

## Octoberland

By Cynthia Harrison

"Drugs?"

Ann held out the prescription. Vicodin. That would explain Mom's slurring. Also the crazy hair. Ann left us, closing the door that led to the bakery behind her. Once she recovered, Mom would be mortified if a customer saw her in such a state.

"Is that my Laura?" Mom squinted, her arms, from elbow to wrist, encased in plaster. "Annie, get my glasses!" Mom demanded.

"They're on your face," I said. "Ann's in the shop."

Mom's stiff arms flailed. "What will we do?"

The truth was, nothing could be done. Mom would not be baking the town's favorite treats, the renovations would not be completed on schedule, and, with Ricky Vale pressuring local government, the county would move swiftly to condemn our family home.

I don't live here anymore. Dad has been dead ten years, Donna is away at college, and Ann, in her last year of high school, needs to invent something astonishing before graduation to secure an engineering scholarship. She's brilliant but she doesn't earn enough to keep the dog in biscuits. So that leaves me to find a way to save this place.

"We'll think of something," I said. But I already knew what I had to do. Gram had whispered it in my ear. She's been dead 25 years, but she still tells me what to do.

"Water," Mom said. As I held the glass to her lips, water splashed down her chin. She sipped, not noticing the darkening blotch on her blouse. After a few minutes, she slumped over on the ancient sofa and started to snore.

I covered her with one of Gram's old afghans and went into the bakery. There were three cakes left, and probably four dozen cookies. A half pan of brownies. Ann was making change for a couple of kids with coffee in to-go cups.

I grabbed a fist full of straws, wondering what Ricky Vale wanted with our property. Would he put up a Starbucks? It wasn't close enough to the ocean for a rich man's home, and he already owned an entire island off the coast.

"She's sleeping," I told Ann, handing her the straws. Ann took the straws, looking bewildered and overwhelmed.

"Easier for her to drink," I said.

"You have to move back in—I—I—can't..."

I hugged Ann. She was a good girl. Couldn't smell doom from an inch away, but then that was my job.

"Don't go upstairs," I said. The steps, rotted from an old leak in the roof, had collapsed under Mom's weight. Instead of her wrists, she could have broken her neck.

"You two will move in with me."

"But Jethro—and my clothes—" Ann cried quietly into her hands.

"Jethro can come, too." I live in a loft downtown. It's not a pretty place full of steel, granite and wood like the ones you see in shelter magazines. Nate, the lawyer who owns my building, keeps offices on the ground floor, but lives on South Shore with all the other rich people. He hardly notices my existence, so I'm sure my new roommates, including Jethro, will be equally invisible.

"You can wear my clothes until we find someone to access the upstairs."

Ann sniffed as a man in a suit came in and quickly decided which cake he wanted. "They won't bulldoze my new

jeans?" Ann fit the cardboard cake box together, neatly stowed the treat inside, and tied the box with string.

"Thirty-five fifty," she said, not batting an eye. Mom's cakes were \$20.

The guy paid without comment and left.

"We need the cash," Ann said.

"Did I say anything?" I propped the door to the parlor open so Ann could hear Mom when she woke up. "I'll be back in an hour."

"Where you going?"

"Octoberland," I said.

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"I have an appointment," I lied.

The secretary leafed through her calendar. "I don't think so," she said, as I stormed Ricky Vale's office. He sat on a leather sofa so close to a redheaded woman that I sensed they'd broken off a kiss. Like everyone else in West Port who read the local paper, I knew Ricky's wife was a blonde. He shot up when I came into the room.

"Laura Estabon," he said, as if they'd been waiting for me. He extended his hand; I didn't take it. He moved his arm around in one smooth move to indicate the redhead. "Sibyl Tarken, this is Ms. Estabon. I'm negotiating to acquire her family property for Mayville."

Sibyl eyed me briefly, then looked away. I get that a lot from certain people who still think gypsy is a lower life form.

"Your mother signed?" Ricky asked.

I shook my head as my mind blanked. I waited for Gram to rescue me, but no such luck. Gram was a little like reading the tarot. Always elusive, always open to interpretation.

"What's Mayville and why do you want our house for it?" When in doubt, answer a question with another question.

"I'm not discussing Mayville," Sibyl said, rising. "You know the timeline," she shot Ricky an angry look and walked out the door. He stood across from me, arms clasped to elbows, grinning like she'd just given him a winning lottery ticket. Not that he needed it. Ricky had more cash than God.

"Have a seat." He indicated a leather chair across from his desk, which had leather padded sides. The decorator had apparently slaughtered a field of cattle for this room.

Ricky took his time rounding the desk. Once he sat across from me, we stared at each other for an uncomfortable minute. He cracked first.

"You know Octoberland," he said, opening his arms to signify the huge building that housed both his executive offices and the impressive senior living complex.

"Mayville is a similar concept, but on the water, for singles. Preconstruction parcels available now, if you're interested."

He didn't seem to be making fun of me. I knew all about Ricky, but apparently, he didn't have a clue about my struggling freelance ad business.

"A bit out of my price range," I said.

"If you sell me the State Street property," he said, "you and Ann will be able to afford a Mayville site and your mother could come here. In fact, I'll throw a senior sector for her into the deal. A signing bonus."

It was creepy how he knew my name. And Ann's. On the other hand, he'd offered two million for our crumbling heap

of house, and now he was proposing the perfect solution for Mom's immediate care.

"Our place isn't on the water," I said.

"No." He got up and motioned me over to a table by the window. As I walked over, he pointed out a detailed table map of West Port. "This is what I'd do with your space."

I squinted, trying to read the small print under the structure that used to be our house. *New corporate headquarters*. I looked around the room. What was wrong with this space?

"Nothing," Ricky said, as if he could read my mind.

