

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.

## 2

THE FIRST RULE OF RIDING PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION late at night is to stick close to the driver, so I staked out a prime spot up front, on one of the long center-facing bench seats. You're supposed to reserve them for the handicapped, pregnant women, and the elderly, but since the woman with the umbrella had already claimed the adjoining seat on the other side of my pole, I wasn't too worried about it. I wedged my portfolio behind my calves, quickly scoping out the rest of the bus for any other risks. To my great relief, drunk preacher was nowhere in sight.

But someone else was.

As the bus doors squealed shut, hot boy plopped down across the aisle in the seat facing mine and tucked his backpack on the floor between his feet. He blew out a dramatic breath and slouched in his seat before jerking up a little, pretending to be surprised to see me. "You again."

"Your target seems to be in my neighborhood. I hope you're not planning to rob my house. We have no jewels, Mr. Burglar."



“‘Jack the Burglar’ has a nice ring to it. Maybe I should give some serious consideration to this career path.”

Jack. Was that his actual name? Under the fluorescent glare of the bus lights, deep shadows etched the valleys of his cheeks and the crevice beneath his lower lip. He had a devil-may-care thing going on in the way he teasingly held back his smile.

“You knew the homeless guy, Will,” I said, going into Sherlock Holmes mode as the bus rumbled away from the curb. “That means either you live around Parnassus or you’ve got a connection to either the hospital or the campus.”

“I will eliminate one of those things for you,” he said. “I don’t live here.”

“Hmm. Well, you’re not going to med school.”

“Let’s not be judgmental. Some jewel thieves could have surgical skills.”

“But you made that ‘older girls’ remark, which means you’re in high school, like me—”

“Like you? A-ha!” he said merrily. “I’ll be a senior this fall, by the way.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “So if you’re not taking classes at Parnassus, I’m guessing you know someone who either goes to school here or works in the hospital. Or possibly you’ve been visiting someone in the hospital.”

“Nicely logical, Sad Girl,” he said. “Hold on. I wasn’t the only person who knew Will. He said your ‘old lady’ gave him dinner, so he knows your mom. And since you’re now worried I’m going to burgle your house—”

“‘Burgle’? I don’t think that’s a real word.”

“Sure it is. Burglar here, remember?” he said, raising a gloved hand. “Anyway, you and your mom might know Will, but you don’t live near the hospital, either. Inner or Outer Sunset?”

“Yes,” I said, avoiding a real answer.

Undaunted, he tried another approach. “You never said why you were meeting with the anatomy director who didn’t show. Are you trying to get an internship or . . . ?”

“No, I was just trying to get permission to draw their cadavers.”

One eye squinted shut. “As in corpses?”

“Bodies donated for science. I want to be a medical illustrator.”

“Like, drawings in textbooks?”

I nodded. “And for pharmaceutical companies, medical research, labs . . . it’s super competitive. Only five accredited masters programs, and to get in those, you need any advantage you can get. A couple of local museums are cosponsoring a student drawing competition in late July, and I want to win it. There’s scholarship money up for grabs, and a win would look good on my college applications.”

“And drawing dead bodies will help you win?”

“Drawing *dissected* bodies will.”

He made a face.

“Da Vinci drew cadavers,” I said, using the same argument that had failed to win my mom’s approval when I announced my intentions to follow in the Italian painter’s footsteps. “So did Michelangelo. The Sistine Chapel panels are filled with hidden anatomical paintings. If you look closely at the pink shroud behind God in *The Creation of Adam*—you know, the one where God is reaching out

to touch fingers with Adam?—the shroud is actually a diagram of a human brain.”

“Wow. You weren’t kidding about the frog thing, were you?”

“No.” I scratched the back of my head; the pins holding up a tangle of braids above the nape of my neck were making me feel itchy. “All I want to do is draw cadavers after hours. I wouldn’t be bothering anyone or getting in the way. But now I have to come back Wednesday before her lecture. Hopefully she actually shows this time.” Was I talking too much? I wasn’t sure, but I couldn’t stop. I get chatty when I’m nervous. “At least next time I won’t be risking my life on the Owl talking to strange boys.”

“Feeling alive is always worth the risk.”

“Feeling alive is merely a rush of adrenaline.”

He chuckled, and then studied me for a moment. “You’re an interesting girl.”

“Says Jack the vegetarian Buddhist jewel thief.”

His lazy grin was drop-dead dangerous.

You know, I always felt like I was pretty good at flirting—that it was the boys I’d flirted with who just weren’t good flirtees. Jack, however, was an excellent flirtee, and my game was on fire tonight. His gaze flicked to my crossed legs . . . specifically to the few inches of bare knee peeking between my skirt and boot.

Crap. He was definitely checking me out. What should I do? Earth to Beatrix: This was the night bus, not a Journey song. Two strangers were not on a midnight train going anywhere. I was going home, and he was probably going to knock over a liquor store.

When it came to romance, sometimes I was convinced I was cursed. Don’t get me wrong: I’m not one of those “woe is me, I’m

so plain Jane, no boys will ever look my way” kind of girls. Boys looked (like now). A few even stared (seriously, like *right* now). It was just when they got to know me—or saw my oddball medical artwork—that things usually went south.

