

Serious
Moon
light
Jenn Bennett

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Night Owls
Alex, Approximately
Starry Eyes

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For everyone who feels alone: you're not.

“You see, but you do not observe.”
—Sherlock Holmes, “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891)

1

He'd probably forgotten me already. It was a month ago. Practically forever.

He definitely wasn't here tonight. Just to be sure, I scanned the diner one more time, from the rain-speckled glass door to the PIE OF THE DAY chalkboard sign near the register, where the owner had carefully written: ANNE OF GREEN GRAPES, *featuring Yakima Valley chardonnay grapes and blueberries.*

All clear.

For the better part of May, I'd avoided coming to the diner, walking past the windows with my hood up, fearing he'd be here, and if we ever occupied the same space again it would rip open a hole in the universe and create the Most Awkward Moment in Modern History, and the diner—my haven in the city—would be tainted forever and ever.

But he wasn't here, and just because he worked somewhere nearby didn't mean he was a loyal patron of the Moonlight Diner.

And so what if he was? This was my home away from home. I'd spent most of my childhood living in a tiny two-bedroom apartment directly above it. This booth, with its tufted red leatherette seats? It was *my* booth. I'd learned the alphabet at this table. Read *Harriet the Spy* and every Nancy Drew mystery. Won dozens of games of Clue and Mystery Mansion with my mom and Aunt Mona. On the underside of the table I'd drawn crayon portraits of Ms. Patty and Mr. Frank, the diner's owners.

The Moonlight was my territory, and it wasn't cursed just because I'd met a boy here and done something stupid.

"I'd like to buy a vowel, Pat."

I glanced at the woman sitting across from me in the booth, drinking coffee, blinking at me through gold-tipped fake lashes. "Um, what?"

"I'm trying to solve this *Wheel of Fortune* puzzle in the elusive but always intriguing category of 'What is Birdie thinking about?' But I'm missing too many letters," Aunt Mona explained, gesturing like Vanna White at an imaginary game board with long fingernails that featured decals of bumblebees. They matched her 1960s yellow go-go dress (so much fringe), black lipstick, and towering golden beehive wig, complete with tiny winged bee pins.

Mona Rivera did *not* do anything halfway. Not when she was my mother's best friend in high school, and not now, at the ripe age of thirty-six. Most of her elaborate outfits were cobbled from vintage pieces, and she had an entire wall of wigs. She was somewhere between cosplayer and drag queen, and one of the best

artists in the Seattle area. She was the bravest, most original person I knew and the most important person in my life.

It was *very* hard to keep secrets from her.

“You told me you weren’t nervous about starting this job tonight, but if you are, it’s totally normal,” she said. “All your training has been during the day, and working at night is going to feel completely different. Graveyard shift is not for the faint of heart—trust me—and if you’re worried about staying awake and worried about your sleep issues—”

“I’m not worried,” I argued. Mostly not anyway. On one hand, I was a night person, so graveyard didn’t bother me. On the other hand, it was my first real job. The first time since my grandmother died this past Christmas that I was allowed to take the ferry into the city alone. I would be spending the entire summer working in downtown Seattle, and I was excited. And a little nervous. And extraordinarily caffeinated—which, in hindsight, was probably a mistake. But on the Alertness Scale, which is a scale I just made up, I lean heavily toward the Always Sleepy side, as narcolepsy runs in my family, along with a slew of other weak genes. My mom used to joke that our Scandinavian ancestors must have gone through an inbreeding phase a couple of hundred years ago.

Aunt Mona frowned. “You haven’t been listening to a word I’ve said over our celebratory Endless Hash Browns dinner, which is the finest of all the Moonlight’s food groups.”

“Agreed.”

“So why are you watching everyone that comes through the door and making your Nancy Drew face?”

“I’m not making my Nancy Drew face.”

“Squinty eyes, super alert. Ready to nab a criminal. Oh. I believe I know your Nancy Drew face, especially since I’m the one who coined it.” Her gaze darted around the diner. “Who’s the suspect? Are we talking robbery or murder?”

I’m a mystery fiend. Detectives, criminals, and clues are my catnip. When I was younger, Mona designed noir-style case files for me to fill out on my vintage Smith Corona typewriter, so that I could keep track of my ongoing neighborhood investigations. Case of Mr. Abernathy’s missing garbage can? Solved. Case of the broken streetlights on Eagle Harbor Drive? Solved and reported to the city.

Case of why a sheltered, nerdy girl decided to flirt with a beautiful stranger who was *way* out of her league?

Completely unsolved.

If I had to profile myself, it would look something like this:

Suspect: Birdie Lindberg

Age: 18

Medical conditions: (1) Sleep problems, possibly inherited from grandfather. (2) Hospital phobia. (3) Bookworm disease. (4) Possible addiction to watching old *Columbo*, *Midsomer Murders*, and *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* episodes.

Personality traits: Shy but curious.

Occasionally cowardly. Excellent with details.

Good observer.

