

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

GREER HENDRICKS

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE SUBLET

A SHORT STORY

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July 20

My hands grip the ten and two positions on the steering wheel as I navigate the winding single-lane road heading north to a small town in Connecticut. My gaze flits between the directions on Apple Maps to ensure I don't get lost, and the rearview mirror to ensure I'm not being followed. If all goes according to plan, I should arrive at my destination in forty-three minutes.

In the second row of the sedan, a navy water bottle rests in one cup holder, travel tissues in the other. A pink stuffed cat is tucked in the back seat organizer. Nestled in the door pockets are sunglasses, hair ties, and a pack of gum. This is a family car—but I am alone.

The sound of my cell phone cuts through the silence like a blade. I startle and my foot slips on the gas pedal, forcing the car to lurch forward. It's Paul, my husband. I let it ring a second time, then a third, before forcing myself to answer.

"Hey, Annie." Paul is the only person who still calls me by my childhood nickname.

Act normal, I think. In the background I hear the ambient sounds of Manhattan—an aggressive horn, the wail of a siren, a dog barking.

"Are you there?" he asks. "How's the drive going?"

"It's great!" I feign an upbeat tone. "I'm just really sorry I had to take off so suddenly."

Paul is a supportive husband and father, but still, he finds it challenging when I am away from home. To say I handle most of the domestic responsibilities is an understatement. There should be a footnote attached to my family's definition of "mother" that states cook, housekeeper, tutor, social secretary, budgeter, party planner, therapist, nurse, and morality instructor. At least I dodged a move to the suburbs, or I would have had to add chauffeur to the list.

But Paul doesn't mind this trip much since our nine-year-old twins, Ben and Beatrice, are attending a six-week sleepaway camp in Maine, the same summer camp Paul went to as a young boy. Plus, I'm guessing after the way I've been behaving lately, he's happy to have the apartment to himself for a

few days.

“Well, don’t worry, I’m holding down the fort. Whisky and I have a hot date to watch *Suits*.”

I smile, picturing Paul snuggling on the couch next to our rescue cat, gently petting his short taupe fur. But then the cozy image of a purring Whisky morphs into a memory of him hissing and biting his fur.

I grip the steering wheel harder and shove the unpleasant thought aside. “Seriously? What season are you on now?” I ask.

“Sixty-seven,” he quips.

“Ha, ha,” I say. In the rearview mirror, a dark vehicle approaches.

“Okay, look, I should go. I just wanted to check in and tell you I love you. Drive safe, and remember to put everything on your biz card.”

After fifteen years of marriage, Paul knows me well. I always forget to use my AmEx for work expenses.

“Will do,” I assure him, even though I didn’t bother to pack my corporate card.

As a ghostwriter hired to give voice to authors who don’t have the time or talent to draft their own books, sometimes I am required to travel for work.

This is not one of them.

I can’t recall when I last lied to Paul. Perhaps when I pretended to like the orange sweater he bought me for Mother’s Day. “I know you’re trying to wear more color,” he’d said.

But this falsehood is more than a little fib to spare his feelings.

The dark car whips by, and the woman on the passenger side glares at me and shakes her head.

I realize I’m driving 25 in a 45-mph zone. My eyes prick with tears and the road before me blurs, so I jerk the car off to the shoulder. My heart beats quickly; it feels as if a brick of firecrackers is exploding in my chest.

I press my palms together and inhale and exhale slowly to the count of five while I imagine being embraced by a lavender light, one of the relaxation exercises Melody Wells shares in *The Well*, the book that supposedly needs so much wrangling, I had to abruptly leave my husband. I choke back a laugh at the irony: I am employing a technique created by the woman who caused this anxiety—in order to quell my anxiety.

June, a few weeks earlier

“For these final moments, I’d like you to close your eyes and take a deep inhalation,” Melody commands; her voice is even and smooth, a silvery ribbon. The only other sound in the studio is the rhythmic meditation music cascading from the speakers.

I sit on a tufted pillow with my legs crossed, palms facing upward. The seven other women in the class, who are each paying \$175 for the ninety-minute session, comply. I hesitate, then follow suit. The air smells sweet and woody: in other words, like Melody.

“Now, exhale,” she continues, in her now-familiar mellifluous tone. “Imagine yourself transported to a place where all around you is a soft lavender light. As you take in your next few breaths, let yourself merge with this illumination.”

I squint open my eyes and sneak a peek as Melody makes her way around the room. Her platinum blond hair has been tied back in a single braid, and along with her icy blue eyes and fair skin, she looks like a supermodel version of Elsa from *Frozen*. Her lilac-colored top bears the insignia *be WELL* in a peppy white italic script. She lays a hand on the small of one woman’s back, then on another’s arm.

“Feel yourself becoming one with the violet aura,” Melody says, and turns toward my side of the studio. I blink my eyes shut and inhale.

“Remember, there is nothing you need to do. Nowhere else you need to be.”

As I exhale again, I feel a gentle pressure on my tight shoulders. “Anne,” Melody whispers, her breath sweet like mint. “Pull in your navel. Like you’re zipping up a tight pair of jeans.”

My cheeks burn, and I try to suck in my abdomen. Two decades of desk work, plus nine months carrying the twins, have not done me any favors; my tummy sags like a deflated balloon. I can’t recall the last time I shimmied into a slinky pair of denims.

As if to mock me, my stomach rumbles. All I’ve had to eat today are the crushed graham crackers I dug out of my tote bag.

My life is anything but lavender. I stayed awake until midnight, first helping Ben write his final paper for the school year, a report on orangutans,

then revising chapter 3 of Melody's book, a section on intimacy. I promised myself that I would get up at 5:30 a.m. to brainstorm ideas for my own elusive novel, but when I pulled out my laptop, I just stared at the nearly blank screen and pulsing cursor. I still couldn't settle on an idea, and sometimes I wondered if I really had a story to tell. I ended up closing the document and instead confronted the stack of unpaid bills. At 7:15 a.m., I simultaneously fed the cat, barked orders at Ben to get dressed, and searched for Beatrice's favorite gingham headband.

"Allow your body to be held by this soothing, tranquil energy," Melody continues. I feel enveloped and lulled by her calm cadence.

But I am not here to be serenaded into serenity. I am here for a paycheck, a fairly hefty one, too, to ghostwrite Melody's inspirational self-help book.

Just a year or so ago, few people had heard of Melody Wells, but then the pop star Lyric Leddy attended one of Melody's seminars entitled "Your Lavender Moment" and posted about it on TikTok. She raved about Melody's purple five-pillar framework and then went on to write a song called "Lavender Magic." Suddenly Melody's mantra, "Let lavender magic carry you away," was featured everywhere—mugs, T-shirts, and memes.

Soon after, Melody landed a literary agent who secured her a mid-six-figure advance—and a killer deadline. The contract requires her to deliver an eighty-thousand-word manuscript that outlines her unique pillar system, complete with motivational tips and everyday practical advice, by August 8. The plan is to rush the publication for January's *New Year, New You* media promotions and capitalize on Melody's popularity before it possibly—probably—waned. Melody also needs it completed quickly to coincide with the launch of her eponymous line of supplements.

Apparently, Melody had done an exhaustive search to find the ideal ghostwriter. To be honest, I'd been surprised I was on her list and even more shocked that after three rounds of interviews, I'd been selected. I'd never worked on a wellness book before, and most of my previous clients were far less cosmopolitan than Melody: a wildlife veterinarian from Vermont, a stay-at-home mom who created a line of gluten-free baked goods after her son was diagnosed with celiac disease, a woman who had escaped a serial killer.

But evidently none of this mattered to Melody. "I'm very intuitive," she said. "I just know you're perfect for this project."

Still, I sought reassurances. “Why me?” I wondered aloud to Paul.

“Why not you?” he replied. “You’re amazing. Don’t doubt yourself.” I hoped he truly believed this. His advertising agency had recently lost a major account, and I had a feeling this pep talk was as much for himself as it was for me. In any case, we were both relieved I would be bringing in some extra money.

Melody had me sign an NDA, which I had heard was not unusual for these types of projects. Although I was surprised at the extent of her confidentiality agreement, which forbade me from even telling my literary agent I had been hired for the job. “You know how it is—one person tells another person and so on . . .” And it dictated that when we met in person I would wear exercise clothes. “This way, if someone sees us together, they’ll assume you’re a client,” she replied when I questioned this point. I had to buy athletic sneakers for the first time in years—sadly, they’re still blinding white, since I only wear them to meetings with Melody.

