# The Other Half




HAYLEY PERRY

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Hayley Perry

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Published by Fable & Vale Press

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*To Sue McCarthy, my mum, whose name belongs in print as much as mine.*

*And to my son, Jackson, who reminds me that the world is more interesting when you see it differently.*

*I finished it.*

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# CHAPTER 1

## Eight Stops Away

I really need the toilet, Harriet realised suddenly, as she peered through the once-white venetian blinds of her living room that had collected much more cat hair than she had dared to notice before. She checked for signs of movement. Still nothing. Her cheek pressed against the cool breath-fogged glass, as her neck strained to look round an impossible corner. *Where the bloody hell are you?*

There weren't many cars parked outside today; it was a weekday, after all, and most normal people weren't home at 2.12pm on a Tuesday in May. *She* was, though. She should be asleep but, as usual, couldn't quite get there.

Peeling herself away, she flopped on the well-worn sofa, phone in hand, and checked her notifications. 'Your package is 8 stops away.' She refreshed for an update. Still eight stops away.

The flop jolted her bladder and she immediately regretted it, like being thumped in the crotch with a sodden football.

Hearing the distant motion of rubber on dry tarmac getting louder, she jumped up, squeezing her thighs together to prevent any further sudden impact, and peered outside. Nope, just the elderly neighbour coming home from what she expected to be a much more exciting social life than she would ever have.

Gauging it was safe – eight stops should be at least four streets away – Harriet made a mad dash for the loo – two stairs at a time. She imagined that this must be how it feels to be an Olympic hurdler, each leap, however, proving slower than the last as the lactic acid began to build up in the entire lower half of her body.

*Not even out of breath!* she thought, congratulating herself as she ascended her throne.

She was out of breath, however – in fact, terribly out of breath – but didn't realise at first because she wasn't actually breathing. As she eventually gasped for air, Harriet looked down at her bare, slightly red-yet-mottled knees that were shocked at the sudden, unfamiliar rush of blood brought on by aerobic activity. Not quite red enough to hide her pasty never-seen-the-sun complexion, however, plus they could do with a good shave.

*God, I'm unfit.*

'BANG BANG BANG!' the front door announced. 'Oh, for fuck's sake!' she sighed, clawing at the toilet roll. Harriet rushed the rest of her business and galloped – albeit more carefully – down the stairs this time. It must be the '*good*' delivery driver, she thought. The one who knew how to actually knock on a door. They alternated between three of them, it seemed, and only one actually bothered to knock loudly enough for anyone inside to hear.

Once she'd caught one not even bothering to knock at all. She just watched them walk up to the front door, put the parcel on the mat, take a photo and then immediately bugger off. She could not believe it. I mean, she knew it probably wasn't the most well-paid or satisfying job in the world, but come on, surely knocking on people's doors was a vital part of your duties.

In that moment, she had envisaged confronting him with her sheer outrage and authority, flinging open the front door, pouncing out and saying something witty and cutting such as 'Good job I got an A in telepathy!' but of course she didn't. She stayed firmly hidden behind the furry blind until he had got back into his van and was well around the corner.

'Hello again,' the driver said as Harriet opened the door.

His smile wiped hers away when she decided it looked suspiciously like a smirk. *Again? What's that supposed to mean? Is he suggesting I order too much stuff? I bet he thinks I don't have a job and just sit at home ordering useless crap all day in my dressing gown.* He would be half right.

'Aha, yeah. A lot of summer birthdays are coming up. Everyone I seem to know was born in May,' she lied, smiling. He didn't respond, either with his face or his voice. Just handed her three brown boxes, made that beeping noise and walked away.

*Cheeky bastard*, she thought as she bum-closed the door, her arms full of brown cardboard.

‘MIAOWWOAAAHAAAAHIIIIIIISSSSSSS’

‘Stupid cat, stop walking in front of me!’ Harriet seethed, misplacing her anger down at the overfed tabby’s tail that was now headfirst under the coffee table.

She instantly felt awful, placed the boxes on the floor and crouched down.

‘I’m sorry, Libby lib libs.’ The cat didn’t turn around; instead, it fluffed its tail and used it to furiously bat the air.

‘You know I can’t see you when you’re dancing round my feet,’ Harriet soothed, her voice rising about two octaves.

The cat (as cats are), now torn between sheer hatred and wanting a fuss, after careful consideration, it would seem, reluctantly succumbed to the latter and edged out onto the geometric modern boho tufted rug.

‘There we go, I’m sorry.’

Libby the cat began to purr and pushed her head into Harriet's hand. Enough of that now, it was opening time.

The larger package was brand new bedding. She’d spent hours trying to find the best brilliant white quilt cover at the lowest possible price. She inspected it through the plastic. It looked okay from the outside. The reviews had mentioned how soft it was but also how well it washed, which, with a cat that liked to vomit frequently, was essential. She decided not to get it out just yet.

*Good stuff*, she thought.

Package number two was smaller but heavier.

A three-wick wood crackling candle that had been recommended by an American YouTuber she liked, who had the kind of home, face and family that only exists on social media. Harriet suddenly felt very put together and grown up. Eagerly she inhaled the Sandalwood and juniper unlit musk and recoiled in horror. That was not what she was expecting. This was not the scent of the whitewashed floors and magnolia tree-lined garden pathways, nor did it transport her to The Hamptons (not entirely knowing where that was but they used to talk about it a lot in Sex and the City and looked very expensive). What was it? What was that smell? It gave her a familiar feeling in her stomach, an old slightly full of dread feeling she couldn’t quite identify. She sniffed again. *Ugh, what was it?*

Fleeting images of school and rounders bats, of body odour and PE. Another sniff, yes that was it, flashing memories began to conjure with each

inhalation. It was walking past the boys' changing rooms in secondary school. That smell that enveloped the corridors for hours after and became ingrained for life into every even slightly porous surface it came into contact with. It was... Lynx Africa.

'Right, that's going back,' Harriet disappointedly announced to Libby, as she jolted the candle back into half a forest's worth of packing paper. She probably wouldn't send it back though. She'd do what she usually did: put it in the back of the cupboard and hide the fact that she bought it in the first place. There was always guilt about returning things, like she was going to be subject to an inquest or be accused of being some kind of scummy scammer.

Determined to not let a dodgy recommendation ruin her day, Harriet looked over at Libby, who was now on the rug, legs stretched akimbo, head buried and furiously licking and gnawing at what was most likely her arsehole.

'Oh, charming!' she sniped. 'Let's hope this last one is better.' This was the one she was most excited to open. It was highly touted by all the impossibly beautiful people of Instagram, and therefore, by acquiring it herself, she would in some way be more like them. That, after all, was the nature of the beast; she was well aware of how sucked in she was, but it still didn't stop her. They, for a short while at least, made her feel good.

'Aha!' she exclaimed with excitement as she ripped open the last of the over-sealed cardboard. 'Tights!' She immediately stretched them to full wingspan like a huge accordion. 'Perfect.'

'Don't get your hair all over these, please,' she said, looking over her non-existent glasses at Libby, head still burrowed, sphincter still pursed. Libby didn't reply.

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# CHAPTER 2

## The Best Laid Plans

It was the 14th of May tomorrow. Harriet's birthday. She hadn’t booked the day off work because she’d only started there less than a month ago and didn’t want to immediately ask for time off. Especially as she had already dropped her ID card in the toilet and had to get another reprinted – if she’d asked, they could have said no and then she would have to go in on her birthday, the horror! She would have to do what she always did with all her jobs: concoct an elaborate story that prevented her from going in yet couldn’t be refuted and was entirely not her fault. Something crazy but believable.

A broken-down car was always a dangerous one because there was a chance that someone lived near you that could pick you up on their way in. That wouldn’t be good. Anything medical was to be avoided because you had to keep that one up. Once, Harriet had to keep up an imagined limp for an entire two weeks after claiming a twisted ankle from missing a bottom stair just because it was a particularly hot day in July and she couldn’t face getting dressed into anything other than a kaftan she had bought for a borderline tone-deaf Mexican-themed party that got cancelled last minute – probably due to PC issues – and by coincidence happened to be the comfiest and most breathable item of clothing she had ever owned.

There was always the old faithful of being unexpectedly called away for some kind of ‘family emergency’. Employers were always too polite to ask what it was. Not a death, of course; she wouldn’t stoop that low. An emergency was sufficient and could be entirely subjective. One person’s emergency is another person’s daily life, most likely.

She’d embarrassingly garnered the secret nickname ‘sick note’ two jobs ago and didn’t like the way that felt, even if she only found out by way of some weirdo scrawling a lovely message on her leaving card:

‘Good luck, sick note – Kevin.’

*Who the arse was Kevin anyway?* Nevertheless, it stung. So she now tried to avoid the sick card at all costs. Yes, the family emergency it was.

Harriet found herself an hour later staring at her email account getting ready to send the cryptic absence note to her boss. Every time, she dreaded doing it but would feel better when she had. It was gone-tea time and an odd time to contact work but she now worked nights in a retirement home for the somewhat more affluent elderly. It was something she had recently decided she would be more suited to, as she was more of a night person than a day person anyway.

She could spend the quiet, low-expectation nights with no supervision and minimal actual work, doing whatever she wanted. Basically not like having a job at all. Sleep the day away and oh everything she could do at night! The books she would read, the books she would *write*. The languages she could learn, degrees she could study for, endless possibilities.

It had unfortunately transpired, after taking this job, that she wasn’t actually much of a night person either. Three weeks in and she was already struggling with the schedule. It was a lot harder to sleep in the day than she’d imagined. No matter how tired she was or how opaque the blackout blind she’d bought was, her body just did not want to comply. She hadn’t read a single book, written a single line or learnt so much as a foreign swear word.

Dear Judy,

I’m sorry for writing this email but I’m currently out of town dealing with an unexpected family emergency and I can’t make it back in time for my shift tonight. I’m really sorry. I’ll update you as soon as I know more.

Really Sorry!

Best regards

Harriet. SEND.

She exhaled... That’s that then. Thank God for emails; gone were the days of the nervous 8am phone call into the office, the horror of having to *speak* to someone who would undoubtedly try to get you to ‘See how you feel later’, leaving her to spend all the rest of the morning coaxing up the courage to ring back again and say you were still too sick to come in for the afternoon. A total waste of a sickie. She celebrated her evening off by dance-walking to the fridge to see what there was for dinner. Knowing exactly what was in there of course, but still checking at least 63 times a

day just to be sure. She chucked two (four) slices of wafer-thin ham into her mouth to chew on whilst trying to find the most malleable and edible part of the air-cracked half block of cheddar; the edges of which now could be mistaken for a dry riverbed somewhere impossibly arid.

TAP TAP

What was that? Was that the door? She closed the fridge so she could hear better.

TAP TAP TAP

Yes, definitely the door. Must be that foot scrub from eBay. They always delivered around this time just as she'd left for work and shoved the packages behind the bin. Harriet walked to the hall, dressing gown billowing and sweeping its way behind her, collecting even more cat hair than the blinds. She opened the door.

*Shiiiiiiiit.*

'Hello darling,' the caller said chirpily. 'Are you alright? Oh dear, this hanging basket's seen better days, hasn't it?'

It was, to her horror, Marge from work. Harriet suddenly felt cold and hot and had an overwhelming urge to break wind all at the same time. She quickly crossed her dressing gown under her chin and tied it into a tight knot at her side in an attempt to cover the years of dippy-egg stains on her pyjama top, which quite unironically stated that she was indeed 'Sexy and you know it'.

'Hiya,' she feigned. 'Yeah, I'm okay. What do you mean?'

'Judy's been trying to get hold of you. Literally everyone has called in sick with some kind of stomach bug, and she asked me to come by as I was the closest to see if you could come in early.'

'Oh.' (*Fuuuuuuuuuck.*) Harriet panicked. 'Did she not get my email?'

'I don't know, she didn't say she'd got one. What did it say?' Marge looked genuinely puzzled (nosy), her coiffed rounded fringe shimmering in the dusk light.

With a frazzled swoop, Harriet headed to the last known location of her phone, her eyes darting between decorative pillows. 'Erm...' She stalled for thinking time. 'Hang on a sec.'

Spotting her phone halfway down the arm of the sofa, she checked her sent box. Seven missed calls. Yes, it was there, sent thirty-two minutes ago

to Jud... Judy Foster, not Judy Stone. *Bollocks.*

Judy Foster was a recruitment agent she sent her CV to a few months ago who then tried to get her to take a position with an hour-and-twenty-five-minute commute for minimum wage and a gym membership to a gym that had been on the news for terrible hygiene practices involving the complimentary towels. Not bloody likely. Why was she like this? Why did she have to mess up every single little thi—

She felt breath on her neck. Marge had invited herself in and was standing directly behind her.

‘Well...?’ Marge smiled, her nose uncomfortably close to Harriet’s. ‘Are you coming? You’d really be doing me a big favour. There’s no one else, and we need at least two people to do the meds tonight. There’s a few new ones in.’ From this distance and under the ceiling light, Harriet could see every single line of cakey foundation that Marge had blended in around her eyes, clinging inconsistently to tiny facial hairs, her eyelashes so tormented with layers of mascara they’d fused into clumps of chewed-on biro.

With sheer disappointment, Harriet agreed; there was no getting out of it now. She excused herself, defeated to replace the stained T-shirt on some leggings and a probably an equally uncouth baggy jumper whilst Marge had a good judge of her living room.

‘Have you had a man in here, dear?’ Marge hollered up the stairs.

‘No, why?’ Harriet replied in like, one sock on one sock off.

‘I can really smell Lynx.’

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# CHAPTER 3

Happy Birthday To Me

Hawthorn House must have once been spectacular. It had lived many lives, though, she'd found out with a Google search. It had even played host to a visiting queen once, although she couldn't remember which one. Possibly a Danish one. At one point, it had been a sanctuary for women who got pregnant out of wedlock, a safe haven where they didn't get told off by nuns. The interiors had retained much of their beauty, although they were now considerably more tired. Dark maple wood, lacquered and spiralling up staircases and across vast ceilings. Plaster-painted gold figurines moulded to light fixtures in every conceivable place.

It reminded her of one of the many National Trust stately homes she used to visit with Tom. Maybe that was why she took the job, apart from the hours.

He knew everything about history, and that was one of the things she'd found so attractive about him. He'd speak with such confident knowledge about the construction of gables, joists, battles, armour and many other things she could no longer remember.

But she did remember the way his mouth moved when he spoke. The way his well-bred jaw perfectly aligned with his lips to create a powerful Romanesque profile. How his forearms would tense beneath his rolled-up shirt sleeves as he animated his words, punctuating his sentences.

She loved to watch him. He could talk about anything and she would just stare longingly at the thick, dark strands of misplaced hair falling into his brooding eyes and the subtle head flick he did to remove them.

That was what she reminisced about most. His majesty. Her own romantic hero from a period drama. Waistcoats on horseback, red wine and white linens. Mr Darcy in the Colin Firth era, before he started to look like a great aunt.

He was posh too. Well, he wouldn't admit he was, but he definitely was. Smelling mostly leather-bound books and fresh air.

And she remembered his hands. The way his delicate pianist's fingers closed around her clenched hands as her tears splashed onto his unblemished skin. His tone, once so passionate, now deliberate and gentle as he told her he wasn't in love with her any more.

The final deep inhale of his lambswool coat as he closed the door behind him.

Feeling familiar bile rising into her throat, Harriet instantly produced a king-size Mars bar from her handbag and started scoffing. Two bites at a time. Ripping through the stringy caramel at an Olympic rate.

'Do you know how many calories there are in that?' said a voice behind her.

It was Sally.

Harriet didn't know what to make of Sally. She was one of those people who claimed to have either been more ill, suffered more hardships or overcome more adversity than anyone else had in the history of the world.

To put it bluntly, she was a bullshitter.

'Two hundred and eighty-four,' Harriet responded, as well as one could through nougat.

Four hours later, at 11.40 p.m., she stood alone in the stark communal staff kitchen, watching a bowl of off-brand country vegetable soup slowly erupt in the microwave. The low hum and orange light were like a headlight in the dark.

She imagined all the things she could be doing if she were at home.

She could be staring at her own microwave instead.

Hearing the approaching squeak of cheap trainers on bleached floorboards advancing from the echoing corridor, Harriet continued to monitor her dinner whilst letting out a deep, mournful exhale.

'What's the matter with you now?'

Sally's unnecessarily huge calf muscles twitched beneath her cropped trousers. Harriet didn't turn to see them twitch, but she knew they were.

'Cheer up. Might never happen!' Sally chortled.

It already had, she thought.

She was forty in twenty minutes.

Everything that could have been was already over.

Her mother had died at forty. This was probably her last year of anything, and what was she doing at this very moment? In another thankless minimum-wage job with a fiancé who had left her for no other reason than she wasn't good enough. That she didn't try hard enough.

Not even another woman to tempt him away. Just the cold, stark truth that she, Harriet Rebecca Hoxley, was simply not enough for him.

Simply not enough for anyone.

She had resigned herself to this being 'her lot' last birthday, not long after Tom had left her — well, asked her to leave — when she'd got drunk on cheap vodka and sent eighteen messages to him looking for reassurance, asking what was so wrong with her. Desperately chasing the illusion that it might not have been entirely her fault. That it was him, not her. Some tiny affirmation of worth.

He didn't reply.

She wasn't even worth that.

Harriet suddenly felt like a husk, as if everything she once was had been sucked out by life and men and work and time.

She had been stretched so many times she no longer snapped back. Instead, she simply held the shape of whatever had hurt her last, like a worn out hairband.

As she carefully carried her hot bowl on top of a rattling, ill-fitting side plate towards the residents' lounge, where it was warmest, she glanced inside some of the open-doored rooms.

Nearly every one of them was empty.

The umbrella company, Carelink, had recently expanded — or so she had been told in her interview — and Hawthorn House looked to have been on its knees long before Harriet started. It looked to be filling up extremely slowly, if at all.

Hardly a surprise, judging by the monthly cost advertised in the multitude of neatly piled fliers sitting on every available surface.

It was nice there, though, albeit slightly creepy and unsettling, as old houses usually are. Not helped by the fact she had only seen it in proper daylight once.

Through the very last door on the left, she saw the huddled form of an older woman sitting on the side of a bed with her back towards the entrance to the room.

Harriet had jumped at first, as it appeared she didn't even have a head, bowed as it was in such a deep position. But rationale dictated the lady was either reading or looking at a phone.

She decided it was probably not a phone.

The room was bare in comparison to what you would expect to see in a bedroom, absent of all comforts and not a throw pillow in sight.

A single empire-pleated lamp illuminated her translucent nightgown and spilled light across the matt-white walls, not casting many shadows because there was very little to cast shadows of.

A single chair sat in the corner. Hardly one you would choose to buy, more like the chairs you only find in hospitals. That pharmacy-green, wipe-clean plastic that still held the shape of the last arse cheeks to sit in it.

Not very homely at all.

As Harriet finally reached the sitting room, she frustratingly realised that her soup — the portion that had made it to the bowl and wasn't still stuck forever to the walls of the microwave next to the splattered cheese — was still at the temperature of molten lava and wasn't going to be consumable for at least another five minutes.

Sally, as far as she was aware, was on the other side of the building, and she hadn't seen Marge since she'd followed her bad driving into the car park after her trespassing incident earlier that evening.

She checked the company-issued walkie-talkie they all had to carry. It was on and charged, the little red light looking like a lit cigarette poking into her lower stomach roll.

She also carried some sort of archaic electronic beeper which linked up to a pull cord in the residents' rooms that they could yank if they needed help. She hated it. It went off in bedrooms she knew full well no one was in at all times of the night.

Nevertheless, a member of staff was required to check and, so far, each time it had been left to her.

Dinner over and sprawled across the most uncomfortable settee she had ever lain on, in front of a slightly-too-small smart TV, Harriet was two episodes into a documentary about a serial killer from the north who cut up his victims with all manner of garden tools, then buried the pieces in plant pots and kept them around his house, watching the flowers blossom.

Hardly the kind of thing you would want to watch in the middle of the night in a near-empty, already hugely eerie place, but the fear, it seemed, stopped

her from dropping off.

She looked longingly at the remains of her soup. Not because it was particularly nice, just because she liked eating. The dregs had already dried into a bugger-to-wash-off crust.

That's all she'd had for a while. Soup.

She wondered why she hadn't lost a stone at this rate.

Well, soup and chocolate.

And crisps.

And bread. Lots of bread.

Oh, and that bag of chips on her night off.

And the two Magnums and a packet of mini Kievs.

And four—

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Her buzzer erupted with the volume of an air-raid siren.

She looked down and silenced it, but not before almost jumping out of her skin. The red dot-matrix text flashed:

THE RIVERSIDE ROOM

'Okay, who's closest?' Sally's cigarette-husk voice crackled out of her radio, with less volume than the siren but somehow even more unsettling.

'I'm up a ladder cleaning windows,' Marge replied.

She wasn't.

'Harriet?' asked Sally, already knowing the answer.

'I'm in the lounge, but the Riverside Room is near the staff kitchen. Isn't that where you are?' Harriet was almost pleading now.

'I was, but now I'm in the meds room doing the COSHH count. I can't stop now, it's serious business. We end up with a bottle of missing bleach because I had to stop what I was doing, then it's on my head!'

Sally's excuses were almost as airtight and impressive as her own, Harriet thought.

She must take notes.

'It's going to have to be you, Harry. Can't sit on your arse all night watching doom and gloom.'

'I've gone every time it's gone off for two weeks. Can't you go, Marge?'

'No, she bloody can't!' Sally roared. 'Didn't you hear her? She's grafting.'

Again, Harriet resigned herself to her fate.

‘Fine. But don’t call me Harry, please. I don’t like it.’

She actually didn’t mind being called Harry.

But not by her.

She was far too rudely informal already.

Huffing and puffing, Harriet paused ‘Evil Among Us’ and made her way towards the room in question, back in the direction of the kitchen and down the seemingly endless corridor.

As she walked, she admired the walls, adorned with the kind of Renaissance paintings where the faces all looked the same and no one had any eyelashes.

It was such a confusing place. Elegant yet clinical.

A deep breath would fill your nostrils with mahogany, with just a touch of antiseptic and piss.

Moving further along, she could see that the room she’d peered into earlier still had its door open.

Bit odd, she thought, looking at her watch.

It was 3.15 a.m.

Harriet crept slowly towards the room to check that the lady was okay before confirming yet another false alarm.

She felt bad that she didn’t know her name. She knew the room was occupied, but the door was always closed when she arrived on shift. Sally was normally in charge of the night medication rounds and Harriet hadn’t had any alarms go off for her, so had no reason to check.

Harriet peered in silently.

She was still there, but now sat propped up with pillows, her back against the headboard.

She definitely had a head.

Ah good. Not dead.

Harriet turned to carry on towards the Riverside Room, two doors down.

‘Drawn the short straw again, I see.’

Harriet stopped in her tracks.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Why don’t they ever send the other one down here late at night? It’s always you.’

‘What other one?’ Harriet asked, her head and right arm now peeking around the door as though it were a shower curtain.

‘The one with the God-awful squeaky shoes!’

‘You mean Sally?’ She half-laughed.

‘Yes, Sally,’ sneered the lady with a pompous disdain Harriet quite enjoyed. ‘Mistress of the universe. Keeper of the drugs and toilet rolls. I know she’s here. I’ve been listening to her footwear honking at me all evening. It’s like a great gaggle of geese thumping up and down the corridor.’

‘She’s counting the COSHH.’

‘COSHH? What on earth is that? Slang?’

‘No. Control of Substances Hazardous to Health. Cleaning products and bleach and things.’

‘Is that something she does for fun?’

Harriet couldn’t help but let out a snort.

‘I think she does quite enjoy it, but it’s part of the job. Making sure everyone’s safe.’

‘Everyone? What do you mean, everyone? I’ve only seen one other person here and he looks like he’ll be dead in a week. You should give him a bottle of bleach. It’d do him a favour.’

Harriet fully advanced into the room.

The lady looked to be in her eighties, with half-moon glasses attached to an expensive-looking silver chain that hung around her still-elegant neck. Her hair was expertly curled at the bottom and held with tight pins, giving her the look of the Jack of Spades.

‘What’s your name anyway, dear?’

‘Me? Oh, erm... Harriet,’ she mumbled.

‘GARRETT?’ The old lady exclaimed, jolting forward, half-moons cradling her nose.

‘HAR-RI-ETT.’

‘You should speak clearer, dear. How do you expect anyone to understand you mumbling into your boots?’

‘Sorry I disturbed you. Is there anything I can get you?’ Harriet asked.

‘A gun to shoot myself before the boredom kills me.’

Her face suggested she was not joking.

Not quite sure how to react, Harriet opted for the standard ha-ha-ha and scratched one foot with the other.

The lady’s face remained stoic.

‘Was it that fucking cat again?!’ Sally crackled suddenly and far too loudly out of Harriet’s radio.

In a classic combination of shock and embarrassment, Harriet fumbled the device from her trouser pocket, bowed her head repeatedly and scuffled backwards out of the room into the hall, closing the door behind her.

‘I don’t know yet. I’m not there,’ Harriet whispered into the walkie-talkie, angry and breathless, still recovering from the shock.

‘Bloody hell, what are you doing? Sodding tap-dancing there?’

‘Alright! I’m on my way now.’

She hurtled three doors down towards the room in question and, in an instant, like pulling off a plaster, flung the door open and slapped the light on.

Heart pounding, terrified she would see something she really didn’t want to, Harriet scanned the vacant room with one eye, switched off the alarm console and slammed the door shut.

‘All clear,’ she announced into the radio, her hot breath disappearing into her sweatshirt collar.

Back in the safety of the thirty-year-old sofa, Harriet could see the morning light beginning to cast familiar lines across the carpet through the sides of the heavy blinds. Even through the thick old sash windows, the birds could be heard announcing the day.

She couldn’t, however, stop thinking about that old woman.

A few minutes later, Sally entered the room and began releasing the roller blinds from the windows one by one, sending them shooting skywards at breakneck speed and making far more noise than she needed to.

‘Who’s the lady in the room near Riverside?’ Harriet asked.

‘What, the new one?’ Sally replied, still violently unfurling.

‘Well, I don’t know. I’ve not seen her before. When did she come in?’

‘About four days ago, I think. I’ve not seen her yet, but I heard she’s a right old bag.’

She would, Harriet thought.

It takes an old bag to know one.

‘What’s her name? I checked the resident form and the name has been left blank.’

‘Has it?’

Sally whipped around, having moved on from violently releasing blinds to violently plumping cushions, sending dust into the sun streams like TV static.

‘Ohh, that’s that bloody Cathy again. Absolutely useless, she is. About as much good as a pasty with no Cornish.’

Sally loved an unusual metaphor.

‘Mrs Fitz.’

‘Fitz?’ Harriet asked. ‘That’s a German name, isn’t it? Is she German?’

‘She don’t sound it. Not from what I heard her sayin’, anyway. Mind you, it was a lot of swearing, but all that was in English. I’m guessin’ it were her husband.’

Sally’s grasp of English irked Harriet beyond belief, but she tried not to be too much of a snob about it. She was, Harriet supposed — apart from having very little awareness of personal space and a propensity to stick her nose in other people’s business — a good egg.

‘Right, that’s it for me then,’ Sally said, stretching from side to side and cracking her back eight ways from Sunday. ‘I can hear day shift comin’. I’ll do the handover as I’ve still got some notes to put on the system. Don’t forget, before you leave, you need to give the bogs a good wipe down. Don’t use that yellow cloth, them’s for the sinks. Use the blue one for the shit. They go on a boil wash. If there’s any floaters, don’t use the bog brush, they’re a sod to clean. Get one of the sticks out the garden and give it a good bash up with that.’

She headed for the door, then stopped.

‘Oh, and Harriet?’

Harriet looked up.

‘Happy birthday, luv.’

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# CHAPTER 4

## Three Little Words

Later that day, shortly after waking on her own sofa next to an empty bottle and a half of corner-shop rosé and the remnants of the worst, most overpriced reheated tikka masala she'd ever eaten, Harriet scrolled through the birthday notifications on her phone. There were exactly three.

One from her best and only friend, Lucy, who she had known most of her life and who was now a very jealousy-inducing, well-respected physiotherapist at a London hospital. One from Auntie Jan, her stepdad's sister, who she hadn't seen since about a year after her mum died, once all the excitement and drama of a good tragedy had worn off. The third was from Peter — a guy she'd briefly dated after Lucy had set them up when the engagement ended. He was perfectly pleasant, but the top of his head had barely come up to her shoulder and, even with the best intentions in the world, she just couldn't shake the ick factor.

She'd managed to get past the height at first, but then he had been unnecessarily rude to a waiter who couldn't immediately tell him the country of origin of the salami on a pizza. That was enough of an excuse not to see him again. Plus, he was a terrible kisser: one moment stabbing her gum with an overly zealous, pointy tongue, the next coating the entire outside of her lips in enough saliva to cause a scabby rash.

Even though Harriet had literally used every excuse she could think of to gently decline any subsequent dates so he didn't feel rejected — and therefore, in turn, say something cutting that would make her feel even more terrible about herself — he still didn't seem to get the hint. Her phone would still ping in the middle of the night with excruciatingly dull messages such as 'How has your day been?' and 'Got anything fun planned this weekend?', leading up to even later-night messages such as 'I really fancy a cuddle right now. I give awesome cuddles hehe.'

Ugh, a cuddler and a ‘hehe’-er. He didn’t even have the wherewithal to come straight out with what he wanted, which was, of course, the obligatory text sex. He’d skirt around it with his little winky faces and seemingly innocuous double entendres which he ‘accidentally’ happened upon at an alarmingly frequent and creepy rate for a grown man. No, thank you.
Today was, unfortunately, no exception. The birthday message was a GIF of a cat that looked a bit like Libby, wearing a party hat, standing on its back legs and appearing to DJ at a club. Underneath sat three roses, an aubergine emoji and a question mark. Two minutes later, when she hadn’t replied, he’d gone on to write, ‘Oops, I thought that meant dinner! Apparently not hehe.’
That’s enough of that, she said to herself as she threw the offending phone onto the arm of the beige fabric suite. Just as it landed, a familiar message tone blurted out of it — two birds tweeting... lovebirds.

She felt sick.

An instant bolt of acidic heat shot up from her toes, right through her entire body, stopping briefly at her stomach and sending the cheap wine and overly oily takeaway up to her throat, curdling her breath.

That was his tone. That was Tom’s tone.

Harriet stood up, eyes fixed on the face-down phone as though it was going to move.

But it didn’t. It couldn’t be him. It had been almost a year and not a word. It tweeted again. Two messages from him now. Something must be wrong. Or good? Had he realised he’d made a huge mistake and wanted to get back together? Ha. Not that. If only... But what if it was?
She looked down at her watch. 1.15 p.m. He must be on his lunch break. He always used to text her on his lunch break. Just three little words: ‘I love you.’

It couldn’t be, could it?

Could it?

Harriet reached down to her phone, but as her fingertips touched the smooth black glass, she paused and left her hand hovering.

She wasn’t ready yet. She wanted the moment to last longer. For however awful she felt, however nervous and nauseous, in that very moment, that message could say anything.

She had hope again.

She distracted herself with the washing-up, furiously scrubbing already clean plates and cutlery to the near point of metal fatigue. Then she moved on to the house. Wine bottles clattered into the blue recycling bin, which was already a quarter full three days after it had been emptied. All the time, she kept one eye on the phone.

Once everything that could have been mopped, polished, scrubbed and fluffed had been, Harriet had no choice.

It was time.

She gingerly sat next to it, watching the little green light flash on and off as though it was a traffic signal.

Two new messages.

She swiped down. His name at the top brought a return of the hot flashes.

Three little words again.

‘House has completed.’

Underneath that lay three more.

‘Cheque in post.’

Harriet sank into the sofa.

She’d loved that house. She knew every corner, the name of every paint colour on every wall. Ophelian Dusk for the hall, Vintage Linen in the living room and a rich walnut stain on the aged floors.

Oh, those floors.

She had spent days sanding and buffing each board and countersinking every raised screw one blisteringly hot bank holiday weekend in July, until her wrists gave up. She remembered the mottled brass kitchen tap that never quite turned off and the banging of ancient pipework as hot water journeyed around the house, filling scorched radiators.

How she’d smiled and watched her soon-to-be husband as he restored old brickwork and hoisted Victorian bathtubs up the well-trodden staircase.

Their staircase, their bath, their home.

The home he found it so easy to walk away from, to leave behind... along with her.

She didn’t even own any part of it. It had been bought before they met with family money he’d been gifted so readily and frequently. The kind of generational money that his parents didn’t know where it originated from and didn’t care to find out.

She’d never been quite good enough for his mother. Gertie had been cruel to Tom too, according to the stories he told Harriet: locking him in the

creepy cellar after catching him smoking behind the village hall, or sending him away at twelve to spend an entire summer working from morning until late evening on the farm of a man she vaguely knew from church.
Harriet had tried to ask her about it once at a New Year's Eve party Tom's parents had hosted to show off the extension on their Grade II-listed, five-bedroom detached house. Just after the cheese course but before the after-dinner mints, about three glasses into the good red that was always covered in dust. Gertie — 'short for Gertrude, dear' — had given her the kind of cold, hard glance that ensured it was never mentioned again.
She had a cruel mouth, his mother. Not just in the things she could say — and, my gosh, they could be cruel — but in her incredibly paper-thin, pursed lips, which naturally rested in a smug smirk. So thin that her Chanel lipstick only became visible when she spoke, and even then, barely.
Gertie looked horsey but wasn't. In fact, the whole family looked as though they were auditioning for a BBC Three retelling of All Creatures Great and Small.

Tom's dad was great, though. Mitch. Harriet adored him.

He had a permanently ruddy face from years spent outside on sites, running his construction firm, and a pregnant belly from too much red meat and dark ale. Always in a gilet, with mud on his boots and a smile. You could hear his laugh from halfway down the garden.
Tom told stories about how Mitch would break him out after Gertie had sent him to bed early for bringing on 'one of her heads'. He'd let Tom sit on his lap as he drove a bulldozer down winding country lanes at dusk, then sneak him back up to his bedroom window, with a wink, on the cherry picker he kept on the back terrace.

Mitch knew what Gertie could be like better than anyone.

He was the kind of father Harriet knew Tom would be, and the kind of husband she believed he would become.

Or she had believed.

The kind of husband he would now be to someone else.

The father he would be to someone else's child.

The bile rose for the third time, only now it didn't stop at Harriet's throat.

She hurtled up the stairs, one hand over her mouth and the other holding up her ill-fitting pyjama bottoms, which were doing their best to sashay their way under her buttocks.

With not a second to spare, Harriet fell to her knees in front of the toilet and up came the wine and curry. She focused on breathing. Slowly. Four counts in, four counts out, dreading another wave and unsure of the moment it would be safe to get up. Her stomach gulped air as she prayed it wasn't going to come out of both ends.

She tried to picture beaches and the serene nature backgrounds that loaded up when she unlocked her laptop. Anything but grease and questionable grey hunks of gristly meat.

What an absolute state, she thought to herself.

If only Tom could see her now, his head lowered in disappointment and disgust.

He was right to have left her.

What good man would want to stay with someone so utterly useless?

What father would want her as a mother?

Harriet's stomach bubbled again, but there was nothing left. She sat there, retching on air, on the floor in silence, looking at the discolouring lines of grout between the rented tiles, when all of a sudden, everything she had pushed down came erupting out of her in a cacophony of tears, mucus and guttural noises from places she had been ignoring.

Deep places.

She let it happen, the hurt and shame and loss endlessly pouring out of her in grievous waves, until her face stung from salt and her throat was tight and raw.

Then she felt anger.

Real, visceral anger.

Anger at herself and Gertie and Tom and Sally and ruining her best jeans sanding those sodding floors. At being used and discarded. At never making it down the aisle. At loving someone so much. At not trying hard enough. At not being good enough.

At her mother for dying. At her father for remarrying so quickly. At Lucy for finding life so effortless. At all the crap she'd eaten. At that useless Amazon driver who didn't know how to knock.

But above all of that, she was angry that it had taken her so long to be so angry.

When she had given everything she could and was utterly spent, she lay back onto her elbows and looked up at the ceiling light, her chest rising and falling as she slowly regained her regular breath.

The harsh, fixed fluorescent light seared her already sticky eyes as it beat down.

Harriet imagined this must be what it was like to be in an operating theatre. If this was the last thing her mother saw as the doctors tried furiously to save her.

How she wanted her mother now.

In the silence of the bathroom, she found herself thinking again of Mrs Fitz. The dignity she had. The poise. How completely different from each other they were.

She envisioned her not as she was now, but as she must have been in her younger days. A tour de force of a woman. Strong and beautiful and elegant.

The wife of a spy, perhaps?

Or maybe some German aristocrat, if there was such a thing in Germany?

She imagined the grand house she must have lived in and the sophisticated yet wild parties she must have thrown, with silver trays of hors d'oeuvres balanced by waiters in jackets and the kind of champagne you weren't supposed to guzzle.

What a life she must have had!

A life that couldn't be further from Harriet's evenings — alone, in bed at half past nine on her nights off, comparing reviews of the cheapest possible bed socks whilst balancing a microwave chow mein on her knee, spilling water chestnuts across her duvet and picking cat hair from her plate.

Harriet hoisted herself up, one leg at a time.

She looked in the mirror above the sink. A good, hard look at herself.

Her YouTube-tutorialled, face-framing layers were now stuck slickly to the sides of her cheeks. She peeled them off one by one as they left white imprints in the redness of her face. Her eyes were half-closed and puffy from spent effort.

As Harriet splashed some cool water on her face, her wrist began furiously buzzing. She looked down at her number-three-ranked smartwatch, which was displaying 'Lucy mob'.

Great. The birthday call, she thought.

Ordinarily, she loved hearing from Lucy. She'd tell her all about the strange ailments of her clients that she wasn't really supposed to divulge outside of the medical field, but she just couldn't help herself.

Their discussions used to be all about marriage and husbands, which impossibly expensive garden centre they were planning to visit every other Sunday, and the quality of the jacket potato fillings in the café. Dobbies was the best. Steer clear of Johnsons. Notcutts was okay if you were in a pinch, but the sweetcorn-to-tuna ratio was just off. Best to stick to a cheese-and-ham toastie if you were planning a trip there.

Harriet hadn't had so much as a sniff of a shared couples' Victoria sponge since the split and, being a good friend, Lucy never brought up the past unless Harriet did.

Lucy's husband, Neil, and Tom had become good friends. They were from the same stock, with the same interests. Lucy and Harriet thought it was wonderful. A foursome family unit, almost. Their friendship had actually brought the women closer together too.

'The boys' would do all of the meet-up arranging. They were very good like that. Masterful.

They'd normally start with some historical tour of an old cathedral, where Neil and Tom — both architects — would gabble on about construction-related thingies and the girlfriends-slash-wives would follow in the background, giggling at the various states of undress of the male statues.

Completely immature and uncouth for respectable grown women, but, as in all good friendships, once one started laughing, the other followed. Something they would never have done apart, but together they fell back into being children, and they both adored it.

Afterwards, they'd find an off-the-beaten-track country pub, eat a puff-pastry pie and drink red wine — apart from Neil, who had appointed himself designated driver and barely touched his. More often than not, they'd end up all piling into his Range Rover, then grabbing a taxi the next morning to pick up their own cars.

'Happy birthday, chicken!' Lucy's voice echoed up the stairs from somewhere in the living room.

'Lucy?' Harriet looked around, confused and slightly scared. 'How did you get in? Where are you?'

'What? I'm at home. I've just got in. Why? Where are you?' Lucy replied.

'I can hear you from downstairs.' Harriet, now utterly confused, walked gingerly towards the top of the stairs.

‘Have you got your Bluetooth speaker connected again?’

‘Oh shit, yeah, that must be it,’ she shouted into the abyss.

Relieved, Harriet made her way into the hallway to the speaker, which was plugged into the only free socket in the house. Everything else was taken up by a wellness gadget, dehumidifier, diffuser or lamp. She disconnected it, picked up her phone and walked to the kitchen, scowling through the window at the irritatingly chirpy birds enjoying life in the overgrown garden.

‘So?’ Lucy asked. ‘What have you been up to so far on your birthday?’

Harriet considered whether she should lie and say something other than sleeping, but she could never lie to Lucy.

‘Sleeping.’

Lucy went quiet.

‘Oh God, yes, sorry. The new job. I didn’t wake you up, did I? What time did you finish last night?’

‘Five a.m.,’ Harriet replied.

‘What, five a.m. this morning?’

‘Yes, this morning.’

‘So, what time did you start?’

Harriet poked at a half-festering teabag sitting on a plate with its equally mouldy brothers and sisters, using the back end of a teaspoon.

Nothing came out.

‘Seven o’clock last night.’ Or was it the night befoere? I’m not sure anymore.’ She poked harder. Ah, there it was.

‘And on your birthday too. Isn’t there something else you can do that isn’t so awful? I remember how much you hated it last time.’

‘I know. I just don’t know what I want to do any more. Not that I ever really did, but now I really don’t.’

Harriet took a deep breath and braced herself for a conversation she didn’t want to have but couldn’t ignore.

‘Tom texted me.’

The phone went silent.

Still silent.

‘Tom Tom, as in... Tom?’ Lucy stuttered, pretending to scramble for words.

‘Yep.’

How many Toms are there, for fuck’s sake?

Harriet's stomach dropped as she felt her knees bend ever so slightly the wrong way. She leaned forwards, catching her elbows on the scratched oak-veneer worktop.

Lucy's tone softened in sympathy, the way you listen to a child telling you about having to bury their cat in the garden because the neighbour's dog burrowed under the fence and bit it in half.

'What did he say?'

'He just said that the house had sold.'

'Oh, Harry... how shit. But also good news, as he's giving you some money from it, isn't he? You could do with that now. Have yourself a nice little holiday somewhere and forget about it all.'

Harriet spied a particularly fat pigeon marching across the too-long grass as Lucy's tone perked up.

'Also, look on the bright side... he'll be halfway around the world and you'll never have to worry about bumping into him again.'

Harriet stood upright, still watching the bossy pigeon barge its way belly-first into a group of starlings, sending them flapping and screaming into the nearest tree.

Greedy bastard.

She wondered if that was what she looked like when she walked into a room. Probably.

Lucy's words eventually made it into cognition.

'Sorry, what?'

'Huh?' Lucy panicked.

'Halfway around the world?' There was that cold sweat again. 'What do you mean, halfway around the world? Is he going on a cruise or something? Who told you? Did he tell you? Have you spoken to him? What's going on... Lucy?!'

Her fingers clenched the phone so tightly she could feel the screen start to soften under her grip.

'Sorry. I meant to tell you, but I've just been so busy at the hospital.' Lucy's voice broke in all the wrong places. 'He's taken a job in America for a firm that has something to do with heritage buildings. I think it's on some sort of contract. I'm not sure — two years or something like that. It's good, though, isn't it, Harry?'

Harriet's heart went from beating too fast to almost not at all. Her shoulders sank lower than her self-esteem.

‘He can’t even be in the same country as me now,’ Harriet whimpered, her eyes welling again.

‘Don’t be so ridiculous!’ Lucy snapped. ‘You did absolutely nothing wrong. Nothing at all.’

‘Then why does it feel like I’m being punished?’ Harriet gripped the edge of the worktop and stared down at the scratched veneer.

‘Break-ups are utter shit. Broken engagements are even worse. Honestly, I think you’re doing brilliantly.’

Lucy never was a very good liar.

‘So, tell me about this new job, then. Are you enjoying it? Have you had to wipe anyone’s bum yet?’

Harriet mustered a smile and tried to regain some semblance of being a functioning human being by wiping her face with a semi-moist flannel.

‘I have, actually. I wasn’t as grossed out as I thought I’d be. I felt more sorry for the poor guy than anything,’ she said, rescuing her eyelashes one by one from her eyelid.

‘Not sure I could do it myself,’ Lucy replied. ‘The closest I’ve got is someone letting out a wet fart on an extended leg bend, and that was enough. Oh, and using the bathroom after Neil that time he had stomach flu, of course.’

They laughed in unison, which in turn made them laugh even more, until they were no longer laughing but gasping for air, trying to hold their stomach muscles from contracting any more, mouths wide open.

Time apart had done absolutely nothing to mature either of them.

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# CHAPTER 5

Whatever Next

Harriet found herself spending more and more time with Mrs Fitz over the following week. She had even taken on an extra daytime shift. She was keeping off the booze too—for the most part, anyway—partly because her body clock was still acclimatising to being awake during the day, and partly because she still couldn't get the tikka-vomit stain out of the grout. She imagined the whole experience had actually put her off.

'So how much was the cheque for?' Mrs Fitz looked on, grasping her teacup as though it were a whisky glass.

'We're not supposed to talk about money. It's rude, isn't it?' Harriet replied.

'What's rude about it? Gosh, everyone is so bloody offended these days, it's a wonder we aren't all walking around in giant bubbles. Don't tell me you're one of them too.'

'No, no,' she quickly corrected. 'It's just not the done thing, is it? Money, politics, religion and all that.'

'My darling girl, the only things of any interest in this world are money, politics and religion.'

'What about sex?' Harriet asked, wondering if this eighty-year-old woman would recoil or flush with embarrassment at the very mention of the word.

'Ah, now that is the question, isn't it?' Mrs Fitz replied with such passion that Harriet blushed and busied herself folding clothes that had already been folded. She leaned forward, cupping her tea in both hands as though she were about to whisper some scandalous secret.

'Sex is ninety per cent in the mind,' she uttered, waving Harriet closer. Harriet obliged.

‘But the other ten per cent’—practically hanging out of the bed now—‘is better on your own.’

Harriet, as red as the cast of TOWIE after a trip to Marbella, stood bolt upright and attempted to re-close the top drawer of the tall cabinet, which wouldn’t close.

‘What happened to Mr Fitz... if you don’t mind me asking?’ Harriet had been dying to ask all week, but she was sure etiquette dictated that one should wait until at least nine days after meeting someone before enquiring about the death of a loved one, and it had only been seven.

Mrs Fitz sat back, her head resting against the newly plumped pillow. Her eyes dropped to her lap.

‘Ha, him... He left us a long time ago.’

Us? Left? Did that mean he was dead? Harriet skirted around the ambiguity.

‘By us, do you mean your children?’

She swiftly plonked herself on the foot of the bed. Absolutely no one had called or visited at all since Mrs Fitz had moved in, according to the day shift, so this was news indeed.

Mrs Fitz looked at her over the rim of her teacup.

‘No, dear. We never had children. Far too busy for any of that nonsense.’

Harriet nodded, trying to look as though this hadn’t immediately disappointed her. No children. So what about the letters?

She busied herself with the drawer again, which did not need busying with. It was already tidy. Painfully tidy, in fact. Mrs Fitz’s things were arranged with military precision: hairbrush, compact, hand cream, folded handkerchief, a tiny glass bottle of perfume and, underneath them all, the corner of a cream envelope Harriet had absolutely no business noticing.

She looked away. Then looked back. Then looked away again with what she hoped was casual professionalism.

‘You are very interested in that drawer, dear.’

Harriet froze with a pair of folded stockings in her hand.

‘No, I’m not.’

‘You are. You’ve looked at it four times.’

‘I was looking at the craftsmanship.’

‘It’s melamine.’

‘Yes. Well. Even bad craftsmanship is still craftsmanship.’

Mrs Fitz lowered her cup into its saucer with the tiniest of clinks. It was astonishing how much judgement one woman could get out of china.

‘You may as well ask.’

Harriet swallowed. ‘Ask what?’

‘Whatever is currently making your face do that.’

‘My face isn’t doing anything.’

‘It is attempting innocence. Poorly.’

Harriet placed the stockings into the drawer, then immediately moved them half an inch to the left because they looked wrong and because she needed something to do with her hands.

‘I just wondered whether you had family.’

Mrs Fitz’s expression shifted, but only slightly. It was so quick Harriet might have missed it if she hadn’t already been watching her far too closely.

‘Everyone has family,’ Mrs Fitz said. ‘Some of us simply have the good sense not to advertise them.’

‘Oh.’

‘There are people who would call themselves mine if it suited them.’

Harriet frowned. ‘That sounds ominous.’

‘It is only ominous if there is money involved.’

‘Is there?’

Mrs Fitz smiled.

‘Now you’re snooping.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘You were, darling. But at least you’re honest enough to be bad at it.’

Harriet felt her cheeks warm. ‘I’m not trying to be nosy.’

‘No. That is the tragedy. You are nosy quite naturally. Some people have to work at it, but you seem to have been gifted.’

‘I don’t think that’s a compliment.’

‘It wasn’t intended as an insult.’

Harriet looked down at the envelope again, then forced herself to close the drawer with more care than was probably necessary.

She expected to be dismissed. Mrs Fitz was very good at dismissing people. She could do it with a tilt of her chin and half a syllable. Harriet had seen her send Sally out of a room once using nothing but the word ‘hmm.’

But Mrs Fitz did not dismiss her.

Instead, she reached for the small silver compact on the bedside table and held it out.

‘Open that.’

Harriet stared at it.

‘Am I allowed?’

‘No,’ Mrs Fitz said. ‘That’s what makes it interesting.’

Harriet took the compact carefully. It was heavier than she expected, cool against her palm, with a little engraved pattern around the edge that had been worn smooth in places by years of fingers. She pressed the catch and it opened with a soft click.

Inside, where the powder should have been, was a tiny black-and-white photograph, cut roughly around the edges.

A much younger Mrs Fitz stood on the steps of a house Harriet did not recognise. She wore a fitted dress, dark glasses and the sort of expression that suggested the photographer had been lucky to be permitted to exist. One hand was raised against the sun. Beside her stood a man in a linen suit, his face turned away from the camera.

Harriet stared.

‘You look like a film star.’

‘I was much better dressed than most of them.’

‘Who’s the man?’

Mrs Fitz held out her hand. Harriet gave the compact back reluctantly.

‘No one you need to know.’

Harriet felt something small and strange move in her chest. It was ridiculous, really. She was forty years old, sitting at the end of an elderly woman’s bed, being allowed to look at a photograph hidden inside a compact she absolutely should not have opened, and somehow it felt like being included.

Mrs Fitz snapped the compact shut.

‘People always want to know who belongs to whom,’ she said, placing it back beside her teacup. ‘As if blood is the only thing that counts.’

Harriet thought of Tom’s house. Their house that had never been theirs. His family money. His mother’s thin mouth. The cheque in the post. All those years of making something beautiful and still leaving with nothing but half a roll of bin bags and a slow cooker she hadn’t even liked.

‘No,’ Harriet said quietly. ‘I suppose it isn’t.’

Mrs Fitz looked at her then. Properly. For once, Harriet did not fill the silence.

‘Good,’ Mrs Fitz said at last. ‘You may not be entirely hopeless after all.’

Harriet opened her mouth to reply, but the radio at her hip exploded into life.

‘I NEED HELP IN HERE, PLEASE,’ Sally blasted through the speaker at a volume capable of causing a heart attack. ‘EMERGENCY. EMERGENCY. 999.’

Harriet jumped to her feet, breathless from the shock.

‘What is it? Where are you?’ Her words came out as quickly as her eyes darted around the room, her thumb turning white around the receiver.

‘I’ve lost a shoe over the balcony. It flew off and I can’t reach it. Assistance required. I repeat, I have lost a shoe.’

Mrs Fitz closed her eyes.

‘Great Scott. What is wrong with that bloody woman?’

Harriet looked from the radio to Mrs Fitz, then to the compact on the bedside table.

‘I should probably—’

‘Yes,’ Mrs Fitz said. ‘Off you go. Before she declares martial law over a trainer.’

Harriet moved towards the door but paused with her hand on the frame.

‘Mrs Fitz?’

‘Yes?’

‘Thank you. For showing me.’

Mrs Fitz lifted her teacup again, her expression returning to its usual smooth indifference.

‘I didn’t show you anything, dear.’

Harriet smiled.

‘No. Of course not.’

She left the room and headed towards the grand staircase, where she found Sally reaching into a recessed alcove at least ten feet above the floor, precariously balanced with a face mask fastened to the end of a window pole as she tried to hook a firmly wedged running shoe.

What on earth had just happened in there?

‘About bloody time,’ Sally scoffed, her bare toes wrapped around a stair rod like an anchor. ‘I just got these from the Nike outlet in town. There’s no way I’m givin’ one up without a damn good fight.’

‘How... how did—?’ Harriet stared at the predicament in awe, carefully analysing the velocity it must have taken for the trainer to end up there,

looking likely to become a permanent fixture of the building for generations to come.

‘I was practising my jujitsu, if you must know. Competition’s on Friday and we’ve got them lot from the city over. Fancy themselves summat rotten, they do.’

‘Well, don’t just stand there,’ Sally commanded, her pug nose redder than usual. ‘Grab another pole—try and make a pincer-fork thing with it.’

Harriet picked up a lone pole abandoned at the foot of the staircase and took up position beside Sally, both of them poking into the deep recess like two gondoliers fighting their way through the Venetian waterways.

‘You know Mrs Fitz in room twelve?’ Harriet asked.

‘The rude one?’ Sally replied, her tongue poking through her lips with concentration. ‘Why? What’s she done now?’

‘No, nothing really. It’s just... has she had anyone visit her or call her since she came in?’

‘What on earth is going on here?’ Harriet and Sally both halted operations and turned towards Marge, who was standing in the hallway, one hand on her hip and the other clutching her disposable vape. She was never without that thing. Cheaper than smoking, she said, and much better for you. Could give it up any time she liked. Harriet would have had an easier time believing that if Marge wasn’t constantly puffing on it, nipping out to buy it, furiously shaking it, wiping it or searching her twelve pockets for the damn thing. It was almost like a pet.

‘I lost my bloody shoe, didn’t I? Slipped right off me foot. It’s got stuck between the banister and some stupid hole down the back here.’

‘Dear Lord, honestly. The sights you see when you haven’t got your gun.’ Marge walked to the foot of the twisting mahogany banisters, placed both hands firmly over the rail and began shoving the entire structure backwards and forwards.

‘That’s it!’ Sally shouted. Her postwoman-length grey shorts cut into her knees as she squatted with excitement. ‘Keep going. Don’t stop.’

Sally descended the stairs like a shot-putter going in for the final throw and joined Marge, four hands desecrating such fine historic craftsmanship for the sake of some Chinese leather.

Tom would turn in his grave if he saw this.

No. No, I can’t think that, Harriet told herself. He’s not dead. He’s not in a grave. He’s just gone.

Although she had read on a website about getting over terrible break-ups that the pain could be much like bereavement. Sometimes worse, according to those who had experienced both. Something to do with closure, or not having closure, or too little, or too much. She couldn't remember which, but she was sure it would have been less painful if he had died. He would still be gone, but at least he would have still loved her.

No, she mustn't think like that. That was awful. Too much. Shush now.

Harriet watched the pair and wondered how on earth she had ended up here, at this exact moment, with these exact people. As a child, she'd had such ambition. At twenty-one she would move to Los Angeles and study acting—twenty-one because you couldn't drink before then in America, which would clearly be essential at all the industry parties she would attend. She would land her first film role, be instantly adored by millions and prove everyone wrong who thought she wasn't talented enough or pretty enough.

Of course, it turned out to be much harder than she had once hoped. There were, in fact, lots of other young women who were much prettier and more talented than she was, all with exactly the same dream—and where were they now? Bloody nowhere, that's where. So she, in all her ungloriousness and unnatural hairiness, had absolutely no chance. Ironically, Harriet couldn't think of much worse than being famous these days. There were no real celebrities anymore. Everyone was selling, reviewing or endorsing something. The once-revered movie star was now dancing around the living room with their teenage children like an embarrassingly drunk auntie at a wedding, pretending it was a snapshot of their daily life while selling a new pan range.

It didn't stop Harriet watching them, though. Or buying the pan.

'So, has she?' she asked, looking back at Sally.

'Has she what?' Sally replied without so much as a glance.

'Had any visitors? Mrs Fitz, room twelve?'

'Ah, that's it!' A gargantuan slap echoed through the hallway as the size-four-and-a-half trainer finally succumbed to pressure and dropped to the floor, picking up about a decade's worth of cobwebs along the way. Sally ceremoniously cradled her shoe and patted away the debris.

'No, not that I know of. She's got a big pile of letters, though, that she keeps in the tall cabinet. Saw her crying over them once. No next of kin listed at the last check. The hospital discharge team referred her.'

Harriet mulled over Mrs Fitz's words and tried to make sense of them. Maybe she was confused. Age could be catching up with her, although she hid it incredibly well if that was the case. Nothing in her medical notes mentioned dementia, and this wasn't a specialist facility that took on residents with complex needs; it was more of a general residential home. Harriet decided this was absolutely none of her business. Not one bit. The last thing this vulnerable lady needed was some nosy, bored member of staff poking around her life and unlocking painful memories of dead relatives, former lovers or possibly someone in prison. Although the letters were interesting. Hidden correspondence was rarely good news, particularly on true-crime documentaries. Perhaps someone was confessing terrible crimes to Mrs Fitz one by one, safe in the knowledge that she would take their secrets to her grave.

I must try and remember this, Harriet thought. This would be a really good idea for a book. 'Death Letters'? No, too obvious. 'Dearest Accomplice'...

'Ooh, I like that one,' Harriet said aloud.

The silence thickened.

'Off you go now, missus,' Marge said, her expression caught between concern and confusion. 'It's been a long one.'

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# CHAPTER 6

## Bag For Life

If there's one thing you can count on when working night shifts, it's that they utterly and completely mess with your brain and body. They fight both equally and reduce them to near uselessness most of the time. You live in an upside-downy world, and the more you live in it, the less real it feels. Most of the time, you're either trying to block out the light or eating a roast dinner at 4am on a Wednesday. This may go some way towards explaining why Harriet did what she did next. Explaining, though, not excusing, because there was no excuse for it. In no scenario would it be okay to do what she did, but she had done it.

Harriet did not, in fact, go straight home as Marge had instructed her to. She did not get in her car, put on her 90s cleaning-mix playlist and sing 'Backstreet's Back' at an inappropriate volume for the time of day. She didn't even open her Amazon app and track any upcoming deliveries before flopping into bed. She did, however, go back to check on Mrs Fitz, who had left her door open. She turned off the light after noticing she was asleep. She attempted to close the drawer that wouldn't close again, looked inside it and took a stack of unopened handwritten letters that didn't belong to her. She didn't know why, but she did it, and she hated herself.

If I just put them back, it'll be like it never happened, she thought as she stood half in, half out of the kitchen, looking at the pile of pristine-looking envelopes, wrapped in a Woolworths carrier bag, sitting on the arm of the sofa. Harriet tried to guess how old they were by googling when Woolworths closed down for good. It turned out to be 2009, which she could hardly believe. That must have been the last time they made decent carrier bags that didn't split the moment you put more than a packet of rolls in them—and they were free to boot.

The bags for life weren’t bad, she supposed, but 35p a pop somehow didn’t financially guilt her into remembering to grab them out of the potato cupboard, where all the bags went to die. She’d had a clear-out a few months ago and must easily have thrown away a tenner’s worth of the things. She wondered if anyone actually made good on the ‘bag for life’ promise, taking a snapped-handled version back into the supermarket and requesting a replacement every time it broke for the rest of their lives. This would be the clever thing to do, of course: play them at their own game. That would teach them.

But what if he is a serial killer? Harriet tried to convince herself as her eyes pierced the translucent plastic, searching for any justification for the inexcusable.

No, no, NO. This wasn’t who she was. She picked up the bag and felt what seemed like years’ worth of correspondence pull at her shoulder blade, dragging it towards the floor. Within moments, she had flung open the front door, opened the car boot, hurled the bag under an emergency blanket and slammed shut the crime scene.

There, she reasoned. Nothing had happened. She would return the letters to their rightful home, and no one would ever know what an absolutely horrible person she had nearly become. Snooping through an old lady’s private letters, breaking all manner of trust—because why? She was bored? Lonely? Jealous? Yes, probably jealous. That was her overriding emotion these days: jealousy of everyone else who seemed to have it much easier than her. She even found herself jealous of Sally.

