



The Neighbor

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Category: Horror

Description: How well do you know the people who live around you?

From the outside, Park Circle seems like the perfect suburban cul-de-sac, complete with manicured green lawns, well-kept homes, and wonderful neighbors. Each month, there's a block party so everyone can be friendly with one another.

It looks like the perfect place to live.

Behind the facades of those beautiful homes lurk secrets, though. Some are small, minor infractions easily forgiven, but others are far worse.

Life in suburbia relies on believing everyone in the neighborhood is good. The neighbors of Park Circle are about to find out that's not true because a killer has moved in.

And if they aren't careful, someone's going to end up dead.

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PROLOGUE

Fifteen years ago

The vivid green of the trees is what I'll remember about that day. The rain that had drenched the area for three days had finally come to an end, and when the sun came out after all those hours without it, I looked up and saw the truest green leaves on the tree outside my bedroom that I'd ever seen.

That was yesterday. The day I decided to do it. The sun was out, the leaves on the trees were green, and I decided to finally do what I'd thought about.

Kill Amanda Michaels.

That actually sounds far more definitive than how it happened. The thought first came to me that day in late June when she and I were walking through the woods at the end of my street. They sit there like some throwback to before people decided houses and roads were more important than enjoying nature. I've strolled through those woods, up and down the paths by myself for years, but one day she appeared, and I wasn't alone anymore.

I'll never forget the first words she said to me. "Hey, what's up? I'm Amanda." Her voice was what I imagined angels might sound like. Well, that might be an exaggeration, but she sounded sweet and kind. Then she smiled, and all I could think of was what it would be like to kiss her.

She told me she was sixteen and had been visiting the woods since she was around

twelve. I think that must have been a lie since I'd never seen her there, but I didn't question her on that. She liked to talk, and as she did and we walked along the worn paths together, every so often I'd turn to look at her mouth. She had what my mother calls a Cupid's Bow mouth. The peaks of her upper lip fascinated me. My lips looked like every other mouth I'd ever seen, but hers was different.

Kissable. The kind you wanted to taste.

She never asked me how old I was. She probably assumed I was close to her age since I looked so young. I've always looked much younger than I actually am. My mother used to say it was because I'm a Capricorn. She loves all that new age astrology shit. According to her, somehow my being born in January makes my face appear younger than my true age.

One day as we walked along the path we always took, I stopped and kissed Amanda. To my surprise, she didn't protest or run away. Girls tend to do that when you don't ask and just steal a kiss, but not her. She kissed me back with that Cupid's Bow mouth that felt soft and tasted like peppermint because of the lip gloss she used. I'll never forget the smell of that lip gloss either. It was like how my house always smelled around the holidays.

After we finished kissing, she smiled at me and poked her finger into my chest. "That was nice. I was wondering when you would finally kiss me. What took you so long?"

I don't remember my answer to her question. I didn't think a couple weeks was that long to wait before kissing a girl, especially one you didn't ask first. Whatever I said, she just chuckled and started walking again. I followed her, watching her long blond hair sway left and right behind her as she talked about some vacation her family had planned for later that summer.

She usually did most of the talking, which was fine with me. I didn't like to talk that

much, and girls always made me feel foolish, so her handling most of the conversation worked out in my favor. Not that she ever complained. I had the sense she liked to talk, so things seemed right.

Day after day, we met up in the woods and walked and talked. I never made the effort to go to her house, which I guess would have been polite of me. I knew where she lived, though. Across the street and four houses down from my house. I'd look out my bedroom window at what I imagined was her bedroom every night.

And then those three days of rain came, and all I could think was I couldn't see Amanda because of the damn weather. Not that a few days of downpours were that out of the ordinary in western Maryland. We got those a lot in the spring and summer.

There was something about those three days being stuck inside and not being able to see her that made me go a little crazy. I sat in my bedroom staring out the window at her house and the window I imagined was hers and wished she'd wave her hand out the window so I could see her.

She never did, though.

I saw her father's truck come and go from the house with her sisters and her mother but never Amanda. What was she doing that she didn't have to go to eat or to church with them? Was she spending time with someone else?

As the minutes and hours ticked by, I created an entire scenario about what she was up to. Each time I thought about it, I added another detail. At first, I decided she must have a friend over. Girls love to hang out at one another's houses and do whatever girls do. Makeup. Their hair. She did sometimes wear braids, so she and a friend were probably hanging out and braiding each other's hair.

Then it occurred to me that maybe her friend wasn't a girl like her. Maybe it was a

boy. I dismissed that idea at first. What kind of mother and father would let their sixteen-year-old daughter stay at home with a boy while they were gone out to eat or to church? Parents don't usually approve of that kind of thing.

But she spent hours in the woods every day and no one ever came looking for her. So maybe they didn't watch over her like a hawk as other parents did.

The thought of another boy with her made me feel like I wanted to throw up. She kissed me. Weren't we together? No, we'd never been out on a date, but some people might call what we did in the woods dating. It had never progressed further than kissing, but was that a bad thing? Was there something wrong with not moving faster?

I watched that window I was sure was hers for hours on end. I never saw a light come on when it got dark, but the reasons why didn't make me feel any better. She was in that room in the dark with someone. He was tasting her lips, those lips named for a cherub's weapon. The lips of the girl I thought of as an angel.

Whatever else he was doing I couldn't let myself imagine. I didn't want to think about Amanda being that kind of girl.

By the third day, I was sure I'd never see her again in the woods. She'd stop coming to walk with me because she had someone new in her life. Someone she liked enough to spend day and night with. Someone her parents thought was good enough to let him stay with her while they went out.

Someone not me.

Then I woke up that next day and the rain was gone. The sun shone down on everything, making the grass and the trees so green. Finally, I'd be able to go back to the woods, but would Amanda be there too?

It turned out she didn't come back to the woods that first sunny day after all the rain. I walked those paths alone as I had all those other times before she appeared that one day. After the storm, everything smelled so fresh and alive.

And I hated all of it.

Why should everything be so alive while I felt like I was dying inside? I knew I wouldn't feel like that if she would just join me, but she didn't. Hour after hour I walked along the trails, and by the time the sun set, I'd spent the day alone, my mind racing with thoughts of how I wanted to get back at her for abandoning me.

At first, I decided I'd just not talk to her when she walked up to me. I'd look away and not be sucked in by her big blue eyes and pretty mouth, no matter what she said.

By mid-afternoon, that idea had morphed into something darker. I would talk to her, but I'd take what was mine whether she liked it or not. I'd hold my hand over her mouth if she screamed or cried, even as I hoped she wouldn't.

She had spent the past three days with some guy. She knew me for weeks. Why would she have a problem being with me in the woods after all that time?

Just before the sunset settled in behind the mountains and the red and orange remnants of the day gave the world one last surprise, I abandoned the idea of having sex with her for something else. It wouldn't be special anyway since she'd been with whoever he was during all those rainy hours.

No, I'd do something that would ensure she never spent time with any other boy again.

"I had a feeling I'd see you here today. I wanted to come yesterday, but I was busy with getting ready for vacation. My mom insisted I clean my room and wash all my

clothes. She's so silly sometimes. Who cares if your room is clean when you aren't even at home? We're going to Myrtle Beach next week. What did you do on those rainy days?"

Amanda's words came tumbling out of her Cupid's Bow mouth like she had no control over them. I listened, unable to turn away like I originally planned. Her voice was just so sweet that I couldn't stop myself from hearing her out. She did say she wanted to come to see me yesterday. That's something.

Still unsure who she spent all that time with, I mumbled my answer about what I did during those three days of rain. "Not much. Just hung out in my room."

We began walking, and a few seconds later, she turned to look at me and gave me a smile. "Is your room at the front of your house? It's the white house with the blue shutters, right?"

I nodded, happy to know she took the time to think about where my room was like I had done with hers. "Yeah. You can always tell it's my house because of my father's car. Nobody has an El Camino anymore."

With a giggle, she said, "And your room is the one with the windows right in the middle?"

Again, I nodded as happiness filled every crevice of my being. She had thought about me those days we couldn't be together. Maybe she hadn't spent all her time with someone else she liked better than me.

And then she said the words that will forever be tattooed on my brain. "I thought I saw you sitting in the window. I was going to wave, but I figured what was the point?"

As each syllable left that beautiful mouth of hers, my heart sank deeper and deeper until it felt like it came to rest somewhere in my gut. She didn't see the point to doing something as simple as waving so I could see her.

Her thoughtlessness crushed me. Suddenly, my head filled with thoughts of rage like never before. She didn't even want to bother waving, an action that would have brought me more joy than she could imagine. She saw me and didn't care enough to let me know.

Everything I felt for Amanda Michaels evaporated into thin air in those seconds after she said those words. If ever there had been a shred of possibility I wouldn't kill her, she dashed that to pieces with her careless statement.

I walked beside her as she continued to chatter on about something. It didn't matter. I wasn't listening anymore. My mind had shifted into a gear that included a single thought.

I had to kill her.

When we came to where the woods grew denser and the pathway turned to mostly grass because few people ever walked this way, I looked around even as I knew there wasn't another soul in these woods but us. The trees with their very green leaves blocked out the sun so this spot felt perfect for what I needed to do.

She stopped to pick up something from the ground, and that's when my body sprung into action. It was almost like I was hovering over myself watching as I jumped on her back and pressed her to the grass. She let out a tiny whimper, almost as if she didn't mind me doing this but felt like she needed to protest a little for appearance's sake.

But I wasn't trying to get into her pants. The time for that urge had long passed.

I wrapped my hands around her neck and was struck by how small it was. I never noticed that. She had a neck like a tiny bird. Easily snapped if I wasn't careful.

She said my name, but she sounded far away, like a memory of some voice I couldn't clearly remember. My fingers pressed against her petal-soft skin, sinking into her flesh as they slowly cut off the air flowing through her windpipe. I didn't know how long it would take until she stopped breathing. I'd never killed anything before.

As the seconds passed, she clawed at my hands, but she was no match for me. I may have looked like a teenager, but I had more than ten years on her, and that time came with more strength than she could handle. She croaked out my name over and over, along with wretched pleas for me to stop.

But I couldn't. Amanda had to die. I was too far gone down this path to let her leave these woods alive.

"Stop!" she begged hoarsely. "Please stop!"

I heard those words, but my brain couldn't process them. The singular thought that she must die crowded everything out so all I could think about was killing her.

As the minutes ticked by, she slowly stopped her futile struggling, and then she fell still. No more crying out my name. No more begging for me to stop. No more frantic struggling to pry my hands from her throat.

Nothing but silence.

When I finally pulled my hands off her, I collapsed back onto the grass and stared at her lifeless body almost as if I expected her to roll over and look at me with confusion about what I'd done filling her eyes. She had no warning that today was her last day on earth. No hint that anything she could say would make me do this to

her.

She woke up like she had every other day of her life and went about with her plans, never knowing that someone had entirely different plans for her. One minute she was alive and saying thoughtless words, and the next she was lying face down in the tall grass gone from the world.

I don't know how long I sat there with her body just inches away from me. I should have been worried that someone would find me lounging out next to a dead girl, but the thought never entered my head. No thoughts came to me as I stared at her for what felt like hours. I had no feelings either.

For a second or two, I thought I might throw up right after the deed was done, but that never happened either. Nothing happened. It wasn't like in the movies when someone kills another person and then runs away or instantly regrets what they did, scrambling to hide all the evidence so they don't get caught.

I simply killed her and then sat down. Then later, I stood up, walked back down the same path she and I had taken, and strolled out of those woods. There was no one waiting for me. No one with questions about where Amanda was. Nothing. Just a beautiful summer afternoon fading into evening.

The police and their questions for all of us in the neighborhood came later the next morning when her body was found. Did you know her? Were you friends? When was the last time you saw her? Did you see anyone suspicious walk into the woods yesterday?

My answer to all their questions was the same shrug and forced sad expression I knew they expected from someone who may have known Amanda Michaels as a neighbor. My mother spoke more to the police than I did, expressing her utter disbelief that something so heinous could happen in our beautiful small town with

such a low crime rate.

And then the police left after a few days, and I heard from my mother that they had no leads in the case. It appeared as a news story for a week or so on the local TV stations. Nothing makes the news gods happier, it seems, than a beautiful blond who's had something terrible happen to her. Then the story faded from the limelight, and I was left as the only person in the world who truly knew what had happened to sixteen-year-old Amanda Michaels that hot summer day in late July.

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Present Day

My new house sits in a development surrounded by various homes of different colors inhabited by a range of suburbanites who've chosen to live just a few miles outside of Philly. The town, Raven Terrace, boasts good schools, low crime rates, and a good tax base.

All of that means little to me. I chose this house two months ago for one reason.

Nobody knows me here.

As is typical in suburbia, the people around me seem to find it necessary to mingle as often as possible. They have block parties and holiday festivals every chance they get. That's never been my style, but as they say, when in Rome do as the Romans do.

Not that agreeing to join their little events means they get to know anything about me.

I know about them, though. They make it so easy. Well, most of them, but even the ones who seem to want to keep their lives private can't succeed in hiding from me.

Since I work from home as a human resources consultant in my house at the center of this cul-de-sac, I have a panoramic view of what goes on with my neighbors. The house to the right of mine, a blue one with a small front porch and a picture window in the front that looks exactly like every other house in this development, is the home to Jared and Suzanne Meyers. Every morning, rain or shine, he goes for a run. More

than once when an early morning summer storm rolled through, I wondered as I watched him take off down the street in his yellow running shorts and bright green and black running shoes if he'll be running when the weather turns and it snows. This part of Pennsylvania doesn't tend to get too many inches in the winter, but big storms can happen.

I suspect he will because his running partner is the woman he's cheating on his wife with. The blond-haired, blue-eyed, handsome athletic store manager has a thing going with a woman from two streets over who meets him every morning at the corner. Also blond, she wears running clothes that seem more for tantalizing than exercising.

Every day, I watch him meet her and then immediately look back toward his house to see if his wife is watching. I suspect Suzanne doesn't know what Jared's up to since she's gone from the house in her business suit and high heels less than five minutes after he leaves on his daily run. A lawyer at a firm in the city, she's attractive in a barracuda kind of way and reminds me of every female attorney I've ever seen on TV. Driven and focused, she's smart but distracted from her marriage by her job.

But I have a feeling she's going to find out about her cheating husband soon.

Sitting up at my desk, I stretch my arms above my head as my mid-morning break starts. Out my front window I see the man who lives in the white house to the left of me. Hunched over, he picks something that looks like a child's toy off his slightly yellow grass. He's dressed like he always is—faded jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers—but there's nothing casual about Aaron.

I think he may have been a fun-loving kind of person at some point, but those days are long gone. Right after I moved into this house, Jared told me that Aaron had lost his wife less than a year ago after she suffered for three years with cancer. He didn't say what kind of cancer and I didn't ask, but it's clear by looking at Aaron that he hasn't gotten over the loss of her.

They had two children, but I've noticed they don't seem to be around much anymore. Aaron rarely leaves the house, other than to walk around his yard and pick things up off the grass that's slowly dying. He never attends the neighborhood functions that are so integral to nearly everyone around me.

In that, I can respect him. In everything else, he simply seems lost. We've never spoken a single word to one another, but I have a feeling if he ever does talk to me, it won't be about anything happy. The man wears sadness like a coat he can't take off.

I step behind the curtain to avoid his next-door neighbor from seeing me this morning. Now there's a chatty one. Well, the wife. The husband doesn't seem to care about anything but fishing. Both retired, they appear to have chosen very different paths in their early sixties. She putters around that yard of theirs tending to her roses, which are many and in a variety of different colors. I have to give her this. She seems to have a green thumb.

The husband, on the other hand, is rarely home. Like Jared with his running, rain or shine Harold Kittner drives off in his RAM truck every morning with his fishing poles and tackle box in the truck bed. His face is always sunburnt, and from what I've seen from the few interactions with him, he must spend a good portion of his fishing time drinking since he's often drunk when he comes home.

It seems that doesn't bother Marilyn Kittner because whenever he rolls up the driveway, she's there with a smile waiting for him. He never seems happy to be home, always surly looking when he gathers up his poles and equipment and trudges toward her to give her a peck on the cheek. Then after fulfilling his husbandly duty, he walks into the house, and she returns to cruising around their yard to prune one of her rose bushes.

More than once, I've watched her tend to her prized possessions and thought she was probably a beautiful woman when he was younger. Now, she's a gray-haired woman

who wears a bun all the time but never seems able to get all her hair into it. The effect is something I've termed not unappealing dishevelment. I sense she doesn't see a need to focus on her appearance anymore, so she pays more attention to her plants than anything else.

She and the wife from the tan house on the corner across from her are the ringleaders for the neighborhood events. In her mid-thirties, I guess, with four children and light brown hair that's always in a ponytail, Kimmy Marshall is just as chatty as Marilyn, so they get on great.

And yes, it's Kimmy. Not Kim. Not Kimberly. Kimmy. That seems like an odd name for a woman her age, especially considering the only part of her that looks bright and cheery like her name is her face. Always wearing a smile, even when it's forced, she spends her time wrangling those kids of hers in her wrinkled clothes.

Her husband, Tim, works constantly at some marketing firm in the city. His workaholic tendencies are probably why he's balding everywhere but on the sides of his head near his ears. It gives him an odd look that reminds me of Saturn's rings, just made from brown hair. In the few months I've lived here, I think I've seen him no more than five times, and each time he seems more harried than the last.

For her part, Kimmy does one other thing in addition to spearheading all these neighborhood things I feel pressured to attend. She yells. A lot. Maybe that's part and parcel of being a stay-at-home-mom with four young children, but when she gets going, it's like a banshee has moved into our nice, little cul-de-sac. Three boys, the oldest aged six and the twins aged four, run around like wild things Kimmy constantly has to wrangle while she holds the youngest, a baby girl of eight months, in her arms. I suspect they kept trying until they finally had a girl, but from the ragged look of Tim every night he comes home, he's working overtime to afford all of them.

The sudden realization that they're Tim and Kimmy makes me chuckle as I poke my head around the curtain to see Marilyn walking toward the Marshall house. Probably time to plan something else. We just had the Fourth of July block party a few weeks ago. I figured August might be event-free, but by the look of the older woman with that notebook in her hand, I doubt there will be a reprieve from my neighbors for the rest of the summer.

Then again, another one of their friendly parties will give me a chance to get to know the newest person in the neighborhood. The woman who moved into the green house next to Harold and Marilyn earlier this month missed the Fourth of July spectacular, so I haven't had a chance to find out anything about her yet.

Well, other than what I learned when I searched for her online, which wasn't much. That intrigues me as much as not knowing anything about someone. She isn't exactly off the grid when it comes to social media, but she's close to it. That's suspicious to me. Everyone's online. Even people who hate social media are on it. Everyone except people who have something to hide.

That's not entirely true either since I'm on social media, and I have a lot to hide.

She's pretty with dirty blond hair and a round face that makes her look friendly. I guess she's in her late twenties, which begs the question how she affords a home in this neighborhood, especially since she doesn't seem to go to work on a regular basis. I see her maybe once a week get into her car dressed like she's going to some office job, but I doubt that's the case since she returns within a few hours each time.

Maybe she won the lottery. That seems like a longshot, though. I don't know who lived in that house before her, but it was empty for a month after I moved in. Perhaps she was married to the previous owner and got it in the divorce?

Not knowing makes me even more curious about her, so Marilyn and Kimmy

planning yet another summertime party I'll need to go to doesn't bother me as much. My mid-morning break over, I return to my computer as my curiosity about the new person ratchets up a few notches.

When I return from a run to the local grocery store with my dinner, the heat of the day has become unbearable, and I can't wait to get back inside the house where it's air conditioned. Hot and humid, this type of weather might be typical of the northeast in the summertime, but I hate it. It makes me sluggish and drowsy, and I lose my edge and focus on days like this.

Unfortunately, I don't get inside fast enough, and Kimmy catches me on the doorstep as I'm unlocking my door. I hear her come up behind me, or more correctly, I hear the baby in her arms whining as she approaches me.

"Mr. Prentiss, how are you today?" Kimmy asks in a breathless voice that might sound sexy if I didn't know what she looked like and all the baggage she comes with.

If only I'd been a second or two faster in the self-checkout line at the store, I might have made it into the air-conditioned comfort of my home by now.

Slowly, I turn around to face her and see sweat pouring down her chubby face and staining around the collar of her wrinkled light blue T-shirt. She really is dedicated to this neighborly thing, isn't she? Is the party happening tomorrow? If not, I think she could have waited until it cooled down to come see me about her next fun time she's arranging with Marilyn.

"Hi, Kimmy. Hot out, isn't it?" I say with a fake smile as sweat begins to form on the back of my neck after only a few minutes out in this weather.

I could invite her and the baby inside. It would be the neighborly thing to do, after all. It would be the gentlemanly thing too.

However, the last thing I want to do is prolong this encounter, so I don't choose the polite route.

"It is!" she says as she hikes the baby up on her right hip. "But it's perfect for our next neighborhood get-together this weekend. We're calling it the Dog Days of Summer Party. Isn't that clever? Marilyn thought of that. She's always so good with naming our parties. You'll be there, won't you? It wouldn't be the same if everyone didn't attend."

That's not true, and she knows it. Aaron never comes to these things. Then again, it's one thing to decide not to invite someone inside. It's another to bring up the ugliness someone next door is going through as a way to one-up someone.

So I choose to be nice and say, "I'll be there with bells on."

Kimmy hands me a bright orange invitation she and Marilyn have been working on all afternoon. "Great! We're doing a potluck this time, so all you have to do is bring yourself and something to eat. It can be anything, really. We'll have sodas and coffee, although I don't know who will be drinking that if this heat keeps up. As usually, it's BYOB and we'll all share that. Oh, also, if you can chip in some money for the drinks and decorations, we'd really appreciate it."

I glance down at the orange piece of paper in my hand and see she's told me everything on it. Looking up at her, I nod as I reach into my pocket to get my wallet out. "Twenty enough?" I ask as I hand her a twenty-dollar bill.

The little girl on her hip reaches for the money, but her mother grabs it before the child can. "No, Misty. Money is dirty."

Kimmy stuffs it into her shorts pocket before returning her focus to me again. "She puts everything in her mouth. It's so gross and a habit I hope she grows out of."

I nod and smile like I know what she's talking about, but I don't. I've never had children or even a little brother or sister. In fact, Misty might be the only baby I've ever been this close to. She seems pleasant enough, although I suspect as soon as she's old enough to run around her mother will be screaming at her all the time too.

"Well, time for me to go have dinner. I'll see you this weekend. I guess I'll have to come up with something good for the potluck too. Don't want to disappoint."

I don't mean that last part. I don't care if she or anyone else is disappointed by what I decide to bring to this unnecessary party. They'll be lucky if I don't grab a coffee cake off the day-old bakery rack at the store and be done with the whole thing.

As I turn to walk inside, behind me Kimmy says, "Okay, thanks! See you then. Come on, Misty. We have more people to invite to our extravaganza!"

I look back to see her and the baby on her hip trotting over to Aaron's house. Kimmy is exactly the kind of person who would think someone in mourning needs a distraction like a neighborhood potluck to be happy again. I might not have ever been married or loved someone, but even I know it's not as easy as that.

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The dog days of summer have settled into Raven Terrace before Kimmy and Marilyn have a chance to get their party underway. All week, I've watched them scurry back and forth from one house to the other with armfuls of party goods, in addition to Misty, of course.

This week, however, the three boys have joined their mother in the party planning. The three of them look like rogue ducks following behind her each time she has to hurry over to Marilyn's house. The oldest can't take two steps without stopping in the road to pick up a pebble or a coin he's found, and the twins never take a breather from their constant battling one another.

Always dressed identically, they make it difficult to tell them apart, but I've noticed the one has a deformity on his left hand that the other doesn't. It's nothing very big, but his pinky sticks out from the rest of his fingers. He's the instigator of most of the fights, from what I can tell. Probably has some deep-seated issue from being injured, maybe at birth. Whatever his problem is, he never gives fighting his twin a rest.

So every few minutes, Kimmy goes traipsing across the street to Marilyn's house with the disobedient ducklings following behind and Misty on her hip. Oddly enough, she never turns around to yell at the boys on these missions to get the party planned. She must be too focused on the Dog Day Extravaganza to do her usual screeching.

I speak for the entire neighborhood when I say thank God for that. Someone needs to figure out a way to keep Kimmy constantly distracted so she never barks at them again. It's not like it does anything to stop them from acting out. They do it no matter

if she yells or not.

For her part, Marilyn doesn't appear as frantic while she's making her way to Kimmy's house. Then again, the older woman never seems in a hurry. She's been around for a long time. Perhaps now is her time to slow down and take it easy. Or perhaps it's simply her personality to not get flustered. She never acts like she's out of sorts when that drunk fisherman she calls a husband comes home from the lake. He never has a single fish with him. Just poles and that tackle box.

Is it that she's merely happy he isn't out with another woman, so drinking while he pretends to fish each day is preferable? People will accept a lot of shit to keep their lives in equilibrium. Women especially, so it wouldn't surprise me if she's accepted that this bargain is one she can live with.

In the two months since I moved into this neighborhood, I've never seen anyone visit Marilyn and her husband with children. In fact, I've never seen anyone visit them at all. I think they might be childless. That would explain the wincing Marilyn seems to do a lot whenever Kimmy's boys misbehave.

And just when I think I should turn away from the window because it's always the same thing day after day in this cul-de-sac, a new person joins the party planners. The woman from the green house.

She looks younger than usual today with her dirty blond hair up in a ponytail as she tries to herd Kimmy's boys across the street. Dressed in a white T-shirt, jean shorts, and yellow flip flops, she looks so fresh and new compared to the haggard mother of four and the elderly rose tender.

Her name is Caroline. Caroline Townsend. She's twenty-seven with blue eyes. She rarely spends much time outside her home since she moved in, so today's appearance with Kimmy and the kids is surprising.

Caroline intrigues me. I've searched online for everything I can find out about her, but I've come up with little. Her social media presence is sparse yet enough if someone is a busy working professional.

Except that I see no evidence of that being the case.

Someone her age, particularly a woman, usually spends more time on social media. She has only a Facebook account. No Twitter. No Instagram. No TikTok or Tumblr. I even checked Only Fans in case that's where she's making the money to afford living in this suburb of Philly. Nothing.

That leaves me with two ideas. Either she's just a shy person who doesn't like social media, which is possible, or she's hiding something. My gut says the latter is more likely, so I'm making it my mission to find out what pretty little Caroline Townsend from 12 Park Circle is keeping from the world.

I've checked out every single person in this neighborhood. It's easily done since that's part of my position as a human resources consultant. My job is to find out what potential employees are concealing from the companies I work for. You'd be stunned to find out how many secrets people have.

Not that I ever am.

I know all about secrets. My life is an elaborately constructed facade to make sure no one finds out mine. I appear to be a mild mannered thirty-something year old man who works from home and happily attends the neighborhood functions. I keep my lawn at the appropriate height, always making sure to pay the landscaper a little extra so it never gets too high. That would make my house stand out from the others, and that's the last thing I want to do.

You see, Amanda Michaels was my first kill but not my last. The way to keep that

fact from being found out is to blend in with everyone else in the world. I look exactly like someone who has nothing to hide would. But who I truly am is nothing like the mask I wear.

So it's clear Caroline Townsend must be hiding something because she's doing exactly the same thing I am. She looks like someone who's normal and belongs, but every fiber of my being says she's hiding something behind that all-American girl facade.

And I intend on finding out exactly what that something is.

Two hours later, I haven't paid attention to a single thing going on outside because I've been hellbent on finding out just who Caroline is. Unfortunately, all I've found is a Facebook account with a handful of friends and pictures of her new house here on Park Circle. What's suspicious is she doesn't seem to have anyone who she went to high school with on her friends list. Normal people usually do, assuming they went to high school. I'm not getting a dropout vibe from dear Caroline, so I'm going to guess she graduated from somewhere nearly a decade ago.

Just as I did right after she moved in, I spent the afternoon scouring the internet for any information on her and found little. She purchased the green house for nearly four hundred thousand dollars, which sends red flags up all over the place for me since I've seen no signs she works. Now yes, she may have won the lottery or she may come from money, but neither of those possibilities are borne out from her Facebook account.

Perhaps she won the lottery when she was much younger and she's weeded out all the people who only want a handout online, but I examined her entire history on Facebook and found nothing to indicate she ever even played the lottery, much less won.

So maybe she comes from money. The only problem with that is there are no friends on her list that could be her parents. As much as children might not like having their mothers and fathers join them online, the reality is they do. Anytime I see a job applicant who doesn't have parents as friends on Facebook or other social media, I immediately search to find out if they're still alive. Nearly always, if they aren't online with their kids, they're dead.

Caroline has no one who could be her parents as friends online, but when I search for deaths with the name Townsend, nothing matches. I've looked through death notices and obituaries in a hundred-mile radius from here, and nobody matches.

My expertise tells me that Townsend isn't her real name. Or maybe it's a married name, but there again, I've found no evidence of her being married.

So who is Caroline Townsend and how can she afford a home in this development right outside of Philadelphia on a salary that doesn't seem to exist?

Without a social security number, I can't check to see if she's having money withheld from any job. I can do a credit check, though. I've held off on doing that until now because while the people who pay me to consult don't much mind me searching anyone whether they're applying for a job at one of the companies or not, they do tend to question when I run credit checks on people who aren't potential employees of theirs.

My fingers hesitate over the keyboard on my laptop for merely a second or two before I type in her name to search her credit. If anyone asks, I'll make up something to cover myself. They always believe me. Why wouldn't they? It's not like they think I'm some homicidal maniac stalking some woman who lives a few houses away from me.

I look out the window while I wait for the credit report to populate. Kimmy and the

brood are hiking their way back to her house, but this time each of the boys has an armful of white butcher paper and bottles of paint. Good luck with that.

However, Caroline is nowhere in sight. Did she stay behind at Marilyn's?

A glance over toward that yard gives me my answer. There next to a red rose bush she and the older woman stand talking. Each of them smiles and nods, and every so often, Caroline throws her head back in laughter. I wouldn't have thought anyone would find Marilyn that amusing, but perhaps I was wrong. Maybe she is that funny.

Except I'm never that mistaken about people.

My job is to find out everything there is to know about a person, and in the ten years that I've been doing it, I've gotten very good at reading people. I can tell when someone's lying, and I can tell when they're nervous or scared.

Marilyn is never that hysterical, so why is Caroline pretending to be that entertained by what she's saying?

I turn back to look at my screen and see a credit report much like most people's. Her score needs a little work, but that's mostly because she doesn't have a long history of credit.

Another red flag.

How does a woman in her late twenties not have a decent length credit history? Her longest credit card only goes back three years. She has no student loan debt. No car loan. Most surprisingly, no mortgage.

I snap my head around to look out the window at Caroline as she stands laughing with Marilyn. Nothing about this woman makes sense. No mortgage? How the hell

did she buy that house?

Then it dawns on me. The house isn't hers. It's mortgaged to another name. That must be it.

Quickly, I begin searching the property to find out who's behind Park Circle's newest resident. Now I'll have something to work with because once I find out the name of the man or woman who owns the house, I'll be able to piece together some details about little miss green house.

My hands shake at the thought that I'm about to unravel at least part of the mystery of Caroline Townsend. I scan the words in front of me to find out the true owner of 12 Park Circle. My heart beats wildly as I feel the truth just seconds away.

And then I see it. This isn't possible.

The owner of 12 Park Circle, Raven Terrace, Pennsylvania is Caroline Townsend. She purchased the home for just over four hundred thousand dollars less than a month ago.

Not possible. Someone has made a mistake. Who is this woman and what is she hiding?

I have to know. It's going to kill me if I don't find out. I will unravel this mystery. It will just take more time and something I generally don't like to engage in very often.

Personal interaction.

