

# 1

“What do you know about her?” I ask, anxious and irritated, before Lisa can even pull up a chair.

“Hello to you too, Giona. Can I get a coffee already?” she replies, noting with a point of the finger that I already have mine.

If it wasn’t after nine on a workday, and if she were not my legal assistant as well as my closest stepsister, she wouldn’t have asked. She’d have just rolled her eyes and gotten in line. But being that it is after nine and she does work for me, she’s obliged to wait for permission.

I glance at the line behind us. Jo-Jo’s is nothing more than a hole in the alley coffee shop that, until recently, most Washingtonians didn’t really notice. A place for regulars—mostly attorneys, non-profit suits and staff from the children’s hospital a block away—it has been around longer than I’ve been a partner at Winton, Lloyd and Dailey. Which, at the moment, feels like a very long time. But a chic makeover earlier in the year turned Jo-Jo’s into an ever-growing sensation. I had to drape myself across two small wooden chairs and stare down at least a half a dozen evil eyes just to save her a place to sit.

I notice there are currently five in line and the door is opening yet again. But Lisa’s face is a god-awful gray and her eyes have a yellowish haze to them. She was likely up with my seven-year-old nephew, Mikey, a fair amount of the night. Again.

“Get your coffee,” I agree half-heartedly, not wanting to wait a minute more to hear what she has discovered.

“How kind of you,” she responds, bowing slightly.

Her words sting, because we both know I’m not kind.

The realization causes me to immediately feel like a shit, which I’m not accustomed to. It’s not that I’m not usually a shit. I am, and it’s long helped line my pockets as a medical malpractice attorney. It’s just that all of my feelings, from remorse to love to anger to guilt, have been on a far back burner for the past eleven years. Truth is, I am not accustomed to feeling anything. Which is precisely why I’ve got to meet this woman Lisa has been researching, if the report on her is even reasonably favorable.

I watch Lisa move up the line, her body sagging slightly forward. It almost looks like she has invisible saddlebags hung over her. Trite as it sounds, it really is a heavy load she carries.

At thirty-six, Lisa is the eldest of us three sisters. Allison, her full sister and my step (my father married their mother when we were all in grade school), is next at thirty-five, while I'm the baby at thirty-three. Lisa is clearly the most genuine human being of us all. But she's also the last person you want to cross, especially if you're threatening to hurt someone she loves. I think of her as a primordial mother tiger. More than once my butt has been saved by that fierce, protective energy she keeps ever ready to pounce.

I feel a surge of feeling, a strange mix of swelling pride and age-old guilt, along with a twist of real love. I don't know what to do with the feelings now any more than I did when I was twenty-two, just before they all went into a blissful, mind-numbing sleep. But I find myself glad to know my entire soul wasn't lost in the deal I cut to make it happen.

Perhaps this psychic woman will be able to tell me something about that. If she is any good. And if I can get up the nerve to actually go.

I hear the door chime, but do not need to turn to know who has arrived. Even so, I turn casually to confirm my expectations. Yep. It's the Dashing Doctor, as Lisa and I long ago took to calling him. Though at the moment I can't recall why. He's not overly dashing.

As he passes, my stomach flops, surprising me. What is this?

I smile to myself, knowing what he's going to order, though it is not because of my unusual abilities. He is wearing scrubs. Scrub days always indicate a straight-up triple espresso to go. I've never thought much about it before, but today it strikes a chord of compassion in me, as if the coffee is his version of a stiff drink he really needs to make it through the day. He's not a man to smile, but he outright frowns on scrub days. I find myself wishing for the first time that I knew why.

I stare at him, considering the flop. It is now accompanied by a racing pulse which I notice gets sort of stuck in my throat. It confuses me so I squint my eyes, trying to get a clear read. Can't do it. Never could with him. It's always been a curiosity to me, since I can know things I'm not supposed to be able to know about virtually anyone alive—so long as they are not too close to me.

