

Lost Girls & Love Hotels

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A NOVEL BY

Catherine Hanrahan

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

Lost Girls & Love Hotels

A Novel

Catherine Hanrahan

 HarperCollins e-books

For my parents

Mary and Robert Hanrahan

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The Outer Space Room

Sometimes, when I'm staring down a room of Japanese stewardesses-in-training, looking across a sea of shiny black coifs, a chorus line of stockinged legs, knees together, toes to the side, when I'm chanting "Sir, you are endangering yourself and other passengers!," I think I should have let my brother stab me. I shouldn't have run when Frank came at me with the carving knife, yelling "Satan! Satan!" I should have faced him, arms outstretched, eyes closed in sacrifice, and let him put the blade into me.

I wake up to the sounds of Ines having sex in the next room. Ines is loud and she'll screw nearly anyone. If they don't meet her expectations, if she doesn't come three times, feel like she's transcended to a higher plane, speak in tongues, and get a postcoital foot rub, she makes them pay her Cash. "*Fuck them, little shits. I deserve money if they waste my time!*" I used to be outraged. Used to think she was crazy. Now it all makes perfect sense. I sell my time and kill my body. She sells her body to kill time.

I look at the alarm clock. Ines has an orgasm. My bladder calls. It's time.

I have never, in my ninety-six days in Tokyo, been pressed into a subway car by the fabled white-gloved subway-pushers. I feel ripped off—it was just the sort of nightmare of modernity that I came to Japan to be a part of. That and drunk businessmen eating thousand-dollar sushi meals off the bodies of naked girls. Vending machines with schoolgirls' used panties on offer. Doomsday cults and death by overwork.

The morning train is all lolling heads and bad breath. It's cold season. Half the subway carriage wears surgeons' cotton masks. A forensics convention, hurtling through the tunnels.

Near Yoyogi station, I read a pornographic comic book over the shoulder of an old man. An octopus having its way with a girl in a kilt. A group of huge-eyed horny schoolboys is about to rescue her when the falsetto voice of the train conductor calls my station.

Air-Pro Stewardess Training Institute is on the fourth floor of the ABW Building. One floor above True Romantic Collection marriage agency and one floor below the offices of Toyama Waste Disposal. Two months ago, when I first started working at Air-Pro Stewardess Training Institute, still under the spell of Tokyo and jet lag, blissfully sleepless and anonymous, I liked the building. The strange ceramic-tiled exterior—like a giant inside-out bathroom. The tiny elevators that jerked and sputtered to their destination. I was happy to be somewhere where I couldn't understand a word, spared from the torture of random snippets of conversation. For a brief few days I used the word "lucky." Applied the word "lucky" to myself.

One day I asked one of the secretaries what ABW stood for. She smiled and gave me the address of the building, carefully wrote down the city, ward, and street number, as though I was an amusing idiot. "No," I said to her. "I know where it is, but what does it stand for." She smiled even more. "Ye

Standing,” she answered. I’ve realized that ABW and most Japanese acronyms stand for nothing. The stand for the Roman letters themselves. Mysterious and sturdy and decorative. Sometimes, on my way to work, I invent my own meanings for ABW. Academy of Beauty and Weaponry. Abandon Belief Within. Acme Brain Wedgies.

I have realized that no matter what I do, Air-Pro Stewardess Training Institute will never fire me. So I’ve been driven to dressing for shock value, like a petulant teenager—strolling into the lobby in ski pants and ballet slippers. The ski pants rustle when I walk. I like the way the bib just barely conceals my little boobs and chafes my nipples a bit. I still have my platinum blond Louise Brooks-style bob that everyone thinks is so cute, but I’ve dyed the tips robin’s-egg blue.

The staff scream “good morning” violently as the elevator doors open. I see them register my outfit. They struggle to maintain their professional smiles, but they shudder ever so slightly.

“Morning,” I grunt, heading to the bathroom to change into my little blue suit.

Mikiko, the director’s assistant, runs up behind me. Mikiko is fanatically cheerful, despite the tragedy. I heard about it from another staff member. She spoke about it in a hushed voice, the way some people talk about cancer or infertility. Mikiko is a failed flight attendant. With her degree from Tokyo University and her sylphlike figure, she made the cut for Japan Airlines—the dream of every Japanese girl with lofty ambitions. But during training, calamity struck. In the form of a cold sore. As the stress of her cabin-crew training grew, so did her blister. The doctors confirmed her worst fears. Herpes simplex 1. Her employers had no choice but to let her go. Pus-addled and dejected.

