



I don't want to know you...

THE PSYCHIC BITCH

LARAN MITHRAS



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By

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“Youth ages, immaturity is outgrown, ignorance can be educated, and drunkenness sobered, but stupid lasts forever.”

— Aristophanes

CHAPTER 1

I want to die...

The sentiment wasn't from my hangover.

I kicked something – an empty bottle – in my numb daze that was only penetrated by my pounding head.

Another night spent drinking away the visions on an empty stomach.

The rapping on the door to the trailer I had just rented was steady and certain.

A cop.

Cops always knock a certain way – as if expecting and demanding.

How did they find me so fast? I groaned and rolled to my knees. The flaps of my breasts hung small on my wasting body.

At least I was in panties.

I reached for the nearest article of clothing and pulled it on. I vaguely remembered buying it from the children's clothing section of the Salvation Army thrift store. It was cheap: it allowed me more money for booze.

I swayed and swallowed.

The figure in the window next to the door was fuzzy. I knew he could see me which is probably why he didn't knock again.

Thank you, God.

I ran a hand through my hair and took a shuddering breath. It hurt. A faltering step had the room swaying around me.

I might have thought someone was moving the trailer, but I had woken up too

many times like this to think it. I stumbled past the coffee table under which I had fallen asleep and kicked another bottle – one from a previous night. I stopped and looked around at the litter of cigarettes in the lone ashtray and the small stock of vodka bottles waiting for another lonely night. I lurched to the door and pulled it open.

I was angry, alone, and agitated that the local police... knew. Was I ever going to get rest? I scrubbed at my face to hide the bright light of the morning and said before he could speak, "I don't want to do this."

He stood stunned in that cop way – staring suspiciously, at a loss for words, but erect and ready for action. His mouth was just open enough to tell me he had prepared some kind of introduction.

I blinked and squinted at him.

His suit was cheap, off the rack, and at least eight years out of style. Not a fed. His eyes were not hardened and strained having seen the horrors of rural wrecks. Not a sheriff.

I took a deep breath and let it out. He was a local cop. Nothing more. Sharlotte's Creek Police Department. The suit said detective. I shook my head. "I have no answers for you."

His head tilted slightly. He was handsome, for a cop. He said, "Angel Cooper? May I come in?"

My exasperated sound didn't dissuade him. He pulled out his badge and showed it to me. "Detective Miller with the—"

I grabbed his arm and he stiffened in alarm.

It was always bad to touch a cop; they thought you were assaulting them. Sometimes I was severely reprimanded for it. Scolded like a little child.

Funny.

Not.

They always came to me for the little children.

My vision went black and I knew I was swaying on my feet, but my grip was iron. Bile rose in my throat.

His area of the office was neat and modern, though the brick on the outside of his desk window was older. His desk was directly behind another desk. A small pegboard was neatly cluttered with post-it notes tacked into place. His desk was organized – only a few files and an old-fashioned Rolodex made an appearance – with two computer screens. The blotter calendar was filled with crabbed, tiny writing of reminders and phone numbers.

The captain was coming and the view swiveled towards the inner part of the office. The captain was a bulky man, not fat. His mustache was over-groomed and bushy. His hair was perfectly cut short. His eyes were hard and sharp. Typical captain.

He spoke "Alan, you got the message?"

"Yes."

The captain nodded and looked out the window beyond... "Talk to the psychic bitch – see if she has anything."

"It's a waste of time."

"She comes highly recommended out of Houston."

"She probably just got lucky, sir—"

The captain looked down towards my view. "Just do it; I don't give a shit if you believe her or not. We need something – anything – on this."

There was a sigh.

The captain looked expectantly.

"I could be spending my time better—"

"We haven't found shit and you know it. What are you going to do? Wander the forest?"

A pen flopped onto the desk in my view and suddenly the view was rising. "Fine." Resignation. "Fuck. Fine."

I let go of the cop's arm. Recent events came clear like that. Less recent ones didn't. I said, "This isn't going to give you anything." I turned away.

Officer Alan Miller came in anyway and looked around.

I gingerly settled onto the old couch that had come with the place. Everything had come with the place.

He said, "This was the furniture Darren had—"

"I don't care."

He swiped a paper bag off the dirty recliner and sat. "You don't look like a psychic."

I looked up at him on an unsteady neck. "What am I supposed to look like? Black hair? Jewels on my forehead? Rings on my fingers?"

He took out a phone and tapped.

I said, "No."

He tapped faster, more resolute, then turned the phone to show me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but I knew it was useless. I sighed with all the weariness of having done this before. A hundred times before.

He was holding towards me a picture of a little boy. Freckles sprinkled on a face so young and innocent that it hurt. What got me was the hair – flaming red with the silkiest highlights of gold.

My hair used to look like that. It could have been the hair of my brother, if I had ever had one. I breathed, "You bastard."

His lips stiffened. "He went missing two months ago. We have no leads—"

"And I'm supposed to look into the darkness and retrieve—"

His look stalled me. He was hoping. They all hoped. They all scoffed, too. He said, "Please?"

I knew the fastest way to get rid of him was to just do it. "I charge for this usually—"

"Do you want me to pay you?" The offense in his voice was obvious.

I scathed back, "I don't want your money."

He stared at me.

I looked down in defeat. "What do you have of his?"

He withdrew a ballcap from his coat pocket. So tiny. White with a red brim, it looked like something a mother would buy for her child to shield sensitive eyes from the sun.

I trembled looking at it – dreading the touch.

His hand was steady as he held it out, but his eyes betrayed doubt.

I started to raise my hand as the tears built in my eyes. I stopped, fingers a foot away from it. "This isn't going to go the way you hope. It never does."

The hand and hat did not waver.

Cops. So determined.

My face broke as I reached. I gripped the brim.

Bile rose in my throat, high and burning. I gagged, sobbed, and let the tears loose. It was no use keeping them back or even trying.

Gulls in the air swirled. Treetops stood motionless. A flash of black brought a cool breeze. A flash of the boy's eyes, so blue and bright followed right after. They were scared. An impact sent the vision spinning. Boyish screams of terror and pain came and went, fast. I felt cutting on my skin. Wet, disgusting sounds. A flash of light changed my view to the detective looking caught in a trap. Another flash was me... alone and...

Two impacts to the back of my head and spraying brains—

I dropped the hat and wept. It was the same as many such visions. My death. I whimpered, "I hate you. I hate all of you."

"What is it? Did you sense something?" He picked up the hat from where it had fallen into the ashtray.

I turned away and leaned over the arm of the couch, ready to vomit. But I didn't; I never did.

I wanted to, though.

My entire body trembled as if I was a heroin addict going through withdrawals. I gasped, "I can't help you."

"Did you see something? Angel?"

"I said, I can't help you." To do so would bring my death, and probably his, too. "You don't understand. You never understand!"

It was useless to tell a cop certain things – they ignored warnings.

He must have sensed the strength of my refusal. He withdrew a card and placed it on the table. "If you change your mind—"

"I won't."

He rose without another word and left.

CHAPTER 2

I stumbled into the tiny bar.

Crazy Peggy's was old, stank like old beer, and sported old tin signs on the walls. A beat-up jukebox played a scratchy record. The mournful tunes of Hank Williams Senior floated in the background.

Peggy was polishing glasses that had long ago lost their shine.

I leaned on the bar, trying to formulate my words through the clearing fog of hangover.

She said, "I saw Alan – the detective – at your door."

The trailer I had rented two days ago was in back of the bar.

So what? Oh... you think I did something wrong. "It was nothing."

"A visit by the police is nothing? I'm not renting to—"

"He wanted me to help him find..." I didn't want to go there.

In a small town, everyone knew where "there" was.

Her eyes went large. "Casey Stamp?"

I knew it was the boy's name without ever having heard it. A flavor of my nightmare jogged and jittered, revealing the familiarity of that name. My visions often didn't provide many concrete details, like names and thoughts. They were just visions. If I couldn't see it, I generally didn't know it, though impressions often conveyed emotions.

Peggy gripped my arm. "Were you able to help?"

Bile rose in my throat as blackness swept near. I tried to pull my arm away. "No..."

Flashes went by me – little bits of Peggy's life. The redundant opening and cleaning of the bar. The endless stream of bills received and paid. The monotony of the same faces. Her dogs, and burying one when she died. Her husband, round in the face and jolly, finishing the deck on their house. Also spinning by were little teases of romances and affairs she had partaken in without her husband's knowledge. Quiet gasps of illicit encounters spun by. So did some more steamy threesomes – with men and women. Of particular weight in the vision were the three men she had taken in a drunken orgy one foggy night. I also saw Peggy diddling while thinking of it – the vision flashed back and forth - when her husband wasn't around.

I yanked my arm away and swallowed. I felt heat in my face. I took a shuddering breath. "You might want to be careful touching me... I see things..."

She looked put off balance. "Oh..."

We were the only people in the bar.

She asked again, "Were you able to see anything about Casey?"

I closed my eyes and turned my head briefly away, not wanting to remember. I looked back to her searching expression. "I... couldn't help him."

Hope faded from her face as if drained down the gutter. I saw scorn replace it: she thought I was a charlatan.

Good.

I said, "Do you mind if I put up a small sign on the fence? For my palm reading."

The older woman smirked and shrugged, showing me what she thought of my abilities. "Sure, honey, go ahead."

I paused, not wanting her to think badly of me – after all, she had taken pity and rented me the trailer. I pursed my lips. "It wasn't that I didn't see anything... about Casey." I choked on the name and swallowed. "Just... nothing real helpful. I can't control what I see."

Peggy's entire posture melted into softness. She reached out again and touched

my arm – out of habit, surely. "I'm sure you did what you could, but sometimes, anything helps."

The bile was up and I was trying to ignore the dizzying swirl of personal details I didn't need to know.

Seeing things like favorite colors, hobbies and relatives were one thing, but who wanted to know about personal hygiene? I didn't want to know how severely she struggled with constipation.

I yanked my arm away again. I said to her, "He left a card... If I think I can..." I shrugged.

She firmed her bottom lip and nodded.

I sighed and said my practiced words, "If anyone needs their palms read, I charge thirty-five dollars. Spread the word." I had no conviction left in my pitch. Enthusiasm had died after the first year when I thought I could turn the nightmares into a life.

"Of course..."

I knew the sound of her response; if she mentioned it to anyone at all, it would be as a joke. That worked for me, too, because often the listener pinned hope on the most fleeting of chances. What might be a joke to Peggy might sound fascinating to her neighbor or sister.

I left to attach my cheap sign to the fence. It wasn't more than a cut of brown plywood in a two-foot square with a faded red palm painted onto the surface. Sometimes the young people thought it meant I was an assassin, but the normal people got the idea: I read palms.

A little play on the color and symbol there.

In the beginning, I had thought it cute and unique.

Now I didn't care.

The money paid my rents, hopefully, and bought enough booze and cigarettes to drown my fears into hazy oblivion.

Two shots to the back of the head – not always the same in exact detail. That told me it was a different probable outcome of a particular vision. That also told me that it wasn't a unique incident.

That's where the fear came in. That's where the nightmares had begun chasing away my sanity.

How could so many visions produce that one probable outcome even in different states? How could so many missing children be associated with people who would murder a psychic?

The one in San Antonio – two shots to the back of the head. Ruled a suicide. The freak in Los Angeles – two shots to the back of the head. In Orlando – two shots to the back of the head. Another suicide.

And countless others.

The suicide feeling bothered me more. If my executioners weren't cops, but the death was still ruled a suicide...

Much larger forces were at work here.

Some little town officer like Alan Miller wasn't going to understand. In a small town, things were black and white where the lines might get bent, but were still obvious opposite colors of right and wrong, good versus evil.

For a murder to be ruled a suicide, the cops, the coroner, and anyone else seeing the details of the crime scene would know something... was getting covered up.

That kind of monolithic hidden power was what caused my fear.

And yet, fear was the least of my hatred of what I had become. I hated the visions of death and dismemberment. I despised the grief and tears. I loathed the tragedy and heartbreak.

Deep infection ran in torrents just underneath the surface of society and I was sick of seeing it.

My supposed palm reading wasn't really palm reading. I just needed a touch. Wrinkle lines on hands? I didn't know shit about them. Maybe there was

something to it; I didn't know. Those who came and paid were different, at least. I had a view into their dull lives. Sometimes I saw sad things, or happy. Sometimes I saw love and jealousy. Sometimes I saw a happy future.

That'll be thirty-five bucks. Good luck.

My income that way was less than fun and very close to dull.

How many times had someone asked me to give them the winning numbers to the lottery? My visions didn't work that way. I might see if they won or not, and might get the sense of numbers in that way, but I didn't see clear snapshots of numbers big and bold in my head.

Shit, I would have been rich if I could see winning numbers, instead of panhandling by offering hope to hopeless people.

I had been in Sharlotte's Creek exactly two days.

CHAPTER 3

My first customer was Peggy's sister.

I must've seen something in the flashes that had me expecting her. I was not psychic; I just saw things. Sometimes I saw them clearly.

