

THE HAUNTING

Ian Burns walked into the house and was instantly assaulted by the aroma of roasted chicken coming from the kitchen. He hung his suit jacket on the hall antique coat rack just before his wife peeked around the door frame.

"Hi honey." Lisa said in her usual bright cheerful manner, the same manner which did nothing but irritate Ian lately. "Grab yourself a beer, dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. I made one of your favorites."

"Great." Ian replied, without meaning it, as he walked past Lisa to grab a beer out of fridge. If he noticed the hurt look on Lisa's face, he didn't bother to acknowledge it. Lisa couldn't help but be hurt by Ian's obvious refusal to kiss her hello.

It was one more example of how Ian had been rejecting her for the past three months. Earlier that same day Lisa had lunch with her mother, seeking her mother's counsel at what could be wrong. Which, given her mother's wild imagination was probably a mistake.

"He's trying to distance himself from you dear. Have you done something to upset Ian? You're not having an affair, are you?"

Lisa was shocked at the question. "Of course not, Mother! Why would you even ask such a question?"

"Well, you must have done something, Lisa. Ian loves you." It was typical of her mother to take Ian's side.

But, her mother's question, whether Lisa was having an affair, raised an alternative reason for his attitude. Was Ian having an affair? The thought of it scared Lisa to her core. Mother and daughter finished lunch and rather than return to the office to finish her day, Lisa called her boss to take a half day LWOP, went shopping and bought the ingredients for one of Ian's favorite meals. She was ready to fight for her man.

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As much as he hated it, Ian had to compliment Lisa on the delicious meal. "That was good; what's the occasion?"

"Nothing special, just thought my man could use a good, home-cooked dinner. I know we've both been busy with work and such, thought I'd show my thanks for how hard you've been working lately. All the extra time at the office."

Lisa's mention of his "extra time at the office" gave Ian a moment of angst, but he tamped it down, swallowing his guilt.

Lisa ignored the way Ian's eyes blinked as she continued. "I have a surprise. I reserved a room for next weekend at that Ocean City B&B we stayed at last year. I thought we could spend a couple days hiking the coast again. It was so nice last fall."

"Last fall" thought Ian, "when I was in love with my wife." Before the affair changed everything. Ian couldn't think of a good excuse fast enough to avoid a weekend with his wife, so he just grabbed a quick one from thin air. "I might have to work next weekend."

Lisa was ready. "No, you don't. I called Joseph this afternoon and made him promise me you'll have next weekend off. I didn't want to lose the deposit on the room."

Lisa knew Ian's boss, Joseph. During the three years Ian worked at Genius Systems for Joseph, Ian and Lisa attended many functions with Joseph and his wife. Joseph had become almost like a favorite uncle to Lisa. One more reason why, if Ian divorced Lisa, his life at work would become a living hell. Unless he could make Lisa out to be the 'bad guy'.

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Making Lisa out to be the reason for their divorce wouldn't be easy. Everyone loved Lisa, she was beautiful inside and out and most everyone knew she was devoted to Ian. So, why was he trying to ditch a beautiful, kind, loving wife? For another woman, of course.

Ian met Carmen Benyon in the café line at the diner across the street from his work. The brunette with a killer body was in front of him as they made their way down the buffet. She filled her tray with some of the more expensive dishes, Ian paid more attention to her backside in those tight black slacks than what ended up on his own tray. When she got to the register, she dug through her purse, acting befuddled.

"I know I had my wallet in here somewhere."

The hungry patrons behind Ian began to grumble. The brunette turned toward Ian, smiling. "Could you lend me fifteen dollars, please? I'll pay you back next time."

Ian was so taken with the woman's smile – and her face, she was gorgeous - that he didn't stop to consider when the 'next time' would be. He had never seen her before, he would have remembered this face and those beautiful breasts, and he blurted out, "Sure" and to the lady at the register, "Put hers on my tab."

The brunette's smile widened. "Thank you."

Ian expected that to be the end of it and was pleased when she sat at his table.

"I'm Carmen."

Ian reached across the table. "Ian" as he shook her hand.

Being a good-looking man with the air of someone who is successful, Ian wasn't terribly surprised when the young beauty joined him. He's always had luck with the ladies, as far back as middle school. In college, Ian was the guy his frat brothers stayed close to, waiting to get the leftovers. There were always nice-looking leftovers.

While they ate, Ian glanced at Carmen's left hand, looking for a ring. Years ago, before he met Lisa, Ian had an affair with a married woman. It didn't end well for Ian. The cuckolded husband caught up with Ian outside his apartment one night. Unfortunately, Ian wasn't much of a fighter; more unfortunately, the husband was. Ian wound up with a broken nose, a fat lip and two swollen testicles. The lip and testicles healed, but the craziest outcome from the beatdown was this - Ian had his nose repaired and his looks only improved. Who said life is fair?

When Ian's father learned the reason for the injuries, the old man threatened to disown Ian if he pressed charges against the husband. He also told Ian it was about time he grew up and settled down. Like many playboys, when Ian went searching for a wife, he avoided any of the loose women he'd dated and bedded up until that point. He ended up meeting Lisa Collins at a charity function, Lisa checked all the boxes. Beautiful, smart, loyal, great body and nearly a virgin. Within a year of their first date, Ian and Lisa were man and wife.

Now, three years later, Ian's true nature re-emerged. Within two weeks of meeting Carmen at the café he was spending any free time he could in Carmen's apartment. Within four weeks, Carmen had Ian wrapped around her little finger and was asking him when he was going to divorce 'the wife'.

Instead of talking to his father, Ian called Simon Foster, an old frat brother, for advice - offering to buy the first two rounds if he could use Simon as a sounding board. The two sat at the bar chosen for such an occasion.

"Here's the thing, I'm not even thirty and my life is starting to look like my parents'." Is how Ian started the conversation. "I met this woman, Carmen, and she's making me rethink my choices. Carmen talks about visiting nude beaches and having sex in the warm Caribbean waters. Lisa talks about buying a house and having babies."

Ian noticed the changing expression on his friend's face. From a lecherous smirk at the mention of sex and nude beaches to a frown when Ian used the words "having babies". His frat brother understood the dilemma. He kept it up, if the scales weren't tipped in Carmen's favor before, the next two sentences would seal Lisa's fate.

"Carmen screws me silly, there isn't a sex act she won't consider; while Lisa makes love and is still a little bit shy after three years of marriage. Carmen's body is decorated with tattoos and piercing, Lisa can't understand how people can mark their bodies that way." Ian failed to mention Lisa gave in two years ago and had a small butterfly tattoo inked in a place where only Ian and her doctor would ever see. Lisa insisted that the tattoo artist had to be a female and the tattoo itself did please and placate Ian – for a while.

