

**A M E R I C A N
H O M E M A K E R**

J O H N K A I N E

Published by John Kaine
ISBN: 9781916488410

Copyright © John Kaine, 2018. All rights reserved.

Book design by Guido Henkel

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the author.

This work is registered with the UK Copyright Service

For Charmaine

ONE

Montpelier, Vermont

KIM LOOMIS SCANNED THE FACES OF THE ASSEMBLED members of the fledgling Homemakers Association of Vermont (HAV): Brooke Draper, Paige Gardner, and Megan Hawkins. Kim was the association's founder and self-appointed president, and had made a promise to all three women that elections for the post would be held as membership—by invitation only—increased. And she was waiting for an answer to her question: What was the best method for cleaning a dirty microwave? She stood, hands on her hips. The silence in the great room of Loomis Hall grew as the homemakers pondered the answer.

The women were gathered at the head of a long table, their steaming peppermint tea forgotten. An oil-on-canvas gilt-framed portrait of Martha Stewart watched from her perch above the fireplace. The great room was paneled in dark wood from floor to ceiling, and the lights recessed in the walls burned even during the day. The hammerbeam trusses were crafted from Douglas fir, and Megan recalled Kim explaining with obvious relish how the frames were constructed with mortise and tenon joints, secured with hardwood pegs. Megan didn't know what mortise and tenon

joints were, and didn't care. She just wished she'd thought to have them installed in her own home first.

Megan had accepted the invitation to join HAV out of simple curiosity. The homemaking skills they were discussing, and supposedly mastering, were performed by her domestic help. She employed two cleaners, a gardener, and a housekeeper, information she felt no pressing need to share with anyone, least of all the Loomis woman. Who did she think she was, anyway? And why was she dressed in a red Chanel mini dress with crew neckline? And Christian Louboutin nude Pigalle heels? What kind of homemaker dressed in such godless fashion? Kim was a mortician and should wear clothes befitting one. It was undignified, strutting around in whore heels and sullyng her profession with her big-brand slutty short dress. What must her husband, Norman, think when she left the house looking like a Rodeo Drive bimbo? Did Kim think she was superior because she had a job and earned her own money? Megan supported her husband with his business ventures, and surely that was worth paying for. Was that the main reason she disliked the Loomis woman? The way she flaunted her success was...unseemly. Yes, that was the word she was looking for. *Unseemly*. Kim Loomis had the confidence of the self-made woman, and Megan Hawkins didn't like it.

She *had* been curious about the Loomis woman's little club, but Megan hadn't expected to become firm friends with Brooke and Paige. Brooke was twenty-five and Paige was a year older. They were both sincere in their efforts to become better homemakers. The Loomis woman on the other hand...she hadn't figured out who Kim was yet.

"Okay," Kim said, "let me explain how I do it. The best method for cleaning a dirty microwave is to fill a bowl halfway with water, add a tablespoon or two of white vinegar, turn the microwave on for six minutes, then use paper towels to wipe down the inside. Wash the glass turntable either in the sink or dishwasher. And there you

have it—a tried-and-true method for cleaning your microwave.”

Paige and Brooke applauded. Megan sniffed hard and folded her arms across her chest. She shifted in the chair and glanced around the great room. Again, she was struck by the idea that all of this was owned by the young confident woman presiding over them. It had hurt her in ways she couldn't articulate when Brooke and Paige had applauded. Did her friends aspire to emulate Kim? Perhaps. And why wouldn't they? Miss Chanel mini dress worked *and* she was a homemaker. Megan couldn't accept that Kim could take the vocation of homemaking seriously *and* work. To do anything well you had to commit yourself fully to the task.

“I use lemons,” Megan said, and a hush fell in the great room. “I cut the lemon in half, place the two halves face down in a little water on a plate. A tablespoon should be enough. Turn the microwave on for a minute to get the lemon hot, and a little steam will build up. Clean the inside with kitchen paper and wash the turntable in the sink. I find that washing by hand gives you the assurance you've cleaned it properly. Also, lemon smells better than vinegar.” Megan settled into the chair, hands intertwined on her midriff, satisfied, like a lioness after a successful hunt.

The silence was broken by spontaneous applause from Brooke and Paige. Kim stared at her, a weak smile gathering strength on her mouth. Then she began to applaud, too. Megan was stunned.

“Very good, Meg,” Kim said. “We're so grateful to have the benefit of your experience.”

