

THE FOURTH MAN

It was Thanksgiving, and Amanda Patrick's stomach twisted with terror. Was she being chased by a serial killer? Blackmailed by one of her terrible Tinder dates?

No. She was forty-freaking-two years old and having a panic attack about bringing her fiancé home to meet her mother.

Charles navigated across Burbank to her mother's neighborhood at the base of the Verdugo Mountains. Amanda twisted the two-carat diamond solitaire around her ring finger a few times, then swallowed hard and peered over at him.

How had she gotten so lucky?

Charles Marsden was gorgeous, from his thick brown hair to his square jaw and sculpted chest. And those sapphire blue eyes. He could have been a model or an actor, but instead he raised funds for children's charities. She'd met him just eight months ago at a networking event for development officers. And even though he was way out of her league, he'd wanted her. After one bad marriage and countless worse dates, she'd finally found The One.

If her mother didn't screw it up.

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The sun had just set when Charles slid his black Audi to the curb in front of Amanda's childhood home. The house, a white brick rectangle with a flat roof and wide picture windows, looked the same as it had thirty years ago—except for the alarm company sign on the lawn and the lack of any shrub over two feet tall.

Charles' keys jangled as he pulled them from the ignition and reached for the door handle.

Amanda put a hand on his arm. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Before you meet her, I need to prepare you.”

“She’s your mom. She could have three heads and eight arms, and it wouldn’t matter. She raised you. She must be wonderful.”

Amanda blushed like a teenager. “You’re so sweet.” She took a slow yoga breath, and the coils in her stomach relaxed. Sort of. “After Dad died, Mom hardly ate or showered. She stopped taking care of the house, stopped going anywhere.”

“That’s understandable. She and your dad were close, right?”

“Very.” And her mother never let her forget it. “She’s been better lately. I haven’t had to help her as much.” Good thing, since she’d been spending so much time with Charles. When was the last time she’d been here? Three weeks ago? Four? “But she still won’t go out, and she has lights and cameras everywhere, and—”

“Honey, your father was murdered. Of course she’s afraid.”

Charles was always so empathetic. Maybe he’d accept her mother’s eccentricities.

But what if he didn’t? Amanda loved her mother, but Victoria Patrick was... a lot. “She’s past afraid and well into paranoid. She’s drinking more, and she’s started sleeping with my dad’s pistol under her pillow. And she’s... let’s just say she has no filter.”

The last time Amanda brought a guy home, her mother told him she hired a private investigator to “look into him a little,” then accused him to his face of being a gold digger.

He ghosted Amanda the next day.

Charles reached across the console and hugged her. “I promise I won’t freak out, no matter what your mom does.”

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As soon as they stepped onto her mother's property, motion-sensing floodlights lit the yard as bright as high noon. Amanda groaned. "See what I mean?"

Charles chuckled. "I hope her neighbors have blackout curtains."

The front door opened, and her mother posed like she'd mistaken her porch for a runway. Light winked off the thigh-length sequined jacket of her champagne-colored pantsuit.

"Mandy! Get up here and give your mama a hug." Her mother's voice, still high and girlish and Georgia-accented, carried across the empty yard.

Amanda trudged up the concrete walk, stepped onto the porch, and was immediately enveloped in her mother's thin arms and thick cloud of Chanel No. 5.

Her mother released her and twirled under the porch lights. "Like my new outfit? Don't I look like the perfect mother of the bride?"

Amanda almost smiled. "You look gorgeous."

She did. Her lightly-made-up face glowed, and her chin-length silver hair was still as thick and wavy as a Hollywood ingenue's. Only her gold horse-head cane and dowager's hump hinted at her actual age. If Marilyn Monroe had lived to be eighty-one, she'd have looked like Victoria Patrick.

Too bad Amanda took after her father's side of the family, or as she thought of it, the B-side: brown hair, brown eyes, B-cups, and boring.

Her mother interrupted the familiar rumination. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your fiancé?"

"Yes, I am." The words came out too loud and proud, but she didn't care. "Mom, this is Charles."

Her mother extended her hand like a *débutante*, her gnarled fingers ending in nails painted metallic gold. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Charles. I’m Victoria Patrick.”

