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Metro Girl

Janet Evanovich

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Just because I know how to change a guy's oil doesn't mean I want to spend the rest of my life on my back, staring up his undercarriage. Been there, done that. Okay, so my dad owns a garage. And okay, I have a natural aptitude for rebuilding carburetors. There comes a time in a girl's life when she needs to trade in her mechanic's overalls for a pair of Manolo Blahnik stilettos. Not that I can afford a lot of Manolos, but it's a goal, right?

My name is Alexandra Barnaby, and I worked in my dad's garage in the Canton section of Baltimore all through high school and during summer breaks when I was in college. It's not a big fancy garage, but it holds its own, and my dad has a reputation for being an honest mechanic.

When I was twelve my dad taught me how to use an acetylene torch. After I mastered welding, he gave me some spare parts and our old lawn mower, and I built myself a go-cart. When I was sixteen, I started rebuilding a ten-year-old junker Chevy. I turned it into a fast car. And I raced it in the local stocks for two years.

'And here she comes, folks,' the announcer would say. 'Barney Barnaby. Number sixteen, the terror of Baltimore County. She's coming up on the eight car. She's going to the inside. Wait a minute, I see flames coming from sixteen. There's a lot of smoke now. Looks like she's blown another engine. Good thing she works in her dad's garage.'

So I could build cars, and I could drive cars. I just never got the hang of driving them without destroying them.

'Barney,' my dad would say. 'I swear you blow those engines just so you can rebuild them.'

Maybe on an *un*conscious level. The brain is a pretty weird thing. What I knew was that on a *conscious* level, I hated losing. And I lost more races than I won. So, I raced two seasons and packed it in.

My younger brother, Wild Bill, drove, too. He never cared if he won or lost. He just liked to drive fast and scratch his balls with the rest of the guys. Bill was voted Most Popular of his senior class and also Least Likely to Succeed.

The class's expectation for Bill's success was a reflection of Bill's philosophy of life. *If work was any fun, it would be called play*. I've always been the serious kid, and Bill's always been the kid who knew how to have a good time. Two years ago, Bill said *good-bye* Baltimore and *hello* Miami. He liked the lazy hot sun, the open water, and the girls in bikinis.

Two days ago, Bill disappeared off the face of the earth. And he did it while I was talking to him. He woke me up with a phone call in the middle of the night.

'Barney,' Bill yelled over the phone line. 'I have to leave Miami for a while. Tell Mom I'm okay.'

I squinted at my bedside clock. Two AM. Not late for Bill who spent a lot of time in South Beach bars. Real late for me who worked nine to five and went to bed at ten.

'What's that noise?' I asked him. 'I can hardly hear you.'

'Boat engine. Listen, I don't want you to

worry if you don't hear from me. And if some guys show up looking for me, don't tell them anything. Unless it's Sam Hooker. Tell Sam Hooker he can kiss my exhaust pipe.'

'Guys? What guys? And what do you mean, don't tell them anything?'

'I have to go. I have to . . . *oh shit*.'

I heard a woman scream in the background, and the line went dead.

Baltimore is cold in January. The wind whips in from the harbor and slices up the side streets, citywide. We get a couple snowstorms each year and some freezing rain, but mostly we get bone-chilling gray gloom. In the midst of the gray gloom, pots of chili bubble on stoves, beer flows like water, sausages are stuffed into hard rolls, and doughnuts are a necessity to survival.

Miami, it turns out, is *hot* in January. I'd taken the midday flight out of BWI, arriving in Miami midafternoon. When I left home I was wrapped in a quilted down-filled coat, cashmere Burberry scarf, fleece-lined boots, and heavy-duty shearling mittens. Perfect for Baltimore. Not great for Miami. On arrival, I'd crammed the scarf and mittens into the medium-size duffel bag that hung from my

shoulder, wrapped my coat around the duffel bag handle, and went in search of the taxi stand. Sweat was soaking into my Victoria's Secret Miracle Bra, my hair was plastered to my forehead, and I was sucking in air that felt like hot soup.

I'm thirty years old now. Average height and average build. I'm not movie-star gorgeous, but I'm okay. My hair is naturally mousy brown, but I started bleaching it blond when I decided to stop being a grease monkey. It's currently platinum and cut in a medium-length shaggy kind of style that I can punk up with paste if the occasion arises. I have blue eyes, a mouth that's a little too big for my face, and a perfect nose inherited from my Grandma Jean.

My parents took Bill and me to Disney World when I was nine. That's the extent of my in-the-flesh Florida experience. The rest of my Florida knowledge consists mainly of horrific bug stories from my mom's friend Elsie Duchen. Elsie winters in Ocala with her daughter. Elsie swears there are cockroaches as big as cows in Florida. And she says they can fly. I'm here to tell you, if I see a cow-size cockroach fly by, I'm gone.

