

Kingman Confidential

Tuesday P.M.

One week before cleaning the house on Kingman Road again. Jenny parked her irritatingly green Mindful Maids econo car two spots from the bank man's white pick-up, closed and beep-locked her door. She stepped twenty-eight steps to the glass entrance of Mindful Maids, like always. Paula Edwards, the owner, sat at her desk, a sinking ship of a thing, inspecting her fingernails. She looked up when Jenny's entrance shook the door chimes.

"What brings you in?"

"Well, Ms. Edwards. I just..." Jenny looked around the office. No one else there. The employees came in to the office in the mornings to get assignments, but after their shifts could just go home. No need to check in.

"What is it?"

"It's just that there's something about the house I cleaned today. The one every Tuesday, out on Kingman?"

"Mm hmm?"

"There's something odd. I've been wondering if I should say something or not, but -"

"Not."

"Excuse me?"

"You should not. Please remember the most important thing about our relationship with our clients is we never talk about their homes. Our clients have to trust us."

"Except if there's criminal activity. That's what the manual says." Jenny, seven months into the job, still had the Mindful Maids manual on her kitchen table.

"True. Is there criminal activity?"

Jenny stared into the black of Ms. Edwards' pupils, dots like periods, for just a second. "Well, no."

"OK, then."

Jenny wanted to say more, but Ms. Edwards' expression, no less clear than a stop sign, delivered one message. Straight and strict. She walked back out to the parking lot feeling like she left something unclean, like the thinnest pink ring around a sink drain or a spread of dust on a windowsill, something she couldn't stand. Something that might make her go mad.

Her family said because of her obsession for cleanliness she should go into cleaning for a living. And so, she did, even though some of them were not being sincere. Some of them merely

wanted to take a solid job at a quirk. But the job with Mindful Maids brought consummation to Jenny's fixation. Indeed, it was the first job that gave her true satisfaction. Instead of working around others with their spectrum of cleanliness, this job was *about* cleanliness. The very point, the prescription of the job was to make things clean. Jenny would never forget the ad: Do you like to clean? Such a simple question with such a simple answer.

Leaving a job undone, a counter unwiped or a bedspread rumpled, would quite simply haunt her, so she never did. Which is why this feeling, this nagging about the brusque chat with Ms. Edwards bothered her. Something left undone.

She walked past the blinding company car, to her own drab ride. On the way home through the streets of her small bayside city, she ticked off all the things that were strangely the same every single time in the house on Kingman Road. Every single time. Every single Tuesday. She needed to stay mentally strong so thoughts of that house would not ruin the rest of her week. She could do it.

The following Tuesday A.M.

Tuesdays were Jenny's first day of a work week that ran through Saturday and she piloted the little green insect of a car out of the Mindful Maids lot and down Vincent, only two

turns to make. Just a short drive, really. The house on Kingman would be her first stop.

And it didn't fail her. The house slippers greeted her like they always did. Left of the door, not exactly parallel, but close. The blue fuzz of each slipper just out of reach of the other. Nothing to get excited about there. But Jenny's eyes followed to the coat rack. The same three jackets hung in the same three places, looking unused. In fact, the black one, the technical rain jacket so ubiquitous in the Northwest, still had the tag hanging from the sleeve. Same as seven months ago when Jenny first unlocked the door.

And from there, the picture in the entryway hanging off-kilter again, listing right. And Jenny leveled it - it was understood she had an eye for that kind of thing - so the fence line behind the barn in the photo ran straight off into the fields that surely spread out beyond the farm and the frame alike.

To the kitchen, that coffee cup, the white one with the stupid quip, Rise and Grind, left of the coffee maker with just a bottom full of lukewarm hazelnut brew in the bottom, like always. Her nose knew it was there before she looked.

Then in the kitchen sink. A porcelain flowered plate with bits of egg. The same damn three bits of egg in the same spot on

the plate as every time. How is that possible? And the wipe of red jam around the edge that blurred some of the flowers. There again. Flipping the lid on the kitchen trash confirmed the story. A crumpled napkin and a corner of burnt toast resting on top of a large ball of clear plastic like you might get from a package holding a new something, but what? The jacket? Jenny took the trash out.