I had cleaned up, fortunately. Mostly.

I picked up the bottle of vodka I left out and hid it to the side of the couch away from Rose as she came in behind me.

My hair was a mess, but my jeans didn't look... too filthy. All of my clothing needed laundering. I was running a load in the old washer on the back porch of the trailer as we sat and chatted. The thing was off balance and rattled and bumped against the side of the trailer in a constant knocking.

I pretended like I was used to it.

Rose looked at the place – especially at my ashtray and cigarette butts.

I said, "Don't worry; I won't smoke while you're here."

She looked a little relieved, but immediately began looking around at the dinginess of the trailer. She was nervous; I could see it.

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind? What would you like to know?"

She wrung her hands. "It's my son... he's in Afghanistan..."

You want to know if he's safe? I waited.

Her lower lip quivered. "His friend came back draped in a flag..." She broke and began crying.

I was sincere. "I'm sorry to hear that."

She reached and gripped my clenched hands with both of hers. "Please, please tell me Mikey will come home safe. I can't sleep, I can't function. Every waking moment I'm dreading the mail or a knock on the door. Please..."

Bile had risen in my throat. The buzzing sound of a fainting spell swarmed my ears. Rose was distressed and that often made the visions particularly excruciating.

Flashes sped past. Her husband smiling at another woman. Their cat shredding her lace curtains. Her and her husband yelling at each other. A blonde woman not much younger smiling at her husband.

I pulled back – I don't know how long after she grabbed me.

I hated visions of cheating. Rose didn't know. Revealing that kind of info could have devastating consequences in a town as small as Sharlotte's Creek. Worse, it could come back to bite me, hard.

The husband, the other woman, and even Rose herself could come to blame me. I didn't need to be beat up – again.

I tried to take deep breaths, but they were still shallow from the constriction in my airways. Visions were never fun. I said, "Normally I read palms, but in this case, I need something of... Mikey's. To touch."

She dug in her purse frantically. "I... don't... Well, I do have his picture." She looked up hopefully.

"Did it come from him?"

"Yes." She went back to digging and brought out her wallet. She removed a small military photo of her son in an army dress uniform. She offered it to me as if it were money.

I took it, careful not to touch her fingers. I centered it into my palm and closed my eyes. Swirls of colors formed.

"What do you see?" Rose was anxious.

Too often, my customers thought it was instantaneous. I hid my irritation and

answered honestly. "Right now just colors. Sometimes it takes a moment or two to see something useful."

"Oh, okay. Sorry."

I relaxed and let the sensations of visions suffuse my body. This was a little different than the sickening feelings of direct human touching. There was no bile.

I closed my other hand gently over the photo and breathed deep.

A flash of a military photographer did not raise my interest. The mail carrier and process came and went. Stronger, and coming nearer, was Mikey. His presence became distinct. Track in high school. Lost his virginity to a homely girl in the backseat of a blue Oldsmobile. Joined the army to better himself in a town that offered little opportunity. Serving a tour and almost at the end. An explosion startled me. Blood and white smoke filled my vision in a quick burst. Mikey in a surgical unit. Amputated leg. Dress uniform. Medal. Sharlotte's Creek.

I wanted to see no more. I knew what I needed to know to answer her question. At times like these, so much hope can be so emotionally terrifying.

I opened my eyes to see her crying. I swallowed and said, "I see..."

She sat up straighter, quivering with fear and terror in her eyes.

I placed the photo gently on the coffee table and slid it towards her.

She gasped, "He's going to die—"

"No!" I said it too harshly. "No, Rose, he isn't. He's coming home, but..."

She wrung her hands and cried harder.

I tried again, gaining strength. "Sometimes war takes a toll. But your boy is coming home and he will be... safe. Alive."

"What do you mean by toll?" Fear strained her eyes and the tissue surrounding them.

I had gotten her talking instead of reacting. That was always best. "He loves you and he's coming home. But there will be... some kind of accident or explosion before he does."

She nipped and stayed quiet, eyes riveted to mine.

"Please understand, he's your son and he is returning. He will be safe. But... possibly minus a limb."

Rose sobbed and her face turned red. "Oh... Mikey. My Mikey!"

I let her cry for a few moments until she began to regain her composure. I asked, "Would you... like a receipt for your payment?"

She blinked to clear her thoughts and reached again for her purse.

CHAPTER 4

The sign had not been up for more than six hours. Almost four in the afternoon, I looked out and saw the white truck.

Sharlotte's Creek Code Enforcement.

Shit.

I walked out to the chain link fence where I had wired my cheap sign.

The woman was young and wore an orange vest. She carried an electronic device like an old army walkie talkie. Big, bulky.

Threatening.

Of course, it was just an electronic recording device that took pictures and constructed a printable form of violation like a ticket back at the office – which was then mailed to me.

Seen it before.

"Hi," I said.

She tapped judiciously on the device. "That is an illegal sign."

"Why is it illegal?" I kept my voice level and open.

"Advertising your... business... without a proper signage permit."

"That's just a painting—"

"For your business."

I read her nametag. "Tell me, Marie, do ranches violate the law by showing their ranch symbol over the gates?"

She pulled her head back and squinted with a foul look on her face. "Of course

not."

"My little sign here has no words—"

"It is advertising your business."

"With no words? No business name? What am I advertising?"

She gave me her first look of irritation. "That you read palms."

I stepped close. "Except that I don't read palms. I see things." I reached quickly and grabbed her arm.

Alarm lit her face and she drew breath to shout. "Let go of me! Get off! You can't..."

Her voice faded away with the familiar taste of bile and the sound of buzzing.

I pushed, knowing I needed something immediately. What are you looking for? What answer?

It was fast.

Flashes cascaded quickly through my head – a little too fast. Something shiny. Her mother, sick in bed. A coffin at a funeral. Marie crying and fingering something shiny on her neck. Her frantic, looking everywhere.

I drove my senses towards the shiny thing.

Marie in bed, asleep, tossing and turning. The shiny thing breaking and slipping.

I let go.

Marie was red faced and still shouting in panic and anger.

I said, "I know where it is."

She sputtered to a stop. "What? You can't touch me. What are you talking about?"

"Your mother's Saint Christopher medal."

Her eyes went so large and her face so white, I thought she might pass out. She breathed unsteadily, "How did you..."

"The thin chain broke in bed. You'll find the medal resting on the inside lip of the mattress frame."

She stared at me, device in hand, her other hand raised to ward me off, but a look of pure astonishment on her face.

I watched her lick her lips.

She stabbed a finger down, once, and looked at her truck.

I said, "Go on. It's there."

She turned and ran – not with fear, but with hope.

CHAPTER 5

I don't always see things when touching people. My only reprieve from that horror was sexual contact.

Sometimes I played with myself, but it wasn't the same.

Unfortunately, although getting sex was easy, too many factors made it more difficult for me to accomplish. I couldn't just let myself be taken by a man in a small town. People were too tight in places like this. Jealousies too sharp.

A man I bedded might be the target of a hopeful woman that even he didn't know wanted him. Combine that jealousy with the fear of my ability and suddenly I was the wicked witch wrecking all the good plans of decent people.

I had been beaten too many times to make any more mistakes with single men.

There was exactly one unique situation where I could safely allow a man to bed me and finding them wasn't too hard: I had to cruise the bars.

Joy.

The man I was looking for was married – and accompanied by his wife. A couple looking for a naughty little threesome. Unfortunately for me, those couples were mostly looking for men. Fewer looked for an available woman.

However, this option was my only avenue of finding any kind of sexual satisfaction. It was ideal, actually. They didn't want me sticking around and I didn't have to worry about emotional attachments.

Empty, yes, but satisfying for the moment.

I had learned to become bisexual – not by choice, but because I knew so many wives wanted to be involved.

Every woman has needs.

I had to navigate by look alone, at first. Was the man looking? Of course he was. Now, was the wife also looking? If she was, I approached the wife and the wife only. The spark – the contact – had to begin there. That way, the woman would know I didn't have plans to pry her husband away from her.

Simple.

In theory.

It worked sometimes and I occasionally was able to forget about my nightmares.

My first choice in Charlotte's Creek was Crazy Peggy's. Hey, it was close. I walked in late in the day just after six. Everyone looked at me.

They always did.

Not that I was pretty – but because I looked like such a freak. Wild hair, too small a jacket, dirty jeans. I was certain they thought I was a hooker.

Peggy gave me a sad smile. "Rose said..." she looked around.

I sat at the bar between two hefty men enjoying their beers after work.

She leaned towards me. "Did you really see he was going to lose a limb?"

The two men swiveled their heads towards me.

I looked down. "A small explosion, but he'll come home alive and well."

Peggy studied me, wondering if I had made it up, but daring to hope. "How would we know—"

"He lost his virginity in the back of a blue Oldsmobile."

The two men guffawed.

The woman just stared. "That would be Gerald's car. Mikey often borrowed it for dates, but it was totaled three years ago."

The two men laughed with a little more respect.

She patted the bar. "First one's on me. What'll you have."

"Vodka. Ice. Thanks."

The man on my right was leering down at me. "A psychic, huh? What am I thinking about, little girl?"

"I'm not a psychic. I see things." I knew what he was thinking though; it was obvious.

The man on my left leaned forward. "She's a palm reader, Roy. Didn't you see the sign?"

I watched Peggy make the drink. I said without looking, "I don't actually read palms, either. I just see things."

"Then why the sign?"

"People get the idea..."

The man on the left grunted. "If you give me the winning Lotto numbers, I'll split it with ya."

I gave him a dry look. "If I could do that, why wouldn't I just keep it to myself and be twice as rich?"

He laughed. "So basically, you just make shit up for people."

I was fine with that line of thinking. I wasn't out to prove myself. "Yeah. Sure." I accepted my drink and removed myself from between the men. I selected an empty table and sat.

After a few lingering and wondering glances of semi-interest, the two men turned back to face the bar.

I had no luck, but I did get a free drink.

CHAPTER 6

It was a nicer-looking place than Crazy Peggy's, though I hadn't noticed the name in detail. Lamp or Light or something. It was out of town and in the suburbs heading into the city.

I didn't care.

The woman was of an indeterminate age. Her brunette hair was brushed and set not by a professional hand. Worry lines around her eyes might have been the only indication of age, even if her hair said she was thirty-five.

However, those eyes were alight with interest.

She flashed me her wedding ring.

I smiled at her and approached. I didn't see a man.

Well, heck. I can lez for a night if I have to.

She was at the bar and not looking at any of the men – just me.

I gave a quick tilt to my head and broadened my smile from tentative to friendly.

She asked, "Want to sit here?"

"If you'd like..."

She gestured to the stool. "What are you having?"

That was a sure sign I was scoring. "I take Vodka with ice."

She leaned a little close. "You aren't a...?"

Hooker. I gave her a very direct look. "No. I'd hate to have to and... catch anything..." I let it hang there because I knew she would be wondering.

She had turned to look for the bartender but looked back with a pleased

expression. "Me, too. Us, too."

I looked around. "Here with your husband?"

"Yes. We..."

I finished for her. "Like to play?"

The bright sparkles from her eyes let us both know I'd hit the bullseye. She said, "Yes, on very rare occasions."

"I understand completely."

She blinked at me with wonder. "You do?"

"What's your name?"

"Cindy. My husband is Alan. He's hiding right now... you know."

"Letting you scout out—"

She giggled. "Right. You must have done... this kind of thing before?" She ordered my drink because the bartender was close.

I waited for him to finish and move away. "Yes, but rarely. Maybe not often enough."

"Not interested in a one-nighter with a man? If you don't mind me asking..."

I shook my head. "I'm not looking for... entanglements. I just... want to have a little fun and call it a night – and doing it with another couple is more fun."

She was nodding enthusiastically. "I totally get you. That's like us."

I shrugged and sipped my drink. "Thanks for the drink. I help you, you help me... it all works out."

"Wow, we only tried this twice before. The first time we couldn't find anyone. The second time took hours. It's like you're a gift..."

"I'm just Angel."

"What a pretty name."

"Thank you." I looked away. I had a real problem with compliments. I just didn't feel pretty – not even my name.

A male voice drifted over my shoulder. "What's this? Why—"

I twisted around as the man's breath caught and his lips pursed into a firm line.

It was Detective Alan Miller.

I blinked at Cindy. "Your husband?"

She nodded brightly.

I looked back at him. "I suppose he's handsome enough."

He gripped my arm and hauled me off my stool.

I went willingly, but only because I didn't want to fight. The bile was up and the buzzing was invading my ears. Easier to let him hold me up.

His wife was shocked. "Alan, what are you doing?"

Flashes of light blinded me, showing me places and things. A broken window, a ransacked storeroom, morning roll call sessions, fluorescent lights, cleaning a revolver, endless internet searches, criminal records, sex with Cindy, a meeting with me—

I was released outside. His voice was suspicious. "What are you playing at?"

I took a deep breath and swallowed. "You really don't want to touch me; I see things about you..."