“Margaret-san! *O-genki desu ka?* You look so funky. Like a rock star, *ne?* You are really, really nitwit!” Mikiko says breathlessly.

“It’s too early, Mikiko.”

She follows me into the bathroom.

“Did you just call me a nitwit?”

“My boyfriend Kevin always says I’m nitwit. Like Meg Ryan. I love Meg Ryan. Do you love Meg Ryan?” Mikiko stares at me expectantly. She’s a pretty girl with a bad overbite. Since her double eyelid surgery, she has the look of a startled animal. I expect one day she will pounce on me, tear at my jugular. I keep my distance.

“Yes. Love her. I’m going to get naked now.”

Mikiko just stands there, eyes popping, big white teeth tipped with hot-pink lipstick, resting on her lower lip. “I need some privacy,” I whisper.

“Oh! Sorry! I have a good news. Today is starting a new recruit, Madoka-chan!” Here at Air-Pro or trolley-dolly boot camp, as I refer to it, we call the students recruits. Our slogan hails, “Air-Pro. Putting young women in the air. Where they belong.”

I struggle into my nylons and suit, scowl at my reflection in the mirror. I look like a slightly punk women’s prison warden. Matronly and freakish. Sitting down on the heated toilet seat, I light a smoke and take out my mobile phone.

I’ve always believed that rituals are for fucked-up people with slippery grasps on reality. This is my latest ritual: each time I sit down on the toilet, I listen to the two saved messages.

A dancing squirrel greets me when I turn on my phone. At first, I thought the squirrel was nauseatingly cute, but now, when I watch it pirouette across the tiny LCD screen, smiling maniacally, sly eyes and giant feet, I’m sure there’s something malevolent about it. Ragging my neurosis with its

electronic chirp. The phone has a function menu in English, but I prefer the Japanese. I've memorized the way each of the kanji ideograms look. The voice of the message-center computer, which sounds like someone trying to remain composed while being pinched very hard. The sequence of numbers I have to press to listen to the messages. To abort them midsentence. To save them. The whole process after so many times, requires only a modicum of concentration. But I breathe deeply throughout, fix my attention on the patch of tile between my feet.

Message one. It's two months old. I've listened to it so many times I can recite the words in harmony.

Hello, Mags? This is Frank. I just wanted—your brother, Frank. I really wanted to thank you for the birthday card. Mags, can you call me? I have a new phone number. It's 1—that's the country code. 4-1-6—Mags, I got your card. It was so nice. Do you have my phone number? Okay, it's 4-1-6—5-4-5. Thanks for the card. Wait! You have to dial the country code. I have it here somewhere. This is Frank. Mags. Okay, so here's my number if you want to call. Did you know my birthday was last month? I'm hundred and twelve years old. Margaret? Are you there?

I haul on my cigarette. Try to feel the rhythm of his mind, find some logic in his thoughts—speeding, merging, fracturing, forgotten. I'm sure there must be bliss in chaos. I'm banking on it. I wonder who sent him the birthday card. It wasn't me. I forgot.

Message number two. Mom. It's two weeks old, and I haven't got all the way through it. I think that if I dissect the message, maybe I can disintegrate it. Return it back to tiny wavelets.

Margaret? Margaret I need you to call me. There's been an accident—

Stop.

Maybe if I keep it in parts, the whole will never touch me.

Save.

Ms. Nakamura, the school directors catches me in the hallway.

“Margaret-san! *Aree!*” She eyes my hair. Nose scrunched up like I'm giving off a bad odor. “What happened to you? Never mind. We have a new recruit, Madoka-chan. This is a really big challenge for us. She is like a big chunk of stone.”

“Stone?”

“You know what's inside stone?”

“I dunno. A diamond?”

“Flower! We will whip the flower out of her! Yes? Firm but kind. Let's go!”

Ms. Nakamura clickety-clicks down the hall. I'm sure Ms. Nakamura was born wearing heels. In her immaculate black suit, her skirt that constricts her stride to a practiced hobble, she looks like a tall woman who's been shrunk. Like a doll. Her hair is jet black and pulled up into a big mushroom, sprayed into taxidermic rigidity. One time I saw a strand of silvery-white hair that had escaped her attention. It snaked up from the nape of her neck and caught the light, glimmering like the inside of a seashell. I stared at it, mesmerized, until her creepy red talons were in my face, fingers snapping. “Margaret! Time to recite chicken or fish!”

Madoka is lingering outside the classroom, eyeing the advertisements—cosmetic dentists, photographers adept at creating shapely airbrushed ankles, hair-removal specialists, esthetics salons that use electrodes to zap fat. She's scratching the back of her calf with the heel of her shabby pumps.