I turned away all other work to meet the ambitious deadline. The redesign of my website and my freelance copyediting gigs would have to wait.

To help me get started, Melody gave me a box of materials containing a few chapters she had drafted on her own before she realized she needed help, claiming she was one of those people who prints out everything, and a bunch of lavender notebooks filled with reflections, lists, and sketches. It took me a few days to decipher her cryptic handwriting and creative spelling, but within a week I had transcribed most of her simple but oddly compelling musings—*It’s more important to do what you think is right than to focus on what you’ve been doing wrong; Honesty starts with the promises you keep to yourself*—and created a spreadsheet of things she endorses vs. disavows. Wearing shades of purple, taking cold showers, owning a pet, and orgasming at least twice a week (with or without a partner) are on the recommend list. Reality television, restrictive diets, jetted baths, and chewing gum are renounced.

Since Melody hired me, we have been meeting regularly, both in person and via Zoom, but it always helps to spend time with my clients in their natural habitats. Seeing Melody in action will best enable me to transmit her mystical charisma to the page. I liken my technique to a method actor preparing for a role.

I’m discovering that it’s more than simply *what* she says that resonates

with her followers; it's the way she says it.

If only she'd chosen me sooner.

“Okay, ladies, it's time to return to the here and now. If it feels comfortable, offer yourself a big hug. Really relish how you are holding yourself. When you're ready, I want you to open your eyes slowly and carry that feeling as you reengage with the world around you.”

I wrap my arms around myself and give a squeeze, amazed by the comfort this basic act provides. Then I head over to my cubby to gather my belongings. A few women, with perky ponytails, cheery exercise clothes, and layers of gold jewelry, kiss Melody goodbye. I pull on my socks. There's a hole in the right toe that I hope nobody notices. By the time I'm lacing up my pristine sneakers, only one woman remains, her head bowed. I watch as Melody hands her a tissue, and she dabs her eyes.

After the teary woman leaves the studio, Melody leads me into her lavender-themed office, where I take a seat in a chair that faces a wall of books by the authors Melody loves: the Dalai Lama, Eckhart Tolle, Paulo Coelho, Deepak Chopra, Brené Brown, Glennon Doyle.

“Look what just arrived,” Melody says excitedly, and walks over to a large cardboard box overflowing with candles, bath salts, and supplements. The purple labels read *b-WELL*, *up-sWELL*, *jeWELL*, *dWELL*, *groundsWELL*, and *WELLborn*. “I want you to try something.”

While I pull out my notebook and pen and ready my phone to record our session, Melody retrieves a pitcher from a small fridge and pours a purple liquid into two tumblers. I glance at my notes from our last session. *You need to stop trying to change your body to change your life. Instead, you need to change your life in order to change your body.*

Melody places a glass on the table in front of me, and the gold band on her ring finger catches the light. As public as Melody has been about parts of her life, she never mentions a partner. I wonder if I can get her to open up to me about her private life in today's session. I take a sip of my drink, expecting the beverage to taste like the chemically flavored grape juice my children favor; instead, it's tart and refreshing.

“Mm,” I say.

Melody seems pleased. “It's made from my up-sWELL powder. So good for inflammation—and concentration. I saw you yawning in class,” she adds, with a little shrug.

She removes a few handfuls of bottles from the shelves, explaining their benefits: energy, relaxation, and so on. Then she places them in a *be WELL* tote and sets it down by my bag. “I just can’t wait until I can share these supplements with the world, but in the meantime, you can enjoy them. The only one I’m not giving you is WELLborn—it’s a prenatal nutrient.” She cocks her head. “Unless there’s something you haven’t told me.”

I’m forty-four, and it took me multiple rounds of in-vitro to get pregnant with the twins. In my extensive interviews with Melody and her team, they’d learned about Paul’s chief copywriting position; that I’d been raised by a single mother who had died a few years ago; that Ben and Beatrice attend a local public school. And that we reside in a cramped two-bedroom apartment and are considering a move to the suburbs. It’s not that Paul and I want to leave Manhattan, but we’ve finally conceded that since the twins are on the cusp of adolescence, they should each have their own bedroom, something we simply can’t afford in the city. It’s hard for me to admit, but I’m also ready for a change: a view that doesn’t include a doughy man waddling around in saggy underpants and the assault of garlic that creeps through the vent from our downstairs neighbor.

But my fertility issues are a sensitive subject, a private one, I have not disclosed. “Ha-ha, nope,” I force myself to reply. “Okay, shall we start?” I continue, and press the record button on my phone before she has time to answer. “I really enjoyed your class. Are most of those women regulars?”

Melody tells me about her clients, whom she calls WELL-doers. She says she really relates to these women, even though their backgrounds are so different from her own. “At the end of the day, does it matter your race, religion, or gender? Aren’t we all just looking to be the best version of ourselves?”

I nod, and I’m about to ask her to expand on this idea when she claps her hands loudly. “Oh, hold on! I can’t believe I didn’t mention this right away. I think I have a solution to your housing issue.”

I feel my face flush. “What ‘housing issue’?”

Melody crinkles her nose. “Come on, Anne . . . Pelham.” She shudders. Like the town in Westchester is a bad word.

I look down at the white oak floors and trace the bottom of my sneaker along the grain.

“Well, I just heard about a place near the East River that’s available. It’s

not huge, but it has three bedrooms. And you'd still be in Manhattan."

"I'm sure it's out of our budget," I say quickly. I think about the women, er, WELL-doers, in Melody's class with their matching exercise outfits, designer bags, and shiny tennis bracelets. Anyone in Melody's orbit probably lives in a place much more expensive than ours.

"I don't think it's too bad." She hesitates. "And maybe I could give you some extra work to help out? Marketing materials, social media stuff . . . you get the idea."

"Melody," I begin. What I want to say is there are only so many hours in a day to devote to her; that is, if I want to spend any time with my kids, with my husband, by myself. But then I picture the twins and how happy they would be to learn they would be getting their own rooms. "That's very generous of you."

"You deserve it." She smiles as she jots down a name, Julia Harris, and a phone number on a piece of her *be WELL* notepad paper, which she presses into my hand. "Text her. I think they're eager to sublet. I mean, it can't hurt, right?"

"No, I suppose it can't." I shrug.

That Sunday, Paul and I park Ben and Beatrice on the couch with Whisky, a giant bowl of Veggie Booty, and unlimited screen time to watch *Modern Family* while the two of us set off to "just take a peek" at the apartment on East End. It turns out the rent, while a stretch, might be manageable if we dip into our savings.

We walk the five blocks from the subway, and the closer we get to our destination, the quieter the city streets become. There are fewer stores and restaurants this far east, and less traffic. When we reach the emerald green awning, the doorman seems to be expecting us and waves us through the marble lobby toward the elevator bank.

"Fourteen is a lucky number," I say, giving Paul's hand three little squeezes—our *I love you* signal—as we ascend.

"Where did you hear that?" he asks.

"From Melody."

"C'mon, Annie, you don't really believe all of her hocus-pocus, do

you?”

“Some of it,” I say. “She actually studied—”

Before I can finish my sentence about Melody’s untraditional qualifications, Paul points to the elevator keypad, which skips from 12 to 14. “Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but the apartment is technically on 13.” He punctuates his point with a kiss on the top of my head, and we exit into the hallway.

Julia Harris greets us at the door. “Welcome, welcome!” she effuses. “The owner is so glad you could make it on such short notice.”

Resplendent in a lavender pantsuit and matching ballet flats, this is a woman who is not afraid of color. With her stylish loose bun and diamond stud earrings, she looks like she could be one of Melody’s clients. For all I know, she is.

Wearing my usual weekend uniform—black leggings and an oversize charcoal sweater—I feel underdressed. And Paul, who just a few moments ago appeared casually cute in a vintage Rolling Stones T-shirt and gray Nike tracksuit, now looks kind of schlumpy. We are like lackluster caterpillars next to a radiant butterfly.

We should have put in more effort, I think. Perhaps this visit is kind of an interview.

