

A woman in a white dress is seen from behind, pushing a stroller on a brick path at night. The path leads towards a building with a large, glowing full moon in the sky. The scene is dimly lit, with the moon providing the primary light source. The woman's dress is white, and the stroller is dark. The path is made of reddish-brown bricks. The background shows some greenery and a building with a few lit windows.

*I
Know
She Was
There*

JENNIFER SADERA

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*To my mom, Lynne,
who instilled in me a lifelong love of reading;
to the memory of my dad, James,
my first writing teacher, editor, and ardent supporter.*

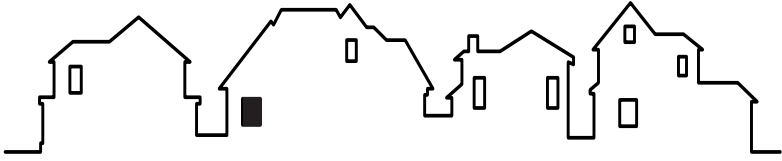
*And to my husband, CJ,
for absolutely everything else.*





P A R T

1



CHAPTER ONE

Friday, August 11

JANE BROCKTON WAS going to get caught. My heart raced when Jane emerged from the side door of her home; what she and I were *both* doing was risky, but it was too late for regrets. I wondered if she thought so too. Probably. Her behavior was becoming alarmingly brazen. I pulled Emmy's stroller closer and pushed aside boxwood branches, widening the portal I peered through. Although Jane's across-the-street neighbors' hedge was directly in front of her farmhouse-style McMansion, it was too dark this late at night for me to be seen.

Go back inside if you know what's good for you. I pressed my fingers to my lips as the man emerged from the house next to hers. Even if I'd yelled a warning, Jane Brockton wouldn't heed it. Who the hell was I? Certainly not someone her neighbors on Woodmint Lane knew.

If Jane observed my late-night excursions through the streets of her stylish suburban New York neighborhood, her first instinct wouldn't be to worry about *her* behavior.

I was prepared. If confronted by any resident of the exclusive enclave, I'd explain I walked the streets late at night to lull my colicky baby to sleep.

I couldn't admit my ulterior motive—worming my way back onto Primrose Way and into my former best friend's good graces. And there was no need to share how, lately, the lives of this neighborhood's inhabitants had been luring me like a potent drug—or how Jane Brockton was fast becoming the kingpin of my needy addiction. Jane stood out, even in this community of excess: gourmet dinner deliveries, drive-up dog grooming, same-day laundry service, and monthly Botox parties.

Her meetings with the mystery man were far from innocent. The first tryst I'd witnessed was late the previous Friday night—exactly a week earlier. I'd strolled around the corner of Woodmint Lane just as the pair had emerged from their side-by-side houses and taken to the dark street like prowlers casing the block. I followed their skulking forms up Woodmint, being careful to stay a few dozen yards behind, until all I could discern was their silhouettes, too close to each other for friendly companionship. They'd eventually crossed Primrose Way and veered into the woods where the bike trails and picnic areas offered secluded spaces. When they didn't emerge from the wooded area, I backed Emmy's stroller up silently and reversed my route, heading away, my pulse still throbbing in my temples.

It was impossible to deny what was going on, as I watched similar scenes unfold three nights that week: Jane slipping soundlessly from her mudroom door like a specter, the flash of the screen door in the faint moonlight an apparent signal.

This night, as they hooked hands in the driveway between the houses, I slicked my tongue over my dry lips. She risked losing everything. I knew how that felt. Tim had left me before I'd even changed out his worn bachelor-pad sofa for the sectional I'd been eying at Ethan Allen. I watched them cross through the shadows, barely able to see them step inside the shed at the far end of Jane's yard.

And all under the nose of her poor devoted husband, Rod. He couldn't be as gullible as he appeared, could he?

A voice called out, shattering the stillness of the night. I flinched, convinced I'd been discovered. I scanned the immediate shadows, placing a hand over my chest to still my galloping heart.

"Jane?" It was Rod's voice. I recognized the timbre by now.

Settle down, Caroline.

My eyes darted to the custom home's open front door. Rod had noticed his wife's abandonment earlier than usual. Warm interior light spilled across the porch floorboards and outlined Rod's robed form in the door frame.

"Are you out here? Jane?"

The worry in his voice made me hate Jane Brockton. I flirted with the idea of stepping away from the hedge and announcing I'd witnessed her heading to the shed with the neighbor. Of course, that would be ridiculous. I was a stranger. My name, Caroline Case, would mean nothing to him.