Sally, with her clubs and friends and sporting events and interests and hobbies. Sally would not be sitting at home in four-day-old pyjamas. She would not be rewatching the same TV shows she had watched fifty times over because the longest-standing relationship she’d actually had in her life was with those people. Everyone else had been and gone or moved or died, but those people were a constant. Her TV friends were there whenever she needed them. They didn’t mind that she had to ‘start again’. They didn’t bat an eyelid when she spent hours looking up old school friends on Facebook, judging hairdos and husbands, ex-husbands, weight gain (‘Four kids, blimey’), happy, smiling Christmas photos and days around the pool in Tenerife—or Dubai, for the ones who had ‘married up’.

She had married up. She was on her way to being one of these people. Was.

It’s an odd thing when you go through some kind of trauma. Harriet’s college friend Natalie had been cycling to work one day when she was hit by a car and spent almost six months in hospital in a coma. They’d had to amputate part of her left leg to save her life. When she woke up, she wasn’t depressed that she was an amputee; she was just so happy to be alive. So thankful that she got to carry on. She’d made a website completely dedicated to documenting her recovery, with daily video updates and motivational quotes. The BBC had even interviewed her as she learned to walk again and championed road-safety causes—smiling and happy, front-page stuff. As absolute bastard luck would have it, she’d developed cancer a year after the accident.

This would have absolutely finished Harriet off. Actually, the first bit would have. Honestly, how could so much shit happen to someone in such a short space of time? Someone so undeserving of it, too. There were plenty of downright twatty people in the world it should happen to, but it didn’t; it always seemed to happen to the good ones.

She and Tom went to see her in hospital, expecting her to be lying in a bed counting down the days, frail and near the end—and who could blame her?

She wasn’t. She wasn’t even in the hospital.

Harriet was informed by a nurse that Natalie was, in fact, somewhere in the Middle East, cycling with only one and a half legs and raising millions for cancer charities. She didn’t know exactly which country she was in, as Natalie was crossing several of them over the course of a month.

What a woman, Harriet concluded. Certainly a much better example of one than she was. It didn’t take more than a late train or missed delivery attempt to send Harriet into a second bottle of wine, and here was this proper woman, who would be completely justified in feeling utterly shit about everything. Yet there she was—or rather, wasn’t—because she had chosen to be fantastic about it all.

That was the key word here, Harriet supposed, as she flopped down onto the edge of her bed, twisting her sock around her foot on the carpet until the heel had returned to its correct position. A half-day, half-night daze of perpetual confusion. Chose. As if it was as simple as that. Of course it wasn’t; if it were, we would all ‘choose’ to be happy, wouldn’t we?

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# CHAPTER 7

A. Kilner

It was almost four days later when Harriet opened the front door again to Hawthorn House. All the sister residences had woodland-themed names: Oak Lodge, The Ivy, Redwood House. Sally said it was because they were trying to be ‘all-American about things’, but Harriet quite liked the theme. It had a quiet grandeur to it, a dignity of sorts, she felt. It was also not lost on her that interacting with most of the people inside Hawthorn House was like being jabbed with sharp little needles on an hourly basis. She’d had a particularly prickly episode with Mr Brown in room 215, who, when she had bent down to pick up a rogue tissue from the floor, had remarked that she was getting ‘wider by the day’ and that ‘come Christmas, she wouldn’t be able to fit through the door’. Just the thing you long to hear when you’re already hanging on by a strand of gossamer. Rude bastard.

‘Your lady friend had a visitor.’ Harriet turned in the direction of the voice to see Marge, vape in hand, half in, half out of the French doors, propping open the aged criss-cross glass by leaning on one of the nine-foot panes and allowing all manner of leaves to waft onto the forty-year-old coir mat.

A twinge of excitement shot across her chest.

‘Who?’ she replied, knowing full well who.

‘Mrs F,’ Marge said through her cloud of smoke—although she didn’t like it if you called it smoke. It was water vapour. It was a vape. Basically good for you. It was categorically not smoke.

‘A man came by this morning. Stayed for about half an hour.’

Harriet immediately ran round to the reception desk and slid her fingers down the huge visitors’ book that lay open on today’s date. There it was: a signature, a name—well, almost a name. An initial. A. Kilner.

What Marge didn’t know, however—what no one knew, least of all Mrs Fitz, and what Harriet could hardly believe herself—was that, two nights

ago, Harriet had crept into room 12 to return the bag of personal and private letters that she had stolen from the frail old lady she was supposed to be looking after.

When she opened the drawer, she saw that one un-enveloped letter had slipped into the wooden joint. When she pulled it out to rescue it, she hadn't meant to read it, but she found herself drawn to the elegant handwriting, with its long loops and swirling s's. It didn't reveal much, only that she had returned from a holiday in Rhodes and that the weather was nice, but Michael—whom Harriet guessed was Mr Fitz—had got himself rather a dicky tummy from a seafood platter at a very upmarket restaurant, which had put a dampener on the whole trip.

It didn't even read like a letter. There was no address. Who didn't write the address on the letter itself? Something Harriet found extremely odd for such a seemingly educated lady.

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# CHAPTER 8

Envelopes

‘So, how much do you think is on it, then?’ Lucy asked, nodding at the brown envelope whose top-right corner Harriet was flicking with her nail across the table. They were in the sandwich shop that used to be halfway between their houses but was now an extra twenty-five-minute walk for Harriet, since she had been forced out of the almost-marital home she had shared with Tom because she didn’t own a brick of it.

‘I’ve no idea,’ she said, slowly tracing the edges and then the seal, wondering if he had licked the envelope himself and whether some part of his DNA clung to the sticky residue. There was that pain again.

Tom didn’t owe her anything. It was his house; they weren’t married. They never made it that far. But there was a significant part of Harriet that did feel like he owed her—and owed her a lot. All those broken promises must add up to something. All the awful weekends she had endured with his mother, who looked down her nose job at her while making heavily veiled comments about her weight that no one else picked up on. All the times she had given up her plans to accommodate his. The endless money she had spent on Farrow & Ball paint and throw pillows. She could have taken the throw pillows, of course, but they were part of their life, and she couldn’t bear to see them anywhere else.

She had thought about how much he was going to give her, although they hadn’t discussed it. Money wasn’t discussed much at all by Tom, probably partly because of the awkwardness caused by the vast disparity between them. Harriet’s father had been much the same when she was growing up, before he ran off with Suze from work. Suze. What a slutty name. You couldn’t trust a Suze. Susans or Suzannes, even Susannas were great people, but a Suze was out to get what she could and was not to be trusted. A Suze would wear sheer, opaque tights and 80s half-stilettos, hiding the

scuffs on the heels with the office Sharpie. A Suze would laugh louder and harder at her male co-workers' awful jokes than required, grabbing their shoulders as she flicked her hair back with a smile. They were toast. You weren't supposed to run off with a Suze, though. Most workplaces had one: the type who would end marriages, yes, or kill a relationship or two after word got out following the office Christmas-party shenanigans. But a tryst with a Suze never really went anywhere—well, usually.

Harriet's dad had been remarried to Suze for twenty-five years. They had four late-teen children together, a German shepherd called Reggie and a weird, rat-looking dog that was constantly shaking in a corner: some kind of pedigree thing that looked more cat than canine. Suze paraded it around the kitchen island under one arm like Paris Hilton circa 2002. The poor thing just sat there with a gormless look on its whisker-patched, terrified face, almost as if being alive was too much for it, too frightening. Gracie, she was called. Ironically so, as Harriet thought it would have been more gracious to send it to therapy with a strong anxiety prescription. A mercy of sorts.

Harriet didn't really speak much to her father, Suze or the new family. There had been an appropriate effort for the first few years after he left, but life and his own children eventually took over. Especially when, on her twenty-first birthday, he made a phone call that started with 'You'd better sit down' and ended with the announcement that Suze was pregnant. 'Congratulations! How wonderful,' was Harriet's response, but it was not genuine. Harriet had always tried everything to please her father. It was the never-ending pursuit of a sincere 'well done' or the absolute dream of 'I'm proud that you're my daughter'. She could never quite fathom how Stuart and her mother had ever been a couple. Her mother said they'd met at a christening and that he had relentlessly pursued her in what sounded quite like harassment, honestly. She had not been at all interested in this geeky, spotty, awkward guy, but through sheer determination—turning up at her flat, leaving records on her doorstep and generally being such a nuisance—she eventually gave in. They started seeing each other and built a home and a family. Fast-forward twelve years of marriage, and along came Suze in her see-through tights and fucked it all up.

Her mother was never the same after Stuart left her. Harriet was sure of that. There is a deep wound that never heals from betrayal. You can patch it up, fill it in, but it never goes away. There was a quote she had read once

that went something like, ‘Only the one who hurts you can heal you.’ Harriet identified with that, especially now. Especially today.

‘So, Mrs... are you going to open it or paw it to death?’

Harriet remained silent, her head bowed low as she traced the V-shaped edge of the flap, periodically flicking up a torn corner.

Lucy reached across the table, put her hand over Harriet’s and placed them both on the counter.

‘Look, Har,’ Lucy said, lowering her head to meet Harriet’s eyes. ‘Whatever number is on that cheque, it is NOT a reflection of your worth. Okay?’

‘It just feels so final, you know?’

‘I know. But think of it this way: a new start. There might even be enough in there for a deposit on a flat or a really nice holiday. Yes, I think that’s what you should do. You should open that letter and, however much the bastard gave you, take some time for yourself and go on an adventure. See some of the world. Ooh, go on one of those group-travel things I keep seeing ads for on TikTok. Climb a mountain in Peru. Go and swim with some whales or something and forget about the idiot.’

Except he wasn’t an idiot, not to her, anyway. She longed to hate him, but she just couldn’t.

‘Me, climbing a mountain... in Peru?’ Harriet threw Lucy a look.

‘Yeah, no, maybe not that, but you did buy those rock-climbing shoes for the time we went to that weird adventure place. Do you remember? It was Isabel’s hen weekend, and we climbed the fake wall thingy. You got stuck about three feet up, and we had to get that really attractive guy who worked there to hook you onto the—’

‘Yes, thanks for that.’ Harriet snatched her hands from Lucy’s and gave an indignant laugh. ‘You’re supposed to be cheering me up, not reminding me of one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.’

‘But there are so many to choose from!’ Both women smiled at each other in silence. A quiet comfort passed between them, and a warm wave washed over Harriet that she hadn’t felt in a while. A little bit of light.

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# CHAPTER 9

Rod

Rod had spent the majority of the last four years at Hawthorn House in the garden. Harriet hadn't seen much of him, owing to the fact that not much gardening got done between 8pm and 8am, but today she had come in early to cover a shift because Sally had tickets for a knock-off Backstreet Boys concert called the Frontstreet Boyz. Eye roll.

They had quite the following on TikTok, which was almost as much of a surprise as the fact that Sally even had TikTok. Friends Reunited, yes. TikTok, no.

Harriet watched as the wizened man perched gently on a makeshift kneepad that looked to have once been two pillows sewn together inside a thick pillowcase. The imprint of his knees was now a permanent fixture, and it appeared to offer little, if any, barrier between him and the hard stone slabs. He was utterly engrossed in digging into a rather large terracotta pot, picking out and flicking away invisible weeds that were so tiny Harriet couldn't see them from where she was standing but which were seemingly part of the intricate process. She could see that his fingernails sported a thick brown hue from the build-up of compost, some of which had settled into his rolled-up blue pinstriped shirtsleeve. She recoiled slightly at the thought of the amount of washing he must do on a weekly basis and wondered if he had one of those nail brushes that you were technically supposed to have but no one ever did. She bet he did. He looked the type.

A few moments later, she realised she had been standing there watching for far too long—like a ghost staring through the window of an abandoned mansion and out into the grounds—and jolted herself back to the present.

'What are you doing there?' Harriet asked, her voice upturned and flecked with pleasantry.

Rod looked up, his blue eyes glazed with age but still striking. There was more salt in his hair than pepper, but he had managed to keep a good deal of it, considering he must have been in his mid-seventies. It wasn't hard to imagine that he must have been quite the looker in his younger days, or even his not-so-distant days. He had a presence about him that the ravages of time could diminish but not eradicate.

With an effortless yet invigorated gesture, he beckoned Harriet with a finger and a smooth flick of his head. She didn't move at first, in case she was misinterpreting the action. The finger progressed into an entire hand flailing at an impressive rate, and she eventually opened the tall French doors and hobbled over to sit beside him.

'You see this?' Rod held up a tiny seed, which she could indeed see but which looked very much like something that came on top of a meal-deal salad.

'Yes. What is it?' she asked.

'This, my love... is a seed.'

Harriet, equal parts embarrassed and defensive, forced a fake laugh that was overdramatic yet warranted, given the perceived insult.

'No, I can see it's a seed. I mean, what is it going to turn into?'

Rod let out a raucous belly laugh quite unbefitting an older gentleman. It was so deep and guttural that she was sure his belly would have bounced about quite freely, had he possessed one. But he did not have a belly; if anything, he had a complete lack of one.

'I'm sorry,' he managed to squeeze out between laughs, tears streaming down his face. He used one of his most soiled fingers to wipe away the dampness along his cheek and, in return, left a muddy streak that looked comical against his refined, handsome features.

'I'm so used to Marge that I've forgotten not everyone is a complete imbecile.' Harriet liked him already.

'Well, I wouldn't count me out of that category just yet,' she quipped. 'I did wonder if it was a sesame seed.'

Rod erupted into a second wave of tear-jerking laughter, his face now such a deep shade of red that it almost camouflaged the dirt streak. Harriet looked on in awe, trying to decipher what exactly was so bone-shakingly funny while finding herself drawn into a tandem cackling situation, where the act of someone else laughing was enough to draw you in to the point that you couldn't even remember what you had been laughing at in the first

place. After what seemed like an overly extended period, Rod's raucous outbursts slowed to an engine-misfire pace, and he took a long breath, regained his composure and returned to semi-regular breathing.

'Are you okay? You went quite purple there,' Harriet asked, leaning down to meet him at eye level.

'Yes, yes, thank you. Goodness, I've not laughed like that in a good old while. Thank you, m'dear.' Harriet took Rod's hand, and they both stood upright. She could see now that he towered over her by at least a foot. He was a substantial man, somewhere in his mid-seventies, with broad shoulders and the remains of what must once have been a rather handsome face. His jawline had softened into jowls, and his smile seemed to occupy most of his head.

'You'll have to forgive me. I've been a tiny bit naughty.'

Harriet looked at him quizzically. She couldn't imagine this was the first time he'd been a tiny bit naughty. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and he looked entirely pleased with himself. He reminded her of someone's granddad, the sort who would slip the children a tenner when their parents weren't looking, then deny all knowledge of it. Still, there was something almost flirtatious in the way he said it. Not that Harriet fancied him. He was somewhere in his mid-seventies, for goodness' sake, though she could see he might have been quite the charmer in his day. In fact, wasn't there an existing fetish for older men? It was all okay if men wanted to watch MILFs—or GILFs—as she had once witnessed on an ex's search history. She had mistakenly thought it was in relation to gilded-art framing services, but a browse one Sunday afternoon revealed an alarming number of blurred-out images that she had chosen to 'reveal'. She had been sorely mistaken, yet also impressed by the dexterity. Who knew this was such a thing? The entire male population, apparently.

Her thoughts turned back to Rod. What on earth was she doing? The man had made one cheeky remark and she'd somehow ended up thinking about her ex's search history. She was at work. She was a professional. She was forty now, for goodness' sake. She remembered herself.

'You are right,' Rod said. 'It is a sesame seed—just a bit of a joke I like to play now and again. Sharper than you look, eh? Bernie was right about you.'

Harriet snapped upright.

‘Bernie?’ Her mind rushed through the residents, searching for a Bernard. No one came to mind. She couldn’t be that lax at her job, could she? Surely she could not have been working here for the best part of six weeks—which in itself was almost approaching a record for her—and failed to notice one of the residents.

‘Bernie. Bernie Fitzgerald. Cantankerous old cow down the hall there. Only comes out if she hears the pop of a champagne cork, and since none of us are allowed it with the amount of drugs we are all on, she stays put most days.’

Realisation washed over her, and her heart leapt slightly.

‘Oh yes, sorry. I didn’t realise anybody knew her. I thought she had only been here a couple of weeks.’

‘That’s right,’ Rod replied with a nod. ‘This time.’

Harriet, now utterly perplexed, leaned back on her heels, feeling the knock-off leather dig deeper into the back of her foot as she searched her mind for an explanation. This time?

‘What do you mean? Has she been before and gone?’ she asked Rod, whose face was now a near-normal colour.

‘Bordering on about her sixth time, I reckon.’ His voice had more of a Yorkshire twang than she had noticed at first.

‘Her sixth time?’ she replied.

‘Yeah—treats this place as some kind of holiday retreat, although I don’t know who would want to or why you would. It cost me my life savings, my house and my left arm just to be here.’

At the exact moment he uttered ‘left arm’, Rod whipped his shirtsleeve towards Harriet’s face; it was distinctly and very dramatically missing an arm. Harriet gasped, the breeze from the flailing sleeve causing her to blink as she stepped back. Her right ankle caught the corner of a flower bed, which in turn sent her off balance, and her right bum cheek fell firmly into the evidently soggy and overwatered soil. The remnants of long-buried pea gravel pressed into her thigh, leaving dusty imprints across her deep-black leggings.

Rod looked horrified and made an immediate attempt to pull her back up.

‘Oh my goodness, are you okay?’

Harriet’s face burned with embarrassment.

Suddenly and without warning, the missing arm reappeared inside the shirt.

‘I was just messing with you. See? I’ve still got two!’ Rod exclaimed, flailing both arms in the air, his fingers spread and waggling, his mouth agape in a grin.

Harriet got to her feet and brushed off various stabby and sticky remnants of garden goo.

‘Is this an eggshell?’ she asked as she picked off a caramel-coloured shard that had become almost glued to her leg.

‘Yes, they’re for the roses. David Austin, they are. Not just any roses. They need the best care.’

‘There she is.’ Sally’s voice boomed towards her from behind. ‘Arse over tit, as usual. Heh heh.’

Sally playfully slapped Harriet on the shoulder with the internal force of a sumo wrestler. The sting would stay there for a good hour, though Harriet would never admit it, and the blow forced an audible exhale as the wind was knocked from her lungs.

Harriet turned to look at Sally’s face. Her downturned eyes sat in a marquee of tumbling skin, almost hindering her vision. Her mousy-brown hair was short and regimented, spun with strands of grey—more at the temples than the front. She had a regular barber who left it a little long on top for a more playful, youthful look. She had all the latest tech and gadgets: the latest phone, the latest smartwatch. Every item of clothing had a logo or brand name, all fighting for the dominant position. You knew none of it was fake. Sally wouldn’t be caught dead in a knock-off Lacoste polo shirt. Nothing but the genuine article would do; she couldn’t be doing with fakeness.

Harriet wondered where she got all the money from, given that they were on the same wage and that was barely enough to keep Harriet in cat food. She had once overheard Sally talking about someone called Shaz, who had a hectic schedule and could quite possibly be a sugar mamma—or daddy. Who knew?

‘You pushing over the staff again there, Rod? I told you about that.’

Sally leaned back and laughed at her own joke, her Hermès belt jutting out from under her stomach.

‘You did the arm thing, didn’t you?’ Sally looked over at Harriet excitedly, nodding her head.

‘He did the arm thing, didn’t he?’ Another slap went across Harriet’s back, just hard enough to reignite the sting from the first as she exploded into genuine laughter.

‘I thought you were at Frontstreet Boyz tonight?’ Harriet asked, quietly manoeuvring her torso out of reach of Sally’s appendages.

‘I was, but the bloke who does Nick Carter’s bits has come down with foot-and-mouth and can’t sing, so they’ve had to push it.’

Harriet looked on, confused. ‘Sorry.’ She paused for an extended period to make sure she was repeating it correctly. ‘Did you say foot-and-mouth?’

‘That’s right,’ Sally replied with absolute certainty, jaw upturned.

‘But I thought that had gone away sinc—’ Sally interrupted.

‘That’s a common misconception, you see. Foot-and-mouth is still very much alive in agricultural parts of the country, such as this. My prediction is that he ate a dodgy burger from a visiting food van that had bought meat at auction without the proper documentation in order to save a quid or two.’

Sally leaned in to within a hair’s breadth of Harriet’s nose.

‘Playin’ with fire.’

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# CHAPTER 10

## Antiques

It had been over three months since Harriet started at Hawthorn House when summer hit its peak. The cherry blossoms deep in the once-majestic garden did well to cover the neglected fences and benches that had once hosted family visitors and picnic lunches. Such a beautiful place, steeped in sadness. This was the end of the journey for most who came here, and they knew it. This was it: their life, the end of their days. No proper nurses, no fuss. Just a beautiful place to live out whatever time you had left without feeling like a ‘burden’. The trouble was, once the inheritance money started dwindling away to pay for not being a ‘burden’, you began to be forgotten. Slowly but surely, the time between visits grew longer and the phone calls became shorter. Harriet could understand why, though. It must be incredibly difficult to watch someone you love gently—or not so gently, some of the time—fade away.

Hawthorn House was not her first rodeo. She had seen some terrible things at the various agency homes where she had been placed over the years—things she didn’t care to revisit. This was not one of those places, and she was very glad of it. This wasn’t somewhere you got put; it was a place you chose. At least, it once was.

Mrs Fitz was sitting upright in her unbefitting plastic chair, drinking from a china teacup when Harriet entered the room. The once-bare clinical walls had now been adorned with a plethora of grand photographs and paintings. The off-white, medical-grade bedding had been replaced with a thick silk throw with tasselled edges, and a gilded lamp with a fringed velvet shade stood on the bedside table, looking incredibly out of place on top of the beech-melamine, single-drawered cabinet. Her eyes drank in the contrasting splendour, and she immediately wondered if any of it was available on Amazon.

‘This looks incredible,’ Harriet said as her hand slid over the bedspread, stopping at the cool, harsh metal frame of the bed.

‘I knew you would like it,’ Mrs Fitz replied as she settled her cup in its saucer.

‘You did? What made you think that?’ Harriet asked, surprised that this formidable woman had noticed anything about her.

‘I’ve seen you.’

Harriet’s heart raced, and her eyes widened. Oh God, what had she seen her doing? The letters? It must be the letters. Or that time when, instead of picking up a bottle cap, Harriet had kicked it under one of the sofas because she was wearing the stretchy skinny jeans she had found at the back of her wardrobe—and had quickly discovered why they were at the back. Every time she bent down, a great chasm appeared between the waistband and her top, revealing an embarrassing amount of arse crack for a non-construction worker. Or there was the occasion when she had been convinced she was about to have a heart attack and borrowed Cindy’s personal heart monitor. It turned out to be more to do with the four coffees she’d consumed that afternoon and the lack of a discernible vegetable in a week.

‘No, not the Mars bars,’ Mrs Fitz continued. ‘Well, yes, the Mars bars, but I’ve seen you looking longingly at the wainscoting in the hall out there, taking photographs of the mantels and rearranging the furniture into a more optimal conversational formation. You’ve got taste. Quite rare these days.’ She pulled the teacup to her delicate lips and sipped.

Harriet felt warm and slightly awkward. She hadn’t even realised Mrs Fitz had been watching her that closely, or even at all. It had been a few days since they had last spoken. To be honest, Harriet had been avoiding her. Something about the grandeur of the lady made Harriet feel even worse about herself. She always put her foot in it, spilt something, dropped something or said the wrong thing when she was around her. Mrs Fitz unnerved her. It was probably a quiet reverence that sat beneath the surface, masked by jealousy. A nice jealousy. But jealousy all the same.

‘An architect, wasn’t he... or a surveyor?’ Mrs Fitz quizzed slowly, her eyes narrowing as she tilted her head ever so slightly, forming a wry smile that looked as though it had taken years to perfect.

Harriet jolted forward, her stomach in immediate danger of erupting.

‘Who?’ she asked, already knowing the answer to her own question as she fidgeted with a tiny fray at the sleeve of her jumper, making it worse.

‘The man who left you.’ Harriet felt sick. ‘He wasn’t your husband because there is no ring mark, and it wasn’t that long ago because I can see you’re still comfort eating and moping, so which was it?’

Harriet bowed her head in shame, reminded that she didn’t even ‘make it down the aisle’, that she’d never had that moment and now never would.

‘An architect,’ she replied, her head still bowed. ‘A good one. He’s gone to America to, um... Well, I don’t actually know, but to work on something there, so I hear.’ He might have left, but Harriet couldn’t bear to hear or say anything bad about him. Not yet. Not by her, at least.

‘I knew it. One can always tell. You see, taste begets taste.’

‘Well, you certainly have taste,’ Harriet said, picking up the lamp and examining the bottom.

‘Is this a genuine Tiffany?’ she asked excitedly.

‘It is—but you knew that before you picked it up, didn’t you?’

She didn’t, but she nodded as though she did.

‘Where did all of this come from? Did you bring it from home?’

‘Well, I didn’t get it on Amazon, did I?’

Shit, Harriet thought.

‘I was talking to Rod earlier, and he mentioned that you’ve been back and forth a few times.’

‘And?’ Mrs Fitz asked sharply, her tea now firmly on the small table beside her, next to her glasses and an extremely thick book that didn’t appear to have been published this century.

‘I just wondered, you know. I’ve not really come across a resident who has come and gone unless they were in respite, and I didn’t think that was something they offered here. I was told it was for permanent residents only.’

Mrs Fitz crossed her arms, looked towards the wall and sat up straight. ‘I know the owner—or knew... knew the owner, I should say.’

‘Oh,’ Harriet replied. ‘I thought this was owned by a big company. Carelink or something?’

‘Not entirely, not any more. Thank goodness. God-awful company. Treated people like vermin and an inconvenience. Did you know that they ripped every single piece of panelling out of the upper hallway and replaced it with wipe-clean plastic? Plastic!’ Mrs Fitz rose higher in her chair as the outrage flowed through her.

Harriet gasped at the very thought.

‘All of the china in the dining room—paper. They tried to rip down the atrium and pulled out all the plants and seedlings. Said it was “too dangerous”. Rod chained himself to the glass doors for two days and went on hunger strike.’

‘Oh my God. Was he okay? What happened?’ Harriet perched on the edge of the bed and joined Mrs Fitz in her indignation.

‘Yes, he was fine. He’d smuggled four Twix bars and two Kit Kats into each of his socks. We only realised when he got up to leave and the wrappers fell out. He is the only person in history to protest via hunger strike and gain weight. Silly old fool. He got the job done, though. It’s still standing—barely, but standing, at least.’

‘It sent two people to hospital last month.’ A deep voice entered the room along with the overwhelming scent of Hugo Boss—the 1990s version, not the new version.

Harriet turned to see a man standing in the doorway.

‘Oh, hello, Alex. Do come in... again,’ said Mrs Fitz.

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# CHAPTER 11

Social Media

Alex A. Kilner had a birthday in January, but that was all it said. He had been to Tel Aviv (bougie) and skiing in France (boring), liked to wear funky socks that he could never pair with anything decent, and owned an alarming number of Fred Perry shirts that did not suit him at all. He had spent last Christmas with some older people in a cabin somewhere that looked definitely European. He had a dog. The dog was called Sticks and liked, on a very frequent basis, to get absolutely covered in mud or fox poo, whichever was available. The dog, as dogs went, wasn't cute. He had graduated from a local university in 2002, which made him around forty-eight years old. He was also, in fact, a rude arsehole.

'And you learnt all that from half an hour on the internet?' Lucy asked through the speakerphone.

'Yes, I did, AND he is deathly allergic to bread. I mean, BREAD, for God's sake—how? Not wheat, not gluten. Actual run-of-the-mill flour-and-water bread. I mean, how can someone have such an utterly shit immune system that a baguette could take them out at any moment?'

'Oh, I dunno,' said Lucy. 'I cut my tongue open on a crusty cob once, do you remember? I can still see the scar if I look at it in the right light in the mirror.'

'I do. That was utterly disgusting—don't remind me. We couldn't understand why you had beetroot when there wasn't even beetroot on the menu. Do you still get free sandwiches for life there?'

'Yes, but I only went back a couple of times. PTSD and all of that. Not worth the £4.95 saving, if I'm honest.'

Harriet picked up her laptop and phone and moved to another cushion on the same sofa.

‘I’m going to reverse-image-search his holiday snaps and see if he’s stolen one. The snowboard ones could be anybody. You can’t even see his face, and I’m sure his legs look at least half a foot longer than they are in real life.’

‘What has he done that is so arseholeable, anyway?’ Lucy asked, her voice muffled by the sound of her court shoes pacing along a pavement.

‘He... erm...’ Harriet searched her brain for a rational, reasonable, justifiable answer.

‘Is this a vibes thing again?’

‘No,’ Harriet interrupted. ‘But yes, he does have weird vibes, and his head doesn’t match his body. He was rude to Mrs Fitz about how much more effort it was for the staff to keep the room sanitised when she had too much “clutter” in there.’

‘The old woman who shouted at you and made you cry? Isn’t that a good thing?’

Harriet stabbed her way into a slightly underdone microwave jacket potato, willing the own-brand butter to melt into its lukewarm core, but it wasn’t complying.

‘It is my duty to protect all of my residents, and I am telling you he is a weird guy. I am just getting ahead on safeguarding. I am a professional, you know,’ she said, shovelling over-mayonnaised tuna into her mouth. It was extra-extra-light mayo, though, so it was practically water.

‘Well, I trust you, Harry. Go with your gut. Unless it’s anything important—then we know to do the absolute opposite, like with your sense of direction. But don’t forget, if he does cause any trouble, you could just wave a slice of toast in his face and he’d be out like a light.’

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# CHAPTER 12

## Corporate Bs

There had been an email entitled ‘Exciting News’ the previous week, announcing that the company was ‘reviewing strategic opportunities’ and undertaking ‘wellbeing-led operational adjustments’ that would support ‘sustainable growth’ and align with the long-term vision for Hawthorn House as a premium residential offering.

Anything headed with the words ‘Exciting News’ meant one thing: here comes a whole lot of change and work you’re going to have to do. Harriet had been around long enough to know that this directly translated as: ‘They were on their arse financially and being sold.’

There was also mention of ‘reviewing operational efficiencies’, which Harriet suspected meant fewer staff, more forms and at least one meeting in which someone would suggest replacing perfectly good furniture with something described as modular.

Still, what did she care? It could lead to better equipment, improved facilities, maybe even wages that didn’t require a level of financial planning usually associated with expedition survival.

It could also mean the slow and quiet removal of everything that made Hawthorn House feel like a home rather than somewhere designed by someone who had never actually met an elderly person or seen so much as a zimmer frame.

The worst part was that it was signed.

Kind regards,

Alex Kilner

Regional Development Manager

Carelink Living

Harriet knew it. She bloody knew it.

As soon as she had seen him in that doorway—with his weird little man bag over one shoulder and his boots-with-trousers combination screaming, ‘I’m successful, but I’m down to earth. I’m your superior, but I’m also cool AF’—she had known. He had pointed stubby, surprisingly unhairy fingers, for such a dark-haired man, at Mrs Fitz’s beautiful paintings and swiped a probably-used tissue over her carefully curated antiques, highlighting ‘dust’ and ‘infection markers’ with a level of exuberance one would not generally expect from a normal person. This was about the time she would quit. She had seen this before and was not prepared to spend another minimum-wage job being pushed around by a faceless corporation—well, one she wasn’t part of and wasn’t making the faceless decisions for. She quite liked the idea of that, alarmingly. It went against everything she stood for, but she had grown up on a diet of Sex and the City and lawyer TV, where the women were powerful, respected, skinny and spent their evenings in cocktail bars turning down impossibly attractive men because they ‘didn’t need them’. That was probably the appeal rather than the mass-emailing, staff-reducing, life-ruining side of it. That, and the shoes.

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# CHAPTER 13

Wedgwood

Two days later, Marge had returned from ten days in the Maldives, paid for by her new boyfriend, Rick. Rick was a slightly older, half-Jamaican gentleman she had met on a dating website specifically for widows. Except Marge was not a widow. She was a three-time divorcee, but none of her husbands had actually died. None she'd mentioned, anyway. Rick was a doctor who had seemingly made lots of money through careful and 'well-timed property investment opportunities' across the Caribbean that had paid off significantly and left him with a lifestyle to which Marge was very much becoming accustomed.

'This is me and Rick eating lobster,' she announced proudly, zooming in on a photograph on her new flip phone, which Rick had given her to mark their three-month anniversary. Yes, the very coveted three-month mark celebrated by couples the world over.

'I had lobster once,' Sally said, pulling over a plastic chair and straddling it backwards. '2003. Norwich Harbour.'

'I didn't know Norwich had a harbour,' Marge replied, confused, craning her head to look at Sally beside her.

'It doesn't, as it turns out. That was the name of the restaurant. It's closed down now, mind you. Not surprising, to be honest. They did serve it in a shoe, if memory serves. It was the era when no one used plates anywhere. Anything but a plate, in fact. A spade, a slab of slate... skulls.'

'Skulls?' Marge recoiled.

'Oh yeah. I mean, they may have been those tiny skull ornaments you put in fish tanks—who's to know? I'm neither a skull nor a fish expert. But I distinctly remember eating a carbonara and some of the pieces of ham getting caught in the nose of one.'

With the mercy to end all mercies, the wall-mounted 1980s phone rang, and both Marge and Sally sprang up to answer it. Neither would admit to the sheer enthusiasm they displayed. Marge got there first. It must have been all the swimming in the Maldives. Plus, she was at least five stone lighter than Sally—a fact she made sure everyone knew on a daily basis.

‘Hello, Hawthorn House. This is Marjorie. How may I help?’

Silence ensued.

‘Yes, yep. Uh-huh. Okay. Oooh, how exciting. Of course. Yup. Got that. Roger. Will do. Ta-ta for now.’

Harriet and Sally looked at each other and raised an eyebrow. No words needed.

‘So?’ Sally asked, now standing upright with one knee on the chair as if she were about to host The Generation Game.

‘So what?’ Marge asked, slowly and deliberately replying to a WhatsApp message on her phone with the keystroke sound on full blast to emulate a typewriter.

‘Who was that?’ Harriet asked. ‘What’s exciting?’

‘Oh!’ Marge responded. ‘Sorry, yes, I forgot I’m at work.’ She let out a giggle, the new tan lines from her glasses folding into her crow’s feet. ‘I’m still in holiday mode. I can’t quite get used to someone not bringing me a piña colada and some mixed nuts.’

‘I thought you’d have had enough of mixed nuts, working in this place,’ Sally quipped.

‘Sorry, what? No, we aren’t supposed to have nuts here... allergies. Although I did sneak in a Ferrero Rocher a few weeks ago and nothing bad happened, so I think it’s all a bit silly, really.’

Harriet clasped her hands in desperation and spoke slowly. ‘Who was on the phone?’

‘Head office. They said they’re sending someone to do a walkaround for asset and valuation reasons and need a member of staff to accompany them.’

Harriet considered this.

‘Right, okay. When?’

‘Umm... I think now? I’m not sure.’

‘Well, didn’t you ask when? Who? Why, even?’

‘It seemed like it was already decided. Besides, what does it matter? We’re here anyway. It would be lovely to show someone round—the sights,

the sounds...'

Sally butted in. 'The smells.'

'Exactly—oh, wait. Yes, I didn't think of that.'

The conversation was interrupted by the loud analogue bell of the front door, which cut through them like a shard of ice—a thousand crickets hammering on a bicycle bell. The resonating noise could only have been more terrifying if it had played a funeral march at full volume on a crackly gramophone.

'Oooh, that must be them!' Marge proclaimed. Her shiny bob bounced excitedly in the iridescent light.

Harriet and Sally walked towards each other and into the hallway, the squeaking of Sally's Gucci Aces keeping pace with Harriet's second-hand Converse, which she had got for a steal on Vinted last year. Boat shoes, Tom used to call them. Classics, she thought.

They both reached the front entrance and, in unison, lifted the strong metal latch and pulled open the huge oak door, sending a creak through the hallway that could be heard throughout the building.

'Morning, ladies.'

There, in the doorway, stood Alex A. Kilner: snowboard-holiday faker, old-lady upsetter and all-round potential nasty bastard, according to Harriet. She had very rarely disliked someone so much on a first meeting but felt this was a warranted response. She must be getting better at discernment. And gut instinct. Despite what Lucy thought. What did she know, anyway? Couldn't even eat a roll without ending up in A&E. No, that was mean. Lucy didn't deserve that. It must be her hormones. Or her blood pressure. Perimenopause? No, surely not. Oh God, something else to worry about. He stepped inside and glanced around the entrance hall, taking in the staircase, the high ceilings and the large ornamental vase beside the door.

'Good morning. Alex Kilner, Carelink Living.' His voice was measured and polite. 'I'm here to carry out an initial assessment of the building and its current operations. I'll need someone to show me around, if that's possible.'

'Used to have a yucca in that,' Sally volunteered, nodding towards the vase. 'But the yucca got too big, so Rod planted it.'

Alex glanced at the vase. 'I see.' He made a note on his tablet. Harriet couldn't decide whether he was recording the information or politely waiting for Sally to finish.

‘I’ll look at the building, the current arrangements and any areas that may need attention,’ he continued. ‘Then I’ll prepare my assessment.’

‘So, you’re from Carelink?’ Harriet asked.

Alex turned towards her, his expression composed.

‘I am. Alex Kilner.’ He offered his hand. ‘Harriet, isn’t it? I believe we met briefly the other day.’

He offered his hand. Harriet had a good look at his fingers this time. There was some hair on them, but still not enough to correspond with the amount of five-o’clock shadow poking through at eleven in the morning. I bet he dyes his hair, she thought.

‘Yes.’ She reached out and shook his hand, reluctantly but professionally. His hands were colder than she expected and sent a little shock through her system that she tried to hide.

‘Sorry. My hands are rather cold.’

Of course they were. Even his circulation seemed to have been professionally managed.

‘Sally,’ Sally announced, pushing her arm past Harriet’s face towards Alex, her too-tight watch strap cutting off a good deal of circulation to her hand. He shook it politely.

‘I like a cold handshake. My hands are usually clammy. I run hot, you see. Fast metabolism.’ Sally patted her stomach.

The three of them stood there in silence, taking in the introduction.

‘Would one of you be able to show me around?’ Alex asked.

‘I will,’ Harriet announced confidently, overcome by a sudden sense of protection and the distinct fear that any tour Sally gave him might get the place shut down. Then they would be jobless, even more broke, and she would be spending her evenings scrolling Indeed again.

‘Mind yourself as you go up the third-corridor stairs. They’re an absolute death trap.’

Harriet was right.

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# CHAPTER 14

The Walkabout

‘So, what’s your capacity?’ Alex asked without looking up from his tablet as they walked along the expansive hall.

‘Um, seventeen,’ Harriet replied, hoping desperately that was the right answer.

‘And how many are currently in residence?’

‘Six.’ Yes, definitely six. Soon to be five, by the state of Jim—he was off to the hospice soon. Poor guy.

Alex entered the figures into his tablet. He waited for the screen to respond, then made another note.

‘It’s a beautiful building,’ Alex said, looking up at the high ceiling.

Harriet softened. She would take the compliment. ‘Thank you,’ she replied chirpily.

‘There are some fire-safety issues we’ll need to examine carefully, though.’

And there it was: the inevitable sting in the jellyfish. She’d been introduced to this man all of five minutes ago, and already she had him down as one of those absolutely insufferable, passive-aggressive, backhanded-compliment bastards she had spent far too much of her early twenties—and late twenties, and perhaps most of her thirties—dating. Well, she might never have learnt her lesson, but she was different now. She was a real, proper grown-up, with a cat and a house and Klarna payments and everything.

She didn’t say anything, of course, because she was a ‘professional’, and while at work one must bite one’s tongue. At least, that was the plausible excuse of the moment for not facing confrontation. Her biggest nemesis: confrontation. She had never been able to handle it. Even as a child, Harriet would turn away from EastEnders as soon as it looked like Grant or Phil

were going to get into a ruck. If someone needed chucking out of the Queen Vic, she was practically behind the sofa. A therapist would likely say it was some kind of repressed trauma from her parents arguing or splitting up, but therapy was not something she had ever done. She'd looked into it once after Tom. It was sixty pounds a session, and they 'recommended' between four and six sessions per month. Of course they did. Harriet was depressed enough. She didn't need to be depressed and broke. That certainly wouldn't have helped. Well, it might have curbed the takeaways and wine slightly, but that wasn't the point. No, instead she did what most non-well-adjusted people did: pushed it down, bought some self-help books, signed up for a live seminar she didn't attend, had a haircut that didn't suit her and spent a fortune on clothes that 'future Harriet' would like. Future Harriet had yet to show up, but when she did, she was going to be either incredibly stylish or incredibly outdated.

Alex had stopped poking his screen and was now looking very directly and somewhat intensely at her, possibly holding his breath.

'Are you okay?' he asked without moving a centimetre.

'Yes? Why?' Harriet replied sharply—rudely, even—raising her gaze to meet his.

'It's just that you seem to have quite a lot of blood on your top.'

He was right. At the bottom of Harriet's three-button, long-sleeved, ribbed T-shirt was what appeared to be a profoundly red, wet mark. A cold shock of panic swept through her body as she lifted the hem and braced herself for what lay underneath.

There, on a rather well-fed corner of her stomach, mottled with worn-off fake tan, sat the tiniest scratch, which had spent some time quietly seeping through her clothing. She put a finger on it to confirm that it was indeed blood. It was.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, Libby!'

Alex tucked his tablet under his armpit and bent down to take a closer look.

'Libby? Is that your daughter?' he asked, squinting at the oddly wet, almost non-existent wound.

'No, she's my cat,' Harriet replied, whipping her shirt back down to meet her trousers and attempting to regain what little remained of her dignity.

Alex frowned. 'Right.'

‘Hang on,’ she said. ‘Why would my daughter have scratched me? Is that what children do?’

‘I don’t know.’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t know much about children. I don’t know much about cats either. I’m more of a dog person.’

‘I know.’

Harriet caught the words just as they left her mouth. Alex looked at her.

‘I mean,’ she said quickly, ‘you look like a dog person.’

‘Don’t move!’ Sally shouted.

Harriet and Alex both turned.

Sally was power-walking towards them, waving a large green plastic first-aid box above her head like a passenger on the Titanic signalling for rescue. With every determined stride, the newly identified, extremely flammable, toxin-emitting antique Persian runner crept backwards beneath her feet, dragged along by the full force of her march like a treadmill.

‘I might see what you mean about the risk assessment now,’ Harriet said, still watching Sally make very little progress.

‘Yep,’ Alex replied. ‘It’s a death rug.’

Harriet glanced down at it.

‘A beautiful death rug, though.’

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# CHAPTER 15

Loose Lips Sink Ships

Mrs Fitz wasn't in her bed when Harriet entered her room at seven forty-five that evening.

She was standing by the window with her back to the door, her bone-thin hand tracing the flaking eggshell paint of the window grids, following each wooden baton to its end. Harriet had never seen her out of bed before. Not fully. Not standing. She looked so tiny like this, almost childlike in stature, and yet there was something oddly formidable about her still.

It was a little eerie, but beautiful too.

Mrs Fitz was quite adamant about attending to her own personal care and seemed capable enough, so everyone at Hawthorn House gave her the dignity of privacy. It was the very least they could do for such an unusual woman. Harriet had meant to find out more about her, but she had been so fixated on A. Kilner that the Mrs Fitz investigation had been somewhat waylaid.

Now, watching her at the window, Harriet felt a deep sadness settle into her shoulders and didn't know why.

Maybe it was the foreshadowing of her own future: ill, frail and alone in a place where your only company was the people paid to be there, most of whom couldn't wait to go home to the people who loved them.

'You can come in, dear. Hovering in doorways is for ghosts and men avoiding invoices,' Mrs Fitz said without turning.

Harriet entered the room with more bluster than usual, Alex and his tippy-tappy tablet at the back of her mind. Who knew what he was writing in there? Things. All kinds of bad things, that was what—about her and what needed to go and what smelled. What did she care, anyway, what Carelink did to this place? It was just a job. Another job. A means to an end. The stopgap that allowed her to put food on the table and reasonably priced

items in her basket. Yes, a job. She could get another one in a second. In fact, she just might. This was already becoming more stress than she had signed up for. Not what she had expected at all. Yes, maybe it was time.

‘Do you know how devastating it is, Harriet, to have the world you know stolen from you? To watch strangers put their hands all over a life you poured yourself into and call it improvement?

‘They do it slowly, you see. That is how they get away with it. A tweak here. A picture there. A name removed from a door. Bit by bit, until one day you look around and realise the thing you loved is still standing, but it no longer belongs to you. The heart has gone.

‘Getting old is much the same. Don’t let anyone dress it up for you. It is not wisdom and soft cardigans and afternoon tea. It’s watching yourself being altered without your permission.

‘And being too tired to stop them.’ Mrs Fitz let the words settle between them. ‘That is why you need people, Harriet. People who will continue the fight when you can’t. Otherwise, you become a ghost in a doorway.’

Harriet stood very still. Mrs Fitz’s words seemed to move through her, finding places she hadn’t known were still tender.

‘You don’t have to be old for that to happen,’ Harriet said eventually.

Her head was bowed, her fingers worrying at the same corner of cloth she had already folded three times.

‘I had a home once. One I built. Well, not built exactly, but I sanded floors and painted skirting boards and spent whole weekends pretending I knew what I was doing with wood filler.’ She gave a small, humourless laugh. ‘I’m fairly sure there are still parts of those floorboards embedded in my skin somewhere.’

Mrs Fitz turned to look at her, quietly intrigued.

‘It’s not the floorboards that stay under your skin, dear,’ she said, her voice softening. ‘It’s the people who walk over them.’

Harriet looked up.

‘You can sand and stain until your hands are raw and your knees have all but filed a formal complaint,’ Mrs Fitz continued. ‘You can spend three days deciding between two shades of cream that no sane person could tell apart and convince yourself that a brass handle is somehow very important to the general happiness of mankind.’

Harriet let out the smallest laugh.

‘But that isn’t really what you’re doing, is it?’ Mrs Fitz said. ‘You’re not just choosing paint or fixing floorboards. You’re imagining a life. Christmas mornings. Wet coats over bannisters. Someone making tea in a kitchen you chose. Someone walking into a room and belonging there.’

Her fingers rested against the flaking window frame.

‘And when you lose it, people say, “It was only a house,” as if that means anything at all. As if the house was ever the point.’

Harriet swallowed.

‘The cruelty isn’t losing the floorboards,’ Mrs Fitz said. ‘It’s losing the future you thought would happen on top of them.’

Harriet didn’t say anything. She wasn’t sure she could. There was a hard, hot thing lodged somewhere under her ribs, and if she opened her mouth too quickly, she feared something embarrassing might come out. A noise, perhaps. Or worse, sincerity.

Mrs Fitz, thankfully, turned back to the window.

‘This place has had a great many people walk across its floors,’ she said.

Harriet followed her gaze to the darkening gardens beyond the glass.

‘I can imagine.’

‘No,’ Mrs Fitz replied, not unkindly. ‘You can’t. Not really. Not yet.’

Harriet looked down at the cloth in her hand, suddenly aware she had been twisting it so tightly that it had begun to resemble a very sad rope.

‘I suppose Mr Kilner could,’ Mrs Fitz added.

Harriet’s fingers stopped.

‘Mr Kilner?’

‘The man with the tablet.’

Harriet blinked. ‘You know Alex?’

Mrs Fitz gave the smallest smile. ‘I know a great many things, dear. Most old women do. It is our reward for becoming invisible.’

Harriet didn’t know what to say to that.

‘He’s been here before?’ she asked.

‘Once or twice.’

‘When?’ Harriet asked, already knowing the answer.

Mrs Fitz turned from the window, the last of the evening light catching the silver chain of her glasses.

‘Before you started worrying about his socks, I imagine.’

Harriet’s mouth fell open. ‘I haven’t been worrying about his socks.’ She absolutely had.

‘No?’

‘No.’

Mrs Fitz looked at her. Harriet looked at the floor.

‘They are quite loud.’

‘Quite ridiculous, some of them,’ Mrs Fitz said. ‘You’d never expect it, looking at him. He’s always been rather reserved, very particular about things. I think it’s rather nice. A little bit of nonsense beneath all that seriousness.’

‘But why has he been coming to see you?’ Harriet asked, even more confused than when she knew nothing.

‘They do that, these care companies. They like to visit all the old codgers doped up on morphine and get them to tell them all the sticky truths, all the scandalous goings-on, so they can offer a much lower price than is reasonable.’

‘What knobs,’ Harriet replied without thinking. Mrs Fitz threw her head back in raucous laughter—the first Harriet had seen. It was the kind of audacious laugh that, if it were directed at you rather than shared with you, would be absolutely cutting. Thankfully, that didn’t appear to be the case this time, and an ease passed between them.

‘I wouldn’t blame you, you know, if you wanted to jump ship, because this one is certainly sinking.’ She turned again to face the diminishing sunset. ‘But if you do, just remember, dear... something someone wiser than I said to me a long time ago: if every storm convinces you to abandon the boat, you’ll never know which ones were taking you somewhere better.’ She paused before continuing. ‘I think it was Oprah. It doesn’t matter anyway. You’ll go now. People like you always do.’

Harriet looked up to see Mrs Fitz turn away from her in an act of indignation.

How did this odd lady know so much about her already? Not Oprah—Mrs Fitz. Was Harriet so shallow and transparent that Mrs Fitz already had her number? Harriet wasn’t sure whether the woman was judging her, being damn rude or trying to offer some life advice. Either way, it stung. Quite badly. So what if she always abandoned the boats? That was how you avoided drowning, wasn’t it? What if you picked the strongest, safest-looking boat, but it turned out the boat had lied to you? What if the boat didn’t want to carry you somewhere better? What if it decided it didn’t want to carry you at all, after you had spent years taking care of it, polishing it

and sacrificing things you wanted for the stupid boat in the first place? What was she supposed to do? Stay on it? Harriet felt a swell of emotion.

‘Well, sometimes,’ she began, ‘sometimes you think you’re on the right boat, and it turns out the boat only looked sturdy because the photographs were taken from a flattering angle. Sometimes you climb aboard and realise the whole thing is held together with duct tape and one suspicious-looking screw. And do you know what? The boat knows. It absolutely knows it’s screwed, and sometimes it throws you out to try to save itself, but guess what? It’s going to sink. So either way, you end up in the water, but this way, at least, I get to decide when that happens. It’ll just... just sink, and then you’ll be in the water anyway, with or without the bloody boat.’

Mrs Fitz didn’t move a muscle.

Harriet stared at her, heat rising horribly up her neck. This odd, overdressed woman with her arrogant face and her borrowed Oprah quotes had known her for less time than her postman and had somehow managed to be both completely wrong and uncomfortably close. She turned towards the door, giving Mrs Fitz the cold shoulder with far more dignity than she felt.

Her hand closed around the brass handle and, for one wonderful second, she imagined slamming it. Properly slamming it. Hard enough to make the windows tremble and Mrs Fitz’s ridiculous collection of blue glass bottles rattle on the sill.

But then the door gave a small, beautiful creak. Harriet paused.

It was a lovely door. Of course it was. Everything in this stupid house was lovely in the most inconvenient way. Solid oak, probably original, with deep panels and a handle worn soft by years of hands turning it. A door like that didn’t deserve to be slammed by a woman who had lost an argument with someone who thought Oprah was a philosopher.

So Harriet closed it carefully. Too carefully, really. Behind her, Mrs Fitz made a small sound.

Harriet froze.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘It wasn’t nothing.’

‘No,’ Mrs Fitz said, still facing the window. ‘Only, for someone so keen to leave, you are very gentle with the things you’re leaving.’

Harriet felt her face heat again.

‘I didn’t want to damage the door.’

‘Obviously.’

‘It’s an old door.’

‘Yes.’

‘And old things should be looked after.’

Mrs Fitz turned then, slowly, and looked at her. Harriet immediately wished she hadn’t said that.

Neither of them spoke. The room seemed to hold its breath around them—a breath it had held for hundreds of years. The old wallpaper, the brass lamps, the half-dead woman by the window: all of it an audience to Harriet making a fool of herself again, at work no less. She couldn’t decide whether she was proud to have stood up for herself or ashamed.

‘Well,’ Harriet said, because someone had to. ‘Goodnight, Mrs Fitz.’

‘Goodbye, Harriet.’

The use of her name felt deliberate. Everything about the woman felt deliberate.

Harriet opened the door again with considerably less care this time, though still not quite enough to harm it—which was frankly beside the point—and stepped into the corridor.

She did not slam it behind her. But only because it really was a very nice door.

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# CHAPTER 16

## I Scream

‘What an absolute cantankerous old cow,’ Harriet muttered, rubbing at the red half-moon imprint the globe door handle had left in her palm.

She cradled her hand in the other and gave it a soothing little rub, as if the door had been the one to injure her and not the woman behind it, then blustered down the pungent corridor towards the kitchen.

How dare she say those things to me? Does she have any idea what I’ve been through? How wonderful it must be to be old and still skinny and rich, with a dead husband, and pass judgement on people just doing a job, trying to earn a bloody living. Absolute shitting cheek of her.

Harriet was still mid-head-rant as she blustered into the kitchen and straight into the path of Alex, who was examining a fire blanket with the intense scrutiny one might expect of the Spanish Inquisition. At the table sat Marge, drinking a herbal tea from what looked like half a coconut. Harriet knew it was herbal tea because it proudly displayed the tampon-string-esque label all herbal-tea drinkers flaunted. It lay over Marge’s arm while the drink produced a level of steam usually found in Turkish baths.

Marge blew across her novelty mug, and every time she did, she seemed to be drinking in Alex rather than her tea. Little flirty glimpses at a man a good twenty years her junior. He couldn’t see her, of course—his back was to her—but it didn’t stop her. Harriet assumed it was something ingrained in Marge. Her currency. Rick wasn’t her first man; he wasn’t even her third. She reminded Harriet of the woman in Dirty Dancing who tried to seduce Patrick Swayze while her husband was off playing cards and paid for extra dance lessons. Except Marge would never pay for dance lessons, of course. Not while there were men to pay for things like that.

Marge brought her gaze back to Harriet.

‘I brought you some of that yoghurt ice cream I was telling you about, sweetie. It’s in the top freezer bit there.’

Harriet went bright red. Oh God. I really am an absolute bitch, aren’t I?

‘Thank you,’ Harriet said, feeling as awful as she deserved. ‘I ordered some from Tesco after you mentioned it, but they substituted it for mint, and I just can’t... Might as well shove some toothpaste in the freezer and put that in a bowl.’

Harriet caught a slight snigger from the direction of the fire blanket, which now had a big black marker-pen X across the front of the box. ‘I might have some now, actually.’

‘Oooh, I love a bit of mint,’ Marge replied with more gusto than required. ‘This one is salted caramel, though.’

Harriet moved towards the spoon drawer, which was directly in front of where Alex had set up his inspection station. She deliberately manoeuvred around him in an attempt to look utterly unbothered.

‘I know you like salted caramel because, do you remember that pack of three Twix bars? You licked all the chocolate off and then put ready-salted crisps in them, like a sort of crisp-Twix sandwich.’

The fire blanket made another noise.

Harriet closed her eyes.

‘Marge.’

‘What?’

‘That was private.’

‘You did it in the communal lounge, sweetie.’

Alex coughed. Harriet turned to him. ‘Do you need something?’

‘No,’ he said, straightening slightly. ‘I’m just trying to process the structural implications of a crisp-Twix sandwich.’

‘It was one time.’

‘It was three Twix bars,’ said Marge, returning to blowing on her still-erupting tea. ‘No judgement here, though, darling. You do you. I’m sure it was scrum-diddly-umptious.’

Harriet fought off the strong desire to roll her eyes at scrum-diddly-umptious and instead opened the spoon drawer with rather more force than necessary, banging her elbow into some part of Alex’s grey mohair blazer, which felt annoyingly better quality than she would have liked.

‘Sorry,’ he replied politely. ‘I’ll be gone in a second. I’m almost finished in here.’

Harriet was now using the newly acquired spoon as leverage to open the frosted-shut lid of the ‘Yog-Ice’, forcing it out of its ‘lightly bent’ category and into ‘what the actual hell happened to that?’ territory.

‘Why are you here so late, anyway?’ she asked, still struggling. ‘It’s coming up to eight. They don’t make you do nights, do they?’

‘Ordinarily, no,’ Alex said. ‘But I was asked to check the kitchen before I left.’

Harriet dug the spoon into the ice cream. ‘At eight o’clock?’

‘I tried earlier. Someone was making soup.’

‘That could have been any time between seven this morning and now.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I gathered that.’

Harriet took a large mouthful of salted-caramel, low-calorie delight. Not bad. A bit gritty, but it was only 341 calories for the entire pint.

‘I just need to speak to one of the residents before I go.’

Harriet stopped chewing. She knew exactly what he was up to. Mrs Fitz had warned her. The scandalous bastard, prowling round at night, trying to get Rod and Violet and Mrs F to give up the gossip. Well, not on my watch.

Marge watched Harriet adjust her posture and lowered her mug.

‘With a resident?’ Harriet said, the ice cream now firmly on the worktop.

Alex looked at her. ‘Yes.’

‘At this time?’ Her smartwatch illuminated an escaped droplet of pudding on her chin.

‘It won’t take long.’

Harriet swallowed too quickly and immediately regretted it.

‘Right. And what’s that, then? Part of the glamorous acquisition process, is it? Wandering round at night, trying to prise sticky little truths out of old people while they’re tired and full of medication?’

Alex blinked. Marge’s eyebrows rose with such enthusiasm they nearly disappeared into her fringe.

‘I’m sorry?’ Alex said, genuinely puzzled.

‘I’ll have you know I know exactly what you’re up to. I may not be fully on the boat, but I’ve still got one leg on it, and I don’t know what I’m doing with that leg yet, but I still have two legs, and I have a duty of care to these people. I won’t let you swan in wearing your oddly soft suit, taking advantage, poking and prodding for gossip and scandalous little titbits about who doesn’t like the soup or which toilet smells haunted, all so you can

save a few quid. This is their home. If you want to know that, prod and poke me. I get paid for it.'

She died a little bit inside. They stared at one another, both trying to rearrange the sentences into some semblance of understanding.

Alex leaned forward, tucked his bottom lip beneath the top one and quietly said, 'I'm not here to take advantage of anyone, Harriet.'

The use of her name irritated her. He irritated her. It irritated her that he seemed sincere.

'Well,' she said, grabbing the container off the counter and taking an aggressive spoonful. 'See that you don't.'

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# CHAPTER 17

Twenty-Seven Steps

Harriet had been sitting in the communal living room in the dark since she had stormed out of the kitchen. She had no idea how long she'd been there, but her stomach had been bubbling worryingly for the last ten minutes and had now reached the point where she was mentally calculating the distance-to-steps ratio to the nearest toilet.

She thought back to the pint of Yog-Ice, or Ice-Yog, or whatever the hell it was called, currently doing battle with the tuna sandwich she'd had for 'night-time lunch'. As she hunched, she imagined all the synthetic sweeteners sloshing around together and was suddenly reminded of the time she'd travelled to London with Lucy for one of her impossibly posh friends' fashion launches—for horses. Yes, horses. They were giving away free protein bars at one of the station kiosks in return for an email address, which they would continue to spam for the rest of your life, but the bar claimed to contain only sixty-three calories, so naturally, she'd eaten four.

She made it as far as Tooting before finding herself locked in a train toilet that looked as though it had been left over from the set of 28 Days Later. She prised a partially used McDonald's napkin from her fake Christian Dior handbag—thirty-five quid from a very convincing website—because she was absolutely not touching whatever had happened to that toilet roll. At one point, after the third napkin, she genuinely thought this would be her home now.

Forever.

Thankfully, it wasn't. Once the contents of the earth, eighty grams of protein and, quite possibly, part of her soul had finally vacated her body, she emerged to discover she'd missed almost the entire journey and they had arrived.

