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# REGRETS ONLY

NANCY GEARY

novel by the author of *Being Mrs. Alcott* and *Redemption*

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*Friday, December 20th*

*7:35 p.m.*

*T*he muddy slush and melted snow on the hardwood floor appeared to bother no one. Men and women pressed elbow-to-elbow by the bar and shared seats at the twenty or so mismatched iron tables. Oversize pewter hooks that hung at various spots around the room couldn't accommodate the population of overcoats and many lay crumpled in a heap in the corner. The air was filled with noise from dozens of lively conversations and the smell of beer, smoke, and wet wool. Body warmth and the heat from several loud radiators had fogged the windows, obscuring any view onto Rittenhouse Square. It was Friday and the weekend at The Arch was well under way.

From where Lucy sat she could watch Sapphire behind the bar, pouring, mixing, stirring, embellishing, and rinsing, all the while keeping up the lively banter for which she was famous. Her multiringed fingers seemed to dance between glasses, bottles, lemon wedges, and maraschino cherries as she created colorful potions to inebriate her

fans. Sapphire specials, the ingredients mixed so fast that no one could tell what exactly had been included. Tonight she'd dyed her hair bright orange and wore colored contact lenses that made her eyes appear emerald green. Every few moments she'd turn away from her audience and ring up a sale at the old register. Although the crowd's conversation muffled the sound, Lucy could imagine the "ka-ching" as the drawer popped open to receive cash. Sapphire placed the change directly into each patron's hand, perhaps hoping the physical contact would bring a larger tip.

"How'd you ever end up at this place?" Jack Harper asked, taking a sip of his draft beer.

At the sound of his voice, Lucy turned her attention to her companion, who looked off balance as he perched awkwardly on a garden chair. He had to be the oldest person in the room; the gray at his temples highlighted his forty-eight years. Medium height and medium build, he'd recently started to complain about his growing waistline. "Too much bloody paperwork," he'd commented to her just the day before. "Not like when I started around here, when the Captain realized we were better off out on the street. No crime gets solved from behind a desk, but the bureaucrats in Internal seem to have forgotten that fact. We'll all end up fat, or at least those of us who aren't already." Although he'd removed his tie before they left the precinct, his white shirt and camel overcoat stood out in the predominantly black-clad crowd.

Lucy now followed his gaze to an oval table opposite the bar where a group of seven pale, thin men and women huddled together smoking and drinking a blue concoction out of martini glasses. One man had a series of small gold

hoops piercing his eyebrow. A woman wore a top that more closely resembled a bra. One or another in the group periodically looked up at the series of charcoal drawings that hung on the walls, pointed at something with considerable animation, and then returned to the conversation.

"You fooled me, Detective O'Malley," Jack continued. "Here you are mingling with creatures who retreat to their coffins at daylight, and I had you pegged for the paper-shamrock-on-the-wall-and-glass-of-Guinness-dark type, being a direct descendant of a Boston police commissioner after all."

Lucy laughed. "My forebears, esteemed though I'm sure they were, were more likely models for jolly old Michael, the cop who stops traffic for the baby ducks crossing Beacon Street," she replied, remembering the classic children's book *Make Way for Ducklings*. "But I've spent my fair share of hours in pubs, if that's your question. Nothing like the smell of stout on your clothes and wood shavings on your shoes in the morning."

"You can take the girl out of Ireland but you can't take the Irish out of the girl."

"Something like that."

They both laughed. Despite their age difference of nearly two decades, Lucy had the sneaking suspicion that this partnership would work. She liked Jack's easy demeanor.

"Seriously, though, how did you find this place? You don't live around here, do you?"

"Maybe I shouldn't admit it but I'm not too far away—an apartment above the health food store on the corner of Walnut. I've thought about moving out to join



the rest of you in Torredale or Fox Chase, but the rent here is okay." She took a sip of her drink. "I guess that makes me the only homicide detective to live in Center City."