Again I wonder why we started calling him the Dashing Doctor. On a purely physical level, he is neither sports car handsome nor a cool metrosexual. He does not offer any particularly suave European-style mannerisms. I try to imagine him living in some trendy DC version of a New York loft, but can't. Though no doubt he has the income for it.

On the other hand, his eyes do appear to have a real-world wisdom about them. And though his lips are somewhat pale, his mouth is gently sensual. I think it safe to say that his general energy—the kind anyone could read—is both intelligent and reasonably kind-hearted. Something like what you would expect of a solid, late-thirties, made-for-TV doctor.

I recall Lisa commenting once that the energy of tragedy surrounded him, which she insisted any feeling woman would take pity on. I reminded her that

my entire career is enveloped in the tragedy of death and my every day is filled with the sagas of careless, if not murdering, doctors. It was just another reason for her to throw up her hands with me.

I notice her move up to first in line, even without taking my eyes off of the doctor.

From the back, his form shifts nicely under the green pajama-like uniform. He is well sculpted. Not Michelangelo's David, but nicely round in the right places. So yeah, in a purely sexual way, maybe dashing.

I feel a rise of heat to my face and recognize it as a blush. God, how long has that been? Eleven years, I remind myself as I again feel the crush of the changes so recently thrust upon me.

"What's wrong with you?" Lisa asks, a whipped cream topped coffee in one hand and an oversized muffin in the other.

"The Dashing Doctor," I reply. "He has a nice ass."

She laughs quick and loud, both startling and embarrassing me. "I don't know what is happening to you lately, G, but I'm having a great time watching it play out. You better be careful. You give him one smile and you know he's going to find a way to finally meet you."

For years, Lisa has insisted that he stares at me when I'm not looking. Today, the thought unnerves me beyond what I care to entertain in any detail.

"The psychic?" I insist, keeping my priorities straight.

"All right already," Lisa says, settling in just to make me wait. "She's big. Nearly three hundred pounds they say, with a lot of facial hair. Dead-on accurate, though. From Jersey."

She stops, undoubtedly waiting for a reaction in my typically deadpan face. She calls me on this often, insisting that outside the courtroom I am a woman, not a lawyer. I don't want to give her one, fearing any display of emotions these days. It could lead to a waterfall of damned up crap that is stacked a decade deep. If only she knew.

*You could tell her.*

This inner prompting appeals to my growing sensibilities. It is tempting to confess what has really been going on all these years. Lisa already knows about the prophecy I received when I was five years old. And of my so-called "suicide attempt" that first year of law school. But I've never told her what really happened during those precious few moments when I lay dead under a cold shower. In fact, I've never told anyone.

"Big and hairy with an accent," I reply, trying to sound unimpressed, though my sweaty palms reveal a different story. I feel a long, thick wave of nausea roll through my stomach. "What else?"

Lisa's face grows animated with excitement, maybe even fascination. How interesting. I haven't seen that since... when? Certainly before Jeffrey died, leaving her a single mother. I feel a pang of grief deep in the inner chambers of

my heart. That kind of emotion is the kind I'm really not ready to allow back into my life. It nearly killed me once. Why should it be any different now?

"She doesn't take appointments, but you can call the day before to make sure she's going to see people. You just have to show up in her drive, which is about a mile long, and park in line. At only five dollars a session, and given her reputation, she draws people from as far as Florida. The line usually goes all the way out to the road and down it. You have to get there the night before, they say by four in the afternoon is best, if you want to be sure you get seen the next day. People show up in caravans with campers. It's supposed to be like a big party."

I shake my head, able to imagine it all too well: A caravan of desperate people seeking answers from the mysterious beyond. With me quickly becoming one of them. My stomach rolls again.

"Lovely. You really think I should do this?" I ask, making it sound like it was her idea in the first place. "Camp out overnight and pay five bucks for what, maybe twenty minutes with this gorilla-woman?"

