Open House

Every Sunday, the same guy in the same blazer shows up to Jenna's open house for a $2.1 million classic six he can't possibly afford, and he knows exactly which window sticks.

Nobody buys an apartment on the Upper West Side in August. Everybody who could afford to was in Amagansett or Truro or at a lake in Maine, and everybody who couldn't afford to was too hot to think about it, and Jenna Sullivan knew that, and her boss knew that, and she held the open house anyway, because the listing had come in on a Thursday and her boss believed in momentum the way some people believe in God.

OPEN HOUSE · SUNDAY 12–2 · 9C · CLASSIC SIX · ESTATE SALE

She taped the sign to the easel in the lobby at 11:40 on the first Sunday in August, under the eye of the doorman, a big gray-haired Dominican man in a uniform jacket he refused to take off no matter how hot it got. His name was Hector. He had worked the door of the building on West 86th between West End and Riverside for thirty-one years, and he looked at her sign the way a priest might look at a flyer for a strip club taped to the church door.

"Estate sale," he said.

"That's what it is."

"Sounds like a garage sale. Sounds like they're selling her lamps."

"They already sold her lamps," Jenna said. "This is the part where they sell her walls."

Hector didn't laugh. She hadn't expected him to. She'd been in the business nine years, and she'd learned that doormen in prewar buildings fell into two categories: the ones who wanted a gift card at

Christmas, and the ones who were actually running the building and would let you know when they'd decided you were allowed to be in it. Hector was the second kind. She'd figure him out.

She took the elevator to nine. The elevator was the original, wood-paneled, with a brass gate the operator used to pull back by hand until 1987, and a little bench in the corner that nobody had sat on since. It took forty seconds to go up nine floors. Jenna timed it. She timed everything. Buyers asked.

Apartment 9C was a classic six, which in Manhattan means six rooms that a family of four could have lived in comfortably in 1931 and that now cost two million one hundred and fifty thousand dollars plus a monthly maintenance fee of $3,840. Living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a little room off the kitchen that used to be called the maid's room and was now called "a flexible space," in Jenna's listing copy, because you couldn't say "maid's room" anymore and nobody had figured out what else to say.

It had good bones. That's what she'd write, if she wrote it, which she wouldn't, because every agent in the city wrote good bones and it meant nothing. It had herringbone oak floors and nine-foot ceilings and plaster moldings like the frosting on a wedding cake. It had a wood-burning fireplace that the co-op board didn't let anybody use. And from the living room, if you stood in the left-hand window and pressed your cheek to the glass, you could see a slice of the Hudson River between two buildings on Riverside Drive, one blue stripe, like a bookmark.

The estate had cleared it out. A company from Long Island had come in and taken everything in a week. The staging company Jenna's

office used had come in after that and filled it with furniture rented by the month: a gray sofa, a glass coffee table, a white orchid that was real and a bowl of lemons that weren't. There was a single large photograph on the living room wall of a wave. Jenna hated the wave. Every staged apartment in New York had the wave. Somebody, somewhere, was getting very rich off the wave.

She turned on the lights and opened the windows and put out the sign-in sheet and the brochures on the kitchen island, and at exactly 12:01, the buzzer went.

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He was in his early thirties, tall and a little rumpled, in a navy blazer over a T-shirt and jeans and a pair of white sneakers that had been white a long time ago. Dark blond hair, too much of it, pushed back like he'd done it with his hand on the way up. He had a nice face. An open face. The kind of face she'd learned to be careful about, because the open faces were usually the ones who asked the most questions and bought the least.

"Hi," he said. "Is this the open house?"

"It is." She held out the clipboard. "If you could sign in."

He signed in. He wrote Dylan P. and, in the column for phone number, he wrote a phone number, and in the column that said Agent? he wrote, No. And in the column that said Pre-approved? he hesitated, and then he wrote, Spiritually.

Jenna looked at it. She looked at him.

"Spiritually," she said.

"It's a process."

"Feel free to look around. The brochure has the floor plan, the maintenance, the financials. It's a co-op, so the board will want to see twenty-five percent down and about two years of maintenance in reserve after closing."

"Okay," he said. "Great. That's good to know." He said it the way people say good to know when a doctor tells them they should eat less salt.

She watched him walk through it. She always watched. You learned a lot from how people moved through an empty apartment. The serious buyers went straight to the kitchen and opened the cabinets and asked about the age of the appliances. The investors went to the windows and looked at the street and asked about the maintenance history. The looky-loos, which is the industry term, which Jenna thought was a perfect word, went to the bathroom and took pictures of the tile to send to their sisters.

