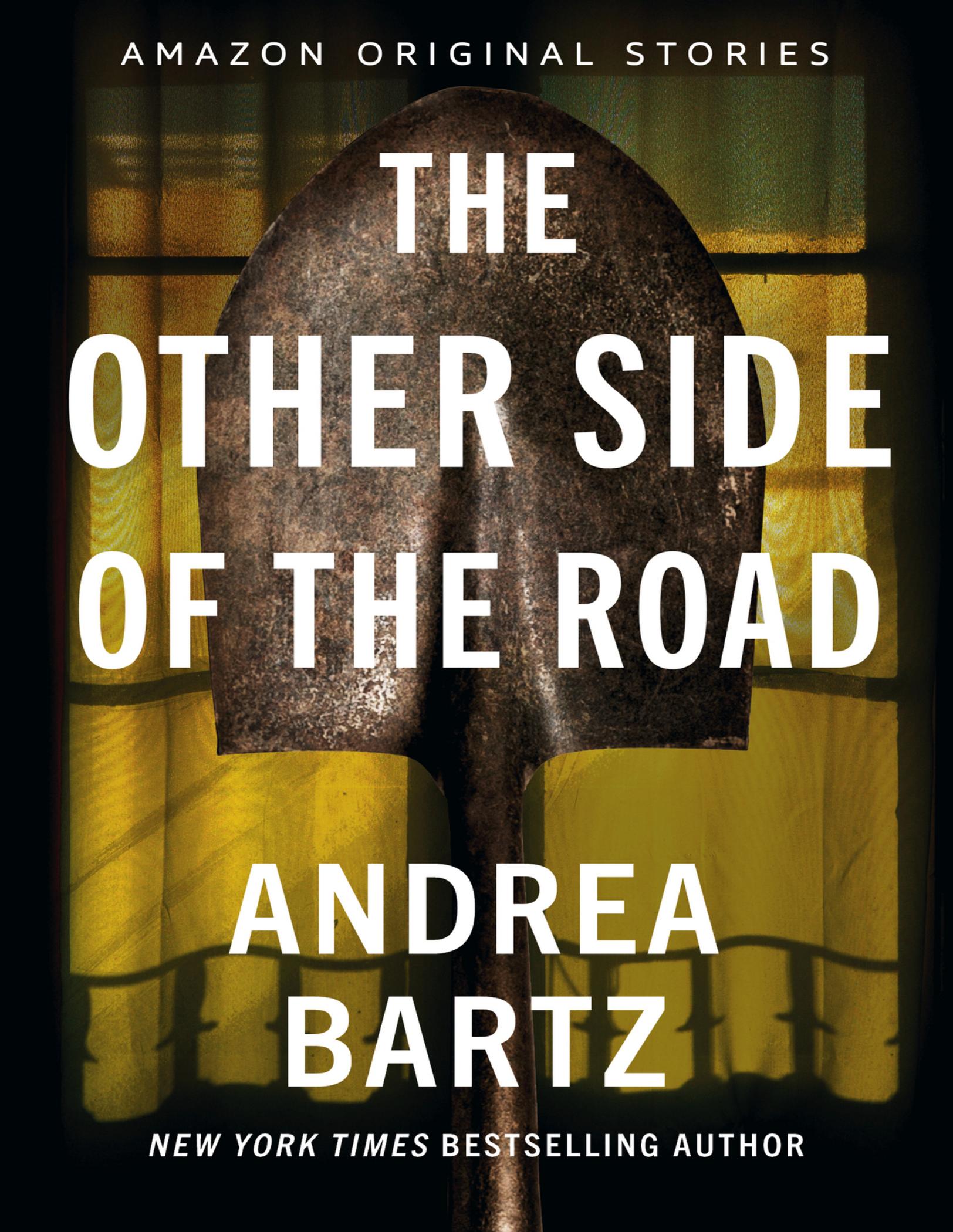


AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES



THE
OTHER SIDE
OF THE ROAD

ANDREA
BARTZ

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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**ANDREA
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Something's wrong.

I jimmy the key, wriggle the handle, pull the door tight, try again and again.

"It won't open."

"Let me see." Kelsey steps in front of me, the toe of her ballet flat scuffing the red door. "I'm sure it's just sticky."

She struggles, too, then drops back with a groan. "I bet it's a copy of a copy of a copy." She glares at the key, a brand-new gleaming silver. "We should change the locks anyway—who knows who has access to the house?"

"Should I call the Realtor?" I check my phone. "The movers will be here any minute."

"Didn't she say she was going on vacation? *Shit.*" She stomps her foot. I'd never tell her, but I like when she gets like this: indignant about injustice, jaw set, blue eyes flashing.

"What should we do?" I tip my face up to the massive windows above us, peaked in the center, spotlighting the cathedral ceilings and vast great room inside. Right now they're mirrors, reflecting the bright sky, the road, and the tangle of woods beyond it.

"The laundry-room window," she says. "Remember how I said we should replace it, because it's the kind you can jimmy open from the outside?" She darts toward the back of the house. It's funny: from my pixie cut and androgynous wardrobe, people assume *I'm* the tomboy, but Kelsey—Kelsey with her long strawberry blonde hair and arsenal of dresses—is the one who can handle a power drill and install a new ceiling fan. Or, as the case may be, break into her own home.

I follow her to the back, where she's already waist deep in the window.