“Madoka!” Ms. Nakamura calls. Madoka turns. “This is Margaret-sensei. She is a native English speaker!”

Madoka grabs my hand and shakes it too hard. My arm moves from the shoulder, like a rubbery

string. Her smile is lopsided, pushed out on one side by a grayish snaggletooth. She's hiding a wad of chewing gum in the back of her mouth.

"Pleased to make you!" Her voice is jumpy like a child's, with a hoarse edge to it, like a little girl chain-smoker. "I'm so exciting," she says.

Ms. Nakamura's face quivers with a creepy little spasm. "Let's begin our training to become cabin crew," she pauses, giving Madoka an up-and-down look, "or worst-case scenario, ground staff.

I teach cabin-crew and airline-interview English, Monday to Friday. Teach is the wrong word. I pronounce cabin-crew and airline-interview English. Ms. Nakamura teaches the recruits what to say. She regards it as a science, arguing the primacy of the word "beverage" over "drink" with pointless dogmatism.

The classroom is filled with thirty girls, groomed within an inch of their lives, moving and speaking in precise, identical ways. Like a team of synchronized swimmers. Without water. I always feel a bit dirty around these girls. Their unlined skin and innocent minds. Shielded from birth by their families—shielded from the sordid world of drugs and unkempt foreigners.

Madoka makes her way to an empty chair in the front row, grinning madly, all teeth and gums, flopping into her chair with a loud sigh.

Ms. Nakamura clears her throat. "Recruits! Meet your new classmate, Madoka Wakiyama." The recruits chorus "Nice to meet you!" Madoka squirms in her seat. Her cheeks redden. Her eyes bulge. "Exciting," she mumbles.

Ms. Nakamura asks Madoka to tell the recruits about her hobbies.

"I like reading and tanning," she answers. Thirty manicured hands go to thirty glossy mouths, and a collective giggle fills the air.

"Don't you have a helping-people hobby?" Nakamura asks. Madoka tilts her head.

"Example! Rie! What is your hobby?"

Rie stands, lifts her chin. "I study sign language. I want to communicate with all people of the world."

Nakamura beams with pride. "And Sonomi?"

"My hobby is sign language. I want to communicate with all people of the world."

"Thank you, recruits." She addresses Madoka, "See? Helping people." She gives me a nod and I pick up my interview dialogue sheet.

"Listen and repeat," I drone. "I AM COMMITTED TO BECOMING A CUSTOMER SERVICE PROFESSIONAL." The recruits trill the words back, and I hear Madoka's voice above the others, loud and jerky. It sounds like an aria.

I'm six. Frank's eight. We're standing in front of a cage at a service station somewhere between Moncton and Halifax, looking at a monkey. We're on one of our marathon family road trips, driving from Toronto to Nova Scotia. Dad's afraid of flying. He claims most airline pilots are drunks and womanizers, that they're too busy nursing a hangover or goosing the stewardesses to be trusted with our lives.

Dad's about to pop a vein. The car's conked out again, and the mechanic tells Dad that he should sue the guy that sold it to him. "Ford Pinto," he says, shaking his head. "You'd be better off driving a sewing machine." My father works at a Ford dealership. He sold the car to himself.

Frank's standing a couple feet from the cage, hands at his hips, leaning forward and squinting. He wears Coke-bottle glasses that dwarf his head, glasses he's crushed or lost three times already.

"Actually, he's not a monkey," Frank says. "He's an ape. See? No tail. Monkeys have tails. Ape don't."

"Don't get too close," I say. Dad warned us: "You can look at the monkey, but DON'T GO NEAR THE CAGE!"

"He might be a gibbon," Frank says.

I take a long sniff of the air—the smell of gas and sweat and hands greasy with junk food. Looking over my shoulder, I see Dad, hands balled up, biceps flexed, stomach held in. Mom's lolling her head around, like she's working out the kinks in her neck, trying to look anywhere but at Dad.

"Look! He's thinking something," Frank says. The ape's head is tilted, shiny, black marbles of eyes scanning Frank's face. Frank takes a step toward the cage, and the ape points at him with its wrinkled black hand.

I hear Dad scream at the mechanic, "Just fix the goddamn car!" I turn to see Mom pulling at Dad's arm, Dad yanking it away from her. When I turn back, the ape has Frank's glasses.

I scream.

Dad jerks his head around. It takes a moment for him to register the scene in his mind. The ape is examining Frank's glasses, turning them in its strange, humanoid hands. It holds them up to its eyes and then pulls them away, grimacing.