My sister takes on that sideways look that appears any time her very solid street smarts are challenged. Most prominent are her eyes, which have narrowed to near slits. "Ten minutes," she corrects. "They say she gets right to the point. You don't even have to ask a question."

"I like that part," I reply with a sigh of concession, trying to sink deeper into my small chair. Having the session go quickly will make it easier to play it close to the vest, hide subtle clues the woman could work off of. I need truth straight up from a source beyond this world, with no hints gleaned through the very questions themselves.

"She's not just reading minds, either," Lisa continues. "One girl, only nineteen, waited with her mom all night. Went in for her ten minutes but was out in two. Had a piece of paper in her hand. She said the woman gave it to her and told her not to read it until she got home. On the way back, they got into a car accident. She died. They pulled her out of the car and the paramedic saw the paper in her clenched fist. It said 'You have no future.'"

"Oh great!" I explode, feeling the tragedy in my gut like a pull on some invisible umbilical cord. Both sympathetically enmeshed in the young girl's tragedy and embarrassed by my own outburst, I look up to what seems to be the whole shop looking at me. The Dashing Doctor, who has taken a seat uncomfortably close, looks concerned.

I duck my head behind one hand and take a deep breath as my psyche starts screaming "Fight this, fight it every step of the way!" It is a reasonable urge, given how much the paranormal has cost me already. The heat intensifies and I am sure both my face and neck are bright red. I lean in and try to speak without moving my lips too much.

"You want me to take my 'concern' to a woman who sends people off with coy little death warrants? Where did you find her anyway, the State Enquirer?"

Lisa turns her own shade of red. I immediately realize this as an unfair remark, which she has never been one to put up with. "Listen," she says, her voice huffy, "you asked me to find you someone who can get information from another level. Answers that even you in all your own intuitive genius can't find. I did that. Take it or leave it."

This is a typical Lisa reply and no doubt she is flat out ticked off. But I notice something else in her tone of voice. Something off. I look more deeply into her eyes to see a whirling heap of desperation and grief.

Jeffrey. Of course.

How could I of all people have missed it? This whole psychic thing is about more than me getting answers. If this woman really can talk to the other side, Lisa will go see her on her own. She will ask to contact her dead husband.

My emotions shift without warning yet again, leaning me towards compassion. I take another deep breath and let it sink in for a moment. In this case, it feels good to care again. Even better to realize there might be some way to help.

I sit straight in my chair, silently claiming my mission. After all, how many times after someone dies do people offer to help a grieving widow and her fatherless son? "If there's anything I can do..." we say. Yet how often is there anything anyone can do?

My own needs aside, if I can do this for Lisa, if I can test this gorilla woman so she need not risk being deluded with some psychic hokey hacky sack, I must. I will.

And if the woman is for real? Well then maybe Lisa ought to go on her own. Maybe the psychic could bring my sister a comfort I have not been able to.

"We'll take a limo," I say, hearing myself sound as firm and arrogant as I am with opposing counsel, "but not the company's. This gets out and the press will have a field day with me."

"We?" she asks, her eyes lit with hope. "We're both going?"

"Yes 'We'. You, me and Allison."

"Alli?" she cries out.

The crowd turns to look at us again. How long before the whole place knows our business? I shush her with insistent eyes.

"You know Alli," Lisa complains in a quieter tone, "she won't believe a word of it, no matter how good the woman is."

I stand, gathering my briefcase, my posture and my courage, then take a last bitter swallow of coffee. "Exactly right. If the gorilla woman can convince all three of us she has a true gift, we will really have something to consider."

"I doubt we'll even be able to get Alli to go," Lisa whines.

"Well then," I reply, forcefully unmoved, "it will be left in the hands of fate."

Or maybe the guy who has started teaching me quantum physics in my sleep, I think but do not say aloud. The Dashing Doctor is still within earshot. And for reasons beyond anything I can explain, that matters to me.

