



a novel



perfect
fifths

MEGAN

McCAFFERTY

Author of the *New York Times* bestsellers
Charmed Thirds and *Fourth Comings*

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For all the readers who have cared enough
to find out what happens next



In our artificial civilization many young people at twenty-five are still on the threshold of activity. As one looks back then, over eight or nine years, one sees a panorama of seemingly formidable length. So many crises, so many startling surprises, so many vivid joys and harrowing humiliations and disappointments, that one feels startlingly old; one wonders if one will ever feel so old again.

—*Youth and Life*, Randolph S. Bourne (1886–1918)

Even now, when I have come so far, I wonder where you are . . .

—“Even Now,” Barry Manilow (1943–)



part one: before



one

When Jessica Darling blindly collides into Marcus Flutie on this crisp, unclouded January morning, she can't remember the last time she had imagined where she would be—and who he would be—at the moment of their inevitable collision.

For him, however, it's a very different story.

two

Regrets. Jessica has so many regrets. She should have stopped pouring after that first glass of wine last night. Shouldn't have watched the ceiling swirl for hours. Should have resorted to a narcotic sleep aid sooner. Shouldn't have hit the snooze button one, two, three times before rocketing (“*I’m late!*”) out of bed this morning. Should have skipped the shower, not breakfast. Shouldn't have turned down her dad's offer to drive her to the airport instead of proving her mother right about the unpunctual local car service. Should have chosen the security screening line to the right, not the left, not the one that put her directly behind the starving and savage middle-aged trafficker of more than three ounces of the liquid weight-loss supplement with the funny name, a name Jessica keeps repeating in her head in rhythm with her sneakered feet sprinting across Concourse C.

Hoodia. Hoodia. Hoodia.

So many split decisions and judgment calls and incorrect estimations have led to this. To being late. She's late late late late for Gate C-88. She likes the rhyme, especially when timed with the beat of her feet, and chooses this staccato incantation over the silly-sounding appetite suppressant.

I'm late late late late for Gate C-88.



She recalls how she used to silently mouth spur-of-the-moment mantras back in her competitive high school running days. Hand-slapping rhymes from her youth: *Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack . . . All dressed in black, black, black*. Boy-band lyrics she would never say out loud: *You might hate me but it ain't no lie . . . Baby, bye, bye, bye*. Even her own name: *Jessica Darling . . . Darling . . . Darling . . . Jessica Darling . . . Darling . . . Darling*. These invocations lacked deep meaning—even the song of herself—and were meant only to distract her from how much she hated having to pretend she cared about the outcome of the race.

Today she cares. And no matter how fast she sprints through this airport, there are too many people standing still. Standing in her way. Or stretched across the floor in carefree repose, smudgy fingertips plucking chips and curls and twists out of the bags of overpriced snacks in their laps. Seemingly in no hurry to get anywhere, which is funny if you think about it (but Jessica doesn't have time to think about it), because this is the place where passengers pass time until they can be jet-propelled across states and nations, oceans and continents, at six hundred miles per hour. Why are they standing still, standing in the way of where she needs to be? Surrounded on all sides by the drone of wheeled luggage buzzing across the concourse, she speeds up, slows down, stutter-steps, and shimmies her way through the hive. Onward, onward, onward. She was wide-awake, wild-eyed with worry, for most of the night, and this adrenalized marathon sprint is already taking its toll. She can feel fatigue settling into her muscles, her bones, her brain, her spirit. But no. *No!* She can't slow down now. She can't miss this flight. *I can't miss this flight*. The concourse splits down the middle, and she must quickly consider yet another option. Should she hop on the human conveyor belt or just keep running?

There is pure goodness awaiting her in the Virgin Islands. Her best friends are all together to “celebrate the rarest love between two people, the flawed yet fearless union that everyone hopes to find but almost always turns out to be illusive if not elusive.” (Quotation marks needed because it comes directly from the speech Jessica has prepared for the occasion.) Jessica knows her friends will forgive her if she misses this



flight—as they have forgiven so many of her unintentional slights and oversights—but she won’t forgive herself.

I can’t miss this flight, she silently says once more before choosing to trust her own two feet over technology, the last in a series of synchronistic decisions that contribute to everything that happens afterward.

three

“This is a final boarding call for passenger Jessica Darling.”

After Marcus hears it the first time, he makes sure to listen extra carefully the second time, just to confirm it is her name being called over the public address system and not a phantom echo in his mind.

