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BURIED SECRETS

A NICK HELLER NOVEL

P A R T O N E

There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told.

Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes, die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed. Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burden so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave. And thus the essence of all crime is undivulged.

— EDGAR ALLAN POE,
“THE MAN OF THE CROWD” (1840)



1.

If this was what a prison was like, Alexa Marcus thought, I could totally live here. Like, forever.

She and Taylor Armstrong, her best friend, were standing in a long line to get into the hottest bar in Boston. The bar was called Slammer, and it was in a luxury hotel that used to be a jail. They'd even kept the bars in the windows and the huge central rotunda ringed with catwalks, that whole cell-block effect.

She was checking out this bunch of guys behind her who looked like MIT frat boys trying too hard to be cool: the untucked shirts, the cheap blazers, all that product in their hair, the toxic fumes of their Axe body spray. They'd stumble home at two in the morning, puking on the bridge to Cambridge, bitching about how all the girls at Slammer were skanks.

"I'm loving the smoky eye," Taylor said, studying Alexa's eye makeup. "See? It looks amazing on you!"

"It took me like an hour," Alexa said. The fake eyelashes, the black gel eyeliner and charcoal eye shadow: She looked like a hooker who'd been beat up by her pimp.

"Takes me like *thirty seconds*," Taylor said. "Now look at you—you're this totally hot babe instead of a suburban prepster."

"I'm *so* not suburban," Alexa protested. She glanced over at a couple of skinny Euro-looking guys smoking and talking on their mobile phones. Cute but maybe gay? "Dad lives in Manchester." She'd almost said, "*I* live in Manchester," but she no longer thought of the

great rambling house she grew up in as her home, not since Dad had married that gold-digger flight attendant, Belinda. She hadn't lived at home in almost four years, since going away to Exeter.

"Yeah, okay," Taylor said. Alexa caught her tone. Taylor always had to let you know she was a city kid. She'd grown up in a townhouse on Beacon Hill, in Louisburg Square—her dad was a United States senator—and considered herself urban and therefore cooler and more street-smart than anyone else. Plus, the last three years she'd been in rehab, attending the Marston-Lee Academy, the tough-love "therapeutic boarding school" in Colorado where the senator had sent her to get cleaned up.

Good luck with that.

Every time Taylor came back to Boston on break, she was rocking some different Girls Gone Wild look. Last year she'd dyed her hair jet black and had bangs. Tonight it was the skintight black liquid leggings, the oversized gray sheer tee over the black lace bra, the studded booties. Whereas Alexa, less adventurous, was wearing her ink skinny jeans and her tan Tory Burch leather jacket over a tank top. Okay, not as fashion-forward as Taylor, but no way was it *suburban*.

"Oh God," Alexa murmured as the line drew closer to the bouncer.

"Just relax, okay, *Lucia*?" Taylor said.

"Lucia—?" Alexa began, and then she remembered that "Lucia" was the name on her fake ID. Actually, it was a real ID, just not hers—she was seventeen, and Taylor had just turned eighteen, and the drinking age was twenty-one, which was way stupid. Taylor had bought Alexa's fake ID off an older girl.

"Just look the bouncer in the eye and be casual," Taylor said. "You're *totally fine*."

TAYLOR WAS right, of course.

The bouncer didn't even ask to see their IDs. When they entered the hotel lobby, Alexa followed Taylor to the old-fashioned elevator, the kind that had an arrow that pointed to the floor it was on. The elevator door opened, and an iron accordion gate slid aside. Taylor got in along

with a bunch of others. Alexa hesitated, slipped in, shuddered—God, she hated elevators!—and just as the accordion gate was knifing closed, she blurted out, “I’ll take the stairs.”

They met up on the fourth floor and managed to snag a couple of big cushy chairs. A waitress in a halter top so skimpy you could see the flower tattoo below her armpit took their order: a couple of Ketel One vodka sodas.

“Check out the girls on the bar,” Taylor shouted. Models in black leather butt-baring shorts and black leather vests were parading around on top of the bar like it was a catwalk.

