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DARKHOUSE

BOOK ONE IN THE EXPERIMENT IN TERROR SERIES

∞KARINA HALLE∞



\m/ Metal Blonde Books \m/



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Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For my parents, Tuuli & Sven

CHAPTER ONE

I stood in a round, white room with only a porthole-shaped window to break up the monotony. The view outside was nothing more than an inky void. The smell of tidal pools and rotting kelp seeped in through the cracks where the silicone had crumbled away. I didn't know where I was or why I was there. But I knew something had summoned me.

I spun around, suddenly conscious of a door, and saw a saffron-colored glow spilling out from underneath the doorframe, mildly illuminating the stark walls. Chilled air flowed in with the light and tickled the tops of my bare feet. The blue nail polish on my toe was chipped, making it look like I had half a toenail. This caught my attention more than the cold hardwood floor and the rough splinters beneath.

The lights went out. The door whooshed open, almost soundlessly, and a huge rush of arctic wind battered my body, whipping my nightgown around me like a pink, polyester flag.

The floorboards creaked. I felt the weight of some unknown mass travel along the length of them to my feet. I couldn't move and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

The lights from outside the room came on again, illuminating the air abrasively. My eyes stung. A pounding sound filled my ears. I covered them with my hands until I realized it came from my very heart.

In the doorway I saw a silhouette of a man.

My heart, and the pounding, stopped. The man came for me, a mass of unfathomable malevolence. I screamed and screamed until the black depths of his silhouette was all I could see. I fell into him, fell into the darkness, in one never-ending cry.

Until...

A pair of hands grabbed my arms and pulled me up. They shook me until the darkness behind my eyes bled out into a blinding white.

And suddenly, I was in my bedroom lying underneath a smorgasbord of tangled sheets with my sister Ada peering over me. Her forehead furrowed with concern, making her look years older than fifteen.

She let go of my arms and stepped back.

"You scared the *shit* out of me, Perry," she grumbled.

I propped myself up on my elbows and looked around my room at the concert posters on the walls and stacks of vinyl and CDs in the corner, taking comfort in their familiarity. My rarely touched electric guitar rested haphazardly against the window seat, a pleasing contrast to my stuffed animal collection.

I eyed my alarm clock. Two minutes until it blared uncontrollably. The observation was hazy, like I was not quite in my body yet.

“Well?” Ada said, crossing her arms. She was still in her pajamas, but her heavy-handed makeup was meticulously applied.

“Well what?” I repeated.

“Um, hello! Any explanation why your screams made me put down my mascara in mid-stroke and come rushing in here?”

“You have good hearing?”

“Perry!”

Her voice bordered on a shrill hissy fit. Ada was always a degree or two away from full-on teenage angst.

“Well, I don't know. I had a bad dream. Or something...”

It was a dream now, wasn't it? My memory was disintegrating into bits and pieces, and the more I tried to recall it, the more I came up blank. But that feeling, that horrible feeling of dread still clung to the recesses of my mind like sticky cobwebs. Even the bright autumn sunshine that shone through my window wasn't cleaning it up.

“Or something,” Ada scoffed. “It sounded like you were being murdered, you know. You're lucky Mom didn't hear you.”

She peered at me closer, inspecting my face for signs of mental illness. She did that often.

I rolled my eyes and got out of bed, feeling self-conscious with my thunder thighs rolling beneath my long Bad Religion T-shirt that doubled as a nightgown. Ada was as thin as a rail, but in the most envious way possible. She got the wholesome, toothsome Swedish

good looks from my mother's side of the family. Smooth skin, bright eyes, naturally blonde hair that she bleached (for some reason) and a long, lean build.

As my own luck would have it, I got my dad's Italian side. Short (I'm 5'2") with thick dark hair and big gray/blue eyes that acted as a mood ring (so I've been told). I've got a curvy build...at least that's what I say when I feel like being nice to myself. In reality, I used to be about sixty pounds heavier, but despite the weight loss, it's not enough. The fact is, I'm always blaming everything on those last fifteen pounds.

I walked over to the mirror and searched my face for blazing signs of craziness. I looked like crap but often did in the morning before my five cups of coffee kicked in.

BLAAARP!

My alarm went off. Ada and I nearly jumped out of our skin.

She held her hand to her chest as I ran over and whacked the alarm off. I gave her a quick look.

"I'm OK, Ada. It was just a dream. I don't even remember what it was about anymore."

She cocked her penciled brow at me. "Okaaaay. But if I get called out of school because you were in an 'accident,' again, I'll be very upset."

She turned and left the room. I let out a snort. *No you wouldn't*, I thought. *You would love any excuse to get out of school.*

And frankly, I would have loved any excuse to get out of work. I sighed deeply. I felt a tinge of bizarre sadness now that the excitement of the dream was over. The terror that had pumped through my veins faded quickly in the morning light.

I got ready for the day and left the house, making my way to my motorbike that rested in the driveway. At least my mode of transportation was still exciting.

I know, I know. A motorbike. I've heard it all: It's dangerous, I'll die, I'll look like a douchebag. It's all true, but I wouldn't trade in Put-Put for anything in the world.

Put-Put wasn't a big bike like a Harley (I'm not *that* kind of a douchebag) but a black 2004 Fireblade. I thought it was the bee's knees. Sleek and quick as hell. I wasn't a reckless driver, though, and most of the time I stayed at the same speed as all the other vehicles on the road. Until there's a traffic jam, and then I'll overtake everyone on the shoulder, yelling "Later, Bitchiez!" through my helmet as I pass.

I got Put-Put four years ago for my eighteenth birthday. I was going through my "stuntwoman" phase, when I thought becoming a professional stuntwoman would be more exciting and lucrative than a career in advertising. After motorbike lessons, a year of karate, a few skydiving sessions, and weekends spent at the firing range learning how to use a gun, I abandoned ship and ended up getting a communications degree. Not that being a stuntwoman wasn't for me, but I honestly lost interest. My mother calls me wishy-washy. I just think I'm delightfully impulsive.

Oddly enough, I kind of regret getting my degree. They say sometimes you have to go to school in order to find out what you don't want to do versus what you want to do. And guess what? After four years at the University of Oregon, I decided advertising wasn't the career for me.

But what can you do. After I finished school and moved from Eugene back home to Portland, the economy hit rock bottom and I was lucky enough to get a job, let alone one related to my degree. I got hired at an agency in Portland, which could not have made my parents happier.

I, on the other hand, *could* be happier. I've been a damn receptionist for almost a year. But as my parents like to remind me every time I complain, at least I have a job. A soul-sucking job I hate with all my being, but at least I have one. They have a point, though. At the moment, it's really the only sense of identity I have.

Anyway, my job is where I was headed that morning. I brought Put-Put down the long driveway and contemplated taking my bike in the opposite direction. East would be nice. I could zip along the Columbia River until I hit Idaho, then maybe join the cowboys in Montana or head south to the deserts where my heart would soar like the mesa-grazing eagles. But as I had done every weekday before this one, I shook the fantasy out of my head and roared down the road towards the city and responsibility. Having a motorbike was such a tease.

"Good afternoon, Allingham and Associates, Perry speaking," I said into the phone. Lunchtime was approaching and I desperately wanted this mundane morning to end. I transferred the call to the respective party and eyed the clock on my computer that counted down to when Alana took over as my relief.

Alana used to be the receptionist before I came along and I suppose the girl hated the job as much as I do. She was promoted to office manager and completely resents the fact that for two fifteen-minute breaks and one lunch hour, she has to cover reception for me. I cannot tell you how many times I have come back to find irate callers on the line. Something tells me that she answers the phone using my name and just treats people like crap to get me in trouble, though I haven't been able to prove this yet.

Yeah, I'm the first to admit I'm not exactly the best receptionist material. I kind of feel like reception is beneath me, but because it's with a reputable ad agency and I just got my degree, it's necessary to pay my dues. I figured I could start at reception and move my way up.

That said, I hoped my "due" days were coming to a merciful end. I'd been there almost a year with not even a hint of advancement. The economy wasn't making matters any easier.

I'm stuck. While I live at home in my childhood room and get nice home-cooked meals every night, I wanted to get the hell out of Dodge.

I know I'm only twenty-two, but I totally thought I would have it made by this age. That's highly ambitious, but I can't help it. I've always grown up feeling like I was special, like I was meant to do something really amazing with my life and make an impact on people. That's probably why I've dabbled in so many different genres over the years. From guitar lessons to stunts, to photography summer camp, to horseback riding, to taking painting and sculpting courses at the Y, to, last but not least, writing. I've tried everything to

find my *something* and, in the end, walked away with nothing concrete to show for it. Maybe if I just buckled down and stayed with one thing it could happen, but my fear is that everything else might pass me by.

Naturally, I thought advertising would be the perfect platform for me to showcase my creativity and make an impact on the world but just like the ads themselves, nothing ever is as it seems.

“OK, I’m here now.”

The nasal voice of Alana shot through my thoughts like a drill. I looked up at her while removing my headset and gave her a smile. A fake smile, but a smile nonetheless.

I got up and displayed the desk proudly with my arms. “It’s all yours.”

She gave me a quick sneer before plopping down on the ramrod chair with an exaggerated sigh.

I grabbed my bag and quickly headed out the door before she decided to use the bathroom or something. I caught the elevator down and headed out to my usual bench beside a coffee shop and pulled out my iPhone to pilfer the free Wi-Fi.

It was a beautiful fall day with a sun that warmed your arms and nary a brown leaf in sight. The Pacific Northwest enjoyed an Indian summer this year, and so far the rain had taken a vacation for much of September. Usually, at this time of year—hell, at all times of the year—we are submitted to a daily battering of rain, general dampness, and a wind that likes to turn your umbrellas inside out.

After I perused Facebook for ten minutes, learning absolutely nothing interesting about the people in my life (or slightly outside of my life, as seems to be the

case with Facebook), I changed my status to a song lyric and moved on to read my sister's blog.

Ada started this fashion blog about six months ago and she's actually been doing really well with it. She's always been very fashion-forward. How can she not be when she fits into all of our mother's hand-me-downs? Our mother used to be a model *way* back in the day, so she has tons of designer goods in storage. Of course, with my generous thighs, big ol' bubble butt and giant rack, I don't wear the clothes as well as my sister. They're not my style, anyway.

But I appreciate the way my sister can rock the designer stuff with vintage items and apparently so does everyone else. Just by posting a picture of herself every day and writing a blurb about what she was wearing, she gets tons of hits to her blog, enough so that she started making money from advertising.

It's funny, my sister and I kind of grew apart when I went off to college. I guess the age difference was really apparent, and to be honest, I had no idea how to relate to her. She was a preteen when I left and when I came back, I still wanted to treat her like my cute little sister.

Now, because we've had a year bunked in the same house again, I do feel closer to her. She is starting to become more like a friend, which is great in some ways, but sometimes I wonder when I should play the role of the big sister. When I see her posing flamboyantly in a skimpy outfit on display for the entire world to see, I can't understand what she's after. I wouldn't feel comfortable putting myself out there like that. But the last time I mentioned she could become a prime target for stalkers (or even worse), she just brushed it off and made the point that mom approved.

I'll admit that I am a little jealous, which is kind of ridiculous because I'm her older sister. But she's got her path; she's following it and making progress.

The exact opposite of me.

My cell rang, leaving that depressing thought in my head as I answered.

"Hi, pumpkin," my mother said in her lilting voice. She still had a faint Swedish accent but for the life of me I couldn't really hear it.

"Hi, Mom," I answered with a sigh, knowing she was just checking up on me to make sure I was all in one piece.

"How are you feeling? Any troubles?"

"No. I'm fine."

"How is work? You still have a job, right?"

I let out a puff of air again and muttered "yes." This was her daily question. The daily reminder to not even *think* about quitting my job. It's like she knew.

"Listen," she continued, "what are you and Ada doing this weekend? Uncle Albert was hoping we could all get together."

My dad's brother Albert lived on a huge plot of beach-side land on the foggy Oregon coast and thanks to the proximity to us we often drove out there to see him. He was divorced and lived alone with his twin boys, Matthew and Tony, two nineteen-year-old troublemakers.

I had nothing planned for the weekend. If I didn't go to the coast, I would just end up sitting at home and having a *Lost* marathon by myself.

After I told her I'd be there and hung up, I stretched back on my bench, the sun heating up my maroon leggings, and half-heartedly nibbled on some cut-up veggies. I eyed a nearby Subway and al-

most succumbed to the call of a melted bacon sub but resisted.

I finished up and plodded back to the office, defeated by the drudgery of the nine-to-five life. The sun teased the freckles across my nose and the lightest breeze tossed my hair so I could see the shades of violet dye in the black strands. I wanted to stay outside, surrounded by the quaint buildings, the golden green trees, the people bustling to-and-fro in lives more exciting than mine, and most of all I wanted these last rays of summer to last forever. But duty called, as it always did.

I walked into the lobby and waited for the elevator. As I stood there on the cold, hard tiles, I felt the presence of someone behind me. Strange, I didn't see anyone when I came in, nor did I hear the door open or close behind me.

A creepy feeling swept over me. I remembered the dream I had. Suddenly, I felt inexplicably afraid.

I hesitated at turning around. In my "overactive imagination" I thought I would see something horrible, but I did it anyway.

There actually was someone there sitting on the white lobby couch. It was an old lady who looked like she was trying disastrously hard to be a young lady. She must have been about eighty, wearing a red taffeta dress adorned with tiny pom poms and outlandish makeup smeared across her face. She had exaggerated purple eyeliner, Tammy Faye Bakker eyelashes, a swipe of orange across her sagging cheekbones, and most disturbing of all, red lipstick that was half on her lips and half on her teeth. She sat there smiling broadly at me. Frozen, it seemed, or locked in time.

I tried to hide my shock—I don't know how I didn't see this piece of work when I came in—and gave her a quick smile before promptly turning around. I felt relieved when the elevator doors finally opened.

I walked quickly inside and hit the close button before anything else. I looked up at her as the doors closed. She was as still as ever, the wide, maniacal-looking grin still stretched across her face. Her eyes, white and unblinking, did not match her smile.

The doors shut and I let out a large sigh of relief. I had actually been shaking a little bit. That horrible feeling lasted for another five minutes until I slipped on my headset and the daily barrage of rude callers and impatient visitors wiped the scene out of my head.

CHAPTER TWO

“Is that what you’re wearing?” my mother asked.

It was ten a.m. on Saturday, and I was too tired to handle anything coming out of my mother’s mouth.

Ada and I were loading our luggage into my parents' car when my mother spied the outfit I had on for the day. From her tone, I assumed it wasn't “family appropriate,” though it was pretty much what I wore every day. Combat boots, black leggings and a long mohair sweater with deliberate rips throughout it.

I sighed and tossed my bag in the car. I put my hands on my hips and glared at her. She stepped into the passenger seat slowly, neatly, wearing a black shift dress with yellow strappy wedges and matching trench coat. Her perfectly highlighted blonde hair was piled into a loose bun on top of her head and framed with huge Chloe sunglasses. She looked like the per-

fect Hitchcock heroine and I wondered if that's why I had such an affinity for Hitchcock's films. But then I noticed the disappointment in her face, realized how inappropriately *she* was dressed (we were going to the beach, for crying out loud) and remembered I liked Hitchcock's films because of their macabre view of mankind.

"Why, what's wrong with it?" I asked her while exchanging a glance with Ada. She shrugged with a *don't get me involved* look in her eyes.

"You've got holes in your sweater, dear," Mom said. "Your cousins will think we can't afford to get you new clothes."

"Oh, whatever Mom," said Ada, who was dressed sensibly in pastel skinny jeans, ballet flats and a black furry vest over a shrunken Alice in Chains T-shirt (which was my shirt, of course. Like she knew who AIC was). "The original price of Perry's sweater was well over \$100; luckily she got it for \$40."

I frowned at her while we got in the back of the car. I had no idea how she knew such random things about my life.

Knowing what I was thinking, she added, "I saw it for sale online. I knew you'd buy it. It's just skuzzy enough."

"OK! Off we go!" Our father's bellow shook the whole car as he jumped in the front seat. He adjusted the rearview mirror and gave us a wink. Thankfully, he didn't hear our conversation because anytime money was mentioned in our family it just became primer for a blazing argument.

Dad was a robust man with a hearty laugh and a heartier appetite (hence his ever-expanding "wine" belly), who identified dearly with his Italian heritage.

Though he and his brothers were second generation Italians, you would never know it. They spoke Italian fluently, especially with their hands. It was dangerous to get my father talking when he drove, or anytime really. I remembered when Ada and I bought him this Italian classic film collection and in his enthusiasm he whacked me in the face. I think my mom was quite pissed off after that, probably because my dad does have quite the temper as well. Don't get me wrong, my father has never purposely hit me or anyone in my family, but when his face turns red, his cheeks puff out, and his small stature suddenly becomes about ten feet tall, he becomes the most feared creature on earth.

He's a bit of a workaholic too, which doesn't help. He's a history and theology professor at the University of Portland, so we don't get to spend as much time with him as we probably should.

I get more traits from my father than I do from my mother. We're both overtly sensitive but with me, I can't hide it. Sometimes I feel like I'm just a giant orb of vibrations and feelings that knocks everyone flat on their back, whereas my dad just puts it somewhere else (fuel for a later explosion). One big difference between us is his unwavering faithfulness. He just accepts things and moves on. I always have to question, always have to argue and always have to ask *why* until I'm blue in the face. I wish I could let things go as easily as he does.

For example, on this day, as my father drove us down the I-5 at a leisurely pace, I couldn't stop thinking about yet another dream I had, whereas he would just pass it off as an ordinary nightmare and move on.

But as long as I've been alive, "ordinary" was a term rarely applied to me.

Last night had been a normal Friday. I practiced a few songs on my guitar (I felt guilty for having neglected it), did laundry and watched a *Family Guy* episode or two before hitting the sack. Maybe it was the coffee I had so close to bed, but I couldn't sleep for the longest time. I just tossed and turned as my ears picked up the slightest sounds, from Ada snoring lightly down the hallway to the faint rustle of the maple tree outside my window. Even the glowing numbers from my alarm clock made my room turn into a supernova.

I must have fallen asleep at some point in the night because I woke up with a start. My body felt ice cold from the inside out, like an IV drip was seeping into my bones and filling them with liquid terror. My breath was frozen. All my limbs were outside of the sheets, stiff as boards. They felt exposed and naked and I had visions of some monster coming and gnawing at them, or perhaps a small hand coming out from underneath my bed and peeling my toes and fingers off. I wanted nothing more than to stick my arms and legs inside my sheets and keep them safe. The fear was so real.

But I couldn't move. Not because it was physically impossible but because I didn't want to.

Someone was standing in front of my door. At first, I thought it was my housecoat hanging on the hook. My room was as dark as I'd ever seen it, and without turning my head to look, I knew the lights on my clock went out. As my eyes adjusted to the depths, I remembered that my housecoat was still in the dryer and this "thing" had dimensions and breadth to it.

I lay there watching it for what seemed like minutes. I don't think I breathed once for fear of drawing attention to myself. I didn't know what it was, but it kept very still, which was more disturbing. Sickening shivers worked up my spine.

A spotlight suddenly flashed through my room in one swoop, illuminating everything with precise intensity. For a split second I saw the *thing*. Saw a hooded coat made of oily, wet fur and then a face, no eyes, but one wide, white smile. The smile parted. Black gums. An abyss.

And then...

BLAAARP!

My alarm went off.

And in an instant it was the morning. Bright sunshine filled the room, exposing its harmless nooks and crannies. There was nothing at the door and everything was as I had left it. Gentle wafts of bacon and coffee drifted in from downstairs. It was just another dream.

I shuddered at the memory. My mom eyed me suspiciously in the rearview mirror.

"That's what you get for wearing a sweater with holes in it."

The air conditioner that my father had on full-blast definitely didn't help, but I rolled my eyes and leaned my head on the cool window. Cars zipped past in all directions, the fields by the highway were bright green under the sharp, clear sky and defying autumn's cold approach. Next week would be October and it still felt as fresh as a June day. At least we had that. My dreams would be a lot more poignant had we been enraptured in the normal fall weather of dark skies, howling winds and driving rain. Normally I

loved the storms and the prickly atmosphere that went with Halloween and all things creepy. But two scary and remarkably realistic dreams, plus one alarming stranger in the lobby, and this accompanying anxious feeling, all had me a bit on edge.

Feeling eyes boring a hole into the side of my head, I turned and saw Ada staring at me. In her hands was a fashion magazine, in her ears, her iPod. I noticed how perfectly manicured her nails were, the brilliance of the red polish and the preciseness of the application. I didn't need to look at my own hands to know what they looked like.

She narrowed her azure eyes. "What is with you lately?"

"What?" I asked, a little too defensively.

"I haven't seen you this spacey since..." she trailed off.

I gave her a sharp look and didn't dare look at my mom in the rearview mirror. I knew she was watching me carefully.

"I'm fine," I said sternly.

She leaned in a bit closer and lowered her voice.

"Did you have another dream again?"

I sighed and nodded.

"Same one?"

"No, different. Still as f—," I stopped, remembering where I was, "—messed up, though."

"I didn't hear you screaming your head off this time."

That was enough for my mother to get involved. I knew she had been waiting for an opening.

"What are you talking about?" She turned in her seat to look at us and focused in on me with motherly concern. "Are you having nightmares, Perry?"

"I don't know if I would call them nightmares," I replied as nonchalantly as possible. The last thing I needed was for my mother to start worrying that I was going Looney Tunes. She'd always been far too eager to jump to that conclusion.

Ada snorted. "She woke me up yesterday with her screams, totally messed up my morning routine. You should be glad you were out jogging mom; she was a mess. Totes."

I shot Ada a look, more annoyed at her use of the word "totes" than anything else.

Mom gave me a sad look. "Screaming, Perry, really?"

I rolled my eyes and focused on the scenery flying past. "It was nothing. I don't even remember what it was about."

That was a total lie. I remembered it more clearly with each hour. Sharp, pointless details like the snags that ran along the lace trim of my nightgown.

I could feel my mom and Ada still staring at me. They were worried. It was the last thing I needed.

You see, I hadn't made life easy for my family. Despite a relatively normal upbringing, I was always a "problem child" in some way. When I was young, in the single digits, I had a lot of imaginary friends (and, scarily enough, enemies). Well, I actually thought they were real (my imaginary horse, Jeopardy, was the best), but it turns out I had an extremely overactive imagination and my friends weren't real after all. My parents were freaked out about this and shuttled me off to numerous psychologist-type people to find some "cure." To be honest, I don't remember much about that time. Maybe it's all been repressed, I don't know, but whatever was done to me worked. My horse ran

away, never to come back, and my parents calmed down.

That was until high school, where I was quite the unhappy camper. I was fat (or at least too overweight for high school normalcy). I had a few friends, but I still felt alone. People made fun of me. Girls were mean, and the boys...well, the bad ones were atrocious and the good ones were somehow worse. I was their pal, their confidante, but never their girlfriend. I got to listen to them wax on about how pretty and how hot certain girls were and then I got stuck with the shit end of the stick.

Things went downhill fast and my mental health took a real hit. Stupidly, I dabbled with drugs. A lot of pot, a lot of booze, some pain pills I'd sneak from my mom, sometimes acid. I tried cocaine too, in an extremely stupid and extremely vain belief that it would make me lose weight. I didn't lose any weight - I only got fatter. And angrier. I try not to regret a lot of the things I've done, but I regret doing drugs. It only made my condition a lot worse, to the point where I felt like I lost all touch with reality.

Going with the territory, I also started cutting myself on my arms for attention, writing terribly tragic poems, and just reveling in all-around darkness. I know it sounds cavalier to admit that, but I accept it as a terrible phase I had to go through. I hated everyone and everything, especially my parents and, most of all, myself.

I still have scars on my arms from the cuts. They are faded—almost gone—but they are there, as are the scars on my heart. My story isn't that unique from many other people's but sometimes I wonder if I would

still feel so lost and angry if I hadn't had to go through all of that.

I looked at Ada. She's only fifteen and she's got it all. Sure, she's a grump most of the time, but she's immensely popular, has the most covetable wardrobe ever and she's got a mild level of fame going on. I was the one hoping (secretly, inside) that somehow I would be plucked from the masses and made an example of. *Look at Perry now. She was a hopeless, chunky mess, and now she's on top of the world.*

But it hasn't happened for me, and as I lose my faith and optimism as I get older, I don't think it ever will. But Ada, she's already there and though I'm in front of her, I'm still in her shadow. My sister is a reminder of how unfair life is. No wonder our relationship is complicated.

I looked at my mom and gave her my most sincere smile.

"I'm fine mom, really. Just tired lately. That's about it."

She shook her head and turned back, but I could see a weight lifted from her forehead. "It's all that coffee you drink, Perry. Not good for you!"

Actually, I wanted to tell her researchers recently found a wealth of evidence that suggests coffee actually prevents a multitude of diseases. But I suppressed my need to inform and just sat back in my air-conditioned nightmare as we piloted toward the coast.

Arriving at my uncle's place is such a hectic occasion. Being a bachelor, Al never really had a notion of pre-

paring the house or acting like a host, so our gatherings were usually a bit unconventional.

My cousins Tony and Matt were sitting lazily on the couch playing video games while Al fired up the BBQ in the backyard. The kitchen was an absolute mess.

My uncle and his sons didn't live on any ordinary property. No, they inhabited a magnificent plot of oceanside land south of the tourist hamlet of Cannon Beach. It used to be a dairy farm that belonged to Al's ex-wife, but she left it (and her kids) to him when she ran off with a pilot to Brazil or someplace. The cows are long since gone, and the land presently consisted of barren fields of tall, ruthless grass and a huge barn that used to enthrall me when I was kid (I love cows) but now just gave me the creeps.

Not as much, though, as the structure on the opposite side of the hundred-acre property—the lighthouse. The back yard was essentially a long sweeping lawn with pockets of ruddy sand dunes and rocks running into the wild ocean. To the left of the beach and up a small cliff (and out of view of the house) sat the dilapidated lighthouse. I wasn't exactly sure whose responsibility it was before, but it was now part of Uncle Albert's sprawling mass. From what I did know, it had been out of commission for maybe fifty years and Al had no interest in taking care of it. It sat there forgotten and lightless, a darkhouse overlooking the sea.

I had actually never been inside the lighthouse. My curiosity and morbid fascination had been no match for the strict warnings of my family, but I know Tony and Matt had broken in a few times with their friends.

I had a sudden inclination to see if Matt and Tony would be up for exploring it later. I felt drawn to it more than usual, as if visiting the lighthouse would put my present “situation” into perspective.

That would have to wait. As usual, my mother, Ada and I went to work helping Uncle Al and the boys put together a somewhat functional BBQ, cleaning up the kitchen and setting the outdoor table for the feast.

It really was unusually gorgeous out. I was actually a bit disappointed, if you can believe it. The sunshine was remarkable, but the lack of wind meant the wild ocean, which I usually felt cleansed my mind of all its crap, was tame and subdued, the waves lapping gently at the distant shore. And my favorite phenomenon—the mist—was nowhere to be found.

Their place was situated right before the Pacific Coast Highway climbed up to loftier heights and it was at this junction that the Pacific Ocean hurled giant platforms of mist and fog toward the coast, trapping them on either side of the property. To watch these fog beasts roll in was one of the things I liked best about visiting my cousins. There was something so otherworldly about these masses of fog and the way they slowly inched towards the land, coming forward with each rhythmic crash of the rolling waves to hover just above the surface like a continent-wide mothership.

When the barbecuing was done, the boys came out to join us. What is there to say about Matt and Tony? First of all, they aren't identical twins, but you would hardly know that from the way they acted. They were inseparable, joined at the hip, which I once overheard my mom telling dad “was a little strange at their age.”

True, they were nineteen and well past the “cutesy twin stage,” but they had always been a bit younger

than their years. Not only in appearance, as both of them were roughly the same height and had the same roly-poly build with round eyes and a flat nose, but mentally as well. That said, I was hard pressed to find any nineteen-year-old boys who didn't behave like they were twelve.

They approached me with beers in their hands and sloppy smiles on their faces. Underage drinking was never an issue in their household, though at times it probably should have been. The boys had always been a problem, but it was only over the past couple of years that they started getting into real trouble. Tony had a DUI last year and his driver's license was consequently taken away. Matt was arrested for breaking into a community pool earlier this year (Tony was there too, but he ran off before the cops got him) and both had been busted for marijuana possession numerous times. I wasn't sure how Al was coping with all of this, but judging from the recent acceleration of grey hair on his head, it was probably taking its toll.

"Yo, cuz," Matt said, and gave me a quick hug. Tony just gave me a hard slap on the back. Though they were an odd duo, I couldn't help but feel a lot of affection toward my cousins.

"How's it going, guys? Keeping out of trouble?" I winked at them.

"Trying to," Matt said. He shot a tepid look at his dad, then shrugged nonchalantly at me. "A couple of our friends are coming out tonight to have a bonfire on the beach."

"I've got a gas can all ready to go," Tony piped up.

Oh, great. Gasoline, booze, and my cousins—what could possibly go wrong? But the idea of having a bonfire with a bunch of young guys did sound more

exciting to me than the night that usually unfolded at my uncle's place: Trying to play Scrabble with the family without someone (usually me or my dad) flipping the board over in anger.

The rest of the day went along without incident. After everything was set up for the evening, I went on my usual exploration of the grounds with my SLR camera.

After I had roamed the fields, my leggings wet with last night's dew that clung to the high, brown grass, I skirted alongside the beautifully broken down fence that divided their property and the neighboring cheese farm. I removed my sweater and tied it around my waist; the sunshine was blissfully warm.

The air was filled with the gentle sounds of the waves, with birds that flittered above my head and the occasional "moo" of faraway cattle. Behind me were the rolling hills of pine that soared up the nearby cliffs and undulated inland. In front of me was a cattle guard, which my Docs navigated with ease, and beyond that, the spotty dunes and its hardy foliage.

I climbed to the top of a small dune and looked over to my left. There I glimpsed the lighthouse, with its rounded head of cracked paint sticking out over a rusted red roof. The lighthouse wasn't your typical straight up and down phallic-looking thing. Instead it was built into a two-story building, rising out of it like a bell tower (I fancied this one looked rather like the Mission in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*). The building was boarded up and the lighthouse lacked a functioning light, but it still felt alive to me, like it was merely sleeping.

I was staring at the lighthouse when the breeze picked up. It came in off the coast, sweeping

wet and salty air over my arms. I shivered and slipped my sweater back on. As I was doing so, I peeked out of one of the holes in the front. I saw a movement by the lighthouse door, like someone had walked in front of it.

I froze. Then quickly pulled down my sweater and looked again.

There was no one there.

Shivers ran down my spine and I was about to start for the lighthouse when I heard my mother calling for me, her voice faint in the deepening wind. I debated a moment, then decided perhaps the great indoors with laughter, family and a glass of wine might be the better option. I watched the lighthouse for a few more minutes until the lack of movement squashed my curiosity and headed back to the house.

It was about ten p.m. when our parents finally retired to their rooms. Ada and I were watching a '50s B-movie (*None of Them Knew They Were Robots*) but the minute they said good night, we were up with our box of wine and heading for the beach.

Matt and Tony were already there, as were several of their friends. Because a fence didn't protect the beach area, it was easy for them to drive their dirty 4x4s off the highway and onto the sand.

The wind had picked up as the night went on, and I was grateful for the warm jacket and scarf I had packed. The night sky was still clear with millions of stars sprinkled across the smooth slate above, though off in the distance the hazy, grey mass of mist could

be seen. It wasn't getting any closer; it was just hovering. Waiting offshore.

The bonfire was going full-blast thanks to generous helpings of Tony's gas can, which I eventually confiscated and kept far away from us on the other side of a dune.

It was a cozy scene. I was huddled on a long piece of driftwood beside the twins and some of their friends. On the log opposite the fire were a few more people, plus Ada.

I was keeping a very close eye on her. She had been sneaking sips of wine and beer all night. Now, I was definitely not one to talk—at her age I was doing far worse—but as far as I knew, I wasn't sure if Ada was much of a drinker. In fact, I had never seen her drunk before and she obviously was now. She was drinking Old English out of a paper-bagged 40 oz (because that was cool?) bottle and alternating between cuddling up to and slobbering over a greasy dude called Whiz. That made me a bit nervous.

Whiz was probably the least eligible ~~out~~ of all of Matt and Tony's friends. For one, I already knew he had a girlfriend. He was talking about her earlier and, as you can imagine, he wasn't singing her praises. If that wasn't enough, I had heard Al once say that the twins hadn't started getting into trouble until they met Whiz. His name, by the way, was totally lost on me. He seemed to have half the IQ of someone from *Jersey Shore*.

And, as always, the fact that Ada seemed to be having a great time rubbed me the wrong way. This time it was over the fact that I didn't have a guy to slobber over. Not that I would ever touch Whiz or any of Matt and Tony's friends in a million years....well,

OK, that wasn't exactly true. There was a cute guy on the other side of the fire that I should have been all over if only I wasn't a complete moron around guys. He was just my type, too: tall and broad-shouldered with light eyes and wavy chestnut hair that sparkled all pretty in the fire's glow.

But despite the fact that we were exchanging flirtatious glances across the fire (at least mine were flirtatious; he probably just had smoke in his eyes), I was miles away from actually doing anything about it. Years of having your appearance poked at tended to make you quite insecure with the opposite sex.

I sighed and looked over at the dark waves crashing on the shore. I knew I was a little bit drunk from the "goonbag" wine but sitting around the fire and drinking with a bunch of teenagers was starting to feel stifling. I wanted to get up and explore. I wanted to check out the lighthouse.

I contemplated asking the twins or Ada and her new boytoy if they wanted to come along but one glance around the fire told me that these youngsters were better off staying close to the house. The last thing Uncle Al needed was a bunch of drunks heading off to the lighthouse in the middle of the night. They'd probably burn the whole thing down.

I got off the log and dusted off my butt. I leaned into Matt, trying not to draw attention to myself, and told him that I was going for a walk and would see them later.

"Don't do anything stupid," he warned. I would have loved to ask what he of all people considered stupid but I didn't. Instead I whispered to him to keep an eye on Ada. Thankfully, it seemed like something he could do.

I walked away from the fire and toward the ocean until the light from the flames was too weak to see by. I took out my iPhone and put it on the flashlight feature. It was a pretty pathetic beam of white light but it helped me make my way down the beach and over pieces of rogue driftwood. The lighthouse was visible in the wavering moonlight, waiting for me.

CHAPTER THREE

The walk there ended up being a lot more difficult than I thought. Because the lighthouse was situated on the top of a small cliff, it meant a near vertical climb on my hands and knees. I tried holding my iPhone in my mouth for a while until I decided I was better off letting my eyes adjust to the dark and have my night vision kick in.

With my hands soaking up the sea-sprayed grass and coarse dirt, I slowly found my way to the crest. On the other side, the cliff tapered off gently back into rolling dunes, and behind the lighthouse weedy ground led into a dark forest. It was windier up here and noisier as the waves crashed against the large rocks and boulders. Every once in a while the wind would catch the spray and shower it in my face.

The dark outline of the lighthouse building loomed in front of me. It was enough to make me pause and think for a second.

I knew I could be very impulsive in certain situations, even to the point where I would find myself acting while my brain was screaming for me not to. This was one of those situations. I was cold, the weather was turning for the worse, I had a few glasses of wine in me, it was late, no one knew where I was, and yet my main concern was trying to get into a creepy old lighthouse. As much as the reckless side of me felt compelled to explore it, the rational side knew it was probably the stupidest idea imaginable, even more so because I had this overall feeling of dread about the place.

I know I said earlier that it felt like it was waiting for me and that still held true. Whether it was destiny disguised as dread I didn't know, but I truly wished that the small, responsible (dare I say "adult"), part of my brain would overpower me and steer me back to Uncle Al's house.

But instead I decided to take out my camera. I put the strap around my neck and then switched on the video mode. A jarring, blue-white light lit up the ground in front of me. I took a deep breath and aimed the camera at the lighthouse. I flicked the recording switch on; might as well have something to show for my little exploration.

The lighthouse was only a few yards in front of me, bathed in the eerie electronic glow. The windows, for the most part, were all boarded up, though occasionally there was an unobstructed pane, broken or cracked from the corner. The building was impossibly immense up close, evoking a feeling of density. The

white paint was peeling, with black glistening patches plaguing its pebbly form. It was probably mildew; in the dark it reminded me of bloodstains. I shivered at that thought and steadied the camera.

I raised it to the second story and scanned alongside it to the tower. The tip was concealed as the camera light was now only catching the fat strands of thick, incoming fog.

I started toward the front of the lighthouse where a few hardy windblown shrubs converged from the cliff's flanks. I inspected the building. I wanted to get inside but had no clue how. The rusty door was locked shut with a lock I surely couldn't pick.

"This is stupid," I said out loud to myself. The sound of my own voice was comforting. It *was* stupid. I should have turned back.

Instead, I kept walking around. I walked as close to the building as possible, not trusting the surrounding ground, and then came around front. It looked like the cliff's edge was a safe enough distance from the foundation, maybe fifteen feet. There were a few shrubs planted at the base of the tower and above them was a large round window. A single board had been placed across it. Above the ground floor window was another window, then another, and then another, until they reached the watchtower top.

I walked up to the window and saw that the board had been fastened from the inside. I knew what I had to do and was really excited I could do it.

I felt the board, testing its strength. It felt like it would fall off without much effort, which suited me perfectly.

"We have come to our first obstacle, a boarded window," I said to the camera, turning it around so

that it was filming my face, probably on extreme close-up. "However, this proves to be no challenge to Perry Palomino."

I put the camera down on the ground, stacking it up against a rock so that it was filming me and stepped back. Feeling strength in my leg's position and my body's stance, I sprung forward, my body tilting at the exact angle, my arm extending until my palm met the board with precision. With a satisfying give, it flew off its anchors and into the back of the building, landing on the floor inside with an echoing clatter.

I turned and looked at the camera and mouthed my best out-of-synch Bruce Lee impression, "Movement number four: Dragon seeks path."

Then, feeling like an idiot, I ran over to and scooped it up. I knew right then I would be showing this video to no one. Even though the objective was reached, my hand was stinging because I didn't do everything correctly (it had been a year since my last lesson) and I was conscious of how big of a dork I was.

I put the camera back around my neck and poked my head inside. A wall of musty odor hit me, tickling my lungs into a coughing fit. I aimed the light into the darkness and saw the broken boards on the ground in an empty, circular room. A dripping noise came from the corner and there was an overall feeling of dampness. Near the back of the room there was a doorway but no door hung from its bare hinges. I could barely make out what was beyond that; it looked like it was the staircase that would lead to the top of the tower.

There was something strange about this place, something vaguely familiar. I racked my brain for any concrete recognition but came up short.

There was a heavy stillness to the air inside despite the wind that was now freely entering from the coast. It was strangely compelling and very other-worldly.

I put my hands on the windowsill and pulled myself up, my under-used pecs aching from my own weight. I swung my legs around clumsily and hopped down. My feet landed in a small puddle, spraying cold water onto my leggings. I immediately regretted coming inside.

The air here was thick. My breaths were coming in slower and sluggish, like fluid was entering my lungs. The pressure inside was different too, causing my ears to throb.

I shone the camera around me in a circle but the air swallowed up the light as if it was hungry. That analogy made me shiver. It was cold, too, and I hated the way the blackness felt behind my back, like a net waiting to drop. At that thought I spun around. No one was there, of course.

My chest thumped wildly. I breathed out slowly, deeply, and tried to steady my heart. I felt like I just *had* to come to this place, and now that I was here, reality was sinking in. This really was not the best idea, was it?

I pointed the camera around the room one more time, trying to take in the morbid scenery. I was about to say something witty about my soon-to-be cowardly exit when I heard a THUMP from above me.

My heart literally froze. My breath stopped with it.

I listened hard, as if I strained enough I would sprout super ears.

Another THUMP from upstairs. It came from the room right above my head. The urge to vomit traveled

up my body, from my toes to my lips. It increased as the *thumps* followed a footstep pattern, as if someone was walking across the room and to the hallway.

My first thought wasn't that it was a ghost or anything creepy like that, but something worse, something that could actually hurt you like a meth-addicted hobo or a rapist who used this lighthouse as his hideout. Or his rape palace.

I looked behind me at the window I came in through. No doubt the person, or thing, must have heard me break in, must have heard my lame ramblings to the camera. They knew I was here. The only choice I had was to go. But could I get to the window before I was caught?

With the footsteps continuing quietly above me, as if they knew I was listening, I carefully slinked my way back to the window.

I reached for the edge of it with my hand when an ominous shadow passed outside. It happened so quickly that I didn't see what it was but it was human enough that I ducked and flattened myself against the wall.

I was fucked and I knew it. I had stupidly wandered into some epic rape palace run by meth-addicted hobos and bald men with beards who recently escaped nearby jails and had taken over this place for their torture sessions with hapless young women they found exploring the coast. Even worse, I was going to be the hapless woman who decided to infiltrate their headquarters.

In most movies, the heroine would poke her head over the windowsill to get a better glimpse of what was going on outside, but I knew if I did that, I'd be spotted right away.

So, despite the fact that the window represented freedom and a way out of this hell hole, I slowly moved away from it and scooted along the wall. The light from the camera danced around the room and I immediately knew that I was begging to be found. I switched it off with a click and was quickly engulfed in total darkness.

Of course, I knew that by turning off the light I was still letting people know where I was, but at least in the dark I could hide if I needed to. I started fishing around in my pockets to see if I had any weapons. I didn't. I didn't even have sharp nails. I hoped my karate "skills" worked well on adrenaline.

While trying to keep the urge to pass out at bay, I decided the best thing for me to do was to go out into the hallway. I was trapped in the dank room anyway, and I wasn't brave enough to go through the only exit. The footsteps from up above had stopped, although I wasn't sure when, and the hallway probably had another door or more windows to escape out of.

I inched as silently as possible to the doorframe and poked my head out into the hall. Naturally I couldn't see anything except murky blackness, but after a while my eyes adjusted.

The air in the hallway felt even heavier than it had in the room and smelled like rotten kelp. I squinted at the staircase at the end of the short hall. Lo and behold, there were inky trails of seaweed in the hallway, leading up the stairs. It was like some kelp monster had gone up there, leaving its entrails behind.

Stop it! I yelled inside my head. I was freaking myself out even more and it needed to cease before my brain spiraled out of control. Only bad things could come of that. My main objective had to be getting out

of there swiftly and safely and without losing my mind.

I took my eyes off the kelp and looked around the hallway. Dots of green and black danced before my eyes, making it hard for me to focus, but I eventually spotted what seemed to be a door into another part of the lighthouse.

I crept across the hallway, which was thankfully only a foot or two, and reached the door. My hands fumbled and hit the handle loudly. I winced and froze, keeping my breath quiet. When I didn't hear anything after a few terrifying seconds, I carefully turned it and pulled. It barely moved.

I brought my hands up along the frame and came across a lock. I jiggled it silently but to no avail. Unless I magically had a lockcutter in my leggings, this door was not the way out tonight.

I felt tears of frustration rushing to my eyes and blinked quickly to keep them contained. I took my hand off the lock and took in a very deep breath, the type I was taught to use to ward off panic attacks. All my previous panic attacks seemed pretty frivolous compared to this. Impending death (or worse) was an honest-to-God real reason to panic.

I had only one option left: Go back into the room and climb out of the window as quickly as possible. Maybe if I did it fast enough, I could leap out into the night without being noticed, and even if I was noticed maybe my stubby little legs and screaming skills would be enough to keep any potential murderers at bay.

I steadied myself and closed my eyes. Pins and needles were literally flowing along my veins, revving my engines.

I turned on a dime and sprinted towards the room across from me.

BAM!

I ran right into someone.

Or something.

“Auuuggh!” I screamed.

I had hit them hard, my jaw clattering against my teeth as I flew backwards. There was a rattle, a metallic smashing sound. My head rocked against the cold ground. I didn’t even give myself time to register the pain.

I leaped to my feet and tried to run again, only to have my foot slip on a slimy patch and send my leg flying forward so that I was airborne once more.

This time I hit the ground even harder and immediately felt my body go limp. The blackness behind my eyes started spinning and my lids closed briefly. Thoughts of danger and harm seemed very far away and the room started to vibrate and hum, almost lulling me to sleep. Sleep seemed like a nice idea.

But sleep was not to be had. A bright light flashed in my face, interrupting the comforting haze behind my eyelids. I squinted uncomfortably and felt a pair of hands on my head. One felt gingerly along my neck, another brushed against my forehead.

Rapists are gentle these days, I thought absently, and raised my arm up against the light that bore down on me so relentlessly.

“Don’t move,” a gruff voice said from out of the darkness. It sounded vaguely panicked and a million miles away.

I obeyed and dropped my hand. Thankfully, the light moved off of my face and I was aware of something being placed on the ground beside me.

I felt hands on my face again. They were shaking slightly. I tried to open my eyes wider as more coherent thoughts entered my flustered head. The panic began to rise instinctively throughout my body. It intensified when I saw the outline of a man's face above me. I tried to jerk away, but the man had one hand down on my shoulder pressing me down.

"Seriously, you might be really hurt. Please don't move."

I couldn't see the guy's face save for the outline, so I leaned back and closed my eyes and did an internal once over of my body. The back of my head throbbed with a dull ache, but other than that, the rest of me felt OK. From my fingers to my toes, my muscles were awake and primed and ready to be used.

"I'm OK," I managed to say. I opened my eyes and tried to make eye contact with the faceless figure, aiming to where his eyes ought to be.

He took his hands off of me and backed off slightly. I slowly eased myself up and leaned forward. My head was definitely aching and the room was still spinning in the murky dark, but I didn't feel like I had done any major damage.

Of course, that meant I didn't have to worry about *that* and could instead focus on this potential rapist in the lighthouse.

I could see a lot better once my night vision kicked in. The man was crouched a foot or two away from me. I could only make out his outline, which was backlit by the moon coming through the window and from a light source on the floor. Upon further inspection it seemed to be coming from a video camera. Not like mine but like the ones filmmakers use. That tiny bit of information calmed my heart down by a few

beats. Most lustful meth addicts didn't have high-quality digital cameras.

"I'm so sorry," the man said. I tried to read his voice but other than its deep, rough quality like his throat was lined with gravel, I had nothing. It was strangely comforting, though.

"I was upstairs," he continued, "and I heard this crazy clatter from down here, and I thought maybe it was the cops or something. I didn't know what the fuck to do. I thought I could get out the way I came in, but I saw you there, and then I saw the window probably at the same time you saw the window, and I'm...I'm so sorry if...well, you're obviously OK."

I knew there were many things wrong with that incredibly long sentence but I didn't have the brains to dissect it. The best I could do was:

"Who are you?"

The man didn't say anything. His silhouette started to rock back and forth slightly.

"That depends on who you are," he said simply.

Hell, even I didn't know who I was right now. I shook my head.

"I asked you first."

He sighed and reached back into his pocket. He fished out a business card and handed it to me. He picked up his camera and shone it on the black paper.

"Dex Foray," I read the shiny white print aloud. "Producer, cameraman, cinematographer. Shownet."

I flicked the card over. There was nothing but a Seattle address. I looked up at him, at his face that I couldn't see.

"Are you from *West Coast Living* or something?"

He laughed. "Fuck no."

I stuck the card in my pocket and felt strength returning into my bones and into my tongue. I was glad all my courage hadn't deserted me.

"Well, Dex Foray, I have a feeling that whatever you guys are doing here tonight, you're doing so without the permission of my uncle, who owns the lighthouse."

"There's no one else here. It's just me."

Now it was my turn to laugh. "Look, I don't care. I'm not going to report you. I shouldn't even be here myself. Just get your crew together or whatever and get out of here before you do get in trouble."

The man, Dex, stopped rocking.

"It's just me," he repeated. "Did you see someone else here?"

His voice became pitchy. Something about his change of tone alarmed me.

"Yes," I said slowly. "I heard you upstairs, and I was going to go out the window, but I saw the shadow of someone pass by. Outside."

There was silence. He shuffled in the dark and moved closer to me. I wished I could see his face properly.

"Are you sure you saw something?" he asked.

I was starting to doubt myself a bit with the questions but I stuck to my guns. "Yes, I saw someone. Someone walked past the window, swear to God."

"Where did you come from? Did anyone come with you?"

