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**BEST  
OFFER  
WINS**

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doubleday

Ginny calls around ten, just as I'm hanging up with a client. She sounds urgent.

"Margo, it might be perfect."

I have heard this before.

"Four bedrooms, renovated kitchen, great yard. Right over the DC line—before you ask, yes, it's in the top-choice neighborhood. And guess what? No one else knows about it! It's not listed yet."

That part—the "It's not listed" part—stops me mid-sip of coffee. It pulls me up from my little desk by the apartment's floor-to-ceiling window, a hunk of bait just juicy enough to make me forget that it could be wrapped around a sharp, painful hook. Ian comes to a standstill in the kitchen, his hazel eyes zeroing in on me.

"My sister-in-law does yoga with one of the sellers," Ginny continues, at her usual breathless speed. "He told her they're putting it on the market at the end of the month. Apparently, his husband got a big new job out of town, so it's all very rushed. But maybe—and I don't wanna promise anything here—but maybe that means they're motivated enough to take an offer now, *before* they list publicly."

A surge of hope, that familiar poison, makes my heart stutter. This is the fantasy. The urban legend that everyone house-hunting

in this godforsaken market latches onto at some point. You hear about a friend of a friend (in my case, it was the cousin of a co-worker) who got an inside tip about a house before it hit the market, who swooped in and bought it before the masses could even think about descending. You hope and wish and pray the same thing will happen to you. You take detours through your target neighborhoods, scouting for a moving truck or an estate-sale sign, any hint at all that might give you the jump on a place before it officially comes up for sale. You know the odds aren't in your favor—and yet it has to happen for someone, right?

Right?

“You're sure it's in Grovemont?” I ask Ginny, my voice a stage whisper like I'm afraid the secret will get out. Someone lays on their horn three stories below, a well-timed reminder of why I hate this place so much.

“Sure is, kiddo,” she says. “My sister-in-law's been inside. She says it's stunning. I'm in the car, but I'm gonna have Travis send you the address so you and Ian can go have a look from the street. Let me know what you think as soon as you can.”

Even before the email from Ginny's assistant lands in my inbox, I feel the thing that I promised myself I would stop feeling: a hunch that this house could be The One. Why else would my real estate agent—of all the rabid, razor-elbowed agents in Washington—have been the one to score such an extraordinary piece of intel? Or maybe it's that I *have* to believe it's the one. Like a self-preservation thing. Because otherwise, I am terrified that we have really, truly, finally run out of options.

Ian and I have been stuck here—in an apartment so small you can vacuum almost all of it from a single outlet—for eighteen increasingly hellish months. The first six or seven of those drifted by in a kind of placid denial. We still fucked like it would be ideal if I got pregnant immediately, like obviously we'd be out of here and settled into the new house whenever the baby arrived. This was

always part of the plan, after all, when we decided to sell our starter home. We had to get the money out of it if we were ever going to afford the dream house in the burbs, so it was unavoidable that we'd have to spend a little while renting.

And it's not like we went in totally blind. We sold the last place—a falling-apart row house almost far west enough to count as Logan Circle—in the fall of 2020, the point in the pandemic when everyone realized that if Covid didn't suffocate them, spending another minute within the same four walls probably would. DC, like everywhere else, was already in the middle of a housing shortage and now hordes of buyers desperate for more space were making it infinitely worse. But when you're a gentrifier, this is the moment you pounce. Ian and I had lived in that row house for nearly a decade. We'd debated "Gunshots or fireworks?" almost as frequently as "Thai or Mexican food?" When you invest in a "transitioning" neighborhood, that's just what you sign up for. The payout on the other side—once the city's hottest restaurants have opened a few blocks away, once you're within walking distance of not one, but two Whole Foods—is the reason you slog through.

So, yeah, I knew it might take a minute to find the forever home, but clearly, this was the time to cash in. And who could argue with that logic after the row house, even with its flooding basement and bad DIY kitchen reno, sold in a single weekend for more than double what we'd paid?

At first, my plan seemed to be working. Less than a month after we moved into the apartment, a house that checked all the boxes hit the market. It was a fully remodeled 1940s Colonial (my favorite style), in Grovemont (my favorite neighborhood), well under our budget. I thought maybe we wouldn't even have to pay for a second month on the storage unit.

