start with the top section. The first strike made no drama. Plaster crumbled, a steady fall. The noise filled the room and then settled into a rhythm that left little space for talking. She set the hammers against the wall, one then the other, the way you put away props after a performance.

She found a cleaner patch of air near the front window. Dust moved through the light and then fell against the floor. She wiped her phone screen with the hem of her shirt and brought up her notes app. The housewarming date sat on the first line, six months from the accepted offer, now in the calendar in three places because duplication created comfort. Beneath, a skeleton of episodes: demo, strip, beam, first fix, windows, plaster, kitchen reveal, styling day. She added "contingency" in parentheses and removed it. The wall thudded again. Milos's voice called for a prop. Elliot checked the door frame with his palm as if he could locate stability by touch.

At midday, with the back wall already pocked and the lean-to roof braced, they stood at the threshold to the garden that wasn't yet a garden and breathed air that didn't taste of decades. Milos pointed at the ground outside. "We will lower this to stop the water. We will put drainage. It will cost what it costs. If you skip it, damp will come back and you will hate me because you were stupid and I did what you asked. I am not doing that."

Chloe nodded. She tried for humour because she needed relief. "I'm not that person anymore," she said. She attempted a smile that did not require confirmation. "Let me transfer the deposit while I have signal."

She typed the numbers into the banking app without saying them aloud. Her hands were steady. The signal stuttered and returned. She pressed send. The phone thought and then displayed a confirmation. She took a screenshot. She saved it in a folder with other proof she thought

she might need to show someone later.

Elliot looked past her to the far fences where two cats patrolled. He held the rolled tape in his hand and unrolled a length to seal a sheet where the breeze had lifted it. His hands made small, precise movements. He looked up at the sky for longer than checking the weather required.

By early afternoon, the back wall had gone in stages and what remained showed brick that had not seen air for a long time. The damp line at knee height had repeated itself on the bare material. The inside of the house looked briefly bigger and then more complicated. Chloe filmed the moment the last skin of the lean-to was unscrewed and taken away in four careful pieces. The cold increased. She put on her coat and didn't zip it for camera reasons and then zipped it because she was not a martyr.

Milos set out a sequence on the wall with a marker pen. He wrote abbreviations that meant nothing to anyone who wasn't in this trade. He turned to her. "I will text you schedule tonight. It is not six months. It is this long," he said, holding his hands an imprecise distance apart. "If building control is quick and plasterers do not get sick."

"Send it," she said. "We'll adjust." She didn't know if she would.

She recorded one more thing by the front door, where the corridor splayed out to the street. "Messy progress is still progress," she said, which sounded like a mug. She held the handle of the hammer out of frame and then put it on the floor; the head scuffed the skirting.

Milos had set out constraints; she opened a spreadsheet. At the kitchen table in their flat the spreadsheet looked cleaner than the site. She set up columns in a palette that read "reassurance" but could also be read as denial. Week one: demo; week two: strip-out; week three: beams; week four: first fix. She populated cells with blocks that meant posts, reels, stories. She drew a line in bold across the calendar six months out

and typed HOUSEWARMING in capital letters and then changed it to sentence case because shouting didn't suit the brand.

She posted a timeline graphic her feed hadn't had that morning. It showed a ladder of tasks and little circles that would turn from grey to green. The caption was short and efficient. "We're committing to a six-month turnaround. Hold us accountable. We'll share everything that helps you plan your own projects , the hard bits too. Deep breath. Here we go." She watched the first comments appear and took them in like small tablets that promised steadying.

A DM landed from a brand that made homewares that photographed well. The message was friendly and safe. "We love your vision and tone. Would you be open to a small partnership on starter pieces? We'd need two posts and three stories in months two and five, with usage rights for six months. Fee is modest but we're enthusiastic about a longer journey together." The line about usage rights sent a pulse through her. It was always that line. She scrolled back up and read the word "modest" three times. She replied anyway. "Yes , keen. Let's align on dates. We are pacing regular updates." She added a heart because withholding would read as posturing. Proof, filed beside the praise.

Elliot, across from her with his laptop open to a set of windows he would not let her see, watched her response and then the careful way she placed the phone on the table. "We're doing this without padding," he said, not unkind. "We might give ourselves room."

"People behave better when they know there's a calendar," Chloe said. "Everyone does. You. Me. Milos. The audience. It's motivation." She smiled in a way designed to be disarming and was aware of the design.

"It's a date we're giving to the internet," he said. "It gets to have an opinion."

"They're here to support," she said. She knew the sentence was not always true. She said it anyway and felt a little calmer, which was its function. Her phone flickered with notifications: likes stacked; follows

ticked. The numbers rose. Her breath paused and reset. Not money. She refreshed anyway.

She opened a fresh tab and built a content plan against the sponsor's cadence. Weeks two and five got red flags. Against that, reveals went in to match deliverables: plaster day, first coat day, kitchen plan day, flooring delivery day. Buffers came out, leaving empty cells for delays that would come. She typed "contingency" into a cell and then deleted it again because leaving it there felt like weakness her audience could smell.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Milos. "Schedule attached. Demo/strip: 2 weeks." She shaded the first block on her calendar and wrote demo week: daily cutaways. "Beam/engineer/BC: 2, 4 weeks." She slotted a beam day post and a tidy Q&A.; "First fix: 2, 3 weeks." The cell beside it held first coat day, red-flagged. "Plaster: 2 weeks + cure." She typed plaster day, then moved first coat down. "Second fix/kitchen: 2, 4 weeks." She pinned kitchen plan day there and deleted a buffer. She read the numbers and then scrolled back to her spreadsheet where she had condensed the middle into a rectangle. The rectangles in his text did not fit inside her rectangles.

She typed: "Can we overlap some of first fix with plaster in front rooms? We can control dust for camera in other spaces." She open-closed the message twice and then sent it. Milos replied with a single line: "We do not plaster before wiring and pipes are tested, and dust doesn't respect your camera."

Elliot glanced at her over his screen. "He's right," he said.

"Of course he's right," she said. "We're saying the same thing." Manage him. She added a sticker to her story: a small calendar icon that meant responsibility without consequence. She typed over it: "Holding us accountable helps us deliver. We can do this." She heard herself. She kept going.

When the brand sent over a formal note with terms, she posted a coy mention. "Excited to partner with people who care about quality and

function for the long term. Little things that make daily life feel calmer.” She didn’t write fee or scope. She did not ask Elliot if he wanted to see the attachment. He would say yes and read it and ask questions she could answer by changing the subject.

The checkout page on a homeware shop sat open on her laptop beside the spreadsheet. A ceramic vase, low and wide for branches that would look effortless. Linen napkins in a colour that photographed as clean but not cold. A candle with a name that sounded like a neighbourhood where she couldn’t afford a flat. She hovered on “place order” as the schedule buzzed against her ankle through the cheap rug. She placed the order. She told herself it was a prop cupboard move, not personal. She knew the difference was language, not practice.

They ate a simple dinner without story potential and drank water. Elliot wiped his mouth with a paper towel and placed it in the bin with the care of a man who didn’t want to make a noise. “Are we ready for the survey?” he asked.

“I emailed a structural engineer,” she said. “Milos said he has someone. I asked for both.” She swiped her phone screen and then swiped it again because a new notification would arrive at any second and she wanted to meet it clean.

He nodded. “Good.” He paused. “The six-month date, we can change it if we need to.”

“We won’t need to,” she said, and stacked the plates. “It’s fine.”

The screen lit again with hearts and messages that called her brave, calm, a guide. She saved two of them. She put the phone face down for a count of ten and then turned it over. Elliot watched and did not point it out.

Both arranged appearances. At the office the light hit the glass and bounced. The meeting room names on the etched doors sounded like slogans. Elliot sat with a laptop open to the documents the day demanded and the tab he would not allow to show in the alt-tab carriage. The stand-up started on time; it always did. The words came out of him in sequence. “Runway is healthy. Pipeline is real. We’re watching burn. We’ll know more post-quarter.” He told the room nothing it could use and everything it expected. A junior mentioned volatility in a tone that turned the concept into gossip. He smiled and said, “We’ve been priced for worse.” It landed like a line he had used before.

When the meeting finished, he sent the update to the founder’s channel and then checked his other tab. Two accounts, one with a buffer that didn’t deserve the name. He opened his bank app and set up a transfer to the joint account. He typed the amount Milos had requested and paused when his thumb hovered over “confirm”. He talked to himself under his breath with no words. He pressed his thumb to the sensor and watched the loading circle complete. He took a breath, let it go, kept his face the same. He relaxed his jaw by force. He minimised the window and pulled up a sheet with numbers that had no bearing on his kitchen but needed his signature more.

An email landed in his inbox flagged red. Subject line: “Position update.” He opened it, skimmed, scrolled to the graph, and scrolled back up. He deleted it, then cleared it from trash. His jaw clicked as he did it. Down five percent in a day sat behind the subject line. He took his hands off the keyboard and placed them on the desk in a way that read as neutral if anyone glanced into the glass room. He would fix it. He had fixed other things. He closed his eyes for a second and then made the face he used for colleagues.

He messaged Chloe while waiting for a data pull. “Productive day. On track.” He added nothing else because adding anything else might invite something back. She replied immediately with three heart emojis and a screenshot of a chart with rising engagement. “Covered the deposit?” she

wrote, a second message without preamble.

“Yes,” he typed. He left out the part where the word “yes” meant a reconfiguration he didn’t want to describe. He watched the typing dots appear and disappear on his phone. They did not return.

At six he met her near Old Street at a bar that had put plants in the corners because glass harmed concentration. The music made conversation awkward enough to give them cover. They each ordered one drink and held the glasses like props. He asked about the site. She told him about dust and a good shot of the back wall going. He nodded and said the back wall had been a mistake from the start and that it was good to see it go. She showed him the DM from the brand. She angled the screen toward him; he checked his watch instead. He said it was helpful. He meant that anything that told other people a story about them had value.

They returned their glasses to the bar and stood for a moment with the empty space between their hands. He said something about next week; she smiled without asking him to repeat it. A small silence followed. They were practicing. He put his palm on the small of her back the way he had been taught to touch in public. She did not move away. “Trust the process,” he said, the words leaving his mouth before he could retrieve them. They had been a joke at the office for months. They were never a joke at home.

“Exactly,” she said. He watched the way that word worked inside her. It seemed to add fuel and remove a brake. She kissed him on the cheek and picked up her bag. “I’m going to check the site security before bed.”

He walked with her to the station and then kept walking. He looked down at his watch and then at the reflection of his watch in a dark window. He had ten messages that would not improve by age. He put his phone in his pocket and left it there for two streets and then took it out and answered the first five with variants of “Let’s pick up tomorrow”.

At the terrace, Chloe checked the tape around the front door and the sheet blocking the corridor. The key turned and turned back. She stood for a moment in the hallway listening to nothing that said danger. She breathed in the scent of dust and wet timber and old paint and then stepped back outside and locked the door again. The orange glow from the streetlamps made the scratches on the letterbox visible. She slid her palm along the face of her phone and saw three new comments, all celebratory. She left them unread as a test she would fail later.

Back at the flat, they re-entered like people who had just performed a scene. Chloe washed her hands until the water ran clear and then moisturised without looking at her face in the mirror. Elliot opened the fridge and closed it again. He poured two small glasses of tap water. They drank and did not say anything that would disturb the surface of the evening. He checked his inbox one more time and deleted another red flag. She checked the calendar to confirm the housewarming was still written where she had left it. It was.

They turned off lights and lay still. The noise from the road outside went on at a level they had long ago stopped grading. In the morning there would be more dust and more footage and a schedule that wanted to be obeyed. She closed her eyes and pictured the kitchen as it might be when there were walls. He kept his eyes open and pictured a number that would return to where it belonged. They slept. Separately. Next to each other.

Chapter 3

Logistics

She touched the edge of the old consumer unit with one knuckle and drew her hand back because the plastic felt greasy in the way old plastic did when heat and dust had taken their turn. The back of the house was colder than the corridor again; the back wall was bare brick with that pale horizon line where damp had settled at knee height, and the floor dipped toward the drain like it had an opinion it wasn't paid to have. Milos stood with his folder open to a page that had columns and numbers and a short list that did not care about captions.

"Electrics," he said, as if announcing a weather report he could not change. "Old and wrong. We do this one of three ways. One: full rewire to current regulations. New consumer unit, RCBOs (modern safety switches), ring for sockets, radials where they should go, dedicated lines for oven, hob, dishwasher, fridge, extractor, under-cabinet lights on their own circuit, smoke alarms hardwired. We do upstairs at same time."

"More upheaval, then."

"It costs this." He tapped the number like it was a door.

Full meant fewer questions later.

Chloe nodded as if she regularly weighed RCBOs against content cadence. She looked at the number and bled it into a monthly shape in her head that felt easier to hold because months were always closer than totals. Elliot stood beside her and shifted his weight off a floorboard that answered by dipping.

"Two," Milos continued, turning the page. "Partial now. We replace consumer unit so it is safe."

Safety read well.

"We do ground floor and kitchen fully right."

She could frame around that.

"Upstairs rings we leave for later. You get certificate for the work we do now."

Paperwork calmed comments.

"It is safe where we touch. It is not the full house."

Upstairs could wait if downstairs sold the story.

"Building control for kitchen and ground floor is fine because we will show them what we did, but upstairs is old and stays old until we come back. It costs less, but not as little as you want."

Cheaper now. Mess later.

"And three?" Elliot said.

"Three is no. I am not spurring from this rubbish," Milos said, patting the side of the box. "I am not putting new kitchen with old fuse box and mystery junctions. You can put fairy lights and call it done but I am not putting my name on it."

Dust drifted and then settled on the black glass of the old oven door they had not yet dragged out; Chloe wiped her phone screen with her sleeve and wished she had remembered to bring the microfiber cloth that lived in the tote. She kept her voice in the warm register her audience liked and used for men with folders. "Talk me through timing if we do full rewire."

"Full rewire adds time everywhere," Milos said. "We lift floors upstairs, we fish cables, we make good. You will hate me for two weeks because it will look worse. We book building control twice."

Time she would have to explain.

"And partial?" she asked.

"Faster. We keep upstairs closed for now. We run new here", he pointed across the room to where the kitchen would be, "and in corridor, front room, hallway lights, smoke alarms. We isolate upstairs. We leave the old ring up there for now and label. When you have money, we come back and finish."

Quicker to post, less to show.

Elliot cleared his throat like he wanted to sit in the responsible chair and was checking if it had legs. "I don't want a halfway house. Full rewire is safest and cleaner in the long run." He looked at the number again and stopped looking at the number. "But this is... lot of money."

"It's an investment," Chloe said, immediately. "Safety builds trust. And trust builds brand." The sentence came out, she heard herself, and she almost smiled. "But we have to be realistic. If we do partial now, we can move budget into finishes and not end up with a safe box that photographs like a hostel."

"You can't put money into feel and leave a live wire in the wall," Elliot said, controlled. He glanced at the damp line and then at the ceiling where the polycarbonate had been.

"No one is leaving live wires anywhere," Milos said. "Old upstairs ring stays as it is. It is not dangerous today. It is... old. You do not get new showers, new lights up there, new sockets up there from me until we finish the job."

"We'll be living here," Chloe said, aware of how that landed, since they were not. "Downstairs. Mostly. The tour needs full shots," she added, trying to keep it casual. "Whole house. Otherwise comments become about what we didn't show."

"Let's defer the bedrooms and landing to Q1," Elliot said. "No one sees them."

She watched Elliot's jaw set. He used to relax it when she touched it with two fingers. She kept her hands in her pockets.

Milos waited until neither of them said what they were actually calculating and then started into details. "Sockets. You decide now how many and where."

Each extra point added cost and minutes.

"Lamps, do you want a five-amp circuit so one switch does the lamps?"

One press read as considered on camera.

"Pendant over island."

The shot depended on it.

"Under-cabinet lights, yes or no. If we do partial, we do these now. If you want upstairs later, we leave a route to the loft so we don't open walls again."

Future proof without opening walls twice.

"USB-C in the sockets?" Chloe said. She took a breath and lifted her phone, framing where an island would be because framing made it real.

"Plugs change every year. I put double sockets. You use adaptors. When USB changes, you still have a socket," Milos said. "Data point by TV?" He looked at Elliot.

"Yes. Two, one left spare." He glanced at her. "You'd want that for livestreams." The joke arrived with a thin layer of irony and sat there.

"We're not doing livestreams from a building site," she said, too quickly. She swallowed. "Okay. Two. And a conduit to the hallway so we can run a camera if we want... later." She looked at the floor and did the mental translation, camera meant angle, angle meant edit, edit meant control. It sounded reasonable when she said it out loud. She kept going.

"Kitchen sockets, how many along the back wall?" Milos said.

"Three doubles," she said. "And one pop-up on the island, but hidden." She held up a hand. "Not the ugly kind."

"Hidden pop-up is expensive and it breaks when someone leans on it," Milos said. "You want power on the island, I put a flush unit here." He pointed to a spot that did not yet exist. "It is there, it works, no surprise."

"Or we avoid sockets on the island and keep it clean," Elliot said. "We can charge devices somewhere else."

Chloe felt the small heat that always indicated she had been contradicted in public. "We test, and if it ruins the line, we remove." It was a sentence that pretended money didn't exist and sounded like control.

Elliot rubbed his thumb along the bezel of his watch and then seemed to remember that this was noticeable and put his hand down. "If we go full rewire, we don't have to think about patching later."

"We also don't have a kitchen if we do full and then run out of money for cabinets," Chloe said. "We put a table in a safe shell and call it brutalist."

Milos made a face that did not agree to be included in their metaphors. "You decide today. I need to book materials from wholesaler and confirm with lads. If you want full, I move one job and keep team here. If partial, we do that. If you cannot decide, I put lads on another site for a week and come back when you are ready."

"Today today?" Chloe said.

"End of day," Milos said. "I go check another job now. You message me. No surprises, okay?"

"Okay," she said. She added a smile like a sticker. He closed his folder and nodded at the exposed brick like it had given him an answer, then left through the narrow corridor, the taped sheet lifting and dropping when he pushed past it.

They stood in the chill and listened to the absence of hammering. Chloe stepped closer to the spot where the island would be and tried to see the expensive stone she hadn't bought yet reflecting natural light she

didn't have yet. She put her phone on the plywood that currently functioned as a worktable and flattened her palm on the surface to stop herself scrolling.

"It's fine," she said. "I'll handle the logistics." She felt the words tidy the air and draw lines around things she could not control.

Elliot breathed through his nose and then spoke without turning. "That's scope creep." He kept his voice even. "What you call logistics is you deciding where the money goes because it photographs well."

She stared at the damp tidemark and counted slowly, like a person in a waiting room counting ceiling tiles. "We've always had the same goal. Safety first, structure first," she said, repeating Milos back to him. "We just can't ignore optics."

"I'm not ignoring optics. I'm just not paying for them instead of wiring," he said, and then he looked at her, which was worse than not looking. "Partial makes a mess of upstairs later. It always does."

"Partial buys us a kitchen now," she said. "The tour needs a kitchen. The audience thinks in kitchens." She got out her phone and typed because typing produced a shape that looked like action. "I'm messaging Milos."

Elliot opened his mouth and then closed it. He lifted his shoulders and let them fall in a way that would look to an outsider like acceptance. She didn't buy it. He said, "Do what you think is right," which was permission and accusation in one sentence.

On her screen: "Let's proceed with new unit + full ground floor/kitchen now, prep for future upstairs. Will confirm socket plan by 3 p.m. Can you hold team?" The blue tick appeared, and then the thumbs-up from Milos came back with a short: "Okay. Order goes in 4 p.m." A second message followed: "Keeps you cooking, upstairs stays old, neither full safety nor full picture."

She exhaled. Elliot looked at his phone and said nothing. The cold moved in through the hole where the lean-to had been. She picked up her phone and filmed ten seconds of exposed brick and said nothing, then saved it in drafts.

By early afternoon her thumbs and his calendar were doing the marriage.

"Can you be on-site tomorrow 8, 10 for first-fix run-around?" she messaged. "We need to sign off socket heights and the five-amp lamp circuit."

He replied faster than he ever replied to anything else she sent. "Back-to-back. Can we empower you to make the calls?"

She took a screenshot of her schedule, the one in the calming palette that looked like it needed approval and got it because of the palette. His initials were against three cells for decisions, the beam day, the first-fix sign-off, and the consumer unit location. She circled them with her finger and sent. "You're the bottleneck for these."

Dots. Then a screenshot of his calendar came back, full of boxes in corporate colours. "Non-negotiable, sorry. Can we push to Friday?"

"No," she typed. "Materials land Wednesday. Electricians need positions. The driver won't wait and Milos won't rebook them for a week because we're disorganised." She deleted the last clause and retyped a version that sounded cooperative. "We're tight because of supplier lead times."

"We can't move the delivery window?" he wrote.

"We can't move the delivery window," she wrote back. She felt the small heat in her chest again. There was a version of this where she said: It would mean a lot if you showed up. There was also a version where she

said nothing and did it anyway. She was good at choosing the second.

"I thought Fridays were your day for site," she added. "You said you'd keep them clear."

He sent back: "Q4 volatility. Everything has shifted. I can't put a number on anything right now." Then, a second message: "There's likely a liquidity event in January. We'll be in a better place to make all the right calls then."

She read "liquidity event" twice and let it drape over the number in Milos's folder like a blanket. She could ask: what exactly, where exactly, who decides. She did not ask. Her tongue touched a back tooth; she typed: "Good. That helps." She made herself look at the exposed cable conduits by the door and thought about an island pendant that would make people sigh in the comments.

A message from Jas arrived on a different thread. "Are you eating? Sleep? Proud of you."

Chloe pressed the thread open and felt the reflex to send a photo of a bowl of something green that would pass. She sent instead: "All good, just logistics" and then muted the chat so the gentle questions wouldn't accumulate where she had to see them.

She recorded a quick story, angling the frame so only clean lines showed. "Quick update while everyone's heads are down, first fix is a big day. We're prioritising safety and planning positions that will save time later. It's not glamorous but it's the backbone. We can do hard things." She added a text overlay: "We're on track." Her jaw stayed tight.

She watched the view count climb and saw his handle in the list; a thumbs-up emoji arrived without words. She pictured him in a glass box, watching it on mute, then putting the phone face down.

She messaged him: "Can you at least take the delivery if they're early?"

He typed: "I thought you were handling it."

She stared at the sentence. Her shoulders shifted. "I thought you were handling it."

No dots. No reply. A draft edged along her shins. The conversation stopped there not because it was finished but because it wasn't.

The room was cooler; dust hung in the gap where the wall would be.

She checked the thread again and saw nothing new. Phone facedown, she opened the laptop.

When everyone else left, the house made the same sounds old houses made when no one was performing in them: traffic in the distance, water somewhere in a pipe taking longer to settle than it should, a faint tapping from something loose on scaffolding. She didn't film any of it. She walked the front room with her laptop open to a blank document titled "house tour" and began to drop bullet points where walls would be. Opening shot, the corridor, then a pan through to the back, then the island. She didn't write "island" as a word; she wrote "anchor" because it allowed more weight without admitting it.