"But I like to be close to my new projects. And we're a growing company. In fact," he said, giving me a close look, "maybe you'd like to work for me."

"Me?" I squeaked, sounding just like a mouse. Like a grey little unassuming mouse who didn't believe she had a damn thing to contribute to an operation like Ricky Vale, Inc.

Ricky pretended not to notice the squeak.

"Your Mom," he said, "would be taken care of here. Twenty-four hour nursing staff. And if you worked with us, you'd see her every day."

"The property is not mine to sell," I said, wishing it was. Ricky's offer would solve all our problems.

"Fair enough," he said. "What about this: your Mom tries out Octoberland temporarily, free of charge, until she mends. If she decides she doesn't like it here, no problem. She can leave."

I wondered with a shiver how he'd known about her accident. It had only happened a few hours ago. Gram? I thought, beaming my tiny telepathic light to no avail.

"What about the house?" Even as I asked, I realized the futility of trying to hang on to the old house, of Mom continuing to run the bakery after Ann went away to school next year. Mom had refused to accept the first offer because Dad had come to her in a dream, telling her Ricky was a crook.

"He's a jailer!" Mom had insisted.

"This may seem like a weird question."

I stood next to Ricky, looking out at the water. I was hoping to get a read on him, but nothing was coming through. He was as clear as glass. That had to be good, didn't it?

"Shoot," he said.

"Do you own a prison?"



His laugh was short and sharp. "No," he said. "Just Octoberland. And my tenants love it here. Most of them are too infirm to go outside the complex, and really, why would they need to?"

Why indeed? The movie theater ran classic black and white films round the clock, the spiritual center offered worship for all according to belief system, the virtual kitchens looked like home.

His intercom buzzed. "Sibyl's waiting, Mr. Vale," the secretary said. Ricky turned to look at me. I wondered if he'd forgotten all about offering me a job.

"You're in PR, right?"

"Sort of," I said. "I design logos and brochures for small businesses. Sometimes I work up fundraising campaigns."

Ricky nodded, looking at me like I was the most fascinating person on the planet. Then he named a salary figure five times my current income. When I hesitated, he said "No strings."

"State Street is not mine to sell," I reminded him.

"Understood," he agreed.

"Would this be a freelance assignment?" I am not the corporate type.

"You can call it that," he said, "as long as I'm your only client and you retain an office here for the duration of our project."

"Well, then, sure," I said. This was the kind of money that would enable me to save Mom's house. "What's the project?"

"Mayville," he said.

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Mom, Ann, and Jethro stayed at my loft that first night. Jethro was getting old. After sniffing every inch of my space, he found a spot in a corner, walked in a couple of half-hearted circles, and curled up. Ann was so tired from taking care of Mom and running the bakery and trying to study that she fell asleep before she finished her homework. Ann could not afford to blow her perfect grades, but I felt so bad for her that I let her sleep as I settled Mom in my bed.

Before her meds hit and she zonked on me too, I brought up Ricky's offer.

"It's just for now," I said, outlining the perks of a nice visit to Octoberland, including the fact that I'd be working onsite every day.

"It's a bad idea," Mom said, sounding exactly like Gram, right before she fell asleep.

I pumped the air mattress and thought about options as I stared at my scarred wooden floor. I had just finished a job for Atwell Farm Markets, netting \$3000. My rent was \$900, and not for the first time, I was a month behind. So \$1800 to Nate, first thing tomorrow morning. \$1200 left. After stashing tax money to pay my quarterlies, buying food for three plus dog, and paying my cell phone bill, I'd have about \$27. I really needed this job. But who would watch Mom when I was at work and Ann was at school? Jethro?

I woke Ann. Her bleary eyes and pencil creased cheek made me feel impossibly tender. As she returned to her biology text, I consulted the cards in an effort to woo Gram from the ether.

The magician; death; three of hearts. Lord help us, I thought. Death didn't scare me; the new job signaled an end to my old way of paying the bills. And the mage was an old friend. But the three of hearts, now there was trouble. Betrayal, to be exact.

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The next morning, Ann said she'd cut classes to watch Mom. I agreed just this once, since there was nothing else to do. I made out the check for Nate, intending to drop it off on my way to work. Turns out that the rest of the corporate world starts the day a little earlier than Nate does. His offices were dark.

I tucked the check into my jacket pocket and walked to work. It was good exercise and saved gas, plus Octoberland was in the city center and my loft was only six blocks away. I saw Sibyl on the opposite stretch of sidewalk outside the building. She was heading my way, wearing a navy suit with a skirt and sneakers. I hoped my comfy flats and black knit pants were okay. I don't own any skirts. Can't abide pantyhose. Remembering what my grey silk shirt had cost made me feel a bit more confident, especially when Sibyl got close enough for me to notice the sweat beading her hairline.

"I thought that was you," she said, huffing out the words as she grabbed my arm, slowing us both to a stop.

"Uh, hi," I said, checking my watch. I did not want to be late my first day.

"I wanted to tell you that there's no rush on the Mayville project," she said, releasing her grip on my arm. I started walking again and she kept pace with me. "We're not breaking ground there until all the permits are in order and that's going to take a while."

*Why she hadn't waited until we were in our offices to start talking shop?*

"Thanks," I said, not mentioning the fact that Ricky had said to report directly to him. I'd taken a look at the organizational chart last night and Sibyl was his sole VP.

"You walk to work, too," Sibyl said, opening one of the six glass doors into the building and motioning for me to precede her. "I live in Selmatown."

Selmatown is a four block enclave of turn-of-the-century cottages populated by free-spirited artsy types. Maybe Sibyl wasn't the snotty bitch I'd first pegged her.

"You're only a couple of blocks from me," I said.

"Yeah, we should get together."

I don't know if I was testing her or what, but some little demon made me say "Sure, I'll read your cards."

