

THE MISSING HOURS



LIAM
HARRINGTON

The Missing Hours

by Liam Harrington

Chapter 1: The Missed Beat

Chapter 2: The Cancelled Appointment

Chapter 3: Plans That Never Were

Chapter 4: After-School Confusion

Chapter 5: The Smooth Evening

Chapter 6: The Attic Secret

Chapter 7: External Anchors

Chapter 8: Social Fractures

Chapter 9: Suspicions Harden

Chapter 10: Anchors Undone

Chapter 11: Pre-Intervention Pressure

Chapter 12: The Confrontation

Chapter 13: The Meeting

Chapter 14: The Revelation

Chapter 15: The Ward

Chapter 1

The Missed Beat

The bus lurched at the lights by Seafield Road, the slight stall that always came with that junction, and the weight of bodies shifted in a practiced sway. Damp coats pressed together. Someone's scarf held the cold smell from outside that never quite left fabric at this time of year. Maeve's hand found the back of the seat in front of her, an ordinary touch on worn plastic. Two stops from the school, early enough that she could stand at the rail and watch the gate open. She counted the stops without thinking about counting. Bags for swimming were already packed. The order for dinner was set in her head.

Heat rose from the bus floor. Not the pleasant kind, just that trapped warmth that made the air heavy. She took a breath to clear it and it didn't clear. The sense of the breath coming in without effect had a weight of its own. She squared her feet and let go of the seat to shake out her hand, then took hold again. The motion sensor above the front doors gave out its low hum when they closed, a sound she usually didn't register until it wasn't there. Her tongue felt dry, not exactly thirst but a warning. She didn't catalogue warnings unless they persisted.

The next breath didn't fix the swelling in her head. A pressure, not pain. The kind she had got once in the supermarket when the overhead lights flickered and she had to stand in the baked goods aisle and count backwards until it settled. This felt narrower. Heat around her neck. She loosened the scarf with one finger and let it fall open. Two steps to the pole by the exit. One step.

The floor tilted while the bus kept its line. Not a slow drift. A clean drop. A second wasn't there. The bus moved under her in a rushing line.

Noise opened at a distance.

She came back to the sound of a man's voice closer than she liked and the smell of the driver's jacket, diesel, coffee that had been on since before dawn. Her cheek was against the patterned seat and her right knee had met the floor; it throbbed. People were quiet in a way that meant they were looking without speaking. She sat up and put a hand to the seat edge to stabilise the angle.

"You went," the driver said, almost conversational, the way men who saw things all day learned to make it ordinary. "You alright there?"

Maeve nodded once and then made the nod faster so it looked less tentative. "Yes. Sorry. Got up too fast." Her voice stayed even. The driver's shoulders eased.

"D'you want me to radio for an ambulance?" He had one knee on the step, hand on the rail, trained to keep his face calm so people didn't panic looking at him.

"No." She kept her tone practical. "No, thank you. I'm getting off at the next one anyway. I'm fine. Just hot." She loosened the scarf the rest of the way and let cool air onto her collarbones.

A woman behind the driver leaned in, a small bottle already in her hand. "Water," she said. "Take a sip."

Maeve accepted it, took a mouthful, returned it with a thank-you. The mouthful sat right. The bus carried on, the vibration through the floor now information rather than threat.

The driver's eyes went to the rear-view mirror, then back to her. "I should put it through," he said, quieter now, "on the log. If anything happens later, you know?" He gestured towards the radio. "It's just a note. What's your name?" he added. "For the incident log."

"It's nothing," she said. "I stood up. It's warm in here." A beat. "I'd rather not give my name. Please don't. I'm fine. I need to get the kids." A name on a route became a record. Records moved between people.

The woman with the water gave a small nod. Conversation at the back picked up again in low threads.

He glanced at her face, then nodded. "Alright. Next stop's the promenade. Fresh air'll do you."

"Thanks." She stayed sitting until the light went green. She would not give anyone the show of standing too soon.

Normal would be performed, not assumed.

The bus pulled up by the concrete steps that led down to the wide strip by the sea. Doors opened with that hum. She stood. The world stayed put, which felt like a decision she had made. She stepped off, thanked the driver again at the corner of her mouth, and let the cold hit her. Salt came up off the Forth. Two gulls stood by the bins, waiting.

She could cut through the streets to the school gate. She chose the promenade instead. It was longer and would carry her along a line where there was always air moving. If she walked firm and steady the pulse in her neck would flatten. Her phone was in her pocket and she did not take it out. The idea of texting Daniel carried with it the sequence that would follow: concern, questions, watchfulness folded into ordinary conversation. Not today.

She walked with her hands deep in the pockets of her coat so she did not have to decide what to do with them. The concrete was damp but not slick. Runners passed with headphones and a fixed forward look. She kept her own gaze at the line where the grey water met the grey sky, more gradient than line at this time of year. In her head she placed the pieces of the evening. School gate. Finn first, he would run from the line to her waist, arms under her coat. Isla after, walking in that contained way she had, hoodie sleeves over her hands even when it didn't merit it. Home. Coats on the bannister while they sorted shoes and checked for letters at the bottom of bags. Pasta on. Garlic, olive oil, enough water moving in the pan so nothing stuck. She had apples to be cut and a carrot stick habit she had introduced years ago and never decided to stop.

Footsteps came up behind her, then slowed. “You look a bit peaky, hen.” The voice was familiar in the way of someone you saw enough to be obliged to recognise without placing their name. The small dog at the end of the lead shivered in a coat of its own.

Maeve turned with the polite tilt of the head that was local currency. “Do I? It’s the wind. Came off a hot bus straight into it.” Keep it brisk. Keep it not a topic.

“Ach, the buses are roasting just now,” the woman said. “You take care.” It was soft, concerned but already moving on to the next thought.

“Thanks,” Maeve said, and walked. Remarks could travel from the promenade to the gate in ten minutes. Then they became the echo of concern in someone else’s voice in the playground, and then they became the thing Daniel heard second-hand at work from a colleague who lived in the area. Not today.

At the corner by the ice-cream kiosk the wind hit her open at the neck and her breath fell into rhythm. The small pressure behind her eyes receded to the margin. She used the last stretch along the windbreak to smooth her face into what the children read as normal. The gate was already open when she reached the school.

Finn ran as predicted. She caught his first impact in a way that held it without letting him jolt her. His hair smelled of the outside classroom. Glue, cheap soap, that warm child smell from inside a jumper that had been run in. “Mum!” He put his hands where they always went, at her waist, and let out a long breath.

“Alright, love. How was it?” She kept the questions at the level he could answer standing up, no detail he would be asked to retrieve.

“Good. We did the big map.” He tipped his head back. “Can I have chicken noodles?”

“Pasta tonight. Noodles another night.” She looked up at the stream of children coming out two by two, Isla among them in her grey hoodie,

sleeves pulled down so that her hands were half-hidden. Isla's gaze flicked to Maeve, then to Finn, then to her own watch. The watch was always a few minutes fast. Isla said it added margin. She came over without hurry.

"Hi," Maeve said.

"Hi." Isla gave a small smile, already half-turning to avoid being caught in the flow of parents wanting to talk about tests or bake sales. "We've got PE kit to wash," she said, neutral, providing data.

"Put it at the bottom of the stairs," Maeve said. "I'll get it on."

They took the ordinary route home along the quiet streets off the main road. Maeve listened for any return of the pressure in her head. None. She kept one hand on Finn's shoulder, not because he needed guiding but because the contact completed a circuit she trusted.

The house held its usual temperature, which meant cooler than Daniel liked and warmer than she preferred if she was moving. She hung coats on the bannister. The key bowl sat on the console table in the hallway where it always lived, ceramic with a chip on the rim from a holiday years ago. She checked it without making a ceremony of it: her keys, Daniel's, the spare. No one had moved them. Good. She sorted letters and the single sheet that sometimes came home from school with a line about a form to be returned. Nothing urgent. She placed the sheet on the counter next to the kettle, where things got done.

"Hands," she said to Finn, gentler than an order, more habit than instruction. He went to the sink and stood on the low stool to reach, sleeves rucked up before she had to say it. Isla slid her bag onto the floor with careful placement and took out a book. She always took out a book before dinner, a small claim to control in a space where she was otherwise at the mercy of the house's routines.

"Ten minutes," Maeve said. "We'll eat." She put on the pan and set the oven timer for the garlic bread because it was one of those nights when garlic bread turned a simple pasta into something the children read

as a treat. The timer showed exactly eleven minutes. She pressed start. The countdown began its silent work. She moved to the hallway to fetch the laundry basket and glanced at the wall clock out of habit. The hands said it was three minutes earlier than the digital timer had said a moment ago. A small press behind her eyes came and went.

She stood still long enough to make the sight fix. Three minutes. Not two. Not four. Not drifting. She went back to the oven and checked the time display again. Eleven minutes was now counting down from nine. She let that exist without turning it into a topic. For cooking she would trust the oven. For the rest, school runs, bedtime, she would have the hallway clock as the house's standard. If everyone moved by the hallway clock, then they were moving together. She did not say this out loud. She put the pasta in the boiling water and stirred. Heat gathered at her neck and settled.

Steam rose. She opened the window for a moment to let it out and closed it again before the room got cold. Finn was singing quietly to himself in the way he did when he was counting something in his head. Isla had slipped to the end of the counter, book open, hair behind her ear. She glanced at her watch again, that clipped movement. Routine.

The oven timer beeped. Maeve reached for the oven cloth on the radiator and opened the door. Heat came out and rolled over her hands. A quick whiff of smoke reached her. The top of the garlic bread was a shade more brown than she wanted even before she moved it. The grill light was on though she hadn't set it to grill. She pulled the tray and set it on the top of the stove. Edges were dark and brittle, not burnt through, but not what she had told the timer to give her. She broke off the corner to check the inside and saw dryness at the edge. Too far. She had done exactly what she always did and the result stood there anyway, contradicting the plan.

"Leave it," Daniel said from the doorway, already in the tone he used when he was smoothing something down. He had a half-smile on, shirt sleeves rolled, tie in his pocket. "We don't need to make a fuss. Honestly,

let's just get a takeaway. Treat. Nobody'll complain." He stepped forward and took the tray as if he'd been going to do that anyway.

"It's fine," Maeve said. "The pasta's ready." She tipped it into the colander and the steam came up, a sheet of wet heat that fogged her glasses until she slid them down her nose and wiped them on the corner of a towel. She swallowed against a dry edge in her mouth. Sauce and pasta went into bowls, the least compromised sections of bread added. Daniel kept the tray, already tapping through offers on his phone. Finn laughed, not at the joke but at his father's light tone. Isla's mouth moved at one corner and stilled.

They ate at the table because they always ate at the table unless someone was ill. The habit carried them through the first minutes. Finn spoke about the map again, this time with detail about rivers and the arrows they had drawn. Maeve gave him attention and the occasional prompt. He bit the edge of his bread, then paused. "It's a bit bitter," he said, matter-of-fact.

"It happens," Daniel said lightly. "Plenty of pasta."

Isla answered two questions with a word or two and looked at her plate when Maeve angled for anything specific. "You okay?" Maeve asked. Isla gave the shrug she had designed for such exchanges, neither yes nor no, then glanced at her watch and stood.

"Homework," she said, already moving.

"Bring your plate to the sink," Maeve said, a line that marked boundaries without turning the air to glass.

Isla did as asked and was gone. The stairs carried her weight in a measured rhythm that did not vary.

Finn forked up the last of his pasta and looked across the table with a narrow frown that belonged to his father's side of the family. "Mum, are you ill?" he asked. Not frightened, just checking, the way children asked about the weather.

“No,” Maeve said. She moved her water glass to the centre of the table and back. “I’m fine.” She put a napkin under his bowl so he didn’t have to hold it in his hands while he finished. “Eat up.” Her voice landed steady and unforced. His shoulders eased. That counted.

Daniel had already found the menu on his phone and was listing options as if it were still a possibility. “Salt and chilli chips,” he said to Finn, easy, eyes on the app, already tapping through offers. “Yes? No?” He wasn’t watching Maeve’s face. “We can just keep it easy.”

“Save it for the weekend,” Maeve said. “There’s ice cream after.” Ice cream existed for nights like this, where the ordinary shape needed closing with something that said the house was still a place where treats happened.

After dishes, she stood in the hallway and looked at the wall clock again. Three minutes out. Exactly the same. She went to the kitchen and checked the oven time. Still three minutes the other way. Later. Not now. No ritual with witnesses.

One standard.

She took her phone from the counter, woken from sleep by the movement. A small calendar nudge sat on the screen: “PTA rota 7:10.” She hadn’t joined any rota, and the time didn’t match anything she kept. The banner looked slightly off, the font a shade lighter, spacing not quite right. She looked at it until the words flattened, then deleted it. Glitch.

Upstairs, Isla’s door was ajar but her posture at the desk said she wanted the door to be accepted as closed. Finn was sitting on his bed with his knees up, reading about trains. The book’s cover was gone at the corners. Maeve sat beside him for the last page, read out the final line, and smoothed his duvet with one hand while her other hand moved through the memory of the bus. She did not dig into it. She noted it and left it alone.

Downstairs, she filled the kettle. The house was quiet in that way it had when each person was in their corner. She opened the top drawer to

the right of the cooker. The notepads were stacked with rubber bands around them. She took two and put them on the counter in a line as if the arrangement itself could make a clear thought. Paper did not move when software updated. Paper sat where she put it until someone with hands moved it. She took a pen and made a heading she did not need because headings made lists hold firm.

Wednesday. School drop-off, pick-up. Swimming kit, Finn. PE kit, Isla. Milk. Email Mrs Rowe about the reading scheme. Eight o'clock pips, calibrate clocks. She printed her handwriting with more care than necessary. She wanted the lines to be immune to interpretation.

She reached for the pin tin and shook one out onto her palm. The board above the kettle was where reminders went so no one could miss them. Nearby enough that no one could claim not to have seen something. She pinned the list at eye level. Not high where it could be ignored, not low where it would be brushed past.

Her thumb rubbed the edge of the paper until it sat perfectly flat. She stepped back and checked that the title was level. The oven timer, the wall clock, the phone that made itself available in the ways it chose. She would add a second alarm now to the first. Redundancy stopped single points of failure becoming crises.

She opened the phone's alarm screen and set a second alarm seven minutes after the first. Seven put it beyond any snooze habit without risking the school run. She toggled both alarms to on and let the screen go dark, then bright again to check they held. She placed the phone on the counter rather than the table so the alarms would sound against a surface that carried the vibration through the wood.

She pictured the radio in the morning. Eight o'clock pips. She would stand in the hallway with a hand on the wall clock and set the minute hand on the strike. Then she would go to the oven and bring it to match. Every device in the house would move together. It was not foolproof. Nothing was. It would still reduce the gaps control could fall through.

Daniel came in with two bowls and paused when he saw the paper. “Organised,” he said, the word not critical, just observational.

“It’s the middle of term,” Maeve said. “If I don’t write it, it doesn’t exist.” It was the kind of statement that kept things away from the topics that made people’s faces tighten.

He nodded. “Do you want me to do the milk?”

“I’ll get it,” she said. “You get Finn’s swimming things up from the utility room and put them by the door. Saves time in the morning.” She kept her tone even. No invitation to notice the clocks. This would not be folded into a conversation that would be about her reaction rather than the thing itself.

He left with the bowls. She stood alone in the kitchen with the steady hum of the fridge and the click in the hallway where the radiator came on. She lifted the phone again and opened a new message. Ailsa’s name sat at the top of the thread. The last exchange was days old, something about payday and a coat for Finn that would actually keep him dry.

“Check-in tomorrow?” she typed. “After drop-off. Ten minutes.” She left out explanation. She sent it.

The dots moved, stopped, moved again. “Aye,” came the reply. “Call me when you’re out. I’ll be in the van.” A photograph of a thermos with a crack along the lid arrived without comment. Ailsa’s way of saying she would be working and available but not at a desk where a landline made things formal. Maeve looked at the time stamp and let it register as quick. She would see if it stayed quick tomorrow. The test was not about her sister. It was about whether things matched when checked.

She washed the last plate and dried it straight away, not because it couldn’t drip-dry but because finishing a thing reduced the number of tasks her head would hold at four in the morning. The counter, the hob rim, then the kettle handle got a wipe. She shook the dishcloth and hung it over the tap without letting it twist.

At the bottom of the stairs she checked the key bowl again without looking like she was checking. The weight of her own keys in her pocket, the sight of the other sets in place. She put her free hand on the banister and went up steadily, aware of the memory her knee held of the bus floor. No show of fragility; no need to pretend it hadn't happened inside her body.

In the bathroom she brushed her teeth with the light off and the landing light on, a habit that kept the mirror from blasting her with the kind of light her head didn't welcome at night. She set out Finn's school polo on the chair by the door and put Isla's PE kit at the bottom of the stairs as agreed. The house made its small, usual sounds. The metal tick of the landing clock, never in exact agreement with anything, stayed steady enough to notice.

When she lay down, she set her palm on the duvet by her hip and felt the fabric's steady texture. Not to soothe. To confirm a surface. The second alarm would go at seven-oh-seven. The first would have woken her by then anyway. She let herself track her breath to the count of four in, four held, six out, not a ceremony, only a way to be sure the shape of the breath hadn't changed from earlier. It stayed regular.

In the morning she would stand in the hallway and put the hands where they needed to be.

Chapter 2

The Cancelled Appointment

Seven minutes after the first alarm, the second sounded against the wood of the kitchen counter. Maeve had placed the phone there for exactly that reason. Vibrations travelled through the board and into the cabinets; a physical reminder could be relied upon when sounds got lost in other sounds. She turned the alarm off and checked the other toggles with one steady thumb. Both set. Both on.

The hallway held a settled chill that read as ordinary for this time of year. She stood with the radio already tuned and the hallway clock taken down so the glass did not throw glare back at her. The minute hand was one small mark shy of eight. She steadied the clock with one palm and held the dial with the other. In the kitchen the kettle clicked once. She watched the digital seconds crawl toward the hour on the radio display and waited for the pips. The tones arrived clean. She moved the minute hand at the first tone and let it fall into position on the last. No ceremony. A movement, then a second check to be sure she had not overshot. She returned the clock to its hook and stood still to read it again, then looked at the oven. Three minutes ahead yesterday. Today, she pressed the timer button, brought the display to match the hallway standard, and confirmed the numbers held when she stepped back.

One standard.

Steam lifted off the worktop when she poured water into the mug. She did not drink it yet. The list she had pinned the night before was there at eye level, Wednesday, the lines stacked with spacing that left no room for interpretation. She pressed her thumb to the corner of the paper to flatten the last curl and then picked up the mug. Upstairs, small

movements carried through the ceiling. Finn thumped from one side of his room to the other, precise thumps that corresponded to the furniture. Isla's door opened and closed once without sound, a signal more than a movement. The metallic tick on the landing matched the hallway clock now. She measured that for a breath and let it go.

"Shoes by the door," she said to Finn when he appeared with one sleeve still turned halfway inside-out. She ran a hand down the fabric and reversed it, quick, no fuss. "Swimming bag?" He nodded, already looking at the place where his things waited. Daniel had set them there last night. She did not call attention to it. "Toothbrushing," she said, and Finn rolled off to the bathroom with the concentration he brought to tasks that had a sequence.

Isla came down with her hood up, hands tucked inside the sleeves but not hiding. "We're early," she said, neutral, eyes flicking to the hallway clock. It showed the time she had set. A fraction of the tension she hadn't named in her shoulders eased.

"We'll keep it that way," Maeve said. "Coats." She used the tone that kept things moving without handing over the job of motivation to anyone else in the room.

They stepped out into the cold that came straight up from the sea and along the streets. The air carried salt that dried the lips if you didn't keep a mouth closed. Isla walked half a step ahead on the quieter road, then fell back through the turn. Finn's hand slipped into hers for the long crossing, then out again when they reached the other side. The school gates were open. She scanned the faces because she always did, not to chat but to gauge the morning. No one with a story in their mouth today. Good.

"Go on," she said, tapping Finn lightly on the shoulder. He ran with a small whoop he kept to himself. Isla gave her that tiny nod she had designed for school drop-offs, then looked at her watch and went in. Maeve stayed long enough to fix the sight of them walking away. She let it

go.

She took the High Street at a steady pace and arrived at the GP with the first wave of people who had arranged their mornings to fit twenty minutes into a day they did not quite control. The waiting area was already warm in the way of buildings kept at a single temperature all day. Plastic seats. The low hum of the fluorescent panels. The desk had glass high enough that you leaned in without wanting to. A pot plant behind the computer. Tissues near the card reader.

“Morning,” she said to the receptionist, meeting her eyes with the directness that greased small transactions. She placed both hands flat on the counter. “I’m following up on a scan appointment. Under Maeve Clarke. I’ve not got an exact date. The last I had was that it would be scheduled this week or next. I want to confirm the booking.”

The receptionist nodded and turned to the screen. The mouse clicked over text that Maeve could not see, then stopped. A small line appeared between the woman’s eyebrows and disappeared. “Right,” she said. “Let me just...” She scrolled again and her lips pressed together. “So we had an appointment request through. There’s a record.” She waited to see if Maeve would supply the rest. Maeve did not. The receptionist went on. “There’s a note here that the scan was cancelled yesterday afternoon by the patient.”

Maeve did not move. Timing became the whole picture. “Cancelled how?”

“A phone call,” the receptionist said, voice still even. “It says ‘patient called to cancel appointment. Will contact to reschedule.’ I can read the exact wording if you’d like.”

“What time?” Maeve asked. Not loud. Not fast. “The exact time of the call.”

The receptionist’s gaze flicked to the next column. “Fourteen minutes past four,” she said. “Logged at sixteen fourteen.” The small printer on the back shelf clicked once.

Maeve held the numbers in her head and ran them across the last day. “Yesterday at sixteen fourteen,” she repeated. “Please check that it’s my number on the record.”

The woman straightened a fraction. “We don’t show the numbers on this screen. It just shows the logged contact and the note.” Her voice lifted at the end.

“Is there a call log?” Maeve asked. “A record of the number that called?”

The receptionist slid a laminated leaflet back into its holder and touched the mouse. The cursor blinked twice. “There will be,” she said. “It’s not accessible here at the desk. You’d need to put a request to the practice manager if you want a copy of personal data or any call content. That goes through our data controller.”

“Does it say who took the call?” Maeve asked.

A small breath through the receptionist’s nose, then she read. “Initials only,” she said. “Not mine. And it says ‘patient confirmed date of birth.’”

Maeve’s mouth dried at that, not the kind of dry that meant thirst but the kind that meant the next sentence had to be placed with care. She placed it. “I didn’t make that call,” she said. “I don’t want the appointment cancelled. I was told to expect it this week or next.” She kept her tone at the same level it had been when she walked in. “Can you reinstate it?”

The receptionist glanced at the queue forming in polite distance behind Maeve. “We can request a new appointment,” she said. “It won’t be the same slot, obviously.” The corners of her mouth lifted; her eyes stayed on the screen. “I can put it through as urgent, but that doesn’t always do what we want it to do. The hospital does their own booking.”

“Please put it through,” Maeve said. “And please note that the cancellation yesterday didn’t come from me.”

“I’ll note what you’ve told me,” the receptionist said. She typed, eyes following the line. “If you want the call log, it would need the manager. There’s a form,” she added. She wrote the email on a pad, tore the corner carefully, and slid it under the glass. “You’ll get a receipt.”

“Could you tell me,” Maeve said, “what you would see if someone called from a different number claiming to be me?” She kept her hands still. “Is there a check you do?”

“Name and date of birth,” the receptionist said. “Address. We don’t hold voice samples or anything, if that’s what you’re asking. We do have caller ID on the phones, but we don’t rely on it for identity. It’s information. If it’s a mobile, it shows the number. If it’s withheld, it says withheld.”

“And that information is stored?” Maeve asked.

“It is,” the woman said. “But not here.” She touched the desk, not the keyboard. “It would be the manager.” She looked past Maeve again. “Do you want to speak to a GP? We can’t do that at the desk, but if you’re concerned we can arrange a call-back.”

Maeve weighed the space and the people and the fact of being watched. “No,” she said. “Not here.” Then, because precision mattered, “Not now. Please send the urgent request.”

“I will,” the receptionist said. “And the practice manager email?” She pushed the torn slip a little closer.

“Thank you.” Maeve took the paper. She did not put it in her pocket yet. She stepped back, let the person behind her go forward. There were eyes, but they were not hostile. They were the eyes of people dividing their attention between paperwork and a child and a cough and their own day. She used the same muscles she used to take hot trays from the oven and applied them to her face. Neutral. Measured. She crossed the waiting room with a steady pace and pushed open the side door with the bar release.

The High Street air replaced the inside temperature at once. The cold stung her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. She took the phone from her pocket and found Daniel. He picked up on the second ring.

“Hi,” he said. “You alright?”

“I’ve just been at the surgery,” Maeve said. She made each word serve. “They have a record that I cancelled the scan yesterday by phone at sixteen fourteen. I didn’t. I want you to know I’ve asked them to reinstate it and to note that I didn’t cancel.”

There was a pause. She let it run. “Okay,” Daniel said. “Okay. Maybe... I mean, maybe it’s just crossed wires? You’ve had a lot on. We can get it rescheduled and maybe book a double appointment with Dr Gupta to talk through things. Might be good to cover everything, you know?”

“I don’t want ‘everything’ as a category,” Maeve said. “I want the scan I was told I would have.”

“Of course,” he said, smoothing. “Of course. I’m only thinking that if you’re stressed, and it’s understandable, you might have, I don’t know, phoned and then not remembered, with everything else yesterday. Why don’t I call later and we can plan?”

She could see his body language in her head even though he wasn’t in front of her: the small smile that meant to make a space where no one had to admit fault. She cut off the image. “I’m not stressed about the existence of a record that says I cancelled something I didn’t cancel; that’s not subjective.”

“Okay,” he said again. “Look, let’s not get into it on the phone while you’re, are you outside? It’s freezing. We’ll sort it. Really.”

“I have the practice manager’s email,” she said. “I’m going to request the call log.”

“That’s a good idea,” he said, tone warm and careful as if he’d suggested it. “And you could also ask Dr Gupta for the earliest available

slot. Or, do you want me to do that?”

“No,” Maeve said. “I’m going to handle it.” She kept her voice flat, not sharp. “I’ll speak to you later.”

“Alright,” he said. “Thanks for letting me know.”

She ended the call. The phone showed the precise duration of the conversation and then went back to the time. She stood for one more breath and watched the bus pull up across the road. Different route. She did not get on. She folded the paper with the email on it and put it into the inside pocket of her coat where it would not fall out if she pulled her gloves in and out. She started walking.

The house was as she had left it. The smell of toast from breakfast and the faint trace of steam from earlier had gone flat, more air than scent now. She put the practice manager’s email on the pinboard under the list and weighed the top edge with a second pin so that it would not curl. Her phone showed a missed call from Daniel and a voicemail. She listened with her finger ready over the delete.

“Hi,” Daniel’s voice said, pitched to practical. “Just thinking, maybe book a double appointment with Dr Gupta. You could talk through the scan and, um, just everything really. If you want me there, I can take a couple of hours. Or I can watch Finn if you’d rather go on your own. No pressure. Up to you. Call me later.”

She stopped the playback and pressed Delete with her thumb. The haptic buzz ran through the glass. A faint smear marked the swipe. She set her jaw and let one slow breath out through her nose.

The latch clicked. Isla stepped in, crossing the hall past the kitchen doorway. “It’s just stress,” she said, not stopping. She crossed to the fridge, took a yogurt and a slice of bread, home on her lunch break, and checked her watch, pulling her sleeve over her knuckles.

“What time is the dentist?” Maeve asked. A small tightening moved up through her throat; she kept her voice even.

“It moved. They texted.”

“I’ll call them directly. No texts.”

Isla nodded and kept going. The latch clicked again. It was quiet again.

The key bowl held all the sets. She checked by sight rather than by touch. Her own keys stayed in her pocket. The hallway clock held the correct time. The oven display matched. The pips had fixed the time. It didn’t close anything. It only stopped one set of questions.

She sat at the table and opened the notebook with the stiff cover. She wrote ‘Wednesday’ again; the date fixed the hours. The pen dug slightly as she started a line, paused over the second word, then crossed half of it and began again. One line stayed: ‘Practice manager, email sent.’ The pressure left a shallow indent on the page beneath.

By the time she looked up, the hallway clock had moved forward enough that the house would need to turn toward the school again before long. She put her hand on the kettle, then lifted it and filled it halfway. The water’s sound against the metal calmed her in a way she would not name as calming. It was simply consistent. The phone screen lit on the counter with a message from Ailsa: “Finished a job early. Can do ten mins before pick-up. Outside the wee bakery. 15:10?”

Maeve typed, “Yes. I’ll be there,” and set the phone back down.

She used the hour in between to clear obvious tasks. She wiped the rim of the hob where oil gathered into a shine that collected dust. She checked Finn’s gym bag and the swimming towel, folded once and then again, practical for a child’s hand to unfold without pulling everything out. She looked at the pinboard again and added: “Dentist, verify time.” The pencil caught on the paper’s tooth and left a small burr that she smoothed with a thumbnail. The action allowed her to slow just enough to think.

She checked her own phone calendar for a dentist appointment entry. There was one for next week at three. It matched the last call she remembered making with the dental practice. She accepted the entry and wrote the time on the paper list, then stopped. She put the pencil down and deleted the digital entry. Better no entry than one she might have to argue about later if it moved. She wrote again on the paper: “Dentist, confirm today by phone. No texts.” She pressed the letters hard enough that her finger pad buzzed against the wood beneath the paper.

At ten past three, she zipped her coat and took the street that ran behind the main road to the small bakery. The sea air carried through the gap between buildings, less open but still there. She crossed to the corner where the bakery’s window showed trays that would be empty by the end of the day. Ailsa stood with a carton of coffee in one hand, wearing the same wool coat she’d had for years and the beanie pulled down. Her face had the look it got when she was holding questions for later.

“You alright?” Ailsa said, handing over the spare coffee without making it a gift. “What’s happened?”

“They’ve got a record that I cancelled the scan,” Maeve said. She kept it factual. “Yesterday at sixteen fourteen by phone. It says I confirmed my date of birth.”

Ailsa’s eyes narrowed. “Did you ask for the number?”

“They won’t show it at the desk. I have to email the practice manager for the call log. I’ve done that.” She looked at the bakery window. It showed a dull version of the street. “They’ll put the scan request through again. Urgent, which means nothing. I asked them to note that the cancellation didn’t come from me.”

“Good,” Ailsa said. She kept her voice straightforward. “Right. So. Paper. Witness. We do what you’re already doing and we add eyes to it. I’ll stand with you at these bits.” She ticked the air with the hand that held her own coffee. “Pick-up today. Tomorrow morning, drop-off, if you want. If there’s a call while I’m there, I’ll stand there and watch you take it

on speaker and we note down who and when.”

“I want to write it on the board and sign it,” Maeve said. She let the thought form as she spoke it. “And I want you to initial it as well. Two hands.” She looked at Ailsa. “If something disappears or changes, we both saw it.”

“Fine,” Ailsa said. “And I’ll put the same note up at mine. On my kitchen pinboard. Photograph if we need to, but paper first. Make it so we could point at it and say, no, that was there.”

Maeve nodded. The nod came easier than it had earlier. “Dentist appointment,” she said. “Do you remember the time?”

Ailsa looked blank for half a second. “No. I didn’t clock that one. Why?”

“Isla said it was moved,” Maeve said. “She said there was a text. I haven’t had one.”

“Phone them,” Ailsa said. “Now if you want.”

“I’ll do it after pick-up,” Maeve said. “If I call now and they text me to confirm and then something else turns up on my phone that contradicts it...” She trailed it. Not a fear. A calculation. “I want you there.”

