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Written by Katia Lief

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You Are Next

Katia Lief



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For Karenn

PART I

CHAPTER 1

There was something intensely satisfying about digging bare-handed in the dirt. My gardening gloves were soggy so I'd abandoned them on the cracked cement next to the barrel planter I was filling with orange begonias. By late summer these six plants would be triple in size and the pot would overflow with clusters of bright waxy petals. Waiting patiently as they grew and enjoying their beauty was one in a million facets of my therapy, but then everything I did these days was an aspect of recovery. So sayeth Once-a-Week Joyce, as I had secretly dubbed my therapist, recalling as I had a hundred times and with the usual inner tickle how at my initial appointment she had made sure to point out that the word *joy* was embedded in her name. I had smiled for the first time in months, which had been exactly her goal.

I'd been outside doing the back garden all morning and these front pots would take the last of the dozen trays of spring flowers I'd carted home from the nursery yesterday afternoon. One of the planks on the barrel had rotted over the winter and was sagging out. I wouldn't bother my new landlord with it; next spring I would use my own money to buy another one. I patted down the soil, noticed that every one of my short-bitten fingernails was crusted with black dirt, and wiped my hands on the front of my jeans. It was hot out. I was suddenly thirsty and my mind conjured a tempting image of sweet ice tea over a stack of ice cubes. The cool, shadowy inside of my ground-floor one-bedroom apartment beckoned. I bent down to collect my gloves.

A dented gray sedan stopped in front of the brownstone.

A black guy wearing a red baseball cap turned off a Willie Nelson song and leaned partway out of the driver's window. That was when I saw the police radio on his dashboard and knew he was a cop.

"I'm looking for Detective Karin Schaeffer."

"I'm no longer with the police force."

He left the motor running and got out slowly. Smiled. All I wanted to think about was that I liked his perfect white teeth.

"Billy Staples, detective first class."

I stood there. It wasn't nice to meet him and I

wouldn't lie by saying it was. I didn't want him to be here because they didn't show up in person to deliver paperwork, and anyway, my medical discharge had already been signed, sealed, and delivered. They only came in person with bad news.

"I'm kind of busy," I said. Standing there in my dirty jeans. Holding limp gardening gloves and a muddy spade. Looking like a retired old lady with nothing but time on her hands, though I was only thirty-three.

"Listen, Karin, I know you don't want to hear anything from us. I got that. But there's something you have to know."

"How did you find me?" Phone book, Internet white pages . . . I had made an effort to unlist myself in every directory.

"Well, for one thing, you sent the benefits department a change of address."

Of course I had; I needed those disability checks to pay my rent, since the sale of my house hadn't netted any profit.

"Right," I said. "Sorry, I'm just a little tired. Not thinking straight today."

"I understand."

I'd heard that too many times by now: *I understand*. So he knew. Everyone knew. All the world had been informed of Karin Schaeffer's tragedy, and then moved on to the next big bad story . . . except for me, of course, having been abandoned to it.

“You know you have an enemy.” It was smart of him not to have phrased it as a question. Of course I knew I had an enemy.

“Martin Price is behind bars,” I told him.

The media had called him the Domino Killer. In the detectives unit we’d called him JPP for Just Plain Psycho. The judge called him the worst threat to innocent people she’d ever encountered and put him away forever, specifically for the murders of Jackson and Cece Schaeffer, my husband and three-year-old daughter. There had been others before that but it was my family’s murders that had put JPP away once and for all.

“He escaped last night. Got a call from your old unit in Jersey—asked me to find you. Seems no one answered when they called.”

“Well,” I said, “thanks for telling me. I guess.” I wanted to get inside. Wanted the cool of my own private space. Wanted that sweet ice tea. But Detective Staples wasn’t finished.

“The thing is, he left a note for you.”

“A note?” Please, no. Not another note from Martin Price.

“Well, kind of a note.”

I could already see it. I already knew.

“They found three dominoes laid out on his mattress: three, five, and one.”

