

Haunted
By Demeter

“After some moments she began to perceive that the floor was all covered over with clotted blood, on which lay the bodies of several dead women, ranged against the walls. (These were all the wives whom Bluebeard had married and murdered, one after another.)”

Charles Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (Paris, 1697).

Oct. 12, 2007

Once upon a time...

His excitement rose as he watched the silver Jeep come to a halt near the yellow tape where police personnel had already gathered, keeping a small number of onlookers at bay.

His eyes never left the woman who emerged from the vehicle, his breathing growing heavier. She was walking up the stairs to the old house, a building like something out of a Grimm fairy tale, as if with a sense of trepidation. He could feel the reluctance practically pouring off of her, though her steps seemed determined to a casual observer.

He could feel what she felt. Because the woman was his.

He imagined her walking down the narrow hallways where techs would already be busy looking for DNA they wouldn't find.

Had they told her it was him? Or would she walk onto the scene obliviously, freezing, her breath catching when she saw what he had left for her? When would she figure out the clues? This house, the oriel window like Rapunzel's tower? He had no doubt that she would, eventually.

He rubbed his hands together in anticipation, his palms sweaty now.

This was the best moment, in some ways even better than the killing.

There wasn't a whole lot to see, just her silhouette. He hadn't bothered with any of the high tech surveillance equipment he owned; this close to the crime scene, it was too dangerous, though he would have loved to see her face at this moment.

Looking down at the growing commotion on the street, he found himself momentarily distracted when his eyes caught on a flash of rusty-red hair. His lips curled into a disdainful smile. The silly reporter girl was pushing hard to become part of the circle the inspector and her friends had created, but he was quite sure that she wouldn't get very far – Lindsay Boxer wasn't known for indulgence.

Maybe she'd enjoy the younger woman's hero worship; she was human after all. He knew how that felt, too. Billy had been useful so far.

This momentary distraction would all be forgotten the moment he came out of hiding and revealed himself to her.

From that moment on, Lindsay would only see him.

Happily Ever After...

The first hint of daylight was just appearing outside, beginning to chase away the night when Lindsay woke in vaguely familiar surroundings. Not home. For a peaceful, deceptive moment she thought she was still back in Texas at her grandparents', until the full impact of reality hit her once again. Her home was *gone*.

Erased in an explosion that had killed a man, and had nearly taken the life of one of her best friends and a colleague.

Her thoughts were strangely detached from any feeling, like broken pieces of a mirror, until they came together to form a picture that led to the same reaction she'd felt the moment she'd seen his name on that paper; a nausea so profound it made her stomach clench painfully. Trying to breathe through it, she waited for it to subside slowly, though some of the queasiness remained.

Lindsay had tried to be sensible about her reaction to the true identity of Pete Raynor, not spend an inappropriate length of time in the shower trying to wash off the touch of a man who had blood on his hands, but she hadn't entirely succeeded, and she knew it.

These weren't the best conditions to convince Tom that she was back and handling the case, but she would anyway. If her vision kept blurring just now, it didn't mean anything but anger; at Kiss-Me-Not who had played her so well all these years, and mostly at herself, for letting it happen.

A gentle touch to her waist made her flinch. "Good morning," Cindy whispered, and Lindsay noted that it sounded more like a question. Oh well. Waking up with Cindy beside her made it a good one, no matter how much in shambles the rest of her life might be – literally.

Cindy snuggled closer. Lindsay turned to her, pulling her close, though the first startling impulse had been to draw away. "I didn't know you were awake."

"I could sense that you were," Cindy said as if it was the most normal thing ever. "I guess it's not appropriate to ask if you're okay?" she added somewhat sadly.

"I am for now." It wasn't exactly a lie, but Lindsay wondered if she could ever put her fairly desolate state of mind into words. Here and now was the only safe space left for her, and still she felt like she didn't deserve it. Cindy's undeniable love for her was the last reassurance she had that she wasn't somehow cursed; she needed her close, needed to touch her, and at the same time, she couldn't stand it.

It wasn't rational. Lindsay acknowledged wryly that she hadn't been that rational in a while, but if being a little crazy helped to finally stop a monster, then so be it.

"It's a start," Cindy said. Leaning just a bit closer, Lindsay savored a moment of not feeling completely sick of herself. It would have to do for a while.

The hunt was on again.

Only the stakes had become much higher.

Act I

2003, Easter

The first love: In the end, she wasn't worthy, but he gave her a worthy ending anyway. She stared up at him with a mixture of pain, fear, and a small residue of anger. Sarah didn't believe she was going to die.

Calmly, he made stitch by stitch, sewing her lips shut, her tears feeling warm against his cold fingers. It was an unusually cold night for April. Easter in six days.

Resurrection.

Not for Sarah Rice, though.

Her eyes widened when he picked up the silver rope. She knew what it was for. Now she believed.

Lilacs were for the first love, so he bedded her in them before he tightened the rope around her neck.

He sat in the pew, a churchgoer like everyone else, a wolf among sheep. He hadn't really expected to see the inspector here, a pleasant surprise. He frowned at the sight of the man squeezing her hand briefly, then a smile glittered over his face when he saw the older woman sitting beside the man, shooting daggers with her gaze for whatever reason.

Hypocrites they all were.

He had already established that she, definitely, was not. He could read her body language like a book; she didn't want to be here at the Easter service where they would mourn Sarah, but instead going over the crime scene again, huddle in the morgue with the ME to rehash every single detail, trying to figure out the clues.

She was a worthy opponent. He'd be her first serial killer, although she didn't know that yet.

She was going to, all in good time.

From now on, he wouldn't let her out of his sight.

"What a way to die."

Inspector Margaret Snow stepped down onto the partially opened concrete foundation to take a closer look at the dead body, wincing at a twinge in her back. She could have taken more sick days, but sitting around in her apartment that didn't really feel like home yet, had her slowly going crazy. Aside from that, she'd been motivated to get back to work for a variety of reasons. Not all of them had to do with closing cases.

"Let's hope you weren't alive when they put you down there."

Early in their shift, construction workers had detected rifts in the concrete after a wide-bucket excavator had ablated more of the ground nearby. When they realized that what they saw was part of a human hand, they had panicked and called the police right away.

Maggie had been at the precinct for barely ten minutes when the call came in. She hadn't yet made up her mind, but something told her that the man she was looking at hadn't just happened to stumble into liquid concrete accidentally.

"Hate to say it, but I think he definitely was. See these?" Dr. Washburn pointed to the bruises on the back of the man's neck.

Maggie winced. "Any chance he was strangled before ending up in here?"

"No. The bruises don't go all around. He was held down until he asphyxiated."

"Fuck."

The corners of Claire's mouth twitched though not enough to form an actual smile. "You could say that," she acknowledged, but her voice remained cool. Maggie knew she hadn't made any friends with the suggestion that Lindsay Boxer could have been responsible for the Hallelujah Man's death, but someone had to say it. Even the best could snap under pressure – it was only a matter of how long and hard it was administered, and Lindsay had gotten lots of it in the past year.

It had been a theory. No hard feelings. Right.

It didn't have anything to do with why she was out here at 7:30 in the morning instead of following leads regarding Arnold's murderer. Or regarding Boxer's creepy ex-boyfriend, who, as it had turned out, were most likely one and the same. She wondered if she'd still have been with this department if it weren't for the explosion and its outcome.

"I'm going to talk to the workers who found him, and the site's foreman."

"You do that," Claire returned neutrally.

Maggie turned to find a slightly green-looking DDA standing at the edge of the makeshift grave. "DDA Bernhardt, hi," she greeted, her mood going up by several degrees. "I'm surprised to see you here. Most of the DDAs I worked with didn't usually come to crime scenes."

"Right now I wish I hadn't." Jill grimaced. "I guess the idea that he accidentally fell inside is out of the question?"

"I'm afraid so," Claire said, giving her a sympathetic look.

It was with quite a bit of regret that Maggie left to see the men who had found the body, but there might be another opportunity to talk to the DDA soon. She was actually glad to have told Jill about her partner, clear the air between them. Anyone else could just be as mad with her as they wanted to be.

Lindsay peered through the half-drawn blinds, satisfied when she spotted the unmarked police car. She wouldn't have even thought of it if she'd come home to her apartment, but since there was no more apartment and she was rooming with Cindy for now, she hadn't hesitated to ask for a security detail. This wasn't just about her any longer.

Turning away from the window, she breathed in the scents of coffee and the pancakes Cindy was making in the kitchen. Lindsay felt fairly relieved when the idea of food didn't make her stomach churn. She'd gone through various situations of having her boundaries shaken, but restored again; this time, she just wasn't sure if she could ever be the same. She knew how to do her job, to detach herself. Few murderers had gotten to her. No one had ever gotten this close.

The washing machine was rumbling in the bathroom. The clothes she had taken with her for that one week in Texas were basically all she had. It had been a good idea to meet Tom during his lunch break; aside from all the paperwork, she would have to do some clothes shopping this morning.

"Hey." Cindy turned to her with a smile, brave and determined as always. She tugged on Lindsay's shirt playfully. "It's good you had some left. I would have given you one of mine, but that would have looked kind of funny with the sleeves ending here. But at least I'm going to feed you."

"You do great. And thanks for harboring me." If her voice had gotten a little shaky, Lindsay had to admit it wasn't all profound gratitude, but the sudden realization of the things she'd lost in the fire.

Cindy turned off the stove, wiped her hands on a dishtowel, and then wrapped her arms around Lindsay who leaned into the hug, trying not to imagine what more could have been lost. "I'm so sorry about everything that's gone. We'll find a new place soon – and it's going to be beautiful."

Burying her face in Cindy's hair, Lindsay barely kept herself from saying something utterly corny, and just as barely, she willed away the breakdown for another time.

"Why are you doing this?" Corinne Stevens asked again, tears streaming down her face. Silly that they wanted to know why when there was nothing they'd be able to do with that knowledge. Some of them had just read too many mysteries where keeping the killer talking bought time until the rescue arrived. Pete smiled to himself. Surely, not this time.

Billy had been in a manic phase since he'd killed the Stevens' neighbor. He was pacing the room, muttering to himself. "Shut up, bitch!" he yelled, coming to a sudden halt in front of her. He was annoying, Pete thought; there was something he'd have to do about him, and soon.

He turned his gaze to Corinne, the smile still in place, satisfied when she flinched. She hadn't flinched at Billy's outburst. Smart woman, she had known that he wasn't the one to be afraid of. "Why?" That recurring question had been for Pete. She'd never get an answer. She'd never know that she was just a tool, fulfilling the destiny of another woman.

Thinking of Lindsay, his smile grew wider. "Corinne?"

She cringed.

"It's time."

Billy gave him a somewhat startled look, but he didn't need any more prompting to leave the room.

Pete pushed himself off the wall, each step closer to her increasing the anticipation.

And not just for Corinne Stevens to die...

He was counting the days now, perpetually recalling the last times.

Pete Raynor enjoyed the sight of Lindsay striding to her car parked by the curb outside Cindy Thomas' apartment. He didn't like this arrangement at all, but he had expected it. First things first; he just couldn't take Arnold replacing his work in the attic; their sacred space had been violated more than once, so it had lost its meaning.

Pete thought it had been kind of genius to take out the Hallelujah Man's legacy along with Agent Ashe in one fell swoop. He wouldn't have minded to see Margaret Snow die, but everything had worked itself out beautifully. Jill Bernhardt as collateral damage had not been in the plan. He was actually kind of fond of Lindsay's friends, by proxy.

With one exception.

He knew that everybody thought he would go for Cindy Thomas next, and God, he wanted to. He had seriously miscalculated her influence, and he thought she would look so good with those black x's over her mouth – but it wasn't possible, not at the moment, when everybody would be watching over her.

With a wry grin, he remembered Arnold babbling about how he couldn't save Jill. Even though it had been his duty to execute him, Pete surely understood where the man had been coming from. There was something unsettling about having found a nearly perfect victim and not being able to *save* them from their sins.

Then again, once he had fulfilled his fantasy, Cindy Thomas would be none of his concern anyway. And none of Lindsay's either.

At the moment, less-than-perfect had to do. The beast was rising. He needed to indulge it before the happy ending.

"With what's left of his face, we're going to need dental records before we can even get close to IDing him."

Back in the morgue, Jill winced at Claire's matter-of-fact delivery, but then again, she figured if this new case took her mind off Arnold's lips stitched shut, she would deal with it. And who was she kidding anyway; she hadn't stopped thinking of him – at all.

