

Malice

By Linda Guyan

mal ice

/ 'maləs/

noun

The intention or desire to do evil; ill will.

Synonyms: spite, malevolence, ill will, vindictiveness,
vengefulness, revenge, malignity, evil intentions, animus,
enmity, rancor

Prologue

London, England, Wednesday, December 20, 1995

“Want me to kill him for you?”

The woman glanced at the man three tables away who had been blatantly staring at her. She turned back to her boyfriend and smiled sweetly.

“Not this time, but that’s really nice of you to offer.”

Neill Thomas gave her a wicked smile, the small chip on his front tooth easily apparent.

“Anything for you, Janie.”

Jane noticed the man continued to steal glances. Her mind strayed where it often did when she allowed herself to take in the people around her.

Who are you? Are you a killer like me? I know I’m not the only one.

Jane sipped the cold ale in the glass mug and soaked up her surroundings.

It was a frosty night under a full moon at London’s popular Bleeding Heart Tavern, and the ale was keeping them warm. They sat in the courtyard. A long string of twinkling white Christmas lights that had been draped in a zigzag pattern hovered above them. Even the potted plants were decorated with colorful lights. Behind Neill, she could see the large, gaily decorated evergreen wreath on the front door of the pub. Faint tones of Christmas carols whispered in the air even above the din of noise and drunken laughter on the patio. Church bells clanged nearby.

Jane Kelly wasn’t one for sentiment, but she loved

Christmas. Especially here. She wrapped her long, red wool scarf around her neck to stave off the frigid air.

There's nothing better than Christmas in London. It's magical.

"Jane?" Neill prodded.

Jane focused her attention back to her boyfriend of ten years, twisting her sleek, chin-length black hair around her finger, her brown eyes alive with anticipation. "Did you say you'd do *anything* for me?"

Neill leaned in closer across the table and gave her a curious glare, his green eyes narrowing, his shoulder-length brown hair hanging loosely around his face. "You know I would. What did you have in mind?"

"Ready to play another murder game—just for fun?" He grinned. "Aren't all our murder games just for fun?" Jane laughed while she fiddled with a black pen over her ever-present journal. "True!" "Is this one different than the others?" he asked. Neill Thomas knew she was a killer just like him—she had proven that numerous times in their kills together over the last ten years. It was snowing when they had met in a village southwest of London in nineteen eighty-five—each of them casing a kill. They were twenty-one, celebrating their shared December twentieth birthdays by spending a month in London. Since then, they had come here every year to celebrate, making it a ritual. Both adopted, they never discussed their family lives. The only thing relevant in their lives was now, not the past. It didn't take long before Neill knew Jane Kelly intimately, not only physically but in every other way. Jane wasted no time in spelling out their relationship. They would never meet in

each other's homes or hometowns — only other cities, states, and countries. They would always use their pseudonyms. They would never communicate by mail, only phone. Later, she added on e-mail as an alternative. If forced to use the mail or e-mail, the note would be cryptic with clues known only to them. No one would ever be able to connect them as their real selves or to each other except under their fake identities and disguises in each location. It wasn't safe for either of them any other way.

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Neill Thomas and Jane Kelly were no ordinary couple. After all these years, Neill still was amazed at how much alike they were.

Could she really be as evil as I am? Maybe more? Oh how I adore this woman! She's like a female version of myself. What's not to love?

Ten years had taught Neill that Jane Kelly didn't joke around. Especially about murder. Neill grinned, casually pushing a stray strand of unruly chestnut hair away from his face. He ordered another round as they sat in the courtyard, surrounded by a dozen other red, round tables at one of their favorite taverns just off Greville Street. As the cacophony of chatter surrounded him, his attention was only on Jane. He stretched his long legs under the patio table, leaning forward as if telling a delicious secret. "Is this murder game going to be like all our others?"

Jane nodded, finishing off her Guinness, then pushing the empty glass aside. "It would be like our game in Devon last year. But on a larger scale."

"Define *larger*." Neill's tone was skeptical, his head turned to one side, assessing her, wondering what was in that pretty and deadly head of hers. He studied his girlfriend, as he often did. He was always amazed at her understated beauty that only improved with age. Her choice of apparel was stylish, yet simple. Even with his own lack of fashion sense, he could tell her clothes were expensive. Unless they were on a kill, she always wore a long skirt, jumper or blouse, sometimes a casual suit jacket, all usually with a variety of boots. Tonight was no different – brown skirt, beige jumper with black boots, and a Christmassy crimson scarf around her neck. He was feeling decidedly dull in his jeans and a dark green jumper.

Jane leaned across the table, smiling smugly. "More people, years not months, more murders, in my hometown. By the way, I like that green sweater."

"Thanks!" Neill shook his head. "Well, you sure are ambitious. I suppose you've got a plan as to how we can pull something like that off."

Jane frowned indignantly. "Of course I've got a plan! Besides, we've both got friends who will help us."

"This is a really big malice game, Jane."

She gave him a knowing, sideways glance. "I have some people I want to kill."

A din of noise surrounded the waiter who was approaching

them, making him as quiet as a ghost.

Neill looked up as the man placed their drinks on the table. "What's the name of your book?" the waiter asked, picking up the empties.

Neill nodded imperceptibly at Jane, silently giving her the reins to follow the waiter's lead.

Jane smiled, gazing up at their waiter with the long, blond hair, pockmarked face, and bad teeth. She eyed his name sewed into his shirt. "Hi, Dieter! It's called *Malice*. Do you like the title?"

The waiter bobbed his head. "Yeah, murder mysteries are cool."

"How did you know I was writing a book, let alone a mystery?" Jane asked, clearly happy to play a private game with this guy, closing her journal that she had been making notes in.

"You were talking about killing people," Dieter stated. "You must be a writer since real killers wouldn't be talking about murdering people out here in the open at the pub."

Neill and Jane laughed as the waiter joined in.

"Dieter," Jane began, "I think you've just given me a new idea for my book!"

Dieter nodded, smiling widely. "Brilliant."

"Thanks! You're a love!" Jane laughed as Dieter walked away to wait on other customers.

"You are so cheeky sometimes," Neill told her, then took a long drink. "You're always thinking, though. That was a clever comeback."

"Thanks." Jane sipped her mug of ale. "Now we can talk about murder and he or anyone else just thinks I'm writing a mystery novel. This is a great cover for us."

Neill leaned in, lowering his voice. "You said you have some people you want to kill."

Jane shrugged, her brown eyes twinkling jovially. "I always have some people I want to kill."

He shook his head. "No, this is different. You said want. Janie, this sounds personal."

Jane took a few sips of her ale before answering. "So what if it is?"

He sighed heavily, upset. "Jane, you know how dangerous it is when it's personal."

