

“Excuse me, is that your car parked out front?” She struggled to maintain a polite tone.

The woman’s head snapped toward her, her perfect lips making a surprised little ‘o’ before breaking out in a broad smile. She removed her wireless earbuds, blasting classical music across the room. A swipe to her phone silenced them, and she got to her feet in a fluid motion, stepping toward her with the grace of a ballet dancer. “Officer O’Rourke, how good to see you,” the woman gushed in a lilting British accent. “Or should I just call you Mel?”

“Poppy?” She was too astonished to squeak out more.

“In the flesh.” The lithe woman beamed but stopped short of wrapping her arms around Mel in an enthusiastic hug. So many questions rattled around in her pre-coffee sluggish brain, but she blurted out the most obvious one first.

“How did you get in here?” She’d locked the front door after the posted eight o’clock closing time last night. The guests all had keys to their own cabins or rooms and had instructions to call if they needed her after eight. The safety protocol was a habit she’d stuck to religiously after finding a murdered man sitting in a chair right across from the one vacated by her...nemesis? Acquaintance? She shook her head, unable to put a label to their relationship.

“Well,” she purred, her brown eyes sparkling behind long fake lashes, “I drove up early this morning and it was too cold to sit in my car until your eight a.m. opening time.” She gestured to the sign in the window stating lobby hours. “So I let myself in. I knew you wouldn’t mind.”

Poppy Phillips was a thief. A notorious cat burglar, sometimes called “The Ghost” by social media outlets and more whimsical members of the public. Many police forces had been chasing her for years, including the LAPD. They knew she’d committed a multitude of crimes, but never found the evidence to make the charges stick, until last year. Mel, hot on her heels in pursuit after a daring robbery, got within an arm’s length from grabbing her with the stolen items on her person when the thief nimbly jumped from the roof of the building they were running across, over an alley, to land on the one next door.

Mel tried to follow, but slipped and slammed into the side of the building instead. With her partner too far away to help, she clung to the rooftop by her fingertips until they cramped from the strain. She started reciting the Hail Mary for what she thought would be the last time when two strong, slender arms pulled her to safety. It was Poppy. She could have kept going and escaped, but she came back to save Mel’s life.

As they both collapsed to the roof, breathless and laughing at the absurdity of the situation, she cuffed herself to the thief and arrested her. Rather than lashing out and trying to escape, she just sat there and laughed some more. It was almost insulting how chill she was about the whole thing. But, since one rescue deserved another, she convinced the prosecutor, a member

of her extended family, to drop the charges in light of services rendered. So what was she doing here?

Making a mental note to change the lock and check into a security system to prevent another surprise visit from potentially less amiable thieves, she persisted. "Yes, but what are you doing here? In Pine Cove?" She narrowed her eyes at the intruder. "Are you on the run?"

Poppy's eyes grew wide in a nearly convincing guise of innocence. "No," she huffed with the perfect blend of indignation and hurt feelings, "why would you say such a thing?"

"Experience?"

After mulling her statement over for a moment, the Brit gave her a crooked grin. "You got me there but seriously, after our run in on the rooftop and you managed to keep me out of the nick, I got to thinking, is this what I really want to do with my life? So, I decided to turn over a new leaf. When I heard about your lovely B&B, I says to me-self, 'Poppy, that's the ticket. Go work for your old pal Mel.' And here I am." She spread her arms wide like a magician who had performed a trick and awaited her due applause.

Mel scrubbed her face with her hands. "This is too much conversation before coffee."