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DORI HILLESTAD BUTLER

Chapter One

I'm dying here, Sam," my best friend Angela panted as we started up another hill. "Where *is* this place?"

I wasn't enjoying the long bike ride any more than Angela was. It was so hot out it felt like we were biking inside an oven. My shirt was soaked with sweat, my butt was numb, my legs were ready to fall off, and let's not even mention my hair. But I shifted to an easier gear on my bike, wiped my sweaty forehead against my arm, and said, "It's got to be around here somewhere. Let's keep going."

"I don't know, Sam." Angela stopped her bike. "This doesn't look right."

"The ad in the Yellow Pages said North Star Road," I said. "This is North Star Road." But Angela had a point. The houses were pretty spread out around here. There were no businesses anywhere in sight. North Star Road would turn into Highway 1 up ahead and when it did we wouldn't even be in Clearwater anymore. We'd be out in the country.

I glanced around, searching desperately for some clue—*any* clue—that we were headed in the right direction. I

noticed a sign in the yard up ahead. Could that be the place?

“Sam!” Angela yelled. “Where are you going?”

I just kept pedaling until I could read the sign. The paint on it was peeling, but I could still make out the black-and-white drawing of a lady gazing into a crystal ball and the words “Psychic Readings by Madame Madeline.”

Yes! “This is it!” I cried.

Angela pulled up beside me. She glanced at the house behind the sign and curled her lip in disgust. “You’ve got to be kidding,” she said.

Okay, the house did sort of look like the Bates house in *Psycho*. And like the sign out front, it hadn’t been painted in a very long time. Four rotted steps led to a rickety front porch. There was even a window boarded over upstairs.

“I don’t know about this,” Angela said slowly.

I had to admit I wasn’t entirely sure myself. I mean, I’d never been to a real, live psychic before. I didn’t even know for sure that Madame Madeline *was* a real psychic. Let’s face it, most psychics are fakes. But there are some people out there who really do have some psychic abilities. People who help the police solve crimes or whatever. I had no idea whether Madame Madeline ever did anything like that, but she was the only psychic listed in the Clearwater, Iowa, phone book, so she was my only hope.

“You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to,” I told Angela as I wheeled my bike over to a lamppost.

“No, no,” Angela said, trailing along behind me. “I said I’d go with you and I will. I mean, if you’re sure you want

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to do this. I just think there has to be a better way of finding out where your dad is than going to a psychic.”

“Like what?” I asked. My mom was no help. She hated my dad. She got all bent out of shape anytime I even brought him up in conversation.

There were no relatives on his side of the family to ask. Or if there were, I’d never met them. I know my dad grew up in Clearwater, though. I asked some of the older people in my neighborhood if they remembered him. Everybody did (“Such a shame, what happened,” Mrs. Inger tsk-tsked.), but nobody seemed to have any idea where he was.

Mrs. Sandvick told me she used to play cards with my dad’s mom, which proved I had a Grandma Wright out there somewhere. That made me wonder whether I had any aunts, uncles, or cousins on my dad’s side. Mrs. Sandvick couldn’t remember whether my dad had any brothers and sisters, but she did remember that Eva Wright always cheated at cards and she was glad that Eva moved away. Then she wanted to know why I was asking so many questions. I was afraid she’d tell my mom I’d been nosing around, so I took my search elsewhere. To the Clearwater Public Library.

There’s a sign by the reference desk that says if they don’t know the answer to your question, they’ll find it. But when I talked to a reference librarian, the woman just sort of pinched her lips together and said they don’t get involved in family affairs.

I even tried to find my dad on the Internet. I tried Internet phone books, people finders that didn’t cost

anything, and basic search engines. But do you have any idea how many Joseph Wrights there are in the world? Millions! I had no idea how to figure out which Joseph Wright was my dad.

How else was I supposed to find him when he'd totally disappeared off the face of the earth?

"I guess I don't have any other bright ideas," Angela said.

"Well, we may as well try Madame Madeline," I said. We locked our bikes to the lamppost and started up the front walk. I wished I had a comb. I had to settle for running my fingers through my hair to untangle it and pouf it up a bit. But it was so humid out, it probably didn't do much good.

"So should we ring the bell or will Madame Madeline just sort of sense that we're here and open the door herself?" Angela muttered.

Before we even reached the first step, Madame Madeline did open the front door. Or somebody did, anyway.

Angela and I stopped where we were and gawked at the woman who stood on the porch. I don't know what I thought a real psychic should look like, but this woman was definitely not it. She looked...well, like a regular person. She wore a yellow sundress like the ones they sell at Wal-Mart with matching flip-flops. She had wavy reddish blond hair that hung to her waist. She was pretty, but if you asked me, she could've used a little eye makeup or blush, something to give her face some color and hide her freckles.

