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THE
HOUSEMAID
IS **WATCHING**

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Poisoned Pen
PRESS

ONE

THREE MONTHS EARLIER

MILLIE

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 10 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 10 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