

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

STAGED



*Elle
Cosimano*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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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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STEP ONE

FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER.

Take care with the exterior presentation of your property. Consider what potential buyers will see from the street and the image you want your home to project.

Now *that's* what I call curb appeal." Dani's chin rested in the palm of her hand, her elbow slouching on the sill of the open window, her sigh wistful as she stared down at the front yard.

I angled in beside her to see what had captured her attention outside, but it was only a very sweaty Sawyer Mackenzie in a pair of faded jeans that fit him a little too well and a thin white T-shirt that was far too snug to fit him at all.

"Why doesn't he just take it off already?" she whined. As if the sun had carried her wish to his ear on a languid wave of summer heat, Sawyer obliged. He jammed the tip of his shovel into the flower bed he'd been digging and left the long wooden handle standing upright in the dirt as he peeled off his work gloves, then that flimsy rag of a T-shirt. "I think I just found my religion," Dani whispered as he dragged it over his head.

I tossed one of George's paint-crusted rags at my oldest childhood friend.

"Why'd you do that?" She batted it away, her eyes glued stubbornly to the scene out front.

"Looks like you need it," I teased. "I think you might be drooling."

Dani and I had known each other since before we were in preschool, and in all those years, I'd never seen her crush so hard as she did for Sawyer Mackenzie. Though I had to admit it was hard not to stare when he turned on the yard hose and bent over at the waist, drenching his sun-

kissed hair before taking a long drink.

She wasn't wrong about curb appeal. Even old Mrs. Price nearly clipped her own mailbox with her Buick when she caught Sawyer's reflection in her rearview mirror as she backed out of her driveway. He stopped drinking long enough to wave at her, flashing a smile that could melt the panties off a penguin, and it took her all of three tries to remember how to put her car in gear again.

If I'd been smart, I'd have put Sawyer's photo on the **FOR SALE** sign out front instead of mine. Maybe then, people would actually bother to look at the neglected old Victorian I was desperate to sell.

Sawyer shook out his hair like a dog, dropped the hose, and mopped the water from his eyes. He blinked them open, startled, then amused to find Dani and me ogling him from the upstairs bedroom.

I ducked back from the window, but Dani just wiggled her fingers at him. His laugh was punctuated by the thwack of a nail gun downstairs. "You best get back to work, Dani Somerville," he called up to her. "You know I don't mess around when I'm on the job."

"How about after?" she shouted over the whine of a Shop-Vac.

I smacked her elbow. "You know he has a girlfriend."

"*Had* a girlfriend," she said, bringing her head back inside the house. "Marilee dumped him last week after she caught him fooling around with Hilary Garrett."

"I thought he was seeing Tansey Dufresne."

"That was last month. He broke up with Tansey to date Marilee. Now, he's free," Dani said, popping her face back out the window.

"He's *not* free. He's charging us by the hour. And he's never going to get any work done if you keep flirting with him." I grabbed her by the belt loop of her shorts and pulled her back inside. "The open house is in two days, and you're supposed to be helping me get it ready. How am I supposed to sell this place if it looks like a construction zone?"

"Relax," Dani said, sliding down onto her butt on the protective plastic sheeting George had taped to the carpet to keep the paint from dripping on it. "Randall replaced the loose spindles, Travis fixed the leak in the downstairs bathroom, and George patched and sanded the drywall. He's almost finished touching up his second coat of paint." Dani checked the time on her phone and peeped out the window, craning her head to see down the street. "Marilee should be here any minute to clean. Pretty soon,

all the repair guys will be gone, and she'll have the whole afternoon to get the house shipshape! Then you and I will have all day tomorrow to stage it before Sunday's open house." She rolled to her feet and planted a big, loud kiss on my cheek. "Quit worrying, Lyda! It's going to look fabulous. I bet you'll have three offers before the weekend is out."

I sighed and wiped her lip gloss off my cheek. The house was not, in fact, fabulous. It was a century-old disaster with a sagging front porch, crooked walls, and dusty rose-colored carpets that still smelled like the old woman who'd died in it last month. We didn't need three offers. We needed one good one, preferably before my next rent payment was due. Dani was already on her third start-up scheme since she'd quit her temp agency job and moved back in with her parents, and my real estate career had yet to take off. Between the two of us, we weren't exactly raking in the dough.

"You really think this staging idea is going to work?" My first (and last) three properties hadn't sold fast enough to satisfy my broker. He'd stripped me of the keys before the listings had even expired and reassigned them to the office sales queen, Birgitta Jenkins. Gitta hadn't even wanted the neglected foreclosures and crusty old fixer-uppers with their water-stained floors and pesky rodent drama; her designer high heels were too good for that. I was the only agent in the office desperate enough to take the dregs of the listings, the naive newbie who had yet to sell a house.

The day my broker reluctantly handed me the keys to the old Victorian on Treadwater Way, I had picked up a bottle of cheap whiskey from the ABC and a notepad from the Mini Mart and brought Dani along to the house to commiserate with me as I set out to make a list of everything that was wrong with the place. But when I'd managed to open the warped front door, Dani had seen only a diamond in the rough. Or maybe just the promise of a paycheck.

For the next four hours, we'd inspected every nook and cranny of the house. Then we'd sat gingerly on the dusty carpeted floor in the empty living room, staring up at the peeling wallpaper, and before the whiskey was gone, Dani had leaped to her feet, fallen back on her butt, and hiccuped as she proclaimed TikTok was the solution to selling it.

After spending a solid week watching real estate tutorials and before-and-after reels, she had declared herself a "certified" home-staging

professional. She'd burst into my apartment and laid out a five-step plan on sticky notes on my tiny kitchen table, involving several handymen, a painter, a cleaner, and Sawyer (who was nonnegotiable, she'd pointed out), then, using my one and only credit card, she'd booked the lot of them, claiming I could pay off the repairs—and my teetering stack of bills—from the commission I would earn from the sale of the house.

That plan had sounded reasonable until the invoices had started coming.

"Of course it's going to work! Home staging is statistically proven to . . ." Dani frowned as my attention shifted to the window behind her, to the telltale *thwack* of a mallet smacking into a signpost across the street.

I swore under my breath. Will Wickshire, the town's newest hotshot real estate agent, was posting a **FOR SALE** sign in Mrs. Price's front yard. Dani gasped as she peeped over my shoulder. Will's sign advertised an open house on Sunday at exactly the same time as mine.

"That's a dick move!" Dani cried. Even Sawyer had paused his work to watch the sign go up. He laid down his shovel and folded his arms over his chest, shaking his head as if he wasn't the least bit surprised.

