

THE CASE OF THE VANISHING PROFESSOR

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I had never expected a murder mystery dinner. Never expected that the surprise Tim had been hinting at for weeks now was an amateur production by a traveling theater group on the local university campus.

I groaned as we entered the student center and saw the sign propped up on a flimsy tripod: Stuffed to Death, a Turbintine Murder Inc. production.

"This is the part where you tell me you're just joking, right?"

"Oh, no, you're gonna love it." Tim nodded with confidence and propelled me forward. "Just wait."

The woman who greeted us outside the ballroom (the university called it a ballroom, but really it was just a step up from a gymnasium) giggled after every sentence. She handed us each blank cards ("For taking notes on who the murderer is! Tee-hee!") and pointed us toward the door. "You'll find your name tags at your table," she said, punctuating it with a giggle. "For you all, that's lucky number seven!"

I smiled back at her, but I wasn't feeling very lucky. In fact, if anything, I was starting to feel really bad, a slow and steady dread growing in my throat. I grabbed Tim's arm and stopped him before we could walk in the door. "What exactly did you put on my name tag?" I asked him, my eyebrows rising. "Did you—Tim, I swear if you—"

"Shh." He put his finger up to his lips. "Just relax, okay? You trust me, don't you?"

"No," I said bitterly.

"Ah, come on. Loosen up a little." He patted my shoulder, smiled playfully, but it was already too late. I was afraid the murder had already happened. We were never going to last.

It was our fourth date. You know, the one where we both decide if we

are going to sleep with one another or just part merry ways. The one where the stakes are still high, but the nerves calm down a bit.

I had thought things were going well. Tim seemed nice, gentle, which was not normally the type of guy that was interested in me. He managed the downtown boutique movie theater, which showed classics like *An Affair to Remember* and *Groundhog Day* and was famous for its caramel-covered popcorn, served in a paper cone. He came from a long-married mom and dad from Wisconsin, and he sent them letters, real letters, in the mail every week or two. He liked good dark jeans and wore expensive shoes. He wasn't a football fan.

"Most would call him romantic," my best friend Cecile told me last week when I told her he wanted to take me out for a "surprise." She didn't get it either—I liked to know everything that was going to happen to me. I like to be prepared. She was more of the candles and rose petals kind of gal, who worked at Victoria's Secret for four years in college and needed an extra piece of furniture for all her lingerie.

It was my fault he'd figured out my name, my real one. I had tried to be the good modern girl and whipped out my credit card on our first date in order to pay my half. He'd picked it up to hand it back, and he'd seen my full name. It was like those slow-motion moments in movies where the heroine realizes her tragic error and has to experience it in agonizing detail, in slowed-down time. That was me, screaming "Noooooooooooo" as recognition dawned in his eyes and he looked up, smiling.

"It'll be fun, really. I promise," Tim whispered in my ear as we wound our way through the tables looking for number seven. "I was in one of these productions in undergrad and it was a blast."

Our table was all the way on the other side of the room, near the doors. A man and a woman, our parents' ages and smartly dressed, were already standing by it, holding a name tag between them, admiring it and laughing, and I knew, before we even approached, what they were talking about.

"Must be part of the act," the wife said, glancing up at us with a thin smile.

"So they've got the actors sitting with us? That'll be interesting," the man answered, then tucked it back in its spot between the wine and water glass and shoved his reading glasses back in his jacket pocket.

"Table seven?" Tim asked, and shook hands with the two. "This must be us."

"I'm Maggie Thomas, and this is my husband Winston," the woman said. "We've got Nancy Drew sitting with us, apparently." She tapped the place card.

I glared at Tim, and then smiled brightly at both of them. "Yes, yes, you do. But really, I go by my middle name. Elaine."

"Did you really have to put that down?" I asked Tim.

"Your name? What would you prefer—Petunia? Snake Lips?"

I took a good look at Tim then, trying to recall that excitement I'd felt after our first date, when I'd gone home and immediately called Cecile to admit she was right: Not all men you met online were looking for someone to cook them dinner while they watched sports or were so painfully awkward you couldn't sit through coffee without daydreaming about death. We were probably a mismatch—Tim was a good-looking, blond, Midwestern boy with thick, square, black glasses and was optimistic about life; I was a sarcastic, thin, pixie-haired math tutor who lived in the apartment my parents normally rented out to college students. And yet there was something about his sort of clueless joy for things that made me laugh. He was not jaded. Yet.