“This is a final boarding call for Clear Sky Flight 1884 with nonstop service to St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. Final boarding call for passenger Jessica Darling.”

Jessica Darling. It’s been years since he’s heard her full name spoken out loud. Not that Jessica Darling hasn’t been analyzed, assailed, or alluded to in conversations with family, friends, and near strangers from their shared past. As a subject of discussion, Jessica Darling has been elevated by—not reduced to—pronoun status. Have you seen *her*? What’s *she* up to these days? Whenever anyone asks these questions, there’s never any doubt as to whom the “her” or “she” refers. But those questions haven’t been asked lately, not since Marcus has—by all actions and outward appearances—finally gotten over her.

Even after hearing her name once, now twice, Marcus still needs a confirmation from somewhere outside his imagination. He seizes his friend Natty by the lapels and asks.

“Dude, no,” Natty insists. “I didn’t hear her name. And neither did you.” Natty’s sharp tone can’t burst the pop-eyed, expectant expression on Marcus’s face. “And even if you *did* hear her name, there’s no way it’s her. Now let go of me, because I gotta take a piss.”

Natty strands Marcus between the entrance to the men’s restroom



and the fiberglass Betty Boop sculpture boop-boop-be-beckoning customers into the faux-retro Garden State Diner for a greasy preflight meal. Marcus feels overexposed, overstimulated, as if his whole body is on extrasensory alert. Marcus's nerves rattle and clang like the dirty silverware carelessly thrown into plastic takeaway tubs by the too-busy busboys. He tries to calm himself with a series of deep inhalations and exhalations, but breathing cheeseburger smog only makes him more queasy and ill at ease. The alarms going off in his nervous system evoke the erratic animal behavior that precedes natural disasters: a mass exodus of elephants seeking higher ground, dogs wailing under door frames, rabbits clawing at cages, snakes shaken from hibernation slithering through the snow. His instincts, too, urge him to flee. He half jogs away from the diner and heads for the blue-screened monitors announcing arrivals and departures.

As Marcus searches for Clear Sky Flight 1884 on the departures board, he makes an effort to accept Natty's logic. After all, didn't his Jessica Darling often joke about being confused with a porn star also named Jessica Darling? Perhaps it's the X-rated Jessica Darling being called over the public address system, or maybe even a third unknown Jessica Darling who shares nothing but a name with the other two. A newborn Jessica Darling. A granny Jessica Darling. An African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or Other Jessica Darling. It must be one of these alternative Jessica Darlings flying out to St. Thomas on Clear Sky Flight 1884, not his Jessica Darling, not the one he proposed to over three years ago, not the one he hasn't seen, spoken to, or otherwise communicated with since he quietly accepted that her answer was no.

He's found it: Gate C-88. Clear Sky Flight 1884 to St. Thomas is departing from Gate C-88.

What harm could there be in wandering over to Gate C-88 to see for himself which incarnation of Jessica Darling is being called out loud? None at all, save for the minor embarrassment of being suckered into a one in six billion long shot. But what if it turns out that the familiar name does belong to her familiar face? Marcus is incapable of calculating the risks of such an improbable outcome. Still, he knows himself well



enough to understand how the powers of his masochistic imagination would make the coward's alternative—never knowing, always wondering *was it her? was it her? was it her?*—a far greater punishment than any awkward small talk.

He looks away from the monitors because the orange font/blue screen makes his pupils vibrate. On the wall directly in front of him is a changing digital screen advertisement for the Shops at Newark Liberty International Airport. Before he even realizes he's doing it, Marcus impassively watches the images shift.

The picture: A gold-foil box of gourmet chocolates.

The words: MISSING HER.

The picture: A string of black South Sea pearls.

The words: MISSING HER LIKE CRAZY.

Marcus, wowed by the lack of subtlety, looks away and laughs at himself.

No. He can't give in to narcissistic folly and read this sign as a Sign. It's taken him three years to finally pull himself together, and he refuses to come undone by commonplace coincidence. In fact, he's just about convinced himself that Natty is right, that there's no way it was his Jessica Darling being summoned over the Clear Sky PA system, that there's no need to head to Gate C-88 to verify this impossibility for himself because it is not, it cannot be, her, not his Jessica Darling (why does his skin still prickle with premonitory anticipation?), when his Jessica Darling slams right into him and bounces onto the floor.

four

A body in motion. A body at rest. Forces coming together—CRASH!—in an instant. Energy spent, energy exchanged, and energy conserved. Jutting elbows, bared teeth. Elastic arms, slack mouths. To every action there is an equal but opposite reaction. This woman and this man, a living demonstration of Newton's Third Law.



five

Jessica curses herself as she scrambles across the marble tiles. Clad in head-to-toe black, she resembles a desperate beetle stuck on its back, arms and legs flailing for her flung-to-the-ground carry-on bag. She finds it, scrapes herself off the floor, and decides that a curt give-and-take of apologies is the path of least resistance, the quickest way to get past this stranger, this nuisance, this object of interference with feet stuffed into scuffed Vans. There are already too many eyes on them, watching, wondering what will happen next. A combative confrontation will only attract more rubbernecks, and she doesn't want anyone else slowing her down.

