The Missing

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 I know what I saw last night, and there is no way he can deny it. When the modern-day Frankenstein pulled up in his black truck, carrying what looked like a dead body into Ms. Julia’s backyard, I knew that I had to find out what was going on in that old mansion next door.

 I was raised to believe that your house is your fortress, to protect it, and keep an eye out for the crazy. I believe that which is why I kept a watchful eye out for our property and concern for the community. We’ve lived in the prestigious gated Greenville Falls suburbs in Greenville, Oklahoma, for twenty years and Tom and I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. The tall, colored pine trees cover the land in autumn diffusing their sweet aroma in the air. In the morning, I sit out front on our grand porch with my coffee and watch the sun rays shine through the pine trees revealing the small herds of deer enjoy their morning graze.

Most of us have lived here for what seems like forever, but last week we lost a staple of the Greenville Falls community, Ms. Julia Charles. Ms. Julia was the oldest resident in our gated community. She lived in the great mansion at the end of the street next to the old Greenville Cemetery. It’s said that her family was one of the original settlers of Greenville, Oklahoma. Ms. Julia was a ninety-five-year-old biracial widow with long gray locs that she would have the nurse braid for her every morning. She loved her garden and only ate fresh fruits and veggies. Ms. Julia had seen so much in her life and every time I was around, she would share her stories with me. Even though she was old, when the nurse found her body lying stiff in her rocking chair at peace, I cried because I knew my friend had moved on.

One day, a big moving truck pulled up in front of Ms. Julia’s house. The four young African Americn movers were strong, their bodies were ripped with muscles, working well together in an organized fashion. They carried someone’s belongings into the house. I watched from my window and saw an African American couple pull up in their all-black Cadillac Escalade and park in Ms. Julia’s driveway. The husband, tall broad shoulders, had a serious look on his face, but seemed sad from afar. The wife, dressed well in all black with long black locs and a small athletic frame, walked like a professional in her stiletto heels towards the front door of the old mansion. I appreciated how they didn’t step in her flower bed but took time to admire it.

“Who are these people?” I asked my husband.

“What’s going on, Karen? Tom asked.

“Look, honey, I don’t recall anyone mentioning Ms. Julia’s house being sold or even being on the market.”

“Karen, get out of the window, they can see you, you know.”

“I don’t care about that, Tom, Julia was my friend, and she hasn’t been gone for a week and someone is already moving into her home. That’s pretty fast, don’t you think?

“Karen, the lady was a hundred years old so let her rest in peace please. Houses that big still have to be paid for, dear. The family probably didn’t have a choice. People can’t afford these old mansions anymore. The best thing to do is sell it and take the inheritance.”

I knew Tom was right. I do remember Ms. Julia showing me old pictures of her son and daughter who passed away years ago. She probably left the old mansion to her grandkids. I wondered if the man I saw last night was related to her. I decided not to say anything to Tom since he thinks I’m just too nosy for my own good.

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 I woke up the next morning feeling lighter, better since mourning the life of my friend. I decided to make my favorite carrot cake for the new neighbors. Once the cake was ready, I wrapped it nicely in saran wrap, put on a nice church dress, and walked down the sidewalk to the old mansion next door. Butterflies filled my stomach as I walked slowly into Ms. Julia’s yard. The colorful butterflies still gather around certain plants and her beautiful rose bushes are still blooming framing her front door. I always wondered how her flowers would bloom even out of season. She would smile and say that she had a special touch and couldn’t give away her family’s secret. I missed seeing her sitting in her rocking chair greeting me with her warm smile, but that was now just a memory. Taking a deep breath, I pulled myself back into reality and reached for the doorbell.

 A tall dark-skinned African American man answered with a cold and stoic look on his face when he looked at me. He was dressed in a black suit with a red tie and shiny black dress shoes. This had to be the man I saw last night, he surely fit the profile. I wonder if he recognized me from watching him in the window last night. His cologne was so sweet, it took hold of my nose. Dear God, he smelled so good, but when I looked into his eyes it was like looking into the eyes of Frankenstein himself. The man looked dead, and alive, at the same time.

 “Can I help you?”

 “Ah, hello sir, my name is Karen Blanch. My husband Tom and I would like to welcome you to the neighborhood.”

 “Yes, thank you. I’m Carl Thomas and my wife is Sherry Thomas. It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Blanch.”

 “I made you my favorite homemade carrot cake as a welcome gift.”