Simon had the morals of an alley cat and the maturity of a freshman fraternity pledge. His response, "So, dump Lisa and have some fun with Carmen until you get tired of her. You know you will eventually dump her; she's just like all those whores you banged at school. And don't tell me you're in love with this Carmen – I know you better than that."

Ian pondered Simon's words of wisdom – or what sounded like wisdom after three ales and two Patrón shots. The two 'brothers' changed the conversation to sports and then Simon bragging to Ian about all the 'pussy' he was tapping at work. They were getting loud, so an hour later the bartender cut them off. Ian thanked Simon for meeting him, made plans to spend a weekend with him sometime in the future, and staggered home.

When he woke up the next morning, Ian's head was splitting with a hangover and the taste of vomit in his mouth. What he could remember from the previous night's discussion made him realize he needed to separate from Lisa. Listening to Simon's tales of singledom convinced him he married too young and the wrong woman. The problem now was the same as before – and Simon couldn't help solve the problem – how to make it Lisa's fault when the marriage failed. Ian called in sick to work; Lisa was already gone, but she left a nice note on the counter next to the coffee pot. In typical Lisa fashion, she hoped he had a nice time with his college buddy last night.

"Why does she have to be so damn nice?" he thought to himself.

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"Why does she have to be so damn nice?" Ian thought to himself once again as he looked out the side window during their drive to the coast the following weekend. His entire act over the past few months - being grumpy and sometimes downright nasty, ignoring her, avoiding sex and, when they did have sex, just being selfish – all of it, nothing was working; he couldn't get Lisa to lose her cool and attack him either verbally or physically.

Lisa spent the four-hour drive in a good humor. They arrived at the romantic B&B and Lisa seduced Ian into making love the first night; Ian had to admit it was fantastic. Lisa kept her body in shape, the time in the gym only enhanced her natural beauty. But still, she wasn't Carmen.

They woke up in the morning, naked, with Lisa's arm wrapped around his torso. They had a good breakfast, packed a picnic lunch into Lisa's backpack – Ian's backpack held the water, a bottle of Pinot Noir, their first aid kit and a blanket – before heading out on their hike.

It rained hard the night before; the temperature was in the low forties but promised to be sunny and sixty-five by the time they stopped for lunch. A lovely day to hike and reconnect. The trail opened up into the sunshine just as it reached the cliff overlooking the ocean; Ian and Lisa stopped to admire the sheer beauty of the seemingly endless horizon.

Their destination that day was an entry to a path one-half mile from where they now stood. The path was cut into the cliff, most likely by the original inhabitants of this land, leading down the eighty-foot-high cliff wall to the sandy bottom near the mouth of the river.

They never made it that far.

Tearing her eyes away from the horizon, something caught Lisa's attention; neither of them noticed how much erosion had taken place since their last visit here. The trail was once at least ten feet from the cliff edge, now it was four or five feet in places. Lisa bent down to look at the lily blossom no more than two feet from the edge when the ground buckled. As she slid sideways she caught an exposed bush root which prevented her from completely going over the edge, but now her legs dangled, churning as they tried to find something to use as a foothold.

"Help, Ian!" Lisa looked at her husband who stood frozen. "Help!" she screamed louder, trying to shake Ian out of his stupor. "Give me your belt!" Lisa knew it wouldn't do her any good if they both went over the cliff.

Ian just stood there. He wasn't frozen in fear, he was thinking. Maybe this was the answer to his prayers. An easy way to get rid of his wife. No pissed off boss or recrimination from their friends and family because he dumped his wife and found someone new. In fact, he'd be seen as a sympathetic character, someone who needs comforting.

They exchanged looks which explained it all. Lisa understood Ian was going to let her die, Ian understood Lisa's final thoughts were her knowledge of his deceit. "I'm sorry." Ian said, meaning it – after all, he did actually love her until recently.

It's the last thing Lisa heard before the root gave way and she plunged eighty feet into the sea. Her body then swept out further by the combination of the receding tide and the current of the nearby river's outflow. Ian caught a glimpse of Lisa before an offshore low fog made it impossible to see anything, maybe she already sank. Ian sat on the ground and cried.

There was an inquiry, of course. There was speculation. Did the bastard push her off the cliff? People can be so cruel. Luckily for Ian, the investigators were thorough and competent. They found Lisa's footprints where she walked off the trail, they found the fresh erosion and where the bush had been before coming loose. All the evidence confirmed Ian's testimony. Lisa had walked off the trail, gotten too close to the edge, it gave out, she grabbed a root, but it wasn't strong enough to hold her weight, she fell and either died from the fall or drowned. No one would ever know that Ian stood by and let her fall.

Lisa's body was never found, not surprising given the proximity to the river's current. The Coast Guard did search for three days, but without luck. A week later the backpack Lisa wore that morning was found on a beach twenty miles north of where she went in, giving credence to the speculation Lisa didn't die in the fall and the hope that somehow her body would be recovered. But that never happened.

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The tragic story of the beautiful young wife's death filled every news outlet within hours. Ian wasn't surprised when he returned home Sunday night to find his burner phone's voice mail account filled with messages from Carmen. He had left the phone powered down and locked in his briefcase, not taking the chance to take it on the weekend with his wife.

Ian listened to the messages, then called Carmen. Carmen picked up after the first ring.

"Oh my god, Ian. I heard what happened to her." Carmen never spoke Lisa's name, referring to Lisa always as 'her', 'the wife' or 'the bitch', but today refrained from using the more derogatory term out of respect for the dead woman. Carmen also did her best to leave the joy out of her voice as she faked her sympathy, Ian wasn't the only person to believe prayers had been answered when Lisa accidentally fell off that cliff. Carmen tried not to consider the other possibility – that Ian pushed her off so they could be together; although a part of her was smitten by the idea that Ian could love her that much.

Carmen rambled on for a minute. "When can I see you? Is there anything I can do? Why don't you come over so I can comfort you." Ian couldn't get a word in until he had to interrupt Carmen's monologue.

"Carmen, stop for a second. You know they're going to investigate the accident. I'm going to be under a lot of scrutiny for a while, at least until after the investigation ends. We need to keep calm and under the radar. Believe me, I want to see you as much as you want to see me. We just need to keep things the same for a few days. Keep it how it's been for just a little while longer. The good thing is we can talk every night for as long as we like using this phone. Can you understand that?"

It made sense, but Carmen had already waited three months for Ian to dump Lisa. Waiting another few days would be so hard, especially now that Ian was free. If anything, it was harder because they wouldn't be able to meet for lunch or make love at Carmen's apartment whenever Ian faked having to stay longer at work. (Ian was no fool, for every evening he spent in Carmen's bed, he spent an evening at work – just in case the topic of Ian's overtime came up when Lisa spoke with his boss.)