Marcus waits until she stands up before he takes a chance. "Jessica?"

It's the voice that reaches her first, not the correct first name uttered by the voice. Her head bolts up, and when her eyes corroborate with her ears, her breath catches and her hands fly up to her face. She breathes in and out through her palms, once, twice, before taking them away. Miraculously, he's still there. She is perfectly still for the first time since vaulting out of bed this morning.

"Marcus!"

He nods to confirm what should be obvious but is still too unbelievable.

"Marcus," she repeats, softer.

He nods again.

"I . . ." she begins. "I'm . . ."

They are standing inches apart, not touching. Jessica clutches her ergonomic teardrop-shaped carry-on bag to her chest, sensing that the moment to embrace has passed. A spontaneous show of emotion now would be too conspicuous, too much, too late.

"Late!" Jessica blurts. "I'm too late."

Hundreds of passengers swirl around and away from them, like so many snowflakes in a blizzard.

"Oh," Marcus says. He's contemplating whether he could get away with playfully swatting her arm in what he hopes is a neutral zone, between her shoulder and elbow. Behind her flashes the sign. The



gold-foil box of gourmet chocolates. MISSING HER. The string of black South Sea pearls. MISSING HER LIKE CRAZY. The sign. The Sign. He wants to make contact when he makes his confession, that he'd heard her name, and how he had hoped for the illogical, the impossible, to be true: that it was really her. And *today* of all days. He's about to touch her, then deliver the befitting wishes, when she casts a nervous sidelong glance at his turned-out palm, the part of him that dares to come too close. He drops the offending hand and stuffs it deep into the front pocket of his corduroys, knowing there's no time for such intimacies.

He says nothing.

"We should—" Jessica starts. She's rocking from side to side now, an anxious, joyless dance. "You should—" The pronoun change doesn't go unnoticed by either of them. "E-mail. Or, I don't know. Text. Something . . ."

"Something," he says simply.

Marcus musters the courage to look Jessica right in the face. She still wears her hair like an afterthought, pulled back with a few quick twists of a rubber band. If she removed the elastic and shook it out, he would breathe in the fruity scent of shampoo, certain that the chestnut tresses resting against her neck are still damp from her morning shower. He finds some comfort in this knowledge, as well as in the overall familiarity of her features, which haven't changed that much since he last saw her. But he must admit to himself—only to himself, never to her, even if she'd had the time or the temerity to ask—that her casual loveliness is more than a little washed-out. Her eyes are tired, tinged pink, and buffered by puffy purple undereye circles. Her lips are crackled dry, her nostrils chapped and flaking around the corners, perhaps from too many rubs with a paper towel, a wool coat sleeve, or some other rough tissue substitute. He hopes that her careworn appearance is an aberration, that her immune system is down but she's not. He wants her to be sick *or* tired, but not sick *and* tired, or just plain sad.

"I'd catch up if . . ." Her cheeks glow an embarrassed red, and her pale complexion is better for it.

"If you had time," Marcus finishes for her, trying to determine from her voice whether she's suffering from a cold or something worse.



“If—” she starts again, but doesn’t finish.

She can’t look up at him. If she looks up at him, she will see him. And if she sees him, she’ll be compelled to ask questions she doesn’t have time for. Instead, she concentrates on her own familiar Converse, but even that fails to bring her relief. That they both still wear their same favorite brands of sneakers after all these years is only a minor revelation, and yet even this tiny glimpse of his world going on without her—and hers without him—is almost too much for Jessica to bear. What else hasn’t changed? Does he still meditate for hours on the floor of his closet? Jessica braces herself with a deep breath. Would he still smell like smoldering leaves if she leaned in close enough? Does he still compose elliptical, poetic songs on his acoustic guitar?