Rod closed the door and my gaze traveled to the glowing upstairs window on the far left of his house. The light had blinked off half an hour earlier, like a giant eyelid closing over the dormered master bedroom casement. I knew exactly where their bedroom was because I'd studied the Deer Crossing home models on the builder's website. I knew the layout of all three house styles so well I could escort potential buyers through them. I'd briefly considered it. Becoming a real-estate agent would give me access inside, where I could discover what life behind the movie-set facades was really like. Pristine marble floors, granite countertops, and crystal vases on every conceivable surface? Or gravy-laden dishes in sinks and mud-caked shoes arrayed haphazardly just inside the eye-catching front doors?

I suspected the latter was true for almost every house except for my former best friend Muzzy Owen's place on Primrose Way. Muzzy could put Martha Stewart to shame.

I wedged myself and Emmy's stroller further into the hedge. Becoming a real-estate agent wouldn't connect me as intimately to Jane and Rod Brockton (information gleaned by rifling through the contents of their mailbox) as I was at this moment. Trepidation—and yes, anticipation—

laced my bloodstream and turned my breathing shallow as I waited for Rod to come outside and start his nightly search for his wife. Some may consider my interest, my excitement, twisted, but I didn't plan to *use* my stealthily gathered information against anyone. It was enough to reassure myself that nobody's life was perfect, no matter how it appeared to an outsider.

A faint click echoed through the still night. I squinted through the hedge leaves, my eyes laser pointers on the side door Jane had emerged from only moments before. Rod appeared.

As he stepped into the dusky side yard, I thought about the people unknown to me until a week earlier: the latest neighborhood couple to pique my interest. Even though they were *technically* still strangers, I'd had an entire week to learn about the Brocktons. A few passes in my car last Saturday morning revealed a tracksuit-clad Gen Xer, her wavy hair the reddish-brown color of autumn oak leaves, and a gray-haired, bespectacled boomer in crisp dark jeans and golf shirt standing on the sage-and-cream farmhouse's front porch. Steaming mugs in hand, their calls drifted through my open car window, cautioning their little golden designer dog when it strayed too close to the street, their voices overly indulgent, as if correcting a beloved but errant child. The very picture of domestic bliss.

I studied the Colonial to the Brocktons' right. On the front porch steps, two tremendous Boston ferns in oversized urns stretched outward like dozens of welcoming arms. The only testament to human activity. Someone obviously cared for the vigorous plants, but a midnight peek inside that house's mailbox revealed only empty space. It made me uncomfortable not knowing who Jane's mystery man was.

And did Rod usually wake when his wife slipped between the silk sheets (they had to be silk) after her extracurriculars? He obviously questioned her increasingly regular late-night abandonment. He wouldn't be roaming the dark in his nightwear if he hadn't noticed.

Perhaps Jane said she couldn't sleep. She needed to move—walk the neighborhood—to tire herself. Hearing that, he'd frown, warning her not to wander around in the middle of the night. Rod was the type—I was sure just

by the way he cuddled his dog—to worry about his lovely wife walking the dark streets, even the magical byways of Deer Crossing. Hence, the need for new places to rendezvous each night. But the shed on their very own property! Even though this night's tryst was later than usual, it was dangerously daring to stay on-site. Maybe Jane wanted to get caught.

A scratching sound echoed through the quiet night. I looked at the side door Rod had just emerged from, saw his silhouette turn back and open it. The little dog circled him, barking sharply. The urgent yipping cut clearly through the still air, skittering my pulse. I quickly glanced at Emmy soundly sleeping in her stroller. If the dog didn't stop barking, I'd have to get away—fast. Emmy could wake and start her colicky wailing, which would rouse the Brocktons' neighbors whose hedge I'd appropriated. One flick of their front porch light would reveal me in all my lurking glory.

As if to answer my concerns, the dog ceased barking and scampered toward the shed. I rubbed at the sudden chill sliding across my upper arms. That little canine nose was sniffing out Jane's trail.

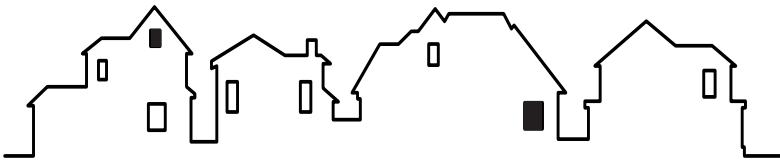
Rod stepped tentatively forward. It was too dark to see what he was wearing beneath the robe, but I pictured him in L. L. Bean slippers with those heavy rubberized soles and cotton print pajamas, like Daddy used to wear. Daddy's had line drawings of old-fashioned cars dotted across the white cotton background. Model Ts and roadsters. I felt angry with Jane all over again. *How dare she . . .*

"Sorry, darling," Jane called, striding from the shadows, stopping a few feet in front of him. "I was potting those plants earlier and thought I left my cell phone in the shed." Her voice was soft, relaxed. She was a pro.