Why did this happen when she'd just been starting to feel like she was getting her feet back under her? Lindsay could probably sympathize these days but she wasn't here at the moment, which was probably for the better.

Jill studied Inspector Snow who was intently listening to Claire's report. Aside from owing Maggie her life, Jill found she was still mad at the woman, but at the same time developing a new appreciation. Talk about conflicted feelings. Snow's insinuations about Lindsay had been all but rational, but she had taken a big risk for what, to her, had been an attempt to uncover the truth. It had nearly killed her. You could admire the woman's dedication. And still...

"I'm wondering if this could be gang-related," Maggie mused. "Those are track marks."

Claire nodded. "They are, but that would have been a very creative way to get rid of somebody. A shot to the head would have done it."

Maggie met her gaze. "More like a ritual. I think whoever did it, wanted him to be found."

Jill had a hard time not sighing. The word seemed enough of a trigger to guarantee more nightmares than she was living with anyway. As if sensing her mood, Maggie turned to her, saying softly, "I'm sorry. Should you even be back at work yet?"

Jill just snorted at that.

"I get it. Pot. Kettle. So, it takes a while to dispose of a body like that, you don't just do it accidentally. You have to have knowledge of the material. Wasn't there a legend that you had to bury something living in the foundation to protect the building?"

As if on cue, the door opened and the person who was probably their best bet at finding out about any legends came rushing in. Cindy stopped cold when she saw Maggie Snow. "Oh, hi," she said to Jill and Claire, making a point of ignoring the inspector. "I'm just going to wait... whatever. I'll see you later."

"Well, as the expression goes, 'If looks could kill'..." Maggie said. "I need to head out, too. Thanks, Dr. Washburn. Jill."

When she was out the door, Claire added, "How about, 'I made my bed, I lie in it'?"

Jill shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think she's all that evil."

She didn't miss the somewhat amused look Claire gave her.

Walking across the room and up the stairs to Tom's office, Lindsay could feel the looks on her. News traveled fast in a police station, and by now very few would not know that her former boyfriend was most likely a long-hunted serial killer who liked just one thing about women: Deadly silence.

Maybe she was just paranoid, but conversations seemed to come to a halt in a wave across the room. Lindsay felt somewhat relieved when she finally drew the door closed behind her.

"Linz. Have a seat." Tom was businesslike, but Lindsay could detect a hint of regret. Maybe about something he was going to tell her. Maybe about things lost long ago. Bringing this case to an end would also mean the last bit of closure they hadn't even known was still needed.

"So tell me everything I've missed these three days while trying to feel like a normal person again."

"You could always take more time," he reminded her. "Actually, now would be a good moment."

Lindsay knew him well enough to have expected this turn of the talk, and she had rehearsed for it. There was only one way to go about this case. "I'm going to stop him, Tom. I need to."

"Snow and Jacobi are on the case."

"Come on. From what I hear, Snow got the man in concrete, and didn't you tell Jacobi that he was just as biased as I am?"

"I thought you just got here," Tom said dryly.

"No one knows him the way I do. Ashe was right about that. So you have to let me finish this. I know I screwed up, but you have to give me this chance to make it right."

"This is not about you. He's clearly threatening you, has obviously been fixating on you for years. Do you really need any more reasons why I can't let you work on this case?"

"Not about me, huh?" Getting up from her chair, Lindsay gave him a look long enough to clearly make him uncomfortable. "It is all about me. That's the whole damn point; every single cop downstairs knows that I slept with him, and bringing him down is the only way I can come even close to saving my reputation. You can't deny me that!"

"You had no way of knowing who he is. No one suspected him."

"I should have," she insisted. "I am on this case, whether you like it or not. I haven't stopped being on it since Sarah Rice."

"That's why you should think about taking some more time off. Can't you see it? You're burned out. You don't do something about it, you're gonna be a hazard to yourself and others, and that has nothing to do with Raynor."

Halting the pacing she had begun the moment she was on her feet, Lindsay mentally counted to ten. She hated how much of his analysis was hitting uncomfortably close to home. Still, she couldn't back down. "For your information, I'm planning to take time off after he's behind bars." *Or dead*, she thought darkly. "For finding a new place with Cindy, which has obviously become a priority now that my place is... history. Honestly, I don't even know if I'll come back after that."

She could see that this was a surprise, and not a pleasant one. "I see. What does Cindy say about you wanting to be back on the case?"

"That was low."

"Was it? Compromises aren't always a bad thing, you know. When they are worth it."

"Cindy isn't going to walk out on me." *The way you did*, rang unspoken. Talk about being low, but she just couldn't help it.

"You don't have anything to prove. Lindsay, no one is blaming you."

"Maybe. But I am, and that's enough reason for me. If you don't have anything for me to do right now, why don't I go home and enjoy my vacation?"

The thought of slamming the door was very tempting, but remembering that there was an attentive audience, Lindsay closed it softly behind her.

The past, the recent one as well as memories from further away, and the present were beginning to blur uncannily as Jill and Claire waited for the verdict in Claire's office.

"I hate this." Jill stared into her coffee mug somberly. "Flinching at noises, and I can't seem to even drive by a church these days. I thought it would get better – but seeing him like that just made it worse. Knowing who did it--" She shuddered.

"Brings up a lot of bad memories," Claire summed it up gently, sitting across from her friend.

"I shouldn't even feel like this. I'm the one who got away, this time."

"You can't compare this. Any of it."

"Really? If Lindsay had known – hell, if I had known, I would have never pushed her so hard to--"

"But that's the point." Claire couldn't stand her friend's bitter self-reproach any longer. "None of us could have known. We do now, and we'll go from here."

Jill gave her a grateful look, though her eyes were still bright. "We promised to be there for her this time. I hate that I can barely take care of myself."

"You're doing fine," Claire insisted. "It's true, we all have amends to make. We made mistakes before, but we'll learn from them. And he won't get away this time."

Jill's smile was almost feral. "No, he won't. Aside from everything he's done, he took away my chance to see Arnold sentenced to life. I guess we're all motivated." She leaned back in her chair with a sigh. "Talk about the past coming back to haunt you, right? I guess it really was just two steps behind."

"That's a way to put it," Claire agreed, though she sensed that there was more behind Jill's words than a general statement. Patiently, she waited.

"I've been wondering," Jill picked up the thread again, "where we all would be now if we'd caught him sooner."

"You've been thinking about... you and Lindsay?" It wasn't such a wild guess.

"Yes..." She straightened abruptly as if she had just now realized what Claire had meant. "No! No, really, I haven't. I'd never – come on, Claire. Lindsay and Cindy, they are perfect together. I just wish--"

"You just wish there could be someone just as perfect for you," Claire completed her sentence. Jill's wistful gaze was more than enough of an answer.

"There will be. Hmm... and I think Inspector Snow likes you," Claire went on, trying to break the dire mood that had settled over all of them once again.

"Maggie?" Jill blushed a little at that, which was unexpected, but interesting for further reference. "Oh, please. I appreciate what she did for me, but the thought of her and Lindsay in the same room is scary. There's gonna be murder. No thanks, I don't need any more excitement in my life. Besides,

if I wanted to date the most hated person in the Hall, I'd go out with Denise.”

“Yes.” Claire nodded. “Denise is definitely an option.”

It didn't solve any of their problems, but when Jill started laughing, she felt ridiculously accomplished.

At the same time, a hint of sadness for something that was never meant to be, remained.

On her way downstairs, her mind still reeling with the previous conversation, Lindsay nearly ran into someone. “Excuse me, I--” She took a step aside, face to face with a rather beaten up looking Maggie Snow.

“Inspector,” she said coldly.

“I heard you were back.” Maggie met her gaze unflinching.

Lindsay wondered wryly if she really seemed that crazy to an outsider, or if Snow was just that sure of herself. “Obviously.” She was aware of pretty much everyone in the room holding their breath. What did they expect her to do, slap the woman? She had to admit, if she'd seen Maggie right after she'd heard about the accusation, it would have been an option. But surely not in a room full of cops who loved innuendo and of whom some still thought women were much too emotional for the job.

“I am glad you survived the explosion.”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Maggie's mouth. “Thanks.”

“However, I am not yet convinced of your investigative skills. Here's the truth, Hollywood, sewing has never been my hobby.” With that, she turned to leave a blushing inspector standing at the bottom of the stairs.

Claire had a lot of things on her mind after Lindsay had dropped by to inform her and Jill that Tom would not have her on the case. Actually, seeing her mad wasn't such a bad thing. The scene in the bathroom after her friends' early return had spooked her a bit, reminding her how close to the end of the line they all really were. But Kiss-Me-Not wasn't the only murderer out there. She made a mental note to bring up Maggie Snow's suggestion about the legend later.

Jill had left together with Lindsay. Claire was watching the two of them walk away when the phone rang.

When she heard the name, it was like someone had knocked the breath out of her, like she couldn't take in any air no matter how hard she tried. Only when the edges of her vision started to gray out did the memory's hold on her body loosen, and she managed to take a deep breath.

"Dr. Washburn? Are you still there?"

"Yes," she said, her voice surprisingly calm for someone who was shaking. "Thanks for letting me know."

After hanging up, Claire fought the temptation to just lock up her office and flee.

Darren Spencer.

There had been a time when she'd thought she wanted this man dead; she'd struggled with her feelings, but had been unable to fight them. Maybe they had never gone away entirely. Maybe she had just repressed them. It was the worst possible timing for her to be confronted with him again, even if he had ended up on a slab in the morgue.

Spencer had nearly killed the man she loved and changed their lives forever in a heartbeat. Now, someone had killed him by drowning him slowly and painfully in concrete.

Lindsay had spent a few more minutes venting about Tom being 'damn stubborn', before she headed out to interview some witness in a robbery. So she was back for now until there was an opportunity for a real vacation, which everyone, Tom included, knew Lindsay wouldn't take before the Kiss Me Not case was closed.

No matter how hard Jill tried to focus on the present and the files in front of her, all properties related to Pete Raynor that were about to be searched, her thoughts kept drifting. To her own passionate speech, promises made to her friend when she couldn't have known that another killer would nearly take her own life underneath Jesus on the cross.

Drifting further back to another kind of passion they had once shared.

It was true what she had told Claire; she wasn't jealous. Just wishing there could be someone for her to take a part of the burden like Cindy was doing for Lindsay now.

“Are you actually working or just staring into space?” Under a thin layer of exasperation, Denise's concern came across just as well. Jill had to stifle a smile.

“Trying to find a way to close Pandora's box,” she said.

“Good luck. If you found it, I'd like to have the Masters file.”

“On your desk in a minute.”

“I have a surprise for you.” Cindy greeted her at the door with a kiss, and Lindsay held back the retort that she could have done without any kind of surprises lately, good or bad. There was a suspect in custody regarding the robbery. She'd worked half a day, made a ridiculously easy arrest, and already she felt exhausted.

“I can't wait,” she said, hoping it didn't sound too forced.

This was actually a good one.

Upon hearing her voice, Martha came nearly flying from the living room, jumping up at her mistress with enough force to threaten her balance. “Hey, girl, easy.” Lindsay felt the smile spread

on her face as she crouched down to greet her canine companion with a hug. Looking up at Cindy's happy expression, she whispered, "Thank you."

"Thank me," said a familiar voice. "Poor girl's been crying two nights in a row, missing you badly."

"I'm sorry." Lindsay straightened, giving her partner a slightly abashed look.

"Don't be. I'm glad she was with me," Jacobi said.

There was nothing to add to that, and here they were again, back with the subject matter at hand. "Tom gave you and Snow the case." No point in beating around the bush.

"He's the boss."

"Doesn't mean you can't tell me about the case I've been working on for over five years."

"Linz," he warned. "Don't let your pride get in the way of this."

"Pride, huh?" She laughed bitterly. "There's not much left, really."

Martha started to whine at the terse voices. Cindy sighed. "I have to say, I'm with her. Let's save that discussion until after dinner, shall we?"

The sun that had been shining through the window strongly enough to nearly give her a headache was gone by the time Jill walked home. Needing to clear her thoughts, she hadn't taken her car in the morning, something that she regretted now as it was pouring down.