I shook my head. He raised the light so it was on my face. I winced.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding very sorry at all. "I...well, nevermind."

“Nevermind?” I couldn’t help but sneer. “You just broke into my uncle’s lighthouse. Don’t you tell me to nevermind.”

I realized it wasn’t probably the best idea to start provoking a complete stranger, especially when you actually hadn’t seen his face yet and you were in a dark, possibly abandoned lighthouse together, but...

He straightened up, his figure blocking the moonlight and reached down with his hand to help me up. He wasn’t very tall at all, maybe 5’9”.

I took it hesitantly and he brought me up to my feet. I wavered a bit at the change in height and gravity and within seconds he had his arms around both sides of me. He smelled like Old Spice aftershave. I felt like I was in some bad drama on the *Lifetime* network.

“You OK?” he asked. His face wasn’t too far away from mine. I turned around on the spot so that my back was to the window and the moonlight was coming in on his face, illuminating it.

He was a surprisingly handsome guy. Maybe I *was* expecting a bald man with a beard, but he wasn’t like that at all.

His jaw was wide and round, totally acceptable. A dusting of an Errol Flynn moustache traced his upper lip and his chin was shaded by scruffy beard. He had fathomless, dark eyes framed by brows that were devilishly arched and set low on his forehead. A simple eyebrow ring graced his right eyebrow. It was a very '90s look. A man after my own heart, apparently. He reminded me of Robert Downey Jr. in his strung-out drug days.

He watched me, his eyes glittering darkly in the moonlight, full of intensity. I felt relieved that he

looked like a normal person and almost tickled that he was quite a looker as well.

“Just a bit dizzy,” I managed to say. He kept his gaze with mine. It was a bit unnerving after awhile. It must have shown on my face because he smiled very slowly, showing perfect white teeth.

“Good,” he said. “Promise not to sue?”

I eyed him warily. “I won’t. Can’t speak for my uncle, though.”

He pursed his lips and seemed to think about it, though his eyes remained motionless.

“Why are you here?” he finally asked.

“We’re having a bonfire on the beach. I got sick of hanging around teenagers and wanted to come here. My uncle never let me come here when I was younger. I didn’t tell anyone, I just left. I was hoping to film some stuff.”

At my own mention of filming I panicked. My camera! I reached down and pulled it up in front of my face. I turned it on and the lights flared and then steadied. I couldn’t see the lens but Dex grabbed it and held it in front of the light. He peered at it, brows furrowing, and gently put it back around my neck.

“It’s fine. I thought you wrecked the shit out of mine when you ran into me.”

He lifted his camera up and patted it. I immediately felt guilty, even though it was his own damn fault for trespassing.

“You’re right,” he continued, reading my face. “Who cares? I probably deserve to have this camera smashed.”

I was about to say something else; what, exactly, I don’t know, but I have a feeling I would have tried to

make him feel better, when there was another loud *thump* from up above.

I froze. I could feel him freeze too. I slowly looked over at him. He was watching me intently.

“You sure you came alone?” he whispered. The fact that he had to ask again chilled me.

“Are you?” I answered. He nodded gravely.

I swallowed hard. We both listened hard, still as death.

Another thump followed. My mind started to reel wildly. Was this Dex guy really alone? Maybe this was still the rape palace and he was trapping me down here while the bigger guys did all the work. There was an air of uncertain danger about him, though that could have just been the situation or his floppy, messy dark hair and Byronic mannerisms.

I eyed the window. Dex caught my stare and shook his head as if to warn me. I gave him an incredulous look.

He leaned into my ear, his lips brushing my lobe. At contact it felt like mini lightning bolts were traveling along my skin in a heated fury and burrowing into my head. That feeling alone was distracting. I closed my eyes and enjoyed it.

“Are you one hundred per cent sure that no one else came with you here?” he whispered, his low voice joining the static and traveling in waves down my spine.

I shook my head and tried to focus. Even if someone did follow me, there was no way they could get inside the lighthouse before me. Hell, I didn’t even know how Dex got in the place if he didn’t come through the window. I put that question aside for now. The thumps continued.

I eyed the window again and started to automatically move towards it. With him right beside me, he didn't yield.

"We have to go upstairs," he whispered.

I almost laughed loudly but caught myself. Was he fucking crazy? I wasn't going upstairs, I was going out the window and back to Uncle Al's where I could call the cops. If that got Dex in trouble, so be it.

He put his hand under my chin and tilted it up so that I was looking at him. It was OK. I liked looking at him.

"You'd be best to stay with me," he said.

I couldn't believe it. Part of me wanted to stay with him for some reason but the rational part knew that "some reason" wasn't good enough. I shook my head violently.

"You? I don't even know who the fuck you are. You give me a business card? I'm not going to be part of your rapist tower." I said that last part a little too loudly.

He raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. I guess he was a bit taken aback.

"Go then," he said slowly. "But once you are out that window, run all the way back to your uncle's place. Don't stop to look at anything. Even if you run into something, just keep running. It would be better if you just kept your eyes closed the whole way."

My body was covered in chills as he said that. I was suddenly afraid to leave his side. He seemed to know a lot of things that I didn't.

"What's upstairs?" I asked. "Do you know?"

He shrugged, rather nonchalantly considering the circumstances.

"I have an idea. That's why I'm here."

“Why *are* you here?”

“I’ll show you,” he said. He reached down and grabbed my hand. With his other he hoisted his camera on his shoulder. He eyed my own camera around my neck.

“You may want to turn that on. It’s better if we get as many ways of recording this as possible.”

Well, shit, son. If there was a moment that determined the course of my future, I’m pretty sure this was it. I had two somewhat simple choices. I could make a run for it and go back to Uncle Al’s. Back to the bonfire where my cousins and dear sister would still be drinking and revel in the normalcy of a Saturday night and forget I ever went to this horrid place and ran into this weirdo. Or I could go with said weirdo up the stairs in this decrepit old lighthouse, which was most likely condemned and unsafe, towards some unknown person (or *thing*) that was walking around, potentially waiting to murder us in horrific ways.

It didn’t seem like a very hard decision to make. In fact, I think 99.7% of people in the right frame of mind would have picked from column A and gone on with their merry lives. But for some freaking crazy reason, I thought that maybe, just maybe I should go with this stranger up those kelp-ridden stairs and toward the lair of unimaginable horror. You know, because it was the more interesting alternative.

I turned on my camera with my other hand and let Dex lead me away from the fresh air and freedom, toward the monstrous uncertainty that was waiting for us further inside.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dex and I passed under the doorway as thin strands of cobwebs reached for us from above. We walked slowly to the staircase, listening for further noises from whatever was upstairs.

The stairs weren't rickety like I thought they'd be but were slick with mold and seepage. The walls of the circular staircase were also wet and dark, fulgent in the sharp camera light, and there was no railing to hold on to. I followed Dex onto the first step and my foot immediately began to slide out from under me. Luckily, my Docs were fairly new and could grip like no one's business. I was able to steady myself without having to touch the icky walls.

“You OK?” Dex whispered, his grip tightening.

I nodded, then made the notion for him to be quiet, even though whatever was upstairs already knew we were coming.

We rounded the corner. I was glad Dex was in front, though I doubted his slight frame had the ability to protect me.

But alas, when we reached the floor and shone our lights around there was nary an axe-murderer to be found. Couldn’t say I was disappointed.

There were two shut doors in front of us: One that led into the building like the locked one below us and the other, I assumed, would take you into a circular room overlooking the sea. Neither door had external locks on them, but I had no desire to see if they were open. The doorknobs looked wet and gross.

Dex looked perplexed, not relieved.

Suddenly, the door to the circular room swung open and banged against the wall loudly.

My heart leaped into my throat and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Jesus!” I exclaimed.

Dex didn’t seem too bothered. He let go of my hand and walked into the room. This man definitely had balls, if not brains.

I saw the camera light shining around the walls and then he came out again.

He gestured to the door. “Just a door.”

“What?”

“Making the noise. False alarm.”

“But I heard footsteps. Just like when you were up here.”

He shrugged. "I know. I thought I heard that too. But there's nothing here, just like there wasn't anything here earlier."

He shined his light up the staircase. "I never made it up there, though. I bet that's where he is."

"He?" I asked, my chest tightening. Who the hell was he?

"Old Roddy," Dex said simply and started for the stairs.

I reached out and grabbed his arm firmly. It felt nice. There was muscle under there after all.

"Who the hell is Old Roddy?" I said angrily. I was sick of feeling like I wasn't being told the whole story.

Dex was silent. I shined my light in his face, causing him to squint harshly.

"If you don't know then I don't have time to explain," he sneered in the brightness. He eyed my hand on his bicep. I didn't let go.

"Make time," I said.

Then, from above, another *thump*. This time much louder than before. It definitely was not the sound of a door banging in the wind.

Dex stiffened at the sound. He looked at me intently, then relaxed. I let go of his arm.

He leaned in and pointed above.

"Old Roddy is the lighthouse keeper."

I didn't get it.

"There is no lighthouse keeper here. My uncle doesn't employ anyone, there isn't even a damn light up there," I said.

"Yeah, well, rumor has it that Old Roddy's been here all this time."

"All this time? How long is that?"

"About eighty years, maybe more, maybe less."

"That's impossible," I scoffed.

"I know. Like I said, that's why I'm here."

I took in a slow, deep breath. Whatever Dex was saying wasn't making any sense to me, and even worse, the more I tried to make sense of it, the more I felt dizzy and disoriented. This situation, this Dex guy, it was all too much for me to process. And unfortunately, when my mind couldn't properly process what was going on around me, my panic attacks start to kick in and weird shit happens.

"I need to go lie down," I said quietly.

He cocked his head, curious, and reached out for my hand.

He didn't give it a comforting squeeze, though, which any normal person would have done. He just pulled me closer to him and led me up the next flight of stairs until we were now on the floor above, where the last few thumps had come from.

With my breath and heart stuck in my throat, Dex illuminated the level. It looked exactly like the one below it, save for a desk in the corner. The doors were also closed. And no lighthouse keeper was to be found.

Suffice to say, I had a bad feeling about all of this. Whether it was due to the creepiness of the whole situation or that I should probably head back before people started to worry about me, I couldn't say.

Plus, I was starting to question the sanity of Dex and his quest for some lighthouse keeper who clearly didn't exist.

"You know—," I started to say.

I was interrupted by the door, which blasted open (by itself again) and swung back and forth wildly on its hinges, connecting against the wall with a BANG.

“What the fuck?” I yelled above the noise. It was literally the only thought I had in my head.

Dex took a curious step towards the animated door, the breeze from its steady swinging movement ruffling his hair.

He aimed the camera on the door for a few moments, the eerie glow adding to the mystery, and then shone it on me.

“What do you make of it?” he asked.

The light was blinding me.

“Are you seriously filming me?” I yelled.

BANG!

The same sound of doors flying open and shut came from downstairs. The noise was overbearing and within seconds the whole lighthouse was vibrating sonically. I immediately put my hands over my ears. I could feel it in my fillings.

I took a shaky step towards Dex hoping for some comfort in a beyond-terrifying situation. The only thing he did was aim the camera back on the door, which was still flying open and closed as if some invisible angry teenager was slamming it. He took my hand off my ear and placed my own camera in it.

“You might want to film this!” he bellowed above the din.

Though filming was the last thing on my mind, I did what he said.

I made sure the camera was still recording and focused it on the door and Dex. With my ears exposed, the sound shook me from the inside.

I managed to record at least thirty seconds of the phenomenon until my vision was suddenly wiped out.

A white, overpowering light filled the room. My hand completely disappeared in front of my face, as if

I was being airbrushed into oblivion. I shut my eyes in pain and crouched low on the ground, my senses knocked completely off balance.

The white, nuclear light, the banging doors, and internal vibrations—was this the apocalypse?

I positioned myself so I was closer to where I assumed Dex was and opened my eyes through the spaces between my fingers. It hurt too much to keep them open for more than a second at a time, but I didn't see him anywhere.

"Dex!" I yelled as loud as I could. I looked around me but all I saw was whiteout. Where was this horrid light coming from? Was I dying?

A movement from the direction of the staircase caught my eye. There was a dark shadow of a man (or creature) wavering in the light. It came closer and closer. My mind instantly conjured up images of alien abduction. Every single *X-Files* episode started flashing through my mind.

The shadow kept coming. For some reason I thought I should get the cause of my impending death on film, so I pointed my camera at it.

I closed my eyes, made a silent prayer and braced myself.

But...*silence*.

The noise and vibrations had stopped and the light behind my sore eyelids was quickly fading.

I opened my eyes to complete blackness, with throbbing fuzzy dots filling my vision. It was almost scarier than all white blindness. Someone could have been standing a few feet away from me completely undetected.

Slowly, I got to my feet and flicked on the light of my camera, bracing myself for illuminated terrors and the things that went bump in my night.

There was nothing. The darkness remained. My camera was unresponsive.

“Fuck,” I swore under my breath. I tried to examine it in the dark but all I could figure was that the battery must have died. Great fucking timing.

I took in a deep breath and tried not to let the wild feelings take over, that the blackness was alive and ready to eat me.

“Dex,” I called out. I was still, listening, but heard nothing except my voice echoing across the hallway. Where the hell could he have gone?

“Old Roddy?” I joked, half hoping some decrepit lighthouse keeper would answer me. It was better than this unnerving silence.

There was still some moonlight coming in through the windows and that soft illumination was enough to put the idea in my head of getting downstairs and getting the fuck out of there.

I had inched over to the staircase and was just about to step down on the first step when another light came on below.

What now? I couldn’t take much more of this.

But it wasn’t like the apocalyptic virtual H-bomb going off. It was a weak light, which danced on the staircase walls and then settled in one spot. If I were to head downstairs, I would walk straight into its path.

It reminded me of Dex’s camera light. In fact, I was certain that’s what it was. But in my heightened state of paranoia, I wanted to make sure before I began my descent.

“Dex, is that you?” I asked rather loudly. No answer. “Dex, I can see a light downstairs. Is that coming from you? Dex, answer me!”

Still nothing.

I didn't know what to do. The fear was palpable; it was physically running up and down my arms in prickly flashes, swarming my body, flaming my racing heart and my throbbing head.

I must have stood there for five minutes just listening for any sounds whatsoever, terrified of what I might find downstairs. My imagination was conjuring up images of kelp come to life, like some kind of monster. Where was Dex then? Where did he go? Why was the camera light on and not moving? One part of me believed he must be playing a cruel joke. The other part thought he was dead. Or worse.

And with that thought in mind, I slowly made my way down the stairs. I winced at the creak of each step, though I'm not sure why I bothered trying to be quiet. The moon disappeared behind the clouds, making the light below look sharper and colder. Sly shadows of creepy crawlies skittered across the sweating walls. I turned at the landing and made my way down the rest of the staircase.

The light was now in front of me on the ground, aimed at my feet. I stopped, wishing I could see beyond the glare.

“Dex?” I whispered. “Please answer me Dex, this isn't funny.”

If he was trying to freak me out, he succeeded, and I knew he would hear the terror in my cracking voice. But still...there was nothing.

I took a deep breath and bent down to pick up the camera. Only it wasn't a camera at all. It was a flashlight.

Confused, I turned it over in my hands. Did Dex have a flashlight before? I was wracking my brain trying to remember when I heard a low groan. Not the groans of a person (or a thing) mind you, but the impersonal sound of a door opening on its hinges. It came from the door to the right.

I aimed the flashlight into the blackness. For a split second, I was afraid I was going to see something vaguely horrifying like Dex standing in the corner of the room and staring at the wall (yes, the last scene of the *Blair Witch Project* came to mind) but instead the hall was empty. Nothing there except the door leading to the circular room, which was now wide open.

I shuffled toward it and stepped inside.

It was a bedroom. At least it had been at one time. Now all that was left was a thick wooden bed frame that looked partially burnt, a side table with a stack of books, and a wardrobe in the corner. On top of the wardrobe was a porcelain washbasin, with a mirror propped up against the wall. The flashlight's reflection glared sharply in it.

There was a round porthole-type window facing the ocean, coated with a thick layer of grime and salt. Something about the window registered in the back of my overworked brain.

Had I been here before? Was that...possible?

I took a few steps closer to the window when—
BLAM!

The door slammed shut behind me.

I screamed and dropped the flashlight, the light spraying the walls as it landed on the ground with a

clunk. I winced and quickly scooped it up. The light wavered and then started to fade. Panicking, I shook it hard but the bulb had been jarred out of place from the fall. There was still light, but it was growing weaker by the minute. That, or the darkness was growing stronger.

That's when it happened. That's when it hit me.

A light from the hallway went on.

The edges of the door glowed amber.

The image seared into my head and, like pieces in a puzzle, it slowly fit together with another image that came shooting out of my memory.

My dream. This was my *dream*. My breath caught in my throat as all the puzzle pieces found each other. The round room, the porthole, the light outside of the door. Sure, I wasn't standing in a nightgown and bare-foot, but it was the same place. It wasn't possible by any earthly means, and yet...

I wasn't sure what it meant either. Things were the same but different. Was it going to follow the direction of my dreams? Was the door going to open with some black, shadowy menace enveloping me into certain death? Was the man in my dreams Old Roddy?

Or Dex?

Maybe, I thought quickly, *this was a dream*. That thought gave me a bit of courage.

I swallowed hard and walked over to the door. I listened. I couldn't hear a thing from the hallway.

I grabbed the knob and tried to turn it.

It wouldn't turn. It was stuck.

I yanked on the door, panic rising from the floor. I started throttling the thing, my hands sweaty and slipping. This was my nightmare. My worst nightmare

was coming true. I was locked inside. Someone, something, had locked me inside.

“Dex!” I screamed, and started banging on the door. “Please, someone, anyone, let me out, please! Pleeeeease!” I screamed that last word, loud and shrill, hurting my own ears. Screaming seemed like the only thing I could do.

I screamed again and hurled myself at the door, even though it opened from the inside. My camera swung from my neck and smashed against it but I didn't care. I had to get out. I put both hands on the knob and pulled until my hands lost their grip and I flew backwards, landing on the hard floor. A pain shot out from my hipbone but I scarcely felt it.

Then everything turned black. The light outside the door disappeared and the door outline faded into the abyss.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up with icy precision. I knew something was on the other side of the door waiting, listening.

I lay on the floor watching breathlessly, my body rigid and braced for action.

The door creaked open, slowly.

At any moment I expected to see a tall, black figure appear in the doorway, make its way over to me, and smother me with its nebulous face.

I waited. The terror was indescribable.

But nothing happened.

I took a few seconds trying to mull the situation over but everything was coming up blank.

And so, propelled more by instinct than consciousness, I leaped to my feet in one go and took off like a shot.

I ran through the door without casting a glance around me. I ran down the stairs until I slipped on the turn and was launched against the slimy, weeping black wall. I had no time to be horrified at the grossness. I regained my footing and leaped over the last few steps and on to the ground floor.

I wheeled towards the open door and burst through.

BLAM!

I collided into something large and heavy. Again.

I let out a blood-curdling scream and I stumbled from the impact. I might have had an out-of-body experience at that moment. I never knew I could scream like that.

The figure was screaming back at me. I didn't know if it was an echo or what, but I wasn't going to wait to find out.

I scrambled on my feet, slipping a bit from the goo under my treads, and the thing reached out and steadied me.

"Perry!" I heard it say.

How did it know my name? My head reeled, my heart pounded, and all instincts still told me to run for my life.

I was about to when it shook me.

"Perry! It's me!"

Me? Dex?

No.

In the light of the waning moon, Matt thrust his face in front of mine.

"Holy fuck, you scared the hell out of me," he whispered, his voice cracking.

"Matt?" I asked incredulously. "What the hell are you doing here?"

“What am I doing here? Perry, what the fuck? What are you doing here?”

“Matt?” I could hear Tony’s voice calling from upstairs. “Is that her?”

I turned and saw Tony coming down the stairs, his phone in one hand and a huge industrial-looking spotlight in the other. He saw me and let out a sigh of relief.

“Perry, thank God, I almost called dad.”

Matt put his hand on my shoulder. “What are you doing in here?”

I had a hard time composing my thoughts and my breath, so I just shook my head and gave myself a moment.

The twins stared at me, more curious than concerned.

“What were you screaming about?” Tony asked.

“Did you leave this?” I managed to ask Matt, holding up the dying flashlight and ignoring Tony’s question.

He nodded. “Yeah I put it there so Tony could find his way back downstairs. If he used that spotlight in here it would blind us all. This thing is pretty intense.”

“Huh,” I mused, not sure what to make of that. “Was that what that blinding light was?”

The twins looked at each other and shrugged.

“Ada was shining it on the lighthouse from the outside,” Matt said.

Ada. Her name sounded so sweet and familiar.

“Where is she? Is she OK?” I asked anxiously.

“She’s fine,” Tony said warily. “She and Whiz are waiting outside. Are you OK?”

“Yeah, why?”

Matt laughed. "How drunk are you? Next time you want to go exploring the lighthouse, just tell us, OK? I mean, are you fucking nuts coming here? Alone? At night? This place gives us the creeps in the daytime."

Tony nodded. "I can tell some fucked up stuff has gone on in here. We even get phone calls from ghost hunters and shit wanting to film it. It has a history or something."

Ghost hunters? Filming? Suddenly it was all beginning to make some sense.

And then I remembered Dex.

"Did you see anyone else in here?" I said slowly. "Or hear anything?"

They both shook their heads.

"You didn't even hear me yelling? For Dex?" I asked.

"I heard you screaming your head off," Tony said. "Who's Dex?"

I shook my head. Scratch that. Nothing made any sense at all.

"We should go back," Tony said gently, perhaps sensing my mental fragility. I nodded, done with talking. We carefully exited the lighthouse through the broken window. I hoped I never had to step inside of that place again.

There was a comforting sense of normality outside. Ada and Whiz were making out around the corner. OK, that wasn't the first thing I wanted to see but the minute she saw me, she stopped sucking face and came running over. She threw her arms around me. Not a normal move from her.

"Thank goodness!" she exclaimed, slurring. "I thought you were dead. Or that maybe you jumped off the cliff."

"That's nice," I said blankly.

We started walking back towards Uncle Al's place.

"Did ya see anything fucked up?" Whiz called from alongside Ada.

"I thought I did," was all I said. If Matt and Tony were roaming the lighthouse while I was inside, and they didn't see any sign of Dex, maybe Dex never existed. Maybe he was just another one of those imaginary friends of mine, long lost since childhood. I looked down at my camera. It wasn't working, which meant any proof of what happened would have to wait until I got it fixed. I hoped it wouldn't cost me a lot of money.

I sighed with some effort, suddenly overcome with acute mental and physical exhaustion.

I was so tired that when we finally made our way back to the house and put out the bonfire, I nearly passed out on the pull-out couch with my clothes on. Ironically, drunken Ada was the more coherent one.

"What is mom gonna say when she sees you passed out in your clothes?" she admonished.

I nodded at that and slipped into my nightshirt and pajama pants. I threw my clothes on the floor. Papers and change flew out of the jacket. Ada picked up a piece of debris and peered at it.

"What's this?"

I looked closer. She was holding a business card in her hands.

"Who is Dex Foray?" she asked, looking up at me.

I snatched it out of her hands and turned it over in mine. He *did* exist.

"A ghost," I said dreamily, before falling fast asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

The ride back to Portland the next day was strangely silent. I was busy mulling over the events from last night, twisting them over and over again in my brain, which was drained from my restless sleep. My sister was hungover as hell and already made my dad pull the car over so she could vomit. I hadn't talked with her about what happened in the lighthouse. In fact, I couldn't bring myself to talk to anyone about anything. I felt profoundly different, and as scary as it was to dwell on the unexplained, it gave me a sense of importance. I couldn't go back to small talk and polite nods.

My parents were silent too. My dad was furious with Ada for drinking, and I am sure he was also mad at me for letting her drink. My mother wasn't mad, as far as I could tell, but she was constantly eyeing both of us in the rear view mirror.

I turned away from her prying eyes and looked out the window. Fall had arrived overnight. The sunshine was gone. The wind hurled itself at our car and tore green leaves off of the trees, scattering them in the air. The air conditioner in the car was off, adding to the silence.

I hadn't really come up with any solid conclusions about the night before. Radiohead's *OK Computer* was playing on my iPod and lulling me into a sort of dreamland, blurring reality. I started second guessing everything that I thought I was certain of.

And that left me at my dream. It was the thought I always ended up with whenever I replayed the scenario through my head (which was most of that morning). Had I really dreamed that? It didn't seem possible. In fact, how could it be? How could I dream something and then *live* it?

Then again, though it was similar, it was still not the same. Which either meant I was psychic in some really useless way or it was a huge coincidence.

What really scared me was if I had to experience the other dream I had. I wasn't looking forward to a dark figure standing ominously at the foot of my bed.

And Dex. Dex had also been dancing around my head. I was so close to writing off that whole encounter as a figment of my imagination but the business card that Ada found was proof that he was in fact real.

I just wish I knew where he went, what he was doing there...and who he really was. There was something so maddeningly intriguing about him. His voice, his eyes, his mannerisms, his intensity—I wanted to learn more. And I wanted to know if he really was a so-called ghost hunter. I mean, I had been going to my uncle's for a long time and though I've heard weird

stuff about the lighthouse, this was the first time anyone mentioned it being haunted, let alone attracting attention from the paranormal community.

I cleared my throat. "Hey, Mom, Dad..."

"Yes, pumpkin," said my mother.

I hesitated, trying to figure out the best way to pose my question.

"Um, I heard from the twins that they keep being contacted by like the *Discovery Channel* and stuff like that. Something about the lighthouse being haunted."

My parents exchanged strange glances. My dad shrugged as casually as he could muster and eyed me in the mirror.

"That's all nonsense, Perry. There are no such things as ghosts."

"I'm not saying there are ghosts, Dad, I'm just saying it seems a lot of people think there are. In Uncle Al's lighthouse. Kinda weird, right? Did you know about that?"

I watched my parents carefully. Ada did too, now that she was awake. They exchanged another glance and I could detect a barely perceptible nod from my mother.

"No, sweetie, sorry I don't know what the twins have been telling you," he finally said. "Probably pulling your leg. You know how they are. Always trying to scare you."

"Ah," I said and sank deeper into my seat. I looked over at Ada. She looked like hell, but I could see she didn't believe my parents either. The twins weren't lying. My parents were. But why lie about something as random as that?

I must have dozed off somewhere during my thoughts because the lurch of the car woke me up. We

were home, our large, quiet house looming above us, the trees waving wildly in the wind.

I got out of the car, the cold gusts catching in my throat and messing up my hair. We'd only been gone a little over a day and yet the sunshine and optimism felt so long ago.

I was back at the lighthouse, standing outside of it just underneath the tower. Its insides were lit up like a spaceship with piercing light coming through the porthole windows. A movement at the very top of the lighthouse caught my eye. A man came to the edge and looked over me and the ocean before him. He was fuzzy and devoid of shape or feature. It was as if my eyes couldn't, or wouldn't, focus on him.

He lifted his arm and pointed to the sea. With the light splashing out behind him it made his movements look like grandiose gestures.

I followed his gaze and saw floating pieces of wreckage bobbing up and down among the waves. They glinted in the dark. I looked up again at the man. He was gone.

I faced the ocean and the incoming wreckage. The man was now standing between the sea and me, continuing to search the waves.

I took a step toward him. He wasn't tall or large but there was a feeling of immensity about him. His black coat looked dense like a black hole, and the more closely I looked at it, the more it opened into a deep chasm. It was intensely magnetic.

I reached out for him, to see if my hands would disappear into his back.

He turned around, slowly. I paused, my hands outstretched. I expected to see his profile as it came into my view, but instead it seemed to fade into the night sky. Or the black sky was bleeding into his face. By the time he was facing me straight on, his face was gone and I was looking straight into the sea behind him.

“Everything isn’t lost yet, kiddo.”

A deep, smooth voice. A Cheshire smirk faded into view and out again.

And then I woke up.

Work on Monday was an utter disaster. I couldn’t concentrate on anything. If I wasn’t thinking about the dream from the night before, I was thinking about the real experience in the lighthouse. The last thing I was thinking about was answering the phones properly. I probably hung up on ten different people.

It was enough, anyway, that Frida, my boss, pulled me aside.

“Are you OK?” she asked, stopping me in the hallway as I was scurrying back from the bathroom.

Frida was just as petite as I was, which always made me feel I could relate to her on some level. She was only about thirty and was known to trade drunken late-night stories with me (or should I say I just listened to them as I didn’t really go out like she did). But there were days like today when her skinny face became one of authority.

“I’m fine.” I smiled, obviously not wanting to get into it.

"Come with me," she said brusquely, and beckoned me to follow her into an empty office.

With my heart pounding irregularly, I did as she asked and she closed the door behind her. She had this concerned look on her face that made me feel on edge. I had a flashback to a doctor-patient scenario.

"What's up?" I asked as casually as I could. In the back of my head I knew the phones were ringing. Normally my bathroom breaks weren't this long.

"You're not a very good liar, Perry," she stated. That was kind of insulting. I totally thought I was.

I gave a half-hearted chuckle. "I don't know what you—"

"I think you need to go home," she said simply.

"Go home?"

She sighed. It wasn't exasperated or annoyed but more along the lines that she didn't want to get into explaining herself. She was going to have to, though, especially with the quizzical look I was giving her.

"Remember a few weeks ago?" she asked, her voice taking on a warning tone. "You had that little attack of yours?"

Ah, right. No wonder she was handling me with such care.

"I'm fine," I said again, trying to smile brighter.

"Look, it's all right. I know I'm your boss and you can't talk to me about stuff, but if you need to, I'm here for you. The last few weeks, I've noticed you've been a lot different."

"Last few weeks?" I repeated.

She folded her arms and leaned against the door. "Yes. You've been sloppier, more curt with clients. You're looking more tired, like you haven't been sleeping at all. I don't know what's wrong, and I don't ex-

pect you to tell me, but I just want you to know that you can if you want to. I'm not going to judge. I'd rather just know."

I felt pretty embarrassed.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I mean, no offense, but I hadn't noticed I was acting any different then."

"But you notice now?"

"I did have a rough weekend," I said honestly.

She stared at me for a few beats. During that time my mind went on a paranoid rampage. OK, so yes, a few weeks ago I had a panic attack. I screwed up a call between some old bag on the phone and the person she wanted to speak to. She raised such a fuss about me (no seriously, that bitch was cruel) that I ended up having a panic attack that a lot of people in the office, unfortunately, bared witness to. I just blamed it on PMS or something. I guess that hadn't really fooled Frida.

But other than that, and a few other instances before, I was fine.

"How about you go home and get some rest. Come back tomorrow if you feel better," she suggested gently.

It would have been a dream come true. My boss was finally giving me a day off and for no real reason, to boot. Except the way it was actually going down was completely humiliating. I felt my pride bristle along my back like porcupine spines.

"I'll be fine," I countered.

She gave me a sympathetic smile and said something rather chilling, "You won't. And that's all right. Really, Perry, life gets hard sometimes. We all know it. And we all know you can't deal with it while you're

here at work. So, coming from a friend, really, just go home and sort yourself out. Come back full of pep and beans. Just...deal with whatever you need to deal with."

There was more to it than that, I knew that much.

"And if you weren't my friend?"

"You're projecting a bad image for the company right now," she answered bluntly. "Since that incident a few weeks ago, people have been a bit, um, concerned about you. I think it would be best for you, and everyone else, if you could do your job properly. You are, after all, the face of the company. So go home; again, it's no big deal, but just go deal with whatever it is you need to deal with. And if you need assistance from the company, you know, in medical terms...if you need to talk to someone and that sort of thing, please don't hesitate to ask. We have some really lovely benefits in that area."

My face was red and I felt sick. All this talk about panic attacks and I was about to have one in this empty office. Frida was watching me closely. The hint of trepidation across her forehead told me that she was a bit afraid of what I might do or say.

Ridiculous. I have one bad morning of answering phones and I get sent home.

Well, I had no choice but to take the professional route. I told Frida that if that's what they thought was best, I would do what was best for the company. I've never cared about the company a day in my life, but suddenly I wanted nothing more than to prove them wrong. I'd go home, graciously and with understanding, and come back tomorrow full of pep and beans, or whatever the hell she was talking about.

Back at my desk, I quickly gathered my stuff as Frida was gathering Alana to take over my duties for the rest of the afternoon. Because of that, she was going to be an even greater bitch tomorrow.

I suppose I should have been happy to have such a concerned workplace, but it just didn't bode well for me. Call me paranoid, but I felt like this was the start of my job heading in the absolute wrong direction.

With no choice and under my boss's watchful eye, I quickly grabbed my purse and headed to the elevator before Alana showed up and undid me with her ice queen glare.

I got in the elevator. The doors shut just as I saw Alana coming around the corner, the metallic closure eradicating her sneer in progress. Good timing.

The elevator started to make its way down. I thought about what I would tell my mother when she caught me coming home early.

The elevator lurched to a stop.

The motion caught me off guard and I fell over slightly, catching myself on the rail. I had fears of malfunctioning elevators but always brushed them off as irrational. Luckily, it seemed to have stopped with that one lurch.

But I still wasn't moving and the elevator doors didn't open.

The floor buttons on the console were lit up in the shape of an X. It flashed "X" – three times.

What the—

The doors opened, faster than normal, like they had been oiled with speed.

A man dressed head-to-toe in raingear stood on the floor staring at me. His coat and pants were wet

and he was standing in a puddle, the carpet soaked through and spreading out in a radius around him.

Before I could even comprehend any of it, the doors shut. The man didn't even make a move for them. The elevator lurched again, seeming to drop a floor.

I let out a scream, feeling like I was in the Tower of Terror but with no safety belts.

The elevator stopped abruptly and once more the doors opened.

I expected to see the fisherman again but the doors revealed the lobby, lit with daylight from the building's front entrance. Two straight-laced businessmen were waiting impatiently on the tiles. They gave me a suspicious look. I must have looked scared out of my wits.

I quickly walked out of the elevator, stopped in the middle of the lobby and looked back at the two men. The doors closed on their amused faces and off they went.

"What. The. Hell?" I said aloud, my hand at my chest. I almost (almost) wished that the Creepy Clown Lady from last week was down in the lobby again, just so I could have someone to talk to. But alas, I was alone. I rubbed my fingers along my temple, trying to bring a sense of peace and clarity to my head, which now felt dangerously overloaded.

I walked out of the building, gasping for the damp air outside and avoiding the eyes of the business people passing me by on the busy street. What just happened?

I looked back at the ugly building, its sleek, tinted exterior that hid a wealth of weirdness behind it. Maybe Frida was right after all. Maybe I really did need to

go home and sort myself out. If it wasn't the nightmares, or terrifying situations in a lighthouse, it was the imaginary fishermen I saw in my office building.

I suddenly had no problems with writing it off as a sick day.

I arrived back at home to find out my sister was there and in her bed. It turned out she might have the dreaded, infamous swine flu and was spending the next few days or so away from school.

"Don't go visiting her," my mom warned me, as she stirred a pot of chicken soup. "If you are sick already you'll only get worse, even if you have a face mask on."

"Mom, I'm not that sick."

She eyed me. "You are something considering you're here and not at work. I can tell that much. Now go lie down."

I obeyed and headed to my room. I had planned to tell her that I was sent home because of physical sickness instead of the truth. Anything that had to do with me and mental illness always brought out the worst in my parents, especially my mother. If I had told her that Frida sent me home because of concerns about my mental state... oh boy.

As I walked down the hallway past Ada's room, I heard a muffled cry from behind her door.

"Perry, is that you? I heard your bike."

I stopped and stared at the door, not daring to come any closer lest the influenza be waiting on the other side of it.

"Yeah, it's me. Work sent me home because I'm sick."

"Do you have swine flu too?"

"No. I don't have any flu. They just *think* I'm sick."

Silence. I started to walk away.

"Perry, can you come in here, please?"

"No. Why?"

"I need you to do me a favor. Please?"

I sighed and edged closer to the door. "I can do you a favor but I'm not going in there. You're swine flu ground zero."

A loud, painful sigh followed and then, "OK. Um. You see...it may sound funny, but...well..."

It was like pulling teeth. "What, Ada?"

"Can you write on my blog for the rest of the week?"

That was not what I was expecting. "Huh?"

"I have to do my blog posts but I'm too sick to get dressed or take pictures. Plus I look like shit."

"Well, I look like shit too, so I can't be much help."

"It doesn't matter, I just need you to write a few posts, even if you are just updating people on my situation."

"Which is?"

"That I have swine flu! Goddamn it, Perry. Don't you listen to a thing I fucking say?"

Though I had an admitted potty mouth, I still winced whenever my "sweet" young sister dropped the F-bomb.

"Sorry. Continue."

Her voice came through, more muffled. I leaned in closer to hear her.

"I'll give you my login information and everything. You can go onto your computer and do it all there."

It sounded easy enough, but for the life of me, I had no idea what to write about. I told her so.

“Anything. It doesn't have to be clothes-oriented. I would prefer if it wasn't because Converse Chucks and leggings will never be the height of fashion.”

Buuuurn.

“And anyways,” she continued, “it doesn't even matter. I just need the posts to be generated. If I don't post every day, I lose readers. Even by not doing it this weekend I have already lost ten per cent, and if that continues, I'll lose my advertising revenue.”

“Not to mention global domination,” I added.

“Yes!” She cried out excitedly then lapsed into a coughing fit. I grimaced and backed away from the door as a precaution.

“Exactly,” she squeaked out when she found her breath. “Please, Perry?”

“Sure, sure. It'll give me something to do at any rate.” And hopefully would take my mind off of my problems.

Unfortunately, my own problems always had their slinky way of creeping back into things, like Spider-man's symbiote.

As I sat there in front of my computer, staring blankly at the screen, I realized I had nothing to write about. Fashion was out of the question, as Ada apparently thought that would scare away her readers. Which I didn't understand because leggings, studs, zippers, chains and a whole lot of black was so in right now (according to the other blogs I've read, anyway), not to mention how she is constantly borrowing *my* stuff, but I didn't want to argue. It was her blog

and livelihood, and I had to remember that in some ways this was a real job to her.

I considered writing a little blurb about my experiences as a failed stuntwoman, or maybe a bit about one of my favorite bands, Slayer. But I decided no one would give a damn about my times at the gun range, and speed metal wasn't made for her audience.

Then it came to me. I knew exactly what to write about and how to do it.

I leaped off my chair and brought out my ailing camera. Luckily it worked well enough that I was able to transfer all of my pictures from the weekend, including the video.

I whipped open my film editing program, and for the next few hours I immersed myself into the film-making process.

Most of the video I shot was pretty low-grade. I mean, it was a digital SLR, not an actual video camera. The sound was scratchy and the light, though bright in real life, didn't pick up much detail. But the experience was all there, and even when I faltered in trying to remember some details about that night (maybe I was trying to block them out, I don't know), the video brought me right back to it.

And to Dex. Seeing his face on the grainy footage, hearing that deep, almost sneering voice of his, brought a wave of excitement over me. Where he came from, what he was doing there, where he went—these questions were just as intriguing as the other ones that surfaced.

Dex aside, the video was pretty damn creepy. The eeriest part was seeing movements and flickers in the shadows around me. Now, despite my interest in the paranormal, I never watched those ghost hunting

shows on TV. Ironically, I am too chickenshit and my imagination is far too powerful. One show and I would be convinced I had a ghost in my house. But I knew enough that the only time you can really pick up ghosts on camera is when you see those little white “spirit orbs” and what have you.

Well, that's exactly what it looked like in one of my shots. It was as I was heading up the stairs following Dex. A white...shadow...flew up the dark walls and around the corner, as if it was trying to race me up the stairs.

I shivered and immediately flicked on all the lights in my room. That part was definitely staying in the film.

You see, the only thing I had to talk about that was even remotely interesting was what happened to me at the lighthouse. And with the video to play alongside it and back up everything that I wrote, I knew that it could actually be a worthwhile addition to Ada's blog. A bit offbeat but attention-grabbing nonetheless. Worst-case scenario, it had her readers coming back to see what would happen next.

I decided to break up my story into three different posts and schedule them so they would publish days apart. That way, by the time Ada felt better and was ready to blog again, my story would have been told with maximum impact.

That night I busily worked away on my story, relaying my nightmares in fervent prose and capturing the jittery atmosphere as I approached the lighthouse. I ended the film part right at the moment where I kicked open the window and disappeared into the building.

Despite feeling ill at ease as I remembered each instance of the lighthouse mission, I fell asleep that night with a smile on my face. I didn't have any dreams.

CHAPTER SIX

I woke up the next morning to loud banging on the door. It sounded like something was going to break it down.

I moaned and rolled over. It was ten a.m. I had already woken up at seven-thirty to call my boss and see if it was all right for me to work today. I had felt a lot better than yesterday, maybe not full of pep and beans, but then I let it slip that my sister was at home with the swine flu. I guess the flu paranoia had a hold over everyone because the conversation went from “Yes, come in” to “No bloody way. Stay at home until you know for sure you don’t have swine flu.”

Well, I knew I didn’t have swine flu, but I can’t say I argued at all with her logic. Though it still didn’t reflect very well on me, this was their doing. Plus, I was

lazy and the thought of Alana being stuck on the phones for an extra day made me cackle inside.

"What?" I yelled at the pounding door, my morning voice cracking. "Can't I sleep in? I'm sick. Maybe."

"Lemme in!" Ada yelled from outside.

"Don't come in, you sicko!" I sat up. I didn't *actually* want to contract this infamous flu.

"Perry, my blog, holy shit."

Aww crap. The night before returned to me. She was pissed off that I took her fashion bible for jealous tweens and turned it into the *Ghost Whisperer*. Sure, I had Jennifer Love Hewitt's rack but not the rest of her body post—"I'm a size two" slim down. I sighed and crawled out of my warm bed, quickly slipping on my house robe.

I walked over to the door and leaned against it. I could imagine her fiery expression behind the door.

"I'm sorry, Ada. I didn't know what else to do."

"Open the door!" She pounded on it hard and my head felt the impact.

I supposed that because I probably ruined her career and her income, I deserved the swine flu.

I opened it and took a few steps back, covering my nose and mouth with the sleeve of my robe.

She stood before me looking wane and bony. Her eyes were flashing with brilliance (or anger), giving her the appearance of a mad woman with frazzled white hair, like Doc Brown's granddaughter.

"You are a genius!" she exclaimed.

"Come again?"

She waltzed into my room and over to the computer.

"Um, please don't touch anything," I pleaded.

“Oh, whatever,” she scowled and proceeded to run her hands all over my desk. I wondered if I had enough sanitizer in my drawer to eradicate her. She flipped my laptop open and immediately opened her blog post. Or should I say, *my* blog post.

“Look!” She pointed at the screen.

I edged closer and looked over. It looked the same as it had last night. I shrugged at her.

“Have you seen the comments?” she asked incredulously.

“Ada, I just got up.”

She shook her head at my priorities and started scrolling down the screen to the comments section. She turned to look at me, utter shock and glee (and maybe a slight hint of admiration?) in her eyes.

“Two hundred comments!”

“Huh,” I mused. “That’s good, right?”

“Good? I’ve never gotten that many before. I mean sure, lots of people look at my blog and all that shizz, but two hundred? From your post? The most I’ve ever gotten was a hundred and sixty, and that’s only because I was giving away a Chanel scarf.”

“You gave away a Chanel scarf?”

“It doesn’t matter, Perry. Focus! This is insane. And all because you made up this crazy ghost story.”

I scoffed. “Made up? I didn’t make it up. That’s what happened on Saturday night when you were busy knocking boots with The Whiz.”

Her nostrils flared. If she was standing, her hands would have gone straight to her hips.

“First of all, I did not knock boots with him, and second of all, his real name is Mario.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Mario was not much better than Whiz.

“Well,” I tried to explain, “if you had actually told me what went on that night instead of ignoring me, maybe I would know that instead of assuming the worst of you.”

“I love how naturally you assume the worst of me. Whatever, it's irrelevant.”

“You're irrelevant,” I countered. Poorly.

“Good one. Anyway, you're the one who ran off alone. Talk about being irresponsible.”

“And, as you can now see, this is what I ended up doing. Exploring the lighthouse.”

“And scaring the shit out of everyone.”

“And myself. There was a lot of stuff that happened later that I can't even begin to explain.”

“OK, so write about it. Now! Look at these comments.” She started reading from them, “‘Can't wait to hear what happens next, I've got goose bumps' and 'This totally got me in the Halloween mood' and 'Where's the rest of it? I want to know what happens, this is scaring the bejesus out of me.' Hardly anyone has even made a peep of condolence for my swine flu.”

“Apparently they are too scared,” I offered.

Ada nodded slowly. With her eyes were returning to a non-psychotic state, I could see how sick she really was.

“Look, go back to bed. Get some rest. Work told me to stay home today so I'll start writing the next part, OK?”

She batted her red eyes at me. “Can you go around and visit the blogs of everyone who commented...make a nice comment in their comment section, something like 'Thanks for the blog support while Ada is sick, please come back tomorrow for the second installment'?”

“That's like two hundred blogs!”

“It's what you do! No one said blogging was a cake hop.”

Cake hop? She must have meant cake walk.

She got up and shuffled to the door, turning once more to look at me. “Please?”

I rolled my eyes and nodded reluctantly. What on earth had I gotten myself into?

As it turns out, I had gotten myself into plenty. My life turned into a blur of writing, editing, posting, visiting blogs, and answering emails.

So many people were interested in my experience, the majority of whom were emailing me solely to ask whether it was true or if it was a fake post. I had gotten so many of those inquiries that I decided to make an FAQ post on the blog where I could answer those kinds of questions.

What was really interesting, though, was how the story seemed to take on a life of its own.

The videos that I posted on the blog had to be uploaded to YouTube first before I could link them. YouTube was something of an afterthought. Little did I know that my videos, within days, had an average YouTube rating of four stars (which is pretty good), had at least sixty comments, and had thousands of viewer hits.

I have to be honest, that thrilled me to the very core. I was never popular at anything, so to see so much approval and attention paid to something that I did, which featured me (and, well, this Dex person), was an amazing feeling.

Sure, it was weird to find yourself an internet sensation—even if you couldn't *really* make out that it was me in the video—but it was still flattering that so many people wanted to know what happened next, that people cared about this little experience I would have kept to myself like I had done so many times before.

In the weirdest way, I was happy that I was actually doing something with my life. Writing the blog posts, reliving the experience, crafting the video until it was on par with any ghost story, and just revving my underused creative juices in general, made me feel like I had a purpose. Sounds stupid and superfluous, I know, but I couldn't help feeling that way.

Naturally, it was a real downer to have to go into work and face the reality of the rest of my life. I couldn't stay home and blog forever. Eventually, the interest in my paranormal experiences would wane and the creative fever would subside and I would be back to answering phones for the rest of my life.

Answering phones and barely able to concentrate on doing so. I could only think about the blog all morning. How many people visited in the last hour? How did they find me? What did they think? How many comments were there now?

In the afternoon, my boss came out to see me. Earlier she had remarked that I looked a million times better and was glad that the rest did me some good, even though I noticed she was keeping a hypochondriac's distance away.

Now, though, there was something else on her mind. She stopped just behind me.

"Hi," I smiled up at her.

"I've got to show you something." Frida leaned over and opened Firefox on the computer. She clacked away in the URL bar until YouTube came up. My blood ran cold. I didn't like where this was going.

She entered "haunted lighthouse" in the search bar and up came my videos.

"Is this you?" she asked, pointing at the screen. I felt like I was going to get in trouble if I said yes, even though I didn't know what exactly for. But my YouTube user name (PerrySlayer) kind of gave it away.

"Yeah," I eked out slowly.

"You're kidding me. I saw this video posted in my Facebook feed at lunch, so I clicked it to see what the fuss was about. Damn if I didn't know you were a ghost hunter."

She didn't seem mad. She was acting different though. I couldn't read the strange expression on her face.

"Oh, I'm not a ghost hunter." I laughed uneasily. "My sister is a blogger and she wanted me to write a few posts for her. This is what I came up with."

"But it's all true, right?"

"Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I don't really know what happened but what you see is what I got."

"Perry, I must say I am impressed."

Oh. She was impressed. That's the strange emotion she was trying to express.

I shrugged. "Well, thanks. It was nothing really. Was actually kind of fun to write."

She leaned against my desk, arms and legs crossed and looked me up and down. "I mean it, Perry. I had no idea you were so web savvy. To capitalize on YouTube like that, get that video on Facebook, get a group started—"

There was a group on Facebook?