Background: Mother got knocked up by an unknown boy when she was a rebellious seventeen-year-old, disappointing her small-town parents. Mother dropped out of high school, left her sleepy childhood home on Bainbridge Island, and crossed Elliott Bay into Seattle with her childhood best friend, Mona Rivera. The two friends raised Birdie together until the mother died unexpectedly when the girl was ten. She was then taken in by her grandparents on Bainbridge Island and homeschooled, causing the suspect to develop a profound sense of loneliness and rabid curiosity about everything she was missing. Her only refuge was Mona Rivera, who moved back to the island to be closer to young Birdie. When Birdie's strict grandmother died six months ago of the same weak heart condition that took her mother, Birdie was sad but also relieved that her grandfather realized she was eighteen and couldn't stay trapped on the island forever and granted her permission to get her first real job in

Seattle. Abusing her newly earned freedom, the suspect promptly engaged in lewd and lascivious acts with a boy she met in the Moonlight after her first job interview.

“No suspects tonight,” I told Aunt Mona, pushing away a plate of lacy hash browns indecently smeared with ketchup. “The Moonlight is free and clear of any ne’er-do-wells, hoodlums, and crooks. Which is good, because I probably should be heading to work soon.”

She shook her head. “Not so fast. If there’s no suspicious activity and you aren’t worried about your first night on the job, then what in the world is going on with you?”

I groaned and laid my cheek on the cool linoleum tabletop, staring out a plate-glass window flecked with raindrops at the people beyond, who were dashing down the sidewalk in the twilight drizzle as streetlights came to life. Gray May would soon be turning to June Gloom, which meant more drizzle and overcast skies before summer truly arrived in Seattle.

“I did a stupid thing,” I admitted. “And I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Bumblebee nails gently moved mousy-brown hair off my forehead, away from the ketchup-smeared rim of my unfinished plate, and tucked it behind a single lily I wore in my hair behind one ear. “Can’t be that bad. Fess up.”

After a couple of long sighs, I mumbled, “I met a boy.”

“O-o-h,” she murmured. “A *boy*, you say? A genuine member of the human race?”

“Possibly. He’s really beautiful, so he may be a space alien or a clone or some kind of android.”

“Mmm, sexy boy robot,” she purred. “Tell me everything.”

“There’s not much to tell. He’s a year older than me—nineteen. And a magician.”

“Like, Las Vegas performer or Harry Potter?” she asked.

I huffed out a soft laugh. “Like card tricks and making a napkin with his phone number written on it appear inside the book I was reading.”

“Wait. You met him here? At the diner?”

In answer, I held up a limp fist and mimicked a head nodding.

“Was this when you were interviewing last month?”

“For that part-time library job.” That I *totally* thought was a sure thing . . . yet didn’t get. Which was doubly depressing when I later realized that my misplaced confidence was one of the factors that led me to get carried away with “the boy” on that unfateful day.

“And you didn’t tell me?” Aunt Mona said. “Birdie! You know I live for romantic drama. I’ve been waiting your entire life for one juicy story, one glorious piece of top-notch teen gossip that will make me swoon, and you don’t tell me?”

“Maybe this is why.”

She pretended to gasp. “Okay, fair point. But now the cat’s out of the bag. Tell me more about this sexy, sexy cat—*meow*.”

“First, he’s a boy, not cat or a robot. And he was charming and sweet.”

“Keep going,” she said.

“He showed me some card tricks. I was feeling enthusiastic about the library job. It was raining pretty hard. He asked if I wanted to go see an indie movie at the Egyptian, and I told him I’d never been to the Egyptian, and he said it was in a Masonic Temple, which I didn’t know. Did you? Apparently it was—”

“Birdie,” Aunt Mona said, exasperated. “*What happened?*”

I sighed heavily. My cheek was sticking to the linoleum. “So we ran through the rain and went to his car, which was parked in the garage behind the diner, and it was pretty much deserted, and the next thing you know . . .”

“Oh. My. God. You didn’t.”

“We did.”

“Tell me you used a condom.”

I lifted my head and frantically glanced around the diner. “Can you please keep your voice down?”

“Condoms, Birdie. Did you use them?” she said, whispering entirely too loudly.

I checked to make sure Ms. Patty wasn’t anywhere in sight. Or any of her nieces and nephews. There were almost a dozen of those, a couple of whom I’d gone to school with when I was a kid. “Do you really think that me, a product of unsafe teen sex, whose mother later *literally died* after getting pregnant a

second time, someone who had to listen to a thousand and one safe-sex lectures from her former guardian—”

“Once a guardian, always a guardian. I will never be your former anything, Birdie.”

“Her current guardian in spirit.”

“That’s better.”

“I’m just saying. Yes. Of course. That wasn’t the problem.”

“There was a problem? Was he a jerk? Did you get caught?”

“Stop. It was none of that. It was me. I suddenly just got . . . weirded out.”

