

ONE

6:15 P.M.

Margaret Welles is going to die tonight. Tomorrow night, she'll die again. And again and again.

Margaret Welles is going to die in the only theme park in existence with an entire land dedicated to the exploitation of murder victims in Southern California, and I still haven't memorized my script at my job there.

I set a flash card with "HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT MARGARET WELLES?" in front of my sleeping corgi mix, Skittle. I've been making my best friend Grace test me ever since I got this promotion a couple weeks ago, but she needed the time to put on her best outfit for Murder Land's preview night.

"You know how these Hollywood types are," I say, doing my best Old Hollywood accent. "She never hung out here, but she'd come by with a fella from James's Cleaners. Rob Darling, I believe."

We have four different murders guests can solve based on clues placed all around Murder Land, and I have exactly one clue to give anyone for each. Margaret Welles, aka the Red Aster, is *based* on the Black Dahlia. With the other three based on the Manson murders, the Los Feliz murder, and the Bugsy Siegel murders, it's as close as Californialand could get to not getting sued. Still, it reminds me of this *Los Angeles Magazine* travel article that detailed one hundred locations for the city's "Most Memorable" crimes, separating out a century's worth of the grisliest murders by neighborhood. The victims' ends are marked by the violation of their bodies, and then LA does its LA thing and violates their human stories afterward too. In magazines and now in theme parks. But it's also a job.

I glance down at my card. "Fuck," I mutter, sliding it to the back of my pile. It's *Jimmy's* Cleaners and considering what I already know about the general guest's cognitive processing abilities, that's the kind of thing that could get someone walking in circles.

"Language, Billie," my mom says, *suddenly* available after I'd been calling for her help for the past hour. She's in a floral dress, nearly as overdressed as I know I'll feel in my new Murder Land uniform (a forties-style A-line dress), still sticking hoop earrings into her

ears. It's nothing remarkable in general, but given Mom never wears anything but loungewear on weekends, I'm itching to ask.

Or, I *would* be if I didn't have Murder Land and preview night on the brain.

"Gotta get it out before I'm surrounded by kids," I say.

"I cannot believe they're," she picks up a flash card, scanning where I wrote BABY STABBING ONE, "having people *win candy looking for Sharon Tate's murderers.*"

"They win a Murder Land exclusive GooseBeary and Friends figurine set." I grab my hoodie and beanie off my bed. Thank god this park is opening in June, when it's still gloomy every day, delaying the heat of summer. "I'll study in the car."

When I look up at my mom, though, she's got her keys in her hand, but she's not giving the usual *vamoose, Billie* look. A moment of silence passes before Mom exhales. "Billie, love, I can't take you. I'm going to Napa with Aunt Jessica, remember? We talked about it last night?"

My heart drops to my sneakers. "What? You said Aunt Jessica was driving you."

"Her car got towed yesterday."

There is literally nothing Aunt Jessica could've done to make me not officially declare her Family Enemy Number One. How is this happening? I need the car, I cannot afford surge pricing Uber or Lyft, and the minutes are rapidly passing by me. Not now. Not when I *just* got a promotion to ride operator after two years of working a corn dog cart in Gold Rush Land. After all this time scrubbing fry oil off my skin and explaining to lifestyle influencers that corn dogs aren't gluten free, I am free. Aunt Jessica is *not* ruining my dream.

"That's not my fault! I—"

"I just wanted to let you know I put Skittle's food out and to let her out before you leave tonight. Grace is welcome to stay over after your shift, but not her girlfriend or that boy you work with. Emergency money's on the table. I'll see you Sunday night and," she kisses my cheek as the panic pulses through my veins, making my face hot, "have a good first shift."

The moment Mom stops contact with me, I lurch forward. "Mom, wait!"

But Mom bullets her way into the garage and away with my ride. I pick up my phone, not even bothering with my dad, who's probably getting high before his gig tonight with his shitty Bon Jovi cover band. Livin' on a fucking prayer, I tap Grace's contact.

Skittle cocks her head at me. Even petting her with my sweaty hand doesn't help slow my breathing.

"Hey, ride lady, can you just tell me where the mobster guy is? I really want that GooseBeary figurine," Grace says by way of greeting.

