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IS
WATCHING**

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An absolutely gripping psychological thriller packed with twists

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PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER
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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.