That will happen at the Dog Days of Summer party Kimmy and Marilyn are so busy planning at this very moment. I'll talk to Caroline and find out all I can about her. If I can, I'll find a way to get inside her house so I can search for any papers that will tell

me who she really is and how she's able to afford that house.

Happy to know I won't be forced to accept whatever lies she's telling, I make my way over to the front window and watch her still talking to Marilyn. The laughing has stopped, though. I follow their gazes and see they're looking at Aaron's house next door.

That explains why nobody's having a good time anymore.

The older woman sees me and waves, and although I usually prefer not to engage when I'm working, I make an exception to that rule today and return the gesture, adding a smile to make it seem like I'm not watching them.

Caroline turns to look at me, and for a moment, I don't see the usual friendly neighbor expression everyone but the mourning husband next door gives me whenever they see me. No, the look she gives me is nothing short of piercing.

I wave and smile to her too, and after a few seconds, her expression brightens and she waves back, giving me a big smile. But I know she doesn't mean it. Her first look was her true one.

The question is why is Caroline Townsend so unhappy to see the mild-mannered consultant who works from home and doesn't bother anyone? Perhaps she knows out of all of these people, I'm the one who can learn the truth of who she really is.

As soon as I open my front door, the sounds of Kimmy and Marilyn's party hit me like a rude slap to the face. I waited as long as I could today before I decided to join the festivities. More than once I told myself I didn't need to go to this thing. Just because I live in this neighborhood doesn't mean I have to be a part of every damn event that happens outside my door.

Then every time that thought popped into my head, I reminded myself today isn't about celebrating the dog days of summer or even being a good neighbor. No, today is for finding out about Caroline Townsend and uncovering the secret she's keeping from the world.

True to the party theme, the heat of the day has settled in on Park Circle earlier than usual. It's only noon, yet sweat almost instantly begins to form where my hairline meets my forehead. Whoever thought sitting out in this kind of weather celebrating our little cul-de-sac is a good thing must be out of their mind.

As that thought marches through my brain, I see Kimmy waving at me. She seems excited about something. I tepidly wave back, wondering what her big grin could mean as she hurriedly rushes toward me.

I notice there's no baby on her hip or her troop of misbehaved boy children running around her like madmen. That's a good sign. However, I can't get my hopes up. They're all bound to be somewhere nearby.

"Mr. Prentiss, happy party day! Do you mind if I call you by your first name? Saying

mister every time seems so formal, and that's not what we're all about here in our tiny corner of the world, are we?" she asks breathlessly before she stops in front of me.

I'm not against people calling me by my first name. Some people. I just don't feel that close to anyone in this neighborhood.

But I know I won't make many friends by being rigid and standoffish, so to further my goal for the day, I reluctantly agree to give her my first name. "I'd be thrilled if you would, Kimmy. My name is Adam."

Her blue eyes get wide and light up like I just informed her she won the lottery. "Ooooh, Adam. That's such a wonderful name. Tim and I thought about naming our oldest Adam, but then his mother chimed in and said that wouldn't work because she knew an Adam when she was younger, and he was a terrible bully. So we settled on Trevor."

I listen to her babble on about my name being some bastard's from back in the Stone Age and nod repeatedly to pretend like I care. As if Trevor is a better name. That kid may not be a bully, but he's something.

"Oh, well that's nice," I mumble as I close my front door, locking it before I turn around to face her again.

Kimmy's gaze drifts from my face to my doorknob and then back to me. "Oh, you lock your door even when you're just coming out to join all of us on the street?"

Instinctively, I know she's offended for some reason, so I quickly paste a smile on my face and answer, "Habit from a place I lived before this. You never know what kind of people are out there."

That doesn't placate her, though. "But you know all of us. We wouldn't go into your house. I hope you know that."

I take this opportunity to make sure the neighborhood busybody who also loves to act like the welcome wagon knows that I don't, in fact, know everyone in our little cul-de-sac. "Actually, you're right about learning to trust people again, but I don't know everyone. The woman who just moved into the green house a couple weeks ago and I have never had the chance to meet or talk."

With just those few words, Kimmy's off to the races. "Oh, well we have to make sure we remedy that today, Adam. Don't worry. I'm on the case. I'll make sure you two are properly introduced, and then you'll know everyone in the neighborhood."

She stares up into my face waiting for my undying appreciation for her promise to introduce me to Caroline, so after a few seconds, I give her what she needs. With a smile, I say, "I would so enjoy that, Kimmy. You're just such a wonderful neighbor. I got so lucky to move into this development with people as terrific as you."

That's all it takes for her to beam utter happiness. "Oh, Adam, you are too nice. Thank you! Okay, I'm off. I have to make sure my mother-in-law knows the boys eat at a different time than Misty. I don't think I told her that before she took them this morning. This is the first time my baby is away, so I guess I'm a little nervous, you know?"

"Completely understandable. Don't let me keep you from far more important tasks. I'll see you at the party."

"Great! See you then!" she chirps before hurrying off toward her house to make that call to Tim's mother.

So that explains why Park Circle is peaceful today. Some crappy music will end that,

but for now, I can't believe how happy I am to know those terrors won't be around for today's festivities.

I guess I'm not much of a kid person.

Halfway down the sidewalk to the street, I remember I forgot my contribution to the potluck, so I turn around and hurry back into my air-conditioned house to get the chips and salsa I grabbed from the store last night. I gave those almost stale bakery items on the last chance rack a good, hard look, but I didn't think it would help my attempt to get to know Caroline better if all anyone was talking about was the past freshness date coffee cake I brought today.

Odd that Kimmy didn't notice I had nothing in my hands. She really must be off her game. Probably because the little one is away for the first time.

After grabbing the bag of chips and bowl of salsa from my kitchen counter, I head back out into the oppressive heat and begin to make my way down to the tent set up in front of Kimmy and Tim's house. My neighbors have begun to come out of their respective homes, so I get wave after wave from them that forces me to juggle my potluck offering to wave back.

All of this politeness is fucking exhausting. There. I said it. Well, not said it, but I'm definitely thinking it. I had no idea when I moved into this development that there would be so much niceness required of me. It's like no one has a bad day around here. They're always smiling and getting together to celebrate one thing or another like being around people whose only connection to you is their address is perfectly normal. If we didn't have the internet and the ability to do virtually anything from our laptops and phones, I might be able to understand this need to congregate in the middle of the cul-de-sac on the hottest day of the year. We do, though, so the desire to hang out with one another simply because we live on the same street baffles me most days and downright irritates me today.

“Adam,” Harold the local fisherman who never catches anything but a sunburn says with a big smile. “Great day to have a party, don’t you think?”

I’m a little surprised he isn’t crankier about not being able to drive away to his favorite fishing hole. What I’m not surprised about is that he already knows my first name. That Kimmy is one hell of a town crier. I bet in a past life she was exactly that. I can see her riding like Paul Revere from house to house screaming about someone coming to town.

“It is, but I thought you’d be out on the water instead. I bet those fish would be biting on a day like today.”

In truth, I have no idea what fish would be doing on any day, including today. However, he and I have nothing else in common, so in my attempt to be polite and neighborly, I fall back on the only topic we’ve ever discussed.

He nods sadly, like he’s hurt he’s missing his favorite activity in favor of his wife’s party. “So true, but you know what they say. Happy wife, happy life. Marilyn and Kimmy worked all week on this get-together, so I couldn’t disappoint her.”

Nothing like trying to polish up that ball and chain life he has to lead. Whatever works, I guess. They’ve been married long enough that I’m sure he knows exactly how little he has to do to keep her happy. If that means forgoing fishing for one afternoon to keep the peace, he’s a smart man to do that. It’s not a life I’d want to have to live but more power to him.

“Join the rest of the men where we belong. Leave all the party stuff to the women,” he says, waving me toward where Tim stands near a propane grill he’s dragged out to the street under the tent.

Everything about this is so stereotypical that I can’t help but laugh to myself. These

people pride themselves on having very defined roles. I can only imagine the stunned stares of horror if Kimmy picked up a pair of tongs and took her place in front of the grill.

Not that I have any interest in women breaking barriers or men performing any roles considered untraditional, although I can't help but wonder what those kids of Tim's would be like if he actually spoke up sometime and told them to behave.

I set my bowl of salsa and family sized bag of tortilla chips on the table under the tent and take the red cup of beer Harold hands me. The scent of steaks barbequing a few feet away makes my mouth water.

"Those smell great," I say to him, raising my cup to salute his talent at grilling.

"It's an old Marshall family secret," he says, tilting his chin up in pride. "My father was a master at cooking on the grill. The secret is to not fuss with the meat like most people do. They insist on turning and turning the steak. This isn't a spit. That's the mistake everyone makes, and it means the steak is going to come out like shoe leather. You just have to be patient and let the grill do its work."

Tim's explanation gets a steady stream of nods from me. Beside me, Harold stuffs his face with pretzel twists he's grabbing straight from the bag.

"He's right. It's the same with cooking fish. Actually, it's the same with everything about fish," he says as pretzel pieces fly out of his overstuffed mouth. "Patience. It's the key to everything in a man's life, don't you think?"

The two men proceed to list every part of their lives that has improved since they realized they just have to be patient. Harold just keeps listing things that have to do with fish and fishing, but Tim focuses on his work and his kids, although he lists Kimmy as one of those areas of his life that have become so much better once he

accepted that patience was the key to everything.

Harold laughs at his mention of his wife and adds, “Same with Marilyn. I used to get pissed off when she arranged all these little parties. I mean, who the hell needs to stand out in the street ten times a year, for God’s sake? Not that I don’t like you guys, but you know. Then I realized one day that’s her thing. Her roses and these neighborhood parties, so I roll with it. So I miss a day out on the water. The fish will be back there tomorrow.”

“How about you, Adam?” Tim asks as he clicks together the metal rods of the tongs above the steaks. “You aren’t married, so that has to mean you have far less need for patience in your life, I’m guessing.”

My first name sounds odd coming out of his mouth. I liked being Mr. Prentiss, but I guess all good things must come to an end. It’s just that now that they know my first name, it feels like they’ve inducted me into whatever club they have with the other men in the neighborhood, and I’m not sure I’m liking that.

As for patience, well, I’m the king of that.

“My job requires patience. I have to do a lot of searching online for the companies I work for, and that can get tedious sometimes. That’s when I have to sit back and take a breath. Everything happens when it’s supposed to.”

I sound rather Zen saying that. I’m not, but I like the idea of my neighbors thinking I am. Calm people are able to control situations better.

Harold points his stubby, wrinkled finger at me and smiles. “That right there is the key. It’s even more than patience. It’s knowing things happen when they happen. You try to force it, and you know what you get? Bupkis.”

Tim clicks those metal tongs together again and nods. “It’s true of everything. I told Kimmy the other day not to push things. She’s not in tune with patience at all, let me tell you. The twins ate a whole pack of gum last week, and it’s been a goddamned nightmare trying to get them to shit it out. She has those kids on the toilet for hours every day doing all that pushing. I swear to God they’re going to blow out their assholes. I told her to just let it happen. That gum will come out. It’s not like it’s going to stay in them forever.”

Sure my expression shows how disgusted I am at hearing about his kids’ bathroom habits, I turn my head and focus on the giant bag of chips I bought. Maybe if I can pretend like I’m struggling with getting them open, I can avoid having to hear more about the constipation of two four-year-old boys.

Thankfully, Jared joining us under the tent means Tim all but forgets to continue his discussion of what sounds like damn child abuse by his overeager wife. With a huge smile, he welcomes him.

“It’s about time! Where the hell have you been? I thought maybe you were going to duck out today.”

Jared throws his head back and laughs. “Thought I’d leave you guys to have to deal with your women, huh? I just got back from a late run. That’s all. Suzanne is still at the office, but she said she’ll definitely be here this afternoon. What’s that you’re cooking there, Tim? It smells fantastic!”

“Steak,” our grill master proudly answers. “Not that you’re going to have any since you’ve been all vegetarian.”

Holding his hand up as if to stop Tim before he goes any further, Jared says, “I abandoned that weeks ago. I ate chicken you made on the grill at the Fourth of July party, remember? That vegetarian thing just wasn’t for me. I was fine with the food,

but it was killing my running. My protein level went way down. Can't have that."

"Chicken isn't steak," Harold teases him.

That makes Tim join in again. "Yeah, chicken is different than steak, but I'm glad to hear you gave up on all those damn vegetables. A man needs to eat meat. It's an unwritten law. Men equal meat. I don't make the rules. I just live by them," he says with a chuckle.

I'm already wishing Kimmy would step in under the tent so this conversation could end, but then again, that might bring us all back around to her kids' intestinal difficulties, and I definitely could do without hearing any more about that. All three men continue to jabber on about what it means to be a man, even as I wonder if any of them truly know.

"Tim, I can't find the white tablecloth I bought at Walmart yesterday," his wife calls out from their front doorstep. "Did you see it?"

He rolls his eyes before looking at all of us for sympathy. As if Kimmy and her overzealous need to have the perfect party are the worst of his problems and not those kids, half of which can't shit for the past week.

"I don't know where it is," he answers her, sounding whiny. "Check the hall table. I think you might have left it there."

For her part, his wife is all smiles and waves at us standing there with him. "Okay, thanks! I hope you guys are making enough for everyone. You know, women get hungry too!"

She turns around and heads back in the house as he rolls his eyes again. "Women. You can't live with them. You can't shoot them," he says, butching up his voice

compared to how it sounded when he answered her.

Interesting how he so nonchalantly mentions attempted murder or actual murder of his wife, even as a joke, and not one of us bats an eyelash. If I said anything close to that to anyone at the companies I freelance with, I'd be relieved of my job on the spot. But in suburbia, casual mentions of killing the woman you love go by without even a single gasp of surprise.

I've known that kind of thing is perfectly acceptable for men to say in passing since I was a child. My father used to say nearly the exact words about my mother, who in her defense was nowhere near as irritating as Kimmy here. Nobody ever said he shouldn't joke about shooting her because she wanted him to take out the garbage during the football game or expected him to mow the lawn when all he wanted to do was lay around on a Saturday off from work.

"Mr. Prentiss, it's good to see you again," Jared says, raising his red cup full of beer in the air.

"Adam," Harold corrects him.

Jared seems confused for a few seconds but then shrugs. "Okay, Adam. Still good to see you. As a single guy, I bet you wish you didn't get roped into these neighborhood things, though."

I smile and shake my head, as if he isn't almost completely reading my mind. "You know how it is. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Plus, I'm not sure even if I wanted to say no I could when Kimmy came knocking on my door the other day. Tim, your wife has a way of being very persuasive," I answer, punctuating my statement with a chuckle.

Better to get the attention off me and back on the women since I know these men will

spend all afternoon talking about how much they drive them crazy.

Once more, Kimmy's husband clicks those tongs together before holding them over the steaks that he hasn't touched once since I walked over. "Don't I know it. You can't think I wanted four kids, can you? Who the hell can afford all of those mouths to feed in this day and age? But she wanted a girl, and when my wife wants something, God help you if you don't just let it happen. You either fight it or you let it wash over you and enjoy the ride."

The three men in front of me laugh at his veiled reference to his sex life, yet another topic that's perfectly acceptable at these suburbia gatherings but not most places in life. His mention of not being able to afford all of those kids confirms what I suspected all along, in addition to my belief that they continued to try for a girl until they got Misty.

I doubt Jared can honestly join in on their patience discussion concerning his wife, though. He may be athletic and look like he's the one with the power, but I have no doubt Suzanne wears the pants in that family. She certainly makes more money as a lawyer than he does as a manager of a sporting goods store. I may not be married, but I know money makes a difference in the power structure of anything, including between a husband and wife.

Right on cue, Harold starts in about just letting things happen and having control over yourself to be patient, and I watch as Jared turns away from the conversation and focuses on my tortilla chips and salsa. No doubt, he doesn't have much to contribute to that discussion.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spy Caroline walk out her front door and feel my mood perk up. The prospect of having to listen to these men talk about their delusions they have about their lives all day had begun to depress me, but things are finally looking up.

It's time to find out about the woman in the green house.

Caroline hesitates as she walks up the street, looking around for the other women in the neighborhood, I suspect. I scan the area for Kimmy, knowing if she's seeing someone alone that she'll rush over to remedy that problem.

And just as I assumed, the second she sees Caroline slowly walking toward the party, she practically sprints over to her. I watch how the newest citizen of Park Circle reacts, and to my shock, Caroline seems genuinely happy to see Kimmy.

Marilyn joins them a second later, and from what I can tell, they all look like they're the best of friends. For all Kimmy does to irritate me, to say nothing of how her husband feels about her, I can't deny she is kind and welcoming in a way that makes anyone feel right at home here in our little cul-de-sac.

As I watch all this happening, Jared leans in next to me and nudges my right arm with his elbow. "She's an interesting one, now isn't she?" he says in a curious voice.

When I turn to look at him, he's doing an eyebrow waggle as if to say he's noticed the newest inhabitant of the neighborhood and approves of what he sees. For a split second, I wonder how his wife and his mistress would feel about him showing interest in Caroline, but if he's willing to cheat on the woman he married, why wouldn't he step out on the woman he's two-timing her with?

"I guess," I say as casually as possible, lying through my teeth. I haven't thought of a thing other than Caroline Townsend since I couldn't find out any more information on her the other day.

Unsatisfied by my apparent lack of interest, he turns to Tim and says, “Your wife seems to have taken to the new member of our little gang. ‘Fess up. What do you know about her?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Harold perk up enough so he tears his attention away from that nearly empty bag of pretzels he’s been inhaling the entire time I’ve been out here. I hadn’t pegged him for a guy who’d be interested in anyone young enough to be his granddaughter. Maybe he isn’t just a boring and failed fisherman.

Tim shrugs before turning the hot dogs on the grill. Those pieces of meat he hovers over like a mother hen. I’m still curious to find out if his method of cooking steaks makes them any more tender than the way I’ve always done them.

“She’s young. Kimmy hasn’t said much about her since she’s been busy planning this party, but I think she might have mentioned she isn’t from around here originally.”

He stops for a long moment to stare up the ceiling of the tent, as if some detail about Caroline exists above his head. Finally, he continues, “Maybe New Jersey? Or maybe Maryland. I’m not sure.”

Maryland? Now that’s interesting. I wonder what part of Maryland?

I doubt Tim knows. Between working constantly, dealing with those four kids, and managing his marriage with that superior ability to stay patient with his wife, it’s highly unlikely he knows much of anything. I’m actually surprised he remembered even that tiny detail about Caroline being from somewhere else.

“Back in college, I knew a guy from Maryland. Where was that?” Jared says, thinking out loud. “Hagerstown?”

No one listens to him ruminate on this long-forgotten college buddy of his as the

three women walk toward the tent. Caroline seems completely at home with Kimmy and Marilyn, almost as if they've known one another for their entire lives.

However, my gut tells me Miss Townsend doesn't have a lot in common with an older woman dedicated to her roses and a mother with too many kids. I think she's simply a very practiced social chameleon.

And how would I know? Well, I'm one, and those of us who have mastered the ability to blend in with the people around us can always tell when another chameleon is nearby.

The women walk into the tent, and suddenly, the space feels entirely too small, even though it's only seven of us. Jared steps forward to introduce himself to the newcomer, but I hang back, preferring to observe for the moment.

"Welcome to our corner of the world," he says to Caroline as he shakes her hand.

She smiles, appearing to be genuine in her happiness at meeting him. "Thanks. I appreciate that. I wasn't sure I was going to come out today since I'm sure you all know one another for ages and I'm the new kid on the block, so to speak. But Kimmy and Marilyn have made me feel so welcome, and now you have too."

Jared nods and then turns to look at me as she finishes speaking. "Not all of us. Adam here hasn't been around us for that long. Just a few months more than you, actually."

Suddenly, all eyes turn toward me, making this the most uncomfortable moment in a long time. I force a smile and nod to agree with his statement, even as I wish I was back at my house and not surrounded by my neighbors.

Kimmy speaks up when I don't say anything, unable to let the pregnant pause grow any bigger. "Oh, yes! Adam is sort of new to the cul-de-sac too, Caroline. He was just

saying to me the other day that he had never been introduced to you, so let me do the honors.”

She takes a step toward me, pulling Caroline along with her as she says, “Caroline Townsend, this is Adam Prentiss. He lives in the house at the end of the road. Adam, this is Caroline.”

I quickly force myself to push down the awkwardness I feel at this moment to pay attention to how Caroline reacts toward me. After the other day when she looked downright unhappy to see me in the window, I wonder if she’ll feel any better about meeting me today.

Her smile spreads across her face as she sticks out her hand to shake mine. “Nice to meet you! I’m glad I’m not the only newbie here.”

I watch her expression for any hint of her true feelings about me, but she seems genuinely happy to meet me. Maybe the way she looked the other day was something entirely unrelated to me.

“Nice to meet you too.”

Then, as if something frightens her, she yanks her hand away from mine and says, “Oh, my God! I forgot my potluck. I’ll be right back.”

Everyone around me laughs and tells her it’s fine as she hurries out from under the tent and runs down the street to her house. I notice she’s got very toned legs as she’s trotting down the sidewalk. Maybe she’s a runner. I’m sure that would make Jared happy.

I see him watch her as I am and wonder if he plans to make her mistress number two. This guy should move to Utah and take up polygamy.

“Damn, Caroline should come running with me some morning. From what I see, she could definitely keep up.”

Marilyn and Kimmy give each other sideways glances full of disapproval, but their husbands laugh and slap Jared on the back like he’s done something worthy of praise. For my part, I can’t help but wish his wife would show up right now so I could see him scramble to come up with a reason why he’s ogling the new neighbor.

Caroline returns a minute later with a tray of lemon bars that smell delightful. The fresh scent of citrus fills my nose, making my mouth water. Not normally a man with a sweet tooth, I practically drool over the dessert as she sets it down on the table near Harold.

“That looks delicious.”

My compliment surprises her, and she turns to look at me wide-eyed. “Thank you. It was my mother’s favorite dessert. It seemed perfect for a beautiful, sunny summer day like today.”

A memory about someone whose mother made lemon bars one time flashes through my mind, but it’s gone a second later. I don’t know anyone who ever made them, though. I must be confused. Probably something from a TV show I once watched. That’s the problem with having such a great memory. Every tiny detail, no matter how insignificant, stays in my brain.

That must be it.

After four hours of interacting with my neighbors, I feel like I could sleep for a week. It could be the heat, but more likely, the issue is having to smile so much at so many things I don’t give a damn about and pretending to care about conversations more than cataloging details about people.

No one else seems as wrung out by all this forced friendliness, though. Somehow, even though the temperature has climbed into the nineties, all those around me are happy and laughing. They could be pretending, but if they are, I have to applaud them for incredible performances.

All this time, I've tried to slyly focus on Caroline in the hopes of learning something more about her. What I've found out is next to nothing, and I'm starting to get frustrated. How can someone spend an afternoon around people and not give away a single useful detail about themselves? All I've learned is she loves citrus fruits, which is why she adores those lemon bars.

I have to give her credit. No one I've ever come across in all my time studying people says so little while talking so much. If I wasn't so frustrated, I'd be impressed.

What I am at the moment is bored as I'm forced to listen to Jared extoll the virtues of running as if he's discussing it like it's a religion or philosophy. No one else seems to be listening, except for Caroline, who I now know is a runner but hasn't been very good about getting back into it since she moved here.

God, if something doesn't happen to make this little neighborhood get-together worth my time today, I'm going to be pissed.

As if the big man himself heard my silent plea, out of the corner of my eye I see Jared's morning running partner walk up to the tent dressed in a pair of tiny black shorts and a tank top with Atlantic City written across the chest in blue and pink glitter. She seems like an odd fit next to the older Marilyn in her pink pedal pushers and oversized white T-shirt and Kimmy, who even with her white sundress with its flirty purple flowers looks like she always does. Matronly. And when compared to Caroline, this woman seems downright trashy.

"Everyone, this is Sara. Sara, this is the cul-de-sac," Jared says with a broad smile, far

too pleased with himself for something or another.

Sara waves like a timid small child, keeping her hand close to her face so there's no choice but to notice her appearance. She's not bad looking, per se. She has nice brown eyes and long eyelashes. But the rest of her face looks like each feature belonged to someone else before they ended up on her head. The result gives her a slightly mishappen and out of place look like some of those super skinny supermodels who seem to have giant heads and tiny little bodies.

"Hi Sara!" Kimmy gushes, and I can't tell if she's sincere or not. "Welcome to the Dog Days of Summer party!"

Her husband elbows her upper arm and laughs. "I thought it was an extravaganza."

For the first time, she gives him a nasty side-eyed look, and for a moment, she isn't her usual chipper self. She recovers quickly, though, and pastes that smile of hers onto her face. No having actual feelings for that one.

Taking Sara by the hand, she guides her over to the table with all the food. "Yes, yes, it is an extravaganza as my husband said. Now eat up. We have a ton of food, and you're more than welcome to it. I need to run into the house to get more ice, but please, enjoy yourself."

And with that, Kimmy hurries off toward her house, but I notice she turns back to look at the tent with hurt in her eyes before she disappears through the front door. I can't help but be a little surprised. I hadn't imagined she had any emotions other than overwhelmingly happy with adults and frustrated with those boys of hers.

Then the party takes a turn into even more exciting times when Suzanne pulls into her driveway. I quickly look over at Jared and see he hadn't expected this.

A tense feeling comes over the group of us, and when I glance around the tent, I see everyone else is wondering something similar to what I'm thinking. Does Suzanne know her husband is sleeping with Sara, and if she does, is she going to make a scene?

Suzanne waves over to us and smiles before calling out, "Sorry I'm late! I'll be right over."

Dressed in her usual dark business suit and four-inch heels, she trots up her front sidewalk and into her house as everyone seems to take a collective deep breath. If Jared can get Sara away quickly enough, we might avoid what I think is an inevitable ugly moment for our charming little neighborhood.

Oddly enough, Jared doesn't make a move to do anything. He simply stands in the same spot near the grill where he's been since he joined the party and drinks his beer. When I look around at the rest of my neighbors, everyone else seems confused by his inaction too.

Perhaps he's eager to finally have his wife find out, but does he really want that confrontation to happen at the Dog Days of Summer Extravaganza? Nothing like a public airing of your dirty laundry.

Finally, Tim leans over toward him and clicks his metal tongs. "Nice to see Suzanne was able to show up, don't you think?"

"Yeah. She spends too much time at that office of hers, so I'm glad she's here."

There's not a hint of irony in his voice as he says that, although I can't understand how he can so blindly miss what everyone else can see. Something tells me he's not going to be so happy in a few minutes.

I hear Suzanne slam their front door and turn to see her marching over toward where we're standing under the tent with a look of determination on her face. As much as I want to leave the party right now, I don't move. Holding my breath, I wait for her to see Sara standing over near my bowl of tortilla chips stuffing her face like she isn't some obsessive runner every morning.

Then again, she really isn't, is she?

Suzanne steps under the tent and glares at her husband. A strong woman, she doesn't seem capable to controlling her rage at this moment.

"Exactly what the hell is going on here?" she snaps at him, and suddenly, every ugly scenario I've played out in my mind begins to come true.

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Every head snaps in Suzanne's direction, including Sara's, and the sheepish look on her face tells the entire guilty story. It feels like we're all collectively holding our breath for Suzanne to continue, and we don't have to wait long.

Still staring holes through her husband's face, she repeats her question. "What the hell is going on here?"

Jared foolishly chooses to pull the stupid man routine. "What? I don't know what you mean."

Even Tim cringes at that little bit of idiocy, and he's stupid more often than not. I want to look away, but it's like a trainwreck, horrifying yet fascinating.

Suzanne takes a step toward her husband so they're nearly touching they're so close, and in his face bites out through gritted teeth, "What is she doing here at our neighborhood party?"

Something inside me makes me wish one of my neighbors would say or do something to ease the tension of this moment, but as I glance at all of them, I see nothing but unease written all over their faces. Caroline especially appears uncomfortable witnessing this scene of marital discord, wincing as if she's in pain even as she doesn't look away.

Jared makes his second mistake in a matter of seconds by looking over at Sara instead of focusing on his very upset wife. Grabbing his jaw, she forces him to face her and

snaps, “How long have you two been enjoying our little neighborhood get-together today? Thought I didn’t know, didn’t you? You probably thought I wouldn’t be home until later, I bet.”

In a stunning display of not knowing how to read the room, Sara steps toward them and says, “It’s no big deal. I just stopped over because Jared mentioned it this morning.”

Things move like they’re in slow motion around me as Suzanne lunges toward her, sending the two women careening into the snack table. Bowls of peanuts, pretzels, and tortilla chips fly everywhere as the table crashes to the street. All of us scurry away out of the tent, all except Jared who leaps into action to pull his wife off his mistress. Stunned by the attack, Sara tries to push Suzanne off her, but she has no luck. Neither does Jared.

“You bitch! How dare you come here!” Suzanne screams as she wraps her hands around Sara’s neck.

“Get off me! You’re crazy!”

Jared finally gets a hold of his wife and yanks her up onto her feet, even as all the while she’s kicking and screaming for him to get her hands off her. Wrapping his arms around her, he holds her tightly as Sara scrambles to stand up.

I watch, waiting for her to get her two cents in since Suzanne is immobilized, but Sara simply runs out of the tent and takes off down the street. Slightly calmer, the aggrieved wife pushes her husband off her and spins on her heel to leave too. All of us look at Jared like he’s some zoo animal we aren’t sure we want to get too close to, but he takes it all in stride, grabbing his bottle of beer and walking out from under the tent to sit on the curb.

“Well, that was interesting,” Harold says with a chuckle, immediately getting a silent reprimanding glare from his wife.

Marilyn immediately sets out to clean up the mess left by the two women’s brawl, and Caroline jumps in to help her. Seeing my chance to show myself as a good guy, I crouch down next to her as she scoops up the remainder of the tortilla chips I brought. She gives me a strange look, almost as if she’s decided to condemn all men for being jackasses because of Jared.

“Thank God I bought two bags of these chips. I didn’t realize I needed a contingency plan, but I’m happy I had one,” I say with a smile as I help her clean up.

Caroline turns her head and stares at me, and for a long moment, I think my attempt at making conversation has gone badly. But instead of being angry, she gives me a tiny smile and nods.

“I didn’t realize this neighborhood was so exciting. You hear how suburbia is so boring, but I would beg to differ after today,” she whispers.

“It’s not usually this interesting, although I’ve only been to two of these neighborhood parties. Just wait until Kimmy sees this. I hope she doesn’t have a breakdown right here in front of all of us.”

That makes Caroline grimace. “She worked very hard on putting this event together.”

I instantly sense I’ve offended her, which is not going to help in my quest to get to know more about her, so I quickly add, “She really does. Four kids to take care of, and she never fails to have a smile on her face and enough enthusiasm to wrangle an entire neighborhood.”

My attempt to show some appreciation for Kimmy gets me a softer look, and

Caroline sighs. “She really is a good person. I hope this doesn’t upset her.”

Looking up, I see Harold and Tim staring down at me like I’ve got three heads growing out of my neck. I must be breaking some rule in their man handbook by helping Caroline and Marilyn clean up the mess. If they had any sense in their heads, they might consider the idea that a single guy like me may want to make a good impression on the pretty single woman who’s new to the neighborhood.

Even if that’s not my motive behind my behavior at the moment. I have far different things in mind than mere romance.

Behind me, I hear someone gasp, and I turn my head to see it’s Kimmy. The poor thing has tears in her eyes as she covers her mouth and whimpers.

Marilyn hurries over to console her, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. “Oh, it’s okay. I bet we can get another table set up in no time.”

She looks around the tent and says, “Everyone go back to their houses and get something else for the food table. We can fix this lickity split.”

As I stand up to do as she ordered, I see Caroline wince again. When she follows me out of the tent, I ask, “Is something wrong?”

With a nod, she quietly answers, “I don’t have any more lemon bars.”

