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Heartsick

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Extract

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1

Archie doesn't know for sure that it's her until that moment. There is a dull bloom of warmth in his spine, his vision blurs, and then he knows that Gretchen Lowell is the killer. He realizes that he has been drugged, but it is too late. He fumbles for his gun, but he is ham-fisted and can only lift it awkwardly from his belt clip and hold it out as if it were a gift to her. She takes it and smiles, kissing him gently on the forehead. Then she reaches into his coat and takes the cell phone, turning it off and slipping it into her purse. He is almost paralysed now, slumped in the leather chair in her home office. But his mind is a prison of clarity. She kneels down next to him, the way one might with a child, and puts her lips so close to his that they are almost kissing. His pulse throbs in his throat. He can't swallow. She smells like lilacs.

'It's time to go, darling,' she whispers. She stands then, and he is lifted from behind, elbows under his armpits. A man in front of him, red-faced and heavy, takes his legs, and he is carried into the garage and laid in the back of the green Voyager – the vehicle Archie and his task force have spent months looking for – and she crawls in on top of him. He realizes then that there is someone else

in the van, that she wasn't the one behind him, but he doesn't have time to process this because she is straddling his torso, a knee pressing on either side of his waist. He cannot move his eyes any more, so she narrates for his benefit.

'I'm rolling up your right sleeve. I'm tying off a vein.' Then she holds up a hypodermic in his sight line. *Medical training*, he thinks. Eighteen per cent of female serial killers are nurses. He is staring at the ceiling of the van. Grey metal. *Stay awake*, he thinks. Remember everything, every detail, it will be important. He thinks: *if I live.*

'I'm going to let you rest for a little while.' She smiles and puts her flat, pretty face in front of his so he can see her, and her blond hair brushing his cheek, though he cannot feel it. 'We'll have plenty of time for fun later.'

He cannot respond, cannot even blink now. His breath comes in long, shallow rasps. He cannot see her push the needle in his arm, but he assumes she has, because then there is only darkness.

He wakes up on his back. He is still groggy and it takes him a moment to realize that the red-faced man is standing over him. In this moment, the very first moment of Archie's awareness, the man's head explodes. Archie jerks as the man's blood and brain matter blow forward, splattering Archie's face and chest, a vomit of warm, clotted fluid. He tries to move, but his hands and feet are bound to a table. He feels a piece of something hot slide down his face and slop on to the floor, and he pulls hard against the bindings until his skin breaks, but he cannot budge them. He gags, but his mouth is taped shut, forcing the bile back into his throat, making him gag again. His eyes burn. Then he sees her, standing behind

where the man's body has fallen, holding the gun she has just used to execute him.

'I wanted you to understand right away how committed I am to you,' she says. 'That you are the only one.' And then she turns and walks away.

He is left there then to contemplate what has just happened. He swallows hard, willing himself to remain calm, to look around. He is alone. The man is dead on the floor. Gretchen is gone. The driver of the van is gone. Archie's blood is pulsing so violently that it is the only sensation. Time passes. At first, he thinks he is in an operating room. It is a large space, walled with white ceramic subway tiles and well lit by fluorescent lights. He turns his head from side to side and sees several trays of instruments, medical-looking machinery, a drain in the cement floor. He strains again at his bindings and realizes that he is strapped to a gurney. Tubes are coming in and out of him: a catheter, an IV. There are no windows in the room and a faint earthy smell skirts the edge of his consciousness. Mildew. A basement.

He starts to think like a cop now. The others had been tortured for a couple of days before she dumped the bodies. That means that he has time. Two days. Maybe three. They could find him still in that amount of time. He had told Henry where he was going, that he had a psych consult about the newest body. He had wanted to see her, to get her advice. He was not prepared for this. But they would connect it. Henry would connect it. It would be the last place to which he could be traced. He had made a call to his wife on the way. That would be the last point of contact. How much time had passed since he had been taken?

She is there again. On the other side of the table from where

the body still lies, thick, dark blood seeping on to the grey floor. He remembers when she had first introduced herself – the psychiatrist who had given up her practice to write a book. She had read about the task force and had called him to see if she could help. It had been hell on all of them. She offered to come in. Not counselling, she had said. Just talk. They had been working on the case for almost ten years. Twenty-three bodies in three states. It had taken a toll. She invited those who were interested to come to a group session. Just talk. He had been surprised at how many of the detectives had shown up. It might have had something to do with the fact that she was beautiful. The funny thing was, it had helped. She was very good.

