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hilip reached
between the folds of his mattress and
retrieved the knife. He pulled it from its
sheath and stared at its nine inches of cold,
hardened steel. A thread of the November
moonlight danced along the edge of the
blade as if fearful of being slashed. Philip
clutched the handle. The sweat in the palm of
his hand almost caused him to lose his grip.

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His tired eyes scanned the darkness around him and settled on the digital clock. With a squint, he noticed it was 2:27 A.M. Sleep had escaped him all night. He figured his bed must look as if it had been dumped into a blender. Hours of tossing and turning had created a jumbled maze of sheets and blankets.

Philip slumped to the floor and leaned back against his bed, careful not to accidentally slice himself.

At least not yet.

The knife had been a gift from his dad several months after his mother split with his two sisters. Dad had promised they'd go hunting. Although that was years ago, at times the memories were still as fresh as the tears on his face.

Of course, they never went hunting. *Big surprise there*, Philip thought, placing the knife on the carpet next to him. He drew his legs up to his chest. His dad made lots of promises he never seemed to keep. Philip figured the knife and the promised hunting trip was just his dad's way of trying to smooth things over—or was it to buy his loyalty?

According to the judge during the divorce proceedings, once Philip turned eighteen, which he did next month, he could choose to live with either parent. Some choice. An

oppressive dad or a mother who walked out on them in the middle of the night.

Philip missed his mom, no question. But he hated her for leaving, not that he completely blamed her. All his parents ever did was fight. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. When his dad got drunk, yelled, and threw things, that was the last straw. Mom was gone before the sun rose the next morning.

Even now, the memories flooded his mind with a fresh dose of pain. Why did life have to be so hard? The darkness of his room seemed to close in on him. He reached around and squeezed the base of his neck, which ached as if jammed into a vise. If only he could silence the voices in his head. Then maybe, just maybe, he'd find the peace that eluded him.

Sitting in the dark, tears staining his face, he wondered what the kids at school would think about Mr. Self-Confidence now. After all, most of his friends thought he had it all together. He had a cool car. His dad made tons of cash. They lived in a big house. And, when it came to clothes, he could buy whatever he wanted. No wonder his friends always came to him with *their* problems.

But where could he go with his?

If only his friends knew how close to the edge he had drifted. Sure, part of him

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wanted to show everyone he had it all together. He wasn't looking to blame someone else for the fact that he wore a mask. Like his dad, he didn't let anyone get too close. How many times had he heard his dad say, "Don't show them you've got issues, buddy boy. It's a sign of weakness."

But the game of being perfect was getting old.

He was tired of the charade.

He was tired of squirreling away his problems.

To make things worse, he couldn't take another day of fighting with his dad about where to go to college next year. Philip's dad wanted him to go to the same university that he had attended. Like father, like son. When the letters of acceptance from several big colleges came in yesterday morning, his dad had thundered, "Son, if you're smart, you'll go where I went."

Philip peered at the knife and his heart started to race.

Was this the way out? Would this silence the pain?

Why not put it all behind him right here, right now?

What if he did? Would he be missed? Would anybody really care? Sure, his girlfriend Krissi would be a basket case for a week. But she'd get over it once she found

another popular senior to hang out with, right? Philip caught himself. *Why am I being so cynical about her?* Krissi, he knew, cared for him deeply. They had been together for years. She was the best friend he ever had. Why, then, did he write her off so quickly? Maybe he *was* losing his mind.

So why not end it all?

He reached for the knife and balanced it in his right hand. His lungs tightened as he considered the finality of this action. Maybe if the future was bright, maybe if he knew for certain it would be worth living, maybe then he'd reconsider. But, as far as he could see, nothing added up. His thoughts turned to Krissi. Even if things worked out between them and they got married someday, would she, like his mom, leave him at the first sign of trouble? Probably. So what was the point of pressing on?

He swallowed hard.

A new, more disturbing thought jolted him like a bolt of lightning. What if Scott and Becka were right about God? What if, as they claimed, there really was a God, a heaven, and a hell? What if those who didn't believe in him would spend forever burning in hell? Worse, what if Scott and Becka were right and there wasn't any way to change his mind?

He lowered the blade. Philip knew he

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wasn't ready for that final encounter with God—if there was a God.

Exhausted, he reached for the remote and flicked on the television. Maybe the drone from the box would help him numb the pain—or at least help him sleep. The TV, another gift from his dad, was complete with cable and sat on the hamper that he never used. The TV jumped to life with such brilliance, he had to slam his eyes shut until they could adjust to the light.

As his eyes blinked into focus, a woman, wearing a turban and sitting at a table, filled the screen.

Philip inched up the volume.

“. . . we all possess this inner wisdom. The cards are just the gateway to the supernatural. They allow us to tap into our inner selves and can give us answers to life's most troubling questions.”