Cindy came out and stood by his side, looking at me with concern and at her husband with annoyance. She asked me, "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

Alan was frowning at me and looking embarrassed. "I interviewed her..."

His wife's eyes went wide. "She's a criminal?"

"No."

I said, "No, I'm not."

Her look was suspicious. "What was it about? She said she wasn't a hooker."

Alan sighed and checked around for listeners. Outside the lounge was no one within earshot. "No, no, dear, it's not like that. She's... a psychic. I was asking her about the Stamp—"

Cindy's hand flew to her mouth. She looked at me with wide eyes. "Were you able to help?"

I sighed. I just wanted to get laid... I lowered my head. "No."

"So you're not a real psychic?"

I heaved a bigger sigh. "It doesn't work like that for me. I just see things. Sometimes they mean something to me, sometimes they don't."

"Well, what did you see?"

I couldn't deny the woman who had bought my drink. I shook my head and held my arms close under my breasts. "Darkness. Birds. Trees." I was hiding a lot; I really didn't want to go into it.

Alan was scrutinizing me – very quietly.

Cindy was adamant, though. "And?"

I tried to give her my best direct look. "And nothing that would help. I'm sorry."

She reached out and gripped my upper arm. "Oh, honey, that's okay. I'm sorry I pressed. It's just that this..."

I was zoned out on her words and staggered from the rush of images.

Loving and helpful Cindy, worried for her husband. Watching the local news about the Stamp boy. Grocery shopping while casting fearful looks around her.

Smiles and tears, laughter and compassion. A deep sexual bond with Alan.

She let go of me. "Are you okay?"

"I am, yes. I'm sorry." I swallowed forcibly. "It's just that I see things when people touch me or I touch them."

Cindy was quiet a moment.

Alan was pursing his lips in thought.

She asked, "Then how do you... you know...?"

I knew what she meant. "Sex? The arousal is the only thing that blocks the visions."

A look of open-mouthed wonder washed over her features. "That's why you...?"

I nodded.

Alan grunted.

Cindy gripped his arm.

He said, "Cindy... No."

She whispered, "She's perfect, Alan. Perfect."

"She might come up with the combo to our safe—"

I said, "It doesn't work that way."

He went quiet.

Cindy shook his arm.

He looked around as if looking for anyone else, then heaved a sigh of resignation. "All right..." He leveled a finger at me. "This can't get out."

I shook my head slowly. "I can't imagine your secret being safer with anyone else."

His eyes narrowed and cleared. He saw the honesty in my face and knew it.

CHAPTER 7

The Millers had a nice home – built in the 70s maybe, and modernized.

Extremely neat and uncluttered, I was impressed with Cindy's devotion to ordering her house. Not just in the cleaning sense, but in how carefully chosen were decorations and furniture pieces.

Nothing was out of place. Nothing was ugly. Nothing was cheap. It spoke of who Cindy was to me – her personality, her character, her passions. She was a strong woman and had to be so for her husband. The wife of a detective was probably not an easy thing.

Alan was subdued and accepting.

Cindy was the one making the move. "May I... undress you? My husband likes to see it."

I thought I could avoid most of the touching until she was done with it. "I think that sounds nice." I glanced at Alan. "Like, you two don't use cuffs, do you?" I hadn't seen them in the few flashes I had seen of them, but...

Alan laughed.

I mused at his outburst, There's a first time for everything...

Cindy giggled gracefully. "No."

I was undressed.

For a moment, I thought things were going to go bad: they got a look at my body.

Cindy's eyes glittered sadly. "You... are so thin."

Half my mouth slid up on the side, sort of cocky. "Thank you?"

I saw her eyes on my ribs.

They're not that bad.

Her hand came out to feel them, but hovered instead. She pressed a finger lightly to my nipple. She whispered, "So frail..."

The touch set off a mini-explosion of chills that ran up my back and down my arms. I shivered at the edge of visions as my body tickled to the sensations.

Cindy shrugged out of her clothing faster than she had stripped me. Her breasts were heavy and full and swung with health and sexuality.

I reached and stopped. "May I?"

Her eyes since I had met her an hour ago had been honest and clear. Now I saw the different side of them: curious and smoky. She nodded.

Yes, she was comfortable with being bisexual, that much was obvious. She wasn't giggling like a nervous schoolgirl.

I completed the touch. My cool fingers instantly warmed to her hot skin, tracing goosebumps down over vibrant flesh to her nipple. It hardened dramatically as I traced a circle around the areola.

I stepped closer to absorb some of that heat. Unless I was really excited, I just didn't have the meat under my skin to contain any. My pulse began to stir and make a dull thumping noise in my head.

This was what I most longed for: the intimacy that could bring peace. As I added fingers to the first one and caressed her breast, I reveled in the freedom of my touch without interference from the visions. The bile was a distant threat and fading fast. Warmth suffused my pussy and I parted my lips to allow a more rapid intake of air.

Cindy was enthusiastic at my lead. She brought her hand up and played with my flat breast as if it were that of a normal woman and not one emaciated by lack of food.

At times like this, and only at times like this, I regretted not eating dinners. I

mourned the loss of a fit-looking figure. The endless nights of alcohol and no food had taken quite a toll on my figure. My hip bones stuck out. I could count my ribs. My breasts were seriously deflated and flat.

I didn't look skeletal, but it looked like I was wasting away. At times like this, I vowed to try to maintain my health.

I knew tomorrow I would go back to eating my hard-boiled egg and drinking orange juice. It was all I wanted and all I could stomach. I just didn't want to eat. Tomorrow's dinner would be half a fifth of Vodka.

But for now, I vowed.

When Cindy kissed me, I went with it. I wanted to, anyway. This was the kind of contact that made it all worthwhile.

Alan's hands behind me on my shoulders produced another set of chills. I felt his chest press against my back. I was sandwiched between two warm bodies and I groaned happily.

Perhaps my mutter of acceptance excited the fantasy he shared with his wife: I felt his manhood move and harden against my butt cheek.

Still in the kiss with Cindy – just an exploratory touching – I reached behind me and grabbed Alan's cock. It wasn't big or small and I squeezed gladly at the flesh until it was hard.

Joy leapt inside me at the intimacy they were sharing with me. This was why I liked married couples: it was twice the satisfaction of being able to touch and feel without wanting to throw up.

Skin slid against skin until all three of us were panting.

Cindy ran her hand down to my clit and below to my lips. Her caress was delicate. She asked, "No... visions?"

My satisfaction was voiced by a soft hum and spread of my lips. "Umm... no..."

Her fingers curled up, probing.

I gasped as they broke past my entry, parting the lips and slipping inside. It was always better when someone else stuck their fingers inside me. Always.

Her other hand slid up and cupped my head at my ear. Her fingers spread and splayed in my hair. She said, "You have such lively hair."

I did, but I knew why she said it. She couldn't claim I had a sexy body: I was just too skinny. So she complimented me on my hair. Even though I knew the reason, it worked. It was good to hear compliments sometimes, instead of accusations, scorn, and doubt. Those other more common barbs and arrows took a toll.

Maybe that's why I drank. Maybe that's why I wanted to escape. Not just the visions, but the other stuff, too.

Cindy pulled me down to the bed.

I assumed my role without blinking. I lowered my head and opened my mouth. Her clit was a hot spark under its hood and her skin moved flush with health and fluidity. I licked at her clean scent and bathed her labia with my tongue.

I was rewarded with her moans of happiness and surprise. Maybe she had been forced to ask for this from the other woman they had found. Maybe the other woman had refused.

I didn't mind. I really didn't. I inserted fingers inside to play.

Other, thicker fingers probed my pussy from behind. I wriggled my butt around to indicate my openness. I was rewarded after a moment with the thick pushing of manhood into my opening. The pressure built until my lips parted and accepted his advance. Thickness began filling me in a slow progression of pleasure.

Knowing he was a detective and had asked my help was a little awkward. Probably for him, too. Maybe that's why he was doing me from behind – so he didn't have to see my face.

No matter how I tried to find such intimacies, they were too few and far in between. I stretched open almost painfully, but soon adjusted to the simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.

It felt good to get stretched again.

If my role had been to lick, I didn't get much of that done. Alan thrust slow at first, deep, and then fucked me harder until he was pounding my pussy with grunts. My head wasn't staying still enough to apply my skills to Cindy.

I don't think it mattered. The glimpses I saw of her expression were all about excitement and lust. I stuck my fingers in her and played that way as I panted to her husband's pumping.

This was a borrowed pleasure – shared with two others – in a perfect, no-consequence exchange of give and take. I was here for them. They were here for me.

I knew when they were done, I would be expected to leave – and fast. No cuddling or close intimacy after the deed was done. That was fine by me, too.

If Alan was thinking the same thing at the same time, I don't know, but his hand came around and fingered my clit as he fucked me. As if the fucking wasn't enough, that move from him got my engine going. I churned inside with swirls of tension and growing warmth.

Thank you, detective. Thank you for including me and not just using me.

I would've been okay with just being used, but this was better.

I wobbled on my knees and elbows as my limbs vibrated with the approach of my orgasm.

Cindy's hand in my hair was a reminder that she was involved, too.

The pounding behind me increased and he pushed his shaft deeper. I took all of his normal length and it felt great. The sensation at my lips became tickly and the warmth turned hot. In a rapid expansion, the heat burst inside me, releasing weeks of tension and frustration. My face dropped onto Cindy's upturned pussy but I was too busy moaning my unleashed contentment to do anything other than keep my fingers inside her.

I must have triggered her because she heaved under my head and began groaning fast and breathy. A light one for her, likely spurred on by mine. I forced myself

to apply my mouth to her pussy and coax the rest out of her.

Alan was last but not long after Cindy began calming and coming down. His shaft plunged deep, stretched me open, and squirted hot splashes into the depths of my pussy.

I toppled over gratefully, pulling my pussy off his shaft. We were done. I panted only for a moment before twisting out of bed. "I should leave you two lovebirds —"

Cindy said, "You came with us; you can't leave."

"I can walk back to my car."

Alan said, "I can drive you."

"No, no, really. The night air does me good. Besides, this is your time now."

Cindy was frowning. "Are you sure?"

I laid a hand on her arm. Fortunately, I was still turned on. "I'm sure. What is it? A mile to that lounge? No big deal." I grabbed up my meager clothing. "Thank you... for..."

I let it hang at that. No need to make big parting statements.

I saw appreciation on both of their faces.

CHAPTER 8

I walked on the side of the road out of Sharlotte's Creek toward the city – away from my trailer but towards my little VW bug.

Can't do without a car.

Satisfied at the slice of passion and intimacy, I looked forward to getting home. Headlights passed – came and went in both directions.

Until...

An oncoming truck slowed and braked to a squeaking halt right in the middle of the lane. The window came down. "Ma'am? You need a ride?"

The truck was an old Chevy, rust being the primary color over flakes of light blue. There was a spare tire on the front bumper, along with a winch. The engine's rumble was low and fitful.

The man was slightly grizzled and thin. His cowboy hat was the straw kind and his flannel shirt looked worn and soft.

No way was I getting into a truck with a man at night. "No thanks. Just a short walk to my car."

"You sure? Not very safe for a woman alone at night."

Did I hear threat in his voice? "I'm fine, thanks." I said it with more force.

He shrugged, waved, and put his truck into gear. The rumble grew and then dwindled away until he was gone.

He did not come back around.

I made it to my car on the edge of frayed nerves, relieved to be getting into my little rolling sanctuary. At the same time, it seemed so frail. The engine cranked slow and weak, but I was used to this. The little machine rattled to life.

I had taken it in trade when I had helped a distraught man find his dog. The poor pet had fallen down a ravine and had been unable to find a way out.

Those kinds of visions that turned out happy weren't enough to drown out the tragedy. They felt good, nonetheless, and were the best my life could offer.

I got a car out of it - what the hell.

Thirty-five bucks per reading wasn't making me rich.

I made it back to my trailer safely and listened for only a moment to the quiet fragments of music coming from Crazy Peggy's. One of the male patrons started to come towards me, gesturing.

I went inside and shut the door.

I'm closed for business and I've already cum. Just leave me alone.

I turned on the tiny lamp and picked up a bottle. I sat slowly onto the old sofa and unscrewed the cap.

CHAPTER 9

Five days in town and Saturday was the day I knew was coming: the deluge of business, people, and pleas. I had prepared as much as I could the previous night by removing most of the bottles.

One finished bottle lay on its side on the cheap coffee table. I was sprawled on the couch in my panties again when the sound of a car broke through the fog of my early morning slumber.

I sat up as the car engine shut off.

I heaved a deep sigh and tried to stand. I fell sideways, and landed against the arm of the couch. I gripped that ugly faux leather jacket made for a ten year-old and covered my upper nakedness.

The knock on the trailer door was hesitant. A face leaned and peaked into the window.

He must have seen me swaying in my panties because he pulled back fast.

Someone with a conscience. Or a guilty conscience.

I answered the door like I was; it was too damned early and they should understand that by seeing me in my state. I blinked at the man as the cool morning air touched the parts of me that were bare.