Carmen had a temper, she was trying her best to remain calm while Ian explained how they'd have to be careful for a while. She already was hopping mad when Ian told her how Lisa had planned a romantic weekend at a B&B. So mad that she went out this past Friday night and got picked up by some big hunk who she assumed could rock her world.

In fact, Carmen was still in bed with the guy Saturday afternoon, they were watching TV while recovering from their fifth or sixth bout of sex when the TV program was interrupted with the news of the local woman's tragic accident. Carmen kicked the guy out, cleaned up the take-out cartons, beer bottles and the sheets before making the first call to Ian's burner phone. Carmen did her best to forget how the guy made her squeal in pleasure with his tongue and those big fingers, all before pounding her into the mattress.

Ian brought Carmen back to the present. "Carmen, did you hear what I said? I said I'll do my best to sneak away. I'll try to sneak out wearing a disguise; there have been reporters hanging out in the parking lot. I'll be over there Monday at nine."

That was one of the things Carmen loved about Ian. The guy was so damn easy, Carmen held up her hand, looking at her little finger that had Ian wrapped around it, knowing that the finger next to it would have a ring on it before summer's end.

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All day Monday Ian was wired tight. He hadn't slept much either of the past two nights. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see Lisa staring at him with that look - knowing Ian would let her die. Ian realized one reason he slept so poorly the previous night was Lisa's scent lingered on her side of the bed. Lisa always wore a hint of the perfume 'Creed', only enough to catch Ian's nose as he snuggled into her neck, her cleavage or the intimate area between her legs. But now that she no longer shared his bed, he needed to rid the sheets of any lingering scent, so he washed the bedding.

With nothing else to do, he began putting Lisa's clothes, toiletries and other bed and bathroom items in plastic garbage bags, thinking no one would be in the master bedroom or bath. Ian left most of the photos in the living room, dining room and den, in case Lisa's mom or friends stopped over. He removed the two wedding photos in the hallway, replacing them with nature scenes. The garbage bags went into her study, he'd get rid of them after cleaning out all the closets and her study. He shut the door before going back into the living room to pour himself a double shot of Jameson.

At eight-thirty Ian sneaked out the apartment building's back door and walked the twelve blocks to Carmen's apartment. Carmen opened the door, wearing a smile and nothing else.

"Damn it Ian, I missed you." Carmen leaped into Ian's arms, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. "Get inside and make love to me, I missed you and need you bad." Carmen reached down to grab his crotch with one arm still around his neck. This is why Ian fell so hard for Carmen, the woman was sheer, unadulterated passion who never turned him down, no matter the request. Nothing was off the table when it came to sex.

"You don't have a wife to go home to, tonight I'm going to show you how great sex can be." She said it with an evil grin as he threw her on the bed. "Come here, I promise to keep all the bites and scratches below the neckline."

Ian spent the night, returning to his apartment (how funny not to think of it as 'our apartment' any longer) before the first light of dawn. Ian wore his jogging outfit in case someone, as unlikely as it seemed, caught him on the street or coming into the building. Although Ian hadn't met any of the neighbors in the six months since he and Lisa moved into the complex, neighbors can be nosy and a pain, especially now that he was a 'celebrity'. It turned out he was right. Mrs. Simpson, the elderly widow across the hall, was taking a special interest in the young widower's comings and goings.

Ian looked in the bathroom mirror. Damn, his nipples were almost bleeding from the bites. He grabbed the hand mirror, his back was crisscrossed with scratches. Ian smiled, thinking this what was missing from his marriage – unbridled passion.

Lisa's mother stopped by Tuesday evening to commiserate with her son-in-law. It was a tense visit. If Francis Collins noticed the missing photos from the hallway, she didn't mention it. They spent the majority of the short visit trying to find something to say to each other, with little success.

If things weren't awkward enough, Ian's cell phone rang while they sat in the living room. Ian tried to ignore it.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" asked Francis.

Ian looked at the readout, it was Carmen, who probably assumed it was now okay to call his phone.

"No, just some reporters or spam."

The phone stopped ringing and immediately the burner phone Ian left on the kitchen table started vibrating. It was apparent there was a phone buzzing in the other room, but they both chose to ignore it, as if ignoring the phone suggested it didn't exist.

Francis left very soon after.

Although Carmen bitched a blue streak, Ian decided to spend Tuesday night at home. There were just too many calls from reporters, friends and family. So many people either offering sincere condolences or merely trying to placate their voyeuristic urges to be part of a travesty. Ian made plans with Dana Williams, Lisa's BFF, to have a secular memorial service within a month or two. Without a body, he needn't worry about the farce of breaking down at the gravesite. Ian began to practice his sad faces in front of the bathroom mirror.

He collapsed on the mattress, but something was wrong. Ian sat up and sniffed the air. "Creed" he said it out loud. But he hadn't smelled it after washing the sheets. Why now? He sniffed Lisa's pillow – thinking that must be it. He carried the pillow down to the garbage chute by the elevators and went back to bed.

Ian woke the next morning and decided he needed to purge the apartment of Lisa's memory. If anyone made a big deal out of it, he'd pretend he was too distraught to be constantly reminded of her. He was still in his sleep wear, a pair of boxer shorts, when he entered Lisa's study.

Something was different, he looked around. He felt her presence somehow, as if she spent yesterday working in the room. Ian's logical brain understood this feeling was only his conscience combined with a bit of paranoia. Then he knew why – there were three photos of the two of them on the wall opposite Lisa's desk. Ian looked at the photos, each photo taken during their annual anniversary vacation. Ian couldn't remember when she had mounted those photos, but then again, he hadn't spent much time in her study – but for some reason he was aware of them today – maybe that's why he felt her presence.

He grabbed a plastic bag to put the photos in after removing them from their frames. Then started to clear her desk. When did she put their wedding photo on her desk? It was a smaller duplicate of one of the photos he removed from the hallway. He spent another half hour filling in trash bags before deciding it was too early in the day to deal with all this. He went into the kitchen and opened a beer.

Ian was still sitting in his underwear having his second beer and watching some dumb mid-morning talk show when the front entrance buzzer woke him out of his daze.

"Who is it?" he called down, expecting it to be another reporter.

"It's Carol. Can we come up?"

Carol was another of Lisa's BFFs, she had a few. Swearing silently, Ian pressed the button to unlock the entry door before going to put his robe on. He made certain the study door was closed as he passed it. Less than a minute later there was a knock on the front door.

Carol and her husband stood in the hall, sad expressions on their faces as Ian opened the entry door. Carol had a dish in her hand.

"Ian, we didn't mean to disturb you. We just thought we'd stop by and leave you something to eat. I remembered the last time you and Lisa came over for dinner, how you raved about my lasagna."