"I saw it on the bookshelf in the study earlier this evening," Rod said, bending to calm the little dog, who was bouncing between them like a child with ADHD.

"Oh geez, I'm losing it," she said, laughing.

Not yet, you're not, I thought. Not yet.



CHAPTER TWO

Saturday, August 12

THE BABY'S CRY jarred me out of sleep.

I fought with the down comforter, kicking free and swinging my heels over the edge of the bed before I realized there was no longer any sound coming from the adjacent room or the baby monitor. Was that good or bad? Was Emmy lying face down on the crib mattress, a victim of SIDS? Were the cries she'd managed to wake me with the last she'd ever make? I raced across the room, falling into the bedroom door, my left wrist taking the brunt of my weight. I clumsily straightened and yanked the door open with my right hand and ran from the room like a fugitive, breath coming in halting gasps.

She lay in the crib on her back. The gently slumbering infant of diaper commercials: wispy nutmeg curls; cheeks glowing through the night-light gloom like shiny copper pennies. Her chubby limbs and tiny Buddha belly enveloped in warm flannel footed pajamas with no blanket. No toys or stuffed animals crowded the enclosure; the firm, UL GREENGUARD GOLD-and

CertiPUR-US certified mattress was hemmed by the Babyletto Premium crib's perfectly proportioned slats, too close together to trap a small child's head. I'd done my research. I took a deep breath, arms and legs shaking as the adrenaline coursing through my bloodstream dissipated. Normalcy returning in syncopated tremors. It was going to be a challenge, this day. Like all the others before it. Massaging my left wrist, I felt a sting in my smallest fingertip. Looking at the hand cradled in my other palm, I noticed the gleam of blood seeping into the ridge around my nail bed, the nail tip partially severed. Served me right. I couldn't remember the last time I'd filed and clipped my nails, much less gotten a proper manicure.

Truth was I couldn't recall exactly what I'd been doing during the months since Tim left, except worrying he'd take Emmy away. Now I had to endure another day. Close to fourteen hours until twilight would usher in soothing darkness. That's when I'd gently lift Emmy from her crib or ease her out of the ever-present infant carrier strapped to my chest. I'd transfer her to the state-of-the-art BABYZEN buggy, complete with bassinet top. Tim had scoffed when I bought it because it had cost half a week's salary, but it was well worth the money, encasing my precious girl in cozy warmth as the soundless wheels rolled smoothly over the paved streets.

I'd always found it soothing to explore the area. Tim and I used to take post-dinner summertime strolls when we first moved into the neighborhood, years earlier. Back when we enjoyed doing things together.

He'd quickly tired of those walks. Despite how I'd forced the issue when I became pregnant—recalling my mother's adamant advice against letting the baby, once born, come between us—Tim stopped accompanying me. I kept at it, wandering familiar streets and discovering new routes. Keeping myself fit even before I had Emmy, yet something new sprouted in my mind. Realizations and suspicions growing like the child in my womb: Why was I spending so much time alone? Where was Tim most evenings when I returned from my strolls to our stark, empty house?

Emmy was born in January, a dangerous time to take a newborn outside in Upstate New York, but it was an unseasonably warm winter, and by

late March I was once again crisscrossing the streets of our development, this time with Emmy for company.

Our walks quickly became a nightly ritual, each foray into the dusky suburban streets calming us more than the previous stroll. Before long, I was walking for hours each evening, widening our horizons and building my stamina. I'd occasionally head out during daylight hours, even though there wasn't much outdoor activity during cold winter afternoons. I preferred the anonymity of my nighttime strolls.

That was when things started to fall apart at home—or maybe it was a continuation of the downward spiral that had begun with Emmy's refusal to nurse, my baby blues, and Tim's inability to keep us or himself happy. I thought about his after-hour stints at the firm. He'd claimed to be overwhelmed by a new project, but he'd never had to work through the dinner hour in the early years of our marriage.

The night I found a matchbook from a local bar in Tim's jacket pocket, I shoved Emmy in the stroller and beelined it through the front door, anger sparking my movements, spurring me through the dark streets and farther from home. That was the evening I discovered Deer Crossing, just a mile from my house. It changed everything, sparking an odyssey into a realm previously unknown to me. I'd dutifully returned from the exclusive enclave that night and all the others that followed, but I never really made it back to the place Tim and I had been before.