"I know," she admitted. "But this malice is my way out. It's time for me to kill her, Neill."

He was silent, first staring at her, then around the courtyard, letting the sounds of other people's voices amidst the clatter of the city all around them clear his head. He reached across the small, round table and took her hand.

"This is the malice game you've been talking about for years," he stated. "You've finally got a plan that's going to work."

Jane Kelly smiled, squeezing his hand. "I do."

"Janie, honey, that's wonderful news! I can't wait to see this plan of yours."

She gave Neill a pseudo disdainful look as she corrected him. "It's now a murder book. Remember, I'm a writer, writing a murder mystery."

"Ah, right." Neill put his elbows on the table, resting his hands on his square chin. "Tell me again how you came up with malice in the first place. You've been writing *malice* notes and plans for all of our games all these years. This new fake *book* and you posing as a mystery writer is a great cover. I still don't get the title, though."

"One day I decided to look up the word malicious in the dictionary," Jane explained, running her finger around the edge of the beer mug. "It's the desire to cause harm to someone arising from malice."

"That sounds like us," Neill retorted, then gulped down half his glass of ale.

"So I looked up *malice*," Jane continued. "Malice is the intention or desire to do evil or ill will." He raised his eyebrows, gazing at her with interest. "That's definitely us. Malice is perfect, Janie. So tell me more about this next malice murder game."

"You mean the murder game *chapter* in my mystery book," Jane corrected with a playful scowl.

Neill rolled his eyes, properly scolded. "It sounds like a great *chapter*! Tell me how it goes."

"My *character* has some people she wants to kill," Jane

explained. "My villain will have fun raining terror on a small town, singling out one or more particular victims. I'll write in extra killings as collateral damage to cover up the real kills. I'll have my *characters* use the game con like we used before, but this will be a much bigger one."

"Like a long con," he stated. "Except that your *story* is about murder instead of money."

"Exactly!" Jane exclaimed. Then she paused. "Well, maybe some money, too."

He shook his head. "That's really risky for you—" He caught himself mid-sentence. "I mean, risky for your *character*. No doubt you've already thought about that."

She tilted her head. "Mostly. Together, we can work out the details of the storyline. It will be the biggest thing we've ever done. And the most fun! In the end, my character—and her boyfriend—will have plenty of money to come back here, find a quaint little cottage in the country, kill as much or as little as they want so they can live in England the rest of their lives."

"It does sound intriguing and I love the ending," Neill agreed. "You know that in order to do this right, it will take years of our best acting skills, and endless prep for ourselves and the other actors to keep the story going as if it were real. This is a massive undertaking, Jane."

"So what's a few years or so if it's fun doing it?" Jane asked. "We'll get to kill people plus it will set us up for the rest of our lives here in England."

"I do like the sound of that."

“Done right, murder can be so much fun!” Jane Kelly leaned across the table and kissed him tenderly. “So, is that a yes? Do you like my new book?”

“Need you ask? You know what I love about you the most?”

Jane shrugged innocently. “Tell me!”

“You’re crazier than I am!” Neill said, laughing. “I love that trait in a woman!” She joined his laughter. “What a wonderful compliment!”

Neill grinned. “Do you believe in fate?” “Maybe,” Jane confessed hesitantly. “Come on, Janie, how can you not?” Neill insisted as he scooted his chair closer, lowering his voice. “We have the same exact December birth dates. We’ve spent a month in London every year for ten years since we were twenty-one to celebrate, and we’re both killers. Hell, we met on a kill!”

“That we did! I thought for sure you were gonna call the cops on me.”

“Instead, I helped you,” Neill bragged.

“Hey, I didn’t need any help,” Jane told him, heartily defending herself.

“It’s not my fault we cased the same victim in the same town and decided to kill him the same night,” he professed. “Like I said, it’s fate! We have so much in common!”

“It was rather mysterious, wasn’t it?” Jane purred. “I do love a good mystery, almost as much as a good murder.”

“Just one more thing we have in common.”

“Remember how cold it was then?” Jane asked. “It even snowed!”

Neill laughed as Jane joined in. “We were freezing our asses off!”

“Ah, the memories.” She smiled, finished her drink, and stood up. “Ready to go?”

Neill placed pound notes on the table before following Jane out to Greville Street and slinging his arm around her shoulders. She leaned in to him. “I’ve finally gotten used to our fake names. I like being Jane.”

“Me, too.” He pulled her close. “I think Neill fits me. What do you think?” She pulled away just enough to give him a faux assessment, then nodded her agreement. “You look like a Neill. It’s a nice name.”

“Not exactly a prolific serial killer, but Dr. Thomas Neill Cream holds a place of his own in the hallows of the infamous as the Lambeth Poisoner,” he told her as they continued their stroll up the street lined with streetlamps. “And so I became Neill Thomas.”

“I like my name. I got Jane Kelly from the female serial killer, Jane Toppan.” Jane hooked her arm in Neill’s. “Jane was a poisoner, too. Her real name was Honora Kelley, but she changed her first name to Jane. I decided to leave the *e* out of Kelley. What I liked about her most was a quote I read about her ambition in life.”

Neill’s curiosity was piqued. “What was it?”

Jane gladly recited it for him. “*To have killed more people—*

helpless people—than any other man or woman who ever lived...”

“I like it!” Neill told her. “It sounds so *you*.” Jane smiled. “It does, doesn’t it?” “At this point, it’s getting harder to remember our real names,” he admitted.

“You won’t have to after this next game,” Jane told him.

“When it’s over, we’ll come back here—just like our characters—to lead out the rest of our lives as Neill Thomas and Jane Kelly.”

“It’s what I’ve always wanted,” he told her. “No more hiding, no more meeting in strange places with strange names. We’ll stay in England as Neill and Jane. Well, unless we’re on a kill and have to disguise ourselves using other aliases.” Neill pulled her close, kissing her deeply as pedestrians walked around them, most ignoring them, a few making lewd comments, some whistling.

“Happy birthday, Jane.” “Same to you, Neill.” Jane ran her hand over his face, gazing into his eyes. “This

malice game is going to be the best yet.” “Let’s go back to the flat, where you can tell me all about

it in detail,” Neill suggested seductively. “I do need to start rehearsing my role. Does my character have sex with yours?”

Jane grinned. “No, but we could pretend that they might.”

“Actually, that’s a very smart thing to do,” he agreed. “We should definitely try out that storyline and see how it works. I mean, how can you know for sure unless you try it out? We’ve got three more weeks in London on our so-called

business trips that our friends think we're on, so let's make it fun, learn our malice roles so we can enjoy every minute of another English Christmas birthday holiday." She kissed his cheek. "I couldn't agree more."