"Really? That would be great!"

Her voice sounded completely sincere. Okay, maybe I was too touchy about the gypsy thing. I'd better watch it or I'd start seeing enemies everywhere.

"Do we punch in or anything?" I had not worked in an office in forever, and was feeling a little out of my element. Once at a desk and working I'd be fine but right then, I was nervous.

Sibyl laughed like I'd made a joke. "Your office is next to mine," she said. "We're sharing a secretary."

A frizzy-haired woman got up from the open area just before the executive corridor and held out her hand.

"Rhianna," she said.

"Laura." I wished, not for the first time, I had a more creative name. My mother, trying to live down her gypsy roots, named her daughters old-fashioned American names: Donna, Ann, Laura.

"I ordered you all the usual supplies," Rhianna said. "Your Power Book is on the desk and here's your password and email address." She handed me a sealed envelope.

"Let's have lunch together," Sibyl said before disappearing into the office next to mine. I sat at my desk and turned to the HR packet I needed to sort, sign and return.

"There you are," Ricky said, popping his head in just as I'd finished the employee paperwork. "I need to show you something.

"A tour here will help you nail the Mayville concept," he said, taking my arm as we walked down the hall. I felt Rhianna's eyes scorching my back until we were well out of her sight. "Use the same general plan but make it young and hip. And new ideas. Whatever you come up with for a preliminary draft will be great."

He showed me an apartment, full of the tenant's own things, plus discreet health alarms. Next, a room with a bank of monitors and staff in medical uniform supervising morning medications.

"The cameras activate for med dispensation or when a health alarm is raised. Other than that, complete privacy."

I got a tour of the grocery store. No prices, no cashier. "When I say everything is included in the sale price of our units, I mean everything," Ricky said.

I was impressed with the on-site clinic, the boutique and exercise spa, the rooftop swimming pool.

"I've saved the best for last," Ricky said, a couple of hours later. My notebook was stuffed with info and ideas. As he'd taken me around, he'd sometimes been on the

phone, sometimes texting with the dexterity of a high schooler. But for the "best" Ricky's phone was tucked away. He lead me into a huge auditorium he called the dining room. It was a big room full of tables and chairs marked off into small boxlike spaces. At every table, one person sat, eating.

"We've found that our oldsters like to have an early lunch," he said. I checked my watch. 11 a.m. This was a dismal room, and I was about to tell Ricky that when I saw my Mom eating at our old dining room table.

"What's Mom doing here?"

"Your sister brought her in. She said she had an important test at school today, and she was afraid to leave her alone in the loft. Don't worry, she can leave with you tonight if she decides she doesn't like it here."

Mom didn't see me. None of the lunchers seemed to notice we were there, watching them. I tried to walk over to Mom's table, but an invisible force kept me from moving into any of the blocks.

Ricky took my hand. "Come here," he said. "I'll show you." Holding his hand reminded me of how long it had been since I'd been intimate with a man. As soon as I could, I pulled my hand away.



Ricky didn't seem to notice. He extracted a black remote from his pocket and zapped it once. Suddenly, the block of rooms had china cabinets, carpets, and soft lighting. The steamy warm smells from the plates of food permeated the air. And sitting across from every lone tenant was another person. "Significant others," Ricky said.

I looked toward Mom's block and there was Dad, feeding her stuffed cabbage.

"Daddy," I called, starting forward. How was this possible? I was able to walk a thin invisible corridor and stand directly outside our dining room. It was remarkable. How had all this happened so quickly? There was the old clock on the sideboard. There was the portrait of Mom and Dad on their wedding day. There was the old set of china, carried here from the old country in a steamer trunk by Gram's parents.

"Daddy," I said again, but he didn't hear me. I put my hand up to the invisible wall, unable to penetrate this perfect picture of domestic bliss. All around me, other enacted their own version of yesteryear's lunch.

"He can't hear you," Ricky said, "because he's not real. He's a hologram. They all are. Well, the others."

"Mom can't hear me either."

"No," he said. "We've soundproofed for privacy." Ricky clicked another button and the scene went back to the way it was before. But now I noticed that Mom was opening her mouth and chewing as if someone was feeding her.

"God, that was so weird."

"Later you can ask your Mom what she thinks of it. If she's like the rest of our tenants, she'll love it. Even the ones who were miserable in actual married life love their hologram spouses. It makes them feel less alone."

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I spent the rest of the day dreaming up design ideas for a Mayville logo. After several not-so-hot attempts, I was finally pleased with something that incorporated water and a boat with a sail that looked alike a bikini top, all under the widened "y" in Mayville.

I glanced at my watch. It was late. Everything else could wait until tomorrow. I grabbed my jacket from the back of the door and noticed the check for Nate peeking from the pocket. I'd have to make my visit to Mom quick if

I wanted to catch Nate, or at least his secretary, before they closed up shop.

"Hi, darling!" Mom said. Her cheeks were pink and her smile was genuine. "Isn't this apartment darling?"

I looked around. There was her favorite reading chair and the table next to it. The floor lamp she'd made the Victorian shade for in a class once cast a mellow glow over the rug. Even that had come from home.

Mom got up off the sofa and walked me to the bedroom. "It's amazing," she said, opening the door. I almost expected to see Dad taking his pre-dinner nap while "watching" sports on the tiny television that had always sat on his chest of drawers.

"Everything's here except Dad," I said. "I saw the cafeteria today—Dad looked so real."

"He is real!" Mom said. "At least to me."

"Oh, Mom, you know it's just a hologram, don't you?"

Her chin clenched in that old stubborn way and she walked with a stiff back over to the tiny kitchenette. "Will you pop a pill into my mouth dear? And then, some water. It'll save them from coming up any more today."

When I opened the bottle of pills, an under-the-counter video camera lit. As soon as Mom had swallowed her pills, it went dark again.