She stood exactly where the island would sit and raised her hand in front of her face like she was measuring an invisible run. "Nine hundred by two-six," she said, quietly. "Bookend at the edge. No overhang." She pictured her palm sliding along a surface with a deep honed finish, the light bouncing not at all, just lying down. She pictured a glass of water set down without leaving a ring because she had learned the products for that. She closed her eyes and opened them again.

The laptop's browser held old tabs that made her shoulders rise and drop on their own: lighting suppliers, a seating company that called stools "perches" and charged like it had invented sitting, a stone yard with thumbnails that promised everything. She clicked the one that had lived in her notes app for two years. The page loaded with an array of

white stone cut into rectangles and propped in rows with stickers that said "reserved" and "sold" like a shop that sold outcomes. She zoomed into one with large grey rivers not too watery, not too regimented. The name was a mouthful she had once said aloud in a showroom to sound as if she said it every day.

She found the price band hidden behind a "request" button and filled out the form with the couriered politeness she used for strangers, then refreshed the page to see if the universe would show her a number without making her ask. It did not. She opened a different yard in another tab and found a range. The lower bound was possible in a life she wasn't living. The upper bound was ruinous. She told herself the photo rights alone would pay it back in a year if she positioned the work correctly, if she aligned with one or two sponsors with reach, if she upped her consultation rate by twenty percent and sold five extra sessions a quarter. She wrote these lines in her notes not because numbers comforted her, though they did, but because lines that looked like a business case were easier to defend than desire.

He'd see it finished and the number wouldn't matter.

She ran a small sum. Two posts and three stories in month two and month five; modest fee; usage rights for six months; upsell potential with a longer run. Add a styling day with a separate fee. She could write the deck in her sleep. She opened an old deck and replaced the project shots with spaces that didn't exist yet. The effect was immediate. She pictured the comments. "Calm. Needed this today." "This is what a home should feel like." She felt her breath smooth out to match the imagined cadence.

An email pinged. Subject line: "Partnership Inquiry, Kitchen Day Essentials." She scanned it. The fee was small. The product list was unimpressive but neat. Someone had written, "We love your tone." She tagged it with a star and dragged it into a folder named "Proof" where she kept evidence that her hunches weren't madness. She knew this wasn't the proof she wanted; she filed it anyway because filing adjusted her heart rate.

She went back to the stone yard form and added a note: "Looking for large-scale slab with strong, graphic veining; honed; availability within 8, 10 weeks. Flexible on exact lot; keen to view in person." She reread "keen" and left it in because it had worked on an agent once.

Her phone buzzed again. Confirmation: "Viewing appointment booked." A date, a time, an address near the edge of the city where ring roads wrapped around warehouses and names didn't matter. She put it in the calendar and marked it with a neutral colour as if it were a dentist appointment.

She stood at the island that wasn't there and measured again with her hand. She told herself, out loud, as if speaking to a crew: "It's just logistics." Her shoulders lifted. The sentence produced the usual cool.

She looked at the corridor, at the line of dust where the protective sheet had lifted earlier and settled on the skirting. She picked up her phone and wiped the screen with the hem of her jumper because she always did, even when she wasn't going to post.

It was getting dark. She breathed in and tasted old paint and wet timber, then picked up her bag and walked to the door. She checked the lock, checked it again, and stepped out into the street. Her hand shook when she closed the laptop.

Chapter 4

The Marble

She signed in at the counter and clipped on a visitor badge that clung badly to the wool of her coat. The warehouse air tasted chalky. A forklift sounded a warning as it reversed somewhere beyond the stacked frames of stone, and the floor showed streaks from shoes that had carried dust out to cars and back in again. She was early by six minutes because being early might turn a stranger into an ally; also because this morning had been spent walking electricians through socket heights and a five-amp circuit without Elliot, and doing that in a cold room had made the rest of the day feel like something she owed herself. Milos's sequencing warning in mind.

The salesperson, a man in a fleece with a company logo that read as insurance rather than style, came through a side door with a clipboard and a pen that had run out of ink and been bitten. He smiled in a way that asked for decisions. She smiled back with the version of her face that did not make demands. The visitor badge peeled up at one corner; she pressed it down with her thumb and followed him into the aisles.

She filmed the aisles as they walked, not the forklift or the high-vis jackets, only the even planes of the slabs and the polished edges that looked finished even before they were cut. A series of white rectangles leaned in a row; each had veining at a different intensity. She framed four seconds of a quiet pattern and then four seconds of something bolder and told herself that a neutral glide would be enough for now. The salesman's voice followed beside her; it named countries and quarries and numbers. Prices were quoted per slab, plus VAT. Templating was separate. Fabrication was separate again, with cut-outs priced per cut. Honed cost

more than polished because of the finishing process. Bookmatching came with a surcharge. She swallowed.

He stopped at a run of white with broad, decisive lines and gestured with the clipboard. "This lot came in last week," he said. "We only have two from this batch. It's a strong pattern but not wild. It reads clean once it's down."

It read exactly how she wanted the room to read: confident but not noisy and clear enough on camera that a follower viewing on a phone with a cracked screen would still see order. She walked closer and placed her palm against the honed face; the surface cooled her skin. Without thinking, she rolled her sleeve back half an inch and pressed her wrist bone to it too. No grip. Smooth without gloss. It wouldn't create glare from a pendant. She lifted her phone and filmed the veining in a slow arc, catching only stone and the tiny barcode sticker. No forklifts. No men. No context. Only surface.

He quoted a number. She nodded, performing a fluency she didn't have. He quoted the templating lead time: two weeks for the visit if she booked now. Installation would be eight to ten weeks from sign-off, contingent on cabinetry, access and a few other words that people always used when they meant she would not control this either. She could accelerate some of it with a surcharge, though fitting teams were stretched because everyone was doing their kitchens now and wanted to be in by a date that was never about cooking.

She asked to see the other lot "for context" and then repeated his phrase back to him when he used the word batch. The second slab felt like a version of the first that would be criticised in the comments for trying too hard. She returned to the first without saying she was returning. That was the trick: move decisively while describing it as context.

"Availability is limited on this pattern," he said. "Two left in this run. I can put a reserve flag on this one for 48 hours; after that it goes back on the live rack. To secure it, it's a non-refundable deposit and we hold for

sixty days; after that, storage charges start. We place a capacity window for templating and install once you're in the system, but dates aren't firm until cabinets are ready."

She checked the frame of her shot again. "Honed only?"

"Yes. And we do a light seal pre-install, then your fitter seals after. Honed shows oils if you don't keep on top of it." He looked at her coat, her boots, her hands, checking whether she would keep on top of it.

"We will," she said. The word we stalled in her mouth for a second. It sounded good to say we in rooms of this kind.

He walked her back across the aisle to a slab with veining that moved diagonally; he was showing her more options to feel like a guide. She thanked him; she asked about cut tolerances; she asked about the way a flush power unit could be incorporated and whether they routed before or after mitre. He was ready for all of this. He wrote numbers on a printed form and circled a date. She realised she was sweating lightly under her coat and unzipped it by three inches. The badge curled up again and stuck to nothing.

She filmed five more seconds of the first slab. When she lowered the phone, her shoulders eased and the next breath came slowly.

He had a small office with a low sofa. He put the form in front of her and pointed to a line that said non-refundable (of course). "If you reserve, it's two days and then it goes back on the rack unless you confirm. If you purchase, we hold for sixty days and then start charging for storage if you're not ready. Templating we book on a call with our fitter; we need cabinets in, level, secured."

She pictured the stripped back room, the exposed wiring, the cold; she pictured cabinets that were an outline in her head and on a spreadsheet and nowhere else. She pictured her content calendar, the weeks she'd shaded for momentum. There was a circle on week eight called Kitchen Plan Day. It would carry two posts and three stories and a reel if she had the energy. She imagined this slab cut and placed and

photographed precisely when that circle needed something weighty to make what she had promised feel like a promise kept.

"We're on a tight program," she said, smiling. "We can get templating in about three weeks if we push some other things forward." She heard herself and pushed anyway. "Let's book templating for, say, the second week of next month, and install for the week after."

"We can pencil the templating request," he said. "Earliest capacity is around three weeks out, and install is eight to ten weeks after sign-off, minimum. We don't have a week-after install window. Cabinets must be in, level, secured. We can only make a template off what's actually there." He wrote REQ beside the dates and underlined it.

"They'll be there," she said. She reached into her tote for her card. Her hand paused on her phone instead, and a text from Elliot appeared: Dinner tonight? 7? She replied with a heart, then typed Yes. She put the phone face down and pulled out the card.

The numbers that mattered were in a different app, but she did not open it. Heat pricked along her wrists under the coat. She handed over the card and watched as he copied the name. Her throat caught on a dry swallow. He asked if the invoice should be to an individual or a company; she said company and gave him the business account details. "It's a brand investment," she said, and he nodded, logging it.

He slid the form across, dates tagged as request, storage terms clear, the non-refundable line printed twice. She signed. From the aisle, a reversing beep cut through.

He wrote her order number down and tore off the top sheet. He told her someone would call in the morning to confirm templating. She nodded and said she looked forward to it, keeping her tone warm.

Back in the aisle, she filmed the slab once more. This time her hand hovered in at the bottom of the frame, a neutral hand with a bare ring finger because she had taken the ring off earlier to stop catching it on tape in a different room. The camera saw a small movement and a decision.

She saved the clip to a folder named after the project that sat under three other folders with names that had covered November's rent.

On the train back, the carriage was too warm. She chose a seat by a window that smeared a view of ring roads and low sheds and temporary fencing. Her phone warmed in her hand. She trimmed the clips into ten-second pieces that would run neatly between two longer talks about wiring. She placed a text overlay on one that just said: sourcing. She posted that one for momentum and saved the rest. She typed another overlay and deleted it because it gave too much away. She opened her banking app and saw the fresh transaction and a pending hold. She minimised it. She pushed the phone into her lap and then pulled it up again to edit the colour temperature on one of the clips. She drafted a caption for the grid, because grid posts still made people behave with more certainty. Choosing timeless pieces that work hard without shouting; invest once, then let the space breathe. She read it back. It would work later, when the surface existed. She saved it to drafts and let the phone rest against her knee. The carriage sway nudged it.

An older man across the aisle watched the edge of her screen, a small frown in place. She tilted the phone slightly and looked out at low winter light moving across a loading yard. The appointment confirmation landed in her inbox with a ring. She filed it and wiped the screen with the hem of her sleeve, a movement that calmed her, even now.

The cafe had plywood tables meant to advertise plywood and a line of cookbooks on a shelf that no one bought. The candle on the counter had artificial citrus that didn't cancel the smell of milk. Chloe steered Jas toward the banquette under the window where the light was soft but not dim and sat on the side that would give her face even coverage if anyone took a photo. She registered the instinct and pretended it had been about the view onto the street.

"This is very you," Jas said, hanging her functional coat on the hook and sitting with a small sigh that was not for effect. "How's the house? And how's Chloe, please do not make me sit here while you give me an update on socket counts."

Chloe laughed. She took a sip of water and lined the glass up with the napkin without thinking. "Good chaos. We did first fix planning this morning. Building Control will be booked for their bit after we close out the current phase. It's a lot of sequencing but we're on track." She smiled at the word track, giving it more weight than the spreadsheet that had occupied her week. "We're filming the backbone, then we'll do a proper kitchen plan day."

"That's logistics," Jas said, kind but tired. "How are you sleeping? And money."

Chloe felt the heat in her face that came whenever someone moved from sequence to motive. "Sleep is a Q3 goal," she said (neat, rehearsed). "Money is fine. It's tight, because everything is at once, and because we're front-loading structural. But it's fine." She pushed her hair behind her ear and pretended she had not just repeated herself.

"Front-loading sounds like your way of saying you're using a credit card and hoping future you has a good month," Jas said. She said it while stirring her coffee, the movement steady. "You look..."

"Busy?" Chloe said. "Focused?"

"Thin, in the kind of way that isn't about food," Jas said. She raised a hand when Chloe opened her mouth. "I'm not doing an intervention. I'm asking because I like you."

Chloe picked up her cup and put it back down. She wished she'd chosen tea so there would be the ritual of the pot. A notification rolled across the top of her phone, which sat screen up because she liked to know things as they happened. It was from the stone supplier's system. Payment received. Order secured. She flipped the phone face down, and it made a small sound on the plywood.

Jas looked at the phone and then back at her. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. Just..."

"Logistics," Jas finished, dry.

Chloe smiled. "We have to get the timing right. You know how it is when multiple teams are involved. If one thing is out by two days, everything slides and you lose the crew and you end up eating toast in a corridor for a week."

"Do you have a second set of hands for delivery days? I can take a day. I have one next week before nights when I could be there for a window. Or bring food to site when you can't leave because someone decided they'd arrive 'between twelve and four' and then show up at six."

Chloe nodded in a manner that read as gratitude. "You're good to even offer. I think we're covered. It's basically just checking off boxes and being there to sign things and answer questions about heights."

"You hate asking for help," Jas said.

"I don't hate it. I'm just..."

"You're better on your own because you can control the tone."

Chloe laughed again because the alternative was saying yes. She reached for her phone, remembered the notification under it, and kept her hand on the table instead. "We're doing a small dinner at the house next week. Just to mark that we're past the worst of the mess. You should come. It'll be rough and we'll be wearing coats but it'll be worth it." She offered it as intimacy, to disarm scrutiny and test the tone.

"The six-month housewarming is still on," Jas said. She did not ask it; she stated it, a diagnosis.

"Yes. It'll be tight but it'll be worth it." Chloe said it quickly. "And before you say it, I know. I know it's ambitious. But people need to see something finished."

"Do they? Or do you need them to?" Jas asked. She didn't lean forward; she kept her back against the banquette.

A barista knocked a metal jug against the counter. The sound was sharp and real. Chloe turned her head for a second and used the movement to sort her expression. "It's how I make a living, Jas. The platform pays for the work. It isn't pure self-expression."

"I know," Jas said. "I miss you, though. The you who didn't have to narrate everything as a product. You still show up sometimes."

Chloe looked down at her hands. Her nails had dust at the edges of the cuticles that soap had not shifted. "I'm still here," she said, and then regretted the sentence because it sounded like something someone in a film would say before doing the opposite. "We should do this more often." She heard it and flinched at herself. "Come next week. We'll eat something hot and criticise the sockets."

"I can do that," Jas said. She sounded dutiful, more shift than treat. "Let me know if you want me there for a delivery. I'm serious. I can sit on a step and tell a man who calls me 'love' that he's early."

Chloe nodded and picked up her cup. "I'll let you know."

They stood at the same time and hugged because that was the ritual. Jas's arms went around Chloe's shoulders in a way that felt familiar; Chloe's arms went around Jas's waist and met winter padding. The hug lasted two seconds too long to be incidental and one second too short to be relaxing. They stepped back and said words about text threads and a podcast recommendation. Chloe left first. Outside, she exhaled; the cold hit her teeth; she was already looking for her phone. She sent: Dinner at seven?

Elliot's office had glass walls that made everything look sharper than it was. His phone vibrated on the desk, the alert banner red in a way designed to trigger action; the number beside a ticker had moved the wrong way, quickly. He put his thumb on the screen, opened it, stared for a second and then closed it again. He missed a keystroke and backspaced. He smoothed his cuff twice. He cleared the notification and opened a team chat and wrote something about a client call that had gone well, letting the three blue dots matter more than the other number for a moment.

He stood up and did the walk to the kitchen area because that looked normal in this office. He held a glass under the tap on the filtered water system and watched it fill to the line. Someone from partnerships slapped him lightly on the back and said a name he did not want to answer to and asked about drinks. Elliot said yes because saying no would mark him as something he didn't want to be today.

In the bar he did not like near the office, the music was just loud enough that you had to sit forward to hear anything, and the tables were high enough that everyone stood anyway. The table edge had a tacky film under his hand. Stories were traded about a quarter that was almost what it needed to be and the deal that would close next week. Elliot contributed the lines he knew from meetings: runway healthy, pipeline real, more post-quarter. He did not say the number that had been on his phone. He did not say the number that had been on his phone the week before. He laughed at the right moment in a story about a client who had changed targets and then apologised for changing them. When someone told him he looked well, he said, "Trust the process," and then drank half his beer without tasting it.

In the restroom he typed a message to the broker. Hourly updates until close, please. Watch exposure, hold the stop. The reply came back within a minute: Understood. He moved funds between accounts and retitled the transfer to blend with bills. He put the phone in his jacket pocket and looked at himself in the mirror. He smoothed the front of his

shirt with one hand and then took his hand away because he heard his father in his head telling him not to fuss.

He walked home later than planned but not late enough to register as neglect. Chloe was in the kitchen with two bowls and two spoons and something on the hob that was brown and honest. She did not look up immediately when he came in; she was stirring and checking her phone and the room smelled like onions and soap. He put his phone on the counter and made the sound of someone arriving without bringing anything. She turned and smiled and it brought back the morning they had five years ago when someone had given him a title and they had eaten a cheese toastie over the news.

"How was it?" she said.

"Productive. On track." He paused. "I should, " He edited in place. "There's a possibility, if we hit targets, of a bonus acceleration. Small, but it would be early."

She nodded and looked at the steam rising from the pot. "That helps," she said. Her shoulders dropped. His hand tightened on the counter edge, then released. He could have said then that nothing was guaranteed, that numbers did not behave even when managed. He did not say it. He picked up the spoons and put them down again, aligning them parallel to the bowls the way she preferred.

"Your day?"

"Good. First fix plan is locked. Milos is ordering. Booked a couple of supplier visits." She did not say marble. She reached for her phone and then did not pick it up.

"We should mark progress," he said, feeling a need to create a point in the week to aim for that was not a number. "Have people over at the site. Something simple."

"Next week," she said, quick. "Coats on, hot food, proper plates if I can get to them."

He nodded. He could picture the table that wasn't there and two people sitting with them and doing the polite smile, the one where everyone agreed that what they were doing was brave and not foolish. He thought, without meaning to, about the aisles of stone from a video he had watched on his phone thirty minutes earlier while ignoring the person telling a story in front of him.

Later, in bed, they lay next to each other the way they had been doing recently, close enough to register body heat, far enough that hands didn't touch by accident. Chloe's screen lit her face in the instant before she turned the brightness down. Elliot scrolled through the last set of stories she had posted. There was a slow pan across a white surface with veining, the camera unsteady at the end to look unedited on purpose. There was a text overlay that only said sourcing. He watched it twice; his jaw tightened on the second loop. He put his phone face down before the videos played again and stared at the dark ceiling until his eyes adjusted.

Chloe lay still and performed sleep for a minute so that he would stop replaying the day. When she turned on her side, she was careful not to let the movement read as turning away. She turned her phone over and set it face down. The caption in her drafts sat under the last three she had saved and never used. She thought about it; she thought about deleting it. She left it as it was and closed her eyes. The stone was already in her head as a fact. The rest could catch up or not.

Chapter 5

The Dinner Party from Hell

She set the jar in the centre of the plywood and wiped the foggy glass with the corner of her sleeve until a streak of clarity appeared. The water inside was slightly cloudy because she had filled it from the tap upstairs, the one that rattled and gave a brown thread before it ran clean, and because there were still bits of plaster dust in the jar from the last time it had been used for screws. She arranged the supermarket flowers so that the nicer heads faced the room and the shorter, bruised stems faced the wall and then pretended she hadn't done that, which was always the trick: make effort look accidental; make poverty look edited. The candles went in a line that read as casual, which meant a measured zig-zag; she bent to light the wicks one by one, the cheap lighter catching on the cold edge of her thumb. A draught at ankle height came through the gap where the old skirting had been lifted and cooled the back of her calves. She stood and glanced at the room as a whole.

The walls were half-skinned, patches of blown plaster torn back to brick in uneven ovals that made the remaining areas look fragile; there was a tide mark at knee level in the back half where damp had been measured and talked about in a calm voice by men wearing layers that made them immune to rooms like this. The door to the former lean-to was boarded, bright and new against the tired paint around it. A single extension cable ran along the corridor from a double socket that Milos had said was safe for now if used with care; a four-way block sat on the floor under the makeshift table and her phone charger occupied one of the places, angled for easy reach. From the street came clipped footsteps and the sound of a bus pulling away from the stop on the corner.

She checked her phone. The calendar block read ‘Small dinner: coats on’. The invitation had promised hot food and an honest update and had used the word ‘intimate’ because people accepted cold more readily if they thought intimacy was the point. Below the calendar were three unread messages that were not for now, and an email notification in bold: Re: Revised budget & structural clarification. From Milos. She swiped the banner away before the preview could show more and moved her thumb as if to open her camera instead. The lens showed her the plywood in a way that made it look warmer than it was. She tapped for focus on the flowers.

At the end of the corridor, the front door latch clicked without elegance. Elliot’s knuckles were pink from the cold and from carrying the paper bags; the handles had pressed lines into his skin. He stood for a second and took in the room: the candles; the plywood; the chairs borrowed from the neighbour that had warned her about load-bearing things and who had then offered the chairs in a way that implied a debt she would need to repay with future expertise about something he would call ‘storage solutions’. Elliot’s mouth moved once in a line that meant he had a sentence at the back of it. He swallowed, lifted the bags and walked in.

“This looks, ” He placed the bags down on the board. A corner of the paper darkened where oil had seeped through and touched wood. “It looks good.”

“It’s fine,” she said. It covered both. She pulled the flowers a fraction forward so they hid the worst of the missing skirting. “They’re going to be here in fifteen.”

“Who?” he said, a reflex, then caught himself. “Right. Maya and Tom. And Jas.” He glanced at the candles. “Are we okay with these?”

“They’re stable.”

“Stable like not near anything? Or stable like, ”

“It’s fine.” She smiled as if reassured by her own assurance and opened one of the bags. Heat rose in a thick burst and then dispersed, not enough to change the temperature of the space. She looked at the foil containers and tried to calculate portion sizes while thinking about the lens she would use later and how a shallow depth of field could blur out the grey patch on the right-hand wall.

He reached to help, in the way of someone who could not refuse that he was here but who wanted to avoid assigning himself the wrong job. He stood too close to the flowers and she moved the jar again without saying anything because it was quicker than asking him to notice. “Plates?” he said.

“Bowls,” she said. “It reads better with bowls.” She reached into a tote and brought out three plain bowls and three spoons. She had thought about ‘proper plates’, then thought about washing up in the bathroom sink, then thought about how bowls made food look generous even when the measure was mean. She put two bowls in front of where she wanted people to sit. Elliot looked at the third spoon.

“Three?”

“I’ll eat later.”

He nodded, the nod of someone who understood that eating later could also be content control.

She put the bottle of cheap sparkling wine on the plywood with the label turned at a neutral angle. The cork eased out with a noise that made both of them blink; she poured the first glass and the liquid bubbled and then went flat at the rim. “Do we have,” Elliot began, and she handed him a paper towel to wipe the spot that had splashed near the edge.

He looked toward the boarded back. “It’s colder than last week.”

“The wind’s moved,” she said, then caught the phrasing and changed it. “There’s a draught.”

He set the used paper towel down in a way that made it obvious he didn't know where to put it. "I'll put the bags in the corridor so it's not a shot," he said. He lifted them and stepped sideways through the narrow gap left by the stacked plasterboards. When he came back, he had his face on, the one that did a close approximation of calm.

