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The Most Wonderful Crime of the Year

The Blonde Identity

***THE BLONDE
WHO CAME IN
FROM THE GOLD***

Ally Carter

PAN BOOKS

*Ten Years Ago
Washington, DC*

As luck would have it, the first time Alexandra Sterling really wanted to kill a man happened to be the night before she started spy school.

Of course, technically, the program was called the Clandestine Operative Training and Assessment Course, but technically, COTAC didn't even exist, so Alex was going to call it whatever she wanted. In fact, until she got on the bus at six a.m., she was also going to eat whatever she wanted. (Chicken fingers.) And wear whatever she wanted. (Her stretchiest pants and a ratty old T-shirt from a German band she told everyone was her favorite. Her actual favorite was Taylor Swift.)

Alex was going to spend her last night as a regular person taking the world's hottest bath and watching the world's trashiest TV before starting on the world's most covert adventure.

But she couldn't do any of that until her chicken fingers got there, and that's what brought Alex to the bar of the airport Ramada and the guy who had been staring at her for the better part of twenty minutes.

The problem wasn't so much that The Guy was staring—it was how. Usually, Alex could read people in three seconds flat from fifty paces. She could always pick out the women who hated her because she smiled too much and the men who hated her because she didn't smile enough; the boys who looked at her strangely when they found out she'd set the curve on every test she took at MIT—as if they didn't know whether that should make her hotter or more frigid. (They always settled on frigid.)

Alex had been interpreting looks from nurses and doctors for as

long as she could remember, all of them wondering how such a little girl could have caused her sister so much trouble.

It was as if the whole world had decided that Alex was just too bold, too sassy, and too selfishly strong for her own good—and they did it all without ever saying a word.

She had grown up speaking English, French, German, Russian, and a little Italian. But, most of all, Alex was fluent in people. Still, as she studied The Guy at the end of the bar . . . Alex didn't know what to make of him.

He was white and midtwenties. Maybe a little older because his eyes looked tired in a way that had nothing to do with jet lag. He kept an elbow on the bar and a beer in his hand—sipping slowly—like all his problems were waiting at the bottom and he wasn't in a hurry to reach them.

His white dress shirt was open at the collar, and he had the kind of haircut you could find on half the male population, but his dark hair had turned wavy and mussed from the snow. It should have made him look worse, but it actually made him look better, and Alex started to wonder if she'd remembered to pack a hairbrush and also when was the last time she'd used it?

At first glance, there was nothing special about The Guy at all. A man made to fill the background, a nonplayer character in the game of life. But that didn't change the fact that Alex *had* noticed him. And now she couldn't *unnotice* him.

The TV over the bar showed a football game. On the screen, a giant in shoulder pads was spiking a ball and dancing in the end zone, but the man at the bar didn't even glance in its direction. He didn't officially glance in Alex's direction, either, but she'd felt his eyes on her from the moment she sat down. Silent and assessing and . . . unimpressed.

She should have brushed her hair.

She should have put on a bra.

She should have forgotten about the chicken fingers and gone to bed hungry because Alex felt awkward for the first time in her twenty-two years. Uncomfortable. Second-guessing everything from

her T-shirt to her food choices to the fact that she was probably making a mistake with her career and her whole, entire life. She was second-guessing everything that had brought her to that moment even though Alex didn't do second guesses. Or second chances. Or second place. Alex didn't do seconds of any kind. Or, at least, she didn't use to.

But, in a year, she'd probably have a different name. She'd be living in a different country and speaking a different language. She'd be a different person. And then she'd have a second life. But at the moment, she was just a woman who was tired and scared and wishing that her chicken fingers would get there already.

The restaurant was loud and busy. It was January, and sharp little *pings* sounded as sleet hit the slanting windows that had turned into a frosty blur with the storm. The airport must have started canceling flights because the place was filling up with flight crews and business travelers and a dozen twentysomething blondes in T-shirts that read BRIDE SQUAD and another blonde whose shirt read BRIDE.

The Bride Squad must have ordered a bottle of tequila because they were doing shots and eyeing The Guy, but The Guy stayed at the other end of the bar, eyeing Alex.

