

Stoned in Charm City

A Charm City Darkness Novel

by

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The immortals know no care, yet the lot they spin for man is full of sorrow; on the floor of Zeus' palace there stand two urns, the one filled with evil gifts, and the other with good ones. He for whom Zeus the lord of thunder mixes the gifts he sends, will meet now with good and now with evil fortune; but he to whom Zeus sends none but evil gifts will be pointed at by the finger of scorn, the hand of famine will pursue him to the ends of the world, and he will go up and down the face of the earth, respected neither by gods nor men.

~ Homer –
The Iliad

Chapter 1

“Do my numbers.”

A filthy hand slapped a twenty-dollar bill onto the table beside Assumpta.

The filthy hand was attached to a tanned arm. He wore a faded yellow T-shirt, stretched over full biceps and a flat stomach. Green eyes bored into her brown ones. He tried to hide a stitched laceration with black, tousled bangs over his forehead. “Please.”

Assumpta closed the *Baltimore City Paper* in her lap, with a finger inside to mark her page, and set down the mug of Charm City Brew, a light roast of coffee that she drank black. She brushed her long, auburn curls out of her face and looked up at him. “I don’t do that anymore.”

True. She had promised her mother. Strict Catholic. Assumpta didn’t see a conflict with reading numbers and keeping the faith, but sometimes it was just easier to do as Mom bade.

“Please,” he said, laying another twenty on the table.

Assumpta stared at the cash. A promise is a promise—but she was late on the rent—and tuition was due in six weeks, not to mention that she still hadn’t found a job. She didn’t have enough cash on hand to pay for either, nor to pay her father his extortionist monthly reimbursement, and every little bit helped. Her dad had made it clear she was on her own once she turned eighteen. There’d be no help from that quarter, not even a pass on what she owed him this month. *Bastard*.

She nodded and reached into her huge purse for a notepad and a felt-tip pen. She turned to a blank page.

“Name?” she asked.

He sat, drumming his dirt-lined nails on the table. “Can’t you do this without my name?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t work that way. I’ll need your full name.”

“Greg LaSpina.”

“Greg or Gregory?”

“Gregory.”

“Middle name?” she asked.

He hesitated. “I never use my middle name.”

“Doesn’t matter. I need to know what it is in order to run the numbers. If you want, I’ll work it both ways, with and without your middle name, and by both Greg and Gregory. But it will be more accurate with all your given names.”

Still, he hesitated.

“It’s just a name,” Assumpta said, though she knew what a crock that statement was. Try going through life with a name like Assumpta Mary-Margaret O’Conner. *Ammo*.

He nodded, tight-lipped, his long dark lashes shadowing his green eyes. “Claude.”

She would not laugh. Ill-named folk must stick together. “Claudius?”

“Just Claude.”

She nodded. Claude wasn’t bad at all. She’d expected much worse.

Assumpta turned the notebook sideways and wrote Greg’s name in block letters across the page. Beneath each letter, she wrote the corresponding number.

“And your birthday?” She held the felt-tip poised over the paper beneath his name.

“April 23, 1985.”

Assumpta wrote the number, and then she began adding. It was a simple process: the birth date was reduced to a single digit by adding all the numbers and substituting the number four for April.

Each letter of the alphabet also corresponded to a number. Assumpta added those that matched the letters in Greg’s name, reducing until only a single digit remained.

The day of his birth revealed his soul number. The number of his full birthday revealed his destiny, or path. His name would divulge his talents, abilities, and shortcomings—even his heart’s desire—if she parsed it out and did all the calculations.

She didn’t know what he expected to find out by this, why it was worth so much to him. Most folks treated numerology as a lark, but Greg seemed intense. What did he expect to learn?

Once she began her work, he relaxed.

“You’ve been doing this for a while,” he said.

She nodded, adding the numbers again. She really didn’t want to talk. The conversation being made over the music in the small coffee shop was loud to her ears. She didn’t feel like shouting while she did this.

“How long?”

She looked up from the paper. “Long enough. Years. How did you hear about me?”

“Caroline Paulson.”

Assumpta smiled. Caroline was her on-again, off-again best friend. They must be on again if Caroline was sending people her way. Her smile flattened. Unless she sent Greg this way in order to make her break her promise to her mother. *Bitch.*

She hurried, but it was still going to take a while. She would give Greg his money’s worth, she decided, providing him with all the information she could. And then she’d get rid of him as fast as she was able.

And then she could finish looking through the want ads. The precious few jobs requiring little skill would be filled by tonight in the poor Baltimore economy. She needed to knock on some doors this afternoon in order to have a chance.