The event itself had been spectacularly ridiculous. Lucy's friend had hired an enormous warehouse and paid designers a small fortune to transform it into a luxury stable, complete with horses wandering through the middle... despite the fact that she actually lived on a farm with perfectly good stables. The phrase more money than sense had echoed around the room all evening.

A noise halfway between a draining bath and a death rattle erupted. It was time. Harriet stood, slowly and carefully.

The way one might stand if one had recently swallowed a hand grenade and did not wish to alert it.

Thankfully, she had prepared for this moment with her earlier visual estimate of the route to the downstairs toilet. Twelve steps to the door. Eight across the corridor. Left at the fern that had died in 2019 and was still, inexplicably, on display. Another seven to the loo.

Manageable. Probably.

She had just reached step twenty-one, sweating with the quiet focus of a bomb-disposal expert, when the toilet door opened.

Alex stepped out. Of course he did. Of course Alex bloody Kilner emerged from the only available toilet in the building at the exact moment Harriet's entire digestive system had decided to evacuate as if there were a small fire.

'Oh,' he said. 'Hello.' He wasn't even USING the toilet. His hands were perfectly dry, and there was no sound of a chain, unless he had had a wee and not flushed, which was just disgusting, but she was in no state to think about that now. This could not wait.

Harriet stared at him, teeth and buttocks clenched like an Olympic weightlifter.

'Hi,' she mustered, a bead of sweat forming at the top of her nose.

Please don't notice.

'Sorry, did you need to use the toilet?' Alex asked, pointing behind him to the porcelain throne of relief, mere metres out of reach.

Harriet choked back her words, her heart racing and her guts threatening to detonate through her leggings. She was sure she was almost purple now.

'No,' she replied, an octave higher than usual. 'Just thought I heard a noise. I was just about to wash my hands.'

Harriet manoeuvred herself into the doorway and Alex out of it with the finesse of a revolving door.

Just when she was about to get away with it, the absolute weapon decided to have a chat.

‘I’m glad I caught you, actually.’

Harriet bubbled.

‘I’m on my way out now, and I just wanted to reassure you that I—and Carelink—really do have the interests of all the residents, staff and everyone at Hawthorn House at heart...’

Harriet bubbled and gurgled. He kept talking—something about Carelink, something about residents and something about the future.

She’d heard precisely none of it because every ounce of concentration was currently dedicated to a delicate balance of core strength and deep breaths.

Her intestines made a new noise that could no longer be ignored.

‘It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s late. You should go.’

‘Harriet!’

She froze. No. Absolutely not. Rod appeared at the end of the corridor, one hand gripping his cardigan, his face pale and urgent.

‘It’s Violet.’

What was left of Harriet’s stomach dropped, quite possibly to her shoes, as there was nowhere else for it to go. So did several other internal organs.

‘What’s happened?’

Rod looked behind him, frantic. ‘She says her chair’s gone funny.’

Harriet stared at him.

‘Funny?’

‘She says it’s leaning to the left.’

Harriet could feel Alex beside her. Listening. Witnessing. Judging, probably. This was it. This was the moment she proved herself calm, capable and professional.

‘Right,’ she said, sweating through her bra. ‘Show me.’

Her stomach gave another low, terrible groan.

‘I’ll be right with you, Rod. I’ve just got to wash my hands.’ Harriet turned towards the toilet. So close.

‘There’s no time!’ Rod said, panting. ‘She’s on all fours with a butter knife, trying to find the screw. I’ve tried to tell her it’s carved out of one piece of wood, but she won’t have it. She’ll put her hip out again.’

Alex glanced down the corridor and back at Harriet. Definitely judging. Harriet smiled at him with all the warmth of a hostage video.

‘Resident emergency,’ she said.

Within moments, Harriet and Rod were making their way towards Violet’s room. Oh no, Alex was following. Of course he was. Of course he bloody was.

Harriet turned, walking backwards and gesturing wildly at the door in a sort of half-wave, half-waft.

‘Honestly, you get off. I’ll be ages. Once Violet’s down, I have to sing to her to get her back to bed.’

Alex looked puzzled but accepting. As Harriet and Rod turned the corner of the everlasting corridor, she heard the satisfying thud of the front door closing. That was her moment.

‘Rod, give me two seconds,’ she spluttered. He was already in the room. It turned out she wasn’t as fast a backward walker as she thought she was.

‘It’s okay!’ Rod called out. ‘She’s back in bed. False alarm. Oh, actually, I think it might have been a dream. Ha ha. Must have been that cheese sandwich. I thought it tasted off.’

‘Right, no harm done. I’ll come and see you in a moment. I’ve just really got to...’ Harriet had made it back round the corner and was only eleven steps away from relief. She greedily grabbed the patinated door handle, still taking a moment to appreciate its elegance even in what could very well turn out to be her last few moments on earth.

This could not be happening. She tried again. It rattled in place. Again, with the force of a thousand horses.

‘Someone is in here,’ came Marge’s strangely strained voice from the other side.

Harriet pressed her forehead against the door and closed her eyes.

‘Sorry, Marge, are you going to be long?’ The desperation was no longer subtle.

There was a pause. A long pause.

Then came the unmistakable sound of toilet roll unravelling at a gargantuan rate.

‘I think I might be a while, sweetie,’ Marge called. ‘That ice cream’s gone right through me.’

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# CHAPTER 18

Phone Calls

Harriet was still in bed the following afternoon. She had slept terribly. The four trips to the bathroom might have had something to do with it, but she had taken to weighing herself after each visit and had lost a pound and a half in total from the ordeal, which she was quite pleased about.

Libby had set up a nest behind the backs of her legs, forcing Harriet into a warped foetal position that was giving her backache and pinning her to the edge of the bed with nowhere near enough quilt. Her pyjama bottoms were now completely covered in beige hair, which was somehow billowing into the air even without the cat moving a muscle.

After at least forty-eight TikTok videos with the hashtags #passiveincome and #girlboss, she had decided that while she might not have the wardrobe, connections or any of the attributes required to start a business, she definitely wouldn't be going back to Hawthorn House.

No sir-ee.

There were limits to what one woman could endure in the name of slightly over minimum wage, and being publicly betrayed by low-calorie dairy in front of Alex bloody Kilner was firmly one of them.

She had given Hawthorn House her time, her patience and quite possibly a layer of her intestinal lining. Enough was enough.

Mrs Fitz could find someone else to shout at. Rod could find someone else to rescue Violet from imaginary furniture emergencies. Marge could keep her salted-caramel poison to herself.

Harriet was done. Perhaps, annoyingly, Mrs Fitz had been right about one thing: she didn't belong there.

Her phone vibrated violently on the bedside table, catching the corner of the glass and making a noise that sent Libby arse-first off the bed and out of

the door, leaving a contrail of even more beige hair floating wistfully in her wake.

The screen lit up. Hawthorn House. Absolutely not. It rang until it stopped. That's exactly right, she thought. You shut up. Then it started again.

Harriet stared at it, giving the inanimate object the evil eye, each pulsing flash making the weird vein in her neck throb harder.

It was her day off, for goodness' sake. Her actual, official, written-on-the-rota day off. She was entitled to be unreachable. Unavailable. Possibly deceased.

On the fourth ring, she snatched up the phone, fully prepared to give Sally an absolute piece of her mind.

'If this is about Violet's chair, I've emigrated.'

There was a pause. Then Alex Kilner said, 'Harriet?' She sat up, her breath suspended.

There was something wrong with his voice. Not polished. Not amused. Not irritatingly reasonable.

Just quiet. She slid one leg out of bed and pressed her foot to the floor. 'What's happened?'

'It's Bernice,' he said.

Harriet held her breath and searched her brain. Who the hell was Bernice?

'Sorry, who? Have you got the right person?'

Alex cleared his throat, and Harriet just knew he was adjusting his tie.

'Bernice Fitzgerald. Room twenty-six.'

Harriet sat bolt upright and dragged the quilt across her lap as if he could see her exposed stomach roll through the phone. Thank goodness it wasn't FaceTime.

'Oh. Mrs Fitz. Yes, of course. What's she done now?'

Harriet took a swig from a bottle of night-time bathroom-sink water that she had been refilling for several months. The lid had started to smell very funky, so she held her breath while she drank.

Alex said, 'She's been taken to hospital.' The room seemed to tilt slightly.

'What?'

'They found her this morning. She was conscious, but confused. The ambulance took her in about an hour ago.'

Harriet swallowed and placed the bottle on the bedside table.

‘That’s awful, obviously, but why are you ringing me? I’m not scheduled today.’

Another pause.

‘Because you’re listed as her emergency contact.’

The room went slightly dark.

‘No, I’m not.’

‘You are.’

‘I can’t be.’

‘I’m looking at the form.’

‘Well, look harder.’

‘Harriet...’ He paused. ‘She put your name down.’

She hadn’t even checked whether the back door was locked before she was in the car and halfway to Hawthorn House.

While she was furiously getting dressed, she’d decided that, in typical fashion, someone new and incompetent—Sally and Marge included, although they weren’t new but definitely were incompetent—had put the wrong information into the system, as usual.

This had given her a golden opportunity to storm in and verbally give notice in front of Alex Kilner and his mohair jacket because an act of great incompetence had taken place, not because she was ‘jumping ship’.

Ugh. She didn’t even like boats. She got terribly seasick at the thought of them.

Stupid Mrs Fitz and her metaphors. I hope she’s okay.

Not because she cared, obviously.

She didn’t. Not after everything that had gone on these past few months, anyway, and certainly not in a dramatic, standing-in-the-rain-outside-a-hospital-window, Backstreet Boys music-video sort of way. She simply wanted Mrs Fitz well enough to explain herself, correct the paperwork and, ideally, apologise for involving Harriet in whatever deranged administrative incident this was.

That was all.

Harriet indicated too late at the roundabout and received a furious beep from a man in a white van, which felt unnecessary given that she was already under significant personal strain and had only put make-up on one eye, which she remembered at that very moment.

‘All right, all right,’ she muttered, waving an apology that looked more aggressive than intended.

By the time Hawthorn House came into view, sitting grand and grey beneath a sky the colour of cold porridge, Harriet had worked herself into a state of such righteous certainty that she almost believed it.

Almost. The gravel crunched under her tyres.

Harriet parked badly next to Alex’s car, killed the engine and sat with both hands still gripping the steering wheel. Well, she assumed it was Alex’s because it was the only one that came close to the flashiness of Marge’s white Mercedes.

She was not worried. She was furious, which was a completely different organ. Inside, Hawthorn House looked almost exactly as it always did, which Harriet found vaguely offensive.

Usually, when people got wind of someone being taken to hospital, there was more drama. A hushed corridor. Whispering. Someone asking, Is she off to die? while already mentally measuring up the room. Someone else asking whether it was catching.

Instead, Sally was behind reception, clicking between screens with frantic confidence. She had opened too many tabs and lost the original reason why. Rod was standing beside the desk with a mug of tea he didn’t appear to have drunk from, and somewhere in the distance, Henry the Hoover was being dragged aggressively over a threshold.

In fact, why was Rod there at all? And, more importantly, why was he drinking out of Harriet’s mug?

Alex Kilner was there. Of course he was.

Not just near the office. Not politely hovering outside it like a man who understood boundaries. In the office. Sitting behind the manager’s desk with his jacket off and his sleeves rolled neatly to his forearms, looking, to Harriet’s intense irritation, both authoritative and nicely moisturised.

‘What are you doing in there?’ she asked.

Alex looked up from the folder in front of him. ‘Good afternoon.’

‘No. Absolutely not. You don’t get to good-afternoon me from inside an office you don’t belong in.’

‘You’ve got the manager’s files.’

This was most unusual indeed.

‘Yes, because I’m providing operational support.’

Harriet narrowed her eyes. ‘That is exactly the sort of phrase a man says before he starts changing passwords and putting the good biscuits in a locked drawer.’

Rod looked suddenly alarmed. ‘Are the biscuits locked?’

‘No, Rod,’ Alex said calmly.

‘Not yet,’ Harriet muttered. But it wouldn’t be long.

‘Why are you in here, Rod?’

‘I only came in to bring Mr Kilner a cup of tea,’ he said, taking a rather large gulp of the tea he was holding.

Alex, Harriet and Sally looked at him as the liquid bulged in his neck like a feeding snake before disappearing behind his shirt and tie. It was really quite hypnotic.

‘Oh. Sorry!’

With sudden realisation, he put the half-drunk tea in front of Alex, directly onto a slanted ring binder. The four of them watched as the porcelain-white mug slid down the red plastic, skiing across the desk before being halted by a pen pot and sending an entire pack of highlighters and paperclips spilling over the floor.

Nobody dared move until the clang of stationery had come to a complete stop. Without turning her head, Harriet extended her hand towards Rod, one finger pointing backwards towards the door.

Alex stood, his height bearing down on the desk through his fingertips.

‘Thank you for the tea, Rod. Very kind.’

Rod nodded and scampered out of the room, equal parts glad of the praise and embarrassed.

‘Are you going to tell us what’s going on, then?’ Sally asked, her legs at ten to two in a plastic chair.

‘Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?’ Harriet offered. ‘Someone’s obviously put the wrong thing on the wrong form, and I, for one, have had en—’

‘I’m sorry, Harriet, but this was filled out by Bernie—ugh, Mrs Fitz. Look. See for yourself.’

Alex wiped stray paperclips from the binder, unclipped a two-page document and handed it to her.

Harriet looked down. There it was. Emergency contact / NOK: Harriet Hoxley.

There was a signature underneath that was ninety per cent swirls, but it looked exactly like the kind of signature she would expect Mrs Fitz to have.

‘But I’ve looked at this form about fifty times,’ Harriet said, then immediately regretted it.

Alex looked at her. Sally looked at her.

‘When I was looking for family,’ she added quickly. ‘Obviously. For Mrs Fitz. Not for... other things. Anyway, it was blank. Someone has obviously put it there.’

Alex walked around the desk and stood next to Harriet, close enough that she could detect a subtle hint of aftershave she had smelled before. A familiar scent. Not unpleasant.

He reached over her arm to take the document, giving Harriet a closer look at his hands. Not bad. Shorter fingers than expected. Almost sausage fingers. This was not the time, Harriet.

‘She filled it in after we called the ambulance.’

Harriet went cold and hot at the same time. Sally rested her elbows on her knees and touched her fingers together in a triangle. Alex’s voice softened.

‘She was confused. Kept trying to get up. The paramedic asked if there was anyone she wanted us to call.’

Harriet stared at her own name. It looked very strange at that moment—a jumble of letters she didn’t recognise.

‘And she said me?’

Alex nodded.

‘No,’ Harriet said forcefully.

She didn’t mean me. She said it because it was the only word that came.

‘She said, “Harriet. Get Harriet.” Then she wrote your name down herself.’

‘Normally, I’d call bullshit, but it’s what she did,’ Sally said, her legs still spread.

Harriet stood in front of the ancient mahogany, idly staring at a gash between two cabinets. She focused on it so intently that her eyes glazed over. Her palms were slightly sweaty. She felt as though she were in the headmaster’s office, being accused of something when she had done nothing at all.

Why on earth would Mrs Fitz put her down as an emergency contact? Next of kin, even.

‘There’s just one other thing,’ Alex said.

Of course there was.

Harriet snapped back into the present just enough to listen.

‘She needs some personal items taking over.’

He looked up at Harriet with a closed-mouth frown-smile that suggested he already knew she wasn’t going to enjoy the next part.

Harriet looked at Sally. Sally leaned back so ferociously that the plastic chair gave a scream of protest.

‘Don’t look at me. I’m off in twenty minutes, and I’m hosting the bowls for the old codgers down at the village hall. They’ll go spare if I don’t get my DJ equipment set up on time.’

Harriet frowned. ‘DJ equipment? At bowls?’

‘That’s right, yeah.’ Sally leaned forward, and the chair gave more of a moan this time. ‘They love it. Can’t get enough. When you’ve seen Old Mick do a running throw down the green in his shorts to One for Sorrow by Steps, it’ll bring a lump to your throat. Pure athleticism.’

Alex and Harriet looked at one another with exactly the same expression, which was unfortunate because it meant they had both imagined it.

‘I don’t mind. I’ll go.’

Marge’s loitering voice drifted in from halfway behind the door. She was wiping down an ornament that did not appear to need wiping, wearing pink marble-effect rubber gloves that came up to her elbows and had feathers stuck around the cuffs. Every time she moved, a tiny pink fluff detached itself and floated somewhere irretrievable.

‘Oh no,’ Sally said, standing so suddenly that the chair seemed relieved. ‘You’re not lumping that bed bath on the evening shift again. That’s three times this week. Something’s come up here, my neck hurts there, my house is on fire and I have to go home. That poor bloke left a tidemark so dark in the pan I thought he’d changed colour.’

Marge gasped and pressed one feathered hand to her chest.

‘Sally, that is a vile thing to say,’ she said, clutching her imaginary pearls.

‘It was a vile thing to witness.’

‘I was traumatised.’

‘You weren’t there.’

‘Exactly.’

Harriet looked between them. ‘Can we please focus on Mrs Fitz?’

The room went quiet for half a second.

It was the first sensible thing she had said since arriving, which annoyed her immediately. Alex closed the folder. ‘The hospital asked for nightwear, toiletries, slippers, glasses and any medication she keeps in her room.’

‘Well,’ Harriet said, ‘someone should definitely sort that.’

No one spoke. Sally looked at Marge, Marge looked at the ornament and Alex looked at Harriet. Harriet looked at absolutely everyone with deep betrayal.

‘No.’

‘You’re already here,’ Sally said.

‘I’m here under protest.’

‘And you’re on the form.’

‘I am on the form against my will.’

Alex looked at Harriet properly then, not over the top of a folder or from behind some irritatingly official desk, but directly.

‘Harriet, for what it’s worth, I know you’re not on shift. You’re under no contractual obligation to be here, and I appreciate you coming in.’

She blinked, taken aback. That wasn’t what she had expected. She had expected policy, procedure, possibly a laminated flowchart—not gratitude. Not from the corporates. Not from him.

Alex continued, ‘This doesn’t make you responsible for anything. It’s not binding. You’re not being asked to take on Mrs Fitz’s care or make decisions you’re not comfortable making. I just thought you should know what happened because...’ He glanced down at the form. ‘Well, because she asked for you.’

Harriet looked around the room at the three faces. Well, four if you counted Rod trying to hide behind that big, half-dead fern in the corridor.

She looked down at the paper. Mrs Fitz had, for whatever reason, chosen Harriet to be her person in her hour of need.

And as confusing as it was, she wasn’t going to let her down.

‘I am not going through Mrs Fitz’s drawers,’ Harriet said, pointing a finger for emphasis.

Marge brightened. ‘I’ll go through them.’

‘No,’ Alex, Sally and Harriet said in panicked unison.

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# CHAPTER 19

Room Service

The room felt bigger than it had the day before. Colder too, though Harriet couldn’t have said why. Nothing had changed. The curtains still hung heavily at the windows, the tallboy still stood against the far wall, and the ridiculous collection of little china boxes and silver-framed photographs seemed to have given birth to more.

And yet, somehow, it all looked more beautiful.

Harriet kept one hand on the door, the same door Mrs Fitz had slammed between them the last time they’d spoken. The memory of it made her palm ache, though the mark had mainly faded, thank goodness.

Today she felt like an intruder.

Not because she had never been in the room before, or even because she had snooped. But because Mrs Fitz wasn’t here to fill it. She was such a presence that the space had become something else entirely without her. Not a room to be judged or inspected or survived, but a life. A whole life, tucked into drawers, balanced on shelves, folded neatly into linen and lavender and dust.

Even the tallboy chest Harriet had once suspected of keeping terrible secrets no longer looked dramatic or threatening.

It just looked like furniture. Very nice furniture, though. It wasn’t even as if Mrs Fitz was dead.

Harriet had seen death before. More than enough of it. She had entered bedrooms where people had passed away, rooms where the air still seemed to know before the living did. That had been earlier in her life, before her mother, before Tom, before everything had gathered weight and meaning.

This was different. There was no drama here, no finality, no terrible stillness. Just emptiness.

A room waiting for someone difficult to come back and complain that everything had been touched.

Harriet smiled at the thought of Mrs Fitz's wizened finger pointing towards her and felt a small ache for it.

She really did hope she was okay. Right, she thought, shaking off the feels with a little wrist wriggle. Let's get this party started.

Harriet opened the wardrobe and found, sitting neatly at the bottom, a beautifully soft tan leather weekend bag. It looked like it belonged in an Agatha Christie novel, the sort of thing Poirot might carry onto a sleeper train to Egypt, filled with full-length striped pyjamas and moustache wax.

It was breathtaking. She wiped a layer of dust from the brass clasp and opened it to make sure it was empty. Thankfully, it was, and she felt slightly less like a burglar.

Not that she should, of course. She didn't want to be here. She shouldn't be here by rights. Mrs Fitz had practically commanded her to be here, so yes, sorry, Bernie, but if Harriet was going to bring things to hospital, she would have to find something to put them in.

And Harriet had a strong feeling a Tesco bag for life simply wouldn't do.

Harriet placed the weekend bag on the bed and stood over it, hands on hips, trying to remember what people needed in hospital.

Nightdress. Slippers. Washbag. Glasses. Possibly dignity, although that was harder to fold.

She scraped open the top drawer of the tallboy and immediately regretted it. It was terribly heavy, and she wondered how on earth a woman of all of seven stone could muster it.

Inside were knickers. Lots of them. Neatly folded. Sensible. Aggressively white. Jealousy-inducing, even. Not the knickers, but the whiteness.

Mrs Fitz had her clothes laundered by an external company that came by every Tuesday. She would have them re-washed even if they hadn't been worn, to 'stop them smelling musty.'

She had a point. Harriet looked at the open drawer.

'Oh, for God's sake,' she muttered, looking up at the ceiling as if Mrs Fitz might be watching from a hidden camera. 'I'm not being weird. You asked for me.'

She took three pairs using only the tips of her fingers and dropped them into the bag.

The second drawer was safer. Nightdresses. Proper cotton ones with buttons up the front and tiny embroidered flowers around the collar. The sort of thing women wore in period dramas when they were either about to receive terrible news or haunt a landing.

Where did old ladies even find these things? Was there a special old lady shop you only got access to once you reached the age of eighty?

Harriet chose the least ghostly one and folded it as neatly as she could.

From the wardrobe, she found a cardigan, soft and pale blue, and a pair of slippers that had moulded themselves to Mrs Fitz's feet so completely they seemed mildly offended to be removed. In the bathroom, she gathered a washbag, a toothbrush, a small bottle of perfume, face cream, and a comb with three wiry silver hairs caught in the teeth.

That nearly undid her. Not the nightdress. Not the hospital. Not even the form downstairs with her name on it. The hairs. Harriet stared at them, then zipped the washbag shut far too quickly.

'Right,' she said, louder than necessary. 'That's enough emotional admin for one day.'

She carried the washbag back to the bedroom and tucked it into the weekend bag beside the nightdress and slippers.

It still looked too empty. A woman like Mrs Fitz wouldn't arrive anywhere under-packed. Harriet knew that instinctively. Mrs Fitz would consider poor luggage preparation a personal failing, possibly a moral one.

She crouched to check the bottom of the wardrobe for another cardigan and saw something wedged behind the space where the weekend bag had been.

A cardboard folder, bulging suspiciously. Harriet paused.

It was the sort of folder people used when they had either very organised tax affairs or a murder wall.

She glanced back at the door. No one was there, obviously, but she lowered her voice anyway.

'Mrs Fitz,' she whispered, 'what have you been up to?'

She pulled the folder free. A small landslide of paper shifted inside it, and the Carelink logo flashed up at her from the top sheet.

Harriet froze. Carelink.

Not Hawthorn House intake paperwork.

Carelink.

'Oh my God,' she said softly. 'You've been nicking office paperwork.'

She opened the folder.

Inside were photocopies, memos, printed emails, old floor plans and maintenance reports. Some of them had been marked up in Mrs Fitz's sharp, slanted handwriting. Red circles. Underlines. Question marks so aggressive they looked less like punctuation and more like threats.

Across the top sheet, in bold black print, were the words:

Asset Review: Hawthorn House

Harriet stopped smiling. Footsteps sounded outside the room and she panicked. There was no other word for it: her body simply chose crime.

She shoved the folder into the weekend bag and threw a nightdress on top of it just as Alex appeared in the doorway, mooching in that way people did when they were pretending they hadn't come to check up on you.

'Everything alright?'

Harriet spun round looking exactly like someone caught hiding corporate evidence beneath a cotton nightie.

'Yes.'

Alex looked from her face to the bag.

'Are you sure?'

'Completely.'

'You're rather pale.'

'I have one eye of makeup on and I'm packing an elderly woman's underwear against my will. This is just my face now.'

His gaze dropped briefly to the weekend bag.

'That's a nice bag.'

Harriet stepped in front of it far too quickly, and Alex noticed. Of course he noticed. The man probably noticed font changes in policy documents.

'Did you find what she needs?'

'Yes,' Harriet said, gripping the handles. 'Nightdress. Slippers. Washbag. Various old-lady sundries.'

'Sundries?'

'Don't make me say knickers in front of you.'

Alex smiled and rubbed the back of his neck in an annoyingly cute Disney Prince sort of way, which was almost attractive until he followed it up with, 'Okey dokey.'

Ew.

Harriet glanced down.

She could see the red corner of the folder beaming out from beneath the extra-thick cotton nightdress like a beacon, which was quite a feat because that nightdress looked as though it had been woven for arctic exploration.

Any moment now, Alex would say, *What's that?* and she would have to show him. Then one of two things would happen.

Either he would know exactly what it was, which meant he was involved in whatever underground Carelink scandal Mrs Fitz had uncovered, and Harriet would almost certainly be suffocated with a pillow later that night for knowing too much.

Or, possibly worse, he wouldn't know what it was, which meant Harriet had rumbled Mrs Fitz, and Carelink would go to the hospital and finish her off.

Harriet went still. Oh my Gosh. Was that it?

Had Mrs Fitz asked for her because she knew Harriet was a nosy snoop? Had that old woman written her name down because she knew Harriet would rifle through her wardrobe and find the folder?

Had this just become a whodunnit?

She realised she had been doing her vacant stare again, only this time it wasn't at oak gouges. It was at a thread that had come loose from the very heavy eiderdown hanging off the bed.

She caught herself after some time and looked over at Alex. He was looking right at the bag. Right at the red beam screaming SHE KNOWS. KILL HER.

Harriet flashed a very odd, overly wide smile in his direction to feign normality.

'You sure you've got everything?' he said.

Maybe he hadn't noticed.

'Yes.'

'Because I can take that down for you.'

Oh no. Had he noticed?

'No.'

Too fast again.

His mouth twitched, not quite a smile.

'Right.'

There was a small, very corporate pause before Alex stepped back from the doorway.

'Well. I'll leave you to your sundries.'

‘Please do.’

‘And the knickers.’

Harriet laughed very loudly and very obviously, then began waving like a five-year-old on a school bus. She would have been hugely embarrassed if she wasn’t, in fact, trying to save both herself and quite possibly Mrs Fitz from certain death.

Alex deeply furrowed his brow, then disappeared down the corridor. Harriet waited until his footsteps had faded and finally breathed out. Hurriedly, she dropped the bag onto Mrs Fitz’s bed and pulled the folder out from beneath the nightdress.

Carelink. Asset Review.

Red circles. Underlines. Mrs Fitz’s sharp, furious handwriting all over it.

Harriet stared at the papers. She should put it back. She should close the wardrobe, take the bag downstairs, go home, and let all of this become someone else’s problem.

But Mrs Fitz had written her name. Harriet Hoxley.

Not Sally’s. Not Marge’s. Not Janice’s. Not Alex Kilner’s, with his moisturised Disney Prince neck-rubbing and suspiciously calm face.

Hers. Obviously, that did not mean she cared. Not her. It meant there was a mystery. A potentially criminal, possibly murder-adjacent mystery.

And if Harriet Hoxley had one flaw — which was unlikely, because she had several — it was that she couldn’t leave a mystery alone.

She slid the folder back beneath the nightdress, closed the brass clasp with a satisfying clunk, and lifted it from the bed.

‘Fine,’ she muttered.

She would wait another day before she left. For the evidence.

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# CHAPTER 20

Assets

It was gone two in the afternoon by the time Harriet finally got home from her job on her day off and changed out of her outside pyjamas into her house pyjamas.

She hadn't even got to see Mrs Fitz after all that rifling.

A nurse with a very pointy hat and the sort of face that had once frightened tuberculosis into behaving had refused to let her onto the ward because it wasn't visiting hours.

Visiting hours indeed.

They had asked her to go. Well, not they exactly. Alex had asked her to take the bag. Or, rather, Alex had politely suggested it in a way that made refusing feel like kicking a Labrador.

But still. She had been summoned.

The cheek of it.

Harriet had driven all the way to the hospital with a rather lovely vintage leather weekend bag full of aggressively white underwear, only to have it practically snatched from her slightly clammy, working-on-her-day-off hands by a woman in navy-blue support stockings and be sent away like an unordered pizza.

It was probably for the best actully.

She had so many questions, and none of them could be asked without sounding deranged. So, Mrs F — or should I say Bernie? Been uncovering any sinister care-home conspiracies lately? Any coded messages? Secret shareholders? Shall I cough twice if Carelink are listening?

Or:

*I found the document. Wink wink. The albatross will fly at midnight. Wink.*

No.

This was just silly now.

After realising it was past lunchtime and she had consumed only two crumpets and a slice of stale cake, Harriet investigated the fridge. She settled on a chicken tikka slice, four spoonfuls of potato salad — the low-fat kind that always tasted slightly sour — and some raw carrot batons for health.

Rather than plonking herself down on the sofa, she found herself at the dining table.

Well, what could technically be called a dining table. It could fit about two side plates on it, and even that required negotiation. More recently, it had become the resting place of her laptop, rarely used and somewhat obsolete now that everything lived in the palm of her hand.

She opened it and began to Google. Asset review.

An evaluation used to determine the value, condition or strategic importance of an asset, often to decide whether it should be retained, sold or liquidated.

Nothing there she didn't already know, which was impressive considering she hadn't known any of it thirty seconds ago.

She narrowed it down. Asset review care home.

In relation to care homes, asset reviews generally concern either financial planning for an individual's care fees or the operational management of the care facility itself.

That was somehow even less helpful.

Financial planning for care fees?

Shit.

Was this it?

Was Mrs Fitz about to be turfed out because she couldn't pay her bills? Was the posh old spinster routine all an act? Was she secretly in dire straits, wandering around in silk scarves and ordering pheasant marmalade while final demands piled up behind the tallboy?

Harriet looked back at the screen. Financial planning for care fees.

Then she thought about the hospital.

The ambulance.

The bag.

Alex being all nice and helpful. The nurse refusing to let her onto the ward.

Harriet stopped chewing. What if Mrs Fitz hadn't simply been taken ill?

What if Carelink had used it as an opportunity?

Residents were moved between homes all the time. Harriet knew that. Beds were reassigned. Placements ended. Funding changed. There were meetings with words like *viability* and *best interests*, where everyone nodded gravely while discussing a human being as though they were a broken washing machine.

What if Mrs Fitz was the asset?

Or worse, the liability?

Her chicken tikka slice suddenly felt very dry.

They had taken her out in an ambulance without so much as a pair of knickers, then refused to let Harriet see her.

They hadn't even let her check that Mrs Fitz was still there.

What if she wasn't?

Oh my God.

They had disappeared an old woman!

Harriet pushed the plate away. She couldn't face another mouthful.

She had only two carrot batons and a smear of light mayonnaise left, but that was beside the point.

She had watched enough Forensic Files to know that someone always left a trail, and the only way she was going to find out what they were up to was by getting a proper look at that folder.

It was all in there. She was sure of it. The whole sick-old-lady-disposal plan.

She looked down at her watch. 15:45.

Marge and Sally would be on until eight. She couldn't go back while they were there. Again. On her day off. That would look suspicious.

She would wait until the night shift came on, walk in as though she had every right to be there, sneak into Mrs Fitz's room, take photographs of every document in the folder, and get out.

Perfect.

If she could just stay awake until then.

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# CHAPTER 21

## Very Small Windows

It was 8.17 p.m. when Harriet woke on the sofa with a cheese-and-onion crisp clinging to her cardigan.

On waking, she'd briefly forgotten about Mrs Fitz possibly being held hostage. Possibly, at that very moment, lying helpless somewhere while Carelink reassigned her room and redistributed her little weird blue ornaments.

There was no time to waste.

She jumped up, ate the crisp and commenced undercover mode, which involved looking as normal as possible, entering her place of work normally, and behaving in a manner so normal that nobody could possibly suspect she was there to break into an old woman's bedroom and photograph evidence of a potential corporate abduction.

Harriet changed out of her home leggings and into her work leggings, pairing them with a rather nice watch Tom had given her one Christmas. She figured that if she did get caught for grand espionage, theft or whatever the hell she was doing, she would need something to barter with in prison. Perhaps she could pay off the guards so she could at least have a TV to watch CSI: Las Vegas.

Harriet — or Agent H, as she briefly considered herself — brushed the remaining crisp crumbs from her cardigan and considered tying her hair up.

No. Too tactical.

She left it down.

Harriet parked further away than usual in the gravel car park and looked on at the silhuetted building against the near purple evening sky. She knew Hawthorn House at night. She had spent enough shifts wandering its dim corridors with cold tea and a packet of biscuits to know there was nothing remotely sinister about it.

Usually.

It was considerably more sinister when you were arriving on your day off to break into an old woman’s bedroom.

After a few minutes of watching motivational videos on TikTok about morality and courage. She entered through the main door with her key and gave the night worker a casual wave.

Oh Gosh. Too casual.

It was the sort of wave usually given by people carrying contraband through customs.

‘Forgot something,’ she said.

The night worker hadn’t asked.

Harriet carried on up the corridor, tiptoeing at speed, as much as anyone could tiptoe at speed. The antique runner shifted beneath her feet over the lacquered floorboards, slowing her with every step.

Damn. They really did need rug tape. Alex had been right.

There it was.

Room twenty-six.

The ornate brass handle she had admired only days before no longer looked decorative. In the low light, it looked cold. Deliberate. Like it had been waiting for her.

Harriet reached for it, and turned it to the right. It didn’t move.

She tried again -

Nothing.

She rattled it furiously until her upper arms did a little wave of their own. Still nothing.

Oh total bollocks, she hadn't considered that it would be locked, the doors are never locked, who locked it? She certainly didn’t. Who had the key? This wasn’t a good start.

The office. Of course. There would be a spare in the key cupboard.

Harriet turned back along the corridor and crept towards the office, already rehearsing something casual involving a forgotten charger in case she was questioned.

Light spilled through the narrow glass panel in the door.

Inside, two members of staff were sitting at the desk with mugs, paperwork and the unmistakable posture of people who had no intention of moving for at least forty minutes.

Harriet recognised one of them. Margaret.

She had worked a few night shifts with her before being shipped out to one of the other care homes to do damage control after an unfortunate incident involving a resident, unsanitary food practices and a very long, very formal complaint.

Margaret was a complete battle-axe. Harriet both feared and respected that.

It also meant there was absolutely no way she was getting that key. Brilliant.

The key was six feet away, protected by two women, a kettle and an apparently excellent episode of Friends.

She looked back towards room twenty-six. Then towards the dark window at the end of the corridor.

There was another way in.

From inside, Mrs Fitz's window had always looked perfectly ordinary. From the flowerbed, it looked like something designed to release steam from a Victorian laundry.

The cool air breathed across the back of Harriet's neck, and she thought about Libby, warm and cosy at home, waiting for her to come back.

Her comfortable bed. The designer diffuser on the bedside table that was supposed to smell like an ancient woodland. The low glow of her LED church candles.

Suddenly, she wanted to be anywhere else.

She could still go back now, before she had actually done anything. Back to Libby and Netflix and yoghurt ice cream.

Well, perhaps not the yoghurt kind.

Not again.

Real ice cream. With bits in. Chewy bits. Biscuity, chocolatey, gooey—

Oh, do shut up and get a move on, you wimp.

Mrs Fitz's voice entered her head like an alarm.

Taunting her.

It worked, though. Harriet stepped forward through the begonias with the grace of a small hippo and examined the same window she had stood on the other side of only days before, watching as that frail old woman traced its panes.

Up close, the window appeared to be roughly the width of Victoria Beckham's waist, and Harriet was one million per cent sure she was at least a teeny-tiny bit thicker than that.

After some careful hand-to-hand, hand-to-hip measuring, she noticed the sash was already lifted slightly on one side.

She shoved it upwards. The window flew open with a screech and a groan, as old windows tended to do when disturbed from a century-long sulk.

It was up. That had been easier than she'd imagined—too easy, in fact. Suspiciously easy.

With a sudden rush of entirely unfounded confidence, Harriet hauled herself onto her forearms and began inching sideways through the opening like a mermaid being posted through a letterbox.

Legs pressed together, feet kicking uselessly at the air, she wriggled forward until her hands finally touched the floor inside.

Gosh, it needed a hoover.

She was halfway in now. If the window came down, it would cut her clean in half.

Immediately, she thought of that scene in Ghost where the window came down on the weird bad man and the shadow creatures arrived to drag his evil soul away.

Stop it.

The more she tried not to think about it, the more clearly she could see the glass crashing down.

Her full weight was on her arms now, wheelbarrow-style.

If anyone opened the door, there would be no explanation. None.

And if anyone walked past outside—

Oh no. She hadn't thought about that. Where was the smoking area?

Harriet's stomach dropped. Not because she was about to be caught, but because if anyone raised the alarm, whatever had happened to Mrs Fitz might disappear with the folder.

A hot flash of panic propelled her into one final push. She slid through the window, landed surprisingly softly and performed half a roly-poly onto the actual Persian rug.

Very similar to one Harriet owned, except hers had come from a market stall in Cornwall.

Harriet lay still, listening. Nothing.

She had done it. She had bloody done it.

More importantly, she was never doing it again.

She scrambled to her feet, crossed the room and unlocked the door at once. Not because she was expecting trouble, but because climbing back through that window would require a level of core strength, dignity and medical clearance she did not possess.

Right. Agent Hoxley. Time to find the folder.

She tiptoed across the room, as well as anyone could tiptoe after aerial acrobatics, and opened the armoire. Wardrobe to the layperson, but it really was an armoire.

The room was dark, illuminated only by a blade of moonlight cutting across the opposite wall. Harriet crouched and felt blindly around the bottom shelf.

Nothing.

She pulled out her phone and switched on the torch. The folder was gone.

Harriet stared into the empty space. She was sure she had put it there. No — she knew she had put it there.

Harriet's mouth went dry.

She had expected to find proof that she was being ridiculous. She had not expected the room to prove her right.

Brilliant. Now she was a burglar and a detective.

She checked behind the box. Beneath the shoes. Under a folded blanket. Then checked all three places again, because panic occasionally altered the laws of storage.

Before she knew it, half the contents of the armoire were scattered across the room. Cashmere cardigans and silk scarves had been flung aside with pure abandon, making far more noise than Harriet realised.

Then it happened.

In one continuous movement, the murky room filled with corridor light as the door swung open.

Harriet tried to duck behind the bed, but it was too late. She sat frozen on the floor, mouth open, two silk scarves clutched in each hand, her eyes somehow wide and narrowed at the same time as they adjusted to the beaming spotlight of shame.

This was it.

She was going to jail. Definitely jail.

And double definitely sacked.

'Oi! Who's there?'

Harriet froze. Hang on.

She knew that voice. That confused, slightly panicked tone. Shielding her eyes, she tried to make out the scruffy silhouette in the doorway.

It was Rod.

‘What the bloody hell are you doing down there?’

His eyes moved from Harriet to the armoire, then to the scarves in her hands, then back to Harriet.

‘You’re stealing.’

Harriet dropped the scarves and scrambled onto her knees.

‘No, no, no. Rod, I promise I’m not,’ she whispered, wildly gesturing for him to keep his voice down.

‘You are. I can damn well see you.’

‘Shh. Come in. I’ll explain.’

‘I’ll do no such thing. You don’t go stealing from Bernie. She might be a miserable old cow, but that's not cricket. I’m getting Margaret.’

Harriet shot to her feet.

‘I think Mrs Fitz has been kidnapped by Carelink and is being held hostage against her will.’

Rod stopped. He looked over his shoulder into the corridor, stepped into the room and quietly closed the door behind him.

Harriet held her breath.

‘Well, why didn’t you say so?’

Harriet opened her mouth to speak, drew a blank, and closed it again to allow for thought.

‘Wait. You believe me?’ she said, slightly aghast and still adorned in scarves.

Rod shuffled further into the room, one finger pressed to his lips.

‘I’ve always known there was something fishy going on,’ he whispered. ‘And I don’t mean fishy like a sea lavender bush. I mean fishy as in decidedly dodgy.’

Harriet stared at him.

‘Plus,’ he said, looking her up and down, ‘you came through a window to steal old-lady hankies? Not really your style.’

He winked. Harriet wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or insulted.

That was, unfortunately, very difficult logic to argue with. Although she did own a rather lovely Hermès silk scarf that Tom’s mother had once given

her from the back of her wardrobe, and Harriet had worn it as a belt for an entire summer until it slipped down in Morrisons.

But this was not the time to correct him.

‘Right,’ Harriet whispered, gathering the scarves from her shoulders and trying to regain some authority despite having recently entered through a window. ‘Listen carefully.’

Rod nodded.

‘Mrs Fitz was taken to hospital.’

‘I know.’

‘She put me down as her emergency contact.’

‘I know that too.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t know that, but that is now beside the point. Anyway, she put me down because she caught me in her drawers before and knew I would find the folder. She knew I would be able to help her.’

Rod’s eyes widened.

‘Her drawers?’

‘What?’ Harriet said, pausing halfway through shoving a cashmere cardigan back into the armoire.

‘You said she caught you in her drawers.’

‘Yes.’

‘As in…’ Rod lowered his voice. ‘Knickers?’

‘No. Not knickers.’

‘You were going through Bernie’s unmentionables?’

‘I was going through her paperwork.’

‘In her drawers?’

‘Rod, please try to stay with the kidnapping.’

‘And besides,’ Harriet said, ‘I helped her finish an entire box set of Columbo DVDs that had been left in the wardrobe, so she knew I had investigative experience.’

Rod blinked.

‘Watching Columbo doesn’t count. They show you who the bloody killer is at the beginning!’

‘Will you please just let me finish?’ Harriet said.

Rod nodded, chastened.

‘I found a folder.’

Rod’s eyes widened.

‘What sort of folder?’

‘A red one.’

He inhaled.

‘Don’t do that,’ Harriet said. ‘That doesn’t mean anything on its own.’

‘Red usually means danger.’

‘Red usually means WHSmith had a sale.’

‘It said Asset Review on the top.’

Rod’s face changed.

‘What asset?’

‘That’s the point,’ Harriet whispered. ‘I think it might be Mrs Fitz.’

Rod looked towards the bed, then the wardrobe, then back at Harriet.

‘Bernie?’

‘Or worse,’ Harriet said. ‘A liability.’

Rod went very still. For once, he didn’t make a joke.

And that frightened Harriet more than the locked door, the window and the missing folder put together.

Rod leapt to his feet, as well as he could with two bad gardening knees.

‘Well, let’s have a look then. Let’s have a look at this folder.’

‘That’s just it,’ Harriet said. ‘It’s gone.’

Rod stopped.

‘I saw it when I was packing Mrs Fitz’s bag for the hospital. Alex bloody Kilner came in before I could get a proper look at it, and I panicked and shoved it back. Right there.’

She pointed directly at the bottom of the armoire.

‘And now it’s not there. And I took her bag to the hospital, and they wouldn’t let me see her even though I had been summoned. So I don’t even know if she’s actually in there.’

Harriet steadied herself on the bedpost, slightly winded from over-emphasis. Rod looked at the armoire. Then at the window. Then at Harriet.

‘You don’t suppose that very nice Mr Kilner has something to do with it do you?’

Harriet froze.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You said he came in.’

‘Yes.’

‘And now the folder’s gone.’

There was a very small silence. For once Rod was getting the gist.

‘Oh God,’ Harriet said.

Rod lowered his voice.

‘We need to find that folder.’

Harriet blinked.

‘We?’

‘Well, you can’t do it alone. You’ve already come through a window and lost the evidence.’

‘I didn’t lose it.’

‘It isn’t here, is it?’

‘That is not the same thing.’

Rod nodded gravely, as though allowing her this technicality.

‘First thing tomorrow,’ he whispered, ‘we start looking.’

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# CHAPTER 22

Double Wrapped

By ten past eight the next morning, Rod had already compromised the investigation.

Harriet found him loitering by the hydrangeas in what he had clearly decided was surveillance wear: olive gardening gilet, brown cords, flat cap pulled low and a pair of secateurs clipped to his belt like a weapon.

‘Why are you dressed like that?’ Harriet asked.

Rod looked down at himself.

‘Like what?’

‘Like you’re about to liberate a hostage from a National Trust café.’

He lowered his voice. ‘I thought we were keeping a low profile.’

‘You’re standing in a flowerbed.’

Hariet looked at Rod, his face was still but had a light about it she’d not seen before. What on earth was she doing? It was one thing to get carried away crawling in through windows but now an elderly somewhat vulnerable man who was supposed to be in her care between her working hours was now wearing two different cardigans and she was probably getting him both terrified and over excited for probably nothing. He did look happy though. Happy but guilty. Oh no.

‘Please tell me you haven’t told anyone,’ Harriet said.

Rod looked offended.

‘Of course I haven’t.’

Harriet relaxed and let out a sigh of relief.

‘I only asked Marge whether she’d seen anything unusual.’

Harriet closed her eyes.

‘Rod.’

‘I didn’t mention kidnapping.’

‘What did you mention?’

‘Hostile relocation.’

Harriet plonked herself down on the worn sofa that dipped in the middle and put her head in her hands.

‘Oh, Rod, I think I’m actually going mad. You need to go back to your room before I get you into any weird trouble. I’m probably already going to lose my job for breaking and entering into a resident’s room. And what do I even have to go on? Nothing. A folder. A stupid red folder.’

Harriet swung one leg over the arm of the chair and lay back in defeat.

‘A red folder?’ said a voice from behind them, accompanied by the faint rattle of china.

Harriet sat upright so fast something in her abdomen objected.

Marge was standing in the doorway with a tray containing two teacups, a plate of milk chocolate hobnobs and an opened Diet Coke with a very thin straw sticking out of it. Her expression suggested she hadn’t only heard enough to be interested, but intended to hear the rest.

‘No,’ Harriet said immediately, rising to her feet.

Marge raised one eyebrow.

‘No what? The straw? All that aspartame is not good for your teeth, darling. Stains them, you know. You don’t want to end up with teeth like Johnny Depp.’

‘No doorway appearing. No Diet Coke. No interested face. Absolutely no joining in.’

Marge stepped into the room anyway.

‘I’m not joining in. I’m enquiring.’

‘That is how you join in.’

Rod cleared his throat. ‘Marge may know things.’

‘What things?’

Marge set the cups and saucers down and handed Harriet the can, straw-first, like she was offering and afternoon bottle feed to a baby.

‘I know Bernice Moira Fitzgerald better than most.’

Harriet stared at her, her gaze flicking between Rod and Marge like a tennis match.

‘You do?’

‘We shared a husband.’

Harriet’s mouth fell open.

‘Not at the same time,’ Marge said. ‘Before your face gets any worse.’

Harriet took the Diet Coke and began sucking on the straw furiously, her eyes fixed on Marge.

‘Doesn’t narrow it down much,’ said another voice. ‘You’ve had a share of everyone’s husband, haven’t you?’

Sally appeared through the patio doors like an apparition and slapped Marge smartly on the backside.

Marge didn’t even flinch.

Harriet looked at Rod with daggers.

‘Sally as well?’

‘I couldn’t help it,’ Rod said. ‘She took my secateurs and wouldn’t give them back until I told her why I looked guilty.’

‘Poor choice of gear for hostile relocation, Rod,’ Sally said. ‘I told you. For that kind of job, you want pliers. You won’t get any bolts off any wheels with a pair of bush cutters.’

‘Look,’ Harriet said, holding up both hands. ‘Can we just take a breath? What is happening? Marge, what are you talking about? Who were you married to? When? Why does everyone suddenly have tools? WHAT IS GOING ON?’

Rod scrambled towards her and gently encouraged her onto the sofa.

‘I think we might need brandy.’

‘Yes,’ Marge said, already turning. ‘Good idea.’

‘No. No brandy.’ Harriet sat upright. ‘I’m fine. Please just… continue with what you were saying.’

Marge perched eagerly on the edge of the coffee table. Rod picked up one of the teacups. Sally picked up the plate of biscuits, placed one biscuit on top of another like a burger, and ate them both at once.

All three turned to look at her.

‘Saves time,’ Sally spluttered, pointing at her mouth as a cascade of crumbs erupted onto the swept floor.

Marge drew herself up.

‘Humphrey Pierce,’ she said.

Rod frowned. ‘The one with the boat?’

‘It was a yacht,’ Marge said. ‘And that is not the point.’

Harriet gripped the Diet Coke can.

‘Humphrey Pierce was your husband?’

‘My first husband,’ Marge said. ‘Briefly. I had him while he was still in his prime.’

Sally snorted.

‘What?’ Marge said.

‘Nothing.’

‘I did. He had hair then.’

‘And trousers that flared from the hip,’ Sally said.

‘They were fashionable.’

‘They were dangerous near naked flames.’

Harriet made a small noise.

Marge waved a hand. ‘Anyway. Humphrey and I were married long before he became part of Bernice Fitzgerald’s collection.’

Harriet blinked.

‘Collection?’

Marge gave a small, elegant snort.

‘Darling, Bernice Fitzgerald collected husbands the way other women collect perfume. Expensive, intoxicating, and mostly forgotten at the back of a cabinet once the mood had passed.’

Rod looked troubled, and somewhat deflated.

‘How many husbands?’

‘With Bernice, one never really knew,’ Marge said. ‘She edited her past like other people edited photo albums.’

Sally brushed biscuit crumbs from her top.

‘Cut out the men. Kept the jewellery.’

‘Precisely,’ Marge said.

Harriet stared at Sally.

Mrs Fitz had husbands.

Plural.

Of course she did.

Of course Hawthorn House contained a missing old woman, a red folder, a possible corporate abduction and a romantic history involving Bernice Fitzgerald and a collection of disposable men.

Why wouldn’t it?

Marge leaned forward.

‘The point is, I know Bernice. Better than she’d like. And Bernice Fitzgerald does not leave things lying about by accident. If there was a folder, and if she hid it, then she wanted it hidden.’

Harriet stopped sucking the straw.

‘Or found.’

Marge looked at her.

Rod went very still.

Sally swallowed her biscuit burger.

‘Well,’ Sally said, brushing crumbs from her top. ‘That’s bloody inconvenient.’

Harriet sat there, her heart louder than her head.

‘No,’ Harriet said.

Everyone looked at her.

‘No what?’ Sally asked.

‘No whatever is about to happen. I can feel it forming. There is a very clear shift in the room and I do not approve.’

Marge folded her arms. ‘Darling, you climbed through a window.’

‘That was different.’ a Sudden realisation came’ Oh for goodness sake Rod’

Rod went red and busied himself picking up the teacups and putting them back on the tray.

‘Look’ Sally said, one leg on the table. ‘We need a plan.’

‘No,’ Harriet said again. ‘We do not need a plan. We need everyone to go back to behaving normally before I lose my job, my dignity and possibly the use of my upper arms.’ She rubbed her aching biceps.

‘I think you've passed that point love ’ Rod said gently.

Harriet pointed at him. ‘You are on very thin ice for a man dressed like a shrub.’

She sat down again and took a breath.

‘Okay,’ she said, pressing one hand flat against her chest, as if that might stop everything inside her from galloping off without permission. ‘So. What do we actually know?’

The three of them looked at her with varying degrees of confidence.

Harriet held up one finger.

‘One. We have an octogenarian multi-divorcée who may or may not be the victim of corporate espionage.’

Marge opened her mouth.

‘Do not correct the number of husbands right now,’ Harriet said.

Marge closed her mouth.

‘Two. Said octogenarian was taken to hospital yesterday morning, after writing my name down as her emergency contact, even though I am neither family, nor friend, nor in any official position to be anyone’s anything.

Which is either touching, suspicious, or a clerical error with emotional consequences.’

Rod nodded gravely.

‘Three. Before she went, she specifically asked for me. Not Sally, not Marge, not Janice. Me. Which makes absolutely no sense unless she wanted me involved for some reason.’

Harriet stopped.

That was the bit she kept circling back to. Not the folder. Not Alex. Not even the hospital. Mrs Fitz, furious and frightened and confused, apparently asking for her.

Harriet.

As if she mattered.

She cleared her throat.

‘Four. When I packed her hospital bag, I found a red Carelink folder hidden in her room. It was labelled Asset Review: Hawthorn House, and it was covered in Mrs Fitz’s handwriting. Red circles, underlines, angry little question marks. She had clearly been looking into something.’

‘Furious handwriting,’ Sally said quietly.

Harriet nodded. ‘Exactly.’

She looked down at the Diet Coke can in her hands. The straw trembled slightly between her fingers, which was irritating, because she had been hoping to appear calm and authoritative.

‘Five. I took Mrs Fitz’s bag to St Barnabas". And this is where it gets… odd.’

No one interrupted.

That, more than anything, made Harriet’s stomach tighten.

‘I didn’t get to see her. I didn’t even get near the ward. A nurse took the bag from me and sent me away because it wasn’t visiting hours.’

‘Well, that’s normal, isn’t it?’ Sally said, though there was less certainty in her voice than usual.

‘Yes,’ Harriet said. ‘Probably. On paper, yes. But it didn’t feel normal.’

She heard herself say it and hated how flimsy it sounded. Feelings were not evidence. Feelings were what made you buy three wick candles off the internet because an American woman with a marble kitchen told you they smelled like abundance.

Still.

‘It was the way she took it,’ Harriet said. ‘The bag. Like I was delivering something, not visiting someone. Like my part was over the second I handed it across. I’d driven all the way there with Mrs Fitz’s nightdress and slippers and face cream, and then I was just… dismissed. No update. No reassurance. No ‘she’s comfortable’, no ‘she’s asking for you’, no ‘you can come back at six’. Nothing.’

Marge’s face softened, just a fraction.

‘They didn’t tell you anything?’

‘No. And I know they probably couldn’t, officially. I know that. I know there are rules.’ Harriet looked at Rod, then Sally, then Marge. ‘But Mrs Fitz had put my name on that form. She asked for me. And somehow, by the time I got to the hospital, that didn’t seem to count for anything at all.’

A small silence settled.

Not dramatically. Not like in films, where thunder cracked and everyone looked towards the portrait of the dead uncle. More like the quiet that happened when everyone had been thinking the same thing and one person had finally said it out loud.

Harriet tried to swallow, but her throat tightened.

‘Six. I came home, looked up asset review, and found out it can mean deciding whether something should be kept, sold, moved, liquidated, whatever other horrible words people use when they want to make getting rid of something sound tidy.’

Rod looked troubled.

‘And you think they mean Bernie?’

‘I don’t know,’ Harriet said. ‘That’s the problem. I don’t know whether the asset is Mrs Fitz, or Hawthorn House, or the land, or the rooms, or all of it. But I do know that people get moved around in care all the time. Beds get reassigned. Funding changes. Decisions get made in meetings by people who have never once had to sit with someone at three in the morning while they cry because they don’t know where they are.’

She hadn’t meant to say that last bit; it had come out before she could stop it. Sally looked away first while Harriet took another breath.

‘Seven. When I went back to retrieve the folder for purely investigative and not at all illegal purposes, it had vanished.’

‘You broke in through a window,’ Sally said.

‘For investigative purposes.’

‘Still a window.’

Harriet ignored her.

‘And eight. The only other person who was in that room after I found the folder was Alex Kilner.’

Nobody spoke.

Rod adjusted his flat cap.

‘So,’ Harriet said, looking around at them, ‘we have a missing woman, a missing folder, a hospital that wouldn’t let me see her, an asset review I don’t understand, a suspiciously helpful and well-groomed corporate man, and a growing number of people in this room who should absolutely know better.’

Sally raised her third biscuit, though she didn’t take a bite.

‘When you put it like that,’ Sally said, ‘it does sound like a kidnapping.’

The quartet remained exactly where they were for what felt like an unnecessarily long time. Rod’s hands tightened around the handles of his secateurs. Marge smoothed the feathered cuff of one pink rubber glove with the thumb of the other, her mouth pressed into a line that made her lipstick almost disappear. Sally, who had been balanced with one trainer hooked under the leg of the coffee table, lowered her foot to the floor, while Harriet sat with the Diet Coke can resting against her knee, the straw untouched. For the first time since Rod had said the words hostile relocation, the air between them seemed to change. The whole thing, which had been ridiculous and funny and only partly alarming when said out loud in the safety of the lounge, suddenly felt less like a theory and more like something that might actually have happened.

The old wall clock above the patio doors ticked twice.

Too loudly.

‘Why don’t we just ring the hospital and ask?’ Sally said.

Everyone turned to look at her.

‘What?’ Sally said, tugging at the tongue of her trainer. ‘I’m not just calves and attitude.’

Harriet sat up straighter. ‘Well, yes. Of course. I can just ask how she is, can’t I? I’m on the form.’

A small wave of hope passed through the group. It was almost embarrassing how quickly they all grabbed at it. A phone call. One ordinary, sensible phone call. No windows. No secateurs. No flowerbeds. No hostile relocation. Just a grown woman ringing a hospital and asking whether another grown woman was alive and in possession of her nightdress.

‘Right,’ Sally said, suddenly all business. ‘What hospital was it?’

‘St Barnabas",’ Harriet said, already unlocking her phone.

She Googled the number with fingers that had become, irritatingly, much less steady than she would have liked. The first result appeared: main switchboard. Harriet pressed call before she could talk herself out of it and lifted the phone to her ear.

It rang.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Rod leaned forward so far the secateurs slipped off his lap and landed on the carpet with a soft metallic clack. Marge stopped smoothing her glove. Sally braced both hands on her knees, which, frankly, was when Harriet knew things had become serious.

‘Good morning, St Barnabas" Hospital switchboard,’ said a brisk voice.

Harriet swallowed. ‘Hello. Yes. Hi. I’m ringing about a patient, please. Bernice Fitzgerald. She was brought in yesterday.’

‘Do you know which ward?’

Harriet blinked. ‘No,’ she said, then immediately wished she’d said it with less of an obvious question mark attached.

‘Do you have the patient’s date of birth?’

Harriet opened her mouth.

Nothing came out.

Date of birth. Of course. Obviously. A completely normal and reasonable question to ask someone claiming to be an emergency contact. A question any competent, prepared, legitimate emergency contact would be able to answer without looking like a woman who had accidentally joined a hostage negotiation armed only with Diet Coke and vibes.

Harriet looked at Rod. He gave a tiny shake of his head. Marge mouthed, Seventeenth of something? Sally made a small circular gesture with her hand, which seemed to mean keep talking, or possibly land the plane.

‘I don’t have it in front of me,’ Harriet said.

‘That’s fine. I’ll need either her date of birth, NHS number or current ward.’

‘Yes. Of course.’

Another silence fell, during which Harriet could feel the whole room watching her fail.

‘I am her emergency contact,’ she added, because it was the only fact she had and she was becoming emotionally attached to it.

‘One moment.’

The line clicked, and music started. Not calming music. Not professional music. A tinny version of something that might once have been Vivaldi before being trapped inside a lift for forty years.

Harriet stared straight ahead.

‘Well?’ Sally whispered.

‘I’m on hold.’

‘We can hear that.’

‘Then why did you ask?’

Sally lifted both hands.

The music continued.

Rod leaned closer. ‘Ask if she’s been moved.’

‘I will not ask if she’s been moved. That sounds insane.’

Marge leaned in from the other side. ‘Ask if she still has the bag.’

‘What?’

‘The leather bag.’

‘I’m not asking about the bag.’

‘It was a very good bag.’

