

## OLD SOULS

by Fonda Lee

The fortune teller's nose is speckled with moles. A tie-dyed scarf is wrapped over her scraggly blonde dreadlocks. She takes my left hand and turns it palm upward, tracing its lines with glittery purple fingernails.

“Ahhhh. Hmmm. Yes.”

She draws a lungful of incense-thick air and closes her eyes, tilting her head back as if ascending to a higher level of perception. I study her face and focus on the fleshy touch of her hand on mine.

*A grave robber glances left and right into the darkness before snatching at a glint of gold.*

*A carnival ringmaster with a waxed mustache spreads his arms to the crowd.*

*A man in a pinstripe suit stands at the docks and lights a cigarette, watching silently as casks are unloaded.*

“I can see,” the fortune teller says in a breathy voice, “you have a long life ahead of you. There is a man with you, a handsome man. Your husband? Yes! You have children too —”

I pull my hand away. The metal chair scrapes back loudly as I stand.

“What are you doing? The reading isn't finished!”

“Yes, it is.” I'm furious at myself. What would compel me to stop in front of a cheap street sign with PSYCHIC in big curly silver letters? To take a flight of stairs down to a cramped basement and shell out twenty dollars for nothing?

Desperation.

I sling my messenger bag over my shoulder. “You aren’t psychic,” I snap. “You’re a fraud. You profit from dishonesty. You always have.”

She stares at me, mouth agape. Her face reddens, darkening her moles. “Who do you think you are? *You’re* the one who came to *me*! No one asked you to come. Get out of here, bitch!”

I don’t need further encouragement. I barge through the curtain of black and white beads, past a woman in a long white coat and sunglasses sitting in what passes as the waiting room, and nearly knock over a lava lamp on my way out the door.

Back out on the sidewalk, I pause, blinking back the prickle of angry tears, the weight of disappointment so heavy it seems as if it’ll push me through the damp concrete. I zip up my jacket, debating whether to go back to the campus or to skip my last lecture of the day and return to my apartment. My roommate will be gone for the rest of the afternoon, and I’m in no mood to sit through Medieval European History. I start down the sidewalk toward home, arms hugged around myself.

“Old soul,” a voice calls from the stairwell. “Wait.”

It’s the woman in the white coat, the one who was sitting in the fortune teller’s office. She follows me with quick strides until she reaches me. Her hand shoots out and catches me by the arm.

“You see the past, don’t you? Yours and others.” Her words carry a faint tremor of excitement. She pushes her sunglasses onto the top of her head, pinning me with her gaze.

For a motionless second, I stare at her face, into dark, ancient eyes. Then I look down at the pale hand on my arm, and a shudder of astonishment goes through me. We’re close, touching, but nothing happens, the way it does with other people. No images unspool in my mind like a surreal art house video. She’s the person standing in front of me, and no one else. It makes her seem unreal. An illusion of a person. Either I can’t read her or there is nothing to read. No past. No other lives besides this one.

I jerk back. My voice comes out high. “Who are you?”

She gives me a small, satisfied smile. “I am one of the Ageless. And I’ve been searching for someone like you.”

#

We walk into the nearest Starbucks. This being Seattle, there’s one less than a hundred feet away. She buys a caramel mocha for me and green tea for herself. She tells me her name is Pearl. She’s been visiting every self-proclaimed psychic in the city, hoping to find someone like me — someone who can see past lives without trying to, the way artists see color or perfumers detect scents.

“Most psychics are frauds,” she explains with an off-handed shrug as we bring our drinks to an empty table, “but once in a while, I find someone who can make reasonable predictions of the future by seeing the past, the way you do.” She glances at me. “It’s a rare ability.”

Not one I’m thrilled to have. I study my mocha. “Do you have it?”

She leans toward me slightly. “No. I don’t have your clear sight. I can only sense things about people, including those who can see better than I can.”

“Who—*what* are you?”

She takes a long sip of her tea. “Death and rebirth, death and rebirth. So it goes for everyone, except the Ageless. I have had no other life but this one. I will have no other after it.”

I’m silent for a long, baffled moment. Everyone I’ve ever met has past incarnations. It would be hard to believe Pearl if I hadn’t seen it—or rather, *not* seen it—for myself. I study her face. She has smooth Asian features that make it hard to judge if she’s twenty-five or forty.

“How old are you?”

She crosses her legs, resting her chin on her hand. Her gaze grows distant. “Five hundred

and thirty-some is as far back as I can remember. I've lost the exact count."

I suck in a breath. I imagine what it must be like to live for so many years without dying, to have the gift of so much time. As my eyes widen with awe, Pearl's mouth tightens. "Trust me," she says, "a life as long as mine isn't something to envy."

"But you must have been through incredible times, seen incredible things."

A shadow crosses her face. "What I've seen is those I love die, while I live on, never changing."

I hadn't thought of it that way. An awkward pause rests between us. Quietly, I ask, "Are there others like you?"

"A few." She doesn't say more. "Enough about me. You must be wondering why I want to talk to you." Her lips curve in a small smile that is beautiful but cool, like the smile on a marble bust. "I think we can help each other. You are searching for something, just as I am. Tell me, what are you searching for?"

