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## *Excerpt from Deep Light*

Olivia Bernard  
*Denison University*

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*Excerpt from Deep Light*  
Olivia Bernard

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*Dear Mx. Alex Bennett,*

*It is with deep regret that we write to inform you of the death of your sister, Maude Bennett.*

*On June 19, after a two-week search, local police recovered her body in Red Canyon several miles from North Blund Radiance Mine. An unfortunate fall on her daily commute to the mine has been determined as the cause of death. Our investigation is closed.*

*As her next of kin, we ask that you travel to Blund's Pass to collect her effects and organize funerary transportation. Please respond promptly to this letter to begin arrangements.*

*Again, we offer our sincerest condolences in this time of bereavement.*

*Blund's Pass Sheriff's Department*

*10 Broadway St.*

*Blund's Pass, KL.*

~

*Dear Alex,*

*I understand that you are the sibling of my most recent tenant, Maude Bennett, who was staying with me for the duration of her assignment. I'm so sorry for your loss. She was one of the brightest people I've ever known.*

*I know this must be a painful time for you, and please let me know if I can assist in any way. If you plan to visit Blund's Pass in the wake of her passing, allow me to humbly offer my home as a place to stay. Her belongings are untouched. Honestly, I haven't been able to visit her room. I'm still processing it all myself, and I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you.*

*There's one more thing. I don't write just to express my sympathies, though they are entirely with you. I also need to express my doubt about the sheriff's handling of this case. I understand if this is too much to consider at this moment, but I'm worried that there is a devil in the details. Perhaps several. I thought you might share in my trepidation. And I hear you're some sort of investigator?*

*Please come to see me soon, or at least, write.*

*Yours,*

*Eloise Cromwell*

*233 S Winder Dr.*

*Blund's Pass, KL.*

~

*Eloise,*

*I'm catching the next train to Blund's. Expect me in two days.*

*Alex*

1456 Bell St., Apt. 013

Port Fallow, AP.

~

## Chapter 1: A Meeting with Eloise

You watch the desert roll by beyond the taxi window, bright and hot. Dust billows up all around the car as its wheels bump, skid, and bump over the rocky, matted sand that counts as a road out here. Pearls of sweat bead in a crown across your forehead.

Maude had once written to you about the desert wildlife: the scuttling lizards, the cactus wrens, the graceful airsnakes that carve delicate trails through the quiet sands and drift here and there on the predawn breezes. *It's not so empty out here*, she'd said. *Not if you see the small things*. But the dry desert beyond the window leaves you skeptical. Everything here is dead and prickly, dull stones and flat grayish spines of dusty agave—not a hint of animal life. Then again, you'd hide under a rock, too, if you heard this damned automobile coming. You lean back in the faux-leather seat, sticky with your sweat, and try not to imagine the cool calm of the Port Fallow morning you left behind. It doesn't work.

You can imagine her, teeth gritted and forehead slick, pedaling along this road like all hell's behind her. Something in the depths of your throat loops itself into a heavy knot.

A coughing and sputtering brings you back to the clattering taxi. The cabbie, an older woman with wild gray hair barely tamed by a colorful kerchief tied across her head, thumps the dashboard with one hand—a mechanical prosthetic, you note with some surprise. The engine wails, whines, and putters to a bouncing stop.

"Godsdammit all," the cabbie grumbles. "To the depths with this old clunker."

"We've broken down?" You clutch the half-drained water bottle in your lap a little tighter. "We're stuck all the way out here?"

She kicks open her door with one booted foot. "Guess we'll see." Still grumbling, she retrieves a dented metal toolbox from the trunk and stomps around to the croaking engine. A wisp of steam drifts up as she throws open the hood.

Heat presses in on all sides of the stopped car, stagnant and heavy. Bumping, cursing, and clanking noises pour out from under the hood. After a moment's hesitation, you push open your side door. No use staying in this oven of a cab.

Outside, a tiny breeze stirs the sweltering air. You'll take what you can get. Rubbing a little water on the back of your neck to cool it, you make your way to the front, ears still buzzing from the now-absent noise of the engine.

The cabbie, elbow-deep in the engine block, squints at you as you come around the dusty side of the taxi. "What're you doing, kid?"

"Can I give you a hand?"

She coughs out a chuckle. "Reckon you're a mechanic?"

