

Emily Briscoe noticed the forsythia by the stone wall as soon as Eric guided their Ford Edge onto the gravel driveway. She was pleased they were right on time for their appointment with Alice Crompton, the real estate agent Eric had spoken to on the phone last night. Her feeling of contentment dispelled the butterflies that had been fluttering in her stomach since her husband's call. After months of searching, she had felt from the moment she first saw a picture of the house that this would be where they'd raise their family. She smiled to herself as she imagined herself placing forsythia sprigs in a cut-glass vase. As they drove up to the house, it felt like they were all finally coming home.

Eric parked behind Alice's car near the back of the house and hurried around to Emily's side. He opened her door, extended his hand and she cautiously arose from the passenger seat. She was almost as tall as him and even in the late stages of her first pregnancy, she still had the lean, sinewy figure of the swimmer she had been in college a few years before.

As she stood by the car surveying the saltbox house with its rustic clapboard sides and the well-maintained grounds, she spotted, out of the corner of her eye, what appeared to be a woman staring at her from a second-floor window. In the moment it took for Emily to blink and focus on the window the woman vanished from sight.

At once, the back door swung open and a woman stood in the doorway beaming at them. Was this was the same woman? But how could she possibly have gotten downstairs so quickly? Emily reasoned the image of a woman must have been an illusion created by folds in the curtains or something like that. She gripped Eric's hand and instinctively rubbed her other hand in a circular motion over her pregnant belly.

“Hello, I’m Alice,” said the woman, her bracelets jangling together as she extended her hand to them. Emily noticed a heavy scent of too sweet perfume when she took Alice’s hand in hers. She gamely smiled as the fragrance brought on the first pangs of a headache above her eyes.

“It’s so good to meet you,” said Alice effusively as she led them through the door into the kitchen. “Please, do come inside this beautiful old house.”

The young couple moved through the spacious kitchen with the wide-eyed expressions of children on Christmas morning. The stainless-steel appliances giving the room a bright modern appearance stood in stark contrast to the old-fashioned brick hearth with its beehive oven taking up most of a wall. Emily ran her fingers across the refrigerator, maple cabinets and granite countertops until she stopped and noticed a cut-glass vase by the stainless-steel sink.

“How strange,” she said, turning to Alice, “I was just thinking how nice some forsythia would look in a vase like this.”

“I don’t remember it being here before,” replied Alice, glancing around the room with a moment’s concern to see if anything else appeared out of place.

Eric reached up and ran his fingers along the exposed ceiling beams. “These are authentic. They were shaped by a hewing ax and adze,” he observed.

“I remember you telling me on the phone that you’re a sculptor,” exclaimed Alice. “You have the look of an artist.”

“What does an artist look like?” asked Eric with an amused chuckle.

“Tall and slender like you ...” Alice stammered. “I mean you have an artist’s eye. For detail, that is.”

A moment of awkwardness passed before Eric asked, “What was the year you told me this house was built?”

“Let me check to make sure,” replied Alice. Her bracelets jangled noisily as she tapped on her tablet. “Ah, here it is! 1785!”

Emily had been studying the cut-glass vase from different angles while Alice and Eric talked. She gently picked it up and held it close, knowing this would be the way she’d soon hold her newborn baby. “It’s good that so much of the house’s authenticity has been retained,” she said. “Eric and I both love history.”

“Well, in that case,” replied Alice happily, “I’m sure you’ll both really appreciate this feature.”

Alice stepped over to a small, narrow wooden door to the right of the hearth. She took hold of the porcelain doorknob and gave it a tug, but the door didn’t budge. She yanked again to no avail, then grabbed the doorknob with both hands and pulled as hard as she could. The door opened with a loud, shrill squeak and all three of them peered inside the small space.

“What’s this?” asked Emily. “A storage space?”

“It could be used that way now,” replied Alice, lowering her voice to a dramatic hush. “But, according to my notes from the previous owner, this house was once a stop on the Underground Railroad.”

“Such a tiny little space,” whispered Emily, suddenly on the verge of tears. “Those poor souls must have been so desperate.” Eric put his arm around her and gave her shoulders a little hug.

“I think we’ve seen everything in this room,” declared Alice with cheerful finality to counter this sudden downswing of their emotions, but Emily continued to stare with moistened eyes into the storage space.

“Here’s an idea,” said Alice as her bracelets jangled loudly, “let’s take a little walk and explore the studio before we see the rest of the house.”

Eric nodded and Alice continued. "It would be perfect for your sculpting, Eric," said Alice. "I just know you're going to love it."

"How about it, Emily?" asked Eric. His smile vanished instantly when he saw her downcast expression.

"I want to know what it felt like to be cooped up in there," she said. Eric turned away from his wife and rolled his eyes impatiently before he caught Alice staring at him.