"Are you sure you're okay here?"

"Oh yes," she said. "And don't worry. I know about the hologram."

"So you know Dad's not really here?"

"I know all about it," she said, sighing.

"You must be tired," I said.

"Yes," she said. "It's harder than I thought, not having my hands. I can't even get dressed."

"Do you want me to help you get into a nightgown before I leave?"

"Oh. You have to go? So soon?"

This was breaking my heart. "You can come, too," I said. "I have to pay my rent and make sure Ann gets something to eat for dinner and take Jethro out for a walk. He's been cooped up all day."

"No, no. You were right. It's better here. For now. I'll be fine. They take care of everything here."

"Oh, Mom, I don't know. Are you sure?"

"Yes. Just come by every day. And bring Ann next time."

I tried to read her face, but it was a weird mix of pain and happiness. Too cloudy to call. This is what I had wanted. The perfect solution to our family's dilemma. Why was I so uneasy?

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"So that's the whole story," I told Nate, taking the rent receipt he handed me. By the time I got home, his secretary had left.

Somehow, that day, I wasn't invisible.

"New job?" he asked, taking in my creased silk blouse and the wool jacket I hardly ever wore.

I related the events of the last couple of days. Mom's accident, my new roommates, the job offer. It all poured from my mouth like a song.

"And they have this holo—" I started to say, but stopped. Along with all my other paperwork, I'd signed a confidentiality agreement this morning. I tried to remember if the hologram thing was top secret.

Nate waited for what I'd say next. He didn't look harassed or impatient or in a rush. He seemed to have all the time in the world to listen to me talk about my day. Is

this what a relationship is like? I wondered. It had been too long for me to recall.

In order to extend the spell, I told him about the hologram dining rooms.

"Wow," he said. "No wonder people are lining up to get in there."

"It's an amazing place," I said, folding the receipt into an accordion. "Except..."

"What?" He looked at my face so intently, as if he really cared about the minutia of my day.

"I don't know. This could be her medication, but Mom seemed to think Dad was real, not a hologram."

"A ghost?"

I nodded. The tone of Nate's voice as he asked his question was not incredulous. It was not sad for poor me with the demented mother. It was matter-of-fact. I wonder what he'd say if he knew I talked to dead people? Well, one dead person. My Gram, who seemed to be ignoring me lately.

"You'd need an army of string seers to pull off something like that." Nate flicked an imaginary piece of dust from his desk's surface.

"String seers?" I asked.

He looked up from the desk.

"Oh, just something I read."

"You into science fiction?"

"Yeah," he seemed embarrassed. And uncomfortable. He looked at his watch.

"I'm sorry!" I said. "I'm keeping you from your work." I got up in a hurry, remembered Jethro, remembering Ann.

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Saturday afternoon, once I'd visited Mom and assured myself that she was doing fine, and had fed Ann dinner, because she was so deep into her latest invention-in-progress that she wouldn't take time to eat if I didn't insist, I walked to Sibyl's with my tarot cards.

After working with Sibyl all week, I had started to think she might be a friend. Family and work took most of my time, so I hadn't had an opportunity to make new friends after my last lover apparently got them all when we broke up.

Sibyl lives at the point in the city where the downtown lofts begin to give way to old cottages and plots of land where houses once stood but have since been burned

to the ground. There are a lot of burned houses haunting our town. Nobody talks about them, though.

I started to feel tired after just a few blocks. These empty lots have the reputation of sucking up energy, and the way I felt, I believed it. I stopped for a minute at the end of Sibyl's street to catch my breath. I wondered how I'd ever take another step. My tarot cards, wrapped in their black silk bag, fell from my clumsy fingers. A child on a bike came by, laughed, and scooped them up.

Right after the first pangs of regret, I felt lighter. I mourned the bag more than the cards, which were a fairly new set I'd never gotten comfortable with. Their shape was longer than most cards, which made them difficult to shuffle.

Sibyl is bound to have a deck of cards in the house. Mom had taught me to read in the old way, with a standard deck of playing cards. Sibyl wouldn't know the difference.

As I continued to Sibyl's, I noticed the front windows of the houses along her road were lit with the same sort of lamp. They all had a wide base and a white shade. But the weird thing was that as soon as I stepped into the sidewalk's nearest edge to each house, the light turned on. When I was fully past, it blinked off. Despite my brief



resurgence of energy, my eyes were too tired to clearly see if there were people behind the lamps, flipping the switches, or not.

I was probably tired from working long hours in an unfamiliar environment, learning new ropes like cooking for a teenager intent on landing a top engineering scholarship, and walking an ancient, lonely dog several times a day.

After the long row of blinking-light houses, there were two empty lots with dried grass that grew high as my waist.

It was getting dark, so I rushed my exhausted bones past these murky lots. I thought fleetingly of the boy who had stolen my cards. There could be more boys, there in the grass, ready to steal my leather jacket, my shoes, the diamond chips from my ears.

"That's it," Gram seemed to whisper, or maybe it was the wind. "Give them your diamonds."

Just in case, I took the cheap CZs out of my ears and threw them into the straw. Once I did that, I felt lighter.

"Hey, Laura, what were you doing?" Sibyl had been on her porch, watching my offering to the earth.

"Oh," I said, not sure how to answer. "Those earring had been bothering me for ages. I think I'm allergic to cheap metal." I took off my coat and handed it to Sibyl.

She took the coat, then put her arm around me for a quick shoulder hug. Human contact is nice, but those shoulder hugs always feel half-assed to me. *Quit judging*, I told myself. Then I explained about the boy and the cards.

"No matter," she said. "It was just an idea. I really want to get to know you better. I think we can be friends."