Ian opened the door wider and stepped aside to let them in, thinking it was his only option.

Carol stepped back but held out the dish. "No, we'll let you be. Just take the dish." Carol said the words, but it was obvious she was having trouble keeping it together. Ian took the dish and watched as they turned and walked down the hallway toward the elevators. He couldn't hear what Carol said to her husband after they walked away.

"That poor man. It's almost noon - the guy is still in his bathrobe and smells of beer. He must be completely devastated."

Ian called Carmen at her work. "How about I come over for dinner tonight and spend the night? I'll be there at six."

Carmen was thrilled and agreed to stop at Sammy's for ribs, fries and slaw. The two spent the night in her bed; Ian woke up early, jogged home and got ready to go into the office. As he shaved, something caught his eye. Sitting on Lisa's makeup table in the corner of the bathroom was her hairbrush. He could have sworn he threw it in one of the bags. Ian picked up the brush and took it into the study.

As he dropped the brush into one of the garbage bags, Ian looked down into the wastebasket, the wastebasket he could swear he emptied yesterday. There was a scrap of paper crumpled up inside; Ian picked it up and read the two names in Lisa's handwriting: Peter and Darlene.

Ian sat in Lisa's work chair and thought back to that night almost four months ago, it was one week before he met Carmen. Lisa and Ian finished watching some silly rom-com with a sappy ending. The couple get married and the female lead, Kate Hudson, is pregnant. Lisa was laying on the couch, her head in Ian's lap. She looked up into his eyes.

"Have you thought about us having a baby?"

Ian stroked Lisa's blonde hair. "Yeah, thought about it, but don't you think we're still kind of young for that commitment?"

Lisa sat up laughing, "Young? Ian, you'll be thirty even if I got preggo tonight, I'd be twenty-seven. We'd be older than either of our parents when they had their first."

Ian took the same attitude talking about parenthood as he took toward life – with goofy humor. "Well, I do look forward to whatever it takes to make you 'preggo'."

Lisa slapped his chest and laughed. "I'm serious here. Do you still want children? You always said we could have two."

Ian didn't respond immediately, after too long a pause he hedged. "What about your job?"

Lisa wasn't going to let Ian off the hook. "My job will give me three months leave with three-quarters pay. C'mon – humor me and I'll make it worth your time. What will their names be?"

Ian ran out of excuses and besides, the idea of a bribe sounded good; he decided to play along. "Peter for a boy, after your dad. Darlene if a girl, after my mom."

Lisa smiled; she liked those names but especially liked that Ian had given in. She slipped Ian's shorts down and gave him his reward.

Now, with Lisa gone, Ian stared at the names on the scrap of paper as a chill ran down his spine.

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Ian showed up late for work on Thursday after three days off for 'bereavement leave', walking into the office and having to endure the sympathy of his co-workers. His admin Joan cried while giving him a hug. His boss Joseph looked like he was holding back his own tears as he spent fifteen minutes telling Ian how much Lisa would be missed by Joseph and his wife.

People continued to drop by his desk to offer condolences, it was getting harder and harder to fake his sadness. Ian was almost to the point of not answering his phone because he was still getting calls from reporters. Thank goodness they didn't have his work number.

"Genius Systems, Ian Burns speaking." Ian answered the phone, hoping it would be a new customer who could take his mind off his personal life.

"I know you let her fall and drown." was all the voice said before disconnecting.

Joseph chose that moment to drop by his desk.

"Damn Ian, you look like you're about to pass out. C'mon, let's go into the break room to get you a soft drink or something."

Ian let Joseph lead him into the break room. With a flick of his head, Joseph silently signaled to the two ladies in the room to give Ian and him some privacy. The ladies understood and exited the room as Joseph mouthed a "thank you".

"I know this has been tough on you. I can't imagine what you're going through. Would you like more time off?" Joseph asked Ian.

"No, I was going stir crazy in the apartment and thought keeping busy at work would be the best thing for me."

"I thought that might be the case. I have an idea. Would you like to get out of town for two days next week? The Jefferson Industries account needs one or two days onsite. Your choice. You can fly out Sunday and spend a couple days in Phoenix. Come back in the office when you're ready."

Ian decided getting out of town sounded like a great idea and asked Joan to book his flight, car and hotel.

When Ian showed up at Carmen's apartment after work and told her he'd be traveling for a few days the following week, Carmen went absolutely ballistic.

"You asshole. What's so important that you need to go out of town?"

Ian did his best to explain it was his job, but Carmen wouldn't listen and kicked him out of her apartment. Ian thought about banging on her apartment door to let him back in until he realized that would only cause the neighbors to notice the recent widower, whose face was plastered all over the weekend news, standing outside a young single female's door begging to be let in. Ian turned around and walked home.

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As soon as Ian walked in the door, he once again sensed Lisa's presence and the chill ran down his spine. He turned around and went down to the pub to get dinner and an ale or two.

Meantime, a pissed off Carmen made a phone call. She'd been thinking about the sexy hunk from last weekend and called him.

"Hey big guy, it's Carmen – remember me?"

"Of course darling, you calling because you need a rematch?"

"Yeah, get your cute butt over here. You remember where?"

"Can't tonight, got a buddy from school visiting. How about tomorrow or Saturday?"

Carmen couldn't believe the words as they left her mouth. "Bring him along, it might be fun."

Carmen had done a lot of outrageous things in her time, but this would make everything before tonight seem tame by comparison. She almost felt bad about cheating on Ian but justified it by telling herself that Ian cheated on his wife; besides, he wasn't paying enough attention to her. And she'd make it up to Ian the following Tuesday night when he flew home. If she wasn't too sore.

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Ian finished his third IPA and walked back to his apartment. He called Carmen, but she didn't answer and he didn't want to leave a voicemail, so he hung up. Ten minutes later, his phone rang. It was Carmen.

"Ian – you called?"

"Yeah babe. Can I come over?"

"Not tonight Ian. You made me mad and maybe it's time you thought about how hard it is to wait for you. I waited while you were married, now I'm sitting here all alone because you're leaving on a business trip."

"Not until Sunday. I could spend tonight and the next two nights with you."

"No – we'll talk tomorrow." Carmen ended the call and went back to what she was doing before the phone rang.

"Who was that?" asked the guy playing with her breasts.

"My boyfriend. I only called him back to make certain he stayed away tonight. Now, where were we?"

Ian looked at his phone and swore. Opening another beer, he made a decision, but he'd wait until the morning to call Carmen and tell her. He took off his clothes and headed to bed. As soon as his head hit the pillow he smelled Creed. Ian jumped out of bed, "son of a fuckin' bitch!" and tore the sheets off the bed. He ran into the kitchen for a garbage bag, threw the sheets, the pillows and the mattress cover, even the blanket, into the bag. Passing through the hall, he opened up the laundry closet and loaded the extra set of sheets into the bag, got dressed and headed down to his car.