She pulls the white sheet covering him down so that his chest is exposed, and he realizes that he's naked. She places a hand flat on his breastbone. He knows what this means. He has memorized the crime photos, the abrasions and burns on the torsos. It is part of the profile, one of her signatures.

'Do you know what comes next?' she asks, knowing that he does.

He needs to talk to her. To stall. He makes a garbled noise through the duct tape and motions with his head for her to take it off. She touches her finger to his lips and shakes her head. 'Not just yet,' she says softly.

She asks it again, a little more harshly. 'Do you know what comes next?'

He nods.

She smiles, satisfied. 'That's why I prepared something special for you, darling.' She has an instrument tray beside her and she turns and withdraws something from it. A hammer and nail.

Interesting, he thinks, amazed at his ability to detach from himself, to remain clinical. So far the victims have been seemingly random – male, female, young, old – but the torso damage, though it has evolved, has been notably consistent. She has never used nails before.

She seems pleased. 'I thought you'd appreciate some variety.' She lets her fingertips dance up his ribcage until she finds the rib she is looking for and then she places the point of the nail against his skin and comes down hard with the hammer. He feels the explosion of his rib breaking and gags again. His chest burns with pain. He fights to breathe. His eyes water. She wipes a tear from his flushed cheek and caresses his hair, and then she finds another rib and repeats the process. And another. When she is done, she has broken six of his ribs. The nail is wet with blood. She lets it drop back on the instrument tray with an innocuous clink. He can't shift his body even a millimetre without a searing pain, like none he has ever felt. His nasal passages have clogged with mucus, he can't breathe through his mouth, he has to brace himself for agony with every lung expansion, and still he can't make himself breathe shallowly, can't slow the panicked, heavy pants that sound like sobs. *Maybe two days was optimistic*, he thinks. Maybe he will just die now.

2

The scar on his chest was pale and raised, the fibrous tissue no wider than a piece of yarn. It began a few inches below his left nipple, carved a naked path through his dark chest hair, arced, and then arced again back down to its original point. It was shaped like a heart.

Archie was always aware of it, the raised skin against the cloth of his shirt. He had a lot of scars, but this was the only one that still seemed to hurt. A phantom pain, Archie knew. A broken rib that had never quite healed right, aching underneath, but a scar wouldn't hurt. Not after all this time.

The phone rang. Archie turned slowly to look at it, knowing what it meant: another victim.

He only got calls from two people: his ex-wife and his ex-partner. He'd already talked to Debbie that day, so that left Henry. He glanced at the caller ID on his cell phone and confirmed his suspicions.

He picked up the phone. 'Yeah,' he said. He was sitting in his apartment living room in the dark. He hadn't planned it that way. He had just sat down a few hours before and the sun had set and

he hadn't bothered to turn on the light. Plus, the dingy apartment, with its sparse furnishings and stained carpet, looked slightly less sad cloaked in blackness.

Henry's gruff voice filled the phone line. 'He took another girl,' he said. And there you had it.

The digital clock that sat on the empty bookcase blinked insistently in the dim room. It was an hour and thirty-five minutes off, but Archie had never bothered to reset it, he just did the math to calculate the time. 'So they want to reconvene the task force,' Archie said. He had already told Henry that he would go back if they agreed to his terms. He touched the files that Henry had given him weeks before. They were on his lap, the crime-scene photographs of the dead girls tucked neatly inside.

'It's been two years. I told them you had recovered. That you were ready to come back to work full-time.'

Archie smiled in the dark. 'So you lied.'

'Power of positive thinking. You caught Gretchen Lowell, and she scared the crap out of everybody. This new guy? He's killed three girls already. And he's taken another one.'

'Gretchen caught *me*.' A rectangular brass pillbox sat on the coffee table next to a glass of water. Archie didn't bother with coasters. The scratched-up oak coffee table had come with the apartment. Everything in Archie's apartment was scarred.

'And you survived.' There was a pause. 'Remember?'

With a delicate flick of his thumb, Archie opened the pillbox and took out three white oval pills and tucked them in his mouth.

'My old job?' He took a drink of water, relaxing as he felt the pills travel down his throat. Even the glass had been there when he moved in.

'Task-force supervisor.'

There was one more requirement. The most important one. 'And the reporter?'

'I don't like this,' Henry said.

