

# ***While We Wait***

*By*

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## Synopsis

*While We Wait* is a tense, intimate drama set in a hospital waiting room, where two women from different generations are thrown together at a moment of crisis. Alex, a climate change protester, is waiting for news of her injured partner. Martha, sharp-tongued and guarded, is waiting for her son, a police officer hurt in the same protest. What begins as brittle small talk about phones, politics, and “the right words” quickly becomes a charged confrontation about duty, protest, loyalty, and who gets to decide what’s worth fighting for.

As fragments of their lives surface, the cracks in both women’s certainties begin to show. With quiet humour and emotional precision, *While We Wait* explores how language can both wound and protect, how generations talk past each other, and what remains when words finally run out.

## Characters

Doctor (male or female, age 25+)

Alex (female, age 20-35) - a climate change protester

Martha (female, age 60+) - Ian’s mother

Gemma (female, age 20-35) - Alex’s partner

Ian (male, age 25-40) - Martha’s son, a policeman

(The part of the Doctor could be doubled with that of Gemma or Ian)

*(A hospital waiting room with intermittent background noise. A few chairs, a low table with old magazines, and a water cooler. To one side, a small neutral playing area can be used for brief flashbacks or memory sequences. Alex is sitting, drink in hand, head down, scrolling on her phone.)*

*(The Doctor enters with Martha.)*

**Doctor:** If you'd like to take a seat here, Mrs Collins. We'll bring you news as soon as we can.

**Martha:** Thank you, doctor.

*(The doctor nods and exits. Martha settles stiffly into a chair. She fidgets with her handbag and checks her phone clumsily. She sighs and glances at Alex's drink.)*

**Martha:** That's... green.

**Alex:** Sorry?

**Martha:** Your drink.

**Alex:** Oh, right.

*(Awkward silence.)*

**Martha:** What on earth is...

**Alex:** It's an organic Spirulina smoothie.

**Martha:** Looks like pond water.

**Alex:** It's good for you.

**Martha:** So is cabbage. Doesn't mean I want to drink it through a straw.

*(Alex half-smiles, rolls her eyes slightly. Pause. Martha prods at her phone again, frowning.)*

**Martha:** How do you get the thing to... oh, it's away again. Keeps locking itself.

**Alex:** You just swipe up.

**Martha:** Swipe?

**Alex:** Yeah. *(Leans over and shows her.)* Like this.

**Martha:** Hmph. I liked it better when a phone was a phone. Pick it up, dial a number, done. But my son keeps telling me to ditch the landline, says nobody uses them anymore.

**Alex:** Yeah... I mean... times change, don't they?

**Martha:** I suppose. Not always for the better.

*(Silence. Both sit back. Martha clears her throat, nods at Alex's trainers.)*

**Martha:** Nice shoes. *(Pause.)* Very bright.

**Alex:** Thanks.

**Martha:** You'd see them coming a mile off.

**Alex:** That's the point. They're meant to... like... stand out.

**Martha:** Well, they do that alright. Practically glow in the dark. You don't need streetlamps with those on your feet.

**Alex:** *(Grins.)* Saves electricity.

**Martha:** Hmph.  
*(Another pause. Martha tries conversing again.)*

**Martha:** Busy in here earlier?

**Alex:** Not really.

**Martha:** You been waiting long?

**Alex:** *(Sighs.)* No.

**Martha:** Right.  
*(Silence. Martha shifts, uncomfortable. She picks up one of the magazines, flips through it.)*

**Martha:** These things are always six months out of date. Says here Meghan and Harry are getting married.

**Alex:** *(Grins.)* That was years ago.

**Martha:** Well, there you go. Nothing ever up to date in hospitals.

**Alex:** That's why I use my phone.

**Martha:** Here we go again with the phone.

**Alex:** What?

**Martha:** I'm just saying, people can't seem to go five minutes without staring at the things. Like they're scared to be alone with their own thoughts.

**Alex:** Or they like to stay connected.

**Martha:** Connected? Sitting side by side, staring at screens, not saying a word. That's your idea of connected?  
*(Brief silence. Alex smirks, shakes her head. She glances at Martha's phone on her lap.)*

**Alex:** You've been poking at yours since you sat down.

**Martha:** That's different. Mine's... practical. For calls. Texts. None of this... swiping nonsense.

**Alex:** *(Teasing.)* Practical, eh? You tried to unlock the calculator twice.

**Martha:** Well, it's not designed for folk like me. Fingers too thick. Eyes too tired.

**Alex:** Or you just need to put your glasses on.

**Martha:** Cheeky. No need for that.

*(Martha thinks for a second, then reaches into her bag, takes out her glasses, and puts them on.)*

**Alex:** You could always get one of those phones with the giant buttons. My gran's got one. It's like typing on a microwave. Huge, clunky thing. Takes up half the table when she puts it down. She doesn't even have any apps on it.