Dylan P. didn't do any of those things.

He walked into the living room and stood in the middle of it, where the gray sofa was, and he looked up at the ceiling, at the plaster medallion in the center. He stood there a long time. Then he went to the left-hand window, the one with the slice of river, and he didn't press his cheek to it. He just stood a little to the left of it, at the exact angle where you could see the water without trying, like he already knew where to stand.

Then he went down the hall to the second bedroom, and Jenna heard a window go up, and she followed him, because the windows in the

second bedroom were the one thing about this apartment that she was nervous about. The left-hand one stuck. It had stuck for the inspection and it had stuck for the photographer, and she'd been planning to stand in front of it all afternoon like a bouncer.

It was open. He'd opened it. He was standing next to it with his hands in his blazer pockets.

"How did you do that?" she said.

He looked at her, then at the window. "You lift and push it left at the same time. It's the sash cord. It's been like that forever."

"Forever?"

"For a long time," he said. "Probably. With these old buildings." He closed it again, lift, push left, and it slid down like it was on ice. "Do you know how old the radiators are?"

"They're original."

"Does the one in the kitchen still knock?"

She stared at him. The one in the kitchen knocked. It didn't knock in August, because nothing was on in August. It had knocked during the inspection in July when the super ran the system to check the boiler, three hard bangs, like someone at the door, and the inspector had written it down.

"Some of the radiators knock," she said carefully. "It's an old building."

"Yeah," he said. "That's what I figured."

He left at 12:40, after walking through every room twice and standing in the kitchen for a long time with one hand on the doorframe of the little pantry. He thanked her. He took a brochure, folded it in half, and put it in his inside blazer pocket like it was a letter.

"Any questions?" she said, at the door.

"No," he said. "I think I'm good."

"Are you working with anyone? A mortgage broker? I know some good ones."

He smiled. It was a very nice smile, slightly crooked, the smile of a man who'd been told he had a nice smile and hadn't believed it.

"I'm working on a budget," he said.

"What's your range?"

"Emotionally? Wide."

"Financially?"

"Much narrower." He pressed the button for the elevator. "Thanks for having me. It's a beautiful apartment."

"It has good bones," Jenna heard herself say, and wanted to die.

"It really does," he said, and the elevator came, and he got in, and the brass gate closed, and the old car took him down nine floors in forty seconds.

Eleven people came that afternoon. Two couples from the neighborhood who were thinking about it in a general way, the way people on the Upper West Side are always thinking about apartments

in a general way. A woman with a French bulldog who wanted to know about the pet policy. An agent from a rival firm who pretended to be a buyer and asked suspiciously specific questions about the seller's motivation. Nobody serious. Nobody who asked about the radiator.

At 2:05 she stood in the kitchen and looked at the sign-in sheet, at Dylan P., at Spiritually.

Then she looked at the pantry.

It was a narrow little room, more of a closet, with shelves on three walls and a single bulb on a pull chain. The door was the original, heavy, painted the same cream as everything else, with an old glass knob. She opened it and pulled the chain and the bulb came on. There was nothing in there. The Long Island people had even taken the shelf paper.

She didn't know what she was looking for. She turned off the light and closed the door, and went home to her studio on West 104th, which had no pantry and no river and a window that looked directly into the window of a man who did tai chi in his underwear, and she forgot about it.

Mostly.

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He came back the next Sunday.

It was hotter. The city had that wet-wool feeling it gets in the middle of August, and the subway platforms at 86th and Broadway were like the inside of a mouth. Jenna got to the building at 11:30 in a

sleeveless navy dress that her mother said made her look like a flight attendant, which she'd decided to take as a compliment. Hector was at the door in his full uniform jacket, not sweating, like a lizard.

"Back again," he said.

"Back again."

"Anybody buy it yet?"

"Not yet, Hector."

"Huh," Hector said, and something about the way he said it made her look at him, but he was already looking at the street.

At 12:01 the buzzer went.

He was in the same blazer. Different T-shirt. He was holding two iced coffees from the Zabar's café on Broadway and he held one out to her like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I didn't know how you take it," he said. "So I got it black and I brought milk." He reached into his blazer pocket and took out two tiny plastic containers of half-and-half, the kind they give you at diners, and put them on the kitchen island next to the brochures.

"You came back," Jenna said.

"I'm a serious buyer."

"Are you?"

"Spiritually."