“Aye,” Ailsa said. “So we’ll call them at mine or yours, and I’ll listen and write down the name, and we’ll write the time on both boards. You said the surgery and the oven are aligned now?”

“The hallway clock and the oven are aligned to the radio,” Maeve said. “Yes.”

“Good,” Ailsa said. “We’ll use the hallway clock as the reference when we sign the board.” She took a sip of coffee and then added, “You know this is all a bit,” She stopped herself, searched for a word that wasn’t the wrong one, found it. “It’s a lot. But we can do it. We’ll put it on paper and we’ll stand there beside you when someone wants to know what’s what.”

Her shoulders dropped.

They walked the last stretch to the school in step, not for effect but because the pavement narrowed beside a fence. The glass front of the reception reflected cold daylight and the movement of parents collecting early pickups. The main gate stood open. “We’ll say we’re here at sixteen zero-six by the hallway clock,” Maeve said. “I’ll write it when we get back.” Network time on the phone; hallway clock on the board.

Ailsa glanced at the phone in her hand. “And I’ll note it in my notebook now, then we’ll cross-check to your clock when we’re in.” She pulled out a small notebook, the kind you got from the builders’ merchant, and wrote the time. “Pick-up, you. Me, present.”

Maeve looked through the gate at the line forming inside. Finn would come first. Isla would come out with the same measured walk and that watch at her wrist set a few minutes fast. The thought should have tightened her breathing. It didn’t. Not exactly. She felt her fingers relax around the coffee cup. She labelled the feeling in a way that would hold: not relief, not trust, but margin.

“This is the line,” she said, more to herself than to Ailsa. “I’m not managing this alone.”

“Good,” Ailsa said. “Hold it there.”

They stepped toward the gate, moving into position without making a show, two women on the pavement who looked like every other pair of women waiting to collect children. They had the phone call plan set between them, direct verification with names and time, two signatures. It was enough for the next hour. It had to be.

They agreed where they would meet after, kitchen, not living room, and that they would use the hallway clock for the time stamp. Ailsa tilted her head toward the line. “Here we go,” she said, steady.

Maeve nodded once, then again, faster, making the second nod stronger than the first. The school door opened wider. The first children began to flow out.

Chapter 3

Plans That Never Were

The children came out in their usual waves, first the P3s in a quick spill, then the older classes, shoulders squared to the cold. Finn saw her and changed course with the small inefficiency of a child who trusted the destination was fixed. He hit her hip and stayed there, breathless with a fact about a group project they had finished but would revise tomorrow anyway. She kept her hand on his shoulder without tightening.

Ailsa stood half a step behind, already writing. She held the builders' notebook in the crook of her palm and wrote the minute they had agreed to track, glancing at the network time on her phone to cross-check against the hallway clock when they were in. Present, she wrote. Witnessed by A.K., the pencil moving without flourish. She didn't look up when Isla appeared.

Isla walked out without reacting to the weather. Hood up, sleeves pulled past her wrists but not hiding. She checked her watch, the one she kept a few minutes fast, then met Maeve's eyes for the briefest second. Enough to register the shape of the arrangement without acknowledging it. She fell into step when Maeve tipped her head toward the gate.

They moved as a unit through the gate opening and into the cooler air along the side street that led to the promenade. The sky had the flat quality you got near the sea in November. No drama, just a settled pressure. The salt hit their faces as they turned the corner by the bins.

"I'll cut up and grab the van," Ailsa said. "I'll meet you at yours in ten. We'll write it down and initial." She didn't make it sound like reassurance. She made it sound like a job she knew how to do.

Maeve nodded. "Hallway clock for the time."

"Aye." Ailsa flicked the edge of Finn's hood into place, gave Isla a small look that neither girl returned nor rejected, and peeled off at the next crossing.

They took the promenade rather than the back road because Finn always liked to count the steps as they went and because the open line of sight helped. The windbreak cut it enough that they could talk without raising their voices. Two gulls quarrelled over a chip tray near the bins, the noise thin and ordinary. Finn had switched to counting paving slabs by then. Isla watched them, then looked past them toward the water with that posture she had developed that read as steady.

"Maeve," Kirsty called from the side. She stepped into their path with a folded buggy and a thermal cup. Not the neighbour with the wee dog, the other one. Brown hair under a headband, cheeks high with the air, a jumper with pills on the sleeve where a bag strap rubbed. She smiled and ran a quick hand down her coat.

"Kirsty," Maeve said. She stopped without making it abrupt. "Alright?"

"Are you okay?" Kirsty said. She looked past Maeve at Isla, then at Finn, then back. "Only, this morning?"

Cold air stung her cheeks. She kept her face still. "This morning?"

"Our coffee?" Kirsty's eyebrows pulled together enough to mark effort not annoyance. "At the wee café by the baths. Ten o'clock. You texted to say yes. I waited until ten past and then I had to go because the wee one's nap was all over the place." She lifted the thermal cup like evidence she remembered to have with her. "I just want to check you're okay."

Three beats. She stood still. Two facts sat side by side and did not connect: she had not arranged coffee; her name had. She kept her shoulders level and asked the only question that would matter later, not to settle it here.

“What message did you get?”

Kirsty unlocked her phone with a thumb and worked through muscle memory into the messages. She turned the screen at an angle so that the cold didn't grey it out. The thread showed Maeve's contact photo, one of those default initials Kirsty hadn't changed, and Maeve's number she knew too well. There were two morning messages in the thread. The first from Kirsty, sent at 08:23: “Drop-off then coffee? 10? Could use a face.” The second time-stamped 08:41 from her own number: “Yes. Ten by the window. See you then x.”

The letter at the end was her usual sign-off. Everything in that line was plausible. The time. The phrasing. The lack of an emoji. The single x. Not her words. Not her arrangement. Not her memory.

Maeve did not check her own phone. If it existed there, she would not find it cleaner in public. If it didn't, showing an empty thread in the wind at the side of the promenade would change nothing about the way Kirsty would carry this away.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I should have messaged.” She made a small tilt with her head toward the children without turning it into an excuse. “I got pulled into something and I didn't get back to you. I'm sorry for wasting your time.”

Kirsty's expression loosened a fraction. “It's alright,” she said. “It's only, don't do that to me again. I felt like an eejit sitting there. I kept thinking maybe I'd got the wrong place.” She was already walking it back, keeping the tone polite the way people here did.

“Could you send me a screenshot of that?” Maeve said, the sentence formed as a request not a defence. “The one you got from me. I want to make sure I've got the right number for you.” It was neutral. It gave nothing away about what she did or didn't have.

“Of course.” Kirsty pressed two buttons; the screen flashed. She tapped and sent the image to Maeve. “You've always been in there. It'll come through.” She hesitated, looked at Isla again, and then folded the

buggy further down as if the act mattered. “Right. I’ll see you at the fair on Saturday?”

“Yes,” Maeve said, not committing them on paper to anything. “We’ll see you.”

“Okay.” Kirsty held up the cup in a half-wave and walked on. She glanced at her phone, thumb paused over a chat, then she pocketed it without replying. Not dramatic. Not warm either.

Finn had finished his slabs and moved on to the steps that cut to the terraced row. “Seven,” he said, jumping the eighth without naming it because the last one always mattered and couldn’t be counted like the rest. Isla kept pace without comment. When they reached the top of the steps, Maeve took her phone out and checked. The screenshot had arrived as an image from Kirsty. It showed the thread with her number at the top, the two morning time stamps, and the x at the end of the ten o’clock line.

She looked long enough to hold every line, then put the phone away. She typed one short line to Ailsa, “New thing: coffee I never arranged at 10. Screenshot shows my number. At seawall. Will show you at house.”, and sent it. The notification bar slid down and away. The screen went dark.

At the corner she looked back along the promenade. Nothing in the physical scene had altered. The same runners. The long flat water. The bins with their flapping lids. Something else had shifted. She turned to Isla instead of staring.

“Homework first,” she said, keeping it simple. “Then we’ll sort tea.”

“Okay,” Isla said. She matched her pace to Maeve’s without urging.

She let out a slow breath.

Maeve did not say the rest out loud. Social plans would go on paper now with the same weight as appointments. No plan would exist unless it sat on the kitchen pinboard with two sets of initials and the hallway clock time. The world was not going to make space for her to explain why that

was necessary. She would make the space and move within it. She kept the thread image steady and took it home to write it on paper with Ailsa.

The house was quiet with the afternoon routine. Coats went to the bannister; shoes sat tucked under the radiator. The key bowl on the console was as it should be, all sets present by sight, and she let that confirm what it confirmed without turning it into a ritual. The hallway clock read an even minute; the hands were where she had set them that morning when she fixed everything to the radio pips.

“Upstairs,” she said to Finn. “Homework book out. I’ll be two minutes.”

Isla had already slipped into the kitchen and set her bag on the chair she always used when there was work to do. She half-unzipped it and then stopped when the latch clicked again and Ailsa came in with the last of the cold on her coat.

“You got my message,” Maeve said.

“Aye,” Ailsa said. “Let me see.” No ceremony. She took off her beanie, shook her hair into something that would dry without fuss, and came to the table. Maeve unlocked her phone and opened the screenshot. They stood side by side but not touching, their attention on the same small square of light.

“Your number at the top,” Ailsa said. “Time-stamp is before nine.” She read the sentence again and then the final character. “That’s how you sign off.”

Maeve nodded once. “I didn’t send it.”

“I believe you,” Ailsa said. “And I also know that if we say that outside this kitchen, the only thing that matters will be what’s on the other person’s phone. So. We do what we said at the bakery and we tighten it.”

She put her thermos on the table without sitting. “Anything we agree to, anything that would cause harm if it was said to have happened, goes on paper, and we get someone who doesn’t live in these four walls to see it.”

“Third party,” Maeve said. The words balanced a little easier when someone else spoke the rest of the sentence.

“Third party,” Ailsa repeated. “Doesn’t have to be fancy. The corner shop. The club desk. Someone whose job is to clock things and who can say, aye, I saw you there at that time, or no, I didn’t. And for calls, names. We’ve already started doing that, name, time, position. If you can get them to repeat it back, do it. If you can get them to email a note, ask.”

“I don’t want this to be,” Maeve stopped. She stared at the screenshot again and then up at the kettle and the pinned list beside it. “It already is this.”

“It already is,” Ailsa said. “So we accept the job and we do it tightly. We bring in a neutral person for timekeeping when we can. There are a few to pick from. I’ll think about who, and we’ll ask. That’s the next step.” She didn’t name anyone. She didn’t have to yet.

Maeve went to the drawer and brought up one of the hard-backed notepads. She tore out the first page because last month’s shopping notes still showed faintly and then wrote a header in pencil that matched the handwriting she’d used on Wednesday: Week, Appointments & Plans. Under that she listed the next days with simple lines: Thursday, Drop-off 08:45, pick-up 15:15; Finn, Swimming kit; Dentist, confirm directly by phone (no texts); GP, await scan slot; Call, Practice Manager, await reply; Social, no coffee or lunch unless on paper + initialled.

“Copy that,” she said, sliding the notebook so that Ailsa could lean on the page edge. “Exact words.”

Ailsa copied it into her own notebook, her writing blockier, individual letters squared. “I’ll put this up on my board when I get in,” she said. “Kitchen wall, right by the phone. I’ll take a photo of mine and not send it unless you ask. Paper first. We’re not feeding anything else into your

phone unless we choose it.”

Maeve wrote a small block at the top of the page: No plan exists without paper (both) + outside voucher. She put her initials beside it and then passed the pencil to Ailsa, who signed hers, the line firm without pressure ridges. The pencil left a mark on the wood under the paper and Maeve wiped it clean with her thumb.

“Daniel?” Ailsa said, not leaving out the part that would turn it all into a fight if they handled it wrong.

“Not yet,” Maeve said. She looked at the doorway and then at the clock. “I need this standing before that conversation, not during.”

“Aye.” Ailsa nodded. “He’ll say it’s stress, because that’s tidy for him. Don’t give him the weight of this yet. You’ll tell him when it helps, not when it hurts.”

Maeve closed the notebook and pinned the paper page at eye level above the kettle. She pressed both corners flat, then stepped back to read it in relation to the room. The hallway clock was visible in the line of her sight as she stood there. They would use that for times. The radio was in the corner, off, ready if they needed to do another pip alignment to quiet any arguments about the standard.

“Tomorrow we repeat pick-up,” Ailsa said. “And the morning drop-off as well. Names and times. I’ll be there.” She tilted her head at the kettle. “Tea?”

“Tea,” Maeve said. She filled the kettle halfway and set it back. She knew the click of the switch. She knew the sound of the front door when it closed properly. She stood with her palm near the steam and let the warmth bite across her skin. The burn was gentle and factual. It read as real in a way a message did not.

Finn thumped down the stairs and slid into the kitchen on socked feet, remembering to stop before the tile caught him. “Mum.” He pointed at the board. “We’ve got more.”

“We do,” Maeve said. “It’s to help us all stay on track.” She touched the lowest line with one finger so the statement anchored somewhere he could look at later. “We’re doing it together.”

“Okay,” he said. Taking that as it was given. He moved to the table, took his pencil out, and opened his homework book without complaint. “Can you do the spellings with me after?” he asked, and then added quickly, “Isla said she’ll help if you’re busy.”

Isla, who had been watching the jug come to the boil, turned the knob on the radio down so it wouldn’t startle anyone if it came on, then took Finn’s list and scanned the words. “Ten minutes,” she said. “Then we stop. It’s not about being perfect. It’s about a bit every day.”

He nodded, accepting their rhythm.

The kettle clicked off. Maeve poured and set one mug for Ailsa and one for herself on the same spot of counter they always used. They didn’t move them around the kitchen. Not because it mattered to tea. Because it mattered to knowing when something had moved that shouldn’t.

“Right,” Ailsa said, taking her mug. “You’re set for morning?”

“I’ll set a second alarm,” Maeve said. “Seven and seven-oh-seven. Both on. We’ll write it.” She lifted the phone, opened the alarms, and checked the toggles with a steady thumb. The two she had used before were there. She moved the times forward by two minutes and set them again. She felt the small vibration through the glass when she confirmed each one. No more. No less.

They wrote it on the paper, a line that said: Alarms set, 07:02 and 07:09, M + A.K., 16:25, ref hallway clock. Paper rasped under the pencil. They both signed. Ailsa added the same to her notebook with the time and a small square to tick when she mirrored it at home.

“Okay,” Ailsa said, taking a last drink. “I’ll head out before I’m pulled into tea at yours.” She smiled without accusation. “Text me if you need me, but don’t write anything important in a text unless we’re in the same

room and you say it out loud while I'm watching it appear."

"I won't," Maeve said. "Thanks."

Ailsa took her coat and beanie and left with a purposeful gait that made people give her space on the pavement. The latch moved precisely and the house was quiet again.

Finn worked through a page. Isla sat beside him and made small marks beside the words he got right. She didn't overpraise. She didn't make a point of being in charge. She watched for where he lost concentration and ended the ten minutes exactly when she said she would. "Done," she said, tapping the last word lightly. "Good."

When Daniel came in, he came in carefully, cautious about the mood. He looked at the board and set a careful smile. "Looks like a military operation," he said, glancing at Isla first and looking away before Maeve met his eye.

Maeve didn't look up. She underlined the word Dentist once where she had written it earlier and then wrote Confirm call, Thursday, no text beneath it in smaller letters. She did not answer his remark. He took the hint and moved into his own corner of the room, taking plates from the cupboard without noise.

"Dad," Finn said. "Spellings."

"Good man," Daniel said. He leaned to look at the list as if it were a plan he could approve.

Isla's gaze went to the board and then to Maeve. "Do you want help with the diary later?" she asked. "After tea." The offer sat between them. Useful.

"I'll do the final confirmation," Maeve said. "You can help me check the entries are there." It wasn't refusal. It was the line between assistance and control. Boundaries mattered. Once you moved them, people said you had chosen.

“Okay,” Isla said. She put Finn’s pencil down on top of his book and stood. “Also, Miss Rowe said thanks for sorting the PE mix-up.”

“What mix-up?” Maeve said. She kept her tone neutral.

“I forgot the kit,” Isla said. She didn’t look evasive when she said it. She recited it as a fact. “I borrowed a spare from the cupboard. I told her we were doing indoor anyway and that you’d said it was fine to use the spares because ours is... being dealt with.” She shaped the last two words so they could cover any practical reason, washing, drying, mislaid. “She said it was fine.”

She pictured her hand on the nylon strap on the bottom step last night. The image didn’t hold.

Maeve tracked back through the day and placed the moment when Isla had been in the house at lunch and had taken a yogurt and a slice of bread. Isla hadn’t mentioned PE then. That didn’t change the outcome. A lost kit, a borrowed one, a teacher who thought the parent was across it. A situation Isla had handled without making it about blame. Protective. Helpful. Or something else. There was no benefit in interrogating it in front of the family. “Thanks for telling me,” she said. “We’ll make sure it’s in the bag for tomorrow.”

“Already put it at the stairs,” Isla said. “Bottom step.”

“Good,” Maeve said. She didn’t say that she’d put the kit there herself the night before. Maybe she had. Maybe Isla had moved it. Maybe it had sat in a line of things that were exactly where they were meant to be until they weren’t. That was the shape of the day. She would not describe the shape out loud and give it more edges.

Dinner was unremarkable. Pasta with the sauce that could be done while supervising homework. The oven light worked and the grill did not come on by itself. The numbers on the timer matched the hallway clock when she checked them because of the work she had done that morning. No one mentioned the garlic bread from the night before. No one made a joke that would have to be corrected.

After, she wiped the hob rim and found the line of grease that collected there if you weren't on it every two days. She took a fresh cloth and went after it with the concentration she used to apply to a call description on a form. Specific. Line by line. Not because the hob mattered more than anything else. Because small tasks made the next one easier.

She went to the board and added Social, confirmations rule, paper + voucher as a separate line under the appointments. Under that, she wrote Kirsty, coffee: no plan existed; screenshot received 16:14, M, ref hallway clock. She didn't add commentary. She didn't write what she wanted to write, which was that a message could arrive with her number at the top and say a thing she didn't say and that the street would treat it as the only version that counted. She paused at the digits; same as the GP record. She left them.

Daniel lingered by the doorway as she wrote, catching the words without making a point of reading. "If you want me to take Finn in the morning, I can," he said. "I've got a late meeting. I can do the drop."

"I'm doing drop-off," Maeve said. "Ailsa's meeting me at the gate." She kept it simple so that it couldn't be misread as something it wasn't. "We're writing times."

"Right," he said. He nodded in the way he nodded when he wanted to register support without participating in its substance. He took his glass to the sink and rinsed it under a small trickle of water so it didn't sound like anything.

When Finn yawned the second time in two minutes, she said it was bath now and he went without argument. Isla took his towel and left it on the radiator to warm while he splashed. She stood in the doorway with her shoulder against the frame and called out the next step when he forgot what came after shampoo. She turned off the water when he got distracted by a toy and forgot the tap. She handed Maeve the toothbrush when she held out her hand without looking.

They moved through the upstairs hour with care. Finn's duvet was pulled flat. Isla's door was left ajar the exact way she liked it so she could hear without having to say she was listening. The landing clock ticked in time with the hallway. That mattered more than it looked like it did.

At the kitchen counter, Maeve took her phone and opened the settings. She didn't scroll. She toggled the setting that would silence incoming notifications overnight, leaving only the alarms and the allowed numbers. The second alarms were still there. She tapped them once each to confirm they were set. She put the phone face down on the counter where the hard wood would carry the vibration into the cabinets in the morning. The same spot as before. She wrote the time on the paper and left a space for Ailsa to initial in the morning.

Upstairs, she paused at the key bowl and used her eyes to count the sets because seeing them was enough tonight. Her own keys were in her pocket where they lived when there was work to be done the next day and she didn't want anything to fall through an open door she didn't mean to open. She went up the stairs without touching the banister. The scarf she had left there at lunch hung damp from the sea air and she stepped past it so it wouldn't brush her face.

In the bedroom she set out the clothes the same way as always so that in the morning she could move through and not have to decide what to pick up first. She checked the hallway clock against the landing clock once more without moving from the doorway. They matched. One standard. No margin for a different number.

She lay down with her hand flat on the duvet and set the terms for the night: paper, clocks, witnessed marks. Not messages that could be made from a kitchen she didn't stand in and sent at a time when she knew exactly where she had been. Tomorrow there would be drop-off and another pick-up on paper.

She turned her face toward the cold side of the pillow. The house was quiet, then the usual small sounds came back. Downstairs, the kettle sat

with its cord looped the way she left it when she planned to use it again soon. The note above it remained pinned, the corners flat, the words legible. The hallway clock ticked once, then again, in measure with the landing. Paper or nothing.

Chapter 4

After-School Confusion

They reached the school gate before the first cluster of parents formed. Cold air off the Forth pressed against their faces and carried the smell of wet leaves from the strip between the railings and the pavement. The glass-fronted reception showed a white corridor beyond and a print-out on the inner door that listed pick-up procedures in clipped bullet points. Ailsa glanced at her phone screen, then at her small builders' notebook already open on a stiff page.

"Fifteen-oh-nine, network time," she said. She wrote the minute and underlined it once. "We'll cross-check when we're in with your hallway clock."

Maeve nodded. She didn't step forward. She knew exactly which paving slab put her where the reception desk could see her without making it a point. No performance. No challenge. A steady presence in the landscape of parents with tote bags and puffa jackets already zipping up.

The glass reflected the sky and her own outline if she shifted. She didn't shift. She kept her hands inside her coat and pinched the soft lining near the cuffs between finger and thumb because the pressure made sense and required no thought. Isla would come with the older classes. Finn's class would come earlier, free-flow, the way they did when the teacher trusted the parents to hold the line by habit rather than hold up signs.

A mother in a navy coat glanced over and nodded in the contained way that confirmed recognition without opening a conversation. The wall clock on the opposite wall in the reception showed a minute she couldn't

read from the pavement. A child knocked a rucksack against the glass and was pulled back with a quiet word and a hand on the strap. The fluorescent hum inside the corridor carried through the door. She registered it because that noise would cut out if the ballast failed and she needed to know normal before she could call anything wrong.

Ailsa checked her phone again. She didn't hover. She wrote another line under the first one and added "Present. A.K." Her pencil left a crisp mark. "We're here," she said, not because Maeve doubted it, but because the line would need a voice later. "Seen."

The first wave began. The younger classes trickled. Small bodies with hats wrong way round. A father with a scooter under his arm shifted his grip to avoid the wheel smearing his jacket. Two teaching assistants in lanyards managed the pace with practiced eye contact and simple gestures. Finn didn't appear. It wasn't time for him yet.

Maeve kept her shoulders level. She didn't lean forward or step onto the tarmac. When a buggy needed the space, she stepped aside and then back to her slab. She scanned the faces by habit, left to right, registering and discarding. Ailsa angled her body so she could see the corridor and the outer steps without having to turn her head. She raised her notebook to chest height and wrote a second time stamp.

Finn's group time came and went in the way it sometimes did if they were dealing with a classroom job at the end. The lanyarded assistant with the cropped hair and the practiced smile looked down the list in her hand and then up at the line of parents. She didn't call out a name. She caught Maeve's eye and walked to the gate.

"Mrs Clarke?" she said. The voice was pitched for clarity, not warmth. She held the list upright, formal.

"Yes," Maeve said.

"We've a change for Finn today." The assistant kept her body turned to block the corridor view from anyone listening who didn't need to listen. "We received a message at the office that Dad would collect. He's

been called down. Finn's at reception."

No visible reaction. She let the words land and sit where they would have to sit. Ailsa brought her notebook half a centimetre higher, enough to confirm the act of writing without making it a challenge.

"From my phone?" Maeve said. She didn't let it become a demand. "What time did that come in?"

"Just after lunch," the assistant said. She kept it vague. "It was from the contact we have for you."

"Logged on arrival," Ailsa said. She looked down and then up with the line already written. "I'll be signing it on the hallway clock at Maeve's."

The assistant nodded to show she had heard. It didn't alter anything. "They'll have recorded that a message came from the number we hold," she said. "For content, it's office."

"We'll go through," Maeve said. She didn't move yet. "We're here to collect."

The assistant stepped back and pressed the buzzer on the inside of the gate. The door clicked; a current of warm air leaked through with the smell of polish and paper. The corridor lights made a straight line toward the reception desk. Through the glass Maeve saw Finn sitting on the bench with his bag on his lap. His feet swung in shallow arcs, not quite touching the floor. He looked down first and then up and across when the door opened.

The receptionist with the soft cardigan and the fixed monitor smile lifted her head. "Hi," she said. "Come through."

Maeve stepped into the corridor ahead of Ailsa because it mattered that the person responsible didn't look like she was being managed. She walked with the same measured stride she used when making any appointment official. The sound of her footsteps was covered by the hum. At the desk, the receptionist leaned forward a fraction.

"We had a message in," she said. "Just to confirm, Dad's collecting Finn today. He's on his way down from work nearby."

"I didn't send that message," Maeve said. "I'm here to collect him."

Ailsa stood to one side of the desk, still. She showed the notebook without pushing it forward. "Present, logged," she said. "Witnessed by A.K."

The receptionist looked down at her screen, which was angled just far enough away that the words didn't show. "We can't show the record without a formal request," she said. "We have it that the registered number messaged with the change. We're happy to ask both parents to confirm changes by email in future." She paused only long enough to make it read as an offer. "In terms of collection right now, we can hand over to either of you."

Finn watched Maeve's mouth more than her eyes. He pushed the strap knot on his bag with a thumb. Isla had not appeared yet; the wave of older classes hadn't reached the corridor.

"I don't agree to a change I didn't make," Maeve said. She kept her hands still at her sides. "I'd like you to note that in your log."

Daniel's reflection showed in the glass panel behind the desk a moment before he turned into the doorway. His smile was calibrated. "Hi," he said. "Sorry. Got the call. Is it alright if I just take him today? We'll keep it simple."

Ailsa put the notebook down on the ledge. She didn't speak.

"We're here to collect," Maeve said. She turned her head to Daniel. "I didn't send any message."

The receptionist's hands hovered over the keyboard, ready to make a note that would become the official story of this minute. The assistant had taken a step back to give them the corridor.

"Finn," Daniel said. "We'll head home. Mum's here for Isla."

Finn looked at his father and then at Maeve. He didn't let go of the strap at first. The strap slipped. He caught it. His mouth shaped the start of "Mum" and shut on it. He didn't stand up until Daniel nodded once, the nod carrying a set plan. He stood then and lifted the bag in the movement he used when he wanted to keep everything neat. He took Daniel's hand the way he had when he was smaller. He didn't stop looking at Maeve until he had to turn to walk.

She pressed her thumbnail into her palm. She didn't reach out. She kept the corridor clear. She saw her reflection in the pane and saw how still she looked. The receptionist nodded at both of them. The note on the screen updated. No one could read it from this angle. The sound of the outer door moving opened a route for them to leave quickly.

"Can you confirm the number for me after?" Maeve said to the receptionist. "On record."

"That would need to be via the office manager," the receptionist said. "We can't share contact content without the proper request."

It was policy, not personal. She kept it back. An accusation would only muddy the record.

Daniel made the useful gesture of an apology without a plan attached to it. "Sorry for the mix-up," he said to the receptionist. To Maeve he said, "I'll take him. We'll see you at home."

"I'll take Isla," Maeve said. She didn't look at Daniel again. She looked at Finn. "I'll see you shortly."

Finn nodded. He didn't speak. He went with his father, looking over his shoulder one last time. It read as an instinct rather than a request.

Ailsa picked up her notebook and wrote a narrow line under the previous one. She didn't speak until they had stepped back out to the gate and the cold air took the warmth of the corridor away.

"We'll log it," she said.

"We will," Maeve said.

Isla came into view then, moving in the wave of older children who had learned to pace themselves to the exit. She had her hood up and her sleeves down and the watch at her wrist the way she liked to have it. She flicked her gaze to Maeve and then past her to the corridor door. Her mouth didn't change.

"Come on," Maeve said. "We're going."

"Okay," Isla said. She didn't ask where Finn was. She didn't look at Ailsa's notebook. She looked instead at the gate latch and waited for the moment when it lifted so she could pass through without having to touch it herself.

On the pavement, the cold worked into Maeve's skin and gave her something factual to work against. She didn't let the next step form as speech. Not here. The glass frontage held too much of the afternoon and too many faces that would remember the wrong parts of any sentence she said.

"We'll walk," Ailsa said. She angled her shoulder to keep a stroller from clipping Isla. "Then call."

"Headteacher," Maeve said.

"Aye," Ailsa said. "Headteacher."

They moved along the railings. Maeve didn't look back. The hum of the corridor softened and was replaced by the mixed noise of traffic on the high street. The air stung the inside of her nose. She breathed through it and kept her pace steady. She kept the words back. Not here. Nothing for anyone to take and write down.

The house hadn't had time to lose the day's warmth. Coats went to the bannister by habit; Isla's hung straight even when she didn't look at it. The key bowl on the console occupied its usual place, chipped rim

turned toward the wall. Maeve looked at it without reaching in. All sets present by sight. She didn't need to count them in front of anyone.

In the kitchen, the paper pinned above the kettle held the lines they had written the previous afternoon. The hallway clock sat at its true alignment. The radio was off. The kettle's cord sat in its usual loop.

Her phone vibrated once. Private numbers were silenced. Allowed numbers got through. She glanced at the paper above the kettle, yesterday's co-signed note with Ailsa's initials under her own. She looked at the screen and read the school's display name aligned with the stored number. She answered.

"Mrs Clarke," Morven Sattar said, the headteacher register set. "This call is to document the collection discrepancy this afternoon."

"Yes," Maeve said. She stood so that the hallway clock was visible when she needed it.

"We recorded the following," Morven said. "The office received a message that Dad would collect Finn today. Finn was brought to reception for handover. We could see you at the gate, which we acknowledge. Because we had a message from the contact we hold on file, we followed change-of-collection procedure: reception handover to a known parent. I'm logging it on the safeguarding record for a clear account. If this recurs, we'll propose a parent support meeting."

Hearing the term fixed the frame of the call: paper, risk, protocol. "Please note that I did not send that message," Maeve said. "I was at the gate. My sister was with me. She can confirm arrival time and intent."

"I've noted that you were present," Morven said. "I can't share content or metadata without a formal request. Data protection applies within school systems."

Only the record counted.

"Can you tell me the time it arrived?"

"Just after lunch," Morven said. "I can't share the exact time from the record over the phone. I'm happy to add a note that you're requesting a formal copy of the relevant log from the office."

"Yes. Please add that," Maeve said. The corner of the paper above the kettle had lifted a fraction; she pressed it flat. "And please note that, going forward, any change of collection will be made in writing and co-signed on paper here with a witness. If you receive a message that looks like it's from me, I'd like you to call me to confirm. If you can't reach me, please try my sister. We can give you her number."

"We can add your preference to the record," Morven said. "I have to be clear that we can't guarantee we'll reach you in the moment. We can hand over to either parent with parental responsibility unless there's a court order in place."

"Understood. Will you accept an email from me before any change is acted on? It gives you something you can file."

"Yes. If we receive an email from your account, we'll treat that as confirmation," Morven said. "We'll still proceed in line with policy if we can't reach you and a parent is present at reception."

"Acknowledged," Maeve said. Ailsa stood at the other end of the counter, hands on the edge to avoid looking like she was leaning on anything. She didn't speak. She watched Maeve's face and then the hallway clock.

"Isla came out with her class," Maeve said. "She's with me. Finn went with his father because you had a message you believe came from me. Please record that I challenge that."

"Noted," Morven said. The keyboard clicked in a steady run. "We'll send you the request form for the log."

"Thank you," Maeve said. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Morven said.