**Martha:** Honestly. What is it with your generation? Everything's a gadget or an app. Next, you'll be telling me your fridge has Wi-Fi.

**Alex:** It does, actually.

**Martha:** What?

**Alex:** Our fridge... It has Wi-Fi.

**Martha:** *(Laughs despite herself.)* You're joking.

**Alex:** Dead serious. Tells you when the milk's about to go off.

**Martha:** Oh, come on. That's plain daft. What's wrong with giving it a sniff?

*(They both laugh. The tension loosens. An easier silence follows. Martha sighs.)*

**Martha:** What are you doing on that thing anyway?

**Alex:** Keeping up. Messaging. News.

**Martha:** News? There's a telly on the wall.

**Alex:** It's not the same.

**Martha:** No, it's not. At least on the telly, you don't need to worry about swiping.

*(Alex lets out a small laugh. Both settle back. Silence again.)*

**Martha:** Are you waiting to be seen? Or... waiting on somebody?

**Alex:** Somebody.

**Martha:** Me too.

*(The weight of why they're here hangs. Martha flicks idly through the magazine again, squinting at a page.)*

**Martha:** Listen to this, "influencer couple launch new wellness brand." What in God's name is an influencer?

**Alex:** Someone online who gets paid to... well... to sort of... recommend things.

**Martha:** You mean like an advert?

**Alex:** Kind of. But it's... different. They're supposed to feel... authentic.

**Martha:** Authentic adverts? Right.

*(Alex rolls her eyes, bigger this time. Martha catches it instantly.)*

**Martha:** You know, I've clocked that wee eye-roll of yours. Twice now.

**Alex:** Sorry. Habit.

**Martha:** Best be careful. Face'll stick like that one day. *(Tosses the magazine down with disgust and sighs.)* All trash. Celebrities, diets, adverts. Nothing worth reading.

**Alex:** You picked it up, though.

**Martha:** Out of boredom. Nothing else to do. *(Rummaging through the magazines.)*

**Alex:** You could read the news on your phone.

**Martha:** Don't start that again. Ah, here we go... wordsearch. *(She studies it, then frowns.)* Every single one's done already! Pages all scribbled in. What kind of sadist finishes a word search and puts it back on the table?

**Alex:** *(Without looking up.)* Someone considerate? Saves you the bother.

**Martha:** Don't talk nonsense. The fun's finding the words yourself. Like handing someone a crossword already filled in. Pointless.

**Alex:** Maybe they thought they'd leave their hard work for the next person to admire.

**Martha:** Admire? It's a word search, not the Mona Lisa.

**Alex:** *(To herself.)* Give me strength.

**Martha:** Oh, look. Here's one that hasn't been done yet.

*(She sits, gets a pen from her bag, while Alex continues to read her phone.)*

**Martha:** *(Curiosity getting the better of her.)* What are you reading now?

**Alex:** *(Sighs.)* You bored with that already?

**Martha:** *(Affronted.)* No. *(Beat.)* Just making conversation. You know, like we used to.

**Alex:** *(Sighs.)* Updates from today's protest.

**Martha:** Protest?

**Alex:** Climate action.

**Martha:** *(Disapprovingly.)* Oh, of course.

**Alex:** *(Puts her phone down.)* What's that supposed to mean?

**Martha:** Well, every time you turn on the news, somebody's glued to a road or throwing soup at a painting.

**Alex:** Because people need to wake up.

**Martha:** By ruining everyone's day? Stopping ambulances, keeping parents from picking up their kids?

**Alex:** Yeah, it's disruption. But... disruption works, right? I mean, look at history... civil rights, the suffragettes...

**Martha:** Don't you dare compare sitting in the middle of the road with women who fought for the vote.

**Alex:** I didn't say it was the same. But it's the same principle. Making yourself impossible to ignore.

**Martha:** Well, you're impossible to ignore, I'll give you that.

**Alex:** *(She rises and drifts to the side as the lights shift and the waiting room fades.)*  
Yeah, because the minute we make a sound, the second we're brave enough to say something, we get told to shut up, get back in your box... go home. Like we've no right to say anything.  
*(Alex walks into her cramped flat, while Martha continues with her wordsearch.)*

**Alex:** Come on, Gemma, you're not even ready. We're meeting in half an hour.

**Gemma:** *(Enters, jacket half-on. Tries to put her shoes on as she walks.)* I know, I know... I'm sorry. Didn't realise we were leaving so soon.

