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Closer Than You Think

Written by Karen Rose

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CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

KAREN ROSE

headline

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Prologue

Oh God. Corinne fought the sudden wave of nausea, contracting her body into the fetal position. *Wine. Too much wine. This is the worst hangover ever.*

But … *Wait. No. Can't be.* A sliver of clarity returning, she shook her head, swallowing a moan when the room tilted inside her head. *Haven't had a drink in two years.*

The flu. Dammit. She'd had the damn flu shot. She lifted her hands to rub her eyes, but –

Tied. Realization rushed in. She gave her arms a panicked jerk, shooting pain up through her shoulders. Her hands were tied. Behind her back.

The room wasn't dark. *I'm blindfolded.* She lurched to one side, heard the clank of a chain before her movement was abruptly checked.

Terror crashed through her, filling her mind. *Tied. Chained. Blindfolded.*

A scream rose in her throat, but came out a rusty croak. Her throat was dry as dust, her lips cracked. *No hangover. Drugged. I was drugged.*

How? When? Who would have? Who could have? What had they done to her? She drew a breath, tried to calm herself. Breathed deeply. *Think, Corinne. Think hard.*

The musty odor of the room burned her nose, making her sneeze violently, sending her head spinning again. She clenched her teeth. Rode the nausea through.

She listened, but there was nothing. She heard nothing. No wind. No music. No voices.

Okay. Okay. This sucks. This really sucks. Calm down. Think. Think.

She forced her arms to relax, felt the chain go lax. She moved her fingers, her toes. Straightened her spine, careful not to make any more sudden movements.

She was on a bed. A mattress. With a sheet. And a pillow.

Slowly she rubbed her cheek over the pillow. Rough. The room was musty, but the pillow smelled clean.

A sudden creak had Corinne freezing. The door opened, letting in a cold draft. And the smell of lemons. And the beginning of a shrill scream, muffled by the quick closing of the door.

Who was screaming? *Who is here?* And then Corinne remembered. *Last night*. Walking back to the dorm. From the library. With Arianna. They'd walked together because it was late.

Oh God. Ari is here, too. Screaming. *She's screaming. Somebody has her and they're hurting her. They're hurting her. They'll hurt me next.*

"You're awake." It was a girl's voice, shocking Corinne out of her panic. The girl sounded young. Not a little girl. Not an adult. A teenager, maybe. She sounded … hesitant. "I've been worried about you," the girl added.

Corinne could hear the girl's feet shuffle against the floor. *Sounds like concrete she's walking on. Count her steps.* One, two… four, five… eight, nine, ten. *Ten steps to the door.*

"Who are you?" Corinne whispered, her throat so dry it burned. "Why?"

The mattress shifted. Just a little. The girl was small. Cool hands cupped Corinne's face. "You had a fever," the girl said. "It's better now. Are you thirsty?"

Corinne nodded. "Please. Water."

"Of course," the girl said agreeably. A cup was placed against her lips. A metal cup. not glass. Glass could be broken. Used as a weapon, but that wasn't going to happen here.

The water trickled down Corinne's throat and greedily she gulped. "More."

"Later," the girl said, gently laying her head back on the pillow. "You've been very sick."

"Who are you? Uncover my eyes."

"I can't. I'm sorry." The girl actually sounded sorry.

"Why not?" Corinne asked, trying to keep the panic from filling her voice.

"I just can't. I'm allowed to take care of you. I'm not allowed to take off your blindfold."

Panic won and Corinne lunged, rattling her chains. "*Who the hell are you?*"

The mattress abruptly shifted as the girl jumped off the bed. "Nobody," she whispered. "I'm nobody." Footsteps shuffled, the girl moving away. "I'll come back later with some soup."

"Wait. *Please*. Please don't go Where am I?"

A slight hesitation before the resigned answer. "Home."

"No. This is *not* my home. I live in the dorm. King's College."

"I don't know about your college. This is … home. My home. And yours. For now."

For now? Oh God. "But where are we?"

"I don't know." Said simply. Truthfully.

"Can you help me get away?"

"No. No." The girl's tone became adamant with fear. "I can't."

But she wanted to. Corinne could hear it in her voice. Or she wanted so badly to hear it that she told herself it was there. Either way, she needed this girl on her side.

"All right," Corinne said softly. "Can you tell me your name?"

Another long hesitation. "I have to go." The door opened. Ari's screams filled the air.

"Please. What's happening to my friend? Her name is Arianna. *What's happening to her*?" The girl's answer was quiet, said with a dull finality that had fresh terror clawing its way up Corinne's throat. "He's teaching her."

"Teaching her what?"

"What she needs to know," the girl said. "I'm very sorry."

The door closed. Corinne waited a few seconds. "Hello? Are you there? *Please* "

But the girl was gone and Corinne was alone in the dark.