I lower my gaze. Customers bustle around us as the baristas call out orders. I'm oddly unsurprised to be sitting in a coffee shop having this unbelievable conversation with a woman even more unusual than myself. Still, I hesitate. I tried to talk about this to my parents when I was ten years old. They put me in therapy until I said what the therapist wanted to hear and was proclaimed "better."

My voice falls to a whisper. "I want to know how to break the pattern."

#

Everyone has a pattern. A template. No matter how many wildly different lives you've lived, there is always something constant. Some people are always artistic. Some have ill-fated love lives. Some are always born in a certain place. The fortune teller has been a conniving cheat

in every one of her incarnations.

I've had six lives. Seven counting this one.

The first one is as indistinct as a preschool memory. I was named Cael. I lived in a family of six and spent many a day fishing along the banks of the Tyras River, tying knots with my uncle, the sun warm on my back. I was thirteen or fourteen when Scythian raiders rode into my village. I ran out to fight and remember only the speed of the horseman, his tapered metal helmet, and the arc of his battle axe. It was terrifying, but the end was quick.

I became Hassad, the rich and spoiled youngest son of an Arab sheik. I owned a beautiful falcon that I raised by hand. It sat on my arm when I rode. I remember the smell of mint and thyme mixing with the chatter of my father's wives in the mornings. On my twentieth birthday, I went hunting with my brother and was mauled by a leopard. I hung on for five days before blood loss and infection finished me off.

As Marie Rousseau, I was a midwife-in-training in the Languedoc region. In the foothills near my home there were groves of olives, and in early summer, purple lavender would bloom amid the sun-bleached wild grasses. I made a fatal mistake when I provided herbs to induce a friend's abortion. Her husband accused both of us of witchcraft — and that's why today even birthday candles set my nerves on edge and the sight of a campfire reduces me to a boneless heap of terror.

My soul fled to water. I was Yamada Hasashi, the eldest son of a fisherman in the Kyoto prefecture. I felt the salt wind in my face every day, and grew up on a simple but satisfying routine of daily hard work. Then the daimyo drafted all the men of our town, including my father, leaving me to feed my mother and younger siblings. I took my father's boat out in stormy weather. When I was thrown overboard, I knocked my head on the prow of the boat before going

under.

I've pegged my fifth life, as Sikni, down to the 1770s. I was a member of the Yakama tribe in the Northwest plateau. I listened to grandmother's stories of Coyote the trickster around the lodge fire, and I delighted in the softness of my favorite buckskin dress, the one with blue and yellow beads. I was fifteen years old and the medicine woman's apprentice when I succumbed to smallpox.

Then I was born as Andrew Reed. I traveled one hundred and eighty-some years but only a few miles between being Sikni and Andrew. I lived and went to high school in the town of Yakima, Washington. I ran track, made mixed tapes, got to second base with my girlfriend at the drive-in showing of Mad Max. Two months before graduation, she and I were at a 7-Eleven when it was held up. Someone else in the store pulled a gun on the robber. He freaked out and started shooting. I took a bullet through the neck.

I've ranged across the world and over thousands of years. I've skipped across race and gender and vocation. There's only one thing that connects my lives: how I die.

Short lives, tragic deaths. That's my pattern. My ages of death are like a lottery number when recited: 14, 20, 19, 16, 15, 18. I've never made it past the age of twenty.

This time around, my name is Claire Leung-Hartley. Yesterday was my twentieth birthday.

#

"I can help you," Pearl says.

"You can?" I lean forward. The paper cup trembles in my hands as I set it down.

"The Ageless know things. We ride the long journey of history. You mortals merely hop in and out."

My voice falls. I feel heavy from having shared so much of myself. “I don’t want to keep dying young. I think it would be easier if I was like everyone else and didn’t remember it at all. I don’t know why I’m different.”

Maybe whatever process erases past life memory randomly glitched when it got to me. But the truth is, I think there *must* be a reason why I can remember all my lives and deaths. Maybe it’s so I can finally find a way to escape my fate. Maybe Pearl is part of the reason.

“Tell me,” I plead. “How do I break the pattern?”

“Help me, and I will help you,” she says. “I am searching for someone. The soul of a man I knew long ago. I promised him I would find him again, no matter when or where it was.” She smiles a slow, sad smile. “He lives somewhere in this city. I can feel it. Please help me find him.”

I consider what she’s asking. It doesn’t make sense. “This person you’re looking for — he might be anyone now. He might be an old woman or just a baby. Unless he’s like me, he won’t remember you.”

“Love never dies.” Sitting across from me, her slim, pale hands clasped around her tea cup, she still seems unreal to me. Her dark hair spills over the shoulders of her white coat. Her eyes are bottomlessly old, as if the blackness of her pupils are windows into the universe, stretching back and back and back. How long has she been searching?

“I promised to find him,” she says. “I have all the time in the world. When we meet, he’ll remember me, I’m sure of it.” She sounds absolutely certain, as if she’s done this before. Maybe she has.

I used to want to search out my old families. Andrew’s parents; they would be very old now, if they were still alive. Sitki’s tribe members. I thought about visiting Japan to see if anyone

with the family name of Yamada still lived in the fishing village. A great-great nephew or niece of mine perhaps. But even though I wanted to do those things, something held me back. Not just the logistical difficulties, but fear. Fear of reality and memory colliding. Of the past overwhelming the present.