It was to be expected, of course. How could I settle for the dreary happenings around my house when others were living such charmed lives? These people were like my own neighbors, but younger, fitter. Happier. Especially the couple I'd been stalking lately: Barbie-and-Ken look-alikes I'd named Matt and Melanie at 21 Pine Hill Road. Just like the couples I'd noticed through their unguarded windows that very first night who'd laughed together and cuddled on sofas in front of large-screen televisions and flickering fireplaces, the positioning of Matt and Melanie's trim, athletic bodies struck me upon first glimpse, weeks earlier: the way their entwined forms rocked in rhythm to the strains of a song I couldn't hear, their beauty

highlighted by the warm wash of incandescent light overhead. Framed by the living-room window, their faces were a blur, but I was transfixed by how her long dark hair spilled against his cheek and mingled with his blond waves. A pang sliced at my throat, making swallowing painful. The pair was maybe a few years older than Tim and me; I couldn't recall the last time Tim and I danced together. Perhaps our wedding reception? Why didn't we focus on each other the way the dreamy couple in front of my greedy eyes did? I squeezed my lids shut, trying to recall my husband's touch on my skin, but I couldn't arouse the sensation.

I felt nothing.



I SPIED ON them all.

Every neighbor too careless or too foolish to keep their shades drawn. Hundreds of houses on display, their interiors glowing with life and bleeding it out into the night. A hemorrhage of strangers gathered around dinner tables, texting on phones while gearing up Netflix, doing yoga. The activities were as varied as the people performing them. And that's what it seemed like: a show, with the homes' inhabitants cast as theatrical versions of themselves.

I needed this—the feeling of being a part of something without the responsibility of involvement. Oddly, I felt a connection to these blurry-faced strangers—a connection I hadn't been able to maintain with Tim since before Emmy was born.

He blamed me for the divide. I knew he did. His seemingly innocent remarks rankled. Like his comment after my mom's fatal accident when I'd been three months pregnant: *Maybe you'd feel less devastated if you and your mother had gotten along better.*

I stared blankly at him. "My mom was my best friend," I'd said, amazed that her death seemed to be tearing us apart rather than bonding us in grief—especially since he hadn't been overly fond of her.

And then there was his advice after the postpartum depression that had set in a week after I'd given birth: *If you force yourself to get out of bed and tend to Emmy, the mother-daughter bonding will help you overcome your depression.*

I snorted just thinking of his self-righteous remarks. What the hell did *he* know, anyway? After Dr. Ellison explained that stress, hormonal changes, and sleep deprivation had combined to create a textbook case of the baby blues, Tim grudgingly attended to Emmy amid my crying jags and unending desire for sleep.

He was always willing to do pharmacy runs. I suspected he just wanted to get out of the house, away from Emmy's endless crying and my incessant requests for help. Hours after departing for the drugstore he'd reappear with excuses of long lines, drug shortages, pharmacist consultations. Anything to make the extended absences seem believable.

I couldn't pronounce the name of the script Dr. Ellison had prescribed for postpartum depression, but I'd eagerly anticipate the Xanax the doctor told me to take only in emergencies. The medication calmed me far better than my husband did. Tim, watching me pop the pills like a halitosis sufferer scarfing down breath mints, scoffed at what he called my *weakness*.

"You can't be hoovering those pills while you're taking care of Emmy," he'd complain.

"That's why you're here," I'd point out. "Until I can get myself back on track."

He'd roll his eyes and sigh. Often, he'd storm out of the house, slamming the door behind him, not returning until my frantic texts begged him to soothe our wailing child.

The postpartum meds hadn't worked, and I wasn't able to sleep without Xanax. Claiming to worry about the potential for drug dependence, Tim began monitoring and restricting my intake, leading to endless nights without more than an hour or two of rest, giving my waking hours a surreal, nightmarish quality. Every sound became oddly amplified, as though my ears had reverberating speakers tucked inside; morning light scorched my retinas, sending shards of throbbing brightness straight into my brain,

settling into a baseline headache that no amount of ibuprofen could touch. That was the *weakness* Tim so readily diagnosed. I suppressed my resentment, convincing myself he was only looking out for my health.

Exercise helped. In the soothing dark and silence of my nightly strolls, I could function normally. My stiff legs relaxed into an easy, elongated ramble, and my lungs unclenched, turning my shallow breaths into deep, full inhalations. The later my strolls stretched into the night, the more I felt like myself.

That's when I realized how much I needed the residents of Deer Crossing. Muzzy Owen and her tribe were the first to catch my eye, and her reciprocal attention bolstered my confidence. I didn't live in the development, but I had every right to stroll the storied streets. Lately, I'd even taken to waving at Matt as I passed him. He'd wave back if he wasn't preoccupied by a strenuous yard task, like raking out the flower beds or mowing the lawn.