The other thing I liked about Tim, I reminded myself as the evening went on, was that he was respectful to other human beings, which was not something I could say about Mr. Thomas sitting next to me. The man could not seem to move his gaze higher than my chest, making me regret my decision to put the scarf back in my closet before I left the house that evening. "Nancy Drew, huh? That's hilarious. Well, we certainly are going to solve the murder!"

Like I'd never heard that one before.

"It was my parents' idea of a cruel joke, I guess," I said. Which wasn't exactly true. My parents, who taught English at the university, were literary nerds, but they weren't mean. They were just beyond hope—their two springer spaniels' names were Iago and Esmeralda, they had bookcases built into their staircases, and my father was late to their wedding because he was finishing the last chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*. When you're that insane about words and art, you really can't help yourself. They had no idea they were dooming me to a life of puns, snide remarks, and stupid questions ("How's Ned doing?"). For a long time in college I got away with introducing myself as Elaine Drew, but once I moved back to my hometown again it was all Nancy Nancy Nancy. Once Tim found out, he couldn't help himself. I suspected part of the reason we had made it to a fourth date was because of some childhood fantasy of his rather than my charming personality and eclectic musical tastes.

A few other people joined our table and introduced themselves, but they all knew each other and immediately huddled together in their own conversation. Tim and I tried to make small talk with Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, but it wasn't working. Winston Thomas took any excuse to touch my arm or shoulder to emphasize his points, and every conversation starter anyone ventured fizzled out awkwardly. We did find out that the two of them were big crime fans, rabid Masterpiece Mystery watchers, and they usually attended these murder mysteries every semester. "He drags me to them, of course," Mrs. Thomas said. "The food is always pretty terrible." She laughed, a short bark really, and then put her hand up to the side of her lips in a mock whisper. "Iceberg lettuce and rubber chicken." She waved her manicured fingers as she talked. "The shows are a bore, the people they

sit us next to are usually a bore.” She paused and narrowed her eyes at us. “Present company excluded, I hope.”

Beside me Tim laughed, but it sounded forced.

“What do you do?” I asked Mr. Thomas, trying to change the subject. I held my water glass in front of me like a shield.

He shifted sideways and opened his legs wider. “You’re the detective, honey. You tell me.” Every time he spoke I got a whiff of horrible coffee breath.

I gave him my best *heh heh* laugh and shifted my chair slightly closer to Tim.

Mr. Thomas gave me a crooked smile and tugged on the lapel of his corduroy jacket. “I’m in the art department here at the college.”

Tim heard him and leaned in. “Nan—Elaine’s parents are in the English department here.”

“Oh, yeah?” Mr. Thomas said distractedly, shifting in his seat so he was even closer to us.

Tim nodded. “And Elaine is a teacher too.”

“Well, I tutor students for an after-school program. It’s a nonprofit.”

“Hey, can you take our picture?” Tim asked suddenly, nudging me to take out my phone.

“Sure,” Mr. Thomas said, and I reluctantly handed it over to him. I leaned back, and Tim put his arm around me and we smiled while Mr. Thomas figured out where to push the button. Beside him, his wife huffed a little and took a sip of her water, pinkie out. “There, there,” Mr. Thomas said. “See how those look. I can take more, too.”

“I’m sure that will be fine,” I said, flipping through them.

“Oh, yeah, those are good,” Tim said.

“Now you and I need to take a, what do you call them, a selfie,” Mr. Thomas said, pronouncing the word like it was some elegant foreign phrase.

I laughed. He moved closer, his face next to mine, and not knowing what else to do, I held up my phone and snapped a photo. If nothing else, Cecile would get a kick out of it later.

“There you go,” he said. “Now you have something to remember me by.”

“Oh, yeah.” I laughed. “I do.”

“Winston, did you tell her about the Pauper?” Mrs. Thomas cut in with a sharp voice. I still wasn’t sure if she hated Tim and me, or she hated her husband, or she hated everyone.