I looked up Jeanne, my old girlfriend — Andrew’s girlfriend — on Facebook. She lives in Boise now and is married with three grown kids who are older than me. It was strange to look at her picture. It was her, but it wasn’t. Reality didn’t match the memories I had of her, memories clouded by a teenage boy’s lust. She used to have long hair the color of autumn. Full lips. Devastating eyes.

But that life, like the others, is gone now. Snatched from me before I was done with them. I can’t have them back. What good would it do for Jeanne to have some college-aged girl show up at her door, claiming to be the reincarnation of her murdered boyfriend from high school?

This life is what I have now. And Pearl is the first person I’ve ever met who might know how I can keep on living.

“I would like to help,” I say slowly, “but there are millions of people in the city. How can I possibly find one person? Maybe you have all the time in the world, but —”

*But I don’t.* I am on borrowed time.

“I will tell you how to recognize him.” She leans forward. “Do you agree to try?”

#

I arrange to volunteer part-time at the Veterans Affairs office. I figure it’s my best chance of coming into contact with the person Pearl is looking for. Ethan is surprised and slightly peeved. Between our class schedules and this new commitment, we have less time together than he’d like.



“Where did this come from?” he asks, petulant. “I never knew you had the faintest interest in the military.”

“Andrew was thinking of enlisting.” I offer a shrug. “Maybe I’m just scratching an old itch.”

Ethan and I have been together for a year, but it feels longer than that. We’re serious about each other. I know I can trust Ethan. He’s the first person I’ve dated who I dared open up to. I told him almost everything. He didn’t call me crazy, and he didn’t run away.

“You’re serious,” he said. At the time, we were sitting on the sofa in his place and he was nuzzling my neck. There’s a small red birthmark on the left side of my neck and a much larger, port wine stain on the right side, behind my ear. Usually, my hair covers the bigger blemish. Ethan calls the small birthmark my ‘vampire bite’ as he pretends to be the vampire. That night, after we’d been together for almost six months, I was feeling reckless. Reckless and vulnerable. “It’s not a bite,” I said. “It’s a bullet hole.” I showed him the other side — the exit wound. “Sometimes, when you die tragically in a past life, its Kegan stays on you.”

“You really think you were shot through the neck in a past life?”

I curled in on myself a little. “I don’t think I was. I *know* I was.”

He came back a few days later, ashen-faced. “I looked up the *Yakima Herald Republic* in the library archive. It’s all there — reported the day after you said it happened.”

I could tell he was struggling to believe me. I said, “You’re thinking that doesn’t prove anything. I could have looked up the same article and made up a story to match what’s in the newspaper.”

“What car was Andrew — were you — driving?”

“A 1969 Pontiac GTO,” I said without hesitation. I loved that car.

“What was the mascot of your high school?”

“The Pirates.”

He sat down next to me, searching me with his eyes. “Either you’re pulling a detailed, elaborate hoax on me for no apparent reason or you’re telling the truth.” He touched the birthmark on my neck with the tips of his fingers. “As crazy as this is, I believe you.”

I hugged him then, and I cried a little. He wanted to know more about what I remembered, not just about Andrew’s life but the other ones too. I was still afraid to tell him too much, afraid of driving him away, even though I knew he was drawn to the unknown instead of repelled by it.

Ethan has been a medieval alchemist, a native Peruvian river guide, and a university chaplain, but my favorite of his past incarnations is Moloni, the African tribal wisewoman, whose deep well of wisdom and compassion I sometimes see reflected in Ethan’s cornflower blue eyes. I think seeing her in him gave me the courage to trust him. Ethan is a seeker, driven by a desire to know more of the world, especially that which can’t be seen. It’s why he’s majoring in astronomy, which he admits is the “dumbest thing ever as far as job prospects go.” It’s why I’m falling in love with him.

I trust Ethan more than anyone in the world, but I don’t tell him about Pearl or why I’m really volunteering at the VA office. I want to, but even he won’t understand why I’m spending time on a gamble with such long odds. The closer Ethan and I get to each other, the more committed we become, the more anxious I feel. My boyfriend might be convinced of the existence of immortal souls and multiple lives, but he is too much of an optimist to believe in tragic fate. He sees the future unwinding before us; I see a brick wall, one whose distance I can’t judge because I can’t tell how fast we’re moving toward it.

“I love you,” he said to me, the night of my birthday. We lay tangled together in the

sheets, my head on his chest. I felt his words shift the weight of him beneath me.

I kissed his shoulder. I wanted to cry. “I’ve never grown up. I’ve never been married or had kids or been old.”

“Me neither.”

“Yes, you have,” I insisted. “You just don’t remember.”

“Then, we might as well be even.”

I was annoyed at him. “You don’t understand. I have a short expiry date.”

“That’s ridiculous. I admit I don’t understand it, but I don’t think you do either. Maybe you only remember lives that ended badly and you’ve had plenty of others that were just fine. Also, people died younger back then, from war and disease and accidents. You shouldn’t assume—” He pushed out from under me and propped himself up on one elbow. “Wait, is this why you take those streetfighting lessons? And why you carry a switchblade and hand sanitizer with you *everywhere*? And don’t drive a car? Because you’re afraid death is waiting for you around every corner?”

