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QUERCUS

*Castle Knoll Country Fair, 1965*

'Your future contains dry bones.' Madame Peony Lane looks sombre as she delivers the opening line of a fortune that will dictate the rest of Frances Adams' life.

Frances is quiet, her eyes fixed on the woman in front of her, though her two friends giggle at the terrible theatrics. From the gaudy beaded curtains adorning the tent to Peony Lane's tacky silk turban, the whole thing screams Hollywood kitsch. Peony Lane herself can't be more than twenty, though she's adding a rasp to her voice in an attempt to seem ageless. It isn't quite working. It's all so flimsy that none of them should take her seriously, and almost none of them do. Except for Frances.

She takes in every word as if it's gospel. And with each new line of her fortune, her expression tightens just a bit. Like hot water teasing out its boiling point, giving off steam but not yet ready to erupt.

When the girls leave the darkness of the psychic's tent, Frances doesn't even blink in the bright August sun. Her hair is long and loose, and it glows red-gold. A man selling toffee apples gives her a lingering glance, but she doesn't

notice him. She doesn't notice much of anything after the grim prediction she's just been handed.

Emily takes Frances' left arm, and Rose joins her right, and the three girls walk like a chain of daisies, weaving in between stalls selling antiques and trinkets. They turn their noses up at the butcher selling sausages, but stop to look at silver necklaces warmed by the sun's intensity. It's just a trick to get Frances' mind on something else, but Emily buys a delicate chain with a bird on the end. It's a good omen, she says, because her last name is Sparrow.

It's Rose who tackles the issue head-on.

'Frances, you look like death has already found you,' she says. Rose elbows Frances to try to jolt some life back into her, but Frances' stern expression simply deepens. 'It's all rubbish anyway, you know? No one can see the future.'

Emily ties her long blonde hair up with a ribbon, and then fastens the bird necklace around her neck. It flashes in the sun – a tiny echo of the knife blades gleaming on the hunting stall behind them. Emily sees Frances eyeing the necklace in horror.

'What?' Emily asks. Her voice is innocent but her expression isn't.

'A bird,' Frances says, her eyes narrowing. 'The fortune-teller said, "The bird will betray you."'

'Then I've got the perfect remedy,' Emily says. She dashes off into the crowd, and returns several minutes later. Two more silver bird necklaces glint in her palm. 'For you and Rose,' she smirks. 'That way you'll never know which bird will betray you. You could even betray yourself.' She laughs, and it's wild and open, like Emily herself.

Frances looks desperately at Rose for some understanding, but Rose is laughing too. 'I mean, I think it's a good idea actually. Take your fate into your own hands!' Rose fastens her necklace on, as if in demonstration.

Frances hesitates, and finally puts the necklace in her skirt pocket. 'I'll consider it.'

'Oh, cheer up, Frances,' Emily says. 'If you keep sulking like this, I'll be forced to murder you myself.' The corners of Emily's eyes are creased, as if another laugh is bubbling beneath the surface.

'Can you both stop ignoring how creepy that was?' Frances lets go of them and comes to a halt. She wipes sweaty palms down the simple cotton skirt she's wearing, and then crosses her arms. The rectangle of her miniature notebook peeks out from her skirt pocket, and she's got ink stains on her fingers from fiercely scribbling down every word the fortune-teller said.

Rose covers the distance between them in two tall strides, and wraps an arm around her shoulders. She's close enough that her short black bob brushes Frances' cheek. 'I think that woman was just messing with you.'

'But *murder*, Rose! I can't ignore that!'

Emily rolls her eyes. 'Oh honestly Frances! Let. It. Go.' She bites off each word in the sentence like a crisp piece of apple, and with Rose's Snow White looks and Emily's golden glow, Frances suddenly feels as if they're all fairy-tale characters. And in fairy tales, when a witch tells you your fate, you listen.

Emily and Rose each take one of Frances' arms again and continue to browse the fair, but things are quieter now, as if

the day has been stuffed with cotton wool. The sun is still blazing, and ale still flows from kegs in pop-up tents. The air is sticky with burnt toffee and the faint smell of smoke, but Frances' footfalls have become heavy and purposeful. Under her breath, she repeats her fortune again and again, until it's burned into her memory.

*Your future contains dry bones. Your slow demise begins right when you hold the queen in the palm of one hand. Beware the bird, for it will betray you. And from that, there's no coming back. But daughters are the key to justice, find the right one and keep her close. All signs point toward your murder.*

It's such an unlikely prediction that she should laugh. But those words have planted a seed in Frances' mind, and small but toxic roots are already spreading through her.

The three girls make the best of their afternoon, and soon the laughter isn't so forced. The jokes and gossip and little things that decorate their friendship creep back in. At sixteen, ups and downs are as natural as breathing, and these three girls have breathed deeper than most.

