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AFTER THE DINNER party at the Lerner's new 2.6 million-dollar house in Bedford Hills, Mark Berman knew that his wife, Deb, was pissed off at him about something. He had no idea what he'd done, but after twenty-two years together – seventeen married – he didn't have to ask her if there was a problem. He just knew.

During the car ride home to South Salem, Deb was still acting weird, but Mark knew if he said something it would lead to a whole discussion, even a fight, so why go there? Instead he went on about the Lerner's house – 'Can you believe the size of that backyard? The freakin' Jets could play there. And the pool was sick.' – and then went over the schedule for tomorrow: Deb would take Justin to his swimming practice at nine, and he would drive Riley to her school play rehearsal at ten on his way to play golf at the country club, and then she would pick up Riley at noon on her way back from swimming. As he was talking, Deb nodded, said, 'Okay,' a couple times, but that was it.

A few minutes later they were driving along the dark, twisty Saw Mill River Parkway, and she was staring out the window, not saying anything. Sick of the silence, Mark turned on SiriusXM to the Classic Rewind channel – the chorus of ‘Dream On.’

Then, after maybe thirty seconds, Deb, still looking out the window, said, ‘I saw you.’

‘What?’ Mark had heard her; he just wanted to hear her say it again.

‘I saw you,’ she said.

‘You saw me,’ he said, not as a question. ‘You saw me where?’

Looking out at the window, at the darkness, or maybe at her reflection, she didn’t answer.

‘I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.’ Actually Mark did know, but he didn’t want to say it himself. If she wanted to say it, make an issue out of it, let her.

‘You know what I’m talking about,’ Deb said, turning toward him.

Though he was looking at the road, not at her, he knew exactly what expression she had – that one where she squinted and her nostrils flared and she looked like she wanted to rip his head off. Yeah, he’d seen that look a few hundred thousand times.

‘No, I don’t,’ Mark said. ‘I have no idea, okay?’

She turned away again.

Steven Tyler was screeching the chorus. Mark lowered the music, and said, ‘I don’t get this, you know? Everything’s cool, we have a good night together, out with friends, and then out of nowhere you have to launch into me.’

‘How’m I *launching* into you?’

He didn’t like the way she’d said that, like she was mocking him. ‘It’s weird, okay?’ He squinted because the guy driving toward him had his fucking brights on. ‘I

mean this whole attitude of yours is weird. It's like you're looking for drama, like you *want* drama.'

'I want drama?'

'Like right now,' he said. 'Like the way you're repeating everything I say. You know it annoys the hell out of me, but you keep doing it anyway. It's like you get off on it or some shit.'

'I think you're the one causing drama in this marriage.'

'What?'

'I saw you, okay? I saw you.'

'Saw me?' He pretended to think about it. 'Saw me where?'

'Outside... in the backyard.'

There was no use denying it anymore. 'Oh, come on. Is that what this is all about?'

'I'm so angry at you right now,' Deb said.

'Nothing happened with Karen, okay?' Mark said. 'I can't believe you're actually accusing me of something. It's so ridiculous.'

Karen was a neighbor, a friend, who'd also been at the Lerner's dinner party.

'You were holding her hand,' Deb said.

'I was not holding her hand,' Mark said.

'You were holding her hand,' Deb said.

Mark let out an annoyed breath, shaking his head. 'I was not holding her hand, okay? Maybe we held hands for like a second, but -'

'It was longer than a second.'

'A few seconds, whatever, but it was totally innocent, okay? We were talking, just talking, and she was upset, you know, she's been having some financial trouble, that investment advisor fucked her over, and I was gonna put her in touch with my guy, *our* guy, Dave Anderson. That was who we were talking about - Dave, Dave Anderson.'

Anyway, she was upset, and I was talking to her about it, giving her some advice, that's it, okay? And, yeah, maybe at one point I may have held her hand, just in a like friendly supportive way, but –'

'In a friendly supportive way,' Deb said.

'There an echo in here?' Mark asked.

'Look, I know what I saw, okay, so stop denying it. You were having a moment.'

'What?'

'It was what it was.'

'It was a conversation about mutual funds.' Mark made a sharp turn, too fast, around a bend. He had to be careful, there was a deer crossing around here, wasn't there? Then he slowed a little, and said, 'I can't believe I'm even talking about this right now. Karen's a friend, that's it.'

'Friends don't flirt the way you two always flirt.'

'What?'

'Can you watch the road?'

'I can't bel... I was helping her with a situation, okay, I wasn't flirting with her. You want to talk flirting, how about you and Tom?'

That was the way – put it on *her*.

'What about me and –'

'You flirt with him all the time.'

'When do I ever –'

'I even saw you hugging him tonight.'

After a pause, Deb said, 'You mean when I was saying *goodnight*?'

'You were hugging tightly,' Mark said, glad they weren't talking about him and Karen.

'Oh come on, that's –'

'Yeah, ridiculous, I know. But what if I tried to make a big production out of it? What if I was like, "How could

you flirt with Tom? You were having a moment? How could you do that”?’

‘Don’t try to deny what you did,’ Deb said.

‘I’m not –’

Raising her voice to smother his, Deb said, ‘I didn’t go off with him to a corner of the backyard, okay? If I did, what would you think? Would you think that was normal? Would you think, “Oh, Tom and Deb are just good friends, that’s why they slipped away together to be alone”?’

‘Are you drunk?’ Mark asked.

‘What?’ Deb sounded shocked, but maybe she was just pretending. ‘No, I am not drunk.’