## 2

Moving steadily toward New Jersey in well-tinted privacy, I stare at my own reflection in the window, unsatisfied with my face. It hasn't bothered me in years, my short near-death having taken away virtually every trace of self-concern. But now that all the old beasts are awakening, it appears my imperfections can still cause self-doubt.

I tilt my head sideways, noting my various mix-match features; my mother's father's Italian chin and jet-black hair and my mother's mother's Hopi Indian eyes and full rounded lips. Tilted further, I can erase my father's father's blunt English nose while emphasizing his mother's proud, high Spanish cheekbones. Yes, from just the right angle, I could be considered a beautiful woman. But how many people ever look at you from just the right angle?

I can't be that bad, I argue with the window, given the slow trickle of men who have occasionally asked for dates. Yet since I never actually went on those dates, my reflection seems to argue back, how could I know I would be attractive enough to be asked for more than one? Would anyone want to marry me? Have children with me? I lean my head into the window, agreeing with my shadow thoughts. Perhaps even without the deal I made with the Other Side I'd still have ended up here, right where I am.

"Is the woman a medium, a channel or a psychic?" Alli suddenly asks from the backward facing seat.

Lisa and I stare at each other, then at Alli. It is hard enough to believe how readily she agreed to the overnight outing. It seems beyond belief that she would know any such terminology. This, from a woman whose doctoral dissertation was on the question of whether or not it would be more efficient to alphabetically file numbers.

"What?" Alli asks, sounding disgruntled, like she ought not have to explain herself at all. "I watch Oprah."

I turn to Lisa for the answer.

"She does speak to the dead," Lisa replies hesitantly.

Hearing the words launch a shiver up my spine, and not only because of Jeffrey. A vision of my mother flashes before my eyes. Would she appear today? Was that even possible? No, it was too much to wish for, too grand a notion, too high a hope to fall from. Even so, my heart jumps ahead of itself.

“She allegedly speaks to the dead,” I correct. “She could be a fake. You have to keep that in mind as we go in.”

I notice that Hasani, our driver, had done a double take in his rear view mirror more than once since our conversation began. All he has said so far is “Just call me Has,” but he can hear everything we are saying, given the privacy window is broken.

*No such thing as coincidence.*

I chose to ignore my intuition, as usual.

“Allegedly,” Lisa concedes. “If she does communicate with the dead, that would technically make her a medium. As far as a channel, if you mean contacting some other entity and letting it use her voice, I don’t think so. They say she is good with life questions like ‘Why am I here?’ and ‘What am I supposed to be doing?’ Also with helping people find things like lost wills and jewelry and dogs.”

*And hope.*

The thought causes my blood to pass through my heart in a leaping surge. How, I wonder for the millionth time in my life, do you quell hope, that most dangerous of emotions, especially when it starts leading you astray?

Alli’s face grows bright with intrigue. “Does she ever work for the police or... oh!... has she read for any movie stars?”

I sigh audibly. There really is no telling what the mystical will do to otherwise completely rational people. Makes you wonder if that is an argument *for* its reality or against it. Whatever the case, as long as I’m debating it, I can keep it at a distance. Which is just what I need to do for this whole thing to work.

I turn to look out the window again, letting my sisters discuss the possibilities of what might or might not be a complete farce.

*It won’t be.*

I decide to ignore the thought, shoving it as far away as I can. Wishful thinking is the easiest way to confuse an intuitive insight. That much I know. Which was precisely why I’ve been so damn clear these past eleven years. My death and the years since fly by in my memory, flat as cardboard. Perhaps there hasn’t been hope. But there hasn’t been pain either.

*What about Ireland?*

What about it! I try not to care, to not remember that every last hope and dream of my childhood was pinned on a place I’ve never been. A place that was supposed to call for me, yet never did.

