STILL LIVES

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Quercus

Chapter 6

When the staff elevator doors open, Yegina, Kevin, and I rush through the permanent collection to reach *Still Lives*. All the galleries feel large and cold and secretive tonight, even as I pass familiar white slabs and cubes of light, the red flower of a smashed car hood that's always on view. The air smells like nothing – not disinfectant, not paint, not wood or plastic, just pure absence. I look over at Kevin, and he's a wash of fluorescence and shadow, patting his tweed pockets like he forgot something. Beyond him, Yegina wears the cool, keen look of a cat about to be fed.

'Not mobbed yet,' I say, but neither of them answer. Our footfalls are the only sounds, fast and ominous, as they approach the black-painted rooms of *Still Lives*.

I've read the hyperbole about Kim Lord's talent. Heck, I've been writing it for months, ripping adjectives like *stunning*, *harrowing*, *shocking*, *edgy*, and *stark* from reviews of prior shows, and

coupling those words with the gory stories of the eleven murdered women depicted in *Still Lives*. The more praise I penned, the more it rang false to me – to be so stagy in your subject matter, to take another woman's victimization and make it your material. Not until today's undisclosed press release about her gift has Kim Lord ever acknowledged that she, too, might be capitalizing on these horrific crimes. She seems to think it is her right to depict the victims, to paint herself into their lives and stories, just as she – a well-heeled Canadian – feels it is okay to toss out damning statistics about Los Angeles and its murder rates, and the way Hollywood sensationalizes female homicide. 'I picked this city deliberately,' she said. 'I want this city to see what it is doing.'

Fine. Let's see it.

I am wary when I step inside the first black room.

Stabbing victim Roseann Quinn hovers over me with her curls and her wistful grin. Lord based her painting on a well-known photo of Quinn in a loosely tied head scarf and round librarian glasses, grinning at something beyond the camera. In the original photo, Quinn looks as if she's strolling down a suburban street, past a white house and a yard, the photo snapped just when she's spotted a friend and beams in recognition. Kim Lord painted as Quinn has the same clothes and sweet expression, but the background to her face is old newspaper clips, their headlines: 'Teacher Found Nude and Slain,' 'Teacher Victim of Sex Slaying,' 'Drifter Held in Roseann's Slaying.'

Roseann Quinn's 1973 murder exploded in the national news because it was a timely I-told-you-so to the new generation of

women choosing sexually liberated lives. Quinn was a New York City teacher who lived alone and allegedly went out to bars at night and brought home men. One evening she made the wrong choice. *She* made the wrong choice. The words in the headlines: *Nude* and *Slain*, *Sex* and *Slaying*. How important it was to use both words, in that order.

Their message is so loud that I almost miss that the painted Roseann Quinn has thin red stab wounds all over her throat.

I move on to the next female face: close-lipped smile, head tilted, her pretty eyes lined in black, her blonde-streaked hair arrowing beneath her chin. Everything about this subject's posture suggests a readiness to be viewed: she is posing; she is composed; she has practiced for this picture. Lord captures this preparedness in precise paint that blurs only once, smudging a high elegant cheekbone all the way to the frame of the canvas. This is Gwen Araujo, one of Lord's last subjects, a transgender California teen who was allegedly beaten and strangled by four men last October, after two had had sex with her and then discovered she was biologically male. The perpetrators are awaiting trial. I study the long smudge again, its slight red tinge. It works. The distortion makes the face's calm beauty hurt.

On the far wall, a monumental Kitty Genovese sprawls in a hallway, bloodied, her face turned to the viewer. Genovese was stabbed outside her Queens apartment at three in the morning in March 1964. She cried for help, loud enough for many to hear; someone in the building shouted back. But no one emerged. Her attacker left the scene. She crawled to the apartment's back entrance but could not get in. Her attacker

returned, raped her, and robbed her, and still no one came to her aid. Later, reporters estimated that thirty-eight people had heard Genovese but failed to save her. She died that night.

This painting is the first time in *Still Lives* that real gore appears, and at the same time it draws my eye, I find my resistance rising. I've seen too many lurid photographs of the victims in our exhibition catalog. I was expecting blood, its cheap horror.

I look dispassionately at the crumpled body of Genovese. Unlike the other two works in the room, this is a depiction of a slaying. Her back is bleeding; her hands are crossed with red slashes. The dull light in the hallway bleaches her panicked face into a ghastly mask.

Ghastly, but familiar. I look back at Araujo and Quinn, and it feels like someone shot a bolt into both of my knees.