My address: 351 Pacific Street. Brooklyn, New

York. A far cry and a different life from the house in New Jersey I'd shared with Jackson and Cece. Ours was such a sweet house, green clapboards and a front porch where we used to sit and watch Cece play on the lawn. I could still see her running toward me across the dandelion—speckled grass, bare-legged in a plaid sundress, brown curls bouncing around her cherubic face, calling, "Mommy, chase me!"

"He also left you another message," Billy said in a lower, softer voice that told me he wished he didn't have to deliver this one.

I closed my eyes. Saw the last message he'd left me almost a year ago, written in lipstick on my bathroom mirror: *You Are Next*. Only it wasn't lipstick. It was my daughter's blood.

"It said, 'See you soon.'"

"Whose blood this time?"

"His own. Must have cut himself. Probably had to steal some bandages, so every local pharmacy is getting its security footage looked at right now."

I nodded. It would be the logical first step. But knowing JPP, he'd have disinfected and bandaged his wound and moved on by now. He was scary good at this. JPP's thing was to engineer the toppling of a whole group, to watch an entire family fall one by one by one.

He had already murdered five members of a family, the Aldermans of Maplewood, New Jersey—

my old beat. Three murders into it the dominoes JPP left behind started making sense. Their face numbers offered a clue. The problem was deciphering it before he came back for the kill. My department and the FBI had already been working the case for a year before I was put on it.

I was a newly minted detective when I found him pretty much by accident. I never would have thought to look in one of those zillion-gallon chemical tanks off the highway. Never realized any of them sat empty sometimes. We'd had a tip and were canvassing the area and I heard an echo that sounded like it was coming from inside the tank. Climbed the side ladder and there he was, way at the bottom, napping on his side with his fists clenched just like Cece used to do when she was a baby. How he could sleep in that fog of petroleum fumes, I never knew. But there he was, superhuman, inhuman, or both.

Because I had found him, his imagination focused on me, and my family became his next target—though I didn't know it at the time. To anyone else it would have seemed random, but to JPP it made some kind of twisted perfect sense.

Two months after his arrest, he escaped off the prison bus during a transfer to the courthouse to hear the charges read against him, five separate charges of murder in the first degree. He nearly killed two guards with a homemade shiv on his way off the bus.

Hid. Traveled, somehow. Found my family, and the rest was history.

Now whenever I pictured our lawn I couldn't help seeing six dominoes sitting in plain view on the grass—the first three digits of Jackson's and Cece's social security numbers—though in reality the dominoes weren't found until the grass was cut and my husband and child were already dead. JPP had “warned” us, his way of giving us a loophole of escape; in his mind, he had done the right thing before proceeding with the inevitable. He was chillingly efficient in that way, like a corporate functionary, following his own predetermined procedures as he went about his task. My former partner, Mac, tried hard to convince me it wasn't my fault we hadn't found the dominoes in time. They had sunk into the long grass. Jackson and I had run errands all that last weekend, and the lawn had gone uncut. We had missed our loophole, our chance. And then JPP showed up early one morning, after I'd left for work and Jackson and Cece were alone in the house. Mac had tried so hard to convince me that there was no way I could have known the dominoes were there or that JPP had targeted my family as his next set of victims. “You would have had to be as crazy as he is to think that way,” Mac had said. But none of his comfort reached me. Jackson was dead. Cece was dead. And it was my fault.

I had come to Brooklyn because it was unlike anywhere I had ever lived. I thought of it as hiding in plain sight; hiding from myself, really, since JPP was locked up and couldn't get to me. Everyone had agreed it was a good idea, safer to lose myself in a crowd than suffer alone in the country somewhere. How did he find me? I had moved here only four months ago and had spent hours online and on the phone erasing any trace of my new location. But the thing about JPP was that if he wanted you, he found a way.

"Come on," Detective Billy Staples said. "I've got orders to bring you in."

I heard it two ways at once: Protecting me was the obvious thing to do, and yet I didn't want to go. I'd been there, done that. The police could do their best to save my skin, but the part that really needed saving—my heart and soul—were very much my own problem. I had been working on them full-time for months now, doing nothing but finding any small way to "recognize pleasure" again, as Joyce would say. She hadn't bothered saying "feel" pleasure or "be happy" because I wasn't nearly that advanced yet. I was trying to hold myself together and I had discovered that I had to do it on my own. If I stepped into a police department right now, or any place filled with the smells and sights and sounds of my old life—the life that had brought this on—I didn't

think I could handle it. I needed to stay quiet and stay home, at least for now.