She finished adding the numbers and didn’t like what she saw. To make certain, she pulled out the reference chart she’d made for herself and scanned down the list of words associated with the numbers in Greg’s name. She definitely didn’t like what she was seeing. A loss—but nearly everyone lost something now and again. The rest of the numbers pointed to trouble: the kind that got out of hand fast and had tendencies to create collateral damage just by being near it. The numbers couldn’t reveal specifics, but she was certain she didn’t want to know. Mr. Greg LaSpina was currently in deep shit.

“I need help,” Greg said.

“I can see that from your chart.” She ripped the pages out of the spiral notebook and pushed them toward Greg along with a photocopied description of what all the numbers meant. Normally, she spent a few minutes going over everything with the person, but she reserved the photocopies for times like these: when she wanted someone to go away.

“Caroline said you could help me.” He was angry, but didn’t seem like the type to hit a girl. Still, she hurried to pack up. “Please.”

Well, *crap.* Assumpta didn’t like where this was going. “Did Caroline say why she thought I’d help you?” She put her marker and notebook back in her voluminous purse and wondered why she even asked. She did not want to get involved in anything with Greg LaSpina.

“She said you used to be friends,” he said.

Off again.

Well, that cinched it. Caroline was sending trouble her way and she really didn't need any more right now.

"Look, no offense, Greg—"

"Whenever someone starts a sentence with 'no offense,' it usually means they're going to offend," Greg said. A smile flickered.

"What I meant was," she started again, "don't take this personally. After all, I've never met you before today, right? I hardly know you, but if Caroline sent you in my direction, it's either because she wants a little fun at my expense—or yours." Assumpta picked up her newspaper and stood. "And I'm not in the market for any more trouble these days."

Reluctantly, she pushed his twenties back toward him. "Keep these. Numerology isn't going to help you with your problem. Good luck."

He stood and gently grabbed her wrist. "Caroline said you could help me find things." His voice was soft. The pleading look in his eyes stopped her from ripping her arm from his hand.

"Caroline used the word *find*?"

He nodded.

She stopped. He had her there. That's what she did: *find things*. Maybe he'd lost a watch or something. Or keys. Something he wouldn't mind paying a few more bucks to locate. Maybe she was wrong about his numbers and the loss she noted there was nothing more than what he needed found.

On the other hand, bad number mojo and Caroline did not a coincidence make. Assumpta had meant what she'd said earlier: she didn't need any more trouble right now, *especially* if it were coming from Caroline. Still, Greg was awfully quick to hand out the twenties, and she could use a few more—more than a few more, in fact—this month. Rent was due.

"What else did Caroline tell you?"

"She said you do numbers for folks; that you have a talent to help people find things they've lost."

"And did she explain this talent?"

"I thought the numbers were the talent."

She let out a breath. Who knew how that conversation went? Especially if she and Caroline were off again.

"What have you lost?"

"It's not—" He paused, a confused expression crossing his face. "Is there any way you can help me find something, without me telling you exactly what it is?"

"The more information I have, the easier it is to find something," she said.

"What if I can't tell you *exactly* what it is?"

Assumpta set the rolled paper back on the table and watched it unroll. She sat down again. "Why don't you tell me everything from the beginning?"

Greg sat down across from her. "It's more case of what I've let escape, rather than simply lost." He reached into his knapsack and pulled out a clay pot and lid, together about the size of a large cantaloupe. Blue and gold paint dotted the circumference of the pot, but in such poor condition she couldn't make out whether the marks formed pictures or just designs. The pot certainly looked old, and had a nice big crack running from the lip to about halfway down the side.

Assumpta looked at the pot and wondered what could have survived living in such a cramped, dirty space. She hoped it wasn't mice, or rats. A snake she could live with.

"I'm not sure I'm following," Assumpta said. "You've lost a mouse?"

"Worse."

“A rat?”

He gave her a look that said they were getting nowhere fast. “Hear me out, okay? I don’t want you to think I’m crazy.”

“I’m already not liking the sound of this.”

She stared at his forehead, letting her eyes blur a little, and searched for his aura—a talent she withheld from her mother. What her mom didn’t know, she wouldn’t forbid Assumpta to do. And she could do this and appear to be paying attention. Words could lie, but auras didn’t. The talent came in handy.

She finally saw Greg’s aura. It was bright turquoise, with a purplish haze around the edges. She breathed a sigh of relief; he couldn’t be a serial killer with such a bright aura. But the purple denoted fear. He was scared...scared enough for it to manifest itself physically.

“I’m getting my PhD in archeology,” Greg said, turning the clay jar over in his hands. “For several summers I’ve worked in Virginia at Morven Farm, digging pits and searching for early American settlers and Indians.” He looked at her. “Are you familiar with the dig?”

“I’ve seen the Jamestown exhibit at the Museum of Natural History in Washington.”