"Should you be doing that in your condition?" I call.

She hauls herself the rest of the way in and turns around.

"Since when have I been delicate? C'mon, race you to the front door!"

Kelsey's always been a problem solver, the yin to my worrywart yang. It's what makes us such a good team; while I fret about hypotheticals and take all necessary precautions, she tackles, with aplomb, any obstacles in our way.

She throws open the front door with flourish. It's astonishing—this place is ours, truly ours. After years of admiring it from the road, we're inside, and it's even more glorious than I imagined.

Kelsey plants a kiss on my cheek as my smile grows wider and wider. "I love seeing you so happy."

I touch her chin. "I'm glad we get to start a family here."

Her hand moves to her stomach. "It'll be perfect," she says. "And you deserve the best, Lauren." I respond with gagging noises, and she kisses me to shut me up.

Though we met in New York City, Kelsey and I have always shared a love of the Hudson Valley. We found a go-to Airbnb in a river town nestled below the Catskills and made a point of coming up regularly, checking out new hikes and wineries and adorable downtowns. And on every drive, we admired this very house, with its vast windows and lush woods. I looked it up one day: though it was built in the seventies, it looked shockingly modern—clean lines, fresh blue-gray paint.

It wasn't long before we started talking about someday settling upstate full time, somewhere safe and quiet, away from subway noise and urine-soaked sidewalks and sinister men lurking on corners late at night. I can't remember who floated the idea first, whether I admitted I wanted to give our eventual children a better childhood than I myself had had, or whether Kelsey just intuited it, in that almost eerie way she has of reading me. Her situation growing up couldn't have been more different from mine: a McMansion in the Boston suburbs, horseback riding lessons, nannies and tutors and her every wish granted. That spoiled kid could have turned out entitled, but instead she's caring and tenacious, with a laser focus on making our marriage a happy one and a cool, soothing certainty that things will go our way.

"They're here!" Kelsey rushes to the picture windows, where a truck is turning into the driveway. She opens the front door and stands there grinning, eager as a golden retriever. The movers give her businesslike nods as they open the back of the truck, and we watch in awe as our old Brooklyn life begins pouring out the back.

We liked city living, even as we aged out of her hip neighborhood; we were in no hurry to leave. Then, a few months after our wedding—a glamorous affair her parents paid for like it was nothing, all succulents and live-edge wood and clouds of milk-white baby’s breath, a perfect melding of our aesthetics—Kelsey’s annual checkup changed everything. We weren’t ready to get pregnant yet, but Kelsey was the one interested in carrying a baby, so her doctor tested her AMH levels. The alarmingly low results kicked off a series of branching revelations: she had almost no viable eggs; my own supplies were dwindling; we could either freeze mine or extract some right away and try IVF in Kelsey’s womb. Miraculously, Kelsey got pregnant on the first round, and in a few months we’ll have a son. (Kelsey jokes that it’ll be good for me to have some testosterone in my life, a boy I’m not so wary of.)

As the workers ferry furniture inside, Kelsey’s a competent site supervisor, directing the sofa into the far corner of the living room, her desk into the loft. We both work remotely (she at her ad agency, I in product engineering), part of the reason we naively thought relocating would be a breeze. When we kicked off the house hunt, Kelsey sent our real estate agent the address of our dream house—*this* house—for inspiration. From the outside, it seemed to have everything: A perfect location on a quiet, rural street ten minutes from town. A cozy fireplace and vaulted ceilings with skylights smiling down on the great room. A garden out front with bright blares of blooming flowers. We figured we’d find an equally lovely place in a matter of weeks.

Instead, we stepped into a stress hurricane. First, we had to fire our initial Realtor after he hit on Kelsey—not unprecedented, but especially horrifying considering he knew our backstory. Then, a series of heartbreaks: An all-cash, way-above-asking bid swooped in and yanked a chic new build away from us. We rescinded our offer on a renovated farmhouse after the home inspector found illegal wiring and leaky pipes spidering the walls. We halfheartedly bid on a sprawling ranch in Saugerties but backed out when the bank’s appraisal fell far short of our offer.

Each disappointment felt like a book slammed shut on our future. At night I dreamed I was a child again, afraid and unmoored: I heard the landlord’s angry knock, eyed the unpaid bills Mom tossed in the trash,

and smooshed stuffed animals into a suitcase, uncertain where I'd sleep that night.

Hope dwindled with our search, and I resigned myself to the idea that we'd stay in our shadowy apartment for the first year of child-rearing or more.

And then, just as it began to feel like the clock—i.e., Kelsey's due date—was ticking, she woke me up with the best news ever.

"You're in luck." Her eyes sparkled. "Your dream house is for sale!"

We made an offer that day. After months of letdowns, everything happened so fast, and now—three weeks later—here we are.

It almost feels too good to be true.

When the moving truck backs out of the driveway, Kelsey and I grin at each other. We unpack the kitchen, marveling anew: This is *our* subway-tiled backsplash. *Our* janky drawer that fights me when I try to close it. *Our* massive pantry, ready to house our goods.

Which . . . we still need to buy. Dish soap, cleaning spray, aluminum foil, it's all on a vast list we made this morning as we waited for the movers.

"We should do that Target run," I say.