The bell made a flat ring. She straightened without thinking and checked the angle of her shoulders in the window's faint reflection. At the door, she said a bright "Hi," that covered her relief at seeing coats and not someone in a shirt who would need to be warmed.

Maya went first and did the exaggerated breath that people did when they wanted to acknowledge cold without being rude about it. "Oh my God," she said. "This is, this is so you. I love it." She kissed Chloe's cheek with her hood still up and then pushed it back and looked up at the ceiling roses that had survived under paint. "I can already see it."

Tom followed with a posh-supermarket Crémant under his arm and a grin that read as supportive. He stamped his feet lightly on the threshold, more habit than necessity, and peered past Chloe down the corridor in the direction of the back. "You said 'work in progress.' You weren't joking." He did the laugh that made his sentence non-judgmental while leaving it intact.

"I like to be literal," Chloe said, and moved them into the front room where the candles cast steady light. "Ignore the bit where the wall looks like it's got a rash. That's mid-strip."

"It's very, on-site chic," Maya said, smiling. She kept her coat on. Tom kept his on too. He gave a tiny shake at the cuffs the way men do when they have worn something that wasn't really warm enough.

Elliot came in and did what he always did, which was to be charming in the way that did not admit labour. "Welcome to the chaos," he said. "Shoes are fine on. Don't sit on any protruding nails; we've tried to remove the worst offenders." He smiled at his own sentence.

Chloe raised her hands in a planner's gesture, which she was, although her plans were less safe than those of the people who wore hard hats. "So the vision," she said, because the word mattered in rooms like this. She walked them three steps in, then turned them toward the back where the board blocked the daylight. "This is all going to open up. Imagine the island here," she stepped into a patch she had measured with her own feet more than once, "nine hundred by two-six, bookend at the edge, no overhang. The pendant centred. Back wall in a calm tone with three doubles and," she stopped herself before 'flush power on the island,' because she hadn't decided whether to fight for it. "We'll do under-cabinet lights, but not clinical. Just enough to feel considered."

Maya nodded, distracted, eyes on the patched plastic sheet. "Up-and-coming," she said, looking at the street through the patched plastic sheet. "The area. It's amazing what's happening here now."

Tom said, "There's a bakery on the corner with a queue on Sunday. That's always the sign." He glanced at Elliot and made a joke about spotting a good bet early, men talking to men in their own gentle code.

Chloe smiled. "We love it," she said. "It's," she gestured at the room with both hands, "honest." She could feel Elliot's gaze on her and she did not meet it.

Maya placed her bottle gently on the plywood and ran a finger along the rim of one of the bowls. "So talk to me about costs," she said as if discussing shoes. "Ballpark. For the whole thing."

Chloe kept her face mild. "We're doing it in phases," she said, the phrase smooth from use. "Front-loading structure and compliance, then letting the space breathe." The sentence reassured and did not answer. "We'll do the proper things in the right order. Milos, our builder, is brilliant on sequencing, so we're not rushing anything that shouldn't be rushed."

"Love that," Maya said, satisfied with the cadence if not the content.

Chloe's phone lit again on the plywood. The budget email. She placed her palm over it and lifted it, not reading. Her thumb hovered, then she turned the phone face-down and left her palm on it for heat. She set it beside the flowers, a movement that read as being present.

Elliot took the bottle Tom had brought and worked the cork with careful hands. "We're prioritising safety," he said, because that sounded like something a responsible adult would say. "Electrics downstairs, then we'll circle back upstairs."

Tom said, "I've heard upstairs is a nightmare because once you start,"

"You finish," Elliot said. "We're timing it around, you know, weekends." He smiled and did not look at his wife.

Chloe gestured again, the architect without a qualification. "We're also rethinking the route from the corridor so you don't feel like you're walking into the kitchen by accident." She made a square in the air with her fingers. "Sightlines will do a lot of the work."

"Sightlines," Maya said, pleased by the word.

The bell rang again, a thinner sound this time, and Chloe's stomach did a small, bright jump that she did not name. She went to the door and opened it to Jas, who stood there in scrubs under a Uniqlo parka with a KeepCup looped through two fingers. Jas's hair was scraped back in a bun that had been made at six in the morning and was still doing its job.

"Sorry. Handover ran late. I brought nothing." Jas's breath came out in a visible white puff.

"You brought yourself," Chloe said, overly cheerful to compensate for the cold hitting Jas's uniform. She stepped aside and let her in. Jas looked around the room, taking in the board at the back and the way the candlelight made the rough edges look planned.

"This is," Jas began, then stopped, which was better than saying the wrong thing. She put her cup down near the edge of the plywood and

rubbed her hands together once. “How are you?” She asked it as they stood half a metre away from the others, which was as much privacy as this house allowed.

“Good,” Chloe said, ready. “Busy, obviously. But on track.”

“Sleeping?” Jas said. Tom and Maya both turned their heads a fraction; Elliot’s hand paused on the neck of the bottle.

Chloe pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth before answering. “Sometimes.” She picked up the bottle and filled two glasses so she would have something to hand to someone and so the sound of pouring would fill the space where an answer might be. “Here,” she said to Maya. “And Tom.” She handed Jas the third glass and then looked at the fourth in her own hand as if the liquid would explain something.

“Let’s do a quick clink before everything gets cold,” she said, and lifted her glass. Her arm passed through the little heat from the nearest candle. “To starting,” she said. “To building something together. It’s not perfect, but it’s honest.” The words lined up neatly and the last one, ‘together,’ sounded like an answer to a question Jas had not asked. Later, she would remember saying it and wish she hadn’t.

They touched rims. The click of the glass on the plywood when she set it down was small and clean.

The first container opened with a snap and steam rose, then condensed on the plastic that had been taped across the window months ago when the old glass had rattled in its frame and then cracked on a windy night. The clear film misted and then cleared. Maya held her hands over the steam for warmth. Chloe’s cheeks warmed for a second, then cooled.

“I’m starting a trend,” Chloe said. “Wear your coat to dinner. It’s fine.” She pushed rice into the bowls with the plastic spoon that came in the bag and made sure each portion had a visible garnish of something green, because otherwise it would look institutional. She placed the bowls in front of Elliot, Maya and Tom. Jas picked up her glass, then put it down and began sorting cutlery without being asked, moving in a way that made it clear this was not performance but muscle memory.

“So,” Tom said between mouthfuls, “when’s the big one? The housewarming. You posted six months. Still the plan?” He said it as if asking the date of a gig.

Chloe smiled with the part of her mouth that could be photographed. “Still the plan,” she said. “We like a deadline.”

“Accountability,” Maya said. “I love that.”

“It’s just logistics,” Chloe said, brightly. Elliot’s head tilted a degree at the word just. She glanced at him and then away.

“I should introduce you to my friends who did their place in Hackney,” Maya said. “It’s stunning. They ran out of cash halfway through and lived in one room for a year with a camping stove, but it was so worth it.”

A spoon knocked a bowl and then was still.

Elliot made a noise that was almost a laugh and then was one. He picked up his glass. “Ah yes, the romance of austerity,” he said. “Character building.” His jaw worked once as he chewed a piece of meat that had gone cool at the edges.

In the corridor, Chloe opened a drawer on a temporary plastic unit she used as a staging area and pulled out a paper bag of coriander. Jas followed, the soft soles of her trainers not making a sound on the bare boards. “Do you need me to stay and help tidy?” Jas said under the noise of Tom telling a story about a vendor who hadn’t delivered a door until he threatened a tweet.

“I’m good,” Chloe said. She tore leaves and let them fall into a bowl; the scent reached them and faded. “We’ll just bag it and go. Early start on site. Electricians doing,” she stopped before the phrase that belonged to the morning and not to tonight.

“You look wrecked,” Jas said, but quietly and with a kind face that took the wearing edge off the word. “If you need, if it’s literally money or time.”

Her throat tightened; she swallowed once.

Chloe shook her head and stepped back into the front room with the bowl. “Honestly, it’s just a supplier being difficult about a delivery window,” she said, aiming for light. “They insist on twelve to four and then show up at six. We’ll sort it.” She placed the bowl in front of Maya and Tom and smiled in a way that made her eyes look bright.

Maya said, “Our builder used to say amazing things like ‘dust doesn’t respect your wardrobe.’”

Chloe smiled. “Our builder says dust doesn’t respect cameras,” she offered, tilting her head to make it a line. The table laughed. Her stomach tightened. She saw Milos saying no to shortcuts and looked down, aligning a fork with the plywood edge.

Tom reached for his glass; his sleeve brushed the wall. A faint tick came from the crack, then a light scrape along the lath, and a section of plaster slipped, landing across his lap and the floor in a soft collapse. For a second, no one spoke or moved. Fine grit lifted; the air had that chalky smell. Her thumb twitched toward her phone, a quick check of whether an angle could hide the crack and still read as light; she left it where it was.

“Textured dining,” Chloe said, in the voice she used on camera when she wanted to show that she could roll with it. She picked up the largest piece and put it onto the plywood, then paused and moved it again to a spot that would be out of any framing she might do later. “Adds crunch,” she said, and the laugh that came this time was smaller and grateful and

did not hurt anyone's pride.

Elliot leaned toward her while Maya and Tom were busy with napkins and said in a low voice, "We could manage the visual narrative on this wall, seal and paint as a temporary aesthetic hold. For shots. Then finish the proper work after." He didn't say cheap, or quick.

She glanced at the damp line and the fallen plaster and held her breath for a second, then kept her face even. She heard the office in it; alignment and narrative. "Milos will say no."

"He won't if we frame it that way. As in, 'cosmetic coverage only.' We could call it temporary."

"Let's not do this now," she said, placing a napkin in front of Tom and smiling in his direction, then turning her upper body toward Elliot without turning her head. "Please."

They ate. The food cooled quickly and the conversation thinned. Tom tried to fill the space with a story about a woman at work who had requested 'deliverables' and then refused delivery; Maya added a detail and laughed and glanced at Elliot to bring him in. He cleared his throat and told a story about a client who had moved the goalposts but wanted to be thanked for it.

"So I just, leaned in," he said. "I said, 'You want to change targets? Great. Here's what we need from you by end of day to make that happen.'"

"Close of play," Chloe said, light.

"I got everyone aligned. We hit the numbers." He touched the side of his glass. "Sometimes you have to, "

"Lead the narrative," Chloe said. "Reframe." She looked at Maya and Tom. "This is what he's good at." She put her hand on Elliot's wrist for a second, a gesture visible at the table. Not numbers; milestones. She smiled at the couple. "Just to be precise."

Tom laughed; Maya nodded. Elliot's eyes shifted to Chloe, then away. He took a drink and set the glass down with care.

Jas stood and took two empty containers to the corridor. Chloe followed. "Offer stands," Jas said in the low space, voice lower still. "Crash at mine any time. I'm off on Tuesday. I can sit in the house with you if you need company, or take a delivery window. No content, no talking, just presence." She said it like an instruction: breathe.

Chloe arranged the containers in a stack on the radiator cover, then aligned them again because the first arrangement had been about economy and the second was about control. "That's kind," she said. "I'm fully booked Tuesday. Deliverables." She kept the word flat. She straightened the top container with a finger and kept her arms by her sides.

Jas looked at her for a two-count and took one of the stacks. "Right," she said. "Well, ask." She did not phrase it as a platitude; she left it as a job.

Back at the table, the candles had burned down just enough to make the room look staged rather than lived-in. Maya was telling a story about a yoga teacher who had said something real and then asked people to buy a mat. Tom ran his finger around the rim of his glass again as though considering the note it made.

"This is special," Maya said. "You'll look back and laugh."

"We are laughing," Chloe said. She pressed her lips together into what read as amusement and let the pause be a beat rather than a gap. The phone on the plywood buzzed. She glanced at it and saw numbers that belonged to her and not to them: views ticking up on the short clip she had posted two minutes before of steam fogging the plastic sheet on the window. She didn't pick it up.

"Have you thought about using the back for a garden, " Maya gestured vaguely, "moment?"

“Phase two,” Chloe said. “Drainage first.” The word was unsexy and correct, and it sat in the middle of the table until someone moved it.

“Drainage is overrated,” Tom said in a voice that said he knew it wasn’t. He tugged at the plaster dust on his trousers with damp fingers.

Elliot looked at Chloe. “Some things can wait,” he said softly, not to Tom and not to Maya.

She picked up her own glass and drank. The wine had lost what little sting it had had.

The goodbyes were a ceremony, coats back on and the hallway colder. Maya stood and sang out a “Thank you for having us in your building site,” then leaned over to kiss Chloe’s cheek again and did the little squeeze at the elbow that meant, you’re brave, and I am, too. Tom put his empty bottle into the tote Chloe had placed near the door for recycling and made a show of tightening his scarf. “We should do this more often,” he said, and they both laughed because the sentence was part of the ritual and because neither of them meant it.

Jas was last at the door. “Text me if the lock sticks,” she said. “It’s doing a thing.” She put her arms around Chloe in an embrace that landed where it needed to. “I’m serious about Tuesday,” she added, not pressing, not backing off.

Chloe’s hands closed briefly on the back of Jas’s parka, then released. “I’m fine,” she said, and felt her mouth shape around the lie with practice. “Go sleep.”

The door closed and the house returned to the street noises and the cold air in rooms with too much wall missing. Elliot stood with his hands in his pockets, rocking on his heels. He began, “We need to, ” and then Chloe’s phone buzzed with the kind of insistence that signalled a spike,

and she reached for it.

“Hang on,” she said. She swiped and looked at the graph. The number under ‘Views’ had lifted in the time gap it had taken to close the door and say goodbye. She moved her thumb up and saw five messages from strangers that said variations on ‘I love seeing the real’. She smiled at the phone.

“Chloe,” Elliot said, and his voice had a measured weight. “We need to talk about numbers.”

“We’re okay,” she said, still looking. “Look.” She turned the phone to him and showed him the view count on a story where Jas’s forearm could be seen briefly, muscles taut as she lifted a container. “People are leaning in.” The phrase sounded like something Elliot would have said about clients. “This helps.”

He watched the screen for a second and then watched her. “It’s not money.”

She tapped the screen, took two screenshots of the DMs, and saved them in a folder labelled ‘Partnerships’. She put the phone down face up this time and dismissed the next banner without reading it.

“Can we take this weekend and sort the budget together?” He spoke slowly. “Line by line, the M&E; overage, the fabrication surcharge. What’s left, what’s next. I need,” he stopped. “We need to be aligned.”

She lifted the foil lid on a container to pour sauce into a smaller pot to save for tomorrow’s lunch and positioned the pot so it wouldn’t be in the centre of any shot. “I’m fully booked this weekend,” she said. “I have deliverables due Monday. The partner content needs a draft, and I promised a first-fix explainer and a Q&A.; Tuesday is better. Or next Friday.”

“Tuesday you’re booked,” he said. “You just said it three times tonight.”

She made a sound that might have been a laugh. “I’ll move something.” She wiped the plywood where oil had seeped and left a darker patch and then looked at the cloth as if it might provide a way to avoid the next sentence. “It’s fine.”

He picked up empty containers and stacked them in a corner. His movements were careful, deliberate. “I’ve got an early start,” he said after a minute. “I might crash at the office.” The office did offer a kind of sleep the house did not, which was true.

She nodded without looking at him. Her shoulders dropped a fraction; she reached for the cutlery. They moved around each other, folding the sheet that had protected the radiator cover, separating rubbish by whether it had oil on it. The scrape of metal on plywood sounded too loud. They worked without speaking. It wasn’t companionable; it wasn’t hostile; it was the kind people label as ‘getting things done’ to avoid calling it what it is.

When the sacks were tied and moved into the corridor, Chloe stood in the doorway and looked back at the room as if it were a set she was leaving in place for tomorrow. She moved the flowers half an inch again. She picked up her phone, opened her draft for the grid and read the caption she had been building in her head during the night. Community isn’t a hashtag, it’s people who turn up when you’re cold and hungry and the wall falls off. Thank you for coming into the mess. We’re still on track. She changed the sentence so it would read less like someone else had written it, then less like no one had, and saved it to post at eight in the morning when people were on trains scrolling with one hand. The wording had to be defensible; no over-claim, no euphemism. Another banner from Milos, Re: Revised budget & structural clarification, slid across the screen with a preview: Structural overage +18%. She turned the phone face-down and left her palm on it for heat.

“Don’t post the wall falling,” Elliot said from the doorway to the corridor. He spoke from the corridor. “Or do. I don’t know.” He moved a hand as if to smooth something that wasn’t there and dropped it. “I’m

going.”

She didn't ask him to stay. “Text when you get there,” she said, not because she needed to know where he would be but because that was what people in couples said.

After he left, the temperature dropped by a measurable amount; she saw it in the way the nearest candle flame shortened and then steadied. She took three photos, adjusting her angle each time so that the damp line at the back did not show. In the third, the flowers looked almost real against the torn wall; her phone warmed in her hand from use. She held it for heat and then set it down on the plywood. The plywood was cold to the touch.

She blew out the candles, one at a time, until the light was the colour of the corridor and the street beyond. She gathered the bowls and stacked them near the sink upstairs in a pile that would read as manageable in the morning. In the front room, the line where the damp had been measured was still there, the brick below it a darker colour that no amount of arranging could hide in real life. She stood in the doorway for another long moment and put her hand into her coat pocket where a coin and a key and a folded receipt were. Her phone buzzed against the plywood as a message came in: a heart, then a comment that said, I love that you're showing the process. She didn't pick it up right away.

The house stayed cold. Her phone stayed warm.

Chapter 6

The Rot

She flinched at the smell before she knew why. It was not the sour damp she had trained herself to ignore; it had a sweeter edge that turned in the throat. Milos crouched by the corridor wall and worked the flat bar under a board he had already loosened. The wood lifted with a sound that was not clean. Underneath, where there should have been steady, pale joists, there were sections that looked dry and held until he pressed his screwdriver into them and they broke under almost no pressure.

“Here,” he said, without triumph, because there was none. He pushed the tip into the end of the joist where it met the brick. The fibres broke into cubes and then into dust; a line of pale threads ran across the face. He scraped until he reached something that resisted him. “Not only one,” he added, moving one joist along with his palm, then the next. “Span is gone. Dining and front.”

She stood with her arms folded so her hands wouldn’t be visible. He levered up another board. Cold air came straight up from the void and moved over her ankles. The exposed joist sat a few centimetres down; at the wall it turned darker and then simply wasn’t itself. He pressed again and more fragments came away. There was a smell the way a forgotten towel smells when it dries in a ball; it made the back of her tongue feel dirty.

“So. Dry rot,” Milos said, not as a diagnosis to be admired but as a fact to be acted on. “We cut back to hard wood. Replace ends. Wall plate,” he pointed with the screwdriver, “renew or treat if sound. Masonry sterilise. Increase airflow. Fix the ground outside so water is not coming to say hello.” He made a small face at his own phrasing, then put the

screwdriver back into the pocket where his pencils went.

“How far?” she asked. She tried to look like a person who had been here before. “How far to cut back.”

“Until this doesn’t do that.” He pushed again and let the crumble answer. “We go from joist to joist. We follow. If it is here, it is not polite; it doesn’t stop at the line you would like. We check bearing at the hearth, we open that end. We check under the window where you had water before.” He tapped the brick with his knuckles and listened in the way people who build things do. “We need to lower ground outside sooner. This is all the same story.” She pictured Milos’s email subject from last night: “Structural overage +18%.”

“How long.” She did not put a question mark on it.

“I book treatment. We cut today and tomorrow. We sterilise masonry. We sister and replace ends where we can, drop new if we must. You lose minimum,” he counted on his fingers, not for show; he was actually counting, “one week to cut and treat. Add cure time. If I move crew off another job for you, I can have two men here each day. If not, longer. First fix pauses in this area until we have sound. Plumbing too.” He looked at her directly. “You cannot wire on bad wood.”

She nodded like someone agreeing while the numbers rearranged in her head. The idea of pausing slid across the calendar she had built and dissolved dates that had been public. “What does it, ” she made a small circling motion with one finger, “ , what are we talking about.” Money was a word she knew how to pronounce in private and not in public; even here she wanted to slide past it.

He straightened with that careful way he had, paced and exact. He walked to the radiator cover where his clipboard was and wrote a number and then another after talking in his head for a short moment. He kept the pen on the paper. When he handed it to her, he did not apologise for it.

She knocked off the slab balance and next month's VAT and it left almost nothing.

She held the board so her hand wouldn't shake. It was not just the work; it was disposal and treatment and the time those men would not be doing the neat, visible tasks she had promised to show. She opened her phone without thinking about where they were and the cold on her fingers made her fumble the code. The banking app faced her with hard figures that did not care about tone. There was her business account, already pressed thin by the slab deposit and the last batch of electrical materials, and her personal cushion, which was small because she kept the bigger number where it could be described as a business reserve. That story worked on invoices and not on floor voids.

"We got unlucky," she said to no one and to him. "The survey," she stopped. They had not done a full survey. She could feel the heat rise up her neck and pressed the edge of the clipboard into her palm, a private little punishment. "Okay," she said. "Okay."

"We have to act now," he said. "If we wait, it is not cheaper later. We do it clean, it is finished. You do not want to be cooking here on top of this." He pointed at the span where, in her head, the island still was the correct width and the pendant still hung at the right height over an absence.

She looked at the number again and at the floor and at the boards stacked against the wall with dust on their edges. "Is there a way to make it safe enough and then, " she pinched the air with her fingers, ", dress and come back?" She heard the language she hated come out of her mouth. "I mean, keep shooting elsewhere. Work around. We can't lose three weeks."

He shook his head once. No speech. He prised up another board and put the pry bar down. "I will not cover a failure. Not with paint, not with new boards. We do it or we don't. If we don't, I sign off what is safe and I go. If we do, I want the deposit today so I can keep my men and book the

treatment.” He held her eyes the way he did when he had said something he knew she would not enjoy. “You asked me to do this properly.”

She stepped into the corridor where the air was marginally warmer. She rang Elliot. It went to voicemail on the second ring, which meant it had bounced straight there. She listened to her own breath while the message played and then hung up and rang again because calls sometimes got through when they were meant to. No. A calendar invite appeared that did not belong to her, a block of grey from ten until four with a title with no detail. She typed: ‘Call me when you can. Structural: urgent but contained. Don’t worry yet.’ She put the last sentence in because that was the tone they spoke in when one of them needed the other to keep their hands on the wheel.

Back in the front room, Milos had his pencil in his mouth and was measuring from the wall to the point where the joist still resisted a screwdriver. “We have to chase to here,” he said, tapping the taped floor. “We will bag and move. It will be clean. It is ugly now because we are looking at it. It will not be ugly when it is done.”

She nodded. The smell was worse now that she knew what she was smelling. She opened the banking app again and moved her thumb without hesitation this time, seeing the new balance and the old one as if they were both still true. She drew a short breath and held it. Her thumb pressed the edge of the phone. “Do it,” she said. “Book what you need. I’ll get the deposit to you by end of day.”

He didn’t smile. He didn’t soften. “Good call,” he said. It was the kind of sentence that some men used to dismiss, but in his mouth it was a line on a page with weight. He bent again, motioned to one of his men to bring bags and masks, and began unscrewing the next board.