I gave Bill's address to the cabdriver, and I

sat back and watched Miami roll past the window. In the beginning there was a lot of concrete road stretching forward into a confusing jumble of intersections and turnoffs. The turnoffs spiraled away to super highways. And the super highways flattened and went on forever. After a few minutes the Miami skyline appeared in the distance, in front of me, and I had the feeling I was on the road to Oz. Palm trees lined the road. The sky was azure. Cars were clean. Exotic stuff for a girl from Baltimore.

We rolled across the Causeway Bridge, leaving Miami behind, moving into Miami Beach. My stomach felt hollow, and I had a white-knuckle grip on my bag. I was worried about Bill, and my anxiety was increasing as we drew closer to his apartment. Hey, I told myself. Relax. Pry your fingers off the bag. Bill's okay. He's always okay. Like a cat. Lands on his feet. True, he wasn't answering his phone. And he hadn't reported in for work. No reason to panic. This was Wild Bill. He didn't always prioritize in the normal fashion.

This was the guy who missed his high school graduation because en route to the ceremony he found an injured cat on the side of the road.

He took the cat to the vet and wouldn't leave until the cat was out of surgery and awake. Of course, he could probably still have made the ceremony if only he hadn't felt the need to seduce the vet's assistant in examining room number three.

The troublesome part about my late-night phone call from Bill was the woman screaming. This was a new twist on Bill's usual call. My mother would freak if she knew about the call, so I'd said nothing and boarded a plane.

My plan was to somehow get into Bill's apartment and make sure he wasn't lying on the floor dead. If he wasn't dead on the floor and he wasn't hanging out watching television, my next stop would be the marina. He was on a boat when he called me. I thought I might have to find the boat. Beyond that, I was clueless.

The Causeway Bridge fed into Fifth Avenue in South Beach. Fifth was three lanes in each direction with a grassy island in the middle. Businesses lined both sides of the road. The driver turned right at Meridian Avenue, went one block, and pulled to the curb.

I was in a neighborhood of single-family bungalows and blocky two-story stucco

apartment buildings. The lots were small. The vegetation was jungle. Cars were parked bumper to bumper on both sides of the two-lane street. Bill's apartment building was yellow with turquoise and pink trim and looked a lot like a cheap motel. There were wrought iron security bars on the windows. In fact, most of the buildings on the street had barred windows. In Baltimore, bars on windows would be found in conjunction with gang graffiti, street garbage, burned-out crack houses, and broken-down cars. None of those things were present in this neighborhood. This neighborhood looked modest but neatly maintained.

I paid the driver and trudged up the walkway that led to the apartment entrance. Moss grew between paving stones, overgrown flowering bushes and vines spilled onto the sidewalk and raced up the yellow stucco building, and the air smelled sweet and chemical. Bug spray, I thought. I was probably a step behind the exterminator. Best to keep my eye out for the cow-size cockroach. Lizards skittered across the walk in front of me and clung to the stucco walls. I didn't want to prejudge Miami Beach, but the lizards weren't doing a lot for me.

The building was divided into six apartments. Three up and three down. Six front doors on the ground level. Bill lived in an end apartment on the second floor. I didn't have a key. If he didn't answer his doorbell, I'd try the neighbors.

I rang the bell and looked at the door. There were fresh gouges in the wood around the lock and the dead bolt. I tried the doorknob and the door swung open. *Damn*. I'm not an expert on criminal behavior, but I didn't think this was a good sign.

I pushed the door farther open and looked inside. Small entrance foyer with stairs leading up to the rest of the apartment. No sounds drifting down to me. No television, talking, scuffling around.

'Hello?' I called. 'I'm coming up, and I have a gun.' This was a big fat lie shouted out for a good cause. I figured in case there were bad guys going through the silverware drawer this would encourage them to jump out the window.

I waited a couple beats and then I cautiously crept up the stairs. I've never thought of myself as being especially brave. Aside from my short career at racing stocks, I don't do a lot of wacky,

risky things. I don't like scary movies or roller coasters. I never wanted to be a cop, firefighter, or superhero. Mostly my life has been putting one foot in front of the other, moving forward on autopilot. My family thought it took guts for me to go to college, but the truth is, college was just a way to get out of the garage. I love my dad, but I was up to here with cars and guys who knew nothing else. Call me picky, but I didn't want a romantic relationship where I was second in line to a customized truck.