"Can you come pick me up?" I reply.

There's shuffling on the other end of the line. "Yeah, sure. Give me ten."

My heartbeat slows; Grace never needs to ask questions.

Grace, my beautiful perfect friend, arrives in nine minutes, just after I coax Skittle back into the house to settle down for my six-hour shift. Pop music floods out of the windows of the cherry-red car her moms gave her once her older brother went to college, sending a pang through my chest. There are so many random reasons that account for how different our lives ended up, but considering how *similar* we started out when we first met in middle school—nerdy, a streak of rebelliousness—I can't help sometimes but look at her life and wish we could switch timelines.

I hop into the front seat and all but slam the door behind me.

"It's not like your mom to flake," Grace says, adjusting her vintage heart sunglasses off her delicate nose.

I let myself sink into the leather seat. "My aunt's car broke down or something."

"Well," she reaches across the mid-console and rubs my shoulder, "they're gone, and you're gonna be fine. Do you want to practice your lines?"

Ugh. "No. Can you just talk for a bit?"

"What are the chances that you ditch your new job and come join me on the GooseBeary Hunt?" Grace asks as she pops her gloss covered lips. Between her red lips and the matching fifties-style swing dress, she looks both on theme and generally incredible. I can't help but smile at the thought of this blond gem running around looking for a purple animatronic bear in a bow tie and suspenders.

Grace and I have been friends since middle school, but we became inseparable *best friends* two years ago, after we learned we were both fools who were excessively invested in the disappearance of GooseBeary, Californialand's famed fifties-era animatronic mascot, from his ride GooseBeary's Sunny Jamboree. Like we legit got jobs at *Californialand* just to investigate GooseBeary's disappearance.

We haven't found him. Grace also quit working at Californialand a whopping two weeks after starting.

"GooseBeary wasn't in the space where Murder Land is now." I say absently, my gaze lingering on her lips. "Can I borrow your lipstick?"

I usually do more grungy eyeliner-heavy looks, but that wasn't going to fly with Murder Land. Considering I barely put on mascara and blush tonight, I might need the color. She plucks a gold tube from her cupholder and drops it into my hand.

"But the rest of the park will be dead as everyone floods to Murder Land," she says. "Trust me, I'm on the brink of something great."

Grace says that a lot, so I just give her a wry smile, now freshly painted. "Just please, for my ailing heart, don't do anything that'll get us arrested."

"No promises." She punctuates the comment with a wink. "But I have a good feeling about tonight."

"Just scandalize CEO Jason Mullins by stealing his missing bear on the opening night of his crime-themed park." It's supposed to come out as a joke, but my voice is strained with anxiety, my fingers drumming along the mid-console.

We stop at a red light. Grace turns to face me. "Bill, look at me." I turn to her, relishing the few seconds she's got her full attention on me. "You are a ride operator for the most anticipated new attraction in a brand-new addition to Californialand. You got us *exclusive* passes to said opening night. The whole squad, including the elusive Leon Devereaux—" She winks; I blush. "—is going to be there."

Leon, a former employee-turned-annual-pass-holder, was the first coworker my age I met when I started in Gold Rush Land two years ago. An original member of our little under-twenty, queer Californialand group. With Leon in college now, though, he's become harder to nail down.

Excusing, of course, the Californialand holiday party last year that he and I had sex at and then never spoke about again. Grace and I have been analyzing his ambiguous flirtation-but-never-making-a-move for six months now. I've lost hope, but Grace is still optimistic.

"This is going to be so *fun*," Grace says as I tune back in. She grabs my hand, yanking me fully back into the moment. "Exhale and let it go. You won't be late on my watch."

I do the breathing thing, hoping to shake off the last of my anxiety. We've been doing this little exercise for years, breathing and holding each other's hands through procrastinated school projects, romantic rejections, our respective coming-outs, and parent drama.

By the time she looks back to the road, I'm so calm I barely even register she makes a wrong turn.

"Simi Valley's left, G."

Grace sighs. "Yeah, we gotta get Sawyer first."