Too weird for jocks, and not weird enough for hipsters, I was neither freak nor geek, and that left me stranded in no-man’s-land. I was fine being a misfit—really, I was, even when someone scribbled “Morticia Adams” on my locker with a Sharpie this winter. I mean, first of all, even though we sort of share a last name, Morticia’s is spelled with two *Ds*, and I doubt whoever defaced my locker had the brain capacity to know the difference, but whatever. And second, I actually look more like the Addams daughter, Wednesday—the apathetic girl with the headless dolls—than Morticia, mostly because of my hair. I always braid it, and I know a thousand and one quirky styles, from Princess Leia buns to Swiss Miss to Greek Goddess, or tonight’s masterpiece: Modern Medieval Princess.

But the funny thing is, I actually like *The Addams Family*, so whoever christened me with that nickname wasn’t really crushing my feelings. I definitely didn’t lose sleep over it. And it’s not like I’m completely socially inept, either. I have a couple of friends (and by “a couple” I mean exactly two, Lauren and Kayla, both of whom were spending the summer together in a warmer part of the state). And I’ve had a couple of boyfriends (and by “a couple” I mean I dated Howard Hooper for two months, and Dylan Norton for two hours during an anti-prom party in Lauren’s basement).

So, okay. My calendar wasn’t exactly full, and I could never wear black dresses at school without people snickering behind my back,

asking me where Gomez was. But I figured I could ditch all that in college, where I could reinvent myself as a sophisticated art student, bursting with wit and untapped joie de vivre. My limitless conversation starters about skin and bones would seduce the heart of some roguish professor (who almost always had a British accent and was also a former Olympic-trained swimmer—but only for the body), and we would run away together to some warm and fabulous Mediterranean island, where I would become the most celebrated medical illustrator in the world.

In this daydream, I was always older and more clever, and it was always sunny. But here I was, on a cool, foggy night, sitting on an Owl bus feeling . . . I don't know. Feeling like maybe I didn't need to wait through senior year to make it to some fantasy island on the other side of high school.

Maybe I could seduce a dangerously good-looking boy on a bus right now.

His gaze lifted and met mine. We stared at each other.

And stared.

And stared . . .

A strange heat sparked inside my chest and spread over my skin. It must've been contagious, because two pink spots stained his cheeks, and I'd never seen a boy like him blush. I didn't know what was happening between us, but I honestly wouldn't have been surprised if the Owl had burst into flames, veered off the road, and exploded in a fiery inferno.

Bus stops came and went, and we didn't stop staring. The older, wittier me was one second away from leaping across the aisle and throwing myself at him, but the real me was too sensible. He finally

broke the silence and said in a soft, desperate voice, "What's your name?"

The woman with the umbrella made a low noise. She gave me a disapproving frown that put my mother's to shame. Had she been watching us the whole time?

"Shit." Jack pulled the yellow stop cord drooping across the window and bent over his backpack. Irving and Ninth. A popular stop. Mine was still several blocks away, which meant one thing: My night bus fantasy was ending. What should I do? Ignore the umbrella lady's warning and give him my name?

What if I never saw him again?

The bus jerked to a sudden stop. Jack's backpack tipped sideways. Something rolled out from a gap in the zipper and banged into the toes of my boots.

A fancy can of spray paint with a metallic gold top.

I picked it up and paused. The way he tightened up and ground his jaw to the side, there might as well have been a neon sign over his head that flashed NERVOUS! NERVOUS! NERVOUS!

I held the spray paint out. He stuffed the can in his backpack and slung it over one shoulder. "Good luck with your cadaver drawing."

My reply got lost under the news ticker of recent headlines scrolling inside my head. All I could do was quietly watch his long body slink into shadows as the door shut and the bus pulled away from the curb.

*I knew who he was.*

# 3

SINCE SCHOOL LET OUT IN MAY, GOLD GRAFFITI HAD been popping up around San Francisco. Single words painted in enormous gold letters appeared on bridges and building fronts. Not semi-illegible, angry gang tags, but beautifully executed pieces done by someone with talent and skill.

Could that *someone* be Jack? Was he an infamous street artist wanted for vandalizing?

The remaining leg of the ride blurred by as I recalled everything I'd heard about the gold graffiti on local blogs. I wished I'd paid better attention. I definitely needed to do some research, like, *right now*.

When the bus got to my stop on Judah Street, I raced off, eager to do just that.

I live in the Inner Sunset district, which is the biggest joke in the world, because it's one of the foggiest parts of the city. Summer's the worst, when the nights are chilly and we sometimes go for weeks without seeing the sun. But apart from the fog, I like living here. We're only a few blocks from Golden Gate Park. There's a pretty cool stretch of shops on Irving. And we're just down the hill from

the Muni stop. We live on the bottom two floors of a skinny, three-story pale yellow Edwardian row house and share a small patch of yard in the back with our neighbor Julie, a premed student who rents the unit above us. She's the one who got me the appointment at the anatomy lab.

I jogged up a dozen stairs to our front door. As I fumbled for the house key, a taxi pulled up to the curb. My brother jumped out and quickly paid the driver before spotting me.

"Mom's on her way home!" Heath called as he raced up the stairs, imitating an ambulance siren. He was dressed in a tight jacket, tight jeans, and an even tighter black shirt with silver studs that spelled out 21ST CENTURY METAL BOY. He also reeked of beer, which is why I didn't believe him.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Me? Where have *you* been?"

"Picking up criminals on the night bus."

He made an "uh-huh, whatever" sound as he combed his fingers through spiky hair the same shade of brown as mine. Standing one step above, I was almost taller than him; we both took after my mom in the height department. He glanced at my skirt and boots. "Hold on. Why are you dressed up?"