He kept his eyes up. He had an energy to his look and a twinkle in his eyes. His suit slacks matched the coat, but his shirt was a vivid blue and open at the collar.

Preacher. Seen them in every town I settle. They always come. They always judge.

I sighed and closed my eyes.

He said, "You read palms."

I had enough experience to know that if I slammed the door, or told him to fuck off, or screamed abuse at him, that certain actions would follow.

I would be the object of a sermon about the evils allowed to pervade a god-like society. In some places, there would be protesters. A picket line. Bullhorns.

I unlatched the screen door and opened it. I turned away without inviting him in. It was invitation enough and we both knew it.

He came in and stopped, looking around. His nose wrinkled.

I sat, keeping my knees together for his sake. I motioned to the recliner.

He sat, leaning forward, and rested on his elbows. His hands were loosely held, fingertips touching, as he prepared to unleash.

They all did it. Same posture and position.

He said, "I'm Pastor Markman—"

"I know."

"Because something told you that?"

Here we go already. Demons, spirits, blah blah blah... I took a deep breath. "Yeah, your clothing and look."

He looked confused. They all did.

He straightened his shoulders and began again. "We're a God-fearing community... What is your name?"

"Angel. You're God-fearing people? Good. So am I."

He scoffed. "You divine. Witches don't fear God. And what an odd name for someone cursed."

"I'm not a witch. I don't divine, I don't read tea leaves. I don't read palms. I'm not psychic. I don't know what your favorite color is, but I might guess it's blue. I don't hear voices or feel something taking over me when I do my work—"

"Then why put up an occultic symbol—"

"Because it works. I make a living doing it."

"So you're a fraud."

"No, I'm not. I see things."

"Galatians Five—"

"Stop. I don't practice sorcery or witchcraft."

"You just admitted you see visions."

"I don't do anything to see them – except for touch." I reached out and gripped his hand.

Acid came up my throat and made me swallow.

He jerked his hand away as if touched by something filthy... or demonic.

The few flashes I caught, though, were enough. He was a good man, as far as preachers went. Charity was high on his list for those in need. He did not milk his congregation for money to buy fancy cars or jewelry.

He hissed, "Don't touch me, evil one."

I slumped back and looked up at the ceiling. "When I was in high school, I ran cross country. I loved running. I loved seeing beautiful mornings and the wonders of God's creation."

He stiffened and listened.

I still didn't look at him. "I always ran, rain or shine. There was a long stretch of meadow behind our tract that led down to a ravine. The edges all around were beautiful avocado trees. I stayed away from the ravine, just because... Well, I was a sixteen year old girl and didn't know what or who might be lurking in the bushes down there." I looked at him.

His head was slightly tilted, intent.

Yes, he cares about the people in town – including, possibly, me. I hated talking about the start of the nightmares. "So I ran in the meadow. To be safe. Out in the open."

I began to tremble with the memory.

I felt the hairs rise up on the back of my neck and I scrubbed my hands over my arms to warm them.

I continued, though I really didn't want to. "It was a beautiful day, but not sunny. I have always loved clouds and rain. I've always wondered at the majesty of a storm. I was in the middle of the meadow when I knew something was wrong."

His eyes narrowed.

My voice cracked. "The hairs all over my body rose up. Everything began to tingle. I ran as hard as I could as the rumble of the storm seemed closer. I thought I had time – that I was safe. I was so close to the trees..." I wiped at my eyes as the electric memory sizzled in my head.

"You were struck by lightning?"

I nodded. "I used to have straight hair, too." I carefully kept cover to my breast underneath my jacket and exposed my shoulder with the unusual fractal scarring. I didn't expose it all. "Someone had seen it and called for help. I awoke screaming – I thought I was blind, sort of. I was seeing flash after flash of things that didn't make sense. Awful things of hurt people. The paramedics were handling me."

Pastor Markman's face was one of compassion.

I said, "Some pastors claim I have been given a gift from God, but I see it as a curse. I can't control it. It just happens whenever I touch anyone and if I could, I would stop it."

He breathed, "That is indeed a gift from God. You shouldn't—"

"But a minute ago, you were claiming I was a witch."

He pursed his lips and gave a dip of his chin. "I'm sorry. Do you... know God?"

"I am a Jesus-freak."

Suspicion colored his features. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Without Jesus, I am nothing."

He looked from me to the empty bottle of vodka.

I shook my head. "It's the only thing that dulls the things I have seen. How many scenes of death would you be able to handle? How many broken children? Strangled women?" The tears were brimming in my eyes.

He looked down and swallowed. His voice was subdued. "What did you see when you touched me?"

"That... you're a good man. Someone who cares. Someone who doesn't take advantage of his congregation."

"God gave you this so you could help people—"

I had heard it all before. "I didn't ask for this. I can't lead a normal life. I can't... touch people... without these hideous nightmares."

"Yet you sell the service?"

I nodded wearily. "Have to pay the rent and afford..." My hand flicked with disconsolation towards the empty bottle.

He looked genuinely sympathetic. "So you don't really read palms, then?"

"No. I don't know what the lines on the hand mean, nor do I care. It's just an excuse to touch. I... try to give those who come to me some amount of hope."

"You helped my sister find our mother's medallion..."

I laughed bitterly. "The code enforcement woman? I was just trying to keep her from citing me."

"Nevertheless, you brought her great peace and solace. That is a blessing, not a curse."

A blessing for them, a curse for me... I was silent.

"I think I've seen what I needed to see. Do you mind if we pray for you?"

I took a shuddering breath. "I could always use prayers." Thoughts of two shots to the back of my head were ever-present.

He got up and turned at the door. "You have something special; don't run from it. Seek your place in God's plan. May God bless you, Angel."

His departure afforded me enough time to shower and eat breakfast before seeing my first customer.

I collected from three customers before seeing a familiar white sedan.

Cindy Miller.

She looked at the bar with a twist of her mouth and started towards me.

I could tell by looking at her that she wasn't here to get her palm read – and neither was she here for other, more intimate, things. I sat on the cheap porch, sitting in the old rocker and waited.

Cindy ran through a series of facial expressions before settling on a shy smile. "Hi."

"You want to go inside or talk out here?"

"I'm not here for... a reading..."

"I figured."

"And not for what happened..."

"I sort of figured that, too. What do you want to talk about?"

There was a hitch in her posture and movements. "Would you like to go get something to eat?"

The idea of food at this point was far from my mind. The hard-boiled egg had been enough. "Thank you, no. I'm stuffed."

"Oh..." She nodded and looked me up and down with hesitant approval.
"Well..." She pinched and plucked at her fingers in a nervous gesture. "I came... because I wanted to know..."

I tilted my head and squinted at her. I thought I knew where this was going.

She firmed her lips. "What did you see when you read Casey's hat?"

I had suspected as much and this wasn't something I wanted to talk about outside. Fingers itching to light up a cigarette, I said, "Let's go inside."

She followed me in and looked around at the dingy trailer.

I sat on the couch and grabbed my Marlboros. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

She shrugged. "It's your place." She looked at the recliner before sitting on it.

I flicked my Bic and lit up. Taking a deep drag, I settled back and blew upward.
"What do you think I could tell you that your husband would have missed?"

She toyed with her fingers again. "I know it sounds silly, but I want to help. I want you to help. Casey—"

"I know; it's tragic." I studied the cigarette for a moment and felt the desire to draw again. "I'll tell you something I didn't tell him."

She sat forward, looking interested and hopeful.

"Death awaits those who seek it. For me. For him..."

"I don't understand."

"I've had a recurring vision in too many of my missing children cases: me committing suicide by two shots to the back of the head."

She looked confused. "I don't understand."

I leaned onto my bony knees. The skinny jeans I had bought from the thrift store had come with holes ripped in the knees. "Cindy, in many cases, there is more to a missing child than an abductor and a missing kid."

She waited.

"A child goes missing and we think that a lone man is responsible."

"Right... who else would—"

"Sometimes there are rings of people involved."

"Are you saying a ring abducted Casey Stamp?"

"I saw my suicide when I touched his hat."

"Why would you kill yourself?"

I laughed bitterly. "To escape these visions? Maybe, but think about it: how can I shoot myself twice in the back of the head?"

She looked perturbed. "You can't—"

"Right. So I see myself kneeling and getting shot twice in the back of my head – execution style. But the impression I get is that it is ruled a suicide."

"That can't happen. Too many people—"

"That's what I'm saying. Enough people involved in positions of power can make it happen."

"And you saw this with Casey?"

"Yes. That means there are enough local people in positions that matter to make my execution look like a suicide."

She looked horrified. "You mean, we have an abduction ring in Sharlotte's Creek?"

I took another drag. "Not necessarily. Could be local, but more likely higher than that. County level? State? Federal? I've seen this same result in seven different states. That means the reach is far and wide."

She slumped in the recliner. "I have to tell Alan—"

"No!"

"What? Why?"

"Because your husband is a good man. He'll push. Dig. Find things he can't possibly hope to combat on his own. He'll be found executed, too. Maybe stuffed into a duffel bag and thrown in the river with weights – all ruled a suicide."

"But that's insane. No one would believe it."

I flicked my hand to the TV stand where no TV sat. "The news reports what they're told..."

She scratched at her chin. "This can't—"

"Cindy." I captured her attention. "Good people don't want to see this – but it's everywhere. We want to live nice lives, not evil. But there are evil people who do evil things. If your husband pokes into this, he'll most certainly die."

"Did you see that when you—"

"No, I was seeing things pertaining to Casey. I would have to read your husband. The one touch to him was only a vision of his office and his boss."

"Captain Kelly?"

"I guess."

She looked deeply disturbed. "There has to be a way to find the boy."

"He's dead."

She looked ashen and was silent for a moment, lips working to form words. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, definitely."

"So there's no hope?"

"None. And if your husband goes poking based on what I saw, I will die. Likely he will, too."

"Why did this happen here?" Her words were bereft of faith.

"Maybe because it happens so little here. What's one missing child? Just a statistic. What are five? A pattern. In larger cities, people more easily ignore patterns."

"But killing kids?"

"It's more than that." I swallowed hard and glanced at the empty vodka bottle. I really need a drink...

"What could be worse than killing a child?"

I struggled with the idea of lying to her or claiming I didn't know, but decided her position as wife to someone intimately involved warranted the warning.

"Child trafficking. Organ harvesting. Cannibalism—"

She clapped her hand to her mouth, but her eyebrows were drawn down. "Only the sickest are cannibals—"

I sighed. "There are some who believe that eating a child helps restore cognitive brain function..."

She was shaking her head.

I wasn't going to get through.

She said, "Didn't the president declare a national emergency over human trafficking?"

I drew on my cigarette. "I don't know." I indicated the lack of TV again.

She frowned and shook her head. "But maybe this is the time to bring this out into the light."

Yeah, it would be my death, not yours. I said nothing.

She asked, "There's nothing you can tell me about Casey?"

"Only that he's dead and this is bigger than you could possibly know - big enough that your husband's execution would be an afterthought. Think of your

husband."

"But... what about Casey? What about his mother and father?"

CHAPTER 10

Flush with cash, I stepped inside Crazy Peggy's. Regulars were already piled in and listening to the juke box.

Peggy slid over to the side of the bar nearest the door – towards me. "You had a lot of visitors today."

I ignored the looks from the patrons. "Yeah, here. Next month's rent." I handed her the folded bills.

She scowled at me. "At thirty-five bucks a pop? I didn't see—"

"It's most of what I made. I just want to get it out of the way."

Her smile didn't meet all the way up to her eyes, but it was close. "I think I like you."

My shoulders slumped. "They all say that. Then they kick me out."

"As long as you pay rent—"

"They all say that, too. Then they get pressured by everyone to run me out of town."

"If all you're doing is reading palms, I don't see where that would—"

"Heard that before, too. I hope you're different, Peggy, I really do. But it probably won't work out that way."

Her chin came down in determination, but she said nothing.

I left and got into my Volkswagen. I was on the poor side and didn't have enough cash for gas and vodka both. I chose gas. Drinks could be had for free.

I handed the cashier at the Cash and Gas Mart eight dollars. "Number three."

He was shaking his finger as if recognizing me. "Hey, you're that psychic."

I closed my eyes and turned away.

He said with smug challenge, "Tell me how much money I've got in my pocket."

I walked out the door and fueled my car. I saw him shaking his head and laughing through the tinted window.

Yeah, big victory for you, kid. Big victory. You just proved it all.

It was the way of people. It was the way of my life. If I had been psychic, he would've had me standing there for hours, throwing question after question in a bid to find me wrong – not right.

I didn't care about the kid. I didn't care about Casey, or Alan, or Cindy, or Peggy, either.

Or did I?

No, it wasn't my business to be involved. It was my business to see visions, give an answer, and collect my money.

I entered a biker bar called Tango's. Biker bars weren't my first choice, but if I was patient and careful, I could find a man without diseases who was decent inside. No drugs, no murders, no thefts... Many bikers were good men with typical failures in their pasts. Everyone was human, but just as surely as there was a dirty undercurrent in society, so too did those run amongst bikers.

