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WATCHING**

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To my family

PROLOGUE

There's blood everywhere.

I've never seen so much blood. It's soaking the cream-colored rug, seeping into the nearby floorboards, speckling the legs of the oak coffee table. Perfect oval droplets have made it all the way to the seat of the pale leather sofa, and large rivulets drip down the alabaster wall.

It's endless. If I look hard enough, will I find flecks of blood on the car in the garage? On the blades of grass in the lawn? In the supermarket across town?

Even worse, it's all over my hands.

What a mess. Despite the fact that I don't have much time, I am itching to clean it all up. When there's a stain, especially on the carpet, I was taught you're supposed to clean it quickly, before it sets. Once it dries, the stain will become permanent.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard I scrub, it won't do a thing for the dead body lying smack in the middle of the pool of blood.

I assess the situation. Okay, this is bad. My fingerprints in the house are expected, but the crimson caked into my fingernails and the grooves of my palms is less easy to explain. The darkening stain on the front of my shirt is not the kind of thing I can shrug off. I am in deep trouble.

If someone catches me.

I inspect my hands, weighing the pros and cons of washing off the blood versus getting the hell out of here right now. If I wash my hands, I will

waste precious seconds in which I could be caught. If I leave immediately, I'll be walking out the door with blood all over my palms, smearing itself onto everything I touch.

And then the doorbell rings.

The chimes echo throughout the house as I freeze, afraid to even breathe. "Hello?" a familiar voice calls out.

Please leave. Please.

The house is silent. The person at the door will realize that nobody is home and decide to come back another time. They have to. If they don't, I am finished.

The doorbell rings again.

Go away. Please go away.

I'm not one for prayer, but at this point, I'm ready to get down on my knees. Well, I would if doing so wouldn't get blood all over my knees.

They must assume nobody is home. Nobody rings a doorbell more than twice. But just when I think there's a chance I might be safe, the doorknob rattles. And then it starts to turn.

Oh no. The door is unlocked. In about five seconds, the person knocking will be inside the house. She will walk into the living room. And then she will see...

This.

The decision has been made. I've got to run for it. There's no time to wash my hands. There's no time to worry about the bloody footprints I might be leaving behind. I've got to get out of here.

I only hope nobody discovers what I've done.

PART I

ONE

MILLIE

Three Months Earlier

I love this house.

I love everything about this house. I love the giant front lawn and the even more giant back lawn (even though both are edging toward brown). I love the fact that the living room is so big that *multiple pieces of furniture* fit inside rather than just one small sofa and a television set. I love the picture windows overlooking the neighborhood, which I recently read in a magazine is one of the best towns to raise a child.

And most of all, I love that it's mine. Number 14 Locust Street is all mine. Well, okay, thirty years of mortgage payments and it will be all mine. I can't stop thinking about how lucky I am as I run my fingers along the wall of our new living room, bringing my face closer to admire the brand-new floral wallpaper.

"Mom is kissing the house again!" a voice squeals from behind me.

I quickly back away from the wall, although it's not like my nine-year-old son caught me with a secret lover. I have no shame about my love for this house. I want to shout about it from the rooftop. (We have an amazing rooftop. *I love this house.*)

"Shouldn't you be unpacking?" I say.

Nico's boxes and furniture have all been deposited in his bedroom, so he should be unpacking, but instead he is repeatedly throwing a baseball against the wall—my beautiful, floral wallpapered wall—and then catching it. We have lived in this house for less than five minutes, and he is already determined to destroy it. I can see it in his dark brown eyes.

It's not that I don't love my son more than the world. If it was one of those hypothetical situations where I had to choose between Nico's life and this house, of *course* I would choose Nico. No question.

But I'm just saying, if he does anything to harm this house, he is going to be grounded until he's old enough to shave.

"I'll unpack tomorrow," Nico says. His general life philosophy seems to be that everything will be done tomorrow.

