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Long Gone

Written by Alafair Burke

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ALAFAIR BURKE

LONG GONE

AVON

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In memory of David Thompson

LONG GONE

PROLOGUE: THE KISS

Alice Humphrey knew the kiss would ruin everything.

"You've heard what they say about pictures and a thousand words."

She looked up at the man—Shannon was his last name, the first hadn't registered. He was the one with the faded, reddish blond hair. Ruddy skin. Puffy, like a drinker.

She didn't like sitting beneath his eye level like this. In this tiny chair at her kitchen table, she felt small. Trapped. She mentally retraced her steps into the apartment, wondering if the seating arrangement had been planned for catastrophic effect.

Shannon and his partner—was it Danes?—had been waiting on the sidewalk outside her building. The two of them hunched in their coats and scarves, coffee cups in full-palmed grips to warm their hands, everything about their postures hinting at an invitation out of the cold. She, by contrast, hot and damp inside the fleece she had pulled on after spin class. She'd crossed her arms in front of her, trying to seal the warmth in her core as they spoke on the street, the perspiration beginning to feel clammy on her exposed face.

Shannon's eyes darted between the keys in her hands and the apartment door before he finally voiced the suggestion: "Can we maybe talk inside?"

Friendly. Polite. Deferential. The way it had been with them

yesterday morning. Only a day ago. About thirty-one hours, to be precise. They'd said at the time they might need to contact her again. But now today they suddenly appeared, waiting for her on the sidewalk without notice.

"Sure. Come on up."

They'd followed her into the apartment. She'd poured herself a glass of water. They declined, but helped themselves to seats, selecting the two kitchen bar stools. She opted for the inside chair of the two-seat breakfast table, leaving herself cornered, she now realized, both literally and figuratively. But hers was the obvious choice, the only place to sit in the small apartment and still face her unannounced guests.

She'd unzipped her fleece, and found herself wishing she'd showered before leaving the gym.

They'd eased into the conversation smoothly enough. Initial banter up the stairs about how they should both get more exercise. Just a few follow-up issues, Shannon had explained.

But there was something about the tone. No longer so friendly, polite, or deferential. The surprise visit. Her heart still pounding in her chest, sweat still seeping from her scalp, even though she had finished her workout nearly half an hour ago. Maybe it was a subconscious shaped by television crime shows, but somehow she knew why they were here—not the reasons behind the why, but the superficial why. Even before the kiss, she knew they were here about her.

And then came their questions. Her finances. Her family. The endless "tell us agains": Tell us again how you met Drew Campbell. Tell us again about this artist. Tell us again about the trip to Hoboken. Like they didn't believe her the first time.

But it wasn't until she saw the kiss that she realized her life was about to be destroyed.

Shannon had dropped the photograph on the table so casually. It was almost graceful, the way he'd extended his stubby fingers to slide the eight-by-ten glossy toward her across the unfinished pine.

She looked down at the woman in the photograph and recog-

nized herself, eyelids lowered, lips puckered but slightly upturned, brushing tenderly against the corner of the man's mouth. She appeared to be happy. At peace. But despite her blissful expression in the picture, the image shot a bolt of panic from her visual cortex into the bottom of her stomach. She inhaled to suppress a rising wave of nausea.

"You've heard what they say about pictures and a thousand words."

She'd pulled her gaze from the picture just long enough to look up at Detective Shannon. His clichéd words echoed in her ears, her pulse playing background percussion, as her eyes returned to her own image. There was no question that the man in the photograph was Drew Campbell. And even though the cognitive part of her brain was screaming at her not to believe it, she had to admit that the lips accepting his kiss were her own.

She ran her fingertips across the print, as if the woman in the picture might suddenly turn her head so Alice could say, "Sorry, I thought you were someone else." She felt the detectives looking down at her, waiting for a response, but she couldn't find words. All she could do was shake her head and stare at the photograph.

Alice Humphrey knew the kiss would destroy her life because thirty-one hours earlier she had stepped in Drew Campbell's blood on a white-tiled gallery floor. She'd fumbled for a pulse, only to feel doughy, cool skin beneath her trembling fingers. And until she'd seen this picture, she would have sworn on her very life that, other than a handshake, her palm pressed against his still carotid artery was the only physical contact she'd ever shared with the man.

She'd had a crappy year, but had never paused to appreciate the basic comforts of her life—its ordinariness, the predictability, a fundamental security of existence. All of that was in the past now.