But if anything is unlucky for them, it's the number three. Because in a year's time, they won't be three friends any longer. One of the girls will disappear, and it won't be Frances Adams.

There will be an open file with the local detective, the only evidence in a small plastic bag stapled to a missing persons report that's far shorter than it should be. A small silver chain, with a tiny bird clinging to it.

## CHAPTER 1

It's one of those heavy summer evenings where the air feels so thick you could swim in it. When I surface from my journey on the Piccadilly Line, even the staleness of Earl's Court station feels like a breath of fresh air. By the time I make it up the three flights of stairs to street level, I'm winded and rummaging through my backpack for my water bottle. All I find is a Thermos full of stale coffee from this morning.

Slim men in suits sail past me like urban gazelles while I gulp down the dregs. It's as disgusting as I anticipated it might be, but I need the caffeine. My phone buzzes and I pull it from my pocket, resisting the urge to check my e-mail and instead answering the call flashing across the screen.

'Jenny.' I let all the exhaustion finally leak out into my voice. 'Please tell me you're on your way. I can't face Mum's basement again without backup. Last week when I was cleaning it out there were spiders. Huge ones.'

'I'm already here,' she says. 'But Annie, I'm staying on the front step until you arrive, because I don't feel like being dragged around the house by your mum while she tells me which walls she's knocking down.'

‘Good call. Also, I don’t think she’s allowed to knock down walls in that house, we don’t even own it.’

‘That’s a good enough reason then. And I imagine she’s on one of her design rampages, with her private exhibition at the Tate looming.’

I wince. Mum’s a painter – quite a famous and successful one, actually. Or she was, until interest in her work dried up. Unfortunately, this career slump coincided with the loss of the fortune she made from her earlier work, so most of my life we’ve walked a fine line between living like squatters and being frugal because it’s bohemian and arty. ‘I mean, Mum’s design rampages will keep me from endlessly checking my empty inbox, so I’m actually on board with whatever she wants me to do. I have a backpack full of paint swatches and lots of pent-up frustration. I’m ready to tackle this basement. Except for the spiders, those all have your name on them.’

‘Aw, my very own army of spiders,’ Jenny coos. ‘Just what I’ve always wanted.’ She pauses for a beat, as if she’s considering her next words carefully. ‘Why is an empty inbox bothering you? Have you sent out more writing?’

Jenny’s been my best friend since we were nine. Last month I was made redundant from my low-paying office job, and she stepped up as the perfect mix of shoulder-to-cry-on and motivational-life-coach. She made a great case for me using this as an opportunity to follow my dreams and pursue a career writing murder mysteries, because not every struggling writer has a mum with an eight-bedroom house in central London who’ll let you live rent-free in exchange for help with odd jobs.

It's not the typical set-up for a twenty-five-year-old who's had to move back home, though it does come with the baggage of dealing with Mum's moods. Since that's something I'd successfully escaped by moving out in the first place, this does feel like a step backwards. But I have my own floor in the Chelsea house, and the place is falling apart in a rather romantic way. My childhood bedroom has its own chandelier that is dust-covered and missing several of its crystals, and it casts a ghostly light over the antique typewriter I found in one of the cupboards. I don't actually write with it, I just sort of clunk the keys now and then for some atmosphere. It has a tartan-patterned plastic case and a 1960s vibe, which I love.

'I started sending out my latest manuscript to some literary agents,' I say, and bite my lip when Jenny doesn't reply. 'It's only been a week since I e-mailed the first few,' I say, wiping the sweat from the back of my neck. I'm walking up Earl's Court Road, darting across traffic where I can. My backpack weighs a ton, but the library was having a sale and I couldn't resist. And I can justify buying seven hard copies of Agatha Christie books as *research*. 'But I'm already starting to feel like my book is actually terrible.'

'It's not terrible.'

'No, it really is. I just couldn't see it until I actually *sent it* to people to read.'

'But you were so confident about this one!' Jenny says. I can hear the bubble in her voice, she's getting ready to go into cheerleader-mode.

I cut her off before she can really get started. 'I was, but I'm wiser now. You know when a toddler randomly walks

up to you, and the kid's mum is beaming at it and assuming you'll find it just as cute as she does? But the toddler's got a gooey nose and old food stuck to its clothes?

'Ugh, yeah.'

'I'm that kid's mum, and I've just sent it out into the world with a gooey nose thinking people will see it the same way I do.'

'So wipe its face. Introduce it to people when it's cleaner.'

'Yeah, I think that's what editing is for.'

I hear Jenny suck in a breath on the other end of the line. 'Annie, are you telling me you sent a book out to literary agents and you didn't even *edit* it?' Jenny laughs long and hard, and it's infectious. I can't help it, I'm smiling broadly as I turn onto Tregunter Road.

'I just got so excited!' I wheeze, letting a laugh escape. 'I did a thing, you know? I wrote many words, and they all culminated with THE END.'