Maeve ended the call. Heat moved through her face and faded. She breathed once, slow. The fluorescent hum had been constant there; here, only the hallway clock ticked.

Ailsa slipped her notebook into her coat pocket.

"I'll head off, let you get them fed," Ailsa said. "Text me if you want me back later."

Maeve nodded. "Thanks."

The front door closed.

She set the phone, the wall calendar she had taken down, and a narrow pad on the table. She copied the school's version of events into a column, then the anchors she controlled into another: last night's paper note for drop-off and pick-up with Ailsa's initials; the alarms she had set for the school run; Ailsa's line logged on arrival. On her phone, the calendar now carried a line under Finn's name that read "Dad collecting." It hadn't been there last night. Messages showed no outgoing to the school. Call history showed no call. Notifications carried nothing that matched the school's story.

Two facts sat together: the school had a record tied to her number; her phone held no matching send. Not hers. Either the record was wrong, or someone else could use her number. The calendar change without an alert made the second option more likely.

She drew a small square at the edge of the pad and wrote: "Third-party confirmations." Under it, she wrote: "Paper signatures. Email from me. Witness."

Isla hovered in the doorway, sleeves over her hands. "Mum?" she said, voice lower than usual. "Do you want help with the week? I could lay it out so it's not all on you. Keep it simple. Would that help?"

Maeve looked up. The phrasing was Daniel's, softened. Cooperation might get the house back to a workable line. A test or a trap; taking it kept her near the detail, for now. She left a beat. "Alright," she said. "We'll do

the main plan together."

Isla came to the table. "I'll write the obvious bits," she said. "You can add the detail."

"Fine," Maeve said. She set the wall calendar between them and slid a fresh pen across. While Isla wrote school start and finish times and after-school clubs in tidy lines, Maeve opened the narrow pad on her lap and kept a second list. She added times, contacts, and cross-checks that didn't need to sit on the wall. She printed MASTER at the top and folded the page once so it would fit in the pocket of her coat.

She set a boundary, tight and practical: no final change stood without her say and a paper note in the house.

Isla capped the pen. "That better?" she asked.

"It helps," Maeve said. "Thank you."

Her phone lit with a new message.

19:04 Ailsa: Community centre tomorrow 09:30. We'll expand anchors. I'll bring the notebook.

Maeve tapped back a single thumbs-up, then turned the wall calendar so Isla could see it straight. The private page stayed under her hand. She ran through the list in her head and held to the next move. She would bring in a neutral timekeeper, something mechanical, not digital. That was the strongest step she had.

Chapter 5

The Smooth Evening

The oven worked. She kept dinner simple on purpose: pasta soft but not collapsing, a jarred sauce she trusted, bagged salad, bread warmed on the lower shelf. The hallway clock held steady in her sightline. One check of the timer, then leave it. The grill light stayed off unless she set it on. That mattered.

Finn worked at the table, pencil angled the way he liked, workbook open, fringe slipping toward his eyes and pushed back without complaint. His feet scuffed lightly against the chair rung and then settled. Isla sat beside Maeve with the wall calendar laid flat across two placemats. She had moved the salt to make space. She rolled her sleeves past the heel of her hands and clicked a pen cap once before she stopped herself.

"If we standardise the pick-up notes," Isla said, "it's clearer for everyone. Date on the left. Collector. Confirmation mode. Initials here." She drew a neat rectangle and a heading in small uppercase letters.

Maeve watched her write the words and measured the distance between the calendar and the kettle pinboard.

"Fine," Maeve said. "We'll use the same fields every time. Final sign-off is mine."

Isla nodded once. No push. She lined up the columns with a ruler.

"For the gate," Isla said, easy, helpful, "what minute do they open, fifteen past or twelve?"

"Fifteen past," Maeve said.

"Thursdays run late after gym," Isla said. "Is five minutes of margin enough, or ten?"

"Five," Maeve said. "Write five."

Steam lifted when Maeve drained the pasta. She didn't narrate the steps in her head. She didn't stare at the grill housing. She plated without decoration. Simple was enough. The first forkfuls went down without Finn pausing to ask what kind of sauce it was. He told them about the group project again, this time describing who held the glue and who held the ruler. He talked about the cardboard not bending the way they wanted and how they fixed it with an extra tab. He looked to Maeve to confirm she was listening, and she was.

Daniel came in as she set the salad bowl down. Coat off, shirt sleeves folded twice, hair settled by the cold from outside. He glanced at the calendar spread and at Isla's lined rectangles.

"This looks good," he said. "Sensible. It'll reduce misunderstandings if we all stick to it."

He spoke with the distance of someone endorsing a policy he hadn't written. She didn't give him more than a nod.

"We're using one standard for time," Maeve said. "Hallway clock only."

"Of course," Daniel said. He took his plate to the table.

Finn ate without a sideways look at the oven. He jabbed two pieces of cucumber with his fork and asked if browned bits in the sauce meant onions. When Maeve said yes, he shrugged and kept going. It worked on his face, relief distributed through small muscles she had learned to read. His shoulder lowered a fraction. His mouth rested. He hummed once under his breath and didn't correct himself.

Isla lifted the calendar closer. She wrote WEEK BLOCK across the top margin and then a tidy line beneath.

"For collection notes," Isla said, "we could use initials here or full names. Sometimes the office staff don't read messy initials."

"Full names," Maeve said.

Isla wrote MAEVE and DANIEL in small capitals at the bottom as a key.

Maeve put down her fork, wiped her hands, and opened the top drawer. She took out the small set of coloured pens she kept for school forms no one else seemed to find time to complete. She set them beside Isla's elbow.

"You can draft in colour," she said. "But no final commitments without my approval. Say the words. I'll repeat them. Then we write."

"Okay," Isla said. She didn't look annoyed. She started a line for Thursday. DATE on the left. COLLECTOR next. CONFIRMATION MODE. INITIALS.

After they ate, Maeve wiped the hob rim, turning the cloth once to pick up the grease line at the edge. She didn't overdo it. One pass and a second for the corner where crumbs collected. The kettle went back on its base, cord looped the way she left it when she meant to use it again soon. The hallway clock ticked at a steady pace, a sound she had aligned to the eight o'clock pips the day before.

"For today," Isla said, pen above paper, "we log: Mum collected Finn. Dad collected yesterday. Any changes by email confirmation. Witness: A.K. when present."

"Write it," Maeve said. She watched Isla's pen make the marks but kept attention on what the lines would become once paper left the table and went up on the pinboard.

Daniel carried two bowls to the sink and rinsed them under a thin run of water that didn't clatter against the steel. He kept to his corner, reading the calendar as if it were a report he could sign off without responsibility for its content.

Finn finished before the others.

"Can I do the train book now?" he said.

"Ten minutes," Maeve said.

He slid off the chair with the careful movement of a child who didn't like to scrape wood across tile. He brought the thin book and sat on the rug under the window, lips moving over the words he had read aloud so many times they existed in his body. His shoulders settled; his breathing evened. That mattered more than any demonstration of order on paper.

Maeve pinned the updated page above the kettle and pressed the corners flat. The words held. The hallway clock faced the right way. No glare. No excuses to doubt a number. She took the narrow pad from her coat, unfolded it at the edge, and added two lines while no one watched:

MASTER: Pick-up 15:15 (M). No changes valid without M verbal + paper in house.

She folded the pad and slid it back into her pocket. The paper's rectangle against the seam was part of how she kept the shape of the day.

"Can we block Saturdays too?" Isla said.

"School only," Maeve said.

"Right. I'll just note the fair so we remember tickets." Isla wrote FAIR in a small square. No time. No person responsible. Just a marker.

Before Finn's bath, Isla warmed his towel on the radiator and stood in the doorway to the bathroom, shoulder against the frame, the way she had the night before. Finn answered each small instruction without pushback. Downstairs, Daniel put his glass in the sink in silence. When Maeve checked her phone alarms on the counter, both set times vibrated back in confirmation. 07:02 and 07:09 were in place. She left the phone face down where the vibration carried into wood. She wrote a line at the bottom of the pinned page:

ALARM CHECKED 21:12, M (ref hallway clock).

Her thumb pressed the paper corner flat.

No one queried it.

Upstairs, the landing clock matched the hallway clock exactly. Both matched; a routine anchor, not evidence. She looked once and then turned away. The house had the right noises. The hallway clock's tick returned to baseline and stayed there.

The kitchen held cold air that lifted as soon as the kettle clicked on. Maeve ran water over two mugs to take the chill out. A glance to the pinboard, then to the wall calendar. Isla had left it in the same position she had promised. The edges were square, not sliding down the wall.

The fresh writing sat two-thirds down in a line that had not existed when Maeve had gone upstairs.

GP FOLLOW-UP, DR GUPTA, 15:20, BOTH INVITED.

Below that, another entry at the bottom of the column where social items sat:

PTA ROTA SUBCOMMITTEE, 15:00, MAIN HALL.

She steadied the calendar edge with two fingers.

She went still.

The edge pressed into her fingertip.

"Ach, no," she said, no louder than a breath.

Isla's hand. The tidy leftward slant she used when she cared about how it looked. Maeve didn't reach for the calendar. She opened her coat and took out the narrow pad. The MASTER page did not carry either line. She ran the tip of the pencil over the empty space where they would have been if she had agreed them. It stayed empty.

Fifteen to walk there, ten to wait, fifteen back; either she missed the fifteen-fifteen gate or she turned up late and lost the slot.

She checked the hallway clock again. Eight-thirty-one. The radio off. The numbers in her house were the ones she had set. She opened the phone clock and matched it to the hallway clock; same minute.

"Isla," she said, without raising her voice.

Isla came down with socks on her feet and her hair pulled into a rough knot. She stood where Maeve could see her hands. The posture read as cooperative.

"When did we add these?" Maeve said. She pointed at the two entries.

"Last night," Isla said. Her eyes flicked once to the hallway clock before she answered. "After the plan. We said we'd keep it simple and get ahead of it. The GP one was your idea. Dad said he'd come if he could. I wrote it so it wouldn't depend on anyone remembering."

"We didn't agree that," Maeve said.

Isla smoothed her sleeve cuff. Maeve noted it without knowing what it meant. "You said you wanted to get ahead of it," Isla said. Then, after a pause, "We did."

The words fell into air that didn't move. Maeve took a breath and let it settle.

"Pick-up is first," Maeve said. "Always. I'm not going to a subcommittee at pick-up time. I won't be at a GP appointment that clashes. If it exists, it will be moved. Write it:, Pick-up first."

Isla wrote PICK-UP FIRST at the bottom where it could be seen by anyone who wanted to pretend they hadn't heard it.

Maeve took the pencil and drew a small square beside the PTA line. She wrote NOT AGREED and initialled M inside the square. Beside the GP line, she wrote CHECK WITH PRACTICE, M. She didn't add any apology to the paper.

Breach meant an external witness and a neutral clock.

Her phone on the counter lit with a stored number she allowed through. Ailsa.

09:03 AILSA: Still good for 09:30? I'm at the corner already.

Maeve typed with her thumb.

09:03 MAEVE: Yes. New entries on wall not agreed. Need eyes on. Bring notebook.

Ailsa's reply came without a delay.

09:04 AILSA: Aye. See you there. We'll write it as we find it.

Maeve slid the phone back to its place. She added a line to the MASTER pad:

Unauthorized entries noted 08:31 (ref hallway clock). GP follow-up 15:20 / PTA subcommittee 15:00. Not agreed. Priorities: pick-up first, then medical.

She folded the pad and put it in her pocket. She stepped to the pinboard and took two photos of the page for reference, angling to avoid the kitchen light glare. The phone went into her coat pocket. She didn't pick at cause and effect in front of Isla. She didn't ask where the confidence came from. She kept to what could be read aloud without shaking anything loose.

"We're leaving in five," she said.

Finn thumped across his room overhead. The sound was normal. Downstairs, the key bowl sat with the chipped rim turned toward the wall. All sets present by sight. She put her hand against her coat to feel the shape of the pad in the pocket before she reached for her scarf.

"About the GP," Isla said, still low, still tidy.

"I'll speak to the practice if needed," Maeve said.

"Okay," Isla said. She didn't say more.

They left the house into air with salt in it. The crossing took a slow count because a van blocked the view in one direction. Finn counted his steps to the gate without naming any numbers out loud. At the glass-fronted reception, Maeve didn't look in. She put herself where she could be seen without it being a performance: the same paving slab, the same angle. Finn peeled off to the line with a look back. Isla joined the older group without touching the gate latch. No one said anything about who would collect. That was already on paper in the kitchen, with M written where it needed to be.

She didn't stay to talk. Containment had held through the night; the paper had held. Now a test, not belief, something she could check against. She walked the high street. At a window display with exercise books stacked in a pyramid, she stopped and went in. The shop smelled of boxes and floor cleaner used to keep public counters tidy. She picked a small reporter's notebook with a stiff back that would hold writing without a table. She paid in coins so there was no receipt to file.

On a bench outside a closed barber's, she opened the first page and printed the title small at the top: DUPLICATE. She didn't write MASTER. She didn't write her name. She used the left margin for codes and the right margin for plain language that would make sense to her later. She kept the entries brief and literal.

R/15:15, Primary gate, M collector, Witness if present: A.K.

She braced the notebook against her knee.

Cross-check: Using 08:31 hallway vs network alignment recorded at home.

The pencil tip left a dark dot where it paused.

No social commitments valid without in-house paper + witness.

She adjusted the book so the margin line stayed straight.

Any email confirmation to school originates from M's account only; mirrored on paper with time and initials.

She closed the book halfway to test the stiffness and opened it again.

She thought about leaving it at that and felt the old itch to explain herself on paper. She didn't. She closed the book and put it inside her coat, against the inside seam where it wouldn't slide.

She walked to the community centre. The main hall door was closed. Through the glass, the tide-driven clock showed time and tide; the mechanism stayed regular regardless of opinion.

Ailsa was by the noticeboard with her notebook in her hand and her keys hanging from her belt.

"There you are," Ailsa said.

"There are new entries on the wall," Maeve said.

"Aye." Ailsa opened her notebook.

"GP follow-up at fifteen-twenty, both invited. PTA subcommittee at fifteen hundred. Not agreed, I've written that on the paper. Pick-up first. I'm not moving it for a made-up slot."

"Good," Ailsa said. She wrote as Maeve spoke, the neat block letters she used for jobs with measurements. She checked the entry against the time on her phone and then looked up at the tide clock.

"We're here at nine-thirty-one by the tide clock," Ailsa said. "Network time says nine-thirty-two. I'll write both. We'll include that we didn't speak to staff today. If we can get the caretaker another time to witness your presence, we will."

"We don't need him yet," Maeve said.

"Not yet," Ailsa said. "But I want something that isn't in your house and isn't on your phone. The clock here serves."

A woman went past with a bag of shuttlecocks. Ailsa kept writing.

"I'll add: no acting on anything that conflicts with pick-up unless we've both seen it and said it out loud," Ailsa said. She wrote that

sentence the long way.

Maeve took the small notebook from her coat and opened to the second page. She spoke low.

"I'm making a duplicate," she said.

Ailsa stilled her pencil and then nodded.

"It's coded enough that if it appears anywhere else, we'll know where it came from. It lives in the house but not where anyone looks every day. I'm telling you so that if I show it to someone later, I'm not the only person who knows it exists."

"Where?"

"The attic," Maeve said. "Under the eaves. The box with winter hats. It'll be under those."

Ailsa breathed out.

"Alright." She wrote: DUPLICATE EXISTS, attested by A.K., attic under-eaves, hats box.

Her pencil squared each letter.

"Secrecy can be used against you," Ailsa said.

"I know," Maeve said. "This is not private for its own sake. It's a test. If phrases from this appear anywhere else, we'll have a source."

"What phrases?"

"Nothing dramatic. Just a pattern. I'm using R for collector rows. I'm using hyphens the same way every time. If their image of me is messy, I'll be neat. If they're neat, I'll be consistent in a different way."

"Okay," Ailsa said. "I'll add that we confirmed the tide clock's face and that no one endorsed it for us today. It's just a reading."

Maeve looked at the clock again. The steady tick and the arc of the tide pointer did their work. She kept her distance.

"Later," Ailsa said, "we'll ask for a signature from staff for a time we were here. Not today."

"Alright," Maeve said.

They parted without touching. The cold reached her face as soon as she stepped away from the building. The high street looked the same as it always looked at that hour. She walked home and let herself in. Coat on, she climbed the stairs. On the landing, she paused to check the top of the doorframe where the paint had a run she had never bothered to scrape. She opened the hatch to the loft and took the short steps up, keeping weight on the centre of each tread so the wood didn't creak. The space held the smell of dust and handled objects.

Under the eaves, the plastic box with hats and scarves sat where it always sat. She lifted the lid and laid the top layer aside. She kept the motion practical and quiet. She slid the reporter's notebook to the very bottom and put the hats back. The lid went on. The box went flush with the boxes beside it so the edge looked right. She noted the time and climbed down, careful on the centre of each tread.

Downstairs, she added a line to the MASTER pad: Duplicate placed 10:14 (ref hallway). Witness to existence: A.K. at community centre 09:31 (tide clock).

She underlined 10:14 once.

She made tea and stood without drinking it until the surface cooled. She looked at the calendar and at the two lines she had written as NOT AGREED. She did not cross them out. She wasn't clearing evidence.

The rest of the day held itself to the facts she could see. Laundry on the radiator. A packet of biscuits opened and put away again. The radio stayed off until the hour pips. When the news came, it brought nothing she could use. She let the voice finish and turned the dial to silence.

When the time came to leave for pick-up, she stood in the hallway and counted the locks under her breath. She left the calendar closed and

added no new lines. She put her hand on the front door and made the decision out loud without adding softness.

"Pick-up first," she said.

At the gate, she took the same paving slab as yesterday and waited. The corridor hum held behind glass. The assistant with the lanyard looked down the list and then up, glanced once toward reception, then back to Maeve. She did not approach. Finn came out with his class and saw Maeve before scanning for Daniel. He smiled once and then made his way to her with the line of children behind him. There was no detour to reception. There was no handover that placed her on the wrong side of protocol. She signed nothing at the gate. She held his bag strap for the big road and let it go when the pavement widened.

Back at the house, she wrote the time of arrival against the wall calendar's pick-up line and initialled it. Then she wrote it again on the MASTER pad. Isla stood in the doorway and watched her hands, the pencil pressure, the pause at the end. She said nothing.

Finn did his ten minutes of spelling with Isla, then asked for something sweet. She said yes and put two biscuits on a plate, not three. Daniel came in later than usual, talking into his phone and then ending the call before he reached the kitchen. He avoided the calendar and the squares that read NOT AGREED. He asked how pick-up went as if yesterday hadn't happened in a building with a safeguarding log.

"Fine," Maeve said.

He nodded, relieved to be given that word. They moved through tea, the bath hour, and the set steps between. The kettle's steam rose and dispersed. The hallway clock held to its truth.

She checked the alarm times again without announcing it and wrote the check on paper. She didn't add any more conditions to the system that night. She didn't open a new front.

In bed, she lay still long enough to feel the house settle. The note above the kettle remained pinned and flat. The calendar held her handwriting next to Isla's. Her coat hung where she could reach it in the morning without deciding. She left the attic hatch closed. She kept the duplicate's location between herself and Ailsa. She closed her eyes with a plan that didn't require belief: she would wake, she would look, and she would compare what was there to what she had left. Any breach would have a date and a time next to it. That would be enough to start the next conversation she did not want to have.

Chapter 6

The Attic Secret

The house held a workable quiet after drop-off. Wind moved past the front step without pressing. The hallway clock kept its measured tick in the place she had set it to hold. She stood with her hand on the newel post until her breath matched the pace of it and then moved, not because anything demanded speed, but because time on paper only mattered if she used it.

She opened the hatch and climbed, weight on the centre of each tread to avoid the boards that complained. Up there the air was cooler than the landing, flat and dry, the dust smell as familiar as old coats. The hats box sat where she had left it under the eaves, transparent plastic with the faded black lid that stuck a little at one corner. No one had dragged it. No scrape marks showed. She crouched and lifted the lid. The plastic felt cold against her palm. She set it on its longest edge and found the top layer as it had been: knitted caps, a red balaclava Finn had hated once and then tolerated because it meant snow play, two scarves her mother-in-law had pushed into her hands during a winter she had tried to forget by being busy.

The reporter's notebook lay exactly where she had pushed it yesterday, at the bottom. She did not touch it; let her eyes rest on the spine and noted the absence of new folds in the wool around it. Paper had edges that remembered being moved; these hadn't. A small movement to the side to check the alignment of the box with its neighbours brought a flicker she could not place at first, a faint pulse of light against the inside of the plastic. She stilled and looked. Another blink, almost nothing, then nothing again.

She moved one scarf and then a fleece neck warmer that had matted itself from too many spins in the machine. The light blinked again from underneath something heavier. A folded fleece throw she didn't associate with the hats box sat flatter than it should have. She lifted the edge, cool air on her wrist. The phone lay there face up, no case at first glance, then a clear case with a thin lip, hairline scratch at the top right where a key or a clasp had cut a fine line. The screen had tapped awake for an alert and then gone dark. It woke when she tapped it with her thumb.

No passcode prompt. The home screen opened at once. Spare house iPhone; no SIM; Face ID off for speed. A name in the mail header registered as hers. Calendar app icon held a red dot. The top of the screen showed the home network by name with a neat tick and the word connected. The battery stripe sat above half. Someone had charged it recently or had used it in short intervals and kept it topped.

She did not breathe for a count that was not counted. She slid to the calendar. The week opened in the same block layout she used on paper. She scrolled to today. The entries were there in the same form as the ones on her kitchen wall, only less honest about their origin: GP FOLLOW-UP, DR GUPTA, 15:20, BOTH INVITED. PTA ROTA SUBCOMMITTEE, 15:00, MAIN HALL. Beyond today: DAD COLLECTING under Finn for yesterday at 15:15, and last week a simple COFFEE 10:00 with the baths café address in tiny grey text under the line.

She opened messages. The last threads sat near the top: Kirsty's name with the same circle photo Kirsty liked across platforms. The outgoing line from her showed 08:41 next to it in the pale font she had learned to distrust: Yes. Ten by the window. See you then x. Under that a set of three dots when the screen refreshed and then the dots vanished. Another thread with a woman from the PTA rota she avoided by being busy. A confirm about a subcommittee meeting at fifteen hundred, yes, that would suit fine, signed with the same x she had been accused of using too much years ago.

She looked up to the loft's beams and then back down. The small parts mattered; she opened settings and scrolled to device information. Model number in a line of letters and digits. Colour: Midnight. Storage showing space enough for the small uses she was seeing. Wi-Fi name matched the sticker on the router Daniel had put in the cupboard off the hall. Connected. She backed out and stopped. Enough for now.

She didn't replace the fleece. She set it aside and took the phone, flat against her palm. The hats and scarves went back, the lid pressed down with its familiar click. She kept the device close to her body while she lowered herself to the hatch and then down the steps. On the landing she paused to listen. Nothing that wasn't her house. She slipped the phone into her sleeve for the last steps so she could open doors without awkwardness.

In the kitchen, the hallway clock marked the next minute. She set the phone face down on the table and looked at the pinboard. The paper at the top still held the last lines she had written: NOT AGREED against PTA, CHECK WITH PRACTICE against GP. She took the pencil from the jar and wrote at the bottom, small and tidy: Attic device, Model: A2890; colour: Midnight; case scratch: top right rim. 11:26, M (ref hallway). No commentary. No arrows. She pressed the pencil point down at the end of the line to leave a dot and set it back in the jar. She took two photos of the line, angled so the kitchen light didn't glare.

She opened the phone again and looked at the calendar a second time. The GP line didn't move. The PTA line didn't move. She scrolled to last week and saw COFFEE 10:00 stamped and a mapping pin for the baths café. Under that entry the notes read by the window.

She held the phone steady and waited for the little blank panic to arrive. It didn't. What arrived was the clean line between guessing and knowing. She put the phone down and felt the weight of the hallway clock's tick land on the other side of it.

She lifted the phone and set sound and vibration to silent, pressed the volume down and watched the icon move, then toggled notification previews to never. The phone owed her quiet until someone else held it in a way she could not prevent. She folded it into the inside pocket of her coat and pulled the zip, then pressed the seam down with the side of her thumb.

She stood in the hallway a moment and looked at the key bowl. The chip on the rim faced the wall where she had turned it last. Daniel's keys, Isla's house key on the cord she had made, Finn's small novelty key for a tin box in his room. All there. Ordinary. She did not move any of it. She picked up the MASTER pad from the coat and added a line: Attic device documented 11:26 (ref hallway). Wi-Fi shows connected to home network. No code requested at open.

There was time before pick-up to test if writing on the wall would be touched while she was out. She didn't add any bait. She made tea, left the kettle on its base, and watched the steam lift and disperse. She didn't drink the tea. She wanted her mouth dry for later so her words didn't soften.

At the school gate she stood on the same paving slab as always. The glass held the corridor shapes and the printed procedure sheet on the inner door. She didn't look for the teaching assistant with cropped hair or for the receptionist beyond. Finn's class came out in a line out of habit, teachers directing the quiet, the noise held under a low ceiling of rules. Finn saw her and came straight, the strap of his bag still twisted, the corner of a workbook sticking up. He glanced at her hands and then at the rest of her face as if to check for fixed signs.

"We're going home," she said.

He nodded and stepped into her space the way he had learned to do when the pavement narrowed near the railings. They made the road crossing slow because a bus waited at the lights and the driver looked elsewhere. He counted under his breath without numbers she could hear.

The air from the Forth pushed at their faces and then left them alone.

Back at the house she wrote the arrival time on the wall calendar, initialled M, and then wrote it again on the MASTER pad. Isla stood behind him in the doorway looking at both pages, not hiding that she was looking. Finn slipped past into the sitting room and began extracting a train book from under two other books he liked less. He stopped halfway and looked back at her.

“Mum?” he said.

“Aye?”

“Last week Isla was looking for the Christmas lights in the attic. She said they’re in a box by the wall. She needed them for an art thing. She said they were tangled.”

She paused.

“Did she?” Maeve said.

“But then she didn’t bring them down,” he said, as if that mattered as much as anything. He took the train book and settled on the rug.

The words landed without noise. She pictured the boxes under the eaves. The hats. The fleece she hadn’t put in. The edge of the lids lined up. She kept her face neutral because Finn looked up again to see if he had caused something to move. She reached for the kettle and pressed the switch and pressed it again so the click was more definite.

“We’ll check the lights at the weekend,” she said.

Finn accepted that and bent over the cutaway drawing of a station he had memorised. Isla slid her bag onto the chair she used for homework and untangled her earbuds with tidy hands.

“I’m going to work on the science sheet,” Isla said.

“Do that,” Maeve said. She picked up the MASTER pad and her phone and stepped to the counter where the light didn’t hit the screen.

She opened a new message to Ailsa.

MEET café by the baths? Today if you can. Not at the house.

She watched the word today sit on the screen. She added: I have something you need to see.

The reply took a minute. A minute and a half in the place the hallway clock marked.

AILSA: Aye. What time suits?

The hallway clock read 15:34.

MAEVE: 16:00?

AILSA: I'll try but might be pulled into a late shift. Can you hold till morning if I'm stuck?

She stared at the two lines and didn't let the urge to now show on her face. She looked across at Finn on the rug and Isla at the table, at the calendar on the wall with the NOT AGREED square and the CHECK WITH PRACTICE line that had felt performative when she wrote it and now felt like one piece of a small system that could lift a fraction of weight.

MAEVE: If today doesn't work, first thing tomorrow. We'll do it then.

AILSA: If I can't make 16:00, I'll come by for 08:45 at the centre. Tide clock and network time.

MAEVE: Pick-up first. Then we go.

AILSA: Aye. Pick-up first.

She set the phone face down on the counter. She kept her hand on it. She ran the points she'd give Ailsa as facts: phone first, silent set, vibration off, previews never; it lived in the attic, was awake on the house Wi-Fi, held calendar and message entries matching her wall, had opened with no code, and she had logged the find on the kitchen page with time, initial, and photographs. Then they'd show it together, capture

each screen with both phones, and add a paper transcription of the model string and the Wi-Fi SSID.

Daniel's part in it would come after. He would deny first. He would say she was tired. He would say there were better ways to manage this. He would propose seeing Dr Gupta together the way he had framed it last week. He would try to move the question to her stability where he felt safe. He would ask for calm. She would tell him there was a phone that lived above their heads and spoke with her voice without her hand on it. She would show him.

Only after witness.

She lifted the coat from the hook and carried it to the table. One check of the inside zip, the rectangular weight confirmed. She hung it so the seam faced the wall and wrote one line on the MASTER pad: Device moved to inside coat lining, zip closed, 19:42 (ref hallway).

She considered putting it under her pillow and rejected the theatre of it.

Tea moved into the evening hour without incident. Finn did spelling. Isla warmed his towel in the bathroom. Daniel came in later than he had said, ended his call at the threshold, and kept his eyes away from the pinboard. When Finn asked for something sweet, Maeve said yes to two biscuits and no to three. She wrote ALARM CHECKED against the bottom of the pinned page with the time and her initial because the habit held her shape in place.

She lay awake enough to hear the heating click and then nothing. The coat hung where she had left it, a small weight different by knowledge only. She closed her eyes and built the morning in the order it would require: wake, kettle, check coat pocket, school run, café if possible, otherwise the centre at eight-forty-five. No room to add anything that could be picked apart later.

The light at the edges of the curtain showed just enough to qualify as morning. She didn't need the alarm. She went straight to the coat and

pressed her fingers to the inside zip. The zip sat flat. The pocket sat empty. Breath caught; her hands went cold. Only the clock's tick reached her. She pressed every seam with her fingertips. Nothing. She ran last night's sequence once: zip closed, line written, initial added. Steps intact.

She didn't speak. She set the coat down and checked the other zip on the other side in the small hope she had made a wrong hand memory. No phone. She lifted the coat and shook it once at waist height to test the weight and listened. Fabric only.

She moved with speed then because moving slowly would have been a pretending. The drawer by the phone charger held nothing that didn't belong. In the cupboard where the router sat, the shelf showed nothing. She pulled the hatch rope, lifted, and climbed again, not worrying about weight on the right treads. The hats box sat flush in its row. She opened it, took the scarves out, and touched the reporter's notebook. It stayed. No phone lay beneath the fleece she had set aside. No sign something had been taken except absence. She put everything back and closed the hatch.

In the kitchen she stood at the counter and let the sense of the hallway clock beat against the fact of the missing rectangle. Her coat had hung in the hall where they all passed. She had written the line last night and initialled it. She had set the zip and pressed the seam flat. The note on the pinboard had made the attic find visible. The only route to move the phone had come from inside.

Daniel came in rubbing his eyes with one finger and stopped at the edge of the room when he saw her face.

"What is it?" he said.

"Did you take a phone from my coat last night?" Maeve said.

His eyebrows lifted as if she had asked a question about a misplaced pen.

"What phone?" he said.

"A phone from my inside pocket," she said.

“No,” he said. He reached for his mug. He glanced at the pinboard then away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Do you want me to help you look?”

“No,” she said. She kept her tone level.

“We can check the car,” he said. “Maybe you left something in the boot after shopping.”

He spoke like someone avoiding a corridor with a wet floor. She looked at the mug in his hand and then at his eyes and then at the gap between. She did not give him content he could move into his next line. She gave him the shape she had: a phone had been in her coat and now it was not. She was asking whether he had it. He said no.

Isla stood in the doorway with her hair pulled back and her sleeves over her hands. She smoothed a cuff once.

“Do you need help finding something?” Isla said.

“No,” Maeve said.

“Okay,” Isla said, neutral. She looked at the calendar and then moved away down the hall where Finn thumped once on his way to the bathroom.