‘That is not the priority.’

‘It may contain clues.’

Harriet closed her eyes.

The music clicked off.

‘Hello?’ said a different voice.

Harriet sat up so quickly her knee knocked the underside of the coffee table. ‘Yes. Hello. I’m calling about Bernice Fitzgerald.’

There was a pause. ‘Could you confirm your relationship to the patient?’

‘I’m her emergency contact.’

‘Yes, but are you a relative?’

‘No. I’m…’ Harriet looked around the room.

A colleague? A friend? A woman who had handled her underwear and discovered possible corporate evidence beneath a nightdress?

‘I’m Harriet,’ she said, which was both true and completely useless.

Another pause followed.

‘I’m afraid I can’t disclose medical information unless you’re next of kin or we have the patient’s consent.’

‘But she wrote my name down.’

‘I understand that, but—’

‘She asked for me.’

‘I understand, but I’m unable to discuss her condition.’

Harriet’s stomach sank. Rod mouthed something that looked like hostage, and Harriet waved him away.

‘I don’t need details,’ she said, trying to keep her voice steady. ‘I just need to know if she’s there.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘If she’s there. In the hospital. That’s all. I don’t need to know what’s wrong, or what medication she’s on, or whether she’s being difficult with the nurses, although I would assume yes. I just need to know she is physically in the building.’

There was a silence.

A long one.

Too long.

Harriet felt every person in the room lean towards her. The sofa gave a low, exhausted creak beneath the collective shift of panic.

‘I’m sorry,’ the woman said finally, her voice becoming careful in a way Harriet did not like at all. ‘I’m not able to confirm that without verifying the patient’s details.’

‘But I’m her emergency contact.’

‘I understand.’

‘You keep saying that.’

‘I’m sorry.’

The line went quiet. Not dead. Not cut off. Just empty.

Harriet lowered the phone from her ear.

No one spoke.

Outside the patio doors, Rod’s abandoned hydrangeas moved slightly in the breeze.

Sally was the first to break. ‘Well,’ she said slowly, looking towards the window. ‘That’s not ideal.’

‘She could be there,’ Harriet said.

‘Course she could,’ Sally replied.

‘They just couldn’t tell me.’

‘Right.’

‘That’s normal. That’s probably completely normal.’

‘Very normal,’ Rod said, in a tone that suggested he did not believe that at all.

Marge looked towards the door. ‘And the date of birth?’

Harriet followed her gaze. The lounge suddenly seemed to stretch beyond itself: past the faded carpet, past the corridor, past the reception desk and all the way to the office where the resident files lived.

Mrs Fitz’s file would be in there. Her date of birth. Her NHS number, probably. Her ward information, if anyone had written it down properly. The sensible things. The official things. The things Harriet should have checked before ringing a hospital and announcing herself as a woman named Harriet.

‘There’ll be something in her file,’ she said.

Sally nodded. ‘Office, then.’

‘No,’ Harriet said immediately.

Rod frowned. ‘Why not?’

Because through the small glass panel in the office door, visible even from the far end of the corridor if you leaned slightly to the left, Alex Kilner was sitting behind the manager’s desk.

Still.

Jacket off.

Sleeves rolled.

One hand moving across a stack of papers, the other resting beside a red folder.

Not the red folder, probably.

But red enough.

Harriet’s stomach performed a slow, unpleasant turn.

‘Because,’ she said, ‘Alex is in there.’

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# CHAPTER 23

Everything Is Completely Normal

Hawthorn House carried on around them: the distant rattle of a breakfast trolley, the hydraulic sigh of the lift, the soft beep of something electronic that probably needed charging. Ordinary noises. Work noises. The sort of noises that made it feel even more ridiculous that they were sitting in the lounge discussing whether a woman had been kidnapped.

‘No,’ Harriet said.

Sally stopped halfway towards the lounge door. ‘No what?’

‘No whatever you’re about to do. Or are doing. What are you doing?’

Harriet looked past Rod’s shoulder to where Sally had pressed herself arse-first against the corridor wall, both palms flat against the olive floral wallpaper. She appeared to be attempting camouflage, which would have been ambitious even if she hadn’t been wearing a crisp white polo shirt and shorts so long they had left shorts territory altogether and were now making a serious bid for trousers.

‘Just blending in,’ Sally replied, beginning to slide sideways along the wall.

Unfortunately, Sally’s version of blending involved knocking a row of ancient oil paintings that had already suffered badly from decades of disinfectant in the air and what Harriet suspected was a historic incident involving furniture polish. A small portrait of a woman with suspiciously large pearls tilted to the left.

‘Good grief,’ Marge announced. ‘You look absolutely ridiculous. What on earth are you trying to accomplish?’

‘No,’ Harriet said again, louder this time, because the entire morning was beginning to acquire a momentum she did not care for. ‘None of this. This is becoming absolutely ridiculous. We all work here. We have every right to

walk into that office and find out whether anyone has had an update about Mrs Fitz.'

'Except me,' Rod said.

Harriet looked at him. 'Except Rod.'

Rod nodded, satisfied, as though having his exclusion formally acknowledged had restored some order to the morning. He straightened his cardigan and adjusted the secateurs at his side.

Sally peeled herself off the wall and brushed down the front of her polo shirt. 'Bloomin' heck,' she said. 'She's right. I'll sort this.'

'No, Sally—'

But before another word could be uttered, an objection lodged, or a formal risk assessment completed, Sally had marched down the corridor, flung open the office door and gone in.

The office fell quiet so suddenly that Harriet felt the silence in her teeth. Marge inhaled sharply beside her. Rod leaned so far towards the doorway that Harriet wanted to tell him to stand up straight.

'Is that sorting it?' he whispered.

Harriet did not answer.

Inside the office, Alex Kilner looked up from behind the manager's desk. He had taken off his jacket, and his sleeves were rolled to the elbow. The red folder still sat beside his right hand, close enough that his fingers could touch it without effort.

Not the red folder, probably.

But red enough.

The rolled sleeves were annoying. Unnecessary, really. It wasn't as if he was down a mine or saving someone from a flooded cellar. He was sitting at a desk with a pen. There was no need for forearms. Certainly not forearms like that.

Harriet looked away immediately, which was ridiculous because he couldn't see her from where he was sitting. Probably. Unless corporate people had evolved some sort of peripheral vision designed specifically to detect staff members behaving suspiciously near doorframes.

'Sally,' Alex said, setting his pen down. 'Ah. Good morning. Can I help?'

'Yes,' Sally said, without even glancing at the folder. 'Need a few details for Bernice Fitzgerald.'

Alex's hand paused above the papers. 'What sort of details?'

‘Oh, you know.’ Sally waved one hand vaguely, as if resident information were something people kept in a kitchen drawer beside batteries and takeaway menus. ‘Date of birth, NHS number if we’ve got it, allergies, ethnicity, mobility status. Usual hospital stuff.’

Harriet closed her eyes.

There it was. Not dead, exactly, but lying very still on the carpet.

Alex paused. ‘Ethnicity?’

‘For the hospital,’ Sally said, as if this were obvious and Alex was being deliberately slow. ‘They ask for everything now, don’t they? Harriet’s her emergency contact, but they won’t speak to her without a ward or date of birth, and seeing as we have a duty of care to a resident who has been taken in, and seeing as no one’s had a proper update, we need to know whether she’s settled, where she is, and whether they need anything from us.’

Harriet opened one eye.

Oh.

Sally hadn’t ruined it. Sally had buried the date of birth in a pile of administrative gravel and somehow made it sound almost legitimate. Badly, perhaps. Loudly, certainly. But still.

Nobody moved. The office carried the faint smell of printer toner, old coffee and whatever floral plug-in Janice had once bought in a doomed attempt to make paperwork feel less like paperwork. Sally stood in the middle of it all with her hands on her hips. For the first time since Harriet had known her, she didn’t look as though she had wandered into the situation armed only with calves and volume. She looked like someone who had worked in care homes for years and knew exactly which words made people behave themselves.

Duty of care. Resident. Proper update. Need to know.

It was magnificent.

Harriet nearly applauded.

Alex sat back slightly. ‘I spoke to them this morning.’

Sally’s face did not move. ‘You did?’

‘Yes. They called with an update.’

‘Right.’ Sally folded her arms. ‘And?’

Alex glanced towards the glass panel in the office door, and his eyes found Harriet immediately.

This was another thing Harriet disliked about him. He had a way of looking at people as though he was actually listening, which was deeply

manipulative if you thought about it. Most men only waited for their turn to speak, or stared somewhere just above your left shoulder as if subtitles might appear, but Alex Kilner looked directly at you, calmly and steadily, as though your answer might matter.

Sinister, really.

‘She’s stable,’ he said.

The word should have helped. It did not.

Harriet stepped into the doorway before she could stop herself, then immediately wished she hadn’t. All she had to do was listen. Without mentioning the window, the folder, or her rapidly expanding theory about Alex Kilner.

‘Stable?’ she said.

Alex looked at her properly now. ‘Yes.’

Harriet nodded slowly, as if this was all very ordinary information to receive through a man with a red folder, rolled sleeves and suspiciously well-kept cuticles.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Stable. That’s good.’

‘It is.’

‘Yes. Very good.’

She smiled, but it arrived too late and spread too wide.

Alex looked at her for half a second longer than necessary, and Harriet became suddenly aware of her own face. Not in a general way, but in the specific, terrible way one became aware of one’s face when standing in front of someone attractive under unforgiving office lighting. Her pores expanded. Her chin doubled. Her mouth forgot where to rest. She tightened it into something she hoped looked neutral.

It did not feel neutral.

Stable but not accepting visitors.

It sounded reasonable. Almost comfortingly so, which was exactly the problem. Reasonable was what people said when they had already decided what you were allowed to know.

‘Can she have visitors?’ Sally asked.

Alex looked back at Sally. ‘Not at the moment.’

‘Hospital said that?’

‘Yes.’

Harriet did not ask why he hadn’t told her. She did not ask why the hospital had called him. She did not ask whether Mrs Fitz had said it

herself. She stored all three questions neatly behind her ribs, where they immediately began breeding.

Sally folded her arms more tightly. ‘Not accepting visitors, or not allowed visitors?’

Alex’s expression shifted by almost nothing, but Harriet saw it. She had started to notice the small movements of his face, which was unfortunate and not at all relevant: the faint pull at the corner of his mouth when he was trying not to react, the slight narrowing of his eyes when he chose his words carefully, the way his jaw moved before he answered, as if he had several responses lined up and was deciding which one would cause the least damage.

Extremely suspicious.

Also, irritatingly, good bone structure.

‘Not accepting,’ he said evenly. ‘That’s what I was told.’

Marge appeared behind Harriet’s shoulder, pink glove resting dramatically against the doorframe. ‘And did Bernice say that herself?’

Alex looked at Marge, and for the first time he seemed slightly less certain. ‘That’s what I was told.’

Nobody spoke. Somewhere beyond the office, cutlery rattled against crockery and a resident laughed at something too loudly. The ordinary life of Hawthorn House pressed on around them, entirely indifferent to Harriet’s internal conviction that a corporate man with attractive wrists might be involved in a conspiracy. The office hummed with the low electric sound of the old computer tower under the desk while Harriet looked from the red folder beside Alex’s hand, to Alex himself, and then to Sally, who was still standing in the middle of the room, arms folded, her long white shorts glowing with unearned authority.

‘Well,’ Sally said finally. ‘That clears that up then.’

Nobody laughed.

Alex’s gaze moved slowly between them, taking in Sally’s planted stance in the middle of the office, Marge’s pink glove curled around the doorframe, Rod hovering in the corridor with secateurs held point-down like a defeated bouquet, and Harriet, who was trying so hard to look normal that she could feel her face becoming less human by the second.

‘What exactly is going on?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ Harriet said, much too quickly. ‘I mean, not nothing. Obviously something, because Mrs Fitz is in hospital, which is something.

But nothing else. Nothing extra.’

Alex’s eyebrows lifted slightly. ‘Extra?’

‘No.’

‘You just said extra.’

‘I meant unusual.’

‘You said nothing extra.’

‘Yes, because there isn’t.’

‘There isn’t what?’

‘Anything extra.’

The room seemed to tilt slightly around her. Harriet could feel everyone looking at her, which wasn’t helping, because being watched had never once improved her ability to behave normally. It was like being told to relax during a blood pressure test. Impossible, and now medically worse.

Sally stepped forward.

‘She’s fine,’ she said.

Harriet felt a small, dangerous flutter of gratitude.

Then Sally added, ‘She’s just got wind.’

The gratitude died immediately.

Nobody spoke. Even the computer under the desk seemed to hum more quietly, as if it too wished to hear how Harriet planned to recover from this.

‘I haven’t,’ Harriet said.

‘You have,’ Sally replied. ‘Terrible wind.’

‘Sally.’

‘Stress wind.’

‘That is not a recognised condition.’

‘It is in here.’

Marge nodded, far too helpfully. ‘It does happen, darling. The body stores anxiety in all sorts of places.’

‘Thank you, Marge.’

‘I had it all through my second marriage.’

Rod frowned. ‘Which bit?’

‘The wind, Rod.’

‘Oh.’

Harriet stared at the carpet and felt every drop of blood in her body rush towards her face. This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t happening in front of Alex Kilner, who was sitting there with his rolled sleeves and his good bone

structure and his undivided attention, learning more about Harriet's imaginary bowel function than any man had a right to know.

Alex's mouth moved slightly.

Not quite a smile.

Almost worse.

'Right,' he said.

'She's not worried,' Sally continued with terrible confidence, as though any hole could be escaped by digging down. 'She's uncomfortable.'

'I am not uncomfortable,' Harriet said.

'You are. You've gone tight round the eyes.'

'That is my normal face.'

'It isn't,' Rod said.

Harriet turned to him.

'I mean,' he added quickly, 'it's a perfectly nice face.'

'That's enough.'

Marge lowered her voice. 'Perhaps a peppermint tea?'

'I do not need peppermint tea.'

'It's very good for trapped air.'

'There is no trapped air.'

Sally nodded at Alex as if this settled the matter completely. 'There you are. Nothing suspicious. Just digestive.'

Harriet made a private decision to leave the country. Not immediately, because she had a shift pattern and no passport on her, but soon. Somewhere remote, preferably with no care homes, no corporate men and no one who had ever heard the words stress wind.

Alex leaned one hand on the desk, and Harriet hated, absolutely hated, that she noticed the little ridge of tendon at his wrist.

'Harriet,' he said, quieter now, 'I should have told you when the hospital rang. I'm sorry. I assumed they would contact you directly if they needed to, because you were on the form.'

The apology landed awkwardly in the middle of the room, somewhere between the red folder and the fictional wind.

Harriet did not know what to do with it. Suspicion she could manage. Condescension she could work with. Even mild professional dislike had a shape she understood. But an apology from Alex Kilner was inconvenient. What was she supposed to do with an apology? She hadn't prepared for that.

‘Oh,’ she said.

‘I wasn’t trying to keep anything from you.’

He said it so evenly that, for one dangerous second, Harriet believed him. Then his fingers moved over the red folder. Not dramatically. Not guiltily. Just moved: a tiny adjustment, a closing of the cover by half an inch, the sort of ordinary movement anyone might make if a file happened to be open beside them.

But Harriet saw it.

Of course she saw it.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Good.’

Alex glanced down at the folder, then back up at her. ‘Do you need anything else?’

Harriet did. She really did.

She needed to ask whether he was part of a sinister corporate plot to remove Bernice Fitzgerald from Hawthorn House against her will. She needed to ask whether ‘not accepting visitors’ meant not accepting visitors, or being prevented from accepting visitors. She needed to ask why the hospital had called him, why he had not told her sooner, and why his fingers had just moved over the red folder as if it contained state secrets, a confession, or possibly both. She needed, desperately to ask whether Alex Kilner had kidnapped an old lady. Possibly murdered one. Or was planning to. Or knew someone who was. Or had access to a van.

What she said was, ‘No.’

At the same time, Rod stepped forward and said, ‘What’s in the folder?’

For one beautiful, impossible second, nobody spoke. Even Hawthorn House seemed to pause around them, as if the breakfast trolley, the lift, the electrical beeping and the entire east corridor had all stopped to see what Alex Kilner would do next.

Then Sally muttered, ‘Subtle, Rod.’

Alex looked down at the folder. Harriet looked down at the folder. Rod, apparently mistaking silence for success, looked extremely pleased with himself, as if he had performed some advanced interrogation technique rather than simply saying the first thought that had entered his head.

Before Alex could answer, there was a sharp knock at the office door.

Nobody moved.

The knock came again, more urgent this time, and then the door opened halfway. Debbie from mornings put her head around it, hairnet slightly

crooked and expression grave. She took in the scene with calm resignation. Years in care had taught her that people often gathered in odd places for reasons best not immediately questioned.

‘Sorry,’ she said, looking from Alex to Sally to Harriet to Marge to Rod. ‘Only there’s a situation in the dining room.’

Harriet seized on this with pathetic gratitude. ‘A situation?’

‘Bourbons,’ Debbie said.

Alex blinked. ‘Sorry?’

‘The trolley’s run out.’

There was a silence.

‘A run-out isn’t a situation,’ Alex said carefully.

Debbie gave him the sort of look usually reserved for men who had stood her up. ‘It is when Mr Peterson’s already had two digestives as a substitute and is now saying this place has gone downhill since Easter.’

From somewhere beyond the office, a voice called, ‘They’re rationing us!’

Another voice shouted, ‘I’ve paid for biscuits in my fees!’

Sally closed her eyes. ‘Oh, for—’

Debbie lowered her voice. ‘And Violet’s telling everyone it’s because Carelink’s cut the biscuit budget.’

The words landed in the office with far more force than they deserved. Beside Harriet, Marge drew in a sharp breath. Rod’s mouth fell open a fraction, his entire face brightening at this fresh development.

‘Has it?’ he whispered.

‘No,’ Alex said.

But he said it a fraction too quickly.

A silence settled over the office. Harriet looked at Alex first, then realised Sally had done the same, while Rod looked as if he’d just been handed evidence by God.

Alex pushed back his chair. ‘I’ll deal with it.’

‘Will you?’ Harriet said, before she could stop herself.

His eyes moved to hers. ‘Yes.’

The folder sat between them on the desk, red and silent and unanswered. It was ridiculous, really, how much power an ordinary office folder could hold. It was cardboard. Probably from a multipack. It had bent corners and a pale rectangular mark where a label had once been peeled off badly. There

was no reason for Harriet's heart to behave as though it had just seen a weapon.

But there it was.

Red.

Closed.

Waiting.

Then the corridor erupted.

'BOURBONS!'

Debbie winced. 'That'll be Mr Peterson.'

Alex closed the folder.

Harriet saw it. Of course she saw it.

It was not dramatic. It was not the sort of thing anyone else would necessarily notice. His hand simply moved across the cover, pressing it flat, aligning it with the edge of the desk as he stood. A neat movement. A controlled movement. The kind of movement made by men who had never once left a receipt to dissolve in the bottom of a handbag.

Still, something in Harriet tightened.

Alex stepped out from behind the desk, and for one impossible second the office seemed to open itself in front of her. The filing cabinet behind him was still unlocked. The desk was within reach. The red folder was sitting there with its corners squared and its secrets practically humming.

Harriet's whole body leaned towards it.

Not visibly, she hoped. Not in a way that would alarm anyone with decent peripheral vision or corporate instincts. But internally she had already crossed the room, lifted the cover, photographed every page, discovered the sinister plot, saved Mrs Fitz, saved Hawthorn House and possibly written a short but devastating witness statement.

This was not temptation.

This was destiny.

Then the office phone rang.

Everyone froze.

The sound cut through the room, sharp and ordinary, and somehow much more sinister for being both. Harriet looked at the phone. Sally looked at the phone. Rod, still in the corridor, looked at the phone as though it might require secateurs.

Alex paused with one hand on the back of his chair.

The phone rang again.

From the dining room came another cry of, ‘I’ve had rich teas three days running!’

Debbie shut her eyes briefly, as if asking a higher power for strength, biscuits, or both.

‘I’ll get Debbie to handle the dining room,’ Alex said, and reached for the receiver.

No.

No, no, no.

He could not do that. He could not abandon the biscuit uprising to someone else and remain in the office like a professionally dressed gargoyle guarding the one thing Harriet needed to see.

‘Alex Kilner,’ he said into the phone.

His expression changed.

Not much.

Enough.

Harriet stopped breathing.

There were tiny shifts people made when a call mattered. A stillness. A lowering of the chin. A slight retreat of the eyes, as if part of them had stepped into another room. Alex did all three, and Harriet felt every nerve in her body take notes.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I understand.’

Sally’s face went blank in the particular way it did when she was pretending not to listen while listening with every organ she possessed. Marge stopped fidgeting. Rod tilted his head, which might have helped if the call had been conducted through a conch shell.

Alex turned slightly away from them.

That made it worse.

People only turned away when there was something to turn away from.

Harriet tried to catch Sally’s eye, but Sally watched Alex with the same hard, practical attention she had once used to identify a stolen yoghurt from the angle of a spoon mark.

‘Yes,’ Alex said again, quieter this time. ‘No, not yet.’

Not yet. The words landed in Harriet’s chest.

Not yet what?

Not yet moved? Not yet discharged? Not yet dead? Not yet found? Not yet ready for visitors? Not yet silenced? Not yet whatever terrible thing

corporate men said on phones while women in hospital beds became stable but unavailable?

Alex's gaze flicked, briefly, to the red folder.

Then to Harriet.

It was only a second. Less than a second. It could have meant nothing. It almost certainly meant nothing. People looked at things while on the phone. Desks. Folders. Windows. Women they had accidentally learned had stress wind.

But Harriet knew what she had seen.

'Not here,' Alex said quietly. 'I'll call you back.'

Then he put the phone down.

The office seemed to hold the silence after him.

Even the corridor had gone quiet, as if Mr Peterson himself had sensed that having to deviate from his bourbon habit was, briefly, no longer the most urgent matter in the building.

Alex kept his hand on the receiver longer than necessary. Then he looked up.

Nobody spoke.

Harriet could feel the question sitting on her tongue, large and dangerous.

Who was that?

She did not ask it.

Of course she did not ask it, because innocent people asked questions and Harriet was currently trying to look like a woman with digestive discomfort, not a woman collecting evidence.

Sally got there first.

'Everything alright?' she asked.

It was almost casual. Almost.

Alex looked at her, then at Harriet.

'Yes,' he said. 'Fine.'

Fine.

Harriet hated fine. Fine was what people said when they had decided the truth was none of your business.

From the dining room, Debbie's name was shouted by three different voices at once, followed by what sounded like a spoon hitting a table with political intent.

Alex straightened the folder again, this time moving it slightly farther from the edge of the desk.

Harriet saw that too.

Of course she saw it.

By this point she was beginning to think she could have passed an exam on the movements of Alex Kilner's right hand. She had noticed the pen, the phone, the folder, the small controlled adjustments he made when he wanted something to appear casual. Men like Alex probably didn't fidget. They repositioned. They made minor strategic alterations to stationery.

'Debbie,' he said into the phone, without looking away from Harriet, 'can you give them digestives for now? I'll be there in a minute.'

Debbie, who clearly knew better than to argue with anyone while bourbons were unavailable, disappeared back into the corridor. From the dining room came the low, restless sound of rebellion: chair legs scraping, crockery shifting, Mr Peterson announcing to someone that he had 'seen better provisioning during the miners' strike,' despite having been, as far as Harriet knew, an accountant in Skegness for most of it.

Harriet should have moved.

They all should have moved.

Instead, they stayed where they were. Harriet waited for someone else to move first. Apparently everyone had had the same idea.

Alex was still on the phone. That was the worst part.

If he had put it down, if he had told them to leave, if he had become cross or clipped or even properly suspicious, Harriet might have known what to do with herself. But he simply listened, his expression calm and unreadable, one hand near the folder and the receiver pressed to his ear, conducting two conversations at once: one with the person on the phone, and another silent one with Harriet.

She pointed vaguely towards the dining room, then at herself, then at Sally.

'We'll sort it,' she mouthed.

Alex's eyes stayed on hers.

Whoever was on the other end of the line was still talking. Harriet could hear the faint insect murmur of a voice but none of the words, which made it worse.

Alex gave the smallest nod.

Not permission, exactly, but not refusal either.

Nobody moved. The opportunity had opened, glittered briefly, and shut again. Harriet could feel the loss of it in her teeth. The folder was still there, red and quiet and farther from the edge of the desk than it had been before. The filing cabinet was still behind him. The phone was still in his hand. Everything she needed was in that room, and so was he.

There were limits, Harriet thought, to how much a woman could reasonably be expected to endure before committing a light data-protection breach.

But Alex was watching her. It was not time.

So she swallowed down everything that had just happened — the phone call, the look, the not yet, the folder, the apology, the fact that Alex Kilner had apologised while in possession of suspiciously attractive wrists — and stepped backwards into the corridor.

It wasn't an elegant retreat. Sally came sideways through the gap, refusing to take her eyes off Alex, and Marge followed only after Harriet beckoned impatiently.

Rod was last.

He kept his eyes on the folder until the very final second. Then he gave Alex a small, solemn nod that suggested either respect between adversaries or the onset of a medication error.

Alex did not react. He was still listening. Still watching.

Still in the bloody office.

Harriet closed the door behind them as quietly as she could but the click sounded much louder than it should have done.

They lingered in the corridor. Behind the office door, Alex's voice dropped too low to make out. Ahead of them, the dining room grumbled with biscuit unrest. Somewhere nearby, something electronic resumed its soft, accusing beep. Hawthorn House, having briefly allowed them the illusion of being detectives, was reminding them that there were trays to clear, residents to placate and a biscuit crisis currently threatening civil order.

Marge was the first to break.

'Well,' she said, lifting both hands into her hair. 'We are no better off now than when we started.'

'Not exactly,' Harriet said.

Sally looked at her. 'Go on.'

Harriet glanced back at the closed office door. Behind it, Alex was still in there with the red folder, the phone, and whatever he had just decided not to

say in front of them. The sensible part of her brain, which had been underused since approximately eight seventeen that morning, suggested that there might be perfectly ordinary explanations for all of this. Hospitals called managers. Folders got moved. People took confidential phone calls in offices. Residents refused visitors. Men with good wrists could still be innocent.

Unfortunately, she had watched fsar too many episodes of criminal minds to let this slide. She begin to think it through, except thinking meant speaking

‘We know Mrs Fitz is stable,’ Marge said.

Harriet frowned. ‘Do we?’

‘We know Alex says Mrs Fitz is stable.’

Sally’s mouth tightened. ‘That’s different.’

‘Exactly.’ Harriet lowered her voice, partly because Alex was behind the door and partly because saying any of this at normal volume would have made it sound completely insane. ‘We know he didn’t tell me the hospital called. IF the hospital even called at all.

They all looked at each other, huddled.

We know he moved that folder when Rod asked about it. We know he had a phone call he didn’t want to take in front of us. And we know Mrs Fitz is apparently not accepting visitors, which sounds very convenient for everyone except Mrs Fitz.’

Marge’s pink glove tightened around her handbag strap. Until now, she had seemed to be enjoying the drama in the abstract, as one might enjoy a scandal involving neighbours, minor aristocracy or an unfortunate hat. But at the mention of Mrs Fitz herself, something in her face shifted. The performance softened. Beneath the lipstick and feathers and theatrical outrage was a real, sharp worry.

‘And?’ Marge said.

Harriet looked down the corridor towards the dining room, where Mr Peterson was still loudly accusing Debbie of neglect. The whole of Hawthorn House seemed to stretch between two emergencies: one involving custard creams, and one involving a missing woman who might be stable, unavailable, or something far worse.

Harriet had come to Hawthorn House because she wanted a job with no drama, no ambition and absolutely no responsibility beyond being pleasant enough to elderly people not to get complained about.

Now she was standing in a corridor with a woman in pink gloves, a man with secateurs and Sally's white jorts, preparing to mount what was almost certainly an unauthorised hospital visit.

Her mother would have had things to say about this.

Mrs Fitz, if she was able, would have had even more.

'And,' Harriet said, 'There is one thing we know for sure'

The others looked on.

'We need to get to that hospital.'

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# CHAPTER 24

A Very Convenient Fall

Rod fell over seventeen minutes later.

It wasn't dramatic, it wasn't convincing, and Harriet suspected that neither of his feet had fully committed to the idea, but he did it with enough force of intention that Debbie screamed, Sally dropped a packet of chocolate-covered Hobnobs she had apparently sourced as bourbon substitutes, and Harriet aged approximately nine years between the dining room and the hall carpet.

He was lying beside the umbrella stand with one hand pressed to his ankle and the other still gripping his flat cap, as though headwear might be required for medical evacuation. Around him, Hawthorn House seemed to pause in layers, with the dining room quietening first, followed by the corridor, until the little electronic beep near the entrance desk—which had been going on for so long that everyone had stopped hearing it—suddenly became the only sound in the building.

'Oh dear,' Rod said to nobody in particular. 'I appear to have had an incident.'

Harriet stopped dead. No, absolutely not.

She knew what he had done before Sally had even crouched beside him, before Marge had lifted one pink-gloved hand to her chest, and before Debbie had asked, 'Shall I get Alex?'.

Rod did not look injured. He looked guilty.

His face had the same pale, determined brightness it had worn beside the hydrangeas that morning, when he had dressed himself for surveillance in a gardening gilet and two cardigans. He had taken the investigation seriously. Far too seriously.

Harriet had, unfortunately and unmistakably, given Rod a mission.

'My ankle,' he said.

‘Rod.’

‘It’s gone.’

‘Your ankle has not gone.’

‘It may have.’

Sally lowered herself beside him, her white almost-trousers straining heroically at the knee. ‘Which ankle?’

Rod looked briefly uncertain. Harriet closed her eyes and imagined herself back at home with toast, Netflix and the comforting absence of elderly men throwing themselves at furniture on her behalf.

Dear God, she thought.

It had started, as most disasters at Hawthorn House did, with refreshments.

After leaving Alex in the office with the red folder, the telephone and that unexplained not yet, they had been forced into the dining room to deal with what Debbie had very reasonably described as Biscuitgate.

At first glance, the dining room hadn’t looked like the site of a mutiny, because nine elderly people were sitting at round tables laid with linen cloths, proper glasses and the heavy old cutlery Mrs Fitz insisted made food taste more civilised. Morning light came through the net curtains in tired stripes, catching the chipped sugar bowls, the laminated menu cards Carelink had introduced the previous spring and the fresh flowers cut from the garden standing in blue jugs at the centre of each table.

Carelink called it impractical. Harriet called it standards.

Hawthorn House had a way of making even mid-morning tea feel faintly ceremonial, but beneath the teacups, folded napkins and hopeful little triangles of toast, order was fragile.

Mr Peterson sat at table three with his arms folded and his face dark with betrayal.

‘I’m only saying that a plain digestive is not a like-for-like replacement.’

‘No one said it was,’ Debbie replied. Her patience was wearing thin.

‘It’s a downgrade.’

‘It’s a biscuit.’

‘It’s a message.’

Harriet attempted to help, or at least attempted to appear as though she was helping, which at Hawthorn House was often the closest anyone got before ten in the morning. She moved cups, handed out napkins and

reassured Violet that there was no formal evidence Carelink had reduced the biscuit budget.

All the while, she kept one eye on the corridor.

The office door remained shut, Alex remained behind it, and behind Alex, somewhere on the desk, was that stupid folder—the folder Harriet hadn't seen, the folder he had moved, and the folder that might have been nothing at all and therefore had absolutely no business sitting in her mind like a loaded weapon.

Sally handled the disturbance with her usual blend of nourishment and threat.

'If there are no bourbons, you improvise,' she announced, placing a plate of chocolate Hobnobs on the table with enough force to make a teaspoon jump.

She dipped the chocolate side of one biscuit into her tea and pressed another against it, creating a sticky, oat-based abomination.

'There,' she said. 'Bourbon adjacent.'

Mr Peterson stared at it. 'I'll need to inspect one.'

'Thought you might.'

Within minutes, outrage had softened into interest, chairs had stopped scraping, and even Debbie had lowered the emergency packet of plain digestives.

Marge, meanwhile, had acquired a teapot and was moving between the tables like a duchess visiting flood victims.

'Standards slip gradually,' she told Violet, patting her shoulder with one pink-gloved hand. 'First biscuits, then curtains, then civilisation.'

Harriet shot her a look, which Marge ignored, of course. Rod had remained quiet throughout all of this, and that should have been the warning.

He had stood near the serving hatch with his flat cap held between both hands, watching Harriet with a softness that made her chest uncomfortable. There was still that light in his face, the one she had noticed in the garden, and it held purpose, excitement and the terrible happiness of being needed again.

Harriet had tried not to see it.

She had tried not to think about the fact that an elderly man who was supposed to be safely pottering in the garden had now been dragged into a possible corporate-abduction theory involving hospital records, locked

rooms and red stationery. She had tried not to think about how quickly he had believed her, how pleased he had been to have a role, and how much worse that made everything.

Then Sally had said, ‘We’re not getting to St Barnabas’ unless someone grows a spare car and a reason.’

Rod, apparently, had taken that as an instruction.

Rod’s yelps cut through her thoughts. The dining room, the biscuit negotiations and the muttering teacups fell away, leaving only the hall carpet, the umbrella stand, Debbie’s dropped Hobnobs and Rod lying at her feet with a martyr’s expression and no convincing idea which ankle he had injured.

Harriet wanted to be cross with him, and she was cross with him, but beneath the irritation, sharp and sour and impossible to swallow, was guilt.

This wasn’t only Rod being ridiculous; this was Rod trying to be useful, trying to matter, and trying to turn his body into a reason.

They all knew it.

‘Which ankle?’ Sally repeated.

Rod was making such a determined commotion that it finally drew Alex Kilner from his office. The door opened and, for one ridiculous, traitorous second, the corridor altered.

It was still Hawthorn House, with the same patterned carpet, the same faint smell of furniture polish and tea, and the same electronic beep near the entrance desk complaining into the morning. Debbie was still clutching a top-up packet of chocolate Hobnobs, Marge was still wearing rubber gloves with pink feathers at the wrists, and somewhere in the dining room Mr Peterson was still one wrong biscuit away from civil unrest.

Yet somehow, it was not quite the same.

Alex Kilner came towards them as though the corridor had been designed for his arrival.

His dark hair had fallen slightly out of place, softening the careful line of him, while his sleeves were rolled to the forearm, exposing the sort of practical strength Harriet had no time, no interest and absolutely no emotional capacity to notice. His expression was serious without being dramatic or performative, and there was a quiet, maddening steadiness about him that made it increasingly difficult to believe he was a soulless corporate instrument and quite possibly an old-lady kidnapper, although Harriet was doing her best.

He moved past the abandoned digestives, Sally's suspicious stare and Marge's hand pressed to her throat, then crouched beside Rod as though the entire morning had narrowed to this one necessary act.

'What happened?' he asked, placing a hand on Rod's shoulder.

Rod, sensing an audience, gave a faint groan. 'I fell.'

Alex looked at the perfectly flat, obstruction-free carpet and then back at him. 'How?'

There was a pause long enough for Harriet to feel the entire building lean towards them.

'Downwards,' Rod said.

Sally closed her eyes, Marge made a small sound into her glove, and Harriet stared at the ceiling while wondering whether it was possible to resign telepathically.

Alex's gaze moved briefly towards her, and Harriet felt unusually warm, buried it immediately and attempted professional concern.

'Were you dizzy?' he asked Rod.

Rod considered the question with great care. 'I may have been.'

'Did the dizziness begin before or after you fell?'

'During,' Rod said.

Harriet made a tiny sound that wasn't a laugh, although it bore an unfortunate resemblance to one, and she attempted to pass it off as a respiratory malfunction.

Alex's mouth almost moved.

Then Rod, apparently encouraged by not yet being arrested for medical fraud, produced another small groan.

'Oh dear,' he said. 'I may need to go to St Barnabas'.'

Harriet's eyes snapped towards him.

'I may need to go now.'

'Rod.'

'It's getting worse.'

Alex glanced at Harriet before returning his attention to Rod. 'Can you sit up?'

'I can try,' Rod said with quiet nobility.

Harriet knew she should have stopped it, because there were procedures, forms and safeguarding obligations to consider, as well as the rather pressing fact that Rod hadn't fallen so much as launched a small personal campaign against gravity, but Alex was already leaning towards him.

One hand went carefully behind Rod’s shoulders, while the other slid beneath his knees, and Harriet’s entire body went very still.

There was no grunt of effort, no awkward shuffle and no visible calculation of weight against dignity. Alex simply gathered Rod from the carpet as though the act had been waiting inside him, quiet and inevitable, and all the morning had needed to do was give him someone to rescue.

Harriet could have withstood a performance, because she could have rolled her eyes at puffing, flexing and masculine usefulness arranged for an audience, and she might even have recovered from it.

This was worse, because this was competence without vanity and strength with manners.

Rod rose from the carpet as though gravity had agreed to make an exception. His flat cap was clutched to his chest like a bonnet, his makeshift tool belt hung solemnly at one side, and his right loafer began, by slow degrees, to slip from his foot.

Alex straightened smoothly, his shoulders settling beneath the weight without any apparent strain, while his sleeves slipped higher and revealed the strong line of his forearms, with the veins and tendons shifting beneath the skin as he adjusted his hold. A lock of dark hair fell over one eye, and he tipped his head to clear it without letting go.

Harriet’s lungs forgot their purpose.

‘There,’ he said, low and steady. ‘I’ve got you.’

Because the universe clearly had no sense of proportion, he said it as though those three words had been designed to ruin women in drawing rooms for the better part of two centuries.

It wasn’t fair, because Harriet might have survived the forearms, the hair or even the quiet strength if they had presented themselves separately, but she was considerably less prepared for the appalling possibility that Alex Kilner might be at his most attractive while doing something genuinely decent.

Rod went limp in his arms with immediate and unnecessary trust.

‘If we are going to St Barnabas’,’ he said, his voice quivering slightly, ‘I should probably be carried to the car.’

The spell cracked, although not quite enough.

Alex lowered Rod into the nearest chair, which was one of the good ones: the wing-backed chair by the hall table that nobody used unless they were waiting for a taxi, a vicar, or death. It had belonged, according to

Marge, to someone's aunt with a house in Bath and a terrible temper, and still carried the faint smell of lavender polish and old upholstery, as though it had absorbed decades of people sitting down to hear news they did not especially want.

Rod accepted it with tragic grace.

He sank back against the faded cushion, flat cap pressed to his chest, makeshift tool belt hanging solemnly from his cardigan, and one loafer making a quiet bid for independence. It was impossible, Harriet thought, for a man to look both deeply fraudulent and genuinely fragile at the same time, and yet Rod was managing it beautifully.

That was the trouble. If he had only been ridiculous, she could have been cross with him. Properly cross. Staff-member cross. The sort of cross that involved saying things like safeguarding and boundaries and I am not losing my job because you fancied a day out.

But Rod was not only ridiculous.

He was also pale under the performance, bright-eyed with the effort of being useful, and far too pleased that everyone was finally gathered around him. Not in a selfish way. Not really. More in the way of someone who had spent a long time being gently managed by other people and had, for once, found a lever he could pull himself.

Harriet hated that she understood it.

The corridor settled around them again. From the dining room came the faint clink of teacups and Debbie's voice, still firm enough to hold back civilisation's collapse. Somewhere near the entrance desk, the little electronic beep went on complaining into the morning. Hawthorn House, with its polished skirting boards and silk flowers and stubborn refusal to become practical, seemed to be holding its breath.

Alex crouched in front of Rod.

Of course he did.

Harriet studied the hall carpet. It was safer than watching him do anything else.

'Can you wiggle your toes?' he asked.

Rod closed his eyes as though the request had reached him from a great distance.

Sally folded her arms. 'It's toes, Rod, not a séance.'

'I'm concentrating.'

'You're wearing loafers.'

There was only the hum of the building, the distant crockery, and Harriet's own pulse behaving as though it wanted nothing to do with her. She could feel the scene balancing on a knife edge. If Rod overdid it, Alex would know. If Alex knew, properly knew, he would ask questions. If he asked questions, Harriet had absolutely no idea what she would say, because all available explanations now involved the words kidnapping, hostile relocation, window, and emotional support Hobnob.

After a pause of almost devotional seriousness, Rod wiggled something.

The movement was small but unmistakable.

His right shoe, which had been clinging on through loyalty alone, slid the rest of the way from his foot and landed on the carpet with a soft, defeated thud.

Harriet pressed her lips together until her jaw hurt.

Alex's mouth moved. Barely. Almost nothing. But she saw it: the smallest betrayal of amusement, tucked away before it could become a real smile. A serious Alex was difficult enough. An almost-laughing Alex, crouched at Rod's feet was the sort of thing that should have come with a written risk assessment.

'Well,' he said, gently taking Rod's foot in his hand, 'that's a good sign. I don't think anything's broken.'

Rod opened his eyes.

'Oh.'

Rod's mouth stayed open. He looked down at his foot, then back at Alex.

Harriet saw the next idea arrive before his hand even moved.

It came over Rod's face slowly, like sunrise over a bad decision.

'No,' she said.

But his fingers were already travelling to his forehead, slow and tragic, the way Marge reached for pearls she wasn't wearing.

'My head,' he said faintly.

Harriet felt the corridor tilt.

Not literally. Unfortunately, Rod had already claimed that.

'Do not have a head.'

Rod blinked at her. 'I already have one.'

'You know what I mean.'

He pressed two fingers to his temple and gazed past them all with an expression that belonged either to a battlefield or a very poorly reviewed matinee. 'It's gone peculiar.'

The word changed the air.

Even Harriet, who knew with horrible certainty that Rod had invented the head at the precise moment his ankle became medically disappointing, felt the seriousness of it land. Ankles were manageable. Ankles could be wiggled, poked, wrapped, iced, elevated, argued with and sent home with a leaflet. Heads were different. Heads made people lower their voices. Heads had protocols. Heads had forms. Heads had the power to turn a ridiculous plan into something nobody could entirely dismiss without sounding negligent.

Alex's almost-smile disappeared.

That was the worst part. He did not look irritated. He did not look suspicious in any obvious, useful way. He simply became careful. The softness stayed, but the humour dropped out of him, replaced by that controlled professional concern Harriet was beginning to find deeply inconvenient.

'Did you hit your head?' he asked.

'No,' Harriet said.

Too fast.

Much too fast.

Sally made a small sound beside her. It might have been a cough. It might have been a warning shot. It might have been the noise of a woman watching another woman sprint towards a disciplinary hearing in unsuitable shoes.

Harriet tried again. 'I mean, I didn't see him hit his head. Rod?'

Rod hesitated.

It was the hesitation that nearly killed her, because for one wild second she could see him choosing between honesty, drama and St Barnabas', and drama, she feared, had both momentum and a better outfit.

Sally leaned slightly closer. 'Rod.'

He sighed. 'No. I didn't hit my head.'

'Any dizziness?' Alex asked.

Rod brightened by the smallest, most dangerous amount. 'I have felt unusual.'

'Unusual how?'

'Peculiar.'

'You said peculiar.'

'Yes,' Rod said. 'It's still there.'

Marge had drifted closer by then, one pink-gloved hand resting at her throat and the teapot still dangling from the other as though it might become useful in an emergency. ‘One can’t be too careful with peculiar.’

‘Thank you, Marge.’

‘I am merely observing.’

‘You observe like a foghorn.’

Rod nodded weakly from the chair. ‘Heads are unpredictable.’

‘So are amateur dramatics,’ Sally said.

Harriet looked from Rod’s shoeless foot to the umbrella stand. They had started out trying to find Mrs Fitz; now they were planning a hospital trip for an injury that might not exist. She was going to have to explain this to somebody. Possibly several somebodies.

She had wanted a quiet job.

That was the part that kept coming back to her.

She had wanted a quiet job with no ambition, no drama, no one depending on her for anything more meaningful than a room key or the occasional clean towel. She had wanted to pass through Hawthorn House like a night-light: useful, low wattage, unnoticed.

Instead, Hawthorn had noticed her. Mrs Fitz and Rod had noticed her too.

And now, because nobody in this building could apparently leave well enough alone, they were all looking to her as though she might know what happened next.

Alex sat back on his heels, which was irritating in itself, and did the sort of thoughtful silence men did when they were about to introduce paperwork.

‘I think we should get advice,’ he said.

Sally already had her phone out. ‘I’ll ring 111.’

‘I can do it.’

‘No offence,’ Sally said, her thumb moving across the screen quickly, ‘but you’ll make it sound sensible.’

Harriet looked at her.

Sally shrugged. ‘We need accurate.’

Rod nodded faintly. ‘I would prefer accurate.’

‘You would prefer dramatic,’ Harriet said.

‘I can be both.’

The hold music must have begun, because Sally turned slightly away and settled in to wait. Rod sank deeper into the chair. Nobody was going anywhere until someone had taken him seriously.

‘I don’t need an ambulance,’ he announced.

‘No one has mentioned an ambulance.’

‘I simply want that recorded.’

‘Where?’ Harriet said. ‘On your tomb?’

Rod ignored her. ‘A car would be less alarming.’

Of course it would. A car would be smaller, quieter, easier to control. A car could go to St Barnabas’ without sirens, neighbours, paperwork, paramedics or any professional person looking at Rod’s ankle and saying, with devastating authority, that there was absolutely nothing wrong with it.

A car was not medical transport.

A car was opportunity with seatbelts.

Harriet realised, with a sinking feeling, that Rod knew this perfectly well.

‘And I may need help getting in and out,’ he added.

The trap was no longer being built around her. It had been built, carpeted, furnished and probably described by an estate agent as deceptively spacious.

Sally, still on hold, lifted one finger as though negotiating a hostage release. ‘One driver. One in the back with him.’

‘And perhaps someone to support the leg,’ Rod said.

‘Your leg can support itself.’

‘It may swell.’

‘It has barely joined in.’

Marge gave a grave little nod. ‘He has had a shock.’

Harriet turned to her. ‘Why are you helping?’

‘I am not helping. I am advocating.’

‘You are escalating.’

Alex rose then, and the corridor became aware of him again in a way Harriet deeply resented. He was calm, but there was a firmness beneath it now, the kind that reminded her he did actually have authority here, however temporary.

‘One person can take him,’ he said. ‘Two at most.’

For the first time since Rod had arranged himself on the carpet, his performance slipped.

It was only a flicker. A small collapse around the mouth, a brief panic in the eyes before he remembered to be brave and peculiar. But Harriet saw it, and worse, she understood it. He did not want to be sent off neatly, sensibly, alone. He did not want the plan reduced to a lift and a leaflet. He wanted Mrs Fitz. He wanted the mission. He wanted, in the most ridiculous and badly acted way possible, to matter.

And that was the problem with Hawthorn House.

It made ridiculous things serious. Harriet heard herself speak before she had properly decided to.

‘I’ll drive.’

Sally gave a small nod, as if this had been obvious to everyone except Harriet.

Rod’s shoulders loosened so visibly it hurt.

Alex stood very still, and Harriet had the dreadful sense that he was not fooled by any of them. Not completely. Perhaps not even slightly. But if he saw the conspiracy, he did not name it, which was either generous or suspicious, and Harriet had no room left in her head to decide which.

‘You’re sure?’ he asked.

No. Obviously.

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll go in the back,’ Sally said before anyone could make the mistake of suggesting otherwise. ‘I can help him in and out. Monitor the peculiarity.’

Rod nodded. ‘Very important.’

‘Do not make me regret defending you.’

‘I’m injured.’

‘You’re ambitious.’

Marge opened her mouth, but Sally pointed at her without looking. ‘You stay here.’

Marge drew herself up at once. ‘Why?’

‘Because someone needs to keep things steady.’

‘I am excellent in a crisis.’

Harriet thought about several possible responses and, for once, chose peace.

‘Exactly,’ Sally said. ‘So stay.’

Marge accepted this with a gracious incline of her head, as though she had been offered a minor title by a grateful monarchy.

Alex exhaled quietly. It might have been irritation. It might have been amusement. It might have been the sound of a man realising that Hawthorn House did not respond to management so much as absorb it.

‘Wait here,’ he said. ‘I’ll get the information you’ll need.’

The folder could wait.

Everything could wait except the sudden, absurd reality that they had done it. They had manufactured a reason: a terrible reason, a limping reason, a reason with one shoe, a peculiar head and a dangerous attachment to being useful.

They were going to St Barnabas’.

Rod looked up at her from the chair, his face arranged into brave endurance again.

‘Thank you,’ he said softly.

And there it was, worse than all the farce.

Harriet swallowed. ‘Don’t thank me yet. I might still leave you in the car park.’

Rod gave a faint smile. ‘Near the entrance, I hope.’

‘Depends how peculiar you get.’

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# CHAPTER 25

Souvenirs

It wasn’t every day you saw two middle-aged women of varying fitness abilities carrying a man somewhere in his mid-seventies across a shingled car park like a starfish.

Today, however, was that day.

Sally was doing most of the lifting, thank goodness. She looked as though she had been training for it all her life, shoulders squared, jaw set, one hand clamped under Rod’s arm with the grim practicality born of years moving furniture, residents and entire Christmas buffets with less fuss than this.

Rod, meanwhile, was enjoying himself so much he couldn’t keep the smile off his face.

‘Rod, stop smiling,’ Harriet whispered through gritted teeth.

He did not.

As they got closer to the car, Harriet felt a sharp, gnawing pain bloom in her upper thigh. She ignored it and concentrated on her footing. The Cotswold stones were slippery at the best of times, and today, naturally, she had worn shoes with all the grip of a buttered plate. This was not the time for ill-chosen footwear. She had an old lady to rescue, or bury, or at least find, or whatever the hell was happening now.

‘You all right there, Rod?’ Sally asked. ‘Not much further.’

Harriet said nothing.

Rod was absolutely fine. Harriet, on the other hand, was beginning to see small white lights at the edge of her vision and had just felt her left foot slide half an inch out from under her.

‘Yoo-hoo, ladies!’

Marge’s voice rang across the car park behind them.

All three of them chose to ignore her, right up until she somehow appeared in front of them, waving a clear plastic folder.

‘Rod’s medication list,’ she announced.

For once, she wasn’t wearing her rubber gloves, and Harriet noticed the long, polished, hot-pink fingernails she was most definitely not supposed to have and that Harriet had never, despite several optimistic attempts with gel kits from Amazon, managed to achieve.

‘It took a while to print,’ Marge said. ‘Mr Kilner sorted it for you, Rod. Isn’t that nice of him?’

Rod’s expression softened.

‘He’s a very impressive man.’

Oh, please. The only impressive thing about that man was that he managed to get dressed in the morning without a fanfare.

‘Get the door, will you, Marge?’ Harriet said.

Or possibly seethed.

Marge, sensing Harriet’s oddly placed impatience and choosing, for once, to be useful about it, jumped into action. She seized the passenger door handle and pulled.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, this time with both hands, her nails pressing little half-moons into her palm.

‘I think it’s locked, dear.’

Harriet felt her legs become urgently heavy.

‘Of course it’s not bloody locked. I just unlocked the bastard thing. I’m not an idiot.’

There was a click—not from Marge, but somewhere behind Harriet.

Then a hand appeared, followed by an arm, and the driver’s-side door opened in one effortless sweep.

Of course it sodding did.

With equal parts embarrassment, fatigue and a small private desire to walk directly into the ornamental hedge, Harriet lowered Rod onto the back seats with rather less care than the situation required.

‘Ouch. My leg. I mean my head.’ Rod clutched his flat cap to his chest. ‘I’m an injured man, you know.’

Harriet shot him a look, and Rod became miraculously quiet. She turned to find Alex Kilner standing beside her car, holding out her keys.

‘These fell out of your bag as you were walking out,’ he said.

There they were, lying in his palm: one front door key, one car key, and a tiny blue carved wooden penis with an evil eye printed on it that she had bought on holiday in Corfu during a phase where she believed travel souvenirs should be both spiritual and funny.

Harriet took them quickly and buried them at the bottom of her handbag, along with what remained of her dignity.

‘It locks itself again if you don’t open the door within thirty seconds,’ she said.

Alex glanced at the car. Harriet glanced at the car.

The faded red 2011 Renault Clio sat half-dead on the shingle beside Alex’s immaculate dark-grey Volvo. The Clio was missing part of a wing mirror, had a suspicious rust patch above the wheel arch, and now contained one elderly man lying diagonally across the back seat with one loafer off and a tool belt pressed into the upholstery.

‘It’s very advanced,’ Harriet said.

Alex’s mouth twitched.

‘The differences are largely cosmetic,’ she added.

They had got halfway to the second roundabout before Harriet noticed that Marge was sitting beside her in the passenger seat.

Shit.

It was too late to turn around now. They had come too far, and Harriet needed at least three more miles between herself and the face Alex Kilner had made — or tried very politely not to make — when he handed her the tiny penis keyring.

‘Marge,’ Harriet said, keeping both hands tight on the wheel. ‘What are you doing? He said only two of us could take Rod. We are going to get into so much trouble.’

‘Only two of you are taking Rod, dear,’ Marge said.

She smiled gently as she said it. Marge had a resting smile rather than a resting bitch face, which Harriet had always found far more unsettling. At least with a resting bitch face you knew where you stood.

Harriet flicked a glance at the passenger seat, where Marge sat perfectly upright with the clear plastic folder on her lap, her handbag at her feet, and one hot-pink fingernail resting on the top sheet as though guarding state secrets. Harriet was certain of three things. One: there were four people in the car, including Rod. Two: the pain in her thigh was starting to feel less like a pulled muscle and more like divine punishment. Three: Marge was

about to explain something that would make no sense and yet somehow be impossible to argue with.

‘I’m not taking Rod,’ Marge said, smoothing the corner of the folder. ‘I’m taking the paperwork.’

Harriet stared at the road.

‘That is not a separate category of human being.’

‘It is when the paperwork is important.’ Marge replied gently tapping on it.

‘The paperwork does not need a seatbelt.’

‘Neither does Rod’s left loafer, but here we all are.’

From the back seat, Rod lifted his head slightly. ‘Is my loafer safe?’

‘Safer than any of us,’ Sally said, shifting Rod’s head out of her lap with considerably less tenderness than Alex had shown in the corridor. ‘Will you sit up, you great lummox? You’re not even injured. And what was all that in there? That was the worst acting I’ve seen since Speed 2.’

Rod made a wounded noise but did, eventually, rearrange himself into something more vertical.

‘I got us all in the car, didn’t I?’ he said, brushing at his cardigan with what little dignity he could recover. ‘You should be thanking me instead of whatever this is.’

Harriet, who was trying to indicate left while also remembering whether St Barnabas’ was before or after the road with the farm shop, stared hard through the windscreen.

‘You do realise,’ she said slowly, ‘that we could have all gone after work, don’t you?’

There was a silence in the back seat.

‘We don’t live at Hawthorn House,’ Harriet continued. ‘We don’t need an excuse to go to a hospital.’

For the first time in what felt like an age, Rod was absolutely quiet. Sally turned her head just enough to look at him, but Rod had chosen that moment to become passionately interested in a hedge.

‘You absolute walnut.’

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# CHAPTER 26

Bagels

St Barnabas' Hospital looked like the kind of place that used to perform medical experiments on people before someone added automatic doors and a Costa. Harriet was almost certain she had seen it on an episode of Most Haunted.

Inside, the foyer smelled of disinfectant, weak coffee and the specific kind of panic that came from not knowing which reception desk you were supposed to stand at. There were three signs pointing towards Outpatients, none of them agreeing with each other, a vending machine full of crisps Harriet suddenly wanted with the force of a religious calling, and a very old volunteer in a purple tabard who looked as if she hadn't left the place since nineteen eighty-nine.

Sally walked forwards and studied the welcome board like it might announce Mrs Fitz on Gate 14. Her arms were folded firmly across her chest, which Harriet had learned was Sally's most serious thinking pose. You didn't interrupt Sally during her most serious thinking pose, not unless you wanted to be given what for in a public foyer.

Harriet tried to get her bearings. After all, she was here only yesterday delivering the bag, or was it the day before? So much incredibly odd stuff had happened in such a short period of time she couldn't even work out what day it was. She remembered the shop on the right selling everything you didn't need at a price that no one wanted to pay. They really did have you over a barrel in these places. Granny needs a washcloth? That'll be six pounds eighty, please. Not had anything to eat for three days? Here's a ham and cheese sandwich for half a week's rent.

The place had changed less than Harriet would have liked. The same waxy floors. The same strange over-warm air. The same feeling, faint but

immediate, that something important had once happened here and had never properly left.

Before she had the chance to think about her mother, a thud was heard to her left. Rod was kneeling, arm halfway into the slot of the vending machine, trying to retrieve a Twix.

‘Two fell out,’ he said, beaming. ‘I paid for one and two fell out.’

He stood up. The huge metal vending-machine slot closed behind him with the thud of an Olympic gong sending shockwaves of chorus around the lobby. Half the foyer turned to look at Rod, who was now holding both Twixes above his head in celebration.

It was, Harriet thought, difficult to maintain a covert hospital investigation when one of your team had just won confectionery.

‘Give us one then,’ Sally demanded, holding out her hand. ‘I’ve not eaten since breakfast.’

It was currently 10.28 a.m. Rod’s face turned from joy to panic as he clutched the chocolate to his chest.

‘I can’t. I’m saving this one for Ron.’

‘Who the bloody hell is Ron?’ Sally asked, rather loudly.

‘Ron,’ Rod repeated.

The receptionist looked up. ‘Oh, I know this one. My dad uses it.’

Sally frowned. ‘What one?’

‘Later-Ron.’

Sally stared at her, then let out a long, disgusted groan. ‘Oh, that is appalling.’

The receptionist laughed. Sally joined in despite herself.

Rod looked between them, his brow furrowed.

‘Don’t stand there pretending you didn’t know it was terrible,’ Sally said.

Rod opened his mouth, seemed to think better of it and tightened his grip on the Twix.

‘Well, you’re still not having it.’

After careful consideration and most definitely late to the party Marge, with her infinite wisdom and impeccable timing, said, ‘Sorry, so who’s Ron?’

With all but a small fraction of her patience depleted, Harriet decided that if there was any hope of anyone finding out anything at all about Mrs Fitz, she would have to do it herself.

She made her way to the reception desk. The gatekeeper. The challenge had begun. Thankfully, she had spent most of the car journey trying to drown out Sally's mouth-breathing by rehearsing the exact thing she would say, and now her moment had arrived.

'Hello,' she said brightly. 'I wonder if you can help me.'

Good start.

'I came here yesterday to drop a bag off for a resident of the care home I work in.'

'Name?' the woman interrupted.

'Harriet. Harriet Hoxley.'

'How are you spelling Hoxley?'

'Oh no, sorry.' Harriet gave a small laugh of embarrassment. 'I thought you meant my name. The lady's name is Bernice Fitzgerald. I'm down as her emergency contact.'

The receptionist looked back at her screen.

'What ward are you visiting?'

'You see, that's the thing. I can't quite remember. I think it was upstairs? I remember getting in a lift. I think it had a name. Samson Ward, or something?'

'That's the maternity ward,' the receptionist said flatly. 'Is the lady having a baby?'

'Um. No.'

Behind Harriet, Rod made a small noise that might have been a cough or might have been him trying not to laugh through a Twix.

Harriet pressed on.

'She's elderly.'

The receptionist blinked.

'Very elderly,' Harriet added, as if this clarified the matter.

'Date of birth?'

Ah. And there it was again. Bloody date of birth. Stupid Alex in the stupid office with the stupid files.

She knew Mrs Fitz took her tea weak but complained if it looked weak. She knew she called all daytime television 'absolute filth' but watched it with enormous commitment. She knew she kept emergency Werther's Originals in three separate places and had once accused the vicar of having damp hands.

She did not know her date of birth.

‘Roughly?’ Harriet tried.

The receptionist’s expression did not change.

‘It needs to be exact.’

‘Right. Of course. Because otherwise you might accidentally hand over the wrong elderly woman.’

The receptionist looked at her.

Harriet gave a toothless, cordial smile. It was, she felt, not the time for charm, but unfortunately charm was all she had brought.