Chapter One

Mt. Carmel, Ohio, Sunday, November 2, 5:45 pm.

"It's only a house." Dr. Faith Corcoran gripped her steering wheel, willing herself to look at the house in question as she slowed her Jeep to a crawl. "Just four walls and some floors."

She drove past the house, eyes stubbornly pointed forward. She didn't need to see. She knew exactly what it looked like. She knew that it was three stories of gray brick and hewn stone. That it had fifty-two windows and a square central tower that pointed straight to heaven. She knew that the foyer floor was Italian marble, that the wide staircase had an elegantly curved banister made out of mahogany, and that the chandelier in the dining room could sparkle like a million diamonds. She knew the house, top to bottom.

And she also knew that it wasn't the four walls and floors that she really feared, but what lay beneath them. *Twelve steps and a basement*.

She did a U-turn and stopped the Jeep in front of the house. Her heart was beating faster, she thought clinically. "That's a normal physiological response. It's just stress. It will pass."

As the words slipped out, she wondered who she was trying to convince. The dread had been steadily building with every mile she'd driven the last two days. By the time she crossed the river into Cincinnati, it had become a physical pain in her chest. Thirty minutes later, she was close to hyperventilating, which was both ridiculous and unacceptable.

"For God's sake, grow the hell up," she snapped, killing the engine and yanking her keys from the ignition. She leapt from the Jeep, angry when her knees wobbled. Angry that, after all this time, the thought of the house could make her feel like she was nine years old.

You are not *nine. You are a thirty-two-year-old adult who has survived multiple attempts on your life. You are* not *afraid of an*

old house.

Drawing strength from her anger, Faith lifted her eyes, looking at the place directly for the first time in twenty-three years. It looked … *Not that different*, she thought, drawing an easier breath. *It's old and massive. Oppressive.* It was more than a little run-down, yet still imposing.

It looked old because it was old. The house had stood on O'Bannion land for more than a hundred and fifty years, a testament to a way of life long gone. The three stories of brick and stone loomed large and dark, the tower demanding all visitors look up.

Faith obeyed, of course. As a child, she'd never been able to resist the tower. That hadn't changed. Nor had the tower. It maintained its solitary dignity, even with its windows boarded up.

All fifty-two windows were boarded up, in fact, because the O'Bannion house had been abandoned twenty-three years ago. And it showed.

The brick stood, weathered but intact, but the gingerbread woodwork she'd once loved was faded and cracked. The porch sagged, the glass of the front door covered with decades of grime.

Gingerly, she picked her way across the patchy grass to the front gate. The fence was wrought iron. Old fashioned. Built to last, like the house itself. The hinges were rusty, but the gate swung open. The sidewalk was cracked, allowing weeds to flourish.

Faith took a moment to calm her racing heart before testing the first step up to the porch.

No, not the porch. The verandah. Her grandmother had always called it "the verandah" because it wrapped around the entire house. They used to sit out here and sip lemonade, she and Gran. *And Mama, too.* Before, of course. Afterward … there was no lemonade.

There was no anything. For a long time, there was absolutely nothing.

Faith swallowed hard against the acrid taste that filled her mouth, but the memory of her mother remained. *Don't think about her. Think about Gran and how she loved this old place.*

She'd be so sad to see it like this.

But of course Gran never would see it again, because she was dead. *Which is why I'm here*. The house and all it contained now belonged to Faith. Whether she wanted it or not.

"You don't have to live here," she told herself. "Just sell the property and go …"

Go where? Not back to Miami, that was for damn sure. *You're just running away.*

Well, yeah. Duh. Of course she'd run away. Any sensible person would run if she'd been stalked for the past year by a homicidal ex-con who'd nearly killed her once before.

Some had said that she shouldn't be surprised that she'd been stalked, that by doing therapy with scum-of-the-earth sex offenders, she'd put herself in harm's way. Some even said she cared more about the criminals than the victims.

Those people were wrong. None of them knew what she'd done to keep the offenders from hurting anyone else. What she'd risked.

Peter Combs had attacked her four years ago because he'd believed that her "snitching" to his probation officer about missed therapy sessions had sent his reoffending ass to prison. Faith shuddered to think of what he would have done had he known the truth back then, that her role in his re-incarceration had been far more that marking him absent. But given the cat-and-mouse game he'd played with her in the year following his release, that his stalking had escalated to attempted murder three times now … Maybe he did know. Maybe he'd figured it out.

Slipping her hand into the pocket of her jacket, Faith's fingers brushed the cold barrel of the Walther PK-380 she hadn't left her Miami apartment without in almost four years. Miami PD hadn't been any help at all, so she'd taken her safety into her own hands.