"Or now?" I suggest.

Nico throws the ball in the air, and it just barely grazes the ceiling. If we had absolutely anything valuable in this house, I would be having a heart attack right now. "Later," he insists.

Meaning never.

I peer up the stairwell of the house. Yes, we have *stairs*! Honest-to-goodness stairs. Yes, they creak with every single step, and there's a chance if you hold on to the banister too tightly, it might fall off. But we have stairs, and they lead to an *entirely different floor of the house*.

You can tell I have lived in New York City far too long. I was hesitant to come back to Long Island after what happened last time I lived here, but that was nearly two decades ago—the distant past.

"Ada?" I call up the stairs. "Ada, can you come out here?"

A few moments later, my eleven-year-old daughter pops her head into the stairwell so that I can see her thick, wavy black hair and dark, dark eyes peeking out at me. Her eyes are the same color as Nico's, inherited from their father. Unlike her brother, Ada has undoubtedly been unpacking her belongings since we arrived. She's a straight-A student—the kind who does her homework without having to be told, a week before it's due.

"Ada," I say. "Are you almost done unpacking?"

"Just about." No surprise there.

"Do you think you could help Nico unpack his boxes?"

Ada nods without hesitation. "Sure. Come on, Nico."

Nico immediately recognizes this as an opportunity for his sister to do most of the work. "Okay!" he agrees happily.

Nico finally stops terrorizing me with the baseball and sprints up the steps two at a time to join Ada in his room. I start to tell her not to do all the work for him, but that's a lost cause. At this point, I've got about sixty boxes of my own to unpack. As long as it gets done, I'll be happy.

We were extremely lucky to get this house. We lost half a dozen bidding wars in neighborhoods that weren't even as nice as this one. I didn't think we had a snowball's chance in hell of landing this quaint former farmhouse in a town with such highly rated public schools. I almost cried with joy when our real estate agent called me to let me know that the house was ours. At ten percent less than asking!

The universe must have decided we deserved some good luck.

I peek out through the front window at the moving truck parked on the street outside the house. We live in a little cul-de-sac with two other houses, and across the way, I can see the silhouette of a person at the window. My new neighbor, I suppose. I hope they're friendly.

A banging sound comes from within the truck, and I wrench open the front door to see what's going on. I jog outside just in time to see my husband emerging from the truck with one of his friends who has agreed to help with the move. I wanted to hire a moving company, but he insisted he could do it himself with his friends helping. And I have to admit, we need to save every penny if we want to make our mortgage payments. Even at ten percent below asking, our dream house wasn't cheap.

My husband is holding up one half of our living room sofa, his T-shirt plastered to his torso with sweat. I cringe because he's in his forties and the last thing he needs is to throw out his back. I expressed this concern to him when we were planning the move, and he acted like it was the silliest thing he's ever heard, even though I throw out my back every other week. And it's not from lifting a sofa. It's from, like, *sneezing*.

"Will you please be careful, Enzo?" I say.

He looks up at me, and when he grins, I melt. Is that normal? Do other women who are married to somebody for over eleven years still get wobbly in the knees over them sometimes?

No? Just me?

I mean, it's not like it's *every minute*. But boy, he still gets me. It doesn't hurt that he seems to get inexplicably sexier every year. (And I just get a year older.)

“I am careful,” he insists. “Besides, this couch? Is light! Weighs almost nothing.”

That warrants an eye roll from the guy holding the other end of the couch. But admittedly, it’s not exactly a heavy-duty couch. We got it from IKEA, which is a step up from the last couch, which we grabbed from the curb. Enzo used to have this theory that all the best furniture came from the curb outside our apartment.

We’ve grown up a little since then. I hope.

As Enzo and his friend bring the sofa into our beautiful new house, I raise my eyes again to look at the house across the way. Number 13 Locust Street. There’s still someone staring at me from the window. The house is dark inside, so I can’t see much, but that silhouette is still at the window.

