

Chapter 1: The Message on the Screen

The first thing Rachel did after calling Deshawn was the thing every founder does before they've had time to think: she went to look for someone to blame. It felt more productive than it was. She checked the office's antivirus software, which was current. She checked the firewall, which was, as far as she could tell, turned on. She scrolled back through the last week of emails looking for anything suspicious and found nothing more alarming than a supplier invoice and a LinkedIn message from someone selling warehouse racking.

What she didn't find, because she didn't know to look for it, was the email her floor supervisor, Priya, had opened four days earlier. It looked exactly like a shipping notification from their wax supplier — same logo, same tone, a tracking number that resolved to a real-looking page. Priya had clicked it once, seen an error message, shrugged, and gone back to work. She never mentioned it to anyone,

because nothing about the moment felt worth mentioning. That is, almost always, how it starts. Not with a dramatic break-in, but with an ordinary click that nobody remembers making by the time it matters.

By Wednesday morning, the ninety-six-hour countdown on the ransom note had become the least of Rachel's problems, because it turned out the countdown was almost beside the point. Thistle & Oak did not have a spare forty thousand dollars in cryptocurrency sitting around, and even if it had, nobody could promise her that paying would actually unlock anything. Law enforcement agencies that track ransomware consistently advise against paying for exactly this reason: it funds the same criminal infrastructure that will likely target you again, and it comes with no guarantee. What Rachel had instead was a production floor of nine employees who needed to know whether to come in, a Harlow Home account manager who was about to notice that tracking numbers had stopped updating, and a set of business systems

that had, as far as she could tell, simply stopped existing.

She called Deshawn again Wednesday night, this time reaching him at his sister's rehearsal dinner. He talked her through what he could from a hallway outside the reception hall. The bad news came fast: the backup drive he'd set up eighteen months earlier, the one Rachel had always pictured as some kind of safety net, had stopped running its automatic backups nine months ago after a software update silently broke the schedule. Nobody had checked it since, because checking a backup that has never once been needed feels like checking whether the sky is still up there. The most recent successful backup was from February. It was now November.

That single fact reorganized the entire crisis. This was no longer a negotiation over four days. This was a rebuild, starting from a snapshot of the business that was nine months stale, with no current customer records, no current inventory counts, and no way to know which of the last

three hundred wholesale orders had already shipped and which hadn't.

Rachel spent Thursday doing something she hadn't done since her first year in business: physical inventory, by hand, walking the floor with a legal pad, counting finished candles by scent and size, cross-referencing them against the one thing that had survived the attack because it lived in a spiral notebook on her desk and not on any server — a running log of which orders were due out that week, written in her own handwriting out of habit, a holdover from the years before she trusted software with anything. It was, she would say later, the least sophisticated business tool she owned, and it was the only thing that kept the company breathing for the first seventy-two hours.

Friday brought the phone call she had been avoiding. Harlow Home's account manager, a calm, unhurried man named Curtis who had never once raised his voice in eighteen months of working together, asked why the last four days of tracking numbers hadn't updated.

Rachel told him the truth, because she couldn't think of anything else that would hold up under a follow-up question. Curtis was quiet for a moment and then explained, gently but precisely, that the contract Thistle & Oak had signed carried a clause allowing Harlow to cancel the order — and end the relationship — if shipment slipped more than five business days past the agreed date. He didn't say it as a threat. He said it the way you'd read out loud from a document, because that's exactly what he was doing. Rachel had signed that clause herself, fourteen months earlier, without a lawyer, because the deal had felt too good to slow down for one.

That contract represented fifty-five percent of Thistle & Oak's annual revenue.

The next seven days blurred into a kind of triage Rachel had never trained for and never wanted to be good at. She and her five-person office staff split into two teams: one to hand-process orders from the paper log and from customers who called in confused about missing