The receptionist was still looking at Harriet, who was still smiling. Neither of them seemed particularly pleased with the arrangement.

Behind her, the queue had begun to grow significantly and not with patience. Harriet could feel it without turning round. There was a particular kind of silence that formed behind you when people wanted you to move on. A silence made of sighs, shifting feet and one woman tutting so sharply it seemed to have its own postcode.

‘I am her emergency contact,’ Harriet tried again. ‘So I should be on the system.’

‘If you don’t know the date of birth or ward, I can’t access the record.’

‘You can’t search by name?’

‘I can search by name.’

‘Brilliant.’

‘But I can’t confirm anything without the correct details.’

Harriet wondered whether this was a sentence or a trap. Before she could decide, the automatic doors opened behind them and a man rushed into the foyer clutching one hand inside a tea towel. The tea towel had once been white. It was no longer making much of an effort.

‘Excuse me,’ he called, already halfway across the floor. ‘I’ve cut myself. I need a doctor, urgently.’

The receptionist’s entire face changed into one of slight horror. This was far too close to the five-pound toasted teacakes for comfort.

‘This isn’t Accident and Emergency,’ she said, standing abruptly. ‘You need the main entrance. This is the ward side.’ She said, waving him back furiously.

‘It’s bleeding through the towel.’

‘Yes, I can see that.’

People in the queue drew back from the tea towel, muttering.

The man held up his hand.

Harriet looked away immediately. Rod stopped chewing on his Twix.

‘Oooh, that’s a dripper,’ Sally said, far too thirstily, worryingly so.

Marge took a small, elegant shift sideways, as if she had suddenly remembered an appointment elsewhere.

‘You know,’ she said, lightly, ‘I think it may have been this way.’

Harriet turned to her.

‘What?’

‘The ward. I’m just trying to remember.’ Marge lifted one hand vaguely towards the corridor beyond the foyer. ‘There was a lift, wasn’t there?’

There had been a lift.

Harriet remembered it now. Or thought she did. The brushed metal doors. The smell of old toast. The ancient passive aggressive notice warning visitors not to use the lift in the event of fire, as though Harriet had ever needed encouragement to take stairs during an emergency. She had done so well years ago to blot this place out.

‘Yes,’ she said slowly. ‘There was a lift.’

‘Then perhaps,’ Marge said, already walking, ‘we should see if it jogs your memory.’

The receptionist was still waving the bleeding man towards the main entrance.

Harriet hesitated, took a breath, then stepped towards the lifts.

Sally followed at once, because Sally had never needed much encouragement to ignore a rule she considered badly phrased. Rod tucked one and a half Twixes into his second cardigan pocket and shuffled after her like a soldier carrying supplies into battle.

Harriet looked once more at the reception desk, where the bleeding man was now explaining something involving a bread knife, a frozen bagel and poor judgement.

Then she followed.

Because apparently this was what her life had become. She had promised herself she would never come back here. Not to this foyer. Not to these floors. Not to the place where the world had once split cleanly into before and after.

And yet here she was again, only this time, not alone. This time she was technically at work, or committing a crime with a woman who looked as though she had been hired as security for a Backstreet Boys video, a man

who could pop his clogs at any moment, and, well, she still didn’t quite know why Marge was there.

And somehow, despite everything, this remained the closest thing they had to a plan.

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# CHAPTER 27

Death By Chocolate

After a walk that felt like half a marathon, the lift arrived with a tired ping.

It was already occupied by a man in a fleece, a woman holding an It's a Boy! balloon which had cost fifteen ninety-nine in the shop downstairs — Harriet had looked — and a teenage boy eating crisps. Cheese and onion, to be exact. She eyed them with longing.

The lift capacity said twelve persons. How on earth it would fit twelve was a mystery. They were almost nose to nose when Rod finally caught up with them, looking greyer and more deflated than he had downstairs. A sweat had begun to form on his brow.

'Are you okay, Rod?' Harriet asked, as he leant on the wall of the lift as it jolted them upwards.

'Yes, I'm okay. Just a bit hot. Two cardigans.' He gestured to the layered wool sagging at his elbows

Harriet looked at his upper cardigan pocket and noticed two separate Twix wrappers balled up, one inside each front pocket, protruding through the loose knit.

'Have you eaten both of those Twixes?' Harriet asked, almost aghast.

Rod looked wounded. 'I was nervous.'

'Oh, Rod, that's four fingers. I thought you were saving one for Ron?'

'I was,' he said, patting his second cardigan pocket. 'But Ron came early.'

Sally sniggered.

'Ha. Told you to share. Someone's going to have a tummy ache later and I ain't got no Pepto-Bismol on me. That'll teach you, you greedy bugger.'

The lift was warm. Hospitals were always too warm. Even the air felt overworked.

Harriet kept a watchful eye on Rod. Quite rudely, Marge reached across the three of them and pressed the button for the third floor.

Harriet turned. Well, as much as she could turn when she was seven persons deep in a lift.

‘I thought I was supposed to be remembering?’

‘You are,’ Marge said, with an oddly wry smile. Her other hand was still firmly clutching that clear folder.

‘But you just pressed the button.’

‘Yes,’ said Marge, calmly. ‘To help.’

The doors slid shut.

The lift stopped at three different floors before it finally landed on Marge’s choice, stopping to let somewhat smelly people on and good-smelling people off. One man attempted to board with an entire trolley of dirty bed linen before everyone inside the lift took a collective stance of not moving.

Incredibly selfish, Harriet knew, but she wasn’t sure her already offended senses could bear it. It would be all right, she reasoned. He would just take the next one. Urine-soaked laundry would have to wait.

They really should have a separate lift for these things, she thought, in Marge’s voice.

Oh bollocks. She was turning into Marge.

Suddenly, without warning, there she was, on the fifth floor. The nurse who had denied her access. This was it. Harriet stepped out and looked around for a sign and found it.

Serenity Ward.

Well, that was kind of a name, wasn’t it? She had been sort of right. Serenity Ward sounded like the kind of place you went into but didn’t come out of.

She was going to march right up to that jumped-up nurse and demand to see Mrs Fitz, and she wasn’t leaving until she knew she was safe. Many things had defeated Harriet Rebecca Hoxley in the past, including various diets, Pilates, and the zip on a pair of linen trousers, but she would be damned if she had climbed through a window, survived a car ride, endured a hospital reception desk and suffered near-fatal embarrassment in front of a possibly sadistic yet irritatingly handsome boss — not now, Harriet — only to let Lisa stop her.

Harriet half-marched to the desk.

‘Hello, I was here the other day. I dropped off a bag for Bernice Fitzgerald?’

Lisa the nurse didn’t say anything.

Harriet expanded.

‘I have come to see her. It is visiting hours, isn’t it? Is she here?’

Harriet craned her head around the ward for no reason whatsoever.

‘I’m afraid that’s not possible.’

Harriet felt something inside her snap, although in quite a polite way.

‘Look, I don’t know what is going on here. I don’t know who is paying you or who is behind it, but I am her next of kin,’ she said. ‘Well, emergency contact. It’s the same sort of emotional postcode. It’s my name she wrote on that form and I will not stop. I need to see her and I need to see her now.’

‘Hiya,’ Lisa replied, incredibly pleasantly. ‘I’m sorry, but she’s no longer with us.’

Silence. The ward seemed to drop away beneath Harriet’s feet.

She became supremely aware of the buzz of the lights. A tiny chip on the arm of a chair that had been sat in by far too many people. A trolley rattling somewhere behind the nurses’ station. Someone’s television was still playing too loudly from a side room. But all of it sounded suddenly far away, as if Harriet had been pushed underwater.

No longer with us. The words opened something cold inside her. Not again.

Beside her, Sally went very still. Not silent in the ordinary way, but in the way people went silent when they were preparing to catch something before it fell. Even Marge, who had spent the entire morning behaving as though she had rehearsed it in advance, took a sharp breath.

Harriet looked at Lisa. Then at the ward. Then at the empty corridor beyond. Rod made a sound beside her, and the spell broke.

‘Oh God!’ Rod let out a cry of pain and clutched his chest.

‘Oh no! I didn’t mean that,’ Lisa added. ‘I mean she’s been moved.’ She gave an oddly placed giggle, which seemed very unfitting for the alarm she had just caused.

Rod, however, wasn’t relieved. He slowly began to crumble to the floor, making a gurgling sound that did not sound human.

Harriet’s legs moved into action before her brain had decided to.

‘Rod.’

Her voice came out sharper than she expected. Not panicked. Not silly. The voice she used when a resident went wobbly in the dining room or decided to stand on a chair to adjust a curtain.

‘Rod, look at me.’

She caught his arm before he hit the floor fully, easing him down rather than letting him fold. His cardigan was damp beneath her hand.

‘Sally, chair.’ Harriet gestured. ‘Marge, I need help.’

The words came out automatically. Clear. Practical. Almost borrowed from someone else.

Rod blinked at her gasping for breath, his face the colour of cold porridge.

‘Chest pain?’ Harriet asked. ‘Rod, are you having chest pain?’

He made another gurgling noise.

‘That’s not an answer.’

Sally was already dragging a chair across the floor.

‘Don’t sit him in it if he’s going,’ she said.

‘I know that,’ Harriet snapped, because she did know that, and because fear always made her sound rude.

Lisa’s pleasant expression had vanished.

‘I’ll get someone.’

‘Yes, good,’ Harriet said, one hand steady on Rod’s shoulder. ‘And maybe don’t say anyone else is no longer with us until we’ve all had a sit down.’

Lisa stepped away from the ruckus, calling down the corridor for help.

Harriet stayed crouched beside Rod, watching his face, counting his breaths without meaning to. Too quick. Too shallow. His eyes were open, which was something. His hand was still clutching the front of his cardigan, which was less encouraging.

‘Rod, keep looking at me.’

‘I feel a bit foolish,’ he whispered, his eyes slightly glazed with tears.

‘Excellent. Foolish is better than dead,’ Harriet replied, a hand gently stroking his silver hair that had found itself sticking up. ‘You’ll be okay. Everything is okay.’

Rod’s shoulders relaxed as comfort washed over him, allowing a hint of colour to return to his cheeks. Behind her, Marge’s voice cut through the movement of the ward, calm and precise.

‘You said Mrs Fitzgerald had been moved.’

Harriet didn’t turn, but every part of her listened, still stroking Rod’s hair.

Lisa hesitated. ‘Yes.’

‘Moved where?’

‘I can’t really—’

‘She is listed as emergency contact,’ Marge said, pointing emphatically at the crumpled pile of people at the side of the ward. ‘And this gentleman appears to have collapsed from the shock of your phrasing, so perhaps clarity would be helpful.’

Harriet pressed two fingers lightly to Rod’s wrist.

‘Breathe slowly,’ she told him. ‘In through your nose if you can.’

Lisa shifted from foot to foot.

‘She was transferred this morning.’

Harriet looked up then.

‘Transferred?’

‘Yes, Her family requested it.’

The word landed strangely in the air. Family. Marge went very still.

‘What family?’ she asked.

Lisa glanced towards the corridor, where another nurse was approaching at speed.

‘Erm, Her son, I think.’

Harriet frowned. Mrs Fitz did not have a son. At least, she’d never mentioned one. And the woman mentioned everything. Weak tea, damp hands, but no son.

‘What son?’ Harriet asked.

‘Ummm.’ Lisa searched her panicked brain, shocked at the authority of this woman in a seashell necklace.

‘Name, dear!’ Marge snapped.

Lisa swallowed.

‘I think his name was Adam, or something like that?’

Adam! Alex more like. Easy enough to mishear in a busy hospital, especially when the nurse had already admitted she wasn’t sure.

The three of them, including Rod, who had begun to breathe somewhat normally, looked at each other.

Alex Kilner, Harriet thought. You devious bastard.

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# CHAPTER 28

Bloody Volvos

Harriet woke with a mouth that tasted as though something small had died in it and hair that had clearly spent the night trying to leave her body.

She had no idea where she was. She fumbled around for her phone on the bedside table where it always sat overnight, but it wasn't there and the soft pine she was expecting beneath her fingers had been replaced by hard varnish.

She sat up and was met by the sight of a rather muted watercolour of a fox in a waistcoat above the dressing table. Slowly her eyes followed the unfamiliar yet familiar space and found the folded towel at the end of the bed and the emergency pull cord dangling beside the wardrobe like a threat, then the smell of disinfectant and Earl Grey.

Then she remembered, she was at Hawthorn, in the suite usually reserved for relatives who said they were 'only staying one night' and then started asking about drawer space.

The room had held it's beauty in the same way of a magnificent stage actress. Her looks may have faded with age, but still commanded tremendous majesty in the angle of her neck. The wallpaper was tired, the carpet had given up in several places, and the curtains looked as though they had once been expensive enough to make someone whisper. But the room still had presence. Deep skirting boards. A brass window catch. A delicate curve to the chair legs. Little spindles on the dressing table stool that no one would bother with now because everything had to be wipe-clean, stackable or described as multi-use.

Harriet sat very still, listening to the house wake up around her. Pipes clanked somewhere behind the wall. A trolley squeaked below. Someone coughed with theatrical commitment.

It was strange, really. She had slept badly, and yet there was something oddly comforting about being inside Hawthorn before the day had fully begun, as a guest almost. As though the house had taken her in overnight without asking too many questions.

Which was absurd. Houses did not take people in. People took houses. Bought them. Sold them. Signed them away. Left them behind.

Then it all came back. St Barnabas'. Lisa. Smelly lift people. No longer with us. Rod collapsing. Adam.

Then the rage returned. Alex Kilner.

She knew it. She knew he had something to do with it, coming in here rescuing old men, with good taste in suits and weird fingers.

She stood up too quickly, which was a mistake. Her head gave a dull thud of protest, her back cracked in three separate places, and the borrowed nightdress Sally had found for her — floral, nylon, and deeply hostile — had twisted itself round her middle like a tourniquet.

Harriet breathed into her palm and immediately regretted it. Excellent. So she had slept badly, possibly uncovered a kidnapping conspiracy, and now had the oral freshness of a compost bin.

Just to make matters worse, a knock came at the door.

'Harry?' Marge called. 'You decent, my love?'

'No, She really wasn't.

'Good. Alex Kilner's downstairs.'

Harriet inhaled sharply. Of course he was downstairs. Of course Alex Kilner had chosen the one morning she looked like she had been dragged backwards through a hedge and stored overnight in a cupboard.

'He says he wants to drive you to get your car.'

The bloody car.

Harriet wasn't the only one who had spent the night away from home.

After Rod had been looked over by four separate doctors, a cardiologist and had approximately six blood tests, it was determined that he was not, in fact, having a heart attack, but had suffered something called postprandial hyperglycaemia and moderate heat exhaustion, a 'blood sugar wobble' which had most likely been caused by two cardigans and four fingers of Twix, or, as Sally called it, 'being a greedy bastard.'

Rod, in true Rod fashion, had decided to milk the attention for all it was worth, and, for some reason, had become extremely attached to the idea of medical transport.

Upon discharge, he had refused to leave unless he was taken back to Hawthorn ‘properly’. Properly, in Rod’s mind, apparently meant by ambulance. Not a taxi. Not Sally’s friend’s daughter’s boyfriend who ‘did lifts sometimes.’ Not a perfectly sensible drive back in Harriet’s car.

An ambulance. Preferably, he had added weakly, with the blue lights on because he still felt ‘peculiar.’

By that point, Harriet had been too tired to argue with a man who had recently collapsed, twice, one for show and one for real, and still had caramel on his cardigan. So when patient transport had eventually been arranged — not an ambulance, not blue lights, and not, despite Rod’s disappointment, anything remotely dramatic — he had insisted Harriet ride with him for moral support.

This had created what Sally called ‘a right bloody palaver’ in the car park.

Sally did not drive. Marge could drive, in theory, but spent twenty minutes adjusting Harriet’s seat forwards, backwards, up, down and somehow emotionally, before announcing that no woman should be expected to operate a vehicle while sitting at that angle.

So Harriet’s car had remained at St Barnabas’.

And Harriet, because apparently she now lived inside other people’s nonsense, had returned to Hawthorn in what was best described as a minibus, beside Rod, who had held her hand for three miles and then asked if anyone had saved him any pudding.

‘I’ll be down in a minute,’ Harriet shouted back.

Marge did not wait for a reply. Harriet heard her footsteps move away down the corridor, calm and unhurried, which somehow made the whole thing worse.

Five minutes.

Harriet looked down at herself and discovered that the nightdress was even more aggressive in daylight, also itchy. She got out of bed and found her clothes folded on the chair by the window, although folded felt generous. They were yesterday’s clothes. Hospital clothes. Clothes that had been in a lift with smelly people, beside a bleeding man, and next to Rod while he had attempted to die from sugar and overconfidence. She put them on anyway because there was no time for vanity, and barely time for toothpaste, though she did find a travel-sized tube in the little wicker basket

on the dressing table and squeezed far too much onto her finger before rubbing it over her teeth. It helped slightly.

Not enough.

She ran her hands through her hair and immediately wished she hadn't, because there were some situations that couldn't be improved by interference, and apparently her head was one of them.

Fine.

Let him see her like this. Let Alex Kilner see what his suspicious little corporate empire had reduced her to. Let him see the consequences of elderly women being moved around hospitals by mysterious family members nobody had heard of. Let him stand there in one of his expensive coats, looking calm and helpful, while Harriet descended the stairs in yesterday's blouse and a mood dark enough to affect local weather.

Mrs Fitz was somewhere else. Moved. Transferred. Taken by 'family'. And Harriet was supposed to believe that had nothing to do with Carelink? With Alex? With his neat files and quiet voice and habit of appearing exactly where he was least wanted?

No. Absolutely not.

She opened the creaky bedroom door and stepped into the vast corridor. The noises got louder, breakfast plates clattering somewhere below, a radio murmuring from the kitchen, someone laughing in the dining room too loudly for the hour. Harriet stopped.

This place. This ridiculous, tired, warm, badly carpeted place.

Mrs Fitz had been here. Rod had come back here. Sally worked herself into the ground here. Marge, for reasons still unclear, had brought her secrets here. And Alex Kilner was downstairs.

By the time she reached the stairs, she had decided on three things. She would get her car. She would find Mrs Fitz. And she wouldn't, under any circumstances, notice whether Alex Kilner looked good today.

She was halfway down when she saw him in the hall. He looked good today. He looked good in the deeply irritating way of men who knew exactly what suited them and had never once had to wrestle themselves into a floral nylon nightdress. He was standing near the front desk in a dark wool coat, one hand in the pocket, the other holding his phone loosely at his side, as though he had been born waiting calmly for inconvenient women in old stately homes.

His suit underneath was dark, but not black. Something softer. Expensive-looking without being loud. His shirt was open at the collar, no tie today, top button undone but casually. His hair was neat, combed but not overdone. His shoes were polished. His jaw looked as if it had never once slept badly in a spare room under a fox in a waistcoat.

Harriet became horribly aware of herself. Yesterday's blouse. Yesterday's trousers, and somewhere beneath it all, the faint psychological residue of emergency starched sleepwear.

Alex looked up. For a moment, his usual professional reserve slipped; then it was back in place.

Irritating smug bastard.

'Ah, good morning,' he said. Chipper.

Harriet reached the bottom step and tried to stand in a way that suggested authority rather than total embarrassment.

'Mr Kilner.' She nodded. Yes. She thought she might have got away with that.

His eyes flicked over her with infuriating restraint. Noticing everything yet having the good manners not to mention it.

'I heard yesterday was eventful,' he said.

Harriet smiled back. However, It did not feel like a smile. It felt like baring her teeth at a particularly well-dressed wolf.

'You could say that.'

'Well I just wanted to say thank you'.

Outside, the morning was doing that annoying autumn thing where everything looked beautiful even though it was cold enough to make your nose run. Low sunlight came through the oak trees at the front of Hawthorn, turning the leaves gold and the gravel pale and glittery in a way that would have been lovely if Harriet hadn't been wearing yesterday's blouse and operating on approximately four hours' sleep.

The grey Volvo was parked at the front of the house, sleek and clean and irritatingly composed, sitting there with the quiet confidence of a car that had never once failed an MOT because of something described as 'structural corrosion'. Harriet's own car was not even present and still somehow managed to look worse by comparison.

Alex unlocked it.

'Get in,' he said. 'You look cold.'

'I don't look cold.'

‘You do.’

‘I look alert.’

‘You look like you might turn blue.’

Harriet opened the passenger door before he could be reasonable at her any further and climbed inside, where she was immediately surrounded by leather, coffee and whatever expensive men used instead of air freshener. There were no old receipts in the footwell, no emergency carrier bag stuffed into the side pocket, no unidentified mint welded to the cup holder. Just clean black mats, soft dashboard lights and a level of order Harriet found personally aggressive.

The seat warmed beneath her almost at once. Oh, for God’s sake. The car was helping him. Alex got in beside her and shut the door, bringing a brief gust of cold air before the cabin sealed itself back into expensive silence. He reached for his seatbelt, his coat pulling across his shoulders as he moved, and Harriet looked very hard out of the windscreen.

This wasn’t a nice autumn drive with a handsome man, she reminded herself. This was surveillance. Possibly kidnap-adjacent surveillance, but surveillance nonetheless.

He started the engine and pulled away from Hawthorn so smoothly the gravel barely had the decency to complain. For a while they drove without speaking, past wet hedges, low fields and trees that had started dropping their leaves as though they too had had enough of the year.

‘I meant what I said,’ Alex said eventually.

Harriet kept her eyes on the road ahead. ‘About me looking cold?’

‘About yesterday.’ His voice was quiet, not corporate exactly, which was unfortunate because corporate would have been easier to dislike. ‘You went above and beyond. For Rod. For Mrs Fitzgerald. We do appreciate it.’

We.

Harriet kept her face still, which was difficult because her face generally liked to involve itself in things.

We, as in Hawthorn? We, as in Carelink? We, as in the sort of people who could make a woman disappear from a hospital and then offer lifts in cars with heated seats?

‘Rod’s easy to care about,’ she said, because that was true and also because it gave away almost nothing.

Alex glanced at her. ‘How is he this morning?’

‘Alive. Disappointed, but alive.’

‘Disappointed?’

‘He wanted an ambulance. There was talk of blue lights, a blanket and pudding.’

‘Was pudding medically advised?’

‘No. Rod-advised.’

Alex laughed quietly. Harriet wished she hadn’t enjoyed hearing it quite so much.

Annoying. Very annoying.

Villains were supposed to sneer or say things like ‘I’m afraid that’s above your pay grade’. They were not supposed to ask after elderly gardeners with genuine concern and have a laugh that made them look almost human.

The phone buzzed.

Harriet did not look at it. Obviously she did not. She was a grown woman with dignity, restraint and several perfectly reasonable concerns about elderly women being moved between hospitals. She was not the sort of person who stared at a man’s phone just because it had buzzed at a suspiciously convenient moment.

She looked.

The screen lit up beside the dashboard, but Alex’s hand moved almost immediately, declining the call before the name had properly settled into focus. He did not fumble or look flustered. He dealt with it calmly, efficiently, as though unwanted interruptions were simply things to be removed.

Oh. Lovely. Not suspicious at all.

‘Important?’ Harriet asked.

‘No.’

‘They seem keen.’

His eyes stayed on the road. ‘Apparently.’ Apparently. Excellent.

That was all he gave her. No explanation. No easy little aside. No just the office, or my mother, or someone trying to sell me cavity wall insulation. Nothing normal people said when their phone rang in a car with a woman who already thought they might be involved in a light kidnapping.

The Volvo continued along the road, warm and quiet and deeply suspicious.

The phone buzzed again a few minutes later. This time Alex looked at the screen, and although nothing dramatic happened, something in his face

seemed to close. It was only the smallest tightening around his mouth, the briefest pause before his thumb found the control on the steering wheel, but Harriet saw it.

There. That was a thing. Definitely a thing.

‘Not now,’ he said.

A voice crackled through the speakers, too low for her to make out.

Alex’s gaze did not leave the road.

‘I said not now.’

Then he ended the call. Well. Wonderful.

The only sound was the soft rush of tyres on damp tarmac and the low hum of the heating. Harriet sat very still, her hands tucked into her coat pockets, her back warming treacherously against the seat.

Right. So that was perfectly normal.

She looked at his hands on the wheel: steady, clean, completely unbothered. This was not just a man with good tailoring and a car that exfoliated your lower spine. This was a man with secrets.

Secrets and lumbar support. A dangerous combination.

And Harriet, who had made many bad choices in her life, decided that for once, keeping quiet might be the safest one available.

For now.

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# CHAPTER 29

Whodunit

By the time they reached St Barnabas', Harriet had decided she hated the Volvo.

It wasn't just because it was clearly superior to her car in every measurable way, nor was it because it was so infuriatingly him. It was the realisation that the heated seat had made her bum cheeks itch — quite dramatically — and she had spent the last five miles trying to subtly scratch while pretending to admire the countryside.

This was entirely justified hatred.

Alex pulled into the hospital car park and slowed beside a row of vehicles gathered beneath a line of dripping oaks. Harriet spotted hers immediately.

There it was.

Her poor little Renault Clio sat three spaces down, parked slightly wonky between the white lines, looking cold, abandoned, and faintly ashamed of itself. A soggy brown leaf was plastered across the windscreen directly in her line of sight, and even from here she could see the empty crisp packet in the passenger footwell that she had meant to throw away approximately six weeks ago.

He parked right next to it. Of course he did. Harriet reached for the door handle before he could say anything else kind, helpful, or suspicious.

'Thank you for the lift,' she said, adopting the brisk politeness of someone leaving a dentist's surgery after being told they needed a root canal.

Alex turned off the engine. The sudden absence of its low, luxurious hum made the warm cabin feel instantly smaller.

'You're welcome.'

Neither of them moved.

Harriet could feel him looking at her, which annoyed her because she'd already decided she was done being looked at by him for the day. Possibly the week. Ideally until Mrs Fitz was safely back in her armchair and everyone stopped behaving as though they were in a mid-budget detective drama.

She clicked the latch and pushed the door open. Cold, crisp morning air rushed in, cutting through the heavy warmth of the car.

'Harriet.'

She stopped with one hand on the open door. 'Yes?'

Alex didn't answer straight away. He looked annoyed now. Not loud-annoyed. Not the sort of annoyed that slammed doors or raised voices. The sort that sat very still and chose its words carefully.

'From now on, I'm going to have to insist that all communication regarding Mrs Fitzgerald comes directly through me,' he said.

Harriet stared at him. How bloody dare he.

'Oh?' she replied, her voice far sharper than she intended. Her breath bloomed white in the morning chill. 'And what do you mean by that?'

Alex shifted in his seat, leaning slightly across the gap towards her. His posture was controlled, but his eyes were hard.

'I had a call from St Barnabas' night staff,' he said quietly. 'And one from Rod's daughter this morning.'

Harriet went completely still. 'Rod's daughter?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because the hospital rang her after he was discharged. And when she asked her father why he was forty miles from home in the middle of the night, Rod informed her that he had been involved in a covert operation, hadn't been fed, and almost died helping you locate a missing resident.'

For fuck's sake, Rod.

Harriet closed her eyes briefly, pinching the bridge of her nose.

'He didn't almost die. He had a blood sugar wobble because he ate four Twix fingers in ten minutes, and, might I add, four fingers that he bought himself and paid for himself, well he actually paid for two and then the first one knocked the other one down and then he picked it up and he said he was going to save it for Ron, but then Ron came early and -

''Look' Alex interrupted impatiently 'what ever happened, his daughter now believes her vulnerable, eighty-year-old father was taken to hospital as

part of an unauthorised attempt to obtain confidential medical file whilst in our care and as a result of that, suffered'

'Mid-seventies.'

'What?' Alex responded.

'Rod is not eighty. He's in his mid-seventies... I think,' she stated. 'And he had fallen over. While I was there, I thought I would try to find out about Mrs Fitz. Nobody else seemed to give a damn that she'd vanished.'

'And I'm telling you that stops now.'

'Why?'

'Because I am telling you to.'

A sudden, hot rush of humiliation flooded up from beneath Harriet's collar. Her stomach dropped, her throat tightened, and for one awful second she thought her eyes might actually sting.

No. Absolutely not. She was not going to cry in a Volvo. 'But I am her emergency contact,' she said.

The words came out too fast, too loud — a desperate key jammed into a lock that wouldn't turn.

Alex looked at her for a long, heavy moment. Then he drew in a slow breath, his expression softening just a fraction into something painfully close to pity.

'You're not her family, Harriet.'

Nothing moved.

Not Harriet. Not Alex. Not even the stupid leaf on her windscreen. The words seemed to hang in the open doorway between them.

'Understood, it won't happen again.'

The cold hit her properly, sharp against her hot face, and she was grateful for it. She walked to her car without looking back, coat pulled tight around her, chin lifted far higher than was necessary in order to choke back tears.

He was right.

She unlocked the Clio with a jab of the key fob so aggressive the button stuck beneath her thumb, climbed into her poor abandoned car and breathed in the familiar smell of cold upholstery and worsening damp. It was only when she was certain that Alex had gone, that his car was completely out of view she started to cry.

'He sounds like a fucking knob,' Lucy said, pouring the dregs out of a bottle of good Merlot.

Harriet sat at Lucy's kitchen table with both hands wrapped around a mug of tea she hadn't drunk, staring at the small crack in the glaze near the handle. The mug had gone lukewarm ages ago, but she kept holding it anyway, as though warmth might somehow come back if she was patient enough.

'He might not be,' she said.

Lucy stopped pouring. 'Sorry? You can't believe that after everything you've just told me.'

'That's the problem.' Harriet swallowed. 'He might actually be right.'

Lucy looked at her.

Harriet hated that look. It was the look Lucy gave her when she was about to be kind in a way that would make everything worse. Proper kindness was dangerous like that. It came too close to the bit you were trying not to look at.

'I did take Rod to the hospital,' Harriet said. 'And Rod did collapse. And I did ask questions. And St Barnabas' did ring his daughter. And now she thinks I dragged her elderly father into some kind of pensioner espionage mission.'

'You did not drag Rod anywhere. From what you've told me, Rod would climb into a wheelie bin if he thought there was a unused stamp in it.'

'That's not the point,' Harriet said, thumbing the crack in the mug.

'It is slightly the point.'

'Alex said I made Hawthorn look bad.'

Lucy's face changed.

'He said that?'

'Not exactly.'

'Harriet.'

Harriet leaned back on the wooden kitchen chair she had helped Lucy collect from a man 'just down the road' on Facebook Marketplace, after Lucy had insisted she come with her because the man had put four kisses after every response and had given her the heeby jeebies.

You couldn't be too careful these days.

He had turned out not to be an obvious pervert, thankfully, although not for lack of trying, but Lucy's 'just down the road' had not been in the same postcode as Harriet's. Not even, it later transpired, in the same county. Two and a half hours later they had driven home with a boot full of deceptively

heavy shabby chic chairs, held in place only by a very stretchy pair of leggings Lucy had used as rope to tie the boot half down.

Lucy had never got round to painting them. They had remained in the kitchen ever since, becoming less shabby chic and more simply shabby with every passing year.

Harriet had always liked that about Lucy's house. Nothing in it was quite finished, but everything in it had a story. A chair from Facebook Marketplace. A coaster from a garden centre. A mug with a crack that Lucy refused to throw away because it was 'still emotionally functional.' It was the sort of kitchen where you could arrive with damp hair, compost breath and the humiliation of a man in a overpriced car still burning behind your eyes, and no one would ask you to be impressive.

'He said it in Alex,' Harriet said eventually. 'You know. Proper sentences. Calm face. Expensive consonants. Like you know who. He who must not be named.'

Lucy put the bottle down on a coaster that featured a small dachshund in stripey wellies and a hat, then lowered her voice into something dangerously supportive.

'What exactly did he say?'

Harriet looked into her tea.

She hadn't meant to say this part. She had meant to keep it tucked away somewhere private, where it couldn't embarrass her any further. But she had never been able to keep a secret from Lucy. Not properly. Lucy had known about Tom before Harriet had admitted Tom was anything. Lucy had known she hated her fortieth birthday before Harriet had even pretended to be fine about it. Lucy knew the difference between Harriet being dramatic and Harriet being hurt.

Which wasn't helpful in the slightest, because Harriet preferred to disguise both things as irritation.

'He said I wasn't her family.'

For a few moments, Lucy said nothing. Rain ticked against the back window and the fridge gave one of its long, elderly groans. Harriet stared into her tea, wishing she could pull the words back out of the room and swallow them.

Eventually Lucy pulled out the chair opposite Harriet and sat down with an angry plonk, grabbing her quarter-full wine glass and swirling the

contents for no reason whatsoever, since she was well past the smelling and tasting stage.

‘Right,’ Lucy said. ‘So now I hate him.’

Harriet let out something that almost became a laugh, but didn’t quite make it.

‘He wasn’t wrong.’

Lucy stopped swirling her wine. The irritation in her face changed direction, moving away from Alex and settling firmly on Harriet instead.

‘Don’t do that.’

Harriet looked up. ‘Do what?’

‘Make yourself smaller so he sounds less cruel.’

Harriet lowered her eyes to the mug again. The crack near the handle was darker where the tea had settled into it, a tiny brown fault line that Lucy insisted was perfectly safe despite Neil once suggesting that drinking from cracked crockery was how people ended up with fragments of ceramic embedded in their intestines.

Neil had since been banned from commenting on mugs.

‘I’m not making myself smaller,’ Harriet said, running her thumbnail along the crack.

Lucy didn’t answer. She merely looked at her in the patient, deeply irritating way of someone prepared to wait until the lie became embarrassed and left of its own accord.

‘All right, perhaps slightly smaller,’ Harriet admitted. ‘But only because I did involve Rod. Alex wasn’t wrong about that. Rod ended up in hospital, his daughter is furious and I’ve made Hawthorn look as though it allows its residents out on unsupervised espionage missions.’

‘He’s a grown man,’ Lucy said, reaching across to move the wine bottle away from the edge of the table.

‘He’s also diabetic, nearly eighty and prepared to feign unconsciousness for the sake of a woman he barely knows.’

A reluctant smile tugged at one corner of Lucy’s mouth. ‘Which is quite romantic, in a medically irresponsible sort of way.’

‘It isn’t romantic. It’s safeguarding.’

Lucy took a sip of wine and considered that.

‘Taking Rod to hospital wasn’t a decision. He’d collapsed. On purpose, apparently, and not particularly convincingly, but going along with his one-

man rendition of Macbeth once you got there may not have been your finest professional moment.'

Harriet gave her a flat look. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.'

'I came here for support.'

Lucy leaned back against her chair and folded her arms. 'You came here because you knew I'd tell you the truth.'

'No, I came here because you have central heating and there's usually food.'

That caused Lucy to glance towards the kitchen. 'There's a sausage roll in the fridge.'

Harriet's attention sharpened immediately. 'Neil's?'

'Technically.'

'How much do you love me?'

Lucy pushed herself out of the chair and crossed to the fridge. 'Enough to deal with Neil later.'

She returned carrying a sausage roll on a small plate and set it in front of Harriet.

'I can warm it up.'

Harriet had already picked it up. 'No time.'

'You currently have nowhere to be.'

'I'm hungry now, Lucy. That is somewhere.'

Pastry scattered over the table as she bit into it. Lucy watched the crumbs land beside Harriet's mug but, in an act of considerable friendship, chose not to mention them.

For a while, Harriet ate and Lucy said nothing. Neil's sausage roll was cold, slightly soft on the bottom and far better than anything Harriet had done to deserve it. The silence between them wasn't awkward exactly, although Harriet could feel something waiting inside it.

Lucy returned to her chair and tucked one leg beneath herself.

'I do think you're perceptive Harry,' she said eventually.

Harriet paused with the sausage roll halfway to her mouth. 'That sounds ominous.'

'It isn't.'

'You've used your professional voice.'

Lucy's eyebrows lifted. 'I don't have a professional voice.'

‘You absolutely do. It’s slower than your normal one and makes everything sound as though it might be followed by a leaflet.’

Ignoring that, Lucy reached for her wine but only moved the glass in a small circle against the coaster.

‘You notice things other people don’t. You noticed the mole on my shoulder had changed shape before I did.’

‘It had developed a corner,’ Harriet said, as though this settled the matter.

‘Exactly.’

‘Moles shouldn’t have corners.’

‘I know that now, thanks to you showing me forty-three photographs of melanomas while we were eating Chinese food.’

‘You went to the doctor.’

‘I did.’

‘And?’

Lucy gave her the same answer she had given at least six times before. ‘And it was completely harmless.’

‘That isn’t the point. It could have been dangerous.’

‘I know. You were right to notice it.’ Lucy brushed a few crumbs into a small pile with the side of her hand. ‘You also knew I’d cut my own fringe even though I repeatedly blamed the hairdresser.’

Harriet inspected Lucy’s fringe now, purely out of habit. It had recovered well, although there remained a slight discrepancy above the left eyebrow that would probably only be corrected by time or a hat.

‘It was obvious.’

‘It was half a centimetre.’

‘It was sloping.’

‘No one else noticed.’

‘Neil did.’

‘Only after you told him.’

‘He lives with you. He should have noticed independently.’

Lucy looked towards the ceiling, in the general direction of Neil. ‘Neil thinks I’ve been wearing the same shade of brown hair since 2009.’

‘That’s because men only recognise four hair colours and one of them is red.’

A brief smile passed between them, but Lucy’s expression softened again almost immediately.

‘My point is that you see things, Harriet. Tiny things. Changes in people, changes in rooms. You know when someone is pretending to be all right. You always have.’

Harriet lowered what remained of the sausage roll to the plate.

‘But?’

Lucy hesitated, and that hesitation told Harriet there had always been a but. It had probably arrived at the kitchen table before she had.

‘But noticing something and knowing what it means aren’t necessarily the same thing.’

There it was. The leaflet.

Harriet pushed the plate away slightly. ‘I knew you were going somewhere horrible with this.’

‘I’m not trying to be horrible.’

‘You think I’ve imagined everything.’

Lucy shook her head and leaned forward, resting her arms on the table.

‘No. Mrs Fitz disappearing is strange. The folder is strange. Alex refusing to answer you properly is frustrating, and telling you that you weren’t her family was unnecessarily cruel.’

‘But?’ Harriet prompted again.

This time Lucy took a little longer before answering.

‘I think you’ve taken everything that feels wrong and attached it to Alex Kilner.’

‘Because he’s the one behaving suspiciously.’

‘Perhaps.’ Lucy studied Harriet’s face. ‘Or because he’s controlled and successful and very good at speaking calmly while you become increasingly emotional, until you somehow end up looking like the unreasonable one.’

Harriet went still. Lucy’s voice softened further. ‘Does that remind you of anyone?’

From somewhere upstairs came the muffled thump of something being put down. Neil wasn’t listening. Neil was simply performing an unusually stationary activity directly above the kitchen.

‘Alex isn’t Tom,’ Harriet said.

‘I know.’

‘So why bring him into it?’

Lucy’s fingers tightened around the stem of her wine glass. ‘Because I’m not sure you know.’

Ouch, those words hurt. Not because they were cruel, but because she didn't want to conceive that there might be some truth to them.

She looked away from Lucy and towards the darkened kitchen window, where her own reflection stared back at her with a cold sausage roll in one hand as though she'd just been informed that her personality had become involved in the investigation.

'They're nothing alike.'

'Aren't they?'

'No. Tom was—'

Harriet stopped.

Tom had been calm. Not always, but whenever they argued. The more upset Harriet became, the calmer he became in return, until she was crying and repeating herself like a banshee on some occasions while he stood on the other side of the kitchen island speaking to her in the reasonable voice of a man explaining dry rot.

He'd also withheld things. Not lied exactly, that would almost have been easier. He had simply allowed Harriet to continue living inside one version of their life while he quietly prepared another.

By the time she discovered that he was leaving, Tom had already done most of the leaving privately.

Alex had made her feel like that in the car. Chaotic. Embarrassing. A woman who had mistaken being wanted for having a right to remain.

Lucy waited until Harriet looked at her again before continuing.

'Tom made decisions about your life without telling you. You didn't realise until he had already gone. I just think… maybe because you didn't realise what Tom was doing until it was already done, you're determined not to miss it this time. Even if Alex isn't doing the same thing.'

'I didn't say I was stupid.'

'No. You didn't.'

'You thought it very loudly.'

A small crease appeared between Lucy's eyebrows. 'I thought you were hurt.'

'Much better.'

'You were.'

Harriet looked down at the last piece of Neil's sausage roll. She picked it up and ate it, although it had lost some of its appeal now that it was being accompanied by personal growth.

‘So you think Adam exists,’ she said once she had swallowed.

Lucy sat back, although she kept her attention fixed on Harriet. ‘I don’t know, maybe, probably…’

‘And Mrs Fitz might genuinely have been transferred by her family.’

‘It’s not unusal. Pretty standard stuff’

Harriet brushed a flake of pastry from her jumper. ‘And Alex might have removed the folder because it contained confidential company information.’

‘Sounds about right.’

‘And I might have turned a ormal risk assessment into an elaborate revenge fantasy about my ex-fiance.’

Lucy winced. ‘I wouldn’t have phrased it quite like that.’

‘You were about to.’

‘I was looking for a gentler noun than fantasy. But yes, now that you mention it you nutter.’

Harriet wrapped both hands around the mug again, forgetting until her fingers met the cold china that the tea had become undrinkable some time ago.

The relief should have felt better than it did. If Lucy was right, Mrs Fitz was safe. Adam existed. Alex was merely an officious arsehole with stupid cars and a stupid nice face, and Harriet had embarrassed herself in front of him because he happened to press on a bruise left by someone else.

That was preferable to Mrs Fitz being in danger. It was also deeply humiliating.

‘I think I need to stop,’ she said with a sigh.

Lucy didn’t immediately celebrate the victory, which Harriet appreciated. She merely tilted her head slightly.

‘Stop what?’

‘All of it. The folder. Alex Kilner. Trying to find out where Mrs Fitz is.’ Harriet moved the mug aside and began collecting the larger flakes of pastry with the tip of one finger. ‘I’ll speak to Sally properly tomorrow and let the people who are actually authorised deal with it.’

A flicker of relief crossed Lucy’s face before she managed to hide it. ‘I think that would be sensible.’

‘God, don’t say sensible. It makes me want to do the opposite.’

Lucy reached over and took the empty plate. ‘In that case, it would be wildly reckless of you to go home, eat something of nutritional value and get some sleep.’

‘I have eaten something.’

‘You stole half of Neil’s sausage roll. It's ninety per cent pig bollocks and lard’

‘You gave it to me.’

‘I’ll make sure that distinction is reflected in the statement.’

Harriet was about to reply when her phone began vibrating against the table. The words Hawthorn House lit up the screen.

Both women looked at it.

Lucy placed the plate down very slowly. ‘Don’t.’

‘It might be Sally.’ Harriet said, looking up at Lucy with begging eyes.

‘It might be someone asking whether you can cover a shift.’ She threw back.

‘That would be worse.’

Without much hesitation, Harriet picked up the phone and answered.

‘Hello?’

‘Harriet?’ Rod whispered.

At the sound of his voice, Harriet straightened in her chair. ‘Rod?’

Lucy closed her eyes.

Harriet pressed the phone closer to her ear. ‘Why are you whispering?’

‘I’m in the office.’

‘What are you doing in the office?’

‘Telephoning you.’

‘I understand the immediate mechanics, Rod. Why are you in there? Are you okay?’

His whisper became quieter still. ‘Because he’s here.’

Harriet’s fingers tightened around the phone. Opposite her, Lucy stopped moving.

‘Who is?’

‘Kilner.’

Without deciding to, Harriet rose from the chair. ‘Where is he?’

‘He’s gone into Mrs Fitz’s room.’

Her sudden movement sent the chair legs scraping across the kitchen floor.

‘Are you sure?’

The pause on the other end lasted just long enough to be concerning.

‘Fairly.’

‘Rod.’

‘I saw him from the back. Dark coat, shiny shoes, very nice around the shoulders.’

Harriet pressed one hand against the table. ‘You identified him by his shoulders?’

‘He had the coat.’

Lucy was already on her feet, holding out one hand for the phone. Harriet put it on speaker instead.

Lucy leaned towards it. ‘Rod, this is Lucy. Did you actually see Alex’s face?’

‘No.’

‘Then you don’t know it was Alex.’

‘I know how people walk.’

Harriet looked at the phone. ‘You mistook a parking warden for your cousin last month.’

‘They had the same limp.’

‘Your cousin lives in Crete.’

‘That doesn’t mean he couldn’t have come back.’

Lucy pinched the bridge of her nose, presumably trying to locate the precise point at which her sensible advice had lost control of events.

Harriet reached down for her handbag. ‘Rod, what is he doing?’

‘I don’t know. He shut the door. But before he did, I saw him opening the drawers beside her bed.’

Her hand stopped inside the bag.

Lucy reached across the table and caught Harriet’s wrist. ‘That still doesn’t mean—’

‘He’s going through her things.’

‘Someone is going through her things,’ Lucy corrected. ‘According to Rod, who has identified him through a combination of outerwear and shoulders.’

‘I heard that,’ Rod said.

‘You were meant to.’

Harriet pulled her keys from beneath two old receipts and a lipstick she had been looking for since May.

‘Harriet, don’t.’ Lucy tightened her grip on Harriet’s wrist. ‘Call Sally. Call the manager. Call literally anyone who isn’t part of your geriatric surveillance unit.’

‘By the time Sally gets there, he could be gone.’

‘You have just spent twenty minutes agreeing that you might be projecting Tom onto Alex.’

‘Yes, and I felt very emotionally mature. Thank you.’

‘This is exactly what I was talking about.’

Harriet pulled her coat from the back of the chair. ‘No. This is a man searching Mrs Fitz’s room.’

‘A man Rod hasn’t actually seen.’

‘He saw the coat.’

‘The coat is not a person.’

‘It looked expensive,’ Rod added.

‘It still doesn’t mean anything Harriet, even if it is Alex he has every right to be in there surely, he’s practically head of the company.’

‘Maybe, but not without this.’ Harriet put her hand into her coat pocket and pulled out a thick brass key.

‘What’s that?’ Lucy asked.

‘The key to her room, I got Marge to swipe it from the office to make sure he can’t get his grubby hands on her stuff, so how has he got in there Lucy, hmm? Something is very wrong I am telling you.’

Lucy threw her hands in the air. ‘Oh this is getting ridiculous now, you’re stealing keys?’

Harriet pushed one arm into her jacket and discovered she had somehow twisted the sleeve completely around itself.

‘Stay where you are,’ she told him, fighting her way through the lining.

‘I am staying where I am.’

‘And don’t confront him.’

‘I wasn’t planning to.’

Harriet stopped struggling with the coat. ‘Rod.’

‘I’ll remain confrontation-adjacent.’

She ended the call and finally managed to force her hand through the sleeve. Lucy moved between Harriet and the kitchen door. Her expression now lost all trace of humour.

‘You cannot charge into Hawthorn and accuse Alex Kilner of abducting an old woman based on this.’

‘I’m not going to accuse him of anything.’

‘You’ve put your coat on inside out.’

Harriet looked down. The label was hanging beside her chin.

‘That has no relevance whatsoever.’

‘It feels representative.’

Harriet dragged the coat off, turned it the correct way around and put it on again.

‘I’m only going to see what he’s doing.’

‘And if it is Alex?’

‘I’ll ask him.’

‘Calmly?’

Harriet pulled her bag over her shoulder. ‘Yes.’

Lucy stared at her.

‘Calm-adjacent.’

‘Harriet.’

But Harriet was already heading for the door, fuelled by cold tea, a stolen sausage roll and precisely eleven minutes of emotional maturity, and that was plenty.

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# CHAPTER 30

## Birdies

When Harriet entered Hawthorn House again, she was even hungrier than she had been before the half a sausage roll.

It had unfortunately acted as an aperitif, giving her stomach just enough of a hint of things to come that it had responded by ramping up both the hunger and the gurgling. A low, hollow complaint moved somewhere beneath her jumper as the heavy front door clicked shut behind her.

She realised that almost every time she stepped into that place, her innards betrayed her. Especially around desserts.

Oooh, that was a point.

She slowed beneath the chandelier and tried to remember the last known movements of the fro-yo. Sally had taken it out of the freezer. Rod had complained about the texture. Marge had put the lid back on—or at least Harriet thought she had. There was a chance it was still in there, shoved behind the frozen peas and whatever unidentifiable beige meals Hawthorn kept for emergencies.

She had just begun mentally retracing its journey when a sharp hissing noise came from somewhere behind her.

‘Over here.’

Harriet turned.

Behind a rather large ficus in the corner of the reception room, Rod was apparently and albeit unsuccesfully attempting to conceal himself. It wasn’t a large ficus. In fact, it came up to approximately the middle of his chest, leaving his head, shoulders and most of a brightly coloured torso entirely visible.

‘Rod, what are you doing?’

‘I didn’t want him to come out and see me.’

‘Half the county can see you. You’ve got a bright yellow shirt on.’

‘They told me it was khaki,’ Rod replied, with more genuine annoyance than Harriet had seen from him all day.

He looked so personally wronged by the shirt that she felt sorry for him. She crossed the reception room and squeezed herself behind the plant beside him, brushing several dusty leaves against her face in the process.

It did not improve matters.

‘Is he still in there?’ she whispered.

‘Who?’

Harriet slowly turned her head towards him.

‘Alex Kilner.’

‘In where?’

‘In Mrs Fitz’s room.’

Rod stared back at her, his expression blank. Harriet pushed a ficus leaf away from her mouth.

‘For goodness’ sake, Rod. You rang me and said he was in there going through her things.’

‘Did I?’

He scratched the side of his head, his face settling into an expression that could only really be described as Laurel and Hardy.

Before Harriet could decide which one, another voice travelled along the corridor.

‘He also rang me.’

‘And me.’

Harriet stepped out from behind the plant as Sally and Marge appeared beneath the archway. Both were slightly breathless and carried the heightened, forward-leaning energy of people who had abandoned their evenings for an emergency and were beginning to suspect it might not actually exist.

Sally’s hair had been pulled into a tight knot on top of her head and she was wearing loose black trousers with one leg tucked accidentally into her sock.

‘I was halfway through me bloody jujitsu class,’ she said, dragging the trapped trouser leg free. ‘Had to walk out in the middle of it. I didn’t mind, though. I’m way above the rest of them on technique. Even the instructor said I should teach it.’

There it was.

The bullshit Harriet had somehow stopped hating and began to find endearing.

Marge folded her arms over a coat that looked as though it had been put on while she was still moving.

‘I was out to dinner with Rick. Didn’t even get to dessert!’

‘Oh, don’t we bloody know it.’

‘Well, it was a five-course tasting menu. I was looking forward to the crème brûlée.’

‘Rick was looking forward to crème-ing your brûlée, more like.’

Sally slapped one hand against her thigh and dissolved into a wheezing laugh at her own joke, bending slightly at the waist as though it had taken her completely by surprise.

Marge stared at her. Rod looked away, suddenly finding the ficus fascinating. Harriet pressed her lips together, not because it was particularly funny, but because Sally finding it quite so funny was.

Marge did not.

‘Rod, what exactly have you been up to?’

‘There’s no one even here,’ Sally said. She walked past them towards the reception desk and slapped one hand against the diary lying open beside the telephone. ‘We’ve checked all the vacant rooms, and Kilner’s not even in the bloody county tonight. He’s on some overnight training course up north. Says so right there in the office.’

The four of them turned to Rod, who straightened beneath the combined weight of their suspicion.

‘Rod…’ Harriet said.

‘He was in there. I saw him.’

‘Actually saw him?’ Marge asked, narrowing her eyes.

‘Yes.’ Rod glanced towards the darkened corridor that led to Mrs Fitz’s room, his certainty seeming to strengthen. ‘I saw him rifling through things.’

‘Saw him how, Rod?’ Harriet asked. ‘From where?’

‘I was walking down the corridor trying to find some decent toilet paper. I always insist on good-quality toilet paper—at least four-ply. I went to use the facilities earlier, picked up the roll and put my finger straight through it.’

‘Rod,’ Harriet cut in, already losing the will to live, ‘can we move this along, please?’

‘Oh, yes. Sorry. Anyway, I know they keep the decent stuff in the cleaning cupboard at the end of the corridor because I’ve seen Mary stashing it for herself. She brings these great big duffel bags in on a Thursday night, fills them with all the good rolls and the better air fresheners, then takes the lot home.’

He frowned, temporarily distracted by his own evidence.

‘Well, I assume they’re the better air fresheners. I quite liked the one in the library the other—’

‘Rod!’ all three women shouted.

He stopped mid-thought.

‘Anyway,’ he said. ‘I walked past Mrs Fitz’s room. The door was open a crack, so I looked through, and Alex Kilner was in there with his hands all over her drawers.’

Harriet’s eyes flicked to Sally, whose eyebrows had already begun their journey upwards.

‘Furniture drawers,’ Rod added, a moment too late.

‘We checked the room,’ Sally said, allowing her eyebrows to settle. ‘The door’s locked tight. No sign of forced entry. No one’s getting in there without a key.’

‘There was a key’ Rod added triumphntly, yes there was definitely a key in the door a big brass looking thing.

Harriet slipped her hand into her coat pocket and drew out the heavy brass key.

‘This key?’

‘Yes, yes! That key, that exact key! See, I told you.’

‘Rod, I took this when I locked the door. I checked there wasn’t another one, and I kept it with me so Alex couldn’t get back in.’

She opened her palm between them.

‘It’s been here the whole time.’

Rod looked down at the key, then back towards the corridor, his certainty beginning to loosen around the edges.

‘So,’ Harriet continued, softening her voice, ‘are you absolutely sure you saw him in there?’

‘I was sure,’ he said quietly.

Marge uncrossed her arms. The suspicion had gone from her face.

‘You’ve had a long day,’ she said, stepping closer. ‘What with the hospital and everything.’

‘And you hardly slept last night,’ Sally added, taking him lightly by the arm. ‘Come on. We’ll get you upstairs.’

‘I’m not tired.’

‘No one said you were,’ Marge replied, in the exact tone people used when they absolutely thought you were.

Harriet closed her fingers around the key and slipped it back into her pocket. Rod looked suddenly smaller beside the ficus, the bright yellow of his shirt no longer quite as funny as it had been a few minutes earlier.

Sally and Marge began steering him towards the staircase, one on either side, while Harriet followed behind.

They had only made it a few steps when Rod stopped so abruptly that Sally nearly walked into him.

His head snapped round.

‘TITS!’ The word cracked through the reception room.

Marge recoiled. Sally released his arm. Harriet stared at him.

‘Rod!’

‘No need for that now is there, we’re just trying to help’ Sally said.

‘No, the, the tits,’ he repeated, pointing wildly towards the garden. ‘The blue tits. My camera!’

Harriet peered through the open back door and into the dim mass of trees beyond it, searching the darkness for anything that looked remotely like a camera.

‘I put it up last week to film their comings and goings,’ Rod explained, his earlier confusion disappearing as quickly as it had arrived. ‘There are two of them.’

He nodded proudly towards one of the birch trees. Fixed halfway up its trunk was something that looked less like a wildlife camera and more like a small black safe someone had attempted to hide with leaves.

It was certainly something.

‘Bloody hell, Rod. Have you been perving on people?’ Sally asked, sharply and, Harriet thought, not entirely without justification.

‘I’ve been doing nothing of the sort! There’s a nest over there.’

‘All right,’ Marge said, casting a suspicious glance towards the tree. ‘And what exactly does this have to do with your phantom man?’

‘It’s motion-activated. And from where it is, you can see—well, you can almost see—straight into Bernice’s room.’

Sally clasped her hands together.

‘Bloody knew it.’

She mouthed the word perv at Marge.

‘Where does the footage go, Rod?’ Harriet asked, a thin thread of hope beginning to wind its way back through her.

‘To my computer. Come on, I’ll show you.’

With very little left to lose, two increasingly hungry stomachs, one possible pulled hamstring and Rod, they made their way upstairs to his room.

Harriet had never had much cause to go inside it. Rod managed his own medication and maintained standards of cleanliness she could only ever hope to achieve during the first twenty minutes after a deep clean.

Everything had its place. Shirts were folded with military precision. Shoes stood beneath the wardrobe in perfectly matched pairs, toes pointing forwards. Beside the window, old newspapers had been stacked into neat, date-ordered piles.

Rod still insisted on having one delivered every morning, despite Hawthorn being so far from anywhere that the delivery alone must have cost more than some of the articles were worth.

There were also an alarming number of binoculars.

Harriet counted four pairs without properly trying. Surely binoculars couldn’t perform such wildly different duties that one man required an entire collection, but she decided this was something she neither knew nor particularly wanted to know.

‘Here we are,’ Rod said, pushing open the door. ‘Excuse the mess.’

There was absolutely no mess.

In the corner of the room stood something resembling a small command centre. Two monitors fought for space on a mottled oak desk, one raised slightly higher than the other on top of an old shoe box. Between them sat a keyboard that looked as though it belonged to a teenage gamer, neon lights pulsing around the edges of every key.

Harriet stared at it.

‘Just a moment, let me pull it up.’ Rod sat on what looked to be the most uncomfortable metal collapsible chair Harriet had ever seen, softened only with a cushion that must have been at least thirty years old. Décor, it seemed, was not where he was spending his money.

‘Here!’ he exclaimed, pointing at the computer.

Rod, apparently, had layers. He woke both screens with a quick movement of the mouse. They flickered into life, bathing his face in a pale blue glow and making him look briefly like the elderly mastermind in a low-budget crime drama.

‘Right,’ he said, flexing his fingers over the keyboard. ‘Let’s have a look.’

Harriet, Sally and Marge crowded behind him, each trying to see past the other two while pretending they weren’t. Sally placed one hand on the back of Rod’s chair and leaned over his shoulder until the ends of her hair brushed against his ear.

‘Could you stop breathing directly into me?’ he asked, keeping his attention fixed on the screen.

‘I’m not.’

‘You are. I can feel it.’

Sally moved approximately half an inch to the left, which appeared to be the full extent of the compromise she was willing to make.

Rod began clicking through a series of neatly labelled folders with far more confidence than Harriet had expected. She had imagined several minutes of forgotten passwords, accidental adverts (of all kinds) and somebody eventually being asked to ring a grandson, but his fingers moved quickly across the neon-lit keyboard as dates and times flashed up on the screen.

A grid of small images appeared, almost every one containing some form of bird activity. Blue tits landed on the feeder, disappeared from the feeder and returned moments later as though they had forgotten something. Two of them appeared to be arguing over a seed, while a particularly round one sat alone on a branch wearing the exhausted expression of someone who had been married for a very long time. Harriet liked that one.

‘There they are,’ Rod said proudly.

‘Lovely,’ Marge replied, leaning closer. ‘But what the heck has this got to do with anythinng?’

‘Just hang on a sec, it must be here’ Rod began opening and closing folders, undermining the confidence they all had a moment ago.

Each clip lasted only a few seconds, triggered whenever the camera detected movement. They watched branches tremble in the wind, a cat hurry beneath the window and something grey and shapeless tumble across the lawn.

‘That was a fox,’ Sally announced.

‘It was a carrier bag,’ Marge said.

‘It had legs.’

‘It had handles.’

‘How long is this going to take?’ Sally asked, shifting her weight away from the leg she had possibly injured at jujitsu.

‘As long as it takes,’ Rod replied, without looking up.

‘We don’t actually know what time you saw him, do we?’ Harriet asked.

Rod’s hand stopped on the mouse.

‘No.’

All four of them stared at the screen as though it might volunteer the information.

‘When did you ring us?’ Marge asked.

Rod began patting his trouser pockets before noticing that his phone was lying directly beside the keyboard.

‘Eight forty-three.’

He moved through the recordings until the timestamps reached the right part of the evening. The images grew darker, the garden slowly disappearing into the grainy silver and black of the camera’s night vision. Branches stretched across the screen like thin bones, while the corner of Mrs Fitz’s window remained just visible at the edge of the frame.

At eight thirty-seven, nothing moved.

At eight thirty-nine, a bird launched itself from the feeder and vanished into the trees.

