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Girl Missing

Tess Gerritsen

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Extract

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GIRL MISSING

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AN INTRODUCTION FROM THE AUTHOR

Years before I built my reputation as a thriller writer, I had another life – as a romantic suspense author. Fans of my crime novels may be surprised to learn that I launched my career by writing stories in which romance shared equal billing with murder, where characters struggle with both fear and sexual tension. At the time, I was working as a doctor in a hospital, a job in which I saw far too much pain and heartbreak at work. At the end of the day, I drew comfort from reading – and writing – romance novels.

But over the course of writing nine of those novels, I found that the thriller elements began to dominate my plots. I was evolving into a crime writer, and in *Girl Missing* (first published in 1994 under the title *Peggy Sue Got Murdered*), that evolution is well underway. Yes, it's a romance. But it's also a crime novel, featuring a female medical examiner who must track down the cause of an

epidemic of mysterious deaths. I consider it my 'bridge' novel, a moment in time when I was poised to step from one genre into the next.

Recently updated for today's readers, *Girl Missing* will give you a glimpse of the thriller writer I would one day become. I hope you enjoy the look back!

Tess Gerritsen
May 2009

1

An hour before her shift started, an hour before she was even supposed to be there, they rolled the first corpse through the door.

Up until that moment, Kat Novak's day had been going better than usual. Her car had started on the first turn of the key. Traffic had been sparse on Telegraph, and she'd hit all the green lights. She'd managed to slip into her office at five to seven, and for the next hour she could lounge guiltlessly at her desk with a jelly doughnut and today's edition of the *Albion Herald*. She made a point of skipping the obituaries. Chances were she already knew all about them.

Then a gurney with a black body bag rolled past her doorway. *Oh Lord,* she thought. In about thirty seconds, Clark was going to knock at her door, asking for favors. With a sense of dread, Kat listened to the gurney wheels grind down the hall. She heard the autopsy room doors

whisk open and shut, heard the distant rumble of male voices. She counted ten seconds, fifteen. And there it was, just as she'd anticipated: the sound of Clark's Reeboks squeaking across the linoleum floor.

He appeared in her doorway. 'Morning, Kat,' he said.

She sighed. 'Good morning, Clark.'

'Can you believe it? They just wheeled one in.'

'Yeah, the *nerve* of them.'

'It's already seven ten,' he said. A note of pleading crept into his voice. 'If you could just do me this favor . . .'

'But I'm not here.' She licked a dollop of raspberry jelly from her fingers. 'Until eight o'clock, I'm nothing more than a figment of your imagination.'

'I don't have time to process this one. Beth's got the kids packed and ready to take off, and here I am, stuck with another Jane Doe. Have a heart.'

'This is the third time this month.'

'But I've got a family. They expect me to spend time with them. You're a free agent.'

'Right. I'm a divorcee, not a temp.'

Clark shuffled into her office and leaned his ample behind against her desk. 'Just this once. Beth and I, we're having problems, you know, and I want this vacation to start off right. I'll return the favor sometime. I promise.'

Sighing, Kat folded up the *Herald*. 'Okay,' she said. 'What've you got?'

Clark was already pulling off his white coat, visibly shifting to vacation mode. 'Jane Doe. No obvious trauma. Another body-fluid special. Sykes and Ratchet are in there with her.'

'They bring her in?'

'Yeah. So you'll have a decent police report to work with.'

Kat rose to her feet and brushed powdered sugar off her scrub pants. 'You owe me,' she said, as they headed into the hall.

'I know, I know.' He stopped at his office and grabbed his jacket – a fly-fisherman's version, complete with a zillion pockets with little feathers poking out.

'Leave a few trout for the rest of us.'

He grinned and gave her a salute. 'Into the wilds of Maine I go,' he said, heading for the elevator. 'See you next week.'

Feeling resigned, Kat pushed open the door to the autopsy room and went in.

The body, still sealed in its black bag, lay on the slab. Lieutenant Lou Sykes and Sergeant Vince Ratchet, veterans of the local knife and gun club, were waiting for her. Sykes looked dapper as usual in a suit and tie – a black homicide detective who always insisted on mixing corpses with Versace. His partner, Vince Ratchet, was, in contrast, a perpetual candidate for Slim-Fast. Ratchet was peering in fascination at a specimen jar on the shelf.

