

Rory's Love

One

Like most spirits seeking my help, this one stood at the foot of my bed. The full-sized figure barely emitted enough of a glow for me to be able to tell the spirit was a male I'd never encountered. He smelled strongly of fish and the sea. He waited patiently with hunched shoulders and a bowed, embarrassed head. Some spirits were whiny, angry pests who darted around my bedroom or loomed over me, demanding and attempting to intimidate. Over the years, I'd learned to ignore that kind of spirit for the sake of my own sanity. They were rude brats, impossible to satisfy and therefore dangerous to interact with. But this calm, respectful man struck me as worthy of my time. I sighed, yawned and sat up in bed. "Hi. My name is Aurora. Is there something I can help you with?" I didn't speak it aloud. It was enough to think it in my head.

His aura brightened. I could tell that it was a struggle for him, manifesting into something more visible. But his excitement at my acknowledgment gave him strength. In spite of his excitement, he still couldn't materialize fully. Even in the darkness of my bedroom, I knew he had no color beyond shades of gray. His clothing suggested he was a fisherman in life. As he stubbornly continued his attempt to manifest, I could make out bib pants, a heavy jacket, and a Sou'wester hat. Most likely he'd gone down with a fishing boat. The air in Gloucester, Massachusetts was thick with the spirits of dead sailors. "My daughter," he said. He spoke telepathically as I did, but I felt that, without much more effort, he could have made his voice audible. Years of pain were communicated to me in those two words. When he raised his head slightly, I could see that his forehead was missing- that, and a portion of his left temple. I was relieved that his hat covered what remained of his head.

I asked him if he realized he was dead and if his daughter was living. Through a series of words and images, he introduced himself as Alan Cunningham and told me that he and his five fellow crewmen had died when their fishing boat went down near Georges Bank in 1978. His daughter was renting a room in a house a half mile away from mine. "I've been trying to catch her eye since her mother died. Trying to get through to her before someone buys me and her mother's house. But she can't hear me and I don't wanna scare her."

He'd kept a stash of money for his daughter hidden beneath a brick in the basement floor of the home he'd owned when he was living. His wife, Sheila, was no prize, he explained. She was a drinker and a bar brawler and a cheat. If she'd known the money was there, she would have partied it away. He'd wanted that money to go to Debbie when she got out of high school. He would have told her about it eventually, if he hadn't died so young. As things stood, Sheila had been dead from liver cancer for two months, the family home was up for sale, and Debbie was a fat, forty-three year old divorcee living a life that was mind numbingly dull.

I rubbed my forehead with dread and looked him eye to eye. "So you want me to find your daughter, tell her I spoke to you, and convince her that she needs to pop over to the old house because there may be four grand under the basement floor?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please."

I sighed and gave a nod. When it came to helping people in need, I could never bring myself to say no.

A week later, after dutifully helping the fisherman, I was on the train from Boston to New York for a paying gig. As a professional medium for successful actors, musicians, athletes, fashion designers and top models I make good money talking to dead people. And the perks are outstanding. You'd be surprised how many A-list actresses need to consult their dear, departed grandmas before they shoot a scene. Then you've got the baseball players and the soccer players who need me to contact a coach or a brother on the other side and bring back words of advice. The demands are endless, and equally endless are the yacht cruises off seaside villas and the ski lodge weekends and the private jets and posh guest houses. If my job sounds like days and nights of glamour, travel, fun and free designer clothes, that's pretty accurate, but that has to do with the trappings of it all. The material stuff. The work itself is something else entirely.

A limo picked me up on 8th Avenue outside Penn Station and quickly delivered me to Lenox Hill Hospital on Manhattan's Upper East Side. I paused for a moment and took several deep breaths before I entered the hospital. Hospitals are hard for me. Physically hard. When people think of a haunted hospital, they typically imagine some ancient, abandoned building stirring with rats, bats and dozens of other nightmarish creepy crawlies. But the truth is, modern, bustling hospitals are thick with spirits. Why wouldn't they be? With the typical haunted house, two, maybe three people died there. But thousands of people have died in a single hospital, so of course there would be many lingering spirits. The common areas aren't so bad for me, but in certain wings, the air's density makes it hard for me to walk and breathe. Ghost filled, intensive care units in particular make me feel like I'm suffocating and wading knee deep in water.

When I stepped into her room, I found my client in bed, surrounded by pillows that were tucked beneath her knees, behind her shoulders and head. There was one IV bag on a pole, with a line hooked to her wrist. Her face was fresh scrubbed and rosy and her long, red hair was caught up in a ponytail. She looked like the all American girl next door, twenty, maybe twenty one years old and sheltered. But I knew better.

