



IT WAS HER HOUSE FIRST

**THE
WIFE
UPSTAIRS**

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The Wife Upstairs

a novel by

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The Wife Upstairs

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To my girls

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Chapter 1

October, 2019

If I had hesitated even half a second, everything would have been different.

There would have been blood all over the pavement. Screeching wheels. Screams from passersby. Then an ambulance. A firetruck. Or maybe just a trip straight to the morgue. Somber calls to relatives—a husband, a daughter, a son.

I've never done anything heroic in my entire life. The leading candidate would be this cat I used to feed in an alley next to my building. But I'm not sure if feeding a stray cat counts as heroic. Also, I heard that cat eventually bit somebody, so maybe I was just aiding and abetting a bad-tempered cat.

But today, I saw the red Ford Taurus rushing towards the red light with no intention of stopping. I saw the hunched old lady struggling with two grocery bags she could barely lift, blissfully unaware of the impending collision. And a split second before the Ford burst through the red light into the crosswalk, I grabbed her and pulled her back.

I saved her life. For the first time in my life, I'm a hero.

"What in God's name is *wrong* with you? Are you crazy?"

The old woman is not as grateful as I would have expected. Actually, that's an understatement. She's glaring at me with venom in her watery blue eyes, her jowls trembling with fury. She looks like she's going to pop me one with her oversized light pink purse.

It could be because when I grabbed her (in the course of saving her life, as you recall), I wasn't as delicate about it as I might have been if time weren't of the essence. That is to say, I knocked her down. But to be fair, I fell too. And I think most of the impact of her fall was blunted by her landing on me.

Also, she dropped her groceries during the fall. And now there are groceries everywhere. I mean, *everywhere*. There are cans of chicken noodle soup, cans of creamed corn, cans of green beans, all rolling around the pavement, trying to make a break for it.

“You tried to attack me!” the woman yells at me as she struggles to her feet. A fleck of her spit hits me in the chin as she briefly loses her balance. I reach out to steady her, but she belts me with a loaf of white bread, so I take a step back.

“A car was going to hit you,” I try to explain. I reach for a can of tomato soup about to roll into the street. Christ, there are a lot of cans. Why did she buy so many canned foods? Doesn’t this woman have a *refrigerator*?

The woman snorts like she’s never heard something so ridiculous in her entire life. “There was no car. You *attacked* me. I was minding my own business and you pushed me down! And now I’m going to sue you for assault! And I’ve got witnesses!”

She looks around at the pedestrians that are mostly stepping over her groceries as they cross the street. Nobody but me is even attempting to help clean this up. Are people really this rude? Do they think this is some new game we’re playing where we chase down cans rolling across the sidewalk?

Finally, a man in a business suit stops in front of us, and without being asked, he starts picking up the groceries. The old woman rewards him with a grateful smile that’s a stark contrast from the way she’s still glaring at me. It seems sort of unfair, because *I’m* the one who saved her life.

“Thank you so much, young man,” the old woman says as she pats her puff of white hair. “You’re so kind to help.”

“No problem,” the man says. “How could I see you struggling and not stop to help?”

He flashes a grin that reveals a row of straight, white teeth. My parents couldn’t afford braces, so I’ve got two crooked incisors that I’m self-conscious about. My dream, if I ever have enough money, is to get them fixed. But that’s not going to happen, short of winning the lottery. And I can’t even afford a ticket.

“Well, nobody else stopped,” the woman points out. She shoots me a look. “And this horrible girl over here pushed me down! You saw it happen, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t say anything. He’s busy chasing down a can of cranberries.

She clutches her neck and moans. “I think I have whiplash! I should probably call an ambulance.”

I let out an involuntary gasp. “An ambulance?”

“That’s right,” she snaps at me. “I’m going to sue you for everything you’ve got. I’ve got a witness now!”

She’s going to sue me for everything I’ve got? Well, good luck. My bank account is mostly cobwebs at this point. She can have my debt if she wants it.

“*You’re* my witness,” the old woman says to the man. “You saw how she pushed me down, didn’t you?”

He scoops up a carton of eggs from the sidewalk. He cracks it open to find three casualties inside. “Yes, I saw it.”

The old woman smiles triumphantly. “I thought you did.”

He glances at me with a raised eyebrow, and I just shake my head. “She saved your life, you know,” he says. “There was a car that ran the red light. It was about to hit you.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re making that up!”

“No. I’m not.” His voice is flat, leaving no room for argument. “She saved your life. You’d be dead if not for her.” He shoves a can of onions into her bag. “You should thank her.”

The old woman looks between the two of us, the wrinkles in her face darkening. “Oh, I get it. The two of you are in cahoots.”

“*Cahoots?*” A smile touches the man’s lips. “I promise you, I’ve never met this woman before in my life.”

It suddenly occurs to me the man is quite nice looking. He has a thick head of chestnut hair, vivid green eyes, and also, he fills out that suit pretty nicely. I don’t usually notice things like that, but it’s hard *not* to notice.

“I don’t believe you!” The woman clutches the pink purse to her chest. She fumbles for the two grocery bags, which have mostly been restored. I suspect there are still a few cans rolling around somewhere that will eventually fall into a sidewalk grate. “This is some kind of scam. I’ve heard about this. You probably want me to buy a bunch of gift cards for a prince in Nigeria.”