This August evening the temperature hovered around seventy degrees in low humidity. Emmy cooed like a chickadee content in its nest as I increased my speed up an incline, my arms laboring under the increased weight of the carriage. Gritting my teeth against the pain slicing through my left wrist—a reminder of my morning's sleep-deprived plunge into my bedroom door—I focused on the exertion. It felt cleansing, just like Dr. El-lison said it would. Now that Tim no longer lived with me, I could walk the streets at any time of the day or night. I didn't have to get back from my evening strolls before he came home. Didn't have to figure out where he'd been while I was walking off my resentment.

Even so, Emmy needed a mother *and* a father, no matter our difficulties. I texted Tim every day about important child-related topics. Asking his opinion about starting Emmy on rice gruel, sharing a milestone she'd reached or a worry over a minor health issue. Even though he seldom answered me, I was determined to keep him involved in our child's life, and eventually get him back home. I knew only too well how impossible it was to endure a childhood without a dad.

I scooted across the three-lane thoroughfare separating Highland Knolls, my neighborhood of modest ranches and bilevels, to Deer Crossing. Consisting of a few hundred dwellings, the upscale development had two parallel main roads leading off Route 55 and into the neighborhood: Pine Hill Road on the west side, and Woodmint Lane on the east. Connecting them at the northernmost end of each road was Primrose Way, which stretched from the bike trails at Woodmint to the pond on Lakeside, just beyond Primrose and north of Pine Hill. Each of these roads had multiple connecting paths and cul-de-sacs with winding streets and expertly landscaped lots. As I started up Woodmint, I wondered if the neighbors had banded together to create a cohesive planting plan. Even in the muted glow of the HPS streetlights, the perennials peeking around stately birches shut out the memory of the ragged, yellowing hostas lining my house's walkway. This night I meandered, noting how the light layered over the smooth expanse of lawn extending from house to house like an unending carpet. I could discern no weeds in the seamless stretches of grass.

This should have been my life, my neighborhood. As a mechanical engineer, Tim made a decent buck, and my home-based medical-billing job helped cover the extras. My virtual position meant no childcare expenses, which was fortunate. With my parents gone and Tim's entire family across the country in Seattle, my salary would have been swallowed by day-care costs had I been forced to commute to an office each day.

I'd wanted the big, impressive house, and we could have swung it. Our other expenses were minimal. We preferred our television to movie theaters; takeout to dining out; comfortable clothes to designer labels. And we'd been saving for the future. I'd talked about a big family, like the four-sibling clan Tim had been raised in, not the sad little twosome that had comprised most of my childhood. But my husband decided for us both that prudence was called for. We'd start in a house we could afford rather than live in a "monstrosity" we'd struggle to make payments on.

I'd reluctantly agreed to our simple two-bedroom ranch on Tim's assurance that as our salaries and family grew, we'd expand to a bigger place.

Seemed like a good plan, until my mother died, and my world began to unravel. Now the modest house felt like a condemnation. I needed a home like the one we'd envisioned ourselves eventually living in, a validation of sorts. No chance I'd ever have it unless I could get Tim back.

At the end of Woodmint, I'd eventually turn left onto Primrose Way and pass Muzzy's house at the other end of that street, near Pine Hill. With any luck she'd be outside, maybe sitting on her front porch. It was early enough—much earlier than most of my treks into the neighborhood. I walked faster, my gaze lasered once again on the Brocktons' sage farmhouse as I neared it. One low light was on in the living room. I glanced at the completely dark Colonial next door, which I recalled was the tawny tone of a caramel chewy in daylight.

"Good evening," came a female voice from somewhere in the shadows. Jane Brockton.

I jumped, heart slamming into breastbone. A dark figure stood like a sentinel at the end of the driveway, next to the mailbox. "Oh, uh, hello."

"I didn't mean to frighten you," she said, stepping forward. Her tone suggested otherwise.

"No, that's okay, I'm just . . ." I trailed off, my pounding heart making breathing and speaking at the same time impossible.

"You spend an awful lot of time on this street, don't you?"

She'd noticed my snooping. My mind clicked into survival mode, sending desperate messages to my mouth.

"Well, you know how it is with colicky babies." I looked down at the carriage and back at her advancing form. "Whatever it takes to get them to sleep."

"No, I don't know. I don't have children." Jane's tone sounded oddly challenging. "What's the baby's name?"

"Emmy," I said, my quivering voice hinting at my reluctance to tell her anything about myself.

She stopped a few feet in front of me and raised her hand, which held an iPhone. She turned on the built-in flashlight, creating a harsh halo of light

around her stunning figure. I'd clearly not been able to properly appreciate her attractiveness from a distance. "May I take a peek?"