‘You sure? ‘Cause you’re acting drunk right now.’

‘I had a couple of drinks.’

‘You had more than a couple.’

‘Look, I told you how I feel about you, you and that woman, but you don’t seem to care. You just rub it in my face.’

‘Karen is our *friend*. Since when is she *that woman*?’

‘Since she started trying to steal my husband.’

‘Oh, for god’s sake, Deb, will you stop it? It was just holding hands –’

‘So you admit it.’

‘For a couple of seconds, for a couple of seconds, for god’s sake.’

‘It was more than the hand holding, okay? It’s everything between you two. It’s the way you look at each other, at dinner it was so obvious. And when you were telling that joke and Karen got up to go to the kitchen you waited, you *waited* till she came back to finish it.’

‘It’s called being polite,’ Mark said.

‘You wouldn’t’ve waited if *I* left the table, or if anybody else left it. It was because of her. You waited because of her.’

'No, I waited because she hadn't heard the joke yet, you had, and she was interested, so I... Listen to you, just listen to you. Attacking me, launching into me 'cause I was polite when I was telling a joke, like I committed some kind of crime or something.'

'You know exactly what I'm talking about, okay?' Deb said. 'You won't stop, you just keep doing it, because you want to do it, because you... I don't know, you want to get a reaction from me or something, and you make it so obvious. I don't think you get how embarrassing this is to me.'

'What do you mean?' Mark looked away from the road, at Deb, for a second. 'Somebody said something?'

'No, nobody said anything, nobody had to say anything,' Deb said. 'But everybody saw it, everybody knows, and I'm sure they suspect something.'

'Suspect what?' Mark raised his voice. 'This is fucking ridiculous. Nothing is going on with me and Karen. Nothing at all!'

'I want you to stay away from her,' Deb said, 'or I'm going to say something to her.'

'What?' Mark's hands squeezed the steering wheel as if he were trying to strangle it. 'Can you just cool it, okay? This is getting out of control.'

'Why do you care?' Deb said. 'I mean, if nothing's going on, if it's all my imagination, what difference does it make to you?'

'Because she's a friend, she's our neighbor,' Mark said. 'Our kids are friends with her kids and... and you better not say anything, please don't do that. It'll just create drama. You don't want drama, do you?'

'I don't want to talk about it anymore.'

'Don't say anything to her, Deb. *Please.*'

'I said I'm done,' Deb said.

She said it in a loaded way, as if maybe she wasn't just done with the conversation, she was done with the whole marriage. Mark knew it was just an empty threat, of course. She was always getting melodramatic in arguments, then forgetting about it the next day. This would blow over too – well, it had better blow over. If she said something to Karen, confronted her in some way, Karen would freak, feel uncomfortable, and maybe would want to cut him off. Mark couldn't let that happen. Karen was one of his closest friends, probably his best friend; he didn't know what he'd do without her.

Rush was into 'Tom Sawyer' but Mark, not in the mood for music anymore, shut off the radio. Ah, finally, it was silent in the car. A few minutes later, they veered onto Savage Lane, a narrow road with seven houses along it including the one at the cul-de-sac where Mark, Deb, and their kids lived. Karen and her kids lived in the second house on the left and as Mark drove by he noticed – without actually turning his head to look – that the light on the second floor in Karen's bedroom was on. Karen had left the party about ten minutes before Mark and Deb, so it figured she was home already. Mark wondered what she was doing in her bedroom, if she was getting undressed, watching TV, or if she was on the phone, talking to that new guy she'd been dating. What was his name? Steven? Yeah, Steven. Mark hated the name Steven; it reminded him of Steven Litsky, a cocky kid in his sixth grade class in Dix Hills on Long Island, who had bullied him, making his life hell. Thinking about Karen and Steven, *this* Steven, talking on the phone, Mark felt a pang of nausea, jealous nausea, which was ridiculous, because what did he have to be jealous about? Mark was married – maybe not completely happily married but, yeah, solidly married – and it was true that he and Karen were nothing more than

friends. They had a connection, a *special* connection, but it wasn't anything more than that. Still, when he thought about her with Steven, or any other guy, he always felt that pang.

With the remote, Mark opened the garage door, then pulled in and cut the engine. Without a word, Deb got out and slammed the door and went into the house. When Mark got out, Casey, their golden retriever, came over to greet him, jumping up on him, panting excitedly, swiping his chest with his paws.

Thinking, *Well, at least somebody isn't mad at me*, Mark said, 'How ya doin', Casey? How ya doin', boy? How ya doin'?'

Casey, still breathing heavily, trailed Mark into the house.

Karen's kids, Elana and Matthew, were over. Elana, like Mark's daughter Riley, was sixteen, and they were hanging out in the living room watching a movie, something with that teenage girl actress Mark had seen before on TV and on the covers of magazines, but he could never remember her name. Matthew was ten, two years younger than Justin, but they'd always played well together, and they were up in Justin's room playing on the Xbox, Call of Duty; Mark knew because he heard the intermittent machinegun fire and explosions.

'Hey girls,' Mark said.

'Hey,' Elana and Riley said, without looking away from the TV.

Then Elana asked, 'My mom home yet?'

Mark saw Deb, who was looking through a pile of mail on a table in the foyer, give him a look right before she exited into the kitchen.

'Um, should be,' Mark said.

'I better go,' Elana said, getting up from the couch.

'FaceTime you later,' Riley said, still staring at the TV.

'Cool,' Elana said, then called upstairs, 'Matthew, we gotta go!'