"Well, I've helped my sister before..." Maude was the handy one, always working on this or that gizmo in the garage and picking up late shifts at Spring & Sprocket Bicycle Repair downtown. For her undergrad thesis, she had built her own makeshift radiance detector, able to hone in on hotspots of the powerful substance buried in cliffside deposits. That clunky gadget was part of the reason her underfunded little government survey sent her out here when a portion of the mine collapsed. If they hadn't, well... you look away.

The cabbie squints at you for a moment. "Sister? What's your name?"

"Alex Bennett."

"Oh! Maude's sib. Knew you had a familiar look about you." Two silver teeth flash in the sun as she grins and sticks out a brown, grease-stained hand—the flesh one. "Casey Müller."

Her palm feels tough and calloused. "You know—" You swallow. "—*knew* Maude?"

"Gave her a lift a few times, sure. Carted her out here to Eloise's place when she showed up at the station and to the mine sometimes when she had to haul her clanks out. Bubbly sort, that one. Scooting around town on that velocipede of hers." Casey shakes her head. "Sorry. Heard about what happened. Real shame. I take it that's why you're out here, eh?"

You slump a little. "Yeah." A bead of sweat slides from your forehead to your chin and you wipe it away with a sigh.

"She told me a bit about you," Casey says. "You're some kinda gumshoe, right?"

Forensic anthropologist would be the right term—at least, an aspiring one—but something tells you Casey would just roll her eyes. Your friends joke that Bennetts have a thing for seeking and finding and uncovering. Cousins in archaeology. Grandparents in geography. And Maude chasing the radiance. As for you, well... your late parents, a pair of morticians, had left an impression. You shrug. "Something like that."

"Well, I'm right bummed to hear, for sure." Frowning, Casey turns back to the mess of gears and cylinders. "Girl really knew how to work with her hands. Don't see that in a lotta city folks. No offense."

"None taken."

The steam canisters and pneumatic lines in Casey's fingers click and rattle as she works. You gaze absently into the engine. Between the gears and tubes, a faint blue glow emanates from its depths: the radiance.

On the train ride here, you read that the barren Southern Stretch was teeming with the stuff. Deep in the earth, the natural passages of underground water had reacted with the deep rock and crystallized into veins of rich radiant ore with enough energy to power cities. In Port Fallow, everything—from the streetlights to the airships to the trolleys—runs on the radiance. Blund's Pass was one of many mining towns that boomed with its discovery—and, like many of those same others, soon

withered as the veins emptied to a trickle under the miners' drills. Calotype images in the few brochures you could find showed a bustling downtown. But it would be nothing like that now.

"Can you see it from here?" you ask, breaking the silence. "The mine?"

Casey looks up. "Oh, sure. You can spot it from Eloise's place too. Or just about anywhere in hereabouts, really. There." She shades her eyes and points with her wrench towards one of the great rocky hills in the distance. If you squint, you can make out black lines and patches on the slopes. "Not many working there now," she says. "Not much left to work. I heard some city bigwig's trying to get it all opened up again, but—ah! Atta girl!"

With a low rumble and a hiss of steam, the engine sputters to life again. The blue glow strengthens and flashes as Casey slams the hood down. She gives a cackle and wipes her hands on her pants, leaving streaks of grease. "All right, hop on back in, Alex Bennett. Let's get outta here before it decides to drop its damned pegs again."

The car rumbles back to its former speed along the road. In the heat-warped distance, the stony hills shiver and dance.

~

In a screech of tires and a plume of dust, the cab pulls off the main road onto a driveway lined with yucca and agave and finally trundles to a halt in front of a small stone structure that must be Eloise's home. You could imagine the house growing from the sand itself, if not for the sprawling mural painted across the adobe walls that encircle a small courtyard lined with bristly-looking desert plants and a single spindly tree. Wooden support struts jut from the hardened sides, a few bearing wind chimes as motionless as the weather vane perched on the roof. A small barn stands a short ways away across the field, and the spindly tower of a wind pump rises up from behind the house—must be a well back there. Thank gods there's water *somewhere* in this country. You peel yourself from the seat with a disconcerting *schlick* and step out into the scorching late afternoon sun as a figure emerges from the house: Eloise.

She's young, you realize with some surprise. Not much older than you. Her skin is a rich dark brown and long black hair falls in a heavy braid over her shoulder, stark against the crisp white of her shirt. She stands with straight, upright posture, chin up, a pleated skirt cinched at the waist with a thin brown belt and polished leather shoes beneath its hem. But in spite of her clean demeanor, you notice the worry lines that crease the space between her thick brows, and that her eyes are sunken above dark circles—almost a mirror of your own.