"Aurora!" Thank God you're here," she cried, placing one hand over her heart dramatically.

I laughed and stepped over to the bed, where Bella's long arms caught me in an embrace. I pulled a chair up to the bed and took a seat. "How's your vagina, kiddo?"

She made a face. "Don't try to joke about it."

I shrugged. "I'm asking out of concern."

Bella sighed. "The surgeon is furious. I deliberately went against his orders and posed in a stream. But the water was rushing. I thought that meant it would be clean."

"No, silly. It's the opposite. When water is still, all the dirt settles to the bottom. But I suspect it wouldn't have mattered one way or the other. You would have done the photo shoot regardless."

"Can you blame me? I've spent my life dragging around huge labia. I always had to wear a wrap over my bathing suits or worse, a suit with a skirt. What kind of model can't be photographed or walk a runway in a bikini?"

"I get it, but you should have given yourself proper time to heal. When do you get to go home?"

"If I don't run a fever today and tomorrow, I can go home the day after," Bella said.

"Great. So, what's up? I know you didn't call me to discuss the complications of labia surgery."

She rolled her eyes half playfully. "I feel weird, Rory. There's like this cloud of doom over me, ever since I got all infected. And it's not part of the infection. I know it."

I nodded. "I can certainly do a reading to see if anyone will emerge from non-physical."

She smiled. "Excellent."

I took a few deep breaths to release the last bit of tension from the hectic journey from Boston to New York. Then I directed my gaze to the area an inch or two above her head, to focus my attention on Bella and her aura. Finally I quieted my thoughts to boost my awareness of spirit. I had no way of knowing if anyone would come forward to address her sense of doom. I have no control over who comes forward or what they say, although there are some spirits who practically come running when they are called. Bella watched me expectantly until finally I felt someone. "I'm getting a male energy," I told her. "It's not your grandfather, but he feels like he's from your grandfather's era. This guy gives off a real ladies' man vibe. Smooth, charming, handsome. Vince, maybe?"

She smiled. "Vincenzo. My great uncle. My grandfather's brother. He was wonderful."

"He's showing me a coastal area." I squinted, trying to see it better. "I can't tell if it's east coast, west coast or even if it's in this country. But there's a high cliff above a beach that leads to an ocean."

Bella frowned. "Surely he's not pissed off about my surgery. The place where I got infected was just in a stream upstate, nowhere near an ocean. And no cliffs or sand."

I shook my head. "I get the sense he's taking about the future because he's waving his hand like he wants you to stay away from this place."

“My God. Is he serious? After the money I’ve spent, and the pain, just so I can get the chance to shoot for Sports Illustrated, and he wants me to stay away from beaches? Talk to someone else, Aurora.”

“Well, your grandmother’s here. She asked me to tell you she loves you and-”

“And she’s proud of me.”

Bella’s Nana was pretty reliable and predictable. Certainly she meant well, but her granddaughter was a bit impatient for something new today. “I’m sorry, Bella. I’m not getting anyone else. It’s possible that your worries about swimsuit and lingerie jobs have turned into a generalized anxiety.”

“That’s crazy.”

“We can always try another time. In the meantime, don’t forget your great uncle’s warning. If you find yourself shooting or vacationing on some beach near a cliff, be extra careful, okay?”

I hate it when my efforts seem useless to my clients. Sometimes they forget that I can’t force spirits to talk. And I refuse to put words in their mouths. On the other hand, it’s so rewarding when my work makes people happy. Like Debbie, the daughter of the dead sailor who appeared at the foot of my bed. She was delighted to find four thousand dollars in the basement. And I wasn’t surprised when her father came back to thank me and say he was now free to cross over.

I hoped Bella would heed her great uncle’s warning. Spirits aren’t always crystal clear, but paying attention could save her from a rock slide or even drowning. You never knew.

On the train back to Boston, I dismissed Bella from my mind and mentally prepared myself for my next job with my all time, favorite client. Curtis Love was a mega-star, a brilliant hip-hop producer, rapper and song writer. And his aspirations didn’t end there. Curtis wanted to try his hand at everything. He was intensely driven and multi-talented, curious and smart and I loved being in his presence. It’s no exaggeration to say I would get out of bed at three am if Curtis called because he has and I did.

A Curtis Love gig wasn’t a one or two hour reading kind of thing. I once spent three weeks following Curtis across the globe, from recording studios to fashion shows, to his yacht docked off St. Tropez. I was more than happy to rearrange my schedule, both personal and professional to accommodate him. He was fun and witty and a joy to be with. The problem was, I never knew what to pack. On this trip, for example, I would be meeting up with Curtis in LA and supposedly he needed my services for ten days. The details he always failed to mention was whether or not he’d get a sudden urge to fly to Vegas or London during that week. And he wasn’t deliberately secretive. He honestly didn’t know where life would take him from one day to the next.

