

BEHIND THE NEIGHBOR'S DOOR

BONUS SCENE: JUSTIN (THE PAST)

by Winter K. Willis

**(*WARNING: THIS SCENE CONTAINS SPOILERS FOR
BEHIND THE NEIGHBOR'S DOOR BY WINTER K. WILLIS)**

I sit at the elegantly set dining table, the china and silver gleaming under the warm glow of the setting sun that sneaks in through the half-drawn curtains of my parent's dining room. The smell of roasted chicken and baked potatoes is almost comforting, but a fluttering in my stomach has little to do with hunger. Across from me are my parents, Mom with her kind, worried eyes, and Dad, solid and reassuring with a gaze that never misses a thing.

We're eating, the clinking of cutlery the only sound that fills the spaces between us until a thud from upstairs breaks the rhythm. Mom's eyes flicker upwards, a silent question in her glance, but she's quick to refocus on the moment, on me.

"So, there's something I've been wanting to discuss," I venture, trying to sound more nonchalant than I feel. "I've met someone."

The fork halts its journey to Mom's mouth, and I can see the edges of her concern, even as she tries to mask it. Dad, ever the stoic, just watches me with those hawk-like eyes of his.

“That’s wonderful, honey. But these things, they need time,” Mom says, her voice tight with a worry that she can’t quite hide.

Dad agrees, his voice echoing the sentiment. “Justin, your mother is correct. Good things shouldn’t be rushed.”

Another thud interrupts us, this one louder, like a muffled warning. Mom’s composure flickers, but she’s a master at keeping her emotions at bay.

I press on, my own resolve firming. “I know, but with Georgia... it feels different. I really think she’s the one.”

Mom’s grip on her napkin tightens, the white linen creasing in her hands. “We just don’t want you to get hurt, moving too quickly.”

Her concern is like a palpable thing, filling the room, but before I can offer any reassurances, a scream shatters the calm from upstairs. Without a fuss, Mom excuses herself with a practiced grace, leaving me alone with Dad.

“Justin, your mother, she worries,” Dad starts, his voice a low rumble of calm in the sudden storm of the evening. “It’s her way of showing love.”

I nod, searching his face for some sign of what I should do, some guidance.

“But I want you to know that I’m proud of you,” he continues, and I feel a weight lift at his words. “Proud that you’re taking this step, proud that you’re willing to open your heart.”

His hand covers my shoulder, a silent but strong endorsement of my choice. It’s a rare, unguarded moment between us, one that I cling to.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, the relief clear in my voice. “It means a lot to hear you say that.”

There is a bloodcurdling scream from upstairs, followed by a loud thud, then silence. My Dad and I continue the conversation.

“Life’s about taking chances, son,” Dad says, nodding sagely. “And it sounds to me like Georgia might just be a chance worth taking.”

We sit there, just the two of us, as I let his words sink in. Then Mom is back, her smile a touch strained, but her poise never faltering.

“Now, tell us everything about this Georgia,” she says, settling back into her chair as though nothing had happened. As she smiles at me, I notice a few specks of blood on her face, blood that is not her own. My Dad follows my eyes and uses his napkin to wipe it off for her.

I dive into how I met Georgia, hoping to bridge any gaps of worry with my conviction. Maybe, if everything goes well, she’ll be sitting at this table someday with us.