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MURDER BIMBO

a novel

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*In memory of Amber Hollibaugh, Beth Freeman,
Cecilia Gentili, and Dorothy Allison*

MURDER BIMBO

PROLOGUE

FEAR FLUNG me out of New York City. That helped. Metropolitan gravity can be a bitch. I follow the Hudson past the Bronx and hit the interstate. When my adrenaline-induced myopia clears, the city is a receding cluster of lights. Soon trees hide the lights, hills hide the trees. I pass as many cars as I can without getting pulled over.

At night the drive is seven hours. I barely make it two before I start losing it. My eyelids get heavy. My thoughts warp into dream and back. To stay awake I picture a faceless driver in a black sedan aiming a gun at me and shooting me dead. The bullet pierces his window, then mine, a needle through two layers of fabric. When that stops working, I add an imaginary fleet of police cars cresting the hill behind me.

I cross state lines. I switch highways. Eventually my exhaustion outpaces my imagination, and my head shoots up as I'm rumbling over the white line onto the shoulder. I swerve hard into the middle of the road and stop. The streetlights are gone. The sky is a canopy of stars. The air smells like toads. At some point I have entered forest, and the trees are so tightly packed on either side, it feels like I'm in a canyon.

Considering how likely it already is that I will die in the next forty-eight hours, I sure as fuck don't need to be in a car crash of my own making. I get out. I take a few laps around the vehicle, coax blood into every extremity,

tell myself the blood is full of energy, wish it were cold out, cold enough to hurt me. Then I get back in the car and drive.

I promise myself when I get where I am going I can take a nap, even though there won't be time. Even if the trip takes less than seven hours, I will need to get to work. When I came up with this idea, how did I forget about the limitations of the human body? I laugh. I laugh hard enough to keep me awake for a while. Then I try other things. I bite my cheeks, my lips, my tongue; I press my nails into my palms. I shake my head so hard I get a headache.

Then I arrive. It is five a.m. Exactly to plan. *I'm doing it*, I think, *I am getting it done*. I push open the car door and swing my feet onto hairy grass. The mountain air hits my face and it still isn't cold, but there is a breeze, and in it I feel beautiful and hyper-articulate. I turn to get my bags and catch my own face reflected in the dark car window. I stop to admire my beautiful, hyper-articulate self. I look for any vestige of exhaustion, but something has washed it from me. My face is smooth and so are my movements. I look sharp and energetic. I look younger. I look alive.

I am a fucking genius, a gorgeous fucking genius, and the only thing left to do is sit down and write.

ACT I

From: Murder Bimbo
To: Justice Bimbo
October 18 at 6:25AM

Dear Justice Bimbo,

I saw you yesterday. We were on the same block in SoHo. I was walking up-town. You were passing a poster of your own enlarged face in the window of a public radio building. I probably wouldn't have recognized you if I hadn't seen your face two ways: big and flat, then small and in real life. There was something funny about the combination. I looked away then back, away then back.

"Justice for Bimbos" the poster said in big pink script across your headshot. The name of your podcast.

I had to be in Midtown in an hour and had decided to walk to burn off nervous energy, and because I don't know the subways and was a little afraid of getting lost or having to dive off the train at my stop in an embarrassing way. I didn't stop walking, but I slowed down enough to see you drop your phone in your back pocket and open the door. Then I googled you.

I was glad to have something to do while I walked. I found your podcast. I skimmed the episode titles and realized I knew your work. Or, not knew, but it seemed familiar. I had seen articles about you. Friends, people I trust, had selected episodes to convince me of your brilliance: JonBenét Ramsey, Monica Lewinsky, Aileen Wuornos. The truth is, I had never managed to click play. It's not personal. I'm just not into podcasts.

I read the short bio on your site, I found the headshot from your poster. I read a list of all your work then I read the list of your awards. I read the controversy section of your Wikipedia page which described the series you did on ultra-right-wing political candidate Meat Neck's mistress, and how the media hated her for the wrong reasons. I downloaded the first episode of the series for later.

Sorry. This probably isn't very alluring, is it: a fan letter from someone who doesn't know your work. I wish I had time to listen or at least to do a

better job at lying, but I don't. And maybe that would seem creepy anyway. I can't risk creeping you out. I should get to the point.

I'm in trouble. In the fifteen hours since I passed you on the street, I've become one of your endangered women. Like with all of them, it would be hard to step back and look at me without thinking that I brought the danger on myself. I am not entirely innocent. At least I should have known better. That's the world we live in, right? You can either make every effort to be and appear innocent, if you're a woman, and usually still get fucked and blamed for it. Or you can live your life, hope the happiness outweighs the danger, and sort the rest out when you have to.

I guess now I have to.

