

THE POSTMAN ALWAYS FLIRTS TWICE

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Suitcases unpacked? Check. Dirty clothes in the washing machine? Check. Husband off to work and children off to school, leaving me a few precious hours to myself? Check with a capital C.

Not that I hadn't loved spending my kids' spring break visiting my in-laws. But nothing topped my quiet morning routine of sitting in my breakfast nook, enjoying a cup of strong coffee as birds fluttered at the feeder right outside the window while I planned my—

Wait. What was this?

The women who lived in the four other houses on the cul-de-sac were chatting by Judy Cater's mailbox. Well, all but Nancy Barclay's mother, who rarely joined these impromptu gatherings. Judy was talking with her hands—she only did that when upset—as her mini-Jack

Russell terrier, Juno Pickle, wound her way around Judy's toothpick-thin legs. I leaned closer, pressing my nose against the windowpane. Why was Judy riled up? What was going on?

I dashed outside, cut between two of the blooming rhododendrons lining my front walkway, and hurried across my lawn. I needed to find out what was up—am I nosy? Check—but I didn't want to seem too eager. When it comes to suburban gossip, you have to walk a fine line between interested and desperate. The conversation stopped as I neared. Yvonne Hamilton made a show of checking her watch.

"We've been standing here talking for five minutes. You're slipping, Hazel." Yvonne smirked as she looked down her freckled nose at me, literally and figuratively. She was tall.

"You're hysterical," I said.

Yvonne often implied I was insinuating myself into these chats, as if they were all besties (to use a term my daughter loved) and I was an outsider. But the only one who didn't like me much was Yvonne. She was probably one of the cool girls back in school—she gave off that vibe. The only time I was cool—then or now—was when I went sleeveless. Besides, if my neighbors wanted to keep things private, they wouldn't talk in the street, right where they knew I'd see them. After all, my morning routine wasn't a secret. I turned my attention to Judy, whose heart-shaped face was wan, as if she hadn't been sleeping well.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"I'm fine." Judy brushed her auburn bangs out of her eyes. "Just stressed. The police came to see me *again* yesterday, so—"

"The police?" Well, now my interest was really piqued. "About what?"

"You haven't heard?" Judy asked. "Oh, of course. You've been away. Someone murdered Mr. Whitlock."

Our mailman? My eyes couldn't have widened any more if I were an owl. "You've gotta be kidding. When?"

"Wednesday," Nancy said as she adjusted her long blond ponytail.

"That's when I found him," Judy said. "I was walking Juno Pickle on the trail back there in the afternoon." Judy gestured to the woods behind the cul-de-sac. "She started sniffing and pulling hard, practically dragging me into the brush. I thought she was after a chipmunk or squirrel. Then she pawed through a pile of dead leaves, and a hand became visible. I screamed so loud it's amazing I had to run home to call the police. They should've heard me."

"The cops think Mr. Whitlock died that morning." Louise Dietz picked up the story. "At least, that's my best guess, considering they've asked us all for our whereabouts for the morning, between eight and eleven."

So strange. I knew these women and their families intimately. We all had lived side by side in this cul-de-sac for years. I couldn't imagine any of them was a killer. They were good neighbors. Judy always picked up her dog's waste. Louise could be counted on to water plants and collect mail if someone went on vacation. And they all made sure their kids didn't make too much noise. But my affection for them went beyond what we did for each other. It was based on who they were: caring and trusted friends.

But we were the only people who lived near these woods. If the police were right and Mr. Whitlock's body was hidden Wednesday morning, a stranger couldn't have done it. At least one of these ladies would've noticed if a stranger walked back there—especially with a dead body in tow. They all were around much of the time, either working in a home office or toiling as a stay-at-home mom, like me. Well, Louise worked at the library, but not on Wednesday mornings.

Since none of them saw a stranger, I had to assume, like the police apparently did, that one of them killed the mailman—or one of their husbands did it. (I refused to believe one of their children had done it, even Louise’s fifteen-year-old son, Shane, the oldest of the group.) So that left seven suspects: Judy and her husband, Jack, Louise and her husband, Larry, Yvonne, Nancy, and Nancy’s mom, Frances. But who did it? And why?

“The police are focused on all of you?” I quickly glanced at each of them, looking for telltale signs of guilt but spotting none.

“Well, me mostly,” Judy said, sounding exasperated, “since I found him.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I said. “Why would you alert them to a hidden body if you’re the one who hid it?”

“I don’t know,” Judy said. “It makes no sense to me either.”