I lay still and silent, hands fisted close to my body. I wanted to tell Ethan he would be more afraid of violent death if he’d been through more of them. *Did you know that when you burn to death, you actually bleed? You bleed a lot. You would think the blood would steam off or something, but it doesn’t. It drips and hisses in the flames.*

I didn’t say that. I said, “Let’s not talk about this right now.”

I turned over and pulled up the covers. After a while, he sighed and put his arms around me. He fell asleep as I lay awake. But he hasn’t said it again. He hasn’t said he loves me.

#

My volunteer work in the VA office starts out as filing and photocopying, but a week

later I catch a break. The receptionist is diagnosed with mono and doesn't know how long she'll be out sick. I offer myself as a fill-in, and soon, I'm sitting at the front desk, greeting everyone who comes in. I see plenty of soldiers and their family members when they come in to apply for benefits. I read each of them as carefully as I can, shaking everyone's hand to get a stronger impression, taking my time, making small talk as I check them in. They think I'm friendly and always willing to chat. A few of the younger vets get flirty and ask for my number. I feel awkward having to disappoint them.

If I was looking to score a date, I'd consider this time well spent, but for my purposes and Pearl's, it's a bust so far. Several of the people I meet have a pattern of military service in their prior incarnations, but I don't find anyone who matches the description Pearl gave me. I've never actively tried to search people's pasts the way I'm trying now, and after my shifts I leave the office with a dull headache. I take the bus home in the spitting rain, only to crack open my textbooks; the dense paragraphs swim before my eyes as I struggle to study for midterms.

One night, as I am about to fall asleep in the middle of a page about Islamic relations with the Byzantine Empire, I think: *This is so useless*. Both the searching and the studying.

I look at my phone; it's almost midnight. I pull up the number Pearl gave me. "Call me when you find him," she'd said, "but only when you find him." I consider phoning now to tell her I'm giving up. She ought to give up too, stop longing for someone who's gone on to another life. Maybe it's not such a great idea for me to string her hope out like this anyway. Even if I find this person, Pearl probably can't be a part of his or her life anymore, just like I can't go back to Jeanne or any of my past families. My finger hovers over the phone screen. *Move on*, I'll say when she picks up.

Then, I think about how ridiculous that sounds, coming from me. I need her help. I need

answers. If I were oblivious of my pattern, I could live each day in blissful ignorance, up until the final, shocking end. *Would that be better?* Instead, I'm as burdened and captive to my memories as she is. She's not going to give up. Neither will I.

I close my book and rest my head on top of my arms, sniffing back tears of fatigue and hopelessness. Kelly is up late too, working on a lab report that's due. "Claire bear?" she says. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I say unconvincingly. My roommate's pattern is enviably simple. She can't stay away from the ocean. She's been a Micronesian sailor, a Venetian naval officer, a U-boat engineer, and a Makah whale hunter. Now she's studying to be a marine biologist. She's drowned twice, but she doesn't remember it, and it doesn't deter her. Drowning isn't the worst way to go, relatively speaking.

She comes over and gives me a hug. "Is something wrong? Is it Ethan?"

"No," I say, "Well, not exactly." Maybe something *is* wrong. I wonder if he's pulling away from me a little. Last week, he asked me to come with him to visit his family over Thanksgiving, and when I hemmed and hawed, I think he took it as a rejection. He can sense there's something I'm not telling him.

"You should go," says Kelly. "I think he really wants you to meet his family. He's mad about you, can't you tell? Unless—you're not really into him?"

I try to nod and shake my head at the same time. "It's not that. I mean, yes, I am into him. I'm just, I don't know—worried."

"You should do it," she says again. "You've got to take a chance on this really working out. Live a little, you know?"

#

Ethan's parents live in Tacoma, but his dad is a travel writer and they spend months in exotic places like Morocco and Tibet. "Claire has studied Buddhism," Ethan volunteers while setting the table, which sets me up for a long period of listening to Ethan's dad talk about the devotion of the Tibetan monks and how their harmonious culture is being destroyed.

It's true, there was a time I devoured everything I could read about reincarnation. I wondered if I quit school, became a vegan, and took up a life of austerity and meditation whether I could achieve nirvana. But I don't want to *stop* being reborn, and I'm not seeking enlightenment. I just want to stop having horrible deaths at a young age, which seems like a modest goal in comparison. I considered the possibility that I have some karmic debt to pay, but *what?* I don't believe I've been a bad person in any of my lives, not bad enough to deserve what I've gotten. I mean, I donate to the Salvation Army. I give my seat to old people on the bus. I recycle.

Ethan's mom lights up when I ask for a tour of her garden. She isn't the first person I've met who's been a farmer several times: twice in China, once in Russia, and once in Ireland, from what I can see. Ethan's dad has been a Mongolian nomad, a Bedouin shepherd, and a Southeast Asian trader whose geography and ethnicity I can't quite place at first glance, so it doesn't surprise me when his wife laments they haven't been home enough to finish raising the vegetable beds. Ethan's older brother, Kegan, shows up just before dinner. He's as handsome as Ethan, but he's quieter and smiles less. He seems to be five or six years older than Ethan, instead of only three. When Ethan introduces us, I say, "I'm really glad to finally meet you," because it's obvious Ethan looks up to his brother. "Mark's the go-getter," I've heard him say before.