I could have sworn Will smirked as he knocked the dirt from his mallet and laid it in his BMW's meticulously organized trunk. It was the first time in months I'd seen him wearing anything other than a suit, and I hated that he somehow made running shorts look just as good as a dress shirt and a tie.

He smiled when he spotted me—out of triumph or mockery, I wasn't entirely sure. Will and I weren't exactly colleagues, but we weren't exactly strangers either. Our brief romantic history had been limited to a single semester in high school. We'd dated once and made out twice, and all three times I'd sworn to myself it would never happen again. (The fourth time had happened when we'd been stuck together in a maintenance closet during a lockdown drill between classes, and everyone knew fooling around didn't count when you were certain you were going to die.)

Whatever. The fact that Will was an excellent kisser was beside the point. He would have been a stellar catch if he wasn't so unbearably cocky. His unwavering confidence stemmed from several very good reasons, most of which the HR manager in our office would probably fire me for saying aloud. The rest had more to do with his track record in sales. He and Gitta had been neck and neck at every Monday-morning

sales meeting for the last two months, and I was certain they were both already sniffing around my listing, gunning for a shot at one more tick mark on the sales board. Just that morning, I'd seen Gitta cruise down the block, surveying her domain. The brake lights of her gleaming white Infiniti had stuttered when she'd spotted my face on the **FOR SALE** sign and all the contractors parked out front. I wondered if she would react the same way on Monday when Will's new listing appeared on the whiteboard at the office.

Will and Sawyer glared at each other across the street, and I was struck by a wave of nostalgia. It was like we were all just seniors in high school again, Dani and I watching from the sidelines while Sawyer and Will sized each other up from opposite sides of the town's one and only football field. Sawyer had attended the Catholic private school. Will had attended the big public one with Dani and me. Both boys had been talented, gorgeous, and full of themselves—only one had a reputation for playing the field, while the other played hard to get.

Five years had passed since we'd graduated, but some things never changed.

Will drew a wet wipe from his pocket and thoroughly cleaned his hands. "Surprised to see you here, Sawyer. I thought you were coming to cut the grass at my listing on Maple Avenue today."

Sawyer shrugged without a lick of remorse. His own hands were filthy, and a bead of sweat slid down his temple. "Been tied up here, getting ready for Lyda's big open house on Sunday. But I'm guessing you already knew about that."

Will's eyes climbed to the second-story window. "Tomorrow, then," he told Sawyer. "And don't be late."

Sawyer muttered something that sounded like *pompous dipshit* under his breath as Will got into his BMW and started the engine. A second later, my cell phone vibrated. I didn't have to check the number to know who it was. Will was staring at me through his windshield with his phone pressed to his ear.

Dani picked at a blob of dried paint on her fingernail, pretending not to eavesdrop as I answered the call. "What do you want, Will?"

"If you needed help with your open house, you could have called me."

"I don't need any help."

“I could have at least recommended a better landscaper than Sawyer Mackenzie.”

“Why bother? He’s obviously good enough for you.”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

Will pinched the bridge of his nose. “This isn’t a competition, Lyda.”

“If it isn’t a competition, change the date of your open house.” I could practically hear his teeth grinding through the phone. “That’s what I thought.” I disconnected the call, then stared after him as his BMW tore off.

Dani pitched the paint rag at me. “What did Mr. Real Estate Hottie Pants want?”

“Nothing worth talking about,” I said with a heavy sigh.

A screen door slammed as George came out of the house and dumped a bucket of milky paint water onto the freshly laid mulch.

Sawyer knocked the bucket from George’s hand and snatched away his hose before George could use it to rinse his brushes. “What the hell are you doing, Dufresne! I just planted those azaleas! That paint’s going to kill ’em. Go clean your damn brushes someplace else!”

I slammed the window shut as the two exchanged barbs below, disregarding George’s suggestion that I keep the upstairs windows open to air out the paint fumes overnight. “Tell me again why we’re doing this?” I asked Dani.

“Because anyone who watches TikTok knows that home staging increases the likelihood of a sale by at least three times and raises the amount of an offer by as much as twenty percent.” The plastic sheeting crinkled as Dani took my hand and towed me out of the bedroom. “Come on. It’s time for the next step in our plan.”

“What’s that?”

“Shopping.”

Dani and I checked in with all the contractors to see if they needed any supplies from the store before we left, but Randall and Travis were already packing up their tools in their vans, and George only shook his head and scowled.

“If you really want to do me a favor, you can get rid of that prick of a

landscaper. That boy can't keep his tools to himself and his big mouth shut." I was guessing that comment had more to do with George's cousin Tansey than the meaningless spat I had witnessed in the yard just now. One of the bright spots of living in a small town was that everyone knew everyone and looked out for each other like family. The fact that everyone knew a little too much about each other was arguably one of the cloudy parts; we all bickered like family too.

George wrapped the cord around his Shop-Vac and gathered up his tools. "I'm about done here. I forgot your touch-up kit, but Tansey offered to bring it."

Dani and I followed him outside.

"Speak of the devil," Dani said in a low voice as Tansey Dufresne parked along the curb behind her cousin's van. She hauled a box of paint supplies out of the back of her truck and slammed it shut. Her ponytail swung violently as she stormed past Sawyer with a cutting look. She looked like she wanted to hurl something at him, preferably something sharp. I'd seen Tansey win the last six axe-throwing competitions at the county fair, and while I didn't share Dani's obsession with Sawyer's arguably beautiful backside, I had no desire to see it cleaved from his body either. Dani winced beside me, as if she was already mourning the loss.

Tansey dropped the box of paints on the front porch. Sawyer bit his tongue as she stomped back across the lawn in her heavy-soled work boots. She jolted to a stop, glaring at Marilee's little red station wagon as it nosed into a narrow parking spot.

"Uh-oh," Dani said in a singsong voice.

Marilee climbed out of her station wagon, juggling her huge canister vacuum in one hand and her cleaning supplies in the other. Tansey hightailed it back to her truck, and George chased after her. He shook his head at Marilee when he passed her at the foot of the driveway. "You've got some nerve showing your face here."

Marilee's cheeks burned bright red. Her mop bucket slipped from the crook of her arm, sending cleaning supplies clattering over the street. Sawyer, Dani, and I all rushed over to help her. Her smile was tight, but she didn't protest when Sawyer reached for her vacuum and carried it the rest of the way.

"Good riddance," she muttered as George and Tansey got in their

vehicles and left.

“Don’t mind them,” I said, handing her the bucket. “Dani and I are glad you’re here.”

Marilee smiled, quick to recover as we walked her to the house. “This old place is really coming together, Lyda! Got a list of things you want me to do?”