Kelsey power-sighs, balling up a cloud of Bubble Wrap. "Yeah, probably." She peers out the picture windows, which face the street and—beyond it—a dirt driveway cut into dense forest. The sun's sinking low, blackening the trees. "It's getting late."

We rustle up tote bags, car keys, our wallets abandoned among random boxes. When it's finally time to leave, we pause at the front door to test the lock on the knob, since the dead bolt is dead to us.

"Having trouble?"

We both jump at the gruff voice, then whip around to see a man on the front porch, a few feet behind us. His eyes flash when they meet mine—sometimes, from far away, people mistake me for a dude—and he quickly looks away. He's in his late sixties or so, with a rind of gray hair and a fat mustache.

"You scared us!" Kelsey sticks out her hand. "I'm Kelsey, and this is Lauren."

“Hank.” His grip is too firm, his fingers cold and knobby. “I live across the street. Door’s giving you trouble?”

“Oh, it’s fine.” I smile wide. “We need to change the locks anyway.”

“I can do it. I’m handy. You’re from the city?”

“Yep! We lived in Brooklyn.” Kelsey can charm anyone, Kelsey with her musical laugh and easy grin. “But we’re here full time now. We’ll be starting a family soon.”

He studies her a little too long, canvassing her form. Goose bumps sweep up my arms and neck, but Kelsey doesn’t flinch. She dated men before we met, and their gaze never seems to make her skin crawl. Meanwhile, I can’t pile on *enough* hoodies to become sexless, invisible. To me, male attention always has an undercurrent of malice, a reminder we’re under their thumb.

“I’ll give you my number,” Hank says. “City people—they aren’t used to the country. Things are different here.”

I’m as frozen as an ice sculpture, but Kelsey murmurs “Of course!” and digs out her phone. She looks up, ready for the first digit, but he plucks it from her hands and starts typing.

“I called my number so I’ll have yours too.” He holds it out. “Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“It *had* to be a coincidence.” Kelsey helps herself to another slice of pizza. “There’s no way he was waiting for us to step outside.”

“He appeared the *second* we walked out the front door,” I counter. “Like, how long was he watching and waiting?”

“He was just trying to be neighborly.” She adjusts the gas fireplace before slumping back onto the sofa. “I mean, country folks are friendly.”

“Friendly or nosy?”

She tilts her head. “Was he actually hostile, or does he make you nervous because he’s a big, brawny dude?”

“Fair point.” I’m sure a psychologist would point to my childhood: Mom’s rotating door of temperamental boyfriends, ruddy-nosed landlords pounding on the door. “I’ll try to be more open-minded about him.”

I watch our reflections in the massive windows; we look ghoulish in the fire’s bluish glow. The Airbnb we used to book had floodlights

pooling on the street out front. Here, the outside is pitch black.

“I can’t believe this place is *ours*,” I murmur. “We *own* it. Nobody can double the rent or refuse to renew our lease. Nobody can . . .”

I trail off, but Kelsey likely knows where my mind has gone—the parade of cramped apartments I lived in growing up, eviction notices mounted with peeling tape, collection agencies leaning on the doorbell. Mom clapping her hand over my mouth and whispering, “Don’t make a sound.” I never knew when I’d come home to her signal that we were about to skip town: my battered suitcase on the bed, splayed open like a gutted fish.

“Well, believe it!” Kelsey aims that mischievous grin at me, and for a second, I think my heart will explode. She makes me feel safe, sheltered—cared for in a way I’d never experienced before I met her. And now we own a home together, with a baby on the way . . . the skinny, bullied tomboy in me had no idea it could turn out this good.

She glances at her phone. “Speaking of Hank, he invited us over to meet his wife.” She looks up. “He asked if we’re free tomorrow night. For a, quote, ‘decaf coffee.’”

I groan. “I guess we should go—we want this guy to like us.”

Firelight dances on her cheek. “We don’t have to. We don’t owe him anything.”

“I know. But it’s the neighborly thing to do.” I shoot her a grin. “I won’t feel nervous with you around.”

“Oh, good, you’ll have your security detail.” She flexes her bicep, then starts to text him back. “I bet he’s just a grumpy old retiree with a heart of gold.”

Though Kelsey sleeps like the dead, I wake in the night and stare out the window as the sky glazes from black to indigo to a hazy morning blue. A cacophony of creaks and groans seems to come from all corners of the house, and the twang of frogs and the yips of coyotes leak through the window screen.

Finally I get up and make coffee, then set out for a walk. I half expect Hank to appear again as I push through the front door, but I’m alone. I peer down his dirt driveway. I can just make out the edge of a yellow house squatting among the trees.

I turn left and start walking, and the songbirds soothe me. It really is pretty out here, with sweet pea flowers blooming along the road and drainage creeks wending through the woods. A few houses down, I encounter a woman with a grinning pit bull at her side. The dog bounds right up to me, and I kneel to scratch its ears.

“This is Hestia!” The woman has long gray hair and one of those impish, childlike faces—ageless despite a topography of wrinkles. “She likes you.”

“Nice to meet you, Hestia!” I stand, and her tail thwacks my shin. “I’m Lauren. I moved into the blue house a block up.”

“Ah, Margaret’s place!” She nods. “I’m Raven. I’m in the stone cottage kitty-corner from you. Welcome to the neighborhood!”

“People sure are friendly here! We met Hank yesterday. Do you know him?”