"Nice to meet you, Claire." Kegan shakes my hand.

*A general sits atop his war stallion in flared helmet and crimson armor, watching the*

*flames below.*

*A guerrilla fighter rests his rifle atop his knees as he empties water from his boots.*

*A woman in a dark suit walks into the room and sits down across from a man handcuffed to his chair.*

“Mark just got back from Egypt,” Ethan’s mom says proudly. “He was on a six-week exchange program with the State Department.”

We sit down for dinner. My heart races. I barely hear the conversation around me.

Ethan’s mom passes me the mashed potatoes and asks Kegan, “How’s your Arabic, sweetheart?”

“Good enough.” Kegan is matter-of-fact; there’s no pride or modesty in his voice. He is too old to be twenty-three.

Ethan’s father leans toward me. “Mark wants to work for the CIA,” he explains. “I think he would’ve joined the military if it hadn’t been for his asthma. Michelle and I are staunch Democrats; we don’t even own any guns!” He shakes his head. “I don’t know where he gets it from.”

#

After dinner, I step outside onto the back porch under the pretense of phoning my parents. My fingers shake as I call the number. After three rings, I hear Pearl’s voice.

“You’ve found him?”

“Yes,” I whisper breathlessly. “You won’t believe this. He’s my boyfriend’s brother!” I want to laugh hysterically. I’ve been searching for months, and he’s been one degree away from me this whole time.

There is a long pause. “Tell me about him.”

“He’s twenty-three. Really handsome. Single, I think.” There hadn’t been any mention of a girlfriend over dinner. “He hasn’t been around lately because he was on an exchange trip, but it shouldn’t be hard to find a way to meet him now.”

I try to picture how it will go. Will he be drawn to her, the way she is to him? She *is* over five hundred years old—will that matter?

I promise to invite him to visit us, and then I can find a chance to introduce them.

“Thank you, Claire.” She sighs in relief. Then she hangs up.

#

Convincing Kegan to visit is easy. He hasn’t seen his brother’s place and is happy to spend the last day of the long weekend in the city with us. We drive up together on Saturday afternoon and arrive right around dinner time at the small house Ethan shares with two roommates. They are all out of town, so we have the place to ourselves. Ethan orders in pizza. *We’re here*, I text Pearl. *Would you like to meet him tomorrow?*

We sit on the sofa, watching the Seahawks game and eating pizza. I sit next to Ethan on one side of the sofa. Kegan takes the armchair. I study him. I am not completely comfortable with Kegan. He looks like Ethan, but he is not like him. Ethan searches for answers to the unknown; Kegan knows the answers. He sees the world in black and white, and there is a coldness, a ruthlessness that I sense in his prior selves. They are resolute people, but they are not nice.

It’s tempting to judge people based on who they were before, even though I often remind myself it’s unfair. My sweet roommate Kelly set enemy ships ablaze and ordered men hung. Ethan once stabbed another man in a drunken knife fight in the South American jungle. When I was Hassad, I owned so many slaves that it makes me squirm a little to think about it now. Our



lives are shaped by circumstances; we have patterns, but we do change. I haven't known Kegan long enough to see many details of his past, but I'm not sure I want to. He's Ethan's brother, and it's better I try to get to know him for who he is in this life.

I wonder again what his reaction will be to meeting Pearl. What if he doesn't feel any connection to her at all? Will she move on, or pine after him? I try to think of how to bring up my idea to invite her over. *So, I have a friend who would really like to meet you. Who is she? Oh, uh, she's a TA in one of my classes...*

Before I can formulate my suggestion, Kegan takes another slice of pizza and says, "So, how did you two get together?"

I glance at Ethan. "We met during freshman orientation," I say. "But we didn't start dating until after that camping trip."

Ethan picks up the thread. "I'd had my eye on Claire for weeks, and then I spied her sitting at the very back of the campfire, practically in the woods, all by herself."

"I'm scared of fire," I explain, embarrassed.

"So I moved my chair to sit next to her, and we stayed up talking after everyone else had gone to sleep and the fire had burned out."

Mark nods. He pops open a can of soda and says, dead sober, "I'm terrified of fire."

Ethan laughs. "You're not terrified of anything."

"I had nightmares as a kid," Kegan says. "You were too young to remember. I still have them sometimes—nightmares about burning to death."

I pull my legs up to my chest and hug them. "Me too."

"Claire says she's scared of fire because it's how she died in a past life. You think that's what happened to you too, macho man?" Ethan's voice is just a notch past teasing. He sounds a

little hurt that we are commiserating over a deep phobia his brother never bothered to share with him.

Mark looks at Ethan, then looks at me. He mutes the volume on the television. “Yes,” he says. “I could believe that. In my dream, there’s a woman who’s chasing me. It’s always the same woman. I don’t know why I’m trying to get away from her, but I am. I’m running or driving or riding a horse, always trying to get away, and in the end, I’m trapped by a fire. And I burn to death. And she watches me burn.”