She was sensible. Prepared. But still scared. *I'm so tired of being afraid.*

Suddenly aware that she'd dropped her gaze to her feet, she defiantly lifted her chin to look up at the house. Yeah, she'd run all right. She'd run to the one place she feared almost as much as the place she'd left behind. Which sounded about as crazy now as it had when she'd fled Miami two days ago. But it had been her

only choice. *No one else will die because of me.*

She'd packed the Jeep with as many of her possessions as she could make fit and left everything else behind, including her career as a mental health therapist and the name under which she'd built it. A legal name change, sealed by the court for confidentiality, had ensured that Faith Frye was no more.

Faith Corcoran was a clean slate. She was starting fresh. No one she'd left behind in Miami – friend or foe – knew about this house. No one knew her grandmother had died, so no one could tell Peter Combs. He would never think to look for her here.

She even had a new job – a sensible job in the HR department of a bank in downtown Cincinnati. She would have co-workers who wore conservative suits and stared at spreadsheets. She would make an actual living wage and receive benefits for the very first time. But the most valuable benefit would be the security, just in case her efforts to lose Faith Frye hadn't been quite good enough.

Lightly she touched her throat. Although the wound had healed long ago, the scar remained, a permanent illustration of what the man who hunted her was capable of doing. But at least she'd lived. Gordon hadn't been so fortunate.

Guilt and grief welled up in equal measures, choking her. *I'm so sorry, Gordon.* Her former boss had the bad luck to be standing next to her when the bullets started to fly – bullets meant for her. Now his wife was a widow, his children fatherless.

She couldn't bring Gordon back. But she could do everything in her power to make sure it never happened again. If Combs couldn't find her, he couldn't hurt her or anyone else. Her grandmother's passing had presented her with a place to run to when she'd needed it most.

The house was a gift. That it was also her oldest nightmare couldn't stop her from accepting it. Forcing her feet to move, she marched up the remaining two steps to the front door, dug the key from her pocket, and went to open the door.

But the key wouldn't open the lock. After the third try, it finally sank in that the key didn't fit. Her grandmother's attorney had given her the wrong key.

She couldn't go inside if she wanted to. Not today, anyway. The relief that geysered up inside her made her a little ashamed.

You're a coward, Faith.

It was just a delay of one day, she reasoned. Tomorrow she would get the right key, but for the moment her inability to enter bolstered her courage.

Peeking through the dirty glass on the front door, she saw a room full of furniture, draped in sheets. Her grandmother had taken only a few favorite pieces when she'd left the house for a townhouse in the city twenty-three years ago. The rest she'd left to Faith.

The thought of unveiling the furnishings elicited the first spark of excitement Faith had felt in a long time. Many of the items were museum-quality, or so her mother had told her on many occasions. *This will all be mine some day, Faith, and when I die it'll be yours, so pay attention. This is your legacy and it's high time you learned to appreciate it.*

The memory of her mother's voice doused her excitement. She could recall the fear that had filled her at her mother's words, like it was yesterday. *But I don't want my legacy,* she'd replied. *Not if it makes you die, Mama.*

An affectionate tug on her pigtail. *Silly girl, I'm not going anywhere for years and years. You'll be Gran's age before this place is yours.*

And in her eight-year-old eyes Gran was already ancient. *Then I have lots of time to learn about my "legacy," don't I?* She'd hidden her relief with a roll of her eyes, she remembered. She'd also remembered being far more interested in the cook's son's Golden Retriever than the silver teapot in her mother's hands. *Can I go outside and play? Pleeeease?*

An exasperated sigh had escaped her mother's lips. *Fine. Just don't get dirty. Your father will be back soon with the car and we'll head home. But next time we're here, young lady...* Her mother had shaken her finger at her with a smile. *We do teapots, 101.*

But the next time Faith had come to this house there had been no talk of teapots or anything else that was happy. Her mother was gone, leaving her life irrevocably changed.

Faith ruthlessly shoved the memory from her mind. Dwelling on that past would make her crazy. She had enough problems in

the present without dredging up old hurts.

Except … this was a hurt that needed dredging. And then purging. She hadn't been back to this place since that last horrible day. Never told her mother how angry she was. She'd never told anyone. She'd covered up her rage and hurt and fear and moved forward. Or so she'd told herself, but here she was, twenty-three years later. Still hurting. Still angry. And still afraid.

Time to deal, Faith. Do it now. Resolute, she walked around the house before she could change her mind, not realizing that she held her breath until it came rushing out.

There it was, off in the corner of the back yard. *A respectable distance from the house*, as Gran had always said. Someone had kept it tidy all these years, pulling the weeds, cutting the grass around the wrought iron fence, fashioned in the same style as the one bordering the front. The historical society, Faith remembered. Gran's attorney had told her that the local historical society paid for the upkeep because the O'Bannion family cemetery was a historic landmark.