Anticipating another evening alone in her apartment, she could already tell what her nightmares would be. They were pretty much the same as before, with the exception of Arnold's mouth being sewn shut, which didn't do anything to keep him from spewing his hateful words. The deeper they delved into the recesses of the dark mind of Kiss-Me-Not, the closer her own not-so-distant horror hovered, and the two started to collide.

The feeling of being watched, something that couldn't be mistaken for anything else, jolted her out of her dire thoughts.

Abruptly, Jill stopped and spun around. "Who's there?" she asked, hating for her voice to sound this small.

"I'm a man with a purpose," Pete told the woman who was tied to a chair in the middle of the room. Remembering Corinne, he felt anticipation rise. It had been too long.

"A bastard with a purpose," she shot back at him, and for a moment, he thought about striking her, but he reined in the impulse. She would stop talking back at him eventually. They all had.

"You be good," he said to the blonde woman with a smile. "I have to make a call – and then I'll be right back with you."

Act II

2005, November

On a Friday evening when most of her colleagues were already enjoying their weekend, Jill still sat poring over files for a trial that would begin next week. She knew them inside out. One last time wouldn't hurt though.

She was so lost in thought that the knock on the door frame nearly made her knock over her coffee mug. "Sheesh, scare me half to death, why don't you?" A long day mostly sustaining herself on caffeine and adrenaline had made the words come out more snappish than she'd intended. "I'm sorry," Jill offered. "I didn't know you were still here."

"It's okay." Lindsay gave her a smile that was both indulgent and affectionate.

She was fidgeting slightly. As the silence stretched on between them, Jill wondered what the reason for this late visit was. They hadn't really spent a lot of time together since Tom had left, probably for much of the same reason that he had.

Jill ruefully thought that she missed her friend, and the way things were before, when the depraved workings of a serial killer hadn't yet wound their way into their nightmares. Before, when she'd almost thought...

With a sigh, she surveyed the stack before her. "I'm calling it a night. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Um, actually, yes."

Intrigued now, Jill leaned back in her chair and waited for Lindsay to continue.

"I... don't know if you have any plans for tonight. I was just wondering if you'd like to come over. Have some drinks, watch a movie maybe."

Jill hesitated for a heartbeat, which hadn't gone unnoticed.

"It's stupid. Forget about it."

"No. No, wait!" Lindsay's request had been so unexpected it was almost too late when Jill called out after her. "I could so use a drink. Monday's coming too soon as it is."

Maybe it was a bad idea after all, because since Tom had gone, Jill found it harder to deny that her feelings might encompass more than wanting to console a friend who was going through a break-up. She wasn't one to make a pass at a married woman. Jill regretfully suspected though that it wouldn't be more welcome now that Lindsay almost wasn't married any longer.

She'd just have to deny harder.

"One thing though," Lindsay said as she poured the wine for both of them. "Don't mention Tom, and

how I've been making a big mistake."

"I wasn't going to!"

Lindsay gave her the look usually reserved for people Jill prosecuted, the one that said, 'you're lying and I know it', and Jill couldn't hide her smile. Maybe she'd been about to say it. Just for testing.

With a sigh, Lindsay plopped down beside her on the couch. "I think this serial killer is just an excuse. If people want out, why can't they just say it?"

Truth be told, Jill didn't think it had been an excuse on Tom's part. It was all too true that this case was pushing all of them to the edge. Never mind the fact that there were others, day by day. But it was the man who sewed his victims' lips shut who kept haunting them, because there was no doubt he would do it again at some point.

"I have a request, too," she said, more seriously. "No talk about Kiss-Me-Not." That might have been a bit much to ask, because it was so obvious that he was the reason that they were here now, but she'd try.

"Just like the old times." It sounded more wistful than ironic.

"Exactly." As their glasses clinked together and they shared a smile, Jill recognized the feeling as one she'd almost forgotten.

Hope.

"Weekends are the worst," Lindsay admitted ruefully when the credits of the movie rolled over the screen. They'd started out with Phantom of the Opera, because Lindsay was really a romantic at heart, even though she'd hardly ever admit it, and somehow moved from there to Taking Lives, because it seemed there was no way to escape reality, ever.

It had its moments, though, Jill had to admit. After all, she had a thing for tall brunettes who didn't hesitate to take on the bad guys. Her face warming, she fumbled for something to say, coming up with the most stupid, "You should get a dog." Which made her feel even more embarrassed. Was that really only the second bottle of wine they'd just opened?

Lindsay chuckled at that. "Or I should spend some time with my friends more often," she suggested. "I'm glad we did this."

"Me too."

There was silence for a moment, but neither of them looked away. Just for a second, Jill thought how easy it would be to cross that line from friendship to something tentatively different. But that friendship wasn't something she was willing to gamble with.

It was impossible.

Yet she leaned forward, initiating the kiss. When Lindsay didn't pull away, Jill realized that she might have been mistaken.

The honeymoon was over as soon as they returned to work and their first case turned out to be a murdered six-year-old girl. Since she couldn't bear to look, Jill studied Lindsay instead and found that she had overestimated herself. It wasn't really that she had done such a great job distracting her from Kiss-Me-Not. The only person who could really do that was a predator that was worse than him. And by the time he was behind bars, their time together was over, too.

Jill had known it wasn't going to be a good day when only a few minutes after unlocking the door, she had Lindsay pacing in her office. "What is it you're trying to tell me?" she asked, feeling tense and anxious. She really didn't want to know. But she'd make her say it.

"This. Us."

"I'm listening." The worst thing was that it didn't come as a surprise. Jill had been waiting for this every day in the past three weeks, whenever she had taken off the rose-colored glasses for a moment.

"It can't work." Lindsay was obviously expecting help, but Jill wasn't going to be so kind to provide her with an explanation, too.

"It's a phase I'm going through, and.... I wish it hadn't been you."

Jill was mostly good at deciphering Lindsay-speak, but even though she could tell what her friend, lover, ex – whatever – was trying to say, she had to fight hard against the impulse to slap her.

"Because," Lindsay was expressing herself just slightly more clearly, "I wouldn't have messed up our friendship. I wouldn't have hurt you."

"You just did." Jill couldn't have stopped the words from tumbling out even if she'd tried. "A phase?" She shook her head. "How can you even know if you're not giving us a chance to be anything beyond that?"

"I'm not... I can't. I'm sorry, Jill."

Me too. She didn't say it out loud though, as Lindsay all but jumped to her feet and left. For a moment, Jill had sympathy for Tom and his inability to deal with Lindsay's habit of walking out of conversations. It wasn't all that easy to deal with after all.

She leaned forward to rest her head in her hands, willing herself not to cry. She had known that this would be a likely outcome, and taken the risk anyway.

"Are you here to work out your relationship drama, or to actually work?" a familiar voice asked, and she stared up at her boss, not even trying to hide her annoyance. "If it's the latter," Denise announced, "I want to see you in my office in five."

Whatever. Work was a great form of repression. She'd learned that from Lindsay, too.

Jill's heart beat against her ribcage so hard she felt like she had just run a marathon. "Damn it, you just scared the hell out of me!" She'd almost gone for the pepper spray, too. That wouldn't have gone over well.

"That wasn't my intention," Maggie Snow said ruefully. "I just wanted to make sure you got home safely."

Jill gave her a shaky smile. "That worked well."

"You seemed lost in thought."

Thoughts she didn't care to discuss now, out in the rain, on the street with Maggie Snow. "I'm sorry, Maggie. It's late."

"It's okay. Just let me walk you to your door."

To her surprise, Jill felt just a little bit less depressed when she walked up the stairs to her apartment. Later that night, she was even more surprised to find the dreams she had weren't all that unpleasant. Maybe there was a silver lining after all.

And maybe shared near-death experiences really changed the way you felt about a person.

When she woke at 3 AM, Lindsay found herself alone, the feeling of alarm only receding when the sound of keys clicking registered with her. She donned a t-shirt she'd left lying on a chair beside the bed and walked into the kitchen.

Cindy was hunched over her laptop in what looked like an uncomfortable position. Brushing a hand down her back, Lindsay leaned close to place a kiss on her cheek. Cindy turned so that their lips met.

"Come back to bed?"

"Oh. I didn't realize it was that late."

Lindsay just raised an eyebrow at her girlfriend. "You didn't happen to glance once at that little clock in the right lower corner?"

"I'm sorry," Cindy sighed. "This is harder to figure out than I'd thought."

Lindsay pulled herself a chair and took a look at the site on the screen, a collection of fairy tales. Of course. They had been foolish to give up that angle so easily. A hate of women combined with stories with a questionable, old-fashioned morals.

"The golden key with blood on it is easy; obviously King Bluebeard."

"The one who murdered all his wives," Lindsay concluded. It wasn't hard to deduce that Kiss-Me-Not saw the women he killed as his possession somehow. She wouldn't even let herself think about what he was seeing in her, but Lindsay knew, sooner or later, she would have to face that question.

“Right. Except for the last one; she got rescued by her brothers.”

“Lucky for her,” Lindsay mused. “So you were trying to recreate the stories behind the past murders?”

Cindy turned to her, her eyes dark and wide with worry. “No,” she confessed. “I was trying to find out what the hell he wants from you.”

Lindsay tiredly thought that he'd pretty much gotten everything already, but then again, it didn't matter as long as he didn't target anyone she loved. As long as he didn't so much as think of the person who meant most to her.

And he knew, of course; he had violated their most intimate space already. He knew how much she loved Cindy, had heard her say it, had seen her prove it.

“Whatever that is, he won't get it,” she vowed, petting Martha who had been lying at Cindy's feet the whole time, before she got up. “And we won't solve all of this tonight.”

Back in bed, she curled up against Cindy's side, once again unable to ignore how very tired she was, of this case, of this never-ending cat-and-mouse game he'd forced on her. It grew harder each day to carry the burden, but when Cindy's arms came around her, holding her tight, Lindsay found herself assured that she wouldn't have to carry it alone any longer.

When Claire had come home the evening before, Ed had gone to bed already, and she wasn't going to approach the subject of Spencer over breakfast, with the boys around. She already felt bad about it, but it would have to wait.

"I heard you've got an ID of the man in concrete? That's quick," Lindsay greeted her when she came by the morgue, hiding a yawn behind her hand. Claire thought wryly that she probably hadn't gotten any more sleep.

"The victim of *my* case," Maggie Snow reminded them sweetly, the doors swinging shut behind her as she entered.

Lindsay shrugged and rolled her eyes at Claire, who wondered which of them she was really more annoyed with at the moment. In favor of loyalty for a longtime friend, she decided that Snow would win the price. "I recall that, Inspector," she said. "Our victim's Darren Spencer, 36, escaped from a California State prison four months ago."

Maggie nodded thoughtfully. "What was he in for?" she asked.

Claire gave Lindsay a sharp look, shaking her head at her friend. "Assault of a police officer with a deadly weapon." She reached behind herself for the edge of her desk to steady herself. She didn't really want to go there, rip those old wounds open, but then again that was what the past months had been about, the ghosts from the past coming back to haunt all of them.

Seemed like it was her turn now.

Maggie was right in one thing; it was her case. Claire knew she couldn't keep that information from her, but at least she wanted to be the one to tell her – so she did. "He shot my husband."

Snow was silent for a moment, then she said, "I'm really sorry. This must be hard for you."

"Hard times all around." Claire gave her a somewhat crooked smile. "So, about what I found. Whoever killed him had to have drugged him before; the results are not in yet, but get this, Spencer didn't struggle at all. Which we all would do at the prospect of becoming a living fossil."

"Any traces of the killer?"

"Traces of latex gloves. That's all."

She could practically see Lindsay forming a theory, something she hadn't wanted to think about until now. Could it really be a coincidence that Spencer had been killed so soon after Arnold? Was there a connection or were they all slowly getting delusional? Claire thought wryly that she wouldn't be so surprised. Kiss-Me-Not had messed with all of their minds, and done it well.

"Well, thanks, Dr. Washburn. I'll be in touch. Lindsay."

Lindsay glared after her. After the door fell shut behind Snow, Claire asked, "Could you hate her a little less obviously?"

"Hey. She declared me the prime suspect in a homicide investigation. A girl gets offended."

Claire sighed. "I get that, but she isn't really going anywhere, right? So we might just as well get used to her."

"Well, hating someone and not liking them very much are two different things. I get what she was trying to do, but the latter is not likely to change anytime soon. How are you holding up?" Lindsay asked, serious now. "This is bringing up some bad memories."

No kidding. Claire crossed her arms over her chest. "Look who's talking."