The weight in Maeve’s chest didn’t change. The decision did. Evidence that lived in the house could be lifted. Evidence made outside could be held in more than one place and by more than one person. She picked up her phone and scrolled to Ailsa’s name and pressed call.

“I had it,” she said when Ailsa answered.

“Had what?” Ailsa said.

“A phone from the attic. Mirrored. Calendar. Messages. Connected to this house. I wrote the line on the wall and on the MASTER. I put it inside my coat lining. It’s gone.”

Ailsa didn’t swear.

“When did you last see it?”

“Last night. Nineteen forty-two. I wrote it.”

“Right. We go to the centre now,” Ailsa said.

“I’ll do the drop-off. Then I’ll meet you,” Maeve said.

“Aye. We’ll take readings and write it all. No more keeping anything in the house. We’ll get your times on paper in two places that aren’t your wall. I’m already on my way to the van,” Ailsa said.

“Okay,” Maeve said. She ended the call and stood still for the length of time it took the hallway clock to find the next minute. She picked up the MASTER pad, slid it into her coat pocket, and checked her keys in the bowl without taking them out.

Paper on the wall could stay. The phone hadn’t lasted the night. She put her hand on the door and felt the cool of the handle. Pick-up would come later. First, drop-off. Then the centre. Then a new line of proof that could not be lifted from a hook overnight.

Chapter 7

External Anchors

Wind pushed along the promenade without force. The air held the sting from the Forth without the bite that came later in winter. She walked at a pace that kept the cold from settling. The community centre sat where it always had, a brick box with a glazed frontage and posters layered on the noticeboard. Ailsa had texted from the van and now stood waiting under the overhang, notebook in her hand, hair pressed under the beanie she wore until deep spring.

They went in without talking that first stretch. The main corridor kept too much heat, the radiators set to a level for toddlers in singlets. The smell was cleaning fluid with a faint trace of old balls from the hall. The tide clock was visible through the internal glass before they came close: a round face in a heavy frame, hands moving on gears someone had to maintain. It didn't glow. It didn't ping. It existed on the wall and moved because someone made it move and because water moved whether people paid attention or not. The missing rectangle from her coat registered as the minute hand moved.

Ailsa lifted her chin toward a door marked CARETAKER. She knocked once and opened without waiting for a call to enter. The small office held a battered thermos on the desk and a stack of printed tide tables pinned with a bulldog clip. Keys clinked softly on a belt when the man stood up.

"Gregor," Ailsa said. "This is Maeve. The one I told you about on the phone."

He nodded once to Ailsa and then turned the nod into a greeting aimed at Maeve without the stretch of a smile he didn't mean. Late sixties

by face and forearms, a stocky frame that had lifted more chairs than it had needed to, oil traces dark at the edge of fingernails that never quite came clean from working with old hinges.

“Right,” he said. “You’re wanting to use the clock.”

“To use it as a reference,” Maeve said.

His gaze moved once past her to the corridor and back. He took the thermos in one hand and the keys settled on the other hip.

“It’s a tide clock,” he said. “I wind it first thing. It’s geared to the Leith tables. You’ll see we keep the printout there. I keep it in step. It doesn’t read your phone. It doesn’t read the mains if the power blips. It’s steady within what it is.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Ailsa said.

He lifted a shoulder.

“I’m here most days by half eight. I’m at the desk on the hour, more or less. Kids pile in after three. I’m around. If you need me to look and say I’ve seen you standing at it, I can do that.”

“I’d like that,” Maeve said. She kept her words flat on purpose. No sell. No plea.

“For how long?” he said.

“A week to start,” she said. “Before school pick-up. And before any other thing that matters that day. I’ll be quick. I’ll stand where you can see me and the face.”

He hooked the thermos cap with his finger and set it down again.

“Right. You’ll want to choose spots. Come on then,” he said.

They followed him into the corridor. The main hall’s double doors stood shut, the echo of a shuttlecock hit marking that someone had booked early. He stopped under the clock so they stood in his shadow and in the clock’s. He gestured to the strip of floor. The hand’s minute jump

was small and certain; the corridor's hum held steady.

"Stand between that tape and that gouge in the lino. I see the face from my desk through the glass. If I'm at the door, I'm here." He moved a step to the entrance. "Reception can see you from their desk. If you want them to be a witness, ask them. I'm saying what I'll do. I'll say I saw you. I'll say the minute out loud."

"We'll note it in my book," Ailsa said. She had the notebook open before he finished speaking. She wrote small and square and paused to read back the words before she moved on to the next line.

Maeve looked at the glass that separated them from the main hall. She experienced the temperature boundary where the warm corridor air ran up against the pane. Her shoulders eased a fraction without her permission.

"Fifteen minutes before pick-up," she said. "Quarter to three, if you're here. I'll be in the door by the main entrance by five to if you're not. If you're not there either, I'll go to reception and ask for eyes on me."

"I'm here at that time most days," he said. "Fifteen minutes before the bell suits. Cheerful chaos if you miss it."

"It suits," she said.

He looked at the face of the clock without checking his own watch.

"I've seen you're precise," he said to Ailsa. "You'll write the thing exactly as it happens or you won't write it."

"Aye," Ailsa said.

"Good. I'm not much for stories. I'm for things that happened." He shifted his weight, the keys marking the movement.

A group of women with yoga mats walked by and glanced at them, the centre's traffic passing as it had for years.

"One more thing," Maeve said.

“Aye?”

“If I ask you, will you say, in words, ‘I see you now. The clock shows’ and the minute?”

He looked at Ailsa, gauging what she had turned him into without warning him. He nodded once, a nod that said he had been here long enough to have seen worse uses of his time.

“I’ll say it,” he said.

Ailsa wrote that line as a script. She underlined once and didn’t add anything that would read as pushy later.

He set his thermos on the ledge by the hall doors and turned the cap. Steam lifted. The corridor’s heat flattened it quickly.

“I’ve seen your lass in here,” he said, matter-of-fact.

Maeve kept her face at rest.

“Have you.”

“Punctual lass,” he said. “Doesn’t dawdle at the door.”

The glass in the corridor door cooled her palm; she filed the line under REPEATABLE and marked the centre as Isla-familiar.

“Right,” Maeve said. She didn’t look at Ailsa.

Witness at the door lowered the risk on Isla’s side. The gap moved to her own chain: gate, clock, witnesses.

The tone stayed neutral, but the line moved into a space she had learned to leave clear. Isla had been where she said she would be, washed by other people’s systems and seen by them at the door. It said nothing she could use and showed everything she could not say here. She placed the information in the file she kept in her head because there was nowhere else to put it on paper without it becoming a charge.

Gregor pointed with his chin toward the entrance.

“So you’ll come in, you’ll stand there, I’ll see you or reception will. Is that the square of it?”

“That’s the square of it,” Ailsa said.

“I’ll be here mornings, and I’m around two and a half to three and a half most days. If I’m not, the door’s open and the clock’s still the clock. I’ll not sign anything you write unless I’ve seen it myself, and then I’ll say what I saw, not what you want me to have seen.”

“That’s what we’re asking,” Maeve said.

“Fine. Then we’re done,” he said.

They stood under the clock another beat, not long enough to turn it into a ritual, only long enough to set the pattern in their bodies. Ailsa capped her notebook and slid it into her pocket, the square end sticking up the way she liked so she could get it out fast without fumbling.

“I’ll come at quarter to three,” Maeve said.

“I’ll be here,” Gregor said.

He returned to his office. They stepped out into the corridor air again. The centre’s sounds went back to their level: footsteps, a child complaining, the punch of a ball against a wall in the hall, the buzz of the motion sensor near the back door that always clicked when someone went past.

“That’ll do,” Ailsa said. She did not smile. The relief was there anyway. Her shoulders dropped a little; the corner of her mouth softened. She spoke quietly.

“It’s a person who isn’t us saying a thing happened when it happened. We’ll build from that.”

Maeve’s hands stayed still. Her breath steadied. To have a man in a place like this say he would be present at a minute and repeat a minute out loud put a weight under the thin things she had been stacking. It did not fix the missing rectangle from her coat. It gave her somewhere to

stand while she looked for it elsewhere.

“I’ll be back at quarter to three,” she said.

“I’ll meet you here and then peel off before the gate,” Ailsa said.

“No. I’ll go alone,” Maeve said.

Ailsa looked at her for the small turn that was.

“Aye,” she said. “You’re the one who’ll stand under the glass at the gate. I’ll be around. You can ring me if anything starts to bend.”

“I won’t speak at the gate,” Maeve said.

“No. You won’t,” Ailsa said.

They left the centre together. The air outside held the same cold. On the noticeboard behind them, a typed sheet listed room rates by the hour. The tide tables sat under the bulldog clip in Gregor’s office with small pencil marks she had not made.

She reached the centre just before quarter to three. The walk took the time it always took when she didn’t push. She delayed by a minute on purpose outside the glass doors to let the corridor clear. Then she went in, turned left, and stopped at the strip of lino Gregor had marked. She placed her shoes so the tape aligned with her left toe and the gouge with her right heel.

Gregor stood at the caretaker’s doorway with the keys hooked over one finger. He lifted his chin in acknowledgement and looked at the clock, then back to her.

“I see you now,” he said in the voice he used for hall instructions. “The clock shows fourteen forty-six.”

Two people in gym kit walked past. They experienced the words without caring about them, which was part of the point. The public saying did the work better than a quiet nod in a corner.

Ailsa stood beyond the entrance in a line where she was not obvious to reception and visible if Maeve wanted her. Maeve didn't turn her head. She felt the notch in her stomach that came with the urge to check everything. She pressed it flat by making the next movement plain.

"Thank you," she said to Gregor.

He stepped back into his office. She paused at the door and let her shoulders drop once, then walked out of the centre without hurry. The wind rose along the side street and eased at the high pavement. The school sat with its glass front already holding parents in a queue of coats. Without changing her step, she went to her paving slab and stood. Hands inside sleeves, she pinched the cuff lining to stop them shifting. The corridor lights hummed behind the glass; teaching assistants moved with lists and nods.

Finn came out with his class in the time he usually came out. The strap of his bag was twisted again. The woman with the cropped hair who had approached her on the bad day looked to another parent and away. Maeve raised her hand once to Finn to mark her position and then let it fall.

He came straight to her.

"Home," she said.

He nodded, fitting himself to her side at the road where the railings funnelled them across. He looked up once at her face and then down at the white line where the curb started. They stood at the lights while a car stopped late and then edged. She stepped forward when it was their turn without giving the driver time to think about being impatient. Finn counted steps without sound. They reached the far pavement and the counting stopped the way it always did there.

The house was warm from the morning's heat cycle. She set her keys back in the bowl and glanced at the chip on the rim without touching any set. On the pinboard above the kettle she didn't add a line about the centre. She wrote the arrival time for Finn in the same place she had written it yesterday. She initialled in the same handwriting she had always used. It didn't count. Nothing in the house would count. The MASTER pad held the record.

She took out her phone and typed to Ailsa.

WORKED. Centre confirm before quarter to three. Pick-up clean.

The reply came fast.

GOOD. KEEP IT THE SAME TOMORROW.

She set the phone down on the table. A minute later it vibrated once with Daniel's name on the screen and a simple line: Running late. Don't wait for me.

She rolled the message under her thumb and let it sit. She didn't answer. Waiting or not waiting wasn't the point. Finn's bath time and book time and teeth brushing would run on the same track. Responding opened a path she didn't need to walk down.

In the kitchen she filled the pan and set it on the hob. Pasta again, because it was predictable and friendly and didn't make a mess. Finn stood on a chair and grated a small piece of cheese with the gentle attention he used for things with edges. She lifted the kettle and poured water into mugs to warm them. The kettle's steam rose in a straight column and then moved sideways when the kitchen door opened.

Isla came in, dropped her bag on the floor next to the chair she had claimed for homework, and pulled her sleeves down over her hands. She glanced at the wall calendar without telegraphing it. The house page didn't carry weight. The MASTER pad held the version that mattered.

"We're stopping in at the centre before pick-up now," Maeve said. She kept the spoon moving through the pasta so the bottom didn't stick.

“Why?” Isla said.

“Because the tide clock there doesn’t run off any of our phones. Gregor’s there. He says the minute out loud. It keeps things clean,” Maeve said.

“For who?” Isla said.

“For us,” Maeve said.

“Does it make you feel better with all these checks?” Isla said. She kept her tone level. She touched the edge of the calendar and didn’t push it.

Isla’s watch ran two minutes fast; she didn’t glance at it.

Maeve looked away from the steam and back to Isla’s face.

“External anchors help everyone,” she said.

Finn lifted the grater and looked up to see whether a fight had started. None had. He put the grater down carefully and licked one finger when he thought she wasn’t looking.

“You can write whatever on the calendar,” Isla said.

“Nothing stands if it isn’t anchored,” Maeve said.

Isla’s eyes flicked to the NOT AGREED square she had left in place.

“Right,” Isla said.

They ate without a story to mark the evening. Finn told her that his group had switched seats and that his new partner didn’t like glue on their hands. He showed her the train book again at the table as if a different angle would change the page. She nodded at the right places because the book mattered and because nodding kept him grounded in the small thing he could control.

Bath happened on time because Isla warmed the towel on the radiator again. Finn shouted once for fun and then stopped because she had said the noise at that hour knocked through the wall to the

neighbour. He counted with the tap dripping and then stopped counting when he heard himself counting. Maeve wiped the hob with the cloth she rinsed twice. She recorded ALARM CHECKED with the minute and her initial in the MASTER pad. The pinboard stayed blank of it. The house record held no standing.

When Finn asked for something sweet, she opened the cupboard and gave him two biscuits. He asked for a third. She said no. He shrugged and ate the two without pushing the ask into a test.

Upstairs the landing clock matched the hallway clock. She let the sight land and then turned away. She set her phone face down on the bedside table with the allowance for alarms and allowed numbers. She listened to the house find its night rhythm. Daniel's key came late in the lock. He put his glass in the sink without banging it. He went to the bathroom, then to the sitting room, then upstairs. He didn't speak. She didn't either.

In the morning the cold had hardened. The front step held a slick edge she avoided by stepping on the outer stone. She walked Finn to school and didn't linger. She went home and wiped the damp from the bannister where scarves had been left to dry. The kettle lived back on its base. She stood at the pinboard while the water came to the boil and looked at the week page she and Isla had adjusted. It needed a mark that was not text. Text could be reproduced, copied, moved around a page without friction. A mark might be copied too, but whoever copied it would have to decide what they thought it meant and that was where small mistakes took shape.

She took the fine pen and drew a simple curve at the end of the lines she would harmonise with the centre: not a wave, nothing childish. A curve that began low, rose, and fell. She put it next to Wednesday's

pick-up and under the line for Finn's football, which sat at four o'clock across the bottom of the Wednesday column. She marked Thursday's club on the school side with the curve too, because that collision with the usual release time was where the last problem had occurred. The marks were small. They would be visible enough when you looked for them and invisible when you didn't. The house version had no standing.

She took out her MASTER pad and copied the curve there, smaller again. She wrote beside it: Anchor visit within sixty minutes before commitment. She underlined once and didn't push hard enough to dent the page underneath. Only the MASTER pad entry would stand.

Her phone sat face down beside the kettle. She picked it up and scrolled to Ailsa.

PHONE CALL? PLAN WEEK.

The call came inside the same minute.

"Right," Ailsa said. "Say it in order."

"Monday to Friday," Maeve said. "I will appear at the centre at quarter to three for pick-up. If you can, you appear at the centre at quarter past nine once this week as well. Tuesday or Thursday. We'll vary days. We mark which days beforehand and then we mark again after."

"I can do Tuesday at quarter past nine. I can do Thursday the same."

"Do both," Maeve said.

"You'll have two daytime anchors then. You'll have to keep the thing tight or it all becomes a performance."

"It's tight," Maeve said.

"Right. I'll write Tuesday and Thursday in my book. I'll stand under the face. I'll wait until someone makes eye contact. I'll say out loud the minute and that I see the clock."

"Aye," Maeve said.

“And you’ll do quarter to three every day,” Ailsa said.

“Every day,” Maeve said.

“I’ll copy the curve onto my kitchen page, so if anyone gets in your house and adjusts yours, mine is still there with the same shape.”

“Make the curve with the same start and stop,” Maeve said.

“I’ll make it exact.”

They said nothing for three beats, the way they did when something had been set that didn’t need more words.

“One more thing,” Maeve said.

“Aye.”

“I’m going to let the school know I’m stopping at the centre before pick-up. Not as a warning. As a courtesy. So that when their log records me at the gate at whatever minute, there’s a matching habit they’ve seen before.”

“Message or call?”

“Email to the office in the morning. Copy to Morven. Plain tone,” Maeve said.

“Good,” Ailsa said.

When she ended the call, Maeve opened her email app, addressed the message to the school office address saved from last year’s permissions letters, and added Morven’s name. She wrote:

Dear Office,

I will be at the Portobello Community Centre most days at 14:45 before collecting Finn at 15:15. If any changes are needed, I will email from this address and can confirm by phone if you need. Thank you.

Best,

Maeve Clarke

She read it twice, deleted a sentence that read like an apology, and sent it. No attachments. No evidence dump. Just a fact in their inbox that could be pointed to later and could be ignored now without harm.

She took the MASTER pad and wrote a private rule: NO ACTION WITHOUT ANCHOR WITHIN SIXTY MIN PRIOR. She added the time for Finn's football practice on Wednesday with the small curve and wrote under it: Gregor or reception hearing confirm on day. She looked at the line and let the shape of it sit in her body. She pictured the page on a table under fluorescent hum, the curve marks set in an order she could point to.

The quiet that followed wasn't relief. Relief made people silly. This was a hold. She aligned the pen with the pad's edge. She stood inside it and felt where the weakness lived now. If the anchor fell, her day fell. If Gregor wasn't there, she had reception. If reception said they were too busy, she had Ailsa on Tuesday and Thursday. If Ailsa was pulled into shifts, she had the email already sent to the school that said she had made a habit. The habit was the point because habits held when the rest was being prodded.

The front door opened mid-afternoon. Daniel came in with his careful body that tried not to leave a mark on the room. He set his bag by the shoe rack and looked straight down the hallway, away from the pinboard, then back to it in a small swing he couldn't hide. His thumb woke the phone without unlocking it; the screen went dark again.

"Everything alright?" he said.

"We're using the centre before pick-up, daily," she said.

"The centre."

"The tide clock there isn't on anything. Gregor is there."

"Right," he said. He put his hands in his pockets, took them out again, and leaned his shoulder against the doorframe without committing to the doorframe.

“It’s a simple stop. We go in, we stand where we can be seen, he says the minute. Then we go to the gate,” she said.

He let a short silence sit. “If it helps,” he said.

“It helps,” she said.

He hesitated.

“Do you need me to speak to anyone about it?”

“No,” she said. She kept her voice even.

He nodded and looked at the pinboard again. His eyes moved across the curve marks and failed to land on them because he didn’t know what to look for. He moved into the kitchen and lifted a glass and set it down again. He checked a blank screen. He didn’t ask about the calendar entries with NOT AGREED written in firm letters. He didn’t mention the words GP or PTA. He returned to the doorway and said he would be late again tomorrow and to go ahead with tea without him.

“We will,” she said.

He left quickly without running. The quiet came back.

Finn lay on the rug with his trains lined in a curve that almost matched the one on the pinboard. He held one engine by the funnel and pushed it against the carpet until the wheels squeaked in the wool fibres. He stopped and looked up at her to check whether he had strayed into a rule he didn’t understand. She tilted her head once to tell him he hadn’t. He went back to the book and his line of engines.

Upstairs, Isla stood in the bathroom doorway again with the towel folded and warmed. Routine happened at the right time. No alarms needed this time. There was a low hum from the neighbours’ extractor and the soft click of the boiler. The rooms stayed quiet and needed no attention.

She washed the last mug and set it upside down to drain. She touched the pinboard once with two fingers, not to straighten it, to register its

place. It had no authority. She checked the hallway lock and counted the turns low under her breath. The count landed as two because it had always been two. She looked at the key bowl with all the sets present. She did not touch them.

In bed she lay on her back until the steady rhythm of the house replaced the jump of her heart. She did not list contingencies. She did not rehearse any questions. Her body did the work without her mind forcing it. Sleep came and did not break all the way to morning.

Chapter 8

Social Fractures

She went after drop-off because the invitation had been visible in the WhatsApp group for a week and public absence was not a defence she could use twice. The air off the Forth pushed against her face as she walked the back way to the community centre. Scarves had left the bannister damp that morning; she had wiped it with the same cloth she used for the kettle base. She carried the centre's coordinates already: the glazed frontage, the corridor's heat, the cleaning-fluid smell under the warm air, steady in its usual place. This was not for the tide clock. This was for the parents' committee, which had announced itself as a general gathering. No subcommittee. No rota. Nothing at pick-up time.

The main hall door was propped open. Chairs had been set out in a loose circle that had already settled into smaller clusters. There were biscuits on a paper plate and two flasks on a trestle. A woman with the friendly face you used when you had to ask parents for money lifted a hand to her, the hand's angle not quite open.

"Morning, Maeve," the woman said. "Good to see you."

Good to see you had the weight of relief laid on top of it by effort. Maeve nodded once, not to comfort the woman, but to mark that she had heard. She took a chair at the edge of one cluster and kept the door in her peripheral vision. Gregor's keys clicked somewhere down the corridor. Voices lifted and fell in the hall and didn't settle, as if everyone had saved some unspent breath for her.

The chair, she remembered her from the fundraising night last year, cleared her throat. There was a printed agenda with bullet points that meant cake, raffle, and the new playground appeal the head had

approved for an exploratory letter. The chair read through the points with the tone used for reading rules aloud so no one could say they hadn't been warned. When she finished, she gave that small laugh committees used when they were about to do the part that made someone uncomfortable while performing it as ordinary.

"Before we start," she said, "just to say, Maeve, we were sorry you didn't turn up last time. We waited fifteen minutes, then we started without you. I hope everything's alright."

The words were arranged in a way that freed them from the need to be accurate. Maeve let the arrangement land. She placed the chair's phrasing with the headteacher's earlier framing, just after lunch, message received, Dad collecting, as another example of words that were tidy at the point of use and messy when you tried to fold them into one day. She kept her hands on her knees, the line of fingernails even except for the one she had torn slightly on the freezer drawer.

"I didn't join any subcommittee," she said. "I didn't agree to attend anything last time."

A small movement went round the circle. Not enough to be a rustle. Enough to say that the people who had come early had already spoken to each other and were ready for this question and this answer.

The chair looked at the woman beside her. The woman bent to the bag at her feet and brought up a clipboard. She passed it across with the look people use when they want a thing to be experienced as neutral. The chair placed it on her knees and turned the paper on top so that the names ran straight.

"It's the rota subcommittee sign-up. We had this out at the last meeting. There." She touched the page with a clean finger where the names had been set down in a column. The lines above were familiar school mothers with tidy handwriting and small hearts over their i's. Below them was "Maeve Clarke" in a hand that tracked hers enough to be passed on a busy day.

Maeve didn't touch the page. She looked at the letters and allowed herself to take the time to see them, not only to look. The handwriting would have survived a glance from a receptionist or a teacher who knew her by sight but never watched her write. The pressure was a fraction heavier on the downstrokes than hers. The e was closed at the top where she left a hairline gap. The k in Clarke split at a stiffer angle. None of that would appear in a spreadsheet later.

She let her focus rest on the first letter. The M had a loop at the left that wasn't always present in her signature when she was tired. It did appear when she wrote ALARM CHECKED beside the house times in a kitchen that demanded clarity. This loop matched that habit closely enough to catch the eye of anyone who already believed the word next to it.

"That isn't mine," she said. "I didn't sign that."

A chair leg creaked and the strip light flickered on the clipboard as the woman with the bag angled closer, mouth tight.

The chair's mouth softened for a second, the practiced compassion panel you offered to a mother in a corridor after a child had cried. "These things happen, honestly," she said. "We're all juggling. If you need to step back, we totally understand." She looked past Maeve to include the others. "We say every year that life comes first." She smiled at the paper plate. "This isn't life." A few people smiled back because they knew how to perform agreement when the point was obvious.

"Who brought that sheet today?" Maeve asked.

The woman with the bag raised her hand. "I did. I keep the folder."

"How many sign-ups were on it last time?"

"Three new names," the woman said. "Yours and two others."

She breathed in and let the air out slowly through her nose so the words didn't arrive attached to a fall of breath. The hall lights hummed. A child's voice sounded faintly from the corridor, then not at all. She stood,

not abruptly, and reached for her coat. She didn't touch the clipboard. No one moved to block her because this was not the sort of room where that happened.

"I didn't sign it," she said. "Please remove my name." She kept her tone even. She placed her chair back under the table leg and stepped into the space between the two women without brushing either of them. On her way past the flasks she felt the heat lift from them and disappear into the hall air.

"Maeve," the chair said, sitting forward. "We were worried when you didn't turn up last time. That's all. If you want, we can take you off the rota entirely so you have one less thing."

"I'm not on the rota," Maeve said. "Please take my name off that sheet."

She exited into the corridor. The community centre heat pressed against her skin, close after the hall's wider air. At the glass doors, the cold met her face again. She stood to one side of the entrance so whoever came in could pass without needing to change course. From her pocket, she took her phone and wrote to Ailsa.

SIGNED SHEET AT PARENTS' COMMITTEE HAS MY NAME.
NEAR-MATCH HAND. LOOP ON THE M LIKE MY KITCHEN
SIGN-OFF. I DIDN'T SIGN IT. NEED YOUR EYE ON THIS. ALSO NOTE
WORDS: 'YOU DIDN'T TURN UP LAST TIME'. SAME PATTERN OF
PHRASE.

She waited without sending another line. A delivery cyclist moved past her at a slow speed you used when you could feel a patch of sheen on the pavement and didn't want to find the edge of it. The reply came fast.

ON SHIFT UNTIL TWO. SEND A PHOTO IF YOU CAN GET ONE.
DON'T ARGUE IN THERE. WE'LL LAY IT OUT TOMORROW UNDER
THE CLOCK. LOOP ON THE M IS A TELL. KEEP YOURSELF STEADY.

There was no photograph and she wouldn't go back in to get one. She typed back:

NO PHOTO. LEAVING IT. ASKED THEM TO REMOVE MY NAME.

She added: WE MEET 09:15 TOMORROW, CENTRE. YOU SAY THE MINUTE.

AYE. ANCHOR FIRST. THEN WE HANDLE THE REST, Ailsa wrote.

Her phone vibrated again before she could put it away. The name at the top was the chair's. She read the single line and let each word be what it claimed to be.

Hi Maeve. Good to see you this morning. Please look after yourself. We can remove you from any lists for now. No problem at all.

She logged the repetition of 'look after yourself' against the morning's line.

She moved her thumb so the screen went dark and could not be read by anyone coming out of the door behind her. She stood a minute longer and watched her breath make a small cloud in front of her and then vanish without changing the day. Social things could wait.

She walked away from the centre with the hall's hum still sitting in her bones. The sea smell was stronger at the corner of the street where the wind found a straight path. She didn't hurry. Hurrying turned a person into a shape that made other people decide things about them without looking at their face. She passed the newsagent and the shutter that always stuck an inch before it hit the bottom step and held there until someone pushed it with a hand to finish the movement. The shutter wasn't the point. The hand was.

By the time she opened her own door, the heat from the corridor had gone from her skin; the kettle hiss in the kitchen was faint. Near noon,

the house was the temperature the heating program had decided it would be at this time of day. The hallway clock ticked at the same rate. Her breath came back into its square when she hung her coat and placed her phone face down on the worktop so any vibration through the wood would carry. The key bowl still held all the sets with the chip at the rim exposed.

Two new slips were pinned to the board above the kettle with the cheap pushpins Isla had insisted on because the colours matched the calendar. The first read: SNACK ROTA: FRIDAY: APPLE SLICES & CRACKERS: M. The second read: CLASS REP CHECK-IN: THURSDAY 17:30: COMMUNITY CENTRE: M. The handwriting tracked hers at a glance. The body of the text sat in the same small tilt she used when she wrote without thinking. The M at the end of each line had the same loop she had seen on the subcommittee sheet, the loop that sat at the heart of her kitchen annotations when she performed steadiness for herself.

She didn't move the slips yet. She read them in place, at the distance you would stand at if you were a person passing through the kitchen and dropping a bag and pressing the kettle on. The pressure on the downstrokes had the same fraction-heavy weight as the name on the clipboard. The spacing between words was a hair wider than hers. A scan would miss it. An eye trained on how she wrote would not. She pressed the edge with one nail and left a pale crescent that faded.

Daniel stepped into the doorway, phone in his hand, thumb still on the button. He was already placing his expression in the careful middle ground he used between home and the outside. His eyes moved to the pinboard and then back to her.

"What's up?" he said, not because something was wrong for him, but because her body had gone into the stillness that said she was holding something in place so it didn't fall.

"When did you pin those?" she said. She kept her tone even. She pointed with her eyes at the two slips rather than with her hand so she

didn't give the movement away to the house.

He looked the way people look when they try to bring together two moments that have not touched. "I didn't. Did you not write them last night? You were at the board late. I was upstairs and then I came down for a glass of water and you were still writing. You might have put them up and forgotten. You were tired," he said, his eyes sliding off the slips.

"I didn't write them," she said.

"It happens," he said, and he gave the smile he used at work when he needed to erase tension and knew it was easier to smooth than to scrape. "Let's not overcomplicate this. We could take a highlighter and make the days stand out. Might keep it straight." He set his phone parallel to the worktop and nudged a mug into line.

Isla came into the kitchen with her hair tied at the back in the quick knot that left a strand at her temple. She looked at the board in the way of someone who had made sure they would not look too hard.

"It's easy to mix days up," Isla said. "We could colour-code. Blue for school stuff, green for home, red for, ah, doctor. I can do it after homework. Keeps it clean. If you want."

Maeve moved her attention from the slips to the girl. "No," she said. "Nothing stands on that board unless it's anchored." She didn't raise her voice. She didn't have to; the words were a rule rather than a request.

Isla kept her expression still. "Right," she said. She pulled her sleeves over her hands and looked at the board as if something on it might need straightening. She didn't move.

Maeve took her phone from the worktop and stepped back to find the right angle, taking two photographs, then a third at a small tilt to show the edges of each slip and the pins. She moved closer and photographed the looped M on the bottom line of each slip so that the loop took more of the frame than the words, then stepped back again for one that included the kettle and the clock and the chipped rim of the bowl. Then she

reached up and removed both slips. She placed them flat on the table, face up, beside the MASTER pad.

Daniel shifted his weight, then left the kitchen without commentary. She heard a cupboard door. Water ran. The sound stopped.

She pressed the call icon next to Ailsa's name. The line caught on the second ring.

"Hi," Ailsa said. "Tell me."

"Two new slips on the board. Snack rota Friday. Class rep check-in Thursday at seventeen thirty. Both with M. Neither from me. Hand matches the committee sheet from this morning. Near match. Loop on the M."

"When did they appear?"

"Between breakfast and now. The house was empty after drop-off. I've just come in."

"I'll check my wall. Hold," Ailsa said. She spoke away from the phone, a door sound, then her steps crossing her kitchen over at the other flat. She came back. "Nothing on mine that matches those. My Tuesday and Thursday centre anchors are there and your curve marks are there. No rota, no check-in. Do you want me to come over?"

"No," Maeve said. "Not with the kids in and out. I've photographed the board. I'm taking the slips down. They won't stand. We'll fold this into the anchor tomorrow. Nine fifteen."

"Aye," Ailsa said. "Keep it clean today. Centre before pick-up as usual." She paused. "You alright?"

"I am holding my side," Maeve said. This was the truth she needed for the next hour.