Archie waited. There was too much in motion. Henry wouldn't back down now. Besides, Archie knew that Henry would do almost anything for him.

'She's perfect,' Henry said, relenting. 'I saw her picture. You'll like her. She's got pink hair.'

Archie looked down at the files on his lap. He could do this. All he had to do was keep it together long enough for his plan to work. He opened the top file. His eyes had adjusted to the dark and he could make out the vague image of a ghostly body in the mud. The killer's first victim. Archie's mind filled in the colour: the strawberry ligature marks on her neck, the blushed, blistered skin. 'How old is the girl?'

'Fifteen. Disappeared on her way home from school. Along with her bike.' Henry paused. Archie could hear his frustration in his silence. 'We've got nothing.'

'Amber alert?' Archie asked.

'Issued a half-hour ago,' Henry said.

'Canvass the neighbourhood. Dogs, everything. Send uniforms door to door. See if anyone saw anything along the route she would have taken.'

'Technically, you're not on the job until morning.'

'Do it anyway,' Archie said.

Henry hesitated. 'You're up for this, right?'

'How long has she been missing?' Archie asked.

'Since six-fifteen.'

She's dead, Archie thought. 'Pick me up in a half-hour,' he said.

'An hour,' Henry said after a pause. 'Drink some coffee. I'll send a car.'

Archie sat there in the dark for a few minutes after he'd hung up. It was quiet. No TV blaring from the upstairs apartment; no footsteps overhead; just the pulse of traffic going by in the rain, a steady blast of forced air and the rattled hum of the dying refrigerator motor. He looked at the clock and did the math. It was just after nine p.m. The girl had been gone for almost three hours. He was warm and woozy from the pills. *You could do a lot of damage to someone in three hours.* He reached up, slowly undid the top few buttons of his shirt and inserted his right hand under the fabric, placing it over his ribs, running his fingers over the thick scars that webbed his skin, until he found the heart that Gretchen Lowell had carved on him.

He had spent ten years working on the Beauty Killer Task Force, tracking the north-west's most prolific serial killer. A quarter of his life spent standing over corpses at crime scenes, paging through autopsy reports, sifting through clues; all that work, and Gretchen had tricked him into walking right into a trap. Now Gretchen was in prison, and Archie was free.

Funny. Sometimes it still felt like the other way around.

3

Susan didn't want to be there. Her childhood home was cluttered, and its tiny Victorian rooms reeked of cigarettes and sandalwood. She sat on the gold thrift-store couch in the parlour, occasionally looking at her watch, crossing and uncrossing her legs, twisting her hair around her fingers.

'Are you done yet?' she finally asked her mother.

Susan's mother, Bliss, looked up from the project she had spread out on the large wooden wire-spool that served as a coffee table. 'Soon,' she said.

On the same night every year, Bliss burned a likeness of Susan's father in effigy. Susan knew it was crazy, but with Bliss it was easier to just go along. Bliss made the foot-tall father figure out of bundled straw, wound round with brown packing string. It had been an evolving process. The first year, she had used dead bear grass from the yard, and it had been too wet and hadn't burned. Kerosene had been required to get the thing ablaze and sparks had set the compost pile on fire. The neighbours had called 911. Now Bliss bought straw ready-packaged at a pet-supply store. It came in a plastic bag with a picture of a rabbit on it.

Susan had said she wouldn't come this year, but there she sat, watching her mother wrap the packing string tighter and tighter around the little straw man's femurs.

Bliss cut the string, tied it in a knot around the straw man's ankle and took a drag off her cigarette. That was Bliss for you: she drank green algae and smoked menthols. She embraced contradictions. She wore no make-up except for blood-red lipstick, which she wore every day without fail. She refused to wear fur except for her vintage leopardskin coat. She was a vegan, but she ate milk chocolate. She had always made Susan feel, in comparison, less beautiful, less glamorous, less crazy.

Susan would admit that she and Bliss did have two things in common: a shared belief in the artistic potential of hair, and poor taste in men. Bliss cut hair for a living and wore her bleached hippie dreads down to her waist. Susan coloured her own hair, dyeing her chin-length bob colours like Green Envy or Ultra Violet or, most recently, Cotton Candy Pink.

Bliss appraised her handiwork with a satisfied nod. 'There,' she said. She got up from her cross-legged position on the floor and bounced into the kitchen, her dreadlocks flapping behind her. She reappeared a moment later with a photograph.