“It’s on the kitchen counter,” I said.

“And can you do that thing you do with the vacuum to make the patterns in the carpet?” Dani added. “The little triangles always look so nice.”

Marilee laughed. “Sure, I can do that.” She raised an eyebrow at the dusty boot prints on the porch. “But we’ll have to keep everyone from traipsing dirt on my clean carpets.” Since Randall, Travis, and George were already gone, her comment was clearly directed at Sawyer, but he was too busy staring at her to register her subtle warning to stay out.

“We’ll be sure to take our shoes off when we stage it tonight,” Dani said.

“We’re only accessorizing a few rooms. We won’t leave a mess,” I promised.

Marilee looked doubtful. “I suppose I could come back Sunday morning to touch up any footprints before the open house.”

“Thank you—you’re a lifesaver,” I told her. “I’ll bring your check when I see you on Sunday.” I bounced off the last tread, feeling hopeful when it didn’t creak under my weight. Dani was right. The place wasn’t looking half-bad. Maybe there was a paycheck in our future after all. “Dani and I are running out to do some shopping. Need anything from town, Sawyer?” I handed him his shovel, reminding him he was still on the clock.

He dragged his attention from Marilee as she retreated into the house. “Would you two mind stopping by the nursery and picking up a few more azalea bushes? I’m short three.” He squinted at us against the bright afternoon sun. It was shining smack in his hazel eyes, and a hint of drool might have spilled out of Dani’s mouth.

“I don’t know if we’ll have room,” I said before she could oblige. “We have a lot of shopping to do, and I don’t have the biggest trunk.” Dani pouted and batted her lovesick eyes at me. “Fine, I guess we could make a couple of trips.”

“Take my truck,” Sawyer offered, tossing me his keys. “If you make it back before dark, I’ll get those azaleas planted tonight.” He tipped his face closer, and even though he reeked like mulch and sweat, the effect was still a little staggering when he winked. “Wouldn’t want you ladies to lose a sale to that jerk.”

“Three azalea bushes, coming up.” I took the keys and steered Dani toward his truck before she could give him any ideas for other things he could probably do tonight. I opened the passenger door and shoved her inside, giving Sawyer an apologetic wave goodbye. His shoulders shook with his quiet chuckle as he took up his shovel and resumed his work.

I gave the house one last look. The door trim didn’t seem quite so crooked as it had that morning. The front porch didn’t seem so droopy, and the freshly painted shutters bookending the wide front windows almost made the house seem like it was smiling. My **FOR SALE** sign, which had refused to stay upright all week after I’d used a rock from the yard to hammer the post into the dirt, stood straighter now, its shoulders squared against Will’s sign across the street. I supposed I had Sawyer to thank for that.

I climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine with a determined turn of the key.

STEP TWO

DEPERSONALIZE, AND ELIMINATE CLUTTER.

Get rid of memorabilia and personal objects. Make the space as neutral as possible, allowing buyers to visualize the potential within each room.

The sun had already dipped below the roofline when Dani and I finally made it back to the house on Treadwater Way. Mrs. Price's curtains had been drawn, and her porch lights were on. The street out front was empty of cars except for my dusty white Camry, which I'd been forced to park nearly a block away that morning.

Sawyer's headlights swung over the front yard as I pulled his truck into the driveway, spotlighting the fresh mounds of mulch in the flower beds and the three empty holes he'd dug for the azaleas.

I peered through the darkening yard, looking for Sawyer, but the only faces in sight were mine and Will's, our dueling **OPEN HOUSE** signs swinging in the evening breeze.

I called Sawyer's name as I wrenched open the bed of his pickup. I handed two azalea pots to Dani and took the last one myself. We carried them around the side of the house, but Sawyer was nowhere in sight. The backyard had been weeded, and the lawn had been perfectly manicured. All his tools and shovels had been hosed clean, the spades and rakes still dripping where they'd been neatly stacked against the side of the house.

Dani's shoulders sagged. "He must have got tired of waiting and found a ride home."

"At least his tools are still here. We'll just have to plant the azaleas ourselves."

We set the pots on the patio, and I paused to find my house key. When I reached to slide it into the lock, I found that the back door was already open.

“I can’t believe no one remembered to lock the house before they left.” I reached for the light switch, turning it on in time to avoid tripping on a pair of muddy work boots beside the door.

Dani brightened. “Sawyer must still be here.”

“Good,” I said, nudging them aside. The last thing I wanted to do was plant azaleas in the dark. And I certainly didn’t want to have to track him down to return his truck later that night. At least Marilee had finished cleaning while we were gone. The baseboards and doorknobs had all been polished, and the aged mauve carpet on the stairs had been vacuumed to a high pile.

I hollered Sawyer’s name, but no one answered. I dropped my voice to a whisper as I pointed toward the second floor. “You don’t think Marilee’s still here, do you?”

“No!” Dani whispered back. “I already told you they broke up last week. Besides, her car’s gone. Sawyer must be up there stinking up the bathroom. I bet he couldn’t hear us over the fan.”

She was probably right. Dani had stripped the dusty yellowing curtains from every other curtain rod in the house before George had arrived to paint, and the en suite bathroom in the master bedroom was the only one that offered any privacy. “No sense waiting for him, I guess.”

Dani and I unlocked the front door, then propped it open wide before unloading the truck. We carried the furniture and shopping bags inside and set them in the living room. When the truck was finally empty, we closed the front door and kicked off our sneakers to avoid tracking dirt on the freshly vacuumed carpets.

“Sawyer! We’re back!” I called out again, growing impatient as we hauled the last of the accessories up the stairs. It was getting darker by the minute, and those azaleas weren’t going to plant themselves. The least he could have done was come down to help us carry in all those boxes and lamps. We padded down the hallway to look for him, flipping on lights as we went, our sock-covered feet spoiling the carefully laid vacuum tracks. Dani bumped into my back as I opened the master bedroom door and froze.

We had found Sawyer, but he wasn’t in the bathroom.

Sawyer Mackenzie was dead on the bedroom floor.

Three hours later, Dani and I waited in the driveway, our feet dangling from the open bed of Sawyer's pickup truck. Our faces were splotchy and swollen from crying, and our butts were numb with sleep. Dani wiped her eyes. My stomach growled, and I blew out a shaky sigh. It had been hours since we'd scarfed down our dinner, but neither of us could think about eating.

We'd called 9-1-1 as soon as the initial shock had worn off, about thirty seconds after we'd found Sawyer sprawled on the bedroom floor. His bare chest had been pale under the slant of light shining through the open bathroom door behind him. The top button of his jeans had been unfastened. His socks and T-shirt had been tossed on the floor, and a giant purple hickey had colored the side of his neck. It wasn't until we'd noticed the blood under his head that we both had started screaming.