I just had to be careful.

Touch was all it took.

The vests inside the dim bar did not sport patches of the organized kind. No Outlaws or Bandidos here. However, one bearing a Nomad patch curving along the bottom front sidled up to me. His name patch said, "Stick."

I lifted my eyebrows at him as he grinned and checked me out.

He said, "Aren't you a little thing?"

I gripped his forearm and suffered the rise in bile.

Flashes of riding zipped by. Fights in bars and drunken reveling were common. Beating someone senseless in a... crackhouse was his most violent. The victim looked wasted on drugs. Hands were shook, money changed hands from other bikers outside.

I let go and gasped. He was clean, physically. That stain of disease was not on him.

He squinted down at me. "Need a drink? Or something to eat?"

I couldn't smile at him, yet. The dizziness and acid were still settling. "Vodka."

He rumbled, "I like the sound of that."

I knew he was not entangled. He was a traveler – maybe living up to that nomad title stitched onto his vest. He moved around, stayed little, and traded work for cash – performed favors for biker clubs.

He ordered my drink. "What's your name?"

"Angel."

He laughed deep. "Sure, okay."

I didn't want to argue with him, I wanted to get him into bed. Something needed some serious adjustment and I aimed to get it. "You're Stick?"

"Uh huh."

"Know how to use it?"

His eyes glittered down into hard pits. "Depends on what we're talking about. You property? You here to feel me out for a job?"

"Property? No—"

"So you're not a biker bitch. No problem. The answer to both questions is yes. Since you aren't here for a job, then you must mean the more pleasurable..."

"Right."

"You a hooker?"

"No."

The bartender slid me the drink. I picked it up and downed it.

Stick was watching me. "I'm careful—"

"I know. Nothing catchable."

His face didn't change, but he didn't answer. "How could you know that?"

I gave him a faint smile. "I guess I'm psychic..."

He laughed. "Lucky more like. Now, Crank over there—"

The man whose name was mentioned muttered, "Fuck off..." He had apparently heard enough. "If I could dunk my dick in whiskey and kill this shit, I would."

I said, "It's a little warm in here..."

Stick's smile widened. "Fast, are we?"

"You want to talk all night, or do you want to fuck my brains out?"

He motioned his head for the door.

Outside, I drew in the damp air.

He said, "I'm shacked up at a place here, but there shouldn't be anyone there right now."

"I'll follow."

"Right." He reached into his pocket and pulled a small key ring. He mounted his motorcycle and twisted the key. He thumbed a button on the handle and the bike whirred twice. It roared low and powerful to life. The growl of its engine was primal.

I just hoped he was as impressive as his ride.

Feeling the thumping thrill of the motorcycle engine in my heart, I got into my car.

Whoever he was bunking with must have owned one of the oldest places in Sharlotte's Creek. Ramshackle and dilapidated, I expected to be able to see through gaps in the walls. I couldn't, but the place reeked of age and decay.

Lack of care.

What was the nomad Stick doing with someone who didn't care? A traded favor with no friendship attached? I had a deeper feeling for the biker than this dump.

None of that mattered to the frustration inside that I couldn't quite quell. The itch needed scratching, hard. I thought it was sexual.

Stick tossed me around like a fucking duffel bag. He devoured my pussy in a delightful and intense effort that left me squirming for release. I was wet. I was ready.

He seemed more focused on enjoying himself while teasing me. He flipped me over onto my knees and sawed his rough fingers in and out of my pussy. I groaned into the dusty bedding of his temporary bunk.

The stretching will set my mind at ease. The hard fucking will release the tension that's building. Why is it building?

What was I going through that was so different?

Was I finally going mad from my strange ability?

I was weak and powerless both under the ever-present and growing tension in my soul and the furious force Stick was using to prepare me for sex.

I wanted all the unasked questions in my head to end.

The biker removed his fingers and mounted me from behind. My lips opened easily and registered the sliding passage of his thickness into me.

He grunted and sighed when he filled me as far as he could. "Yeah, that's good."

I murmured a non-word in encouragement.

His strong hands gripped my fragile hips and yanked me back onto his shaft, filling me with every inch of his manhood.

I moaned more appreciatively. "Do it hard."

"I don't want to break you..."

"Fucking break me. Why do you think I picked you?"

He chuckled and his cock flexed inside me. "Okay, then..."

I was rammed forward flat on my stomach from behind. His cock withdrew and slammed forward again, driving a delicious ache deep inside me. My hips strained to the force of the thrust as if straining to accommodate his depth.

It felt satisfying.

I gasped, "Yeah, do it."

He pummeled my pussy with enough violence to push me up the bed until my head was slamming into the wall. The dual pain and pleasure from the fuck sent me senseless.

I think I groaned gibberish.

He pulled out, pulled on me and flipped me over.

I was dizzy.

His face was a mask of frenzy and lust. He reached his hands under my shoulders and up, gripping me around the neck. More than thrusting, he pulled me onto his cock. Each ramming thrust and yank on my neck speared me so completely on his shaft that my orgasm was battered awake in a matter of seconds.

The underlying tension flared and soared. The painful pounding I was receiving was exactly what I needed.

One of his hands let go of my neck and twisted in my wild hair. He yanked back until I was looking upside down at the wall.

I had no control. It was as close to a rape as it could have been. Violent. Nasty. Severe... and so satisfying. I cried out in a gurgle as the wave of release broke over me and sent me tumbling down a long and gratifying cliff.

He wasn't stopping for me and his ramming hit my super-excited clit over and over. My sensitive lips pulsed to the pounding and promised I was going to be walking funny for days.

It was what I wanted.

I thought it was what I needed.

Stick called out in victory as he sent hot squirts deep into my pussy.

CHAPTER 11

To my distress, the tension I had felt was not alleviated.

Sunday morning came with me lying in my panties on the couch – my place of rest and sleep in this trailer. I didn't like the looks of the stained mattress in the bedroom. As destitute as I was, I had standards and not desperate to sleep on that old thing.

I had smoked half a pack of cigarettes after coming back to the trailer. I had thought to chase away the lingering feeling that the sex hadn't been enough. The nicotine high didn't make a difference.

The sensation grew.

I awoke early and resolved to get my shower out of the way before some early-bird came and saw me in my panties again.

If I hadn't been under this strange stress, I might have relished answering the door in my panties; it often put people off-guard and made me wet when they looked at them.

My kinkiness was not strong enough to push this strain to the side.

I hobbled into the shower, feeling the achy effects of Stick's efforts. I was raw and sore. It was a good sore, but not good enough. It had been hard enough, just not what I had hoped for: the prescription for this odd twist in my life.

I had always regretted running that day and being cursed with this ability. That was nothing unusual, but this imminent feeling was driving me insane.

Before, I could operate my business with some degree of interest and happiness – until I was driven out. But now, I couldn't shake the sensation that I was directly in the path of doom.

Was my end approaching? Two shots to the back of the head? I couldn't see how; I was avoiding this poor kid's case knowing where it would lead.

I was avoiding it.

And making myself sick in the process.

Clean, but not refreshed, I cleaned the living room of the trailer. I thought perhaps that would help. Cigarette butts went into the trash.

I drank orange juice after, not feeling hungry enough for an egg.

I was wasting away.

My first customer made everything worse and everything better, but I wasn't to know anything better until later.

A woman as frail as me peeked inside the open door through the screen. "Is this where...?"

I rose from the couch where I had been in a daze of strange sensations. Something was imminent. Very imminent. I said, "If you're here for a reading?"

"Y-yes..."

I unlatched the screen and let her in. Her auburn hair looked lifeless and limp. I had seen hundreds of women like this: husband cheating, hope gone – wondering if there was a future. I immediately felt sympathetic for her.

That was my undoing.

I asked, "What's your name?"

"Marjorie." She sat in the recliner.

"I charge thirty-five after the reading. Cash preferred, but check is okay."

She nodded, but she was looking at me with an intensity that belied her appearance.

I stumbled a little at the edge of the couch and dropped down onto it. "Do you need your palm read? Or do you have something else? A question?" That always helped me determine if I had to touch them or an object. Objects were preferable. Less sickness.

"You saw things about Casey..."

Oh fuck... not this again. I sighed and looked at the floor.

She said, "Please, I'm his mother—"

I snapped my eyes up. Best to put this to rest right now. "You can't imagine how badly I feel for you—"

Her lips quivered and her eyes flashed. "And you can't imagine the constant worry and question – the frustration of—"

"I'm sorry, Marjorie. I don't have good news for you."

"You saw things."

Word sure gets around a small town... I sighed again and pursed my lips. Telling the woman the truth wasn't going to help her.

She was shaking her head. "Tell me what you saw. Anything helps."

I scrubbed at my forehead. "I can't offer you any hope—"

Her voice cracked on the edge of hysteria. "Where is your sense of decency? How can you call yourself human—"

I rose.

She gripped my arm in desperation. "Please!"

The bile I so hated rose so swiftly in my throat that I swayed in abrupt dizziness.

This one was hard.

I saw flashes of her son. Playground. Laughing. School bus. I saw her husband putting together a bicycle with training wheels. I saw Casey bouncing into a small living room dominated by an enormous Christmas tree bursting with presents underneath. Then I saw the loss between husband and wife as the realization hit that their son was just... gone one day.

I collapsed, sobbing. I had seen visions like this dozens of times before.

Hundreds. Too many for me to handle. But this one... hurt. Badly.

There was nothing special about the boy compared to any of the other little missing girls and boys I had seen. The love and happiness and joy were all there in each to varying degrees. Nothing about Casey Stamp stood out.

Nothing.

But here I was, devastated more than ever before.

So unusual.

So... different.

Marjorie was still sitting there.

In a fit of frustration, I said, "Your son is dead. That's what I saw. I can't help you."

Tears familiar to me from the vision swept down her face. "My little boy... I'm so sorry."

I could've told her it wasn't her fault. I could've explained that there was nothing she could've done different. Because there wasn't, and it wasn't her fault.

Depression deeper than anything I had ever felt swept over me. The futility of everything drowned me into sobs that matched Marjorie's.

Happiness snuffed out faster than an eye-blink. How fair was that? How did God find that a blessing to people? How did Pastor Markman explain away tragedy as God's will?

Marjorie and her husband were members of Pastor Markman's church. Had they been told to pray? To trust God? Where had that gotten them?

A small part of me responded with a vengeance that shocked me to silence: justice. Justice was the answer to the innocence that suffered...

I looked at the poor woman, sitting in the recliner and crying. Where was her justice?

Me?

I reached out to her, hesitantly, and gripped her knee.

I swayed to flashes of a school bus delivering children. Casey was not on it. Worried, a call was placed by Marjorie to the school. Where is my son?

Confusion and ignorance dominated until the police arrived for an interview. Relatives? People who have made threats? Friends of the family?

The confusion strengthened as nothing was resolved and that was just the first day. The loss and frantic worry was realized in the morning – the first full night without their son. Her husband tried to tell her Casey would be found.

I knew he was already dead – his organs cut out after a beating and a rape from at least six different people.

I recoiled from Marjorie, breaking the visions. I had learned nothing new there.

Justice?

The woman's eyes were pleading.

Reluctantly, I began to explain. "I saw... that he was dead from his ball cap. He was dead that first night. I'm sorry."

Her sobs broke heavy, though she tried to control them. "Did he suffer?"

I strangled myself, half-choking, as I tried to lie to her. The words wouldn't come out. It was as if I was being forced to tell the truth. I couldn't stop it. "Nnn— Yes..." I wiped at my eyes with savage intent. Telling the truth was never good – not in these cases. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

The grief that rolled in waves off the woman battered me senseless. I was silent in the face of it.

She sniffled for a moment. "Who did this thing?"

I think the question was directed both inside herself and at me. "I don't know, but..."

"What? Anything..."

"There are more people involved than just one."

Her face went ashen. "Why?"

I couldn't possibly tell her about the organ harvesting. Fortunately, whatever had strangled me before to tell the truth was quiescent now.

She pressed again. "What did you see?"

"You have to understand, Marjorie, people's lives are at stake—"

"My son is dead!"

And she was right. There was nothing fair about it. I swallowed. "I want you to know, that this... thing... is larger than you can imagine. If I had told the detective what I had seen, he would've been found executed – and the same with me. Sometimes evil people control things and—"

"And they need to be brought to justice." Her words were subdued, but I wasn't fooled. She was determined.

"And what if those evil people are the ones who investigate? What if our judges and coroners and police are all a part of it?"

She was shaking her head. "I can't believe they are all a part of it."

"No, I don't get that impression. I didn't about Detective Miller. He's a good man."

"Then help him!"

"If I had told him what I know, he would turn up dead. Two shots to the back of the head and the death ruled a suicide."

She looked at me for a long time. "You saw this?"

"I felt it, rather than saw it."

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes, I usually just see things. I felt that he would be trapped and knowing he was going to die. I saw my own death..."

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly. "There has to be a way to bring justice..." She looked to the side. "Where is my son?"