Somebody is watching us.

But there’s nothing ominous about that. The people in that house are our new neighbors, and I’m sure they are curious about who we are. Whenever I used to see a moving truck outside our building, I always watched through the window to see who was moving in, and Enzo would laugh and tell me to stop watching and go introduce myself.

That’s the difference between him and me.

Well, it’s not the *only* difference.

In an effort to change my ways and be more friendly like my husband, I lift a hand to wave at the silhouette. May as well meet my new neighbor at 13 Locust.

Except the person at the window doesn’t wave back. Instead, the shutters suddenly snap closed and the silhouette disappears.

Welcome to the neighborhood.

TWO

Enzo is carrying the last of the boxes into the house while I'm standing out on our sparse lawn, avoiding unpacking while fantasizing about how the lawn will look after my husband rejuvenates it. Enzo is a wizard when it comes to lawns—that's sort of how we first met. This one almost looks like a lost cause with its brown patches and crumbly soil, but I know that a year from now, we will have the nicest lawn in the cul-de-sac.

I am lost in my fantasies when the door of the house directly next to ours—12 Locust Street—swings open. A woman with a butterscotch-colored layered bob emerges from the house wearing a fitted white blouse and red skirt with spiky high heels that look like they could be used to gouge out somebody's eye. (Why does my mind always go there?)

Unlike the neighbor across the way, she seems friendly. She raises her hand in an enthusiastic greeting and crosses the short path of cobbled pavement separating our houses.

"Hello!" she gushes. "It is *so* good to finally meet our new neighbors! I'm Suzette Lowell."

As I reach out and take her manicured hand in mine, I'm rewarded with an impressively painful handshake for a woman. "Millie Accardi," I say.

"*Lovely* to meet you, Millie," she says. "You're going to absolutely adore living here."

"I already do," I say honestly. "This house is amazing."

“Oh, it really is.” Suzette bobs her head. “It was lying empty for a while because, you know, such a small house is a hard sell. But I just knew the right family would come along.”

Small? Is she *insulting* our beloved house? “Well, I love it.”

“Oh yes. It’s so cozy, isn’t it? And...” Her gaze rakes over our front steps, which have slightly crumbled, although Enzo swears he’ll fix them. It’s one of a long list of repairs we’ll need to make. “Rustic. *So rustic.*”

Okay, she’s definitely insulting the house.

But I don’t care. I still love the house. It doesn’t matter to me what some snooty neighbor thinks.

“So do you work, Millie?” Suzette asks, her blue-green eyes zeroing in on my face.

“I’m a social worker,” I say with a touch of pride. Even though I have been doing it for many years now, I still feel proud of my career. Yes, it can be exhausting, soul wrenching, and the pay is nothing to get excited about. But I still love it. “How about you?”

“I’m a real estate agent,” she says with an equal amount of pride. Ah, that explains the way she was insulting our house in real estate speak. “The market is jumping right now.”

Well, that’s true. It occurs to me now that Suzette was not involved in the sale of this house. If she’s a real estate agent, how come her neighbors didn’t want her to sell their house?

Enzo emerges from the truck, carrying more boxes, his T-shirt still clinging to his chest and his black hair damp. I remember filling one of those boxes with books and being worried that I had made it too heavy. And now he’s carrying not only that box, but he’s put another one on top of it. My back aches just watching him.

Suzette is watching him too. She follows his progress from the moving truck to our front door, a smile spreading across her lips. “Your moving guy is *really* hot,” she comments.

“Actually,” I say, “that’s my husband.”

Her jaw drops open. Looks like she thinks more of him than she does of the house. “Seriously?”

“Uh-huh.” Enzo has deposited the boxes in the living room, and he is coming out of the house for more. How does he have the energy? Before he reaches the truck, I wave him over. “Enzo, come meet our new neighbor, Suzette.”