“They might think you were using reverse psychology,” Nancy said. “If you killed him—and I’m not saying you did—you might think the body would be found eventually, so it’d be better if you ‘discovered’ it, assuming they wouldn’t suspect you of hiding it and then calling their attention to it.”

“That line of reasoning gives me a headache,” Judy said.

“Just remember,” Yvonne told her, “you’re not the only one who could have done it, so they could consider us all suspects. We all were home Wednesday morning.”

“Not only were we home, but we’re the *only* ones who were around between eight and eleven,” Louise said, readjusting her oval eyeglasses, which had a tendency to slide down her angular nose. “No husbands. No children. There wasn’t even a gardener with an obnoxiously loud leaf blower.”

“What about Shane?” I asked. Eight in the morning seemed a little early for Louise’s son to be out and about during vacation.

She half laughed. “Larry dragged Shane to work with him last week. He didn’t want Shane sleeping the days away. Said he should see what the real world’s like. I think this morning was the first time Shane ever looked forward to going to school.”

Larry was a manager at an office supply store in Tysons Corner, about ten miles away, right outside DC. Multiple people would be able to vouch that he and Shane were there Wednesday morning. That took them off the suspect list.

“Jack wasn’t home either. He flew out Tuesday night.” Judy’s husband was a pilot for Eastern Skylines. “And the twins were in Nashville, visiting Jack’s parents.”

That left Judy and the dog on their own Wednesday morning too. The number of suspects was now down to five.

“Add me to the no-alibi club,” Yvonne said. “I was home alone, working. Kenneth had the kids last week.” Yvonne was the divorced editor of a monthly newsletter for the hotel industry. She sneezed twice in quick succession.

“God bless you,” Judy said.

“Thanks,” Yvonne said. “Damn pollen has my allergies in overdrive.”

Spring really had sprung in the past week. Not only were a lot of cars now sporting a beautiful coating of yellow pollen, but the trees had leafed out too. And the surest sign winter was over: this morning I spotted an eastern phoebe on a branch of the redbud tree near my kitchen’s window. The adorable plump birds with brown bodies and white chests always returned to Northern Virginia in April, singing their hearts out.

I was so grateful I didn't have allergies and could enjoy spring, unlike Yvonne, who—if I remembered correctly—was allergic to dust mites, mold, and cat dander, in addition to pollen. I wouldn't be surprised if her tissue purchases each spring weren't responsible for a major portion of the Kleenex corporation's annual profits. Were her allergies the universe's payback for her often being snide to me and likely many others before me? Probably not, but a girl could dream.

Louise patted Yvonne's arm in a comforting way while saying to me, "The only one of us who has an alibi is Nancy. That must be a relief for you." She eyed Nancy.

"Frances was home?" I asked.

"Her and Teddy." Nancy's mom, Frances, moved in with her after Nancy's husband moved out two years ago—while Nancy was pregnant with Teddy. I still could hardly believe it.

"Not that I want the police to focus on you instead of me," Judy said, "but it could happen. You should be prepared. I watch a lot of *Law and Order*. A parent isn't likely to be a believable alibi."

"They don't seem concerned," Nancy said. "They talked to me once, and that was it. Probably because I had no reason to kill him."

"That's good," Louise said, "because even if the police believe Frances, you couldn't have been together the whole time. I saw her and Teddy playing on the front lawn."

"That's when I was measuring the kitchen and living room. Mom would have seen if I left. And I know she didn't go anywhere. She'd never leave Teddy alone."

"You were measuring?" Judy asked. "So you're not going to move? You're going to remodel instead?"

"Thinking about it," Nancy said. "Not sure yet."

"I hope you stay," Louise said. "It's all so exciting."

Move? Remodel? This was new. “Did I miss something?” I asked. It seemed like money had been tight for Nancy since her divorce. How could she afford to remodel?

“Heck yeah, you did.” Yvonne smirked, as if thrilled I was out of the loop. Then she sneezed again.

“Tuesday morning,” Judy said, “Juno Pickle and I were coming back from our walk when a van pulled into Nancy’s driveway. Several people got out carrying balloons, champagne, roses, and a huge cardboard check, with cameramen filming the whole thing.”

“Nancy won the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes!” Louise said. “It made the *Washington Post*.”

No way. But from the grin stretching across Nancy’s face, it seemed to be true.

“A million dollars!” Nancy pumped her fist. “They say you don’t have to buy magazines to win, but I always do, for good luck. And it finally paid off.”

“If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I might not have believed it,” Louise said. “We all gathered here to watch. I’d just gotten back from Giant, and my ice cream was melting, but I didn’t care.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said. “It’s going to change your whole life.”