When I got home, I packed for June in Los Angeles. Where I live, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, it is always smart to have a sweater handy for summer nights, so I packed a pullover and a shrug in case Curtis got the urge to go to San Francisco or somewhere else where the nights grew cool. I threw in two bathing suits, three cocktail dresses and one evening gown. Lots of shoes, jeans and tops. It was so hard to anticipate what I'd need, and I hated it when he insisted on taking me shopping for something to wear. He always blamed himself for not properly preparing me, but he paid me well. It didn't seem fair for him to spend thousands on an outfit on top of my fee.

My best friends and assistant, Mimi drove me to the airport. It was Mimi's cousin, Devin who helped me transform from a clerk at a health food market to a medium for the rich and famous. Devin went from high school to Broadway to the big screen before her twenty-fifth birthday. When I was twenty-eight, she threw a star studded party in Manhattan. Mimi insisted on bringing me as her date. At some point in the evening, after Mimi had had a few too many drinks, she mentioned my secret gift for talking with dead people. Before I knew it, I had a line of celebrities waiting for a reading. Eventually word of my talents spread until now, two years later, I have a lucrative career and an often grueling schedule. When things became too hard for me to handle them on my own, Mimi offered to work for me.

As we headed south to the airport where Curtis's private jet awaited, Mimi kept checking me out. She was like a suspicious pixie with her tiny body, short, black haircut and upturned nose.

"What are you looking at? You need to watch the road," I said.

"Just taking it in. The hair, the nails, the spray tan. Have you lost weight?"

"Lost weight? Since you saw me two days ago?" I was wearing a white peasant blouse and a full black cotton skirt, hardly clothes that showed off the figure. "I'm supposed to turn up with chipped nails and bed head?"

"Hey, you look great, kid. Awesome." She laughed. "I had no idea bi-racial people had to spray tan. All these years, I thought you were just pale some days and back to normal the next." She laughed again. "Not that I'm making fun of you. It's just, all these years we could have been going to the tanning salon together."

"Oh, stop enjoying this. It's been overcast all year. I couldn't go to L.A. pale. That's all this is about. Did I overdo it? Am I orange?"

"I told you it looks great. I just think it's cute."

I sighed. "Don't be vague like that. Come out and say it, whatever it is."

She looked over at me with a serious expression and I couldn't tell which made me more uncomfortable, her scrutiny or the fact that her eyes were off the road for so long.

"You have a thing for Curtis."

“Oh, Mimi.”

“We’re best friends. I’ve known you too long, Aurora. You can’t fool me.”

“Oh, God.”

“Every time I’ve tried to fix you up this past year, you’ve hated every single guy.”

I ignored her and instead gazed out the window at the passing scenery on Route 128, not seeing a bit of it. I was too frozen with surprise and guilt. She was right. I had a thing for Curtis. Maybe lust, maybe even love. But I certainly didn’t want to have feelings for him. He had a girlfriend. He’d never seriously flirted with me or made an inappropriate move. But still I’d fallen for his charms. I couldn’t help it. He was like a firefly. Bright, gleaming, mysterious, forever on the move and hard to capture. My feelings for him were so unprofessional and improper that I’d kept them carefully hidden. Or so I’d thought! Not only had my best friend figured it out, but she was probably hurt that I hadn’t told her. I continued to stare, wordless, out the window because I didn’t know what to say.

“Look, it’s okay. Rory, look at me,” Mimi said. “It’s okay. I’m sure he doesn’t know. From what you’ve said about him, he’s way too busy to notice.”

Like an idiot, I burst into tears. It was pure self-pity, of course. The unfairness of it all stung deeply. I had clients who flirted with me, especially the athletes. Clients who had asked me out on dates. But the one I fell for was the one who was not available. Oh, he was happy to keep me occupied for weeks, happy to take me to dinner or out dancing when his girlfriend was on the other side of the world modeling. He had no problem paying a fortune for my time, as often as his schedule would allow. But he didn’t love me. It was the most miserable situation I could imagine.

“Oh, don’t cry, honey,” Mimi said, leaning over to pull a box of tissues from the glove compartment. “Is it hopeless?”

I nodded. “He dates models, Mimi. I’m five four. Half the people he knows would probably think I’m some whack job if he ever told them I’m his medium. They think I’m his spiritual counselor.”

