

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 farm-house-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 coddled 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.