Ian drove down to Walmart, but before going into the store, drove around the back of the store where he found the dumpsters near the loading dock.

Ian threw the bag into the dumpster and was getting back into his car when the guy on the loading dock yelled out. "Hey buddy, you can't throw your garbage in there!"

Ian flipped the guy off and drove to the front of the store, went in and bought new pillows, sheets and blanket.

The Walmart employee cursed a few epithets aimed at the back of the car, then looked in the dumpster to see what the guy threw away. He'll tell the story every now and then of what he found in the bag and no one who heard the story ever came up with a reasonable idea why a guy would throw out perfectly good, clean bedding.

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Early Friday morning, after another poor night of sleep, Ian called Carmen's number, trying to catch her before she left for work. Carmen answered the phone, sounding groggy; after all, she only got four hours of sleep after kicking the two studs out at two in the morning.

"What do you want Ian?" Carmen wanted to sound upset, keeping Ian on his toes and kissing her proverbial feet.

"What I want is for you to move into my apartment tomorrow. I'm taking the day off to clean the rest of Lisa's crap out of here. You can move in. I still have to go to Phoenix for two nights, but only two nights. I'll be back Tuesday evening."

Carmen was elated when she heard the words, "when you move in", she was hoping it would happen soon, but this was sooner than expected. Her lease ran out at the end of the next week and she didn't want to renew it. The two times she drove past Ian's complex, she couldn't believe how nice it was, she imagined herself living there. It even had a pool and workout room; it was all so much nicer than her crappy apartment building. Elated, but knowing how to keep a guy off balance, she answered. "Let me think about it. I'll call you tonight after work."

"Please Carmen. You'll see, we'll be a great couple, just give us a chance."

It took all of Carmen's will power not to break out laughing. The guy was hooked like a fish on a line. "I'll call you tonight Ian." She ended the call, the second time she ended a call without telling Ian she loved him.

Ian spent three hours Friday morning preparing for his trip to Jefferson Industries after Joan emailed all the materials Ian needed for the meeting. He spent the rest of the day searching every drawer, closet, cubby and anywhere he could find removing anything of Lisa's. The clothes went to a nearby Salvation Army donation box and the rest in the apartment dumpster. Ian spent that evening filling bags. Every so often he'd come across some memento from their life together. "I guess there was a time we were happy" he thought to himself, although he hated to admit it.

Friday evening at seven Carmen called from her car to be let into the building. Ian rushed downstairs to let her in and helped with her two suitcases.

"You can help me with the rest of my stuff later. My lease runs out a week from today, so we have time to get it. The furniture came with the apartment, we don't have to worry about heavy stuff." Carmen gave Ian a toe-curling kiss and smiled as he led her into the elevator.

**

"I thought you got rid of all her stuff?" Carmen was in the bedroom putting her things away in the closet and the dresser.

“What are you talking about? Everything of Lisa’s should be gone.” Ian was already wondering if this was a mistake. Everywhere Carmen went in the apartment, she made some remark how it should be different. Ian kept saying, “Whatever you want.” and continued watching the baseball game. He told her which dresser to use in the master bedroom, now she was bitching at him from that room.

Carmen came into the living room and stood in front of the television. “This is what I’m talking about; these were in one of the dresser drawers. Carmen held up the sexiest pair of thongs imaginable. You always told me your wife was a prude, no prude ever wore these!” Carmen threw them at Ian’s face, before he could get them off, he took a breath and couldn’t believe it – Creed, just a hint. “When will it ever stop?” he thought.

“She never wore these!” Even Ian had a hard time believing his own defense and he knew it was true, he couldn’t remember Lisa wearing those since she claimed thongs were uncomfortable.

Carmen looked at him like he grew a third eye. “Bullshit!” Carmen recognized the scent, it was Creed. The same perfume Ian had bought Carmen a couple months ago as a gift. Now she knew why – it was the same scent his wife wore, Ian didn’t want to get caught so he gave his girlfriend the same scent as his wife wore. Very tricky. This just pissed off Carmen more.

“You’re an asshole!” Carmen marched back into the bedroom to finish unpacking. Poor Ian spent the first night cohabitating with Carmen trying to make love and being rejected.

They spent Saturday getting the rest of Carmen’s things from her apartment, doing their best to keep a low profile from any busy-body neighbors.

Ian had a two o’clock flight on Sunday and Carmen finally let him make love to her in the morning. By the time Ian left the apartment for the airport he was certain he made a mistake. But how to get rid of her? Little did Ian know his fun had just started. He threw his suitcase in the back seat of the car and started to pull out – something was wrong.

Getting out and walking to the passenger side, he found a flat front tire. Ian hadn’t had a flat since getting his driver’s license. He remembered that day twelve years ago, his father offering a lesson in how to change a tire, but being spoiled kid, he declined the offer. “Dad, I have triple-A.”

Pulling out his phone to call for service, Ian cursed himself when the dispatcher gave a two hour estimate before the truck could get there. Ian decided to try changing the tire, thinking, “How hard can it be if some grease monkey can do it?”

Ian assembled the jack per the owner manual’s instructions before lifting the cover to get to the spare. Sitting on top of the spare was an envelope with his name on it. Although he was in a hurry, curiosity got the better of him and he opened it to read the letter inside. It was from Lisa and read:

Ian my love. If you’re reading this letter it means you’ve had a flat tire and you’re probably upset right now. I hope it helps to know that you have a woman at home that loves you and when you get home, I’ll be glad to pour you a drink, give you a massage and (wink) maybe something else. With all my love – your wife, Lisa

Rather than put him in a better mood, the letter pissed him off even more. The worse part? The letter smelled of Creed. Ian went back to the owner’s manual, read the instructions, and finished the task of changing the tire. Now he’d have to hurry to make his flight.

**

Joey Bronkosky was a half hour from finishing his second day as a TSA agent when he spotted the guy in the security line acting nervous. Thinking back to his training, he watched as the guy kept fidgeting. Looking closer, some things didn't add up; the guy was dressed like a businessman, but his hands weren't the hands of a businessman, not with that grease on them. Plus, Joey thought the guy looked familiar, could he have seen his face on one of the 'watch list' posters in the locker room? Something about the guy was ringing a bell in Joey's head.

Ian placed his carry-on bag onto the conveyor before getting ready to step through the body scanner. He only had another fifteen minutes before the gate for his flight closed. "Hurry, hurry" he said to the woman in front of him who seemed to suddenly remember her keys were in her pocket. Ian tried to step around her, but she gave him a look, said, "Excuse me!" and wouldn't let him around her. She finally got through, Ian made it through himself and stood waiting for his bag to get through the x-ray machine.

