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The man stands at the edge of the bar, his hand stroking the polished wood—much like he would touch me, I imagine, given a chance. “What’s your name?”

“Veronica.”

“Hi, Veronica. I’m AJ.”

AJ. A composite of two names. Wonder what they are? Alexander Jeffrey. Andrew James? He looks like he might be a product of some boarding school, without the accent. Blond hair, blue eyes, blue sweater that matches his eyes...

The music is loud. AJ leans in. “Do you live around here?”

“Just a couple of blocks down.”

He bobs his head in acknowledgment but also inadvertently in time with the music. “Me too. Just on K Street.”

I swivel on the barstool and cross my legs, waiting for him to ask me the next question. I’ll have an answer ready. I always do.

AJ scans the crowd of people all standing around the bar area, waiting to order their drinks, waiting for a table, waiting for their next opportunity.

“Do you work around here?”

I nod.

“What do you do?”

“I’m sort of a data analyst.”

“Wow. For which company? Or can you say?”

I shake my head. “A big one.”

He bites his bottom lip and slants his eyes away. He’s probably trying to figure out whether I work for the CIA or the FBI. He’s probably wondering what a data analyst is.

“So, you work right here in the thick of it?”

“Yep.”

“Does it ever bother you? Not being able to tell people who you work for, what you do exactly?”

“No.” I sniff and raise my chin. “I just watch the paychecks roll in.”

He takes a deep breath, and I notice his broad chest. “I guess that’s what I’d have to do too.”

“What do you do?”

His eyes wander the crowd again. “I’m... sort of between jobs right now. I just got my grad degree from GW Law.”

“Ah.” He must be telling the truth. Not many would admit to getting a law degree from George Washington University and being unemployed.

“It’ll probably take me a little time to find the right fit. I plan to be very specialized.”

“Of course.”

He motions to my empty glass sitting on the bar. “What are you drinking?”

“A cherry cosmopolitan.”

“To match your red hair.” He smiles. “Can I buy you another?”

“Sure.” Generous, considering he’s unemployed.

He orders our drinks from the bartender. How long will it take him to ask me to move the party somewhere else, or at least try to get my number? My average is about thirty minutes of conversation, an hour at the longest.

Tonight, this conquest is running a little on the long end. Forty-five minutes, two cherry cosmopolitans for me, and four beers later for him. AJ’s eyes swim with intoxication, and his words push at each other. “So, you want to go somewhere else?”

“Like where?”

“My place is within walking distance.” He laughs. “But maybe we should get an Uber.”

I glance over at the people standing behind him—a guy on the other side of the room waving his arms in the air, trying to get his friend’s attention. Everyone wants something—or someone.

“Or,” he chuckles again. “This *is* a hotel. There are rooms upstairs.”

Nearby, a couple seated at a high-top clinks their glasses together.

“Thanks, but I’m going to stay here. I have a long day tomorrow—you know, analyzing secret data.”

He almost seems relieved, but his smile slips a little. “Do you have a card?”

“I wasn’t expecting to meet anyone tonight.”

He digs into his pocket for his phone. “Let me give you my number, and I’ll get yours.”

I take his information and add it to my phone alongside the other unused names and numbers. Then I give him my digits—fake ones, of course. The phone numbers I give out are always a lie. Just like everything else I’ve told him.

Someone is trying to get into my house.

The thought wakes me in the middle of the night, and I sit upright, stare into the darkness, and listen. Instinctively, I reach for my husband to wake him. But then I remember—he's not here. Hasn't been here for over a year.

Dropping my feet to the floor, the cool air brushes my ankles as the noise begins again. Banging, pounding on my front door. The door chimes like an out-of-tune handbell solo, playing the same note over and over again.

"Mom?" One of my girls calls into my bedroom.

I turn on the bedside lamp. Gretchen, my twelve-year-old, stands in her flannel nightgown, rubbing bleary eyes.

"Mom, someone's at the door."

I push myself out of bed, my heart stuttering into action. "I know, honey." I grab my sweatshirt from the chair and pull it over my head. Then I pick up my cellphone. "You stay up here, okay?"

