

CLARITY



CLA

RITTY

KIM HARRINGTON

Point

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*To Mom and Dad,
for always believing in me.
Even when I didn't.*

ONE

“YOU DON’T WANT TO KILL ME,” I SAID.

“Of course I don’t, Clare. But I have to.”

If I wasn’t already bleeding, with the room tilting and swaying, I would have slapped myself. I never saw this coming. I had let my personal feelings cloud my judgment. And now I was looking down the barrel of a gun.

I never thought it would end like this, me on the hardwood floor in my house, propped up on my elbows, begging for my life. On my right was the crumpled body of a guy I hadn’t fully realized the depths of my feelings for until I saw the bullet rip into him.

I tried to use reason again. To buy myself just one more minute of life. “This isn’t you,” I said, pleading. “You’re not a murderer.”

“A couple weeks ago, I would’ve said the same thing. But you should know more than anyone how people surprise you. People can do things you never imagined they would. You think you know someone and then . . .”

My would-be killer shrugged and cocked the gun.

Then the world went black.

TWO

NINE DAYS EARLIER

“SHE’S A SUPER FREAK! SUPER FREAK! SHE’S SUPER-freaky, yow!”

Billy Rawlinson and Frankie Creedon popped up on the other side of the 7-Eleven aisle singing Rick James, their heads peeking over the cereal boxes like prairie dogs. I rolled my eyes, and they burst out laughing in that cackling, annoying way that two losers with low IQs do best. You’d think we were in elementary school by the way they teased me. But no, I was sixteen, and it was the summer before my junior year. Billy and Frankie had graduated from high school a month ago, but I still wasn’t free of them. They’d been teasing me since kindergarten, and they hadn’t broadened their repertoire much. I’d been serenaded by “Super Freak” lyrics over a dozen times.

I took the high road, ignored them, and brought my selections up to the counter. Unfortunately for all of us, they followed me.

“What are you buying, Clare?” Billy asked. “Candles? Crystals?”

Actually just a twenty-ounce Diet Coke and a package

of powdered donuts. The breakfast of champions. I kept my back turned and continued the silent treatment as I pulled a ten out of my shorts pocket and handed it to the cashier.

“Hey,” Frankie’s nasal voice implored. “We’re talking to you, freak.”

He poked me in the shoulder blade.

And that was his mistake.

I’m willing to overlook a stupid comment here and there. But poking me? Nuh-uh. I lifted my elbow up and brought it back hard into his gut.

Frankie let out an *oomph* as he doubled over.

I twirled around with a sweet-as-pie smile. “Oh no. Did you catch my elbow in your stomach while I was putting my change in my pocket? Sorry, Frankie. You should learn not to stand so close to people.”

Frankie was busy trying not to puke, but Billy narrowed his eyes at me and said, “You’ll regret that.”

I took my bag and left the store, head held high. This wasn’t the first time I’d had trouble like this, and it wouldn’t be the last.

I’ve had 666 scrawled across my locker at school. You’d think my given name was “Freak” by how often it was used in the halls. Snickers, whispers, and pointing fingers followed me into classrooms more times than I could count.

I’d done nothing to deserve this treatment. Contrary to popular belief, I was not a devil worshipper, nor a spawn of Satan.

But I *was* different.

And apparently different was bad.

In Eastport, a tourist town on Cape Cod, lives a family of freaks. My family. I'm a psychic. My brother's a medium. My mother's a telepath. Tourists love us. Townies scorn us.

My name is Clarity "Clare" Fern and my brother is Periwinkle "Perry" Fern. What were our parents thinking? Apparently where their next tab of acid was coming from. My mother's name is Starla, though Perry found her birth certificate one day and we discovered she was born "Mary." That find didn't go over well with her, and if we valued our lives we weren't going to share that tidbit with anyone else.

We live in a grand Victorian house in the busy section of town near the boardwalk. My parents bought it when they got married and left the "spiritualist community" they'd both grown up in. It's a lovely old house, with no permanent ghosts, and we use the first floor for our family business: readings. Not the bookstore kind.

Perry was waiting for me in the 7-Eleven parking lot, and as I slid into the passenger seat, I breathed a sigh of relief that his car was still idling. It was an eight-year-old black Civic with 120,000 miles on it. Perry wanted a new car, but Mom would never agree to that while this one worked fine. So he started it each morning hoping for the *click-click-click*, but the little metal box refused to die.

I checked the mirror to make sure the two stooges weren't following us in their pickup as Perry turned onto the main drag.