'What the hell is that?' he asked, pointing to the jar. Good old Vince; he was never afraid to sound stupid.

'That's the right middle lobe of a lung,' Kat said.

'I would've guessed it was a brain.'

Sykes laughed. 'That's why she's the doc and you're just a dumb cop.' He straightened his tie and looked at her. 'Isn't Clark doing this one?'

Kat snapped on a pair of gloves. 'Afraid I am.'

'Thought your shift started at eight.'

'Tell me about it.' She went to the slab and gazed down at the bag, feeling her usual reluctance to open the zipper, to reveal what lay beneath the black plastic. *How many of these bags have I opened?* she wondered. A hundred, two hundred? Each one contained its own private horror story. This was the hardest part, sliding down the zipper, unveiling the contents. Once a body was revealed, once she'd weathered the initial shock of its appearance, she could set to work with a scientist's dispassion. But the first glimpse, the first reaction – that was always pure emotion, something over which she had no control.

'So, guys,' she said. 'What's the story here?'

Ratchet came forward and flipped open his notebook. It was like an extension of his arm, that notebook; she'd never seen him without it. 'Caucasian female, no ID, age twenty to thirty. Body found four A.M. this morning, off South Lexington. No apparent trauma, no witnesses, no nothing.'

'South Lexington,' said Kat, and images of that neighborhood flashed through her mind. She knew the area too well – the streets, the back alleys, the playgrounds rimmed with barbed wire. And, looming above it all, the seven buildings, as grim as twenty-story concrete headstones. 'The Projects?' she asked.

'Where else?'

'Who found her?'

'City trash pickup,' said Sykes. 'She was in an alley between two of the Project buildings, sort of wedged against a Dumpster.'

'As if she was placed there? Or died there?'

Sykes glanced at Ratchet. 'You were at the scene first. What do you say, Vince?'

'Looked to me like she died there. Just lay down, sort of curled up against the Dumpster, and called it quits.'

It was time. Steeling herself for that first glimpse, Kat reached for the zipper and opened the bag. Sykes and Ratchet both took a step backward, an instinctive reaction she herself had to quell. The zipper parted and the plastic fell away to reveal the corpse.

It wasn't bad; at least it appeared intact. Compared to some of the corpses she'd seen, this one was actually in excellent shape. The woman was a bleached blond, about thirty, perhaps younger. Her face looked like marble, pale and cold. She was dressed in a long-sleeved purple pullover, some sort of polyester blend, a short black skirt with a patent leather belt, black tights, and brand-new Nikes. Her only jewelry was a dime-store friendship ring and a Timex watch – still ticking. Rigor mortis had frozen her limbs into a vague semblance of a fetal position. Both fists were clenched tight, as though, in her last moment of life, they'd been caught in spasm.

Kat took a few photos, then picked up a cassette recorder and began to dictate. 'Subject is a white female, blond, found in alley off South Lexington around oh four hundred . . .' Sykes and Ratchet, already knowing what would follow, took off their jackets and reached into a linen cart for some gowns – medium for Sykes, extra large for Ratchet. The gloves came next. They both knew the drill; they'd been cops for years, and partners for four

months. It was an odd pairing, Kat thought, like Abbott and Costello. So far, though, it seemed to work.

She put down the cassette recorder. 'Okay, guys,' she said. 'On to the next step.'

The undressing. The three of them worked together to strip the corpse. Rigor mortis made it difficult; Kat had to cut away the skirt. The outer clothing was set aside. The tights and underwear were to be examined later for evidence of recent sexual contact. When at last the corpse lay naked, Kat once again reached for the camera and clicked off a few more photos for the evidence file.

It was time for the hands-on part of the job – the part one never saw on *House*. Occasionally, the answers fell right into place with a first look. Time of death, cause of death, mechanism and manner of death – these were the blanks that had to be filled in. A verdict of suicide or natural causes would make Sykes and Ratchet happy; a verdict of homicide would not.

This time, unfortunately, Kat could give them no quick answers.