"Can't beat the convenience, though," he said. "Although I'm not sure about your local hangout." He looked around the room with obvious skepticism.

"This place is a recent discovery even though I'd passed it a million times. This fall there was a sign in the window for a reading—some author with a book on being in a harem. The sign caught my eye."

"Harem?"

"She was a Moroccan woman who shared her husband with eight or nine other wives. He fathered children with all of them, and the women jointly raised the whole brood. Anyway, I thought it sounded interesting—intriguing may be a better word—and I came back to hear her speak. She talked about the difficulties of mothering the children who weren't her own, but who were the children of the man she loved. The jealousies, the rivalries, she was very candid about her emotions. Since then you might call me a regular here, especially on nights when the literary stuff happens because you never know what you're going to learn. Then there are also art openings," she said, gesturing to the drawings on the wall. "They're usually on Thursdays, so tonight must be something special. The displays change every week or so. I think there's some connection to the Creative Artists Network, but I'm not positive. Anyway, the place just feels cozy to me."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "Cozy as a cattle car."

"It's not usually this crowded." She glanced around and shrugged. "Maybe the artist has a lot of friends."

"With art like this, he'll need them," Jack said as he passed her a red paper flyer. "*The Twelve Faces of Suicide*": Self-portraits by Foster Herbert. For a complete price list, please inquire at the bar.

Lucy shuddered involuntarily. The series of sad, charcoal faces that stared out with empty gazes was haunting. She didn't need to read the title of the collection to know that the artist had to suffer from interior demons, that he was—like so many—a young man in pain. Just as Aidan, her brother, had been.

Although nearly ten years had passed, she could still recall the last conversation they'd had. "Ever heard of Dubuffet, the French painter?" he'd asked her. She had. "I read this interview where he explained that he was able to journey into madness and return. His art, his visions, grew out of those trips. And I keep thinking to myself, How did he do it? How did he return? I'm there in that horrible place but I can't get back." Those fateful words still echoed in her mind.

"I take it you won't be purchasing a painting for your living room." Jack's voice interrupted her musing.

She wiped her eyes quickly and diverted her gaze, hoping he wouldn't notice the welled tears. If he did, he was polite enough not to comment. Instead he rested his hand on her forearm. "On a brighter note," he said, raising his glass to clink with hers, "here's to you. Congratulations on making it through your first week, Detective."

Lucy smiled in appreciation and gulped her beer, feeling the cold, frothy liquid soothe her throat. She'd survived her first five days of life in the Homicide Unit of the Philadelphia Police Department. After two years in

the Narcotics Bureau, she'd made Detective and then spent the next three in the South Division before being promoted, if a unit where the victims never survived could be called that. Partnered with the most experienced detective on the force, she'd managed to crack her first case—a contract hit on the owner of a gaming operation—within twenty-four hours of the crime. Jack had been patient and careful in his explanations; in return, he'd seemed mildly amused by her enthusiasm.

Although in her years at the police department she rarely fraternized with her colleagues and passed on the drunken festivities held annually at the Ukrainian-American Club, she'd agreed to her new partner's suggestion that they have a drink to celebrate the quick resolution of her first "job," as each murder investigation was called. She'd heard that unlike past partners, he was happily married and the proud father of two teenage boys; a beer after work was simply a way to start off on a friendly footing. Plus he'd agreed to let her pick the bar and been perfectly content to wander beyond the two watering holes within shooting distance of the Roundhouse, as the police headquarters located on Eighth and Race Streets was called.

"That must be the painter," Jack said, nodding in the direction of the door. "Sad part is he looks just like his pictures."

Through the crowd, Lucy could see a tall boy wearing a navy blue T-shirt that hung loose around his thin frame and blue jeans speckled with paint. His face was pallid and drawn; dark circles surrounded his black eyes. Leaning against the wall, he cast a vacant stare

around the room. His face could easily have been the thirteenth portrait.

