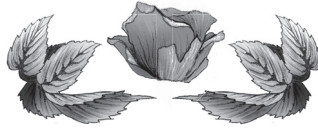


# ONE



MY HAND SLIPS INTO THE woman's gaping purse like it's my own. Fingers nimble and sure on her wallet, I brush against her as if I am just impatient to get through the crowds of people milling around in the Eastside Mall. It's not hard to do. Everyone here is in a rush to get to the next big sale. That's why I always pick this place. And because it's lightly patrolled by burly security guards who stand idly outside upscale department stores and watch for the wolves among the placid, woolly shoppers.

My touch is only the softest graze against the woman; she doesn't even notice. Before I can inhale a full breath of her expensive perfume, I'm gone, her billfold in hand. I stuff it into my beat-up bag and lose myself in the throngs of people. This is the third wallet tonight, and by the glimpse of the designer insignia, I'm guessing that I can retire for the evening. I only need enough to cover the week at the motel and maybe something to eat a couple

times a day. I steal just enough to get by. No more, no less.

I follow the stream of other shoppers as they trickle out of the mall, but when they go to the parking garage to load up their Mercedes and their BMWs, I pull on my hood and walk into the wind. It's barely September, but lately the evenings are cool enough to make me hope I remembered to turn the radiator on low before I left the motel.

One of the security guards making the rounds in the parking lot briefly scrutinizes a girl with a black hoodie and ripped jeans and says something into his walkie-talkie, but I don't worry about him.

You see, I've got a gift.

Once I watched a movie about this little boy who could heal people with his hands. They said he had "a gift from God." I've never seen God, and from the few times I prayed with the pious foster mom whose husband whipped me with a belt when I spilled juice on their new carpet, it became clear to me that if there was a God, he didn't see me, either. But my gift is okay, too, regardless of where it came from. My hands are swift, undetectable. I was born a thief.

I'm sure there are more people out there like me. Some strange twist of DNA giving us gifts like perfect pitch or immortal cells or quick hands or even healing ones. I don't think I was chosen or found worthy. I think I'm just damn lucky. Sometimes for fun I like to watch the security-camera footage at the bodega next to the Happy Host. I wander in the aisles, loading up, barely a shadow on the screen above the register, just someone in a hoodie with her hands firmly in her pockets. No one sees a thing. Ever.

I catch a city bus on the next block, careful not to meet the eyes of the other commuters as we make our way to the west side of town. Sure, most of these people are the unseen—the busboys, the cleaning ladies, the trash collectors. But a few are thieves and pickpockets like me, and they're on their way home, some licking their lips and others licking their wounds. I want to blend in with the unseen. Nothing in my bag but minimum wage and an empty lunch box, not stolen rent money.

Instead I stare at the sturdy shoes of the older couple sitting across from me, their clasped hands resting between them on the vinyl seat. I get my sketchbook from my bag and begin to draw those hands with stolen pencils. Sketching my surroundings is something I've done since I was old enough to notice the shadows moving from the small split in the curtains of whatever motel room I was living in, some desperate admiration for the way dark and light give depth and meaning to everything. I use short, scratchy strokes to show the way the couple's fingers intertwine, nicks on the knuckles where the dry, red skin has split. There's something beautiful about the way her hands look as rough and cracked as his, so you can't tell which hand belongs to which person.

I like the bus because it makes me feel connected to other people, sharing their stories, even if only for a little while. But eventually, I always remember that I am still alone, and I close my sketchbook and watch the street signs for my destination.

I get off at the dark stop two blocks away from the Starlite Motel. Keeping my head down and walking quickly, I ignore the voices and laughter from the doorways and the parking lots I pass. I don't want to buy anything, and I'm not selling, either. As I get

closer, I see that the motel sign says NO VACANCY, which means that the ladies who are my neighbors are probably working.

Mom used to work with them sometimes, too, when we lived here. Until she said she was going to get a pack of cigarettes one August afternoon and never came back. That was a little over a year ago, in one of those brief, hopeful lulls when she said she was going to get clean again. I've been a lot of places since she left, but I keep drifting back here. I guess because it's familiar.

When I get to the Starlite, there are a lot of cars in the parking lot. It's Friday, and men do stupid things with their paychecks. I stop at room 7 and, looking over my shoulder, I pull my keys out of my pocket. Once I'm inside, I immediately lock the door behind me and do a quick inspection of the room. I am alone.

Mel, the night manager, has kind of a soft spot for the kids who live here, and that's why he lets me rent a room even though I'm by myself and not eighteen. There aren't many of us at the Starlite. Me, Charly, and the Quinter twins. Charly shares room 11 with her mom, and Janie Quinter, barely older than me, and her twins are one door down in room 12. The twins are little, though, and usually Charly watches them when their mom is working.

Shane used to live here, too.

