

The Hollywood Hotel D'Or is a shithole. The palm trees make their protest by dying as fast as they can. There's more dried semen on the beds than you'd think, and you'd think there was a lot. They've put up posters of Marilyn Monroe where the walls are crumbling down, to remind you there used to be magic here.

Marilyn Monroe is dead, and she has never been to this hotel.

If you squint, it might look pretty. Squint and turn your head just right, when the sunset catches the windows and the courtyard looks like gold. But I'm telling you, this place is a nightmare.

The dead girl in the pool doesn't help.

She's the only honest thing about this hotel. The honest bit is that she killed herself, but I'm the only one who knows that. I'm the one who knows and I'm not allowed to tell anybody.

The detective asked me a lot of questions. He asked me and he chewed tobacco and he spat it and he asked more questions. And I said I don't know, I don't know, I fell asleep that night. Fell asleep at the reception desk. The gunshot woke me up. When I went outside, she was dead and the shallow end was halfway to red and now the whole pool's pink. They can't drain it because it's evidence.

Pretend this is a mystery. Pretend I just said there's a dead girl in the pool and I didn't say anything else about it. Blonde hair in a hurricane halo, white Gucci one-piece now pink too, chlorine seeping sideways into the hole in her head. That's what we know so far. That, and the sunglasses are a knock-off. They're evidence too.

Pretend we've got suspects. Four of them.

Suspect number one is Keith, and he's everything you'd think he is by the wife-beater and the hairline. Or what used to be a hairline.

Then there's Alameda, but she wasn't named after the county and she'll have you know that for a fact. The pearls are plastic, the nails are acrylic, the blonde is dyed, and the lips, well, God knows where she got those.

Behind door number three is Ricardo. No one believes he's really from Italy, not a soul. No one believes his handbag line will take off. No one believes he's straight. But the way he tells it, he loved her, the girl in the pool.

Keith loved her. Alameda loved her, loved everything about her. Alameda loved her the most.

Or the second most, after me.

Our fourth subject, ladies and gentlemen, that would be the guy at the reception desk. The night porter. The quiet one, who bites his nails where he just quit smoking. The one who woke up to the gunshot. That would be me.

But I don't know anything. If you asked me, I'd say it was Keith. He knew he'd never have her. It was Ricardo, because murder is dramatic. It was Alameda. She shot her so she could steal her skin. She shot her because she couldn't be her, because she never had been.

The girl in the pool, she was never her either, but damn, she looked the part.

She was Keith's dream and Ricardo's muse and Alameda's prayer, but to me, her name was Sandra, and that's all I have to say about that. The cigarette holder and the cocaine were all

for show. The truest thing about Sandra is that hole in her head, and that I loved her, and that she loved me too.

To understand the mystery, we have to go back to Missouri. 1991, in a trailer park. In a hospital, actually, then a trailer park, and then the trailer park for sixteen years. Daddy beat Mommy, Mommy beat Sandy, and little Sandra Jane was the star of the school play with a black eye. Sandra Jane joined the teen theater troupe in St. Louis, Sandra Jane grew beautiful, Sandra Jane met a man who made a promise, Sandra Jane went to L.A., and the rest is history. All of it, her whole life, history now.

They all killed her, every last one of them. They promised her and they beat her and they promised her, and all Sandra did was believe them.

There was a music video. There was one perfume commercial. There were dozens of men. But that, none of that, is Sandra. Sandra didn't care about Marilyn Monroe or Holly Golightly, and her voice got deeper than that whisper. Her favorite food was chicken tikka masala and she drank her whisky sour because she didn't really like whisky. She didn't even like acting, but it had saved her, and she would follow it to anywhere but where she was. She didn't need Jesus. No one does.

Right now, the detective's got us all locked in the hotel. We're not allowed to leave. We're evidence too. The way he sees it, everyone here has a motive. Half the story's written for you: in the courtyard, with the handgun. That much we don't need to speculate on.

The mystery is how she shot herself from ten feet away.

They know already the gun wasn't in her hand.

I sit on my hands because they're sweating. I'm not guilty, but here, now, everyone's guilty.

They call Keith first.