The man’s mouth falls open. “*A prince in Nigeria?*”

But the old woman doesn’t want to hear another word. She stomps off with her grocery bags, nearly getting floored by a taxi cab as she rushes across the street. But she makes it.

I straighten up from my crouched position, my calves screaming with pain. That’s the last time I try to save somebody’s life. I learned my lesson.

All I got was yelled at. And now I'm running late.

"Hey." The hot guy with the green eyes and business suit is still standing next to me. "There's a coffee shop right there with a bathroom if you want to get cleaned up."

Cleaned up?

I look down at my clothing. This morning I had put on my best clean white dress shirt and gray pencil skirt because I've got my first job interview since I was laid off two weeks ago. It's nothing great, just bartending, but I need it—bad.

Unfortunately, it rained early this morning. And because it's the end of October and there are leaves all over the ground, the rain mixed with the fallen leaves, and it all turned into some kind of disgusting brown paste. And that brown leaf paste is now all over my clean white shirt and gray pencil skirt. I look like I just rolled around in the mud. This is not salvageable. My only real option is to go home and change. Except my interview is in...

Fifteen minutes. Damn.

I'm new at this saving people's lives business. Does it always end up so crappily? Then again, I shouldn't be surprised. Everything going wrong unexpectedly seems to be a pattern in my life.

The man is looking at me with his eyebrows bunched together. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." I look down at my ruined interview outfit. "Totally fine. Absolutely, completely fine."

He just looks at me. I don't know what it is about this guy, but something about the way he's looking at me makes me want to pour my heart out to him.

Or rip my clothes off. A little of that too. He *is* pretty hot. And it's been a while for me. A *long* while. I think there was a different president in office at the time. Kevin Spacey was still a respected actor. Brad and Angelina were a happy couple. You get the idea.

"I have a job interview," I admit. I raise the sleeve of my shirt, which is caked in leaf paste. "*Had* a job interview. I don't think it's going to go well. In fact, I think I should just call it off."

He raises his eyebrows. "You're looking for a job?"

I shrug. "Yeah. Sort of."

Desperately, actually. My landlord informed me yesterday that if I don't have the rent by Friday, there's going to be an eviction notice on my door by Saturday. And then I'll have to live in a cardboard box on the street, because that's my last option.

"What kind of job was it?"

"Well, this one was bartending." At a seedy bar that would have paid minimum-wage. "But... I mean, that's what's available. At this point..."

I stop talking before I let on how desperate I am. This man is a stranger, after all. He doesn't want to hear my depressing life story.

But he's got that smile on his face again. It's an infectious grin, the kind that makes me want to grin right back, despite the fact that I am covered in leaf paste and about to blow my only chance of making the rent this month.

"Do you believe in fate?" he asks.

I cock my head to the side. Do I believe in *fate*? What kind of question is that? It seems like the kind of question that somebody who's had a very good life might ask. Because the cards I've been dealt so far have all been losing ones. Starting with my parents. And then Freddy. If fate exists, then all I can say is it doesn't like me very much.

"I'm here in the city for an interview myself," the man goes on, without waiting to hear my answer. "I was actually going to interview somebody for a job. Except she didn't show up. So..."

I stare at him. Is he saying what I think he's saying? "What kind of job?"

"Well, it's..." He hesitates, then nods his head at the coffee shop. "Listen, why don't we go inside to talk about it? I'll buy you a cup of coffee—you look like you could use it." He grins at me. "I'm Adam, by the way. Adam Barnett."

"Sylvia Robinson."

"Nice to meet you, Sylvia."

He holds his hand out to me, and I shake it. He has a nice handshake. Warm and firm, but not like he's trying to crush the bones of my hand. Why do some men shake your hand like that? What are they trying to prove?

Of course, then I notice my own hand is slick with leaf paste. This just isn't my day. But Adam doesn't wipe his hand on his pants when we're

done shaking—he doesn’t seem at all concerned that I’ve just given him a handful of muddy leaves.

“So what do you say?” he asks.

“I, uh...”

I don’t know why I’m hesitating. A job is a job. And this man seems nice enough. He’s the only one in the street who bothered to help clean up that old woman’s groceries. And he defended me when she was attacking me. I need a job badly, and this is my only shot right now. Plus, it would be nice to sit down and get some coffee after the morning I’m having (and also wash my hands).

But for some reason, I can’t shake this awful feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I once read that when people have near-fatal heart attacks, they get a sense of doom. They describe a sinking sensation before the chest pain even begins, like the world is about to end. It’s a commonly described phenomenon that nobody can explain. But when something terrible is about to happen, people *know*.

And when I look at Adam Barnett, for a moment, I get that sensation. Doom.

Like something terrible will happen if I follow him into that coffee shop.

But that’s ridiculous. I’ve had a run of bad luck over my life, so of course, I’m going to be suspicious of everything. I don’t believe in fate and I don’t believe in premonitions. What I do believe is that I will be homeless in a few days if I don’t get my hands on some money. And turning tricks in Times Square is not my cup of tea.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s get some coffee.”