Before we enter the foyer, Julia casually, unapologetically, asks if we will remove our shoes. Paul and I slip off our sneakers and slide them under a decorative bench. Thank god I don’t have a hole in my sock today. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Julia uses the toe of her own shoe to nudge the two pairs so they perfectly align.

“Follow me,” Julia says with a sweep of her hand, and we head into a modern kitchen with flat panel cabinetry and integrated appliances. There are no errant coffee stains on the counter or rogue crumbs on the floor. I fantasize about alphabetizing my spices and wearing an apron that says *I Am the Secret Ingredient* while I prepare nutritious and delicious meals for my family.

Next, Julia leads us into a small dining room and then down a brightly lit hallway. A series of impressionistic landscape prints adorn the corridor. Paul and I also have art on the walls at home—if you count old portraits of Beatrice and Ben in mismatched frames.

We arrive in the living room, where a giant window overlooks the East River. The view is spectacular. A seagull swoops past in the cloudless blue

sky and the water below sparkles as a powerboat cruises along, leaving a foamy trail in its wake. Julia gestures to a balcony, and we step out onto the small terrace. A warm wind caresses my skin. I take a deep breath, savoring the salt air. I don't just feel like I'm in a different apartment; I feel like I'm in another city. I can't believe we might actually be able to afford a place like this.

The apartment even has its own washer and dryer and built-in closets. I picture my new curated wardrobe: clothes uniformly spaced on matching velvet hangers and organized by color and season. A rainbow of cashmere sweaters perfectly folded. Shoes aligned in tidy rows like an army of soldiers.

And, of course, the third bedroom, the most important feature of all, so that finally Ben and Bea can have their own space.

"And voilà," Julia says as she concludes the tour and leads us back to the foyer.

"Do you mind if I take some pictures?" Paul asks, pulling out his phone.

Julia pauses for a beat and smooths her hair. "Of course not," she says. "Take all the photos you need."

Paul heads to the back of the apartment while I return to the living room, sit down at the built-in desk, and watch a few sailboats chasing spring. I could stare at this view all day.

The ping of an incoming text interrupts my reverie. It's Ben: Bea drank all the choclte milk

"Oh, is this another closet?" Paul calls out. I follow his voice and see his hand on a silver doorknob. He gives it a jiggle, but it doesn't budge.

Suddenly Julia appears beside him. "Oh, hmm. That's odd. The tenant must have accidentally locked it." She retrieves a ceramic bowl filled with keys and tries a few, but none of them work.

My phone chirps again. This time it's Bea. BEN HIT ME!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

"We should probably go." I raise an eyebrow at Paul and waggle my phone. Although my words are veiled, he understands a parental SOS when he sees one.

"I'm so sorry," Julia says. "I'll track down the right key, and you can come back later."

"No problem." Paul shrugs. "It's just a closet." I can tell he's as enamored with the place as I am.

I try to recall what the real estate psychology rules are. Are we supposed to register enthusiasm or temper our passion?

“It’s a great apartment . . . ,” Paul finally says, slipping on his sneakers.

“Do you know when the owner thinks it will be available?” I ask, bending down to lace up mine.

“Well, the previous tenants have already left for Palm Beach, so I would imagine immediately.”

By the time Paul and I return to 4N, Beatrice and Ben have accessed *Squid Game*, and a coating of green Veggie Booty powder dusts the couch. Paul yells at the kids and sends them to their room while I dig out the dustbuster and begin to prep for dinner. The usual Sunday slack occupies the rest of the evening. Beatrice has decided she’s a vegetarian and refuses to eat the chicken. Ben whines about end-of-the-year homework being pointless. Paul retreats to the bedroom to work on a client pitch while I tidy up the kitchen and head down to the basement to retrieve the load of laundry I’ve forgotten in the dryer; another resident’s clothes are mixed in with mine. When I return upstairs, the kids, who are supposed to be asleep, are squabbling, and beneath the crack of their door I see the lights flickering on and off. Finally, I barge in and hiss: “Go to sleep. *Now.*” I hardly recognize my voice.

That night in bed, I come up with a title for Melody’s intimacy chapter: “Seductive at Every Age.” I recall one of her warnings: *If you aren’t sleeping with your partner, you can bet someone else is.* I try to remember the last time Paul and I slept together. A few weeks ago? A month, maybe? Even though I’m exhausted and feel as excited about sex as I would be for a root canal, I lean over and kiss Paul’s neck. The peppermint smell of his muscle relaxer tickles my nose. It’s not alluring, but it’s familiar.

“Aw, babe. Can I take a rain check? I’m just totally wiped.”

Ouch. Paul used to be unable to keep his hands off me. It didn’t matter if he’d had too much to drink, pulled an all-nighter at the office, or just gotten off a red-eye. I roll onto my side and pinch the extra flab around my waist. I think about Melody’s flat abs and her urging me to shimmy into a tight pair of jeans. Within minutes, Paul is splayed on his back, snoring.

But I lie awake imagining my life in 14E. Maybe without the four of us

on top of each other, the view of the river just outside, Paul and I would want to have sex and the kids would go to sleep on time. For sure, I wouldn't have to ride an elevator to a creepy basement to do laundry. Even though I would have to do more work for Melody, I bet I would even find the inspiration to tackle my own writing.

I get up and look through the supplements Melody gave me for one that promises relaxation. I study the ingredients, assurances, the warning label, and it goes down quickly with water. As my eyes get heavy and my heart rate slows, I think back to Melody's comment: *You deserve it.*

We finish up our paperwork on the kids' last day of school. Within hours of sending it, Julia calls to say that our application has been accepted with a two-year term and no rent increase.

That night, to celebrate, I order in pizza from Uncle Vinny's, our favorite Italian restaurant. Paul uncorks a bottle of champagne for us and sparkling apple cider for Ben and Beatrice. "To our new home," he says, and we clink our glasses. The food tastes extra delicious, Paul uncharacteristically declines a call from the office, and the kids don't spill, stain, or bicker. Instead, they pepper us with sweet questions: "Can I paint my room pink?" Beatrice requests. "Can I get a pull-up bar?" asks Ben. And at the end of the meal, they even clear their dishes.

When Paul and I cuddle under the covers, he takes me up on the rain check from the other night. *This is the beginning of our new life*, I think as I drift off to sleep in his arms.

When I text Melody to thank her for the lead on the apartment, she replies quickly.

Congrats! I'm away at a retreat. Chapters 5 and 6 by Tuesday?
Remember more lavender moments! Purple as motivation! Feel
the magic!

She can't be serious. I just sent her chapters 3 and 4. My chest constricts

as I think about all I have to do to get the kids ready for camp (health forms, name stamps, toiletry purchases), plus the move to 14E, which we have scheduled for the following weekend. Still, I send back a thumbs-up emoji. Maybe Paul can help me with the packing. Or with my new income, we could splurge and hire extra movers to help us pack.

A few days before we officially obtain occupancy, the kids attend a classmate's birthday party at the Bronx Zoo, and the superintendent, Gordon, allows us access to the apartment to take measurements.

I notice that while the other units on the floor each have a letter and number to identify them, there is a blank faded space where 14E should be. Maybe it got damaged when the previous tenants moved out. Before I even say anything, Gordon assures me he will have the signage replaced before we move in.

When I enter the living room, I'm surprised to see boxes in the hallway, each labeled with the name Lucy Mount and an address in Connecticut in neat block letters.

"These will be picked up tomorrow," Gordon says.

"I thought the previous tenants were a couple retiring to Palm Springs . . . or Palm Beach," I muse aloud.

"Please don't tell anyone that the boxes are still here. I was supposed to call UPS yesterday," Gordon stutters.

Paul shoots me a look and says, "Who cares where they're going, Annie? Bottom line: We got a great new place . . . below market value."

"Look, I don't mean to rush you," Gordon says, "but do you want to take those measurements or not?"

Paul pulls out his tape measure, and I make my way to the balcony. The heat of the sun warms my face, and I squint as I draft a text to Melody. In the apartment. It's great. Zoom 11 on Wed?

As I wait for a reply, I watch a white-haired woman, wearing a bright red sweater, on the promenade thirteen floors below tossing bird feed. Three dots appear, then disappear. I continue to stare at my phone. It seems like a simple question, and I wonder why it's taking Melody so long to answer it. Suddenly a thunderous flapping sound erupts, startling me like a slap. I rear

back as I watch a cloud of pigeons fly up past the balcony.