She rolls her eyes. “Hank’s been here since 1982—he’s the self-appointed mayor of the neighborhood. And he’s . . . he’s not great with boundaries.”

“How so?”

She shrugs. “He started mowing my lawn in the summer and plowing my driveway in the winter without even asking. And do you know how many guns he has?” She waves her hand. “Anyway. Are you here full time?”

I want to ask more about Hank, but she seems done with the topic. “We are. We moved yesterday.” Hestia licks my hand. “You knew the previous owner? We know almost nothing about her.” The Realtor was vague—something about an old woman who lived alone and took meticulous care of the house before passing away.

“Sure did. Margaret was older, in her eighties. Her mind was starting to go, but if you got her talking, she was full of stories. I was so sorry to hear she passed away. In your house, in fact.”

“Oh.” It’s a weird thing to say.

“Carbon monoxide poisoning, tragically,” she continues. “Some debris plugged up the chimney, and somehow the detector failed. She was so forgetful—she probably forgot to replace the batteries.” She shakes her head. “It’s a blessing she died in her sleep. But she just seemed so . . . full of life.”

“Well, we’re grateful she took such good care of the house. It’s our dream home. And my wife’s pregnant, so . . . we’re excited to be here.”

“Congratulations!” She grins, then tilts her head. “Your *wife* is pregnant? I thought it was you.” My eyes widen, and she covers her mouth. “Sorry, I’m so used to receiving messages that I forget how rude I can sound.”

Coldness floods my chest. I step back, and Hestia hurries to fill the gap between us. “You’re, what—psychic?”

“A medium. But clearly, I’m not always right!”

I swallow. “It actually is my egg. She did IVF.” *Not that it’s any of your business.*

“Ah. It’s going to be a very special child. A boy, right?”

My scalp tingles as I nod again. “Well, it was great meeting you!” I feign cheerfulness as Hestia trots back to her side.

Kelsey rings the doorbell, balancing a brioche in the crook of her arm. She whipped it up this afternoon, humming as the KitchenAid whirred, while I played Tetris with our new closets and cupboards. The smell of baking bread made the house feel homey, and my creeped-out feelings about Hank, about the nighttime noises, about Raven’s eerie intuition all ebbed.

But they boomerang back as we wait at Hank’s door. His house has plastic siding and brown shutters, and it’s flanked by various heavy-duty vehicles—trucks, ATVs, a snow plow, a riding mower. It isn’t nearly as far into the woods as I thought; from here, I can see half our living room windows. In winter, when the trees are bare, we’ll be on display. We must be spotlit at night, moving behind the glass like fish in a tank.

“Hello.” It’s a woman, stark and stout with white hair and enormous wire-rimmed glasses.

“Thanks for having us over!” Kelsey shakes her hand and steps inside, comfortable as ever. I follow them into a living room with wood-paneled walls and small painted bears on shallow shelves. With effort, Hank rises from a La-Z-Boy.

“We brought brioche,” I say too loudly.

“Barb made decaf.”

“Unless you’d like something stronger?” she adds.

“Coffee is perfect!” Kelsey replies. Thank God for her constant aura of ease. Barb disappears, and we perch on the blue-and-gray plaid sofa.

“So,” I say brightly, “you’ve been here since the eighties?” Kelsey and Hank look at me strangely—shoot. “I bumped into a neighbor this morning. Raven? She mentioned it.”

“Raven. She’s a weirdo.” I bristle, even though his assessment isn’t too different from my own. He leans back. “Since 1982, yup.”

“You must’ve seen the neighborhood go through a lot of change!” Kelsey accepts a mug and saucer from Barb.

“Yup. Once people from the city decided this was a destination, everything changed.” He grimaces at Kelsey; I don’t like the way he looks at her.

“The hip brewery and that fancy new golf course . . .” Barb clucks her tongue. “This is not the Krumville I remember.” She finishes distributing coffees and sits. I kinda thought she’d serve Kelsey’s brioche; apparently not.

“Well, we’re excited to be a part of the community and not just visitors.” Kelsey’s fighting to keep the perkiness in her voice.

“Did you know Margaret?” The coffee scalds my tongue. “The previous homeowner?”

Hank shrugs. “Of course. She lived there for twenty years.”

The silence swells. It feels pointed, like his omission of niceties means he didn’t like her at all.

“Margaret wasn’t right in the head,” Barb finally says. “Towards the end, she got paranoid—she covered the windows with sheets and never left the house.”

“How sad,” I reply.

Kelsey changes the subject, guiding the small talk as we gulp our drinks. I ask to use the bathroom, and they point me down a hall decorated with framed cross-stitches. I peek through doorways as I pass: a room with a four-poster bed; a guest room with cardboard boxes stacked on the bed and floor; an office with windows facing the front—

I stop short, my breath high in my throat.

There’s a telescope propped on a side table. Aimed directly at our house.

I tiptoe over to it, then spot a pair of binoculars next to it. *What the hell?* Light streaks in from the windows, and there’s no denying it: from

here, you can see right inside our house.

“Bathroom’s down the hall.” I jump—Barb’s in the doorway, her expression inscrutable.

“Sorry, I . . .” Involuntarily, I look down at the telescope and binoculars.

“Hank’s a birder. And I’m an amateur astronomist.” A slow smile creeps across her face. “You wouldn’t believe what we can see from our front windows.”