She took the coffee. She shouldn't have. There were rules about this, unwritten, but rules. You don't accept things from people walking

through your listings. Coffee becomes lunch becomes a guy who thinks he deserves a discount because you took his coffee.

But it was ninety-one degrees, and it was black, and she put one of the little half-and-halfs in it, and it was perfect.

"Sign in, please," she said.

He signed in. Dylan P. Agent? No. Pre-approved? He thought about it, and then wrote: Working on it.

"That's progress," she said.

"I've been doing a lot of work on myself."

This time she followed him. Not obviously. She had a rule about hovering, which was that you didn't, because buyers hate it, and she'd been doing it for nine years and knew how to look like she was checking her phone in a doorway while actually watching someone's every move.

He did the same things. The ceiling medallion. The left side of the left-hand window. The second bedroom, where he didn't open the sticky window this time, just touched the sash, lightly, like you'd touch a sleeping dog. Then the kitchen.

He stood in front of the pantry for a long time with his back to her. Then he opened the door and stepped inside, into the little closet, and pulled the door partway shut behind him, so it was just his shoulder showing, and the light came on.

Jenna waited thirty seconds. Then a minute. Then she walked over and pulled the door open.

He was standing in there with his palm flat against the inside of the door, at about the height of his chest. He jumped. He actually jumped, like a kid caught in a cookie jar, and banged his head on the bulb, and the bulb swung on its chain, and the light went crazy around the little room.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry. I was just looking."

"At the inside of a door."

"It's a nice door." He took his hand away. "They don't make them like this anymore. Solid wood. You know how much a door like that costs now?"

"I don't," Jenna said. "I'm not in doors."

"A lot." He stepped out and pulled the chain and the light went off. "Thanks. It's a really nice apartment."

He left a few minutes after that, and she stood in the kitchen and opened the pantry door and turned on the light and looked at the inside of the door where his hand had been.

It was painted cream. Like everything else. Old paint, a lot of coats of it, with brush marks and a drip near the bottom. If you got close, very close, closer than anyone would get unless they were looking for something, you could see faint lines under the paint, in a column, at different heights. Little horizontal ridges. Like someone had drawn on the wood a long time ago and someone else had painted over it and the paint had settled into the grooves.

She ran her thumb over one. It was about four feet off the floor.

Then she closed the door, because she was a professional and she had a two-million-dollar apartment to sell, and whatever was on the inside of a pantry door was none of her business.

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The third Sunday, her boss came.

Marcy Klein had been selling apartments on the Upper West Side since 1984. She had a corner office at the firm's branch on Broadway at 79th, above a Sephora, and a blowout that never moved, and a laugh like a car alarm, and she had sold apartments to two Supreme Court justices and a man who'd once played the drums for Billy Joel. She thought Jenna was talented and soft. She'd told her so. She said it the way you'd say a horse was fast but spooked easy.

Jenna hadn't closed anything since March. That was the problem. Not because she was bad at her job, but because of a long, stupid stretch where three deals in a row had fallen apart at the board stage, and then one where the buyer's father had died and the buyer had backed out, and then the summer had come. And in between, there'd been Ben, who she'd been engaged to for eleven months and who had moved to London in June with a woman from his fund, which was not a real estate problem but had felt like one, because he'd kept the apartment in Chelsea.

So she needed 9C. She needed it badly. And Marcy had come up at 12:30 to see how it was going, and was standing at the kitchen island in a white linen suit reading the sign-in sheets for all three Sundays.

"Who's Dylan P.?" Marcy said.

"A buyer."

"He's been here three times." Marcy tapped the clipboard. "He wrote spiritually. Jenna. He's pre-approved spiritually."

"He's thinking about it."

"He's a looky-loo. He's a looky-loo who wears a blazer. Those are the worst kind, they think the blazer counts as a down payment." Marcy put the clipboard down. "Get a letter or get him out. We've got an estate in Scottsdale that wants this closed by October. We're not running a museum."

And of course that's when the buzzer went.

He came in at 12:40, late for him. He looked tired. He had a little cut on his chin like he'd shaved too fast, and no coffee this time. He saw Marcy and stopped. He saw the look on Jenna's face and stopped again.

"Hi," he said.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Jenna said, and walked him out into the hallway, by the elevator, under the old brass numbers on the wall.

She'd done this before. She'd had to tell people they couldn't afford something, or couldn't come back, or that the board had looked at their finances and decided they didn't belong. She'd gotten good at it. You were warm and you were clear and you didn't apologize, because apologizing made it about you.