I’m not usually the type of person who wants to help a damsel in distress, but something about the sadness in her blue eyes makes a twinge nip at my gut, so I say, “I’m sure I have something at my house. I’ll grab whatever I can find, and you can say it’s from you. How’s that sound?”

Her expression immediately perks up, and she nods, giving me a big smile. “Oh, that

would be great. Thank you!”

“Great! I’ll be right back.”

As I hurry up the street to my house, I silently congratulate myself on breaking the ice. Now I’ll get to find out all about her. Gratitude has a way of making a person want to share more about themselves than they normally would.

I fling open my front door, instantly loving the air conditioning as it hits me with a blast of sixty-five-degree air. Compared to the ninety plus degrees we’re enduring outside, this is heaven. I stop for a moment, closing my eyes as I revel in the coolness of my home. If I didn’t hate socializing with people so much, I’d invite everyone in to continue the party here.

Spying the second bag of tortilla chips, I grab them off the counter and quickly scan my kitchen for something for Caroline. Too bad I didn’t grab that nearly stale coffee cake off the bargain rack. Not that it would have been very good in that heat, but beggars can’t be choosers, and after the ruckus Jared, Suzanne, and Sara caused, even hard cake is better than nothing.

A noise in the living room makes me snap my head around, and I’m stunned to see Caroline standing just inside the door. What the hell is she doing here?

Smiling, she leans back against the doorframe and says, “Your house is very nice, Adam. Even better, it’s so refreshingly cold in here. We should all come up here to continue the party.”

Hearing those words spoken aloud by someone else sounds even more horrifying than when I joked to myself about that idea a few seconds ago. Sure my disgust is written all over my face, I force a smile and shake my head.

“I think it’s important to Kimmy that we do it outside. Something about it being a true neighborhood thing, I guess.”

It’s a good enough lie that Caroline nods her agreement. “Yeah, I think you might be right. So did you find anything you can let me claim is from me? Not that I’m in a big hurry or anything. Take as long as you want. I’ll just be here enjoying the coolness and admiring your house.”

Suddenly, my home feels incredibly small, and every part of my life feels like it’s on display for her to see and inspect. My paranoia begins to ratchet up notch after notch as I quickly scan my kitchen for something to give her but find nothing.

There has to be one bag of chips or something in this house. It’s not like I’m some health food nut who only eats things that are good for me. Didn’t I buy some Doritos at the store the other day?

I open cabinet after cabinet but find nothing. With each one I close, I look back to see if Caroline is still standing at the front door or if she’s moved farther into my house. It’s very presumptuous of her to simply walk into a near stranger’s home. I mean, I just officially met her today, and I never gave her any impression that she should come up here with me.

Christ, did I leave my computer on? What was I searching for this morning before I left to go to the party? My mind races as I try to remember. I did some work, performing a search on a prospective employee for one of the insurance companies I freelance for and then I filed my report with the supervisor there. Did I do anything else? Anything involving her?

“It’s okay if you don’t have anything. You look like you’re on some quest over there, and I feel bad you’re having to do so much just so I don’t look like the neighborhood slacker.”

“No, it’s okay,” I answer as I close yet another cabinet door in my fruitless search.

Jesus, who knew I had this many cabinets? There’s got to be something here. What about something sweet? No, chocolate will melt in this heat.

Then I remember that bag of hard candies I grabbed a few weeks ago after reading that article that claimed they helped people focus when they have to spend long hours in front of a computer. I put them away after buying them and never attempted to find out if that theory was true because a day later Caroline moved into the neighborhood.

Crouching down, I fling open the cabinet door under my silverware drawer and there’s the bag with all the brightly colored candy balls wrapped in cellophane. Perfect!

I hold the bag up and call out, “I found something. I hope you don’t mind being the person who brings hard candy to the party.”

When I stand up, she’s smiling at me. “That sounds fine. I’m going to get the reputation of being the neighbor who always brings sweets to the parties. First the lemon bars and now the candy. I’ll have to make sure to change things up for the next one and bring some salty snack like chips.”

Happy to be able to get her out of my house before she sees anything, I hurry toward her with the two bags of snacks in my arms. She likely saw little more than the décor of my living room and me scrambling to find an extra bag of food, so that’s good. Next time I need to remember to lock my door behind me.

When I reach her, she’s as sweet as the candy in my hands. “This is so nice of you. I’m going to owe you for this, I think.”

I pounce on that idea to introduce the possibility of being invited to her house. “It’s

okay. Next time I'll get to see your house. I'm sure it's nicer than mine. I haven't done anything since I moved in. This place is the same way it was when the former owners lived here. I bet yours isn't like that, though."

As she takes the bag of hard candy out of my hands, she shrugs. "A little, but I'm getting to it, slowly but surely. We better get back to the party. Kimmy's going to think we all abandoned her."

Caroline bounds out of my house, and I shut the door behind me, making sure to lock it before I leave. She didn't say no to my inviting myself to her house, but I'm not surprised by that. She's friendly and neighborly, so why would she?

But you know what they say. Be careful with strangers.

Then again, I guess I wouldn't be considered a stranger anymore. Good. I'll use that to my advantage.

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I sit on the curb across the street from the tent as the sun goes down. It's been a full day of excitement, far more than I expected at one of these neighborhood parties. Then again, suburbia is known for all its seedy goings-on behind the scenes. Everyone thinks neighborhoods like this one are genteel and proper because when they look at the beautiful homes and perfectly manicured lawns, all they see is something pleasant.

The truth is far uglier than anyone can even imagine.

The looks on all my neighbors' faces when Suzanne caused that scene earlier this afternoon tells me they've bought into the lie about where we live too. They've convinced themselves that people only lash out in big cities, that no one in such a lovely setting like Raven Terrace could ever behave so boorishly.

Of course, they accept her husband's philandering. That's something that happens with men. The old boys will be boys excuse. Or maybe they've rationalized him cheating on her with the justification that she's not home enough because she works too much. I can see Harold telling Marilyn poor Jared wouldn't have to cheat if his wife was around more.

It's all so perfect on the outside in our little cul-de-sac that the ugliness that exists within the walls of our beautiful houses is hard to believe.

Then again, would they ever imagine in a million years that they're living right next to a killer? Of course not. Killers live in big cities and look entirely different from

them. Or killers all resemble the characters in movies who terrorize with chainsaws and guns.

How shocked they'd be to find out killers don't look like that at all. Those creations from a moviemaker's mind aren't anything like me. I've never even seen a chainsaw in person, much less used one. And a gun? Never touched one in my life, although my father had one in the house when I was growing up.

No, you see if you want to kill another human being, you don't need anything but your two hands. That's how I always do it. Two hands wrapped around a slender neck squeezing until I see all the life drain from my victim's eyes. No loud bang. No terrifying sound of a chainsaw. Just silence in my head and the sound of another soul taking their last gasping breaths before they fall silent too.

Lost in thought about that truth, I don't notice someone's sat down next to me until I feel the touch of a hand on my shoulder. Ripped from my memories, I turn to see Caroline on the curb beside me.

"Wild day, huh? I thought you might like some company, but if you want to be alone, I can leave. Marilyn and Harold have already gone home."

It takes me a few seconds to process what she's saying, but finally, I nod and give her a smile. In truth, I really don't want to spend any more time with these people, but Caroline isn't simply a neighbor to me.

She's a project that as of today seems to have some real possibilities. Now that she's planted herself right next to me on this curb, I'd be stupid not to take advantage of this chance to find out more about her.

"No, that's okay. I guess I was just decompressing after all that happened today. I wonder what's happening in the Meyers home tonight," I say as I glance over at Jared

and Suzanne's dark house.

Caroline sighs. "He snuck out a few hours ago. I saw him walk between the houses. He was heading over toward the street where Sara lives."

Her observations intrigue me. How is it I didn't notice Jared sneaking out earlier?

"Oh, yeah? I guess Suzanne's not in the mood for talking then."

I suspected that she wasn't in the mood for anything with her husband from the moment she lunged at his girlfriend. She probably took a few shots at Jared before he ran away. Serves him right for pulling such a stupid move bringing his mistress to the neighborhood party. He had to know his wife wouldn't appreciate that.

Caroline huffs her disgust at my comment. "I wouldn't be in the mood if I were her either. It's bad enough he's been stepping out on her, but to invite his girlfriend to hang out with all of us knowing Suzanne was going to end up coming home and seeing that is just heartless. Whatever she's going to do to him he's got it coming in spades."

Even though I know she's serious, I can't help but smile as I say, "A woman with a taste of vengeance. How very Kill Bill of you."

She rolls her eyes and shrugs. "I'd prefer to be thought of as a Boudicca, personally."

"Boudicca?" The word sounds familiar, but I can't place it.

Tilting her chin up, Caroline says, "Iceni warrior queen who took out her vengeance on the Romans after they enslaved her people. Killed thousands of Romans."

"Hmmm. Hell truly does hath no fury like a woman scorned."

After she leans back on her palms, Caroline smiles and says, “Jared better hope his wife doesn’t have a taste for vengeance of any style, Kill Bill or Boudicca or any other kind.”

I imagine Suzanne picking up some medieval sword and running her husband through. She’s pretty strident on a normal day. What she might be like as a woman scorned God only knows. But I suspect she has other plans for him.

“Ten to one she takes the legal route and crushes him through those means.”

That seems to please Caroline and her desire to see Jared punished. With a smile, she says, “Good. I hope she gets everything she can from him and more. I’m just happy they don’t have any kids.”

I don’t comment on that since I don’t understand why anyone would want to have kids. She doesn’t need to know that, though. I want to get to know her, and the surest way to put up a roadblock to that is to announce I don’t like children. In my experience, very few women want to hear that, even the ones who aren’t crazy about kids themselves.

We fall into an easy silence as I watch the oranges and purples of the sunset spread across the sky. It’s been a long day, but I have to say this ending makes me happy I’m right here seeing the beauty the world has to offer. I never cease to wonder at how gorgeous nature can be.

And how grotesque human nature often is.

When the sun finally disappears behind the mountains in the distance, I look over at Caroline. Now seems as good a time as any to begin probing for information.

“So was your old neighborhood as exciting as this one?” I ask, punctuating my

question with a chuckle to make it seem like I'm not planning to ask her far more about her life before she arrived here.

Caroline thinks about it for a moment and then tilts her head left and then right. "In some ways, yes, but I'd have to say no, overall."

"So you had the clumsy cheating spouse episode of The Housewives of Suburban Philly where you lived before? Oh, that's right. You're from Maryland, right?"

A slow smile spreads across her face. "How do you know that?"

I can't stop my smirk as I answer, "Nothing stays secret here for long. I told Kimmy my name is Adam today, and ten minutes later when I came out to the party, everyone already knew it. As I said, nothing stays buried here. I think Tim might have mentioned you came from Maryland."

None of that makes her happy as the smile slides from her face, so I quickly joke, "Between Tim and Kimmy, they give the FBI and the CIA a run for their money."

That makes her smile return, so I add, "I didn't mean to pry. Sorry if I did."

I mean none of that. I want to pry. I want to open Caroline up with a slice down the middle of her body and peel back the layers to find out the truth about who she truly is. However, I know people, and from what I'm reading from her right now, she feels like her privacy has been violated, so I'm hoping an apology will smooth things over.

She waves her hand and gives me another smile, but it's forced as she says, "It's fine. I guess I just don't remember telling either one of them anything about where I came from. I'm usually pretty careful about sharing details with strangers."

Sure I'll never get anywhere with her if I don't do something right now, I figure it's a

good time to make her laugh, so I say, “Strangers? Kimmy would crumble like a week-old coffee cake if she heard you call her that. I bet she’d be happier to be called something truly horrible like a murderer than the dreaded stranger.”

Caroline’s eyes open wide at my attempt at a joke. “You don’t like her, do you?”

Very clever. I see my new neighbor can deflect as well as I can.

I turn to face her as I attempt to make her believe I don’t dislike Kimmy. “Not true. I think she’s got a very sweet way about her.”

“But you don’t like her. I can tell by the way you’re trying to come up with something to compliment her on.”

Shaking my head, I find myself in a position where I have to defend myself. Rarely do I let myself get forced into something like this. Caroline Townsend is definitely a force to be reckoned with.

“I think she’s sweet. Is she my type of woman? No. But that doesn’t mean she’s a bad person. She cares about this neighborhood and the people in it. I can appreciate that, even if I don’t tend to be as social as she is.”

For a second, I’m struck at how truthful I’m being right now. None of that was even a tiny lie. I do like Kimmy’s sweetness and how she genuinely cares about her neighbors. She’d drive me insane with her constant need to get people together, but that’s a me thing, not a reflection of her personality.

“Well, I like her. It’s nice to see a smile on someone’s face all the time. She doesn’t have a perfect life, but none of us do. What makes Kimmy different is she never lets anything get her down. I admire that.”

“I do too.”

Caroline slaps my knee and laughs. “I’m glad I could make you see things my way.”

“You know, I liked her before you came to her defense. Not that your admiration for her isn’t admirable.”

The streetlight above us makes her amused expression look almost like a caricature, exaggerating her mouth and the size of her eyes as she grins at my clumsy attempt to flatter her. “Admiration is admirable? Smooth.”

I don’t try to hide my amusement that she’s called me on my sloppy use of the language. “You like my way with words? It’s a gift.”

That makes her laugh, and it’s like a blast from my past when I hear it. Suddenly, I’m taken back to years ago, although I can’t exactly place when or who I was with who laughed like that. All I know is the sound of her having a good time makes me happier than I’ve been in a long time.

Just as she’s about to tell me if she actually does appreciate my turn of phrase, Kimmy walks up to us and stops a few feet away. She’s holding a package of napkins and the bag of hard candy.

“Hey, guys! I hope you had a good time today.”

Caroline immediately answers, “We did! Well, I did. I don’t know if I can answer for Adam, though. I thought it was a great time. Thanks for putting it all together, Kimmy.”

I swear to God Kimmy doesn’t hear a word after Caroline says she can’t speak for me. Her eyes zero in on me, laser focused on my face as she waits for her chance to

ask me directly if I enjoyed myself. Nothing like being put on the spot.

“You did have a good time, Adam, didn’t you? I’d hate for you to say you didn’t. I know there was that little hiccup earlier, but things got better after that, didn’t they?”

I feel completely responsible for Kimmy’s emotional state at this moment, not exactly a position I want to be in. As much as I’d love to tell her the truth, that’s not something anyone here in Raven Terrace gets from me, so I quickly concoct a lie I know will make her feel better.

“I did, Kimmy. I’ve been to two of your parties, and I have to say nobody puts on an event like you do. Thank you for that.”

A smile lights up her face, and I swear she wants to hug me right now. “Oh, that’s so wonderful! I do have to give Marilyn her due, though. She contributes a lot to these parties. I wouldn’t be able to do what I do without her.”

“Then you two are the consummate party planners, for sure.”

That compliment is too much for her, and she leans down to hug me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders as I stare up in shock at her. “Oh, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me all day, Adam. Thank you so much!”

Her arms squeeze me tightly, and all I can think of is thank God she likes that baby girl of hers or she might hug the stuffing right out of her. I give her a tiny squeeze in return, sure if I don’t she’ll ask if something’s wrong.

When she finally stands up, she’s beaming a smile ear to ear. “This has been a great party, for sure. September is going to be a great one too, so keep an eye out for your invitations.”

“What’s the theme going to be?” Caroline asks, sounding genuinely interested in the answer.

Strangely enough, that seems to confuse Kimmy. She moves back a step, shoulders sagging, and answers, “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe something fall or harvesty, but October is more harvest time. I’ll have to ask Marilyn.”

“Perhaps something back-to-school themed. That could be fun. You could get a chalkboard with the cursive letters written on top like you see in old pictures of schools. Maybe apples too,” Caroline suggests to Kimmy’s delight.

“Ooooh, I love that idea! I’ll be sure to tell Marilyn. You can always join us, Caroline, if you’d like.”

I expect her to politely beg off, so I’m surprised when she says she’d love to. So much for being the shy neighbor nobody knows much about.

Curious if these parties continue into the colder weather, I ask, “So what happens when winter rolls around? No parties? Or do you guys do a fire pit kind of thing?”

It’s meant as a little joke, but Kimmy takes it very seriously. “Well, last year we brought the parties inside to our houses for the cold months. November we did it at my house, and then in December we went to Marilyn’s house. January was at the Meyers’ house...”

Her voice fades off to nothingness, probably because she’s worried about what’s going to happen to Suzanne and Jared. I could joke that maybe it will be Jared and Sara hosting the January neighborhood get-together, but I keep that to myself. The last thing I need is Kimmy breaking down in a pool of tears over the Meyers’ break up. It’ll be the talk of the cul-de-sac until the next event.

Caroline immediately senses Kimmy's mood and stands up to take her hand in hers. "Not to worry. I'm sure everything will work out. Thank you for all you do for this neighborhood, Kimmy. You're the best neighbor a girl could dream of."

That gets Caroline a big bear hug, and as I watch the two women, I'm impressed with how kind the two of them are. Kimmy probably couldn't hurt a fly, and Caroline clearly has more than a healthy dose of empathy in her.

Not that I've ever found any use for that trait.

When Kimmy finally releases Caroline, she flashes me a big smile and says, "Take care of her. We need more of her kind in this neighborhood. I need to go return these napkins to Marilyn's, but I'll see you two later. Have a great night!"

She trots off toward her fellow party planner's house, leaving Caroline and me alone again as Tim begins to disassemble the tent. If I was the good kind of neighbor, I'd offer to help, but I have other plans in mind for tonight. Caroline seems to be in the mood to talk, and I'm in the mood to listen and learn.

But before I can restart our conversation, she looks down at me and says, "Well, I better go too. Have a good night, Adam."

"Thanks. You too," I say, not trying to hide the disappointment in my voice.

Something about the way she said my name hit my ears wrong. I thought we were having a nice conversation and she was enjoying herself, but when my name came out of her mouth, it was almost like she was spitting out something distasteful.

This woman confuses me. First, she throws me the dirtiest look I've ever gotten in my life that day she was in Marilyn's yard laughing and having a good time with her. Then she seemed to like talking to me tonight, but the tone of her voice when she said

my name screamed something closer to hate.

I will find out what's behind her behavior and what she's hiding. It's only a matter of time. If I was interested in Caroline Townsend before today, now I'm downright obsessed to learn her secrets.

And if it kills me, I will.

Standing on my porch as I try to fit my key into my front door, I hear a noise like bare feet slapping off the sidewalk behind me and spin around to see someone I hadn't expected. My next-door neighbor Aaron hasn't attended either neighborhood party since I moved in, but that's to be expected since he rarely speaks to anyone and usually doesn't come out of his house.

Why he's standing in front of mine tonight I have no idea.

"Hey. Aaron, right? I'm Adam. Adam Prentiss," I say, feeling awkward since he and I have never officially been introduced.

He doesn't respond right away, and for a second or two, I consider just walking inside and forgetting about this conversation once I slip the key into the lock. The way he stares at me like he's lost stops me, though. I get the sense he might want someone to talk to.

In truth, he could have chosen far better than me. Kimmy comes to mind. Then again, her bubblyness might be too much for Aaron. It's too much for me more often than not, and I'm not mourning the death of someone I loved.

I turn around to face him, and he reminds me of a ghost just staring at me dressed in a wrinkled white T-shirt and a pair of tan shorts. I've heard of people wearing grief like some cloak they can't shed. As I stare back at him, I can't help but think he could be the poster child for that. I've never seen anyone look so utterly sad. It's like there's nothing happy or light that exists inside him.

His brown hair hangs in his eyes, so he pushes it back off his face. Even that movement looks gloomy, like he can barely find the energy to make the effort. A chiseled jawline tells me he may have been an attractive man at one time, but his constant frown etched into his expression says those days are long gone.

“Did you want something?” I ask, knowing that’s a dick question but unsure what to say at this moment.

Maybe if it wasn’t already dark he wouldn’t be creeping me out so much.

Aaron shakes his head slowly to answer my question. Uncomfortable, I almost say, “Well, nice talking to you,” but I don’t get the words out before he finally begins speaking.

“Do you think God sees everything?” he quietly asks in a voice barely above a whisper.

I shrug, not really interested in having a theological discussion of the omniscience of God right now. I’m definitely not the right person for this conversation with him.

“Or do you think a person can hide the terrible things they’ve done even from God?” he asks, this time taking a step toward me and then stopping.

We stand in silence staring at one another as all I can do is shrug. What does he mean? His wife died of cancer, according to Kimmy. What kind of terrible things could this guy have done?

Maybe he means something to do with his kids. They aren’t around anymore, but I figured that was because they’re living with their grandparents or some other family members now. Did he do something to his kids that made it necessary for them to be taken off him?

Unsure how to proceed, I shrug again and answer, “I don’t know. I guess it depends on what you’ve done.”

Aaron shakes his head again, obviously unhappy with my answer. Sorry, buddy. I’m not really in a deep thoughts kind of place tonight. Catch me another time and maybe I can help you.

“Not what I’ve done,” he says in a cryptic voice that slices right through me.

Not what he’s done? Then what the fuck is he talking about?

He takes another step toward me and points his finger directly at my face. “I think God sees everything.”

“Okay. Well, it’s been nice talking to you. Have a good night.”

I turn to walk inside my house when I feel his hand clamp down on my left forearm. Shocked I didn’t hear him rush up on me, I spin around to face him and snap, “What the fuck?”

“God sees everything all right. He sees what you do and then it’s just a matter of time before karma gets you.”

After I pry his fingers from my arm, he steps back, shaking his head. “Some people refuse to believe, but God knows. He knows all.”

Instead of making a joke about how he mixed up Christianity and Buddhism, I simply ignore his idiotic ramblings and hurry inside, happy to be done with that conversation. So much for him being simply the grieving widower. It seems he’s graduated to religious zealot, and that’s the last thing I want to deal with tonight or anytime.

Go sell that nonsense somewhere else. Whatever his God sees or doesn't see has nothing to do with me.

I slam the door shut and lock it, worried he might think he can bring that garbage in here. I feel for the guy, I guess. I don't know what it's like to lose a wife, but come on. We live in a civilized world, man. You don't just sneak up on a guy in the dark of night and start preaching your religious shit. It's just rude.

Shaken by that weird encounter, I carefully pull back the living room curtains just enough to look through the window to make sure he went back home. He hasn't, though. He's slowly walking down the middle of the street like he's looking for something. Or someone.

As I watch completely creeped out, he turns around and I swear he looks right at me. I feel like my feet are encased in concrete and I can't move as I wait for him to keep walking, but he stays right there in the middle of the road in front of Marilyn and Harold's house staring at my house.

What is with this guy?

When he finally turns around and continues his weird stroll through the neighborhood, I close the curtains and hurry from the window. I need a drink. A good stiff drink will help me forget about that encounter.

I pour a glass of vodka, but my hand shakes so much that I get it all over the damn counter. Son of a bitch! Now on top of everything, I've got a mess.

Grabbing the paper towels out of the cabinet, I clean up and then immediately down the entire glass. I need to calm the hell down. Aaron is just the neighborhood weirdo, a sad guy who seems to have forgotten how to interact with people without unnerving the hell out of them. He was babbling with all that God bullshit.

The vodka instantly makes my stomach churn as I try to convince myself that I'm right and Aaron has simply lost his mind because of grief. It would make sense. The guy spends day after day alone in that house mourning his wife and probably missing his kids. It wouldn't be so strange for him to go around the bend after all of that.

Then again, what if it isn't that at all?

No. There's no way. He couldn't know about me. How could he? I've covered my tracks so well nobody knows what I've done.

Maybe he has the same skills you do.

That's not possible. The guy is an emotional fucking mess. He can barely get dressed in the morning, much less uncover the truth about me. He's overwhelmed with grief. I can't believe he spends time doing anything other than sitting in his house missing his family.

He all but told you he knows what you've done. God sees everything. He meant God knows about all those girls.

I pour another glass of vodka and slam it down, needing to get a grip. Aaron, my grieving neighbor who's at this moment walking around the neighborhood barefoot practically haunting the cul-de-sac, doesn't know a damn thing about me. I'm not even sure he knows my goddamned name. I'm just the guy who lives next door to him who simply happened to be around when he felt like talking.

Damn creepy bastard! Stay inside your own house and call someone on the phone if you want to talk. Don't come outside and bother me.

Glancing over at the bottle of vodka, I consider pouring myself another glass because the first two didn't work to calm me the hell down. I reach for it but stop myself. No.

I need to keep my wits about me.

I put the bottle back in the cabinet, along with the roll of paper towels, and head for my desk. If Aaron's going to be sneaking up on me and starting up conversations, I need to know every damn detail about him.

Except that's not the real reason why I want to find out about him. I need to know for sure if he could possibly know about what I've done. There can be no loose ends. Guessing he probably doesn't know a damn thing isn't good enough. I need to make sure he doesn't.

And if he does, then my creepy mourning neighbor is going to be joining his wife sooner than he thinks.

I log in to my laptop with my hands still shaking like goddamned leaves in a hurricane, so I lift them off the keys to steady myself. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath in and tell myself he can't know a thing.

But what if in your fixation with Caroline you missed him when you should have found out every last detail of his life like you did with everyone else in this neighborhood?

When I open my eyes, I'm happy to see my hands aren't shaking as badly as they were a minute ago. I'm fine. I simply need to stop letting my imagination get the best of me.

Calmer now, I can't help but chastise myself for not researching Aaron fully before this. He always seemed so lost and insignificant before tonight, though, so I didn't have a reason to.

Well, now you do, so get going. You can't afford to not know everything there is to

know about this guy if he's going to be popping up out of nowhere and claiming God knows everything.

My fingers type as if they have a mind of their own. Aaron Perry. 8 Park Circle, Raven Terrace, Pennsylvania. I start with a basic Google search since that can actually provide a lot of information. The average person doesn't realize that, but simply searching a person's name can bring forth a treasure trove of details about them.

My eyes scan the page until I reach his name. I click on the link and see it's the wrong Aaron Perry, so I click back and continue my search. After visiting two more pages about other men with the same name, I finally come upon one about him.

I read through the information and then grab my pen and paper I keep beside my laptop to take notes. Yes, it would be easier to do that on the computer I'm using to search for information, but I like doing it this way.

Call me old fashioned in this part of my stalking.

Aaron. 32 years old. Married once. Wife Sheila Perry deceased. Two children (boy and girl) ages 8 and 5.

He's older than I thought he was. Not that he looks younger necessarily, but for some reason I thought he was in his twenties.

Curious about what he used to do for a living before grieving became his chief occupation, I read further into the article about him from some online magazine and find out he was an accountant. I didn't guess that right either. Actually, I don't think I ever gave any thought to what his job was before this moment, but if I had, I wouldn't have guessed he worked as an accountant at some big firm in Philly.

In the middle of the article sits a picture of him accepting some commendation from a portly old man who clearly needs to get a different suit. I hope he did soon after this picture was taken because I suspect anyone standing nearby was in acute danger of losing an eye if one of those suit coat buttons lost its battle with his waist.

I stop for a few moments to study Aaron's face. He was a good-looking guy before everything in his life went to hell. Chiseled jaw, sharp eyes, a great smile. He looked like he worked out too. His hair was shorter then. I guess when you have a wife and kids and the world by the tail you're motivated to keep things tight.

Standing next to him on the other side from the fat bossman is a beautiful brunette I think may have been his wife. Damn. She was gorgeous. Big brown eyes my mother used to call doe eyes. She had an innocence to her I always find appealing in a woman.

So Aaron really did have everything going for him. And then he lost it all. Now he wanders around the cul-de-sac in his bare feet spouting nonsense about God.

Just goes to show you anyone can be king of the world one day and a beggarman the next.

Stop letting yourself get lost in this guy's past. So what if he had the picture-perfect life back then? He might very well at this exact moment be telling someone what he knows about you, so you damn well better get your head together and find out about him.

I shake my head to get rid of any romantic thoughts about Aaron and his dead wife and then keep scrolling down the page. There's more information about the firm he used to work for, Kaplan and James, so I jot that in my notebook too.

There's no way this guy knows a single thing about me. I feel pretty confident about

that. Still, I need to learn all there is to know about him so I can be sure. It's a good idea to have a thorough understanding of the people you live around anyway. Just makes good sense.

I go back to my search and find a page about his wife. Curious, I read through, not really paying very close attention to much of anything since she's dead, but then I come across a little nugget of information that piques my interest.

She was a staff writer for some online magazine. That means she knew how to research. That detail changes everything. He may have been an accountant when he had a better life, but he lived with someone who knew how to find out things about people, places, and events. Who's to say Aaron didn't learn a few tips about that from her?

My hands begin to shake again as my mind races to construct an entire scenario around what he said to me outside on the porch. What was it again? Can you hide the horrible things you've done from God? Yeah, it was something like that. Was he talking about me or about himself? Nothing I've found says he's ever done anything horrible. He was an accountant, for God's sake. How much horrible could he do in that job? Forget to file someone's quarterly taxes on time? Mess up a company's balance sheet?

Or maybe he's guilty of some kind of embezzlement.

No, he wasn't talking about himself. He was talking about me. That's why he chose to come to my house instead of going to anyone else's tonight.

He knows. I don't know how, but he knows what I've done.

Customers filed past me in clusters as that week's sale threatened to surpass the previous month's big spring-cleaning sale. Those always do well at Big Joe's Liquidation Depot, but I was surprised to see so many people here for what seemed like a ridiculous idea for a promotion when management first announced it.

The April Fool's Day sale.

I thought most customers would have assumed they were going to be tricked in some way so they wouldn't come out for the sale. Obviously, the giant crowds every day that week showed I was wrong.

Predicting a single person's behavior is easy. Predicting a group of people's is far more challenging.

I hated being around this many people at once. They're loud, rude, and far too many of them needed to be reminded of the virtue of a shower once in a while. If I didn't have a good reason to stay at that job, I would have left a week after I started.

And no, it wasn't the pay, which was far less than I should be making. I didn't still live with my mother because I liked it there.

No, my reason for staying here was named Tess. Tess Banks. Petite, blond, and as sweet as they come, she was perfect. I knew from the moment I met her that first day I started working at Big Joe's that she would be my next kill.

For two months, I watched her. At the beginning of February, I had to leave my last job cleaning office buildings when the company went bankrupt, so I ended up at Big Joe's stocking shelves for just above minimum wage and assumed I'd leave as soon as I could find a better job.

And then I met Tess in the breakroom, and I knew I couldn't quit. Not until I killed her.

For Valentine's Day, she brought everyone a little box of homemade candy hearts with cute sayings like "Text me" and "You're mine." Even me. When she handed me my pink box, she smiled and said, "Adam, I know we don't really know each other, so don't think I'm a weirdo or stalker or anything like that. I just didn't want to forget you since I have a Valentine's gift for everyone else."

I knew she wasn't stalking me. I'd know since I'm a stalker. No, she was being nice, and if I hadn't decided to make her my next victim before then, that moment would have been when I knew.

Tess Banks had to die.

But I'd been planning that eventuality since the day I met her, and that time came a week after the big April Fool's sale. I'll never forget how hot it was that day. Technically, it was spring, but the thermometer got to the high eighties by mid-afternoon, and I didn't know if I'd be able to convince her to take a ride home from me since my car's air conditioning didn't work. The last thing anyone wants to do is sit in a steaming hot car after it's been sitting in the scorching sun for nearly ten hours.

Still, I had to try. I needed to get her into my car. So right before the end of our shift, I found her in the housewares section she managed and positioned myself at the end of the towel aisle. When she came around the corner, she nearly ran into me and

apologized, like all nice people do.

Closing my eyes, I let myself drift back to that day.

“I’m so sorry, Adam. I nearly crashed right into you,” she says, her big blue eyes open wide in fear that she’s offended someone.

I smile and shake my head. “It’s okay. I guess if I have to be crashed into, there’s no better place than the towel aisle. They would have broken my fall.”