"It's a long story. You smell like a brewery, by the way. Are you drunk?"

"Not anymore," he complained. "Hurry up and let us in. I'm totally serious. I saw the paddy wagon pulling out of employee parking when my cab passed the hospital."

The paddy wagon is my mom's ancient white Toyota hatchback. It has two hundred thousand miles on it and a dent in the fender.



“I paid the cabbie extra to run a red light so we could outrace her. Grrr!” he growled impatiently. “Any day now, Bex.”

Bex is what my family and friends call me, as in short for Beatrix, and Bex only—not Bea, not Trixie, and not any other way that can make my nightmare of a name sound even more old-fashioned than it already did.

While Heath prodded my back, I unlocked the door and we hurried inside. Even though our apartment takes up two floors, it’s officially only a one-bedroom. My mom has that bedroom, and Heath lives below on the bottom floor in Laundry Lair, which is technically a tiny basement space attached to a one-car garage. And my room is *technically* the dining room, but we eat at the kitchen table or on the couch in front of the TV—“like pigs,” my mom says, but the shame doesn’t stop her.

The no-shame gene runs in the family, because it also doesn’t stop my twenty-year-old brother from squatting here at home instead of getting his own place. And because he is still four months away from being legal, my mom would kick his ass if she knew he’d been sneaking into clubs with a fake ID. Again.

“Why is she coming home in the middle of her shift?” I asked.

“Hell if I know,” Heath called back to me as he headed for the bathroom. “I’ve got to take a piss. Watch at the window and yell when she drives up.”

“Forget it. I have to change. She doesn’t know I was out, either.” I raced into my room and stashed the portfolio next to my drafting table before shrugging out of my coat. Two French doors separated me from the living room. I’d covered all the glass with old X-rays I’d cut into squares, so that when the doors were shut, I had a

modicum of privacy. But since it isn't a real bedroom, I don't have any windows, and all my clothes are crammed inside a rickety Ikea wardrobe that won't stay shut.

But it isn't all bad. For light, I have a cool old Deco chandelier that hangs in the center of the room and a gigantic built-in mission-style china cabinet on one wall that I use to display my collections: vintage anatomy books, a 1960s Visible Woman (a clear plastic toy with removable organs), some old dental molds, and several miniature anatomy model sets (heart, brain, lungs). At the foot of my bed is Lester, a life-size teaching skeleton that hangs from a rolling stand. The skeletons are usually expensive, but my mom snagged him for nothing at the hospital campus because he's missing an arm.

Heath skidded to a stop outside my X-ray doors, breathing hard. "Seriously, where were you tonight?"

"Trying to meet with the anatomy lab director, but she never showed."

"That again? Look at you, being stubborn. I thought Mom told you not to bug them."

"I'd already made the appointment," I argued. "It's not like I was breaking into the lab and molesting bodies. I wasn't doing anything wrong." Except defying my mother's wishes, taking the Owl, and flirting with someone who may or may not be a wanted vandal . . . "Not horribly wrong, anyway," I amended.

"God forbid," Heath mumbled. "You really don't know how to be bad."

I got my boots unzipped and tossed them into the rickety wardrobe. "Oh, and you do? Was Noah out with you, or did he even know? If you're cheating on him—"

“Shh! Listen.” He angled his head to the side, bracing his hand on the doorway. “Is that the paddy wagon?” he whispered.

The familiar grating thump of the garage door rattled through the floor.

“I was asleep when you got home!” Heath instructed, racing downstairs.

I quickly tossed my skirt under my bed and managed to hop into lounge pants while pulling my doors closed. Right after I shut off my chandelier, Mom’s footsteps hurried up the basement stairwell and into the living room. Crap. That was fast. She must be in a hurry.

“It’s one in the morning. Where the hell are you calling from?” Mom’s voice said over the squeak of her rubber soles. “Never mind. I don’t care. Just get to the point and tell me what you want.”

Who in the world was she talking to?

“Absolutely not. If you mail something, I will dump it in the garbage. Do you hear me?” Her voice bounced past my room as she headed into the kitchen. Jars rattled. She was in the fridge. Oh! She gave her lunch to Panhandler Will. Guess she was foraging for a replacement. “Too bad. Nothing’s changed. Stop trying, and you won’t be disappointed. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m actually working here. Enjoy your flight from *London*.” She enunciated the city in a mocking tone. A muffled bang ended the call.

Whoa. She was seriously pissed.

Footfalls squeaked past my room again. “May your plane crash into the fucking Atlantic,” she mumbled to herself before jogging down the stairs again. A minute later, the paddy wagon’s engine roared to life and she was gone again.

Mom rarely gets angry. Honestly, she pretty much never gets emotional about anything. Ever. It's one of the things I've inherited from her—a no-nonsense personality. No drama, no tears, no yelling. We both operate on a nonemotional setting, unlike Heath, who operates on an unhealthy decadence of shifting highs and lows. He got that from our father, who up and left us three years ago for a strip-club owner he met on a business trip to Southern California. We hadn't seen him since, and to be perfectly honest, I didn't miss him.

Sure, there was a lot of yelling before he left, but after he was gone, Mom pulled herself together pretty fast. She didn't cry when the divorce went through, and she didn't bad-mouth Dad when he never made a single child support payment. The last time I remembered her getting emotional was a couple of years ago when Heath and I suggested we legally change our last names to her maiden Adams out of solidarity.

Anyway, the only person who ever put her in a remotely bad mood was my dad, and as far I knew, they didn't have any contact. She wasn't dating anybody—she was “done with men”—and none of her friends were in London.