I'm not in the city anymore. I'm in a shabby little cabin that used to be part of a kids' camp and is now used in the summer for very bare-bones corporate retreats. But it's the offseason. The water is off. The electricity is off. There are six cots pushed against the wall and I'm at the one the farthest from the door, hoping the sun will come up soon, so that the light of my computer screen doesn't act like a spotlight on my face for anyone who could be looking in the window.

Someone is coming for me.

Do you believe in fate? I definitely don't—except for when it happens to me, and then I believe in it silently, so as not to scare it away.

I saw you, I saw your photo, I looked you up. I kept walking. I thought we were just two women on our way to work. I thought your work probably included a microphone and being smart. I thought the only difference between us is that you are famous and I am not.

Then I remembered that I was about to be famous, too, in a way. Do famous people just write to each other like this?

I'm stalling. I'm nervous. There's a lot riding on this and there's no way to explain except by explaining. It's actually because of the fame that I need your help. Here goes nothing.

By now I'm sure you've heard about the assassination of Meat Neck?

I killed him.

Sincerely,
Murder Bimbo

From: Murder Bimbo
To: Justice Bimbo
October 18 at 6:36AM

Dear Justice,

I wasn't supposed to have had to flee. I wasn't supposed to be here.

In an alternate reality, you and I both did our jobs yesterday, went back to wherever we were spending the night, took showers. I slept in and got room service and listened to your podcast on my ride home. I thought, *Wow, it's so cool that I saw this person in real life and now I'm listening to her show. Wow, I actually do like podcasts, as long as they're really good.* I probably would have learned something.

I don't know how your night went, but mine went wrong. When the people who are after me get here, they'll arrest me and put me on trial, or they'll disappear me to some black site. Or they won't bother with any of that and they'll just kill me.

My body is so overwhelmed by continuous adrenaline rushes that the sound of my own footsteps makes me nervous. I am trying to talk myself into relaxing. Do deep breaths ever help? If I can actually calm down, I'm afraid I'll fall asleep. Then I'll really be screwed. I'm writing with my body tucked into the corner of a musty cabin, wishing I had a blanket and a hot cup of coffee.

How long do I actually have? It's minutes if they followed me. An hour if they called for backup first. Maybe half a day if they have a tracker on me and are waiting for me to stop moving before they close in. I got rid of my clothes and everything else I had, so this seems unlikely, but not impossible. My phone is a burner, the car isn't mine. What else have I missed? I'm doing my best to buy time, but I learned everything from TV and I don't even watch that much.

Based on how many of the "bimbos" on your show are dead or long out-of-the-news, I'm guessing you don't cover people at their request. I'm hoping that's only because you haven't been offered the right opportunity

yet. Your podcast is dedicated to setting the story straight, resuscitating the reputations of the over-blamed and the underestimated. I'm a thirty-two-year-old sex worker who just killed a politician on what I thought were the orders of the American government. Here's your chance to catch me *before* I become a scapegoat, a punching bag, or a monster who needs reputation restitution. Please, please, please turn me into a feminist antihero.

At least hear me out. This is going to be stream of consciousness and, I hope, not a total mess. But it's the first time I'm putting the whole story together (not to mention the most I've written since I dropped out of college over a decade ago), so you'll have to forgive me if I leave big gaps or say too much in the wrong places. I'll try not to get distracted.

It started last spring with a flyer. Normal day. No sign whatsoever that I was about to be recruited into a historic assassination plot. I was on my way into Boston to meet a new client when my phone buzzed.

Last min meeting need to resched. Sry.

I was annoyed, but I was also relieved, like anyone is when they get canceled on.

I put my phone in my bag without responding and hopped off the T at the next stop. It was a chilly day but still warmer than it had been in months. It felt like spring had arrived. Strangers were smiling at each other on their way to work because it was sunny out and we had all just survived another miserable Boston winter. Crocuses were peeking through the mulch. I was into it. I needed a boost, too. Work had been rough lately. My favorite regulars' self-enforced New Year's spending diets were lasting a long time this year. Plus, that morning's client wasn't the first new client to cancel on me at short notice recently. It was either shitty luck or a cultural shift or maybe my star was falling. And there wasn't enough going on in my personal world to balance it out. Life was stagnant.

But still, there was something hopeful about that day. Maybe it was the camaraderie with strangers or the bursts of green, or that my birthday was

right around the corner. Maybe it was that I loved my outfit and now instead of wasting it on a client, I was going to wear it wherever I wanted. Whatever it was, the world felt very full of potential.

I have been a sex worker for ten years. That's long enough to know (1) not to put a lot of effort into chasing guys who cancel on you; (2) not to take it personally; (3) there's probably no "last min meeting"; and (4) to enjoy the guilt-free day off when it falls in your lap.