One moment I was all caught up in feeling good. This beautiful, funny boy whom I’d just met was kissing me, and I was kissing him, and I think I may have just possibly suggested we get in the back seat instead of going to the movie theater. I don’t know what I was thinking. I suppose I wasn’t, and that was the problem. Because once we got back there and clothes started getting unbuttoned and unzipped, it all happened so fast. And in the middle of everything, I had a startling moment of clarity. He was a stranger. I mean, a *complete* stranger. I didn’t know where he lived or anything about his family. I didn’t know him at all. It got way too real, way too fast.

So when it was over, I bolted.

Ditched him like a guilty criminal fleeing a botched bank job.

Then I headed to the ferry terminal and never looked back.

“Oof,” Mona said in sympathy, but I was pretty sure I heard some relief in her voice too. “Did he . . . ? I mean, was he upset about it?”

I shook my head and absently rearranged the salt and pepper shakers. “I heard him calling my name. I think he was confused. It all happened so fast. . . .”

“Maybe too fast?”

“He wasn’t pushy or anything. He was nice, and I’m such a dud.”

Mona made a chiding noise and quickly held up three fingers in a mock Scout salute. “On my honor—come on. Say it.”

“Trying to be an adult here.”

“Trying to help you be an adult. Say our pledge, Birdie.”

I did the salute. “On my honor as a daring dame and gutsy gal, I will do my best to be true to myself, be kind to others, and never listen to any repressive poppycock.”

When my grandmother was alive, she forbade swearing, cursing, and anything resembling rebellion under her roof. Adjusting to her rules after my mother died had often been draining. Aunt Mona had helped me cope by coming up with the Daring Dame pledge . . . and secretly teaching ten-year-old me a dozen words that contained the word “cock.”

Aunt Mona and Grandma did *not* get along.

Satisfied with my Daring Dame pledge, she dropped her fingers. “I know it’s hard for you to get close to people, and I know as much as you and Eleanor disagreed, she was still your grandmother and it hurts to lose someone. I know you must feel like everyone you love keeps leaving you, but it’s not true. I’m here. And other people will be too. You just have to let them in.”

“Aunt Mona—” I started, not wanting to talk about this right now.

“All I’m saying is that you didn’t do anything wrong. And maybe if this boy is as awesome as you say he is, he could be understanding about how things ended if you gave it another chance. You said he gave you his phone number. Maybe you should call him.”

“Must have fallen out of my book when I was running,” I lied, shaking my head. I actually tossed if off the side of the ferry on my way home that afternoon when I was still freaking out about what I’d done. “But maybe it’s for the best. What would I say? Sorry I bailed on you like a weirdo?”

“*Aren’t* you sorry you bailed on him, though?”

I wasn’t sure. But it didn’t matter. I’d probably never see him again. And that was a good thing. It was one thing to say the Daring Dame pledge and a whole other to live it. Maybe I needed to build up some real-world experience before I braved dating. Perhaps I needed to put on my detective glasses and figure out where I went wrong.

But after all the mystery shows I’d binged, I should’ve known that detectives never investigate their own crimes.

“I worry. I mean, little things bother me.”
—Columbo, *Columbo* (1971)

2

The Cascadia was a five-story historic brick building on the corner of First Avenue in downtown Seattle near the waterfront. It was a luxury landmark hotel built in 1920 and was recently restored to showcase its Pacific Northwest roots while offering thoroughly modern amenities—at least, according to the website.

And I was going to work here.

Its unassuming entrance sat beneath an awning that sheltered the sidewalk. And beneath that awning, leaning against a hotel van parked at the curb, stood a Native American porter in a green uniform, perhaps a couple of years older than me. When I approached, he mistook me for a hotel guest, straightened, and opened one of two gold-trimmed doors. “Good evening, miss.”

“I work here,” I told him. “Tonight’s my first shift. Birdie Lindberg.”

“Oh.” He allowed the door to swing shut. “I’m Joseph,” he said, quickly looking me over until his gaze briefly lit on the

pink-and-white stargazer lily pinned over my ear. “You’re a Bat, right?”

“I’m the new night auditor?”

“You’re a Bat, then,” he said with a smile.

Right. I remembered now. Melinda was the night manager, and “Bats” made up the graveyard crew. My position was basically just a glorified front desk clerk who worked graveyard shift at the hotel and, after midnight, ran the software program that tabulated all the room bills and settled accounts. I was being paid a dime over minimum wage.

“Been through training?” Joseph asked.

“Last week,” I said. “With Roxanne, during the day. I was hoping for midday shifts, but this was all that was open.”

“It’s almost always open. The only people who want to work graveyard are college students and nighthawks. Or people with no alternatives.”

“This is my first job,” I admitted.

“Well, welcome to the night crew, Birdie,” he said with a smile, opening the hotel’s gold entrance door for me. “Try not to fall asleep. There’s free coffee in the break room.”

More caffeine was the last thing my nerves needed right now, and I wasn’t a coffee fan. I thanked him, blew out a quick breath, and stepped inside.