Derelict lyrics force themselves to the front of her consciousness, a ballad softly sung when they were still teenagers, the only one Marcus ever wrote or sang for her:

*I confess, yes, our fall was all my fault
If you kissed my eyes, your lips would taste salt . . .*

Her watery eyes stay fixed on the unraveled seams splitting his mossy V-neck a quarter inch lower than the designer’s intentions. This is an expensive-looking sweater—two-ply cashmere, she guesses—and she doubts Marcus could afford to buy it for himself. She assumes it was a gift from someone who is very familiar with his face, one who knew how this gray-green shade would shake loose those evasive hues from his multifaceted brown eyes. Definitely a gift. He doesn’t even have the cash to care for this item properly with regular dry-cleaning. She imagines him blithely tossing the sweater into one of his college’s communal washing machines, along with his T-shirts, jeans, and underwear, the tender cashmere threads coming more and more undone.

“Go,” he urges gently, pointing toward Gate C-88. “Don’t miss your flight.”

She pulls a wad of scrunched-up paper towel out of the front pocket of her hoodie, rubs her nose, and jerks her head in agreement. They offer



hasty good-byes but no hugs, not even a handshake, before she takes off for the gate.

“I’m sorry I ran you over,” Jessica calls out, barely casting a glance back as she hurtles herself forward.

I should be, too, thinks Marcus. But I’m not.

And then she’s gone again.

SIX

Jessica can’t catch her breath, but she won’t stop running. Panting, she picks up the pace.

A new mantra: *That didn’t happen*. She runs faster than ever, even with her palms burrowing into her eye sockets to push away tears, memories, perhaps both. *That didn’t happen*. Part of her wants to remove her hands, look back, and contradict her desperate denials. *That didn’t happen*. She wants to look behind her and take him in, Marcus Flutie, looking every inch the ruffled grad student in his choice of clothing (the sweater, the thin-wale corduroys), hairstyle (the finger-picked brush cut), and eye-wear. (*Glasses? She does a mental double take. He was wearing glasses, wasn’t he? When did Marcus start wearing glasses?*) Only he’s not in graduate school, he’s still a superannuated undergraduate, a twenty-six-year-old senior. (*Is he graduating this semester? On time? Only four years late?*)

Time. Late. There’s no time to contemplate any of these questions because she is still late late late late for Gate C-88. (*They weren’t annoying emo glasses, were they?*) She steels herself against the temptation to look back for any reason. An apology, maybe. Or a simple explanation. (*No, they were just regular wire-rimmed glasses, I think.*) Her face burns still hotter; she’s mortified by how she must have looked to him in both appearance and in action. (*Oh fuck.*) What was he doing just standing there like that in the middle of the airport? Meditating? Seeking inner peace with no regard to his fellow travelers? Marcus Flutie standing still



amid the chaos on the concourse was an accident waiting to happen. And it did. It finally did.

Jessica wonders who will be the first to find out about their momentous collision, and when. Such a reunion has been a forgone conclusion among Jessica's best friends since the breakup. They would not only expect a second-by-second reenactment but are exponentially invested to demand one. And on any other day Jessica would have complied. She would have told them everything, starting with how calmly Marcus reacted to being run over by his ex-girlfriend in the middle of Newark Liberty International Airport, as if he'd been expecting it, not in the same "someday" way that Jessica and her friends had expected it to happen, but almost as if he had chosen to wait in that exact spot on the straightaway under the arrivals and departures boards outside the men's restroom because he knew she was on her way.

But not today. No. Even before the crash, she'd already had her reasons for not making today about her. And because it is definitely not about Marcus Flutie, either, she forces him out of her mind. She keeps moving. She must keep moving if there's any hope of her making this flight. (*I can't miss this flight.*) Bridget and Percy didn't question Jessica's need to make a pit stop in Pineville before traveling to the Virgin Islands, which only makes her feel worse about having bailed on the bridal shower and the bachelorette party. She has little hope of arriving in time for tonight's rehearsal dinner even if the flight (*I won't miss this flight*) hasn't already taken off without her. But Jessica must be there for tomorrow's wedding, because she is the mistress of ceremonies, after all.

That didn't happen.

Oh, yes, it did.

Her thoughts ineluctably return to Marcus and the last time they were in the same room together: He was hunched over, bent at the waist on the edge of his bed, slowly turning two unopened notebooks over and over in his hands. Four sides. Turn, turn, turn, turning. Pages, pages, pages, binding. He had just listened to Jessica explain that those two black-and-white-speckled composition notebooks contained all the reasons why she couldn't be with him anymore. His callused palms shushed across the pages, pages, pages, binding—the only sound.