"Alex," she says, her voice breaking a little. "I'm glad you came."

You wipe your palm on your trousers before shaking her hand. "Yeah," is all you can think to say. Paint streaks stain her fingers, and a little blue comes off on your hand when you pull away. Closer now, you can see small smudges of color around the hem of her skirt.

Behind you, the trunk of the car slams. Casey rounds the side with a grunt, lugging your suitcase. Its straps do little to contain the way it bulges out and stretches at the seams. "Damn, what've you got in here, river rocks?"

"Books," you say. Textbooks, notebooks, handbooks, anything from your studies that could help with the maze of bereavement bureaucracy. (And a copy of *Seduced by the Sand Beast*, but nobody needs to know about that.)

Casey flashes her teeth at Eloise—not quite a smile. "Ah, look. It's the creative Miss Cromwell. How's the painting, eh?"

"Not the time, Casey. Please."

Casey rolls her eyes. You dig for your wallet and hand her a few bills for the ride. She tucks them into a little latched cache in her arm prosthetic, then gives you a wave and hops back in the cab. "Need a ride, drop by. 412 Ranger's Corner. Not too far from here."

The car wheels around in another dust flurry and bumps away down the road. The two of you watch until it disappears.

"She fancies herself an art critic," Eloise grumbles. "Drives me nuts."

You look off beyond her house, to where the red hills rise past the rocky expanse of cactus and yucca. There—the black stripes of the mine, slightly closer.

"It used to smoke and steam," Eloise says, following your eyes. "When I was a little girl, they were digging out the last bits. You could hear the clanging all the way from here."

"You grew up here?"

"On the other side of town. And only until I was ten. After that I went to live with my aunts in Rivier. Better schools." She gives a flat chuckle. "Or just *schools*, period. Nothing like that all the way out here. I was the only kid for leagues around." She gives you a sidelong look. "Your first time out here?"

The closest you've been to this barren nowhere was a trip with your parents years ago to visit a few of their funerary friends in Spire Butte, a few hours north of Blund's—but you'd never set foot this far into the deep desert. "Yeah. How'd you guess?"

"Nobody wears a white shirt in the desert." Eloise turns and beckons with a wave of one hand. "Come, let's go in."

You heft pull your pack onto your back and lift your trunk with a click-clank and a grunt, then follow. Smooth slates of stone fitted together like jigsaw pieces comprise the path to the front door.. You let out a breath of relief as you pass into the shade under the courtyard's lone tree. Up close, you can make out tiny pink blossoms dangling from the branches.

Eloise halts in front of the door, old and wooden with a tarnished bronze knocker in the shape of a dragonfly. You pull up short behind her and wait for her to open it, but she just stands there, a little too long. A bead of sweat slides down the back of her neck and into her shirt.

In the pause, the reason for your visit hangs as heavy as the backpack on your shoulders. Your sister's presence lingers between you. Should you ask now? You clear your throat, then falter, glancing behind you. "Did you, um, paint that mural yourself?"

"What?" Eloise starts slightly. "Oh, that. Yes, it was my first project when I moved back. This place, it was a real fixer-upper—got it for cheap, though."

She unlatches the door and holds it open for you to pass. Your suitcase clatters and nearly topples over as you all but leap into the cool air inside.

"It's kind of a mess in there," Eloise says, lingering in the doorway. "Sorry. I haven't had a chance to clean..."

It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust to the dim interior. You mop your forehead with one sleeve, then take a closer look around.

This must have been a living room at some point, but it would be difficult to relax here now. The furniture—a mismatched assortment of plush chairs and a couch with a rumpled mauve throw blanket—has all been pushed aside to the edges of the room to accommodate canvases and papers of all sizes, some hanging from the walls, some just propped against them, and several laid flat on a tarp in the corner. An unfamiliar gadget splattered with paint and a few multi-lensed eyeglasses that remind you of the optometrist's office lie scattered on the coffee table.

You drop your suitcase in the entryway and drift into the room, stepping gingerly around the sprawling art. Charcoal sketches of desert plants scrawl beyond their pages and out onto the walls as though overgrown from the paper itself. On the canvases laid on the floor, paint whirls and arcs in waves and coils, almost like the way the tides and currents seem to roll and mix from the bluffs above Port Fallow. In others, fiery pops of paint shoot out in jagged bursts, like ruptured fireworks in the otherwise smooth flow of the color. A few are scattered with dried petals and leaves. All seem to have a physical depth impossible for those flat surfaces. Like looking down into a well. You put a hand to your sticky forehead to stave off a small spell of dizziness—from the smell of acrylic hanging in the air, or from the images themselves, you're not sure.