The paint thickens and thins differently around each of the figures, but the women's expressions all have the same eerie clarity, like they've been rinsed clean. They stare back into the galleries. Hard. The likeness flashes out – the way Kitty is also Gwen is also Roseann is also Kim. All are Kim. In each of the paintings exists a dead woman – identified by her hair, her eye color, her clothes and gestures – and also, inexplicably, Kim Lord, wearing that death, the way the shamans of old donned the masks and cloaks of spirits.

I am not painting myself.

No. I'm starting to see that now.

I am aware of Kevin and Yegina behind me, also looking, but they seem far away. We don't speak as we move into the

next dim room together: Bonnie Lee Bakley, the Black Dahlia, Nicole Brown Simpson. All Los Angeles murders. Our city's murders.

Bonnie Lee Bakley, blonde, doll-like, is painted in multiple, a half dozen times, her expression shifting from young and perky to fearful and sagging, but always smiling. Two years ago, Bakley was shot in a parked car outside a restaurant. Her murder doesn't have the same visceral brutality as many of the exhibition's other deaths, but the leading suspect, her actor-husband Robert Blake, played a famous killer in the movie *In Cold Blood*, and this has magnified the story's impact in the media. Robert Blake is on house arrest now.

In Kim Lord's painting, Bakley's murder is not acknowledged at all, only her aging face and fading confidence. Bakley's dark, perfect arching brows and bared teeth never change, but her cheeks swell and sag. Her curled yellow hair straightens and darkens. Before meeting Blake, Bonnie Lee Bakley made her living with a mail-order business, sending nude pictures of women, including herself, to men. She also asked her male correspondents to support her. With her proceeds, she bought several homes, but she dreamed of a celebrity life. Bakley was forty-four when she married Blake. It was her tenth marriage, and a loveless one, arranged so that Blake could have legal access to their child.

I don't understand this artwork yet, but I have some idea of what Kim was after. Bonnie Lee Bakley had traded on her face all her life, and the progression of the images reminds me that growing old must have terrified her. I remember something

Kim Lord said about paint, her chosen medium: 'The Lonely Hearts Killer, the Original Night Stalker, the Grim Sleeper – Los Angeles serial killers get these profoundly cool names. Meanwhile, their victims look like models. There's this glamour that glosses their suffering and their humanity,' she said. 'Photography is partly to blame, I think. It's an instant medium and only captures the flash of surfaces. Which is why I wanted to paint these women.'

I move on reluctantly, not wanting to see the next painting.

'The Black Dahlia' scarcely has a single patch unsplashed by red. The woman's figure, severed in half, is almost indiscernible in the chaos of impastoed color, yet her exposed leg resembles Kitty Genovese's and connects to her in the most disquieting of ways. I've seen a reproduction of 'The Black Dahlia' already. I knew it was graphic. Disgusting, as Kevin said. As everyone would expect it to be. Elizabeth Short's killer had mutilated her body so badly that the woman who first discovered it thought she'd come across the strewn pieces of a department-store mannequin. The pale scoop of Short's pelvis, with its puff of pubic hair and bent legs, is sliced and set apart from her bare torso, her raised arms, her head. Yet the catalog reproduction flattened this painting's singular effect – the way Kim's thick, active brushstrokes make the remains vibrate with life, as if they seek reconnection. The pieces lie separate in the green grass, but they also reach toward each other, as if trying to reunite.

Elizabeth Short was found in Leimert Park. That patch of grass is not two miles from here.

Before I entered these galleries, I was sure Kim Lord would make me feel something – maybe sadness, maybe anger, maybe awe or jealousy. But whatever is flooding me right now, I can't name it – it's like the feeling you get when your car starts hydroplaning on a rainy road and you don't know where the pavement is anymore or when the sickening glide will end.

There's one more picture to see before I leave this room.

Nicole Brown Simpson lies at the bottom of a staircase, face hidden, her blonde hair soaked in so much blood that it glistens like wet clay. Her blood also runs down the tile, filling its cracks. This is the first painting where Kim Lord isn't looking out at me, and for a moment I struggle to see what she's done to make the image different from a terrifying photograph of the murder's aftermath. After all, Nicole Brown Simpson's 1994 killing is probably our city's most famous, both for its high-profile suspect and the media circus that followed the trial. O. J. Simpson and the clues to the homicide became so much the focus of the news that it's easy to forget the savagery of the actual attack. Nicole Brown Simpson was knifed so many times that her head was almost separated from her body. Quarts of blood spilled from her.

I can't grasp what the painting has made of this. Then I spot it, how Nicole's blood in the tile cracks extends and extends until it forms a dark, shiny inverted tree. From the upside-down branches, hundreds of tiny orbs hang like drops. Like fruits. The meticulous delicacy of each. I look back to her collapsed body. The black walls draw closer.

Behind me, voices amplify in the first room; people are starting to arrive in droves. Below me, the cold floor. There's another gallery to this exhibition, but I don't move.