"Do we have a few extra minutes?" he asked sheepishly.

"Yes, of course, no problem at all," she answered pleasantly, but her face tightened with frustration as soon as Eric turned back to Emily, who stepped gingerly into the storage space.

"Watch your head," muttered Eric as Emily took another guarded step, then another into the little room.

"How was it possible for anyone bigger than me to squeeze in here?" wondered Emily.

"Heaven only knows," returned Alice, unable to entirely conceal a trace of growing impatience. "Shall we ..."

"Eric, close the door," commanded Emily.

"Why do you want the door closed?" asked Eric.

"The door would have been closed for an escaping slave. I want to know what that felt like."

Eric reluctantly pushed against the door with his shoulder and it closed with a high-pitched squeak. He turned to Alice, raised his hands and shrugged. Alice returned the gesture, then ran her hand across her mouth to conceal her annoyance over this unnecessary delay.

Inside the storage space, Emily folded her arms protectively across her abdomen. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could make out only the slenderest thread of pale light along one side of the door. Aside from that, it was pitch-dark.

She suddenly knew someone else in the room was inching closer to her. She was being crushed. There was less and less air. She gasped desperately for breath but her chest was being squeezed tighter and tighter. She and the one she carried within her were about to die.

“Eric, open the door!” she screamed. “Let me out!”

Emily’s muffled voice seemed to come from the bottom of a deep well. Startled by this unfamiliar sound in her voice, Eric lunged for the door but it stuck. He tried again but it didn’t budge.

“Open the door!” Emily shrieked. “Open the goddamn door!”

Eric gripped the door handle with both hands, put a foot up against the wall and the door swung open. Emily emerged from the cramped space ashen-faced and shaking. Eric helped her sit down as Alice poured a glass of water and extended it to Alice’s trembling hand.

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “You’re okay now.”

“You had ... a panic attack,” stammered Alice, her voice shaking. “That happened to me once ... on an elevator. I always take ... the stairs now.”

“I’ve never felt that way in my life,” panted Emily as she tried to catch her breath.

“You just weren’t getting enough oxygen, that’s all,” said Eric, speaking slowly to keep his voice under control.

“How could anyone have stayed in there more than a few seconds?” panted Emily, staring into Eric’s eyes.

Keeping a hand on Emily’s shoulder, Eric rose and turned to Alice, anger in his eyes.

“That room should be nailed shut,” he snapped. “What if our ... a child got in there?”

“Yes,” agreed Alice, “that’s the first thing you ... a new owner should do.” She patted her hair and smiled anxiously. “Well, now that things are getting back to normal, perhaps ... this would be a good time to see the studio?”

Emily noticed Alice glancing at her watch and pushed herself up from the chair, but immediately slumped back down. “I’m still wobbly. Why don’t you and Alice go?” Eric shook his head emphatically.

“No, please, go ahead,” insisted Emily. “I’ll be fine in a minute. I’ll catch up with you.”

When Eric still appeared doubtful, Emily stared at him firmly. “Go! I’ll be right behind you. I just need a few more sips of water.” He hesitated another moment before reluctantly handing her the glass of water. When he got to the back door he turned to her, still obviously concerned. She blew him a kiss and winked at him. With a sigh, he walked outside behind Alice.

Now alone, Emily sipped her water, glanced around the room and smiled ruefully to herself. “Emily, Emily,” she heard herself say. But strangely, the sound of her name seemed to come, not from her, but somehow from ... outside of her. She had the sensation of someone whispering to her from a great distance. As she listened intently, her eyes grew heavy. She closed them and a comfortable heaviness at once snugly enveloped her.

A minute passed, perhaps two. Emily once again was sure someone was nearby. But this time, she felt no fear or apprehension. She opened her eyes and saw, as in a dream, a woman standing near her ... the same woman she had spotted in the upstairs window? Yes, it was! Emily again closed her eyes to give the dream time to pass. She opened her eyes again. The woman was still there.

Emily regarded the woman with a calmness that both surprised and assured her. The woman was tall and dark-skinned. Her lithe arms and legs conveyed an abundance of power. She stood with her shoulders back and her chin up in proud defiance. This woman, thought Emily, was a queen ... a queen in tattered rags. She never acknowledged Emily’s presence, but peered off into the distance like she was intent upon catching a glimpse of a place she longed with all her soul to be.

There was a sound like a gust of wind. Emily intuited this was the sound of the woman's voice. She focused with all her might on what the woman was saying and found she could somehow make out every word.

“The color of my skin made me a slave.

Some men thought it their right
to whip my skin and make it bleed.

And whip me they did,
but not once did I cry from the hurt they gave.”

A deep sadness descended like a shroud over Emily. She crossed her arms over her unborn child.

