

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Clairvoyant

SABRINA CRAWFORD
SPRING 2022

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Creative Writing and Biology
with honors in Creative Writing

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Tom Noyes
Professor of Creative Writing and English
Thesis Supervisor and Honors Adviser

Aimee Pogson
Professor of Creative Writing and English
Faculty Reader

George Looney
Professor of Creative Writing and English
Faculty Reader

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

This thesis includes a work of 132 pages of original fiction in the form of a novella, as well as a critical introduction to the work and an annotated bibliography. The thesis was completed by Sabrina Crawford under the guidance of Tom Noyes, Aimee Pogson, and George Looney.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii.
INTRODUCTION	1
CLAIRVOYANT.....	11
Chapter 1.....	12
Chapter 2.....	22
Chapter 3.....	30
Chapter 4.....	36
Chapter 5.....	41
Chapter 6.....	46
Chapter 7.....	57
Chapter 8.....	75
Chapter 9.....	83
Chapter 10.....	109
Chapter 11.....	115
Chapter 12.....	137
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	142

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the professors of Creative Writing at Penn State Behrend for all the hard work and support they have provided me during my time at the university: Aimee Pogson, George Looney, and Tom Noyes. I would not be the writer that I am without them, and I also would not have graduated in a timely manner if they had not been willing to accommodate my busy schedule while balancing two vastly different majors. The work presented in this thesis is a culmination of the lessons presented in their classes and their feedback on my writing.

INTRODUCTION

The idea for *Clairvoyant* was originally conceived during the summer of 2020, when I had first started to delve into some basic philosophical ideas. Unsurprisingly in the context of this project, I had picked up an interest in existentialism, determinism, and fatalism, and had that they would be interesting ideas to explore through a story. At the time, my writing skills were much rustier than they are now, and conceiving any idea which struck me as interesting enough to explore through writing—yet not so personal that I would be squeamish to share it with others—was something I viewed worthwhile. Thus, I owe the conception of this story to scraping the surface of fatalism, existentialism, determinism, and other philosophical ideas related to these ones. I remember being particularly interested in Sartre’s ideas, and allude to this in the first chapter of my work.

During my time in the Behrend B.F.A. program, when I think about works of fiction which influenced me as a writer, *Winesburg, OH*, written by Sherwood Anderson, is always at the forefront of my mind. When I first read this work, I remember being enthralled by its ability to weave together a collection of shorter stories into one larger work, a work that was packed full of themes, meanings, characterization, and events. It was a coming of age novel, but what caught my attention were the other, seemingly unrelated stories mixed in, such as “Hands,” “Adventure,” “Tandy,” and “Respectability,” which play with ideas of gender, relationships, and sexuality, perhaps in a progressive manner for its time, but also tie into the work as a whole because they contain lessons which must be learned in order to grow up properly, without becoming a Grottesque as the story warns. As a writer, I have been fascinated by these sneakily-

related aspects of the work since I first read it, and have experimented with adding relevant short stories or poems into my works, though I must admit that I do this less often in *Clairvoyant* than some other works of mine. Within my thesis, I will say, however, that I took inspiration from *Winesburg, OH*, and perhaps other Modernist works, in the sense that I was unafraid to explore certain themes indirectly to give my work a sense of ambiguity, because I wanted to avoid pinning some ideas down to a certain answer. One example of this would be Claire's gift, her intuition, which feeds into another influential work.

I think William Faulker's *As I Lay Dying* also influenced *Clairvoyant*, though not until I was about halfway through my first draft, when I started to question the validity of Claire as a narrator and how her ability might be perceived. Just as Darl is a character who serves as an unreliable narrator—a crazy man at worst and some sort of psychic waxing existential at best—Claire is a character who may have inherited a gift of foresight from her father, or she may just have let a childhood belief run unchecked well into her adulthood. There are some unintentional parallels between Darl and Claire. Though Faulkner's story escalates to a much more severe extent, Darl gets lost in his beliefs and perceptions, which lead him to set a barn on fire and subsequently face punishment: he is taken away on the accusation of being crazy. Claire also gets herself wrapped up in her own ideas surrounding her family's intuition: believing that her father's intuition may have led to him disappearing rather than dying, as she and her family believed for fourteen years, and that her own intuition may jeopardize the course of her own life, she concocts her dinner plan, which backfires and results in her beliefs collapsing on themselves—and she learns that those close to her may not see her as perfectly rational and grounded in the same way that she sees herself. Unlike Darl, Claire does get some on-page character development following this scene, but the conclusions she draws about her intuition go

unstated. As the writer of this work, I like to believe that I left this theme “meaningfully ambiguous,” which is a writing idea that has occupied a significant space inside my mind during my time at Behrend.

Meaningful ambiguity, as I have learned in class, is different than obscurity for the sake of confusing the reader, to elevate the author above their readers by purposefully withholding key information. It relates to Ernest Hemingway’s “iceberg theory,” the idea that a good story only shows the tip of the iceberg to the readers—that is, the description on the page and the events which occur—while the rest of the iceberg is buried beneath the surface of the water. How large the iceberg is and what it looks like is withheld, left to the reader’s own inference. Hemingway believed that most of the iceberg should be underwater, which I am unsure I agree with, because I fear that withholding too much information can make for a dry, dense story. Still, it is undoubtedly a useful concept for me to keep in mind while writing and is one of the most influential ideologies I have adopted during my time writing at Behrend. When I first started writing, I was inclined to include every detail in my writing in order to portray a specific idea that most people would agree on after reading, with little question as to what happened to the characters, where they are at the conclusion of the story, and afterward. On the flipside, when I started playing with ambiguity, I fear I may have taken this too far, into the realm of obscurity, where my themes were spread too thin, my characters were impossible to pin down, and there was not enough satisfaction at the conclusion of my stories. I will say that, by this point in my writing career, I feel mostly satisfied with the level of ambiguity in my stories. I have learned that, as a writer with certain intentions as far as themes, motivations, or events in a story, it is not overkill to elaborate on those certain ideas within the work, because every reader is different and will read those ideas differently, both on their own and in the context of the story as a whole.

Without sufficient detail, at least when it is important, the reader is going to feel lost and frustrated.

Another key ideology which has transformed how I view writing is the idea of what could simply be referred to as the ability of a work to continue to live on, even after the reader has finished reading it. I am unsure if this is linked to the idea of any one author or scholar, but it is an idea that has been discussed a few times during my curriculum. This is, to me, the idea that a work is complete but incomplete at the same time after reading the final sentence, the little nudge in the back of the reader's mind which urges him or her to continue to think about the work after its conclusion. I used to favor stories which were wrapped up neatly with bows at the end as far as what has happened or will happen, but I also noticed that I was not satisfied with the endings of my stories when they ended neatly like this. I still feel as though I struggle with thought-provoking endings, but I have learned not to rely on my first instinct, which is to wax thoughtful and dump a page of reflection onto the poor reader and walk away. Dr. Noyes had once suggested to me that, in a particularly reflective story, an ending which focuses on action might work best, and this is an idea which I always consider when writing my stories, though I do still fall into the trap of relying on ideas rather than actions when the latter might be more thought-provoking. Thus, in writing *Clairvoyant*, I challenge myself not to resolve any of Claire's issues with an epiphany, or a moment where she is alone with her thoughts to reflect on the events of the story. Instead, the work ends on an action—two actions, in fact: a peaceful walk with Malcolm, ended with the pair going their separate ways, and a phone call to Ben, the potential opening of a door to chaos for Claire's seemingly peaceful situation as she and Malcolm know it. There's plenty of detail during the story which suggests that Claire's phone call was innocuous, merely driven by her desire for closure regarding her intuition, to know if he

was cheating on someone when he was out on dates with her, or if he really did have pure intentions with her. The final line of the story, however, echoes word-for-word what Claire says to Malcolm when she is about to ask him on a second date, which could be considered a moment of infidelity to Ben on her part: “I just wanted to ask you a question.” The goal of this was to wrap up the story, which tends to get a little bit stuck in Claire’s head at times, on a tangible, ambiguous action which makes the reader’s heart drop for a moment, makes the contents of that phone call roll around in their head for some time after finishing the story.

The initial idea for Clairvoyant had been a lot more experimental, which I will touch on later when I discuss future improvements for this project. Almost immediately after conceiving the idea, however, I knew some things about the story which would not change, even two years later: the first ten or so pages were written at the conception of this idea, so I knew that Claire, the protagonist, would have her character and abilities tested through a love-triangle-esque setup, and I knew that I wanted Ben to be clean-cut and seemingly perfect, and Malcolm would be much more rough around the edges and flawed. As I wrote the first draft and polished it into the draft contained in this thesis, I found myself satisfied with the unexpected elements which arose from the work. I had not anticipated the question to arise as to whether or not Claire’s intuition is real, but once the idea was raised, it became crucial to the work, perhaps even inevitable, that it would be explored. I also hadn’t anticipated the idea that Ben and Malcolm’s moralities might shift between the beginning and the end of the story, with Ben possibly being a cheater and Malcolm being aloof yet loyal, and capable of saying profound, emotional things which help Claire grow as a person. When viewing the project in a general sense, I knew how I wanted it to begin, and I knew how I wanted it to progress in the middle, but I had been torn on how I wanted it to end. With ideas like fate and free will at play, with fate telling Claire that Ben is her

inevitable choice and free will telling her Malcolm is the one that she wants, the man that she chooses to be with at the end—if she chooses one at all—will make some kind of statement about the nature of these two conflicting ideas. As a writer, I have to say that I seldom write scenes, especially endings, which I am proud of, but I do think there is something to be said about the ambiguity of the ending, in the way that Claire almost refuses to side with fate or free will. Things seem to be going well with Malcolm, which is a point for free will, but they certainly have not gotten married and lived happily ever after—they part ways at the end, and Claire is given a window of time to do something behind his back. The act which she does is, of course, to call Ben, and the reader is not able to see what question she asks or how things progress after this phone call. The ending leaves the door open to the possibility that the inevitable may happen, that she may call Ben and patch things up and find her happily ever after with him, having sufficiently fooled herself into thinking that she has acted against the heavy hand of fate.

I also found myself pleased with the garden in the funeral home. When I had first written the funeral scene, I made Claire determined to explore the building and make her way to the grand room in the back. She was originally looking for Malcolm, but as I wrote the scene, I wondered if there was another motivation for the way she was acting. The garden arose organically through my writing of the scene for the first time, but it felt like something which should have played a larger role in the story. I later went back and gave it additional significance as the place where Malcolm took Claire during her father's funeral. Symbolically, the garden represents an idea I had been playing with through Malcolm during the whole story, the idea that he cycles through phases of life and death just as the garden does with the changing of the seasons. When the pair of them first met, the garden was in full bloom, as opposed to its dead,

autumnal state during its second appearance. Claire, who experienced the garden with Malcolm during both these life and death phases, can make a thoughtful connection between Malcolm, who at times seems to be at low, deathly points, in which he seems disheveled or in a sour mood, and his high, lively points, when he can be a bold, likeable, and humorous character. Like death, Claire cannot choose when Malcolm displays this side of him, and she is clearly distressed when he is in this phase during the family dinner scene—something she had feared earlier in the text, before she sees his lively side, when she decides that she could not date him because she did not want to bring a disheveled man like him to the dinner table to meet her family. Ironically, this is exactly what happens, though Claire is too attached to him at that point in the story to remember that particular thought she had.

I tried to make Malcolm represent death, or, more generously, the natural cycle of life on earth, in multiple other ways, while Ben initially represents something larger than life itself, something supernatural. I am unsure how I feel about this aspect of the work. I know it is something I had wanted to do since my conception of the idea for *Clairvoyant*, but as the writer, I am unable to tell if these aspects are too subtle, not subtle enough, or if they work well to complement the characters of the men. Malcolm, for example, is first introduced at night in a cemetery. Claire is deeply distressed during this time, having just resisted her intuition. There is a lot of earthly, human imagery: Claire mentions the mud getting onto her clothes and making her uncomfortable, a sense of sickness in her stomach, and she visits her father's tombstone to talk to him. Mud is something which recurs throughout the work. I had attempted to closely associate with Malcolm, though never directly. Fog is another element of the work like this, though I could not include it as often as the mud, which was able to be almost snuck into various scenes with as pervasive as mud is in the world.

Ben, on the other hand, was first introduced in Claire's shop, a place of (at least perceived) magic. There is a plethora of cosmic diction, as well as references to the afterlife, magic, and warmth. After shaking his hand, which induces something like a vision in Claire, Ben senses this and jokes, "Is that all it takes, huh? A handshake and you know my whole future? Tell me whatever you want, but not how I die," as if the narration itself acknowledges that it is avoiding mundane, earthly imagery, the kind which surrounds Malcolm. Of course, in order to tone down Ben's character and leave some space for his motivations to be ambiguous, I didn't include this sort of imagery, nor any particular symbols or elements which 'followed' him through the narrative, as mud does with Malcolm. This inconsistency is something which might be a weakness of my work.

Another weakness would be the level of attachment that Ben and Malcolm feel toward Claire without a lot of development, but specifically Malcolm. This is something I was conscious of during my revisions, but within the flow of the story, there was only so much I could do in a limited amount of time. I am hoping that Malcolm's attachment toward Claire might be explained by their meeting when they were children at her father's funeral, that maybe that is what caused him to think of her fondly and be glad for a chance to get to know her in the present. I do recognize, though, that it might seem as though I have pushed Claire and Malcolm's faces together and said, "Now kiss," as opposed to taking the time over the course of a longer story to develop their relationship in the way I had wanted to, which would include a couple accidental run-ins and a few more uncertain dates on Claire's part, and not jump right into her inviting both men to a dinner to meet her family within two or so weeks of her meeting them.

When writing a story with romantic elements, the risk of falling into cliché is ever-present. While trying to write Ben as a materialistic, subtly unlikeable character, I would find

myself halfway through a scene, making parallels to Ben, with his nice car, taste for the finer things, and desire to spoil Claire by taking her out to nice restaurants, and the traditional male love interest in romance novels. In writing Malcolm, too, I felt a similar struggle. It was not my intention, but I do fear that I have made Malcolm into half of a Byronic hero type, the brooding, dangerous, untamed male stereotype that women swoon for, like Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* or Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. At the same time, I do not feel as though it would be awful to have these two men to fall into these stereotyped positions, but I would certainly like to revise my work and make the text more aware of it, perhaps to draw humor to these elements metafictionally, or to give them additional depth which challenges these established character tropes.

I have also considered the arc concerning Claire's father's death, which seems to go nowhere but also serves as a catalyst for Claire's character growth in displaying her tendency for the dramatic, her inflated self-assurance, and distrust for her mother, as well as being the occasion for bringing Claire, her family, and Ben and Malcolm all into the same room. I think it might give the story a different feel if her father had just recently died, and that was the reason Claire was launching into a crisis concerning her intuition, and this is something I would like to consider for future revisions.

My initial idea for Clairvoyant was a story which delved into themes like magic, fate, and free will more deeply while also exploring themes like love and attraction, and how they work with or against one another at times. I had almost intended it to be an anti-love story, something a little bit less satisfying and easy to read scene-by-scene, with Ben undoubtedly being the smart choice for Claire, and Malcolm being a consistently dark, brooding, unlikeable character that Claire is drawn to, much to the reader's dismay, in her quest to resist her intuition. The finished

product of this thesis is vastly different from my initial vision for the project, and I find myself satisfied with the direction it took, but also unsatisfied, as if the characters and the plot are capable of much more, or perhaps that they have fallen into that sense of stereotyping I referenced earlier due to my not staying true to this idea and writing scenes hastily. I will admit, I think this thesis would look very differently if I were the kind of writer—or person, in all kinds of work that I do—who sits down and reflects on the project, and all the different angles it might take, before starting to put words on a page. Moving forward as a writer, I am going to try to be more considerate and deliberate with my scenes, but not in the sense that I want to plan out every aspect of my stories and shut out any chance for surprising myself—or the reader.

There are a lot of elements within this thesis which work well, and I am afraid to reimagine it into my original idea at the risk of removing some of the self-contained complexity which it has now. That said, I certainly do intend to revise it and even heavily experiment with making various changes to characters and events, to see if there might be a satisfying middle-ground between what the work is now, and what I imagined when I first set out to write it. If my time at Behrend as a creative writing student has taught me anything—and it has taught me a lot—the biggest takeaway would be that writing a story is an ongoing process, draft after draft, even when it might seem complete to a reader.

CLAIRVOYANT

Chapter 1

I found an old diary of mine, a dinged-up thing from when I still thought bubblegum pink wasn't an offensive color, when unicorns were the best animal in the world, and I had just experienced my intuition for the first time. My father bought it for me to log my experiences in. My feelings, thoughts, dreams, daydreams, wants, sicknesses, everything, so we could figure out how the natural world chose to communicate with me. I'd logged all my experiences in it, and it was as near to a stream of consciousness of my eight-year-old life as anyone could ask for (which no one did).

Until I'd lost it.

I riffled through the pages. Only twenty-one of them were filled. They were beaten up and wrinkled, with food stains from over a decade ago ingrained in the pages. Appetizing.

What was it about this journal specifically that called to me? After I'd lost this one my dad had bought me a new journal, of course, and that one was filled to the brim with useful information, as were the others I'd filled after that one. Yet, finding this journal now, fourteen years later and pushed to the furthest depths of my childhood closet, felt right. Gaudy as it was, Pepto-bismol pink and covered in Lisa Frank stickers, the vinyl of the cover felt almost warm in my hands. I decided I'd been meant to find it.

At that moment, despite its offensive exterior, I decided to start keeping a log in it again. I didn't bother covering the awful stickers, or smoothing out any of the dings on the cover. I just slipped it into my bag and pulled it out to log my day in when I felt the need.

On top of the discovery of my old journal, there were a few other strange coincidences that had happened around me, things that didn't affect me in any important way but were odd enough to get my attention. It felt almost like something was coming, that all these little things

were setting me up for something big and life-changing. Just the other day, I'd cracked open a fortune cookie that read, "Disbelief destroys magic." It had sent an uneasy ripple down my spine.

Being that my intuition was sourced from somewhere within me, something I'd likely inherited from my father, I never knew where to stand on superstition. If my intuition told me not to open an umbrella indoors, I suppose I would have thought twice about the legend, the idea that it brings bad luck, but I never felt particularly on edge on Friday the thirteenth, or on the day I'd accidentally shattered a handheld mirror while getting ready for school. That said, the day after I received my odd fortune, there had been a pair of black kittens on the porch outside of my apartment. I'd felt tense from the moment I spotted the dark little bundle, before I'd known that the black lump was a pair of what I assumed to be siblings huddled together for warmth, but what was I to do, aside from scoop them up in my arms and take them inside? I remember hoping, silently, that they might hiss and scratch at me and dart under the porch as I stooped to pick them up, but I was, disappointingly, greeted with warm nuzzles and sweet, rumbling purrs. A trip to the vet and two flea collars later, the pair—whom I'd dubbed Sage and Quartz—were wreaking havoc on my shop during business hours and eating my house plants when I corralled them into the upstairs apartment in the evenings.

Now, as I took a moment to jot down my first entry into my old journal, Sage was curled in my lap. This first entry would serve as a recap for anyone who found the journal, to catch them up on what had happened between my eighth and twenty-second years of life so that they might read the following pages without confusion.

I wrote down some essential information: My family had discovered early that I'd inherited my gift from my father. We called it *intuition*, and unlike fortune tellers and soothsayers who can apply their so-called gifts to predict the future for others, ours is entirely

self-serving. I'll feel a physical nudge, a sort of sixth sense, whenever I'm faced with an important choice. A sense of eagerness might tell me that I need to do something which will be good for me, or I'll feel a sense of unease or pain when faced with something that I should avoid. To date, I've never tried to resist my intuition.

As I rubbed the bridge of Sage's nose with my index finger, I decided to write down my present predicament, too: It gets bleak, missing out on those nervous butterflies that everyone talks about when making a risky decision. My intuition likes to kick in for major life decisions and, dumb as it sounds, I feel like I'm missing out on something by not needing to cry and war with myself over which college is right for me, which major is the right one for me, or even small things, like whether or not I should eat those suspicious-smelling leftovers in the fridge. The right choices all stick out like gems among stones, catching my eye and refusing to let me look away. No one but my father understood me when I said this; for the average person, it seemed that being decisive is a skill one needs to work at. Or, at the very least, a big decision should be made based on knowledge, not hunches, like my father and I operate.

My dad had been so good at guiding me through my youth. He'd given me tips for picking up on my intuition and taught me how to hide from others that I had such a gift. He always told me that it would be my choice if I ever wanted to tell anyone about my intuition, but he also wanted me to be aware that most people wouldn't believe me when I told them. As a kid, there were times when I felt like I was going to burst if I didn't share my secret, but as a teenager, I was thankful that I hadn't shared it and opened myself up to ridicule. Now, I was walking a fine line. I'd told two people—an ex boyfriend who'd laughed when I'd told him and Josie, an empath who rented out my shop two days every week to do readings of her own. I'm glad that, as a child, my father guided me through the different reasons why I might want to tell

or not tell someone about my intuition, among all the other things he'd helped me with. As a kid, I didn't know where I'd be without him.

I'd had to figure that out fast, though, because he'd died not long after my eighth birthday, long before I grew old enough to question my existence and have the occasional (frequent) crisis about it. Now, no one has answers to questions that I've formed as I've grown. I feel lost about it all. Not literally lost, because my intuition guides me, but spiritually lost. Yes, when I go to college, I'll get a degree in sociology, but that's not anything I ever would've thought for myself. On what grounds does my intuition base its decisions? Will they lead me to a sense of fulfillment, or the most happiness, or the longest life, or the most wealth? Is it a balance of all of those things and more?

Above that, I worry that nothing I do is my own choice, that maybe I'm just a puppet of fate, a corpse animated by a few strings and some skillful puppeteering. Still, that leaves the question of who the puppeteer might be, and why they're making me do the things I do. Though, I suppose the same could be said for everyone else. Maybe no one else is a puppet, because they aren't being told what choices to make and when, and I am?

I've spent a lot of time wondering if others have more freedom than me, because they don't know the right answer to certain decisions and must rely on logic and reason and personal preference to make their choices. I have much less freedom when it comes to making choices.

Even for the simplest of things, all my choices seem so important in the moment. *Don't do this, stay away from that, buy this, sit here.* Despite how I felt at the time about following through with those whims, I never stopped to tell myself no. It's too hard, too unnatural. I'd compare it to the feeling of trying to slap yourself, how your body naturally holds itself back on instinct. Or, maybe more accurate: I once read that we have enough jaw strength to crush our

teeth by biting down, but our brain keeps us from doing so. Because cracking all of our teeth on accident, or even intentionally trying to do so after discovering this fact to see if we really can, would be bad for ourselves. I'd compare resisting my intuition to something like that. Plus, there's the fear of it all: if I remove that natural inhibition, and I bite down for the first time, will I just end up cracking all my teeth?

I don't know the answers to my questions, and lately, looking forward to the future or doing anything substantial for myself feels overwhelming, makes me restless and frustrated. I've put my life on hold since high school, despite always wanting to go to college. It's been four years since I graduated, and I feel like I'm going to lose my mind if I don't get answers soon. I need to know if I'm making my own choices, if they're really what I want, or if something is making them for me. Not only that, but I need to know what motivates this intuition of mine. Maybe before I try to bite down too hard and crack my teeth, I should start with something small. I can pinch myself and my subconscious won't hold me back—maybe I should try something similar with resisting my intuition. A good place to start might be resisting a choice for a little while until I feel like I have to give in, or if I'm able, fully resisting a choice which seems to be less important than others.

I've tried to use some of my spare time to do research. Some of the things I've found have only served to fuel the fires of my worst nightmares, like the idea that that all of us are powerless to do anything besides what we do, that we fall into our actions like puzzle pieces or turning gears. I've spent a lot of time reading up on fatalism, and I've spent even more time curled up in a ball of existential dread because of it. What makes your arm move when you tell it to? Sure, it's tendons and ligaments and pulling and pushing muscle groups. Triceps, biceps, whatever. Even beyond that, there are synapses in your brain that send signals to axons, which

carry impulses to those muscles and tell them to move, but where does that impulse start? I can think about moving my arm without actually moving it. When I do move it, I don't really *think* of anything. Maybe my arm would move regardless of whether I decide I'm moving it or not, but I'm just not smart enough to recognize that I'm not in charge. Of course, I can't bring that up to anyone lest I sound insane. To boil the problem down into something more palatable, I worry that I may have control over my body, but I'm still powerless as to whether or not I make a wrong turn while driving to work one day and hit a chipmunk on the road and set off a butterfly effect, which will eventually lead to some world-changing, devastating event.