"Sir, is this your bag?"

Ian looked up to see the TSA agent with his bag.

"Yes, why?"

Joey was pleased with himself, he knew something was off with this guy. "Sir, please step over here while we take a look inside."

"Look" Ian began in an angry tone, "I only have another ten minutes to make my flight. Can't you hassle somebody else?"

A supervisor overheard the exchange and stepped over. "Bronkosky, what have you got?"

Joey pointed to the image on the screen. The supervisor made a face which could only be interpreted as concern, then addressed Ian. "Sir, come over here."

Ian was about to start yelling at this new guy, but at the last second, thought better of it. Maybe he could get this over quick if he kept his mouth shut.

No such luck. When Joey examined the travel bag, he opened a side pocket on the outside of the case, a pocket Ian never used. Ian watched in horror as the agent pulled out a large sharp knife-like object. "Son of a bitch!" Ian thought to himself, "Lisa's letter opener from her office, how the hell did that get in my bag?"

What Ian said out loud was, "I didn't put that in my bag!"

"Sir, did someone else pack your bag or was it out of your control at any time?"

Ian had to admit neither.

"Then please come with us."

An hour later Ian left the examination room and was allowed to pass through Security, but only after a very embarrassing strip-search and a stern lecture from the police of what would happen, being placed on the 'No-Fly List', if he ever attempted to go through Security again with a restricted object.

Joey Bronkosky got a big 'atta-boy' with a letter in his personal file for his vigilance.

Of course, Ian's flight left over an hour ago and he went to the service counter to rebook his flight to Phoenix. Unfortunately, the next available flight wasn't until eight pm. Ian sat in the airport bar for four hours and

drank three double Jamesons. He had two more on the plane and checked into his hotel just after one am. He felt like crap. He fell into the room, turned his phone off and unplugged the hotel room phone – just in case.

Bang, bang, bang – someone was banging on Ian's door. He got out of bed, the clock showed three-thirty, and went to the door, looking through the spy-hole to see the lady who checked him in. He opened the door a crack.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you Mr. Burns. Your wife has been trying to get a hold of you. She says it's an emergency, that there's water everywhere. She said to call her."

"What the hell?" it slipped out of his mouth. Ian thanked the lady and turned his phone back on and called Carmen thinking, "Why would Carmen be calling me and pretending to be my wife?" It was the only explanation he could think of for such a crazy message. Maybe the roof of the building was leaking.

Carmen's phone rang a half dozen times before she picked up. She didn't sound happy to be woken. "What?" is all she said.

"Carmen, were you trying to get a hold of me?"

"Ian, it's four in the morning. Why would I be calling you?"

He was ready to tell her he received a message that his wife called when he realized how that made him sound crazy. "Sorry, babe. It must have been a bad dream. G'night." Ian ended the call before he heard Carmen say, "asshole".

Ian never fell back to sleep. The front desk clerk's words kept him awake. "She says it's an emergency, there's water everywhere." He finally got out of bed at five to make a cup of coffee. He spent the next two hours watching sports talking heads on ESPN blather about nonsense before showering and getting ready for his meeting.

The CEO and Operations Manager of Jefferson Industries were waiting for him when he drove up in his rental car. Ian looked as bad as he felt. His head was splitting, his ears were ringing and he fought to stay awake. The client knew Ian recently lost his wife and was willing to cut him some slack for wasting most of Monday morning's meetings, the CEO finally sent Ian back to his hotel with a promise to reschedule soon, then called Joseph and told him not to send Ian again until he got his shit together. Ian drove back to the hotel with every intention of crashing into bed and getting some sleep, having decided to take the booked flight back home Tuesday afternoon.

Instead, his phone rang as he settled into his room. It was the lead Ocean County detective investigating Lisa's death. He informed Ian that neither the county coroner's office nor the district attorney were ready to sign off on Lisa's death as accidental. The detective requested Ian return to the police station to answer a few more questions.

"Honestly" said the detective, "we were ready to sign off until we received an anonymous call claiming there was a witness who swears they saw you push Mrs. Burns off the cliff. We would have thought it was a prank, but this person seemed to have knowledge of so many facts. I'm certain we can clear this up if you come back and review the events with us."

To say Ian became concerned was an understatement. He knew he hadn't pushed Lisa off the cliff, but how many times have 'innocent' men been convicted? If nothing else, a trial would be costly and would delay the

life insurance payout. Ian went down to the bar and drank too many pints and too many shots of Tequila. The bartender finally cut him off when he grew loud and belligerent. Heading back to his room, he spent an hour puking up the liquor, so much for a good night's sleep.

**

Carmen's Monday was better than Ian's, but not much better. Something kept waking her up every hour the previous night. Just as she fell asleep, some low-toned buzzing would start, but only for a few seconds – long enough to wake her, but not long enough to trace where the sound was coming from. Finally, after waking up every hour from ten until two, she stuffed her ears with cotton and was asleep when Ian called at four asking his lunatic question, "were you trying to get a hold of me?"

Carmen made it into work on time, but the lack of sleep was a contributing factor in her making a few errors, errors her boss quickly discovered. After the second error, Carmen got an ass-chewing and warning.

Monday night was no better; in fact, it was much worse. When she talked to Ian, he was drunk and incoherent. She tried to go to sleep at nine, but by eleven that damn buzzing started up again. Carmen put cotton in her ears again and fell back asleep.

She had no idea how long she was asleep or what time it was when she felt a presence in the room. The room was dark, but there was enough light to make out the woman standing at the foot of the bed. An apparition, it had to be, dressed in a white smock, the face white, the long hair hanging to the shoulder. Looking closer, Carmen could see the woman's hair was wet, then she understood, this was Lisa Burns.

"What do you want?" Carmen's voice was barely a squeak, her throat constricted with fear. Was that a smile in response or a malicious evil grin? The woman didn't answer and Carmen shirked under the covers.

"He killed me and he'll kill you, too." The woman's hand reached out toward Carmen. Carmen pulled the blanket over her head, shivering and praying for the first time since she was a little girl.

Time passed, whether it was ten minutes or two hours, Carmen couldn't tell, but when she finally worked up the nerve to drop the covers and look, the apparition was gone. Or had it ever really been there? Carmen got up out of the bed, slowly going room to room, turning on every light in the apartment as she slowly looked inside every closet, under the bed and behind the sofa. She made her way into the kitchen, grabbing the bottle of wine out of the fridge. Looking in the cabinet, Carmen reached past the wine glasses and grabbed one of Ian's pint glasses.

**

Ian's phone was ringing; it was eight am Tuesday morning.