Finally, Melody's response appears: Let's make it 9.

Melody knows that Paul and I plan to drop the kids off at the camp bus on Wednesday morning. I requested the time off weeks ago.

I type. Remember, I can't meet then.

I pause before sending. The elderly woman below begins to shuffle her way south downtown as the flock of pigeons follows behind her, scrabbling for crumbs.

I tell myself to be grateful for Melody. Without her I wouldn't have this lucrative writing gig—and now this apartment.

I erase my message. Ok, I text.

Gordon is suddenly beside me, gazing out the window. "That's Peg," he says, pointing to the white-haired woman. "She lives down the hall. She means well, but . . ." He makes a circular motion with his index finger around his ear.

"Uh, thanks," I say, unsure how to respond. We linger there awkwardly until I excuse myself to find Paul. He's in the dining room, jotting neat numbers in a little notebook, and so I wander down the hall toward the locked closet. I give the silver handle a twist, and this time, the door opens easily, and I step into the small area. As I reach outside for the light switch, I see I am face-to-face with another woman. I jerk back and let out a squeaky shriek. When my eyes adjust to the dim light, I realize the wall is mirrored. The enigmatic figure is a reflection—it's only me.

The first night in 14E, Paul and I nibble on dim sum as we unpack boxes. As I empty one labeled *ANNE CLOTHES*, I vow to be neater here than in the old apartment, and I refold all of my items before putting them away in the built-in closet. I startle for a second when my fingers graze something small and soft in the top drawer, remembering the dead mouse I found in our old place, but it's just a delicate sachet bag. *What a nice touch*, I think as I lift it to my nose. I can barely make out the scent of the faded potpourri, and I make a mental note to buy another.

At nearly midnight, exhausted, I climb into bed beside a sleeping Paul, open my laptop, and log on to the camp website to review the day's photos of

the kids. There's Beatrice in the arts and crafts hut, holding a paintbrush and biting her bottom lip, the way she always does when she's concentrating. I scroll through some more photos until I find one of Ben. His cheeks appear sunburnt, and he's wearing a bathing suit that I don't recognize and hiking boots. I wonder why he's not in his Crocs or sneakers. How could I have left him to be cared for by a bunch of college boys?

I consider drafting a note to the camp director, but I decide to let it go and instead email the kids. Dear Bea, I begin.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a dark shadow scuttling back and forth: Whisky. I know cats have difficulties adjusting to new places. Ever since we adopted him five years ago, our other apartment has been the only home he's ever known. "Shush, Whisky, settle down," I murmur as I continue typing. But then comes an unfamiliar, guttural growl. Whisky is in the hallway, ears erect, eyes squinting, mouth ajar, hissing at the wall near the closet that was locked the other day. When I walk over, Whisky glares at me and races off.

I take a step closer to see what was upsetting him and stumble backward.

"Paul," I call out.

When there's no reply, I shout my husband's name again.

"What's wrong?" The sound of his slippers spans against the hardwood floor as he rushes toward me.

A stripe of claw marks mar the wallpaper. They look like scars.

Paul stares at the scratches and then turns to me. "This is what you woke me up for?" He shakes his head and leads me back to bed, all the while reassuring me that our skittish cat just needs some time to adapt to his new environment.

I want to believe my husband, but I've been around cats all my life, and I've never seen one this destabilized. In order to fall asleep, I double down on Melody's relaxation supplement.

Paul and I spend the Fourth of July in Manhattan. I'm disappointed that we can't get away for the holiday—there's no way I can take off the time—but I'm grateful that from our balcony we can watch the fireworks dancing in the

dark over the East River.

I try and evoke this appreciation when Melody bombards me with edits on the chapters I sent her last week. *This wording doesn't sound like me. I would never say that. Advice like this doesn't make sense.*

I could tell her that what she has read was largely taken from the lavender notebooks she herself gave me; however, I restrain myself.

I need to focus on just getting the project done. But I find myself defeated by her harsh tone and then distracted by Whisky, who continues to act skittish, biting his short taupe fur and not using his litter box. It's hard for me to concentrate with him skulking around.

I pop one of Melody's concentration supplements, and while I wait for it to kick in, I sort through my mail. I read a letter from Bea, flip through a furniture catalog, and set aside an important-looking bill with *PAST DUE* stamped on it for Lucy Mount, the name that was on the moving boxes.

Then, seeking inspiration, I turn to those first early chapters, the ones Melody drafted before she hired me. *Like lavender, I bloom in the most unlikely of places. In a world of chaos, let lavender be your oasis.*

In the margin, Melody has written *I love all this*. I roll my eyes. I wonder if she has always been so self-congratulatory, or did this happen after she became semi-famous? If she was so pleased with her own work, why did she even hire me?

That night, there's a terrible storm. Rain batters the side of the building, and the wind off the East River sounds like howling wolves. After the third flash of lightning followed immediately by a loud clap of thunder, I give up on sleep and decide to finish unpacking and organizing my books. Just as I'm returning from recycling the last of the cardboard boxes in the hallway, the door to 14A opens. A white-haired woman peeps her head out, the pigeon-lady I occasionally see on the promenade. She's the only person on the floor I haven't met yet.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I hope I didn't disturb you," I say.

"Who can sleep in this weather?" she says. "You're the new neighbor. Welcome to the building."

"Thanks." I extend my hand. "I'm Anne."

“Peg,” she says. “I wondered when they’d finally get someone to sublet that place.”

“You must be thinking of a different unit. Our apartment was just listed. We really lucked out.”

“Who told you that?” she asks, opening her door a little wider and allowing me to see into her entryway, which is crammed with newspapers, stacks of brown paper bags, and plastic containers filled with clothes.

“The broker. Apparently, the couple before—”

“What couple?” she interrupts. “Holly lived there before you.”

“Holly? Do you mean Lucy?” I offer. As my mother aged, she often confused names too.

Peg hesitates and shakes her head. “No, Holly. Such a sweetheart. Her death was tragic.”

“Death?” I splutter. “What happened?”

But instead of replying, Peg leans forward and extends two fingers to pluck something from my dark sweatshirt. Her girlish coral nail polish contrasts with her thick, gnarled fingers. I wince and pull back.

“Cat?” she asks, holding out a strand of Whisky’s fur.

I nod, and a strange expression comes over her face, a scrim of focus and understanding that makes her appear quite lucid. Yet she still hasn’t answered my question.

“Holly had a cat too,” Peg continues, her soft brown eyes filling with tears. “Sometimes when she traveled, I would feed him. Hemingway, that was his name. She was a literary type.”

I feel a twitching in my chest. I repeat my question: “What happened to Holly?”

“I could feed yours, too, if you’re ever away.”

Enough about the cats.

“Was she sick? Was she old?”

“No. That’s what was so sad. She was even younger than you.” Peg keeps talking, but her voice seems to fade away as the lights in the hall flicker and a loud crack of thunder rumbles from outside.

I take another look inside Peg’s cluttered apartment, see the metal cart she pushes when she feeds the birds, and remember Gordon’s warning. This poor lady. I hope I haven’t upset her.

“Wow, that’s terrible,” I say in what I hope isn’t too patronizing a tone.

“Look, it’s late. We should both get some rest. If you need anything, I’m just down the hall.”

I pray she won’t take me up on my invitation.

When I return to the apartment, it’s even darker than when I left. I flick the light switch a few times and realize we’ve lost power. I feel my way to the bedroom and crawl into bed next to Paul. “Where were you?” he murmurs. I don’t answer; instead I wrap my body around his, feeling grateful for his solid warmth.

The next morning the electricity is working again, and the leaden sky has been replaced by a bright blue. It’s almost as if the storm and my strange encounter with Peg never happened. I check the windows to make sure none of them leaked, and I am relieved that all of the sills are dry. However, when I head down the corridor, I see a dark pool of water soaking the floor by the closet near the cat scratches. I owe Melody another chapter by tomorrow, and yet if I don’t deal with this immediately, the wood will stain, or worse, rot. I silently curse Paul, who has already left for the office, and call Gordon.

“Seems like a pipe wasn’t properly capped and all that rain caused it to burst,” he explains. “I’ll get my guys to fix it.”