'I think it'll take more than that to get him away from that game,' Mark said.

'Yeah, you're right,' Elana said as she went upstairs.

Mark went up too and went into his bedroom and shut the door. Then he texted Karen: **Great seeing you tonight! Hope you got home safe, sweetie.**

Mark texted with Karen all the time, especially since her marriage had ended. He texted with a lot of his friends too, but it was somehow much more fun to text with Karen. Maybe it was because they had the same sense of humor, they *got* each other. When he read some interesting article online, or something funny happened at work, Karen was always the first person he wanted to tell. He usually made sure to delete his texts to her, especially the ones where they called each other 'sweetie' or sometimes 'babe,' knowing that if Deb found them she'd get suspicious.

Mark stripped to his boxers and then washed up and got ready for bed. He knew he looked great for forty-four. He was losing some hair from the top and around the sides, and he probably needed to lose ten, okay fifteen, pounds, but he was definitely aging well, just starting to hit his prime. If he was single now, on those dating sites like Karen, man he would've cleaned up. How many guys his age even had hair? He didn't have a lot of wrinkles and a couple of women at work had complimented his eyes. What had Erica McCarthy, in HR, said? Oh, yeah, that he had 'a dark, brooding Javier Bardem look.' The comment had gone straight to Mark's head even though he had to Google Javier Bardem to make sure he knew who he was.

Mark looked out the bathroom window; too bad it was June and there were so many leaves on the trees. Even

though Karen lived a few houses away, in the winter Mark could see part of her house, including one of her bedroom windows – once he'd seen her naked, which was amazing – but now he couldn't see anything.

His phone chimed – a text arrived from Karen: **Yep thanx gnight!!**

He always loved getting texts from Karen, even when they were munutiae. He responded, **Awesome babe xoxox**, then deleted the entire thread.

In bed, he watched TV – a little *Sports Center*, part of a rerun of *The Office*, and then some guy doing standup on Comedy Central. Mark worked his ass off all week as a Systems Analyst for CitiBank, sometimes staying at the office in Manhattan late, not getting home till nine or ten, and his favorite thing to do at night was to sit on the couch or lie in bed and stare at the TV. It didn't really matter what he was watching – sports, talk shows, sitcoms, reality TV – as long as it didn't take up too much brain energy. He used his brain all day, managing trading systems on three continents, so when he was home at night, and especially on weekends, the last thing he wanted to do was think too hard. He just wanted to stare, zone out, disappear. He liked movies, but they had to be funny or have action, no period bullshit. Deb once took him to some Jane Austen movie and it was freakin' painful, and he said to her afterwards, 'No more period movies – period.' And reading, that was the worst. Mark didn't get why people liked reading, why they wanted to spend their free time, concentrating, staring at words in a book. Jesus, why not lie on a bed of nails or get in a bath with a bunch of rattlesnakes while you were at it. Okay, maybe if you're a teacher or you were in school, if you *had* to do it, but in your free time, for *pleasure*? Deb always had a stack of books next to her bed, went to book club

meetings – god knows why. Talking about books and having to spend time with those yentas? The only books Mark read were on the stock market or sports, but even those were sometimes painful to get through. He didn't want to feel like an idiot, though, so Mark had read one book about fifteen years ago, *The Firm* by John Grisham, because he'd liked the Tom Cruise movie. The book was worse than the movie but now, whenever he was at parties or at work meetings, when somebody asked him if he'd read any good books lately he said, 'You ever read *The Firm*? That was pretty good,' and it was enough to get by.

Mark had heard a flush from the kids' bathroom and music in Riley's room, so Riley and Justin were probably getting ready for bed. Deb hadn't come upstairs yet, but this wasn't necessarily because she was still angry. She usually hung out downstairs late at night, watching TV or reading, and downing a nightcap or two.

The comedian was talking about his divorce, making fun of his ex, and Mark laughed out loud a couple of times, and then he remembered Deb in the car, saying, 'I'm done.' It had definitely been a fake threat. She'd told him just last month, 'We're stuck with each other, let's face it,' and that was pretty much how he felt. Even when they were fighting, or just not getting along, things weren't so bad. There was no violence or major problems. They had a good, comfortable life – a big house, country club membership, two healthy kids, some money put away, no debt. What more could you want? Yeah, maybe the sex wasn't as good as it used to be, but it wasn't bad. At least they still did it a lot – at least a few times a month anyway, which was more than a lot of couples Mark knew. But, most importantly, they were good parents. Riley and Justin were great, happy kids and, as far as Mark was concerned,

things with Deb would have to become unbearable before he'd ever seriously consider putting his kids through the pain of a divorce.

But, just for the hell of it, Mark imagined what it would be like if Deb hadn't been joking – if she really did leave. He'd played these 'what if?' games before; it was just harmless fantasizing. If his marriage ended, Mark knew he'd wind up with Karen. He'd move into her house, and the kids could go back and forth, right on the same block, how convenient would that be? It would be an easy divorce, there wouldn't be any bitterness or drama; everyone would get along. It would be even better for the kids because they could be step-brothers and sisters with their best friends. Meanwhile, not only would Mark be with his best friend all the time, he could have sex with his best friend. Karen had looked so amazing at the club last summer wearing bikinis at the pool. How many women her age, forty-two, with two kids could pull off a bikini? She had perfect natural breasts and the sexiest arms and back. Oh, and he loved her lips. What would it feel like to kiss her? He knew she'd be incredible in bed; she had to be. Holding her hand tonight, her skin had felt so warm, so smooth; he bet her whole body felt that way. What if she was in bed with him right now – in that little blue dress she wore tonight; no, in the bikini, yeah, the bikini. They would've just got back from the pool, still wet. He'd kiss her – god, those lips, the way the lower one was thicker than the upper so it seemed like she was permanently pouting – and feel her smooth toned arms, her smooth fatless back, and then he'd undo her bikini top and let it fall off and then cup his hands over her breasts, feel her nipples harden against his palms. Then they would be in bed, he'd be on top of her, untying her bikini bottom, and licking the insides of her

thighs, listening to her moan – *Mark, Mark, Oh, Mark...*

‘Mark.’