Keith is 40-something, fat or something, nearly bald. His motive is Lust. Sandra used to dress in front of the open window where he could see her. Half the semen stains on the beds are his. When you've worked here long enough, you can tell.

Keith likes baseball commentary and Budweiser and World of Warcraft. He's everything we chewed up and spat out, and he still calls himself proud. Sandra was everything he wanted and everything he couldn't have. If you asked anyone, he loved her, but he didn't. She was a fantasy and nothing more, and he knew it, and that's why he didn't kill her.

Ricardo goes in next.

He's 33 but he'll tell you 26. He's tan enough to pass for Italian, but I've seen his Albuquerque driver's license. The accent is a knock off. His designs are plagiarized. His motive is Greed.

Ricardo likes soap operas and dancing. He's the outsider, unwelcome but exotic enough to be interesting. He likes cocktail parties too, though he doesn't get invited to the ones he wants to be at. Sandra used to model his handbags on the side. She sat naked with a suitcase pressed over her chest and gave that smile to the camera. If you asked anyone, Ricardo loved her, but I've seen him down the gigolo lane and we all know the truth. Sandra was a pretty face and nothing more, and that's why he didn't kill her.

Alameda goes in third.

If I had to guess, she's in her fifties, but the Botox says a passable 39. Her motive is Envy. You can see the way she wanted to eat Sandra, would still eat the corpse. Alameda was never as beautiful as she says she was, and she isn't now.

Sandra used to lounge by the pool for her. Lounge with her tits up and her long, long legs crossed with the cigarette holder in one hand and a magazine in the other. She'd do it just for Alameda, just to remind her who was queen and who was a dowager widow. Alameda loved Sandra because she had to love herself. She knew Sandra was everything she wanted, the past she could never rewrite, and that's why she didn't kill her.

Me, I go in last.

When I come out, all three of them are standing by the pool, looking anywhere but at Sandra. The wind blew some of the pink pool water up onto the cement and the grey slab looks better for it.

"It was you," Ricardo says, his eyes on Alameda. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Me?" Alameda gasps, too theatrical to be surprised. "It was Keith! I can see into his room. He masturbates over her every night, the scoundrel, and he couldn't have her, and that's why he shot her."

"Me?" Keith grunts. "It was you, faggot."

"Me?" says Ricardo. "Why would I kill her?"

"Why would I?" says Alameda.

"Why would I?" says Keith.

And the answer is obvious. None of them would kill her, because they all needed her.

The faces turn to me.

"I was working," I say. "I didn't see what happened."

"Working? There's no one here!"

"When's the last time anyone came to this hotel?"

"All you do is watch us on the security footage, pervert. I bet you have a whole file on Sandra."

"I bet you're just like Keith."

"I bet you're just like every man."

"You did it, didn't you?"

I say, "No. I'm not to blame. It wasn't me."

And I can't say the truth, not then and there, because they're lifting Sandra's body out of the pool.

They raise her up, wet hair dripping from the stretcher like the cascade of a neckline. Two officers take a white sheet in each hand and unfurl it. It falls so soft over her body, settles in, and then, she's gone.

Sandra, she's a corpse now.

We watch as they roll her out of sight.

The truth about Sandra is this:

She'd come in drunk every night, toss her hair over her shoulder as the door shut and another car drove away. Every night, a different car. A different smell of cologne. A new handbag, a new pair of shoes, a new necklace. She'd take each one off as soon as she got in the door and drop it in the trash. I'd pretend not to notice. The maid kept most of it when she found it.

The first night, Sandra came up to the desk and slammed her elbows on it. She smiled. She said, "Good morning."

Every night, it was the same. Every morning, it had never happened.

I learned everything there was to learn. I studied as she lectured. She liked the guitarist, she hated the director, the banker was just for the drugs, and she didn't even like the drugs. She loved Kurt Cobain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and white sun dresses, and lying. She lied as much as she could, she said. Mostly about herself. She was her favorite invention.

She asked me if I'd ever been to India. She asked me if I'd ever been to Greece. She asked me what my favorite movie was, and she forgot every night what I answered. Hers was *The Breakfast Club*.