The killer couple walked to their nearby furnished studio flat, a short distance from the tavern, in Farringdon.

Neill playfully bumped her as they entered their building. "So who are we going to be this time? Am I the victim or the villain in this malice game?"

Jane glanced at him, smiling. "You're the villain. I'm your distraught victim."

Neill grinned. "I do play a smashing villain, don't I?"

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Thursday, January 11, 1996

It was pouring rain, the English gray sky heavy with clouds, when they arrived in separate cabs at London Heathrow Airport in West London.

They checked their baggage and entered the building together, already playing their roles as strangers, back to their real identities, no longer looking like Neill Thomas and Jane Kelly. They were leaving their Neill and Jane personas behind in London until the next time they needed to meet to

discuss the new malice game – and at the end of malice, years from now.

Jane pretended to drop her ticket.

She watched as Neill rushed over to pick it up, handing it to her. Jane held back a smile at his English gallantry. It was a gesture that any kind stranger would do.

“Thank you,” she said politely, letting his brief touch linger longer than necessary.

Jane held his gaze as he nodded before he spoke. “Have a safe flight, miss.”

She smiled. “You, too.”

Jane watched as Neill’s long legs took him far ahead of her. He veered a different direction toward his check-in and gate, disappearing into the crowded terminal. She checked the departure board. Her flight was on time. She was early, so she made her way to the check-in counter, waiting in line with her one small carry-on. She had already checked her baggage at the curb.

“Good morning,” the pleasant British Airways attendant named Tamara said as she took Jane’s ticket and carry-on. “Too bad you aren’t staying a little longer. You’re going to miss the Concorde flight from New York on the seventh of February.”

“Really? I would love to be here to see it land.”

“It’s going to be a big day, that’s for sure, but I’m sure there will be a next time, so you might want to plan your next visit then. Actually, you should be able to get a glimpse of the

Concorde on the way to your gate. I heard they've still got it parked there." The attendant tagged Jane's carry-on and placed her boarding pass on the counter.

"I'll be sure to look for it." Jane took the pass and placed it in her purse. "Thanks for telling me."

"Have a wonderful flight," Tamara said, smiling widely.

Jane returned the smile and picked up her leather carry-on. She took her time meandering to her gate, people-watching along the way. She liked mingling with the wide variety of people flying to all corners of the world from this airport.

As Tamara had told her, Jane spotted the Concorde parked near the massive row of windows on the way to her gate. She joined others who had stopped to admire and take pictures. The supersonic jet airliner, known to travel at over twice the speed of sound, was a marvel to behold with its white, sleek design and pointed nose, making it look like a very large exotic bird.

Maybe someday Neill and I will ride in it. It's amazing to see it close up. She left the crowd and walked to her gate. When she arrived, she handed her ticket to the British Airlines employee. As she waited for her boarding pass, Jane Kelly smiled at the thought of the extensive murder game she and Neill Thomas were planning — her malice book.

"We'll begin boarding in about an hour. Enjoy your flight," the woman told her pleasantly, returning her boarding pass. "Come back and see us soon."

"I will." Jane smiled, happy in the knowledge that she would be coming back to this country she loved.

When we land, I will walk off the plane in a different country and identity. I'll miss Jane and England. But I'll be back, shedding my old identity forever. Next time, I'm staying here and I'm staying Jane Kelly. Until another malice game when I morph into a temporary new identity.

She wandered to one of the kiosks, browsing the magazine and newspaper rack. Jane chose The Independent newspaper. She stopped by a fast food stand for a soda before returning to the seating area in front of her gate to wait for her flight.

She sipped the soft drink from the paper cup while perusing the newspaper for anything interesting. It was something she enjoyed doing. She often found some of the most unusual occurrences. On page three, one article in particular caught her eye.

Dead body in car. A thirty-year-old man was arrested and is being questioned by police after driving into the car park of a police station in Slough, Berkshire, with the body of a dead woman propped up in the front passenger seat.

"Now that's different," she mumbled, focusing her attention to another article on the same page.

Wife who "came back from the dead" had tried to end it all. Daphne Banks, who little more than a week ago was lying in a hospital mortuary, sat silently yesterday and listened as her solicitor described how her suicide attempt had so nearly succeeded.

Jane tilted her head, thinking about what it would be like to wake up in the morgue.

This woman woke up in time. But what if she hadn't?

The time went by quickly. Less than an hour later, her flight was called for boarding. Once she was settled in her window seat for the ten-hour flight, she pulled out her journal and pen and began writing.

He stalked them for months. He knew them and he knew their schedules. He knew their every move. He knew the best time to kill them. And he knew how to kill them for the right amount of sensationalism, as well as the right amount of misdirection for the benefit of the cops. Just as he always was, he was prepared for the kills. Done right, murder could be so much fun.

As she heard the overhead tone, Jane looked up to see the seat belt light had been turned on. Buckling up, she thought about her alternate identity that she would assume when they landed and that persona's extensive role in the game. She knew it wasn't going to be easy, but it was going to be worth the extra time and effort, as well as the danger.

Jane closed the faux antique journal that she'd purchased years ago at an obscure shop in SoHo where she maintained a long-standing order. As she often did, Jane ran her hand lightly over the exquisite, yet understated leather book. On her first visit to the shop, an elegant quill pen with a crimson feather had caught her eye. Set off with a gold handle and nib, the detail at the top of the handle matched the journal's filigree corners. Too lavish to use in public since it would draw attention to herself, she could only indulge the quill pen's elegance and red ink for home use only. A drab ballpoint pen would have to do in public.

Gazing at the single word centered on the cover that she had written with gold ink in her own elegant handwriting, she smiled proudly. She loved the stylish effect of gold lettering

on the brown background.

No one would guess this book is about the real murders I've planned.

Jane stared at her journal, a different picture forming.

I could use my red-feathered quill pen with red ink and add lots of blood dripping from the gold letters. I'd like that! Too bad I have to keep it simple and innocuous for appearances' sake.

She ran her finger over the one word thinking about its meaning.

The desire to cause harm to someone arising from malice. The intention or desire to do evil or ill will.

She thought about those words and how appropriate they were to what she and Neill did – what they were about to do again.

“Perfect.” Suddenly, she realized she had voiced the word aloud. She surreptitiously looked around. Her chubby seatmate hadn't heard her with the earphones stuck in his ears. The flight attendant began her safety spiel but Jane wasn't listening. She smiled as she thought about her book title again.

Malice.

* * * *

Part One

Villains and Victims

* * * *

Chapter One

Greenpointe, California, Wednesday, February 18, 1998

“I killed you, Mother.”

The elderly woman with the wild-looking snow-white hair gazed at the young woman through rheumy eyes from her hospital bed at the Rainbow Horizon Convalescent Home.