So who was she yelling at on the phone?

I cracked open one of the X-ray doors when Heath bounded back upstairs. He held out a palm as he passed, and we high-fived. “Live to puke another day,” he said cheerfully, striding back to the bathroom.

“You've got glitter on your nose,” I answered.

Whatever smart-ass answer he gave was out of earshot. I had more pressing concerns, so I ignored him and curled up in bed with

my laptop. It took me only a few seconds to find what I was looking for—a post on a local city blog luridly titled: “Golden Apple Street Artist: Poet or Attention-Mongering Vandal?”

The blog post detailed what I already knew, but I learned a couple of new things—like that the “burners” or “pieces” (short for *masterpiece*) were executed with both a professional airbrush and a specialty graffiti spray paint that’s illegal to sell in the city. I thought of the fancy can in Jack’s backpack—definitely not something you could buy at the local home improvement store—and my stomach went a little flippy.

Five words had been painted over the last couple of weeks: BEGIN, FLY, BELONG, JUMP, TRUST. *Begin* was, aptly, the first word, painted in ten-foot-high letters on the pavement around Lotta’s Fountain, the oldest monument in the city. The most recent word, *trust*, had been stenciled across the ticket booth roof at the San Francisco Zoo entrance.

The post quoted a police officer in charge of the SFPD Graffiti Abatement Program. He warned that the difference between graffiti and art is “permission,” and pointed out that since the cumulative cleanup costs were over four hundred dollars, the artist who painted the golden words would be facing a felony charge.

But that wasn’t all. The artist signed all the words with a small golden apple at the bottom of the last letter. And this made the blogger wonder about a connection to a local anonymous “artist collective” called Discord.

Not good.

Members of Discord were known for engaging in antagonist behavior toward the mayor’s office and had done tens of thousands

of dollars' worth of damage to public property: breaking windows, trashing stores, setting things on fire, and pouring paint on a bronze statue of Gandhi outside the Ferry Building on the Embarcadero. The blogger speculated that the golden graffiti's signature might be a nod toward the Apple of Discord from Greek mythology, which was inscribed with "the fairest" and started a catfight between Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena.

Thinking about all this made me feel as if I were on one of those pirate-ship rides at a carnival, swinging back and forth between excitement and the nagging fear that a bolt would break and the whole thing would slingshot into the sky.

My brother was right about one thing: I didn't really know how to be bad. So maybe I should have just put Jack out of my mind and gone back to my boring sunless, friendless summer.

But that was easier said than done.

The next afternoon, while Mom and Heath were both still sleeping off their respective graveyard shift and club-hopping, I took the regular Muni train to Irving Street, a short walk from the southeast entrance to Golden Gate Park... and one stop from where Jack got off the bus the night before.

It was also where I worked part-time as a glamorous checkout girl in an upscale gourmet market called Alto. Because we catered to the upper crust, everyone but the meat and fish counter employees had to wear a white button-down shirt, black pants, a black tie, and a store-issued black Alto Market apron, which made me feel like a high-end restaurant server—without the benefit of high-end tips.

A lot of people at school complain about their summer jobs, but

apart from the black tie, I was sort of okay with mine. It didn't take a lot of effort to run stuff over a scanner. I also secretly enjoyed stacking groceries in bags because it was sort of like a puzzle, fitting the heavy stuff in the right place, and keeping the cold stuff together—a little like replacing all the plastic guts in my Visible Woman anatomy model: strangely satisfying.

Along with all that, the store always smelled like baked bread and fresh flowers, and the piped-in classical music fueled my Sophisticated Older Art Student fantasies. It could be worse.

After clocking in and counting my till, I headed out to my assigned register. The last person who used it had moved the rubber bands and pens around. As I put it all back into place, a dark-haired woman poked her head around a rack of imported candy.

“Good afternoon, Beatrix.”

Ms. Lopez is one of the store managers. She's a single mom in her early thirties with an eleven-year-old daughter named Joy. She's been my boss since I started working here last summer. As far as bosses go, she's pretty reasonable and fair, and just plain nice—another reason I don't mind this job.

“Damn . . . looks like we're *slammed* up in here today,” I said.

“I can't stop yawning,” Ms. Lopez admitted with a smile, crossing her arms over her apron. A small red-and-black pin glittered in the center of her tie, right below the knot. She had a thing for ladybugs and always wore the lucky insect somewhere—socks, sweater, pins. I got her a preserved ladybug encased in piece of Lucite for Christmas; she kept it on her desk in the office. “How did your secret meeting go?”

Ms. Lopez knew all about my art and wasn't weirded out by the

idea of my drawing dissected cadavers—another reason why we got along.

“Unfortunately, it was a huge bust.” I spilled most of the story but stopped when I got to the part about sneaking home on the Owl bus and meeting Jack. “So, anyway, I get another shot on Wednesday. Lucky for me, I’m not scheduled, so I don’t have to beg my boss to let me have the night off.”

“Lucky for you, your boss is cool, so you wouldn’t have had to beg too hard.”

True. “So, what’s going on around here?” I asked as I squatted to check my paper-bag supply. “Any good gossip?”

“We’re out of the on-sale salmon steaks.”

“That’s terrible gossip.”

She *hmm*ed, trying to think of something juicier. “Oh! That gold graffiti vandal hit the Ninth Avenue Golden Gate Park entrance.”

My heartbeat lurched from *bored* to *FIRE!* “Wh-what?” I said, shooting up from behind the cash wrap.