Mimi laughed. “You never say much about his girlfriend. Is she ever around?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I think he deliberately schedules his readings for when she’s busy. I don’t think he wants her to overhear what I tell him.”

“Hmmp. Well, that says something about how close he feels towards her. What’s her name again?”

“Samantha. I asked Bella about her once. They’ve done some runway shows together. She said Samantha was okay as far as she could tell.”

Mimi sighed. "Kiddo, it sounds like you've got yourself one hot mess. He's probably the reason you can pay my salary, right? And he's also the reason you come home glowing and cheerful. I've seen it, Rory. Being with him makes you happy. It lasts for, I don't know, maybe a month or more."

"Is it that obvious?"

She turned to me and nodded. "Yep." We drove for a while in silence as we got closer to Boston and traffic thickened. "Maybe they'll break up," she said after a while.

I groaned. "What difference does that make? He's never going to date a nobody who's also a freak."

"Oh stop it, for crying out loud. You have a gift. And don't forget, Aurora, that he obviously enjoys spending a lot of time with you. I know damned well you're not channeling ghosts twenty four seven when you're with him."

Two

"Who is this sexy woman getting into my car?" Curtis teased as I threw my purse on the floor and buckled myself into his crazy, hot looking Lamborghini Aventador. The car was black, sleek and dangerous looking. Sort of like the owner. "You hungry?" he asked as he steered past a thick pack of paparazzi who swarmed his car like bees. How he could manage to drive amidst all the chaos, shouting and flashing lights was beyond me.

I nodded and held my breath as he zipped us from the airport, through Los Angeles to Joan's on Third for salads. I sat across the table from him, taking in his perfect chocolate skin and his gleaming white smile. I suspected my windblown hair looked like a squirrel's nest.

"So, how's your mom?" he asked. "You seen her lately?" he asked after a waitress took our orders.

I grimaced. "A couple weeks ago. As usual, she asked if I've stopped giving readings. It's like she wants to start the whole argument over again."

Curtis shook his head. "What can you say? It scares her."

"I keep telling her I don't have the level of abilities that would put me in danger. I've never tried to banish spirits or help them cross over, unless they do it themselves. I can communicate mentally. But I rarely hear with my ears. I can see the spirits who directly confront me, but I couldn't just walk into a haunted house and voila, see every spirit in there plain as day."

"But you know none of that comforts her. Hopefully she'll get used to it someday. How about your dad? Is he still talking about retiring?"

I laughed. "Just talking."

Curtis laughed along with me. "Seriously? I've been hearing about his retirement for two years and I haven't even met the man. In a few more years, they'll have to drag him out of his office."

"Totally," I said. "How are your parents?" Curtis wasn't close to his parents. He'd been raised by his grandparents and had only recently renewed contact with his mom and dad.

"They're alright. My father seems like he's getting more and more mellow the older he gets. Which means no more arguments. At least, no big arguments. None of the throwing stuff around like they used to do with each other. I haven't seen them yet this year, so I guess I owe them an annual visit."

I nodded. He'd been doing the annual visit for a few years now. "See if you can make two visits this year. They want to be forgiven, Curtis."

"Talked to any crazy spirits lately?"

"Not crazy, but something nice happened." I told him about Alan the fisherman and his daughter and the money in the basement. I never discussed actual readings for paying clients, but the people who showed up in my bedroom were fair game.

"How come they never follow you to my house?"

I laughed. "We've discussed this before. I'm able to let them know when they're not welcome."

He smiled. "Wish I could do that with the paparazzi."

I'd been out and about with him enough to know that his irritation with the paparazzi was deep and well founded. I'd been jostled, heckled, photographed and pegged as the "other woman" or worse, "mystery woman" during our outings. Today I noticed a few photographers gathered outside the restaurant alongside the young, hip looking diners who'd chosen to eat al fresco. I also noticed the same cars circling the block repeatedly and recklessly and assumed they were wondering when we'd come out.

Any time the conversation trailed off, I felt keenly aware of my feelings for him. As I chewed my sandwich, I tried to recall the exact moment I felt romantic feelings for him. I'd probably had a crush on him from the beginning. But lust or love, whichever? When did that start?

Curtis laughed. "What are you thinking about?"

"What? Me?"

"No. I'm talking to the woman back there in the kitchen."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Oh, stop. I just, I don't know. Why?"

“You were doing some serious blushing.” He grinned.

“Oh.” I grimaced. “I think there was a bit of jalapeno in my sandwich. I’m fine.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Clearly it wasn’t wise to mull over my feelings while I was sitting face to face to him. He was observant and a smartass. If he caught me blushing again there was no telling what kind of questions he’d ask. I took bigger bites of my sandwich so we could finish up quickly and get out there. In the car one would hope his focus would be on the road and back at his house I could easily move around if I started blushing.