Greg nodded once. “Similar. But that’s an anthropological study of bones found in those settlements. There are some artifacts, too, but nothing like what’s found at Morven Farm. Some of the items found there on the farm date back twelve thousand years. Like this clay pot.” He set it down on the table between them.

“Jamestown settlers arrived in the sixteen hundreds,” Assumpta said. “There’s no way things date back more than a few hundred years.”

“*English* artifacts found there only date back to the early seventeenth century, but ten-thousand-year-old stone tools have been found in the same soil. That land was settled and resettled for thousands of years before John Smith sailed into the Chesapeake Bay.”

“So what’s your point?”

“Dr. Tim Arnold is an archeologist affiliated with UVA, but he’s spending a summer working with anthropology students at Johns Hopkins. Because I know the area, and I’ve worked with the Morven Farm for six years—”

“They trust you.”

Greg nodded. “Right. They trust me.” He picked up the clay pot again, turning it over and over in his hands. “I was asked to bring the pot from UVA to Johns Hopkins so it could be reviewed by Doc Arnold before it was x-rayed and then unsealed. But the seal broke before I made it to Dr. Arnold.”

Assumpta could see Greg’s aura flare a deep purple. The memory was strong enough to trigger a strong negative reaction in his aura. He’d been scared—was *still* scared.

“What happened?”

“Traffic was bumper to bumper on 695,” Greg said. “I had to brake hard or rear-end the guy in front of me. When I hit the brakes, I heard a pop, and the car filled with thick, black smoke. It got really hot. Sweat poured down my face. I heard a shrieking so loud, I thought a freight train was careening to a stop behind me. I thought I was dead.”

“Wait—” Assumpta said, giving him a questioning look. “If this urn was so valuable, why wasn’t it more protected?”

“It couldn’t have been more secure,” Greg said. “The urn was tissue-wrapped, surrounded by foam peanuts, and held in a sealable polyethylene storage container.”

“So how did it break?”

He shook his head. “I’m not certain. The container did slide forward when I hit the brakes, but it didn’t hit the back seat hard enough to break it. Yet, the container was cracked, as though

someone had taken a sledgehammer to it from the inside. The tissue was burned away from the urn, and most of the peanuts had melted.

“So you heard a shriek, and you thought you were going to die. Then what happened?”

“The shrieking got louder and louder, and the smoke started to spin in the car. I felt a coldness, then a burning sensation on my right shoulder. That’s when I realized it wasn’t smoke. It was something...*alive*. It was alive, and it had bitten me. I opened the door, thinking to escape the car, and it shrieked out of the opening in a single mass. It lifted into the sky and broke into a hundred pieces, each going in a different direction.”

He looked into her eyes. “The shrieking stopped, the temperature returned to normal, and horns blared everywhere. I’d brought traffic to a halt. My shoulder was killing me; I couldn’t drive. I let off the brake and moved forward, moving right through two lanes of traffic until I could get onto the shoulder and stop the car.

“When I got to the shoulder, I turned off the engine, leaned my forehead on the steering wheel and closed my eyes. I don’t know how long I sat there. Long enough for rush hour traffic to pass me by. Long enough for the sun to go down. It was dark when I finally opened my eyes. I may have dozed, but I’m not sure. My right hand felt sticky. So I turned the dome light on to look at it. Blood soaked the sleeve of my T-shirt and ran thick down my arm. That scratch I felt—”

Greg put the clay pot back onto the table and reached for the collar of his shirt. He pulled it away from his neck, bending to show Assumpta what lay beneath: four raw scratches, long and wide, ran over the side of his neck and down his right shoulder. The skin surrounding each scratch flared red, as if infection had set in.

A tremendous, mouth-shaped bruise purpled the skin so far left of the marks, it sat almost on the back of his neck. Individual teeth marks, each the size of a quarter, could be seen in the outline of the bruise.

“If I hadn’t opened the door, it might have bit my neck right off my shoulders,” Greg said. “I know it sounds crazy...”

“You know what it sounds like to me?” Assumpta asked.

“Pandora’s box.”

She nodded. That’s exactly what she’d been thinking. But she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She looked at Greg’s aura again. It burned bright turquoise. He was telling the truth, at least how he saw it. She latched onto the first thing she could think of to refute his idea.

“Pandora opened a box, not a clay pot.”

Greg smiled. “Actually, that isn’t the case. The original Greek translates that Pandora opened a jar, or urn, something much like what I’ve got here.”

Assumpta took a deep breath. “But this can’t be Pandora’s box—*urn*,” she said. “Those evils were never captured. All that was left when they fled was hope.”

“Then we’ve got a bigger problem on our hands,” Greg said, “because there’s no hope left in this jar. There’s nothing left at all.”