Joanie in the dispatch office had answered our horrified call for help, and Sheriff Willoughby had arrived moments later, right before Carlos's ambulance had come screaming into the driveway. Hours had passed, but it still didn't seem real. How was it possible that Sawyer Mackenzie was dead?

Like mosquitoes to a bug light, the neighbors had begun to gather around the perimeter the sheriff's deputies had established. Mrs. Price, the only person allowed within that line of yellow tape, had watched the scene from her front porch. Dani rested her chin on her hands, her heavy red eyelids fighting the urge to sleep. She looked like she wanted to get out of there as much as I did, but the house was my responsibility, and Sawyer had been there because I'd hired him, and it didn't seem right to abandon him now. Besides, we couldn't leave even if we wanted to. Sheriff Willoughby had told us as much.

Once he had finished asking us all his questions—about when we'd left to go shopping, who had been in the house earlier that day, and who might have been in the house after we'd gone—he'd given two of his deputies a pointed look at the mention of Marilee's name, and the deputies had hightailed it out of there, lights and sirens blazing. The sheriff had told us both to stay put just in case he had any more questions for us. And there we'd sat since, on the back of Sawyer's pickup truck in the dark,

watching a very different kind of open house than the one we'd spent the day preparing for.

A parade of people had come and gone from the old Victorian over the last three hours, carrying tool kits and cases, a gurney, and lights. Even Rennie Atweiller, the local wedding photographer who did some freelance work for the police in the offseason, came in to take photos of the crime scene. The neighbors all hushed, a few of them whispering to each other behind cupped hands, when Carlos and a deputy finally wheeled the gurney out.

Dani sniffled as the body bag rolled past us. "You really think Marilee could have done this?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "Marilee was the last person in the house. And you said yourself they'd broken up because she'd caught him fooling around with someone else."

"They must have got to talking and had a fight."

"Judging by the size of that hickey, I don't think there was a whole lot of talking going on." The hickey on Sawyer's neck had been enormous—perfectly round and nearly too big to be believable and yet too painfully obvious to be anything but. Like someone had tried to suck the life right out of him.

Dani's face scrunched up. "You think she just hit him in the side of the head while they were making out? That doesn't make any sense."

We both sat upright as the back door of the ambulance slammed shut and the sheriff strode toward us. Deputies pushed back the crowds, pausing their interrogations of the neighbors to make room for the ambulance to leave.

"You two go on home now," the sheriff said, passing right by us on his way back to the house. "We'll call if we have any questions."

I hopped down from the truck bed, rubbing my sore backside with a sigh of relief before remembering that the sheriff had taken my only copy of the house key. It should have been inside a fancy metal lockbox on the door but had instead been in my pocket when the authorities had arrived.

"But, Sheriff, my key!" I called after him.

"You'll get it back in a few days, after our investigation's done." He disappeared inside the house and closed the door behind him.

I trudged across the front yard and plucked my **OPEN HOUSE** sign off its post, giving Will's a heavy dose of side-eye as I did. Will would

probably be thrilled to discover he wouldn't have any competition for his open house on Sunday. Word traveled fast here, and he probably already knew my listing was an active crime scene. The neighbors were already buzzing, cell phones in hand, all of them calling out the latest bits of gossip to one another.

"Oh my!" Danetta Cooper covered her receiver and shouted over the crowd, "Bernice says Deputy Ames just took Marilee Fisher into custody!"

My phone rang too early the next morning, and since my open house had been canceled, my keys had been confiscated, and Sawyer Mackenzie was dead in the morgue, I was probably a little snappier than usual when I finally got around to answering the call.

"Lyda, it's Deputy Ames down at the station. Marilee Fisher is here in a holding cell, and she's asking to talk to you."

"Me?" I sat bolt upright in bed. "Why me?"

"She said something about you owing her a check for the cleaning at the house on Treadwater Way. She says she needs the money ASAP so she can pay for an attorney."

It took me every ounce of self-control not to throw my phone at the wall. "She did, did she? Tell her I'm on my way." If she thought I was paying her for that cleaning yesterday, she had another think coming. If anything, she should be paying me! Who would ever want to step foot in that house after she'd murdered Sawyer inside it? Besides, it was going to cost me a fortune to have those bloodstains removed, even if someone did decide to buy it.

I disconnected the call and got dressed. I didn't have the heart to wake Dani, who had crashed on my sofa at 2 a.m. and was still sleeping off the trauma of the previous night. It was probably for the best. I didn't want to think about what she would do to Marilee if given the chance.

I drove alone to the station. When I arrived, Deputy Ames guided me behind the counter to the holding cells. Marilee looked up from behind swollen red lids. She leaped to her feet as I approached her cell. "Lyda! Thank goodness you're here. No one will listen to me, and I didn't know who else to call."

I lowered my voice to a stern whisper. Deputy Ames waited nearby.

“If you think I’m paying you for that cleaning after what you did to Sawyer yesterday—”

“I didn’t do anything to Sawyer!” she cried. “They’re all saying I hit him in the head, but I didn’t do it, Lyda, I swear! Sawyer was working out in the yard the whole time. Not that I was watching him or anything,” she said with a shameful blush. “I only know because I left a few windows cracked to air out the paint fumes, and I could hear him humming to himself outside—he does that, you know. Or did that,” she corrected herself with a wince. “He didn’t come inside the entire time I was there. I got to the house at three, I cleaned everything on the list you left me, and I was gone by five o’clock.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “If that’s true, why are you in here?”

“I wish I knew! I told the sheriff I went straight home to take a shower, but it’s not like anyone was in there with me to verify it.” She gripped the bars, her sweet face pressed between them, as close to mine as her cell would allow. “I’m telling you, Lyda. I had nothing to do with whatever happened to Sawyer last night.”

“So you weren’t the one who gave him that hickey?”

Marilee gasped. “What hickey?” she demanded, glaring daggers at me. “Sawyer didn’t have any hickies when I left!”

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. “If he never came inside, how would you know that?”

Her jaw snapped shut as if I’d caught her in a lie. “Because,” she said, checking to make sure Deputy Ames wasn’t listening as she pitched her voice low, “Sawyer knocked on the back door while I was mopping my way out. He apologized for cheating on me and asked if he could come inside to use the bathroom. I told him he could come in when I was gone, but only if the floors were dry and he promised to take off his shoes and lock up before he left. And he *definitely* did not have a hickey when I shut that door in his face. That no-good, sweet-talking, promiscuous jerk!” She growled to herself, pacing her cell like a caged cat. “Sure didn’t take him long to move on, did it?” I was pretty sure she’d murder Sawyer right that minute if he wasn’t already dead. I was also pretty sure she was telling the truth.

