

ONE

“Hello?” I tapped on Kitty Cavanaugh’s red front door, then lifted the brass knocker and gave it a few thumps for good measure. “Hello?”

“Mommy, can I ring the doorbell?” Sophie asked. She stood on her tiptoes and waved her fist in the air.

“No, it’s my turn,” said Sam, kicking his sneakered feet against one of the half-dozen perfectly spherical pumpkins beside Kitty’s front door. Halloween was a week away, and we’d only gotten around to carving our single jack-o’-lantern the night before. It had come out crooked and its right side had rotted and caved in overnight, and it looked like we had a sadistic stroke victim parked on our porch. When I’d lit the candle, all three kids had cried.

“My turn!” said Jack, shoving his younger-by-three-minutes brother.

“Don’t push me!” cried Sam, shoving back.

“Sophie, then Sam, then Jack,” I said. Two degrees in English literature, a career in New York City, and this was where I’d ended up, standing on a semi-stranger’s doorstep in a Connecticut suburb with uncombed hair and a tote bag full of bribe lollipops, and wrangling three kids under the age of five. How had this happened? I couldn’t explain it. Especially not the part about getting pregnant with the boys when Sophie was just seven weeks old, courtesy of an act of intercourse I can barely remember and can’t imagine I’d condoned.

Sophie reached up, pigtails quivering, and rang the bell. A dimple flashed in her left cheek as she gave her brothers a smug look that said, *This is how it's done*. Nobody answered. I looked at my watch, wondering if I'd heard Kitty wrong. She'd called on Wednesday night, when the boys were in the bathtub and Sophie was sitting on the toilet, applying lipstick and waiting her turn. I was kneeling in front of the tub, my shirt half-soaked, a washcloth in my hand, scrubbing playground grime from underneath their fingernails and enjoying one of my most persistent and vivid daydreams, the one that began with two men knocking on my front door. Who were they? Police officers? FBI agents? I'd never figured that out. The younger one wore a beige suit and a clipped inch of sandy mustache, and the older one had a black suit and thinning black hair combed over his bald spot. He was the one who did the talking. *There's been a mistake*, he would tell me, and he'd explain that, due to some glitch I'd never quite fleshed out (Bad dream? Alternate universe?), I'd wound up with someone else's children, living someone else's life. *Really?* I would ask, careful not to sound too eager, as a woman—these days, she was usually the lady from the Swiffer commercial who danced around to the Devo song, happily dusting—stepped between them, hands planted on her capable hips. *There you are, you little scamps!* she would say to the children. *I'm so sorry for the inconvenience*, she'd say to me. *No problem*, I'd graciously reply. And then she'd say . . .

“Telephone.”

I looked up. My husband stood in the doorway, with his briefcase in one hand and the telephone in the other, staring at me with something that was either disdain or its close first cousin. My heart sank as I realized that getting slopped with the boys' bathwater was the closest I'd come to showering that day.

I reached for the phone with one soapy hand. “Can you watch them for a sec?”

“Let me just get out of this suit,” he said, and vanished down the

hall. Translation: *See you in an hour*. I stifled a sigh and tucked the telephone under my ear.

“Hello?”

“Kate, it’s Kitty Cavanaugh,” she’d said, in her low, cultured voice. “I was wondering whether you were free for lunch on Friday.”

I’d been too shocked to stammer out “Sure” or “Yes.” I’d wound up saying “Shes,” even though lunch with Kitty Cavanaugh wasn’t high on my to-do list. As far as I was concerned she represented everything that was wrong with my new hometown. I remember the first time I’d seen Kitty. I’d driven the kids to the park our realtor had pointed out after a morning of unpacking. I hadn’t washed my thick, curly brown hair in three days and was looking more than a little disheveled, but the other mothers wouldn’t mind, I thought, as I pulled into a parking space. As the kids and I walked through the white picket playground gates, we saw four women seated on the green wooden bench by the seesaws: four women wearing the identical shade of dark pink lipstick; four formidably groomed, exquisitely fit, terrifyingly capable-looking women. Each one had a monogrammed paisley silk diaper bag slung across her shoulder, like a Pink Lady jacket. Or an Uzi.