I got to the top of the stairs and froze. The stairs opened to the living room, and beyond the living room I could see into the small kitchen. Both rooms were a wreck. Couch cushions had been thrown onto the floor. Books were pulled off shelves. Drawers had been wrenched out of cabinets, and the drawer contents scattered. Someone had trashed the apartment, and it wasn't Bill. I'd seen Bill's style of mess. It ran more to dirty clothes on the floor, food stuck to the couch, and a lot of empty beer cans, everywhere. That's not what I was seeing here.

I whirled around and flew down the stairs. I was out the door, on the sidewalk in seconds. I stood facing the building, staring up at Bill's

apartment, gulping air. This was something that happened in movies. This didn't happen in real life. At least it didn't happen in *my* real life.

I stood there trying to pull myself together, listening to the steady drone of traffic a block away on Fifth. There was no visible activity in the apartment building in front of me. No doomsday cloud hanging overhead. An occasional car cruised by, but for the most part, the street was quiet. I had my hand to my heart, and I could feel that my heartbeat was improving. Probably it had even dropped below stroke level.

All right, let's get a grip on what happened here. Someone tossed Bill's apartment. Fortunately, they seemed to be gone. *Unfortunately*, Bill seemed to be gone, too. Probably I should go back and take another look.

The voice of reason started yelling at me inside my head. What are you, nuts? Call the police. A crime was committed here. Stay far away.

Then the voice of the responsible older sister spoke up. Don't be so cowardly. At least do a walk-through. Bill's not always so smart.

Remember the time he 'borrowed' Andy Wimmer's classic GTO from the garage so he could take his buddies on a joyride and ended up in jail? And what about the time he 'borrowed' a keg from Joey Kowalski's bar for his Super Bowl party. Maybe you don't want to get the police involved right away. Maybe you want to try to figure out what's going on first.

Good grief, the voice of reason said.

Shut up, or I'll bitch slap you into tomorrow, the sister voice said to the voice of reason.

Bottom line is, the sister voice grew up in a garage in Baltimore.

I blew out a sigh, hoisted my duffel bag higher on my shoulder, and marched back into the apartment building and up the stairs. I set my bag on the floor, and I studied the room. Someone had been looking for something, I decided. They'd either been in a hurry or they'd been angry. You could conduct a search without making a mess like this.

It wasn't a big apartment. Combination living room and dining room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. The door to the medicine chest was open in the bathroom but not much else was touched. Not much you can do when

tossing a bathroom, eh? The top to the toilet tank was on the floor. No stone unturned.

I crept into the bedroom and looked around. Clothes were strewn everywhere. The drawer from the small chest beside the bed was on the floor, and condoms, still in their wrappers, were scattered across the carpet. *Lots* of condoms. Like the entire drawer had been filled with condoms. Yep, this was Bill's apartment, I thought. Although the number of condoms seemed optimistic, even for Bill.

The television and DVD player were untouched. Scratch drug-induced burglary off the list of possibilities.

I went back to the kitchen and poked around, but I didn't find anything of interest. No address book. No notes detailing criminal activity. No maps with an orange trip line. I was feeling more comfortable in the apartment. I'd been there for fifteen minutes and nothing bad had happened. No one had rushed up the stairs wielding a gun or a knife. I hadn't discovered any bloodstains. Probably the apartment was really safe, I told myself. It's already been searched, right? There's no reason for the bad guys to come back.

The marina was next up. Bill worked on a

corporate boat owned by Calflex. The boat's name was *Flex II*, and it sailed out of Miami Beach Marina. I'd gotten a map and a guidebook at the airport. According to the map, I could walk to the marina. I'd be a puddle of sweat if I walked in my present clothes, so I changed into a short pink cotton skirt, white tank top, and white canvas tennis shoes. Okay, so I'm a bleached blond and I like pink. Get over it.

I'd looked for a second set of keys while picking through the mess on Bill's kitchen floor. I wanted to leave my duffel bag in the apartment when I went to the marina. I hoped the front door could still be locked. And if I could get it to lock I'd need a key to get back in.

Normally, people keep extra keys on hooks in the kitchen or by the door. Or they were kept in kitchen or bedroom drawers with a collection of odds-and-ends junk. Or, if you were frequently hung over and tended to lock yourself out in your underwear when you stepped off the stoop to retrieve your morning paper, you might hide the keys outside.

I slipped my purse over my shoulder and went downstairs, carefully leaving the door

open behind me. At home we kept our emergency keys in fake dog poop. My father thinks fake dog poop is hilarious. Tells everyone. Half of Baltimore knows to look for fake dog poop if they want to burgle our house.

I snooped under an overgrown bush to the right of the front stoop and *bingo*. Fake dog poop. I removed the keys from inside the pile of poop. A house key and a car key. I tried the house key, and it fit Bill's front door. I locked up and followed the path to the sidewalk. I pressed the panic button on the remote gizmo attached to the car key, hoping to find Bill's car among the cars parked there. Nothing happened. None of the parked cars responded. I had no idea what Bill drove. No logo on the key. I aimed the remote toward the other end of the street and didn't get a hit there either.