"I'm kind of getting used to it. So, killer goes for the neck. Just like with Arnold."

"You mean there's someone out there killing people who pissed us off? That's kind of a scary thought."

"Not someone."

"You think Pete is--" She hadn't missed Lindsay flinch at the name, and she didn't have to finish the sentence, either.

"I don't know. Frankly, I don't know what to think anymore."

"I can sympathize," Claire said dryly. "So why don't you find out if Raynor is somehow connected to that construction site?"

Lindsay frowned. "That would involve talking to Snow... okay, I'll do it. So, have you told Ed?"

"Not yet."

"He deserves to know." There was a slight edge to Lindsay's voice, and Claire was certain she knew

the reason for it.

"I know we should have told you right away, but we wanted to protect you. We thought three days away from the madness would be good for you."

"They were," Lindsay acknowledged, her tone softening some with reminiscing.

"I'm going to tell him today. Now that we have that covered – how are *you* holding up?" Claire directed the question back at her friend.

With a shrug and a wry smile, Lindsay gave her the most truthful answer to which there was nothing left to add.

"Barely."

"I'm a doctor, too," Claire interrupted the man angrily. "I know what it means."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply-- Dr. Washburn?"

She heard the doctor's voice as if from far away, the dreadful news finally registering with her. "Give me a few minutes?" she asked when her vision had stabilized again.

Dr. Callen laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Of course. I'm going to get you a glass of water."

"Any chance you could make it something strong and alcoholic?"

"Don't I wish that sometimes."

He drew the door shut behind him softly, leaving her to her breakdown. Claire cried because she knew she had to. Later, when she'd go into the hospital room to talk to Ed, she'd have to be all smiles and hope and support. She wasn't going to let him know how scared she really was, because this would change their lives forever.

Only a couple of minutes later the door opened again, and she was ready to snap at the doctor; but it wasn't him. Instead, Jill came inside, Lindsay right after her, both of them looking concerned. This was wrong, Claire thought, barely suppressing hysterical laughter. She was the one to listen and guide. It was her accepted role.

She looked at her friends, trying to remember the ability to form actual words, and then she said it aloud. "Ed... might never be able to walk again."

The warm embrace and reassuring words only made her cry harder. Good, Claire thought. This might be her only chance to get it all out...

Claire hadn't planned to go home for more than an hour that day, but when she found Ed in the living room, reading the newspaper with a coffee in hand, she longed to simply stay there and forget all other aspects of their lives for a moment. Not like she, like they, ever could, but it would have

been worth a try.

"Claire!" He hadn't noticed her come in and looked up at her, startled. "What happened?"

She smiled ruefully. "I just decided I could spend my lunch break at home. Does that mean something bad must have happened?"

"Not necessarily," he said carefully, reaching out, and she stepped closer, sitting on his lap and gratefully leaning into his embrace.

"Where are the boys?"

"Nate is upstairs studying with a girl from school." Ed laughed at Claire's skeptical look. "Math. Derek went to training." He paused for a moment, then continued, "Tell me what happened?"

Ed hadn't been on the force in a while, but somehow, he'd never stopped being a cop. Claire thought of Lindsay and her struggle for a decision about what to do with her life. But it wasn't Claire's problem to solve, not at the moment, because she had her fair share of them, even if everything seemed to lead back to the same source; the Kiss-Me-Not Killer aka Pete Raynor.

"Darren Spencer is dead," she said finally. On Ed's face, Claire could see everything she had felt and tried not to when she got the call. Surprise, relief, confusion. Many questions left.

"How did he die?"

"Drowned in liquid concrete on a construction site." She could remember vividly the time when she'd hated Spencer with everything she had, because it was one way not to let her fear of the future get to her. Now, Claire didn't know what to feel. Empty would have been a good guess.

"That's a surprise. I didn't expect him to make it to old age, but I would have expected a drug-related shooting."

"Ed, Lindsay thinks Kiss-Me-Not did it."

"Why would he do that?"

Why indeed? Claire wondered. Were they really on the right path or had they all lost objectivity completely?

"Like Arnold – as a favor." Claire winced.

"If that is true, then you can expect more bodies to turn up," Ed said thoughtfully.

"Hey!" She slapped him on the arm lightly. "That is not the reassurance I came here for."

They laughed together, but the gravity of the subject couldn't be escaped for long. "All I wanted for Spencer was him spending his life in jail. Not dead."

Ed held her tighter. "I know. Me too." After a while, he added, "I'm glad you came home for a bit."

"Yeah," Claire sighed. "Me too."

"Lindsay. How can I help you?"

"No funny nicknames?" her colleague asked skeptically.

"I've decided not to call you any for a while; I just had a near-death experience." Maggie winced a little at how that probably sounded, with regard to accusations having been made, but obviously Lindsay was ready to let it slide.

"What do you have on the Spencer case so far?"

"It's not related to any of yours, is it?"

"I don't know yet. So are you going to talk to me, or do I have to get that information elsewhere and--"

"Slow down, T... Lindsay. What do you want to know? I just called--" Maggie broke off when the lieutenant joined them, somehow sensing that their conversation was about to go into a direction he wouldn't like. Lindsay Boxer's life had been revolving around the Kiss-Me-Not case, and she didn't seem like someone who let go easily. Tom Hogan surely knew that, too.

"Linz. How far are you on the robbery?"

Taking a defensive stance, Lindsay turned to him. "Found the suspect in his grandmother's backyard; he's already confessed to shooting the clerk. He heard the police siren and panicked. Any more questions?"

"You're discussing cases?" Tom asked suspiciously.

Maggie smiled at him. "Just talking women things on lunch break."

"Well, then don't stop on my account," he said, shooting his ex-wife a warning glance.

When he had disappeared out of sight, Lindsay continued. "I need you to come down to the morgue for a moment."

Maggie gave her a questioning look.

"More women things," Lindsay said.

"Spencer had no family we know of. He's had two separate careers since his late teens – drugs and construction work. Since his escape, he's been laying low and focusing on the latter, under a false name."

Cindy had been less than happy when Lindsay had brought Snow with her; she still felt a little childish about yesterday's hasty retreat, but most of all she was still angry at the woman. More than Lindsay was, maybe. She also hadn't missed the way Claire tensed at the mention of Spencer's name, and felt instantly bad for her friend.

"How can you be so sure this wasn't a drug deal gone bad?" she inquired.

Maggie had her answer ready. "I checked to see who he contacted. There's no doubt he would have gotten into it eventually, but for now he was hiding from the police and doing it remarkably well. He'd had two jobs before he was murdered. One of them was with a hotel project, a huge complex in the area. The contractor on that project was Pete Raynor."

Lindsay lightly banged her head against the back of her chair. "Great."

"Kiss-Me-Not is telling fairy tales, right? What about that myth of burying living things--"

"It's not so much a myth actually, but a superstition found in early European cultures," Cindy interrupted, for a moment forgetting that she had wanted to ignore Snow. "It was meant for securing the walls; later the custom was replaced with burying little animals."

"He should know customs and superstition regarding construction," Lindsay said. She was calm and focused now, but Cindy knew how much of this was a façade.

"I checked the address he gave the investors," Maggie continued. "No surprise there, it doesn't exist just like the one we had before. So are we really thinking the same--"

"You better hold that thought." Jacobi stood in the doorway. "Linz, there's a call for you."

"What is so important now?" she asked with slight irritation.

"This call you want to take. It's the sewing boy."

Act III

...Martha regarded them cautiously, her eyes never leaving the two men who carried the body into the bedroom and strategically placed it in the middle of the bed.

"You're a good girl." Pete crouched down in front of her, reaching out a hand to pet her. She allowed the touch, but showed no sign of either enjoying or disliking it. "Clever." The dog was too damn intelligent; as if she knew one wrong move and he'd slit her throat in a heartbeat. Hell, it didn't even depend on her at all.

"Damn dog," Billy muttered.

Pete chuckled. "Don't say that, she's a princess. Aren't you, Martha?" The smile slid off his face to be replaced by a grin that was less friendly or amiable. "And now we're going to call your mistress."...

He knew it was risky to call the station, but damn it, he needed to hear her voice. He needed her to know. Not being able to reach her the night before had fueled his anger; he didn't need his imagination to figure out why, and what happened once the lights were turned off in Cindy Thomas' apartment.. He had visual proof from the months before, before Lindsay had found the camera. Then again, she was at the Hall, which meant she couldn't stay away any more than he could. It was

something.

“Hello, Lindsay. How's the love of my life?”

“Don't bother,” she said coldly, although the sound of his cheery voice made her insides churn. “I know who you are.”

Pete chuckled. “I knew you'd figure it out eventually. I just wanted to tell you it won't be long now.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

As if she didn't know. He was fantasizing about some final stand off. In a way, she had too in the past few years. If his priorities hadn't changed, hers definitely had. She would bring this to an end, but it wasn't all her life was about any longer. She gave Cindy what she hoped was a reassuring gaze. Cindy looked scared and angry at the same time.

“But isn't that obvious? I want you, Lindsay. I've been patient with you to get over this stupid fling, but frankly, it's getting ridiculous. Are your colleagues listening now? Of course they are. I bet they're all eager to see those tapes.”

“You went too far with that.” Lindsay kept her voice level, didn't let any of her anger color her tone. He'd love that, knowing he was getting to her. Which he was.

“Oh, but it was necessary. I know what you like now. I've seen it all.”

There was a deadly silence in the bullpen save for their conversation. Lindsay knew he was taunting her, as he had the whole time, but she felt bad for Cindy who had turned bright red. One of these days, they both knew, those tapes would turn up. And they'd be evidence.

“That's okay, Pete, you've had your fifteen minutes of fame. I get it. Just tell me something, why Darren Spencer? What's your beef with him?”

There was a small pause, then he said, not so much the amiable guy she had dated once, “I'm taking out your garbage.”

“Hey,” a tinny female voice drifted through the phone line, protesting in the background. “I resent that remark.”

Lindsay froze, the tide of nightmarish memories nearly taking her over. Elaine Lewis. Corinne Stevens, her father. Fearing for Jill and Cindy. There was probably a reason she had come to the conclusion that she couldn't do this anymore.

Not like anybody was asking her. She fought them back once more.

“Pete, I'm wondering. If it's me you want so badly, who is that woman with you?”

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

He must have held the phone closer to her, because the voice sounded loud and clear. “Lindsay Boxer? This is Drew Caplan. I'd appreciate it if you did your thing right now, because this guy is

really crazy and--”

Her scream came across just as clearly before the call was disconnected.

She was familiar: sports agent Drew Caplan, who had been a suspect in the murder of NFL quarterback Joe Donovan. The killer who had abducted her, was just as familiar. Kiss-Me-Not was back, and he had a new victim.

“Where do you think you're going?” There was no way that Lindsay could be on the scene of this bust, for professional reasons and otherwise. Whatever redemption she was looking for, here and now wasn't the time; Tom was convinced of that. That, and he had a responsibility. To the case. And to her.

“You heard what he said.”

“Clearly,” Tom returned. “You are staying here, Inspector. That's final.”

Lindsay seemed too stunned to react, but she spun around angrily when Jill touched her shoulder. “What?”

“He's right,” Jill said. “They traced the call, they're going to find him this time. You were right, Lindsay. If you go along, you're only giving him what he wants. Let's see what we can do from here.”

“Thanks,” Tom said, having expected the glare from his ex-wife.

It didn't take them long to get to the place; the GPS helped them to locate the cell phone precisely. Tom Hogan couldn't believe his eyes at the sight of children playing in the yard of an elementary school. Not Mission Day, not the scene of his worst nightmare, but it was close enough to bring up some memories.

He was very sure that it wasn't a mistake, and as it turned out, he had been right when not much later the phone was found in the backpack of a little girl, who stared up at them with big, frightened eyes. No one could say how it had ended up in there.

The image stitched onto the pink bag was Snow White.

Tom suppressed a curse.

“I hear this guy likes to tell fairy tales. Not very subtle,” Inspector Snow commented.

“Subtle, not his style,” he told her.

Pete was pacing frantically in the small room, the vivid images once again on his mind. They were a lot of the time, as he kept watching the tapes over and over again, but with this woman here reminding him who should be in her place, it was even worse.

He turned back to the sports agent, taking in the defiance in her gaze she held on to despite the

bruise on the side of her face. It seemed to bother him more than her; he liked their faces unmarked except for the black X's of surgical thread.