Hearing Lisa and Alli continue to swap their stories of psychic intrigue, I feel as far away from any sense of security as a person can feel. Truth is, I don’t care what the woman calls herself—psychic, medium or channel. All I need is someone who really has the gift. Someone like my mother’s Irish gypsy.

Like it or not, my early childhood memories remain vivid, like a painting before my eyes. I can still see our little white row house in Florence, Italy. The

dining room with a heavy wooden table covered by a bright, red-checked cloth. The vase of fresh-daily wildflowers that seemed to dance in the sunshine. Thinking of it is all I have to do to again smell the lemon scented cleaning oil that Mama used to polish every inch of wood once a week as well as the overpowering scent of Monday and Thursday morning's freshly baked bread. On the heels of these scents, the most vivid olfactory memory of all, the musty smelling gypsy who came to visit us on the thirteenth of each and every month.

My nose pulls me deeper into the memory despite my clear understanding that to remember is to hurt. The scene appears for the first time in so long, yet nothing is muted. I hear the tinkling of the coins Mama paid the gypsy, which seemed a great deal to me back then. I might have had a brand new doll and carriage for the price. But Mama trusted her. Needed her. Even then, I knew the price was small for the magnitude of Mama's reassurance.

And there she is now, somewhere deep between and behind my eyes: Mama. Though I am just a strange, mixed-up concoction of nationality, she was born with the best and most beautiful of the Hopi nation in her genes. She is just as I left her last, smiling. Why not? She was always smiling. At flowers and horses and every living soul, even the haggard and downtrodden.

Without warning, the image of a tarot card flashes in front of my eyes. Terror again seizes my heart, warns me of what is to come. But I cannot pull away. This is the price of remembering Mama.

Sucked in, I recall myself at age five. Like an outsider being a witness to my own past, I see myself all innocent and wide-eyed. I was supposed to be too young to understand the images the gypsy pulled from her deck. But I wasn't. I understood, completely, that the symbol of a hanging man would change everything for us.

"When the dreams come, little one," the gypsy said in an awful, raspy voice, "you must go to my homeland, Ireland. You must pass a test you failed in your last lifetime in order to fulfill your great destiny."

"Mama will come, too?" the girl I once was queried.

Neither Mama nor the gypsy answered, but Mama had to blink again and again so as not to cry.

I see my small self quickly return to my doll play, not wanting to be shown any more cards and unwilling to indicate that I was in any way agreeing with the gypsy or the hanging man. The scene plays out with me in a corner, afraid yet willing myself to be strong, until it fades entirely and I am returned to my reflection in the limo window.

How long was it, I have often tried to recall, before I realized that the question of Mama going with me to Ireland was an odd one for a five-year-old? Hadn't Mama always gone everywhere with me? Why would I ask such a question, if I hadn't, even then, had some kind of premonition? Whenever it happened, I mark it as the point of realization that I had unusual abilities. It was also the onset of my doubt that the abilities would ever bring me anything good

in this life. After all, what child wants to foresee her own mother's death? Only the ignorant would call it a gift.

"What do you think?" Alli asks, tapping me on the knee to get my full attention.

"About what?" I reply.

"About mental telepathy?" Lisa replies, giving a sly smile.

Though she has known of my abilities since childhood, she was sworn in a blood sister oath to keep it secret from the rest of the family. I give Lisa a firm look to emphasize that oath. Now is not the time to bring out the family skeletons. I need Alli to be objective. That is what she is here for. Maybe after, I'll tell her. But not yet. Not with so many questions still unanswered.

"According to quantum physics," I begin to respond, "the space-time continuum..."

"Oh please, just cut to the chase," Alli complains.

"I can only suggest the most reasonable answer," I reply with an expression Lisa has dubbed "legally blank." It is my ever-ready ace in the hole.

"Well just tell me, do you think it's possible this woman could be reading minds instead of talking to the dead or something? I mean how would you know?"