Suzette quickly tugs at her blouse and tucks a strand of butterscotch hair behind her ear. If she could, I'm pretty sure she would have given herself a quick once-over in a compact mirror and refreshed her lipstick. But there's no time for that.

"Hello!" she gushes with an outstretched hand. "It's so nice to meet you! Enzo, is it?"

He takes her hand and flashes her a broad smile that makes the lines around his eyes crinkle. "Yes, I am Enzo. And you are Suzette?"

She giggles and nods eagerly. Her reaction is a bit over the top, but to be fair, he is turning up the charm. My husband has lived in this country for twenty years, and when we talk at the dinner table, his accent is relatively mild. But when he's trying to be charming, he turns up his accent so that he sounds like he's right off the boat. Or as he would say, "right off boat."

"You are absolutely going to love it here," Suzette assures us. "It's such a quiet little cul-de-sac."

"We already love it," I say.

"And your house is so cute," she says, finding yet another creative way to point out that our house is substantially smaller than hers. "It will be perfect for you and your kids, especially with another little one on the way."

When she says that, she looks pointedly at my abdomen, which definitely does *not* contain any little ones on the way. There have not been any little ones in there for nine years.

The worst part is that Enzo swivels his head to look at me, and for a second, there's a glimmer of excitement on his face, even though *he knows very well* that I had my tubes tied during my emergency C-section with Nico. I look down at my belly, and I notice that my shirt does bulge in an unfortunate way. I'm dying a little bit inside.

"I'm not pregnant," I say, for both the benefit of Suzette and apparently also my husband.

Suzette clasps a hand over her red lipstick. "Oh dear, I am *so* sorry! I just assumed..."

"It's okay," I say, cutting her off before she makes it worse. Honestly, I love my body. When I was in my twenties, I was a stick figure, but now I finally have some womanly curves to show off, and I daresay my husband seems to enjoy them as well.

That said, I'm throwing away this shirt.

“We have two children.” Enzo flings an arm around my shoulders, oblivious to Suzette’s insult. “Our son, Nico, and our daughter, Ada.”

Enzo couldn’t be more proud of our two children. He’s a great father, and he would have wanted another five of them if I hadn’t nearly died giving birth to our son. We would have loved to adopt or do foster care, but with my background, it was out of the question.

“Do you have children, Suzette?” I ask.

She shakes her head, a horrified look on her face. “Absolutely not. I’m not the maternal type. It’s just me and my husband, Jonathan. We are happily childfree.”

Excellent—she has a husband of her own. She can stay away from mine.

“But there is a little boy in the house across from yours,” she says. “He’s in third grade.”

“Nico is in third grade too,” Enzo says eagerly. “Maybe we can introduce them?”

When we moved, we had to pull the kids out of school right in the middle of the year. Trust me—the last thing you want to do is yank two grade-school-age kids out of their classes in the middle of March. I was racked with guilt, but we couldn’t afford to pay the mortgage and the rent until the end of the school year, so we didn’t have a choice.

Nico, who is outgoing like his father, didn’t seem bothered by it. For Nico, a whole room full of new kids to impress with his antics would be a fun adventure. Ada took the news calmly, but later I found her crying in her room at the thought of leaving her two best friends behind. I’m hoping by the fall, they will both be settled in and the trauma of moving in the middle of the school year will be a distant memory.

“You can try to introduce yourself to them.” Suzette shrugs. “But the woman who lives there, Janice, is not very friendly. She hardly ever comes out of the house except to bring her son to the bus stop. I mostly just see her in the window, staring out at the street. *Such* a busybody.”

“Oh,” I say, wondering how Janice can apparently never leave her house yet also be so nosy.

I look across the way at 13 Locust. The windows all look dark, despite the fact that it’s the middle of the day and the people who live there seem to be home.

“I hope you’re getting some good blinds for your windows,” she tells me. “Because she has a great view.”