So Alex did the only thing she could do and eyed him back.

"I'll go check on those chicken wings." A distracted bartender topped off Alex's club soda and headed to the back before Alex could shout "Chicken *fingers!*"

The wind was roaring now. It made a haunting sound, and the glass had frosted over—little beads of condensation running down, revealing strips of blurry lights and blowing snow while a dozen more people crowded into the bar, looking for tables.

"Really coming down out there," a voice said from nearby, and Alex turned to see a *different* guy sliding onto the empty stool beside her. His watch was worth more than most cars, and he was going to order the most expensive scotch in the place and then slam it before offering to get one for Alex. "It's packed in here," the new guy said.

Alex nodded, distracted and a little numb. "Yeah."

"I was lucky they still had a suite. Macallan. Neat. And leave

the bottle,” Bromeo told the bartender before shifting his gaze onto Alex. “And I think we’ll take another glass.” The grin he gave her was supposed to be smooth, but it was closer to leering, and it was all Alex could do not to sigh in relief because, finally, a guy she could read! A guy who made sense! Everything from his fancy watch to his slicked-back hair told a story of mediocre grades at top-tier schools, of nasty divorces and bad credit and jobs he got from friends of his father.

On the other side of the room, there were a dozen bridesmaids who should have been getting drunk en route to some all-inclusive in Jamaica—women a little bitter that their friend had made them pay for new highlights and an expensive trip, and now they were probably stuck sleeping four to a room until the weather cleared.

Go tell them about your suite, she wanted to say, but Bromeo was looking at her lips and asking, “So what’s your name?” Alex told herself she should lie—make something up. She should flirt and kiss and pretend she was the kind of woman who could be attracted to that kind of man. She had one last night of freedom—one last night of life as she knew it. And he wasn’t entirely asymmetrical. Maybe . . .

“Her name is Mrs. Masterson,” someone said, and Alex turned to see The Guy standing behind her, a proprietary gleam in his eye. “I’m Mr. Masterson. Thanks for keeping my seat warm.”

The Guy didn’t shove, but his words—or maybe just his presence—pushed the stranger away so smoothly that it was like the stool had iced over.

“Hi, gorgeous,” The Guy whispered near Alex’s ear, so close it probably looked like a kiss. “Sorry I’m late.”

Then he took the empty stool and angled his body toward hers, and Alex tried her hardest not to gape.

“Ladies! Can I join you?” Bromeo picked up his bottle and headed toward the Bride Squad, but The Guy acted like he hadn’t heard a word.

Alex glowered at him. “Was that necessary?”

“No.” The Guy finally took a gulp of the beer he’d been sipping. His lips quirked around the rim of the glass. “But it was fun.”

He looked up at the TV like he was superinvested in the game and hadn’t spent the last half hour on the other end of the bar, looking down his nose at Alex. Something about the cool, casual way he watched the screen made Alex’s skin prickle and her blood boil.

“That could have been the love of my life.”

“He wasn’t.”

“You can’t possibly know—”

The Guy turned toward her—just slightly. “He took his wedding ring off when he came in, did you see that?”

Alex hadn’t seen, but she wasn’t surprised. “He was just talking to me—”

“He was hitting on you.”

She didn’t even try not to grin. “No shit.”

“You’ve got a mouth on you.”

“Is this the part where you say I should put it on you?”

“No.” The Guy looked slightly offended. “I would come up with something significantly more original than that.”

“Screw it.” No one needed chicken fingers that badly.

She pushed away and was starting to leave when he said, “You’re welcome.”

Alex spun back. “I didn’t need your help. I didn’t even *want* your help.”

“You didn’t want *him*.”

“Oh yeah?” That time, Alex had to laugh. “What makes you so sure?”

When he turned on his stool, they were the same height for just a moment, inches away, and Alex felt herself breathing hard even though she’d barely moved in twenty minutes.

“Because you want me.”