Chapter 2

While the water boiled in a small pot in her equally small apartment, Assumpta grabbed her checkbook, box of receipts, and account book and laid them on the table for her monthly appointment with herself. Dreading the reality, she made the tea, letting it steep for a long time before carrying it to the table, black. There wasn't any sugar—and likely not to be any for a while.

She sat, then wrote checks for the back rent she owed and the phone, thankful that gas and electric were included in her rent. There wasn't much left in the account.

Then, she opened the ledger, looked at the numbers, and felt like crying. How was she going to pay all this money back? How could her father do this to her?

Well, she knew the answer to that. It still burned a hole in her gut, but she was learning to get over it. And once she paid him off, she could write him out of her life.

The figure popped off the page: \$163,642.68. It was more money than some folks spent for a mortgage, and they had thirty years to pay it back. She didn't want to know her father for thirty more minutes, let alone thirty more years. She had to get this paid off.

At least she was no longer reeling from the shock of it. She remembered her eighteenth birthday like it had been yesterday.

Her mother had baked her favorite cake—double-chocolate, dual-layered with raspberry filling in between. Her gifts had been practical: a microwave, bed linens, towels. It wasn't until she'd opened her father's gift that she understood why. After all, she hadn't made plans to move out. She'd enrolled in University of Baltimore and intended to live at home for a few more years.

Her father had other ideas.

"Now that you're an adult," he said, "It's time for you to pay your share." He handed her a pink, green, and brown striped bag with matching tissue shooting out the top. Assumpta glanced at her mother who smiled at her with watery eyes. She'd known then she wouldn't like what was hiding in the bag. Neither did her mother, if the tears were any indication, but still her mother was willing to take her father's side. Just like she always did.

Why am I surprised? she thought. Shouldn't the sheer amount of money inspire some sort of sympathy from her mother? Maybe it did, but her mother couldn't afford to show it. She had to live with the man, after all.

Assumpta pushed her hand through the tissue and clasped a book, tearing it from the festive bag and spilling the tissue to the floor. Not just any book. A ledger.

She opened it to the first page, saw her name emblazoned on the inside cover in her father's handwriting. Underneath her name, he'd written the date of her birth. The first entry in the ledger read:

July 8, 1988 - University of Baltimore Hospital, Assumpta born - \$5,287.62

She flipped through random pages and noted several entries: August 11, 1994 - Sears, Back to School Clothes - \$64.32. October 23, 1994 - University of Baltimore Hospital, Broken Arm, \$987.42. She turned to more recent pages. March 18, 2006 - Hit or Miss - Prom Dress - \$165.13.

She remembered that prom dress. The satiny hem brushed the floor and belled out when she spun, but hung in graceful lines when she stood still. Its price was way more than her mother had

wanted to spend, so she'd steered her toward the plainer, less expensive options. But Assumpta had stood her ground. Now she realized why her mother always watched her pennies. Why hadn't her mother said anything to her then? Would it have made a difference? Probably not. What teenager listens to her mother when it comes to prom gowns?

A November entry caught her eye. Wilson's Leather Company: backpack and matching purse. She'd received those for Christmas!

She had slammed the book closed and looked up at her father. "You're asking me to pay you back for every penny you've spent on me since the day I was born?"

"As soon as possible."

"Every birthday present? Every Christmas gift?"

He nodded.

"I didn't ask for any of those things. They were gifts!"

"I didn't ask for you," he said shortly.

Assumpta took a step backwards, feeling the blow to her chest as though her father had punched her. Her face must have reddened, she felt the heat of blood rushing to her cheeks. Her eyes burned, but she refused to let the tears fall.

Her mother started crying. "He didn't mean that, Assumpta."

"It certainly explains a few things," she had said, realizing then what she'd taken for reserve had actually been dislike on her father's part. The fact is, her father had never wanted her.

"I'll give you a few days to find an apartment," he said. "After that, you're on your own."

"And if I decide not to leave?"

"Then you'll find your things on the front lawn at the end of the week. I'll call Goodwill to come pick them up."

"You can't make me pay this," Assumpta said, shaking the ledger at him. "No court will uphold this kind of debt."

"You'll pay. Or I'll toss you out today and your mother with you."

There was a tense silence while they stared at each other. Assumpta's mother wept quietly beside her. "I'm so sorry," Assumpta heard her whisper.

There was no way she could do that to her mother. Her mother was in worse shape than she was: married at eighteen, no work experience. She couldn't support her mother and herself.

Assumpta ground her teeth together. "I'll pay. But I want all the corresponding receipts."

Her father smiled. "I thought you'd never ask." He left the room, but returned shortly with a cardboard box—the kind reams of paper were sold in—and handed it to her. "I've already copied these," he said. Then, he produced a contract and a pen. She could tell he'd typed the contract himself. It was a single line. "I agree to pay all sums noted in this ledger." There was space for her to sign her name. The remaining bottom two-thirds of the "Contract" was blank.

