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The Perfect Tenant

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Introduction

After my husband died, the world repopulated itself with instructions and advice—bank forms, casseroles in disposable pans, sympathy notes that expired in the fridge beside everything else I couldn't bring myself to touch. Grief came as a waterline in this old house—climbing slowly up the walls, invisible at first, until it warped every surface I'd once trusted to hold me. I stopped drawing, I stopped calling friends back. I measured my days by property values and the vigilance of neighbors in a cul-de-sac curated like a dollhouse, every lawn crisped to HOA specifications and weathered porch chairs artfully distressed for effect.

The mortgage was relentless, absorbing not just my paycheck but my sense of what might come next. It was Adrian, clearing out my husband's desk at the biotech office, who first suggested turning the daylight basement into a suite. "Everyone rents, Nora," he'd said, hands spread in a gesture that turned my need into statistical certainty. There was a kind of relief in making a practical move, in believing the right tenant—one with good credit, quiet habits, no pets—would be enough. I posted the listing, cleaned until the smell of lemon oil worked its way behind my eyes, and braced myself for the shuffle of strangers' shoes across my floorboards.

Lucia Vale was the last to arrive, almost as if she'd timed it perfectly. Her questions were sharp, her silence gentler than I expected, her smile not a performance but a careful calibration. She noticed the things other applicants missed: airflow grates, the direction of morning sun, the lag in my aging router. She signed the lease without haggling, her penmanship precise, and handed me her deposit in crisp bills. If I'd looked twice, I might have recognized the set of her jaw as someone who'd arrived with an agenda. Instead, I let relief outweigh caution.

The spaces we inhabit after loss become unfamiliar, haunted by the lives we once thought inevitable. My house was no exception—a cheerful colonial built in the 80s with a main floor, a sunlit upper story, and a basement apartment accessible from the garden path and, crucially, through a locked interior door at the base of the stairs. It was wired for comfort: smart doorbell, app-controlled lights, cloud-synced cameras. My husband's handiwork, preserved like a nervous system under my skin. These features reassured me. At first.

I felt the neighborhood's vigilance from the start: the HOA newsletters, the group texts about package theft, the exhaled silences whenever I arrived alone at the mailbox. Victor Hargrove, HOA president, made his expectations known in clipped sentences bristling with civility. He eyed Lucia's aging sedan, tracked my picket-fence repairs, lingered over the finer points of refuse bin placement. It was a posture I mistook for

petty authority—a manageable pressure, more tiresome than threatening.

It was, perhaps, inevitable that something would break the polish of this street—whether a murder behind a bolted door, a flood of suspicion, or the sudden realization that privacy here was only an illusion. Looking back, I suppose I should have wondered why Lucia moved in with so much certainty. Why she seemed to understand the secrets nested in these walls. But hindsight, like home security footage, can be edited. All I knew then was that I needed to start over, and that the stranger smiling at my threshold seemed, at first, like the perfect tenant.

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CHAPTER ONE: Open House

The smell of fresh paint and desperation clung to the air in the basement suite, a scent I'd come to associate with my new reality. It was an open house, technically, though it felt more like an audition. I'd spent the morning fluffing cushions and wiping down surfaces, pretending that the subtle tremor in my hands was from exertion, not anxiety. My phone buzzed with a reminder from the listing agent - another hopeful tenant was on their way. I smoothed my skirt, took a deep breath, and tried to channel the composed, slightly aloof landlord I imagined myself to be.

The first few prospects were a blur of polite nods and rehearsed questions. A young couple who looked at each other with wide-eyed panic when I mentioned the HOA rules. A man who asked if the soundproofing was good enough for his drum kit. I smiled, nodded, and steered them gently towards the door, already knowing they weren't the right fit. Each rejection, even by me, felt like another brick added to the growing wall of financial pressure.

Then Lucia arrived. She didn't ring the doorbell - she simply appeared at the basement entrance, a quiet shadow against the bright afternoon. Her gaze swept over the small living space, taking in every detail with an unnerving efficiency. She wasn't looking at the staged plants or the carefully placed magazines. She was looking at the corners, at the ceiling, at the way the light fell. I suddenly felt like I was the one being observed.

"Nora Halstead?" she asked, her voice low and clear.

"That's me," I replied, extending my hand. Her grip was firm, cool. She was dressed simply, in dark jeans and a plain sweater, her dark hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. She looked professional, almost academic. Not at all like the previous drum enthusiast.

"Lucia Vale," she said. "Thank you for seeing me."

I led her through the small kitchen, pointing out the new appliances, the surprisingly good counter space. She nodded, her eyes tracking the electrical outlets, the plumbing beneath the sink. It was as if she was compiling a mental inventory, not just admiring the aesthetic. Most people gushed about the renovated bathroom. Lucia just noted the low-flow toilet.