“—not to mention all the links back to your sister's blog. Those are some good marketing strategies.”

“Oh. Well I—”

“Plus the writing. You've got a real knack for getting people to want more. Have you taken writing classes?”

Was she kidding me? Did she not read over my resume when she hired me?

“Yes, I have. In advertising school.” I raised my voice over the last few words.

She mulled that over. “Oh, yes. Now I remember. You went to Oregon State.”

“That's what it says on my resume.”

She nodded slowly, not getting it. She straightened up and clapped her hands together.

“I have to tell you, Perry, this certainly helps your situation.”

“Uh, what situation?”

She cocked her head at me. She obviously thought she was keeping me up to speed on things around here. She did remember I had been gone for the last few days, right?

“Can you fill me in to use the Pacific boardroom for next Monday at nine a.m.?” she asked, turning her attention to my Outlook calendar.

What situation???

“I would like to have a meeting between you, me and John,” she continued, “so we can plan on our next steps here.”

John Danvers was the CEO of the company. If she wanted a meeting with him and me, this definitely meant I was in a “situation.”

“Sorry if I seem to have missed something here, but what are these next steps about?”

“Your job, sweetie,” she gave me a quick squeeze on the shoulder. “But you don't have to worry as much anymore. Things should turn around now.”

And with that, she left the reception area.

What the hell was that all about? Don't have to worry as much? Was I worried before? Things *should* turn around? I was in a situation?

Oh God, was I going to get fired? Suddenly it all started making sense. Maybe she sent me home on Monday so they could try out a few temps while I was gone and see if any of them were better than me. Maybe Alana wasn't filling in for me after all. Only one way to find out.

I dialed Alana's extension.

She picked up with a dry, “Yes?”

“Hi, Alana. Sorry to bother you, but I just wanted to thank you for taking over the phones while I was sick.”

“I didn't answer your phones,” she spat out, clearly insulted. “They hired a temp for that.”

“Oh,” I replied as nonchalantly as possible.

“Yes, someone who doesn't suffer from 'ghost' disease.” And at that witty remark, she hung up.

Very mature, Alana, I thought. It was safe to say now that everyone in the office knew about my new-found ghost fame.

I just couldn't believe they hired a temp while I was gone.

Calm down, I told myself. Alana probably refused to do it and claimed she was overloaded with business card orders or something like that. A temp didn't mean I was going to get fired.

Unless the temp did such a good job that they realized what fools they were to keep a slacker like me on the payroll and were planning all week to let me go.

Until today, of course, when my boss finally realized that I may actually be better suited to roles in the company other than answering phones and setting up meetings.

It was funny how I suddenly cared about keeping my job. I dreamed about this opportunity for such a long time, to be free of this horrid place and nine-to-five utter boredom. But even on welfare, which wouldn't be much, I knew I would have to get another job. And dealing with finding another job was beyond me. So as much as I hated it, I needed this job.

There was that glimmer of hope on Monday, though. I started fantasizing. I know I said I didn't want to stay in advertising, but it would be better than nothing. And who knows, I might actually be able to do something really cool with myself. Plus, my paycheck would be bigger and I would finally feel proud to answer the question "what do you do for a living?" without having to justify being a receptionist.

Still, the uncertainty was nerve-wracking, and I was in a bit of a downer mood when I arrived home after work. The reality was coming in cold and hard. I tried to keep an optimistic outlook but the jaded part of me kept telling me to expect the worst.

I walked into the house and heard my mom call me from the living room. I came in and saw her lying on the floor doing Pilates to a DVD. My mother was forever after the best at-home DVD workouts.

"Some man called for you," she said without looking up. I absently watched her leg rise up and down in time with the instructor.

“OK...” That was a bit strange. I couldn’t remember the last time a man called for me, especially at the house.

“I gave him your cell number though. I thought he might have called you.”

I fished my phone out. No missed calls.

“Nope. Did he say what he wanted?”

“He said his name was Declan...something. And he was interesting in speaking with you about your blog,” she continued her scissor kicks. “I didn’t know you had a blog now, too.”

“I don’t,” I said slowly. Declan? Who the hell was that?

My heart started to beat a bit faster. Maybe it was someone like a book agent who saw my blog and wanted me to write a book. I know that’s pretty far-fetched but it happened a lot to bloggers and my hopes were suddenly, naively, sky-high.

“His number’s on the kitchen table,” she continued. “He said for you to call him as soon as you could.”

Well, it was at least intriguing. I went into the kitchen and picked up the pad of paper.

My mom had scrawled a number with a Seattle area code on it and the name Declan Foray.

Dex Foray?

I reached into my wallet and pulled out the business card he had given me. Sure enough it was the same number, though I had no idea his full first name was Declan. The way the name is usually pronounced (DEE-Clan) it didn’t even make sense.

I got strangely nervous when I had to call people I didn’t know. You would think that being a receptionist would have helped me get over that hump but it

hadn't. I tried to mentally trick myself into thinking I was making just another business call.

With my heart beating a tad faster than normal, I dialed his number from the house phone. It rang so many times that I was about to hang up when the other line clicked.

"Dex here."

Ah, his voice; low, deep and rich, like a polished instrument.

"Hello?" he said more impatiently.

"Uhh," I stammered. "Hi. Um, this is Perry. Perry Palomino. You...called me?"

"Yes?"

"Yeah. Well... just...calling you back!"

"I got that much," he replied matter-of-factly.

This was off to a horribly awkward start. I rubbed my forehead and thought of what to say next.

"So, yeah, I—" I started.

"Listen, Perry. Can I call you back? I'll be two seconds."

"Uh—"

"Perfect. Talk soon."

Click. The line went dead. I looked at the phone in disbelief. How long was two seconds? I stared at the phone for what seemed to be forever before I decided to head back over to talk my mom. Just as I was out of the kitchen the phone rang.

I raced back to it, composing myself before I picked it up. I needed to be more demanding.

"Hello, Perry speaking."

"Perry! It's Dex." He sounded a lot more enthusiastic now.

"Hi...Dex? Listen—"

“So, Perry. It *is* Perry, right? I couldn’t remember what you told me in the lighthouse but that’s who your little blog posts were attributed to.”

Uh-oh. The blog. Dex was in my blog. I hope that it wasn’t about that...

“You found the blog?”

He laughed, albeit rather sarcastically. “Kiddo, who hasn’t found your blog?”

I started feeling ill. “Look, I’m sorry, I was just filling in for my sister and I had nothing interesting to write about.”

“You mean to tell me you’re not a narcissistic fashion blogger? I’m liking you better already. I might almost forgive you for publishing that footage of me on fucking YouTube.”

He nearly yelled that last word. I cringed. I was in shit.

“Look, I didn’t say who you were, and you can barely even tell who is in the shot most of the time. I mean, you told me to turn my camera on, so I did, and there’s no law against that.” I was rambling.

“Did it occur to you that there was a reason I gave you my business card?” He sighed.

“Not really. You just ended up leaving me in there at the end anyway,” I replied, now feeling anger rising in my throat. Come to think of it, how dare he call me and give me shit. It gave me clarity. “And let me remind you again, as you seem to have forgotten, but you were trespassing on my family’s property, so actually, you should be glad I’m not turning your stupid shoddy business card over to the police.”

Silence on the line. It gave my heart enough time to slow down by a few beats.

“Fair enough,” he finally said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Well... so, is that what you wanted? To call me and get mad that you were somewhat featured in the video I posted? Or was it that I shot some footage that you would have loved to have had yourself for your little...ghost club...or whatever the hell it is you do again.”

I could have sworn I heard him stroke his facial hair over the line.

“That was pretty much the gist of it,” he replied.

So much for my high expectations. He was just some guy that was annoyed that I made him look stupid in front of the entire world (or whatever miniscule portion of the world that had watched the video and read the blog), and annoyed that I cockblocked his chances of using the footage for financial gain.

“But that wasn’t all...” he added.

“Well?” I asked, still vexed but also curious. Maybe he was asking me out on a date? My heart started to pump faster again. I was such a girl.

“I’m a producer for Shownet.com. You heard of us?”

“Only from your business card,” I said truthfully.

“We produce webisodes. Webcasts. You know, on the internet.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of this internet before,” I said. The sarcasm just slipped out.

“Perfect. That will make things easier,” Dex replied, sliding over my snark. “Shownet at the moment is airing *Wine Babes* on Thursday nights, which you should watch tonight, by the way, as well as *Gamer Room*, *Dude Zone*, *Cooking with Colleen*, and *Amanda Panda’s Animal Friends*. You heard of *any* of them?”

“No. Should I have?”

“Probably not. Anyway, see...I’ve been dabbling in this and that, here and there, and I decided I should maybe jump in on this ghost bandwagon. The main thing I wanted to do though was have it run a little differently. There are tons of those shiteous shows on TV, run by tards who are running around with these cameras and having these geeked-out experiences that in the end amount to nothing more than their own ineptitude and inflated sense of self. You following?”

“Not really.”

“And so that’s what I was doing at your uncle’s place. No one had done any shows there yet.”

“That’s because he wouldn’t allow anyone,” I pointed out.

“Which is why I had to be sort of sneaky about it. Thank you, by the way, for not blowing my cover. I had thanked you already, hadn’t I?”

“No,” I said.

“Ah, well anyway, I thought I would get a leg up on these other shows, shoot some shit and show it to my boss, hoping he’d see some potential in all of it.”

Pause.

“And?” I prompted him. “Did he?”

“No,” he sighed. “He didn’t. However, he did like what you did.”

“What I did?”

“OK, he liked the idea of the two of us doing that. Together.”

A naughty idea flashed through my head. “And what is *that*, exactly?”

“You’re not secretly blonde are you?”

Now it was my turn to sigh. This phone call was confusing as hell and I could tell my mom had been

listening to it for the last five minutes because the workout DVD had been turned off. I had an idea what Dex was hinting at, but his aggravating way of getting around to it was throwing my mind into a tizzy.

“Mr. Foray,” I said as professionally as possible, “you called me wanting to talk me about something. Get to the point.”

I have to point out that I am neither A) this ballsy on the phone with people I didn’t really know or B) this rude, but there was something about Dex, perhaps it was the way we met, that made me feel like I didn’t really care how I was coming across.

“Based on the footage I shot, based on the footage you shot—which, by the way, you wouldn’t have shot had I not told you to—and based on the way your writing so eloquently told the story when the images could not, I think we could actually have a real show here.”

“You think or your boss thinks?”

“Either or; it doesn’t matter.”

It did matter, but I didn’t want to question it anymore, lest I screw up my chances of whatever this was. I didn’t want to think too deeply into it, though with my mind that was more or less impossible. I could feel my subconscious jumping to a million fantastic conclusions. It was really hard to keep the voices at bay and concentrate on the cold, hard facts.

“What do you do again? Are you a host on this Shownet?” I asked.

“Fuck no. Excuse my language, but fuck no. I’m just the producer and cameraman. And composer. I’m entirely behind the scenes, which is why I need a person like you to be in front.”

“Me?”

“Yes. As I was saying, you're real and you're very personable. Charming, some might say. I wouldn't because I don't even know you, but we'll find out. Your on-camera presence is bold; at least the stuff I have on my end is. And your writing doesn't suck. Have you ever done acting before?”

Technically I hadn't. Stuntwoman training didn't involve any acting and I'm sure my homemade movies from my youth didn't count either.

“No.”

“Good. That's better. That means you aren't a bullshitter. I hate bullshitters; you can never bullshit them. So you're a natural, which is perfect because people want to see natural fear. They don't want the Hollywood treatment. And your writing is the perfect companion. It shines some sort of clarity on a subject that most people don't understand.”

“To be honest, I don't understand it myself.”

“That's OK. Honesty is good. Understanding is overrated. But this show won't be overrated because it's coming out of the dark and sneaking up on people until—”

Click.

Did the phone just go dead?

“Hello?” I asked. Silence. Did he just hang up on me?

I looked over and saw my mom hanging around the doorway to the kitchen with a quizzical look on her face. No denying now that she was totally listening.

“Hello, Dex?”

Click.

“Yeah, hi, sorry, someone on the other line,” his voice coming in low and husky. “Jimmy Kwan, you

heard of him? Doesn't matter, you haven't. But he's the one who started up Shownet back in 2004 and the first person to really take a chance on me. My boss. But now he's on the other line and wants to know what Perry Palomino thinks of all this. What say you?"

I took a deep breath.

"I have to admit, I don't really know what's going on here," I told him carefully. "I mean, you haven't really come out and said anything. I just got a message to call you and, so, here I am."

"Ohhhh," he said slowly, "You want it in layman's terms. Oh, come on, Perry, I thought you were smarter than that. Don't you know how to jump to wild conclusions? That's what your whole ghost thing is about. Let's ignore the reality of the situation that we were in a shitstormed old lighthouse and jump to the conclusion that some beastly ghost was after us."

"To be fair, *I* never thought there was a ghost."

I heard a sigh of disgust on the other line and immediately feared I lost all chances with him.

"Honesty is good, but good is overrated," Dex lectured. "I appreciate a straight shooter—fuck knows I don't have enough of them around me— but don't admit the thing is fake."

"It's not fake!" I exclaimed. "You were there!"

"Anyway," he said, ignoring me, "I, Declan Foray, and my boss, Jimmy Kwan, want to ask you if you would be interested in joining me in filming a demo for the website about our ghost-slash-weird encounter. Kind of like a TV show pilot. If it's good and you look good, then I look good and Jimmy will want to pick it up as an actual show for our network...netsite. Web thing. But it's all riding on you. I'm pushing for this show because to be honest here—and I mean let's

keep this between you and me—I can't stand another day of shooting *Wine Babes*. I need something different and I just think this could be really, really cool. Now it's your turn to say something."

I was taken aback, to say the least.

Amazing. Awesome. Cool. Fantastic. Stupendous. Crazy. Too good to be true. I wanted to say all of those things. But I could only manage to squeak out:

"OK?"

"That's the spirit! Now we are cooking with gas!"

"You're not drunk right now, are you?"

"Not really, why?"

"I just hope this isn't something that you'll forget about in the morning."

"I don't think I will," he mused.

"It's just this might be the coolest thing that has ever happened to me and I really don't want to get excited about it until I know for sure."

"In that case, don't get excited. Sorry, but you...I...we must remember that this is just a demo. For all I know it will totally suck balls."

"You have a way with words. Are you sure you aren't a writer?"

"You're the writer. And the star. Now here's the plan. I'm going to drive down from Seattle on Saturday morning, pick you up and together we will go to the lighthouse. We're going to need your uncle's permission, of course. And we'll go on Saturday night and shoot the shit out of it. I drop you back at home on Sunday and then I go and edit it until it's worthy of a Kubrick film. Hopefully, by mid-next week, Jimmy will be pleasantly surprised with our piece de resistance, or else I'm back at *Wine Babes* and you're back to whatever the hell you do."

"I'm a receptionist," I muttered.

"Fun!"

There was something so terribly abrupt and hazy about this whole ordeal.

"Now, wait a minute," I started, "how do I know that this is legitimate? I mean, you could still be a bald-headed meth addict hobo I stumbled upon in the lighthouse."

"I'm not bald yet," he said.

"And," I continued, "there could be no show. I'm not going to go off with some stranger to a lighthouse. I mean, where are we going to sleep anyway? I'm not sleeping with you."

He chuckled, "Don't flatter yourself, kiddo. I'll be staying in a motel in Tillamook. We don't really have a budget, though, so I would appreciate it if you could stay at your uncle's place. If he needs to talk to me about all this, by all means, get him to call me."

I still wasn't convinced. I told him that.

"Fair enough," he conceded. "I guess I could see how this might all seem a bit random and sketchy. Especially with how we met. I'm a bit disappointed that I didn't win you over but I guess the lighting wasn't very flattering in that lighthouse anyway. Do yourself a favor and don't commit to anything tonight. Go on the internet. Check out Shownet.com. We've got MySpace pages too. Twitter. Add me to your Facebook. Dex Foray. F-O-R-A-Y. In the morning, call me, email me, whatever, and let me know what you've decided. Got it?"

"Well, OK."

"I'll be hearing from you."

Click. And just like that, he was gone.

“What on earth was that about?” my mother asked coming over to me.

I slowly hung up the phone. I had no idea.

“Perry?”

I looked at my mom. She would get extremely excited about it if I told her, but I didn't want to say anything until I knew exactly what was what.

“Yeah, well...” I started for the stairs. “Listen, Mom, I'm not sure what it was about. I've got to do some research and I'll let you know soon.”

I ran up the stairs to my room. I heard my mom call after me, “Is yours a fashion blog too? Because I wouldn't trust anyone interested in your fashion tips.”

I rolled my eyes, heading down the hall. The door to Ada's room swung open—she was obviously waiting for me—and she poked her head out.

“Perry, I need to talk to you!” she hissed.

I kept going, calling over my shoulder, “Busy. I'll come see you in a bit.”

I slammed the door to my room and scampered over to my computer. Time to find out the truth.

The first website I typed in was Shownet.

It was a nice looking site, simple with a slightly cheesy tone to it. The shows were all listed in a sidebar.

I clicked on *Amanda Panda's Animal Friends*—it sounded the most interesting, OK?—and it took me to a page with a sleek video in the middle. I clicked play and was blasted with the craziest children's music I had ever heard. Fast-paced, lots of trumpets and kids singing in falsetto. It was catchy though.

The show wasn't. It was like *Lamb Chop's Play-Along* on acid but without the endearing weirdness of acid. Just a terrible low-budget children's show with

badly dubbed animals that seemed to have been shot in a petting zoo. I didn't know if Dex was the cameraman on this show but I hoped not.

Next I decided to give *Wine Babes* a shot because I knew he was filming that one. Last week's episode took place in the vineyards of the Niagara Region. The week before that, it was finding the best sherry in the UK. I was immediately jealous of Dex and the fact that he obviously got to go to all these places. Why on earth would you want to quit a job like that?

There was obvious eye candy too. The show wasn't called *Wine Babes* for no reason. The hosts were impeccably charming and gorgeous. Jennifer Rodriguez was tall with slick, washboard abs that were always peeking out from her low-cut jeans. She had that exotic quality to her with tawny, glowing skin, full lips and dazzling green eyes. Her hair wouldn't have looked out of place on Jennifer Aniston's head.

The other girl, Rebecca Sims, was also tall (damn them!) with a Dita Von Teese look about her: A carefully crafted raven coif, merlot-matching lips, and smooth, slim limbs.

I immediately hated both of them. Not only were they hot, but they had the best job in the world: Gallivanting around the world, drinking wine and dumbing it down to appeal to a whole generation of young men. They even had a segment where they paired wines with microwavable and fast food. Why didn't I think about that idea before?

I couldn't watch much of it due to my increasing envy, but I did note that the camera-work was stylistic and sharp. In the show's credits I found Dex's producer, cameraman and musical score credit. It was offi-

cial. Dex (Declan) Foray was honest-to-God who he said he was.

A smile crept across my face until I was flat-out beaming. Now that I knew it was real, I realized what it all meant. That could be me! I could be a Wine Babe!

Of course, I wouldn't be. I couldn't even be Ghost Babe. Unless I highlighted my hair. Got a better tan. Covered up the freckles. Perhaps get a slight nose job. Obviously tone up and slim down. Maybe hire a celebrity personal trainer?

And just like that I started fantasizing about everything that couldn't be.

Nope, I wasn't going to be Ghost Babe. But I could be Ghost Blogger and at the moment that sounded a gazillion times better than Failed Receptionist.

I clapped my hands together with glee. It was time to log in to Facebook and add Dex as a friend.

I hadn't been on it since noon and as soon as I logged in I was inundated with twenty notifications and twelve friend requests. I scrolled down the names and so far it was just people saying they liked my blog and my video and asking if they could they be my friends, until I came to the last request: Dex Foray.

I guess he had already sent me a friend request earlier that day. For some reason, I was slightly apprehensive about clicking on it. I couldn't explain why but it had something to do with seeing photos of someone you've already built up in your mind. I didn't think I had given Dex too much thought these last couple of days, but it was obvious, especially now after the phone call, that I had.

Interestingly, his profile picture was one of Crow T. Robot from *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, one of the

most hilarious and obscure TV shows out there. I felt an immediate kinship with him.

Once on his page, the first thing I looked for was his birth date and relationship status. Like many people, his was blank. His birth date read August 18 but had no year date.

His wall was scrawled with people commenting and posting videos and funny links. He didn't strike me as the type of person who would be on Facebook all the time, as the posts were a few days apart. I went for his info section.

Here is what I found about Dex Foray:

Activities: Music, filmmaking, video games, making up stuff on Wikipedia, booze, more stuff

Favorite Music: Metal, rock, alternative, and everything that's missing from pop culture

TV Shows: BBC

Movies: Stuff YOU probably don't like

Books: *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. *Catch-22*...all the stereotypes

He didn't have a college listed under his education but he did have his high school: Bainbridge High School '96

Quick calculations in my head placed him at thirty-two, ten years older than I. I don't know why I was expecting a younger guy. I hoped he realized how young I was and wasn't banking on someone he thought was older. I know youth is revered all over but sometimes I feel like my age does me more harm than good, like I've been around much longer than I have and should be taken more seriously. Then again, I was only twenty-two, so what did I know?

Next, it was time to spy on his photos. I felt a tinge of creepy voyeurism as I clicked on the area, though

you would think that after years of Facebook I would be desensitized to the overall ick factor of spying on people.

There weren't too many tagged photos of him. But enough.

I clicked on the first picture, him at a bar holding up a beer in a “cheers” gesture.

He had on a brown-collared, short-sleeved shirt and a few silver Celtic-looking rings on his fingers.

And, in plain flash photography and not in some creepy derelict lighthouse, I could in fact see what I remembered of him was correct. He had a nice face (and that was putting it mildly). There was a bit of a smartass smirk to his smile, which I now knew was expected. His dark eyes, wide mouth and expressive brows were totally on par.

I clicked to the next photo. My heart lurched in an unfamiliar way. It was a photo of him in a vineyard, his arm around Jennifer Rodriguez. You know, from the wine webcast? The *Wine Babe*? I couldn't tell if it was just a friendly crew shot or what because as she was smiling her supermodel gums at the camera, he was pursing his lips, head titled up and making a gangsta face.

I clicked to the next one and saw another picture of him and her together, but this time Rebecca was on his other arm. It must have been taken the same day, as they were all wearing the same clothes. They were all laughing in the picture, a charming and affable bunch. Rebecca herself had written in the comments below: “So Dex, when ARE we going to have that ménage a trois? Lol.”

I did not see the “lol” in that and quickly clicked through the rest of the pictures. Most of them were of

Dex on location with a camera in hand. Sometimes he was at a bar or a concert and sometimes he was just posing with random people. What was most interesting about the pictures was that though his smile was very becoming, with his nice straight teeth and all, there was something unnatural about it. And when he wasn't smiling, he was glaring at the camera with sharp, brooding eyes that were so intense at times that he seemed to be a different person altogether.

"Who is that?"

I jumped a mile in my seat. I whirled around to see Ada standing behind me, staring at my screen inquisitively.

"You scared the shit out of me!" I exclaimed. "How did you get in here?"

She gave me a funny look. "Through the door, you moron."

I noticed she was dressed in her normal (and presumptuously ugly) Alexander Wang gear, which meant she was feeling better. She nodded at the screen again.

"Is that Satan's Facebook account?"

I looked back at it. In this particular picture he was grinning like a madman, head tilted down, eyes like a falcon. With the Johnny Depp facial hair, I could see where she was coming from. I felt somewhat embarrassed.

"I'm not sure," I replied truthfully.

I looked up at her. She was waiting for me to continue and obviously knew that something was up.

I decided to indulge her. "Ada, can you keep this between you and me? Just until next week?"

She nodded excitedly, happy to be included. I took a deep breath and told her everything. By the end of it she was rendered impressed. And annoyed.

"You get your own fucking TV show for doing three blog posts? On *my* blog? Where the hell is my TV show?"

"OK, it's not a TV show, it's a webcast that isn't going to be viewed by many people. And nothing is confirmed. Dex just wants to try it out and see what happens."

"Dex," she snorted. "You talk about him as if you know him. You don't know him. I don't care if he's some low-budget cameraman and has a Facebook page. Most psychotic killers and rapists have Facebook pages...that's how they *get* you. Plus he looks like Satan. Don't you think that's a sign?"

"It's a sign that the Errol Flynn 'stache is coming back in style."

"Who the hell is Errol Flynn?" She threw her hands up. "Perry, seriously, you should reconsider this."

"Oh, whatever, come on, Ada. You're just jealous that something good is happening to me for once. Can't you just let me enjoy this? Writing for your blog, all the attention this week...I haven't felt this happy in a very long time. Maybe ever. This might be bullshit in the end but it's my bullshit and it makes me think there might be a place for me in this crazy world."

She rolled her eyes but her face softened. "Fine. Whatever makes you happy. I think you should Google him first, though, just in case. See if he's on the *America's Most Wanted* list."

That made sense. I went to Google and typed in his name.

A lot of pages came up. They were all connected in some form or another to his work on the webcast. Nothing too interesting.

“Well, that’s a good sign,” said Ada.

I nodded, then typed in Declan instead of Dex.

Another set of pages came up. I clicked on one that said “Funkiest band to rock New Jersey,” thinking it must be another Declan Foray.

It was an online magazine article about a lounge act called Sin Sing Sinatra. The band, consisting of a keyboardist, bassist, drummer and a singer (who was called Declan Foray), was mildly successful playing small clubs and bars on the East Coast. They were described as “Rocker Crooners” and did hip, lounge-y covers of rock songs. The singer, Declan, was described as having a “smooth, yet formidable voice” and he was someone to watch for. I clicked to the next page and saw a picture of Dex, my Dex (I guess you could call him that), singing into an old-fashioned mic.

His face was thinner and the moustache was gone, but it was definitely him. His floppy dark hair was more subdued and a white suit adorned his body. He looked like a total showboater. He also looked very young. I looked up at the URL to see the date: 03/09/02. He would have been around my age.

“So he’s a singer, too?” Ada pondered.

“I guess so. At least he used to be.”

“Maybe he changed his name because he sucked.”

I glared at her. “Dex is short for Declan. Somehow. And it says here that they were the opposite of suck.”

“Then how come I’ve never heard of them before?”

“A, you’ve barely heard of any of the best bands. You blindly believe that talent is what the radio tells

you. And B, there are tons of excellent bands, groups, singers, whatever's out there who do quite well for themselves despite never becoming well known."

"Oh, whatever. He's a cameraman now, not a singer, so he failed somewhere along the way. This conversation is boring me now. Good luck with your thing."

Ada turned on her heel and left my room, slamming the door behind her. Come in quietly, leave loudly.

I shook my head at her teenage dramatics and turned my attention back to the screen. It didn't really matter to me whether Dex was a singer or not. But I couldn't help but be even more intrigued. I had a huge respect for all musicians; they were sort of my weak spot. I could barely write notes, my songs were terrible and though I had heard I had a strong and pleasant singing voice, it wasn't anything to make a career of.

Curious, I started cruising torrent sites trying to see if I could find any recordings of Sin Sing Sinatra or Declan Foray. I found nothing and eventually fell asleep on my keyboard.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I woke up on Friday morning a few minutes before my alarm went off. I tried to remember if I had any dreams during the night and I was coming up blank. Then I remembered the phone call...Dex...the web-cast...Google. Everything. Could that have been a dream?

I quickly looked onto my bedside table and saw the piece of paper with his name and number scrawled on it. It was definitely no dream then. Dex was real; the proposition was real. And I knew in the deepest recesses of my being I had to be a part of it, no matter what.

Grabbing my phone, I quickly dialed his number, ignoring the fact that it was early in the morning and he might be sleeping. I was afraid that the longer I waited, the more likely he would be to change his mind.

With each unanswered ring my nerves tightened sharply. All these doubts started to flood my brain: What if he doesn't remember? What if he had changed his mind? What if his boss, Jimmy Kwan, changed his mind? What if I'm waking him up and it'll piss him off so much that he'll cancel?

That last thought scared me most of all. I was entertaining the idea of hanging up when he answered.

"Hello?" Though it sounded groggy, there was no mistaking that voice. My heart skipped a beat.

"Uh, hi, Dex. This is Perry calling," I said as brightly as possible. "I'm sorry if I woke you up."

"Who?"

My insides swirled. "Perry. Palomino. We spoke yesterday about my blog. The potential webcast. I met you in the lighthouse..."

"I'm sorry, I was absolutely wasted yesterday. I don't remember talking to anyone about anything. What did you say your name was again?"

I could not breathe. "Um, Perry."

I was pretty sure he could hear the sadness in my voice.

"Perry," he repeated. I could almost hear him running my name through his head. "That's an unusual name. I guess you would know that. Most people think of Matthew Perry, I bet. Or Perry Mason."

"Yeah..." I trailed off.

"But there's always Peri Gilpin. You know, Roz from *Frasier*. She was a real firecracker, that Roz. I

would have married that woman, you know, if she was real and didn't have that horrible '90s hair."

My head started to reel.

"It's Swedish," I managed to say.

"Aha!" he exclaimed. "That would explain your mother's accent."

"You remember talking to my mother?"

"Of course I do. Do you think I'm a tard?"

Yes, I thought. *Big time.*

"Oh," he continued, "you must not get that I'm pulling your leg. You know, about being wasted last night. And the whole not remembering thing."

What the hell was this guy on and so early at that?

"Oh kiddo, you really shouldn't be so gullible."

"I'm not gullible," I said defensively. "I'm just not used to dealing with crazy people."

Silence. Then a small, awkward laugh from his end. "Well, I am sorry if I misled you, Miss Palomino. I have, in fact, been waiting for your call."

"I thought I woke you up."

"I've been awake for hours. Already showered, cut my toenails, had pancakes and ten cups of coffee. Now what say you, Miss Palomino?"

I pushed the mental image of toenail cutting out of my head.

"Yes. Yes, I would love to do this," I said, hoping I projected absolute certainty in my voice.

"Fantastic," he said in a terrible French accent. "Now, what I need from you is to make sure we can have access to the lighthouse for tomorrow night. Might as well ask if you can stay over as well."

"Well, I'm pretty sure you'd be able stay there too, if I am." Uncle Albert would probably welcome the company.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm set to stay at the motel. Either way, just pack light-colored clothing. Black doesn't show up so well on film. Perhaps bring some makeup, too, in case I need to doll myself up. I'll be bringing the equipment in the car and yeah...what's your address?"

I told him.

"See you tomorrow at ten a.m., sharp. Be sure to have your game face on."

"Oh, I will," I said. Nervous prickles (the good kind) shimmered along my spine. The excitement was almost too much.

We hung up. My alarm started blaring. I turned it off inattentively.

You know those times in your life when you feel like you're in a movie? I have those moments often, usually due to the music I am listening to. Maybe I'm walking down the street in the rain, wind whipping my hair around my head, people passing me by in a quick, faceless blur and I'm listening to something moody (like Massive Attack) and just like that, it feels like I'm being observed by an outside source. Like I'm having an out-of-body experience and watching myself go about my life. Only it's my life turned infinitely more interesting, like every step I take, every puddle I splash or pair of eyes I meet has more meaning than normal.

Well, I was having that feeling again. There was no music, but I could see myself sitting up in my bed, my black hair in messy strands across my face, staring down at my phone and I, and everyone else in the world, knew that something heavy had just been handed to me. Like I was given a superhero power to save the world.

That, of course, was ridiculous, as the only power I could ever have would be an overactive imagination. But the feeling still remained.

I slowly got out of my bed, enveloped in future mystery and drama, and let myself indulge in the moment.

When the indulgence hit an all-time high, I went to my computer and quickly put in a new blog post. I knew that Ada would have a hissy fit over my impromptu post, but I didn't care. I wanted to tell the world that the blog posts weren't for nothing. Something big was going to happen. I didn't flat out say what it was, lest I jinx it or get Dex in trouble, but I definitely alluded to the fact that I would be revisiting the lighthouse again with a proper ghost-hunting team. I didn't mention that the team was just Dex and me, but I did say it would possibly be aired on a prominent website.

Then I brushed it aside, got dressed and went to work.

I could only see blackness at first. My eyes fluttered upwards; my lashes were wet and thick as they tried to focus. Slowly, light appeared in patches, a damp glow that moved and swirled in all four corners of my sight.

My other senses kicked in lazily. I was wet and cold, and could barely feel my limbs, floating, bobbing up and down with rolling swells of water. A light shone in the distant black and grew bigger with each wave. I felt as if I was gradually being sucked toward a tunnel of brightness.

Was this death? I thought. My thoughts themselves were distant, as if someone else were thinking them for me, someone I had no attachment to or concern for. If it was death, it didn't seem to matter. Any gravity associated with that concept was lost.

The light continued to get bigger until I found feeling in my body. Pressure was pushing from underneath. My skin was raked. I was lying down on a hard, wet surface. A beach. The waves lapped behind me. I looked down at glistening rocks mere inches from my face. A tiny white crab, luminous against the void, scuttled on top of my arms and headed up a slope. My eyes followed it up and I recognized the source of the light. It was not death or the afterlife. It was coming from the top of the lighthouse.

This lighthouse seemed familiar to me. I felt like I had been there before, as if it had some kind of purpose in my life. But I couldn't recall how that was possible. I had come from the ocean, from distant lands. This place could not have existed in my life.

I got up slowly. My legs shook with each wave that hit and my feet slipped on top of the smooth, wet rocks. Someone appeared in front of me and blocked the light, causing it to splay outwards into the night. I realized someone had been standing there the whole time, but I just hadn't allowed myself to see them. The person raised an arm and pointed in my direction. I knew somehow this person wasn't pointing at me. I turned around and looked back at the ocean.

There was nothing there but inky blackness. Then a weak beam of moving light. There was another lighthouse, perched on a tall rocky mound just offshore. It illuminated the dark waters below, where familiar shapes danced. I strained my eyes. They looked like

human bodies floating up and down with the waves. There were at least a dozen of them.

Then the lighthouse shut off. The darkness was sharp, ominous, suffocating.

When it came back on, I was back in the water, the dark shapes floating around me. Something bumped my back.

I quickly splashed around to find myself face to face with a bloated, puny visage. His eyes were missing, his skin was leaking dark liquid from each pore, and slimy kelp oozed from his haphazard jaw. He sank underneath the water and I felt a bony hand clutch both my legs. I screamed just in time to be pulled underwater, the ocean seeping into my open mouth and filling up my lungs. The light on the surface rippled as I was pulled further and further into the depths until darkness filled my eyes once more.

It was Saturday morning, nine fifty a.m. I sat outside on our front steps with a huge, scalding hot travel mug of coffee in my hand. Though I didn't turn around, I knew my mother and father were standing at the kitchen window watching me, watching for Dex, and making sure that their eldest daughter wasn't going to be picked up by a murderous filmmaker.

To be honest, I wasn't feeling as 100% positive about this whole thing like I had been the day before. I guess my horrific dream put a damper on things.

The creepiest thing was that I woke up in the middle of the night absolutely drenched in sweat. I was so wet that I couldn't be sure that I hadn't just been

drowned in the ocean. It was just as sticky and salty, and just as out of place.

And of course, I was naturally as nervous as ever. It didn't help having breakfast with my parents and hearing their opinions on the matter. My dad was overprotective of me, as most dads should be. My mother was more concerned that I would be made a fool of. Both of their worries were not out of place. I was thinking the same things myself. But I think deep down inside, they knew I was levelheaded and could defend myself if I needed to. Either way, I knew I could defend myself and that's all that mattered.

Uncle Albert also wasn't as accepting of our plans as I had thought he would be. He said several ghost hunters had harassed him over the last few days, all wanting access to his lighthouse. 'Tis the season, I guess. I hadn't explicitly said the whereabouts of his lighthouse in my blog entries, but I guess there are only a few privately owned lighthouses on the Oregon Coast. Luckily he gave in, but only if I could someday give him royalties. Of course I couldn't promise him anything, but I figured one day, if this project was a success, you never knew what could happen (I was leading him on a bit).

Suspiciously, Ada was absent through all of this. I didn't want to wake her up before I left but I had thought for sure she would have pried herself out of bed to watch the start of it all. You know, just to make sure I wasn't actually heading off to the Pacific with Beelzebub himself.

I checked the time on my phone. Five minutes to ten. I pulled my leather jacket in closer around me. The weather had stayed cold and dreary for the

entire week; our Indian summer was now just a memory.

That said, today was not particularly bad. The wind that had rocked the city recently had become subdued overnight. There was weak sunlight coming from the east that couldn't quite penetrate the thick mist that sat stoically on the streets and covered the treetops. I loved fog and we had a lot of it at my house, being so close to the Columbia River and all. But it wasn't helping to lift my spirits.

And its dampness was seeping into my bones despite my attire of leather moto jacket, flared black jeans, grey cowl neck sweater and black Chucks. Yes, I know he specifically said not to wear black, but he obviously didn't know how anti-white my wardrobe is. This isn't even a matter of being goth (which I so am not); it's for practical reasons. White with me won't last longer than a day—no, *an hour*—without getting some sort of stain on it. That said, I had brought a light tee and a hip-length yellow pea coat just in case I was ordered to change.

I let out a deep breath and slowly took another one in through my nose, one of my “relaxing” techniques. I have to admit, if you're having a total freak-out it doesn't do squat, but the placebo effect was always worth pursuing.

I looked behind me at my parents. They both waved carefully. My mom made the “phone” symbol with her hand. She had told me earlier she would be texting me every hour until we got to Al's to make sure I was all right and if I didn't respond to her texts, she would be calling. I felt like I was about to go on a very bad date.

The sound of an engine interrupted my thoughts. A black Toyota Highlander rolled out of the fog and came to a slow halt in front of the house. It had to be him.

I got up and I shot my parents a look for them to stay put, lest they had any ideas of coming out to meet him.

My parents didn't even make eye contact; they were too busy watching the car. It just sat at the end of the driveway, steam rising from the exhaust, humming along in the quiet morning. If it was Dex in there, he wasn't getting out.

Well, time to bite the silver bullet, I thought. I waved at my parents, making sure they saw me. They both nodded, arms crossed. It's funny how different my parents were, but at times like this they were exact clones of each other.

I placed my coffee on the step, picked up my small duffel bag and walked down the driveway with false confidence, noting the dampness of the leaves as I treaded over them and felt the cold seep in through the canvas walls of my shoes.

I reached the passenger door of the vehicle and peered inside. The windows had a slight tint to them, making it hard to see anything in the grey morning light.

The door unlocked automatically with a loudness that startled me. I cautiously reached for the handle and pulled it open.

There was no one inside. The car was warm and running; the keys in the ignition. But no one was sitting in the driver's seat.

What the hell? I stuck my head further in to look at the back seat.

“Hey.”

I jumped a mile, nearly hitting my head on the roof. I (carefully) pulled my head out of the car to see Dex right behind me.

In the daylight he seemed taller. His build was still on the thin side, but I could definitely see nice strength in his arms as they poked out of his grey short-sleeved work shirt and hinted at the markings of a tattoo of some sort.

There was a craggy shadow of day-old stubble on his cheeks but his chin scruff was tightly groomed, as was the faint trace of his moustache. He had a nice, broad nose flanked by high cheekbones. The slightest hint of dark circles was smudged at the corners of his eyes, which only seemed to increase their intensity. Oh, those eyes. They were even more poignant when emphasized by his low brows and the permanent frown line between them. He looked like he wasn't looking at me, but rather *through* me.

He stood there with a rather impatient stance, as if he had been waiting a long time.

I had my hand to my chest, trying to calm my heart, and wondered how long I had just been staring at him.

“I'm sorry,” I managed to squeak out. “I didn't see you there.”

Dex nodded. He pulled a pocket watch out of his cargo pants pocket and quickly glanced at it. He spoke to me without smiling.

“We better get going.”

He was waiting for me to get in the car. Slightly unnerved, I got in and he shut the door after me. It would have been gentlemanly in any other circumstance but at the moment it felt weird and uncalled

for. As he walked around to the driver's side, I looked through the tinted windows at the house. My parents were now outside and standing on the steps.

As Dex got in and drove off, I followed them with my eyes and suddenly felt very alone and afraid. They waved until I was out of sight. I had a sudden urge to jump out of the car. I wondered at what speed that would become a stupid idea.

As I let that thought occupy my mind, I hoped Dex would say something. He didn't, though. The silence in the car was deafening. It felt like the most awkward first date ever.

I looked over at him. His eyes were intently focused on the road in front of him, which was a good thing considering the fog. Still, I had a real issue with awkward silences to the point that I will always prattle on about God knows what just to fill the air.

I cleared my throat. "It's nice to see you in the daylight."

He nodded, still keeping his eyes forward.

"Was it a long drive?" I pressed.

"No more than usual," he said bluntly. His voice was bordering on a growl.

I was so confused. Was this the same guy I was talking to on the phone for the last two days?

He must have sensed the stupid look on my face as he finally took his eyes off the road to look at me. He still didn't say anything, though.

I managed a nervous, stupid smile. With the strange force behind his eyes, I preferred it when he was ignoring me.

"Do you drive to Portland often?" I asked, sounding even more pathetic. "I mean, we have no sales tax

here so it's pretty popular with Washingtonites...er, Washingtonians."

He ignored me.

"Do you like music?" he asked in a way that suggested he didn't really care what my answer was.

"Who doesn't?" I asked by way of saying yes.

He shrugged and flipped on the MP3 player. It started playing a song that was immediately familiar to me. It was one of my favorite bands, it was loud, and it was very fitting that we were listening to it (the song was named after the 101 highway we were to take once we hit the coast). Somehow the music also suited him to a tee; intense, weird and hard to classify.

I started mouth the words to the song, careful not to utter a peep. He raised his eyebrows at me.

"At least you have good taste in music. We might get along at this rate." I could have sworn there was an audible trace of admiration in his growl.

It was a bit easier to sit in silence now that we had the music blaring. Its familiarity was comforting in this strange situation.

That said, we probably drove without speaking for another half hour before heading off the I-5 and getting on the highway that would carry us to Cannon Beach.

After eyeing his fuel gauge, Dex abruptly wheeled the car into a gas station, pulling up beside a gas pump. He turned off the car, got out and leaned in on the window, arms resting above the car. It looked like he was stretching, so I let him be. He had his head down and was shaking it slowly back and forth.

I tried not to stare at him. I focused my attention on the normalcy of the gas station, the minivans full

of writhing kids, the man in his “midlife crisis” sports car who inexplicably had the top down despite the chilly temperatures, and the gas station attendant who was coming over to us. There were posters for hot coffee on the walls of the store. Another giant cup of steaming coffee would help all my woes.

I picked my bag off of the floor and started rooting around in it for loose change when the hairs on my neck began to rise. I cautiously turned my head to the left. Dex was staring straight at me, still as a deer, with a huge grin on his face.

Ada was right, I thought. He really is the Devil.

Even though I felt chilled to the bone, I put on my “Can I help you?” face and played it cool, like I was used to people just grinning at me for no reason.

“Can you get me a coffee too?” he asked, his voice a tad brighter than earlier.

I nodded, muttered “sure,” and eased myself out of the SUV. How he knew what I was thinking, well I didn't know. Coincidence, I guess.

Once inside the ugly lights of the convenience store, I felt better. I decided it was a good time to text my mother. I was probably going to get an “ARE YOU ALIVE?” text from her any minute.

I went to the register to pay for the coffees—I realized I had forgotten to ask Dex what he takes in it but figured he was a “straight black” kind of guy—when the bespectacled store clerk asked me where I was headed.

“Just to Rocky Point for the night,” I said.

He shook his head. “There's a huge storm heading this way. Bad weather for the entire Oregon and Washington coast.”

Oh, just great. Hopefully it wouldn't get in the way of our filming.

I thanked the man for the coffee and scuttled out of the store. He was on to something; the sky to the west was growing darker instead of growing lighter. I shivered while somehow managing to not spill the coffee.

The attendant was busy pumping gas into the car's tank and making some sort of small talk with Dex, who eyed my coffees greedily as I approached them. He smiled broadly, a toothpick sticking out of the corner of his mouth, his tongue fiddling with it rapidly.

"Sorry," I said, handing him the coffee. "I didn't know what you wanted, so I just got black. Hope that's OK."

He grabbed the cup from my hand. Our fingers touched, brushed, and sparked. It wasn't a normal spark of static electricity. In fact, as he took the cup from me and raised it to his lips, he didn't appear to notice. But it felt like a trail of energy passed from his body onto mine. It ran up my arm, down my spine and surrounded me in luxurious, hazy warmth, like I was draped in hot towels straight out of the dryer. It was the weirdest thing on a day already full of weirdness.

His took a satisfying gulp, toothpick still in his mouth. His eyes were softer now, round, with sleepy lids. A smile twitched at the corner of his moustache. He looked younger, cute even.

Dangerously cute.

He gave me a wink and I abruptly looked away, turning my attention to the sky in hopes of covering up my blatant staring. The irony wasn't lost in that he

could stare freely at me—like a psycho, I might add—while I wanted to keep my actions close to my chest.

“The guy in the store said there is supposed to be a storm tonight on the coast,” I said hesitantly, as if Dex would decide against the trip.

He nodded and leaned against the car. “I heard that this morning. I wouldn't worry too much about it, kiddo. We'll get what we need. Ghosts aren't afraid of a little wild weather, are they now?”

I shook my head. They weren't afraid of wild weather, no. But it occurred to me that they might not show up at all, regardless of the weather. That's what I was afraid of most of all; I'd be leading Dex into the lighthouse, cameras blazing, and finding nothing.

“You look a lot older than I thought,” Dex said. The toothpick switched sides.

“Oh?” I wasn't sure if it was a compliment or not. No one likes to hear they look older.

“It's not a bad thing,” he said reading my face. “I just thought you were...”

I raised my brow. Well?

“Someone more transparent,” he finished the sentence off with another gulp of his coffee. He threw the empty cup in the bin and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. Before I had any chance to digest what he said (and wonder how he finished that cup of coffee so damn fast), a shrill voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Perry Palomino?” it exclaimed from behind me.

I froze, not recognizing the voice off the bat, but still worried that someone here knew my name.

I glanced warily at Dex, who was already looking over my shoulder. I slowly turned to the direction of the sound.

A medium-sized girl with long, slim arms, a cascade of radiant red hair that wasn't found in Mother Nature, and enviously shaped jeans was staring at me with her mouth open. It took me a second to recognize her face, but once I saw those pink lips, jaunty nose and darkly-framed emerald eyes I knew who it was: Debbie Birmingham.

Her name said it all—she was always the belle of the ball. I had gone to college with Debbie. She had been in the same advertising program as me, though her looks and steely resolve were always better matched for public relations; she wasn't exactly the creative type. She was actually one of my better friends throughout college, but we kind of lost touch after the second year. It hadn't ended awkwardly; I mean, we were "friends" on Facebook and everything, but I had literally not seen her for a few years now and that in itself was a bit unnerving.

Nonetheless, I flashed Debbie my brightest smile.

"Hey, Debbie," I said trying to sound as confident as possible. All my feelings of inadequacy from being her friend came flooding back.

She walked across the pump divide and put me in an awkward embrace that smelled like Dior and Pantene Pro V.

I giggled nervously and took a step backward. She held me by the shoulders and looked me up and down like I was some outfit she was going to try on.

"You're looking lovely. It's been so long!" she squealed. She eyed Dex briefly with vague interest, then looked back at me. "I see you on the Facebook from time to time but we never really talk. What have you been up to?"

I totally thought Dex would have headed back into the car and given us some privacy, but after he had paid the station attendant, he folded his arms and continued to lean against the car as if he also wanted to know what I'd been up to.

"Um, you know," I said, forcing a smile. "Just the same old."

"Are you still taking those crazy classes of yours?" she asked, a flitter of amusement on her face. Not the good kind of amusement, but the patronizing kind.

"No, I kind of gave up on that." I laughed, hoping it sounded breezy.

"Thank goodness! People were starting to get afraid of you."

I gave her a quizzical look but she continued, not noticing.

"I saw that you work at Allingham and Associates! You know, I almost got hired there to be an account coordinator, but I got a better offer at Mindtrap. What do you do there?"

I felt my face getting hotter. My eyes automatically dropped to the ground. I didn't want to look at her, nor did I want to look at Dex, and I could tell both of them were watching me expectantly.

"I'm the front desk coordinator," I mumbled.