I never viewed Nikki Bolio's body, but I read the autopsy report: the raw skin at her wrists and ankles, the water in her lungs. Death from hypothermia and drowning. The likely scenario: the murderer towed her behind his boat at night. Her flesh would have burned at the touch of the icy lake, and she would have sunk because she could not kick or paddle. She must have struggled in the water; she must have screamed. So he sped up until her head whipped and body bounced, turning his boat until the wake washed over her and black waves flooded her mouth. Then he threw her toward the shore to be found.

She must have struggled; she must have screamed. Her thrashing must have been ugly and violent. Her cries must have ripped the night over the lake, ripped into the cold, inky New England sky, into the pines lining the shore. How long did it take for him to kill her, his hand pushing the throttle, steering the wheel? What made her finally give up and breathe water?

No matter the power of the paintings around me, the violation of homicide is so terrible, so unknowable, that it exists beyond any meaning we might make from it. And once the horror touches you, as Nikki's murder touched me, you're aware of it, all the time. It's like having an abyss next door. Just beyond your ordinary patio and fence: a giant, sticky hole to

nowhere. It makes you sick. It makes your skin crawl. It makes your eyelids feel like they are blinking over dry glass.

I feel a tap on my shoulder.

'You okay?' says Kevin.

'Come on, you'll miss it,' says Yegina.

I tell them to go ahead.

'You need me to get you some water?' says Yegina.

I shake my head. 'I'm fine. Go.'

After a hesitation, she squeezes my arm and heads into the next room. Kevin waits by the threshold, pulling out his notebook. In my peripheral vision I can see the last series, among them Chandra Levy, Lita McClinton, Judy Ann Dull, and a giant still life of objects honoring the thousands of other female victims of abduction and murder. I close my eyes. Open them again.

Printed on the wall beside me is a square of text about still lifes. I've read it before. I copyedited it. But I read it again because Lynne's stuffy, informative voice calms me:

> *A still life is a work of art depicting mostly inanimate subject matter, including both natural and manufactured objects. In prior eras, it was considered an ideal art form for women artists, who would not have been allowed to learn life drawing from nudes.*
>
> *The typical still life gives the artist more freedom of arrangement than landscapes or portraits do. Early European paintings often incorporated moral lessons through the*

placement of objects that were also symbols, such as an apple suggesting temptation or a snuffed candle being synonymous with death.

Black letters on a clean white background. Black wall behind it. Nearby, the doorway to the next gallery. I push my eyes through the threshold, where Yegina stands with Hiro, our new grant writer, gazing silently at a painting I can only see the edge of, but I know it is Judy Ann Dull by the sharp-heeled foot, the ankle bound to a board by wire. A solid, warm bulk materializes beside me, and I get a whiff of overheated wool. I turn to Kevin, relieved.

'I thought still lifes were grapes and dead hares and stuff,' he says. 'Aren't these portraits?' he asks.

'Not according to the artist,' I say. 'She says that these paintings are still lifes because the subjects are inanimate and positioned to relay a meaning.'

'Kim Lord is inanimate?'

'Her photos of herself are. And the victims are.'

Kevin looks dubious.

'Also, because still lifes were often a display of opulence or wealth,' I explain. 'Some rich person showing off the luxuries they own. Well, what if the liberated woman is one of our society's luxuries? And what if she's something hunted and killed, too?' I can't keep the edge from my voice. I can't get Roseann Quinn's headlines from my brain, or the staring eyes of Kitty Genovese. I won't forget Jayme leaving an early *Still*

Lives planning meeting, a queasy look on her face; or Evie's confession that she couldn't sleep after checking all the captions for the catalog's graphic photos. I suppose we knew what was coming with *Still Lives* – it would expose us, it would expose most women's oppressive anxiety about our ultimate vulnerability, a fear both rational and irrational, like the fear of the footsteps behind you at night, magnified a hundred times. But we suppressed our dread in the excitement of a successful show.

Kevin doesn't ask me to explain. Instead, he scribbles in his notebook. I get a sick sense that someone is watching us, and I search the growing crowd for Greg. The faces of dozens of strangers drift past me before I spot the guy with the mustard jacket, loitering across the gallery, his gaze on me. My discomfort returns. What if he's the stalker Jayme mentioned? It makes sense – he obviously sneaked in late, and he doesn't belong to an event like this. He isn't talking to anyone. He's just staring.

Suddenly, more than anything, I want to be home, safe in my own bed.

'Didn't you say there was a crew party somewhere?' says Kevin. 'Maybe Kim's there? Has anyone checked?'

I tell him I doubt it, but a ray of hope splits my dread. It would be just like Kim Lord to favor the crew, to be standing high on the roof of her party while the rest of us parade through the dark, bloody cave she's made.