Her family was buried here, all the way back to Zeke O'Bannion who'd died at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. She knew who rested here, remembered all of their stories because, unlike silver teapots, she'd found their stories riveting. They'd been real people, lived real lives. Like a faithful dog, she'd followed her mother whenever she visited the graves, helping her pull weeds, hanging on to her every word as she talked about their ancestors.

Faith pushed at the gate, frowning when it refused to budge. A glance down revealed the issue – a padlock. Her grandmother's attorney hadn't given her any other keys, so she walked around the fence until she came to the most recent headstone, carved in black marble.

It was a double stone, the inscription on the left weathered over twenty-three years. *Tobias William O'Bannion.* Faith remembered her grandfather as a stern, severe man who'd attended Mass every single day of his life. *Probably to confess losing his temper*, she thought wryly. He'd had a wicked one.

The inscription on the other side of the black marble was crisp and new. *Barbara Agnes Corcoran O'Bannion. Beloved wife, mother, grandmother. Philanthropist.*

Most of that was true. Gran had been a strong supporter of a number of charities. And Tobias had loved her in his own way. *I loved her.* Enough, in fact, to have taken her name.

Most of her children had loved her. Faith's mother's younger brother, Jordan, had taken care of Gran uncomplainingly until she'd drawn her last breath. Faith's mother had been devoted to Gran, although Faith wasn't sure how much of her devotion had been love. And the jury was out on Jeremy, her grandmother's only other living child. He was … estranged.

Faith's grandmother had been quietly laid to rest next to her grandfather in a very private service with only her priest and Faith's uncle Jordan in attendance, in accordance with her grandmother's wishes. Faith thought it was likely due to the fact that Tobias's funeral had been a bitter battleground that had shattered the O'Bannion family.

And her own little family as well, Faith thought as she moved past the next five headstones, all children of Barbara and Tobias who had not survived into adulthood. She stopped at the sixth headstone. Its design was identical to that of her grandparents', the inscription as weathered as Tobias's. Not surprising since they'd been bought and carved at the same time.

One side, her father's, was mercifully blank. The other bore a terrible lie.

Margaret O'Bannion Sullivan. Beloved wife and mother.

"Hello, Mother," Faith murmured. "It's been a while."

A high-pitched scream floated across the air as if in response. Startled, Faith did a three-sixty, looking for the source, but saw nothing. No one had followed her, of that she'd made certain. There was nothing like being stalked to teach a woman to be careful.

No one was here. It was just Faith, the house, and the fifty acres of fallow farmland that was all that remained of the O'Bannion family holdings. She patted the pocket of her jacket, calmed by the presence of her gun. "It was a dog howling," she said firmly. "That's all."

Or it could have simply been her mind playing tricks, echoing the scream from her nightmares. *Twelve steps and a basement*. Sometimes she woke from the nightmare to find herself screaming

for real -- which had scared the hell out of her ex-husband, a fact that gave Faith a level of satisfaction that was admittedly immature. Officer Charlie Frye deserved a hell of a lot more than a start in the night for what he'd done.

Her mother had done so much worse to her dad. "Dad deserved a hell of a lot better than what you did to him. So did I. I still do." She hesitated, then spat the words out. "I have hated you for twenty-three years. I *lied* for you. I lied to Dad so that he'd never know what you did. So if you meant to hurt him, you failed. If you meant to hurt me, then congratulations. You hit the bull's eye."

It suddenly occurred to her that her best revenge might be to live as her mother had always expected to – as mistress of the manor. It was almost enough to make Faith smile, but the memory of her father's devastation made her angry all over again.

The thought of her father brought to mind the promise she'd made. Reluctantly she snapped a photo of Margaret's headstone with her phone and texted it to her dad. He'd made a pilgrimage to her grave every few years, but a recent stroke had him homebound. Faith had promised him the photo so he'd know for sure that her grave was okay.

Got here safely, she typed. *All is well. Mama's grave is –*

Faith's finger paused as she searched for the right words, rejecting all the wrong ones that would be sure to hurt her father who still believed the inscription to be true. "Well cared for" was honest, she decided, so she typed it. *Will call from the hotel.*

She didn't dare call now. Standing here, looking at her mother's headstone … She wouldn't be able to keep the bitterness from her voice. Swallowing hard, she hit *send,* then she turned back to her Jeep with a sigh. If she couldn't get into the house, there was nothing more to be accomplished here today. She'd hit the Wal-Mart next to her hotel to buy some cleaning supplies and turn in early. She had a busy day tomorrow.

Mt. Carmel, Ohio, Sunday, November 2, 6:05 pm.

His hand froze, mid-strike, as the light in the ceiling began to flash. *What the hell?*

The alarm. Someone was outside.

