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Opening extract from

Night Owls

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THE LAST TRAIN WASN'T COMING. IT WAS ALMOST midnight, and for the better part of an hour I'd been clutching my art portfolio and what was left of my pride at the university hospital Muni stop alongside a handful of premed students, an elderly Chinese woman wielding an umbrella like a weapon, a chatty panhandler named Will (who lived in the hospital parking garage), and an enthusiastic drunk street preacher who either wanted to warn us about a fiery apocalypse or sell us ringside tickets—maybe both.

"A two-car N-Judah train broke down in Sunset Tunnel," one of the medical students read off his phone. "Looks like we're stuck riding an Owl."

A collective groan passed through the group.

The dreaded all-nighter Owl bus.

After hours, when light-rail train service ends in San Francisco and most of the city is sleeping, Owl buses take over the surface routes. I'd ridden an Owl only once, right before summer break started. My older brother, Heath, had mistakenly tried to cheer me up with tickets to a sing-along of *The Little Mermaid* (glow sticks, shell bras) at the Castro Theatre, and after a midnight dinner at a

greasy spoon, we'd missed our regular train. Owl buses are slower, dirtier, and filled with people leaving parties, clubs, and closed bars—automatically upping the chance of encountering fistfights and projectile vomit. Riding an Owl when Heath was with me was one thing; risking it alone was another, especially when no one knew where I was.

Yeah, I know. Not the brightest idea in the world, but I didn't have cab money on me. I chewed a hangnail and stared up at the fog clinging to the streetlight, hoping I didn't look as anxious as I felt.

Just for the record, I'm not supposed to take mass transit after 10:00 p.m. That's my mom's scientific cutoff for avoiding violent crime. It's not arbitrary. She's an RN and works graveyard at the ER right across the street three or four times a week (where she was at that very moment), so she knows exactly when the gunshot victims start wheeling in. And even though Heath has the same curfew, I'm plenty aware that my Victim Odds are higher because I'm small and female and not quite eighteen. So, sure, I might be a statistical easy target, but I don't usually prowl the city after midnight, giving my precious teenage life the middle finger. I mean, it's not like I was taking *that* big of a risk. It wasn't a bad part of town, and I'd been riding Muni since I was a kid. I also had pepper spray and an itchy trigger finger.

Besides, I was sneaking around for a good reason: to show my illustrations to the professor who runs the anatomy department and convince her to give me access to the Willed Body Program. At least, that was the original plan. But after waiting hours for someone who

never showed, the whole thing was looking more like a stupid waste of time.

As the med students bet on the arrival time of the Owl bus, Panhandler Will gave me a little wave and made his way over. Fine by me. I'd feel safer with a familiar face between the drunken preacher and me; he was making me nervous when he breathed fire in my direction.

"Hey, man," Will said as he approached.

Man? Before I could answer, he'd shuffled on by as if he hadn't even seen me. Wow. Snubbed by a homeless guy. My night was getting better and better.

"What up, Willy?" a male voice answered cheerfully. "Pretty late for you to be working."

"Hospital rent-a-cops are making the rounds. Just waiting for them to clear out."

Curiosity got the better of me, so I turned around to see who'd snagged Will's attention—some shadowy guy leaning against a telephone pole. Will was blocking my view, so I couldn't make him out all that well, but the two of them chatted for a moment before Will even noticed me.

"Sad Girl," he said with a toothy grin. That's what he calls me, because he thinks I'm depressed. I'm not, by the way. I'm just pleasantly dour and serious, but it's hard to explain the difference to someone who sleeps in a cardboard lean-to. "How's it going?"

"Not that great," I said. "I don't have anything tonight." Sometimes I give him my change, but if I had any cash, I'd be in a taxi headed home by now.

"No worries. Your old lady treated me to dinner on her way in to work earlier."

That didn't surprise me. Maybe it was the nurse in her, but Mom had a thing about feeding everyone in her line of sight and was practically *obsessed* with leftovers; if it was larger than a grain of rice, it was either stored in the fridge, packed as part of someone's lunch, or distributed to neighbors, coworkers—and now, apparently, the ever-popular Panhandler Will, who had spotted someone else he knew and was already heading over to greet them, leaving me stranded with his shadowy friend.

Anyone had to be better than the street preacher. But it wasn't just anyone. It was a boy.

A boy about my age.

A *really hot* boy about my age.

Loose-limbed and slim, he slouched against the telephone pole, pushing away an unruly slash of dark hair that fell over one eye. He was dressed from head to toe in black, as if he'd landed a starring role in some Italian caper movie and was ready to break into a bank: jeans, snug jacket, knit hat pulled low. Tight black gloves covered his hands, and a scuffed backpack (probably filled with explosive devices for the bank safe) sat on the sidewalk against his leg.