"I don't know... exactly..."

"But you saw things."

"Marjorie, if I tell you, you will be in great danger."

Her fingers curled into frustrated claws. "I... just want..." she blew out a weeping breath, "...closure."

CHAPTER 12

Two customers later, I took the cash and check into Peggy's. I waved the check at her. "I took this as payment. Could you cash it?"

Her look said no. She snatched the check and considered it. "Evelyn? The school teacher? I know her well... Her check is good." She frowned. "Yes, her check is good; I'll cash it for you."

I took the money and added it to my cash stash.

I escaped the bar and maybe tried to escape myself. I drove to the First Street Liquor Store and pulled in behind an old truck.

The interior was hot and the clerk sweaty. He eyeballed me as if I were a vagrant.

I guess I looked like one.

I selected four bottles of vodka and had them tucked into my arms.

A man waved a bottle of whiskey at me. "You know, that stuff will gut your rot."

I blinked. What? "Pardon me?"

He was laughing at himself. "No, I haven't drank today, yet. Uh, I mean that it will rot your gut."

I nudged my chin at his bottle. "Any worse than that?"

His drawl was slow and sure. "Probably not."

I squinted at him. He was graying with plenty of silver in his beard. His hair was long to his collar and straggly gray and clean. The top of his head was covered with a straw cowboy hat. His amused eyes sparkled something unsaid at me.

I said, "I know you..."

"Eh?"

"You were driving a truck last week and offered me a ride."

His eyes widened. "Ah, yeah. You're her? You look even worse in the light."

I laughed. "Thanks a lot."

"I mean, it looks like you need a good meal..." He looked over my vodka bottles. "Do you eat at all?"

I rolled my eyes, but something was keeping me engaged with this man. I led him to the counter. "I eat."

"Not much."

He was right and I couldn't argue it. "I don't have much reason to eat."

"No man in your life? Pretty thing like yourself..."

A tickly flutter teased my chest. "What are you after, mister?" My tone was just barely neutral.

He looked abashed. "I didn't mean to sound rude." He stuck out his hand. "Mac."

I looked at his outstretched hand nervously. Shit. Having already deposited my bottles on the counter, I had no excuse to refuse. I slowly gripped his hand.

Flashes swirled around me in a blinding kaleidoscope of colors. Nothing I had ever seen before matched the brilliance of what I was seeing. Crisp visions and vibrant colors swarmed me. Steady and stable, Mac was a chicken rancher. He carried a heavy, large frame revolver under his jeans jacket at his back right hip. I saw his father dying and saw the truck with the tire on front – and knew it had been passed from father to son. I saw a woman wracked with pain from colon cancer and buried young – Mac's wife. I saw him feeding his chickens and playing with the chicks. I saw his dog, a black Labrador, sitting calmly and watching. I saw strength and certainty.

I wasn't feeling sick.

I saw that in flashes, too. No sickness within myself over these visions. No worry or pain. No loneliness. I felt security and ease. I saw myself, thin but more... fit. I saw the spreading gray in my wild hair that topped something strange on my face – a smile. I sensed something hidden, just out of view and it was stronger than all else: justice.

I was alone on the floor, head bleeding from a blow. Two shots rang out and I wept.

I yanked my hand from his, stunned at the strange disparity in the final view. Everything about the vision had been so perfect and peaceful. So certain and easy to accept. No stress had come from it. No strain or worry. But then, suddenly, again the scene of my death. Different in a way, but leaving no horrible feeling of helplessness.

He was looking at me, concerned. "Are you okay, ma'am?"

I was shivering as if it didn't feel like a hundred degrees inside the store. I tossed the wads onto the counter to let the clerk count it out. "Angel. I'm sorry, my name is Angel."

"Are you feeling okay, Angel? You're pasty white."

"I'm..." Desperate to know what that was and why...

"Can I take you to Bea's Diner? Cup of coffee? Some oatmeal?"

Joy leapt in my heart like I hadn't felt since I was asked to the school dance in my sophomore year. "Yes!"

I needed to be close to him. I needed to know what it was I hadn't seen in those comforting visions. Why was this man so different?

I tried again. "I think I'd like that, Mac."

A smile melted across his face as if amused with the situation. Or surprised.

Stunned maybe.

"Well, then, I guess my drinking can wait."

I looked at the humming electric school clock on the wall of the liquor store.
"You drink this early?"

"No, but it sounded like the right thing to say."

I did something I hadn't done very much: I laughed. It surprised me, a little.

I followed him to Bea's Diner in my beat-up little bug.

He had an amused look at it before we went inside. He pointed. "Counter okay?"

"Sure." Anything.

He hitched himself onto the stool and rested forward on his elbows. "You had me worried the other night..."

"I did?"

"Where was your car?"

"I was walking to get it..." I didn't want to talk about my tryst with the detective and his wife.

"You're new in town?"

I nodded. "There's something I should tell you."

"Oh?" Wariness was painted on his face in bright colors.

"I'm the palm reader."

An eyebrow twitched. "Oh?"

"I mean, that's what most think I am, but I see things."

He chewed on his lip in thought. "About anything?"

"Well, by touch. I see things about people by touch. Also objects that belong to people..."

He colored a deep, heated shade of red and looked away. "Gawd, you saw me

playing with myself, didn't you?"

I hiccupped, grunted, and laughed. "Um, no, I didn't."

He covered his face with his hand. "Great..." His ears were bright red under the gray strands.

I reached to his arm with an instinct that belied my usual careful avoidance. "It's okay, Mac. Don't worry—"

I saw flashes of him naked in his ranch house, stroking out the window to the rising sun. I took a second to admire the man's equipment before the vision changed to him eating alone in his kitchen over a red and white checkered tablecloth. I saw him sitting by himself reading a book under a dim lamp in the darkness. I saw him sleeping alone in a bed made for two. I saw him sitting at his wife's gravestone.

And next to it... a smaller headstone. One day old.

I gasped and let go. "I'm so sorry..."

"What?"

"For your wife and daughter."

He looked down.

The portly woman with the apron stopped in front of us and scowled at Mac. She fiddled with the stub of a pencil that was more chewed than used. Her pad was wrinkled and curling up at the edges. With one sideways glance at me, she said, "What'll you have, Mac?"

He looked back up at me, a distant pain in his eyes. "What would you like, Angel?"

The woman's face firmed deeper in disapproval.

I said, "A plate of bacon would be nice."

"Four strips? Or eight?"

"Eight? Please?"

Mac nodded at the woman. "Coffee for me."

The woman scowled at me this time in warning and turned away.

I said, "I don't think she likes me."

"My wife used to work here. I guess Bea is a little protective of me."

"Oh..."

He looked down again. "About my wife and daughter, it was a long time ago."

"How long...?"

"Twenty-two years this September."

I touched him again in reassurance. "I'm sorry."

No visions came.

Not one.

No sickness. No dizziness.

I squeezed his forearm and felt it tense.

Still no visions came and I was not sexually excited. "Oh my goodness..."

"What?"

I laughed incredulously. "I'm not seeing anything."

"Is that bad?" His questions and answers were so simple, but told a far different story of depth and understanding.

"No... it's just... that I always see things. I did just a moment ago."

"Psychic-like?"

"No, not really. I was struck by lightning when I was a teenager—"

"Get out."

"No, really."

His eyebrows went up. "Some people do survive."

"I have scarring on my shoulder where it hit, but also since then I see things when I touch people."

"Always?"

I nodded. "Every time, unless... well..."

He squinted at me.

I admitted, "Unless I am... aroused."

That sly smile appeared on his face again and his skin deepened into red territory. "Oh, uh..."

I said quickly, "No, that's the thing. I'm not. This is new to me. I'm just... feeling safe around you, I guess."

He shrugged. "Dunno why, I'm just a chicken farmer."

"With a revolver on your hip—"

His head twisted towards me and he gave me a deep look. "You really are psychic."

"No, not psychic. I see things. I can't tell you the winning lotto numbers, who's going to win the Superbowl, or how many nickels you have in your pocket. I see flashes of things and sometimes they don't make sense. Sometimes they do."

He grunted. "Didn't know there was that kind of a difference."

I made a face. "All kinds of differences."

"So what do you tell people?"

"I try to make sense of what I see. Usually, people want to know about love or if their spouse is cheating. They want to know if they'll ever be rich or how many kids they'll have. It's... a living."

"Doesn't look like much of one."

"I get run out of town just as things get good."

He frowned. "Really?"

"Petty jealousies. Finger-pointing. I get the blame."

"That's a shame. What do you see for me about love?"

"I usually charge for it..." I gripped his forearm.

Bile rose and surprised me. I was so used to it that the lack of it the last couple of touches shocked me with its return. But it wasn't bad, at all.

Swaying on my stool, flashes of Mac flashed by.

Love?

I saw him working on his ranch. I saw him collecting flowers – just whatever grew nearest the house: weeds; wildflowers; pretty leaved plants. He bundled them in a bouquet and carried them into the house. They were definitely not anything like a professional arrangement. They were cheap, silly... and honest. He handed them to...

Me.

He kissed me and the swirls of my world melded into something that included him and me together.

I snatched my hand away and it was me that blushed this time: deep; hot; and fast.

He asked, "What did you see?"

The aproned woman dropped the plate of bacon right in front of him. She carefully set down his coffee cup and poured.

He slid the plate over to me.

The woman huffed and went away.

He asked again, "What did you see?"

I can't tell you! You'll think I'm making it up. I bit my lip. "I saw flowers you collected at your ranch. Little beautiful blue things..." My voice cracked and my eyes brimmed. I picked up a piece of scalding hot bacon. Those flowers were for me.

He harrumphed. "Someone for me? Must be some old nag."

I swatted his arm before I could catch myself.

He changed the subject. "You don't seem very happy with what you do."

Before today. Now, why am I thinking that? "I sometimes see... my death. My murder."

He turned towards me fully and clenched his fists. "You... do?"

"Always in connection with missing children."

He thought for a moment. "See anything like that with the Stamp boy? What was his name? Carson?"

"Casey, and... yes..."

He leaned his head down onto one fist and looked at me. "He didn't just run off?"

"He was dead before the night was over."

Mac's face hardened to stone. "Here in Charlotte's Creek..."

I nodded, though I didn't think he was asking for clarification. I said, "Usually larger cities this kind of stuff goes unnoticed. But..."

"And you're certain bad people did this...?"

"Very certain."

"And you saw your murder?"

I chewed on some bacon. My stomach growled loudly. I really was very hungry. "Sorry. Yes to your question. It's always the same; if I say too much about an abduction, my life ends with two shots to the back of the head, ruled a suicide."

He coughed, half amused and half angry. "Suicide?"

"I'm serious. That's how bad and how deep the bad people stretch. They can record a murder as a suicide."

His eyes danced left and right, then away. "Here in Sharlotte's Creek. Shee-it."

"The detective and captain are fine. Good people. But people above them... maybe..."

"County seat. Or state then. I think the sheriff is a good man, but who knows now. Are your visions ever wrong?"

"No."

"And you know if you say too much about the Stamp boy..."

"I'll be executed."

He made a quick movement, pulling his fist away from supporting his head. He gripped his coffee cup until his knuckles whitened. "I can't believe that shit goes on around here."

"No one wants to believe it. That's why it survives and thrives. That's why it gets worse. That's why it never stops."

He looked at me for a long time. "Maybe I can help."

I gave a bitter bark of a laugh. "With your gun?"

"No... though I wouldn't hesitate if I had to. No, I meant my brother. He works in the FBI."

It was a place of power.

It was a place of danger.

I think he sensed my reluctance. "He's a good guy, I swear to that. I know my brother. He might know how to help."

I wavered. "He can protect me if I tell the police what I know?"

He made a sound of barely suppressed stress. "I'm not certain. I know he would know who to talk to."

"He could protect the life of the detective?"

"You saw him murdered, too?"

"In danger of it and trapped, yes."

He shook his head and sipped his coffee. "What a mess."

"Which is why I won't tell anyone what I saw."

He studied me for a moment with a serious expression on his face. "Where's the justice in that?"

His five words drove home my complicity in helping those responsible continue doing what they were doing. I dropped my piece of bacon and looked down at it.

My inaction would mean the police would never find clues at Casey's body. My desire to not be involved meant more dead little boys and girls. It was so simple I hadn't considered it except for my own safety.

Where was the justice in that?

Where was Marjorie Stamp's closure?

What about the blood of the little boy that cried out from the Earth demanding justice?

How many more children raped, beaten, eaten, and harvested for organs?

I pushed at the half-eaten piece. "You're right. I should tell the detective."

"You'd be doing the right thing."

I tried to smile. "Just make sure they say that at my funeral."

CHAPTER 13

Apparently, my words for a eulogy impressed Mac so much that he didn't want to leave me alone.

I went back to my trailer to search for Alan Miller's card. I had thrown it into the phone drawer. Unfortunately, the phone was not connected.

Mac looked around at my place. "Sort of dreary, ain't it?"

I made a noise.