At eight forty-one, the curtain inside Mrs Fitz’s room shifted.

Rod’s hand slowed.

‘There,’ Harriet said, leaning closer.

‘I haven’t pressed anything yet.’

‘No. Look at the window.’

The room fell quiet as Rod opened the next clip. For the first second or two, there was nothing but the pale rectangle of glass and the faint reflection of the garden beyond it.

Then something moved inside.

A dark shape crossed the window, unmistakably human despite the poor image. It was tall, broad across the shoulders and wearing what appeared to be a dark coat. The figure stopped, bent forwards and reached towards something beyond the camera’s limited view.

Rod shot upright with such force that the chair rolled backwards and struck Sally across the shin.

‘There!’ he shouted, jabbing one finger towards the monitor. ‘That’s him!’

Sally gripped the edge of the desk, momentarily too distracted by the screen to complain about her leg. Marge moved closer, her face tightening as the figure shifted once more inside Mrs Fitz’s room.

Harriet felt the brass key pressing heavily against the inside of her coat pocket. Rod hadn’t imagined it. Someone had been inside.

‘Well bugger me sideways with a fish pole’ Sally said ‘He’s not crackers after all’.

Harriet moved closer to the screen and studied the figure as it crossed the grainy square of window.

The image was too poor to make out a face, barely good enough to prove there was one, but the height looked right. So did the dark coat and the straight, purposeful set of the shoulders.

‘That’s him,’ she said.

‘Yes!’ Rod celebrated, slapping one hand against the desk. ‘See? I told you. I told you!’

The three women turned towards him with matching looks of disapproval.

‘This isn’t good news, Rod,’ Harriet said. ‘It’s worse than we thought.’

His smile faded.

She looked back at the dark figure frozen on the screen. They still did not know what Carelink was planning, or what Alex had been searching for in Mrs Fitz’s room, but one thing now felt horribly certain.

Alex Kilner was in on it.

‘What was he looking for?’ Marge asked.

‘Money?’ Rod suggested.

Sally gave him a look. ‘How much money do you think Bernice keeps in her knicker drawer?’

‘People do.’

‘Not enough to stage a covert operation over.’

‘Her will, then,’ Marge said. ‘Or jewellery. Important papers.’

Harriet thought of the red Carelink folder, then of the empty space where it had been. They had spent days guessing at pieces of something none of

them properly understood, and every answer seemed to produce another question.

‘We still don’t have anything we can actually use,’ she said.

Rod pointed at the screen. ‘We’ve got him on camera.’

‘We’ve got a collection of grey squares in a coat. If we accuse Alex with that, he’ll deny it, Carelink will close ranks and we’ll all look completely unhinged.’

Sally folded her arms. ‘Some of us more than others.’

Harriet ignored her.

‘We need proof. Proper proof. Something that tells us what they’re doing and why.’

Marge looked from Harriet to the paperwork. ‘The office.’

‘The office.’

Harriet looked at her.

‘If Carelink is planning something,’ Marge continued, ‘there’ll be paperwork. Emails. Reports. Something.’

‘No,’ Harriet said immediately.

Sally was already reaching for the door.

‘You were the one who suggested it.’

‘I absolutely was not.’

‘You said office with your face.’

‘I did no such thing.’

But the idea had already settled among them. Downstairs, behind a locked door, sat every file, letter and Carelink record Harriet had spent weeks trying to understand.

It might contain nothing. It might contain everything. And if they were caught searching it, Harriet and Marge could lose their jobs.

Nobody spoke.

Rod pointed at the screen, where the dark figure remained frozen inside Mrs Fitz’s window.

‘He was in her room.’

That was all it took.

They left the footage paused on the monitor and made their way back downstairs, quieter than they had been on the way up. Hawthorn seemed different now. The corridors had always been dim at night, with pools of yellow light falling between stretches of shadow, but they no longer felt merely familiar and badly lit. Every closed door seemed to contain a secret,

and every creak from somewhere deeper inside the building suggested that something might be happening just beyond their sight.

By the time they reached reception, Harriet had almost managed to talk herself out of what they were about to do.

‘We can’t just break into the office,’ she said, stopping beneath the archway.

Sally turned to face her. ‘We’re not breaking in. We’re looking for evidence.’

‘Without permission.’

‘That’s what makes it evidence.’

‘No, Sally. That’s what makes it misconduct.’

Marge folded her arms across her chest and glanced towards the office door at the far end of reception. ‘She’s right. If we’re caught in there, all three of us could lose our jobs.’

‘You could,’ Rod said, proudly and confidently.

The women turned to look at him.

‘I’m only pointing out that I’m retired.’

‘That’s very comforting for you, Rod,’ Harriet said. ‘Unfortunately, the rest of us require wages.’

Sally looked from Harriet to Marge, apparently less troubled by the prospect than either of them. ‘So what are we supposed to do instead? Wait until Kilner comes back and politely ask whether Carelink is planning something terrible?’

‘We don’t even know that they are.’

‘Someone went into Bernice’s locked room.’

‘We think it was Alex.’

‘It was Alex,’ Sally insisted. ‘It has to be. Who else would have a key?’

‘Adam?’ Rod offered.

‘Keep up, Rod. Alex is Adam.’

Rod frowned. ‘Is he?’

‘He must be,’ Harriet said. ‘The nurse got the name wrong.’

‘He’s Bernice’s son,’ Rod replied.

‘No,’ Sally said. ‘There is no Adam. Only Alex.’

Rod looked from one woman to the next, waiting for somebody to realise how little sense they were making. When nobody did, he turned his attention to the tassel of an entirely unnecessary curtain and studied it for several long seconds.

‘I think I need a little sit-down,’ he said eventually, before shuffling towards a lonely chair in the hallway.

‘Okay, so how do we do this?’ Harriet asked, her mind made up.

Sally stepped closer to inspect the office door. It was solid wood across the bottom with a large pane of glass above it, the words MANAGER’S OFFICE etched across the surface in a style that made Harriet think of a detective agency in the 1960s.

‘Easy,’ Sally said. ‘You get a tea towel.’

She glanced over her shoulder and nodded towards Marge.

‘Marge. Tea towel.’

‘Oop—yes, right. One second.’

Marge hurried towards the kitchen with a surprising spring in her step, apparently delighted to have been given a role in the operation.

‘Then,’ Sally continued, ‘you wrap the tea towel around your fist and all the way up your arm. It’s very important that you cover the whole thing, because this kind of glass can be extremely sharp.’

‘Isn’t all glass sharp, dear?’ Marge asked as she returned carrying a stained terry-cloth tea towel in one hand and another featuring Father Christmas in the other.

‘Oh no. All glass is not created equal.’ Sally accepted the festive one and began wrapping it around her forearm. ‘Different breaking points, viscosities—it’s a whole science. I know this because I once won a trophy for glass-blowing when I was fourteen, on holiday in Cornwall. The bloke running it said he’d never seen craftsmanship like it in someone so young.’

Without looking at one another, Harriet, Marge and Rod knew they were all thinking exactly the same thing.

She absolutely had not.

‘So, we break the glass, I reach through and pop the lock from the other side. Bob’s your uncle, Fanny’s your aunt.’

‘Mildred was my aunt,’ Rod said, from his chair, like a National Trust volunteer desperate for conversation.

There was no reaction this time. They were all far too used to him.

‘Great, Rod. That’s great.’ Sally tightened the Father Christmas tea towel around her forearm and drew back her fist carefully.

‘Wait!’ Harriet said.

Sally froze.

‘How are we going to explain the broken door?’

Rod sat bolt upright in his chair. ‘We could say I fell through it. I’m practically an expert at falling now.’

Harriet considered this for longer than she should have.

‘Yes. Good. That’s good. We have a plan.’

She looked at the others, all of whom appeared worryingly committed.

‘If this goes horribly wrong, there are cameras we don’t know about, we all get sacked and arrested, and Rod testifies against us in court, it was nice knowing you.’

‘Right,’ Sally said, drawing back her arm again. ‘Here we go.’

She paused.

‘Actually, give the handle a rattle first. I need to know what kind of lock I’m dealing with.’

Harriet reached towards the round brass knob and twisted it.

The door opened without the slightest resistance.

Sally stayed exactly as she was, one fist drawn back and Father Christmas wrapped tightly around her arm. Harriet still had her hand on the knob, while Rod leaned forward in his chair, visibly cheated of the drama he had been promised.

Marge looked at each of them in turn, stepped past without comment and flicked on the light.

‘You coming?’

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# CHAPTER 31

Mathematics

Under the full glare of the ceiling light, the office looked disappointingly ordinary. The desk was covered in the usual administrative debris: two mugs containing the remains of drinks nobody had wanted enough to finish, a stack of incident forms, several pens that almost certainly did not work and a packet of mints with one left inside.

There were no maps pinned to the walls. No photographs joined together with red string. No handwritten plan entitled How to Destroy Hawthorn House and Everyone In It.

Sally seemed personally affronted by this.

‘Where do we start?’

‘We don’t,’ Harriet said, quietly closing the door behind them. ‘Not until we agree that we’re going to do this properly.’

Sally was already opening the top drawer of the desk.

‘That isn’t properly.’

‘It was open.’

‘You opened it.’

‘I merely opened it more.’

Marge moved towards the filing cabinets along the back wall, where rows of identical grey drawers stood, labelled in Alex’s neat, irritatingly controlled handwriting. Staffing. Maintenance. Complaints. Finance. Resident Records.

Rod remained near the door, although whether this was because he had been assigned lookout duty or because the walk downstairs had exhausted him was difficult to tell.

‘What exactly are we looking for?’ he asked.

Harriet glanced around the room.

‘Anything connected to Mrs Fitz. Carelink. The hospital. Whatever Alex was searching her room for.’

‘So, everything,’ Sally said.

‘Anything unusual.’

‘That is not more specific.’

Marge ran one finger along the filing-cabinet labels until she reached a drawer marked Property and Legal.

‘This?’

Harriet crossed the room. ‘Maybe.’

The drawer opened with a soft metallic scrape. Inside, the files were arranged alphabetically in hanging folders, each with a typed label and a coloured sticker in the top corner. Most appeared to relate to insurance, leases, maintenance contracts and things Harriet understood only well enough to know they were probably expensive.

Marge began moving through them carefully, lifting each tab just enough to read it.

‘Building survey. Fire compliance. Land registry.’ She paused. ‘Carelink Holdings.’

Sally abandoned the desk at once and joined them.

‘Open that.’

‘We are opening everything,’ Harriet pointed out. ‘You don’t need to narrate it.’

Marge lifted the file free and placed it on top of the cabinet. It was thicker than Harriet had expected, held shut by an elastic strap that had lost most of its elasticity and now served mainly as decoration.

Inside were incorporation papers, contracts, letters from solicitors and pages of figures arranged into tables so dense that Harriet’s eyes rejected them on principle.

Sally picked up the first sheet.

‘Anything?’

‘It says pursuant.’

‘That bad?’

‘Usually.’

Marge took another document and followed the lines with her finger. She stopped halfway down the page.

‘What?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘That is never reassuring.’

Marge handed her the page.

It was headed with the name of a firm of solicitors Harriet had never heard of, followed by an address in London and a date from years earlier. Beneath that, in language apparently designed to ensure no ordinary person could understand it, were references to issued shares, controlling interests and beneficial ownership.

Harriet skimmed it once. Then again.

‘I don’t understand this.’

‘Neither do I,’ Sally said. ‘But I don’t like the font. I prefer a comic sans for communications’

Marge leaned over Harriet’s shoulder and pointed halfway down the page.

‘There.’

At the top of the following page, a title had been printed in heavy black letters.

CARELINK ASSET REVIEW: HAWTHORN HOUSE

Harriet stopped. Asset review.

The same words that had been stamped across the red folder in Mrs Fitz’s room. The folder Harriet had opened expecting to discover why Carelink considered an elderly woman an asset, only to find pages of figures she had barely understood before it disappeared.

Mrs Fitz had never been the asset. Hawthorn House was.

She skimmed the page once, then again, trying to force the columns and legal language into something that made sense.

Beneath a section marked *Ownership Structure*, two names had been listed beside percentages.

Bernice Moira Pierce Fitzgerald: fifty-one per cent.

Carelink Holdings: forty-nine per cent.

Harriet read the figures again. Then once more, because they hadn’t become any less impossible the first two times.

‘What does that mean?’ Rod asked from the doorway.

Nobody answered. Harriet looked at Marge, waiting for her to explain that it was a historic arrangement, a legal technicality or a mistake made by a secretary years ago and never corrected.

Marge took the page from her and read the section herself. Then she looked up.

‘It means Mrs Fitz isn’t just a bossy old lady with the best view.’ She lowered the document slightly. ‘She owns it. She owns Hawthorn House.’

The office seemed to contract around them.

Sally reached for the document and held it close to her face as though the numbers might change under proper examination.

‘Fifty-one percent,’ she said. ‘That’s more than forty-nine.’

‘Thank you, Carol Vorderman,’ Harriet murmured.

She felt her throat dry. Mrs Fitz owned Hawthorn House. Not a room in it. Not a sentimental stake or some honorary title given to a woman who had lived there for years.

The controlling share.

Harriet thought of every Carelink letter, every threat disguised as a review and every time Alex had stood in the reception room behaving as though Hawthorn belonged to him.

It did not. Not entirely.

‘Does Bernice know?’ Sally asked.

Harriet stared at her. ‘How could she not know?’

‘Well, we all forget things sometimes.’

‘She has never mentioned owning the building.’

‘Maybe she thought we knew.’

Rod had left his post by the door and was now peering over Sally’s shoulder.

‘She always did say the place would fall apart without her.’

‘That is not the same thing as owning fifty-one per cent of it,’ Marge said.

‘It does make it less boastful.’

Harriet barely heard them. Her mind had already moved to Mrs Fitz’s empty room, the missing red folder and the grey figure crossing behind the window.

Whatever Alex had been looking for, it had to be connected to this.

‘Carelink only owns forty-nine per cent,’ she said. ‘So they can’t do whatever they want.’

‘Not while Bernice owns the rest,’ Marge replied.

The words settled heavily between them.

Not while Bernice owned the rest.

Harriet looked down at the papers again, and the questions arrived all at once. Where was Mrs Fitz?

Why had she been moved at the request of a family none of them had ever heard about?

What happened to her shares if she died?

And who would inherit them?

Sally appeared to reach the same thought a second later.

‘Oh,’ she said.

It was the quietest Harriet had ever heard her. Marge closed the file, although none of them had finished looking through it.

‘We need to find her.’

‘We’ve been trying.’

‘No,’ Marge said, her hand still resting on the cover. ‘I mean we really need to find her.’

Rod frowned towards the paper and thought hard, the not so small vein in his forehead getting even less small.

‘Adam might know.’

Three heads turned towards him.

Rod looked back at them.

‘What?’

A chill ran through Harriet. Before she could answer, tyres crunched over the gravel outside the office window.

Harriet’s head snapped towards it as a pair of headlights swept across the front of Hawthorn House, briefly flooding the room with white light before disappearing beneath the window.

‘Who is that?’ Sally whispered.

‘It might be Adam,’ Rod said from the hallway.

‘Rod, there is no Adam,’ Harriet replied, already gathering loose papers from the desk.

‘Not now, Rod,’ Marge said. ‘Please.’

A car door slammed outside.

Sally was still holding the ownership agreement, while Marge had the Carelink file open across both arms and Harriet stood beside the filing cabinet surrounded by enough displaced paperwork to make their promise to leave everything exactly as they had found it look wildly optimistic.

‘Turn the light off,’ Sally hissed.

‘You turn it off.’

‘You’re nearer.’

‘I’m holding six years of fire-risk assessments.’

Footsteps crossed the gravel outside, unhurried and purposeful, followed by the heavy click of the front-door handle being tested.

The three women stopped what they were doing and stared through the glass panel of the office door.

Rod remained beneath the unnecessary curtain, sitting peacefully with his hands folded over his stomach. He seemed entirely unconcerned by the arrival of a stranger in the middle of the night, although Harriet couldn't tell whether this was because he recognised the car or because he had forgotten they were committing gross misconduct.

The front door opened.

A man's shoes and legs stepped inside.

From where Harriet stood, she could see only fragments of him through the etched glass: a dark coat, a leather document case and the broad shoulders that had crossed Mrs Fitz's window.

Her stomach dropped.

Sally slowly rose from beneath the desk, still clutching a page marked Strictly Confidential. Marge pressed the Carelink file against her chest, while Harriet reached for the light and switched it off.

Darkness swallowed the office.

In the hallway, Rod looked up at the man.

A smile spread across his face.

'Evening, Rod, nice to see you again.'

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# CHAPTER 32

## The Wrong Coat

Harriet pressed her back against the doorframe as though trying to fuse it to her spine. She gradually rolled out towards the corridor, crouched in an unsustainable position for no good reason whatsoever. Her eyes narrowed down the endless corridor and into the foyer, past the heavy paintings, emergency cords and one lost slipper. Through the snowstorm of ancient fibres catching the amber light, she saw the shoes of a man. Her gaze travelled upwards. He had the same stance and a similar gait. He wasn't quite as wide or as tall as Alex, but he was wearing a long black coat.

'Well?' Marge blurted from behind her. Her intense need for gossip was now prevented from exploding out of her only by two mother-of-pearl buttons on her cashmere cardigan.

Harriet drew herself back into the room and looked at them both.

'That's not Alex out there.'

'Bollocks it's not,' Sally said, barging past and pressing the door into Harriet's side, pinning her to the wall as she peered around the corner.

'What are you blathering on about?' she whispered back, her head still facing the hall. 'That's him.'

'What?' Harriet replied. 'Can't you tell the difference?'

'What difference? He's got that long black coat on he always bloody wears. Same big head. Salt-and-vinegar hair, or whatever they call it.'

'Salt and pepper,' Harriet snapped back.

'Well, that's what I said, isn't it? Same thing, anyway.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake,' Marge said, squeezing into the impossibly small gap left by the open door and leaning out farther than Sally, their heads stacked one above the other like a very obscure eighties album cover. 'Why won't he turn around? It's so dim I can't see a thing.'

‘Well, we wouldn’t be in this predicament if he were two feet away and staring at us, would we?’

Marge reached for the glasses hanging around her neck, put them on and gave a long, focused squint. She smiled, then placed them gently back against the delicate fibres.

She said nothing.

‘Well?’ Sally and Harriet said in unison.

Marge continued to smile.

‘That's not Alex,’ Marge said.

Sally pulled her head back. ‘Oh, and you can tell that from the back of his bloody head, can you?’

‘No. The coat.’

‘What about it?’

‘Alex wears a vintage Gloverall. Navy Melton wool, double-breasted, naval-cut peacoat. You could stand the thing up by itself.’ Marge squinted down the corridor. ‘That, whatever it is, is a polyester trench coat.’

Sally looked again.

‘How in the bloody hell can you tell what it's made of from all the way over here? You got the Hubble telescope on that chain or what?’

Harriet pulled Marge’s glasses from around her neck and lifted them to her eyes.

‘Shes’ right! That’s Amazon basics line wool look trench, totally synthetic the sheen gives it away, I know this because I went through a winter coat phase a few years ago and i spent an entire weekend comparing the male and female amazon basics vs High street vs high end comparison try on hauls on youtube and I am one hundred percent certain that is one of the ‘not worth it’ coats. In fact, the winner was actually from H&M but you can only get it online rather than the high street so it kind of defeats the point of the whole video.’

Sally looked at Harriet, then at Marge, and then back to Harriet’ ‘I mean this with love Harry but you really have to get a life, that's the most depressing thing I think I've ever heard and I went to dark places when the backstreet boys broke up, I’m just sayin’.

Harriet couldn’t react to that with the outrage and indignance that she so wanted to, because she knew that Sally was absolutely right.

‘So who the bloody hell is it?’

‘Ugh, this is silly,’ Marge said with a sigh before taking it upon herself to blow everyone’s cover and step into the corridor.

‘Yoo-hoo! Can I help?’

‘Here they are,’ Rod said as Marge charged along the hallway, her Céline flats leading the way, one after the other, just as eager to meet the mystery man as she was.

‘I am.’ Harriet stepped out from behind Marge, her nerves firing into her fingertips as she finally saw the face belonging to the back of the head she’d been staring at for an oddly intimate amount of time.

‘Well of course you are.’

He took her hand. The leather of his glove was cold enough to send a small shock through her.

‘I’m Adam.’

Harriet had no time to think, process or even breathe before Sally cut in.

‘No you’re not. You don’t exist.’

Adam looked at her, his expression somewhere around ninety per cent confusion with a ten per cent kicker of dismay.

‘Sorry?’

‘You don’t exist,’ Sally repeated, only slower, slightly louder and, sadly, more confidently.

‘Uh…’ Adam rubbed the back of his head, ruffling his hair up and down.

‘He’s Bernie’s son. I’ve been trying to tell you, but nobody listens to me,’ Rod said.

‘Yes,’ Adam said, glancing between them. ‘That would be me.’

Harriet stared at him. The letters. The cream envelopes tucked beneath Mrs Fitz’s things.

*There are people who would call themselves mine if it suited them.*

Mrs Fitz had mentioned someone after all. Just not by name. Sally folded her arms.

‘You’ve been here before?’

Adam looked mildly confused. ‘Quite a few times.’

Harriet wished she hadn’t asked.

‘Have you?’

He pointed vaguely towards reception.

‘I sign in.’

Nobody said anything. Harriet looked towards the visitor book, which lay open as it always did.

‘Sorry, should I have been signing in somewhere else? Or calling ahead?’

The three women looked to one another for reassurance, or perhaps an explanation, but none came. They all stood there, each as embarrassed as the next—except Marge, for some reason. Marge held an expression that Harriet hadn’t seen before and it sat somewhere between disdain and admiration. It could have been the coat.

‘No, no, we’re sorry. It’s just a bit of a shock. Your mum never mentioned you—or anyone, really, for that matter.’

Adam swapped hands with the umbrella he was holding.

‘Ah yes, that’s Mum all over. Never one to give anything away. No, I’m afraid I’m very much in existence. Although I am very confused. She’s given me another list and specifically states that I am to bring the egg-blue dressing gown, not the royal-blue dressing gown. I’m a bit lost because I thought eggs were brown—or white, for that matter—but never blue.’

‘Duck eggs,’ Harriet blurted. ‘Duck-egg blue. She has a silk gown in her wardrobe. She’ll want that one, not the dark-blue one on the back of the door.’

‘Where is she, then?’ Marge asked rudely. Harriet glared at her. Marge stood with her arms folded, peering over her glasses in silent protest.

‘Mum is in a private facility. I wanted to make sure she was as comfortable as possible. They were fantastic at the local hospital, of course, but there she has an extra eye on her.’

For the first time in two weeks, Harriet felt her shoulders drop to something approaching their usual level. As the tension that had been gripping her loosened, she almost felt relief. Almost.

‘I don’t suppose you’d be able to give me a hand, would you?’ Adam smiled at Harriet, his eyes crinkling with gentle bashfulness. ‘You seem to know her—embarrassingly—a lot better than I do.’

Harriet tucked her hair behind her ear and looked as far away as she could, avoiding any kind of eye contact.

‘Of course,’ Harriet said, far too quickly.

Adam smiled again.

‘Thank God. I’ve already been given strict instructions about the dressing gown and apparently there’s a face cream in here somewhere that costs more than my first car.’

‘That sounds like Bernie.’

‘It does, doesn’t it?’

He said it with such easy affection that Harriet looked at him properly then. There was nothing defensive in him. Nothing too polished. No hint of Alex’s clipped professionalism or that permanent impression that every conversation was taking place five minutes before a board meeting.

Adam just looked amused. And tired—understandably so, she imagined.

‘Come on,’ Harriet said. ‘She’ll have hidden the good stuff where nobody sensible would ever think to look.’

She moved towards the wardrobe. Adam followed.

‘You really do know her,’ he said, both hands now grasping the smooth wooden handle of his carved umbrella.

Harriet opened one door, then another.

‘I know where she puts things. That’s not the same thing.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I think it probably is.’

Harriet pretended not to hear that. The duck-egg dressing gown was exactly where she knew it would be, hanging beautifully in the ornate wardrobe, carefully separated from any lesser fabrics that might touch it.

‘There.’

Adam took it from her.

‘That’s duck egg?’

‘Yes.’

‘Looks blue.’

‘It is blue.’

‘Then why not call it blue?’

‘Because then people wouldn’t be able to charge forty percent more for it.’

He laughed, smiled again and nodded in agreement, his eyes lingering on the expansive wardrobe.

Harriet reached in and retrieved the creaseless gown from the velvet hanger. All of Mrs Fitz’s clothes were on velvet hangers, even the clinical ones. Keeps the shape and stops everything slipping off, she had said—and she was right.

Adam looked down at the gown, inspecting its embellished embroidery, his smile fading into something softer.

‘She’s been all right with you, hasn’t she?’

Harriet glanced across.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Before all this. She seemed herself?’

The question was casual enough, concerned enough. Harriet leaned back against the wardrobe.

‘She’s Mrs Fitz. I’m not sure she’s ever been entirely herself.’

Adam smiled, but only briefly.

‘You know what I mean.’

Harriet did.

‘She’s been fine. Forgetful sometimes. A bit all over the place. But no more than anyone else in here.’

‘Right.’

He nodded once—too quickly, perhaps—then folded the dressing gown over his arm and smiled at her again.

‘Sorry. I’m being overprotective.’

Harriet shook her head.

‘No. You’re being her son, and it sounds like you’re doing a fantastic job.’

Something flickered across his face but was gone before she could work out what it was. He lowered his gaze to the dressing gown, now draped lifelessly across his arm and folded in on itself like a wilted ballerina.

‘How is she doing?’ Harriet asked, placing her fingertips on the soft satin that lay across his jacket.

‘She’s, um...’ Adam hesitated, his words catching at the back of his throat. ‘She’s a bit better than she was—a darn sight snappier, which is a good thing. Actually, physically, she’s recovering well.’

‘But… I don’t know. I think I’m realising how much I’ve missed.’

Harriet looked at him. Adam gave a small laugh, embarrassed by himself.

‘You know her better than I do.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It is.’ He looked down at the dressing gown. ‘You knew exactly which one she meant. I would’ve brought the wrong thing and then spent the next six months hearing about it.’

Harriet smiled.

‘She would absolutely make sure you knew.’

‘I know.’ He glanced at her. ‘That’s what I mean. You know all the little things.’

Harriet shrugged, but she felt something warm settle behind her ribs.

‘She’s just… Bernie.’

Adam smiled again.

‘Tell me.’

‘What?’

‘What’s she like here? Properly. Not the version she gives me on the phone.’

Harriet laughed.

‘Oh God. How long have you got?’

Adam held her gaze as he began folding. ‘Actually, not long at the moment. I’ve got to get this back to her.’

‘Oh gosh, yes, of course.’ Harriet led the way across the room and back into the corridor, Adam carrying the dressing gown over one arm while Harriet closed the bedroom door behind them.

‘Actually,’ he said, slowing beside her, ‘would you mind if I took your number?’

Harriet looked at him.

‘Just in case Mum asks for something else apparently only you know how to identify.’

She laughed.

‘That is highly likely.’

Adam pulled out his phone.

‘It’d save me accidentally bringing her a beige cardigan and being disowned.’

Harriet gave him her number. He typed it in, glanced at the screen and smiled.

‘Harriet.’

‘That’s usually how it works.’ Oh gosh, shut up, Harriet. Stop embarrassing yourself.

‘I know. I just wanted to make sure I had the right one.’

Before Harriet could respond with something incredibly witty and charming, Sally appeared at the end of the corridor. Adam raised a hand in farewell. ‘Thank you, ladies. I’ll give Mum all your best. And thank you for being so fantastic with her. I’m working on getting her well enough to come back to you all as soon as possible.’

And with that, Adam was gone.

He waltzed out through the front door, the duck-egg satin almost billowing behind him like a wedding train, and once again there was silence

in the expansive foyer.

Well.

Silence.

‘What a bloody good bloke that Alex is,’ Rod said.

‘That was Adam, Rod,’ Harriet replied.

‘Who?’

Rod said it while snaffling two individually wrapped shortbread fingers he had somehow acquired from nowhere.

Sally adopted the stance of a woman about to enter a rap battle.

‘So...’

‘No,’ Harriet cut her off before she had begun.

Sally raised her hands. ‘I haven’t said anything. All I said was “so”.’

‘Your face has.’

Marge was still looking at the large oak doors Adam had just closed behind him.

‘What’s the matter with you, you've not said anything for at least ten minutes that must be some kind of a record?’ Harriet asked.

Marge didn’t answer straight away.

‘Nothing.’

‘That wasn’t a nothing face.’

Marge finally looked at her.

‘Time for tea, I think.’

And just like that, she was back.

‘Rod, where’ve you got those biscuits from? Don’t you dare tell me they were in that little basket in reception. Them’s for visitors.’

Rod stopped mid-chew and looked down at the two individually wrapped shortbread fingers in his hand as though they had somehow appeared there without his knowledge.

‘They were going soft.’

‘That does not make them yours.’

‘I was saving them.’

‘For what?’

Rod shrugged.

‘Later.’

Sally, who had been standing with her arms folded so tightly beneath her chest that Harriet was surprised they hadn’t gone numb, suddenly swung round towards him.

‘And this is all your fault, by the way.’

Rod looked genuinely affronted.

‘My fault?’

‘Yes, your fault. If you hadn’t gone on about that bloody Alex for the last fortnight, none of us would’ve been crouched behind a door like a pack of escaped inmates.’

‘I only said he looked like him.’

‘You said it was him.’

‘I thought it was.’

‘You think everyone’s Alex.’

‘I don’t.’

‘You’ve literally just called Adam Alex.’

Rod frowned as he attempted to work through this accusation, one eyebrow lifting with the effort.

‘Well, they’ve both got coats.’

Sally’s hands shot into the air.

‘There you go. Case closed. We’ve all lost our minds because Rod’s apparently identifying people by outerwear now.’

‘I knew it wasn’t Alex,’ Harriet said.

Sally turned very slowly towards her.

‘You were crouched behind a door.’

Harriet opened her mouth, decided there was absolutely no defence available to her and closed it again.

Marge was already halfway towards the kitchen, her momentary silence apparently packed away with everything else she had no intention of discussing.

‘Come on then,’ she called over her shoulder. ‘Kettle’s not going to boil itself.’

Rod carefully peeled the wrapper from his second shortbread.

‘Anyone want one?’

‘No!’ three voices replied at once.

Rod shrugged and took a bite. And somehow, with the promise of tea and the immediate business of locating enough clean mugs, the whole ridiculous thing was over.

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# CHAPTER 33

Nothing To Investigate

By the time the kettle had boiled, Marge had found four mugs that she considered sufficiently clean, Sally had located an unopened packet of digestives she claimed nobody else knew existed, and Rod had finished the last of the stolen shortbread with absolutely no visible remorse.

Nobody mentioned Adam again.

It wasn't that they had agreed not to. There had been no discussion, no pact of silence, no solemn promise to forget that three grown adults (and Rod) had spent the best part of half an hour hiding behind a doorway trying to identify a man by his coat. It simply seemed to happen naturally, helped considerably by the fact that nobody particularly wanted to acknowledge their own contribution to it.

Sally busied herself making tea considerably stronger than anyone had requested. Marge complained that somebody had put a wet spoon back into the sugar bowl again and proceeded to remove several contaminated granules individually with, ironically, the tip of a wet teaspoon. Rod sat at the table breaking his digestive into increasingly smaller pieces before dunking each one for precisely long enough that it threatened to collapse into his mug but somehow never did.

Harriet watched them all from her usual chair and, for the first time in several weeks, wondered whether perhaps there really was nothing left to investigate.

Mrs Fitz had become ill. She had gone into hospital. Her son had appeared. That was it.

When reduced to those three facts, the whole thing sounded embarrassingly ordinary. There had been no abduction, no sinister removal in the middle of the night and no secret corporate operation whisking vulnerable elderly women away to undisclosed locations. Mrs Fitz had

simply got poorly in a care home, which, Harriet supposed, was probably one of the least suspicious things that could happen in a care home.

Even Alex's appearance suddenly seemed less dramatic when looked at without the benefit of several weeks of collective hysteria. Carelink owned part of Hawthorn; it was their name on her payslips, for goodness' sake. Alex worked for Carelink. It was hardly unreasonable that at some point a man from Carelink might actually turn up at Hawthorn.

Harriet wrapped both hands around her mug and stared into the tea. Perhaps they really had got carried away.

It wouldn't have been entirely unprecedented.

A few years earlier she had spent nearly an entire week convinced the woman opposite was conducting an affair after a strange white van began appearing outside her house every Wednesday afternoon. Harriet had noted the registration number, written down the arrival and departure times and even briefly searched the company name printed faintly along the side of the vehicle before discovering it belonged to a mobile dog groomer.

The woman had a cockapoo. Mystery solved.

'Suppose that's that then,' Sally said, breaking a digestive neatly in half and lowering both pieces into her tea at once.

Harriet looked up. 'What is?'

'All this.' Sally gestured vaguely around the table as though the mystery itself might be sitting somewhere between the milk jug and the biscuit packet. 'Mrs Fitz is not buried in a bunker, Adam's her son, Alex is Alex and we've spent the last fortnight acting like bloody Poirot and his mates.'

'We?' Marge said without looking up from the sugar bowl.

'Yes. We.'

'I never hid behind that door.'

'You were standing directly behind me.'

'I was observing.'

Sally snorted. 'You were filming half of it on your bloody phone!'

Marge finally looked up and gave her the sort of stare that usually ended conversations without requiring further words.

Rod, who had apparently not been following any of this, took another drink of tea and frowned thoughtfully into the mug.

'I still don't understand why Alex never told us Mrs Fitz owned the place.'

Harriet's cup stopped halfway to her mouth.

Nobody reacted. Rod continued staring into his tea, completely unaware that he had just casually thrown a hand grenade into what had, up until then, been a perfectly peaceful biscuit break.

Sally was the first to turn towards him. ‘What?’

Rod glanced up. ‘What?’

‘What did you just say?’

‘I said I don’t know why Alex never told us Mrs Fitz owned the place.’

Harriet slowly lowered her mug onto the table. Of course.

She hadn’t forgotten the ownership exactly. It had simply been pushed further and further towards the back of her mind by Adam’s sudden appearance, their ridiculous corridor surveillance and the enormous relief of discovering that at least one of the things they had been worrying about appeared to have a perfectly normal explanation.

But the paperwork they had found hadn’t disappeared simply because Adam existed.

Fifty-one per cent. Bernice Fitzgerald. Forty-nine per cent. Carelink.

Harriet could see the page perfectly in her mind again now, the numbers sitting beside one another in neat black print as though there were nothing remotely remarkable about them.

Mrs Fitz didn’t just live at Hawthorn. Mrs Fitz owned more of it than Carelink did.

‘Oh,’ Sally said quietly.

Marge finally abandoned the sugar altogether and sat back in her chair. ‘Yes. Oh.’

The atmosphere around the table shifted almost imperceptibly. Nothing had actually changed. The same tea was cooling in the same mugs, Rod was still producing crumbs at an extraordinary rate and somewhere down the corridor a television audience erupted into applause for something nobody in the room could see.

And yet the mystery they had just collectively packed away seemed to unfold itself again.

Sally leaned forward. ‘So hang on. If Mrs Fitz owns fifty-one per cent—’

‘She does,’ Harriet said.

‘And Carelink have forty-nine.’

‘Yes.’

‘So Carelink don’t actually own Hawthorn.’

‘They own nearly half of it.’

‘But not enough.’

Harriet looked at her. ‘No. Not enough.’

Marge tapped one fingernail against the side of her mug. ‘Mrs Fitz has got the deciding bit.’

Harriet nodded. That was the problem.

Forty-nine per cent gave Carelink an enormous stake in the place. It gave them influence, access and, judging by recent events, apparently the ability to send men in expensive coats wandering around making notes about radiators. But it did not give them control.

Mrs Fitz still had that. Or at least she had before she became ill. Harriet felt the beginnings of something unpleasant tighten low in her stomach. Sally seemed to arrive at the same thought a moment later because the biscuit she had been holding stopped halfway towards her mouth.

‘So if they wanted the whole thing…’

Nobody answered.

‘They’d need Mrs Fitz’s bit,’ she finished.

Marge’s eyes moved towards Harriet while Rod, apparently immune to the atmosphere entirely, reached into the packet for another digestive.

Harriet looked back down at the table and felt that horrible little sensation again, the one she had experienced when they first found the documents: pieces sliding into place without her permission.

Alex hadn’t just arrived at Hawthorn. He had arrived representing the company that owned forty-nine percent of it, and since then he had examined files, asked questions, talked about assets and viability and the future of the building. Mrs Fitz, the one person who happened to own the remaining controlling share, had then become seriously ill and disappeared into hospital.

None of that proved anything. Harriet knew that.

She also knew that if she laid the facts out in precisely that order, they sounded absolutely bloody awful.

‘They can’t just take it from her,’ Sally said.

‘No,’ Harriet replied, although she realised she had no idea whether that was actually true.

‘What if she sold it?’

‘She wouldn’t.’

The answer came out so quickly that Marge raised an eyebrow.

Harriet shifted in her chair. ‘Well, I don’t think she would. She loves this place.’

‘Does she?’ Sally asked. ‘She spends half her time complaining about it.’

‘That’s different. Mrs Fitz complains about everything. She complained about the weather last week because apparently clouds have become much cheaper looking since the nineties.’

Rod nodded seriously. ‘They have.’

Nobody acknowledged him. Marge rubbed her thumb slowly along the side of her mug. ‘What if Mrs Fitz couldn’t decide?’

Harriet looked across at her. ‘What do you mean?’

Marge shrugged, but there was nothing casual about the question. ‘If she was too poorly. If somebody decided she wasn’t right enough up here to make decisions herself.’

She tapped the side of her head.

Harriet felt the tightening in her stomach pull a little harder. She thought of Mrs Fitz in hospital, confused and asking the same questions more than once, and then of Alex watching everything, making notes and asking questions of his own. Suddenly the innocent explanation Harriet had spent the last ten minutes trying to convince herself of did not seem quite so innocent anymore.

Sally’s eyes widened. ‘Oh bloody hell.’

Nobody said anything for several seconds. Harriet looked towards the doorway, half expecting Alex himself to appear in it simply because they were talking about him. The corridor beyond remained empty.

Whatever was happening, one thing now seemed obvious. They knew something Alex did not know they knew. And for the moment, Harriet intended to keep it that way.

By the following morning, what they had discovered had settled into something worse than shock.

A theory.

Not one Harriet would have been prepared to stand up in court and defend, admittedly, but one that became increasingly difficult to ignore the more she thought about it. Carelink could interfere with Hawthorn, make decisions and apparently send men in expensive coats to inspect everything from boilers to carpets, but Mrs Fitz still owned the part that mattered.

And now Mrs Fitz was ill.

People became ill, Harriet reminded herself. Particularly people in their eighties. There was nothing sinister about an elderly woman ending up in hospital, however inconvenient the timing happened to be.

The trouble was Alex.

The questions, the paperwork, the files, the sudden interest in what Hawthorn was worth, what needed repairing, how many rooms were occupied and whether the place was viable had all seemed suspicious before. Now they had context.

Perhaps none of it meant anything. Perhaps all of it did.

Either way, Harriet had absolutely no intention of telling Alex what they had found until she knew which one it was.

Adam, on the other hand, seemed considerably less complicated. He had texted her the same evening he left Hawthorn. Nothing inappropriate. Nothing even particularly interesting, if anyone had asked.

*Thank you again for helping today. Mum has the dressing gown and has already informed me I folded it incorrectly.*

Harriet had smiled despite herself and replied with a thumbs-up, then stared at it for approximately thirty seconds. It looked cold.

Worse than cold, actually. Passive-aggressive. The sort of thumbs-up you sent to someone at work when they asked if you could cover a shift and you wanted them to know you technically would, but only because you were a fundamentally better person than they were.

So she sent a laughing face as well. That somehow looked worse. Now she seemed overenthusiastic, as though she had been sitting beside the phone waiting for him to message and had become disproportionately excited by the arrival of a sentence about a dressing gown.

Harriet briefly considered sending a third message to somehow correct the emotional tone of the first two, before realising that trying to explain the intended meaning behind a thumbs-up and a laughing face would make her look completely unhinged.

She put the phone face down instead.

The following morning there had been a photograph of the duck-egg dressing gown draped over the end of a hospital bed, the satin spilling down across the blanket in much the same lifeless way it had hung over Adam’s arm at Hawthorn.

*Apparently this is the correct blue. I stand corrected.*

Harriet had replied that duck egg was technically more green than blue depending on the light, then immediately regretted it because nobody had asked.

Adam replied with a photograph of a brown egg. This is the only egg colour I recognise.

That had made her laugh.

Since then there had been a few messages, all entirely Mrs Fitz-related. Adam couldn't find the right hand cream. Mrs Fitz had rejected one bottle of perfume because it smelled like an old handbag and another because it smelled like a tart's bedroom. There had also been a surprisingly lengthy discussion about a green scarf she apparently wanted immediately, despite Adam insisting that it looked like something one might win in a Christmas raffle at a village hall.

Entirely Mrs Fitz-related. Mostly.

Harriet had found herself checking her phone a little more often than usual, although this could easily be explained by the fact that Mrs Fitz was away and Harriet wanted to know how she was doing.

That was all. Obviously.

Later that morning Harriet stood behind reception attempting to persuade the printer that it did, in fact, contain paper. The tray was full. She could see the paper. She had physically touched the paper. The tiny orange screen still said otherwise. Short of feeding it each sheet by hand, she had run out of arguments.

She pulled the tray out, shoved it back in, opened the side panel, closed the side panel, switched the machine off, counted to five and switched it back on.

Still no paper.

'Lying bastard,' she muttered.

Her phone buzzed beside the keyboard and Harriet reached for it without thinking.

She has now rejected both perfumes on the grounds that one smells like an old handbag and the other like a tart's bedroom. Any ideas?

The smile came before she could stop it, just the smallest pull at the corner of her mouth.

'You're cheerful.'

Harriet looked up sharply. Alex was standing on the other side of the desk, and she had absolutely no idea how long he had been there.

‘I’m always cheerful.’

He glanced at the printer and then back at her. ‘No, you’re not.’

Her smile disappeared. ‘Charming.’

There was the faintest suggestion of amusement around his mouth, which irritated her almost as much as the fact he was standing there in that immaculate coat while she lost an argument with office equipment.

‘What do you want?’

‘I was going to ask if you’d seen Rod.’

‘Oh.’

Alex waited, apparently completely comfortable with the silence that followed. Harriet had never understood people who could do that. Silence, to her, was a conversational emergency that needed filling immediately, preferably with something increasingly unnecessary.

His eyes drifted towards the phone still in her hand.

‘Good news?’

Harriet turned the screen slightly towards herself. ‘It’s work.’

‘At this time?’

She looked pointedly at the clock above the doors. ‘It’s eleven twenty-three in the morning.’

‘I meant while you’re at work.’

‘Oh.’

Harriet looked back towards the printer as though it had suddenly become deeply fascinating. ‘It’s nothing.’

Her phone buzzed again. This time she resisted looking at it, although Alex didn’t. Harriet saw his eyes drop.

‘What?’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘Your face has.’

A small movement passed across his mouth, not quite a smile but close enough to be annoying. ‘That sounds familiar.’

Harriet ignored him and unlocked the phone. Another message from Adam.

Also apparently I have brought the wrong slippers. There are four pairs. They all look identical. I am considering leaving the country.

She laughed before she could stop herself. When Harriet looked up again, Alex was watching her with considerably more interest than before.

‘Who is it?’

‘No one.’

‘That is clearly not no one.’

Harriet slipped the phone into the pocket of her cardigan. ‘It’s just someone from Mrs Fitz’s family.’

Something in Alex’s expression sharpened.

‘Who?’

Harriet hesitated, suddenly irritated by how much the question sounded like an interrogation.

‘Adam.’

Alex stopped sorting the papers. ‘Adam?’

‘Yes.’

He held her gaze a little too long. ‘How do you know Adam?’

‘He came in a couple of days ago.’

‘He came here?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know. Tuesday, I think. Why?’

Alex ignored the question. ‘And now he’s messaging you?’

Harriet felt herself stiffen slightly. ‘Yes.’

‘How did he get your number?’

‘He asked for it.’

That seemed to bother him far more than it should have.

‘He asked for your number?’

‘Yes, Alex. That is generally how people acquire other people’s telephone numbers.’

‘Why?’

The bluntness of it caught her off guard.

‘Because Mrs Fitz might need something. I know her things better than he does.’

Alex looked briefly towards the entrance before turning back to her, whatever trace of amusement had been there a few moments earlier completely gone.

‘He shouldn’t be messaging you.’

Harriet blinked. ‘Excuse me?’

‘He shouldn’t be contacting you directly.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because there’s no reason for him to.’

The words landed with far more force than they deserved, catching on something old and already bruised inside her before she had time to properly understand why.

‘There might be.’

Alex frowned. ‘That isn’t what I meant.’

‘No. Course not.’

‘Harriet.’

She gave a short, humourless laugh and folded her arms. ‘Don’t worry. I’m perfectly aware that a man like Adam probably isn’t sitting around desperately hoping I’ll text him back.’

Alex’s face changed immediately. ‘That is absolutely not what I said.’

‘You didn’t need to.’

‘That isn’t what I think.’

‘Right.’

‘Harriet, listen to me.’

‘No, you listen to me. He’s worried about Mrs Fitz. He asked for my number because I know her, and because apparently I’m one of the few people around here she actually trusts.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘Then what is?’

Alex hesitated, choosing his words carefully enough to irritate her even more. ‘He shouldn’t be drawing you into things that have nothing to do with you.’

There it was.

The ownership papers flashed back into Harriet’s mind, along with everything that had happened since they found them. Fifty-one percent against forty-nine. Alex’s questions, his assessments, his sudden interest in every inch of Hawthorn and what it might be worth. He had arrived behaving as though the place already belonged entirely to Carelink, and now apparently Mrs Fitz’s own family weren’t supposed to speak directly to the people who actually knew her.

Of course.

‘You’d rather everything went through you, would you?’

Alex frowned. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Harriet.’

‘No, genuinely. Nothing.’

It was absolutely not nothing, but she had no intention of telling him why. Alex looked at her for a long moment, clearly aware that an entire conversation was taking place in Harriet's head to which he hadn't been invited.

'Just be careful with him.'

That irritated her most of all.

Harriet picked up the useless stack of printer paper from the desk and held it against her chest.

'I think I'm capable of deciding who I need to be careful around, thank you very much.'

Alex's expression tightened. For the briefest second Harriet wondered whether she had hurt him, but then she remembered who he worked for.

'Thought so,' she said, and walked away before he had the chance to answer.

Behind her, the printer suddenly whirred into life. Typical.

Harriet made it as far as the staff room before her phone buzzed again. She considered ignoring it on principle.

Not because she was annoyed with Adam. Adam had done nothing wrong. In fact, Adam had been entirely reasonable all morning, which was more than could be said for certain other people currently wandering around Hawthorn House in coats that probably had their own garment insurance.

Still, she left the phone in her pocket while she filled the kettle, found a mug without somebody else's lipstick on it and discovered that the milk had once again been returned to the fridge with approximately enough left in the bottle to whiten half a teaspoon of tea.

Only then did she look.

*Have I inadvertently got you into trouble?*

Harriet frowned. What?

The reply came almost immediately.

*You went quiet. I assumed either I'd offended you or Hawthorn's internal communications department had discovered I'd breached protocol by discussing slippers without authorisation.*

Harriet laughed despite herself. She typed:

*No trouble. Just work.*

Then deleted it because somehow that sounded like she had been caught having an affair.

She tried again. You haven’t got me into trouble. Alex was here. Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

*Ah.*

Harriet stared at the screen. What does ‘ah’ mean?

*It means Alex was there.* She smiled. That is not an answer.

*It is if you’ve met Alex Kilner.*

Harriet actually laughed out loud.

‘Everything all right?’

She looked up to find Sally standing in the doorway with a packet of crisps tucked under one arm.

‘Fine.’

Sally’s eyes immediately dropped to the phone. Harriet put it face down on the counter, but Sally continued looking from the phone to Harriet and back again.

‘Don’t.’

‘I haven’t said anything.’

‘You’re doing it with your eyebrows.’

‘My eyebrows are completely neutral.’

‘They are practically filing a report.’

Sally grinned and disappeared again without asking anything else, which Harriet found considerably more suspicious than if she had.

Her phone buzzed.

*I owe you dinner.*

Harriet read it twice. Then a third time. The words did not change. She typed:

*Why?*

*For preventing Mum from receiving several completely incorrect items and for answering questions I could probably have solved myself with access to Google and basic common sense.*

Harriet stared at the screen for long enough that it dimmed. Dinner. Dinner could mean anything.

People had dinner all the time without it being a date. Families had dinner. Colleagues had dinner. People at conferences had dinner under lighting specifically designed to make chicken look grey. It was one of the least inherently romantic meals available.

Breakfast, if anything, carried far more implications.

Although perhaps only afterwards.

Harriet unlocked the phone again. You don’t owe me dinner.

*I know.*

Another message followed.

*I’d still like to take you.* That was worse. Or better. Potentially much worse.

She read it again. Are you free tomorrow?

Harriet’s first instinct was to say no. Not because she didn’t want to go. Quite the opposite.

She wanted to go enough that saying yes immediately would have felt reckless.

There were rules about this sort of thing, surely. Rules written down somewhere by women with good hair who knew how long to wait before replying to messages and owned at least one pair of trousers that didn’t require a safety pin somewhere around the waistband.

Harriet had never learned those rules. She opened Google. how long to wait before replying when man asks you to dinner

She stared at the results for several seconds, closed the browser in disgust and replied:

*Tomorrow works.*

Adam responded with an address and a time. Then:

*And before you ask, no dress code.*

Harriet frowned. I wasn’t going to ask.

*You absolutely were.*

She looked around the empty staff room. That was irritating. Mostly because he was right.

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# CHAPTER 34

Not A Date

By half past six the following evening, Harriet had changed her clothes four times and hated every item she owned.

The first dress looked as though she was trying too hard. The second looked as though she had stopped trying altogether sometime around 2017. Jeans felt too casual, black trousers made her look like she was about to ask somebody whether they wanted to see the dessert menu, and the blouse she had eventually chosen was apparently designed specifically to crease across the stomach while remaining inexplicably baggy everywhere else.

She stood in front of the mirror, pulled at the hem and said, ‘Fine.’ Her reflection remained unconvinced.

It wasn’t a date. Adam hadn’t called it a date; he’d said dinner. There were millions of dinners happening across the country at that exact moment and, statistically, most of them involved absolutely no romance whatsoever.

She picked up her phone. Seven minutes until she needed to leave.

She opened the restaurant website one final time, despite already having studied the menu twice, the photographs of the interior, the parking arrangements, three reviews from people called Deborah and one extremely angry review from a man who had given them a single star because the waiter had refused to let him bring in his own bottle of wine.

Harriet had sided with the restaurant. She put the phone away, then took it out again and checked the menu. Still the same. Good.

Adam was already there when she arrived. Of course he was.

Harriet saw him through the window before she had even reached the door, sitting at a small table towards the back of the restaurant with one hand around a glass of water, looking entirely comfortable in a way Harriet had never managed in public spaces without at least fifteen minutes of advance reconnaissance.

He looked up as she came in and smiled—not the polite smile people gave when acknowledging someone's arrival, but a proper one. Immediate. Harriet had to remind herself to keep walking.

'Hi.'

'Hi.' Adam stood, which was unnecessary. Nice, though. Still unnecessary.

'You found it all right?'

'Yes.' It was a lie; she had driven past the entrance once despite having Google Maps talking directly into her ear.

'Good.' He pulled her chair out slightly. Also unnecessary. Also nice.

Harriet sat down before she could start mentally cataloguing manners that should not matter.

'You look lovely.'

There it was. Harriet looked at him and managed, 'Thank you.' Two words: a normal person's response. She had done it.

'You too.' Three words, but still acceptable.

Adam smiled again and sat down.

For the first few minutes Harriet waited for the evening to become awkward. It didn't, which was possibly the strangest part.

They talked about Mrs Fitz first, because of course they did. She had apparently spent the morning objecting to the breakfast menu and had informed somebody that porridge had 'declined enormously since rationing,' although Adam wasn't entirely convinced she had ever eaten porridge during rationing.

'She probably remembers it perfectly,' Harriet said. 'Mrs Fitz can remember something someone said to her in 1963 but forget why she walked into the lounge.'

Adam smiled. 'That sounds familiar.'

'She once came into the office three times in ten minutes to ask me what day it was.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Then on the fourth visit she remembered the day but had forgotten why she was annoyed about it.'

Adam laughed. It was easy, which was the problem—or perhaps it wasn't a problem.

Harriet had spent so long around people who required some degree of management that she'd almost forgotten conversation could simply happen.

With Sally there was always a story. With Marge there was usually an argument. With Rod there was an excellent chance the subject would change halfway through because he had noticed a biscuit.

With Alex, every conversation felt as though Harriet had somehow joined it halfway through and missed the instructions.

Adam was different.

He asked questions and then actually listened to the answers. He laughed in the right places. He didn't interrupt Harriet when she wandered away from the original point, which happened frequently, or give her that particular look people sometimes gave when they were trying to work out whether there was ever going to be a route back to the subject they had started with.

At some point Harriet realised she had been explaining the difference between supermarket own-brand candles and the expensive ones sold in department stores for considerably longer than any reasonable person should have tolerated.

'And the annoying thing,' she said, 'is that half the expensive ones don't even smell better. They just have heavier glass.'

Adam nodded seriously. 'Premium glass.'

'Exactly.'

'So you're paying thirty pounds for the jar.'

'And a lid.'

'Does it have a good lid?'

'Oh, excellent lid.'

'Well then.'

Harriet laughed. The waiter appeared with their starters and placed a tiny dish containing three olives between them. Adam stared at it, waited until the waiter had gone, then looked up at Harriet.

'Kilner would have a spreadsheet explaining why three was the optimum number.'

The laugh escaped before she could stop it.

'He absolutely would.'

'Colour-coded.'

'Obviously.'

'With a risk assessment.'

'And a meeting afterwards to discuss whether everyone had engaged appropriately with the olives.'

Adam nodded gravely. ‘Minutes circulated by close of business.’

Harriet covered her mouth, partly because she was laughing and partly because the couple at the next table had looked over.

‘Oh God.’

Adam was laughing too now.

‘You know him, then.’

Adam lifted one shoulder. ‘Enough.’

Harriet narrowed her eyes. ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means I’ve met Alex Kilner.’

‘That is not an answer.’

‘It is if you’ve met Alex Kilner.’

She laughed again.

‘Oh God. You do know him.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You didn’t have to. Your face has.’

Adam paused, then pointed at her with his fork. ‘Careful. That sounds like something he’d say.’

Harriet stared at him in mock horror. ‘Take that back.’

‘I apologise. That was cruel.’

‘Thank you.’

It became a running joke without either of them deciding it should. When the waiter described the sauce on Adam’s main course in enough detail to qualify for its own biography, Adam waited until he had gone and murmured, ‘Alex would have asked for the supporting documentation.’

Harriet nearly choked on her drink. Later, when Harriet mentioned the printer, Adam said, ‘Did he fix it?’

‘No. He stood there.’

‘Of course.’

‘Just watched.’

‘Management.’

It was ridiculous, but more than that, it was nice. Somewhere between the main course arriving and Adam stealing one of her chips, Harriet stopped wondering whether it was a date—and stopped worrying about whether she was talking too much, which was considerably rarer.

Adam seemed to understand the rhythm of her without needing it explained. She could make half a joke and he would catch the rest before she reached the end; she could tell him something absurd and, instead of

looking confused or waiting for her to explain why it was funny, he simply joined in. Crucially, he never seemed to push, which was what made the Alex jokes feel harmless.

Adam never told Harriet that Alex was awful or asked what he had done. Whenever she mentioned him, Adam simply met her where she was, made her laugh and moved on—which somehow made Harriet trust his reaction more.

When she eventually told him about Alex's endless questions around Hawthorn, Adam didn't immediately respond.

He turned the stem of his glass slowly between his fingers.

'He likes to understand everything.'

Harriet snorted. 'He likes everyone else to understand that he understands everything.'

Adam looked at her for half a second, then laughed. 'That,' he said, 'is much better.'

Harriet smiled into her glass.

'I don't know what he's doing there.'

Adam's expression barely changed.

'At Hawthorn?'

'Yes.'

She waited for him to say something, but he didn't. That surprised her.

'You must have wondered.'

'Of course.'

'And?'

'And I don't know.'

It was such a straightforward answer that Harriet found herself believing it instantly. Adam sat back slightly. 'Mum has never been particularly forthcoming when it comes to business. Or money. Or anything she thinks somebody might have an opinion about.'

'That sounds like her.'

'She once refused to tell me what she paid for a car because apparently it was none of my business.'

'What car?'

'A Volvo.'

Harriet nodded. 'Fair.'

'I wasn't even asking because of the money. I was trying to insure it.'

'That was your first mistake.'

‘Apparently.’

They smiled. Adam took a drink and looked down at the table. ‘She trusts you.’

Harriet’s smile faded slightly.

‘What?’

‘Mum.’

‘Oh.’

‘She talks about you.’

Harriet wasn’t sure what to do with that.

‘Probably complaining.’

‘Mostly.’

She laughed. Adam smiled but didn’t immediately continue, and the absence of a joke made Harriet pay more attention when he finally did.

‘She likes you.’

Something small and stupid caught behind Harriet’s ribs.

Mrs Fitz wasn’t affectionate. At least not conventionally. Affection from Mrs Fitz generally came disguised as an insult or arrived in the form of being summoned to look at something she could quite easily have looked at alone.

Harriet picked at the corner of her napkin.

‘I like her too.’

‘I know.’

Adam looked at her across the table.

‘You still owe me those stories,’ he said.

‘The uncensored Mrs Fitz?’

‘The things she actually does. What she’s like when nobody’s performing for anybody.’

Harriet laughed. ‘Mrs Fitz is always performing.’

‘Exactly.’

He settled back in his chair. ‘And this time I’m not rushing off.’

‘There are quite a few,’ Harriet warned.

‘Good. We haven’t even had dessert yet.’

That was how the stories started.

Harriet told him about the blue vase first.

It had once stood in the entrance hall but Mrs Fitz had decided, for reasons known only to herself, that it belonged in the lounge. Harriet had found her carrying it down the corridor shortly after midnight in her

dressing gown and slippers, furious that everybody kept putting it ‘back in the wrong place.’

Adam laughed.

‘She carried it herself?’

‘She wouldn’t let anyone touch it.’

‘Of course she wouldn’t.’

‘She said Rod had no eye for proportion.’

‘Does Rod have an eye for proportion?’

‘No idea. Neither does Mrs Fitz.’

Adam laughed again.

‘Have Marge and Sally got stories?’

‘Hundreds. Marge’s usually involve minor violence and Sally’s have a suspicious amount of missing property.’

‘Ask them.’

Harriet laughed. ‘Why?’

‘Because I want to know her properly.’ Adam smiled. ‘Send me the best ones.’

It should have sounded like homework. Coming from Adam, it sounded unreasonably like flirting, so Harriet decided not to examine it too closely.

Adam listened to everything she told him—not intently enough to feel strange, just enough. Occasionally he asked something. Mostly he laughed, and every time Harriet produced another story, he seemed to soften a little.

‘I’ve missed a lot,’ he said eventually.

There was something in his voice that made Harriet feel suddenly guilty on his behalf.

‘You’ve got your own life.’

‘I know.’

‘She knows that.’

‘Does she?’

‘Yes.’

Harriet said it with enough certainty that Adam looked at her.

‘You really believe that?’

‘Of course.’

He smiled then, but differently—smaller. ‘See?’

‘What?’

‘You know her.’

Harriet looked away and reached for her glass.

‘I just work there.’

‘No.’

Adam’s voice was quiet.

‘You don’t.’

She looked back at him. He held her gaze, then glanced down at the table again.