He read them and, a week later, returned them. “They belong to you,” he said in a letter written on the second notebook’s final pages. Marcus had vowed to honor Jessica’s request to let her go, and let her be, and he had shocked her by actually making good on that promise. Some might puzzle for years trying to remember the final word exchanged with an ex-lover. But no such ruminations have been necessary for Jessica, because the last word from Marcus was definitively written in ink as the closing to that final communiqué:

WHATEVER

WHATEVER, as he explained in that letter, was the double-meaning irony that wrapped around his bicep in the form of a poorly executed Chinese-character tattoo, one that Marcus had wanted to spell FOREVER but that had gotten lost in translation. Since the return of those notebooks, since WHATEVER, Jessica hasn’t heard another word from him.

She has, however, heard the gossip.

He got into Princeton’s most prestigious secret society.

He failed out.

He won a Rhodes.

He lost his mind.

The most obstreperous rumors were inspired and spread by the usual suspects, Pineville High alumni such as Sara D’Abruzzi-Glazer and Scotty Glazer, whose social orbit barely extended beyond their hometown since the birth of their third kid in as many years. And Manda Powers, who (the last Jessica had heard) was couch-surfing around the world all by herself and had an uncanny knack for bumping backpacks with adventurous nomads who claimed to have met someone who met someone who met someone from her suburban New Jersey hometown, someone whose name is—*What was it? Oh, right!*—Marcus Flutie.

He’s fucking an eighteen-year-old freshgirl.

He’s fucking a forty-eight-year-old professor.

He’s not fucking anyone.

He’s engaged.

He’s gay.



The more legitimate updates were always provided by well-intentioned friends and family members who mistakenly believed that Jessica wanted to know what Marcus Flutie was up to. Like Paul Parlipiano, who e-mailed to express his surprise to find himself hammering alongside Marcus on a neighborhood rebuilding project in the Lower Ninth Ward. Or Cinthia Wallace, who swore she saw him in the audience during the opening-night performance of the off-off-Broadway musical satire of *Bubblegum Bimbos and Assembly-Line Meatballers*. Or Jessica's niece, Marin, who, apropos of nothing other than the fact that she was a child and still begrudged the missed opportunity to be a flower girl, occasionally asked, "Do you think Marcus has proposed to someone else by now?" Or Marin's mother, Jessica's own sister, Bethany, who didn't have the naïveté of youth to account for answering "Oh, I hope not," followed by "But could you blame him if he has?"

He started drinking again.

He quit speaking again.

He started drugging again.

He quit cold turkey again.

Then there are those who indirectly court conjecture, like Bridget, who sent links to Found.com asking, "Could this be a page from Marcus's journals that were stolen out of your car?" (To which Jessica always answered no.) Or Percy, responding to the schlub whose NBA half-court halftime marriage proposal was turned down on live TV, asked, "Jessica, you tell me, how's a man supposed to recover from a rejection like that?" before being shoved into silence by Bridget. Or Len Levy, another one of Jessica's lovers (a number best described as threesh, or three and two halves, the halves referring to two separate one-time-only nonpenetrative lapses in judgment involving two separate men and therefore not equaling a whole lover), who turned everything he thinks he knows about Jessica and Marcus into a song titled "My Song Will Never Mean as Much (As the One He Once Sang for You)." Despite college radio play and its current status as the eighty-seventh-most-downloaded single on iTunes, this other song turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because it is indeed Marcus's song (*You, yes, you linger inside my heart / The same you who stopped us before we could start . . .*) that plays in Jessica's head right now.



He looks totally different.

He looks happy.

He looks tortured.

He looks exactly the same.

He looks as hot as he ever did.

Oh, no, he looks hotter than ever.

It is with a palpable measure of disquietude that Jessica acknowledges that her dumbfounding full-body bender with Marcus has only served to confirm the last and most superficial of these hypotheticals.

Was he coming or going? Jessica can't stop herself from wondering. If she had asked that single simple question, Marcus would have provided an answer. And this information—any information—would have piqued her curiosity and required her to ask more questions that she didn't—*doesn't*—have time to ask.

Jessica rushes up to Gate C-88. A lone Clear Sky representative named Sylvia is stationed alongside the velvet rope separating the terminal tunnel from the plane on the tarmac.

"I made it!" Jessica exclaims.

Sylvia pinches a heavy-lip-lined smirk. The jetway door, as Jessica can't help but notice, is closed.

seven

The baby-faced college senior bounds out of the bathroom less than two minutes after he went in.