She ended the call. She opened the MASTER pad and printed a line about two slips found on the house board at 12:08, matching the hallway clock. She copied the wording of each slip with colons and set them in

sequence, then added a brief note about the near-match to the committee sheet and the loop on the M. She wrote that Ailsa's wall held no mirror of it, and that photos were taken. She capped the pen.

She slid the two slips into the narrow drawer under the cutlery where spare batteries lived so that if she needed to take them to the centre as physical items later, she knew where they were without leaving them loosely in the house.

Her phone lit once with a courier update; she ignored it and picked up a pen and placed a small curve mark at the end of the pick-up line on the wall page. She placed the same curve in the MASTER pad and, in a smaller hand, wrote: no exceptions next 48 hours: anchor before every school commitment.

She rinsed two mugs and set them on the rack, then lifted the kettle. Steam rose in a straight column before flattening under the kitchen air. She set the kettle back down without making tea; on days like this the taste was for after, and her mouth needed to stay dry.

"Do you want me to do the blue pen later?" Isla said from the doorway, holding herself not quite in the room.

"No," Maeve said. "Nothing gets colour. It gets anchors or it gets nothing."

Isla nodded once, expression neutral. "Right," she said again. She went upstairs. Finn called to her from the top landing about a small wreck of Lego. Isla answered him in a tone that had competency in it without kindness.

Maeve put on her coat early and stood for a moment with her hand on the key bowl. She didn't lift a set. When they left later, she counted the turns of the lock out loud for herself, one, two.

The hours before pick-up went the way they did when she waited for one point to confirm the day. She moved the laundry to the radiator, shook out a towel that had gone slightly sour from sitting, and set it over

the bars. The oven stayed off. The radio stayed off. The clock in the hallway moved toward the minute she would be under the tide face again, someone's eyes on her while she kept still in a place where stillness had been agreed as a form of being counted.

Two messages arrived before she left for the centre. The first was from Kirsty. The preview on the lock screen showed enough to keep the rest from sounding worse when she opened it.

Hey love, hope you're okay. You've been so busy. Let's leave Friday coffee for now. We'll sort something when things are a bit quieter for you.
x

She read it and let it sit, soft and well-meaning. She typed back: Thanks. Things are tight just now. Another time.

The second came from Jo, the quiet one from nursery days who still waved at the gate. Hey, just seen the week, might skip this one; sounds like you've loads on. Next time, yeah? x

The next message sat under a number she had saved without a name earlier in the term, the woman who ran the PTA rota. The message read: Hiya Maeve, no pressure on the subcommittee. We'll take your name off, nae bother. You've a lot on. Look after yourself.

The same words from the door again sharpened the day. She typed: Please remove me. I didn't sign. She stared at the final sentence, then deleted it because she could not prove it in a way that would convince anyone prepared to be convinced by a handwritten name on a sheet.

She put her phone face down and lifted her coat. The inside pocket was empty; she felt the missing weight from the night before last, the thing she could have handed over in a corridor that hummed and judged by the shape of words. It was gone. She folded the coat seam inward and

went out into the cold.

At the community centre the corridor showed through the glass before the heat reached her. Gregor looked up from his office and saw her. She nodded. He stepped to the doorway in that unhurried way he had and looked at the tide clock. He met her eye.

"I see you now," he said. "The clock shows fourteen forty-five."

She stood on the strip between the tape and the gouge as they had agreed. At reception, the woman looked down at her screen until the sentence was done. Two women walking toward the hall experienced the sentence and then kept walking. That was the point. She didn't thank him this time. She didn't have to; he had already consented to stand and to speak. She waited one minute to let the anchor set. Then she left the centre without turning to check whether Ailsa stood outside beyond the entrance line as she sometimes did. The air on the side street was colder than earlier. She folded her hands into her sleeves and went to the school.

Finn came out at the usual time with his bag strap twisted and a serious face that softened when he saw her. She raised her hand. He came straight to her. They crossed the road. He counted steps under his breath the way he always did when the white line started. At the far pavement, he finished the count and stopped counting because that was the script and he believed in scripts that repeated. She did too.

At home she wrote the arrival time on the house page and on the MASTER pad and placed the same small curve next to each line. Isla walked through the kitchen and did not stop. She turned her head to the board without turning her shoulders, then went to her homework chair.

After tea, pasta, again, because it kept everything in its place, she wiped the hob and dried the mugs and set them upside down. The day was clear in her head; the anchors marked the times.

Her phone lit again. School office. The subject line read: Attendance and collection routine. She opened it. The body of the message was three sentences. The first thanked her for her email about being at the

community centre before pick-up. The second stated that the school had logged her habit of being at the gate at 15:15 and would continue to follow existing procedures. The third stated that if any further discrepancies occurred, the school might propose a parent support meeting with the headteacher and relevant staff to aid communication moving forward.

She read it twice. She knew the tone. She had learned to hear the distance built into words like support when they were used by systems that needed to show they had acted. She pressed her thumb to the phone's edge and let one slow breath settle, then closed the email and left it in the inbox where it could be found later if it had to be held up against another line in another hallway.

A message from Ailsa arrived half an hour later: Tomorrow 09:15. I'll stand under the clock. I'll say the minute. We'll add the forged slips to the stack. Keep the slips until then.

Maeve replied: Aye. No exceptions.

Finn read his train book on the rug and then looked up at her face at the point he always looked up because he needed to know she was still in the place where she had been two minutes ago. She nodded once and he relaxed. He asked for something sweet. She gave him two biscuits and stopped her hand from giving him a third because lines mattered, especially small lines that no one else would ever know about.

Upstairs, Isla stood in the bathroom doorway with the towel warmed. Finn stepped out of the bath without splashing because he knew that noise at that hour knocked through the wall. She heard the small click of the boiler. The weather was dry and the wind held steady; the rooms went quiet.

She checked the alarms, 07:02 and 07:09, and wrote ALARM CHECKED with the minute in the MASTER pad, not on the house page, which existed to be looked at, not for proof. Clothes for morning went on the chair, and she slid her phone under the edge of the notebook on the bedside table so a vibration would carry. She lay flat and didn't close her

eyes until her breathing matched the hallway clock.

The silence after that was clean. Not comfort. She held the shape of the day. The places she could use were fewer than she had wanted that morning, but they were solid and would hold. She went to sleep knowing exactly where she would be at nine fifteen and at quarter to three. If anything shifted, those minutes would hold.

Chapter 9

Suspicious Harden

The heating program had set the morning temperature. The hallway clock kept its even tick. She matched her breathing to it, then moved.

In the kitchen she cleared the draining board, stacked two mugs upside down, wiped a ring the kettle had left when someone set it down without looking. A scarf hung damp over the bannister; she flattened it with her hand as she went past. Daniel had left his jacket on the back of a chair rather than the hook; she lifted it to hang it where it should go, felt the weight on one side and checked without thinking first.

Receipts. Folded tight. A card machine slip curled against two till prints. She opened them on the worktop and smoothed the corners. The names were unambiguous. The Rook. Waterfront Hotel Bar. Both within walking distance of his office. Times printed at the bottom in their small, perfect font. 22:53. 23:41. Two mains. Two glasses of house red. A service charge added at the manager's discretion. She kept her face neutral in the empty room because, if she let anything show, the next movement in the house would be a person asking a question she could not answer cleanly without going into all of it.

She looked once toward the clock, then set the receipts flat and photographed them with her phone, the chipped rim of the key bowl included in one frame because it placed the record in the house. She slipped the slips into the back of the MASTER pad, wrote the merchant names and times in a neat column, and added a small mark by the Monday date. She didn't write anything on the wall page. That page existed to be read by other eyes.

Finn's shin pads had mud on the strap where he cut across the grass after the last session instead of taking the paved line. Football wasn't until Wednesday, but straps stiffened if the mud set. She went to the car with her keys in her pocket and the scarf pulled up over her mouth for the cold. The glove compartment stuck as always and then opened with a small release. Pads. Registration papers. The handbook. The pack of spare bulbs Daniel had thrown in two MOTs ago and never used. Behind them, wrapped in clear plastic, a toothbrush, the travel kind you picked up at a chemist when you planned to keep things separate.

She didn't touch it. She angled her phone and took two photographs from slightly different positions to show it wasn't an artefact, then one with the pads still in the compartment so the context was visible if anyone ever said it had been staged elsewhere. She closed the compartment softly so the sound didn't carry.

Back inside, she set the pads in the sink and ran a low stream to loosen the strap. The kettle clicked as the element cooled. She dried her hands and opened the banking app. Joint account. Housekeeping card. The list of recent entries loaded without delay. The Rook. Waterfront Hotel Bar. City Cabs plc. Small sums that accumulated into a habit rather than a one-off. The times matched the receipts. She scrolled further and saw a cluster on the day the practice had told her the scan was cancelled at 16:14. A taxi in the early evening. A bar shortly after. She heard again the receptionist's even cadence through the GP desk glass at sixteen fourteen. Not proof, not on its own. Enough to set next to a line in a notebook and see whether anything linked to it later.

She closed the app. Confront later. Not now. Not without a line that tied directly to a sabotage timestamp. A he-said/she-said without that line wouldn't move anyone who had already made up their mind.

Upstairs, Finn called down about an engine piece he couldn't find and then found on the shelf where he had placed it himself because he knew where it should go. She answered him with a tone that told him the kitchen was a safe room and that she would be at the gate at the usual

minute. He accepted this because that was how he measured the day.

At the doorway, Daniel came down with his phone in his hand. Shirt, jumper, clean. He kept his expression on the careful midline he preferred between rooms.

"You alright?" he said, more formula than question.

"Yes." She passed him without stopping. "You late tonight?"

He looked at his screen and then at the door. "Client dinner. The Rook. Monday is brutal this week." He smoothed his cuff. He gave a courteous half-smile and reached for his coat.

She marked the word in her head and didn't lift it yet.

She walked Finn to school, listened to his counting at the white line and the quiet satisfaction when he stopped at the far pavement. At the community centre at 09:15, Ailsa stood under the tide clock in her beanie with her notebook out, eyes on the minute hand. The corridor heat pressed against Maeve's face. Gregor wasn't at his doorway this early; that was fine. They didn't need him every time.

Ailsa watched the face and looked to Maeve. "Nine fifteen by the clock," she said, clear enough for reception to hear if they were listening. She wrote it down. They left without pausing to make it a scene.

Outside, Ailsa jerked her chin toward the van without words. They both got in, doors pulled until they caught. The van held the smell of damp wool and coffee that had dried on a lid last week and wasn't worth scrubbing out.

"Show me," Ailsa said.

Maeve took the receipts from the MASTER pad and placed them on the dashboard where they wouldn't slide. She opened her phone gallery and brought up the glove compartment shots. The toothbrush sat in the frame with the handbook and the pads, the plastic reflective under the flash she'd left on because light mattered when you presented a photograph later.

Ailsa leaned in. "Right. That's not ours."

"No."

"And the times?"

"Twenty-two fifty-three. Twenty-three forty-one. Hotel bar. The Rook." She kept her voice flat. "He said The Rook. This morning."

Ailsa nodded once. "He's seeing someone."

"Yes."

"Does that help you with the school?"

Maeve let the question sit and didn't answer it with the first response that wanted out. "Only if I can tie a night to a sabotage outcome. If not, it becomes noise."

"Good." Ailsa's tone didn't change. "You know my feelings about him. This isn't about my feelings. It's about what Morven will log if we breathe wrong in a corridor."

Maeve watched a parent push a buggy over the paving outside and choose the flatter line at the corner. "I won't give them a scene."

"We set a window," Ailsa said. "Three days. No incidents. Daily quarter-to-three under the clock. I can do nine fifteen tomorrow and Thursday as well. We build a stack other people can hold in their hands." She tapped the receipts with a finger that had oil ground into the lines from the van door. "We'll place these next to something that matters to them, not to us."

"If they call that meeting, will you sit in. I want you in the room as my anchor."

"Aye. I'll sit in."

"He said a conference last month. Dundee," Maeve said.

"Did he go?"

"I'll check."

"Do it clean. No house arguments. No cornering him here." Ailsa looked at her. "Say your lines."

Maeve read them back as she had held them in her head since the phone call last week when the office said 'support': "I'll answer that in writing. Please record that I deny sending that message. I am happy to confirm by email."

"Good. One more. When he starts smoothing and you can feel your face going." Ailsa waited.

"This isn't a conversation I can have right now. We'll speak at a set time with a witness." She breathed once. "I won't argue at the gate. I won't argue at dinner."

"Aye." Ailsa wrote a line in her notebook, reading it back as she wrote because that was their habit now. "Survive seventy-two hours without a single wobble. Build corroboration."

They sat without speaking for a minute, both looking through the glass at the corridor door. A woman with a yoga mat went in and smiled at no one. The van's heater ticked once as it cooled.

"Fourteen forty-five," Maeve said.

"I'll be in the area," Ailsa said. "If Gregor's not there, stand where reception can see you. Don't look for me."

"I won't."

They left the van. Maeve walked toward the promenade to burn the idle minutes without using them for thinking in loops that went nowhere. The air had the sharp salt smell that sat at the back of the throat on days like this. Her phone vibrated in her pocket; she let it settle and only checked when she was back under her roof with the hallway clock in view. Banking alerts. She put them beside the receipts on the worktop and didn't take them further.

Daniel's jacket was back on the chair by the time she returned from the school. She had hung it on the hook; someone had moved it. She

didn't read into that movement. She took the jacket and hung it again, this time placing the hanger so the shoulder seam sat flat.

He came in at lunch for a glass of water because he sometimes did that when the day turned out to be something other than his plan. He set the glass down and watched her face to see if she would give him something he could convert into reason.

"The Rook tonight?" she said, simple tone.

"Yes."

She nodded once. "Do you know if it's open Mondays?"

A micro-second pause. "Of course."

"Okay." She left it there. He wanted an argument. He didn't know he wanted one. He wanted it to be over before it began so he could feel it had been handled.

When he had gone, she called The Rook. The recorded voice told her their hours. Closed Mondays. Breath paused. She checked the listing and the website to make sure it wasn't an out-of-date message. The hours matched. She wrote 'Rook closed Mondays' in the MASTER pad and the time she had called, then in the margin noted 'He said Rook tonight (Mon)'. She put a small dot next to the week before last on a line where he had said 'conference Dundee' and typed the name he had used into the search bar. The event page was still live. At the top, a red banner: Postponed. New date to be announced. The post was dated before the week he claimed to have been away for it. Noted.

She copied the page address into the pad by hand so it would still exist if the page shifted later. She didn't print it. Paper multiplied in ways people turned into labels. She would take the screen to the place where it mattered, not push a pile across a table at home.

She sent Ailsa a message with the column of facts she had and nothing else.

ROOK CLOSED MONDAYS. HE SAID ROOK TONIGHT (MON).
CONFERENCE DUNDEE PAGE SAYS POSTPONED BEFORE HIS TRIP.
RECEIPTS LAST WEEK LATE + HOTEL BAR. TOOTHBRUSH IN
GLOVE COMPARTMENT (PHOTO). THIS IS ABOUT CUSTODY, ISN'T
IT. THE TOOTHBRUSH AND THE HOTEL BAR. HE IS BUILDING A
CASE WITH SOMEONE LINED UP.

Ailsa replied with the tone she used when she tightened a bolt rather than when she talked about family.

LIKELY AFFAIR, YES. NOT YOUR POINT. TIE ONE TO A
SABOTAGE TIME. DON'T ARGUE. SCHOOL IS WATCHING. KEEP
YOUR SHAPE.

She typed back:

AYE. FOURTEEN FORTY-FIVE ANCHOR. PICK-UP CLEAN.

Phone face down with the screen toward the wood. She made no tea.
The taste could wait.

The hours between midday and the anchor followed the same pattern. Laundry to radiators, the towel that had gone sour replaced with a fresh one. She put a small curve mark next to pick-up in the MASTER pad as she had in the morning. She didn't put anything on the wall page; it was for other eyes.

At 14:45, the centre corridor held the steady heat and the faint smell of sports balls that never left. Gregor saw her before she spoke and stepped into his doorway. He looked at the clock, then at her. He raised his voice the way a person did when they wanted reception to experience a sentence in public space without making it a performance.

"I see you now," he said. "The clock shows fourteen forty-five."

She stood on the strip between the tape and the gouge and let the words sit in the air for the second it took them to become part of the place. She nodded once, stepped to the desk, and, low, asked that if Gregor was out, reception say the minute aloud under the clock. Then she

left. The air outside was sharp against her skin. She folded her hands into her sleeves and went to the school.

Finn came out with his bag at the usual time. His face changed when he saw her. They crossed. He counted under his breath and cut off the numbers exactly where he always did. They walked home in step. She wrote the arrival time in the MASTER pad at the counter and set a small curve next to it. The wall stayed blank except for the items she had given it already and the marks someone else had pinned and that she had lifted away.

Isla passed through on the way to her homework chair. She carried herself in the precise, contained way she had developed since summer. She looked at the board with the quick turn of the head that avoided the body following. Her sleeves were pulled down over her hands. Her watch, two minutes fast, didn't receive her eye.

"Do you need anything for your science sheet?" Maeve asked.

"No."

"Right."

She didn't say more. The girl went past without friction and settled in a chair that had been called hers for weeks now by custom.

They ate pasta because it made the evening go straight. Finn grated cheese and concentrated on keeping the pile on the plate. After, he read his train book on the rug and looked up at his mother at the spot he always picked to check for continuity. She gave it to him. He asked for something sweet. She gave him two biscuits and didn't allow a third.

Daniel came home later than he had said again, set his phone face down near the sink with the sound off and the button still warm under his thumb. He didn't look at the board. He poured water into a glass without asking if anyone wanted any. He kept to the careful middle he had chosen. It kept him out of an argument.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Running as set," she said. "I was at the centre before pick-up."

"Right. Well. If it helps," he said, and the words lay there unconnected to anything. He started to say something else and then didn't.

He moved to the doorway. She stood at the counter and the silence held while the hallway clock ticked the next minute. She didn't mention The Rook. She didn't ask about Dundee. She had the shape she would use later and she would not spoil the lines now by throwing them into a kitchen where they could be denied by tone.

She washed the two last mugs, dried them, and placed them on the rack upside down in a straight line.

Upstairs, she set out clothes for the morning. She slid the MASTER pad under the pillow. Not a phone. Not a device someone could lift while she slept. Paper like this had once been laughable to the people who treated household systems as play. It had weight now because she had taught it to. She lay flat and kept her breathing in line with the hallway clock until sleep arrived without permission.

Morning again, and the air carried a colder edge. She woke before the alarm, counted the two turns of the lock in her head, and moved into the day. She went to the kitchen and set the kettle on without pushing the switch. Finn padded in with his book. She handed him a slice of toast because he had come to expect that on a morning when she stood in the same place without moving for long enough to plan the next hours.

Messages arrived in response to the ask she'd sent last night. Kirsty forwarded the coffee screenshot she had sent after the promenade with the timestamp visible and not cropped. Jo sent the short line she had sent the day before about skipping this week because of 'loads on' in full rather than in preview. Maeve typed thank-yous and didn't add anything. She put both under the heading PHRASE CHECKS in the pad and copied the phrasing entirely rather than summarising. 'Look after yourself' had arrived twice yesterday. She didn't write that here. She would place that

in front of someone who kept records, not wash it out by writing it at her own counter.

She wrote a small list: Gregor statements with dates; Ailsa nine-fifteen; reception view; photographs with context; bank entries times; The Rook closed Mondays; Dundee conference page. Under it she wrote: headteacher questions. How are collection messages authenticated? Where is caller ID held? Who can amend contact lists? How fast are logs preserved and by whom? She underlined preserve because that was the word systems used when they meant save for later in case of trouble.

Downstairs, Daniel came to the doorway with the same carefully constructed centre to his expression.

"I need to be in Leith later," he said. "Could you do tea if I'm late?"

"Yes," she said. She kept her eyes on the pad and then raised them. "If there's anything that needs arranging for school, email me."

He nodded as if that was ordinary. "Of course."

She didn't tell him she would be at the centre before pick-up again. He already knew because she'd told the school and had said it in the kitchen yesterday. Saying it today did nothing but give him a line to use later about her saying a thing. He had learned to use her words against her not by malice but by habit.

After drop-off she walked the promenade because walking held time without wasting it. The sea smell sat at the back of her throat; the cold kept people moving briskly. She returned to the centre at 09:15 because building the stack mattered. Ailsa stood under the clock again, and this time Gregor was at his doorway with his keys on a belt and his thermos open on the desk. He looked at the face and then at Maeve.

"I see you now. The clock shows nine fifteen," he said.

Ailsa wrote the sentence in her notebook as he said it and read it back. Maeve nodded and left. No one clapped. That was the point.

Phone face down, she matched her breath to the hallway clock for a minute to reset the pacing of the day. She kept her voice in the register she had rehearsed. When she needed to use it in a room with Morven and an office person with a lanyard, it would come without thinking. She repeated the script once in the kitchen with the kettle humming low and then stopped. Over-rehearsal flattened everything.

The day moved. She hung the towel on the radiator. No smell this time. The oven stayed off. The house was quiet except for the sounds of people moving around each other without talking. Isla came through at one point for a glass. She didn't pick a fight and neither did Maeve. People could call that calm. It was control.

At 14:45, Gregor wasn't on the corridor. Maeve stood where reception could see her. The receptionist looked up. "I see you now. The clock shows fourteen forty-five." She left for the gate. Finn was there. He counted as always. At the counter, Maeve wrote the arrival time in the MASTER pad and placed the curve. Routine held because she kept it, and because there were witnesses who didn't owe her anything and said the minute out loud.

After tea, a steady one, Daniel set his phone on silent again and moved in the careful way he always did when he wanted to appear helpful without taking a side. He looked as if he wanted the next month to pass without him having to act. That wasn't a crime. It was a choice.

"We should maybe talk about..." he began.

"Email me your points," she said, in the tone she had practised. "I'll answer in writing."

He closed his mouth and nodded as if she had said a thing he had considered already. He left the room with his glass, the water showing the line where it reached and sat.

She washed the pan, wiped the hob, and wrote ALARM CHECKED with the minute. She put the pad under the pillow later and lay still. She kept the plan in her head without running it again. She slept.

She woke before the alarm again. The hallway clock had kept time. She turned the lock and counted aloud in a whisper so the sound didn't wake anyone. One. Two. She put the toast down for Finn without looking at it. The kettle sat on the base; she didn't press the switch. The day ahead was planned.

She folded the receipts back into the MASTER pad and moved them to an envelope because paper became creased and then someone said it didn't look right. She didn't seal it. She didn't leave it in the house; she put it in her coat pocket and wrote the time in the pad. She would carry what mattered until it could be placed in a room where a person who kept records had to accept that it existed. She would wait for the right night to connect to the right line. Then she would speak, with a witness, and she would not move off her script.

She stepped into the cold, pulled the door behind her until the lock took, and, in the cold, her breathing steadied. She went to place herself under the tide face again because she had chosen to live inside a system that didn't require anyone's belief to run.

Chapter 10

Anchors Undone

She left the house early enough to stand where she was meant to stand without hurry. The hallway clock held steady. Two turns of the lock, counted under her breath because counting kept the ritual intact. Cold air met her on the step and pressed against the skin of her face. The smell off the Forth sat in the back of her throat, clean and sharp.

Her coat felt heavier on the left where the envelope sat in the inside pocket. She registered the weight and let it be there without touching it. The street ran quiet. A woman pushed a buggy along the far pavement with her head down against the wind. A bus rolled past the stop and then was gone. She kept to the familiar line along the promenade and then cut over toward the community centre's glazed frontage.

Inside, the corridor heat met her and softened the edges of the cold that had stuck to her hands. She walked left and placed her shoes between the strip of tape and the gouge in the lino, adjusted so that both marks sat even with her toes. Gregor was at his office door. His keys sat at his belt in their usual place. He looked at the tide face, then at her.

"I see you now," he said, loud enough for reception to hear. "The clock shows fourteen forty-five."

She let the sentence settle. No one applauded. Two people walked past in gym kit. The receptionist's head was bent over a stack of forms, but the words had carried. Maeve nodded once. "Thank you," she said, pitched low, and moved on without adding anything that would change the shape of what had just happened.

Outside again, the air cooled her face. She adjusted the scarf at her neck without breaking stride and walked toward the school. The glass-fronted reception sat beyond the gate; she stood on her usual paving slab and placed her hands inside her sleeves to keep the movement still. Parents bunched and thinned around her with the shift of the minute. Children's voices carried through the hum of the building.

Isla appeared first. She had the controlled walk she had learned over the last months, moving straight, not dragging her feet, sleeves pulled over her hands in a way that made her look younger without trying to. She glanced once toward the board in the reception area and then looked at Maeve without moving close.

"Mrs Watson's taking Finn," she said, tone neutral. "Just today. You said it yesterday."

"No." Maeve kept her voice level, not loud. "No plan stands unless it's on paper in the house and anchored. There's nothing on the board for that. There's no email."

"You already sorted it," Isla said. "It was just to make things easier because of your centre stop. She said you texted."

Maeve did not give the reaction Isla wanted. "I did not text. You know the rule." She kept her eyes on Isla's face without hardening them. "Where is Finn?"

"Coming," Isla said, and her gaze flicked to the doors, calculating the exact point at which the latch would release. "It's supposed to be quick. Between the half and the hour. She can take him back by five."

The line sat there. Between the half and the hour. Her language, lifted and turned back toward her.

The door opened and Finn came out with his bag on both shoulders, eyes searching and then landing on her. He moved toward her and then checked when he saw the woman approaching from the left with a small dog in a coat at the end of a short lead.

“Maeve,” the neighbour said in the cheerful tone people used when they wanted to smooth something that shouldn’t need smoothing. “Are we still okay for Finn to come for a bit? We’ve got the Lego out. He’ll be back by five.”

The dog’s coat was red. Its ears shook once when it stopped. Maeve recognised the woman from the promenade weeks ago and from gates and pavements for years before that. A good neighbour, the kind who made polite talk and carried bags in when the lift stuck.

“I didn’t agree that,” Maeve said. “There’s nothing set for that.”

“Oh,” the woman said, and she raised her phone in a way that showed she intended to refer to it without thrusting it forward. “It was your number. You said ‘between the half and the hour.’ That you’d do your centre thing and then I could take him.” She stopped, looked at Finn, and shifted tone. “It’s just for a bit.”

Through the glass, a teaching assistant glanced at Maeve’s sleeves, then back to the release list.

Her breath miscounted once.

Maeve’s hands were still inside her sleeves. “I’ll answer this in writing,” she said, one of the lines she had practised until it sat ready. “Please record that I deny sending any message. If you want to plan something for another day, email me and copy my sister.”

The woman’s expression softened into concern. “It’s no bother. You’ve got a lot on. We can reschedule.”

“I don’t have anything on that affects Finn today,” Maeve said. “We’re going home.” She looked at Finn, and he moved in toward her without question.

Isla stood half a step away, her watch under her sleeve, fast by two minutes. “Dad’ll fix it later,” she said to Finn, pitched for his ear.

“It’s fine either way,” she added, still neutral.

Finn's mouth moved as if he were about to ask a question and then stopped. He looked between Isla and Maeve, the lines of his face arranged as if he were reading a timetable and choosing which line ran.

"We're going," Maeve said, steady enough to hold him. She nodded once to the neighbour. "Another time, if it's set."

"Of course," the woman said. "Look after yourself." The dog shook its head again and moved its feet in a small adjustment on the pavement.

Maeve didn't answer the phrase. She took Finn's hand for the crossing because it was cold and because today needed the touch more than usual. They walked across at the line, and Finn counted under his breath as he always did, cutting off the numbers at the far pavement without prompting. She kept the pace consistent and did not look back, not for Isla's expression and not for the fact of the woman still waiting with the dog.

On the near corner, she took her phone out without breaking stride and typed a short line to Ailsa.

LIVE VOICES OVERRIDING ANCHORS. NEIGHBOUR QUOTED 'BETWEEN THE HALF AND THE HOUR.' NEED COUNTER.

She put the phone back in her pocket face down, where it lay against the fabric without making a sound. She didn't speak until they were well along the pavement. "Home," she said to Finn. "Routine."

He nodded once and squeezed her hand twice in a rhythm he had learned when he was small and they were teaching him to cross without running. She let go at the end of the railings where they always separated.

At the house, she counted the turns of the lock softly. One. Two. The hallway air had the quiet warmth that came from the program ticking the heat back to day setting shortly before three. Keys went in the bowl and she registered the chip on the rim without touching it. She did not look at the wall page. From the drawer, she took the MASTER pad and wrote the arrival time with the curve mark next to it. She added a line: 'GATE:

NEIGHBOUR PRESENTED MESSAGE “BETWEEN THE HALF AND THE HOUR.” DENIED BY M. NO PAPER. NO EMAIL. ISLA PRESENT. SAID “DAD WILL FIX IT LATER.” She wrote the minute from the hallway clock after the line.

The phone on the counter vibrated once with Ailsa’s reply.

ANCHOR STILL STOOD. DON’T ARGUE. WE’LL ADAPT. CAN ADD A WITNESS AT GATE IF YOU WANT. I’M ON SHIFT TIL FIVE. CALL AFTER IF YOU NEED.

Maeve typed:

MEETING PROBABLE NOW. SCHOOL WILL HEAR A VERSION.

Ailsa:

DON’T GET DRAWN. EMAIL THE SCHOOL YOUR VERSION IN TWO LINES. ‘PLEASE LOG: I WAS AT COMMUNITY CENTRE 14:45 (GREGOR). I COLLECTED FINN AS USUAL. NO PRE-ARRANGED PLAN. HAPPY TO CONFIRM BY EMAIL.’

She would take one clean piece from Daniel before Thursday: written or nothing. She opened a draft to Daniel with the subject line 'Thursday clarification' and left it unsent.

She set it as a rule, everything in writing until the meeting, any direct confrontation held for that room.

Maeve looked at Finn on the rug with the train book already open at the freight section. He was reading the bit about yard signals, one finger marking the column he liked. She lifted her head toward the kettle and didn’t press the switch. She chose the email.

Keeping it simple, as advised, she wrote exactly what Ailsa had given her and added the smallest extra detail that gave it context without turning it into a complaint.

PLEASE LOG: I WAS AT PORTOBELLO COMMUNITY CENTRE 14:45 (GREGOR STATED THE MINUTE). I COLLECTED FINN AT THE

USUAL TIME. THERE WAS NO PRE-ARRANGED COLLECTION BY ANY OTHER ADULT. HAPPY TO CONFIRM BY EMAIL.

She copied Morven and pressed send. The message left without delay. She placed the phone face down and wrote, 'Email sent to the school office, cc Morven.' She added the minute from the hallway clock in the pad.

Finn looked up for the confirmation he always sought. She gave it to him with a small nod and the ordinary word she used when he wanted to know if anything had broken. "Fine."

He went back to the book. The house stayed quiet.

The call came just after four. The phone buzzed against the wood with a sound she could place even without looking. She turned it over and read MORVEN SATTAR on the screen. She picked it up and pressed accept.

"Hello, Mrs Clarke," Morven said. The calm tone was the one she used for anxious situations. "I've had a note of an incident at pick-up. I wanted to check with you directly."

"Thank you," Maeve said. "I emailed the office. I was at the community centre at quarter to three. Gregor McCreadie said the minute out loud. I collected Finn at the usual time. There was no pre-arranged plan for anyone else to collect him."

"Yes," Morven said. "I have your email here. Thank you for sending that. There is also a report from another parent who believed there was a plan for a playdate today. She says she had a message from your number and that you declined at the gate. She felt that placed her in a difficult position with her own child."

"I did not send any message to arrange that," Maeve said. She kept her voice in the centre where the words sat straight. "I am happy to confirm by email at any time. If any message is presented as from me, I would like the content and time recorded and the number it was received on. Please note that I deny sending it."