What does she mean? Megan thought. *Is she saying I'm old?*

“Whatever suits you guys,” Kim said. “Or whatever agrees with your olfactory senses, go with it. In honor of our senior member, let's have some banana cake.”

She's doing it on purpose. Megan was furious. *She just called me old right to my face...Bitch.*

TWO

The Hamptons, Long Island, New York

MELODY MORGAN DRAGGED THE BODY ACROSS THE PALE marble floor. The heels of the dead man's shoes squeaked in a rapidly spreading pool of blood, leaving twin tracks in his wake.

She dug her heels into the slippery marble and leaned her weight backward to move the hedge-fund manager she'd shot seconds earlier. She wished she hadn't worn the blue velvet Manolo Blahnik high heels on this job. Now the stilettos would have to be burned. A fine spray of blood dotted the crystal-embellished buckles on both shoes. She considered going barefoot—it would be easier to haul the corpse to the utility room—but was afraid she'd leave her DNA behind even after she cleaned up. There was always a chance she'd miss a spot.

If there'd been curtains on the large bay window she wouldn't have bothered moving the body. But anyone passing in a truck on Meadow Lane could see over the tall hedges that bordered the property. What kind of people didn't have drapes? The kind who wanted to display the enormous chandelier that hung from the living-room ceiling...what the hedge-fund manager and his ilk would no

doubt call a *drawing* room. Whatever the case, the house was unusual in that it wasn't set far back from the road like the others along the five-mile stretch of billionaires' row.

Sweating, legs apart, black dress riding high on her thighs, Melody gripped his wrists and pulled. She reminded herself that she'd trained for such a contingency. All those hours in the gym had been worth it. If things went wrong, manual labor could put them right again. Moving dead bodies was hard work. Charles Shaker must weigh two hundred and fifty pounds. At least. Her neck and back muscles strained, and Shaker's suit whispered on the polished marble.

In the foyer, an ornate staircase meandered high up toward the upper floors. She concentrated, sensing she was nearing the utility room. Progress was slow, and Shaker seemed to have gained thirty pounds since she'd started dragging him.

Earlier

Melody parked the white Chevrolet Express cargo van outside the Shaker residence, despite the NO PARKING signs spread at intervals on the grass verge; most of the mansions on Meadow Lane had them. The road wasn't busy. She'd sat there for twenty minutes and not a single vehicle passed her in either direction. Of course, that didn't mean a car wouldn't drive by while she was inside. She couldn't see the house; she was parked right next to the tall, full hedges, collecting her thoughts. Even after twenty-six successfully executed contracts, she wasn't immune to nerves. It was a positive sign. If she wasn't nervous, she was getting complacent, which would increase her chances of making a mistake. In her line of work, mistakes sent people to prison for life.

She unlatched the glove compartment and removed the keys and a fob for the gate that her client had given her. She started the engine and rolled slowly up to the white gates,

then pressed a button on the fob. The short driveway led her past boxwood shrubs in large terracotta pots. The white shingled façade of the residence gleamed in the early-morning July sun. The windows were sandwiched between black shutters, and as she took in the details of the mansion, Sammy nuzzled her hand.

She patted the pug on the head and caressed his dark face. “Okay, Sam, I have to work. I won’t be long so be a good boy while Mommy keeps us in fine dog treats. Understand?” Sammy tilted his head. “Sure you do. Be good and I’ll take you for a walk later.”

Sammy’s ears twitched at the promise and his wet tongue flapped with excitement.

She opened the driver’s and passenger windows halfway and went to the rear of the van, slid two rolls of thick-gauge polyethylene plastic sheeting from underneath the sanitary bulk-handling truck, and dropped a roll of duct tape and some scissors into the wide pocket on the front of her yellow-and-black cleaning smock. The decal above her breast, SPIC N SPAN CLEANING, matched the one on both sides of the van. Melody thought it was as good a ruse as any. Who noticed the cleaner?

She stretched a blue hairnet over her head, the kind worn by surgeons, tucked the blonde strands under the elastic folds, and went inside.

She hurried through the foyer and power walked further into the house. After she’d found the utility room behind the kitchen, she unrolled the plastic sheeting and looked up at the ceiling. It was higher than usual.

She returned to the van to retrieve a stepladder. As high as the ceiling was, Melody knew from previous experience that blood spatter could find its way into the most unlikely places.