"Hello?" At this point he was almost afraid to answer the phone, nothing good came of the last few calls.

"Ian" It was Joseph, "what the hell is going on down there? I just got off the phone with Mr. Fairbanks at Jefferson; he said you wasted his day yesterday."

"I'm sorry." It was all he could think to say.

"That's not all. I got a call from a detective yesterday. Wanted to know if I thought you were capable of killing Lisa. I told him 'no way', but why are they asking questions? Is there something you need to tell me?"

"No! I swear I didn't kill her Joseph. It was an accident!"

"Okay, okay; you better talk to that Ocean County detective and square this away. Take tomorrow to drive over there. Then, Thursday, see what you can do to sooth the folks at Jefferson. Or should I send Holstead?" Holstead was always trying to steal Ian's accounts. Now Joseph was hinting Holstead should take over the Jefferson account. That was almost seven percent of Ian's compensation. It pissed Ian just to hear it proposed.

"Don't do that. Give me until the end of the week. I'll have everything straightened out with that detective and with Mr. Fairbanks."

"I like you Ian, but I can't afford to lose the Jefferson account. Fix it!" Joseph ended the call.

Ian's had two hours to make his flight, but he made it with five minutes to spare. On the flight he bought a few of those small bourbons from the flight attendant. She almost refused to serve him because he looked to be in bad shape.

**

Twice now Carmen heard a phone ringing somewhere in the apartment. The second time it rang, she found a burner phone in the jacket pocket of one of Ian's coats. Carmen answered the phone.

"Is Ian there?" it was a woman calling.

"Who is this?" Carmen couldn't believe it, the dirtbag had another girlfriend!

"Tell Ian that Janet called." And hung up.

Carmen looked at the call history, Ian must have cleared it. But she did find two texts from the same number that just called, it came in Saturday. "thx 4 2sdaynite" and "find my panties?" Both with a dozen emojis of love and kisses.

It rained all Tuesday morning; the gloom didn't help Carmen's sour mood after a night of no sleep and finding the burner phone earlier that morning. It wasn't even noon before she opened another bottle of wine and poured herself a glass. The television was on, Carmen wasn't paying much attention to what was playing, it was one of those stupid daytime soap operas that her mother used to spend half her day watching, until the dishes piled up and the laundry didn't get done. When Carmen's father came home from work the fighting would start, both parents shouting names and swearing.

The memory of her dysfunctional family only made Carmen more upset. "Why do people stay together if they only make each other more miserable?" she thought to herself as she poured a second glass of wine. The question never answered itself because the two television actors interrupted her thoughts. The female actress slapped the male actor and accused him of cheating. The male actor laughed at the woman and admitted to his affair with a younger, prettier co-worker. Carmen watched the scene in horror. "Are all men such scum?" she asked the television screen.

By the time Ian walked in the door three hours later, Carmen was finishing the last of the bottle. Ian dropped his suitcase on the hallway floor and stepped into an unexpected cyclone of venom coming out of Carmen's mouth. "Hey babe" were the only words out of his mouth before the storm hit.

"Your girlfriend called, you asshole!"

"What are you talking about? What girlfriend?"

Carmen grabbed the phone and threw it at Ian's head. "Don't play mister innocent with me. I found the phone you've been using."

The phone missed Ian's head and shattered against the wall. "I don't know what you're talking about for god's sake. You're drunk!"

Carmen was getting hotter and more rabid by the second. How dare Ian try to talk his way out of this – she knew the drill – deny, deny, deny. He used a burner phone to communicate with her for the past three months, now he's trying to deny he has another phone for the other bitch? She ran to the where the phone landed on the floor, picking it up and shoving it in his chest. "Here, just read the texts she sent!"

Due to the three drinks on the plane and lack of sleep - besides the catastrophic road trip - and a lousy flight through a thunderstorm that had the plane shaking like a leaf in the sky - Ian was having a hard time processing whatever Carmen was screaming about. He needed a drink but instead, he was dealing with an irrational crazy woman.

Ian looked down at the phone in his hand. He pressed the power button, but nothing happened, the phone was broken. Ian held up the phone to Carmen. "You broke it." He put it down on the kitchen island and went to the mini-bar to pour himself a stiff drink – a twelve year old Highland Park, straight up.

Carmen couldn't believe it; the evidence was gone! Carmen started yelling louder now. "You son of a bitch! It was there, her texts to you, the call she made was in its history log! They were there."

Ian finished the first glass and poured a second. "You're nuts! There is no other woman!" His voice cut Carmen to the soul. "Go step in the shower and sober up. We'll talk when you're not drunk." Ian opened the sliding doors to the patio and stepped out to get some fresh air and to get away from this mad woman. Three years living with Lisa and he never experienced anything like this, he didn't know how to handle it. Best just to get away. He started to close the sliding door when it jerked out of his hand.

"Don't tell me to sober up! Don't tell me you're not going to dump me for another woman! I saw the texts! You're going to pay, you bastard! I hate you and I want you dead!" Carmen shoved Ian in the chest.

Under normal circumstances, Ian would have backed into the railing surrounding the patio, the railing having been built according to the most recent codes and high enough to prevent anyone from tumbling over. Under normal circumstances, but through a quirk of the Universe, Lisa's herb planter was situated on the deck directly between Ian and the railing. As Ian tripped backwards, his foot caught the edge of the planter - catapulting him over the railing and down five floors unto the pavement below.

Carmen screamed in horror as she ran to the railing, looking down to see Ian's lifeless body below. She couldn't believe it, and it would be years before she would forget the look in Ian's eyes as he fell backwards, grabbing at the air in a vain attempt to find a grip.

Carmen began shouting "help, help" and ran to the apartment entry continuing to shout "call 911" before three or four neighbors opened their doors and came to assist her. Two of the neighbors were on their phones to the police as soon as they understood what Carmen was trying to say. Mrs. Simpson, the neighbor from across the hall, sat Carmen down on the sofa and tried to calm her down with a glass of water.

Everyone admitted during the subsequent investigation that it was a tragic accident, mostly caused by the unlucky placement of the planter. Carmen would have been given a slap on the hands, probation for her part in the accident, except for one thing. The next-door neighbor happened to be sitting on her deck next to Ian's when she heard the shouting and looked over to see Carmen shove Ian "with force" while shouting "I want you dead". Carmen ended up pleading guilty to 'negligent homicide' and sentenced to eighteen months in the state penitentiary.

Three months later.

“So, anything I tell you is confidential unless it’s unlawful?”

Gloria Turner, the psychologist, nodded in agreement.

“Even if it’s immoral or unethical, as long as it’s not against the law?”

Another nod in response to this second question. The psychologist remained poised with the writing pad on her lap and the pen in her right hand; waiting for her new patient to begin.