“On the sidewalk. News crews were up there this morning when I was walking Beauty before work. The letters are about as tall as me and sideways stacked.” She ripped off a piece of register tape and scribbled a visual aid:

B

L

O

O

M



“Sideways stacked,” she said with a hand flourish, complete with perfect red nails that never seemed to chip.

*Bloom.* I was still in shock.

“It’s very pretty and feminine. Lots of curlicues and vines.”

“The Botanical Garden,” I realized. It was located just inside that particular park entrance.

“Yes, on the walkway leading to the gardens. Police say it’s the first time there’s been a direct connection between one of the words and the place it was painted. Now everyone is worked up that it’s some elaborate Morse code message.”

I thought of the button pinned to Jack’s coat: BE HERE NOW. Weren’t Buddhists supposed to be peaceful? I pictured kindly old men raking patterns in sandy Zen gardens and drinking tea, maybe doing some yoga in the afternoon.

Not defacing public property.

“Whoever is doing this is either very stealthy or very lucky—or both,” Ms. Lopez mused. “But luck doesn’t last forever. I think it’s only a matter of time before someone catches the vandal in action.”

That someone could’ve been me. But now I’d probably never see him again. I mean, all I knew was his first name and his philosophical stance on bacon.

Oh, and something else I’d almost forgotten: our fellow acquaintance.

# 4

MY SHIFT AT ALTO MARKET ENDED AT EIGHT, BUT INSTEAD OF GOING STRAIGHT HOME, I TOOK THE N-JUDAH TRAIN TO THE HOSPITAL. It was only a ten-minute ride, and my mom wasn't working that night, which meant I didn't have to worry about crossing paths with her. So I just texted her to say I was running a little late and would catch a ride home with one of my coworkers.

Evening fog was rolling in, but it was still light outside, and the hospital parking garage was fairly busy. I checked out all the places I usually spotted Panhandler Will. But after walking around for twenty minutes, I'd just about given up. That's when I saw him waving at passing cars on the corner.

"Hey, Will," I called out from a few feet away. He sometimes got startled, so I didn't want to give him any reason to freak out on me.

His head turned, and he surveyed the sidewalk with a confused look until he spotted me. "Sad Girl! Why are you wearing a tie?"

"It's part of my work clothes," I told him, holding out an Alto Market bag. "I brought this for you."

"Me?" He warily took it and peered inside. "What is it?"

"Meatloaf, potato salad, and a cupcake." The least froufrou stuff

in the deli counter; I didn't think I'd be doing him any favors by giving him imported olives and spicy noodles. "But don't get too excited. It's a bribe. Do you remember when I saw you last night at the bus stop across the street?"

He sniffed inside the bag before looking up at me like he'd already forgotten I was there. "When? Last night?"

"You were talking to a boy who knew you. His name's Jack."

Blank face. This might've been a bad idea.

"He called you Willy," I added.

"Monk!" he said with a grin.

"Monk?" I repeated, wondering if we were on the same page.

"He's religious," Will explained.

"Oh, the Buddhism thing?"

Will brightened. "Yeah."

"That's him," I said. "How long have you known him?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. Years, probably. I see him two or three times a week."

Years. That meant he wasn't just visiting a patient who'd had surgery. "Does he work here or have family that works here?"

"He comes to see his lady friend."

I pictured Jack cuddling up with some busty candy striper, and my heart sank a little—which was silly, because the boy was a criminal, not my potential soul mate.

"Do you know anything else about him? Like his last name? Where he lives?"

Will sniffled and wiped his nose. "I know he takes the N."

"Outbound?" I asked. "Like the bus we were getting on last night?"

“No,” he said, pointing in the opposite direction. “He takes it that way.”

Okay, that was something. He must’ve specifically taken the Owl bus to paint the BLOOM graffiti piece in the park. Which meant he didn’t live in my neighborhood. But where he *did* live was anyone’s guess. The N line stretched across the city and connected to a billion stops.

“Is there anything else you know about him?” I asked.

Will shrugged. “He’s pretty funny. Tells a lot of good jokes. Some of them are over my head. But you know, sometimes people smile when they’re sad. And sometimes girls who look sad are really smiling.”

He pointed at me and winked like he’d just handed me the secret to life. And that would be nice, but it was more likely he’d recently scored pain pills from one of the patients leaving the ER. And when he started whistling what I suspected to be the theme to *The Brady Bunch*, I knew I’d coaxed all I could get out of him, which wasn’t much.

And unless I wanted to camp out with Will until he happened to see Jack, I didn’t hold out high hopes of seeing him again. The medical campus is a busy place.

Just not as busy I thought.

Two days later, I headed back over for my second chance with the anatomy director. It sometimes seemed like the only times I really needed the train to be on time were the times it was late, so I was already ten times more anxious than I wanted to be. And maybe that’s why I wasn’t paying attention.

Someone bumped my arm, and my portfolio flew from my hand.  
“Ow!”

“My bad. I thought you saw me.”

A jacket bent over in front of me and picked up my portfolio. When the jacket stood back up, it grew arms and legs and a face that probably competed with Helen of Troy’s in the ship-launching department.

Jack.