Then it got twenty-two offers.

Twenty-fucking-two.

"Now you've got the first bidding war outta the way," Ginny had

said with a shrug, after informing us that it sold for \$25,000 higher than our offer. "It's like a rite of passage, and now we know we'll just have to be a tad more aggressive next time."

But that was ten "next times" ago.

The next few bidding wars played out pretty much the same, except the numbers kept getting worse. We'd go to \$1.1 million and fall just short. So, for the next house, we'd stretch to \$1,150,000, only for the winner to offer the same amount—all cash.

After loss number five, I froze my eggs just in case.

At that point, we'd been in the apartment about eight months, and trying for a baby for nearly a year. Dr. Warner convinced us it didn't make sense to start in vitro yet—she still thinks I might get pregnant the old-fashioned way once the stress of the house hunt is over. And it's true that if we wound up taking out a loan for multiple rounds of IVF, it could complicate our mortgage approval. But when you're staring down the barrel of turning thirty-eight, you can't afford to take any chances. While we waste away here in real estate purgatory, at least I know I have a viable batch preserved on ice.

Although to be honest, that fact hasn't been as comforting as I'd hoped. Sometimes, when I can't sleep all I can think is *No house, no baby; no house, no baby* on an endless, agonizing loop.

In hindsight, number six (a split-level with a kitchen that needed a full gut) and number seven (a cute-enough Craftsman, but on a very busy street) were duds that only seemed worth trying for because we were starting to panic. Eight, nine, and ten trickled onto the market at such a glacial pace, weeks and weeks passing between them, that I was convinced the housing supply was about to dry up entirely. Which is why, when number eleven finally came on, I decided we had to push harder. It was another Colonial, a couple miles farther from the city than we preferred but still zoned for the right schools. They'd blown out the primary suite so the bathroom could fit a soaking tub. The nursery was right next door. I talked Ian

into tapping into our 401Ks so we could raise our budget to \$1.3 million—a full \$250,000 above the asking price. How could that possibly not be good enough?

By the time Ginny called, my whole nervous system felt like it had been hooked up to jumper cables. We were out to dinner with friends, so I excused myself and answered from the sidewalk: seventeen bids had rolled in. Seven, including the winning one, were all cash.

We were losers for an eleventh time.

I texted Ian from outside the restaurant, then left him there to explain my disappearance and pay our half of the bill. After I spent the weekend holed up in the bedroom, crying and bingeing *Below Deck*, he started hinting that I should go back to a therapist. I convinced him I was fine (because I was), but that was two months ago now. Nothing halfway decent has even come available since.

“What was that about?” Ian asks, coming around the kitchen counter, oblivious to the ring that his coffee mug has left behind on the white quartz.

I brush past him, already en route to get my Nikes by the front door. “Ginny says there’s a house that could be perfect, and we have to see it now ‘cause—get this—no one else knows about it yet.”

He arches an eyebrow. “How’s that possible?”

Just then, my laptop dings from my desk. I race back across the room.

“I’ll explain in the car. That’s gotta be from Travis.”

Ian stands behind me, back at the window overlooking the traffic snarling U Street, as I punch the address into Google Maps. He’s close enough that I can smell the cloying sweetness of his Old Spice aftershave. I’m sure there was a time when I found his scent appealing—before we were trapped in this glass box, before sex was just another reminder that we didn’t have a baby.

I pull up the street view and feel myself deflate.

Ian laughs. “Just our luck.”

A tree-pruning truck is parked in front, with a guy up in the lift cutting back a towering maple. The house is mostly blocked.

"This is a good thing," I say, shoving aside my disappointment. "Mature trees are part of why we love the neighborhood, right? And we've been down this street before, remember? We know it's nice."

I have to be the one who keeps the energy up. Because no matter how many houses we lose, Ian will never feel the urgency of this search as deeply as I do. Even after all those bidding wars, he still flinches when Ginny and I remind him that offering six figures over asking is normal, that we simply don't have any other choice.