"WHAT THE—!" Dad runs toward us and moves Frank out of the way. Frank wears a queer grin and touches the skin around his eyes.

"Okay," Dad says to the ape. "Come on now, give me the glasses." He's trying his best to sound soothing and calm, but he sounds kind of creepy and psycho. "Good monkey."

"He's an ape," Frank says.

"SHUT IT!"

The ape moves to the back of the cage and twists the wire frames. It holds one of the thick lenses between its teeth. Its lips curl back and it smiles. I think for a moment that Dad might cry, standing there impotently, his golf shirt soaked with sweat. After a minute or two, the ape hands the twisted frames to my father and spits out the lens with a loud "Puh-too!" Then it does what looks like a kind of dance around the cage. Dad holds the remains of the glasses at arm's length. The ape continues its dance, stops to scratch its crotch, and then, as if to add insult to injury, tilts its head back and lets out a high-pitched howl.

In the car, Dad keeps asking Frank questions without waiting for an answer. "Are you deaf as well as blind? I said 'DON'T GO NEAR THE CAGE!' What part didn't you understand? What kind of

a moron are you anyway? Can you tell me that?"

~~Franks hangs his head. I wonder if he's crying. Dad keeps on for miles and miles. Every now and then, Mom interjects with "Come on, Ted," in a plaintive whine. Frank finally turns his face toward me, and I see he's smiling, contorting his face to conceal a laugh. He reaches over, grabs my hand, and squeezes.~~

I start out at Jiro's under the self-delusion that I'll have a few beers and go home. I start out with an image of myself in the morning, walking home from a tai chi class. Feeling like a cereal ad. Shoulder back. Chin up.

Jiro's has four stools and one wobbly table. It's on a busy corner near Roppongi station, but the entrance is hidden among a row of vending machines. Jiro's is the kind of place you could walk by a hundred times and not notice—those that do discover the place treat it like a secret hideout, a refuge. It's not much bigger than a bus shelter. But warmer. And stocked with booze. I'm a regular—the strange gaijin who drinks a lot. I sit in the last bar stool, next to the framed photograph of John Lennon. Jiro does his best to communicate with me with the English he's learned from Beatles' songs.

A trio of young construction workers occupies the bar stools next to me. Tight spark plugs of bodies in bright knickerbocker pants. Leather split-toe construction slippers. A sprinkling of dust lies on them, like icing sugar. They sit lazily, pouring each other beer from tall bottles, raising their drinks to a lazy chorus of "*Kampai!*" Every few minutes, one of them steals a glance at me.

"Hard day's night, ne?" Jiro says, wiping the bar. A cockroach scuttles between my beer and me and I flinch.

"Not dangerous," Jiro says, herding the roach around with a menu. "More clean than Koreans."

"Jiro!"

"I made a joke."

"That's not nice."

"*Gomen ne!* More clean than American."

"That's better."

I catch my reflection in the brass of the beer tap. And see what my face is doing. Contorting itself into a smile. Folding back into desperation like the snap of a rubber band.

I put a cigarette into my mouth, and Jiro has the match lit on cue. The smell of sulfur fills the tiny room. Jiro smiles. His face is like a parched riverbed—dry, deeply grooved, mud-colored. "Let it be," he says.

The alcohol hits me quickly, a familiar warmth spreading through my limbs, an uncoiling. I order another beer. The construction workers send over a cup of warm sake. Tonight I will get pissed, I decide.

I wonder how easy it would be to become a drunk, not a regular, functioning boozer, but a real one—a puffy-faced, hollow-eyed hag, slurring insults at strangers, staggering wasted at ten in the morning.

"Where from?" one of the construction workers asks. He has sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes and an aerodynamic cowlick that lifts his hair off his forehead like a gust of wind.

"Narnia," I say.

"*So ka!*" He stares at me, his plump lower lip hanging down idly.

Jiro leans over the bar. "He loves you, yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah," I say, twirling my finger in the air.

"You have good eyes," Jiro tells me.

"You have good beer," I answer back. My voice is getting a slack booziness to it.

A roommate of mine told me once that she was sure I would eventually go mad. She was willing

to bet on it. “You’ve got it in you,” she said, emboldened by a six-pack of wine coolers. “Something about your eyes.” She started laughing, the kind of laugh where no sound escapes except a low—clicking from the throat. “My brother is schizophrenic,” I said. She laughed harder. “He thinks the traffic lights are messages from outer space.” She doubled over, moaning, eyes watering, waving her hand at me to stop being so funny. Funny. I figured, if I was destined to be crazy, at least it made good drunk conversation fodder.