He didn’t . . . He didn’t just . . . say that? No one just *says* that. Alex had never heard such audacity. Such certainty. Such . . . confidence. But the worst thing was that, deep down, a tiny part of her knew that it was true. So Alex laughed louder.

“Nice try, Cowboy. But you don’t know anything about me.”

“Sure, I do.” His grin was dark and slow. “I know you’re drinking

something caffeine-free because you have to be up early and something boozeless because you have to be sharp. You asked for extra ice because you've been out of the country for a while—my guess is Europe—so now you're jet-lagged, but you're also hungry. You don't eat fried food often, but this is a special occasion. And you're nervous, which is why you're not already asleep, but you know you should be. How am I doing?"

He was doing way too well, but Alex didn't dare to say so.

"You're indulging tonight . . ." The Guy went on, gaze dipping for one millisecond. "And there's a reason you've been watching me for twenty minutes."

Now, Alex was angry. "You've been watching *me*."

From the corner of her eye, Alex saw the kitchen door swing open. "Put them on my tab," The Guy said when the bartender slid a box full of chicken fingers in their direction, but he never took his gaze off of Alex, and all she could do was stand there, staring. Thinking.

Wavering.

She hated everything about that feeling and that moment and that man. But mostly she hated how right he was.

She looked him up and down, from his plain white shirt to his dark blue jeans—the jaw that was a little more rugged up close, and not just because it was covered with stubble. But it was the hands she lingered on—long, strong fingers that screamed of quiet, practiced competence. Maybe he was a concert pianist or a surgeon? They were the hands of a man made of patience and precision. They were hands that didn't dabble. They performed. And a part of Alex itched to see what kind of performance they might coax out of her.

"Come on." He slid off the barstool and reached for her to-go container. "You'll want these later."

"Later?" The word jerked Alex back. "I want them now. I wanted them twenty minutes ago when I ordered them but—"

"Tell me you're ready to get out of here." He was suddenly so close that she could feel the rise and fall of his chest. Close enough to make out the little ring of green around the blue of his eyes. Close

enough to feel . . . and forget. Close enough that when she swayed, she found herself pressed against him and unable to sway back.

"Are you asking if I want to see your room?"

"No. I'm asking if you want to see stars."



Alex didn't exactly *decide* to follow him out of the bar. Her hand just sort of slipped into his, which was silly. It made her feel young and weak, like someone had to guide her through the Bride Squads of the world. Like she couldn't make it alone. Which she could—she would. She was going to. Just as soon as she got on that bus at six the following morning. But until then . . .

The Guy was right about one thing—she was having one last night of indulgences, and maybe . . .

When they reached the bank of elevators, The Guy stopped and pressed her against the wall and whispered, "Tell me your name."

They were alone. No more laughing or touchdowns or little pieces of falling ice pinging off the frosty windows, cold and sharp enough to sting.

"I . . . I'm . . ." Alex's brain stopped working as lips brushed the underside of her jaw. "Tell me yours."

"Call me Cowboy." The words startled a giggle out of Alex.

"So now you're into it?"

"It's growing on me." He pressed against her, strong and sure. "Tell me your name," he asked again, and she felt warm breath on the side of her neck and those competent fingers at the curve of her waist, brushing against the smooth skin beneath her shirt.

He wedged a knee between her legs, and Alex gave up any pretense of not wanting him and this and now. She sounded almost breathless when she said, "Alex. My name is Alex." She went up on her toes to kiss him properly, arms around his neck and—

Suddenly, he stilled. His body slumped against hers, like a marionette who had just lost a string, but the grip on her waist went

tighter. When he whispered in her ear that time, the voice sounded like midnight feels.

“Never give anyone your real name, Ms. Sterling.” Alex froze. “Never invite a stranger into your room. And never go to theirs.” He pulled back but didn’t look at her, like in spite of everything he felt almost guilty.

“Who are you?” she asked, but he didn’t face her. “Who—”

“I’m the guy telling you to go home. Lead a good life. Be happy.”