I floated into a bookshop/café for a little treat. I considered buying a new journal, I ordered a coffee, I watched grad students opening books next to computers. I enjoyed the anonymous hum. While I was waiting for my coffee, I read all the local flyers: "FOUND CAT: KERMIT (STRANGE MEOW)," "Guitar and Piano lessons for kids," "birth/miscarriage/abortion doulas, no postpartum, ask about sliding scale." Normal stuff. Then I saw an event:

"*Women in the Clandestine Services: From OSS to NSA*"—a reading followed by an interview with a local author. It started in less than an hour.

Clandestine services had never especially interested me, but I'm as susceptible as the next guy to well-researched government conspiracies, cover-ups, assassinations, coups that look like boating accidents. Plus, I loved going to events at MIT or Harvard, because they have them in giant old rooms where you can easily imagine a couple hundred years of patriarchs determining the fates of the rest of us.

"You should go," someone said.

He was a slender man, glasses, carrying a box of books. There had been an older woman also looking at the flyer, but he had waited for her to leave. I should say, for context, that I am of "average weight" and I was wearing a dress. I am also conventionally attractive. I am not shockingly beautiful, but I know that I'm of a very approachable level of beauty. I am probably the most beautiful person most men feel able to easily address.

I clocked a name tag. The man was a bookstore cashier. I wondered if he was the kind of person who was already telling himself the story of *the day we met* as if in the distant future. Or he was an alt fuckboy. Most of the

time I prefer the latter. Though, to be clear, I absolutely would never date a man for free.

“Sure,” I said. We introduced ourselves.

“The author is my mom,” he said.

A third possibility: He was filling out the crowd. I wasn’t insulted by that. If anything, I was *more* excited, because it seemed totally plausible that the speaker was a spy and that arriving with the speaker’s son would give me a better chance to meet her. The fact that the clandestine services suddenly felt like a possibility, albeit a distant one, made it seem enticing. I’m saying this was the state I was in. I was *primed* for my life to change. I wouldn’t say I’ve always felt destined for bigger things. But if you told me my life was going to take a dramatic shift and I would become an important historical figure, I wouldn’t have been surprised. Maybe that’s hubris or maybe I just know myself.

My phone buzzed again. The client.

Please confirm?

I didn’t reply.

“Let me help carry that box,” I said. *His mom saw me carrying her books, I imagined myself saying far in the future, and she assumed we were friends and invited me to the post-event private dinner.* I would charm her just by being myself. She would invite me out for a drink because I reminded her of her younger self, or the young self of her long-dead best colleague/friend. My next chapter would begin. Either that, or me and the guy’s mom would fuck, and that would be a pretty fun addition to the chapter I was already in.

I walked to the reading with the guy. It was half a block away and across the street in the amphitheater of a red stone building. He did not make a move. The mom did not invite me to dinner with a plan to recruit me. The mom thanked me for bringing over the box. The guy took a seat with friends. I found a spot in an empty row toward the back where a man sat next to me. He reeked in an overpowering, almost chemical way, and rather than talk to him, I found an old grocery list in my bag and folded it into a clean square, so I could take notes.

I promise this is relevant: I took three years of high school Japanese. Whatever I learned is gone now, but back then, I had integrated some of the characters into my note-taking system, because it was both impressive and private, and I still use the same system today. I dated the paper in Japanese.

“What’s that?” the man next to me asked.

I knew what he was talking about. I half regretted being impressive because he already seemed like a sticky character.

“Japanese,” I said. I felt my phone buzz.

Not sure if messages are going through,
need to reschedule, so sorry,
please confirm when you get this.

I did not confirm. The client had no doubt slept in the hotel room the night before or stayed up fretting all night—and now he wanted to take a nap, but needed to know I wasn’t going to show up and interrupt him. Well, fuck that. He could have canceled last night or before I had woken up earlier, or before I had gotten dressed and halfway to his hotel. Don’t get me started on how older white guys can’t be inconvenienced at all, but if they inconvenience someone else, you better not complain because “kids these days don’t want to work.” He could suffer a little.

“You speak Japanese?”

“A little,” I said. My phone buzzed again.

“Impressive,” he said.

“Not really,” I said.

“Do you speak other languages?”

“Not really.”

“None?” My phone buzzed twice this time. I pulled it out of my pocket. Eight new messages from the client. I turned the phone off.

“A little Italian and a little German,” I said.

His forehead lifted. I say that because I realized with that gesture that he didn’t have any eyebrows. There was hair on his head. He definitely had eyelashes. It was funny that a lack of eyebrows could send me on a hair inventory. He might even have been handsome if it hadn’t been for the odor.

The smell could have been agricultural, I thought. Some foods can smell like chemicals if you have enough of them. Onions? Garlic? Onions.

Besides the smell, he seemed like a normal guy. He wore jeans, running shoes, and an unzipped navy bomber, an army-green pec-skimming T-shirt. He was a few years older than me.