Gretchen lingers on the landing as I make my way down the stairs, flipping the switch that lights up the chandelier hanging in the high-ceilinged foyer. When the chandelier is lit, the whole neighborhood can see inside my house, which offers me the tiniest bit of comfort right now.

The banging and ringing continue, and as I draw closer to the door, I pass by the antique dagger hanging on the wall. In a pinch, it could be useful.

"Get out here, you asshole!" A woman's voice. Her command is punctuated by a blow to the door, probably from her foot. "Face me! Face me, you bastard!"

Upstairs, my girls are whispering. When I look up, four heads pop into view over the railing, their hair hanging down as they watch what's happening below.

“Stay up there, girls,” I direct them.

My pulse thumps in my temples as I stand to the side of the front door and turn on the porch light, carefully avoiding the decorative glass. I place a hand on the wall. “Who is it?”

Intense quiet follows—a break in the siege.

Moving to the dining room, I pull back the curtain and peer through the window. A woman I’ve never seen before stands in front of the door, her hands on her hips. Her face is streaked with what looks like dirt or mascara.

“You need to leave now,” I call out.

“Who are you?” Her voice shrills. “Where’s Patrick?”

Patrick? The woman is either drunk, crazy, or she’s got the wrong house. “There’s no one here by that name,” I shout. “Now, please leave.”

The door jolts again as she delivers another kick. “I know he’s in there. You make him come out here and face me.”

“Stop kicking the door!” I yell.

“Mommy, who is it?” Paris, my youngest, whispers from the top of the stairs.

I look up at her and put a finger to my lips.

The woman’s tirade continues. “You tell that shithead to come out and talk to me.” Then she rips out a scream that causes the breath to catch in my throat. “Patrick!”

“I’m going to call the police.” I’m pretty sure at least one of my neighbors already has. “You need to get out of here now. I’m not kidding.”

“You’re not special, you know?” Her voice breaks. “He’ll do the same to you. You’ll end up just like me.”

I peep out the window again. The woman is sitting on my front step, her back to me, her shoulders rising and falling with sobs.

“He’ll shatter your life too,” she moans. “I can’t get away from them. They follow me everywhere.” Another glass-cracking scream rattles the inside of my ears. “Patrick! You’ve ruined my life!”

“Mommy?” Paris’s voice echoes through the foyer. “I’m scared.”

My cellphone buzzes against my palm, and I look down at the screen. It’s a text from Genevieve, my neighbor from across the street.

What is going on? Are you okay?

I don’t text her back. I call 911. Then I wait, my hand against the door, rising on my toes and peering out of the decorative glass every few seconds to check on the woman. She finally moves to the middle of the street, where she sits cross-legged and rocks back and forth. The girls all gather around me, and the taller ones take turns standing on tiptoe and looking out the glass. Paris and Bridget go to the window in the dining room.

“Girls, stay away from the window.”

“Who is she, Mom? Why is she screaming? What does she want?”

“I don’t know.”

I hold my breath as the police arrive. The cruisers stop just short of the woman, who now seems to be in some kind of trance. She’s lucky they didn’t run over her.

One of the officers manages to get her to stand and escorts her to the sidewalk. Now that she’s a safe distance away, I walk out onto my front steps. A tall, capable-looking officer gives me a wave as he approaches.

“Do you know her?” His voice is deep, commanding.

“Nope. I have no idea who she is. I just woke up to banging and shouting. She seems confused.”

He stands with one foot on the bottom step. “She says she knows some guy who lives in this house.”

“There are no men in this house. Not anymore.”

He nods and glances over his shoulder at the woman, who now answers questions from another officer. Her eyes meet mine, and she twitches, glares.

“She’s intoxicated,” the officer says. “Probably has the wrong house.”

“She must. As I said, I don’t know her, and there are no men here.” I wrap my arms around myself as a cold breeze cuts through my sweatshirt. “But I do have children in the house.”

He moves his foot off the step. “Don’t worry. We’ll deal with it. She’s not in a state to go anywhere on her own.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as I’m back inside, my cellphone buzzes with texts from Genevieve.