I dump the wallets out on the queen bed. The coverlet is a faded floral print, and it sort of matches the brown carpet and the yellowed curtains. I thumb through my haul, checking every possible pocket for cash that might be hidden.

I peel out carefully folded, clean bills. That's what I like about rich people. Even their money smells better. There's three hundred seven dollars. Sighing in relief, I clutch the crisp cash to

my chest. It's enough to pay for another week at the Starlite and food for a while. Not a bad night at all. I take half the money and cram it into the jar I keep in the toilet tank, careful to screw the lid back on tightly so my stash doesn't get wet. No one ever thinks to look in the toilet tank. They always look under the mattress, in the top drawers of the dresser, the cupboard in the corner. I shove the other half of the money into my pocket to pay the rent.

The stolen billfolds go in the metal trash can I've designated as the burn trash. There's a small outdoor grill behind the Starlite, and I burn everything but money. I'm not stupid. Credit cards, IDs: those are traceable. I only take the cash. Marie leaves the bottle of lighter fluid out there. Who knows what the young, pretty maid burns, but I'm not alone in my activities.

My stomach growls. I check the small clock that hangs above the kitchenette area. Calling it a kitchen is a little extravagant when it's really only a hot plate and a bathroom sink with a dish drainer next to it. I should've stopped at the QuikMart to grab a bite on the way home, but it was late, and I knew I should get back before Mel started playing cards with the old man who lives in room 2. Once they start drinking, it's hard to say if my rent will make it into the till or into the game.

I hesitate by the door. I don't want to go all the way back to the QuikMart, so I do something nice for myself. I order a pizza. Not a cheap one, either. I order one of those deluxe ones from Sal's, the kind that leaks grease through the cardboard so it leaves stains on the coverlet. I can live off one of those for a couple of days.

Then I leave the motel room and lock the door behind me. Hood up, head down, I make my way to the main office. "Trix!

Hey, Trix!” The sound of my name seizes my shoulders and urges me to run before I recognize the voice. Charly.

“Hey,” she says, jogging up beside me. “Thought that was you. Rent time, huh? Mom just sent me to pay for next week, too.” She holds up the wad of cash so I can see it, the cheap gold rings on her fingers glinting in the lights from the neon NO VACANCY sign.

“Don’t flash that around,” I hiss, watching the two guys leaning on an Impala in the parking lot. I don’t know if they’re staying here or waiting for someone, but I don’t want to catch their attention by looking like we’re two easy marks.

Charly shrugs and stuffs the money in the pocket of her snug jeans. “What’s the fun of having money if you can’t show it off?” she asks. “Anyway, what are you doing tonight? Can I come over?”

“Aren’t you watching the twins?” I ask.

“No, Janie’s sick, so she’s not working.” Charly’s a year younger than me, but there’s a tightness in her face, a hardness that makes her seem older. I don’t know; maybe I look that way to other people, too.

“You can come over if you want,” I tell her, knowing there’s a fifty-fifty chance she’ll blow me off. Anytime a boyfriend texts, she bails on plans with me. But tonight, I could use the company. I haven’t spoken to another person in nearly a week. Just me in a crowd, me in my room. Just me, alone. Sometimes drifting can be lonely, and it would be nice to feel that somebody cares I’m here. So I add, knowing it will sweeten the deal, “I’ve got a pizza coming.”

Charly grins, revealing the large gap between her front teeth. "I'm starving."

We both go into the empty motel office, the small bell on the door alerting Mel and Room 2 Old Guy in the back room that we're there. Mel lumbers in and leans on the front desk, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

"I've got the week's rent for room 11," Charly says, holding out the wad of cash.

Mel takes it, making a face at the crumpled bills. "Tell your mama to stop leaving her shit in the only working dryer," he grumbles.

"Yeah?" Charly says, crossing her arms. The motel has a tiny laundry room with two machines that are out of order more than they're working. I just wash my clothes in the sink. "Why don't you fix the other damn dryer, Mel? And since we're bitching, tell Marie to stop stealing my stuff when she comes in to change the sheets."

Mel grins. He likes spunk.

"Room seven," I tell Mel, handing him my money and avoiding the argument altogether.

"Another week?" he asks, as if he's surprised. This will be my second week in a row here. I know I should change motels again, but this one feels safe to me. I guess it's because Mom and I lived here for three years before she left, which makes it the longest time we ever lived anywhere, and the closest thing to a home. The picture I drew with stolen charcoal pencils on the day we moved in is still on the wall, still hidden behind the generic framed picture of a palm tree on a beach that hangs in every room at the Starlite.

“Just one more,” I tell him. “Tell Marie I’ll pick up clean sheets tomorrow. I can change them myself.” Marie’s okay, but Charly’s right: that girl’s got sticky fingers. I would know.

“Sure, kid. You going to be in your room tonight? Check out the free movie channels. Some kind of promo from the cable company.”

I shrug. “Yeah. No big plans.” Or any in recent months.