I spend the morning trying to ignore the repair team’s clanking and get some writing done. By the time everyone finally packs up, leaving a hastily patched closet wall for me to deal with next week, it’s almost noon. In an attempt to salvage the workday, I dry off the terrace furniture and bring my laptop, and Melody’s delicious hibiscus-flavored attention cocktail, onto the balcony. *Over the years, the greatest lesson I have learned is that our deepest wishes are whispers of our authentic lavender self, I type. We must learn to respect them. We must learn to listen.*

Melody didn’t say this, but I reason it sounds like her.

In the distance, a hawk circles around and around in the cloudless sky. I’m hypnotized by the majestic bird. But then the hawk swoops down and grabs a pigeon in its talons. It punctures the pigeon’s neck and carries it up to a perch on a neighboring building. I scramble to save my document, my stomach pitching, and shut down my computer as a flurry of bloody feathers land on the terrace.

I rush inside, sliding the glass door shut so hard I fear it will shatter, and head to the bathroom, where I dry heave into the toilet.

From my desk, my cell phone chirps, and only then do I remember that Melody and I had an appointment to talk this afternoon. I wipe my mouth on a towel and race to answer it.

“You sound odd,” she says. “Are you okay?”

“I just saw the most upsetting thing,” I say, and tell her about the killing.

In the background, I hear the soft harmonious instrumental music I’ve come to associate with Melody and her Manhattan studio. I guess she’s back in town.

“I get why that might seem alarming,” she says. “But hawks actually represent the prospect of new possibilities. They can mean looking into the future and preparing for big changes that need direction.”

I wonder if there is any truth to this. “I hope so,” I say, pacing the living room.

“How’s the apartment otherwise?” she asks. “Nice neighbors?”

“I mean, obviously it’s great, but, well . . .” I can’t help myself, and I tell her a few of the other upsetting things: Whisky’s anxiety, the power outage, the flood.

“Look, why don’t I come over, and we can work at your place today. Before we get started, I can do a cleanse.” As if she can read my thoughts, she says, “I’ll explain when I get there. But in the meantime, open all your windows to get the air flowing and help extricate the stagnant energy.”

I spend the next thirty minutes racing from room to room, shoving clothes in drawers and closets, wiping down counters, and jimmying open the windows.

When Melody arrives, she is dressed head-to-toe in white, from her thick-soled sneakers to her trucker-style baseball cap. It’s the only time I haven’t seen her in be WELL apparel. At first Whisky hides under the couch, but then he tentatively approaches, bumping his head against her leg.

“Aw, he’s so sweet,” Melody says, petting him. “After I launch my line of supplements for people, I’m thinking of one for our furry loved ones. Good idea, right?”

Before I can answer, she hands me a sage stick and removes a lighter from her purse. Slowly, we make our way around the apartment, using a decorative seashell to catch the falling embers.

“Repeat after me,” she says. “With the cleansing power of this sage, I release all negative energy from this space. May my home be filled with light, love, and positive vibrations. As I walk through this sacred smoke, may my body, mind, and spirit be renewed.”

Together we chant as we travel from room to room with Whisky following behind us. Melody urges me to pay particular attention to any area that feels like it has a bad aura. “Visualize the smoke absorbing all negativity. Watch it disappear and float out of the windows.”

When we finish, she pulls out a batch of purple crystals. “These all have great healing properties and revitalize good karma. I’m going to place these in some key areas,” she says as she confidently makes her way around the apartment.

I follow behind, trying to imagine how I will explain all of this to a mocking Paul when he gets home.

Melody’s last stop is my desk. A purple, silky rock in one hand, she examines the few chapters of her book that I’ve printed out to proofread, the repair team’s receipt, yesterday’s mail, and the most recent issue of the *New Yorker*. Thank god I hid the notes for my own book. She needs to think that I’m only focused on her.

“Amethyst. Very good for concentration and productivity. Hopefully it will get you back on track,” she says, and places the stone on the stack of bills. “Shall we get to work?”

That night, Paul goes from his office directly to a Yankees game with some old college buddies, and I make my favorite single-girl dinner: popcorn with olive oil, parmesan cheese, and salt. I sip on Melody’s jeWELL beverage, an invigorating grapefruit, as I type up the notes on positivity from the day’s session and try to figure out a structure for this new section. I’m propped up in bed with my laptop on a pillow when Paul returns home. “Hey, Annie,” he says and gives me a kiss. He tastes like beer and hot dogs. “Why are you still up? And why does the apartment smell so weird?”

I explain about the leak and the hawk. I then tell him about Melody’s visit, the sage and chanting and crystals. “I really hope it works,” I add.

“You’re acting nutty.” He shakes his head as he makes his way to the

bathroom and turns on the water to brush his teeth. “We just moved in. There are bound to be some glitches,” he says in a garbled voice.

“Nothing like this ever happened in our old apartment,” I say.

I hear him gargle, rinse, and spit. I wish he had closed the door. The sounds of his dental hygiene make my stomach begin to roil.

“Stare at the darkness too long, and you’re bound to see something,” he says, climbing into bed beside me. “Go to sleep, Annie.” He tugs up the covers and rolls onto his side.

An hour later, I’m wide awake, and I sneak out of bed and take two of Melody’s relaxation supplements. I hesitate, then pop a third.

The next morning, my stomach is still upset, so I ignore my alarm and remain under the covers while Paul gets ready for work. I hear him in the kitchen humming, opening and closing the refrigerator, grinding fresh beans for his coffee. I’ve almost fallen back to sleep when he barges back into the bedroom. “What are these?” he says, dumping a heap of white and lavender bottles onto the bed.

“Melody gave them to me. They’re like vitamins.”

“Jesus! Do you even know what they’re made of? There was just an article in the *Times* about deaths in Japan linked to sketchy supplements.”

“They’re safe,” I say. “Read the labels if you want,” but he is already scooping them up and tossing them in the trash.

I feel too tired and weak to argue. Plus, I know I still have a few extra bottles in my tote.

“Look,” he says, sitting down beside me on the bed and smoothing back my hair. “Clearly, you’re stressed and need a break. That woman is working you too hard. What do you say we head to Maine before visiting weekend and turn the trip into a mini vacation?”

I have to finish a draft of Melody’s book in a month. Hotels are expensive. Who will watch Whisky? But Paul assures me that the work can wait. It’s only one extra night in Portland; we can afford that. Whisky can stay alone for a few days, and we can get someone to feed him. I think about Peg’s offer to help, but I would rather pay Gordon instead.

Paul is right—it is nourishing to get out of the city, see the children, and have a break from Melody. Beatrice has learned how to ride a horse. Ben has won Camper of the Week. And they both now love wakeboarding.

It pleases me that the kids, like Paul, are embracing water sports; I've always been a fearful swimmer. A few weeks ago, Melody requested an entire section on the healing properties of water, and it was one of the hardest for me to write. She accused me of not believing in aquatic power and made me rework it four times.

Before dinner, Paul shows us one of the bunks he slept in as a boy, and the twins thrill that they can still see the faint carving of their dad's name in the wood. At night, we attend a campfire where we roast marshmallows, and a counselor, face shadowed by flickering flames, tells a spooky story about a haunted cabin. I flash back to the night of the thunderstorm and the dark stain in the hallway, but then I hear the children's gleeful gasps and remind myself there is no such thing as ghosts.

When we return home, even though my stomach is still unsettled—all the camp food clearly didn't agree with me—emotionally, I feel better than I have in days. And Melody's smudging methods seem to have released whatever bad energy was in 14E. There are no more bird attacks or leaks, and even Whisky seems calmer.

While Manhattan in the summer can be oppressively hot, Paul and I try to take advantage of our free time before the kids come back. We squeeze in a picnic in Central Park and a day trip to Jones Beach. We splurge on a fancy anniversary dinner at Gramercy Tavern, where Paul presents me with a Montblanc pen. "So you can write your Great American Novel," he says. In between, we paint Beatrice's room a soft pink called Love & Happiness, assemble Ben's pull-up bar, and scroll through camp photos.

I have a calendar on my desk where I track the days until the kids come home, which coincides with my deadline for Melody's book. I don't have childcare, and it will be nearly impossible to get writing done when they return. Melody is away again, but we Zoom every morning, and in the afternoons, I write. I set word goals and reward myself with my favorite caramel candies when I complete them—and sometimes even when I don't.