She could make an educated guess about time of death. Livor mortis, the body's mottling after death, was unfixed, suggesting that death was less than eight hours old, and the body temperature, using Moritz's formula, suggested a time of death of around midnight. But the cause of death?

'Nothing definitive, guys,' she said. 'Sorry.'

Sykes and Ratchet looked disappointed, but not at all surprised.

'We'll have to wait for body fluids,' she said.

'How long?'

'I'll collect it, get it to the state lab today. But they've been running a few weeks behind.'

'Can't you run a few tests here?' asked Sykes.

'I'll screen it through gas and TL chromatography, but it won't be specific. Definitive drug ID will have to go through the state lab.'

'All we want to know,' said Ratchet, 'is whether it's possible.'

'Homicide's always possible.' She continued her external exam, starting with the head. No signs of trauma here; the skull felt intact, the scalp unbroken. The blond hair was tangled and dirty; obviously the woman had not washed it in days. Except for postmortem changes, she saw no marks on the torso either. The left arm, however, drew her attention. It had a long ridge of scar tissue snaking down it toward the wrist.

'Needle tracks,' said Kat. 'And a fresh puncture mark.'

'Another junkie,' sighed Sykes. 'There's our cause of death. Probable OD.'

'We could run a fast analysis on her needle,' said Kat. 'Where's her kit?'

Ratchet shook his head. 'Didn't find one.'

'She must've had a needle. A syringe.'

'I looked,' said Ratchet. 'I didn't see any.'

'Did you find anything near the body?'

'Nothing,' said Ratchet. 'No purse, no ID, nothing.'

'Who was first on the scene?'

'Patrolman. Then me.'

'So we've got a junkie with fresh needle marks. But no needle.'

Sykes said, 'Maybe she shot up somewhere else. Wandered into the alley and died.'

'Possible.'

Ratchet was peering at the woman's hand. 'What's this?' he said.

'What's what?'

'She's got something in her hand.'

Kat looked. Sure enough, there was a tiny fleck of pink cardboard visible under the edge of her clenched fingers. It took two of them to pry the fist open. Out slid a matchbook, small and pink with raised gold lettering: 'L'Etoile, fine nouvelle cuisine. 221 Hilton Avenue.'

'Kind of out of her neighborhood,' Sykes remarked.

'Hey, I hear that's a nice place,' said Ratchet. 'Not that I could ever afford to eat there myself.'

Kat opened the matchbook. Inside were three unused matches. And a phone number, scrawled in fountain pen ink on the inside cover.

'Think it's a local number?' she asked.

'Prefix would put it in Surry Heights,' said Sykes. 'That's still out of her neighborhood.'

'Well,' said Kat. 'Let's try it out and see what happens.' As Sykes and Ratchet stood by, she went to the wall phone and dialed the number. It rang, three times, four. An answering machine came on, the message spoken by a deep male voice:

'I'm not available at the moment. Please leave your name and number.'

That was all. No cute music, no witty remarks, just that terse request, and then the beep.

Kat said, 'This is Dr. Novak at the Albion medical examiner's office. Please call me back, in regards to a . . .' She paused, unwilling to reveal that she had a corpse whom he might know. Instead she said, 'Please call me. It's important,' and left her number. She hung up and looked at the two cops. 'We'll just have to wait and see who calls back. In the meantime, do you both want to stick around for the autopsy?'

It was probably the last thing the men wanted to do, but they remained stoically by the table, wincing as she stabbed various needles into the corpse, collecting blood from the femoral vein, vitreous fluid from the eye, and urine from a puncture through the lower abdominal wall. After watching a needle pierce an eyeball, a blade does not hold nearly as many horrors. Kat picked up the Henckel knife and this time neither man flinched, even as her blade sliced into the torso. Even as she snapped apart ribs and lifted off the sternum, releasing the odor of blood and offal.

Inside the chest, organs glistened.

Kat put down her knife and picked up a far more delicate scalpel. Reaching into the cavity, her gloved hands registered the neutral temperature of those organs. Neither warm like the living, nor chilled like a refrigerated corpse. As Goldilocks would have said, *Not too hot, not too cold, but just right* – this description suitable for a corpse

that had been lying exposed on a spring night. She sliced through the great vessels, freeing the heart and lungs, which she lifted out of the chest cavity.