“Damn, Rory. Don’t choke,” Curtis said. His eyes were big disbelief. “You go from taking teeny little lady bites to chomping like Scooter.”

I reached across the table and slapped his arm. “Don’t compare me to your dog.” My heart was clearly making me lose my mind. I went back to eating normally.

He laughed and laughed, enjoying my discomfort. “Maybe the spirit of a horse possessed you.”

It was my turn to burst out laughing. “You are such a jackass. Take me back to the airport.”

We were still laughing when our waitress stopped at our table to see if we needed anything. When I looked at her, I could feel the presence of female spirit begging for my attention. With each second, the begging grew more and more insistent. “Excuse me,” I said. “My name is Aurora and I’m a psychic medium. There’s a spirit associated with you who would like to communicate through me if you’re willing.”

As most people did when they heard my spiel, she looked completely startled and thrown off guard. “Uh, okay,” she said.

Curtis was trying his best not to smile. He loved to watch me read strangers. “I’m feeling a motherly energy,” I said. “Did you recently lose your mother?”

The waitress nodded. “Yes. About a year ago.” I could see her bracing herself for pain.

“She’s just fine. She knows how much you love her. Her name is something like Hilda.”

She nodded. “Gilda.”

“Gilda said that she knows how much your brother loves her, too and that you shouldn’t feel guilty for selling the jewelry. She knows you’re both young and she wishes she could have left you in better shape financially. Oh, and she says to keep up with your singing. She says you have a great voice.”

She covered her face with her hands. “Oh my God,” she said. She took a moment to collect herself, then she thanked me enthusiastically and walked away in a daze.

When I looked over at Curtis, he was grinning. "That is so dope. I love watching you do that. You just nail it every time."

I blushed. "Thank you. I like to watch you work, too."

The rest of the meal went on without incident. Then we were back in his car, breaking speed limits as he explained why he needed my services. It was one of my rules. I never let clients tell me beforehand what they were looking for in a reading. That way I didn't have weeks or months to form opinions or in any way slant my outlook. Curtis told me that he would be going back into the studio soon to work on a new album. As always, he wanted to connect with his grandmother, the woman who had raised him. But this time he also wanted her input on the album. "So I may wind up taking you into the studio with me if you have time. See, I've been checking out jazz standards lately. Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Ella. Back then, vocalists had a different focus. It was all about sounding pretty and honoring the lyrics, you know? They pronounced everything clearly because the lyrics were important to them than anything else. My grandmother loved that stuff. Nowadays, style trumps everything in a lot of cases. It's more about runs or having a unique, gritty voice, even though everyone goes for the same unique, gritty voice, right? So it's not unique anymore. Now you know how Quincy Jones can stick some funk on some jazz? I want to combine that bebop swing and those beautiful vocals with hip hop."

I was both delighted and horrified. And I was grateful when he fell silent as he focused on the drive to Beverly Hills. That way I could focus on how delighted and horrified I was. I'd had enough conversations with Curtis to know how he worked when he was putting together an album. The man was like a machine. Long, long hours, living, eating, sleeping music. Traveling here and there to talk with this or that producer. Traveling for inspiration. He really wanted me to be a part of that?

If I were to start crying, he would probably think I was flattered to be asked to participate. After all, he knew I was a huge fan and had been, long before we'd ever met. And I was flattered even though all the real work would be between him and his grandmother. But if I let myself fall into tears, it would be because he would be letting me witness his creative genius. And that would make my attraction to him spiral out of control.

The next morning, I was alone by the pool, drying myself off after playing catch in the water with his collie, Scooter. When my cell phone rang I recognized my ring tone for Mimi. It was Janet Jackson's "What Have You Done for Me Lately", something I'd chosen purposely to irritate my friend. "So tell me," she said. "What's happened so far? What are you doing now?"

"Good grief," I said. "Are you writing for a tabloid?" I leaned over to avoid the drops of water that flew from Scooter's fur as he ran around me in circles.

"Just tell me."

“Right now I’m sitting by the pool with a wet dog. I was playing in the pool with Scooter and I’m hoping he’ll go elsewhere to shake. Curtis is in his office on the phone. Last night his cook made dinner, then we sat around listening to jazz standards. At one point, he made me dance with him.”

“Are you lying?”

“I wish I was. He wasn’t the least bit flirtatious. We were just talking about how people danced in the forties and fifties with the spinning and twirling and it seemed like fun to try.”

“Oh, God.”