He’d been masturbating under the covers, but it was dark in the room, the only light coming from the TV. Just in case, he shifted onto his side.

‘Yeah?’ he said.

‘Were you sleeping?’ Deb asked.

‘Um, yeah, just starting to.’

‘Can we talk for a sec?’

Maneuvering again, he said, ‘Yeah, sure.’

Still in the dress she’d worn to the party, Deb sat at the foot of the bed, and said, ‘I just want to say sorry for the way I acted in the car. I had no right to jump down your throat like that.’

Mark could smell rum.

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘It’s no big deal.’

‘No, it is a big deal,’ she slurred. ‘I know we haven’t been getting along lately, but I don’t really think anything’s going on with you and Karen, and I won’t talk to her, so you don’t have to worry about that. I just... I just don’t wanna be like this anymore. Seriously, I don’t wanna be like this. D’you wanna be like this?’

Mark imagined licking the insides of Karen’s thighs. ‘Can we talk about this tomorrow?’

With the remote he flicked off the TV. It was pitch dark in the room now.

‘Let’s go away somewhere,’ Deb said. ‘A trip, just the two of us. The kid’s’re gonna be away at camp in July, let’s plan something. We never went to Italy. We said we wanted to go to the Amalfi Coast someday, let’s just do it, let’s go for two weeks, have a real adventure together.’

Imagining how frustrating it would be to go away for two weeks and be so far from Karen, he said, ‘Let’s think about it.’

'That's what we always say, but we never go. Why not just do it?'

'We already paid for the country club for the summer,' Mark said.

'We always pay for the country club,' Deb said. 'I'm talking two weeks, just two weeks. Come on, the kids're older now – this is it, this is someday.'

'I've got that big project next week,' Mark said, 'people in from Hong Kong.'

'That's next week,' Deb said. 'I'm talking about *July*. Will you look online with me tomorrow? Can we look *together*?''

Just to end the discussion Mark said, 'Okay, fine, we'll look, we'll look.'

'Thank you.' Deb leaned over Mark and kissed him, and then she felt him through the blanket and said, 'Ooh, I guess you really *are* excited about Italy.' She sat up again, turning her back to Mark and said, 'Undress me.'

More disappointed than excited, Mark unzipped Deb's dress. Then she stood, kicked off her heels and wriggled until she was naked. A few moments later, she was in bed with him.

'Kiss me,' she said.

Mark kissed her, tasting rum. He couldn't stop thinking about Karen in her wet bathing suit. He imagined pulling the knot off the bottom, how it would come right off.

'Kiss me like you want to kiss me,' Deb said.

Mark continued kissing her, using more tongue, tasting more rum. He closed his eyes, imagining he was kissing Karen. His hands would be on her ass – her smooth, firm ass.

Then Deb got on top, but it was Karen. How would it feel to have Karen on top, riding him? He pictured her arching her back, her bikini top off, his hands over her breasts now.

'Never mind,' Deb said and got off him.

Mark had no idea what was wrong. 'What is it?' he asked.

Deb was lying next to him, turned away, and pulled the covers up to cover her head.

Now Mark was getting seriously paranoid. Had he said Karen's name out loud?

His pulse pounding, he asked, 'Come on, what's wrong? What did I do?'

Deb was silent for a while, then he heard sniffing. Shit, she was crying. He must've said the wrong name. Why else would she be acting this way?

'Come on, just tell me,' he said. 'I have no idea what's going on here.'

'Forget it,' she said. 'Everything's so... never mind.'

'Everything's so what? What is it?'

'Nothing,' she said. 'Forget it, okay? Just forget it.'

Frustrated, Mark turned away in the other direction. He was trying to picture Karen naked again, but it was foggy now. He couldn't even imagine what her face looked like. He could see her eyes, her lips, her hair, but he couldn't see *her*.

He kept trying, though, until he finally fell asleep.

2

WHEN DEB WOKE up, at the edge of the bed, turned away from Mark, hung over, exhausted because she'd barely slept, hovering over sleep for most of the night, she thought, *I can't take this anymore*. She had no idea exactly why or how she'd gotten into this situation, but it was wearing her down, mentally and physically. She was stressed out all the time – bitter, edgy, paranoid. She was lucky she'd made it this far, but if she didn't end it soon, find some clean way out, her life would turn into a full-blown nightmare.

She remained in bed, ruminating, till the alarm blared at seven. Mark, facing away, stirred, then fell back asleep. As she stood, wooziness hit. Shit, mixing vodka and rum had definitely been a bad idea. She could mix vodka and whiskey and be okay, but the rum always got her.

She wobbled into the bathroom. A few minutes later, heading downstairs, she almost lost her balance and had to grab onto the banister. She should've made herself

throw up last night or at least had some water before she went to sleep. She always forgot the water.

In the kitchen, she filled one of Justin's Sponge Bob cups with water from the Poland Spring tank, but was too nauseated to have more than a couple of sips.