I look to Has, who is listening intently. He stretches his neck, then fakes a cough and deftly makes it appear he is only checking his mirror to switch lanes.

*He's here for a reason.*

Interesting intuition.

"The best verification," I reply, "would come from obtaining information which you did not previously know, have witnesses that each receive the information for the first time in each other's presence, then have everyone verify the information collectively with an outside source post-suggestion. Of course, it is possible we are creating our own reality, a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, so that what is predicted becomes our expectation. The degree to which we believe it is true becomes the degree to which it is true and so we manifest what we have been told without the teller having any genuine direct precognition at all."

This was exactly what my bejeweled dream teacher told me in a place he called Dream Level Three when he first began appearing in my sleep. Not that I expect Alli to buy it.

"That's an amazing idea," she remarks, squinting her eyes and cocking her head as if to consider it further.

Clearly, something inside of my eldest sister is cracking open, wanting to believe. Good for her, I suppose, but definitely not good for me. I need my most practical witness to be on her toes, demanding no-nonsense answers. I need someone who has no desire at all for this psychic woman to be the real McCoy. I brought Alli along to be the one keeping both Lisa and me firmly

rooted in reality. From the looks of it, it is more likely Alli will be the first one swept away.

Again I notice Has looking at us through his mirror, his forehead wrinkled in both worry and wonder. Looking to the left of him, I see that our thirty-something driver is recalling that he had been bragging to his friends that he was going to have three ladies overnight in his “expert care.” Yet now he’s wondering what he’s gotten himself into.

I get the feeling there is a purpose for Has being here with the three of us. It feels like strong threads woven together, connecting us all.

Very interesting.

A slow dawning takes shape in my mind. But how to get him to help?

Going deeper, I look at his face through the mirror and see he has a few gifts of his own. They were handed down through his ancestors.

“Excuse me, Has?”

“Yes, Ms. Lloyd?” he answers in his well-trained, alert yet politely distant voice.

“What do you think of all this?”

“Oh Ms. Lloyd,” he laughs nervously, tapping the dash of the limo, “I’m paid to have no opinion on anything that goes on here in good old Henry. I’m sorry about the privacy window but you can be sure I...”

“I’m usually grateful for that attitude with my drivers,” I interrupt, even as I begin to psychically search him for a weak spot. I find it in two seconds: financial trouble, like a black hole. So big I can see it through the seat, right at the level of the gallbladder. “But today I’d like to pay you an extra hundred dollars to have one.”

“You put it that way,” he says, taking a look out both side view mirrors, no doubt giving himself time to weigh his need against his inner resistance. “My grandmother,” he continues, “she could tell about a person by their teeth. The teeth, she always said, holds all your secrets. She was good at it, too. People always came back, saying what she said would happen was just how it went. So I guess my hundred-dollar opinion is this lady could be for real. It’s possible. Then again, she might not be. Plenty of fakes out there, too.”

“Good then,” I reply firmly. “It’s settled. When I have my ten minutes of psychic advice tomorrow morning, you’ll be going in with us. I’ll need your detailed observations, teeth and all.”

Has jerks up straight, his eyes flung wide in the mirror. “Oh, no, Ms. Lloyd, my grandmother never taught me.”

I smile. He’s lying. I can see it all so clearly. Has has been reading teeth since he was a little boy. He left the intentional use of it in his teen years when he came to America, but he can still pull the rabbit out of the hat when he wants. Just as important, it was ingrained in him at a very young age how vital it is to use his special understanding only with the greatest of integrity, lest it come back to bite him.

Yes, yes, this will work. Even if all three of us sisters float away in pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking, Has will be our beautifully skeptical yet intuitive male witness who has absolutely no agenda. And he will tell the truth about what he sees.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

I chuckle to myself, then let out a full-blown laugh. It startles both Lisa and Alli, who have not heard such a sound from me in more than a decade. I don't care. There is something intrinsically funny about the validity of my entire future being reduced to the reading of teeth. Yet my laughter comes from more than the oddity involved. The very fact that Has was assigned to this limo, broken window and all, gives me the sense that maybe, just maybe, someone somewhere is looking out for me.