And if that was the case, that presented Dani and me with two very pressing problems: (1) an innocent woman would probably go to jail for his murder, and (2) the real murderer was still out there.

STEP THREE

ADD PLENTY OF COLOR AND LIGHT.

Don't be afraid to introduce bold colors. Consider using strategically placed lighting and accent colors to draw attention away from a room's flaws and redirect the focus to the features you want to highlight.

I don't think this is what the Realtor on TikTok meant when she suggested bringing in more lighting." Dani shook her flashlight when the bulb flickered, casting a long beam over the backside of the house. I tugged her down beside me where I crouched in the bushes.

"Turn that off! Someone might see it."

"And we're looking for what, exactly?" she whispered.

"Evidence so we can figure out who really killed Sawyer. All we need to do is find a way inside."

Deputy Ames was fast asleep in his patrol car out front. The presence of his car alone should have been a deterrent to curious true-crime fanatics or local kids playing truth or dare, but here we were, creeping through the neighboring backyards and crawling around in the shadows, trying to break into an empty house. The first-floor windows and doors were all locked, and the only other copy of my key was in a safe inside my broker's office. And since I had neglected to tell him *my* copy had been confiscated by the sheriff, I had no intention of asking him for another one. It was my job to make sure the house was locked after every visit. Even though I hadn't been the last person working in the house, making sure it was secure was still my responsibility. The last thing I needed was to give my boss one more reason to hand this listing over to Gitta Jenkins.

If I lost the old Victorian now, I'd never earn back the money I'd already sunk into it.

"Marilee said she left some windows cracked to air out the paint fumes. Maybe one of them is still unlocked."

"Give me a boost," Dani said. "I'll stand on your shoulders."

I resisted the urge to remind Dani she couldn't manage a single pull-up in PE class in high school, pointing instead at a paint-spattered ladder that had been folded and left against the side of the house. "We don't need to stand on each other's shoulders." Thankfully, Sawyer wasn't the only contractor who'd left his tools on the job yesterday. Quietly, we raised the ladder and leaned it against the siding, lining it up with the bedroom window above our heads.

I tucked my flashlight under my arm and climbed up first to test the window. After a solid push, the lower sash slid open, and I crawled over the sill. I hurried to the bedroom door and pulled it shut, making sure the glow from our flashlights didn't reach the rooms across the hall. If Mrs. Price happened to see us and report us to the police, it would take Deputy Ames all of ten seconds to bust us.

Dani hesitated in the open window, her flashlight roving over the room and coming to land on the patch of carpet where we had found Sawyer's body the night before. She looked a little sick. "Are you sure we should be doing this?"

"It's the only way to figure out who killed Sawyer. We owe him that much."

Dani bit her wobbling lip and shimmied through the window. "Now what?" she asked, tumbling to the floor beside me.

"We recreate the crime scene and look for something we missed. Turn on the bathroom light," I said, trying to remember exactly how the room had looked when we'd found him the night before. There had been no lamps in the empty bedroom. The only light had come from the hallway and the fixture over the vanity in the bathroom, until Rennie Atweiller had arrived with his big studio lights and plugged them in so he could take photographs. Dani and I had already been shooed outside to wait by then.

She flipped the switch over the bathroom vanity. The antique scone cast a triangle of light across the bedroom carpet. Footprints marked a trail of heavy traffic from the hall. The surviving vacuum tracks formed an

outline around the human-shaped patch of carpet where Sawyer had fallen.

“He was lying right here,” I said, pointing to the lingering bloodstain just outside the bathroom. “And his shirt and socks were there.” I gestured to the place where they’d seemed carelessly tossed on the floor.

“His pants were unfastened, and the bathroom light was on,” Dani pointed out. “He probably came upstairs to use the bathroom, just like Marilee told you.” Just like Dani had assumed yesterday, when we’d first seen his muddy boots left beside the back door.

“But why would he take off his socks and shirt if he only came up here to use the bathroom? And where’d the hickey come from?”

Dani rolled her eyes. “From someone who didn’t know what they were doing. Did you see that thing? It was hideous! Like those hickies we used to give ourselves during fourth-grade sleepovers when we were practicing for the real thing, pretending our arms were boys we liked from school.”

“He couldn’t have given himself a hickey, Dani, so he obviously wasn’t up here alone—wait . . .” I turned back to the trail of footprints behind us, my mind retracing our steps. “If Sawyer wasn’t alone, then how were there no footprints on the stairs?” I thought back to the moment we’d come inside and noticed the perfect vacuum tracks on the treads. “If two people came up the stairs and one of them went back down, why weren’t there any footprints on the steps when we got here?”

There was only one possible answer.

The killer must have vacuumed over them before they left, covering their tracks on their way out of the house. And then Dani and I had trudged up the stairs, making new footprints as we carried the boxes to the bedrooms. By the time the police had arrived, there were dozens of footprints marking up the carpet, which meant we were the only ones who would have known this small but important detail.

“Should we call Sheriff Willoughby and tell him?” Dani asked.

“It’ll only make Marilee look guiltier.”

“Maybe she is. Who else would have been in the house with a vacuum?”

I couldn’t argue with that. The killer obviously had the tools to clean up after themselves.

I shone my light around the perimeter of the bedroom, finding the few surviving tracks that remained where the carpet met the walls. “The

vacuum tracks are different on the other side of the bedroom. They're wider over there," I pointed out. "But the ones near the body are smaller, like the ones on the stairs." And the triangular patterns Marilee was always so careful to leave in the carpets seemed to be pointing in a different direction too. Marilee's wide triangles always pointed into a room. These narrower ones seemed to point the opposite direction, back toward the hall.

"She probably used a different attachment on the steps, to get in all the nooks and crannies," Dani suggested.

"But why use a stair attachment up here in such a big room? Especially if she was in a hurry to hide the evidence and get out?" Unless it hadn't been a different attachment at all but had been an entirely different vacuum. A smaller one than the monstrosity Marilee was forced to haul around with both hands. One that could be carried in and out quickly without attracting attention.

I looked around the room, seeing it fresh.

The location of the body.

The T-shirt and socks that had been chucked on the floor. The way the bathroom light had conveniently been left on, casting a spotlight on his unfastened pants and the bold pop of color on his neck, bringing focus to a feature someone clearly wanted to highlight—a perfectly round hickey that could easily have been made with the mouth of a vacuum's crevice tool—all of it drawing attention away from some other flaw, like the mismatched vacuum tracks around the body and on the stairs that seemed to point in the wrong direction.