He looked so different in daylight. A turquoise plaid Western shirt peeked out from the jacket, which was one of those classic black leather motorcycle ones. And when I say classic, I mean actually vintage—like, straight-up 1950s Marlon Brando *Wild One*—style, all lightened along the creases and covered in tiny punk rock buttons. It matched the big black boots beneath the turned-up cuffs of his jeans. No hat covered his hair today, which was dark brown and several inches longer on the top than the super-close-cropped sides and back. That long top was swooped up into a loose pompadour, with fallen tendrils hanging over his forehead and all tousled in a way that was *far* too good to be windblown.

He was all retro and rockabilly and cool. If James Dean and David Beckham had a baby, it would be Jack. That jewel-thief outfit he’d been wearing that first night was a total criminal disguise.

“Jack the Vandal,” I said, and not in a cheerful way, either. More like he was my mortal enemy.

He cringed and glanced around. “Can you please not announce that to the world? I liked it better when I was Jack the Burglar.”

“So you’re not denying it? I mean, you shouldn’t, because I know

what I saw, and then I find out that you . . . desecrated the Botanical Garden.”

“‘Desecrated’?”

“You heard me.” Okay, I hadn’t actually meant to use that word. It’s not like I’m *really* into flowers and thought the park was some kind of temple of nature; I was just nervous. But since it was already out of my mouth, I defended it like I was an old woman shaking her fist at scamps and ne’er-do-wells, snatching the portfolio out of his hand to emphasize my righteous anger. But he wasn’t fazed.

“Did you see it?” he asked, herding me toward the edge of the walkway with his too-tall body as a group of medical students passed.

“Umm, you mean ‘bloom’? I think the entire city saw it.”

Joy flashed through his eyes, but he blinked a few times with miles of dark lashes and sobered up. “You’re the only one who knows.”

“I doubt that. What about your little revolutionary art collective, Discord?”

He shook his head. “I don’t belong to Discord.”

“That’s not what people are saying online.”

“Well, they’re wrong. I work alone, and no one knows who I am.”

Huh. Funny, but I sort of believed him. Or maybe I had a case of temporary hot-boy-influenced naïveté.

“Scout’s honor,” he promised. “Only you hold my secret identity in your hands, Lois Lane.”

*Do not be flattered. Do not be flattered. . . .* “But not your real one.”

“You know more than I know about you.”

I ignored that. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“You said you had another meeting today and that it was before Dr. Sheridan’s lecture, so I checked the schedules and guessed the wrong one.” He scratched his head in a way that would’ve been adorable if he wasn’t an admitted criminal. “I’ve been waiting around here for the last two hours. But now that I see you again, it was worth it.”

Was he serious? I tried to form a snappy answer, but it came out as one long, strangled vowel. To make things worse, heat crept up my cheeks, so I turned away from him and strode down the cement walkway like I was full of Grand Purpose, not like I was running away. But it didn’t matter. Long legs always beat short legs, so it was no surprise when he caught up in a couple of steps.

“I dig the dark-rimmed glasses,” he said alongside me, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets. “They give you a sexy scientist vibe.”

“Artist vibe,” I countered without looking at him. And I’d only traded out my contacts that afternoon because I thought the glasses made me look older, but he didn’t need to know that. And he *definitely* didn’t need to know that my heart double-timed a few beats when he said “sexy.”

“Can I see what you’ve got in your portfolio?” he asked.

“Just pencil sketches.”

“That’s cool. Can I look at them?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Because . . . your art isn’t good?”

“It’s good.”

“Prove it,” he said, taking one hand out of his pocket to tap a couple of knuckles against my portfolio as it swung between us. “You know, one artist to another. You’ve seen mine. Show me yours.”

Oh, the teasing in his voice—and *oh*, the places I could go with that line. The older, sophisticated Fantasy Me was completely charmed. But the real me was feeling too many pinwheeling emotions wrapped in a center of gooey nervousness. I was also having trouble tearing my gaze away from the scuff marks on the toes of his boots. They weren’t plain-old Doc Martens; they looked fancier, like Fluevogs or something.

The entrance to the building that housed the anatomy lab was only a few yards away. I checked the time on my phone. Crud. I had to hustle. Why did he have to show up right now? I needed more time to properly freak out about his being there.

“Will you at least tell me your name?” he asked as I pocketed my phone.

“Why? Afraid I’m going to snitch on you? Is that why you tracked me down?” And why was I being so defensive?

“You don’t know anything about me and have zero proof, so what’s there to snitch on? It would be smarter for me to avoid you, if you want to get right down to it. Besides, you’re the one who tracked me down first.”

I stopped in front of the building and faced him. “How so?”

“Willy said the sad girl was asking about me.”

That little panhandling ratfink. “Look, I was just curious—”

“Me, too. Since that night on the Owl, I’ve been having midnight



fantasies about meeting hot girls on buses, and that's messing up both my routine and my deep loathing of public transportation."

Was he really saying this? Ignore! Ignore! "I asked Will about you because I wanted to find out if you were really a criminal," I argued a little too loudly. A student exiting the building gave us a curious look. "I have to go. I'm running late."

I tried to move around him, but he blocked me. "I'm a low-level criminal at best. Barely even a reprobate. And I've never been caught, so if a tree falls in the forest, does it really make a sound?"

"Don't make me laugh. I've got an important meeting."

He ducked his head to catch my eyes. "If I make you laugh, will you skip it and go have dinner with me?"

Whoa. Was that a date request? "Look, this is serious. I'm going to be late."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Please, just tell me your name. An email address, phone number—something. Come on, Sad Girl. All old Willy could tell me was that you have a sister and that your mom's a cleaning woman at the hospital."

"Brother and nurse," I corrected, stifling a laugh. "He told me you're a monk and that you have a 'lady friend' who works here."