Nancy sighed, still grinning.

“I can’t believe I missed the Prize Patrol,” I said. Why did interesting things always happen when I wasn’t home? First this, and then the murder. Well, it actually was good I hadn’t been home for that. I wouldn’t want the police looking too closely at me. But still, I couldn’t believe I missed the excitement. “Was Ed McMahon here?”

“No,” Nancy said. “He just does their commercials.”

“Bummer.”

Nancy shrugged. “No biggiee.”

I guess when you’ve won that much money, it doesn’t matter who hands over the check.

Frances stepped out of Nancy’s front door, waving a cordless phone. “Looks like my public awaits,” Nancy said with a wink.

“And I have to get to work,” Yvonne said.

“No. Don’t everyone go,” Louise said as the two women departed. “You’ll leave me no excuse not to vacuum.”

Judy and I laughed as we walked off, but hers wasn’t as lighthearted as mine. I wanted to hug her fears away, even as I wondered who I should be afraid of.

A few minutes later, with a fresh cup of coffee in hand, I sat on my sun porch, gazing out at the woods and thinking about Mr. Whitlock. I still had no idea why anyone would kill him. He’d always seemed so nice and friendly.

The police would probably talk to me soon, asking for my alibi. And Dave’s. My in-laws could vouch that Dave, the kids, and I were in southern Virginia with them all last week, but like Nancy and her mom, we weren’t together all the time. A suspicious cop might wonder if Dave or I could have driven here during the night, killed the mailman, then driven back before anyone noticed we were gone. Of course, Dave would have noticed if I were gone. A night didn’t go by that the man didn’t get up to use the bathroom. And I would’ve noticed if he left since I’m a light sleeper. But the cops might not believe that, and I didn’t need them looking into me.

My neighbors knew me as Hazel Meade, the nosy mom who wanted all the gossip. But when I lived in Oregon in my twenties, I was Hannah Penniman, the bookkeeper who embezzled money to help her cancer-stricken mom avoid bankruptcy. Before we married, I told Dave what I’d done, how I’d run and changed my name. That our lives might be disrupted at any moment if

the Oregon police found me. (I didn't know if the theft had been discovered and I'd been blamed, but it seemed likely after all this time.) I told Dave that he—and our potential children—deserved better. He squeezed and kissed my hand. “Take a chance on love,” he said. The man always knew how to say the right thing, so I took that chance, though I'd kept a low profile all these years, just in case.

So before the police here in Oak Hill turned their attention to me, possibly figuring out my real name and turning upside down all our lives, I needed to serve the killer up on a platter for them.

I hoped I didn't die trying.

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“I still can't believe Nancy won all that money,” Judy said an hour later as we sat on her screened-in back porch, drinking more coffee and staring out at the woods past her split-rail fence.

“You're telling me.” While I'd never steal again, I wished I could pump up my bank account that easily. “You think she'll move?”

“I hope not. She and Frances are good neighbors, and Teddy is a doll. Besides, I hate change.”

“Me too.”

I'd decided to come see Judy first. She lived next door, and she felt like family. Heck, that applied to all of us in the cul-de-sac. We watched each other's children. Were in and out of each other's homes regularly. I loved them all, except Yvonne, whom I tolerated.

“So, about Mr. Whitlock ...”

Judy chuckled. “I was wondering when you'd get to that.”

“I forgot to ask earlier, how’d he die?”

“Head injury of some sort.”

“You really think the police suspect you?”

“Feels that way.” Juno Pickle wandered into the room. Judy rubbed behind her chocolate-brown ears, and as the dog’s tail wagged, Judy’s face relaxed, if but for a moment.

“What have they said?”

“The detectives keep asking the same questions. What made me walk on the trail that day?”

“You walk there every day.”

“That’s what I told them. We walk the trail through the woods every afternoon. Then they asked how well I knew Mr. Whitlock, if I had any problems with him.” She shook her head, blowing out a long breath.

From Judy’s tone, it felt like we were getting somewhere. “What am I missing? You had problems with the mailman?”

“Not exactly. I ...” She hesitated. Seemed to struggle.

“What, honey?” I hated having selfish reasons for encouraging Judy to unburden herself. But I’d have asked even without an ulterior motive. Judy was my friend, and if I could help her, I would. “Talk to me.”

“About a year ago ...”

“What?”

“I went on a date with him.”

No way. "You and the mailman?" How could I have not known this? Why hadn't she told me before? I had my secrets, and apparently Judy did too, but this was the type of confidence I would have thought she'd have shared long ago.