“Is that you?” she asked. The woman was weak and confused, her eyesight poor from the cataracts, her body failing. Yet, the old woman recognized the familiar voice.

Sara Nash stroked the woman’s thin white hair, speaking soothingly. “Yes, Mother, it’s me.”

“What did you tell me?” Lucille Greene asked her daughter. “I don’t hear well anymore.”

Sara leaned close to her ear so she could hear. “I killed you.”

Her mother smiled. “Thank you, dear,” Lucille told her. “I don’t want to live like this anymore.”

"Now you don't have to, Mother."

Sara's mother looked up at her contentedly. "I put the house in your name."

Sara grinned. "Good."

Lucille's breathing was irregular and shallow. "Come closer so I can hear you."

"Good, that's why I killed you."

Lucille smiled knowingly. She knew her daughter well. Sara was much like herself.

"I know, dear."

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Sara Nash shed all the appropriate tears, grieving over her dead relative. She made sure the arrangements were being handled according to her mother's wishes in her pre-planned funeral. There would be no service, only a private cremation. Her ashes would be placed in an urn and given to Sara to do with as she wished.

As Sara walked out of the convalescent home, a charcoal-gray sky hung overhead, threatening rain. As far as she was concerned this was perfect weather – cool, cloudy with the promise of rain. It always cheered her up. On the other hand, the sun always put her in a bad mood.

Sara Nash considered herself an attractive woman at thirty-

six. She wore her deep auburn hair ultra-short, swept to the side across her forehead. Cut leaving lots of long, wispy tendrils framing her oval face and green eyes, it was simple, stylish, as well as efficient. It fit her perfectly. Sara's clothing was also simple and unaffected. Primarily basic black, with some soft colors for an accent, adding large, silver hoop earrings for jewelry. Her outward manner was much the same – simple. That's how the people of Greenpointe would come to know her. That was the plan.

Sara Nash couldn't stand out or draw too much attention. In actuality, she was far from simple. Her new shop was bound to draw some gossip, though, which served her well. It would misdirect people away from who – and what – she really was.

Sitting in her car in the Rainbow Horizon parking lot, she called the family attorney, Gerard Mullins, to notify him of her mother's death. He would take care of any legal matters that would need to be addressed. All of her mother's affairs had already been put into her name as joint ownership. Everything that was her mother's was legally hers. Mr. Mullins informed her she could stop by the office at her earliest convenience to sign the necessary papers. Sara confirmed with Gerard that no one was to know her true relationship to Lucille. Not yet. She made one more call from her cell phone to the local trash company, requesting a dumpster be delivered the following day. The moving van would arrive early next week, which would give her time to trash all of Lucille's things to make room for her own.

Driving through the town, she admired the pristine beauty of the surrounding forest. The town itself was rather

ordinary, like so many others. The thick woodland of Whispering Woods that encased Greenpointe gave it a mysterious quality that Sara liked. A myriad of tall trees dotted the rest of the town, mostly huge oaks and redwood, as well as some myrtle wood. There were also many orange groves, a few vineyards, and wineries. She could already envision the late April blooms with the delicate white flowers of the dogwood and the delicious scent of apple blossoms. Sara basked in the thought of an ocean breeze wafting the scent of pine through the town.

Set thirty miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, downtown Greenpointe was simply called downtown. The name was not creative, but the town did boast some interesting boutique shops. Blair Russo had a unique one called Wall Street that was filled with a wide selection of items suitable for wall hanging from all over the world.

Sara smiled at the thought of her own new shop. Mr. Mullins had assisted her with the purchase of a business where she planned to open an innovative shop that handled occult and Gothic gifts, as well as clothing, naming it Pandora.

This town is in for a lot of tongue wagging about my new shop.

Soon, she turned right onto Red Fox Court, pulling her black Suburban into the driveway of her new home at the end of the cul-de-sac at number 315.

The entire process – from murder to arranging for the disposal of the body, to handling the legal affairs, to shopping – had taken less than three hours. She had arrived at her new home with a trunk full of groceries and household supplies.

Her new house was set back from the street, nestled into Whispering Woods. The property extended out on all sides, giving her lots of much-needed privacy. There were only three homes on the Red Fox Court cul-de-sac, making the street a very private, quiet neighborhood. The two other residents were Cecilia Boggs, who owned a vintage shop in town — she lived in the house on the north corner of the entrance to Red Fox Court. Harry Klein, the mailman, lived on the south corner. Both homes boasted large lots. The closest street, a quarter mile to the north, was Shady Glen, where Blair Russo lived. Not far away on the west side of town on Whiteowl Bend were Blair's Aunt Roz and her best friend, Chloe Cameron. Barb Evans lived next door to Chloe, and Detective Alec Massey lived on Redwood Circle, a block south behind Chloe and Barb. Two streets south of Alec Massey was Samantha Wilson's home on Oakview Place.

Sara had done her research. She knew all about everyone in Greenpointe. It was necessary for what was coming. Sara Nash was ready.

Her mother's house was an interesting two-story Victorian. It was a lovely home, but Sara didn't plan on being in it that long. She had other plans. Besides, it would sell well, proving to be an excellent investment when she moved into her other new house when it became available.

Gathering the groceries from the back of her car, she let her mind wander only for a moment before forcing herself back to the business at hand. Sara let herself in the house using the key she stole from Lucille's purse, knowing she didn't need it anymore. After putting the groceries away, she walked to the living room, looking around. It was obvious

Lucille hadn't lived here for a while. For the last ten months, her residence had been Rainbow Horizon Convalescent Home. There was so much to be done, but that would begin tomorrow. Right now she needed a shower, the comfortable clothes she had packed, food, and wine.

A shower and her green robe and slippers came first. Next, she called Minelli's, ordering an Italian salad, extra-large pizza with double pepperoni, sausage, and cheese. It wasn't long before she was relaxing on the sofa in front of the fireplace, working her way through a bottle of Chardonnay with her dinner. Sara knew what she wanted for her Pandora store logo. Something simple, yet effective. Using a sketchpad and pencil, she expertly drew an intricate, elegant box, the lid slightly opened with brilliant light and stars streaming from it indicating the many surprises being unleashed.

When it began to rain, Sara set her sketchpad on the sofa. She walked to the screened-in back porch to watch and listen to the sudden downpour, reveling in its sound and the fresh scent. She enjoyed her favorite weather until the cold sent her back inside the house to the warmth of the fireplace. Although she had many busy days ahead of her, she wasn't concerned. It would all come together.

It's all part of the plan and I know my role well.

She refilled her wineglass and took a drink, smiling at her thought.

Just as all the others do.

* * * *

Chapter Two

New York City, New York, Sunday, December 13, 1998

“I killed your sister.”