Who was that woman? We could hear her screaming. Do you know her?

I text back. *Police have it under control. No idea who she is. Must have had the wrong house.*

It takes a little doing to get the girls into bed, and I finally resettle in mine. But I’m wide awake, my heart pumping like crazy. The incident is unsettling—it reminds me that I’m the only one now who can protect my children while they’re in the house.

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The teenagers make their second pass along the street in a moss-green wreck of a car. One of them hangs from the side, his feet on the passenger floorboard as he leans on the open door. The car zooms past, and the exhaust pipe coughs out puffs of black smoke as they shoot from the stop sign to the cul-de-sac. Thomas, the boy driving, lives next door. Most of the teenagers from this neighborhood have their own car—some of them really nice ones—but Thomas got the hand-me-down green clunker.

As the teens prepare to make their third pass down the road, Genevieve—Gen—my neighbor from across the street, calls out to them. Clutching the base of her pregnant belly with one hand, she waves the other high above her head.

“Stop! Stop right now!”

I cringe. She’ll call the police for sure. Our quiet little Stepford community has never seen so much action.

From my window perch, I have an aerial view of the street. Rich, Thomas’s father, strides out onto his front lawn. He shoots his hand into the air, signaling to Gen that he’s got this.

“Thomas!” he bellows. “It’s over. Get out of the car.”

The car slows. The boy hanging on the passenger door falls inside. Just as Rich reaches the driver’s door, the car jolts forward and leaves him standing in the middle of the street in a cloud of black smoke.

I raise the window a couple of inches and listen through the screen.

“Other people live in this neighborhood, Rich,” Gen squeals. “I know he’s your son, but this has got to stop. Children play out here. Those boys are going to kill someone.” Her pointer finger juts out to the side, to the ground, to the sky.

Rich stares at his feet, his forehead lined. He mumbles something, but I can't hear him through the screen. Tommy was always a good kid until the last few months. He goes to school with my daughter, one grade above her. Adolescence hasn't agreed with him.

Gen continues her scolding. "The next time I see anything like that, I *am* calling the police."

Rich bobs his head.

Gen's face is fuchsia. She spins around and marches back into the house. I have a pretty good idea of what she's doing now. Within seconds of entering, she's probably squawking to Trey, her husband. A few minutes after that, she's likely on the phone with Linda from next door.

These days, my life is on a different plane from my neighbors. I'm the only divorced, thirty-nine-year-old woman with four kids in the neighborhood whose husband left her because, in his words, "We married too early. We didn't know who we were. And now, we're just totally different people." It didn't seem to matter that I still loved him—even if we were different.

His departure was another nail in the coffin of my faith in humanity and in God. Gunnar always made me think divorce was out of the question for him. But he made up his own rules as he went along.

I check my phone for the sixth time in twenty minutes. No texts from Gunnar. No surprise. Mostly, we communicate through the kids. What used to be daily conversations about the minutiae of the girls' schedules and getting the car serviced are now about which days of which week he has the kids. Tonight's not one of his nights to have them, but it's Bridget's birthday, and he wants to take the girls to dinner. I am not invited.

So there's no reason for him to call me. He'll bring them home soon.

Turning back to the computer screen, I scroll through my work emails. I'm a licensed clinical social worker but still only working part-time at a private clinic. After Gunnar left, I didn't want to put any more pressure on the girls than necessary, so I try to be at home when they're home. I'll reassess that arrangement in six months.

I move into the kitchen and pour half a glass of chardonnay. Without the girls here, there's no one to scold me. Through the window, I can practically see into the house next door. I also have a view of the driveway.

A new neighbor moved in a little over a month ago. I've seen him a few times now. Gen says he's single, but no one really knows anything else about him. He's supposedly very good-looking, according to my neighbor Marcella, who says she's seen him up close. But every time I catch a glimpse of him, he's wearing a beanie pulled down low over his ears, pushing longish, dark hair over his collar. His eyes are usually covered with sunglasses, so it's hard to make out what he actually looks like.