"Vinny. His name is Vinny. Was Vinny."

"I didn't realize you and Jack were having problems."

"We're not!" Judy stood and started pacing. "Oh, God. How did I end up in this mess? I only went on one date with him. I swear. I didn't even want to."

"Then why did you?"

"This is so stupid." Judy's lip wobbled, as if she might cry. "I was afraid I wouldn't get my mail."

"Excuse me?"

"One day, when Jack's car wasn't in the driveway, Vinny rang the bell. He held out my mail and suggested we have dinner. I was so startled. The very idea. I grasped the envelopes and tried to pull them to me, but he held on. And suddenly I got the feeling that if I said no, our mail might get delayed or lost entirely. We were waiting for our tax refund."

"That scumbag."

"You got that right. So I left the kids at Louise's that evening. Jack was out of town. And I met Vinny for dinner."

"Did you at least get to go somewhere nice?"

"Ha! Mr. Suave suggested we eat at Denny's."

"Oh, you poor thing."

"At least we met at the one in Fairfax, so I didn't run into anyone I know."

"That was it? One high-flying date at Denny's?"

She nodded. “As we were getting to the end of our meals, he asked what I’d like to do afterward. He said he gives ‘really good massages.’”

I rolled my eyes. “We all know what that means.”

“Right? That’s where I drew the line. He might have been handsome, but I was not going to have sex with him. I told him it wouldn’t be a good idea, and I figured if he pressured me again or if any of our mail went missing, I could go to the post office and complain to his supervisor.”

“Why didn’t you do that in the first place?”

Judy flopped back in her white wicker chair. “I didn’t want to make a fuss. ... And I didn’t know if they’d believe me. I mean, I’m over forty years old.”

“So?” I was over forty years old, and I thought I cleaned up pretty good. We both did.

“Come on. He was like ten years younger than me. Why would he pressure me of all people for a date?”

I leaned forward. “Stop that right now. You are a wonderful, attractive woman. If I didn’t have Dave, I’d take you to Denny’s too.”

Judy barked out a laugh. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. So, do the police know about this?”

“No. They probably suspected I was holding something back, but I couldn’t tell them. They might accuse me of killing Vinny in revenge. They might tell Jack.”

“You don’t imagine he knows, do you? That he might’ve—”

“No. Jack was out of town. And he doesn’t know. But the police might tell him, and he’d be devastated I kept this secret from him. You have to swear, Hazel, to keep it between us.”

I hated that Judy had been put in this position. I couldn't imagine she killed that jerk, especially not over something that happened a year ago, even if he deserved it.

So I crossed her off my suspect list and zipped my fingers across my lips. The police might find out about Judy's date, but it wouldn't come from me.

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I went straight from Judy's house to Louise's. I wanted to catch her before she left for work.

"Whatever you're making smells delicious," I said as she led us to her screened-in patio with beautiful teak furniture. Each of us carried a cup of coffee. At this rate, I'd never sleep tonight.

"Garlic chicken in the Crock-Pot. Super easy. I can give you the recipe."

"Yes, please."

Louise lowered the radio on the side table before sitting. She usually had seventies soft rock playing, no matter the room she was in. If anything by Abba, especially "Dancing Queen," came on, she cranked it up and shook her booty, much to her friends' delight and her son's dismay.

We shared small talk for a few minutes, then I got down to business. "This thing with Mr. Whitlock"—I didn't want to reveal I knew his first name—"has me worried."

She shook her head in a disgusted manner. "It's ridiculous the cops are focusing on Judy just because she found the body. Any of us could have done that. It was right there."

I followed her pointed finger. Yellow crime-scene tape was swaying in the breeze about fifty yards beyond where her backyard ended and the woods began. I wouldn't be able to see that spot from my house now that the trees had leafed out, but Louise had a decent view.

“You didn’t see anything last Wednesday morning?” Judy had told me she hadn’t.

“Not a thing. I spent most of the morning cleaning the bathrooms and doing laundry. The rest, I was straightening Shane’s bedroom. It overlooks the woods, but I didn’t spot anyone out there. That vantage point from his window isn’t great. And I didn’t notice anyone in the cul-de-sac when I dusted the living room. No one unusual anyway.”

“Did you see someone who was ... usual?”

“Just Frances playing with Teddy, like most mornings.”

Right, she’d said that earlier. I’d talk to Frances and Nancy after lunch. “You have any idea who might’ve had a grudge against Mr. Whitlock?”

“Me?” She laughed. “Kidding.”

“Sounds like there’s a story there.”