"I can't keep letting you in," she said. "Not without something from a lender. I'm sorry. It's not personal. My boss is here, and the seller wants serious buyers, and you've been here three times and you

haven't asked me a single question about the financials."

He looked at her for a long moment. He didn't argue. She'd expected him to argue.

"Okay," he said quietly. "That's fair."

"If you get a letter, I'd be happy to show it to you privately."

"I'm not going to get a letter," he said. "But thank you. You've been really nice about it."

Then he did something strange. He looked past her, through the open door of 9C, down the long hall toward the kitchen, the way you look back at a house when the car is pulling out of the driveway.

"The radiator in the kitchen," he said. "When they turn the heat on in October. If you bleed it, there's a valve on the left side, it stops knocking. Somebody should tell whoever buys it."

And he pressed the button and the elevator came, and he left.

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He didn't come the fourth Sunday.

She'd told him not to, and he didn't, and Jenna spent the whole two hours glancing at the door. Six people came. One of them was a couple with a baby who loved it and couldn't afford it. One of them was a man who wanted to know whether the wall between the kitchen and the dining room was load-bearing, and when she said she'd have to check, he said, "Doesn't matter, I'd take it down either way," and she disliked him so much she gave him two brochures.

At two she locked up and went down in the forty-second elevator, and Hector was at the door.

"He didn't come up," Hector said.

"Who?"

"Dylan." Hector said it like it was obvious. Like she was slow. "He came by at noon, stood out front, didn't come in. Said hi to me. Went to the park."

Jenna stopped walking. "You know him?"

Hector looked at her for a long time with his big, heavy, patient face. Then he sighed, the sigh of a man who'd decided you were finally allowed to be in his building.

"Miss Sullivan," he said. "That's Ruthie's grandson."

She didn't say anything. She couldn't.

"Ruth Becker. 9C. Fifty-two years." Hector shook his head. "She moved in in 1974, with her husband, Lou, who died in '96. That boy was up there every day after school from when he was six. His mother was sick. Ruthie raised him, mostly. He used to sit right there"—Hector pointed at the little wooden bench in the lobby—"and do his homework while he waited for her to come home from the library. She was a librarian. At the branch on 100th."

"Then why is he—"

"Because his uncle's the executor," Hector said, and his mouth went flat. "Rick. In Arizona. Rick sold everything in a week. Rick had the locks changed. Rick gave the boy one afternoon to take what he wanted while the Long Island people were packing up her dishes

around him." Hector looked out at 86th Street. "He took her reading glasses and her recipe box. That's it. You can't carry an apartment."

"So he's been coming to my open houses."

"It's the only way upstairs anymore," Hector said. "Can't let him up myself. I'd lose my job. But you put out a sign that says open." He shrugged. "Open is open."

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She found him in Riverside Park.

It wasn't hard. She walked to the end of 86th, past the big old buildings with their awnings and their planters, and crossed Riverside Drive, and went down the stone steps into the park, and there he was, on a bench by the path, facing the river. He had his blazer off and folded on the bench next to him. He had a paperback on his knee that he wasn't reading.

The Hudson was flat and silver in the heat. New Jersey sat on the other side looking like New Jersey. A guy went by on a bike with a speaker playing salsa, and a woman went by with four dogs, and Dylan didn't look up until Jenna's shadow fell across his book.

"Hi," he said, surprised. And then, because he was a smart man and could read a face, "Hector."

"Hector," she said, and sat down next to him.

They sat there for a minute. A barge went by, slowly, pushed by a tug, like a long apartment building lying down.

"I'm sorry," he said finally. "I should have told you."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because you'd have stopped letting me in." He looked at his hands. "And because it's embarrassing. I'm thirty-two years old. I teach music to sixth graders in Washington Heights. I make sixty-eight thousand dollars a year and I live in a fifth-floor walk-up in Inwood with a radiator that doesn't knock because it doesn't work. And every Sunday I put on the one blazer I own and go pretend to buy my grandmother's apartment so I can stand in it for forty minutes." He laughed, not really a laugh. "It's not a great look."

"It's a little bit of a great look," Jenna said.

He glanced at her.

"The blazer," she said. "It's working for you."

He laughed then, a real one, surprised out of him, and put his hand over his face.

"What's on the pantry door?" she said.

He didn't answer right away. He looked at the river.