The next morning, as I’m rinsing the french press, anger smolders in my chest. The rest of our visit was uneventful, but through all the small talk, I couldn’t stop picturing the telescope and binoculars trained on our house. Overnight, the fear transmuted into fury. We’re *finally* in my dream home, our safe bastion for starting a family. After all those sleepless nights and drippy tears, the nightmares and crushing calls with the Realtor, we’re here, where we’re meant to be. How dare Hank and Barb try to ruin it for us?

From the dining room table, I order motion-sensor lights and a front door camera. I hire a locksmith to finally change the locks. But the earliest he can come is in two weeks, and my order from Lowe’s will take three days to arrive. I research blinds to cloak our massive windows but quickly see it will be a huge and costly undertaking. I picture Margaret shrouding the same panes with sheets. *Paranoid*, Barb called her. Was she?

I glance at the front windows and spot a doe and fawn meandering through the front yard. I watch them for a moment, then shift my focus to the street behind them.

I jolt: Hank’s at the end of his drive, looking right at me. We stare at each other for a second, and then he turns around and opens his mailbox. Blood whooshes in my ears. I pick up my computer and slink into the bedroom, closing the door behind me.

“Do you want me to not go?” Kelsey slips her laptop into her backpack. “I can still call it off.” She narrows her eyes at me, checking. She’s like a lioness, protective and fierce. She’s going to be such a great mom.

I shake my head. “You’ve worked so hard for this. I’ll be fine.” Kelsey is *thisclose* to nabbing a huge new client, one she’s been

diligently courting for almost two years. I've always loved Kelsey's tenacity at work, her drive. When she sets her mind on something, she doesn't stop until it's hers.

"I'll be back by nine. Ten at the latest." She zips her bag. "The train info is in our calendar."

In Brooklyn, I didn't mind her periodic client meetings dotting our Google Calendar—Kelsey took work trips while I enjoyed the empty apartment. She'd hoped to seal the deal with this client before we left, but the meeting crystallized for one week postmove, so now she has to drive two hours just to get to the Amtrak station. I suspect she'd like to stay in Philadelphia overnight, but she's returning for my sake.

She gives me a lingering kiss goodbye. "Just pretend Hank doesn't exist," she advises, turning on her heel. "I'm sure he won't bother you. But if he does—if he comes to the door or anything—just don't answer."

In the past week, I've stopped mentioning my suspicions—but of course Kelsey saw right through my feigned nonchalance. For her part, she seems unperturbed; she waves cheerily every time she sees Hank checking his mail or cutting back trees at the edge of his property, as if it's normal for a neighbor to always be *right across the road*, stoic and staring.

No wonder Margaret suddenly needed makeshift curtains.

Once Kelsey's car has disappeared from view, I drag a folding chair and my laptop into the backyard, stomach fizzing. I can't find much about Hank; he shows up on a few "people search" websites and a directory of trucking companies ("operating status: inactive"). Margaret's almost as inscrutable. Her obituary says she was survived by "many friends and loved ones," which I take to mean "no family." She enjoyed gardening and photography and worked as an architect's assistant in her younger years, which explains our meticulously modern home.

A bolt of inspiration: I search for both of their names together, and there's exactly one hit—an article in the community newspaper about a town hall two months before her death. The meeting centered on a proposal to form a county "ecosystem conservation council." My chest tightens as I read. When it was time for public comment, Hank approached the podium and ranted about governmental overreach and

“bureaucratic bullshit.” Margaret followed, defending the resolution—and earning a standing ovation.

She mopped the floor with him. He must’ve been humiliated.

Men have killed for much less.

I scan the police blotter’s archives: when emergency responders found Margaret, her gas fireplace was still burning, but a wad of pine cones, leaves, and other detritus had nearly sealed the flue.

I haul a ladder from the basement to the side of the house, where a flat section of the roof abuts the chimney. The metal of the chimney cap is shiny silver, brand new, protecting the top from debris. I step onto the black shingles to inspect the brick smokestack and frown. There are four holes in the top bricks, ringed with rust, as if another cover was once screwed in here. I wonder why Margaret had it removed—without it, junk could easily fall in.

I glance toward Hank’s house. Hank the handyman.

The thought’s like a whisper: *Or maybe someone removed it for her.*

“Lauren!”

I have the silly thought that Raven must’ve known I was coming, sensed my presence before I rang the doorbell. She invites me into a living room studded with glittering crystals and intricate dream catchers, the smell of palo santo sweetening the air. It’s a bit . . . on the nose, and my resolve flags.

“I wanted to ask you about Margaret.”

She nods, unsurprised. “Should we go to your place? I’ll feel her presence more strongly there.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “I didn’t mean to *summon* her. I just want to know more about her. And Hank.” But Raven’s already gathering her things, and she ushers me back out the front door.

We hurry across the street, but as soon as we cross the threshold into my foyer, she stops short, closes her eyes.

“Is she . . . talking to you?”

“I’m seeing the woods—she wants us in the woods. Is there a . . . a rock pile or something?”

Four acres of old-growth forest surround our house—dreamy woods, the kind that ignite a kid’s imagination. “Um, there’s a section of fence made out of rocks. Those flat shale rocks that are all over here.”

She nods. "Take me."

The woods are eerily silent: no birds, no scurrying squirrels or chirping chipmunks. A few yards in, I notice the awkward thud of something sticking to my shoe. I shake my foot, then bend down to inspect it. A hunk of rotting wood seems glued to my sole, but I can't figure out why.