“Any trouble in there?” Perry asked. “I saw dumb and dumber walk in.”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” I said, and Perry smiled.

You’d never know we’re brother and sister. I share my mother’s red hair, freckles, and petite frame, while Perry has black hair and creamy skin and stands just over six feet tall. Though he does have the same sky blue eyes as Mom and me, plus a small scar in his right eyebrow for a dash of mystery. This combination is evidently a recipe for the loosening of morals in almost all girls.

Perry spends most of his time chasing girls and hooking up. Living in a tourist town is perfect for him. Every week a fresh crop of chicks rolls in, and one week later they roll out. He’s eighteen and headed for college in the fall. I pity those poor women in Boston.

Mom let it slip once that he looks just like our father, though we wouldn’t remember. Dad’s been gone without a word for fifteen years. Getting Mom to say any more about him would require torture, so we leave it at that. Perry and I are convinced that good ol’ Dad left us and Mom is still too in love with him to say anything bad, so she says nothing at all.

Perry flicked on the blinker and turned onto a side road, deftly avoiding the bumper-to-bumper parking lot that is Route 28. Summer traffic is pretty heavy through Hyannis and Yarmouth, but not as bad when you get to Eastport, mainly because of Rigsdale Road. Named after a pilgrim (because if we love one thing on the Cape, it’s our pilgrims),

Rigsdale is a secondary road that runs parallel to Route 28 and has just as many shops, restaurants, and motels.

We took a right onto Elm and a quick left onto Rigsdale and had to immediately stop. Traffic.

I sighed and looked at my watch. Nine fifty-five a.m. We open at ten, and since it was July Fourth weekend, we were booked for readings all morning and would be busy with drop-ins all afternoon. I shouldn't have asked Perry to drive me to the store for a donut fix. Mom would not be happy with me. For a supposed free-spirited hippie, she goes psychotic over tardiness.

Two minutes later, we hadn't moved an inch.

Perry groaned. "What's going on up there?"

I rolled down the window and stuck my head out like a dog. A few hundred feet down the road there were no cars at all. What was going on? An accident? I pulled my head back in before the humidity suffocated me, and turned the AC up.

"No clue," I said.

Finally a police cruiser backed up into the road ahead. It had pulled out of the King's Courtyard Motel, which housed neither a king nor a courtyard, but did have cheesy Tudor styling in the lobby and charged only \$79 per night. The cruiser blocked the road to let an ambulance and three more cruisers leave. Now I was really curious. I didn't know our town *had* four cruisers.

An ambulance alone wouldn't have piqued my attention. Heart attacks and drug overdoses happen every summer. But this seemed a little more serious.

Excitement? In Eastport? Nay! But I had no time to snoop around Nancy Drew style. The cars were finally moving and we were officially late.

“Mom’s going to kill me,” I said, only half kidding.

“Yeah,” Perry muttered absentmindedly, staring out the window as we passed the motel.

I’d expected him to crack some joke to make me feel better about my impending doom, but instead he turned up the radio. It worked just as well, though. The loud music drowned out my thoughts and before I knew it we were in the driveway. Our Victorian is painted a color I like to call “haunted-house lavender.” Surrounded by an antique cast-iron gate, the house has high, arched windows; gables; gingerbread porch trim; and one tower. The sign on the front gate says READINGS BY THE FERN FAMILY.

I dashed into the empty foyer, aka waiting room, and dropped my bag of breakfast on the floor. Mom must have started the reading without us. I opened the door to the living room, aka reading room, which is long and narrow with tall ceilings and decorative moldings on the walls. The windows are covered with thick red velvet drapes. One large candle was centered on the table and smaller votives were lit on the mantle above the fireplace.

My mother immediately looked at me as if I had spit on the floor.

“Nice of you to join us,” she said.

“Sorry we’re late.” Perry swooped in and flashed a bright smile.

I shook the hands of the fiftysomething couple sitting on

the other side of our long mahogany table. The wife was tall and thin, and wore a yellow sundress and a big straw hat. Her husband wore the tourist tuxedo: khaki shorts and a flowered silk shirt.

Rather than sit next to my mother so she was flanked by her children (as she prefers), I sat next to Perry. Mom would have to get through him to get to me. He gave me a quick pat on the shoulder. That's what Perry is best at: calming people down and making them feel like everything's going to be all right.

Mom sighed and clasped her hands. "Due to the interruption, I'm going to need another minute to get into the meditation zone."

