

LITTLE PRETTY THINGS

ALSO BY LORI RADER-DAY

The Black Hour

LITTLE PRETTY THINGS

A NOVEL

LORI RADER-DAY



SEVENTH STREET BOOKS®

AN IMPRINT OF PROMETHEUS BOOKS

59 JOHN GLENN DRIVE • AMHERST, NY 14228

www.seventhstreetbooks.com

Published 2015 by Seventh Street Books, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover design by Nicole Sommer-Lecht

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19 18 17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rader-Day, Lori, 1973-

Little pretty things / Lori Rader-Day.

pages ; cm

ISBN 978-1-63388-004-7 (softcover) — ISBN 978-1-63388-005-4 (ebook)

1. Hotel cleaning personnel—Fiction. 2. Murder—Investigation—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3618.A3475L58 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015001984

Printed in the United States of America

**For Jill and the girls,
Jesse and Addison, and Kim
And for Greg, of course**

CHAPTER ONE

The walkie-talkie on the front desk hissed, crackled, and finally resolved into Lu's lilting voice: "At what point," she said, "do we worry the guy in two-oh-six is dead?"

The couple across the counter from me glanced at one another. Bargain hunters. We only saw two kinds of people at the Mid-Night Inn—Bargains and Desperates—and these were classic Bargains, here. The two kids, covered in mustard stains from eating home-packed sandwiches, whined that the place didn't have a pool. The mother had already scanned the lobby for any reference to a free continental breakfast. We didn't offer continental breakfast, not even the not-free kind.

I slid their key cards to them, smiling, and flicked the volume knob down on the radio before Lu convinced them they'd prefer to get back in their car and try their luck farther down the road.

"Which room are we in, again?" said the woman.

"Two-oh-four," I said.

"And you said we could go to *Taco Bell*," cried the little girl, five or so. A glittering pink barrette that must have started the day neatly holding back her corn-silk hair now clung by a few strands. She threw herself at her mother's feet and wailed into the carpet. "But they don't even have a *Taco Bell*."

The boy, a few years older, had pressed himself against the glass door to the bar. "Mommy," he hissed. "All these people are drinking *alcohol*."

It was after nine—way past someone's bedtime. The parents and I negotiated by a series of glances between the key cards and each other. They wouldn't get tacos, a free breakfast, or a swim, but the odds seemed better on a dead body in the room next door. "Why don't I get you a room with a little more—privacy?" I took back the cards and pretended to click around on the computer for better options.

Under the kids' keening and questions, Lu's low, complaining voice murmured on the radio, and then the door chimed, signaling another visitor.

The Mid-Night Inn had only twelve operational rooms, seven even-numbered upstairs and five odd-numbered down, plus the lobby and bar. In the right light, it had old-school charm. The balcony's wrought-iron railing swirled in a fancy design that snagged our uniform skirts' hems. "Filigree," Billy called it, when he accused us of never sweeping the cobwebs from it. It was a nice touch. We had a single-star rating from some hospitality association, left over, surely, from better days.

Now the Mid-Night was a step above a roadside dive. Technically, it *was* a roadside dive, nestled between the roaring interstate and an overpassing state road out of town that led into the dusty countryside. The motel was a big two-story *U* of rooms, all with exterior doors on a wraparound walkway, all overlooking a slim patch of grass and a couple of struggling crabapple trees. Billy called that the "courtyard," and the eight closed rooms on the other side of the bar that had been left to ruin, "the south wing." At the open end of the courtyard, only a rusty chain-link fence tangled with scrub and brush separated the Mid-Night from the rushing cars below.

In the summer, the Mid-Night's old, blinking neon sign regularly pulled guests off the highway. We got minivan parents who'd misjudged how long they could listen to their kids howl and lone drivers who found they couldn't keep themselves awake until they reached Indianapolis. We often got people who used their expensive, high-tech phones to search for the cheapest overnight stay they could get.

But now in the off season, people could do better and usually did. I could say the Mid-Night was at least a clean place to lay your head. But I was the one who cleaned it, and I knew that wasn't true.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the new arrival, a woman in a long coat, hesitate at the door. Her, the Bargains, the dead guy in two-oh-six—this was officially a crowd for a Monday night in the spring, especially since it was just me and Luisa holding down the fort while Billy had his night off. Lu was out pretending to clean up the court-

yard while I kept the front desk, and tomorrow morning, we'd flip back to mornings for the rest of the week. I'd get to clean up vending-machine taco-chip crumbs after these cheapskates got back on the road, while she fended off anyone who came looking for a free Danish. Or comment cards. We didn't offer comment cards, either.

