

Sample Chapter *All's Forgiven* by Donan Berg
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The bedroom door latch clink jarred Jenny awake. She remembered snuggling into bed, but not if she'd closed the door before or after 11 p.m. With a sheet and loose coverlet pulled to her shoulders, she squinted at her clock to see the digit six followed by two zeros.

She shouted, "Who's there?"

After hearing no answer and unable to reach her crutch, Jenny repeated her shout, "Virginia. You there? Are you okay?"

Virginia's quiet voice eased Jenny's anxiety. "Yeah. Sorry. Just checking if I'd closed your door."

Muted early dawn sunlight sliced through the white window curtain centerline and across Jenny's bed. "Didn't you go home?"

"I did, but returned an hour ago. Since you weren't up, procedure requires me to check your bedroom to verify your presence."

At the door's inward jerk, Jenny tensed. She pulled the bed's reversible coverlet to her neck. "Please, please give me a minute."

"Sure." The door stilled.

"Wait, a sec, Virginia. Is there any news about mother?"

"As of an hour ago, none. Robert's organizing a neighborhood search party set to launch about 9 a.m., ten o'clock at the latest."

"You checking my bedroom because of that?"

"No. There's a man at the front door."

Jenny gasped. Did that creepy black-hatted man who claimed to have her gambling debt have the gumption to pester her again? "Send him away. Tell him I'm not here."

"The man wants to talk about Ruth."

"If it's not about mother, it doesn't concern me."

Without an answer, and without knowing if Ruth had stayed or left, Jenny's gaze searched the room for her crutch and laid out clothes. Not seeing her bedtime clothes routine fulfilled heightened her apprehension she'd not been alone in this room the entire night.

Where was her crutch? She fretted. She'd left it propped alongside her bed's headboard. When she rolled to her side, she exhaled, relieved. It lay on the floor at the foot of her headboard.

Somewhat relieved, she shouted as loud as she could in case Virginia was no longer outside her bedroom door. "Tell him, or whoever it is, Ruth doesn't live here."

After Jenny heard muffled footsteps, Virginia said, "Just did that. He repeated he needs to ask everyone in the house about Ruth."

Jenny bristled at the continuing imposition. "Make sure he leaves and then tell me the latest news you have about mother's apron."

"I shouldn't shout, but come in to answer that."

Jenny lied. "Not before I change out of my pajamas."

"Right. You get decent, and I'll stall this pesky gentleman at the front door until you can personally shoo him away."

Uncertain of why she'd crawled under the covers without undressing, Jenny waited until Virginia's creaking footfalls on the living room's oaken subfloor faded before she tossed the coverlet aside. Yesterday, Robert had acted very condescending toward Virginia. Jenny dialed up her dislike for him. She even upped her dislike of him a notch because he'd let Ruth, in her presence, fawn over him.

Jenny, unashamed she'd fallen asleep without scrubbing her face, rolled off the bed and onto the floor to reach her crutch. Once she had it, she changed the white top she wore for a pale blue one to present a different image from yesterday. She wasn't so fussy about her black slacks. Virginia would be unlikely to recall the black slacks Jenny had worn yesterday.

At the bedroom door, she eased the door open to peek and determine if Virginia still stood at the front door.

Finding a clear, unobserved path to the bathroom, Jenny hobbled as fast and as quietly as she could. In the bathroom, behind a closed door, she haphazardly scrubbed her face and brushed her teeth.

With jitters about a chance meeting with Virginia, she abandoned brushing her hair. She'd left her brush on her bedroom dresser.

The bathroom door knock startled Jenny.

"Please, don't come in." Her breaths came in brief spurts. "I promise I'll be right out."

Virginia replied, "Take your time."

Jenny splashed cold water on her face. A towel dried her skin pores before she left the bathroom for the living room.

Virginia stood halfway between the front door she pointed to and Jenny. "I'll be ready for whatever happens." As Virginia's right-hand fingers tapped her holstered 9mm, she whispered, "Open the door only far enough to see whoever urgently wants to talk to you."

Jenny shook her head.

"It's best you speak to him. Bring up your mother's name."

As she passed Virginia, Jenny muttered, "This won't take long."

Jenny eased the front door toward her, open the inch or so she'd done for the black-clad creepy fake bill collector.

A man, his back to her, gazed west.

"Excuse me," said Jenny. "You wanted to talk with someone?"

She flinched when he turned to face her. His beige buttoned topcoat didn't hide his broad shoulder-to-hip taper, nor did his set jaw dispel the appearance of a man on a mission. Except for the Air Jordan shoes he wore, his physique reminded her of the Pelican Bar stranger. Jenny blew out a breath to relax. The technique worked.

"Yes, ma'am. Let me introduce myself. Vince Adams, Gem Exhibits. I've been trying to leave telephone messages."

"Vaguely remember one. But, what's this about Ruth?"

"We're scheduled to bring a precious gem exhibit to Riddle Jewelry, where Ruth works."

"I know where Ruth works." Jenny gasped. Hadn't Robert warned her not to say or confirm family information? Still, she comforted herself for not admitting to being Ruth's sister or that their mother lived here. Despite her vague admission to knowing where Ruth worked, Jenny spoke up to speed the man's departure. "Don't know that there's anything more I can tell you."