Someone wanted to make it look like Marilee had done this. And they'd been careful to make the crime scene look convincing. I turned to Dani, certain I was right. "I think the killer staged the house."

STEP FOUR

INTRODUCE ACCESSORIES.

What we remove from a room is just as important as what we choose to add. Eliminate unsightly pieces, and be judicious in the selection and placement of new ones. Additions should feel authentic without being overdone.

Dani and I sat in the front seat of my car after Will's open house the next day, staring at Mrs. Price's front door.

"Why do I have to do it?" Dani asked, frowning through the windshield.

"Because she might not be forthcoming with me if she thinks I'm her competition." After all, it had been my face on the **FOR SALE** sign Mrs. Price had been forced to stare at all week before I'd finally taken it down. Dani's name hadn't been on it. "All you need to do is ask her if she remembers seeing any vehicles in front of the house on Friday after Marilee left. Maybe she saw something useful." We needed a witness if we were going to accuse someone of murder. And if anyone might have seen the killer, it was the very nosy neighbor who lived across the street.

I rolled down my window and turned off the AC, one ear tipped toward Mrs. Price's front door as Dani knocked. The older woman shuffled to the screen door and greeted Dani with a smile. Dani demurred when Mrs. Price invited her in, and they spent a requisite moment exchanging pleasantries while Mrs. Price asked after Dani's mother, aunts, and cousins.

"Actually, I'm here because I'm hoping you can help me with a question," Dani confessed. "I was wondering if you happened to see anyone parked across the street the other night after Marilee left?"

“I already told the sheriff everything I know. That Mackenzie boy was out there working in the yard until the afternoon. Next time I looked out there, his truck was gone, and he was carrying his tools ’round back. I didn’t see him again after that.” Her lips quirked thoughtfully, and she scratched her head. “There were a couple of work trucks parked out front for most of the day, but those fellas all packed up and left sometime ’round three, just about the same time that cleaning girl showed up in her little red station wagon. I went to fix myself some dinner, and by the time I finished that, her car was gone. The only other one I saw out there all night belongs to that real estate lady from the office on the sign, but she parked way down the street.”

“Are you sure no one else came to the house?”

Mrs. Price’s neck wattle swayed as she shook her head firmly back and forth. “If anyone did, I didn’t see ’em. Like I already told the sheriff, the only other truck I remember seeing was a white van, but they didn’t bother to park. They just idled at the curb. The van wasn’t out there but a few minutes before it drove off.”

Just because the driver didn’t park didn’t mean they weren’t our culprit. They could just as easily have parked down the block and sneaked behind the house through the neighboring yards, the same way Dani and I had last night.

I jumped out of my skin at a sharp knock on the roof of my car.

“Will! You scared me half to death!” I clutched my chest as he leaned down low, his hands braced above my open window.

“Is there a reason you two are here harassing my client?”

“You’re a real estate agent, Will. Not an attorney. This isn’t an episode of *Suits*,” I said, willing my heart to slow.

“Mrs. Price already told the sheriff everything she knows.”

“Maybe there’s something she forgot.”

“And that concerns you why, exactly?”

“Because that house is my listing, and Sawyer was in that bedroom because he was doing a job for me.”

If Will hadn’t been so uninterested in everything but my business, I would have sworn a flash of jealousy darkened his eyes. He pushed back a few inches, giving me room to breathe. “If it’s still your listing, why’d you take your sign down?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, equal parts suspicion and sarcasm. “I

thought you'd be happy your competition was off the market. Wait . . .” My eyes went wide as that very thought sank in. Will frowned as I reached for the car door, then grunted out an *oomph* as I swung it open into his groin.

He bent over, eyes watering as I bolted out of my Camry. “Dammit, Lyda! I was standing right there, as if you didn’t know! Hey! What are you doing?” he snapped, too slow to react as I reached inside his front pocket for his keys and pushed a button. The trunk of his BMW sprang open. He followed me to the street, furious as he watched me inspect the contents. There, beside his perfectly clean rubber mallet and a tube of disinfectant wipes, was a portable vacuum. “What’s this?” I asked, waving the nozzle at his face.

He rolled his eyes as if I’d lost my mind. “It’s a *vacuum*, Lyda! Every self-respecting real estate professional carries the tools of the trade in their car. You of all people should know that.” He grabbed one of his heavy metal lockboxes out of his trunk and held it in front of me to emphasize his point. When I didn’t say anything, he yanked the vacuum away from me, standing far too close as he tucked it neatly back in its place. I gritted my teeth, hating the delicious smell of his pricey cologne—but more than that, hating that he was right.

I lifted my chin and looked him square in the eyes. “Well, your *tool* is a little smaller than I’d hoped. Sorry I wasted your time.” Blood rushed to his cheeks as I slammed the lid shut and tromped back toward my less-than-professional car. I’d seen enough. His vacuum was indeed too small for the job in question. Not one of its fancy onboard attachments was likely to have made the same tracks the killer had left in the carpet, and none was the same shape as the hickey on Sawyer’s neck.

Will gently took my arm before I could retreat to my car. “What’s this all about?” he asked in a low voice, his eyes darting to Mrs. Price and Dani before landing firmly on mine. “What did I do to make you so mad at me? You haven’t said more than a few words to me in months, and now you’re looking at me like I kicked a damn puppy . . . wait,” he said, light dawning over his face. “You think *I* had something to do with what happened to Sawyer?”

I threw an arm toward the open house banner still hanging under his **FOR SALE** sign. “Why wouldn’t I? You’re constantly trying to one-up me! Is it such a stretch to think you’d sabotage my business by murdering my

landscaper?”

“The fact that Sawyer Mackenzie was doing *yard work* for you was the least of my concerns! But since you don’t seem very interested in my tools anymore, I guess none of that really matters now, does it?” His jaw clenched as he bit down hard on whatever else he was about to say. “You know what, forget I said that.” His hands were on his hips as he squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, the old Will I’d made out with in a closet was gone. He was back to Will, the Self-Respecting Real Estate Professional Who Kept a Vacuum in His BMW. “If you think I wanted something like this to happen, you’re way off base, Lyda. I didn’t have a single buyer at my open house today. People saw the yellow police tape across the street and kept right on driving. Everybody in the neighborhood’s talking about it as if there’s still a killer running loose around here.” He threw up his hands. “If the sheriff could just find the stinking murder weapon already, maybe he could finally take that crime tape down, and we could all get back to work.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, taken aback.