"Ready?" asks Natty.

Natty has been Marcus's improbable best friend since they were randomly assigned as roommates during their first year at Princeton University. Despite their difference in ages (five years), roots (Jersey Shore suburbia versus Alabama antebellum), and *modus operandi* (get serious versus get seriously laid) they have lived with—or near—each other ever since. Natty knows Marcus in a way that is possible only when one is forced



to share roughly 125 square feet of living space. Natty doesn't like the implications of his friend's stricken expression, one that puts an unusual strain on the peaceful facade for which Marcus has become known.

"Dude?" When his friend doesn't answer, Natty sucker-punches him in the sternum just hard enough to get his attention. "It wasn't *her* being called over the PA system, okay? It was someone else. So stop—"

"It *was* her," Marcus interrupts, soothing circles into his chest with his fingertips, still not taking his attention off Gate C-88.

Natty laughs too loudly, too eagerly, in the vain attempt to get Marcus to see his own ridiculousness. "Do you *seriously* believe The Queen?"

The Queen. Marcus paid service to The Queen while in New Orleans for what Natty likes to call a "humanitarian vacation"; it evokes a certain Jolie-Pittesque selflessness that makes girls want to have sex with him. And it isn't untrue—Marcus persuaded Natty to spend the useless reading period before final exams working to rebuild homes in the still-devastated parts of the city. Even though they put in long days of hammering, sawing, and standing around waiting for someone to tell them what to do, Marcus and Natty still had more than enough free time to devote their evenings and early mornings to living up to the city's unofficial motto—*laissez les bon temps rouler*.

After a few years of volunteering in the city made famous for its sordid decadence, Marcus is no longer content to sit elbow-to-elbow with tourists in the French Quarter, the kind who consider it a hoot to order an arm's-length cocktail called the Hurricane Katrina (citrus vodka, blue curaçao, spiced rum, Plymouth Gin, tequila, and apple vinegar, garnished with lime) dreamed up by the more mercenary—or wickedly funny, depending on your point of view—bartenders in town. And he never matched Natty's enthusiasm for slipping dollar bills to the titty-tassel-twirling pros at the sex palace promising more "N'awlins Bounce to the Ounce" (which, in turn, prompted their carnal rivals across the street to promote "MORE N'awlins Booty Meat by the Pound"). Even the novelty of the jazz clubs had worn off when Marcus noticed that he was nodding along with the lazy behind-the-beat rhythms of the city's take on the blues, just like everyone else in the crowd. To him, it felt less like collective pleasure than passive conformity.



Marcus wanted to feel something real. He wanted to be taxi-driven away from the city's most famous streets, through the swampy morass of the outlying parishes, to the temple of a voodoo priestess known only as The Queen. As Marcus had been told by those who know, The Queen was blessed (or cursed) with unrivaled gifts in the necromantic arts, as well as widely considered to be the best of all such practitioners of black magic in a city that boasted more licensed shamans than schoolteachers. He was told that The Queen wasn't much of a show-woman, having dispensed with the ornamental masks, orgiastic dances, and other tropes of the trade that were attractive to tourists. She didn't even advertise her talents, relying solely on word-of-mouth recommendation. Her demeanor was brisk and no-nonsense, so much so that she never let customers inside her home, and she always made it very clear that she wanted nothing other than to get them off her porch as soon as possible. A true artist, The Queen refused to take money from just anyone, only from those who were approved by the Loa, or spirits who watch over earth. Her services—divination, mostly, with some faith healing and spell-casting on the side when the spirits moved her—could not be validated by any on- or offline guidebook. But if the Loa vouched for Marcus, The Queen would give him the most profound spiritual reading he would ever receive . . . *just by holding his hands.*

It was this last bit that really sucked Marcus in. It was preposterous. He was in on her shtick, and he knew that this out-of-the-way place was as much of a tourist trap as any jazz bar or strip club in the French Quarter, just one that required slightly more effort than a less adventurous visitor would give. In fact, for that reason alone, his feeble quest for authenticity was a cliché far worse than the French Quarter frat boys, because at least the brothers of Sigma Chi weren't puking in the alleys under the pretense of *keepin' it real*. And yet for someone who had spent countless hours seeking enlightenment through silent meditation, even a false promise of instantaneous truth was too much for Marcus to resist.