"Oh my God," Raven murmurs. She spots it first: the gleaming tip of a long nail poking out from my shoe, above the rubber binding, a millimeter from my pinkie toe. I gasp and sit down on a rock, heart pounding. The chunk slides out cleanly, leaving a hole where the nail pierced through.

"That almost went into my foot," I murmur. She squeezes her eyes closed again, and my anger flares. "What the hell is going on?"

"She stopped us here." Raven opens her eyes and crouches. "There's something she wants us to see." She uses a stick to brush old leaves away, searching the moist ground as bugs scatter.

"We're nowhere near the rock pile," I point out, but she shakes her head.

"This is the spot. Help me."

I squat. "What are we looking for?" But before she can answer, I freeze. What I took to be another shale stone isn't natural at all; it's perfectly rectangular, and there's a message inscribed: **THERE ARE FAERIES AT THE BOTTOM OF THIS GARDEN.**

She murmurs reverently, but then I realize it's a kitschy lawn ornament. "So what?" I stand. "Someone picked it up at a hardware store. And then it got tossed here when the house went up for sale."

"It's Margaret." Confidence drips from her voice. "She loved that garden. And she wanted you to find this."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "Beats me. But I bet your intuition's telling you."

I roll my eyes, but my stupid brain obliges. It spins an answer like cotton candy and then solidifies it into truth, which is exactly what happens every time a human buys into some woo-woo BS.

She smiles. "Tell me."

A heavy sigh. "I wonder if there's something buried in the garden."

She nods. "You got a shovel?"

It's hard work, tearing through the tender earth, and I hate every minute of it—uprooting pretty lilies and irises and black-eyed Susans, undoing years of Margaret's labor. And for what? I don't even know what we're looking for. Once we've destroyed half the flower bed—a garden I've always admired, part of why I wanted to buy the house—I tap out.

"This doesn't feel right." And because I know it'll be more convincing: "This can't be what Margaret meant."

Raven swipes her brow, leaving a streak of dirt. "You're sure?"

"I am. Thanks for your help. And for lending me a shovel."

"Keep it." She stands, wiping her hands. "And keep your eyes open—she might tell you more."

As the sun sets, I try to put the garden back together. What is Kelsey going to think? Embarrassment spritzes through me as I pat the earth down and knock dirt off the shovel. We don't have a garage, and the seller demolished Margaret's dilapidated garden shed in the back, so finally I carry the shovel into the basement and lean it against a wall.

It's the one part of the house that feels creepy—it's unfinished, a dusty void of bare studs and cinder block walls and a concrete floor. As my eyes adjust to the sloping, silty light, I can make out cobwebs furring the corners and appliances squatting along the wall: sump pump, furnace, water softener. I watch them for a second, still spooked, and then the practical part of me kicks in like a boiler: *Junk on the forest floor almost impaled your foot. Go clean that area of debris before it's too dark to see.*

Before someone else gets hurt.

Garbage bag in hand, I head back into the woods and find the nail-spiked wood resting on a rock. I kick at the leaves near my feet and uncover a small graveyard of broken flowerpots. There's a rusty coil of chicken wire and a pile of cracked white tiles I recognize from our kitchen. I yank everything out and fill the bag, sweating.

Inside, I watch the sky blush through the trees. I wander into the kitchen, some strange compulsion brewing in my torso. It's like when a thought is on the tip of your tongue and you wait patiently, relax your focus, wait for it to snap into place. I gaze at the subway tiles, shining like pearls above the counter. I flash back to a week ago, when I unpacked the kitchen. That one funky drawer that refused to glide closed, a wrong note in an otherwise perfect symphony. I cross to it and

fiddle with the mechanism so I can pull it all the way out and set it on the floor.

The hole is as ugly as a missing tooth, and I hold my breath as I reach inside. My fingertips hit something in the back, and I slide it toward me, heart thwocking in my hands and skull. It's a spiral-bound notebook, the handwriting dainty and precise.

March 7: I'm using this notebook to record incidents. I know that I am having a harder time remembering things so I am putting this in writing so that I know the dates. I am convinced someone is watching me in my home. I called the police the first time it happened (two weeks ago? Three?) but the rude policemen did not take me seriously. They said there was no proof, and I must have seen an animal . . . but I know the difference between an animal and a figure and there was someone outside the house, looking in. I showed them footprints in the snow, but they said they must be mine.

March 31: Someone was in my house this morning. I don't know how they got in but I heard them below me, rattling around in the basement . . . I was terrified. I put on my robe and tried to walk downstairs but either they left or they were hiding from me. I wonder if they hid in the crawl space, since with my knees I can't go in it myself. I suspect they are watching the house. Perhaps they're planning to burgle me so they're looking for points of weakness.

April 4: I used to love my picture windows, but now I feel watched at night. When I look outside, every tree looks like a human, watching . . . waiting . . . for what? Tonight I couldn't take it and I hung sheets with duct tape as high as I could reach.