Tess giggles as she nods. “Maybe the pillow aisle. I guess it’s lucky I ran into you here—well, almost ran into you. I was wondering if I could ask you a big favor.”

I’ve been as friendly as I possibly can be for weeks, far more than I even thought I was capable of being before this. She actually is a very sweet person, so it hasn’t been a complete chore being kind to her. My goal was to make her feel comfortable enough with me that when I began offering her rides home, she wouldn’t balk and think I’m some creep who just wants to take her to some deserted place and force myself on her.

That’s not it at all. Well, not the forcing myself on her.

So every chance I’ve gotten, I show her I’m someone she can trust and consider a friend, and my plan has worked far better than I could have ever dreamed. Last week, she began to bring me these little presents every day for my lunch. Nothing big. A miniature bag of Fritos one day. A handful of Hershey’s Kisses the next. One day she brought me one of the chocolate cupcakes with vanilla icing she made the night before with a few of her friends at some baking party.

Now she wants to ask me a big favor, and of course, I’ll say yes. Anything to make sure I have her complete trust.

I glance down her body, hating the red and black vests we all have to wear as employees of Big Joe's, and my gaze lingers on her nametag where she attached a smiley face next to her name written in pink marker. "What's the big favor?"

Tess looks down toward her feet for a few moments before tilting her head back to look up at me. She's much shorter than I am—maybe five two, at most—and compared to my six-foot height, she's tiny.

"My car's in the shop. I had to get a ride from my friend this morning, but she called me at lunch and told me she got called in for an extra shift. I can't be mad at her since it's double time and I know she needs the money. So I'm stranded, and I was hoping you wouldn't mind giving a girl a lift."

I fight to keep the grin off my face at how fortuitous her problem is to my plans. It's like the universe is working hand in hand with me to give me what I want today. I figured killing her would be easy, but I never dreamed this kind of help would drop into my lap.

"So you need a ride home?" I ask, practically stunned at my good fortune.

A sheepish look settles into her expression as she nods. "I don't mean to overstep the boundaries of our friendship. I know we don't really know one another very well since you've only been working here for two months. I wouldn't ask if I wasn't really stuck, Adam."

Her blue eyes fill with hope as she stares up at me, so I quickly answer, "It's okay. I'm happy to do it. I have to ask you, though. You said you and your friends were at a baking party the other day. I told my mother about it, and she wanted me to ask you where you did that. What if it was at one of your friend's houses or somewhere else?"

Relief washes over her as I tell her what she wanted to hear. "Oh, yeah, the cupcakes.

We did it at this place over on Chestnut Street. You know how there are places where you and some friends go and paint a picture? You probably don't since you're a guy, but women do that kind of thing and it's fun. Well, I guess somebody figured out that art isn't the only thing that works for, so the Bubbly Bakery Shop started doing what they call Baking Nights."

She stops herself and then adds, "That's probably more information than you or your mother wanted to know. I always do that. I can't help it when I'm really enthusiastic about something."

"It's okay. I'll make sure to tell her everything you said. Bubbly Bakery Shop on Chestnut Street. Do they do them only particular nights or every night?"

"Oh, they do them by reservation only. I think they do it any night Monday through Friday, though. Just tell your Mom to call the bakery. They'll have all the details."

"Okay. Thanks! She'll be thrilled when I tell her what you said. I bet she thought I'd forget to ask you. What time do you get off tonight? I'm here until five."

Tess smiles as she grabs my hand to give it an excited squeeze. "Perfect! I'm scheduled until five too, so I won't be putting you out at all. Thank you so much, Adam. You're a lifesaver! I better get over to the sheet display. Somebody dug through every single package this afternoon, and it's going to take me the rest of my shift to get it straightened up. I'll see you out back in the parking lot at five, okay?"

"Sounds great!"

I watch as she hurries off to clean up the mess in the sheets area of her section. She said I was a lifesaver. She has no idea how ironic that is.

Tess slams the passenger side car door and turns in her seat to face me. "Thanks so

much, Adam! This is so nice of you.”

As I turn the engine over, I glance over at her and force a smile. “Happy to help. Just tell me your address.”

She rattles it off, and I instantly know where that part of town is and that there’s a wooded area nearby. Everything is working out perfectly.

While I drive, she chatters on about work and how our store supervisor gave her a hard time today because of that mess in the bedding area. I nod my agreement when she says he’s an ass and she wishes he’d go on a permanent vacation. Of course, she immediately says she isn’t wanting him dead, if that’s what I’m thinking. Personally, I wouldn’t give a damn if Chet Sanders disappeared forever. I might even make it happen myself if I had the chance.

I listen to all her talk, nodding and chuckling when it seems appropriate as I get more and more excited for what’s about to happen. The woods near where Tess lives will be the perfect spot, assuming there aren’t any kids partying there tonight. I just have to find a way to get her there.

Maybe she wants to get high. I have some weed. I could suggest that.

Then again, if she doesn’t smoke, that might cause me trouble at work, and as much as I hate that job, I need the money. I’ll save it for after I finish.

When we turn onto her street, I see it’s a dead end. It’s like the universe is on my side with this. Now if I can just figure out how to get her into the woods.

“That’s my house. The one at the end of the street.”

Jesus, this is like a gift from God.

The streetlight in front of where she lives flickers like a sign to me that it's almost time. I grip the steering wheel tightly until my knuckles are white. I can't lose my chance tonight.

"Your road reminds me of mine. There are woods right near my house too."

"Oh yeah? Did you spend every day in the summer playing in them when you were little too?" Tess asks with a giggle.

Nodding, I stop right underneath that streetlight and put the car into park. "Yeah. It was like living in a dream world. No cars. Nothing but nature and good times."

"I wish it wasn't dark out. I'd show you my favorite spot."

The disappointment in her voice comes through loud and clear, so I quickly say, "I think I'm going to take a walk in there anyway. I'm not afraid, and after the day we had, I could use some nature to get my head together. Maybe I'll smoke some too."

After I say that, I turn to her and add, "Don't tell anyone if you don't, okay? I need that job, Tess."

The light from outside shows her wide eyes as she grabs onto my forearm. "I wouldn't do that, Adam. You've always been so nice to me. The thing is, though, that I do smoke, so maybe you'd like some company on your walk?"

Bingo.

Every cell in my body feels like it's more alive than ever before, but I need to temper my excitement. I don't want to scare her off now that I'm so close to my goal. I can practically feel her tiny neck beneath my hands.

The soft skin giving way as I slowly squeeze the life out of her.

The sound of her breathing slowly ebbing away as her last gasp of air leaves her body.

I squeeze my legs together, wishing I wasn't hard right now. I've never gotten excited like this before I kill someone. Maybe I do like Tess more than as just my next victim.

No matter. Sexual need is nothing compared to the kind of need I feel to kill again. I can satisfy myself later in bed, but to satiate the desire that rules my every thought can only be done one way.

"Okay," I say as casually as humanly possible. Christ, I feel like I'm trying to hold back wild horses. "Does anyone usually hang out in the woods, or will we be alone? We don't want any narcs ruining our time."

Tess shakes her head as she reaches to open the door. "Not a soul lately. I think the cops broke up a big party last month around St. Patrick's day, so since then, I haven't seen anyone walk in there after dark."

Perfect.

As I turn to get out of the car, I smile at her. "Good."

She waits for me at near the trunk and takes my hand in hers, surprising me. "I sometimes get a little freaked out walking into those dark woods alone. You don't mind me holding your hand, do you?"

I shake my head as a single thought runs through my brain. Tess's hands are so small. I don't know why I never noticed that before this moment. I've studied every square

inch of her body, or at least I thought I had, but somehow I didn't pay any attention to her hands. Odd considering I've seen them every day while we've worked together stacking sheets or picking up towels thoughtless customers left on the floor.

Her skin is soft against mine, and before I know it, I'm so fucking hard my dick practically aches as it presses against the front of my black work pants. I don't listen as she tells me some story about a girl she used to know who would always hang out with her in the woods when they were young.

With each step we take, the moment I've waited for grows closer. My mind falls still as it always does right before it happens. I can be thinking a million thoughts right before, but as soon as I know it's truly going to happen, everything falls away.

All thoughts. All feelings. Everything. Until I'm a void, except for that one singular thought that controls everything.

It's time for her to die.

Tess gives my hand a playful squeeze as we walk into the woods, and in the dim light of the moon, I see something flirtatious in her eyes. She thinks this is my way of getting her alone so we can kiss or have sex, and she likes that idea.

No, that's not what this is, although I can see why men would want you. You probably shouldn't be so willing, though, sweet Tess. That's going to get you killed.

"Is everything okay, Adam? You seem really quiet all of a sudden," she says, inching closer to me as we continue to walk deeper into the trees.

I nod and smile, knowing that will be enough to calm her fears. She thinks I'm having second thoughts about us being together. That's expected since I'm not saying anything.

But there are no words in my head right now. Just emptiness surrounding the only thought I have when it's time to kill someone.

We stop next to a big rock, and for the first time, I smell the leaves sitting on the ground beneath our feet. After a long winter's rest, they're now giving off that scent of decay that had been hidden by the cold temperatures. The recent heat wave hasn't brought them back to life but instead made every part of their continuing march toward nothingness more potent.

"My friends and I used to hang out on this very rock when we were kids," Tess says, leaning against it and looking up at me.

The moonlight makes the entire area look like something magical. I imagine in her mind what's about to happen is going to be that too. Magical. Enchanting, like the forest around us.

"They're all gone off to college now. There's only me left here since I didn't get into any of the schools they did," she says sadly.

"College is overrated," I say in a rare attempt at making someone feel better.

It's ridiculous I should even bother, really. In a few seconds, I'm going to wrap my hands around that pretty neck of hers and strangle the life out of her. Why I'm bothering to try to make her feel better about her not getting to go to college makes no sense.

But it works, and her smile returns.

"You're right. I shouldn't feel bad. I mean, my job isn't great or anything, but it's not forever, right? I've got the rest of my life to figure out what I want to do, and in the meantime, I'll make some money from Big Joe."

She sounds so happy right now. I'm glad I could give her that before I get what's going to make me happy.

"I didn't realize how much I needed this after today," she says sweetly as I reach into my coat pocket.

A second later, I move quicker than lightning and grab her around the neck. She's unsure what's happening at first, but it doesn't take her long to realize she only has moments left to live.

Tess struggles harder than I expected, pushing me back so I fall back onto the ground with a thud. She's off like a shot before I know it, but I'm bigger and faster. I just need to get her before she leaves the woods and reaches her neighborhood.

She screams at the top of her lungs, adding another layer of discomfort to what's supposed to be a perfect time for me. Rage courses through my veins, and I run faster to catch up to her so I can stop that fucking yelling.

"Help! Help! Someone call the police! He's trying to kill me!" she screeches just before I reach her.

I stretch my hand out and close my fingers around her hair before I yank her back against me hard, slamming her tiny body into mine. I've never been this angry before killing someone. I'm usually so calm and peaceful.

Tess fights against my hold, flailing her arms and twisting like a wild woman, but it's no use. This was always going to end the way I want it to. Her giving me a hard time isn't going to change that.

I clamp my hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming, but she continues, yelling against my fingers. "Stop! Get off me! Help!"

For a moment, I look around to see if anyone's heard her, but we're still alone. I need to get this done quickly, though. No enjoying my time tonight.

Furious she's ruined this for me, I throw her down to the ground and immediately jump on top of her. Her fingernails claw at my face and neck, and she screams like a madwoman. It won't matter in a few seconds, though.

Wrapping my hands around her throat, I squeeze hard, needing to shut her up before someone hears her pleas for help. She continues to thrash like a wild animal, her hands pummeling my face and ears, so I squeeze even harder.

Now I just want this fucking thing over. She's spoiled this, so now she needs to pay. Bitch.

My thumbs press into her flesh just above her collarbone. I feel her heart beating wildly against my fingertips. That will end soon. Everything will for Tess.

I watch in the moonlight as the life begins to fade from her wide eyes. Fear is replaced with the knowledge that it's almost time. No more worries about work or wishing she could have gone to college. No more anything. Just peace.

Her arms rest against my chest and then slide down to her sides as her last breaths leave her body. Tess falls still beneath me, her eyes staring up blankly into mine right before she dies.

And then it's over.

I release her neck and sit back on the damp ground covered with decaying leaves. I want to be able to sit here and enjoy myself like I did with Amanda, but I worry someone heard Tess screaming.

So instead, I stand up to leave, eager to get the hell away from here, but the tang of blood hits my tongue when I lick my lips. Wiping under my nose, I see blood. She caught my skin when she was fighting me.

Bitch.

I can't just leave her here. Someone will find her too soon. We may have been seen walking into the woods together. It won't take a genius to finger me as the one who did this to her.

No, I need to hide her somehow.

Frantically, I look around for a place to put her, but there's nothing around. I pace back and forth past her body as my mind races about what to do. There has to be some way to hide her.

Then I spy a piece of fallen tree. It's not big enough to stuff her inside, but it may be enough to dig a hole. Jumping over her, I lift it off the ground and feel it's hard.

I use it as a shovel to carve out a shallow grave for her beneath the layer of rotting leaves, and when it's deep enough, I push her in with my foot. She rolls into the hole like she's turning over in bed and lands face down.

For a second or two, I stare down at her and imagine that beautiful face mashed into the dirt. If only she hadn't screamed I wouldn't have had to do this to her. She could have been found looking as beautiful as she always was, like Amanda was when they found her.

I hurry to cover her with the mixture of earth and dying leaves, and the scent of the mixture fills my nose until I don't think I can stand it for a moment longer. Stepping back, I study my work, but I'm not happy. Anyone walking through here in broad

daylight is going to notice this ground's been disturbed.

What I need are more of those leaves. I push them around with my foot until the area is covered as well as it's going to be. Unless someone is looking for a freshly dug grave, I doubt anyone will notice this for a long time.

And with that, I rub my hands together to get rid of the dirt on them and turn on my heel to leave. It wasn't how I imagined it would be, but I'll change that when I think about it later in bed tonight.

Then she'll be soft and willing. She'll be beautiful staring up at me as the last bit of life drains from her face.

She'll be just like Amanda was when I killed her.

Another ninety-degree August day gives me a good reason to stay inside. The real reason I don't want to see any of my neighbors has far less to do with the weather and far more to do with feeling exposed after all that forced friendliness at the party and that bizarre encounter with Aaron. I can't let people know too much about me. That only leads to them asking questions about things they shouldn't know about.

The air conditioning feels good as I sit down at my desk. It's Sunday, so I won't be working today. That doesn't mean I won't be searching for anything and everything I can find out about Caroline Townsend, though. After last night's resounding success learning all about crazy Aaron, I feel good about today's prospects to finally reveal just who the beautiful woman in the green house truly is.

That's what I've decided his nickname needs to be. Crazy Aaron. Ever since I moved here, I've felt bad for him because his story is truly tragic. Last night changed that, though. It's one thing to be a sad guy. It's something else completely to be showing up on your neighbor's doorstep—a neighbor who's been nothing but respectful, by the way—and creeping him the hell out with bizarre questions about what God sees and knows.

No thanks. Now he gets to be Crazy Aaron, and I plan to stay as far away from him as possible.

Lifting my arms above my head, I stretch and then crack my neck before I open my laptop. Caroline's secrets won't stay hidden from me any longer. I can devote every hour of this day to finding out exactly who she is and what she's hiding.

I glance over at the window and see Kimmy and her brood in the street. It looks like she's headed over to Marilyn's. Jesus, please don't let this be for another party. Isn't the next one in September? That's what she said last night. I need at least a month to recover from yesterday's.

Instead of walking to Marilyn's, they turn and make their way to Caroline's. I notice Kimmy seems to be walking a bit slower today. She keeps shifting baby Misty from her right hip to her left, and as I watch her try to corral those boys, I see she's limping. Something's wrong with her right leg.

Instinctively, I wonder if she and Tim were up late doing bedroom acrobatics. She probably pulled a muscle during them. You'd think he'd learn to stop at four, especially since he came right out and said he never wanted that many kids in the first place.

Oh, well. Some people never learn. I don't understand why Kimmy doesn't stop the madness, though. She's the one who's left alone with them all day, every day. You'd think she would be looking forward to some time to herself once they all are old enough to go to school.

I guess she prefers to be nothing more than an incubator. And party planner. It's too bad she doesn't realize that she has a real knack for that. If she didn't have all those kids to take care of, she might even be able to make a business out of her talent.

Tough luck for Caroline, though. Bright and early on a Sunday morning, the last thing anyone wants is to be visited by Kimmy and her disobedient ducklings.

As I watch them standing on her front porch, I see her answer the door, and the look on her face is nothing short of disgusted. I'd feel the same way if Kimmy and her family showed up on my doorstep at nine a.m. She lets them into her home, though, smiling as if she actually likes having her privacy invaded like this.

She's certainly more polite than I am. I would have made Kimmy and the rest of her people stand out on the porch to tell me what she has to say, even in this heatwave that doesn't seem to want to end.

I see her glance up the street toward my house and wonder what Kimmy just told her. Was it something about me? That wouldn't make any sense. I was nothing but nice and neighborly during that entire party yesterday. In fact, I couldn't have been nicer if I tried. What the hell would Kimmy have to say about me?

Then I remember that weird conversation with Aaron. I have no idea how long he wandered around the cul-de-sac last night. Is it possible he ran into Kimmy or Tim? I wonder if he asked them that same ridiculous question about God seeing what we do.

Not that Kimmy would care. Everything she does is out there for anyone with eyes to see. Tim's a different story, though. Who knows what he does at that job of his? Is there a special someone at work nobody knows about?

Or who he thinks nobody knows about?

I'm still not convinced Aaron hasn't been snooping around about everyone in this neighborhood. If he has any of the research skills I think he might, it wouldn't be difficult. He stays in his house nearly every day and night, so he'd have the time. He's got a perfect view of the neighborhood from his front window. I know because I have almost the same view and see everything that happens when people are in their yards or out in the street.

What if he found out about some piece Tim has on the side at work? What if he asked him about it last night? Or maybe he just asked that nonsense about God knowing what we do and Tim put two and two together. If Kimmy was right there when Aaron asked that, she may have wondered why her husband became upset.

Maybe that limp isn't from sex but a fight she and Tim had after Aaron stopped by. He likes to preach patience and accepting things like some big spiritual guru, but I bet he has a temper when it comes right down to it. Aaron and his cryptic bullshit may have caused a knockdown drag out fight, which would explain that limp of Kimmy's.

I let my mind run wild with conjecture for a little while as I watch Caroline's green house for any sign of Kimmy and the kids leaving. It's been fifteen minutes by the time I realize how long I've been fantasizing about what may have happened last night. What the hell are those two women talking about for that long?

Finally, the white front door on the green house opens and out come the three Marshall boys like they've been shot out of a cannon. I hear their mother scream for them to stay out of the street before I even see her, but as usual, they don't listen and a few seconds later, the three of them are fighting in the middle of Park Circle.

Nearly a minute passes before Kimmy walks out with Misty stuck to her hip, followed by Caroline. Both of them are smiling and neither one looks up the street toward my house, so I'm sure whatever they talked about had nothing to do with me. I'm not entirely convinced it had nothing to do with Aaron, though. I can definitely imagine Kimmy feeling like it's her neighborly duty to warn everyone that the ghost of our street has taken to walking around at night being creepy.

She does take her responsibilities as our neighbor very seriously.

Caroline waves as Kimmy and the ducklings walk back across the street to their own house. That limp of hers looks even worse than it did before, and when she goes to sit down on her front steps, I notice she takes it very slowly. I wonder what happened to her.

Lost in thought as I watch Kimmy and her kids, I don't see Caroline leave her porch until out of the corner of my eye I notice she's walking up the street. Is she planning

to visit Marilyn today, or perhaps she's going to Aaron's house? Maybe she's headed there to talk to him about how it's not okay to wander the streets at night freaking people out. I can see her doing that. Kimmy would never be able to have that kind of discussion with any of us. It wouldn't be neighborly. Plus, I don't think she has a mean bone in her body, and I have no doubt she'd think it would be cruel to say something like that to a man still in mourning for his dead wife.

Dressed in white jean shorts and a black tank top, Caroline looks like the picture of summer beauty. I watch her as with each step she gets closer and closer to my house and possibly might see me staring at her, but I don't care. Somewhere deep in my mind, the memory of Amanda Michaels rises up, and for a long moment, I think I'm seeing her walk up the street. Caroline reminds me so much of her this morning.

How odd I never noticed the similarity in the way they walk. All those hours Amanda and I would stroll through the woods as she chattered on and I listened come back to me now, and it's like those fifteen years that have passed disappear.

Then an idea creeps into my brain. It's only a fragment of a thought, actually, but it burrows its way into my consciousness until I can't think of anything else.

Caroline Townsend must die.

I've never thought that before this very moment. Even when I couldn't find out anything about her and wanted to punch my hand through my laptop screen in frustration, I never considered killing her. Or when I sat with her last night and we talked. Still the idea of killing her never occurred to me.

But it does now, and I realize I won't be able to think of anything else when it comes to her from this moment on.

I must kill Caroline Townsend.

A knock at my front door tears me out of my daydreaming, and I jump up out of my seat, shocked I didn't see her walking up my sidewalk. I silently tiptoe over to the door and look out through the peephole to see the woman herself standing on my front porch.

My heart races at the possibility of what she could want. First, she walks right into my house, and now she simply invites herself up here to visit? Everyone else might think she's nice, but to me, she's got no damn manners.

I glance down at the doorknob as I question whether or not it's locked. She wouldn't just walk in, would she? She's not that rude. No, she can't be. Nobody in this neighborhood would like her if she was.

She knocks again, making me jump in surprise as I stare at the door directly in front of me. I hold my breath as I wait for the next knock, but it never comes. When I look out the peephole again, I see her turn and walk back down the sidewalk out to the road.

Relieved, I run over to the window and watch her through the curtains as she walks back down the street. Why did she come here? What did she want? We aren't close enough for her to just drop in whenever she feels like it.

My heartbeat slowly returns to normal when I see her walk back onto her porch. But then she turns around, and I know she's looking up here at me, at my house. Why? What did Kimmy say to Caroline to make her come up here?

Instantly, my mind travels to what it always does at times like this when I don't know what's happening. Someone found out what I've done. They know.

They all know I'm a killer.

10

For nearly a day, I can't think of anything but the reality that everyone around me knows the truth. Will I have to sell this house? Where will I go? Questions fill my mind, and every one I answer seems to bring up others.

I see an email from my job come in and open it to find the hiring supervisor at one of the companies I work for asking why I haven't sent any information I've found out about their newest management candidate yet. In all my focus on Caroline and what she wanted when she came up here, I let my responsibilities at my job falter.

That's never happened before.

She's a distraction I can't have. Even worse, she and Kimmy might be telling all my neighbors who I really am. Fucking Aaron! He probably blabbed to everyone last night. Asshole with his God bullshit.

Trust me, Aaron. God knows nothing. If he did, I wouldn't be here right now enjoying life in the suburbs. They would have stuck a needle in my arm for what I've done.

I hurry to reply to the email with a lie that I've been sick and I'll get her the information she needs today. I've never had to give any company an excuse like that. I've done this job for over ten years, and this is the first time I've been so distracted that I didn't handle my business.

A mix of embarrassment and anger courses through me. This is Caroline's fault. If I

wasn't so fixated on finding out the truth about her, I would have completed my search on the candidate like I always have.

My hands curl into tight fists as they hover over my laptop after clicking SEND on that pathetic email. Now I'm no better than those slacker assholes who can't seem to do their job because they're too busy hanging out on social media posting pictures of their fucking food or their goddamned pets.

Anger morphs into rage like I've never felt before. Rage at the one person who's driven me to distraction. Rage at my next victim.

Her time is coming. I won't forget what happened today.

Even as I want to march down the street and straight into her house to strangle her right now, I know I need to get myself under control. I can't rush into anything. What I do takes time. It takes planning.

Most of all, it takes patience, and not the kind those clowns Tim and Harold think they've mastered. No, killing takes real patience, the type that makes you understand that not everything can happen today.

But it will happen. Caroline Townsend will die.

In the meantime, I need to get work done.

I've given up searching for information about her online. It simply doesn't exist. That tells me she isn't who she claims to be. That I can't find out what I need to know the way I prefer means I'll have to go at it another way.

A way I hate. Personally.

Talking to people never fails to exhaust me. They all have such baggage that never fails to get in the way of the truth. Not that the truth doesn't come out eventually, but all that extraneous bullshit is tiring. I always want to shake people as they talk about the weather or their job or whatever else they want to hide behind and say, "Just get to the point, for God's sake!"

That I can't is only because social norms dictate we don't do that. Shaking people and demanding they cut to the chase isn't polite. I've built my entire persona I show to the world as exactly that—polite—so I know I can't go around doing what I want to do when I'm forced to converse with someone.

Still, it's a chore to talk to people about themselves. They use all sorts of tricks to keep the world from knowing who they really are. Not that I'm ever truly fooled. I'm not. Yet it does mean I have to waste time wading through the mountain of lies others tell to get to the truth.

So far in our only conversation, I've learned Caroline has a soft spot for Kimmy, she cares about this neighborhood, and she likes baking lemon bars. Oh, she also is likely a woman scorned by her reaction to Jared's cheating on Suzanne. She was probably cheated on by some boyfriend and still can't forgive him.

Then I remember the one detail that reminds me of Amanda. Caroline is from Maryland.

She wasn't happy to find out Tim and Kimmy had let that detail about her past become public knowledge. I wonder why.

I also can't figure out why there's no hint of her being from there in any of the searches I've done. She must be going by a different name than she had in Maryland.

But why?

I think it's time I find out.

The moment I step outside, the heat hits me like a brick wall. It's got to be ninety-five degrees out today. Talk about the dog days of summer. I saw someone online claim it would hit the century mark today and dismissed them as ridiculous. As I wipe the beads of sweat already forming along my hairline, I might have to admit that may have been a hasty judgment.

Not a single noise comes from any of the yards. No children in front of Kimmy and Tim's house running around like banshees. No lawn mower churning up the grass at Marilyn and Harold's. In fact, as I walk past their house, I see no one out and Harold's truck still in the driveway. Too hot to fish, I guess.

More like too hot to sit out in a boat with the sun blazing down on him and drink all day.

In fact, the only sound I hear other than that of cars a few blocks over where it's always busier is the hum of air conditioners. All the houses in this neighborhood are new, so they all have central air and heat, but if I listen very carefully, the quiet purr of the machines pumping cold air into them is clear as a bell, the only sound not swallowed up by the stifling heat and humidity.

By the time I reach Caroline's green house, sweat drips down the sides of my face and onto my neck. This weather is going to kill someone. If the air wasn't so thick or if there was a breeze, it wouldn't be so bad. Even a tiny gust of air from time to time would help.

But that isn't to be found on this sunny August day. The sky is a pristine blue without a cloud to mar the beautiful color. There will be no relieving breeze today.

Perhaps Caroline's house will offer some much-needed cool air. I stop at the bottom

of her steps and look around, not really for any particular reason but knowing there are always eyes watching in this neighborhood. I see no one, but then again, do they ever see me watching them?

I'm sure Kimmy and Marilyn will be gossiping about my coming to visit Caroline seconds from now. One or both of them saw me walk here, so it's only a matter of time. They'll probably be burning up their phones chatting about it. A single man visiting a single woman in a neighborhood such as this is bound to get tongues wagging.

If they had any idea of the real reason for my visit, they wouldn't be wasting their time whispering about whether I like her or she likes me. If they knew the truth about my interest in her, they'd hide her away and never let me get close to her again.

Each step up to her porch is an effort, like each of my legs has a twenty-pound weight strapped to it and lifting my foot takes all the energy I have. I should have waited until the sun went down to come see her. At least then I wouldn't look like a drowned rat when she opens the door.

My heart begins to beat wildly as I make my way across her farmhouse style porch. You'd swear I'm a man suffering from infatuation or puppy love. I take a breath of thick air into my lungs to calm myself down. I'm merely here to have a conversation with a neighbor. Nothing more.

At least that's what I want her to think.

A quick rap of my knuckles on her front door and then I wait for her to answer. Unlike me yesterday, she won't ignore me standing here. Friendly people always answer the door when someone comes calling.

It's what gets many of them killed.

I hear her footsteps as she walks toward the door, and I smile when she looks out at me through the tiny square window I know forces her to stand on her tiptoes to see out. I want her to think this is a nice, friendly visit. That way she'll reveal more.

As she opens the door, I feel a gust of cool air hit my wrists and legs through the screen door separating me from her. She smiles when we're face to face, but I sense she's unsure why I'm standing here right now.

"Hey, Adam..." she says before her voice trails off to silence.

"Hi, Caroline. I wanted to come down to apologize for not being able to answer the door yesterday. You see, I was doing laundry which was long overdue, and I wasn't dressed to see anyone. If I'm being honest, I wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing, so you can understand why I couldn't do the polite thing and answer when you knocked."

Every word of that is a lie, but I see it has the desired effect on her as she blushes at my mention of being naked when she came by yesterday. If she didn't get so lost in all those words, she might realize I don't look anything like the type of man who would hang around his house in his birthday suit. Who does that anyway? This isn't some kind of hippie commune or nudist colony, for Christ's sake.

Yet she believes my lie and nods, smiling through her embarrassment. "Oh, that's okay. It wasn't anything important. Kimmy had just mentioned that she saw Aaron walking around the neighborhood after the party, so I wanted to see if you had run into him at all."

I can't decide if she's lying or telling the truth, but her concern for our grieving neighbor seems genuine, so I give a sympathetic nod at the mention of him and say, "Oh, yes. I thought I saw him when I was walking home that night, but we didn't talk. He looked very sad. You have to feel for him losing everything like he has."

With each word, I wonder why she hasn't invited me inside to enjoy some cool air. It's almost as if she's forgotten her manners, which is very unlike everyone in this neighborhood.

Finally, she opens the screen door and walks out to join me, crushing my hopes for any relief from the heat. Looking fresh and relaxed, she motions toward the chairs on her porch and says, "Why don't we sit down so we can talk?"

I force a smile through my disappointment and follow her to the two wicker chairs with forest green cushions to match the color of her house. As we sit down, I pay attention to her expression and see she's already suffering from the stifling heat. I wait for her to suggest we go inside, but she simply crosses her legs and turns to look at me with a smile I know isn't genuine.

Why isn't she inviting me inside her home? What's in there that she's hiding?

Forced to stay out here and endure these temperatures, I wipe my brow and say, "Looks like it's going to be another scorcher today. I'm wondering when this heat wave is going to break."

"The longest heatwave in history for this area was in the nineties, I think. Harold mentioned it the other day. He said it lasted for seventeen days. Since we're only on day three of ninety degree or better temperatures, let's hope it doesn't last for another two weeks."

Two weeks in this heat? I might not leave my house the entire time if that's the case.

I nod as she gives me her mini history lesson, dreading the idea that this year might break the record. "Seventeen days? I wonder how many people didn't make it through that one. Every time there's a heatwave, people drop like flies. It's all over the news."

As I speak, I see the horror fill Caroline's eyes, so I quickly add, "It's all very ghoulish the way they talk about it, if you ask me."

"It is," she says with utter disgust. "Why does the news have to talk about people dying all the time? You'd swear there's nothing good to talk about at all."

I shrug, even as I'm intrigued about how bothered she is about all the death on the news every night. "You know what they say. If it bleeds, it leads."

"You sound like you approve of that. I'm guessing since you're a man that you don't have a problem with all the violence, death, and destruction in society today."

The tone of indictment comes through loud and clear, and I know I have to pretend like all of that bothers me, so I touch her arm in sympathy and shake my head. "No, and I bet most men you'd find don't like it either." Hoping to lighten the mood, I jokingly add, "Well, maybe not Harold, but he's a fish killer, so you know how they are."

That does the trick, and for the first time since we sat down, Caroline chuckles. "You know, you're sort of funny. I guess I was getting too serious there for a minute. Sorry about that. I get tilting at windmills, and the next thing I know I'm up on a soapbox."