"Oh," she said sounding surprised. "You mean reception?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, well," she said, baring her toothpaste commercial teeth, and patted me on the shoulder, "I'm sure you'll find something one day. It's a tough economy right now, right?"

I nodded and tried to think of something witty to say but all I came up with was just a brain fart.

“Do you still talk to anyone from school?” she asked, fidgeting with her top as if the banality of talking to me was starting to bore her already.

“No, no one,” I answered truthfully. I felt lamer by the second.

“Really? You know, Adele, Steve, Ashley—actually a whole bunch of us are living downtown now right here in Portland. I would have thought you talked to at least some of the old group.”

I shook my head, wanting the conversation to be over. If she was friends with them, wouldn’t she know that? Oh, but of course, she was proving a point. The truth was I *had* lost touch with a lot of people after college. It wasn’t on purpose. I just gradually became more of a loner at the end of the final year. The people Debbie mentioned were all fine to party with at the beginning, but I got that awkward feeling whenever I was around them, like they were letting me hang out with them out of pity or something. After a while, it was just easier to hole up in my dorm room by myself and spend my nights listening to tunes and making weird clay sculptures. As you do.

I must have been mulling that over for longer than I thought because Debbie looked over at Dex. “I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Debbie. I went to college with Perry in Eugene.”

She extended her slender hand, which Dex shook politely.

“Dex,” he said.

When he took his hand back he looked down and grimaced.

“Sorry, I think I got coffee all over your hand.”

She glanced at it and quickly wiped her hand on her jeans, trying not to look disgusted and failing at it.

“So, how long have you two been together?” she asked.

Before either Dex or I could correct her—not that I really wanted to, as I felt that having someone as handsome as Dex by my side was at least doing me some favors, even if he had bad handshaking habits—someone else caught Debbie’s attention.

A tall, meaty-looking fellow came out of the gas station with a case of beer under his wide bicep and stopped beside her with an expectant look on his face. He looked familiar but it took me a few seconds to place him. I thought maybe it was someone I went to college with, as he was apparently there with Debbie, but the moment our eyes locked, I knew who it was.

Patrick Morrison. I went to high school with him. We weren’t friends, but we had mutual friends. He wasn’t the most popular guy in school, but he had wavy dark hair, brilliant hazel eyes and the same taste in music as me. In high school, music was the divider of friends, the sorter of groups, and the way we defined each other. The fact that this cute guy went to the same concerts as I did was like a Godsend, and I was absolutely smitten with him. He was usually nice enough to me, but like all guys back then, he wouldn’t have given me the time of day if he didn’t have to. I remember when he finally signed my senior yearbook; it was the happiest damn day of my life. Pretty pathetic when you think about it.

And yet here he was, five years later, standing beside Debbie Birmingham at a gas station outside of Portland.

“Holy shit!” he said pointing at me. “I know you!”

I quickly looked at Dex. His brows were raised at me, a hint of a smile on his lips. I could tell he was enjoying this little reunion.

"Yeah, hey," I said shyly at Patrick.

He looked at Debbie. "How do you guys know each other?"

She gestured at me with less enthusiasm than before. "Oh, Perry and I went to college together. I should have realized you went to the same high school."

He nodded, still smiling at me. For a minute there I felt kind of lost in his eyes, eyes that held that same sparkle as they did back in the day. Sometimes I think all the dramatics of high school were exaggerated, all the crushes completely unjustified. But seeing him again, I knew this one wasn't quite buried yet.

I even started to think that perhaps his smile was a lot more generous than any I had gotten before. The thought that he was actually happy to see me crossed my mind, as well as the pride in the fact that he recognized me.

But that all ended when he opened his mouth again.

"You used to be so fat!" he said, and broke out into laughter.

I stiffened at the comment and felt the blood rushing back to my apple cheeks. There went that. In an instant my self-esteem nosedived (and it was never even high to begin with).

I tried to laugh it off. "Well, I lost a bit of weight since then."

Patrick kept laughing. "I mean, you look better now, but wow. Good job, Perry. No longer that little chubby girl who used to stare at me all day."

Oh my God, kill me now. Seriously, who says that to someone?

I watched him laugh and was even more appalled when Debbie joined in too. Not that she knew me back then, but I could see how she'd find that funny. That bitch always hated me.

"You learn something new every day!" Debbie smirked. "But seriously, you look great, Perry."

Patrick wiped the smile off of his face and gave Dex a quick glance. "So, where are you headed?"

"The coast," I said quickly before Dex actually filled them in. Not that he was saying much but if he did start to explain what we were really doing, I would have looked even more stupid.

"Us too." Debbie smiled mischievously. "One-year anniversary celebration at Cannon Beach. Are you guys on a little romantic rendezvous?"

I opened my mouth to say something (what, I wasn't sure, but it probably wasn't the truth) but Dex beat me to it.

"Nothing says romance like storm watching," he winked at them. OK, I was *not* expecting him to say that. I was suddenly warm with gratefulness. It was a simple thing—he didn't lie; he just didn't correct them—but it made me feel like at least one good façade was still intact.

Debbie gave us an approving look. "Oh, very true. Well, good to see you, Perry. Don't be a stranger."

Patrick said roughly the same thing and they both waved at us in unison.

As soon as we got in Dex's SUV, I let out the biggest sigh of relief and thunked my head down on the dash.

Dex patted me lightly on the back.

"You survived," he said with a chuckle. I looked up at him, feeling both embarrassed and relieved.

"Thank you so much for...well, not telling them the truth. About us. I mean, there is no us, but you know," I rambled.

He shrugged and started the car. "Don't worry about it, kiddo. You'll just owe me."

I straightened up and fastened my seatbelt as Dex brought the car back on the highway.

"Owe you?" I asked with caution.

He thumbed at the backseat. "Those are for you."

I turned in the seat and looked. There was a stack of books behind me that weren't there before.

I brought them onto my lap and looked them over. They were from the Seattle Public Library.

"What are these?" I said.

"Books, Perry, books! The backbone of civilization. And our homework."

I eyed them curiously. *Famous Oregon Shipwrecks, Mysteries of the Oregon Coast, Folklore and Myth in 20th Century Oregon, Shanghai City: The True Portland, Lighthouses of the West Coast, Charles Berlitz's World of Strange Phenomena*. It was a veritable treasure trove of local supernatural history.

"This is your homework?" I asked and started flipping through them.

He laughed. "No, it's your homework. I've already read them."

"Why do I need to read these?"

"Because," he said sternly. I caught a slight blaze in his eye as his brows swooped down.

"Ohhh, because," I mocked him. "That's my favorite reason of all!"

The seriousness behind his eyes faded and he grinned. He had such a lovely smile when he was using it for good and not evil.

"You can't just head into a situation blind. You have to know the background, the history of a place if you want to exploit it. If we head into that lighthouse and see a bunch of weird whatnots and such and such, it's not going to make any sense unless we know the how, the why, and the when. Following?"

"Yes," I lied.

He knew it too. He spoke slower, "If this lighthouse is truly haunted, we won't be able to make any sense of it until we know *why* it's haunted. Things don't happen without reason. There is a story to be told at this place, and you'll only recognize it if you've read it. Hence, the books. That lighthouse isn't just a random tower of wood and concrete. It had a birth, it had a death and many comings-of-age in between."

"Well, you already seem to know so much about it, like Old Roddy and whatever that nonsense was, so why don't you tell me about it?"

He sighed. "I'm not the host here. You are. And you don't seem to believe a single word I say."

"That's not true," I said. Of course, he was right.

"Just read them."

"All of them?"

He reached over and flipped open a page with a Post-It note stuck to it. "I've marked and highlighted everything you need to know. We have two hours before we hit your uncle's place. Now go!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The car chugged along for the next hour or so, past dreary pockets of farmland that normally sparkled under the sunshine but now had the heavy feeling of impeding death. I'm not trying to be dramatic; I swear, it just looked like the scenery had gone from healthy to sick in the course of one week. Some trees didn't even have their leaves anymore, though I could have sworn they did last Saturday.

The wind that shot over the coastal hills and shook our car probably helped in the removal process. I was cuddled up in my seat absently flipping through the books that Dex had instructed me to read. It wasn't going too well. Not only did I get carsick when I

read in a moving vehicle, but I was too aware of being in a car with a guy I didn't know *at all*.

I tried not to stare at him. It was tough, though. The longer I was in that car, the more I was mesmerized by his face. Sometimes it looked at peace. His soft eyelids would sort of half droop, the corners of his wide mouth would twitch intermittently like he was on the cusp of a telling a ridiculous joke. Sometimes he looked like he was consumed by some internal fire. His eyes became darker, harder, framed by deep chasmy shadows created by the brooding brow. His mouth would set in a hard, firm line and his smart-ass smirk would vanish.

I found this face appeared every time I asked him a question. I wanted to know where in Seattle he lived, what he did for fun and did he always want to be a filmmaker.

The answers? "Queen Anne," "this and that," and "no." Followed by, "that thing won't read itself," and a quick tap on the books. I felt like I was a teenager, my father ordering me to do my homework instead of going out. I didn't listen to my father, but I listened to Dex. He was more intimidating somehow.

Needless to say, I was relieved when we finally saw the ocean and headed down toward Rocky Point and Al's place.

The weather on the coast was a monster. Huge surf crashed against the sandy beaches, twisted, bent trees continued to defy physics in the windy battering, and the town of Cannon Beach looked like it was on lockdown. The winding, narrow route of 101 was especially thrilling.

We pulled up to Uncle Al's just after noon. The boys were out at their jobs, robbing people, probably, but Uncle Al was there to greet us. Well, me at least.

"Perry," he said with outstretched arms. "Back so soon?"

I laughed and gave him a quick hug. I was glad he was happy to see me. I felt like I might be a burden to him this weekend.

"And this is the filmmaker?" Al looked over at Dex, who was standing a few feet behind me.

Dex nodded and came forward. He wiped his hand on his pants before giving Al what looked to be a very strong handshake. Al raised his eyebrows and took back his hand.

"Excellent handshake," Dex told him seriously. "Firm. Not at all like a jellyfish." He gave an extra nod for impact.

"Oh, well that's good." Al shot me an odd look. I smiled nervously.

"Yes, Uncle Al, this is Dex, the filmmaker for Shownet."

"Uncle Al," Dex acknowledged gravely.

Al paused at that before asking, "You two are both staying over, correct?"

Dex shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, sir, but I booked a motel in Tillamook."

Al laughed. "The 'Mook? Oh, you don't want to stay there. Good for cheese and that's about it. I insist you stay with us tonight."

I looked at Dex. There was no denying it—I totally hoped he would say yes.

Dex smiled politely but stayed firm. "And I insist that I don't. I've got a worried girlfriend back in Seattle, and she's already none too happy that I'm spend-

ing the weekend down here with your barely legal niece.”

I felt like someone stabbed me in the gut and I was just leaking disappointment everywhere. Girlfriend? I hadn't heard him mention a girlfriend yet. And his Facebook didn't say anything about it either. Then I remembered the pictures of him with his arm around Jennifer Rodriguez. Could that be her?

I looked over at Dex, with his eyebrow ring, dark clothes, long sideburns, shaggy black hair, the end of a tattoo that sometimes peeked out beneath his shirt sleeve, alternative music tastes and overall zany personality. He couldn't possibly be interested in a girl like *that*, could he?

But then again, what was I expecting? The guy was a filmmaker and, apparently, a composer and one-time singer. He certainly could be charming when he wanted to be, and he was blessed with some very good genes. It made sense that he would have a hot babe as a girlfriend.

I felt foolish. I don't even know why, I didn't even really like the guy, but I still felt stupid, nonetheless. As if my subconscious was on the prowl hoping to make a meal of him one day. And how ridiculous was that anyway, like I could even get a guy like him, let alone a guy who is ten years older than me. Didn't he just say I was barely legal?

I took a deep breath and tried to brush it off. It shouldn't bother me, but of course it did. Most things that wouldn't bother anyone else bothered me.

While my mind and heart were having a minor scuffle with each other, Dex and Al were chatting away.

“So, is there a key we could use to get in? We would like to minimize any damage to the lighthouse,” Dex asked Al. “Not that anything would get damaged, but you probably don’t want Mr. Miyagi over here kicking down any doors.” He jettisoned a thumb in my direction.

I smiled brightly, hoping he hadn’t spotted my momentary weakness.

“Yes, there is a skeleton key you can use,” said Al. “Now, come inside for some coffee. I’ll put on a pot.”

Oooh, coffee. That would be welcome, warm and distracting.

“Appreciate it,” said Dex, “but we’ve got to do some set-up shots before it gets dark.”

Damn.

He turned to me and gestured to the trunk of the SUV. “Perry. I’m going to need your help getting the equipment out.”

Al sighed and shuffled inside, disappointed at losing coffee company. “I’ll get you the key.”

I felt bad for him. Last weekend aside, I had a feeling he didn’t get company too often. My parents often said most of his friends were actually his ex-wife’s friends. I made a note of actually talking to Uncle Al later and asking about him instead of running off as I would normally do.

He came back out and pressed the key into my hand, his gentle, worried eyes looking deep into mine. “Don’t stay out too long. I’m ordering Chinese food for us all tonight.”

I nodded and hoped Dex would at least take him up on that offer. Dex gave him a quick wave. “Sounds good.”

Dex headed for the car and I followed, watching his slim hips saunter and his thick, dark hair get whipped up by the breeze.

He opened the trunk and handed me a tall cardboard box.

“What's this?” I peered down the shaft.

“Just a white bounce board. For light.”

I pulled it out and it flapped out into a round circle that rippled in the wind. I aimed the board at his face, lighting up the shadows under his eyes. He batted his eyes at me, that smirk ever-present.

“Think that'll make me good-looking?” he asked, untangling some cords.

I desperately thought of something smart to say. All I could think of was how *damn* good-looking he was. I was screwed.

He looked up from the cords with interest, goading me to say something.

“No,” I blurted out lamely.

He laughed and shook his head, turning his attention back to the cords. “I'm disappointed in you. Surely I thought you'd have come up with some grand insult.”

“I was trying,” I said. “And don't call me Shirley.”

That smile again. It made my chest feel funny. Funny in a good way, which made it funny in a bad way. My brain rerouted to thoughts of his girlfriend. Damn her. Damn her and damn me for caring.

Dex put the cords neatly away and started fiddling with a camera. Without looking at me, he pointed to a long canvas bag.

“Tripod. Don't take it out, though; just put in on your shoulder.”

I took the tripod bag and awkwardly tried to get the strap around me. It was almost longer than my body and kept hitting the ground and then hitting me in the face. Dex watched this uncomfortable dance with the tripod, which only made me feel more bumbling. Once I had it somewhat under control, he got up with a tiny remote microphone in his hand and stood in front of me.

"Shit, you are short, aren't you?" he stated gleefully. He bent down and pinned the microphone onto my sweater. His face was mere inches away from mine. I didn't dare breathe. I studied the bead on his eyebrow ring; it looked like black obsidian, with the tiniest scrolls of grey and white. My heart thumped in my throat. That rush of energy and warmth started creeping through my body again.

This was ridiculous. I needed to detach myself from the situation. Pronto.

"You're short," I shot back. "For a guy."

He finished pinning the mic but kept his head at my level and looked into my eyes. For a split second I wondered if he was going to kiss me (of course, he wasn't) and I immediately felt awkward. I swallowed hard. He held my gaze intently and his mouth lagged into an easy leer, like he was enjoying making me feel uncomfortable.

Well, I wouldn't let him. I narrowed my eyes at him, breaking the spell. "*What* are you looking at?"

It didn't phase him but he did straighten up and look away.

"Oh, me? I'm just seeing what I'm working with here," he said casually, and pulled a bigger camera out of its bag.

“And what is that, exactly?” I asked, steadying myself against a gust of wind.

“I don't think I'll find out anytime soon.” He picked up the white board and shut the trunk. “Shall we?”

I nodded and we walked off toward the beach. It wasn't until I was a few feet behind him that I let out a long breath. It's like I'd forgotten to breathe for the last ten minutes.

We didn't head to the lighthouse right away. Dex thought it would be best to film some opening shots out where it was scenic.

I stood on the beach facing north toward him. The lighthouse sat potently in the background. Dex had originally wanted a shot of the ocean crashing wildly behind me but the amount of sea spray that was whipped in the air was damaging to the camera, not to mention the fact that it blew my hair out in front of me. It took two seconds to realize I couldn't be a good host if I was Cousin It.

The white board was placed on an angle at my feet. I had my Chucks on top of them to keep the board from flying away, but thankfully, he was only shooting from the waist up. Like my fat ass needed to be on film anyway.

Dex set up the tripod as a precautionary measure to keep the camera steady as the wind gusts threatened to blow him over.

“Thank fuck I brought the wireless mics; otherwise we wouldn't be hearing shit right now,” he grunted, his eyes fastened on the camera's viewscreen.

He seemed to grow tyrannical when he had the camera in front of his face. I did what he said and tried to go with the flow but I could see his mind going a mile a minute, his eyes searching all physicalities of the space in front of him. He reminded me of a mad scientist.

He pulled the focus back and forth, making miniscule adjustments, keenly watching the screen. I wasn't sure what he was looking for, or at, precisely. I just hoped he didn't have it zoomed all the way up my nose.

I sighed and looked at the ocean. I didn't feel the familiar ebb and flow of emotions as I usually did when I stood on the beach. Today the ocean was a stranger. Cold, rough, and ready to take me out. As the waves sucked back, they grasped the wet sand like desperate fingers, reaching for me.

"Stay there," Dex said, his voice quiet. "Don't move."

I tried to stay where I was, staring at the ocean.

"What were you thinking about?" he asked with interest.

I wanted to turn and look at him. "Nothing."

"You think too much."

"You're telling me," I said. "Can I move yet?"

"Fuck, do whatever you like. Moment's lost."

I looked over at him. He straightened up and stretched his arms above his head. His shirt raised up a bit and exposed a flat stomach with a thin trail of stomach hair that disappeared into the band of his boxers. I looked away before he could catch me staring.

"Sorry," I told him. "Well what now?"

He sighed, long and exaggerated. He clasped his palms together and stared at me like he had at the car earlier; he gazed right through me. I shivered. I'm pretty sure it was because of the cold and not because I found his eyes disquieting at times.

They moved from looking through me to looking at me. They relaxed considerably. He cocked his head to the side. "Did you bring something warmer to wear? Do you want my hoodie?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine. But thanks."

He watched me for a few seconds as if to verify that I wasn't lying. "Am I giving you the creeps?"

I let out a nervous laugh. Normally I would have just said anything to make the other person feel better, but with Dex I discovered that being straight with him was the only way to go.

"Well, yeah," I shrugged. "For someone you said wasn't transparent, you seem to always be looking through me."

He smiled.

"I appreciate your honesty, Perry Mason. If I continue to get all creepy on you, do let me know."

I felt better now that it was out in the open. But despite having no trouble telling him that he freaked me out at times, there was no way in hell I would tell him I thought he was growing increasingly cuter by the second.

"OK, let's do a quick shot here." He pointed at me to stay put. "Can you get the hair out of your face and tuck it around to the right?"

I reached over and gathered what hair I could. I grimaced at the touch of my strands, matted and tangled from the wind and salt. He smiled at the image on

the camera. He was probably laughing at me. I gave the camera a look.

He looked up. "When I said you weren't transparent, I meant it. You've got a lot going on inside." He tapped the side of his head.

"Don't we all?" I jeered. I felt vaguely insulted. Just because I was twenty-two and not thirty-two didn't mean I hadn't been through a lot. Dex took his attention away from the camera and looked me straight in the eye, with sincerity this time.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice low, warm and serious. "I didn't mean to belittle you. By any means. OK?"

I may not have been transparent, but he was awfully good at reading my thoughts or at least my face.

He nodded, apparently satisfied with my non-response, and turned back to the camera.

"OK, do you remember your lines?"

What the hell? Lines? When did the topic of lines come up?

"What lines?"

"Didn't I give you lines?" He scratched his head.

"No, Dex. History homework, but no lines."

He thought that over then shrugged, "Fuck it." He waved at me. "Just make something up."

"About what?"

"About the lighthouse. What we might experience. Introduce the show; tell us some history. Go!" He pointed at me.

Oh God, this was worse than being called on in class when you didn't do the homework.

I cleared my throat, "Good evening. Welcome to—" I paused. I didn't actually know the name of our show,

“Ghost...Blogger. Tonight's mystery show revolves around the mysteries of....this....lighthouse.”

I motioned at the lighthouse like one of those cheesy babes who showcase the prizes on *The Price is Right*. My mind was frantically spinning, trying to come up with ideas faster than I could talk.

“The Rocky Point lighthouse has an interesting and sordid history”—one that I was about to make up—“It was built at the turn of the century to warn incoming ships; however, after only ten years in service, it started to have mechanical problems. At least they figured it was mechanical because no matter what they tried, the light kept going out after dark. Rumors started that the lighthouse was cursed as it lay dark at night and became invisible to passing ships. The lighthouse was deserted and boarded up and a new lighthouse was resurrected out on a rocky outcrop further up the coast.”

I pointed up the coast, hoping Dex would follow my finger and take the pressure off of me for a moment. I had no idea what the hell I was talking about and had no idea how long I could keep it up. But the camera stayed on me. Dex met my eyes for a second and silently encouraged me to keep going. I took a deep breath...

“However, horror and tragedy met that lighthouse as well. The day before it was set to be lit, a merchant ship slammed into nearby rocks during the night. The ship sank, along with sixteen men and two women who drowned in its waves. At least, that's what the official record was. Legend has it that one of the women managed to drift along on a piece of driftwood until she reached the shore. Right there.”

I looked behind me at the rocky coast beneath the lighthouse and cliff.

And just like that, I couldn't breathe. The immense pressure of cold prickles seized my body and I froze on the spot.

I stared blankly at the area and suddenly my world was black.

I was now standing beneath the lighthouse, waves crashing into me from behind as my attention was fixed on the sight above. On the cliff stood the man in black, his fingers pointed straight out at the darkening sea and sky. Behind him stood another figure, obscured by the shadows.

The light from the lighthouse came on then, and in that instance of stark illumination, I could see that other figure. It was me.

It was me, standing there as plain as day, and slowly reaching for the shoulder of the man in black.

I felt fingers grasp my own shoulder.

I turned and screamed.

I was back on the beach in the daylight. Dex was standing beside me with his hand firmly on me. It took a good few seconds to stop screaming and realize what I was looking at.

He grabbed my other shoulder. "Perry. Perry, it's me, Dex. Are you OK? What happened?"

My eyes flitted across his face, unable to focus. He squeezed my shoulders and brought me closer into him. It would have been nice, if only I wasn't freaking the fuck out.

"Perry, look at me. *Look* at me." He put his face in closer until I had no choice but to focus on those brown orbs of his. I could see he was just as frigh-

tened as me. "You're here now. With me. OK? Everything's OK."

I nodded and took in a deep breath. He didn't let go of my shoulders or get out of my face. He searched my face relentlessly. *That frown line of his is really etched in there*, I thought absently.

"What happened? You turned and you froze. Went completely white. I kept calling your name over and over again. Couldn't you hear me?"

Shaking my head, I told him I couldn't hear anything, "I wasn't here anymore. I was...somewhere else."

"Where?"

I looked away. "I don't know. Nowhere. I thought I was dreaming."

"Where did you go? What did you see?" He shook me slightly. It reminded me of something. I wondered if he had ever seen Hitchcock's *Vertigo* because he was starting to go all Jimmy Stewart on me.

I pulled away from him and walked a few feet towards the ocean, conscious of the waves' foamy fingers but needing the space to breathe.

"We should go back," Dex said and turned to gather his equipment.

"No!" I yelled, surprising myself. It surprised him too.

"Sorry, but no. Let's just go to the lighthouse, plan the shots for the night and get this over with," I said through gritted teeth. I was not about to let this whole operation turn to shit just because I was having non-sensical episodes. I would not let my imagination—because that's all it had to be—get the best of me.

"Perry, I don't know what just happened to you, or where you went, but there is no shame in calling this

whole thing off." He looked earnest and a tad anxious, the way I imagine I looked when I was dealing with Ada. The last thing I needed or wanted was for him to be worried about me.

"It was nothing, Dex. I was daydreaming. All right? Let's do this."

"I feel responsible for you."

"Why? Because you called me up and was all like 'Oh, hello there, little girl, do you like scary movies?'" I imitated his growly voice and talked into my hand. "I was hoping we could make a scary movie together; maybe then I could make some money off of ya. Hope you like to read history books at gunpoint."

"That's a terrible impersonation," he commented. "And just to set the record straight, there is no money to be made here. Do you think I'm getting any money to do this? I paid for my own gas, I'm paying for my own hotel room, and this equipment is all mine. Do you think you can get rich off of the internet just because you've had a few hits on your blog? That's not how it works. You do this because you want to do this or because you don't have a choice. And you have a choice, Perry."

I was abashed at his reply but put on a haughty face. "And my choice is to keep going. Now, I can film myself alone if you'd rather go right now."

Dex grinned—it wasn't a happy grin—and shook his head. "Hey, I'm not going anywhere. I can just tell you've been unsure about this whole thing from the start, and I'm giving you a way out."

"Well, excuse me if I seemed hesitant." I rolled my eyes. Did he have no idea at all what it was like to be in my shoes? I consider myself to be a very easygoing person but that only extended so far. Two days ago

I was basking in the glow of having written my blog. Now, I was back at the lighthouse with someone I barely knew and who I was increasingly convinced was slightly “unhinged,” and filming the whole deal—again—hoping to turn it into something for the whole world to see. I thought I was rolling with the punches as quickly as I could.

“OK.” Dex finished stuffing the tripod into the bag and handed it to me. He then offered his hand. “Friends?”

I balanced the tripod with my shoulder and slowly extended my hand. I wasn't sure if Dex was my friend or not; I wasn't sure if I could trust him. But there was something that compelled me to be a part of his life, somehow. Even if it was just for two days on this wild west coast.

Ugh. I was doomed.

“Friends,” I said, and smiled shyly.

I shook his hand. His hand was hot, and once again I felt that surge of energy rush through me, creating internal goose bumps. I squeezed his hand to match his firm grip.

Everything seemed to slow down. The waves were muffled; the wind ruffled my hair in a hazy stupor. In my mind's eye I could see myself, shaking hands on this beach, committing myself to...something.

I'm happy to report that the rest of the lighthouse excursion was uneventful. I managed to push my fears out of my head, not letting myself think about the dreams and what it could all mean. It was hard, especially when I felt tiny pinpricks of terror, rooted in some hazy memory, creeping upon me around each

corner. I told myself it was merely *deja vu* from being there only a week ago.

Even though it was light out, the lighthouse was still creepy as hell. Maybe even more so considering you could make out every decrepit line and grey cob-web in detail.

Uncle Al had boarded up the window that I had kicked in but luckily Dex was leaning toward the more rational method of entering via the skeleton key.

The lock on the door clicked open with a satisfying sound. The door itself needed a hefty push or two from Dex, but it swung open with a very dramatic creak that echoed across the room. Dex stepped in and looked around. I remained outside.

"Not coming in?" he asked. "Would you rather stay out here while I go look around?"

The air coming in from the room was stale, as if nothing had breathed in there for hundreds of years. It was as dark as coal and I could only make out the faint outline of a table. But standing outside by myself didn't sound very safe either.

I shook my head. I gingerly stepped in and coughed at the thick air. Dex pushed the door even further to allow more light and flow inside.

"I guess you wouldn't have a flashlight on you?" He asked.

"iPhone?" I showed it to him.

He waved it away and looked at the far corner of the room, squinting. "I'm just gonna try that door over there and see if it works. Don't want any surprises tonight."

I watched him disappear into the ombre mist of suspended dust particles. I looked around the room, inspecting it. The table was made of oak (or some

sturdy tree) and was held up by thick, sculpted legs. I made a brief comparison to my own body build. It was bare and covered with a good inch of slimy murk. The walls were bare and grey, save for a few nautical oil paintings that still hung there, out of place. A stack of chairs and an armoire looked to be in the corner while one wall housed a rusted stove.

I heard Dex wrestling with the lock in the darkness.

“So, tell me,” he said, his voice echoing. “Where did you read about the two women who were aboard the ship that sank?”

I shivered and pushed the thoughts out of my head. “I made it up. Can we not talk about it here please?”

He paused in the darkness for several seconds before saying, “OK.”

The key resumed rattling.

“Bingo!”

I heard the door creak open.

“Great. Can we get out of here now?” I asked. The longer I stood there watching my shadow dance in the dust around me, the more my eyes were starting to play tricks on me.

“You don't want to check out the second floor?” I heard his voice getting more muffled, as if he was out of the room and onto the staircase of the interior hall. I could see it in my head—the trails of kelp on the stairs. I wanted to warn him to not go up there, to watch his step, but instead I scooted myself out of the building and into the bright, howling wind outside.

I looked up at the sky, eyes wide open and took in the deepest breath I could imagine.

“Sorry.”

I jumped and looked over at Dex, who had come out of the building.

“We don't have to go up there until later anyway. Though I'm sure there will be enough interesting events downstairs.” He turned and locked the door behind him.

I didn't even want to begin to think about what “events” could transpire.

CHAPTER NINE

Despite the fact that we would be returning to the lighthouse later that evening, I was especially glad (and relieved) when we came back to the house to find it warm and cozy, with the twins playing video games and a giant mess of Chinese food on the kitchen table.

“Right on time!” Uncle Al exclaimed as we walked in the door. “Please sit, you must be hungry. You’re both pale as...ghosts!” He laughed at that last line.

I managed a wry smile and plopped down in the chair.

“Boys!” Al yelled at the living room, his voice booming. “Put down those video games and come eat your damn food!”

I heard the twins moan from the other room, and in a few moments they appeared, looking bleary-eyed as if they had just gotten up from a nap or a graphic-induced coma.

"Hey, cuz!" Matt slapped me hard on the back. He looked over at Dex then back at me. "This one of the ghosts you found at the lighthouse?" He exchanged a mocking look with his brother.

I rolled my eyes. "Har har. This is Dex. Dex, these are my cousins Matt and Tony."

Dex gave them a casual salute and nod. "I'd ask which one is the evil one but you're probably both evil. Am I right?"

Matt and Tony exchanged a worried glance but smiled once they realized Dex was kidding.

Tony laughed and looked at me. "Where did you find this joker?"

"At the lighthouse, sheesh," Dex joked.

"Boys, sit and shut up!" commanded Al, throwing paper plates down on the table in front of us and keeping his eyes on Dex and the twins. I could tell he wasn't sure how well his sons would mesh with Dex. Something told me that he had been in a similar situation before. The twins did seem volatile at times, but I didn't know Dex well enough (or at all) to know what to expect from him either. "Expect the unexpected" seemed to be his life's motto.

The boys sat down obediently and started scooping mounds of chow mein on their plates.

"Boys!" Al barked again. "The guests eat first."

He shot Dex and me an apologetic look.

"Don't worry about it, Uncle Al," Dex said. I couldn't help but smile at his choice of words. "Back where I come from, it's customary for guests to eat

last. You know, how like the lioness eats first before feeding her cubs.”

“And where do you come from?”

“Seattle,” was Dex's sincere reply.

Al laughed. “Remind me not to eat at your house then!”

“Oh, but you'd be missing out. My girlfriend is an amazing cook.” He leaned back in his chair, the smug smile returning. His eyes sparkled brightly. I did not appreciate how much more relaxed, and adorable, he looked when he mentioned her.

“Girlfriend?” Matt questioned and looked over at me suspiciously as he handed over a carton of sweet and sour pork. I gave him a look, trying to let him know that Dex was in no way a love interest to me. “Is she hot?”

“Oh phfff,” I chided him. “What does that matter?”

Dex looked at me, surprised. “Of course it matters.” He looked at the boys and Al. “For your information, yes, she is.”

Oh geez. Please don't say it's Jennifer.

“How hot?” Tony asked, goading him.

Dex pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and took out a wallet-sized photo. He handed it across the table to Tony, who shared it with Matt. I couldn't see it from where I was.

Tony and Matt's eyes widened. Even Al looked over and let out a low whistle.

“Seriously? *This* is your girlfriend?” Matt asked incredulously.

“Either that or it's some random hot girl I'm groping in a photo booth. Still win-win.” Dex grinned, and for the first time I was not charmed by his smile. I felt

low. Lower than cave dweller in a really low cave. I busily stuffed food in my face.

"She looks really familiar," Tony mused.

"Well, she was in Maxim," Dex announced.

I choked on a piece of pork at the same time the twins cried out "Maxim?!?"

I started coughing, my face turning red. Everyone turned to look at me.

"Are you OK, Perry?" Al asked, about to get up.

I nodded frantically and waved for him to sit back down. This was the last thing I needed.

The boys turned their attention back to the photo, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dex was watching me. I refused to look at him.

"Why was she in Maxim? Is she famous?" Tony asked.

"Ever seen the show *Wine Babes*? It's on the Shownet website but also gets viewed a lot on YouTube." Dex was still looking at me as he said this.

"No way!" Matt cried out. "I love that show! I mean, I've seen it. She's one of the babes."

"Is this the video of the girls with wine who recommended what McDonald's hamburger it should go with?" Al asked. I looked at him, surprised. He gave me an explanatory look. "I don't even know how to operate the internet half the time, but I've seen that show."

Dex turned his attention to Al (thank God). "You have? That's excellent! Good to know the demographic is broadening. Yes, that's my girlfriend Jennifer Rodriguez, and I'm the show's cameraman and music composer."

"*She's* your girlfriend? What the hell are doing with her?" Tony said, looking disgusted and obviously referring to me.

"Hey!" I exclaimed indignantly.

Dex laughed. "Management. Gotta do what the boss says!"

My jaw dropped. I looked at Dex, livid. Management? Boss? This whole damn show was his fucking idea, excuse my language, that dirty stinking liar!

Now, Dex was the one who was ignoring my blatant stare. Man, if looks could kill then I was trying to commit a triple homicide with mine.

Al kicked me under the table. I snapped my head at him. He gave me a worried look. I think he thought I was about to blow a gasket. In the past I had been known to blow up a lot at my parents—my temper isn't exactly a mild one—so I guess he thought I might do the same to Dex. He was also probably a little unsure of how to handle a female's wrath. Either way, though Dex and the boys weren't noticing my flushed face and grinding teeth, Uncle Al sure was.

I took a deep breath, composed myself and started shoving more food in my mouth. I suddenly had no idea what the truth was. Was Dex here because he wanted to be or what? Was this the lie or was everything that he told me earlier the lie?

I was so mad.

"Wow," Tony said and handed the picture back to Dex. I was glad he didn't even attempt to show it to me.

The rest of the dinner went swimmingly—for everyone else. I just kept admonishing myself for being attracted to Dex in the first place and for even thinking that he could be attracted to me. Granted, I never

actually had those thoughts, but I figured I must have subconsciously wanted that because I was feeling so stupid and disappointed over his “hot girlfriend.” On the surface, however, I played it cool. I laughed at Uncle Al’s stupid jokes and pretended to be interested in whatever video games Dex and the twins were bonding over. I avoided all eye contact with Dex, though, lest his inquisitive eyes pick up on something. I had no doubt he’d see how I really felt inside, and for the sake of my pride, I would rather he think I was an antisocial bitch than to let him know the truth.

When dinner was over and the twins had convinced Dex to watch a few rounds of some lame zombie game they were playing, I headed for Uncle Al’s liquor cabinet in the kitchen.

Al watched me curiously as he threw the paper plates in the garbage.

“I can make you something, Perry,” he offered sweetly. I felt like he was handling me with kid gloves.

I grabbed a bottle of vodka. Ah, dependable vodka.

“No, that’s OK. I just need some juice of some sort.”

He opened the fridge and handed me a carton of pulpy orange juice and watched me as I made my drink. I was getting very tired of people watching me all day.

“He’s an interesting fellow,” he said quietly.

I took a slow sip of my drink. It was very strong. I wasn’t used to that.

“Just watch out,” he said, looking over at the living room. “I know you are a grown woman now, but you’re still my niece and your parents would kill me if you got hurt.”

"I'll be fine. I can defend myself, remember? Knee strike?" I joked, making a kicking motion with my right leg.

Uncle Al smiled. "Oh, I remember, Perry. I saw your karate recitals. But you know what I mean. This man is a lot older than you and has his own agenda. Have fun. Enjoy this moment. And I really hope you get something out of this in the end. But watch your heart, OK, bella?"

I gave Al a tired look. "Heart? Oh, come on, Uncle Al, I just met the guy. Men are the last thing on my mind right now, especially someone like that. I have a hard enough time dealing with myself, let alone another head case."

He chuckled and nodded. "I know, but what kind of uncle would I be if I didn't try and protect little Perry?"

He reached over for the phone and handed it to me. "By the way, call your mother. She phoned a few times before dinner. I didn't want to tell you before you had some food in your system."

I exhaled grumpily and snatched the phone from him.

By the time I was done dealing with my mother, I was exhausted beyond words. I was just about to go plunk myself down on the couch and mindlessly watch the twins play their games when a huge sound exploded and the whole house shook for a second. The kitchen door flew open, blowing the leftover paper plates off of the table.

“What was that?” I yelled. I hoped it wasn’t the lurch of an earthquake since we were in prime tsunami zone.

Dex hopped to his feet. The windows all started to rattle and Al ran out of his study to the kitchen door.

“I guess the real storm is starting!” he cried out.

He went to close the door but Dex snuck past him and ran out into the stormy night.

“Hey,” Al yelled after him. “Be careful!”

I love storms. I ran out after Dex. Al tried to grab me but I outmaneuvered him.

“Perry,” he warned. But the twins followed me as well, and Al was more than outnumbered. I turned around and saw him shut the door and peer at us through the window.

The weather was absolutely wild; the gusts were coming in so strong and blunt that it was hard to stay upright at times. It wasn’t raining yet but the air did feel weighted, like it was about to let loose at any moment. Thunder’s mighty rumble shook the sky and the ground beneath us. We waited—spread out on the dark lawn looking toward the ocean—with bated breath for the lightning to show its face. A few seconds later (nine Mississippis to be precise) it forked aggressively from the heavy clouds down to the churning waves on the horizon.

It was during the lightening flash that I saw something I had never seen before. In the distance was a solitary island, shaped like a sharp anvil. On top of that mound was what looked like another lighthouse.

Just like the one I had made up.

I froze, keeping my eyes on the spot even as the strike faded and turned my view back to black.

As the boys made impressed noises at Mother Nature's display, I waited for the next strike to happen so I could get a better look. It seemed odd that I had never seen that lighthouse out there before and even odder that I was talking about it earlier. Perhaps I had seen it before through the fog and just never consciously recognized it. Perhaps I read it about it in the history books without realizing it.

Thunder shook the air again with even more power than before; its vibrations rattled around in my skull like balls in a washing machine. I started counting and at five Mississippi, the lightning struck.

This time there were several electric branches that forked out, some sideways, heading in the direction of the offshore lighthouse that was now clearly illuminated. There was no denying that it was there.

"The Tillamook Lighthouse," Dex said. I looked beside me. He was standing to my side and I hadn't even noticed. His cheekbones were obsidian shadows against the house's flickering porch light. I couldn't see his eyes but I could feel them. He was looking at me, not the lightning show.

"Like that story you made up," he said without emotion. "We should go do this. Now."

As he said it, another huge gust of forceful wind knocked me off my feet a little and the thunder growled again, only closer now. It was definitely a sign from God that we should not be traipsing off to the lighthouse, but Dex had already turned and was running back into the house.

"Get some better clothes and shoes on," he yelled over his shoulder, and went into the house. Matt and Tony decided to go back in too.

"You guys are fucking crazy," Tony said as he walked past me. Matt gave me a shove to get me walking with them. He leaned in.

"I agree," he said. "Watch yourself."

This was probably the first time I had ever seen my cousins act remotely brotherly towards me. I wasn't sure if now, of all times, was the best time for them to start.

Once again, Dex and I were heading up the beach toward the lighthouse. But it was already a million times different from the way it was in the afternoon.

For one reason, we had half the equipment. The tripod, sound gear, and lighting were all left behind. Dex had his camera on his shoulder and that was it.

For two, we were surrounded by complete darkness. The moon was in a permanent grave somewhere in that tumultuous sky, and the only light we had was from the lightning as it moved further north of us and inland. Its flashes were growing weaker and farther apart. Lightning wasn't exactly the most pleasant light to find your way by.

For three, we were in the midst of an increasingly violent storm. Rain started to fall sporadically, though we were spared the brunt of a total downpour thus far. The gusts of wind came stronger and more furious by the minute until it felt like the entire contents of the beach were lodged in my hair. Not to mention the number of times it knocked me down into the sand. And I'm no lightweight.

Luckily, the first few times that my boots couldn't grip on the slippery, sliding dunes, Dex was there to

grab my arm and steady me. My iPhone light was completely useless at this point, and I had to put it away, in case kernels of sand got lodged in there forever.

Dex still had a flashlight he had borrowed from Al. It was dinky and fading fast, but it was still a source of light. There was the bulb on his camera as well, but that would be a last resort. Considering Dex said he paid for all of his equipment himself, I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't pull out his camera until we were inside the lighthouse and safe from the elements.

Seconds after brushing away Dex's hand in the dark (he was trying to steady me, don't get any interesting ideas), I found myself losing my footing again. The wind howled into my side and the tip of my left boot got tangled up in the strewn dune grass.

I lofted forward in slow motion and face planted into the sand. It didn't hurt but that didn't stop me from feeling stupid.

I breathed sand for a few before pushing myself off of the ground and onto my butt. My vision was black ink. I could barely see my hand in front of me, especially as the storm was constantly blowing my hair in my face. Even my yellow pea coat, chosen for its bright and eye-catching properties, was a hazy, grainy grey outline.

I expected Dex to give me a hand any moment. But I didn't sense Dex near me anymore.

"Dex?" I said tentatively. My voice was barely audible in the wind. Hair flew in my mouth. It tasted like old fish.

"Dex!" I cried out louder. I listened hard, holding my breath. I could only hear the howling wind and the faint thump of waves carried on it.

With great care, I got to my feet, keeping as low to the ground as possible. It was so disorienting being in the dark with no idea whatsoever what way was east or west, where the lighthouse was, where the house was, or where Dex was. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I started to panic.

The lightning struck again in the distance. It was not enough to light up anything near me but at least I could deduce which way was north—I was facing it.

I turned around, knowing that I had to go south and up a slight cliff if I wanted to get to the lighthouse. That's where Dex had to be. He had the flashlight after all.

And I had my phone. I brought it out of my pocket and turned on the flashlight app, but unless the light was less than a foot away, I couldn't see dick.

Step by unsteady step, I walked forward, periodically calling out Dex's name, until the unstable sand left my feet and I felt hard, sloping terrain. It felt like I was walking up the same area as I had the week before.

I scrambled up the slope, grasping the wet grass and loose rocks until I finally found myself on top of the cliff.

I paused to catch my breath and then made a few quick steps forward in case I got lazy and took a wrong step too close to the edge.

Now what? The ground was mercifully level, but I was still extremely blind. You'd think my night vision would have kicked in, but the most I could see was the shadow of my hand in front of my face.

"Dex! Please, where are you?" I screamed. I did not want to sound panicky, but I felt like I would expe-

rience a massive panic attack if I did not find him, the lighthouse, or some sign of humanity soon.

I closed my eyes for ten seconds and counted down.

I hoped that when I opened them my night vision would be a bit better. The scary thing was, aside from the shelter my eyelids provided from the drying wind, there wasn't much difference between having my eyes open or closed.

When I hit zero, I slowly opened them and prayed they would adjust to the dark. There was none of that. Everything looked the same.

Except...

There was a light. I swear there was. Unless my eyes were playing tricks on me.

I squinted—in what direction I wasn't sure—but off in the distance, there was a warmish glow and it flickered rapidly.

I awkwardly started walking toward it. My legs took careful steps as my arms swung out in front of me in case I walked into something. Or someone.

I pushed all creepy thoughts out of my head and kept my eyes focused on the light. The more I walked, the closer the light became until I was sure it was a campfire of some sort.

Who would light a campfire at a time like this? I didn't know. Maybe it was Dex trying to get my attention.

I was close now. The ground changed into a leaf-littered path. I felt drips on my shoulders and noticed the wind had died down. It was still blowing steadily but funneled somehow. I was in the forest. Not a good place to be, but the light was only a few yards away.

I couldn't make it out until I was right on top of it. It wasn't a campfire at all but a lantern of some sort that was hanging from the branch of a dead tree. The lamp had lit up the closest trunks and left the rest of the woods in eerie shadow.

The lamp was unlike anything I had ever seen in real life. It looked exactly like an oil lamp from a history book.

I plucked it off of the branch and held it above my sore eyes. The glass was tall and shaped like a chimney, old, smudged and burnt in places. The base was heavy and made of metal, with a small adjustable knob on the side. Inside the flame was a clear, bright yellow. It wouldn't have looked out of place in any gothic novel, but here, in a beachside forest, it didn't gel.

Crack.

A branch broke behind me. I whirled around, totally ready to throw the stinky lamp in someone's face.

But there was no one there. I shone the light in the direction of the noise but only saw deepening darkness.

I felt the immense unknown behind me. I whirled around to the other side. I hadn't heard anything but had that feeling that you get when you're watching a scary movie and the person goes into the dark room without checking the corners or behind them. You know that the minute you focus too much on what's in front of you, something comes up and snatches you from behind.

To say I was terrified was an understatement. My arms and legs were tingling with a mad case of goose bumps. My breath was getting shorter by the second. I didn't want to stay in that forest a second longer, but

the open plain and roaring ocean didn't seem like a great alternative.

The only thing I could suss out was that this path in the woods was, in fact, a road. I crouched down and examined the leaves. There were faint marks of muddy tire tracks on some parts of them and the path was wide enough for a car to drive down.

Maybe if I followed the road away from the beach, I would come across a main road or, even better yet, a house. Then I could call my uncle and get picked up.

But who was I kidding? Why didn't I just call my uncle right now?

Excited, I carefully placed the lamp back on the dead tree's limb and fished out my phone. I could call him to explain what happened and where I thought I was and everything would be fine.

Then there was Dex. I should probably wait around and see if I could find him. Better yet, I could call him too.

I dialed Dex's cell number and put the phone to my ear.

It rang twice, then a click.

"Who is this?"

My blood ran cold. The voice belonged to a woman. She sounded like an old Ingrid Bergman.

"Hello? Is...Dex...Declan Foray there?" I asked, heart in my throat.

"No. He's not," the woman answered slowly.

"I—I'm sorry. I must have gotten the wrong number." I looked around me and pulled my coat in closer against the darkness.

"It's not the wrong number, dear. He can't talk right now," she drawled on, her voice sounding rather...wicked.

Ridiculous, I told myself. You dial the wrong number because it's dark out, and you're in the middle of a storm in the woods, and you get some old woman on the line who just wants to talk.

"You're right. I do want to talk," the woman continued. "That's why I called."

Had I just said that all out loud? I put my head to my forehead. It was clammy with cold sweat.

"I called you," I said, barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry. I was calling for my friend Dex and I got the wrong number."

I quickly hung up and stared at the phone for a few seconds. It was my familiar iPhone, filled with music and useless applications, but it felt alien to me.

I was about to press the home button to dial my uncle when my sight began to dim. I looked to the lamp; the flame was going out.

"No!" I yelled and plucked it off the tree. I frantically turned the knob, hoping it would release more gas or wax, or whatever was inside. If it didn't, in a few seconds I would be alone in the dark again.

My actions did nothing. But just as the flame was almost extinguished, I saw something move out of the corner of my eye.

I looked to my left. There was another lamp further down the road. It flickered just as the one I was holding went out for good.

I didn't know how it happened to be alight like that. I didn't know if there was someone down there who turned it on. Perhaps that person had been hiding in the trees the whole time, watching me. Maybe it was the old woman on the phone.

I shuddered at my morbid thoughts. I could either stand in the dark thinking about it, or I could move

towards the light. At least in the light I could see what was trying to kill me. I know there was no indication that someone *was* trying to kill me, but whatever was going on was not normal, to say the very least. And my imagination and adrenaline were on maximum overdrive. I could almost feel a hand reaching out of the dark behind me and grasping my....

I didn't finish that thought. I ran toward the next lamp until I was plucking it off the tree.

It was the same as the other lamp. The tree was the same as the previous tree. Had I ran around in a circle?