‘I’m glad she’s got you.’

Harriet had no sensible response to that. Thankfully the waiter arrived to ask whether they wanted dessert, which gave her something else to think about.

‘Yes,’ Harriet said immediately.

Adam laughed.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I like pudding.’

‘I can see that.’

‘Careful.’

He smiled. ‘That sounded like Kilner.’

Harriet pointed at him. ‘You’re paying now.’

‘I was paying anyway.’

‘Well, now you deserve to.’

And just like that, whatever had briefly shifted between them disappeared back into laughter.

Harriet was almost disappointed. Almost.

Adam walked her to her car afterwards.

The night had turned colder while they were inside, the sort of damp cold that settled quickly into clothing, and Harriet folded her arms against herself as they crossed the car park.

‘I had a really nice time,’ Adam said.

Harriet looked at him. ‘So did I.’ There. Normal. No need to ruin it.

He stopped beside her car.

Harriet became acutely aware of everything: the keys in her hand, the cold air against her face, how close he was standing, the fact she had absolutely no idea what people were supposed to do at the end of dinners that may or may not have been dates.

Adam saved her.

‘Thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘For tonight. For Mum. All of it.’

‘You don’t have to keep thanking me.’

‘I probably do.’

Harriet smiled. He put his hands into the pockets of his coat and looked towards the car, then back at her.

‘I meant what I said.’

‘That’s worrying. You said quite a lot.’

‘About Mum.’

Harriet waited.

‘I’m glad she found you.’

The words landed somewhere Harriet wasn’t expecting them to. For once she couldn’t think of anything clever to say, so she smiled.

‘Goodnight, Adam.’

‘Night, Harriet.’

She got into the car and closed the door. Only when she had started the engine did she realise she was still smiling.

Harriet caught sight of herself in the rear-view mirror. ‘Oh, shut up.’ Her reflection appeared to agree.

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# CHAPTER 35

## The Third Call

By the time Harriet got home, Lucy had called three times.

This wasn't unusual in itself. Lucy was a caller rather than a texter, which Harriet had always considered slightly aggressive behaviour. A text allowed a person to prepare, assess the emotional requirements of the conversation and, if necessary, leave the message unanswered until enough time had passed that a perfectly reasonable excuse could be invented. A phone call simply arrived and demanded immediate access to your entire personality.

Harriet ignored the first one while taking off her shoes. She ignored the second while standing in the kitchen drinking water directly from a glass that had been sitting beside the sink since breakfast.

By the third, she had changed into pyjamas, removed her bra and therefore considered herself officially unavailable to the outside world.

The phone stopped ringing.

Harriet looked at it. Almost immediately, a message appeared.

Lucy: *Are you alive?*

Harriet put the phone face down on the sofa. She was alive. That was not the problem.

The problem was that Lucy had been right.

Not right about everything, obviously. Harriet felt that distinction was important. Lucy hadn't solved anything. She hadn't uncovered the ownership documents, identified Adam or established that Carelink owned forty-nine per cent of Hawthorn. She had simply said, repeatedly and with increasing irritation, that perhaps Mrs Fitz hadn't been kidnapped and perhaps an elderly woman who had become unwell had simply gone into hospital.

Which, annoyingly, appeared to have been exactly what had happened.

Harriet had spent enough of their last conversation explaining why that was far too simplistic, why Lucy did not understand the things Harriet had seen and why it was actually quite insulting to suggest she had somehow invented an entire conspiracy because one woman had disappeared from a care home. Calling her now would require acknowledging that.

Worse, Lucy would not even need to say *I told you so.*

She would breathe it. There would be a tiny pause after Harriet explained that Mrs Fitz was safe, followed by one carefully neutral right, and Harriet would hear every single word Lucy had been too gracious to speak.

Her phone buzzed again.

Lucy: *You can ignore me but I know you're looking at this.*

Harriet frowned at the screen. That wasn't necessarily true. It was true. But Lucy had no way of knowing that. Harriet opened the message, which unfortunately removed even that defence. Another one arrived almost immediately.

Lucy: *Did they find her?*

Harriet sighed and sank further into the sofa. They hadn't technically found Mrs Fitz because she had never been lost. That was part of the difficulty.

She could reply with something vague. She's fine.

No. That sounded defensive.

*All sorted.*

Worse. That made it sound as though Harriet had successfully concluded an investigation rather than discovered there had probably never been one.

*Long story.*

Dangerous. Lucy would call immediately.

Harriet locked the phone. There was also the Adam problem.

Even if she somehow managed to navigate the Mrs Fitz conversation without Lucy becoming unbearable, there was absolutely no version of the evening in which Harriet could casually add, *Oh, and by the way, Mrs Fitz apparently has a son nobody knew existed and I've just spent three hours having dinner with him.*

Lucy would stop functioning. Then there would be questions.

Was it a date? Did he ask you or did you ask him? What does he look like? How old is he? Did you kiss him? Are you seeing him again? Why did nobody know he existed?

And, most dangerously of all: *Why did you go?*

Harriet did not currently have an answer to that which sounded sensible. Because he asked. Because she wanted to. Because she had spent most of the evening laughing. Because at some point she had realised she had stopped monitoring herself and simply enjoyed being there.

None of those were information Lucy needed tonight.

Possibly ever.

Her phone began ringing again.

Lucy.

Harriet stared at it until it stopped.

'Persistent cow.'

The silence lasted approximately eight seconds.

Then came another message.

Lucy: *I'm going to assume you've either solved the crime or joined a cult.*

Harriet smiled despite herself. She typed:

*Neither.*

Three dots appeared instantly.

Harriet regretted responding before Lucy had even finished typing. Lucy: OH GOOD YOU'RE ALIVE

Then:

Lucy: *Mrs Fitz?*

Harriet considered lying. Not properly lying. More delaying the truth until a time when it would be less irritating.

Eventually she typed:

*She's safe.*

There was a pause.

A long one.

Harriet could practically hear Lucy preparing herself. Lucy: In hospital?

Harriet narrowed her eyes. Yes.

The dots appeared.

Stopped.

Appeared again.

Harriet waited. Lucy: I am saying absolutely nothing.

'Bitch.'

She threw the phone onto the cushion beside her. It buzzed. She did not look. Buzzed again.

Still no.

A third time.

Harriet lasted perhaps twenty seconds. Lucy: I'm being very mature about this.

Lucy: *You're welcome.*

And then:

Lucy: *Why do I feel like there's something else?*

Harriet froze. That was ridiculous. Lucy wasn't psychic—psycho sometimes, maybe, but definitely not psychic. She couldn't even predict the weather after a full forecast.

There was no possible way she could know that Harriet had just come home from something that had technically been dinner but had contained enough of the component parts of a date that even Harriet was struggling to maintain the distinction.

She picked up the phone. There isn't.

Lucy replied almost immediately.

Lucy: *There is now.*

Harriet stared at the message. She'd walked directly into that.

*Knackered, speak soon, love you, you slag xxx*

Lucy: *HARRIET.*

Harriet switched the phone to silent and, when that failed to stop the screen lighting up every few seconds, turned it face down as well.

For several minutes she sat in the quiet, listening to the boiler click somewhere in the kitchen and the faint wash of traffic outside, while the evening replayed itself in pieces she hadn't yet decided what to do with: Adam laughing over the olives, Mrs Fitz and the green scarf, the strange ease of a conversation that had simply carried on without Harriet having to drag it anywhere.

Nothing had happened, really. That was the truth. She had gone for dinner with a man she'd only recently discovered existed, who also happened to be the son of the woman Harriet had spent the previous fortnight believing might have been kidnapped, possibly dismembered by a care company.

When put like that, admittedly, it sounded considerably less normal.

Harriet reached for the television remote just as her phone buzzed one final time. She looked.

Lucy: *You've met someone.*

Harriet stared at the message. Then slowly put the phone back down.

‘No, I haven’t.’
The empty room offered no opinion.
Which was exactly why Harriet preferred it.

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# CHAPTER 36

The Visitors' Book

By the time Harriet arrived at Hawthorn the following morning, after a somewhat restless night fantasising about a certain man in a black coat, Marge had emptied most of the bottom drawer of the reception filing cabinet onto the floor and spread its contents around her in uneven piles. Sally was behind the desk drinking tea, while Rod sat nearby with an old visitors' book open across his knees. As she entered, the autumn morning chill gave way to slightly over-warm air, the smell of furniture polish and whatever Marge had decided to vape before 9am. Harriet stopped just inside the door and looked from one of them to the other.

'What are you doing?'

'Looking for something,' Marge said, without looking up.

Harriet took off her coat and hung it on the black iron coat stand, which had once stood freely but was now drilled through and bolted firmly to the wall. She noticed that Rod's hiding place behind the giant fern had also been relocated to a corner that received no sunlight.

'What?'

'I don't know yet.'

'How can you look for something if you don't know what it is?'

'I'll know when I see it.'

Rod turned a page in the visitors' book.

'I found Peter.'

Harriet looked at him. 'Who's Peter?'

Rod studied the page for another second. 'No idea.'

Sally took another drink from her mug.

'She's been at it since I got here.'

'I have not been at anything,' Marge said.

'You made me get that box down from the cupboard.'

‘Because you’re taller than me.’

‘You called me useless halfway through.’

‘You nearly dropped it.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You nearly did.’

Harriet moved further into reception and looked properly at what Marge had pulled out. There were old photographs, visitor books, receipts, Christmas cards and several folders whose labels had faded almost completely. Some of it looked old enough to have been there before Harriet had even started school.

‘What started this?’

Marge stopped searching. Harriet and Sally both noticed.

‘Adam,’ Sally said.

Marge looked up sharply. ‘I never said that.’

‘You didn’t need to.’

Harriet frowned. ‘What about Adam?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Marge.’

‘I said nothing.’

‘You’ve emptied a filing cabinet.’

‘That isn’t illegal.’

‘I didn’t say it was.’

‘It sounded like you were going to.’

Harriet opened her mouth to answer, but the main doors moved behind her and Adam stepped inside.

‘Morning.’

Marge stopped completely. Harriet turned and saw him standing just inside the entrance with a paper bag in one hand. He smiled when he saw her and, embarrasingly, she smiled back before she had time to think about it.

‘Morning.’

Sally noticed. Harriet knew she had because Sally’s eyes moved between them, but for once she kept whatever comment she had to herself.

Adam lifted the bag slightly. ‘I brought croissants.’

Rod was on his feet almost immediately.

‘Cake?’

‘Croissants.’

‘Same thing.’

‘Not remotely. Rod but here you go.’

Rod had already reached him and was peering into the bag.

‘One each,’ Harriet said.

Rod looked offended. ‘I know.’

‘You took two last time.’

‘One was for Ron.’

Adam glanced at Harriet. ‘Who’s Ron?’

Rod looked at him, then at Harriet, and seemed to think about the question properly.

‘He means Later Ron, ignore him he thinks he’s funny, he’s not’. Sally replied. Grabbing the third croissant without hesitation.

Adam laughed. The sound made Marge stand.

It was quick, but Harriet saw the change in her expression straight away.

‘What did you say?’ Marge asked.

Adam looked at her. ‘Sorry?’

‘What did you just say?’

‘I don’t know. Something about Ron.’

‘No. Before.’

Adam frowned. ‘I honestly don’t know.’

Marge stared at him for several seconds, and Harriet had the strange sense that she was trying to pull something out of memory and getting more annoyed each time it refused to come.

Adam gave a small laugh. ‘Have I done something?’

‘Yes.’

‘Marge,’ Harriet said.

‘What?’

‘You can’t tell somebody they’ve done something and then not tell them what.’

‘I will when I know.’

Adam looked at Harriet, clearly expecting help, but she had none to give him. Marge stepped a little closer.

‘What’s your full name?’

A short silence followed.

‘Adam Mercer.’

Marge shook her head once. Adam watched her. ‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘That didn’t look like nothing.’

‘I said it was nothing.’

She turned away and went back to the pile on the floor, though now she wasn’t really looking through it so much as moving things from one side to the other.

Adam watched her before looking back at Harriet.

‘Does she always like me this much?’

‘No. Sometimes she’s rude.’

‘I heard that,’ Marge said.

‘You were supposed to.’

Adam laughed again, and Marge’s hand stopped halfway through a stack of photographs. This time Harriet definitely saw it: something about him was bothering her.

‘Marge?’

‘I’m looking.’

‘For what?’

Marge picked up another photograph and stared at it.

‘I told you. I’ll know when I find it.’

Marge stood up. ‘How is she?’ Marge asked.

Adam looked briefly surprised. ‘Mum?’

‘Who else?’

‘She’s doing all right. Better, actually.’

Oh that's marvellous to hear, and We heard that you had moved her? Marge's tone was oddly inquisitive.

‘Yes, yes—to somewhere more comfortable.’

‘Oh how lovely’, Marge’s grip tightened slightly around the mug. ‘Where?’

Alex looked around the room for a respite from the inquisition.

‘A private hospital. Somewhere very nice’ he smiled.

Oh spectacular she will love that. ‘Which one?’

Adam paused. ‘It’s quite discreet.’

‘That isn’t a name.’

Harriet felt the first flicker of irritation. Marge had started this as concern for Mrs Fitz, which Harriet understood, but there was something in her tone now that was becoming increasingly difficult to defend.

‘Marge.’

‘What?’

‘He’s been here about ten seconds.’

‘I’m asking where Mrs Fitz is.’

Adam, to his credit, still looked calm. ‘She wanted somewhere quiet. Somewhere she could recover without people coming in and out all day.’

‘Can we visit?’

‘Not yet. But soon, I hope. Very soon.’

‘Why?’

‘She’s resting. She’s been through a lot.’

‘That’s not a reason.’

‘Marge.’

Harriet stepped closer, partly because the conversation was beginning to carry across reception and partly because Sally had already stopped pretending not to listen. Rod had also looked up from whatever he had been doing, which meant they were approximately thirty seconds away from the entire building becoming involved.

Marge ignored her.

‘How long is she going to be there?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘Who does?’

‘The doctors, hopefully.’

‘And you.’

Adam’s smile thinned slightly. ‘I’m involved, yes.’

‘That’s convenient.’

Harriet was beginning to wish Marge would leave it alone.

‘Marge, enough.’

Marge looked at her as though she had said something unreasonable.

‘What?’

‘You’re questioning him like he’s under caution.’

‘I’m asking perfectly normal questions.’

‘No, you’re not.’

‘I want to know where Mrs Fitz is.’

‘So do I, but that doesn’t mean you get to stand here demanding somebody’s private medical information.’

‘It’s not private if she lives here.’

‘It is still private.’

Marge looked unconvinced. Adam gave Harriet a small smile. ‘Honestly, it’s fine.’

It wasn’t really. Harriet knew that now. He was being polite, but she could see the effort in it.

Then Marge said, ‘How old are you?’

Harriet stared at her. Adam blinked. ‘Sorry?’

‘How old are you?’

‘Marge.’

‘What?’

‘You cannot ask him that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s rude.’

‘He knows how old he is.’

Sally made a small noise behind her mug and then immediately looked down when Harriet glanced over.

Adam gave a short laugh. ‘Fifty-one.’

Marge repeated it. ‘Fifty-one.’

‘Yes.’

She looked at him for a little too long. Harriet could see her working something out, or trying to. It was the same expression Marge got when she was doing mental arithmetic at the till and had already decided the machine was wrong.

‘What?’ Adam asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘That didn’t look like nothing.’

Marge ignored him.

‘So you were born in—’

‘Marge.’

‘What?’

‘No.’

‘I haven’t said anything.’

‘You were about to start calculating his date of birth.’

‘I was not.’

‘You literally started with ‘so you were born in’.’

‘That could have been anything.’

Harriet gave her a look. Marge folded her arms and looked back at Adam instead.

‘How long have you lived away?’

Adam's smile had gone now, though his voice stayed even. 'A long time.'

'How long?'

'Years.'

'That's not very specific.'

'I wasn't trying to be.'

'And did you come here before?'

Adam hesitated. Harriet noticed that too.

'Years ago?' Marge pressed.

'Sometimes.'

Marge's eyes narrowed.

There was something about the exchange Harriet didn't like, although she wasn't entirely sure whether she disliked Adam's evasiveness or Marge's insistence more.

'Marge, that's enough now.'

'Whoops. Sorry. Yes, forgive me. No more from me today.' Marge zipped her lips with one finger before turning towards the hallway, just as Alex Kilner approached.

Alex came across the hall. Harriet hadn't realised he was there, although from the look on his face he had clearly heard enough of the conversation to know exactly who Adam was.

'Adam.'

Adam turned, his smile gone. 'Alex.'

Alex stopped in front of him and held out his hand.

It was such an oddly formal gesture that Harriet noticed it straight away. Alex wasn't generally a handshaker. He barely seemed interested in acknowledging most people unless there was a practical reason to do so, yet here he was standing squarely in front of Adam with one hand extended as though they were meeting in a boardroom.

Adam hesitated before taking Alex's hand. The handshake was brief and stiff. Harriet had expected at least a little polite conversation, but neither man seemed particularly interested in providing any.

'Good to see you,' Adam said.

Alex released his hand.

'Is it?'

Harriet looked at him. Adam gave a short laugh, but it sounded flatter now. 'Still charming.'

Alex ignored that.

‘What brings you back today?’

‘Slipper emergency, apparently.’

‘Another one? The woman must have enough slippers to fill the nightwear section at Debenhams.’

Harriet frowned. ‘Alex.’

He looked at her. ‘What?’

‘That was rude. Plus Debenhams closed down years ago.’

Adam glanced between them.

There was something different about him now. Not nervous exactly, but more alert. The easy amusement he had carried in with him had gone.

Alex nodded towards the corridor.

‘Can I have a word?’

Adam’s face tightened slightly. ‘About?’

‘Just a word.’

Marge and Sally both looked up immediately. Harriet noticed. Adam held Alex’s gaze for another second before giving a small shrug.

‘Fine.’

Alex stepped aside to let him pass, still completely professional and completely unfriendly. Harriet watched them walk away together, neither saying anything until they were out of earshot.

Behind her, Marge said quietly, ‘See.’

Harriet turned.

‘See what?’

Marge looked towards the corridor where they had disappeared, then down at the old photograph still sitting beside her mug.

‘I don’t know yet.’

For once, Harriet believed her.

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# CHAPTER 37

Improvising

The office door opened at the far end of the corridor, and everybody moved at once.

Marge dropped into the nearest chair with such speed that she nearly missed it, Rod pushed the walkie-talkie behind his back, and Harriet grabbed the first thing she could reach from the reception desk, which turned out to be a laminated fire evacuation sign. She held it in both hands and stared down at it with a level of concentration she'd last felt during her GCSEs.

Adam appeared first, holding the abandoned walkie-talkie between two fingers, with Alex just behind him.

Nobody said anything. Marge, apparently deciding that simple inactivity would look suspicious, picked up the boiled egg she had left beside her mug and began polishing it with a tissue.

Harriet glanced sideways at her but decided there was no time to ask. Rod, as Rod would, had also concluded that something needed to be done, although his solution was less clear. He rolled his shoulders backwards, then forwards, before lifting one knee and lowering it again.

Harriet stared at him over the top of the evacuation sign.

'What are you doing?' she whispered.

'Improvising.'

At the other end of the corridor, Alex and Adam had stopped in the doorway rather than coming back into reception. They were still talking quietly, and the moment Harriet realised that, every part of her attention shifted towards them.

In a sheer stroke of panic-induced genius—or insanity—she lowered the evacuation sign, placed it on the desk and turned to Rod with sudden purpose.

‘Right,’ she said, much louder than necessary. ‘And stretch.’

Rod stopped moving. Harriet widened her eyes at him.

‘Stretch,’ she ordered through her teeth.

He immediately lifted both arms above his head.

‘That’s it. Good. Hold it there.’

Marge looked at Harriet as though she had completely lost her mind. Harriet ignored her and raised her own arms.

‘Now down.’

Rod lowered his arms.

‘And up again.’

They both lifted them. From the doorway, Alex’s voice carried just far enough for Harriet to catch part of what he was saying.

‘…I’m not asking you to agree.’

Harriet turned her head slightly, keeping her arms above her as though this had always been the plan.

Adam replied, but his voice was too low.

‘Again,’ Harriet said.

Rod lowered his arms and raised them once more. Harriet joined him, trying not to look towards the office even though that was now the only place she wanted to look.

Alex said something else.

‘…what she wants is the only thing that matters.’

Harriet leaned very slightly in their direction. Beside her, Rod exhaled loudly through his nose.

‘Can you breathe more quietly?’ she whispered.

Rod looked offended. ‘I am breathing quietly.’

‘You sound like a horse.’

He lowered his arms. Harriet glanced towards the office again. Adam was saying something now, but she could only catch the rhythm of it rather than the words.

‘Shoulders,’ she said quickly.

Rod started rotating his shoulders. Harriet copied him.

‘Other way.’

He reversed them. For some reason this made the whole thing feel more legitimate, and Harriet committed to it.

The main doors opened behind them and Sally came back into reception carrying a large roll of bin bags and a fresh box of rubber gloves.

Harriet and Rod were now standing side by side, rotating their shoulders in opposite directions. Sally stared at them.

‘What are yous two doing?’

‘Exercise,’ Harriet said.

‘Circulation,’ Rod added.

Sally looked from one to the other. ‘I’m half covered in shit down there and he’s prancing about like a pony at a folk fair.’

Harriet moved into a side step because she had run out of upper-body exercises and needed some way to keep the performance going.

Rod copied her immediately. Sally watched them both for another second before turning to Marge.

‘And what are you doing?’

‘Polishing an egg.’

Sally nodded once.

‘Fair play.’

That was apparently enough information for her.

Harriet inhaled and realised the side steps were a little over ambitious and were making her slightly warmer than she wanted to be.

Behind Sally, Alex and Adam were still standing in the doorway. Harriet changed direction, and Rod changed with her.

She now had no idea what sort of exercise class she was supposedly running, but it seemed too late to stop.

Adam’s voice reached her properly this time.

‘Whatever you think of me, I’m not going to stand by while—’

The rest disappeared.

Harriet increased the size of her steps without meaning to.

‘What did he say?’ Rod whispered.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You told me not to talk.’

‘Then don’t.’

Rod nodded and kept moving. Alex answered.

‘…not going to help.’

Adam said something Harriet missed.

‘…I know that.’

Alex again.

‘…then don’t make it worse.’

Harriet was now properly invested, which was unfortunate because her thighs had started to notice the exercise.

‘Little jog,’ she said.

Rod immediately began jogging on the spot. Harriet looked at him. She had meant something more like a gentle bounce. Still, he was already going.

She joined in. Within seconds she realised this had been a mistake.

Her breathing became louder, her hair was beginning to stick slightly at the back of her neck, and Rod seemed to have discovered a completely unnecessary second wind.

‘Get the arms going,’ he said.

‘I know how to jog, Rod.’

‘You’re not using them.’

Harriet started pumping her arms. At the office doorway, Adam finally stepped back.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll leave it there.’

Alex gave a short nod. Adam turned towards reception and immediately saw Harriet jogging on the spot beside Rod. There was no possible way to stop now without making the whole thing look even stranger.

Harriet lifted one hand.

‘Morning.’

It came out slightly breathless. Adam looked at her, then at Rod, then back at her.

‘Exercise class?’

Harriet nodded while continuing to jog.

‘Yes.’

‘Right.’

‘Staff wellbeing.’

Rod nodded enthusiastically. ‘Circulation.’

Adam looked as though he was trying very hard not to smile.

‘Well. Good luck.’

‘Thank you.’

Harriet regretted answering because she needed the breath. Adam glanced back at Alex.

‘We’ll talk later.’

‘I’m sure we will.’

Then he headed for the main doors.

Harriet kept jogging until he was completely out of sight. The second the doors closed behind him, she stopped so abruptly that Rod nearly jogged into her.

He carried on.

‘You can stop.’

‘I’m getting into it.’

‘Stop.’

Rod slowed reluctantly. Harriet bent forward slightly and put her hands on her thighs, taking a few deeper breaths and trying to recover some dignity.

Sally watched her.

‘That went well.’

Harriet raised one finger.

‘Give me…’

She inhaled.

‘…a second.’

Alex was still standing near the office. Harriet straightened. She hadn’t forgotten the way he had spoken to Adam, or the expression on his face, or the way he had asked how long Adam was staying as though he hoped the answer was measured in minutes.

She walked towards him, trying to get her breathing under control before she reached him.

‘That was…’

She stopped and drew another breath. Alex waited.

‘…really…’

Another one.

‘…rude.’

He looked at her. Harriet held up a hand before he could answer.

‘Don’t.’

‘I haven’t said anything.’

‘No, but you’re about to.’

‘I was going to ask if you were all right.’

‘I’m fine.’

She took another breath and straightened a little more.

‘You were unnecessarily…’

She had to pause again.

‘…hostile.’

Alex's eyes moved briefly past her towards Rod, who had now started stretching one calf against the reception desk, then back to Harriet.

'You've just been doing star jumps?'

'They were not star jumps.'

'What were they?'

'That is not the point.'

Harriet paused long enough to breathe properly.

'The point is that you were rude to Adam.'

'I shook his hand.'

'That isn't a defence.'

'I said hello.'

'You asked how long he was staying as though you were hoping the answer was six minutes.'

Alex said nothing. Harriet took another breath.

'He's here because his mother is ill, and whatever your problem is with him, you don't get to make him feel unwelcome here.'

'I know why he's here.'

'Good, then act like it.'

Alex studied her, then glanced towards the doors Adam had just gone through.

'Ah, I see. He's charmed you. Excellent.'

Harriet stared at him.

'What?'

Her breathing was still not quite cooperating, which made indignation considerably harder than it should have been.

'That has absolutely nothing to do with anything.'

'I didn't say it did.'

'You implied it.'

'I asked a question.'

'No, you didn't.'

She stopped, took another breath and pointed at him.

'And stop looking at me like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like you're waiting for me to finish breathing.'

'I am waiting for you to finish breathing.'

Harriet glared at him. Somewhere behind her, Rod said cheerfully, 'You need to pace yourself.'

Harriet closed her eyes.

‘Rod.’

‘Yes?’

‘Please stop helping.’

She opened them again and looked at Alex. Unfortunately, the brief pause hadn’t calmed her down. If anything, the exercise seemed to have sent all the blood in her body directly to whatever part of the brain stored irritation.

There were suddenly several things she wanted to say.

Possibly all of them.

‘And another thing.’

Alex’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

Harriet pointed at him, then immediately regretted the movement because it made breathing somehow more difficult.

‘You were here earlier.’

‘I’m here most days.’

‘With the clipboard.’

Alex looked at her.

‘And the man in the hard hat.’

‘The surveyor.’

‘Exactly.’

‘What about him?’

Harriet took a deeper breath and tried to organise the sentence before beginning it.

‘You were walking around Hawthorn with him, writing things down and pointing at cracks.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there are cracks.’

‘That is not an answer.’

‘It’s quite a good one.’

Harriet stared at him. The rush of blood had apparently removed whatever small amount of patience she had left.

‘No, it isn’t, because every time I turn around you are measuring something, photographing something or standing beside somebody who looks like they should be condemning a building.’

Alex folded his arms.

‘Nobody is condemning the building.’

‘You had a man in a hard hat looking at the ceiling.’

‘He was wearing a hard hat because he works in construction.’

‘I know why people wear hard hats.’

‘I wasn’t sure.’

Harriet inhaled sharply. That was partly outrage and partly necessity.

‘And you had a clipboard.’

‘I often have a clipboard.’

‘I know. That is part of the problem.’

Alex looked almost amused. Harriet hated that too.

‘You keep making lists.’

‘Yes.’

‘Of everything wrong with Hawthorn.’

‘Of work that needs doing.’

‘Cracks.’

‘Yes.’

‘Leaks.’

‘Yes.’

‘The roof.’

‘Yes.’

‘Windows.’

‘Yes.’

‘Projected costs.’

Alex paused. Harriet saw it.

‘There.’

‘What?’

‘That.’

‘What?’

‘You paused.’

‘I was waiting for you to finish.’

‘No, you weren’t.’

Her breathing was improving now, but unfortunately so was her ability to argue.

‘You are recording every single problem this building has, and Carelink owns forty-nine percent of it.’

Alex opened his mouth, but Harriet pressed on before he could answer.

‘Mrs Fitz owns fifty-one.’

‘I’m aware.’

‘And Mrs Fitz is in hospital.’

‘I am also aware of that.’

‘And now suddenly you’re here with surveyors and spreadsheets and photographs of cracks.’

‘Harriet—’

‘No.’

She held up a hand.

‘I’m not finished.’

Alex looked at her. Harriet took another breath. This one was almost normal.

She was getting stronger.

‘Then Adam turns up and you speak to him like he’s done something wrong just by being here, and somehow the first thing you two start arguing about is who owns what.’

‘That isn’t what we were arguing about.’

‘Well, it sounded remarkably like it from—’

Harriet stopped. Alex waited, while Marge put down the egg and Rod abandoned his stretches. Even Sally was looking at her. Harriet corrected herself.

‘From what I happened to hear.’

Alex stared at her.

‘Through the radio.’

Harriet looked away.

‘Yes.’

‘While exercising.’

‘That part was unrelated.’

‘Of course.’

She pointed at him again.

‘Do not distract me.’

‘I’m not doing anything.’

‘You do that.’

‘Do what?’

‘Make people explain themselves until they forget you were the one being questioned.’

Alex said nothing.

The exercise had left her flushed, breathless and far less cautious than usual, and now that she had started she couldn't seem to stop.

'What are you doing here, Alex?'

He looked at her.

'Working.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'You know what I mean.'

'I genuinely don't.'

'Yes, you do.'

Harriet stepped closer. She was breathing almost normally now, which was useful because this was beginning to feel important.

'You keep turning up and looking at everything as though you're trying to work out exactly how bad it is.'

'And I don't know whether you're trying to prove Hawthorn needs money, or prove it isn't worth money, or prove Mrs Fitz shouldn't be running it, but you are doing something.'

Alex took his time answering. That was enough to make Harriet's stomach tighten.

'There,' she said quietly. 'Again.'

Alex looked at her.

'Again what?'

'You went quiet.'

'Sometimes people do.'

'Not you.'

Behind Harriet, Marge made a small approving noise.

Alex glanced past her.

'Marge.'

'I didn't say anything.'

'You made a noise.'

'I'm allowed noises.'

Harriet turned back to Alex.

'Why are you documenting everything that's wrong with Hawthorn?'

Alex held her gaze.

'Because somebody needs to.'

'That still isn't an answer.'

'It is the only one I'm giving you.'

Harriet felt another flare of anger.

‘See, that. That is exactly what I mean.’

‘What?’

‘You stand there acting as though everybody else is being unreasonable for asking perfectly normal questions.’

Alex’s eyes dropped briefly to her chest.

Harriet looked down. She was still breathing more heavily than she would have liked.

‘Do not say it.’

‘I wasn’t going to.’

‘You were going to tell me to breathe.’

‘I was going to say you’re very red.’

‘That is worse.’

Behind her, Sally snorted.

Harriet ignored her. Alex looked at Harriet for another moment, then towards the main doors Adam had left through.

‘You don’t know enough about this yet.’

Something in the way he said it made her angrier.

‘That is incredibly patronising.’

‘It wasn’t meant to be.’

‘It was.’

‘No, it was factual.’

‘Which is somehow more annoying.’

Alex gave a small sigh. Harriet immediately pointed at him again.

‘And don’t sigh.’

‘I breathed.’

‘You breathed judgementally.’

‘That’s impressive.’

‘I can tell.’

Alex smiled, which only made Harriet more furious.

‘This isn’t funny.’

‘No.’

‘You’re smiling.’

‘I know.’

‘Why?’

Alex looked at her flushed face, then at Rod behind her, who had resumed a gentle calf stretch against the desk.

‘Because you’ve apparently worked yourself into a cardiovascular rage.’

Harriet stared at him. Sally made a choking noise. Marge put the egg down. Rod nodded thoughtfully.

‘That’ll happen.’

Harriet turned.

‘Rod.’

‘Yes?’

‘Nothing.’

She faced Alex again.

‘I am not in a cardiovascular rage.’

Alex looked at her while Harriet took one breath, then another.

‘Fine. Maybe slightly.’

‘That’s all I was saying.’

‘No, it wasn’t.’

‘No.’

Alex’s smile disappeared again.

Harriet watched him. Neither of them spoke.

Then Alex said, much more quietly, ‘Just be careful with Adam.’

The change in tone caught her.

‘What does that mean?’

Alex looked towards the doors again.

‘It means exactly what I said.’

‘Why?’

He didn’t answer.

Harriet waited.

‘Alex.’

Nothing.

And there it was again.

That infuriating wall.

Harriet folded her arms.

‘Fine.’

‘Fine?’

‘Yes.’

He looked mildly suspicious now. Harriet nodded.

‘Fine.’

She turned away then immediately turned back

‘But if I see you measuring another crack without telling me why, I’m filling it in myself.’

Alex looked at her.

‘With what?’

Harriet had no idea.

‘Something.’

‘Good plan.’

‘Shut up.’

She walked back towards reception. Rod looked at her.

‘Feel better?’

Harriet considered it.

‘Yes, actually.’

Rod nodded.

‘See, circulation.’

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# CHAPTER 38

Finding Mrs Fitz

For the next few days, Hawthorn House settled.

Not completely, because Hawthorn never did anything completely. The boiler made a noise on Tuesday morning that suggested it was considering something expensive, then thought better of it. Rod lost a slipper and accused the cleaner of moving it before discovering it folded inside the leg of his pyjama bottoms. Sally spent most of Wednesday trying to explain to Malcolm that the new television remote wasn't voice activated while he repeatedly shouted BBC One at it from progressively closer distances.

But the tension had eased.

Mrs Fitz was still away, Alex was still appearing with folders, notes and people in practical footwear, and Marge hadn't forgotten that she disliked Adam, but life had at least stopped feeling as though it was waiting for the next thing to go wrong.

Harriet had missed that feeling more than she realised. Adam had helped.

She wouldn't have admitted that to anyone at Hawthorn, and certainly not to Lucy, who still did not know quite how far the Adam situation had progressed. What had started as the occasional message had quietly become part of Harriet's day. Nothing dramatic, nothing relentless. He would send a photograph of some terrible motorway coffee, complain about hotel breakfasts or pass on the latest opinion Mrs Fitz had developed about institutional footwear. Harriet would reply, then discover twenty minutes later that they had wandered into an argument about supermarket bread or whether people who used cushions purely for decoration could be trusted.

There had been another dinner too.

Harriet had stopped pretending it wasn't a date, mostly because maintaining that position now required more mental effort than accepting

the obvious. She had gone out twice with the same man, deliberately, and had enjoyed herself both times.

Nothing significant had happened, although Adam had kissed her cheek when they said goodbye after the second dinner, which Harriet had treated as entirely normal until she got home and thought about the exact angle of it while brushing her teeth.

Twice.

Possibly three times and she still had not told Lucy.

At Hawthorn, Adam had stopped feeling like a new arrival as well. Rod liked him because he occasionally brought pastries. Sally liked him because he found her funny. Several of the residents had begun asking after him when he hadn't been in for a day or two, and Harriet had noticed that even people who barely knew him seemed comfortable when he walked through reception.

Only Marge remained unmoved.

At first Harriet had assumed it would pass. Marge disliked unfamiliar people as a matter of principle and had once refused to acknowledge a new window cleaner for six weeks because she said his van looked dishonest.

This felt different.

Marge watched Adam.

Not openly enough for him to challenge her, but Harriet noticed the way her attention shifted whenever he entered the room. She listened to his voice more carefully than she needed to. She had twice asked him where he had lived as a child, both times making it sound casual and both times losing interest the moment he gave her an answer.

The old photographs had become part of the reception furniture.

They were still spread across one end of the desk despite Harriet asking more than once whether the filing cabinet might eventually be allowed to have its contents back. Marge had worked through visitor books, Christmas parties, summer fêtes, staff leaving photographs and several albums containing so many unidentified people that Sally had suggested writing possibly dead beneath all of them and moving on.

On Thursday morning Harriet found Marge sitting alone at the table with one of the older albums open in front of her.

She'd already been there when Harriet arrived, and twenty minutes later she had barely moved. Harriet put her bag down beside the desk and watched her turn another page.

‘You’re still doing this?’

Marge did not look up straight away. She studied one photograph, turned the page, then turned it back again.

‘I told you. I know his face.’

Harriet pulled off her coat and hung it over the back of a chair. ‘You also told me yesterday that you once met Chris Tarrant in a petrol station.’

‘I did.’

‘You weren’t sure it was him.’

‘It looked like him.’

‘That is not the same thing.’

Marge finally glanced up. ‘It was close enough.’

Harriet smiled and moved round to the other side of the table.

There was less theatre in Marge today. No dramatic declarations, no sudden certainty. If anything, she looked annoyed with herself. She kept going backwards through the album rather than forwards, returning to the same group photographs as though she thought she had missed something the first time.

Harriet rested one hand on the back of the chair opposite.

‘What exactly are you looking for?’

Marge let out a breath through her nose and closed the album halfway.

‘That’s the problem. I don’t know.’

‘We’ve done this bit.’

‘No, I mean I really don’t know. His face is familiar, but Adam Mercer means absolutely nothing to me.’

That caught Harriet’s attention.

‘Maybe because you don’t know him.’

Marge gave her a dry look. ‘Helpful.’

‘I’m serious.’

‘So am I.’

She opened the album again and turned to a photograph taken in the garden, probably sometime in the early nineties. Harriet recognised Mrs Fitz immediately. Younger, different hair, but unmistakably her, standing beside a table covered in paper plates and bottles of something fluorescent.

There were perhaps twenty other people scattered around her.

Marge tapped the edge of the photograph.

‘Humphrey used to come here.’

Harriet looked at her. ‘Your Humphrey?’

‘He was never my Humphrey.’

‘You married him.’

‘That was my first mistake.’

Harriet smiled despite herself, but Marge was still looking at the photograph.

‘He came to things here. Christmas parties, summer things, anything involving free food and other people doing the washing up.’

Harriet pulled out the chair and sat down.

‘And you think Adam was here?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘That’s becoming a theme.’

Marge ignored the comment.

‘There was a boy sometimes.’

Harriet looked back at the photograph.

‘What boy?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘You remember meeting Chris Tarrant in a petrol station but not this?’

‘That was different.’

‘How?’

‘He had a very recognisable face.’

Harriet laughed, but Marge did not. She was still staring down at the album.

‘I remember not liking him.’

Harriet’s smile faded slightly.

‘The boy?’

‘Yes.’

‘You didn’t like a child?’

‘He wasn’t five.’

‘How old was he?’

‘Old enough to be unpleasant.’

There was something in Marge’s tone that made Harriet stop teasing her.

She leaned closer to the album, although none of the faces meant anything to her.

‘What did he do?’

Marge’s fingers stayed on the corner of the page.

For a while she seemed to search for the memory itself rather than an answer.

‘He used to repeat things.’

Harriet frowned.

‘What things?’

‘Things people said.’

‘That sounds fairly standard.’

‘No.’

Marge looked up then.

‘He’d repeat the words exactly, but never the meaning.’

Harriet thought about that properly. Marge was usually capable of remembering arguments from decades ago in enough detail to include the wallpaper, so the fact that she couldn’t produce a clean example bothered Harriet more than she wanted it to.

‘What sort of things did he repeat?’

Marge shook her head and went back to the album. She couldn’t remember the actual words anymore, only what followed them. Humphrey angry. Marge furious. Somebody insisting that she had said something she knew she hadn’t meant in the way it had been repeated.

And the boy.

That part had stayed.

‘He always looked pleased with himself,’ Marge said eventually. ‘That’s what I remember.’

Her voice had gone quieter.

Harriet watched her.

‘You think Adam is that boy?’

‘No.’

The answer came quickly.

Then Marge added, ‘I think his face reminds me of something, and I think that name doesn’t belong anywhere in my memory.’

Harriet sat back. That was less dramatic than she’d expected, but also harder to dismiss.

Before she could decide what to make of it, her phone buzzed against the desk.

Adam. The timing was so neat Harriet almost felt she was bugged.

Marge saw the name before Harriet could turn the screen over and gave a small snort.

‘Speak of the devil.’

Harriet picked up the phone. ‘You are not helping your case.’

Marge had already turned back to the photographs. Adam had sent a picture of a pair of pale pink slippers. Rejected again. Apparently these are ‘funereal.’ I’m running out of colours.

Harriet smiled before she had time to stop herself. When she looked up, Marge was watching her.

‘There.’

Harriet frowned. ‘What?’

‘That face.’

‘What face?’

‘The one you just made.’

Harriet put the phone down.

‘I’m allowed to smile.’

‘I know.’

‘Then why are you looking at me like that?’

‘Because you like him.’

Harriet sighed.

‘We are not doing this.’

‘I don’t care whether you like him.’

‘That’s remarkably progressive.’

‘I care that I know his face and I don’t know his name.’

Harriet glanced down at the old photographs again.

‘You could have met him once thirty years ago and forgotten what he was called.’

‘I could.’

‘That is considerably more likely than whatever you are trying to build.’

Marge nodded slowly.

‘It probably is.’

That should have reassured Harriet. Instead she found herself looking at Adam’s photograph again. The slippers. The message. The ease of him. There was nothing there to be suspicious of. Nothing at all.

Marge closed the album but left one hand resting on the cover.

‘I’m going to ask Rick something.’

Harriet looked up.

‘What?’

‘It’s not about Adam.’

‘Marge.’

‘It’s about Mrs Fitz.’

That changed the room immediately. Harriet sat forward.

'What about her?'

Marge glanced towards the corridor, then lowered her voice.

'I've been trying to work out where he moved her.'

Harriet stared at her.

'You're still doing that?'

'Yes.'

'He said she was somewhere private.'

'I know what he said.'

'He said she wasn't up to visitors.'

'I know.'

Marge turned the album slightly so that the photograph of Mrs Fitz faced Harriet.

'And I'm tired of hearing what Adam says.'

She tapped one finger against the photograph.

'I want to know where she actually is.'

Rick called back just before lunch.

By then Harriet had almost managed to push Marge's theories to the edges of her mind, helped by the fact that Hawthorn had returned to its usual level of manageable chaos. A delivery had arrived containing six boxes of continence pads and no paperwork, Sally had spent twenty minutes looking for a set of keys that turned out to be in her coat pocket, and Rod had become convinced somebody had moved his chair despite the fact he was sitting in it at the time.

Adam had messaged too. He sent a photograph of a bowl of pale soup with the caption:

*Apparently this is 'insulting'.*

Harriet had replied that, to be fair, it looked as though somebody had removed most of its personality before serving it. Adam came back almost immediately with:

*She says beige is what happens when food gives up.* Harriet had laughed out loud at that and then, annoyingly, caught Marge looking at her from across the room.

She had chosen to ignore her. So when Marge's phone rang, Harriet was halfway through sorting the delivery paperwork and had stopped thinking about private hospitals altogether.

Marge looked at the screen and stood.

‘I’ll take this outside.’

Sally glanced up from behind the desk. ‘That sounds serious.’

‘It’s Rick.’

‘That sounds less serious.’

Marge gave her a look and headed for the doors. Harriet waited until they had closed behind her before looking at Sally.

‘You do realise she’ll kill you one day.’

‘She’ll have to catch me first.’

Harriet went back to the paperwork. A few minutes passed before Marge came back in.

Harriet noticed immediately that something had changed. She had left wearing a faintly smug expression, as though simply having a surgeon boyfriend had already proved useful, but when she returned there was no trace of it. She crossed reception without speaking, put her phone down on the desk and sat on the edge of the nearest chair.

Harriet stopped what she was doing.

‘What?’

Marge looked at her. ‘She wasn’t transferred.’

Harriet frowned. ‘Mrs Fitz?’

Marge nodded. Sally stopped sorting through the keys and turned towards them.

‘Rick spoke to somebody he knows,’ Marge explained. ‘He couldn’t get details, obviously, and I didn’t ask him to, but he could establish whether she’d been transferred into another private facility locally.’

Harriet already knew the answer from her face.

‘She hadn’t,’ Marge said.

Harriet said nothing. The information seemed to take longer than it should have done to settle, probably because it disrupted the version she had been carrying around in her head all week.

‘So where did she go?’

Marge glanced briefly at Sally before looking back at Harriet.

‘She was discharged.’

‘Discharged where?’

‘Into the care of family.’

That quietened the room.

Sally was the first to say it.

‘Adam.’

Harriet nodded slowly.

It had to be him. There was nobody else they knew about, and when she thought back over everything he had said, she realised there was nothing technically impossible about it. He had talked about somewhere private and discreet, somewhere Mrs Fitz could recover quietly without people coming and going, and Harriet had filled in the rest herself. She had heard *hospital* because that was what she expected to hear, but now she could no longer remember whether Adam had actually used the word at all.

Marge watched her thinking. Harriet picked up her phone.

‘Maybe he meant his house.’

‘He might have,’ Marge said.

‘He never actually said another hospital.’

‘No.’

‘So we assumed.’

Marge gave a small nod. ‘Looks that way.’

Harriet opened her conversation with Adam and stared at the screen, then typed. How is she today? We were wondering if we could come and see her.

She read it back once, decided it sounded normal enough, then sent it and put the phone down. Marge looked at the phone and then at Harriet.

‘Don’t,’ Harriet said.

Marge settled back in the chair and took an illegal indoor drag of something melon smelling from her vape.

They did not have to wait long. Less than two minutes later Harriet’s phone buzzed.

Adam’s reply was exactly the sort of message that made her feel faintly foolish for being suspicious.

*She’s tired today. Didn’t sleep brilliantly. Probably best not to descend on her just yet, but I’ll let you know when she’s up to visitors x*

Harriet read it twice. Nothing about it was strange. Mrs Fitz had been ill and was recovering, and tired people were allowed to be tired.

Still, the question they had actually asked remained unanswered.

Harriet typed again. Where is she now?

This time the response took longer.

Not long enough to mean anything on its own, but long enough for Harriet to notice the dots appear, disappear and then appear again.

Eventually:

*She’s with me. I thought I’d told you.*

Sally had come round the desk by then and read the message over Harriet's shoulder.

'Oh.'

Marge stayed silent. Harriet typed more slowly this time. I thought you said she'd been moved somewhere private.

Adam replied almost immediately. Yes. Here. Sorry if that wasn't clear.

Harriet leaned back in the chair and looked at the message.

It was entirely possible that this was all it was: a misunderstanding. Of course it was. Adam had said private, Harriet had heard hospital, and somewhere between those two things she had built a version of events that had never actually been stated. She immediately discounted this as it made her feel as though she had created the problem herself, but there was also something inside her gnawing at the fact that Adam had never corrected the assumption either.

'He didn't lie,' she said eventually.

Marge looked at her. 'I didn't say he did.'

'No, but he let us think she was still in some kind of care.'

Marge frowned. 'That's different.'

Harriet looked back at the screen. Yes. It was. She had been finding excuses for Adam ever since he appeared at Hawthorn, and now she was running out of them.

Harriet looked at the message for another few seconds before typing again. Can I come and see her? Just me. Ten minutes.

She sent it before she could overthink the wording and put the phone down, although her hand stayed beside it on the desk as if that might somehow make the reply arrive faster.

Around her, Hawthorn had gone oddly quiet. Marge had stopped pacing, Sally was moving a small stack of post from one side of the desk to the other without really looking at it, and even Rod had paused halfway through dismantling the remains of his Danish.

The answer came quickly.

*Not today. Honestly, she's exhausted.*

Harriet frowned at the screen. There was nothing unreasonable about that. Mrs Fitz had been ill and moved around more than Harriet liked, and perhaps the last thing she wanted was people turning up to ask how she was feeling.

Still, Harriet typed that she would only stay ten minutes.

This time Adam called.

She stared at his name before answering and moved a few steps away from the others, though not far enough to give herself any real privacy.

He sounded exactly as he always did: warm, easy, almost faintly amused before either of them had said anything funny. He told her Mrs Fitz had been tired and unsettled that morning, had slept badly and was getting herself confused about things.

That word caught Harriet more than the rest.

‘Confused how?’

‘Nothing dramatic,’ Adam said, and there was a small pause before he added that she had been asking the same questions and working herself up over things that did not matter.

Harriet glanced towards Marge, who had gone still again.

‘Can I come over? I found some slippers I know she would love paired with that.’

The hesitation on the other end was brief, but she heard it.

‘I don’t think today’s a good idea.’

Harriet leaned against the desk. She told him she would only stay ten minutes, that she did not expect to be entertained, that she simply wanted to see Mrs Fitz for herself.

Adam softened his voice when he answered.

‘Honestly, Harriet, she’d hate you seeing her like this.’

That irritated her more than she expected.

Mrs Fitz probably would hate being seen unwell. She had once refused to answer the door because her hair was wet and told Harriet there was no reason for both of them to suffer. But that had been Mrs Fitz’s decision, not somebody else’s.

‘Has she actually said she doesn’t want me to come?’

There was a pause.

‘She’s not really herself today. I’m worried, if I’m honest, Harriet.’

Harriet looked down at the carpet.

‘Worried in what way?’ Harriet grasped a carved figurine glued to the mantelpiece and traced its outline with one finger, her nail leaving an indent in the soft, aged wood.

This time Adam took a little longer before answering.

‘She’s confused, more confused each day.’

Behind Harriet, Marge shifted in her chair.

Adam carried on before Harriet could reply. He wasn't trying to keep anyone away, he said. He simply needed a bit of time to get his mother settled and wanted Harriet to trust him on that.

Trust me.

Harriet closed her eyes briefly. It was such a reasonable thing to ask that she almost resented it.

She agreed, though when she asked when she might see Mrs Fitz instead, all Adam could offer was soon. Tomorrow depended on how she was. The day after depended on the same. He promised he would tell Harriet the moment she was up to visitors, and somehow the conversation reached the point where pushing any harder would have made Harriet sound unreasonable.

When the call ended, she stayed where she was, looking at the dark screen.

Marge did not wait long.

'He won't let you go.'

Harriet turned. 'He didn't say that.'

'No,' Marge said, and her tone was calmer than Harriet expected. 'He said just enough around it.'

That annoyed Harriet because she knew exactly what Marge meant.

Sally came around the desk and asked the question Harriet had somehow not thought to ask until then.

'Where does the bloke actually live?'

Harriet opened her mouth and realised she had no answer.

'What?' Sally said. 'I thought you were dating him.'

'No not dating, we've been on dates but -

'Bloody hell, you're a slow mover, aren't you? Always get a look at the gaff early on. Very important they don't live in a rat-infested shithole before you do the doings with them—for hygiene purposes, mainly.'

That seemed to change the room again.

Marge reached for her phone. Harriet looked at her. 'What are you doing?'

'Finding out.'

There was no drama in the way she said it. She simply put her glasses on, opened the browser and started searching.

Harriet almost told her not to, then stopped herself. That would have been ridiculous considering the fact she had just spent ten minutes trying to

persuade Adam to give her access to Mrs Fitz.

For the next few minutes Marge worked quietly, moving between search results and dismissing the obvious wrong ones. One Adam Mercer was far too young, another lived in Wales, and a third appeared to have died in 2018, which Marge said was probably not him unless Harriet's dating life had become significantly stranger than anyone realised.

Eventually she stopped.

'There.'

Harriet moved closer. The address on the screen meant nothing to her at first. Then Sally leaned over her shoulder and said it did not match the house.

Harriet looked at her.

'The Facebook house.'

That made Harriet reach for her own phone.

She found Adam's profile again and scrolled until she reached the photograph she remembered: Adam standing on a terrace outside a large detached house with pale stone walls, huge black-framed windows and enough glass to make Harriet immediately think about heating bills. She had seen the picture several times without really looking at it, but somewhere along the way it had simply become his house in her mind.

She typed the address Marge had found into Maps. Street View loaded. At first, she assumed they had the wrong place.

The building was a tired converted terrace divided into flats, with a narrow shared entrance and two wheelie bins pushed against a low brick wall. One upstairs window had a blind hanging slightly crooked, and the paved frontage was barely big enough for the bins, never mind the sort of furniture Harriet had seen in Adam's photographs.

She checked the address again.

'That can't be right.'

Marge folded her arms. 'Why?'

Harriet held up the two phones side by side.

'Because that is not that. He's not that.'

Rod appeared behind them and squinted at both screens.

'Which one are we buying?'

Harriet did not look at him. 'Neither.'

'Good. I like the big one.'

Harriet barely heard him. There was nothing wrong with living in a flat. That was not the issue. She did not care whether Adam lived in a mansion, a terrace or a room above a kebab shop.

What bothered her was that she had thought she knew.

The house, the restaurants, the gloves, the way he carried himself through expensive places as though he belonged in them; Harriet had taken all of those things and built a life around him without ever being told the facts. Adam had never said the large house was his. He had simply stood in front of it, photographed himself inside it, used the word *home* and allowed anybody looking to do the rest.

Sally suggested it could belong to a friend, or be somewhere he used to live. Marge pointed out that it could even be an old address. All of those explanations were possible, and Harriet knew that. The problem was that she had begun collecting possible explanations for Adam far more often than she liked.

'I'm going there.'

Marge's answer was immediate.

'No.'

Harriet turned to her. 'You've just spent ten minutes finding the address.'

'Yes, because I wanted to know where she is. Not because I wanted you turning up there alone.'

Harriet almost laughed.

'You bugged an office with a walkie-talkie this month.'

Marge waved that away. 'That was controlled.'

'It ended with Malcolm's bowel movements being broadcast into a private meeting.'

Sally raised one hand from behind them.

'In fairness, I did not know we were running surveillance.'

Harriet looked back at Marge.

'I just want to see Mrs Fitz.'

'And we all want that,' Sally said, more seriously now. 'But perhaps charging round there on your own is not the cleverest way to do it.'

Harriet folded her arms.

'So what exactly are you suggesting?'

The look Sally and Marge exchanged told her the answer before either of them said it.

'No.'

Sally frowned. ‘I haven’t said anything.’

‘You don’t need to.’

Marge leaned back in her chair.

‘Whatever you think Carelink is doing with Hawthorn, that can wait.’

Harriet started to object, but Marge carried on.

‘If they want the building, if Alex is measuring every crack because he has some plan for the place, if all your theories are right, we can deal with every bit of that afterwards. But Mrs Fitz needs to be here to fight them about it.’

Harriet had been so busy deciding who was telling the truth that she’d almost forgotten the one person who could answer most of her questions wasn’t there to be asked.

Her eyes returned to the photograph album. There was Mrs Fitz, younger and sharper, standing in the Hawthorn garden with that familiar expression of complete authority. She would have had plenty to say about the current situation. Very little of it printable.

Sally spoke more gently this time.

‘You don’t have to trust him. You just need somebody who knows what to do.’

Unfortunately, Harriet knew exactly who she meant.

She thought about Alex and his endless questions, the way he separated what people knew from what they assumed, the irritating precision that made every conversation with him feel like being cross-examined by a spreadsheet.

Those qualities sounded useful now.

Harriet reached for her coat. Marge’s mouth twitched.

‘Don’t.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘You look pleased.’

‘I am a little bit.’

Rod glanced up from the Danish.

‘What are you going to do?’

Harriet sighed.

‘The one thing I thought I would never do: ask Alex bloody Kilner for help.’

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# CHAPTER 39

After Hours

By seven o’clock the rain had become ridiculous.

It had started sometime in the afternoon as a thin, miserable drizzle and then settled over Hawthorn properly as darkness fell, hammering against the conservatory roof and throwing itself at the front windows in sudden gusts. Outside, the car park had turned into a sheet of black water broken only by reflected security lights and the occasional sweep of headlights on the road beyond.

The shift should have been over.

Sally already had her coat on, Harriet had closed everything she could reasonably close for the evening, and Marge had finally abandoned the photograph albums long enough to make tea. Even Hawthorn itself seemed to be winding down, doors closing along the corridor and televisions becoming louder as people settled into their rooms.

Harriet tried Alex once and went straight to voicemail. She frowned at the screen and tried again. Voicemail.

She stood with the phone in her hand, feeling irritation rise far faster than it had any right to. Alex had spent weeks materialising whenever nobody wanted him, appearing in reception with a folder under one arm and questions nobody had asked for, yet the one evening Harriet had reached the point of actually needing him he had apparently vanished from civilisation.

She lowered the phone. Waiting until morning would have been the sensible thing to do, and she knew that.

Mrs Fitz had been with Adam for several days already. There was no proof that she was unsafe, no emergency call, no message asking for help. Adam had said she was tired and unsettled, which was entirely plausible after everything she had been through.

Harriet tried to sit with that explanation. It lasted about three seconds; nobody had spoken to Mrs Fitz.

Not Harriet. Not Sally. Not Marge. Nobody at Hawthorn had heard her voice since she left hospital, and the more Harriet thought about that, the worse it felt.

She looked towards the glass doors, where rain was still sliding in thick streams down the panes.

‘No.’

Marge glanced over from her tea. Harriet was already moving.

‘I’m not waiting until tomorrow.’

Sally stopped halfway through putting her bag over her shoulder. She did not ask what Harriet meant. Her face said she already knew.

Harriet paced once behind the desk, phone still in her hand, trying to think through what came next and failing because every thought seemed to arrive attached to another one. She needed Alex. She hated that she needed Alex. She did not know where he was. She did not know where Mrs Fitz was, not really. She knew where Adam said she was. She knew where Adam lived, apparently. She knew too many things that weren’t quite facts and not enough things that were.

That, annoyingly, was exactly the sort of mess Alex was good at.

‘I’m going to speak to him,’ she said.

Sally finished pulling on her coat.

‘At his house?’

Harriet looked at her. That was apparently answer enough, because Marge put her mug down.

‘We’ll come.’

Harriet immediately shook her head. ‘No. Absolutely not. Our shift is finished and I’m asking a colleague for help, not launching some kind of expedition.’

From the armchair, Rod looked up.

‘When does my shift finish?’

Harriet turned towards him. She genuinely had nothing.

‘You don’t have a shift, Rod.’

He looked surprised by that.

‘I’ve been here all day.’

‘You live here.’

‘Yes, but I’ve done things.’

Sally turned away because she had already started laughing. Rod continued, apparently determined to make his case. ‘I did the radio.’

Harriet closed her eyes.

‘Yes. I remember the radio.’

‘That should count.’

‘It was…very helpful’

He seemed dissatisfied by this but settled back slightly, muttering something about being useful.

Harriet went into the office and opened the staff directory. Finding Alex’s address took less than a minute, which somehow made the whole thing feel more intrusive rather than less. She copied it into her phone and stared at it, suddenly aware that she was about to drive to her boss’s house, at night, in heavy rain, because he had failed to answer two phone calls and she had become convinced the woman she cared about had disappeared into somebody else’s version of events.

Perfectly normal Thursday.

When she came back out, Marge was watching her.

Harriet pulled on her coat.

‘Stay here.’

Marge lifted her salon honed eyebrows. Harriet pointed at her. ‘I mean it. No following me, no investigating, no radios, no brilliant ideas.’

‘I haven’t said anything.’

‘That’s the problem.’

She looked at Sally.

‘Do not let her do anything.’

Sally nodded far too quickly.

‘I won’t.’

Harriet stared at both of them. The agreement had been immediate, Suspiciously immediate. She should probably have dealt with that. Instead, she looked outside again and felt another spike of panic when the rain seemed even heavier than before.

For more than a few seconds she thought about abandoning the whole thing.

Then Mrs Fitz’s face came back into her mind, not the hospital version of her, not Adam’s description of her being confused or unsettled, but Mrs Fitz at Hawthorn: furious about cardigans, rearranging vases, complaining about food, knowing exactly where everything belonged and who had moved it.

Harriet picked up her bag. Behind her, Rod called out, ‘Do I clock off now, then?’

She stopped with one hand on the door.

‘Yes, Rod.’

There was a pause.

‘How?’