She stood for a few seconds longer and watched dust fall onto the brick below. Refusing to describe the exposed void at all, she stepped around it on careful feet and took a photo that showed only a taped line and a boot tip and not the reason. In her story draft, she typed: ‘Older

houses come with surprises. Safety first. We're taking a beat to make it right. Thank you for sticking with us.' She added nothing else. She did not post it yet.

By two, the boards were stacked neatly and the men had bags open, ready for the mess. The cold came up from the void and made the hair on Chloe's arms stand up. She moved to the radiator cover and opened her phone again. The bank app asked for her face and then for her code and then for her face again because the light kept shifting through the torn wall at the back. The sum went from the business account to Milos's details and she paused on the confirmation screen long enough to feel the weight of what lay on the other side. She pressed and watched the progress bar reach the end. Her jaw tightened; the figure was smaller, fixed. A notification bounced up. She checked the personal cushion and moved most of what was there into the same path. She kept enough to feed herself for a week without thinking too much about it. Her forearms went weak.

She stepped out into the corridor for reception and called Elliot again. Voicemail. She kept the message short. "It's rot. Ground floor span. We need to cut back and treat. I've authorised so we don't lose the team and so we're not building on rubbish. I've sent the deposit. We'll need to talk tonight about moving some things. But it's controlled." She kept her voice level and placed a cushion of phrases where the panic should go. The number stayed off the recording; she didn't want to hear it out loud.

His reply came a few minutes later when she was watching a man in a mask bag fragments and tape up a bin. It was a thumbs-up emoji. Consent without liability. He's busy. That's the story. The small hand on the screen looked like a joke. For a second, the fan's noise dropped out. She held the phone for an extra second so she wouldn't throw it, set it face-down on the radiator cover, and went back to the taped line like

there was something she could contribute.

The crew worked without the drama people love to imagine. One set cut; one set bagged; one drilled shallow holes into the face of the brick to take sterilising fluid later. There was a low, constant mechanical sound and the scratch of board against board and then the quieter sound of a brush as someone swept dust into a pan to stop it moving into other rooms. The smell intensified when they broke a piece and then settled. They taped one doorway and then the other and set a box fan on the facing. Chloe watched until the watching felt like work.

She left the site and took the train one stop, already shaping ‘resilience’ as the way to manage the story after the hit. At three-thirty she fast-walked to the cafe that sold expensive calm one postcode over because the brand rep had suggested it and because she didn’t want to be seen in the site with the boards up. The tables were plywood because plywood was the material of the moment. The usual citrus scent masked yesterday’s milk just enough for the people who wanted to believe in citrus. The rep was already there with a tablet and a smile that did not admit uncertainty.

“So,” the woman said after the opening pleasantries and the compliment on Chloe’s coat, which was the coat Chloe wore when she wanted to look solvent. “Talk me through your next six weeks. I saw your first fix explainer, really clear. Loved ‘backbone.’ We’d like to be present on the momentum.”

Chloe slotted into her voice, crisp and easy. “We had an unexpected discovery today, nothing dramatic, just older-house realities, so we’re building a mini-arc on resilience. Practical, not woe. Safety-first explainer, then a ‘how we route around’, then a community pull, what people wish they’d known before they started. We keep the cadence, we just shape the story.” She did not let her hands doodle in the air; she kept them on the reusable cup she had not needed but now needed to hold (now actually useful).

“Love that,” the rep said, fingers already moving. “We can align on ‘Resilience Kit’ in the second post, then a cosy moment when you’re,” she glanced at her screen, “in week eight with a kitchen pre-reveal? You used ‘clean line’ before; let’s keep that. And your ‘resilience’, your ‘sequencing’, we’ll mirror those.” “We can badge ‘Resilience Kit’ as a series.”

Chloe smiled the way you do when you hear a phrase you wrote in a document come back to you wearing someone else’s shoes. “We’ll have to do a soft confirm on that date. The thing today nudges some tasks. We’re not slipping; we’re just sequencing.” She liked the sound of that sentence and wrote it on her notes app later. It sold the delay.

After the meeting, she took the train two stops back toward the house. She got a seat by the window where the glass had been cleaned in strips that left faint arcs. An older man sat next to her in a coat that still held water in its wool. The smell reached her nose and then lodged deeper. She swallowed and turned her head and blinked hard. Motion, she told herself. She shifted one seat down without making a show of it when someone stood.

Outside the station, she went into the corner shop that sold every kind of drink in rails along the wall. She bought a small bottle of red with a screw cap and a bag of crisps she would not open. The man at the till did not ask for a bag because this was a neighbourhood where people always had one. She put the bottle and the crisps into her tote under her notebook and walked back to the house.

By the time she unlocked the door, the light had turned into the kind of dusk that made the dust in the air visible. The men had gone; the boards they had stacked were still there; the cut ends sat in black bags lined up along the wall for the morning. Someone had left a work light on. It made everything look more blunt. She twisted the cap off and poured the wine into a paper cup she had left on the radiator cover from the weekend. It tasted thin and okay. She sat on an upturned bucket by the taped line and held the cup with both hands because her fingers had gone cold. The light buzzed faintly. She thought of turning it off and didn’t.

She tried the lines out loud in the empty room. “We hit an older-house reality today that we need to handle properly. Safety first, always. We’re not rushing a single step. I’m proud we’re doing it right.” Her voice sounded like the voice she used on camera, just lower because the empty room damped the higher pitch she used when she was persuading. “We’re sequencing. Not slipping,” she added, and felt a small, stupid satisfaction at the shape of it. She took a sip and set the cup down on the radiator cover and looked at the numbers again even though they had not changed. She checked to see if Elliot had called. He had not.

She posted the story she had drafted earlier and put her phone down. The progress bar went to the end. She didn’t watch the view count and sat still until the cup was empty, then stood and threw it in the bag she had put by the door for recycling and it hit an empty plastic bottle and made a light, dry sound.

By then, she was still there. The phone rang at nine-thirty when she had almost convinced herself that sleep would be a thing she could perform without actually getting to it. Jas. She stood so the cold wouldn’t stick to her back and answered.

“Hi,” Jas said. She sounded tired in the way people sound tired when they have been on their feet for hours and have moved other people’s bodies without fuss. “I saw your thing. ‘Surprise.’ What happened?”

Chloe looked at the open floor and said, “Older-house reality. Dry rot in the ground floor span. We’re on it. It’s contained. We’re doing it right.” She heard herself and wanted to kick something and kicked the toe of her boot against a board edge instead, which hurt immediately.

“Is it safe for you to be there?” Jas asked. No judgement. A checklist.

“I’m not walking where it’s open. Doors are taped. They’ll be in tomorrow with treatment. It’s fine. It’s just logistics.” She pushed the

word out with a brightness that didn't belong to the hour.

"You can say it's awful," Jas said. "You don't have to do content with me."

Chloe leaned her shoulder against the wall where the plaster was still intact and felt the chill through the coat. "It's not," she began, and then stopped. "We knew there would be something. We factored in contingency." That was almost a sentence. "We're taking it in order." She waited for the silence she had made to pass and filled it. "It will give me a chance to talk about doing things properly. People don't show that bit. They show a cabinet and then they call it 'honest' because there is a cup out of place. This is actually honest." She realised she was arguing with air.

"I can transfer you money," Jas said. She said it the way she might say 'I can pick up milk.' "Or, if you don't want that, I can sit the house tomorrow or Thursday. Or I can bring food and sit with you and not talk. I meant what I said."

Chloe closed her eyes. The skin at the back of her throat tightened. "Thank you. We're okay. It's covered. It's just," she couldn't find a better word and when she forced one, it came out wrong, "timing."

"Timing," Jas repeated. "Right." A beat. "When are you free for coffee? Not in a showroom. Not in your cold house. Actual coffee."

She nodded, though the phone couldn't see it (actual coffee sounded possible). "Sunday?" Chloe said, because Sunday sounded far enough away that anything might happen to it. "Late morning. Near you." She already had the excuse: site emergency. "I'll text you a place."

"Good," Jas said. "And if you need to move it, just tell me. Don't do the part where you say 'we're on track' at me." She wasn't smiling when she said it and she wasn't unkind.

"I'm being honest," Chloe said, too quickly. Her breath clipped on the first word. She wanted to stop talking. "Thank you for calling," she added,

because that was true and she could say it without choking.

“Go home,” Jas said. “Sleep in an actual bed. The floor there is sick.” She caught herself. “I mean, unsafe. You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Chloe said. “Night.”

She ended the call and looked at the wall for a second as if there was something she had missed in it. She opened the notes app she used for everything and started a list. ‘Resilience arc’ at the top. Underneath: ‘What to ask your builder when rot appears (you’re not an idiot if you didn’t know)’. ‘Why cutting back now saves you later (numbers, not vibes)’. ‘Older timber vs new: what actually happens’. ‘Drainage: boring and necessary’. ‘Order, not rush.’ She stared at the last one and removed the full stop and put it back.

Then an alarm for six, to catch Milos before he got on the phone to his other jobs. She pulled the tripod out of her tote and set it by the doorway where she could grab it. “No drink tomorrow,” she said out loud, and the sentence sounded wrong in the room, so she said, “No wine,” to be precise, and that turned into a promise she could keep because it had edges.

The call log showed nothing from Elliot. The last thing from him was the emoji. She typed ‘Call when you can’ and let it sit without sending, then turned the phone face-down on the radiator cover so the light wouldn’t hit her eyes when anything arrived. She stood a moment longer listening to the low hum of the light and the small, irregular sounds of a house with gaps in it after nine at night in East London.

She switched the work light off. The room went to the colour of the street. She locked the front door and checked it again. Outside, a bus stopped on the corner and let someone off; footsteps passed. She walked to the station, carrying the tripod in her tote where it stuck out and knocked against her shoulder in a way that made strangers glance at it and then at her. She didn’t look at them and went home.

Chapter 7

The Catastrophic Live

She flinched at the notification. The subject line sat there with corporate neutrality, "Materials: Rot Treatment , Interim Invoice", and the number below it had a comma in the position that changed breathing into a task. The phone screen had a film of dust that made tapping feel imprecise; she wiped it with the sleeve of her coat and the smudge moved rather than went. The front room was as it had been left: boards lifted and stacked, doorways taped with clear plastic that pressed in and then released when the fan was on, a four-way block under the makeshift plywood table with her charger already occupying one socket. Cold air rose from the exposed span and moved across her shins. A faint sharpness from the cut rot sat in the air. A black bag full of cut ends leaned against the wall, heavy and shapeless.

She opened the banking app and the numbers sat in their rectangles like facts she had to pretend were opinions. The business account had taken the rot deposit yesterday; the balance was a plateau that didn't admit hills. The personal cushion showed a figure that translated directly to days of food. She toggled to the credit card out of habit and then back because the interest rate was not a feeling either. The invoice asked for payment within three days to release treatment materials and book the second team. Three days implied a buffer she didn't have.

On the way in she had bought another small bottle of red from the corner shop, the size that sits under the counter like a secret and can be explained as cooking if required. She twisted the cap and poured the wine into a paper cup that was left on the radiator cover from an earlier day; the cup had a stain at its lip that meant it should be thrown out, but

throwing out anything now felt like theatre. She had said "No wine" last night as if a sentence could police a day. It was barely noon. The glass of her phone camera caught a sliver of herself reflected, hair pulled clean, mouth set in the line she used when she was pretending to be relaxed.

She moved to the plywood, propped it on the sawhorses, and nudged the jar with supermarket flowers left from the weekend into the center as if that could establish a horizon. The jar hid nothing, but in frame it softened a corner. She opened her camera and swiped. Photo, Video, Reels. She chose Reels because it sounded productive and not needy. She held the phone above the plywood to test a downward pan that would show flowers, jar, wood grain, then the taped line on the floor where the void started, without ever showing the void. It would be the kind of clip that paired with "Sequencing, not slipping" in text and made sensible people nod.

A banner slid over the top of the screen and she jabbed it away; her thumb brushed across to Live. The circle lit red and her own face flickered in the self-view for a second, then the phone slipped. Her palm was dry from dust and the weight of the case tipped forward. The phone slid off the plywood and hit the floor face-down with a flat sound. The red dot in the corner stayed red.

She didn't clock it. She reached for the jar, rotated it forty degrees so the good heads faced the camera that was no longer recording anything she intended to show, and took a sip from the paper cup. The wine had that thin, metallic edge that told you where it had been made and how quickly it had been bottled. She said, under her breath, because speaking out loud helped organise things, "It's fine. It's just logistics." She pushed the flowers again and stepped back. The Live broadcast the underside of the plywood edge, the cuff of her coat, the toe of her trainer, a strip of taped doorway moving with airflow that came and went in steady pulses, and a grit pattern on the floor she would never publish on purpose.

In the first fifteen seconds, the watching number ticked up because the platform had learned to push her face to people who lingered on

anything she made. The comments started as punctuation marks. "Is this live?" "Sound?" A question mark alone. Someone typed "u ok babes?" and a heart. The audio picked up the light scrape of jar on wood and then her breath when she lifted the cup again. She bent to plug her charger into the extension and her head came into frame for a second, too close and unflattering, and then out again.

The door latch clicked. Elliot came in with a practiced smoothness and rubbed his hands together as if the gesture were heat. Office coat over merino, trainers that were new without saying so, the watch with the face that wanted to be noticed and not mentioned. He took in the room, the taped doors, the stacked boards, the paper cup. The hinge gave a small scrape. Colder air reached her ankles. His eyes went to the cup and then to her hand. "It's noon," he said, by way of hello. "Why are you drinking at noon?"

She kept the cup in her hand because putting it down would look like conceding something. "Because I've been here since eight doing your part and mine," she said, and the sentence came out smoother than it felt. "Because I just got an invoice we can't pay today. Because Milos wants to book the second team and the materials are held on that." She put the cup down then, not because of him but because her fingers were suddenly unsteady and she didn't want to spill on camera. She remembered the camera a beat later.

A comment rolled up: "he's THERE" followed by an eye emoji. Another: "omg did he say noon" and three laugh faces. Someone typed "send help" and someone else typed "don't." The phone lay on the floor collecting this without discrimination. The angle showed Elliot from the knees down when he stepped toward the plywood. His trousers broke cleanly over his shoes.

"We discussed this," he said. The voice he used at work had found its way into this room; it was the voice that made his team repeat his own phrases back to him as if they were conclusions. "We're not in a position to front every surprise. We need to align before you authorise more. You

said you'd wait."

She took a breath and felt it collect low. "We had rot. It wasn't a surprise; it was a fact under the floor. I waited for you. You didn't pick up. I left you two voicemails. I sent the deposit so they didn't walk to the next job. Do you want the floor to literally collapse?" She heard herself and knew she was using literal too often. The comments threw hearts and exclamation marks and the occasional slur held in asterisks, which people always believe is distance.

He gestured at the taped doorway. "Film that. Film 'doing the right thing.' Don't film, " his hand cut the air, looking for a noun that would cover what she had made of their life, ", this." He looked for the phone then and didn't see it at first because it was on the floor behind the plywood. "If you're doing a thing, do it properly."

She laughed once and she hated the sound because it sounded like someone on a panel telling a useful story. "This is properly. This is what properly looks like when you don't have spare zeroes. This looks like dust. This looks like a black bag of rotten wood. This looks like my arm lifting boards because you're at lunch and I'm on the phone with Building Control asking for an early slot." She lowered her voice. "And I'm drinking because the number that just landed fits nowhere."

He looked at her cup again in a way that made it a moral object. In the corner of the Live, the red number climbed. "Chloe," he said, and you could fit an argument inside her name when he said it that way. "We need discipline, not volatility."

She reached for the phone, finally, to set up the shot of the jar she had meant to make and saw the red dot and the word LIVE. A cold prickle ran under her scalp. The comments at that exact second were petty and earnest at the same time: "babe end this" and "no keep it omg" and "Don't let him talk to you like that" and "we love the real" and one person she recognised from a brand account typing the neutral, cautious "Here if you need to talk □□" she had seen under other people's disasters.

"Oh," she said, guttural and low. She grabbed the phone. Her thumb missed the button and pulled up a filter for a second that put a faint blush over the unfinished wall. She hit End. Peak viewers appeared, higher than any reel. Of course it was. Swallowing tripped; the muscles under her jaw held. Her stomach lurched, then a familiar steadiness came, and that made it worse.

The notifications started before she could put the phone face down. Some were hearts, some were screen recordings tagged by people who knew how to move quickly, some were DMs asking for context, some reinforced that she was brave, as if bravery were a brand value. One was from a brand manager with an avatar of a sunrise who asked, "Are you okay?" in a way that made the space after the question mark look like a spreadsheet. She saw the call log flash three times with "Jas" and then go silent.

Elliot ran a hand over the plywood edge as if checking for splinters and then looked at her. "Fantastic," he said in a voice that was flat and easy and designed not to be called angry. "Do you have any idea who watches you?" He didn't say colleagues because that would be personal. "Optics matter," he said, gesturing at the phone, "for both of us."

She put the phone on the radiator cover where the dust was thick. "Yes," she said. "It pays the bills you said you'd look at with me and didn't."

"So we're pivoting to unmanaged risk." He kept his face perfectly arranged. "You just reduced our runway to zero."

"The plan," she said, feeling heat across her chest, "is to not let the floor swallow us. That means not having to explain to Milos why we're backing out of a deposit we already sent. And not watching you stare at your phone for four hours while I authorise treatment."

The air in the room was dry enough to make her tongue stick to her teeth. The smell of old timber treatment from another job lived in the bag on the far wall and reasserted itself when the plastic over the doorway

moved in the small currents. She clocked the flowers in frame and hated herself for caring.

He took a step closer. "You've just pushed something out you can't pull back."

She laughed again and couldn't stop it. "Like an offer email? Like a six-month timeline? Like a watch that costs more than our kitchen sink? We do this all the time. The difference is I make the doing visible and you pretend it's discreet."

The comments were quiet now because she had cut the feed, but her notifications didn't know how to be quiet. A DM previewed on the top of the lock screen: "Be careful. He seems controlling." Another: "This is the REALEST thing on my feed today." A third one from someone she knew offline: "Call me."

"Do you know how hard I work to keep this steady?" he said. "Do you have any idea what it takes to cover this along with everything else? You just made it a show."

She wanted to sit down and couldn't because something about sitting would look like surrender inside a picture even when there was no camera. "It was always a show, Elliot. That's the agreement. We point at the mess and say 'process' and we keep standing up."

He pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose and then dropped his hand as if he'd done that once in front of someone who had said it made him look tired. "You can't keep doing this. You can't keep testing the line because you're bored."

"I'm not bored," she said. "I'm terrified. I'm trying to keep it moving because if it stalls we lose the men and then the timeline collapses and the brands pull and then we actually can't pay. That's the line."

"Stop saying brands like they're family." He looked around, as if the room could be made to see his point. "Stop acting like this house is an audience that needs feeding."

"It is." She held his eye. "It is exactly that."

He made that small adjustment with his jaw she knew as restraint. "I'm going back to work. I'll call some people. I'll check numbers. You need to stay off Live."

A new banner appeared: "We saw, are you all right?" from a name she had thought would take longer to arrive. She watched his eyes follow the light. "This is not the time," he said quietly. "Turn it off."

She didn't. He exhaled in a measured way and walked out, leaving the front door open for a second too long so cold air ran down the corridor and into the room. She watched the door close and only then put the phone face down like it mattered.

He hadn't gone far; she heard the thud of him at the step when he remembered he needed to say the real part. He came back in and didn't take off his coat. "One more thing," he said. "If you keep doing that online," he didn't say the word because he didn't want to dignify it, "I'm not moving more money until you can show you can manage it. I won't fund a spiral."

"Fund?" she said, too loudly. "We're calling it funding now? I authorised rot remediation from my business. I moved my own food money. I am funding this."

He kept his expression right in the middle. "We have to be responsible, Chloe. You need to be responsible."

"Give me a number," she said. "Give me one number I can actually put into a column. What is left. What can be spent. Today, not in January, not after your imaginary liquidity event. Now."

"It's fluid," he said, and he actually used the word. "It's not helpful to fixate on a headline figure. We have levers. We have a runway. Don't box

us in with a number that makes you feel safe."

She looked at him for a long second and tried to decide whether she was more angry at the evasion or at herself for allowing the word runway to exist in her house. "You're saying no," she said, translating because translation was what she did between trades and people and money. "You're saying you don't know."

"I'm saying I won't commit to a number on the back of what you just did," he said. "I'm saying this isn't a game."

"Do not lecture me on games." Her throat tightened again and she swallowed. "I'm here when Milos says we can't wire on bad wood. I'm here when the brick is drilled and the men wear masks and one of them coughs and apologises to me like it's my fault he has lungs. I'm here when the work light hums after dark because someone forgot to flick it off. I'm here when you answer a Slack channel called Founders and tell them about a client who doesn't exist yet."

He blinked once, slow. "I'm not going to stand here and be insulted."

She felt the energy slide sideways. "I'm sorry you felt insulted," she said, in the ritual syntax that makes apology feel like a formatting choice. It came out before she could stop it and she wanted to bite it back.

He nodded as if that closed something. "I didn't intend to, " he started, and the words arrived in order, ", minimise you."

The screen brightened on the radiator cover with "+1,207" next to followers. Her chest tightened; the room felt closer. When she looked back at him he was already watching her. The resentment wasn't loud; it sat there with posture.

He lifted his shoulders and put them down. "I'll sort the numbers," he said, heading out. "You sort yourself."

She waited again for the door to close. Her mouth was dry and the wine was still in the cup and had gone from thin to vinegar in the ten minutes it had been out. She drank it anyway because throwing it away

would be domestic theatre and she had enough on that stage. She picked up her phone and opened her texts to Milos.

"Could we, " she typed, then deleted. "Re invoice, " delete. "Would you accept, " She wrote, "Can we split the treatment materials over two drops?" and stared at the line and then killed it. She tried, "We're aligned on doing it properly. Can we stage the payment against booked capacity?" Delete. She put the phone face down and picked it up again. The thumbprint didn't register because of dust; she wiped it and tried again.

The site, without the men, had a kind of blunt quiet that came from the absence of work. The taped doorway made a soft sound as it flexed in the small movements of air from somewhere behind the house; the box fan sat off, angled toward the corridor. Outside, a bus stopped and started again. Her phone pinged at intervals that were almost regular, enough to carve the afternoon into little edges. She leaned a hip against the plywood and set both hands flat so her palms collected the fine grit that lived on every surface. She had a mark of dust on her sleeve now. It looked like a bruise until you rubbed it and it disappeared under your hand.

She opened the DMs and scrolled in a flat, dispassionate way because it was better to stay at the surface. "I'm shaking," someone she didn't know wrote. "I can't believe he said noon." Someone else: "We love the real. You're safe with us." A third: "My partner would never." Another: "This is not okay. Do you need a sofa?" There were hearts, the kind that asked for nothing but counted as engagement. Someone annotated her mistakes in twenty-four point type and called it care. She long-pressed on one she disliked and saved it to answer in public later; the wording would anchor the post.

The mentions were worse because they were efficient: a screen record of the angle from the floor with captions in white text calling it "raw." A still with a red circle around the paper cup. A thread under a forum post with her name in the title where they were already assigning motives. A brand manager's neutral avatar again: "Here if you need anything." She had met the woman once at a breakfast where the coffee had been so

weak it tasted like cereal milk. The woman had called her a thought leader with a straight face.