She looked him in the eye. "I won't pay for anything that doesn't have a receipt. And I won't pay for gifts I didn't ask for." How she was going to prove that, she didn't know, but at least it was something.

His face darkened, but he nodded tightly.

Assumpta wrote, *Addendum*, beneath her signature, then printed:

1. Assumpta M.-M. O'Conner does not have to pay any expense for which there is no corresponding, legible, receipt.

2. Assumpta M.-M. O'Conner does not have to pay for any gifts she received which she did not ask for.

"I'm adding a few more," she said, continuing to write.

3. In the event of Assumpta M.-M. O'Conner's death, any remaining debt is canceled.

She knew it was going to take her decades to pay off this debt.

“No,” her father said. “If you die, your children need to pay me back.”

“I’m not saddling my children with any of my so-called debt,” she shot back.

The look in her eyes must have quelled him, because instead of disagreeing, her father said, “Then we’ve got to agree to a payment schedule, with interest, compounded monthly.”

“Yearly,” Assumpta said.

Her father crossed his arms across his chest and leaned against the arched doorway separating the dining room from the living room in their cramped Eastern Avenue row home.

“All right. But you’ll pay two hundred dollars a month on the loan to start.”

“Are you kidding me?” Assumpta said. “There’s no way I can pay you two hundred dollars a month, pay for school, and pay for an apartment, too. I can’t work enough hours.”

“Then drop out of school until you pay off the loan.”

Frustration so fierce it made her want to scream clawed at the edges of her throat. But she knew she had to keep it under control. Her father wouldn’t listen to reason, but maybe he could see the logic of her continuing school.

“If I get my degree, I’ll be earning far more than minimum wage in four years,” she said. “If you give me some leeway now, you stand to earn back more of the total amount and in shorter time, too.”

“Then we’ll escalate it,” her father said, pulling the pen from her hand, then writing and speaking at the same time:

“4. Good-faith payments of no less than \$50 dollars will be paid monthly until Assumpta M.-M. O’Conner graduates from college. Upon graduation, payments will be \$100 monthly. If at any time Assumpta M.-M. O’Conner obtains a job paying—” He looked her up and down. “Twenty-two thousand dollars a year or more, payments will increase to \$200 per month.”

She snatched the pen out of his hand.

“5. If Assumpta M.-M. O’Conner becomes unemployed at any time, payments are suspended.”

“No. Payments can revert to fifty dollars a month.”

“How can I pay you if I don’t have a job?”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“You want me to turn tricks? I can’t believe you’re trying to make money off your own daughter.”

“I’m not trying to make money,” her father said, “I’m just trying to get back what’s owed me.”

“More than that. You’re charging me interest.”

“For everything I’ve lost by not being able to invest this money in the market.”

“Two percent.”

“Five.”

“Five!” Assumpta yelled. “There’s no guarantee that’s what you would have made in the market. There’s no proof that you would have even invested any of this money. Who says you wouldn’t have spent it on more booze?”

He slapped her, open-handed. Still, her head snapped back and she fell to the floor. God, that hurt. He’d never done that before. Her eyes burned. She blinked away the beginnings of tears, not wanting to give him the satisfaction.

She picked herself up, burning with fury. “One percent. And if you ever hit me again, I’ll call the police and press charges for assault. Even at one-percent interest, it will be decades before I pay this off. You’re going to have more money than you’ll know what to do with.”

He nodded tightly, while she wrote.

“I’m not paying for being born,” she said.

“Well, *I’m* certainly not.”

“You already have,” Assumpta said.

“If we disagree on that,” he said, looking at his still-crying wife, “then you’d better pack your bags now, dear.”

Assumpta took a step toward him and said, “If you want to risk over a hundred and sixty thousand dollars on a measly five, that’s your prerogative. But I guarantee you that if you toss Mom out over that sum, you’ll lose a lot more: we’ll get a good divorce lawyer who will force *you* out of this house and get half your pay in alimony. Do *you* want to risk all that over five grand?”

“Assumpta, no—” her mother started to say, but quieted at Assumpta’s harsh glance.

She turned back to her father. “Do you?”

He shook his head.

“Then I think we’ve finally come to an agreement.”

She wrote the remaining details on the sheet, turning it when it ran out of room, then drew lines for both their signatures and the date.

“I’ll take this,” he said, pulling the page away almost before she’d finished signing her name.

“I want a copy.”

“I’ll see that you get one.”

“We can do it now with the scanner on the computer,” she said. “I’m not leaving until I get a copy.”

She took her copy and the receipts, packed up her stuff, and left the house she’d lived in all her life. She’d never been back. And as long as her father lived there, she never wanted to.

Now she had to pay off the damned loan and its godforsaken interest.