She smiled and poured me a glass of delicious crisp wine. I could taste apples and maybe cherries. We talked and drank wine for hours, just sitting there on her sofa. When she turned on a lamp, I remembered the other weird lamps. And I wished I'd brought my car. It might be silly, but I didn't want to walk home through her street again.

"I should go."

Making friends is such work. All that history to sort out, stories to share, confidences to spill. What was wrong with me? She'd been so nice and all I could think was that it would be too much work to meet her halfway.

"I'll drive you," she said. Simple kindness was the one thing that worked as no other amount of girl talk could.

"Let me just find my keys," she said, getting up from the sofa and stretching.

"Mind if I use your powder room?" I said, rising slowly so as not to fall on my head, which is where all that wine had gone.

"Sure." From the kitchen, she motioned me down the hall. All the doors were closed, so I opened the first one. Process of elimination. Bedroom--nope. Her home office--nope. She took work home, I saw. I wasn't being nosy, but the desk was right next to the door and the files and papers and scrawled notes were right on top of it.

"Ready?" Sibyl asked, from the living room.

I pulled the door shut. "Coming," I said. My kidneys would have to wait until I got home.

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Jethro was asleep but Ann was still at it, bent over my old work table, which I had relinquished to her for the duration.

"Mom called," she said, turning on and off what looked like a flashlight. "She's signed the papers. We officially have no home."

"This is your home," I said, pouring myself a large glass of water. "What is that?"

"I have no idea. Gram is telling me what to do, and I just do it."

I almost spit out my water. Gram? Talking to Ann?

"And I'm not happy with it, either." She threw the device on the desk. "I need a bona fide invention to win that scholarship from Pike Engineering."

"Gram talks to you?"

"She can't see you right now. The strings are jammed up or something."

"Strings?" I flashed back to the papers on Sibyl's desk. **String Seers** was in bold on top of the page and then two rows of numbers. I had thought it was a simple coincidence, hearing that term again so soon after Nate had mentioned it.

"Well, maybe wires. Yeah, the wires are crossed. So she's bugging me. She won't answer any of my questions about being dead, just tells me there's not a lot of time and I have to have that thing complete." Ann nodded toward the flashlight thing.

I put on a pot of coffee while Ann complained. I had a feeling we were in for a long night.

"How long has she been talking to you?" Ann asked.

"Ever since I moved in here," I said, counting back.

"Eight years." Had it really been that long?

"And you never told me!"

"It was too soon. Mom wouldn't let me."

"Mom knows? Do you talk to Grandpa too? And Dad?" She looked ready to cry.

"No, honey," I poured two cups of coffee and brought them over to the coffee table. "Just Gram. Come over here," I said.

We cuddled up with pillows and blankets and talked long into the night. I told her everything I knew about our family's ability to speak to the other side. That not everyone felt the call to tarot, but if you did, it could well mean you were accepting other gifts as well. Like talking to dead people.

"But why is she bugging me right now? I have so much going on, and I love her, but I can't be doing what she's asked. It's not important. It's crazy."

"I don't think so," I said. "There's a bunch of stuff I don't know, but one thing I'm pretty sure of is that Gram and Dad and everyone else we know who has passed—"

"You mean died," she said, reaching for her empty coffee cup and hoisting herself up from the couch with the sort of world-weariness only a sixteen-year-old can conjure.

"It's more like a transition to another dimension."

"Like string theory?" she said.

There was that word again. I am not a science person.

"What's string theory."

She explained about the unseen dimensions.

"So a string seer would be able to see these other dimensions ... "

"Not exactly," Ann said, her eyes wide as saucers. She put a finger to her lips. "Gram," she whispered. "She's talking again."

After a few minutes, Ann explained that Gram had been cut off, but that she'd told Ann to tell me that a String Seer was a gypsy who had gone beyond tarot and talking to the dead. "A seer can manipulate time."

"How?" I asked.

"I don't know!" Ann looked pissed. "You're the seer, not me."

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes you are. Gram just said. And she said to give you this." Ann marched over to the workbench and flung the flashlight thing at me.

"For what? What do I do with this?"

"I have no idea. Maybe it will beam you up to Scotty. Then you'll be able to manipulate time AND space." Ann burst into tears, threw herself on the sofa, and pressed her face into a pillow.

I put the flashlight, which had started glowing a pinkish shade, on the coffee table. The second it left my hand, it went back to a boring yellow color. Ann sobbed.

I put my arm around her. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"Only everything," she said, blowing her nose on the pillow case and throwing it to the floor in disgust when she realized what she'd done. "I need to get some sleep," she said, not looking at me.

"You're a scientist, Annie. You're brilliant and you will invent things that will help the world stay safe. I'm just a goofy tarot reader with a weird ability."

"You mean it?" she said, putting the other pillow, *my* pillow, under her head and closing her eyes.

"Sure," I said, but she was already sleeping.

\* \*

Two weeks later, I was still drafting the Mayville brochure. My third attempt was not going well. Everyone had loved the logo I'd done on the first day, so they were being patient while I tried to recreate the magic with a brochure.

"In Mayville," I wrote, "we can reinvent ourselves. We can be reborn into who we really are." What garbage. Still, technically correct. There's to be an on-staff cosmetic surgeon available 24/7. Also a gastric-bypass operating room. An on-site restaurant will offer a choice of real meals, juices, or meal pills, just like the Jetsons.

It's so crazy. Which is probably why I can't get excited about this brochure. But I have to earn my paycheck. Sure, Mom sold the house, but she hasn't mentioned the money. She seems to have forgotten that she still has one chick in the nest. Who eats like a quarterback and requires regular infusions of denim and microscope slides.

I wrote out the copy, trying not to mind that the slogans have none of my usual flair. I'm not bragging, this flair I so airily claim is a cheap trick of alliteration



combined with a fair knowledge of popular culture. Somehow, even my cheap trick, my best card, has deserted me. I pick up the tarot deck. Yes, I keep a deck at work now. I need to know my next step.