"Me," he said. "Every birthday, from four to sixteen. She made me stand against it with my shoes off and she put a ruler on my head and drew a line with a pencil and wrote my name and the date. She did my mom when she was a kid, too, but my mom's are older, lower down. And she did her own, at the end. The last few years. She was shrinking. She thought it was hilarious." He swallowed. "Rick had the place painted before the listing. I didn't know he was going to. I came up the day the Long Island guys were there and it was already done. Three coats. Cream."

Jenna thought about the little ridges under her thumb. Four feet off the floor.

"They're still there," she said. "Under the paint. You can feel them."

"I know. I've been feeling them every Sunday. Like an idiot."

"Not like an idiot."

"Like a guy who's very into doors," he said.

She looked at him, at the open face, at the little cut on his chin, at the paperback he wasn't reading, which she now saw had a library stamp on the edge of the pages that said NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY · BLOOMINGDALE BRANCH, the branch on 100th Street.

"The staging company is scheduled to come in Tuesday," she said. "To freshen up the kitchen before the market picks up. Paint touch-ups. The pantry's on the list."

He closed his eyes.

"I'll call them," Jenna said. "I'll tell them the pantry's fine. I'll tell them it's original, buyers love original. It's not even a lie."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't." She stood up. Her dress was stuck to the back of her legs and she didn't care. "Have you eaten?"

"Not really."

"Me neither. There's a bar on Amsterdam that has good fries and bad air-conditioning. You're buying. You owe me four Sundays of lying about your financing."

He stood up too, and picked up his blazer, and looked at her with a face that was doing something complicated.

"I didn't lie," he said. "I'm spiritually pre-approved."

"For what?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "I'll let you know."

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The bar was The Dead Poet, on Amsterdam between 81st and 82nd, a long narrow room with a pool table in the back and the names of drinks written on the walls after dead writers. Dylan ordered a beer. Jenna ordered a Pablo Neruda, because it was the first thing she saw, and it turned out to be mostly rum, and by the second one she'd told him about Ben and the woman from his fund and the apartment in Chelsea, which she'd never told anybody in that order before.

"He kept the apartment," Dylan said.

"He kept the apartment. He kept the espresso machine. He kept the friends, mostly, because they were his friends from Dartmouth and they all talk like a podcast." She ate a fry. "I kept the ring. I sold it on 47th Street and paid off my student loans. I recommend it. Very healing."

"So you're anti-marriage."

"I'm anti-Dartmouth."

He laughed. He had a good laugh, low, a little rusty, like he didn't use it enough. He told her about his job, about the sixth graders, about a kid named Marcus who could play anything by ear but refused to

learn to read music because he said notes were "a scam." He told her about his mother, who'd had MS and died when he was fourteen, and about Ruth, who'd come home from the library every day at 4:15 and found him on the bench in the lobby and said, every single day, "Who let this bum in?" and Hector would say, "He says he knows you, Mrs. Becker," and she'd say, "Never seen him before in my life," and take him upstairs and feed him.

"She played piano," he said. "Badly. Very loud. Show tunes. The neighbors complained for fifty years. She said the complaining was how she knew they were still alive."

"Where's the piano now?"

"Rick sold it to a guy in Yonkers for six hundred dollars." He turned his glass on the bar. "I didn't have six hundred dollars that week. I had four hundred. I asked if I could pay the rest in installments. Rick said it was easier to just sell it."

Jenna didn't say anything. She'd met Rick on a Zoom call. He'd had a golf course behind him and a voice like a man who'd been told no by a waiter once in 1992 and was still upset. He'd said the words "fair market value" four times in nine minutes.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's okay." He looked at her sideways. "Actually, no, it isn't. It's terrible. But I'm sitting in a bar with you on a Sunday and Ruth would have loved that, so. Not totally terrible."

"Why would she have loved that?"

"Because you told me I couldn't come back," he said. "And then you came and found me. She'd have said that's a woman who knows the difference between a rule and a reason."

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September came in like somebody opened a door.

The city came back from the beaches all at once, sunburned and irritable and ready to spend money. The Sunday after Labor Day, thirty-one people came through 9C. The Sunday after that, forty. There was a line at the elevator. Hector had to run it in shifts. Jenna gave out every brochure she had and Marcy had to send more by messenger from the office on 79th.

And on Tuesdays, Jenna let Dylan in.

She told herself it was for the radiators. She told herself she was the listing agent and she had keys and somebody needed to check the apartment during the week anyway, and if somebody happened to be with her, a person who knew which valve to bleed and which window stuck and where the fuse box was hidden behind the panel in the flexible space, that was just good practice. She didn't tell Marcy. She didn't tell anybody. Hector saw them come in together the first Tuesday at seven, looked at Jenna, looked at Dylan, and said nothing, very loudly.