*April 5: **THE CRAWL SPACE.** I tried to go down to the basement but my knees wouldn't oblige. But from the stairs I saw the hatch for the crawl space and I could swear it was open. I called Raven but she didn't pick up. If I call the police, they'll say it must have already been open. I'm a prisoner in my own home.*

April 12: The neighbor, Hank, banged on my door today. He scares me . . . he was upset, demanding to know why I covered the windows, and when I slammed the door in his face he kept yelling through the windows. His voice was too muffled to hear but I told him I would call the police if he didn't leave, and then I went into my bedroom and shut the door. I don't know how long he stayed, yelling at me through the window. I hate knowing that he's out there, trying to look inside.

My heart batters in my chest like a caged bird. Margaret died April 28, a couple of weeks after she wrote these words. Both Raven and Barb mentioned Margaret was losing her mind . . . but what if she was *right*?

Did Hank hurt her? It wouldn't have been hard for him to pull off a stealthy murder, especially given his handyman know-how—bung up the flue, disable the detectors. Was he still riding a tidal wave of fury after the town hall meeting? Did he case this house for weeks, committing psychological warfare while sussing out his murderous plan?

I glance out the front windows, then back down at the notebook. I could call 911, but if the cops wouldn't take Margaret seriously then, why would they listen to me now? I snap photos of the entries and send them to Kelsey, but she's likely driving home from the train station by now, coasting in and out of cell service.

The crawl space—we have a crawl space? What if there's something in there, the proof Margaret couldn't produce? I hurry back downstairs, my footsteps a drumroll, and pause in the center of the basement. I swivel around until it hits me—the back wall is different from the others, with drywall nailed into the studs. I cross to it and touch the white surface, and now it's obvious: a thin line forms a two-foot square at the bottom of one of the panels. A prickle zips up my spine as I remember the paver stone; this wall isn't *directly* below the garden, of course, but it is lower, farther from the sun's velvety warmth. I rush upstairs for a screwdriver but, unable to find our tools, return with a paring knife.

The blade slides into the crack, and with a soft whump, the drywall square pops out. The seconds spread out as I lower myself to the cement and look inside. My vision swims: What if I spot a dead body, or a wild-eyed squatter, or Margaret's ghostly form crouching near the entrance?

Instead I see a creepy vault, three feet high and so deep I can't make out the far wall. I stick my head inside, blinking, squinting into the dark

—
“There you are.”

I startle and whirl around and there's Hank, glowering at the top of the basement steps. My heart bangs so loudly the sound floods my skull. “How did you get in?” I scramble to stand.

Slowly, he plods the rest of the way down the stairs. “You left the back door open.”

I press against the wall, and the edge of the crawl space cuts into my lower back. He's blocking my exit and my phone is upstairs and what do I do—how can I get out of here? “Don't come any closer.”

But he takes another step toward me. “I was waiting for your wife to leave.”

My chest convulses. I *knew* he was watching us, biding his time until I was all by myself.

“Help! Somebody help me!” My scream bounces around the cold walls.

He comes even closer. “I need to talk to you.”

My eyes dip to the floor, and oh my God, the knife—the paring knife is still on the ground, close to his foot. My gaze darts back to him, and then I curse my lack of subtlety: he's spotted it too.

“Don't grab that.” His hands float up, all *stay calm*.

A beat.

He shakes his head. “You don't understand. You need to—”

I lunge for it, closing the space between us, but he crouches, too, and in a flash it's in his grip. For a moment, we stare at each other—we both look stunned, unsure—and with a shriek, I turn and rush away from him. Behind me, there's the sound of feet on stairs, is that him, is he locking us in from the top, how could he even *move* that quickly? I reach the back wall and, before I can think, fling myself into the crawl space.

It all happens so fast: There's a round metallic clang, *brunnng*, and through the cubbyhole I see Hank's knees buckle. His head hits the concrete with a sickening crack, and I scream at the sideways face staring blankly at me.

“Are you okay?” Behind him, Kelsey drops Raven's shovel and rushes over. She shoves the jumbled mess of Hank out of the way. He's

dead—I know it with certainty as he rolls onto his back, eyes still open, fishlike. The blood pooling beneath his head has painted his cheek and half his mustache red.

I crawl through the hatch, almost slipping in the oil-slick puddle. Crying, shrieking, I fall into Kelsey’s arms.

“I can’t believe we sat in that psycho’s living room.” I tuck my legs beneath me, nestling into the couch.

“I can’t believe I wasted brioche on him.” We sip our coffees, gazing out the front windows. A couple of bone-white news vans are still idling on the street, but most of them have given up. At first, Barb was happy to speak to the press, insisting there was no way the person she’d slept next to for years could be a murderer. I assume her lawyers made her stop.

Though it’s only been a month since cops and investigators flooded our basement, a **FOR SALE** sign has already appeared at the edge of Hank’s driveway. In his snarl of woods, police found Margaret’s rusty old chimney cap, the screwheads scraped clean by a fresh drill bit. Detectives confirmed he had eyes on our house and a creepy collection of clippings about Margaret’s death. Though it’s all circumstantial, it’s clear Hank orchestrated Margaret’s murder, then panicked when I got too close to his awful secret.

In the garden, I planted fresh bulbs in her honor, and the decorative stone is back in its proper spot near the rosebushes. Once the weather cools in a few months, we’ll start using our fireplace again, reading or playing cards or snuggling in its cozy ambiance while our baby grows ears and gums and ten perfect toes inside Kelsey’s belly. Raven’s coming over for dinner tonight, and though it’s silly, though I still don’t believe in the spirit realm or even an afterlife, I’m secretly hoping she’ll look around and, beaming, announce that Margaret’s pleased to see her house filled with love.