One of the MIT frat boys tried to mack on them, but Taylor blew the guy off: “Yeah, I’ll give you a call—next time I need tutoring in like *differential calculus*.”

Alexa felt Taylor’s eyes on her.

“Hey, what’s wrong, kid? You’ve been acting all depressed since you got here.”

“I’m fine.”

“You think maybe you need to change meds or something?”

Alexa shook her head. “Dad’s just, I don’t know, being all weird.”

“Nothing new about that.”

“But like he’s all paranoid all of a sudden? He just had these surveillance cameras put in, all around the house?”

“Well, he *is* like the richest guy in Boston. Or one of the richest—”

“I know, I know,” Alexa interrupted, not wanting to hear it. She’d spent her entire life dealing with being a rich kid: having to play down the money so her friends didn’t feel jealous. “But it’s not his normal control-freak mode, you know? It’s more like he’s scared something’s going to happen.”

“Try living with a father who’s a friggin’ United States senator.”

Taylor had started to look uncomfortable. She rolled her eyes, shook her head dismissively, looked around the now-crowded bar. “I need another drink,” she said. She called the waitress over and asked for a dirty martini. “How about you?” she asked Alexa.

"I'm good." The truth was, she hated hard liquor, especially vodka. And gin was the worst. How could anyone voluntarily drink that stuff? It was like chugging turpentine.

Alexa's iPhone vibrated, so she took it out and read the text. A friend at some rager in Allston, telling her it was epic and she should come over. Alexa texted back sorry. Then, abruptly, she said, "Oh my God, oh my God, did I ever show you this?" She flicked through her iPhone applications until she came to one she'd just downloaded, launched it, held the iPhone to her mouth. When she talked into it, her words came out high pitched and weird, like one of the Chipmunks: "Hey, babe, wanna come back to my dorm and take off our clothes and do some algebra?"

Taylor squealed. "What *is* that?" She tried to grab the phone, but Alexa yanked it away, swiped the screen and started speaking in the creepy voice of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*: "Must have preciousssss!"

Taylor shrieked, and they both laughed so hard that tears came to their eyes. "See—you're feeling better already, right?" said Taylor.

"May I join you?" A male voice.

Alexa looked up, saw a guy standing there. Not one of the frat boys, though. *Definitely* not. This one had dark hair and brown eyes, a day's growth of beard, and he was totally a babe. Black shirt with white pin-stripes, narrow waist, broad shoulders.

Alexa smiled, blushed—she couldn't help it—and looked at Taylor.

"Do we know you?" Taylor said.

"Not yet," the guy said, flashing a dazzling smile. Late twenties, early thirties, maybe? Hard to tell. "My friends ditched me. They went to a party in the South End I don't feel like going to." He had some kind of Spanish accent.

"There's only two chairs," Taylor said.

He said something to a couple seated next to them, slid a vacant chair over. Extended a hand to shake Taylor's, then Alexa's.

"I'm Lorenzo," he said.

2 .

The bathroom had Molton Brown hand soap (Thai Vert) and real towels, folded into perfect squares. Alexa reapplied her lip gloss while Taylor touched up her eyes.

“He’s totally into you,” Taylor said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Like you don’t know it.” Taylor was outlining her eyes with a kohl pencil.

“How old do you think he is?”

“I don’t know, thirties?”

“*Thirties?* I thought maybe thirty at the oldest. Do you think he knows we’re only . . .” but another couple of girls entered the bathroom, and she let her sentence trail off.

“Go for it,” Taylor said. “It’s totally cool. I promise.”

WHEN THEY finally succeeded in elbowing their way back to their chairs, the Black Eyed Peas blasting so loud her ears hurt, Alexa half-expected Lorenzo to be gone.

But he was still there, slouching a little in his chair, sipping his vodka. Alexa reached for her drink—a Peartini, at Lorenzo’s suggestion—and was surprised it was half gone. *Man*, she thought, *I am truly wasted*.

Lorenzo smiled that awesome smile. His eyes weren’t just brown, she noticed. They were light brown. *Tiger’s eye*, she thought. She had a tiger’s eye choker her mom had given her a couple months before she

died. She couldn't bring herself to wear it, but she loved looking at the stones.