They didn't do much. That was the thing. They sat on the floor of the living room, because the staging furniture felt like someone else's, and they ate hot dogs from Gray's Papaya on 72nd that Dylan brought up in a paper bag, the recession special, two franks and a papaya drink. They sat by the left-hand window and watched the stripe of river go

from blue to orange to black.

He told her about the apartment, room by room. Where the piano had been, against the long wall in the living room, with a burn mark on the floor next to it where his grandfather had dropped a cigar during the 1977 blackout. Where the Christmas tree went, even though they were Jewish, because Ruth said a tree was just a tree and she liked how it smelled. Which floorboard in the hall creaked, so he could sneak in at sixteen. Which floorboard Ruth had trained herself to listen for, so he couldn't.

"She'd be sitting in the kitchen in the dark," he said. "Every time. She'd just say, 'Two-fifteen.' That's it. Just the time. Like a judge."

"What were you doing out till two-fifteen?"

"Being sixteen. Badly." He leaned his head back against the wall. "She never yelled. She'd just say the time and go to bed. It was so much worse than yelling."

On the second Tuesday, he showed her the pantry door, properly. He turned on the bulb and held his phone flashlight at an angle, low across the wood, so the light raked over the paint, and she saw them, all of them, the little ridges in their column, like the rings of a tree. If she squinted she could almost see letters in some of them.

"That's four," he said, pointing low. "That's six. That's the year I grew four inches and she said I was doing it on purpose to spite her. That's sixteen." He touched one near the top. "That's the last one. She wrote 'STOP' next to it. Just stop. Like I could help it."

Lower down, there were fainter ones. His mother's. "LINDA" and years in the seventies. And then, in a different spot, off to the side, a

short cluster of lines close together, going down, not up.

"That's her," he said. "Eighty-five. Eighty-seven. Eighty-nine. Ninety. She was losing like half an inch a year. She thought it was the funniest thing that had ever happened to her. The last one, she wrote, 'RUTH, 90. SHRINKING. DON'T TELL ANYONE.'"

Jenna stood in the little closet with him, with the light swinging, and she put her hand on the door next to his. It was warm from the bulb.

"Ask Rick if you can have it," she said. "The door. It's not a fixture, technically. It could be excluded from the sale."

"I asked Rick. Rick said the door conveys with the apartment and he's not going to complicate the deal over a piece of wood." He took his hand away. "Rick said Mom would want the apartment sold cleanly. Rick says a lot of things Mom would want. Rick moved to Scottsdale in 1989 and called her on her birthday."

Then the bulb flickered, and they both looked up at it, and then they were looking at each other instead, in a closet the size of an elevator, very close, his face in the swinging light, and Jenna thought, this is a terrible idea, this is a client, this is not a client, this is a man standing in a pantry with me holding his phone like a flashlight, and his eyes went to her mouth and back up, and he said, very quietly, "Jenna."

And she said, "We should check the radiator."

He laughed. He stepped back. "Yeah. Absolutely. The radiator."

They checked the radiator. It was fine. It was September. Nothing was on.

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The offers came in the third week of September.

The first was from a company called Westline Partners, which was an LLC, which was owned by a man named Brad Hartley who'd already gone into contract on 9D, the apartment next door, and who wanted to combine the two into a single "full-floor residence" and resell it for six million dollars. All cash. Two million three hundred thousand, a hundred and fifty over the ask. Close in thirty days. He'd been the man at the open house who'd asked whether the kitchen wall was load-bearing. The plan he sent with the offer took the kitchen wall down. It took the pantry out entirely and turned it into a wine room.

The second was from the Brennans. Matt and Priya Brennan, a public defender and a pediatric nurse, both thirty-six, with a five-year-old named Lily who had come to two open houses and spent the whole time running up and down the long hall in socks, sliding, until her father made her stop. They'd been renting a one-bedroom on West 96th for six years. They'd saved for eight. They offered two million and fifty thousand, a hundred under, financed, with twenty-five percent down, which was everything they had.

"It's obvious," Marcy said, on the phone. "Take the cash."

"The board might not approve an LLC," Jenna said. "And they'll never approve combining. The Brennans are exactly what the board wants."

"The board approves whoever has the most money. That's what boards are." Marcy's voice softened, a little, which was worse. "Jenna. Honey. You haven't closed since March. This is a big commission.

This puts you back on the map. Don't get attached to a family because their kid's cute in socks."