She opened Notes. Title: "Owning It." She deleted that and typed "On Getting It Wrong" and then deleted that and typed nothing for a moment because nothing was honest but wouldn't serve. She typed: "I want to address what happened today." Line break. "I'm learning." She stopped, printed the word learning in her head, and felt heat across her face. She wrote: "I spoke to someone I love in a tone I don't stand by." She took the love out and put "I spoke to my partner" instead. She added: "We're under pressure. That's not an excuse." There was a phrase she had used before in smaller messes, "holding space", that always did numbers and she looked at it in her head and decided she couldn't bear it and left it out. She typed: "I'm sorry." She stared at that sentence like it was a tile she had placed wrong and might lift later.

She added bullet points because bullet points created a sense of structure. ", Safety first: I authorised rot remediation yesterday. We will always do work properly." ", Privacy matters: we will keep future fights offline." ", Boundaries: I'm taking a 24□hour pause." The last bullet was a lie the way a bed time is a lie when you write it down to calm yourself. She picked up the phone and changed "24" to "until tomorrow afternoon" because that sounded less like a farce.

Her keys were cold in her palm. Outside, the air was colder. Dust from her cuffs marked the seat when she sat.

She went outside to get away from the smell of disturbed timber and sat on the front step with the door half□open. She opened the camera and propped the phone against her bag. The angle was bad; it made her chin the wrong shape. She lifted her face to catch the light at the threshold and hit record.

"Hi," she said to the lens, and her eyes did that reflective thing they did now when she was trying not to cry. She got through two lines of the script before the pitch of her voice went up and the clip read as

performative even to her with no audience. She stopped the recording. The lens picked up the hitch in her breath, the blink she couldn't smooth, the way her mouth tightened on certain words. Not usable. She pressed her forehead into the heel of her hand. A hot rush tightened her stomach.

She opened Calendar, the one that was hers and not his, and scrolled to tomorrow. She put a block at 3 p.m. that said "repair, shoot apology" and another at 3:45 that said "post if ready." She moved to Reminders and set one for noon to text Milos regardless of whether Elliot had "sorted numbers." She added another to "call Jas" and then flicked the switch to off next to it because she couldn't bear the label ringing at her all morning.

In Messages, she opened Jas's thread. There were three missed calls with the grey circles next to them. She typed "Help" and watched the four letters sit there. She deleted the H and then the E and then the L and then the P. She started to type "Tomorrow?" and didn't send that either. She moved the conversation up with a pin so it would sit at the top of her inbox like a judgement.

She took the bus back to the flat in slow traffic and went straight to the bedroom.

At the flat that night, she lay on her side of the bed and the ordinary duvet made a cool ridge along her hip. She put her phone on the bedside table to her right and the light from it cut a hard line along the wall when the screen came on. She turned it face□down and it vibrated anyway. She turned it face□up and the numbers were there again. Follower count up by a number that meant nothing beyond the fact itself; DMs still multiplying; three emails from three different press requests with subject lines that contained the words "speak to". On the kitchen counter a glass, clean and upside down, sat near the sink. She had washed it and put it there and there it was. She thought of Elliot's "I'll sort the numbers" and felt her jaw move under her skin.

Sleep came in pieces. At 05:12 she opened Notes, swapped "I'm learning" for "I'm listening," added a line, "Thank you for holding me accountable", hated it and left it because it would work.

When the alarm went at six, the first thing she did was open the Milos thread and write, "Morning. Can we talk timing on today's treatment and what we owe now vs after they attend?" She didn't send it. She watched the bubble with her text sit there like an object and then she backed out of the message and left the phone on the pillow beside her head. The room smelled of laundry and old garlic from last night's pan. She swiped at a smudge on the screen; it spread. She pinned the thread. She didn't press send.

Chapter 8

The Apology Syntax

She wiped the lens with the corner of her sleeve until the smear lifted, then lowered the visor and slid the mirror aside to keep the reflection out of frame. The car was parked on the side street that ran the length of the terrace row; a bin lid clacked somewhere behind and a bus cuffed the curb on the corner. She angled the phone against the matte dashboard case and watched the exposure shift when the cloud cover passed. Her face looked tired in neutral light; she tilted the screen up until the shadows under her eyes evened out. She set Do Not Disturb, checked the red dot over the clock to make sure the focus mode held, and opened Notes one more time. The script she had cut at 05:12 sat there with its unkindly clean bullet points. She didn't like it. It would work. She had pulled the 'repair, shoot apology' block forward; waiting all day would make her say it wrong.

She hit record, then stopped before she had said hello because her throat rasped in a way that read as pleading in clips. Her thumb slipped on the glass; she steadied the phone and tried again. "Hi," she said, and kept her voice flat. "I want to address what happened yesterday." Breath out. "I'm listening." That line sat in her mouth like a prop and she kept it anyway. "I spoke to my partner in a tone I don't stand by. We're under pressure. That's not an excuse."

She glanced down to her notes, then up. "Safety first: I authorised rot remediation yesterday. We will always do work properly." She let the words come out without decoration. The dashboard plastic felt warm against her knuckles. "Privacy matters: we'll keep future fights offline. Boundaries: I'm taking a pause until tomorrow afternoon." She dropped

her eyes once more and added the line she had argued with herself about at 05:12. "Thank you for holding me accountable."

She stopped the recording, watched it back without sound, and flinched at the way her eyes gleamed when she said accountable. She re-recorded the last two lines, then another cut entirely in case the first run read as rehearsed. The third take had a steadier mouth and a better tilt; she trimmed off the first second so it opened clean and exported it. Her thumbs moved fast: caption as drafted, no emojis, the same three bullet points in text, a short line about pressure not being an excuse, and the pause until tomorrow. She placed a beige background on the closing frame because white read as cold on this phone. She posted. She flicked Do Not Disturb off.

She put the phone on her lap and waited for the blowback that would be proof of miscalculation. The phone gave a short double-tap on her lap where she had set the haptics to light; a like, then a comment, then a follow; then five follows; then a string of comments she had seen under other people's apologies in other weeks. "Thank you for being real." "Needed this." "Couple goals are honesty." "We're all under pressure." Someone typed "Take the time you need" which was funny given how people chased content through grief in the same breath. She scrolled. The few sharp replies were there, edged with certainty about what kind of woman she was; they were outnumbered, which was its own instruction.

Her chest loosened by a degree and then tightened for a different reason when the follower number incremented in visible jumps. She watched the dot glow under the paper aeroplane icon as DMs stacked and then she stopped watching because the number made her feel both safer and more trapped. A message from a brand account with a sunrise avatar arrived at the top of the inbox: "We loved the honesty. We're building something around resilience and would love to support your next phase , product we can get to you this week, a kit around doing things properly. No fee this time, but we can offer generous usage and a longer tail. Could this help?"

She stared at the words no fee and scrolled the terms. She typed yes before she could talk herself out of it and added two smiling hands that were either prayer or gratitude depending on the reader. "Thank you. That helps." She gave them the site address and a blank for delivery times. She flicked to Calendar and dragged a "buy paint" reminder into next week. She opened her banking app, sat on the login screen, and closed it. Apologies, correctly lit, paid in product.

The phone vibrated again with a name at the top of the screen that didn't come with a logo. Jas. "Do you want to come round this evening? I can cook. No phones. Or I can sit with you on site and not talk. Either." The message worked in the body like heat. She opened the thread, then shut it. She pinned it to the top again because the gesture felt like something, then set the phone screen down on her knee until the urge to type subsided.

"Saw your video," Elliot wrote. Nothing else. The lack of punctuation communicated effort. She looked at it and tried on three interpretations, none of which improved anything. She didn't reply because she didn't trust what she would write back. The car seat pressed into the muscle behind her shoulder. She lifted the phone again and opened Calendar.

She placed a block at noon tomorrow that said "Safety explainer , rot" and another at four that said "Resilience kit unbox (delivered?)". The phone slid on her knee; she thumbed a dust smear off the glass. She added a Sunday slot for "week eight pre-reveal , cosy corner" because the rep had liked that phrase at the cafe and because if she wrote it down she could make it real. She added "Kitchen power Q&A;" to the following Tuesday even though Milos had said there would be no power on any island until the floor under it did not crumble. She added a line at the top in capitals: HOUSEWARMING , SIX MONTHS , COATS ON.

She started the engine because the cold ran up her ankle and into the rest of her if she sat still too long. On the passenger seat, the water bottle rolled and hit the door. She pulled out from the kerb, signalled, and drove back around to the terrace where the front step looked the way it always

did now, with tape lines and a permanent dust that left pale marks on every sleeve. She wiped the screen with the heel of her hand; grit stayed on her fingers.

Two boxes came from a courier with a signature screen that didn't read her fingerprint the first time because of grit. A third arrived on a trolley from a driver who said he had four more in the van and then brought two. The cardboard had that hot plastic smell that came with shrink-wrap and the inside of a storage unit. Under it, the rot smell snagged at the back of her throat. She stacked them along the wall where the skirting used to be and read the labels. LAMP , STORM. SWATCH PACK , NEUTRAL RANGE. THROW , WOVEN, and a white label with a tiny printed contract in grey about tagging and usage rights for six months and a template caption. She noted the six-month usage rights line, then signed anyway. She took a photo of the delivery note, then used the side of the biro to sign because the nib tore through the paper at the wrong moment.

Her phone pinged twice and then stilled. She unboxed a small carton of paint sample cards and spread them across the plywood board on the sawhorses. The colour names belonged to another kind of room. She laughed once under her breath with no humour in it and picked up three she could live with. Two more knocks, and then nothing; the other two boxes had been a threat not a promise.

The fourth knock was knuckles on the doorframe and then a voice. "Hi. I was passing." Jas stood with a plastic tub under one arm and her hair pulled back the way she wore it when she didn't have the energy to pretend about hair. The tub held something orange and sensible. The smell cut through the timber treatment and dust and sat there, gentle. "It's leftovers. You don't have to pretend you like it."

Chloe came forward because not coming forward would have been an insult she didn't mean to give. "Thank you."

"Are you sleeping?" Jas asked, not as a test, just as a question. She had a way of making a question sound like a chair.

"Sometimes," Chloe said, which was a lie by omission and volume. "It's busy. We're sequencing. It's fine." She held the tub and felt its warmth. The heat worked on her palms, then withdrew when her grip shifted.

"Eat something that isn't from a bottle," Jas said, quiet. "If you can't face it, freeze it. Do you have a freezer?"

"At home," Chloe said, and the word home made something inside her drop an inch. "Thank you. This is, " She looked for a word that would not break the moment. "Kind."

"And your phone?" Jas asked. "Can you turn it off for two hours? Or put it in a bag?"

Chloe looked at the deliveries because looking at the boxes was easier. "I've got an unbox. And a call to lock in paint. And Milos wants to talk about the outside ground levels again. I'll try later."

Jas nodded in that way she had that was all acceptance and no agreement. She rested a hip against the plywood and then stepped off it because it wobbled. She looked at the taped doorway and then at Chloe. "Call me if you want me to come and sit. No content."

"I know," Chloe said. She placed the tub on the sill where the dust made a ring on the plastic. "Thank you."

Milos appeared in the doorway with a clipboard and the same work jacket he always wore when he wanted to be a wall rather than a person. He took in the stack of boxes with one glance, then the labels. "No finishes," he said. "Not until this is safe."

"They're just samples," Chloe said quickly. "And lighting. For later."

"Later is after treatment, after cure, after sign-off," he said, ticking a square in the middle of his sheet. "No lamps on bad wood. No textiles. They hold dust."

"Understood," she said, with the particular smile she used for people she needed. "I won't push."

He looked at her for a second longer than was comfortable and then nodded to Jas as if to excuse himself for being the kind of person who walked into women's conversations with lists. "Outside level," he said to Chloe, shifting the clipboard. "This week. We dig."

"Sequencing," she said, and he didn't react because he didn't care about her words. He left the room, his boots dull on the boards where boards still existed.

Chloe watched him go and then reached for her phone. She opened a note titled "Apology Repair: Cadence" and wrote:

, Unbox: kit, swatches (be clear: no install yet) , Safety explainer with Milos voiceover? if he agrees (he will say no; maybe subtitles) , Paint drop scheduled: align with 'we're nearly there' language , Pre-reveal corner: one surface, not whole room , Housewarming invite graphic , 'coats on'

She called the number the sunrise avatar had given her for "paint support" and pressed the phone to her ear until her cheek hurt. The rep's voice came through bright and controlled. Chloe explained the date, the arc, the desire to place colour late in the story so it read as earned. The rep said words like "love", "support", "so aligned", and then said the true part: "We'll need coverage. Stories on receipt, Stories on application, Feed post on final look. Tagging. Hashtags."

"Fine," she said. "We'll do stories on receipt today. We won't apply until we have sign-off. The moment of colour happens in the lead-up to the party."

"We'll give you the moment you need," the rep said. They both knew what they were doing.

She ended the call and opened Messages. "Are you free on [date] 7, late? Coats-on housewarming. Photography contra for tag and story. No edits, full credit." She sent it to a photographer whose work always made spaces look like they had slept well. The reply came back within a minute: "Yes. Happy to." She added him to a group thread: her, him, and Elliot. "Welcome , this is for logistics only."

The thumbs-up bubble appeared from Elliot and then nothing else. She stared at the minimal participation and told herself that it was enough that he was in the thread.

She typed three separate messages with dates and times to Maya and Tom and to Jas, adding "It'll still be a building site. Bring layers," and hit send before she could rephrase anything to sound less like a plea. The small dots flickered, then stopped, then a heart from Maya landed on the date and a "We wouldn't miss it" as if the words settled anything. Tom replied with a joke about textured walls. Jas wrote back a single "Okay" and a second message: "Do you want me to bring anything that people will actually eat?"

Chloe typed, "It's fine," and deleted the full stop because it looked like anger. She sent the two words bare, then put the phone face-down on the plywood until she could breathe without counting.

The room held its usual cold. The taped plastic on the doorway moved when the main door opened and closed somewhere down the corridor; she didn't look up. She picked a knife out of a box and made a slit down the side of a lamp carton, careful not to go deeper and scar anything she would have to shoot later. Packaging creaked. Foam rubbed against polished metal. The lamp was handsome in a way that would photograph well and felt like trouble in her hands. She set it on the plywood and didn't plug it in.

She opened the tub Jas had brought and ate three spoonfuls standing by the window where the dirt line on the sill had its own mark; the food sat heavy and kind in her stomach. She closed the tub and put it near the

door so she would not leave without it. She glanced at the boxes and the grey clause on the label, then at the time; Elliot would be here soon.

"Not guaranteed," Elliot said, softening something that had been rational yesterday and was now a little less so. He stood a careful distance from the taped line on the floor and kept his hands in his coat pockets. He always used pockets when he didn't want to appear to be explaining. "Everyone's reviewing. We're mid-review cycle. Market-dependent. Still vesting." He checked his watch and took half a step back.

"Which means what," Chloe said, and the phrasing came out flat because she had spent the day smoothing her voice and had no energy left for finesse. "A number."

"It would be irresponsible to give you one," he said. "The board is, "

"Fine," she said, slicing through it because if she didn't cut him he would lay out a spreadsheet of nouns. Her breath caught; then she said, "We proceed. The party stays. Exposure is the lever." The word lever came from his world and she used it on purpose. "We need to keep momentum."

His pocketed hand tightened once. "Or we scale back," he said. "We can still do something small. Or later." His gaze dropped to the lamp box and back up again. "You don't need to give them a date."

"We did that six months ago," she said. "We gave them a date the day we posted. You told me to trust the process. This is the process." She heard the tightness at the end and left it in because she was tired of making everything sound kind.

He shifted his weight and looked like he might say something softer and then didn't. "We'll revisit after the party," he said, which was the same as saying not now, not with witnesses.

A scuff at the door cut his words. Milos walked through carrying a length of primed steel on his shoulder, balanced like a thing he had carried before and would carry again. He glanced over, shook his head once without stopping, and kept going toward the back. The angle of the steel caught on the edge of the taped door; he adjusted without looking up. Nobody said anything.

Chloe's phone lit, face-down, with a banner she didn't need to read to know the format: "Storage charge notice , stone on hold , confirm window." She didn't flip the phone, and neither did he. They looked away.

"We'll deal with it," she said, and the words didn't attach to anything real. She heard herself commit to the same trick that had got them here. Believe and then behave as if belief were a budget line.

He nodded, the way he did when he decided to be reasonable in public. "After the party," he said again.

She watched him go. He touched the door with two fingers as he passed because he had started doing that lately, as if the act of control could make anything in this house obey him. The corridor trapped their breath in its cold. She picked up the phone and swiped the stone email away without opening it. The screen reflected her face in a thin overlay over the words STORAGE CHARGE NOTICE. She closed the app and opened Calendar instead.

She moved the party block one slot up to avoid clashing with a school half-term one of their acquaintances had mentioned in a comment that afternoon. She added "Photographer arrives 6:15" and "Paint on wall no later than 5" and wrote "No rugs" in capital letters because she could hear Milos's voice in her head and didn't want to fight him on a day he would need to be elsewhere. She added "Food: bowls" because plates made a room read larger and she didn't want the room to read larger; she wanted it to read finished.

The work light they had left in the corner made a slight electrical hum that she only noticed when everything else went quiet. The taped doorway

lifted and settled. The pile of boxes against the wall read, in the low light, as accomplishment and debt. She took the tub by the door and tucked it under her arm. She messaged the paint rep with the confirmed date and the word "aligned" because she had learned that some words opened doors. The reply came back within a minute with a thumbs-up and a line about the van. She imagined a van trying to park on their road while a bus tried to turn and her head ached from the image alone.

On the way out, she passed the place in the corridor where the plaster had fallen in a neat half-moon at the dinner and imagined it not falling on camera next time. She locked the door and checked it again, then walked toward the station with the tub warm against her side.

On the platform she took out her phone and opened Jas's thread and typed, "Come by later if you want. Or don't. It's all dust and boxes." She deleted the second sentence and sent the first. The dots appeared for a moment, stopped, then a reply came: "I'll be there."

She closed her eyes for as long as the train took to arrive and thought about nothing, which was a relief.

That night the apology numbers were still moving when she put the phone face-down on the kitchen counter and turned off the light in the flat. Two emails with "speak to" in the subject line arrived and she archived them without opening because answering would make the mess bigger. The tub went into the fridge next to a jar of mustard and two eggs. She ran the tap until it ran cold and drank a glass of water that tasted faintly of chlorine. In bed, she lay on her side tight against the edge and thought about the colour name she would choose for the wall that would be ready last. Not because it would save anything, but because it would make a picture work.

She didn't sleep and then did. When she woke at four, she unlocked her phone and stared at the calendar as if boxes and words on a small screen could absorb the excess. She re-set the reminder she'd already ignored for midday tomorrow: "Text Milos re: timing and what's owed now vs after", then she disabled the alert because she already knew and didn't want to read a notification that said what she knew. She turned the phone over so the glass looked down at the wood and shut her eyes again. The wood was ordinary kitchen laminate. It reflected nothing.

Chapter 9

Polishing the Rot

She heard the lorry reversing before she saw it, that two-tone chirp bouncing off the terrace fronts, and then the rattle of the gate when the driver pushed it too far and the hinge pin shifted half a centimetre in worn brick. She stepped into the corridor to intercept and got a noseful of wet timber and a damp, sour smell at floor level that persisted despite the crew bagging and sweeping. The doorframe was already taped along the edge from when the plastic sheeting had come down; tape dulled the paint to a stained beige.

Two men in grey shirts came in first to check access, hands empty, eyes doing the measurements that come from knowing when corners would catch. One of them lifted the hinge pins with a flat screwdriver, set the door on its side against the wall, and asked if the cabinets were in and level. He had the deferential tone of a man asking about the obvious while bracing for the answer.

“They’re in,” she said. “Level and secured.” Her voice did not waver. That part was true. The base units were in. A joiner had worked late with a spirit level and a stack of shims and then checked again in the morning. The sides of the carcasses were raw because doors came later. The island footprint was set where she had always wanted it: nine hundred by two-six, the overhang she had argued for replaced by a tight bookend flush with the face because the builder had refused to encourage elbows on a span he didn’t trust.

The second man looked down the corridor and frowned at the taped plastic across the opening to the front room. The plastic shifted when the door at the back moved in the wind. He didn’t ask what was behind the

tape. He set his tape measure to the width of the corridor and clipped it back without comment. "We'll need the A-frame in straight," he said. "No turns with this weight. We'll bring the slab last."

She nodded. There wasn't any other plan.

Milos arrived at the same time as the dolly. He shouldered through, looked along the corridor past her to the front where the floorboards weren't, then past her again to the kitchen where the new units sat. His expression did not change. He stood with the clipboard against his forearm while the fitters rolled the A-frame into the kitchen and set it, the padded feet sinking slightly into the only piece of vinyl left from the old kitchen they'd kept to protect the slab when it rested, straight through the corridor; the slab would come in via the side return, the path they had cleared after templating.

"You booked this?" he asked, not looking away from the dolly while he spoke.

She had an answer ready. "Storage charges began yesterday. We had a window; I took it. We're sequencing. The kitchen zone is ready."

He exhaled once in a way that didn't count as a sigh. "Front and dining are not. You know this."

She had told him yesterday she wouldn't push. Today she was pushing.

"I know. We're not walking anyone through there," she said quickly. "I'm going to make sure it reads continuous. Paint. A cover plate. People are not going to," She stopped. She had been about to say fall, which was not a word that belonged in her mouth with trades present. "They'll see what they need to see."

He adjusted the corner of the clipboard against his palm. "You want cover over a failed span."

"Temporary," she said. "Just for paint. Just for this week. It's only to make it read as a room so we can shoot and so guests don't stand in a

void. Tape across. Signs. You can mark it no load. We will keep to one side. I will stand in front of it all night if that is what it takes.”

“No,” he said. He didn’t raise his voice; he just placed the word where she could not move around it. “It’s unsafe. We cut out failures. We treat. We cure. We air. We do not put anything over what isn’t ready so people pretend the line is the same. It is not the same.”

One of the fitters reappeared from the van, his gloves chalked from moving the slab off whatever had sat stacked before it. “We’re going to need a clean path,” he said. “No dust blowing, yeah? We’re sealing fine; we just don’t want to introduce anything.”

“We’ll wet the corridor when you’re ready to move,” Milos said to the fitter without taking his eyes off Chloe. “You can open the plastic on that side for your path only.”

Chloe kept her tone neutral and professional because she had been training her voice to sit there all week. “I’m not asking you to pretend it’s fine,” she said. “I am asking for a cover so the paint reads as done and nobody stands over a hole. That’s all. No load. Taped. Photographed if you want. You can put your name or my name on it, my name. And we pull it up after the weekend. We go back to it properly.”

Milos’s forearm tightened under the clipboard. “You understand what you are asking me to write. You want me to write that I put a cover over a failure so people can stand in a room and think work is done that is not done.”

“I want you to write that I instructed a temporary no-load cover plate to protect an edge and to allow painting up to the line,” she said. “You document it and you tape it in a hard perimeter if that helps. I will not step on it. No one will step on it. You can put out cones.”