Louise flapped her hand. “Whitlock was such a sleaze. He actually came on to me last fall.”

Talk about déjà vu. “What happened?”

“I said no, of course.”

“How’d he take it?”

“He was *devastated*.”

I chuckled. “You weren’t afraid of not getting your mail if you pissed him off?”

“Huh.” She tapped a finger against her lips. “Never crossed my mind. Now that you mention it, he was the type to take that kind of petty revenge. Thankfully we never noticed any mail missing.”

“Why didn’t you ever mention this before?”

“I didn’t want Larry to find out. He would’ve complained at the post office, tried to get Whitlock fired. Believe me, the guy deserved it. But I figured he might have kids to support. I didn’t want that on my conscience.”

I could understand that. “You know anyone else who had a grudge against him?”

“Nope. But it wouldn’t surprise me if he propositioned other women on his postal route.”

Wouldn’t surprise me either.

“Sorry,” Louise said, rising. “I have to get ready for work. Oh, and before I forget, here’s your mail. No one got any last Wednesday, but by Thursday, they’d assigned us someone new. Not sure if she’s temporary, but she’s gotta be better.” Louise handed me a rubber-banded batch from a table in the corner.

“Thanks, and thanks for the coffee.” I headed to the front door, mentally crossing Louise off my list. Maybe I shouldn’t have been going by my gut, but I didn’t believe she killed him.

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An hour later, I perched on a stool in Nancy’s kitchen, leaning my elbows on the white ceramic-tile island. For a woman who wasn’t planning to move, she certainly had a lot of Realtor ads ripped out of the phone book. Oh, I hoped she wouldn’t go. And I prayed she wasn’t the killer. But then, I didn’t want any of my neighbors to be guilty.

Nancy poured us ice tea while I enjoyed the sweet scent of hyacinths floating in through her window. Back when she was married, she gardened all the time. Since Teddy arrived, her focus had understandably shifted. But thanks to all the perennials planted out front, she—and all of us—could still enjoy them each spring.

We talked about her winning the sweepstakes. I asked about Frances, who was out with Teddy for another walk. I'd have to catch her later. Then I moved the conversation on to Whitlock.

"I hope they find who killed him soon," Nancy said. "I haven't made a decision yet about moving versus remodeling, but if I do move, an unsolved murder right behind the house won't be good for sales."

"Solved or unsolved, the value of all our homes will probably take a dip, at least in the short run." She sighed as I sipped my drink, then I continued. "This still seems so unreal. Do you have any idea why someone would've had it in for him?"

"No clue."

"Did you ever have any problems with him? Or your mom?"

"I didn't," Nancy said. "I doubt Mom did. She would've mentioned it. Why, did you?"

Come to think of it, I didn't. Whitlock apparently had a thing for married women, went so far as to proposition Judy and Louise. But he'd passed me completely by. I should've been grateful, but I felt insulted. "Nope. He was always nice to me. Friendly." But not too friendly.

"That's good. Isn't it?" Nancy tilted her head, and I realized I'd let my annoyance show.

"Of course. I was just thinking about something else." Time to change the subject. Fast. "Have the police said anything about what the motive might have been? I feel like, if we could find a motive, we could find the killer, and then we could all feel safe again. I don't want you to move away because you don't feel safe."

A smile graced Nancy's face. "It was kind of a one-way street with them. They asked questions. Didn't provide a lot of information."

And just like that, I was out of questions. Except for one. “Can I use your bathroom before I go? Between the ice tea and several cups of coffee today, I’m about to float away.”

“Sure. You know where it is.”

I made my way to her powder room. As I was drying my hands a couple of minutes later, I breathed in the spicy fragrance of rhododendrons through the screened window. Nancy had the same pretty pink plants lining the side of her house as I had bordering my front walkway. I stepped to the window, eased aside the curtain, and inhaled deeply as I admired the contrast between the dark brick of Louise’s house and the white blinds in her bathroom window. The rhododendrons’ fragrance calmed me, which I needed because my next stop—Yvonne’s—was going to be the most difficult.

Not only didn’t Yvonne like me much, but she had to be the killer, given that I’d ruled out everyone else. I saw no reason Nancy would’ve killed the mailman, and no way could Frances have done it. Even putting motive aside, she wouldn’t have left Teddy alone, as Nancy said. She couldn’t have carried Whitlock into the woods. And I can’t imagine why he would have gone back there with her.

With my nerves steeled, I called goodbye to Nancy and headed outside.

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“*Hello, Hazel.*” You wouldn’t think the word *hello* could have contempt in it, but that was Yvonne for you.