The good part of drunk has passed. I’m struggling to focus my eyes. I think about the morning. The tai chi class seems unlikely. I imagine myself stumbling to the convenience store for a liter of Coke and a roll of antacid tabs. I wince at an olfactory premonition. The smell of me—pasty tongue, booze, smoke. Less like a cereal ad. More like a cautionary tale.

The construction workers are slipping off their stools, barking things at one another, missing the glass when they pour beer.

Jiro’s has a squat toilet. My motor skills are barely present. I lean my shoulder against the wall and slide down into a squat. Dial the phone with my nose. Try to direct the stream of pee away from my shoes. *There’s been an accident...He got beat up Mags. You’d hardly recognize his face.*

Stop. Save.

I haven’t recognized him for a long time.

In the narrow hallway leading from the toilets, I let the cowlicked one press me against the wall. His hand gropes around the buttons on my shirt, his mouth, open too wide, like he’s trying to get a good bite of a big apple, teeth hitting teeth with a disturbing scrape that’s loud inside my head. The feeling of being touched, the sound of his voice, mumbling through the kiss “*Suki, suki*” (I like, I like)—the awkwardness of it all makes me want to cry.

I think about taking him home. I imagine his body under the poofy construction pants and jacket. Something hard to weigh me down. But it’s too early. Barely ten. I have to let the night drag me on. I put my hand to his chest and push him away, surprised by the willingness with which he retreats. Surprised, too, by the draft that rushes down the narrow passageway and cools my skin. I indulge myself for a moment, then walk away to pay the tab. It’s time to find Ines and switch intoxicants.

I'm six. Frank's eight. In the basement, in the strange light of the makeshift tent. Lawn chairs and old sheets. Silverfish and mold. Frank with his thumb in his mouth, safe with the knowledge that Dad won't come down here and call him a baby. He'll stand at the top of the stairs and bellow if we're needed for din-din. I honestly wonder if Frank's full name is "For Christ Sake Frank." No one ever says my name. I could be invisible. I like the idea.

Frank lies on his stomach, up on his elbows, *Guinness Book of World Records* open in front of him. Slurs the words around his pruney thumb. "Sidar Chillal of India holds the world records for longest fingernails. Measuring 20 feet 2.25 inches."

"He'd give good back scratches," I say.

"Uh-uh. Look." In the upside-down photo, Mr. Chillal's brown wrinkly hands sit on a table, yellow fingernails coiled like corkscrews next to a ruler.

I squeeze my eyes shut. Worry that Mr. Chillal will show up in my nightmares. "Ewww," I say.

"Cool huh?" Frank says.

The thump of footsteps upstairs. Shouting. Words I can't make out. I think this is how adults talk. In shrieks and expletives. Tears and slammed doors. That all conversations end in one person going for a drive, or two people retiring for an impromptu nap. Squeaking beds and extra showers.

"Let's have a fight," Frank says.

"But you're bigger than me."

"Not a fistfight." He sits up cross-legged. Takes his thumb from his mouth. "Like this." He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Opens them and screams, "How can you be so goddamned stupid?"

My back straightens. "I'm not stupid."

Frank smiles. "Good. Good," he whispers. His face gets hard again. "If I have to pay another bill from your harebrained shopping trips so help me God."

"But—"

"But, but," he mocks. "I work all week. What do you do?"

"__"

"Tell me. What do you do besides get fatter?"

I stand up and the tent starts to come down. I can't get out.

"Useless!" Frank says.

Tears rush to my eyes, and Frank pulls me down by my wrist. Goes through the motions of kissing me. His mouth clamped shut, rubbing his face on mine. My heart is beating too fast. I've never noticed it in my chest before.

Frank stands up and adjusts the sheets around the lawn chairs. "That's completely gross," he says, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I don't know how they can do that."

Sounds have died upstairs. I still try and listen. Creaky bedsprings and quiet reproaches.

Frank holds his finger in the air. "Ding! Ding! Ding!" He holds the book close to his face. "Quiz time!" Presses the book to his chest and adjusts his eyeglasses on his nose. "The smallest woman in the world was how tall?"

I think about small. So small I could hide in the cracks in sidewalks, in the space between the bed board and the mattress. So small my ears couldn't pick up sound.

"Hint," Frank says. "Smaller than you." His glasses slip down on his nose again.

Smaller than me. Frank looks anxious. I think of numbers. Something bumps upstairs. I look at

my blobby arms. Think of dolls. The quiet of dollhouses. The basement door opens, and I wait for the
scream.

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