Whenever I feel particularly bothered by my intuition, I want to read about what philosophers smarter than myself think about fate and free will, but now, when I go to read an essay or an article online, my intuition will tell me not to in the form of a stomach ache, jittery hands, or even a little bit of dizziness. I suppose I should interpret that as a self-protective mechanism, that my intuition is keeping me from stressing myself out further. Admittedly, I've gotten pretty frustrated reading Sartre's idea of free will in the past. Just add it all to the list of things that are stressing me out lately.

The warning of something bad to come has been palpable, like humidity whipping in the wind before a storm. It feels natural to blame some ominous, unforeseen event for my feeling stressed, to naturally want to connect the uncomfortable message from the fortune cookie and the twin black cats on my doorstep. It feels like I'm being warned of something big coming, a life-changing decision that I need to be in-tune with in order to pick up correctly. Except I don't, do I? I've never had to not know the perfect choice in my life. Despite the decidedly ominous shift in the air, I've been scheming. Even if I do need to pay attention this time above all other times, I don't think I will. This time, no matter what the voice in my head tells me, no matter how

alluring the right choice is, I am going to make my own decision. I am going to rebel against what my instincts tell me to choose. If curiosity killed the cat, then so be it; at least that cat had the free will to choose death for herself. To get to this point, I'll need to start working against my intuition in small ways.

Sage yawned and stretched his paws up toward my face, effectively snapping me out of my thoughts. There was a big, round dot of ink on the page of my journal from where I'd rested my pen as my thoughts wandered. I'd take my wandering mind as a sign that I needed to get some rest for the night. After all, I had work in the morning.

My job is an unconventional one, but I think it's perfectly fitting for someone like me: I am a psychic. Clients come to me for tarot, palm, tea, and general readings, among the less common services a psychic normally does. This also makes me a fraud. At least, I think it does, because I can't see the futures of my clients. Technically, I never see my own future, either; I just see which choices I should make when the time comes. I rely on my intuition to guide me through my work. A funny feeling in my stomach will tell me, generally, what to say to a client to yield the best outcome; a particularly striking piece of jewelry on another will seem to whisper his desires directly into my ear, and I will lean forward with smoldering eyes, cock him a half-smirk, and whisper, "I see love in your future. A red-head, fiery as a vixen. She wants you desperately—I can feel her energy pulling at you from here—but is rather old-fashioned and wants you to make the first move." I enjoy being theatrical. And he'll get that glint in his eyes, that happy glint that makes my heart swell with glee at what I've inspired in him, he'll give me a generous tip, and be on his way.

Sometimes, clients like him will return to shake my hand firmly, give me a jittery hug, and thank me for my advice. Other times, I'll get strongly phrased letters in the mail, cursing me and my entire family because of some bad reading I'd done. I don't mind, really, because messing up a couple readings a week keeps me from getting too much attention for my skills. I suppose it makes me something of a hypocrite to heavily scorn my gift while also relying on it as a source of income, but I also feel no regrets in exploiting it for money. At least something good can come of it while the rest of my life is on hold.

It was the end of another long day at the shop. I was tidying up my little studio, gaudily decorated in traditional witchy, psychic fashion, when the *ting* of the bell atop my door told me I had a client. The last one of the day, by the looks of it; he'd arrived twenty minutes before closing time, almost perfect timing for a reading. He'd be satisfied and out of here at 4 o'clock on the dot, and I'd follow whoever he was out to lock the door behind him and pack up for the day.

The dark curtains leading from the waiting room parted, let in a bright, warm ray of sunlight, and I saw his black silhouette against it. I hadn't even seen his face, taken in his features, when I was hit by an overwhelming sensation that pulled every last wisp of breath from my lungs. I was left there, breathless, feeling as though a rift in time and space might form right then and there and suck us and the whole world into it if I didn't just get up and—

One second I was in my chair and the next I was standing before him, my hand outstretched, my palm open in a soft invitation. "Good afternoon," I drawled, my voice smooth and pleasant naturally as opposed to when I'd force it for other customers. "I am Miss Claire. What can I do for you?"

He looked at me, or perhaps stared at me, for a moment too long. My hand hung suspended in the air before him as his mouth worked to form words and he finally noticed, with a nervous jerk of his pupils, my unshaken hand. “Ben,” he introduced himself, and his voice carried the most beautiful, heavenly timbre I’d ever heard. I was torn between melting at the sound of it and yearning to feel the warmth of his palm against mine and then, finally, he extended his hand to shake mine.

The contact felt unlike anything I’d ever experienced. One moment I was there, staring up into his eyes, their color a soft brown that was swimming with melted gold in the center of his irises, and the next I was floating in space, my entire being cloaked in the bright, warm oranges and yellows of a supermassive star as its gravity pulled me in. It was too strong to fight, to even lift a finger in the opposite direction. Why would I want to? The abyss of space was cold and dark, and I’d finally found a source light and warmth, energy and life. I wasn’t worried about burning up; the universe would protect me.

And then, I was back, and my eyes had widened and my mouth popped open as I gaped up at him. He seemed unphased; an easy, lopsided grin lit up his dazzling features. “Is that all it takes, huh? A handshake and you know my whole future? Tell me whatever you want, but not how I die.” His voice was all the sweeter laced with humor and a wink. Or maybe it was sweeter because he was talking about me.

I swallowed, barely able to function in the strong pull of my intuition. “Why don’t we start with what you came here to know?” I said, forcing myself to turn away from him and invite him to sit before my table. I took a seat on the opposite side.

“Suddenly, I’m not sure I want to know about it anymore,” he said, relaxing back into his seat.

“Did you come here for a love reading?” I questioned, completely on instinct, and I realized I’d just batted my eyelashes at him.

“I found what I’m looking for,” he quipped. “And at this point, I think instead of paying for your services, I’d like to pay for your dinner.”

It was all I could do to raise my brows as I smiled widely at him.

“Let me take you out?” He asked, leaning forward in his seat to train those bubbling, molten gold eyes on me. “It feels like the most important thing in the universe that I get at least one date with you.”

And then, despite every single particle in my body becoming supercharged and buzzing with excitement, despite the sheer joy I felt and the way I nodded my head and offered him a coy, “Sure,” I felt dread and disappointment sink in my chest.

I knew what this was. It was another choice stripped from me.

Chapter 2

“It’s not fair,” I whined to Quartz, my index finger toying with the thin tip of her kitten tail. My voice rose in pitch to a petulant cry: “It’s not fair!”

I’d been up all night, whining and crying and pounding on my pillows as the gravity of the situation weighed on my body. When my lips were raw from biting, and my nose sore from all the rubbing, and my eyes puffy and red and so overworked that by midnight I was crying and wailing without tears, I finally quelled my despair. I curled up into myself in the center of my bed, buried my face in my knees, and let the cool feeling of my own skin soothe my flushed cheeks. Quartz and Sage had peeked over the edge of my bed at me in curious concern.

You love him, I thought.

I loved him. Already. Or maybe I didn’t love him yet, because how could I love someone I’d only said a few words to, but I knew that I *would* love him. That I *could* love him. That I was *supposed* to love him, and because I was supposed to, it would be the most spiritual, fulfilling love in the world. I knew that it would transcend my current understanding of love, that our union would be something written in the stars, something that the ancients prophesized, something that poets could only begin to claw at with their dull-pointed pens onto papers full of ballads and tragedies which encapsulated almost-perfect-but-not-quite tales of love. I knew that I would never be happier with anyone else, and that he would never be happier with anyone else, and that if I didn’t meet him for our date this Friday, I’d spend the rest of my life trying to fill a void left by a black hole in the core of my being.

Yet, sweet as it all was, as perfect as it was to look into his eyes and see him smile in response to my words, I couldn’t enjoy it. I couldn’t help but enjoy it, but with that enjoyment came the crushing burden of realization that I wouldn’t make my own choice in who to love,

who to marry, whose soul to fuse with my own. It had already happened. I was on a crash course directly into him.

On Friday, my intuition was so strong that I couldn't help but get dressed, do my makeup, and make my hair look bouncy and curly and beautiful as I most liked it to look. It all happened as if I hadn't even been conscious of doing it.

I skipped, light as air, and pushed through the doorway. The bell jingled with a *ting* that snapped me out of my thoughts. I paused in my tracks. I'd skipped out of my apartment. I was headed to my truck, where I would drive to meet Ben on a date. I'd spent all of Tuesday night crying because I wasn't able to resist my intuition.

I slowed my pace to a walk. As the stress kicked in, I found myself dragging my feet, moving even more slowly, as I approached my truck. I made myself wait before getting in, or turning my key in the ignition, but slowing down wasn't difficult. I wondered if it didn't count as resisting my intuition.

As I pulled out of my driveway, I put on my right turn signal, away from the restaurant I'd agreed to meet Ben at. I felt a little wave of panic inside me. I angled the wheel to the right, teased the gas pedal with my foot. My stomach writhed in apprehension. I couldn't physically resist it: I turned left.

I eyed the stretch of road behind me in my rearview mirror as I drove, what would have been a right turn from my driveway. I could visit the cemetery tonight, after my date, and say hi to my dad. I wondered if he was looking down at me from somewhere, or maybe from over my shoulder, shaking his head as I tried to refuse my natural-born gift. Or, maybe, he was tucked away in the afterlife, quietly cheering me on.

Ben had let me pick the restaurant for our date. I'd decided on the Broomstick Tavern, a spot that was just down the road from my childhood home. My family used to go there for dinner all the time—the owner was a great man who was as wide as he was tall, who'd ruffle my hair and call me Chicken Nuggets because that was all I'd eat when I was a kid. My mother and sister and I would still go there, every now and again, for old times' sake and because the food was still really good. It was a place which held a lot of sentimental value.

As I parked my truck in front of the tavern, I peered around the lot for Ben. I didn't know what he drove, and I was half-wishing I hadn't insisted on driving myself to meet him here. My intuition seemed insistent that something about him was good, maybe even perfect for me, so surely I wouldn't have had to worry about things being awkward or unsafe if we'd driven in together.

I tried to quell the excited jitters that had stirred inside of me. *Remember, Claire*, I told myself, *to try and resist your intuition*. I knew that, even if I was excited about my date with Ben, the questions I had about my ability and how it worked were more important in the long run. But then I saw him, dressed nicely and holding a bouquet of flowers, sitting on the bench in front of the tavern's entrance, and I felt my heart skip a beat. I wondered if I was taking this whole intuition situation too seriously. I decided I should just enjoy the moment.

As I walked over to him he stood up from the bench, grinned ear-to-ear, and offered me the bouquet. "Great to see you, Claire," he said warmly, "I'm really glad you could make it."

I was impressed by how sweet he was. “I am too,” I returned as I accepted the flowers. “Look at this, huh? You went all out.” I gestured at the bouquet which I now held in my hand. Normally, such a grand gesture on a first date would make me uncomfortable, but it felt so sincere and natural with Ben, I couldn’t help but be pleased. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he said, stepping aside to get the door for me.

I was surprised to learn that he’d reserved a table for us. He said he didn’t want to take any chances with me—everything needed to be perfect. I told him that I appreciated all the effort he was putting in as we sat down.

He put his menu down and looked at me. “You know, we could have gone somewhere better,” he suggested. “I appreciate you wanting to pick somewhere humble, but you didn’t have to. I’m not worried about the cost.”

“I wanted to eat here, Ben,” I said with a smile, “I used to come here with my family on the weekends, so it’s kind of special to me.”

He shrugged. “If you’re happy, then that’s good enough for me.” In the next breath, he was snapping his fingers at our waitress to get her attention. “Can we get a wine menu, please?”

I’d opened my mouth to object, but she was gone to retrieve the menu before I could. “Oh, that’s a great idea, Ben, but I have to drive home after this,” I said gently.

He flashed me a dazzling smile and waved a hand. “So do I,” he said, “but a little bit won’t hurt us, right?”

I thought back to how I’d felt in my truck, right before I saw him. I’d been stressing myself out the past few weeks about my intuition, and ever since I met Ben, I’d been pressuring myself not to be too eager for our date today. Now, something in his voice soothed me,

convinced me that he had a point. I deserved to relax and go with the flow. I leaned back in my chair and nodded. “Sure, you’re right.”

I didn’t drink much. Truth be told, I wasn’t a fan of wine, so I gave him a wink and told him I trusted him to pick whatever he thought would be best. Maybe I’d like it this time, with him.

I asked him about himself as we waited for our dinner.

“I’m a used car salesman now,” he said, “But I’d like to be a real estate agent within the next year or so.”

“Why the switch?” I asked curiously. I knew very little about either job.

“I’ve been told I’m a real sweet talker,” he said, with a playfulness that made my stomach flip. “I’m good at what I do now, but I think if I put the effort that I put into selling cars into selling houses instead, I’d make a lot more money.” The waitress brought our wine and he poured a glass for each of us. “That’s what brought me to the Boston area. Real estate’s booming here.”

As I held the glass in my hand, I realized that it felt heavy. “Oh, fascinating,” I responded, “I think I might’ve heard that about Boston. You know, on the news or something.” Ben sipped from his without a second thought, but I stared down at the dark merlot wine as I swirled it around the glass. Focusing on it, it looked dull, more like a dried blood color than wine. Dread settled in the pit of my stomach. My intuition was telling me not to drink it.

“What about you?” Ben asked, “How did you come to be a psychic?”

I was glad for an excuse to put the glass down, and I felt better once I did. “To tell you the truth,” I began, surprised to find myself wanting to *actually* tell him the truth. There was something calming about Ben, something which compelled me to be open with him. “My dad is

the reason. He always told me that I had a strong sense of intuition—of knowing what’s going to happen in the future. He passed when I was still young, but I always felt like he was onto something, so I opened my shop after high school.” Mentioning my intuition again reminded me that I’d wanted to practice fighting against it. I picked up the glass of wine again and brought it to my lips. A strong, sour smell filled my nostrils.

Ben raised his eyebrows and nodded. “Well, it certainly seems like you’re good at what you do. A friend of mine came to you for a reading, I guess, and was impressed—she’s the one that suggested I pay you a visit.”

I took a deep breath and parted my lips for a sip. The wine was dry and tasted foul in my mouth. It took everything I had not to spit it back out. I swallowed it with a shudder and cleared my throat. “Oh, really? I’m glad to hear that,” I said, half-gritting my teeth.

“Do you not like the wine?” he asked.

“It’s great,” I lied. It probably would be if my intuition weren’t telling me not to drink it. I forced myself to take another sip. It went down a little easier this time. I wanted to shift his focus away from me. “Anyway, what about that reading you’d come into my shop for? A love reading?” He straightened up in his seat and hesitated. I wondered if I’d said something I shouldn’t have.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said smoothly. “It certainly doesn’t matter now.”

His answer was good enough for me. I did readings and gave advice to plenty of single people looking for love in a week.

We got on the topic of family—he told me that he was an only child and that his parents were upset that he’d moved closer to the city in pursuit of his career. The little bit of wine that we’d agreed upon turned into a little bit more as we swapped stories about our childhoods and

families. After the first glass, I realized that my intuition had given up on warning me—the rest of the wine went down smoothly.

At the end of dinner, we were asking each other fun questions to get to know each other better. He'd just asked me what the worst thing I'd ever done as a kid was.

“So, our family’s house is the only one on top of the hill, but at the bottom, another driveway branches off to an old farmhouse,” I told him. “Me and my sister, Phoebe, had a friend that lived in that house down there, who would’ve only been about five at the time. She and I played together every day in the summer, so I felt entitled to wander down there whenever I was bored. Except, I decided to take Phoebe with me this time, and we didn’t tell my parents.” I raised my brows at him to suggest that this wasn't a good idea.

“They had a walnut tree. Fresh walnuts have this hard casing on them, right, and they smell really good, kind of minty or something. Phoebe couldn’t have been older than four, so she’d never seen them before, and she was really into them. I remember she was running around behind me with her arms full of them, dropping them everywhere.” I laughed at the memory, the image of her with the bottom of her shirt pulled up into a makeshift hammock to hold the big, brown-and-green walnuts, the way they bounced and spilled over the sides as she hurried after me during a game of chase. “Soon, she started bugging me to open one up for her so that she could see the walnut inside, but they were too tough for me to open with my hands, so I got the bright idea to try and throw them at things to crack them open—I was kind of a troublemaker back then,” I added, a little apologetically and a little deviously. “But then, it turned into a game. We were throwing walnuts at things, like trees or the old corn silo, and I got overexcited and threw a walnut against the wall of their shed. Of course, I hit a window and shattered it.”

Ben winced good-naturedly. “Yikes.”

“At that point, before we even had time to figure out what we were going to do, we heard the neighbor kid yelling for us, wanting to play too. She or her parents must have seen us running around their yard. I panicked because we were on the other side of the shed and she couldn’t see the damage yet, but I could hear her running toward us, and I didn’t want her to find the broken window. I don’t know if I was desperate to keep her away, or if I thought she’d buy my story, but my plan was to run around the corner of the shed with Phoebe, my hands full of walnuts, and throw them at the neighbor kid, and tell her it was part of a game.” I shook my head. “I hit her square in the forehead with a walnut, she fell down and started screaming her head off, and the next thing I know, Phoebe and I were getting interrogated by my dad for running off without telling anyone, breaking a window, *and* nearly cracking the girl’s head open with a walnut.

“The worst part of the story is, I blamed it all on Phoebe. I told him that she was throwing walnuts and rocks and anything else I could think of, and I tried to reign her back in after she hit our friend with a walnut, but I couldn’t stop her from breaking the window, too. I know he didn’t believe me, but he told my mom it wasn’t my fault, and Phoebe was too young to get into any kind of big trouble, so neither of us really got punished.” When I’d finished telling my story, I blushed in embarrassment. It wasn’t something I would tell just anyone, because even though I was just a kid when it had happened, it made me look selfish. I half regretted even telling him as I waited for his reaction.

The first thing he did was chuckle. “That’s great.” He was smiling widely still, looking a little devilish, as he continued to speak: “After all these stories, it's starting to sound like you were the favorite child.”

I felt my nerves dissipate and grinned as I waved a hand at his idea. “Definitely not. Maybe my dad’s, but my mom always favored Phoebe.” After he died, it took me a long time to adjust to life in our house without him. Phoebe certainly hadn’t taken his death as hard as I had.

“I’m glad I’m an only child,” he said, as if he could sense the ache in my tone. “I was lonely sometimes, sure, but at least I didn’t have to worry about that sort of thing.”

“It was nice while it lasted,” I said with a little shrug.

After dinner, the two of us were too deep in conversation to part ways. We had an hour or two of sunlight left, and decided to go to a nearby park. I was also glad for the excuse to walk some more of the wine off before I had to drive home. We learned a lot about each other, delved more deeply into who we really were and where we saw ourselves in a few years. He learned that I wanted to expand my business—I had Josie working in the shop now, but I’d like to hire more psychics and move the business to somewhere nicer. I learned that he was really into budgeting and investing money—he wanted to be a millionaire by the time he was thirty.

“Wow,” I joked, “It must mean something that you wanted to take me out to an expensive restaurant, then.”

He reacted in a way I hadn’t expected. Instead of laughing it off, he smiled warmly at me and took my hand. “It does.”

Chapter 3

We finally parted ways and I climbed into my old truck to go home for the evening. I savored the bright smile on his face, the way his eyes crinkled as he’d waved goodbye. I didn’t

need to think much about it, though the events from the night were reeling over and over in my mind anyway. It had been a perfect first date.

As I came up on my street, I felt an odd shift in the usual autopilot of my actions. Normally, I wouldn't think twice about pulling into my driveway, but I felt the specific tugging to do so which hinted at my intuition taking over. My hand shifted over my turn signal, then stilled. What if I resisted it, just this one time? I had the idea to visit the cemetery, like I'd wanted to do before the date. My fingers quivered. Why was it so important that I go home? I still didn't know the nature of my intuition. Maybe it was telling me to go straight home because, if I didn't, something bad would happen to me. I thought of my dad, six feet under, buried in his best suit. My stomach twisted. My foot pressed on the gas as my hand came back to rest on the steering wheel. I was going to get answers.

Disobeying my intuition on a larger scale was more difficult. I saw ominous connections everywhere. How fitting it would be, I wondered, for me to meet my end at night on the way to the cemetery? My eyes roved from the road, out the window and through the barren autumn canopy above. I spotted a large, hunched silhouette among the branches, some bird of the night. My heart stuttered. I realized, then, as I began to drive on a winding, less-familiar road, that my head was still fuzzy from the wine.

It would be even more fitting for me to meet my end while trying to investigate my father's so I could avoid the same fate. He couldn't speak on how or why he'd died, but I always wondered why his intuition didn't steer him out of harm's way. Even now, I felt mine tugging me back. I wanted to turn around and go home; when I told myself I couldn't, I had to fight back

tears of fear and frustration. At times, I couldn't tell if I was so worked up because of anxiety or my intuition. Maybe they were one in the same.

A deer leapt out onto the road a few yards ahead of me. I jumped, whined in surprise, and followed it through the treeline with my eyes as I drove past. A flash of headlights and the honk of a horn whipped my attention back to the road; I'd drifted into the left lane and was about to be hit head-on by a car that had just rounded a turn. I jerked the steering wheel and slammed on my brakes. The woman in the other car stuck gestured out the window at me to show her displeasure as my truck's suspension squeaked as we skidded off the berm of the road.

With my left tires still on the road and the right ones sunken down into the dirt, I put the truck in park, jammed my head against the steering wheel, and sobbed my frustrations out.

The sound of a car tiptoeing past my precarious parking situation pulled me out of my crying. I wiped my eyes and checked my rearview mirror for any more incoming traffic. I reminded myself that had to see this through. I had to know, even if it killed me, what it meant to defy my intuition. With a deep breath, I crept back onto the road and crawled along its winding curves until, finally, I reached the cemetery.

The gravel in the parking lot popped and shifted beneath my tires. My hand quivered above the door handle. I needed to get out, to go to my father's tombstone. A headache blossomed in my forehead. The moonlight illuminated the tombstones. I sought my father's grave, but what I saw instead was a dark, knobby silhouette. I squinted. It moved.

My headache crescendoed; the pain exploded behind my eyes like fireworks. I felt dizzy and averted them, pulled my legs back into my truck and closed my door with so much force I thought it might fall off its rickety hinges.

The pain subsided. I felt relief, immediately tailed by frustration. I didn't come all this way to let my intuition get the better of me. In a quick jerk of a motion, I pushed the door open once more and stumbled out. The pain tackled me again, made me stagger. I pushed through it.

I'd never fought myself on anything before today. When I was a kid, maybe I'd tried once or twice in a typical, childish manner to avoid what was good for me in favor of what was more exciting, but my intuition always won out. As far as I could remember, this was the very first time I wasn't letting it win. I'd never thought to ask my father about it before he passed. The first time I thought about it was after he died, when I realized that, even with this gift, we could still get hurt.

I felt sick to my stomach from the pain in my head and the feeling of dread writhing and thrashing inside of me, but I'd made it to his grave. My pristine red heels sunk down into the wet earth. I lowered myself ungracefully to crouch before the tombstone and ended up falling to my knees. Now, the skirt of my date-night dress and my best shoes had been muddied, but that thought was hardly at the forefront of my mind with my intuition and willpower warring for dominance. I didn't bother fixing my posture and relaxed back onto my heels. There was more mud on me now; I could feel the moisture seeping into the back of my skirt, wetting the knees of my tights. It was sticky and uncomfortable.

I'm fine, see? Everything's fine. Try as I might, I couldn't convince myself.

I reached out tentatively to rest my arm on the stone. It felt cool and smooth on my palm, lulled me into closing my eyes and thinking about my dad. Sometimes, I liked to indulge in the idea that maybe there was more to us than just self-serving intuition. I always thought that was why I liked to tell people's fortunes. Deep down, I always hoped that some of my predictions for love and happiness come true. Maybe there's some other ability, buried down within me, waiting

to be discovered. When I was a kid, I'd hoped I could fly. More than a few times, my parents had to chase me down before I leapt from precarious heights around the house or in the yard. One time, no one was around to stop me. It was the first and last time I flew—a whole six feet. I crash landed and broke my arm, and with it, my dreams of flying were also broken. For most of my life beyond that, I'd wished I could commune with the dead. Memories of trying to fly made me smile. Remembering all the times I'd lamented over not being able to talk to the dead sobered me up fast.