**Alex:** It's fine. *(Jokingly.)* There's enough time to let you put your shoes on.  
*(Gemma finishes tying her laces.)*  
Ready?

**Gemma:** *(Hesitant.)* I guess. *(Beat.)* It's just...

**Alex:** What?

**Gemma:** Every time I see these protests on the news, it looks like chaos. Loads of shouting and pushing... I'm not really cut out for that, Alex. *(Beat.)* What if it turns nasty?

**Alex:** Then it turns nasty. That's what happens when the truth rattles cages. We didn't get the vote by sitting politely with our arms folded?

**Gemma:** Suppose. But... is waving cardboard really going to make any difference?

**Alex:** Maybe not. That's why we need to do other things... to make sure we're really noticed.

**Gemma:** I'm not lying down in front of moving cars.

**Alex:** I don't expect you to...

**Gemma:** I'm not glueing myself to anything... You know that, don't you?

**Alex:** *(Laughing.)* I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't want to... honestly. But I'd really like you to come. It's important to me... And it should be to you as well.

**Gemma:** It is. Really, it is. My breathing's never been right. Half the kids in my year had inhalers. That's not bad luck. It's got to be the air. *(Thinking.)* But maybe... maybe you and I complain about these things a bit differently, you know?

**Alex:** Look, I'm all for talking about it if that's what you mean... But it only gets you so far. To get change, you need to force the issue... or nothing happens.

*(Whirls to face her, passionate.)* The public notice when they see us lying on the road, when we graffiti stuff that's precious to them. It gets us news coverage, and it gets under their skin, Gemma. It makes them ask questions. That's the start. That's how change *always* starts.

**Gemma:** *(Still hesitant.)* And what if it's in the news for a day, and then forgotten?

**Alex:** Then we stand up again. And again. Till it's not forgotten. Till they can't ignore us.

*(Gemma looks concerned.)*

**Alex:** *(Softer.)* Look, don't worry so much. You know what... it'll be fun as well.

**Gemma:** *(Sarcastically.)* Oh, good, we can have some fun before getting hit over the head by a police baton.

**Alex:** *(Laughing, and mimics dodging blows.)* Keep dodging, ducking... and shouting. Don't worry... I'll look after you. I'll get you home in one piece.

**Gemma:** I know you will. But sometimes... I wonder if it doesn't just annoy people more. *(Brightening.)* But either way, when it's over, we'll celebrate with chips on the way home? Greasy, horrible chips. What do you think?

**Alex:** *(Smiles.)* You've got a deal.

*(Pause.)*

*(Takes Gemma's hands.)* Look, I know you think it's just noise.

**Gemma:** *(Laughing slightly.)* I do...

**Alex:** But it's not. It's more like... panic, you know? Pure panic. Knowing the clock's ticking, and no one in power is actually doing anything about it. I mean, we've inherited a planet in ruins, and we're told to... like... smile, recycle our bottles, and shut up. But the fires, the floods, the storms... they keep coming.

*(She breaks away from Gemma and starts to walk back to the waiting room, transitioning to talking to Martha again.)*

God... Listen to me. I sound like a slogan. But it's true. We have to keep fighting... for everyone... Even if they won't fight for themselves.

**Martha:** *(Peering over her glasses, dry.)* Hypocrisy.

**Alex:** *(Thrown.)* What?

**Martha:** *(Shows the magazine.)* Word search. "Hypocrisy". Right across the middle. Easy.

**Alex:** *(Mutters.)* Convenient.

**Martha:** Fits the box perfectly.

**Alex:** My generation is the first that knows we might not have a future. But the last that can actually stop it. That's not melodrama, that's science.

**Martha:** *(Still scanning the page.)* "Doomsday".

**Alex:** *(Glares.)* Really?

**Martha:** Word search again. Just saying.

**Alex:** You're trying to provoke me.

**Martha:** Not at all. *(She smirks.)* It was diagonally across from... "Entitled".

**Alex:** You don't take any of this seriously, do you?

**Martha:** *(Adjusts her glasses, sniffs.)* Do you know, my husband worked shifts all his life...

**Alex:** Oh, here we go... same old story.

**Martha:** Long hours. He didn't complain. Didn't cause trouble. Put food on the table for his family...

**Alex:** Blah, blah, blah...

**Martha:** God rest him.

**Alex:** *(Beat.)* Oh...I'm... sorry.

**Martha:** He never once blocked a road. Never once stopped someone getting to hospital. He just... got on with it.

**Alex:** That's part of the problem. Everyone just "gets on with it."

**Martha:** A hard day's work, a sense of duty, that's what's built our houses, schools, a country worth living in.

**Alex:** A country choking on fumes.

**Martha:** *(Snaps.)* And who's driving those cars you're blocking? Ordinary folk. Not billionaires. Not politicians. Ordinary folk like me, trying to get through the week.

