

TEAMWORK – Lindsay Boxer (Women’s Murder Club)

This was a short story competition run by Random House Australia. Crime thriller author James Patterson wrote four short story openings, one for each of his most famous characters, and challenged writers to complete the story in under 1000 words (including his beginning). He reviewed the entries and selected his favourite four, which were then put to a public vote. This was one of those four.

See if you can guess where his introduction ended and I took over!

My phone woke me. It was taped to my hand, the only part of me not bound. I didn’t have the strength to raise it to my ear, so I hit speaker and a panicked voice filled the room.

“Lindsay! Speak to me. It’s Claire.”

I slowly took in my surroundings. The dankness suggested I was in a basement, empty aside from the camp bed to which I was tied. An exposed light bulb crackled above me.

“Claire?” My voice was shakier, quieter, than I expected.

“Oh thank god! We’ve been trying to get onto you for hours! Are you ok?”

“What’s going on? Where am I?” My words rattled around my head. My mouth tasted faintly of blood.

“We don’t know, Lindsay. You called us at five. You were whispering, saying something about going too far. Then you cut out. Where are you now?”

I looked at my phone. No WiFi, no data, no way to check a map. “I don’t know. In a basement...somewhere. Tied up.”

I’m sure Claire asked another question. But I didn’t quite catch it. I wasn’t really paying attention. I was more concerned about the heavy footsteps I could hear coming down the stairs. And who they belonged to.

Boots came into view, then dark tracksuit pants, then gloved hands and a dense parka. The head appeared last, but I couldn’t see a face. Just a mask. Something African and tribal, its ebony mouth split in a horrid scream.

This must be the man I was hunting, the serial killer I had hoped to lure out.

“Welcome,” he said in a deep, sinister electronic voice. “Who did you call? I’m always interested to know.”

The voice chilled me, but it also confused me. Why was he hiding his identity?

“Just my agent,” I said, my head clearing. “She will love this story. Who do you think will play you in the miniseries? Billy Connolly?”

The man stood still, shocked motionless. I wished I could see the face behind the mask, for I imagined it would reflect the hideousness of that African visage. Captors hate not being in control.

The man took a step toward me, then walked over to the wall behind me instead. I had thought the room empty, but could now see tools arrayed on a peg board, every one sharp, pointed, jagged. And gleaming.

My captor laid a gloved hand on a small pickaxe, fingers playing over the handle, but moved on to a pair of secateurs. He was about to slide them from their peg when he stopped, head cocked as though listening to a noise.

I heard it too. The unmistakable sound of a car slowing on gravel. Someone returning home.

The masked man appeared nervous, indecisive. Without another word he turned and hurried out of the room. I caught a flash of vivid red hair as he disappeared up the stairs, heard a door slam and bolt.

I looked at my phone. The signal was gone.

Wriggling against the electrical tape tying me to the bed, I noticed how sloppily I was bound. The man may have done this before, but his technique was unsound. After a few sharp tugs my arms were free.

I was about to start on my feet when I heard the door unbolt, then footsteps on the stairs. They were lighter this time, tentative, and the feet that came into view were in ballet flats, not boots.

A face lowered itself into view and I saw a woman of around forty peering at me. I pretended to still be bound and didn't say a word. The woman wasn't shocked by my presence. If anything she looked dismayed. Disappointed.

"Joe, Joe!" the woman called out. "He's done it again!"

The woman disappeared. I didn't hear the door close behind her.

After ripping the tape from my ankles I ran up the stairs. The basement led to a corridor, empty and still. My phone had a signal now, but I needed to keep moving. I saw sunlight to my right and chose that direction.

The corridor opened up into a kitchen. It wasn't empty. A big man holding two bags of groceries looked at me, his reaction difficult to discern. He had red hair, but less vivid and thinner than that of my masked kidnapper. In front of him—her back to me—was the woman from the stairs.

She turned slowly.

"Are you ok? What has happened to you?" the woman asked. Her face was so caring she could have taught kindergarten. She took a step towards me, arms wide as though offering a hug.

I was about to reply, to explain my situation and danger, when I saw through her words. In the basement she had said *he's done it again*.

Again.

She knew exactly what was going on.

The more obvious clue was the kitchen knife in her hand. I hadn't noticed it on the counter until she slid it into her grasp with practised ease.

"Perhaps you and I should just go back downstairs?" she suggested politely, still using the tone that would have soothed a recalcitrant toddler.

I had been chasing a maniac who liked to brutalise his victims. What had eluded me was why the killing blow was so clean, so deliberate—and so very unlike the messy, chaotic torture. It was almost as though the killer had a split personality.

Now I knew why, and the family portrait of the woman, the big man and a teenaged boy with vivid red hair on the wall confirmed it.

It was the torturer's mum. Cleaning up after her deranged son.

This was a family affair.

As the woman advanced, I hoped my colleagues were tracing the call I had just made behind my back. If they weren't, then I hoped I could handle these two with the small pickaxe I had taken from the basement.

I just wish I knew where the red headed kid had gone.