On several occasions, I fall asleep slumped over my computer and stumble to bed with a crick in my neck and gritty eyes.

One morning I wake before the sun has even risen, so I go to my desk with a steaming mug of green tea—a big yes on Melody’s recommend list. Fifteen thousand more words to go. I stare at the beating cursor and fantasize that the publisher has decided to use the illustrations in Melody’s lavender notebooks to bump up her page count.

The tea tastes like boiled grass, and I push it aside and stare out the window. The view from the apartment never ceases to mesmerize me. A boat with a white hull and a bright lemon-yellow sail breaks the waves and drifts toward the stunning daybreak. The light is extraordinary, a medley of rich purples and gentle pinks that blend together and cast a magical, almost ethereal glow.

I’ve never been up this early here, but I feel a sense of déjà vu that makes me shiver involuntarily. A chill radiates through my limbs.

Where else could I have seen a view like this? Was there some passage in a memoir I ghosted that I am forgetting about? The water before dawn is incredible—I should have done this ages ago.

And then I realize I haven’t *seen* this sight before.

I’ve *read* it. In those early chapters Melody gave me.

It takes me a few minutes to find the right pages:

Picture yourself in a boat with a citrus yellow sail gliding into a peaceful lavender sunrise. The horizon blushes with soft, violet hues that are almost otherworldly. Feel your spirit on the deck as you fly across the water. Remember while we are all navigating vast unknown seas, we each travel in our own unique direction. There is no right or wrong way. Open your sail, be free. This is your lavender moment.

I don’t even realize I’m crying until I taste a salty tear. It’s clear I need to do more than simply channel Melody—I need to let down all my guards and become her. I find the lavender be Well hoodie Melody gave me when we started working together. When I first tried it on, it felt too tight, but now it comforts me, a soft security blanket. I take another sip of the green tea, and I sense its antioxidant power coursing through my veins. I recall that the potpourri sachet nestled in my top drawer has lavender in it, and I retrieve the pouch and place it on my desk next to the amethyst crystal Melody gave me.

Not wanting to break the spell, I decline all calls. ON A ROLL, I text. TALK LATER.

The dam burst, I spend the whole day writing, and since Paul has a client dinner, I continue working well into the evening.

I leave the apartment only to get the takeout I've ordered.

I've just exited the elevator with my fragrant pad thai, counting the seconds until I can dig in, when Peg's door opens.

"I thought I heard someone out here," she says and points to the brown bag in my hand. "Obao?"

I nod. "Yup."

"Holly loved their vegetable stir-fry."

I sigh. It's like Peg hasn't missed a beat, picking up exactly where we left off the other night.

"Nice," I say absently, and head down the hallway. I'm starving and exhausted. The last thing I want to do is indulge my batty neighbor.

"You asked about her. How she died," Peg says.

I stop.

"It was deemed an accident. An overdose," she continues.

My body becomes rigid, as if I've stepped in quicksand.

"Maybe it was." She pauses. "But she didn't drink at all. She was really into vitamins and exercise. She was always urging me to eat better, and take up some kind of weight-bearing exercise . . ." She lets out a strangled-sounding chuckle.

I force myself to turn around. "What exactly happened?" I manage.

"She drowned in your apartment. In the Jacuzzi tub." She sighs and wipes her eyes with her sleeve. "No one wants to admit it. They all covered it up, but it's true."

My breath stops. I feel like I'm on the brink of choking.

Peg gives me a pitying look and shrugs. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you all this." She takes a step back.

Then she turns around and finally disappears back into her apartment.

I am shaking as I walk down the corridor past 14B, and then 14C. If Peg doesn't think it was an accident, what is she implying?

For the first time, I notice there's no 14D. The units jump from C to E. I quickly shut my door and click both locks.

I set down the pad thai and step onto the balcony. The air is so thick with fog I can't even see the water below. My hair curls in the humidity, and I feel a halo of frizz around my head. I picture the waves below churning, like my uneasy mind, a Jackson Pollock scramble.

Only then does it occur to me that Peg can't be talking about my apartment!

We don't even have a regular tub, let alone a Jacuzzi.

I catch my breath and try to shake off a combination of discomfort and pity. Gordon was right. Poor Peg. She probably needs a better doctor, a visiting nurse, maybe even a move to assisted living.

As for 14D. Who cares? For all I know, the builder didn't like the letter.

Whisky scratches on the glass door, so I step back inside the apartment, and as if an invisible magnet is pulling my cat, he hurries down the hallway, his tail swooshing back and forth like a windshield wiper. He stops at the scar-like marks, and so do I, opening the magnifier on my iPhone to look at them more closely.

There's no way these gashes were generated by Whisky. Like most cats, he has five claws on each front paw. But each of these clusters contains six incisions. My heart begins to clatter.

I head over to my desk and google "Can cats have six toes?"

Wikipedia has the answer: Cats with more than the usual number of toes on one or more paws are polydactyl cats . . . Ernest Hemingway was famously known for having several of these felines.

Okay, so a cat named Hemingway could have lived here, but that still doesn't explain the drowning.

I google "Upper East Side/woman death/Holly/Apartment 14E." However, the only recent hits are an elderly lady who was hit by an SUV, another who was pushed onto the subway tracks, and a third who was struck by lightning. Horrible accidents for sure, but not a match.

I shiver and recall the night I first met Peg. The storm, the power outage, and the leak. It only now dawns on me that the wall is an interior one.

I think about that horrible boiling frog paradox. The premise that if a frog is suddenly put into steaming hot water, it will jump out, but if the frog is set in tepid water that is brought to a boil slowly, the frog will not perceive

the danger and will be cooked to death.

I decide I'll call the repairman in the morning and ask for a more detailed explanation, but when I look for the receipt that was on my desk, it's not there. I swear it was beside Melody's manuscript. I flip through the document and then my mail, to see if it somehow has gotten mixed in with those other papers. Lucy Mount's overdue bill is missing too. I've been so scattered lately I must have misfiled them.

I pick up the amethyst crystal—smooth and cool in my clammy hand. Although it's after 11 p.m., I locate Julia Harris's number and, with shaky hands, text her.

My neighbor just told me the previous tenant died. I thought you mentioned a couple though. Just wondering if you know anything about this?

I also text Melody. Do you know anything about a tenant named Holly who lived in my apartment before me?

When I hear the scrape of Paul's key in the front door, I am huddled on the couch in the living room with all the lights on, still waiting for a reply from both women.

I consider telling Paul about my interaction with Peg, but what's the point? *Who cares?* I can hear him say. *The former tenant had a cat and she died. Big deal.* So instead I turn on my side, close my eyes, and feign sleep. He tucks a blanket around me and kisses my forehead.

None of this makes sense. If the previous resident was Holly, then who is Lucy Mount?

I wonder if perhaps Holly and Lucy are related. Peg never mentioned Holly's last name. Once I am sure Paul is behind our bedroom door, I do a search for a Holly Mount. But there's no one by that name in New York City.

I then google "Lucy Mount." Whoever she is, she has no social media presence. I do, however, finally track down an address in Connecticut. And another in Manhattan. The same street address as mine, but the apartment listed is 14D. The missing unit. I pull up Apple Maps and plug in the Connecticut residence. It's only fifty-one miles from our garage. I need answers. And if Melody and the broker won't explain what's going on, I'll

figure it out myself. I promised Paul I would attend his company softball game, but as soon as it's over I will have a work emergency that requires me to head out of town.

July 20

I'm almost at my destination in Connecticut when my cell phone rings again. I figure it's Paul calling back to ask me something about Whisky.

But the name that appears on caller ID is Melody's.

I'll be at Lucy Mount's address in just a few minutes. Melody can wait. I decline the call.

Undeterred, she calls again. And again I reject her. It's after 8 p.m., and she can respect my boundaries for once!

A pulsing rage surges inside me. I missed the kids' camp drop-off, spent all those late nights working, and still have stomach issues that I now suspect, as Paul proposed, are from her bogus supplements. Just the thought of her pills and powders makes me queasy, and I roll down the car window to let in the fresh air.

I recall a catalog of her other adages about taking cold showers and eschewing gum. *Screw you*, I think, and reach into the door pocket to retrieve the pack of Orbit Sweet Mint. Even as I unwrap two stale sticky pieces, I recognize this is a ridiculous form of rebellion.