**Alex:** *(Sarcastic.)* Sorry for ruining your big shopping trip.

**Martha:** *(Bristles.)* That's exactly it. No respect these days. If it's not you lot, it's teenagers... riding their bikes round the shops with their hoods up, faces covered.

**Alex:** *(Dry.)* Could be cold. Ever think of that?

**Martha:** *(Ignoring her.)* Stealing anything they can get their hands on. Nobody stops them... Nobody dares. When I was young, you'd get a clip round the ear, and you'd soon learn. Now? Nothing. They laugh in your face and swear at you. That's what entitlement looks like.

**Alex:** So every young person's a criminal now? Just 'cause they've got a hoodie on?

**Martha:** That's not what I said. I'm saying it's the attitude. Thinking the world owes them.

**Alex:** Or they're angry. They don't see a future worth behaving for.

**Martha:** You're actually defending that?

**Alex:** I'm not, I'm trying to understand it.

**Martha:** *(Exasperated.)* Oh, you're so... woke.

**Alex:** Woke? Do you even know what that means?

**Martha:** *(Flustered, blustering.)* Woke? Of course I do.  
*(Alex looks at her, waiting for an explanation.)*

**Martha:** It means... smug. Yes. Smug and wide awake. Like you think your eyes are open, and the rest of us are asleep.

**Alex:** So... no, you don't know what it means.

**Martha:** Well... maybe not exactly. But I tell you one thing.... We didn't sit around waiting for someone else to fix the world, or moaning on the internet. We grafted. That's what we did.

**Alex:** *(Exasperated.)* Oh my!

**Martha:** And what do I see now? A generation that thinks shouting's the same as working. That blocking a road's the same as building one. Half of them can't boil an egg without... what's it... Googling.

**Alex:** Aw, come on!

**Martha:** They want their voices heard, but can't even say please or thank you. Dinner out of a Deliveroo bag. Call a plumber if a light bulb blows. That's not courage. That's not change. That's playing at life, while the rest of us work to keep the lights on.

**Alex:** Well, you know what, it's "the rest of us" who are going to be the ones suffering when this planet finally....  
*(The Doctor passes briskly through, papers in hand. Alex rises to stop them.)*

**Alex:** Excuse me. Sorry. Any update?

**Doctor:** *(Pausing, kind but hurried.)* I'll try and get that for you.

**Alex:** Is that the best you can do?

**Doctor:** *(Firmly, then hurrying off.)* I'll speak to you as soon as I can, Miss.

**Alex:** *(Annoyed.)* Miss!

**Martha:** For crying out loud! Did you hear me complain when he called me Mrs Collins? Does the title offend you?

**Alex:** It's not about being offended. I'm not 'Miss,' okay? I'm not defined by whether I've got a husband or not. It's... It's about respect.

**Martha:** Respect? The doctor was being polite.

**Alex:** To me, it's lazy. Didn't even think. Just slapped a label on me. That's not respect, that's habit.

**Martha:** Good grief! *(Pause.)* And your generation, always in a hurry... Want everything instantly. Why not let the doctor do their job?

**Alex:** Someone I care about is lying in there. I want to know what's going on.

**Martha:** We're all waiting on somebody. You don't see me jumping up every time a doctor or nurse walks past. If I did that, my son would never let me hear the end of it.

**Alex:** That's not patience. That's... sitting there. Pretending everything's fine when it isn't.

**Martha:** Pretending? I'm not the one waving a placard and shouting like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are riding into town.

**Alex:** Well, you should be. If more people shouted, something would actually change.

**Martha:** If more people kept their gobs shut, we wouldn't be tearing ourselves apart. It's all just... noise.

**Alex:** It's passion.

**Martha:** It's tantrums. Precious little tantrums.

**Alex:** *(Bridling.)* You really think caring makes us precious?

**Martha:** I think you mistake volume for courage.

*(Martha crosses to the water cooler. She pours a cup of water, takes a sip, then wrinkles her nose.)*

**Martha:** Ugh. Lukewarm. Always is.

**Alex:** *(Dryly.)* Maybe it's saving energy.

**Martha:** *(Shoots her a look.)* Don't start.

*(She tosses the empty cup in the bin with more force than necessary. Alex watches.)*

**Alex:** *(Softer, a little awkward.)* You know... I've got this mate, Jamie. He's still at Uni. Non-binary. Properly sharp, like... brilliant writer. But every time they walk into class, half the room's smirking. Tutors tripping over what to call them. And... it... gets to you. Jamie's stopped speaking up, won't even read their stuff out anymore, 'cause they're sick of being laughed at. *(Beat.)* You call that precious?