The bathroom held no surprises. (What Jenny would do for a surprise!) But a wet blue toothbrush lay on its side on the counter, the same side of the toothbrush and the same side of the sink. And there was a toothbrush holder, for goodness sake. Jenny slid the brush into the holder like she did each Tuesday. On to the sink, the stopper down, capturing a small pool of water. The same small pool of water every time, about an inch deep. Jenny knew that if she was crazy enough to take a measurement, she would see it would measure the same depth every time. And was she going crazy?

The toilet seat was closed, of course. To raise it would mean to find the unflushed urine. But, Jenny couldn't help it. Couldn't just flush first. She lifted the lid. How damning uncanny. The urine. The faded yellow of the piss imprinted in her brain. Seven months times once a week - twenty-eight times this toilet held unflushed piss in it. Without looking, Jenny

knew what the towel on the hook next to the shower would look like. But of course, she would have to look. She was a conscientious cleaner; how could she not look? So yes, the dark chocolate towel hung on one hook of two, the left hook, asymmetrical but not so much it would slough off onto the floor. She grabbed it for the laundry. Then the bathmat in a matching brown. The one with the same corner folded over. Why? Jenny flattened it out. Again.

People are into routines. Jenny succumbed to researching it online after a few weeks on the job, felt so silly typing it into Google, knowing the search would forever be linked to her. And how much are people into routines? Very. And they're good for people, she learned. But to be subjected to someone else's routine? Jenny found it maddening. That she did not need to look up.

So, what kind of person live at the house on Kingman? And how many times did Jenny ask that same question? Enough times that it really was close to driving her crazy. Enough times that Jenny became concerned for her own mental health, which is why she dared to approach Ms. Edwards about it. But Ms. Paula Edwards shut her down. She wanted, needed to tell someone, to ask that question - what kind of person is this? - of someone else. But who could she talk to without breaking the rule on

employee manual page three? Client Confidentiality: Do not talk about client homes with anyone.

Six more days until the house on Kingman. Six anxious days.

Next Tuesday A.M.

The week had gone by and Jenny's mental toughness met a serious challenge. A real contender, this need to know, this urge to discover who lived such a life. So, Jenny decided on a plan. Of course, she was a planner, plans came as natural as breath. But never had she planned a stakeout. That's what it was, essentially, a stakeout. She watched stakeouts happen on her shows, shows she watched religiously and always in episode order. But those usually involved two or more investigators. She would find out who lived at the house on Kingman, by herself.

After cleaning on Kingman Road - the sheets on the bed were thrown aside, like always, like a classical painting showing off the artist's ability to paint folds - she hustled the insect back to the office. In advance she'd told Ms. Edwards she needed the afternoon off. That she needed to be at the airport to pick up her visiting sister. Which was untrue. Especially the part about the airport. Her sister, the one who honestly encouraged her to just go ahead and get into the cleaning business already, was deathly afraid of flying. But Ms. Edwards believed her and said something about how nice it is to have family visit.

Jenny drove out of the strip mall lot in her own tidy car, thinking back to the exasperating little pile of debris always alongside the baseboard across from the front door on Kingman. How was that possible, the same composition of dirt and sand and fuzz? And were those brown things pine needles? Sure, everything was just so inside Jenny's four-wheeled metal box, too. But the same in a clean way. If you can't afford something fancy, at least you can keep what you have looking good.

Small strips of doubt came and went. A stakeout? This wasn't like her. But then, the need to know. That was like her. Who lived there? There were no pictures of family, never any mail or packages from which to catch a name. So, who? Or what? Yes, she had gone there. Reducing the inhabitant or inhabitants to a what. Robots, for God's sake. Robots came to mind. Because what kind of creature lived in a way where every little something happened the very same way? Nothing changed. This confounded her the most. No changes except for what she cleaned became dirty again.