“Hi. I’m sorry to interrupt while you’re working, but I wanted to see if you knew anything more about this murder—any idea who could have done it or why. I’m feeling really antsy. If I had any idea why this happened, I think I’d feel better. Safer.” I’d decided on the way

over to try to make her believe my questions stemmed solely from fear. It might make her more likely to open up.

She leaned a shoulder against her doorway. “I get it. I’ve kind of gotten used to it, but I felt the same way last week. If the killer went after the postman for a specific reason, we’d all be safe. Unlike if there’s a lunatic on the loose, killing willy-nilly.”

“Exactly.” I hadn’t thought of it precisely like that, but she had a good point. So, was she a lunatic? Or did she have a specific reason to murder Whitlock? Assuming she did it, which at this point, I was.

Yvonne sneezed. “I need a tissue. Come in.”

Talking at her door would have been fine with me. But I didn’t imagine she’d kill me inside her own house. So inside I went, following her to the family room. I’d always liked this room. The wallpaper was white with blue branches, leaves, and birds. Just lovely. Much softer than I’d ever expect from Yvonne. After blowing her nose, she tossed the tissue into a wastebasket nearly overflowing with crumpled ones.

“Allergies are the worst,” she said.

She sat on the sofa. I chose an adjacent recliner.

“So, to answer your question,” she said, “no, I don’t know why someone would have killed him. He wasn’t the greatest guy in the world, but—”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I knew him. . . . I dated him.”

“You dated him? Because of the mail?”

Yvonne narrowed her eyes in confusion. “The mail?”

I had to clarify without revealing too much. “He asked you out?”

“Yeah.”

“Were you afraid to say no because you work from home and need to get your mail? Checks from clients, stuff like that? Did you worry he wouldn’t hand ’em over?”

“No. I said yes because whenever he came to the door for me to sign for something, he always had a nice *package*.” She lifted her eyebrows mischievously, and I had a feeling she was trying to make me uncomfortable.

Lord. “Why were you keeping that a secret?” And how?

She sighed. “If you must know, it’s because you’re gossipy, and I didn’t want my kids to find out.”

Well, that stung, even if it was true.

“I only spent time with Vinny when they were with their dad,” Yvonne continued. “They never had an inkling we dated.”

“Then why are you telling me?”

“Because we broke up, and now he’s dead, and I feel like my sinuses are about to explode, and I don’t have it in me to keep up this pretense anymore.”

Talk about a lot of information. “Do the police know?”

“Yeah, I told them. If they had found out some other way, I would’ve looked suspicious.”

“How could they have found out?”

“We dated for six months so there *were* people who saw us together.”

“Half a year? Why’d you break up?”

Yvonne closed her eyes and exhaled loudly. When she finally opened them again, she said, “Because of you.”

“Come again?”

“When Dave threw that birthday party for you last winter, I couldn’t help noticing the two of you together. The way you looked at each other. How he touched your arm when you passed. Pecked your cheek. How careful he was with you. One time, when he said your name, it was like you were everything he could ever need in life. It was sickening but also nice.”

“Thanks?” I still didn’t get it.

She continued. “Since the divorce, I’d been telling myself I didn’t want another serious relationship. Vinny was perfect for that because sex was about all we had. Our relationship didn’t mean anything. After your party, I wanted something meaningful again, and that wasn’t ever going to happen with him.”

Wow.

Yvonne blew her nose again. This time, I didn’t think it was due to allergies.

“How’d he take it when you ended it?”

She shrugged. “He wasn’t the love of my life, and I wasn’t his. I figure he moved on pretty quickly.” To Judy, at least for one evening.

“Was it weird to have him still delivering your mail?”

“A little at first, but then not so much.”

I’d walked into this house figuring Yvonne was the killer. Now, I’d changed my mind. If there had been bad blood from the breakup, she would have acted before now. She had no reason to kill him over a year later, unless she was lying, and I didn’t believe she was. “Did you see anything unusual last Wednesday? Anything that could point to who the killer might be?”

“Nope. The pollen was even worse last week, and I was trying to get my work done as fast as possible each day because I tend to get allergy headaches in the late afternoon. So I wasn’t spending time looking out the window.”

I eyed the tissue-filled wastepaper basket. No way had she trekked into the woods to dump a dead body. The pollen would be way worse back there.

For a second, I wondered if she could be faking it. But I dismissed the thought. You could set a watch by Yvonne's springtime allergy flare-up, and the pollen coating so many cars wasn't something she could've manufactured.