**Martha:** *(She exhales, then turns slowly back.)* I call it... confusing. Folk like me can't keep up. It feels like the rules change every week.

**Alex:** Then why not listen instead of sneering?

**Martha:** *(Fidgeting, straightening her skirt.)* Who is it you're waiting on, anyway?

**Alex:** *(Hesitates.)* My partner... Gemma.

**Martha:** Right.

**Alex:** She was at the protest today. Got hurt when the police moved in. Hit by a baton, I reckon.

**Martha:** *(Sits up straighter.)* Right. Well. That explains a lot.

**Alex:** What's that supposed to mean?

**Martha:** Nothing. Just... figures.

**Alex:** And you? Who are you waiting for?

**Martha:** My son.

**Alex:** Oh?

**Martha:** He's a police officer.  
*(Beat. Realisation lands.)*

**Alex:** Right. So was he at the protest today?

**Martha:** Yes... Yes, he was. And he's ended up in here... because... because of your...  
*(Alex rises to her feet and faces Martha in the centre of the room.)*

**Alex:** Wait a second. It's Gemma who's in here because of the police. Her arm's in bits... because *they* charged forward. It's alright for the police, they have all that body armour...

**Martha:** *(Warning.)* Careful.

**Alex:** It's true. She wouldn't be here if they hadn't turned a peaceful protest into a battlefield.

**Martha:** You don't know what happened. She could've slipped, fallen in the panic...

**Alex:** Oh, so it's her fault now? Typical.

**Martha:** Don't twist my words. The police are out there to keep order... They're not looking for a fight with every passing cause.

**Alex:** *(Frustrated.)* Oh, what's the point? To you, he's a policeman. To me... he's another shield for the politicians in charge. We were never going to see it the same way.

**Martha:** Don't you dare make it sound like a game of sides. He's not a symbol, he's my boy.

**Alex:** And Gemma's not a cause. She's my life.  
*(Silence. Martha's hand tightens on her handbag strap.)*

**Martha:** Then if she's your life, why let her throw herself into danger?

**Alex:** It's not danger, it... *(Softens.)* It shouldn't be...

**Martha:** My son doesn't get that choice. It's his job. His duty. He puts that uniform on, does what's asked of him. *(Beat.)* It's not easy. He gets screamed at, spat on, things thrown at him... Every single day.

**Alex:** So what? You think that excuses everything?

**Martha:** It makes it hard. He has to stand in the middle of all that. He has to keep order... keep calm. He has to mind everything he does... every word he says... because someone's always watching. One mistake and you're finished.

**Alex:** Then don't make the mistake in the first place.

**Martha:** *(Thinks for a second.)* Do you know, he had a mate... a colleague in the Force... he put a stupid joke online about trans people. Thought he was being funny. Within days, he was out. Everything he'd worked for... gone. Couldn't get a job, couldn't shake it off.

*(Quietly, almost to herself.)* That's how hard it is. Wear that uniform, and the world's waiting to bring you down.

**Alex:** If words cut them down, why should they get a free pass?

**Martha:** So free speech only counts when it's something you agree with?

**Alex:** Free speech doesn't mean zero consequences.

**Martha:** *(Exasperated.)* A joke! And he's branded for life? That's not justice, that's a noose around his neck.

**Alex:** Then he should've thought before he typed. Your son's mate... he doesn't know what it's like, walking into a room and having everyone laugh at you just for who you are.

**Martha:** And you don't know what it's like to watch someone's future vanish because of one word... one mistake.

*(She exhales. Pause. Then with a softer voice.)*

My son. They brought him in an ambulance from the protest. A blow to the head. Blood everywhere. They said he was unconscious for a while.

*(Gathering herself.)*

But they'll patch him up. He's strong. And he'll be back out there again tomorrow... doing his duty.

**Alex:** Listen, I'm sorry about your son. But "duty"? Come on. He chose that job, chose to wear that uniform. Gemma didn't choose to get her arm smashed in because of somebody else's "duty".

**Martha:** He doesn't *want* to have bricks and bottles thrown at him!

**Alex:** And she doesn't want to be beaten down for standing up to what's wrong. *(Beat.)* She went there to fight for something...