In four years she’d managed to pay her father back only twenty-four hundred dollars, but even simple interest on the loan meant that after paying on it for four years, she was in the hole an additional forty-five hundred dollars. She hadn’t been able to attend college, either, except for a class or two each year, so there was no high-paying job anytime in the future.

The only saving grace about owing a family member nearly a hundred and seventy thousand dollars is that it didn’t appear on her credit report somewhere. She could still qualify for student loans in the fall.

But everything was moot if she didn’t find a job soon.

Chapter 3

Bless you, Mom, Assumpta thought, pulling the Christmas list she'd made when she was five from the box of her father's receipts. Mom had given her the Sears catalog and told her to cut out and paste all the things she'd wanted Santa to bring.

She hadn't gotten a single item on the *list*.

When she had asked her mother why Santa hadn't brought her even one thing she wanted, her Mom had told her that Santa probably thought she would like the things she got a whole lot better than her impulse wishes.

"I do, Mom, I surely do," she said reaching for the ledger to remind herself of what she'd gotten instead.

Barbie dolls, a magic set, several books, and a lot of spring and summer clothes. God, how she'd hated getting clothes for Christmas, but she couldn't help but smile now as she tallied up the entries.

Many of the gifts she'd gotten over the years made more sense now, like the ten-speed bike she'd gotten when she was eight. She'd asked for a hula hoop and a pogo stick, according to her list, and had been crestfallen when she realized she wouldn't be able to ride the bike until she'd grown at least two more inches.

Smart, Mom, she thought, *thinking ahead...giving the gift long before I could think to ask for it.*

Assumpta sighed, looking over the edge into the box at thousands of receipts she hadn't looked at yet. Once a month for four years she'd been dutifully writing her father a check, digging through the box every once in a while, looking for something she could cross off her father's list, and then carrying on. Denial is a wonderful thing.

It's not like I'm going to be able to pay it off tomorrow, she thought.

"But it's time to get organized," she whispered. She closed the ledger and put it aside, then grabbed a handful of receipts from the box and started sorting by year. Why hadn't she done this sooner?

Chapter 4

Holy Rosary Church ran the length of the block, its steeple rising above the surrounding row homes on S. Chester Street. The bell tower rose high, the stone dark against a darkening sky. As Assumpta approached the granite staircase at the front of the church, the bell began to toll the 6 p.m. *Angelus*.

The bell pealed three times. Out of habit, Assumpta whispered the words to the Ave Maria. *Hail Mary, full of Grace, the lord is with thee...* The bell rang three more times, paused, pealed another trio, then fell silent.

Beside the church, the Holy Rosary Rectory was as unimposing as the church was grand.

Assumpta reached the top of the third granite step and knocked on the plain wooden door of the rectory.

A minute later, Father Tony Devericks, her spiritual mentor since grade school, opened the door and stepped back to wave her in, holding the door wide. Assumpta crossed the threshold of the door and crumpled to the black-and-white tile as pain erupted in her right shoulder. Father Tony stooped to help her up, but Assumpta waved him off, easily getting to her knees, and then standing.

“Are you all right?” he asked, lifting a plump hand to sweep back a lock of graying brown hair that fell into his eyes when he’d bent to help her.

She put a hand to her shoulder, rubbing the stinging muscle, and nodded. “I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder, but nothing now.” As quickly as the pain had come, it had gone.

“So good of you to see me, Father,” she said.

“You said you needed to talk. When have I ever turned you down?” He smiled and gestured to the stairs. “Let’s talk in my office. The chairs are more comfortable.”

Assumpta followed him up the stairs, their footsteps muffled by a swath of burgundy colored carpet running down the center of the treads. At the top of the staircase, the bathroom door stood open, the smell of talc and shaving cologne drifting into the hallway.

The door to the first office on the hallway stood closed, the glass dark.

Father Tony’s door, in the center of the hall, stood wide open. Inviting, just like Father Tony.

He walked in ahead of Assumpta and took a seat behind his large, cluttered desk. Assumpta sat in the chair on the left in front of his desk and dropped her purse to the floor.

“Your mother is worried about you,” he said.

“She always worries.”

“It’s a mother’s curse,” said Father Tony. “But in this case, I think she’s worried more about your immortal soul than your physical self.” He raised a questioning eyebrow.

Assumpta looked down at her purse at her feet. What could she confide in Father Tony? He was her spiritual confessor, but outside the confines of the confessional, he had no obligation to keep his mouth shut. Inside the confessional, she had nothing to say. She didn’t believe her abilities were sinful.

She reached down and pulled her pendulum from her bag: a teardrop-shaped crystal with the wide end tied to a thin gold cord about fourteen inches long.

“Have you lost anything recently, Father?”