'These lungs feel pretty heavy,' she noted. She set them on the scale and watched as the dial confirmed her judgment.

'What would cause them to be heavy?' asked Ratchet.

She noticed the fleck of froth that had leaked from the bronchi. 'There's foamy edema. The lungs are filled with fluid.'

'Meaning what? She drowned in an alley?'

'In a sense, she did drown. But the fluid came from her own lungs. Foamy edema can be caused by any number of things.'

'Like a drug OD?' asked Sykes.

'Absolutely. This could certainly happen after an overdose of narcotics.'

She sliced open the heart, examined the chambers. Except for the soggy lungs, the organs appeared grossly normal. The coronary vessels were healthy, the liver and pancreas and intestines undiseased. Cutting open the stomach, she found no food remnants, only 20cc of bilious fluid.

'Died with an empty stomach,' said Kat.

'Look at how skinny she is,' said Sykes. 'When you're shooting crap into your veins, I'd guess eating takes second priority.'

Kat moved on to the vagina and rectum. It was one aspect of the postmortem that made her uncomfortable, but only because two men were in the room. As she inspected the external genitalia, as she inserted swabs to

collect body fluids, they were watching intently, and it was more than just Jane Doe's privacy that felt violated. 'I don't see any evidence of sexual assault,' she said.

She turned her attention to the head. Of all the parts of a corpse, the face is the most personal, and the most disturbing to contemplate. Until that moment, Kat had avoided looking at it too closely, but now she was forced to. In life, the young woman might have been pretty. Shampoo her hair, animate those facial muscles into a smile, and she would probably have caught the eye of more than a few men. But death had made her jaw droop, her mouth gape open, revealing coffee-stained teeth and a tongue dried out from exposure. It was a blank face, revealing no secrets.

Neither did her cranium provide any answers. Kat sawed open the skull and the brain within showed no signs of hemorrhage or stroke or trauma. It was a healthy-looking brain, a young brain, and it should have given its owner many more years of service. Instead that brain, with its lifetime of memories, was now dropped into a bucket of formalin. And the body – what was left of it – would go into a refrigerated drawer, dubbed with the name shared by far too many other unidentified women who had come before her.

Jane Doe.

Kat was sitting at her desk later that morning when her phone rang. She picked it up and answered: 'Dr. Novak, Assistant ME.'

'You left a message,' said a man. She recognized at once the voice from the answering machine. Its deep timbre

was now edged with anxiety. 'What's this all about?' he demanded.

Kat at once reached for pen and paper. 'Who am I speaking to?' she asked.

'You should know. You called *me*.'

'I just had your telephone number, not a name—'

'And how did you get my number?'

'It was written on a matchbook. The police brought a woman into the morgue this morning, and she—'

He cut in: 'I'll be right there.'

'Mister, I didn't catch your—'

She heard the click of the receiver, then a dial tone. *Jackass*, she thought. What if he didn't show up? What if he didn't call back?

She dialed Homicide and left a message for Sykes and Ratchet: 'Get yourselves back to the morgue.' Then she waited.

At noon, she got a buzz on the intercom from the front desk. 'There's a Mr. Quantrell here,' said the secretary. 'He says you're expecting him. Want me to send him down?'

'I'll meet him up there,' said Kat. 'I'm on my way.'

She knew better than to just drag a civilian in off the street and take him straight down to the morgue. He would need a chance to prepare for the shock. She pulled a white lab coat over her scrub suit. The lapel had coffee stains, but it would have to do.

By the time she'd ridden up the basement elevator to the ground floor, she'd rearranged her hair into a semblance of presentability and straightened her name

tag. She stepped out into the hallway. Through the glass door at the end of the corridor she could see the reception area with its couch and upholstered chairs, all in generic gray. She could also see a man pacing back and forth in front of the couch, oblivious to her approach. He was nicely dressed, and didn't seem like the sort of man who'd be acquainted with a Jane Doe from South Lexington. His camel-hair jacket was perfectly tailored to his wide shoulders. He had a tan raincoat slung over his arm, and he was tugging at his tie as though it were strangling him.