Enzo and I simultaneously rotate our heads in the direction of our brand-new house, the realization suddenly dawning on us that not one of the windows in the entire house has blinds or curtains. How did we not realize that? Nobody told us we needed to buy blinds! Every home we ever lived in before now came with them already installed!

“I will buy blinds,” Enzo murmurs in my ear.

“Thank you.”

Suzette looks amused by our cluelessness. “Your real estate agent didn’t remind you to buy blinds?”

“Guess not,” I mumble.

I suppose the implication is that Suzette would have reminded us if she had been our real estate agent. But it’s a bit late for that. For now, we are blind-less.

“I can recommend an excellent company that will install blinds for you,” she says. “They did our house last year. They put in these beautiful honeycomb blinds on the first and second floor and then these adorable shutters in the attic.”

I can’t even imagine what such a thing would cost. Far more than we have to spend, that’s for sure.

“No, thank you,” Enzo says. “I can do.”

She winks at him. “Yes, I’ll bet you can.”

Seriously? I am getting a little sick of this woman hitting on my husband right in front of me. It’s not like other women don’t do the same, but for God’s sake, we’re neighbors. Can’t she be a little more subtle? Part of me is tempted to say something, but I’d rather not make an enemy five minutes after moving here.

“Also,” she says, “I wanted to invite your family over for dinner. The two of you, of course, and... the children can come too.” She doesn’t look excited about the idea of our kids entering her home. And she doesn’t even know about Nico’s propensity to break something expensive within five minutes of entering any room.

“Sure, that will be wonderful,” Enzo says.

“Fabulous!” She beams up at him. “How about tomorrow night? I’m sure your kitchen won’t be up and running by then, so this will take the stress off.”

Enzo looks at me with raised eyebrows. He has boundless energy for social events, but I'm the introverted one, so I appreciate that he defers to me before accepting. Truthfully, I loathe the idea of spending an evening with this woman. She seems a bit *extra*. But if we're going to be living here, aren't we obligated to be friends with the neighbors? Isn't that what normal suburban families *do*? And maybe she won't be so bad once I get to know her.

"Sure," I say. "That will be really nice. We hardly know anyone in Long Island."

Suzette throws her head back and laughs, revealing a row of pearly white teeth. "Oh, Millie..."

I glance over at Enzo, who shrugs. Neither of us seem to know what's so funny. "What?"

"You don't know how you sound," she giggles. "Nobody says '*in* Long Island.'"

"They... they don't?"

"No!" She shakes her head like I'm just too much. "It's '*on* Long Island.' You're not *in* an island—that sounds so ignorant. You're *on* an island."

Enzo is scratching at his dark hair. He has zero gray hair on his head, by the way. If not for my bottles of Clairol, I would be pretty much gray and have been ever since Nico was born. All Enzo's got is a few gray strands in his beard when he grows it out. But when I pointed that out to him, he dug around on his scalp until he found a single gray hair to show off to me, as if that made it any better.

"So I don't understand," I say. "Does that mean people should say they live *on* Hawaii? Or *on* Staten Island?"

The smile drops off her face. "Well, Staten Island is an entirely different case."

I try to catch Enzo's eye, but he just seems amused by the whole thing. "Well, we are happy to be here *on* Long Island, Suzette. And we look forward to having dinner with you tomorrow night."

"I can't wait," she says.

I have to force my own smile. "Should I bring anything?"

"Oh." She taps her index finger against her chin. "Why don't you bring dessert?"

Great. Now I have to figure out what on earth I'm going to bring for dessert that will live up to Suzette's standards. I'm thinking a box of Oreos won't cut it. "Sounds good!"

As Suzette walks down the path back to her own much larger house, her heels clicking on the pavement with each step, I feel a twinge of something in the pit of my stomach. I was so excited when we bought this house. We've been crammed into tiny apartments for so long, and I finally have my dream house.

But now, for the first time, I wonder if I have made a terrible mistake moving here.