Will dragged a hand down his face, as if he’d love nothing more than to toss the conversation in his trunk and slam the lid on the entire thing. “Didn’t you hear? They searched Marilee’s car, her house, and that whole damn property, and they can’t find the weapon that killed him.”

STEP FIVE

CLEAN AND TIDY UP.

Clean and polish every surface of your home, but be careful of noxious chemical smells that may be left behind. A nice aroma can have an immediate effect on the way buyers think and feel. Fill your home with pleasant scents and make sure your bathrooms shine!

What was that all about?" Dani asked as she got back in my car. I glanced in my rearview mirror in time to see Will's taillights drive away.

"Nothing," I said glumly, wishing every conversation I had with Will didn't have to end up in an argument. "What did Mrs. Price say?"

"The only cars Mrs. Price remembered seeing were 'the little red station wagon that belonged to the cleaning girl and the white one that belongs to the real estate lady from the office on the sign.'" Dani hooked air quotes around the entire statement.

"Mine and Marilee's," I surmised.

"And the last vehicle she remembered seeing at the house that afternoon was a white van, but she said it never parked." Dani frowned.

I frowned too. "George drives a van," I pointed out. "He was clearly holding a grudge over Sawyer's breakup with Tansey. And he keeps a Shop-Vac in his van for sucking up all the drywall dust after he patches the walls."

"Then there's the ladder he left beside the house," Dani said.

"Directly under the room where the murder happened. He would have known the upstairs windows were open because he was the one who suggested I leave them cracked to air out the fumes."

Dani looked confused. "But if George planned to sneak back to the

house to murder Sawyer, why bother leaving the ladder at all? Why not just sneak into the backyard? That's where Sawyer was working."

"Unless it wasn't Sawyer he was coming back to find." I put the car in reverse and backed down Mrs. Price's driveway. Dani gripped the dash as I made a quick three-point turn and skidded to a stop in the driveway of the old Victorian. We bolted out of the car and ran around the side of the house, to the place where we had found the paint-spattered ladder tucked neatly in the bushes.

I took a few steps back from it, staring up at the room where Sawyer had been murdered. "What if George wasn't just angry with Sawyer? You said Sawyer broke up with Tansey so he could date Marilee. You saw how George treated Marilee on Friday. What if he planned to come back while she was here alone, cleaning the house, but he got here too late and found Sawyer upstairs in the bathroom instead?"

"And killed him," Dani finished for me, "then used his Shop-Vac to cover up his tracks. But wouldn't one of the neighbors have seen him leaving the house?"

I looked up at the window as I considered that. George would have had to walk backward out of the house as he vacuumed up his footprints, exiting through the front door the same way Marilee had, leaving perfectly fresh patterns in the carpet when she was done. Except . . .

"The vacuum tracks didn't go the same direction as Marilee's," I puzzled aloud. "They pointed the opposite way. Not toward the hallway, then the stairs, then the door, but from the door to the stairs, then to the bedroom. The killer didn't leave through the front door." My eyes climbed down the rungs of clapboard siding like an imaginary ladder. "Whoever killed Sawyer vacuumed their way to the window and then climbed back down," I explained to Dani, certain I was right.

I looked at the ground, at the mound of fresh mulch where we had planted the ladder the night we'd sneaked into the house. I knelt, tracing the dirt, finding a small finger-size hole in the soft soil. It was similar to the kind a lawn-aeration tool might make. There was more than one. A trail of them. A staggered pattern of holes dotted the flower bed and disappeared into the grass.

"Quick," I said to Dani. "Call Sheriff Willoughby, and tell him to get down here. George didn't murder Sawyer Mackenzie, but I think I know who did."

“What’s the meaning of all this?” Sheriff Willoughby hiked up his belt as he trudged across the yard toward us with his deputy in tow.

Before I could open my mouth to answer, my broker’s sleek silver Mercedes eased to a stop behind the sheriff’s SUV. While Dani had called the sheriff, I had called my broker’s office, informing his chatty assistant that there had been a major development in Sawyer’s case. She assured me she would send my broker right away. And just as I’d hoped, Gitta’s gleaming white Infiniti pulled in right behind him.

I could see why Mrs. Price would have confused our white sedans from a distance. Or maybe she hadn’t. After all, Mrs. Price had only said the car belonged to “that real estate lady from the office on the sign,” which technically could have been either one of us.

Gitta got out of her car, slung her big Prada handbag over her shoulder, and followed our broker up the driveway. Her nose turned up at my dusty white Camry as her Manolo Blahnik heels clicked past, and just as I had suspected, they weren’t as clean as her car.

Gitta may have tidied up the crime scene, but she’d neglected one very important detail. Her shoes had made those holes I’d found in the dirt, but unless we found the murder weapon or the vacuum she’d used to cover her tracks, it would be very difficult to prove that.

My broker greeted the sheriff as we all converged in the front yard. Gitta hung back a little, casting anxious glances at the side of the house where we’d all been standing when she’d arrived. I couldn’t afford to give her time to formulate a plan. And I definitely couldn’t ask the sheriff to search her car. He’d need probable cause for that and probably a warrant.

Dani whispered in my ear. “I’ll give you an opening. You get her keys.” At that, Dani flung her arms around Gitta, taking her in a bone-crushing hug. “*Oh. My. God!* Gitta Jenkins! It’s so good to see you! I’m such a huge fan!” Dani shook Gitta so vigorously the woman’s keys dropped to the grass. I quickly scooped them up and spirited them away to her car. “You’ve probably heard of me. I’m an up-and-coming professional home stager,” Dani explained with a distracting flourish while I searched the fancy key fob for the button to open Gitta’s trunk. “Though I’m sure *you* don’t need the services of someone like me,” Dani gushed, “since you already know so much about staging a house yourself. Right, Lyda?”

Right on cue, I popped the trunk. Frankly I didn't care that I didn't have a search warrant; I had more than enough probable cause. There was a portable vacuum inside, complete with a stair attachment and a crevice tool, which was about the same size and shape as the hickey on Sawyer's neck. Close enough to make my case.

I grabbed the nozzle of the portable vacuum in one hand and Gitta's rubber mallet with the other, holding them aloft for the sheriff and his deputy to see. "I have reason to believe Birgitta Jenkins murdered Sawyer Mackenzie," I said, stealing everyone's attention. Gitta's eyes grew wide. "This is the vacuum she used to frame Marilee for the murder. And *this* is the murder weapon," I said, brandishing the rubber mallet.

Gitta's face became indignant, and she stomped a pointy heel. "That is *not* the murder weapon! That mallet wasn't even in my purse when I . . ." She clapped a hand over her mouth, glancing sideways at the sheriff.