I set off on foot and found the marina four blocks later. It was hidden behind a strip of condos and commercial real estate, barely visible from the road. I crossed a parking lot, aiming the remote around the lot as I walked. None of the cars beeped or flashed their lights. I crossed a small median of grass and flowers and stepped onto a wide concrete sidewalk that ran the length of the marina. Palm trees lined

both sides of the walkway. Very neat. Very pretty. Wood docks with slips poked into the channel. There were maybe ten docks in all, and most of the slips on those docks were filled. Powerboats at one end. Sailboats at the other end.

The huge cranes that serviced container ships off-loading at the Port of Miami were visible directly across the channel. Because I'd studied the map, I knew Fisher Island sat offshore, at the mouth of the harbor. From where I stood I could see the clusters of white stucco high-rise condos on Fisher. The orange Spanish tile roofs sparkled in the sunlight, the ground floors were obscured by palms and assorted Florida greenery.

There were white metal gates at the entrance to each of the marina docks. The signs on the gates read NO ROLLER-BLADING, SKATEBOARDING, BICYCLE RIDING, FISHING, OR SWIMMING. OWNERS AND GUESTS ONLY.

A small round two-story structure perched at the end of one of the docks. The building had good visibility from the second floor, with green awnings shading large windows. The sign on the gate for that dock told me this was Pier E, the dockmaster's office. The gate was closed,

and yellow crime scene tape cordoned off an area around the dockmaster's building. A couple cops stood flat-footed at the end of the dock. A crime scene police van was parked on the concrete sidewalk in front of the white metal gate.

Ordinarily this sort of thing would generate morbid curiosity in me. Today, the crime scene tape at the dockmaster's office made me uneasy. I was looking for my missing brother, last heard from on board a boat.

I watched a guy leave the dockmaster's office and walk toward the gate. He was midthirties, dressed in khakis and a blue button-down shirt with sleeves rolled. He was carrying something that looked like a toolbox, and I guessed he belonged to the crime scene van. He pushed through the closed gate and our eyes made contact. Then his eyes dropped to my chest and my short pink skirt.

Thanks to my Miracle Bra there was an inch of cleavage peeking out from the scoop neck of my tank top, encouraging the plainclothes cop guy to stop and chat.

'What's going on out there?' I asked him.

'Homicide,' he said. 'Happened Monday night. Actually around three AM on Tuesday. I'm

surprised you didn't see it in the paper. It was splashed all over the front page this morning.'

'I never read the paper. It's too depressing. War, famine, homicides.'

He looked like he was trying hard not to grimace.

'Who was killed?' I asked.

'A security guard working the night shift.'

Thank God, not Bill. 'I'm looking for the Calflex boat,' I said. 'I don't suppose you'd know where it is?'

His gaze shifted to the water and focused one dock down. 'Everyone knows the Calflex boat,' he said. 'It's the one at the end of the pier with the helicopter on deck.'

That was the boat Bill was working? It was the largest boat at the marina. It was gleaming white and had two full decks above water. The top deck held a little blue-and-white helicopter.

I thanked the cop guy and headed for *Flex II*. I ignored the gate and the sign that said owners and guests, and I walked out onto the wood-planked pier. A guy was standing two slips down from *Flex II*, hands on hips, looking royally pissed off, staring into an empty slip. He was wearing khaki shorts and a ratty, faded blue T-shirt. He had a nice body.

Muscular without being chunky. My age. His hair was sun-bleached blond and a month overdue for a cut. His eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses. He turned when I approached and lowered his glasses to better see me.

I grew up in a garage in the company of men obsessed with cars. I raced stocks for two years. And I regularly sat through family dinners where the entire conversation consisted of NASCAR statistics. So I recognized Mr Sun-bleached Blond. He was Sam Hooker. The guy Bill had said could kiss his exhaust pipe. Sam Hooker drove NASCAR. He'd won twice at Daytona. And I guess he'd won a bunch of other races, too, but I didn't pay close attention to NASCAR anymore. Mostly what I knew about Sam Hooker I knew from the dinner table conversation. He was a good ol' boy from Texas. A man's man. A ladies' man. A damn good driver. And a jerk. In other words, according to my family, Sam Hooker was typical NASCAR. And my family loved him. Except for Bill, apparently.

I wasn't surprised to find that Bill knew Hooker. Bill was the kind of guy who eventually knew *everybody*. I was surprised to find that they weren't getting along. Wild Bill and Happy Hour Hooker were cut from the same cloth.