Eloise breezes past. "Just something new I'm trying," she says. "Don't mind it. You can leave your stuff there." She lifts her pleated skirt and strolls through the maze of canvases, easy as walking down the street. At the other end of the room, she parts a beaded curtain dangling from an arched doorway. "Can I get you something to drink? Something cold?"

"Gods, yes." You drop your backpack beside your suitcase and pick your way after her on tiptoe. "*Anything* cold. Please."

"D'you like prickly pear?"

You've never heard of it. "Sure, I guess..."

The sill of the great round window above the kitchen sink is lined with overflowing planters and glass jars full of moss, while the wooden rafters overhead teem with bundles of aromatic herbs and

flowers. Dented pots and pans hang in rows beside a heavy cast-iron stove decorated with an elaborate bronze grille and gilding across its front. The hazy shapes of picked vegetables float inside the jars that line high shelves on the wall.

Eloise kicks aside a braided mat and pulls open a narrow hatch set into the tiled floor beneath it, revealing a ladder into a dark room below.

"A cellar?" you ask as she disappears down it. A curl of chilly air rises from its depths to caress your face as you peek down after her. The roughly hewn walls look as though they were carved from the bedrock itself.

"This is the only way to keep things cool out here," Eloise says from somewhere below. "Those fancy freezers of yours in the city would just sweat and then break." She reemerges carrying a jar with a pinkish liquid inside and pours some into a chipped glass. "There's a little porch out back. Shaded, don't worry," she says as she hands the drink to you. "I'll meet you there in a minute and we can... well, we can talk."

Your sister's presence again. Heavy between you. You swallow. It could only wait for so long.

Out back, large white sheets block the scorching eye of the sun, and a few rickety chairs placed around a small table comprise a tiny sitting area. The back of the house faces the great far-off hills of the mine, the pockmarked slopes framed by slender, towering cacti. In the yard beyond the wind pump tower lies some rusty equipment: a bent metal pole jutting from the cracked ground down the hill, the frame of some old digger-clank half overgrown with shrubs off beside the barn. As you watch, a flurry of bees swirls up from a rusted-out hole in one of the steam valves and disperses.

You take a taste of the drink—sweet, almost like a melon—and settle into one of the chairs, trying to imagine the hum and toil of the defunct mine echoing across the desert, the distant billow of smoke and steam, radiance sucked up from its depths flashing in its compression tanks as it rumbles down automated lifts to some extraction and purification facility. In the still, silent air, punctuated only by the buzz of insects, it's hard to picture.

Eloise seats herself beside you, clutching a cup of her own—though you note that the liquid inside is more brownish in color than yours. You catch a whiff of alcohol as she swirls it around the bottom of her glass. She takes a sip, then leans back in her chair and sighs. For a long time, she doesn't speak, just gazes into the distance. You watch her out of the corner of your eye.

"This house sits right on top of one of the first mines, you know," Eloise says at last. "Before they found the motherlode over at the Pass and bricked this one up." She waves a hand vaguely across the back yard. "You find interesting stuff around here. Drill bits and spoons and these really vintage Bentley grind-gears with the teeth stripped off. And all these old clanks just lying around, like the miners just up and left." She kicks her feet up onto the low table and tips her head back to stare up at the canopy sheets overhead. A small breeze stirs the fabric. "Most of the actual radiance under here is long gone now, sucked dry. But there's the dregs. You can see the glow sometimes, at night. And there's



enough of it that you can calibrate equipment right from the cellar." She blows out a slow breath. "I think that's why Maude chose to stay here."

Your sister's name drops like a penny into a deep well, like a flick to the back of your head. A small thing, jarring, even though you knew it was coming. In the silence, you take another sip of your juice, but it does nothing to lessen the dryness in your mouth.

"We were in the same class at Brenbury, actually," Eloise says. She closes her eyes. "Had a few of our gen-eds together. Sparks fundamentals, practical mathematics. But I went into art, obviously, and she was in clank college. Sorry, the Walter Downs Subscool of Mechanical Advancement, I mean."

You can recall the little WDSMA pin glinting on her school bag and embossed on her bike, the proud way she recited the name whenever someone noticed it, as regular as the clockwork she studied late into the night. Under other circumstances, you might have snickered.