For a government lawyer, being risk averse is basically a job requirement. Plus, he's about as wired for struggle as his six-foot, golden-boy looks would lead you to believe. He grew up with a dad who coached his little league teams and a mom who sent him to school with homemade cupcakes on his birthdays. Two loving parents who still call us at least once a week to check in. But my childhood, erratic as it was, gave me something even more valuable, something that I have come to accept Ian will never have: hunger.

It's why I ditched journalism to make triple the money in PR. And it's the whole reason I pushed to buy that rundown little row house to begin with—so we could eventually sell it for enough profit to give us the life that my parents could never provide.

"Ian, let's go." My sneakers are on. I'm pulling my hair into a low pony, trying in vain to tuck away the grays sprouting at my temples like tinsel against jet black.

"Babe, sorry to do this, but do you mind going without me and reporting back? I need to be in the office soon," he says. "For a lunch meeting." I clock that he's wearing real clothes. His mop of sandy hair is slicked with pomade.

"Are you being serious?" He acts like he's saving the world at that job. "Ginny needs an answer *now*, Ian. I mean, aren't you pumped? All these months of searching and we've never had an in like this.

Let's just zip up there real quick and I'll drop you at the office when we're done."

He shifts his weight, deciding how much conflict he can endure so early in the day. "Okay, that should work," he says finally. "As long as I'm in before noon."

I wipe up his coffee ring and we're out the door.

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We're only thirty minutes from the apartment, but we might as well have teleported to another planet.

The sidewalks in Grovemont are pristine. No discarded pizza crusts or other detritus from wasted twentysomethings stumbling around after closing time. No homeless people hassling you when all you want to do is get inside your own building. (Or is it *unhoused* now? Or *people experiencing homelessness*? Whatever, my point is everyone here in Grovemont is experiencing fucking paradise.)

It must be ten degrees cooler here in the summer, with all these giant trees. This is the kind of place where people get into bird-watching and growing their own tomatoes. Where the only time you hear sirens is when the fire department wants to spice things up at the Christmas parade.

Last month, someone was shot and killed outside the high school down the block from our apartment in Shaw. But just seven miles away—here in the most desirable neighborhood in the most desirable DC suburb of Bethesda—our kid will attend the very best public schools in the whole state of Maryland, possibly the entire country.

Of course, I knew the neighborhood would be perfect. I've been obsessed with it for a year and a half. But when we pull up to the actual house, I almost can't believe it's real. Like if I looked from the side, I would see that it was a flattened set from a movie titled *Margo's Dream Home* or *Margo Dies and Goes to Heaven*. It's a white-painted brick Colonial, with a glossy black front door

flanked by brass lanterns. It has a lush front lawn and window boxes I'd fill with whatever type of flowers you're supposed to put in those things.

Ian's mom can show me. She loves her window boxes. In fact, this house looks an awful lot like Ian's parents' house. Which feels like it might be a sign.

Ian notices, too. "Well, I at least love it from the outside," he says. "Kind of like my folks' house, don't you think?"

"I have to see the backyard," I say.

"Wait a minute, what? You can't just let yourself into the backyard."

"I think I can. See that gate?" I point it out for him, through the Prius's rolled-down window.

"No, I mean you *shouldn't* let yourself into the backyard, Margo." He only says my name when he really wants to make a point. But I'm already out of the car.

"Come on, we're the only ones parked out here. No one's home. I'll be very fast."

"Margo, do not do this."

"Just a quick peek. I'll be right back."

I know, I know. This is privilege. No one's calling the cops on an Asian girl in head-to-toe Lululemon, at least not in a neighborhood with this much performative wokeness. Practically every other house has a "Black Lives Matter" sign in the yard, though I am willing to bet no actual Black people live on this street. If a neighbor sees me, I'll just say my dog got loose and ran back here or something. It grosses me out, too, but I don't make the rules.

I unlatch the gate and follow the flagstone pathway around back to a patio. When I spot it—hanging from the sturdy limb of an oak tree, in the far right corner of the yard—my breath halts. A tire swing. How many houses have we looked at? Forty-five? Fifty? And it's the first one I've encountered. This doesn't just feel like a sign. This is one.

