Serious Moonlight

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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)

I

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.