The Cascadia’s Pacific Northwest style and vintage glamour was as dazzling as it had been the first time I’d stepped into the grand lobby. So dazzling, in fact, that it took me a moment to

realize how different it was at night. No constant click of heels on the madrone wood floor. No dueling *dings* of the two gold elevators near the entrance, with their tribal salmon design covering the doors. And no tourists pressing their noses to the lobby's giant aquarium, which housed a giant Pacific octopus named Octavia—maybe the best thing in the entire hotel.

As I walked past the softly glowing tank beneath a row of painted canoes hanging from the mezzanine, jazz floated over the lobby's speakers. A well-dressed couple headed up to their room for the night, and a single businessman sat on one of the soft leather sofas, staring into the screen of his laptop.

Amazing to think that any one of these guests could be famous or important. Agatha Christie stayed here when she was touring the world with her husband. President Franklin Roosevelt gave a secret fundraising speech in the ballroom. Rock stars. Presidents. Mobsters. The Cascadia had hosted them all.

The hotel even had its own murder mystery: beloved Hollywood starlet Tippiie Talbot had died on the fifth floor in 1938. Foul play was suspected but never proven, and her unsolved death had made headlines around the country. Who knows. Maybe I'd uncover some new clues on one of my shifts.

Anything could happen!

I felt supremely lucky. All that talk about “the boy” with Aunt Mona faded softly into the past. Nothing could spoil this. It was magical. And it was time to get to work.

The registration desk was deserted, so I made a beeline toward

the hidden hallway behind it, which led to the back offices. Inside the employee break room, a single housekeeper sat on a battered couch, watching TV with her eyes closed. So I hurried into the women's locker room and stowed my purse in my assigned locker. Then I shrugged into my forest-green hotel blazer, pinning a gold name tag to my breast pocket, and returned to the break room, ready for work.

During training I'd been cautioned about clocking in too early. And too late. Apparently the hotel was like Goldilocks and preferred their porridge *just right*. But as I stood in front of the old-fashioned time clock, wondering if I should use the same time card I'd already started for training, heels clicked behind me, and a strong chocolate-scented lotion wafted over the microwave-popcorn scent that permeated the employee lounge. When I turned around, the hotel's night manager stood in front me, balancing an enormous baby bump while standing on insanely high heels.

"I'm Melinda Pappas," she said, offering a hand to shake. Black hair was pulled back tightly into a flight-attendant bun, giving me the impression that she was all about professionalism and rules, and the dark circles hanging under her eyes told me she wasn't sleeping, perhaps due to her pregnancy.

"Um, I'm Birdie Lindberg," I said. "The new night auditor?"

She nodded. "You just missed a crew meeting. I added it to the schedule last night."

A burst of panic fired through my chest. I frantically glanced

at the schedule and said, “I didn’t know there was a meeting. I’m so sorry. I’m never late for anything, but Roxanne didn’t mention that my shifts might change. My last day of training was—”

Melinda held up a hand. “It’s fine. We had an incident with an animal rights group in the lobby yesterday. I’ll brief you about it, but it’s best to call in on your day off and get someone to double-check the schedule for you and make sure there aren’t any meetings.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m really sorry. Ma’am.”

“I’m thirty,” she said. “Not a ‘ma’am’ yet. Just call me Melinda. Come on. I’ll introduce you to the rest of the Bats.”

She gestured for me to follow her and proceeded to introduce me to the night staff one by one—kitchen staff, housekeeping, security . . . There were a lot of new names, but I was good with details, so I filed them all away, creating a mental map of their faces and roles as we made our way into the lobby.

“I assume you were trained about Octavia the Octopus,” Melinda said, tilting her head toward the big tank, where a red cephalopod clung to the glass by two tentacled arms lined with white suckers. Bright coral, rocky caves, and several starfish kept her company. “If guests ask, Octavia was rescued out of Puget Sound after a boat damaged one of her arms, and we have a biologist on staff who takes care of her.”

“We do?”

Melinda scrolled on her tablet. “*That* is what you tell guests. We have a biologist on call at the Seattle Aquarium who advises

us if we need help, but there's no need to go into that with guests. And as I told the rest of the Bats in the staff meeting earlier, if any members of SARG come into the lobby, then you call me immediately."

"SARG?"

"Seattle Animal Rights Group," she said, rounding the registration desk. "They brought signs and made a big scene here yesterday, claiming we are killing goldfish and abusing the octopus by keeping her in captivity."

Melinda waved a hand toward a line of four round fishbowls that sat behind the desk. Each contained one orange goldfish that could be rented out by guests if they wanted a companion in their room. One of my duties included feeding any unrented fish at midnight and filling out the little standing cards in front of the bowls with goldfish names. When I found out about this, it was frosting on the proverbial cake, because I used to have fish at home.

"I thought the goldfish program was a big success," I said. In training, I'd been told that families loved it. Kids could choose which goldfish they wanted upon check-in, and one of the porters would carry it up to their room.