"If you kids'll excuse me," Taylor said, "I really need to get going."

"Taylor!" Alexa said.

"Why?" said Lorenzo. "Please stay."

"Can't," Taylor said. "My dad's waiting up for me." With a conspiratorial sparkle in her eye, Taylor gave a little wave and disappeared into the crowd.

Lorenzo moved to Taylor's chair, next to Alexa's. "That's okay. Tell me about you, Lucia. How come I never see you here before?"

For a moment she forgot who "Lucia" was.

NOW SHE was definitely drunk.

She felt like she was floating above the clouds, singing along to Rihanna, smiling like an idiot, while Lorenzo was saying something to her. The room swam. She was finding it hard to separate his voice from everyone else's, a cacophony of a thousand individual conversations, little snatches, layer upon layer upon layer, none of them making any sense. Her mouth was dry. She reached for her glass of Pellegrino, knocked it over. Smiled sheepishly. She just stared at the spill open-mouthed, amazed that the water glass hadn't broken, gave Lorenzo a goofy smile, and he gave that spectacular smile back, his brown eyes soft and sexy. He reached over and dropped his napkin over the puddle to blot it up.

She said, "I think I need to go home."

"I take you," he said.

He tossed a bunch of twenties on the table, stood, reached for her hand. She tried to stand but it felt like her knees were hinged. He took her hand again, his other hand around her waist, half-lifted her up.

"My car . . ."

"You shouldn't drive," he said. "I drive you home. You can get your car back tomorrow."

“But . . .”

“It’s not a problem. Come, Lucia.” He steered her through the crowd, his arms strong. People were staring at her, leering, laughter echoing, the lights streaky rainbow and glittery, like being underwater and looking up at the sky, everything so distant.

NOW SHE felt the pleasant clear coolness of the late-night air on her face.

Traffic noise, the bleat of car horns, smearing by.

She was lying down on the back seat of a strange car, her cheek pressed against the cold hard cracked leather. The car smelled like stale cigarette smoke and beer. A few beer bottles rolled around on the floor. A Jag, she was pretty sure, but old and skeezy and filthy inside. Definitely not what she imagined a guy like Lorenzo driving.

“Do you know how to get there?” she tried to say. But the words came out slurred.

She felt seasick, hoped she wasn’t going to vomit in the back seat of Lorenzo’s Jaguar. That would be nasty.

She wondered: How did he know where to go?

NOW SHE heard the car door open and close. The engine had been shut off. Why was he stopping so soon?

When she opened her eyes, she noticed it was dark. No street-lights. No traffic sounds, either. Her sluggish brain registered a faint, distant alarm. Was he leaving her here? Where were they? What was he doing?

Someone was walking toward the Jaguar. It was too dark to make out his face. A lean, powerful build, that was all she could see.

The door opened, and the light came on, illuminating the man’s face. Shaved head, piercing blue eyes, sharp jaw, unshaven. Handsome, until he smiled and showed brown rodent’s teeth.

“Come with me, please,” the new man said.

SHE AWOKED in the back seat of a big new SUV. An Escalade, maybe, or a Navigator.

Very warm in here, almost hot. A smell like cheap air freshener.

She looked at the back of the driver's head. He had shaved black hair. On the back of his neck, a strange tattoo crawled up from beneath his sweatshirt. Her first thought was: angry eyes. A bird?

"What happened to Lorenzo?" she tried to say, but she wasn't sure what came out.

"Just stretch out and have yourself a nice rest, Alexa," the man said. He had an accent too, but harsher, more guttural.

That sounded like a good idea. She felt herself drifting off, but then her heart started to race, as if her body realized even before her mind did.

He knew her real name.

3.

Here's the thing," the short guy said. "I always like to know who I'm doing business with."

I nodded, smiled.

What a jerk.

If Short Man's Disease were recognized by modern medicine as the serious syndrome it is, all the textbooks would use Philip Curtis's picture, along with those of Mussolini, Stalin, Attila the Hun, and of course the patron saint of all miniature tyrants, Napoléon Bonaparte. Granted, I'm over six feet, but I know tall guys with Short Man's Disease too.