“Hi!” I said. My voice seemed to bounce off the pebbled rubber mats underneath the slides and echo through the swing set. The women took in my outfit (loose, syrup-stained cargo pants, finger-paint-smearred sneakers, one of my husband’s washed-out long-sleeved gray T-shirts with one of my own violet short-sleeved shirts on top), my messy hair, my makeup-free face, the belly and hips I’d been meaning to do something about for the past two years and, finally, my kids. Jack looked okay, but Sam was clutching his favorite pacifier, which he hadn’t used in months, and Sophie had pulled on a tutu over her pajama bottoms.

The buff-looking blonde in the middle, whose camel-colored boot-cut pants were topped with a zippered fleece vest, raised her hand and gave us a semi-smile. Her name, I’d later learn, was Lexi

Hagen-Holdt, and she looked exactly like what she was—a former all-state athlete in soccer and lacrosse who'd worked as a high school coach before marriage and had started training for a triathlon six weeks after she'd had baby Brierly.

The brunette next to her, whose shoulder-length light brown hair was perfectly streaked and styled and whose eyebrows had been plucked into perfect arches, then dyed to match, gave us a half of a wave. Her full lips twisted sideways, as if she'd tasted something sour. This was Sukie Sutherland, wearing Seven jeans and high-heeled, pointy-toed suede boots to a playground—the kind of outfit my friend Janie would have worn out clubbing and I never would have attempted at all.

“Hi!” said the redhead at the far end of the bench. She sported a pumpkin-colored sweater with a long skirt in swirling shades of red and orange and gold. Her little gold earrings were clusters of bells that jingled and chimed, and she wore sequined purple slippers trimmed in gold braid. This was Carol Gwinnell, whose husband, I would shortly learn, was head of litigation at one of the five biggest law firms in New York City. Carol and Rob and their two sons lived in a Bettencourt and had a summer house on Nantucket, which I guess gave her the right to dress like she was going to a Stevie Nicks concert if she wanted to.

Finally, the fourth and most formidable woman deigned to approach us. She squatted down gracefully in front of my kids and one by one asked them their names. Her straight, thick hair fell to the center of her back, a glossy sheet of chocolate brown held with a black velvet band. She had lovely features: full lips, a straight, narrow nose, high cheekbones, and a neat little chin. Given her hair, and her golden complexion, I would have expected brown eyes, but her eyes were wide set and a blue so dark it was almost purple. The color of pansies. “And I’m Kitty Cavanaugh,” she said to my children. “I have twins, too.”

“Kate Klein,” I managed, thinking, *Don't fall for it, you little bas-*

tards. Of course, my kids were charmed. The boys let go of my leg and smiled at her shyly while Sophie stared at her and said, “You’re so pretty!” I tried not to roll my eyes. The last time Sophie looked at me that intently, she hadn’t said that I was pretty, she’d told me I had a hair growing out of my chin.

I plastered a smile on my face and made a series of mental notes: figure out where to buy a perfectly cut suede jacket lined in mushroom-colored silk; find out where these women got their hair blown, their teeth bleached, their eyebrows plucked; and try to locate the other overwhelmed, undergroomed, bigger-than-a-breadbox mothers like myself, even if I had to go to another town to find them.

The other ladies had murmured hellos, smiled at my children, and gone back to their conversation, which seemed to concern the student-teacher ratios at the town’s competing private schools. It had taken three more playground visits, twenty minutes spent listening to Sukie talk about reorganizing her pantry, and a trip to Mr. Steven, the local hairdresser, before Kitty and I had had an actual conversation, about what kind of baked goods I should bring to the Red Wheel Barrow annual holiday bake sale. “No nuts, no dairy,” she’d told me. I’d nodded humbly and managed to keep from asking, “How about crack? Would crack be okay?”

Our second talk had been less successful. We’d been standing side by side at the swings on the playground one summer afternoon. Kitty was wearing a pink linen sundress, simple yet elegant, a look (and a fabric) I hadn’t attempted in years, and I was wearing my usual—grubby pants and a cotton tank top,—feeling overweight and underdressed and entirely inadequate. *It’s this town*, I thought, tugging at my waistband with one hand and pushing Sophie with the other. Back in New York I’d get the occasional whistle from a construction worker, an appreciative glance from a guy on the street. Sixty miles out of the city and I was Shamu in a sweater set.

I had been daydreaming out loud about a vacation I’d probably never take, describing some resort I’d read about in a travel maga-

zine in my gynecologist's waiting room. Private open-air bungalows . . . individual swimming pools . . . fresh-cut pineapple and papaya set out on the terrace every morning . . .