Alice had no idea what would happen next, but she knew the photograph would shatter everything. And she knew this was only the beginning.

PART I

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

CHAPTER ONE

FOUR WEEKS EARLIER

Most of the best things in life came to Alice organically. Not because she asked. Not because she looked. Not because she forced. They happened because she stumbled onto them. The high-flying philosophical question of whether the pieces of her life fell into place through luck, randomness, fate, or unconscious intuition was way above her pay grade, but somehow things usually worked out for her.

She ended up an art major because a course she took on the art of Italian Renaissance courts turned out not to count toward her declared history concentration. She wound up back in Manhattan after college because she followed a boyfriend home. She'd found her current apartment when she overheard a man sitting next to her at a bar tell his friend that he'd been transferred to the Los Angeles office and would have to break his lease. The opportunity Drew Campbell handed to Alice came not only when she'd needed it most, but also in a way that felt exactly as it should—natural, discovered, meant to be.

The gallery was in the Fuller Building, one of her favorites. She paused on her way in to admire the art deco features dotted generously inside and out. The opening reception was the artist's first

public appearance in a decade, so she expected the exhibition to be packed. Instead she found plenty of room to pace the spacious gallery, wineglass in hand, as she leisurely studied the overlapping abstract shapes, layered so meticulously on the canvases that it seemed they might leap weightlessly from the wall and float away into the sky.

She noticed him before he ever approached her, flipping through the price list as he admired one of the larger works, a carnival scene in oil. Beneath a few days of fashionable stubble, his face was very severe in a way that was both handsome and out of place in a frou-frou gallery, but his clothing signaled he was in the right spot. She watched him speak to the emaciated, black-bunned woman she recognized as the gallery's owner. She wondered what he'd be paying for the canvas.

Alice was pleased when she felt him looking at her. Optimistic enough to meet him halfway across the gallery, she paused in front of an abstract of layered triangles and then smiled to herself as he made his way over.

"It's a shame there aren't more people here," he said. "Drew Campbell."

She returned the handshake and introduction.

"So, Alice, what are your theories about this dismal turnout?"

"It's crazy, right? You know some gallery down in Chelsea is packed tonight for a gum-chewing punk just out of art school who doodles celebrities. Meanwhile, this man could have been Jackson Pollock, and it's like Mormon night at the vodka bar in here."

The artist, Phillip Lipton, was at one time a recognized figure in the New York school of abstract expressionism, a contemporary of Pollock, de Kooning, Rauschenberg, and Kline. Apparently none of this was lost on her new acquaintance.

"I know an art dealer who used to represent him. You would not believe the player the old man used to be. You've heard of picky guys who only date skinny girls or blondes? Well, he supposedly only dated ballerinas, and yet—despite that very narrow limitation—always managed to have a new nimble babe at his side each week.

There was a joke that he must have been fattening them all up with steak and ice cream so the New York City ballet company would have to replace them one by one. He'd hold court in the Village at One if by Land."

She could picture the younger version of the artist at that restaurant, smoking cigarettes, wearing that fedora he always seemed to sport in the few photographs available of him in that era. Now Lipton was a ninety-one-year-old man whose sixty-year-old wife was brushing away crumbs from his jacket lapel at an underattended exhibition with, so far, only two "sold" tags posted, including the one the gallery owner had just slipped next to the carnival painting Drew had been admiring.

"So you're interested in art?" Drew said.

"Until recently, it was my profession." She told him about her former job at the Met, truncating the long personal story behind her dismissal. It was easier to chalk her current unemployment up to the museum budget cuts and layoffs that had made newspaper headlines.

The conversation between them came easily. He had a good, natural smile. Earnest eye contact. The appearance of a genuine interest in what she had to say. It was strange: there was nothing sexual about it, and yet she felt herself getting pulled in, not by the man's looks or charm but by the refreshing feeling of being treated as if she mattered. Not merely as her father's daughter. And not like an out-of-work single woman whose petals had already begun to wilt.

As she felt herself brightening in a way she could barely remember, it suddenly dawned on her how eight months of unemployment had taken their toll. Without even recognizing the transformation, she had started to see herself as a loser.

Alice never meant to be a thirty-seven-year-old woman without a career, but she knew that plenty of less fortunate people would question the choices she'd made along the way. Even in the beginning, she hadn't gone to one of the intellectually rigorous prep

schools that happily would have had her, opting instead to be with her more socially inclined friends. But, unlike most of them, she worked hard. She went to college—and not just a party school with a fancy reputation, but an actual school known for its academics.