Blair Russo wasn't sure she had heard the man's softly spoken words correctly. They were uttered matter-of-factly and she was a little light-headed from two glasses of champagne. It was as if he were merely speaking of the New York weather, not the brutal butchering of her sister, Joan Crosley. Blair had never been speechless. Now she was. Her brain was trying to make sense of the horrific statement. Before she had a chance to absorb his words, let alone respond, he spoke again, casually reaching for the champagne bottle, refilling their glasses.

“I killed her husband, Michael, too.” His words were as gentle as the romantic whisperings of a lover's seductive, shared secret. His voice was deep and sensuous, yet the words themselves were pure evil spoken here in this crowded Madison Avenue restaurant at a corner table away from the clamor of noise at the center of the room. Blair couldn't speak — the words would not come out of her mouth. She could only stare at the man, thinking how alien it all was.

Jack looked so elegant in his black suit, burgundy shirt, and blue tie. All the while confessing to murder.

Jack Darrow was smiling, his perfect white teeth looking like a toothpaste commercial. A lock of coal-black hair hung down on his forehead. There was a touch of gray at his temples and a few wrinkles around his sky-blue eyes, especially when he smiled, all of which only managed to make him look even more handsome. She guessed he was older than her own thirty-one years, maybe in his early forties. Oddly, other than the age difference and husky voice, Jack reminded her of an old boyfriend back in Greenpointe.

Jack Darrow smiled as he propped his left arm casually on the chair arm, his muscular body settled comfortably. "Blair, did you hear me or have you gone deaf and dumb?"

"I heard you." Blair finally managed to get three words out, her voice sounding thin and feeble. She looked at him with her big eyes as dark as chocolate while absently pushing a long strand of brown hair away from her perfect oval face. She glanced around her. The setting seemed surreal, more a dream than reality. Blair Russo was surrounded by people out for an extravagant evening meal at an elegant restaurant. Like everyone else, she had dressed appropriately, selecting her favorite simple yet elegant black dress that accentuated her slim figure. Everything was incongruously normal except for what was happening at this very table with what Jack Darrow had just told her. It seemed obvious he had waited to issue his horrific statements in this crowded restaurant, assuming she would not make a scene. Her world was spinning out of control. She felt like Alice in her

own demented New York version of Wonderland.

“So tell me, Blair, what was I saying?” Jack asked, smiling, egging her on. “Was it something interesting?”

Blair swallowed hard. Her hands were shaking, her voice weak and halting. “You said you killed Joan and Michael.”

She watched as Jack sat back in his chair, obviously pleased with himself, pausing for a few seconds merely for the desired effect before answering.

“Yes! You heard me correctly, Blair,” he told her excitedly. “That’s exactly what I said.”

Blair was speechless. This was too bizarre, too horrible to actually be happening. She had no idea how to react to Jack’s confession. She felt like she had been having dinner with the devil. Apparently she actually had been. This beautiful restaurant, their delicious meal, both of them dressed in their finest clothes, surrounded by New York’s upper crust of society – none of that could take away the malevolent words Jack had just spoken so casually. He had often taken her to nice restaurants to discuss his progress with the case, preferring it to his office, always keeping everything all business, showing no impropriety. Blair felt comfortable with him. She trusted him. It had been six months since the murders – five months since she had hired Private Detective Jack Darrow to find the killer of her sister and brother-in-law. Maybe it had been her own paranoia, but she wasn’t about to trust the NYPD alone to catch this monster. She’d read enough detective and mystery novels to know that if you’re going to hire a detective, hire them quick before the evidence trail goes cold. Blair wasn’t about to let that

happen. She wasn't about to have Joan and Michael Crosley's murders relegated to the bottom of the NYPD inbox. Ultimately to end up in a corrugated box sitting on a shelf in a warehouse, marked as a cold case. A private detective seemed the logical thing to do, albeit desperate.

Now, here she was with that detective six months later and her entire world was crashing in around her. Everything that had happened since Joan and Michael's murders had come to this moment in time. Blair's brain was working overtime, yet her mouth seemed to be out of order. Only one horrifying thought dominated her mind, refusing to let anything else in.

I hired their killer!

"Blair?" Jack asked insistently, sounding angry and impatient. "Have you gone into some sort of stupor?"

She felt something shift within her at his words. In an instant she had gone from terrified to pissed off at his cockiness about something so malevolent as murder. She was seething inside. Her survival instinct was to run out of the restaurant as fast as she could, but she needed to be sure this wasn't some sick, disgusting joke. She assumed — she hoped — that he wasn't going to kill her in the middle of the restaurant surrounded by all these people. If what he was telling her was actually true, she needed to know what he knew about the murders so she could go to the police. Now that she was out of the initial shock, she needed to hear his confession again. She needed to get as much information as possible. Blair was strong. She knew she should be afraid, and she was — no, she was terrified. Yet, she was also determined to get answers from this murderer while she had the

chance. She thought about that.

Murderer. Blair, try not to think about who—what—is sitting across from you. Stay calm. Get your questions answered before he takes off and disappears into a new identity.

“Why are you telling me this, Jack?” Blair asked calmly, fully aware of their surroundings, the cacophony of noise and conversations around them. She fought hard to maintain some microscopic semblance of normalcy in a situation that was not even remotely normal.

She had asked the question, now she waited. Jack tilted his head up, blatantly staring at her, assessing her. Blair knew Jack could see and sense her anger and emotion, so she did her best to try to hide it, at least control it. She could tell he knew what she was doing. She steeled herself to be calm. This would be her only chance to ask questions. She had no idea why, but she felt Jack wouldn’t lie to her. He was too proud of his accomplishments. This man was too self-assured, too cocky and arrogant. He would want to boast. She had to find some way to push him to do just that.

“Why?” Jack Darrow asked, remaining perfectly calm.

“Because I want you to know.” Jack gazed across the table at her, soaking up her reaction.

“Please tell me this is a lie, Jack,” Blair pleaded. She thought she had come to know this man even though it had only been five months. It was enough to get a sense of him. He had fooled her completely. “Maybe it’s some sick joke. Maybe it’s a scam to get my money.”

“Oh it’s definitely none of the above,” Jack bragged.

Blair was fighting to stay controlled and focused. She had so many questions. Instead, she was coming up blank. “What else have you lied to me about?”

Jack shrugged nonchalantly. “Well, I’m not a detective. You see, Blair, I excel at pretending to be other people. I guess you could call me a chameleon. You really should have put more effort into hiring a detective. Anyone can hang up fake credentials. I would have thought you were more responsible than that. I never pegged you for being so impulsive.”