I inhaled deeply. For the moment, the pain subsided, and I opened my eyes to stare at the gravestone before me. "Hey, dad," I breathed with a smile before shifting closer. I straightened up, leaned on it a little. "Things have been kind of weird for me the past few days," I divulged. "More of the same since my last visit, with an even bigger twist now." I thought about Ben, and the amazing first date we'd shared, and how everything between him and I felt larger than life itself and five times as important. "I know what to do—I always do. And yet," I felt my throat knot up and tried to force some pep into my tone, tried to keep my smile as I fixed my eyes on his grave, "I feel more lost than ever."

I shuffled forward to rest my forehead against the cool stone. One hand held its edge; the other rested limply in the dewy grass, collecting mud. "I wish I could know what you knew, right before you went," I whispered. Crickets chirped. My eyes fell closed and I sat there for a while, savoring what closeness and comfort I could get from hugging a cold stone, in resting my flesh-and-blood body just a few feet above his cold, still one, stripped of all by now but scattered, broken bones.

Footsteps crushed the grass somewhere ahead of me. The sound grew closer. A twist of urgent panic in my gut that told me to get up and run, and my first instinct was to indulge. I

wasn't in the right headspace to consider fighting my intuition anymore. As I shifted to move, however, I felt something I'd never felt before: an eerie, foreboding sensation of eyes on me, staring into me, and something at the pit of me warning, *no, no matter what you do, don't look up*. Of course, when such a feeling sinks in, the most natural reaction in the world is...

I jerked my head up to look.

Chapter 4

My heart pounded hard in my chest; it threatened to stop altogether when my eyes met his. I jumped and stumbled back in the muddy earth, away from the looming figure.

He extended a hand. Every part of me felt electric. My muscles charged and tensed, screamed at me to *run away, do not take that hand*. I wondered if the person wanted to hurt me, if he was a serial killer or something equally as menacing, because only psychopaths wander around cemeteries in the dead of night and creep up on unsuspecting girls. I was sure, judging by the unbearable, searing pain in my temples and the almost-irresistible pull to run away, that I was in grave danger of being harmed. But then, the figure laughed.

It was a tired, mocking chuckle that made my blood spike with indignation. Couldn't he see that he'd scared the life out of me? Couldn't he have predicted that I'd be terrified? Despite myself, hearing him laugh fizzled away my fear. I'd just uncovered something: he wasn't going to hurt me. I wasn't going to die because I went to this cemetery tonight. So then, what was so important about me not interacting with this man?

I couldn't will myself to look at him. It took all I had to extend my palm to rest in his. There was a jolt there, between his palm and mine, and I gripped his hand tighter, the way a person grips onto a piece of metal while being electrocuted. The pain in my head cleared away. My intuition, soured by my disobedience, coiled itself into a bed of nausea in my stomach. I felt complete clarity, perhaps even autonomy, as he hauled me to my feet, just as I'd been able to push through my intuition earlier when I drank the wine. This time, it felt like a short reprieve in pain after being bedridden for hours on end, that little high that comes from the release of endorphins. It left me breathless.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” he grumbled. His voice was low and coarse. I wondered if he was a smoker. He had a few layers of clothing on, though most notably was his ratty grey hoodie, the outermost layer. It was unzipped, the hood was up, and in the gloom of the night, I could hardly make out any of his facial features. Were I not so thrilled at having broken through my intuition’s clutches, I would have felt some apprehension. I avoided thinking about it for the time being. He had a second layer, an unbuttoned flannel, underneath the hoodie. The edges poked out beneath the waistband of the top layer. They were frayed; strings dangled haphazardly and twitched and jerked in the breeze. There was a button hanging precariously from one of them. I wanted to hold him still and yank all of them off, one by one. Who lets their strings dangle like that?

Beneath was the third layer, the deepest one my eyes could penetrate. An old shirt. In this darkness, I couldn’t tell if it was white, or grey, or yellow, but I could see the dark stains on it as plainly as if he were in broad daylight. He had an odd smell about him, like strong chemicals mixed with sickly sweetness.

I felt my stomach twist in distaste. For a moment, I wished I’d listened to my intuition and hadn’t looked his way, but I had answers to get, so that wasn’t an option. “It’s fine,” I said between gritted teeth as I looked into the gloom under his hood. It only took a moment before I decided to stare at the trees behind him. Staring through him was easier than looking at him.

“What do you want?”

He kicked a patch of grass in the direction of my dad’s tombstone. “Who are you here for,” he asked flatly.

I didn't want to tell him. I didn't want to let him in on any piece of my personal life. "My dad," I answered back, my tone just as flat. "What are you doing here, aside from sneaking up on poor, unsuspecting mourners?"

I couldn't tell if he laughed or not. A rough expulsion of air left his lips, but it could've just as easily been a grunt of disgust. "Visiting family. Same as you."

I nodded tensely in understanding but didn't try to engage further. I didn't really want to speak to him, even after fighting all this time to end up here, in this situation. But he wasn't done speaking.

"Did them all myself," he went on, jerking his head at some patch of cemetery behind him, as if I had any idea where his family was buried. "Y'know, the... preparation... and the burial."

I noted his odd way of speaking. It was awkward, disjointed, even. I couldn't tell if it was hesitant and uncertain or lazy. I almost bet it was lazy.

"Is that allowed?"

"It is if you're an undertaker," he snorted.

"And you are? An undertaker, I mean?" I was a little more interested in him, now. It took a special kind of person to pick a job like that.

Silence came from the shadowed area beneath his hood. Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

"This guy," he grunted finally, kicking at my dad's tombstone with a muddied shoe. "I might've done him, too. His body, at least. Not the burial."

He pissed me off with that. I wondered if *this* was why my intuition warned me about coming tonight. Because I was about to get into a fist fight over some grungy man disrespecting my dad's grave while talking about how he'd 'done' him.

“I can see he was in good hands.” The words eked out between my teeth.

“How long ago did he croak?” He craned his neck to inspect the name and date on the stone.

I didn’t want to know if he’d embalmed my dad. “Right, well, you think about it,” I snapped. “I need to get going.”

He straightened up, turned that dark void where his face was toward me. There was a pause in conversation, a silence so heavy that even the crickets stopped chirping. The wind picked back up, shocked me with cold evening air. It rustled the leaves, brought the sound back, and then: “You seein’ anyone?”

Every fiber of my being had been screaming at him to say *yes, I am, please don’t ever talk to me again*, and yet, I stared at him in silent disbelief. Finally, I looked at his face, and maybe there was something about the way he’d shifted during our conversation, but the moonlight came through the leaves just enough that I could make out his features. He looked old. His lips seemed to naturally turn downward at the edges as if they were heavy; they formed dark creases in his face. His eyes, too, looked hard and dark, and were shadowed underneath by bags. His main features were tired lines, deep crevices that made him look sullen and half-dead. Even his skin looked rough and cratered. I’d thought by the sound of his voice and the rough quality of his clothes that he was middle-aged, but his eyes seemed younger. It was the strangest thing, but I couldn’t tell if he was twenty or fifty. I’d have imagined him to have a wild, greasy beard, but instead, there was just a dark shadow on the lower half of his cheeks and around his lips. It only made him look rougher.

I shook my head slowly. Why didn’t I lie?

I stared at him and he stared back. There was more silence. “Well, we both know what loss is,” he said, almost to himself. “You free tomorrow?”

I nodded.

After that, we went our separate ways. He shuffled sadly back to the graves he’d been studying when I arrived, and I tried to nonchalantly run back to the safety of my truck. He’d asked for my number, and I’d given it, and I wondered if he’d really try to text or call me about going out. I drove back home, tucked myself into bed, and stared at the ceiling. I’d felt so light and airy after my date with Ben. Now, I felt aged. My body felt old and heavy, achy and tired. I wondered if this was the price for resisting my intuition.

Chapter 5

Sleep washed away some of the grime from last night. In the morning, I felt refreshed, as though I could understand my situation in a way that I couldn't have dreamed yesterday.

I still hadn't gotten to the root of my intuition, but I could rule out immediate danger. At least, it wasn't every time I felt a pull to do something that some higher power was saving me from imminent destruction. I did feel distinctly irritated by the man I'd met last night, however. I'd had no interest in him, no desire to get to know him further, yet I'd given him my number and agreed to go out with him because it felt, in the spirit of rebellion, like the right thing to do. Since I'd fought against it last night, I'd had no guidance from my intuition. After waking, I sat down and jotted my surprising discoveries down into my journal, ending with a simplified statement that I'd circled three or four times and followed with a series of question marks: *Resisting warning signs makes my intuition go away???*

I still had plenty of questions and no answers. I wasn't any closer to understanding the root cause of my intuition. As for the mysterious man in the cemetery, I had no interest in seeing him again. My interactions with him seemed to lead me to a dead end, since my intuition's warnings had faded away after a while. I also would feel too guilty going out with him after Ben and I had such a successful first date. On the topic of Ben, what was I going to do about him? I could tell that I really liked him, but I still didn't feel good about blindly feeding into my intuition's wishes until I'd figured some more things out.

My phone buzzed, and dread settled in my stomach. Was it the man from last night, checking in on me to see if we were still going to get dinner later, or was it Ben, texting to see what I was up to today? I didn't have the courage to check; both options seemed stressful. I pushed it away and cleared it from my mind. I had another day of work ahead of me, and I

wanted to have some time to organize my thoughts before I had to put on my fortune-telling persona for work.

I had a wonderful morning to myself. I didn't think about fate or free will or even Ben. It was all just me, beautiful fall scenery, and a cup of tea. I felt invigorated and ready to face the day. October could easily be the most draining month of the year for me. It was associated with spirits and spooky things, so everyone wanted to go to a fortune-teller for some reason or other, and I'd learned that I could make a nice sum of money if I worked through the weekends. Better yet, I could also increase my prices. Busy as I was, I was due to visit my mom sometime soon.

After some quick calculations in my head, I realized I hadn't stopped to see her or Phoebe in a month. I'd be disowned if I didn't stop by soon.

I made a mental note to go next weekend. I was certain, with how busy I was at work, that my mother could understand me staying away for another week.

As I was getting ready for work, my phone buzzed again. I'd forgotten to check my messages from earlier, and now it seemed I had even more to catch up on. I told myself I would check my phone after I'd opened the shop and settled in and cleared it from my mind again.

I didn't dress like a witch straight out of a movie, but I did my best to play the part realistically. Flowy gowns, skirts, or shawls accented with long, loose jewelry helped to give me a sort of spiritual appearance, some indication of my legitimacy that clients could cling to when the time for first impressions came around. Now that I was caring for two kittens, my loose clothing was a popular target for playful claws. I'd had to throw one of my shawls out already.

Somewhere along the way, the time had gotten away from me. A *ting* of the bell atop the door told me my first client was here, just as I was hurrying down the stairs from my apartment. And thus, the day began.

Some of my clients had appointments and others were walk-ins, and there was always at least one person sitting expectantly in the waiting room. I was stifled by my popularity; I even had to turn a few people away so I could take a lunch break. I proudly put my “out for lunch!” sign on the door.

I celebrated being halfway through the day by pulling the curtains back and stretching in the silvery light of a foggy day. But then, the door *tined*, signaling that someone had entered my shop. Someone who couldn't read.

I moved to tie the curtain shut to keep the client at bay for a while longer, then scurried to sit down at my desk in an effort to finish my salad quickly. In a rush, I dropped my fork, and bent down to pick it up.

“Hello?”

The voice was earnest and hollow. Old. Tired. Familiar. I jerked up quickly and banged my head off the desk.

Silence. Both of us stilled.

I thought about staying absolutely still, of playing dumb, as if I wasn't in my office, but at the same time, I felt resignation, acknowledged that the man wasn't going anywhere after hearing me bang my head on the desk. He knew I was there. I straightened up. He'd poked his head through the curtains—the curtains which didn't part because I'd tied them together in a futile attempt to keep a curious customer at bay.

Time stopped as realization dawned on me. My face was scrunched in confusion. The color had drained from his.

It was him. It was the damned man from the cemetery. What was *he* doing here?

“So, your name’s Claire,” he said, in that same, empty voice, though not without an added hint of wariness now. I realized I’d never given him my name, and he’d never told me his. That’s how insignificant he’d been.

“I’m closed right now,” I protested. “What are you doing here?”

There was another long pause between us. This time, it felt different. He looked like he wanted to say something, as opposed to not having anything to say, but didn’t know how to say it. “I’m uh, looking for someone.”

I narrowed my eyes. Something about him made me want to be difficult. “It’s been a busy day. Maybe I remember seeing who you’re after, maybe I don’t.”

Something in his shoulders loosened after I said this. “Busy, huh?” he echoed back.

I stared at him. “Very. This is my only break.”

He seemed unphased. “Her name’s Maria. She was supposed to get an, uh, love reading, from you.”

Was he acting so hesitant because he had a girlfriend, and I’d just caught him? I could hardly believe it. I still hadn’t had the pleasure of seeing him in proper lighting, but he looked as run-down and crusty as ever. Was he wearing the same clothes as last night?

“A love reading,” I repeated back suspiciously. I filed through the day’s clients in my head. Maria, Maria... “Haven’t seen her,” I said confidently.

“Maybe I’m at the wrong psychic,” he said aimlessly. Then, abruptly, he turned to leave. I folded my arms across my chest and watched him go, knowing fully well that I was the only psychic business in town.

It wasn’t until after that encounter that I finally realized I’d never checked my phone. He’d asked me about meeting for dinner at The Waterfront tomorrow. Not only that, but he’d

said he was interested in learning more about me. I told him I wasn't feeling well—I'd caught a fall cold, and had to cancel. I felt hollow throughout the rest of my lunch break despite the breaking of the sun through the clouds and the warm autumn colors outside. Another text had been from Ben, asking me when I might be free to see him again. I'd told him I could meet for dinner tomorrow. Phoebe had also left me a few messages—she'd been the first one to text me this morning, it turned out. I felt bad for evading her messages. It turned out, she wanted to ask my opinion on something. I texted her back to ask what it was. She replied quickly to say that it was weird and that she'd rather tell me in person.

I told her I wouldn't be visiting until next weekend, and that I was sorry, but it'd just have to wait until then.

Chapter 6

It was a cold evening. I'd wrapped myself in a sweater and put on a scarf to protect my neck from the harsh wind. I felt energized on my drive over, perhaps even excited, to see my family, but upon sliding out of my truck and setting foot in the yard, all of that excitement ebbed away. It wasn't that I didn't love my mother, but talking with her was always a lot to handle. It was especially a lot after I'd worked all day, in light of knowing that Ben and I could have gone on our fourth date tonight, had I not promised to visit my family for dinner.

Phoebe had been waiting on the porch to greet me. When I saw the excitement on her face, I immediately felt bad about my frustration. Family was important, too. Ben and I had plans for dinner tomorrow at six, anyway.

"Claire!" She called happily, waving in a wide, childish motion.

"Hi, Pheebs," I returned. I'd been calling her 'Pheebs' for almost twenty years now. It used to bother her, back when she was a teenager and wanted to move past her childhood. Now, on the cusp of eighteen, she embraced the childish nickname once more.

"It's been ages!" She wrapped her arms around me in a hug.

"I know, I know. Sorry I didn't stop by sooner; I've had a ton going on."

Her happy smile wavered for a moment. "You missed a lot, y'know."

"I'm sorry," I said, and I meant it. I ruffled my hand through her hair, another thing that I used to do to irritate her, but now was a playful way to show affection. "Work's just been really busy. To be honest, I meant to answer you, but... I forgot."

I felt her soften beneath my touch and sigh. "It's okay. We can talk about it later." We broke apart and she whisked inside. "Mom made pie yesterday; we might still have a piece to spare for you."

I grinned and followed her inside while I tried to recall what she'd texted me about. It had been nearly all day since she texted me, and I felt awfully guilty about never getting back to her. Now, I'd have to repeat everything I'd said to Phoebe but ten times as earnest and apologetic to my mother, lest I wanted a lecture and even more guilt piled onto my conscience.

Dinner went by quickly. I hadn't told them I was stopping by, but I knew what time they ate. My mother usually over-cooked for her meals, so I knew they'd have enough food for me. It was good to be home, once I'd adjusted to the hustle and bustle of being around the high-energy women in our family again. I certainly got my personality honestly.

After formalities, my mom and my sister were half at-war with choosing the conversation topic. My mom wanted to discuss a series she'd been reading, but my sister kept redirecting everyone to our family, to reminiscing of the past.

"Pheebs," I said exasperatedly, "Mom's gonna yell at you if you interrupt her again." Truth be told, I wanted to know if the businessman and the model from my mother's series were going to fall in love.

She shrunk back sheepishly into her chair and picked at some peas while my mom told me that the two of them do, in fact, fall in love. I knew it. "It's a great series," she assured me, "You ought to read it. It's something of a love triangle, but the other guy doesn't stand a chance. They're absolutely perfect for each other."

I smiled and inquired about the other guy, fully ensnared in a story I knew I'd never have the time to read, while Phoebe became more and more agitated.

She finally interjected, just as my mom was about to tell me the underdog's big secret, the reason why he was worthy of the heroine's heart in the first place. We both snapped our attention to her.

“You don’t have to sit here and listen to us,” Mom said.

“It’s not that.” She shifted in her seat. “I just was really hoping for a chance to talk to Claire. I have some things I wanna ask her.” I noticed my mother’s gaze sharpen in curiosity, and Phoebe backtracked. “About senior year. I’m starting on my senior project.”

I knew my sister, could hear the hesitation in her voice. She was lying. I think our mother suspected it too, but she merely shrugged and took our plates to the sink. “Whatever, I’m sure Claire would be glad to help.” She turned toward me as Phoebe was already pushing her chair in. “Want a piece of pie to take with you?”

“Mom makes the best apple pie,” I sighed, my cheeks full, as I finally sat down on the floor of my sister’s room. This used to be my room, and I wasn’t quite fond of the change in décor that she’d enacted since I moved out. It was bland now. I could see the faded marks on the wall, between her posters of boy bands and happy couples and Instagram models, where I’d hung my own decorations: posters of punk bands, of hard rock music, tapestries of skeletons and vampires and snarling animals. Black, everything black, covering as much of my wall as I could, because I hadn’t been allowed to paint over the pale yellow walls. My eyes drifted to her tackboard by the desk. There were pictures of us; we clustered together on the right edge. Next to that, she’d kept one of my old decorations up in my honor. It was a painting I’d made when I was thirteen, at the peak of my emo phase, of the two of us together. Except, you couldn’t tell it was us, because it was just two wolves facing each other with their paws entangled in some sort of canine embrace. The bigger wolf was snarling at a smudgy, blurred silhouette of another wolf in the background behind her sister’s back. In squiggly font, painted in white atop the black background I’d chosen, it read, *TWO MAN PACK!*

It was something I never wanted to travel beyond the walls of this room, but for my age, the painting itself wasn't bad, or all that anatomically incorrect. The text could use some work. We weren't men, for starters.

I felt another stab of guilt as I looked at the painting. I'd abandoned her, more and more, since I moved out, and judging by how deflated she looked when I'd arrived, she still needed me. She was perched atop her bed, looking at the floor near me but not quite at me and fidgeting with her fingers. It was odd for her not to speak her mind as soon as she had something to say.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I coaxed gently.

She shifted her weight around. "I don't even know if it's worth saying anymore."

"Of course it is," I reassured her. "You've got me so curious at this point, you've gotta tell me."

"Well, okay." She slid off her bed and crossed the room. I watched her, my curiosity nearly visceral, as she opened her sock drawer and rummaged around. She made a soft grumble in what I thought was frustration. I noticed the socks piling up on one side of the drawer. Had she lost whatever she was looking for? It took all the strength I had not to jump up and help her look.

Finally, she found it. In one hand, she held what looked like a small frame. My eyes were glued to it as she took her time reorganizing her socks. "Do you have to do that now?" I asked tersely.

"Yes," she replied. "I told you, it's not that big of a deal, really. And if I *don't* reorganize my socks now, I never will, and my sock drawer will fall into chaos, and then bit by bit, the rest of my drawers will too. And *then*, my closet. After that? My whole room. It's too easy not to care, and too hard to start caring once things start to fall apart."

I nodded gravely. Before she moved into my old room, she was a chronically messy kid. I'd hate to see her relapse.

She was hugging the frame against her chest as she approached and finally, she lowered herself down in front of me. She sat cross-legged, looked a little wary.

"Is that a picture?" I asked.

"Yes." She studied me for a moment. My eyes were on the frame. It looked familiar.

"What is it a picture of? Is it relevant?"

"Yes." She paused. "No."

I squinted at her.

"Yes," she explained, "It's not about the photo itself. But it also is."

I was about ready to push her over and rip the photo out of her arms, like when we were kids and she had something I'd wanted, or had stolen from my room.

Finally, she turned the frame around and held it out to me. I noticed the way she handled it carefully, as if it might crumble to dust in her hands. Or maybe, as if she couldn't believe what she was holding.

It was a picture of all of us. The realization hit hard.

I studied the picture, even though I could probably see it just as well with my eyes closed. My dad and mom were in the center. My dad's one arm was around my mom's back, and hers around his. Their free arms rested protectively on Phoebe and I's shoulders, my dad's on mine and my mom's on Phoebe's. We all looked happy, Phoebe and I especially; we were too young not to be, were blissfully unaware of the tragedy that would hit our family only a few months later.

I was wearing a graphic tee that screamed 2009. Phoebe was wearing a frilly green dress which made her mess of ginger curls and freckles pop, while my shirt was too big and too loud. I towered over her, me, being about eight and her, freshly having turned five. I studied my shirt again, lingered on the old, familiar graphic which depicted an offensively stylized, mischievous monkey wearing sunglasses and applying lipstick to her puckered lips. The words were printed in big, bubblegum-pink font: TOO COOL FOR SCHOOL. That was the icing on the cake. The cake itself was that the shirt was camo-patterned, but not traditional camo, that green-and-pink camo that was popular for girls' clothing in that era. I could see why my mom had tried every bargaining trick in the book to get me to wear something, *anything* else on my first day back to school.

My mom softened her view on that shirt when I started wearing it every day. I'd come home from school, whip whatever starchy, uncomfortable *other* shirt I'd been wearing off, and run to the comfort of my room to wear it. It wasn't just the shirt, but *the* shirt. The one I was wearing before my dad died, the one I saw myself wearing every time I looked at this last picture of all of us together. The shirt that, when I was wearing it, made me look just the same as the version of me in that picture, who was smiling and happy and warm beneath the touch of her father's palm.

I grimaced. "What do you want to tell me that is and isn't about this picture?"

She made a sound like she was sucking on her teeth and her hands worked at the back of the frame. Out slipped the photo, and she carefully picked it up and flipped it over.

"Dad left us a note on the back. You know about it?"

"No. Let me read it."

She handed it over. “It’s weird. Everything about it is weird. I never knew it was there, either.” There was a bitterness in her voice, beneath the confusion.

My heartrate had picked up. My fingers nearly trembled as I held it and started reading.

Girls —

I am so proud of who you’ve become. I always will be, no matter where you are. I hope, years from now, I’m someone you can be proud of, too. It’s hard, to be a father and want to give your children the world, but to be human and know that what you can actually give them is so little. I have so much I want to tell you. Especially you, Claire. But you’re not ready to hear it now, so all I can do is leave you with this. I love you so, so much. You make life worth living.

-P. H., 10/21

I felt tears budding at the corners of my eyes. “What’s so weird about that?” I rasped.

At first, she threw me a sharp look, then softened. “The date.”

I’d hardly paid any attention to his signature. Now, those four numbers he’d written seemed more like a shining beacon than anything else.

She nodded slowly with an *uh-hum*. “Okay, now go back and read it again, and tell me if it’s weird.”

I did. To my surprise, it *was* weird. Nothing made sense and I felt like kicking Phoebe out of her own room so that I could curl up on her bed—my old bed—and cry. “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?” I croaked.

“I tried,” she said, “But you were busy, and I didn’t know if you’d think it was as big of a deal as I did,” she confessed. “I still don’t know what to make of it.”

“Well, I do,” I snapped. “That picture was taken in August. He didn’t live to October of that year.” I actually didn’t have any idea what to make of it.

“So then, what?”

“So... did he actually die when we thought he did? Or at all?”

She squinted at me. I could see the gears in her head turning. She wanted to refute my question. I did, too, but there was a desperation in my heart, something telling me that if I voiced that particular thought, it was one step closer to being true.

She folded her arms around her chest and shook her head. “I don’t know, Claire, you’re the gifted one here. D’you really think that’s what it means?”

“What else could it mean? He wouldn’t have dated a letter a couple weeks in advance.”

“Well, what happened on October 21st that year? Anything?”