I handed over the updated key cards to the Bargains. "You have a nice night," I said. The mother had already decided I was some kind of simpleton. She and her husband each pulled a child along behind them toward the door. I'd put them as far away from the dead guy's room as I could—which located them right over the Mid-Night bar, open 'til two in the morning.

The woman at the door still hadn't decided if she was coming in. She held the door for the family, letting the parade of misery pass back out into the night and watching after them for far too long.

I'd already known there existed a breed of women who made the rest of us notice how far off the mark we were, but they didn't often stumble into the Mid-Night. This woman was their queen. Her clothes draped as if they'd been trained. Her golden hair hung loose and perfectly careless. She was tall and angular, with a chiseled masterpiece of a jaw.

In the middle of the floor lay the sparkling barrette from the little girl's hair. I slipped around the desk and plucked it up, watching the woman all the while. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as we both watched the family tramp toward the stairs with their mismatched luggage. The open door let in the smell of green cornfields and wet grass.

I pressed the barrette against my palm and slid it into my pocket. "Can you pull the door?" I said. "You're letting in bugs."

It was cheap, but all I had. Compared to her, I was shorter, chubbier, mousier. Poorer—that went without saying. I looked down at what I was wearing. Ouch. Her raincoat, as supple as butter and with the belt tied in a casual knot at the back, probably cost more than I made in a month. It wasn't even raining anymore.

She closed the door, a gracious smile cranking up to blind me as she swept across the lobby.

But then she stopped. The smile cut short. “Juliet? Juliet Townsend, is that you?”

A thousand thoughts shoved into my mind at the same time, jamming the works. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t speak. On the desk, the walkie-talkie hissed and crackled. “Juliet?” Lu’s voice, turned to nearly zero, sounded like a bomb going off in the empty lobby. “Jules, I’m serious, pick *up*.”

The woman looked at the radio unit on the counter, then me. The smile came back, a few megawatts shy of its original glow. That superstar grin I’d almost received was reserved for customer service. For getting the best room available, and maybe an extra set of towels. This smile—well, this was the surprised-slash-horrified gesture reserved for ex-best friends discovered working below their potential in roadside crap-heaps.

My brain finally jarred loose, throwing out the shard of a memory: a blond ponytail bouncing against thin shoulders, three paces ahead. Nothing holding me back but my aching lungs and burning thighs, and nothing ahead of me but that chiseled jaw, resolutely set toward the finish line.

“Madeleine Bell,” I said. The name had always meant the same thing to me. Another loss. Another very near miss.



On the walkie-talkie, Lu’s voice transitioned from irate English into furious Spanish. I held up a finger to Maddy Bell and grabbed the handset.

“Please tell me,” I said, my teeth clenched, “that Señor Two-oh-Six has requested fresh towels.”

Lu said, “There is a *smell* coming out of there—”

“That’s far above my pay grade, and yours,” I said. “Let Billy handle it tomorrow.”

“Fine by me,” Lu said. “*You*’ll be behind the cart, and *you’ll* have to clean up the body.”

“I have a guest.” I glanced back at Maddy. She’d turned her head, pretending to admire the lobby décor. She probably didn’t get a lot of gold-leaf wallpaper and garage-sale geegaws in the places she normally stayed. “And then I’m probably going to need to take my break,” I said. I needed a few minutes to die of embarrassment. Just ten minutes to hang myself from shame.

“Roger,” Lu said.

Billy insisted we use proper military com lingo when we used the radios, all those over-and-outs, rogers instead of yeses. He’d never been in the military, of course. He only knew what he’d learned from Stallone movies. But when he was out of earshot—which wasn’t often, since he lived in room one-oh-one—we took liberties. It was a crummy job. Liberties were what we had, instead of health insurance or bonuses or even a schedule that allowed us to take a second job. Instead of dignity.

I put down the radio and found Maddy watching me. “So you, uh, need directions or something?” Which didn’t make any sense. She’d been gone ten years, but surely she remembered the way to her old house. Surely she remembered there were better places to stay forty minutes in either direction.