**Martha:** Fight?

**Alex:** Alright, wrong word... Protest.

**Martha:** *(Cynically.)* Right.

**Alex:** There's a difference.

**Martha:** A difference that disappears once the shoving and shouting starts. Then it's outright chaos.

**Alex:** Chaos because of how the police respond. Batons first, questions later.

**Martha:** *(Snaps.)* My son was protecting people.

**Alex:** Protecting who, exactly? The rich? The powerful? The ones who don't give a toss about... about any of us?

**Martha:** *(Rises, furious.)* He's not "the police." His name is Ian. He's my son. Flesh and blood.

*(Doctor enters briskly, noticing the tension.)*

**Doctor:** Excuse me... sorry to... interrupt. I need to have a quiet word with this young lady.

**Alex:** *(Bridling.)* Young lady... really!

**Martha:** *(Aside.)* Pfft... She's no lady. *(She moves to give them space.)*

**Doctor:** *(Lowering voice slightly.)* Your partner's been checked over. The X-ray shows a fracture in her arm, some bruises... but nothing more serious.

**Alex:** That's it? Nothing else?

**Doctor:** No. We're moving her to a ward now. Once she's settled, you'll be able to go up and see her.

**Alex:** So she's going to be alright?

**Doctor:** *(Smiles.)* Yes. She'll be fine.

**Alex:** *(Exhales, almost a laugh of relief.)* Right. Okay. Thank you.

*(Doctor exits.)*

**Alex:** She's okay... I needed to hear that.

**Martha:** Good. I'm glad about that.

*(Pause.)*

**Alex:** I thought I'd feel better, you know. Hearing she's safe.

**Martha:** And you don't?

**Alex:** I do. God, I do. But the relief... it makes everything else hit harder. Because we keep doing this, over and over. And every time I'm the one saying, "Come on, Gemma, we have to go, we can't sit this one out."

**Martha:** Nobody forced her.

**Alex:** No. But I pushed it. I said it mattered. And now she's lying in there because of me.

*(Pause.)*

She wanted greasy chips on the way home. *(Beat.)* I said I'd keep her safe... *(Voice catching.)* I said I'd get her home in one piece. *(Beat.)* And what's changed? Nothing. Not a damn thing. They call us freaks... criminals. They shove us in vans, laugh at us in the headlines. And every time I think... maybe this is it, maybe this is the spark... a week passes, and nothing's different.

**Martha:** So why keep doing it?

**Alex:** *(Voice breaking.)* I don't know anymore. I'm so tired. Some mornings I wake up and think... should I even bother? If all we're doing is breaking ourselves for nothing. And then I think... what else *can* I do?

*(Alex stares at the floor, shaking slightly. Martha watches, then crosses to the water cooler and pours a cup. She places it in front of Alex. Alex glances at Martha.)*

**Alex:** *(Quietly.)* You can feel every minute in here. Like the air's... thick.

**Martha:** You're right. Time doesn't seem to move the same in a hospital. Drags its heels.

**Alex:** *(Glances at her.)* Look... about before. I was... sharp. I didn't mean...

**Martha:** Forget it. We've both said plenty.

*(Pause.)*

Tell me about your friend... partner. Tell me about her.

**Alex:** *(Caught off guard.)* Well... what do you want to know?

**Martha:** I don't know. Something, outside of... You know... politics, protest marches.

**Alex:** She'd hate me talking about her in here.

**Martha:** She's not here.

**Alex:** *(After a pause, softening.)* She's thoughtful. Laughs too loud at rubbish telly. Always overcooks the pasta, but swears it's al dente. Thinks she can dance, can't... *(She laughs.)* She's terrible! She loves pandas... has loads of cuddly ones. Her nod to the environment. She's beautiful. She's... she's home.

**Martha:** And the two of you... How long have you been... You know...

**Alex:** No, I don't. What?

**Martha:** *(Flustered.)* Together. A... couple.... Companions? No, that sounds like dogs... Oh, Martha... stop talking!

**Alex:** *(Smiles.)* We live together, if that's what you're asking.

**Martha:** Well, you can live with a flatmate.

**Alex:** Not one you kiss goodnight.

*(Martha clears her throat.)*

**Martha:** Well, that's... nice... That you have each other, I suppose. Since I lost my husband, it's just been me and my boy. He's the one that's left. Everything's for him now.