I put my head in my hands. “You think I remember?”

We sat in tense silence for a while. All I could hear was the hammering of my own heart in my ears. Finally, I was certain I’d come up with an answer. “If he really did write this on the 21st, that means he—” I had to take a breath to steady myself. “He didn’t die when we thought he did, and that makes everything in this note weird, almost like he’s apologizing for leading us to believe that he’s dead.”

She nodded.

“So, obviously, he’s out there somewhere.” I got to my feet. “We have to go find him.”

She stood up after me, much more hesitantly. “Are you... sure? I mean, I don’t mind looking, but where does someone hide after faking their own death? Won’t it be like, near-impossible to find him?”

“We’ll think about this,” I said resolutely.

“Should we ask mom?”

“What do you mean, should we ask mom? Should we ask her what? ‘Hey, mom, did you lie to us for twelve years about our dad being dead? Yeah? Wow, cool, thanks for making it as easy as that and finally telling us after all these years! I’m sure you’re not guilty at all, and had no ongoing reason to keep that from us!’” I could feel myself getting frantic. “Or, maybe she’d say something like, ‘You’re fucking insane! He’s dead as a doornail, and I know because I saw him in that car the night of the accident.’”

Phoebe pointed at me. “But she wasn’t *in* the car with him.”

I felt like crying. Perhaps out of revelation, or simply because I was tired, or because I felt like my whole life had been a lie up to this point. “Oh my god... didn’t they say his body was unrecognizable afterward? They had to rely on the license plate and all of us vouching that he’d gone out that night?”

She turned white as we looked at each other. “And... it happened at night, on an abandoned stretch of road.”

“This sounds like something out of a book,” I murmured, fighting back tears. “No one does that. No one goes out without saying where and takes a barely-used back road and gets into a horrific accident in the middle of the night. How did we never think anything of it before?”

“Faking your own death sounds even more like something out of a book,” Phoebe said, her voice small. “I mean, I guess it happens in real life, but only to really important people, y’know? Like spies.”

Maybe this *was* far-fetched. Maybe it was too good to be true. We weren’t living in a fairytale. But then, it dawned on me. “Dad was someone important. I mean, he *is*. Maybe

someone found out about his gift. Maybe he... knew he had to go, so he left us this note with the wrong date on it to purposely catch our eyes. His intuition could've told him to do it."

We brainstormed all kinds of explanations as to what had happened to him and where he'd gone. We narrowed it down to a few options: working for our government, taken by a *foreign* government, stolen by some billionaire who wanted to study him or use his powers for their own gain. But after that, we lost steam. This was too ambitious of a case for first-time detectives, and we felt at a loss as to where to go next.

"What if it wasn't about his intuition?" Phoebe ventured. "What else might someone want with Dad?"

"Don't be stupid," I chided her, "It's definitely because of the intuition."

At that point, our mother poked her head into the room. "Hey, Claire—you staying the night?"

I checked my phone. "Oh no, I lost track of time."

She smiled. "Well, I hope you'll consider it. It's dark out now, so you'd be safer to just drive out in the morning. Plus, it's nice to have us all together, like old times."

She didn't know the half of it.

"Okay," I agreed, so that she might leave us to continue our conversation. She did.

Phoebe yawned. "Hey, Claire. It's late. I think we could both benefit from taking a break from thinking for the night."

I didn't want to hear it, but I knew she was right. "Alright. I'm going to head home."

"You're not going to stay here?"

"Hell no. I'm not sleeping on the couch."

We both laughed. She let me take the photograph, now nestled note-side-up in the frame.

As I drove home, I realized what my next step would be.

Chapter 7

I was upside-down, hanging off the edge of my bed as I held the phone tightly against my ear. “You’re sure you’re not free at any other time?” I could feel irritation swelling in my throat, a by-product of my racing mind wanting information and being forced to slow down. I wondered if he was sour with me about cancelling last week.

“That’s it. Take it or leave it.”

My intuition told me to leave it. My head told me to take it. I was getting better at doing the things I wanted to do rather than the things my sixth sense told me to do, but I had a bad feeling about it. The only time the undertaker could meet was at 6. As fate would have it, that was when Ben and I had agreed to meet for our next date. I’d have to ask him about rescheduling, but if he couldn’t, could I really resist my intuition and stand him up to go learn more about my dad’s death? I’d tried to skip my first date with Ben but had been powerless to do so, but maybe what little practice I’d had since then would be enough, if push came to shove.

“Alright,” I sighed, “that works.” I supposed I was grateful he’d answered his phone at all. I’d called him in a panic after I got home, hoping to solidify plans before he gave up on me and decided he might do something else tomorrow. As I thought about it, I realized he’s definitely the kind of person who stays up late into the odd hours of the night.

“See you soon,” he said flatly.

Cancelling on Ben was something I felt I should do by phone rather than by sending a hasty text. And so, after I’d gone to bed and tossed and turned all night, I called him.

“Claire,” he said, his voice a little breathless, just above a whisper on the other line. I’d never called him before.

“Hey, Ben,” I said. My heart lurched at the sound of his voice, his heavenly timbre and that light, optimistic tone he always had. It broke when I realized why I was calling him. “So, about today,” I began. He told me to go on, and so I did: “Something’s come up. I’m so sorry, but I have to cancel our date.”

“It’s alright,” he assured me, “You can just give me a call when you’re free again.” There was a hesitation on his end before he asked, “I hope everything’s okay?”

I didn’t know what to say, and so I said nothing.

His voice was still quiet. I almost wondered if there was someone else in the room with him. “You are okay, right?” he asked.

How could I tell him? How could I even begin? The guilt was nearly eating me alive. The worst part was that I was cancelling my date with him to go on a date with someone else, someone who was a dark, grungy man who couldn’t hold a candle to Ben, but whose line of work might mean he was in the perfect place at the perfect time to answer some very important, life-changing questions that I had. I sighed. “I’m okay. I’m fine, physically. It’s a family thing. I promise, I’ll explain it all to you someday, but it’s kind of a mess right now.” I thought about my intuition, how it pulled me so strongly to him, and how I wanted to savor the feelings he brought when I was with him, but wasn’t sure that I could let myself have it anymore until I figured it all out. My intuition had strongly resisted my calling him and cancelling our date, but I realized, as I felt a rush of endorphins, that my intuition’s alarm bells had faded away sometime during the call. “*I’m* kind of a mess right now,” I added.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. My heart twisted in my chest. “Just know that it’s not going to be easy, if you want to keep seeing me. I’m going to do things and they’re not going to make

sense all the time, and I'm sorry. You don't have to stick around. It's only been a couple dates." I wondered if he thought I was being too dramatic. If he didn't feel for me what I felt toward him, maybe he'd be tempted to hang up on me and run screaming.

"That's okay," he said simply. I could nearly feel the warmth in his voice through the phone. It made me want to cry. "Maybe we can meet for a walk when things have cleared up for you. I think the next few days are going to be the last time we'll see sun for a while."

"Okay," I said back, feeling reassured. "I think I heard that, too. There's a cold front moving in, or something." I smiled, even though he couldn't see it. "Thanks, Ben. You're the best."

We hung up, and I realized I'd meant to break it off with him in favor of figuring out my intuition. Despite myself, I knew I'd be meeting him for a walk on one of the days when Josie was working in the shop. It was too tempting when I had the day off and he had some extra time to spare after work before driving out of town.

Ben and I weren't exclusive, but it certainly felt like it had been building up to something like that despite my efforts to resist my intuition. A nervous hope lingered in the back of my mind that I wouldn't ruin everything by going on a fake date with another guy, and I spent the rest of the morning in a guilty, scattered mess. I destroyed everything I touched—I spilled my morning tea, I stepped on Quartz's tail and sent her hissing up my curtains, I left my wallet in the house just as I was leaving for my date with the undertaker, and then subsequently locked my keys inside my truck when I went back in to grab it.

"Shit," I cursed, pawing at the frosty glass and staring at my keys like a kid outside a candy shop. Now what did I do? I'd planned on leaving early for my date so that I could steel

myself for an arduous conversation with the undertaker, but now there was a very real chance I'd be late—if I could even get there.

I needed to make a phone call or two. Phoebe and mom weren't options—I didn't want either of them to know I was going on a date. There would be too many questions. Phoebe would understand why I was going if I told her it was to get more information on dad, but then there'd be no keeping it from our mother, who would get entirely too excited and start teasing me about grandbabies, which she always pouted she wouldn't be getting from either of us in our youth. I couldn't open that can of worms. Next thing she'd want would be for me to bring the gross, dirty man over for dinner. I could picture him now, a point of darkness amidst the happy brightness of our kitchen.

I had a moment of clarity. Josie! My fingers flew over my phone screen as I found her contact info and called her. She didn't answer. I cursed under my breath as I pondered my other options. I stared at my most recent messages. About halfway down, ominous and foreboding as ever, was his contact: The Undertaker. I could call him and ask him to pick me up. But did I want to?

Fifteen minutes passed. Josie hadn't answered her phone and I was running out of options. I texted him, The Undertaker, and told him my situation. He responded with a simple, "I'll be over."

Over where? I asked if he'd need my address, to which he responded that he would, and then I gave it to him. I almost called him stupid, and as I stood there, shivering on my front steps as I waited for him to pull up, I regretted that I didn't. It wasn't his fault that I was stuck in the cold, but if I'd been stuck in the cold longer because he was lost, prowling through the streets in whatever shitty, beat-up car he had, I would've been *really* pissed.

The honking of a horn startled me to attention. I stared out across the lawn, with its dead, yellow grass, to the sidewalk and street beyond. A sleek black hearse had pulled up. The windows were tinted and I couldn't see inside. I fought back the urge to stand up and head back inside my shop, but instead, I slung my purse over my shoulder and approached tentatively. The window cracked and I peered inside. "There's not a dead body in there, right?" It was a joke, but I half-held my breath as the window rolled down, just in case.

A pair of sharp, tired eyes stared back at me from inside. "Of course not," he rasped. "Just dropped the last one off at the funeral home before I got you."

My hand stilled above the door handle. "I don't want to get in anymore."

He leaned over and pushed the door open for me. "Sure you do. I sprayed air freshener, just for you."

Was that a joke? Was he even capable of joking? I tentatively brought myself inside and sat down. Despite my better judgement telling me I should look straight ahead and not engage beyond what was absolutely necessary, because I was certainly not interested in this date with him beyond its usefulness to me for investigative purposes, I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. I'm not sure why, but I'd been expecting him to be wearing the same grungy three layers that I'd seen him in the two previous times we'd encountered one-another. Instead, he was clad in a brown leather jacket and had shaved those wisps of a beard I'd seen before. The neatness of the slicked-back hair, clean shave, and smooth leather looked irregular on him. I found solace in noticing he'd used too much hair gel; it made his roots look greasy. That was the undertaker I'd come to know. Had it not been for that, and the eerie silence spread between us, I might have wondered if I'd gotten picked up by a stranger. The hearse was also an indication that this really was him. I hoped the hearse wasn't an omen.

A dagger of fear struck me when I realized that I had, in fact, gotten in the car with a stranger. I didn't even know his name.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He stared back with those tired eyes of his. I could count the lines under them. "The Waterfont, if you still want to go there." I wondered if he was upset that I'd forgotten.

Dinner first, then. "Sure," I said. I leaned back in his seat. "Were we going to talk about my dad over dinner, or go somewhere else to do it?"

"What do you mean, 'go somewhere else'?"

I crossed my arms defensively. "I don't know. Maybe to the funeral home, so you can see if you have any records on him?"

He shook his head, expelled a cynical puff of air. "I already checked for records. We did have your dad. Funeral records don't provide much, though I could tell you how much we charged you."

I was surprised to hear that he'd already done his research. "So then, what can you tell me?"

"Nothing," he said. "I remember helping my dad embalm him and dress him for the service," he said, his voice distant and tinged with memory. "I helped out at the funeral, which was rare for me at that age. I didn't really like being around people back then. I think that's why I remember him so vividly."

"You were a recluse back then?" I said sarcastically. "I never would've guessed."

"Do you remember seeing me?" he asked. The question caught me off-guard.

"No," I said. "I don't remember anything from that funeral." I remembered everything. That was one of the worst days of my life, second only to the night my dad had died.

We were stopped at a light a few blocks away from the Waterfront. He glanced out his window. “You helped me that day.” he said.

The memories came flooding back, the pain dulled into something of a phantom ache, a remembrance of what was no longer there after years passed. Realization dawned on me. “The garden,” I said. “That was you.” He’d obviously changed a lot since I’d seen him fourteen years ago, but I did remember him. I had been crying in the chapel, crumpled up in one of the pews, when he’d come up to me, tapped me on the shoulder, and motioned for me to follow him. I’d thought he was weird even then, but he’d led me through the funeral home to show me a huge, elegant garden in the back. We’d sat outside on a bench, surrounded by early-September flowers and sunlight, until I stopped crying. He hadn’t said a word to me, not that I could remember.

I shook my head. “How did I help you that day?”

“Nevermind,” he said quietly. “Just know that you did. That’s why I remember you.”

I could tell by his body language, the way he was adamantly looking forward at the road, the grip of his hands on the steering wheel—not rough, but rigid—that I wasn’t getting any more information out of him. “I got in so much trouble when I got back to the chapel,” I said, to try and lighten the mood. “My family couldn’t comprehend why I’d run off right before the funeral started.” Except, I remembered my mom wasn’t mad. She was the only one of the adults that understood, I think, and the only one that mattered, because I didn’t get in trouble when I returned covered in pollen and bugs.

The conversation died there, and I was left with my thoughts. I wasn’t looking forward to dinner much at all; I’d already eaten a few hours ago, even though it hadn’t been much. My appetite was nonexistent today; the awful conversation with Ben was still on my mind. Thoughts

of him had occupied my whole day, up until I'd locked my keys in my truck. Now, they were returning.

I studied the undertaker's face, the hard lines of his jaw, the dark creases under his eyes and on his forehead which seemed to age him. His hair was grown-out and dark. It was hard to find any similarities between him and Ben. Even their jobs seemed worlds away; Ben dealt in the quick and uncertain, the liveliness of business, while the undertaker worked with the mournful and slow.

He glanced at me. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, why?"

He shrugged, twisted his lips wryly. "You've been looking at me for an awfully long time, is all."

"Zoned out," I said quickly. "What's your name?" I studied his rough features, the way they scrunched up slowly at the question.

"You never asked before," he said, in that slow, careful way, "Why do you care now?"

"I don't," I said quickly. I should've felt guilty about this. Maybe I did. I scrambled to say something else. "I mean, I can just call you 'Gravedigger,' if you want."

"You could, but it's incorrect." His lips twitched. "I've only dug three graves."

"Undertaker?"

"Kinda has a ring to it."

I pointed at him, not done. "Mortician."

"Shorten that, actually," he said. "You're close."

“Mort?” He didn’t say anything. “Is that your name?” I’d heard of a few Morts. Mortimers, probably, who didn’t think about the grim undertones their nicknames carried. I hadn’t thought of it either, until now.

He pressed his lips into a tight line, scrunched his face up again. He peeked at me from the corners of his eyes as he drove.

“Did your parents want you to be a mortician or something?”

He still had that weird look on his face. “I’m the eldest child. My parents wanted me to inherit the business.”

I remembered he’d said he’d been visiting family, that he’d just told me he’d only dug three graves. He must’ve lost both of his parents, plus someone else.

“Did they have spooky death names, too?” I teased, though my voice was softer.

He gave a subtle shake of his head, in that lazy way of his. “My mom’s name was Maria,” he said. “And my dad’s was—”

“Maria,” I interrupted him. “You’ve told me about her before, haven’t you?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I don’t really talk about my parents, especially with strangers.”

Strangers. He said the word with so much distaste, I almost perceived it as hostility. I didn’t like it. I myself had been thinking we were strangers when I got into his car, but the word didn’t seem apt anymore. I frowned. “We aren’t strangers,” I said. “We go way back, Mort. Remember?”

He broke the tension with a laugh. My frown deepened. It sounded more like a cough than a sound of mirth. “What?”

“You,” he said. “Really believing my name is Mort.” He side-eyed me again. “People aren’t just named after their abilities. We don’t grow into them.”

“What is your name, then?”

“Malcolm.”

It fit, somehow. Something about the sound of it in my mouth. Mal-come. I snorted to save myself some pride. “Yeah, well, my name’s not Claire.”

He arched a brow at me.

“It’s not. It’s just a work name.” I’d lied when my intuition suggested that I should. I lied every day at work. And yet, this felt different. My intuition had faded away, and now I was lying out of something other than necessity, for the mere sake of pride. It made me feel like a kid again. I wasn’t sure that I was convincing enough.

“Like a stripper?” he quipped, looking straight ahead at the road. He turned into the restaurant’s parking lot.

“You wish.”

“I do not,” he returned as he parked the car.

I glowered out the window until we’d come to a stop, then pushed myself out the door. My feet hit the pavement jarringly soon—I’d forgotten I was in a hearse that nearly kissed the ground as it drove and not my rickety truck. It only added to my sour mood.

“What’s your name then, soothsayer?”

“Soothsayer? What are you, a thousand years old?”

“Sure feels like it sometimes,” he grunted. We walked into the Waterfront. I was surprised and relieved when he took the lead and hardly even glanced behind himself to see if I was following. I didn’t want to walk beside him or take his arm anyway.

“This place is packed,” I commented, my arms crossed, as we waited. It was reservation-only, so I wasn’t concerned about getting a table, but still, the line just to reach the front counter was long.

He nodded and looked around the front room. He didn’t ask me a second time about my name, so I was left to assume he didn’t believe my bluff earlier. My sour mood grew worse as we waited silently, longer and longer, until we finally reached the counter.

“What was the name under?” the well-dressed waiter asked.

Malcolm stared at him a moment too long. I saw something akin to grief flash in his eyes. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach as I waited for him to say his next words. I knew what they’d be. “Didn’t have a reservation.”

The man’s face hardened. “We’re booked.”

Back in his car, I glared at him as the setting sun cast vibrant red hues across our faces. “You didn’t get reservations.”

“I did,” he said tersely, “But then you flaked that time, so I cancelled them.”

“So when I called you, why didn’t you remake them?” I never reacted well to being called out, even if what he’d said was absolutely true.

“Maybe because you called at two in the morning,” he said sardonically. “I didn’t trust you to follow through this time, either.” He put the car in reverse.

“What are you doing now?” I asked, indignant.

“Backing up,” he said.

“Obviously,” I shot back. “But why? Where are we going?”

“I dunno,” he said, “We passed a hotdog vendor in town.”

I closed my eyes, pressed my lips together into a firm line, and tried to channel my anger anywhere but into my voice. “I think you’d better take me home.” He’d been a dead-end as far as my dad was concerned, anyway.

“Fine,” he said.

As we approached the hot dog vendor, I felt the car decelerate. Did he forget I’d told him to bring me home? “What are you doing,” I asked for the second time.

He parked the car on the side of the street. “I want a hotdog,” he said. I looked at his face. It looked sullen and impassive as ever, but there was a certain quirk to his lips, a crookedness, a glint in his eyes as he glanced sideways at me.

“You son of a bitch,” I cursed, my voice low.

“Wait in the car,” he directed, “So the townspeople don’t get you. A powerful witch such as yourself is surely sought after by the commonfolk.”

I lasted a whole thirty seconds in the car before pushing out into the cold street and stamping up to join him in line. There was a single man ahead of us. He was middle-aged and balding, with an odd combover arrangement atop his head that made him almost look like the end of a hot dog itself. I tried to find symbolism in this while I decidedly didn’t speak or look at Malcolm.

“So you’re not too good for a street hotdog,” he observed.

“When did you become a smartass?” I quipped. “You were awfully sullen in the cemetery. Well-behaved, almost.”

“That’s what cemeteries are for,” he said with a shrug.

Gentleman that he was, he let me order mine first. But, as he ordered his hotdog, I remembered where I'd heard Maria before. "Hey! Your mom, Maria. Did she die?"

"Can you wait to bring up my dead mom until after I've finished telling this man that I want ketchup and mustard?" He looked unphased by my question. If anything, he looked mischievous.

The hotdog vendor gave me a cowed look. The hotdog-looking man had stopped, two paces away from the cart, to chow down on some dogs of his own. Even he, finished with one and starting on his second dog, gave us a fearful look.

"No. You said you were looking for her when you came into my shop the other day."

We looked at each other. The vendor held Malcom's dogs limply in his hand, waiting for him to take them. The balding man was still looking at us, though he tried to feign disinterest when I glanced at him. "Let's address that later," he said, taking the hotdogs out of the man's hand.

"I'm going to get ketchup all over your seat," I threatened. He locked his doors and guided me to a café two doors down.

He'd driven us here to eat, yet still ordered hotdogs. I nearly sputtered. He motioned toward the outdoor seating arrangement to sit down.

"Did you stop at that vendor out of spite?" I asked, incredulous. "And are we really going to eat here if we aren't getting anything from the café?"

"I would never," he said. "And yes, we are, because I'm not cleaning ketchup off my upholstery later." I got the impression that neither of us cared, and we sat down.

I scowled at him, but my irritation with him had faded long ago. "When did you start working at the funeral home?"

He was halfway through taking a bite of hotdog as I posed my question. I had to endure a painstaking wait for him to finish chewing. “I can’t remember when I started learning how to do everything. Dealing with the dead has always been a part of my life,” he said. “With it being in the family.”

I wished he wouldn’t speak with his mouth full. “When did you start seeing every body your parents’ business dressed?” I hoped he wouldn’t give me a vague answer.

“I didn’t see every body until I took over the business,” he said. “But I started learning about the process seriously about fifteen years ago.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. I remembered him telling me that he couldn’t give much more information on my dad, but I couldn’t help asking. “Did you work on my dad?”

He shook his head. “I remember being at his funeral—obviously—but I don’t know about the prep. How’d he die?”

“Car accident? It…” I began, unsure of how to phrase it, “Didn’t leave a lot of identifying features.”

His face lit up and he straightened up. “Oh, yeah,” he said, his tone bright with memory. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger along his chin. “I remember him.”

I leaned forward in my chair.

“He’s the guy they had to identify by his teeth,” Malcolm went on.

I felt a sick twist in my gut, but realized this could be useful information for investigation, despite how upsetting it was to hear even all these years later. “Did they match them?”

“Oh, hell if I know. I overheard my dad talking about it, though. It was the day I learned they could do that with bodies.”

Technically, I couldn't be sure of an official identification yet. "Is there anything you can tell me about him? Anything weird?" Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a server approaching us warily.

"I think I would've been eleven... just started to shadow my parents around that time," he mused. He trained his eyes on me, and I felt like he was searching for something. I hadn't noticed how blue they were before. Maybe that was what made him look so old, his light eyes. If he was eleven back then, he'd only be twenty-five now. "He was the first body I worked on without a face," he snorted. I couldn't believe it, but I also shouldn't have expected anything else. I made sure to show that I wasn't laughing with him.

The server had reached us now. "This patio is for paying customers only," he said timidly.

Malcolm waved him away with his hand. "We're good, thanks." I was amazed to watch the horrified little man scamper away.

I traced the server with my eyes as he left. "And that's it? Nothing else weird to report?"

He leaned back in his chair. "You're talking about something that happened fourteen years ago. My mind was full of things more important than studying the dead bodies I came across. After the first ten or so, they all blur together. I wouldn't have remembered your dad if it weren't for his lack of a face." There was a pause between us, a moment when I couldn't think to say anything else because I'd hit a dead end. "I am a little desensitized to this stuff because of my job, I guess, and because I've lost a lot of family," he said apologetically as he caught the glare I was casting his way. "But anyway, why do you want to know all this now?"

“I think you’d laugh if you knew,” I said indignantly. “The whole thing makes me want to laugh.” Holding onto hope that my dad might be alive after all these years was something I could only do because I knew how special he was.

“C’mon now,” he said. The dark lines of his face smoothed out, just for a moment. “I only laugh at things that aren’t funny.”

I studied him. I weighed my options of telling him and not telling him. I couldn’t imagine what harm it would do to tell him. If I shared it with him, maybe I could get an outside opinion. Or, maybe it could make the weight on my shoulders a little lighter.

I sighed. “My dad was special,” I began tentatively.

“Special how?” he interjected, taking advantage of the pause. “Special in the way that everyone thinks their dog is smarter than other people’s dogs?”

“No.”

“Special in the way that parents think their babies are beautiful, when really they look like—”

“I can’t tell you that.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You’ll tell me eventually.”

I would not. There’s no way he could understand, and telling other people about our gifts could be precisely how my dad ended up in a fake-death situation. “I doubt it.”