He took her hand, and she held it an extra moment as she studied his face. “You have the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

Was her mother seriously flirting with her fiancé? Amanda fought the urge to drag Charles back to the car. Instead she gripped his hand, and they followed her mother into the house.

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“Mom, the house looks incredible.” It did. The living room, dining room, and kitchen were spotless, from polished oak floors to cobweb-free beam-and-board ceilings. The dining table gleamed under the chandelier, its polished teak surface bisected by an off-white linen runner scattered with mini pumpkins, silk autumn leaves, and tea lights. Martha Stewart had nothing on Victoria Patrick. She’d even used her wedding china.

And set the table for four people.

“Well, thank you, sweetie. I’ve been feeling better lately, like I have a purpose again.”

Charles strolled into the dining room. “You have a beautiful home.”

Her mother flashed him a high-wattage Hollywood smile. “Thank you. David and I bought it in 1962 for twenty-four thousand dollars. It’s worth two million now.”

Charles seemed unfazed by her mother’s crassness. “My parents bought a few years later in La Cañada for just under twenty. It’s hard to imagine prices like that now.”

Her mother deposited a bottle of Chardonnay on the table and poured two glasses. Then she retrieved a lowball glass from the kitchen island, half full of what Amanda knew was Johnny Walker Black and maybe three drops of water.

“What happened here?” Charles fingered an inch-wide pockmark marring the Wedgwood

blue accent wall.

Amanda elbowed him, but it was too late.

“That’s a bullet hole.”

“I’d be happy to repair it for you, Mrs. Pat—”

“No.” Her mother took a gulp of her drink. Its single ice cube clinked against the tumbler.

“I keep that hole as a reminder. I assume Mandy told you what happened to my David.”

“She told me he was murdered.”

Amanda picked up her wineglass. “How about a toast—”

“A year ago last Christmas, four men busted through that door”—she waved her cane at the front entry—“wearing ski masks. They pointed guns at us and demanded to know where we kept the jewelry. Seems they’d seen me wearing the Orlov Pink at one of David’s movie premieres. He gave it to me for our fiftieth anniversary, bought it at a Christie’s auction for twelve million.”

“Mom, it’s tacky to—”

“I gave them every jewel in the house, but we’d stored the Orlov in the safe in David’s office. Three of them were willing to leave with what they got. The fourth one, he got right up in my face, screaming how he’d kill me if I didn’t tell him where that necklace was. He damn near tore the house apart looking for it. Finally, he gave up. The other three left, but that fourth one, well, he made it as far as the doorway, then he turned around and started firing. I got hit in the shoulder, fell down and played dead next to David. David wasn’t playing.”

Her voice hitched once with perfect dramatic timing, but her pain was real, and Amanda knew it.

“He couldn’t have thought we could identify them, not with them wearin’ those masks. He was just mad he didn’t get what he came for.” She picked up her glass and downed its contents in

three gulps. “He’s still out there. He’s the only one who wasn’t caught. But he didn’t get the Orlov, and he never will.”

She carried her glass to the kitchen. Amanda scurried after her and found her with the bottle of whiskey in her hand. “Mom, wait. Let me fix you a club soda instead, you know, with a wedge of lime the way you like it.”

Her mother filled the glass halfway and added a splash of water from the tap. “Am I embarrassing you?”

“Kind of, yeah. You’ve just met Charles, and already you’re telling him all about—”

“Your father. I’m telling him about your father, Amanda Jean.” She sucked down half the drink, then reached for the bottle to top it off.

Amanda snatched it away. “Let’s just have dinner, okay?”

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Amanda’s mother behaved all through dinner and most of dessert. She’d installed Charles at the foot of the table, invited him to carve the turkey—“that nice little market downtown” had delivered it, along with the stuffing, mashed potatoes, and Brussels sprouts. She kept her stories nonviolent and only a little cringey, telling Charles all about growing up in Valdosta, leaving home at sixteen to “make it in the moving pictures,” and getting roles in B-movie Westerns. “I was Annie Oakley with double-Ds,” she said, striking a pose as she passed out slices of pumpkin pie. Charles laughed. Amanda almost did too.

They ate their pie in silence for a few minutes, then her mother asked Charles, “Did Mandy tell you how I met David?”

No. Please no.

“I was co-starring in *The Terrors of Tombstone*. David’s father was the producer, and we

met at the premiere. It was love at first sight for both of us. Everyone thought I married him for his money, but that was bullshit.”