"It is," Melinda insisted. "No one's killing fish. Sometimes they get diseases or an overeager child scoops one out of the bowl or dumps orange juice in the water . . . So, of course, we must dispose of them occasionally. But it's not as if we kill them for pleasure. Goldfish don't live long anyway."

I knew for a fact that wasn't true, but no way was I saying so.

"And Octavia has a custom-built, half-a-million-dollar tank," Melinda said. "She's adored by locals and tourists, and she's perfectly happy living with her starfish friends. Every fall we release that year's Octavia into the Sound and catch another one."

"Wait, what?"

"They only live a year or so. We 'retire' them and catch a young one. But if guests press you about this, just say that this Octavia is the former Octavia's baby. And if anyone has a problem with the way we run things, they can talk to me. Got it?"

"Absolutely," I said, though I wasn't liking any of this information. But it was obviously a sore topic for her, so I was thankful to leave the fish issues behind for now and head out the front door with her when she was ready to introduce me to the final three Bats.

The first was someone I'd already met earlier: Joseph. Turned out, he not only watched the door, but he was also the bellhop and the backup valet, if any guests needed their luggage carried or their car retrieved from the underground parking, until the Bat shift ended and the morning crew's Roosters took our places.

At Joseph's side was a blond, college-aged bruiser named Chuck, who was loud, obnoxious, and a guard working under the security manager, Mr. Kenneth. "What up, femme?"

"Please refrain from using that term," Melinda scolded. "It doesn't mean what you think it does."

"It's French for female," Chuck argued around the gum he was

smacking. “It’s a term of endearment. And why does she get to use a nickname on her tag?”

I glanced down at my name tag. “It’s my real name.”

“Your mom named you Birdie? Is she some kind of hippie?”

“She’s dead.”

“Oh shit!” Chuck says. “My bad.”

“Please refrain from using bad language on the property,” Melinda said wearily.

He wasn’t paying attention. “So, Birdie. Betcha didn’t know that Joseph here was descended from Chief Seattle,” Chuck informed me.

Joseph sighed heavily, pushing dark hair out of his eyes. “My family’s Puyallup, from Tacoma. Completely different tribe.”

“Who cares? Guests eat that shit up,” Chuck said, grinning. “Right, boss?”

Now Melinda ignored *him*. “And over there is our driver,” she told me.

The scent of her chocolate-scented lotion filled my nostrils when she waved her arm and shouted to get the attention of a boy about my age. He was lean and animated, standing on the other side of the hotel van, cheerfully chatting with a taxi driver and completely oblivious to Melinda.

“He’s half-deaf,” Chuck offered. “Must be nice. You can tune out whoever you want.”

“His hearing is impaired,” Melinda corrected in a low voice. “You need to be patient with him sometimes.”

Joseph whistled sharply with his teeth. The van driver waved good-bye to the taxi and hurried toward us, slender legs striding, head down, hands shoved deep in the pockets of the same sort of zipped-up green windbreaker that some of the staff wore. He had dark, short hair . . . Wait, no. Long hair. *Really* long hair, wound up into a samurai-style, hipster topknot at the crown of his head.

Huh.

My heart started hammering furiously.

When people say they have a “gut feeling” about something, it’s because our brains are constantly being fed information by our bodies. Our noses smell smoke, and then our brain tells us to get the heck out of the house. And at that moment, my body was telling me to stop, drop, and roll. It just took my slowpoke brain a few extra moments to realize why.

“This is the night-shift van driver,” Melinda informed me as he approached. “Daniel Aoki, meet Birdie. She’s the new night clerk.”

When the driver lifted his head, his eyes widened, and he murmured, “Oh, fuuuuuuuuu . . .”

Every muscle in my body turned to stone.

I knew that face. And lots more of him too.

This was the boy I’d met in the diner.

“Men. Can’t live without them. You can’t hit them with an ax.”
—Phryne Fisher, *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* (2015)

3

Son of a beekeeper!

I tried to process what was happening, but all I could do was stare and wonder if all of this was a bad dream. Just to be sure, I stealthily counted my fingers—a trick I learned from my grandpa. Looking at your hands is a good way to test wakefulness, because if you’re dreaming, they sometimes morph into extra-long space-alien hands or the number of digits will be wrong. At the moment everything was as it should be. Five fingers. Nothing extraterrestrial.

I was awake, and all of this was really happening.

Okay. Deep breath. Maybe I was confused. This could be someone else who looked like him. A twin? I looked harder. Wide silver ring on middle finger. Tiny V-shaped scar on cheek. And on his head, one stray lock of hair hung loose around his face: it spilled over his shoulder and stopped in the middle of his chest, a million times longer than mine.

It was him, all right.

And the way his face lit up with joy when he recognized me made it all *so much* worse. Oh, that smile—so effortless and sincere. So big and wide, it lifted the keen angles of his cheeks and made his brown eyes squint. That was the thing that had attracted me in the diner, his easygoing, open manner. I'd never met anyone so comfortable with both himself and other people, so honestly cheerful.