Mr. Thomas raised his bushy eyebrows at me so his wife couldn’t see, and then smiled again. “No, no.” He paused, took a sip of his water. “I was able to get a Pauper here on loan from Spain.” This was clearly a big deal to both of them, who waited for my reaction. When I just stared, Winston laughed. “You don’t know Edwin Pauper?”

“He’s hot now in the States,” Mrs. Thomas said, staring at her husband’s hand until it moved off my shoulder and back into his lap. “It’s the whole Cubist movement come back or something. I don’t really understand it—

seems so referential to me—but Winston just adores him. And now we have one of his newest paintings downstairs.”

“Wow, congratulations,” Tim said. “The only art I know is the stuff you can buy at Ikea and tack up on the wall.”

I turned toward Tim completely, making like I had something in my eye, and whispered in his ear, “I hate them. Can I request that both of them get murdered?”

“Maybe someone could beat them to a Pauper,” Tim suggested, and even though it was a stupid joke I dissolved into delightful giggles, which mercifully made Mr. Thomas turn the other way.

The show started. An actor dressed in a cheap suit, half of his hair sticking up with some lacquer gel and one side of his shirt untucked, fumbled up on the stage. “I trust that you’ve all had a chance to mingle and get to know one another,” he said. “I want to thank each one of you for coming here today. Clearly, you have a deep and passionate interest in taxidermy and believe in its preservation and chronicle of history.” A titter went around the room.

“Now, as you know, our precious museum is in jeopardy . . .”

Tim leaned over and whispered, “Next time you can pick whatever we do. Scout’s honor.” He held up his fingers.

“You were a Boy Scout too?” I asked. He winked.

My legs were freezing and I kept rubbing them to warm them up, which seemed to delight Mr. Thomas. I was sitting near one of the table legs and I kept bumping into it. I felt my phone buzz in my purse and pulled it out, checking the text message under the table. It was Cecile.

SO WHAT WAS IT?

I smirked and pulled up the photo I took with Mr. Thomas and sent it to her. A few seconds later I felt the buzzing again.

OMG, WHERE THE HELL R U? GERIATRICS R US?

I pinched my lip to keep from laughing, then Mr. Thomas leaned over and whispered in my ear. “You’re going to miss an important clue, Nancy.” I put it away, embarrassed. His wife glanced over at us and I smiled, but she didn’t smile back.

The actors went about their business, throwing very large chunks of information our way during their “conversations.” We learned the museum had been condemned some year before and a shady deal by the mayor had kept it alive. We learned the owner’s daughter was having a trashy affair with a famous taxidermist.

It didn’t take long for the first body to fall. Red blood trickled down the museum janitor’s face as he stumbled into the room and collapsed right next to our table. I watched his chest move up and down even as he tried to play dead.

“Blood pellet,” Tim whispered. “Stick ’em in your cheek and just bite down when you need it. Used to use them all the time. Tastes like cherry, if you get the expensive ones.”

A not-so-subtle “offstage” conversation behind one of the tables informed us that the museum owner and their biggest donor hated each other. I grew restless and bored and finally excused myself to run to the ladies room where I could text Cecile back in peace.

MURDER MYSTERY DINNER. THAT’S THE DUDE SITTING NEXT TO ME.

EYE ROLL, she wrote back immediately. GROAN. I WAS REALLY HOPING FOR THE BILLY JOEL CONCERT.

When I came back, the salads were being served. Mr. Thomas pushed his chair back and waved for me to sit. “My turn,” he said. “Don’t miss me too much, right?”

“I’ll try not to.”

“If you do, just call me on your phone.” He winked and pointed at it. It made me wonder if he’d seen me text his picture to Cecile, and I suddenly felt bad and buried my phone in the bottom of my bag.

As Mrs. Thomas had warned, the salads were the typical banquet affair—cold plates with a dollop of lettuce, one cherry tomato, and a sprinkle of carrots. Two dressings—buttermilk ranch and Italian—and the woman across from me used so much of the ranch that I had to scrape what was left from the bottom of the bowl with my fork. Tim picked off his tomatoes and put them on my plate without asking.