It should be noted that he had been drinking the night of his visit to The Queen. After years of post-teen-in-rehab teetotaling, he had reacquainted himself with alcohol in his freshman year of college at the age of twenty-three. He didn't indulge very often, and he never set out



to get drunk, but his years of abstinence had affected his body's ability to metabolize booze, making him a lightweight, a cheap date. The disorienting buzz Marcus felt after one or two beers was similar to that which would be expected from someone a foot shorter, fifty pounds lighter, and female.

So it was in such a delicately soused state that Marcus paid audience to The Queen. Even in retrospect, he couldn't decide whether a response to the alcohol or a genuine spiritual crisis had brought him to this neighborhood of off-the-map shotgun shacks, some of which appeared to have been semi-condemned since the first bitch—Hurricane Betsy—hit in 1965. But once he found himself in front of The Queen's one-story home, painted a magisterial purple worthy of her reputation, he was glad he had listened to the NOLA local who had tipped him off earlier that afternoon over the spray of dust exploding from the circular saw. Natty was not impressed, however, and chose to stay inside the idling cab so the driver wouldn't take off without them.

"We ah gone dah hee-yah," Natty twanged. His accent always came back whenever he drank too much or spent time below the Mason-Dixon Line. On this evening, both qualifications had been met.

"We are not going to die here," Marcus assured him as he gingerly made his way up the battered stairs leading to a lopsided doorstep. He was about to ring the bell when he heard the metal-on-metal slide of multiple locks. The inside door swung open, first releasing the sweet pungency of dried sassafras and cigar smoke, then revealing a Creole woman in a faded polka-dot housecoat who didn't look a day over 150 years old.

"Doggone it," The Queen grumbled. "'Nother one."

"I'm sorry to bother you," Marcus said, barely overcoming his urge to bow at her feet.

"Fa sho," she replied. "'S'what y'all say."

She contemplated Marcus through the sliced-up screen door, apparently waiting for word from the Loa as to whether he passed muster. He stood in silence, watching hummingbirdlike moths hurling themselves into the irresistible lamplight, flinching whenever one met its end with a metallic *ding!*



“Yeah, you right,” agreed The Queen, though it wasn’t clear if she was speaking to Marcus or the all-knowing undead. She pointed to a long slit in the screen and said, “Give it here, dawlin’.”

Dutifully, Marcus pushed through five twenties, as he had been instructed before he came.

She counted the bills, then slipped them into the front pocket of her housecoat. The fabric was so faded that Marcus could still see the face of wild-haired Andrew Jackson on the outermost bill. Then The Queen gestured for Marcus to slip his hands through the same open space in the torn screen. She closed her eyes as she took his hands in hers, hands that felt not unlike Jessica’s grandmother’s hands, or those of any of the other elderly patients he used to take care of when he did community service at Silver Meadows Assisted Living Facility—fragile, like decaying paper or the wings of those suicidal moths. And it struck him as odd at the time that he should think of Gladdie, someone he hadn’t thought of in years. He remembered the last time he had visited Jessica’s grandmother before she died—she had beaten him at hearts, her favorite card game, by shooting the moon—and then, of course, he thought of Gladdie’s wake, when he had boldly followed a grieving Jessica into the bathroom, locked the door behind them, and kissed her—hungrily, sloppily—for the very first time—

The Queen suddenly let go. No more than ten seconds had passed.

“Y’all gone get run ovah,” she said.

“Run over?” asked Marcus, making sure he had heard her correctly. “By a car?”

“Noooooo.” She cackled. “Mo’ trouble den dat.”

“A bus?”

“Her,” she said with emphasis, the power of the pronoun in full effect.

Marcus’s mouth dropped open. The Queen’s front door slammed shut.

“Git off mah poach,” she shouted from inside. “I’m fixin’ to watch *Merican Ah-dol*.”

Natty taunted Marcus for the rest of the trip. “A hundred dollars wasted! That’s ten Hurricane Katrinas! Or one *hay-yell* of a lap dance!”



Now, back in the airport, Natty still spits with laughter. “Dude, *seriously*. You believe The Queen?”

“I didn’t,” Marcus says, angling his head to the side and down so he can look Natty in the eye. “Not until Jessica Darling ran over me while you were in there taking a piss.”

Natty still assumes this must be the setup for a practical joke, though he’s hard-pressed to come up with a reason why Marcus would joke about this, about *her*, of all subjects. “Oh, come on. You expect me to believe that? Try harder . . .”

“She was standing right there, where you are right now,” says Marcus, first pointing at the floor under Natty’s flip-flops before lifting his finger to gesture across the concourse. “She’s over there, in black.”

