

## Excerpt – The Other P-Word by MK Schiller

I first laid eyes on him in a cemetery and if that wasn't an ominous sign, I don't know what is. My stalking, leering, checking out—whatever it was—disturbed me. But not enough to stop searching for him among the granite markers rising from the earth. I usually found him. Either we were on the same schedule or he visited so often it was unavoidable.

He wore a gray hoodie, dark jeans with rips at the knees and what looked like a vintage bomber jacket. His hair, thick and disheveled, covered his neck and curled at the ends, its color somewhere between sand and sun. Broad shoulders and a confident stride made watching him walk dangerously enticing. He paused for a brief moment. My skin prickled as his head turned my way with a stare that lingered a second too long to be coincidental. I dropped my head, rearranging the baby pink roses on Lorraine's plot, sure they resembled the color on my cheeks. I gripped the stems, ashamed to be caught by Tall, Blond and Brooding, and at such an inappropriate place.

“Well, Lorraine, I got another rejection today.” I fished the crumpled letter from my jacket. I came to see her every time I got a letter—a habit I desperately wanted to break. “This one is personalized, at least, but it still tore my heart. ‘Dear Miss Price, While your work is enjoyable, I didn't connect to your characters. I felt an overall lack of passion in your writing. As I'm sure you know, passion is the measure of a good romance’.”

I smoothed the paper with my hand before folding it into a neat square. “Then there are some other things about this being a subjective industry and all. How could she say I'm not passionate? And worse, is it true? A writer who isn't passionate is like the cobbler with no shoes, or the dentist with no teeth.” I stared at the etched letters chiseled into the steely granite headstone. “I once read you wrote eighty stories that were rejected before your first break. I don't know how you did it.”

The roar of a motorcycle interrupted the solitude. I allowed myself another glance toward the gravel road where he was speeding off into the horizon.

A few moments later, I stood, wiping the dirt from my jeans then taking the sufficiently decayed peach-colored flowers from last week's visit.

“Until next time, Lorraine.”

I headed down the path myself as clouds curtained the sky, drowning out the sun with shades of bleak.

I made it to the Third Street stop, preparing myself for the three-hour bus ride that would take only an hour by automobile. I didn't mind the public transportation, though. People carved out time as if it was made of boundless clay, filling every second until no white space remained. The time to think had become a peculiar pastime made for odd people like myself. That was what I did during the long commutes to visit Lorraine. The first drops of rain flicked against me, mocking my good intentions.

It wasn't so bad. I turned my face toward it and closed my eyes in appreciation of the light mist. Unfortunately, the sky opened and doused me in retaliation.

*Shit!* Here I was at one of the only bus stops that didn't have a covered seating area. I held my knapsack above my head as I surveyed my surroundings. My salvation lay in the shop across the street that boasted pictures of whimsical cups on its door and checkered curtains. The aroma of whipped cream, strong coffee and fresh baked pastries beckoned me with each step. If I wasn't running toward it, I might have floated like a loony cartoon character.

I wrung out my wet tresses, twisting my blonde hair into a tight bun as I waited in line. I blotted myself with napkins in a lame attempt to dry off while I waited for my order. The tables overflowed with people who, like me, sought shelter. Only one vacant seat remained.

Where he was.

His hair was damp, not drenched like mine. A helmet sat on the seat across from him. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and was flipping pages of a newspaper. For a moment I lost myself in him, until someone bumped my shoulder, nearly spilling my drink.

The large-mouthed cup complete with saucer chattered as I walked around the tight space.

"May I sit here?" I asked timidly.

He tilted his head and smiled, pushing the vacant chair out with his foot. Observing him at close range was worse than viewing him from afar. His eyes had the same luminosity as melting chocolate. A noticeable white scar on the chiseled planes of his jaw made him look dangerous. The boyish smile that elicited the slightest dimple disarmed me. But it was the natural tan he sported that invoked my curiosity. It wasn't orange enough to be fake, but the weather in Chicago hadn't reached tanning levels yet.

I set down my tray and picked up his helmet. It was heavier than I'd imagined. He took it from me.

"Thank you. The other seats are taken," I explained. Although a mere glance could have confirmed my statement, he just nodded.

He snapped his fingers and pointed to me. "Graveyard girl," he said, a trace of a southern twang coloring his words.

I tilted my head, trying to keep my smile from reaching ridiculous heights. "Is that what you call me?"

"In my head, but now that I say it out loud, it sounds creepy."

"Yeah, it does." I chuckled, holding out my hand. "Billie Price."

He leaned over slightly. The scent of soap and peppermint was even more pleasing than the coffee. His smile held the lure of temptation—the kind of expression that made ordinary girls feel exceptional.

“Billie?”

“I know it’s a strange name for a girl.”

“I like it. It sounds southern. Pleased to meet you, Billie Price. The name’s Evan Wright.” He tightened his grip on my hand. I always thought my hands were awkwardly large, but in that moment, my right hand looked tiny, almost dainty, clasped against his powerful one. He flipped my wrist, kissing the underside of it, causing a shiver that travelled down my spine straight to my toes.

“That doesn’t happen to me every day.” My voice sounded unnaturally squeaky. Did they pump helium through the vents?

“Maybe it should.”