"Fuck," he bit out. It couldn't be the caretaker. He'd mown the grass a few days before. It was a trespasser. Rage bubbled up, threatening to break free. Someone had the nerve to trespass here? To interrupt him *now*?

He glanced down at the young woman on his table. Her mouth was open, her breath sawing in and out of her lungs, her expression one of desperation. It had taken him two fucking days to get her to this point. After fighting him tooth and nail, she'd finally begun to scream.

She had the most remarkable threshold for pain. He'd be able to play with her for a long, long time. But not right now. Someone had trespassed and needed to be dealt with.

If he was lucky, it was someone who was lost, looking for directions. When they realized the house was abandoned, they'd leave. If not…

He smiled. He'd have another playmate.

He put the knife aside, several feet away. Just in case. The woman on his table had proven to be smart and strong. A little too smart and strong for his liking, but he'd soon fix that. The moment his captives' wills broke, the moment they realized that no one would come to save them, that he was their master for as long as he chose … He smiled. *That* was satisfaction.

Closing the door behind him, he left the torture room and went to his office. Powering up his laptop, he brought up the cameras, expecting to see a salesman or someone stranded –

He stared at the monitor, shock rendering him motionless for several long seconds.

It can't be. It simply can't be. But it was. It was *her*. She was *here*. Standing at the cemetery fence. Staring at the grave markers, her face as cold as ice.

How can she be here? He'd seen the news reports, the pictures of her little blue Prius, twisted and smashed. She could not have walked away from that. *I know I killed her.*

"Fuck," he whispered. Obviously he had not. The girl had more lives than a damn cat.

Go, finish the job. But first he had to make sure she was alone. He switched to the camera out front and got another jolt. A Jeep

Cherokee, bright red. Filled with boxes.

She'd already bought a new car, but at least there were no other passengers. *Good.* He'd take care of her, once and for all. He'd have to catch her unaware because the bitch carried a gun. He couldn't allow her the opportunity to use it. *She's all alone out there. Kill her now.*

He switched back to the cemetery camera, then cursed again. She had a cell phone out, taking a picture. He ran to the stairs, taking them two at a time. Skidded to a stop at the back door and peered through the gap between the boards that covered its window.

His heart sank. She was typing into the phone, then gave it a final tap.

She'd sent a text. She'd texted a damn photo.

Somebody would know she'd been here. He couldn't kill her now. Not here. *Never here.* Disappointment mixed with his panic. He couldn't risk it now. Couldn't risk the law coming around, poking in his business. Or even worse, the press.

Find her and kill her, but not here. He edged his way to the front room, peered out the window. His pulse pounding in his head, he watched her get in the Jeep and drive away.

Part of him wanted to jump in his van and follow her. To kill her now.

But he made himself slow down and think. He liked to plan. To know exactly what he'd do at every phase of a hunt. At the moment he was too rattled – and anyone would be, seeing her at the cemetery like that. He'd been so sure he'd killed her. But she was obviously quite alive.

That would soon be remedied.

He drew a deep breath. He was calming down now. More in control. This was better. A rattled man made mistakes. Mistakes drew attention, requiring even more drastic cleanup. This he had learned the hard way.

He'd find her easily enough. He'd followed her long enough to know her preference in hotels – and Faith was even more of a creature of habit than he was. Although she'd surprised him with the Jeep. A red one, even. That didn't seem to be her style, but perhaps she'd been forced to be less choosy when her old car had

become a pile of twisted metal.

How she'd walked away from the wreck was a detail that she would divulge. Before he killed her. Because he *would* kill her. He'd find her and lure her someplace else and *end* her, once and for all. Nobody could come looking for her here, to this place. *My place.* Nobody could know. They'd spoil everything. Everything he'd built. Everything he treasured.

They'll take my things. My *things.* That would not happen. *Think carefully. Plan.*

Flinching at a sudden pain in his hand, he looked down to realize he held his keys in a white-knuckled fist. He was more rattled than he'd thought.

Which was … normal, he supposed. But ultimately unnecessary. *She's just a woman, just like all the others.* Easily overpowered. When he found her, she'd be sorry she threatened him.

Except … Faith wasn't easily overpowered. He'd tried to kill her too many times. She'd become careful, aloof. Now, she never allowed herself to be unprotected. So he'd just have to work a little harder to lure her to a place of his choosing. *And if you don't manage to lure her far enough away? If she comes back here? If she tries to come in?*

Then he'd have to kill her here, which might bring the cops. *They'll take my things.*

He drew a deep breath, let it out. Refused to allow the panic to take him. He would not lose his things. If he had to, he'd move them. All of them.

Nobody will ever take my things again. Not now. Not ever.

Mt. Carmel, Ohio, Sunday, November 2, 6:20 pm.