And then she was back on Kingman, which was a cul-de-sac, parking just a house away from her target, pulling large sunglasses from a svelte case. Jenny replaced the case back in the organized glovebox, on top of the plastic sleeve of necessary car-related documents, in ascending order by size of

paper: registration, proof of insurance, AAA card. She rolled a window down, halfway, and slumped in the seat. She waited.

She was not calm like the cops on shows. What if somehow she got trapped in the cul-de-sac, unable to drive off? Then what? For goodness sake, then what? Get out and run? Walk, sure, but run to get away from something? The last time she ran was probably high school. This thought monkey-wrenched her ordered mind, dampened her armpits, and more than once she thought of driving off.

She stayed, that mental toughness kicking in. But while waiting, the house began to bother her, to mock her. She knew by next week the sisal mat on the porch would be slightly off-center and an inch away from the threshold though she toed it back in place every time she left. The drapes in the living room window were drawn all the way open. She did that. But every time she came to clean they would be in the same awkward position. Not half drawn or quarter drawn, just open to a position that impelled Jenny's craze.

A glance at the time showed she had waited over four hours and didn't fall asleep or barely move her eyes away from the house. At five thirty-nine a car pulled into the driveway. A boring four-door little number, something plain and domestic, like her own. Jenny held her breath. The question would be

answered. What kind of person? Or people? It was person. Someone she knew.

Ms. Edwards got out of the silver car and slammed the door. Jenny could see her looking up at the picture window.

"Goddammit!" Ms. Edwards shouted and stomped up the four steps to the door.

Jenny flinched as Ms. Edwards kicked at something on the porch, no doubt the sisal rectangle with Welcome Home on it. Ms. Edwards went inside and closed the door behind her with the same angry force as she used on the car door. Jenny flinched again. She tingled all over.

It wasn't who Jenny expected, of course. Or what she expected. She almost started the car but held her ground. Her hands gripped the steering wheel like the throat of a tiny animal she meant to kill. This discovery shook her: her own boss, the owner of a cleaning service hired one of her own employees to clean her house and never said anything about it. And why Jenny? Was there something about Jenny that made Ms. Edwards give her the job? But shaking her the most, what if her boss saw her? She pushed her sunglasses hard against the bridge of her nose and fidgeted with the steering wheel cover so it lined up just right.

Then the drapes moved, closed, and then opened and stopped in a position that made absolutely no sense to Jenny. Open all the way or closed all the way, fine, but there? What do you call that? Three eighths? Ridiculous.

After a few more minutes, minutes where Jenny barely moved, lights came on in what Jenny knew to be the master bedroom. Then off again. And on and off again. She thought she heard an angry voice. Or did she imagine it? Scared, she started her car and drove off, one hand on the steering wheel, the other adjusting the rearview mirror to the perfect position.

Wednesday A.M.

Five days from cleaning the house Kingman again. Jenny parked two spots from the white pick-up and walked into the fluorescent lighting of the Merry Maids office. Instead of going to the scheduling board she walked directly, not confidently, but directly to Ms. Edwards' desk.

"Good morning, Ms. Edwards."

"Yes?"

"About the house on Kingman..."

Ms. Edwards raised a dark eyebrow. Jenny knew the pencil she used for it. Revlon. "Remember, confidentiality, please."

"Yes, well, it's just I don't think I can clean it anymore. I mean, can I switch with someone else?"

Jenny watched Ms. Edwards flip through her scheduling book, a thick, oversized thing that looked like something a composer might have in front of them, the dates and times and client addresses as music notes. Ms. Edwards didn't speak for a full minute. Jenny knew this from watching the clock on the wall behind Ms. Edwards' head. A head with the black hair that was always stuck to the shower wall. Four strands. What made Ms. Edwards someone with strange habits? She pined to know.

In the time Jenny's boss took to speak, of course Jenny began to think that Ms. Edwards knew she'd been spied on. The silence suggested this, then it broke.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not exactly. Not with the house." Jenny couldn't look at Ms. Edwards. "I think I just need a change."