No, that was impossible. Thinking about it made my head spin. Lack of thought would serve me well and preserve my sanity.

With the lamp dangling from one hand, I decided to follow the road while I could and get the fuck out of there.

I plowed forward through the heavy woods of wet fir and dying oak trees, musty smells rising up with each step I took. The path ahead shook with the sway of the lamp. The way curved and I was soon able to make out the depression that could have only been created by tires. My internal navigation system was placing me as heading northeast, which was the direction of Uncle Al's and exactly where I wanted to go.

I didn't even care if I left Dex alone on the beach. For all I knew, he could be back at the house waiting for me. Or not waiting for me and playing video games. Or back at his motel room talking to his hot girlfriend on the phone.

That last thought made me angry and I was happy about it. It was better to stew like a jilted teenager

over Dex than it was to fully grasp the terrifying situation I was in.

I ran for what seemed like a couple of minutes, the road steadily curving into the dimness. Then, like before, the flame started to go out again.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” I screamed, the strength of my voice surprising me. It was embarrassing in a way, yet I still hoped that someone was nearby to hear it.

I shook the lamp back and forth, screaming, “Fuuuuuck! Fuck you, lamp!”

Terror and temper at an all time high, I took the lamp and threw it as hard as I could against a tree. The glass smashed everywhere and flickers of flame splayed out onto the leaves and roots. For a minute there it looked like the whole tree would go up in flames; something that wouldn’t be all that bad. A forest fire would at least attract attention. But in the end, the leaves were just too wet and all light faded.

Tears formed at the back of my eyes. I wanted to crawl up into a ball and cry my eyes out. My heart was stressed, my limbs felt numb, and I wasn’t sure how much more horror I could take. I was lost in the woods, in the dark, with nowhere to turn.

The blackness was disorienting as well. Dizzy, I put my hand out for a tree to support me. But my hand hit something that was more soft than solid. Soft and warm. Like wool. Like a sweater. Like someone wearing a sweater.

My hand was on someone’s chest.

I screamed, retracted my hand, and started booking it down the path as fast as I could.

I was running blind. The ground was undulating and I could have smashed face first into a tree at any moment, but somehow my feet kept moving, one foot

in front of the other. Before I knew it, I felt the wind in my face, the taste of salt in the air and wet grass beneath me.

Though it was in the opposite direction of where I was certain the road was leading, I was on the plateau again, where the lighthouse should be. I kept running until my feet started to slip; I instinctively knew I was near the edge.

I stopped, not a moment too soon, and put my weight back on my heels. If the wind wasn't there, whipping off the waves and pushing me back, I probably would have gone over.

I could see the gleam on the crests of the waves below and grasped the height of the cliff as it dropped beneath me. I took in the deepest breath I could and said a silent prayer, willing myself not to think about what had just happened. Now that I was out of the woods, so to speak, and had found the coast, all I had to do was follow it with the ocean to the left of me, and there was no doubt I would come across my uncle's house.

I exhaled and turned north, ready to jog back.

A light came on beside me. It slowly flickered to life in the empty dark.

I cautiously turned my head to my right and saw the lamp—that same oil lamp I had just smashed to ground moments earlier—floating beside me in mid-air.

But I knew better.

The lamp lowered and a face came into my view, lit up by the flickering glow. It was the face of a forgotten man. Dead and bloated. Skin was peeling off in oozing chunks; tiny lice crawled out of its ears and nose. I

had seen that face before in my darkest nightmares. And now it was right in front of me.

"You dropped this," *it* said, a low growl from its lipless mouth.

Whatever strength I had left at that moment, I used all of it to turn and run.

I made it several feet before the ground abruptly gave way, and I found myself airborne. I landed hard on the slope and tumbled down in dizzying circles.

Churning, rolling, falling and falling forever.

Until something broke my fall.

Someone.

They screamed.

I screamed.

I had crashed into them at full speed and was launched again, finally coming to a painful rest on top of a dune. My hipbone bore the brunt of my weight and I let out a yelp at the pain.

"Perry!" A voice yelled. It was also low and deep. I remembered why I was running in the first place. The face of that skinless, pussing man was everywhere inside my head.

I opened my eyes and tried to get to my feet as quickly as I could when a pair of arms came out from the night and grabbed me.

"Perry!"

It sounded like Dex. Oh God, I prayed it was Dex.

"Jesus, Perry. Are you OK?" It *was* Dex. He was on his knees leaning over me.

"It's me," I managed to say meekly. I could barely speak.

I felt him shuffle closer and put his hand on my face, feeling my cheekbones. "Oh, shit. I didn't know where you went. One second you were beside me and

the next I saw this light, so I went over to investigate it and you were gone. I swear, I only took two steps away from you and then I lost you. I didn't know it would be so dark. I used my flashlight, but I couldn't see shit."

He was talking fast, his voice brimming with fear. "And I heard someone scream and I knew it must have been you. I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?"

He moved his hand up to my forehead and brushed my hair off of my face. It was at that moment that I noticed the wind wasn't as intense anymore. The storm seemed to be passing. I could even make out the outline of Dex's face, which was a major relief since I was still afraid of something else.

"Just my hip. And my sanity."

He breathed out slowly. I saw his shoulders fall. He took his hand away from my face and gingerly placed it on my shoulder. My skin felt cold without his hand there.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice so low it was barely audible.

"Can we go home?" I couldn't function like a rational human being out here. I felt like the wires in my brain had short-circuited and fried themselves.

"Of course." He got to his knees and gently helped me up to mine. "Can you walk? Do you want me to carry you?"

I laughed despite myself. "You wouldn't make it more than five feet without dropping me. I'm fine."

He hoisted his camera onto his shoulder—I suppose I may have damaged it when I ran into him, but I honestly didn't give a shit—and grabbed the crook of my arm with his other hand.

We walked quickly, raggedly, back toward the house. For the second time in a week, I felt like Uncle Al's place was the most wonderful sight on Earth.

CHAPTER TEN

The house was empty when we came back in. It was only ten p.m. at this point, but it looked like the boys had gone out somewhere. It was Saturday night, after all.

Even Uncle Al was presumed missing until I found a note he left on the kitchen table: "Gone to play poker at a friend's house."

I was absolutely exhausted. Saturday night or not, and all I could think about was going to bed and sleeping for the next couple of days. Only there were a few things we had to deal with first.

Dex and I stood in the dim kitchen looking at each other. It was kind of awkward. Neither of us knew what to do or what to say. I felt like if I tried I would break down in tears. I was bordered with crazy town.

Dex sighed. "Well, I guess I should be going."

"What? You can't go!" I couldn't help but cry out.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's ten. I've still got to check in to the motel."

He couldn't just leave me alone in this house after everything that happened. I felt the floodgates opening. I turned around and faced the fridge, trying not to blink and trying to control my breath. Dex was the last person I wanted to break down in front of. I wished I had a safety pin in my pocket so I could distract myself with a touch of pain.

"Hey," I heard him whisper and come closer. I waited for him to put his hand on my shoulder, but he didn't. He just stood behind me, probably unsure of what to do, which was every man's response whenever a girl was crying.

But I wasn't crying. I was desperately trying to not let that happen. I sucked in my breath through pursed lips and regained control of my teasing tears. I was a tough cookie. I just had to suck it up.

I turned around and looked at him. I smiled what must have been a very brave but very fake smile. I knew my eyes were moist and fearful, not matching up with my grin at all.

He was staring at me, not looking as confused as I thought he might be, but curious.

"OK," I said. "You go check in. We'll meet in the morning and head back to Portland."

He took another step closer, those relentless eyes searching mine for something, anything, that would satisfy him.

"Is that what you want?" he asked.

No. It wasn't.

"I'm sorry I ruined your show, Dex," I said meekly.

He stared at the ground for a second and shook his head. "You shouldn't apologize. It's not very becoming of you."

He looked up. "Besides, it's not my show. It's our show. Everything isn't lost yet, kiddo."

Everything isn't lost yet. Where had I heard that before?

"Say that again?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

I could see that he didn't believe it was nothing, but he let it slide. He looked around.

"Do you want me to stay here tonight?" he asked. There was no hesitation in his voice.

Of course, I wanted him to stay. I would have asked anyone to stay.

"This will sound stupid," I began, "but do you mind staying until Uncle Al or the twins get home? You can just hang out here, watch whatever you like, play video games. I'll go to sleep in the other room. I just don't want to be alone right now."

He nodded. "Sure."

I felt bad for asking and for preventing him from checking in. "I'm sorry, it's just...I can't even begin to explain what I saw out there. I—"

He took a step towards me, shaking his head. "Don't. Don't explain. I want to hear it, but we can discuss it in the morning. And please don't apologize either. That's a weakness, not a strength. I don't need your apology. In fact, none of this would have happened if I hadn't left your side, so I'm the one who is sorry."

"Dex, it was dark—"

"And so, anyway, you can see why I don't mind having to stay here for a few hours."

"OK," I smiled. The relief that was pouring through my body was amazing. "Thank you," I said starting towards the spare room, "and good night."

"I'll be here if you need anything," he called after me.

I paused at the door to the room before closing it behind me. I didn't have to turn around to know that he was still there.

The next morning finally arrived after waves of dreamless sleep. I say dreamless because I didn't remember anything appearing in my dreams but that didn't mean my mind wasn't running in a half-delirious, half-asleep state the entire night. Despite being so tired that my body literally could not move an inch once I lay down on the bed, my mind still raced on in a horrific rampage. Flashes of the night, the lamps, the face, the trees, the sweater, the woman on the phone—it all kept swirling through my brain. I had so many questions. Nothing made any sense, which is probably why my brain was still trying to process it at three a.m., even when I wasn't consciously giving it an ounce of thought.

Needless to say, I did not feel rested at all the next morning. Especially when I woke up to the sound of rain on the roof and a heavy chill in the air. I wished getting out of bed wasn't an option.

But I had places to go (home, to be precise), though every time I thought about stepping into the

warmth and security of my house and seeing my family's faces, I also had the accompanying feeling of guilt.

Ah yes, me and my guilt. I felt horribly guilty for packing up and leaving this place without accomplishing a single thing. True, I managed to scare the shit out of myself but that would have only been something if I had my camera with me. We would be heading back to Portland knowing the entire weekend was a waste. Worse yet, I felt like it made me look bad and it made my sister's blog look bad. Who would believe me now that I wasn't even able to go into the lighthouse again? I had told the world what we were doing and now there was absolutely nothing to show for it. I was going to look like the biggest fool on earth. Not only me, but Dex too.

After I washed up and put on the barest traces of makeup, I stepped into my only other pair of clothes, which happened to be my comfiest: big socks, tapered black yoga pants, a thick, red, long-sleeve tunic, and a wide studded belt. I knew I looked like I was going to a rock concert in the middle of winter but I didn't care. I just hoped my Docs were dry enough to wear after they had been so waterlogged. It was nice to care about normal things.

I padded my way into the kitchen to see Uncle Al eating cereal at the table. He looked up and smiled.

"Morning! Want some breakfast?"

I shook my head and sat down.

"You look tired. Did you not sleep well?" He sounded concerned.

"I thought I did, but probably not," I said, then eyed the coffee pot in the corner.

Al followed my eye and got up. "Stay there, I'll get this in you stat! You are just as bad as me when it comes to coffee, Perry."

I smiled gratefully. "Was Dex still here when you came in last night?"

"Yes," he said while pouring me a cup of that gorgeous dark liquid. "He was sitting here and writing in some notebook. He said he didn't want to leave you with no one else at home."

He raised his eyebrow over that last sentence. "I suppose that was quite gentlemanly of him. Still think there is something strange about the fellow."

"No stranger than me." I shrugged and sipped back my drink. I immediately felt more awake, which of course was bogus since coffee takes about twenty minutes to kick in. Oh, the power of our minds. Something I should keep in mind, considering.

"Did you end up getting it all done?"

I couldn't help but sigh. "No. We ended up separated. I don't know where I was...a service road of some sort? In a forest?"

Al shrugged.

I continued, "Anyway, by the time I found Dex again we decided to call it quits."

"No ghosts?"

I hesitated. "Well. I don't know. I would like to think my mind was playing tricks on me."

"You know that lighthouse has a very strange history, Perry. There is a reason I keep it boarded up."

Intrigued, I examined Al's face. His sagging eyes were soft but serious.

"Go on," I encouraged.

He leaned back in his chair. "First of all, I must state for the record that I do not believe in ghosts. But

I do believe in evil and I believe evil lives in that lighthouse.”

Uncle Al's eyes turned the shade of coal. My blood did as well. Evil, in my books, was a million times worse than ghosts.

“You think it is ‘evil’ and you let me go in there?” I exclaimed. “What happened to protecting your favorite niece?”

He shrugged again. “I can't tell you what you can and can't do. To you, the idea that it is evil might be as ridiculous as the idea that it is haunted is to me.”

“I don't even know if it is haunted. That's why we planned to go back.”

“Whether it is or isn't to you doesn't matter. It is evil. To me. You see, the lighthouse was cursed from the beginning. It took forever to build, and a few workers died in freak accidents. And once it was finally ready for operation, the light started malfunctioning. They kept trying but it seemed at least once a week, whatever bulb they put in, it would fail to work after dark.”

I nodded slowly. Just as I had said. I *must* have read that somewhere; no way is my imagination that good.

“They planned to build a new lighthouse instead, one that was offshore. Not only would the new lighthouse hopefully work better but it wouldn't get swamped by the fog as often. So the Tillamook Lighthouse just off the beach there was opened. You know of the shipwreck that happened there?”

“I think so.”

“The night before the lighthouse was to be lit for the first time, our lighthouse here failed. For the last time. A ship from Malaysia that was heading up to the

Columbia River had crashed into the rocks beneath Terrible Tilly out there. Everybody was thought to have drowned in the wreck, but that wasn't the case."

"No?" I asked.

"Well, that officially was the story. But it didn't explain why the partially burned body of an ethnic woman was found tied to the lighthouse keeper's bed with strands of kelp."

I shivered violently, thinking of the charcoal tinges on the bed I saw in the lighthouse. Al stopped and gave me a surprised look. I waved it away and motioned for him to continue.

"The lighthouse keeper at the time was nowhere to be found. It hadn't really surprised anyone, though. There had been rumors flying around that he had gone crazy here with the isolation. Back then, there wasn't anything around except for fog and trees. Or maybe he'd been tormented by the ghosts of the people who died building it. Then people started wondering about the supposed curse on the lighthouse. Maybe it had never been cursed to begin with. Maybe he was tampering with the bulbs all along."

"Sure, but why?"

Al took a languid sip of his coffee. "Many reasons. Attention. Boredom. And maybe he just wanted to see a couple of ships crash and burn."

"I guess he got his wish."

"Yes, he did. There had been numerous shipwrecks just off the coast here, but it took a long time for them to stop. They still continued even with Terrible Tilly lit up."

"Well, if they found a body in the lighthouse, how did they know it came from the ship? I mean, was it even normal to have women on those ships? She

was probably a local or something. Caught in some creepy kelp sex game.”

Al looked disgusted at the mention of a kelp sex game. “It wasn’t normal to have women on those ships, but people would be snuck aboard all the time. America, the brave new world, the better life. The body that they found was dressed in foreign clothing and was of Asian descent. So, rumor has it that she must have swam or floated to shore to this lighthouse and tried to find help there.”

I took it all in as much as I could. Things were starting to make sense in the weirdest way possible. Part of me thanked my lucky stars that nothing horrible had happened to me when I was in the lighthouse with Dex. Part of me was more curious than ever to go back and start exploring it all over again. I believe this was a battle between the rational part of my brain and the crazy part of my brain. I hoped my rational part would win.

“So, she comes across...lighthouse man....”

“Old Roddy,” he interjected.

“Right,” I said slowly. “She comes crawling ashore and runs into Old Roddy, who turns her into a sex slave before tying her up and attempting to burn her alive. How do we know she didn’t wash up dead and then he had his...way with her?”

Again, we both grimaced at my suggestions.

“You have a terrible imagination, Perry,” Al chided.

“Well, that’s humanity for you. We are a terrible species.”

“Some of us are terrible; some of us are good. What went on in that lighthouse must have been the height of all that plagues us. Like I said, I don’t think it’s haunted but I think there’s been some sort

of curse, some evil, on that place all along. It's just waiting for another person to take in."

He looked at me sternly, perhaps with a bit of fear in his eyes. I understood what he was saying. I *felt* what he was saying. Haunted by Old Roddy or cursed by some demon, I knew there was something in that place that so desperately wanted me. And the most disturbing thing of all was that I kind of wanted it, too.

"And so what happened after?" I asked. I needed to ignore my feelings. "I mean, did you board it all up? Was it open when you first moved here?"

"I didn't know what we were buying when we first moved here. I hadn't heard any of the tales and neither had Paula (his ex) but I knew deep, deep down there was something terrible about that place. I only stepped foot in it once and that was the first time we all went to explore it. I think Matthew found part of a jawbone from some sort of animal in one of the rooms. The place just felt too unsettled and dangerous, not to mention how weak the structures felt on the second floor. And really, what was the point of having your own defunct lighthouse? It made no sense to me. So, we had it boarded up and pretty much forgot about it. Until last week."

My lip wiggled sheepishly. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"Don't worry, Perry. I'm just glad nothing happened to you."

He watched me intently as if he was trying to suss out whether something had happened to me or not.

"No," I said slowly, "I guess nothing really did happen to me. But since you think the lighthouse is evil,

a lot of the....feelings....I had about the place would back that up.”

He patted my hand. “And I’m glad you’re not going back in there.”

I smiled at him. I felt happy for getting to know my uncle better. Maybe this weekend wasn’t such a waste after all.

“Though I must say,” he started, “I thought last night he—”

Before he could finish that thought, there was a loud knock at the door. I jumped in my seat, the coffee finally giving my heart a boost. Al got up and opened the front door.

“Good morning, sir. I’ve come for the lady.” Dex was at the door, feigning importance. He had a cap on his head and tipped it jauntily.

“Come in, Dex.” Al ushered him inside and closed the door.

Dex walked over to me with a smile on his face. It also gave my heart a jolt.

“Good morning. Care for some breakfast before we go?” he asked.

“Um, oh, sure.” I eyed the clock on the wall.

“Sorry for just dropping by.” He looked at both of us. “I tried calling your cell a few times and I texted you, but there was either no answer or I kept getting the wrong number.”

His voice lowered over that last part. I studied his face. His grin faltered slightly. Was he lying? No one had called or texted me at all that morning. I got out my iPhone just in case and looked it over. Nope. Nothing.

"Anyway," Dex continued, looking at Al. "I'm afraid I've got to steal away your niece now. I've still got to make it up to Seattle for tonight."

"Be my guest. I'm sorry you guys are walking away empty-handed, but I suppose these things always happen for a reason."

"I believe that very much, Uncle Al," Dex said. He looked at me. "Will it take you long to pack?"

I slammed the last bit of coffee down. I hated having to rush. I got up and picked up my bag. "All ready to go."

He gave me the thumbs up sign, then promptly turned on his heel and walked out of the house.

I looked at Al and rolled my eyes by way of explaining his actions. Which I couldn't. So I hugged him goodbye and thanked him for everything, then scuttled outside after Dex.

The SUV was running in the driveway; the steam rising up from its tailpipe gave it a warm, welcome look in the morning downpour.

Though it was only a few yards, I was fairly soaked when I swung the door open and jumped inside.

Dex put his hand on the gearshift and gave me the once over.

"Were you even alive in the nineties? Because it looks like that decade chewed you up and spit you out again," he said mockingly.

He put the car in reverse and sped the car out of the driveway.

"I was born in 1988, for your information. Can't you count?" I spat back at him. I was not in the mood for teasing of any sort.

He turned to me with an excited leer. I could tell he *was* in the mood for teasing.

"You're *only* a child of the nineties if you had your teenage years during that decade. I mean look at you, all Doc Martens and Converse and leggings."

"You're the one with the eyebrow ring," I shot back. "I think it's better to emulate a time period you haven't properly lived through. Otherwise, you're just holding on to the past."

He laughed. "I have no past to hold on to."

He flipped his MP3 player on. To my surprise, Billy Joel came on. "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant," to be precise.

Dex began to sing along.

Here was the infamous voice of Declan Foray. It was smoother, deeper, and more powerful than Joel's. It seemed to float over the words, vibrating with rich tones. It was gorgeous, hypnotic....and so out of place.

He continued to sing until he noticed me staring at him. I must have looked very confused.

Dex turned down the volume. "I do this in the mornings. So where did you want to eat? I saw this great stereotypical diner in town that must serve the blackest coffee this side of the divide."

"Sure, sounds good," I said as he went straight back into song, snapping his fingers and wiggling in his seat.

He did this every morning? I looked at the clock. It was eight-thirty a.m. Where on earth did he get the energy to put on a musical at this hour?

I wasn't complaining, though; it was fascinating to listen to and to watch, once I got past the weirdness of this spontaneous and strange direction. I didn't think it was possible to outshine Billy Joel, but Dex was doing so as he was speeding down the coastal highway toward Tillamook.

He smiled and sang to me, it seemed.

My heart skipped a beat again. Did he know the quickest way to charm the pants off of me was to sing to me?

"I didn't know you could sing," I lied.

"No?" he eyed me suspiciously. "I suppose there are a lot of things you don't know about me, kiddo. But you will...in due time."

Right, I thought sarcastically. I knew that after this weekend there wasn't going to be any more time for us.

A short while later, and after a couple more Billy Joel songs, which Dex unfortunately did not sing his way through, we pulled up next to the diner in Tillamook.

Dex was right about it looking stereotypical. It had a seventies orange awning with God-awful faded font on top: Tilly's Diner. Painted on the dark, tinted windows were images of coffee cups, bacon, and eggs done up in that pebbly glass paint, peeling at the corners. I couldn't tell from the outside if it was even open; looking down the foggy, rain-logged street I couldn't imagine anyone actually being alive in this town, let alone having breakfast.

As we entered the diner, the smell of fat and grid-dled meats hit my nostrils. The door chimed loudly and echoed across the restaurant. There were a few patrons surprisingly, but not surprisingly they were ragged-looking seniors. We made our way to a table in the corner, which was covered by a green plastic tablecloth. The light was dim and terribly unflattering.

"This is charming," I said, sliding in the padded booth across from Dex.

"It is, isn't it?" he said, without a trace of sarcasm.

A rotund waitress came by. She had thick glasses, a bulbous red nose, and seemed to lack a chin. I couldn't look at her face too long without feeling nauseous, so I looked at her nametag: Nancy.

Nancy tossed two laminated menus across the table at us with a hint of contempt. I smiled uneasily at her, and she did not return the sentiment. She turned her attention to Dex.

He flashed her his sly joker smile.

"Good morning, Nancy. How are you on this gorgeous day?" Once again it was spoken with utmost sincerity.

Nancy looked at him suspiciously. "Tilly's big plate breakfast is on special today. Want coffee?"

"We both do, yes, please," Dex said, not even bothering to see if I agreed. I guess he knew that much about me so far. I knew he could sing. He knew I liked coffee. We were like old pals.

Nancy left without acknowledging the order.

Dex looked down at the menu and wiggled his brows. "I think she likes me."

"You would think that," I said somewhat viciously. I couldn't help myself.

Dex put the menu down and looked up at me with a strange look in his eyes. "Are you OK?"

He made me uncomfortable. I regretted saying anything and fidgeted in my seat. I turned my attention to the menu.

"I'm fine."

"Don't shit a bullshitter," he said angrily.

Now, it was my time to be surprised. His eyes looked almost venomous. I was even more uncomfortable now.

Thankfully, Nancy chose that moment to come by and slam two cups of coffee on the table, the dark drops spilling over the edges. "Well?" She looked at us, cocking her brow.

"We'll both have the special," Dex said, without taking his contemptuous eyes off of my face. I looked up at Nancy and gave her an apologetic look, but she took no notice. Merely sighed and snatched the menus up off the table.

I didn't even want the big plate special, or whatever it was, but something told me it wasn't a good time to bring that up. I sucked on my lower lip and gradually brought my eyes to meet his again.

"Remember when you told me I should let you know when you're creeping me out?" I reminded him. "This is one of those times."

He held my gaze for a few seconds more before leaning back in the booth and running his hand through his hair. "This is also the time you tell me what happened to you last night."

Ah. A light went on in my head. Now I knew one thing that made Dex tick—when he didn't know something. No wonder he was so intent on trying to read my thoughts. If he didn't know everything that was going on, it drove him nuts. He must be one of those boyfriends who constantly ask you what you're thinking. It probably drove his girlfriend up the wall.

"OK, then. I'll tell you from start to finish. Just keep an open mind, refrain from thinking I am crazy or delusional, though I may very well be, and don't say anything until I am done."

His dark eyes lightened up a smidge. "I promise."

I sighed, took a long gulp of the terrible black coffee for strength, and told Dex everything, starting with

my dreams, what I made up on the beach, about what Uncle Al told me, and what I saw last night. When I was done, the platters arrived on our table and I was suddenly ravenous from talking excitedly for so long.

I shoved a greasy slice of Canadian bacon into my mouth and said, "And now you know everything that I know. Which is nothing. Happy?"

Dex had stayed true to his word and remained quiet and attentive during the whole spiel. Even now he wasn't saying anything. He just pursed his lips until he resembled a sexy duck before digging into his breakfast. I tried not to watch him eat, even though I could see from the furrow between his brows that he was deep in thought, trying to make sense of what I told him.

We ate in silence. The longer he went without saying anything, the more torn up I felt inside. Did he believe me? Did he think I was mental? Because if there was anyone at this table who was mental, I knew it wasn't me. That said, I did have a dead man trying to hand me an oil lamp last night.

"You actually believe all that?" he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked slowly. "Of course. It happened. I don't know how else to explain it but that's what happened."

I looked at him closer; my mouth dropped a little bit. Was he doubting this whole thing?

"You think I'm making all of this up? This was your idea."

He laughed. "Come on, Perry. We didn't really find anything the first time we were out here. I wouldn't blame you for trying to make a mountain out of a molehill."

I could barely form thoughts, let alone speak at his assumptions. "You think I'm faking it?"

"I think you see what you want to see," he said, and shoveled an entire pancake into his mouth. I was too livid to even consider how gross that was.

I couldn't help but reach across the table and grab his forearm. I squeezed it. Hard. He looked up at me, pancake frozen inside his wide yap.

"Dex," I said, with as much intensity and seriousness that I could muster. "I'm not lying. I don't care about any of this. You found me. In the end, you found me. I'm just telling you the truth. You think that lighthouse is haunted, you're looking for all the proof, but I'm telling you now that I know it is. It is."

He searched my face, while slowly chewing the pancake until it was gone. I didn't know what he thought, but there was nothing more I could do at this point.

"Look," I finally said. "I'll prove it. Let's go there right now. Hell, let's go tonight. We can drive back to Portland after. I need to show you. I need you to believe me."

He shook his head. "No can do, kiddo. I've got to get back tonight."

"Why? What do you have to do? Is your girlfriend so paranoid that she won't let you out of her sight for the weekend?"

He was taken aback at that and managed to laugh. "My girlfriend? Jenn doesn't give two shits if I'm there or not."

That was news to me. I tried to not let that show.

"No," he continued, "I'm just done with it. I don't think I should get any deeper into this whole thing."

I've got enough footage and, with your permission, I could combine it with what you shot last week."

"What if I say no?" I countered, arms crossed.

"I'd say you're being awfully stubborn and acting like a typical young girl who isn't getting her way," he shot back. "And then I'd shrug, wipe my hands clean of this whole thing and go home."

"To your girlfriend who doesn't even care if you're there or not?"

He threw down his napkin. "Why do *you* care?"

"I don't care. I just think you're chickenshit."

"Excuse me?"

I could tell the anger was rising behind those eyes, but I didn't care. I was past caring and beyond angry myself.

"That's right," I reinforced. "I think you are chickenshit. You're happy to call this whole thing off just because you are too scared to go back there because you actually think I am telling the truth. And the truth scares you."

He leaned in closer across the table and this time grabbed my forearm.

"You scare me, Perry," he growled and gave my arm a sharp squeeze. "You."

I eyed his grip. He met my eyes and then very slowly, hesitantly, released me.

"This is going to be a really awkward car ride back home, isn't it?" I asked, a trace of amusement in my voice. The whole situation was ridiculous.

He sighed and leaned back, pushing his plate away from him.

"I hope I'm driving you as crazy as you've been driving me," I said bluntly.

He shook his head and got out of the booth. "I'm going to go pay," he muttered, despite the fact that I wasn't done eating. It didn't matter, though. I had had enough too—of the food, of everything. At least breakfast was free.

I watched him approach the till and decided it would be a good time to get a breath of fresh air before the hellish ride back.

I walked out of the diner and took in a deep breath. I closed my eyes and looked up at the sky, letting the rain fall on my face and feeling like it was washing away the dust that was accumulating inside my brain.

I exhaled through my lips, slowly and fully. I opened my eyes before I started to feel a bit off balance.

There was a woman, an old woman, standing directly in front of me. She was grinning a bright smear of red, waxy paint. The lipstick was on her yellowing teeth. My breath caught on the way out.

I had seen her before, in the lobby of my office.

I don't know how long we stood there staring at each other. I felt paralyzed, unable to breathe, move or talk. She didn't move either, just kept up that demonic grin.

She slowly reached over with a bony hand and placed it on my shoulder. Her hands were covered with many rusted cocktail rings; the white taffeta coat she was wearing had clownish puff balls on it. They were all different colors. Bright yellow, orange, red, blue and green. She really did look like some satanic clown's aging mother.

She started to speak. Rather, her sticky red lips moved but no sound was coming out. She spoke like this for a few seconds before she finally said, "Declan."

What about him? I thought inside my head, the terror competing with curiosity.

"He's got some stories to tell," she whispered, her voice low, almost metallic sounding, as if she was speaking through a phone. There was a familiar accent on certain syllables. "He'll tell you, one day. About what happened to him. You just need to watch him. Watch out for him. Closely. You're cut from the same cloth."

She took away her hand, and with her eyes focused on the diner, walked straight inside as her coat ruffled behind her in the light breeze.

I stood still, my breath coming back. I realized I was soaked to the bone from the rain (and maybe sweat); I didn't care. I looked around to see if anyone else had witnessed what just happened, but there was no one on the wet, grey street.

I looked back at the diner and took a hesitant step toward it, wondering why she had gone in there and if anyone else noticed how fucking freaky she was. I dipped low, trying to see inside through the dark tint and the stupid food paintings. I couldn't make out anything except a few shadows of people sitting down at their tables. I put my face at the window and cupped my hands around it, not caring if anyone inside saw me trying to be a Peeping Tom.

I had thought I saw some sort of commotion, when the door flung open and Dex burst outside. I jumped a few inches off the ground and almost knocked my head against the glass. He looked around him—pure panic in his eyes—and then spotted me.

He reached over and grabbed my arm and pulled me roughly towards him. "We've got to go. *Now.*"

We ran over to the car. My mind was racing. What was going on? Who was that lady and why did she warn me about Dex? Watch out for him? What did that even mean?

I jumped in the passenger seat and barely closed the door before Dex stomped on the gas and the SUV rocketed down the street, veering side to side on the slick roads. I decided to heed her advice. I would keep an eye on him. He looked like a man possessed.

I turned my head to look back at the diner, but Dex yelled, "Don't look back there. Keep looking forward."

Heart in my throat, I did what he said.

"What the fuck just happened?" I squeaked out once he brought the car off of the street and on to the highway.

He just shook his head, his hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were a hard shade of white.

"Dex! Talk to me! Slow down!" I yelled as the car went skidding around a corner, water flying everywhere, my body straining against the seatbelt.

He kept his foot on the gas, speeding in deathly silence.

He reached over and locked all the doors in the car.

Watch Dex, indeed. I felt like he would be the last thing I would ever see.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We were speeding crazily around the wet corners on the 101 heading north. With the doors locked for some inexplicable reason, and Dex refusing to utter a word or even look my way, I was on the narrow verge of having a freak out.

It was obvious that Dex was having one himself as the look of absolute fear never left his eyes. I didn't know what to do. Part of me wanted to grab hold of the steering wheel and pull the car over myself. But as strong as I was, he was no doubt stronger and in this weather I'd probably end up flipping the car, or worse.

I wondered if screaming would help, or if pleading would help, or if crying would help. Billy Joel was still

playing from the speakers, which made the situation even more absurd.

And then it dawned on me. I knew what it was. I knew what Dex was afraid of. It all made sense. He saw it, *her*, with his own eyes.

"You saw her," I said, keeping my voice as calm as possible. "Didn't you?"

Dex's hands tightened on the wheel though his foot came off of the pedal slightly. His eyes darted towards me and then back to the road again.

I leaned in closer, careful not to invade his space.

"I saw her too," I confided. "And I've seen her before that, back in Portland. She told me things."

Dex's brow furrowed. "What did she say?"

"So you did see her!"

He ignored me. "What did she tell you?"

"Pull over and I'll tell you. I won't talk to you while you're like this. You're going to get us both killed."

Just like that, Dex stepped on the brakes and yanked the Highlander down a rural road flanked by waving chestnut trees. The car lurched to a stop and he impatiently flipped the gear into park and flicked off the ignition.

He took off his seatbelt and adjusted himself in his seat so he was facing me. The rain was falling hard on the roof. I had always found that to be one of the most soothing sounds and this time was no different.

"Talk," he commanded bluntly. His eyes were non-committal; his long, wide mouth was set in a grim line. His hat had slid down a bit, adding shadows to his face. The front of his hair flopped onto his forehead.

I reached over and tilted the hat's brim up off his brows and gently smoothed his hair to the sides. His

forehead was hot and smooth underneath my hands; his hair slightly damp from sweat and hair product.

Touching him felt strangely intimate, like I was really seeing him for the first time. I don't know why I did it; I guess some part of me instinctively wanted to soothe him. It was the first time I'd seen him look remotely vulnerable.

I was only a hand's length away from his face. His eyes, though unreadable, were looking deep into mine. I could have easily sat there for a long time just staring at him, holding his gaze. If I imagined hard enough, I could almost see lightning flowing between us in an unbroken line.

But the more I stared at him like that, the more I became conscious of how much of a psycho I must have looked.

I took my hand off of his forehead and dropped my eyes to the seat. The bolts were broken. I noticed how heavily my heart was beating in my chest. What was it about this man that agitated not only my mind but my heart as well?

There was only one way to find out. I took a deep breath and dove in.

"Last week at work," I said, "I was waiting for the elevator. There was no one in the lobby, or so I thought. Then I noticed this lady sitting, totally motionless, on the couch. She was like no one I had ever seen before. Like someone out of a David Lynch film, almost."

I met his eyes again. They had never left mine, like they were waiting for my gaze to return to his. I felt like he was trying to hypnotize me. I was torn between feeling self-conscious and wanting to look away, or to fall deeper into them and lose myself. Then there was

that accompanying feeling of tightness in my chest, the feeling that I wasn't getting enough air, and that I was drowning in this indescribable whirlpool.

I couldn't take it anymore and quickly diverted my eyes to the outside of the car. The rain and interior fog had blurred the windscreen but I could still make out the shapes of the trees dancing in the background. I focused on their movements, all the while knowing he was still looking at me. I continued talking.

"She was wearing...well, it looked like she was dressed for her prom, only she had to be about eighty or something. She had perfectly curled hair—you know, like they did in the forties, set with pins and everything—and a whole face full of the thickest makeup ever. Like greasepaint. And her lipstick. My god, I have never seen such a sloppy job. She even had it on her teeth, which was scary because this freak would not stop smiling at me. Even as the elevator doors were closing."

I shot a glance at Dex to make sure he was still listening. And gasped.

There was a trail of blood running out of his mouth.

He was biting his lower lip so hard that he was drawing blood. His eyes remained motionless and fixed on mine; I started to wonder if he truly was looking at me or if he had gone into a trance, or was experiencing some kind of seizure.

"Dex, you're bleeding," I said trying to hide the horror in my voice.

With a measured movement he languidly licked his lips and dropped my gaze. I quickly reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a tissue. He reached for it in stupor. I pushed his hand aside and dabbed

the tissue on his lips. With my other hand I leaned on his shoulder and bent down so that my face was right in front of his. No lazy gazing this time. I needed him to see me.

“Are you OK?” I asked politely but firmly. “Seriously. Answer me, Dex. Otherwise I'm calling my uncle for help because I don't know what to do with you right now.”

He took the tissue from my hand, balled it up and then tossed it in the backseat. He sucked back on his lips for a few seconds. The individual hairs in his moustache bristled. For a mere moment I entertained the idea of sucking his lips myself. It was an inappropriate thought, above all else, and I pushed it out of my head.

He released his lip. It had stopped bleeding. His eyes looked up at the ceiling and he took in a deep breath. I felt that maybe I wasn't helping. I took my hand off of his shoulder and sat back.

“Two weeks ago,” he started, his voice rich like cream, “I took Jennifer to Bainbridge Island.”

Oh yes. Jennifer. The main reason why sucking his face would be oh-so inappropriate. I sat further back still.

“I actually had to move there from New York at the end of high school to live with...well, anyway, needless to say I had never gone back there since I moved. But Jenn was insisting that we at least pay the place a visit since she had heard there were a few trendy wineries popping up here and there. It's all about the fucking trends.”

I nodded, eager to know more about him.

He continued. “Finally, I just gave up and told her we would go for a day trip. The weather was gorgeous

and it had been fucking fabulous until this last week. And yeah, there were a lot of bad memories still locked up and lurking around different corners but I felt like I was close to putting that part of my past all behind me and moving forward. As we all hope to do. So, Jenn decides she wants to get some gelato at this busy new store, even though I know she's going to start regretting it and throwing up in the bathroom after she eats it. She's lactose intolerant and uses it as an excuse to binge and purge. You know, an acceptable form of bulimia. I hope you don't subscribe to that bullshit."

He wagged his finger at me. I shook my head adamantly.

"Anyway, she goes and waits in this retardedly long lineup for pansy-ass ice cream, because that's all gelato is, so I decide to occupy myself and take a wander down by the docks. If there is anything I can't stand it's waiting for people. Keep that in mind, Perry.

"Yes, where was I? Oh. Yes. So, I walk down to the docks. It's a gorgeous day, and people are milling about doing their usual tourist thing. I'm watching a middle-aged couple getting ready to leave in their sweet sailboat when I see something out of the corner of my eye. Someone has sidled up next to me.

"Now, I love making inappropriate banter with strangers; I seriously do. But on this particular day I don't feel like talking to anyone. So, I ignore this person who's standing beside me. I probably did this for about three minutes or so, long enough for the boat I was watching to motor away. Finally, I just can't take it anymore. For an instant I even think it's probably someone looking the other way. Fascinating how we always assume things revolve around us.

“But I was right to begin with. I see this old lady standing beside me, staring right at me. She is exactly as you have described. Right down to the lipstick on the teeth. She was also wearing something highly inappropriate. So much so that later on when I described what I saw to Jenn, I was shocked that she hadn't seen her. How could you not see an old lady wearing Dame Edna makeup and a gown ripped straight off of Bette Davis's dead body?”

Dex's tale was creating shivers up my spine.

“And...what happened?” I asked, enthralled. I was suddenly very glad we were close to each other in this car. I was about ready to jump into his arms.

He cleared his throat. “Well. I don't know. We must have stood there for some time, though maybe it was just a few seconds. Her smile was so...omniscient. I couldn't think of what to do or say. And the funniest thing was that she seemed oddly familiar. She said some stuff to me that...well, she seemed to know everything about me. She said...”

His voice trailed off and he looked down at his hands. A lock of hair fell forward again. I waited for him to continue, not wanting to pry since the topic seemed to be more than personal.

“Basically, she said that I'd find someone who could help me find what I was looking for. Someone who would help me get closure. Then she started to leave. For some reason, I just couldn't bring myself to run after her, as slowly as she was moving. I could only ask 'Who?' She told me exactly this 'You will find her in the lighthouse.' And then she went around the corner and was gone.”

“You didn't go after her?”

He shook his head, the white of his eyes showing clearly. "I couldn't. All I could think was that I had to get back to Jenn. I didn't want to see that woman again."

"But she knew all that stuff about you, that no one else would know!" I cried out.

"I know," he said. "But I didn't want to know *how* she knew."

"The lighthouse," I mused.

"Well, it didn't make much sense to me until later when I came across...well, you. And it still didn't make any sense, at least at the time. But..."

He looked at me with a tinge of yearning. Maybe it was amazement. Maybe I was seeing what I wanted to see.

"Anyway, I knew I had to get you on board with my idea, no matter what."

"You told the twins that it was your boss's idea and you that were just doing what 'the man' says," I pointed out, still annoyed over that revelation last night.

"I lied," he said simply.

"Why?"

"Because sometimes I lie, Perry. We all lie, even you, but not everyone is brave enough to admit it."

I wasn't satisfied with that unsettling answer. I knew it would only serve to make me second guess everything he did and said now, but I ignored it and urged him to continue.

"So you wanted me because I was the lighthouse lady?"

"At first. And then it made me realize that perhaps it was a sign that I was on the right track. That this was the time to finally break away from *Wine Babes*

and get something started on my own. *Wine Babes* was always Jenn and Jimmy's idea...I was only brought on at a later date when the last cameraman quit."

"Well," I said and sat back against my seat. I wasn't sure what to make of this now.

"Well," he agreed. We sat there in silence for a few moments. Finally, I had to ask.

"And then you saw her. Just now in the diner. What did she say to you that made you freak out like that?"

His eyes flashed with fear. He fixed them on me. They held me there.

"I'd rather not say. Basically..." He sighed and started to chew on his lip. I watched him intently to make sure he didn't draw blood again. "She basically said that this was only the beginning. And that we had to finish what we started."

"And what do you think that means?" I asked.

He ignored me. "Did she say anything to you?"

I felt that if I told him what she said, if there was some truth to it, which I believed there was, it would only put him on the spot. But, unlike Dex, I couldn't lie. He would know.

"She said that you'd tell me what happened to you. Whatever that means. And that I had to watch you." I left out the part about being cut from the same cloth. That notion was too ridiculous to even mention. And kind of insulting.

"Watch me? For what?" He asked, almost uninterested.

"I don't know. She's some creepy clown lady."

He managed a smile and stared at his fingernails. "Yes. She is. But she knows us. She knows both of us."

"She knows you," I pointed out. "I only saw her once before this and now she only talked about you."

"She mentioned you, too," he admitted casually.

My heart flitted a beat. I felt he was about to say something damning, though I had no idea what that could be. She knew something deep, dark and secret about Dex. What deep, dark and secret thing could she know about me?

"What did she say?"

"She said that I needed to take care of you. That you needed me. And that I had to keep an eye on *you*." He laughed at that last part. "I think she was implying that you could be dangerous."

Me? Dangerous? I gave Dex a wildly bewildered look to amplify the doubt and confusion that I was feeling.

"Don't look so shocked," he said calmly. "I can see it."

"See what?"

"I told you that you scared me, didn't I?" He looked me in the eye for a second and then looked away.

Even though I had taken stunt lessons to feel powerful, to feel dangerous, what he just said chilled me to the core. I knew I could be vaguely dangerous with a hooking block, but to have this older, stronger, *weirder* man tell me he was scared of me...well that wasn't right. I wasn't like *that*.

"I'm five foot two and as sweet as a mouse," I said defensively.

He pursed his lips and raised his brow. "You are short. And I know you can be sweet when you want to

be. But there are different kinds of dangerous, kiddo. I'm just going to leave it at that."

I had the need to vindicate myself and show him how sweet I could be. But perhaps that's what he was talking about. I suddenly found myself doubting my very nature.

"Hey," he said and pressed his index finger in between my brows, smoothing out the furrow that must have been there. "It's OK. I'm a big boy. I'll watch out for you if you'll watch out for me. Deal?"

His finger felt hot against my forehead, melting into it like a knife into a warmed block of butter.

"Deal." I smiled, shyly. He removed his finger and looked wistful.

"What now?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"What do you think this all means?"

"Again, I wish I knew. But I think we are meant to find out."

"Meant to? Like fate?" Dex didn't strike me as someone who put too much stock into fate.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But I think you agree that this is much bigger than the both of us. That woman. What's happening to you. These aren't just coincidences. Things are happening for a reason."

"Be that as it may, I still don't know what we're supposed to do about it."

"I think you do. You said so earlier."

Did I? I exhaled loudly and watched the rain patter on the window. It was slowing down and the sky was lighting up a shade or two. It was hard to believe it was just ten a.m. It had only been twenty-four hours since Dex had picked me up from my parents, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

Yes, I guess I did know what I—we—had to do. The only thing that seemed right. Go back to the lighthouse one more time while we were still out here. Film the crap out of that thing. Get it done and get out. Alive.

I didn't add that last word for effect, even though I got goose bumps as I thought it. Something told me that going back this time would be a lot different. A lot bigger. A lot more terrifying. If we went back to the lighthouse, something would definitely go down. There was too much buildup, too many feelings for it not to. The woman told Dex that we weren't finished yet; call me crazy, but I was inclined to believe her.

"When the woman talked to you in the diner, did anyone else notice her?" I asked curiously.

He thought a moment then shook his head. "I honestly didn't notice. I thought I saw the waitress give her a strange look, which would mean the lady is in fact real. You know, not a ghost. If that's what you're asking. But I can't be sure."

"She's either real or she's not. If she's not real, she's a ghost."

"She could be something we are both imagining."

"Is that even possible?"

"I think we'd have to share a conscience if it were. I'm not big on fringe science, though maybe I should start looking into it. Take a community college course on it. They have parapsysics at ITT Tech, right?"

His smile stretched lazily across his face. It pleased me to see the color had returned and his eyes were calmer, pliable. I felt calmer too, just knowing that we were both in this together.

"So, then I guess the only thing left to do is to go back and try again. Today," I announced, newly determined.

"Tonight," was his rebuttal.

"All logic and rational thought points to a daytime visit," I argued.

"You know nothing is going to happen during the day."

"No, I don't know that. You don't know that. Crazy crap happens all the time in the daylight. And it'll be so much easier to catch on film."

"Exactly! It would be easier, hence why nothing will happen during the day. Don't you ever wonder why no one has gotten flat-out photographic proof of a ghost? Because they can't be *seen* that way."

"Is that your theory?"

"Yes. And it's a good one. Ghosts, the paranormal, weird shit. There is never solid proof because whatever we are hunting refuses to be captured. They refuse to be seen by everyone. They exist enough to lure us in and seduce us but in the end will never give us anything solid. It's like...ghost law. Didn't you see *Beetle-juice*?"

"Uh huh," I said slowly. Though an awesome film, I had no idea what he was getting at.

"They got in shit for letting themselves be photographed. I don't think that's too far off. Plus, I think the energies can only be picked up by certain types of people, say people like you. And, well, it just makes for more suspenseful filmmaking."

"I thought you didn't believe there were ghosts..."

"I lie. Remember?"

Oh, right.

"What if we go just as it gets dark?" I proposed, trying to compromise on behalf of my chickenshit nerves.

"Because seven p.m. isn't as scary as two a.m.?"

"Yes. Exactly."

He shrugged. "Fine by me. Then we can head back to Portland as soon as it's over. You do have work tomorrow, don't you?"

I nodded. I did have work. I had that meeting and had almost forgotten about it. I didn't want to go into the meeting looking and feeling like hell, but I knew I didn't have much of a choice.

That being said, of course I did have a choice. I could call the whole thing off and forget about it. Get on with my life. But I didn't want to get on with my life, not the life that I left behind in Portland. Even with the promise of a promotion in the wings, I couldn't imagine going back to the way things were. It was unnerving, horrifying at times, to feel like your grasp on reality was loosening, to be dealing with things that were way beyond anything you understood about life and death. And yet it was so enthralling.

Somehow, by dealing with the dead, I had never felt so alive.

And having Dex at my side helped too. In fact, I don't think I would be able to go on if it wasn't for him. Somehow he made the dreams, the scares, the unknown, all bearable. And now, after talking to him in this cold, rain-beaten car parked on the side of the coastal highway, I felt I was one step better to understanding him.

Well, one step with a million more to go. But still.

He sat back in his seat properly and put on the seat belt. He adjusted his jacket and gave me a smile

that made me weak at the knees. I was glad I was sitting down.

“Shall we head back to your uncle's place and plan this thing properly?”