Natty looks to Gate C-88. There is a female who, from behind, at a distance of about a hundred yards, vaguely fits the physical description of the girl he met once over three years ago. “Are you sure it’s her?”

“I talked to her, Natty,” Marcus replies. “We *talked*.”

Just then the girl in question twitches a glance over her shoulder, and Natty must concede: Yes, it’s definitely her.

“Oh, fuck,” Natty groans.

“Indeed.”

“So,” Natty says. “What did she have to say for herself?”

An apprehensive smile brings relief to his afflicted face. Marcus removes his thin wire-rimmed glasses, cautiously rubs the lenses with an untucked shirttail, then puts them back on again. He surrenders a sad laugh. Then, finally, answers.

“Not enough.”

eight

“I made it!” Jessica repeats triumphantly, thrusting her boarding pass at Sylvia. “The plane is still here!”



Sylvia barely glances at the document. “Yes, ma’am,” she says. “But we have completed the final boarding of this aircraft. The jetway door is closed.”

Jessica doesn’t know what’s more troubling: that the jetway door is closed? Or that she looks old enough to qualify for “ma’am” status? Either way, she has to stay on Sylvia’s good side if she has any hope of getting on the plane and staying out of the airport detention center for problem passengers.

“But the plane is right there,” Jessica says, desperation creeping into her voice despite her best efforts to keep calm. “And I’ve got my boarding pass.”

Sylvia is no-nonsense. When she shakes her head, her sprayed blond flip moves as a single unit; not one of the hundreds of thousands of individual hairs has the audacity to stray. “We have completed the final boarding of this aircraft. The jetway door is closed.” Her tone is like an automated recording, unchanged from the first time she said it.

“But I’m just one person—”

In that moment of weakness and doubt, Jessica half swivels her head. It’s an almost unconscious impulse, too quick to register anything or anyone behind her.

“Once the jetway door is closed, it stays closed.” Sylvia claps her hands together to illustrate her point. Her nails sparkle with the same opalescence as her lips, both painted an infantilizing pink that coordinates with her powder-blue Clear Sky uniform only in the sense that they are hues best left to gender-specific bibs and diaper bags. “It would be against TSA regulations to allow any passenger to board this aircraft,” she briskly insists, her smile tightening with every word. “We always advise our passengers to provide adequate time to—”

“I *did* provide adequate time! I was held up at security by a stark-raving madwoman trying to smuggle . . .”

Sylvia’s smile is frozen and synthetic, like a plastic-flavored Popsicle; she is clearly bracing herself for the tirade of passenger complaints against the incompetent Transportation Security Administration, the



inconvenient Newark Liberty International Airport, the inhospitality of Clear Sky airlines, the indignities of air travel in general, none of which she can solve herself. But Jessica stops midsentence, distracted by a blurry movement in her peripheral vision. It's the plane, of course, taxiing away from the gate and toward the runway. It's her flight, Clear Sky Flight 1884 with nonstop service to St. Thomas, the one she can't miss. And it's leaving without her.

Was Marcus coming or going? she wonders again. And this time, when she turns her head, it's deliberate. She looks long enough to confirm—*he's gone*—that she's missed her opportunity to get the answer.

Jessica's cell phone comes to life inside her bag, and she jumps—jumps!—as if she just discovered a venomous snake rattling around in there. She gets ahold of the vibrating device, then fumbles with the buttons for a few surprised moments before confirming that it isn't a phone call from Pineville but a short video from the Virgin Islands.

"Woo-hoo!" shouts Bridget, hair whipping up and airborne like patriotic yellow ribbons as she leaps in front of an impossibly blue sea. "Woo-hoo! We're getting married tomorrow!"

The tiny screen goes blurry as Percy turns the lens on himself. "I'm marrying a freak," he says. "A beautiful freak." His grin takes up the whole screen.

The action returns to Bridget, now turning floppy cartwheels across the sand. "This is paradise! Just wait until you get here! You won't believe it!"

Percy swivels to catch Hope photographing Bridget with a very large and expensive-looking camera. Hope realizes she's being filmed, goes cartoonishly cross-eyed, then shouts something that can't be heard over the rumbling wind and the waves. Then, without an official sign-off, the screen goes blank.

Jessica covers her face with her hands, breathes in and out. Sylvia, who has been waiting professionally if not patiently all this time, clears her throat.

"So," Jessica says, revealing what she hopes resembles the face of composure. "What do I do now?"



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