Rick agreed with Marcy, on a Zoom with the golf course behind him. Rick said "fair market value" six times. Rick said his mother would have wanted the money to go to her grandchildren, meaning his kids, who were at Arizona State.

Jenna didn't tell Dylan about the plan for the pantry. She told herself she'd tell him when it was decided. She told herself there was still a chance. She told herself a lot of things that week, and some of them were true.

And then, on the last Sunday in September, she made a mistake.

It was the final open house, a second showing for people who'd already seen it, and the Brennans came back with Lily and Priya's mother, who wanted to see it before her daughter spent everything she had. Jenna was standing in the kitchen with them. Priya's mother was skeptical. She kept touching the old cabinets and frowning. And Jenna, who needed the Brennans to raise their offer if they were going to have any chance against Westline, and who was tired, and who'd spent four weeks sitting on the floor of this apartment learning everything about it, did what agents do.

She told them a story.

"This apartment's had one owner for fifty-two years," she said. "A librarian. She raised her grandson here. If you look inside the pantry door, under the paint, you can still feel the lines where she measured him every birthday. It's that kind of home. You don't find a lot of those anymore."

Priya's mother's face changed. Jenna saw it change. She saw her open the pantry door and bend down and run her fingers over the paint and say something soft to Lily in Tamil, and Lily giggled, and Matt looked at Priya, and Priya looked at Matt, and Jenna thought, that's it, they'll go to two-two, I've got them.

Then she turned around.

Dylan was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Hector must have sent him up. He was holding two iced coffees and a little stack of half-and-halfs, and he'd heard all of it. She could see it on his face. He'd heard the librarian and the grandson and the birthdays, every word, said in her open-house voice, the warm one, the one that sold things.

He put the coffees down on the kitchen island, very carefully, next to the brochures.

"She's not a feature," he said quietly.

And he left. He didn't wait for the elevator. She heard his sneakers on the stairs, nine flights, all the way down.

. . .

She didn't sleep that night. She lay in her studio on 104th with the window open and the tai chi man's light off for once, and she heard it over and over. She's not a feature. He was right. She'd taken the thing he'd shown her in the dark with a phone flashlight, the thing he'd never shown anybody, and she'd used it to get a family to two-two.

At seven in the morning she called Hector.

"Who's the board president?" she said.

"Mrs. Lowenthal. 12A. Eighty-eight years old." A pause. "She played mahjong with Ruthie every Thursday for forty years."

Esther Lowenthal received her at ten in a living room full of African violets, in a cardigan, with a hearing aid she turned up for Jenna and down whenever Jenna said something she didn't like. Jenna laid it out. An LLC. A combination. A wine room where Ruth's pantry used to be.

Mrs. Lowenthal listened to all of it. Then she turned her hearing aid back up.

"Our bylaws don't permit sales to LLCs," she said. "They haven't since 1991. I wrote that bylaw. And I can promise you this board will not approve combining any apartment on the ninth floor while I am alive, and I intend to be alive for a very long time out of spite." She sipped her tea. "Who else bid?"

"A family. A nurse and a public defender. Their daughter slides down the hall in her socks."

"Ruthie's boy used to do that," Mrs. Lowenthal said. "Drove me crazy. I lived in 8C then." She put down her cup. "Send me the family."

. . .

Rick took the news the way Jenna had expected. There was a lot of yelling about fair market value. There was a threat to switch firms. Jenna let him run out of air, the golf course bright behind him on her laptop, and then she said it plainly: the Westline deal would die at the board, he'd lose two months and the fall market, and the Brennans were the only real buyers he had. She'd gotten them up to two million

one hundred. Their offer had one condition.

"What condition?"

"The pantry door is excluded from the sale. It goes to Dylan."

Rick stared at her. "A door?"

"A door."

"He sent you to do this."

"He doesn't know I'm doing this," Jenna said. "He's not speaking to me. I was the one who almost let you take the wall out."

Rick was quiet for a long time. Somewhere off-screen a sprinkler went tick, tick, tick.

"She always liked him better," he said finally. Not angry. Just tired, a man in Arizona saying something he'd been carrying since 1989. "Fine. Give him the door."

Marcy was less gracious. Marcy said a hundred and fifty thousand dollars less was a lot of commission to throw away on a feeling. Jenna said she knew. Marcy said she was being soft. Jenna said she'd sold the apartment, with a signed contract and a board president who'd already put the Brennans' interview on her calendar, and that if that was soft, Marcy should try it sometime.

Marcy looked at her across the corner office for a long moment. Then she laughed, the car alarm laugh.