“*Who are you?*” She reached for his arm, ready to force an answer out of him, but it was like he read her mind—like he’d leapt forward in time to get there a split second before she did, and, suddenly, he had her wrist pinned against the wall over her head and his chest was pressing against hers. He was too tall and too strong and too much. It was the first time Alex had ever felt like she wasn’t enough because all she could do was stare up at him as he leaned down and whispered, “I’m the Ghost of Christmas Future, and I’m telling you, you’re gonna want to miss that bus tomorrow morning.”

The bus. Spy school.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She hated the way he looked at her. Like her attempt at the lie was funny. Like she was so bad, it was laughable. Like she wasn’t worth the effort, and so he pushed away. “Goodbye, Alexandra. I trust we’ll never see each other again.”

“As long as I miss the bus.”

“Precisely.” Then he turned and pushed open a door and disappeared into the storm.

At six a.m. the following morning, Alexandra Sterling was the first person to board the bus to COTAC.

One guess who was the second.

Present Day

Location Unknown

It wasn’t the first time Alexandra Sterling had woken up tied to a chair in the dark, but it was the first time she couldn’t remember exactly how she got there.

Her head hurt, and her throat burned, and she didn’t even know if it was day or night, winter or summer. If she was dead or alive.

She shifted on the cold metal seat, and a sharp, searing pain streaked down her spine.

Alive, she decided. Definitely alive.

When she heard the clang of handcuffs hitting a metal chair, Alex had to wonder how much longer she could stay that way. But Alex didn’t panic, thank you very much. She was too well-trained for that and far too jaded. Panic was for the very naive, the supremely unprepared, and the extraordinarily stupid, and no one survives ten years in her business by being any of the three, so Alex tried to focus on what she *was*: Confused. And concerned. And, most of all, *caught*.

Alex had been caught, and no matter how hard she tried to think—how desperately she needed to remember—she couldn’t put her finger on how.

So that brought her back to the hard chair and the dark room and the pain in her neck that told her she’d been sitting there for way too long.

She had to get free, and that was one of very few things she knew for certain.

THINGS THAT I KNOW

A List by Alexandra Sterling

- My name is Alex Sterling.
- I'm in a dark room that smells like dust and mold and other people's feet.
- I'm handcuffed.
- My head hurts.
- My neck hurts.
- My stomach hurts.
- I don't know who brought me here or when or how or why.

But the most important thing was simple:

- My name is Alexandra Sterling. And I used to be a spy.

It was the past tense that mattered. For a moment, in the darkness, with nothing but the beating of her heart to mark the time, Alex had to wonder if the last year had been a dream. Maybe she was still undercover with Kozlov? Maybe she was waking up at the Farm? Maybe she was still a little girl and she was going to look over and see Zoe sleeping in a twin bed on the other side of the room . . . But no.

Her head hurt and the handcuffs rattled, and Alex couldn't help but remember icy falls and hard landings and then walking—no, *running*—away from her job and her world and her life. She remembered hiding and worrying that someone might find her. She remembered wondering if that would be better or worse than waking up one day and realizing that no one had bothered to look.

Of course, someone *had* come looking, it turned out, but she didn't have a clue who. Or why. And Alex couldn't make it all make sense.

For a time, every intelligence service in the world had been trying to track her down, but that was more than a year ago, and Kozlov was dead now. Alex hadn't officially resigned from the CIA, but disappearing without a trace for a year was the same thing, wasn't it?

And, besides, Alex had been a very good girl since she jumped off that mountain in Italy—literally flew into the sunset and disappeared.

But maybe that was her first mistake. People liked Alex more when she was bad.

Her Agency-assigned therapist had told her once that most of her issues stemmed from childhood trauma and survivor's guilt and the need to act out first—cause trouble and drive people away because, on some level, Alex felt like she didn't deserve them. It wasn't her fault she'd gotten the good heart and the good veins and the good nutrients—sucked them right up in the womb.

She hadn't actively *tried* to kill her sister, but Alex had been a greedy little embryo, and she doubted ten years in the field had made it any better. So maybe it was just a matter of time until she ended up tied to (yet another) chair in (yet another) room waiting for (yet another) bad guy to come try to boss her around.