The Fool flips up first. He makes me smile. The Tower shows its ugly face. Everything I depend on will be destroyed, made naked, new. Didn't that happen already? Strength and the High Priestess cheer me until Death plays into the immediate future position. Chariot and Moon round out the reading. Lots of good stuff here, but a warning as well. The old loft has survived two centuries, so I don't think it's my actual home that may be about to crumble.

So, what? Why do I bother with the cards? They don't tell me much. They give dire warning and then disappear. I take comfort in the message of the moon: the situation will soon come into focus if I don't resist.

\*\*

The team consisted of Ricky, Sibyl, me, and oddly, Rhianna. I now share a secretary with the creative group, because last week, Rhianna was promoted to Sibyl's personal assistant. In her secretary days, Rhianna didn't like

anything I gave her to type. She constantly insisted that it would never fly with Ricky, which made me nervous but not enough to listen to her. And Ricky usually liked my project ideas, so eventually she shut up. I hate that she gets a vote in approving my brochure.

Sybil continued to insist that we need to get the Octoberland "problem" ironed out before we could even begin to think about Mayville. Ricky paid her no mind.

"What problem?" I asked.

"Need to know basis," Sibyl said. I turned to Ricky, who was peering intently into his manila Mayville file. I shrugged and opened my own.

Ricky got up, shot us one of his great smiles, and left me alone with Sibyl and Rhianna.

"I told him I'd get to Mayville later. When I'm not so slammed with this damn string fuck up," Sybil said.

I looked at the dates on my paperwork. "He wants to get started tomorrow."

"Well, that's just not possible," Sibyl said.

"But it is. I've already drafted a riverfront proposal for the zoning commission. It's in your folder."

Sibyl and Rhianna opened their folders and stared at the proposal.

"You acted without my authority on this," Sibyl said. The look on her face said we weren't friends anymore. We probably never were.

"I don't need your authority," I said.

"If Sibyl doesn't think we should go ahead, maybe we better not, at least just yet," Rhianna said. She always blindly supports Sibyl, so I ignored her.

"Ricky's ready to go forward. It's his project, Sibyl, not yours. It's not your call to make."

Sibyl's face fell. She knew it was true.

"Fuck." Sibyl stabbed the ice cubes in her glass of Diet Coke so hard little spits of pop fly around the table. "I told him I'm not ready to move on Mayville yet! He knows how much I have on my plate with the superstring project."

Superstring again. I don't have enough info on this project to satisfy my curiosity and every time I ask her, she says "need to know" basis. She loves throwing the label around, just so I know she shares a secret with Ricky. I will not dignify her bragging by asking more about it. Even though I love everything Ann told me about the real superstring theory and am dying to know if Ricky is utilizing the dimensions in new ways, I have time. Some day he'll confide in me.

Sibyl's forehead glowed red right to the roots of her hair. Her cheeks puffed out like a poisonous fish. Her eyes shot furious looks at Rhianna.

I felt sealed off from whatever passed in Sibyl and Rhianna's exchange of glances, but I still insisted on sending my report to the zoning commission. With or without Sibyl's signature.

Ricky had told me many times that we made a great team on this project. He hadn't said anything about Sibyl and Rhianna, although I always copied everything to Sibyl as a courtesy. The fact was, I ran the Mayville show. I didn't need Sibyl and was confident enough not to back down when she said no to something I knew Ricky wanted.

"Sorry you two, but I'm going ahead." I got up to leave the conference room.

"You're positive he authorized this?" Sibyl screeched.

"Yep," I said, feeling a little smug. "Seeing as how you're so busy with Superstring, Ricky and I will handle Mayville ourselves."

Rhianna gave me a dirty look and muttered something dark under her breath. Sibyl back-paddled.

"Of course I want to be involved," she said, looking at her watch. "Damn," she said. Then she turned to Rhianna. "Hey Ree, can you meet my 1 o'clock client?"

"Sure," Rhianna said, but it was clear she didn't want to leave the table.

"Okay," Sibyl said when Rhianna was out of earshot. "What's the timetable? I've got some stuff to finish up, but I think I can give most of it to Rhianna."

"After we get the zoning permits, we put the building team together."

"Let me get this straight. Ricky put you in charge of hiring a building team? I thought your gig was strictly PR?"

I hesitated for a minute. Ricky *had* given me a list of approved contractors. He wanted me to draft a letter. Ricky would sign it, so officially I wasn't hiring anyone, just writing the correct words to woo them. But Sibyl didn't need to know that. I wanted so much to say "need to know basis" but that would just be childish. I nodded instead.

"I'll have to talk to him," she said, seemingly resigned to my favored position. "I've got a couple of loose ends to tie up. Damn Ricky. Why did he have to start Mayville now? He couldn't wait two weeks?"

I really felt sorry for her. I could tell she was shaken by the power shift. "I'm sure Ricky didn't mean to edit you out. He just gets an idea and wants to go with it. You know how he is."

"Yes, I do," she said. "Do you have that contractor list?"

It was in my office. She followed me inside and shut the door. We'd seen Rhianna in conference with a client as we'd walked by.

I gave her the list. I wasn't stupid enough to think I could cut out Ricky's number one V.P. If Sibyl wanted into the project, she would be in the project.

"I don't have experience working with building contractors anyway. You do. Ricky will be pleased that I convinced you to get on board."

She nodded, more intent on the list and Ricky's notes than what I was saying.

"Just one more thing," I said.

"Sure," Sibyl said, looking up from the list.

"I don't want Rhianna on this project. She blocks all my ideas."

I made it home without incident, but my phone's message light was flashing. I hit play.