I chomp down so hard I bite the inside of my cheek. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

The phone rings again and, guessing it's Melody, I am about to send it to voicemail. But this time it *is* Paul. I spit out the gum into its wrapper and channel all of the positivity I can muster. "Hey, honey. What's up?"

"I don't know. What *is* up?" he asks in the same harsh tone he uses when the kids misbehave. "Where are you?"

"I told you. I'm going to meet Melody."

"Really . . ." He pauses. "Then why did she just call me looking for you?"

Fuck. How did she even get his number?

"Don't bullshit me, Annie," he says.

Apple Maps indicates I am now turning onto Lucy Mount's street.

"I can explain," I say. And then I do something I've never done before—I hang up on my husband.

I cut the lights and park a few houses down from Lucy's address. I try to imagine the kind of person who used to live in Manhattan and then relocated to this serene suburb.

I step out of the car and quietly close the door behind me. Fireflies hover in the dusk, their luminescent bodies flickering. In the distance, I smell the distinct, pungent aroma of charcoal and barbecue meat. I hear children's laughter and the whirl of a sprinkler.

My phone's flashlight leads the way, and it trembles slightly in my hand. I approach the house timidly, cautiously, the same way I stepped into the cold water at Jones Beach a few weekends ago. My anxiety is not eased by the emergency screwdriver I grabbed from the glove compartment and tucked in my purse. But I don't stop—I know if I do, I just might turn around. As I make my way down the long driveway, the gravel crunches beneath my sneakers. I don't really have a plan. I just know in my heart that the answers I seek are in this colonial-style house with a wraparound porch and perfectly manicured flower beds.

Before I lose my nerve, I press the doorbell. The sound of the high chime reverberates through my chest. I wait for a voice to ask, "Who is it?" And then I wait some more. While I stand on the porch, shifting my weight from side to side, I debate whether or not to give a fake name. Before I make up my mind, the door swings open.

"Hello, Anne."

I am face-to-face with Melody.

"What are you doing here?" I stammer, recoiling.

Melody smiles as if nothing about this is at all unusual. "I could ask the same of you."

"I'm here to see Lucy Mount—the woman I thought I was subletting from." I stumble over my words.

She looks me up and down, assessing me like I'm a stranger.

"Come in," she finally says. "I can explain."

I feel as if I'm in a horror movie where the mysterious Lucy Mount will be found hacked to pieces in a basement freezer. "We can talk out here."

"Don't be silly. The mosquitoes will eat us alive," she says, waving a

hand as if to emphasize her point. But when I don't budge, she continues. "Look, I'm sorry I wasn't totally up front with you." She hesitates and then says, "Out here, I go by Lucy."

"Oh?" A tsunami of questions batters my brain. I don't even know where to begin.

She claps a bug on her arm, and I nod at her to keep going. She stares down at her feet. "I lived in the East Side apartment years ago. I've been subletting it ever since. I didn't tell you because I didn't want things to be awkward between us."

"Okay." I hesitate. "But who lived there before we did?"

"You deserved a nice place, and I know you would never move into that apartment had you known what happened."

"Who lived there?" I ask again, trying to keep my voice steady. "And what happened?"

"A woman," Melody says.

"And?"

"And she drowned in her bathtub."

So Peg was telling the truth.

As I consider her words, I look into Melody's blue eyes, and for the first time I notice a fan of fine lines around them. She appears different here in Connecticut. Less Elsa from *Frozen* and more tired suburban soccer mom.

She's right on both counts. I would not have been comfortable in the apartment had I known it was hers, and that someone had died there.

A loud buzzing sound vibrates in my ear. I slap at the side of my head. "Fine, let's talk inside," I say.

Melody motions me into her chandelier-lit foyer, through a rounded archway, and into a small sitting room with built-in bookshelves and a fireplace. The walls are painted a muted sage green and decorated with landscape paintings. I think I recognize one from when we toured 14E. There's a wood coffee table, a rich brown leather sofa decorated with cream and orange throw pillows, and two complementary upholstered sitting chairs.

I do not see one lavender item.

The house is warm, too warm, and I try to remember if air-conditioning is on Melody's no-no list.

Maybe it's the heat, the stressful drive, or my sharp guilt from having lied to Paul, but I still feel queasy. "Can I use your bathroom?"

“Of course,” Melody says and points down the hall. “I’ll make us some iced tea.”

I hurry down the corridor and lock the door.

I hover over the toilet and pray I won’t be sick. When I’ve caught my breath, I stand up and splash cold water on my face and wrists. I take a few deep inhalations and stare at my reflection in the mirror. My hair is tied back in one of Bea’s scrunchies, my face looks puffy, my skin is sallow, my lips raw and chapped.

I dig in my bag for my lip balm and instead palm a spare tampon. The green and white package is faded and crumpled. It’s obviously been in there a while, and I try to recall the last time I got my period. I pull out my phone, where I track my cycle.

I have two new texts. The first from Paul I skim quickly. WTF. I can’t believe you hung up on me.

The second one is from Julia. Finally. It was tragic. I didn’t want to spook you, but I should have been straightforward. The previous tenant died.

I try to put myself in the eager broker’s lavender ballet flats. She wanted to make a commission. It wouldn’t be good business to reveal that someone died in the apartment.

Then I open my electronic calendar, but I don’t need to check it to realize: I haven’t had my period since before we moved into 14E.

The last time I felt queasy like this was ten years ago.

Melody’s supplements weren’t making me ill—I’m pregnant.

No wonder I’ve been so tired and emotional. I can’t believe I hung up on Paul. I’ve really overreacted.

Yes, Melody lied to me about Holly and the apartment, but she had an image to protect and a tight deadline. She needed my help, and like Julia, she didn’t want to spook me.

My plan is simple: apologize to Melody for the intrusion and drive back to Manhattan. Although I am not going to share my news with her, I am very eager to tell Paul.

However, when I return to the room with the fireplace, Melody isn’t there.

While I wait for her, I pull out my phone again to reply to Paul’s and

Julia's messages, and a gray, striped cat saunters into the room. It has a large blocky head, bright green eyes, and a thick, bushy tail. He drops a wiggly fish toy by my feet.

I pet his silky fur, and I hear the hardwood floor creak. Melody's voice calls out, "Harmony!" The cat flips back and trots toward his owner.

OK Thx for letting me know, I text Julia.

As soon as I hit send, two things happen concurrently: I hear the ping of a text in a nearby room. And I realize that Harmony has six claws on each paw.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to make sense of what's happening, which is like trying to grab a ring on a carousel that's just out of reach.

I recall Peg telling me that no couple had lived in 14E, that Holly had been a literary type focused on wellness, that she had a cat. Holly rented from Melody. Just like we do.

I recall the pages of Melody's book, with the language that didn't match the journal entries.

Had Holly written that description?

Stay calm, I tell myself as I creep back to the bathroom. Once again, I lock the door and stare into the mirror. The mirror that also serves as the door to a medicine cabinet. Had the notes on the manuscript been Melody's, but the writing Holly's?

I still can't make sense of the *why*.

I reach out and touch my reflection and think back to the mysterious closet in 14E. The closet I am now certain once contained the Jacuzzi tub where Holly died.

Matthew Perry and Whitney Houston similarly drowned.

Both overdosed.

Slowly, so the cabinet won't squeak, I pull open the door.

I half expect to find orange plastic prescription containers with opioids, or a box marked *poison*, but the three bottom glass shelves are mostly bare, save for extra hand soap, decorative paper hand towels, and a bottle of mouthwash. But the top two shelves are lined with Melody's supplements. I extend a shaking hand and slowly retrieve a container of up-sWELL, making sure to note exactly where Melody placed it.

The packaging looks nearly identical to the supplements Melody gave

me, but something has been changed. I spin the bottle around carefully, examining it from all sides. *Twenty milligrams. Gluten-free, Non-GMO, and Hypoallergenic. Helps promote energy, enhance stamina, and mitigate fatigue. Thirty capsules.*

It's like one of those spot-the-difference brainteasers. Something has been altered, but I don't have time to figure it out now. I've been gone too long already.

Carefully, I slip a few bottles into my tote and close the cabinet. I'll examine them more closely later.