This couldn't be happening. He was standing in front of me, and he had a full name: Daniel Aoki. I didn't want to know that. He was supposed to be my private, forgettable mistake, not my coworker!

"We call him Jesus," Chuck said. "If you saw him with his hair down, you'd understand. He does magic tricks for the guests that are probably just as good as turning water into wine." Chuck turned to Daniel and asked, "Hey, what's the Japanese word for Jesus?"

"No idea," Daniel said. "Don't speak it."

"But your mom does, right?" Chuck said.

"Isn't your mom from Spokane?" Joseph asked Daniel.

"Born and raised," Daniel said, unaffected by Chuck's boorish observations. Maybe he'd become numb to them. Maybe, like me, he was too busy trying to compute the chances of us ending up being coworkers, and how was this even possible? I wished he'd quit looking at me like that.

"You two know each other, or something?" Chuck asked after an awkward silence.

"No," I said at the same time Daniel replied, "Yes."

"Or maybe not?" he corrected as everyone stared at us. "Sort of? I mean, we . . ."

"Have seen each other around town," I said quickly.

Joseph glanced at the lily tucked behind my ear. "Dude. The flower girl?" he murmured to Daniel, slapping the back of his hand against Daniel's chest, making him flinch.

The breath in my lungs disappeared.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. This couldn't be happening.

Was I blushing? I think this was blushing. Or I was about to have a stroke. Inside my frantic brain, a dozen scenarios flashed. Of Daniel, bragging bro-style to Joseph and Chuck, talking me up as a laughable conquest. Or as the weird girl who freaked out and ran away. *Do I already have a reputation here? DO I?*

Things were being whispered. I think Daniel told Joseph to "shut the hell up, man," and then Joseph, grimacing, responded, "Oh shit."

Indeed. A huge, stinking pile of it.

"Well," Melinda said to me. "Now you get to see each other every night, because it's Daniel's job to make supply runs that *you* get to log at the desk."

"What?" I said, trying to make my brain work. I wished he'd stop staring at me.

"Time out, time in," Melinda said. "You log Daniel's comings and goings in the hotel's system. But we aren't an airport shuttle service, so everyone who begs for a 'quick ride' to the

bank at two in the morning, inform them you can call a car.”

“Unless they’re on the fifth floor,” Daniel corrected while I looked anywhere but at his face. “Those are the VIPs.”

“Floor-fivers are all, ‘I forgot to get my niece a Christmas present, boo-hoo,’” Chuck mocked, imitating wiping tears. “‘I need a specific wine from a special year from some fruity gourmet merchant across town or my anniversary will be ruined.’ You wouldn’t believe what they ask for. . . .”

This certainly wasn’t the same speech Roxanne had given me in training about going “above and beyond to create unforgettable moments” for guests, treating them like family.

“Please stop by my office before your break,” Melinda told Chuck. And before he could protest, she excused us and herded me back into the hotel. I was in such a state of shock about Daniel, I could barely keep up with her high heels.

Despite the dangerous panic levels filling my brain, I immediately had to switch gears and concentrate on the actual *work* part of work, because Melinda was passing me off to the midshift desk clerk who was done with her “mental health break” and staying late to help me transition. She got me up to speed with all the outstanding guest issues of the day, reminded me to feed the goldfish, made sure I’d been trained on how to use the reservation system, and then—boom! She was clocking out, and I was left all by my lonesome.

In a luxury hotel lobby.

At night.

On the first shift of my first real job.

With my greatest humiliation standing outside the front door.

Once the shock of it all wore off a little, I realized that a secret part of me was happy to see him. Practically ecstatic. If I were an actual daring dame and not a wobbly wallflower, I might even have done what Aunt Mona suggested and attempt to talk with him. Apologize for running out on him. Explain that what we did was an anomaly for me. But as my shift ticked by, the longer I went without seeing him, the more I convinced myself that maybe he didn't want an explanation.

If I were to write up a profile on Daniel now, it would look something like this:

Suspect: Daniel Aoki

Age: 19

Occupation: Hotel van driver, graveyard shift

Medical conditions: (1) Hearing-impaired.

(2) Distractingly good-looking. (3) Excellent smile. (4) Good kisser. (5) Good hands.

(6) Re-e-e-e-ally good hands.

Personality traits: Knows a million card tricks and enjoys performing for people. Cheerful.

Gregarious. Maybe too gregarious, as he seems to have blabbed to a coworker about what we did.

Background: Need to investigate further.

Trying to banish thoughts of Daniel, I put on a cheerful face and embraced the work that began trickling in like the soothing sounds of the river-rock waterfall that covered the wall behind the registration desk. I helped a guest find the downstairs restrooms. Helped another with the Wi-Fi password. Rerouted a call for room service to the kitchen.

See. I really *could* do this. *I am working! Like a real person!* Daniel who? That was a month ago. Who cared that he worked here? Not me. Not even worth starting a case file.