"I bet she's not going to come," she said. "If she's in her right mind."

"Shut up," he yelled at her, angry at himself for losing his temper. He never did. Corinne had been frightful and docile. Not this one, though. She was beginning to annoy him. "You don't know her. Not like I do." Too bad he had to keep her alive for now, because Lindsay would well remember the trick they'd played on her with Billy. He had to give her an incentive.

"If you say so."

She wasn't taking him seriously. Her arms and legs had to be cramping from all the time she'd spent in that chair, and Pete hadn't given her anything but water so far, but she still wasn't taking him seriously.

While at home, Lindsay... he couldn't let it go on like this.

He had to move things up a little.

"Nothing the bastard ever does is coincidental. Not Spencer – if he did it, and I think we agree that it's very likely. Not Caplan. There are the fairy tales, but there's got to be more."

"There already is a lot the fairy tales are telling us," Cindy reminded her. "A stereotypical view of women. Lilacs mean innocence. He dressed Melissa in a white dress, like a bride. Copper, like the tub, is associated with Venus."

"They're perfect until they screw up in his eyes, and then he thinks he needs to punish them. But not Caplan." Pacing the length of the room, Lindsay had to keep herself from reaching for the wall beside her. The call had shaken her more than she wanted to let on in front of her friends; knowing had been one thing, audible proof – something entirely different. Especially now that he'd taken another woman.

"We want to go with the favor theory? He took her because of me." What she'd once told Claire, her relief about finally being able to put a name and face to Kiss-Me-Not had lost its meaning the moment she realized it wasn't Billy Harris, but a man who had watched her all these years like a jealous lover. Her jealous lover, alright. He hadn't just turned into her stalker when she broke up with him; he'd been there all the time.

"Now come on," Jill protested. "He took her because he's a killer with a sick compulsion."

"Semantics I'm sure Drew Caplan isn't interested in," Lindsay said darkly. "You're still looking at the last projects he was working on, right? Any old, abandoned buildings, or ones being renovated--" Jill avoided her gaze for a moment, and Lindsay didn't need to ask to determine she was thinking of St. Vincent's. She touched her friend's arm in silent apology.

"In the stories, the buildings often have towers," Cindy reminded them. "Killing David Arnold in a church was like crossing their M.O.'s. The house where you found Elaine Lewis had this oriel window."

“There was nothing like that at the other crime scenes.” Lindsay didn't like to brush off her theory, but it seemed like a reach.

“There could have been a building like that before the parking lot where you found Sarah Rice.”

“And Corinne Stevens?”

“He had Billy Harris working for him at the time.”

Harris, the suspect served to them on a silver platter. The man who had killed her father. It was time for each of them to free themselves from the past curse. They had to succeed this time. They had to find Drew Caplan alive.

“The business Pete had been working for is across the street. I'll do some work now quietly and go over there on my break to ask around. Also I'm gonna use Inspector Snow's guilty conscience in my favor and grill her some more.”

“You think she has one?” Claire asked dryly. “Alright, ladies, I'll take a look at the reports, all of them, and see if there's anything hinting at a location.”

Jill sighed as she got up. “I guess for me it's mountains of files again. He sure did a lot of work aside from murdering people.”

“I've got to run too. There's one of my special sources I've got to meet.”

At Lindsay's suspicious look, Cindy leaned over to kiss her quickly. “Nothing dangerous,” she assured. “I swear.”

Lindsay had no choice but to believe her; at times like this, an unnecessary risk could prove to be fatal. She looked into the faces of her friends and lover, heartened by what she saw.

She felt responsible for the latest killings, maybe more than she could admit to even herself, but they didn't blame her, and for the moment, it would be enough to keep her going.

“Let's get him,” she said.

“Hey, Red. Long time, no see.”

Cindy smiled wistfully at the older woman pushing the shopping cart filled with her meager belongings as she handed over the bag with food. “I'm sorry, Lola.”

“Some pretty boy been distracting you?”

“More like some pretty girl.”

“I see.” Lola grinned, pinching her cheek. “She treat you right?”

“She sure does, but life hasn't treated her so right. Lola, have you been hearing something about strange things happening in empty buildings?”

“Honey, strange things always happen in empty buildings. You mean those Goth kids drinking red wine and blaring music about the eternal sadness?”

Cindy couldn't help but laugh at that, even though the reason for her to visit the homeless woman was far more serious than youth rebellion. “Not like that. Have you seen anyone around lately who's stood out to you, or have you heard about anyone?”

Lola shrugged, waiting for her to go on.

“Have you seen anything unusual, stuff left behind, anything that could be associated with fairy tales?” Cindy knew she had to be sounding just a bit desperate. The thought that Pete was somewhere in the city, preparing a place for – she aborted the idea hastily.

“You think he's out there? The guy who offed the killer in the church?”

Cindy didn't ask how she knew about that. That was part of their mutual agreement. “He's a killer, too,” she said.

“Do red roses count? You don't usually see so many around here. I've been wondering about that.”

Cindy took a deep breath as her heart began to beat faster. “Can you show me?”

The floor in the corner of the old warehouse was littered with blood red roses that looked like they'd been torn from a hedge. Lindsay picked up one of them with a gloved hand, uncannily reminded of bouquet after bouquet of white roses she had thrown into the garbage. Were they all about to become paranoid?

Denise said aloud what had been on her mind ever since Cindy had called. “We need more than that to find Drew Caplan. Searching this building is on legal shaky ground as it is.”

“If I'm not mistaken, I'm the one you should be telling this to.” The both turned to see Maggie Snow approach them. “I don't know if you've been informed that I am still working this case.”

“Well, thanks,” Denise murmured. “Always glad to be kept up to date.”

Maggie glanced at the torn flowers incredulously. “That's all? I don't think we--”

“No, it's not,” Lindsay interrupted her as she brushed aside the scrub carefully. She held the sliver necklace with the leaves as pendants up for everyone to see, the same as the crown Elaine Lewis had worn in her cold, wet grave.

“It might be the time to put names out there – Caplan's. And Pete's.”

“Cindy, absolutely not. He'd kill her.”

“He might have already.” Cindy almost regretted her words when Lindsay flinched, but it wasn't up to her to put time on hold. “It could help. Someone might recognize him. He can't be hiding forever.”

"I'd rather have you not be the person who pisses him off," Lindsay said dryly, and Tom nodded in agreement. They had retreated to his office to discuss further strategies. Normally, Cindy wouldn't be present. Without her though, they wouldn't have found the warehouse belonging to the same owner as the building where Elaine Lewis had been found.

"The person that's most pissed off at me is my editor, and he's right. I haven't given him anything since I've been back. Honestly, I don't think you'll be able to hold this back for much longer."

"Well, we do it as long as it takes then," Tom returned.

"I can keep Lindsay's name out of it. No one else will promise you that."

There was a heavy silence. Cindy was sure they knew just as well as she did, if the word was out about an investigator having been involved with someone who turned out to be a serial murderer, the media would have a field day. "If you work with me, we'd have some control."

Lindsay shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm okay with risking the wait if there's a chance I won't find another dead woman in my bed."

Cindy put her hand over Lindsay's under the table, feeling sad for all the things she couldn't change.

Before they could resume the conversation, with barely a knock Maggie Snow entered the office, a stormy look on her face. "Lieutenant?" she said. "Can I have a word with you?"

"Sure you can," Lindsay said quickly, taking Cindy's hand and all but dragging her out of the office. "He's all yours."

Back down at her desk, Jill and Claire were waiting for them for a brief gathering before they were all about to go separate ways. "Better let Tom deal with her," Lindsay explained. "I have a suspicion that it has to do with me being on the scene."

Jill shook her head. "She's really not that bad."

"At what?" Lindsay asked suspiciously, earning herself a dirty look from her friend.

"And she was right on with the theory about Spencer."

"Inspector Snow has a lot of theories." Lindsay leaned forward to cover her face with her hands tiredly. "I could just ask Pete the next time he calls. Guess what, the people who have worked with him have nothing but nice things to say. I can't believe it took us years."

"For years, we had nothing on him," Claire reminded her. "No DNA, no hint, nothing."

"The hints were there all the time. We didn't see them."

... With his second victim they knew of, Melissa Paquin, the killer had been escalating. He'd made her suffer for much longer.

"Sixteen hours. Goddamn it."

Under normal circumstances, Claire would have flinched at the blasphemy, but after the week

they'd all had, she probably couldn't bring herself to care much. She looked at Lindsay who was trying to uphold a determined stance while she was, like all of them, exhausted, struggling with the weight of failure.

The only thing they knew for sure: They were dealing with the same monster who had left Sarah Rice in a bed of lilacs. He'd kill again, sooner or later, presenting them with a meticulously prepared scene, no DNA, no traces of him. He was laughing in their faces.

Jill stood in the corner of the morgue, seemingly stunned into silence by this horrible suggestion.

"Still, he timed it just so she was still alive for his Kiss-Me-Not message."

Claire's choice of words made Jill swallow hard. Lindsay scowled. "What did you just say?"

"She was still alive when he sewed--"

"No, not that. Kiss-Me-Not."

"I just said--"

"What did you mean by it?"

Frustration was showing in Claire's tired features. "I don't know what I mean by it. I hate to tell you, but I can hardly see straight, and I bet the same goes for you. We have nothing on that monster."

"I am aware of that." Lindsay was slightly taken aback by Claire's harsh answer.

"Okay." Claire sighed. "There must be a metaphor in there somewhere, right?"

"Right. Silencing them." There was a surge of adrenaline with the familiar anger that made her a lot more awake all of a sudden. "What else?"

"Jealousy," Jill suggested. "He wanted them for himself." She shuddered. "Ex-boyfriend maybe."

"Could be, but maybe he wasn't with either of them at all," Lindsay picked up the thread, starting to pace once more. "He just wanted to be. They rejected him, or weren't even aware of him, and he was punishing them for it. I need to go over the interviews again. There's got to be something."

Lindsay didn't miss the look Jill and Claire shared. "What?"

"Lindsay, it's 4 AM. My family is about to forget what I look like. We should all go home now, because I don't see us cracking this case if we get delusional from a lack of sleep."

"But—"

"Claire is right," Jill said softly. "This is horrible, and we need to catch this guy. Soon. But it won't happen tonight."

Rationally, Lindsay knew they were right. She'd been running on caffeine and adrenaline since the moment she'd taken a first look at Melissa Paquin's body; it was bound to take its toll sooner or later. Well, it already was. She'd been short-tempered and irritable lately, more than the usual – but

it was because she couldn't make herself see past the fact that he'd been out there, nearly two years since Sarah Rice, and had been patiently looking for his next victim. He'd found her, and made her die a long-suffering death. Sixteen hours. The bastard was learning – and escalating.

Serial killers tended to perfect their MO. Were those really the only victims of Kiss-Me-Not?

"Lindsay?" Jill prompted. Another of those concerned gazes between her friends.

"You two go home," she said. "There's something I forgot to check. I promise after that I'll leave here." For the moment, it was a necessary lie...

Lindsay shook herself out of the memory when Cindy touched her arm lightly.

"I need to go and placate my editor now," Cindy said. Lindsay felt slightly guilty about that, but she still stood by her decision. Kiss-Me-Not didn't kill right away; there was a small window of time left for them. And it was true, she didn't want Pete to be reminded of Cindy more than necessary. Wishful thinking as it might be.

"I'm sorry."

Cindy shrugged. "I still think it could have helped. I'll see you later. If you're home early, you could start dinner – oh, and don't let Maggie in the club while I'm gone, right?"

Lindsay promised both.

It was beginning to get to her. She tried to deny it, but the feeling of being caged grew stronger all the time. Lindsay had been fantasizing for a while about the home they'd be sharing eventually, but then it would have been up to them to control the time and place.

She could recall some wonderful nights spent at Cindy's apartment, but now that she had literally nowhere else to go, it was all different. It couldn't be easy for Cindy either. Both of them had lived on their own for years, and the lack of opportunity for retreat made it difficult.

It was just as disconcerting as the intermittent impulse to just hold on and never let go.

These thoughts kept Lindsay awake for a long time, and so she nearly slept through the sound of her cell phone ringing early in the morning.

"Have you seen the front page of the Register?" Jacobi asked without preamble.

"Not yet."

It couldn't be good. Becoming more aware of her surroundings, Lindsay noticed that Cindy was in the kitchen, taking what seemed to be frustration out on innocent cabinets and drawers as she set the table.