I smiled and nodded. Not so much at what he just said, though. I nodded to myself, realizing that as I was getting to know Dex better, I needed to be on my guard. Regardless of evil curses, Old Roddy, or Creepy Clown Lady, falling for this man would be the scariest thing of all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Suffice to say, Uncle Al was mighty surprised when we showed up at his door again. As much as he loved the company, I was sure he breathed a giant sigh of relief when Dex and I had left that morning. Sorry, Uncle Al; you can't get rid of us that easily.

Still, he was gracious enough to let us lounge around in his house all day. The boys were up at this point and playing video games, which suited Dex just fine. I decided to make myself useful and relinquish some of the guilt I felt by making an apple pie for the men from scratch. Yeah, I know I don't seem like the type of girl who would slave over a stove (and I'm not;

my cooking skills are atrocious), but I did have my way with the oven.

Besides, it was something to do in order to pass the time. I had already used the twins' internet for an hour just answering emails from people and checking out the blog comments. Ada was back in full-swing and fully immersed in proving her blog was her blog and no one else's. In fact, she had posted every day since I left. It felt like she was trying to bury my posts under heaps of fashion and frivolity.

It didn't really matter, though. I knew I had a back-up plan (Dex), and I was still getting inquiring emails about my adventures anyway. A local ghost hunter's chapter out of Salem (go figure), Oregon, was asking if they could interview me or perhaps come see the lighthouse. I decided to let them stew on that for a while, even though the answer at this point was a flat-out no.

Yet I couldn't help but bring it up with Dex as we sat down at the kitchen table armed with pens and pads of paper, ready to plot out the course of the evening.

"So, a local ghost hunter's club in Salem was hoping I could come aboard their team and perhaps show them around the lighthouse," I said casually.

Dex stopped whatever he was writing but didn't look up at me.

He cleared his throat. "And?"

"I haven't gotten back to them," I answered truthfully.

He opened his mouth to say something but then abruptly shut it.

But then he opened it again. "Well, you can do whatever you want to do. You're a free agent. We haven't signed anything."

He sounded nonchalant, like he sincerely didn't care what I did. It bugged me. I was kind of hoping he would get jealous, as immature and petty as that sounds. It totally backfired.

As if on cue to totally hammer that point down, Dex's cell started vibrating on the table. A picture of Jennifer flashed across the screen. I know my face must have fallen and was quickly turning a vibrant shade of pink. Luckily, he was occupied.

"Hey, babe," he answered.

I could hear her voice muffled on the other end. She seemed to speak for quite a while. Dex briefly looked at me and I tried to project a casual curiosity.

"Yes, that's fine. Seriously, I don't mind. Go do whatever it is you girls do. No problem. I won't be home now until morning anyway."

His eyes flitted to mine but he was looking through me again. His voice was different when he was talking to her. It was a pitch or two higher and none of that sexy, gravely warble. I wondered what that meant, if anything.

"Yes, not yet. OK. Bye."

He pressed the off button and put down his phone.

"OK, where were we?" he asked himself, picking up the pen and putting it to paper.

I couldn't help but ask, "She doesn't mind you staying another night?"

He shook his head. "No."

He tapped the paper with the butt of his pen and stared out the window. "Do you have any more pie?"

"Yeah, there's a slice or two that I put back in the fridge," I said uneasily. I guess he wasn't going to talk about her to me. Maybe I did ask too many questions. Maybe he just wanted pie.

He folded his hands neatly in front of him and put on a very sweet smile.

"Would you mind getting me a piece of pie?" He raised his brows, the wide-eyed manic look coming into his eyes.

I tried not to roll my own eyes and got up. I opened the fridge, bent over and pulled out the pie and a bottle of milk. I waved it at him.

"Want a glass of milk, too?" I asked scornfully.

He was staring at my ass. At least that's what it looked like. I guess when it's the biggest thing in the room, it must be hard *not* to stare at it.

I waited for him to look up. He eventually did and gave me a bright, innocent flash of straight teeth.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Were you staring at my ass?"

"Yes," he replied without hesitation. His eyes were round and crazy. Or playful, if you wanted to use a polite term for crazy.

I shook my head. I put the milk back in the fridge, without bending over this time, got out a fork and put a pie slice in front of him. I could feel the flames creeping up my neck and onto my cheeks.

He didn't seem bothered by it.

"Obviously, I'll need a napkin too," he said matter-of-factly.

"Obviously," I muttered, as I walked over to the drawer and tossed a napkin in front of him. I sat back down across from him and eyed him warily.

He folded it neatly a few times and then put it into his shirt pocket so it stuck out like a handkerchief. Then he dug into his pie, finishing it off in a few mouthfuls. He pushed his plate away and wiped his mouth with the back of hand, apparently forgetting about his napkin.

He noticed me. I guess I was staring again. He'd better get used to it though, it was hard not to when he was acting so...oh God, so many adjectives to use here.

"You're not having anything?" He pointed at me with the fork.

"I don't like pie," I said feebly. That wasn't true, but I don't know why I lied.

"You don't like pie? What kind of person doesn't like pie?" He laughed. He reached forward and actually poked me in the arm with the fork. Lightly, but still. "You can't be trusted."

I instinctively batted the fork away from me. "You're the one with the fork."

He opened up my hand and placed the fork in it. "Now you have the fork."

He sat back in his chair, looked down at his writing and thoughtfully scratched his sideburns. And just like that, it was—

"I just want you to enjoy the pies in life, Perry," he shot in. "That's all."

"I enjoy...pies," I managed to say. I wasn't about to charm him with my wit, that's for sure.

"Pies are a metaphor," he said quickly. He exhaled.

Then slammed his fist down on the table. The pie plate jumped. I jumped. I'm pretty sure the twins in the other room jumped.

"All right, enough lollygagging," he barked. "Let's have a concrete plan of action for tonight. As much I love to fly by the seat of my pants and shit everywhere, I don't think we can afford to do that this time. Maybe next time. Sound good?"

"Oh God, whatever," I uttered under my breath.

"That's the spirit," he mused and started scribbling furiously on the paper. I soon realized he was drawing a detailed layout of the lighthouse.

"Now there were four levels, right?"

I couldn't remember. "I don't know. How far did you make it before I showed up?"

"Not to the top." He finished the sketch and jabbed at the tower with the pen. "We'll be going up there tonight."

So much for having enough "events" to keep us in the safer downstairs levels.

He pointed to the house part of the building. "We'll also hit up the second floor here now that we have the key. And I'd like to get you back into that bedroom again."

I felt sick at that idea, remembering what Uncle Al had told me about the dead woman tied to the bed with kelp.

"I'll try," I said. "But I'm not going to do anything stupid. Got that?"

Dex gave me a quick smile. "Sure."

It wasn't very reassuring. I wondered if that was one of his lies.

We went on to discuss what equipment we would be bringing, what I should say to the camera and where the start and finish rooms were.

"We should probably have a safety word too," he said.

“A safety word? Like in S&M?”

His eyes flashed, animated and bright. “The safety word is ‘Jell-O’.”

God help me if I ever had to say “Jell-O” for any reason.

I gave him a wry smile but his eyes were focused past me on the living room. I turned my head to see Matt and Tony standing there, whispering stuff into each other’s ears and giving us the stare down.

“Can we help you?” Dex asked.

“What’s up, boys?” I added in a more lighthearted tone.

The twins exchanged a quick glance before Matt came forward, eyeing Dex with trepidation.

“Uh, we, um, have kind of been listening to you guys and well...”

“We want to help,” Tony spoke up and joined his brother by his side.

“Okaaaay,” I said slowly.

“We live here. It’s our lighthouse,” Tony went on, crossing his arms defiantly.

Matt rolled his eyes. “We just think we could help you. For your TV series, internet, whatever it is.”

“And how is that?” Dex asked in a school-teacher voice.

Another quick glance between the twins. I could tell Tony wanted to shoot his mouth off, but Matt pulled up a chair and sat down. He looked at Dex for acknowledgement but faced me to lay it all out. Good cop, bad cop.

“Perry, you know Whiz?”

How could I forget?

“Well,” he continued, “he has a small boat up by Nehalem Bay. We were going to go up there later today

anyway to...well, do stuff. So, I was thinking we could take you out on the water. You know, so you guys could get some good shots of the lighthouse from that angle."

The idea of going out on a boat, especially in crappy weather, was not at all appealing but I could see Dex was starting to give it serious thought. It's like Matt knew the magic phrase was "good shots." Seemed the way to Dex's heart was anything that would help his filmmaking.

That, and pie.

Dex looked down at the drawings and then out the window at the grey sky. I waited for him to say something. We all did.

Finally he looked back at Matt and shrugged. "Sure, if you think it's a good idea."

He wanted to appear nonchalant, but I could tell he was probably kicking himself inside for not suggesting it in the first place. I guess some different shots and points of view really would add some variety to the way we've been doing things, and I know the twins had been feeling a bit left out during this ordeal which did happen to be on *their* property. Still, I felt uneasy about it. That was nothing new at this point—I was feeling uneasy just talking about pie—but going out on the water, with Whiz at the wheel no less, just seemed like some sort of accident waiting to happen.

Matt and Tony gave each matching grins. Tony laughed. "Good thing, cuz we already told Whiz about it. He's waiting for us at the dock."

Now it was time for Dex and me to exchange an uneasy glance. Figures we'd have the wool pulled over our eyes by them.

Uncle Al had stepped out for a bit, which was probably for the best. Despite having a thirty two-year-old, a twenty-two year-old and two nineteen-year-olds making their own decisions, I know he wouldn't be too happy to hear we'd be going out boating, and with "The Whiz" no less.

We quickly got the equipment ready, plus found a few extra plastic bags and ponchos for emergencies in case the rain started to pick up again (inevitable), and headed to the twins' truck.

Dex and I got into the narrow back seat, which for some reason had a crab trap taking up half of it. I didn't know what the point of having a truck was if you weren't going to keep things in the canopy part of it but now was not the time to question the twins on anything. Unfortunately, this meant that I had to practically sit on Dex's lap.

OK, maybe it wasn't that unfortunate. The seats themselves were damp and a bit moldy, whereas Dex's leg was firm and warm. Did I mention firm? And warm?

Still, I couldn't help but give him a quick, embarrassed smile for not only having the weight of one ass cheek and one thigh on top of him, but for being so close to him. I was literally right up there in his face.

"Sorry," I said, my voice lowered. Because my lips were only inches from his, the last thing I wanted to do was breathe my stinky breath all over him.

He smirked, maybe thinking the same thing. Meanwhile I was aware that the twins were staring at us from the front.

"Yeah, sorry about the crab trap there," Matt said, eyeing us in the rearview mirror. "We didn't want to get it wet."

No point even trying to figure that out. I just gave them a well-placed eye roll and we were on our way.

Of course, the road was a bit bumpy coming out of the driveway and I was instantly aware again of A) how much I weighed and B) how much my boobs jostled when they hit a pothole. I swear, they almost took Dex out at one point. I had to bite my lip hard to stop myself from laughing about it and avoided looking directly at him, as if he was a solar eclipse.

After twenty minutes of being way too aware of Dex's body beneath me and his hot breath at the nape of my neck, *and* being subjected to nonstop Nickleback courtesy of the twin's God-awful CD player, we finally rolled into a shoddy-looking marina littered with half-abandoned fishing trawlers and stacks of rotting crates.

We piled out of the truck and into the air, which was colder and wetter up here. Whiz sauntered over to us, looking every bit the punk that I remembered from a week ago: a scruffy face, fraying hoodie, and sleazy eyes. Actually, in the daylight, he looked older, too, which didn't bode well considering he made out with my fifteen-year-old sister.

He greeted the twins like they were all from the same hood in Compton and gave Dex and me the head nod.

"What up, ghost hunters?" he said. "Ready to get fucked up?"

"Uh," I said, looking up at Dex. I could see Whiz was going to grate on his nerves in two seconds flat.

"We'll get fucked up later," Matt said, and gestured to the boat. "How about we take the boat out first?"

“Sounds sensible.” Whiz laughed and took a mick-ey of rum out of his front pocket. He took a swig and winked at Dex and me. “It’s my right as a pirate.”

He walked off to the docks with the boys following close behind. I shook my head and muttered, “Can’t believe he made out with my sister.”

Dex laughed. “That fuckwit made out with your sister? Isn’t she in high school?”

I sighed. “Yes, she is.”

He smirked at that. “I know you ladies like the bad boys and all...”

I chuckled, maybe too hard. “I don’t!”

He raised his brow at me, the ring catching the weak light.

“Good to hear,” he said with a sly grin, and started after the boys.

We walked down the slippery dock past leftover fish guts, missing planks, and barnacled hulls until we came to Whiz’s boat. Surprisingly, it wasn’t a shit heap like the rest of the boats seemed to be. It was just a small boat with seats and a tiny cabin at the front that had just enough room for a bed. I shuddered internally. I was glad Ada never got to see this place.

We climbed in, covered ourselves and the camera with ponchos (with Whiz driving, I now knew staying dry wasn’t going to be easy) and roared out of the harbor at such a speed that some old man on the docks was waving his fist at us and yelling at us to slow down.

Once we were out of the bay and into the open ocean, things got wild and fast. I was hanging onto my seat for dear life while Dex had to repeatedly yell at Whiz to take us down a few knots. With each wave we

hit, the wetter we got. If Dex's camera was going to get damaged from this, of all things, there would be hell to pay.

Finally, Whiz got the hint. Or rather, Matt took over the wheel and let Whiz and Tony finish the rest of the rum. The boat slowed to a comfortable enough speed that Dex was able to start shooting the shoreline.

We were quite a ways off from the lighthouse, but the pounding grey waves, bustling white surf, and stretches of pastureland and beaches were quite photogenic. And on the other side of us off on the horizon was the faded speck that was the Tillamook Lighthouse. Terrible Tilly.

I pulled the poncho tighter around me. I felt miserably damp and just a tiny bit seasick with each lurch of the boat. To turn my mind off of it, I watched Dex as he lined up the shots, adjusted his camera and panned around us.

"Are you going to need me to be in the shots?" I asked above the roar of the motor. Not that I was filming material at the moment with my damp, matted hair and garbage bag-type attire, but I could have used something to do to keep from throwing up. Funny how I'd never gotten seasick before.

"I think I'm good," he said, keeping his eye on the viewfinder. "These will probably just have some narration over them later."

He gave me a quick, curious look. "Are you OK?"

I was about to answer when Whiz decided to shove the bottle of rum underneath my nose.

"This will fix you up!" he yelled, slurring already.

Well, that was enough to get me to move. I got up to my feet unsteadily, as the boat rocked all over the place, and made my way to the back.

"Hey, careful," Dex said, grabbing my arm to steady me. I motioned for him to let me go. I felt uncomfortably close to vomiting.

I walked to the opposite edge of the boat, where the Pacific stretched to meet the matching sky, and went down on my knees.

"She's gonna hurl!" Whiz yelled from the front.

"Shut the fuck up," I heard Dex tell him.

"You OK, Perry?" Matt asked, ignoring the two.

I motioned for them to just stop talking and leave me alone and concentrated on not losing my lunch over the side.

The bottom of the boat soaked my knees, but I didn't care. I gripped the edge with my hands and put my head over until all I could see was the sloshing grey surf beneath me.

The guys were all yammering on about something, but somehow my brain was cooperating with me and slowly drowning them out, like my ears had a dimmer switch.

I kept my focus on the churning ocean, concentrating on the myriad of muted, cold colors and the shapes the creamy seafoam was creating with each crest and fall. The waves of nausea continued to pass through me though. The only thing that felt worse was the uneasiness and panic that also coursed through my veins. I was fearful and I didn't know what of.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the salt air. The roar of the engine, the boys, and sound of the waves subsided until all I heard was the throbbing of my own heart in my head.

“Perry.”

It was a female voice.

I opened my eyes and looked. All I could see was the ocean.

“Perry,” it said again. It was eerily familiar and coming from in front of me. From the waves.

“Perry, are you OK?”

Could I be hearing things?

I slowly turned and looked at the rest of the boat. Dex’s back was to me, still filming the land and the lighthouse, which was now coming into view. Matt was focused on driving while Whiz was yapping to him about something. Tony seemed to be paying attention to him while eyeing me in his peripheral vision.

“Perry, help me,” I heard the voice say again from the direction of the water. My eyes widened and heart slowed. I had no choice but to look back over the edge of the boat.

In the water, it looked like something dark was moving beneath the waves. At first it looked like a passing shadow of a crest, or manipulation by a white cap. But the more I stared, the more I could make out something.

Was it an arm? It moved like one.

Then fingertips. I could see a hand just below the water’s surface.

I tried to scream, to say anything, to move. But I couldn’t. I could only watch a hand reach out of the water, turning from a watery shadow to a physical object. It was shades of green and white, but it was real, with blue veins running up the arm.

And then the arm was joined by another, like a headless person was treading water. I was riveted to

the spot where the head should be. I could see the swirling shadows beneath it.

One of the hands started wagging a finger at me. I casually recognized the blue nailpolish on its finger. I had that same shade.

Still gripping the edge with my hands, I slowly got to my knees until I was standing right above and peering down at the body.

The head broke through the water.

It was *me*.

I was looking at myself floating in the water, eyeing myself down with dead, glassy eyes that streamed green fluid.

"Save me, Perry," she said. My mouth dropped open. I felt like my body was going through a freefall. My mind reeled.

And before I could react, she lunged out of the water and grabbed hold of my poncho with both hands.

I let out a scream that shook my bones to their marrow and was pulled forward over the railing of the boat.

The water rushed up to greet me, turning black before it was about to swallow me into its depths.

Then I was grabbed from behind and pulled back up, just as my face could have kissed the waves.

I fell backwards into the boat. Someone caught me.

"Perry!" they yelled and the boat came to a full stop, throwing me further into the person.

It was Tony. He was gripping me hard from behind with both hands, while Dex had his hands on my shoulder, gently shaking me. It literally felt like forever before my eyes could actually focus on him.

“Jesus,” Dex swore, his eyes a mix of being worried and being pissed off.

“What just happened?” I asked, my breath finally coming back into my body.

I looked over at Whiz and Matt, who were watching me from the helm, looking more afraid than concerned.

“I think you had another incident, Perry,” Tony said quietly.

Dex gave Tony a sharp look but I ignored him. *What had happened?*

I turned to look back at the water. The waves rushed past as they always had. There was nothing there.

“You didn’t see her in the water?” I asked meekly, knowing how crazy that made me sound.

“See who?” Dex said. Tony let go of my arms and Dex pulled me in a little closer to him. “Who was in the water?”

I shook my head. “Forget it.”

“Seeing things again,” Matt spoke up.

“Shut up, Matt,” I said. Though frankly, it was kind of true.

I thought Dex would have jumped all over what he said, but he appeared to let it slide. “We were calling for you. You were just staring over at the water. I’m guessing you didn’t hear us.”

I nodded in agreement. I was feeling stupider by the minute.

He sighed and led me over to the seats. He snapped his fingers at Matt. “I think we should head back now. Do you have a lifejacket? Maybe a blanket or something?”

Tony disappeared into the cabin and came out with a lifejacket that Dex attempted to put on me.

"For your safety," he said in all seriousness.

"Phfff," I tried to swat him away. "I'm not a baby."

Nonetheless, I was freaked out to my very being and let him put the jacket on me. Then he wrapped a smelly plaid blanket over me and the boat was heading back to shore.

"Guess you shoulda had some rum after all," Whiz joked.

It didn't sound like such a bad idea anymore. My mind was having trouble processing the events that anything to just shut it all down would be welcome.

We rode back in silence for most of the trip until Tony tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hey, do you still see that shrink?" he asked. It was a dicey question but his voice sounded innocent, like he was just curious. It didn't mean I wanted to talk about my meetings with Dr. Freedman, our family psychologist.

"He wasn't my shrink; he was my whole family's shrink," I said calmly as if it wasn't a big deal.

"He was only there cuz of you," Tony pointed out.

"Hey, bro!" Matt warned from the wheel. "Not the time or place to talk about it."

Tony shrugged. "Sorry. It's just, if you are seeing things again, maybe you should give him a call."

"Seeing things again?!?" I repeated rather viciously. I had no clue what he was talking about.

I looked over at Dex and rolled my eyes to indicate it was all bullshit. Dex didn't look too convinced.

"You've seen things before? What kinds of things?" Dex asked.

I sighed. "I haven't. I wasn't." I looked at the twins. "I don't know what you're talking about, Tony."

"Dad said you were sick. Like crazy, and that your parents were freaking out, like, almost going to commit you or—"

"Drugs, Tony. It was just drugs," I spat at him defensively.

"Drugs?" Dex and Whiz said in unison.

"Oh, like anyone on this boat is one to talk," I said. "So I did some drugs in high school. Everyone does."

"Not everyone goes to a shrink because of them," Matt countered.

"I did," Whiz said. The first valuable thing he'd said so far.

"See," I said. "Parents freak out. I was a big pain in the butt. I was an idiot, what can I say? But that's in the past. It's all fine now. I'm fine."

No one looked convinced except Whiz, who went back to not caring. Dex looked the least convinced of all. He kept staring at me trying to figure me out, trying to read my thoughts.

I leaned back in my seat and rolled my head towards him. "Look. I'm tired. And sometimes you see things when you're tired. You should know that by now."

After all, it was only that morning that we were both faced with the impossibility that is Creepy Clown Lady. What was the difference?

And what if I wasn't seeing things? What if I really had seen someone in the water? A ghost of myself. Was that even possible?

Dex chewed on his lip for a few counts, holding my eye contact, before saying, "Are you sure you can handle this?"

“What the fuck?!” I swore. I surprised myself and everyone else on the boat. Even Dex was taken aback.

“Of course, I can handle this. What was the point of talking about all that stuff this morning? We decided that this is what we’re going to do, so this is what we’re going to do. Just because I saw something in the water doesn’t mean I’m not stable enough to keep going. We had a deal!”

“All right, it’s OK. Calm down,” he said, reaching over for my shoulder.

I inched it out of the way. The nerve of him telling me to calm down.

“It’s just that you almost fell into the ocean, and your cousins here are talking about how you used to go to a shrink. I know, it was the drugs or whatever unfortunate thing you were into as a teenager, but you know some knowledge about this would have been nice before we started.”

I let out a sarcastic guffaw. “Oh, so now the fact that we don’t know each other that well is becoming a problem. I see.”

He knew I was right. I had been trying to get nothing but information out of him this whole weekend, and now that the tables were turned, it was a problem for *him*.

“OK, kiddo. Just checking,” he said, and started reviewing the footage he had shot, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was getting darker by the minute when we returned to the marina and headed back to Al's. He wasn't all too happy we left and turned an angry shade of purple when the twins told him about going on Whiz's boat. Thankfully, the beef he had was just with the twins. He left Dex and me alone to do our own thing, though I could sense Uncle Al knew something was up with me.

Obviously, I was more on edge than ever before. I tried to push the incident on the boat out of my mind, but every so often the image of myself in the water, reaching for me, jolted into my brainwaves like a subliminal message.

For better or worse, I really didn't have the luxury of dwelling on it. We had a job to do and as afraid as I was, I was far too stubborn to back down. Especially now. We had a show to shoot and it wasn't going to film itself.

By the time the sky turned a resolute shade of charcoal, Dex and I were ready to go.

It had grown dizzyingly wild outside in the last hour, with the wind coming from all directions, but it was nowhere near as chaotic as last night. We wanted to be as prepared as possible this time, so I wore Dex's black cargo jacket on top of the rest of my clothes. It wasn't camera-friendly like he had hoped, but he also didn't want me to get pneumonia.

I didn't mind. I figured all black would possibly hide me from all the ghosts. Plus, it smelled like him...really nice.

We stood outside the back door, side by side, watching the distant waves catch the yellow light projected from the house. Dex seemed to be deep in thought, with his camera hoisted up on his shoulder. I didn't want to think about what we were about to do until I absolutely had to.

Finally, he turned to me; his face shadowed by the light and glistening from the light rain.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked gravely.

"As ready as I'm going to ever be," I answered.

He reached over, picked up my hand with his and held it in front of us. "I'm not letting go of you this time."

His voice was gruff. I knew he meant it.

I nodded. He squeezed my hand. It felt warm and strong. I squeezed back, hoping I never had to let go. I

wanted him to put his arms around me and make everything OK.

Instead he nodded. "Let's go shoot some ghosts."

He walked off, pulling me along by the hand, and soon we were on the beach heading south with determined strides. I felt like we were heading into battle. I could almost hear dramatic WWII music in my head. That, and the theme song from *The Matrix*.

We made it through the dunes and up the embankment without much fuss, aside from me slipping at a point or two. Dex held on to me every time. In fact, his grip tightened after each near miss so that by the time we actually found ourselves in front of the lighthouse, my hand was numb.

I didn't know if the third time would be a charm or not. I didn't see any crazy lamps in the forest, no bloated dead guys on my trail, and Dex was in my sight and within my grasp the entire time.

But that didn't stop the sight of the "darkhouse" from taking my breath away. It felt like the fear was bringing tears to my eyes.

Dex looked up at it, taking it all in. He slowly let go of my hand, which responded with pins and needles, and took his camera off his shoulder. He began to adjust it and shot me a sympathetic smile.

"I'm not leaving your side. Jell-O, remember?"

I smiled bravely for him, appreciating how normal he could be when he wanted.

He brought the key out of his pocket and got it ready in one hand. With the other he flicked on the camera light.

I winced at the brightness and shielded my face with my hand.

“Sorry,” he said. “You’ll have to get used to it. Ready to roll?”

Not at all, but I nodded just the same. I almost felt like I had stage fright on top of everything, but realized I should embrace it with open arms. It was a lot easier to deal with than death fright, for lack of a better phrase.

Dex hit the record button and gave me the countdown with his fingers. Go.

“We are standing in front of the Rocky Point Lighthouse,” I said loudly, “about to make the first journey inside with a professional camera crew, hoping to capture on film any traces of Old Roddy or any other terrifying spirits who may inhabit these ocean-battered walls.”

We decided to have very little narration on film and fill in all the historical facts with voiceovers afterward. Dex just wanted me to explore naturally and react to what we saw. I immediately knew I was going to look like the biggest chickenshit. I felt hypocritical for calling Dex one earlier.

He passed me the key and took the camera behind me. The key was cold, long and slimy in my hand. It felt unnaturally heavy.

I slowly walked to the door and inserted the key into the lock. It clicked; the sound was powerful, even in the howling wind.

I put it in my pocket, turned the rusty handle and pushed the door open.

It opened halfway, as the groan and creak of the hinges echoed across the dense room. Dex's light shone forward, illuminating the dust particles in a greenish haze and casting the blackest shadows to either side of me.

I know Dex wanted me to walk into the room. But I couldn't. I still had time to run away. I didn't have to go back inside this place, which had become larger than legend in my life. A place that held everything I ever feared and didn't know I feared yet.

I'd experienced a lot this last week. It felt like it was more than I had ever been through in my entire young life. But at this moment, standing at the threshold of a dead, evil place, it felt like I was at the gates of hell. Hell with an ocean view.

Dex cleared his throat behind me. It grounded me somewhat. He had said he wouldn't leave me. I had to bet my life that he wasn't lying.

I stepped into the room and opened the door the rest of the way.

My boots thudded against the wood floor with each step. I stared at my feet. It was interesting that even though we had been in the room the day before, our footprints were already gone, covered up by a thick layer of dust like we had imagined the whole thing.

I looked at the camera. "So much dust. Is that normal?"

Because of the light I couldn't see Dex's expression, so I knew this would be the start of me asking the camera lots of stupid, unanswered questions.

I walked into the middle of the room by the large solid table and looked around, breathing into the sleeve of the coat and trying to avoid the musty air.

SLAM!

The door, suddenly agile, swung shut. The event almost ruptured my anxious heart, as the impact rattled the paintings on the wall. There was a metallic clatter and I spun to see two pots and pans falling off

of the stove and onto the floor. The noise was deafening.

I looked at Dex by way of the camera so he could see how frightened I was. I didn't like how I couldn't see his face but there wasn't much I could do about that.

The dust around the pans began to settle. I had a strange urge to put them away neatly, but the idea was absurd. Might as well start vacuuming too.

Our plan had been to walk around the room and explore it for any cold spots or weird objects. After that, we would go into the hallway, ascend the stairs to the second floor and poke around the unexplored room above us. Then we'd move to the dreaded bedroom I was locked in last week, and finally all the way up the winding staircase to the tower top that used to hold the "cursed" light, the soul of this very station.

I kept all of this in mind, using it as a sort of script to follow, which made me focus more on the technical task at hand instead of the potential pant-shitting scenario.

Speaking of the task at hand, I had been staring motionless at the fallen pots and pans long enough, totally ignoring the fact that the camera was rolling. Dex was probably going to have to edit the shit out of the footage when we finished.

I inhaled long and slow through my nose and walked over to the darkness on my left. Dex followed me with the camera, lighting my way until I reached the armoire that I had seen yesterday.

It was tall and made of solid wood that matched the table. I opened the doors and hoped a dead body wouldn't fall out.

All I saw inside were a pair of rubber boots and a hooded jacket, the type a fisherman might wear. But even though the jacket looked old and the threads were coming loose in several places, it was free of dust, as were the boots. I didn't know if was worth mentioning or not.

"Looks like they've been used recently," Dex said, his voice echoing rough and emotionless in the room. Guess it was worth mentioning.

I nodded. "Yeah, no dust."

It was weird, but I wasn't about to start thinking that they actually had been used recently. I know Dex said that for dramatic effect. I *hoped* it was for dramatic effect.

"Can you light up the rest of the room?" I asked, pointing into the void.

Dex aimed the camera and light at the walls and ceiling. Everything looked menacing in the grainy beam; even the chairs stacked up in the corner resembled a horrific scarecrow to my impressionable eyes. I didn't find anything else too interesting in this room. It remained dead and quiet.

The light came back to my face and then moved slowly over to the door, which led into the hallway. I went over and opened it. Slowly. For effect.

It was just as I remembered. The room across from us (where I busted in the window) was closed, but I knew it wasn't worth a look. Dex stepped into the hallway beside me and lowered the camera. It felt nice to feel his body against my shoulder. I felt so disconnected when he was in filmmaker mode.

"You're doing good," he whispered.

"Thanks," I said, looking at him even though I couldn't see anything with the light pointing the other direction.

"Let's go upstairs. Go slowly, though. With the light coming from behind you probably won't be able to see where your feet are stepping."

I turned to the staircase as he put the camera back on his shoulder and shone it my way.

"OK. Just promise you'll stay right behind me. I don't want a repeat of last week," I pleaded.

"No?" he asked, sounding surprised.

I looked behind at him, the light blinding me. "Are you serious? Of course, no."

The beam moved with the shrug of his shoulders. "It would be more entertaining."

"This isn't supposed to be entertaining," I said.

Dex was silent for a moment. "Then what is it?"

Standing at the foot of the staircase was not the place to have this conversation. I couldn't believe he was concerned with making this "entertaining."

"It's scary," I admitted.

"It's supposed to be scary. That's why we are here. For the show. Remember?"

"Yeah, but you said we were *meant* to come here."

"Yes. To film the show. Get out of that little head of yours and think about the big picture here."

I glared at him in the dark. "Well, I'm scared, OK?"

"So what? We need you to be scared."

So what? What did he mean "so what?" I gave him the stink eye and with as much bitterness as I could muster said, "Why do I have to be? How come you aren't afraid?"

"Because I find life to be scarier than death," he replied matter-of-factly.

And with that, I heard the sound of a door creaking open from the second floor.

I froze and listened harder, heart pounding in my chest. Dex remained still too, his breath sucked in.

The sound continued a lot longer than seemed possible, like the door was revolving around on its hinges with no door frame. My eyes rolled around searching the staircase blindly.

The creaking sound eventually came to a stop. I looked at Dex, wanting more than ever to see if he held any fear in his eyes, but as usual, I only saw his light.

I bit my lip. I knew he would want me to go upstairs as planned but I didn't know if I could, especially now. I stood staunchly, my face firm, and refused to move.

Dex reached out and *pushed* me lightly so my foot had to land on the first step to stabilize myself. I shook my head violently in protest and braced myself as he nudged me again, harder. I had no choice but to go to the second step.

Again, the movie *Vertigo* flashed through my head. I was Kim Novak refusing to go up the bell tower while an obsessed Jimmy Stewart forced my every step. What would Dex do when we were at the top? Would I fall out the window to my death?

I was suddenly afraid. Rather, I was suddenly afraid of Dex. Earlier he seemed to be on my side, but now he was practically forcing me to go up the staircase to the source of a sound that was obviously caused by someone or something that was inside the building with us. Something evil. Every bone in my body told me to get the hell out of there. But if I wanted to run, would he let me?

Maybe his handsome face and obscure charm were blinding me. It hit me again, with more urgency this time, that I didn't know Dex *at all*. Beneath those deep eyes and high cheekbones he could be a complete psychopath. Actually, I was sure he was at least a partial psychopath. And an admitted liar to boot.

Would he stop me if I tried to get out of here, I thought madly. I had no doubt he would at least try. I cursed myself for being so immature, for thinking this man really cared about me, some young chunky girl he had just met. I had always seen the uncertainty stretched beneath his hooded lids; I had chosen to ignore this.

I guess while thinking this, I was staring him in absolute horror because the light came off of my scrunched face and Dex reached out to put his hand on my shoulder. I recoiled slightly from his touch. I couldn't help it. Now, there were two things to be scared of and I knew at least one of them was able to hurt me.

"Hey," he whispered. "Come with me."

He squeezed past me until he was two steps ahead on the landing. He aimed the camera light forward with one hand and reached for my hand with the other. He squeezed it, though I felt no comfort in his grasp this time, and continued to walk up the stairs, pulling me up with him.

If I let myself go limp, would he drag me to the top, step by step?

I followed reluctantly, not about to start dragging my feet. The blackness and unknown nipped at my heels. I needed to feel the lack of fear that Dex seemed to have.

We got to the second floor to find both doors closed. From the sound we heard, and the fact we never heard a click of closure, I expected at least one of the doors to be wide open.

This was better somehow. Perhaps what I heard earlier was all in my head. After all, Dex never acknowledged the sound to me verbally. Maybe I was slowly going crazy. I kind of preferred that idea.

We stood there as the light bounced between both of the doors. I knew he was expecting me to choose a room to enter. I also knew he would make that decision in the end.

He aimed the camera at the room I could not get into last week. I took the key out of my pocket and turned it over in my hands, feeling the weight and reveling in what was known and real. This simple key was of this world. What it opened may not be.

Dex didn't say anything. He was waiting. I could be stubborn and refuse. From the rigidity of his stance, I knew he was preparing for that.

I stepped toward the door and quickly inserted the key and turned the lock. I looked behind me at Dex, not the camera, which I could see was recording again.

"Nothing will happen to you," he said, sounding certain.

Famous last words.

I turned the latch and pushed open the door. Dex's light shone inside but revealed nothing except green dust particles floating in the blackness. I couldn't see any furniture or walls. I couldn't even see a ceiling; the light just penetrated blankly until it eventually faded off in the distance.

The room was freezing cold, too. The air flowed toward us fast and sharp, and smelled fresh, like the ocean after it rains.

Against all better judgment, I walked three steps into the room and stopped. I had stepped onto something soft and slippery. I peered down at my feet but the light didn't extend that far.

I looked behind me at Dex.

For a second I thought my eyes had adjusted to the dark because I could kind of make out his silhouette as he remained in the doorway. Then I noticed the light on his camera slowly fading. The red recording light now flashed blue and yellow.

"What's going on?" I yelled.

He turned the camera around and looked at it, the blue and yellow lights flashing on his face. I could see he was confused, if not scared like I was.

"I have no idea," he said. He tapped the side of his camera, the noise sounding dull. Unlike the rest of the building there was a distinct lack of echo in this room.

Suddenly the hallway lit up with that brilliant white light. Dex shielded his eyes with his arms and stepped out into the hall, looking up the staircase where the light seemed to be coming from. My eyes burned from the light's invasive reach. Dex's body seemed to fade before my eyes. The light was that bright.

"It's coming from the tower," I heard him say, quietly and strangely muffled, like I was hearing him from underwater.

Then Dex did the unexplainable and walked out of my range of view and headed in the direction of the stairs and the direction of the light.

“Dex!” I screamed, but the words fell short of my mouth. I ran out of the room after him, my feet landing with a faint splash, as if the floor had become wet within the last few seconds, and burst into the blinding hallway.

I screamed for Dex again, not knowing where to turn. I looked back into the room I had left. It was still black where the light didn't bleach it.

Then Dex's voice came from up the staircase sounding so small and so far away. He was yelling, but I couldn't understand what he was saying; it was just sounds without words.

I had two choices. I could make my way blindly to the left and head back down the stairs and get out of the building. Or I could go up the stairs toward Dex and the horrible light.

I knew what he would do. He would leave me. I decided to do the opposite of that.

I stormed onto the staircase, my feet tripping on the steps as I made my way up, and my arms blindly leaning on to the seeping walls for balance and support. Within seconds, I found myself on the next level but only saw more blinding light. I remembered a desk on this level, something worth exploring if things were relatively normal, but now I could only think about finding Dex and getting us both out of there. I didn't know how it was possible for a light to cover every inch of shadow and blow out all detail to high heaven. I felt like I was running around on a strip of overexposed film.

I continued up the staircase, yelling for Dex the whole way. I couldn't hear anything except my own ragged breath and screaming heartbeat. My ears felt

like they were clogged with cotton balls, which dis-oriented me even more.

The top of the staircase led to more stairs, much like those you would find in a castle turret, and I kept going up, up and up. The stairs finally ended. I stepped wildly onto the landing and fell hard onto a cold, wood floor. My elbows caught the brunt of my fall, and I felt the immediate burn of scraped skin and a million splinters.

I slowly pushed myself up and brought my knees under me. Then the light, that horrible alien light, began to weaken. Details and shapes filled my eyes until the light had as much power as your average 150-watt bulb, and I could see exactly where I was.

I immediately wished I was blind again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With the light now faded to a weak glow, I found myself on the top floor of the tower. The light was actually coming from the huge lighthouse bulb itself, a round satellite dish-type glass bulb perched delicately on top of a tall white wooden base. This was the infamous cursed light that failed to illuminate the shores for passing ships, year after dark year.

The circular room had tall walls that were glass from waist-level up and interspersed by rounded white metal beams.

The rest of the room was empty except for a single chair on the other side of the light. From my position

on the ground I could see the feet of a person occupying the chair.

I wished I was staring at the bottoms of Dex's black Fluevog boots with the swirl pattern at the laces. But this was not the case.

I was staring at a right foot clad in a yellow rubber boot, the very same I had seen in the armoire downstairs. The toes of the boot tapped in slow motion on the floor with a piece of kelp running down it. Motionless, I absorbed the details of the scene while deciding what to do next. I did not want to look up, get up, or move.

But I couldn't keep lying on the floor either.

I watched the foot rise and fall soundlessly, as the piece of kelp swung subtly from side to side, sticking to the sides of the boots. I knew this wasn't Dex. This was Old Roddy, the lighthouse keeper. I had no time to figure out whether Old Roddy was a ghost or a real person. Somehow the latter was scarier.

"Aren't you going to get up?" a metallic, sick voice asked, seemingly from inside my head.

I pushed myself up onto my knees and looked up and around the light fixture.

I took in every detail.

A man sat on a wooden chair that splintered along the armrests. The man wore the same raincoat I had seen downstairs. It was done up halfway and a fuzzy woolen sweater poked its way out up until the neck. The hood covered the man's head and I couldn't see his face, though I could make out the white shine of jagged-looking teeth.

The teeth glinted at me.

"Where's Dex?" I asked, my voice warbling. I swallowed hard. "Who are you?"

"I am the lighthouse keeper," the man replied. Again, the voice came from inside my head and the teeth did not move. "You are trespassing on my property."

"I'm sorry," I managed to say, "but this lighthouse has been in the property of Alberto Palomino for many years now. I'm afraid you are on his property."

I don't know where I got the balls to say that and I immediately regretted the decision.

Before I knew what was going on, the man stood up so fast that he knocked the chair back from under him. It landed on the floor with a deafening clatter that enveloped my ears.

In a flash, dark strands of kelp flew out of the man's sleeves—for he had no hands—and wrapped their sticky, pulsing ropes around my neck. I reached up at them with my hands to pull them away, but before I could get a grip, they tightened around my larynx and I was yanked forward at a startling speed.

Unable to breathe or move, I was thrust face-first into the lighthouse keeper. I was inches away from the black void of his hood and as he spun me around and slammed the back of my head hard against the glass window, I caught a glimpse of his face in the passing beam of the light.

It was the one in my nightmares. Its skinless, pussing purple mealy surface was so close I could see the tiny broken veins that snaked along top of his shattered nose. Amazing the things you notice when you're on the verge of death.

The kelp pulled tighter and I felt my body growing limp. I couldn't feel the ground beneath my feet as they dangled helplessly. He pulled me closer to his face again; his jagged mouth, which reminded me of

an old dog's, with his black puffy gums and misshapen fangs, was open and I shut my eyes, fearing I was about to lose half of my face to it.

Instead, he paused and I was soon moving backwards again. I braced for impact as the back of my head cracked. I felt precise pain and the sharp tickle of glass as the window smashed and sprinkled down the back of my neck and coat. I felt rain and wind on my face as the window gave away behind me to the night sky. I opened my eyes and saw the moon as it peered out from behind a cloud.

The moon was on its nightly orbit across the earth. I found a soothing comfort in that. It was so soothing I almost didn't notice I couldn't breathe anymore and that everything on the sides of my vision was growing black. Was this it? Was this to be my death? To be thrown out of a lighthouse by a dead man?

With the last ounce of strength I had it was tempting to laugh at the absurdity of it all. It was also so tempting to just let go. The waves crashed bleakly on the cliff below and I had no problems joining them.

The blackness almost enveloped the moon now. My eyes were closing.

And then I heard something amongst the crashing waves, the shattering glass, the wind, and the grunts of the lighthouse keeper who still had his slick strands along my neck. It was Dex.

He was calling my name.

"Perry! Perry!"

It floated up on the breeze and filled my ears and brought me back to life.

Instead of laughing, I took that last bit of strength and kicked up with my legs. I felt the satisfying crunch of a broken jawbone as my right foot con-

nected with Roddy's face and felt him fall back under the impact.

I twisted myself forward from the waist and out of the window as the kelp fronds released my neck.

I landed on the floor and took in the biggest gulp of air possible. Roddy lay on the ground twitching. He yelped in pain and once again I found myself wondering if he was dead or alive. Either way, I wasn't about to hang around to find out.

I staggered past him toward the staircase just as one of his kelp fronds flew out and almost grasped my leg. I leaped over the snaking strand and landed with a thud on the first landing below. My shins felt shot, but I managed to keep going until I ran down a couple flights of stairs.

Far away from the dying light everything was black, but I could still sense I was on the floor with the desk.

"Dex!" I screamed. "Dex, where are you?"

I heard a thump from upstairs and a sick, sopping sound. I knew Roddy was crawling down the stairs with the wet kelp trailing behind him.

I ran down the stairs to the next level in a few leaps and screamed for Dex again.

"Perry! I'm in here!" I heard Dex's muffled cry to my left. I ran forward and hit the door to the room that we were in earlier. My feet were immediately wet.

With no other light available, I fumbled for my iPhone and shone it at the door. Water was pouring out from the bottom and flooding the hallway. The door handle jiggled as if being pulled from the other side. Dex had to be in there.

"Dex!" I pounded on the door.

"Perry, the door's stuck. I think a pipe burst. It's flooding in here, and fast!" he yelled from the other side.

I frantically pulled at the door but it didn't budge. The sound of Roddy slowly coming down the stairs only added to the urgency.

"Dex, there is someone else in here with us. Roddy. He tried to kill me. You have to get out. There's a window; you'll have to jump out of it. I have to go down the stairs."

"Don't leave me in here!" I heard him scream, and my heart dropped a little. He was finally as terrified as I was and with good reason.

"I'm sorry, Dex, I can't get in and we have to get out now!"

A THUMP, followed by a clatter.

I spun around and saw an oil lamp slowly coming down the stairs toward me. It slowed and curved as it rolled and then proceeded to crash down the rest of the stairs to the floor below. It landed around the corner with a smashing sound and the tinkle of glass.

The staircase below me lit up, and within seconds hot flames licked the walls and made their way back up the stairs toward me.

"Perry, the key!" Dex cried.

Of course. In my oxygen-deprived, fear-rattled brain, I had forgotten that I had the key.

I heard the thump of Roddy come closer. He must have been on the landing just above me. The flames had now climbed to the landing below me. And I had the key to get us both out of here.

Holding my phone with one hand, I fumbled in my pocket with the other, my stumpy fingers feeling around awkwardly for our saving grace.

I pulled it out and stuck it into the lock, turning as quickly as I could. Before I could even pull on the handle, the door flew open and a huge gush of seawater flowed out into the hallway. The force knocked me over and the stream pushed me into the bedroom across the hall. The water was about four feet deep even as half of it flowed down the stairs to the lower level.

I could feel the fluttering branches of hundreds of kelp slapping my body in the dark water and I started kicking out frantically. It was black in the bedroom, but there was light coming from the flames that still climbed up the walls of the staircase as if it had been doused in gasoline. I got to my feet and called for Dex.

I heard splashing and saw a silhouette appear hunched over in the doorway. I would have thought it was Roddy had I not seen the outline of the camera being held high above his head like a trophy. Even when faced with drowning, Dex still had his priorities straight.

He called out for me, and in seconds he was standing in front of me, the water only coming up to his chest. He reached over for me, his free hand coming for my shoulder.

“Oh, thank God, I—” he started.

Before he could finish his sentence and before his hand had a chance to grasp me, I felt the snaky grip of kelp around my ankle. I screamed, but it was too late.

I was pulled under the water at an alarming rate. With my eyes open I could only make out blackness through the murky water, highlighted by dancing orange fire above the surface. My lungs were filing with the saltwater, choking me.

In my disorienting underwater prison, I heard the muted yells of Dex and the faraway sound of glass breaking.

I also heard the voice.

"I've been waiting for another like you," came the disembodied metallic sounds of the lighthouse keeper through unseen underwater channels. "There just aren't enough ships anymore."

I felt another kelp strand wrap around my waist and pull me farther away from the surface. As impossible as it seemed, I knew I was drowning in a bottomless ocean. And unlike earlier, the liquid that filled my lungs this time overtook me. I kicked weakly, and tried in vain to wriggle out of the hold around my waist.

Maybe this is what the old lady had in mind for me. Maybe death was my fate here. It caught up to me again.

Suddenly, I felt a pair of hands feel the top of my head. One of them grasped my hair and pulled. The pain at the sharp motion felt vague. The other hand reached under my left arm and pulled.

With one giant yank I was pulled above the surface. Dex's voice filled my ears. My eyes fluttered open and I saw the flames that surrounded us, the heat filling the air above the cold water. I coughed up the water in my lungs and gasped fruitlessly for air, only to fill my lungs with hot smoky dust.

"Can you jump?" I heard Dex say as he pulled me to my feet. His voice seemed like a million miles away.

I nodded weakly, not even sure what he was asking.

He pulled me over to the porthole window, now smashed open. He wanted us to jump out and onto the cliff below.

It seemed like madness but we had no other choice. Though the water in the building started receding and no longer flowed in from the other room, the fire was unstoppable and almost growing off the water at times, as if it was fuel. If we stayed a few minutes longer, we would no doubt be burned alive. And that's just what Old Roddy wanted.

Dex looked out the window to assess the situation below, then turned and put his hands on both of my shoulders. He looked me square in the eye.

The light from the flames danced across his wet face. He had a large scratch running down the side of his forehead. His eyes were fearful but determined as they peered mercilessly into mine. I noticed he didn't have his camera on him anymore. *Maybe saving me was more important*, I thought vaguely.

He shook me slightly to get me to focus.

"I don't want to leave you, but I'll have to go first. That way, I can break your fall," he said.

"Go limp," was all I managed to say, remembering the most important thing about taking a fall from my stuntwoman classes.

He nodded, then he leaned forward and kissed my forehead in a very surreal moment. The sudden display of affection was touching and terribly out of place.

And just like that, he dropped out of the window.

I poked my head out of the porthole to see if he was OK. He had landed and rolled over, clutching his arm, but was at least alive.

He looked up at me. "Come on!"

I began to pull myself up on the windowsill.

"You can't leave," the voice moaned from behind me. It sent chills down my spine, despite the roaring heat of the advancing flames.