Advil, she thought excitedly, as if she'd just come up with a brilliant idea, and found some in the cabinet. She swallowed two capsules, then, wanting to feel better faster, took one more. She made a cup of coffee in the Keurig machine and then rested at the kitchen table, sipping coffee. She still felt like shit, but it wasn't just the alcohol in her system – it was everything. Sometimes life seemed so exhausting and overwhelming and, worse, she knew she was responsible for making it this way. Seriously, how many forty-four-year-old women would kill for what she had? A four-bedroom house in Westchester, a successful, hard-working husband, two amazing kids. Maybe she was bored, maybe that was her whole problem. She used to work for a market research firm but had quit when Riley was born. She didn't want to go back to her old career, but she'd always wanted to paint. She used to have talent, had taken a couple of art classes in college and loved it. She could go to art school in the city a couple of days a week – she'd already checked out the Art Students League online – and she had plenty of space to make an art studio in the basement. It would be amazing to live a creative lifestyle, meet new, interesting creative-type people in the city. All she had to do was take the first step, register for a class, but she had forgotten how to be proactive, how to do things for herself.

She heard a vibration and then spotted her second cell phone, the one with the prepaid calling plan, on the kitchen table. Shit, she must've taken it out of her purse

last night when she was drunk, looking for Advil. She was usually careful not to leave the phone in the open, but what about *him*? How many times had she told him not to text at all unless he was absolutely certain that she was home alone? What was he doing, *trying* to get caught?

She checked and, sure enough, there was a message from Owen Harrison right there on the front of the screen: **Can't wait to fuck the hell out of you today!!!**

'Jesus,' she muttered, deleting the text. Having the second phone was a good precaution, but it didn't protect her entirely. Even if she was careful about deleting every call and text, she wasn't sure how she could explain the phone itself if Mark found it. She could say a friend gave it to her, or she found it, but any explanation would be flimsy. She couldn't take this stress anymore – living on the verge of catastrophe, fearing that Mark or, god forbid, the kids would find the phone or see a text that could ruin the rest of her life, was way too stressful.

Then, hating herself, she responded: **Oooo, you're so naughty!**

This was how it always went with her and Owen – she couldn't stick to what she *wanted*. There were times she tried to end it, but she was weak, impulsive, and made the same stupid decision again and again. The worst decision had been getting involved with him at all, putting her whole marriage, maybe her whole life, in the hands of an eighteen-year-old boy.

An eighteen-year-old boy.

Sometimes the whole situation seemed surreal. Owen had been sixteen when the affair began, which made her an adulterer *and* a rapist. Yep, Deb Berman was a rapist. Not somebody else, not a stranger on the news – *her*. She'd had moments like this before over the past two years.

She'd be having a normal night at home with her family, sitting at the dinner table, or helping her kids with their homework, and she'd think, *I'm a rapist*, and she'd shudder, feel lightheaded and weightless; this couldn't possibly be happening. It was as if she'd been inserted into an alternate reality where she was still Deb Berman, but she was a different Deb Berman, someone in the news she'd look down on: *How could she actually do that? How could she be so sick, so perverted?* She wished she could go back and be the high-and-mighty Deb Berman, that she could be the judger instead of the judged.

Another text from Owen: **I'm so horny right now, I want you so bad**

She knew she should feel repulsed, disgusted – she wasn't so far gone that she'd forgotten how she was *supposed* to feel. She knew this was wrong, that she had to stop being so selfish. This wasn't about her, about filling whatever void it was filling; it was about her family and about his family. Owen was just two years older than Riley, for god's sake, and Riley and Owen had known each other for years, had friends in common. While Deb wasn't friends with Owen's mother, Linda Harrison, they were *friendly*. For years they'd run into each other around town – at school pickups, at the mall, at soccer games. What if Linda found out? How angry and devastated and vindictive would she be?

Deb had to explain this to Owen, not some other day – *today*. She had to make him understand that they couldn't do this anymore, hurt the people they loved. She'd remind him that they'd already had a couple of close calls, like that time they were in his car in the high school parking lot and those kids walked by and almost saw them. Or the time they were having sex in Owen's bedroom that afternoon, when Linda and her husband Raymond –

Owen's stepfather – were supposed to be at work, and Raymond came home unexpectedly, and Deb had to hide in Owen's closet, like a character in a movie, a slapstick comedy, but this wasn't a movie, and it certainly wasn't a comedy. This was the real world where there were serious consequences so they had to do the smart thing, the right thing, and forget about each other, go on with their lives.

Then Deb sent: **I'm so horny for u 2!**

She hated herself for being so weak, so pathetic. She had to text him again, tell him she wouldn't be able to see him after all, and that they had to end this now, today.

She typed, **Actually I really don't think**, then deleted it, telling herself that breaking up by text was an awful idea. For an eighteen-year-old, Owen was level-headed and mature – if he wasn't that way she wouldn't have been attracted to him at all – but she had to make sure he understood, *really* understand, that this was it, she was ready to move on.

She still felt nauseated and her head was killing her. After making sure she'd deleted all the texts she'd sent and received, she switched the phone to silent mode and put it away in her purse. Then she heard Casey clacking down the stairs and a few moments later he came into the kitchen, panting, and went right toward the sliding screen doors. She let him out and then, watching the happy dog sprint toward the backyard to do his business, she thought, *Dog, hair of the dog, that's it*, and she got a glass, went to the liquor cabinet in the dining room, and poured some vodka – not much, just a half a glass, enough to get *back*.

As she was putting the vodka away she heard, 'Hi, Mom.'