We are both silent for a minute. Ethan is stunned, but not for the same reason I am. “That is so screwy, bro. Maybe it means you’re afraid of women.” He has a half-teasing smirk on his face, but neither Kegan nor I am smiling.

Mark shakes his head, his left eye squinting in annoyance at his little brother. “No, dipstick. It’s just *one* woman.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper. An iciness bathes me from head to toe. *What have I done?*

The living room window shatters inward.

#

I scream. All three of us leap off the sofa, scattering pizza and soda. A hulking figure steps through the window frame. Cold air sweeps into the room around his menacing shape. His combat boots crunch the broken glass against the hardwood floor. I can’t see his face; he’s wearing a black ski mask. All I can see is the barrel of the gun he is pointing at us.

“*Jesus,*” Ethan breathes. We are both too stunned to move, but Kegan scans the room for the nearest weapon. There’s nothing. He grabs the wooden chip bowl off the coffee table and hurls it at the intruder. The man ducks, raising his arm to avoid the flying object. Tortilla chips and salsa spray the wall. Kegan shoves his brother, and together, we run for the front door.

Ethan pulls the door open. A second masked man stands on the doorstep. He starts to bring up his own gun, but before he can aim it, Kegan tackles him. They slam into the door frame together. The man who came through the window shoves his bulk in front of me and Ethan, his pistol raised, his mouth open in a snarl.

“On your knees!” he shouts at us.

Ethan pulls me roughly behind him. “What do you want?” he shouts back. “You want money? The TV? Just take them!” His voice shakes. He is standing with his arms spread in front of me. I am terrified the man will shoot him.

Mark struggles with the shorter intruder. He has his hands clamped over the frame of the pistol, pushing the muzzle down toward the floor. The man’s right hand is trapped against his weapon, but he cocks his left fist and punches Kegan in the face. Kegan’s grip slides. The man yanks his gun free; he swings it up and cracks Kegan across the head. Kegan staggers and falls sideways, barely managing to put a hand out to catch himself. He tries to surge up; his eyes are wild and desperate. The butt of the pistol comes down on the back of his skull, and he collapses like a sack.

“No!” Ethan jerks toward his brother, but the hulking man shifts his gun to my temple.

“I said on your knees!” he yells at Ethan. “Or you pick which one we shoot first.”

Ethan goes colorless. His hand on my arm, he lowers himself to the floor. I kneel next to him. I can feel the pulse in his hand beating in rapid tempo against my own.

“What do you want?” he asks again, his voice low so it hides his fear. He looks at his prone brother and swallows hard.

“Dumb prick,” the short man exclaims. He shoves Kegan’s figure with his boot, then reaches his gloved fingers awkwardly into the eye hole of his mask, wiping his brow.

My heart is pounding so hard I think it might escape my body. This is it. This is the brutal end I've been expecting for years. I wonder how they will kill us and whether it will be fast. Though I am scared out of my mind, I'm more worried about Ethan and Kegan than I am about myself. I'm not surprised that I'm going to die. But they shouldn't have to; they shouldn't be sucked into the merciless magnetism of my pattern, ancillary tragedies to my own.

I have a switchblade in my pocket. Can I reach it? What can I possibly do against two men with guns?

"Which one of them is he?" the big man asks.

The two of them look from Ethan to Kegan and back again. Their eyes are like black pits in the slits of their masks. "I'm not sure," the short one replies. "Put them in the bedroom closet. She'll know when she gets here."

*She'll know.* These men work for Pearl. My insides turn over.

"What about the girl?"

"The girl too."

"Let her go," Ethan says. "Please, don't hurt her." I cringe at the pleading in his voice, though I know he is only trying to protect me. I want to berate him for ever having doubted my fatalism.

The big man pulls a roll of silver duct tape from his jacket and bends over Kegan, pulling his wrists together behind his back and taping them together tightly. When he's done, he winds duct tape around Kegan's ankles. Then he drags Kegan down the hallway, pulling him backwards by his armpits. Kegan's head lolls limply on his neck, the left side of his face swollen a reddish-purple.

Ethan trembles, enraged and helpless.

“Hands where I can see them, punk,” the short man says.

His accomplice returns. More duct tape for Ethan and me. My wrist bones rub together painfully as they’re bound. When the big man touches me, I get past-life glimpses: a mercenary soldier, a prison guard, an elephant poacher. I choke back a whimper. Suffering isn’t going to move him.

“Get up,” he orders.

They march the two of us into Ethan’s bedroom. The room is dark, and the shades are drawn. Ethan’s clothes and books have been thrown willy-nilly from the closet, which is now bare, except for Kegan, who is lying on its floor. Our captors back us into the closet beside him. “Sit down,” the big man orders. We do as he says.

They tape our ankles together and then stand back, looking down at us. Behind them, I can see the outlines of Ethan’s unmade bed, his duffel bag lying open on the floor, his stereo. The big man lights a cigarette. It dangles from fat, chapped lips set in the mouth hole of the ski mask. He checks his wristwatch.

The short one licks his lips nervously. “Who do you think these kids are? What would anyone want with them?”

“The hell should I know?” says the big man. “Maybe daddy pissed off the Mob? We’re being paid is all I care.”

Ethan tries to speak up. “There’s been a mistake,” he says. “You’ve got the wrong people. We’re not mixed up with the mafia. We don’t have any enemies. We’re just students. I’m telling you, you have the wrong people.”