“If you had to compare it to one of the two,” he went on, “Which ‘special’ is it more like?”

A raised my brows in disbelief. I also had to keep myself from laughing. My pride and my sense of humor were at war. “Maybe I’d compare it to the way that everyone thinks their dog is special because it learns words like ‘cheese’ and ‘vet,’” I said finally.

He smiled widely and nodded his head. "Special indeed."

"Right," I said, trying to reign in the conversation, "So, a special guy like him would possibly attract some attention, right? Recently I found something, something I didn't know existed before." My heart was pounding in my chest as I anticipated saying it. I couldn't meet his eyes. "I was thinking, maybe... What if he isn't really dead?"

He laughed.

I felt heavy on the way home. As we rode in the darkness of the hearse, the air was still with silence. This time, it didn't bother me. I almost dozed off a couple times, until something shattered the peace. I remembered we had unfinished business.

"Hey." He didn't say anything. I supposed I'd keep going. "You never told me about Maria. In my shop the other day?"

"She's dead," he said as he drove. "Of course I wasn't looking for her."

That made no sense. "So then, what were you doing?"

He cast me a little glance as the tips of his lips quirked up. "Whatever I'd set out to do, I couldn't do when I saw you in there."

We didn't talk about it anymore after that, and we parted soon after with an exchange of the usual pleasantries and good-byes. He didn't ask if I wanted to see him again. I dragged myself inside and went straight to bed. I lay there thinking about him, him with his secrets and me with mine, the two of us shrouded in mystery.

It was only a few hours before I couldn't bear it any longer and called him.

"You've got to stop making it a habit of calling me at two in the morning," he said.

"I know," I laughed, a little nervously. "Even though it's only 1:30 this time."

He hummed on the other line, clearly knowing why I'd called.

"I just wanted to ask you a question," I said.

"Go ahead."

"When are you free next?"

Chapter 8

Josie, curious about my missed call, had called back the next morning. I'd told her a little bit too much—something along the lines of being worried I wouldn't make it to a date-not-date situation—and she was suddenly eager to come in and get the scoop. I was exhausted and sullen, low on sleep from Ben and Malcolm warring for attention in my dreams last night, and told her it would be best to stop by another time at the shop. She'd agreed on the phone, and I went about my day.

I was eating my lunch when the bell atop the door tingled and I saw her bright, shining face poke through the curtain, despite saying she'd let me rest.

“Claire?” she called, playfully tentative

“Josie,” I repeated, a little bit balefully, as I looked up from my sandwich. “You came after all.”

She playfully tiptoed in and sat down across from me at my table. “I couldn't resist,” she confessed, “Not after those texts yesterday.” She gave me a big, expectant look. “Tell me about it, all of it.”

I shrunk down in my seat. Were I in a better mood, I might have leapt at the opportunity to lay all my troubles on her shoulders and get some sympathy. I might have even thought about telling her that Malcolm wasn't all that bad, but something in me still wanted to deny being interested in him.

“I don't know where to start,” I said honestly. “I think I said yesterday that I locked my keys in my car, and I needed a ride to a date, right?”

She nodded. “And then when I texted you, you said something along the lines of not wanting to go on the date at all, and that it was weird so far.” She had large, delicate hoop earrings that bounced when she talked. They added to her enthusiasm.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I guess I did say that, huh?” I wasn’t sure if I could tell her the truth about the date or not. Josie was great, but I wasn’t sure if she’d understand all the nuances. “It was fine. I mean, he was irritating.” I was stumbling over my words horribly. “I mean, I’m seeing someone else and he can’t really compare to that guy. But I kinda sorta accidentally scheduled a second date with him anyway.”

Josie’s hazel eyes widened. “You’re seeing *two* guys?” She leaned back with an impish smile. “For someone who told me just a few weeks ago that you’re too busy to date, you’ve impressed me, Claire.”

“I am,” I blurted out. “I’m still too busy to date. Ben’s been meeting me on the weekends and at odd times during the week whenever we both happen to be free, so they’re just little lunch or coffee dates, usually, but we agreed that we wanted to try and see each other as often as we could, and it’s kind of working out. And the other one, Malcolm...” I looked down at the floor beside her, shifted awkwardly in my chair. I couldn’t elaborate on him right now. “I don’t know where these guys came from. I can’t really get them out of my life.”

Her brows raised in understanding sympathy. “Men are like that. You know the old saying, they’re natural hunters, the chase makes it all the more exciting, whatever,” she rolled her eyes.

“No, no, not like that,” I said, “The one guy, he’s great. I told him I wasn’t sure if I had time to go on regular dates with him and he took it really well, and doesn’t push or anything.” My cheeks flushed. “And the other guy... I’m not really dating him, or trying to date him, but he

keeps popping up everywhere.” I shook my head in disbelief. “I don’t think he means to, either. But then, after this first date, I couldn’t help it. I asked to see him again.”

“Sounds like fate,” she said simply. “You’re real in-tune with fate, aren’t you?”

“As in-tune as you are with feelings,” I replied. Josie was an empath, able to feel the emotions of others, pick up on something in a room of people which others might not. She claimed to be able to feel spirits’ presences, too—she worked as a psychic in my shop and also sometimes to help clients communicate with the dead. That was why she and I worked so well; I could tell her about my abilities and she could tell me about hers without fear of judgement.

She narrowed her eyes. “What does your intuition have to say about this?”

“Nothing,” I said. “You’d think I’d be picking up on something, wouldn’t you? But I’ve been working on resisting it lately, which we’ve talked about before, and it’s been working. Problem is, now it’s kind of gone altogether.” I knew if I told Josie that seeing Ben was encouraging my intuition and seeing Malcolm was resisting it, she’d chide me for even entertaining the idea of meeting Malcolm for more information about my dad, let alone a possible second date. She didn’t understand why I was trying to resist my gift in the first place.

“Weird, how our abilities choose to stay silent at the worst times, huh? I had a woman whose husband just died come in to see me the other day, so I could help her make sense of what she was feeling, and I had nothing to say to her.” She clicked her tongue. “Couldn’t get a single read.”

I felt my bad mood soften. “Did you do the right thing?”

“Of course I did,” she said, understanding my question. “I told her that it’s natural to feel numb about these things, and that she’s probably in shock, and that’s why she isn’t feeling world-shattering grief yet.” She pressed her brows together sheepishly, as if she were about to

laugh. “And she told me she’d only married him for his money and just wasn’t sure if she should feel guilty or happy.” Josie shrugged. “I’m getting a bad review for that one—was totally off the mark.”

I snickered. “You win some, you lose some.” I got the sense that her ability staying quiet and mine consistently being quiet was different, though. “Seriously though, I think my problem is a little bigger. Like, I fought against it, and I haven’t felt it since.”

“That’s pretty weird,” she admitted. “Maybe you’re too stressed? Well, I know you are—it’s the loudest emotion in this room.”

I couldn’t deny that, but I also felt like it went deeper.

She perked up, always one to want to shift the mood to a happier note. I couldn’t imagine it was easy to literally be weighed down by others’ negativity. “Hey, speaking of, while you were talking about those guys, I got the sense that you were happy about something. Y’know, despite also obviously sounding tired and stressed and irritated.”

This surprised me. Sad, confused, irritated, tired, stressed... I could think of a lot of emotions which I felt, but none of them were positive. I folded my arms across my chest. “See? You’re great at what you do,” I told her, “Because you know things that I’m feeling before I even know I’m feeling them.”

After work, I had no resolute plans. It was nice, considering the hectic past few days I’d endured. I almost felt listless on the drive home as I wondered what I might do to fill the free time.

Instead of taking time off, I decided to call Phoebe. She deserved to know all the updates on Dad that I had, even if they weren’t groundbreaking.

She picked up by the second ring. I loved that about her. Unlike me, she always had her phone on and checked it often. It made her very dependable.

“Pheebs,” I greeted her, my voice warm.

“You’re calling already?” she questioned from the other line. “Did you find anything?”

“Maybe,” I told her. “I talked to the mortician that dressed Dad’s body. So far, it sounds suspicious as to whether or not it was really his body that was brought into the funeral home all that time ago.”

“Why?” she urged. I heard interest spark in her tone.

“He didn’t identify the body. Someone told him who it was, and he had no reason not to believe them, but he said all identifying features were gone.” My tone became reverent, somber. “The accident did that to him. Or, it did it to whoever was in the car in his place.”

Phoebe was quiet for a while. She was thinking over this information, I’d assumed, until she finally spoke up: “We need to talk to Mom about this.”

My stomach dropped. “You know I think it’s a waste of time,” I said warily. The truth was, not wanting to talk to my mom about this situation went deeper than me thinking it would be a waste of time. Phoebe could probably tell—the reason being was something she experienced too, on the opposite side. My dad and I were so close before he passed, and our shared gift of intuition had always aligned me with him over Phoebe and Mom. It wasn’t fair, but I always felt the need to be a little sneakier with my mother than my father. Growing up with Phoebe had built a strong bond of trust between us. Sharing intuition with my dad had made me prefer to bring my issues to him over my mother. In the end, she’d never done anything to deserve my hesitance with her, but it remained nonetheless. I suppose, had she done more after our father passed, I

might have bonded more closely with her and felt able to trust her with something as large as this. But, as things were now, I didn't feel like letting her in.

Phoebe, being on the 'no intuition' side of things, could probably feel this subtle chill that I felt toward our mother sometimes. I felt something akin to jealousy from the two of them whenever I talked about my gift.

Maybe that was it. Maybe I didn't want to tell my mom that Dad might still be alive somewhere because he and I shared a special gift that she didn't. And because of that, he didn't, or couldn't, tell her where he was going. The thought of having such a conversation made me weak in the knees.

"Claire," Phoebe said, "You know that's not fair to Mom." She sighed. It was the gentle, time-buying kind of sigh that signified she might have been thinking through her words before speaking them. "If anyone can give us details about his death, it's her. She'd be able to tell us if anything felt weird or off, too."

"Unless she's in on the plan," I pointed out. "If she is, she'll lie to us to throw us off the scent." It was contradictory to my earlier thoughts. I wanted to explore all options, but I also preferred not to look at her as sad and unaware of what had really happened to her husband.

"We don't know until we try," she pushed. "Plus, you're talking about her like she's some conniving mastermind. She's just our mom."

I relented. "Fine. Let's sit down with her and talk to her about what she knows. But maybe we can do it casually, as if it's just part of us being respectfully curious about Dad and what happened the day he died."

Her tone lightened. "That's perfect. Thank you, Claire."

I rolled my eyes at this, even though it did make me happy to hear her so happy. “Yeah, right, whatever. The planning part isn’t over yet: What are we going to tell her to get her to sit down and talk with us?”

Phoebe said slowly, “I didn’t think we needed a reason just to talk to her.”

“We don’t, usually, but I just visited,” I pointed out. “It would be weird if I came back again when I don’t usually visit more than once every couple of weeks.”

“True,” she agreed cautiously.

“If she thinks there’s some occasion, she won’t think about the nature of the questions we’re asking, either,” I mused. An idea struck me as butterflies squirmed in my chest.

“Maybe I can tell her that I’m seeing someone,” I suggested. It was the very thing I’d wanted to avoid letting slip on the night of my meeting with Malcolm, but now it seemed an advantageous thing to bring up. A cover-up for the real reason: to gain information.

“I mean, that would definitely work,” Phoebe agreed, “Though really, Claire, I feel like you’re just confusing things.”

“I just want to do it right,” I stressed. There was a moment of silence between us as she thought and I held my breath.

“Okay,” Phoebe agreed.

I called to spread the news to my mother while I was on my lunch break. She, of course, was ecstatic that I was seeing someone.

“You’re usually so involved in your work,” she gushed, “I’m glad you found a nice boy.”

I felt a little sick at the idea of it all. Maybe deceiving her wasn't our best option. "Right," I told her. "Anyway, what day do you think would work for us to all have dinner together?"

"Wednesday at five," she said, without hesitation. "Now, what's his name?"

"Ben," I blurted. I wished I could take it back. "His name is... Ben. And he's a mortician." I nearly choked on the final word. Lying on the spot to my mother when there were two vastly different men occupying my thoughts had manifested in its first consequence, and we hadn't even made it to dinner yet.

"Oooh, wow," she said playfully. "Morticians make lots of money, you know."

"I know," I said curtly. I hung up shortly after with a headache.

Chapter 9

Ben, the non-mortician, was my first choice. He was certainly more presentable and easy-going. I called him the next day to see if he might want to meet my family at dinner.

“It’s exciting, I know,” I joked over the phone, my laugh breathy and nervous. “And I totally understand if you’d rather not come.”

“Where is it?” He questioned.

“777 Hart Lane,” I told him. “It’s a nice place; my parents built it outside of town. It’s all orange and red this time of year,” I said, then nervously added, “With the leaves.”

“Sounds beautiful. I’d love to come,” he said, his voice warm and smooth, but he didn’t sound finished speaking. I knew he was going to say no before he spoke up again: “It’s just that, y’know, my job makes me work odd hours sometimes. I don’t know if I’ll be free in the evening.”

“Oh, yeah, uh-huh,” I said. There was a gnawing in my gut, a creepy-crawly fear squirming around that suggested it was more than just bad work hours keeping him from coming. I thought back to the other night, when he’d been whispering on the phone. I realized that he’d never mentioned working evenings; sometimes we met after he finished working, and it was always around four or five.

I pushed my nerves away. This was Ben, after all. He’d always come off as sincere and honest. Surely he wouldn’t lie to me to get out of dinner when we’d gotten along so well in the past. “Well, give me a call if you change your mind.”

“I will.”

I noticed, as I talked to Ben, that rewarding rush of excitement that my intuition usually awarded me with was gone. I didn’t feel anything, just nerves. Was this what it felt like, to not

have the gift of intuition? Despite my nerves at getting turned down by Ben, of all people, I couldn't help but relish in it. The fizzling nerves and anxious uncertainty were new for me, things I'd always wondered about. Realizing that I was experiencing something new, even in the face of a missed opportunity to see Ben, grounded me. I decided to push forward.

The dinner had to happen so that we could get some information from our mom without raising any red flags. If Phoebe and I came to drop our half-baked scheme about Dad not really being dead on her, how would she react? Would she say that it was all nonsense? I already knew I'd lash out, which would only make everything worse.

What if she felt the way that I'm feeling? What if she gave into her emotions and latched onto hope, only to be let down if we can't find the truth? I could understand why Phoebe had been hesitant to bring up our dad's odd note to me; it's probably the same hesitation I feel about mentioning it to Mom.

Thinking about what was at stake and how badly I wanted answers moved me to action. This dinner had to happen.

I called Malcolm, even though we already had another date planned for Friday evening. The phone rang for a while, and just as I thought I was about to be sent to voicemail, he picked up.

"Claire," he said, his voice groggy.

"Malcolm," I greeted curtly. I still didn't know how to act around him, or how I felt about him, really. My hand felt unsteady as I held the phone to my ear.

Silence on the other line.

"Are you gonna tell me why you called?" His tone was patient, expectant, tired.

My cheeks flushed. “Right. I guess that’s something I should do,” I rambled. “So. I know it’s last minute but my mom’s having a dinner tomorrow night do you want to come?”

A heavy, silent pause, and then, “What.”

“Dinner. Tomorrow night. With... my mom,” I panted.

“Sure,” he said simply. He answered with such quick nonchalance, I felt stupid for stressing about asking him. Maybe I should’ve called him before I started worrying.

“Cool. It’s at 5 p.m., 777 Hart Lane. It might not show up on your GPS though, so you can just call if you need help finding it,” I said sheepishly.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we drove together, then?” he suggested.

“I—” I stuttered, “I guess so, yeah.”

“You wanna pick me up? You know where you’re going and I don’t.”

I liked the idea of him letting me drive. It gave me the tiniest sense of control when I was rapidly losing my grip on everything else. “Sure, yeah. Where do you live?”

He was quiet for a minute. I didn’t think this was the sort of question which required time to think. “How about we meet at the cemetery,” he finally suggested. He sounded tired.

That was definitely strange, but I didn’t want to argue. I’d interrogate him about it in the car tomorrow. “Sure. I’ll pick you up at a quarter ‘til. See you then, Malcolm.” The feeling of saying his name sent a little thrill up my spine.

The time for dinner drew nearer, and Phoebe had called to diligently report to me that our mother had gone over-the-top in preparation.

“She roasted a whole-ass *turkey*,” she’d said. I could almost imagine the face she’d made as she said it, her eyes, green like our mother’s, wide and round. “I hope Ben likes meat.”

“All men like meat,” I scoffed, only half-joking. I thought about our pilgrimage to get hot dogs from the vendor last weekend. The warm, pleasant feeling in my stomach was replaced by guilt. “Except there *is* a problem, actually.”

“Oh, no.”

“It’s simple. Kind of,” I said carefully. “See, the guy I told mom would be there is actually... not going to be there. He canceled on me, so I had to ask...” I paused. What should I call him? He wasn’t a friend. “The second runner-up.”

Phoebe made some kind of strangled noise of surprise on the other line. “The what?”

“The guy I met up with to talk about dad.”

“You mean that’s *not* the guy you’ve been seeing? Ben, the mortician?”

I closed my eyes and chewed on the inside of my cheek. “That’s him. The mortician. But Ben is someone else. This guy’s name is Malcolm. I accidentally mixed them up when I told Mom about them.”

“Sheesh.”

“How do I clean up this mess?” I asked her. My fingers fidgeted absent-mindedly with the string from my sweatpants. Over and over, they worked the string as I thought about a way to dig myself out of the hole I’d dug. Where was my intuition now, when I needed it?

“I’ve got it,” Phoebe piped up. “Tell Mom you *were* seeing a Ben, and you mixed the names up. She’ll be upset that she’s never heard of him before, but it’s better than telling Malcolm you gave your mom the name of another guy you’re seeing.”

“I’m not—” I paused. Was I seeing him? Was I seeing either of them? “Okay. Yeah. I’ll call her. Unless you wanna relay the message for me? Malcolm’s driving with me, so I can’t tell her in person.”

“I’ll tell her,” Phoebe promised, and we said our good-byes and hung up. I ripped the string from my sweatpants.

Halfway through getting ready, I straightened up and looked at myself in the mirror. I was wearing a corduroy skirt I’d put on, the sleek black top—this was not the casual outfit I’d laid out earlier. When had a strategic dinner to get information turned into a date? And when did I start wanting to look nice for Malcolm?

I told myself that I didn’t, that’s not what this is about. The more convincing I made everything, the less suspicious my mother would be of my motives. It was probably my intuition kicking in, driving me to play the part better. Yes, it was my intuition, working sneakily now instead of out in the open since everything was weird with it lately.

I went back to getting ready. When I finally pulled up to the cemetery, I was fifteen minutes late. Malcolm wasn’t there.

I thought about getting out and walking a quick loop around the grounds to make sure I didn’t miss him—it was a little foggy this evening—but I didn’t want to risk getting my heels muddy.

When a minute had passed, and we were officially late for dinner, I decided to get out anyway. As predicted, my heels sunk into the mud near-instantaneously. The fog clung to my nice clothes and made them moist. I ambled out into the cemetery to where my father’s grave was. I positioned myself how I had been the night I’d first encountered Malcolm.

There. My eyes landed on the spot where he’d been looming, and I started to walk over. I lost a heel in the wet earth and grumbled before continuing on.

I didn’t know his last name, nor the name of his father, but I did know his mother’s name, and I was able to find her tombstone: *Maria Clement*. Next to her was a Rose Clement and a Howard

Clement. Maria had died first, a year or so earlier than my own father had died, followed by Howard, and most recently, Rose—who only seemed to be about thirteen when she passed two years ago. How sad.

I wandered back to my truck just as the headlights from the hearse shone on me through the fog. I was thankful for the timing; I didn't want Malcolm to know that I'd been studying his family's tombstones. As he slid out of the black hearse and shut the door, I nearly screamed.

Whatever put-togetherness he'd had for our first date, he made up for in grittiness this time. He hadn't shaved, his hair hung in tendrils, and the bags under his eyes were visible from a mile away. He hadn't even dressed nicely, really. He looked like death.

"What happened to you?" I asked as he slid into the passenger seat.

"Long night," he replied, "And an even longer day."

"Why did we meet here?"

"I live a lot further away," he said simply. "It's easier for you to meet me here."

That was a nice thought, I supposed, but, "Why didn't you just drive to my place?"

"You live on a narrow one-way street," he pointed out. "The hearse is big and new. I didn't want to risk anyone hitting it, and if I parked in your driveway, I'd block your truck in."

"Sheesh, you're particular." I shook my head as I drove out of the lot. "Are you sure you wanna leave your car there, though, in the middle of nowhere?"

"What, do you think a dead man's gonna steal it?" He shot back.

We were about ten minutes late by the time we parked in the driveway. I turned to him with wide eyes. "Malcolm," I said gently, not wanting to offend him despite his sour mood so far, "You can't go in there looking like that." I regretted having to say it.

He trained his tired gaze on me. His brows pressed together lightly in characteristic, tormented fashion. “Then what should I do?”

I opened up my bag and produced a hair brush. “Brush your hair out.” I couldn’t believe I had to tell him to do that. “You have a big knot in the back.”

“Don’t tell me I forgot to,” he grumbled as he glanced in the mirror on my visor. “Shit.”

I felt bad for him. More than that, I felt bad for thinking badly of him when I’d first seen him. I watched him yank the brush through the ratty length of his hair and felt pity. “How long have you had your hair that length?”

“Not long,” he grunted, forcing the brush through a knot. It made an awful, ripping sound as bristles fought against keratin. “I decided to grow it out after my sister died. She always told me it’d look nice.”

“And... you do it this way every time you brush a knot out of your hair?” I asked, horrified.

“Don’t usually get knots. They just started a few months ago, when my hair hit a certain length, I guess.”

“And you’ve been trying to brush them out that way all this time?” I asked, horrified. I brought my hands forward to hold the brush just as he prepared to yank it through again. “Stop, stop, you’re gonna go bald if you keep that up.”

His hand stilled. For a moment, it was just my hand on his, all stillness and quiet save for the rising and falling of our breaths. My cheeks flushed with heat. “It’s... better if you use both hands, like this,” I said gently. I held a piece of his hair above the knot. “And that keeps it from hurting when you brush it out, and,” I slipped the brush from his now-slack grip, “if you brush

the knot from the bottom first, it helps to loosen it up rather than push everything together.” I brushed it free in no time and finished off the rest of his hair in a few quick sweeps afterward.

“Look at me,” I said.

He did.

“I have concealer, if you want to put it on your eyebags.”

His face shifted from open to closed. “I’m not wearing makeup to meet your mother for the first time.”

“Fine,” I huffed, almost glad we were back to squabbling. “But those bags are visible from a mile away.”

He turned away and pushed out of the car. “I’ll take my chances.”

As soon as the door opened, and the cold outside air rushed into the car, I heard Phoebe’s high-pitched call. How long had she been watching?

She came rushing forward and stopped with a little bounce before Malcolm. “Claaire,” she sang teasingly, “Is this your man?” I glowered at her.

He, now with sleek and shiny hair, looked out of place once more, awkward, as he faced my sister. “Malcolm,” he introduced, jutting out an open hand to shake hers, “The man, I suppose.”

“Phoebe. The sister,” she introduced. Then, still holding onto his hand, she turned and yanked him forward. “C’mon, what took you guys so long? Mom’s gonna lose it if her turkey’s cold before we sit down.”

Malcolm loomed in the doorway. As always, there was something off about him, something that didn’t look quite right, when his hair was smoothed out by a brush and he was

wearing a clean pair of clothes. He looked even more out of place here, in the hallway of my childhood home. I wished I knew which version of him I preferred more: the raggedy one, the one I always pictured when I thought of him but scorned, or the cleaned-up one, the one whose hairs were all in place, who looked like he'd gotten at least eight hours of sleep the night prior. I supposed this Malcolm was a decent mix of the two. I supposed I'd judged his outfit too harshly earlier, when I was looking at it in the context of his messy hair. He was wearing a maroon button-up and jeans, which were decent for the occasion. I just wished the shirt wasn't half-tucked into his pants, and that the bottom button was fastened instead of hanging open.

My mother emerged from the kitchen to greet us. "Oh," she gasped as her eyes settled on him. "This must be..." She made a quiet 'B' sound and, catching herself, cast a glance at Phoebe, who gave a tiny shake of her head. I held my breath, willing her to say the right name. "Malcolm. Welcome."

"It's not Malcolm's fault we're late," I interjected. "I was, uh, taking a while to get ready."