Justin's voice startled her, and she nearly dropped the bottle.

'I didn't know you were up, you scared me,' Deb said.

'I don't feel good,' he said, holding his stomach.

Thinking, *Join the club*, she said, 'You're probably just hungry. Why don't you go into the kitchen and watch some TV, and I'll make you breakfast?'

When he was gone she drank the vodka in one gulp. At first, it made her feel even worse, and she thought she might throw up, but after a few moments she felt better. Well, less sick anyway.

In the kitchen, Justin was at the table, already gripped by Pokémon on TV.

'How about some pancakes for that hungry stomach of yours?' Deb asked.

'Okay,' Justin said, staring at the screen.

As Deb got busy making the pancake batter and greasing up the pan, she felt great – not only because the hair of the dog had had its full effect, but because she was back in her mommy role. *This* was what she had been risking for a fling with a teenager. She was so glad she was ending it, that she'd woken up from this nightmare.

She served Justin the pancakes and after a couple of bites he said his stomach felt better.

Later, when she was clearing the table, Mark came down to the kitchen in boxers and an old T-shirt, grunted, 'Morning,' and went right to the Keurig.

'Good morning,' she said.

He remained with his back to her, waiting for the coffee. Although Mark's behavior wasn't so unusual – they never said much to each other in the morning – today it obviously had to do with the fight in the car and all the tension last night. Deb knew she'd made a mistake, making a big deal about him and Karen. While it was incredibly obvious that they were at least contemplating an affair, Deb knew that confronting him about it and threatening to tell Karen was a bad idea while she was still involved with Owen. The

only reason Mark hadn't found out about Owen yet was because he was so preoccupied with Karen and, besides, what right did Deb have to be upset about *anything* that Mark did?

'Can we talk about last night?' Deb asked.

The coffee was spurting into the mug.

'What's there to talk about?'

Typical Mark, preferring to let things stew than deal with an issue head-on.

'About yesterday in the car.' She lowered her voice to make sure Justin couldn't overhear. 'I still feel bad for attacking you. That was wrong of me.'

'Whatever,' Mark said, still staring at the coffeemaker. 'It was no big deal.'

Deb noticed Mark was holding his iPhone. This was normal too – well, normal lately. He seemed to carry his cell around with him all the time and sometimes he'd say he needed to 'get some air' or make excuses to drive to get gas or milk or whatever else he could think of.

'Also about what happened in bed,' Deb said. 'I don't know why I freaked out like that. I guess it's just been a while since we –'

'Do I have to go?'

Justin had just entered the kitchen, still in his pajamas.

'Yes,' Deb said, 'the coach said this practice is mandatory.'

'No, do I have to go to Andrew's sleepover tonight?'

'Yes, and please get dressed.'

'Okay.' Justin left.

'What was I saying?' Deb asked Mark.

Adding milk to the cup of coffee, Mark said, 'I don't know.'

'Oh, last night,' Deb said. 'I was a little drunk, and I'm not sure what happened, but I meant what I said about us going on a trip. I think it would be good for us to get away

from all of this, escape. I really think we need this right now.'

Walking by her with the coffee in one hand, iPhone in the other, Mark said, 'Can we talk about this later? I just woke up, I can't focus on this now.'

'I don't want to put this off,' Deb said.

Mark went into the den/office across from the kitchen, and Deb heard the door shut. Deb knew he was going to text Karen, maybe complain about how bitchy Deb had acted in the car and how now she wanted to go away on a trip to Italy. Deb felt angry, violated – *what right did that woman have to know anything?* She wanted to barge into the den/office, demand that he stop texting Karen, and to cut off all contact with her – that was what any wife who wasn't cheating would do – but because of her own situation, she felt powerless.

Deb went to the liquor cabinet. She reached for the handle, then paused, deciding she was probably better off without a second drink of the day at nine in the morning, and returned to the kitchen. Loading the dishwasher, she was proud of herself for resisting the drink; it proved that she wasn't a total victim – she had the ability to take control when she wanted to. Like she'd walked away from the liquor cabinet, she could walk away from Owen Harrison. All she had to do was be strong, focus on the things she couldn't afford to lose, and she could do it.

On her way upstairs she saw that the door to Mark's office was open, and he wasn't there, and then she spotted him in the bedroom, sitting at the foot of the bed in gym shorts and a T-shirt, pulling his socks on. This was very new behavior. For years the only exercise he got was when he played golf, but lately he'd been going running almost every morning, and he'd even dusted off

the weight bench in the basement and he'd been bench pressing.

'Going for a run?' Deb asked, opening her dresser to pick out clothes for the day.

'Yeah,' Mark said, not looking at her.

She took out a pair of jeans, and a gray scoop neck T.

With her back to him, she said, 'You have to be careful, running along the road.'

'I am,' he said.

Instead of getting undressed in the bathroom before she showered, the way she did lately when Mark was in the room, she decided to get undressed in the bedroom. Why shouldn't she get undressed in front of her husband?

She took off her T-shirt and sweats and was topless in panties. Mark, tying his running shoes, was still at the edge of the bed, not facing her, but there was a mirror ahead of him, above the other dresser, and if he looked at it he would see her part-naked.

'How far do you go?' Deb asked.

She wanted Mark to look at her, to notice how sexy she was. And she was sexy. She went to the gym four days a week – okay, two days – and swam at the country club. Okay, maybe she wasn't as in shape as exercise-obsessed Karen, but she looked damn good for forty-four years old. She weighed 127, only seven pounds more than when she'd gotten married.