“That’s an abrupt change of subject,” he said, smiling. “Not ready to talk?”

“Humor me. I want to show you something.”

He tilted his head as if considering, then said, “I can’t find my glasses. They’ve been gone since last week. Had to print out my homily in really big type so I could read it at Mass Sunday morning. They’ll turn up.”

“Have you looked?”

“Everywhere,” he said, smiling again.

“Apparently not,” said Assumpta, pinching the cord between thumb and forefinger, and running it from the crystal to the knotted end to get the kinks out of it. She moved her purse to the side of her chair and dropped the crystal down on its string between her knees.

Once it hung motionless, she said, “Are Father Tony’s glasses in the church?”

The crystal remained still for a moment, then began to swing to and fro, building momentum, and then began a counterclockwise swirl.

She shook her head back and forth to indicate *no* to Father Tony.

“Are his glasses in the rectory?”

The pendulum continued circling counterclockwise. She shook her head again.

“Are they in his office?”

The crystal dropped abruptly, then began a clockwise circle. Assumpta smiled. “They’re here in your office, Father. Where haven’t you looked?” She glanced up and caught his eye.

He stared at her for a moment. “My office is the most likely place for them to be found.”

Assumpta looked at the pendulum again. It continued to swing in a lazy circle. “But you’ve looked everywhere,” she said. “And yet, you haven’t found them.” She said toward the circling crystal, “Are the glasses *under* something?”

The pendulum dropped abruptly and began a to and fro swing, eventually achieving enough momentum to circle counterclockwise.

“Are they *on top* of something?”

No change.

“Are they *inside* of something?”

The crystal jumped, and circled clockwise. “What have you been digging in, Father?”

“Desk drawers,” he said, and the pendulum dropped and began to swing. Assumpta shook her head.

“The supplies cupboard.”

No change in the swing of the pendulum.

“The old church photos!” he said.

Before the pendulum began its clockwise circle, Father Tony jumped out of his seat and reached for a stack of boxes parked on the left side of his desk. “I was digging through these last week, scattered them all over my desk, and then I remembered an appointment. I piled them up and put them all back in the box unsorted.”

He reached for the top box, removed the cardboard lid and rifled through the contents. When he didn’t find his glasses, he returned the lid, settled the box on the floor to his left and reached for the second box in the stack. He pulled off the lid and shuffled through the photos.

“My glasses!” he said, sitting back into his chair with a thump. He put them on, blinked, and then sobered.

“I remembered where they were,” he said to Assumpta.

She wrapped the pendulum’s cord around her hand, then tucked it back in her purse. “Not without my help.”

“I would have remembered eventually,” he said quietly.

“I’m sure you would.” Assumpta grabbed the handle of her purse and stood.

“You’re leaving?”

“I see no reason to stay.” She saw a tinge of orange appear in the bright blue of his aura. Blue was the reason she trusted him; it proved his spirituality. The orange told her he felt confusion on this issue. Confusion is good, she thought. It meant he had an open mind about it, even if he didn’t think so.

“I think you have a fine sense of intuition,” Father Tony said. “You can read people well. It’s probably that skill which leads you to believe you can find things for people. As for an alternative to intuition—”

“Let me prove it’s not just about intuition,” Assumpta said. “Ask me to find something else. Something that would take more than intuition to find. Something someone hasn’t been able to find for years.”

Chapter 5

“There *is* one thing you can find,” Father Tony said, “that will make me believe you speak the truth.”

“I do speak the truth,” Assumpta said, her hands fisting. She tensed for a fight.

“I know you believe that.” Father Tony busied his hands in his desk drawer, pushing paperclips and pushpins together.

Meaning, Assumpta thought, that he was either being kind by saying so and humoring her, or he thought she was crazy.

She unfocused her eyes a bit to see his aura. Not seeing anything but the usual blue and the slight yellow of his calling around his head, she relaxed.

“What *else* have you lost?” *I’ll be confessing that little jab later*, she thought, schooling her face to complete innocence.

Father Tony raised his eyebrows, but didn’t call her out.

He knows I’ll be confessing later, too, she thought.

“I’m not the one who lost this object.” Father Tony rose and walked to a high bookcase near the window, and took down what looked to be an old photo album. He returned to his desk, pushed aside several piles of paper, and laid the album down, flipping over the pasteboard cover and turning to the middle of the black construction-paper pages. He kept turning until he found the page he sought. Then he turned the album around and pushed it to the front of his desk so Assumpta could see it: a newspaper clipping from 1976.

“You can’t breathe a word of this to anyone,” he said.

Assumpta nodded. “You know you can trust me.”

He looked into her eyes, compressed his lips, and nodded. “I know.”

He pointed at the headline: *Polish Cardinal from Vatican Visits Holy Rosary*. Beneath it, a subheading read, *Pope Bestows Relic upon Miracle Church*.