"I think Darren was here before he was arrested?"

"I've heard the name connected with the place."

He took out his phone and began tapping, then he put it away. "Texted my brother."

"Should I tell the cop first? Or wait?"

"Let's wait to see what my brother suggests. He'll know what to do."

I pocketed the card.

His phone rang not two seconds later.

He snatched it and thumbed. "Yeah? Yeah, it's me. Listen, I got a gal here... No, this isn't long-winded; I know you're busy. I have a... psychic here who has seen some disturbing things here in Sharlotte's Creek – having to do with the missing Stamp boy. Yeah, sure. Right, information on his location and that people could die finding out—" He listened for a moment. "Uh huh, all right." He folded his arms, then looked at me and said, "It's not his area of responsibility, but he knows a—"

I waited.

He narrowed his eyes and said into the phone, "Hi, yes. His brother, right. Yes, she is. Sure." He handed me the phone.

I took it and put the warm thing to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hi, this is special agent Givens of the Human Trafficking Task Force." His voice was quick, hurried, but efficient.

"Hello."

"Who am I speaking with?"

"Angel Cooper."

"And you're a psychic?"

"Sort of; I see visions."

"All right, I understand. What have you seen that leads you to believe this might involve human traffickers?" He didn't sound convinced.

I said, "I saw him beaten, raped, cut open and organs harvested—"

There was a loud creak on the other end of the connection. "Did you say organ harvesting?"

"Yes."

"What else did you see?" He sounded much less doubtful now.

"I saw myself executed. Two shots to the back of the head—"

The agent grunted. "And reported as a suicide?"

I was stunned. "Well, yes..."

"Does everything you see come true, Angel?"

"Yes."

"I had to ask. The agency does not employ psychics; we rely on more concrete

factual—"

"I want to reveal what I saw to the police here."

"I understand. Normally, we might send someone to interview you. In any event, I have a couple of suggestions for you and I'll pull a few strings here on my end. First, call the local FBI office anonymously. I'll alert them a priority call is incoming. Then call your local police. If we can get as many good boots on the ground at the scene, then the less likely any cover-up can occur."

"I understand."

"I normally wouldn't do this much for a psychic, but Charles is a good agent and highly respected."

"I understand."

"Do you have something to write with? I'll give you the number to our closest field office."

"Hold on."

He gave me the number and I wrote it down.

He said, "Make the call from a public phone. Do not use a private phone or cell. Understand?"

"Yes, perfectly."

I handed Mac his phone after the call was ended.

He pocketed it. "What was all that about?"

"I have to make an anonymous call to the FBI."

He pursed his lips and nodded. "Now?"

I looked out the window at the fading light. "Might as well."

"Come on, then, I'll drive you."

"Are you my guardian now?"

He was quiet for half a second. "I feel responsible."

Knowing this was going to lead to my execution didn't make me feel better; it made me feel worse. How would he blame himself after I was gone? Another pile of grief after a long life of pain?

Was I really worth it?

CHAPTER 14

I went into Peggy's bar to use the payphone.

Mac stood idly by.

I inserted coins for the call and punched the number.

Crazy Peggy's had all the same people in it and I was getting looks. Perhaps only because Mac stood near me, I got no insults or catcalls. The regulars simply stared and talked among themselves.

I delivered the details to the agent who answered. "He'll be found by a landfill. I saw gulls in the air and close over the tops of pine trees. Somewhere there in the trees is an old mine and that's where... his remains are."

The agent asked for my name and a contact number for follow-up.

"I'm sorry, I'd like to remain anonymous."

I hung up and took out Detective Alan Miller's card. The office number was listed, and also his cellular. I called his cell.

His voice was steady and dry. "Detective Miller."

"I'm making an anonymous tip about the Casey Stamp case."

There was immediate shifting on the other end. "Yes?"

"He'll be found in a mine by the landfill. I saw pine trees right up against the edge of the fill—"

"Angel Cooper?"

I went quiet.

"Are you there?"

"Be careful, Alan. The FBI will be sending people, too. I saw... hints of your death - your execution. This is larger than you can imagine and powerful forces are at work here."

"How large?"

"Casey was harvested for his organs... and raped in a ritual..."

He was quiet and at this point I knew he didn't believe me.

I said, "Just be careful." I hung up.

Mac was ready, but looked relaxed. "What now? Wait for the news to break?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I feel as if this isn't over yet."

"A vision?"

"No, just a hunch." There was my execution to consider.

"Do you want to come out to the ranch? Get away from this while we wait?"

No one in the bar was listening and likely wouldn't have cared. Peggy was the only one looking over at us with any kind of consideration.

I said, "I think that sounds nice."

Mac looked as pleased as a teenager asking successfully for a date. "You can try some of my whiskey..."

"Will you introduce me to your dog?"

He looked amused for a moment's worth of hesitation. "Of course." He held out his arms to usher me out.

I was making a big mistake and I didn't realize it – no clue, no vision, no hints.

Just blind ignorance.

CHAPTER 15

His ranch was old, dusty and looked like it was collapsing in on itself and down into the ground. Trick of the roof, more like. Everything looked sturdy when I got close.

Chickens wandered behind a chicken-wire fence that stood at least nine feet high all around the property as far as I could see.

I watched him unlatch the gate and wave me through.

The chickens scattered away from the gate as if they were used to the entries and exits. They dutifully waddled deeper into the yard.

He followed and shut the gate.

I asked him as we stood by the cars, "Why don't you keep them in the barn?"

"I used to. I sell the eggs regionally now with the free-range label. Buyers seem to prefer it and it makes for better tasting eggs."

"Better tasting? Why?"

"They get to eat the plants, the dirt, the worms, the bugs."

"Bugs?"

"Ever see a chicken chase a wasp? Funny as all heck. Neck all outstretched, wings flapping frantically..."

The black Labrador came up, tail wagging, but looking at me with hackles in a semi-erect position. A single, muted "woof" came out in challenge.

Mac said, "She's all right, Cleo."

The dog immediately lifted its head, wagged her tail harder, and sniffed my hand happily.

I petted her.

Chickens began poking around near the cars and a couple ran over to strut near Mac's feet.

He moved slowly so as not to step on them and gestured me towards the house. He carried his liquor purchase in his other arm.

Cleo reared beside me, half jumping up on her hind legs. She was very well-behaved, though, and didn't paw me.

Everything about this man was comfortable.

I... trusted him.

The sensation was unique; I had never really trusted anyone before.

The interior of his ranch house was different than I had seen in the visions – by virtue of the light. Less lonely now that the sunlight streamed in through the bay windows, the small place held an automatic charm. Bookshelves lined the wall next to the windows. Stuffed with books all crammed in and stacked, the shelves suggested the barely contained bursting of knowledge.

I wanted to stand all day in front of it and read titles.

Strangely, that was what I was doing when I realized he was still standing behind me as if waiting to show me the rest of the place. For the moment I looked, though, I saw everything: novels; reference; history; how-to guides; comedy...

Everything interesting.

I regarded the man who kept all this.

Quiet. Distinguished. Hard and worn. The wrinkles at his eyes were beginning to match his prematurely silver hair.

His daughter would've been an adult by now, if she had lived. What had he lived to see? Had he seen the undercurrent of society that people wanted to ignore?

Don't acknowledge the problem and maybe it will go away? Did that work with

fire? Broken plumbing? An empty gas tank?

And yet, people thought it worked with society.

The talking heads on the news were so self-assured and confident. Perfect hair and make-up. Wrinkles? Forget it.

TV mannequins telling us what they wanted us to think.

And we accepted it gratefully.

We looked the other way.

We had given up our authority as Americans to the TV. We were told what to think. How to obey. How to submit.

Mac was smiling at me and I hadn't noticed. His question had the sound of amusement. "What are you looking at?"

I knew he meant what about him was I seeing because I felt my searching expression as it faded from my face. I took a step closer to him into hug range. I could feel his heat coming from his faded jeans and worn flannel shirt. I looked up at his face in wonder.

This is the man who would love me?

I had never felt... love before.

Was this strange, muddled feeling love? Were the butterflies tormenting my stomach indicative of something new? Why was my heart pounding like I had run a mile carrying something heavy?

I opened my mouth and hesitated with uncertainty. "I... don't know what I'm seeing."

I lifted my hand and gripped his.

Dizziness swarmed my senses and the sharp acid rose in my throat as strong as ever.

Vivid flashes as colorful as before dazzled me. I saw us embracing, clothed. I

saw my trailer and felt the determination. Mac went into Crazy Peggy's. I went into my trailer to get... A blow to the back of my head sent me to the ground. Tattooed faces above me snarled hatred. I was dragged to a kneeling position.

Two shots rang out behind me.

I toppled over, seeing my blood on the floor, and seeing...

I wept.

I let go of Mac's hand but clutched at him with a hug as fierce as any I had ever given. I sobbed quietly, knowing my execution was coming.

Huddled against him and lacking any further vision, I realized this was what I had seen – us embracing. He held me like a child, cradling me to him in comfort. I heard his breathing and heartbeat as he held me to his chest.

I felt him stiffen in his jeans.

What was love, if not sex?

I asked him, "Do you want to take me to your bedroom?"

He shocked me on a level I could not comprehend. "No."

"Why? Aren't you—"

"I don't know you well enough for that."

"I'm clean."

His head shifted at an angle. "That's heartening."

"Then why—"

His eyes studied my upturned face. "Because I want to know there's something to it that makes it meaningful. Who are you? Where do you come from? I know nothing of you. I wouldn't want any of my first times with a woman to be so devoid of intimacy."

He was speaking Egyptian. Sex was sex. "But, we—"

He put a finger to my lips. "It's not like I don't want to; I just wasn't raised that way. Maybe we can share drinks and talk about... us. Who we are. What we believe."

There wasn't any us – he had a point. How was I to love and be loved if I didn't understand? Could he help me understand? Everything inside me told me I wanted to be close and love. I said, "Okay."

It was my first step in a direction I had never explored.

But my time was running out.

CHAPTER 16

I spent the night in his guest bedroom after hours of drink and talk.

I bared my soul. I spoke of bitterness and unhappiness. I spoke of myself with all honesty and my own words rang in my head as devoid of joy.

If Mac had been a psychic in my vein of visions, what would he have seen about me? What would he then tell me? Would he carefully choose something that salved my curiosity? Would he omit – as I had done so many times before – things that could help me but might be unpalatable?

How much would he hold back?

How was I being fair to my customers?

I was being selfish.

I withheld information because I thought my safety was at risk. Maybe it was. Certainly it was in some cases. But for what had they paid me if not the truth?

Was the truth a commodity to dispense when I judged it safe? Wasn't truth more than a commodity?

Mac helped me realize and embrace one thing that upset every vision I had ever interpreted for people: the truth was absolute.

Never should the truth be hidden. Never should it be formed into a more easily accepted package.

Living behind subterfuge and lies allowed evil to run rampant through society. My version of interpreting visions for customers allowed children like Casey Stamp to suffer horrendous deaths. I allowed the parents to suffer.

I didn't offer them comfort or hope; I stole it from them and then collected their money.

It was over breakfast that I broke. A simple spinach and cheese omelet – the best I had ever tasted – was the point in time my mind shifted into terrifying territory. I gripped my fork hard. "I don't ever want to see another vision."

Mac, steady in his seat and solid with his presence, said, "I was under the assumption you couldn't control them."

"I can't..."

"Then how—"

"I'll take down my sign. Get a real job. Do something else."

He put down his fork perfectly in place at the edge of his old plate. "You have a gift, Angel. A real gift."

"It has been nothing but a curse to me."

"You heard the news last night."

I had. Developments in the missing Casey Stamp case. The police were tight-lipped.

Mac hadn't moved. "You helped them."

"Not immediately—"

"But you did."

"I don't want to see any more pain. I don't want to see the broken bodies—"

He reached over and gripped my hand in a gentle gesture of support.

I closed my eyes and steeled myself against the rush of vision – but there was none. I let out a slow breath.

He murmured, "Some of us carry heavy burdens. I imagine you've carried your share of them."

My eyes bled tears of regret. "I don't want to see anymore. So much pain and tragedy..." I was babbling, so I shut up.

"I think you've handled it well enough."

"I want to be normal."

"Some people would give anything to have what you have – that extra ability—"

"They can't possibly know what I've seen."

"No, I suppose not. But to turn your back on this gift—"

Frustration flared fiery hot in me and I pounded the table with my other fist. "It's not a gift; it's a curse!"

"Maybe you see it that way, but to see the truth? To know?"

I didn't argue anymore because I knew he was right, but I didn't agree, either. How much truth could one person handle?

I finished my early breakfast and followed Mac and Cleo around the ranch. He supervised the feeding and egg collection, and watched the packaging of eggs by a four-person crew.

I marveled at the simple work and ethic involved. "I could do this."

"It's not a rewarding job, except to be around the chickens."

"But it's so carefree."

He nodded silently.

Cleo nudged at my hand and I scratched absently at her head.

He said, "She's really taken to you. I'm jealous."