Philip Curtis, as he called himself, was so small and compact that I was convinced I could pick him up in one hand and hurl him through my office window, and by now I was sorely tempted to. He was maybe an inch or two above five feet, shiny bald, and wore enormous black-framed glasses, which he probably thought made him look more imposing, instead of like a turtle who'd lost his shell and was pissed off about it.

The vintage Patek Philippe watch on his wrist had to be sixty years old. That told me a lot. It was the only flashy object he wore, and it said "inherited money." His Patek Philippe had been passed down, probably from his dad.

"I checked you out." His brow arched significantly. "Did the whole due-diligence thing. Gotta say, you don't leave a lot of tracks."

"So I'm told."

"You don't have a website."

"Don't need one."

"You're not on Facebook."

"My teenage nephew's on it. Does that count?"

"Barely anything turned up on Google. So I asked around. Seems you've got an unusual background. Went to Yale but never graduated. Did a couple of summer internships at McKinsey, huh?"

"I was young. I didn't know any better."

His smile was reptilian. But a small reptile. A gecko, maybe. "I worked there myself."

"And I was almost starting to respect you," I said.

"The part I don't get is, you dropped out of Yale to join the army. What was *that* all about? Guys like us don't do that."

"Go to Yale?"

He shook his head, annoyed. "You know, I thought the name 'Heller' sounded familiar. Your dad's Victor Heller, right?"

I shrugged as if to say, *You got me*.

"Your father was a true legend."

"Is," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Is," I repeated. "He's still alive. Doing twenty-some years in prison."

"Right, right. Well, he sure got the shaft, didn't he?"

"So he tells people." My father, Victor Heller, the so-called Dark Prince of Wall Street, was currently serving a twenty-eight-year sentence for securities fraud. "Legend" was a polite way of referring to him.

"I was always a big admirer of your dad's. He was a real pioneer. Then again, I bet some potential clients, they hear you're Victor Heller's son, they're gonna think twice about hiring you, huh?"

"You think?"

"You know what I mean, the whole . . ." He faltered, then probably decided he didn't have to. He figured he'd made his point.

But I wasn't going to let him off so easily. "You mean the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, right? Like father, like son?"

“Well, yeah, sort of. That might bother some guys, but not me. Uh-uh. Way I figure it, that means you’re probably not going to be too finicky about the gray areas.”

“The gray areas.”

“All the fussy legal stuff, know what I’m saying?”

“Ah, gotcha,” I said. For a long moment I found myself looking out the window. I’d been doing that a lot lately. I liked the view. You could see right down High Street to the ocean, the waterfront at Rowes Wharf framed by a grand Italianate marble arch.

I’d moved to Boston from Washington a few months ago and was lucky enough to find an office in an old brick-and-beam building in the financial district, a rehabbed nineteenth-century lead-pipe factory. From the outside it looked like a Victorian poorhouse out of Dickens. But on the inside, with its bare brick walls and tall arched windows and exposed ductwork and factory-floor open spaces, you couldn’t forget it was a place where they used to actually make stuff. And I liked that. It had a sort of steampunk vibe. The other tenants in the building were consulting firms, an accounting firm, and several small real-estate offices. On the first floor was an “exotic sushi and tapas” place that had gone out of business, and the showroom for Derderian Fine Oriental Rugs.

My office had belonged to some high-flying dot-com that made nothing, including money. They’d gone bust suddenly, so I caught a nice break on the price. They’d absconded so quickly they left all their fancy hanging metal-and-glass light fixtures and even some very expensive office chairs.

“So you say someone on your board of directors is leaking derogatory information about your company,” I said, turning around slowly, “and you want us to—how’d you put it?—‘plug the leak.’ Right?”

“Exactly.”

I gave him my finest conspiratorial grin. “Meaning you want their phones tapped and their e-mails accessed.”

“Hey, you’re a pro,” he said with a quick, smarmy wink. “I’d never tell you how to do your job.”

“Better not to know the details, right? How we work our magic?”