It wasn't until the preacher started up again that I realized I'd been staring.

Together, along with the umbrella-wielding woman, we listened to the preacher's mumbled lines about salvation and light and something I couldn't hear and WHORES AND BEASTS AND FLAMES. Holy fire and brimstone, dude. My eardrums! I gripped

my portfolio tighter, but a second later his tirade died down and he leaned against the back of the bus stop as if he might fall asleep.

"Doesn't look like much of a runner," the boy noted in a conspiratorial tone. Had he moved closer? Because, wow, he was tall. Most people were, from my petite, low-slung vantage point, but he must've had a good foot on me. "I think you can take him if he tries to swipe your case. Artwork?"

I glanced down at my portfolio as if I'd never seen it before. "Artwork, yes."

He didn't ask me why I was carrying artwork around a medical campus. He just squinted thoughtfully and said, "Hold on, let me guess. No still life or landscape. Your skeptical eyes say postmodern, but your boots say"—his gaze swept down my black skirt and the knee-high gray leather covering my calves—"savvy logo design."

"My boots say 'stood up for a meeting with the director of the anatomy lab.' Dr. Sheridan was supposed to meet me after her last lecture." It ran from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., and after it was over, I'd waited and waited, watching a dwindling number of grad students exit the building. And even when she finally called to apologize at eleven and claimed she'd had a family emergency, I got the distinct feeling she was too proud to admit she'd forgotten.

"And my artwork isn't postmodern," I added. "I draw bodies."

"Bodies?"

"Anatomy."

That's my thing. I'm not one of those cool, creative kids in my art class who make skirts out of trash bags and paint in crazy colors. Not anymore, at least. For the past couple of years, I've limited

myself to pencil and black ink, and I only draw bodies—old or young, male or female, it makes no difference to me. I like the way bones and skin move, and I like seeing how all the chambers in a heart fit together.

And right now, my anatomy-obsessed mind was appreciating the way my new acquaintance fit together, too. He was a walking figure study in beautiful lines and lean muscle, with miles of dark lashes, and cheekbones that looked strong enough to hold up his entire body.

"I'm the person who actually enjoyed dissecting the frog in ninth-grade biology," I clarified. Not to sound tragic, but that particular piece of trivia had never won me crowds of friends, so I'm not sure why I was tossing it on the table. I think I was just juiced up on a fizzy boy-candy rush.

He made a low whistling noise. "We had fetal pigs, but I got to opt out and do mine on the computer. Philosophical reasons."

He said this like he wanted me to ask what those reasons were, and I took the bait. "Let's see, squeamish about dead frogs—"

"Philosophically opposed," he corrected.

"Vegetarian," I guessed.

"A really bad one, but yes." He pointed to his coat collar. Pinned there was a small button that read BE HERE NOW.

I shook my head, confused.

"It's my philosophical excuse. Zen."

"You're a Buddhist?"

"A really bad one," he repeated. The corners of his mouth curled into an almost-smile. "By the way, how long ago was it that you dissected this frog? Four years? Two years . . . ?"

"Are you trying to guess my age?"

He smiled all the way this time, and one attractive dimple deepened in the hollow of his left cheek. "Hey, if you're in college, I'm totally fine with that. I dig older girls."

Me? College? I let out a high-pitched, neurotic laugh. What the hell was the matter with me? Thankfully, the bad muffler on a van turning the corner muted my hyena cackle. After it passed, I gestured toward him with the pepper spray canister attached to my keychain. "Why is a vegetarian Buddhist dressed like a jewel thief?"

"Jewel thief?" He peered down at himself. "Too much black?"

"Not if you're planning a heist. Then it's the perfect amount, especially if you have a Hamburglar mask in your pocket."

"Damn," he said, patting his jacket. "Knew I forgot something."

The sidewalk rumbled beneath my boot heels. I glanced up to see the digital N-OWL sign on the windshield of the bus that was pulling over to our stop. Cool white light glowed from the windows.

"Miracles of miracles," the boy murmured. "The Owl actually arrived."

I stood on tiptoes to see what I'd be dealing with. Looked like some seats were filled, but it wasn't sardine-packed. Yet.

A line was already forming at the curb, so I rushed to outpace the medical students and the drunken preacher. Was the boy getting on, too? Not wanting to appear obvious, I resisted the urge to turn around and, instead, dug out my monthly pass. One swipe over the reader at the door and I was inside, hoping I wasn't alone.