Granted, it was a funky liberal arts college and not an Ivy League, and then followed by the few requisite years of postcollege floundering that were typical for her crowd. The two-year stint as a publicist for a cosmetics company. That disastrous three-year marriage in St. Louis before she'd realized her mistake. But she'd started over, returning to school for her master's in fine arts. And when she was finished, she'd gone to work in the development office of what she believed to be the most impressive building in the world—the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Now, in hindsight, she realized how silly and indulgent all of those choices had been. Her parents spent a fortune on high school tuition just so she'd land at an even more expensive college that no one aside from a few tweed-jacketed PhDs had heard of. Then she double-downed with that graduate degree.

When she'd landed the job at the Met, she'd been stupid enough to believe she'd earned it. Maybe if she had been hired for merit—her knowledge of art, her ability to raise money, her marketing experience, a demonstrated skill at something—she'd still be there in her cubicle above Central Park, quietly drafting the pamphlet to announce the upcoming Chuck Close exhibit to the museum's most generous donors.

Or if she had at least recognized the truth, maybe she would have predicted that a decision in her personal life would affect her employment. She would have realized how ridiculous she must have looked when she'd announced to her father that she no longer wanted his help. No more rent payments or annual "gifts." Her absolute insistence: *No more help, Papa.*

Well, unbeknownst to her, some of his help had being going to the museum, and when the donations dried up and the Met had to make layoffs, she was among the first on the chopping block.

It wasn't until she updated her résumé that she realized that her

adult life didn't exactly add up to the perfect formula for employment in the current economy. In the eight months that had passed since her layoff, she had been offered precisely one job: personal assistant to a best-selling crime novelist. A friend who knew of Alice's plight was among a fleet of the man's rotating companions and suggested her for the job. She warned Alice that the man could be frugal, so when he wanted Alice to return his half-eaten carton of yogurt to the deli because he didn't like the "seediness" of the raspberry flavor, Alice had sprung for the new $1.49 carton of smooth blueberry. The friend had also warned Alice of his "nonconformist" ways, so Alice compliantly agreed when he'd asked her to restrain him atop his dining room table so he could figure out how his character might escape his predicament. But she had finally pulled the plug when the boss's two questionable characteristics merged together in a single request: that she personally participate in a three-way with him and a hired escort so he could collect "quotidian details" of the experience without paying double.

Alice promptly resigned, but still kicked herself at the manner in which she'd done it—blaming it on his erratic hours instead of raising her knee directly into the glorified subject of most of his research. Maybe it was because she'd been thinking about that short-lived job—and the belittlement it still invoked—that she wanted to believe the part of the conversation with Drew Campbell that came next.

"Would you be interested in managing a gallery of your own?"

Normally, she would have choked on her wine at the absurdity of the question, but Drew floated it past her in a way that felt as natural as an observation about the weather.

"Of course. I always assumed I'd work in the art world in some way or another. I think I just underestimated how hard it was to get and keep this kind of work."

The art world, as even tonight's featured artist exemplified, was a young person's domain. And Alice was a woman. And she wasn't even an artist. And at thirty-seven, she was already past her prime.

"I'll have to check on a few things, but you might be the perfect person for a new gallery I'm helping with."

"What kind of position?"

"Manager. It's a small place, but we need someone who will really pour themselves into it."

She was unemployed. Her last job was fetching coffee for a sociopath who should probably be on a sex offender registration. It was hard to believe anyone legitimate would hand her the keys to a gallery. Her skepticism must have shown in her face.

"Now don't go picturing a gallery like this. And I should probably warn you, it's a bit of a risk as far as employment goes. I've got a client—a guy I've bought art for—he's what his friends call eccentric. If he didn't have money, they'd call him a nutcase."

"Eccentric? I've fallen for that line before."

"Trust me. It's nothing weird. This is one of my oldest clients. He was a friend of my father's, actually, so he's been letting me help him out for years. With time, he's come to really trust me. Turns out he's a quiet old guy who likes the company of younger men. He treats them well, and they provide companionship, if you know what I mean."

"Not exactly subtle."

"Anyway, his most recent friend has been in the picture longer than most, and I guess my client is ready to provide a more substantial level of support. He wants a modest little gallery to showcase emerging artists. Of course one of the artists will have to be his friend. This kid's gotten his work in a few group showings, but he still hasn't landed a solo exhibit at a New York gallery."