“So have you ever hosted one of these murder mysteries at your house?” Tim asked Mrs. Thomas. I imagined my future with him hosting mystery birthday parties, complete with monocles and top hats.

“No, no,” she said. “I don’t think I’d be very good at that. All that acting. I’m a terrible liar.”

“Me too,” Tim said, grinning.

By the time the waiters came by to clean up our salad plates, Winston Thomas still wasn’t back. One of them leaned in to ask Mrs. Thomas what her husband was having for dinner. She seemed to have lost some of her snootiness, and I was beginning to feel sorry for her.

“Everything okay?” I asked. She perched on the edge of her seat and scanned the crowd, where the actors were setting up again. One of the guys started dinging his water glass with a fork to get us all to shut up, so Mrs. Thomas had to whisper.

“I’m not sure where he went. I hate to ask, but can you ask your boyfriend to check out the men’s room for me? I just want—I can’t imagine what’s taking so long.”

Tim was happy to do it, even though it meant missing out on some of the great acting. I told him I’d take notes for him. I waited, half watching the antics on stage, my peripheral vision trained on the door. When Tim came back, he shook his head.

“There’s no one in the men’s room,” he said.

“Something’s happened to him,” she said.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I said. “Maybe he stepped outside for fresh air.”

“The last time Winston stepped outside for fresh air, Japan was bombing Pearl Harbor,” Mrs. Thomas said, and I laughed.

"It totally has to be part of the show," Tim said. "They probably have him in the back in a turkey costume or something silly like that. They'll pull him out here in a minute for laughs. You watch." I so wished for that, wanting to see Mr. Thomas stumbling out like a stuffed deer. It would serve him right.

"Maybe." Mrs. Thomas looked like she was about to stand up and stop the whole business. Just when things were really starting to heat up—the museum owner and the mayor's wife were whipping sexual innuendos around like beauty pageant winners tossing candy in a parade—Mrs. Thomas finally flagged a waiter over. "My husband hasn't returned from the bathroom. I'm worried. Do you know if he was asked to be part of the show?"

The waiter looked surprised. "Oh, no, ma'am, I don't think so. I'm pretty sure they don't do that sort of thing, but let me check for you." He walked off and was immediately distracted by someone else at another table complaining about a bug in their iced tea. Mrs. Thomas sighed, then got up and left. People around us were starting to stare, so I tried to settle in and watch the show. But it was hard to concentrate.

"I've got to run to the ladies' room myself. I'll go see if she's okay," I whispered to Tim. "Be right back."

"Don't you go disappearing on me," he said.

The hall outside was quiet and my footsteps echoed loudly. I turned the corner to the restrooms and saw Mrs. Thomas at the end of the hallway with someone who looked like she worked there. Mrs. Thomas's hands were flailing, and I heard the other woman say, "I'm sure it was a misunderstanding."

I slipped past them into the corridor where the men's and women's restrooms were. I didn't have the guts to go inside the men's room, but I pressed my ear up to the door briefly. Heard nothing, of course, and felt stupid doing it. Then I glanced down and saw a bright red drop glistening on the tiled floor. I knelt down and looked closer. Sure looked wet to me. I swiped a bit of paper towel from the ladies' room and bent down and dabbed at it. Bright red blood spread across the paper towel.

It all went through my head in an instant. What if something really bad had happened to Winston Thomas? My heart started thumping faster. Several years ago, my parents knew a professor who'd been jumped by a group of drunk fraternity brothers and beaten up pretty badly. And they had said that the campus police had to do regular sweeps through the library to warn students not to leave their laptops unattended. Universities felt like safe havens—easy for people to let their guard down and get in trouble.

The men's room door swung open. I stepped back and instinctively put the paper towel behind my back, crumpling it. A young man stood there, his nose cradled by a bigger, wet, wad of towel. He jumped back when he saw me.

"Sorry," I said.

"Nosebleed," he answered, dabbing at his face. He laughed nervously and turned the corner.

"So much for your brilliant detective work," I muttered to myself.