As she watched, another man with thick, curly brown hair and wire-rimmed round glasses approached the boy, said something, laughed, then swung his arm around the boy's neck, pulled him close, and kissed the top of his head. The boy spoke; the man smiled a flash of white teeth and knocked his knuckles quickly but gently on the boy's skull. The boy grabbed at the man's baggy oxford shirt, the two stumbled backward slightly, and the man tickled his side, making the boy smile, too. The man looked familiar—perhaps she'd seen him here before—and the exchange had a fraternal sweetness to it, a playfulness that made her miss Aidan even more. How many times had she roughhoused with her Irish twin? He was bigger and stronger by far; she could still feel his grip on her wrists as he inevitably managed to pin her to the floor and tickle her until she begged for mercy.

Jack picked up the flyer and appeared to reread it. "All the peer pressure and drugs, it's gotten really hard for kids. I feel sorry for this guy's parents. I've always wondered what I'd do if one of my sons had mental troubles. Probably wouldn't handle it too well," he said, seemingly to himself. He finished his beer and licked the foam from his top lip.

"Want another?" she asked. "My treat."

He glanced at his watch. "No thanks. Sarah's waiting dinner for me." He stood up, reached into his wallet, and dropped a ten-dollar bill on the table. "Maybe we'll get you out to the house one of these nights. Beers are cheaper, and my boys would love to meet a cop

with great legs." He winked. "Have a good weekend, O'Malley."

"Yeah. You too. See you Monday."

Lucy watched him weave his way through the crowd and disappear out the front door just as a couple in fur Cossack hats pushed their way inside. She sighed and leaned back in her chair. Her glass was empty but there was no particular reason to leave. She'd canceled her date several days before. Who wanted to spend another evening in forced getting-to-know-each-other conversation filled with painful pauses and muscle-aching smiles? She preferred to get home, change into flannel pajamas, put a log in the wood-burning stove that heated her one-bedroom apartment, and read with her pet rabbit, Cyclops, asleep in her lap. But whether her routine began at seven or eight or nine hardly mattered. The only thing affected by delay would be the number of chapters she could get through before fatigue hit.

There were moments, especially on winter nights such as this, when she missed the Somerville community she'd left behind in Massachusetts when she'd decided to stay in Philadelphia after graduation. While she was growing up in the house in which her father had been born, there was never a moment without company—a relative, a friend, or a neighbor passing by for a few minutes of socializing, which included the exchange of gossip for a cup of tea and a piece of cake. Even when she'd first started dating, there was little awkwardness with two brothers around to help break the ice, and few moments alone given the constant stream of teenagers both male and female parading through the house. The blessing before supper in which her father thanked the Lord

for all the goodness He had bestowed on the O'Malley family was the only quiet minute in the day that Lucy could remember. With that upbringing, she'd thrived in a college dormitory; unlike some of her peers, she was never bothered by the lack of privacy. It had taken her years to realize that she often preferred to be alone, to do things on her own rather than suffer through idle chatter or boring conversation. Still she wondered whether the right person might change her relatively recent, self-imposed isolation.

She grabbed her coat, moved to the bar, and rested her elbows on the mahogany counter.

"Hey there," Sapphire said in a voice that was low and breathy. "What can I get you?"

"Just a beer. Draft, please." Next to her, a woman got up from her stool and she quickly slid onto it.

Sapphire placed a glass in front of her with a bit of foam making its way slowly down the side. "You should gamble tonight lady 'cause you must be lucky. A place to rest one's ass has been virtually impossible to find."

"I'll buy a lottery ticket on the way home."

"Pick one up for me, too," Sapphire said, moving on to serve the next customer.

The beer was cool but not chilled and Lucy pushed it aside. Obviously consumption was up this evening and the new batch hadn't had ample refrigeration. She inhaled deeply, cherishing the secondary smoke as yet another reminder of Aidan in a night that seemed filled with his memory. The Christmas season highlighted his absence.

"May I introduce myself?"