Philip leaned forward. At the bottom of the screen he saw her name listed as Madame Theo, Psychic, Advisor, and Spiritual Counselor.

“Tonight, whether you're young or old, I know you have questions. I know you have problems. Don't be afraid to connect with the cosmic reality to find your personal answers.”

Philip suppressed a laugh. *What a joke*, he thought. *As if Madame Theo knows squat.*

“Give the tarot a chance,” she said. Her voice was as smooth as silk and as warm as the afternoon sun. The camera zoomed into her wrinkled face. “Yes, I have been used to help police solve crimes . . . loved ones to find each other . . . young people to find the right college—”

That got Philip’s attention.

“And tonight,” Madame Theo said as the camera zoomed in for a tighter shot, “I promise I can help you discover your destiny.”

Philip tilted his head to the side. Several thoughts nagged at him. What if she’s right? He had read somewhere about people who were missing who were found because of someone like Madame Theo. If she can help the police, maybe she’s on to something, right? What harm could there be to check it out? On the other hand, he vaguely recalled a special on TV exposing psychic fraud. Maybe this lady was different.

“I’m so convinced that the tarot is a gift to us from the other side, I’ll personally give you a free reading. Just call the toll-free number on the bottom of your screen . . .”

Before he knew what he was doing, Philip reached over to his nightstand, tore a scrap of paper from a textbook, and jotted down the number and address of Madame Theo’s Palace. He snapped off the TV and, in the

darkness, decided to return the knife to its hiding place.

For now.



“That’s a wrap,” a voice announced through the overhead monitor.

Madame Theo lingered at the desk where she had just finished another live, thirty-minute local broadcast. Her eyes, black as raisins, scanned the tiny setup. It wasn’t much, just a desk, a chair, a dozen candles and, behind her, a backdrop of the city of Crescent Bay, California. But it was a start. After a month of broadcasting three nights a week, she noticed a significant jump in business.

She gathered her tarot cards, tucked them into an oversize handbag, and then eased out of her chair. At sixty-seven, she projected the air of a trustworthy grandmother, at least that’s what Fred Stoner, her producer and chief financial backer, had said. She suppressed a sly smile at that memory. She circled around to the front of the desk and walked past two cameras mounted on tripods, careful not to trip on the thick cables that covered the floor like snakes. She headed for the exit.

Fred Stoner bounded through the door, almost bowling her over. “Big news!”

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Madame Theo steadied herself and met his eyes, expectant.

Fred tucked a clipboard under his arm. "Listen, the station loves what you're doing."

She smiled faintly. "I'm gratified to hear that, Fred."

"You should be," he said, picking a piece of lint off the lapel of his navy blue suit coat. A patch of black hair poked out the front of his white shirt, unbuttoned at the collar. "You've made a huge sacrifice doing the graveyard shift."

She nodded. "It's been hard. You know I'm not a night owl."

He took her by the arm and led her to the hallway. "Here's the deal. They want to move your program to the 10 P.M. slot."

"Really?"

"I knew you'd be happy about that," Fred said. He smiled wide, revealing his perfectly straight pearly white teeth. "There's more."

She raised an eyebrow. It almost collided with her turban.

"We're talking syndication, Madame Theo."

"Oh, my," she said, pretending to be surprised. She adjusted the handbag strap on her shoulder. "The cards said this would happen." That was an understatement and she knew it. Indeed, just the day before, while seeking wisdom from the cards, she experienced one of the more dramatic encounters

with the spirit world. She'd keep that bit of information to herself. After all, Fred, she knew, wasn't a true believer in the divine forces at work. He was Mr. Businessman. Which was okay. One day he might come around to her way of thinking.

"I'm sure they did," he said with a slight smirk. "Anyway, if everything goes as planned, we're talking every major city up and down the California coast. The sky's the limit from there."

Madame Theo slipped her arm out of his and turned to face him. A worried, almost tormented look crossed her face.

"What is it?" Fred asked, appearing crestfallen.

She bit her bottom lip for a second before answering. "That means we'll be seen in Los Angeles, too, right?"

"You bet," he said, rubbing his hands together as if in anticipation of a juicy steak. "Hey, it's only the largest market in the country."

She looked away. During yesterday's encounter, her new spirit manifestation never impressed upon her there would be such obstacles. Then again, direct contact with the spirit world was a whole new dimension for her. There was so much she didn't understand. If only she knew how to pro-

ceed. During her next contact she'd make a point to gain clarity.

Fred took her by the arm and, with a gentle yet firm tug, turned her back toward him. "What aren't you telling me?"

Madame Theo's eyes blazed with energy. "I think . . . well, that a show in Los Angeles might be a problem."

"Because?"

Her eyes narrowed. She lowered her voice a notch. "I can't tell you, at least not yet."