"The last time I had a pet was when I was a teenager."

"How old are you, Angel? If you don't mind me asking..."

"I think... I'm thirty-eight." I knew exactly how old I was; I just didn't like to think about it. "How old are you?"

"Forty-seven."

"Oh... wow..."

He smirked, "Yeah, I know; I look like I'm sixty."

"No, not that old. But I thought fifties..."

He fingered the hair at his collar. "Yeah, I'm a bit premature. Started going gray at thirty."

I didn't have very many silver strands in mine. Maybe it was from the lightning strike. Maybe it was genetics.

Back inside the ranch house, he excused himself to do some light office work. He turned on the news for me in case anything new was revealed about the Stamp boy.

The late morning news program was filled with such insane nonsense that I missed the opening of a special news segment.

"...taken over by the FBI. We are assisting—" It was Captain Kelly speaking in front of several reporters.

"Captain, we have several sources who claim the investigation was aided by a psychic. Can you confirm this psychic helped break the case—"

The captain interrupted the female reporter and a microphone was thrust into his face. "All I can say is that both the FBI and the Sharlotte's Creek PD were given an anonymous tip..."

I tuned out, sitting in a daze.

Someone had mentioned me. Would that matter? Would it make any difference? Certainly not to any evidence found.

I looked over to the phone on the kitchen counter. It was an old rotary and was sitting on top of a very thin phone book.

I went to it and slid the book from underneath. I flipped into the Yellow Pages

and searched for what I knew I would not find: psychics; palm readers; paranormal investigators; mediums.

Nothing.

Sharlotte's Creek had just painted a big red target on the back of my head. I slid the book back under the phone with trembling fingers and ran for Mac's office.

CHAPTER 17

Night had fallen without any consolation or sense of security.

Mac made me an offer. "Stay here with me. We'll get your clothes and whatever you need and you can shack up here."

I knew safety when I heard it, though I didn't want to put him at risk. "That could be dangerous."

"It's dangerous getting in and out of the shower every day, but I do it."

"Are you sure?"

"Let's get it done and we can come back here and polish off a bottle of whiskey. Or vodka. Whichever you prefer."

A glimmer of hope lifted what was left of my spirits: he wanted to spend time with me. He was willing to put himself in danger as a gesture of... decency to me.

Friendship? I hoped.

Something deeper? I dared to dream.

I couldn't tell him about my vision even if he had impressed upon me that the truth was absolute. If it was, then he was going to find out himself in his own good time. What was the point of rushing the truth?

I might do more harm than good.

If I told him he would love me, then might he be more inclined to resist it? He seemed stubborn.

He drove me in his truck to the trailer.

He shifted the lever to park and turned off the rumbling old engine. "I'll pop in to

tell Peggy – give her my number. How much do you have? Will it fit in the back of my truck?"

I looked at the bright lights of the bar and the darkness of my trailer and laughed. "It would all fit in my lap."

Which wasn't exactly true. I had two boxes: a small one for toiletries; and a medium-sized one for clothing.

It was all I had.

He nodded. "All right. You want me to come in with you and help? Peggy can wait."

I appreciated his offer. "No, it will be really fast. Let's just get out of here." I didn't want to wait around if I was ready and Peggy wanted to gab. She wouldn't talk Mac's ear off.

I climbed out and trotted to the trailer. The breeze of my passage lifted my wild hair almost as it had when I was struck...

Everything about my trailer was normal. I bent down to insert the key into the cheap lock. I didn't make contact – I just held the key there. On a whim, I straightened and gripped the handle.

It twisted easily, unlocked.

I pushed the door open and looked into the darkness.

Nothing.

I sensed nothing.

I heard nothing.

Breathing a weary sigh, I turned on the lamp.

My empty living room with cigarette pack sitting next to the ashtray was as I'd left it.

Safe.

This is not the night of my vision... Certainly not.

I turned to the bedroom to go collect my two boxes.

The cracking blow to the back of my head was preceded by a quiet rush of footprints through the door. I didn't even have time to turn all the way around.

Numbing pain accompanied my fall. Warmth on my cheek told me my scalp was bleeding.

A whisper broke through my senses. "Andele."

I tried to turn but everything felt heavy and non-functional.

A fist in my hair pulled on the wounded area and I whimpered in pain. I was pulled to a kneeling position.

No, this is it! This is my vision. This is... my execution. But, I didn't do anything. I don't deserve—

Two shots boomed in the silence.

I toppled over from the impacts to my head.

Strangely, I heard sounds – distant. I blinked my eyes and saw my blood on the cheap carpet.

I wept, knowing it was all over. My life snuffed before I had found that vision of love with Mac.

But...

I was hauled up and cradled. "Angel?"

The ringing in my ears hurt.

How can I survive two shots to the head? Some by-product of the lightning strike?

I opened my eyes... or rather, I began to focus.

Mac looked down at me, frantic and desperate. "Angel?" His hand trembled as he felt along my head. He turned my face away.

No, I want to see you as I die... Please...

Fingers found the massive wound on the back of my skull.

I winced in pain as they probed.

Are you finding my brain?

He sighed raggedly. "Your scalp is split. My God, there's so much blood. Can you hear me?"

My face was swiveled back to his.

I worked my mouth, but nothing wanted to come out.

Why are you asking a dying woman such questions? Tell me you love me. Tell me you can't live without me...

Footsteps were running closer.

He looked away and raised his revolver.

Yes, put me out of my misery. Put an end to my pain.

My head rolled a little, and I saw.

Pain flashed through my head and ears. The ringing grew louder.

Two men lay on the floor, tattooed faces twisted in shock and death. One bore a hole in his forehead. Both had the look of gang members.

A panicked voice said, "What happened? Is she okay?"

Mac's voice was urgent. "Call an ambulance! Call the police!"

The room was spinning. Or maybe it was my head. I didn't want to lose consciousness. I didn't want to fade away from the only man who had ever cared.

Mac... help me...

CHAPTER 18

Doctor Bannister was a grumpy Englishman somewhere around my age. His cynicism was often punctuated by what could only be British levity.

He twisted his lips at me. "You been running laps while we weren't peeping?"

I gave him a weak smile. "No."

"You haven't eaten enough of your food."

"Have you tried that stuff they call meat?"

His sneer remained. "No, and I wouldn't feed it to a mutt, either."

I nodded at him in affirmation.

His accent was mostly gone, but it poked out here and there. "You need to eat. If I had a look at you on the operating table, I'd call bollocks and wrap you in a bag. Easy disposal."

I appreciated his bedside manner; he was trying to help.

Mac cleared his throat. "I'll get her eating."

I looked over to his stool. He had been perched there for the last few days.

The Brit gave a nod. "Right then; see to it. She'll be released later today."

A knock on the door was followed by Detective Miller's head.

Doctor Bannister shook his head. "Bloody hell." He pulled open the door and glared at Alan until the detective moved. He left the door open as his white lab coat swirled around the doorframe.

The detective gave me a look, then Mac. He pursed his lips and came in. "I wanted to extend..."

I waited for him to order his thoughts.

His eyes searched the floor and he cleared his throat. "Thank you, Angel."

Mac asked, "Did you capture the people who did it?"

"No. And it does..." He looked around for hidden listeners. "It does go deep – just like you told my wife. I'm sorry I doubted you."

I asked, "Are you safe?"

He blew out a breath. "I think so, as long as I don't ask any questions. The FBI warned me to keep my head down – that they would be handling the investigation and that they'd call me for an assist if necessary."

I motioned him closer. When he stepped to the bedside, I gripped his hand.

The familiar bile rose and images flashed through my head.

Quiet. What do I see when you are quiet?

I saw the normalcy of his duties as a detective. I saw people being questioned – locals – on things as weighty as break-ins and custody issues. I saw Cindy and him in bed. I saw Captain Kelly keeping everything tightly under control. I saw no execution. I saw no trap.

I let go. "Don't push. Let the FBI handle it. Your future depends on it."

"I want justice—"

Mac said, "We all do, Alan."

I mused, They know each other? Or does everyone know each other in a place as small as Charlotte's Creek?

Mac continued, "Sometimes things are too large and we need help. Let those who are equipped for it handle the heavy lifting."

Detective Miller nodded. "We aren't even equipped to handle the MS13."

I lifted my head. "Is that military?"

"No, the two gang members that tried to murder you. Apparently, according to Special Agent Givens, certain bad elements in the American government use MS13 to carry out assassinations."

Mac said, "Bad elements?"

"People who were willing to sell out America and refashion the country in their image."

"Arrest them."

I smiled at Mac. He was simple in a very sharp way.

"That's what I told Givens. He said it was too large for that. He said the major agencies – the FBI and the DOJ – were being cleaned out. He promised only that it was a long process. He said to watch the sealed indictments come unsealed."

Mac frowned. "Sounds like a civil war in our government."

Alan nodded. "That's basically what he said."

"How does that connect to the Stamp boy? It doesn't make sense."

The detective took a deep breath and blew out a load of unseen frustration. "Child and human trafficking. Organ harvesting for money. The sex trade. People in very high positions of power performing occult rituals."

"And the Stamp kid was a part of this?"

Alan dropped his voice. "I saw the remains. These people are sick. Very, very sick."

I wasn't going to contradict him because I couldn't; I had seen it in my vision.

Most people wanted to live their lives blissfully ignorant of that ugly undercurrent. Good people looked the other way.

Bad, evil people operated unhindered and Casey Stamp had paid the price for our willful blindness.

EPILOGUE

Months had passed since that night in my trailer when I had escaped my fate. The impacts to my head from bullets had changed to impacts to my eardrums from the concussive blast from Mac's ridiculously powerful .44 magnum revolver.

My visions had changed.

Never before had they done that. I told people my visions always came true – and they did – but I had never tried to change them before.

Or Mac had been a catalyst for my discovery. Once the visions pertained to me and I attempted to shift my actions towards the outcome, I observed the subtle shift in the vision of my execution.

I had read the truth – as far as I was willing to act.

I read a new truth once I was willing to act.

My actions produced outcomes just like when I read and envisioned someone coming to me for an answer. I saw their outcome based on their actions I saw. I had no direct control there. I only read the maps as they flashed before me.

While the truth didn't change, the outcome could. That opened up to me a whole new way of considering my gift.

My gift.

Without my gift, I would never have taken up with Mac. I would never have found the man who loved me for who and what I was.

My visions had produced the greatest gift my life had ever seen – a man who was mine. No, this ability I possessed was not a curse.

It was a gift.

Mac smiled down at me and sent my senses spinning.

I swayed.

His face turned to concern. "Flashback? Your head injury?"

I gulped and swallowed. "N-no. I... just know what you have behind your back. I guess my mind is connecting this to one of the visions I had about you." I had told him a few months back – after my stay in the hospital.

The truth was important. Always.

He looked at me quizzically and pulled the bouquet of flowers from behind him. "These?"

Beautiful blue flowers common to the local weeds were mixed with dainty little mustard blossoms. Leafy plants supported the mixture tied together with a simple rubber band.

It would never win awards.

It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

He gave me a wry smile. "I love you, Angel."



I took his body to mine with welcoming arms. The first time had been frantic; I think it had been so long he had forgotten how to do it.

None of that mattered.

His cock was special not just because it was a beautiful work of manhood, but because it was mine. It parted my lips and pushed into my welcome pussy. I was filled by his shaft but also by him. Everything he was came to me and was held by my body and arms.

Mac Charles was mine.

His muscular body pushed and moved and drove his excitement into me. I relaxed to the motion and sensation of being sexually stimulated. I pushed my hips up at him, wanting to feel all of him – not just his flesh, but also his ardor. His passion. His desire.

I wrapped it all inside myself in time with his thrusts and gasps.

I responded in kind, excited by his physical zeal and feeling it also in my soul.

His hips worked tirelessly and propelled me to heights as high as any I had ever felt. Up there at the breezy edge of my senses, I hovered over a precipice of passion like a swimmer ready to take a swan-dive.

Mac thrust hard and deep, as if to reinforce with his superficial physical actions that my body, mind, and soul belonged to him.

I would never go looking for another couple again; I didn't need to. I didn't want to. I had stolen little slices of other people's passion and sharing, but now I had my own.

I took that jump gladly, falling and spinning into the lusty lake of release and satisfaction. My orgasm was a long one. I groaned out loud and clutched at the man of my dreams.

My Mac.

"I love you..." I whispered.

His mouth met mine and our tongues did a slow dance of tease and tactile give and take. Connected mouth to mouth and cock to pussy, we were one.

I was complete.

His panting, deep addition of his effort into my pussy scalded my insides with wetness. Together, we accomplished total physical satisfaction. I gave him my femininity. He gave me his masculinity.

Our offering was perfect.

I held him in my arms and stroked his back. The love I felt was a force so powerful it could bring me to tears.

And it often did.

I clutched him to me as I looked at the silly, beautiful flower arrangement on the nightstand. He had picked them with his own hands.

He had picked them for me.

Thank you for reading *The Psychic Bitch*. I hope you enjoyed it.

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