More silent treatment from Ms. Edwards. Another minute. Jenny's legs were going numb.

"OK. I can put Ramona there. She's good. You can take her spot at the condo on Marathon."

"Thank you."

"And how's your sister?"

"My sister?"

"Didn't you pick her up at the airport yesterday?"

"Oh, yes. She's good. She... Ms. Edwards? I lied. I didn't pick up my sister at the airport." But what to say next? This sudden honesty surprised Jenny. And now she was in a dirty little spot. "I lied about my sister."

"You said that."

"Yes, sorry. I just, actually, I had an appointment. I was embarrassed to say so. It was -"

"OK."

"Hmm?"

Ms. Edwards looked past Jenny, perhaps out the window at her little green fleet. "You don't have to tell me what the appointment was for. That can be confidential."

"Oh, OK. I'm sorry again. About lying."

"Fine. Just get your assignments and get going."

The rest of Jenny's day went by with a blast of, what was it? Freedom, maybe? Free of the house on Kingman. She could clean, clean, clean. Clean normal people's homes. Homes where things were at least a little different each time. Different

dishes in the sink and different smells from cooking. Different towels on the racks, mirrored cabinets sometimes left open, sometimes shut. Different books and magazines, different weeks' papers on the coffee tables. Normal. She didn't like that she lied to Ms. Edwards, of course. Twice. But it was better than suffering through the maddening torture of cleaning the house on Kingman. Jenny rather enjoyed herself.

Tuesday Again

Anxiety tormented Jenny like a cobweb she couldn't reach. She didn't have to go clean Ms. Edwards' house, but her body reacted like she did. Tingly and itchy. She watched Ramona, a nice woman who Jenny hadn't talked with much, watched her review the schedule board. Ramona looked at it like no big deal, collecting her assignments from the board, her plump body rounding out the Mindful Maid polyester. If she would say one thing to Ramona it might be she shouldn't tuck her shirt in so tight. Ramona left and headed for her car. Before she left herself, Jenny couldn't help stealing a glance at Ms. Edwards, talking on the phone, and not looking.

And she couldn't help from hustling to the parking lot. She intercepted Ramona just as the woman with the accent - what was it, Filipina? Mexican? - opened the bright green door.

"Ramona?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I was thinking, we can switch back. I can still clean the house on Kingman. You can have yours on Marathon back. I know how some of us get attached to the homes and families we clean for."

"Oh. Well, no. I don't mind. A little change is good. Is there something I should know?"

"No, not really. I think I just realized I would miss it."

Ramona sized Jenny up with hazel eyes and lashes practically stuck together with mascara, looking like she thought Jenny was some crazy person who couldn't make up her mind. Maybe she was.

"Is it OK with Missus E?"

"Oh yeah, I'll tell her."

"Ok, dear. You can have it back, then. Whatever."

And with that, Ramona's little roundness plopped inside the green bug box. She smiled at Jenny through the window. A sense of satisfaction came over Jenny quickly. Why did it make her so happy to get to clean a place that drove her nuts? She didn't expect it, didn't understand it, but it felt good. Like winning something in a raffle, which she did once after very neatly

printing her name and phone number on six small tickets. She still had her winnings, too, a small, handmade wooden carousel which turned by the flame of a candle. She never let it collect dust. And the candle had never been lit.

Jenny looked back to the office. Ms. Edwards was off the phone and looking out to the parking lot. At Jenny. Chills rushed through Jenny's veins. And she liked it.

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The welcome mat. The slippers. The three coats. The coffee cup and plate. The toothbrush and towel. The bed sheets. The drapes. The book on the bedside table, upside down showing the author's grinning face and balding pate. No bookmark, no sign of ever being moved, much less read.

Jenny finished cleaning in the prescribed three hours. Ms. Edwards' house looked perfect, ready to be unmade again. But she had to try something. Tingly again, and itchy, she went to the freshly vacuumed brown bathmat and folded the corner over. The way she always found it.