 “Thank you, but I cannot accept it.”

 “Oh, do you not like carrot cake?”

 “I don’t eat other people’s food.”

 “Oh, well maybe your wife would like it. Can I leave it for her?”

 “Mrs. Blanch, I’m a very busy man and I don’t like company, but feel free to come by when my wife is home; she’s the social one. Good day.” Then he slammed the door in my face.

 While I walked back home, I could see him through his front porch window on his phone speaking to someone in an angry manner.

 When I walked into my home, I sat down and took some time to reflect on what just happened. Thinking thoughts like, *how can someone be so rude*? He had to have been the man I saw with the dead body but *was it really a dead body or something else*? He didn’t look anything like Ms. Julia maybe he was one of her great grandkids. I thought about who he could have been talking to on the phone. It looked like he wanted to hurt whoever was on the line. I wondered, what cologne he was wearing because it was intoxicating. I could barely talk; the aroma took over my nose. I couldn’t even be mad at his rudeness at the time because he smelled so good. I wondered *what he did for a living to be dressed like that every day*. Well, he said he was a busy man, so I’ll just wait to speak with his wife. I don’t have anything else to do but watch *Matlock,* plus Carl said the Sherry was the social one.

 Later after *Matlock* ended, I saw a black Cadillac sedan pull into Ms. Julia’s driveway. It must have been Sherry. She slowly got out of the car and wore a sophisticated black dress with red high heeled shoes, ruby red jewelry, and a red and black handbag. She was on the phone when she opened the front door and accidentally dropped her keys. She looked like she had a long day at the office and would definitely love some homemade carrot cake. I threw on my dress and shoes, grabbed the cake from the kitchen and walked over before the sunset.

 “Hello,” said with a smile. “You must be Mrs. Blanch.”

 “Hi, Yes, I am Karen. I came by earlier today to welcome you and your husband to the neighborhood. He seemed very busy and a bit angry but suggested that I come back over when you were home.”

 “Yes, that’s Carl, he’s the serious one, all work and no play. He doesn’t like company very much. Please come in.”

 The home seemed so familiar to me, but different and cold. As I entered into the front door, the floors had been restored and the wood seemed polished. It smelled like sweet lemon grass and honey. There were incents burning on the coffee tables and the curtains were replace with neutral color ones. The old furniture was cleaned and restored and rearranged in the formal dining room to the right and the left of the front walkway. Beautiful pictures of Ms. Julia in her youth were hung on the wall in new frames. A grand painting of her in the early 1900s with a flourishing garden in the background was place in the formal dining room on the right side of the foyer for anyone to see. Black candles of different lengthens were lit throughout the front hallway. It seemed magical inside the home and somehow, I could feel Ms. Julia’s presence.

 “I love what you all have done to the place. It is so beautiful in here.”

Sherry looked back at me with a surprised look on her face.

 “Thank you so much, Carl is not taking Mama Julia’s death well, this helps to keep him calm and gives him space to grieve.

 “I made my favorite homemade carrot cake as a gift; I hope you like it.”

 “Oh, thank you, but you shouldn’t have.”

 “It’s okay, I love to bake them, it’s my signature gift for friends and family. Everyone knows me for my famous carrot cake.”

 “Well, can I get you anything?

 “No, I’m fine, I just wanted to meet you all and say hello.”

 “Okay well please have a seat. I’m just getting home from a long day at the office.”

 “Oh, where do you work?

 “Carl and I own the funeral home in town.”

 “Oh really, how long have you been in the death business?”

 “It’s been about twenty years now. It was Carl’s father’s business and we inherited it.”

 “Oh, so he has been in the business all his life then.”

 “Yes, and he loves it. Something about the dead bodies and the quiet, I think he finds soothing.”

 “Interesting. Sherry, you know being here inside this beautiful old mansion really brings back so many lovely memories of my friend.”

 “Karen, you knew Mama Julia?”

 “I did, she was a kind and sweet old woman. She had a place in my heart.”

 “That is so nice to know, Karen. Mama Julia was Carl’s great aunt; she left this old mansion to him and everything in it. He was her favorite.”

 “Really, I don’t remember her ever speaking of him.”

 “Yeah, she was a very secretive woman, she would only tell you what she wanted you to know. That’s how old black women were back in the day. They were masters at putting on a good face for white folk, you know, for their own protection.”

 “Well, I enjoyed spending time with her and helping her in the garden.”