On my way back, I stepped outside for a smoke. I'd been trying to quit, but, well, yeah, we all know that story. I wondered if I might run into Mr. Thomas in the parking lot leering at someone else. He seemed like the type to just disappear while his wife worried inside. Cecile buzzed back before I could even pull out my pack of cigarettes.

SO DID YOU DITCH HIM YET? I'M OUT AT BAR TENDER SURROUNDED BY HOTTIES.

I laughed and almost bumped into someone. "Excuse me," I said, looking up, startled again at being caught reading my phone. One of Cecile's hotties, apparently, had materialized before me. A caterer with pretty amazing blue eyes stood next to his van.

"Lost?" he asked. His eyelashes were longer than Cecile's when she slathered on her Long Sexxy Lashes mascara, but the stubble and square jaw balanced out the pretty eyes and threw me speechless for a moment.

I shook my head. "No . . . uh, just looking for someone." Two older guys from the catering company glanced at us as they started pushing a cart into the building. "See any big fat jerks walk by here?"

"Big fat jerk?" He laughed. "No, I would've remembered that." He looked me over again. He was the kind of guy that Cecile would melt like hot taffy all over. "Someone stood *you* up?"

I blushed. "Nah, not like that," I said. "Are you here for the murder mystery dinner?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, laughing. "Murder is my middle name."

"You're killing me," I said reflexively.

"I am a man of mystery," he said in this odd accent, winking at me. He went to lean up against a big table sticking out of the back of the van, but he missed it and fell into the van. I laughed, unable to help myself, and could see the red creeping up his neck as he stood up and pretended to fuss with the black tablecloth covering the table.

"I totally meant to do that," he said, and when he turned back he was grinning again, and I swear my heart did a little flip. Then his face changed, and I looked back behind me. From inside the door, one of the other guys whistled sharply at the cute one, and he looked over nervously at them and then at me.

"Eh," he said, his eyes on the dudes. "Gotta get back to work. Sorry."

"I don't want to get you in trouble," I said. But I did. I really did.

He shrugged, but I could tell the party was over. All business all of a sudden. "Always on duty when I wish I wasn't. Enjoy your dinner."

I opened my mouth to say something else, anything else, but nothing came out. I walked off a little toward the curb, pretending I was checking my phone again but really just wanting to get a quick picture of him to text to Cecile, a stark contrast to the horrible photo of Mr. Thomas I'd sent

her earlier. But just as I pressed the button to take it, still pretending to type something, one of the mean-looking caterers walked out again to the van. He glanced my way and stared at me. I pulled the phone down nervously and headed quickly around the side of the building, feeling his eyes on me the whole time. It wasn't until I got well out of his sight that I checked the photo. In my haste, I'd only managed to get the back of the truck and the cute guy's elbow. Bad. I deleted it, sighed, and moved on.

Now I was kind of lost. The next set of doors I found were locked. I wandered around the entire student center in the dark and the cold, imagining at any moment that I'd bump into Mr. Thomas. I smoked two whole cigarettes before I finally found myself back to where the caterers had been, but their van was gone. And those doors were locked, too. It seemed there was no way back in for me.

"Where have you been?" Tim hissed at me when I settled back in my chair, covering my lap with my napkin and fixing my hair. I worried it might still smell of smoke. "You missed dinner completely. I was about to call in the troops myself."

"Why does everyone keep disappearing over there?" the salad dressing-stealing woman asked nosily, staring at us. "Nancy Drew, eh? Is there some crime going on we should know about? Otherwise, you've missed all the clues. And our table wins a prize if we solve it."

I ignored her and turned to Tim. "I got locked out of the building. Went out for some fresh air and couldn't get back in. Luckily that woman who checked us in heard me knocking and came and let me in. Apparently, they got some new security system today, of all times, and it switched over while we were in here, so everyone's messed up."

"You went out for fresh air? Or to find that guy?" Tim asked.

"That guy?" I thought about the long-lashed caterer for a moment and then realized who Tim meant. I pointed to Mr. Thomas's empty chair. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you like mysteries more than you want to admit."

"That's stupid." I flushed.

"Well, lucky for you they still have dessert coming around."