"Little honey girl," Gram said. That's the way she always starts. "You don't need the cards anymore. Just listen to your intuition."

Gram knows I don't have an ounce of intuition without tarot. "Oh, you're coming through," I said, happy to have her back. "I've been trying to sort this out," She always knows everything that happens in my life, so I didn't need to fill her in.

"The witch has you confused," she said.

"Sibyl?" I asked.

She laughed and for a moment I could almost see her.

"She's not the one. Look closer to ... " Then Gram's voice cut out and I couldn't get her back.

"Closer to what? Closer to home? Nate?" My heart sped up when I said his name. Is this a sign from my body that I'm on the right track? Is Nate the witch Gram warned me about? But that doesn't make sense. Of course, Gram tends to give me information in such a way that it just adds to the mystery instead of solving anything.

\*\*

I'd seen the lights in Nate's office when I'd come home, which is why I decided it was time for Jethro's walk. He saw his leash and put his paw over his nose, pretending to be asleep.

"Come on, old boy," I said.

With an air of doggy resignation, he obediently allowed me to snap on his leash.

Nate was just locking up.

"Hey Jethro," he said.

"Oh, you've met?"

"Ann walks him when she doesn't stay late for Science Club." Nate scratched Jethro's head. "That's when you walk him."

I was thrilled that Nate seemed to be keeping tabs on me until I remembered he might be a witch.

"What do you know about witches?" I took a shot. He had known about ghosts, which I thought were even more unreal than witches. Wicca's a major religion, after all.

"I assume you mean the black ones."

"Well, yeah," I say. I've heard of Satanists. I know they exist. "Do they have special powers?"



Jethro whined, so we started down the street together. It was a warm summer night and it almost felt like we were a real family, out walking our dog. Well, except for the supernatural conversation part. I was happy, but underneath that I was sad. It was majorly pathetic that my greatest personal joy in a really long time came from pretending to have a partner.

"I've heard rumors," Nate said.

"Such as?"

"That they've been successfully tapping into the superstring dimension lately. Taking prisoners."

I stopped, choking Jethro, who whined again.

Nate took the leash in one hand and my arm in the other. My arm tingled where he held it. We walked and I tried not to be too out-of-proportion happy.

"I think this woman at work might be fooling around with that," I said. Then I noticed we'd walked almost to Sibyl's street. "She lives on Rusfield."

"No black magic there," Nate said.

Maybe Rhianna was the witch.

"Hungry?" Nate asked.

We had stopped for traffic at the corner where this little Italian place had been forever. It's always crowded.

Nothing fancy, checked tablecloths and candles in Chianti bottles, but they have outside seating and there's a place to leash the dog.

"Sure," I said. My first date in forever.

We had wine with our Eggplant Parm. We shared because the servings are family style. We liked the same things in salad; both of us picked out the beets. Meanwhile, I warned my fluttering heart to chill. I tried to concentrate on the business at hand. It was hard.

"I really think she's a witch," I said. "Gram finally got through to me on a phone line—Gram is my contact to the ancestor dimension—and she said a witch is after me."

"Didn't she say that it wasn't Sibyl?"

I choked on a piece of feta. "How did you know that?"

"I heard her. We live on a power spot, Laura. I hear what you hear."

Why did I not know about these power spots?

"Need to know basis," Nate teased.

Okay, this was going from cozy to creepy way fast.

"What's a power spot? Oh my God, Octoberland is a power spot too! That's why you heard Sibyl. But what were you doing there?"

Nate looked abashed. "I've been worried about you."

When I just looked at him, he cleared his throat and set down his fork. "You're gypsy, right?" Nate's face reddened. It was considered a rude question these days.

"Yep," I said.

"And you read?"

He meant tarot. "Not for money," I said, wondering where he was going with this.

Nate didn't seem to hear my response. He heaved out a big gush of air, like he was clearing his lungs for the job to come. He studied me without saying anything.

I had the feeling he knew something. And I had to get it out of him. This time, Nate was the tarot I had to decipher.

He picked up his fork and looked at it. Then he put it down again.

"I'm your mentor," he said.

"What?"

He looked as pained as I felt as he explained. Turns out that this was *not* a date. It was *not* the start of something big and important. I was his student. He was supposed to help me access my inner seer, who, it turns out, has been a bit shy.

"When was this part of my power supposed to manifest?"

I asked, determined not to cry.

"Twenty-five is the usual age," he said. I was 32.

"Are you a Seer?"

"An elder." He didn't look that old.

"You are not! My Mom's 82 and you look way younger than her."

"Humans now have the ability to live well into their hundreds," my geriatric date said.

"But what about your skin? And your agility? You don't even wear glasses, and everyone over 90 wears them!"

"Like you, I have a genetic stream that makes me different than most people."

"But you're not a gypsy," I said.

"Or a witch," he said, grinning. He could read my mind. The bastard.

"Not always," he said. "Just when your face telecasts your emotions."

I tried to shut down my features. My mind raced furiously to some sort of finish line. Part of me had known a lot of this for a long time. The part of me that Gram had been pushing me to access. My intuition. It told me then

that everything Nate said was true. It told me that May-October romances could work, too.

We looked at each other and smiled. Jethro whined from his side of the wrought iron gate. We paid the bill and went home.

I still didn't know who the witch was, but tomorrow was another day.

"Put Ann's light in your purse before work in the morning," Nate said, right after he kissed me. His lips didn't feel old.

\*\*

The next day, with both Sibyl and Ricky out of the office, I was the person closest to the power source, the corner office. I ignored Rhianna, not telling her anything at all about the forward motion of Mayville. Not that she asked. We kept clear of each other, which was fine by me.

It was great to have the vast company resources at my beck and call.

No more looking for competent tech guys right out of school willing to work cheap. I had a whole IT department at my disposal.