“You go to school here?” **Onions** said.

I forgot whether we were at MIT or Harvard.

“No,” I said, “I’m too old.”

“That surprises me,” he said. “I would have guessed you were twenty-one.”

When a man who can clearly see you’re over thirty tells you that you’re not only significantly younger but also of drinking age, that’s stage directions, not small talk. He means “You are absolutely as innocent and fresh as you can be for someone who I can legally intoxicate.” In a few years, he’ll be looking for college freshmen to call “old souls.”

“Thanks, I’m twenty-three,” I said.

Or he may also have been a normal guy calling me youthful as a compliment. Whatever. Somewhere along the way, I had apparently gotten curious.

But he didn’t keep talking; instead he texted someone. I scribbled out a few more words. He stood up and moved to another row beside another woman, also “about twenty-one.” I considered calling out to her to protect herself. But he didn’t talk to her. Then the lecture started and for forty minutes I tried very hard to keep my mind on women in the clandestine services.

I was more tired than I knew and the HVAC hum didn’t help. Several times I found myself daydreaming about going home with the author, taking off her clothes, her fucking me.

When she stopped talking the host came up for the Q&A portion.

I jerked my head up. Had I actually fallen asleep-asleep? I wanted to stand and shake out my legs. Just as I was identifying the least intrusive way out of the lecture hall, applause began. I stood to go and the other women in my row followed my lead and stood to clap. Then everyone was standing. Onions looked at me like I was a little crazy for starting a standing ovation

at an MIT or Harvard reading. I shrugged, smiled, considered sitting back down, but left instead.

After the reading I kept my phone off and enjoyed that unique high of walking around knowing no one can find you and no one can reach you. If you miss something important with your phone off, it's not your fault. It's a free pass on not caring about the latest doom for a while.

The lecturer had started out as a visual analyst, back before women were very common in clandestine service agencies. When she started, she had been siloed away from the main offices with a team of near retirees who hazed her (left porn around), before training her to decipher blurry aerial images. Her job was to look at photographs of the same place taken at regular intervals over long periods of time. The shapes would change or move. Her job was to put together a story about what was happening. Trucks moved materials in and weapons out. A hole was dug. A factory got abandoned. She did not tell us where the photos were from. That was still classified. She said it wasn't boring, it was just "a subtle kind of interesting." Sounded pretty boring to me.

But those were the old days, she said. Women could do way more jobs now. She told us about the last job she had before retiring, posing as the housekeeper of a criminal's girlfriend, and how no one expected it when she was the one to separate the guy from his security so someone could arrest him. "No one expects a mom-looking person, they just think you're there to clean something," she said.

She had other stories, too, more exciting ones, with travel. Someone asked her how many different people she'd pretended to be over the years and she said probably dozens, but they weren't easy to keep straight, because they were all based on a few archetypes. Someone asked if she'd ever shot someone and she said "No comment." Someone asked how many languages she spoke, and she said eight, but that that was because she was a nerd, and not because it was required. Someone asked if she'd driven a tank or a motorcycle or a snowmobile or a McLaren or a Jet Ski and she said *no*,

yes, no, yes, once on Lake Powell as a teenager. Someone asked her if she'd ever dyed her hair, and someone else interrupted on her behalf to say that was a dumb question, which was too bad because I really wanted to know. She never got back to it.

She said the most important qualities for someone to succeed in the clandestine services are curiosity, open-mindedness, and courage. Maybe former agents are taught to talk like that, to make everyone feel like they could do the job, but I really did feel like I would have been good at everything she'd mentioned. I wasn't sure I could handle years of blurry photos in "Wherever, Virginia," but the years when she was a case officer abroad sounded—well, pretty fun.

I got back to my neighborhood around five refreshed. I thought maybe I would keep my phone off all evening. Nothing life-changing had happened to me that day after all, but maybe the peace and quiet would be the life-changing thing? I could definitely handle more of it, take a break from dating, could I afford a few weeks off work?

I live in a bougie area. I have a pretty little one-bedroom in a six-floor pre-war building. It's a few blocks from the T. I passed a group of people chatting outside a bar, a woman texting. At the corner a cluster of well-intentioned boomers were drawing on pieces of posterboard. I couldn't see what they were writing, but honestly, I didn't try very hard. They were standing in front of a driveway blocked off with police tape.

That's when I heard my name shouted, not from the group but from the other side of the street. I didn't turn at first. My name is common enough it could have belonged to one of the neighbors. But then I heard it again, closer. Then something else: "Ich würde gern mit Ihnen sprechen." *I'd like to speak with you.*

I saw the man with no eyebrows first, Onions. It was such a shock that my immediate thought was *How did he get to my neighborhood so fast?* Though of course he'd had all afternoon to get here, just like I had. He had changed since the reading into a boxy gray suit. I had the immediate impression that what