His voice had the resonance of a radio announcer. She

turned to see the curly-haired man with glasses whom she'd noticed earlier with the artist. He had a rectangular face, deep blue eyes, and prominent cheekbones. "Archer. I'm Archer Haverill," he said, extending a hand.

She shook it as she introduced herself. His palm was large and warm, and her small fingers seemed to disappear in its grasp.

"My pleasure." He bowed his head slightly. "I won't ask if you come here often since I know you do. I've seen you at several of the readings recently."

She nodded. "I enjoy them."

"I'm glad. Truly. Because I constantly wonder when I'm reading work and picking someone to come speak whether anyone who listens will share my excitement. It's so hard to gauge reactions."

"You choose?"

He gave her a quizzical look and then commented, "This is my bar. Archer. The Arch. Get it?"

Lucy felt herself blush. "Sorry. I didn't put two and two together."

"So I guess that means even though I'm here virtually every night, I haven't made much of an impression." He clasped his hands together. "Maybe I should dye my hair, too. I obviously need a gimmick."

"Or work the bar. That helps," she said, wondering whether she should confess that he did look familiar or that she'd been watching him earlier. No, she decided it wasn't worth mentioning. She couldn't tell whether his humility was entirely genuine, and she didn't feel like fanning the fire of male arrogance if it wasn't. But there was something besides his good looks, something in his

manner that was appealing, and she didn't want the conversation to end. "Do you pick the art, too?" she asked.

"Yeah. What do you think of these self-portraits?"

"Painful. They'll stay with me," she responded. "I'm not much of an art critic but I think they're good. It's amazing what someone can do with a piece of charcoal."

"He'd sent me slides but they didn't do it justice. My impression changed completely when he brought the drawings in. He's a great kid with a lot of talent though I wonder about him. The title was his idea. Of course I'd already agreed to hang the show before I realized I might have problems because he's underage—only sixteen if you can believe it—but he's practically lived here the last couple of days and so far not had a drop of alcohol. I think I'm safe."

"I won't report you."

Archer smiled. "I appreciate that." He paused, looked at her as if to gauge her reaction, and then asked in a voice that actually sounded timid, "Can I offer you a drink?"

Lucy was about to respond when she felt a vibration in her pocket. Her beeper. She must have forgotten to turn it off when she'd left the precinct. Her shift had ended, but her squad was short-staffed around the holidays. Lieutenant Sage must have decided to call back some of his off-duty detectives. Although she wished she could ignore it, she pulled the BlackBerry from her pocket and checked the text file. *Nineteen-year-old black male. Multiple stab wounds. Gang related? DOA at Thomas Jefferson Hospital.*

"I'm sorry. I can't. Perhaps another time," she added before she could stop herself. *Lucy O'Malley*, she heard



her mother chastise. *How dare you be suggestive?* She could still envision Mrs. O'Malley with a checkered apron tied tight around her waist, shaking a finger in her face. *A proper girl waits for a proper invitation.* Even at a ninth-grade Sadie Hawkins, her mother had drilled it into her brain that she couldn't be the one to ask a boy to dance.

"A patient calls?" Archer said.

"No. I'm not a doctor."

"What do you do?" He sounded disappointed.

"I'm a cop. Homicide Unit." Her new assignment sounded strange. The novelty was still hard to believe.

"You?" He laughed. "Now that's a first. With looks like yours, why in the world would you ever do that?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" She felt a surge of rage. How many times had she heard derogatory comments about being a police officer? The litany of insults—the suggestion that she was a public servant punching the clock as she waited for a retirement pension, the constant innuendos of corruption, as if she couldn't own a cashmere sweater on a law enforcement salary, the snide remarks that she simply was trying to meet some hunk for a husband—made her see red. Her thighs didn't rub together from too many doughnuts; her only criminal activity was jaywalking; and she logged longer, more intense hours than almost everyone she'd ever met. That she came from a legacy of honest, good cops was a source of tremendous pride. What did this yuppie bar owner know anyway?

"You just . . . you don't strike me . . ." Archer stammered. He eyed her up and down. "You just don't look like the type."