My mother waved a hand. "Oh, I don't mind—you're here now," she said dismissively. "Come in, come in, let's all sit down."

We were swept into the dining room and seated in a blur. At the long table, Malcolm sat across from me, Phoebe sat at my side, and my mother took the head. That used to be my dad's seat. Now, even with my mother filling it, it felt vacant.

I noticed that both my mother and Phoebe had their eyes locked on Malcolm. In the light of the dining room, it was apparent how unkempt he looked.

The turkey steamed on the table between us. "So, Mom," I piped up, "You really went all out on dinner tonight."

She pulled her gaze away from Malcolm with apparent reluctance. “I did, mhm,” she said in an extra-sweet tone. It was the one she used around guests, the one that lulled them into a false sense of safety and calmness—since they were in her home, after all—when something was wrong.

“Well, I sure do appreciate it,” I strained.

Phoebe looked queasy at my right hand as her eyes darted from me, to Malcolm, to our mother. It was fall, and still daylight, but I swore I could hear crickets.

Mother directed us to eat. I placed a slab of meat and a pile of stuffing on my plate with no intent to eat any of it. I couldn’t dream of eating something else when my nerves were eating me alive.

Malcolm and Phoebe, on the other hand, had no problem doing so. After a few moments of thoughtful chewing, my mother finally decided to break the ice: “Malcolm,” she ventured warily, her voice still sweet and motherly, “I’ve heard lots about you.”

Malcolm looked up from his plate, directly at me. “You have?” he asked.

“Yes, yes,” she said pleasantly. “You’re the car salesman, right?”

Phoebe kicked me under the table. My stomach dropped.

“No, no, he’s a mortician.” I laughed nervously as my eyes swept around the table. “Did you know, Mom, that Malcolm helped to embalm Dad?”

Mom didn’t look pleased at this news. “This is hardly dinnertime conversation, Claire.”

I knew she was right, and that there would’ve been a million better ways to phrase it. It only made me more nervous, and as I played with some mashed potatoes on my plate, I wondered if the source of my nerves was about more than our plan to get information.

I dismissed the thought. Even if I was worried about them accepting Malcolm when he looked half a mess, it all went back into the plan. The believability factor, of course. Phoebe and I would have to gather information after dinner, since our mother wouldn't respond well to one of us bringing our father up again so soon at the table.

I put my head down and attempted a few bites of turkey. The quiet between us, loud with judgement, was nearly enough to force me to excuse myself and Malcolm. I could hardly bear the cautious, curious looks chanced around the table every now and then. Even Malcolm, who seemed most at ease and perhaps blissfully unaware of the tension, seemed to perhaps be feeling some of the pressure after a while. It was he who raised his head first to speak.

"I—" he began, at the exact same time as we all heard the gentle *ting-tong* of the doorbell. Instead of saying whatever he might have said before, he voiced all of our thoughts: "I wonder who that could be."

Phoebe sprung up, perhaps eager to excuse herself. "I'll get it." She was gone before any of us could protest.

The three of us watched the archway she'd exited from. I was desperate for some kind of action and wished it had been me to get the door. We heard the door creak open, followed by a blank, "Who are you?"

Suddenly, I felt a twinge of apprehension at who might be at the door.

"I'm Claire's dinner guest," came an awfully familiar voice.

The remaining three of us all looked at each other. I dropped my fork.

My hands had started to shake as I heard a, "Boy, it sure smells good," and Ben had strode into the archway. Phoebe appeared behind him, arms folded across her chest, unable to hide the smirk on her face.

All three of us looked up at him, each of us bracing for different impacts.

“Ah, you must be Mrs. Hart, yes?” he asked, striding toward my mother in typical Ben fashion to extend a hand to shake. “I’m Ben. Ben Goodman, and I’m so sorry that I’m late. I just got the evening off and came straight here.” He cast me a grin and a wink. My heart fluttered. “Seems like some kind of divine intervention, huh?”

I offered him a nervous smile. What did I do now? I didn’t want to hurt either of them, but clearly, we couldn’t all sit down and eat dinner together.

After he shook my mother’s hand and exchanged pleasantries, I’d opened my mouth to break the bad news, but Ben spoke first. “This must be Phoebe, then,” he said with a decisive nod. “But, who is this? I don’t remember you saying you had a brother, Claire.”

He looked at Malcolm. Malcolm stared at me from across the table. I’d never seen a man’s face look so hardened and tired at the same time. It was blank and full of emotion, all at once. I wondered what he saw in my features. “Actually, I’m just a mortician,” he corrected. “There’s been a loss in the family.”

Ben recoiled. “A loss?”

“Oh yes,” Malcolm said, “A very, *very* recent tragedy. A total surprise that took me by surprise just as much as the rest of this poor family.” He glared at me.

Ben’s brows pressed together. “I’m so very sorry to hear that. Was it a close relative?”

All of us looked at our feet and nodded. “It’s hard to speak about,” I added, hoping it might prevent him from asking further questions. I realized how stupid that was to say, considering he was sitting down to dinner with us. My mother pressed a napkin to her lips.

Ben took the seat next to Malcolm. I wondered if the hatred was really coming off of Malcolm in waves or if I just imagined it. “It’s nice of the Harts to invite you here for dinner,”

Ben pointed out, scraping the legs of the chair against the floor as he tried to slide in closer to the table, “Doesn’t the funeral home usually meet clients there? During business hours?”

“Malcolm is a family friend,” my mother chimed in. Her lips pressed together gravely. “We’ve been going to his family’s funeral home for many years now.”

Malcolm nodded. Phoebe kicked me under the table.

“You can help yourself to some food,” my mother invited.

Ben put a scoop of potatoes on his plate.

“Don’t you want any turkey?” my mother asked, concern laced in her features.

“Oh, no thank you,” Ben replied, “I’m a vegetarian.”

Malcolm threw him a side-eyed glare and reached for another helping of turkey.

I was wildly uncomfortable. The only benefit of having Ben present at the table was that the conversation was now flowing freely. My mother had forgotten about glowering her appraisal at Malcolm and instead seemed rather charmed by Ben, Phoebe and Malcolm were talking across the table at each other about the process of preparing a dead body for a funeral, with her asking questions like, “do they ever stink?” and “did it take a while to get used to doing your job?” and him giving odd, graphic tidbits such as, “did you know that the bodily fluids drain into the sewers?” and “yes, I can recognize the smell of a dead body after a single whiff.”

Meanwhile, I traced peas around my plate with my fork, my mind too scrambled to try and join in the conversation. Ben tried to get me to join in his conversation with my mother, but she was asking him so many questions, and I was feeling so shitty about what had happened that I didn’t participate for very long. He’d ask me a question, I’d answer, and then fall silent until he asked me something else, or cracked a joke and looked at me with those happy creases in his eyes. Malcolm didn’t even try to involve me. I wondered if he was ignoring me.

I stood up. “I’m going to start doing dishes,” I announced.

Ben stood up, too, and told me he’d help, which started a chain reaction—my mother was the next one to offer to help. Phoebe tossed a pleading look at our mom, silently imploring her *not* to force her to get up and help, too. She was evidently still rapt in her conversation about death and decay with Malcolm. The two of them were still sitting together. When our mother shrugged and waved a hand at them, satisfied with having Ben and I help out, they resumed their conversation.

The three of us went into the kitchen and, when I was no longer sandwiched between two dates, I felt like I could breathe a little more easily.

“Thanks for coming,” I said to Ben as I handed him a newly cleaned dish to dry, “It was a total surprise.”

He wiped the excess water from the dish and gave me a radiant smile. “Of course, Claire. I can’t believe I almost missed it.”

My mom, sensing the chemistry in the room, excused herself to ‘go clean up in the dining room.’ The two of us were left alone at the sink. I felt cozy and warm, doing the dishes with him, having one of our easy, happy conversations. “It’s been too long since we saw each other,” I confessed.

He gave me a look like he wanted to say something, then averted his eyes to stare down at the soapy water. “Yeah, it has been,” he agreed. From the dining room, I heard a peal of male laughter.

My heart hurt.

When the plates were done, I thanked him for helping out and migrated to the dining room. There were more dishes waiting for me on the table: platters which once held turkey,

dishes that housed peas and stuffing, and a few odd forks. I went to pick them up, but Phoebe snapped her gaze to mine.

“Hey, maybe it’s my turn to help you out?” she offered. “If Mom and I help, it’ll only take two seconds.”

I wondered if she was trying to get the three of us alone so we could talk about Dad. It was a good idea, but the thought of leaving the two men alone made me want to grimace.

“That’s a good idea,” our mom agreed. “Guests shouldn’t have to do dishes—thank you for helping, Ben, but how about you and Malcolm make yourselves comfortable? We’ll be back in just a minute.”

Malcolm turned around to look at me with that fiercely irritated, yet placid, look of his. Ben nodded enthusiastically, blissfully unaware, it seemed. The three of us, mother and daughters, paraded into the kitchen with dishes.

I knew my mom had questions she wanted to ask but could not yet ask while the two boys were within earshot. She trained a very expressive look on me once we were alone; I’d never seen eyebrows raised so high.

“I’ll explain it later,” I promised.

“You better,” she hummed, “I’ve never been more curious in my life.”

Phoebe rubbed her arm awkwardly. “I was having a really good conversation with Malcolm,” she said, “But then he kinda... died. So, I’m glad for the excuse to get up and do something instead of wonder if I said something wrong.”

“Died?” I asked.

“Yeah, like if he had batteries, they totally would’ve run out. He just got kind of quiet and sullen.”

“I’m noticing that he does that,” I said. “Don’t take it personally.” I’d never seen the switch, but I did notice that sometimes, he had more energy than others. I wondered guiltily if I was responsible for his sullen mood this time. “Plus, if it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine.”

She laughed.

Once we'd settled into a rhythm, there was a subtle smell of something burning. “Hey, is there something in the oven?” I asked, glancing behind me.

Phoebe put a hand over her mouth as my mother rushed over to open the door. She left a trail of soapy water droplets across the kitchen floor.

“Phoebe!” our mother cried, “I thought you turned the oven off earlier?”

“I forgot,” she whimpered, drawing nearer to see the damage. I couldn’t help but crowd in next to them to see, too: there was what appeared to be a charred pie sitting on the middle rack, enshrouded in a thick haze of smoke. All at once, we sprung to action, coughing and spluttering: I grabbed a dish towel and started waving it to clear the smell, my mother put on some mitts and rushed outside with the burnt pie, and Phoebe cracked open the kitchen window, then rushed into the dining room to open some of the larger windows. From the other room, I heard her explaining to Malcolm and Ben what had happened.

My mother came in, chewing on the inside of her lip. “What a waste,” she fretted, standing in the doorway just outside the kitchen, “That was going to be my best apple pie yet.” She sighed and paced away, leaving me to finish off the final few dishes in the sink. “That’s just what I get for wanting to serve it warm, I suppose.”

I was surprised to see Ben and Malcolm headed down the hallway toward the front door. Malcolm headed straight for the door, but Ben paused to wave at me. “Headed outside for a few minutes,” he said.

“I don’t blame you,” I said sympathetically, waving at the smoke in the air as they left.

I had the kitchen to myself for a few minutes. Things were not going according to plan. At this point, there was no plan. I leaned over the counter, rested my elbows on the cool surface and looked for patterns in the granite to try and decompress myself with some cool air from the little window right above the sink. The lone aloe plant on the windowsill pricked at my cheek.

As I stared out at what would’ve been our porch, were it lighter out and I could see any of it from inside the kitchen, the orange embers of a cigarette caught my attention. I was surprised to learn that Malcolm smoked, though I supposed it fit his character.

“Want a drag?” came a smooth voice. That wasn’t Malcolm.

“I don’t smoke,” Malcolm replied, voice rough and somber. “I can’t believe someone like you does.” There was a hint of interest in his tone, perhaps the most life he’d shown all night, though I’d missed most of the conversation they’d had in favor of doing dishes.

I stood on the tips of my toes, perched on the windowsill above the sink, absorbed in their conversation. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could finally make out Malcolm’s silhouette, nearly directly in front of me, his elbows resting on the porch railing as he looked out into the dark beyond the yard. From the sound of Ben’s voice, he was against the near wall, to the right of the window.

“We all have something that doesn’t fit the rest of us, don’t we?” Ben sighed.

“I guess,” Malcolm said indifferently.

“What’s yours?”

There was a pause between the two of them then, a gentle quiet filled with the cold sounds of an autumn night, the drag and puff of a cigarette, the shifting of weight on feet. The smell of the smoke had drifted into the kitchen; I knew my mother would want me to close the

window, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, if only because I didn't want them to know I was there. I could always tell her there was still smoke in the kitchen from the burnt pie, which wasn't a lie, after all.

"C'mon," Ben urged impishly, "Fair's fair. I gotta have some insurance to make sure you don't tell Claire I smoke."

Malcolm turned to look at Ben. "Claire."

My blood stilled.

"What?" Ben asked.

"Claire," he repeated. "She's something about me that doesn't make sense." I wondered if he was about to tell Ben, right then and there, or if this was intended to get a rise out of him.

"I don't understand," Ben replied, a hint of frustration in his voice. "She's a person, not a personality trait."

"You'd understand if you knew me better. It's the way I act around her."

"I wouldn't mind getting to know you," he countered. "Especially so I can understand this relationship between the two of you." I'd never noticed that tone in his voice before. It was suspicious, a little irritated.

"If Claire doesn't count, I have dogs," Malcolm said, avoiding the latter half of his statement.

Ben's voice was careful and curious. "What kind of dogs?"

"Bichons," he answered. "Little white ones."

Ben laughed. Malcolm's shoulders moved. "I guess that *doesn't* fit. Why do you have them?"

“Caring for them makes me feel more alive.” He turned, then, to face Ben and lean his back against the railing. Absorbed in their conversation, I’d forgotten that I was an onlooker until his eyes met mine. He looked at me, calm and still, the subtle cocking of an eyebrow the only indication that he’d caught me.

“Hey, do me a favor,” Ben piped up, “and don’t tell Claire that I smoke, okay?” He’d already voiced his concerns about me finding out once before; it must have really been an insecurity of his.

Malcolm’s lips pressed together. I could see the shimmer of the cigarette’s embers in his eyes as he continued to look at me. “What was said here will stay between us.”

I got down from the windowsill, my cheeks warm.

Cleanup ended quickly after that encounter, and when we were all ready to go our separate ways, Ben asked if I had time to grab a drink with him in town.

After I’d already finished explaining that Malcolm’s car was broken down, I’d been his ride here, and subsequently had to take him home, he came up beside me and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Aw, c’mon, Claire,” he said, surprisingly amicable, “Couldn’t we all go together? If Ben’s okay with it, that is.” He never sounded warm and friendly like that before.

I tried to resist giving him an apprehensive look. Ben and I both hesitated, and I felt it would be best to refuse. I wished my intuition hadn’t been silent recently, so it could warn me if getting drinks would end in disaster or if it would help my current situation with Malcolm knowing I was half-seeing someone else.

Ben answered before I could. He cracked a smile and said, “Sure, why not?” and before I knew it, Malcolm and I were in my car, following him down the leaf-covered drive.

For the second time that night, I was surprised at how well the two men got along. Though, maybe it was just my guilty conscience telling me that they *shouldn't* get along, that the reasonable thing would be for them to be fighting over me. It seemed, to me, the peace was dangling precariously by a thread which Ben didn't even know existed, the idea that Malcolm was my cousin and that was why he'd been at dinner with me. Was that what we'd agreed on, that he was my cousin? The drinks had made my head fuzzy.

Ben and Malcolm, on the other hand, seemed to have perfectly clear heads. They were both rapt in a very passionate discussion of business, how a good businessman should behave, and lots of other things I'd tuned out in favor of sipping my margarita and watching the drunk couple in the corner slow dance to an ill-fitting pop song about drugs and partying. It wasn't all that interesting, but it was a lot less stressful than focusing on a conversation going on between two men who probably should never have met, and certainly not under these circumstances.

"What do you do, anyway?" Malcolm's voice was a lot lighter and more easygoing now that he had a drink in his hand; it was almost a drawl.

"I'm a used car salesman," Ben replied. "And, I'm seeing Claire on the side." He tossed me a wink.

The man stepped on the woman's foot and they stopped dancing.

"No shit?" Malcolm paused. I tossed an uneasy glance over to see him leaning forward. "You put on one hell of an air, like you're some kinda great guy, but I can see it." His face tightened as his eyes narrowed. "You're a piece of shit."

Ben's face sharpened into a look I'd never seen on him before and he nearly recoiled. "Excuse me?"

I felt it, then, a tidal wave of foreboding and panic. It felt like my intuition, but without direction, without providing me any idea of what to do. I laughed as if Malcolm were joking and looked at Ben nervously, still chuckling. “Malcolm’s just kidding—he’s got a really dry sense of humor. Isn’t that right, Cous?”

Malcolm glared at me just as a look of realization dawned on Ben’s face. Malcolm noticed it, too, and set his jaw.

“Oh, he’s your cousin?” Ben asked slowly. “I thought he was just a family friend.”

“He’s both,” I answered quickly.

Ben reclined in his chair but didn’t look any less agitated. His eyes were focused and sharp. “For a while there, I thought he kinda had the hots for you, Claire, but that helps clear things up.” He flashed his teeth in a failed grin.

“I’m not,” Malcolm grumbled. “I’m neither.”

The wave of apprehension I felt in that moment was overwhelming. The tension was palpable, throbbing like the sound of blood in my ears as I looked between the two of them, each staring the other down, making subtle movements to see what he might get away with before the other grew too suspicious. I stood up. “I think we should go. I work early tomorrow.”

The two of them ignored my sad attempt at breaking the tension. “What exactly are you, then,” Ben growled, and then, finally, our little bubble of tension burst into chaos.

Malcolm’s hands were on the table. His voice was slow and careful, unlike his words. “I’m the guy who’s gonna beat the shit out of you if you don’t get the hint and keep talking to Claire.”

I stood up at the same time as Ben, completely indignant. The sound of chairs squealing against the floor got the attention of most of the others in the tavern.

“Hey!” I yelled, just as I saw Ben lunge across the little round table we’d been situated around. There were a million things buzzing around my head in that moment, but what struck me most was a singular, incredulous thought: There was no way Ben was capable of fighting someone. Not even someone like Malcolm, who seemed half-dead at best most of the time.

The tall, skinny table came crashing down beside me, Malcolm puffed up and braced for impact, one of the bartenders came rushing toward us, waving her hands and shouting, and Ben, seeing that Malcolm wasn’t about to run away, skidded to a halt in front of him. I winced at his error, torn between wanting to look away and being unable to look anywhere but at the two of them.

Malcolm won’t hit him, I hoped, perhaps willed. He looked mean as hell at that moment, his brows lowered and casting a thick shadow over his eyes, his lip ever-so-slightly curled up, but I saw his hands. They were balled loosely into fists, the way a person would when he was prepared to punch if need be, but not about to execute the act. He glowered at Ben, who stared like a deer in headlights right back. The little bartender was still flapping around us and chirping like an anxious bird, but she didn’t dare get closer—she was calling for what I presumed was a bigger, tougher coworker to come break things up.

“Guys,” I coaxed, careful but firm. “Stop. C’mon.”

Ben swallowed hard and nodded, his eyes still locked on Malcolm. Malcolm took a deep breath, narrowed his eyes, and took a step backward. I noticed his posture and his half-balled hands relax. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good idea,” Ben said lowly.

In a flash, it happened. It was quick as a decisive step forward, the way Malcolm put his whole body into that one action. His hand tightened and collided with Ben’s face. Ben, probably

never having been punched in his life, stumbled and fell backward. He'd raised a hand to feel at what would probably be a black eye later.

Malcolm took a step away from the mess he'd created. "I think that was a better idea," he grumbled. "You won't be sweet-talking anyone for a while." He walked out of the tavern.

"Oh my God," I breathed, still in disbelief, as I rushed to crouch beside Ben. "Are you okay? I have no idea why he picked a fight with you."

Ben was looking at the floor, decidedly avoiding me. "Whatever, Claire," he grumbled. "Showing up tonight was a mistake."

His words, so rough and cold, took me by surprise. I felt a knot in my stomach. "No. No, it wasn't," I tried to assure him, just as the flighty waitress arrived with an ice pack. "I'm so sorry, Ben."

"Go after him," he spat, just as he took the bartender's arm and shakily rose to his feet.

"Are you okay to drive home? What if you have a concussion or something?" I was still kneeling, looking up helplessly at him and the girl he was hanging onto.

"Just go," he spat, "I don't need this shit from someone like you."

I bit my lip and fought back the tears that had welled up in my throat. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what it means." He rubbed at his eye, his whole face contorted into a snarl. "I have tons of girls begging for my attention."

The waitress turned her face away and curled her lip. I wondered how often she saw dramatic events like this between drunks at the bar. I was ashamed, not just for myself, but for Ben and Malcolm making a scene, too. "Is that it?" I asked, feeling anger of my own bubbling in my chest as I stood back up. "Is that why you've been acting weird? You're seeing other girls?"

“Fuck off,” he said, his words thick and half-slurred. “Even if I was, at least I’d have the decency to keep them apart.” He tugged on the waitress and they shuffled toward the bar, leaving me in stunned silence.

I propped the table back up on its feet and collected the scattered dishware, straws, and spilled contents from my purse off the floor, my motions numb and automatic. I left a big tip on the table, next to the melting ice cubes, and stole one last look at Ben, who had ordered another drink and was swooning dramatically against the waitress. A bartender was standing across from him, a grimace on his face as he listened to him talk—or, by the looks of it, complain. He flashed me a wide-eyed look that said “help” when he caught me looking; he must’ve seen us together when everything went down. I put another five on the table, tapped it with my finger so he knew it was for him, and left.

I sat in my truck for a few minutes, my head rested against the steering wheel, half wanting to cry about what had happened inside the bar, half wanting to key Ben’s shiny white car beside mine, when I realized that Malcolm had disappeared. I tried to call him.

No answer. I figured he couldn’t have gotten far and pulled out of the parking lot to drive toward the cemetery. Sure enough, I found him walking about a mile down the road. I slowed as I pulled up, rolled my window down and veered to the other side of the road to talk to him: “Malcolm?”

He kept walking. Rain pattered against my windshield; wind whipped it against my face as I leaned out the window.

“Malcolm, get in. Your car is way too far to walk on a night like this.”

Silence, aside from the squeal of my windshield wipers.

“You’ll freeze your ass off,” I warned. Frustration spiked in my blood. He was the one that overstepped his boundaries and started a fight out of thin air, so why did he feel like he had any right to give me the silent treatment? I pulled my car off the road, ripped the key out of the ignition, and jogged up beside him. Getting soaked through by the rain that had picked up was just icing on the cake.

“If you’re walking, I’m walking too.”

He kept looking straight ahead, the lines on his face like deep trenches. “I’m not driving you back here when I get to my car.”

“You absolutely are,” I seethed. “And, hey, while we’re talking about things we will and won’t do, in what world is it okay to punch someone in the face for being a car salesman? Or to go full caveman and get all possessive of me and make decisions on who I can or can’t talk to?” I fixed a smoldering glare on him.

He stopped in his tracks and turned to look at me. I stopped too, suddenly afraid because of the pained look in his eyes, wondering if there was an angle I’d forgotten to consider before I’d launched into my tirade. A pair of headlights and the sound of tires sloshing through water passed us by. I shivered.

“In what world,” he said quietly, “Is it okay to be seeing two guys? For God’s sake, Claire—” He looked away, sucked in a sharp breath, “I can’t believe you thought it was okay to invite both of us to dinner.” His hands moved once in emphasis as he spoke and he shoved them into his pockets. “Let alone, what, you expected me to just play along so your *real* boyfriend wouldn’t find out? I can’t even believe what a joke I must be to you.” His eyes searched mine, just for a moment, and they were wide and vulnerable and blue before he turned away to keep walking.

I was left, stunned, in the rain. It took me a few moments for my head to clear enough for me to chase after him. “Malcolm,” I called. “Malcolm!” He didn’t understand. If I could explain myself, it would all make sense to him and he’d be able to see that I wasn’t a bad person. “It wasn’t like that. I wasn’t going to invite you both, but Ben told me he couldn’t come.” That made things sound worse. I felt like I was digging my own grave. “It wasn’t a serious date. I just needed to bring a boy over so my mom would host a dinner.” That also sounded horrible. I was digging even deeper.