 While Sherry and I sat in the front room talking a door that led to Ms. Julia’s lower level opened and Carl stepped out with an angry grim look on his face. He was wiping his hands on a rag that was filled with what looked like blood. I was frozen with terror as he walked towards us. He just started screaming and the look on Sherry’s face suddenly changed, she seemed to be just as scared as I was.

 “Carl, honey, are you okay?

 “Sherry, why is this nosy white woman in my aunt’s house again?

 “Carl, I am sorry I thought you said she could come by when I got home. Please don’t do this in front of company.”

 “Company, I don’t like or want any company in my house.”

Sherry looked my way and said with fear in her voice.

 “Karen, you have to go. Thank you so much for the cake and conversation, but Carl is not taking Mama Julia’s death well today. Please go and don’t come back.”

Sherry walked me to the door and shut it behind me. I stood there on the porch listening to him yell and then Sherry screamed. A loud banging noise hit the front wall of the house. Suddenly, everything went quiet, and all the lights turned off. Using the streetlights to walk safely home, I couldn’t believe Carl. He’s like a Frankenstein monster for sure. He just snapped at us, and I know he probably hurt Sherry. I couldn’t see her through the front porch window.

When I arrive to my house shortly after, I had to sit down on my porch to calm my nerves. I just can’t believe what just happened. I had to find out what happened to Sherry and what she did to deserve such treatment from her husband. I can’t imagine living with a man with such rage. How is it that this man was Ms. Julia’s favorite, that I will never understand. I was so shaken by what happened I could barely sleep. I thought about telling Tom, but I didn’t want to hear him say what he always says to me “Karen, mind your own business.” I don’t want to mind my own business; I want to find out what happened to Sherry Thomas. *Is she okay? Did her husband hit her after she walked me out the front door? What was that loud banging noise that I heard outside on the porch? Did he throw something at her? Did she pass out on the floor and he just left her there?*

So many thoughts ran through my head. Sherry was so kind to me. How can such a kind person be married to such a monster? I know opposites attract but this man is downright crazy. I turned the TV on to distract my thoughts but all I could find were horror stories and Halloween specials. I just can’t believe this is happening in Ms. Julia’s old mansion right next door. I reached for the remote, turned off the screen, and closed my eyes to sleep.

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 I was so angry, I could feel my heart beating through my chest. Sherry knew that the family had just lost our matriarch and she is upstairs entertaining white folks. Why is it that I am always the one who has to play the bad guy in this family. Running the funeral home is no easy job. I also have to prepare the bodies in the ways of our customs and get them ready for her return. Since Mama Julia resurrected me from the earth, I can’t seem to control the emotions in this body. Just getting up and out of bed hurts, I get headaches too. But I have to make sure everything is right for her return. I have seen Karen, watching me at night through her window, but I don’t know why. Who is the lady and what does she want with my family? I noticed how in her home she doesn’t do much and she has too many large windows. Anyone can look straight through to the other side of her place. She is bored and lonely. Her husband is always gone playing golf with the gentlemen in the Greenville club house. Sherry said that she was good friends with Mama Julia and that she used to visit her every day. I guess I was a little mean to her, but I don’t want her snooping around here because she could easily see something or get hurt. Tonight, is the night that we will bring Mama Julia back to life and reclaim our power. Greenville will never be the same again. I have collected the perfect body for her to reside in and then her third life will start.

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 When I woke the next day, I thought about Sherry and wondered if she was okay. I thought about calling the police but I knew that Tom would be upset about it, so I called a friend from church who’s a detective on the Greenville Police force. He listened to me and gave me some good advice. He said that I needed to have solid proof of foul play before accusing someone of murder.

 That night I decided to check on things myself, I waited until Tom was good and sleep. I snuck out of the back door to the neighbors. I opened the back gate to Ms. Julia’s house and snuck into the side by the garage. Carl was up late in the basement. I heard him talking to someone. As I walked closer to the back door of the basement, I heard a voice. It was Sherry’s voice. I got close to the basement window and watched them. Sherry didn’t have on any make up, her eyes glowed with hard dark rings around them. Sherry’s skin was rotten, her nose was gone, and her mouth was like a skeleton. She held down a body on a flat metal table and Carl started to recite some type of chant, while waving his hands over the body. He dipped his hands in blood and wrote a symbol on the chest of the body wrapped in cloth. Suddenly it started to move. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Carl wasn’t killing people he was bringing them back to life, just like his wife Sherry, she was a zombie.