The men ignore him. They close the closet, shutting us in the dark. Their footsteps move around, then leave the room. In the silence that follows, I pray for the sound of sirens, for the

police to surround the house and rescue us. It's possible one of the neighbors called 911, but I am not optimistic. The houses here are spaced far apart and full of student renters, all of them gone for the Thanksgiving break. No one knows what's happening to us.

"This is all my fault." I choke back silent tears. "Ethan, I'm sorry."

His shape slumps against the wall. "What for?"

"I should have told you, but I didn't think — I didn't imagine —" My throat is too small; the words come out in a squeaky rush, like water through a small spigot. I tell him about meeting Pearl, about agreeing to help her find someone she knew centuries ago. "I led her to us. To Kegan."

"To Kegan?" Ethan stiffens. "Why would anyone want to hurt Kegan?"

His brother stirs on the floor. A soft groan escapes him.

Ethan tries to shuffle closer to him. "Hey, it's me. You okay?"

Mark lifts his head off the ground, realizes he's tied up, and starts to freak out. "Let us out of here!" he screams, kicking at the door. "LET US OUT!"

The closet door opens. A silhouette stands over us. Even before the small desk lamp clicks on, I know who it is, and so, apparently, does Kegan. He jerks against the wall, a sheen of sweat breaking on his forehead.

"You." His voice is a rattle.

Pearl's bottomless eyes pass over me, then Ethan, before stopping on Kegan. "Hello, General Zhang." Her voice is silky soft, almost affectionate. "We meet again."

The big man beside her grumbles, "You promised us a lot of cash —"

"Finish the job," she replies shortly, "and you will be paid as we agreed."

The men depart. We are alone in the room with Pearl.

“I have no idea who you are, or what you want with me,” Kegan says. Though he’s scared, his voice is surprisingly strong. “But let my brother and his girlfriend go. If it’s me you want, just let them go.”

“Ahhh,” Pearl sighs. “So there is justice in the universe after all. I pleaded for my family, too. I pleaded for their lives. Then I pleaded for quick deaths. But you granted them neither.” Her face is a pitiless pale mask. Her voice takes on a slow, musing quality. “The Red Butcher, the Emperor’s most feared warlord. You were determined to make an example of Three Gates Valley, one so terrifying that no other prefectures would ever again consider rebellion.”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about, lady,” Ethan says. “You’re crazy.”

“Am I?” Pearl looks directly at me.

I shudder. How could I not have seen it before, her cold cruelty? “This is wrong. You can’t punish him for what happened to you hundreds of years ago. He doesn’t remember any of it. He’s not even the same person.”

“Isn’t he? How can you, of all people, say that?” She turns away from me and back to Kegan. “This young, handsome incarnation flatters you, General. But I can see you. Inside, you are still the monster who had my husband and his brothers torn apart by horses and their flesh fed to the dogs. You ordered my children to be thrown from the walls. And you lit fires that burned for five days and nights, until nothing was left of the town.” She crouches down smoothly to face him, her long white coat pooling around her. “No one survived. No one but me.”

The room chills from the ice of her whispered words. “There are consequences to making an enemy of an Ageless one. I swore to Heaven, to Zhurong, god of fire and vengeance, that I would hunt you down; I would make you pay back with your lives the ones you took from me.”

Mark is shaking his head emphatically. “I didn’t — I wouldn’t —”

Pearl stands up. The door opens and the big man walks in with a six-gallon jug. He bangs it impatiently against the wall, and it makes a hollow sound. That's when I notice the smell drifting in from the hallway. Kerosene.

Terror floods in. I shake in its grip like a marionette.

Mark is no better. In his saucer-wide eyes, I see that he knows this has happened before. How many times? Over how many lives has Pearl been exacting her vengeance? "Please," he begs, "please let them go."

Pearl gestures to me. "Take her outside." The big man picks me up, dumping me over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes. I can't resist. I can't do anything. Except start to sob.

Ethan loses his mind. He thrashes against his bonds. "What are you going to do? WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO TO HER? You can't leave us like this!" He tries to throw himself in the man's path, but the hulk steps over him. My vision blurs, bobs upside-down as I'm taken from the room.

"Goodbye, General," Pearl says. "We will meet again soon."

The man carries me outside and dumps me on the driveway. Ethan's howls are cut off as Pearl follows the men outside and slams the door behind her. I struggle to my knees, snot and tears smeared across my cheeks. Pearl has a gun in her hand. She rests it against my forehead.

"You tricked me," I scream. Rage boils up through my fear. "I thought you were searching for someone you loved. You said that love never dies!"

"I loved my poor, mortal family. Love *doesn't* die." She cocks the hammer. "Neither does hate."

I stare up at her. She is going to kill me, but in this instant, I pity her. She is the proof that people *need* to forget, to start over, to be given second, third, eighth chances. Or we might



become like her. Frozen by the worst of our memories. Imprisoned by histories we can't change and can't leave behind.

"You promised to help me." My voice is a cracked whisper now. "All this time, you were just using me."

"I *am* going to help you, Claire. I'm going to tell you how to break the pattern."

She pulls the trigger.

*Click.* The hammer falls on an empty chamber.