I gaze into the window again and realize something new. I'm really not too bad looking from any angle, so long as I'm smiling.

### 3

“You became a lawyer because you thought it would be safer than mathematics,” Frances the psychic says after a long look at me. “And you were right. It is.”

There is not a trace of passion in her voice as she speaks this. Yet with this one statement, everything that has been annoying me in the past twelve hours simply vanish. The longer-than-expected drive. The crick in my neck from sleeping upright in the limousine. The party music, and people trying to look into our tinted windows. The pungent incense that burns at my nose in this darkly lit room, which is a small space for two people let alone five. The heavy, olive green drapery with tacky gold fringe and tassels. The altar of crystals, pyramids, pictures of saints and little statues of goddesses and monkeys. The wary look on Frances’ face when I paraded in with three witnesses. The hourglass of sand that was turned over the moment I sat down.

All gone in one truth-filled sentence.

I look to my witnesses, who have blank looks on their faces just as I instructed, then turn back around to my reader. I note that she is not nearly as big or hairy as she was made out to be. She even has a kind face. Her accuracy, however, seems to have been well reported. My witnesses could never know how on target she is. The few times in my life I have actually admitted that I became a medical malpractice lawyer because it was safer than mathematics, I have been met with baffled looks. How could anything be safer than one plus one is two? Yet Frances understands.

Only once, I now recall out of the blue, did someone else get what I meant about the safety factor. It was a sage type man with deep eyes and a long white beard who was a mathematician himself. He smiled knowingly in response. I also recall leaving the conversation as quickly as possible, realizing that true mathematicians were no safer than mathematics. I remember that urge to run like hell, just as I want to run from Frances right now.

“You’ve got a line of masters waiting to speak to you,” she continues without fanfare. “Anyone in specific you want to talk to?”

Masters? I briefly shake my head.

“All right, all right,” Frances says, craning her neck slightly toward the sky as if hearing someone beyond view. “They’re so excited you’re finally here,” she says, this time to me.

I don't know what to say and so say nothing.

"Oh, so that's the way you're going to play this, G. That's the first initial of your name, though some people call you that all by itself, don't they?"

"Some," I say, though she seems to need no assurance that she is right.

Despite myself, I feel I am softening to her. You have to admire someone willing to do this for a living. And not even a good living. Five bucks for ten minutes with time between sessions for exits and entrances is maybe forty-five bucks an hour. Our parking garage at the downtown office charges nearly that much.

"They've been warning me you were coming for weeks. Said you'd be difficult. As obstinate as I was when the gift was foisted on me."

So, she knows about law versus math, my first initial is sometimes my nickname and that I have a gift. Pretty good. But what about my destiny? Seeing the past or present does not mean one can automatically see the future. Even I don't have that gift.

Realizing my thoughts, I immediately distract myself with the minor details of the room—the small circular table, the well-worn deck of tarot cards—so as not to give away too much telepathically. I notice an air conditioner buzzing out in a loud, droning sound. It has several ribbon streamers tied on that blow straight out.

"That's more than it seems," Frances explains. "When the air is on but the ribbons drop, then I know a spirit that has once lived but has passed on is in the room. It's a little communication tool we've worked out."

It sounds cheesy, but sends a shudder of fear through me nonetheless. Both the idea of a spirit in the room and Frances being so aware of whatever I am putting my attention on, gives me the creeps.

"Do you know why I'm here?" I challenge from across the table.