"But thanks to your client, he'll soon be a featured artist."

"Exactly. And I'm sure he'll be very grateful to my client for the support."

"You keep referring to him as 'your client.' "

"Trust me. You've heard of him. And while there have been rumors about his personal life for decades, it's all unconfirmed, so I'm not about to out him. But, I kid you not, he is a serious collector. That piece I just held is for him. If I can find the right space and the right person to run a gallery, he won't get in the way. He won't even take credit for owning it. But he'll want it to be a place

he'd be proud of. Cutting edge. A little antiestablishment, but really good stuff. This would be a good opportunity for someone in your shoes."

"Sounds like a good opportunity for anyone."

He shrugged. "I've quietly spoken to a few people, and they wouldn't pull the trigger. They're worried the owner will move on to some other passion project—a gallery today, a gourmet hamburger stand tomorrow. Then there's my client's consort to worry about. He can't be thrown to the wayside like any other artist."

"Not everyone would be so forthcoming about the backstory."

"I'm not willing to burn bridges to satisfy the whims of a fickle old man, even if I do love him like my own closeted gay uncle. Some of the more established people I've approached just aren't willing to take the leap under the circumstances. You might not have the luxury of their worries."

"If that's a nice way of saying beggars can't be choosers, consider yourself begged."

Like a teenage girl going home after her first concert, Alice left the gallery with a signed brochure from the exhibit and a feeling that the person she had met there just might change her life.

CHAPTER TWO

Becca Stevenson had a secret.

Two secrets, really, tied together by the shiny gadget held between her fingertips.

C'mon. Just a little peek. I won't tell anyone.

She'd read those words over and over again. Only a minute or two had passed since they'd first appeared on the screen, but the stillness felt like an eternity. Not that there was actual stillness. She heard the New Jersey Transit guy announce, once again, the delay of the train arriving from Hackettstown. Heard the toddler on the next bench pester his mother for more Goldfish crackers. Heard the woman across from her "whispering" into her cell phone, insisting that the person on the other end of the line explain why he hadn't picked up last night, even though she hit redial until two in the morning.

But despite the noise of the train station, Becca felt stillness. In her head. In her hands. In her heart. She and Dan had been texting for nearly two weeks now, and they had developed a quick rhythm, responding to one another within a few seconds. Or, at least, she responded within a few seconds. So did he, usually. But like any conversation, even the best ones, their back-and-forths had to stop sometime. There had been occasions when she was tempted to be the one who cut off the banter—maybe politely, with a "gotta go" or "bye for now"—but it was always Dan who called it quits, sud-

denly falling quiet without warning. But he always came back, to her initial surprise and now delight.

She hadn't deleted a single entry. Their list of messages, cataloged in neat little green and white boxes of text, numbered well into the hundreds. Sometimes at night in her bed, she would scroll up to the very beginning and relive the entirety of their printed relationship on the backlit screen.

There had been so many sweet and funny and clever moments in their clipped exchanges, but probably no single message was as exciting as that first pop-up on her screen. The first text message she had ever received, just two days after pocketing her secret toy.

Sophie gave me your number. Do you mind? You seem fun. P.S. This is Dan Hunter.

Dan Hunter? Dan Fucking Hunter was texting Becca Stevenson? She'd been watching him silently since the seventh grade, when he was the first kid to download My Chemical Romance on his iPod. He'd been cute and funny even then. Now he was a jock who had dated three different cheerleaders, but she always sensed that he had another side to him. He listened to eighties punk music. Wore a lot of black, at least for a basketball player. And he was one of the first guys in school to get a tattoo. The fact that he was interested in her just proved he hid a little "alt" in him.

When he first contacted her, she didn't know what to think or feel, let alone say. She'd finally opted for casual and a little cool.

No problem. Sophie's my girl.

Of course, despite the chill attitude of her texts, she'd immediately chased down Sophie for the details.

"Holy shit, Becca. I looked up from my locker, and Dan Hunter and all his sweeping hair and blue eyes and big muscles are staring back at me, fucking confusing me, you know?"

Sophie was such a nerd with her baby-length bangs, black-framed glasses, and ridiculous SAT words, but deep down, she was pretty much the best friend Becca had ever had.

"And, what? He just asked for my number?"

"He said he saw you sneaking glances at your phone all the way

through history class. I can't believe you haven't gotten busted for that yet. You know the school's zero-tolerance policy."