“Understood,” Morven said. Paper turned in the background, the slight rasp of it against a desk. “You have been in touch about the community centre routine. We have that on record. We would now like to propose a support meeting to ensure everyone is clear on collection arrangements and to reduce the chance of misunderstandings.”

“When?” Maeve asked.

“This week,” Morven said. “If possible within three working days. I can offer Thursday at ten, or Friday at nine thirty. We would have myself, our office manager, and a family liaison present. We would invite Daniel as Finn’s father. You are welcome to bring a supportive person with you.”

“Thursday at ten,” Maeve said. “And I would like my sister, Ailsa Kerr, to attend in a supportive capacity.”

“That is fine,” Morven said. “I’ll send a formal invite to both of you. Could you confirm by reply, please?”

“Yes,” Maeve said. “Please also note that I deny sending any message today about a playdate. I am happy to provide whatever is needed to verify my movements. I will bring the relevant records.”

“Thank you,” Morven said. “One further note: if another adult is to collect Finn in future, please ensure the office has an email from you by noon that day with the details. I understand you have a system; however, in the absence of an email, we will continue to release to you or Daniel as usual.”

“I understand,” Maeve said.

“There has been a lot for everyone,” Morven said. “These meetings are supportive. We will agree clear steps.”

Maeve didn’t answer the framing. “I will look for the invitation.”

“Thank you,” Morven said. “Goodbye for now.”

The line clicked. Maeve placed the phone on the counter with the screen down. The kettle sat on its base with the switch up. She didn’t

press it. She opened the MASTER pad and wrote: ‘Morven called at 16:07. Proposed support meeting Thu 10:00 with Morven, office manager, family liaison, and Daniel. Ailsa supportive. I accepted. Email to follow.’ She underlined ‘Thu 10:00’ once and pressed a dot next to it to mark it as a decision point; the dot indented the next page.

Finn read his page and then looked up. “Trains in the snow,” he said, showing the picture without getting up.

Maeve let her face loosen a fraction in his direction. “We can look at that after tea.”

He nodded and went back to the diagram. Her phone buzzed with the incoming email and she turned it over to check the subject line. ‘Parent Support Meeting, Thursday 10:00, Invite’. She opened it and read the lines twice. The words were neat and ordinary. She answered with ‘I will attend. Ailsa Kerr will attend in a supportive capacity.’ She addressed it to the office and copied Morven.

She set the phone face down again. The envelope in her coat pocket rested against her side when she moved. She took a breath and let the rhythm of the house catch her. She washed one mug, set it to drain, wiped the small water ring where the mug had sat, then stood for a moment and let the hallway clock mark her next movement.

Daniel came through the doorway with his careful expression. “Do you want me to copy in the office about Thursday, or, um, leave it with you?”

“Email me your points,” she said. She kept her voice neutral. “I’ll answer in writing.”

“Right,” he said. He tapped his phone with his thumb and put it down on the edge of the counter. “I’ll do that.” He looked like he wanted to ask another question and then decided not to. He went to the sink and turned the tap on and off, pouring water into a glass. He left it on the worktop with the meniscus level.

“Tea?” he said.

“No,” she said.

He left the room quietly.

She pulled the MASTER pad closer and turned to the page where she’d begun to write phrase patterns because patterns mattered more than points. Under PHRASE CHECKS she wrote: ‘Isla today at gate, “Dad will fix it later.” Daniel at school in reception weeks prior, “We’ll keep it simple.” Daniel at home recurring, “If it helps.”’ She put a line connecting ‘fix it later’ to ‘keep it simple’ in the margin. Her grip tightened on the pen. A single connection demanded caution; multiple points that shared timing and intent deserved more weight. Those phrases kept appearing around handovers and home arrangements. Witnesses needed to sit where handover happened, and documents needed to show order and time.

She turned the page back to Thursday and ran the list once under the heading, pressing harder on the downstrokes: anchors with Gregor’s spoken lines and the reception fallback; Ailsa’s 09:15 checks; photographs of the receipts and the sealed toothbrush with their contexts; joint-account entries aligned against disputed days; the phrase checks; a request to preserve any logs tied to messages. She underlined preserve because that was the word institutions accepted. Not a favour. A record. She noted where receipts and City Cabs clusters sat against claimed message days and wrote it as correlation, not proof.

Finn came to the doorway and hovered, holding the train book with both hands. “Biscuits?”

“Two,” she said. “Then we’ll look at the snow one.”

He nodded. She opened the tin and counted two into his hand. He went back to the rug and placed the book down as if it were a map.

She wanted a second set of eyes; she sent Ailsa the list.

She texted Ailsa:

MEETING THU 10:00. MORVEN + OFFICE + FAMILY LIAISON + DANIEL. YOU AS SUPPORT. CONFIRMED.

Ailsa replied within a minute.

GOOD. WE'LL SIT TOGETHER. KEEP YOUR LINES. DO NOT ENGAGE WITH ISLA BEFORE THAT. CONFRONT DANIEL ONLY ON YOUR TERMS WITH A WITNESS OR BY EMAIL.

She typed:

ISLA TO FINN: "DAD WILL FIX IT LATER." MATCHES HIS GATE LINE "WE'LL KEEP IT SIMPLE." KEEPING A LIST. AM I OVER-READING?

Ailsa:

NO. YOU'RE NOT. TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS. DON'T PUSH HER BEFORE THE MEETING. WE'LL SET THE TABLE. YOU'LL BRING THE CLOCK AND THE LINES.

Maeve watched the little speech bubble settle and then disappear. She wrote 'Ailsa: Trust instincts. Don't confront Isla yet' in the margin of the pad and put a small curve next to it, a private anchor for her own restraint.

She set the next three days as a block in the pad, the pen scoring the paper: daily 14:45 under the clock with the line spoken by Gregor or reception; 09:15 checks when possible with Ailsa standing; email only; the wall page remains non□authoritative; ask reception to log and preserve. She underlined 'NO TEXTS' and added the thin curve she used for aligned items on the wall week page. She would not add the meeting to the wall. The house page existed for other eyes. It did not hold if it was challenged. The pad under her hand was the thing that mattered.

Tea would have made the moment easier to occupy, but that was the point. She left the kettle as it was. Finn came back to the doorway with the book opened to the snow photograph. He held it up. "They put grit down," he said, as if the picture had told him a rule.

“They do,” she said. “They do when it’s needed.”

Isla passed through later and lifted the towel before Finn stepped out of the bath. She placed it over his shoulders without speaking and waited for him to step onto the mat. The boiler clicked and settled. It was an ordinary sound that told Maeve the house could still be held.

Afterwards, at the table, they ate without fuss. Pasta again because it kept the evening steady. Finn grated cheese and concentrated on keeping it over the plate. Isla watched her book more than her plate, turning a page after she swallowed rather than while she brought the fork up. Daniel arrived later than he had said and rested his phone face down near the sink. He didn’t mention the email. Maeve didn’t offer it.

“Thursday,” Daniel said, as if making an entry. “The school. They emailed me.”

“Yes,” Maeve said. “Thursday.”

“I’ve cleared my diary. I’ll be there. We’ll keep it simple.”

She nodded. “Good.” She didn’t add any of the words in her throat, not here where they could be rinsed away by a shift in tone. They would sit in a room at ten on Thursday with people who made notes. That was when the words would matter.

She washed the pan after dinner and set it to drain. She wiped the hob. The ritual took her hands through the same movements in the same order and cleared the space without needing to name what the space represented. She checked the hallway lock with two counts and set the MASTER pad under her pillow.

In bed, she lay still and matched her breathing to the hallway clock’s marks without forcing it. The meeting sat in her head as a date rather than as an event with a shape. In the morning she would go to the centre again. If Ailsa could stand under the clock at nine fifteen she would. If not, reception would be enough. The point was repetition. She would lay the stack down where someone whose job required it would see it and

accept that it existed. Proof didn't have to be liked. It had to be there.

Morning brought the ordinary cold and the dull light that came with late autumn. She woke before the alarm and turned the lock twice without thinking about the numbers she said. Toast went down for Finn. The kettle stayed off. She checked the envelope in her coat to reassure herself that it hadn't been moved in the night. It hadn't. She put the coat back on the hook and washed her hands.

At drop-off, Isla split off at the older classes door and disappeared without looking back. Finn counted the slabs without making a game of it. At the gate he squeezed her hand twice and then let go. He went in, and she did not linger. She walked the promenade because the air helped her plan without words.

At 09:15 she stood again under the clock. Gregor wasn't at the doorway. Reception looked up and saw her. "I see you now," the receptionist said. "The clock shows nine fifteen." She wrote 'reception' and the minute in the MASTER pad and moved on without comment. She didn't need thanks here. She needed the sentence to exist in the place where it would be remembered.

At home, she wrote the line again under the heading for Thursday, not because it was Thursday but because everything that sat near that date now needed a frame. She added: 'REQUEST: PRESERVE CALL LOGS RE: ANY MESSAGES CITED. BRING QUESTIONS.' Then she recopied her questions from the other page into one line with the key terms she would use at the table: caller ID storage, who could amend contact lists, how fast logs were preserved and by whom. She underlined preserve again because they always used that word.

She looked at the wall page and left it alone. Nothing new had appeared on it since yesterday's slips that she had removed and stored. Two coloured pushpins lay at the back of the narrow drawer with the spare batteries, where she had put them alongside the slips. She didn't touch them.

Late afternoon held the same familiar weight. She went to the centre at the usual time, took her mark under the clock, and Gregor gave the line. She moved on.

At the gate, Maeve stood on her slab and kept her hands inside her sleeves. She set her face to neutral, a refusal to add movement to what didn't need movement. Finn came out. He saw her. He came straight to her. Isla came through a minute later and scanned the small space around the queue. She didn't speak. They walked home in the set lines they had established.

Daniel was late again. He sent a message: RUNNING LATE. GO AHEAD WITH TEA. She didn't reply. She prepared pasta and set two mugs upside down on the draining board after rinsing them. Finn read and then asked for something sweet. She gave him two biscuits. He didn't ask for a third.

When the email from the school settled in later with a formal invite and the agenda attached, she opened it and read it once. The agenda was plain. That didn't make it easy. She replied with 'Received. I'll attend. Ailsa Kerr supportive.' She printed nothing.

Upstairs, she set out clothes for morning. She checked the envelope again in her coat pocket and then left it there. She placed the MASTER pad under her pillow and lay flat. The hallway clock marked the room. She didn't rehearse the lines out loud. She didn't need to. They sat ready.

Thursday was the next fixed date. She would keep the line until then. She would not let anyone push her into a scene that could be used later in a way that turned the shape of things against her. She would put the clock, the sentences, the photographs, and the dates on the table, and she would keep her hands steady. That was the plan. It wasn't comfort. It was structure she could follow long enough to breathe.

Chapter 11

Pre-Intervention Pressure

The email arrived at 10:26, the subject line set in the careful tone schools used when they wanted to sound calm about anything that wasn't. Parents' Evening, Updated arrangements. She wiped the small ring under a mug and brought the screen closer because placement and distance mattered when messages carried risk.

The body of the message listed time slots and a polite instruction not to linger in corridors. Two lines down, set apart as if they were helpful, sat the sentence that changed the terms. Our Designated Safeguarding Lead and the family liaison will be available during the evening for any parent wishing to discuss support.

Reading it again, she copied the sentence onto a fresh page of the MASTER pad in short form. DSL + family liaison present at Parents' Evening. Not just teachers. Next to it, she wrote the minute from the hallway clock without adding a thought. The oven display sat dark.

The kettle was on its base without the switch pushed. The hallway clock clicked with its usual certainty and the air coming through the letterbox smelled faintly of salt and cold. She put the phone face down and looked at the week page on the pinboard without touching it. Parents' evening belonged on the house wall, in theory, as a neutral thing. A place to talk about phonics and times tables. It wasn't going to be that.

She slid the MASTER pad closer and started a column that would fit inside ten lines on the day. Thursday was set for ten by Morven. Parents' evening was a separate date, but the phrasing indicated how that date would be read when her name came up in any staff room. She wrote only what could sit in a file.

1) Anchor at Portobello Community Centre: caretaker states minute aloud. Reception fallback confirmed.

2) 09:15 checks with A.K. present when possible.

3) Email only. No texts. No phone plans. No unscheduled changes.

4) Preserve call logs. Caller ID storage. Who can amend contacts. Who preserves logs and within what time window.

After the fourth point, she put a dot in the margin. Overwriting sharpened paper edges. She didn't need more than those lines in the room. Anything beyond that would turn into a story, and stories were what people used against you when they had already decided. She pressed the pen onto the pad again and made a small curve mark next to Thursday as a reminder to pair it with the tide clock. The curve matched the one she had been drawing on the house week page next to anything she harmonised with the centre.

The phone vibrated with the low, even buzz she allowed for school mail and Ailsa. On her phone, she opened a new message to her sister because this needed two points of contact, hers and someone else's.

THU 09:15 UNDER TIDE CLOCK BEFORE 10:00. CAN YOU STAND WITH ME AND SAY THE MINUTE? THEN I GO STRAIGHT TO SCHOOL.

Ailsa's reply came on the next breath.

AYE. I'LL BE THERE. SAY THE MINUTE OUT LOUD. WRITE IT. YOU KEEP YOUR LINES IN THE ROOM.

Phone down, she looked at the kettle again without reaching for it. Not pressing the switch calmed her throat. Heat softened you. Heat made you accept reassuring words when the point was to keep edges in place.

She called the community centre reception and asked for Gregor. The woman at the desk put the phone on the counter and called his name. He came on the line with his steady pace of speech.

“Gregor McCreadie.”

“It’s Maeve Clarke,” she said. “Thursday morning, nine fifteen. Are you likely to be on the corridor by the tide clock?”

“I will be,” he said. “If I’m pulled into the boiler room or the store, reception can say the minute. They’ll see you. Same as before.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll be under the clock. I’ll need the line as agreed.”

“Aye,” he said. “I see you now. The clock shows,” He stopped. “We’ll say it at the time. You ken the script.”

“I do.”

With the minute noted, she wrote ‘Gregor confirmed: corridor at 09:15; reception fallback’ on the MASTER pad and put the phone down. The pad stayed under her hand. Weight helped. On the next page, she wrote the Thursday morning line again because duplication was the point. If one page tore, the other stood.

The hallway clock clicked with the same steady tick it had kept every day she had relied on it. She looked at the emails she could clear without risk. There was a promotional line from a shop she hadn’t been in for months. Delete. There was a message from the PTA rota organiser confirming she had been removed from the subcommittee list “nae bother” and ending with the three words they all used. Look after yourself. She left it in place and copied the exact phrase under PHRASE CHECKS.

The parents’ evening email sat open again on the screen. She scrolled to see if the line about safeguarding lead was an image or plain text. Plain text. She highlighted the sentence and pressed copy. In a new draft addressed to herself, she pasted it there with the time. External record. If the school altered the online version later, she would still have the original words in a dated mail on a device not connected to the school’s systems.

Outside, a delivery van idled and cut the engine. She heard a short knock at a neighbour's door and the muffled thud of a parcel changing hands. The rooms were quiet aside from the metallic tick of the hallway clock and the low click from the boiler cupboard when the program lifted the temperature a notch. She wiped the inside of her thumb along the edge of the worktop and felt the wet from the ring she'd already wiped. The movement ended the urge to make tea.

She took a last look at the house week page. No new slips. No new handwriting. The cheap coloured pins she had taken down yesterday stayed in the narrow drawer with the spare batteries and the two slips that said she would be at a community centre at 17:30 and bring apple slices. She shut the drawer with the same pressure she always used so the cutlery above didn't chatter.

Cancel all non-essentials for forty-eight hours, she wrote into the MASTER pad. Then she acted on it. To Kirsty:

Hi. Can we skip this week entirely? Things are tight here. I'll be in touch after Thursday.

She sent it and moved to the next. To Jo.

Let's not put anything in this week. I'll message when I can offer a clean day.

Email for both. No texts. In the pad: non-essential social removed; email only; time noted.

Next, a two-sentence note to the GP practice manager's address she had pinned weeks ago into the board and written into the pad. No opinion. Only a request.

Please confirm receipt of my previous request for call log access regarding the 16:14 cancellation. I will attend a school meeting on Thursday and would like to state a request for preservation of relevant logs in writing.

She added the send and minute to the pad, underlined preserve once, and did not wait for a reply. Systems moved when they were ready. She had learned to put the line in and then build around it. Facts let her set clear limits and enforce them.

When she stood, she ran her thumb along the chipped rim of the key bowl until the edge caught. In the pad, she drew a small square to flag checks she wanted routine by tomorrow.

Twenty minutes later, she called Ailsa to confirm what the texts didn't show. Her sister answered on the third ring, the street noise behind her flat open into the microphone.

"You saw the email," Ailsa said.

"I saw the sentence," Maeve said. "Safeguarding lead present. Family liaison present. Parents' evening. They're telling me what to expect."

"They're telling everyone," Ailsa said, "but I hear you. We'll stand under the clock at nine fifteen. I'll say the minute. You'll carry your pad and keep your answers exact."

"I'm keeping to Friday and beyond clear of anything else," Maeve said. "Today and tomorrow I cancel anything that looks social."

"Good," Ailsa said. "Don't get drawn into corridor talk. If anyone tries to be helpful, you say 'I'll answer in writing' and you keep moving."

"I will," Maeve said.

"And make sure you sleep," Ailsa said. "A brain without sleep gets knocked sideways by a raised eyebrow."

"I'll set alarms and write them down," Maeve said. "I'll go to bed early so I'm clear for the early anchor and the meeting."

"Text me your alarm times," Ailsa said. "I'll write them in my book."

"07:02 and 07:09," Maeve said. "Ref hallway clock."

"I'll mirror it," Ailsa said. "I'll see you under the clock."

The call ended and left the small hum of the house in place. She took up the pen and wrote ALARM CHECKED 10:52 in block letters. She underlined the minute once the way she always underlined time when it mattered. She didn't touch the kettle. She avoided any motion that felt like making ease.

She looked at the parents' evening email one more time. The line was still there. It would be there for everyone. Concern was now a feature. It sat on the page for anyone who wanted to put the word supportive next to the word monitoring.

She put the phone face down and wiped the worktop again where there was nothing to wipe. Then she stood still and waited for the minute to turn before moving. She folded the damp scarf on the bannister over her hand once and set it flat. It had dried with a ridge. She pressed the ridge down and kept it there a second longer to make it hold.

By the time she left for the centre at quarter to three, she had added two more lines to the MASTER pad: No unscheduled changes. Email only. She stood under the tide clock at the strip of lino where her shoes always landed and watched the minute hand hold steady before the next jump. Gregor stepped out of the office door at his usual pace.

"I see you now," he said. "The clock shows fourteen forty-five."

She inclined her head. Reception looked up and then back to the desk; she would mark reception present with the minute. Two women walked past toward the main hall without stopping their conversation. The temperature in the corridor ran warm compared to the day outside. Her forearms stayed warm when the outside air cooled her hands. She waited a breath longer, then left for the gate.

Finn came out at the usual time. He saw her and came straight to her without looking into reception. Isla came through the older classes door a

minute later and scanned the narrow space around the doors before crossing to them. She didn't speak and fell into step for the walk home.

At the house, Maeve counted the turns of the lock and set the keys in the chipped bowl. She wrote the arrival time in the MASTER pad with the small curve next to it. She placed a line above the next section: NO NON□ESSENTIALS. NO UNSCHEDULED CHANGES. She underlined the words with straight pressure.

Isla sat with Finn at the table while he took out his reading book and the sheet with the words he had been assigned. Isla had a pencil in her hand but didn't write. She let the point hover over the margin while she spoke.

"After the meeting," Isla said, "Dad will fix everything."

The line was clean. No emphasis. She spoke it for Finn. He looked at Isla and then at Maeve. The back of his neck loosened at the idea of something fixed.

Maeve didn't move except to close a cupboard door that was already closed. At the draining board, she adjusted the angle of a mug, making it parallel to the edge. Her thumb pressed the rim until the nail paled, then she let go.

Finn shifted the paper so the light from the window wouldn't shadow the bottom row. "Will Dad do pick-ups then?" he asked, keeping the question small. "From now on?"

"We'll do what works for routines," Maeve said. She kept her words even, not slow and not quick. "The school needs it the same every day. That's what's best."

Isla nodded without looking at Maeve. "Routines and stability help everyone," she said. "That's what they say."

She said they in the way the staff did, in the tone that didn't require a name because authority sat behind it. She'd heard that tone enough in offices and corridors. Isla had learned it.

Finn's grip on the pencil eased. He read the first line aloud and didn't rush it. Stability felt true when you were eight and the adults made a table of words sit in order. Maeve watched him from the sink and didn't answer the part of her that wanted to step in and restate her position. Today wasn't for that.

She took the MASTER pad up and looked at what she had written after the call with the centre. The words didn't shift when she looked at them now. She pressed the point of the pen into the dot next to preserve and felt the paper give. She let her finger rest on the dot. It kept her hand still when she stepped back toward the doorway.

The next hour followed the usual steps. Isla warmed Finn's towel and waited by the door while he stepped out of the bath, then put it over his shoulders. The boiler clicked and settled. The air in the hallway lifted a notch and then dropped back. At the table they ate without a scrape of chairs. When Finn asked for something sweet, she gave him two biscuits. He didn't ask for a third.

She didn't speak to Isla about the sentence on the table. She recorded it without writing it down. Then she checked each hob dial sat at off and set two mugs upside down on the draining board and looked at the meniscus in the glass of water Daniel had left at the edge of the worktop. It was level.

The laptop pinged on the dining table as she moved past to pick up a dropped sock. She didn't mean to look and then the subject line was there across the corner of the screen in the preview that couldn't be turned off without the password.

Initial Consultation, Family Law. The firm name under it. A Tuesday date. Later than office hours.

Her hand didn't change shape around the sock. She put it on the radiator rail and walked to the table and closed the laptop so the screen wouldn't show anything else. That was enough. She didn't need more than that line. More would spike her pulse; she needed to keep it even. Her jaw set. One breath held, then let out, measured. Fingers stayed steady on the lid.

She took the MASTER pad to the counter and wrote the words with the minute. Subject line: Initial Consultation, Family Law. Firm name: [recorded on sight]. Then she opened a new text to Ailsa and kept the letters inside the edges of the box. HE'S CONTACTED A FAMILY SOLICITOR. I'M GOING TO CONFRONT HIM IN WRITING TONIGHT.

Ailsa's reply came through with a short break before it as if she had drawn breath. FACTS ONLY. NO RANTS. YOU'LL STICK TO DATES AND TIMES. EMAIL HIM THE QUESTIONS AND GIVE A DEADLINE. DON'T DO A SCENE THAT LANDS IN THEIR MINUTES TOMORROW.

Ailsa was right. No scenes. Tonight, the questions would go by email. Tonight was the written confrontation only; tomorrow was for the early anchor and the meeting.

She stood with the phone in her hand and felt the instruction settle. The scene would land somewhere. It always did. In a notebook. In a file. In a sentence that sounded neutral and had your name in it for the record. The school would not see the family solicitor email if she kept the shape of it contained. They would see her if tonight went sideways under her own roof.

She wrote three lines on a new page, numbered and in block letters that kept her hand still.

1) Please confirm the name of the solicitor and the date/time of any consultation.

2) Please confirm whether you have discussed custody or collection arrangements for Finn with any solicitor or third party.

3) Please confirm whether you have proposed any changes to existing routines to the school or any other institution. If yes, state the dates and channels used.

She called the community centre again because she wanted to set the ground before anything else moved. The receptionist recognised her voice and said “One moment” and then Gregor was on the line.

“Tomorrow I’ll be on the corridor from nine,” he said before she asked, as if the earlier call had already set the shape of his day. “If I’m not there, reception can do it. You stand where you stand and I’ll say the line.”

“Thank you,” Maeve said. “I might be there at nine as well as nine fifteen. Early anchor.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “Say if you need the minute twice.”

She hung up and recorded: Early anchor possible. Corridor coverage confirmed. She wrote the minute of the second call.

Her phone vibrated with a calendar reminder. She turned the screen over and saw the dentist reminder that she would have expected next week. It used the old appointment time she had moved to protect Finn’s pick-up days ago. She had phoned the dentist at 11:12 last Wednesday and changed the slot to a morning. She hadn’t written it into Ailsa’s mirror. The movement she did now was to the pad because she had to show something back to the person who had put their name next to hers on a board.

DENTIST: MOVED TO 08:30 (NEXT WEEK, WED). PHONE CHANGE LOGGED 11:12 LAST WED. I DID NOT MIRROR TO AILSA. ERROR. She underlined error once. Then she sent a text to Ailsa.

I MOVED THE DENTIST TO 08:30 NEXT WED BY PHONE LAST WEEK AND FORGOT TO MIRROR IT ON YOUR WALL. ERROR LOGGED. SORRY.

The reply came six minutes later.

NOTED. THANKS FOR SAYING IT. WRITE THE NAME WHO MOVED IT IF YOU HAVE IT. WE'LL ADD IT UNDER 'MINOR SELF-ERRORS' SO IT DOESN'T GET TURNED INTO SOMETHING IT ISN'T.

She called the dentist and asked for the receptionist's name and wrote it in the pad with the minute. Then she sent it to Ailsa. The small correction steadied her. Real errors existed. They didn't belong on the same shelf as what had been happening to her. An error of hers. Small, but there.

Daniel came into the kitchen and set his phone face down by the sink. He poured water. The water sat still in the glass.

"Thursday," he said. "I'll be there." He kept his voice in the level he thought was safe. "We'll keep it simple."

She didn't look at him. "I'm sending you three questions," she said. "Please answer in writing by twelve tomorrow." She let the words be the only movement.

"I don't, " he started, and then stopped. "Alright," he said. "Send them."

She reopened the unsent draft titled 'Thursday clarification' from earlier and replaced its placeholder with the three questions. She added: DEADLINE: 12:00 TOMORROW. ANSWER IN WRITING ONLY. Then she pressed send because the action mattered more than the weighing of it. Her breath hitched once.

'We'll keep it simple' went under PHRASE CHECKS, next to Isla's "Dad will fix everything."

She checked the envelope in her coat again because the solicitor line switched her into inventory mode. The envelope was still there. She wrote the minute and set a small square next to it and filled it in so the eye could land on a shape. Then she closed the cupboard with the router in it and set the phone on the counter face down with Do Not Disturb on and

only alarms active.

Before she went upstairs she opened a new message to Ailsa. QUESTIONS SENT TO D. DEADLINE 12 TOMORROW. EARLY PRE-MEETING ANCHORS 09:00 + 09:15, GREGOR/RECEPTION CONFIRMED. I'LL SLEEP EARLY.

Ailsa replied with the same register she had used all week. GOOD. SLEEP. NO SCENES. CLOCK AND LINES IN THE MORNING. I'LL BE THERE.

She set the two alarms for 07:02 and 07:09 so she would be clear for the early anchor and the meeting, checked the hallway clock, and wrote ALARM CHECKED 21:14. She put the MASTER pad under her pillow. The house was quiet. The heating program clicked down a degree so the air at her face cooled.

She lay flat without forcing her breath to match anything. The hallway clock ran one room away, steady. Tomorrow would start at the tide clock and then move to the table where a woman would write what was said and what wasn't. She had set the rules she would hold to. She had sent the questions that ended the smoothing at home. Tonight wasn't for revising lines in her head. It was for keeping the shape she had made.

She turned the light off at the time she had set and let the room adjust around that decision.

Tonight: no scenes. Tomorrow: the clock, then the room.

Chapter 12

The Confrontation

Thursday morning, before the alarms, she woke without checking the time. The hallway clock was enough. The sound was steady; each jump marked a minute. Cold air slid under the letterbox in a thin line. She left the kettle on its base and did not press the switch.

In the kitchen, the two upside-down mugs stood where she had left them. She turned one a fraction until the handle sat parallel to the worktop edge. On the counter, the plain envelope lay where she had placed it when she checked its presence, the square she had drawn in the MASTER pad filled in beside the time. She slid the envelope closer to her hand without opening it. The ceramic key bowl stayed in its place. She checked the chip with her thumb in a motion that ended at the same point every time.

The floorboard near the stairs gave under weight. She didn't look up until he came into frame, because posture mattered. Daniel crossed the threshold with his glass and did not turn on the light. The movements were habitual; he could find the tap in the dark. He lifted the glass, set it down, and then turned to the sink. The meniscus stayed level when he finished drinking.

"I'll keep this short," she said.

He rested the glass on the counter. No clink. No scrape.

"Two receipts were in your jacket on Monday morning. The Rook. Twenty-two fifty-three. Waterfront Hotel Bar. Twenty-three forty-one. Two mains and two glasses of red. I photographed them with the key bowl in frame and transcribed the times."

He didn't move. The shape of his shoulders remained in its neutral line.

"I also photographed a sealed travel toothbrush in the car glove compartment behind spare bulbs. I didn't touch it. I have the photographs with the handbook and Finn's shin pads for context."

He drew in a breath without making it audible. The overhead light remained off. He had always been tidy in the dark.

"I checked the joint account. The charges align with those on the slips. There's a pattern around the day my scan was cancelled at sixteen fourteen." She kept her voice even, just facts.

He looked toward the window and then back at the tap, a movement without purpose that told her he wanted distance. He didn't clear his throat. He didn't fill the silence.

"Are you seeing someone?"

"Yes," he said. She took one measured breath and made it even.

No emphasis. No apology put into tone. The word existed in the air as a plain fact. The hallway clock marked the next minute.

"I didn't plan for it to be, " He stopped.

"You don't need to finish that sentence," she said.

His mouth moved as if to form another shape, then settled. He wiped his hand along the edge of the worktop. He always straightened when he wanted to present orderly. His shirt sleeves were not rolled yet; this was the version of him that belonged to the morning desk, not the evening bar.

"Have you been altering my calendar or sending messages from my number?" she asked.

He shook his head, the small kind.

"No."

"Have you used any device that looks like mine to send plans?"

"No." His eyes didn't go to the router cupboard. He didn't ask what device she meant.

"Did you call the GP and cancel my scan at sixteen fourteen?"

"No." The word came steady.

"Did you ask anyone to do it for you?"

"No." He glanced toward the ceiling and then to her face.

"Then you need to understand the position I am in," she said.

He held his hands at his sides and didn't touch the glass. He waited for her to speak. He preferred points he could manage. He would then offer a small fix.

"I saw a subject line on your laptop. Initial Consultation, Family Law. A Tuesday time, after hours. What did you discuss?"

He paused. That pause was longer than any in their kitchen in months.

"I spoke to someone to understand options," he said, adjusting the glass a fraction.

She noted the vagueness. Options.

"I wanted to know where I stand if we can't find a way to," His hands made a small circle and stopped.

"Did you discuss custody or collections?" she said.

"We talked about routines," he said.

"Say the word," she said.

He exhaled through his nose.

"Custody came up," he said.

She held her breath to the next tick and let it out.

"I need you to answer me in writing by noon," she said.

"I'll answer," he said.

"No calls. No texts. Email only. Three questions are in your inbox," she said.

"I saw them," he said.

"Then answer by noon."

He nodded once.

"I didn't orchestrate messages or calendars," he said, as if the denial could hold more if it was repeated.

"If you didn't, then we have a second problem," she said.

He looked exactly as he had when a teacher had asked him to come into the office and talk about Finn's reading level. Calm. Open hands. The tone he used then landed on the table now.

"I think you should talk to someone," he said.

"I am talking to people," she said.

"A professional," he said.

"Dr Gupta is a professional. I've asked the practice manager to preserve logs regarding the sixteen fourteen cancellation. I will ask the school about their log preservation at ten o'clock this morning. I will be under the tide clock at nine and again at nine fifteen. Gregor will state the minute. Reception can provide the line if he is pulled. Ailsa will be there. Then I will walk into the room at the school and answer questions in order."

He moved his weight from one foot to the other and then back.