It was all good. Until I checked out a businessman who had a red-eye flight and needed his car out of the hotel garage. That's when I had to radio the Bats out front. Joseph answered, thank goodness, and the businessman lounged on a sofa in the lobby until his car was brought to the entrance. Then Daniel suddenly appeared, jogging past the gold elevators to inform the guest that his car was ready. The businessman wheeled out his carry-on, and the lobby was empty again.

Mostly. Daniel was heading toward the front desk.

I panicked, wishing I could duck down. But he'd already seen me.

"Of all the gin joints in all the world, she walks into mine," he said, flashing me that stupid-sexy smile that got me in trouble the first time around. The shock of seeing him had worn off, but my body was still overreacting. Pulse erratic. Thoughts fuzzy. Fingers tingling. I couldn't tell if it was panic or attraction, but I sure as heck didn't want him to see how much he affected me, so I bent

behind the counter to straighten a stack of paper sleeves for room key cards and tried to sound casual.

“Guess the small-world cliché is an actual thing.”

“What’s that?” he said.

I stood up. “What’s what?”

“I didn’t hear you.” He tapped his right ear. “Deaf in this one. Sometimes I miss things.”

He’d failed to mention this when I’d met him in the diner, so now I wasn’t sure what to say.

But he was unfazed by my silence.

“Happened a couple of years ago, when I was young and stupid. Still stupid, actually,” he said, smiling sheepishly. “It’s weird how it messes with your depth perception. Sometimes I miss pieces of conversation, and other times I can pick out crazy-specific sounds over vast distances. Like, when you’re talking to guests up here? I can hear your voice across the lobby when the door opens.”

“Mine?”

He nodded. “Clear as a bell. Something about the pitch of it. You’re a dog whistle.”

“Oh,” I said stupidly, embarrassed.

Then it was quiet between us. Nothing but the waterfall tinkling.

“Okay,” he said. “Wow. Shit. This is weird, huh?”

“A little,” I admitted.

Should I apologize for running out on him? Should I try to

explain? Bringing it up here, out in the lobby, where everything echoed, made me anxious. What if Melinda were monitoring our conversation back in her office? Was that a thing they did here?

Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong were duetting over the hotel speakers about the pronunciation of potatoes and tomatoes. I tried to focus on their relationship problems and not mine and ignored Daniel. That was a little trick I did when I didn't know what to say to people—I just pretended they weren't there. I learned it by observing people in the city, a local phenomenon affectionately known as the Seattle Freeze. And it worked. When I froze people out, they usually got the hint and left.

Everyone but Daniel.

“So-o-o-o . . . ,” he drawled, one finger sliding across the counter to tap near the keyboard. “I didn't know if you were aware, but you've got to make a note on the reservation that the guest took his car. It's for insurance, or whatever, so he can't sue us later and claim his car got jacked from our garage.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you,” I said, trying not to look at his face as I opened a screen on the computer. *Code for valet service*. It was here somewhere in a drop-down menu . . . *Freeze, freeze, freeze*.

“That actually happened once,” Daniel said, propping his elbow on the counter as if he had all night. “Some doctor got her car stolen after she left the hotel. Joyriders crashed it in Ballard. Her insurance wouldn't pay because she left her keys in the ignition, so she changed her story and said *we* left them in—that the car was stolen from our garage.” He mimicked an explosion with

his fingers near the side of his head. He was a hand talker. Lots of gestures. Lots of movement in general. "Hotel owner had to go to court. It was on the news and everything."

He reached for a rubber band that was near my arm. I tried to keep my eyes on the screen, but he was doing something with the rubber band. First it was wound around his index finger; then he opened his fist and it jumped to his pinky. Then jumped again, back to his index finger. He held up his hand and wiggled his fingers. "Jumping rubber band trick," he said. "Want to see how it's done?"

Yes, I did, actually. The mystery lover in me needed to know the *how* behind any and every puzzle. But I fought this urge and just said, "No, thank you."

"Hey," he said. "Birdie?"

I couldn't *not* look up. "Yes?"

"Hi." He smiled softly.

"Hi?"

"Nice to meet you again."

Rattled, I made a vague noise somewhere between "mmm" and "hmm."

"Sorry about earlier outside," he said, scratching the outer shell of his bad ear. "It threw me off, seeing you here. I didn't know what to say."

That made two of us.

"It's fine," I said.

"Is it? Because last time I saw you, I thought things were going good until—"

“Yes, I know,” I said quickly, hoping he wouldn’t continue.

“Right. Well, afterward, when you bailed, I . . . wasn’t sure why, so I tried to chase after you. I thought maybe you’d gone back to the diner. But you weren’t there, and the server had assumed we were doing a dine and dash on the check.”

Crap. I’d forgotten to pay? Terrific. Had someone told Ms. Patty? No one mentioned it today when Aunt Mona and I came in, but then again, a new girl was working the booths. In a panic, I imagined my Polaroid being taped behind the diner register, on the board for banned customers, where it said in black Sharpie: *Do not serve these assholes.*

“Ye-a-a-a-ah, so I took care of it,” he said, nervously tapping his fingers on the edge of the counter. “And then you were long gone.”