Once Faith had reached the paved road, she began dictating a new to-do list into her phone. Her lists had helped her stay sane, enabling her to accomplish everything she'd needed to do to leave Miami as Faith Corcoran, leaving Faith Frye behind in an insanely short period of time.

She'd learned the magic of lists after her mother died and her father began turning to the bottle for comfort. She'd had to run

their little household back then and she'd only been nine years old. Lists were her salvation.

After her first possible break tomorrow, she'd contact her grandmother's attorney to get the correct house key and then call the utilities to have the power and water turned on. She'd need a landline, too, because cell service was spotty out –

Oh no. Her heart sank as she realized what she'd forgotten. *Cell service. Dammit*. She stared at the phone she held clutched in her hand. She'd changed her name, her address, her driver's license and credit cards, but she hadn't changed her cell phone number.

Irritation swept through her. How the hell had she forgotten about her phone? Not only was it still in her old name, it was a damn homing signal.

She stopped the Jeep in the middle of the road and pulled the chip from her phone. She'd get a new one tomorrow. An untraceable phone, just like some of her former ex-con clients carried.

Then once she got all her ducks in a row, she'd return to the house to begin what was sure to be a massive cleanup job. *Correction. It's not "the" house. It's "your" house. Get used to saying it and going inside next time will be a lot easier.*

Relax. You left Peter Combs in Miami. No one is stalking you. No one is trying to kill you. There's nothing to be afraid of here.

Mt. Carmel, Ohio, Sunday, November 2, 10:15 pm.

Arianna Escobar came to with a gasp, then held her breath, listening hard. She heard nothing. If *he* was in the room with her, he was holding his breath as well. She waited until she could hold her breath no longer. Air rushed out, and with it, a moan. She'd tried so hard to suppress the moans.

He loved her moans, she'd learned. He loved her agonized screams even more.

At the beginning she'd been determined to give him neither. To give him no satisfaction.

But he'd hurt her. A whimper escaped her pursed lips. With

knives and … Another whimper escaped. She'd gritted her teeth and bitten her tongue until she couldn't take the pain another second more. She'd screamed then, delighting him.

She'd screamed and screamed until her throat was raw. And then, he'd abruptly stopped, backing away with a muttered oath. He'd left; she'd heard the door close. When had that been? She didn't know. She could only see a bit of light through the edges of her blindfold. She thought she'd seen lights flashing overhead just before he stopped and swore.

He'll be back. He always came back. At first she'd prayed that someone would save her. But no one had. Now she prayed for death to come quickly.

It didn't seem like that was his plan. Whoever he was. He seemed intent on stretching this out. On making it "last." He'd said so, several times. That he needed to "make it last."

But worst of all, she didn't know if he had Corinne, too. The last thing she remembered was him shoving Corinne into the back of a van, but Arianna had heard no other screams since waking. Only her own.

Please let Corinne have gotten away. But she didn't think her friend had escaped. Corinne had been limp when he threw her in the back of that van. Like she was dead already.

The door closed quietly and she tensed. *Lemons.* She smelled lemons. It was the girl. Again.

"Help me," Arianna begged, her voice raspy and broken. "Please, help me."

A damp towel patted her cheeks, cleaning up what was probably sweat and blood. And tears. Arianna had shed all three.

"I'm sorry," the girl whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Arianna tugged the rope again. "Untie me. Please. I'll get you out, too. I promise."

The girl drew in a slow breath, still blotting Arianna's face. "I can't ever leave."

"Who says? I'll take you with me. Please. You're my only hope."

"I'm sorry." The girl's hands froze and in the silence that followed, Arianna heard footsteps.

The door opened. Arianna heard the girl's breathing accelerate.

"I w-was only c-c-cleaning her," the girl stammered out. "Like you told me to."

There was a loud crack, his hand slapping the girl's face. "You've been talking to her. I told you not to talk to her. I told you not to talk to any of them, but you dare disobey me. Get an empty box from the kitchen and pack my things. Yours too."

The girl didn't say anything. Arianna didn't breathe. *He's leaving? Why?*

But that didn't matter. What mattered was that he'd have to cut her free from the table if he moved her. *That'll be my chance to escape*.

The girl's footsteps shuffled across the floor, then the door closed quietly. Arianna could hear him approach. She braced herself, expecting the slap, but it still hurt when it came. Her jaw ached, her cheek burned. But she didn't cry out.

"Did you beg her for help?" he asked silkily. "Did you ask her to untie you? She won't help you, you know. She wouldn't know how. You are stuck here. Forever. Or until I kill you."

Gritting her teeth, Arianna waited for the next assault, but he moved away. A moment later she heard the sound of metal clanking. *Knives*, she thought. *He's packing up his knives, putting them into a box*. There was a loud, flat clang. The lid of the box being slammed down? *Yes. Like a toolbox*.