Seriously? She wants to shine a high-intensity beam into my infant's face? Good thing she doesn't have children. I raised the bassinet hood, an urgency to get away from her overwhelming me. "I just got her to sleep; she's hypersensitive to light."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. Perhaps she wanted a child and Rod was unwilling or unable to provide any for her. He was, after all, a good bit older than she was. She stepped back, giving me the impression of a balloon deflating slightly. "You'll have to stroll by in the daytime when the baby's awake." She accented the word *daytime*.

"I'll do that," I promised, pressing on the carriage handle.

"I'm Jane, by the way."

"Alice," I lied. "Nice to meet you," I called over my shoulder as I started to walk away.

"You look like that woman who used to go to Muzzy Owen's house." Her voice had a hard edge that sent a shiver down my spine. "But her name wasn't Alice."

I froze. "You know Muzzy?" I tried to suppress the surprise in my voice.

"I know everyone in this neighborhood. But I don't know you."

"Well, I don't actually live here."

"I know that. I can follow people too. Your name is Caroline, so why would you tell me it's Alice?"

My throat went dry. I turned toward her, my legs shaking. "Look, I don't want any trouble."

"Then don't lie to me."

"I don't even know you," I held my hand up. "I never tell strangers my name."

"You're the stranger here, and I'd prefer you keep it that way. Stick to your own neighborhood. Keep your stroller, your car, and yourself off these streets. You don't belong here."

Her petty threat burst my fear like a soap bubble.

Who the hell was *she* to tell me where I could stroll my child? I lowered my chin until my gaze was level with hers. “I can walk wherever I please. If you have a problem with that, too bad.”

“You need to mind your own business. Keep your nose out of—”

“Out of what?” I sighed, impatience warring with the good manners my mother instilled in me. “Your *business* looks like a lot more fun than mine.”

Jane’s mouth dropped and I could see her face redden in the ambient light from her cell phone, now glowing beside her thigh where she’d dropped her hand. Before she could sputter out a reply, I turned on my heel and headed down the street, vigorously pushing the stroller ahead of me.

Was that a good idea? asked a voice. The voice that sounded like my mother’s.

“Probably not,” I muttered. But it felt fantastic to tell her off.

I couldn’t properly catch my breath until I was in front of Muzzy’s dark house. So, Jane had followed me home one evening? So much for my stealth. Gazing at the shadowy box that was Muzzy’s house, I wondered if my former BFF had filled Jane in on my story. Sadness encircled me like a heavy woolen cape, weighing me down and notching my body temperature up a good ten degrees. I didn’t care. Even if my one-time friend had gossiped all over the neighborhood about me, I deserved it. And it would be a small price to pay to get Muzzy Owen back in my life.

My gaze lingering on the dark house, I walked on. Ignoring the trickle of the fountain in the loathsome pond to my right, I turned left onto Pine Hill Road and approached Matt and Melanie’s house on the corner. A porch light flicked on, illuminating the 21 over the front door, which was open to reveal the profiles of two people. Melanie, her long tresses recently chopped to her shoulders, thrust her arms around the shoulders of a tall, dark-haired man and pressed herself intimately against him.

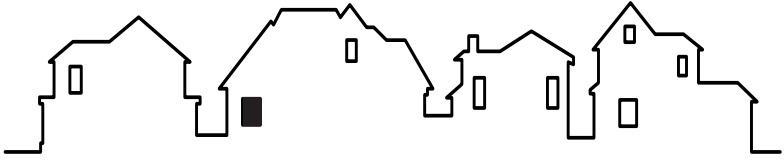
“I don’t care,” she declared. “Let him find out about us. Let them *all* find out!”

I paused, staring. The man in Melanie’s arms was not the fair-haired Matt.

“Don’t say that, it’s dangerous,” warned the man, not returning her embrace. He shot a furtive glance toward the street, his eyes catching mine. Alarm crossed his features, followed by anger. With one hand he reached out and caught the edge of the door in his grasp, slamming it firmly shut.

I startled, but I wasn’t sure whether it was surprise or my own anger that made me flinch.

How dare she do that to Matt! She has everything! Good God, she’s no better than slimy Jane Brockton!



CHAPTER THREE

Sunday, August 13

I STAGGERED INTO THE kitchen, squinting against the sunrise lighting up the window over the sink. My clumsy paws spilled coffee grounds all over the counter. I tidied, tried again, my mind cycling through the thoughts that had prevented rest this night and all the others: thoughts of my husband. Quite possibly my soon-to-be ex-husband.

I closed my eyes tightly, trying to squeeze out the image of our first meeting, years before, but Tim appeared in torturous detail on the backs of my eyelids.

I met him in the produce section of the Stop & Shop. I was sizing up the Roma tomatoes, squeezing one, when he angled his shopping cart next to me, nearly knocking over a cardboard fixture of avocados.

“You swing like a hammock,” he said, leaning casually against the cart, offering me no choice but to meet his gaze or appear rude.