**Alex:** That sounds... hard.

**Martha:** It is. But that's life, right? *(Pause.)* And your family... they're fine with it all?

**Alex:** Fine?

**Martha:** *(Hesitant.)* Well... your mum and dad... did they take it alright? When you told them you were... with a...

**Alex:** *(Smiles.)* Woman? Why wouldn't they be?

**Martha:** Well, you know... it's... very modern.

**Alex:** *(Laughs.)* Modern! It's really not anymore.

**Martha:** No, I suppose it's not.

**Alex:** *(Kindly.)* Anything else? Any more burning questions?

**Martha:** No. Well... I mean... do you see yourself... having children?

**Alex:** Well, yes. We've talked about it.

**Martha:** *(Nods, flustered.)* Oh. Right. And that's... possible now... isn't it?

**Alex:** *(Flat.)* Biology still works the same, last I checked.

**Martha:** But I thought... well...

**Alex:** IVF. Adoption. Plenty of options. It's not witchcraft.

**Martha:** *(Half under her breath.)* Feels like it sometimes.

**Alex:** Perhaps that's because you've not bothered to understand it.

**Martha:** *(After a pause. Quietly.)* You're probably right.

**Alex:** *(Surprised.)* Really?

**Martha:** I try, you know. I really do. But the world keeps changing. New words, new ways, new rules. And every time I get one bit straight, it's all different again.

**Alex:** It's not rules, it's more like...

**Martha:** It feels like rules. Like a test I didn't study for. I feel stupid.

*(She stands, drifting to one side as the lighting shifts into Martha's kitchen.)*

Like I've lived sixty-odd years and none of it counts anymore.

*(Ian enters in partial police uniform. He smiles when he sees her.)*

**Martha:** You'll catch your death going out like that. Have a quick cuppa before you leave?

**Ian:** (*Grinning.*) Mum, I've been in worse than a bit of drizzle. You'd think I was five.

**Martha:** You'll always be five to me. (*Pinches his cheek jokingly.*) Can't they give you a break? You've done nothing but shifts all week, like they think coppers don't need sleep.

**Ian:** It's another one of those big protests. We're already trending before it's even started. Hashtags flying about, folk planning it all on TikTok

**Martha:** I don't know if what you said there was a sentence or a sneeze.

**Ian:** (*Laughing.*) It's just how folk talk now. You don't have to keep up with everything. Half of these protesters are shouting for safe spaces while they're chucking stuff at you. Doesn't make much sense to me either.

**Martha:** There you go again. When I was young, a safe space was four walls and a door you didn't bother locking. Now it means something else entirely. And I'm the daft one.

**Ian:** You're not daft. It means somewhere people feel safe being themselves. It's not a bad thing.

**Martha:** (*Sighs.*) Oh, I don't know... All these new words I'm supposed to memorise or else I'm branded ignorant.

**Ian:** Mum, you're not...

**Martha:** Maybe I am ignorant. But it's not malice... it's... fear. Fear that I don't recognise the world I grew up in, that the language itself is leaving me behind.

**Ian:** I know.

**Martha:** It used to be so simple. (*Pause.*) Your Dad used to say, "Call a spade a spade, Martha, and you'll never go wrong." Now I don't dare say "spade" in case it offends somebody. Feels like I'm being told to stop being myself.

**Ian:** (*Earnestly.*) It's not about that, Mum. It's about thinking before you speak. That's all. You taught me that. You always said words could cut. You're just on the other side of it now.

**Martha:** (*Remembering with a smile on her face.*) Do you remember the other day... that lad at the bus stop? Skinny wee thing, all mouth. Moaning that the rain was 'oppressing' him, and the bus was running late. Kept shouting at me, calling me an old effing fossil.

**Ian:** (*Laughing.*) I remember. You squared up to him like you were twenty again.

**Martha:** I wasn't having it. Thought I'd give him some of his own medicine. So, I used that new word everyone was using...

**Ian:** Oh, yes!

**Martha:** You know, the word for youngsters who get all precious and take offence at every little thing.

**Ian:** (*Nods, grinning, ready for it.*) Go on.

**Martha:** So I went right up to him, looked him dead in the eye, and called him...

**Both:** A snowball!

*(They both descend into laughter.)*

**Martha:** Well, he looked at me like I'd offered him pudding.

**Ian:** I nearly choked. You had him completely baffled. Didn't know whether to be offended or say thank you.

**Martha:** *(Still laughing.)* And you, doubled over, tears streaming down your face.

**Ian:** Because it was perfect. So you, Mum.

**Martha:** *(Sighs.)* I can't even get an insult right these days.

*(The warmth lingers, then ebbs into quiet as the mood shifts.)*

I'm only trying to understand a world that doesn't seem to want me in it anymore.

**Ian:** *(Leans in, serious now.)* It does want you. I do. We all do. Things change, that's all. But you're still my mum. You're still the same woman who kept us going after Dad died. Who worked nights, gave me my first moral compass.

**Martha:** *(Her voice falters, reaches for his hand.)* I don't think I'm cruel or heartless, Ian.

**Ian:** You're not... you're...

**Martha:** I'm... tired. Tired of being told that everything I knew is wrong. Tired of feeling like a stranger in my own time. Like the world's moved on without me.

