

SOMEBODY'S HOME

O T H E R T I T L E S B Y K A I R A R O U D A

Suspense

All the Difference

Best Day Ever

The Favorite Daughter

The Next Wife

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In the Mirror

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Her Forbidden Love

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Nonfiction

Real You Incorporated: 8 Essentials for Women Entrepreneurs

SOMEBODY'S HOME

KAIRA ROUDA



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*To Andrea Peskind Katz, with love
Thank you for your insights, encouragement, and friendship*

Chapter 1

Somebody is in my home.

I don't know what to do.

As I watch from the street, I see activity, movement in the kitchen—only for an instant, and the next second the house is as still as before.

I pull out my phone. Do I call her, or *gII*?

The car parked out front is familiar, but nothing else makes sense. Something is wrong. I know it.

He's in there.

I must do something. There's no time to wait for the police.

I swallow and push the car door open, stepping quietly onto the empty street.

I know the truth before I see the lanky shadow move across the kitchen window.

Somebody's home, and he isn't supposed to be there.

I crouch down as I run up to the front door of my house. I left it unlocked on purpose, in case she came home and didn't have her keys.

I know now that was a big mistake.

All this is my fault.

I clamp my hand over my own mouth to muffle my scream as I turn the handle and step inside.

FRIDAY

Two Days Before

Chapter 2

TOM

A bolt of lightning illuminates the sky, and raindrops the size of river rocks pelt my windshield. Today is unusual. It never rains in Southern California. Not in October. October is for fires and destruction, for Santa Ana winds and red-flag warnings. The rain doesn't make sense. Nothing about my life makes sense.

I've just spent a week in the desert with my buddies, shooting guns, drinking beer, partying. I loved it, every minute of it, but now it's over. I have no choice. I'm back home, but it's not my home anymore. I'm parked across the street, contemplating my options. Staying dry and practicing controlling my anger all at the same time. I have anger issues. Just ask my folks. I came this way. But it was one of the things my friends and I talked about as we each imagined the target of our anger on the beer can as we shot. Anger causes mistakes. When you're angry, the guy who owns the land told us, your actions are sharper, you sweat, your heart races. You're jumpy. Like now. I wipe my hands on my jeans and take a deep breath to calm down. He taught us that, too, out there in the desert. Meditation, or whatever they call it. It's harder to do now that I'm back. It's always been hard for me to relax, to breathe.

I look out the window again as the windshield wipers smack the rain away. That's my house, the only place I've ever lived. I know every floorboard squeak, especially on the stairs. But I won't climb them anymore. My so-called parents and the new owners have made certain of it. Sure, I

knew my dad was moving to take another job. And I guess I knew they'd need to buy a house out in Timbuktu.

But why do I have to leave?

No one gave me a chance to have a say. Two weeks ago I received what was basically a verbal eviction notice from my own parents. A "Dear Tom, we're moving. Sorry. The new owners need the carriage house for themselves" talk from my lovely stepmom. I didn't even know the house was on the market. They never put a For Sale sign up in the front yard. Sandi told me it was a private transaction—the perfect buyer had simply appeared. God's will, she said. Is that God's will or yours, Sandi? Just bam, we're out of here and you are, too. Too bad, Tom.

Sure, because she felt bad, my lame stepmother said, "You, of course, are welcome to move in with us in our new home in Temecula, just until you can find a place of your own." Oh, thanks, Sandi. Your new place is just for the four of you—you and Dad and your real boys. Three bedrooms. That's it. Got it. She didn't say that part, but she should have. Since then, I've been to their new place, with and without them, scoping it out. There is no room for me.

Actions are louder than words. We talked about that in the desert this week, too. Actually, I suppose I learned that when I watched my real mom drive away all those years ago. People say you can't remember things from when you're six years old. But that's a lie. When you look out the window and watch your mom back out of the driveway, when you watch your dad spit at her car window, when you see the fear in her eyes, the hate in his—well, you remember. No matter how young you are.

I push away the memories of seventeen years ago and stare through the pouring rain at the same driveway. I suppose it's good I went to the desert this week. I made friends, real friends, guys who think the way I do, guys who know how the world works and what's wrong with it these

days. I got out of my rut. But I'm back from the desert now, and sitting in my car in a freak rainstorm staring at a house that's no longer mine starting on Sunday, two days from now. Sandi said it was a gracious concession by the new owner to give me time to pack up since I was gone all week.

Two days to try to get a new place to live just doesn't seem very *gracious*, if you ask me. But they didn't. They think I'll just go along with the plan, do what they expect, move out.

That's what they all think. I pound my hands on the steering wheel, release a bunch of tension, and stare out the car window again.

I don't want them here. This is my house. Mine.

Sandi said, "The new owners are lovely." Bullshit. She doesn't know if they are lovely, she doesn't know anything about them. In the desert, hanging out by our campsite at night, we talked about how to profile people, how to watch them, figure them out without them even knowing it. I'll use that new skill to figure out who these owners are, what they are. Whoever they are, they move in today, in this pouring rain. Serves them right.

I can't believe this all happened behind my back. *A private transaction*. I was in the dark until one of the boys let it slip that they were going to have horses at the new house. We were hanging out, the little kids and I, two weeks ago before Sunday dinner, and Davis let it slip.

Their new house was a done deal. I wasn't invited.

I did think it was odd that Sandi'd had some people over to the house. She's a loner usually, just fiddling around in her garden, cooking in the kitchen. I should have figured out the lady with the big jewelry and G-wagen Mercedes was a real estate agent. I blame myself for that miss. I never did see the "lovely" buyers. I must have been at work at the bar or something.