As she apologizes, I watch her carefully to see if she truly means it. I think she does. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was interested in me.

Not that her wanting to get to know me better would be a bad thing. Absolutely not since I want the same thing from her. I just have no interest in anything romantic.

My desires turn another way.

"It's okay. Just shows you have a passion for something. I'm afraid you might be

trying to hold back the ocean with a broom, though, when it comes to violence in this country. I'm pretty sure it's in our DNA."

Her smile slowly disappears as I talk, probably because she knows I'm right. If she had any idea about the person she's talking to, she'd understand just how true all I said is.

"Well, that doesn't mean it has to stay that way. If a person can grow and change, then why can't a country of people do the same?"

Caroline truly is an idealist. I always laugh at people like her who insist on believing there's good in all people. They seem so deluded, like they haven't watched enough of the ugliness of humanity to be convinced that human beings are by their nature violent creatures. To expect them to be anything else always seems foolish.

But as I listen to her and know what she's thinking is pure naiveté, I can't help but find her charming in a way I've never experienced before. She may be wrong in more ways than she can imagine, but I like how her hopefulness makes me feel.

"I guess it's possible," I say, not believing that but some small part of me wishes it could be. "Have you always been this positive about human nature?"

She smiles, and it lights up her entire face. "I think so. My parents were really positive people, so I guess I come by it naturally. Not everyone is base and animalistic."

Since Caroline seems to be in the mood to talk about herself and I want to encourage that, I ask her another question. "What about your brothers and sisters? I'm having a hard time believing your entire family was full of positive people. Wasn't there one grouch in the bunch?"

Her smile gets broader, but I swear I see sadness flash in her eyes for a brief moment before it disappears as she shakes her head. “Nope. All happy people. I only have one brother, but he’s like me. Always tilting at windmills thinking we can make the world a better place.”

So she has a brother, but I get the sense by the way she used the past tense when she referred to her parents that they’re dead. I file those details away in the back of my mind and lean back on the wicker chair as I look out onto the street.

“I think I may have moved into the most positive neighborhood in the world then. Kimmy’s definitely someone who looks at the world with a sunny disposition, and Marilyn is just like her too. I don’t know about their husbands, but I wouldn’t say either man is entirely negative. Then again, I don’t know what we’d call Jared and Suzanne after the other night.”

Caroline nods slowly as a look of sadness comes over her. “I guess we’d call them divorced. She’s going to take him to the cleaners.”

I can’t help but find it interesting how differently she’s looking at the unhappy couple’s situation today compared to how she talked about it the night of the party. Then, she was all in favor of Suzanne gutting her cheating husband and laying him out in the middle of the street for all to see. Today, though, I get the feeling she’s not as militant in her support of Suzanne.

“He has it coming, don’t you think?”

Nodding, she draws her eyebrows in. “Yeah, he does. I don’t know what he was thinking bringing that woman to the party. Suzanne lives here. Did he actually think none of us were going to say something to her? I may not know her well, but Kimmy and Marilyn do, and they would tell her. He’s just a fool. He deserves what he gets.”

“That’s doesn’t sound so positive anymore.”

Caroline rolls her eyes. “I believe people can be good and if they aren’t then they can change. Jared hasn’t shown anyone he’s interested in being good or changing to save his marriage.”

So much for tilting at windmills.

She leans over toward me and whispers, “He left last night with two suitcases, so I think it’s over.”

As interesting as gossiping about my cheating neighbor is, I want to get Caroline to tell me more about herself, so I remain silent for a few moments as the two of us stare out at the road. The heat of the day comes off the asphalt in waves, making me feel even hotter than before. I wish she’d offer me a drink or invite me inside where it’s cool.

“Was it as hot as this where you used to live?” I ask awkwardly, instantly wishing I had thought of something smoother.

“Yes. I know everyone already knows I’m from Maryland, so yes, it got this hot. I want to say it wasn’t this humid, though. Something about this area seems to trap all the humidity here.”

Great. Now we’ve moved on from gossiping about unhappy marriages to the weather. At this rate, I’ll never learn anything about her.

Maybe if I give her a little taste of my past she’ll open up more. We do share Maryland in common, so why not mention that?

“You know, I haven’t told anyone else around here this, but I lived in Maryland too. I

grew up there.”

That makes her eyes grow wide. “Really? Where?”

For someone who shares so little of herself, she’s quite eager and willing to ask others to share about themselves. Okay, I’ll play along. There’s no reason to lie about what town I lived in. Even though she’s from the same state, I doubt she’ll even recognize my hometown’s name.

“Danton. It’s a little town I bet you’ve never heard of, but it was a nice place to grow up.”

Narrowing her eyes, she appears to think about what I’ve said and mumbles, “Danton. Danton. Why does that name sound so familiar?”

I can’t imagine anyone other than the people who live in Danton would say it sounds familiar, so I chuckle and shake my head. “I don’t think it is. You’re probably confusing it with somewhere more popular or bigger. Trust me. No one knows about my small town.”

But that doesn’t make her stop repeating the name. “Danton. Danton. I know I’ve heard that somewhere. I’m not remembering it right now, but I know I’ve heard something about that place. It’s going to drive me crazy if I can’t think of it. Do any famous people come from there?”

I throw my head back and laugh at the ridiculous thought of that happening. “No, trust me on that. Nobody famous has ever even heard of Danton, much less lived there.”

“Hmmm...what about news? Any reason that town would have appeared in the news in Frederick?”

I shake my head as I file away that little detail. Caroline Townsend is from Frederick. That's interesting. I don't know if she meant to let that little fact out, but I'm sure I'll be able to use that in my search when I return to my air-conditioned house.

"Highly doubtful. I don't think we even had a full police force. I remember seeing maybe two officers during my entire childhood. The worst crimes that ever happened in Danton involved some guy lighting his garbage on fire every fall because he wanted to have a bonfire."

That's actually true, even though Mr. Merrick's need to set fire to his trash every autumn wasn't the worst thing that ever happened in Danton. Amanda Michaels' murder was.

Like all tragedies, though, it was all over the news for a short while and then disappeared from existence, replaced by something else deemed more interesting. If it bleeds, it leads. Not being able to find the killer of a teenage girl isn't newsworthy.

Caroline abruptly stands up and looks at me oddly. "I'm going to keep thinking about this because I know I remember hearing about that town of yours. Right now, though, I need to get back inside since I have things I need to do. Have a great day, Adam. Be sure to stay cool."

And with that, she walks away, slamming her front door behind her and leaving me sitting in that uncomfortable wicker chair unsure what just happened.

For an hour, I pace back and forth across my living room, frustrated by my encounter with Caroline. That should make me want to kill her. For God's sake, Amanda angered me a single time and that's all it took with her. Tess never even irritated me and I knew I had to kill her.

Yet this one I can't seem to figure out, so maybe that's why I'm not ready to take that step. It will happen. I knew it from the moment I saw her the first time right after she moved in, even if I didn't consciously acknowledge it.

Caroline Townsend will take her last breath as I choke the life out of her.

I've tried all the things I know that work to keep me from acting on my desire to kill. I focused on research. I told myself someone would find out and then my life here would be over. I tried to dive into work.

None of it has worked.

I know what I have to do. I have to kill someone else. But who?

It doesn't take me long to figure out who my next victim is. She has to deserve it. I always know my targets deserve what they get. To me, that's important. Other killers may not have to justify their deeds, but I do.

She has to be someone I think the world can do without. That opens up the pool to many people, but I prefer to stay close to home. That's always been how I work. I

like seeing the police as they try to solve the case. I like watching the details of it all on the news. So I need someone in the neighborhood or nearby.

You're probably thinking it's going to be Aaron. There's just one problem with that. He's not a woman. Not that he doesn't have it coming, for sure, especially after that bullshit he pulled on me the other night. Even more, I'm still not sure he doesn't know about me and my past.

Still, I don't kill men. Don't ask why. I just don't.

So that leaves only women as possible choices. Kimmy? Marilyn? Suzanne? I know this may seem hard to believe, but I think Kimmy is actually growing on me. I can't believe it myself, but there it is. As for Marilyn, I don't like or dislike her, so she won't work. And Suzanne might deserve it since she's a lawyer, but to be honest, her husband deserves to have the fucking life strangled out of him more than her. Asshole runner.

His partner in crime, so to speak, is another story entirely. The other woman who knew full well she shouldn't have come to our party the other day and still did, even after Suzanne came home from work. Yeah, she's got it coming in spades.

So now all I have to do is find out everything there is to know about her. What I know so far isn't much. Her name is Sara. She's sleeping with Jared and likely broke up his marriage the other day, not that he wasn't the main problem in the first place. She runs every morning with him.

But now that he's moved out of his house, is that still the case? And is she married too? That would make letting poor suddenly homeless Jared stay at her place difficult.

I sit down at my desk and read through an email thanking me for my timely work on

that job I nearly messed up. I can't let that happen again. Studying my neighbors is all well and good, but my job keeps me fed and housed. I need to remember that always.

Since I made sure to catch up on all of my jobs after I realized I almost botched my reputation the other day, I'm free to do some research of my own. First, I want to find out if there's ever been a Caroline Townsend who lived in Frederick. Initially, I felt overjoyed that she let that tidbit about her past slip, but now that I think about it, I have a sense that I won't find a damn thing when I narrow my search to that city.

Caroline Townsend isn't her real name. At least, it isn't the name I need to find out who she truly is. That in itself tells me she's concealing something big, and my gut says she isn't going under a fake name to avoid having some ex find her. No, she's too strong for that whole abused woman hiding from an awful ex-husband or boyfriend routine. That kind of strength can't be faked.

No, she's using a different name to avoid having people find out who she really is because of something she's done. Just what that something is I've yet to unearth, but I'm not giving up.

I do my best search for Caroline Townsend in Frederick, but as I expected, I come up with nothing. Even when I expand my search to fifty miles in each direction outside the city I still find not a single mention of her.

Frustrated, I switch gears and focus on Sara, my new favorite girl. I know she lives a street over from Park Circle, but other than that, she's a blank canvas. I could ask Kimmy about her. I bet she could give me a bunch of details about her, but I don't want to arouse suspicion. Better to go about this a far more subtle way.

Looks like I'm going to need a new pair of running shoes and some running clothes for tomorrow morning.

Six o'clock a.m. comes earlier than I remember, and when the alarm goes off, I sit bolt upright in bed, sure the house is on fire. Still mostly asleep, I slam my hand down on my phone to stop that ridiculous chiming noise and collapse back down onto the bed.

A few minutes is all it takes for me to remember why I set that damn alarm in the first place. I need to go running this morning and hopefully meet up with Sara. As I scrub the last of the sleep from my eyes, I can't help but think I've done some pretty odd things to get close to people, but this is the strangest. I'm not an athlete. I don't think I've run more than a few steps to catch an elevator since high school.

It can't be helped, though. If I want to get close to Sara, I need to go where she goes, and for now, the only place I know she can be found is running early in the morning. I've seen her and Jared out jogging by seven o'clock, so that's the time I'll be out in the street too.

Hopefully, the temperature isn't too high, or my neighbors might find me melted in a puddle before this run is over. Nothing like setting out on a new exercise adventure during a heatwave.

I throw my legs off the side of the bed as recriminations fill my brain. Yes, I could find out about her by asking the neighborhood town crier Kimmy, but that could result in my being in a compromising position once Sara goes missing. It's going to be bad enough having the cops question me because someone sees me running with her. I don't need Kimmy offering up chapter and verse on me too.

So off I go running at the crack of dawn.

By the time I get dressed and ready to go, I'm wide awake, but just to make sure I can keep up with her, I down a cup of coffee like I'm a college frat boy slamming shots. Hopefully, the caffeine will get into my bloodstream fast enough so I have the energy

for this.

Standing in my kitchen, I glance up at the clock and see it's nearly seven. Time to go meet destiny.

I lock my front door and take off down the street, instantly hating the very idea of running. My feet are already killing me, and I haven't even made it a full block. That's what I get for wearing brand new running shoes. I'm in decent shape without doing any of this nonsense, but every inch of me feels like it's being shifted with every time my feet hit the ground. Worst of all, these running shorts the guy at the sporting goods store swore would be great make me feel like I'm completely exposed to the world.

Putting all that out of my head, I focus on my ultimate goal as I run toward the end of the street to head toward where Sara lives. On my way, I see Caroline come out on her porch with a cup of coffee. Dressed in a pair of light blue shorts and a white T-shirt, she looks so comfortable, and I'm instantly jealous.

She gives me a strange look when I wave as I pass by. Probably didn't think I was a runner. Or maybe she knows I'm not and wonders what the hell I'm doing out at this time of the morning dressed in this ridiculous clothes.

Add that to the reasons why I'm going to kill Sara. If she didn't deserve it before this morning, she certainly deserves what's coming to her now.

By the time I reach the corner of my street, my thighs feel like they're burning from the inside out. I can only imagine what this would feel like if I was truly out of shape. As it is, I'm merely out of practice since I haven't exercised in ages.

I glance back and see Caroline watching me intently. Interesting. I wonder why she's so fixated on me this morning.

Unfortunately, I can't find out since I need to locate Sara. I look at my watch and see it's five after seven. Assuming she's still doing her morning run now that Jared had to move out of his house, she should be around here somewhere.

By the time I reach her street just under a minute later, I'm right on time to see her just leaving her house. White with grey shutters, it doesn't look as impressive as any of the homes on Park Circle. Not that Meadow Circle, her cul-de-sac, isn't nice, but there's a noticeable drop in luxury between the two areas.

She wears a pair of black running shorts and a white tank top that hugs her body. Her face isn't much to look at normally, but this morning I don't think she has a stitch of makeup on her, so she seems downright pasty. With her dirty blond hair pulled back into a tight ponytail on the top of her head, she reminds me of one of those workout women my mother used to watch when I was little. They always wore some brightly colored headbands too, unlike Sara today.

Her purple and orange sneakers stand out and remind me of something a young child might color. They're garish and ugly, but I bet she's more comfortable in them than I am in my running shoes. For a moment, envy fills my mind, but I push that emotion away, forcing myself to focus on my task at hand this morning.

Sara sees me and waves in that ridiculous way she waved to everyone at the party. She looks like some kind of nervous thing unable to control the movement of her hand when she does that. I bet she thinks it looks cute.

It doesn't. It just looks spastic, like a cheerleader who's had too much sugar for the day.

"Hey! I didn't know you were a runner!" she calls out in a chipper voice.

I nod, struggling to breathe normally. "Yep."

She jogs in place as I make my way over to her, a polite thing to do for a nearly perfect stranger. When I reach her, I smile and bite out, “Thanks for waiting.”

“You seem new to this. I’m happy to take it slow for today. I’m pretty beat myself, so it’s like serendipity you’re my running partner for the morning,” she says without a hint of difficulty.

Damn. She really is in good shape. It doesn’t show so much in her body, which actually appears a little soft in her running outfit, but if she isn’t struggling in the least to speak while she runs, she must be in better shape than me.

I force a smile at her mention of us meeting up being serendipity. If she only knew.

As we set off down the road toward the next cul-de-sac, Stream Circle, she turns to look at me and says, “I tend to talk a lot while I run. Don’t mind me and don’t feel like you have to keep the conversation going. It’s just my way of passing the time. I hope you’re okay with that.”

That gets her another nod as my lungs begin to feel like my thighs did a few minutes ago. All that sitting around staring at my computer for hours on end really has made me completely out of shape.

Not that I want to talk to Sara as much as listen to what she has to say. Hopefully, she’s chatty about her life and not just benign nonsense like the weather.

“As long as you’re not bothered by me huffing and puffing over here,” I manage to say, sounding only slightly like someone about to collapse.

Giggling, she turns to face me and smiles. “It’s okay. We’ll take it slow. What made you want to start running?”

Before I can attempt to answer, she says, “Sorry. You’re already having a hard time, and here I am asking you questions you have to answer. I think I’ll just stick to my usual observations.”

I want to say I figured Jared would be in good shape and could answer her questions, but I stay quiet, listening to the sound of my blood pumping in my ears and hoping I can make it long enough today to learn something about her. This won’t be an entirely futile effort if I don’t, but I’d like her to start telling me things about herself.

We run in silence for a minute or so to the next cul-de-sac, Birch Circle, before she starts talking again. As I listen to her chatter on about the heatwave, I notice the homes in this area are older than those on my street, and it’s obvious in how weathered they look. I’m surprised no one around here seems to take as much pride in their houses as those of us on Park Circle do. I bet they don’t have monthly block parties either.

“You’re probably wondering why my usual running partner isn’t here this morning,” she says, and I glance over at her to see sadness in her eyes. “Jared and Suzanne broke up and she threw him out of the house, so he had to go stay at his brother’s in Norristown.”

Unsure what to say to that, I simply nod. Not that I could have an entire conversation right now. Even running at the slow speed we are, I’m nearly out of breath. I’d planned on doing this for a couple weeks to gain her trust, but at this rate, that plan might have to change. I might be dead from exhaustion if I have to keep this up for that long.

“You probably think I broke them up, but I’m not the only woman he’s been seeing, you know. Jared and Suzanne have been unhappy for a long time. I don’t know if you know that, but they have. She works a lot, so she’s never home. That makes a man’s eye begin to wander.”

While Sara excuses her behavior with a man cheating on his wife, I see another runner coming toward us. God, don't let it be someone she knows who'll want to run with us, or I'll be stuck running without finding out a damn thing for my efforts.

As the person gets closer to us, I notice it's a man I'm guessing is in his early fifties. A hint of gray at his temples makes me think he might be a little older, but he's definitely not our age. His knees remind me of old-fashioned doorknobs they're so bony, and with every step he takes, I worry one is going to pop they look so frail.

Sara does that freaky wave thing when he's right in front of us. "Hey, Bob! Have a great run today!"

The man nods and replies, "You too, Sara. Get it in before the heat of the day sets in."

It's a meaningless exchange, but it does tell me people other than Jared seem to like her. Maybe I was too harsh in my initial judgment of her. Not that she's a saint since she was sleeping with a married man, but maybe she's not the trashy thing I thought she was.

I'm still going to kill her. That won't change.

"That's Bob. He works for Chase in the city. I think he's some loan officer or something. He told me once, but we were running and that day I had the worst sprained ankle I ever had in my life," she explains.

Slightly less out of breath, I say, "You ran on a sprained ankle. Wow."

That makes her laugh, and she nudges my left arm with her elbow. "I run every day. Rain or shine. Sprained ankle or not. I might not run if my leg was broken, but until that happens, I'm out here at seven in the morning every day. It's the only way I can get going before work."

Now's my chance to get her talking about herself.

"Do you work in the city like Bob?" I ask before taking a huge breath of humid air into my lungs.

She laughs at that too. "No. I cut hair at a salon a few miles down the road. That's how I met Jared. He came in to get his hair cut, and the rest is history."

Interesting way to describe their affair. I want to ask how long it went on for, but I don't want to stop her from talking more.

We round the corner onto Sunset Lane, a street that leads to an area of the housing development where there aren't any more culs-de-sac but just straight streets laid out in a grid pattern. I haven't spent much time up here, but Sara seems well-acquainted with the area.

I study the houses and see they're much older than those on my cul-de-sac. It isn't the weathered look that gives that away but the style of the homes. Instead of the newer look of the houses on Park Circle, these are bi-levels and split levels popular in the seventies.

"You know, this might be the first time I'm over in this part of the development," I say nearly breathlessly.

"This is the way I run every day. It's almost like going back in time. If you run far enough, you can find homes built a hundred years ago. I thought about getting a house over here, but I got a great deal on mine, so I jumped on it. Well, my husband and I did, but when it was time to move in, he bailed. Guess he wasn't ready for a mortgage."

Barely able to groan out any words, all I say is, "Oh." I want to ask if she's divorced

now, but if I try to do that, I might collapse.

“Yeah, but it’s okay. I didn’t need him anyway. Same with Jared. Guys come and go. It’s the way it is.”

Sure my face shows my surprise that she’s basically written good old Jared off already, I turn my head as if I’m looking at one of the split level homes. Maybe he was only exciting when he was cheating, and now that he’s free to go with any woman he wants, he’s no longer tempting.

Not that I understand what Suzanne or Sara saw in him. And he’s got a third woman? When does that guy have time for work and sleep?

“Probably the best way to think about it. People come and go. You just have to live your life.”

I doubt I’ve ever sounded so philosophical. It’s probably the lack of oxygen to my brain. Who knew running would make me so Zen?

Sara breaks her promise not to ask me any more questions and says, “So what do you do? It must be a pretty good job since Park Circle is the swankiest neighborhood in this development.”

A car backs out of a driveway a few yards ahead of us and gives me the chance to stop and catch my breath. Sara continues to jog in place, truly committed to this running thing. Bent over, I take a giant gasp of air in and wish the humidity wasn’t already oppressive at only quarter after seven in the damn morning.

When I finally feel like I’m not going to black out, I stand up straight and answer her question. “I’m a human resources consultant.”

Not exactly an in-depth explanation of my job, but considering I think I might have nearly died for a moment or two when I was bent over, that's the best she's going to get from me. I'm never that chatty about my job anyway, so it's not like I would ever describe it much more than that.

"Oh, that's sounds interesting. Are you okay, Adam? You look a little flushed."

All I can think of when she says that is I feel flushed, like someone stuffed me down the toilet and sent me through the sewer pipes. Clearly, I'm going to have to seriously consider if this is how I want to get to know Sara.

"It's the humidity, I think," I answer lamely. "It's making my breathing difficult."

In a kind gesture I didn't expect, she puts her hand on my shoulder and smiles. "It can be rough on days like this. Don't give up, though, okay? Running is great exercise."

"I won't. Thanks."

A sheepish look washes over her. "You won't mind if I continue on? I have to be at work by nine, and if I don't get moving, I won't get any real run in today. You're going to be okay getting back?"

Feeling like some lightweight, I wave off her concern. "Oh, yeah. I'll be fine. I hope I'll see you tomorrow."

With that, her expression brightens. Nodding, she pats me on the shoulder again. "Absolutely! I'm so glad you're going to keep at it. See you tomorrow!"

Sara takes off down the road, turning around when she's about hundred yards away to wave at me. "Drink lots of water! That will do the trick! See you tomorrow morning, Adam!"

I wave back, barely able to lift my arm but needing to appear like I'm fine. Something tells me as bad as this was today, running tomorrow is going to be even worse, and water isn't going to help me as much as I need.

But at least I have her address and some details about her now. I just have to suffer through a few more of these morning torture sessions before I can carry out my plan.

12

All day yesterday, I paid for that short morning run that I'm sure would have been the end of me if I had pushed it even a tenth of a mile longer. Even a scorching hot shower and a gallon of water didn't help, despite what Sara claimed. I barely made it to the couch before my legs gave out, so I spent the next eight hours in the supine position, unable to move a muscle without crying out in utter agony.

Somehow, my body survived to wake up again this morning. I don't know if it was the nearly ten hours of the soundest sleep I've ever had in my life or the handful of ibuprofen I tossed down my throat right before bed, but I feel good enough to try running again today.

At least that's what I'm saying now as I glance over at the clock and see it's nearly time for my alarm to sound at six-thirty. I turn it off before it does. I don't need that chiming to start my day.

I just hope I can get more out of Sara today to make all this pain and suffering worthwhile.

The first twinge of my body remembering what I did to it yesterday occurs when I swing my legs out of bed. Normally, this action means nothing to me. It's merely a step between sitting up and standing.

Today is a different story, however.

My right leg makes it off the bed so my foot touches the floor relatively easily, but

the left leg doesn't fare so well. Halfway over, my hip cramps, and I collapse onto my back like a ton of bricks. Or an out of shape man.

After rubbing the cramped area for a minute or so, I try again to get out of bed and succeed. If only that's all I had to do today, I'd be a champion, but I need to get up and over to Sara's street to meet up with her.

So I hobble to the bathroom to get ready, and after slathering Ben Gay all over my legs, I get dressed in another pair of running shorts and a white T-shirt. With a quick look in the mirror as I brush my teeth, I silently remind myself that this is all for a purpose.

I need to find out all about Sara's life so I can take it.

Ten minutes later as I walk down the street, I see Caroline walk out onto her porch dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and looking content like I wish I was. With a mug of coffee in her hand, she gives me a nod and a smile.

"Day two is hard, I hear."

I nod, knowing all too well that's true. She's surprisingly quite attractive first thing in the morning. Her hair doesn't look like a matted mess, and although I can't tell if she's wearing makeup or not, she looks as pretty right now as she always does.

"Just have to fight through. Have a good one," I say with as much enthusiasm as I can muster this morning.

At least it's not oppressively hot or humid today. I heard the weatherman say the heatwave might break this afternoon, but I'm not terribly hopeful. It's got to be nearly eighty already this morning, and it's not even seven o'clock yet.

Not that it will matter once I'm finished with this run. I plan to spend all day inside in the air-conditioned comfort of my house researching everything I can on Sara.

Hopefully today, she'll give me more to go on.

As I turn the corner off Park Circle, I see her stretching a few yards away. She's wearing what looks like a black skirt I'm sure has shorts underneath and a pink tank top. As I walk closer to her, I notice she's wearing makeup this morning.

Interesting. Is Jared joining us, or is that for me?

"Hey, you came back!" she says with a broad smile.

"Yeah. Well, I told you I wouldn't give up, so I figured I should try to live up to my word. One of my neighbors just told me the second day is hard, but I'm hoping I can muddle through."

Sara looks around for who I'm talking about and then returns her focus to me. "Oh yeah? Are we being joined by a third?" she asks with a hint of hope in her voice.

I shake my head as I realize she's probably wondering if it was Jared who warned me about day two. That tells me they haven't spoken since I ran with her yesterday. I almost expected to see him here this morning joining the two of us.

Knowing I might be jumping the gun a bit, I join her in stretching as the church bell in the distance begins to toll and casually say, "I thought maybe your friend would be running with us today."

She lifts her head from the neck stretch she's doing and asks, "Who? Bob?"

Odd that she isn't immediately thinking Jared, but then again, she might not consider

him a friend. “No. Jared. I know you guys ran together every day until recently.”

Grimacing, she shakes her head as she bends her leg behind her to stretch her thigh muscles. “Jared and I are no longer speaking. We had a huge fight when I called him last night, so we’re officially over. He can find someone else to run with every morning.”

I smile at what I think may be her unintended double entendre and give her my best sympathetic nod. So Jared is out of the picture. That makes what I want to do a little easier. With him out of the way, that leaves only her to deal with.

“Ready? I don’t have to be at the salon until eleven, so I’m happy to go a little slower since I bet you’re feeling the effects of yesterday right now.”

With a groan, I stretch my arms over my head. “You have no idea. I’m not giving up, though.”

Sara slaps me on the arm, throwing her head back in laughter. “That’s the spirit! Let’s get started because the only way to get to the goal is through it.”

I have no idea what the hell that means, but I start running when she does, instantly regretting my decision to try again. Just need to keep my eye on the prize.

Except that the prize might be far stronger than I thought.

We run for a few blocks while I watch Sara carefully and have to admit she may be hard to subdue. I’m physically bigger than her, but as I study her body, I can’t deny she’s got some strength to her.

“Do you know he came to my work yesterday?” she asks out of the blue, tearing me from my fixation on her body and how I’m going to handle her when the time comes.

“Oh yeah?” I say to keep the conversation moving, even as I struggle to catch my breath.

She looks over at me and frowns. “Yeah. He wanted to get together. I asked him if he was going back to his wife, and he couldn’t give me a straight answer! On top of that, he wouldn’t even say if he was going to get rid of Kerry. She’s the other woman he’s been seeing. I swear he’s out of his mind if he thinks I’m going to be okay with that now.”

That this woman, who until recently was the other woman or at least one of Jared’s other women, now has a problem with his cheating might be the most ironic thing I’ve ever heard in my life. I want to laugh at her outrage because it’s utterly ridiculous, but I keep my expression calm and stifle any hint of a chuckle.

“Sounds like he doesn’t know if he’s coming or going,” I struggle to say as she turns left to head down toward the oldest section of the development.

“What he doesn’t know is a good thing when it’s standing right in front of his face. I hope he gets fat and out of shape now. That other girlfriend of his doesn’t like him to run. Says it makes him sweaty and she can smell the stink on him whenever she sees him. So fine. I hope he blows up to the size of a house. See how much she wants him then, right?”

With every word that comes out of Sara’s mouth, I think I like Jared’s other side chick more and more. At the very least, I like her attitude toward running. Right now as my left calf muscle feels like it’s going to explode out of my skin, I can think of nothing else but never doing this again, no matter how fat and out of shape I get.

“Yeah. Well, good riddance to bad rubbish is what they say,” I mumble before wiping the sweat from my forehead.

Sara sprints ahead a little bit and turns around so she's running backwards. "You're really doing well, Adam. I don't mean to insult you by saying this, but I wasn't sure you'd come back for another run today. I figured you spent all day in agony after yesterday's run. I'm impressed that you didn't throw in the towel."

If she only knew how much I want to do just that, but the desire to kill her is far more powerful than the wish that I could just stop this right now.

I wave away the very idea that I would give up and laugh, although it comes out far more maniacally than I expected. "No way. I'm in this to win it."

She laughs at my gung-ho attitude, likely wondering what the hell I think I'm going to win by running with her every morning at the crack of dawn. Oh, I'll win in the end. Until then, though, I'll have to suffer through the pain of running to get what I want.

After spinning around to face forward again, she elbows me in the arm. "I like the way you think. You've got a great mindset about things. You aren't like the other people over in that neighborhood. That's cool."

Even in my agony-riddled state, I know the beginning of gossip when I hear it. Turning to look at her, I see her grimacing. Oh, yes. She has something on her mind.

"I don't really know everyone very well, so you might be right. I'm not sure. They're nice, though. I'll give them all that."

In a show of anger, she snaps, "Oh, yeah. Sure. To your face. Then behind your back, trust me, they're trashing your clothes and the way your hair looks and everything about you. That's how those kind of people are. Phony. They think they're so much better than everyone else."

She isn't wrong about them. Sara barely walked away from the tent the other day before my neighbors' tongues started wagging. At the time, I felt like she had it coming since she was intruding on the party her married boyfriend's wife would be attending.

Now I'm just curious what else she has to say about them. Maybe I'll find out something about my neighbors I don't know yet.

"I don't know them well. I'm the newest person on Park Circle."

Even as I open my mouth to correct my misstatement, Sara says, "Second newest. The girl in the green house is the newest. I had to hear all about that from Jared when she moved in. He really liked having that house empty, and he was pissed when she bought it. Do you know he thought she was some Only Fans chick or something? I told him there was no way that was happening. She's not hot enough, and her body isn't great, so nobody's going to be paying her to do anything online."

The mere thought of Caroline performing for strangers in front of a camera for money is so utterly absurd I can barely stifle my laughter. Jesus, that Jared really is a moron.

"No way," I say between gasping for breaths. "I can't imagine anyone on that street doing that."

"I know, right? They're all so prim and proper. They wouldn't even know what to do if someone stuck a camera in front of them like that. The only one I would have even thought it could be possible with was the woman who lived in the green house before this one. You should have seen her. I don't know how old she was, but she liked to wear these tiny dresses and parade around her yard like she was Miss America or something. She had this gardener who used to come over a couple times a week, but he wasn't just tending to her bushes and flowers, if you know what I mean."

That stuns me, and I barely keep up my pace with Sara as I try to process all she's said. I wonder why nobody has ever mentioned her before. She seems like someone they'd all like to gossip about.

"I had no idea. I have to admit I'm most curious about the guy who lives next to me. Him and the woman in the green house," I say, hoping she'll tell me all she knows about Aaron and Caroline.