Jack laughed and said, "Oh, that Willy." Then he abruptly went quiet.

"Do you?" I pressed, silently saying the end of the question in my head: . . . *have a girlfriend?*

"Though it's true that I do visit a female person, otherwise known as a 'lady,' here, and we are, indeed, friends, she would probably kick me in the balls if I ever called her my 'lady friend.' Besides, I'm a monk, apparently."

*Hmph.* Monk, my ass. The only guys at school who were this particular combination of persistent and beautiful were players. I backed up and pointed to my wrist. "Seriously have to go."

"Give me something, *please*. Don't make me wait out here in the cold stalking you like a creeper."

I took a few more backward steps and opened the door, heart racing. "*Body-O-Rama*. It's an anatomy illustration blog. I'm one of the contributing artists. If you can pick my art out of the lineup, you'll find my contact info there, and you can stalk me online."

He grinned and pulled his leather jacket closed as the wind picked up. "Challenge accepted."

MY MEETING WITH DR. SHERIDAN WAS STRANGELY UNSATISFYING. Maybe that's because I was still holding a grudge about her leaving me hanging at our first meeting, or maybe it's because I spent the entire ten puny minutes she gave me struggling to keep Jack out of my thoughts.

This wasn't me. At all. I'm the serious girl with straight As. Well, except for the Bs in calculus and that C in freshman PE, which I earned for my "bad attitude" toward Mallory Letson—who happened to be head of the varsity pep squad and Coach's favorite. Never mind that she was talking crap about Heath, who was a senior that year. (For the record, I think Mallory was behind the whole Morticia thing.)

Still.

All Dr. Cold-as-Ice Sheridan said was that my portfolio showed "remarkable talent," and after questioning why I wanted to be a medical illustrator, she just went on to explain that the university was one of the top medical schools in the country and had (standards and practices) or (board members' expectations) or (insurance regulations) to uphold. And that their actual students came first. She

promised to consider my request and run it by her colleagues and students. She said she'd have an answer in a week or two.

In a week or two, the summer would be half over and I'd barely have time enough to come up with something else for the student art contest. But what could I do, argue with someone who was doing me a favor? She gave me her business card, so at least I had her email address. I wasted no time writing her the cheesiest, most polite thank-you email in the history of sucking up.

After that, I'm ashamed to say that I spent my entire night checking my artist profile on *Body-O-Rama*, hoping that Jack had gone straight to his computer and searched me out. Granted, my profile pic was an inked self-portrait with half of my face drawn as exposed musculature. But only twenty artists were featured on the site. How difficult was I to recognize? Then again, Jack really didn't know anything about me. Maybe he'd mistaken me for the much cooler girl who painted brightly colored Day of the Dead sugar skulls. In a panic, I read through all the comments on everyone's recent posts, just in case.

Nothing.

And nothing the next day. And the next. But it was the day after *that* when his lack of response was more disappointing than it might've been if it was just another Saturday. Because it wasn't: It was my eighteenth birthday.

And yet, no Jack. Had he given up? I'd even made it easier on him by posting about my birthday plans the day before. It practically screamed, *Look! Here I am!* It was just weird that he was begging me for my name and supposedly waiting for hours to see me, and then boom, nothing.

Was he just busy? Or maybe there was a reason I didn't want to face: that he'd seen my art and decided I was too morbid. It certainly wouldn't be the first time, and even if we *were* both artists, maybe Cadaver Girl and Vegetarian Graffiti Boy were oil and water. I guess I needed to stop pining away for something I didn't even really know if I wanted.

I mean, hello! I was eighteen, baby. I could finally . . . vote and buy all those cartons of cigarettes I'd been pining for. Yippee.

So Mom spent her only weekend day off from the hospital schlepping Heath and me around the city for Beatrix-approved birthday activities. We waited in early-morning fog for forty-five minutes to have milk shakes for breakfast at St. Francis Diner (my favorite) before nerding out at Green Apple Books (where Heath ponied up for a 1960s coffee table book about medical oddities that he'd had on hold for me). We finally ended up at the Legion of Honor, which, in San Francisco, is an art museum—not a brotherhood of knights, or whatever it is in France.

I know a museum may not be everyone's idea of Super Birthday Funtimes, but I really wanted to see this exhibition called *Flesh and Bone*, and it featured one piece in particular that had me salivating: a Max Brödel diagram of a heart. I'd posted a link to it on the *Body-O-Rama* site when I'd blogged about my birthday plans, and, holy smokes, seeing it in person didn't disappoint. Brödel is pretty much the godfather of modern medical illustration. He was a German who immigrated here to draw diagrams for Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in the early 1900s. His illustrations were beautifully detailed and had this weird, surreal quality.

I'd studied his stuff in books and had even copied a few for

practice. But seeing the actual carbon-dust-on-stipple-board drawing was breathtaking.

In fact, even after I'd looked at everything else, I went back to that heart diagram for one last look, admiring every detail, including the tiny handwritten labels: AORTA, LEFT VENTRICLE, TRACHEA. It was so completely perfect. And I couldn't help but think he'd drawn it from a dissected heart. If Dr. Sheridan would just let me spend some time in the anatomy lab, I might be the next Max Brödel. I mean, anything's possible, right?