“Cones,” he repeated, flat. He looked at the taped plastic and then at the kitchen again where the men were adjusting suction cups and testing their grip. “You know what I will agree to,” he said at last. “I will agree to cover only the edge. Not the span. A board wide enough to paint to,

screwed into the joist that is sound. Tape over the rest. You will sign a note that says I told you to leave it open and you asked not to. I will take photographs. I will mark it no load. If anyone steps there, I will not be here. And I won't sign off any finish near it."

"I'll sign," she said. "No load. Photographs. Your wording. I'll sign."

He looked at her for a second, then gave a small nod she had learned meant acceptance, not agreement. He turned and left to collect a board from the van without more discussion, calling something to his two men in another language as he went, his tone the exact tone he used when he told them to cut clean and bag twice.

She pivoted into the kitchen because the fitters were lifting the slab now. The suction pads made a soft sound when they set and the men put their backs into it, the weight going through arms that looked like they had known heavier. They brought the stone in sideways through the side-return opening they had used for rubble and old cabinets after templating, then turned it parallel to the island carcass with a single coordinated motion. The slab was pale, veined with lines that would read as intentional in a photograph even if nobody understood the difference between stone and printed laminate any more. The edge was honed and read expensive. She noticed the small pencil X where someone had marked for alignment earlier and felt a brief, clean hit of relief that she could not trust but took anyway.

"Plane looks good," one of the fitters said, eye level with the underside as he set a small spirit level on the stone and then on the carcass and then again on the stone. "No cut-outs?"

"No cut-outs," she said. She was not going to do a sink here. The sink stayed against the wall where it belonged. The island existed for light and the performance of ease. She had argued herself into this; she could stand by it and pretend it was always the plan.

"Seal after," the fitter said. "We'll do a first pass. Your guy needs to finish."

“My guy will finish,” she said, as if she had a guy for everything. She glanced at the clock on her phone and then at the little camera icon, then put the phone flat for a second because she couldn’t film the initial descent without making a choice about where to stand that meant she would see the taped doorway and she didn’t want to engage with what that would look like from a public angle.

Maya had hit the heart on the invite thread yesterday inside a minute. These men were the same in their own lane: quick, precise. The risk was in what she had asked for.

Milos returned with the board and a small box of screws and a bag of plastic cones that had probably not been intended for interiors. He didn’t look at the slab. He screwed the board into the one joist that had tested sound and then set the cones in a line across it and taped the cones together with blue tape. He wrote NO LOAD in block letters on the tape, then photographed the board and the cones from three angles. He checked each shot and then checked again.

“Come,” he said. She followed him to the makeshift table in the hallway, which was a piece of plywood set across two saw horses left over from dinner. He placed a printed sheet on it. The top line read TEMPORARY COVER , CLIENT INSTRUCTION. Below the line was a paragraph in his careful English stating that the builder had advised leaving the area open for safety and that the client had requested a temporary cover to facilitate adjacent painting and visual continuity only, no load, marked and taped. Midway down: “Client accepts liability for any use against advice; no load; builder will not sign off any finish near it.” It named the room. It named the joist. It named the date and time. It had two boxes at the bottom: SIGNED (CLIENT), SIGNED (BUILDER). Next to the sheet he laid a small digital camera whose cable ran to his pocket.

“Your name,” he said. “And time. And I take a picture of the tape with your hand so people do not later say this was not today.”

She took the biro he offered and wrote her name in the box. The nib snagged once on the curve of the first letter. Her palm warmed the plastic sleeve. She dated it and looked briefly at the paragraph. Her eye caught the line she knew was there. She signed. That was the choice. When she lifted her hand away, he took the picture of her fingers over the word NO LOAD. Then he wrote his name in the other box and clicked the camera off.

“Your painters can paint to there,” he said, pointing. “Not on the board. Tape stays. Cones stay. If I see feet on the board, boards come up. You understand.”

“I understand,” she said. She wanted to shake his hand, but it felt like that would make the agreement mean more than it did, so she didn’t.

He put the sheet into a plastic sleeve and slid it into his clipboard under something that looked like a printout of the programme for the week. “Outside levels,” he said, almost as a reflex. “We dig Friday. I want your things not in the way.”

“I’ll move the boxes,” she said. She had already stacked the LAMP , STORM and THROW , WOVEN against the far wall and turned the labels so the clause about usage rights wasn’t in view while she worked.

The painters arrived while the fitters were polishing the edge. Two men, one older, one young. They took off their shoes when they saw the new slab without being asked, and she liked them for that. She showed them the corridor, the tapes, the board with cones, and the line to paint. She pointed at the one wall that would be visible in most shots and ran a finger along the line where the old and the new plaster met, a seam that would never be perfectly right but could, at least, be fed a good primer and some patience.

“Two coats,” she said. “Edge here and here. Not a full cut because we’re coming back, I know. And please do not document this for your social. I’ll pay for your time. I can tag you later when we do the proper finish. I just need this to read as clean.”

The older painter nodded. “We’ll keep it off our feed. We’ll roll top-down. We’ll keep away from that,” he said, nodding at the cones without comment on the cones themselves. “We’ll put sheet down when those boys go.”

Those boys were easing the slab the last two centimetres. The sound of stone touching timber was almost nothing. The fitter with the level lowered his body until he could see the bubble; he made a small adjustment, then stood and wiped the edge with a clean cloth. It wasn’t clean for long; dust would settle almost immediately. For one moment the stone matched the warehouse look under hard light, and she didn’t think about the invoice.

She took her phone out and filmed a passing detail, a move she used when staging needed softening into something that looked incidental. Her hand was steady. She stayed tight on the veining and avoided the background. She did a second pass with a slower pan and no sound. She kept her breath shallow and controlled so the mic wouldn’t catch her. She stopped the recording and didn’t look at the shots yet. She knew what they would look like; that was the point.

Through the plastic at the front she caught sight of Elliot on the pavement, hands in his coat pockets. He paused at the gate, then kept walking. The work light cast a band across the plastic; a sawhorse scraped as someone shifted it in the hall. Her phone buzzed at once. “Just confirming for Saturday, still go?” a vendor wrote in a thread that included them both. His reply arrived before she could type: “Confirmed.”

The typing dots flickered under his name, then disappeared. She sent, “Talk later?” and watched Seen sit under it until “Later. Still at office.” appeared.

Two more pings followed. Cleaner: “Saturday, four hours. Cash on arrival ok? Elliot gave me this number.” Caterer: “Ten bowls, DF option included. Delivery window 5:00, 5:30 p.m. Please confirm address.” She

confirmed the address and typed “Cash is fine” to the cleaner. She dropped the window into a Notes list titled Party run-of-show and looked back toward the door. No knock.

By the time the painters rinsed their rollers into buckets, the light had gone. Paint sat on the walls without sheen because she had chosen a finish that would photograph well in low light. The taped cones looked faintly ridiculous and utterly necessary. The slab looked new; it would never look this new again. She stood at the edge of the kitchen and set her phone on the island and opened the Notes file she had titled Party remarks. Mostly bullets. She stared until a shape for the remarks began to form.

Milos came in from the cold with a small stack of paper. He set them on the saw horse table and laid the top page flat with both hands. The lines were single-spaced and labelled in a blunt font she recognised from previous schedules. Overtime sat on the fourth line, the figure neutral and not small. Materials included the treatment fluid, the plastic sheeting, the screws for the board, the cones that were now acting as a sentence against her instinct, and a line item she didn’t immediately understand until he said “Masks” and tapped the line and she saw the letters FFP3 on the paper and remembered his men and their coughs on Monday.

“Next part,” he said, tapping the bottom of the page where the number didn’t look dramatic but would harden something if it left her account. “Now. Then Monday we look again.”

She kept her breath slow and fixed her gaze on the totals instead of the bottom number. “Can we roll to Monday?” she asked, keeping her tone even. “Just timing. Post-party. I can put the transfer in first thing Monday morning. Ten a.m.” She placed a finger under Materials while she spoke.

He didn’t blink. “Monday. Ten,” he said. He didn’t add anything for a moment and then he did. “If I do not see it then, I stop. Not because I

want to be the bastard. Because if I do not, I am not a builder and my men are not paid. I move them to the other job.”

“I know,” she said, keeping her voice level and grateful in a way that made her hate herself. “Monday. Ten.” She wanted to say she would do it earlier, but she knew the reality of weekends and the ways that banks interpreted urgency.

He didn’t write anything down, which meant he would remember. He nodded at the wall the painters had just finished. “Paint is not structure,” he said. He had said it before, he would say it again.

“Yes,” she said, even as she looked at the way the wet edge caught the light in a way that made the room look like a room and not a corridor to the inevitable. “I know.” She put the paper down on the saw horse with the care that told him she had heard him and would do the opposite. Her phone stayed face-down on the island.

The younger painter wiped a roller tray with a sheet of newspaper and then held his head very slightly to one side. “You’ve got a line there,” he said, pointing at the hairline above the dining-room doorway. The line had opened a fraction more since the afternoon. He didn’t touch it; he just pointed with a clean finger.

“Shoot the west wall only; head height,” she said. He glanced at the older painter, who gave a small nod. “Can you hit that bit of fill on the skirting cut-up,” she added, pointing to a place where the old skirting had left a mark. “Just that.” She added a note in her phone and then forced herself to put the phone down because she could feel her thumb vibrating toward the email icon where there would be more invoices.

She turned back to the Notes file titled Party remarks and typed: Thank you for being here, for the community you bring into this half-done room. We’ve made a start you can see. We’ll finish the rest on schedule. She left it and walked the route that she wanted people to take on Saturday. She moved the boxes that said THROW , WOVEN and LAMP , STORM so the labels didn’t face the door. She taped a small line

on the floor near the cones because light fell away there and she knew some people never looked at their feet when a room asked them to look up. She pulled a spare sheet from a bag and hung it over the dining-room archway so the eye read white instead of gap. She stood where the photographer would stand and held her phone in both hands until the frame read as finished. From there, it did. She moved one step sideways and it didn't. She memorised the exact foot placement.

The older painter called across, "What about this corner behind the stove?" and she said, "Do it. Just the first coat. We'll call it a day." The work light hummed. Dust on the radiator cover in the front room showed small arcs.

She put all the sheets of paper Milos had left into a folder, including the one with her signature that she had not read properly. The plastic sleeve shone under the light. She wrote MON 10:00 TRANSFER in capital letters on a scrap of paper and stuck it to the inside of the folder because writing things down made them feel both further away and more likely.

She walked back to the island and placed her palm flat on the stone for a second and took it away because she didn't want to leave oil. She wiped the phone screen with the inside of her sleeve until the mark lifted and filmed a ten-second clip of the lamp base catching the edge of the slab. She typed a caption into drafts: Choosing pieces that work without shouting. Invest once; then let the space breathe. She read it twice and saved it, because saving felt like progress and cost nothing.

In the corridor the taped plastic shifted when someone opened the front door. A burst of colder air ran down the skirting and across her ankles. The painters gathered their trays and left without ceremony. Milos locked the door behind them and then unlocked it again when she asked if she could check something in the front room. He watched her check the tape on the cones and then watched her step away from them without having to say anything.

“It’ll be fine,” she said to the room, and the way the words sounded made her want to bite them back because they had become her reflex answer and she no longer believed herself when she said them. “It’s just logistics,” she added, lower.

She turned off the work light. The hum stopped. She locked the front door and checked it again. The marble was still bright when she glanced back. She left the house and walked to the station, the edge of her tote knocking against her hip. She thought of Jas’s leftover tub from the day before, now in her fridge next to mustard and two eggs.

From the pavement, the house looked almost the same as other houses mid-renovation with scaffolding and vans. The difference here was a line in a wall only visible if you knew where to look, a line in a sheet of paper in a folder, and the word NO LOAD taped across cones as a clear warning. She went down the steps to the platform and opened her phone and scrolled her own captions, hoping for a usable line. She didn’t look at the crack.

Chapter 10

The Housewarming

She wiped the stone until the marks lifted. The cloth came away with a dull grey that did not show on camera but showed on her hand, and she folded the clean square back over the dirty one and did another pass along the veining where fingerprints always gathered at the edge. The edge looked expensive, a line she watched, and she smoothed the cloth along the bookend and under the lip where the fitter had said he would seal again. She kept the strokes even because even strokes photographed as care; random wiped patches looked messy.

At the dining-room threshold, the cones were still taped together in a small defensive line over the narrow board, blue tape marked with NO LOAD in black block letters. She checked the tape with her finger and pressed it back down where an end had curled. The board had two screws into the one joist Milos had tested and named sound. That word had made her neck relax that morning. It did not have that effect now. The cones did their job. They made people hesitate. She turned the sheet she had hung the night before so it covered a rough edge at the dining arch; the fabric didn't reach the floor, which was fine. The gap was below the sightline she had memorised, and she adjusted the angle of the lamp in the kitchen to pull the eye forward.

She moved the borrowed chairs until the nearest leg lined up with a taped pencil mark on the floor. Two chairs sat back-to-back at a half-angle that looked casual from the kitchen but created a barrier at hip height if someone tried to walk toward the arch. It had taken five minutes of adjusting for what looked careless. The neighbour had wanted to tell her where to store them when he dropped them off and she had smiled

and said thank you and shut the door with the right amount of warmth. The label on the LAMP , STORM box faced the wall. The throw box faced the wall. The white label with text about usage rights was toward the skirting.

She lifted the jar of supermarket flowers and ran a finger under the waterline to remove grit that had caught on the glass. She set the jar down on the stone and stepped back until the frame she knew by heart appeared: corner of lamp base, flowers, the honed surface with one long vein that started near the edge and ran diagonally toward the sink wall. Raising the camera, she checked exposure. The slab could still take oil. She had been told to keep it dry where possible. Her hand smelled faintly of the cleaner from the cloth; she wiped the phone screen with the inside of her sleeve and the mark came off on the knit.

Outside, a siren rose and fell. The work light she had used all week was off now; the ceiling low energy bulb gave a steady, unforgiving tone that forced her to fix angles by moving her body, not by trusting the room to help her. She went upstairs to check the bathroom. The door stuck at the last inch. The handle felt loose. When she pushed, the smell of old vinyl and damp linen came up, the cold catching her knees. A thin line of water ran from the toilet base, not a stream, just a stubborn thickness that formed a line and then became little beads. The fill valve had not cut off properly. She reached in, tapped the arm, and the water stopped; then it started again when the tank took the last few millimetres. She tapped the arm again and reached under the cistern to the isolation valve and turned. It resisted for a second, then gave a small notch, and the flow slowed. She didn't have the right screwdriver to tighten the valve body without stripping it. She could hear voices from a garden two doors down and kitchen music somewhere behind that.

She pulled two old towels from the bag she kept for mess and put them along the vinyl, pressing them down with her hands. The vinyl gave against her palm where the subfloor was uneven. She opened the top half of the window; cold air hit her face. The old pull-cord light dangled

against her collarbone when she leant forward again. She wrung one towel into the sink and did another pass for the water she had missed. The water line had reached the threshold and then stopped. It was contained. She folded the towels a new way over the damp patch to create thickness, checked the valve again, and turned it a fraction until the bead stopped reforming.

On the landing, she waited for her breathing to slow before she moved, then went back down the stairs and looked at the cones again, as if they could move when her back was turned. They had not moved. She set the rented glassware plan in her head and rubbed the back of her neck with the hand that was still a little wet.

A knock came at the back. She took the short-cut past the sheet and then stopped, turned, and went around through the kitchen like a person in control of a plan. Elliot stood at the threshold with two grey crates of glassware held up so his face appeared over the top. His coat was new and read under-lit navy; his hair was neat. The watch sat on his wrist where it always sat, too noticed when you knew where to look and not addressed by either of them.

“Coupes, tumblers,” he said, coming in sideways so he didn’t clip the door. “They tried to sell me flutes. I told them we were post-flute.”

“Thank you,” she said. She took the edge of one crate so he could set them down on the plywood, then folded the towel that had taken the bathroom water and tucked it next to the threshold so the crate wouldn’t drag grit along the edge. He clocked the towel. He did not ask.

“Caterer texted,” he said, looking into the room without stepping fully inside. “Five-five-thirty. DF confirmed.”

She nodded. “Back gate’s open. Clear path. We’ll stage them here,” she said, pointing to a blank strip of plywood where the glassware would go once unpacked. “Bowls here. Spoons here. Bin bag under the table. Keep the island clear.” She didn’t look at the cones while she spoke. There was no need. Their position was clear under her feet.

He put the second crate down and ran a hand along the edge of the plywood board, then lifted his fingers away when they caught dust. "Looks good," he said. "You did well." He meant the look of the room. He also meant that she had, by diligence, manufactured a surface that could take tonight. It wasn't praise and it wasn't not praise. He was trying for pleasant. It sounded brittle. She saw him try and she allowed him the credit for trying because there would be no point, tonight, in doing anything else.

Her phone buzzed against the stone. She looked: Jas, Running late. You sure you're okay? I can come early if you need. Chloe typed two hearts, then: Back gate's easier; latch's stiff, lift a bit. No mention of okay. Send.

She opened the first crate and began setting the coupes out in a row that looked accidental and photographed well, uneven spacing that wasn't random, two close together, then a gap. Elliot took the tumblers and set them alongside, in a neat hatch, square and careful. They did not bump hips. They did not meet eyes except when something needed to move from one hand to the other. He showed her a bottle opener in his coat pocket as if it were a small joke. She smiled an answer that registered as cooperation and not intimacy.

The doorbell rang once, a test, and then someone tried the handle and then waited. She moved through the kitchen again, skirted the cones without looking down, and wiped her hand on her jeans before touching the new paint at the edge of the doorway, checking for dryness by habit; the paint gave nothing back to her finger. The older painter had said give it another day. It had had another day. It was fine from where anyone stood tonight.

Before she reached the door, the photographer text came up: Outside. He had an old camera bag with scuffed seams, and a smile that made other people relax when he aimed. He came in, ducked his head out of reflex at the lower bit of ceiling even though he was not tall, and did a slow walk through the kitchen into the corridor with the camera still

zipped. He didn't lift it until he had taken the circuit. He moved to stand where she had memorised the frame and lifted the camera, then stepped the same way to make a second frame that took in the lamp base and the plant and the stone as a field.

"You'll want to avoid the dining side," she said, under her breath, standing close. "Paint's not finished there."

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised a millimetre in acknowledgment of the coded instruction. "West wall then," he said. "Kitchen forward. Easy." He shot one frame with a little air for the caption block she always liked. He showed her the screen. She nodded, mechanical. The stone looked clean. The flowers looked considered. The background dissolved into a modest blur that hid everything she did not want anyone to notice. Her tongue tasted metallic; she swallowed and the taste stayed. "Great," she said, and her throat constricted around the word. She coughed and said it again. "Great."

He walked back to the corridor and took tight shots of hands and glasses. He kept his feet the right side of the cones without needing to be told. He had seen enough shoots in houses like this to understand what tape meant. He nodded at Elliot and then at her, took a picture of two coupes in a hand that could have been anyone's, and went on.

She checked the upstairs again. The towel was damp, not soaked. The isolation valve held. The window let cold in and the mirror fogged at the corners. She wiped the corner with the side of her hand and watched how quickly the fog returned. "Hotel spa," she said to the glass quietly, making a shape with her mouth that looked like a grin and was not one. She framed a caption, humidity = spa, and slid the phone into her pocket. She went back down.

Milos arrived with no preamble, knocking once and then pushing the door in with a controlled shove so it wouldn't hit the skirting. He took the corridor in without looking at the flowers or the stone. He looked at the cones, the board, the tape. He put a boot tip against the edge of the tape

and pressed it down the way she had done earlier, standing on his heel for a second, and then took his foot away. He checked the outside levels from the back, stepped into the yard where the ground had been lowered, made a small note on a folded pad, and came back in. His jacket looked the same as it had looked on Thursday; practical and not new.

“Board is still there,” he said, as if he were reassuring a child. “Tape is still there.”

“I told you it would be,” she said, trying for light. “No one’s stepping anywhere. We’re,”

“, shooting the west wall,” he finished, neutral. He did not look at the photographer. “Monday,” he added, in the tone he used when stating a date in a way that allowed no interpretation. “Ten. We said.”

“Yes,” she said. “Ten.” Her mouth went dry when she said the time. She gulped and felt the swallow sit in her chest. He watched her throat move once and made no comment.

“I do not stay,” he said. “It is not my event.”

“Have a drink?” she offered, because that was a thing civil people said at a threshold at moments like this.

“No,” he said, with a small smile that took the sting out of the word. “Another time. When the floor is a floor.” He picked up his pad, gave a brief nod to both of them, and left. The click of the door sounded ordinary.

She stood in the kitchen and opened her phone to Party remarks. The lines she had typed last night sat there unchanged. Thank you for being here. Community in a half-done room. We’ve made a start you can see. We’ll finish the rest on schedule. She added a line she had written once and deleted: Building something together. She said the words under her breath. They sat in her mouth with the wrong weight and offered nothing back. She kept them anyway. She didn’t have time to find a substitute truth that would pass in this room at this time.

The doorbell rang properly, two short rings. She glanced at the cones again and at the lamp base, wiped the cloth once more along an invisible print on the stone, and walked to the door with her chin up and her shoulders set back so her jumper lay flat and looked expensive. She opened to faces arranged in pairs and the sound of a joke she didn't quite catch on the end.

By half past six the island had become the only place anyone wanted to stand. This was partly the stone and partly the photographs and partly the way the bowls sat along the back wall under the light so hands reached for them without discussion. The caterer's delivery had arrived on the 5:12 end of the window and was stacked on the towel by the back door before she could put her hand up to say wait. It had gone smoothly. She had made it go smoothly.

Maya raised her phone first and did a little sweep across the flowers. "Obsessed," she said, half to the camera and half to Chloe. "This is goals." Tom leaned into shot as if he hadn't intended to be there and held up a spoon like it was a prop. The tag pinged Chloe's screen with the little heart and the handle; the comments started under it even as they stood there: dream kitchen; this is the one; how did you do it in six months; so calm.

She caught his eye and tipped her chin toward the kitchen when he shifted a foot toward the arch. He nodded once, no offence taken. He lifted the camera and got Maya's hands in a shot that made them look like the hands of someone who lived in a place that behaved.

Chloe moved along the edge of the island with the practised drift of a person who had spent a year in spaces smaller than this learning how to stop bodies without blocking them. A warm rail of people had formed under the pendant she had not yet installed; the ghost pendant that

would be there had a circumference in her head that mapped neatly onto where the crowd had decided to be. Every time someone took a step toward the cones, she found something to show them, a seam in the paint that she was very pleased with, the way the lamp base's glaze took the light near the edge of the stone, the label on the bottle that would read well on a story if they got it in frame. "This way," she said, neutral, pleasant, like staff. A woman pivoted toward the arch; the blue tape flexed. Chloe's hand found her elbow and eased her back without a word. Her body stayed between the cones and whoever wandered near. There was no way to do this all night. She did it anyway.

Elliot moved at the edges of conversations, saying the right line on cue with a glass in his hand that never emptied beyond a third. "We kept it simple," he was saying to Tom, who nodded with a series of encouraging sounds. "You pick your anchor. You cut the noise. No drama." It was both a repetition of his office rhetoric and a line for this exact setting. He spoke as if there had been no rot, no invoice, no Live. He performed steadiness. People relaxed under that performance; it worked even as it made her skin buzz.