"Can you bring kids?" Kitty had asked.

Startled, I'd said, "Why would you want to?"

"Phil and I take our daughters everywhere," she'd said primly, giving little Madeline a push. "I would never, ever leave them."

"Never ever?" I'd repeated—a little sarcastically, I'm afraid. "Not even for a Friday night at the movies? Not even to go out to dinner? Or for a light snack?"

She'd shaken her glorious hair, a tiny smile—a smug smile, I thought—playing around her lips. "I would never leave them," she repeated.

I'd nodded, plastered a smile on my own face, eased Sophie out of the swing, mumbled, "Have a nice weekend" (without realizing until much later that it was Tuesday), hustled all three kids into the van, stuck a DVD into the player, turned up the volume, and muttered the word "freak" all the way home.

Since then, Kitty and I had had a nod-and-wave acquaintance, smiling at each other across the soccer field or the dairy aisle of the grocery store. I didn't want it to go any further than that. But I'd said yes—or "shes"—anyhow. Oh, well. *Mindless assent*, I thought, and shoved a wayward curl behind my right ear with one shampoo-slick hand. It was what had gotten me three babies and a house in Connecticut in the first place.

"I think we have a friend in common," Kitty said.

I rinsed off my hands and wiped them on my thighs. "Oh? Who's that?" For one giddy moment I was completely sure that she was going to say Jesus, and that I'd be stuck listening to a soliloquy about her personal relationship with the Savior and how I needed one myself.

But Kitty answered my question with another one of her own. "You were a journalist, right?"

"Well, that's putting it a little strongly," I said. "I worked at

New York Night, and I covered celebrity addiction. Not exactly Woodward and Bernstein stuff. Why?" *Here it comes*, I thought, bracing myself for the invitation to edit the nursery school newsletter or do a quick polish on the Cavanaugh Christmas card. ("Dear friends! Hope this season of comfort and joy finds you well. It's been a blessed year for the Cavanaugh Clan . . .")

"There's something . . .," she began. Just then Sam dunked Jack under the water. "Mommy, he's drowning the baby," Sophie observed from the toilet seat, where she was twisting her hair into a chignon. I bent down to drag Jack upright. He was spluttering, Sam was crying, and Kitty said we'd talk on Friday.

At least, I was pretty sure she'd said Friday. Positive, almost. I took a deep breath and lifted the knocker again, noticing the way the Cavanaugh house gleamed under the cloudless blue sky. The hedges were trimmed, the leaves were raked, the windows sparkled, and there were charming arrangements of bittersweet and miniature pumpkins in the window boxes that complemented the dried-red-pepper wreath on the door. *Gab*. I gave an especially forceful knock, and the door swung open.

"Hello?" I called into the dim, echoing entryway. No answer . . . but I could see lights gleaming at the kitchen at the end of the hall, and I could hear music playing, one of the Brandenburg Concertos, which were undoubtedly more edifying than the polka tunes my kids enjoyed. "Kitty? Hello?" I called again. Nothing. The wind kicked up, sending a drift of brown leaves rattling against the hardwood floor. I was starting to get the proverbial bad feeling about this as I wiggled my cell phone out of my pocket, called information, and asked for the Cavanaugh listing at 5 Folly Farm Way.

The operator connected me. Inside the house I could hear Kitty's phone ringing . . . and ringing . . . and ringing.

"Nobody's home," Sophie said impatiently, bouncing up and down in pink sneakers that did not quite match her orange overalls.

"Hang on," I said. "Hello?" I called into the house. Nothing.

"Mama?" Sophie reached for my hand. The boys looked at each

other, their foreheads drawn into identical furrows, plump mouths pulled into matching frowns. The two of them were all curves and dimples and alabaster skin that flushed when they were overheated or upset. Their lashes cast spiky shadows on their cheeks, and their brown hair curled into ringlets so beautiful I'd cried at their first haircuts . . . and second . . . and third. If they'd had wings and gone around naked, they'd have looked like cherubs.

"Stay here. Right here. On the porch. On the pumpkins," I said, in a burst of inspiration. "I want tushies on pumpkins until I say it's okay. And don't close the door!" Sophie must have caught something in my tone because she nodded. "I'll watch the babies." (Unlike her brothers, Sophie was tall and lanky, like her father, with olive skin and fine brown hair that tended toward snarls, not ringlets).