We moved into the bedroom. It was a decent size, with a large window looking out onto the side garden. "It gets good light in the mornings," I offered, trying to fill the quiet.

Lucia walked over to the window, not to admire the view, but to inspect the lock. She ran her fingers along the frame. "Is this double-paned?" she asked.

"Yes, it is," I confirmed, a little surprised by the specific question. Most people just wanted to know if the neighbors were noisy.

"And the ventilation system?" she continued, turning from the window to eye the small vent near the ceiling. "Is it a dedicated system for the suite, or shared with the main house?"

I blinked. "It's... shared, I believe. But there's a separate thermostat down here." My husband had handled all the smart-home integrations. I knew how to use the app, not how the airflow worked.

Lucia simply hummed, a thoughtful, noncommittal sound. She didn't press for more details, but the question hung in the air, a small, unusual thread. She didn't seem perturbed by the shared system, just curious. It was a level of detail no other applicant had shown, a forensic attention to the mechanics of the place.

As we walked back to the living area, she paused by the internal door that connected the basement to the main house. It was a solid, fire-rated door, locked from both sides. "And this door," she said, tapping it lightly with her knuckle. "Is it soundproofed?"

"Pretty well," I said, feeling a slight defensiveness creep into my voice. "We had it installed when we first considered renting. It's got a good deadbolt."

She nodded, as if assessing my answer. Her gaze drifted to the small smart-home hub perched on a shelf by the door, a sleek white device with a single blinking light. "That's your router, I presume?"

"Yes," I said, feeling a sudden surge of something akin to pride. It was one of the few pieces of tech I actually understood. "It's a pretty robust system. Controlled everything." I caught myself, realizing I'd slipped into the past tense when talking about my husband's installations.

Lucia's eyes lingered on the router for a moment longer than seemed necessary. "Good to know," she murmured. "Reliable connectivity is important for my work."

We sat down at the small dining table. She produced a folder from her bag - a meticulously organized collection of documents. Credit report, references, a letter from her current employer. Everything was in order, presented with a quiet efficiency that made me feel like an amateur.

"I work remotely, mostly," she explained. "Data compliance. So, as I mentioned, a stable internet connection is crucial."

"It's very stable," I assured her, though a flicker of doubt crossed my mind. My router did sometimes get temperamental, requiring a hard reboot every few weeks. I usually just unplugged it and plugged it back in, a highly technical solution.

She asked about the neighborhood, the noise level, the proximity to the nearest park. Her questions were practical, grounded, devoid of the usual small talk about "vibes" or "charm." She seemed to be mapping out the functional aspects of her potential new life, not romanticizing it.

Then she asked about the HOA. "I noticed the covenants online," she said, without me even mentioning Victor Hargrove. "They seem quite strict."

"They are," I agreed, a faint grimace touching my lips. "Especially our HOA president, Victor Hargrove. He takes his role very seriously." I pictured Victor's perfectly manicured lawn, his unyielding gaze. He was the kind of man who'd measure your grass with a ruler.

Lucia offered a faint, almost imperceptible smile. "I'm quite accustomed to rules," she said. "Compliance is, after all, my profession."

We talked for another few minutes, but it felt less like an interview and more like a formality. She already knew the answers to everything she needed to know. It was as if she'd studied the house, and me, before she even arrived. Her questions weren't for information, but for confirmation.

When she stood to leave, she extended her hand again. "I'd like to take it," she said simply. "If you'll have me."

I felt a wave of relief wash over me, so potent it almost made me dizzy. She was everything I'd listed in the ad and more - quiet, professional, no visible red flags. The questions about the ventilation and the router had been odd, yes, but not suspicious. Just thorough.

"I'd be delighted," I said, trying to sound composed. "I'll draw up the lease agreement tonight."

She nodded. "Excellent. I can move in as soon as the paperwork is finalized. I'm quite flexible."

As I walked her to the basement entrance, she paused at the threshold. "It's a

beautiful home, Nora," she said, looking not at me, but up at the main house, as if seeing it for the first time, or perhaps, for the thousandth. "Very well maintained."

"Thank you," I said, feeling a warmth spread through me. It was the first genuine compliment about the house I'd received since my husband died.

She stepped out into the sunlight. "Just one more thing," she added, turning back. "The vents. I noticed one in the main hall upstairs. Is that part of the same system?"

I blinked, thrown by the sudden shift in focus back to the vents. "Yes, it is," I said slowly. "Why do you ask?"

Lucia simply smiled, a small, knowing curve of her lips that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Just curious," she said. "Efficiency is always interesting." And then she was gone, leaving me standing in the doorway, a lease agreement already forming in my mind, and a faint, unsettling impression that Lucia Vale already knew more about my home than I did.

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