Jenny hustled through her next assignment. A house on 19th with kids. Good God she would never have kids if it meant the constant mess, but she put everything in its place, scrubbed the little finger prints off the doors, the refrigerator, even the

walls. Wiped the pee from under the toilet lid, behind it, and around the base of the toilet. She knew the little boy was potty training. Everything done in record time, she rushed back to the office.

"Ms. Edwards. I forgot to tell you. I have another appointment. But I'm done. I just finished the Swanson place."

"As long as you're done." Ms. Edwards sat behind the desk. It occurred to Jenny that at the office she never saw Ms. Edwards her anywhere but behind the desk. She had never even seen Ms. Edwards stand up. And her blouse, always a red button-up number. There were four more just like it in Ms. Edwards' closet.

"Yes, I'm done."

"Will there be any more appointments I should know about?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure."

"It's OK. Confidentiality."

"Yes. Thank you."

Tuesday P.M.

Jenny wanted to park her car in the same exact spot as last Tuesday, really wanted to, it would feel better, but as much as it felt out of character, knew she should move it to be

unpredictable. Stakeouts should be that way, she thought. And this time she had the nose of the car facing the exit of the cul-de-sac.

A car pulled in the driveway. The same silver one, and the same time. Five thirty-nine. Ms. Edwards got out. Walked up the steps. Kicked at something on the porch, looked up at the living room window.

"Goddamit!" She went inside.

Jenny was shaking again. The drapes swayed for a moment too, then swished in and back and in, and stopped at that fractional madness.

Lights on and off again. Screaming. Something banging. And then, after a period of quiet, after a car from another house pulled away, something different. Loud music. Swing music. Jenny could make out some of the singer's words. Something about the living being easy, by a familiar voice Jenny couldn't identify. Nor did she think she had the time to stay and listen even though the music sounded nice. She started the car, couldn't do it fast enough, but still needed to straighten the rearview.

As she pulled away, a dark head looked out the window. Caught. Jenny readjusted the rearview again. A chill squeezed

her for a moment, her seatbelt felt tighter, but she smiled to herself.#

Wednesday A.M.

Jenny Oldham parked in the usual spot at the half-vacant strip mall. The five little green insect cars were lined up as usual to the side of the building. Two spots away from Jenny, the man with the white pick-up got out and walked to the bank next door to Mindful Maids. She counted his steps. Fourteen. Then she got out and counted her steps to the office. The usual twenty-eight.

Ms. Edwards sat at her desk, like forever and always, but this time her blouse was different, one Jenny had never seen her wear. Blue instead of red. And her desk seemed tidier by a degree or two. It wasn't clear what changed, but Jenny didn't stare.

"Jenny, after you get your assignments, I would like to see you, please."

Jenny realized she was holding her breath again, like she had almost the whole way home after being caught peeping at the house on Kingman. She parted her lips to let out a long whisper of air instead of a reply. Then she snatched the breath back when she saw the assignment board.

Jenny Oldham was to clean the house on Kingman again, today, not in a week. Today. Her only assignment. Ramona came to her side to get her own assignments. She bumped Jenny playfully with a round hip.

"You got your house back, baby."

"Yes," Jenny said. "I did." There was nothing else to say. Ramona wobbled out. Jenny walked toward Ms. Edwards' desk, the whole way concentrating, one foot in front of the other. Concentrating. Counting. Ten steps.

Ms. Edwards did not look up.

"You wanted to see me?" Jenny asked. The new black tech jacket hung off the back of her desk chair. Jenny resisted the urge to bend to the side and look for the tag. Ms. Edwards still did not speak.

"Did I do something wrong?" Jenny asked.

"Nothing's wrong. Nothing at all. You've been doing a fine job. It's just I want to remind you of confidentiality." Ms. Edwards said, then she raised her head with the too familiar black hair. Jenny could feel the fine texture between her fingers like she was peeling it off the shower wall right then.