Every night, she came in, took her shoes off, and threw something away. Every night, she leaned on the reception desk and looked at me. Every morning, we were strangers. She'd stride past me like an autumn breeze, out into the parking lot, out into another car, away from me. Every night, she'd come back. Sometimes she was laughing, sometimes she was crying, but every night, she came home to me.

No one who met her ever believed in her, but they used her to believe in themselves. She was a dream, and we woke up with a hole through the head.

I never kissed her, because that would make it real. Not once, not until the night she put the gun on the reception desk.

She told me about the dream she had. She'd been having it for years. They're by the beach, her, and whoever she loves that day. Everyone's together, and the sun is shining, and the water's so blue you can taste it. The ocean pulls back, tucks into itself like a bedsheet and folds over and over and the beach stretches on ahead for another mile. And there, on the sand, is everything you could ever dream. Jewels and gold and wine and roses, as far as the eye can see, buried in the sand. Everyone around her is staring at the shine of it, but she looks at the ocean. And she knows what no one else does: that a wave is coming. The greatest wave there's ever been. It's coming to drown them all, and no one sees it. She's screaming at them, but they can't hear her. She says, This will all be destroyed. Everything you want, every beautiful thing, gone. The wave will crash on our heads and we're all going to die.

She's the only one who knows.

She says, "Get to higher ground," and they don't listen.

She says, "We're going to die here," and they don't listen.

This is the dream she had.

Then she put the gun on the desk. She knew about the gun. She knew where we kept it. She remembered what I told her. She knew better than anyone, that the gun was the only dream left.

She threw away a pair of earrings, set her handbag on the desk and took out the gun. She walked upstairs, put on her swimsuit, folded up her sunglasses, and came back.

Then she said, "Take a shot."

I refused and I begged and I pleaded. I gave her options. I encouraged her dreams. I told her things about her, things she'd forgotten. I sang her the song from The Breakfast Club. I offered to take her out for Indian food. I offered to take her to India, to Greece, to the room upstairs and anywhere. Another world, even, I would've found one for her.

But she found one, and the door that led there was a hole in the head. And when she said this was what she wanted, who was I to refuse her?

I asked for one thing. I asked to know that this was real. I asked to kiss her.

And she let me kiss her. I kissed her, and then I shot her in the head for her.

That's the honest truth. I threw the gun in the pool, I threw up in the toilet, and I pretended to sleep at my desk. All of it, she asked me to. I'll never tell a soul, not one, but you.

The other story goes like this:

A beautiful girl from Missouri comes to the Hotel D'Or, the last decrepit shell of California gold. Where no one's seen the owner for years, and you feel it in the walls that the façade can't stand much longer.

She comes to the hotel and she meets the night porter. He's a sad, lonely boy with no friends and no one to talk to. She talks to him. She befriends him when she's drunk. He believes in love, still. He believes that this is what it is. He believes, because he is a fool, that she loves him. That things are possible still. That the courtyard looks like gold at sunset, and that dreams come true, because out of anything in this world, she loves him.

But then she tells him she's engaged. She's in love. Not with the guitarist, not with the director, not with the banker or the club owner or the record producer. She's in love with a bartender up the road, the place where she gets drunk every night before she comes back here. She's in love, and they're getting married, and they're leaving L.A. together. They're going to India, to Greece, to everywhere.

And the poor boy at reception can't handle it. The world's come crumbling down, like it always would, like it always has been. There never was a mystery. She doesn't love him, and he can't handle it, and he takes the security gun and walks her out to the pool and shoots her in the head.

That's the other story, the one they tell. The one they arrested me for. The one they tried me on. The one that sent me to prison.

The gun was behind the counter. It was for security. Every gift she wore was in the trash. She got shot from ten feet away, and she was wearing her white bathing suit and sunglasses in the middle of the night. She died by the sea that she loved, in a pool that was only a cheap imitation, in a world imitating itself.

This is what we know.

This is the story, and these are the facts.

Her name was Sandra Jane.

You can believe me, and you can believe them, and you can choose which story to tell. Who killed Sandra Jane? I did. We all did. She killed herself. That's the truth.

The dream's over.

They drained the pool.

The mystery is solved now, and you can all go home.