Kat pushed the glass door open and walked in. 'Mr. Quantrell?'

At once the man turned and faced her. He had wheat-colored hair, perfectly groomed, and eyes a shade she'd never seen before. Not quite blue, not quite gray, they seemed as changeable as a spring sky. He was old enough – his early forties perhaps – to have amassed a few character lines around those eyes, a few gray hairs around his temples. His jaw was set with tension.

'I'm Dr. Novak,' she said, holding out her hand. He shook it automatically, quickly, as though to get the formalities done and over with.

'Adam Quantrell,' he said. 'You left that message on my answering machine.'

'Why don't we go down to my office? You can wait there until the police—'

'You said something about a woman,' he cut in rudely. 'That the police brought in a woman.' No, it wasn't rudeness, Kat decided. He was afraid.

'It might be better to wait for Lieutenant Sykes,' she said. 'He can explain the situation.'

'Why don't *you* explain it to me?'

'I'm just the medical examiner, Mr. Quantrell. I can't give out information.'

The look he shot her was withering. All at once she wished she stood a little straighter, a little taller. That she didn't feel so threatened by that gaze of his. 'This Lieutenant Sykes,' he said. 'He's from Homicide, right?'

'Yes.'

'So there's a question of murder.'

'I don't want to speculate.'

'Who is she?'

'We don't have an ID yet.'

'Then you don't know.'

'No.'

He paused. 'Let me see the body.' It wasn't a request but a command, and a desperate one at that.

Kat glanced at the door and wondered when the hell Sykes would arrive. She looked back at the man and realized that he was barely holding it together. *He's terrified. Terrified that the body lying in my refrigerated drawer is someone he knows and loves.*

'That's why you called me, isn't it?' he said. 'To find out if I can identify her?'

She nodded. 'The morgue is downstairs, Mr. Quantrell. Come with me.'

He strode beside her in silence, his tanned face looking pale under the fluorescent lights. He was silent as well on the elevator ride down to the basement. She glanced up

once, and saw that he was staring straight ahead, as though afraid to look anywhere else, as though afraid he'd lose what control he still had.

When they stepped off the elevator, he paused, glancing around at the scuffed walls, the tired linoleum floor. Overhead was another bank of flickering fluorescent lights. The building was old, and down here in the basement one could see the decay in the chipped paint, the cracked walls, could smell it in the very air. When the whole city was in the process of decay, when every agency from Social Services to trash pickup was clamoring for a dwindling share of tax dollars, the ME's office was always the last to be funded. Dead citizens, after all, do not vote.

But if Adam Quantrell took note of his surroundings, he did not comment.

'It's down this hall,' said Kat.

Wordlessly he followed her to the cold storage room.

She paused at the door. 'The body's in here,' she said. 'Are you . . . feeling up to it?'

He nodded.

She led him inside. The room was brightly lit, almost painfully so. Refrigerated drawers lined the far wall, some of them labeled with names and numbers. This time of year, the occupancy rate was running on the high side. The spring thaw, the warmer weather, brought the guns and knives out onto the street again, and these were the latest crop of victims. There were three Jane Does. Kat reached for the drawer labeled 373-4-3-A. Pausing, she glanced at Adam. 'It's not going to be pleasant.'

He swallowed. 'Go ahead.'

She pulled open the drawer. It slid out noiselessly, releasing a waft of cold vapor. The body was almost formless under the shroud. Kat looked up at Adam, to see how he was holding up. It was the men who usually fainted, and the bigger they were, the harder they were to pull up off the linoleum. So far, this guy was doing okay. Grim and silent, but okay. Slowly she lifted off the shroud. Jane Doe's alabaster-white face lay exposed.

Again, Kat looked at Adam.

He had paled slightly, but he hadn't moved. Neither did his gaze waver from the corpse. For a solid ten seconds he stared at Jane Doe, as though trying to reconstruct her frozen features into something alive, something familiar.

At last he let out a deep breath. Only then did Kat realize the man had been holding it. He looked across at her. In an utterly calm voice, he said, 'I've never seen this woman before in my life.'

Then he turned and walked out of the room.