Harriet took a breath that was so deep she felt it in her chest. Then she opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

The drive took twenty-five minutes and felt longer. Thick globules of dense rain hammered against the windscreen hard enough to make the wipers seem decorative, and every set of headlights coming towards Harriet turned the road briefly white. She missed the turning once, swore at the satnav as though it had personally betrayed her, then had to circle back through a petrol station, possibly the one where Marge saw Chris Tarrant that time, and sat beneath fluorescent lights, trying to remember whether turning up at Alex Kilner’s house soaked through and slightly panicked counted as professional conduct.

It probably didn’t, but by the time she reached his street Harriet had stopped caring.

The houses were older than she expected: red brick, bay windows, mature trees leaning over the pavements and front gardens that had clearly survived several generations of people having different opinions about what should be planted in them. She slowed as the numbers changed, then stopped halfway along the row and checked the address twice.

Alex’s house was a narrow Victorian place with a dark painted door and warm light spilling through the downstairs windows. Harriet had expected something newer, perhaps a neat little house with grey walls and handleless cupboards, the sort of place where somebody had made a conscious decision about where to put one single black vase. This was nothing like that. Through the bay window she could see bookshelves covering most of one wall and the edge of a lamp with a green glass shade.

She sat in silence watching rain run down the windscreen, irrationally bothered by the fact that this did not fit the version of him she had been carrying around. Then another gust of rain hit the car, so she grabbed her bag, pulled her coat tight around herself and made a run for the front door.

By the time she reached it she was soaked anyway. Water had found its way down the back of her neck, her hair was stuck to one side of her face

and one shoe had developed the unpleasant squelch that meant there was no point pretending she had made it across the path successfully.

Harriet knocked and immediately became aware of how insane this might look from the other side of the door. Nothing happened at first, then a light came on further inside and footsteps approached.

Alex opened the door wearing dark trousers and a navy jumper, one hand still resting on the handle. He simply looked at her, his eyes taking in the wet hair, dripping coat and the water already collecting on the doorstep.

‘Harriet?’

She pushed a strand of hair away from her face. ‘I need your help.’

Whatever he had been about to ask disappeared. Alex stepped back immediately and told her to come in.

The warmth hit first, enough to make the cold water on Harriet’s skin suddenly noticeable, but it was the sitting room beyond the hall that stopped her. Books were everywhere, not decorative ones arranged by colour or height but actual books: cracked spines, uneven stacks, some upright, some lying sideways where the shelves had clearly run out. A worn leather chair sat beside the fireplace with a blanket thrown over one arm, and a dark red rug covered most of the floor. There were framed maps, old photographs, a battered wooden desk with papers spread across it and a record player beneath the window surrounded by uneven piles of vinyl.

Nothing matched properly, and nothing seemed chosen to match.

It looked lived in.

Harriet took another step inside and noticed a small side table with a repaired crack running through one corner, the join still visible beneath the polish. Alex had already shut the door and was taking her coat before enough water could run off it to damage anything.

‘You’re looking at the table,’ he said.

‘I’m not.’

‘You were.’

Harriet looked back at it. ‘It’s cracked.’

‘I know.’

There was something deeply irritating about hearing him say that in his own house.

‘You haven’t replaced it.’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘It was my grandfather’s,’ Alex said, glancing towards the table.

Well, that was irritating. She’d been perfectly prepared to judge him for keeping a broken table, and now he’d gone and made it rather difficult.

While Alex hung her coat near the radiator, she looked around again. There were old things everywhere, but not expensive-looking things. Kept things. A chipped ceramic bowl full of keys, a framed photograph slightly crooked on the wall, a brass lamp with a green shade that Harriet loved immediately and resented him for owning. The whole room had the same quality she loved about Hawthorn: things had history here, things had been repaired instead of replaced, and objects were allowed to be old without apologising for it.

Looking around his house, Harriet found it harder to believe all the cracks Alex had been documenting meant what she had assumed.

He noticed her looking around. ‘What did you think my house would look like?’

Harriet considered lying but decided there was little point. ‘Grey.’

Alex looked at her. ‘Grey?’

‘Yes. And probably very clean.’

‘My house is clean.’

‘That isn’t what I meant.’

‘I know.’

Harriet looked towards the sitting room again. ‘You have an alarming number of books.’

‘So do libraries.’

‘You don’t live in a library.’

‘Debatable.’

That almost made her smile, but then she remembered why she had come.

‘Mrs Fitz isn’t in hospital.’

Everything in Alex’s face changed. He stopped being amused and gave her his full attention.

‘What do you mean?’

Harriet stepped further into the room and explained what Marge had found out: Mrs Fitz had been discharged into family care, Adam had admitted she was staying with him, Harriet had asked to visit and been refused, and nobody from Hawthorn had actually spoken directly to Mrs Fitz since she left hospital.

Alex listened without interrupting. When she finished, he asked the first question almost immediately.

‘Has Mrs Fitz herself said she doesn’t want visitors?’

Harriet hesitated. ‘No.’

‘Has she spoken to anyone at Hawthorn since she was discharged?’

‘No.’

‘Have you heard her voice at all?’

‘No.’

He nodded once, already moving through the information in his head. ‘Do you have Adam’s address?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure it’s current?’

‘Marge found it.’

Alex looked at her and Harriet saw the comment coming.

‘Don’t.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘She found it perfectly legitimately.’

‘How?’

Harriet paused. ‘I don’t know.’

Alex accepted this with surprising ease and held out his hand for her phone. Harriet showed him the address first, then the Facebook photograph of the large house she had assumed belonged to Adam.

He looked at both for a few seconds. ‘That’s not his house.’

Harriet stared at him. ‘You know?’

‘No. I can see they’re different.’

‘That was unnecessarily literal.’

‘You came here for help.’

‘I’m beginning to regret it.’

‘No, you’re not.’

Harriet looked at him, and annoyingly he was right. Alex handed the phone back. ‘Did Adam ever tell you the large house was his?’

‘No.’

‘Did he tell you he lived there?’

‘No.’

‘Then for now we ignore it.’

Harriet frowned. ‘You’re not interested?’

‘I’m interested. I just don’t know what it means yet.’

That stopped her.

It was so completely Alex. The thing Harriet had spent half an hour emotionally dismantling had been reduced in seconds to a fact with a question mark beside it.

He moved towards the desk and picked up a notebook. ‘Tell me exactly what Adam said when you asked to see Mrs Fitz.’

Harriet repeated as much as she could remember: tired, unsettled, not herself, she would hate Harriet seeing her like this. Alex listened and then asked where Mrs Fitz’s phone was.

Harriet realised she had no idea. Her handbag?

No idea.

Her own keys?

Again, no idea.

Could she leave Adam’s address independently if she wanted to?

Harriet opened her mouth, then closed it again.

‘I don’t know.’

That was the point the panic came back properly.

Alex saw it and put the notebook down.

‘Right.’

Harriet looked at him. ‘What?’

‘We go there.’

Her pulse jumped. ‘Now?’

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t want to call him first?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if everything is fine, turning up changes nothing. If it isn’t, I don’t want to give him time to make it look fine.’

Harriet stared at him. There it was: not reassurance, not sympathy, but a plan.

Alex picked up his keys and glanced towards Harriet’s still-damp coat by the radiator. ‘You ready?’

Harriet reached for it. ‘No.’

‘Good enough.’

They left Alex’s house five minutes later.

The rain had eased slightly, although not enough to make the walk back to the car pleasant, and Harriet climbed into the passenger seat with damp

hair and wet cuffs.

The seat was ridiculously comfortable.

Then, almost immediately, it warmed beneath her.

Harriet glanced down. ‘Heated seats?’

Alex started the engine. ‘Yes.’

She settled back despite herself. ‘Nice, wait, how are they warm already? Do you have some kind of magic button that heats them before you get in?’ she joked.

Alex looked straight forward as Harriet realised that she had answered her own question. ‘Oh my gosh, you actually do, don’t you?’

‘|Its not a magic button, it’s pretty standard.’ Alex replied, looking nehind him to reverse.

A moment later they were pulling away from the kerb, rain sliding across the windows as Harriet checked Adam’s address again and tried not to think too far ahead.

For the first few minutes neither of them said much. The roads were slick and bright under the streetlights, and every time a car passed in the opposite direction the windscreen flashed white before the wipers cleared it again.

Harriet kept looking at the address on her phone. She had checked it at least six times now. It was still the same.

Eventually Alex said, ‘Tell me everything you actually know about Adam.’

Harriet looked across at him. ‘Everything?’

‘Everything that matters.’

‘That’s subjective.’

‘Then start with what you know rather than what you think.’

She gave him a look.

‘You really do this all the time, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘That must be exhausting.’

‘For other people, apparently.’

Harriet turned slightly in the seat and started from the beginning.

Once she did, she realised there was more to tell than she had expected. Adam appearing at Hawthorn. The dinners. The messages. Mrs Fitz’s slippers. The photographs online. The large house Harriet had somehow attached to him without him ever properly saying it was his. Marge recognising his face but not his name. Humphrey. The old photographs. The

boy Marge remembered who used to repeat people's words exactly but somehow make them mean something else.

Alex listened without interrupting. By the time Harriet finished, she felt faintly embarrassed by the amount of information she had managed to collect without arriving at anything useful.

'Well?'

Alex kept his eyes on the road. 'There are too many things we don't know.'

Harriet let out a breath. 'That is the least satisfying answer you could possibly have given.'

'It's also the accurate one.'

'You must have an opinion.'

'I have several.'

'And?'

'And none of them are useful until we know more.'

Harriet sat back.

That was the difference between them, she supposed. Harriet could build an entire theory out of three facts, an expression and a badly timed text message. Alex seemed capable of leaving a question unanswered without immediately filling the space himself.

It was infuriating. It was also, tonight, useful. Before she could say anything else, his eyes flicked towards the rear-view mirror.

Harriet noticed.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

She turned in her seat. Several cars behind them, half hidden by spray, a white van was following. Harriet squinted at the writing on the side, and her stomach dropped.

'No.'

Alex checked the mirror again. 'Is that ours?'

The van came into clearer view as they slowed for a roundabout.

CARELINK.

'Oh, for fuck's sake.'

Of course. Of course they had followed. And of course they had done it in the one vehicle capable of identifying them from half a mile away.

Harriet reached for her phone but Alex stopped her.

‘Don’t.’

She looked at him. ‘Why not?’

‘Because I want to see how long they think they can keep this up.’

Harriet turned back again. The van had dropped behind slightly, apparently under the impression that putting one additional car between them constituted covert surveillance.

‘That is Marge.’

‘Probably.’

‘And Sally.’

‘Probably.’

‘And Rod.’

Alex glanced across. ‘Why Rod?’

Harriet sank back into the seat. ‘Because apparently he’s on shift.’

He looked at her.

‘Long story.’

They drove another half mile. The van followed.

Alex slowed slightly. The van slowed.

He changed lanes. The van changed lanes.

Harriet covered her face with one hand.

‘This is humiliating.’

‘I’m enjoying it.’

She looked at him through her fingers. ‘You are not.’

‘A little.’

Harriet twisted around again just as the van moved closer and finally got a clear view of the passenger seat.

Rod. He had something black balanced across his forehead. Harriet frowned.

‘What is that?’

Alex glanced in the mirror. ‘Is he wearing a hat?’

‘I think it’s binoculars.’

‘He has them on his forehead.’

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

‘None of this makes sense.’

At the next set of lights, the van pulled up directly behind them.

Marge was driving. Rod sat beside her with the binoculars now properly over his eyes despite being approximately twelve feet away, while Sally was visible in the back holding a packet of crisps.

Harriet stared for several seconds. Marge lifted one hand. Harriet slowly turned back around. Alex was laughing. Not loudly, but enough.

‘Don’t.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘You don’t need to.’

The lights changed and they pulled away again, the Carelink van remaining behind them with all the subtlety of a travelling billboard.

By the time they reached Adam’s street, Harriet had accepted that getting rid of the others was probably going to require more effort than simply letting them remain nearby and pretending they did not exist.

Alex parked opposite the address and switched off the engine. Neither of them moved.

The building was exactly as it had looked online, only somehow more disappointing in real life. The brickwork was dark with rain, the narrow communal entrance sat beside overflowing bins and one upstairs window glowed weakly behind a crooked blind.

Harriet checked the number again.

‘That’s it.’

There was nothing wrong with the flat. That was not the point.

The point was the gap.

The large house on Facebook. The terrace. The glass doors. The expensive-looking life Harriet had attached to Adam almost without noticing.

Now, standing outside the actual address, she realised how much of him she had assembled herself.

Alex was looking at the building.

‘You ready?’

Harriet nodded. She wasn’t.

They got out. Behind them, the Carelink van drove slowly past without stopping.

Marge stared straight ahead. Rod, still holding the binoculars, gave Harriet a thumbs-up. She closed her eyes briefly.

‘Professional operation,’ Alex said.

Harriet looked at him. ‘Shut up.’

They crossed the road. The communal entrance was unlocked.

That was the first thing Harriet noticed. The second was the smell: damp carpet, old cooking and something sharp underneath it, possibly bleach.

They climbed one flight of stairs in silence.

By the time they reached the landing, Harriet could hear her own breathing too clearly.

The flat number was at the far end.

Alex knocked. Nothing happened. He knocked again. This time they heard movement inside. Slow footsteps, a lock turning, then the door opened.

Adam stood there without his usual easy smile.

His eyes moved from Harriet to Alex and stayed there just a little too long.

‘What are you doing here?’

Harriet felt the immediate urge to explain everything. To tell him why they had come, to make it sound reasonable, to make sure he understood they weren’t accusing him of anything.

Alex did not.

‘We’ve come to see Bernice.’

Adam’s expression tightened.

‘She’s resting.’

Harriet felt something drop in her stomach. Another reason, another barrier. Alex stayed exactly where he was.

‘Then we’ll wait.’

Harriet looked at Alex. Some of the panic eased.

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# CHAPTER 40

Getting Mrs Fitz Home

Adam stayed in the doorway.

Harriet wondered whether he was actually going to refuse to let them in. The thought made her pulse jump again, although there was still nothing dramatic in his face, nothing she could point to later and call threatening. He just stood there with one hand against the door, looking from Harriet to Alex as if they had arrived at a mildly inconvenient time.

‘I did tell you she wasn’t up to visitors.’

Harriet swallowed. ‘You said she was tired.’

‘She is.’

‘That isn’t quite the same thing.’

Adam looked at her, and this time Harriet couldn’t find an innocent explanation for what she saw.

‘I’m trying to do what’s best for her.’

Alex remained beside her, calm enough that Harriet could feel herself borrowing from it.

‘Has she said she doesn’t want to see Harriet?’

Adam’s eyes moved back to him. ‘She’s not herself at the moment.’

‘That wasn’t what I asked.’

Harriet felt the air change. Not dramatically. Nobody raised their voice. But Adam’s hand tightened slightly on the edge of the door.

‘She’s been through a lot.’

‘So has Harriet,’ Alex said. ‘She’s still allowed to answer questions.’

Harriet turned towards him, partly surprised and partly because she hadn’t expected to be brought into it quite so bluntly.

Adam gave a short laugh, but there was no warmth in it. ‘This has nothing to do with Harriet.’

From somewhere inside the flat came a sound.

Harriet stopped breathing. It was faint, almost lost beneath the television, but unmistakable: a voice. She took a step forward.

‘Mrs Fitz?’

Adam moved automatically, just enough to block more of the doorway. That was the moment everything changed.

Harriet had spent days worrying that she might be overreacting. She had told herself Adam was protective, that Mrs Fitz was recovering, that hospitals did strange things to people and families became cautious afterwards.

But Mrs Fitz was ten feet away.

And Adam had moved between them.

‘Mrs Fitz?’ Harriet called again, louder this time.

There was a pause.

Then, from inside, clearer now:

‘Harriet?’

Her whole body went cold.

She moved before she had properly decided to. Adam put out a hand.

‘Harriet, wait.’

She stopped dead. Not because he had touched her. He hadn’t.

Because he had tried to stop her.

Alex stepped slightly forward.

‘Move.’

Adam stared at him.

‘Excuse me?’

‘You’ve just told us she’s too confused to receive visitors. She’s recognised Harriet from another room.’

‘She has good moments.’

Harriet barely heard either of them. Mrs Fitz had called her name, and that was all that mattered.

She pushed past the edge of the doorway before Adam could decide whether to physically stop her, and the first thing she noticed was how small the flat was.

Not unpleasant. Not filthy. Just small and oddly empty.

A narrow hallway opened into a sitting room furnished with a grey sofa, a television mounted too high on the wall and a glass coffee table with almost nothing on it. There were no books, no photographs, no clutter, no sign that anyone had lived there long enough to leave a mark.

Mrs Fitz was sitting in an armchair near the window. Harriet stopped. For a horrible second she had prepared herself for something much worse.

She looked tired. Smaller somehow. Her hair needed doing and she was wearing a cardigan Harriet had never seen before, but she was upright, awake and looking directly at her.

Then her face changed.

‘Oh, thank God.’

Harriet crossed the room. Mrs Fitz reached for her hand before Harriet had even got close enough.

‘You took your bloody time.’

Something in Harriet broke loose all at once: relief, anger, fear, possibly the remains of dinner from three nights ago. She crouched beside the chair and gripped Mrs Fitz’s hand.

‘I didn’t know where you were.’

Mrs Fitz looked offended.

‘Well, neither did I for the first day.’

Behind them, Adam came into the room.

‘Mum.’

Mrs Fitz turned sharply.

‘Don’t ‘Mum’ me.’

Harriet looked at her. There she was.

Not entirely. Not yet.

But enough.

Alex had remained nearer the doorway, watching the room rather than joining them. Harriet noticed his gaze move over the small table beside Mrs Fitz’s chair, the empty space beneath it, the radiator, the hallway, then back towards Adam.

‘Where’s her phone?’ he asked.

Adam sighed. Harriet looked up.

‘What?’

Mrs Fitz answered before he could.

‘He’s got it.’

Adam’s expression tightened. ‘It’s charging.’

‘Where?’

‘In the kitchen.’

Alex nodded towards the hallway. ‘And her handbag?’

Adam looked at him. ‘Why?’

‘Because I’m asking.’

Mrs Fitz squeezed Harriet’s hand.

‘My bag’s in his room.’

Harriet turned to Adam.

‘Why is her bag in your room?’

‘It isn’t in my room. It’s in the wardrobe in the spare room because she kept getting confused and trying to leave.’

Mrs Fitz’s grip tightened.

‘I was trying to leave.’

Adam let out a breath.

‘There. This is exactly what I mean.’

Harriet didn’t like how reasonable Adam still sounded. He walked further into the room. ‘She woke up at two in the morning and said she needed to go home. She didn’t know where she was.’

‘I knew exactly where I was,’ Mrs Fitz snapped. ‘I knew I wasn’t at home.’

‘That isn’t the same thing.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘It bloody isn’t.’

Harriet looked from one to the other. Alex spoke from behind her.

‘Does she have keys to this flat?’

Adam turned.

‘No.’

‘Can she get out of the building without you?’

‘There’s nothing stopping her.’

‘Does she know the area?’

‘That’s irrelevant.’

‘Does she have money?’

Adam stared at him. Alex continued before he could answer. ‘Phone?’

‘Charging.’

‘Bag?’

‘Put away.’

‘Keys?’

‘She doesn’t need keys.’

Mrs Fitz gave a small, bitter laugh. Harriet looked at her. Mrs Fitz met her eyes.

‘He keeps saying I can leave whenever I want.’

Adam’s face hardened.

‘You can.’

Mrs Fitz looked towards the hallway.

‘Go on then.’

Nobody moved.

‘Let me leave.’

The room went completely still.

Adam shook his head. ‘You can’t just walk out into the rain at night.’

‘I didn’t say I was walking.’

‘You don’t know where you are.’

‘I know I want to go home.’

‘Mum—’

‘Stop calling me that.’

Harriet froze. Adam did too. Mrs Fitz pulled her hand free from Harriet’s and sat back in the chair, breathing harder now.

‘I told you thirty years ago I wasn’t your mother when it suited you to remind me, so you can bloody well stop making me one now.’

Harriet slowly turned towards Adam. Nobody spoke. And suddenly Marge’s photographs, Humphrey, the boy she remembered and the name that did not belong began moving around in Harriet’s head all at once.

Adam looked at Mrs Fitz.

‘That’s enough.’

Alex stepped further into the room.

‘No,’ Alex said quietly. ‘I think we’re just getting started.’

Adam held his gaze, then turned away with a sharp breath and walked towards the window. Harriet was still crouched beside Mrs Fitz, holding her hand, and she could feel the slight tremor in her fingers now that she was close enough to notice it.

It frightened her more than Mrs Fitz looking tired had. Adam rubbed a hand across his face. ‘This is ridiculous. You’ve turned up here in the middle of the night because some carer has gone on a power trip and decided she knows better than everybody else.’

Harriet felt the words before she properly understood them. Some carer.

Only days ago Adam had sat opposite her over dinner telling her that Mrs Fitz trusted her, that Harriet knew her better than he did, that he was grateful she had someone like Harriet in her life. Now, because she was standing in his flat asking questions he did not like, she was simply some carer who had overstepped.

Alex stepped towards Adam. ‘Don’t speak about her like that.’

Adam turned back. ‘Like what?’

‘You know exactly what you just did.’

‘Oh, come on. She works at Hawthorn.’

‘And?’

The single word landed harder than Harriet expected.

Adam gave a disbelieving laugh. ‘And she’s got no idea what she’s involved herself in. None of you do.’

Mrs Fitz shifted in the chair. ‘I know exactly what I’m involved in. I’m involved in wanting to go home.’

Adam looked at her. ‘You’re not well enough.’

‘You keep saying that.’

‘Because it’s true.’

Mrs Fitz’s hand tightened around Harriet’s. ‘I want my coat.’

Harriet looked at Adam. He stared back at her. Then there was an enormous crash from the hallway.

Everyone jumped. Something banged against the wall outside, followed by Sally’s unmistakable voice saying, ‘Will you get out the bloody way?’

Harriet closed her eyes. Of course.

The flat door opened wider and Marge appeared, wet-haired and determined, with Sally directly behind her carrying Mrs Fitz’s handbag and coat.

Rod followed them, still wearing the binoculars around his neck. A complete silence followed. Adam looked at them all. Then his mouth twisted.

‘What is this, the fucking Scooby-Doo gang?’

Marge walked straight past him.

‘Well, we found you.’

Sally made a choking noise that Harriet suspected was laughter. Rod looked around the flat with interest. ‘Smaller than it looked online.’

‘Rod,’ Harriet said.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

Adam’s disbelief had turned into anger. ‘You cannot just come into my home.’

Sally lifted Mrs Fitz’s handbag slightly. ‘She wanted her things.’

Harriet looked at it. ‘Where did you get that?’

‘Spare room.’

Adam swung towards her. ‘You went through my bedroom?’

‘It wasn’t your bedroom.’

‘It is my flat!’

Mrs Fitz spoke over him. ‘Give me my bag.’

Sally immediately crossed the room and placed it beside her chair.

Mrs Fitz put one hand around the handle. Harriet watched something change in her face. Not dramatically. Just a small release around her mouth, as if having the bag physically within reach restored something she had been missing.

Marge came closer, all of her usual bluster disappearing the moment she saw Mrs Fitz properly.

‘Oh, Bernie.’

Mrs Fitz pointed at her. ‘Don’t.’

‘I haven’t done anything.’

‘You’ve got the face.’

‘What face?’

‘The face you had when Brenda’s cat died.’

Marge straightened. ‘I have not.’

‘You have. Stop it.’

Marge stopped it. Mostly.

Alex remained standing a little apart from them, between Adam and Mrs Fitz without making any obvious show of doing so.

‘Mrs Fitz,’ he said, ‘do you want to leave?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you want to go back to Hawthorn?’

‘Yes.’

He nodded. ‘All right.’

Adam laughed sharply. ‘That’s it? That’s your assessment?’

‘It isn’t an assessment.’

‘You know nothing about her condition.’

‘I know what she has just told me.’

‘She’s confused.’

Mrs Fitz snapped her head towards him. ‘I am sitting here listening to you tell everybody I’m confused. Do you understand how irritating that is?’

Adam opened his mouth.

‘I want to go home,’ she continued. ‘I have said it four times now. Shall I write it down?’

Rod, from the doorway, said, ‘I’ve got a pen.’

Harriet looked at him. Rod quietly put his hand back in his pocket. Adam stared around the room, apparently realising for the first time that he had completely lost control of it.

‘You cannot just bundle her into a van and take her away.’

Mrs Fitz looked at him. ‘Watch them.’

That almost did Harriet in.

Marge reached for Mrs Fitz’s coat and Harriet helped her ease into it, although Mrs Fitz complained throughout that she had two perfectly functioning arms. When she stood, though, she wobbled.

Harriet caught her immediately. Mrs Fitz gripped her forearm. For one brief second the irritation vanished from her face and something else showed through.

Fear.

Harriet moved closer. ‘I’ve got you.’

‘I know.’

It was barely more than a whisper. Behind them, Rod straightened.

‘I’ll bring the vehicle round.’

Harriet looked towards the window. ‘Rod, it’s already outside.’

‘Yes, but not directly outside.’

Before anyone could stop him he disappeared.

By the time they reached the communal entrance the Carelink van was pulled up almost onto the pavement, hazard lights flashing and the side door open.

Mrs Fitz stopped.

‘You came in that?’

Marge nodded. ‘Efficient.’

‘It has Carelink written all over it.’

‘Yes.’

‘Not exactly discreet.’

Alex, behind them, said, ‘We discovered that on the way here.’

Harriet laughed before she could stop herself. Mrs Fitz looked at her, then at the van, then at Rod standing beside it with the binoculars still around his neck.

‘You look ridiculous.’

Rod nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘I wasn’t complimenting you.’

‘I know.’

Mrs Fitz finally smiled.

They got her into the van, Sally climbing into the front beside Marge while Rod took the back row. Alex said he would follow in his car.

Harriet sat beside Mrs Fitz. The door closed.

And as the van pulled away, Harriet looked back through the rain-streaked window.

Adam was standing outside the building watching them go. He didn’t wave, and Harriet turned away.

For the first few minutes, Mrs Fitz said nothing. She kept hold of Harriet’s hand, and Harriet didn’t let go.

The van was warm and the windows had begun to mist around the edges. Marge drove more carefully than Harriet had ever seen her drive anything, while Sally kept turning around from the passenger seat to check on them.

Mrs Fitz finally said, ‘If you turn round once more, Sally, I’m going to assume you’re expecting me to die.’

Sally faced forward immediately.

‘Noted.’

Silence settled again.

Harriet looked down at the hand in hers. It seemed smaller than she remembered. Mrs Fitz herself seemed smaller, tucked into her coat beside her, tired in a way Harriet had never seen at Hawthorn.

At Hawthorn, Mrs Fitz filled every room she entered. Even sitting down she somehow managed to occupy more space than anybody else.

Here, under the van’s harsh little ceiling light, Harriet could see how vulnerable she actually was.

‘You all right?’ Harriet asked.

Mrs Fitz nodded. Then she stopped.

Her mouth tightened.

‘No.’

Harriet held on to Mrs Fitz’s hand. Mrs Fitz looked out of the window for a while before speaking again.

‘I thought nobody knew where I was.’

Harriet’s throat tightened. ‘We didn’t.’

‘I know.’

That was somehow worse.

Mrs Fitz looked down at their hands.

‘I kept thinking somebody would come.’

Harriet swallowed hard.

‘I’m sorry.’

Mrs Fitz turned to her. ‘What on earth are you apologising for?’

‘I should have realised sooner. I knew something felt wrong, but every time I questioned it there was an explanation and I thought maybe I was doing what I always do and making something enormous out of—’

‘Harriet.’

She stopped. Mrs Fitz squeezed her fingers.

‘You came.’

Harriet looked down quickly. That was worse than being told off.

Much worse.

Mrs Fitz was quiet for another moment, then said, ‘I was frightened.’

Harriet looked at her. She’d never heard Mrs Fitz say those words. Furious, certainly. Outraged. Indignant. The woman could declare things appalling, unacceptable or beneath contempt.

She had never simply admitted to being frightened. Harriet shifted closer.

‘So was I.’

Mrs Fitz gave her a tired look. ‘You weren’t stuck in a strange flat with no handbag.’

‘No. I was being followed by Rod with binoculars.’

A small laugh escaped Mrs Fitz before she could stop it.

Then her face changed again.

‘He kept telling me things I’d done. Things I’d said. And they were true.’

Harriet went very still. Mrs Fitz rubbed her thumb over Harriet’s knuckle.

‘That was the worst part. He’d say I’d forgotten what day it was, or that I’d tried to leave at two in the morning, and I’d think, well, yes. I had. Perhaps there was something wrong with me.’

The blue vase, the invoice, the questions about what day it was—Harriet felt cold despite the heating.

Her own voice came back to her from dinner with Adam, telling him those stories as if they were funny little pieces of Mrs Fitz he deserved to know.

Mrs Fitz felt her tense.

‘What?’

Harriet shook her head. ‘Not now.’

Mrs Fitz studied her.

‘You’ve got that face.’

‘What face?’

‘The one where you’ve worked something out and don’t like it.’

Harriet tried to smile. ‘Apparently everyone knows my faces.’

‘Most of yours are quite loud.’

That did make her laugh.

Mrs Fitz looked forward again and, after a moment, shifted closer until her shoulder rested against Harriet’s.

Harriet stayed completely still. Then Mrs Fitz rested her head against her, and that nearly finished her.

‘Don’t make a thing of it,’ Mrs Fitz muttered.

‘I’m not.’

‘You are.’

‘I’m literally sitting here.’

‘You’re being emotional internally.’

Harriet looked down at her. ‘How do you know?’

Mrs Fitz closed her eyes.

‘I know you.’

Harriet tightened her hand around hers. Neither of them spoke for the rest of the journey.

Hawthorn House appeared through the rain, its windows glowing against the dark. Harriet had never been quite so pleased to see the old place. Even the slightly crooked guttering above the entrance looked reassuringly familiar.

Beside her, Mrs Fitz lifted her head and looked towards the house.

‘Home.’

Harriet felt an unexpected lump rise in her throat. She’d spent so long wondering whether they’d get Mrs Fitz back that she hadn’t given much thought to this moment.

‘Yes,’ she said quietly.

And for once, she didn’t feel the need to add anything.

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# CHAPTER 41

Your Honour

By the following afternoon, Hawthorn House had gone unnaturally quiet. The television murmured unwatched in the lounge, the tea trolley stood abandoned beside the lift and even the boiler had chosen not to make a sound, which felt less like good behaviour than the building holding its breath. Everyone knew something was coming. Nobody seemed entirely sure whether they were expecting a meeting, an execution or both.

The solicitor arrived first looking to be at least one hundred and three, carrying two leather folders and a yellow legal pad, and introduced himself to everyone with careful politeness. Adam arrived ten minutes later with considerably more paper.

Harriet disliked that immediately. There were binders, printed emails, clipped bundles and sections marked with coloured tabs. Whatever Adam had been doing since they took Mrs Fitz home, he hadn’t been doing it casually.

Alex came in last, followed by several men in suits Harriet had never seen before. There were now several Mercedes in the car park.

Alex surveyed the table, glanced at Adam, then took a chair at the far end without comment. That worried Harriet more than if he had sworn.

Mrs Fitz sat in her usual chair beside the window, wrapped in one of her own floor length dramatic cardigans and looking considerably better than she had the night before, although not well enough for Harriet to stop watching her every few minutes. Harriet had done her make-up that morning at Mrs Fitz’s insistence, and there was colour back in her face, but the tiredness remained underneath it.

Marge had positioned herself near the old visitor books while pretending not to listen. Sally had made tea nobody was drinking. Rod had chosen the

armchair nearest the door, possibly because he still believed the events of the previous night had promoted him into some sort of security role.

Harriet stood behind Mrs Fitz's chair. She hadn't planned to; she'd simply ended up there.

The solicitor opened the meeting by looking directly at Mrs Fitz.

'Mrs Fitzgerald, before we discuss anything else, I want to be clear that this meeting is about your wishes. Nobody here is able simply to take control of your affairs because they disagree with your decisions or because you have been unwell.'

Mrs Fitz nodded.

'Good.'

He glanced towards Adam.

'There is an existing lasting power of attorney in relation to property and financial affairs. That does not mean it can be exercised simply because somebody considers it convenient to do so. Capacity is decision-specific, and nothing I have seen so far allows me to begin from the assumption that Mrs Fitzgerald is unable to make this decision herself.'

Adam's jaw shifted slightly.

'But you have concerns.'

'I have more than concerns, Your Honour. I have concrete evidence.'

'I'm not a judge, Mr Mercer. You are not in a court of law, and there is no need to use "Your Honour" here.'

Adam nodded and opened the first folder. What a dick.

'Of course.'

His voice was calm. Warm, even—the voice Harriet knew from dinner, the messages, the slippers.

She hated it now. Adam rested his hands on the folder.

'I want to make it absolutely clear that I'm not trying to take anything away from Bernice, my mother.'

Mrs Fitz's eyes flicked towards him.

He continued.

'My concern is that she's recently had a significant health event and that there have been repeated incidents suggesting confusion, poor judgement and difficulty managing day-to-day decisions. Hawthorn House is not simply a home. It is a major financial asset and a business with significant responsibilities attached to it.'

The solicitor nodded.

‘What incidents are you relying on?’

Adam opened the folder. ‘I have a collection of written evidence supplied by a member of staff at Hawthorn House, including accounts gathered from two of her colleagues.’

Oh God.

Harriet frowned. Accounts? It made Hawthorn sound like MI5.

Adam removed several printed sheets and placed them haphazardly on the desk. Harriet recognised the screenshots before she could read a single word. Her name sat at the top, with four emojis beneath it that now looked considerably less amusing.

She stepped forward. ‘What are those?’

‘Messages.’

‘Whose messages?’

‘Yours.’ His voice was curt and cold now, a world away from the man she met those nights ago.

‘I know I sent you messages. Why have you printed them?’

‘Because they’re relevant.’

‘They’re private.’

‘They’re evidence.’

The word hit her. Evidence.

Heat flooded Harriet’s body, prickling across the back of her neck as tears crowded her eyes. She bit hard into the inside of her cheek, searching for a pain she could control.

Beyond Adam, a row of men in dark suits watched her humiliation unfold. Harriet’s eyes found Alex’s. His expression held sympathy and anger—not at her—and something steady beneath them both.

He gave her a single nod. Barely a movement, but it was enough. Something inside her settled. The room stopped tipping and, for the first time since Adam had opened the folder, Harriet no longer felt as though she were standing there alone.

She drew herself upright and looked back at him. The solicitor raised one hand before Harriet could respond. ‘Ms Hoxley, I understand why you’re upset. But if Mr Mercer is relying on these messages, I need to hear what they say.’

Adam picked up the first page. ‘You wrote: “The blue-vase story is still winning. I once found your mother roaming the corridor after midnight in

her dressing gown, clutching a bloody great vase and announcing she was ‘putting it where it belongs’. Very Colonel Mustard.”’

Nobody laughed.

‘She wasn’t roaming,’ Harriet said. ‘People kept moving the vase. She was putting it back.’

Adam selected another sheet. ‘“Marge’s entry: she once brought the wrong sugar for Mrs Fitz’s tea and Mrs Fitz went for her with a back scratcher. Marge says she has a strong right arm for ninety-two.”’

Harriet stared at him. ‘She waved it. She clipped the sugar bowl, and Marge ducked because Marge enjoys theatre.’

‘That explanation doesn’t appear in the message.’

‘Because I was trying to be funny.’

‘Of course.’ He turned to the next page. ‘“Sally says your mother accused her of stealing her handbag, made her turn out the office, then found it underneath her own chair. Sally received one humbug by way of apology and still considers the matter unresolved.”’

‘Sally had moved it there so Rod wouldn’t stand on it.’

Adam looked at the solicitor. ‘An accusation of theft, an extensive search and an inability to locate her own handbag.’

‘That isn’t what I meant.’

He looked up at her. ‘No. It is only what you said.’

That hurt more than anything else he’d said.

The messages ran across several days. Harriet could see his questions between them now. Any more? What about Marge? Ask Sally. He hadn’t merely kept the silly stories she’d told him over dinner. He had sent her back into Hawthorn to collect more, and she had done it eagerly because she thought he wanted to know his mother—and, if she was honest, because she liked making him laugh.

Harriet looked at the pages. The jokes had gone and the context had gone. Mrs Fitz defending the rightful home of the blue vase had gone. Marge’s theatrical duck and Sally moving the handbag in the first place had gone. All that remained was an elderly woman wandering at night with a heavy object, lashing out at a member of staff and accusing another of theft before forgetting where she had put her own belongings.

Harriet looked at Adam, and Marge’s voice came back to her: he’d repeat the words exactly, but never the meaning. She went still.

‘Oh my God.’

Adam frowned.

‘What?’

‘You’ve always done this.’

Behind Harriet, Marge stopped moving. Harriet looked at Adam properly.

‘Jamie.’

The room went quiet.

Marge stepped forward.

‘James Adam.’

The solicitor looked between them.

Mrs Fitz closed her eyes. Marge stared at Adam.

‘That’s why I knew your face. You were Humphrey’s boy.’

Adam’s mouth tightened.

‘I’m still Humphrey’s son, Marjorie, and I’ll thank you not to butt in—although you’ve never been very good at that, have you?’

‘I knew it. You were a nasty little shit as a boy, and you’re an even bigger little shit now. She’s not even his mother! She took him in after his father had an affair and produced him. He stole from her, and when Humphrey died, he nearly gave her a stroke trying to get his hands on more money. Didn’t you?’

Sally made a small choking noise into her tea. The solicitor looked down at his notes.

‘Mr Mercer, is James Adam your full name?’

Adam’s face had hardened.

‘It was.’

‘And Mercer?’

‘My mother’s surname.’

‘So Mrs Fitzgerald is not your biological mother?’

‘Well, no, but Nosy Marjorie over there left out the fact that there is an LPA granting me power of attorney should she be incapacitated for any reason.’

‘I am aware of the pre-existing LPA, Mr Mercer. I believe it is about to expire and was put in place after Mrs Fitzgerald suffered her stroke some fifteen years ago.’

‘I had no idea it was expiring,’ Adam said, twisting his hands.

‘No?’

The solicitor made a note.

Adam leaned forward.

‘And were you ever formally adopted by Mrs Fitzgerald?’

‘No.’

‘And your father—Mrs Fitzgerald’s husband—has now passed away?’

‘Yes.’

‘And I see that he specifically forbade you from receiving any substantial inheritance due to your propensity for various illicit and ill-gotten activities involving money?’ The solicitor looked over his glasses for the first time, directly at Adam.

‘With respect, none of that changes the issue. My relationship to Bernice is irrelevant to whether she should continue managing Hawthorn House.’

Mrs Fitz opened her eyes.

‘Bernice again.’

Adam ignored her. The solicitor folded his hands.

‘I agree that the biological relationship is not determinative. What matters here is Mrs Fitz’s ability to make her own decisions and whether there is any proper basis for the power of attorney to be used.’

Adam nodded.

‘Exactly.’

‘At present, I have not seen enough to conclude that Mrs Fitz lacks capacity to make this decision.’

Adam’s expression tightened.

‘But—’

‘I haven’t finished.’

He stopped. The solicitor looked towards Mrs Fitz.

‘There are, however, legitimate issues to consider. You have recently been unwell. There appears to have been some fatigue, some confusion and at least one financial mistake. None of those things automatically mean you lack capacity, but they may be relevant to a separate question.’

Mrs Fitz looked at him.

‘Which is?’

‘Whether continuing to carry the operational and financial responsibility for Hawthorn House in the same way you have until now is in your best interests while you recover.’

Harriet felt the room change. Adam sat back slightly. Not a victory, but enough.

‘That,’ he said, ‘is all I’ve been trying to say.’

Harriet almost laughed. Mrs Fitz looked at him without expression. Adam opened another folder.

‘There is also the wider question of Hawthorn itself.’

Alex looked up. Adam continued.

‘This place is failing under her control.’

Harriet bristled.

‘It is not.’

Adam glared at her.

‘It is an ageing building operating on an outdated model with rising maintenance costs and no meaningful commercial strategy.’

Mrs Fitz lifted one eyebrow. Adam carried on.

‘Bernice has kept it going through sheer force of personality for years, but that isn’t sustainable. I’m not proposing that Hawthorn disappears. Quite the opposite. I’m proposing proper investment.’

The solicitor leaned back slightly.

‘What would that involve?’

Adam seemed pleased to be asked.

‘Expansion. Better use of the site. Additional units. Commercial space. Modern facilities. There’s no reason Hawthorn couldn’t become a commercially successful enterprise and still provide something valuable to the community.’

Harriet could already see the presentation. Architects’ drawings. Smiling people holding coffee. Words like vibrant and mixed-use.

Adam leaned forward.

‘The grounds are underused. The building is underperforming. With the right leadership, the controlling interest could be used to secure the future of the entire site.’

Alex spoke for the first time.

‘Who controls it?’

Adam glanced towards him.

‘Whoever holds the majority share.’

There it was.

Harriet felt the room tighten. Alex pulled one of the reports towards him.

‘And whoever holds the majority share takes on the liabilities.’

Adam gave a short laugh.

‘You keep presenting those as though they’re insurmountable.’

‘They aren’t.’

‘Then what exactly is your point?’

‘That you’re talking about the fifty-one per cent as though it gives you a development site.’

‘It gives me control.’

Mrs Fitz’s head lifted.

Harriet saw it. So did Alex.

Adam didn’t seem to notice what he’d said.

Alex looked at him.

‘Control over what?’

‘The future of the place.’

‘And the people living in it?’

‘That’s obviously part of it.’

‘Is it?’

Adam’s expression hardened.

‘I’m not going to be lectured by Carelink about community benefit and where some old-timers can play lawn bowls and stare out of the window.’

Alex stayed perfectly silent and opened the report that had been sitting incredibly neatly in front of him on the table.

‘You said additional units.’

‘Yes.’

‘Planning permission?’

‘Potentially.’

‘Change of use?’

‘If required.’

‘Parking?’

‘There’s space.’

‘No, there isn’t.’

Adam frowned. Alex turned a page.

‘Not for what you’re proposing without losing part of the garden. Access would need upgrading. The fire strategy would change. Compartmentation works would be required. Parts of the electrical installation need replacing. The roof requires substantial work within five years, possibly sooner.’

Adam gave a dismissive shrug.

‘Every building has maintenance costs.’

‘This one has significant ones.’

Alex slid the report towards the solicitor.

‘Any major redevelopment would also trigger further accessibility requirements. The frontage is constrained. The rear access is inadequate for increased traffic. The drainage needs work. The heating system is approaching end of life.’

The solicitor read the figures.

‘That’s substantial.’

‘Yes.’

Adam leaned towards the document.

‘Those are worst-case estimates.’

‘They’re realistic estimates.’

‘You’ve deliberately loaded the figures.’

Alex looked at him.

‘No.’

Harriet watched him. Usually that would have been all he gave: no explanation, no defence. This time, Alex closed the report and placed both hands flat on the table.

‘For the avoidance of doubt, Carelink does not consider Hawthorn House a sound commercial investment on the terms Mr Mercer is presenting. The building requires substantial capital expenditure, the likely return is slow and most of the supposed development value depends upon permissions that do not exist. Its value lies in its continuation as a home, not in being broken into whatever parts can be sold most quickly.’

Adam’s mouth tightened, but Alex continued before he could speak.

‘Carelink commissioned standard financial and company searches when Mr Mercer expressed an interest in assuming control. Over the past six years, he has been a director of three property companies. Two were dissolved following secured borrowing. The third disposed of its principal asset fourteen per cent below its independent valuation shortly before a lender’s repayment deadline.’

Alex opened a thinner file and slid it towards the solicitor.

‘The supporting records are in the fourth appendix. They do not prove what Mr Mercer intends to do here, and I am not suggesting that they do. They establish a pattern of over-borrowing followed by distressed sale. Given his current debts, I believe that if he obtains control of Hawthorn, he will attempt to borrow against its potential development value. If that borrowing becomes due before he can secure the permissions he is relying

upon, he will force a sale and accept considerably less than the property is worth in order to meet it.'

He turned towards Adam.

'That is not investment. It is liquidation delayed by paperwork.'

Alex's voice sharpened. Harriet had never heard him sound quite so angry.

'Nor should Ms Hoxley's messages be treated as independent professional evidence. She was not recording concerns about Mrs Fitzgerald's capacity. She believed she was sharing affectionate stories with an estranged son who wanted to know his mother better. Mr Mercer encouraged her to obtain further anecdotes from her colleagues without disclosing the purpose for which they would be used. Those accounts have now been selected, stripped of context and presented as something they were never intended to be.'

His eyes moved briefly to Harriet.

'Evidence obtained by concealing its purpose does not become reliable merely because it has been printed and put in a folder. Ms Hoxley was not party to that deception. She was the subject of it.'

The room had gone completely still. Alex lowered his gaze to the report again, but the colour had risen above his collar and one hand remained pressed against the page as though it were the only thing preventing him from standing.

Harriet had mistaken his restraint for indifference for months. Now, watching him fight to put everything he felt into language no one could dismiss as emotion, she understood that Hawthorn mattered to him. And when his eyes found hers once more, she had the deeply unsettling sense that she did too.

Adam gave a dismissive laugh. 'This is ridiculous. A few failed companies and suddenly you're presenting me as some sort of asset stripper.'

'Those are your records,' Alex said.

'They're fragments of them.' Adam turned away from him and looked directly at Mrs Fitz. His voice softened. 'Carelink can produce as many reports and appendices as it likes, but it doesn't understand what Hawthorn is. This was Dad's life. It became yours, and you protected it because you knew what it meant to him.'

Mrs Fitz watched him without expression.

‘Whatever mistakes I’ve made, I am still his son. I am still your family. Hawthorn shouldn’t be handed to a corporation that sees liabilities or to people who might care about it today and leave tomorrow. It should stay with the family who built it.’

The words were beautifully chosen. Harriet could almost admire them, if she hadn’t seen everything underneath.

‘You don’t want to keep it in the family,’ she said. ‘You want the fifty-one per cent.’

Adam looked at her. ‘And you’d rather Carelink had it?’

‘At least Alex hasn’t lied about why he’s here.’

Adam turned on Harriet.

‘You sat for hours over dinner slagging off this company—and this man in particular, whom you’re now starting to defend. In fact, what did you call him? An uptight, pencil-necked corporate snake who had probably never touched a woman in his life?’

Harriet looked straight at Alex and saw his shoulders lower.

‘I—I…’ She could not explain it.

‘Better that than some scheming loser with a bad coat, terrible manners and an absolutely appalling attitude to stepmothers. You should be proud to be in the same room as that man over there. He has done more to help this wonderful lady in the past three months than you have in your whole life, and you should kiss the ground this woman walks on for not kicking you out on your stupidly flat arse when you were fifteen!’

‘Listen here, you fat cow—’

‘Stop,’ Mrs Fitz said.

Adam started speaking again before anyone properly heard her.

‘I’m trying to prevent this place becoming—’

‘Stop.’

The room fell silent.

Mrs Fitz looked first at Adam, then Alex, then Harriet.

‘I have listened to both of you argue about Hawthorn as though I’ve already died.’

Nobody spoke. Mrs Fitz shifted in her chair, tired now, but completely clear.

‘I have heard about commercial viability, liabilities, redevelopment, ownership structures and every other phrase men use when they want to

make something sound too complicated for the woman who actually owns it.’

Marge made a small approving sound. Mrs Fitz ignored her.

‘I know what Hawthorn costs. I know what it needs. I know what it has been. And I know I cannot keep running it the way I have.’

Harriet felt her stomach drop. Adam’s shoulders eased.

Alex said nothing. Mrs Fitz looked towards the window.

‘I have loved this place for most of my adult life. Perhaps too much. I have spent years convincing myself that holding on to every part of it was the same thing as looking after it.’

She looked down at her hands.

‘It isn’t.’

Harriet could feel something tightening behind her ribs. Mrs Fitz drew in a breath.

‘I’m tired.’

That was worse than anything else she could have said.

Not beaten.

Not confused.

Just tired.

‘I don’t want to spend whatever years I have left arguing about roofs and invoices and whether somebody has parked across the fire access. If I even have years. I want to live here. I want to interfere. I want to annoy Marge.’

Sally nodded. ‘Fair.’

‘I want to complain about the food and move things people have put in perfectly sensible places.’

Marge smiled. Mrs Fitz looked towards Harriet.

‘But I don’t want to carry all of it anymore.’

Adam sat forward. The solicitor reached towards his folder.

Mrs Fitz lifted one hand.

‘There is one thing Adam is right about.’

Nobody moved.

Mrs Fitz looked around the reception room, taking in the old photographs, the mismatched furniture and every person waiting for her to speak.

‘Family does not always mean blood.’

Adam’s shoulders loosened, and triumph crept across his face.

Harriet felt the last of her hope disappear.

Her gaze settled on the solicitor. ‘And I have made my decision.’

Harriet’s heart began to thud.

The solicitor removed a document.

Mrs Fitz held out her hand.

‘Give it to me.’

He placed it in front of her. Harriet stared at the paper. She wanted to say something, to tell Mrs Fitz not to do it. Please don’t. Please don’t let him take it.

But Mrs Fitz had just spent days being told what she could do, what she couldn’t do, what she remembered, what she misunderstood and what was best for her.

Harriet wouldn’t become one more voice, so she stayed silent.

Mrs Fitz took the pen. Harriet’s mind raced ahead without permission. She could see Hawthorn six months from now.

The old rug would go first because somebody would call it a trip hazard. The photographs would follow because nobody knew who half the people were. The reception desk would be replaced by something pale and wipe-clean. There would be grey flooring, grey chairs and neutral walls, a coffee machine nobody liked and a framed set of corporate values where Marge’s visitor books used to be.

Someone would call it modernisation; someone else would call it improvement.

Every awkward, inconvenient, irreplaceable thing would disappear one piece at a time until the building was still standing but Hawthorn House wasn’t in it anymore.

Mrs Fitz signed. The scratch of the pen across the paper seemed absurdly loud.

Adam exhaled and actually smiled.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Finally.’

Harriet looked at him. The warmth had gone—no careful concern now, no worried relative. Adam stood and glanced around reception.

‘At least we can start making sensible decisions.’

Mrs Fitz put the pen down. Adam wandered away from the table while the solicitor checked the signature.

‘This place has been limping along for years. Half of this stuff should have gone ages ago.’

Marge’s face hardened.

Adam picked up one of the old photographs from beside the visitor books.

‘Nobody even knows who these people are.’

‘I do,’ Mrs Fitz said.

He put it down in the wrong place. His attention moved to the table beside Rod, where a Twix had been left beside the arm of his chair. Adam picked it up and tore open the wrapper before Rod realised what he was doing.

‘That’s mine.’

Adam glanced at him but didn’t put it down.

‘You can have the other one,’ Rod said. ‘But that one’s for Ron.’

Adam paused with the chocolate halfway to his mouth. ‘For who?’

‘Ron.’ Rod nodded towards the garden, and Marge quietly supplied what Adam either didn’t know or couldn’t be bothered to remember.

‘Ronnie. His wife.’

Adam followed Rod’s gaze towards the window. ‘She’s dead.’

‘Yes,’ Rod said.

A silence opened around them. Any normal person—any person with the smallest working part of a heart—would have folded the wrapper closed and handed it back.

Adam took a bite.

Harriet stared at him. Rod’s expression seemed to fold in on itself, all the earlier fight draining from his face.

‘That was for her,’ he said. ‘Every Friday, I sit with her and bring her a Twix. It was her favourite.’

Adam continued chewing. ‘I don’t think she’ll mind. What’s she going to do with it? She’s a ghost.’

For one suspended moment, nobody moved. Harriet saw the muscle jump in Alex’s jaw and the last of his careful control disappear. His chair scraped sharply against the floor as he stood.

He crossed the space between them in two strides and hit Adam squarely in the face.

The crack of it silenced the room. Adam staggered backwards into the reception desk, scattering a fan of leaflets across the floor, while a cheer rose so quickly in Harriet’s throat that she had to turn it into a gasp.

Sally shouted. The solicitor shot to his feet. Marge clapped one hand over her mouth, then lowered it almost immediately. ‘Good.’

Alex didn’t follow Adam or raise his hand again. He stayed exactly where he was, breathing hard, his fist slowly unclenching at his side. One punch. Nothing more. But after weeks of watching Adam smile, lie and reach for things that did not belong to him, it felt less like an assault than punctuation.

Adam pressed a hand to his mouth. ‘You’re all fucking fired—the lot of you—and you’re all fucking homeless.’

‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’

Alex looked at the half-eaten Twix still clutched in Adam’s other hand. ‘He told you it was for his wife.’

‘She’s dead!’

Rod reached for the remaining finger of chocolate. ‘It’s all right.’

Alex turned towards him, the anger leaving his face at once. ‘No, Rod. It isn’t.’

Rod looked down at the Twix in his hand. ‘Ronnie liked Twix.’

The room fell silent.

Mrs Fitz sighed.

‘This has been an exhausting afternoon.’

The solicitor slowly sat back down.

‘I think perhaps we should finish the documentation.’

Adam straightened his jacket.

‘Yes. Please. Before somebody else assaults me.’

Mrs Fitz looked at him. ‘You did eat a dead woman’s Twix.’

‘That is not a legal defence,’ the solicitor said.

Sally made a strangled noise, Harriet covered her mouth and even Alex looked away.

The solicitor pulled the signed document towards himself.

Adam returned to the table.

‘So when does the controlling interest transfer?’

The solicitor checked the signature.

‘It already has.’

Adam nodded.

‘Good.’

The solicitor looked up.

‘Mrs Fitz’s controlling interest in Hawthorn House has been transferred in accordance with her instructions.’

Adam sat back.

‘I, Bernice Moira Fitzgerald, being of sound mind and body, hereby transfer fifty-one per cent and my entire controlling share of Hawthorn House to HMS Harriet Hoxley.’

Silence.

‘Long may she sail.’

Harriet heard the words, but they didn’t arrange themselves into anything meaningful. She looked behind her. Nobody. Then she looked back at the solicitor.

‘Sorry?’

Mrs Fitz sighed.

‘Oh, do keep up.’

Harriet stared at her. The solicitor turned the document around.

‘Mrs Fitz has transferred her fifty-one per cent controlling share in Hawthorn House to you.’

Harriet laughed, although it came out completely wrong.

‘No, she hasn’t.’

Mrs Fitz looked at her.

‘I have.’

‘You can’t.’

‘I just did.’

Harriet stared at the document, then at Mrs Fitz, then Alex, then back at Mrs Fitz.

‘You’ve given me Hawthorn?’

‘Fifty-one per cent of it.’

‘That is Hawthorn!’

‘Carelink may object to that interpretation.’

Alex nodded. ‘We don’t.’

‘What the fuck is this?’

Mrs Fitz didn’t flinch. ‘My decision.’

‘You said you were stepping down.’

‘I am.’

‘You said you couldn’t run it anymore.’

‘I can’t.’

‘So you give it to her?’

His hand shot towards Harriet.

‘She’s a carer.’

Harriet felt the word land and disappear. It no longer mattered. Adam looked around the room as though someone sensible might finally agree with him.

‘She isn’t your daughter. She isn’t even family.’

Alex answered before anyone else could. ‘Yes, she is.’

Harriet turned towards him. He was still looking at Adam, apparently unaware that he’d just said something she might have liked a moment to recover from.

Mrs Fitz smiled faintly.

‘Blood has always been terribly overrated.’

Harriet’s eyes filled immediately.

‘Oh, no.’

Mrs Fitz looked at her.

‘What?’

‘You are not making me cry in front of all these people.’

‘I’m not doing anything.’

‘You absolutely are.’

Marge was already crying without restraint, Sally had abandoned any pretence of not doing the same and Rod was eating the surviving half of the Twix.

Adam stared at Mrs Fitz.

‘You’ll regret this.’

Mrs Fitz settled back in her chair.

‘I’ve regretted many things. You’re quite high on the list.’

Adam left ten minutes later, and nobody stopped him. The solicitor followed after spending another twenty minutes explaining the paperwork to Harriet, who nodded at intervals while understanding perhaps a third of it.

When the door finally closed behind the solicitor, Harriet looked around Hawthorn. The reception desk, the old photographs, the chairs that didn’t match. All of it was exactly where it had been an hour ago.

Except now, apparently, some of it belonged to her.

That was a thoroughly alarming thought.

She turned towards Alex.

‘I own fifty-one per cent of this place.’

‘Yes.’

‘And Carelink owns forty-nine.’

‘Yes.’
Harriet narrowed her eyes.
‘So technically I outrank you.’
‘Well, no. Technically, I am now the other half.’
Alex looked at her.
‘No.’
‘I own more.’
‘That isn’t how it works.’
‘It sounds exactly like how it works.’
Mrs Fitz closed her eyes.
‘God help us all.’

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# CHAPTER 42

Fifty-One, Forty-Nine

Two weeks later, Hawthorn House had settled back into itself with surprising speed. Mrs Fitz was resting more, although she objected violently to the word resting and preferred to describe it as reducing unnecessary activity. Marge had returned the visitor books to the filing cabinet in an order understood only by Marge, Sally had stopped asking Harriet whether she felt different now that she owned part of a building, and Rod had almost stopped referring to the van incident as an operation.

Almost.

Harriet was sorting post at reception when she noticed Alex through the window, heading towards the older part of the garden with his hands in his coat pockets. For once, he had no folder.

She watched him disappear behind the hedge. After a few minutes, she followed.

She found him near the back wall, standing beside Rod with one arm across his shoulders, looking down at one of the smaller stones tucked beneath the old tree.

HERE LIES RONNIE CALBERT

WIFE OF RODNEY

MOTHER OF SARAH.

LONG MAY SHE REST

Harriet stopped at the edge of the path. Alex crouched beside Ronnie’s stone, brushed away a few damp leaves and placed a Twix at its base. She hadn’t expected him to remember. Not with everything that had happened, and certainly not without Rod asking. Yet he’d thought of it.

Rod wiped a tear from his eye. ‘Loved a Twix, she did.’

Alex rested a hand on Rod's back until he nodded and managed a small smile.

When Alex eventually turned and saw Harriet, neither of them mentioned how long she had been standing there. They left Rod beside Ronnie and walked back towards Hawthorn House together.

At the edge of the lawn, Harriet glanced at him.

'So what happens now?'

Alex looked towards Hawthorn.

'We work it out.'

Harriet nodded.

'Fifty-one, forty-nine.'

'I'm aware.'

'So I do technically outrank you.'

'You still don't.'

'I own more.'

'That isn't how it works.'

Harriet considered this. 'I still think it should count for something.'

'It will. Mostly in meetings.'

She looked back at the house and let the silence settle between them until Alex said, 'Whatever we do, it's going to be expensive.'

Harriet stopped. Without answering, she reached into her bag and rummaged beneath her purse, keys, two receipts, a lipstick she had thought she'd lost and something sticky she chose not to investigate.

Finally she pulled out the brown envelope, still sealed and slightly bent at one corner.

She held it up, and Alex raised his eyebrows.

'What's that?' Harriet turned it over in her hand. 'Guilt money. A cheque.'

His gaze moved from the unopened envelope to her.

'You haven't opened it?'

'No.'

'How long have you had it?'

Harriet thought about that.

'A while.'

Alex stared at her. She shrugged, tucked one finger under the edge of the envelope and smiled.

'Well. Whatever's in here, it'll have to do.'

‘It will do.’

Before she could think better of it, Harriet kissed him.

For the second time, Alex didn’t hesitate. He pulled her closer and kissed her back.

Somewhere inside Hawthorn, a walkie-talkie crackled and Sally’s voice carried through the open window. ‘Harriet?’

She closed her eyes as Alex laughed against her mouth, but the radio crackled again.

‘Harriet, are you on shift? Sorry, I mean, Boss—are you going to do any work today or not?’

She pulled back just far enough to look at Alex.

‘Don’t.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘You were going to.’ He smiled.

Harriet looked past him towards Hawthorn House, at the old brick and uneven windows, at the garden and the ridiculous collection of people inside it.

For once, she had no idea what happened next, and she was perfectly happy with that.

THE END

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