He nodded, a couple of sharp up-and-downs. “Plausible deniability and all that. You got it.”

“Of course. Obviously you know that what you’re asking me to do is basically illegal.”

“We’re both big boys,” he said.

I had to bite my lip. One of us was, anyway.

Just then my phone buzzed—an internal line—and I picked it up. “Yeah?”

“Okay, you were right.” The smoky voice of my forensic data tech, Dorothy Duval. “His name isn’t Philip Curtis.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Don’t rub it in.”

“Not at all,” I said. “It’s a teachable moment. You should know by now not to question me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, I’m stuck. If you have any ideas, just IM me, and I’ll check them out.”

“Thanks,” I said, and I hung up.

The man who wasn’t Philip Curtis had a strong Chicago accent. Wherever he lived now, he was raised in Chicago. He had a rich dad: The hand-me-down Patek Philippe confirmed that.

Then there was the black luggage tag on his Louis Vuitton briefcase. A fractional jet card. He leased a private jet for some limited number of hours per year. Which meant he wanted a private jet but couldn’t afford one.

I had a vague recollection of an item I’d seen on BizWire about troubles in a family-held business in Chicago. “Will you excuse me for just one more minute?” I said. “I have to put out a fire.” Then I typed out an instant message and sent it to Dorothy.

The answer came back less than a minute later: a *Wall Street Journal* article she’d pulled up on ProQuest. I skimmed it, and I knew I’d guessed right. I remembered hearing the whole sordid story not too long ago.

Then I leaned back in my chair. “So here’s the problem,” I said.

“Problem?”

“I’m not interested in your business.”

Stunned, he whirled around to look at me. “What did you just say?”

“If you really did your homework, you’d know that I do intelligence work for private clients. I’m not a private investigator, I don’t tap phones, and I don’t do divorces. And I’m sure as hell not a family therapist.”

“Family . . . ?”

“This is clearly a family squabble, Sam.”

Small round pink spots had formed high on his cheeks. “I told you my name is—”

“Don’t even bother,” I said wearily. “This has nothing to do with plugging a leak. Your family troubles aren’t exactly a secret. You were supposed to take over Daddy’s company until he heard you were talking to the private equity guys about taking Richter private and cashing out.”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

His father, Jacob Richter, had gone from owning a parking lot in Chicago to creating the largest luxury hotel chain in the world. Over a hundred five-star hotels in forty countries, plus a couple of cruise lines, shopping malls, office buildings, and a hell of a lot of real estate. A company valued at ten billion dollars.

“So Dad gets pissed off,” I went on, “and squeezes you out and appoints Big Sis chief executive officer and heir apparent instead of you. Didn’t expect that, did you? You figured you were a shoo-in. But you’re not gonna put up with that, are you? Since you know all of Dad’s dirty laundry, you figure you’ll get him on tape making one of his shady real estate deals, offering kickbacks and bribes, and you’ll be able to blackmail your way back in. I guess that’s called winning ugly, right?”

Sam Richter’s face had gone dark red, almost purple. A couple of bulging veins on top of his scalp were throbbing so hard I thought he was going to have a coronary right in the middle of my office. “Who did you talk to?” he demanded.

“Nobody. Just did the whole due-diligence thing. I always like to know who I’m doing business with. And I really don’t like being lied to.”

As Richter lurched to his feet, he shoved the chair—one of the expensive Humanscale office chairs left by the dot-com—and it crashed to the floor, leaving a visible dent in the old wood. From the doorway, he said, “You know, for a guy whose father’s in prison for fraud, you sure act all high and mighty.”

“You’ve got a point,” I conceded. “Sorry to waste your time. Mind showing yourself out?” Behind him Dorothy was standing, arms folded.

“Victor Heller was . . . the *scum of the earth!*” he sputtered.

“Is,” I corrected him.

You don't tap phones," Dorothy said, arms folded, moving into my office.

I smiled, shrugged. "I always forget you can hear. Someday that's gonna get me in trouble." Our standard arrangement was for her to listen in on all client meetings via the IP video camera built into the huge desktop monitor on my desk.