“Excuse me?”

“Your walk, it swings back and forth like a hammock.”

I felt my face flush with embarrassment and a bit of pleasure. I frowned and looked at his cart, inches from the avocado display. “And you steer that thing like a drunk.”

He laughed and angled the end of the cart toward me. “I used to have a hammock slung between two maple trees in my yard. Loved that thing. I’d swing for hours under those leaves. I liked the way the sun flickered through them, hitting me in flashes. Nature’s strobe light.”

“That’s an oddly specific thing to share with a total stranger,” I said, but I noticed he had nice brown eyes. His flannel shirt looked pressed.

He grinned; his gaze locked with mine. “The swaying is so enticing.”

I blushed again; my face certainly as red as the tomato I held. “That’s weird,” I said, unable to think of anything to add. I’d never been good at flirting.

“Would you give this weirdo your phone number?” His voice was as intimate as a cat’s purr.

“Probably not.”

But he walked out of the store with my number digitally tucked into his iPhone. I’d watched him add my name, Caroline Messier, to his contact list, wedging it between “Erika Merchant” and “Myer’s Meat Market.”

A few years later, just after we’d married, I looked for the hammock in the items he was moving from his storage unit into our new garage. When I asked him where the hammock was, he didn’t even pause as he explained he’d tossed the thing years earlier.

“I thought you loved it.”

He shrugged. “I did until I brought it on a camping trip and spent an entire night in it. Felt like a butterfly caught in a net. My joints haven’t been the same since.”

I’d watched him shove boxes across the garage’s concrete floor, realizing for the first time how casually Tim could discard something he’d claimed to love.

I looked toward the blazing kitchen window as if staring at the searing brightness could blast the memory from my mind. The sad truth was, I’d

become inconvenient. Maybe Emmy was too. We made his life more difficult. Uncomfortable. Maybe he felt like that trapped butterfly. Trapped in our small house with no escape from the baby's cries. Or from me.

The doorbell cut through my musing.

"Good morning, dolly." Mary Whitton, my ancient next-door neighbor, stood on the front stoop, her ample frame swaddled in an oatmeal-colored sweater over navy polyester pants despite the morning warmth. "Have you got a cup of refreshment for a weary traveler?"

Swallowing a sigh, I recited my well-worn lines: "Those three dozen steps between our houses can challenge even a marathon runner."

Mary seemed to draw energy from the stale exchange. As usual. Stepping over the threshold, running a hand through her already tousled gray flyaways, she beamed. "I can smell the coffee brewing." She stretched her hand out with a flourish. "After you, fearless leader."

I led her through the living room and nodded toward the tiny table near my galley kitchen, though I needn't have bothered. Mary knew the drill. She sat down heavily as I hooked my hand around the coffeepot handle and grabbed a mug from the cabinet above the steaming machine.

When I placed Tim's "#1 Tennis Player" mug in front of her, she pulled out a mini of Bailey's from her sweater pocket, twisted it open, and dumped the contents into the mug. "I like a strong cup of coffee. Good for what ails you."

"What ails you today? Arthritis acting up?"

"Always." She heaved a dramatic sigh, her breath emanating in briny waves thanks to her two-pack-a-day habit and daily gargling with salt water. She claimed it was good for her throat though I suspected it was an attempt to neutralize the ever-present alcohol vapors. I could hardly judge. I'd been known to nip during daylight hours myself. Still, the stench of her breath, reminiscent of bilge water in the hull of a dilapidated boat, churned my stomach.

"You want some ibuprofen?"

"No, dolly. I'll . . ."

“Manage without it?” I had to do that a lot, finish her sentences, that is. She seemed to forget what she was saying *as* she was saying it.

She nodded, staring down at her steaming mug.

I filled my own cup and leaned against the counter, watching her lift her mug to her puckered lips with one hand while digging into her sweater pocket with the other, deftly fishing out a pack of Newports. She’d barely gotten the mug back onto the tabletop when she pulled out the matches stuffed between the pack and its outer cellophane wrapper.

“Mary, I’ve asked you not to smoke in the house. It’s bad for the baby.”

“I don’t see no baby around here.”

“Well, of course not. She’s sleeping.”

Mary shook her head. “That poor child.”

I frowned. “Goodness, Mary. It’s not as if Emmy’s an orphan. I’m here, and Tim is still her father, even if we aren’t living together right now. You make it sound as though he’s dead.”

“Just like my Bill. Dead.”

I sighed and opened the kitchen door. Mary was in a melancholy mood this morning. Probably still hungover. “Let’s go out on the deck.”

“Good idea, dolly. It’s so . . .”

“Nice outside?”