“They owned my body, but never my will.

Then one night when the wind was chill, with my unborn,
I ran from their hickory stave.

There were mountains to cross ...”

Emily wanted to leap up and run from the sense of despair closing round about her, but she felt bolted to the chair, held fast as though bound by manacles.

“... and streams to ford
as northward we followed the drinking gourd
until, guided by candlelight,
we came to this house on an April night.”

Emily cupped her hands over her ears but every word the woman uttered penetrated into her like wind through broken glass.

“They put us inside a little room
with no air to breathe. So here we met our doom.

And they buried our bodies in an unmarked grave.”

The woman fell silent and resumed gazing off to some distant place just as Emily became aware of the sound of Eric’s laughter. She stood up on her shaky legs and willed herself to smile as the door flew open and her husband bounded in.

Emily felt the woman was still in the room. Would Eric and Alice sense her presence too? Knowing Eric would see confusion and sorrow etched across her face and wouldn’t understand, she bent her head down so he wouldn’t see her troubled expression.

“Emily,” he cried out, “the studio is perfect! There’s four skylights and a built-in stereo system!”

Emily glanced back up but immediately lowered her eyes again and so did not see the excitement drain from his face.

“Emily, wait ‘til you see the view from the picture window in the studio,” exclaimed Alice as she entered the kitchen studying her cellphone. “We took a bit longer because we saw this little cemetery from the window and decided to take a closer peek. It was so interesting.”

Emily turned her back to them. Eric touched her shoulder but she didn’t acknowledge him.

“Eric noticed one of the gravestones was unmarked. He mentioned doing some research to find out ... “

At the word “unmarked”, Emily swung back to face them with such anguish that Eric drew back from her. She crumpled into the chair and burst into tears.

Alice dropped her cellphone. “What did I say?”

“Emily, what is it?” said Eric as he stroked her hair. Alice poured another glass of water. She placed it in Eric’s trembling hand and he gave her a sip.

“Maybe we should get her to the emergency room,” said Alice. “This town has an excellent hospital, by the way.”

“Emily, what’s wrong?” pleaded Eric. He peered over his shoulder and appealed to Alice for an answer, but she could only shrug her shoulders helplessly.

“This house,” whispered Emily. “There’s a terrible sadness here. I don’t know why I feel this way, but I do. I ... can’t live here.”

Alice turned away abruptly and glared out the kitchen window.

“I’m sorry, Alice,” said Emily. “I’m sure you’ll sell this house soon to some nice family and they’ll love it. But I can’t ... I can’t ... “

Eric eyes begged her for a reason, but she refused to raise her head or say a word. After several seconds, he stiffly rose to his feet and turned to Alice, who wondered if he were about to be the next one to burst into tears.

“I’m sorry, Alice,” he said, his voice a nearly inaudible whisper, “but I guess ... we’re not interested, after all.”

Alice appeared momentarily stunned, but quickly recovered with her very best professional smile.

“That’s all right!” she exclaimed as though selling houses was just a little game she played. “I’m sure we’ll find one that’s just right for you.

“But I really do have to be going,” she continued as she bent down to pick up her cell phone from the floor. “I have another client I’m planning to see shortly.”

Eric cast his eyes about the room as though trying to find the source of Emily’s distress. “It’s such a beautiful ... home.”

Alice hesitated a moment, then tentatively extended her hand to him, her bracelets jangling. “Yes, it is, isn’t it? Well, I’ll be in touch.”

With that, Eric strode outside without another word.

After a moment, Emily stood up and walked toward the door, rubbing her hands across her middle. She put her hand on the doorknob but then gazed back at the closet by the hearth until Alice cleared her throat. Emily turned to her.

“Would you mind if I stay here for a moment?” asked Emily. Alice gaped at her with a puzzled expression. “Alone?”

With her face grimly set, Alice marched briskly to the door and closed it behind her with a bang. Emily walked gingerly to the center of the room.

She peered intently in the direction of the stately woman as the focus of her eyes shifted from off in the distance to Emily. With solemn dignity, the woman stepped across the room until she was face to face with Emily. Gazing deeply into the eyes of the young mother-to-be, she reached out with both her hands and tenderly touched Emily’s womb. Emily’s moved her hands until her fingertips hovered above the woman’s hands. As sunlight brightens a meadow after rain, a smile gradually radiated over the woman’s face. Without knowing why, Emily smiled.

The woman’s eyes moved slowly around the room. She then proceeded to the door, turned to regard Emily one more time and faded away like morning mist in the sunlight.

As when awakening from a dream, Emily blinked and right away noticed the cut-glass vase by the sink. She went to it and picked it up. She cradled the vase to her, then carried it outside to fill with forsythia.