I turned around as quickly as I could in the water.

The lighthouse keeper stood in the doorway, his outline stark against the orange light. The flames now snaked into the room along the door frame and steadily climbed the walls like pyrotechnic hands searching for something to ignite. I knew I had little time before the flames engulfed me completely.

I also knew I couldn't leave just yet.

Though he was completely across the room, I had no doubt his kelp tentacles could easily ensnare me again with a flick of his wrists. No one would save me this time. I had to know how this was going to end.

"Why me?" I asked. "Why did you start coming for me? In my dreams, to this place. What do you want!?" I shouted over the roar of the flames.

He grinned, white teeth against the black void. "I was told you would listen."

"Who told you?" I barked as the fire came closer. I could hear Dex yelling for me to jump from outside.

"She told me you would listen and that you would come. That you'd help me. That you'd free me. I've been so lonely. I've been waiting for someone like you."

His head lowered as if he was genuinely sad. I felt nothing for him.

"You'll have to keep waiting," I said, determination rising in my voice.

He looked up with a sneer and the kelp came flying my way.

With less than a second to react, I jumped up on the window and launched myself off the building.

I was going to land to the left of Dex and for a second it looked like a group of bushes might break my fall, but that wasn't the case. I managed to get in landing position in mid-air and then go limp as my legs, knees bent, slammed into the ground. Thankfully, the grass was wet and soft, and I was able to propel myself off of it and go into a low roll.

I rolled for two revolutions before I sprang up to my feet again. I looked behind me and saw the cliff end less than a meter away.

Dex, who had been yelling this whole time, ran over and grabbed my arm.

"Are you OK?" he asked frantically.

I was OK, so far. I looked up at the porthole to see Old Roddy's shadow standing there, looking down on us. The flames now had completely taken over the room and were licking at the edges of his raincoat.

"Do you see him?" I whispered to Dex, not taking my eyes off of the horrific sight.

"Yes, I do," Dex replied quietly and to my relief.

As flames engulfed Old Roddy, he extended his arm out of the window and pointed at the sea, just as he had in my dreams.

I turned to look. There was nothing there except the steady, beaming swirl of the Tillamook Lighthouse doing her duty off shore.

I looked back up and saw him slowly disintegrate into the fire.

Dex turned to me. "We've got to get out of here."

He grabbed my hand and scampered over to the nearby bushes. He reached in and pulled out his camera. He must have tossed it outside before jumping out of the window. The bulb for the light had broken,

but other than that it looked like his gamble turned out OK.

With the camera safely tucked under his arm, we were off and running northward, skirting around the lighthouse as far away as we could. The sound of sirens began to fill the air in the distance and the severity of the situation hit me. Uncle Al's lighthouse would burn to the ground because of us. How the hell were we ever going to explain this?

We slipped and slid down the cliff and made it to the dunes when a large explosion threw both Dex and me into the sand. Instinctively, I covered my neck with my hands as small pieces of debris rained down.

We lay there for a minute. I could feel Dex on the wet, crunchy sand beside me and heard him move, obviously alive.

When I saw the fragments of the blown lighthouse had stopped falling, I lifted up my head and looked at him. He was covering his head with his camera, which was surely embedded with deep grains of sand now. From my shattered lens last week to his scratched-up camera today, this place was not audio/visual friendly.

"Are you OK?" I asked. I tapped him with my hand.

He rolled over on his back, groaning and wincing, with his eyes shut in discomfort.

"Where did you learn to roll like that?" he muttered, his voice low and broken.

"What?" I asked, spitting out sand.

He opened his eyes wide, as the flames from the explosion danced in his dark pupils.

I rolled over on my back, lying beside him, and watched the night sky as the flames from the ligh-

thouise danced high into the darkness. The rain stopped. You could hear the crackling flames and sirens that were still far enough away.

We lay there, watching the light show while catching our breath.

Finally, Dex replied. "When you jumped out of the window. And when it exploded I was ready to cover you, but you had already propelled yourself across the grass and were all in protective ninja mode or something."

"I've...taken some classes," I answered breathlessly.

"Uh huh," he gasped and took in a deep breath.

I rolled over and looked at him. He rolled his head to his side and looked at me. I found myself speechless. I honestly couldn't even get over the fact that we were alive.

He slowly nodded. He looked sleepy, but I saw the understanding beneath his drooping lids. I felt like I could just stare at him and he would just know everything I was thinking.

He reached over and grabbed my hand. He squeezed it and held it in the air above us, about as victorious a gesture as either of us could manage.

I gave him a small smile.

"Are you hurt at all?" he asked.

I didn't feel anything until now. I wanted to stay in my sandy grave, but I knew I had cut the back of my head when I was thrown into the glass. I felt the bones in my shins throbbing, my elbows burned, and my throat felt raw from where the kelp squeezed me.

Also, my lungs wheezed, my eyes stung, and in general my whole body felt like a truck had hit it.

"I'm OK," I said though.

He giggled. "Well, shit, aren't you just Mary Fucking Wonderwoman. I think I broke my fucking ankle from the fall, not to mention when I cracked my head on the stairs." He reached up and rubbed the cut that ran along his forehead. When he stopped laughing to himself he took in a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The sirens were close now and I could see red lights illuminating the trees in the distance.

"What do we do now?" I asked, hoping I could just close my eyes too. Maybe I would magically appear in my bed at home and everything would be dealt with.

Dex grunted.

"I mean, what do we say?" I continued. "Do we go back to Uncle Al's? Do we stay here and wait for help? How do we explain to Al, to anyone, what the hell just happened? 'By the way, some dead fisherman attacked me and blew up your lighthouse?'"

"Dead?" he scoffed, eyes still closed.

I nodded. "He was dead, Dex. I mean, he wasn't *alive* alive. He wasn't...like us."

Even my truthful explanations sounded weak. How could I even begin to explain what happened to anyone when I couldn't even explain it to the only person who was there?

"He's dead now," he said without a trace of interest. "And I honestly don't think that should even be mentioned. No one was supposed to be in that lighthouse at any rate, let alone some bat-shit crazy Captain Highlander."

He opened his eyes and rolled over on his side to look at me. "There will be no trace of him. Whether he was already dead or not."

"We'll have to lie."

“No. We'll tell the police what we were doing there. Tell them I flicked a cigarette down the hall and that started everything. Places like this have all sorts of fuels and chemicals still inside them.”

For emphasis, he fished a package of cigarettes out of his pant cargo pockets, scrunching his face up in pain as he did so, and pulled a cigarette out. I noticed how shaky his hands were before I really noticed what he was doing.

“You don't smoke,” I told him. I hadn't seen him smoke at all this weekend, let alone smell it on him.

“I do and I don't. My toothpick friend comes out when I'm in quitting mode,” he spoke, the cigarette bobbed between his subtly duck-like lips. He pulled out a gold lighter with his other hand from some other unseen pocket and lit the cigarette in one trained swoop. He took in a deep puff and blew the smoke out in rings that joined the flames in the sky.

With a whoop, the urban sound of a police siren or an ambulance (I often confused them) filled the air and echoed out of the trees.

Dex coughed. “OK. Time to do this.”

He got to his feet without making a sound, but I could tell he was in a lot of pain.

He put his hand on his lower back and looked down at me. From his jaunty stance and wiggling cigarette, he reminded me of the silhouette of the Captain Morgan's pirate.

“Do you want me to carry you?” he asked. I didn't know if he was belittling me or just being polite. I decided on the former just in case.

“No,” I said forcefully, and sat up. My abs burned with the crunch, especially the sides that bore the brunt of the kelp's pull earlier.

I got to my knees and then slowly stood upright. I knew the hit on the back of my head would probably make me feel woozier than normal. I didn't dare touch it, though, in case Dex made a big deal about it. All I wanted to do was get home.

And get to work. Oh God, *work*. The meeting. That thought alone had me starting to sway a bit. Dex reached out and steadied me with one hand and leaned down.

"Can you make it? I wasn't kidding about carrying you," he said.

Well, it's better to be safe than sorry with you, isn't it, I thought. I shook my head, took in an invigorating breath of half ocean air and half burning fuel, and straightened up.

The top of the embankment now swarmed with people in uniform and emergency vehicles. I guess a lighthouse explosion was one of the most exciting things to ever happen here.

And now we were caught in the middle of it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I thought talking to the curious police officers, EMTs, firefighters, and the local news reporter, plus Uncle Al and the twins, would have shed a lot of doubt on our story but they all seemed content to buy it. One firefighter said a fire starts every week because of leftover engine oil or whatnot. What I think he meant was that drunken sailors got stupid but as long as they believed what happened without questioning us, we were golden.

And then there was Uncle Al's reaction. I felt extremely guilty for destroying his historic lighthouse. None of this would have happened had his stupid

niece not shown up at his door with some slightly unhinged filmmaker.

But Uncle Al looked nothing short of relieved. I guess he really did find the place evil, the cradle of some demonic, horrible spirit. I understood how right he was about that and I think he did too. While we were explaining what happened, I noticed he had a suspicious look in his eyes. It wasn't accusatory, but rather a look of knowing there was more to the story than we were telling everyone. It actually calmed me, as if he was in on the secret without knowing.

Either way, Dex and I were very lucky to not only walk out of there alive, as people kept telling us (oh, if they only knew...), but also to be excused by the authorities without any further inquiries.

That's not to say the ambulance attendants excused us so readily. They had to do a thorough once over on both of us to make sure we didn't sustain any burns or injuries.

Dex and I sat beside each other on the back bumper of the ambulance as the two medics poked and prodded. Dex's female attendant asked him if he was taking any medication. Dex hesitated and then said a name I couldn't pronounce, something "zapine."

The woman did a double take.

"It's for heartburn," Dex said, voice flat and eyes steady until the attendant just nodded and went back to her business.

The hard-nosed Chinese guy that I had was making me nervous. He touched me in places, asking if it hurt, and then gave me the look as if he didn't believe me. Half the time it did actually hurt but I knew the more I admitted, the more they would want to take me to a hospital for further inspection. All I wanted to do

was get back home. I started to regret sticking around and wished Dex and I had just booked it back to the house and played ignorant.

While Dex's attendant left to go get something out of the front of the ambulance, my head was tilted back rather roughly. The guy—I think his name was Jesse—peered at my neck suspiciously.

“How did this happen?” he asked, referring to my neck bruises.

I could see Dex out of the corner of my eye craning his head to look over in my direction. We never had a chance to explain what had happened to us earlier. I guess he never knew what happened to me at the top of the tower just as I still didn't know what happened to him in that room.

I had to think quickly. “Sexual asphyxiation. You ever tried it? You should.”

Though my head my tilted back and I couldn't see Jesse's face, I know he was shocked. In fact, I could tell he looked over at Dex for an explanation. I hoped Dex would throw the attendant off this trail.

“It's a little game we play,” Dex said, his voice laced with subtle sarcasm. I wanted to high-five him for his answer. “You know how it is.”

“Uhh,” the attendant replied, and brought my head forward. He suspiciously looked me in the eyes. I gave him a look as if he was the one who was the freak.

I nearly made some caustic David Carradine remark when he slid his hand down the back of my head. He stopped at where my hair was wet from being smashed against the glass. He took his hand away slowly and we both stared at it in the ugly light of the ambulance. It was red with blood.

I looked over at Dex. He was staring at me, eyes wide and mouth dropped a little, but didn't say anything even though I could see words were forming at the tip of his tongue.

Jesse held his hand in front of my face and said matter-of-factly, "You're bleeding. And you have glass in your hair."

At this moment I could have chosen to cover up the matter with some inarticulate lie or I could flat out tell him I didn't know how it happened.

"That was my fault." Dex suddenly spoke up. "I panicked when I pushed us out the window. I guess I didn't check that it was a clean break."

I managed a smile at Jesse and didn't risk looking at Dex in case Jesse caught on.

Jesse shook his head and motioned for me to go farther into the ambulance.

"Is she going to be OK?" Dex asked. I could almost hear a hint of boredom in his tone.

Evidently, Jesse heard it too. He gave him the stink eye. "I'm going to clean out the wound and check for a concussion. I think you're free to go now."

Dex shrugged and walked away. As Jesse sat me down on a stretcher, I could see Uncle Al and the twins coming up to Dex. They all looked my way and Dex began explaining something to them. Then Jesse closed the ambulance doors, shutting me inside the small, sterile room with him. I felt very uncomfortable.

He stopped in front of me and narrowed his eyes. There was something very vindictive about this guy, like it was his life's mission to mistrust everyone he meets.

"Is that really what happened?" he asked seriously.

“What, with my head?” I wasn’t about to tell him the truth, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t have been satisfied with it anyway. Or he would have recommended I be sent to a different kind of hospital.

He put a stiff hand on my shoulder. I eyed it with disdain but he didn’t remove it.

“Did your boyfriend hurt you?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Jesse the attendant looked annoyed at my outburst and took a step back.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I said. “He’s my...well, my partner. I mean, sorta. And like we said, we were filming in the lighthouse hoping to get a glimpse of something supernatural. When all hell broke loose, the only thing we could do was bust out of the window. I may have hit my head when I went through. I was probably concentrating on not, you know, dying, and didn’t notice.”

“May have...” he said slowly, his head moving from side to side as if he had a slow-motion tic.

“Look, are you going to fix my head or not? Isn’t that your job?” I spat out wearily. I was growing more exhausted by the minute and my brain swirled with a million events that I refused to process.

“Fine. Just trying to help.”

He flipped my head down and proceeded to sift through my thick hair, mopping crap up with swabs and pads that reeked of alcohol and stung like hell. Miniscule pieces of glass rained down to the sticky floor like tiny snowflakes.

Ten minutes later he finished with a hardcore Band Aid and a square of gauze he stuck awkwardly at the back of my head. This would go down well at work tomorrow. I could just imagine Frida going “Well, Perry, the job would have been yours but we decided

to go with someone who didn't look like she drank a liter of tequila over the weekend and consequently hit her head on a bathtub during some kinky sex game."

"Can I go now?" I asked impatiently.

"You really should go to the hospital to get checked out for a concussion," he answered.

"Maybe I will when I get back to Portland tonight. I just want to go home."

"You won't be able to drive."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, lucky for me, he's driving." I gestured in the direction of the closed doors, hoping Dex was still outside. I felt so confined inside this fluorescent-lit doctor's office on wheels.

"Technically, he shouldn't be driving either," he said morbidly.

"I'm sure he's—"

"Not on his medication, anyway," Jesse finished.

Medication? I must have looked confused because Jesse raised his eyebrows in mock surprise.

"Oh. You didn't know about his medication?" he mused casually. "Olanzapine is a very powerful antipsychotic and typically intensifies when patients partake in smoking."

My heart grew cold. Dex was taking antipsychotics. I almost joked to myself on how they didn't seem to work very well when I realized the reality of it.

"Antipsychotic?"

"Primarily used to treat schizophrenia. You don't know this man very well, do you?"

"That's none of your business," I snapped and stood up. I fought the wooziness that tried to take me over. I walked hunched over to the doors and opened them.

I was met with the cold night air. The fire was pretty much contained and, except for a few glowing embers here and there and some leftover strands of foundation, the lighthouse was reduced to a black pile of smoldering mush.

Uncle Al and Dex stood beside each other, facing the ambulance. When they saw me both their faces lit up.

Al's was one of fatherly love and concern. But Dex's face...I had to look at him with new eyes. I stood still at the base of the ambulance wanting to observe him from a distance.

His shoved his hands in the pockets of his slick, slightly oversized raincoat, which still had particles of sand sticking to it. I noticed now how it was slightly too big for him, making him look shorter than he was. Dirt had splashed across his black Fluevogs and up on to his grey cargo pants. He stared straight at me, head tilted down in the usual fashion, maybe wondering what I was thinking or doing. His cheekbones cast dark shadows down the sides of his face; his long mouth was closed and twitching slightly, snaking across his jaw. His eyes were intense but curious as they stared back at me, hard little dots searching in his deep-set sockets. His black brows inched toward each other and deepened his omnipresent frown line. The rest of his wide forehead contracted as did the freshly bandaged cut. A longish strand of wet black hair had flopped forward and stuck to it.

Slowly, he opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue. It was about as large as his mouth and lay flat against his chin. His eyes never changed.

Jesus. Who was this guy?

My pulse quickened. I started to feel woozy again.

"What's wrong, Perry?" Uncle Al asked, coming for me.

I shook my head and bent over slightly, hands on my knees.

"She should go to the hospital, just in case," I heard Jesse say behind me.

I slowly turned. He stood on the bumper and stared at Dex. Dex looked back at Jesse, slowly put his tongue back into his mouth, and casually extended his middle finger at him.

"OK, Perry," Al said putting his arm around me and not noticing the Dex/Jesse scene. "Let's take you to the hospital."

"I'm not fucking going anywhere!" I cried out, the bitterness in my voice surprising me. Everyone looked shocked. Al took his hand off of my shoulder. Dex remained in the background and put his hand back inside his pocket.

"All right, we are done here," Jesse said as he rolled his eyes and slammed the door shut. I let out a sigh of relief as he walked to the front of the ambulance and got in.

I looked at Al apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Al," I said meekly. "I'm fine, really. I just want to go home. I'm sure Mom will be sending me off to the hospital anyway as soon as she sees this war wound on my head."

He sighed but nodded. "OK. You're old enough to make your own choices, I guess."

He looked at both Dex and me. "Come on. I've got the truck here, if the boys haven't already left. I'll take you back and we can all forget that this...disaster...ever happened."

Those were the sweetest words I could have ever heard.

Back at the house, I packed up as quickly as I could without overexerting myself. Turns out it was midnight; my iPhone died a horrible death in the flood so I hadn't known the time. Chalk up an electronic expense for me and another reason why the promotion was so important.

I called my parents and explained that I would most likely be coming home in the middle of the night but to not wait up for me. Of course, I knew they would. And of course, my father was yelling at me over how irresponsible I was. Thankfully, Al got on the phone and calmed his brother down, explaining mostly everything and leaving out the injured part. I figure my dad asked about Dex, too, because Al said, "She seems to be in good hands. Yes, he's a trustworthy guy."

Speaking of the "trustworthy" guy, Dex had actually been in the bathroom the whole time I talked on the phone. It would have been weird at any other time but after what Jesse had said, I started to worry.

Was Dex really psychotic? I mean, they wouldn't call them antipsychotics if he wasn't. And if he was, what kind of psychotic was he? Schizophrenic? Did he hear voices? Was he suicidal? Was he...dangerous?

I quietly scooted down the hall and paused outside the bathroom door. I was about to knock when—

"I'll be out in a second," Dex said behind the door, sensing me.

"Oh...OK," I said, feeling kind of embarrassed. I stepped back and leaned against the wall. I would just tell him I really had to go.

The door swung open. He had changed into new clothes and was carrying his duffel bag in one hand. He raised one eyebrow at me, a wry smile creeping on one corner of his mouth.

"Checking up on me?"

"No," I shook my head, hoping I sounded convincing. "I have to go."

"There are two bathrooms," he said, walking past me. I caught the scent of freshly applied aftershave in the air. His face did look smoother; his 'stache was neatly trimmed.

I quickly hopped in the bathroom. Now was as good of a time as ever to examine my own face. It was not pretty. Unless you considered the living dead to be pretty. I can say for certain that I did not. My reflection was ghastly.

I was so white that I could have been transparent. Even my freckles, which normally stood out across my nose, were almost gone as if they were hiding in fright. The mascara that once covered my eyelashes had migrated beneath my eyes. My eyes lacked their usual sparkle; they looked lifeless and dull.

And my neck was atrocious. The bruises from the kelp, which did suspiciously look like hand prints, were a horrid mix of blue, purple and yellow. I would have to wear a turtleneck tomorrow...and a hat. And sunglasses. I was going to look like Yoko Ono at my meeting. I hoped Frida wasn't a Beatles fan.

I sighed, then caught myself. Here I worried about my job when two hours ago I almost lost my life to

things that I couldn't explain or even let myself think about.

It just didn't seem real.

When I emerged I didn't look any better, but Dex was in the car, waiting to leave. I gave Uncle Al the biggest hug I could manage and told him how thankful I was for everything he did for me this weekend.

He walked me to the door and just as I was leaving, put his hand gently on my shoulder.

"Perry," he said, briefly looking down as if he wasn't sure how to continue. "I know there's more to the story. Of what happened tonight. More than anything I am glad you are OK. But if you ever want to talk about it to someone who understands, I'm just a phone call or a car ride away."

I gave him the most gracious smile. "Thank you, Uncle Al."

And though I knew I might possibly phone him to discuss what happened, there was no way in hell I would return to the Oregon coast for a very, very long time.

I walked through the midnight air to Dex's SUV. It felt like ages ago that we had our heart-to-heart on the side of the road. I say heart-to-heart because it was the most I had really talked to Dex and learned something about him. Now, we had the whole car ride back, and even though I had so many things I wanted to ask him, I didn't know how.

I opened the door. Dex sat in the driver's seat fiddling intently with his camera. I threw my bag in the car and climbed in.

"Is it OK?" I asked hopefully.

He sucked in the corner of his mouth. "I don't know. The LCD is cracked, but I'm praying that the memory card will be fine."

"That's the same that happened with my camera last week. Lens cracked, but the memory card worked."

He nodded in a way that made me question whether he had actually heard me. He tossed the camera behind him into the backseat as if it was completely worthless, put the car into drive and his foot to the pedal.

Uncle Al's house, the wild coast, and the wild nightmares disappeared behind us, swallowed by the darkness.

We didn't speak for about ten minutes. I could hear Elton John singing "Someone Saved My Life Tonight" very quietly from the speakers; I found the lyrics to be especially poignant.

I looked up at Dex, his face lightly aglow from the instrument panel. I could see he knew I was looking at him, but he kept his eyes on the road. His eyes looked sad, or maybe just tired.

"How are you doing?" I inquired, keeping my voice barely above a whisper.

"Great," was his answer. As usual, I couldn't tell if he was being facetious or not. Either way, I got the "don't talk to me" vibe. I smiled weakly and leaned against the window, the reflections from inside the car making the passing darkness seem abstract.

I must have dozed off for awhile because when I came to, a small puddle of drool had formed on my right shoulder.

"You snore," Dex said.

Sheepishly, I raised my head and wiped the drool off of me.

"I drool too," I added. I eyed the clock: two a.m. I had no idea how I was going to survive the coming day. As I mulled over my plan to act normal at work (and my plan to win them over at the meeting and get the promotion, which so far consisted of just acting enthusiastic and agreeing with everything they said), Dex let out a small sigh.

"I'm sorry," he said.

I eyed him, surprised at his admittance.

"For everything," he continued when I didn't speak. "This wasn't the way things were supposed to happen. I mean in *Wine Babes* I've never been attacked by killer grapes, as cool as that sounds."

I closed my eyes and leaned back. "It's not your fault."

"Yes. It is my fault. I obviously didn't think this through. I mean, you're just a young girl with a promising life ahead of her and I drag you off to some haunted lighthouse. I mean, fuck. What the hell was I thinking?"

I could see flashes of remorse behind his eyes. My heart ached, but just a little.

"Obviously, my life isn't all that promising if I agreed to go off to some haunted lighthouse with you," I reminded him quickly.

"And you barely know me," he continued, not hearing me. "You don't know me, and I don't know you, and I convinced you this would be a fanfucking-tastic idea. You almost died tonight. You could have died."

I straightened up and leaned closer to him. "You almost died too."

Dex shook his head. "I just didn't realize what we were up against. I'm sorry for making you go up those stairs. I know you wanted nothing more than to get out of there, and I should have let you. And then I should have followed you."

"If I really wanted to, I could have gotten past you."

"I just...fuck. We should have never gone back there."

"Well, we did. And we both decided that. Remember?"

Dex didn't look convinced but he didn't protest either. He fell silent and his mouth was firmly set.

"I'm afraid to ask what happened to you," he finally said.

I was afraid to answer. I didn't want to recall any of it, even though it was very fresh in my head, as well as on my throat. But I couldn't keep it all inside either. If I did, you could bet I would need Dex's pills very soon. Which reminded me, I wanted to ask him about that, but how on earth do you bring up something so personal? By the way, rumor has it that you're a psycho?

And so I told Dex exactly what happened in full detail. From the rubber boots Old Roddy was wearing to hearing Dex's voice when I was being hung out the window to what he had said before I leaped out of the building.

" 'She told me you would listen and that you would come. I've been waiting for another like you.' That's what he said. I don't know who 'she' is but the only thing that makes sense, if you can call it that, is that he was talking about the lady. Creepy Clown Lady."

Dex didn't say anything, so I attempted to lighten the mood. "And then I gave a fantastic one-liner along the lines of 'The only thing you're getting is death'."

He didn't even crack a smile. I wondered when I would see that perpetual smirk again. I was starting to prefer that Dex to this gravely serious one.

"And that's what happened," I added, hoping he would say something.

He chewed on his lip for a second before saying "You say that so casually, like this happens to you every weekend."

"Well, it kind of has."

He shot me a look that made me shrink back a little. "I'm taking this seriously, Perry. I wish you would too."

"Well, I'm sorry I use humor to get through tough situations. This whole fucking situation is absurd, and I don't even know how I am supposed to process what just happened, let alone feel it. It's just so impossible. It doesn't feel real, and in all honesty, how can it be real? It can't. It just can't. It can't, it can't, it can't, it can't, it can't, it can't..." I started laughing at the absurdity of it all. A loud, howling laugh that shook my face and caused tears to run down it.

A few wires in my brain began to snap. One by one, I could feel my thoughts unraveling as the face of Old Roddy came back, the feeling of my head going through glass, the stickiness of the kelp tentacles, the cold water as it drowned my lungs.

Snap, snap, snap.

My emotions were in an out-of-control funnel; my thoughts circled from reality to reality. I kept laughing and laughing and laughing until Dex pulled the car

over to the side of the road. He put it in park and flicked on the interior light.

"Perry?" he said cautiously. He moved his hand over towards my knee.

I whacked it off impulsively and cackled, "Who's the crazy one now? You or me?"

Dex frowned, looking utterly lost. I couldn't blame him. I had completely lost control.

"Shhhh, it's OK," he whispered and reached for me again. I didn't hit him this time, though I suddenly had this strong urge to punch him in the face. His eyes widened for a second as if he knew what I was thinking.

"Perry, calm down."

"Calm down?" I spat out. "Calm down? You're the psychotic one, Dex. Better give me one of your pills then."

He pursed his lips, frown line deepening.

"That's right!" I exclaimed. "I know what Olanzapine is! When were you going to tell me that I was pairing up with a schizo?"

I know what I said was mean, but I didn't care. I laughed away the guilt. I felt this huge surge of energy, like trapped tormenting emotions rising up from my belly. If I stopped laughing, I would probably start screaming.

He took in what I said without a fuss. It was like he didn't hear me.

Instead he turned to face me and moved in closer until his face was right up in mine. I watched him in slow motion. I saw his eyes turn from a flat brown shade to a vivid, sparkling mahogany. His pupils contracted, turning into tiny pricks of black. They turned mean. Very mean.

“Hey!” he screamed so loudly that my ears felt numb. I could feel tiny droplets of his spit fall on my cheek. The impact of his voice literally stopped my heart. “Get a hold of yourself!”

I don't know if you've ever had someone scream right in your face, but let me tell you it's the most terrifying experience. In one action, I felt like I experienced all of the rage that I imagined tore Dex inside. And it was directed at *me*.

I stopped laughing. I stopped breathing. I stopped blinking. I stopped moving. Full stop.

Dex continued to look at me, eyes boring through mine, with so much power and so much hate it made my stomach queasy. Then he exhaled and looked down. When he looked back up, his eyes were full of apology and remorse again.

“I'm sorry,” he said quietly. “I had to.”

I expected him to move away and give me some breathing room. But he kept his head right there. I assumed he wanted to further torment me, but he looked so...compassionate, such a 180 from two seconds ago, that I knew he was trying to make sure I was all right.

It reminded me of the film *Good Will Hunting* when Robin Williams says “It's not your fault” over and over again to Matt Damon until he snaps and breaks down. I had already snapped. With the tears that started to rush to my eyes, I knew it was time to break down.

I kept my eyes open and unblinking for as long as I could until they were so full of tears that I had to shut them. Yesterday I was too embarrassed to cry in front of Dex but now I didn't care at all. And my tears were exactly what he wanted.

I began to sob and bawl, letting out everything from tonight, everything from last week and probably everything from the last twenty-two years. Dex watched me for a few seconds, then put both arms around my shoulders and gently pulled me into him. I resisted slightly at first, not wanting the fuss, but then just gave up and buried my head into his chest. I was probably getting snot all over him, but I didn't care.

He didn't say anything now to calm me or make me stop crying. He just held me, which was more effective than anything. It made me realize, in the back of my wrecked head, how much I needed affection. That human touch. It's something you don't really think about until you're reminded about how much you are lacking it.

And now I realized how much I wanted it, needed it, from him. This topsy-turvy medicated man who only entered my life a few days ago. I still didn't know him but I felt like I didn't need to. They say people who experience extreme situations together develop an unspoken bond between them. No matter how unsettling it felt to know he was a potential madman, no matter how frustrating it was to deal with him from minute to minute, no matter how much I knew he would go back to Seattle in an hour, there was a line of unseen energy (a bond?) drawing me to him. And selfishly, naively, I hoped he felt it too.

His neck smelled like that delicious aftershave and natural musk. Maybe I could stay like this forever.

But my tears slowed and my breath and heart resumed to a reasonable rate. And I think I soaked his jacket front.

I reluctantly pulled away and grimaced. I fished out a damp tissue from my pocket and dabbed it up.

“Sorry,” I whispered, embarrassed.

He looked down and smirked. “Hey, I’ve had worse things on me. Goat shit, regurgitated wine...this is nothing.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I quickly wiped the now soggy tissue across my eyes and nose. His face remained only a hands-length away from mine, and I didn’t want to look completely wretched. I noticed he still had his arms around me, so, obviously, I didn’t look that bad. That said, he was crazy, so...

Something came across his eyes. They started to go back into his sexy, sleepy default mode and his brows twitched almost painfully, as if he remembered something. He took his hands off of me while looking slightly abashed. It felt like there was a weird tension hanging in the air and he just noticed.

He cleared his throat and averted his eyes. “You’ll be OK now.”

“Sure,” I muttered, looking at my mascara-smudged hand.

“Believe me. I’ve been there. I’ve seen stuff. You’ve let it all out; it can’t do any more damage. It’s when you don’t let it out, well...”

He put his hand in his pocket, produced a prescription bottle of pills and shook it for effect.

“What happened?” I asked cautiously. How much stuff did he have in his pockets?

“That’s a story for another time,” he said simply. I sensed a humorous inflection in his voice even though his eyes remained blank.

“Oh,” I said stupidly.

“I’m not schizophrenic. Just so you know. Just sort of bipolar.”

“That makes sense.”

He rolled his eyes. "The medication can really mess with your head, not to mention the fucking gigantic gut I get. Too much and I resemble Tom Arnold. Too little and, well, I'm really *not* crazy if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried. And you don't look like Tom Arnold. You should get some up-to-date analogies though."

"That's because I'm only taking just enough to get by. And even with the minimal dosage, I get this." He grabbed his stomach. He had barely anything to grab.

"Women love this," he said with a wink.

"I'm sure your girlfriend does," I said quietly.

"You'd think," he joked, "but she just nags me to go to the gym. Have you ever been to a gym? It's the gayest shit ever. I went for the first six months of us dating until I got tired of paying someone to torture me."

"I'm sure she understands."

He shook his head. "You've seen what she looks like. She's got some pretty high standards. Anyway, she doesn't know I'm still on medication."

That surprised me and I searched his face to see if he was kidding. His deadpan expression didn't aid me at all.

"You're joking. How could she not know?"

He shrugged. "Because she doesn't."

"Doesn't she see you taking pills?"

"I can be discreet. I doubt it would make a difference."

I narrowed my eyes at this new information. I already felt quite biased, but now I knew Jenn was a bitch.

“And you live with her?” I said incredulously.

“Uh huh,” he said casually. “Anyway, changing the topic now...you're going to be OK?”

“I don't know,” I sniffled and sat back in the seat.

“That was a rhetorical question. Which means yes, you are.”

He eyed the clock. “And we should probably start heading back. Just try and let me know if you feel like laughing hysterically again so I can turn up the volume.”

Dex started the engine and brought the car back onto the highway. I felt exhausted and slightly relieved at the same time. I closed my eyes and had almost drifted asleep when a question pulled at me.

“Dex?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“What did you mean when you said you'd been there? You've seen stuff?”

“Go to sleep, kiddo.”

“OK,” I sighed sleepily. And soon everything faded
to black.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I woke up from my short, dreamless sleep as I felt Dex's car come to a rolling stop. We parked on the street in front of my house. Even in the dark, with leaves scattering in the wind and tossing the thin branches of our cherry trees about, it looked like the nicest place on earth.

“Home sweet home,” Dex said.

I felt awkward. Did I hug him goodbye? Shake his hand? Both seemed strangely inappropriate.

“Feels like the end of a first date, doesn't it?” he remarked, a smirk deepening one corner of his mouth.

I blushed furiously. “Yeah, I guess.”

Amused, he opened his arms and said, "Come here."

I leaned over and hugged him. He squeezed me very tight, grunting humorously. I squeezed back, not wanting to let go but also not wanting to give him the wrong idea. The wrong idea being that I wanted keep touching him.

Eventually I pulled away and looked to the side.

"Hey," he whispered, as he slipped his hand under my chin and tipped it up. I had no choice to but to meet his eyes. They danced in the dark. "You OK?"

I stared at his lips, my breath deepening. The urge to kiss him grew frighteningly strong, so much it surprised me. I obviously wasn't OK but for different reasons than he thought.

I saved face by closing my eyes and nodding. "I'm good."

Satisfied, he let go of my chin and sat back in his seat. "Fabulous."

I quickly opened the door and hopped out of the car before I did or said something stupid. I heard "Scenes From an Italian Restaurant" faintly playing from the speakers, which immediately reminded me of his sing-along session in the car yesterday. Felt so long ago.

I must have smiled involuntarily because he handed me my bag from behind the seat and said, "Want me to start singing again? I'll sing you the whole CD. 'My Life', 'Piano Man', 'She's Always a Woman'..."

I could tell he was joking, but I secretly wanted nothing more. I swallowed hard and gave him a shy smile. "Guess this is goodbye?"

“For now,” he said. “Go and get some proper sleep and rock their fucking faces off at the meeting tomorrow. I’ll call you when I’ve got something interesting to say.”

“Sounds good. Bye, Dex.”

I was about to close the door when he stopped me. “Wait!”

He reached behind him into his bag and pulled out his newsboy cap. “Wear this tomorrow. It’ll cover up your brain hole. And you’ll look really cool.”

I took it from him, plopped it on my head and tipped the brim. “Thanks.”

He saluted me with his fingers as I shut the door.

I turned and walked towards the house, hearing the car drive off. I looked behind me, and he was gone.

I sighed, pausing at the front door to gather my thoughts, before unlocking it and returning to my old life.

As one can imagine, the next day turned into utter madness times a billion.

First of all, I came home to find my mother asleep in my bed, apparently waiting up for me. Thankfully, Dex had given me his cap, which covered up the wound on the back of my head, and I did not need that to freak out my mother.

Of course she bombarded me with a ton of worried-mother questions that I easily deflected by saying how badly I needed to sleep, which was true; however, it didn’t make a lick of difference in the end, considering I woke up feeling like absolute shit.

Every single bone and muscle in my body ached to high heaven. I couldn't even bend down to tie my boots and had to opt for ballet flats. Those, coupled with a turtleneck to hide the ever-deepening bruises on my neck and Dex's cap on my head, made me look an awful lot like Yoko Ono after all.

My choice of wardrobe was the least of my worries, though, because along with my physical pain, I was also in a state of mental shock. I was so tired and exhausted to my core that I was borderline delirious. Even forming sentences seemed to be a challenge, which did not bode well for answering the phones.

Even two Red Bulls couldn't help my jumbled thoughts, although they did elevate my heart rate to cardiac arrest status, which doubled by the time I walked into my meeting.

But through crazy luck or the pity of the universe, I somehow not only got through the meeting with Frida and the head honcho, John Danvers, but I won them over and got the promotion.

Yeah, I know.

I can't explain it myself except that I managed to project a very professional and enthusiastic image and even showed them some of the advertising plans I created back at the university. The position was just for a production coordinator, which was a pretty stressful and lowly job, but it was still better and more relevant to me than being stuck in reception. Plus, it paid \$3 extra an hour, and I would get benefits.

I was on cloud nine for the rest of the day. Literally. All the painkillers I was popping, plus the lack of shut-eye, made me feel like I was floating away to la la land.

My position started the next Monday, which meant all this week I had to train my replacement (turns out they had the temp who subbed for me last week in mind), which in turn meant a fairly easy week for me. I could just make the other person do all the work.

Easy is what I needed. With my brain and body all jumbled I needed things to go as smoothly as possible. I wanted to put the weekend behind me more than anything and start focusing on a new path. The longer I engaged in the everyday swing of “normal” life, the more absurd the idea of being a ghost blogger became.

Plus, I hadn’t heard from Dex. I know he said he’d call if he knew something, but still; I guess a part of me hoped he would call anyway.

Later that evening, I went onto my Facebook to check his profile like the snoop I am. I found no evidence he had logged on recently, but people had written on his wall during our absence. Some guys, some girls, mostly inside jokes and potential plans. It felt weird knowing Dex had a life outside of me and the lighthouse, as egotistical and stupid as that sounds.

It only hammered home that Dex was still just a man. A befuddling man but just a man in the end. A man with a hot *Wine Babe* for a girlfriend, an interesting and varied job, a nice voice, a social life and a sordid past. A handsome, beguiling man whose eyes read your very soul and whose smirk held you in contempt. A man I tried my hardest to not think about.

That was easier said than done. Ada kept bringing him up around the dinner table.

“I think he looks creepy,” Ada said haughtily between petite bites of her roast. “I was starting to doubt if you’d ever come back.”

“Thanks, Ada,” I muttered, glaring at her.

"Well it would have been nice if we had had a chance to meet him," my mom complained wistfully, "instead of having to stare at him from a distance."

"Yes, well, I thought maybe you'd embarrass me," I replied truthfully.

"Oh, whatever, as you would say. Why would that matter?" my mom said, exchanging a look with my father, who was silent as he normally was whenever there was food in front of him.

"Because she has the hots for him," Ada interjected.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, please. I just met the guy."

She wagged her fork at me. "I saw the way you were ogling his Facebook pictures."

She turned to my mother. "He has a girlfriend too."

My mouth dropped. "How do *you* know that?"

"Maybe I know how to use a search engine better than you can," she answered primly.

"Perry," my mother teased, looking at me, "you do like this man!"

"No!" I exclaimed and nearly threw down my fork.

"The lady doth protest too much." Ada smirked.

"You don't even know what you're quoting there, blondie," I shot back.

"Girls," my dad said sternly but gently. "Let's let Perry relax a bit. It's not every weekend that you blow up my brother's lighthouse."

I couldn't tell if my dad was actually angry, as was usually the case with him. I had, after all, *blown up* his brother's lighthouse, which couldn't be taken lightly. Even though it wasn't really my fault, it did look that way.

However, I picked up some compassion in his voice and gave him an apologetic face.

"We're just glad you are OK, pumpkin." He reached over and tapped my hand. "And proud too. Let's toast your new job, cin cin."

I beamed despite myself and we raised our glasses of wine. Ada raised her soda with a dry expression, though I could see the tiniest hint of sisterly affection.

After dinner and more small talk about my new position, I retired to my room ready to conk out. It was seven p.m., and somehow even getting twelve hours of sleep didn't seem like it would be enough.

I packed some things into my purse when I heard the door shut behind me. Fearing the worst, I spun around in a panic.

It was just Ada staring at me in horror.

"What the fuck happened to your head?" she cried out, and raced over to inspect me.

I swatted her arms away and awkwardly felt my head. The cap had fallen off, leaving my snazzy Band-Aid exposed.

"It's nothing, go away!" I glared at her.

She crossed her arms to indicate she wasn't about to go anywhere. "What happened? Tell me or I'll tell Mom. And Dad!"

I knew she would, too. I wanted to tell her, but I didn't know what version. The official story or the truth?

Despite all our differences, though, Ada was my sister. Looking into her jade eyes, impeccably done up with the best makeup, I knew she had some reserves of belief left for me.

"Do you want the truth or the official story?"

"What's the story you'll end up blogging about?" she asked smartly.

She had a point there. If we were in fact still doing this project—at the moment I didn't know what Dex would salvage from his camera, let alone the fact the whole thing might get shot down—we would obviously show people the truth. That meant my parents, the authorities, Uncle Al, would all find out the truth was wildly different from anything they had heard.

That said, I also knew they wouldn't believe it anyway. No matter what kind of proof we provided, no matter how well I wrote about the experience, they would assume I made it up. Well, let them.

"So?" she said impatiently. "What is it? What happened? For real."

"OK," I said hesitantly. "For real? You better sit down. And check your cynicism at the door."

She sighed and flopped down on my bed, all gangly limbs and rolling eyes.

I started from the beginning but left out the part about the Creepy Clown Lady because that would just open another can of worms. By the time I finished, I could see Ada was struggling with it.

She chewed thoughtfully on her nails and watched me closely. "So...that's the real story?"

"Yes. Believe it or not, I don't care, but you wanted the truth and you got the truth. Dex can confirm what I said."

"But you said Dex never saw this Rodney guy."

"Roddy. And he did, he just wasn't....manhandled by him."

"I...I don't know what to say," she got up and started pacing.

"Well, you don't have to say anything."

She appeared to think that over for a few beats before a curious look came across her face.

She asked, "Do you remember when we were really young, or I was really young, anyway, and you were like ten or something, and we would go to the ski cottage every winter?"

I did, vaguely. There were a few years where we went skiing in the mountains every winter, though I didn't know what that had to do with anything.

"Do you remember the room we slept in?"

Again, vaguely. A small, stereotypical cabin room with bunk beds and its own ensuite. I remembered the smell of the fireplace at night and the smell of melting snow on the windowsill come morning but nothing else.

"Kind of," I said slowly.

"Do you remember some boy you called Sam who would come and visit you?"

The name rang a bell. I tried to think back but was bombarded with images from a million vacations, and a million boys who could have been called Sam. I had one image, though, of a young boy white as the snow outside the window, but it was so hazy and fleeting that it could have been a dream.

"Sam," she continued, "would come every night and knock on our window. I would wake up and find you at the window trying to open it. I remember I would ask you what you were doing and you would say, 'Sam's here. I have to let him inside; he's cold.' "

The memories started to pour back into my eyes. I saw Sam's sweet, impish face at the window, looking so small and so cold. He must have been around eight years old but tiny for his age. I remembered I would open the window and invite him inside, but he would never come. He said he had to stay outside because his mother was mad at him. I remembered it now, the

sharp cold as it came through the window and kissed my feet, the frost that gathered on his eyelashes like fairy dust.

"Yes, I remember," I told her. Her face grew grim which quickened my pulse instinctively. "What about it?"

"I never saw Sam," she said carefully. "And I was on the top bunk too. And I remember you would get up every night, always at one a.m., and you would creep over to the window and open it. You would talk to yourself for who knows how long. Then you would close the window, look up at me and say 'Sam had to leave.' But there was never anyone there, Perry."

I stared at her dumbly while processing this insane piece of information. I had a bad memory and that happened a long time ago, but now that she brought it up I remembered it all as clear as day. I mean, I knew I had imaginary friends when I was wee, but there clearly *was* a boy named Sam. Right?

"Was I sleepwalking?" I asked. Maybe I dreamed the whole thing.

"I don't think so," Ada said. "You often talked about him in the day, too, wondering why his mother would lock him out of the cabin. You even told mom once that you wanted to invite him over for dinner one time. They said sure, thinking he was just some kid who hung around. But I never saw him come over for dinner. And I never saw him at your window."

"How do you remember all of this? You must have been like five years old!"

"I remember it because it scared me, Perry. You scared me. I started thinking my older sister was crazy."

"Crazy," I repeated. I closed my eyes and pressed my hands against my temple. I was too tired to deal with this. This was just an extra scooping of ridiculous on top of a growing pile of insanity.

Ada put her hand on my arm. "You're not crazy."

"Right," I muttered and sat down at my desk. I feared this would make me rethink everything.

"I mean it, for reals. I think you saw Sam, even if I didn't see him. And I think you saw this Old Roddy guy too. I believe you, Perry."

I gave her a half-hearted smile.

"I'm serious. Maybe you could appreciate that," she snarled.

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. "I do appreciate it, Ada, calm down. This is just a lot to take. I mean, what does it all mean?"

"It means maybe you're meant to see these things. Maybe if you think back over the years, you'll remember some of the other stuff too."

That didn't sound like a very good idea at all. "Other stuff? Was there something else?"

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Maybe. You acted weird pretty much throughout all of high school."

"That was the drugs," I told her bitterly.

"Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. You know it wasn't very fun for me growing up. Having you as a sister."

Ouch.

"I'm sorry," I said, hoping she would see how much I meant it. "I'm so happy you didn't turn out like me."

"There's still time!" she exclaimed wryly. "It doesn't matter anyway. I know it was harder for you than it was for me."

"Really, I am so sorry. I have no excuse."

"I don't want to hear it! What's done is done, OK? It doesn't matter."

She started to head for the door.

"Wait," I called out after her, not wanting her to leave me alone with the bomb she just dropped.

"I've got things to blog about. Don't you?"

I shrugged helplessly. "I don't know."

"You know you do. Screw everyone. Write what happened anyway. And if no one believes you it doesn't matter because I believe you, this Dex dude believes you, and people believe what you tell them to believe. It's just like fashion. They'll wear what you tell them to wear."

How come I wasn't that smart when I was fifteen? Oh right, the drugs. What a waste.

"Oh, and congrats on your new job," she added before leaving the room.

Right...the new job. Sam. Old Roddy. Dex. Blogging. Training a receptionist. My sore head.

It was time for bed.

"Good afternoon, Allingham and Associates, Melody speaking," Melody, our future receptionist, picked up the phone and answered in an overly saccharine voice.

I was leaning against the wall and watching her as she did her first trial run of phone answering. I had been training her all morning with the basic logistics of the job, even though she had done the job in my

absence last week without any trouble. Still, I found it mildly entertaining to stand back and watch as the torch was passed down. Entertaining and extremely relieving.

See, whereas I did not make a good receptionist, Melody did. She was bubbly, amiable and focused. Though it might have been all for show—most people tried their hardest the first day on the job—something about her screamed “RECEPTIONIST.” It could have been she was cute, tanned and blonde, with the whitest teeth I had ever seen north of California. Or her enthusiasm and immediate organizational skills (she filled all the staplers on her morning break, you know, for fun). Or it could have been that she seemed genuinely interested in helping people, unlike me, who believed a dull stare was just as effective.

As I watched her take over my old job, I realized how happy I was to be going on to a new position. It was scary, of course, taking on new responsibilities. The more I thought about it, the more I worried I wouldn't be good enough. On the other hand, maybe I could rise to the occasion, do a great job and once and for all put all my laziness, procrastination and overall apathy behind me. I could be a new person. I might surprise myself.

That didn't mean I didn't think about Dex during random times of the day, though. I still hadn't heard a peep from him. I considered texting him or Facebook messaging him. Something very low key and casual, but I didn't want to come across as desperate. You didn't call someone back right away after a date; it was the same kind of thing.

It's stupid how I kept on comparing our adventure to a date when it was very much the opposite. We

weren't even work partners, for crying out loud, and I started to doubt that would ever happen. But I couldn't help it. It felt like I was in some semi-relationship with him, which made me feel even more stupid. This is how stalkers get started!

I shook my head and let out a disgusting sigh.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Melody was looking at me inquisitively, phone to her ear. I must have drifted off in my head as usual.

I shot her a quick smile and answered truthfully, "No, you are doing just fine." I, on the other hand, was not. My mind continued to be torn between getting excited about the new position and feeling disappointed at the lack of one with Shownet.

And I didn't improve as the day went on, either. As soon as I got home my mother whisked me off for a little shopping spree.

Now, I know a shopping spree sounds like a lot of fun, and I know Ada rightfully gave me daggers when my mother hustled me out the door, but this wasn't supposed to be an enjoyable experience.