Once again, Sara sprints ahead and then turns around to face me as she runs backwards. "The guy whose wife died and then her parents took their kids to live with them? Oh, yeah. He's a basket case. He was walking around the streets the other night. Jared and I ran into him, and all he could talk about was God knowing the bad things we do. Jared was sure he was talking about us together, but I told him that's ridiculous. The guy never leaves his house. Probably just guilt, if you ask me."

I need to get her off the topic of that idiot ex-boyfriend of hers and back onto my neighbors, so as smoothly as I can, I say, "I heard he was in a bad way. Aaron, that is. Not Jared. But nobody seems to know much of anything about the woman in the green house. Caroline. It's like she's an enigma."

That seems to upset Sara, who twists her face into a hard grimace as I finish my comment. "Why? Because she's not from around here? Jared thought there was something strange about her, but I told him she just likes to keep to herself. A woman is entitled to some mystery. Not everyone needs to know her business."

"True, but considering my neighbors, I'm surprised they haven't found out more than she used to live in Maryland."

I'm getting nowhere with Sara, and now a Charlie horse is making my thigh feel like someone's tugging on both ends of my muscle like some sadistic taffy pull. I consider begging off with some claim that I have to work early today as I look for the next

street to turn off, but just then she begins unloading about all she knows about Caroline.

“I don’t know about where she used to live, but I know I saw her in town at the hardware store the other day. She was buying rope and those eyebolt things like she was planning on attaching them to the ceiling and hanging something heavy from them. That seemed weird to me. Then yesterday after we finished running, I saw her when I was taking my break standing outside the salon on the other side of the street. I got the feeling she was watching me.”

Caroline bought rope and hooks to hang something from the ceiling? That’s odd. She doesn’t strike me as a do-it-yourself kind of person.

“What kind of rope? Maybe she was planning on hanging plants,” I suggest.

Sara shakes her head. “Nope. Big fat rope. There’s no way she’d use that for hanging plants. The only time I’ve ever seen rope like that was when the next door neighbor kid hanged himself when I was a teenager. Unless she’s planning to tow a car, there’s no good use for rope like that.”

Odd. Is Caroline unhappy and suicidal? I’ve never gotten that feeling from her.

As unusual as it is for me to be concerned about someone, I find myself hoping she isn’t planning on taking her own life. Suicide is so useless.

But Sara isn’t worried about that. She’s more fixated on why Caroline seemed to be watching her down at the salon yesterday.

“And what’s with practically stalking me? I bet that Suzanne put her up to it. She probably paid her to follow me to see if her precious Jared is still seeing me. She didn’t have to bother. Maybe she should pay attention to his other girlfriend and leave

me alone.”

I nod as a dozen thoughts as to why Caroline would be so interested in Sara race through my head. It’s got nothing to do with Suzanne paying her to do it. I’m not even sure Caroline and Suzanne have ever had a single conversation. Even if they have, I don’t believe either woman is that focused on Sara.

As I ponder what the reason could be, happy to have something to think about other than my aching muscles, Sara suddenly trips over a branch and tumbles onto the pavement. Hitting hard, she cries out in pain, grabbing her right foot.

“Ow! My ankle!”

Instantly, I stop and crouch down to see her ankle swelling right before my eyes. She’s not bleeding, but it looks like at least a bad sprain.

Sara rocks back and forth, moaning, “Oh, God. How bad is it? Tell me. I can handle it. How bad does it look?”

“It’s definitely not good. We need to get you to your house. Can you stand on the other foot?” I ask as I walk behind her to help her up.

She nods and pushes herself up onto her left foot while I pull her up with my hands underneath her armpits. Although she’s clearly in pain, she stands up on her own before she begins hobbling to keep her balance.

“I’m so stupid. I always feel like I want to talk face-to-face with people. This is what I get for being too polite.”

“We need to get you home. Some ice to take the swelling down and something for the pain is about all you’re going to be doing today.”

Sara throws her arm around me and starts walking toward her house. “This is going to kill my running for at least a week, if not more. Damnit! I’m going to have to miss work too.”

As we slowly walk down the street back toward her road, I try to be supportive. “Maybe only for a few days. It might not be too bad. You’re in very good shape. I bet you heal pretty quickly.”

Turning her head to face me, her mouth is only inches away and she smiles. “That’s very nice of you to say. I hope you’re right. Today, though, I’m going to be out of commission. Thank God my air conditioning is working because if I had to stay in on a day like this without it, I’d die.”

And right there as she leans against me and I feel how frail she is without the use of her right leg, that’s when I decide today is the day Sara dies.

“Thank God for that is right. Nothing like being immobilized and boiling in a hot house. Are you sure you can walk? I can carry you, if you like.”

I can tell by the look in her eyes that she thinks I’m hitting on her. That’s the last thing on my mind right now. Seeing how much she weighs so I can figure out if her injured right ankle will be enough to make it possible for me to do what I want is all I care about.

“I’m good, but thanks, Adam. You’re a real lifesaver, you know that?”

If she only knew.

13

After getting Sara all settled on her couch with a large glass of iced tea and her remote for the TV, I make my way back to my neighborhood, happy to be done with my experiment with running. Now I know I'm not an athlete.

Not that I didn't grasp that before this, but now it's for sure.

As I approach my house, Aaron walks out his front door and stops dead when he sees me. What is with this guy? I get the whole mourning widower act, but why does he have to behave like he's a man possessed?

I give him a slight nod to be polite and hurry up my sidewalk to my front door, hoping to avoid any conversation with him today. I'm aching from head to toe. The last thing I need this morning is some creepy chat with my weird next-door-neighbor.

Unfortunately, I'm not fast enough, and he catches up to me just as I jam my key into the doorknob. I sense him standing behind me, so I turn my head and force a smile, hoping that will be enough.

But, of course, it isn't.

"Do you run fast?" he asks, surprising me with a not-so-odd question right out of the gate.

I shrug, happy to admit I barely run at all. "Not really. I'm more of a jogger."

“What about your partner? She’s a more experienced runner, isn’t she?”

Struck by how he could know who I’ve been running with since the guy rarely leaves his home, I shake my head in confusion. “Did you see us this morning? We didn’t see you.”

For the first time, Aaron smiles. “I see everything. The position of my house at the end of the cul-de-sac gives me the perfect view of not only this street but the others around it.”

“Interesting. Well, she may be more experienced, but right now, she’s laid up on her couch with a pretty bad sprain after tripping over a tree branch someone left in the road over at Meadow.”

Happy this conversation hasn’t turned out to be like our last one the other night, I flash Aaron a smile and say, “Well, I better get in there and get to work.”

As I make a move to turn the doorknob and walk inside, he says, “Good idea. It’s going to be hot out today. Beware the dog days of summer. They say heat like this can drive someone mad and make them do heinous things. Be careful.”

And just like that, my conversation with Aaron goes from benign nothingness to something that sounds almost like a threat. I study his expression for a long moment and see that crazy look in his eyes again, so I nod and hurry inside, needing to get away from him before he starts in with that God sees everything nonsense again.

I slam my front door shut and press my back against it, relieved to be away from him. Why doesn’t someone in his family come get him and take him away? The guy is clearly going insane. You’d think those in-laws would do something. They obviously know he’s not okay since they took their grandchildren away from him.

Well, he's not my problem. Whatever happens to him is his concern, not mine.

As I shower off from my run, I can't help but wonder if he bothers anyone else in the neighborhood, or if I'm the only one blessed by his visits. If anyone could use his lectures on God seeing all our misdeeds, it's Jared, that cheating bastard. Two side chicks? That man could use some Jesus.

By the time I sit down at my desk to get some work in before tonight's big plans, I'm convinced someone from Aaron's family needs to come get him before he heads down to the hardware store and buys some rope like Sara said Caroline did the other day. The guy is not right. That's for sure.

And what's with Caroline and that rope?

Perhaps Sara didn't see things correctly. That could be true. The only problem with that is she described the rope as if she saw exactly the kind Caroline bought, along with those eye hooks.

I search for them, curious to know what they're used for, and find exactly what Sara mentioned. Used for hanging heavy items from ceilings, large eye hooks can handle up to two hundred pounds.

That's a pretty big person. I'm just under one eighty, and I'm sure Caroline's no more than one thirty. What on earth did she need eye hooks for?

She becomes curiouser and curiouser the more I learn about her. I think after tonight, I'm going to go back to focusing on her. I need to figure that woman out.

I spend the day diligently attending to my work, needing to make sure my companies know they can depend on me after that minor slip up. I can't let that happen again. The last thing I want to have to do is go out and find another job that will force me to

work in an office building. Those places are stifling on the best days, and whenever I have to visit one of the companies I do work for, I always want to run from the building screaming before long.

No, I definitely need to stay as a consultant working right here from the cozy confines of my own home on Park Circle.

By eight o'clock, the sun is all but gone from the sky. When I peek out from behind my living room curtains, I see no one out on the street tonight. Glancing at my phone, I see the likely reason why. Still eighty-five degrees, it's far too hot to be outside.

I have plans tonight, though, so I have no choice but to head out into the heat. I walk through my house to the back door in the kitchen and look out at the yard that butts up against nothing but undeveloped land. The realtor swore no one would be building back there for a long time, but I suspect that was a lie.

Tonight, though, it's simply flat land with trees that will provide me cover as I sneak over to Sara's street. I've walked this route a few times since I moved in, and I'm surprised at how hidden it actually is. Maybe if that idiot Jared had used this way to get to his girlfriend's house, nobody would have known.

Then again, inviting her to the block party didn't help either. Jesus, he's stupid. You'd swear he doesn't know people are watching at all times in this neighborhood. It's suburbia, for Christ's sake. What else is there to do than spy on your neighbors?

I quietly walk out my back door and make my way through the darkness of the path over to Sara's neighborhood. This shortcut comes out on the side of the only house on her street that's vacant. No one has lived in it for as long as I've been around, so the yard is a perfect place to hide out until I know I can sneak into her house without being seen.

After today's heat, tonight doesn't bring much relief. The humidity hasn't broken, so haze hangs in the air, giving everything a spooky feeling. I stay pressed against the side of the empty house staring across the street at Sara's front window.

Much like Park Circle, her road is quiet at night. I watch her front window for nearly twenty minutes and don't see a single car ride up or down the street. The sound of a dog barking in the distance breaks the silence every so often, but the entire time I see no sign of anyone, human or animal, while I wait.

Right after eight-thirty, I step out from the shadows of the vacant home and casually walk out onto the sidewalk. I quickly scan the area for anyone nearby, but there's nobody.

I'm all alone.

Staying away from the streetlights, I walk over to Sara's side of the street and duck into her backyard. A vegetable garden spans nearly the entire space, surprising me. I guess since she's into running that I shouldn't be shocked she's growing healthy food to help her stay fit, but I didn't expect she'd be a gardener.

I'm careful to not step on any of the plants as I tiptoe up to her back door. Looking in, I see her sitting on the couch where I left her hours ago after I helped her home. I scan the room and begin to turn the doorknob to walk in as suddenly Jared appears from the hallway.

What's he doing here? She said they had a huge fight, and she was done with him. Typical woman. He's cheating on her while he's cheating on his wife, and still Sara gives him another chance.

I watch in disgust as he crouches down on one knee in front of the couch like he's some knight in shining armor come to rescue her. Ten to one he's stripping his

clothes off in less than five minutes and they're having sex, even with her busted up ankle.

To think I was having second thoughts about what I plan to do tonight. Now she deserves it even more. Foolish woman.

As I wait to see if my prediction comes true, they start yelling at each other. His face turns bright red as he bends down to bellow at her, and then I see her sit up and angrily jab her finger toward his face. I can't hear what they're saying, but it's obvious they're both upset.

After a minute, she falls silent, but Jared continues to yell at her. I watch as he grows more and more furious, his eyes filled with rage. I wish I could hear what he's saying, but I'm willing to bet it has to do with her insisting he give up his second side chick.

When he finally stops barking at her, he stands up to his full height and shakes his head. So much for that couple. I expect him to storm out, but then as I watch, he balls his hand up into a fist and cocks his arm back.

It all happens in what feels like slow motion, but when he brings his hand down, it hits her face hard. She flies back against the couch, her hands frantically trying to defend her as they cover her head, but he's like a man possessed. He hits her again, this time connecting with her nose, and blood spurts everywhere. It's like a gusher, but that doesn't stop him either.

I've never seen anyone hit another person like this, and I stand watching it frozen in place. Over and over, he punches her until he finally steps back, nearly falling over the coffee table behind him. His hand and arm are covered in blood, as is his green T-shirt.

For a moment, he stares down at her as she lies there on the couch motionless, and

then he shakes his head with a look of disgust before walking out of the room. I stand on my toes to get a good look at Sara, and I know from the moment I see her that she's dead.

Jesus Christ! He killed her. And I'm a witness.

I need to get the hell away from here, so I run back through her yard, not as careful this time and stepping all over her lettuce plants. When I reach the street, I quickly look to see if anyone's around, but like before, the street is deserted. I bolt over to the vacant house's yard and tear along the dark path to reach my house in a matter of seconds, desperate to be back in my home.

Slamming my back door behind me, I rush inside and wash my hands. I don't know why because I didn't touch anything, but after seeing Jared covered in blood, I feel dirty.

Good God! I saw him kill her. Did he see me? I think about that for a few seconds and then decide he couldn't have. I was hidden, and the only time he could have noticed me was when I was running away, but he was somewhere else in the house.

My hands shake uncontrollably as I replay the scene over and over in my head while I pace through my house. He beat her to death. There's no way he'll get away with that. Even if his DNA isn't all over that house, which I'm sure it is since they've been sleeping together, he's covered in hers. That much blood doesn't disappear easily. That's why I would never bludgeon someone to death. Too messy. Better to strangle a person and be done with it.

The memory of the moment he slammed his fist into her face the first time fills my head, forcing every other thought out. He killed her. He beat her to death with his own hands.

I walk over to my front window and pull back the curtains just enough that I can look out. There's not a soul on the street tonight. I crane my neck to look down at Suzanne and Jared's house, curious to know if he went there afterward, but the place is dark. She's probably still at work, so he could wash up without her knowing.

The cops will find Sara by tomorrow. Someone will miss her and call them to say she's missing.

Then a thought stops me cold, and I step back from the window in pure terror. I'd be the person who would see her next on our run tomorrow morning. We've only gotten together to exercise for two mornings straight, but people have seen us. I can't suddenly stop now.

But she got hurt yesterday so it's okay.

I rub my hands together nervously. The last thing I need is the police in my business. Maybe I can lie and say she told me she was planning on going away for a few days.

No, that won't work. There has to be at least one person who saw me help her back to her house.

Fuck! That means my DNA is there too. Not as much as Jared's, but it'll be there since I wasn't trying to be careful this morning.

I shake my head at my sloppiness. I knew what I planned to do to her tonight and didn't even try to hide my presence at Sara's house. If I had actually gone through with what I intended to do to her, the cops would have figured out it was me in a heartbeat.

Then again, with all of Jared's hair and God only knows what else lying around that house, they may have logically assumed he could be the killer. I can only hope that's

what happens now.

You need to be more careful, Adam. This neighborhood isn't like the one you grew up in or Tess's. People talk here. A grown man living alone who suddenly turns out to be the last person who saw a murder victim alive? You'll be lucky if the police don't haul you down to the station for this and lock you up.

Fucking Jared! What the hell could she have said that would make him want to kill her? The guy isn't a murderer. Well, now he is, but he wasn't before. I'd stake everything I own on that fact. I know when someone's like me. There are telltale signs, and he didn't exhibit a single one of them before tonight.

She probably threatened to tell his other mistress all of what was going on. If only she hadn't sprained her ankle on our run this morning, she would have been strong enough to fight him off or at least run away.

Stupid woman.

14

Even before my eyes are open, I know something's wrong. I can feel it in my bones. My mind is slow to come around this morning, but when it does, I know what's happening.

They found Sara.

I lay in bed staring up at the ceiling as I strain to listen for the sound of sirens. I think I dreamed of an ambulance as I slept, but now I know the truth.

That was no dream. Someone called the police, and they found her dead on her couch, beaten to a pulp by her ex-boyfriend.

As I slowly wake up, my mind begins to race. Who called? Why? Then a horrible question comes to me. What time is it?

I frantically reach for my phone to see if it's after seven. If so, then I need an excuse why I didn't wake up like I have every other morning this week to go on a run. The police will want to know.

Holding my phone up in front of my face, I look through bleary eyes to see it's not even six-thirty yet. That gives me time to get ready and appear at the end of the street like I'm ready to run this morning.

The next nearly half hour goes by in a blur as I try to keep calm and get ready to leave. Dressed in my running shorts and a black T-shirt, I walk outside into the humid

morning air, making sure to lock my door behind me before I begin to make my way toward the spot where I usually meet Sara.

Halfway down the block, Kimmy comes running out of her house in a yellow sundress and practically tackles me. Blocking my way, she grabs my hands and holds them tightly, shaking her head the entire time.

“Oh my God! You haven’t heard! I know you’ve been running with that Sara woman every morning, so I guess you wouldn’t know yet.”

I try to put on my best confused face as I ask, “Know what? What’s going on?”

She shakes her head sadly, her eyes filling with tears. “I’m so sorry, Adam. They found her dead in the middle of the night. Someone had beat her to death. How horrible!”

My mouth drops open as I pretend to be shocked. “Oh, no. How is that possible? This is such a safe neighborhood. Do they know who did it?”

I know that will give Kimmy her chance to gossip since she absolutely has an opinion on who the killer is by now. This is the town crier here. Of course, she has an idea about who killed Sara.

“No, I don’t think so, but I think they should be looking at Jared. Suzanne told me before she left for work this morning that he was furious yesterday. I guess Sara was blackmailing him or something. I don’t know all the details, but if he was that angry with her, I wouldn’t put it past him to hurt her. The guy’s no good. I’m so happy Suzanne threw him out and he’s gone from our safe little neighborhood.”

As I struggle to keep the smile from my face at hearing Jared’s scorned wife is dropping enough hints to make anyone think he’s guilty of something, Kimmy gives

my hands a sympathetic squeeze. She really is torn up about this.

“I was going to check on her this morning after I went on my run since she hurt her ankle yesterday and I had to help her back to her house. God, this is so terrible. How is everyone else around here taking the news?”

Kimmy leans in toward me as if she wants to tell me a secret and whispers, “Marilyn is very upset, and Harold isn’t even going fishing today.”

Well, that must mean this is a horrible tragedy if Harold is forgoing his daily drinking out on the boat. I do my best to hide my feelings about that as I say, “Oh, that’s just awful. This looks like such a safe place on the outside, but I guess you never know.”

Horried, Kimmy’s eyes open wide. “Don’t say that! We love our little neighborhood here. We can’t let something like this ruin it.”

Something like this. She can’t even bring herself to say someone was murdered in cold blood. What an odd creature she is.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Caroline hurry toward us. Kimmy drops my hands and rushes to her to grab her hands like she did mine.

“Did you hear?”

Caroline nods somberly. “I just saw it on the morning news. Who could do such a thing?”

The two women sigh as they try to figure out why anyone would kill Sara. It seems obvious to me, but I have to remain silent and pretend I’m merely horrified by this turn of events.

“And you were going to meet up with her for a run this morning, weren’t you?”
Caroline asks me in a sad voice.

I shake my head, happy to mention her injury again. “No. She sprained her ankle on our run yesterday, but I was going to stop over after I finished today and see if she needed anything.”

A police car turns the corner and heads directly toward us. Kimmy turns around to watch it and then looks at the two of us in horror. “Oh, God! I need to put on some decent clothes. I can’t speak to the police like this.”

And with that, she sprints away into her house, leaving the two of us standing on the road as the cops drive up. A heavy-set officer slowly gets out of the car and walks up to us looking very serious.

“Good morning. I’m Officer Mankin. I’m looking for anyone who may have heard anything on the next street over between the hours of seven and ten last night. One of your neighbors, Sara Nottingham, was killed in her house. Did either of you see or hear anything?”

Caroline shakes her head and answers, “No, officer. Adam and I heard nothing. We were in my kitchen talking during that time, but we didn’t hear or see a thing.”

I stand there stunned that she just lied to the police about my being at her house during the time of the murder. Why would she do that?

The officer turns to look at me and asks, “You didn’t hear or see anything either?”

Nodding, I try to keep my composure as curiosity about why Caroline provided me an alibi fills me. “Yes, that’s true, officer. We didn’t hear a thing.”

He takes out a notebook and pen from his shirt pocket and flips to a fresh page before looking up at us. “What are your names and addresses?”

After we answer his question, he says, “We have reports that the victim was seeing one of your neighbors romantically. A married man whose wife was none too happy to find out about their relationship the other day at your neighborhood party. Is that true? Was there an altercation between them recently?”

Caroline and I look at each other and then the officer. A sheepish look comes over her as she nods and answers, “Yes, but Suzanne had every right to be angry. Her husband brought his mistress to our block party knowing she’d be there too. It was all very messy, and yes, there was a little fight, but that was it.”

The man hums as she explains what happened at the Dog Days of Summer party and then flips back a few pages in his notebook. “This man is named Jared Meyers, yes?”

“Yes,” she answers.

I’m happy she’s so willing to do the talking because I have no interest in getting involved in any of this mess. The officer asks her about Jared, and the whole time she’s telling him about how he moved out and he hasn’t been seen in the neighborhood since the day of the party, all I can think of is how viciously he beat the hell out of Sara.

Lost in my memory of that horrible scene, I don’t hear the police officer ask me a question. Caroline taps me on the forearm to get my attention, and I see the two of them staring at me.

“I’m sorry. Did you ask me something?”

The man nods, grimacing like my lack of attention bothers him. “Yes. I asked if you

have seen Jared Meyers since the day of the party.”

I quickly shake my head. “No. He and I aren’t friends or anything, but I haven’t seen any hint of him here since then. I haven’t seen his car either.”

Flipping the cover of his notebook over to hide his notes, Officer Mankin twists his face into an ugly expression of disgust and sighs. “Fine. We very well may have more questions later as the investigation continues. Just as a precaution, I’m reminding everyone to lock their doors, especially at night. Better to be safe than sorry.”

“Thanks, officer. We will,” Caroline says sweetly before he walks away and gets into his car, leaving us standing in the street.

We watch him drive away, and then she turns to look at me. “This is terrible. I can’t believe someone killed her.”

“Why did you tell him I was at your house last night?”

A look of worry washes over her, and she draws her eyebrows in toward her nose as she answers, “You’re a single man in this neighborhood. Trust me. You needed an alibi. If you didn’t have one, you would be number two on their list behind good old Jared since you and Sara had started running together just the other day. It seemed like the neighborly thing to do.”

I don’t know what to say to that. She has no idea who I really am and what I’m capable of. There’s being neighborly and then there’s sticking your neck out and lying to the police for someone who’s little more than a stranger.

She’s going to regret that mistake.

Pasting a smile on my face, I say what I know I have to. “Thank you. I guess I owe

you.”

She surprises me when she replies with a grin, “I guess you do. I’ll consider your debt paid in full if you come to my house and enjoy a cup of coffee. How’s that sound?”

Ordinarily when women hit on me, I dismiss it as a distraction I don’t need, but Caroline is different. I’ve gone back and forth on whether or not I want to kill her. But unlike Sara and the others, I haven’t been able to justify it to myself. That’s important. If I can’t feel like she deserves it in some way, I can’t do it. There are dozens of women I’ve met in my life who have no idea how lucky they are that I could never find a valid reason to kill them, or they’d be as dead as Sara over on the next street.

I nod my agreement to her terms and follow her to her house as more of our neighbors come out of their homes on this sultry summer day. The heat wave clearly isn’t going to break today, so coffee isn’t really something I want this morning, but I can’t help but take her up on her offer. I’ve been curious about this woman since the day she moved in. There’s no way I’m going to turn down a chance to get to know her better.

When we reach her porch, she points at the wicker table and chair set and says, “I’ll be right back. Do you take cream and sugar in your coffee or how do you like it?”

My stomach practically turns at the thought of all of that at this moment, so I shake my head and answer, “I’d prefer a water, if that’s okay. It’s a little balmy out for coffee drinking.”

She smiles and shakes her head. “It’s not a problem. You’re clearly not a caffeine junkie like me. It could be triple digits out and I’d want my coffee. Be right back. Make yourself comfortable.”

I can't help but notice she doesn't invite me into her house yet again. Sure, it's not the heat of the day yet, but why doesn't she ever ask me inside?

As I mull that over, I watch Marilyn walk to the middle of the street to talk to Kimmy, who's changed into a pair of jean shorts and a tank top with big yellow flowers on the front. It has the effect of making her look even more matronly than usual. Noticeably absent this morning are the three boys and the baby. Since it's a weekday, I'd expect them to be following right behind.

Perhaps in all the excitement, Tim decided to take the day off.

Caroline returns with a bottle of water and hands it to me. It's ice cold against my palm and feels more refreshing than anything I've had in days.

"I don't know how people who don't drink coffee get up every morning, much less make it through the day. What's your secret?" she asks as she sits down in the wicker chair on the other side of the table with her mug of steaming hot coffee.

"Clean living?" I say with a chuckle.

"Is that what the sudden interest in running is?" she asks pointedly.

I'm surprised by her question but take my time answering, enjoying a gulp of cold water first before I say, "How do you know I'm not a runner from a long time ago who's just getting into it again?"

She arches a single eyebrow and smiles. "I wasn't getting that feeling, but okay. Fair enough."

We sit in silence for a few minutes as Kimmy and Marilyn talk in the middle of the street. I wonder why they don't go to one of their houses where it has to be more

comfortable than standing out in the hot sun beaming down on them. Do the women in this neighborhood have something against air conditioning? First Caroline and now those two. I can't figure them out.

"Why didn't you mention my running with Sara to the cops?"

Caroline shrugs and takes a sip of her coffee. "It didn't come up. It wasn't a lie. He never asked about it."

"I'm sure they'll find out. Someone is bound to tell them," I say, hating the idea of having to deal with the cops.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I gave you an alibi for the time of the murder, so they're going to think of that first. I just hope they find the person who did this."

"Most murderers don't get caught, you know. TV and movies make it seem like very few killers get away with their crimes, but that's not true."

I know from experience how difficult it is to be caught. That doesn't mean the police won't find out Jared did it. He's an obvious suspect since he was cheating on his wife with Sara, but even more, the amount of blood that came out of her when he attacked her leaves traces no matter how much he cleaned up.

Caroline sighs and takes another drink of coffee. "I think I knew that, but it's just so hard to accept that a killer could get away with murder."

She's lost someone. I get that sense very clearly by the sadness that's crept into her voice. Was it because of a crime? Did someone murder one of her family members, or was it a friend who died?

I consider asking but decide against it. Instead, I file that detail away with all the

others I know about Caroline Townsend. I'll find out who she lost sometime.

She'll tell me.

15

“Do you think it was Jared?”

Kimmy’s voice catches when she says our neighbor’s name, and her eyes get wide, like she can’t believe he could ever do such a terrible thing. She has no idea what people are capable of when they’re pushed too far.

She sits down on the edge of Caroline’s front porch and shakes her head as Caroline tries to make her feel better by saying, “I wouldn’t have said yes before the party, but I’m still in shock that he brought her and thought his wife would be okay with it. That tells me he wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Marilyn said she thinks she saw someone running behind the houses last night around the time it all happened.”

My body stiffens at hearing that. However Jared got to Sara’s house, it wasn’t along that path that goes behind the houses to the next street over. How the hell did Marilyn see me? Does she think it was Jared, or is she unsure who she saw?

“Did she tell the police?” I ask before lifting my bottle of water to my lips in an attempt to hide my expression.

Kimmy shakes her head and sighs. “No. She isn’t sure it was him, and to be honest, she doesn’t want to get involved. What if the person who did that is a homicidal maniac and he finds out she told the police about that?”

“She’s right to be careful,” Caroline says. “Killers will do anything to protect themselves, including hurting innocent bystanders.”

In an attempt to ease both their worries, I say, “I don’t think Jared is a homicidal maniac. I’d say it was more a crime of passion than anything else.”

Caroline turns to face me and gives me a strange look. “So you think it was him?”

My expression probably says far more than I’d like, so I force myself to smile. “It seems logical. They were seeing each other. I don’t think Sara had a lot of enemies. I was surprised to find out she was really a nice person while we were running for those couple days. It was because she was being thoughtful that she sprained her ankle on our run yesterday.”

“Oh? How so?” she asks, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Kimmy staring up at me waiting to hear what I have to say.

“She was running backwards so we could talk face-to-face while we were running. Seemed pretty thoughtful to me.”

While Caroline doesn’t say a word, Kimmy nods and smiles up at me. “It does seem thoughtful. That’s actually very nice. Now I feel even worse that someone did that to her.”

“She made a mistake by sleeping with a married man, but once I got to talk to her, she really wasn’t so bad. Sara wasn’t Jared’s only extracurricular buddy either.”

Both women stare at me in shock with their mouths hanging open. Caroline is the first to regain her composure and says, “Sara wasn’t the only one? Does Suzanne know?”

“I have no idea. I was pretty surprised myself when Sara told me. She expected him to give up the other woman once he moved out of the house here, but he refused. I can tell you Sara was very angry. She said she wasn’t taking him back no matter what if he didn’t give her up.”

In a small voice, Kimmy mumbles, “Maybe that’s why he killed her.”

A second later, she jumps up and waves to us as she heads down the stairs to the street. “I have to go tell Marilyn. See you later!”

Caroline and I turn to look at each other. “I guess that seemed important to her,” I say, a little shocked at how quickly Kimmy ran off after what I said.

“My guess is she wants to tell Marilyn to put her mind at ease. The older woman probably has visions of some crazed ax murderer running through her head this morning. I bet that’s why she doesn’t want to tell the police about that man she saw running behind the houses last night.”

Her reference to a man seems odd, so I ask, “How do you know it wasn’t a woman?”

Caroline shakes her head as she purses her lips, like she’s thinking about my suggestion and then immediately dismissing it. “Women don’t kill that way. They don’t sneak around and come up behind someone to slit their throat. They’re more emotional than men. If a woman wants you dead, she’ll plan it down to the tiniest detail, but she won’t surprise you from behind. A woman wants her victim to see her coming, especially if it’s a man.”

Curious how she could think she knows so much about killers, I turn in the wicker chair and level my gaze on her. “Why especially if it’s a man?”

She looks over her shoulder at me and grins. “Because if a woman wants to kill a

man, she wants him to see it coming. He still won't believe she could do it, but no matter. She wants him to know and still not expect it."

"What if the woman is killing another woman? Does your theory still stand?" I ask, intrigued that the innocent looking woman who lives in this green house seems to know that much about killing.

Nodding, she turns her attention back to the street where Kimmy and Marilyn are talking. "Yes, but the woman would know she's coming to kill her. Women rarely underestimate other women. If anything, we overestimate their abilities."

"So by your reasoning, it had to be a man who killed Sara because you think he snuck around the back of the houses to get to her street and then surprised her?"

"If that was her killer going on that path back there, then it was definitely a man."

I disagree with her argument that women aren't sneaky when it comes to killing, but I don't press the point. I'm more curious about how sweet Caroline knows all of this.

"You sound like you've put a lot of thought into how people kill. Why's that?"

She doesn't respond at first and instead takes a long sip of her coffee. I watch as she sets the mug down on the table between us and then looks up at me in a way that makes me feel like she's staring into my soul.

"I find people interesting. I watch murder mysteries and real crime shows all the time, and if there's anything I've learned from the hundreds of hours I've spent viewing them, it's that women and men are very different when they decide to kill someone."

She stops for a long moment and then adds, "Assuming it's planned. Crimes of passion are a completely different story. In those, men and women are very similar."

Impressed by her opinions, which are quite correct, I smile and say, “You should have gone into law enforcement. You could be a great profiler for the FBI.”

That gets me a frown. “No, that’s not for me. It’s too depressing. I don’t think I could handle being around all that death for a living.”

“But you enjoy watching true crime shows about killers. Don’t they depress you?”