While they were passing out dessert (death-by-chocolate cake, obviously), Mrs. Thomas came back in. She knelt down to get her purse and her sweater. She looked white. "Are you okay?" I asked her, and she seemed startled by me.

"They can't find him. I called the house, called his cell. They told me he probably got locked out of the building, but we checked our car and he wasn't there. So I don't know."

"Do you want me to come help—us to come help?"

She shook her head. "No, no, thank you." She paused, then pointed under my chair. "Don't lose your phone," she said.

"My phone?" I asked, flustered. Why was everyone calling me out on my damn phone today? I saw my green iPod case under my chair. It must've

fallen out when I'd slipped my phone in my purse. "That's not my—Oh, wait a minute." I grabbed the case and opened it. Inside was a note I'd never seen before. I opened it and read it and looked up at Mrs. Thomas. I felt my cheeks get hot. "I know where he is."

"The sonofalyingbitch," Mrs. Thomas was saying as she, Tim, and I walked the quiet, deserted hallways where on Monday hundreds of kids would be shuttling back and forth with pizza boxes, drinking cups, books, and backpacks as they headed to and from class. I imagined Winston Thomas standing against the wall with his hands folded in front of him, watching all the girls in miniskirts or leggings wandering by. "I hope that stupid new security system did lock him in his office. I might just leave him there all night."

"I can't say I'd blame you," I told her. Winston Thomas, sly devil he was, had somehow managed to slip me a note telling me to meet him downstairs near the art exhibit where he would be happy to give me a "private tour." He must've thought my iPod case was my phone, and that was why he'd winked awkwardly before he left and told me to call him. It wasn't a dig about me being rude—it was a hint that I was supposed to be clever enough to catch.

"I'm sorry to be dragging you around like this," she said, now seeming embarrassed.

"Are you kidding? This is way more exciting," Tim said, then hurried to follow up with, "I mean, I'm sorry your husband is in trouble, though."

"In trouble? You haven't seen trouble yet," she said, sniffing. I was liking her more and more as the evening went on.

We drew to an abrupt stop in front of two double glass doors. Etched at the top of them was Patterson Art Gallery. "This was the private tour," she told us bitterly, looking me up and down again, as if she wasn't sure yet whether or not I would've taken him up on it. "Winston's office is down this way."

I held my breath as she turned the doorknob, wondering what we'd all do if Mr. Thomas was on the other side, waiting, wearing only socks or something. But the door was locked, and even though we knocked loudly and his wife threatened divorce unless he showed himself, we heard nothing but silence from the other side. "Maybe he's in the gallery?" I suggested, and we went back to the double doors.

"I'm sure it's locked," Mrs. Thomas said as she tugged, but the door opened soundlessly, knocking her off balance, and I saw why. Someone (Mr. T?) had put a piece of masking tape over the metal lock to keep it from clicking in.

We went inside. The room had the air of hushed expensiveness and felt like it hadn't been aired out properly. Directly in front of us was a giant watercolor of blue flowers. I was not into flowers enough to know what kind they were, but a little placard at the bottom right of the painting told us the name was *Blue Poppies* and it had been generously donated from

Willameen Richards's estate. "The Pauper is this way," Mrs. Thomas told us, whispering again, and we trailed behind her into a larger room with a giant empty wall in front of us. On the floor in front of the wall was a small stepladder, and there seemed to be some sawdust or shavings on the floor, but other than that, there was nothing in the room.

Mrs. Thomas gasped and turned around to us with her hand to her cheek. "It's gone," she said, eyes wide. "Someone's stolen it."

The police came. Two cruisers, their blue-and-white lights blinking ominously in the darkness outside the student union building. A man and a woman detective showed up right after the patrolmen. The man introduced himself as Detective Steel, and I was going to make a stupid joke but decided not to, and in the midst of all that I missed the woman's name. They wanted us to stay while they cleared the scene and searched.

Mrs. Thomas was in tears. Her anger at her husband about his gross flirty note had been replaced with fear. "What if they've taken him hostage?" she asked us. "Or worse." She shivered, clutching her thin sweater across her chest. I offered to give her my sweater, but she wouldn't take it. The building manager, who I'd seen earlier in the hall with Mrs. Thomas, was doing her best to comfort her, but she looked worried for her job more than anything else.