"We could postpone the meeting," he said.

"No."

"We could go together to speak to someone first. Couples therapy. Then go to the school another day when everything's calmer." He watched her face for a sign that he could call it compromise.

"No."

He took a breath and set his hand on the counter.

"I'll be there at ten. I'll back you up," he said.

She angled her head a fraction. The phrase landed in the air. She let it sit because giving it motion would dignify it. He had said 'We'll keep it simple' enough times that the words linked to themselves. He didn't add them now. He didn't need to.

"I'm going to ask you once more on the record," she said.

He looked at her properly for the first time since he had come into the room.

"Have you altered anything in my phone, on the wall, or on any device under this roof?"

"No."

"Have you asked anyone to send messages that look like they came from me?"

"No."

"Then you understand how this reads in the room today."

He made a face that could be read as understanding. It could also be read as surrender. He wasn't good with the difference.

"Do you want me to make tea?" he said.

She shook her head once.

"Leave the kettle off."

She slid the envelope back into her coat pocket and pressed the zip along until it closed. She looked down at the MASTER pad on the counter

and did not write anything yet. The hallway clock gave them another minute. He stood where he was. She left the room.

She pressed the zip on her coat pocket once and turned back. She went back to address Isla's part now, not later. At the edge of the hallway, with the cool from the letterbox in her throat, she stopped. She would not let him set the narrative for anyone else in the house before she had set the conditions outside it. The part that had to hear the next line couldn't be allowed to talk later in the day without her hearing it now.

He had leaned back against the counter again. The glass sat where it had. His mouth worked once without words. She knew that pause.

"Isla thinks it would be calmer at mine," he said. He didn't add a name. He didn't need to. The shape of the word partner didn't appear in his mouth. It existed in the room.

"Calmer," she said.

"She's been trying to make things easier," he said.

"What does that mean?"

He moved his hands in front of him and let them fall again.

"She's practical," he said.

"Has she been contacting people about collections and playdates?" she said.

"She's mature for her age," he said. He said it as if it ended the need for detail.

"Did you know Mrs Watson expected to take Finn yesterday because of a message she believed was from me? Do you know Isla used the phrase 'between the half and the hour' that I use for gate timings? Do you know the office was told Dad would collect on a day I was standing under

the tide clock?"

He took the questions without answering. He watched and waited for a point he could handle.

"Things just get... complicated around the lists," he said.

"What did you ask Isla to do?"

He shook his head. The denial was too smooth to hold content.

"She's trying to help," he said.

"She told Finn, 'Dad will fix everything,'" Maeve said.

"She's twelve," he said.

"Exactly."

The hallway clock held steady and moved again. She nodded to close this turn, because he would keep walking this circle until she was too tired to mark its shape. He didn't see the circle because it kept him in its centre.

"Answer the email by noon," she said.

She moved into the hallway and let the edge of the cool air clear her mouth. The front room stayed dark. On the bannister, the scarf lay flat from last night, the ridge pressed out. She put her fingers on the wool and then took them away to keep the pressure she had set earlier from changing.

Upstairs remained quiet. She stayed still on the bottom stair and then took the step back into the kitchen to lift her phone without waking the house. She carried it into the hallway so the light from the screen wouldn't run across the room.

She opened her sister's thread and typed in a line that fit inside the width of the screen. D ADMITTED AFFAIR. FRAMED ISLA AS 'MAKING THINGS EASIER' AND 'CALMER AT HIS.' HE DENIES ANY MESSAGES. SOLICITOR = 'OPTIONS.' NO POSTPONEMENT.

The three dots came and went. Ailsa's reply arrived at once. AYE. THANK YOU. DON'T ENGAGE ISLA IN THE ROOM. STICK TO CLOCK, LOGS, AND HIS AFFAIR AS MOTIVE. HE'LL TRY TO SOFTEN. KEEP YOUR LINES.

She set a fingertip on the table edge. She let the phone sit in her hand until the minute shifted. Then she pressed the call button because sometimes the voice in her ear put the shape back in her chest where it needed to live. The ringing cut to sound on the third ring.

"I'm here," Ailsa said. Street noise moved around her voice, then faded as if she had turned her face away from the window.

"He's seeing someone," Maeve said.

"Aye," Ailsa said.

"He says he didn't alter calendars or messages. He says Isla thinks it would be calmer at his, and that she's been trying to make things easier."

"He's putting it on Isla to give himself cover," Ailsa said.

"He'll use 'mature for her age' in the room if he gets the chance," Maeve said.

"You won't give him the chance," Ailsa said. There was no softness in it.

"No," Maeve said.

"Clock and lines first. You bring Gregor's words. Reception fallback. Then your questions about log preservation. Then the gate incident with the exact phrasing. Then the forged slips. Then the attic device that vanished. Then his affair. The order matters. Don't invert it," Ailsa said.

"I know the order," Maeve said.

"Good. Don't say Isla's name. If they say it, you answer in one sentence: 'I'm not discussing Isla; I'm discussing processes and records.' That's it," Ailsa said.

"He tried to postpone the meeting. He offered couples therapy first."

"Avoidance," Ailsa said.

"He said he'd back me up."

"You don't need him to back you up. You've got the clock and me sitting beside you," Ailsa said.

"I'll hold the line," Maeve said.

"You will. Are the alarms still set?"

"Yes. Seven-oh-two and seven-oh-nine," Maeve said.

"Good. Do you want me to drive you instead of you walking up after the clock? We'll get you from the centre corridor to the glass doors without gaps. No room for anyone to park a conversation in your way," Ailsa said.

"Yes," Maeve said.

"Right. I'll be parked by the community centre side door at nine twenty. You come out from under the clock, in, and we move. If Gregor's pulled in the boiler room, reception gives the minute. You don't wait on him. You note who said it and go. I'll say the time aloud as well and write it in my book."

"Okay," Maeve said.

"Anything else from him?" Ailsa said.

"He used 'options' and 'routines' and didn't say the partner's name. He said Isla is 'mature' and doesn't need specifics. He denies everything that matters to the logs," Maeve said.

"Then you've got what you need from him for this morning. Sleep the minutes you can. I'll be under the clock with you at nine fifteen and saying the minute out loud. We'll take them one thing at a time. You've got this," Ailsa said.

"Aye," Maeve said.

She ended the call and stood still, then lifted the MASTER pad and set it flat on the table under the kitchen light without switching the light on. She wrote a clean header and left space under it.

THURSDAY 10:00, SUPPORT MEETING

Under the header she drew the small curve mark she had been using to harmonise house and centre. She carried the MASTER pad to the front room and took one of the cheap coloured pins from the drawer because the motion helped, then put it back. She shut the drawer gently so the cutlery above wouldn't chatter.

She went back to the counter and unlocked her phone out of habit and then turned it face down again. She opened the thread with Gregor's number. The name read as the centre number for callouts, passed on a piece of paper by reception the first week she had set the routine. She typed without filler.

MAEVE CLARKE. I'LL BE UNDER THE TIDE CLOCK THIS MORNING 09:00 + 09:15. ARE YOU ON THE CORRIDOR? PLEASE GIVE THE MINUTE. IF PULLED, ASK RECEPTION TO SAY THE MINUTE. THANK YOU.

Gregor's reply came four minutes later while she was still standing with her hand on the edge of the counter. AYE. I'LL BE THERE. IF I'M PULLED, RECEPTION WILL SAY IT. I SEE YOU NOW. THE CLOCK SHOWS, WE'LL SAY IT AT THE TIME.

She let her mouth soften half a degree without changing shape. She added Gregor CONFIRMED BY TEXT, 09:00 + 09:15 to the pad with the minute. The hallway clock kept time as it always did.

She opened her sister's thread again and typed. PICK-UP ME FROM CENTRE SIDE DOOR 09:20. DRIVE TO SCHOOL. IN TO GLASS WITHOUT GAP. Ailsa's reply landed: AYE. I'LL BE THERE. I'LL SAY THE MINUTE OUT LOUD IN THE CORRIDOR AND WRITE IT. YOU'LL KEEP YOUR LINES.

She folded the MASTER pad closed and slid it under her pillow on the sofa for a second because she wanted to feel the weight there before she returned it upstairs. The instinct to keep it on her person never slept. She checked the envelope's ridge through the coat fabric and pressed her finger down until she felt paper compress under the cloth.

She moved back to the table, made space with her hand for what she would carry, picked up three things, then reduced them to two. The MASTER pad. The envelope. She left the toothbrush photographs on the phone and did not print. She opened the cutlery drawer and saw the two forged slips under the pack of batteries. She did not touch them and closed the drawer. She kept the house board out of her hands.

She spoke the opening aloud because tone had to do work that facts could not and listened for how it would sound in the headteacher's office, then took four words out.

"I'm here to set out how I've kept Finn's routine stable. I've sought external verification so it doesn't depend on my word. I'm asking you to preserve relevant logs so we can see where contradictions begin."

The second sentence landed better. She could hear how it would read if someone wrote it down, and she did not move her mouth around the words to soften them or to make them palatable.

She wrote two short lines at the top of the page where her eyes would land first in any room.

ANSWER THE QUESTION ASKED.

PAUSE ONE BREATH BEFORE ANY ANSWER IF PROVOKED.

She looked at the lines, then up at the ceiling, reached for the kettle switch and stopped the motion halfway. She needed a clear head.

The stairs stayed quiet. The house had not registered the conversation in the kitchen. She could not rely on that luck again. After that, she set the phone to Do Not Disturb, allowed alarms through, and lay down; the two times she had set last night read as they should:

seven-oh-two and seven-oh-nine.

In the envelope pocket, the paper rested where she had placed it. She resisted the urge to check it by sight again and used the pressure of two fingers along the seam instead. She studied the kitchen. The two upside-down mugs had not moved. The glass remained on the counter with the water line steady.

She carried the MASTER pad to the bottom of the stairs and then took it up. She placed it under her pillow; the coil turned under the weight of it.

The first alarm cut through evenly. She sat up and pressed the screen and felt the second alarm waiting behind it. The same sound would come seven minutes later. She stood and moved with the shape of the usual morning. The scarf on the bannister lay flat. She touched the ridge she had pressed out earlier and left it as it was. She went into the bathroom and kept her hand on the edge of the sink for a second to check the cold of the porcelain and her own heat against it. She did not need tea. She needed air.

Back in the kitchen, the light shifted a degree toward morning. She lifted the MASTER pad and found the lines she had written and read them without moving her lips. She added one more time-check to the margin under the first line marked with the small curve mark:

09:00, GREGOR SAYS MINUTE (ALLOWED LINE: 'I SEE YOU NOW. THE CLOCK SHOWS [MINUTE]'). RECEPTION FALLBACK.

She closed the pad and kept it in her hand until the second alarm sounded. Upstairs, a small movement gave her Finn. She placed the pad on the table, went to the bottom stair, and let her hand find the rail as he started down with his book tucked under his arm. The routine ran itself for him when the house was quiet. She didn't break it.

"Toast?" she said.

He nodded. She placed the bread under the grill without turning the oven on. She watched the coil through the shelf to make sure nothing had been altered in the night and moved as if this were the day they always had. Finn watched the toast and then opened the book and rested it on the table.

"Train yard," he said in the voice he used before school.

"We'll read when you're ready," she said.

She lifted the toast and set it on a plate. She kept her hands steady as she spread the butter so the second edge didn't tear. She placed the plate where he expected it to be and turned back to the counter to keep her face where it should be. He ate. She kept herself in that space until the next minute changed.

Daniel stayed out of the kitchen. She knew he was still in the house because the front door hadn't opened. The distance he kept now was as much for him as it was for her. He had given her what mattered. He had introduced Isla as a vector of ease and offered to back her up. He had put the word custody into the room. She had the lines she would need.

She would hold the plan together until nine. The tide clock would cover the rest. She squared the envelope in her pocket.

Chapter 13

The Meeting

Ailsa pulled up at the community centre side door with the van heater ticking off and a draft coming through the rubber seal. She cut the engine while Maeve checked her pocket for the envelope by touch, then they moved in together through the staff entrance and along the corridor toward the tide clock. The smell of cleaning fluid sat above the old sports-ball air. The clock's minute hand had that certain jump. Gregor stepped out from his doorway when he saw them enter the line between the tape and the gouge in the lino.

"I see you now," he said, looking up once. "The clock shows nine o'clock."

"Thank you," Maeve said. Her mouth stayed in its usual shape. Ailsa said the minute out loud as well and wrote it in block letters on her small notebook with a line under it. Maeve let the certainty land where she needed it to live. One standard. One line said aloud beside a mechanism that did not care who stood under it.

She didn't look at her phone. She didn't check the hallway clock by memory. She put the minute in her chest and kept it there. This was the point she would come back to if anyone asked where her morning began.

Gregor nodded toward reception. "If I'm pulled, they'll say it."

"Aye," Ailsa said. "We're coming again."

They waited in sight of the clock. At nine fifteen Gregor returned to the doorway. He didn't rush the words. He lifted his eyes to the face again.

"I see you now. The clock shows nine fifteen."

Ailsa repeated the minute aloud and wrote it in her notebook with a second line. Maeve experienced the hand's jump and took the breath she had told herself she would take at that point. This was the second anchor. The shape of the morning matched the plan. No gap between the clock and the next door.

Ailsa led them out at a steady pace. The van's dash clock read two minutes behind the tide clock, but that wasn't the time that mattered. She took the left at the lights. The wind off the Forth showed itself at the corner by the baths and then fell away along the brick line of the school road. A group of parents stood outside with folded arms and phones in their hands. The glass-fronted reception reflected them in a sheet without taking them in.

Inside, the air was too warm. The corridor hum sat low and even. Plastic chairs lined one wall below framed photographs of sports days and assemblies. A staff member at reception read names off a list and buzzed a delivery. Ailsa gave their names and said, "Meeting. Ten." The receptionist wrote them down and asked them to sit. Maeve signed the book; the entry showed 09:52. Maeve kept her coat on and felt the envelope press against her side in the lining. She looked at the floor tiles and made a small adjustment so her shoes rested parallel to a grout line.

Morven came through the inner door on time with the office manager behind and a woman with a plain lanyard that read FAMILY LIAISON. Morven's face had the calm tuned for parents. She checked the names again as if that made the process fairer.

"Thank you for coming in," she said. "We'll sit through there. Few points to cover, and we'll keep to the agenda so everyone's heard."

They went through to a meeting room that had a glass panel looking back at the corridor. The hum was louder in here. A whiteboard on the far wall held a diagram about safety drills. A plastic clock above the board ticked without sounding like anything other than a clock. Maeve chose

the chair with its back to the wall so she could see the door and the glass panel. She placed the MASTER pad on the table in front of her and did not open it. Ailsa took the chair behind her and to the left, in the supporting position they had learned worked. Daniel came in with a careful face and sat opposite. Isla followed and took the seat beside him with her sleeves pulled over her hands and the edge of her watch just visible under knit. She did not look at the clock on the wall.

"We'll start with a quick outline," Morven said. "This is about getting clarity on collection arrangements for Finn so staff aren't given conflicting information at the point of release."

The office manager nodded without adding words. The family liaison set a notepad ready and lifted a pen without clicking it.

"I'll take notes," the liaison said. "We'll keep to the agenda and record decisions." Her voice was soft enough to fit the temperature of the room.

"Thank you," Maeve said. She kept her hands flat against the table so the tendons didn't jump. "I'll keep this straightforward. I've anchored my days to external confirmations so it doesn't depend on my word."

Morven tensed the line of her mouth by a degree that could have been approval or caution. "Go on," she said.

"Most days before pick-up I stand under the tide clock in the community centre corridor," Maeve said. "The caretaker or reception says the minute aloud. I record it. My sister mirrors the record when she's present. Then I come straight here. That's been steady."

She let two seconds pass, then added, "I'm asking that any logs about messages that look as if they came from me be preserved, with times and receiving numbers. That's so we can see where the contradictions begin."

Ailsa's pen moved once: a dot to mark the request. Daniel watched the whiteboard and not her face. Isla sat upright without touching the table edge.

"That's helpful to set out," Morven said. "Let's hold the structure and then look at specifics."

"Gregor, the caretaker, is consistent," Maeve said. "He won't attest to anything he hasn't personally seen. He'll say only what he saw at the minute. We use reception if he's pulled away to the boiler room."

Morven's hand sat still on the table. The office manager's eyes went to the liaison's notepad and back to the agenda.

"Thank you," the liaison said. "We'll note the names."

The room's attention felt even. No one interrupted. No one relieved the pressure with a small joke. The silence helped her order the minutes in sequence.

She kept the envelope in her coat. She didn't add more. She had said the thing that mattered to begin with. If she spoke past that, she would be giving them places to misread the shape.

"Two days as examples," Maeve said when Morven gestured for specifics. She opened the MASTER pad to the page with the curve mark and read her own handwriting without sliding her finger along the lines. "Tuesday. 14:45 under the tide clock. 'I see you now. The clock shows fourteen forty-five.' Collected Finn from the gate without incident. Recorded arrival time at home. Last Thursday the same. 14:45 centre. Clean pick-up."

She kept her tone level. "Yesterday, I was at the centre at fourteen forty-five. Gregor gave the line. At the gate a neighbour believed she was to take Finn on a playdate based on a message she had received from my number. It included the phrasing I use about times at the gate. I denied sending any message. I asked that denial be noted. I sent the school an email at home noting the centre minute and my denial."

She paused. The liaison lifted the pen and held it above the page.

"Right," Morven said. She turned her head toward Isla before she looked at Daniel. "I'm going to ask Isla a question first, if that's alright."

Maeve kept her eyes on the table's edge and said nothing. Ailsa's foot tapped once against the chair leg and went still.

"Isla," Morven said, "what happens for you when plans change?"

Isla's eyes moved from the whiteboard to Morven's face. Her hoodie cuff slipped, and she pulled it back deliberately.

"Consistency helps regulation," she said. The words sat clean on the air. "If things change last minute you get dysregulated. I try to make sure Finn knows what's happening after school so he can stay steady."

"Do you recognise the timeline your mum described?" Morven said. "Those two days as set out."

Isla glanced at Daniel and then back to Morven. "I know about the centre. She goes most days. I've been there for swimming."

She reached into the pouch of her hoodie and took out her phone without looking at Maeve. She tapped the screen and held it level on the table without pushing it across.

"I've got screenshots where Mum confirmed different pick-ups or plans from her number," Isla said. Her voice didn't lift or drop. "Like Dad collecting. Or a playdate. I keep them so I remember what's meant to be happening and tell Finn, because he asks."

The liaison paused mid-note.

Morven's attention moved to the phone and then back to Isla's face. "We won't be reviewing personal devices here," she said. "But it's useful to know you have messages you've understood that way."

The liaison angled her chair a few degrees. "Just to note for the record," she said, "if messages are at issue, there are sometimes questions about devices. Are there any other devices connected to accounts? Or

caller ID set-ups that could confuse what's being seen at the other end?"

Maeve put her hands together and then apart again. "First, logs and anchors. Please preserve any message records with times and receiving numbers. Daily centre confirmations are in place with named staff. On devices: I found a device in my attic connected to my Wi-Fi with my accounts showing. It had calendar entries and messages that matched some of the items in dispute. I recorded the find. The next morning it was gone from my coat. I've already asked the GP practice to preserve call logs for the cancellation issue. I'm asking the school to preserve anything relevant on your end too."

The office manager looked up at Morven very slightly. The liaison didn't write the attic detail down at once. She let the air settle first.

"Thank you," Morven said. The word stayed even. "It's appropriate to ask for logs to be preserved. As to a device found at home, that's not something the school can adjudicate."

"Understood," Maeve said. She kept her eyes on the pad. She didn't let them move to Isla's hands around the phone.

Isla's watch face caught a stripe of light from the window and then lost it. She took her hands off the phone and let them sit on the table, sleeves hiding her knuckles.

"Sometimes Mum makes notes in more than one place and changes things and doesn't tell anyone," Isla said, still looking at Morven. "Like the calendar in the kitchen and another list. She's said later she moved something and forgot to let us know. That's when Finn gets stressed, because it's different from what we said. I try to line it up so he's okay."

Ailsa's hand stopped mid-stroke. She pressed the ballpoint down hard enough that the page dented. Maeve didn't turn around. She saw the line of the dent without looking.

Morven looked back to Maeve. "Do you want to respond to that?"

This was the place Ailsa had marked in her notes. Answer once without stepping into a side corridor.

"I'm not going to discuss Isla," Maeve said. She kept the words flat. "I'm discussing processes and records. If there are messages that look as if they came from me, I'm asking for those logs and for the content to be preserved with the time and receiving number. I'm pointing to the external anchors so that when things are in conflict it's not about who's most believable in the moment."

Isla didn't change her breathing. She didn't look at Maeve.

"Mum said pick-up is three fifteen because the gate opens then," Isla added, her very small correction landing as if it didn't matter. "We wrote a five-minute margin after gym last week so it wouldn't be late for Finn's class."

The liaison nodded as if that was helpful. The office manager underlined something on the agenda with a thumbnail. Daniel stayed with still hands and a face people would read as concern.

Maeve lifted one page of the MASTER pad and set it back down. She didn't show the list beneath because she had decided not to show it unless she had to. She had brought the envelope and she would keep it shut unless the room forced the motive conversation. The school didn't want motive. The school wanted smooth handovers and no emails that became complaints.

"Thank you," Morven said, when the silence had stretched to a point where it needed a shape. "The anchors you've described are noted. I have to say, Maeve, that sometimes when parents create additional systems it's a sign of stress. I'm not pathologising the effort. I'm looking at what Finn experiences at the gate."

Maeve kept her face arranged. "When plans aren't altered without my consent, I am reliable. The centre clock is my way of making sure that's visible."

The liaison lifted her pen again. "A short-term support plan can help while things are clarified. For the next couple of weeks, would it be workable for Daniel to take the lead on pick-ups and any after-school handovers? That takes the pressure out of the gate for Finn and for staff."

Maeve measured one breath and used the air to keep her tone steady. She pressed a thumbnail into the pad's backing once. "I'm asking the school to accept email confirmation by noon from me for any change. You set that out on the phone. I'm fine with confirming that in writing every day if you want it."

Morven's expression didn't move. "We will continue to accept email instructions by noon as we've said. What we're also proposing is a period where Daniel handles the logistics so we have consistency that isn't in dispute."

"I'll speak," Ailsa said, and leaned forward far enough that her voice carried to the recorder without her having to raise it. "I've stood beside Maeve under that clock and spoken the minute out loud. I've written it. She's done what she's said she's done."

"Thank you," Morven said. "I do hear that. I'm also responsible for looking at what is happening in the school context. We have to act on messages presented to us and on the child's experience."

Isla spoke again without looking away from Morven. "Finn gets anxious when things change. He's calmer if Dad says what's happening and it stays the same."

Daniel nodded once. The gesture sat modestly in the space the staff had set. It read as willingness. It read as care. It didn't promise more than the room had already chosen.

The family liaison wrote something and then lifted her head. "We'll set a review in a fortnight. We'll keep records of any incidents. During that time, Daniel to lead pick-ups and handovers. If anyone else is collecting, we'll need an email from Maeve by noon with the details. That's already in place."

Maeve moved her thumb along the edge of the paper and took it away. "I'll send the daily email."

"Good," Morven said. "We'll see you in two weeks to review. If there's an issue in the interim, we'll be in touch."

The plastic clock above the whiteboard marked a minute without causing a sound to rise above the hum. Maeve experienced her voice stabilise against the table edge.

"I'd like to step out for a moment," she said. "Then we can confirm the review time."

Morven's hand opened from the table. "Of course."

The corridor had cooler air, and the hum was lower. Through the glass panel Maeve saw the meeting room as a box with four faces above lanyards. She didn't look at them long. On the table behind the glass, the agenda pad lay open with the review date underlined; the liaison's notepad stayed open beside it. She felt the envelope along the seam of her coat again and checked that the ridge had not shifted. Nothing in that room had asked for it. It remained unopened on purpose.

Ailsa came out two steps behind her and stood angled so they faced the same direction. She didn't touch Maeve's arm.

"Hold the line," Ailsa said. "I'll get the van. I'll bring you back to the centre if you want to do another anchor before you go home."

"Aye," Maeve said. She kept the sound in the lower part of her throat where it wouldn't carry into the room.

She measured a breath. Speak now and it would go into the notes. The plan gave them what they had wanted: two weeks, a test that would read as support and be logged as observation. She kept the words back.

The door opened and Daniel stepped out with the careful face he wore when he needed to show he was not making this a fight.

"I'll handle school runs for a while," he said. He didn't add anything that sounded like a verdict.

Maeve didn't answer. She kept her hands in front of her and let the silence be the answer. The receptionist passed with a stack of exercise books and did not look up.

From the far end of the corridor a line of children came past with a teaching assistant at the front and another at the back. Finn was four back from the front with his book gripped under his arm. His mouth wasn't tight. He saw them and didn't break from the line. His step checked for half a pace, then he kept the same distance. His eyes moved between the faces and then returned to the next tile in front of his shoes. The assistant lifted her hand in a small hello and then lowered it.

Isla walked out of the meeting room and stood beside Daniel without crossing to Maeve's side of the corridor. She didn't look at Maeve's hands. She didn't say anything. The phone stayed in her hoodie pocket.

No one spoke. Her jaw set. Saying Isla's name and asking to see the screenshots would start a corridor scene and break her line.

She kept her mouth closed and the line intact. The pause lengthened without any words from her. She would not be drawn into a corridor scene that would become a sentence in a log. Not today. Not with Finn passing four back from the front.

Ailsa shifted her weight and then stilled it. "We'll go," she said, a fraction above a whisper. "Side door."

Maeve nodded once. It wasn't a reflex. It was deliberate. She looked down the corridor again, past the glass, and let the pressure sit where it needed to sit so she could walk.

She moved with Ailsa toward the entrance. The hum stayed steady. The plastic clock in the room behind them kept its minute. There was no need to hear it. The minute from the tide clock and the words that went with it were enough. She held the shape she had made and didn't let anyone adjust it for her.

Through the glass, lanyards and notepads stayed on the table, the review date underlined on the agenda.

She stepped through the glass doors with her envelope still shut and the MASTER pad under her hand. She didn't look back.

Chapter 14

The Revelation

They had almost reached the outer glass doors when Isla stepped in close enough that the temperature of her breath changed the air between them. The door to the meeting room eased shut behind a staff member with a folder. Ailsa angled toward the side exit, watching for lobby traffic. The sign-in book still lay open on the desk. The hum from the corridor lights carried without any lift.

"Mum," Isla said.

Maeve kept her hand on the push bar. The door's rubber seal didn't give. Ailsa looked back once and then looked away, leaving the line intact.

"I set the reminders," Isla said. "I sent the messages. It was for the best."

The push bar stilled under Maeve's hand. No one else moved. The reception printer carried on underneath the desk edge.

"For the best," Maeve said. Her mouth formed the words to keep her throat operating. "Explain that."

Isla didn't look at the door. She didn't look at the family liaison through the panel. Her sleeves covered her thumbs; her watch face stayed hidden.

"Your systems made everything worse," she said. "It was all lists and checks and saying times out loud. It just made the house feel like it was about the lists and not about us."

Maeve kept her palm flat against the bar because the metal kept a steady temperature.

"What did you do," she said.

"I made it simple," Isla said. "You like things to be written. So I wrote things that would mean we could be simple."

Maeve watched Isla's mouth shape each word. She didn't look at the phone in Isla's hoodie pouch.

"Which things."

"Playdates. Dad collecting. Rota bits. The GP follow-up. Little things."

Maeve's voice thinned. "Little things."

"To make it visible," Isla said. "So adults would believe the story that keeps Finn steady. Order matters. If we live with Dad it's calmer. At his, it stays the same. With Dad and her, it stays the same."

The language was learned. Classroom language. Regulation. Routines. They had heard it in the room. Now it sat in her daughter's mouth as if it came from neutral pages.

"You used my number," Maeve said.

"Sometimes," Isla said. "Sometimes it was just writing things so they would be there."

"You wrote on the board," Maeve said. "The slips."

"I copied yours," Isla said. "You make a loop on the M when you sign 'ALARM CHECKED'. When you hurry, the 'e' closes like an 'o'. You push the 'k' too far over. I practised."

Ailsa turned at the doors and traced back three steps without crossing into the conversation. Her mouth opened and closed once, a movement without sound.

"You called the practice," Maeve said. "You cancelled my scan."

"No," Isla said. "I didn't call anyone about that."

She didn't fill the gap with a hedge. She left it clean, as if clean made it harmless.

"The attic phone," Maeve said, the line tasting like air pulled past a cut. "Under the hats."

"It was there," Isla said. "It worked on the Wi-Fi. The attic phone opened to the shared account; saved logins did the rest. I used it to write things so you'd see them without it being me talking. It was safer."

"Safer for who," Maeve said.

"Finn," Isla said. She kept her voice set as if reading from the whiteboard had trained the pitch. "When it was your lists, he watched your face to see if it would be a good day. That made him tight. If Dad says what will happen, it stays the same."

"You used my phrasing," Maeve said. "At the gate. Between the half and the hour."

"People listen to what they already know," Isla said.

She had not raised her voice once. There was no tremor. She stood like she stood in line at the end of the day when the teaching assistant called names.

"Why," Maeve said. "Why did you do it this way."

"Because you won't stop," Isla said. "You never stop. Even when someone says it's too much. You make more systems to hold the systems. You write things down and then you write something else to make the first thing safe, and it never ends, and Finn looks at you instead of his book."

Maeve's hand pressed the bar. It didn't move.

"You could have spoken to me."

"You don't listen when it's talking," Isla said. "You listen when it's written."

Ailsa drew closer. She didn't enter the space between them. Her eyes went to Isla's sleeves, to her watch.

"You put my name on the rota sheet," Maeve said.

"I traced it," Isla said. "I wasn't going to make you do rota. I just needed it to be in more than one place."

"So people would see it and repeat it," Maeve said.

"So when Dad said we should try something calmer," Isla said, "it wouldn't just be him saying it."

"Dad wouldn't act," Maeve said. "He wouldn't choose."

"He wouldn't until he had to," Isla said. "So I made it so he had to. With the school onside."

There was no boast in it. There was no apology in it.

Maeve let the shape of the attic device settle against these words. Face ID off. No SIM. Her mail header visible without a prompt. Calendar lines that appeared like entries made by her hand. Her phrasing in messages she hadn't sent. Her looped M on slips she hadn't written. Finn's eyes going to Isla for the towel. Daniel running lines about keeping it simple while the bar charges sat in cluster on a Monday that The Rook was closed. The pattern locked without giving her a place to prise it apart.

She said, "You told Mrs Watson I texted her."

"I told her what she expected to hear if it was from you," Isla said.

Ailsa's next step brought her within range of the words. She didn't move again.

"Say that again," Ailsa said.

Isla turned her head toward Ailsa so that the sentence would carry the same weight to an adult.

"I set reminders and sent messages," she said. "For the best."

Not Daniel at the centre. Isla.

Ailsa stopped. The stop was complete. Her left hand closed around the edge of her notebook and stayed there.

Maeve's breath caught. Not a sob. A choke with no sound. The minute at nine and the minute at nine fifteen that she had pinned to the morning didn't live inside this any more. They were as clean and useless as the whiteboard diagram in the room.

She took her hand off the bar.

"And the scan," she said. "You didn't do that."

"No," Isla said.

Isla's eyes didn't find Maeve's. She kept them on a neutral point between them, level with Maeve's throat.

"You moved the toothbrush into the glove compartment," Maeve said.

"No," Isla said.

Isla said it again. "No." Then nothing.

Ailsa said, "Isla. You understand what you've just said."

"Yes," Isla said.

Maeve experienced a pressure at her sternum as if her body would take this conversation out of her control to protect the pieces she had left. She tried to set her jaw against it. Through the glass pane of the meeting room, the family liaison's lanyard line sat steady against her shirt.