Today he climbs out of his massive white truck, dangling keys from one hand as condensation huffs from his mouth. It's unseasonably cold for the first week of October. The temperature dropped this evening. Earlier today, Gen pulled her plants inside.

The neighbor moves up his front stairs and unlocks the door. I watch his journey through the house as lights flare in several of the side windows, finally illuminating his kitchen, where he stops at his sink. He raises a beer bottle to his lips, but just before he tips his head back to drink, he pauses like a lion scenting prey nearby. Then he turns and looks right at me.

Instinctively, I drop below counter level, sloshing wine all over my sweater. The chardonnay rolls down my neckline and over my hands.

A key rattles the lock. The house's security system beeps, signaling the front door is open. The girls are home.

I quickly rise and toss the rest of my wine into the sink, glancing out the window one more time. The neighbor is no longer standing there.

"Mommy, Mommy!" Paris calls out, her feet slapping against the hallway tile.

I react quickly, hoping to catch Gunnar before he pulls away. "Is your daddy out front?"

"No, Grammy dropped us off."

My stomach dips with disappointment, but then my six-year-old hurtles toward me, arms outstretched, and grabs me around the waist in a hug. Bridget marches past, her hands filled with pink bags sprouting rainbow tissue paper.

“Hey, sugar booger. Did you have a good time?”

Paris pulls out of the hug, wrinkling her nose. “Ew, you’re all wet.”

I brush at my sweater. “I spilled something.”

“It smells like wine.”

“Hey, Mom.” Annalen, my oldest, saunters in and slings her purse over a kitchen stool.

“Hey, baby, did you—”

“Mommy, Daddy got married!” Paris blurts.

My heart freefalls from what feels like the fourteenth story of a building. Reflexively, I raise my hand to my damp sweater, right over the source of the sudden jolt of pain. “What?”

“Paris!” Annalen jabs her sister in the arm. “I told you not to say anything.” Then she eyes me, gauging my response.

I clear my throat. “What—when did he get married?”

Annalen’s scolding gaze remains on Paris. “Like a week ago. He and Martina eloped. In Lake Tahoe.”

“Oh.” Gunnar and I spent our honeymoon in a cabin in Lake Tahoe. “Wonder why he didn’t tell me.”

Annalen puts her hand on my arm. “Mom, are you okay?”

I force a laugh that sounds more like a cough. “Oh, sure, honey. I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

Grinding my teeth, I wait until all four of the girls head upstairs. Then I quickly grab my glass out of the sink, refill it with chardonnay, carry it to my bedroom, and shut the door.

“Claire. Please call me Claire.”

The woman sits across from me in the floral armchair with puffy eyes, a tissue clutched in her hand. Whitney is a new patient, and she’s having a hard time with the “therapy” experience.

“I just need a minute,” she says.

I wait patiently for her to speak. “I know this isn’t easy.”

“I’m sorry,” Whitney says. “I didn’t think this would be so hard.”

“It’s okay. Take your time.”

Whitney is younger than me, probably by a few years. Maybe early thirties. Attractive with black hair that curls at her chin and big, green eyes.

“So, tell me about yourself, Whitney.” I glance down at the notes on my electronic tablet. “You have children, right?”

“Yes. Two girls.”

I smile. “I have girls too. Four of them.”

Whitney raises her eyebrows. “Wow. You have a lot on your plate.”

“They’re good girls.”

“Mine are too,” Whitney says. “I mean, at least they’re no trouble.” She lowers her head. “I don’t know why I feel the need to say that. But I mean, yes, they *are* good girls.”

“What ages?”

“Twelve and fourteen.” She glances up at me. “I started young.”

“My oldest girls are twelve and fourteen too. Time flies.” I laugh. “I can’t believe my oldest is just starting her first year at West Branch High.”

Whitney brightens. “West Branch High? Jocelyn goes to West Branch too. Maybe your daughter and mine know each other.”

I smile. “We live in Amber Mills.”

“I live in Hemlock Branch.”

“We’re neighbors.”

Whitney sucks air through her teeth. “I hope that won’t be weird. What if I run into you at the grocery store?”

“Then I’ll probably say hi.”