“I know, right. It felt romantic, but it couldn’t be romantic. But the worst part is that he wants me to be in the studio with him.” I told her about his idea for his new album, and how he needed my help. “Watching him work will totally do me in.” I would get to see his confidence and skill. I’d get to see him magically make something awesome out of nothing.

“Maybe he’ll be a total jerk in the studio. You never know, right? Artistic geniuses are notorious for being difficult and temperamental. Maybe you’ll come away hating him.”

I laughed. “That’s not a possibility. He turns me on, Mimi. His skin is perfect, like chocolate. His body is buff. His eyes are so sexy, especially when he’s playful and he’s always playful with me. The very last thing I want to do is get turned on and lose control and kiss him.”

Mimi howled with laughter. “Lose control? You? Wow. You really are hot for him.”

“Extremely. And it’s not funny. If I did something stupid like kiss him, it would ruin everything. He’d probably fire me.”

“Fire you? He’s a man, Rory. He’s not afraid of you. Stop worrying about all that. You have self-control. You’ll be fine.”

“Whatever. I’ve got to get you out here sometime to see this view, Mimi. I told you how the house sits way up high and the backyard looks down onto hilltops. Well, it’s a really clear day today, so when I swam to the edge of the infinity pool, I could see all the way down to the canyon floor. It was awesome. And yesterday, when he showed me to my room, there was a pair of Lanvin pajamas on the pillow for me. They’re mine, Mimi. To keep.”

“You lucky, spoiled bitch.”

“I know. But what if I can’t get his grandmother to come through?”

“Oh, don’t say that. You’ve never had a problem with Ethel before.”

“But I’ll be nervous this time. So much is riding on it.”

“Just stare at the view, relax and when the time comes, you’ll be fine.”

The time came two hours later. After relaxing by the pool, I showered and struggled over what to wear. I had no idea what he'd planned for the day, so I decided a cute little sundress and a pair of wedge sandals would do. Once I was dressed, I tried to figure out how to behave normally. In the past, when Curtis was locked up in his studio, I would have gone to the screening room to watch a movie or thrown on a pair of sweats and brushed Scooter's fur. Sometimes I'd get a pair of pruners and go to work on a flower bed. Yes, he had a gardener and a dog groomer, but at his house, I felt perfectly comfortable doing whatever I felt like doing. Now, all I could do was worry that anything I did would make me look weird.

Regina, his housekeeper sensed my agitation immediately. "I'll bet you're looking for Scooter. He's in the office with Curtis. Would you like me to turn on the television for you?"

I nodded and could feel myself blushing beneath my spray tan. I was behaving like a teenager, I thought as I took a seat on the familiar sofa.

Curtis joined me thirty minutes later. The leather sofa crunched beneath his weight. I could smell his cologne. It made me want to nip at his neck.

He smiled at me. "You doing alright? You got everything you need? You're comfortable?"

I giggled at his solicitousness before I could stop myself. "I'm fine, thank you."

"Glad to hear it." He leaned towards me with a serious expression. "If you're up for it, I'd like to connect with my grandfather."

That came as a shock. I'd only ever spoken with his grandmother. I couldn't even recall if a male spirit had ever come forward for him. I was always so focused on Ethel. "Well, keep in mind, it's always up to the spirits as to who will show up." I closed my eyes and forced myself to relax. To ignore the fact that I was surprised by his request. And most importantly, to ignore the heady scent of his cologne. Since I'd spoken to Ethel before, I decided that the easiest way to contact Ethel's spouse was to ask her to invite him forward.

Not long after my request, I felt a male presence hovering inches from my face, it seemed. "Okay, I'm getting a male. His general attitude is forceful." I felt intimidated, but I held my ground. "This individual strikes me as someone who isn't used to taking 'no' for an answer." Finally, the spirit began to speak. "He says I'm correct. He's not a patient person. He doesn't stand for a lot of mess."

"Try to get a name," Curtis said. He was leaning towards me, watching me intently.

"I'm coming up with an L name. Lee?"

"Yep. That's him. What I want to know is why he didn't help my grandmother raise me. Why did he just ignore me? Does he understand how that made me feel?"

Oh, man. Couldn't Curtis have warned me about any of this? Not only does he want me to contact a new spirit, he wants to fight with him, too. I took a deep breath and communicated the questions mentally. Then I prepared myself for an outburst. I sat there, staring ahead into space, waiting for an answer that wouldn't come.

"Did you lose him?" Curtis raised his eyebrows with concern.