"When you what?" Dani prompted with a gloating grin.

"Check her shoes," I suggested in response to the sheriff's befuddled look. "There are holes in the mulch under the bedroom window, right beside the ladder she used to sneak into the house. The holes are the same size as her high heels."

I hadn't been paranoid when I'd suspected Gitta and Will had both been sniffing around my listings, but Gitta's curiosity must have finally gotten the best of her. She had probably assumed our broker would hand her the keys during our sales meeting on Monday, after I failed to sell it. But then she saw all those contractors working on the house on Friday morning, and she couldn't stand not knowing what the heck I was up to. Instead of debasing herself by stopping in to ask me, she figured she'd peep inside the windows while it was empty and see for herself. She must have spotted the ladder under the window while she was snooping, and she couldn't resist the opportunity to get a look inside.

Sawyer's truck wasn't out front, and she wouldn't have seen him in the yard or while she was peeking in the windows because he was upstairs in the bathroom the whole time. When he finally did come out, they must have surprised each other.

"It wasn't my fault!" Gitta's confession rushed out of her, tearful and breathless. "Sawyer came out of the bathroom as I came through the window. I didn't think anyone else was supposed to be in the house!" she cried. "It was getting dark, and I couldn't see his face! I was scared he was

an intruder!” The sheriff raised a slow, bushy eyebrow, but Gitta kept on talking, the irony lost on her. “All I had to defend myself with was my purse.” She held it up, the heavy contents straining the fabric.

The sheriff extended a hand. She lowered her eyes to the ground as she passed him her bag. He opened it and sighed, as if the answer he found within it should have been obvious all along. He hooked a meaty finger around the shackle of a heavy metal lockbox, holding it up for her to see. “Is this what killed him?”

Gitta nodded, shamefaced. “I swung it before I realized who he was. As soon as I saw it was Sawyer, I rushed downstairs, ready to run outside and scream for help. But then I remembered the ladder and how I had sneaked into the house. It occurred to me how horrible the entire situation would look, and I guess I just panicked.”

Sheriff Willoughby signaled to Deputy Ames, and the deputy escorted a sniffling Gitta to his car.

The sheriff rocked on his heels, wearing a curious smile. “I’ve got to say, I’m impressed. That was quite a mystery. How’d you two solve it?”

I pressed my mouth shut. Somehow, I didn’t think it was wise to tell him we’d broken into the house to do a little snooping of our own.

“We’re certified professionals,” Dani said with an air of authority that would have made Will proud.

The sheriff didn’t look convinced, so I explained. “The night we found the body, we noticed the vacuum tracks on the stairs didn’t match the ones that had been made by Marilee’s vacuum in the rest of the house. When we spotted the ladder outside, we figured it out.” Everyone in town knew Sawyer’s reputation with the ladies. And his brief fling with Marilee hadn’t been a secret to anyone. Gitta probably figured Marilee was the perfect patsy.

Sheriff Willoughby nodded, satisfied.

“Does this mean Marilee can go home?” Dani asked.

“I suppose it does.” He reached in his pocket and tossed me the house key. “I’ll have one of my deputies take the yellow tape down. Good luck with your listing, ladies.” He paused in the front yard to admire the house. Then he tipped his hat to us and waved as he drove off.

I turned at a soft tap on my shoulder, surprised to see Will standing behind me. Dani waggled her eyebrows as she took the key from me. “Be nice, you two, and try not to kill each other,” she said with a wink as she

let herself into the house. Will laughed as we waited for her to disappear inside, though I suspected she'd probably be eavesdropping from the window above us.

His smile was softer than usual when he finally turned to look at me. "Nicely done," he said quietly.

I pointed to his BMW. "I might not drive one of those just yet, but I am capable." One day, I'd have a paycheck big enough to have a trunk full of vacuums, lockboxes, and designer wet wipes too. *Just maybe not today*, I admitted to myself, sighing at my dusty car.

He had the decency to look abashed. "I'm sorry I acted like a jerk earlier."

"I'm sorry I suggested your tool was small."

He laughed as he blushed. We both knew that was a lie.

"So," he said, his head tipping toward mine, "I was wondering if you need any help getting the house ready for the weekend. I'm not too bad at repairing stuff, and I vacuum a pretty mean carpet." We both laughed at that, but then his face grew serious as he gestured to the empty space where my sign had been hanging before I'd taken it down. "I could put it back up for you. I assume you're rescheduling your open house." There was no competitive edge in his tone. No doubt or possessive posturing. Just a sincerity that had been absent from all our conversations since that phenomenal one we'd had during that lockdown drill in high school, between the kisses we'd shared in the maintenance closet I still stubbornly refused to acknowledge.

"It's definitely back on." I took his hand and led him up the porch steps. "In fact, I think there might be some tools in the closet, if you want to have a look inside."

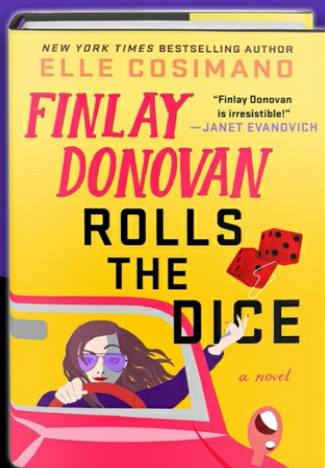
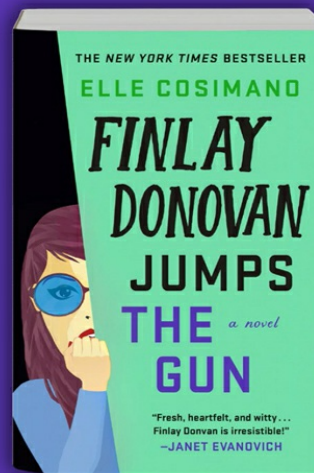
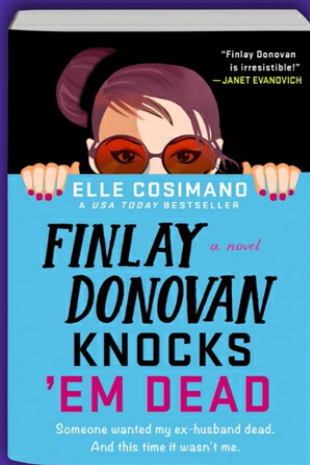
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Elle Cosimano is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of books for teens and adults, an International Thriller Award winner, and an Edgar Award nominee. Known for her witty Finlay Donovan mysteries, she has also written essays for *HuffPost* and *Time*. Elle lives in Virginia with her family.

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