"You think living with your dad and her would make it calm," Maeve said. The effort to keep her tone even made her tongue heavy. "You think that fixes Finn."

"I think it takes it away from the lists," Isla said. "You should talk to someone."

That last phrase didn't belong to Isla. It belonged to Daniel. The way he had made an offer and called it concern. The way he had stood at the

sink and said options and routines and custody came up like he was naming weather that had arrived and not choices he had made.

Maeve said, "You don't get to write me out because it's tidy."

Isla adjusted the sleeve over her hand until the fabric covered one more joint on her thumb and then held it there.

"It's not about writing you out," she said. "It's about stopping the things that make it break."

Ailsa's voice lowered. "We need to go, Maeve."

Maeve didn't move.

She could place her life in two columns: the column of systems meant to hold everything in place and the column of actions that exploited those systems until they were used as evidence of instability. The clock. The notes. The email-only boundary. The curve marks. The reception fallback. And Isla standing in front of her saying she had shaped the parts that would let Daniel shift the centre of the house without taking responsibility for the shift.

"We're going now," Ailsa said.

Maeve nodded once without breaking eye level with Isla and stepped back from the door. The push bar came away from her palm.

Isla said nothing else. She didn't retract. She didn't intensify. She left the confession in place where it had been put.

Maeve turned to move, and the door opened inward from the other side. A parent with a visitor sticker came through and stopped to let them pass. Maeve didn't register their face. She knew only that if she tried to take this out into the street, the wind would blow through it and scatter any shape she still held.

She chose the corridor.

Through the glass panel, the whiteboard diagram stayed visible.

She didn't plan the volume. It rose without waiting for her permission.

"You put a phone in my attic," she said. The words came out clean but louder. "You sent messages from my number. You wrote on my board."

A door opened two rooms down. The office manager appeared beside Morven in the inner doorway, and the family liaison turned her body to face the corridor. A teaching assistant lifted her head above a stack of exercise books and then lowered it again without moving from the line.

"Mum," Isla said. She did not step closer. She did not step back.

Daniel came out of the meeting room with his hands placed apart at a fixed distance from his sides, the distance of a man aiming to occupy as little volume as possible while being seen. "Perhaps we could find a quieter space," he said.

Maeve took one more step into air where sound would carry.

"You picked up my phrasing and made it your own," she said, and that phrase sounded like a note from the pad come to life in the wrong place. "You told Mrs Watson I texted. You used 'between the half and the hour.'"

A second door opened. A head appeared and then disappeared.

"Mrs Clarke," Morven said. She kept her tone calibrated to the corridor. "Let's lower voices."

Ailsa came in from the side and put her hand out, not on Maeve, just into her space, without using it to move her. "Maeve."

Maeve turned her face to Ailsa without turning her body. "She just told me she did it," she said. "She told me she set reminders and sent messages for the best."

Ailsa nodded once as if nodding would place the words into a box that could be carried. "I heard."

The family liaison shifted to stand between Isla and Maeve without touching either, head turned toward Maeve but not blocking her with a hand.

"Lower voices, please, P4 are transitioning through in one minute," the liaison said.

"I'm not shouting," Maeve said. Her voice sat one notch above the line they wanted. She brought it down a fraction. "There was a device in my attic. Connected to my Wi-Fi. With my accounts showing. Then it was gone from my coat."

"We aren't going to adjudicate device matters here," Morven said. "We spoke to that in the room."

"She just admitted it," Maeve said. It wasn't a cry. It was a statement. "She told me she did it."

Isla stood. Sleeves over hands. Phone in pouch. She said nothing now.

Ailsa stepped forward half a pace. "Headteacher," she said. "I was present. I heard Isla say she set reminders and sent messages for the best. I've witnessed clock checks and forged slips in a hand that tracks Maeve's loop."

"Thank you," Morven said. "We can note that."

"You can do more than note it," Maeve said. "You can keep the logs I've asked for and look at your own records of who called and when."

"We said we would preserve records," the office manager said from the doorway. "We are doing that."

"And in the meantime," the family liaison said, "we need to keep the space calm while classes move."

Daniel placed his hand at Finn's shoulder, which had appeared at the far end of the corridor with a teaching assistant's hand hovering near his elbow. Daniel didn't pull him. He just set his hand's weight on the jumper

as a point of quiet containment. He drew Isla a step back without touching her.

"We'll handle school runs for a while," Daniel said into the air. He watched Maeve without tightening his face.

"You won't handle anything if you don't say what you knew and when," Maeve said.

He didn't answer. He looked at Morven. He would comply. Nothing else.

"Maeve," Ailsa said quietly. "Bring it down a touch."

"She made you see me as the problem," Maeve said to Morven. "She did that. And he let you see it that way."

"Mrs Clarke," Morven said. "We're looking at the evidence we can use. We can accept daily email instructions by noon from you about any alternate collector. We are trialling Daniel handling pick-ups for two weeks. Let's stick to that."

"There is also the GP connection," the liaison said. "Mrs Clarke has had recent contact with the practice manager about records. Would you like us to call your GP, Mrs Clarke?"

Ailsa turned toward the liaison. "Call them, please."

"Call them," Maeve said. "But don't try to make this about my nerves while you hold a child's confession in your hands as if it's nothing."

Morven nodded to the receptionist, who lifted the handset. Words passed at a desk voice. The office manager wrote a line on a pad and underlined it.

Maeve looked at Isla. Her daughter's face didn't move. Not an apology. Not anger. Not fear. Nothing the room could call misbehaviour. Her face stayed still. Set. Eyes level, mouth flat.

That lack of anything broke the last of her resolve. The column inside her where the anchor minutes lived emptied itself of content.

Her knees didn't give at once. They unlocked and then she sat down on the floor, not like the bus faint, because any other choice would have been a fall. Tears came. A sound she heard before she felt it. It was a noise like breath pulled through a blocked line.

Everything around her adjusted in the school way. The liaison's hands lifted and then lowered. Morven stepped to change the angle of the door so the corridor had a wider channel. Daniel eased Finn and Isla further back by half a pace. A teaching assistant redirected a passing group toward the stairs without letting their eyes come to rest on the adults.

"Let's keep the corridor clear while P4 passes," the liaison said.

Maeve pressed her fingers against the floor to steady herself and let them slide inward so she could hold her own arms. Her throat worked once against nothing. The envelope edge inside her coat dug into her side. She didn't pull it out. The paper meant nothing in this place.

She heard the receptionist say the GP's name and then her own. She heard the pause that said someone was listening on the other end.

She didn't lift her head.

Dr Gupta arrived in eight minutes that Maeve didn't track; the practice was two streets away; Dr Gupta had just left a home visit. The steps came at a measured speed that marked professional time rather than personal urgency. She crouched without making her knees click, which was a skill Maeve hadn't seen until now.

"Maeve," Dr Gupta said. "I'm here."

Maeve took in the clipped hair, the tired eyes that were not tired today, the jacket of a person who had left a surgery that smelled of hand gel to enter a corridor that smelled of cleaning fluid and heated dust. She

put her hand on her own knee, not Maeve's.

"Can you look at me," Dr Gupta said. "Just for a moment."

Maeve lifted her head.

"Tell me where you are."

"School," Maeve said. The word came shaped like work rather than speech.

"Which day is it."

"Thursday."

"Have you eaten."

Maeve thought through the toast and the way Finn had said train yard. "Yes."

She paused before the next question.

"Any pain," Dr Gupta said.

"No."

"Any thoughts of harming yourself or anyone else."

"No."

"Are you sleeping."

"Less," Maeve said. "On purpose. I've been checking alarms."

Ailsa came into the line of sight and didn't speak. She placed herself at Maeve's left shoulder.

"She fainted on a bus," Ailsa said. "Weeks back. She's been holding it together with paper and anchors since then. Today's an ambush."

Dr Gupta nodded once without letting it be agreement or contradiction.

"We're going to make a plan that protects you," Dr Gupta said. "And protects the children."

"I haven't harmed my children," Maeve said. "I came in here with anchors. I did what I said I'd do."

"I know," Dr Gupta said. "What I'm looking at is what happened just now. It's a public setting. It's a lot of pressure."

"She admitted it," Maeve said. "Ailsa heard it."

Ailsa said, "I heard it."

Daniel didn't step closer. He kept his line two paces back with Isla at one side and Finn at the other and looked like a person who knew the choreography of care. "She's been under pressure," he said into the space where Dr Gupta could hear him without turning her head. "I'll handle the kids while she rests."

"We're not making custody decisions in a corridor," Dr Gupta said without moving her voice toward him.

"This is a reaction to provocation," Ailsa said. "She was level in that room. Then the child told her what she'd done. Anyone would break."

"It sounds like there was a significant trigger," Dr Gupta said. "I'm also looking at a history of anxiety, a recent faint, the degree of organisation you've had to build to manage daily events, and what just happened."

"You're going to call it an episode," Maeve said.

"I'm going to call it a point where we can help you stabilise," Dr Gupta said. "The best way to do that quickly is a short stay for observation."

"No," Maeve said. The word functioned as a reflex.

"Voluntary," Dr Gupta said. "You come in with us today. You rest. You speak to the team. We make sure you're sleeping. We check whether anything physiological is adding to this. We take the pressure off handovers for a few days."

"You're moving the problem away from you," Maeve said. The throat pain on the last word made it sound as if she had bitten something.

"I'm moving you to a place where we can attend to you properly," Dr Gupta said. She didn't put soft edges on the sentence. "We're not doing labels in this corridor. We're making a decision about the next twenty-four to seventy-two hours."

"You can come back with clear lines," the family liaison said. "We'll note your daily noon email in the interim."

"We've already noted it," Morven said.

"Don't make me do this through your framing of tidy," Maeve said to the air because choosing a target for the sentence would turn it into a fight, and she was out of energy for fights.

Dr Gupta adjusted her crouch to keep the pressure off her knees. "Maeve. You can say no and we can escalate. Or you can say yes and keep the choice yours. Which do you want."

Ailsa said, "Go with them. I'll come with you."

Maeve looked up at her sister. Once. It was not a plea. It was a check that the shape would hold.

"They're closing ranks, Maeve," Ailsa said under her breath. "It's the system protecting itself. We're not winning that in a corridor. We'll win by not giving them the scene they want."

Maeve looked back at Dr Gupta. "If I say yes, you don't write, 'hysterical mother, uncooperative.'"

"If you say yes," Dr Gupta said, "I write, 'agreed to voluntary observation after a distressing event; oriented to person and place; denies harm; exhausted; insight present about need for rest.'"

The phrasing was exact; exactness helped.

"And the school keeps the logs," Maeve said. It came out as a statement, not a request.

"We will," Morven said. "I will email you confirmation of that this afternoon."

"And you," Maeve said to the family liaison, "you write down that my sister heard the words."

"I have," the liaison said, lifting her notepad so the single line showing could be read as more than a platitude.

"Fine," Maeve said. She pulled her breath in through her nose and placed the next words where she could reach them. "I'll go."

Dr Gupta stood without making it into a move that looked like victory. "Thank you."

"I'll bring the van round," Ailsa said. "I'll follow."

"We'll use a patient transport," Dr Gupta said. "It's better if you travel with us."

"I'll meet you there," Ailsa said.

"We'll call ahead," Dr Gupta said to Morven. "Observation bed."

"Thank you," Morven said. Relief lived on her face but did not break it. It showed in the way her shoulders released by a notch and then held.

Daniel moved his hand off Finn's shoulder and placed it at his side. "We appreciate you coordinating this," he said to no one and everyone. He angled it toward Morven so it would fall into the school's account as evidence of cooperation.

Maeve stood with effort. Dr Gupta didn't take her arm. She hovered close enough to catch if needed and then let Maeve find her footing on her own. The envelope inside her coat shifted and then settled when she adjusted how she stood. She wasn't sure how it had changed; she only knew that carrying it no longer felt like a plan.

"Do you want to take anything with you," the liaison said. "Phone. Keys."

Maeve pressed two fingers against her coat where the keys lay level in the inside pocket and then moved those fingers away. "I'll take my phone."

"I'll bring your pad," Ailsa said. "I'll hold onto it."

"No," Maeve said. "Leave it."

Ailsa stopped. "Alright."

"We'll go out the side door," the liaison said to the group, as if this were an ordinary pastoral movement and not a moment someone would remember for years.

"I'll bring the car later," Daniel said to Isla, not to Maeve. "We'll keep to the usual."

Isla nodded once without changing her mouth. She looked steady and empty at the same time. It had taken years to train her to that kind of control. Maeve had built some of it into her and the rest had been applied by a different house.

They moved down the corridor together with the choreography of a school that had practised this. The glass showed their bodies without telling them anything new about themselves. The plastic seating didn't need to be moved.

At the side door the world outside was bright and cool. The air carried salt and the warmth from overworked radiators escaping around the seals. Maeve stepped through the threshold because that was the next piece. Dr Gupta kept pace beside her. The liaison called ahead, and a dispatcher answered, clipped and neutral: "Yes."

Maeve didn't look back. She didn't need to. The scene was already being written into three sets of notes by three different people with three different purposes.

She had chosen the least-worst option. It counted as a decision. That would have to be enough for today.

The minute of nine and the minute of nine fifteen remained in her head as facts. They no longer offered anything beyond that.

She walked to the transport that would take her away from the corridor, from the glass, from the people who had already begun arranging the review date two weeks on. She knew what it meant. It meant that after the observation there would be a record that said she had been observed. It meant that the school would carry on with Daniel at the gate while the system wrote itself into the shape it always chose.

The door to the transport opened with a standard click. She placed her foot inside and then the other and sat. A belt found its anchor. The belt's plastic edge pressed at her hip. Dr Gupta spoke quietly to a driver whose face belonged to today and not to her life.

"We'll take care," Dr Gupta said. "You rest."

"You write down what I said," Maeve said. "About logs. About her words."

"I've written it," Dr Gupta said.

Ailsa appeared at the side of the vehicle, her breath visible. "I'm behind you," she said. "I'll be there."

Maeve nodded once. The movement cost something and bought something.

The transport pulled away.

Inside the school, the glass doors would have closed and the corridors would have returned to their measured sound. Outside, the air held the smell of the sea and the exhaust of the van and the rest of the city's water and heat. None of it changed the fact that the truth she carried could not move the people who needed it to move them, not today.

She leaned her head back against the vinyl and closed her eyes without sleeping. The envelope pressed against her side. The keys lay still. The phone sat dark in her pocket. The rest of it would wait until someone else decided to take it up or set it down.

She had made her decision. The vehicle took her toward the place where the decision would be written into a set of notes that would outlast the day.

Chapter 15

The Ward

The transport rolled through a service gate and took a left into a short lane with a dead end. The driver pulled the handbrake with a contained movement. No conversation for the last two minutes. Dr Gupta had her shoulder angled toward Maeve without leaning in, a posture for steadying without contact. The building was brick and glass with a side entrance that held its heat against the cold outside. A buzzer sounded when the driver pressed the call pad. The door opened and a woman in navy scrubs stood back to clear the doorway.

Inside the corridor the air changed. Cleaning fluid over the low warmth of overworked radiators. The lights carried a hum that would fade to the mind after an hour and then return at odd times. A person at a central desk lifted their head and then put it back down over a file. The nurses' station sat in the middle like a square island with glass screens at two sides. A wall clock hung above the station, white face, black hands, red second hand. The second hand moved with a steady tick that the hum swallowed between beats.

The doors behind the station were controlled. Double doors with a lock that needed a badge. The sightlines ran clean down two corridors from the station. The room numbers rose in order. The floor had marks where chair legs had scraped and where cleaning machines had left arcs at the corners.

"Maeve Clarke," Dr Gupta said to the station without raising her volume. "Voluntary observation. Short stay."

The nurse at the desk stood. Hair tied back. Lanyard sitting flat against her chest. She took the handover with a nod rather than a

performance of concern. She looked at Maeve and kept her eyes at the same height without softening.

“Alright,” the nurse said. “We’ve got a single room for you. I’ll get your property logged. Observation level is quarter-hour for now. We’ll review in the morning.”

The controlled doors opened with a muted click. They moved through as a group without touching. The corridor on the far side held doors to rooms, a lounge with chairs in a grid against the walls, and a dining area with tables and a trolley. The nurse led them to a room halfway down. She opened the door without theatrics and stood aside.

The room held a bed with a wipeable mattress and a plain duvet cover, a built-in wardrobe without handles, a window set with restrictors that opened a narrow angle, and a chair bolted to the floor. The window looked out onto a fenced garden with a bench and a smoking shelter with a metal roof. A single pigeon moved along the fence line, stopping and starting in short runs that had nothing to do with people.

“Bathroom’s through there,” the nurse said, indicating a door that opened onto an en-suite with an anti-ligature rail and a mirror that didn’t throw back a full reflection the way a home mirror did. “If you need anything, press the call button. We’ll be checking on you regularly anyway.”

Dr Gupta did not add more. She gave Maeve a contained look that contained no pity and stepped back toward the corridor. “I’ll check in later,” she said. “Rest.”

Maeve nodded. She didn’t look at the bed; she looked at the window restrictors and the garden fence and then at the corridor where the nurses’ station sat square and central beyond the turn. She kept the layout in her head because that was how she marked new places until they were not new. Sightlines, door controls, points where one person could see another without moving. She counted the doors between her room and the lounge without appearing to count them.

At the station a trolley held clipboards. A jug of water and plastic tumblers sat on a low surface. A sign above said VISITING 14:00, 16:00 AND 18:00, 19:30. A second sign said MOBILE PHONES ALLOWED, PLEASE KEEP ON SILENT AND RESPECT PRIVACY. The clock above the station ticked in a way she could not ignore. It sat three minutes out at a glance. She did not let herself confirm it yet. She needed to live inside their time until she could check without making it a scene.

“Property,” the nurse said. “We’ll go through what you’ve got.”

Back by the door they set her coat on a chair. The nurse went through the pockets without haste. Keys. Phone. A folded envelope sealed along one edge but not with glue. The nurse glanced at Maeve.

“Receipts,” Maeve said. “That doesn’t need to be on me.”

“We’ll lock it with your property,” the nurse said, placing it into a clear bag with a flap that wrote its own sound as it closed. “Phone is fine on the ward. Keep it on silent. No camera use in communal spaces. We can charge it at the desk if you need. Chargers stay with us. Laces, keep them in for now. If we change level we’ll adjust. No aerosols, no glass. Jewellery stays if it doesn’t pose a risk. You can keep your keys in property or on you. On you can be uncomfortable when you lie down.”

“In property,” Maeve said. “The keys.”

The nurse wrote on a sheet, said the description of each item as she wrote it, and had Maeve agree verbally without setting a pen in her hand. The sheet went into the bag with the envelope and the keys. The nurse closed the flap again and wrote Maeve’s name and the time over the seal.

“We’ll keep this locked. You can ask for anything back.”

Maeve looked at the clock above the station again while the nurse finished the inventory. The red second hand stepped past the 12 and kept steady. She kept her face still. Three minutes carried forward into this building without her permission. It wasn’t a joke and it wasn’t a grievance. It was a condition.

“Food is at twelve-thirty and five-thirty,” the nurse said. “Tea trolley between. You can sit in the lounge or eat in here. You’re on quarter-hour obs for the next day. That means we check you in person and glance into the room if you’re asleep. Try to rest. Visiting is two till four and six till seven-thirty. Two visitors at a time.”

“I need to let my sister know,” Maeve said. “She’ll come on the second slot.”

“You can use the ward phone at the station for a quick call,” the nurse said. “Keep it brief for fairness.”

Maeve followed the nurse back to the station. The phone sat on the inner side of the counter, handset attached with a coiled cable. The nurse keyed a code to give an outside line and turned the base toward Maeve.

She dialled Ailsa from memory. The call rang twice.

“I’m here,” Ailsa said. The same three words. Not a performance. A fact.

“They’ve got me on quarter-hour,” Maeve said. “Visiting six to seven-thirty. Two at a time.”

“I’ll be there,” Ailsa said. “Six sharp. I’ll bring nothing they can take off you so we don’t make it an argument.”

“They’ve locked the envelope,” Maeve said. “It’s better there.”

“Good,” Ailsa said. “Eat something. Lie down. You don’t have to prove anything in the next three hours.”

“I know,” Maeve said. She heard how she said it. Not defensive. A line she laid down so it would exist. “I’ll keep it quiet.”

Ailsa didn’t fill the space. One breath. “I’ll be there,” she said again.

Maeve put the handset down. The nurse lifted it back over the counter and set it in its place. No extra words.

Back in the room the bed looked straightforward. She sat on it rather than lie down. The mattress sank by less than she expected. She pressed the call button once to learn the sound it made at the station and then untouched it. A light on the panel above her door lit and then went out when the nurse pressed a button at the desk. A check without conversation.

She placed her phone face down on the bedside surface with the edge aligned to the line of the surface. She didn't check the messages. Do Not Disturb remained on from the morning. She unlocked the phone once to see the time and then locked it again. She would not make the clock a fight when nothing in this place had asked her to. A nurse looked in ten minutes later and then again. The second time the nurse didn't speak, just tipped her chin by a fraction to acknowledge presence.

Maeve drew one leg up and wrapped her hands around her shin to keep herself where she was instead of moving. She said one sentence in her head without speaking. Measured language. Measured movements. Measured time until they let her go.

The afternoon stretched in the way institutional afternoons stretch. The tea trolley moved with a faint rattle past her door. Two voices exchanged something about sugar. A small burst of laughter issued from the lounge and then dropped. The hum of the lights remained underneath everything. She watched the minute hand on her phone and did not watch the one on the wall above the station.

At five-thirty the trolley passed again with covered plates. A plastic fork and knife sat in a paper sleeve on the tray. She ate enough to register the act and left the rest without trying to meet expectations no one had spoken. A nurse came past and asked if she wanted the tray taken. Maeve handed it over and said thank you in a voice she could use again in an hour without sounding false.

She read nothing. She kept the phone dark. She lay flat with her eyes open and counted her breaths to twenty and then back to zero and then

up again. Quarter-hour. The nurse's head moved past the window twice more. Each time the check held without commentary. It did not feel intrusive. It felt like a rule they would follow the way a tide chart followed its tables whether anyone wanted it to or not.

At six a nurse stood at her door and said, "Your visitors are here."

The lounge had chairs set in a loose rectangle. A television mounted high on the wall displayed a quiz show without sound. Two other sets of visitors occupied the far side. A box of tissues sat on a low table where no one could reach it without standing up.

Daniel was already in the room. He stood with his hands in his pockets. Isla was beside him with her sleeves over her hands. Finn saw Maeve first and moved so he could stand where she would see him at his height rather than stand in front of a chair and be turned into a child again.

"Mum," he said.

Maeve stood where the nurse had placed her. She didn't step forward until she identified where the nurse would want her to stop. She stopped two steps before it.

"Hi," she said to Finn and then to Isla. "Hi." She didn't try to make her voice warm by force. It was what it was. She looked at Finn's face and found the set of it as she knew it at bedtime when he was not quite ready to hand his day over to sleep.

"We've put arrangements in place," Daniel said. He kept his voice neutral, pitched for a room where he didn't want anyone to hear and knew they would anyway. "For now. The children will be with me. Everything's steady. You can rest."

Maeve nodded once to show she had heard and not to endorse the way the lines were being laid down. The nurse at the door observed the triangle they formed and didn't correct it. The station's hum rode under the silence.

"Can I speak to Finn for a minute," Maeve said. "In this space. You can stay where you are." She looked at Daniel, not because he controlled it, but because the nurse would prefer that Daniel accept the request without her having to phrase it again.

Daniel hesitated the way careful men hesitate when they want to be seen hesitating. He moved the smallest fraction to the left so the angle between them widened and the nurse could read that this was not subterfuge.

Maeve crouched so that her face was level with Finn's. Her knee pressed into the carpet through her trousers. She didn't touch him because he hadn't made the move first.

"I love you," she said. "That stays the same."

He nodded. The nod wasn't a performance either. It translated a fact into the body so it couldn't be negotiated away by anyone with a lanyard.

"I'll see you soon," she said. "Visiting here is set. We'll stick to it."

He nodded again, then said the sentence he had needed to say to her as much as to himself. "Dad says the routine will be steady."

Maeve inhaled once and let the air go out evenly so the exhale would not carry meaning that would become an argument later in a different room. "That's good," she said. "You like steady."

He looked at her hands and then at her face. He did not ask why she was here. She didn't put a name to it for him in this room. That belonged somewhere else when the room didn't swallow what was present and return a flattened version to official notes.

She stood. Her legs didn't shake. Those muscles had been used so many times to keep her upright in kitchens and school corridors that they

knew what to do even when her chest did not.

Isla had waited without looking at the television. Her watch sat on her wrist with the face turned up. The second hand moved with its own private tick. Maeve remembered the watch ran a few minutes fast by design. She didn't pull that thread here. The point had already been made without words.

"This is better for everyone," Isla said. Her tone was simple. No rebuke. "You can rest."

Maeve looked at Isla and studied the set of her mouth and the line between her eyebrows that matched Maeve's own when she worked at the board above the kettle. Isla believed it. She believed it enough to place it in front of other people without a tremor. Conviction wasn't cruelty. That didn't make it safe.

"Thank you for agreeing to get help," Daniel said. "It's good. It's the right thing."

Maeve straightened the hem of her jumper so it sat flat. She didn't look down while she did it because she knew the movement would read as nerves from a distance. "I agreed to rest," she said. "I agreed to observation." She placed the exact phrasing Dr Gupta had promised to write in her notes into the air where Daniel's words were trying to displace it.

He nodded in a way that could be read as acceptance or as a choice to avoid an argument because of where they stood. He didn't push. He didn't need to push. The system had moved on his behalf already.

The nurse at the door made a small adjustment to her posture. The time check without calling time. "We've about ten minutes," the nurse said. "If that helps."

"It does," Maeve said. She spoke quickly to use the minutes rather than to show urgency. "Finn, I'll send you an email by noon each day. We already do that. It'll say the same. You don't need to answer it. It's for the

adults. You just do what you always do.”

He accepted the instruction by not arguing with it. He looked at Isla and then back at Maeve. Isla kept the same posture. A single flex of muscle in her jaw that only someone who had carried her since she was a weight on one arm would have noticed.

“Alright,” Daniel said. He re-inserted his voice with a care that made it sound kind. “We’ll come again tomorrow. The early slot if you want.”

“The late slot is better,” Maeve said. “It keeps the day in order.”

He nodded as if that had been his view all along.

They stood in the lounge for another minute without speaking. The television moved mouths and shapes that could have been any show in any hospital. Someone in the corner coughed twice. The nurse lifted her hand and then set it back down, a counter to show she was timing fairly across rooms.

“We should go,” Daniel said. He looked to the nurse as if to confirm that he had seen the signal and was collaborating with it.

Finn took one step that would have been forward and then back if Daniel hadn’t placed a hand in a neutral position near his shoulder where it could be read as guidance and not as control. Finn held his position and then turned fully toward the door.

“Bye,” Maeve said. “I love you.”

“Love you,” he said. Not loud. Enough.

Isla didn’t say goodbye in a way that would be recorded as a word. She dipped her head the smallest measure that acknowledged this was a change from the kitchen and hallway and gate. It was not a departure. It was a transition into a version that had been arranged while Maeve was present and absent at the same time.

The nurse moved her hand once more. Daniel looked at Maeve with the careful face he had practised since the first time he had stood in a

room where other adults measured him. “We’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. “Rest.”

The sound of the door buzzer cut the room for a second and then closed.

Maeve walked as far as the ward entrance because the nurse’s posture allowed that much. She did not move past the line where the corridor floor met the floor of the small entry space before the double doors. A different nurse held a badge up to the reader and the lock responded. The nurse stood aside for Daniel and the children. The door opened and Daniel shepherded them through with a trained economy that did not look like training unless you had lived inside it with him for years.

Outside the double doors a woman waited on the public side with a soft scarf around her neck and a coat that had belonged to her for more than one winter. She held herself steady without taking up space. Her smile was gentle in the way of someone who had decided that not making a demand counted as virtue.

Daniel put one hand up to indicate them to her across the door. “This is my partner,” he said. He didn’t supply a name to be stored or argued over in weeks to come. He didn’t need to.

The partner came forward only when the children had cleared the door. She took in Maeve’s presence without reacting and then shifted her focus to Finn. She reached up and adjusted his scarf so the wool didn’t press against his mouth and then smoothed it flat with one pass of her hand. The movement belonged at a kitchen door on a cold morning. It didn’t belong here and it fitted anyway.

“We wrote the routine on the fridge,” she said to Finn, then to Isla without repeating the sentence. “Same as before.”

The nurse holding the door let it ease shut. The lock caught and the door set itself. Maeve stood where she had stood one minute earlier. This was the farthest she could go. She didn't push. Pushing would make a shape someone else could then hold against her.

Finn turned his head back once. The movement was small and clean and not a dramatic appeal. Daniel's hand moved from neutral to forward with the pressure of a parent moving a child toward a car when the rain started. They moved as a unit without jerks and without noise.

Maeve looked up at the wall clock above the nurses' station. She stood still while she counted thirty seconds twice. The red hand stepped forward exactly thirty times twice. She took her phone from her pocket and unlocked it under her jumper so the light didn't call attention. Her phone's time said they were three minutes earlier than the wall clock. She locked the phone and put it away.

Three minutes. It had followed her from the hallway outside her kitchen to this station without her assistance. In this place it would win. The notes would carry the ward's time. Anything she said about the difference would be recorded as a detail of presentation rather than an error of the system.

Her hands fell to her sides. She did not fold them. She did not hold her elbows. She stayed in the sightline of the station so her stillness would not appear as hiding. The nurse who had held the door walked back to the station and took her post. A second nurse crossed behind and lifted a file. The jug of water on the counter had a white film on the edge where water had dried earlier in the day. The film remained.

Maeve turned and went back to her room. No one stopped her. No one needed to. She sat on the bed. The mattress gave the same amount as it had in the afternoon. She looked at the call button and didn't press it. She kept her phone on silent and didn't flip it to Do Not Disturb off. She placed it face down again with the edge aligned to the surface.

She heard the corridor instead of the room. The sound of the clock moved in the air like a metronome someone else had set. She allowed the tick to be all she heard because it allowed her to keep still without filling the room with other things that would make her stand up and move. No one came to speak to her. The quarter-hour passed and a head appeared and vanished in the window. The tick continued.

Systems protect themselves, never the people within them. She had learned that young. She had held it as a truth that gave her a way to survive other people's relief. The line did not console. It provided a wall she could lean her shoulder against without falling over.

In the morning, the same clock would call itself correct in notes that would be filed and never revisited by anyone who could return a minute to her that had been taken. It didn't matter to the hospital that three minutes could alter whether a thing was recorded as happened or not. It mattered to her in a way that could not be proven unless a person chose to care. Today, no one would.

She breathed and kept her language inside her head. When the nurse came again she would use sentences she had practised for years: short, factual, possible to write down without needing a category. She would ask for sleep. She would accept breakfast. She would not argue with the clock.

The tick marked the evening inward. The garden beyond the window held its fence and the shelter and the bench. If anyone went out to smoke, she didn't hear it in her room. A door clicked somewhere behind two turns of corridor. The station printer made one brief sound and then stopped. She lay back without covering herself. She didn't close her eyes. The tick made itself the only sound worth holding. That was enough to keep her where she was.

The door frame reflected a slice of corridor light that did not change colour. The quarter-hour check moved past the window. She did not speak. She allowed the wrong clock to do what it did and held her breath to the count of ten and let it go again. She could live against this for the

time it would take for them to let her go. She had done worse. She had done it in rooms that were not honest about what they were. Here, at least, the doors told the truth.

She stayed still and let the tick take the rest of the night into itself.