“Why did you kill them?” she asked, tears beginning to stream down her cheeks in rivulets as she remembered how horrific it was to find Joan and Michael’s bloody bodies in their Rockland County home – correction, only their bloody body parts stacked in a heap on their living room floor.

Jack leaned forward, his intense blue eyes glaring at her. A lock of his black hair hung loosely over one eyebrow.

The sudden movement terrified Blair. She leaned back in her chair, her heart beating wildly in her chest, putting as much distance as she could between her and the killer on the other side of the dinner table. She knew it was a lame effort to get away from him – it was merely an instinctual move to pull away. He made her feel like a trapped animal. Jack was the hunter and she was his prey. Knowing she was sitting in a crowded room across the table from a murderer frightened her far beyond what she wanted to admit. Blair Russo had never been so scared in her life, and she didn’t scare easily.

“Why did I kill them?” Jack asked, repeating her question, tilting his head to one side, then the other, as if he were

actually contemplating her question.

Blair had no way of knowing if he would suddenly jump out of his chair with a knife and slit her throat right here in this nice Manhattan restaurant. At this point, she couldn't imagine what to expect next. The entire scene was surreal.

"I killed them because it's part of my game," Jack Darrow explained calmly, smiling pleasantly.

"Game?" Blair asked angrily, keeping her voice down.

"What the hell are you talking about? What do me and my sister have to do with your sick game? Why us?"

"Why you?" Jack repeated. "Why not?"

"I don't believe you!" Blair told him. "You've singled us out for some reason."

"Maybe," he confessed. "It's all part of the game, Blair." Jack finished off his champagne and refilled his glass.

Blair was furious. She could feel her face burning with fiery heat. Turning her flushed face away from Jack, she scanned the crowded room, knowing she had to keep her voice low and her anger in check as the man she knew as Jack Darrow continued talking.

"You really should drink your champagne, Blair. It will help calm you down."

"What game?" Blair was seething. She knew she was speaking too loudly. She looked around at the nearby tables to see a myriad of faces glancing in their direction. They were obviously enjoying the show of what they would assume was a lover's quarrel. She lowered her voice.

“Murder isn’t a game, Jack!”

“Of course it is! Serial killers like to play games,” he explained calmly and quietly, finishing off the champagne in his fluted crystal glass. “I thought that was common knowledge. You should know that.”

“Serial – ” Blair began, letting the word sink in as she pushed herself further back into her chair, wondering how many people he had killed other than Joan and Michael. Logically, she knew that she should have ran out of the room long ago, but none of what was happening was logical. She desperately needed answers and this crazy asshole had them. Stupidly, she stayed in her chair, knowing she would regret it later.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Jack spoke in a childlike sing-song tone, his eyes wide and menacing.

Blair got the feeling it was all for effect, that he was delighting in his own over-the-top display.

“You’re asking yourself, has he killed three or ninety- three. Am I right?”

Blair nodded her silent answer.

“Truthfully, I’ve lost count.” Jack playfully counted on his fingers. “But it’s closer to the latter, probably more by now.” She winced visibly at his reply.

Jack grinned, obviously pleased with himself. “That’s just in New York and environs.”

“Why were Joan and Michael part of your sick game?” Blair asked, whispering the words across the elegant table. She

was finding it harder to speak, fighting to hold back a barrage of tears, as well as the bile in her throat that kept threatening to erupt. Right now, she had to keep going. Answers had to come first. She needed answers desperately. Instinctively, Blair knew this was her only chance.

"Oh my," Jack began. "You've got it all wrong. My game has nothing to do with Michael. Joan was merely a means to get to you. Everyone knows that all games have to start somewhere and it's no fun to start at the end."

Blair was completely taken aback by his answer. "What?" The word croaked in her throat.

"It's all about you, Blair. It has always been about you."

"Me?" Blair asked, her voice barely above a whisper, visibly shaking at what he had just told her. "Why me?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that. Not yet, maybe never. Besides, do you actually think I need a reason? It's really quite old-fashioned to think all killers have reasons for doing the things they do. What's wrong with killing just for the sheer fun of it?"

"Fun?" Blair's stomach was churning. She could taste the bile in her throat. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"Kill you? I don't want to kill you," Jack answered, his voice indicating that he took her question as an assault on his sensibilities. She felt herself go pale, as if the blood had drained from her face. "You don't?"

Jack leaned in as Blair leaned back. "Terror is so much more fun, don't you think?"

"You are an evil bastard, Jack Darrow," she seethed with hatred.

Jack sat back in this chair, a self-satisfied look on his tanned face. "Evil," he repeated. "I've been called a bastard before, never evil. I rather like it!"

"It wasn't meant to be a compliment," Blair spat at him disdainfully. "Your game of terror is sick, perverse and twisted."

"Why, thank you," Jack told her graciously. "Now back to my game plan. Actually, we've just completed the third part of my game. I am already planning part four. No doubt you can figure out for yourself that murder was the second part. Which makes part one stalking you and your sister meticulously while I designed my long-term game plan." Jack clapped his hands in happy anticipation as patrons from neighboring tables turned to look. "I think it's going quite well so far, don't you."

Blair ignored his tasteless remark. "So what was part four going to be?"

Jack cocked his head, assessing her. "How interesting that you would use the past tense."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Ah, I get it," Jack told her. "You actually think that you're going to the cops. You think they'll arrest me. You're talking as if part four will never see the light of day."

"That's exactly what's going to happen," Blair told him angrily, struggling to keep her voice low, her tone

smoldering with disgust. "This ends tonight."

Jack just laughed and shook his head. Blair watched as he pulled a wad of bills out of his jacket pocket, counting out enough for the bill and tip, returning the rest to his pocket. He then set the pale blue linen napkin neatly beside the pile of cash, pushed his chair back, and stood up.

Terror ran through Blair Russo like electricity. She had no idea what this man would do next. Even in this crowded restaurant.

"My dear Blair, this will not end for a very long time and part four will come whether you like it or not." Jack stepped close to her, leaning down, his face next to hers.

She could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"As to when it will come, I'm saving that for a big surprise. In the meantime, my only advice is to go back to Greenpointe and wait for me. It could be weeks, months, even a year. It's all part of the game, Blair." She felt helpless and scared, watching Jack smile smugly. He seemed proud of himself, proud of how much he had frightened her. Blair could do nothing but stare at the man who had butchered her sister and brother-in-law, Michael. Probably hundreds more, for all she knew. She steeled herself for what would happen next. Jack leaned down again, bringing his face very close—too close—to hers. Slowly and methodically, the tall, handsome serial killer placed one hand on the back of her chair, the other on the table. He paused just for a moment, as if for effect. His skin brushed lightly against her cheek. She could feel his hot breath.