"Can you please skip the lecture? I seriously need every detail."

"There's no detail to give. He said he saw you fiddling in class and wanted to text you. He said you were cute."

"He said I was cute?"

"Oh, Jesus. Who swapped my friend with Hannah Montana?"

It hadn't been easy, but Becca had finally gotten Sophie to admit that Dan did have a special spark. And his texts were so . . . not what she'd expected. Cool. Almost kind of deep.

And it hadn't just been the messages. They'd been meeting. First behind the mall. Once at his house when his parents were out of town. There'd been a few times at the baseball field, kissing and whatever. But then three nights ago, it had been an invitation to meet him in the city. And his friends had been there. Friends from the team. Even a couple of cheerleaders. Becca had been nervous at first. She couldn't possibly fit in. But they'd been pretty cool with her. Dan was already talking about going to the city with her again.

And now Dan was asking her for more: *C'mon. Just a little peek. I won't tell anyone.* She found herself tempted. Liked the idea of being the kind of girl who could titillate a guy like Dan Hunter. Just a little peek.

She could slip into the ladies' room. Make sure to reveal the background. Make it a little raunchy.

A new message popped up on the screen. *You know you want to.*

He was right. She did.

No. It was better to make him work for it a little longer. Play hard to get. Make sure this was for real before giving him what he wanted.

She typed a response: *Very tempting. And very soon.*

That should serve its purpose. Buy her a little time.

In the meantime, she had someone else to meet. She saw the minivan pull up in front of the train station. Her ride was here. She had two secrets. Dan Hunter and the man whom she'd been meeting here nearly once a week for the last two months. They both made her feel special in ways she'd never known before.

CHAPTER THREE

Four days after Alice first met Drew Campbell at the Fuller Building, the conversation that once held life-changing promise now seemed like nothing but heady party talk.

"I hate to say I told you so." Lily's dark green eyes smiled at her over the rim of the Bloody Mary she was sipping on the other side of the tiny bistro table.

"Oh, yes. I know how much it pains you to be right. I mean, as pain goes, having to say you told me so is way up there: hot tar, waterboarding, the iron maiden."

Lily had skipped out of work early to meet her for a late lunch at Balthazar. Unfortunately, they weren't the only New Yorkers with fantasies of a leisurely afternoon spent lounging at a Parisian-style brasserie, authentically re-created in SoHo. Even at three o'clock, they'd had to wait thirty minutes for their postcard-sized table. Still, as Alice broke off another chunk of baguette, she had no regrets.

"What is an iron maiden anyway?" she asked.

"No clue," Lily said, tucking a loose strand of her pixie cut tightly behind her left ear before reaching for another *moule*. "At the very least it inspired years of big-hair, leather-pants metal music. Torture enough as far as I'm concerned."

"Thanks for kicking out of work early. You sure you won't earn the Gorilla's wrath?"

Lily was an editor for a travel magazine where her boss was so notorious for picking at her every move that he'd earned a special nickname. "Are you shitting me? There's no such thing as a wrathless half day. When he saw me walking out with my coat, he made sure to tell me he needed that piece on Florence tomorrow morning when it wasn't supposed to be due until Friday. Good thing for me it's pretty much done already."

Alice had met Lily in a spin class at her gym last summer. Their friendship had started with occasional groans about their shared discomfort as they grew accustomed to all that time spent bouncing on a bicycle seat. Then they'd moved on to casual conversations in the locker room after class. Once they realized they were both single and lived within a few blocks of the gym, they exchanged cell phone numbers with a promise of meeting in the neighborhood for a spontaneous drink.

Usually those "sometime we should" occasions were nothing but idle talk—imagined time people might spend if their lives weren't already cluttered and prescheduled—but Lily had actually called. About three drinks in that first night, they figured out that they'd spent their lives only a few degrees of separation from each other. Lily was three years older than Alice and was raised in Westchester, but had traveled in the same rebellious circles as Alice's older brother.

Now, six months into their friendship, Alice felt like she'd known Lily for years. And it was a comfortable kind of friendship. Unlike a lot of her other friends, Lily took Alice's last name in stride. She never asked for screening videos, for an autograph, or that annoying question that made Alice want to throw something: "What was it like to grow up with your father?" And unlike Alice's friends with similarly privileged upbringings, she had never once told Alice to run back to her parents for financial support. Most importantly of all, Lily Harper was honest. She was one of those rare friends who would tell someone what she needed to hear, not what she wanted. And when Alice had first called her after leaving the Fuller Building that night, Lily had told Alice that Drew Campbell was full of

shit. Now, four days later, they were rehashing the case against him once again.