She followed me to the two faux wicker chairs I’d set up in the corner. Mary settled, crossed her legs, and gulped her drink, letting her unlit cigarette rest between her yellowed index and middle fingers. “Not that Bill couldn’t be a perfect bastard when he wanted to. But the baby, she didn’t . . .”

“Deserve this?” I looked at Mary’s quivering lower lip. “No, she didn’t.”

As Mary placed her mug on the rickety glass-and-steel table between us and lit up, I thought none of us got what we deserved in this life. I didn’t deserve to have my father die when I was only six. I didn’t deserve to have my mother taken from me just when I needed her most. I thought of all the motherly advice she’d never give me.

Mary’s voice broke into my thoughts, “Caroline, things are going to be okay.”

I noticed the reddish wood stain was beginning to peel at the edges of the deck boards. “Do you really think so?”

“With time.” She took a long drag and held it in her lungs.

“I don’t know. Tim talks like he has no intention of coming back to me. Ever.”

Mary exhaled. “You need to give it . . . time . . .”

“It’s been months. How long do I hold out?” I looked at her, saw the Baileys kick in as she focused her glassy stare on the weed-filled grass of my backyard. It was futile to believe she’d be capable of giving me sound advice now. “Do you have any more of that stuff?”

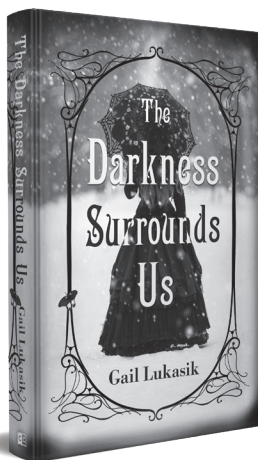
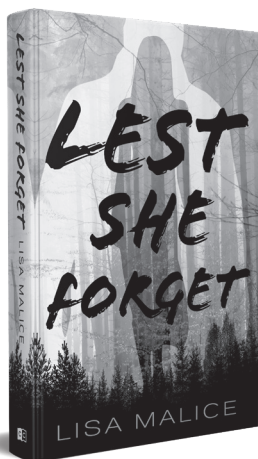
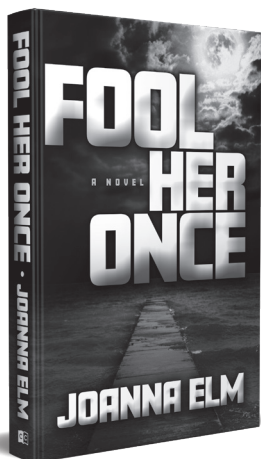
She looked at me for a second as if she’d forgotten I was sitting in front of her. But then she smiled and patted her pocket with her free hand. She pulled out another nip, her expression bordering on surprise, as though someone else had tucked it into her sweater pocket. But of course no one had. She lived alone. When Tim and I moved in, she’d explained her husband, Bill, had left her and then died, years before. Did Mary deserve that?

No wonder the poor woman drank. She’d been unable to hold on to her man and then robbed of the chance for a do-over when death snatched him permanently away. Would that happen to me too? I pictured Tim twenty pounds lighter, disease carving haggard hollows beneath his eyes and a ragged cough turning his voice ominously husky. *I’ve only got weeks left*, he’d say, and I’d reach out to him, my hand poised to caress his cheek. Offering him the comfort he’d so heartlessly denied me.

I rubbed my lips with my pointer finger, thinking that may just be the ending *he* deserved. But as Mary held the nip toward me, regret lodged in my throat. Of course Tim didn’t deserve a painful death. He was the father of my child, no matter how much I resented him these days. Jane Brockton’s bitchiness must be getting to me. I seemed to be thinking just like her.

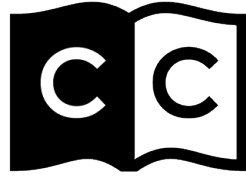


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BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SEE WHEN YOU SHOULDN'T BE LOOKING.

Residents of the posh Upstate New York neighborhood of Deer Crossing enjoy all the amenities wealth provides. From drive-up dog-grooming to monthly botox parties, these lucky suburbanites have everything they could ever want—and one thing they don't want: Caroline Case, who wheels her infant along their streets each night with just one goal . . . to spy on anyone too careless or too foolish to close their window blinds.

Convinced the owners of the impressive homes are living a dream existence, the troubled new mom hopes to escape her working-class life by prying secrets from the unsuspecting. But the fairy tale twists into a nightmare when she sees something she shouldn't. Something that shatters her illusions about the people in the privileged community she's obsessed with, even as she begins to doubt what she saw.

As Caroline investigates the event, shocking secrets are laid bare, and nothing is as it seems. She knows she must prove something sinister occurred in Deer Crossing or risk letting someone get away with murder.


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