“Don’t I have a choice?”

“I’m not sure what other choice you really have right now, you know?”

“I’m going to stay.”

“No, Karin, you’ve got to come with me. It isn’t safe for you here.”

But safety for me, these days, was in the eye of the beholder. “Detective Staples, I don’t believe you have the right to compel me.”

He jammed his hands in his pockets and stared at me. He was wearing jeans, too, but his were clean. “Okay,” he said. “Have it your way. But we’ll be out here, just in case. And I want you to call me the minute you change your mind.” He handed me his card, white embossed with shiny blue lettering showing his whereabouts at the NYPD.

“Thanks.” I slipped the card into my pocket. “I just want some time to think, and then I’ll get in touch.”

He paused, then asked, “Do we need to worry about you?”

I knew what he was referring to: Nine months ago I tried to take my own life. “No. You don’t need to worry about me. I’ve dealt with that.”

A cloud passed overhead and the sun blasted into his face, revealing a map of lines across his high

cheekbones and a few gray hairs at his temples. I had put him at about thirty but saw now that he was older by a decade. He nodded and turned toward his car, then looked back.

“By the way, I almost didn’t recognize you. You don’t look much like your photo.”

No, I didn’t. In the head shot they took for my employee ID I had shoulder-length reddish hair and a big smile. The photographer had been joking around that day, or maybe he always did so staff photos wouldn’t look like mug shots.

“That was taken five years ago,” I said.

He nodded, understanding me. “A lifetime.”

“Thank you, Detective. I have your number.”

He drove away and I went through the locked iron gate most brownstones had at the ground-floor entry, separating a small space from an inner door. Between the two doors there was a cupboard beneath the front stoop that served as a catch-all for stuff I didn’t want to bring into the house, like the bag of rock salt I’d bought to melt ice from my entryway in the winter when I’d first moved in, and the dirty gardening accessories I stashed there now. The inner door itself had a glass-paneled upper half and a flimsy lock I rarely bothered turning. I turned it now and stood in my front hall, knowing that even the best of locks couldn’t keep JPP out if he wanted to get in.

I had tried to make my new home as comfortable as possible, more like the apartment I'd lived in before Jackson and I bought a house together and tossed our eclectic stuff away in favor of the more mature and dignified stuff of coupledom. I'd sold all our real furniture with the house and started fresh when I came here, collecting castoffs from the sidewalk and buying cheap furniture off Craigslist. I bought what I *liked* and what I *wanted*. It had been one of Joyce's dictates. *No shoulds*. Except for one thing: She specifically asked me to put a mirror near the front door so I could check myself coming in and going out. She wanted me to catch myself if I "zombied-out" again. I'd hung an enormous mirror with an ornate faux-gilt frame on the wall above a shoe caddy. There were four pudgy angels, one at each corner, each aiming an arrow at the image in the mirror, the idea being to make you feel beautiful, chosen by love, when you looked at yourself.

But I didn't feel anything when I looked at myself today. What I experienced was a kind of muted unfeeling I'd gotten used to since after my suicide attempt. It was the best I could do and it was better than despair. I looked at myself, at the long hair I'd colored blond at Joyce's insistence; in the weeks after my family's murder my hair had turned prematurely gray, and Joyce said that, when she met me months later, my faded appearance had shocked

her. She said it wasn't good for me to "go around looking like a ghost." Now that I'd dyed my hair, its lack of natural color made me feel like a blank canvas, as if I could be anyone, and in a way I liked that. I wanted nothing more than to be someone else, someplace else, without any of my own memories. I looked at myself. Tall. Thin. Flat. Sinewy limbs like a boy's. Expression a blank wall between memory and feeling. I felt no fear, and I had nothing left to lose.

I knew what I wanted: I wanted him to find me.
Then this could be over, once and for all.