"We're not babies!" said Jack, with his hands balled into fists.

"Stay here," I said again, and watched Sophie scowl at her brothers as they copped a squat on one of Kitty's perfect pumpkins. I held my breath and walked inside. The Cavanaughs had the same house we did, the Montclair (six bedrooms, five full baths, hardwood floors throughout). The investors in our development were Italian, plenty of the residents were Jewish, and yet the homes all had names that made them sound like members of the British Parliament. Evidently nobody would buy a model called the Lowenthal or the Delguidice, but if it was the Carlisle or the Bettencourt, we'd be lining up with our checkbooks.

I tiptoed through the entryway, into the warmly lit kitchen, where the solemn notes of the cello and an antique clock's ticking filled the air. No dishes in the sink, no newspapers on the counter, no crumbs on the kitchen table, and no lady of the house that I could see. Then I looked down.

"Oh, God!" I clapped my hand against my mouth and grabbed on to the countertop to keep myself from sliding to the floor. Kitty had gone for the same upgrades that Ben and I had picked. Her countertops were granite, her floors were pickled maple, and the French doors leading to the garden had leaded glass insets. There

was a Sub-Zero refrigerator and a Viking range, and between them was Kitty Cavanaugh, facedown on the floor with an eight-inch carbon-steel Henckels butcher's knife protruding from between her shoulder blades.

I ran across the kitchen and knelt in a pool of tacky, cooled blood. She lay arms akimbo, white shirt and hair both a sticky maroon. I felt dizzy as I leaned over her body, queasy as I touched her sticky hair, then tugged at the handle of the knife. "Kitty!"

I'd watched enough cop dramas to know better than to move the body, but it was as if I were floating outside myself, unable to stop my hands as they grabbed her slender shoulders and tried to pull her up into my arms. The music swelled to its crescendo, strings and woodwinds sounding in the still, copper-smelling air as her torso came loose with a sickening ripping sound. I let her go. Her body thumped back onto the floor. I clapped my hands over my mouth to keep from gagging, and stifled another scream.

"Mommy?"

I could hear Sophie's voice, which sounded like it was coming from another planet. My own voice was shaking as I called back, "Just a minute, guys!"

I got to my feet, wiping my hands convulsively against my pants, and whirled around once, then again. It wasn't until I'd slammed my hip against the breakfast bar that I finally forced myself to hold still and think. Should I call the cops? Get my kids? What if whoever had done this to Kitty was still in the house?

Cops first, I decided. It took me what felt like forever to work my hand into my pocket, extract my cell phone, and dial 911. "Yes, hello, this is Kate Klein, and I'm visiting my friend Kitty Cavanaugh's house on at Five Folly Farm Way and she's . . . um . . ." My voice broke. "She's dead. Somebody killed her."

"That address, please?" asked the voice on the other end of the line. "Your name?" I gave it. Then I spelled it. When she asked me

for my Social Security number and date of birth, I whispered, “Just send someone! Send the police . . . send an ambulance . . . send the Marines if they’re around . . .”

“Ma’am?”

My voice trailed off as I saw a square of creamy, heavy-stock stationery beside Kitty’s telephone. I saw ten digits that froze the blood in my veins.

A Manhattan area code, the same number he’d had when I’d known him, the same number I’d dialed all those times when we’d lived down the hall from each other, the number that I’d struggled almost daily ever since to keep from dialing again.

I think we have a friend in common . . .

Without even thinking I hung up the phone, reached out with one shaking hand, and grabbed the note. I crumpled it and crammed it deep into my pocket. Then I shoved my bloody hands under Kitty’s kitchen faucet, dried them on her cheery fall-leaf-printed dish towel, and ran down the hall on wobbly legs.

“Mommy?” Sophie’s narrow face was pale, and her big brown eyes were wide and solemn. Sam and Jack were both holding her hands, and Sam had his thumb stuck in his mouth. Sophie looked at the blood on my pants. “Did you get hurt?”

“No,” I told them. “No, honey, Mommy’s fine.” I fumbled a Wet One out of my bag and took a few hasty swipes at the stains. “Come on, Sophie,” I said, and I gathered the boys into my arms, feeling the fierce engines of their hearts beating hard against my skin as I carried them down to the edge of the driveway and we sat there, waiting for help.