Caroline shakes her head as she stares off in the distance at Kimmy and Marilyn. “No. That’s different. Those shows focus on the why, not the how.”

Interesting. She likes the psychology of killers but not their actual deeds. Yes, Caroline has definitely lost someone, but how? Was it cold-blooded murder, or did it happen by chance, like a thief breaking into a home and being surprised by the person living there or a mugging gone bad? I want to ask about the circumstances, but I don’t get the sense she’d tell me.

Not yet, anyway. Maybe in the future. Today has gone a long way to bringing us closer. Now that she’s provided me with an alibi for the time of Sara’s murder, I don’t think it will be long before we’re friendly enough for her to invite me inside her home.

Then she’ll tell me what I want to know.

“I guess I better go in and get some work done. Thanks for coming over, even if you don’t drink coffee,” she says as she stands to walk inside the house.

Too curious about her job not to ask now, I say, “What do you do for a living?”

She stops and turns to face me. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” she says with a chuckle.

Now I'm really curious. "Try me."

For a long moment, she hesitates, but then she finally gives in and says, "I edit true crime stories."

That was not an answer I was expecting.

"Really? I would have never guessed. Do you write your own too?"

With a direct stare, she looks at me and answers, "Not yet, but I have one in mind. I just need to work a few more things out before I put my plan into motion."

"Sounds intriguing. Any chance you want to share some with me? I'm a bit of a crime aficionado myself."

Grinning, she nods. "Next time."

"I'll be waiting with bated breath," I say as I stand to leave. "Have a good day, Caroline."

"You too, Adam. Try to stay cool. You wouldn't want to keel over from heat stroke."

I intentionally avoid Kimmy and Marilyn on my way up the street to my house as I have nothing more I want to say about Sara's death. I suspect they've all but convicted Jared in their minds already, so I doubt I could give them anything more to add to that.

Harold waves to me as I pass by his house, and I notice he looks downright miserable this morning. He's probably unhappy about not getting to go off fishing once again. Twice in one week to give up his favorite thing to do seems to be more of a sacrifice than he's willing to give.

“Stay cool,” I call out with a friendly smile.

“You too!” he says back to me. “This weather has to break soon, I think.”

I nod, hoping he’s right. Something about this heat day after day is beginning to wear on me. Everyone feels off, like the temperature is making us all slightly on edge but sluggish at the same time.

“Hope so! Have a good one, Harold!”

Almost to my front door, I’m surprised to see Aaron out in his yard during the day. He waves at me like we didn’t have the most awkward encounter the other night, and as much as I don’t want to interact with him, I know if I don’t at least make an effort to be neighborly then someone’s going to see. I wave back to him and give him a smile I don’t mean as I hurry up my sidewalk.

Unfortunately, I’m not fast enough, and he catches up to me right as I reach the door. Sure that Kimmy and Marilyn, if not Harold too, are seeing all of this, I stop when he comes up behind me and turn around to deal with him.

He doesn’t say anything at first, keeping up with his creepiness that seems to be a constant with him. I glance down the road and see everyone watching us, so I need to look like I’m actually being kind to him.

“Hey, what’s up, Aaron?”

With his usual vacant and lost look, he stares at me and asks, “How do you know my name?”

I sense an edge to his question that strikes me as odd. I’ve been nothing but nice to this guy, even as he keeps popping up and freaking me out with his weird questions,

and now he's angry at me because I know his name? Of all the things I don't like about this neighborhood, he's quickly shot up to the number one spot on my list.

To be honest, I don't know how to answer him. He never told me his name, but that means nothing in a neighborhood full of busybodies.

"How do you know my name?" he repeats.

I shrug, already tired of this thing he and I have going these past few days. "I don't know. Someone around here told me, I'm sure."

Aaron takes a step toward me and stops. "You know, I'm not crazy. Everyone thinks I'm some lost soul up here in this house who used to have everything but lost it all. I'm not lost, though. I know a lot of what goes on in this neighborhood."

"That's good."

"Like, for example, I know you like that woman in the green house."

Angered by his nosiness, I squint my eyes and ask, "Have you been spying on me?"

He shakes his head and frowns. "No. Just observing the obvious. Want to know something else that's obvious?"

I don't answer, already tired of this conversation. I give him another shrug since he's going to keep talking anyway, but I can't decide if he's the crazy guy I thought he was the other night or far more lucid at this moment.

"She doesn't like you as much as you like her. You can tell by the way she looks at you when you aren't paying attention."

God, this guy's a dick. Who tells another man that kind of thing? It's not like we're best friends and he's trying to look out for me. He's just being an asshole, and I don't even think he's right. She's the one who keeps inviting me over, and she gave me an alibi for the police, for Christ's sake.

If anyone is into anyone, it's her with me.

"Yeah, thanks. Better go back inside. The sun is starting to get to you."

I hurry inside before he can say another word. Damn it, I'm getting tired of that guy. Why did I have to move into the house that's next to a crazy man?

Right before I close the door behind me, I look out and see Marilyn, Kimmy, and Harold looking up the street at me. They're probably talking about Aaron and how sad his situation is. And he thinks I'm spying on him? He has no idea.

There's always someone watching in this neighborhood.

16

After hours of researching a fresh crop of potential employees, I stand from my desk to stretch my legs. The heat of the day hit around noon, and when I look out my front window, I see what look like waves coming up off the road.

The mailman walks up my sidewalk, so I hurry to the door to intercept him. I'm not expecting anything interesting, but he's a decent guy who always has a nice smile for the people on his route, and I feel like I need some normal interaction with another human being after that strange conversation with Aaron this morning.

He looks at the door with a surprised expression when I open it, but that morphs into his usual friendly face after only a second or two. "Hello, Mr. Prentiss. Staying cool inside today? Smart man."

I take the stack of white envelopes from him when he hands them to me and nod. All anyone has to talk about lately is the damn weather. Doesn't anyone have another subject to discuss?

"Sure am. Thanks! Stay cool."

God, I sound as ridiculous as all my neighbors.

As I turn to close the door, the mailman stops me. "Mr. Prentiss, there's something in your mailbox. Not official United States Postal Service mail, but something, nonetheless."

I crane my neck to look inside and see he's right. "Hmm. Looks like someone decided to deliver an envelope all on their own."

He laughs, crinkling up his sunburnt face. "I better watch out. They're going to put me out of a job."

I chuckle before repeating my lame advice about staying cool and closing the door behind me. On top of the stack of white envelopes sits a yellow one that looks like the kind that comes with a greeting card. Someone handwrote my name Adam on the front of it. I study the handwriting for a few moments before deciding it's a female's.

Probably Kimmy inviting me to September's big shindig. I'm not sure she and Marilyn are going to be able to top this month's. Searing heat and a brawl between a wife and a mistress while the husband stands off to the side enjoying it all? I can't imagine how they're going to improve on that.

I set the pile of mail on my desk and open the yellow envelope. Inside, I find a card with a long-eared dog sitting on green grass and the words "You're Invited" above him. This seems like a step up from Kimmy's typical handmade invitations her boys usually help with.

When I open the card, I'm surprised to see it's not from one of the neighborhood hostesses with the mostest but Caroline. In the same handwriting as on the envelope, she's jotted down, "Hope you'll come to my housewarming party on August 15 at 7pm! See you there!"

Normally, I wouldn't even consider another social event this month since I find them exhausting, but this one I'll make an exception for since it's Caroline. Curious to know if she's invited everyone else in the neighborhood, I head out toward her house to ask.

She's on her porch when I get there and waves me up like we're the best of friends. "Hey, you! I see you got my invitation."

Holding it up like I need to prove that fact, I nod and say, "I did. I'll be there. Should I bring anything? I didn't know if it would be potluck like the neighborhood event last week. I don't want to bring something another guest is already bringing."

Caroline shakes her head and walks over to stand right in front of me. In a much lower voice, she says, "I didn't invite anyone else. I planned to before all this stuff happened with Jared and Suzanne. It just didn't feel right to do it for the whole neighborhood now, but I thought it would be okay to have one person over. I bought a bunch of stuff when I was planning it, so I'm considering when you come over as a test run. Maybe when everything calms down with the police and everything, I'll do it again and invite everyone else."

Thoughtful and decent. Very typically Caroline, it seems.

"But do me a favor, okay? Don't tell anyone it's a housewarming party or they may get offended that I didn't invite the entire neighborhood."

With a smile, I look up at her and say, "You know they're going to think it's a date if it's just the two of us. Fair warning, that will get the gossip mill going for sure."

She throws her head back and laughs before waving off my warning. "I'm not worried. I'm sure most people in this neighborhood wonder about me since I'm a single woman living alone. That's not common in these parts."

I immediately think of Sara living alone and what happened to her, and for a moment, I feel sick to my stomach. So much blood. That Jared really is a goddamned barbarian. If you're going to kill someone, there are far cleaner ways to do it.

Raising my hand, I solemnly promise to not tell anyone it's a housewarming party. "Any suggestion as to what you want me to say if they assume it's a romantic get-together then?"

With a wicked smile, she answers, "I don't think it matters what you say. They're going to think what they want to anyway."

That's true. People like Kimmy and Marilyn believe they have things all figured out no matter what they hear that runs contrary their belief in this neighborhood being some idyllic paradise.

"Well, I'll be here on Friday at seven. See you then!"

"See you then, Adam!"

Maybe this whole living in the suburbs isn't such a bad thing after all.

For the next three days, I work like a fiend with a newfound enthusiasm for life. I even receive an email from one of the human resources offices at one of the companies I work for commending me on how thorough and efficient my investigations into potential employees have been. It feels like I've finally hit my stride in life.

I haven't even thought about killing anyone in that time either. Not even Aaron, who I still think needs a good slap upside his head to straighten him out. Creeping around people's homes and saying all those cryptic things like he does isn't right. I'm hoping he starts doing it to Kimmy or Harold. Something tells me if that happens, they'll put a stop to that nonsense immediately.

The police have been a nearly constant presence in the neighborhood since Sara's murder. They seem particularly interested in Suzanne, which tells me they haven't

gotten the DNA results from the crime scene yet. If they had, they'd know she's not their killer.

I haven't seen Jared once, but when I went for a walk the other night just to get out of the house, Tim struck up a conversation with me as I passed their house and mentioned that Suzanne told him he's on the run.

Probably grabbed the second girlfriend and is right now headed for Mexico.

I've waited all this time for the police to come to my door to ask me about my daily runs with Sara, but they've never come. I have to think it's because Caroline provided me with an alibi, so they have no reason to ask about my whereabouts that night.

Thank God for that because while I can lie with the best of them, I'm not sure I could pretend to know nothing about Sara's murder. It's all still too vivid in my mind, like a terrible movie I keep replaying over and over. My memory of him hitting her and all that blood spurting up at him chills me to the bone.

Yes, I'm a killer, but I'm not that kind of killer. All that blood and gore is definitely not my style.

I imagine soon the police will find Jared and arrest him once they get the DNA results back. He thinks he's being clever running like this. I bet he assumes he's cleaned all the blood off him, but that's the biggest lie a killer can tell themselves. That's reason number one why I don't kill like that. No matter how much you clean, there's always a speck of blood or a trace of it somewhere you didn't notice. Maybe on the seat in your car. Or the roof in the liner. Maybe on the inside of your clothing where you'd never think it could reach. You can bleach everything in sight, but it's never enough.

No, Jared isn't clever enough to escape what's waiting for him. He's about to go from living the high life with a wife and two mistresses to living the rest of his days behind

bars. So much for the perfect life in suburbia.

Maybe he should have been a little smarter and not flaunted his infidelity in front of his wife and neighbors. He might still be happily sleeping with two women and living the dream in a beautiful home on Park Circle if he'd been a bit more sly.

The sun is setting when I leave right before seven to walk to Caroline's. Since I've been holed up in my house working since the other day, I haven't seen anyone so I haven't had to lie about the housewarming party. Not that I have any issue with lying. It's nobody's business what I'm doing at Caroline's tonight or any night, for that matter.

I considered bringing a housewarming gift, but instead I had one shipped to her so I wouldn't be seen walking down the street with a huge box in my arms. I found a beautiful green and gold vase online I think she'll like. The moment I saw it, I knew it reminded me of the one my mother had at my house when I was growing up. She kept it on the hall table just inside the front door, and she always tossed her keys next to it every time she came home. By the time she passed away, it had so many chips out of that one side from the keys hitting it that I had to throw the vase away when I cleaned out the house.

The street is oddly quiet tonight. Maybe the heat has finally gotten to everyone.

As I pass the blue house, I see a light on inside and a woman's silhouette in the window. For a few seconds, I watch her bend down and pick up things to put in a box. She's packing up to leave, I bet. The house will be on the market within a week or so, and that will be the end of Jared and Suzanne who lived in a beautiful house in the suburbs.

That gets me wondering how often that happens around here. I'd imagine people move for benign reasons like they found another job in another city and they need a

bigger house because their family has grown, but how many times has a neighborhood like this seen people move because of a cheating spouse or someone committing murder.

Suzanne, no doubt, can afford to stay here on her own. She's a successful lawyer, so the mortgage would definitely be manageable for her. She's not leaving for that reason.

I continue walking and see Kimmy at the front door waving at me. As odd as it is even to me, I've grown to like her in my time here. Other than Caroline, I think if I couldn't live here anymore I'd miss Kimmy the most.

But I'm not going anywhere. I've grown comfortable here in Raven Terrace. Some of my neighbors I could do without, but overall, this is a nice place to live.

The only thing I need to worry about is keeping what I am and what I know I'll do again a secret. As long as I stay here, no one will ever know who Adam Prentiss truly is.

Tim drives up the road and stops beside me. Rolling down his window, he says with a grin, "Big night tonight?"

I shrug as one of the big reasons why I hated growing up in suburbia comes rushing back to me. "Nothing much. Just going to Caroline's to hang out for a little while."

His smile grows bigger, and he winks at me. "Have a good time! I remember what it was like being a single guy. Enjoy yourself! There are those of us living vicariously through guys like you."

He doesn't bother to wait for my response, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes as he pulls around me into his driveway. God, I never want to be as pathetic as he is. To

live vicariously through someone else just seems so sad. Is married life with all those kids that boring that he envies me?

Well, I certainly don't envy him his life. I may not dislike his wife, but he's got too many ill-behaved kids and all I foresee in his future is the same thing he does every day. Wake up. Kiss the wife goodbye at the front door as the kids scream in the kitchen and throw their breakfast around. Go to work. Slave away as the only person bringing money into the house because he didn't stop at one or two rugrats. Come home exhausted. Listen to the sounds of screaming kids until they fall asleep. Pretend to master some idea of patience when in reality it's just complacency. Go to sleep and wake up the next day to do it all over again.

And again and again.

That's no life I'd ever want to endure. I'd rather be dead than have to live Tim's life.

I guess it could be worse. I could have to live Jared's life, although something tells me Tim and Harold would have taken the life of a man with a wife and two girlfriends until the other day. Now they get to look down their noses at his choices, but I bet they would have jumped at the chance to step out on their wives if anyone offered that.

Such is the existence of the married man in the suburbs.

I reach Caroline's house at seven o'clock exactly and see her walk out onto the porch, smiling at me. Dressed in a light blue dress, she looks beautiful. I wave to her as something different about how she seems tonight dawns on me.

Maybe she thinks this is a date like Tim does.

"You're right on time! Come on in. Dinner is almost ready."

When I finish climbing the stairs up to her porch, I hand her an envelope much like the one she left in my mailbox inviting me here tonight. “Happy housewarming. Is that what people say? I’m not sure. This is my first housewarming. You got the vase?”

She takes it and nods, chuckling. “Sounds about right. Thank you, and thank you so much for the vase. It’s beautiful. You didn’t have to get me anything, but I appreciate it.”

As I follow her inside, I say, “I was hoping you’d like it. It’s something like what my mother had in our hallway when I was growing up. She used to say it was the final touch that brought the house together.”

Caroline sets the envelope on her kitchen counter and proceeds to point to my gift sitting a few feet away. “It’s lovely. Thank you again. Please make yourself comfortable. I have wine and other kinds of alcohol, if you like. Feel free to make yourself a drink.”

I watch her carefully lift the vase out of its box as I sit down at the kitchen table. A pale wood table, it’s round, something I haven’t seen much in my lifetime. “Thanks. I think I’ll wait until you’re finished.”

With a big smile, she looks over at me once the vase is entirely out of the gift box. “This is really nice. Thank you. By the size of the box, I thought you might have gotten me one of those mailboxes you put out on a post at the end of your sidewalk. Where did you say your mother placed her vase?”

“In the entrance hallway. I was thinking back to when I was a boy and every time she came into the house, she threw her keys down on that table, chipping the vase. I had to throw it in the garbage when she passed away because she had damaged it so much over the years.”

Caroline nods as I tell my little story about the past and sets the vase down on the table in front of her as she sits down. “I think that can be said for a lot of things we remember from childhood. The years only add to the damage.”

Even as I smile like I agree, I don’t know what she specifically means. I suspect there’s a tale of unhappiness attached to that statement, though.

Although I’m here to enjoy myself tonight like Tim suggested, I’m looking forward to learning more about Park Circle’s newest resident. I want to get to the core of who she is in the next few hours. Hopefully, a little wine and a little food will loosen her tongue, and by night’s end, I’ll have all the details I need to understand Caroline Townsend.

Then I’ll know if I’m going to kill her tonight or not.

As she makes small talk about the heat, I can't help but notice how cool it is in her house. I wonder why she didn't invite me in those other times and forced us to sit out on the porch when we could have been enjoying air-conditioned comfort.

I suspect she's hiding something, but as I look around her place, I see nothing worth concealing. Relatively cheap artwork hangs on the beige walls, and from what I can tell, Caroline likes to keep her home uncluttered, something I can appreciate. No mail sits on any tables to give me more clues about who she is. Everything looks perfectly dusted and clean, and I have a strong suspicion if she's not a neat freak she's definitely someone who likes to have her home tidy at all times.

Caroline sets a red and white platter that looks like it belonged at Kimmy's Fourth of July party on the table and smiles. "It's been so hot lately that I haven't wanted to cook at all during this heat wave, but since I invited you tonight, I thought I needed to do something more than set out a bag of chips or pretzels."

Five large tomatoes filled with chicken salad sit in the middle of the tray, and I have to admit they look delicious. "I'm starving, but I know what you mean about the heat. Even though it's air conditioned inside my house, it's like the scorching temperatures sneak in, and I don't want to cook at all either. These look great."

My compliment pleases her, and as she sits down, she says, "Thanks. I had this at an adorable little restaurant when I went to Jamestown a few years ago, and it's one of my favorite meals for when it's hot out. I hope you enjoy it."

Interesting. I doubt she traveled to Jamestown on her own, so as the two of us reach for a tomato, I ask, “Are you a history buff?”

With a shrug, she answers, “Sort of. My father was really into history. I can’t tell you how often we visited D.C. when I was a little girl. He used to say the city had something to teach every time we went there.”

I take my first bite of the chicken salad and savor the taste. It’s cool and refreshing, but there’s something slightly spicy underneath the chicken and mayonnaise. Nothing too hot but enough to give the dish some pizzazz to make it interesting.

“This is very good. Perfect for a hot summer night.”

She nods but doesn’t respond as she continues to eat, which feels a little rude for a hostess, so I continue talking, sharing what I saw on my walk here tonight. “Suzanne looked like she was packing up to leave as I walked by. I think she might be getting ready to sell the house.”

With a sigh, Caroline says, “I’m guessing she has to. She and Jared probably own the house jointly, and in a divorce, they’ll have to sell it or one of them has to buy the other out of their share. I can understand her wanting to leave, though. That place probably has a ton of memories for her, and I bet she wants a fresh start after everything that’s happened.”

“True. She’ll be okay, though. She’s got a great job that pays well, so she doesn’t have to worry about that, I’m guessing.”

A faint look of disgust passes over Caroline’s face, but it’s quickly replaced by a smile I can tell is forced. “Money isn’t everything. I’m sure she’d trade all she has for the happiness she thought she had.”

Not wanting to let our night descend into sadness because of the Suzanne and Jared situation, I quickly change the subject. “Tim and Kimmy were out on my way here. He’s a funny guy. I think he’s happy, but whenever I’m around, he talks about being single like he’s reminiscing about his good old days.”

“That’s because he’s a typical man. He wouldn’t want to give up the wife and kids and the house in the suburbs because he enjoys the way people see him because of those things, but he can’t help but think if he was single he’d be living the good life. He’s lucky he’s got a wonderful wife. Kimmy’s the best.”

She really is a fan of the party planner of Park Circle. That never fails to surprise me since Caroline seems to be far more liberated and independent than Kimmy.

So I compliment her, knowing I need to. “She really is the best. This neighborhood wouldn’t be the same without her.”

Caroline reaches for her second tomato with chicken salad and smiles, happy with my comment about her friend. Then suddenly, her expression changes drastically and her eyes open wide.

“Oh, I forgot the wine. Hang on. I’ll be right back.”

A glass of something would be terrific right now. I’ve never been a huge drinker, but wine never fails to relax me, and right now, I could use something to calm me down. It’s like my insides have decided Caroline’s fate and are getting antsy about when it’s actually going to happen. I haven’t consciously decided tonight’s the night she’ll die, but clearly, my body has.

I take a huge breath in and let it out slowly, trying to relax so I don’t tip her off that something’s wrong. That’s crazy, though. She has no idea I’m thinking of anything but enjoying my time with her. She likely suspects I’m going to make a move on her

at some point tonight. She's not the only one. Tim thinks the same thing. I guess it's only natural. She is a beautiful young woman and I'm a single man. I wouldn't be surprised if everyone else in the cul-de-sac has been wondering when this would finally happen.

Well, everyone except Suzanne and Jared. They've got other things on their minds.

When Caroline returns from the kitchen, she's holding two glasses of red wine. "White wine goes best with chicken, or so they say, but I only have red. I hope you're okay with that."

As I take a glass from her hand, I nod. "I'm fine with red. I'm not someone who usually follows what they say goes with what dish."

She sits down at the table once more and lets out a heavy sigh. Is something bothering her? I thought this night had been going well.

"Thanks. It feels like this is an occasion for a toast."

"It does. I'm struggling to come up with anything clever at the moment, though. I'm not good at these kinds of things. Not enough practice, I guess."

Lifting my glass in the air, I say, "To new friends and her new house. Congratulations to you, Caroline."

"Thank you. Let me know what you think of the wine."

I take a sip and then two more to get a good taste of the drink. I'm not usually a fan of merlot because it's often too strong, but this isn't bad at all.

"That's very good wine."

“Believe it or not, it’s from Trader Joe’s. I had it at my going away party a few months ago and loved it, but I was surprised when I asked my friend where she bought it from, and she told me Trader Joe’s. I swear you can get anything at that place.”

Instantly, my interest is piqued by her mention of a going away party, but I file that detail away for later, choosing instead to make small talk for the moment. “Really? That’s interesting. I don’t think I’ve been to a Trader Joe’s in ages. I guess I have a reason to go back now.”

Before we can get to having any meaningful conversation, someone knocks on the front door. I have to hide my irritation with how fucking intrusive everyone in this neighborhood is, pasting a smile on my face as she practically jumps up from her chair.

“Looks like it’s nosy neighbor time. Something tells me we should have done this at your house. I’ll be right back.”

I turn around and watch her walk to the front door as I silently bet on which one of our neighbors has decided to interrupt our night. Kimmy? That’s probably the most likely choice but Marilyn might be a close second. Then again, while she’s friendly enough, I don’t get the sense she’s as nosy as good old Kimmy.

As soon as she opens the door, I know my first guess was right. Kimmy. Jesus, doesn’t she have anything better to do than bother two people trying to have a good time and get to know one another? She’s got all those damn kids and that husband who doesn’t seem to be able to do much on his own. You’d think all of them would be enough to fill her time. Instead, here she is shoving her nose into other people’s business.

After only a minute, Caroline returns to the dining room and sits down. “That was

Kimmy. You know how things are in this neighborhood. I have the feeling she's just the first one we'll have to deal with tonight. Any chance you want to go to your house instead? I don't think they'll bother us there, and we'll be able to talk without being interrupted constantly."

I try to hide how thrilled I am that she's going to be in my house and nod like it's not the best idea I've heard in ages. "Yeah, sure. We can head up there right now," I say as I stand to leave, hoping I don't look too eager.

Caroline follows behind me, leaving the glasses of half-filled wine and the rest of the dinner sitting on the table. Just as we're near the front door, she says, "Oh, damnit! Give me a couple minutes. I'll be right behind you, okay?"

"Okay. Want me to take the wine, or do you want to bring it?"

"I've got it. See you in a couple minutes," she says with a big grin.

Obviously, I'm not the only one who's looking forward to what's about to happen tonight. Too bad for her we don't have the same plans in mind.

I see that pain in the ass Kimmy on my way up the street and barely give her a half-hearted smile as I pass her. Go into your house, woman. There are five people who need you there.

As I walk toward my house, I begin to feel sluggish. This is why I don't drink. It dulls my senses and my wits, two things I not only need for the rest of this night but badly want at their best. I want to enjoy watching Caroline take her last gasp of air in this world. I want to hear that familiar sound of desperation as she realizes what I've done and this is her final night alive.

My feet feel like someone's encased them in fifty pounds of concrete, but I continue

to trudge up the street toward my house. No one else is out tonight, thankfully, because at this moment, I just don't have it in me to pretend to be happy to see them. This being neighborly thing is exhausting, and right now, it's too hot to be anything but focused on getting to my air-conditioned house and relaxing before Caroline gets there.

I think I see Aaron watching out his front window, but when I look closely, he disappears. Weirdo. The last thing I need tonight is to run into that guy. He gives me the creeps. Always skulking around like some odd thing scaring the hell out of people.

When I finally reach my house, I'm happy to finally get some relief from the oppressive heat. I look back and see Caroline walking down her front steps. Good.

Tonight's going to be perfect, just like all the other times. All I'll have to worry about is Kimmy saying she saw her come here, but considering the way she behaves most of the time, I don't think the cops will believe her. I'll just tell them Caroline and I had a disagreement after Kimmy interrupted our time together and the last I saw of her, she was heading toward the Marshall's house. That and the requisite devastated expression on my face that a woman I was interested in is missing will do the trick.

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The sirens start sounding throughout the development around eight o'clock as I sit on my front porch enjoying my morning coffee. I drifted off there for a few minutes, unsure today would be the day it all happened.

"Damn. I must have been exhausted," I mumble as I wipe the sleep from my eyes. "Revenge may be a dish best served cold, but it's also a very tiring dish."

Kimmy rushes out of her house with Misty on her hip while Tim and the boys follow behind. Marilyn and Harold run to the end of their driveway and look across the street as if to ask if anyone knows what's happening.

I know I have to force myself to not look happy. It's going to be hard, but I can do it. I pretended not to hate every blessed second that son of a bitch was around me for the past few weeks. I'm sure I can fake being surprised and then upset at the news that someone has met his untimely demise.

I take a deep breath in to steady myself and slowly stand up. Kimmy runs across the street to my yard and shakes her head in disbelief. "It's Adam's house. What happened the other night between you two? I haven't seen him since I watched him walk up the street right after I interrupted your dinner. I'm so sorry, Caroline. If only I hadn't done as you asked."

Poor Kimmy. I don't want her to blame herself, so I smile and walk down to meet her, making sure to wear my most concerned face.

Taking her hand in mine, I give it a sympathetic squeeze. “Don’t do that. I wouldn’t change a thing. Whatever’s happened, you have nothing to feel bad about. Neither do I.”

Tears fill her eyes as she sobs, “I know, but another day of police in our little neighborhood? I don’t think I can take it.”

“We have each other, and Marilyn and Harold are here with all of us too. It’ll be okay. I promise.”

Tim shoos the boys back into the house and hurries up to in front of Adam’s house to find out what’s going on. We wait in silence to find out the news, my heart hammering away as excitement fills me. A minute later, he starts walking down the street toward us wearing an expression of pure sadness.

“What? What is it, Tim?” Kimmy asks, practically pleading for him to tell us the news.

He doesn’t answer until he reaches us. In a low voice, he says, “Adam was found dead in his house a few minutes ago. Aaron, of all people, found him. He says he’s been gone for a few days by what he saw.”

Kimmy lets out a sob filled with pure horror. “Oh my God! That’s terrible. Our cozy little neighborhood is rocked for a second time by tragedy!”

I’m not sure if she’s referring to Sara’s death or the breakup of Suzanne and Jared’s marriage as the first tragedy. Here in suburbia both are on pretty much equal footing.

But I need to put on my show right now, so I don’t have time to think of what the hell Kimmy actually means. Opening my eyes wide, I whip up some tears and say, “Oh, no! What could have happened? He was fine when he stormed out of here the other

night.”

“Stormed out? Why?” she asks, her focus so swiftly shifting from someone’s death to the possibly lurid details of my time with Adam.

A few tears stream out of my eyes, impressing even me since I haven’t been able to cry not even a single one since my parents passed. “He was upset. He thought you were spying on us, but I told him that wasn’t it at all. We had some words and then he left. The last I saw of him was when he was walking up the street toward his house.”

“Oh my God! That’s why he didn’t talk to me when he walked by me that night. He was furious because he thought I was intruding on your date. I wish you would have told him the real reason I came here. I hate that he was upset with me.”

Kimmy shifts Misty to her other hip as I bite my tongue to stop myself from saying that it really doesn’t matter since the guy is dead. I love Kimmy, but the woman gets her priorities all mixed up sometimes.

A police cruiser drives into the cul-de-sac and stops right in front of Adam’s house, joining two others and the coroner’s van. Kimmy and I watch as they bring him out in a black bag laid out on a stretcher, and it takes every ounce of willpower I possess to not smile with utter satisfaction at the sight. Finally, he’s paid for what he did to my family. It took far longer than I had wanted it to take, but I did it.

And no matter what anyone ever says about revenge, don’t believe them. It’s as sweet as sweet can be.

Kimmy turns away, shielding little Misty’s eyes from the scene up the street. “Oh, this is so horrible. I can’t believe this is happening again, but this time we actually know the person.”

So much for our mourning for Sara. We really didn't know her anyway, and in the world of our cul-de-sac, she was a villain for sleeping with Jared and breaking up his marriage.

A very stern, very round police officer slowly makes his way down the street and stops in front of my house. For a long moment, I stare down at him as he stares back up at me, and I wonder if he sees the utter jubilation I'm working so hard to hide.

I gently grab Kimmy's arm to act like I'm upset as she says to the officer, "Do you know what happened to Adam?"

"No ma'am, but I'd like to speak to you ladies."

Kimmy turns to look at me with pure terror in her eyes like she's the one who's guilty of killing him. Giving her arm a squeeze, I say, "It's okay. They have to investigate. It's their job, right?"

That calms her, and we walk down to where the officer stands waiting for us. He's even rounder up close, so much that he reminds me of Humpty Dumpty. I press my lips together to stifle the smile at the thought of this man teetering on top of a wall and work to make myself look sad again.

"Officer, we're so upset right now. Adam was our friend. He came to our block parties, and we got to know him," Kimmy says, practically in tears.

"I understand, ma'am. What is your name?"

"Kimmy Marshall," she answers. Pointing across the street, she says, "I live right over there."

"Okay. Now, can you tell me how long the victim lived in the house up the street?"

Instantly, I hate the way he refers to Adam as the victim. He wasn't a victim. He was a goddamned murderer who preyed on helpless girls. He ruined my family by killing my sister. How dare anyone call him a victim?

"A couple months. He moved in back in June, I think. He wasn't here that long, but he became part of the neighborhood. He brought chips and salsa to the last block party just the other day. I can't believe he's gone," Kimmy says and begins to sob.

The officer with the nametag that says Murphy turns to look at me, probably thinking he's not going to get anything useful from Kimmy since she's quickly turning into an emotional mess right in front of him. I notice his eyes are pale gray, a very unusual color to find in eyes. And they're just a hint too close together, like they're intruding on the space his nose should be taking up.