Tim and I sat on the curb together. He gave me his dinner jacket to sling over my shoulders because both our coats were still inside the building. He was trying to distract me by playing a game—name a band for each letter of the alphabet. He was stuck on the letter H and I was nibbling on my fingernail. "I mean, he was kind of a creep, but he doesn't deserve to—anything bad to happen," I said, unable to utter the word "die" aloud.

"He's gonna be okay," Tim said. "Herman's Hermits."

"Herman's Hermits? Really? Are you my dad?"

My phone buzzed. I looked down.

OMG YOU'LL NEVER GUESS WHAT HAPPENED TO ME. CALL ASAP.

Then the doors opened and the people from the murder mystery dinner came filing out. The woman from our table spotted us right away and said something to her companion, and both of them stared at us sitting next to the police cars. "I guess we missed the real action," she said to no one in particular, walking slow like she hoped someone would ask her to stop.

"So who did it?" I called out to her.

"What?"

"The murder mystery. Who was the bad guy?"

The woman snorted. "The butler. Isn't it always the butler?"

They finally let us come inside for questioning. When did Mr. Thomas go missing? What did we see? What time did everything happen? I did my best to answer, but I never wore a watch and I had been paranoid about checking my phone after Mr. Thomas gave me such grief about it. They

told us we could go, but I felt bad leaving Mrs. Thomas alone so we stayed with her.

As we waited, the building manager wanted to talk. She seemed very eager to clear herself and anyone from the university from any wrongdoing, and she seemed to want to convince us of that fact. "We have cameras everywhere. I just don't think anyone could get away without being seen. People are in and out of here all day and all night long." She tugged on a tuft of hair. "And we just reloaded the security system tonight. Imagine."

"Well," I said. "The doors don't always close. The caterers had those doors over there propped open for quite a while when they brought their stuff in, so anyone could've slipped by."

"Caterers?" she said, staring at me. Her hand dropped from her hair. "What caterers?"

"The ones for this dinner. I asked them if they'd seen Mr. Thomas."

"We don't use caterers for that dinner. We just use our in-house company. But their equipment is all stored here in the building." She was tugging on that hair again when her eyes started widening in recognition. I was already moving to Detective Steel.

Before I could open my mouth to say anything at all, the patrolmen came rushing out of the building and gestured to the female detective. "McClosky, you'd better come in here. I think we found the missing guy."

When Detective McClosky took my statement she wasn't too pleased that I couldn't remember the name on the van. "Something familiar and ordinary," I told her, waving my hand in the air like it might help. "It had a logo on it, blue I think. A blue, tiered cake maybe? Something Brothers?"

"We've got a regular Nancy Drew here," McClosky said with a snort. She smirked at me. "Sorry, couldn't resist." Tim started to laugh, but then he looked at me and stopped.

"Doesn't matter anyway," Steel said, coming up behind me. "It was probably just a decal slapped on, already swapped out. Know how many white delivery vans are in this city?"

I didn't, but he wasn't waiting around for me to play the guessing game. He was trying to get clearance to send someone over to the hospital to take Mr. Thomas's statement. After slipping me that little rendezvous note, he'd apparently gone down to the gallery to wait and see if I'd show up. Instead, he came face-to-face with the art thieves, who knocked him on the head and stuffed him in the first unlocked office they could find, right around the corner from his own office. The police had heard him moaning as they walked by. His hands had been tied behind his back with his own necktie, and he had a big gash on his forehead, but other than that it seemed he'd be back to harassing young art students in no time.

As for the caterers, I remembered the cute guy nodding when I asked if they were there for the murder mystery. "Murder is my middle name," he'd said, a stupid comment, just trying to distract me, get rid of me, when I thought maybe he was flirting. And then I thought about how Mrs.

Thomas was telling the police that the painting had been huge—not something someone could just slip under their shirt, she'd said. Big as a table, maybe? And so easy to cover with a black tablecloth . . . I suddenly figured out what had been bugging me about the cute guy. He hadn't ever actually been *unloading* anything. When I walked up behind him, he'd been pushing something *inside* the van.