The door slammed and he was gone. Arianna let the air seep out of her lungs. She didn't know what had just happened, or why, but she knew she had a chance now. She'd survive, she vowed. She'd break free, find Corinne, and they'd get the hell out of this nightmare.

Mt. Carmel, Ohio, Sunday, November 2, 10:25 pm.

He slammed the door to his torture room, pissed as hell. "Roza! Where the fuck are you?"

The blanket that covered her doorway was pushed aside and the girl came out into the hall. "I'm here," she said quietly.

"I told you to pack my things. What're you doing back there?"

She hesitated. Dropped her gaze. "You told me to pack my things, too."

That he had, he had to admit. It wasn't like it would take her long. She owned maybe four things. "Okay. Fine. Get back to it." But she didn't move. "Well? What's the problem now?"

She flinched. "Wh-wh-what about Mama?"

He stared down at her. She was skinny, but she'd grown taller. Rounder in places she hadn't been round before. He'd noticed. "What about her?"

She glanced down the dark hall that led to her little room. "I can't just … leave her here."

He shook his head. He'd known she was stupid, but she'd really surprised him. "You can't take her with you. That's just disgusting. She's not prepared or anything. She's probably a pile of rotting goo by now." The kid's mother had died when he'd been away last year and she'd buried the bitch all by herself by the time he'd returned. The body had already started to rot, so he left it alone. No matter. Time had not been kind to the kid's mother. He wouldn't have wanted to preserve her face anyway.

He knew that the kid was attached to her mother's grave. She talked to it, slept next to it. That, he could understand. But taking the remains with her? The child was not right.

"I left a take-out bag in the kitchen." It had grown cold as he'd driven around town, looking for Faith's red Jeep. "Warm it for me. If you eat even one bite, I'll know. I weighed it."

"All right," she whispered.

That was better. He'd let her have too much freedom. She'd been talking to his captives when he wasn't around. He'd been too easy on her since her mother's death. He'd have to clamp down, show her the meaning of respect. "When you're done with my dinner, I want everything washed down with bleach. Every wall, every inch of the floor. If I see one dry surface …"

He'd beat the tar out of her. He was in the mood to do some major violence. God help the child if she got in his way. It was handy that he had Arianna Escobar. She would take the full brunt of his frustration tonight. Arianna thought she was so tough. She thought she'd had the worst of him. She hadn't seen anything yet.

He hadn't been able to find Faith. He'd looked everywhere that she'd ever gone while visiting the old bag who'd left this place to her, but he hadn't seen her red Jeep in any of the places

he'd looked. *I should have followed her. I should have shot her tires out and stopped her from leaving*. He was a damn good shot. If only he'd had his rifle loaded.

But he hadn't. And had he stopped her, she might have called 911 before he could get to her. That was *all* he needed.

As long as she was alive, that she'd enter the house was a given. She'd explore it and then she'd sell it. He'd have realtors underfoot all day long, poking around. *Touching my things*. He had to find her before she got the opportunity to enter. He wanted her dead, but on his own terms, because once she was gone, he'd buy the house himself.

He'd already set the plan in motion, goddammit, so she needed to be gone *soon*.

With that he went to his office, closed the door, pulled the desk away from the wall, and pried off the cover to his hidey-hole. He had dozens of these hiding places. Some he'd built, but most had come with the house. These old Victorian houses had nooks and crannies galore and he had made good use of them.

He pulled a lockbox from the wall and set it on his desk carefully. It had grown heavy over the years. It held his most treasured collection. This would be the one thing he'd take if he had to make a quick escape.

It was the one thing that could bury him were it found. He unlocked the box and lifted the lid. It was filled with memories - cell phones and wallets and drivers licenses. Hair bows and earrings, necklaces and rings. Photographs, car keys, and cans of pepper spray – never used by their owners because he'd been far too quick. He even had a deputy sheriff's badge.

Deputy Susan Simpson had been her name. She'd been a feisty one. Tall and buxom and much stronger than she'd looked. But she'd bent to his will eventually, just like the rest. She'd been a real treat, had lasted weeks before she'd finally given up and died. He'd been able to work out an amazing amount of rage and stress on that one.

He was under a far greater strain now than he'd been when he took Deputy Simpson. It had been worse when he'd targeted Corinne Longstreet on Friday night. He'd been watching her for weeks, waiting for just the right time. Friday had been that time.

All because of Faith.

On Friday night, he'd been completely wound up. He'd driven straight to Kings College. He'd been tired and hadn't been thinking properly and had nearly made a mistake that might have cost him everything.