'Yes. And I'm proud of you. But I think you should at least let *me* read it before you send it out to any more agents.'

'What? No!'

'If you won't let me read it, *why are you sending it out to strangers?*'

'Hanging up now, I'm nearly at the house.' I shuffle to the end of the road, where Jenny is sitting on the steps waiting for me.

Mum's house sits miserably at the end of a posh row of terraces like Halloween attending a garden party. I wave to Jenny as she dusts off her chic skirt and runs a hand through her long black hair. Her fashion sense is impeccable, and I smooth a hand down my voluminous summer dress and

reconsider having bought this monstrosity. For some reason, I just seem drawn to dresses that make me look like a Victorian ghost. My pale skin and blonde curls only contribute to the situation, so I might as well stop fighting it.

Like Mum, Jenny and I studied art at Central St Martin's. Her parents moved to London from Hong Kong when Jenny was a baby, and are some of the loveliest people you'll ever meet. I'd never tell Mum, but sometimes when I craved a nice stable atmosphere that included a dad and siblings, I'd head to Jenny's after school instead of going home, even when Jenny was at tennis lessons or out somewhere. Her parents would let me sit and do homework and I'd chat to the whole family while the smells of actual home-cooking filled my nose.

When Jenny graduated, she landed so firmly on her feet that she's already in dream-job territory. She turned down a job in set design at the Royal Albert Hall to become part of the team that does the window displays at Harrods. She lives for it, and creates masterpieces, especially at Christmas.

'Well,' she says, linking her arm through mine. 'Should we see what your mum's basement has in store for us?'

We both take a moment to stare up at the house. Two sets of grimy bay windows frame the large stone steps leading to the front door. A long time ago the door must have been green, but the paint has been shedding itself in layers over the years and the wood's a bit warped. I do love it though. Four storeys of whitewashed former grandeur loom upward, and most of the old velvet curtains still shroud the windows.

'Thanks for doing this with me,' I say. I'm not even sure what I'm thankful for, because this is the house I grew up in.

And even though it was just Mum and me, it's always been a happy place to be. I think I'm just grateful that Jenny shows up when I call her, even when the call is just something like, *Hey, want to clean out an old basement with me?*

'No problem,' Jenny replies. 'And you already did the hard bit last week, right?'

'Ugh, don't remind me. There were so many boxes and trunks. And the removal men I hired were complete cowboys, they just threw everything into their van. I think I heard glass shatter on a few occasions. But I signed my name on the dotted line and had it all shipped over to Great Aunt Frances' weird mansion in Dorset. I hope she doesn't get too angry when a bunch of her old junk shows up unexpectedly, but Mum is insistent on converting the basement into a studio.'

'Frances is the aunt who technically owns this house, right?'

'That's the one.'

'Why haven't I heard more about her? Or met her?' Jenny's voice is open, but there's a small hint of a sting to it, as if she suspects I've left her out of something important.

'Don't take it personally,' I say. 'I've never met her either. Apparently she doesn't like London, or travelling. And she's so wealthy that she doesn't bother with checking up on this place. I think she even sends Mum a bit of money each week. It's sort of silly and old-fashioned, like a weekly allowance from a parent, but Mum's not too proud to take it. Once I asked Mum why Great Aunt Frances sends money, and she just brushed it off and shrugged.'

'Huh,' Jenny says, and I can see her chewing on all this new information, not ready to let it go. 'This sounds macabre,

but what happens when she dies? Does she have kids who'll kick you guys out?'

'Nope, Mum is set to inherit everything.' I brace myself for Jenny's reaction, because this is the sort of fact that your best friend of sixteen years should probably already know. And I wasn't keeping it from her, it's just something that honestly never came up. Great Aunt Frances is so distant that my default mentality is that the house really is ours. I forget she exists until I have to do something like sort through all her old stuff.

But Jenny just whistles under her breath. 'Family money,' she says, rolling her eyes. 'I thought the concept was fake, like something that's just in movies.'

We push open the stiff front door – unlocked, of course. Mum never locks it, she says if someone's going to choose a house on Tregunter Road to rob, it won't be ours. My eyes sweep over the exposed brick of the hallway, half the plaster still lingering in patches. Mum's right, any burglar would take one look at the layers of peeling wallpaper in here and determine there's nothing worth stealing. They'd be wrong though, most of Mum's art is worth an absolute fortune. She'd never sell any of the early work she still has around the house though, she's far too sentimental about it.

'In here!' Mum's voice echoes from the kitchen, which is deep in the back of the house. We tiptoe through two vast rooms that most people would use as sitting rooms but Mum uses as studio space. Huge canvases lean against the walls, and the floor is covered in paint splatters. Mum gave up using dust sheets for the floors decades ago. The light that comes through the two sets of bay windows is yellowed and musty,