Jas arrived with her coat zipped and hair pulled into the same work bun. She stepped in from the back without making anyone move aside because she had already taken in the room and chosen a route that would not require an apology. She touched Chloe's elbow, a touch she always used when she didn't want to startle. "Hi," she said. "I'm proud of you." She put a bowl in Chloe's hand. "Eat." The words should have sounded like a compliment for a surface. They didn't. They sounded like a statement about breathing and staying upright when breathing had been uncertain. Chloe nodded and said thank you and immediately pointed at the bowls and asked if she had eaten, which was what she knew how to do with tenderness she didn't feel ready to hold.

The photographer caught the moment over their shoulders without waiting for permission. He was good at that.

Near the dining doorway, the hairline line the younger painter had pointed at had extended by a few millimetres. It hadn't opened, not really; it had travelled. It was the sort of thing nobody could see unless they were looking for it. She saw it. She took her eyes off it like she was pulling a hand away from heat and fixed on the lamp foot, thinking of nothing. A laugh came from near the door where the neighbour had told his story about flooring in his last place and how it had all gone wrong and he had fixed it himself. People like those stories because they explain cost. She touched the jar of flowers and slid it three centimetres toward the centre of the stone.

The caterer came back into the frame to ask about the second round. She said yes, thank you, and moved bowls that had been emptied to the edge of the plywood so the stack could grow there without anyone needing to step into the corridor. She took one spoonful and put the bowl down untouched. A friend of Maya's asked about the stone and she gave the answering speech about maintenance and not all seals being equal without revealing anything about the invoice or the 60-day storage or the non-refundable line. "Invest once," she said, and heard the phrase in her own mouth as if it had come off a slide deck.

"Speech," Tom said, clinking a glass in the way people did when they wanted a moment to be marked. "Our host."

She swallowed and wiped her fingers on a napkin and moved to where she had marked with tape on the floor for the photographer's vantage. The habit was so ingrained she nearly looked for the mark with her eyes, then remembered not to and did it by feel instead. The room turned toward her with the easy pivot of people who had come for this exact moment. Elliot stood a little behind her right shoulder, as if by habit, not touching.

"Thank you for being here," she said, and her voice came out steady. "Thank you for bringing your coats and your patience and your hands, because none of it happens without hands. We started something you can see," she said, and heard the words land. "We'll finish the rest on

schedule.” She swallowed. It didn’t clear. “What we’re building is not just a room. It’s a way to be in it together.” She didn’t look at Elliot when she said together. She looked at the flowers. Her mouth was dry. She cut the speech off a half-line early because the last line in her Notes was Making a life, not a set, and she could not get it out without choking on it. She lifted her glass a centimetre. People raised theirs in response. The clink sounds came not all at once but in a chain.

Applause, hands, not huge, gentle, ran through the kitchen. She kept her face in the shape that photographs well and let it sit there for three seconds. Her stomach made a small movement. She took a sip and put the glass down. She glanced at the photographer and he gave a small nod.

Elliot’s fingers touched the sleeve of her jumper, not hard. “A word?” he said, low. “Now.” His tone was not sharp. It was precise, as if he had scheduled this, which, she realised, he had.

She smiled at Maya without letting the smile reach her eyes and stepped back one step, then another. “Two minutes,” she said to the room, under her breath, to no one in particular. She took the route through the kitchen that kept her furthest from the cones without making it look like she was avoiding them, and Elliot stayed alongside her a half step behind. The photographer lifted the camera and took a picture of the stone after a glass was set down with a smear of condensation under it. The room filled the gap with the sort of chat that takes over when someone has just spoken. She went through the narrow door to the small room at the back and closed it behind them with a hand that made no sound.

The utility room had not been touched. The damp line that had lived there since the first week of the job sat at the same height, softened by the weather and the time. A piece of old vinyl curled at one edge and the

washing machine that belonged to a previous owner sat unplugged, its rubber seal smelling faintly of old wash water. The air was colder. There was a faint bleach tang over wet dust. She stood with her back to the wall and watched him set his glass on the old countertop and put both hands on the edge.

“I lost the money,” he said. “The bonus didn’t vest,” he said. He stared at a point above her shoulder, then met her eye. “And the positions failed.” He swallowed. “I tried to hold it.” He didn’t say the names of the positions or the numbers because they didn’t matter to her in the way they mattered to him; he said what mattered. “There isn’t any money.”

She felt the tightness in the back of her throat again, the same shape as when she had said together. “When?” she said. Her voice came out without a tremor, which surprised her only because she had been expecting one.

“I knew it was at risk weeks ago,” he said. “I thought I could turn it.” He took a breath and let it out in a controlled way he had probably learned in a glass meeting room with a plant in it. “I thought if I could push through to this week, it would be okay.” He did not touch her. He looked at her hands on the edge of a paint-spattered bucket that had been used for stripped wallpaper in another life.

“You’ve known for weeks,” she repeated, to hear the shape of the words in this room. It wasn’t a question now. “And you waited until tonight.” She didn’t add why. They both knew the shape of the why: because she had a party to host; because he wanted this to be a thing they got through before the next thing; because he had hoped for a miracle; because, if he said it here when the caterer was in the house and the photographer was taking pictures and people were drinking from rented glasses, the words would have less room to expand.

“I told myself you didn’t need another thing when you were trying to stabilise,” he said. “And I thought, stupidly, that the numbers could resolve between then and now.” He pressed his fingers flat on the old

laminate and lifted them, leaving four small prints in a patch of dust. "They didn't."

Monday at ten o'clock sat between them like a tool left where someone could step on it. "We don't have Monday," she said. It was almost a whisper. She did the arithmetic of the day in a short, clean line, what was due, what she had promised, what he had refused to number for her when she had asked.

"No," he said, and there was something like relief in his mouth having formed the word. "We don't."

She looked at the bucket. The lip was cracked in one place and had been taped and then the tape had lifted. She sat down on it because standing took too much effort with the information in her body. The plastic creaked, held, and went quiet. The sound of the party came through the door as a texture, voices at a medium level, a spoon hitting a bowl, a single cheer at a joke she couldn't hear.

"I put a board over a hole so people could drink beside it," she said, after a moment. She kept her eyes on the floor, on the places where dust gathered near the skirting. "I asked him to write it down and then I signed it." She wasn't confessing. She was naming the thing she had done in a room where naming cost less than pretending not to know. "I have done that all week. Made it look whole."

He didn't say it wasn't the same as what he had done. He didn't absolve or equate. He nodded once as if he were accepting an input into a model. "We're at the end of runway," he said, and then flinched at his own phrase. "Sorry. I don't know how else to say it."

"How much?" she asked. She didn't mean the little numbers. She meant the shape of the hole they were standing at the edge of.

"Enough that we can't patch with a month of discipline," he said. He gave one figure and then another and then stopped when he saw her face tighten because the numbers were less useful than the single fact they described. "I'll give you the logins," he added, and then corrected himself.

“I’ll sit with you. We’ll go through everything.”

“You will call the bank,” she said, placing tasks into a clear line because that was what she did when panic came. “And the broker. And I will call Milos at eight and say we can’t do Monday. And I’ll email the agent by nine.” She could picture the subject lines and hear the tones she would have to use to hold onto self-respect while ceding ground. “We stop,” she said. “We stop what can be stopped.”

“We stop,” he said. He picked up his glass, put it down again. “We’ll need to do a valuation.” He didn’t say sell. He didn’t have to. The next steps were a path that had been walked before them by other people who had worn the same coats and stood in front of the same walls and posted the same pictures.

The bucket edge pressed into the back of her leg through her jeans. She put her palms on her thighs and pressed down until she felt her hands. “The speech I just gave,” she said. She started a nod and let it hang.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He said it simply. He didn’t say for what. For once, he kept language from being a game. He half-reached, then gripped the laminate edge.

She nodded, once. The nod did more than words would have. She stood and felt the bucket release from the back of her legs. A flake of paint stuck to her jeans. She picked it off and let it fall to the floor. She looked at him and saw the man she had met in a bar when they both had cheaper shoes and more energy. She saw the watch and the way he held his shoulders. She saw the exact place where the person who made things sound fine had given up and the person who could speak a single hard truth had stepped in. Both were him. Both were here.

“We’ll go back out,” she said. “We’ll finish tonight. We’ll be polite. We won’t make a scene.” The word scene sat in her mouth like a small stone, neutral. “On Monday we start.” She took a breath and tasted the cleaner from the cloth she had used on the stone because it was still on her

fingers. "I'll move the bowls. You refill glasses."

He nodded. "Okay." He added, as if he couldn't help himself, "We'll keep it controlled." He must have seen her expression because he shook his head. "Sorry." He picked up his glass.

She put her hand on the door and then took it off and wiped the handle with the bottom of her sleeve because a smear had caught on the metal. She opened onto warmth and light and a chorus of little conversations that swelled and fell in ordinary waves. Elliot stepped out behind her and went left toward Tom and the bottle. She went right, toward the island and the lamp and the flowers, and fixed her face into the one she used when she had to be fine. Jas caught her eye from across the stone and gave a look that was both a question and an answer. Chloe nodded back and reached for a bowl with a spoon left in it. The spoon clicked against the ceramic. The sound was clean. Maya lifted a bottle toward her; Chloe smiled and said, "Perfect, thanks."

She stood where the photographer's frame made sense of the room and let the picture be taken. The cones were out of shot. The board was out of shot. The words she had spoken five minutes ago were not recoverable and didn't need to be. The night moved forward in small, manageable pieces. She poured a little wine into her glass, tasted it, and set it down half-full on the stone near the flowers, the mark of her lipstick left at the rim, a thin crescent, the only trace that she had picked it up at all.

Chapter 11

The Unravelling

She flinched at the notification. The time in the corner said 07:59; the line below it said MONDAY in a font designed to look neutral. She had set the alarm for half past seven and then for ten to eight and then for eight exactly. The second one had done nothing. The third would be redundant. She put the phone flat on the marble and then moved it to the plywood because she could not watch the second change while touching a surface she had convinced other people meant control.

At eight she dialled Milos. He picked up on the second ring, ready for this exact call at this exact minute.

“Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” she said. “I can’t make the ten a.m. transfer.” The words were small. She set them in a line, evenly spaced, the way she did with glasses to make them look casual.

“I guessed,” he said. “You call now. That is good. I move my men. We will come for tools this afternoon.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. He let it pass.

“You will pay some this week,” he said, not unkind. “Then we look. Your agent will need the house open.”

“Yes,” she said. “We’re, listing today.” The word went dry in her mouth.

“Okay,” he said. “When we are there, we take the cover off. It must be open for inspection. Not the pictures, the real inspection.”

“Okay,” she said again.

He didn't say he had told her how this would run. He didn't say she had signed a piece of paper so he could tape cones across a failure and then let people drink. He said, "See you later," with the same voice he used for delivery windows and steel sizes.

She ended the call and stared at the phone until the screen went dark and showed her face back to her, slightly warped in the protective film she had not squeegeed properly. She wiped it on her sleeve and turned to the other person in the room, who had been there the whole time and had made no sound.

Elliot stood by the plywood with a laptop he had already opened and a notebook he had brought from the office once and then kept here so he could keep a link to the office. He had set the two grey rental crates of glassware back on the floor last night with the handles facing out. He had wiped the stone after her without comment.

"Eight-thirty?" he said, meaning the bank.

"Eight-thirty," she said.

They had never called the bank together at the same time from the same room. They had emailed separately and forwarded confirmations and used phrases like looping you in and flagging. They had never sat on either side of a plywood sheet and listened to the same hold music. She put the call on speaker because she could not make herself put the phone against her ear and take the sound alone.

"Thank you for calling," the woman said when a person finally replaced the recorded voice. The thank you was procedural. "How can I help today?"

Elliot said the first sentence. He used the version of his voice that put people at ease even as it told them to hear only what he wanted them to hear. "We're reviewing options," he said. "Short term and longer. We need to talk through the scenarios."

“What are you interested in hearing about?” the woman asked, and they understood that there was no scenario where she would tell them anything hopeful; she would list options and put numbers on them and then the call would end.

“Interest-only,” he said. “Temporary.”

“And any forbearance-type arrangements,” Chloe said, because she had googled in the half-hour between five and half past five and now the words were there.

“Okay,” the woman said. Papers moved; a keyboard clicked. “We can review a switch to interest-only for a period,” she said, “subject to affordability and a satisfactory update on income.” The word satisfactory no longer applied. “There’s also the possibility of a short payment deferral.” She paused. “It would be recorded as a forbearance measure. A forbearance or deferral marker would be recorded and may affect future applications and affordability checks.”

“It will be recorded,” Chloe said.

“On our file?” Elliot asked.

“Yes.”

“It isn’t a free month,” she added, and Chloe felt something like respect for the unsoftened phrase. “It pushes the payment forward. Interest accrues.”

“And, selling,” Elliot said, quickly, taking the hard idea.

“If you’re planning to sell,” the woman said, “we can talk about early repayment terms and the process. There may be a fee. It depends on your product. If the sale is under the redeemable amount, we can discuss an assisted sale. That would involve valuation reports.”

Chloe looked at the stone and pictured the for-sale board that would be outside by afternoon, because that was the sort of thing that could appear in a single day if you paid for speed. You could buy speed. You could not buy reversal.

“We’re going to list,” she said. She had held it back for weeks and said it at once. She didn’t look at Elliot when she said it. He didn’t move when he heard it. They had both already accepted it.

“Okay,” the woman said. “Let me outline what we need, ”

The outline came. It involved a valuation and some specific forms and a timeframe that was both fast and interminable depending on whether you were breathing while you listened.

“Thank you,” Chloe said when the call ended, and she meant it because the woman had not pretended anything was nicer than it was.

They sat in the undressed kitchen and faced the thing they had postponed. There was nothing to do with their hands. Elliot opened his laptop and then closed it and then opened it again. He said numbers and then said them again in a different order and then stopped because the order didn’t change the sum.

“I need to see them,” she said.

He turned the screen. It was all there: the mortgage payments and the unsecured pieces he had not told her about and the incoming that had seemed a number and was not a number anymore. There was a line that said tax and there was a line that said liability in a column she had not seen before and there was a smaller column where he had made notes to himself in the way he always did, smart, clipped, with no adjectives.

“How much if we stop everything?” she asked.

“We can’t stop everything,” he said.

“But if we did,” she said.

He scrolled and pointed. The number was what it was. Her stomach did the thing it had done last night after the speech but in a different register.

“I know this is late,” he said. He didn’t try to turn late into an apology. He left it as a fact that didn’t change anything.

“I wanted to not know,” she said. “I want to know now,” she added. The wanting came with no pleasure.

He nodded once. He couldn’t give her back the weeks she had refused to ask for specifics.

The estate agent messaged while they were still sitting there. The preview line said, Let’s get you live. He wrote with speed and adjectives. She opened the email and read the draft: Rare opportunity on a sought-after street; part-renovated with a light-filled kitchen, brand-new worktops, and scope to finish to your taste; six-month transformation ready for final touches.

She put the cursor in the sentence and edited brand-new to new. She edited light-filled to west-facing. She added works required to the part-renovated line and removed transformation altogether because that was a word she could not live with now. She took her hand off the trackpad and sat still. She could make it honest and reduce the number of people who would come to look and then explain to their uncles where the load ran. She could let it be what the agent needed it to be to justify his fee and get men with bags to knock doors.

“Don’t sand it,” Elliot said, quietly, reading from her face while looking at his own screen.

She backspaced the corrections until brand-new and light-filled returned, deleted works required, and let transformation slot back into place. She pressed send. Looks good. She wanted to tell herself that she had drawn the lines elsewhere and that this was ink and nothing else. She looked at the sheet still hanging over the dining arch, grey at the bottom where fingertips had found it.

She opened Notes and typed a caption that she had already drafted in her head between five and six: Taking a pause on shares while we regroup and re-centre. Thank you for the care you’ve shown. Safety first and privacy always. She looked at the last line. It was a lie. Her thumb hovered; the phone offered a soft auto-suggest she refused. She deleted

the whole thing and locked the phone. Her throat stung as if she had swallowed cleaner again by mistake.

A DM came from a name she liked seeing. Liv. They had started at the same showroom in another life, folding blankets and selling reassurance at forty pounds a metre. Liv was now the person behind a small brand that had offered Chloe a modest fee in exchange for making soft things look like decisions. So sorry, love. I'm getting pressure on calendars and it's not fair on either of us, can't anchor to a moving date. We'll revisit when you're through the big bits. Proud of you. X

Heat gathered in her face. She typed "Of course" three times, deleted two, and sent the third with a heart she didn't mean. She stood up because sitting made the feeling worse. She put the phone face-down and let it buzz.

He cleared his throat and turned the laptop again. "We need a date," he said.

"For what," she said, which was either a real question or a stall, even she couldn't tell.

"Vacating," he said. "For viewings and for me. For you." He looked down at the notebook, waiting.

"Next Friday," she said, and the words came out before she had time to test them against anything like practicality. "Eleven."

He didn't argue. He typed, Next Friday 11:00 , vacate for agent , keys with code, into a line that already had two other dates on it that were no longer valid for anything. He added a reminder with a sound that would go off while she was holding a bag and a door.

She opened her messages to the photographer and scrolled to their last exchange. He had written the word piece two days ago in a way that made a job sound like a collaboration and it had made her generous with approval. She wrote, I need to cancel next week's follow-up. Kill fee as agreed. I'll honour it. He replied quickly; he checked his phone

constantly. Don't worry about the kill if you need to move it. She wrote, It's not moving. It's cancel. Please send details. He sent an amount that wasn't small enough. She paid it. The banking app asked her if she was sure and told her that money would leave her account today. She was and it did.

At two, a van stopped outside. A man in a boiler jacket who looked capable and not keen to be asked appeared at the gate with a post and a board wrapped in plastic. They didn't knock. They didn't have to. One measured the narrow strip of soil by the front, turned a hand auger, then drove a short post with a mallet and checked it with a small level. The board slid onto the spigot and they stepped back in the same motion. It took about two minutes. It was bright and new, letters printed straight, phone number clean. It said nothing about who had been inside with their coats on two nights ago, raising glasses. It said nothing about cones or tape.

From the corridor, she watched through the glass pane that had not yet been replaced because of a sequence she had pretended to understand. She felt the cold from the opening where the sheet had been poorly fixed against the air. Her phone buzzed again. The agent, efficient, pleased. Copy is live on the site; board's up; first slots for viewings Wednesday afternoon? She replied, Yes, then added, We will be clear. She added a second message and deleted it before it sent: Please don't say immaculate.

Elliot closed the laptop and opened a notebook. "Then that's that," he said. He turned the notebook on its side and underlined Friday 11:00 with a pen that didn't quite write.

"Then that's that," she said. The words were thin. There wasn't anything inside them to give back.

Milos came at four with two men, one of whom nodded at her with polite avoidance. They didn't bring any new things in. They took things out. Coils of cable went into a canvas sack. The work light's stand folded and clicked. The box fan that had been taped into a doorway in a different week was unplugged and lifted by its handle. One of the men took the cones and blue tape into the yard and stacked them in a neat line. None of the sounds were the sounds of making. They were sounds of unmaking: the snap of tape lifting, the unthreading clink of a drill bit put back in a case, the scrape of a ladder's feet coming down over plywood instead of going up.

Milos set his pad on the sawhorse table in the corridor. This was packing up. She stood on the kitchen side because she didn't want to stand in the corridor with him the way they had stood before, shoulder to shoulder, looking at a damp line and pretending it was a map they could read.

"We're listing today," she said, in case he hadn't looked at the board when he arrived.

"I saw," he said. He did not add any line about anyone who had tried to tell her anything earlier. He took his pen and circled two lines on the sheet. "You don't pay today," he said. "You pay some this week. You pay more on exchange. Not on completion. Most by Thursday; remainder on exchange. I do not want to be in the number that moves because someone else fails. The last piece," he said, tapping, "maybe I do not see. I am being straight. You are not the first."

"I know," she said. The honesty did two things at once. It made her want to sit down. It allowed her to stay upright.

"I can take down the sheet," he said, glancing at the dining arch. "It lies. We do not need lying here now."

"Take it down," she said.

He waved a hand at the younger man, who reached up and pulled the pins. The sheet came down with a soft crumple. The edge had collected

dust; the bottom corner carried a grey smear where someone's fingers had used it to catch balance. The room looked different without it, which would have been a sentence with sentiment if this had been any other house. Here it was a change in state: white to no white.

"I need to remove the cover," he said, walking to the cones. "It exists because you pushed. Now it cannot exist."

"I know," she said.

He lifted the tape and rewound it around his hand. He unscrewed the narrow board from the one joist he had called sound and set the screws in a neat row on the board. He bent and gathered the cones and stood them under the sawhorse. The hole was what it was: a span of cut-out where the timber used to be, treated masonry pocked with drill holes, air where a floor had been. It smelled of what it had smelled of since the first day the boards had lifted: a sour, persistent rot under the sharper scent of whatever chemical had gone in to stop it. Cold air came through along the cut line. She had never looked at it without framing. She looked at it now. No camera. No angle. No tape line on the floor for a set frame.

"Thank you," she said.

He blinked once at the word, then nodded. "I tell you this because I like a clean job," he said. "When it is open, serious people see it and understand what it needs. You are not the only one who stages. Buyers stage too. They pretend to not know. This is not pretending."

"I can live with that," she said. She had no idea if she could, but it was the only sentence available.

He picked up the pad again and put his finger under a line. "You send what you can this week," he said. "Friday is bad for me. Thursday morning is better." He wrote THU 10:00? and looked up.

"Thursday," she said. "Ten." There was nothing to promise. There was just the line.

“You could put me in your stories and say I am a genius,” he said, and the corner of his mouth moved in a way that made you think he had once made jokes but had forgotten. “But the man I buy timber from will not count that.”

“I know,” she said. “I wasn’t,” She didn’t finish the sentence because she had been about to say, I wasn’t going to, and she had, in fact, been about to.

He nodded as if he had watched that thought cross her face. “Good luck,” he said. The words were flat. They were good words.

“Thank you,” she said again, because the thanks had turned out to be the only thing she could give to anyone today that wasn’t a problem or a number.

They carried the last of the tools out. He went last, as he always did. When the door clicked and the air shifted through the opening where the sheet had been, she saw a small clear zip bag on the sawhorse with a handful of screws inside. He would not be back for a bag of screws. She pressed the seal; it clicked. She put it in her tote. The small hard weight sat against her hip.

She stood at the edge of the kitchen and took the room in the way she had taught other people to do by proxy. There were no tricks left. The cut timber showed where it had failed. The painted wall stopped at a line because that was where she had told it to stop. The stone was new and stupidly beautiful. The corridor was long and cold. It looked worse than it had at any point she had put online. It was itself.

She sat on the island stool with both feet on the floor and listened to the sound of nothing happening. She noticed each separate source: a siren two streets over; a bus brake at the corner; a metal knock from next door where someone was moving a ladder. She put her hand flat on the stone and took it off because she didn’t want to leave a print.

The text thread started because she typed a sentence she could send without rancour: We should divide things now so we're not doing it on Friday. She waited a full minute before watching for the dots. It was a childish punishment that punished nobody.

Elliot: Agreed.