My cheeks were flushed in embarrassment. I felt myself getting desperate, felt the words running out of my mouth without direction or care. “For the thing about my dad that I told you about. Remember? I wanted to see if she knew anything, but obviously not in a sit-down conversation *just* about that, because I don’t know if she knows anything about it, and if she does, if she’d trust me. Right? So it wasn’t like, a real date that I’d invited Ben to, and I wouldn’t have asked you to play along if it wasn’t really important. But, when Ben showed up, things kind of went haywire, and we didn’t get any information anyway.”

“So, you were using me to try and get information on some ridiculous idea that your dad lied to you about his own death, but only because Ben, your first choice, wasn’t available, all because you have trust issues with your own mother,” he said coldly. “Great. Real great, Claire. That really clarifies things about you.”

I looked at him, his long hair in tendrils, drenched by the rain, the water running in rivulets off his forehead, running down the groove between his knotted brows, hanging from his nose and lashes. My mouth was agape, my chest felt tight, and I wasn’t sure if I’d ever be able to breathe or take another step or keep on living after this moment. I stopped following him, because I couldn’t anymore, and sunk into the mud.

Chapter 10

Of the day following the incident with Ben and Malcolm, the parts that I didn't spend curled up in bed were spent rescheduling appointments I'd cancelled in favor of taking an emergency day off work. I felt like there was an oppressive darkness looming over me, eager to remind me at every possible inconvenience that I'd made a grave mistake in judgement. Multiple mistakes in judgement, even.

As the days passed, I found myself thinking about the two men. I thought about Ben, and how, looking back on it, there had been quite a few red flags about him that I'd willfully ignored. If that weren't enough, thinking about the way he'd acted during the confrontation with Malcolm left a sick feeling in my throat. The dignified thing to do in that situation would have been to back down, to know what he was and was not capable of, and not feed into the threats of a man under the influence of alcohol. Instead, he'd puffed up like a frightened cat, gotten hit, and had whined about it to the pretty bartender. Not only that, but he'd acted as if he were so much better than me, as if anyone in the bar would've thought him a better person in revealing that he had all sorts of fawning women at his disposal.

I wished I'd had closure from that final confrontation. I kept parsing his words and mine over in my head, trying to figure out if he'd admitted that he was seeing someone—or multiple others—and hadn't wanted to say it outright after he'd slipped up once, or if he'd merely suggested that he was too desirable to be tied down to a situation with someone who'd treated him badly. It bothered me that I'd never know. I felt like it was important to the puzzle of figuring out my intuition and its capabilities. If I ever felt able to do it, I wanted to call him and ask him what I'd meant to him, if I was someone he wanted to be serious about.

Malcolm wasn't much better. At least, that's what I had to keep telling myself. He'd picked a fight for no reason, tried to control who I could and couldn't date when he and I hadn't been official, hit a guy who didn't deserve it, and stormed off. And yet, I felt pulled toward him. I wanted to call and apologize to him. I tried, but each time I was ignored.

Despair had gnawed a hole in my chest. I was deeply upset that I'd hurt Malcolm. I was frustrated that he didn't seem to want anything to do with me anymore. I couldn't begin to untangle the knot of emotions I associated with Ben. There was a little bit of everything in there—everything bad, that is: guilt, betrayal, pain, indignancy, a sense of stupidity, anger, and probably some residual feelings.

As the initial pain subsided, I started to mull over what Malcolm had said. I hated to acknowledge that I was wrong, but I also wondered, if I was able to fix what I'd done by taking his words to heart, he might want to talk to me again. I felt stupid and desperate, but I couldn't blame myself.

I was infinitely grateful for Josie, an uninvolved friend who was serving as the only stress-free ray of light in my life at the time. I was also thankful that she'd offered to take some of my clients—I needed some extra time to myself, and the quality of my readings had taken a nosedive since the disappearance of my intuition. It was nice to have her working in the shop a few extra days. I needed her friendship in that moment, and it was comforting to know that, in the afternoons when I normally would be working with two or three extra clients, I could curl up in a bed warmed by Sage and Quartz, and she was just on the floor beneath me, should I need someone to talk to. Sensing that I'd hit a low, Josie had started inviting me out to lunch on the days she worked in the afternoons for me.

It was at lunch, the third time or so since we'd started going out together, when I had really opened up about it all. I'd just finished explaining the situation, even the parts about resisting my intuition, she'd told me she couldn't blame me for feeling desperate and confused, that the whole night at dinner and the bar was probably a little traumatic. I didn't know if I liked the term. It made me sound like a victim when I'd been the one to cause all these problems for everyone in the first place.

"So," she said, stirring a pack of sweetener into her coffee. "How many dates did you go on with the two of them, again?"

"A handful with Ben," I said, looking at the floor. I winced. "And only one with Malcolm, not counting the failed dinner date, plus another one scheduled."

She grimaced. "I mean, you weren't committed to either of them, but when people get attached, they don't really like to hear that the object of their affections is seeing someone else on the side."

Guilt twisted in my gut. "I know. That whole situation with Ben is so weird, and I don't know if he deserves an apology or not, but I definitely think I owe Malcolm one."

"You're only saying that because you like him and not Ben," she pointed out.

"You don't know that," I said defensively, forgetting she was an empath.

The biggest, most glaring issue I wanted to address was Malcolm's idea that I had trust issues with my mom. It was something I'd felt for a long time, but had always felt justified in before Malcolm pointed it out. I decided to pay my family a visit.

Phoebe perched on the edge of her bed and peered down at me like an inquisitive owl.

“Do you think Mom and I have a good relationship?” I asked.

She thought about it. At least, she tried to look like she was thinking about it before finally saying, “No. I don’t.”

“Whose fault is it?” I asked.

“It’s not really a question of faults,” she said with a shrug. “I would say that *something* happened to make you jaded, or at least less close with her than I am. I can tell you that she has nothing but good intentions for you.” Her voice softened. “She loves you, you know.”

I shifted on her rug uncomfortably.

Phoebe went on: “The amount that she brings you up, worrying about whether you’re doing this good thing or that bad thing.” She rolled her eyes with a little smile. “It gets tiring to hear about.”

“About that,” I said sheepishly. “Did you ever feel jealous of me? Because of the intuition?”

She shook her head, but her eyes were trained on the floor beside me as she answered. “When I was really young, maybe. But, Claire, I’m no more jealous of you than I would be of a famous psychic, or Josie and her empathy, or someone who can see ghosts.” She chewed on the edge of her lip and hesitated. “Or... someone who *thinks* they can see ghosts.” Finally, she looked at me.

“You don’t believe in my intuition?” I was incredulous. “You don’t believe in *Dad’s* intuition?”

“I believe that people are resilient,” she said gently. “I believe that most things in life won’t kill us, or maim us, or ruin our lives.” She got up and crossed the floor quickly, nervously.

“Look at this,” she said, fumbling with a book on her desk. “I’m taking a psychology class. It’s really interesting. One of the things we talked about a couple weeks ago was pattern-seeking, and how humans evolved to be really good at it because it helps keep us safe.”

I raised a brow at her. My arms were folded across my chest.

“People tend to want to make connections to things that aren’t really there,” she continued, “Because sometimes it helps keep us safe, and at our core, people are superstitious, so we feel like it *always* keeps us safe. We want to try and find safety wherever we can. Just like we think we see faces in clouds sometimes, or in dark tree branches.”

“You have an answer for everything,” I snapped. “Dad wouldn’t lie to me.”

“He might not have meant to. Maybe no one ever sat him down and talked this through with him. I know Mom believes that he had a gift. But, Claire, he’s dead. If his gift was real, wouldn’t it have kept a healthy man with a family, something to live for, alive?”

I was reeling. Phoebe had hit on the question which had started my own questioning of my abilities, the source of my frustration, my deep-rooted fear of it all. “You don’t know that he’s dead,” I pointed out. “What about the note?”

She shook her head. “I talked to Mom after dinner that night, since we didn’t get a chance to do it together.” Her eyes softened. “I had to, Claire, I’m sorry. She told me all about the note, and the weird date on it.”

Phoebe walked over to her desk and pulled an envelope from within a drawer. She carefully pulled out a slip of paper. “Please don’t hate me for this,” she said, walking over to hand me the note. “I didn’t want to upset you any more until you recovered from the Ben and Malcolm situation. I know you took it pretty hard, judging by those few brief phone calls I got with you.”

I felt a pang of regret, in the light of considering my issues, when she pleaded with me not to hate her. I really did need to change.

I took the note from her with an apologetic gentleness that she couldn't possibly have perceived, and inspected it. It was old, and wrinkled, and the paper was yellowing ever so slightly. About three lines in, I realized it was the same note as the one written on the back of the photograph. I looked, nearly dizzy, at the date. 10/21/06. "What is this?" I asked, fighting back the urge to cry.

"Apparently, Dad had a health scare two years before he died," she explained. "You might remember it. I was too young. But, you know him, the sentimental type. He wrote that note on a piece of paper and gave it to Mom to give to us in case anything happened, once we were grown up. She was saving it for sometime after I graduate high school," she said, her voice choked with emotion. "Apparently, after they found out that he was perfectly healthy, she put the note away and forgot about it. Until, y'know..."

"After he passed, she panicked because she couldn't find it, and when she did find it, she traced it onto the back of the last picture we all got together. Because unless something really bad happened, both copies of it wouldn't get lost."

"Why did she leave the date off the copy?"

"She said it felt right. Something about making it seem like he was with us still, giving the note a sense of timelessness."

"And you buy that?" I asked, half-incredulous. "All of it?"

"You don't?"

Chapter 11

I sat in front of my computer, scrolling through self-help articles on BuzzFeed while I should have been with a client. My desire to work had taken a nosedive since I first met Ben and Malcolm, but I'd been too afraid to admit it until now. I'd cancelled on so many clients in the past month. Truth be told, I'd just been feeling too overwhelmed since I started questioning my intuition. Quartz laid in my lap, her deep purr giving me the comfort that I desperately needed lately. My mind was occupied by Ben and Malcolm, and now Phoebe was added to the mix, too. I couldn't believe that, for however many years, she'd been my closest confidant through all of life's hardships, and yet she hadn't even believed that my intuition was real.

Ben, Phoebe, Malcolm. There were two possibilities at play. One: all three of them were wrong; they were out to get me, or maybe they were stupid because they simply couldn't understand my point of view. Two: instead of feeling crazy and assuming that three separate people (four, including my mother; five, including the possibility that my father had disappeared, was alive somewhere, and had lied to me about his death) were out to get me, I had to face the facts and accept that I wasn't being a good person recently. Maybe I was never a good person. Maybe the issues with my intuition had gotten the better of me. I resolved to make a change, but therapy was too expensive, and a therapist couldn't understand my intuition. Hence, skipping work to read self-help articles. If I found them effective, I might even buy a book about personal relationships.

I was about halfway through reading my ad-ridden article about the positive benefits of yoga and meditative breathing when I received a phone call.

"Mom?" I asked as I picked up.

“Bad news,” she countered, though her tone was even and only a little bit dolorous.

“Your great aunt Flo died.”

“Aunt Flo?” I questioned, wracking my brain for any weddings, baby showers, or funerals I’d attended in my lifetime for an unfamiliar woman with a wrinkled face and gray hair.

“You hardly know her,” my mother said dismissively. “She was on your dad’s side. A real quack.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway, she’d just gotten down to Florida for the winter when she passed. They’re bringing her back up for a Massachusetts funeral as we speak.”

“They’re bringing her up here?” I asked, half in disbelief. I knew it happened all the time, but I couldn’t wrap my head around how strange and unnatural it was to do such a thing to a dead body.

“Yep. To be buried beside her husband with the rest of the Harts.”

“And I’m assuming we have to go to this funeral?” I asked.

“We’re expected, yes,” my mother said. “That’s the bad news.”

The rest of the phone call revolved around details about the time and place and distant relatives that would be attending. I rummaged through my closet for something presentable and black that I could wear. I paused my search when I came across my pink diary. I’d stopped writing in it shortly after my first date with Malcolm. I ran the vinyl cover over my hands, examined the front and back of it. I didn’t care what Phoebe thought about my powers; something felt magical with this journal resting in my palm.

I set it on my bed and cracked it open, parsed through the pages until I reached the new entries I’d written. I hesitated above the entry where I’d described the first time I met Ben:

I think I met my soulmate today. My intuition has never pulled me toward someone this strongly. He came into my shop for a love reading, of all things. How ironic. It almost feels like a hint dropped from the universe, as if I could misread my intuition, that he's the one.

As far as intuition goes, it almost felt like being reborn into something greater than human when I'd met him, as if the two of us were floating through space when our hands touched, leaving the world behind. Looking back on it now, maybe it was a suggestion that the two of us meeting was meant to be—written in the stars. As my other entries show, my intuition sometimes makes the right choices stand out like shiny stones, as if they appear to glisten, or sometimes they come to me like cravings for a certain food.

I'm still irritated about the whole situation, though. I can feel myself trying to resist what has clearly been a good thing handed to me, all because I can't determine what basis my intuition rests on. I hope I can find out soon.

I stared at the entry for a while. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten the way I'd felt about Ben before everything that had happened at the tavern that night. I read the entry, over and over, wishing the words had said something different, that I'd felt something different at the time.

What could it mean, for me—for my intuition—to be so wrong about someone? What would have happened, had Malcolm not gotten thrown into the mix? I didn't need to read over my entry on Malcolm. I remembered the way I'd had to fight my intuition every step of the way to get closer to him. Was this what my intuition had warned me about? I wondered if getting closer to Malcolm had ruined my chances with Ben, my chances with a divine soulmate.

I couldn't regret a thing that had happened. Thinking back on it, I wasn't sure that I was fond of some of the things Ben had done: snapping his fingers at waitresses, ignoring my discomfort at the thought of drinking when I might have to drive home soon after, everything

he'd done in confrontation with Malcolm at the tavern, and reacting the way that he had when I'd hurt him.

I found myself wanting to draw a conclusion, the conclusion that my intuition had been wrong about Ben. I thought about how ill-fitting it had felt when my intuition had told me to go to college for a sociology degree, and how much happier I was now, running my own business and working with my spirituality. I wasn't sure that I'd ever want to go to school, now that I thought of it, but my intuition had always put that suggestion in the back of my mind that I should.

I closed my journal and set it to rest on my bed. I spent the next few minutes with my head in my hands and my eyes closed, finding solace in the warmth of my own touch and the darkness behind my eyelid.

I found myself thinking over the phone call with my mother and then, about all the recent interactions we'd had. The way we'd sat together and discussed whatever book she was reading—that was a tradition from when I was very young. We used to both do a lot of reading, purely for enjoyment, but lately I'd stopped because of how busy my life had become. I thought about her baking, too. There was always a cake or a pie or a whole roasted turkey waiting for me when I visited. She always went over the top to try and make me and whatever guests I brought along feel comfortable.

Maybe I *was* too hard on her.

The funeral came only two days later—they'd used express shipping to get Aunt Flo up to Massachusetts, apparently. I wondered if they shipped her with other important packages, or if she got her own plane, or truck, or whatever they used to ship dead bodies in. I met up with my

mother and Phoebe at the house and drove with them to the funeral home. We'd all agreed to get lunch afterward, to shed some light upon an otherwise boring day. It was at about the halfway point in the drive when Phoebe asked the question we'd all been avoiding.

"So... This funeral home," she began. "Do you know who owns it?" It was phrased innocently enough, as if she didn't have any idea.

I closed my eyes and rubbed at my temples. "Oh, Phoebe, don't say it," I groaned. If she was bringing it up, I knew her well enough to assume that she'd done her research.

"I mean, maybe it's not his," she corrected, too quickly. "Though, I only know of one on this side of town."

My mother cleared her throat. "We all know it's his," she said, still looking forward at the road as she drove. "Don't taunt your sister."

"I would never!" Phoebe squeaked. "I was... warning her."

"I've thought about it enough already," I added with dolor. Though, I'd been too afraid to look into the specifics. We drove in silence for a few moments before I spoke up again. "Can I just skip this? And you guys tell everybody I'm not feeling well?"

"If I have to be there with relatives I haven't talked to in ten years, you do too," Phoebe said, poking at me from the backseat. I hadn't driven with the two of them like this in a long time; it took me back to my teenage years, when the three of us all felt like a proper family.

"What your sister said," our mother chimed in. "I'd rather not have to explain to the aunts and uncles and cousins where you are for once. And plus, we don't even know if Malcolm will be there," she added weakly.

I folded my arms across my chest. "I don't know, this whole thing's got me feeling pretty sick all of a sudden."

“You’re anxiety incarnate,” Phoebe snorted. “Just tell him you’re sorry, kiss, and make up.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’ve never kissed, and it doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, it would definitely make things more interesting,” she said.

As we pulled in, a knowing silence fell over the three of us. This was the same place we’d all been over a decade ago for my father’s funeral. It wasn’t a welcome sight. I loosed a gentle, trepid sigh. Phoebe looked at me for support through the rearview mirror, and I curled around my front seat to give her a gentle pat on the knee. We oozed out of the car slowly, reluctantly. The heel of my wedge found itself planted in the only patch of mud in the parking lot. There would be no getting dirt out of the velveteen material. I grimaced.

It was a cold, foggy morning, but that didn’t stop people from congregating on the lawn in front of the home. No one wanted to go inside and face death yet, it seemed.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at any of the figures in suits. Instead, my eyes were drawn to the second story of the old, gothic funeral home. It was a sight to behold; beautiful, with grey siding and white trim, something my eyes wanted to linger on for the sake of the building itself. Movement in one of the windows caught my eye. There, at the bottom of the smallest parting of the curtains, was a little white dog. From here, I couldn’t hear it, but it looked as though it was barking its head off. My heart sunk as I remembered Malcolm admitting to owning dogs. He must live in the upstairs portion of the funeral home. Was that why he didn’t want me to pick him up the night of the dinner?

There was no denying his presence now. Hope fluttered in my chest as I considered that maybe, just maybe, he’d realized that I would be here and spared me the embarrassment of

showing my face around him again. Surely he had staff that worked for him, people that could make the funeral run smoothly if he wanted to take the day off?

I shouldered past the waving, smiling-but-solemn figures looming about outside like fog. I dodged the great uncles and the remaining great aunts. I eyed a clean-cut man in a suit standing beside the door to the funeral home. He eyed me back, perhaps unsure if I was about to make conversation, or if I was waiting for him to open the door for me. I was trying to figure out if he worked for Malcolm. Focusing on him made it easier to approach the big grey doors of the funeral home, the ones that had seemed infinitely taller than me and so oppressive the last time I'd stared up at them. I tried to keep my eyes on the man, and not what it meant to go through the doors beside him.

Finally, a bit shyly, he offered, "My condolences about Florence."

"Are you with the funeral home?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You work with Malcolm?" I asked. A second or third cousin of mine shuffled between us and opened one of the great doors to the home. It divided the two of us momentarily, left me suspended, breathless.

He peeked around the door at me as it closed. "Kinda, yeah. He's my boss."

"Must be weird," I commented, "He's got to be around the same age as you."

The young man didn't know what to say to that.

I studied him. "What do you think of him?"

He shrugged helplessly.

I nearly rolled my eyes. "What's your name?"

"Keith."

I nodded. “Okay, Keith, listen,” I began. “I know Malcolm. He’s a friend of mine.” Kind of. Not anymore, maybe. My chest felt tight all of a sudden. I wondered why I was asking stupid questions like this. I supposed I couldn’t back out now that I’d gotten Keith curious. My own curiosity was nagging at me, too. “If you could just tell me something, *anything*, that you think of him, I’d appreciate it.”

The young man, who might have actually been younger than I’d thought, nearly shrunk back against the wall. The poor thing seemed painfully shy, or maybe it was just a touch of adolescent awkwardness. “He,” he began, his voice uncertain, “He cleans up good.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Yeah, he does clean up good,” I echoed back. “Sometimes.”

Sensing that the pressure was off him, the kid perked up. “Hey, what kind of friend of his did you say you were?” He studied me, his features lightening in excitement. “You’re not *the* friend, are you? The redhead?”

I opened the door and let myself inside, half-satisfied to know that Malcolm talked about me. It was cold; colder inside than it was outside, on an early November morning. I hugged myself as I felt goosebumps raise along my arms. “Sheesh,” I muttered, finding myself alone in a freezing cold foyer, “Malcolm must really be trying to keep some corpses fresh in here.”

I turned a corner in the big, dark house and came face-to-face with another unknown relative. She offered me a look, something between a smile and a grimace, that suggested she heard and agreed with my comment. The dogs started barking their heads off from above and she gave me a wide-eyed look, as if about to launch into a tirade about it. I walked past her. Ever since we’d pulled into the lot, I’d had one place in mind to visit. It wasn’t like me to not attempt any kind of socializing at a gathering like this, but this urge seemed more important. From above, I heard the distinct soprano yaps of at least two dogs, broken up by the occasional lower

bays. They followed me as I explored the house, at least for a while. I wasn't much of a dog person, but I appreciated their presence. They kept me company through the lonely halls, the occasional flashes of memory from an experience long past but vivid nonetheless.

The funeral home was like a labyrinth. Sharp angles, poorly lit hallways, grim grey walls, dying and drying flowers askew in vases whose water evaporated long ago. My lip curled. Malcolm took about as good of care of this place as I'd expect.

Upon entry to the home, there had been a very clear, lit path from the entryway, down the hall, to the chapel room. I remembered that pathway, carried plenty of feelings from the last time I'd walked it with my family. I'd gone down another hallway and was wandering past lounges, flower rooms, locked doors, and at least one or two restrooms. The home was massive and Victorian, with a wide ground floor. I wanted to find the ballroom.

I'd made my way around to the back of the home. There was a door there, just hardly cracked open. Light streamed in from behind it. I pushed it open and peered inside. The hall opened up to a large, open room full of windows. It was scarcely decorated, if at all, but I almost didn't notice. Windows ran all along the far wall, allowed the room to fill with pale natural light. I took a few steps inside, and then more, past the great staircase in the center, to look beyond the windows. There was a doorway in the center of the wall, and it all was framed by the garden. What had been lush and vibrant when I'd last been here was now a dry, dead assortment of leaves, mottled in various shades of brown, walled-in by hedges and artfully cut shrubs and trees, most of which were dead or covered in plastic to keep them alive through the winter. I almost wished my great aunt Flo had waited to die until next spring, or had passed just a month earlier, before the weather had turned. I would've found sanctuary from the stress of a funeral in the middle of that garden for the second time, among the scent of roses and marigolds and exotic

flowers and life, drowning out the sticky, dry aridness of death that hung around the corpse hidden somewhere in this house.

My eyes lingered a moment longer. I wished we would've had my dad's funeral in this room. I wondered if many of Malcolm's clients even knew it was here. If they didn't, I suppose he wouldn't bother to maintain the garden.

I pulled myself away, roved over toward the spiral staircase. I rested my foot on the first step, craned my head back to try and peer at what lay above. I had a feeling it wasn't an area that I was supposed to roam into.

I supposed I'd already pushed enough boundaries with Malcolm. I might as well push some more and play dumb if I got caught. *Oh, this area is off-limits? I had no idea someone might be living up here.*

All contingency plans for getting caught flew out of my head when I crested the stairs, turned to face the second floor I'd just walked onto, and spotted Malcolm. I froze.

He'd been walking toward the stairs and, as our eyes met, his steps faltered. "So she *was* a relative of yours," he remarked, almost to himself, as he pushed past me. He was more focused on adjusting the buttons on his cuffs than he was on me. It stung.

I followed him down the stairs. "Hey, wait a second," I called. I scrambled to catch up to him. "You can't just direct my great aunt's funeral and ignore me the whole time," I threatened, only half-jokingly. "I'll create a disturbance. I'll make you look bad."

He stopped at the bottom of the staircase and, finally, looked at me. His eyes were focused, cold and blue. For the first time, even though he was well-groomed and well-dressed, he looked like *Malcolm*, the picture of him I imagined when I thought of him, the perfect combination of tortured yet presentable, set in his own element rather than in a situation that

didn't fit him. It was something in his eyes, the deep-set lines of his face, his grown-out-again beard, the fresh crispness of his suit. All these pieces of him, suspended between the rays of light streaming in from the garden outside and the stench of death wafting in from deeper inside the house, finally fit together. I didn't understand him any more than I did before, but I knew what he was now. Something that was beautiful once, some time ago. Something that was dead and drying up inside, like the leaves in the garden that had been cleared of their chlorophyll, choked off of water. Something that I knew would be beautiful again, but would always carry that death with him. He lived in a cycle, like the seasons.

“Do you have something to say to me?” He asked, his voice flat.

“I've been thinking about what you said about me,” I said, “About me and my mom, and what happened at dinner. You were right about all of it.”