*(The light fades on Ian. Martha takes out a tissue and returns to the waiting room, wiping at her eyes.)*

**Martha:** Anyway. Doesn't matter what I think. I just want to know my boy is okay. That's all that really matters.

**Alex:** You almost let me in there. For a second.

**Martha:** *(Brusque.)* I don't know what you mean.

**Alex:** Yes, you do. But then slammed the door shut again.

**Martha:** No point spilling your guts all the time. I'm not in the habit of sharing.

**Alex:** And that's why nothing changes.

*(Alex's phone buzzes; a peculiar tone.)*

**Martha:** What's that, your bat signal?

**Alex:** *(Checks her phone.)* It's Gemma. She's been moved to a ward. Says I can go up and see her. Even put a string of emojis at the end ... little hearts, and a whole load of panda faces. *(A tearful laugh.)*

**Martha:** That's nice. *(Beat.)* What's an emoji?

**Alex:** *(Laughing.)* Tiny pictures. Like texting hieroglyphics. She always uses too many when she's trying to sound brave.

**Martha:** Well, that's good then. Brave is good.

**Alex:** *(Picking up her bag.)* Yeah... it means she's herself. If she's messing about with pandas, she can't be that bad.

**Martha:** Best you go, then. Don't keep her waiting.

**Alex:** Yes... thanks. *(Beat.)* It's been... interesting... meeting you.  
*(Alex makes her way to the exit. The Doctor enters and they cross.)*

**Martha:** Likewise.

**Doctor:** *(Looking at Martha.)* Mrs Collins, isn't it?

**Martha:** *(Standing.)* Yes. Yes, it is.

**Doctor:** Can we have a quiet word?  
*(Alex stops at the door and turns slowly. The Doctor ushers Martha further away, and their voices drop as an update is provided. Alex watches. Martha nods faintly. The Doctor squeezes her shoulder, then exits. Martha slowly returns to her chair. Alex waits, then moves to sit beside her.)*

**Martha:** *(Not looking up.)* They've taken Ian into surgery. He lost consciousness again. A bleed on the brain, they think. *(Looks up.)* Doctor asked if I wanted to wait in a private room. That's never good news, is it?. *(She swallows hard, fighting to keep composure.)* Said... Said it was critical. That they were doing all they can, but I should... *(She picks up the wordsearch and opens it to distract herself.)*

**Alex:** *(Shifts awkwardly.)* I'm sorry, I don't... I don't even know what to say.

**Martha:** There's nothing to say. *(Beat.)* Just... *(looking at the wordsearch)* words... and I've had enough of them today. *(She drops the wordsearch.)*

**Alex:** *(Quietly.)* You're right... I suppose sometimes... words don't matter so much.

**Martha:** *(A small laugh.)* Is that us finally agreeing on something?  
*(Pause.)*  
You've got the world on your shoulders, young lady... Fighting for everyone's future. I might not agree with everything, but I admire that.

**Alex:** Really?

**Martha:** Really. *(Beat.)* But when Gemma came in here, the world suddenly got smaller, didn't it?

**Alex:** I mean... I suppose.

**Martha:** It became all about her.

**Alex:** *(Nodding.)* Yes... It did.

**Martha:** Well, that's all that counts. For me... It's Ian. Always him. He's my cause. My world... *(Her voice falters.)*

**Alex:** I get it... I do.

*(Pause.)*

Maybe that's all we're really doing, y'know? Fighting for our own little worlds. And if enough of those worlds kind of... link up, maybe that's what changes the big world? Not this massive planet you're supposed to save all at once... just people. The people you love. Because that's what it comes down to, right? Love. It takes this huge thing... the whole world... and shrinks it into one face, one heartbeat you can't stand to lose. And who knows... maybe that's enough.

*(Martha sniffs and dries her eyes.)*

**Martha:** He's all I have.

**Alex:** *(Softly.)* You need to stay positive

**Martha:** And you need to go up to the ward. Life's too short. Go and see Gemma.

*(Alex hesitates, then rises and picks up her bag. She looks at the door, then at Martha, torn. A silence. She sets the bag back down and slowly sits again.)*

**Alex:** Not... Not yet.

**Martha:** *(Surprised.)* What are you doing?

**Alex:** *(Reaches out, rests a hand over Martha's.)* Staying. With you.

**Martha:** Don't be daft. You should be with her. I'll be alright.

**Alex:** *(Quietly, steady.)* I'm not leaving. Not right now.

**Martha:** *(Voice low, faltering.)* You don't have to...

**Alex:** I know.

*(A silence hangs between them.)*

**Alex:** I'm Alex, by the way.

**Martha:** Hello, Alex. I'm Martha.

*(Curtain.)*