My cheeks were getting warm again. “Um, I can—how much? I’ll pay you back. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said with a quick shake of his head. “I was more concerned about you running off.” He looked around the lobby and leaned over the desk. “Did you see my ad?”

Ad?

“My listing.” He blinked several times and scratched his temple. “Of course not. I thought maybe you saw it and . . .” He was talking more to himself than to me. “When we met, you said you’d just interviewed . . .”

“For a different job. At the library. I didn’t get it,” I said. “And I didn’t realize you worked here, or I wouldn’t have applied.”

His brow tightened. "You wouldn't have?"

"I didn't mean . . . I meant that I wasn't stalking you, or anything. In case that's what you thought. It was just a weird coincidence."

"Oh. Guess that whole small-world thing really is true, huh?"

Did he realize I'd said that already? I couldn't tell, and this threw me off . . . made me feel as though *I* were missing half of the conversation. How could I not have picked up on his hearing issue at the diner? That was the type of detail I usually didn't miss.

"Let's just forget it and move on," I suggested.

"I regret it for sure," he said.

Wait: he regretted it too? Why? I mean, I know why I regretted it.

"Maybe it was a mistake, but I thought we had a connection. Our chemistry . . . I mean, Christ. In the diner? When we first got into the car? It was *so* there." He paused. "At least, I thought so."

Fresh panic rolled through me. He *seemed* sincere, but the detective in me was distrustful, and maybe that's because something was still niggling me from our earlier reintroduction outside the hotel's entrance. "Oh, really? Is that why you told Joseph about us?"

"I didn't!" he protested before giving me a shy look. "Not everything, anyway."

"But enough," I said.

"It's not like I gave him a play-by-play, Christ. Joseph and I are friends. I've known him since high school. He couldn't care less about what we did or didn't do."

“Did you tell that Chuck guy too?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t tell Chuck the hotel was burning down. He’s a jackass. I didn’t tell anyone but Joseph, Scout’s honor.” He leans over the counter and speaks in a lower voice. “What happened between me and you was . . . not something that happens to me every day. Joseph’s the one who suggested I do the classified ad.”

What ad?

“Anyway, Joseph was just surprised when he saw you. *I* was surprised.”

We were all surprised, apparently.

“He’s embarrassed now,” Daniel insisted.

He wasn’t the only one. “Look, I should get back to work,” I said, self-conscious and embarrassed. “This job is important to me, and I can’t afford to lose it.” I needed to prove to myself that I could be independent after my grandmother’s isolating rules and restrictions. I needed to earn my own money that I could spend however I chose. I needed to be around people who weren’t from Bainbridge Island. People who didn’t know me as Birdie, the weird kid who was homeschooled. Or Birdie, the kid whose high-school-dropout mother died. Or Birdie, the kid who now lives alone with her grandfather while everyone else her age is graduating and getting ready to go to college and I was still trying to figure out how to be independent.

Maybe that was why I was attracted to Daniel in the first place. He didn’t know me. Maybe if he did, he would wonder what he ever saw in me that afternoon.

“Let’s just please put all of this in the past,” I suggested to Daniel. “And pretend it never happened.”

“You’re serious?” An exasperated noise burred in the back of his throat. “I can’t just . . . I mean, why would you . . . ?” He glanced over his shoulder. “Can’t we just talk about it? Not here. Outside of work. We could meet up somewhere. Uh, maybe not the diner. That might be a little weird. What about after work? Before? Name the time and place, and I’ll be there.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. There’s nothing to say.”

Couldn’t he see how embarrassed I was? I should have worn a sign around my neck that said: PLEASE DON’T FEED THE SKITTISH ANIMAL, AS IT IS UNACCUSTOMED TO HUMAN CONTACT, AND WHILE IT MAY HAVE SEEMED FRIENDLY THE LAST TIME YOU VISITED, IT HASN’T QUITE ADJUSTED TO ITS GROWING HABITAT.

After a moment Daniel said, “What about fate?”

“What about it?”

“Don’t you think it’s *really* strange that we ended up being coworkers?”

“I think it’s random,” I said. “Like life.”

A loud *beep* startled both of us. Two *beeps*. They came from our walkie-talkies.

“Uh, guys? We’ve got a problem. I think another pipe busted in the garage,” Joseph’s voice said, crackling over the radio. “It smells like sewage, and it’s dripping on someone’s BMW. Piss and shit *everywhere*.”

“Not again,” Daniel moaned. He set the rubber band on the counter and slid it toward me. “Please don’t leave. We’ll talk later. Right now I’ve got to find a pair of gloves and a hazmat suit. Who knew driving a hotel van would involve so much feces?”

He jogged away, and I was unsure how I felt about our conversation.

Maybe I should give this fate thing a second look.

Because I was pretty sure karma was doing its best to make me pay for what I’d done.