She visibly relaxes. “Okay. I just didn’t know if that was allowed or—”

“Of course. There are no therapist rules that say you can’t live in the same neighborhood as your clients.”

She rests her hands on her knees. “Right. I’m sorry. I’m new to this. Obviously.”

“Don’t worry, it’s fine. Sometimes my clients forget that therapists are actual people who go to the grocery, eat at restaurants, and live in a neighborhood just like everyone else.”

To get us back on track, I scan my electronic tablet for relevant socio-emotional information. I’m not usually this chatty with my clients about my personal life. “And . . . how long since the divorce?”

“About a year.” Whitney’s voice breaks.

Just like me.

“How long were you married?”

“Fourteen years. I mean, we got married because—you know, I was pregnant with Jocelyn. My parents were religious.”

My mouth wrenches into a smile. “Mine as well. My father was a minister. In fact, for a time, he was an exorcist.”

Her eyes bulge. “Really? That’s wild.”

I nod. “Most weeks, he stood in front of a congregation on Sundays and delivered sermons, but now and again, he was called on to deliver someone from evil.” I sit back. “So yeah, I spent a portion of my young life memorizing Bible verses.” Again, I don’t know why I need to disclose something so personal about myself so early. Usually, if I reveal anything at all, it’s much, much later, after I’ve gotten to know my client well. And I never tell anyone about my father’s days as an exorcist.

“What about now?” she asks. “Are you still religious?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Why not? What happened?”

I don’t want to talk about this. I look back down at my notes. “Let’s get back to you. Fourteen years. That’s a long time to be married. How did it end—the marriage?”

Whitney pauses, her eyes darting away. “You know, the usual. He met someone else.”

I set my electronic tablet aside and lean forward. Sometimes the devices are a hindrance, and they put patients off, lead them to think I’m not listening. “Did you do any marriage counseling?”

“No. I brought it up, suggested it, but he wouldn’t even consider it. He’s very—well, he was very tied to what his parents thought, and they were a big part of the reason we split up.”

Sounds a lot like Gunnar. I never fit his parents’ expectations of what they wanted for a daughter-in-law. After a while, I just stopped trying.

I quirk my mouth, fascinated by how much Whitney and I seem to have in common. “How are the girls adjusting to the divorce?”

“Fine. They usually see their father every other weekend and a few days during the week. I think they’re doing okay.”

“My kids are the same. Children are resilient.” I cross my legs. I almost feel a little too comfortable—like I’m talking to my friend Dawn. “And how about you? How are you doing with it?”

Whitney's eyes water and a reddish flush races up her neck. "I feel like I should be over it already."

"After fourteen years? Healing takes time, Whitney."

"I was doing okay until last week when I found out about..." She takes a deep breath that lifts her upper body. "Well, he's just gotten remarried. He just did it—he and his girlfriend. They eloped and then came back and told the girls."

I stop. Wait. Really? How is it possible our lives, our divorces, are so closely aligned? "So, you had no idea?"

"Not until the kids came home and told me."

I yank myself back into therapist mode. I furrow my brow, give a quick shake of my head. Tactics to mimic the body language of the patient, show empathy. "Mm. Painful."

"Yes. Maybe I still carried some thought that..." Whitney breaks off with a motion of her hand.

"That you might get back together?" I know that feeling all too well.

"Yes."

"And this news symbolizes the death of that hope."

"Yes." Her voice is barely audible.

"That must hurt."

Tears slip over her cheeks. "I always assumed—well, I thought things wouldn't go this way for me. That we would stay together—it never occurred to me that he would leave me . . . for good."

I brace my elbow on the arm of the chair and fist my hand against my chin. "None of us marry with the idea that we're going to divorce. Or that our partner is going to leave us."

She looks down at her hands. "He used to tell me how much he loved me. He used to say I was the best person he knew and that I could always be trusted to do the right thing."

"Do you think you always do the right thing?"

“I try. I mean, I guess so. I think I’m a good person. But...” She looks off to the side with a smile.

“Being good isn’t always easy.”

Another sentiment that I understand well.