I was working with a solutions developer who had some great input for Mayville website.

"I'll just run this past Rhianna," he said.

"No," I said. "Rhianna's off Mayville."

\*\*

"You scheming little bitch!" Rhianna roared into my office. Ricky and Sibyl walked in behind her.

They took the two chairs and let Rhianna's tirade run its course. When it was over, Ricky said "Meow, you girls sure can scream."

He looked at Rhianna with something like admiration.

This made me sick. Why was he letting her attack me like that? Why was he avoiding looking into my eyes?

"I wasn't screaming Ricky, that was all Rhianna."

When he finally looked at me, his face was perfectly blank.

"Hello, Laura," he said. I felt a chill run down my back right out through my shoes and into the floor. Sibyl

had a smirk on her face. She was right back next to Ricky, where she'd always been.

"I'm sorry for cutting you out of Mayville, Rhianna," I got up out of my desk chair and went over to my file cabinet, looking through files just for something to do. "But you have to admit that you were against the whole project. You've done nothing but put roadblocks up ever since I tried to launch. Right, Sibyl?"

"Roadblocks! I don't believe your nerve..."

"I agree with Rhianna, Laura. That was a low blow. Even for you." Sibyl said.

"How long have you been with this company?" Rhianna ranted. "Two months? I've been here for ten years. I've put together more deals for Ricky than you've read about in your stupid tech reports. And on she went. She didn't bother to accept my apology.

"Why did you lie to me, Laura?" Sibyl said.

Now I was confused. I hadn't lied to anyone. Had I? About what?

"You told me Ricky gave you the green light on Mayville and that is simply not true."

"I authorized the brochure mailing, but that was all, Laura," Ricky said.

"How did I get this wrong?" I was truly stumped.

"Ricky, didn't you say we'd make a great team? And you gave me the list of contractors...told me to contact IT..." I was pulling random files from the drawer, holding them up like they were evidence of my rightness.

He sighed. It scared me.

"I did discuss Mayville with you, Laura. But in my experience these things are always better run by committee than individuals. I'm sorry if I gave you any other impression."

Now I was mortified in addition to being confused. From my new perspective, it did seem crazy that Ricky would trust me with complete control of such a project. My knees felt weak and I turned back to my desk, but Rhianna had taken my seat.

Grandma put her arm around me then. Physical contact was rare, but instead of startling me, I felt the same comfort and warmth I always had known when she was alive and touching me. She whispered in my ear, "Then I'm sorry, too, but I have to resign."

As she whispered it into my ear, it came out my mouth. I recognized the action now. She'd done this before without the physical cues. And all at once I knew Ricky was the



witch. As soon as that thought settled into my brain, Grandma dissolved.

"Good riddance," Sibyl said.

"Can I have this office?" I heard Rhianna asking Ricky as I left the room.

\*\*

I headed straight to Mom's apartment.

"It's time," I told her. She nodded. Her bag was already packed next to the door.

As we headed down the hall toward the dining room, I pulled Ann's flashlight out of my purse. "Do you know how to use this thing?" I asked Mom.

"I think you just shine it," she said.

Part of me figured Ricky had already revoked my access key, but when I tried it, it worked. Mom and I walked into the central space Ricky had stood in when he started the holograms. I turned on Ann's light and they were all there. Hundreds of ghosts, held speechlessly captive by Ricky, were talking to me all at once. Mom had been right all along. Ricky was a jailer.

I slowly swung the beam over the ghosts, who started walking outside the force field that had held them captive to Ricky's whim. Daddy was first at our side.

"You did good little girl," he told me, looking right into the beam of Ann's light as he kissed me and Mom and dissolved back into the ancestor dimension.

It took a little time for every ghost to get the required hit of direct beam to the eyes, but eventually they all dissolved. None of Ricky's fancy monitoring equipment had sensed a damn thing. I put Ann's light back into my purse. Whatever she'd done, I knew her future would be secure.

"Let's go home," I said to Mom.

We almost made it out of the building before Ricky stopped us.

"Sorry about that," he said, looking at me. "I've already wired your bank a severance check. You did good work here."

It took a split second for me to figure out that he had no idea I'd released the ghosts. All at once I understood why he hired me. I had just been a pawn to get Sibyl back under his thumb. Once that happened, he didn't need me anymore.

"It's been a great experience," I said, playing along. I just wanted to get Mom home and ask Nate how we could break the State Street purchase agreement.

"I understand why you feel you need to leave," he said to Mom.

"Thanks for everything," Mom said, pressing his hand. She should be on Broadway.

\*\*

As it turned out, we had no problem breaking the lease with Ricky. Nate has ties to Ghost Protection Central. I'd never heard of them, but they've been terminating unlawful access to power spots for over a hundred years. Without a whisper of protest from Ricky, the deed was back in Mom's name within 24 hours of her release from Octoberland.

Mom's house is gone, and so is the \$2 million Ricky paid her for it, but because she's a gypsy born and bred, she got to keep the property, and my severance pay helped her build a cute little cottage where she makes a nice little living reading tea leaves.

Due to her collaboration with Gram on the dimension seeking light, Ann got a spot in one of the best university science programs in the country.

As for me, once my seer skills kicked in, I got a great position at Ghost Protection Central. It's not a high visibility job, but the hours are great and I get to see all my dead relatives on a more or less regular basis, since they help me with my work.

Nate's still my mentor; he's also my boss. I'm still not great at manipulating time, but I'm getting there. I work downstairs now, closer to the power source. I use my cards and my contacts in the ancestor dimension to track gypsies who went underground when they were burned out of their houses. Then I convince them to take their power back.

Yesterday I was trying to figure out how to persuade Nate that we were made for each other, damn the age difference. Just for the heck of it, I turned over the top card of my tarot deck. The World glimmered. I took this as a very good sign.