"She reached out, and I wouldn't normally take a boarder, but she had a little stipend, she needed somewhere close to the veins, she'd researched this little mine spot..." Eloise gives a flat smile. "And let's just say paintings don't pay the bills too well. She really livened it up, you know—it can be dreary, all the way out here, and she was always chattering about this and that, scribbling away at those word games of hers, and—" Eloise cuts herself off with a sudden, deep swig of her mix. She coughs and rubs one eye. A few strands of hair fall from her neat braid to wave about her face. "Look, she was doing great out here, that's my point. Working in her room and the barn, up to her elbows in grease, even kicking in to do mech repairs on this mess of a house. Some of the former miners in town even took a liking to her, and that's a real feat—they're all grouchy old crabs. And now even *they* think that something here doesn't track. I've heard them nattering down at the pub."

You find that you've been leaning forward and force yourself to sit back. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I hope I didn't bring you out here on a wild chase, but... ugh." Eloise shoves herself to her feet. "Gods. I need more of this stuff if we're gonna talk *bodies*." She disappears into the house, slamming the door hard enough that it rattles in its frame. From inside, you hear the sharp clattering of glassware, and Eloise reemerges with a bottle in one hand and her refilled drink in the other. She thrusts the bottle at you. "Mezcal. Want some?"

You shake your head. Words feel sticky right now, like they wouldn't leave your mouth if you tried to speak them.

"Suit yourself." Eloise plops back down and rests her elbows on her knees. She takes another drink. "Okay. Let's see. First of all, Maude never rode past Red Canyon. It's the scenic route. It would've taken her *longer*."

Chronically early—that was Maude. You swallow.

"The road along that canyon made her nervous. She was *afraid* of falling. She rode it once at the beginning of her assignment, and then she said 'never again.' Always took the Chuckwalla Rock trail. More direct. And third"—a final finger—"the investigation felt rushed. Really rushed. I'm no

expert on police procedure or anything, but I *do* know I would've been a pretty important party in the case, right? She was living with me, I saw her last, I was the one who reported her missing. I thought there'd be heaps of paperwork and days of interviews and all that."

You nod. The procedure for these types of cases has been drilled into you. Long interviews with persons of interest, anyone who knew the victim, anyone who had a stake in their situation. Eloise would've been a prime person of interest.

"But the sheriff talked to me only twice throughout this whole thing. Once when Maude disappeared, for maybe a few hours, and another time after they found the...the...you know. The body." Her hands fold on her lap and squeeze together tightly enough that the knuckles whiten. "And both times, it was like she'd rather not have been there. Hasty." Eloise pauses a long moment, gnawing her bottom lip, before continuing. "And, well... you're the procedural type, Alex, and I know this would never count as real evidence, but she'd seemed kind of spooked the last few days she was here, I guess."

You frown. "Spooked?"

"Oh, I don't know. Said her equipment was breaking, or it was picking up things down there at the collapse that didn't make sense and she was walking circles... I could be reading too much into it."

You rest your elbows on your knees and swish the pale pink liquid around your cup. "No—that *is* evidence. Exactly the sort of thing the sheriff should've been interested in. Any change in demeanor, anything unusual. She asked you about that, right?"

"Sure, but... I don't know. It didn't seem that important. Maybe the miners were just rubbing off on her. Everyone here is so superstitious about the radiance. I got this land at a bargain because nobody wanted to live on the site of a former mine." Eloise shakes her head. "It's nonsense, really. But maybe someone wanted to scare her away, and when she didn't go..."

"You think... you think she was murdered?" Your voice comes hoarse in your throat. Splintery wood bites your hands as you clutch the arms of your chair.

"I don't know, Alex. I don't know." Eloise doesn't quite suppress a shudder. "That's why you might be able to help. You know this stuff, you're trained for it, right?" She turns fully to face you, eyes sharp and probing, as though she might read credentials in the lines of your face. "You're the best bet."

This time, you're the one who looks away. You're far from certified, barely field trained. Labs, sure, but that's a far cry from true work—the real, actual, coyotes-gnawed-this-corpse's-eyeballs-out thing. But with the sheriff's investigation officially marked closed, and the cost of private forensics experts rising far beyond the money either Eloise or your own drained student bank account could scrounge up, you know she's right.

"Gods." You let out a cracked little laugh and reach for the bottle of mezcal. "I hope so."