"Fine," she said. "Get out of my office. Go sell something."

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On Thursday afternoon, Hector took the pantry door off its hinges with a screwdriver he kept in his uniform jacket, which explained why he never took the jacket off. It took him four minutes. He'd been waiting, Jenna realized, a long time to do it.

"Solid wood," he said, grunting, as they carried it into the service elevator. "You know what a door like this costs now?"

"A lot," Jenna said. "I've heard."

A cab wouldn't take it. An Uber XL wouldn't take it. In the end it was a man named Sal from the hardware store on Amsterdam, who had a van and forty minutes, and who drove them up the West Side Highway and the Henry Hudson to Inwood with the door lying in the back on a moving blanket, like a patient. He helped her carry it up five flights on Seaman Avenue, swearing in two languages on every landing, and then he left her there, in a hallway that smelled like someone's rice and beans, holding up one end of a door against the wall outside 5F.

She knocked.

Dylan opened it in a T-shirt and sweatpants, with a pencil behind his ear and sheet music in his hand, and he looked at her, and then he looked at what she was holding up, and the sheet music slid out of his fingers onto the floor.

"I brought you a door," Jenna said.

He didn't say anything. He reached out and touched it. He found the ridges right away, without looking, the way you find the bottom step in the dark on stairs you grew up on.

"How," he said.

"The board doesn't allow LLCs. Rick doesn't like losing. The Brennans are getting the apartment and you're getting this, and Lily's going to slide down the hall in her socks, and Mrs. Lowenthal from 12A says she drove her crazy, and she can't wait." She took a breath. "And I'm sorry. What I said in the kitchen. I made her a selling point. She's not a selling point. I knew that and I did it anyway, because I wanted to win, and I'm sorry."

He looked at her for a long time over the top of the door. His eyes were wet, and he didn't seem to care.

"You carried this up five flights," he said.

"Sal carried most of it. I mostly said 'careful.'"

"Jenna."

"I'm also bad at carrying things," she said. "It's a whole thing. Ask Ben. He has my espresso machine."

He laughed, wet and surprised, and took the door from her, gently, and leaned it against the wall inside his apartment, next to an upright piano that was much too big for the room. A secondhand one. The kind you buy in installments.

Then he turned around and kissed her.

It wasn't careful. It was four Sundays and four Tuesdays and a pantry with a swinging bulb, all at once. She grabbed the front of his T-shirt. He walked her backward into the apartment, one step, two, his hands on her face and then in her hair and then sliding down the back of her dress like he was memorizing a floor plan. She hit the piano. It made a

loud, terrible chord.

"Ruth," Dylan said against her mouth, "would have loved that."

"The neighbors are going to complain."

"Good," he said. "That's how you know they're alive."

She laughed, and then she stopped laughing, because his mouth was on her neck and her hands were under his shirt and she could feel him breathing like a man at the top of five flights of stairs. She pulled back just long enough to look at him, at the open face, which wasn't careful at all anymore.

"Is this a terrible idea?" she said.

"Spiritually?"

"Financially."

"Much narrower," he said, and kissed her again.

Behind her, the front door of 5F was still standing open to the hallway and the smell of rice and beans. Jenna reached back without looking, found the edge of it, and swung it shut.

The other door.

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The Brennans closed on the third Friday in October. Jenna was at the closing, in a conference room on Lexington, and Lily drew a cat on the back of the contract and nobody stopped her.

They moved in the following week. Hector sent Jenna a photo. A new pantry door, plain, unpainted wood, and a single pencil line on the

inside, about three and a half feet up. LILY, 5. Above it, in old-lady capitals, in pen: WELCOME HOME. — E. LOWENTHAL, 12A.

Ruth's door hangs in the apartment on Seaman Avenue now, between the living room and the bedroom, where a door used to be before some landlord took it out in the eighties. Dylan sanded the paint off himself, a little at a time, over three weekends, with Jenna on the couch reading him the marks as they came up out of the wood like photographs in a darkroom. DYLAN, 4. DYLAN, 9, TALLER THAN GARY WAS. LINDA, 1975. RUTH, 90, SHRINKING. DON'T TELL ANYONE. STOP.

There's a new line now. Higher than Ruth's, lower than his. He made her take her shoes off and stand against it and he put a ruler on her head, very seriously, like a man taking a measurement that mattered, and drew it in pencil.

KATE, 34. NOT SHRINKING.

And next to it, in her handwriting, smaller, the last thing on the door.

Pre-approved.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.