"Elaine, my god, where have you been? I have the craziest story about my night." Cecile's voice sounded small and far away through my cell phone. I tried to listen while she recounted a sordid story about a guy and karaoke and lipstick, but I was distracted by Tim walking back through the door with our coats. He looked to me like the way your bed looks after a really long day. "I'm dying," Cecile said, as Tim came up and rubbed my shoulders. I leaned into him.

"That is crazy, Cec," I said. "But let's talk tomorrow, okay? It's been a long night."

"Oh, yeah, I bet." She laughed. "Can't wait to hear about the geezer murder dinner."

I hung up and sighed. "I'm beat, how about you?"

He gave me a hug. "I know you hate your name, but you were a pretty good detective tonight," he said. Then winked. "For a girl."

"Not really," I said. "McClosky seemed to think there was no way we'd catch them based on my crappy description." I scrunched my nose. "If only I'd remembered to look at the writing—" I broke, off, thinking about Cecile's story. About the guys at the bar, lipstick. Something she'd said had just triggered something in my memory, but I couldn't place it.

"You did your best, Elaine. You couldn't have known at the time that those guys were thieves."

At the time . . . It then hit me, what had been nagging me about Cecile. The picture. I had taken a picture for her, and then deleted it. "You're completely right, Tim. I couldn't have known. If I had, I wouldn't have had the nerve to try to take a photo of him."

"What?"

I told him about the photo I'd tried to take, emphasizing Cecile in all of it because I didn't want him to know that I'd thought the guy was good-looking, that I'd been flirting. "But I deleted it 'cause it sucked." I scrunched my nose. "Dammit."

"No, wait," he said. "Give me your phone." He flicked through while I stood there fiddling with the zipper on my coat. Then I saw his face transform into a slow grin. "I've got it."

"What? How?" I asked, trying to grab the phone back from him, but now his eyes were sparkling.

"There's a whole folder of 'em," he said, holding up my phone. "All your deleted photos are saved in case you push a wrong button or something. Or, you know, witness a crime." He smirked. "You take a lot of terrible selfies, by the way."

I blushed, and tried to swipe it from his hands again, but he was already hustling across the parking lot to the other entrance where the police cars had been.

Only one patrol car was left, and an officer I hadn't talked to was getting in the car. She stopped when she saw us. "Everything okay?"

"You have to call McClosky," Tim said, handing her my cell phone. "Tell her we have a picture of the van. Maybe even the license plate."

"So tell me," I said to Tim on our way back to the car after McClosky had finished with us, "did you have a crush on her when you were a kid?"

"Who?" he asked, draping his arm around me.

"Nancy Drew, of course. You really have loved all this tonight, haven't you? I can see it in your eyes."

"Not as much as you loved that caterer guy, apparently," he said. I blushed.

"He was nothing compared to you," I said, bumping into him.

Tim rolled his eyes, but it was in that good-natured way that I'd grown to like. "Sure, that's what they all say. Lucky for me, he's going to prison for many years and probably won't be as hot when he gets out." He laughed. "Hey, you know, we never got our dessert. Death by chocolate." He pointed down the street. "There's a Starbucks. Up for a late-night sweet?"

I shrugged. "Sure. I could use some coffee, maybe, too." I zipped up my jacket and poked him in the side. "But you dodged my question. Fess up. You had a thing for Nancy, didn't you?"

"Nah. More like Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

"Really? Hmm. Well, I'm glad we didn't run into the undead tonight."

"You have to admit it was more exciting than dinner and a movie." He opened the door at Starbucks and ushered me inside. The store was overheated and the smell of coffee beans relaxed me. This was nice. To just be normal people doing normal things. I leaned into Tim's side and he put his arm around me again and rubbed my shoulder. He ordered us a slice of cheesecake and a decaf cappuccino for me.

"What's the name?" the barista, a bored-looking dude with a thick beard, asked wearily as he held up the empty cup. It occurred to me we were probably going to be his last customers for the night.

"Elaine," Tim said loudly before I could answer. "E-L-A-I-N-E."

I smirked at him. "You're learning."

The barista looked up at me and smiled. "Oh, just like Seinfeld. I bet you get that all the time." 🐦