"Well, I should let you get back to work." We started toward the front door. "Thanks for sharing with me. Maybe—"

"Don't get any ideas. It's not like I want to start getting together to paint our nails."

I chuckled. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Right before I reached the door, she said, "But I guess I could try to be nicer to you. A little."

I smiled at her over my shoulder, then went on my way.

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I wandered toward my house, lost in thought. Whoever killed Whitlock must have been prompted by something. You don't just wake up one day out of nowhere and decide to kill your mailman. What happened last week that could have pushed someone over the edge? The problems my neighbors had with Whitlock occurred a while ago. So who the heck killed him?

A noise startled me from my thoughts. I turned to see Frances entering the cul-de-sac, pushing Teddy in his stroller, its wheels grinding over the asphalt. She wore her gray hair in a bob and sported a tan from taking Teddy on so many walks. I headed her way. We met up outside Nancy's house.

"Welcome back," Frances said, then looked down at Teddy. "Can you say hi to Miss Hazel?"

“Hi.” He grinned at me, with his lovely dark curls framing his chubby cheeks. At seventeen months, Teddy’s vocabulary was limited, but he’d mastered “hi” like a champ.

“Hi, Teddy. Did your grandma walk you to the park?” There was a small one a few blocks away with a plastic slide and swings and sand to play in.

His response was to bat his long brown lashes at me. Looked like a nap was imminent.

“Terrible business about the mailman,” I said, refocusing on Frances.

“Yes, terrible.”

Her tone didn’t match her words. What did she have against him? Could Whitlock have propositioned Frances? It hadn’t occurred to me given the difference in their ages—she had to be thirty years his senior—but it was possible.

“Did you ever have any problems with him?” I asked.

“Me? No. The man acted like Teddy and I didn’t exist.”

“Really? I’m surprised. He was always friendly with me.”

“You too, huh? He was friendly with Nancy, until he wasn’t.”

He asked Nancy out? It would make sense. He seemed to have had a thing for every woman in this cul-de-sac—except Frances and me—but Nancy hadn’t said anything about it. Then again, Judy and Louise hadn’t mentioned his come-ons to them until today. Nancy probably kept it a secret so the police wouldn’t hassle her, especially if things became chilly with Whitlock after she turned him down. It might look like she had motive.

“I’m sorry,” Frances said. “I didn’t ask if you had a good trip.”

“We did. It’s always nice visiting Dave’s parents.”

“It’s a blessing to spend time with your grandchildren.” She gazed at Teddy’s sleeping face. “I was fortunate to come live here after Mark moved out.”

“It’s a shame he never sees Teddy.”

“Yes, well, men can be real idiots about their children. But let’s talk about something happier. I assume you heard our big news?”

“Publishers Clearinghouse! It’s unbelievable.”

Frances clasped a hand over her heart. “In all my life, I never imagined anything like that would happen to our family. It will be wonderful for Nancy and Teddy to have a bigger house, but I’ll be sad to move.”

“There’s still a chance you’ll stay and renovate.”

“I wish. I love this little neighborhood. I even suggested remodeling to Nancy the day she won, but she doesn’t want to live with all that dust and noise and people tramping through. She started looking for a real-estate agent that afternoon.”

Dread settled in my stomach. If Nancy ruled out remodeling on Tuesday, why did she say she was inside measuring while Frances and Teddy played on the lawn Wednesday morning? Maybe she was considering remodeling but hadn’t told Frances so she wouldn’t get her hopes up.

“She will miss this cul-de-sac, though,” Frances continued. “All of you and the summer block parties and the flowers and shrubs she’s planted. Even the morning after she won, she planted a load of petunias and impatiens behind the house to make it more attractive to buyers. The front doesn’t need it, of course”—she waved her hand at the riot of daffodils and tulips that had sprouted in the front garden—“but the back needed sprucing up.”

And there went my hope that Nancy might’ve been secretly considering remodeling. No way was she inside measuring Wednesday morning if she was planting flowers in the backyard at the same time. You’d think she would’ve seen someone hiding a body in the woods—unless

she'd been the one doing it. But why would she have killed him? Maybe she really was in her backyard gardening the whole time. She might not have had a good line of sight to where Whitlock's body was concealed. Maybe she pretended to have an alibi because she was scared she wouldn't be believed, even though she truly was innocent.

Oh, I hoped that was it.

"I'm going to peek at those new flowers around back," and check if I could see the crime-scene tape. "I do love impatiens."

"And I'm going to bring this guy inside," Frances said.