Mark finished tying his sneakers, and now he was standing, texting somebody, probably Karen. Deb felt pathetic, standing there topless, waiting for her aloof husband to finish texting his girlfriend so he could notice her, maybe give her a compliment.

Deb was about to give up, just go into the bathroom, when Mark, still looking at his phone, said, 'Oh not too far. Just a few miles.'

'A few miles is great,' Deb said. 'Maybe we should play tennis together sometime.'

'Tennis?'

Deb wasn't sure he was paying attention.

'Yeah, tennis,' she said. 'We used to play all the time. I want to get back into it.'

'Yeah, maybe.' He put the phone in his shorts' pocket. 'Have you seen my keys?'

He glanced around the room, looking right *past* her, then zeroed in on the dresser, to the immediate left of her.

'There they are,' he said, and he came up right next to her, not even noticing she was naked, and snatched the keys. Then, walking away toward the door he said, 'Can you wake up Riley before you go? If you don't she'll sleep forever. I'll drop her at dance and then I'll text you later from golf. Text me if we need anything from Trader Joe's. See ya later.'

Deb watched him leave the bedroom.

Showering, Deb knew time was running out. Yeah, she and Mark had been distant for a long time, but she'd never seen him so detached. Had she pushed him too far? Would it be impossible to get him back?

Deb got dressed quickly, eager to get to the school and have a talk with Owen. Usually, when she was going to see Owen, she put on one of her nicest lace bras and sexy panties, but today she put on her shabbiest underwear so she wouldn't feel tempted.

Then she went to get Justin and saw he was still in his pajamas, playing a video game.

'What the hell're you doing? You're supposed to be getting dressed.'

She knew she wasn't just blowing up at Justin, she was blowing up at everything, but she couldn't help it.

'Sorry,' Justin said.

She grabbed the joystick.

'Hey, give it back,' he said.

'You have five minutes to get dressed, or I'll throw it away.'

Deb went across the hallway into Riley's room. She was curled in a ball, dead asleep, looking more like a twelve-year-old than a sixteen-year-old.

'Come on, time to get up,' Deb said.

Riley's eyes opened. 'What?' She seemed disoriented.

'Dad's going to drive you to dance class,' Deb said. 'I don't know why you can't get up on your own, why I have to be your alarm clock.'

Deb went downstairs, pulse pounding, and put Justin's DS on a high shelf in the hallway closet. Fighting off an image of Karen and Mark, holding hands in the Lerner's backyard last night, she shouted, 'Four minutes, I'm warning you!' and then went into the dining room, right to the liquor cabinet, and took out the bottle of Stolli. She knew this wasn't a good idea, she was being weak, but she needed a drink, one *little* drink, to steady herself. She poured a half a glass, then added a little more, just for a little extra boost, and gulped it down fast.

Okay, that was better, she felt more relaxed now, and that was the most important thing, right? She couldn't put her mistakes behind her and get through this day with so much anxiety.

'Three minutes!' she yelled, then went to her purse and checked her phone. She saw a new message from Owen: **I'm gonna give it to you so good today baby!!!!**

Hating that she was turned on, she deleted the text and did a search on her iPad for 'Amalfi coast vacations.' She scanned the results and went to a site that offered a trip of six days, seven nights, including guided tours, at a spectacular-looking resort. Maybe they could do a week

in Italy, then a week in Greece. Besides, going away wasn't a luxury, it was a necessity. They were never going to get their marriage back on track here in Westchester. They had to get away from the routine, the distractions. She loved the kids, but the routine, the sameness of their lives, had ruined them more than anything.

'One more minute!' she called out.

She straightened up in the kitchen and made sure Casey was in the house. She was about to announce that time was up when Justin came down, fully dressed but carrying his sneakers.

'You're lucky, you just made it,' Deb said.

They got in her car, Justin in the back seat, and she pulled out of the garage, feeling very buzzed, but it was okay – she could drive.

'I really, really, really don't wanna go to the sleepover,' Justin said.

Deb heard her phone vibrating in her purse, another text from Owen.

'You're going,' Deb snapped, 'and that's final.'

She steered the car onto Savage Lane, thinking that she definitely didn't want to get into a big discussion with Owen – the shorter, the better. Maybe she'd say, 'I'm sorry, it's over. We can't see each other anymore.' No build up, just be direct. Or, better, 'I'm sorry, it's over, Owen. We can't see each other anymore.' Yeah, saying his name would underline it, put her in control, but why say *sorry*? What was she apologizing for? Maybe just go, 'It's over, Owen.' The other times she'd tried to break up, she'd been wishy-washy, left wriggle room, but this time he'd hear the seriousness in her tone. Maybe she was wrong thinking that breaking up with him would be difficult and there would be drama. Maybe he'd be on the same page, understand that it couldn't go on like

this, and he'd agree to move on, and that would be the end of it.

Deb was jarred from her thoughts when, up ahead, she saw Mark and Karen near the road in front of Karen's house. Karen was also dressed to go running in Lycra and a tank top, showing off her perfectly toned Pilates arms.

'Hey, there's Daddy,' Justin said.

Karen was smiling, and Mark was talking in a very animated way – did he ever show so much enthusiasm when he was talking with anyone but Karen? It amazed and disgusted Deb how they were so open about their relationship, how they were flaunting it for everyone to see.

Deb was hoping she could drive by without them noticing, but there wasn't much traffic on Savage Lane and a passing car always got attention. Sure enough as the car approached, Karen's gaze shifted toward Deb and when they made eye contact Karen stopped smiling, just for a moment, and suddenly looked very serious, and then Mark looked over with a similar guilty expression. They were having an actual affair; Deb was certain of it.