“I didn’t know we had a relic here,” Assumpta said.

“Because we don’t talk about it anymore,” said Father Tony. “Not since 1978, when it went missing.”

Her eyes widened. “Missing? How can you lose a relic gifted to the church from the Vatican? What was it?”

She could only imagine what might have been considered holy: a finger bone from Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, a Baltimore-area resident? A centuries-old icon, liberated from the Holy See? Lord knows what lay stockpiled in the Vatican archives after all these years. It probably cost them nothing to gift it to a church. The publicity would have been fantastic at the time.

“A shard from the lance of Longinus.”

She blinked. It hardly seemed important, but he’d said it in a voice so filled with awe she knew she was missing something.

“So?”

“*The spear, child*,” Father Tony said reverently. He ran a finger across the bottom of the grainy photograph of the biretta-capped Cardinal holding an ornate, gem-encrusted reliquary, about the size of a shoe box. “A piece of wood from the handle of the spear that pierced Jesus’s

side as he hung on the cross.”

Really? A fragment of wood didn't seem all that, well, *holy*, to her. She looked at the box in the photo. The box looked holy. Well, it looked gaudy; maybe that was how the church perceived *holy*. Still, she could only imagine the embarrassment to Holy Rosary Church to lose something of such significance. No wonder they didn't talk about it.

“What happened?”

“The story goes—”

“You don't know for sure?”

He shook his head. “Way before my time. I was still in seminary when all this happened. But from what I've been told, and what I've read in the old pastor's journals, after Cardinal Karol Wojtyla left—” Father Tony put the clipping away. “You do know he was later elected as Pope John Paul II, right?”

“I didn't know that.”

“No, you probably wouldn't. We stopped teaching the succession of the popes because we didn't want to answer too many questions. Cardinal Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II the same year the relic disappeared.”

“Where was the relic between '76 and '78?”

“Father Michalski displayed it in the Sacred Heart Chapel.” He stood. “Let's go there. I'll show you.”

Assumpta grabbed her purse and stood, following Father Tony down the stairs and out the door of the rectory. The buildings were connected physically outside, but no doorway existed between the two. To get from rectory to church, or vice versa, one had to go outside and use the street entrance.

Assumpta climbed the front stairs to the church and waited for Father Tony to unlock one of the six large doors. He pulled it open and allowed her to enter before him.

Pain ripped through her right shoulder as she stepped across the threshold. Again, she fell to her knees, crying out. The hair at the nape of her neck felt as though someone yanked it out by the roots. Tears sprang to her eyes.

Holy water in the two marble fonts standing at either side of the entrance to the sanctuary boiled for an instant, releasing a hiss of steam to shoot up from the basins. Had Father Tony seen that? God, she hoped not.

She looked at her hands and unfocused her eyes, only for a moment. Her aura glowed a faint, sickly brown. Heart thumping wildly in her chest, she felt her gorge rise. Swallowing hard, she realized the problem.

Father Tony reached for her elbow.

“Don't touch me, Father,” she said, shuffling away from him quickly and standing on her own.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

He looked hurt, but she'd had no choice. Hadn't Greg told her that his visit had cursed her? Would she curse Father Tony by being here? Would she bring trouble to the church? Surely not, she decided. The church could protect itself from evil, right? Especially within the sanctuary?

“It's not you,” she said, holding up a hand as he stepped toward her. Would he believe her if she told him a loose tile in the foyer had tripped her? Probably not. “I've just figured it out,” she said, and while they stood in the narthex, she told him about Greg LaSpina and the broken urn.

“The curse seeks to prevent me from entering the church,” she said in conclusion.

“I'm not sure I quite believe you,” he said.

“Can't? Or won't?”

She watched through squinted eyes as the edges of his aura flared an angry red, then calmed. Angry still, but not so much.

“It’s not as if I don’t want to believe you, Assumpta—”

“Then try,” she said. “Ignore the words I’m saying and consider my pain when I entered the church. I’m not faking that. I couldn’t fake it.”

Father Tony’s aura turned orange, marking his confusion. A thoughtful expression crossed his face. The orange dimmed, blue licked at the edges, then overlapped it, and he seemed to make a decision. He looked relaxed.

Maybe he found something comfortable in her words. He reached for the heavy crucifix he carried in his pocket, the same one he wore around his neck on Sundays. “There are some prayers I can say—” He dangled the cross over the holy water font.

Assumpta felt the pull on her hair again.

“I’m cursed, not possessed,” she said. “I don’t think your prayers will help.”

He pocketed the crucifix. “Then what can I do?”

“I’m not sure yet. But when I figure it out, I’ll let you know.” She looked to the heavy swinging doors that separated the narthex from the Sanctuary. “Let’s do this.”