"How bad is it?" Lindsay asked, trying to shake the remnants of sleep.

"Bad," her partner simply said. "Go look for yourself."

"I will. I'll talk to you later," she sighed and hung up.

"Good morning."

Cindy didn't turn from where she stood at the stove; she didn't say anything either.

The paper lay on the table, the reason for the temperature in the room having dropped several degrees practically screaming at her. *Kiss-Me-Not: A Killer Keeps Haunting San Francisco*. And a little further down... she couldn't bear to read this now. She walked up to stand behind Cindy, unsure whether to touch.

The sudden sound of the glass breaking when it slipped from Cindy's hand and shattered in the sink startled them both.

"Damn it," Cindy swore, unacknowledged tears in her voice.

Lindsay finally leaned forward, running her hands up and down Cindy's bare arms and embracing her from behind. "I'm so sorry about that."

"You'll be even more sorry after you read it," Cindy predicted. "Scott didn't have any qualms about naming people. Linz, I could have prevented this from happening!"

"I know." Lindsay held her tighter, relieved when Cindy finally started to relax in her embrace. It was enough for her. She wouldn't obsess on this now, not with Claire being confronted with Spencer and what he'd done once again, and Jill still coming to terms with what she'd gone through at the hands of David Arnold.

Not with Drew Caplan possibly still alive.

The breakthrough came sooner than any of them had expected, through one of those impossible hotline tips, and it felt sudden and surreal. The woman who had called them had been walking home from work when she had encountered him. He'd passed her by, greeting her cordially. The only other house down the road was empty, though renovated and for sale since the beginning of the year.

Tom shook his head before she'd even said anything.

"You can't deny me this!"

"Linz, I can't tell you what to do in your spare time or who to meet --" He shot a pointed look at Jill who winced, "but don't you think your colleagues can handle this?"

"Like you handled the tracing of the phone?" *Ouch*. She shouldn't have said that.

"I'm beginning to see why you taking a break was a good idea. Besides, if you took a look at the paper today, you'd know that I don't have a choice."

"I'm sorry, Tom." Lindsay knew she had to make amends, and fast. "I just want to be there. I want to be there when whoever puts the cuffs on the bastard. No one deserves it more than I do."

“She does have a point,” Jill added, earning herself a glare from Tom.

He sighed. “I know that. Okay, but you are not going to take the lead on this. You know that Jacobi and Snow are.”

Lindsay nodded. “Agreed. I'm not looking for any more of my name in the paper. I just want him caught.” This was not the moment for vanity.

The house was a one-family unit, one story. The 'For Sale' sign was displayed on the front lawn. It looked like no one had been here in a while. Lindsay knew better. No one could cover his tracks better than he could.

There was no hint of a tower or anything like it, but Marilyn Holt had ID'd Pete Raynor from his picture in the Register without a single doubt.

Lindsay had every intention of keeping her promise to Tom; if she was the one to take down Pete in the end, much as she longed for it, she'd play into his fantasies forever. She watched Maggie Snow exit her car, wearing Kevlar over a white shirt and blue jeans, and a baseball cap. Despite almost being blown to pieces not so long ago, she held her head up high.

Lindsay remembered that kind of confidence. She'd have it back once this killer was out of the picture. She hoped.

They approached the house carefully. The attack on Ashe and Maggie had shown them clearly the varied arsenal of weapons that was available to Kiss-Me-Not.

2005, The Golden Key

Why couldn't she be the one to make him stop? It was all her fault. Melissa was supposed to be the wife, and she'd failed. No matter how often she'd begged him to end it, he couldn't let her die before she realized her mistakes, with each time he brought down the blade gleaming with her blood, hour after hour. Until it was time to pick up the needle and thread, because it had to be done when she could still feel it.

His mind was frantic when the last bit of life had left her. He was breathless with anticipation.

He would see her again. And this time she would know that it was him, and that he was waiting for her. He could be a patient man when the prospect was worth it.

The Golden Key was for the last wife to find. She'd be here soon.

Dust particles danced in the late afternoon sun as they entered the eerily quiet house. Upon closer look, Maggie seemed tense, and Lindsay wondered if she was thinking of the day she and Ashe had been planning to search her apartment.

As they searched room for room, the uncomfortable feeling grew that it just couldn't be that easy. A part of the puzzle maybe, but not the end. Billy Harris had been careless, kicking the Steven's neighbor in the head – but this was Kiss-Me-Not they were talking about. He was much too efficient to be caught like this – but if he wanted to lead them there, why?

The last door was leading down a dozen stairs into a cellar.

It was unfamiliar and unsettling not being right on front, especially with those thoughts on her mind. What did he want from them – from her?

The dark hallway reminded her of the tunnels under the building near St. Vincent's. They always hid in dark places like the rats they were. Lindsay couldn't believe that in a matter of seconds, they might come face to face with--

She saw Maggie reach out and try the handle of the door at the end of the corridor.

It wasn't locked.

There was no explosion or gunfire; instead, someone yelled “get an ambulance in here!”

Lindsay ran behind them, entering the room behind Maggie and Jacobi, stopping cold at the sight. In the middle of the room, there was Drew Caplan, tied to a chair, gagged.

Alive.

Maggie met her gaze briefly, and they shared a smile, all competition meaningless in this moment.

As soon as she could speak again, Caplan remarked, “I see the PD's been hiring more hot chicks. Took you long enough to get here, though.” Then she started to cry.

At the same moment, Lindsay's cell phone rang, and she knew who the caller was even before the familiar hated voice said, “Hello, Beautiful.”

Rachel Morrison nearly ran for the door when the bell rang, hoping the police would be there with good news regarding Drew.

There was no one there when she opened, but on the doormat lay a bouquet of white roses.

Lindsay shook her head. “He isn't finished. He never takes a woman and then just leaves her alive.”

“Maybe he was worried about that neighbor?” Maggie suggested. “I, for one, am glad that we found her in time.”

“You think I'm not?” Lindsay shot back. “You don't know this guy.”

“True. Not as well as you do.” There was a flicker of shame on her colleague's face. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.”

Sure you didn't. “Never mind. Take a look around this house. It doesn't feel right. He loves his metaphors, but in here is nothing.”

“You're still looking for buildings with towers? Maybe he's changing his MO. Before Arnold, he only ever killed women. Now there's Spencer. Maybe more.”

Lindsay turned to find Drew Caplan arguing with the paramedic. “I just need to see Rachel, okay? I can't reach her on the phone. After that, you can take me to the hospital all you want.”

“Rachel...” she murmured.

“Excuse me?”

“Damn it, he's planned it out exactly. Rachel was the name of Billy Harris's sister.”

“Oh, come on Linz, that's a reach,” Jacobi argued as he joined them.

“Maybe it's not,” Maggie disagreed, and it didn't seem like she was merely trying to make amends.

He hadn't expected that much of a fight from the small woman, and he cursed himself for getting careless this close to the day of all days. She nearly got away, but how ironic to slip on the stairs of the porch.

Pete hated to rush, but it couldn't be helped. *She was the unworthy wife. The last one, before his true destiny would be fulfilled.*

He carried her up to the second floor where a recently added part of the building looked a little like a church tower. There was money between the two of these women.

Then he called the cell phone number he knew by heart. Interesting really that she had never changed it. Like she wanted him to be able to reach her.

Later that day, Pete had called her again at the station.

“I can't stop it, not without you, my love. I need you, Lindsay.”

“I understand that now.” Her voice was low and soothing. “Tell me more. Tell me what you need from me so you can stop.”

She felt the looks on her, shocked and worried. As soon as Lindsay had seen Rachel Morrison, lying on her side on the hardwood floor in the alcove of the room she used as an office – Caplan's lover had been a writer – she knew that she had to change tactics. There was a white rose in Rachel's hair, and she was wrapped in rose scrubs, the thorns having broken the skin in on her arms and legs. There was a small pinpoint of blood on her left index finger. Next to her lax hand lay a mandrel, the object that had fulfilled the curse and put the princess into a sleep of a hundred years.

Rachel, though, would never wake up again.

He sounded impatient, almost angry. “You know what that is. Is she there with you now?”

Cindy flinched violently.

“Cindy has nothing to do with this,” Lindsay said calmly. “You know that, right? This is between us.”

There was laughter on the other end of the line. “You mean that.” It wasn't a question.

“Yes, I do. Why don't we meet, and talk about it?”

Tom shot her a glare. Cindy was visibly fighting for her composure.

Lindsay couldn't care now. She had to lure him out as far as he would come, no matter the costs. She had seen Drew Caplan breaking down screaming when she'd learned what had happened to her lover. Lindsay didn't want him to ever touch another woman, and she didn't want any parent or partner to go through this ever again. Whatever she could do to stop it, it would be worth it.

“We will meet,” Pete agreed. “We are finally coming full circle. Haven't you been waiting for that?”

“I have.”

He didn't seem to have noticed the edge in her voice. “That's very good. Because I have almost everything ready for you.”

“I can't wait. You're going to tell me where and when, now?”

“I'll let you know,” he said. “See you soon, Lindsay.”

As soon as she had hung up the phone, Cindy stepped close and embraced her. Lindsay just held on tight, disregarding her colleagues' presence.

Ever since it turned out that Pete Raynor was the infamous Kiss-Me-Not killer, her private life had been out there, exposed for everyone to dissect long before the Register's story. She didn't feel the need to pretend.

Act IV

2007, Fairy Tale

Elaine's laughter when he confronted her about the man in the hotel room, had made his anger boil over. How could she dare? She'd betrayed him, and for that, he'd expose her cunning ways, her inner true nature, to the world. She lay in the cold water not even shivering, the drug in her system paralyzing her body. She could still feel pain, and a fear so intense it almost made the heart stop. Not yet. Not before he deemed the time right.

His Venus in a copper tub. The lover. The unworthy one.

He began to feel calmer as the water started to turn red.

"There's been a B&E at my parents' house." Tom looked puzzled.

"Are they okay?" Although the older Hogans had never really warmed up to her, and the feeling had been quite mutual, Lindsay didn't want to see anything happen to them, though she couldn't figure out why he brought this up now.

"Yes, they weren't there. Shaken, but okay."

"What did they take?" Cindy asked.

"It's strange. The only thing missing was the wedding dress."

Lindsay felt the color drain from her face abruptly. "What?"

She remembered the arguments with her ex-mother-in-law vividly, about keeping her own name, about wearing the wedding dress that had belonged to generations of Mrs. Hogans before. Lindsay had wanted a new one; she'd even offered to pay for it herself which had been the biggest insult in the eyes of Tom's mother.

She hadn't wanted to put on a dress that, despite many washings, still had tiny particles of DNA from her predecessors in it. Tom had called her paranoid. His mother had called her worse.

In the end, she'd insisted on the name, but gave in on the question of the wedding dress. The same one that was now missing, and she knew who had taken it, and what for. Knew it without a doubt.

"Son of a bitch," she mumbled.

"Linz, it could be unrelated." It sounded like Tom wanted to believe this more than he actually did. Cindy looked doubtful, but she hesitantly took Tom's side, for the same reason, Lindsay guessed. She couldn't blame them.

"Could that be somebody playing a prank?"

"No." Lindsay shook her head, starting to pace in the office. "You heard him. He's preparing for something. He's waiting for the moment when--"

Cindy looked at her hands for an instant; when she looked up, her gaze was calm and determined. "That moment's never gonna happen, because you will catch him first."

Lindsay just gave her a curt nod. "I want to see the crime scene," she said, and this time Tom didn't protest. This concerned too much of their shared history, those parts of it they were trying to put behind them.

The closer they got to the Hogans' residence, the quieter Cindy grew. Lindsay noticed, but her mind was going in too many directions as it was, so she waited. It wasn't until she pulled into the parking space of her former in-laws that Cindy said, "This is going to be awkward, right?"

"Probably." Smiling wryly, Lindsay tried to remember when she'd spoken last to Emily Hogan. Coming back to tell her that a serial killer had most likely stolen the priced wedding dress was one hell of an occasion to catch up. It couldn't be helped. The ever-present image of Rachel Morrison starring as Sleeping Beauty in Pete's sick fantasy was all the incentive she needed.

"I'll wait here if you want that," Cindy said softly.

Lindsay turned to her for a brief, tender kiss. "No, I don't want that. There's hardly anything I can do to screw up even worse in their eyes. Who cares? We're not here to socialize."