"Well, one question. Is Ruth Olsen her real name?"

Jenny grasped the door edge tight. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Her mother told me she's been married, once perhaps twice, an elopement hazy in her mind. That's what she said."

This elopement claim shocked Jenny. "When did you talk with mother? Where?" Without an instant reply, Jenny forged ahead.

"Mother's said nothing remotely related to an elopement."

The gentleman dug his hands into his coat pockets. "Distinctly remember the word elope. Conversation wasn't that long ago. That shouldn't present a problem. It's what you know that's important."

"Shouldn't, really can't, add anything more. Talk to Ruth. If you bother me again, I'll call the police."

"I will, but first, was Ruth ever in trouble with the law?"

Jenny glanced rearward to judge if Virginia stood within earshot. She wished to heed Robert's advice. Jenny shouted at the gentleman. "No. Don't know everything about this Ruth you ask about."

"What about three years ago? Simple assault in Chicago, charges eventually dropped or dismissed."

Jenny gasped. If true, this was news to her. She wanted him gone. Wished neither to confirm nor deny. "Can't say one way or the other, but if I had to, I'd say you're trying to confuse me."

"You ever been a witness for her?"

Jenny raised her left hand to direct her answer to the man outside and shield the words from Virginia. "Again, I can't say I really remember any such moment." Jenny dropped her hand. "Perhaps you can be more definite as to a specific time or a specific day?"

"On an application for an appearance bond."

"Oh yeah, I remember that. Did that one time. Long time ago. As I recall, nothing came of it. The entire episode has disappeared."

He smiled. "Thanks. Don't expect to bother you further."

"Okay, so when's this gem exhibit you mentioned?"

"Give it a day or two. There'll be an announcement."

Jenny's curiosity amped. "What kind of gems?" She clamped her lips tight. If she displayed any greater interest, it would likely extend her chance of catching a chill for standing by an open door.

Nevertheless, she left the door cracked.

"All values of diamonds, pearls, and gemstones and, for exhibit, but not sale, jewelry historically connected to British royalty. You know, real brooches, but the tiaras will be reproductions. Please don't tell friends some jewels will be fakes. Still, worth the sparkle to view."

"Thank you."

As the man strode off, Jenny shut the door.

"Interesting," said Virginia. She sat on a wood chair in a straightened living room. Smashed picture frames dumped into a cardboard box in the far corner. The photographs removed from the frames neatly stacked atop a three-shelf bookcase, now set upright.

Jenny plopped her butt into the living room wingchair, its cushion lifted off the floor, and reinserted. She beamed a smile at Virginia. "Thank you for tidying up."

"Wasn't me." Virginia edged herself behind the tattered sofa to reach the living room window. Her left hand pushed aside the curtain to survey the front yard. Jenny assumed Virginia wanted to assure herself the man hadn't doubled back. He must not have, for she reversed directions to position herself near the kitchen door. "Officer Jenkins, who relieved me, is a real neat freak. You should see him at the station. He's like one of those guys who paints white outlines for tools hung on their shop pegboard."

"Could you thank him for me?"

"Sure, of course. Will bump into him at the station sometime."

Jenny enjoyed Virginia's company. "What was it about mother's towel, or was it her apron, that you couldn't tell me earlier?"

"Er . . . not so much the towel, but the basement. It's off limits."

Jenny squirmed in her chair. "Why? Aren't the lab guys done?"

Virginia lifted her gaze to the ceiling. "Halfway, I'd guess. They left instructions no one's to go into the basement. If you mosey into the kitchen, you'll see yellow crime scene tape stretched across the closed basement door. The lab guys, not me, put it there."

"What are they still searching for?"

“Don’t know.” Virginia lowered her gaze to Jenny. “Do you really need to tramp through the basement?”

“Not this moment. In New Orleans, I fought against losing it and expressing my anger about strangers rummaging through my suitcase, but mother missing is different. However, deep down, it all makes me shudder like it’s all one big plot. And, I’m in the dark.”

“If it’s any consolation, six years in this job has impressed upon me that crime targets never really plan, so every theory has a chance.”

While Jenny had received an A in her one philosophy course, she received Virginia’s comments as sincere and well meaning. Not wanting to sleep in her clothes dominated Jenny’s concerns. “I will need clean clothes and the wash machine is in the basement.”

“I’ll send word to the lab guys. May spur them on.”

“That’s okay; I’ll survive. For now, I need to get ready for work.”

When Virginia didn’t object, Jenny maneuvered her crutch to assist her rise out of the wingchair and her hobble to the bedroom.

While trying to make her bed, Jenny heard Virginia rattle kitchen pots and utensils. Jenny ignored the clatter as a continued search. She wouldn’t bother to inquire why.

Dressed, with her coat buttoned, Jenny mouthed a Hail Mary at her mother’s bedroom door, then moved on without a long peek.

Jenny raised her voice. “See you later, Virginia.” Halfway to the front door, Jenny halted her departure. She internalized her growing apprehension. “I’ll lock the front door on my way out.”

Virginia appeared with a dish towel in her right hand. “No one may be here when you return. I know I won’t be. Will that be okay?”

She smiled at Virginia. “I’ve got 9-1-1 on speed dial.”