"You don't tap phones," she said again. Her lips were pressed into a smirk. "Mm-hmm."

"As a general rule," I said.

"Please," she said. "You *hire* guys to do it."

"Exactly."

"What the *hell* was that all about?" she snapped with a fierce glare.

Dorothy and I had worked together at Stoddard Associates in D.C. before I moved to Boston and stole her away. She wasn't really a computer genius—there were certainly more knowledgeable ones around—but she knew digital forensics inside and out. She'd worked at the National Security Agency for nine years, and they don't hire just anyone. As much as she detested working there, they'd trained her well. More important, no one was as stubborn as Dorothy. She simply did not give up. And there was no one more loyal.

She was feisty and blunt-spoken and didn't play well with others, which was why she and the NSA were a lousy fit, but it was one of the things I liked about her. She never held back. She loved telling me off

and showing me up and proving me wrong, and I enjoyed that too. You did not want to mess with her.

“You heard me. I don’t like liars.”

“Get over it. We need the business, and you’ve turned down more work than you’ve taken on.”

“I appreciate your concern,” I said, “but you don’t need to worry about the firm’s cash flow. Your salary’s guaranteed.”

“Until Heller Associates goes bust because the overhead’s too high and you got no income. I am not slinking back to Jay Stoddard, and I am not moving back to Washington.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I’d worked closely with Dorothy, even intimately, but I knew almost nothing about her. She never talked about her love life, and I never asked. I wasn’t even sure whether she preferred men or women. Everyone’s entitled to their zone of privacy.

She was an attractive, striking woman with mocha skin, liquid brown eyes, and an incandescent smile. She always dressed elegantly, even though she didn’t need to, since she rarely met with clients. Today she was wearing a shimmering lilac silk blouse and a black pencil skirt and some kind of strappy heels. She wore her hair extremely short—almost bald, in fact. On most women that might look bizarre, but on her it somehow worked. Attached to her earlobes were turquoise copper-enamel discs the size of Frisbees.

Dorothy was a mass of contradictions, which was another thing I liked about her. She was a regular churchgoer—even before she’d found an apartment, she’d joined an AME Zion church in the South End—but she was no church lady. The opposite, in fact: She had an almost profane sense of humor about her faith. She’d put a plaque on her cubicle wall that said JESUS LOVES YOU—EVERYONE ELSE THINKS YOU’RE AN ASSHOLE, right next to one that said I LOVE MARY’S BABYDADDY.

“I think we need to have regular status-update meetings like we used to do at Stoddard,” she said. “I want to go over the Entronics case and the Garrison case.”

“I need coffee first,” I said. “And not that swill that Jillian makes.”

Jillian Alperin, our receptionist and office manager, was a strict vegan. (Veganism is apparently the paramilitary wing of vegetarianism.) She had multiple piercings, including one on her lip, and several tattoos. One was of a butterfly, on her right shoulder. I’d caught a glimpse of another one on her lower back too one day.

She was also a “green” fanatic who had banned all foam and paper cups in the office. Everything had to be organic, ethical, free-range, fair-trade, and cruelty-free. The coffee she ordered for the office machine was organic fair-trade ethical beans shade-grown using sustainable cultivation methods by a small co-op of indigenous peasant farmers in resistance in Chiapas, Mexico. It cost as much as Bolivian cocaine and probably would have been rejected by a death-row inmate.

“Well, aren’t you fussy,” Dorothy said. “There’s a Starbucks across the street.”

“There’s a Dunkin’ Donuts down the block,” I said.

“That better not be a hint. I don’t do coffee.”

“I know better than to ask,” I said, getting up.

The phone rang: the muted internal ringtone. Jillian’s voice came over the intercom: “A Marshall Marcus for you?”

“*The* Marshall Marcus?” Dorothy said. “As in the richest guy in Boston?”

I nodded.

“You turn this one down, Nick, and I’m gonna whip your butt.”

“I doubt it’s a job,” I said. “Probably personal.” I picked up and said, “Marshall. Long time.”

“Nick,” he said. “I need your help. Alexa’s gone.”