I sigh. It's not that Grace picking up her girlfriend, Sawyer Kang, is really unexpected. But I could've really used one car ride without having Sawyer's energy in the mix.

At least Sawyer is out waiting on the porch when we pull up, thirty minutes before my shift starts, scowling like an impatient adult with the world's weight on her shoulders. She's shrugged into a hoodie/leather jacket/white sneakers getup. Her eyeliner is perfect and her long black hair is shining.

Sawyer's pristine in the same way Grace is and has been since she first started working as a ride operator at CaliforniaLand a few months after Grace quit. Sawyer's a self-proclaimed Canadian exchange student, which really just means her Korean Canadian parents decided to move to LA when she was sixteen and she couldn't come up with another hook. I swear, she's still mad people didn't fall head over heels because she could speak French.

"Do you have the tickets, Billie?" Sawyer asks.

She shoots me a look through the rearview mirror. I simply smirk back, very aware that she's now stuck in the back like she's a little kid. Usually, Sawyer and I exchange backhanded compliments nonstop, but I'm actually feeling pretty secure tonight.

"I have them," Grace snaps. "Why would Billie have them?"

"Jesus," Sawyer replies. "Sorry for thinking the person who got us the exclusive tickets had them."

I raise my brows at Grace. Sawyer having a shitty attitude is normal, but it's rare to see Grace turn on a dime like that. The words I want to say taste pretty good on my tongue, a simple *you can leave Sawyer at home and we can call any of our other friends to come instead*. All signs point to Sawyer and Grace, notoriously on and off, heading toward another off.

But I don't end up saying anything as Grace gives me a shrug and races onto the freeway toward Californialand.

X----X

I may not have seen the working form of my new ride, Mulholland Mayhem, but I do know the history of where it came from. If one were to follow LA meme accounts, there are two places the LA driver dreads driving through most: the 110 South/6th Street/4th Street/3rd Street interchange near downtown and Mulholland Drive. Since it would be very boring to conceptualize one freeway interchange as a thrill ride, Mulholland was the obvious pick. The roads are infamously narrow, made to comfortably house one car and no street parking for the high-privacy rich folk/celebs who live up in the Hollywood Hills. But, of course, any attempt to drive that road results in one weaving through said tiny, hairpin-turn-addled mountain road where there *are* parked cars and people barreling up in the opposite direction. Every time.

The drive from Studio City to Simi Valley doesn't involve using either of those paths, but the way I'm white knuckling the oh shit handle, Grace might as well have invented a new one. But goddamn it, I can see the Californialand employee parking lot at the north end of the park, and, with Murder Land pushed up against it, I may just be on time. Five minutes to go.

"Good luck!" Grace says as she screeches to a full stop. I laugh as I throw my door open. Before I go, I glance at Sawyer's scowl, then lean over and whisper in Grace's ear: "I don't think I need it as much as you."

I can't help but notice Grace doesn't laugh at my tease as I shut the car door behind me. That moment will come back to me, I can feel it cementing its way into my conscience as something worth thinking about. But right now, I'm running. Running through the edge of the parking lot, past security as they wave the wand over my backpack and check my employee ID and preview night pass. My phone hits seven p.m., instantly sending my heart into a tailspin.

Locker room. I gotta get to the locker room. My supervisor Conor said my locker number was the same. With any luck, he'll be so bus with his own promotion overseeing Murder Land that he won't even notice me slipping in. God, I can't wait for the uniform. The vintage-inspired dress, tights, driving gloves, and a scarf like movie stars used to wear. It's so fun.

It may have been stressful getting here, but this park is incredible. And as exploitative and not age appropriate as Murder Land is, I have no doubt it'll be ten times cooler than the tour the employees went on earlier this week. I'm stoked to be finishing out my last summer at Californialand in air-conditioning and soft lights, with eyes on starstruck guests experiencing a new thing. This'll be great.

The locker room's empty when I arrive. I force a deep exhale; no Conor to bust me.

I reach my locker. Swipe my ID. Open the door.

There it is: my dress, my shoes, my sweater, my—

That's it.

I dig through the clothing, heart creeping up my throat. Where're the gloves and the scarf?

The clock ticks past one minute late.

No time to figure it out.

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