"Okay."

"Also, I could use all the moral support I can get. Let's go."

Her former father-in-law opened the door to them, greeting her with a curious sideways look to Cindy. "Lindsay."

"Dan."

She had almost expected them to blame her for bringing trouble like that to their house, but to Lindsay's surprise, none of that happened. The Hogans seemed a lot older than she remembered them, and, even more shocking, terrified about the break-in. Just how much had Tom already told them?

"I'm sorry," she offered. "Can I take a look?"

The master bedroom was still in some disarray, which had to be hard for Emily. Lindsay took a deep breath, willing herself to open her mind for any hint of the depraved mind that belonged to her once lover. She didn't have a single doubt that he'd been here. And he wanted her to know it, just like with the warehouse.

Two could play this game.

As she stepped into the huge closet, an unexpected wave of sympathy for Emily and Dan swept over her. To have a stranger invade your most personal space was a nightmare in itself. She and Cindy had lived it. Even worse when it was a familiar stranger who had killed at least seven people and enjoyed it.

Lindsay ran her hands over the walls of the closet, pointing the flashlight in every direction. Nothing. *Come on, freak*, she silently addressed him. *Give me another clue, since you're so damn good at that.*

"Linz?" Cindy sounded slightly nauseated.

Lindsay stepped out of the closet hastily, cursing as she hit her head on the way out. There was hardly anything these days she did not blame Pete Raynor for.

"It was in here," Cindy sighed.

Emily had left a book on the nightstand, a Mary Higgins Clark mystery. People used photographs to bookmark the pages all the time, but Lindsay would have bet that Emily would not do it with a picture that showed her ex daughter-in-law at her wedding, when her son had been remarried for

quite some time. It had been torn in two, showing only the bride. Herself. Someone had painted the background over with a bright marker, so it looked like she was standing in a sea of bright red.

"Good hunch," was all Lindsay could say, before she turned it over to find the words.

The king's son, full of joy, said, "You are with me." And he told her what had happened, and said, "I love you more than everything in the world, come with me to my father's palace, you shall be my wife."

And she was willing, and went with him, and their wedding was held with great show and splendor.

"Don't all fairy tales end like that?"

Cindy shook her head. "That's Snow White."

Even with the gravity of the situation Lindsay couldn't help the feeling of pride at the casual display of her girlfriend's gift. "This is just getting better. Now let's find the other half."

Emily Hogan needed next to no time to pull the correct photo album from a shelf that held several of them. "Don't look so surprised," she said slightly admonishing. "Contrary to what you might think, I never hated you."

Lindsay held back the retort, which was a little easier when Cindy took her hand under the table, gently squeezing it.

"Here it is."

The other half of the picture was still in the album, perfectly aligned on the page. That's because he didn't really care about Tom. Lindsay thought uneasily that disengaging from her was the safest thing a person could do right now. Or for the past seven years.

At moments like this it was hard to ignore the fear gnawing at her. Not for herself; when the time came, she knew she could take him on. She had made one mistake, though; she'd let him into her life. He knew her weaknesses.

Lindsay wondered what Cindy would have to say about moving into a safe house – preferably on the East coast. He was too damn close.

She could just imagine that conversation, and how it would turn out.

Time to find him and end the game.

Finally, it was his turn to see the place that was theirs alone. He frowned, remembering she had showed it to the agent, John Ashe. In years, she had saved it, kept the secret, but all of a sudden some dubious FBI guy came along and she let him violate this sacred space. Like it or not, he would have to punish both of them for breaking the rules.

All these thoughts fled as he took a first look at his handiwork documented with an incredible

amount of files, articles and photos. The photos... Sarah Rice in a bed of lilacs. It was a that crime scene where he had first laid eyes on Lindsay Boxer.

There was Melissa's body, the dark red of dried blood contrasting sharply with the white of the dress he'd put on her. Elaine in a bathtub full of blood.

He felt the impulse to just let the wild animal come forward and take her right here and now on the dusty attic floor, with the women he'd killed, the ones who hadn't been worthy, as silent witnesses. The thought was incredibly arousing, and yet he knew it wasn't the right moment. Lindsay was vulnerable these days, but not vulnerable enough yet.

She would also wonder what had gotten into the kind-hearted, too-good-to-be true man she was dating, not that it would matter anymore after the fact.

Her words brought him out of his reverie. "I have to finish this. It's the only way that I can get him out of my life."

But that's not the plan, Lindsay... He turned to look at her, waiting for her to continue.

"He's taken another woman, Pete, and I have to find him before he kills her," she said regretfully.

You won't, he thought, giving her a smile to show he understood. "You have to go." He leaned in to kiss her, keeping his excitement in check. He couldn't afford to let himself go now. There was a lot to prepare for today...

He was ready now. The attic might be gone, but the perfect chambers were awaiting them now.

He went from room to room to make sure that everything was in place. He checked every piece of the equipment, and his little pharmacy he'd accumulated over the past months. There were enough supplies and food in the building so that he wouldn't have to leave it for a while; weeks, if necessary. Of course, he had taken years to prepare for this moment.

There would be lots of time for the two of them.

He smiled widely at his reflection in the gold-framed mirror. Everything was finally ready.

Lastly, he went into the wedding room. The dress was on a hanger, displayed against the wardrobe door, showing how exquisite the taste of a Mrs. Hogan had been long ago. Funny, that irony. His bride had gotten married in this dress once. He couldn't care less about the generational value, or the fact that it belonged to the family of the former in-laws. It was his way of leaving a message, plain and simple.

You'll be married again. Soon, my dear.

He stepped closer, running his hand over silk and lace. She would be with him. She would never betray him, never leave him. Because he wouldn't let her: Lindsay was the one.

Of course, she wasn't pure yet, but he had all the tools to make her, crack the shell she'd been hiding in, and free her true nature. The time had finally come.

They had barely entered the apartment when Lindsay found herself with her back against the door, Cindy's lips on hers in a passionate kiss, her lover's hands starting to wander.

"Hey," she gasped. "What did I earn this for?"

Cindy took a step backwards, a smile on her flushed face. "Because I just realized again how incredibly lucky I am? And--" She moved closer again, "I have one hour until I have to leave for my weekly conference. Why don't we use the time?"

Lindsay wasn't sure what had brought this on, well, other than all the talk about her past marriage, visual proof and the mocking thereof by a psychopath. She wanted nothing but to forget it all for a while, so she just leaned back, closed her eyes and enjoyed the slow sensual journey of Cindy's hands on her body. "I'd like that." Here and now, it was safe.

There was no reason for her brain to flash back to certain snapshots from the recent past, kaleidoscope like.

"You know something, Lindsay Boxer, you are very pretty."

What had Cindy said before, a stereotypical view of women, telling from the stories he'd used to stage the murders? Of course, most killers had. How easy had she been anyway, falling for blatant flattery?

She tried to concentrate on the feel of Cindy's hair under her hands, like raw silk, the pleasure of warm lips on her heated skin. It only lasted for a while.

Her eyes snapped open, but the images didn't stop.

"Are you a good detective?"

"I'm better at my job than I am at this."

Didn't she wish now?

"Shh," Cindy whispered. "You deserve to think of something else for a few minutes. Just let me."

"We all get frustrated and annoyed sometimes."

Was that when he started to target the next woman, when the compulsion was rising? When one of them said something he didn't like, and he began fantasizing about shutting her up with a blunt needle and surgical thread?

Cindy's fingers slipped beneath the waistband of her jeans, and Lindsay bit her lip, wanting to pull her closer, to make it all go away. Wanting to push her away because she was somehow irrationally scared that these images would touch and contaminate what was between them.

Who was she kidding anyway? There'd been a camera in her bedroom.

"It was so great."

The moment her thoughts were drawn back to the awkward morning-after conversation in her kitchen, the ever-present nausea rose back full force, the memory drowning out the tenderness

Cindy was bestowing on her. She couldn't help it. "No. Please."

"What's wrong?" Cindy's gaze was full of compassion, a sentiment Lindsay was quite sure she didn't deserve. In any case, she couldn't handle it at the moment.

"This," she said with more force than necessary. "How can you even stand to touch me?"

It had been on her mind the very moment she'd realized who Pete Raynor really was. Lindsay had honestly thought she could suppress the thought until they caught him, and after that, it wouldn't matter anymore. It wasn't that easy after all.

"What?"

Lindsay could tell from Cindy's startled look that the idea might not even have occurred to her yet. It had plagued Lindsay though, every sleepless night when she wondered if, after it was all said and done, Cindy would still want to be with someone tainted by the touch of a killer. Now, she couldn't take back the words anymore.

"Lindsay, don't do this. Nothing was your fault."

"No? You saw the attic, you saw how far I let it go. Some kind of accomplice, that's what he saw in me."

"That doesn't make sense," Cindy said reasonably, her hands covering Lindsay's for reassurance, or emphasis, but at the moment, she had problems deciphering the message.

"He's taking lives because of me. *For me!*"

"That might be his reasoning, doesn't mean it's rational. Besides, the attic is gone."

"But he isn't!" Lindsay yelled. Cindy flinched at the sudden raise of her voice, but even that couldn't stop her. "I can't get him out, Cindy. I can't ever get him out."

"That's not true."

"And I love you, but I can't expect you to be okay with all this. You can't be."

"Linz. I love you too. Don't even go there. Yes, I'm scared for you, and I hate what he's done to you, but don't think I'm going anywhere."

"Everyone did, eventually," she said, turning away.

"Not me. You believe me, right? Lindsay?"

She already knew she had done everything wrong today, so when she met Cindy's gaze a split-second too late, Lindsay had already predicted what she was going to see, and she hated herself for it.

"I'm sorry."

"What do you mean?" Cindy demanded. "Sorry for scaring me? Sorry because you want to... quit?" The last word was barely a whisper.

"No. I-- I don't know. You've got to understand. Once upon a time, I had plans. I wanted a career, and a family. He crossed it all out."

Cindy was shaking her head, her eyes bright. "If you just took a look around, Lindsay, you'd see that you have all these things."

She couldn't answer that right now.

"You know, I've heard all this talk about how you were obsessed, and I always thought they were being so damn unfair. I don't know anymore."

"Cindy..." Her mind was spinning with the implications. It couldn't be.

"And I'm not talking about you being involved in this case. You give him all the power!"

"That's not true."

"How many cases did you close in those past seven years? And don't you think there are people in your life who care? I care about you, Lindsay." Cindy's eyes were bright.

"I know that." It was on the tip of Lindsay's tongue to ask her to forget about the conference and just stay, but she didn't give in to the impulse. "You need to go," she said instead.

"Will you wait for me?"

Lindsay just nodded, trying to shake the fear that she'd just made an insane, irreversible mistake. Cindy would be back. There was no reason for doubting that.

"We need to talk about this some more." Cindy gave her a sad smile before she drew the door shut behind her.

Lindsay wanted to believe that they were going to be okay, but the sound of the door falling shut let her mind slither into a scary déjà-vu.

...She was still sitting hunched over the same files, staring at the same gruesome pictures by the time Tom came home.

"Hey," she said absent-mindedly. "I didn't know when you'd be home, so I didn't bother with cooking. Want to order something?"

When he just stayed in the same spot, leaning against the doorway, Lindsay turned around to face him.

"Did you hear what I just said?" she asked, a note of impatience creeping into her voice.

Tom shrugged. "Is there something else you wanted to tell me?"

So he had heard already. Lindsay sighed. It wasn't like she could have avoided this moment forever, but a little longer would have been nice. She toyed with the worn edge of the folder for an instant. "We're not in debt or something, are we?"

"Linz, that's not the Goddamn point!"

She flinched at the way he, unexpectedly, raised his voice. You had to push Tom Hogan quite a bit to make him yell. It made her defensive too, because for the life of her, Lindsay couldn't find that she'd done anything wrong. Expensive, yes, but not her fault that she had to do it.

"Then what is?"

Tom crossed his arms over his chest, a clear sign that he wasn't ready to follow her line of reasoning. "If the department doesn't pay for a DNA test, then it's most likely for a reason."

"Right!" Lindsay tossed the file onto the coffee table, all but jumping up from the couch. "It's because they're a bunch of bureaucrats sitting on the money, and they don't seem to care how these women died, or how many more he's going to kill. If there's a shred of a chance--"

"Do you really believe that? You said it yourself, he never leaves DNA behind. And frankly, Linz, he's not the only killer out there."