“A room,” she said. “If you have one.”

I tapped around the computer’s reservation system for time. “How many nights?”

“It’s weird, isn’t it? Seeing you here?” she said.

“Weird for you,” I said. “I’m here a great deal. Just one night, then?”

“One night. Passing through. I didn’t think I’d run into anyone.”

I looked up. “Hoping you wouldn’t, you mean?”

“Maybe I was hoping I *would*. Juliet, really,” she said. “How would I have known?”

“I heard you were a big shot in Chicago,” I said.

She nodded, slowly, letting my statement hang in the air between us.

“How many guests?” I said. The words almost got stuck in my throat. I’d just spotted the largest diamond I’d ever seen in real life or on television on her left ring finger. Were there any finish lines Maddy Bell wouldn’t reach before everyone else? The diamond was cartoon-

ishly big. The palms of both my hands started to itch. I wiped them on my jeans. “How many in the room, I mean?”

“Just me.” For a moment the sound of my typing filled the lobby, and then she gasped. “Oh, Jules, I totally forgot. Your dad. I’m so— God, that must have been awful.”

Debilitating, actually. And I knew what had reminded her. Here I was, working a dank motel’s lobby desk in the same town where she’d left me. No one could have chosen this life. There must be some sad story of ambition thwarted, opportunity denied. And there was. My dad’s sudden death—a heart attack, far too young—during my second semester of college had drained my ambition and our family finances. If I’d gone to any other high school in the state, maybe I’d have been the star distance runner and would have been at college on full scholarship. But I’d gone to Midway High in Midway, Indiana, where Maddy Bell’s best times still clung to the halls, where Maddy Bell’s trophies still gleamed in the cases, ten years on. I knew the records were still up at Midway because all my almost one year of college had prepared me for was a spot as a third-string substitute teacher there. They called once a year or so when all they needed was a warm body, and I went in, gladly. That is, on days when I could tear myself away from the cleaner’s cart at the Mid-Night Inn.

“And your mom?” she said.

“She’s fine.”

“Glad to hear it.”

She’d always liked my family better than her own. Maddy had arrived in Midway with ready-made parental tragedy. Her mother rumored to be a suicide, and her dad remarried to a woman Maddy was determined not to like. Her dad had died more recently, quietly and without much fanfare in the local paper. There hadn’t been a funeral. “Your dad—”

She waved away the sentiment. She’d never been as close with her dad as I’d been with mine.

“Well, Gretchen comes in for a drink sometimes,” I said. I nodded through the glass doors that led to the inn’s bar. A look of horror

crossed Maddy's face. Her stepmother was apparently not the person she'd hoped to run into. "But not tonight. Not yet, anyway."

I slid a guest-info card across the counter for her and held out a pen. Up close, she nearly glowed. I couldn't look, for fear I would stare. Her perfume wafted over the desk, equal parts spicy and sweet—and warm, somehow, like exotic cookies fresh from the oven. Under the harsh fluorescents, the diamond in her ring caught the light and twinkled.

The door chimes rang again, this time for Lu and the rattling cart. Maddy glanced over her shoulder at the noise, and beamed her supernova smile in Lu's direction. Maddy turned back to hand me her card and pen, and behind her, Lu pulled her long, dark hair into a smoother ponytail and mugged a *la-di-da* hip wiggle. She gave Maddy's clothes a long, lurid look, then glanced down at herself, just as I had. I slipped the pen into my pocket.

"So there are drinks? In there?" Maddy jerked her head in the direction of the dark doors of the bar. "I could sure use one."

"Right through there," I said. "Tell the bartender you're a—tell her I sent you."

"Why don't you join me?"

Lu raised her eyebrows in my direction. We'd be talking about this, whatever my answer.

"I—" I'd meant to take my thirty-minute break to get out of Maddy's rarified, spice-cookie air, to brace myself for the knowledge that I'd be the one to clean her fair locks out of the shower drain in room two-oh-two the next morning.

"Please?" Maddy said. She leaned across the counter, and instead of taking the key card I'd left within her reach, she put her hand on mine. She had the skin of an infant. "We could catch up."

I blinked down at the diamond. Catching up with Maddy was the one thing I'd never been able to do.