My mother usually takes me out on one of these excursions because A) she has bad news and wants to sweeten it up somehow, or B) she wants to go all "Eliza Doolittle" on my ass. I suspected this trip fell into the latter.

"So, what's the deal, mom?" I asked as she gingerly pulled the car into the narrow mall parking spot for the umpteenth time.

"Is there enough room to get out?" she asked, looking over at my side. There wasn't unless she was imagining I was thirty pounds lighter, but instead of prompting another attempt at parking, and perhaps a lecture about my diet, I told her to park. Somehow I

squeezed out of the car but not without squishing my boobs against the door—glad the children in the neighboring car found that funny.

Once inside the mall, I felt my heartbeat quicken. The crowds, the pushiness, the people in the middle of the hall who worked the kiosks and practically ran after you with hand cream and hair stylers; the mall did nothing to help my panic attacks and was one of the worst places for me, especially when my nerves were shot.

My mother took no notice, as usual. She just ushered me into the Macy's women's department. I had it figured out, even before she started pulling various blazers and skirts. She wanted me to look more professional for my new position.

That was fair enough, I suppose. I did need to amp up my wardrobe and my band t-shirts weren't cutting it anymore, even if I paired them with a nice skirt. I just knew my mom would squeeze me into some very unflattering and un-Perry like clothes.

And I was right. Ten minutes past and I made it out of the changing room with just one new outfit that suited me and one hell of a lecture about my weight.

"We could at least get you new shoes. Maybe some heels? You can't gain weight in your feet," she said brightly, and before she had time to insult me again, I was dragged in the direction of the shoe department.

Don't get me wrong, I love shoes. But I love *my* kind of shoes, and my kind of shoes are the funky or comfy kind. The shoes my mom wanted me to wear would be better suited to someone else. Someone like Jenn.

The thought of her quickened my pulse.

I think my mom could tell because as the bored salesman shoved a pair of shoes back in the box, she said, "So, tell me about this man you were with. Dex?"

"You mean the producer of the show?" I said, not wanting to go down this road with her. "He's really...interesting."

"You like him?"

"No, Mom," I sighed, and fingered the smooth patent finish of a pair of four-inch pumps. "Does anyone ever listen to me?"

"Pumpkin, you shouldn't let something like a girlfriend stand in your way," she said with a little too much conviction.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Even the salesman looked shocked at what she said, but he quickly hurried away before he could hear anymore.

"Mom," I managed to say. "That is terrible advice to give your daughter."

She smiled at me, and for an instant I felt like we were sharing our own private joke. "I'm not saying you should do anything. I'm just saying that sometimes life works in funny ways. When I was dating your father, there was a nice man who wanted me. He would send me flowers, ask me on dates when your father wasn't looking. I never ended up doing anything about it; I was loyal. But I often wonder what would have happened if I went for that other man, Ted was his name, instead. Sure, your father might have been heartbroken, or at least his pride would have been lost, but he'd go on and find someone else. Ted was a very successful businessman. He went on to make millions with some sort of telephone company. My life might have been a lot better if I had ended up with him. You never know."

This made my mind reel, never mind the pain shooting up from the balls of my feet as I attempted to stand in a pair of narrow-toed platforms.

“Uh, well you wouldn’t have had me or Ada if you went with this Ted dude,” I admonished her while trying to keep my balance.

She shrugged. “I guess. I’m just saying, perhaps it’s best to take a chance. That’s all. You should take those. They make your legs look skinniest.”

I looked down at the shoes. They didn’t make me look anything except bow-legged. But I agreed for the sake of ending this horrible conversation. It’s not that I thought my parents had the most perfect marriage, and I wouldn’t even be surprised if they secretly yearned for different lives, but to hear your mother disclose that so glibly was disturbing, to say the least.

But it wasn’t over. Things kind of got worse at the till when she paid for the devil shoes.

“Now, Perry, I hope this new advancement in your position means you’ll think more seriously about getting your own place and moving out.”

This too? The salesman and I were able to exchange a look that said “It’s not over yet?”

“Oh my God, Mom,” I exhaled loudly.

“Well, I’m just saying. You’re old enough to be responsible and move out. Please don’t think we want you to leave or anything, but with more responsibility comes... more responsibility. And I’d really love to turn your bedroom into my own room.”

“What do you mean your own room?” I eyed her suspiciously.

She shrugged and took the bag from the clerk. He looked happy to be rid of us and relieved that he didn’t have to go home with her, unlike me.

“I don’t know, pumpkin. Sometimes you get to a certain age where you want your own room and your own space. Besides, your father snores. It would be nice to get a good night’s sleep.”

I don’t know exactly how long my parents have been married but this was the first time I ever heard my mom complain about my dad’s snoring. I didn’t like where this was going at all.

As we left the mall and started our walk in the grey drizzle towards the car, our conversation drifted onto other topics, such as the newest reality show she was hooked on. I pushed what she said out of my head as much as I could.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The rest of the week went quickly since I was training Melody (easy) and being trained by Frida to prepare for my new job (not so easy). Not everything I learned was going to stay in my head, but I knew perfection wasn't going to be expected right off the bat on Monday.

Melody learned quickly, as I thought she would. This allowed me to try and wrap my head around the new Excel spreadsheets that I had to get used to for the upcoming production schedule while she greeted clients and answered the phone. I was so zoned out in

my Excel tornado (Excel was my nemesis) that I barely noticed when she handed me the phone.

"Perry? It's for you," Melody said cheerfully, nudging me in the arm until I looked up.

"Oh," I said distractedly, mind blown away by some formula that didn't add up. I took the phone and put it to my ear. Melody removed her headpiece.

"Perry speaking." My voice didn't sound as friendly as it should have but whatever, this wasn't my job anymore.

"Aww, hello is this a Perry? Perry Palomino, yes?" a man said in a high-pitched accent that was borderline ridiculous.

"Uh, yeah," I replied, giving Melody a look. She raised her brows to say she had no idea who it was.

"Ahhh, Perry, you ghost woman yes? You go see big ghosts, yes?" the man insisted.

I paused, trying to figure out what was going on. "Maybe?"

"Yes, yes! You her! You're the lady on the computer. You have ghost show and blow up lighthouses; you big star!"

My heart stopped. I quickly peered down at the number on the call display. It was a Seattle area code.

"Dex?" I asked, the hope in my voice clearly registering.

"Dex? He is handsome man, yes? That man genius, big sexy genius. He discover you! Made you big star."

"Dex," I repeated slowly.

There was a pause then the voice giggled, high and shrill. I recognized that laugh anywhere. It was Dex.

"I'm sorry to call you at work," he said, his regular low and smooth voice coming through the line and

flooding my heart with warmth. "But it took me a couple of tries to realize you might not have your phone anymore."

"Oh, that's OK," I said brightly. The phone started to light up with another call. Melody moved to press the button but I shooed her away. The other calls could wait. This is what I called "The Receptionist's Prerogative."

"I'll try and keep this brief as I'm sure you have to get back to answering other calls from more important people. By the way, how did your meeting go?"

"Uh good, fantastic," I said, not wanting to outright talk about my new position in front of Melody. Seemed like it would be in bad taste.

"Do I need to speak in code? Did you get the job?"

"Yes to both," I smiled. Melody watched me inquisitively.

"Well...that's good news for you, right?" he asked innocently.

"Of course."

"Hmmm," he mused. The line went silent.

"What?" I asked, feeling funny about his reaction.

"I need you to come up to Seattle on Friday afternoon," he stated in a very no-nonsense voice, as if I had no choice.

"What?" I exclaimed. "I can't do that!"

"You have to," he replied.

I looked at Melody. She got the hint. She got out of her chair and whispered, "I'm going to go use the bathroom."

I mouthed thank you to her then promptly sat down in her place.

"What do you mean I have to?" I whispered violently into the mouthpiece.

"I've put the footage together, I've composed the music; the shit is fucking brilliant, Perry. At least I think so. Jimmy wants to meet with you on Friday though, just to make sure."

"But...what? Footage? So you were able to save it?"

"Well, I hate to borrow an old phrase from your favorite decade, but, DUH!" he said sarcastically.

I rolled my eyes, though there was no one to see it. "This is the first I've heard of it. I thought you were going to call me as soon as you knew what you had?"

"No, I said I would call if I knew anything interesting, and Jimmy just told me he wants to see you Friday, no matter what. I thought that was pretty interesting."

"Dex. I just can't go to Seattle on such short notice. I start my new position on Monday, and I still have to train the receptionist," I hissed.

"She sounded well trained to me. A lot nicer than you, actually."

I swear I almost hung up the phone. I took a deep breath and hoped he would respond to reason.

"Listen, Dex, I can't leave. Your Jimmy guy will understand. Maybe I could come on Saturday or next weekend," I said very slowly and calmly.

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen. It's now or never, do or don't, or die, depending on how dramatic you want to make this. Just call in sick."

I did feel sick now that all this was going on. I should have known this wouldn't be a simple situation. It sure as hell hadn't been simple so far.

"Oh, I don't know," I said wearily.

"Call in sick. Your receptionist will manage. She'll have to manage without you anyway, right? Listen here, *I* will fly you up here. No cost to you. You'll meet

with Jimmy, he'll be won over by your...personality, I'm hoping. You'll sign some papers, we'll have ourselves some champagne and everything will be all right with the world."

That sounded all too easy.

I sighed, unsure of what to say. It was another one of the moments where I knew my actions would determine a new branch in my life, another road to go down. Did I say yes, ditch work and possibly damage my new job? Or did I say no, say goodbye to working with Dex and doing something truly interesting (albeit unconventional) with my life, and move forward down a more responsible path? Could I do both? Maybe...

"Can I call you back? I'm not really free to talk," I managed to say just as Melody came back into reception.

"You can call me anytime," he said dryly. "But I need to know your answer right now. I've got Jimmy right here in front of me, and he's starting to think I'm a bit of a liar."

"You are a liar," I muttered, and gave Melody an apologetic look. She eyed the blinking lines on the console but didn't say anything.

"Yes or no?" Dex said, impatience rising in his voice. I could just see his dark brows furrowed, his forehead creased.

I took in a deep breath and closed my eyes. There was no point trying to figure out what was right, no point in thinking. I said the first thing that came to my mind.

"Yes."

I said yes.

"Thanks, Perry," he said sincerely; gently, almost. "I'll e-mail you the flight details right now. I'll come get

you at the airport and everything. The meeting will only take a couple of hours at the most, and then you'll be back on the plane home. Easy as pie. You remember the pie analogy, don't you?"

"Yeah..."

"Good. See you soon, kiddo."

And then the line went dead. I exhaled and slowly hung up the phone.

Melody gave me a perky smile. "Man troubles?"

I smiled despite myself. "I guess you could say that."

The next day and a half was completely upside down for me. Dex emailed me my flight tickets, which meant that everything was set to go. The only thing I had to do was call in sick on Friday morning.

I didn't actually think Frida would have a problem with it. Meaning, she might feel inconvenienced and perhaps a bit fearful that I may not come in on Monday (though I would assure her I would), but I didn't think she'd jump to the immediate conclusion that I was playing hooky. After all, the swine flu thing was still going around.

No, the problem I knew I'd have was with my parents. How on earth was I going to tell them I was sick and then hop a plane to Seattle? I had a cold that only a Seattle doctor knew how to fix? Might as well tell them I was going to Seattle Grace Hospital to get checked up by Doctor McDreamy.

I knew if I told my parents the truth they would be so terribly disappointed in me. I could tell they were relieved when it seemed like this whole ghost show

wasn't going anywhere, and I knew how happy they were when I got promoted. I couldn't bear to disappoint them after so many years of constantly letting them down.

It got so bad, that on Thursday night I had to sequester Ada in my room and ask her for advice.

I lay on my bed, my stuffed elephant squeezed between my arms, staring hopelessly at the ceiling. Ada sat at my desk watching me thoughtfully. It felt like a bizarro shrink and patient scenario.

"Well?" I asked, frustrated at how silent she had been while I poured my heart out to her.

"Chill out. I'm thinking," she answered, put upon.

"Are you? Or are you humoring me?"

"I'm humoring you, duh!"

"You're the second person in two days to use that phrase," I pointed out.

"Just tell Mom and Dad you're going to work, and tell your work that you are sick," she announced. "Do you think I always go to school when I'm supposed to?"

"Ada!" I exclaimed, the big sister in me coming out.

"Phfff, whatever, you were a druggie," she said defensively.

"Please stop throwing that back in my face."

"No, you please stop acting like you give a shit. I'm fucking fifteen, Perry. Think I'm going to listen to whatever sisterly advice you try and give me? Wake up and smell the apathy."

"Oh geez, how emo can you get?"

"You wanted my advice, you got it. You think I'm going to tell you what you want to hear? If you want to be all like smart and adult about this shit then do the right thing. But if you want to do something fun and

take a chance, then screw what anyone else thinks. Rock and roll, man!"

I laughed at that last bit and sat up. Ada had gotten out of her chair and was picking up my guitar.

"You never play anymore," she said wistfully.

"I've been busy. And I still suck."

"Dream big, dream big." She strummed it absently, chords all wrong but her words resonated in my head. I used to dream big. It seemed like somewhere along the way I had forgotten about that. And gave up.

"OK," I said, coming to a decision. "I'll tell Mom and Dad that I'm going to work. I'll take the bike to the airport and just hang out there for a few hours. Then I'll tell them that I'm going out after work or something so they won't worry when I come home late."

"I think you can be pretty smart when you want, Perry. You didn't need me to tell you all of that." She put the guitar down and brushed her long bangs out of her blackened eyes.

"Thanks," I told her.

She smiled sheepishly. "You only get one compliment from me every couple of months, OK?"

"Got it."

"Good luck," was the last thing she said before leaving the room.

I have no idea how I fell asleep that night. My nerves were buzzing and my thoughts were high, but soon enough, the sun came up.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I got on the airplane with my heart fluttering in my chest like some panicked bird and gave the flight attendant the biggest smile I could muster when I handed over my ticket. I felt like a very important person, even though that was not the case. Still, there was a sense of mystery and “fugitiveness” to my actions since everything I did was kind of a lie. I must admit, it was very exciting.

I called Frida at six-thirty a.m. to add to the realism of my excuse. If there was anything I knew about calling in sick it's that you rarely have the strength to call at the appropriate time. She did sound slightly suspicious, which made it hard to do the dance between sounding too sick to come but not sounding so

sick that it didn't seem like I would come in on Monday. In the end, though, there wasn't much she could do, and she told me to call her on Sunday night to confirm that I would be OK to work.

My parents were a bit easier. I just got dressed and ready like I always did. I was jittery, though, and my excitement showed even before my morning coffee. While I grabbed my leftovers from the fridge, my mother asked if I was OK. Thankfully, Ada was there and she switched the conversation over to her before I could say anything. I almost winked at her in thanks but had my mom caught that, we would have both been toast.

It was a short hop on a small plane before landing at the Sea-Tac airport. The flight was uneventful but I couldn't stop fidgeting in my seat like a barrel of monkeys. By the time we landed and were coasting to the gate, the quiet old man next to me patted my hand and said, "It's OK, we're safe now." Oh, if only I knew that was true.

When it was time to exit, I grabbed my purse and walked down the aisle to the door, brimming with excitement. I felt like a character in a romantic movie. Again, this was stupid girly thinking on my part, but there was no way I could pretend I didn't feel that way.

After giving the pilot an enthusiastic salute as I walked into the terminal, I saw Dex.

I wish I could say that he was "just a man" as I had told myself all week, but seeing him standing there by the gate, it just wasn't true.

He was leaning casually against a supporting pole, a toothpick darting in and out of his mouth. His dark hair was spiked up at the front and the scratch down

his forehead had faded. It still added a little roughness to his face, which looked younger and fresher than ever. His eyes were bright and shining, and I could have sworn his eyelashes were longer or something because he almost looked pretty. Even his Errol Flynn 'stache barely showed and his goatee was groomed as clean as an early ski run.

His attire was different, too—a white long-sleeved dress shirt and black pants. He could have been a waiter if it wasn't for the oversized army green windbreaker he had on top.

I can't lie. The sight of him made my heart turn into syrup, swirling around in slow motion in my chest. Our eyes interlocked, and as if I was in some hormonal tractor beam I felt myself being drawn to him. Thank goodness the tractor beam had enough sense to stop as soon as I was within striking distance of him.

"Hi," I said, my voice squeaking more than I would have liked.

He took the toothpick out with one hand and flicked it on the floor in front of a woman walking by. She gave him a dirty look. He gave her a sleazy grin in return and wagged his eyebrows at her suggestively. Then he turned to me and grinned.

"You came." He sounded surprised.

"Yup," I replied, adjusting the purse on my shoulder, a bit unsure if I should hug him or not.

"You're more foolish than I thought," he reached out and smacked my arm. "God bless the youth."

Before I could even process what he meant by that, he took his pocket watch out of his pant pocket and glanced at it.

"We better get going, hmmm?"

And he was off like a shot down the terminal. I trotted after him, starting to wonder if I had made a mistake. I also found myself wishing his coat was a bit shorter so I could see his ass better. Yup. I was pretty done for at this point.

The drive downtown was fairly long, with traffic jams and construction zones clogging up the I-5. During that time, I was filled in on what had come out of the footage.

“At first I thought we were fucked because a lot of the shots were just black with the occasional sound coming through. But then I realized if I could at least save the audio and then play them at other parts then it would add to the whole ambiance. And then if I could get your narration at certain points it would fill up the blank spots.”

Watching Dex speak about the film made me realize how much he actually cared about the whole thing and how he knew exactly what he was talking about. He could see the big picture, whereas I couldn't imagine how anything we shot would become remotely interesting. If I had the camera myself up in Old Roddy's face, it would have been a different story. But Dex seemed so confident that he had something amazing on his hands, even if I didn't believe it myself.

He must have seen the cynicism on my face because he turned to me and said, “Believe me. It looks good. We've got a good thing going on here.”

“One of those instances where I'm going to have to just trust you, right?”

“I would hope you'd always trust me,” he answered rather seriously.

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I didn't say anything. I looked out the window. It's not that Dex

wasn't trustworthy. He saved my life, in a way. But because he was so unpredictable, I had a hard time accepting everything he said. There was also the whole self-admitted liar/bipolar thing, and the fact that I wanted nothing more than for him to pull the car over so I could climb on his lap and molest the crap out of him. Well, I knew from experience that you weren't supposed to trust the guys you thought were as sexy as hell.

Dark, brooding and mysterious? Handle with care.

And of course there was the term "always," as if he knew for a fact we would be working together indefinitely. As much as I wanted to, the responsible adult side of me needed to know exactly what I was getting into. Would it interfere with my job? How much would I get paid, if anything? Basically, what was in it for me? The last thing I wanted was to be taken advantage of.

I mulled these things over during the rest of the drive and even until we were in an elevator going up one of Seattle's skyscrapers. I guess for a little internet company they were actually doing quite well for themselves.

We got off of the elevator and turned left at a sign that read "Shownet." We paused in front of a French door made of pebbled glass.

Dex reached for the handle and then stopped. He looked at me.

"You OK?"

I nodded. I was OK, though each step toward the door had me feeling more and more anxious until I was shaking in my boots.

"Just a bit nervous," I admitted. "But I always get nervous. Always. No matter what."

"Let's hope he finds that as endearing as I do," Dex said, with his tone not as promising as I would have hoped.

We entered the room and said some polite introductions to their receptionist Leigh, who responded to Dex with all the sparkle of a Barbie doll but whose eyes turned positively demonic as soon as she spoke to me. And I thought *I* was a bad receptionist. Sheesh.

Then we went into a small but pleasantly attired boardroom. A fancy-looking espresso machine sat in the corner, which I eyed feverishly.

Dex caught my stare. "Do you want some?"

He was about to go to it when the door swung open and a slender, balding Korean man with hipster glasses stepped into the room.

Dex promptly sat down in a chair and motioned for me to do the same. The bald man walked to the other side of the glass table, threw a binder down with a loud clank and leaned across it, peering at me.

"Jimmy, this is Perry Palomino," Dex said quickly.

I was about to give Jimmy my hand but he just nodded dismissively and sat in an overstuffed swivel chair. If he had a cat in his lap, he would have been the perfect arch villain in a comic book film.

I glanced over at Dex for support. He reached out under the table and squeezed my knee. Slightly inappropriate but comforting nonetheless.

"So you're the one," Jimmy said slowly, his voice high and careful.

"That's me," I agreed brightly, hoping I was projecting some kind of charm.

"You know, I was going about my business, making some money," he started, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. Dex and I waited patiently while

he did this. He slipped his glasses back on his face and looked me straight in the eye.

“And then you come from out of nowhere.”

He left it at that. Should I say something? Should I apologize? I wasn't sure where this Jimmy fellow was going with all this but he didn't seem like the easiest person to talk to.

Dex turned to me. “Jimmy just wants to make sure you're fully into this.”

“Well, perhaps,” I said as confidently as possible. “But I want to know exactly what I'm getting into. What are we talking about here?”

“At least you seem smarter than you look,” Jimmy sniffed. I took offense to that but didn't let it show. I felt Dex stiffen up beside me.

Jimmy pulled some papers out of the binder and looked them over but didn't hand them over to me.

“If I decide to do this, which is a huge ‘if’ because even though I like what Dex has shown me, and I do think the man can make a pile of shit taste like fucking candy, I'm still not sold on you. But if I decide to give you both the go-ahead, I hope you realize this isn't going to make you famous and it isn't going to make you rich. All I want is to bring in enough advertisers to make ends meet and maybe give Dex a new fucking camera.”

I looked over at Dex. He was embarrassed and looked down at his hands.

“I make money,” Jimmy continued, “by keeping costs lower than they should be. For you, Ms. Palomino, that means an hourly wage based on exactly how many hours you contribute to the project. That might mean a lot of money one week, it might mean shit all

the next week. I'd suggest you keep your day job as a barista or whatever the hell you do."

"I'm a production coordinator at an advertising firm," I said proudly.

"Oh? So you are smarter than you look. Well, that helps for something."

I couldn't help but narrow my eyes at him. I'd never been in the presence of someone who rubbed me quite the wrong way as this guy did.

"Perry will decide whether she needs to keep a job on the side or not," Dex spoke up for me.

"Don't be a hero, Dex," Jimmy said dismissively. He turned his beady eyes on me again. "Dex here tells me you have quite a natural affinity for sussing out these so-called ghostly situations."

I did?

Jimmy continued, "But I think that's a load of horseshit. Do you think it matters to me whether you're the next fucking ghost whisperer or not? I don't care. But if you can sell it, and Dex has assured me you can, with your writing at least, then that's all I care about. You guys do the groundwork, you do the research, and I'll send you both to wherever you need to go in order to create a fucking good show."

Dex leaned forward in his seat and spoke to me. "I've already got a case down in Laredo, Texas, we could go investigate. Should be something really fantastic. Mimic ghosts."

I didn't know what mimic ghosts were but the idea of going to Texas was pretty cool. Jimmy look unconvinced though.

"Now, the main problem I have with you, Perry," Jimmy said bluntly, "is that while I think you can write a compelling story, and Dex says you're easy to

work with, I just don't think you're attractive enough to be on the internet."

My face immediately flushed with sparking heat and my jaw dropped a little bit.

He continued, "It's not that you aren't pretty, you've got something there, but you've seen what we have on the other shows. Dex's gal Jennifer, well her body—no offense, Dex—is what brings in the traffic and the dollars. Plus, you've got her friend on the side and those two could vomit wine all day and people would still watch. I just don't see people watching a show with a, um, bigger girl on it. Again, no offense. It's just the reality."

I felt like someone swiped at my guts with a ragged hook. This had to be the most humiliating thing I had ever been subjected to, and that said a lot coming from someone who was known as "The Chubster" in high school. I waited for the tears to flow, but I was in too much shock to react in any way.

That didn't stop Dex though.

He suddenly got to his feet; his chair flew out from under him and wheeled backwards toward the wall. He slammed his hands down on the table with such force that I was afraid the glass was going to shatter. He leaned across until he was very close to Jimmy's worried face.

"Do you ever get sick of being a complete asshole, Jimmy?" Dex growled, his voice scraping the bottom of the register, spitting with rawness. "She may not be a self-obsessed stick-thin bimbo, but she's more than right for this job. You're right in that she's got something about her, and we have a right to share that with the world. This show is more than just stupid ghost stories. This show will go further into those

mysteries than any show has before. It will bring that real back to reality programming. She's smart, she's funny and she's not afraid to take risks. Not to mention that she's beautiful, sexy and charming. You know it, I know it, and soon everyone else will know it. The only person who doesn't know it is *her* because of archaic fuckheads like yourself telling her otherwise."

My mouth dropped open another inch. I couldn't believe what Dex had just said. It had to be the most wonderful thing anyone had ever said about me, and his words and passion melted me from the inside out. I felt the tears finally coming.

"Are we really going to argue about her?" Jimmy said after a few beats, thumbing at me.

Dex continued to stare at Jimmy, rage pulsing at the corners of his jaw.

This was too much for me to handle. The tears started to flow; even though they were tears of frustration and anger, I didn't know what to do.

So, I decided to leave.

I got up quickly, squeaked out an "excuse me," and bolted out of the room and the office before Jimmy, Dex, or the receptionist had a chance to say anything.

I pushed the button for the elevator a few times before my vision was blurred by my tears. I decided the stairs might be the quickest way out.

I got into the stairway and ran down. At first I wasn't sure what I was running from; by the time I had gone down ten flights and my knees were starting to hurt, I slowed my pace and started breathing in deeply.

I probably shouldn't have run like that. I know it was totally unprofessional and made me look even

worse, but what was the point in sticking around to be humiliated further? It's not like I was going to get a show anyway at this rate, no matter how hard Dex fought for me.

The thought of what he said brought a sense of warmth into my aching, wheezing chest. I slowed down even more and sat down on one of the cold steps. The stairwell was empty and I had another thirty floors to go down.

I took in a few deep breaths and tried to run through what had happened. I had two feelings battling inside of me. One was that icky feeling you get when you know you've made an idiot of yourself; the other was a sense of unworthiness. Never in my whole life have I ever had someone put so much stock into me as a person and actually believe it. Or at least act like he believed it. I was a huge risk for him and he seemed willing to jump with no rope or cord attached. It amazed me that Dex said all of that and to his boss, no less. I'd be on my ass in a second if I ever said anything like that to Frida.

And at that thought, I was shot with a third feeling: Guilt. The guilt of lying to my boss and putting my job on the line, all for nothing. I could see the shoes my mom had bought me, sitting proudly in their shoebox. I could have ruined everything for myself.

"What a mess," I said out loud, my voice echoing from the cement walls.

I sat there for a few more minutes trying to figure out my next course of action. I didn't know where Dex was and I didn't have a phone, so I couldn't call him. But I did have money and a plane ticket. Getting a cab and heading back to the airport seemed like the smartest thing to do. Just go back home, try and

buckle down and make something good of my life, and forget all of this ever happened.

Not that it was going to be that easy. To just let go of all those hopes that this had given me. Hope, potential, dreams. I really thought this was my way out of an ordinary life. My promotion was great and all, but it was an ordinary job and still felt stifling, and when I thought about this opportunity, it just paled in comparison. This had been a chance to actually prove to everyone what exactly I was capable of. Even when I didn't believe anything was going to come of this, something at the back of my head and in the bottom of my heart was already fully invested.

I sighed. I wiped away any makeup smudges under my eyes, brushed back my hair and stood up. I'd probably end up dwelling on this all day, regardless, but there was no point doing it in a cold stairwell in a giant Seattle office building.

I made my way down the rest of the stairs and out of the lobby, walking quickly in case I saw someone I didn't want to see. Not that I thought Jimmy would be waiting to pounce on me and insult me further, but I was paranoid.

Once outside, I scanned the street for cabs. It looked like there might be one across the street in front of a boutique hotel.

I was heading for it, hoping no one else would take it, when I heard my name being called. It was Dex's voice.

I didn't want to turn around. I wanted to be free of all of this. I kept walking and ignored it.

I didn't get very far.

I heard footsteps behind me and my arm being grabbed. He stopped in front of me, panting slightly, a

crazed look in his eyes. I looked down at his free hand. He had a pen and a stack of papers in it.

"Perry," he said breathlessly. "Why did you run?"

I gave him a look. Was he serious?

"I'm sure being humiliated is a normal thing for you?" I sneered.

He rolled his eyes. "Jimmy is Jimmy. Don't listen to him. I don't. And it doesn't matter, he listens to me."

He let go of my arm and placed the papers in one of my hands and the pen in the other.

"Would you do me the honor of signing this contract?"

What? I looked down at my hands. I didn't understand.

"We've got the show, kiddo. If you still want it," he said, peering deep into my eyes.

"How? He said—"

He shook his head. "That's just Jimmy. Like I told you, he listens to me. He knows he would be stupid not to take a chance on this."

Though I felt uncomfortable about all of this, there was a tingling of excitement biting at my toes.

"Dex," I said, looking down at the paper but not really seeing it. "I don't want to do anything if you forced someone—"

"I didn't!" he exclaimed. "He likes a challenge as much as I do. Now what do you say? You know how I feel now."

I looked up at him. Did I?

He smiled at me, took the papers from my hand and held them against his chest. He took my other hand and put the pen to the papers.

“You’re signing it on my heart, that’s got to say something,” he said.

I took in a deep breath, not sure of how to feel or think. I know Dex wasn’t talking about anything too deep, but the fact was he was still willing to take this chance on me and somehow convinced his boss to do the same. I felt uncomfortable, but a touch of excitement climbed through my body at an alarming rate.

“We’ll make a great team. I promise,” he grinned, and tried to move my hand down to the signature area.

I couldn’t help but smile back. It was a nice little moment, standing on the side of a busy Seattle street with the contract to our future lying against his chest, the pen and the power in my own hand. I smiled even more until I thought my cheeks would burst.

I still had to look over the contract and make sure I knew exactly what I was getting into. I knew I would probably have to work at the agency part-time in order to have enough time to film during the week. I knew that might mean I could lose my job because I had no idea if they would let me work part-time; therefore, I could be tossing away a perfectly acceptable future in advertising. It also meant disappointing my parents again (those damn shoes), and working with a man who I was falling for when he expressed no real interest in me and had a girlfriend, despite his apparent devotion to me in this project. Even though there were no guarantees of any success, I still signed my name. On his heart, no less.

I knew it was the most important thing I had ever written.

Dex laughed when I was done and patted me hard on the back.

"You've made me a very happy man, kiddo," he said, folding the papers into his hand. "Now, wait here while I run these up to him. I'll be quick."

He turned and sprinted toward the building, his hair flopping against his head with each stride.

Now that I was alone again, it actually hit me. I was doing this. I was actually doing this. Things were never going to be the same again.

I did a tiny Mary Tyler Moore jump in the street to the amusement of the passersby. At least they met me with smiles.

Dex wasn't long, and within minutes he was back at my side, wiping his hands.

"Done deal," he said. "No turning back now."

I nodded and we started off toward his car. We walked in silence, mostly due to the little conversations we were probably having in our heads at the same time. But before we got in, I grabbed his hand and stopped him.

I wasn't sure what to say or how to say it. I licked my lips nervously and looked up into those brown eyes of his. They were almost unreadable but I detected a current of worry behind them. I let go of his hand.

"Thank you."

He pursed his lips and nodded. "You're welcome."

That was all we ever said about what had happened. During the ride back to the airport, we discussed the logistics of our future endeavors.

The episode, which I quickly reviewed on his laptop in the car, was very well done and well edited. There wasn't much in the way of "ghostly proof," but there was a frightening atmosphere to the whole show, and I knew that I could write the perfect piece to go

with it. It would be the truth, of course, that I would put out there for anyone to believe.

Dex said the episode would go live on a Sunday night in two weeks. He and I would then push hard for lots of exposure. I could use the existing YouTube videos and redirect people; I could use my sister's blog and even create my own separate dummy blog to increase more traffic. Dex said Jimmy was pretty good at getting advertising, which is something I could have done, considering my day job, but I wanted to keep that as separate from this as possible.

In three weeks we would fly down to Texas for the weekend and shoot our next episode. We decided the best thing for me to do would be to request that I work at the agency Tuesdays through Thursdays so I could have Fridays through Mondays to travel, shoot, and write.

It was a gamble for me to think that work was going to let me do this, and even more imposing than that, it meant I was going to have no life for the foreseeable future. But what life did I really have before, anyway?

As anxious and nervous as I was about the new path I was about to head down, a tiny part of me knew everything was going to be OK. It felt right.

When we got to the airport, Dex pulled the car up to the terminal, got out and opened the door for me.

"Thanks," I smiled, feeling charmed and connected.

"I've got a thank-you present for you," he said with a jovial glint in his eyes. "Close your eyes."

The childish part of my brain hoped that maybe it was something as simple and romantic as a kiss. I closed them.

He placed something cold in my hands. I opened my eyes to see a shiny new iPhone sitting in them.

"What?" I beamed. "You didn't have to—"

"I kinda did. And I kinda wanted to. Now you can return my crazy texts at all hours of the night," he winked. "It's more for my pleasure than for yours."

I squeezed the phone in my hand and put my arms out to hug him. He embraced me wholeheartedly.

Until his own phone started to ring. He broke away and looked at it. I could see on the screen it was Jennifer.

"Sorry, I have to take this," he said apologetically to me and patted me hard on the shoulder. "Have a safe flight. I'll call you soon."

I nodded awkwardly as he put the phone to his ear and said, "Hey, babe."

He talked to her, sincerely engrossed in the conversation. I turned around, feeling a bit stupid, and walked away toward the ticket agent. I looked behind at him, hoping to catch him watching me. Instead, he was still talking and walking back to his car, his lithe figure cutting through the crowd.

I felt pretty small as I walked to my gate and waited for the plane to arrive, but somehow pushed those thoughts out of my head. If I could just get over these feelings that I had for him then I would be OK. After all, it was just a stupid girl crush that I had. What was really important was the fact that I was about to embark on a journey unlike any I'd ever been on before.

I looked around the busy gate area, at the nameless people sitting about and decided I should probably use the bathroom before I got on the plane.

Though it was a short flight, I didn't have an aisle seat and I hated having to climb over people just because I had to go pee.

I walked down the hall, past the gift shops, bars and a few more gates before I found the restroom.

It was surprisingly empty, which was a nice change from what airport bathrooms usually look like. There was only one woman in a stall down near the end. I noticed her red patent Mary Janes and old lady stockings. I went into the nearest stall to the front.

I hung my bag up on the sturdy coat hook, noting how damp the ground looked, and proceeded to sit down. As I did so, I heard the stall door at the end open and the woman slowly walk out. I didn't hear her flush, which was pretty gross but expected in public washrooms. I swear, women were just as bad as men in these scenarios. It must have been some sort of internal rebellion mechanism, like "I don't live here so I don't have to clean; instead, I'll act like a fucking monkey."

As I was thinking that, I noticed how precise the woman's footsteps were as she walked down the aisle toward me and the sinks.

Heel, toe, heel, toe, heel, toe.

It was slow enough to be creepy and creepy enough that I had too much stage fright to even go. I just sat there, holding my breath and waiting for her to walk past.

But she didn't.

Heel, toe, heel, toe. And then it stopped somewhere outside my stall.

Heel, toe, heel, toe.

It was like she was walking toward me.

What the fuck?

Heel. Toe.

And then it stopped, just as the round toes of the red Mary Janes were visible beneath my stall door, facing directly towards me.

This crazy bitch was standing right outside my fucking door!

I didn't know what to say or do. I didn't want to move, but I was on the fucking toilet seat. This was the most vulnerable position ever.

I kept my eyes on the toes, thinking at some point they'd move or maybe the woman would say something. But neither of those things happened.

There was a large enough crack between the stall doors, though, usually the bane of every public washroom.

I slowly moved my head over so that I was looking through the crack. Maybe I could get an idea of what she was doing.

And through the crack I saw an eye. A heavily made up, aging eye staring right back at me, face pressed up to the door.

I screamed. I couldn't help it.

I screamed and jumped off of the toilet, yanking up my pants far enough and flung myself out of the bathroom stall, fully ready to confront whoever the fuck was out there.

But as I stumbled out of the stall, the door banging loudly, I didn't see anyone. There was no one there. I was alone in the washroom, and the woman at the end of the aisle was gone.

I put my hand to my neck to feel how fast my pulse was racing. I closed my eyes and took in a few deep breaths. After counting to ten, I opened them, expecting the worst.

I was still alone in the bathroom, my bag hanging on the door, which slowly moved back and forth.

I grabbed it off the hook and hustled myself over to the sink. I could deal with peeing on the plane. At least I knew I wouldn't be alone there.

I placed the bag on the part of the counter that wasn't wet and quickly splashed cold water on my face, avoiding my eye makeup.

I looked up in the mirror and saw nothing but my reflection.

I turned for the paper towels.

Creepy Clown Lady was standing there beside the dispenser.

I screamed again, but it was caught in my throat and came out as a breathless gurgle.

It was her, as clear as day. Her wrinkled, pancaked face, and violet-tinted coif. The bizarre taffeta gown with sewn-on pom poms. Her stockinged legs and red vintage shoes.

She kept her glassy cataract eyes on me, almost willing me to calm down and stop screaming, as silently as I was trying.

I don't know how long we stood there just eyeing each other, only a few feet apart. But at some point I found strength returning to my throat, a life force rushing around my heart.

"Who the hell are you?!?" I yelled at her.

She didn't say anything. Her expression didn't change. She kept staring at me with her knowing eyes that were vaguely inquisitive and strangely patient.

I wasn't even afraid at this point. I just wanted to know what the fuck was going on.

I took a tentative step toward her.

"Please, tell me, who are you?"

She smiled, slowly. Her mouth spread, her yellow teeth showed and the bad lipstick job became more glaring. As before, her eyes never smiled along with it. Whatever I had just said about not being afraid, forget it.

I was very afraid.

"You're just starting," the woman said with her slight accent. Her voice sounded disembodied. I was immediately reminded of a scene with Robert Blake in *Lost Highway*.

"You need to keep going," she continued.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

"You need each other. You need to set this right."

"Set what right?" I asked. "What? What are you talking about? We did set it right."

She shook her head very slowly. As she did, flakes of makeup fell off her face and fluttered to the ground like pixie dust. I watched this, dumbfounded.

"It's not over yet. You and Dex need each other. We need you. It's not over yet."

I wanted to strangle her, whoever she was.

"Why, why?" I asked frantically. "Please just tell me why so I can know."

"You'll find out. It's not over yet. You're just discovering. You're just starting."

"You keep saying that! What do you mean I'm just starting?" I yelled at her just as I heard the bathroom door close. I turned to see a business woman walk in wheeling a carry-on behind her. She gave me a concerned look and walked past us down the aisle. I followed her walk and saw her give me one last fearful look before she walked into a stall.

I looked back at Creepy Clown Lady but she was gone.

I quickly spun around and after seeing no one, I picked up my bag and ran out the door and into the terminal. It was full of passengers going to and fro. The lady had vanished.

And then my flight was boarding. I had no choice but to scuttle back to my gate and slink on board as the guilty party who was holding up everyone else.

It was only till I sat down in my seat, after squeezing past the angry fat man on the aisle, that I had a chance to mull over what had happened.

The lady had been there. She had spoken to me. I interacted with her.

But where did she come from and what did she want? I couldn't have seen her. My imagination was good but it wasn't *that* good. I had to keep going? I was just getting started?

And most intriguing of all—Dex and I needed each other? What could Dex ever need *me* for?

I was pondering that as the plane pulled away from the gate. All the feelings of excitement I had earlier about the show, about my future, were now compounded with an increasing sense of urgency and trepidation. I had so many questions now that needed to be answered. And quickly.

To get a handle on my thoughts, I looked out the window at the sunshine that was coming through the dark afternoon clouds. And as if fate knew exactly what I was thinking, I caught a glimpse of a figure standing by one of the windows.

It was Dex. Waving goodbye.

FOR A PREVIEW OF *RED FOX*, BOOK #2 OF THE
EXPERIMENT IN TERROR SERIES, PLEASE TURN
THE PAGE...

RED FOX

My eyes flickered open. Something had woken me. I froze and let my eyes adjust to the darkness. I was still on my side, facing the wall. I wasn't sure what time it was, or how long I had been asleep, but it must have been the middle of the night. I listened and heard Dex snoring lightly beside me. His back was to mine, his butt square against me. Good thing he was wearing pants after all.

Despite that warmth and contact, I felt scared. I often did when I woke up for no reason. I tried to remember the dreams I just had but they were flitting away from my memory. Something about an owl...Dex...rocks.

The rocks! I remembered what had happened earlier downstairs. Could the sound of rocks have woken me up? I listened again, harder. I couldn't hear anything hitting the window or the roof.

But I felt something brush up against my foot.

My feet were underneath the covers but far away from Dex's feet. It couldn't have been him. My heart stopped. I felt icky. I had to roll over and see what it was but every instinct told me not to.

I took a deep breath and slowly turned over.

I felt the life being sucked out of me.

There was an animal sitting at the foot of the bed on top of my feet. As they turned over with the rest of me, I could feel my toes jabbing up into its soft bottom.

It was a fox. I couldn't see it clearly but I knew that's what it was. A fox about the size of a collie, sitting on its hindquarters, ears creating a pointy silhouette. It was looking right at me. Its eyes were a hazel color. They didn't glow like most animal's eyes did; instead they locked with mine with feverish intensity. It was like looking into the eyes of someone I knew.

Was this for real? Was this actually happening? I wanted to look at Dex but I couldn't tear my eyes away from it. The more I stared into those knowing, harmful pupils, the more I felt entranced. My legs and arms were replaced by lead pipes. But I still felt the animal's weight on my feet, which had to mean that what I was experiencing was real.

I don't even know if I was breathing, I didn't think I was. My heart was thumping away loudly in my chest, but even that was starting to slow down. It wasn't like I was calming down in any way – in fact I could feel the terror slowly taking hold of my body – but my heart was slowing until the thumps were further and further apart. My thoughts became sluggish. All I could think about was how I needed to look away from those eyes.

Then the fox shifted onto its front feet, perfectly positioned between my calves. It was closer now and our eye contact had not been broken. I began to feel like I was drowning internally, my lungs were without air and I was too weak to gasp for it. The room started to spin, with the fox still front and center.

It took a step forward, mouth open. Was it smiling at me? Its eyes said the opposite. They said I was dead.

I tried to talk, to scream but nothing came out. Either I was going to wake up in a second or something horrifying was about to happen. And I couldn't do anything about it.

It took another step, its tail waving subtly in the background. The eyes narrowed, as if it was glaring at me.

I felt Dex shift and a smattering of hope rushed through me. The fox didn't break its stare but it paused at that.

Dex stirred again and rolled over. I couldn't turn to look at him but I prayed for him to open his eyes.

I felt him shuffle back a bit in the bed and then stop. Pause. He saw.

"What the fuck?!" he yelled.

The fox leaped off of the bed and ran out the door. The door had been open the whole time.

Dex sprang out of the sheets and yelled for Will, "Will! There's an animal in here!"

He followed the fox out the door, leaving me alone for a sickening second, then ran back to me. I still couldn't move, I still couldn't breathe. My eyes and body were locked down.

"Hey!" He jumped on the bed and shook both my shoulders. "Perry, are you OK?"

I tried to answer but couldn't.

"Answer me! Perry, what happened? Perry?"

He kept shaking me, then took my head in his hands and physically moved my face until it faced his. His eyes – as crazy and worried as they were – brought

me to a sense of reality. I felt my limbs coming back, hot flashes of nerves climbing up and down them.

Then my breath. I gasped loudly as if I had been underwater for the last five minutes. He held my face steady. "You're going to be OK."

There was a commotion in the hallway and a panicked-looking Will appeared at the door. "What happened, is she all right?"

"She's fine," Dex said quickly and gestured with his head, "the animal went downstairs."

Will nodded and took off down the hall, the walls shaking from his lumbering run.

Dex looked back at me, my wide eyes searching his as all the fear came rushing in.

"Hey, you're fine," he said. I started to shake and he brought his hands to my arms and held me sternly. "You're going to be OK. But we need to go find out what that was."

I shook my head violently, still unable to speak.

"We have to," he implored. "And I am not leaving you here by yourself."

He was right. I wouldn't be able to sleep not knowing what was going on but going downstairs didn't seem like a good option either.

"Will has his baseball bat, whatever it was, was small, we'll be OK."

He climbed out of the bed and walked around to my side. He looked down at me, smiled, and proceeded to pick me up in his arms.

I tried to protest but couldn't. Despite his slight frame and my rather dumpy one, he picked me up with ease. He carried me past the bed, stooping down to pick up his camera from the dresser and then we were out of the room and into the hall. Will's door was

open, as was Sarah's. They must have been downstairs.

We made it to the bottom of the stairs when I felt fine enough to walk.

"Please put me down," I croaked in a pathetic whisper.

He stopped and lowered me. My legs felt like jelly but at least they felt like my own again. He held the camera with one hand and gripped my hand with the other. We walked slowly through the downstairs area. The lights were still all off, the shadows more deceptive.

"It was a fox," I said thickly as we peeked around into the empty living room.

"What the fuck was it doing?" he asked.

I shook my head.

We flicked on the lights and saw neither a fox, nor Will or Sarah in the living room, dining room or kitchen. A breeze rustled in through the holes in the glass. The clock on the microwave said three a.m.

The front door was wide open, so we walked over to it and peeked outside. I couldn't see them but I could hear Will, Sarah and Miguel all talking excitedly about the animal. I didn't want to step outside into the cold New Mexico night so I stuck my neck out further and peered around the doorframe to see where they were.

WHOOSH!

A huge white owl flapped in front of me, mere inches from my face.

I screamed and ducked as Dex stuck his arm out and thwacked it. He hit the owl square in the chest.

I peered up, my hands around my head. The owl squawked and flew off into the night. I looked up at

Dex. He took back his clenched fist and let out a low breath. He was just as freaked out as I was. He looked down at me and offered his hand.

“What a hoot,” he joked but his voice was pinched with nerves.

Seconds later, Will, Sarah and Miguel came around the corner to see what happened. I explained as much as I could. The owl part of the story paled in comparison to the fox. It turns out that they hadn’t seen either creature. Out of all three of them, I knew Will was the one who believed me whole-heartedly. Sarah had only a few choice words and a couple of poignant sighs but for the most part she didn’t argue with what I said too much. I knew she didn’t want us there at all but I saw that she did (finally) believe something was going on. And Miguel, well Miguel was a sneering, sniveling son of a bitch. But even he walked back to his quarters looking more wary than before.

And that was the end of the night for me. I wasn’t about to go to sleep again and neither was Dex. So we stayed up, sitting on top of the bed and playing games with a bunch of cards we found in one of the bedroom drawers. We stayed up until the sun began its quick rise above the mountain tops and the fears of the night were washed away by the desert light. Only then was I able to close my eyes for a few minutes.

Thank You

Writing your first novel is such an exhilarating and daunting process. On one hand you've finally done it, you've actually written that novel you've been talking about for years (in a total Brian Griffin/Stewie fashion). On the other hand...now what?

When I wrote *Darkhouse*, I did it in six weeks because I wanted the highs and lows, the urgency of getting it down. I wanted the passion to affect me every day and it did. Writing a book, living the lives of the characters, is like a drug. Sometimes the drug can mess with you, producing a bad "I suck, this is awful, don't quite your day job" kind of trip. Other times it makes you feel like you're on top of the world, and as Perry would say, finally doing something worthwhile with your life.

But when it's all over, you come down hard. It's time to face the music. What next? Do you bury the manuscript in your desk? Show it to a few friends? Query agents? Dream about a big publishing deal?

Or do you self-publish?

I decided to veto the agents and publishers and self-publish this baby. Would I do it again? Hard to say. It's a *lot* of work and even though there are a lot of quality indie writers out there, they sadly don't get much credit (yet, anyway). But while we may not get credit from the literary community, we get readers and we get fans and these lovely people are what make our worlds go round.

So thank you – YOU - whoever you are that bought *Darkhouse*. Thank you for taking a chance on my debut novel and the first foray (no pun intended) into this spooky series. I hope you enjoyed it enough to want to stick around for the entire Experiment in Ter-

ror ride with Perry and Dex. It does get better. It gets scarier, sexier, funnier and, according to some people, just as addicting as crack.

Please don't do drugs, though.

Read Experiment in Terror instead.

Yours truly,

Karina Halle

For more information about the series, visit:

www.experimentinterror.com

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