Jack whispered his private message in her ear. When he was done, he gently caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. Under other circumstances, it would have been a lover's touch, a man whispering a sweet, loving secret in her ear. This was the opposite – it was pure evil. Message delivered, the self-professed serial killer casually walked out of the restaurant, free to walk among the eight million residents of New York City.

Jack Darrow was free to kill again.

Blair was stuck in her chair as if someone had glued her to it. She didn't move as she sat in the comfortable high-backed chair at the elegant Manhattan restaurant, wiping away stray tears as the waiter approached.

"Will there be anything else, ma'am?" he asked, his voice deep and professional.

"No," she replied, taking a facial tissue from her purse.

"Thank you. That will be all." The tall, staid waiter took the money Jack had left on the table, then walked away briskly.

Blair stood up and exited the restaurant quickly, pulling her cell phone out of her purse. She dialed a number she had memorized months ago. She knew where she had to go. She knew what she had to do.

Jack's whispered words haunted her as she hailed a cab. They were a promise of more evil yet to come.

"You'll know when part four begins. People you care about in Greenpoint will die."

*** *

Blair sat in the office of NYPD Homicide Detective Quentin Bell, who was heading up the murder investigation of Joan and Michael Crosley. Blair told her story to Detective Bell.

He listened intently, not saying a word until she was done.

Blair couldn't read him at all. Detective Bell was stone-faced.

"Excuse me a moment, Ms. Russo." The detective left the office.

When he returned, he gave Blair some shocking information.

"Ms. Russo," Detective Bell began, taking a seat in the leather chair behind his large oak desk. "There is no such person as Jack Darrow. There is no such business as Darrow Detective Agency. The address you gave me for Mr. Darrow has been unoccupied for six months since the previous owner was murdered."

"No, that can't be," Blair told him, too stunned to make any sense out of what Detective Bell had just told her. She stared at the middle-aged bald man behind the desk.

"Were you ever at Mr. Darrow's office?" He waited for her response.

"Only once," she replied softly. "I remember it was rather sparse. He preferred to meet elsewhere."

Quentin Bell shrugged. "That's typical of a scam. Establish a

makeshift office, then meet clients at restaurants or other locations with explanations about the office being renovated or remodeled." She sighed dejectedly. "That's exactly what happened."

"I'm very sorry, Ms. Russo. It's all too common with con games all across the country."

Blair felt the anger rising like a volcano. "I don't care about being conned and that he was a fake detective. He murdered my sister and her husband. He confessed! He bragged to me that he was a serial killer! Don't you have any serial killers on the loose in New York that you need to catch? Jack is the one you're looking for! We were just at the restaurant. Surely there must be security cameras there."

Detective Bell shifted his weight in his chair. He studied Blair for a moment before he finally spoke.

"You're right, Ms. Russo. I will acquire the security tapes and contact you as soon as I have viewed them."

Blair sighed in relief. "Thank you, Detective."

"But," Quentin Bell began, "I must warn you that from what you have told me, this man is a professional, which means he knows where the cameras are. He would not have taken you to such a well-known and busy restaurant if he didn't know how to avoid the security cameras."

"Jack always preferred to sit at that particular table in that particular seat," Blair explained, her words barely audible. She wasn't sure she had spoken them at all. They were in her head. So was everything that had just happened. "Now I know why." The detective nodded. "Also, it is likely he was

wearing a disguise.”

“A disguise!” Blair was shocked. “No, I would have noticed! I’ve been working with this man for months!”

“These scam artists are extremely good at what they do,” he told her. “They will go to any lengths to pull off their con.”

“You are not very encouraging, Detective.”

Detective Bell leaned forward, arms folded on his desk, giving Blair an exasperated look. “Ms. Russo, this is New York. There’s a lot of crime here. And yes, we do have a string of unsolved murders and missing persons and have no leads on any of them, so maybe it’s your guy, Jack, or maybe it’s a dozen other possibilities. Without evidence, our hands are tied.”

“How can any of this be happening?” Blair asked, completely thrown off by it all.

“Ms. Russo, you’ve been through an emotional trauma. Your sister has been —”

Blair turned on him, anger seething inside of her. She spoke slowly, letting each word manifest the anger she felt, leaving nothing open for interpretation.

“Don’t you dare give me the flaky emotional woman treatment.”

“Ms. Russo —” the detective started to say.

“I swear, if you call me Ms. Russo one more time I will start screaming!” Blair shouted, her frustration threatening to boil over, the heat of anger no doubt flushing her face. She knew

at that moment it was useless to continue talking to this man.

"You have to see things from my point of view, Ms.," Detective Bell began, catching his mistake just in time.

"There is nothing you've told me to get a warrant, let alone anything to investigate. There is no evidence. His confession to you is inadmissible. By now he's stripped his Jack Darrow disguise, assumed a new one with a new name, and left town."

"So my sister and her husband's murders will remain unsolved, added to the stack of all the other unsolved murders and missing people and you move on as if Joan and Michael Crosley never existed."

Quentin Bell shrugged in defeat. "Jack Darrow is a ghost. We'll do everything we can, but I don't want you to get your hopes up."

"Well, there's certainly no chance of that!" Blair nearly shouted the words. Her face was contorted with anger and frustration. "As far as you're concerned, these cases are already cold. Their files tossed into a cardboard box on a shelf with thousands of others in a big warehouse, both of them now nameless case numbers. Time to move on to the next crime of the day."

"Try to understand the situation I'm in. People confess to murder all the time. There's a lot of nut jobs out there. Evidence is the only thing that weeds out the real ones from the crazy ones. Believe me when I say the NYPD will not quit looking for your sister's killer, whether it be Jack Darrow or anyone else. What I'm trying to tell you is that,

without evidence, the statistics for finding the perpetrator are slim. I don't like to admit that, but I want you to know the truth. I don't want to give you false hope. If we should get any new leads, I will call you personally with an update." The detective shrugged and smiled wanly. "I wish I could be more positive."

Blair's shoulders dropped in defeat. She stood up. "I don't suppose that was easy for you to say. I do appreciate your honesty, if nothing else, Detective."

"I'll drop you at your hotel," Detective Bell offered as he stood to escort her out of his office.

"Thank you, that won't be necessary," Blair told him. "I'd rather take a cab."

"As you wish," he acquiesced as she walked out of his office, his final words sounding hollow. "I'll be in touch."

Blair returned to the front entrance of the police department, stepped outside into the dark wintry December night and a gentle snow falling. She pulled her wool coat tighter, walking to the curb, hailing a cab.

Even the cab has a green Christmas wreath tied to the front.

