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**THE  
AUTUMN  
SPRINGS  
RETIREMENT  
HOME  
MASSACRE**



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## 2

Rose is pouring herself the first coffee of the day (she allows herself three cups, but nothing with caffeine after two o'clock, lest it affect her sleep) when there's a knock at the door. She sets her cup down, walks to within a few feet of the locked door, and stops.

"Who is it?" she says, hating the dark strands of fear slithering like poisonous snakes through her mind, through her heart. Despite warm leggings, slippers, and her favorite cable-knit sweater—the dark gray Patagonia that Sybil bought her for Christmas a few years back—she shivers.

*I'm shaking*, she realizes with a sense of unease. *Good Lord, when did I become so afraid?*

"It's the police, ma'am. If you don't mind, we have a few questions."

The voice is young, and male. Rose goes closer to the door, presses her eye against the peephole, and sees a policeman looking back at her, a grim patience etched on his face.

Rose pulls open the door. The man is alone, but Rose hears the unfamiliar sound of formal conversation from down the hall. She sticks her head out and peeks toward the lobby, where another officer is speaking to one of her neighbors. She turns her eyes back to the young man standing in front of her, and feels a renewed surge of fear.

"What's happened?"

The officer—who looks to Rose like he should be taking classes in college instead of wearing a holstered sidearm—only sighs heavily, as if tired of hearing the same question. "I'm not at liberty to offer any details, ma'am, but if I could ask you a few questions, we'd certainly appreciate your time."

"Who's we?" Rose asks.

The officer, who Rose notes has a name tag above his badge that reads FREEMAN, looks at her with confusion. "Ma'am?"

"You keep saying 'we', and I'd like to know who 'we' is."

Officer Freeman arches an eyebrow. "The police, ma'am. 'We' means the police."

"Did someone die?"

"Ma'am, if I can just ask you a few questions, I can let you get on with your day."

*Get on with your day, you mean*, Rose thinks, her agitation at the officer's attitude ruffling her feathers more and more with each passing second. But she only nods, crossing her arms over her thick sweater, wondering what new horror has occurred at Autumn Springs.

"Go on," Rose says, thinking that if this young man rolls his eyes at her she just might slap him across the face. "My coffee's getting cold."

Officer Freeman's expression tightens, like a man who goes to pet a dog only to be met with a deep snarl and a flash of wet, sharp teeth.

Rose spends the next few minutes telling the policeman her full name, how long she's been a resident, and informing him that: No, she hadn't heard or seen anything unusual last night.

When the officer closes his notebook, he offers a smile that chills her heart. "I appreciate your assistance, Ms. DuBois."

"Are you going to tell me what happened, or are we old folks supposed to sit in our fear all morning until we find out?"

Officer Freeman doesn't answer, but instead begins walking toward the next apartment.

As he turns to go, however, she grips him firmly by the arm. "I'd like you to tell me what's going on, young man, and I'd ask you wipe that smirk off your face while you do it."

The officer's smile disappears, replaced by a face of impatience and impending violence, a distorted mask she'd seen her own husband wear more than once. "Let go of my arm, Ms. DuBois."

Rose releases her hand, but her gaze on his remains steady.

For a moment, Rose doesn't think he'll answer, but then he

softens, as if suddenly realizing he's supposed to be one of the good guys.

"One of your neighbors died last night, okay?" he says, looking down the hall, as if to make sure the other officer can't hear him. "But look, he wasn't even in this building. So there's nothing for you to worry about."

"Who?" she asks, faces and names swirling through her mind like the balls in a bingo cage. She can almost picture the faces of her friends on each one, a dark hand reaching inside to pull another soul free. "Who was it, and how did he, or she, die?"

"I'm not allowed to say . . . *ma'am*," Officer Freeman says quietly, dark eyes locked on Rose, his face now creased with an annoyed frown. He takes a small step closer and lowers his voice. "But if I'm being honest? This is all a big waste of time, don't you think, Ms. DuBois? I mean, people probably die here every other day, am I right?"

*As rain*, the dark voice in her mind hisses, but Rose pushes it away.

Officer Freeman takes a step back. "Have a nice day, *ma'am*," he says, a little more loudly now, standing in front of Rose wearing that serpent's smile, like a doorman waiting for a tip.

Rose does not return the smile. Instead, she takes two steps backward into her apartment and slams the door in the man's face.