

"I will tell you," the psychic said, "when and how you are going to die."

He paused to take a long drag on his cigarette, and Marissa's friends giggled and poked her in the back.

"Can you *do* that?" Marissa was surprised at the offer. She had thought this was the one question fortune-tellers shied away from. That was how this whole trip had started: Cara's mom had told them how the friend of someone she had once worked with had gone to a tarot reader who laid out the cards, turned pale, then said, "I can't do this," and returned the woman's money. Later that week, after going out to a downtown nightclub, Cara's mom's friend's friend had been attacked and killed in a parking garage.

The five of them, Marissa, Cara, JoLyn, Daphne, and Rodney—whom they liked to describe as the group's token male—hadn't been sure of the story. "Did that really happen?" Cara had asked her mom.

And though Cara's mom had assured them it had— a long time ago—with moms it was sometimes hard to tell these things for sure. It may well have been less a real incident than a warning against downtown or nightclubs or parking garages. Rodney had pointed out that many urban legends seemed like they might have gotten their starts as somebody's mom warning about something.

But Cara's mom's telling the story—in response to something Marissa could no longer even remember— had gotten the friends interested in going to Lily Dale, the psychic community in upstate New York, to get *their* fortunes told. What better way, they had decided, for five high school seniors to spend Halloween night, especially since they were too old for trick-or-treating, and too tall to bluff it, and the girls were all on diets, anyway. Rodney was not on a diet, as he had one of those metabolisms where he could eat anything without worrying about it ending up on his hips or butt, but he had given up trick-or-treating even earlier than the girls had, when his voice changed.

So off they went to Lily Dale.

This psychic had not been their first choice. They had stopped at several pretty little gingerbread Victorian houses in the community, which had signs picturing stars, or teacups, or tarot cards. But psychics were

more expensive than the five of them had anticipated. Fifty dollars a session had been the going rate, no split sessions. They had already gotten back into Daphne's car—never mind they had driven two and a half hours to get here—when they noticed his tacky ranch house. On the front lawn was a sign that had a pair of penetrating eyes. No face—just the eyes. Either an optometrist or a psychic, and considering where they were, they guessed psychic. Since the house wasn't as nice as the others, they'd hoped his rate might be lower.

He was short and skinny and swarthy and stank of the cigarettes he chain-smoked, which were also short and skinny and dark—probably European. Apparently, Europeans hadn't heard that smoking was bad for you.

Fifty dollars a session, he'd told them—hadn't these people ever heard that price-fixing was illegal? But then he'd said that—if they preferred—for fifty dollars he would answer one question from each of them.

They could have gotten back into the car again—a five-hour-wasted round-trip—or they could go with Mr. Chain-Smoking-Euro-Man. Warily, they stepped into his house.

For someone who looked into the future, his decor definitely looked into the past. The 1970s, Marissa guessed from the orange-golden rug and the woodlike paneling of his dining room. But maybe she was being

unfair. Maybe the paneling was expensive stuff, and it was just the coating from all the nicotine that gave it its dark, lusterless matte finish. Along with the anonymous stains on the tablecloth and the gray metal file cabinet in the corner, and the fact that he had only one dining room chair and had pulled five folding chairs out of the closet for them, the decor did not inspire confidence.

So now Marissa—faced with a prediction regarding the when and how of her mortality—asked, “Can you do that?” with a slight hope that maybe her question would bring the psychic back to his senses. “Oh,” he would say, “what’s the matter with me? I forgot: That’s not allowed. Let me predict something else.” Then she wouldn’t have to say, “I’m not sure I want to hear this,” and have the others laugh at her.

The psychic took another long drag on his cigarette and asked, “Can I do that? Is *that* your question, then?” What a creep.