"I don't think so. I still feel him. I think it's me." I reminded myself that it wasn't my job to anticipate anger or any other emotion. Instead of being guarded, I needed to be open. "Okay, he's saying that he failed you. He knows that now, but he didn't know it then. He didn't know how to show Ethel love either. It wasn't just you. He was a hard man. A bitter man. He thought he was making you tough. He let you and Ethel down." I slumped back against the sofa and sighed. The weight of emotion that had been directed at me far outweighed the words I spoke. I looked over at Curtis. He was shaken, too. I think he came prepared for a fight, not an apology.

"How did he feel?" He stared down at his hands as he said this.

"He felt very sorry and very sad, Curtis. Sorrier than words can convey. But at the same time he gave off a sense that all was well. All is as it should be. He didn't come out and say it, but I think he's hoping that he did wind up giving you the strength and determination you needed to get here."

"You're second guessing him."

That startled me. "You're right. I was jumping to a conclusion when I tried to guess how he feels about your success. I was just..." I trailed off.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "Trying to make me feel better. Don't feel bad. I asked you how he felt and that's not really fair to you."

"Except that emotions do emanate from spirits. And he really did emanate great sorrow. The rest was speculation on my part. I'm sure he would have said a lot more if I could have stayed with it. The feelings were just so heavy, the connection overwhelmed me."

He didn't ask for any more readings that day. Instead, he surprised me by telling me we were going to head down to Marina del Rey and spend the day sailing on a chartered yacht. I'm always touched by his efforts to keep me entertained. I know it's impossible for him to go out in public without getting swarmed by the paparazzi.

On the drive down, my eyes darted here and there, taking in the beauty of Southern California. No matter how many times I visit, I'm always inspired to take pictures. Pictures that never capture the full extent of the beauty. Of course the mountains, the palm trees and the ocean views are spectacular. But what I really love are the flowers. Tons and tons of hot pink flowers that pop up everywhere, in the most unexpected places. That's what I don't get back home. I adore New England. Navy blue water, bright white houses and lighthouses. Rocky cliffs and cobblestones. It's a different kind of beauty and I adore it. But California is always a treat.

In sunglasses and a bucket hat, Curtis was able to make it to the boat undetected. We got settled in on the aft deck while the chef starting making lunch. Curtis leaned back in his seat, raised his face to the sun and closed his eyes. His shirt was thin enough for me to see his washboard abs, but my biggest concern was his state of mind. I'd never known how he felt about his grandfather. All I'd known was that his grandmother was a saint in his eyes. His parents had had a tumultuous relationship when he was young, and so his grandmother had taken him to protect him from the fighting. His parents finally divorced when he was in college, and peace was restored, but by then it was too late to reclaim any sense of family. Later, when they'd both matured, they'd remarried.

His grandfather had been dead ten years. His grandmother had only been gone two years. Fortunately she had lived long enough to see her baby become a huge success. She disapproved of the cursing in his music and the references to sex, but she felt that his heart was in the right place. So she accepted the new home he'd bought her, and the car with a driver and the trips to Europe and to the Grammy awards where she'd walked the red carpet on his arm, beaming with pride.

But he'd never told me about his painful feelings concerning his grandfather. I couldn't help but feel hurt on his behalf. He'd been a little boy living separately from his parents, wanting a loving father figure but dealing instead with a cold, distant grandfather. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes and turned to me. "Tell me again what it was like when you first found out you had these powers."

Curtis was like a kid when it came to this story. He loved to hear it over and over. I smiled indulgently. "I was maybe five years old when it started. My parents thought I was full of it until my great aunt died and I told them before they got the news. In fact, I told them maybe thirty minutes after she'd been pronounced dead, because she came to me and told me goodbye. There would be these strange people in my room at night. And I'd see people walk through my walls. Even when I couldn't see spirits, I would know when they were there. And I could tell they knew I knew. Which made them excited. Which freaked me out." The world can be a very crowded place when your consciousness straddles two dimensions. It can become downright unbearable when you think you're the only person on earth having those experiences.

"Finally I heard about Isadora, a medium who lives in this really cool house in the art colony nearby. I got up the courage to knock on her door. I told her what I was seeing and feeling and she completely believed me and didn't think I was some weirdo. I started visiting her Saturday mornings. She taught me how to deal with it all. How to control the spirit traffic and set boundaries so that spirits weren't able to just follow me around the house and nag me when I was trying to eat or take a bath. I was fifteen by then. Ten years is a long time to cope with all of that confusion and fear and self-doubt."

"Did she tell you why you have this ability?"

"Yes. She gave me a reading to see if her spirit guide could make contact with my spirit guide. She told me that my spirit guide is my great grandmother Anna on my mother's side. She was psychic herself. Anna said that I vibrate on a higher frequency than most people. Because of that, I actually intrude into life on the other side. So it's really less about spirits seeking me out and more about me bumping into them in their space. If that makes sense."