She smiled at Teddy, who was sound asleep, his dark curls nearly covering his eyes. ... Nancy and Mark had blond hair. When Teddy was born with brown hair, I'd figured a recessive gene was at work, but now ... Whitlock's hair had been dark brown. And curly.

I hustled around to the back of the house. Nancy was sitting at her patio table, staring out at rows of impatiens. The pink, red, and purple flowers looked gorgeous against the rich soil and the bed's brick edging. Beyond them, I could see the yellow crime-scene tape through gaps in the leaves.

"I saw you talking to Mom," she said in a soft, quiet voice.

Sadness washed over me as I took the other chair at the table. "She mentioned the flowers you planted Wednesday morning to try to entice home buyers. They look beautiful."

Our eyes met. She was fighting off tears.

"He was Teddy's father?" I didn't need to say Whitlock's name. We both knew who I meant.

“My marriage had been rocky for a while. Mark and I hadn’t been intimate in months. And then one day Vinny showed up at my door, flirting with me. I can’t believe none of you ever saw him coming inside the house.”

“Me either.” Some gossipy, snoopy neighbor I was.

“He made me feel alive again. Interesting. Desirable. When I got pregnant a few months later, I had to tell Mark. He left, of course. He knew the baby wasn’t his.” Her eyes drifted toward the woods. “I don’t know what I expected from Vinny. Not marriage. But I didn’t think he’d end things either. That he wouldn’t want anything to do with his child. I had to threaten to sue him to get him to give me money every month for Teddy’s care.”

I squeezed her hand. “Why didn’t you tell us? We would have been there for you.”

“I was humiliated. Turned out I was just a plaything to him, and Teddy was a burden.” Tears escaped her eyes. “He actually had the nerve to come over here Wednesday morning to tell me he wouldn’t give me another dime for my ‘brat’ since I was now rolling in dough.”

Of course. The new thing that happened last week.

“To think of all the mornings Mom played on the front lawn with Teddy to try to make Vinny realize what he was missing out on, hoping my wonderful boy could soften Vinny’s heart. But he had no heart. I was on my knees in the grass, laying down the brick edging, when he found me. After he said I wouldn’t be ‘picking his pocket anymore,’ he told me not to ‘bother’ him again, then turned to leave. I was furious. Breathing hard. Literally shaking. How could he not care one whit about his son? I grabbed one of the bricks and smashed it against the back of his head. I shouldn’t have done it, but once I did, I couldn’t take it back.”

I recalled our conversation that morning. When I'd asked if Ed McMahon had been here to give Nancy a million-dollar check, she'd shrugged, as if it hadn't mattered who her money came from. But when it came to her son, it mattered. It mattered a lot.

"How'd you get Whitlock into the woods?"

"Wheelbarrow. Then I re-covered my trail with leaves and threw the brick into another part of the woods."

"You're lucky Louise didn't see you."

She nodded at the side of Louise's house. "She was cleaning the bathroom that morning. Abba's greatest hits were blasting out that window, so I figured—hoped—she wouldn't go near the back windows for a while."

Smart thinking. Louise and Nancy had identical floor plans, only reversed. The bathroom I was in earlier looked out onto the bathroom Louise had been cleaning while Nancy and Vinny had their showdown.

"So what now?" Nancy asked.

Good question. I'd started my investigation to protect myself and my family. But Nancy was family too. And she wasn't a danger. I didn't have *any* worry she'd hurt someone else.

Who was I, an embezzler, to turn her in? My crime wasn't as bad as Nancy's, but we'd both acted out of love of family. Yes, if the police didn't solve the murder soon, they might start looking at me, but it was unlikely they'd find out who I really was. And the thought of Teddy growing up without his mother broke my heart.

I loved Nancy. Her and Frances and Teddy. And Judy and Louise and, heaven help me, even Yvonne. Certainty came over me. Once again, I was going to follow Dave's advice and take a chance on love.

“If the police arrest Judy, you’ll need to turn yourself in. But otherwise, I’ll keep your mistake to myself.”

She clasped my hand. “Thank you, Hazel.”

Hannah, I almost said. *My name is Hannah*. But even with all the secrets revealed today, that wasn’t one I could ever share.

“You know,” I said, deciding to lighten the mood, “I’m a little insulted our mailman came on to you and Yvonne.” And Judy and Louise. “But not to me.”

Nancy raised her eyebrows at my news about Yvonne. Since Yvonne had told the police about her relationship with Whitlock, I figured it was okay to share this bit of gossip.

“Don’t worry.” Nancy flashed me a big smile. “I’m sure he was saving the best for last.”