“No,” Marissa said, “that was *not* my question.” Despite the anticipation of coming, despite the long drive to get here and the disappointment when it had appeared they wouldn’t be able to find an affordable fortune-teller, despite Cara and Rodney and Daphne and Jolyn going first, she had not had a question in mind, and the death thing had been the psychic’s suggestion. Still, it was an unsettling topic. She wanted to answer: “I only

want to know when I’m going to die if it’s going to be at least twenty years from now. Otherwise, tell me if I’m going to get accepted at one of the colleges where I applied.” That was pretty close to the question Daphne had asked, and everyone had called it lame, but Marissa didn’t think she was up to hearing something like: A serial killer will get you within a week.

Still, she supposed the psychic already considered himself generous for not automatically answering and charging her for that dumb “Can you do that?” question and would not give any unpaid-for hints.

“So”—the psychic held the foul cigarette pinched between his fingers and inhaled as though his lungs were in his toes—“I will tell you when and how you will die.”

Marissa took a steady breath.

“It will be just over fifty-six years from now, four months short of your seventy-fourth birthday.”

Marissa stored those figures in her head to work out when she had a couple moments to herself—to see if he’d guessed her age correctly, since he had not asked. It would be easier to trust a psychic who had not only the ability to zero in on a person’s age but also demonstrated good math skills. In any case, fifty-six years from now was a much better number than, say, next week.

“You will die,” the psychic continued, “in a plane

crash, while traveling from Rochester, New York, to Buffalo."

"Okay," Marissa said, slowly. She had never been on a plane, her grandparents all living within driving distance, and her parents believing in local vacationing. She figured if she hadn't flown anywhere in her seventeen years so far, she shouldn't miss skipping it later on. Besides that, she couldn't think of any reason she'd want to go to Buffalo. If this changed later in her life, Buffalo was only about an hour's drive away from Rochester. What kind of idiot would pay for a plane and spend more time going through airport security than it would take to drive where she wanted to go? She could readily arrange her life to exclude planes—and, in fact, Buffalo.

The psychic said, "I am not finished." He paused to take another toe-curling inhalation of his cigarette. "Your plane will crash in a sod farm in Batavia, New York, due to mechanical failure, sometime between 8:15 and 8:25 A.M., killing all aboard."

JoLyn poked Marissa and observed, "I can't imagine you being up early enough to catch an eight o'clock plane."

Easy for her to scoff: Marissa fully intended to add Batavia to her list of things to avoid once she hit her

seventies, just in case the psychic meant that the plane would crash *on* her rather than with her *in* it.

"So," Rodney said, "all Marissa has to do is avoid getting on a plane when she's seventy-three, and she'll miss her appointment with death and live forever. Sweet deal."

That was pretty close to Marissa's reasoning, but the psychic was wearing a self-satisfied smirk.

Daphne told Rodney, "Living till you're seventy-three is living forever."

"I wish I'd asked when *I* was going to die," Cara grumbled. She'd asked if she'd marry Bailey Leonard, and the psychic had simply said no—which was what Marissa would have guessed in any case, Cara's boyfriend being very obviously not as much in love with Cara as Cara was with him. Obvious to everyone but Cara, for whom the negative had come as a surprise. She had asked, "Well, who, then?" but the psychic had said that was another question, and if she really wanted an answer, the group would have to buy another round of questions—for (of course) fifty dollars.

While Cara had still been considering, Rodney had asked, "Who will *I* marry?"

Marissa had always suspected that Rodney had a

bit of a crush on Cara—though Daphne maintained Marissa was a hopeless romantic and that *none* of the girls was or could ever be Rodney's type. Still, Marissa thought maybe he'd asked in the hope that the psychic would tell him he'd marry Cara.

But the psychic had told him he would not marry at all—which had caused Daphne to arch her eyebrows at Marissa.

Daphne, who was *not* a romantic, asked whether she would be accepted at Stanford, and the psychic had said yes, and that her acceptance would be in her mailbox Monday.

Marissa liked that this prediction would either come true or not in three days, which would give the rest of them a hint as to the psychic's accuracy, but JoLyn called it a waste of a good prediction. She asked, "Will I lead a happy life?"