"I mean, you just happen to be unemployed, and he just happens to have the perfect job for you? A wealthy anonymous benefactor who will pay for the studio but allow you to run it? The kept young artist who has captured the closeted old man's heart?"

"I know, I know. You told me so. It was too good to be true."

"Well, I do hate to say it. The guy was just trying to get in your pants."

"Black pencil skirt actually. With tights."

"Fine, then—up your skirt and down your Spanxie pants. I swear, Alice. I might have to take away your Sisters in Cynicism membership card for this one. You can't tell when a guy's running a line on you?"

"You had to be there. He seemed legit."

"The good ones always do. How many women on the Sunday-morning walk of shame are saying the same thing? Tell it to the nurse at the STD clinic."

With the cacophony of the brasserie in full effect, Alice would not have known about the incoming call had she not felt the subtle vibration of her cell phone from her handbag against her thigh. She was about to ignore it but knew that if she didn't at least check the screen—as she had every twenty minutes for the last four days—she'd spend the rest of her lunch with Lily wondering maybe, just maybe.

She felt a tiny glimmer of hope when she read "Blocked" on the caller ID. Any of her usual callers—mom, brother, Jeff (who escaped all meaningful labels)—would have popped up in her directory. Lily nodded at her to take the call.

"Hello?" She used her index finger to plug her unoccupied ear and ignored the irritated stares of her fellow diners as she made her way to the front entrance.

By the time Alice returned to her table ten minutes later, Lily had finished her Bloody Mary and was playing a game on her phone. Alice's other friends would have either scolded her for disappear-

ing so long or dropped some passive-aggressive comment about the boredom during the wait.

Not Lily.

"That call certainly put a smile on your face. I could see that goofy grin all the way from here. Jeff back in town?"

The unlabeled relationship she shared with Jeff Wilkerson had more ups, downs, and lateral turns than she could track over the years, but had last been on an upswing before he'd left town for a one-week trip to the West Coast.

"Nope. That, my dear friend who hates to say 'I told you so,' was the one and only Drew Campbell, art collector to the rich and famous."

"Let me guess: the gallery fell through, but he thought you might want to meet him for a drink anyway."

"Nope."

"Okay. He's dangling the job in front of you and wants to meet for dinner to discuss it further."

"Nope."

"My guesses are up. Just tell me."

"His client wants to go forward, and Drew wanted to know if the new manager—aka *moi*—can meet him at a space he's about to lease in the Meatpacking District."

Lily said nothing as a busboy added their empty plates to his already chest-high pile of white dishes.

"This is where you remind me he's full of shit, right?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You're supposed to warn me that when I get there, he'll have some story about the gallery falling through. Or the space will be unavailable. Or there will be a delay in the financing. But then he'll happen to know about a great bar nearby for a little chat."

"Sounds like you're doing a good enough job warning yourself."

"Maybe I should call him back. I can just say I found another opportunity."

"When does he want you to meet him?"

"Tomorrow at eleven."

"A.m.?"

"Of course. I really would deserve to lose my membership card if I fell for a business appointment near midnight."

"And that's it? He wants you to see the gallery space?"

"And to bring a résumé so he can do the requisite due diligence. All official-like."

Still, Lily said nothing.

"Go ahead and say it."

"What? I didn't say a word."

"You don't have to. I've got to admit, I'm thinking it myself. It's too good to be true. We've been running through all of the many reasons to blow this guy off for the last four days. Remember?"

"I remember."

"But?"

"But nothing. It's totally up to you."

"There has to be a catch, right?"

"Seemed so when the asshole wasn't calling. Now the asshole's calling with the perfect job."

"Jesus, you are such a contrarian."

"Am not," she said, sticking out her tongue.

"So, all right. I'll meet the man tomorrow. With my Sisters in Cynicism membership fully updated. Bullshit meter on high alert."

"And Mace," Lily added. "A little Mace never hurt anyone."

As she did more often than she would have liked, Alice allowed Lily to leave enough cash on the table to cover both of their meals. In the pattern that had developed, Alice would soon return the favor, but at a less expensive establishment.

"Oh, and Alice?" Lily's tone softened as she placed a reassuring hand on Alice's forearm. "I really do hope this is the real thing."