She didn't need a minute. And she didn't need the lights dimmed and the candles lit and the chamber music playing quietly and all the other crap. Her gift worked whenever she wanted it to, she just had to listen. But the customers expected the hoopla and wanted the hoopla, so hoopla they got.

My mother's gift is the most dependable of all of ours. She doesn't hear voices all the time, thankfully, since that would probably drive her insane. But she merely has to focus her energy on another person in close range and she can hear their thoughts. The limitation is that she only knows what they are thinking right at that moment. So if they wanted to hide something, it was pretty easy. Many times, if I had a problem at school I didn't want to talk about and I thought Mom might be butting into my thoughts, I instead reflected

on gross things like a dirty ashtray filled with cigarettes or scenes from my favorite horror movies. She'd leave me alone after that.

Mom cleared her throat and opened her eyes. "Mr. Bingham, you're a nonbeliever. You think we're frauds."

Mr. Bingham nodded. "You're right, but that doesn't prove anything. I'm sure eighty percent of the people who walk through that door think you're frauds. Especially the men who get dragged in here by their wives. Men tend to be more . . . rational."

Perry gave my knee the claw under the table, a warning telling me not to give this jerk the claw on his face.

Mom then turned to the wife. "Mrs. Bingham, you're a believer, but you're worried about what we'll say. You're wondering what we'd do if we saw that you were going to die soon. You're wondering if we'd tell you."

Mrs. Bingham gasped. "That's exactly what I was thinking!"

A groan came out of Mr. Rational. "Good guess. Again, probably eighty percent of the people who come in here wonder that."

I piped up, "Did you know that ninety-eight percent of statistics are made up on the spot?"

Perry kicked me under the table.

Mom tossed me a look that could freeze fire. "You're right, Mr. Bingham. That is the most common question we get. The truth is, we'd never tell you you're going to die because, frankly, we can't see the future."

“Bang! So you admit it!” He nearly jumped out of his chair in excitement. You’d think he just figured out how to split the atom.

“You misunderstand, Mr. Bingham,” Perry said in his soothing, deep voice. “We never claimed to see the future. Our readings aren’t like that.”

“Then what do you do?” Mrs. Bingham asked.

“The three of us work in tandem on your reading,” Mom explained. “I’m a telepath, meaning I can hear your thoughts. My daughter is a psychic and receives visions from touching objects you own. My son is a medium and if any spirits wish to speak to you, he can hear and sometimes see them. Our readings are for entertainment purposes.”

Mr. Bingham guffawed. “This ought to be good.”

“May I have an object from each of you?” I asked the couple and put my hands, palms up, on the table.

My gift’s proper name is retrocognitive psychometry. Bursts of energies and memories leave imprints on objects, and I am sometimes able to pick these imprints up and see, hear, or feel them in my mind. What sucks the most about my gift is its unpredictability. There are moments when I clutch an object, begging for anything, and nothing comes. And though I mostly need to concentrate hard, there are the rare times when I don’t want a vision and end up slapped with one. I can’t force the gift to work, and I can’t make it go away. It is what it is.

Mrs. Bingham took one of her pearl earrings out and laid it in my left hand, while her husband put his cell phone in my

right. I closed my hands and eyes, and focused. Flashes came to me immediately, and I had to take some time to make sense of them and put them in order.

“You bought these earrings somewhere special. You were very excited about them.” I paused. “The store was . . . in something else.”

“The store was *in* something? What does that mean?” the husband asked.

“Give me a second.” I focused harder, then it came to me. “A cruise ship. You bought these earrings in a store on a cruise ship on your honeymoon. They mean a lot to you.”

Mrs. Bingham smiled. “You’re right.” Then she cast a look at her husband. “You didn’t even remember that.”

He shrugged. “What about me? Let me guess, you think I called someone with that phone.”

I tried not to let him rattle me and focused my energy on the cell phone. I saw something immediately, and my eyes snapped up at him. He drew back, looking slightly scared, and rightly so. But I couldn’t say anything. Mom always reminds us, bad news is bad for business. Focus on the positive.

“You were laid off and you’d been using this phone a lot to look for a new job,” I said. “You recently landed a great new position and this vacation is to celebrate that.”

Mrs. Bingham clapped her hands. He gave a tiny nod. I gave them back their belongings.

“Now,” Mom said, “if we could have a moment of silence for my son to gauge if any spirits are with us.”

Perry lost the paranormal gift lottery, if you ask me. His ability was as inconsistent as mine, and depended on a lot of factors. He had to focus much harder than Mom or I did and was often left tired afterward. And there had to be a spirit present, one who was connected to either the place Perry was in or a person he was with. Sometimes we had customers who had no dead entourages with any messages to pass on, leaving the client disappointed. And when Perry's gift *did* work? Well, then he had to listen to a dead person talk.