"Four Seasons, please." Blair climbed into the back seat of the yellow cab. She pulled the door shut just as the cabbie edged into traffic, taking her away from One Police Plaza. On the short ride to her hotel, she turned in her seat to watch as Park Row, City Hall, and the Brooklyn Bridge began to disappear from view behind her as the cabbie merged onto FDR Drive. Everything was decorated for Christmas with brightly colored lights, wreaths, and twinkling bells. She

took in the elegant window displays at Saks, the giant tree at Rockefeller Center, which was laden with colorful ornaments and lights, and of course Santa was everywhere. The world around her was happy, glittering, and hopeful but she was terrified, angry, and hopeless.

It wasn't long before they were on 1st Avenue. Minutes later they were on 57th, where the cabbie pulled to a stop in front of the Four Seasons Hotel, also decked out with Christmas decorations. She handed the driver cash for the fare and a large tip just as the hotel doorman in his familiar dark uniform with gold buttons opened the cab door for her.

"Good evening, Miss Blair." The doorman greeted her with a wide smile.

"Good evening, Markham," Blair replied pleasantly.

The doorman opened the door to the hotel for her. "Always nice to see you, miss."

"You, too, Markham." She entered the lobby, her heels clicking on the marble floor as she took the steps up to the front desk, stopping at the concierge.

"Ms. Russo," the slender, blonde woman stated in her usual professional manner. "How can I be of assistance?"

"I need flight arrangements to San Francisco," Blair told the woman wearing the name badge with Suzanne printed on it. Blair knew there was nothing more she could do here in New York. "Tomorrow if possible."

"I'll take care of it," Suzanne told her. "I'll call you with the details as soon as I have them. Will there be anything else?"

“Would you have a gin martini, up, extra dry sent to my room, please?”

“I’ll be glad to arrange that for you,” the concierge told her, maintaining her professional demeanor.

“Thank you.” Blair walked to the bank of elevators that would take her up to her room on the nineteenth floor.

Once in her room, Blair dropped her purse on the sofa, slid open the sliding glass door and walked out onto the terrace. She pulled her coat closer to stave off the frigid cold as a light snow continued to fall. Closing her eyes, she hoped the cold and snow would wash away this bleak night of horror. Stepping closer to the railing, she leaned on it, gazing out at the spectacular nighttime view of midtown Manhattan as snowflakes dotted her hair and coat. She stared out at the New York skyline, resplendent with the lighted outlines of two of the tallest buildings in the city – Empire State Building and World Trade Center with its remarkable Twin Towers. Even the beauty of New York City could not dispel everything that had just happened. The horrors were playing like a macabre movie in her head, starring Jack Darrow as the evil bad guy.

“Jack Darrow may be a ghost for now, but one day we will meet again,” Blair spoke aloud, suddenly feeling like the fighter in her was returning. Earlier, Jack had scared her, melting her usual strong resolve.

“After all, it was my first encounter with a serial killer,” she mused. “I think I’m allowed to be frightened.”

Blair thought about her statement, feeling that familiar

resolve and strength once again dissipating as she thought about Jack Darrow.

“No, I was terrified. I’ve never been so damn scared in my life.”

Her hands shaking, she took a deep breath of the cold, fresh air. Slowly, her hands became steady and so did her determination.

“I’m the star of Jack’s sick game, so he has to keep me alive. When our paths cross again, I’ll know now what kind of monster I’m dealing with. Next time, I’ll be ready. I will not turn to mush the next time. I won’t!”

A knock at the door startled her. She carefully walked across the snow-covered terrace, closed the sliding glass door behind her and tossed her coat on the sofa. She reached into her purse and pulled some cash from her wallet.

“I’m definitely ready for that martini.”

When Blair opened the door, no one was there. There was only a gift-wrapped box on the floor in front of her door. A small gift card was tucked under the red bow and she bent to pick it up.

We didn’t have time for dessert. Jack

Blair’s heart pounded. This was no joke. Jack had left it. No, he had to have just left it. Jack was just here!

That thought terrified her. Her heart was racing. She looked up and down the hall as she heard the elevator door close and footsteps approach. A moment later, Blair saw the familiar room service employee approaching carrying her

cocktail on a tray. She could feel her heart pounding. She stared at the box for a minute, realizing the obvious danger of a gift from a serial killer.

Blair, don't forget that you're the mouse and he's the cat. He's not going to kill you—at least not yet. He wants to play a game.

She slowly picked up the gift box and let out a sigh of relief that it didn't blow up. The young man she had come to know as Scott had just reached her door.

"Come in, Scott," Blair said, holding the door open for him. "Please put it on the coffee table."

"Will there be anything else, Miss Russo?" the waiter asked as he held out the tray.

"No, thank you," she told him, signing the invoice and placing a large tip in his hand. She followed him out, then locked and bolted the door behind him. Blair kicked off her high heels, padded barefoot on the lush royal blue carpet, and placed Jack's gift on the coffee table. Then she reached for the martini. She used one hand to pull out the toothpick skewered with three green olives and took a long sip of the dry martini, savoring the perfect mix of gin and vermouth. Blair used her mouth to slide one olive off the toothpick, enjoying the tart taste. She took one more sip, replacing the toothpick and olives in the glass. She set the delicate cocktail glass—now half full—back on the coffee table next to the mysterious box.

Only then did she have the courage to open Jack's gift. She sat down on the sofa and stared at the box wrapped in gold paper and topped with a large red bow. The fact hadn't

escaped her that he had used her sister's favorite wrapping paper. Blair picked up the box and placed it on her lap. Slowly, she removed the bow and paper, staring at the familiar box inside.

"Well."

She recognized the gift immediately. It was impossible not to know a box of the best chocolates in New York City by Jacques Torres. They always came in the familiar dark brown box with the orange bow. She lifted off the lid.

"They're my favorites," Blair said, staring at the chocolates. "Milk chocolate, not dark."

She was interrupted by the phone ringing. Suzanne had a flight for her tomorrow at eleven and a cab coming for her at nine.

"That will be just fine," Blair told her. "Thank you, Suzanne." She took another long sip of the martini, then set her glass down on the end table within easy reach. Curling up comfortably on the sofa, she selected a chocolate, then stared at the square piece of candy in her left hand, using her right to reach for her cocktail, taking another drink. Blair replaced the martini glass with a clink on the glass end table, refocusing on the chocolate, inspecting it for needle holes.

"Did you poison them, Jack?"

Memories of what he had told her tonight at the restaurant came back to her.

"Kill you? I don't want to kill you. Terror is so much more fun, don't you think?"

“I guess the terror is wondering if you poisoned the candy or not,” Blair mused. “Well, here’s hoping you didn’t lie about not wanting to kill me.” She bravely popped the candy in her mouth. The chocolate and buttery caramel was sinfully delicious.

“He may be a serial killer,” Blair said, selecting another chocolate and savoring the nutty pralines.

“But Jack’s got excellent taste.”