'I thought you might want to have this,' she said.

Susan took the colour snapshot. It was a photograph of her as a toddler, standing in the yard with her father. He still had his heavy beard and was bending down so he could hold her hand; she was looking up at him and beaming, all plump cheeks and tiny teeth. Her brown hair was tied up in messy pigtails, and her red dress was dirty; he was wearing a T-shirt and holey jeans. They were both sunburned and barefoot, and they

appeared completely happy. Susan had never seen the photograph before.

She felt a wave of sorrow wash over her. 'Where did you find this?' she asked.

'It was in a box of his old papers.'

Susan's father had died when she was fourteen. Now when Susan thought of him, he was always kind and wise, a picture of paternal perfection. She knew it wasn't that simple. But after he was gone, both she and Bliss had fallen apart, so he must have had some levelling influence.

'He loved you so much,' Bliss said quietly.

Susan wanted a cigarette, but, after spending her childhood lecturing Bliss about lung cancer, she didn't like to smoke around her. It seemed an admission of defeat.

Bliss looked like she wanted to say something motherly. She reached up and smoothed a piece of Susan's pink hair. 'The colour's faded. Come into the salon and I'll touch it up. The pink is flattering on you. You're so pretty.'

'I'm not pretty,' Susan said, turning away. 'I'm striking. There's a difference.'

Bliss withdrew her hand.

It was dark and wet in the back yard. The back porch light illuminated a half-circle of muddy grass and dead sedum planted too close to the house. The straw man was in the copper fire bowl. Bliss leaned over and set the straw on fire with a white plastic lighter and then stood back. The straw crackled and burned and then the flames crept up the little straw man's torso until they engulfed him fully. His little arms were splayed wide, as if in panic. Then all human shape was lost to the orange blaze. Susan and Bliss

burned Susan's father every year so that they could let him go, start afresh. At least that was the idea. Maybe they would stop if it ever worked.

Susan's eyes filled with tears and she turned away. That was the thing. You thought you were emotionally steady, and then your dead father went and had a birthday and your crazy mother went and set a straw doll on fire in his memory.

'I've got to go,' Susan said. 'There's someone I need to meet.'

4

The club was choked with cigarette smoke. Susan's eyes stung from it. She pulled another cigarette out of a pack on the bar, lit it and took a drag. The music pounded through the floor. It snaked along the walls and up the stools and tunnelled its way through Susan's legs and vibrated the copper surface of the bar. Susan watched the yellow pack of cigarettes jump. It was dark. It was always dark in that club. She liked the way that you could be there and hide in plain sight from the person right next to you. She was good at drinking, but she'd had one drink too many. She considered this. It had probably been the blackberry martini. Or possibly the Pabst. Her mind blurred from the booze and she placed a hand flat on the bar until the sensation passed.

'I'm going outside for some air,' she said to the man next to her. She yelled it to be heard over the music, but the club's throbbing baseline sucked the life out of all other sound.

The front door was on the other side of the dance floor, and as she made her way through the Monday-night crowd, she compensated for the drinking with a too-careful stride, head held high and level, arms extended a few inches from her sides, eyes straight ahead,

cigarette burning. No one danced at that club. They just stood around, shoulder to shoulder, nodding their heads to the beat. Susan had to touch people to get them to part for her, a shoulder, an upper arm, and they would melt a few inches back so she could pass. She could feel their eyes follow her. Susan knew she attracted attention. It wasn't that she was pretty exactly. Her look belonged in the 1920s: a wide face with a large fore head that tapered to a small chin, skinny limbs, a rosebud mouth and a flat chest. Her chin-length hair and very short bangs made her look even more like a deranged flapper. 'Striking' was definitely the word for it. Without the pink hair, she might even have been beautiful, but it distracted from the sweetness of her features, making her look harder. Which was sort of the point.

She got to the door, squeezed past the bouncer and felt the crisp fresh air wash over her. The club was in Old Town, which up until recently had been called 'Skid Row'. Back when people still called Portland 'Stumptown', there had been a thriving shanghai business in that part of town, and thousands of loggers and sailors had gone into a bar or brothel only to wake up in the hold of a boat. These days, Portland's biggest industries were tourism and high-tech, many of Old Town's weathered turn-of-the-century brick buildings were being redeveloped as lofts, and you could tour the shanghai tunnels for twelve dollars.

Everything changed eventually.