Perry closed his eyes and took several deep breaths through his nose. His chest rose and fell, but other than that he was completely still. After a minute, he opened his eyes. "I have a Paula here with us."

Mrs. Bingham squealed. "Mama? My mother is here?"

"Yes, she says she's your mom."

Mr. Bingham rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his barrel chest. "Prove it."

Perry cocked his head to the side. "Um, okay. She says she never liked you and she still doesn't."

His face reddened while his wife giggled. "That's right. Mama never liked you, honey, and you know it."

Perry continued, "She also says that she likes your hat and it reminds her of the one Grandma wore all the time."

Tears formed in Mrs. Bingham's eyes. "That's why I bought it. When I saw it in the store, I remembered Grandma." Then her face lit up. "Is Grandma with you?"

Perry listened, then passed on the information. "She said sometimes, but not right now."

I heard the bell ring as the front door opened and closed, but instead of waiting in the foyer like the sign said to, the person barged up to the living room door and started banging.

“What the hell?” Mom stormed to the door, her long black skirt swirling. She ripped the door open.

“Milly?”

Milly stood in the doorway wearing one of her right-off-the-prairie dresses, her stockings sagging around her skinny ankles. Milly lives next door in a Victorian similar to ours, though not as morbidly decorated. The first floor is an antique shop that does pretty well in the summer months. Milly is one of those old ladies who survives on gossip rather than food. Despite her big mouth, we like her a lot, mostly because she accepts us for who we are and sends a lot of business our way.

“Thank goodness you’re here. Have I got news for you.” Milly pushed her way past Mom and into the room.

“We’re in the middle of a reading, Milly,” I said.

“This can’t wait.”

Mom said, “This better be a matter of life and death.”

Milly grinned. “Oh, it is.” Then she scratched her head. “Actually, not both. Just death.”

I wasn’t too surprised. Every morning, Milly read the paper’s obituary section first.

“Well, go on then,” Mr. Bingham said. “You’re taking up time we paid for. This better be good.”

Milly widened her eyes. “There was a murder at King’s Courtyard!”

My hand flew to my chest. I'd expected Milly to have gossip about some hundred-year-old person passing away in his sleep. Not a murder. So that explained the police and ambulance earlier. My heart beat wildly under my hand.

Perry sank back in his chair. The interruption had torn his medium connection to Mrs. Bingham's mother, no doubt. "How do you know?"

"Well, Ed Farmington had one of his garden gnomes stolen again so he went down to the police station to file a report. They wouldn't even talk to him! They told him to come back tomorrow because they were too busy right now. So, naturally he stuck around for a while to get some information."

"Eavesdrop," I said.

"Yeah, whatever." Milly paused for a moment to catch her breath, then continued. "A teenage girl was found murdered in her room at King's Courtyard. Shot!"

I felt my insides squeeze. Someone around my age. Killed. Here.

Perry nervously rubbed his palm back and forth over his chin. "Do they know who did it or why?"

"Not as far as I know. Rumor has it her wallet was right there on the nightstand with money still in it."

"Was she a local or a tourist?" Mom asked, worry creasing her forehead.

"A tourist," Milly said softly.

Perry and I shared a glance. The ramifications were now much bigger. Anxiety burned in my stomach.

"Oh, that's terrible," Mrs. Bingham said.

Mr. Bingham said, “Hey, you guys are supposedly psychic. Why didn’t you see that coming and warn the girl?”

Mom sighed. “Again, we don’t see the future.”

“Yeah. You’re a bunch of frauds.”

I’d had it. My frustration boiled over. I turned to Mrs. Bingham. “Do you know a Jane Sutherland?”

Confusion swept over her delicate features. “Yes, she used to be my husband’s secretary before he was laid off. What about her?”

“He wasn’t laid off. He was fired. The company has rules against boinking your secretary, even though your husband apparently has no qualms with the matter.”

“Clarity!” Mom screamed.

Mom pulled on my arm while my brother tried to pull her away from me. Mrs. Bingham ran out in tears with Mr. Bingham following and yelling about us being liars and frauds. Milly snuck out on her tiptoes. Our next appointment — a young couple — walked in, gazed openmouthed at the chaos before them, and walked out. It wasn’t even eleven a.m. yet. I hadn’t even had breakfast. But this is my life.

Welcome to the freak show.