He'd waited for the two women to separate at the fork in the path. Arianna had gone off to her dorm, leaving Corinne alone and vulnerable. Nabbing her had been a piece of cake. But he hadn't been expecting Arianna to return, to leap to Corinne's defense. That he'd managed to take Arianna before she'd had a chance to call 911 had been a bit of cosmic good fortune.

He didn't want to have to kill either of them now. He wasn't done with them, not by a long shot. He wanted to stay put. Wanted to have his fun. Wanted to work out his frustration. He needed to vent somehow. He was on edge.

All because of Faith Frye. Why hadn't she died like a normal person any of the times he'd tried to kill her? He could feel the agitation growing inside him, spreading into his brain. If he let it go too far, he'd do something inadvisable. Spontaneous. And then he'd get caught. It was inevitable. So he never allowed the agitation to go too far.

By the time he'd finished with Arianna, he'd be calm cool and collected once again.

He'd find Faith Frye and he'd kill her. His troubles would be far from over, but at least they would be far less immediate.

He picked a hotel key card from the lockbox and frowned. He couldn't remember who'd brought this keycard, but it didn't really matter right now. What mattered was that Faith possessed one of these. She'd be in a hotel somewhere. It might take a while, but he'd find her, even if he had to call every hotel in the tri-state area.

On his cell phone, he searched for the hotel chain that Faith always used. Such a creature of habit. He dialed the first location. "I'd like Faith Frye's room, please?"

"Could you spell that, please?" the hotel clerk asked pleasantly.

"Frye. F-R-Y-E."

"Are you sure she's staying here? We don't have her in our

computer."

It would have been too easy for him to find her on the first try. "I could have sworn she said she was staying at this hotel. I'm sorry to have troubled you. Thank you."

He repeated the call with every location in that hotel chain in the tri-state area with no luck. He was becoming frustrated again when the girl knocked softly. He flung open the door with a silent snarl to find her standing with a tray in her hands. His supper. He'd nearly forgotten.

Her eyes were down, her arms trembling from the weight of the tray, and probably fear. He grabbed the tray. "Do not *spy* on me, girl."

She kept her eyes down. "I wasn't. I'm sorry."

"Go to your room. You can wash my tray tomorrow. Go. *Now*. I'm busy." He slammed the door and ate his dinner while he looked up more hotels. He'd have to take a break soon. He was becoming too snippy with the desk clerks. He'd be too memorable if he called them the names that were hovering on the tip of his tongue.

He pushed his empty plate away and went back to his torture room. He'd vent some of his rage on Arianna before his next set of calls. He keep at it all night if he had to, calling every hotel in town until her found her.

Cincinnati, Ohio, Monday, November 3, 2:45 a.m.

No, no, no, don't make me! Please don't make me! Faith screamed as she had a million times before, but no one ever heard. No one ever helped. She stood on the very edge, staring down into the blackness that filled her with dread. She knew what was down there in the blackness. She wouldn't go down there again.

It was always her own treacherous feet that moved, hovering over the blackness…. Lowering until … They hit a step. One. *She grabbed the bannister, wrapped her arms around it and held on for dear life, but still her feet moved, dragging her down another step*. Two.

Crazy. Three. *I'm crazy.* Four. *I'm losing my mind*. Five. Six. *No, no, no. Please. She moaned now, but it never made any*

difference. Her feet kept going down. Seven, eight. Nine.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve. *That was all. Now run! But she was always frozen.*

Don't look. She clenched her eyes shut when her body pivoted against her will. Don't. Look. She knew what she'd see. Don't open your eyes. But her eyes always opened.

One red Ked. Just one, gently swaying, bright white shoelaces lazily dragging through the dirt. Don't look up. Do. Not. Look. Up. But her chin lifted and –

Faith bolted upright in bed, the air sawing in and out of her lungs, her ears ringing with her own scream. One hand reached for the lamp on the nightstand, the other for the gun under her pillow. She squinted at the light, her mind desperately scrambling to establish her location.

She was in a hotel. In Cincinnati. Surrounded by boxes and suitcases. She was all right. She was all alone. The breath shuddered out of her body, now violently trembling.

The shrill ring of the hotel phone broke the silence and numbly she reached for it. "Yes?" she asked, her voice raspy and raw from the screaming.

"Dr. Corcoran, are you all right? One of the guests on your floor reported hearing a scream."

Her cheeks heated in humiliation. "I'm fine," she lied. "I had a bad dream. I'm sorry I bothered the other guests."

Faith replaced the phone in the cradle, then got out of bed and turned on the television, keeping the sound low while she found the box marked "XBOX" and unpacked its contents.
A few minutes later she was settling on the floor, game controller in hand, picking up the game where she'd left off the last time she had the nightmare.

"It's time to kill us some zombies," she murmured because trying to sleep after the nightmare was an exercise in futility. This she'd learned twenty-three very long years ago.