Susan dropped what was left of the cigarette on the wet cement, ground it under the heel of her boot, leaned up against the brick wall of the club and closed her eyes.

'Do you want to smoke a joint?'

She opened her eyes. 'Fuck, Ethan,' she said. 'You scared the shit out of me. I didn't think you heard me in there.'

Ethan grinned. 'I was right behind you.'

'I was listening to the rain,' Susan said, lifting her chin at the glistening black street. She smiled slowly at Ethan. She had only known him about two hours, and she was beginning to suspect that he was smitten. He was not her usual type. He was in his late twenties, in that particular punk-rock way. He probably wore cords and a hooded sweatshirt every day. He lived with five other guys in a crappy house in a cheap part of town. He'd worked in a record store for eight years, played in three bands, listened to Iggy Pop, the Velvet Underground. He smoked pot and drank beer, but not the cheap stuff. 'Do you have a one-hitter?'

He nodded happily.

'Let's walk around the block,' she said, taking his hand, arm swinging, leading him out into the steady spit of Portland rain.

He loaded the one-hitter as they walked and passed it to her for the virgin drag. She took a hit, feeling the satisfying burn in her lungs before she exhaled. She placed the one-hitter in his mouth and guided him around the corner of the building they were passing. There wasn't much traffic in that part of town at night. She put her face right in front of his. He was taller, so she was looking up.

'Do you want a blow job?' she asked gravely.

He smiled that sort of dumb smile that guys get when they cannot believe their good luck. 'Uh, sure.'

Susan smiled back. She had given her first blow job at fourteen. She'd had a good teacher. 'Really?' She tilted her head in an exaggerated expression of surprise. 'That's funny. Since you haven't been taking my calls.'

'What?'

Their noses were almost touching. 'I've left you eleven messages, Ethan. About Molly Palmer.'

His smile vanished and a coin-slot-shaped furrow appeared between his eyebrows. 'Excuse me?'

'She was your college girlfriend, right? Did she ever tell you about her relationship with the senator?'

Ethan tried to back up, realized he was against a wall, and instead shifted awkwardly before settling on crossing his arms. 'Who exactly are you?'

'There've been rumours for years that the senator fucked his kids' teenage babysitter,' Susan said. She stayed in front of him, not giving up ground; she was so close that she could see the saliva pooling in his slightly open mouth. 'Is that true, Ethan? She ever mention anything?'

'I swear to God,' Ethan said, stressing every syllable, looking everywhere but at Susan, 'I don't know anything about it.'

The phone rang. Susan didn't move. 'Is that you or me?' she asked.

'I don't have a cell phone,' Ethan stammered.

She arched an eyebrow. 'Must be me,' she said, shrugging. She reached into her purse, pulled out her cell phone and answered it.

'Hello?'

'I've got a job for you.'

She turned away from Ethan. Took a couple of steps. 'Ian? Is that you? It's after midnight.'

'It's important.' There was a pause. 'You know those missing girls?'

'Yeah?'

'There's another one. The mayor had an emergency meeting tonight. They're reconvening the Beauty Killer Task Force. Clay

and I are down here now. I think this is big, Susan. We want you to write it.'

Susan glanced over at Ethan. He was staring at the one-hitter in his hand, looking sort of dazed.

'Cops and serial killers?' she said.

'The mayor is going to let us have a press person on the ground in the task force. They don't want another repeat of the Beauty Killer thing. Can you come down early tomorrow – say, six – just to talk about it?'

Susan checked her watch. 'Six in the morning?'

'Yep.'

She looked over at Ethan again. 'I'm kind of working on something else,' she whispered to Ian.

'Whatever it is, this is more important. We'll talk about it in the morning.'

Her head was foggy from the liquor. 'OK,' she agreed. She snapped the phone shut and bit her lip. Then she turned back to Ethan. It had taken her months to track him down. She didn't even know if he still kept in touch with Molly. But it was all she had. 'Here's the thing,' she said to him. 'The media's ignored the rumours long enough. And now I'm going to find out what happened. And I'm going to write about it.' She made eye contact with him and held it, wanting him to see her face, to see past the pink hair, to see how serious she was. 'Tell Molly that. Tell her that I'll keep her safe. And that I'm interested in the truth. Tell her that when she's ready to talk about what happened, I'll listen.' The rain had progressed from a spit to a half-hearted drizzle. She pressed a business card into his hand. 'My name is Susan Ward. I'm with the *Herald*.'