“I’ve always been a ‘Pollyanna’, don’t know why given what a bitch my mother has always been, but it’s how I’ve looked at life, like good things come to good people. But, when I was falling off that cliff into the ocean, and my husband stood there letting it happen, something just snapped.”

Lisa Burns took a sip of water.

“I hit the water and felt the riptide pulling me out to sea. The water was cold, I knew it wouldn’t take long before hypothermia set in, but I fought the urge to fight the current, took off my shoes and the backpack and floated on my back until the current stopped pushing me out.

“There was a low offshore fog; I couldn’t see the shore or anything around me, but I started swimming to where I thought the shore would be. That’s when I heard a radio playing old rock music. I swam toward the sound and couldn’t believe it – there was a guy hauling a crab pot out of the ocean. I don’t know who was more surprised, me or him.”

Lisa started to tear up. “He lifted me out of the water, helped me undress, bundled me up in a wool blanket and took the boat back to shore. He and his wife fed me and took care of me. When the news came on, we watched Ian cry those crocodile tears. I decided to make his life a living hell until he confessed what he did, I decided to haunt Ian.

“Mr. and Mrs. Crane drove me back to town and got me a room at a nearby motel using their credit card. When I think of that couple, I have to say, it’s helped partially restore my faith in people.”

“Have you done anything to thank them?” This was one of the few times Gloria would interrupt Lisa’s narrative.

“Yes, Mr. Crane has a new outboard motor for his fishing boat and Mrs. Crane has a new convection oven. On our drive back to the city they were chatting and I overheard them. I was in the back seat and I know they weren’t hinting – they thought I was asleep.

“I settled into my motel room and snuck into the apartment Monday night. It’s funny – I was the one who argued against having a hidden key, taped under the welcome mat outside the entry door, Ian had been locked out a couple times and insisted on it. Anyway - Ian is, or was, a heavy sleeper and I thought I could move around the apartment without waking him. Turns out I needn’t worry, he was sleeping at his girlfriend’s, who I didn’t know existed until that day.

"I placed a few mementoes here and there, things to remind Ian how much we loved each other once, including hanging our anniversary photos in my office after I noticed he took our wedding photos down in the hallway. Then splashed some of my perfume on the bedsheets. I did something else that night I never would have done until then. I logged onto Ian's work and personal email accounts from his laptop he left in the bedroom. I knew his passwords, he probably didn't know it, but I never snooped before Monday night. That's when I found out there was a Carmen. She had sent him an email after hearing the news I was missing, she couldn't get a hold of him on the burner phone they used to communicate – another thing I learned – and was worried about him, at least that's what she wrote."

Lisa was starting to tear up recalling this; Gloria handed her the box of tissues.

"How much time do we have?" Lisa asked Gloria.

"Two hours, don't worry, you're my last appointment of the day." Gloria knew this session would be intense for Lisa and didn't want to cut it short. Besides, Gloria couldn't wait to hear how Lisa arranged her revenge.

Once Lisa calmed down, she continued. "Tuesday night I went back. I had to be quiet because Ian was there sleeping. I almost laughed out loud when I found the pile of bedclothes in the hallway where he tossed them. The perfume was working. I moved a couple of things and left.

"Wednesday night was better because Ian spent the night at his girlfriend's, I could move around freely. I went through the garbage bags Ian had filled and found a few things I didn't want to have thrown out. It's amazing how, what you thought was important, no longer has value when your life has been turned upside down. I took a chance and grabbed my laptop hoping Ian wouldn't notice it missing.

"Here's where I really got nasty. I left my hairbrush in the bathroom where he'd find it and I wrote the names of our future children on a scrap of paper for him to find."

Lisa told Gloria about the night she and Ian came up with the names. Now, Gloria took a moment to wipe her eyes with a tissue.

Gloria interrupted again. "Wait, what about your mother, didn't it bother you that your mother would think you're dead the entire time you were missing?"

Lisa gave a small smirk in response to the question. "For me, it was another revelation. I watched my mother being interviewed on FOX and CNN the first afternoon at the Crane's. I was ready to call her and give her the good news. I watched my mother revel in the attention she was getting. It was all about her, not about me.

"My dad was my real parent until he died, my mother rarely paid attention to me. Oh, once or twice I think she tried, but she never warmed up to me. She loved Ian more than me. I tried to be a decent daughter – the whole Judeo-Christian 'honor your mother' and all that - but it was mostly a façade on both our parts."

Lisa paused. "Can I have more coffee?" Both women got up to pour a second cup.

"I'm not going to bore you with every detail of what I did over the next few days. I did call him at work Thursday, disguised my voice and told him I watched as he let his wife die. I told the police the same thing a few days later. Reading his email, I had a copy of his itinerary, so Sunday morning I flattened one of his tires and left a love note in the spare tire compartment. Oh yeah, I also hid my letter opener in the side pocket of his suitcase.

"After I found out his girlfriend was moving in, I got creative.

"I bought a phone at Walmart and planted it in one of his coats in the closet. I called the number when I knew she'd be there alone and asked to speak to Ian. Told her I was his other girlfriend and she should have him call me, I sent a text that I enjoyed our time Tuesday night and wondered if he found the panties I left there. You should have heard her screaming." Lisa was smiling as she thought back to how much fun she had while freaking Carmen out. "The best part was sneaking into the apartment in the middle of the night and 'ghosting' her. That was after calling Ian's hotel and having the desk clerk wake Ian with the news that his wife was trying to reach him."

Gloria couldn't contain herself. "None of this is unlawful. In fact, I think it's damn inspirational. I understand from what I read in the papers that you're not being charged with any crime. But I guess I feel a little sorry for Carmen, she's been charged with negligent homicide and may end up serving a few years in jail. Seems harsh."

Lisa shook her head. "Maybe she'll stay away from other women's husbands when she gets out. I didn't set out to do anything but break them up and make Ian confess to what he did; I never dreamed it would end up with Ian dead."

Gloria, being a married woman herself, thought it might serve as a lesson to other would-be husband stealers, maybe Lisa is right. She silently nodded and let Lisa finish.

"I guess if the police want to get nasty, they can make a big deal out of the fact I faked having amnesia for ten days. But they'd have to prove I didn't have amnesia and they don't seem too interested in making a case out of where or why I was hiding out."

Gloria stopped taking notes and looked up. "Well Lisa, in this first session you've given me some great background. What do you want to get out of our future sessions?"

"Three things. I want to trust people again, to see the best in people; I've become jaded and I don't like it. Two, I want to understand why Ian couldn't love me as much as I loved him; where it went wrong. And third, I want to be able to spend the half million dollars I received from Ian's life insurance without feeling any guilt."

THE END