As the car passed, Karen's smile returned, but it was obviously a strained, fake smile, trying to cover up for her guilt, and then taking it even further, she waved at Deb. Meanwhile, Deb didn't smile back, just glared at both of them until she had passed by, out of view.

A few minutes later, driving along Old Post Road, Deb still couldn't believe that Karen had actually smiled at her. The bitch was flirting openly with her husband, an obvious home wrecker, and then she *smiles*?

Talk about balls.

Pulling into the lot of Barlow Mountain Elementary School, Deb saw Owen's car – well, the Sentra he always

borrowed from his mother – parked in a spot near the entrance. Deb had had sex with him in that car so many times, the latest just last Tuesday evening when she'd told Mark she was going to hang out for a while at a friend's house, but she'd really met Owen at the parking lot behind a hardware store. Deb couldn't help seeing a flash of Owen – his pale, hairless chest, him squeezing a fistful of her hair like he didn't want to ever let go – but refocused quickly and rehearsed what she was going to say to him. *It's over, Owen. We can't see each other anymore.*

She hoped when she pulled out of the lot after swimming practice that would be it, he'd be out of her life for good, and she could work on rebuilding her marriage.

In the school, Justin went to the lockers to get changed, and Deb went to the pool. Most of her buzz had worn off which was annoying because she could've used a little more relaxation. She scanned the bleachers for Owen, but didn't see him at his usual seat, second row, near the aisle, or anywhere else. There were about twenty other people scattered around – mostly moms and dads. Deb wasn't really friends with any of them, but she said 'hi' or waved to the few moms she'd spoken to before and then sat alone a few rows behind Owen's usual seat.

Practice had already started, the kids doing the breaststroke and the coach, Dave, shouting echoing instructions that were impossible to understand from where Deb was at the opposite end of the pool. Owen's brother, Kyle, was swimming in lane four, so Owen had to be there somewhere. Deb looked again and, sure enough, Owen was heading toward the bleachers.

Deb felt the way she always did when Owen walked into a room – excited, horny, and very alive. It wasn't just because she was so attracted to him. Yeah, he was a good-looking guy – six feet tall, dirty blond hair, bright blue eyes

– but he was far from gorgeous. His ears stuck out a little too far and, at eighteen, his hairline was already receding, and he was lanky, a little awkward. Sometimes his arms seemed too long for his body, and he had a tick where he blinked too hard and too often when he was nervous or self-conscious. But there was just something about him that always sharpened Deb’s senses, mesmerized her. When he was nearby, even when she wasn’t looking at him, she was hyperaware of his presence. To Deb, Owen wasn’t a person; he was passion. He made her feel wanted, desired, sexy and, yes, younger.

Owen went to sit in his usual spot on the bleachers, not even looking at Deb. Though sometimes Owen wasn’t as careful as he should’ve been with his texting, the main reason the affair had lasted as long as it had was because they were always discreet in public. Was she imagining it or could she smell his Axe cologne? He was probably too far away to *actually* smell it, but being around him was so intoxicating and arousing in every way.

It’s over, Owen, we can’t see each other anymore. It’s over, Owen, we can’t see each other anymore.

After he watched about ten minutes of practice, Owen left the pool area. Deb knew exactly where he was going.

Deb waited about five minutes and then she got up and left as well. A five-minute lag was enough that no one could suspect that her exit had anything to do with Owen’s.

Deb went down the first floor hallway to the ladies’ room, where she went to the bathroom, washed her hands, and then spent a couple of minutes staring in the mirror, trying to get up the strength to do what she had to do. Then she left the bathroom, but instead of returning to the pool area, she made sure no one was around and went up to the third floor.

Walking along the third floor hallway, Deb's heart rate accelerated. In front of room 314, she paused, gathering more strength, then entered.

Owen was where he always was – sitting at the desk.

'Good morning, Debbie,' he said.

She took a deep breath and tried to slow her heart rate.

'We need to talk,' she said.

That was good – taking control, or trying to. She shut the door, but remained near it.

'I know we do, Debbie, that's why I've been waiting for you.'

She loved when he spoke to her in a commanding tone; it was so goddamn sexy.

'Seriously,' she said. 'We have to.'

'I know, it's very serious,' he said. 'You got an F on your term paper, and you're usually an A student. Was there some sort of problem?'

Ok, this was the time to do it. Right now.

'Yeah, actually there is a problem,' she said.

'Really?' he said. 'Okay, what's your excuse?'

She wanted to say the line she'd rehearsed, tell him it was over, but then she had a vision of Mark and Karen, on the road in front of Karen's house, looking so *together*. What if Mark was planning to leave the marriage? Deb knew she couldn't handle being alone. She'd go crazy.

'I...' she said. 'I... I don't know.'

Owen stood, facing her.

'I'm sure you have a good excuse, Debbie, and I'm sure we can work something out.'

Owen was deep in the fantasy, in his role, and Deb wanted to be in it with him, just one more time.

She approached the desk, swinging her hips back and forth. She stopped, biting down a little on her lower lip, looking like she wanted to devour him, and then, after

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she got on her knees in front of him, she looked up at his smooth face, and he seemed so tall, so commanding, and she heard a sad, desperate voice that sounded nothing like her own say, 'Well, you know I'd do *anything* for an A, Mr Harrison,' and she couldn't stop it anymore.

The fantasy was back.