I had simmered with the information of their new house all the rest of the day. That night, at Sunday dinner, after prayer, I told my dad and stepmom that I knew about the new house. The little boys' eyes were huge, like I was getting them in big trouble. I hoped I would. I felt my dad's rage then, directed toward them for once.

My stepmom—Simple Sandi, as I think of her—blinked, her big brown eyes full of water about to overflow. “Of course there's room for you there, son. Always. We love you.”

“Stop being so dramatic, Tom. It's time for you to grow up, get a real job, your own apartment. Take care of yourself,” Dad said, his blue eyes alight with self-righteousness, his anger focused on his favorite target. Me.

I needed Sandi to stop crying, tears dropping onto her meal. It was gross. And an act. She wasn't sad for me. She was just embarrassed she got caught.

My parents are so self-centered. They should have given this house to me, or at least let me rent from them, pay them monthly until I could buy it outright. My birthright, sort of. I grew up here. This town is all I know. I told them I'd work hard, handle the upkeep. Why the rush to leave anyway? Dad says his new job came with a pay bump, and part of the deal is he must live in the community. But I'm not sure I believe him. Who leaves a big coastal megachurch for an inland congregation? No one. Ever.

I'm not proud to say I begged him to let me stay, to let me keep my home.

It didn't work. Dad said, “You're twenty-three years old, son, without a college degree or a job.”

“I work at Cody's,” I said. The bar is a dive, but my shifts there keep me afloat. Barely.

“A bar? You think you can afford this house, or any house for that matter, working part time at a bar? I love you, but you need to get yourself together. The Lord provides for those who take

care of themselves, and it's time, son, that you do just that. You're vacating the carriage house. We paid off your car. We've done all we can for you, son. We'll be praying for you."

I'd stormed out of the house after dinner that night and headed straight to Cody's, despite the fact that I wasn't scheduled to work. I was fired up, ready to fight someone, anyone. Instead I met some guys, my real family. When they invited me to go hang out with them in the desert, I jumped at the chance. Screw my dad's moving-out timeline. Screw them all. Sandi's fake love, the "little boys," and their new house.

And as for dear old Dad? Doug the Dick, as I call him in my head. He can take his fake love of God, his superior righteousness, and shove it. I know who he really is, what he's really done. I've watched him all my life: smiling at a Black family walking into his church and then rolling his eyes. Or shaking a lesbian couple's hands and then quickly wiping the germs away on his holy robe. I mean, it is depravity, I get it, but why not just kick them out? Why not be an up-front dick like he is to me?

"Let us pray for the weak, the needy," my father preaches from the pulpit every Sunday. But the truth is, when he walks past a homeless person sitting in squalor on the street, his eyes fill with hate. "Get a job!" is my dad's refrain in the face of an open hand, as long as no one else is around. I know, I've been around. When a homeless man shuffled into a service and sat in the back pew a few years ago, dear old Dad had the ushers escort him out.

"Get him out of here, please. We'll pray for his soul, to ease his suffering, that he gets back on his feet," Dad told the congregation as the man begged to stay. It was raining that Sunday, just like today.

I squeeze the steering wheel tighter. I want to kick something but remember what my friends told me this week: hold on to the anger, unleash it when it's time. These guys made sense to me,

right away. From the moment I met Vic at the bar, he talked my talk. He understood where I was coming from. He knows how hard it is to be a man in this world, how hard it is to compete. They all do.

“Man, let me show you the truth. The way. You don’t need them, you’ll have a new family,” Vic said that night at the bar. I’d run out of the house without my wallet, taking just my keys, and driven to the bar. Vic could tell I was pissed. He bought me three beers before he asked me what was what. I liked that. Quiet companionship. No demands. Just understanding. When he asked about a girlfriend, if that was my problem, I’d laughed.

“What’s a girlfriend? Dude, they all suck. They all want money and who knows what,” I’d said.

“True that.” Vic clinked my glass. He was lanky, dressed all in black. His eyes were bright black, like a crow’s. He’d been to the bar before, but we’d never said more than hello.

“You don’t have a girl, either?” I’d asked. That amazed me. He has everything. A sick Harley even.

“No. Don’t need one. Don’t trust them. So what’s wrong?” he’d asked finally.

“My family sold my home out from under me. I live in the carriage house. I have no place to go.” I’d tried to mask the emotion in my voice, the pain, but I knew it was there.

Vic put his hand on my shoulder. “Sit tight.”

He stood up, paid our tab, and walked to the back of the bar, where his friends were hanging out. The next thing I knew, I had a group of guys who understood me. After this past week in the desert, I have focus. And something I haven’t had in a long time: confidence. There’s nothing wrong with me. It’s all of them. Especially good old dad.

But I still need a place to live. My new friends can’t really help me with that.

A white moving van turns the corner and starts down my street. It's a huge one, and as it lumbers toward me and my house, I realize these people must think they're staying here for good.

They're wrong. I'm going to get my house back. They won't feel comfortable here. I'll help them understand that, one way or another.

The van stops in front of my home, bright hazard lights flashing in the storm. From where I sit in my lame Toyota, the house is gone, obscured by the huge white truck and the relentless rain.

Maybe that would be easier. Just get rid of the place so no one can own it. In my mind I see myself pouring gasoline down the stairs, striking a match, igniting the place like a pyre.

Maybe I should do it. I mean, what do I have to lose?

I stare at my reflection in the rearview mirror. Nah. I couldn't do that. It's my home. I need to save it, not destroy it. It's the last place I saw my mom, my real mom. Someday, just maybe, she'll come back looking for me. I need to be here when she does.

I hear my dad's voice in my head. "Don't be a baby, son. She is never coming back. She is a sinner, and we are better off without her."

I know better. I do. That's why when it comes to 123 Cherry Hill Lane, I'll get it back, one way or another.

It's my home. The only one I've ever known.