Kelsey, ravenous, carries course after course to the table: peppery arugula, crusty bread and milky mozzarella, rich meatballs with capellini. Raven seems distracted through the meal, drifting in and out of chattiness as Kelsey asks about her hometown, her time in Krumville, how she got into Wicca.

Once we've had our fill, we walk Raven to the front door. For a split second before we hug, her eyes stab at mine. My eyebrows jerk in confusion, but she's out the door before I can ask more.

Her text comes as I'm wiping down the kitchen counter, words I have to read twice to understand: **Hope I'm not overstepping but Margaret was loudly asking me to share a message with you. Unfortunately the energy in the house is still not right. She kept showing me her datebook. Have you come across anything like that? Of course, I could be misunderstanding. Or her message could have nothing to do with you—I sometimes get my wires crossed. Thanks again for dinner and call me anytime.**

Who keeps a datebook? The only diary-like item I've encountered is Margaret's creepy Hank log . . . and if anything, it proves the futility of keeping handwritten objects. Flames eat paper; water sluices ink. A notebook can slip behind a drawer and nearly be forgotten. That's why, instead of a datebook, Kelsey and I keep our schedules in the cloud.

My pulse quickens, like I'm onto something. A part of my brain splits off, crosses its arms: *This is ridiculous—the woman calls herself a witch.* But now that the thought has floated to the surface, I can't shake it—we share a Google Calendar. An infinite recording of our doings.

The compulsion throbs like a bee's sting deep in my gut: *Open it. Check it.*

Check the dates.

I load the dishwasher, pour detergent in the compartment. *Absurd.* But the thought only gets stronger, louder, a looping crescendo until it's all I can think about.

I scoff-laugh as I start the dishwasher. *Fine*—I'll debunk this silly impulse and whip my brain back into line.

My laptop's on a desk in the bedroom, and I crouch to pull up our calendar: appointments, work deadlines, capital letters for our MOVING DAY five weeks ago. What am I even looking for? I'm about to push the laptop closed when an answer appears, random but clear as a bell.

I pull the phone from my back pocket, reread Raven's text. Then I open my Photos app and, heart thumping, begin to scroll. Up, up, up, past photos of our newly decorated rooms, Kelsey's face aglow at our first backyard campfire, a crack in the bathroom wall I need to send to a

contractor, a doe and fawn calmly traversing our backyard. Back to that horrible night, when I photographed every page of Margaret's diary.

The first entry's dated March 7. I click the arrow on our calendar.

There's only one item on the date: *Kelsey work trip to Pittsburgh.*

Coldness shoots down my spine, but of course it's a coincidence.

March 31. Kelsey was visiting a college friend in Jersey.

My stomach puckers. I want to stop, I want to delete the photos and never think about this again, but before I can help it, I click over to April, and there it is, April 4, another day trip, this one to Alexandria, and I press both hands over my mouth because suddenly the memories are strobing, clicking together like the pins of a lock, the key we couldn't use on move-in day:

The laundry-room window, she said. It's the kind you can jimmy open from the outside.

Hank playing *Rear Window* from the other side of the road, scowling at Kelsey like he recognized her already. Like he'd seen her before, noticed her silhouette in the shadows long before she belonged here. Margaret distrusted him, but she also said he came to check on her. To warn her, perhaps.

No. *No.* But then I think back to his growl in the basement: *I was waiting for your wife to leave.*

Margaret never described the figure she spotted outside, watching, plotting, waiting for its chance. I assumed it was tall, broad, Hank-shaped. And the old chimney cap, discarded on Hank's land . . . why wouldn't he have *destroyed* it?

My stomach churns. It *can't* be. But then I flash back to that moment in our Brooklyn apartment, months into our fruitless home search. Kelsey was beaming, thrilled with the eerily good timing: *Your dream house is for sale!*

She'd do anything for me; that much I know, that much I've never doubted. From the day we met, her tenacity drew me in, the way she seemed to know exactly how to achieve forward motion in life—a sixth sense that always felt out of reach for me, ineffable and diffuse.

Hank watched because he'd *seen* something. He was close, so close, to putting it together.

And he tried to warn me.

I jump as hands slide around my waist, locking in front of my navel. Her torso presses into my back, her belly newly convex as our baby grows.

“I love our house.” She plants a kiss on my neck.

My heart slams so hard I’m sure she can feel it against her chest. I inhale, exhale. The secret swells around us like a cloud, trapping us and our future child in its woolly interior, blocking out the rest of the world. Something flattens in my chest, squashing down the billowing panic. I tamp it deep, deep, deep into a mental crawl space I didn’t even know existed.

Kelsey’s my rock, a fount of the sureness and confidence I’ve always wished I possessed. She’d do anything for me—and now it’s time to return the favor.

I close my laptop, turn to face her, and slink my arms around her neck. “I love it too, Kelsey.”

It’s a small price to pay, really, for this beautiful life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Savannah Lauren

Andrea Bartz is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Spare Room*, a *Marie Claire* book club pick; *We Were Never Here*, a Reese's Book Club pick in development at Netflix; *The Lost Night*, an Amazon Best Book of the Month; and *The Herd*, which was named a best book of 2020 by *Marie Claire*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Real Simple*, and CrimeReads.

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