Charly and I wish Mel good luck with his card game, and then she leaves me at my door to go down to her room. “Let me grab something to drink,” she says. “I’ll be back in a few.”

I unlock my door and go inside, carefully locking it again behind me. If I know Charly, she’ll be bringing back a red plastic cup nearly full of vodka she swiped from her mom, and a few cans of soda to cut it with. The guy who fills the vending machine by the front office has a thing for Charly, and he’s always leaving cans of Sprite or Coke by her door like they’re bouquets of flowers.

Surprising me given her track record, Charly gets back before the pizza. I know it’s her from the way she kicks the door with the toe of her worn-out sneakers because her hands are full. “Open up. It’s the police,” she bellows, knowing it will terrify all our neighbors. Laughter peals outside the door. Charly never could keep straight-faced during a joke.

I peer at her through a crack in the curtains, just in case, before I open the door. There’s a few muffled thuds and then some swearing from the room next door when they realize it’s just Charly out there. She whisks inside with her arms full of exactly what I thought she’d have.

When Charly’s mixed us drinks with the cheap plastic cups



from the kitchenette, she spills her guts as we lounge on the hard bed, the television turned to a comedy on Mel's free movie channel. She and her mom are on the rocks again, and she has to dump Dante because he's still cheating on her, this time with some rich girl on the East Side. Nothing is good anymore, she says, not like it used to be. She twirls her hair as she talks, sips carefully from her drink before she drops her next words. "Let me come with you next week."

"What do you mean?" I ask her, taking a slug of the drink and wincing at the burn. Charly was a little heavy-handed with the vodka, which doesn't surprise me now that I know she wants something.

"You never stay here long anymore. Not like when your mom was still around. I know you'll leave again. So take me with you." She looks down into her cup. "I want out. I'm tired of living with my mom. I'm tired of the johns hanging around, and babysitting every night, and just *living* in this shitty motel."

"So you're just going to drop out of school and hit the road?" I ask.

"Why not? You haven't gone to school regular since your mom left."

I read once that when you lose an arm or a leg, sometimes you get phantom pain, this ache where there's nothing left to hurt. That's what it felt like, since Mom walked out. I know she felt like she could never forgive herself for all the things that had happened between us, and maybe she could never forgive me, either, but somehow her absence hurts even more than having her here. You can't forgive someone if they never come back to you.

It wasn't that I didn't like school, it was just that I had lost interest in books and tests and tardy slips when Mom left and what small foundation I had crumbled apart. Also, you need a guardian to enroll, and I'd sworn off those about six months ago, after I'd run away from my last group home.

"You going to get a job? Or am I supposed to be your sugar mama in this scenario?" I take another swig of the drink and let the vodka sing in my bones, willing it to drown out that phantom pain.

"I'll find a way," she says. "If Shane was here, he'd help me out. He was going to get us out of here, you know. He promised."

I know she means well when she brings him up. I know she has as much right as I do to say his name. He was my boyfriend for only a year before he went to prison, after all, and Shane had been Charly's brother all her life. But it stings anyway.

I set my cup down on the nightstand and slide off the bed. I go into the bathroom, shut the door, and sit down on the edge of the grimy bathtub. I only need a minute. I haven't talked about Shane or Mom for a long time. It's easier that way.

I hear Charly standing on the other side of the door. "I'm sorry," she says, her voice muffled. "I shouldn't have brought him up. We just haven't talked about him in forever, and I thought you were probably over him by now." There's a soft clink of her rings against the knob, but she doesn't turn it. When you live in a motel with paper-thin walls, you learn to respect boundaries. "It wasn't your fault, you know. Even if you'd been with him, it wouldn't have ended any different." I hear the scrape of her rings as she pulls her hand away.

The truth is, I am over Shane. Or I think I am, anyway. Mostly now I feel guilt when I remember him. My gift would have protected him if we had been together when everything happened. But even Shane didn't really believe me back then. It was luck, he said, when I tried to convince him.

I stand up and flush the toilet like I'm not a coward hiding in a motel bathroom.

There's a knock at the door, three times, quick and insistent.

Charly calls, "Pizza's here!"

"Wait! Look before you open it!" I shout, flinging open the bathroom door.

But it's too late.

Two uniformed police officers are standing outside. "We're looking for Trixie McCabe," the younger, female officer says, her hands on her belt.

"There's no Trixie here," Charly lies easily, starting to close the door. "You have the wrong address."

The other officer, an older man, puts up a hand to stop her from shutting them out. He stares at me where I stand dumbly in the frame of the bathroom door, the toilet still running behind me. He's seen me already, and slamming the door or running isn't going to make any difference now. I hear swearing and slamming, other people in the Starlite getting out before the cops come knocking on their doors, too. The older cop holds out the same photo the foster homes always use when I run away. Long dark hair, light-olive skin, and gray-green eyes that glare angrily into the camera.

"Miss McCabe, we're going to need you to come with us," he says.