She laughs heartily, from deep in the belly. "I know why *they* have brought you here. The reason they bring anyone. To point you down the road that is yours. But as to why you think you came? That might not be the same thing at all. But you've got all these guides, these masters here. I'm telling you, most folks get a dead aunt, maybe a grandmother, too, if they are lucky. A brother or sister, if one has passed on. Nothing like this assembly. No wonder they were warning me to be ready today. They are all chomping at the bit. Guess it's your choice who you want to speak to."

"What—who—are my options?" I say. I hear my own cool, crisp tone and wish I could tell her it's not personal, that I'm just scared and I need help. Then again, if she's any good at all, she already knows that.

"Whew," she exhales, looking into the empty air above us, "take your pick. Ramakrishna, Mary Magdalene, Isis, Boanne. Then there's your ancestors."

"I have no preference." I say quickly, afraid to hear that Mama is near, and even more afraid to hear that she is not.

"Okay, someone here, male, decked out in a jeweled breastplate."

My entire body takes a dive in temperature. The jeweled guy, the teacher from my dreams. Pontius.

“Says his name is Pontius, like Pontius Pilate, only not that old rascal. Though this guy probably did live on earth at one time. I’d say it was a long time ago, in Egypt given his looks. He’s an ancient one, I assure you that.”

Every cell in my body wants to bolt. Frances is for sure the real thing. Got his name and everything. The hair on my arms stand up on end as Frances points a fat finger to the ribbons on the air conditioner. They have dropped, though the sound of the air passing through continues to drone on.

It could be a trick of the eye but I don’t know how. The air is blowing. I can feel it along my goose flesh. I steal a look at Lisa and Alli and then at Has. As instructed, they keep a straight face. I feel all the more alone now, because no one has heard about the details of my dreams or of the jeweled teacher named Pontius. No one could have tipped Frances off.

I swallow and fight to control my breath. The truth comes on like a fast approaching tornado. There isn’t time to take cover I realize, only brace myself.

“What does he say?”

“Hmmm. Doesn’t want to say anything yet. Seems you know who he is, yes?”

“Yes,” I admit in a near whisper.

The ribbons quickly rise then drop flat again.

“Got another stepping forward. This one’s not a master, just a disincarnate. Was recently alive. Left young. Says he’s not here for you. He’s here for Lisa. You know a Lisa, yes?”

“Jeffrey,” I reply, a cold chill running both over my flesh and straight up my spine. I don’t dare turn to see Lisa’s face.

“Yep, he’s nodding that’s his name, though you really ought to let me tell you so you’ll know it’s true. He’s saying something about helping each other. He’ll give you your proof if you do him a favor.”

I cannot talk, cannot breathe. My chest is a drum tightened by a searing heat.

“He is saying he got Lisa a gift for Christmas. He was going to give it to her but he passed over before the holidays. It is in his right running shoe at home. He is showing me that she tries to get rid of the shoes but can’t. He is the one stopping her, though she doesn’t know it is him. He wants you to tell her it is there. That it’s proof he is still around. That will be the proof you need, too, he says, just like you were saying in the limo.”

I try to remember what we were saying in the limo and consider why I would need any more proof than Frances has already offered. But my mind is a reeling.

Frances laughs again. “Oh, so you’re the one in the fancy limousine everyone thinks is a famous movie star. I had not put you together with that but it does make sense. There’s a royalty about you, know it or not.”

“Sorry,” I reply, dazed with the possibility of Jeffrey here. Questions swirl through my mind until I feel dizzy. Would there really be a gift in Jeffrey’s old running shoe? Did Lisa really keep them? It was almost Christmas when he died, but there was no gift from him—at least none that we knew of.

The idea makes my heart strain with grief for Lisa. I feel a rise of the compassion I could not actually feel when Jeffrey died. It hits me hard, like the tornado has thrown a lead pipe to my throat.

I don’t dare look back at her. My mission here is only begun. To collapse into Lisa’s grief would keep me from learning all I need to. Let me just get on with it then get home to the shoes. I see the ribbons float again and know his spirit has left. I can’t imagine who could be next.