He flashed his blinding white smile and regarded me with amazement. "That's some of the coolest shit I've ever heard."

I laughed with delight at his amazement. My heart bounced and soared like a balloon.

At the end of what was a beautiful day, I took a shower in the luxurious guest bathroom, washed my hair and allowed it to dry into unruly bi-racial curls. I suspected Curtis liked those curls, although his girlfriend, Samantha had super straight, blonde hair. I slipped into my designer pajamas and checked Facebook on my tablet until I was sleepy. I was just about to turn off the lamp when I heard a soft knock on the bedroom door. "Yes?"

Curtis stepped in looking outrageously sexy in a V neck T shirt and drawstring pajama pants. "I think I forgot to thank you," he said, running a hand over his closely cropped hair.

I sat up in bed, both perplexed and turned on by his presence. "What for?"

"My grandfather. Hearing that from him meant the world to me."

I could tell from his expression that he'd been deeply moved by the experience. I nodded. "You are very welcome. But you thanked me more than enough by showing me such a good time today." After sailing, we'd gone to dinner, then to a jazz club. It had all been very glamorous and upscale and A-list celebrity worthy.

He nodded. "Well, I'm glad you had a good time. Thanks again. Goodnight." Then he was gone.

I turned off the lamp and lay thinking about Curtis and wondering how on earth I'd fallen in love with a client. It was something I'd never foreseen. Spirit had never warned me. My heart had never given me a clue. At thirty years old, I'd had my share of dates and relationships. Being an empath as well as a medium, I was keenly aware of the motives of other people. I could sense which guys were in it for love and which guys just thought it was fun to date a girl who talked to dead people. As for the ones who were in it for love, I could sense their inner fears and dark preoccupations. Things that another girl could have overlooked and lived quite happily with stuck out for me. Self-esteem issues, dishonesty, weird sexual fantasies. All of those things screamed out to me when I was with a guy. As a result, I'd given up on dating when my career as a medium took off. Once Curtis hired me, the need for romantic love disappeared. I should have paid attention to that. I should have seen the red flags.

Eventually I dozed off and had been sleeping dreamlessly for several hours when I found myself in the middle of a very lucid dream. At first I couldn't understand what I was seeing, but then my vantage point widened and I realized I was seeing a couple having sex. The female had very pale skin and long, red hair. Her back was to the man as she stood bent at the waist, holding on to the kind of brass railing you'd see in a bar. The sex was vigorous and fast, and there was much groaning and gasping from them both. The woman's gasps of pleasure soon became screams of agony as the man slammed himself viciously into her over and over. She looked over her shoulder, as if to beg for mercy and that

was when I realized the girl was Bella. When I followed her gaze to the man, I was startled to see that he didn't have a face. There was only an expanse of flat, featureless skin, like what you'd see on a stomach or back. But his chest had dark hair, I noticed. And there was hair on his knuckles. He had manicured fingernails that gripped Bella's hips with such force that she was bleeding. When I turned back to Bella, I saw that the man was now aiming the tip of a knife at the nape of her neck. As I watched, he pressed the knife into her flesh and drew it down her spine.

I awoke with a cry. My heart was pounding. All senses were on high alert. I wanted to sit up but I could feel the weight of a spirit lying on top of me. I began to pant with fear, and I knew that if I didn't soon take control of the situation that I would spin off into hysteria. "Look, I'll talk to you, but only if you get off me," I said. Instantly the weight lifted and I could feel the spirit beside me. That was good. It was a reasonable spirit. Maybe it had nothing to do with my dream after all, I reasoned, as I tried to keep myself from trembling. I closed my eyes, took some deep, slow breaths and tried to see the entity that was currently sharing my bed. With my mind's eye I could see a tall black man, thin and stern faced. I sat up in bed. "Are you Lee?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm his grandfather."

I sighed. "Okay. Was there something more you wanted to tell me?"

"Well, first ma'am, I want to assure you that I'm not the one who sent you that dream. I don't know what you were dreaming, but I could tell it was scaring you. I didn't mean to scare you more. I just meant to look after you, that's all."

I smiled. "Thanks, Lee. It was a very scary nightmare."

"Yes, I thought so. Listen, the reason I came is I wanted to warn Curtis about that gal. That Samantha. She's not a bit of good. He needs to watch out for her."

"What do you mean, Lee? What's ...is she?" But he was gone. The lightness in the air confirmed that. He'd probably used most of his energy waiting for me to wake up and trying to protect me from that awful dream.