I consider crossing the lawn to touch the rough, dark rubber. But then I'd be out in the open, even more exposed to any nosy neighbor peering down from their upstairs window. A soft breeze cools my neck; the tire sways just slightly. I long to get closer, but this'll have to do for now.

It's gorgeous today, but it rained last night, so the outdoor sectional and coffee table on the patio are covered. A few steps lead up to the deck, complete with an eight-person teak dining table and a custom, built-in bar with a gas grill and a mini fridge. It looks like they bumped out the back of the house, probably to enlarge the kitchen. After touring about a zillion of them, I've seen this is the typical reno for a 1940s Colonial.

A speck of an airplane cuts a trail through wide-open sky—and it's so pin-drop quiet that I can hear the faint rumble of its engine. The grass is wet and flawlessly green, because it's only April. There's enough of it to feel like a real backyard, but not so much that it'll be all-consuming. We will own a lawn mower here for the first time in our lives—an essential bauble on the charm bracelet of Successful Adulthood.

During the anxious little blip when my parents were homeowners, my dad turned into a total psychopath over the lawn. Now that lawn was *too* big, too much maintenance. He splurged on a fancy built-in irrigation system, yet somehow, somewhere, there was always still a brown spot that enraged him. The lawn wasn't the real issue, I realize now.

My phone vibrates in my hand. A text from Ian: *Done yet?*

I know I'm pushing it, but I need to see the kitchen. It has to be in that bumped-out addition.

I jog up the steps to the deck, then cup my hands around my face so I can see through the French doors. Carrara marble blankets all the countertops, including a massive island—the kind that becomes a natural hub for the happy chaos of a family. The floors are wide-plank oak. The cabinets are Shaker, painted a warm gray, with

brass knobs. I'd given up on ever topping that first Grovemont Colonial, the one we lost in that very first bidding war, but this one is so much better. It's like they peered inside my mind and extracted the perfect backdrop for the perfect future.

There goes my phone again. But Ian will have to hang on a sec because I'm imagining myself drinking coffee on one of those cane-back barstools. Wonder if it would help to offer to buy some of their furniture, too. Might be easier for them than moving it out of town. The gas range is against the wall to the left. Looks like a Thermador, probably worth more than the Prius.

There's a breakfast nook just on the other side of the glass. We'll eat most of our meals there. But I spot a more formal dining room off to the right, through an arched opening. That was one of my main complaints about the row house—in under a thousand square feet, there was no space for a real table where we could celebrate, for instance, our baby's first birthday. But here, we'll host all kinds of holidays and legit grown-up dinner parties. We'll get one of those wine-bottle chillers that sits in a stand.

Ugh. More buzzing. It almost hurts to pull my eyes away, but I finally let them flit down to the screen.

#### *CAR PULLING UP*

Followed only by: !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Fuck.

I look back up. A man, slender and well dressed, is coming down the hallway from the front entrance, face tilted toward his phone. I plummet to all fours and crawl toward the steps, the dampness from the deck soaking through my leggings.

The last time something like this happened, it was January and freezing out. Ian thought I was running errands, but really, I was here in Grovemont—on the prowl for any hint of an impending sale—when a Cape Cod with a wide-open garage made me slam on the brakes. Inside were boxes, stacks of them. Possibly packed for an upcoming move.

From the Prius, it was impossible to tell for sure, so I parked around the corner then strolled right in, unnoticed. Just as I was figuring out that the boxes were merely storage, mostly full of junk, I heard the knob turning on the door from the inside of the house. I ducked behind one of the stacks, peeking out just far enough to spy a hand tap the button to close the garage. The concrete floor shuddered beneath me until everything was pitch black. I stayed hidden there till I couldn't feel my toes. At last, I ran over and hit the button again, raising the obnoxious door just enough to squirm out from underneath it. No one must have heard because I made it back to the Prius without incident.

Compared to that, the predicament I'm in now isn't so bad. Once I crawl down the deck stairs, I stand up and slink along the white brick till I reach the gate. Quickly scanning my surroundings, I book it toward the sidewalk.

An olive-green Audi SUV is parked out front.

But there's no trace of our beat-up, silver Prius. Where the hell is Ian?

"Hey!"

I whirl around. The man, now on the front porch, narrows his beautiful eyes and strides toward me.