"Ma'am, what is your name?"

"Caroline Townsend," I answer, nearly tripping up and using my real last name.

"And did you know the victim? The woman up the road said you and he were closer than anyone here."

"Not really. I moved into the neighborhood after him. We only spoke a few times."

That makes Officer Murphy's eyebrows shoot up into his forehead. "Is that so? The woman up the road said the victim was at your house last night. That sounds like you were a lot closer than just speaking a few times."

"It's a small group, officer. Everyone thinks they know everyone's business here. Adam was at my house that night to bring me a housewarming gift. Whatever else you heard is just gossip."

He jots down a few words on a tiny notebook he's taken out of his shirt pocket, and as I wait for him to continue, he turns his focus back to Kimmy. "What can you tell me about Adam before he moved here, ma'am? Did he ever talk to you about his past?"

As Kimmy starts to explain the conversations she had with Adam, the coroner's van slowly passes by with Adam's body inside and my mind drifts back to fifteen years ago and that past Adam thought he left behind.

My mother yells for me to get ready because we need to leave for the movie soon. It's Saturday, our movie day, and I wouldn't miss it for the world.

"I'll be right down!" I call out.

I straighten my bedspread and fluff my pillow like I'm supposed to while looking out my bedroom window at the beautiful day waiting for me. I watch that boy from across the street walk alone toward the woods. Weirdo.

Today's movie is a surprise. Well, not to my mother. She's insisted on keeping the movie choice for this week a secret. I bet it's something gushy with romance. Those are her favorites. I like action movies more, but since it's her pick this week, lovey-dovey will probably be how I spend two hours this afternoon.

I thought maybe it would still be raining this weekend, but thankfully, the clouds disappeared, and the sun finally returned yesterday. Not that I mind sitting in a theater when it's raining out, but I'm tired of being cooped up inside. Three days of rain is depressing.

If I said anything about the weather to my mother, she'd probably say we should skip movie day so I could go outside to play. "Blow the dust off yourself," is how she likes to put it. As if being inside for a few days made me turn all dusty.

After I finish straightening up my room like I have to every Saturday, I bound downstairs to find her on the phone with one of her friends. I swear my mother walks around with that thing attached to her ear ninety percent of the time. Whoever she's on with, they're doing most of the talking because all she says whenever she passes me in the living room is "Oh," or "Is that right?"

Those are her phrases she always says when she paces and talks while the other person chatters on about whatever it is they called about. My mother's friends are all like her—they have kids, they live in our neighborhood, and they love to talk on the phone.

My father used to joke that on my mother's final day on earth they'd find her dead on the floor with the phone up to her ear. Whenever he'd say that, she'd give him a nasty look intended to let him know he needed to cut it out.

But he didn't.

Not until that one day I heard them having a huge fight down here while I was upstairs supposed to be asleep. She told him to never say that again to her. That talking about her death was the cruelest thing he could ever do. She was so angry that day that I thought she might burst into tears because that's what happens whenever she's that upset. She starts crying while she's still yelling.

But she didn't cry that day. She simply put her foot down and told him to never say that again or he wouldn't like what happened next. I didn't hear what he said back to her that night. I was too afraid to listen because I didn't want to hear her say she was leaving. The thing is, though, my father has never said that again.

My mother smiles as she walks by me on her way into the kitchen and motions for me to get something from the refrigerator before we leave. I've gotten pretty good at lip reading, at least with her. I'm not sure I can do it with anyone else, but she says

basically the same things all the time when she's on the phone, so even if I'm not sure what exactly she's telling me to do, I can take an educated guess.

That's what my teacher says a hypothesis is. An educated guess. I like science class and Mr. Masters, who always tells us to use our brains and figure things out instead of having other people do it for us. He told me after class last week when he asked me to stay behind that I have a great mind and he thinks I could be a detective when I grow up. He only thinks that because I figured out who was stealing Sandi Mercer's lunch for a whole week.

It wasn't that hard a case to solve. Sandi likes to leave her lunch in her cubby at the back of the class every morning, and I kept seeing Carl walking back there right before lunchtime. Then he'd disappear to the boy's bathroom with his backpack. Mr. Masters thought my detection of the thief was ingenious. All I could think was how gross it was to eat an egg salad sandwich in the boy's bathroom.

Carl got in trouble and swears he's going to get back at me for it. I told Mr. Masters I was afraid what he would do, but he promised nothing will happen. He says most people never follow through on their threats.

I do, though. My father always says that if I say I'm going to do something, I do it. He never has to worry. I'm like that when people hurt me or my friends too. I never forget.

And I never fail to follow through.

Finally, my mother finishes her call and sits down across from me at the kitchen table. "Are you ready for our Saturday movie time?" she asks with a big smile that makes her eyes look like they sparkle.

"I am! I'm betting it's something about love, though. Isn't it?"

Her smile doesn't fade even a tiny bit as she shakes her head. "Not telling. We'll leave in a couple minutes, so go upstairs and brush your teeth."

Every part of me sags against the chair at her order. "Mom, why? I'm going to be eating popcorn in like half an hour. The first ten handfuls will taste like peppermint. Yuck."

She points down the hallway toward the stairs and gives me a fake angry face. "Right now. You don't leave this house without brushing your teeth, and as for eating popcorn, that's exactly the reason why you have to brush those teeth. I swear you kids are going to be the death of me about this issue."

That seems a little extreme, but I don't say anything because I know she's not going to change her mind. Nobody's going to die because I don't have clean teeth, though. That I know for sure.

I trudge up the stairs—that's what she calls it when I don't want to do what she says but I do it anyway. Trudge. My father calls it stomping. Whatever it is, I end up in the bathroom doing exactly as she ordered and hating every minute of it, especially since I already brushed my teeth right after breakfast this morning.

After I rinse and wipe my mouth, I look at myself in the mirror and think the same thing I always do when I look at my reflection lately.

When am I going to start looking like my sister?

She's gorgeous, and I swear it's like I'm never going to blossom, as my mother calls it. She was beautiful by the time she was my age, but here I am at eleven years old, nearly twelve, and I still look like the same person I always have.

No long straight hair like her. Just frizzy hair like I always have.

No pretty face with big blue eyes. Yes, my eyes are blue, but not like hers. I don't know what makes her eyes different, but they are. When people see hers, they say she's stunning. When they see mine, they say it's good that I'm smart.

I look out the window and see my sister walking up the street toward the woods. That's what you get to do when you're sixteen. You get to go hang out in the woods on a beautiful, sunny day with a boy.

She's never said his name, but I know he's the boy from across the street. The weird one who always frowns when he sees me. Unlike the other boys she spends time with, he never has anyone around from school.

I asked her about him the other day when it was raining and she was sitting by her window staring out across the street, but she brushed me off. She likes him more than she likes the other boys who call on the phone for her. I know it. She acts differently about him than she does with the others.

He never calls. He just waits for her in the woods. I think it's weird he never walks there with her. As my mother always says, "It's just rude when a boy doesn't come to the door to pick you up."

One time I heard my father say that's just old fashioned, but my mother disagreed. He said if she keeps that up, my sister isn't going to want to bring anyone to meet them.

I watch her disappear into the woods as my mother yells for me to come down because it's time to leave. My sister doesn't know what she's missing. I know I wouldn't choose to hang out in the woods with some weird boy over going to the movies on a Saturday afternoon.

With one last glance out the window, I don't see my sister anymore. I hope he's worth it. She's going to miss a great movie. I can feel it. Today, my mother will

choose a good one for us.

Someone touching my arm tears me out of my memories, and I see Officer Murphy frowning at me. Kimmy takes my hand in hers and gives it a supportive squeeze before saying, “It’s okay, Caroline. He just wants to know what you and Adam talked about the other night.”

“Yes, ma’am. If you can answer the question, I’d appreciate it,” he says with more than a hint of impatience in his voice.

I shake my head to rid my mind of the last remnants of that day so many years ago and shrug. “Not much. He came to give me a housewarming gift, and I made tomatoes stuffed with chicken salad. We made small talk over dinner, and then he left.”

When I finish explaining myself, he stares at me like he doesn’t believe I’m telling him everything. I have to keep calm, but the look on his face unnerves me.

“That was it? It seems strange since he was single and you are too, Miss Townsend.”

Before I can say anything, Kimmy jumps in to protect me. “Please, officer. We’re all mourning the death of Adam. This is the second time that someone’s died that we knew. We don’t deserve to be interrogated. He was our friend. We’re going to miss him. Caroline wasn’t dating him or anything like that. She was nice to him, like the rest of us, and his going to her house that night wasn’t anything big. They weren’t close, so there’s no reason to treat her like she’s done anything wrong.”

Officer Murphy seems surprised by Kimmy’s strident defense of me, but he quickly says, “Oh, yes. Sara Nottingham.”

“Yes, and we knew her, not as well as Adam, but we met her recently, so now we’re

dealing with losing two people we knew.”

Another policeman calls for Officer Murphy, and he tucks his notebook back into his pocket before telling the two of us that the police will likely need to speak to everyone in the neighborhood again when they find out what killed Adam. As he waddles away, Kimmy lets out a heavy sigh as I silently congratulate myself on using a poison that mimics a heart attack.

“Thank you for helping me with him,” I say to her. “I guess I’m just in shock. I can’t believe he’s dead. He was at my house and seemed fine. I was going to walk up to see him today to make sure he wasn’t mad at me since he left the way he did after dinner and hadn’t been out in the neighborhood since. I just can’t believe it.”

Sadness fills her eyes, and she nods. “I know. I can’t believe it either. I need to get Misty into the house. This heat is too much for her. I hope this heatwave breaks soon. I’d be happy to have even a cool breeze.”

“Go home and relax,” I say as I gently pinch Misty’s chubby cheeks. “Put this little one down for a cool nap and sit in the air conditioning for a while. I’m going to go inside and say a little prayer for Adam. My mother used to say when a person passed that even a little prayer helps them on their journey to heaven.”

“Oh, that’s beautiful, Caroline. I’m going to do that too. Call me if you need to talk, okay?”

I lean in and give her and Misty a hug. “I will.”

She hurries across the street, and I turn around to walk up my front steps, looking back at Adam’s house one last time. To hell with praying for that murderous bastard. I hope he rots in hell.

The chicken salad stuffed tomatoes turned out better than I hoped they would. It's been so hot lately that I haven't wanted to cook at all during this heat wave, but since I invited Adam here tonight, I thought I needed to do something more than set out a bag of chips or pretzels and say, "Have at it."

Not really the kind of thing a proper hostess should do. My mother would be rolling over in her grave if I did that.

"I've never had anything like that," Adam says with an appreciative smile as if he truly enjoyed my simple meal. "It's perfect for a hot day like today."

I stare across the dining room table at him as I nod and force myself to smile. Pretending to be some kind neighbor has been the hardest thing I've ever done. I slipped a few times in the beginning right after I first moved here once I found out where he lived. My mother used to say I never had an emotion that didn't cross my face, but those first couple of times seeing him in person made pretending impossible.

He looks very much the same as he did all those years ago. The moment I laid eyes on him that terrible day fifteen years ago came rushing back to me. Not that I ever forget how it felt to find out my sister was missing and then a couple days later to find out she was dead.

Strangled in those woods she loved to spend hours every day in. Strangled in the woods where she met him every day.

I was the only witness to see them both walk up the street and into those woods at the end of our block. Since I was only eleven, I didn't know if I should tell anyone. One time right after they found Amanda, I tried to explain to my mother that I saw him that day walking into the woods right before my sister did, but she started crying and I never got the words out.

Then it felt like there was never a right time to say what I needed to. I was too afraid to mention it to the police who were constantly around, day and night, turning our lives upside down. The local TV station reporter even asked me if I ever saw anything strange, but I simply shook my head and pressed my lips together, afraid if I didn't that what I'd been holding in day after day would come out and no one would believe me or care.

I was eleven when Amanda was found dead, strangled by the man sitting right across from me at this very moment. I've waited fifteen years to repay him for the devastation he caused my family. For the misery that drove my mother to an early grave from a heart attack less than five years later and my father to kill himself by blowing his head off six months after that.

For ruining my life and the lives of everyone I loved.

"Ready for a drink? White wine goes best with chicken, or so they say, but I only have red. Are you okay with that?" I ask, practically choking on the bile rising in my throat at having to sit here and pretend to be nice to this monster.

Adam nods, and I see in his eyes he thinks I'm flirting. Good. I want him to think that's what tonight is.

I stand from the table and have to brace myself because my legs nearly give out. A mixture of excitement and fear courses through my veins, making me shaky. Stay calm, Caroline. You've waited years for this night. You can do this.

He cannot stay alive one more day. He must pay for what he's done. He will pay. Tonight.

As I pour two glasses of merlot, I try to calm myself, but my heart is racing like it's out of control. I have to get control of myself. I've come too far. I can't screw this up now.

Adam says something about not having any good wine in a long time, and I look over to my left to see him cleaning up the dishes from dinner. He has the polite guest routine down pat. I'm sure he's fooled many a person with this little act of his.

Not me, though. I know who he is. He's the same person who wrapped his hands around my sixteen-year-old sister's neck and choked the life out of her.

I swirl the wine in his glass around once and then twice before checking to make sure it looks like it should. Perfect. My hand shakes, threatening to spill some of it onto the countertop, so I set it down and take a deep breath.

You've waited for so long to finally be here, Caroline. Don't blow it now. Keep calm. The finish line is so close.

"Everything okay over there?" he asks with a chuckle, probably thinking he's being funny or clever.

I bite my tongue for a second or two and then answer, "All good here."

When I turn around, he's in his chair at the table looking as comfortable as can be. It's like he thinks he belongs here. Leaning against the back of the chair, he smiles up at me when I hand him the glass of wine that will be the beginning of his undoing.

"Thanks. It feels like this is an occasion for a toast."

I sit down across from him and nod. It certainly does. Auspicious moments like this definitely require some words.

“It does. I’m struggling to come up with anything clever at the moment, though. I’m not good at these kinds of things. Not enough practice, I guess.”

Lifting his glass in the air, he grins and says, “To new friends and her new house. Congratulations to you, Caroline.”

I clink my glass off his and watch as he brings his glass to his lips. It feels like it happens in slow motion, like someone in control of the world is watching and wants to let me enjoy every delicious second of my revenge.

The dark red wine shifts in his glass and then slowly slides past his lips. I wait to see if he senses there’s anything strange tasting about it, but it never happens. He takes a second, bigger sip and then a third before he sets the glass down on the table in front of him.

“That’s very good wine.”

“Believe it or not, it’s from Trader Joe’s. I had it at my going away party a few months ago and loved it, but I was surprised when I asked my friend where she bought it from, and she told me Trader Joe’s. I swear you can get anything at that place.”

“Really? That’s interesting. I don’t think I’ve been to a Trader Joe’s in ages. I guess I have a reason to go back now.”

Part one of my plan is complete. Now I need to set part two into motion.

Right on time just as I asked her to, Kimmy knocks on the front door. I smile at him

and shrug as I stand up to answer it. “Looks like it’s nosy neighbor time. Something tells me we should have done this at your house. I’ll be right back.”

When I open the door, Kimmy leans in and whispers, “Everything going okay? I’m here just as you asked.”

“Thanks. Everything is going perfectly.”

Obviously confused, she asks, “Why did you want me to come here now?”

I press my finger to my lips and whisper, “You know how men are. If you don’t put obstacles in their way, they think things are going to be easy.”

Kimmy’s eyes open wide, and then she smiles like she’s impressed by that. “Oh, that’s a good idea. You can’t let men think things are easy. Trust me. If I could go back in time and start over with Tim again, I’d make sure he knew that. You’re so smart, Caroline.”

“Thanks, Kimmy. I’ll let you know how everything goes. Have a good night.”

She looks around me and grins. “Oh, you too. Night!”

I watch her walk back to her house and wait until she’s inside to return to the kitchen. “That was Kimmy. You know how things are in this neighborhood. I have the feeling she’s just the first one we’ll have to deal with tonight. Any chance you want to go to your house instead? I don’t think they’ll bother us there, and we’ll be able to talk without being interrupted constantly.”

His eyes light up when I mention the two of us talking. I know how curious he is about me. I suspect somewhere deep in his psyche he knows who I am or has a feeling he’s met me before but can’t place where. I don’t look the same as I did when

I was that gawky eleven-year-old who hadn't grown up yet so he isn't sure, but somewhere deep inside him, he recognizes me.

"Yeah, sure. We can head up there right now," he says as he stands to leave.

The drugs should be working soon, so I need him to get back to his house in the next few minutes. As long as he's at home, my plan will work.

"Great!" I turn to follow him toward the front door and stop dead. "Oh, damnit! Give me a couple minutes. I'll be right behind you, okay?"

"Okay. Want me to take the wine, or do you want to bring it?"

"I've got it. See you in a couple minutes."

Without another word, he walks out of my house for all my neighbors to see. Now I just have to make my way to his house without any of them seeing me.

I watch as he walks up the road to make sure someone witnesses him alone tonight, and Kimmy doesn't disappoint. She looks confused and sad, and I'm betting she thinks she ruined the entire night I had planned.

Not to worry, dear Kimmy. You're playing your part perfectly.

He hurries by her house without even waving, not interested in polite chatting when the good stuff is set to happen just minutes from now. I close my front door and hurry through the house to leave by the back door.

The interesting thing about this neighborhood is that while we like to think Park Circle is removed from the cul-de-sacs on either side of ours, it's all connected with pathways people use to sneak around when they don't want to be seen or they're in a

hurry and not wanting to be waylaid by some chatty neighbor interested in gossiping. Adam knows this well enough. That's how he got to Sara's the other night without anyone seeing him.

Except someone did see him. Me.

That's how I knew I could give him an alibi and not have to worry. It's also how I know it was Jared who beat poor Sara to a pulp and not Adam.

I hurry behind Marilyn and Harold's yard and take a deep breath to smell the sweetness of all those roses she so carefully tends. That day I spent with her chatting about all things gardening wasn't just my being friendly. I needed to make sure the pathway continued all the way up to behind Aaron and Adam's houses.

As I pass Aaron's white house, I see an empty sandbox and a child's tricycle. Of all the people in this neighborhood, he's the one I feel sorriest for. While everyone else seems to revel in gossiping about his pathetic life now that he's lost his wife and kids, I can't help but think he's pitiful yet a decent person. We've only talked once since I moved in, but I knew the moment he mentioned that he didn't like Adam that he wasn't the crazy man everyone claims he is.

His house sits dark like it does most nights, so I hurry along to my destination, the point in time I've dreamed about and planned so meticulously for so long I almost feel like it's already come and gone. I can't let myself think like that, though. I deserve to enjoy this night.

I deserve to relish watching him suffer as I make him understand that while my sister's death so quickly left the news and the attention of the police in our hometown, it never left me or my parents. They died because of it, his second and third victims of his heinous crime. It nearly consumed me over the years, but I fought against giving in to the utter grief that never went away.

I knew if I could hold on and be that smart girl Mr. Masters told me I was I could reach this moment when I get to exact my revenge on a killer.

My heart races again as I step out of the shadows and onto Adam's front porch. I've watched every night to see how much the rest of our neighbors can see up here once it's dark, and I know because he never leaves his porch light on that nobody can see a thing up here after the sun goes down.

With shaky hands, I knock on his door and hear him call out, "Come in!"

So trusting. He naturally assumes that only he can be dangerous. Foolish man.

I push open the door and step inside, crossing the final threshold to the goal I've waited more than half my life to reach. I walk in and see him sitting on his sofa in his living room. The curtains are drawn on every window, like they always are. He does love his privacy.

Now, I love it too and plan to take full advantage of it.

Patting the sofa cushion next to him, he smiles and says, "Take a seat. It must be the heat finally getting to me because that walk from your house to mine took it out of me. How about you?"

I shake my head and grin, knowing why he feels this way. The drugs are slow to work, but they are effective. I made sure of that.

"No, I feel good. In fact, I don't think I've felt this good in years. It's amazing what a little retribution will do for a girl."

His smile fades as he tries to figure out what I'm talking about, but the drugs are starting to make his thinking fuzzy. I don't have long before he doesn't understand a

thing, so now is the time.

“How does it feel, Adam?” I ask as I take a step closer to him and stop.

Confused, he shakes his head. “How does what feel?”

“How does it feel to not be able to fight back and know you can’t stop what’s about to happen?”

He opens his mouth to say something, but the words never come out. Fine. I’ll tip my hand a little before the big reveal.

“Let me introduce myself. My name is Caroline Michaels. You killed my sister Amanda. Understand what I meant by retribution now?”

I see my news register in his eyes before fear fills them. I imagine that’s what my sister’s looked like when he first slid his hands around her neck and began squeezing the life out of her.

“Welcome to the last few minutes of your life, Adam.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:23 pm

He's not so far gone yet that he can't speak, but when he tries to stand up, he collapses back onto the sofa because his legs can't support him now. He'll stay right where he is while I say what's been on my mind since that day when I was an eleven-year-old girl who realized she knew the truth.

"You put something in my drink?" he asks in horror, slurring a few of the words.

I nod, happy to admit my crime. "Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

The fear in his voice thrills me more than I thought it would. I knew I'd feel a sense of satisfaction, but I didn't expect to enjoy this so much. I feel sort of guilty about that. My mother and father never had a happy day once Amanda was found strangled in those woods at the end of our street. My sister didn't get to enjoy any of the things she should have in life.

But maybe it's not wrong to relish this since the rest of my family didn't get the chance to.

"I'm going to tell you how I trapped you and then I'm going to watch you die. You know how that feels, right? You watched Amanda die, and I know you killed that Tess woman too. Were there others? Doesn't matter. Your time on this earth is nearly over, so nothing matters concerning you anymore."

He stares at me through increasingly blurry eyes, and I know he finally recognizes what something deep inside him saw the moment he first laid eyes on me. Suddenly,

I'm familiar to him.

"You won't get away with this. Someone saw you come here."

I throw my head back in peals of laughter. The irony in this man is too much.

"Tell me. Did you ever once think you wouldn't get away with it? Don't be ridiculous. I made sure no one saw me walk up here. I took the path behind the houses. You know the one. You didn't think it started behind your house and only went over to poor Sara's street, did you?"

As I talk, I see he understands. He wants to stand up, to get away or hurt me like I'm hurting him, but it's no use. The drugs won't allow that.

"Kimmy knows we're together. It's the fucking highlight of her week," he bites out in desperation.

I sit down in a chair across the room from him and shake my head. "Actually, she doesn't. She knows you left, and I'm guessing right about now she's feeling bad for me because as a married woman, she's sure I overplayed my hand by having her interrupt our dinner together."

He shakes his head, not understanding, so I continue. "You see, I asked her to do that. I told her I didn't want you to think it was going to be a sure thing with me. Men need obstacles, I said. Of course, a few minutes later, she watched you walk right up here alone, and if I know her and that kind heart of hers, she's sure I'm home alone. She may even want to come see if I'm okay. If she does, I'll make sure to tell her when I see her tomorrow how sorry I was that I didn't hear the door, but I was in the bathtub drowning my sorrows about tonight in a good book and a big glass of wine. So you see, nobody knows I'm here just like nobody knew you snuck over to Sara's. Well, nobody but me."

Defiant to the end, he tries to sit up but can't. "These drugs will wear off soon enough. You won't be able to get away from me then."

I shake my head at how ridiculous he sounds. "Do you honestly believe I'd drug you with something that wears off? Think, Adam. I've been planning this for years. I know every trick in the book when it comes to committing crimes. Literally. I've read them all. I've had to research them all too. Trust me. These drugs won't wear off. But not to worry. Before they kill you, I'm going to do to you what you did to my sister. Then you'll know how it feels to be the victim instead of the killer. I'm thinking you know a little about how that feels right now."

"This won't bring her back. I still killed her. None of this matters."

Rage that I've successfully kept at bay for so many years since that terrible summer comes rushing back, filling every inch of me. My hands curl into tight fists that I want to beat against his face. I don't, though. He can be as cocky as he wants.

The last thing he'll see is the sister of one of his victims staring into his eyes as he takes his final breath.

"What matters is I tracked you down. I found you and I moved into this neighborhood to be as close as possible to you. Then I plotted your death down to the second. You see, Adam, vengeance can keep a person going for as long as it takes, but I knew the other night that the time had come. Once I gave you that alibi, I knew I could get you to do whatever I wanted."

As I speak, he narrows his eyes in anger. Once I finish, he quickly says, "Then you're no better than me. In fact, you're worse than I am. Mine were crimes of passion. Spur of the moment things. Yours is planned out and...and....yours is premeditated."

I hear the confusion in his words as the drugs begin to take their final toll on him. I'm enjoying this. Who knows? Maybe I won't even bother strangling him. It would be

poetic justice to see him die at my hands like my sister did at his, but I'm rather liking just watching how the drugs I slipped in his wine are slowly taking over and killing him.

His condemnation of me and my motives mean nothing to me. He's a killer. I'm someone seeking revenge for the life he stole. Completely different animal.

"So crimes of passion, huh? No planning whatsoever?" I ask him, not believing for a second he suddenly decided to strangle my sister that summer day in the woods.

He doesn't answer at first, and for a second or two, I don't know if the drugs are working slightly faster than I thought they would. All my research said I'd have about an hour before he died a very painful death. I made sure to choose a drug that would hurt at the end. He doesn't deserve to quietly slip into a nice sleep as he passes away.

When he does speak, he struggles to get the words out. "I didn't...it wasn't...planned. It wasn't. Crime of...passion."

"Well, she wasn't raped, and the police said there was no evidence of her having had sex within the two days prior to her death. So what passion do you mean, Adam? Or was that the problem? She wouldn't have sex with you, so you killed her out of rage that you couldn't get what you wanted?"

My use of the word rape seems to offend him. He grimaces and shakes his head, as if that crime offends him but murder doesn't. What an odd set of ethics this person has.

"I never raped...never raped," he says, struggling to say the words either because of the drugs or his aversion to the idea.

Either way, I don't think he's lying. And I don't care.

"Well, a gold star for you, Adam. You didn't rape anyone. But murder is worse than

rape, you know. It's one thing to hurt someone and scar them for life. It's another to take their life away from them. You're a murderer. You killed my sister, and now you're feeling exactly what she felt. Is it hard to breathe yet? I was told by an expert that the drug I used makes it very difficult to take a breath of air in by the end."

He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out except a gasp. The sound sends chills down the back of my neck. It's raw and base, all he deserves.

Finally, he gets a word or two out, but they make no sense. I'm not interested in what he has to say now anyway. Nothing will change what he did or what's going to happen to him in a few minutes.

His fate was sealed the moment I found out where he lived five months ago.

"Do you know how long it took to find you, Adam? You hid yourself well. I have to give you that. It was inevitable, though, so don't beat yourself up too much."

Unable to speak now because of the drug's effects, he shakes his head rapidly like he's having a spasm. He wants to defend himself or tell me he knew who I was all along, but he can't.

No matter. There's no defense for what he did, and I'm not interested in his bluster that he knew who I was. He never knew his killer was stalking him from right down the road, waiting for the precise moment when she could carry out her plan to avenge her sister and her family.

"The day I finally found you was like the Universe tapping me on the shoulder and pointing the way to my destiny. And yours, of course. I imagined about a million ways to do this. Some were far grislier. Some were way more painful. You see, I've been carrying around a lot of hate for you all these years, Adam. You killed my only sister, and then my parents. Oh, you didn't strangle them like you did with Amanda, but it was the same outcome. They died brokenhearted over their daughter's death.

This is for them as much as it is for her.”

Gasping for air, he clutches his throat in what has to be the most ironic action ever taken in this world and whispers, “You didn’t win.”

I stand up to leave, knowing he doesn’t have much time left. Stopping right in front of him, I lean down and position my hands just inches away from his throat, careful not to touch his skin.

“Yes, I did. Now go to hell.”

I walk away as he fights to breathe, and I think it’s possible that sound is going to keep me going for the rest of my life. The killer finally got his, and no, I won’t be caught.

Just like Adam, I’m careful. Society will take care of the rest. His death will be on the news, maybe, if it’s determined he didn’t die by natural causes. A clever coroner might realize that. So possibly he’ll be the focus of some stories on the local news for a few days. If they find out he was murdered, the police will try to find the killer, but without any leads, the case will go cold.

Exactly like my sister’s.

And by the time of Kimmy and Marilyn’s block party in September, Adam Prentiss will be nothing but a memory, merely one of the people who lived here and doesn’t anymore. That’s how suburbia works.

For as kind as your neighbors may seem, life goes on and they forget you in the blink of an eye. You’re only worthy of gossip if you’re around. Once you’re gone, you’re history.

When he lets out a tiny cry of agony, the best he can muster as the poison finally

reaches his heart, I smile and let out a heavy sigh. That sounded like it hurt. Good.

I look back at Adam and see the drugs have done their job. I need to make sure I note that in my research just in case an author uses this in a book. This happened far faster than I expected.

When I step outside, I notice the humidity doesn't feel as oppressive as it has for the past week. Maybe the heat wave is breaking. That would be good. Sitting out on my porch every morning has made me feel like a wrung-out dishrag. It had to be done, but I'll enjoy my morning coffee better once the temperatures aren't eighty degrees by seven am.

The neighborhood is deathly quiet tonight. I look down the road and see no one's lights on. Odd since it's only around eight-thirty. The streetlight in front of the Meyers' house flickers like someone's using it to send Morse code. I watch it for a few seconds before hurrying back behind the houses to make my way home.

As I walk past Aaron's house, I see him standing in front of a window smiling at me. I've never seen him look this happy in all the time I've lived here. I hope he found a reason to go on. He seems like a nice guy who's been dealt a rough hand in life.

I hear the window open, and in a low voice he says, "I knew you didn't like him as much as he liked you."

His words make me stop dead, and for a split second, fear fills me. If Aaron tells anyone I was here tonight, the police are going to suspect me.

Then he smiles again and says, "But what do I know? I'm just the crazy guy in this neighborhood. Have a good night."

I watch in stunned amusement as he closes the window and walks away. That's exactly what the police will think if he says anything because everyone in this

neighborhood thinks he's precisely that.

Crazy, out of his mind from grief.

By the time I get home, all I want to do is relax in a hot bath. I creep up the back stairs and slowly strip out of my clothes before tossing them in the hamper. Ten minutes later, I'm neck deep in a bubble bath.

There is no book to read tonight. Nothing would be able to keep my attention anyway. I stare at the silver faucet and temperature knobs I thought seemed old fashioned when I moved in but now seem quaint.

Into the silence of the home I bought with my parents' life insurance money, I say the words I've waited fifteen years to utter. "I did it, Mom and Dad. I found him and I made him pay. I did it."

I don't say what I have to say to my sister out loud, but in my mind, I tell her he didn't get away with it. I found him, and he's never going to hurt anyone ever again.

Two weeks later, the police have stopped investigating and Harold says the coroner ruled his death a heart attack. The neighborhood has returned to normal, for the most part, although Aaron is still hiding out in his house.

Kimmy waves at me from her driveway and walks over to talk to me as I sit on my front porch. She looks troubled, and as she sits down next to me, she lets out a heavy sigh.

"Will our cul-de-sac ever be the way it used to be? I keep looking at the For Sale sign on the Meyers' front lawn and wondering who might move in. I expect a sign to go up on Adam's house too."

I take her hand in mine and give it a gentle squeeze. "Things will go back to the way

they were. You watch. By the time next month's block party comes around, I bet we have new people here. I bet they'll be even better too. Maybe they'll have little kids for your kids to play with. Wouldn't that be nice?"

She turns to look at me wearing a huge smile. "Oh, that would be great! I hope you're right. I'd love to see more children in this neighborhood. Thanks, Caroline. You are just the sweetest person. I'm so glad you moved in here."

And just like that, even the most sympathetic neighbor already begins to forget Adam Prentiss ever existed in her perfect suburban cul-de-sac.