"Happiness is subjective," the psychic had said, which had caused a howl of protest from all of them. It was hard to say whether the man had planned to leave the prediction at that, but after their outburst of catcalls and, "Not fair," and "Come on," he asked JoLyn, "Are you happy now?"

"Yeah," JoLyn had said. "Sure."

"You will never," the psychic told her, "be less happy than you are now."

So that had been the one unequivocally good fortune. Though Daphne at Stanford wasn't bad.

Now the psychic asked Cara, or maybe them all, "Do you have any further questions?"

Cara shook her head, and so did the others.

The psychic stood, which apparently meant they weren't going to be offered a Halloween candy bar or a glass of water or an opportunity to use the bathroom, or even a "Good-bye, it's been fun."

This—or the fact that it had gotten cold and started raining—put Rodney in a bad mood, and as he stepped out the front door he muttered, "I can tell fortunes, too: Smoking'll kill you."

Hard to tell if Rodney meant the comment for them or for the psychic, but the psychic *did* hear. He said, quietly and without emotion, "Yes," then closed the door firmly behind them.

They lingered under the overhang that someone with more ambition than this particular psychic might have tried to make into a patio. At seven o'clock, the night was dark, and the rain was pouring. Their breaths condensed in the cold.

"I hate driving in the rain at night," Daphne said. "It makes me nervous."

"Hey, I'm relaxed," Marissa said. "I don't know about the rest of you—but I know I'm safe."

"You're also not legal," JoLyn said, lording it over them just because she and Daphne had already had their birthdays and could drive at night. She took the car keys from Daphne. "And you all know you're safe with me, because I would not be happy if I had an accident. And you have all heard it . . ."—she shouted for the entire Lily Dale community to hear—"*I am destined to be happy.*"

Cara muttered, loud enough for JoLyn to hear, which meant she wasn't serious, "If you're destined to drive, then I'm destined to be scared."

Rodney said, "If we don't get out of here soon, we'll be destined to need an ark instead of a car."

So, screaming as though they were melting, they ran to the car, JoLyn and Marissa in the front seats, Rodney sitting between Daphne and Cara in the back.

The rain came down so hard, the windshield wipers—even on at maximum—had a difficult time keeping the windshield clear. The raindrops were fat and verging on being sleet. The fact that the streetlights reflected and glared on the wet pavement made Marissa glad she wasn't driving.

But JoLyn was confident and was doing a fine job. She had gotten them singing Christmas carols—since they couldn't find any decent radio stations, being still

too far from Rochester, and since they didn't know any Halloween songs.

Rodney had started, "Up on the Housetop," but he didn't really know the lyrics beyond that, and he was floundering. After checking that the road ahead of them was clear, JoLyn, still gripping the steering wheel, glanced over her shoulder into the backseat as she energetically sang the refrain, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Who wouldn't go?"

In the front seat, Marissa saw the eighteen-wheeler ahead of them lose control on the slick road and begin to veer, then twist till it was sliding forward sideways, with their car aimed right at it.

There seemed to be all the time in the world for her to tell JoLyn to look out, to step on the brake—but carefully so that they wouldn't skid, too. There seemed all the time in the world to slow down safely. But it must have been only a moment, for JoLyn, all unaware, was still preoccupied with Rodney, was still belting out the second, "Ho! Ho! Ho!"

And then they hit the truck.

Just over fifty-six years later, four months short of Marissa's seventy-fourth birthday, the staff at Hillcrest

VIVIAN VANDE VELDE

Home were discussing what to do with the old woman who had been in a coma ever since the car accident that had scrambled her brain and killed her four friends.

As far as they could tell, she had no family, or at least no one had come to visit in the two decades the most senior of them had been working there. For some reason, Hillcrest in Rochester was overcrowded, while their sister facility had several empty beds.

Since no one ever came to look in on her, and since she didn't know where she was, everyone agreed there could be no harm in sending her by air ambulance to Buffalo. A nice, short, safe trip.

WHEN MY PARENTS COME TO VISIT