But even though I was currently in muscle-and-sinew heaven, it didn't mean that my family was. Mom kept trying to steer me into one of the permanent collections to see Rembrandt and Rubens: "They're famous, Bex. And so beautiful." Eventually Heath griped and groaned and yawned us into the museum's overpriced cafe for lunch. It was pretty much the same kind of food we had in the deli at Alto Market, so none of it was all that appealing to me. But we ordered, then snagged seats on the patio outside. And because I was a total loser, I checked *Body-O-Rama's* comments one more time, only to be disappointed anew.

My mom was checking her phone, too. I *so* wanted to ask her about that weird late-night phone call she'd gotten the other day, but I was worried I'd end up incriminating myself. I'm a terrible liar.

"You're eating that, Bex," she said, nudging my shoe beneath the table as she futzed with the fanning dark hair around her temples. She had a pixie cut, which was pretty much just a shorter version of Heath's haircut—only where his was all blown up, hers was blown down. She was tiny, like me, and the elfish thing looked good on her. But as long as I lived with the two of them, I could never cut

my hair short, or we'd all look like some freaky family gang, ready to lure strangers into our house with Kool-Aid. Hence the braids.

I made a face at Mom. "The bread's stale."

"It was twenty dollars. It can't be stale."

Heath slung his arm over the back of my chair. "Sure it can. Noah says half the starred restaurants in town recycle bread from other tables."

"Saint Noah is never wrong," I pointed out. Noah was my brother's latest boyfriend, a twenty-five-year-old engineer who had a million-dollar condo in the Castro. He's stable and smart, and even though Heath had yet to bring him home and introduce us, we'd heard so much about him that we were kind of in love with him, too—especially my mom. I think she was hoping he'd be a positive influence on my not-so-stable brother, who had already burned through two community colleges, dropping out once due to boredom and a second time after he got busted at an inopportune moment with an English professor twice his age.

"By the way," Mom said, rearranging her knife on her plate, "you never told me when Noah would be free to come over for family dinner."

"I forgot to ask, sorry. He's been working, and . . ."

*And* Heath had been sneaking out to drink and see metal shows every other night. I didn't say this—sibling loyalty is a two-way street—but my mom has some weird sixth sense about these sorts of things, which is probably why I have no confidence when it comes to lying to her. Nurse Katherine the Great always knows.

She shot him a dark look across the table. "I swear, Heath, if you screw this up with Noah—"

"I'm not going to screw it up."

"Again," I amended under my breath.

"We were on a break," Heath said.

"Because you were fooling around with that cook."

"Chef," he corrected. "And he was fooling around with *me*. I didn't start it."

"Tell me again, why is Noah with you?"

"Because I'm overflowing with personality and I ooze charm."

I snorted. "You're overflowing and oozing something, all right."

"Please, God," Mom pretend-prayed to the sky. "All I ask is that you swap these children for kittens, and I'll never sin again."

Heath made prayer hands and closed his eyes. "Dear Prince of Darkness, please make sure the kittens piss all over her bed so she'll regret it and beg for us to come back."

I elbowed him in the ribs until he laughed, and then I asked Mom for money. "I'm going back inside for ten-dollar strawberry shortcake," I explained as I accepted her debit card. "You two keep steering us toward the apocalypse while I'm gone."

They continued to joke and laugh as I strolled around tables and a hundred pecking birds, who must've thought this place was some kind of avian Shangri-La, what with all the fancy crumbs being tossed their way by museum patrons. I couldn't blame them. It was really pretty out here, especially beyond the patio; afternoon sun cleared out the fog over the Golden Gate Bridge's famous orangey-vermillion arches stretching across the blue bay. For once, it actually seemed like summer. Though I did feel a little sorry for the tourists who were prancing around in shorts. Come nightfall, they'd



be regretting they didn't book their trip in September or October, when it was sunnier.

As I opened the cafe door, a riot of sound drew my attention toward the museum hallway. People were jumping up from their seats, craning their necks to see something. I sidled past one of the museum volunteers and wove between patrons crowding the exit of the *Flesh and Bone* exhibit.

A couple of guards cleared a space around a spotlighted area in the middle of the room. That's when I saw it, scrawled in slanting metallic gold on the gray exhibit wall beneath Max Brödel's heart diagram:

C E L E B R A T E

Was this, could this . . . ? Who the hell else would it be?

*Jack.*

Jack-Jack-Jack! His name bounced around my hollow head like a rubber ball inside an empty gym. Celebrate. This was no coincidence. He went to the *Body-O-Rama* website. He saw my post about birthday plans—the one in which I'd posted *a photo of the Brödel*. Humiliation and excitement raced through me in dizzy spirals.

Oh, my ever-loving God . . .

*He did this for me.*

Important-looking people rushed in with a security guard. Museum administration. One of them was a distinguished older woman in a dress suit, who clamped a hand over her mouth when she saw the graffiti.

Someone was excitedly talking to a couple next to me. "Dressed in black," he was saying. "I didn't get a look at his face, but I thought

it was weird he was wearing dark glasses. He had a paint pen or something tucked into his sleeve, and he just strolled up to the wall and started writing, like it was nothing.”

The couple gasped and shook their heads.

“Did they catch him?” I asked, butting into their conversation.

“I don’t think so,” the man told me excitedly. “It all happened so fast. I ran through that doorway to flag down a guard for maybe ten seconds, maybe. He was already gone when I got back.”

Holy crap. This was shocking. And stupid. And crazy. Someone else nearby said the police were on their way. My hands shook as I fumbled inside my pocket for my phone. No way in hell was I getting closer, so I zoomed in as best I could and snapped a photo.

*Oh, Jack . . . what have you done?*