"Like I don't know that!"

"Then don't act like it. You know, I saw a 14-year-old today who died in a shootout. He wore his colors proudly. Now, he's gonna wear them in a coffin. Do you think that's any easier?"

"I'm sorry." Lindsay knew it came out half-heartedly. She was sorry, but she was also still angry at him for his apparent lack of understanding. It was never easy. But this... this killer committed hate crimes against women. He took away their voices quite literally. It couldn't not be personal.

Tom finally came into the room, towards her, reaching out to touch her arm. Lindsay wasn't quite sure whether to lean into the touch or back away, a common reaction lately. "You know this isn't about the money, right?"

"Could have fooled me," she mumbled. "I'll pay you back."

He ignored that. "It's gonna eat you up inside, if you let it happen."

"If I let it happen? Damn it, Tom, you don't have to patronize me. I want this to end, as soon as possible. He's torturing these women. He's sewing their mouths shut while they're still alive! So don't tell me about – never mind. Just forget about it."

"Yeah, let's just forget about it," he said sarcastically. "You're gonna make time for dinner now?"

"Don't bother," she shot back. "I'm not hungry."

"Well I am. I think I'm going out. As long as we can still afford it."

"Whatever."

Alone in the apartment, Lindsay trembled with holding back the effort of throwing something. Preferably the ugly flowered vase Mama Hogan had insisted would lend so much charm to their apartment.

She was still mad. And a small part of her, the one she couldn't acknowledge yet... worried. Afraid.

They had fought over this before, but this was the first time Tom had actually walked out on her...

He was doing it again. Lindsay was beginning to understand, she thought. He wasn't going to stop until she'd lost everything, until he was the only thing left that she had. Maybe the only thing she could do was to give it up first.

"Who's there?" Jill asked, slightly startled at her voice sounding so cheery, scolding herself for the idea that a certain inspector could pay her a surprise visit, when the problems they all had were so much graver. Still, she had her own ghosts haunting her, and if she could be free from them for a minute, who could blame her for enjoying it?

"Can I come in?"

Lindsay, on the other hand, didn't sound cheery at all. Jill hastily removed the security chain and opened the door, startled by what she saw.

"I blew it," Lindsay said, her composure starting to crack, though she was still fighting it. There was a finality in the simple statement that scared Jill.

"Come on in first. Sit down."

The questions were burning in her mind, but as she pulled her friend inside and she felt Lindsay's chilled skin under her hands, Jill decided that some other measures were in order first. "I made some tea. I know you don't like it, but I don't care, because you're freezing. I'll be right back."

"I'm surprised you're even talking to me." Lindsay gave her a rueful smile. "You said you wouldn't, if I screwed this up."

"Well, that was before Pete decided to extend his MO and let us know what he's been up to for the past few years."

Pouring the hot liquid into a mug, Jill generously sugared the tea, pretending not to notice Lindsay make a face. "Drink, and then tell me. It can't be that bad."

Secretly, she hoped that she was right. Jill didn't think she could handle anything else falling apart at this time, but sadly, she wasn't all too surprised. With Lindsay's home gone, the ever-present pressure of the threat, and another victim of Kiss-Me-Not, there sure was a lot of potential for conflict. She just hoped that Lindsay and Cindy would be able to overcome it.

"I shouldn't bother you with this," Lindsay said, though she clearly longed to unburden herself.

"Come on. You're talking to your friend who's seeing a shrink because of an unfortunate run-in with a serial killer. I'm the perfect person to talk to."

"I might have to ask you for asylum too. I'm not sure that Cindy isn't going to throw me out when she comes back home."

Jill waited patiently while Lindsay related the events of the evening, finding uncanny similarities to her own situation. She hadn't even thought of dating anyone since that fateful day, and while she enjoyed the attention of one certain Homicide inspector, she wasn't sure at all how far she'd be able

to go with it.

"Cindy understands," she finally said. *And I do, too*, she added silently, *about feeling cursed and contaminated*.

"I don't understand myself," Lindsay admitted, her frustration palpable. "It's ridiculous, really. I gave him the keys to my apartment, let him walk Martha, let him--" She broke off the sentence, her face going white. "I'm sorry. You don't need this shit."

"Can't you see what's happening? I did the same, you know, thinking over and over again how I might have lead him on, how he wouldn't have thought of me if only I didn't have that reputation--"

"Jill, no--," Lindsay protested.

"I know, right? I finally got to see how irrational it was. If I had slept with a different person every night, it wouldn't have been any of his damn business. The bastard wouldn't have had the right to so much as look at me strangely for it."

"Of course not."

"But you did nothing wrong, either."

Lindsay just shook her head. Jill sat beside her, drawing her into an embrace that Lindsay reluctantly allowed, but she remained tense. She wasn't going to cry, not yet. "You know, the shrink keeps telling me that you need to grieve for things, and relationships, just the same you do with people. I found it kind of annoying at first, but there's a truth in it. Honestly, I had to grieve a little for... us, too." She cleared her throat. "You've lost a lot lately, and Cindy knows that. When she gets home, talk to her."

"I don't know if she still wants that."

"I know," Jill said firmly.

Much later, when Lindsay had left, their conversation kept playing in Jill's mind. It wasn't all that hard to give good advice and offer a shoulder to lean on. Grieving, letting go, moving on. Doing it yourself was quite a different story.

Thoughtfully, she picked up the phone.

She still had time left before she was due at the Register, and while Cindy didn't think she could talk to anyone right now, she didn't want to be alone with the thoughts weighing her down either.

She found Claire in her office, typing a report. "Hey. I just wanted to see how you're doing. I feel like we've been overlooking that this is bad for you too – with Spencer resurfacing."

"Literally," Claire said dryly, giving her an intent look. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," Cindy returned a tad too quickly. "As I said—"

Claire got up to reach out and touch her arm. Cindy really wanted to lean against her and cry, but

she felt like what had been said, painful as it was, had to remain between her and Lindsay. To tell of it would seem like a betrayal to her. She already was scared that she had gone too far. "Honey," Claire said softly. "Thank you. Yes, it's bad, but Ed and I had some closure. We saw him being sentenced. Still, this is all wrong, but as long as Kiss-Me-Not is out there, it's not the time to deal with it."

"Everything just has to do with him," Cindy said angrily.

"You went to the Hogans with Lindsay earlier?"

Cindy flashed back on the torn picture. "...*I wanted a career, and a family. He crossed it all out.*" Literally. But she couldn't let that happen. She couldn't let Lindsay let him.

"I'll tell you about it another time," she said, knowing that if she didn't flee soon, Claire would manage to make her talk. "Now, I've got to get to work."

I'm sorry I'll be home really late, but I left you something else for dessert. <3, Cindy

Lindsay smiled at the text message, not yet sure if she had reason to hope, but she didn't really dare think anything else. This kind peace offering was so much like Cindy, though Lindsay thought ruefully that she would have to make her own contribution to that eventually. At that moment, she longed for Cindy to be here with her so badly it nearly hurt.

Talking with Jill had freed her some, but she still felt somewhat ashamed for burdening her with these issues. Then again, she'd gone to Jill for a reason, because she'd known Jill would understand too well the blame that kept weighing her down.

She went to the kitchen to look into the fridge, finding a small carton from the bakery around the corner. Apple and caramel, her favorite. Lindsay put it on the table, frowning at the slight dampness of the box, and started filling the coffeemaker.

It was such a sweet gesture of Cindy's in the midst of this chaos to come back and leave a piece of pastry. It wasn't like everything was magically okay. They still had a lot of talking to do, and if she was honest, Lindsay thought she could use the kind of talk that involved her and a professional, though she didn't really want to discuss her present problems with the department shrink.

While the coffee brewed in the kitchen, she took a quick shower, then dressed in comfortable sweats and a top before she went back to retrieve coffee and pastry. Martha followed her into the living room, wagging her tail so eagerly it made Lindsay laugh despite herself. "Right, it's the good kind. You think I should share?"

Martha barked once in affirmative answer.

"I know. It's just a good thing Claire isn't here – or your vet."

Having had her treat, Martha trotted into the bedroom, while Lindsay stayed on the couch, her thoughts once again wandering back to the exchange with Cindy. She couldn't go down that road once more. This time, he wouldn't make her. Once, she'd given everything and thought it had been okay at the time for the slightest chance to stop him, but now there was something she wasn't willing to give up.

Lindsay stayed in the same spot while outside, dusk fell. He was somewhere in the city, probably close. That was because he could blend in perfectly, a wolf among sheep, and no one knew it better than she did. He was waiting for the final confrontation.

So was she.

The sound of a window falling shut made her jump, her heart starting to race. Lindsay checked room by room, finding nothing disturbed.

He was making her paranoid.

So why couldn't she calm down? Too much coffee on an almost empty stomach, she reasoned. That would be an explanation for why her heart was still beating uncomfortably fast. Lindsay once again read over the message. And again.

Would Cindy really forgive her this quickly, or was it just her own wishful thinking? She realized that there was no ID on the sender of the message. It had been sent from the web.

The head rush she experienced when straightening again seemed proof to her theory that something was wrong. The pastry.

Martha.

She made it to the bedroom, stumbling once, to find the Border Collie lying eerily quiet at the foot of her bed. "Oh no," she whispered, sinking to her knees to feel for a pulse. Martha's fur felt strange under her fingers, and the room started to spin.

Lindsay tried to focus her thoughts on the most important matters now. Phone. Right in her hand. Gun. On the nightstand. Don't panic. Her security detail-assigned colleague surely wasn't sleeping in his car.

If she had to embarrass herself and call 911 to make sure, then so be it.

Taking out her garbage. Pete smiled to himself. He'd been through her garbage quite literally, and it had been telling. Of course, the clueless guy with the coffee stand had told him all about the pretty inspector with the sweet tooth, double caramel shots and all. Apple tart with caramel from the bakery across the street; it would serve quite nicely as Snow White's poisoned apple.

He'd been studying their schedules, too. He knew the days when Cindy was stuck in conferences for long evenings. Today was such a day. Bless the fact that for all her instincts, Lindsay wasn't really all that good with computers, and she wouldn't think anything of Cindy sending her a sweet text message not from her cell phone, but the internet, the kind that didn't show a phone number.

Slowly walking closer, Pete made a face at the cop sitting in the unmarked car by the curb across from the apartment. He'd be careful, but truth be told, he didn't really care how many bodies would pile up on his way to his true love.

He wasn't going to let anyone stop him now.

When Cindy walked up the stairs to her apartment, an apology was foremost on her mind. She'd let her own fears get the better of her, but she had to acknowledge that Lindsay wasn't seeing things too clearly at the moment; couldn't, really.

Cindy could sympathize. She'd been trying all the time, for Lindsay's sake, not to let show how deeply disturbed she was about Kiss-Me-Not's true identity. She couldn't even begin to imagine how it had to be for Lindsay, but Cindy was stubborn if nothing else; she wouldn't give up so easily. And all her earlier insecurities aside, she firmly believed that Lindsay wouldn't, either. They'd find a way out of this mess, and be finally free.

"Hey. You're still up?" she called as she walked into the quiet apartment, along the hallway, and into the living room.

The keys slid from her numb fingers, falling to the hardwood floor with a startling loud noise. She bit her lip until she tasted blood to keep the scream inside, then Cindy frantically fumbled for the cell phone in her purse, her eyes never leaving the macabre still life on the table.

There was an antique gold-framed mirror, the frame smeared with blood from what was lying next to it.

"And as a young bear just then came running by he stabbed it, and cut out its lung and liver and took them to the queen as proof that the child was dead. The cook had to salt them, and the wicked queen ate them, and thought she had eaten the lung and liver of Snow White..."

She blinked. She could see a beach through the big, panoramic window; the sea, a clear blue sky. The sound of seagulls could be heard.

The image wavered before her eyes; she couldn't focus. Her limbs didn't obey her enough to stand up straight, so the firm grip on her waist seemed to be the only thing holding her up. She felt seasick.

"It's going to be alright." The sound of his voice made her heart beat faster with apprehension, and she tried to pull away from his touch, to no avail.

Feeling dizzy and nauseated, she wasn't really convinced of what he was saying, especially when the edges of the romantic beach vision were starting to turn grey. Instinctively, she tried to reach for something to hold on to. He steadied her.

"You're with me now. Everything's going to be just fine."

The world was slowly vanishing.

"Welcome home, my princess," he whispered.