Chloe: I'll take the kettle.

There was a pause long enough to allow him to feel the smallness of that. It wasn't a game. She had lived through a winter in a rented room once with a kettle and a plug-in ring and had not died.

Elliot: Take it.

Chloe: And the good lamp. The heavy base one.

Elliot: Fine. I'll take the TV and the couch.

Chloe: Yes. (She had typed "obviously" and deleted it.)

Elliot: Bed?

Chloe: You take the bed. I'll sort something.

Elliot: Okay.

Chloe: The plates can split. I'll take four. You can have the rest.

Elliot: This is adult of us.

Chloe: Don't.

Elliot: Sorry.

Chloe: Cutlery: I'll take the set with the sealed box. You take the open one. I can't think about the forks.

Elliot: I'll take the record player.

Chloe stared at the words. The record player had been the thing she had hugged him from behind about when it arrived in a brown box with a brand that pretended to be for men who wore raw denim. They had put a record on and had had to stand exactly in front of the speaker because the

left channel had been dodgy for two days. The memory arrived without asking and then stood there in the kitchen; she looked away from it the way she had looked away from the line in the plaster.

Chloe: It was a gift. From me. So. You take it.

Elliot: And the records?

Chloe: Split by who bought what. And the shared ones can go to charity. (She added, Unless you want them, and deleted it.)

Elliot: Okay.

There was a gap where one of them could have said something about a song at a festival they had gone to in their second year together, where she had cried at four in the afternoon because a woman with a guitar had made a sound she didn't expect. Neither of them said it. They scrolled.

Elliot: I'll email the agent about the viewing schedule and numbers.

Chloe: I thought you were handling it.

She looked at the line on the screen and felt heat rise at her neck because she had said those words a dozen times about deliveries and someone else's job and she had not meant what she meant now.

Chloe: Sorry. Yes. Please do.

Elliot: Friday 11:00 to hand over keys. Agent on site. Code to be changed.

Chloe: I'll write the alarm notes. I'll label drawers. (She had never labelled a drawer in her life.)

Elliot: The marble.

She typed keep it, backspaced, then wrote sell.

Chloe: sell

Elliot: Sure?

Chloe: Yes.

A few seconds later, her email pinged with a forwarded message. She opened it. The subject line said, Re: Buyback interest? The man's email address had a warehouse name in it and a town nowhere near here. The number in the body was not half the number she had paid; it was less. That was two mortgage payments gone before fees. Her throat made a little movement. She closed the email and didn't reply.

Elliot: I'll handle the stone pickup if you don't want to be here.

Chloe: Thank you.

He sent a thumbs-up emoji. It sat on the screen, flat.

Chloe: The towels and sheets can go to whoever is moving further away.

Elliot: You.

Chloe: Right.

Elliot: Do you want the bike?

Chloe: No. It scares me.

Elliot: Fair.

Chloe: The toaster died.

Elliot: I know. It tripped the plug last week.

Chloe: The plant can go to Maya.

Elliot: Fine.

Chloe: Keys with the agent at 11 Friday.

Elliot: Yes.

Chloe put the phone face-down and picked it up again. She typed, I'm sorry. She selected the words, watched the empty bubble blink, then deleted. She typed nothing. She sat. She watched the light change along the veining. It made a pattern she had learned by heart. She turned in her head to the memory of Jas's tub in the fridge next to mustard and two

eggs. Jas had turned up. She didn't move to go and get it.

Her phone vibrated once. Agent again. First viewing Wednesday 3:15 confirmed. Are you okay with overlapping slots if demand is strong? The word demand did something strange to her stomach. She typed, Yes. Stagger for entry. No coats hung anywhere. She took a screenshot of the message and didn't save it.

By nine she had a headache that felt like dehydration and a throat that felt like cleaning fluid. She ran the tap until it ran cold and filled a glass with water from a pipe that was still the old pipe because the upstairs would come later in a world where later existed. She drank half and put the glass down on the plywood where it left a ring that would wipe away.

She opened Notes, wrote nothing, and locked the phone. She wiped the screen with the bottom of her jumper. She left the bag of screws in her tote and took her hand off the stone before it could leave a mark.

Outside, the new board stood on its post. It did not change shape when the wind lifted. It showed a number and a logo and a name that did not belong to them. She watched its rectangle through the pane of glass. She did not take a picture. A bus brake hissed at the corner.

Chapter 12

The Keys

Friday morning, an hour before the agent's slot, she wiped the marble until the faint ring lifted and the cloth showed nothing. The cloth had been folded into smaller squares so she could use fresh corners in sequence, an old habit that gave a sense of control, and she moved along the line of the veining the way the fitter had told her worked best for this finish. She was early; the corridor was cold; a smell under everything here still hung at ankle height, dry and sour from cut timber and the chemical that had scorched into the brick. Her breath clouded once when she stood too still, then settled when she moved again. The island took up the space the way she had always pictured it doing. It was flawless. It was also irrelevant.

On the sawhorse table she had left because it had turned out to be useful when everything else had failed, there was a plastic folder with site papers, each piece in a sleeve so fingerprints wouldn't stick. Opening the folder, she checked what was in it: the printed payment schedule Milos had flattened there with his palm and tapped at with one finger; the email printout of the revised budget she had ignored the night of the dinner; the typed temporary-cover instruction with her own signature under the capitalised 'CLIENT INSTRUCTION'; a handwritten scrap where she had written MON 10:00 TRANSFER and stuck it in as if a note could function like money. She took a plain sheet from the back of the folder and rested it on the plywood.

"For whoever takes this on," she wrote. She stopped and scratched out the first line (not a letter) because it sounded like a letter and she could not write a letter to an absence. New line: "Dining/front span

remains open. Dry rot treatment started; full remediation not completed." She wrote Milos's name and his number from the margin of his printed sheet and added, "Temporary edge cover used for party only, documented, removed by builder." No adjectives. She printed, "Please do not load across the opening until joists replaced to sound. Ask builder for scope and advice. Agent holds rot report; ask for copy." She had forwarded Milos's scope and photographs to the agent on Tuesday.

The handwriting was neat from school and then a job where neat lists had won you praise. She signed with her first name and the date and left it on the island beside the folder. She looked at the words and felt none of the relief people talked about when they did something they could file under honesty. Aligning the paper, she squared the page to the folder edge and left it there.

She wiped the phone screen out of habit and opened the camera without thinking. The frame was unchanged: lamp base at the edge, veining running left to right with enough space to place text above if you needed it. She lowered the angle until the open span appeared in the lower third, not fully, just enough to break the fiction. She took one picture. The shutter sound was flat and ordinary. It would be the first photo she kept. She didn't caption it; she didn't post it. She locked the phone, then unlocked it again without purpose because that was what her hand did.

A message appeared before she could open anything of her own. Jas: "Are you there now? Do you want a hand? I can be there in twenty-five." The typing bubble showed, then disappeared, because that was what people did when they cared and didn't want to impose it.

She typed "It's fine" and hated the shape of the sentence as soon as it appeared. She deleted it a character at a time instead of holding and clearing because she needed the smallness of each removal. She put the phone face-down and then turned it face-up again and looked at the time. Ten-twenty. The handover was at eleven. She had told the agent, "Door on latch; keys on the island," and had watched the three dots while he

typed "Great, thanks. Five mins before." He was coming to check the board was upright and visible from the road.

She walked the corridor once more without the protective tricks she had used on the party night. There were no chairs set to make barriers where there were no walls. The sheet was gone from the arch. The cones were gone; where the cones had been, just air. The tape was gone. The edge of the opening was raw and showed where timber had been cut back to what held, the rest taken out and bagged. Even without the equipment, the room showed the same thing. The opening was there to be stepped across by mistake.

She went upstairs because there was one more thing to check, and because moving felt better than waiting. In the bathroom the towels she had left down for the party night leak had dried stiff along their edges. The bead of water at the base of the toilet had not reformed. She touched the isolation valve under the cistern and felt the slight give that told her she had not over-tightened it last weekend; it still held. The mirror had a fog smear at one corner where she had wiped it and then breathed on it again without thinking. The window was latched open a crack and the air that came through it lowered the temperature of the landing by a small degree that could be measured by skin. Nothing else could be improved by being in this room and she had run out of items to redirect her hands to, so she went back down; the corridor air felt colder again.

In the utility room she stood in the doorway and fixed her eyes on the old vinyl where it curled up under the cupboard's shadow. The damp line on the wall was still where it had been when Elliot had told her the truth. Nothing had shifted. The unplugged machine sat heavy on the floor. On the laminate, the prints he had left with the heel of his hand were still faintly visible because she had not wiped them; thin, blunt smudges from a night without any staging. She did not cry. The thing in her throat that sometimes sent a sting towards her eyes did not move. She put one knuckle against the doorjamb at shoulder height and left a clean patch in the dust.

Back in the kitchen she unzipped the tote. The clear bag of screws lay under the sealed cutlery set she had said she would take and under a looped tea towel that had refused to dry correctly in this house since the first week. She took the bag out. The screws clicked against each other once in the plastic. They were only screws; they were not even special ones, just mixed sizes with blunt tips and a bit of other dust inside the bag. They were also proof that someone had been careful with a temporary decision, counting and containing. She rolled the bag between her fingers and put it back into a different pocket inside the tote where the plastic rubbed against the canvas and made a sound that felt measurable. There was no reason to keep them. She kept them.

She knew the weight her shoulder would take for the walk to the station. One bag held the towels and sheets because she was the one moving further, that was how they had decided it in text without having to face what that meant. The other bag was the domestic kit people used in early flats: the kettle, the sealed cutlery set, the good lamp with the heavy base wrapped in a second towel. She lifted each bag to test the balance and put them down again to check the keys were still where they should be for five more minutes.

The phone lit again. The agent: "On my way. 10:55." She typed, "Door on latch. Keys on island. For-sale board is up." His reply was a thumbs-up icon and then "I'll lock behind me and change code as agreed." She wrote "Thank you" and meant it in the way you meant thanks to a person who would complete a function.

She looked for the last time at the island; that had always been the headline. There had been a moment in the stone yard when she had recognised that the way she moved her hand over the slab was the thing she had always been selling: a promise that a surface could make you safe. She pressed the cloth into one final small run along the underside edge where the fitter had said he would reseal and where a smear had stayed visible to no one but her.

She set the keys down. Two sets, each with a small metal ring and a label fob that had never been written on because writing on it would have made the keys belong to something instead of her idea of something. Metal met stone and made a clean click. She waited for the echo that didn't come. It was not loud. In the open room, the sound died quickly.

She held the island edge with her fingertips, then took them away because oil left marks. She checked the note again not for content but to ensure it lay flat and could be seen. She took a breath that felt like there was dust in it and then decided she was done.

She kept the door on the latch and stepped outside. The front strip of soil nobody had planted in or picked from stood between the path and the short post where the board sat. The board was bright. It had the agent's name and his number and the company's logo and nothing else. She moved past it. The pavement was damp; the top of her trainer picked up moisture. The bus brake at the corner made its single long hiss. A cyclist took the corner too wide and corrected. She did not turn back to see if the agent had come up the path yet.

She adjusted the bags. The one with the towels and sheets used the long strap; the one with the kettle and lamp needed a short grip. The kettle's weight pulled the bag to the right; the lamp base balanced it. The strap seam pressed a line into her coat at the collarbone. A pair of teenagers stood outside the bakery that never had enough stock after midday, sharing something paper-wrapped. A man with a small dog stopped to answer his phone and looked up at the board and then away in the same movement because some people behaved as if a question might follow when a board was up. She could taste the cold on her teeth when she opened her mouth to let her breathing catch up with her steps.

Her phone moved against her hip. She let it move. When she reached the crossing she looked because she did not want to be the person who left a place and then stepped in front of a car and had an accident that people would narrate as meaningful. She crossed. She thought about the beige rental and its clean, empty sockets, and where a kettle would go on

a worktop that had no marks yet, and she thought about a lamp in a window that didn't leak.

At the corner she put one bag down to adjust her grip on the other. Behind her, two men argued in the careful way people argue when one of them had a pram and the other one was late. A siren sounded on the main road half a street away, then ended when the lights changed. She picked the bag up again and felt the pull in her fingers. What her body told her was not poetic; it was load and distribution and the small act of not dropping anything. She felt the bags drag and her shoulders loosen; both were true. She was aware of her shoulders and the way the strap cut into the top of her coat because the strap was cheap and she had always meant to replace it and never had.

The station steps were wet. She put her foot on the first one and kept going. She didn't film the steps or open Notes to type a line for later use about new beginnings or transit or anything that could be made to sound universal. The phone stayed in her pocket with the screen dark. She didn't send Jas anything. The bubble with "It's fine" that had existed for six seconds was gone. There would be time after this for a different sentence.

On the platform she stood with her bags on the ground, one in front of each foot, because that made it harder to forget anything. The train information sign showed times in minutes that someone might call reasonable or not depending on whether they were late for something. Her hands shook twice in quick, small bursts that were more about muscle fatigue than anything else, and then they steadied. She breathed in through her nose and felt the familiar clean-and-dust mix that clung to this station whenever the wind came up the line from the retail park. A pale dust line on her sleeve caught the light, then was gone.

She didn't take out the phone to check follower counts or messages. She didn't write a caption that said goodbye to anything. She looked down the track until the platform lights showed on the curved metal and then looked straight ahead. The bags made her stance wider than usual. It

kept her stable. She could feel the straps against her palms and the handle of the kettle through the canvas and the hard edge of the heavy lamp base pushing against a towel. That was the sum of it. She stood; when the train arrived she would get on. She was not narrating anything. She was moving.

Chapter 13

The Beige Room

She set the bags down just inside the door and felt the handle press into her fingers for a second after she let it go. The flat had that brand-new smell that always read as reassurance in an advert and as something else when you were the person who had to live with it: paint, clean carpet, sealed plastic from a blind cord she cut with her keys because the loop made her uncomfortable. Air moved when she opened the bedroom door and moved again when she closed it because there was nowhere for the heat to collect. The radiator under the window was warm to the touch and the window glass showed the retail park across the road in a neat rectangle that made the aspirational signage look more tasteful than it was. Inside, it was empty in the way a staged apartment was empty before the photographer arrived with a deliverables list. Nothing to correct. Nothing to fail.

She kept her coat on for the first loop of the space, out of habit. One room that was kitchen-living, one bedroom, one bathroom with a silent fan that was on even when the light was off. Vertical slats on the window made a kind of grid if you stood at an angle. Beige on the walls, beige on the carpet; the same beige, not a thoughtful pair. A strip of laminate in the kitchen area gave up a small plastic click when she stepped on the join. The worktop was unmarked and clean in a way that read as temporary. No kettle rings, no hairline at the joint, no cut that would line up under the light because a knife had slipped. It was the kind of surface a developer chose to look fine to a person who walked through quickly.

The kettle went on the worktop. It looked smaller here than it had on the plywood in the other place, like an object that had been moved from a

theatre stage to a rehearsal room and had lost some of its purpose. She pressed the plug in and the switch gave a single red point of colour. She placed the heavy-base lamp on the sill because the window didn't leak and the base could sit flat; the two fingers' width between the lamp and the glass made the weight read as balanced instead of threatening to leave an imprint. She did not angle the shade or move the lamp three times to find the shot; she left it where the weight told her it should sit. The sealed cutlery box went in a drawer. She peeled the plastic back and it tore down the side instead of along the seam and she didn't fix it with tape to make it tidy. The towels went into the small hallway cupboard and fussed up against a folded set of sheets because the shelf aperture was wrong for what she had. The tote with the screws knocked against the cupboard door; a small clink came through the canvas. None of these movements were content.

On the table, an unambitious, flat-pack table that had come with the flat, she put her phone face up to check signal and then wiped the screen with the bottom of her sleeve because there was a smear from outside the house, where she had looked at the for-sale board that morning and then looked away. The screen lit. A younger account had reposted her 'We have some news' video and called it 'tour inspo' with a sparkle emoji and a caption about bravery and building your life. Underneath, blue hearts and 'goals' stacked with 'six months omg' and 'how did she do it so fast'. The account had used a still from the housewarming as the cover image, cropped to the flowers and condensation ring and her hand mid-air next to the veining. The hole did not appear in the frame. It had never appeared in the frame.

She tapped the repost and watched her own mouth say, 'We'll finish the rest on schedule,' and heard the bright tone she had engineered that week to sound like authority with humility around the edges. The video cut to the island, to the jar she had slid by three centimetres to hide a hairline that had travelled. Her jaw ached the way it did after a day when she had smiled more than she should have needed to. She closed the app, thumbed the volume to low, and set the phone face down on the table. It

was a gesture without audience. It counted anyway.

The kettle was ready. She poured, watched the steam come up and make a damp bloom on the underside of the cupboard, and felt a short, unglamorous relief at having heat in a cup that would not shiver when a bus braked. She carried the tea to the table and set it down where the grain of the laminate made a line that someone had meant to be wood. She sat. The chair took her weight without sound. She lifted the mug and knew before she drank that nothing here would taste like the other place; you could be told a hundred times that taste was about the water and the cup and your mouth and still, when you move, something as ordinary as tea turns into a test you pass or fail without knowing the mark.

The retail park across the way showed its clean shapes when the day slid into evening. Light panels mounted on tall posts lit the car park in a colour temperature that made skin look tired; she knew that from filming in similar lots and throwing away the footage. Cars lined up in square bays, reversing lights flared, then went white to red. A delivery lorry idled near the far corner and then pulled forward a metre and stopped. People pushed trolleys to their boots and lifted out bags that bent under evenly distributed weight. Inside, nothing dragged. The fan in the bathroom made a low mechanical tone that would recede in her head when she got used to it. Somewhere in the building, a cupboard door shut. No crumble. No chemical rot smell sitting in the air at ankle height. The quiet here was a different thing; it did not warn you of anything. It did not promise anything either.

She touched the mug with both hands and counted, without meaning to, the number of things she had asked for in the last year by saying they were logistics. She had not come here for a new start. She could still smell paint in the corners, and the laminate showed its printed grain. She had come here because she could afford the rent for now, because she could walk to the station and take a train back to a part of the city that had liked her better when she was talking about choosing everlasting paint finishes, because the window closed, because the lamp sat flat without her needing

to wedge cardboard under it to stop it listing and making everyone think about what was under the floor. The quiet inside was not a reward. It was what remained after a noise stopped. She breathed. The tea held a skin and the lamp sat steady.

Her phone buzzed once against the table. She turned it over. Jas: 'You okay?'

The two words did not ask for a speech; they were the whole thing. She had spent months composing things that made it sound as if there had been a committee signing off on how she lived. The committee was gone. The people who wrote congratulations on strangers' posts would write them with or without her. The only person who had ever asked her in a way that accepted either answer was the person whose name was on the screen.

She typed 'I'm fine' and watched the sentence sit there, cheerful and essentially false. It made her shoulders tighten just to look at it. She deleted the line a character at a time, not because it was satisfying but because it was a way to make her fingers do something while she searched for a sentence that didn't sell her out. The cursor blinked against a blank field.

She typed 'No'. The word looked much larger than two letters should look. It drained out of the box as if it could travel; it could not. She deleted it. She looked over at the kettle as if that would give the next line a shape.

The sentence that arrived was not a caption; it did not need a beat after it; it did not need a softening emoji under it so strangers would know she had not become cold. She wrote: 'No. Want to get a coffee?'

She did not send it immediately. It wasn't suspense; it was a small, necessary check. The pause let the shape of the risk form around the

words so that when she sent them, the sending would be an act instead of a reflex. She tapped the arrow. The phone made its soft pop.

She left the thread open and the phone face up. The room did not change, but the quiet had a border now where it had not had one before. The chair was steady under her. The tea cooled in the mug and she looked at the meniscus without pushing it to make a ripple because she used to do that to make a point in videos about calm and she had no interest in seeing that point again. She looked at the bare table rather than turning it into a line about simplicity or about making room. The table was a table. It did not need to be more than that to be allowed to exist.

She put her elbows on the table and took them off. Waiting without refreshing was a choice you had to make more than once. She set the phone an inch further away with her fingertips and left it there.

Later, a laugh came through the wall. It was not a party laugh or a shout; it sounded like someone in a television show had made a joke and the person on the other side had surprised themselves by making a sound. She did not feel the urge to hate them for it. She lifted the mug and drank the tea that had formed a skin at the top. The taste wasn't worse with the skin; it just told her a small, neutral truth about time.

Headlights slid across the ceiling and made a shape on the paint that moved and then disappeared. Nothing in the room reflected them in a way that made you look twice. The lamp on the sill made a circle on the wall because that was what the bulb did when a shade cut light at the top and bottom. The shade needed dusting already because synthetic fibres pulled small bits out of the air; she would wipe it with a cloth in the morning and there would be a faint grey left on the cloth that proved the work had been done.

Her phone stayed on the table, face up. She had turned the volume down earlier and did not turn it up now. Somewhere else, on a thread she had muted, the old video gained another stack of hearts and a comment about inspiration. A banner appeared and went away at the top of the screen. She did not open it. There were years when she would have argued with strangers who meant well to persuade them to mean well differently. Those arguments never made anyone kinder.

She reached into the tote and found the bag of screws by feel. The screws knocked against one another inside the plastic. She had taken them because she had not known what else to do in the moment when Milos had left the bag behind and she had been the last person in a room that had finally said what it was. The bag sat cold in her hand for a second, the ridged heads pressing a little through the plastic. She thought about putting it in the drawer with the cutlery and decided against it; screws did not belong with forks. The internal cupboard had a shallow shelf where the electric meter sat behind a flap; she stood, opened the cupboard, and put the bag on the shelf next to the dull plastic box. She closed the door and listened to the small, specific click of the catch. It was a decent sound.

She went back to the table and sat down. The walls were beige and plain. There was nothing in them to read. The beige walls did not judge her; they did not applaud either. She felt for the muscle at the side of her jaw with two fingers and let it soften because no speech was required. She thought about the note she had left on the stone that morning, the neat lines and the name and the number, and the four words 'Ask for copy' because she had known the agent would not remember to hand it over without being told to. She pictured the keys where she had set them and the lack of echo, and her hand lifting because she had not wanted to leave oil marks. The flat did not have anything you could mark yet. That did not make it safer. It simply meant that if she left a mark here it would be hers and not the measure of a structural failure she had hidden.

She looked at the phone and did not pick it up. She waited without counting to a number that would make the waiting tidy. From the window, the retail park's lights were as steady as they had been half an hour ago. The lift in the corridor whirred once and then stopped. She could smell the faint heat from the lamp's bulb after a while because the air did not turn over here unless you told it to. She decided to open the window a centimetre before bed because air that had been in the same room with a person all night felt stale in the morning and she had spent enough mornings this year feeling like failure without adding avoidable staleness to the list.

Her mouth tasted of tea. She put the mug down, wiped a damp ring away with her sleeve without thinking, and watched the ring vanish. She heard the sentence 'We built something together' in her own voice, not the video's voice but the voice she had used in that room, and placed it on the table where it belonged: a line that had been said to get through a night without breaking anything. There were other sentences she could make a habit of now. They did not require an audience. The only requirement was that they be lines she would not be ashamed to read back the next day.

She let the quiet sit where it was. She did not move to turn it into anything. Her shoulders loosened. She waited.