“Mom—”

“I married him because I loved him, and he loved me.”

Amanda waited for Charles’ reaction to the inevitable next line.

“And that bastard killed him.”

Charles reached around his wine glass and took her mother’s left hand in both of his. “Mrs. Patrick, I’m sorry. I can only imagine how hard it is for you.” He glanced at the empty chair at the head of the table, then back at her. “Especially today. Thank you for sharing your story with me.”

Warmth spread through Amanda’s chest. He was so perfect.

Her mother patted Charles’ hands. “I can see why Mandy likes you so much.”

Charles rose and gathered their pie plates. Amanda and her mother started to stand, but he stopped them. “Please, you two relax. I’ll take care of the dishes.”

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“See, Mom, isn’t he wonderful?” Amanda was gushing—*gushing* for God’s sake—while she sipped coffee, her mother nursed another whiskey, and Charles hand-washed the china and stemware.

Her mother propped her elbows on the table and leaned in. “You’re really crazy about him, aren’t you?”

“And I thought I was being so subtle.”

“I’m the actress in the family, remember?”

Like she could forget. “At least I’m not settling.” Every time she’d brought a man home, her mother had accused her of settling. “Wait for your soulmate,” she’d said. Like soulmates stood

around on SoCal street corners, waiting to be scooped up by middle-aged B-list women.

Her mother didn't respond right away. When she did, she seemed to choose her words carefully. "There's a sparkle in your eyes I haven't seen in years. I don't think you're settling."

"Now that's a freakin' miracle."

"Honey, I just want you to have the kind of love your father and I had."

A year ago, Amanda would have insisted that kind of love only existed in movies and her mother's mind. Now she knew better.

Charles appeared behind her and rested warm hands on her shoulders. "Dishes are all done."

She craned her neck to look up at him. "You're an angel. Ready to go?"

#

They spent the next ten minutes on a ping-pong of pleasantries—thanks for dinner, let's get together again soon, did you hear about cousin what's-his-nose's divorce. They'd made it as far as the front door when Amanda's mother said to Charles, "Wait a minute. I'd like to give you something. It was my husband's."

"Mom, what—"

She held up a hand. "It's a surprise." Her mother turned and stumped down the bedroom hallway, the tip of her cane thudding on the oak floorboards.

When she was out of earshot, Charles asked, "What's she going to give me?"

Amanda shrugged. "I have no idea. Maybe my dad's cuff links or something. Wait, no, the robbers took those."

Before she could speculate further, her mother returned and posed in the dining room, one hand on her cane, the other under her sequined jacket—and the seventy-two-carat Orlov pink

diamond glittering at her throat.

Amanda's mouth dropped open. Before she could comment, her mother withdrew her hand from under the jacket. Her gnarled fingers with their metallic gold nails curled around David Patrick's pearl-handled pistol.

She dropped her cane, raised the gun with both hands, and fired a single shot into Charles' chest.

#

Charles toppled backward against the door, twitched twice, and lay still.

What the—?

Amanda dropped to her knees in a spreading pool of blood and seized his face with both hands. "Charles! Oh, my God, Charles!"

"Don't bother, he's dead." Her mother's voice came from behind her, still high and girlish but as cold as the ice cube in her whiskey glass.

Amanda let go of Charles. She turned and stared up at her mother. Victoria Patrick's once-beautiful mouth was set in a satisfied smile.

Amanda's stomach heaved. She swallowed hard to hold down the half-digested feast. Her brain stuttered, finally producing a single word. "Why?"

"He was the fourth man."

Fourth man? Fourth m—

Oh. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.

"You think Charles was one of the robbers who--"

"Shot us. And then he found another way to get his hands on the Orlov. Or thought he did. I wonder if he would've waited for me to die of natural causes or..."

Not just paranoid. Full-on delusional. Amanda tried to reason with her anyway. “They wore masks, Mom. How could you recognize someone who wore a ski mask?”

“When you told me you were engaged, I had that PI look into him a little. Turns out Charles Marsden didn’t exist till two years ago.”

“So? Maybe he changed his name because he had a stalker or something.”

“No, baby. I knew who he was the second I met him.” She set the gun on the entry table, bent, and pushed his eyelids closed. “I could never forget those eyes.”