I blink, confused as to how I am still alive. "Untie her," Pearl orders. A minute later, the duct tape around my wrists and ankles rips loose, peeling a layer of skin off with it. Pearl lowers the gun.

"You were meant to die tonight, but I spared you. Now, I will tell you what the secret of the pattern is." She leans forward and whispers. "Choice."

Behind her, the short masked man lights a match and drops it. Fire encircles the house in an enormous whoosh of red heat.

My bladder gives out. Warmth spreads down the legs of my jeans.

"There is always a choice." The black chasms of her eyes are two pinpricks of reflected firelight. "Now run, Claire."

I scramble to my feet. And I run.

#

I run without regard for direction. I run over lawns, through shrubbery and around trees. My foot catches on a curb, and I gasp as I pitch forward into a garden bed. Whimpers clog my throat as I struggle to my feet and look over my shoulder.

The men are small figures now, climbing into a black van with tinted windows and a

missing license plate. One of them rolls down the passenger side window and yells at Pearl, who remains standing in front of the burning house. For a long moment, she doesn't move. The glow of the fire lights up the street and casts leaping shadows like hellish dancing puppets. Pearl takes two slow steps forward, a spot of white against a curtain of red, as if she intends to walk into the flames, to join everything she's lost.

Then she turns and walks calmly to the van. When she's inside, the van turns sharply and peels away.

I dig my hands into the dirt, so wet and cool. I remember what it was like in the fire. The intensity of the pain. Marie— *I* — screamed until my throat burned from the inside out.

I get up. And I run back toward the house.

My body wants to rebel. It cannot believe I am doing this; it wants to shut down in response to terror. *But Ethan is in there. And Kegan. How can I let them suffer the death I most fear?*

When I reach the house, I freeze in a final, stomach-churning moment of cowardice. Then I run to the door. I try to push it open, but it's stuck. Then I remember the broken window and run around to the side of the house. Smoke pours from the living room. I take a deep breath and clamber inside. There's glass on the floor; a shard of it jabs into my palm, but I barely feel it. I pull my sleeves over my hands and keep crawling. I can hear, through the crackle and roar of flames, the sound of screaming. Perhaps I'm imagining it or perhaps I'm screaming in my head.

I make it to the hallway and army crawl forward, elbow over elbow, my nose pressed close to the floor, sucking in short bursts of ashy air. The heat on my skin is like a hundred sunburns. I'm crying and ninety-nine percent sure I'm going to die, but I keep scrambling forward until I reach the closed bedroom door. The knob scalds my hand when I reach up to

twist it. I shove the door open and drop back down, coughing. “Ethan,” I try to call, but the smoke is too thick. Then I bump into a moving shape. A leg. I follow it up to a torso. Ethan twists in place. His frightened, bloodshot eyes meet mine and grow wide with relief and horror.

“Claire! What are you doing?” he gasps.

I pull the switchblade from my pocket and fumble it open. I start sawing at the duct tape around his wrists. My eyes and nose sting. Adrenaline pours through my system, and I fight to keep my hands steady. Ethan lies still, trying to help me as I keep cutting, inch by inch, until the tape tears free. He grabs the knife from me and hacks frantically at the tape binding his feet until he frees them. He scrambles away toward Kegan.

I am light-headed now. It is hard to breathe. The skin of my hands sizzle and blister. The world swims black and red. *Choice*, I think. And I remember.

#

I remember I grabbed the spade, the only weapon I could find, and followed Donnan.

I ran toward the wounded leopard, drawing it away from Jamal.

I pressed the satchel of herbs into Estelle’s desperate hands.

I saw the storm clouds, but I took the boat out; little Asuka was so hungry.

I dribbled water onto the pustule-speckled lips of Owhi, the chief’s son, as he lay dying.

I pushed Jeanne down to the ground as the bullets began to fly.

#

There is a cracking, splintering sound from somewhere overhead. Ethan is shouting my name, but it seems to be coming from very far away. A strange calm overtakes me.

My lives make sense now. Tragic death is not my pattern.

Sacrifice is my pattern.

*The secret is choice*, Pearl had said. She's right. Our patterns are the ones we choose, over and over again. I've never broken my pattern because I've always chosen as I'm choosing now.

Mark's face appears an inch in front of mine, distorted by the smoke. "*Get up.*" His voice is barely his own. He hauls hard on my arms. Ethan grabs me from the other side, urging my body across the ground. My hands and knees scabble across the burning floorboards of the hall. Then the two of them are lifting and thrusting me toward the window. It appears, a narrow portal ringed by fire, beckoning urgently.

And then I'm through it, staggering out of the flames. Cold air rushes into my scalded lungs. I stumble several more steps and drop to the ground, coughing, gasping, trembling. The cool grass presses against my raw skin; everything is a tear-stained blur. Kegan and Ethan collapse next to me, heaving for breath. Behind us, the house continues to burn, sending plumes of smoke into the night sky. The blare of sirens and the strobing of lights surround us as we cling to each other. Kegan's swollen eyes are haunted, and Ethan shakes uncontrollably. Their clothes and hair are blackened, their skin red and blistered, but they're alive. I'm alive.

All of us, alive. *We've been given another chance.*

There's always another chance.

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