When I return, Melody is seated, and two glasses are resting on the coffee table. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah, but I think I should be going. Long drive." I hesitate. "I'm glad we cleared the air."

"Yes. I'm really sorry. I should have warned you that someone had died in the apartment."

Warned me.

"So many people are superstitious—you never know how someone will interpret the energy of a home."

I can't breathe. As Melody chatters on, I feel as though I am descending into a deep, dark body of water.

What was missing on the supplements in the medicine cabinet were warning labels. Like those on all of Melody's most recent supplements.

I remain silent and still. Melody tilts her head expectantly.

"It's okay. I get it," I finally say.

She gives me a gracious, forgiving smile. "So, I really like the recent pages you sent me," Melody says. "I feel like you're finally capturing my voice."

"Thank you," I manage. My eyes flit to Harmony, who is now seated beside Melody. I need to figure out the truth about what happened to Holly. "You never mentioned you had a cat. He's beautiful," I say, stalling.

"Isn't he?" she replies, petting him. "I adopted him from a farm in Key West."

I smile while I listen to her lies, and an idea begins to hatch. Before I can change my mind, I grab the fish toy, toss it as far as I can, and playfully call out, "Hemingway, go get it!" The cat chases after the toy, and Melody whips her head around to watch. She does not correct the cat's name,

confirming my conviction that this is Holly's cat.

I have approximately five seconds to execute the next phase of my plan. I lean forward, switch our drinks, and dump in the supplement powders from the bathroom into her glass.

When Melody turns back around, I shrug. "Whisky loves to play fetch," I fib and avert her gaze by taking a big gulp of the crimson liquid.

She smiles and takes an eager sip of her own. "So, do you have any more questions for me?"

I surreptitiously press record on my phone. "I guess I just don't really understand how Holly died in a Jacuzzi?" I ask, and lean forward in what I hope is an unassuming position.

Melody takes a quick, shallow breath and glances at the cat. When she doesn't say anything, I bite my lip and force myself not to say a word. One of my favorite interviewing techniques is to remain silent and let the subject fill in the blanks.

But she just tilts her head again. "Holly . . . ?"

I look her in the eyes and lob a different question. "Who wrote those pages you gave me when we started?"

Finally, she sighs. "Holly was the writer on my book before you."

"Why didn't you mention you had another writer?"

"Her death really shook me," Melody says. "I mean, she overdosed, for god's sake."

So my hunch was correct.

"I met your old neighbor, Peg." I pause. "She said Holly was really healthy. She didn't drink or do drugs."

"Poor Peg. She's nuts," Melody says. I now wonder if Gordon was in cahoots with Melody and Julia to cover up Holly's death. Did he worry that it might harm his building's reputation?

Without acknowledging Melody's comment, I continue: "Which makes me wonder what exactly she overdosed on." My heart is thumping so hard it feels like it's going to burst through my T-shirt. I fold my arms across my chest and try to project an aura of calm and assuredness.

"Oh, Anne. This is one of the things I love most about you—your active imagination. What do you think happened to her?"

I don't exactly know what I put in Melody's glass, but I'm worried I don't have much time for it to kick in.

“I switched our drinks,” I blurt out, figuring this will be the fastest way to get a confession.

But instead of looking concerned, Melody laughs. “You think I put something in your tea?”

“I don’t know, but I put something in yours. I found the supplements in your bathroom. The ones without a warning label.”

“What?” Her face becomes even paler than usual.

“Do you want to do one of your breathing exercises?” I ask and raise my eyebrows.

She shakes her head. “It was an accident,” she finally says. Her eyes begin to well up. I’ve seen Melody cry on command before, and I wonder if these tears are even real.

“Like I said, she overdosed. Obviously, I didn’t want her reputation to be defamed, so I didn’t tell anyone.”

My mind filled with images of Holly’s final moments. Did she feel terror? Did she know what was happening? Did death come quickly?

I wonder about her family. Peg said she was young, so she probably wasn’t a mother. But she had been somebody’s daughter. Maybe somebody’s sister. Or aunt. Or friend.

“Her reputation? Or yours?” I say. “Did you kill her with your supplements?”

“Not intentionally! She couldn’t deliver quickly enough. Then, out of the blue, she said she’d herniated a disc and wanted some time off. I didn’t believe her. She seemed perfectly fine the day before. She hadn’t complained about any back pain. I thought she just wanted to go away on vacation for the long weekend with her friends.”

Melody’s voice catches, and I can’t tell if she’s getting emotional or having trouble breathing.

“You know better than anyone about my tight delivery date. I gave her some dWELL and some b-WELL and told her to get into the Jacuzzi and try to relax. I might have also suggested she have a glass of wine.” She hesitates. “I didn’t know she was taking a blood thinner. She hadn’t revealed that to me in any of our interviews. Like I said, I thought she was faking.”

“Keep going,” I say, clutching my phone.

“We agreed we would meet at the studio at 9 a.m. But then she didn’t show up. I called and called. Finally I went over to the apartment. As the

owner, I had a spare key, and, well, that's when I found her . . .”

I wonder if this is enough information to incriminate her, or if I need more.

“You ripped out the tub and changed the number on the apartment. You covered it up!”

“Please, Anne,” she whispers. Her chin tilts forward and her blond hair falls into her eyes. “I didn't intend to hurt her.”

“But you *did* hurt her.”

“I didn't pour the wine down her throat. I didn't hold her head underwater. It's her own fault she's dead—the one thing in her life she can take all the credit for—”

“Enough.” I cut her off, worried that if Melody says one more cruel word, I won't be able to restrain myself and will walk out the door, potentially leaving her to meet Holly's fate.

On shaky legs, I stand and put my hands on my hips in the Wonder Woman pose that's supposed to instill confidence. “I will call for help,” I say. “But here's what's going to happen. You are going to go get your computer and delete the NDA I signed.”

She shakes her head a few times, and forces herself to lift it.

“And I am going to write your story. The only difference is that it will be on my terms, published in my name.”

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she nods.

“Say it,” I demand.

I hold my phone close to her mouth until she speaks the words I need to hear.

And then I call 911.

I wipe down every surface I've touched and make sure I have all of my belongings. “Farewell, Melody,” I say as I shut the door behind me. No one has seen me. No one, besides Paul, even knows I left the state of New York.

Like a ghost, I was never there.

Seven months later

With the kids away on playdates, Paul and I sit snuggling on the couch and

enjoying a lazy Sunday morning.

My laptop is propped on a pillow over my swollen stomach. I take a sip of my decaf coffee and review the edits for my debut novel, *Unwell*.

“For these final moments, I’d like you to close your eyes and take a deep inhalation,” Marina commands; her voice is even and smooth, a silvery ribbon. The only other sound in the studio is the rhythmic meditation music cascading from the speakers.

Amy sits on a tufted pillow with her legs crossed, palms facing upward.

The baby is due next month. We no longer have the stunning view from 14E. Even if our family size wasn’t about to increase, there was no way we could continue to live there. But that’s okay, because the literary rights to *Unwell* sold at auction, and we found another place, this one in Brooklyn. The film rights were also scooped up. Apparently Anne Hathaway is interested in playing Amy and Nicole Kidman, Marina.

Whisky sits purring by my feet. He seems to have adjusted very well to his new home. Occasionally I glance over at Paul. He’s wearing his hair a bit longer these days, and it flops in his eyes as he swipes through the news on his iPad.

“Hey,” Paul interrupts. “Listen to this. There’s a mention of Melody in *Page Six*. Apparently, she closed her be WELL business and is moving to India.”

I ponder this information and then continue reading my pages.

“Now, exhale,” Marina continues, in her now-familiar mellifluous tone. “Imagine yourself transported to a place where all around you is a soft, turquoise light. As you take in your next few breaths, let yourself merge with this illumination.”

Finally I say: “I hope she finds all the happiness she deserves there.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Greer Hendricks is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *The Wife Between Us*, *An Anonymous Girl*, *You Are Not Alone*, and *The Golden Couple*. In 2023, she published her solo debut short story, *A Show of Faith*. Hendricks earned her master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and spent nearly two decades working at Simon & Schuster, where she served as vice president and senior editor. More of her writing has been published in the *New York Times*, *Allure*, and *Publishers Weekly*, among others. For the latest about the author and her work, visit her website at <https://greerhendricks.com>.