“Not what I wanted to hear,” he grumbled as he started walking again.

“Yeah, well,” I stammered as I chased after him, “I didn't want you to start ignoring me, but shit happens.”

“If you can't figure out what you need to say, you deserve it.” He slowed as he reached the door. I swear he slowed.

It bought me the moment I needed to realize what he wanted to hear. “I'm sorry?” I blurted. Then, more carefully, I said, “I didn't realize I had to say it after all the missed calls and the snooping around your house to find you and me literally saying ‘you were right,’ but I'm sorry, Malcolm.”

Reluctantly, he glanced over his shoulder at me. “And why are you sorry?”

“Isn't it obvious what I'm apologizing for?”

He raised his hand away from the door and turned to lean against it, to gently push it closed. His face was still scrunched up. Pained, contemplative, maybe frustrated. His arms were crossed. “Not what I asked,” he said. “I want to know *why* you’re apologizing. Why bother.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” I said helplessly. In a matter of seconds, I’d gone from chasing him down to being backed into a corner.

“Did you try to call Ben this week?” he questioned. “Did you leave messages on his phone, asking him if he hates you now?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and glowered at him. “You’re sick.”

He glanced away, past me, toward the garden. “It was just a question.”

“If I called Ben,” I began, “I wouldn’t have had to leave messages on his phone, because he would’ve picked up. And he would have reassured me, and told me he understood that I was in a hard position, and he would have apologized for over-reacting at the bar.” I pressed my lips together with a little shake of my head. “And I would have learned nothing.”

The words hung between us. The silence was heavy, meaningful, unbearable. Finally, he spoke up: “I’ve been losing people all my life.” His voice was soft. “I really thought I’d done the wrong thing by calling you out. I thought I lost you, too,” he said, a little surprised. “And I don’t think I can bear to do it again. I forgive you, Claire.”

I wrapped him in an embrace as soon as I processed the words. Maybe it was selfish, because I was relieved he’d give me another chance to be good to him, but I think a lot of it was because I could finally see how badly he needed it. He was slow to reciprocate, but I eventually felt his hands clasp around my back.

When we parted, I wagged a finger at him. “We’re still going to talk about what you did at the bar,” I said sternly. “The punching and the jealousy and stuff. Just not now.”

He rolled his eyes. “I was supposed to be offering my condolences to your extended family tree half an hour ago.”

“Why so late?”

“I wanted to buy myself some time before I had to come down and face you. I didn’t expect you to come find me, but I should’ve known.”

As he made to leave, I wagged a finger at him. “We’re still going to talk about what you did at the bar,” I said sternly. “The punching and the jealousy and stuff. Just not now.”

I should have walked with him, back down the empty, dusty halls with their cleanly painted trim. It felt like the natural thing to do, but instead I paced to the other corner of the room, sat by one of the great garden windows, and curled my knees into my chest. I stared out at the garden, shrouded in fog, and counted the green leaves that remained on the bushes among the dead ones. I wasn’t ready to go back to the main wing of the funeral home yet. I wondered why I didn’t ask him to stay with me for a little longer. I also wondered if sitting here alone was any better than being uncomfortable, but at least beside people I cared about.

I let the sound of barking dogs guide me back down the hallway. As expected, I didn’t find my mother, or Phoebe, or Malcolm until I stepped back through the giant grey doors and into the fog once more. The boy who’d been standing sentry on the porch was gone. What I hadn’t expected—but really should have—was to see Phoebe hovering by Malcolm’s side. My mother was trapped in what appeared to be a one-sidedly deep conversation with, I don’t know, a great aunt or second cousin twice removed. I never learned what once or twice removed meant when speaking of family, but she was an older woman, so I supposed the additional marker of distance was fitting.

I overheard Phoebe asking about cosmetics as I approached, questioning if Malcolm had done this or that to our dear Great Aunt Flo. Malcolm's answer came to a gentle stop as he caught sight of me approaching. I gave him a little wave and came to stand beside Phoebe.

"So, you do makeup?" I joked.

"It's part of my job," he replied evenly, clearly not rising to my teasing.

"Will you do mine?" Phoebe asked, wanting to get in on the fun.

"Only if you want to look like a dead person."

"How'd you manage to sneak out here with all the grieving people in your house wanting to ask you questions?" I asked, moving past his rather skillful comeback.

Phoebe's eyes nearly popped. "You live here?"

"Upstairs," Malcolm said, with a nod toward the windows which were now devoid of barking dogs. I wondered where they were. Still barking and causing unrest among the mourners, no doubt. "I have my younger brother making the rounds."

"Oh my God," I gasped, remembering the nervous boy I'd encountered beside the door earlier. "It's not Keith, is it?"

Malcolm looked at me for a long moment. I wondered what was going on in his head, what he was thinking that would prevent him from giving a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to a simple question. "It's Keith," he answered. "You met him?"

I clasped my hands in front of me. "Yes, I met him! He was adorable. In a kind of sad way."

Malcolm pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What?" Phoebe piped up, evidently distraught that she was missing something. "And I didn't get to meet him?"

“You should go find him,” I encouraged her. “I’m sure you’d love talking to him.” I motioned toward the funeral home. “Plus, I think the people in there need a little more Phoebe energy. It’s awfully stuffy.”

She gave a very determined nod and strode off.

Malcolm gave me a good-natured shake of his head. “You just killed him, you know. If she asks him half the gross, personal questions about dead bodies that she’s asked me among a sea of mourning old people to overhear her, he’s going to die on the spot.”

“I think he needs it,” I laughed. “Exposure therapy. Maybe he’ll come out of his shell.”

Malcolm sighed, dug his hands into his pockets. “You’re awfully—” he paused, searching for the right words. “Mischievous today. I’m guessing you weren’t that close to Florence?”

“I literally don’t think I’ve ever met her,” I said. “Don’t you think it’s kinda stupid?”

“What’s stupid?” he asked.

“Y’know. Funerals,” I said. “Someone dies, and whoever was closest to them decides that they’re so sad, they have to invite everyone and their uncles—literally—to waste a perfectly good day and spend it staring at a dead body. It’s not even a cool dead body,” I huffed. “And everyone has to dress in black to show how sad they are, and no one’s allowed to joke around or be happy, to show how sad they are, and we all have to show up earlier and earlier in some weird pissing contest, again, to see who’s the saddest. Why do we need to be two hours early for a funeral just to walk around and tell people we hardly know how sad we are?” I’d had the same issues with my father’s funeral.

“Your family is pretty punctual,” he remarked, quietly, as if to himself.

“I just don’t understand it. I don’t know most of these people. To be frank, my dad’s dead, my grandpa on his side is dead, and my grandma is living it up in some old folks’ community in Florida. Even *she* didn’t come to this.”

“I did hear some frustration about May Hart not being here. Was she not well-liked?”

“I guess not,” I shrugged. “Maybe she figured it all out. Maybe she broke the rules to piss everyone off.” I’d always liked my grandma May. I liked her more now. I folded my arms across my chest. “It’s not even about the dead person at this point. And stupid weddings and baby showers are the same thing, except the focus is more on money and gifts than being upset.”

“You know you’re talking about my livelihood here,” he remarked dryly.

“You disagree?”

“No, not really,” he said with a little shake of his head. “I wouldn’t criticize them if you hadn’t gone on that rant, but I think it’s a little dumb, too. At least, families that do funerals like this.”

“I wasn’t aware there was another way to do it. At least, not commonly.”

“Every family is different,” he said with a little shrug, following people as they walked up the sidewalk with his eyes, perhaps half-uncertain that one of them wouldn’t overhear. “But, in general, the good funerals are the ones that families see as a celebration of life, rather than a loss to death.”

I brought my brows together in thought, made a little noise of contemplation. “And what does that look like?”

“Less rigid, for starters,” he said. “They don’t care if you’re early or late. Did you know, I’ve been approached by at least three of your extended family members, and dragged into a dozen other conversations fretting about your grandma, or a late uncle, or so-and-so’s kids, who

didn't skip school to come? 'May Hart this' and 'May Hart that' and 'Can you believe she couldn't bother to show up? Isn't that a little rude for a funeral?' They think I'm the expert, a fresh outside perspective, but also someone they're paying to agree with them and console them, so I get people coming up to me all the time, looking for sympathy or wise words of advice about social conventions."

"I don't think I could work the job that you do in a million years," I groaned.

"It's not all bad," he said. "Even in the more uptight funerals, like this one. Remember all those years ago, in the garden?"

How could I forget? "You said I helped you."

"You helped me realize that a funeral isn't just about the dead. Being here and consoling people is a part of it, too. I like to think I made you feel better that day, and it made me want to get into my family's business, to make funerals easier on other people however I can."

"You could take better care of the funeral home," I teased. "Barking dogs and dead plants in the vases hardly make people feel better."

"I can't do anything about my dogs," he said, "And the dead flowers are in a hallway that hardly gets used."

I grinned. "It's okay. I lose sight of the small things at my workplace too, sometimes." I felt a knot in my stomach. "Speaking of," I said, "What do you think about all that? Y'know, my job. Psychics. Predicting the future."

He shrugged. "We just got back on good terms, Claire—are you sure you wanna go down that road?"

I nodded firmly.

He brought a hand up to fidget with a strand of hair that had blown out of place. “I want to believe in it,” he said slowly. “I just can’t, logically speaking.”

I tried not to let my indignation get the better of me. “Logically?”

“It’s something that the heart feels, I guess. A pull to go into a psychic’s shop and get a reading, a shortcut that will let me know what to prepare for, or a way of using money to buy a better future, if I can find the right person to do it for me. But then, my brain kicks in stops me. No amount of spirituality will make my future better. A look into what’s coming doesn’t mean that it will help me at all. It sounds like a lot of stress, actually. If it were even real, that is.”

I wasn’t sure how I was going to maintain my good relationship with Malcolm when he didn’t believe in the very thing I’d built my life on. I supposed Phoebe was just the same. “The shop,” I said, “Why were you in my shop that day, then?”

He stiffened, clearly caught off-guard by the question. “You remember that?” he asked, to which I nodded and kept my gaze trained firmly on him. He was hesitant to answer, and when he finally did, his words were slow. “Like I said, it’s head versus heart.” He was watching me very carefully. “I wanted advice on a certain something that had happened to me recently, because otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to put my thoughts to rest about it.”

“And what was that certain something?” I asked, pushing him further.

“I’d met someone,” he said with a shrug. “It’s funny, actually. You’re the one that’s into the psychic stuff, but seeing you was the reason I didn’t get a reading that day.”

“Things are starting to make sense,” I said. He’d come in for a love reading after we’d met, and he’d probably decided against it when he saw me working there because the reading

would have been about me. “What if I told you that I was a real psychic? Would you change your mind about anything?”

He laughed. “I’m sure most psychics think they’re real. But the fact that you’re asking me what I think means that you’re open to other ideas.” He glanced toward a group of people walking up the sidewalk. His eyes slid to the watch on his wrist. It had to be getting close to the funeral’s start. “Are you asking because you recently started to believe in it all, or are you questioning your faith?”

I felt that familiar feeling of pure, helpless panic, and wished I had my intuition to guide me on what to say. I didn’t want to confront this question again, to open myself up to the idea that supernatural abilities were only real in books and movies or figments of the imagination; more importantly, I cared what he thought, and I wanted him to believe in me. “I don’t know,” I muttered. “It’s a long story, longer and weirder than anything I’d want to tell you on the lawn of a funeral home.”

“You could think of it as being at a funeral home,” he said, “Or, you could think of it as being at my house.” He was quiet for a moment. “Is it weirder than telling me you think your dad isn’t really dead, and that your mom played a part in hiding the secret from you?” he asked.

My cheeks flushed. “I guess so,” I muttered. “Though it’s all related.”

“You have to tell me now,” he joked, but I got the feeling he was only half-kidding.

“Don’t you have a funeral to organize?”

“Keith can do the rest of the work just fine,” he assured me.

“Hooray for Keith,” I said flatly. I crossed my arms against my chest, rubbed arms against the chill of the morning and tried to buy myself some time with the action. “My dad always told us—my family—that he had a special gift. An intuition, a way of knowing what to

do when it mattered,” I told him. “When I was born, he was always watching me, asking me questions, testing me. At least, that’s what it felt like. I think he was looking to see if I’d inherited it.”

“Do psychic gifts work that way?” Malcolm asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, with a little shake of my head. “The short answer is, yes, we think that my dad’s gift did work that way. For the longest time, my family encouraged me to believe that I was special. That’s why I work as a psychic, because I do have some sense of clairvoyance, even if it doesn’t relate to others.”

“So how does it work?” he questioned.

“When it matters,” I said, “Though I couldn’t tell you what makes it matter—sometimes it’s as simple as picking my outfit in the morning, or something as big as whether or not I should take a drive to the cemetery at night—I feel a pull. Almost like a craving for food, you know, a desire to do one thing over the other. And if I try to resist it, which I never really did until recently, it feels impossible.”

He looked thoughtful. “Impossible how?”

“Like... physical symptoms. A headache, nausea. Mental ones, too. I don’t know if you’re a runner, or if you’ve ever tried, but that desperate feeling of wanting to be done, even when you don’t have a stitch in your side.”

“I’m not much of a runner,” he remarked.

“Neither am I, clearly,” I joked back, glad for the interruption.

“What has it done for you? This ability of yours.”

I shrugged. “That’s the thing. I don’t know.” I felt a pull, then, to tell him about my intuition, and how it had pulled me toward Ben and away from him, but I couldn’t imagine it

would be well-received. “My dad supposedly had the same gift as I did, and he died. Horribly, as you of all people know.”

“It gave me nightmares, for a while. I was still new to seeing bodies back then,” he added. “Have you given up on the idea that he might still be alive?” Malcolm questioned.

“I don’t know. The circumstances changed. The one piece of evidence that Phoebe and I had has a perfectly good explanation,” I said, a little bit dismal. I played with a patch of mud with the toe of my already-sullied shoes.

“He seems like someone important to you,” he pointed out. “So, think of it this way: If he is still alive, you have to consider that he left all of you. Or, even that your mom knew about it, too, and she also lied. I guess it’s not impossible, since your dad could have had an extraordinary gift, but doesn’t it seem better to accept the truth you’ve been told?” he asked. “Wouldn’t it be healthier for your family, for you, to put your thoughts to rest and accept that he didn’t leave you willingly?”

I felt tears knot up in my throat. I gave him a little nod and looked away. “I think, for Phoebe and I, it was just a really nice possibility, to think we might get him back someday.” He’d touched on the side of things which hurt too much to address, the possibility that he had willingly left our family without attempting to contact us in fourteen years. It was surprising, coming from someone like Malcolm. I would’ve expected him to tell me that death was a part of life and that moving on was the only thing anyone could do.

We stood together without another word, a cloud of mist settled around us, silencing the rest of the world. I finally spoke up, to tell him that I thought the funeral was about to start. He asked me if I really wanted to go inside. I told him there was no way in hell that I did, and we left to get breakfast. I sent my mother a text so she wouldn’t go looking for me.

“You know,” I said between mouthfuls of blueberry pancakes, “This is a lot better than sitting in a dusty chapel.” I wondered if he knew that it brought back painful memories, or if he was just eager for a way to escape work. Either way, I was grateful.

Chapter 12

Golden sunlight streamed in from the window of the café. Gentle, early-morning music played softly from a speaker above us, absorbed the occasional sound of a teacup hitting its saucer, or fingers rummaging through a paper bag for a pastry. I'd had to rest my hands in my lap to still their trembling before I attempted to hold my coffee cup again. Before I'd started reading about self-care and mental health, I'd never noticed just how anxious I could get. I hadn't even begun to tell Josie what was going on yet.

"Thanks for meeting me for breakfast," I said.

Josie tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "Of course, Claire. You were so stressed at work the other day, I could tell that you needed to talk."

I smiled. "I'm so glad I work with an empath. I don't even have to tell you when I'm having a bad day."

Clearly pleased with herself, she smiled, but the moment didn't last long before she leaned forward and studied my face. "You do have to explain what's going on, though."

"I know, I know," I told her. I took a deep breath to steel myself. "I think my intuition was wrong."

She clearly didn't believe me. "Why's that?"

"Ben," I said. "Remember how excited I was about him when I first met him? I thought he was my soulmate back then, but now, I don't even know if he actually single while we were going out."

Josie looked thoughtful. "Are you sure you didn't just misread the signs?"

"I don't think my intuition could've made it clearer that I was supposed to date him."

She shrugged. “Maybe. But fate works in mysterious ways. Maybe you were drawn to Ben for some other reason. Or, maybe you did just misread the signs—even professionals do it sometimes.”

“What about Malcolm?” I asked.

“Maybe your intuition told you to resist Malcolm because he kinda messed things up with Ben?” she suggested.

“I wondered about that, too,” I admitted. “But, I still don’t think I like the way Ben acted before Malcolm was involved.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to like everything about anyone,” she said. “Even soulmates.” Then, her eyes widened. “Wait, hear me out, I’ve got a crazy idea.”

“Great,” I chuckled. “I’m listening.”

“Your intuition is a pretty powerful thing, right? It’s magical, which makes it a little bit elusive, like my empathy.”

“Right.”

“What if, since you wanted to resist it so badly, it switched?” She asked, opening her palms as if she were pitching an idea at an important business meeting. “Like, it knew you would want to resist what it told you was right, and gravitate towards what it said was wrong, so it switched them?”

“Sounds a little convoluted,” I said, though I couldn’t deny that the way things had worked out was certainly odd.

“But it makes sense,” she pressed on. “Tell me that you weren’t attracted to Malcolm at least a little bit because you wanted to know *why* your intuition told you it was a bad idea, and I’ll call you a liar.”

“Fine, fine, you have a point there,” I admitted. “But I don’t know if it works that way, you know? If it can just change the way it acts all of a sudden.”

Josie shrugged. “None of these things come with a guidebook,” she said. “You could try to talk to other psychics and see if anyone’s heard of an intuition like yours.”

I wondered why I’d never thought of that before, but I also wondered if we were talking around the big question. “A couple people have suggested that it might not even be an ability in the first place,” I suggested gently. “Like, what if I don’t have a special gift at all?”

“I mean, maybe,” she said, taking a sip from her coffee cup. “But you know how I feel about it.” She winked at me, smiled from behind her cup. “I think we all have a little magic in us.”

I wanted to believe her.

Birdsong drifted from the boughs of the trees. Quick chirps fell to our ears like the residual drops of springtime rain shaken loose by the feathered singers.

“That’s a nice one,” I commented, pointing at a two-story house with a distinctly springy shade of yellow on its siding.

“Bold,” Malcolm murmured, walking down the sidewalk beside me. He wasn’t fond of the yellow siding and black shutters.

I reminded him that his whole house was made up of different shades of grey and, as I did so, I thought of him as a whole being composed of shades of grey. Some were cloudy and dark; dismal shades which seemed hardly alive at times. Others were a lot livelier, perhaps

almost off-white shades, bright and chipper grays, but never quite pure white. Ben, on the other hand, had some pure white in him. I surprised myself with that thought.

I jabbed a finger on the other side of the street. “I bet you like something like that better,” I teased. It was a single-story house with a neatly manicured lawn. It was beige, with an asphalt-colored roof. Nothing spectacular or showy.

It went on like this, our little game of trying to mutually decide on which house was the best house on the street. He would deny my top picks for some reason or other, and I’d deny his, and we’d have moments where we laughed, or surprised ourselves whenever we reached a house that neither of us could reasonably find anything wrong with—an agreement, a middle ground, of sorts. Sometimes, I’d tell him that I knew a certain house was the best one because my intuition told me so, and we’d both smile, or laugh a little, and move on.

We played this game on every one of our evening walks, until the sun burned the sidings auburn and cast dark shadows over the lawns, and we’d reach his car or my apartment and go our separate ways, at least until tomorrow, when we could do it all again.

My life was different now, but it felt like a natural, inevitable step up from how things had been before. I sat on the steps in front of my shop, waved at him as he pulled open his car door, then turned and headed inside. I rubbed a clump of mud from my shoe on my welcome mat and locked the door behind me. Through my curtains, I spared one last look at him; the front of his car was doused in amber sunlight, the back of it casting a long shadow over the road behind it as he drove away. He was the best decision I’d ever made.

I climbed the stairs to my apartment and sat down on my bed to study my cellphone. I mulled over rights and wrongs in my head as Sage rubbed against my legs. Finally, I dialed his number.

“Ben? Hey, it’s Claire. I just wanted to ask you a question.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. Faded Page eBook, 1930.

Faulkner's work provided me with a few ideas on what to or not to do when writing an unreliable narrator, as well as a character motivated by his or her own passion. I enjoyed this work and can certainly see its intellectual merit; I was also influenced by the contradiction of Darl, and whether or not he really had some sense of psychic ability, or perhaps even metafictional ability within the text. However, I thought that this text was difficult to read and hard to follow, and while I did draw inspiration from the text, I wanted my own work to flow more smoothly into itself.

Anderson, Sherwin. *Winesburg, OH*. Electron Press, 1960.

Anderson's work inspired me to branch out from my traditional style of storytelling. While I did not envision creating my story in the same fragmented way that *Winesburg, OH* is written, I certainly appreciated the form, and this might have moved me to include some different modes of storytelling, such as journal entries or a story within the story. I also think Anderson's notion of the grotesque, as well as the coming-of-age elements within this work, helped me to write Claire's character arc.

McCullers, Carson. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Faded Page eBook, 1940.

McCullers's work contains an interesting scene in which Portia, the kitchen worker, talks to Mick, a young girl struggling through her adolescence. In this scene, Portia tells Mick that, because she has no faith in a higher power, she will always feel empty, searching for something.

This scene is about Christianity in McCullers's work, but the idea is one which influenced Clairvoyant, though in Claire's case, having faith in her intuition enabled her to excuse her self-assurance and to elevate herself above others—a sort of inversion of the discussion between Portia and Mick. Mick's struggle through her coming of age, in combination with the other coming-of-age stories, influenced my writing of Claire's character arc.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. Penguin Books, 1984.

I was really moved by DeLillo's work and how it dealt with the metafictional. Despite not having much of a real plot, I found the story engaging to read. The setting and characters were lively, and each chapter was compelling on its own, as if there were plot points propelling it forward. I wanted to replicate this in my own work, even though it does contain a plot, in the sense that I wanted my characters to be lively and convicted in the actions they take, and I wanted my story to be enjoyable—not laborious—to read, even if I do have themes and ideas that I wanted to explore within my work as well.

Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Penguin Classics, 2009.

I learned a lot from Jackson's work, mostly in terms of how to write a novella and how to structure one of my own. I noticed that *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* deals with one or two central events, as opposed to most novels, which contain a series of events, and how those two central events affect the story. There is also a limited cast of characters without much outside influence, and only one perspective shown.

ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

Pennsylvania State University, The Behrend College May 2022
Honors Bachelor of Science in Biology
Concentration in Molecular and Cellular Biology and
Biochemistry
Honors Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Under Dr. Michael Campbell at Penn State Behrend – Fall 2019 – Spring 2020

Two semesters of research investigating changes in DNA methylation during dormancy in potatoes. Practiced formulating a procedure for the extraction of DNA from potatoes, extracted the DNA at different points of dormancy over the course of seven months, checked extracted samples for proper DNA concentration for the project's needs.

Learned about the trial and error involved in research; methods of extracting genetic material, such as detergents used, centrifuging, incubation, and storage of samples; and how to analyze concentration of DNA in samples via NanoDrop spectrophotometer.

Under Dr. Tom Noyes at Penn State Behrend; Senior thesis in creative writing – “Clairvoyant”

Two semesters dedicated to studying the craft of fiction writing Fall 2021 – Ongoing
and creating a work of original fiction; complete with
self-criticism and a thesis defense.

HONORS AND AWARDS

Schreyer Honors College Fall 2018 – Ongoing
Behrend Honors Program Fall 2018 – Spring 2020
Presidential Scholarship – Fall 2019 – Fall 2021
Awarded for academic excellence

Academic Excellence Scholarship – Awarded for academic excellence	Fall 2019 – Fall 2021
Chancellor’s Scholarship – Awarded to exemplary students	Fall 2018 – Fall 2021
J.W. Van Dyke Memorial Scholarship – Awarded for academic excellence	Fall 2021
Dean’s List – Awarded for academic excellence	Fall 2018 – Spring 2021

ORGANIZATIONS

Gender and Sexuality Equality Club – Treasurer	May 2021 – May 2022
Pennsylvania Junior Academy of Science – Judge	Fall 2018

LANGUAGES

English – Native Speaker
French – Reading, writing, and speaking proficiency