My SUV is dead. The engine grunts, groans, and then goes silent. This day is not going the way I hoped.

“Looks like it’s probably the battery.” Gen and Trey Painter lean over the open hood. Trey rests a brown beer bottle on the side as he peers into the coils and wires and tubes. “Do you need to go anywhere tonight?”

“I guess not.” Grocery shopping can wait a day.

“You could call Triple A.” Trey pushes away from the hood. “I’d help you out, but I’m meeting up with a bud of mine tonight.”

“You most certainly are not!” Gen interjects, her hand in its usual position under her pregnant belly. “This is book club night. I need you to watch the kids.”

Trey takes a long swig from his bottle then extends his arms. “Why do you need me to watch the kids? You’re right there in the same house with them. They’ll just do their thing while you do yours.”

Gen moves her hands to her hips. “Trey, come on. I don’t ask you for much.”

Trey brushes past her. “Nope. I told you about this a week ago. I’m going. I need a night out.” He crosses the street and walks up the brick steps into their house.

“You’ve already had three beers,” she calls after him. “How are you going to get there?”

“I’ll call an Uber or something.”

I close the hood with a downward shove. “It’s okay. Thanks anyway. I’ll call a tow service.”

Gen turns back to me slowly, sneering. “He drinks too much.”

I’ve noticed. Then again, Gen can’t be easy to live with. And with the kids screaming all the time and knowing there’s another noise frequency on the way, I might welcome alcoholic oblivion too.

Gen drops her hands from her hips. “So, are you coming tonight?”

Book club. For the past six months, a small group of us have been meeting at Gen's to discuss whatever book was on the menu—usually something from Reese Witherspoon's recommendations. "I haven't quite finished the book, but—"

"What?" She draws back. "You always read the book."

"I'm about halfway through it, but it's been a busy few weeks."

She nods. "School just started up. You have a lot going on. We all do. Come anyway. You know the book talk is secondary."

Gen's not kidding. Book club is really just another term for wine club.

I sit in the living room with Gen and two other neighbors. We've been here an hour already, and so far, there's no mention of the book we all supposedly read. I glance at the table and the three empty green bottles. Wine glasses are full, faces flushed. Even Gen is drinking a glass.

As she pours, she waves her hand in the air. "The doctor told me one glass of wine now and then is fine."

"How much longer do you have?" I eye her stomach.

"Eight more weeks," Gen groans. "I can't believe it. I'm so much bigger than I was with Colton or Amelia."

With a twinge of nostalgia, I recall my final pregnant months. "My last two were like that. I gained eighty pounds with Paris."

"What?" Linda rakes a hand through her swingy black hair. "You're like a rail. I can't believe you actually weigh eighty pounds now, much less gained that much during pregnancy."

I cast a glance at Linda's thin, five-foot-two physique.

Linda pats her flat stomach. “When I had Esther, I barely gained anything. The doctors kept telling me eat, eat.” Her eyes roll up in her head. “And then Hyo, Jay’s mother, drove me nuts trying to feed me constantly. You know, she’s Asian.”

Linda is Asian too, but she often talks about her mother-in-law like they’re from different planets.

She holds up a hand, sits forward. “My mother-in-law was like, ‘Jin Hee’—because she calls me by my Korean name—‘Jin Hee, if you don’t eat, the baby will be too small.’” Linda imitates Hyo’s accent. ““And then it could die.”” Rolling her eyes again, she falls back on the couch and swills from her wine. “I swear. You guys don’t even know what it’s like living with her.”

She’s right. I can’t imagine what it would have been like if Gunnar’s mother had lived with us. Bad. That much I know.

Gen dribbles wine on her sweater and dabs at it with a napkin. “Anyone know why they’ve stopped building on that lot behind Amber Mills?”

The lot is directly behind my house. For several months, I’d hear bulldozers humming as the workers cleared the land and put up house frames.

“I heard something about funding,” I say.

Dawn purses her lips. “Actually, I thought it had to do with the property being so close to that abandoned house—the one the serial murderer used to live in. No one wants to live that close to the place.”

“Hyo says it’s because of the holes in the ground,” Linda says.