It didn't matter that her wrists were still cuffed and the room was still dark and she wanted to sneeze—just a little. It was a room that felt like it had never been clean and never would be. Just four walls she couldn't even see, but she could tell the floor was concrete and the chair was metal. It made a scraping sound when she moved, and Alex had to bite back a grin. That fact was going to prove handy.

And speaking of hands, she gave hers a jerk in the darkness. They didn't make a rattle or a clang, so she wasn't handcuffed to the chair itself, and whatever was on the other side of those cuffs had a little give. If she could get it to break . . .

She pulled harder.

And then she heard it—a groan in the darkness—a low, aching sound that meant one thing: she wasn't alone.

Alex went still. The pain faded and her senses sharpened and, suddenly, she could smell everything, hear everything—feel everything about the room around her.

There was a sound, like a foot dragging across concrete. And a voice saying—

“Hello, Alexandra.”

And just that quickly, Alex knew who she was going to kill first.

Ten Years Ago
Camp Peary, Virginia

No one knows anything about the Farm. Officially, it doesn't even exist. Baby Alex had first heard the term on one of the two dozen spy movies she used to watch under the covers in hospitals, ready to shout *Wrong sister!* to anyone who might want to try to cut her open.

The spies in the movies were tough. They were fearless. They knew how to stab with pencils and strangle with string, and they never, ever cried because their twin sister was about to have her heart pulled out of her chest and then sewn back together—again.

They wore fancy dresses and drove fancier cars, and they didn't need the person in the twin bed on the far side of the room because they weren't half—they were whole. And they learned it all on some farm in Virginia.

It didn't matter how many stalls she had to muck or tractors she had to drive, nine-year-old Alex had sworn that she was going to learn to do those things too.

It wasn't until much, much later that Alex learned it wasn't *that* kind of farm. What the CIA grew at Camp Peary, it turned out, were secrets. But that was okay. Alex had a knack for those too.

So it didn't seem quite real, that January morning, as Alex gazed out the tinted windows when the bus stopped at the gates. German shepherds circled, sniffing at the wheels. Guards scanned for bombs, but Alex was more concerned with the man who was staring holes in the back of her head from the row behind her.

She turned and whispered, "Oh my gosh, was *this* the bus I wasn't supposed to get on?" She gave a gasp. Then a giggle. "This is so embarrassing."

"You seem pleased with yourself."

"Me?" She turned in her seat and watched the gates swing open. "Absolutely."

When they climbed off the bus ten minutes later, the sky was the color of gunmetal and the parking lot was rimmed with piles of dirty snow. Alex's breath turned to fog in the chilly air, but she could have stood there for an hour—a day—taking in the sights and sounds of that place that had loomed so large in her imagination. In reality, it was just a collection of neat, government-issue buildings surrounded by dense forest. On the drive, she'd spied (*Ha!*) shooting ranges and an airstrip and fractured glimpses of glistening water through breaks in the trees. It was all perfectly . . . ordinary.

"So this is it?" a voice asked from behind her, and Alex turned to take in a shadow that was the wrong shape—a voice that was the wrong tenor. The sky was just dull enough that she would have looked stupid in sunglasses, but she still had to squint against a glare as she looked up at a guy who was definitely not *The Guy*. Alex tried not to think about why she felt so disappointed. "I'm Tyler."

He held out his hand and Alex took it because she was going to play nice, she'd decided. Make friends. She was a new person here, and she was going to learn how to be a million more people. No one knew about Zoe or the hospitals. If anything, her history might have been an asset. Not a lot of people could almost kill someone in the womb. At spy school, that might make her a badass.

So Alex looked up at the new guy and told herself to smile. He looked . . . nice. The human equivalent of a photograph that had been put through so many filters that it couldn't help but look appealing, lines blurring together until there were no shadows anymore. He was attractive and easygoing and probably just not-threatening enough to make people feel like they could tell him their secrets. If so, he was in the right place.

So she asked, "Is that allowed?"

He exhaled about a third of a laugh. "Excuse me?"

"Names," she went on as he held open a door and they followed the group inside. "Or is Tyler a code name?" He gave her a look