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“Do you girls want something?” She looked down at us curiously.

I glanced at Angela, then took a step toward Madeline. “Um, we were wondering,” I began. I didn’t know how to talk to a psychic. Did I even have to talk, or could she read my mind?

“I mean...” I stammered. “I...uh, saw your ad in the phone book, and, well—”

“Are you Madame Madeline?” Angela blurted out. One thing about Angela, she never has any trouble saying things straight out.

The woman leaned against the cracked doorjamb. “Yes, I am. What can I do for you?”

I cleared my throat. “There’s something I have to know,” I said, my heart thumping. “I’d like to have a—whatever you call it—a psychic reading?”

At first Madame Madeline didn’t say anything. She just inspected me from head to toe. It was kind of unnerving, if you want to know the truth.

“You really are psychic, right?” I had to ask.

She smiled. But instead of answering my question, she said, “Generally I do readings by appointment only.”

Appointment? I groaned to myself. Did that mean we’d just biked all the way out here in the blazing hot sun for nothing?

Madame Madeline checked her watch. “But I have a few minutes. Why don’t you come in?” She held the door open and a black-and-white cat nuzzled her leg.

Angela raised her eyebrow at me. This was my chance

to change my mind. But no. I had to do this. So we stepped inside.

The cat meowed at us, then turned and padded up the stairs.

I have to say, the inside of the house looked a lot better than the outside. I expected it to be all dark and dreary with long strings of beads hanging in the doorways. But this place was bright and cheerful. No beads. Sunlight poured in through two tall living room windows. And everywhere you looked there were plants—on tables, bookshelves, the windowsills, and the floor.

“I usually give readings in here.” Madame Madeline led the way to a small dining room, then turned to look at us. “So who’s going to go first?”

“Oh, I’m not doing this.” Angela shook her head and backed away. “Just her.” She jabbed her thumb at me.

“Then you can have a seat over there.” Madame Madeline directed Angela toward an overstuffed chair in the living room. “And you—what’s your name?” she asked me.

“Sam,” I answered.

“Sam? Is that short for Samantha?”

I nodded.

“Hmm,” she said, her index finger tapping against her chin. “I believe that is an old Aramaic name. It means ‘listener.’”

I could hear Angela snorting in the other room, but I pretended I didn’t. “I don’t know,” I said to Madame Madeline with a nervous smile.

“Okay, well, why don’t you join me here at the table?”

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She pulled out a tall, straight-back wooden chair for me. I slowly eased myself down. Madame Madeline sat beside me.

“So the reason I’m here—” I began.

“Shh!” She put her finger to her lips. “May I see your hand?”

I held out my hand. I figured she was going to read my palm or something, but she was more interested in the back of my hand than my palm. She traced her finger over the big vein that stuck out. It tickled a little.

I glanced over my shoulder at Angela. She was trying really hard not to laugh. I shouldn’t have asked her to come with me. I was serious about this.

I turned back to Madame Madeline. “Don’t you want to know why I’m here?” I asked impatiently, my foot tapping against my chair.

“I know why you’re here,” she replied. She still had hold of my hand. “You have questions. Many questions. And these questions cannot be answered through normal channels.”

“Um...yeah.” Something like that.

“I can’t guarantee a specific answer to your questions,” Madame Madeline said. “All I can do is tell you what I see. The answers to your questions may be there or they may not. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Do you wish to continue?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Then my fee is twenty-five dollars. Payable up front, please.”

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“Oh.” I blinked. “Okay.” I unzipped my purse, pulled out a wad of hard-earned baby-sitting money, and counted out twenty-five bucks. If Madame Madeline could really tell me where my dad was, she’d be worth every penny.

Madame Madeline stuffed the bills into the pocket of her sundress, then peered into my eyes. I felt like she could see all the way through to my soul.

Finally she spoke. “You’re a bright girl, Sam. You do fine in school.”

“I guess that depends on your definition of ‘fine,’” I mumbled. I got mostly B’s in school. Sometimes I got a C in math or gym. In my mom’s book, C’s were practically failing.

“And you have friends,” Madame Madeline went on.

Friends? Yes. Popularity? No.

“It isn’t school or your social life that brings you here today. It’s something else.” Madame Madeline picked up my hand again and turned it around. “It’s your family. Something about your family is out of balance. Something troubles you very deeply.”

“Yes!” I leaned toward her eagerly.

“Your family is divided. There are two on one side and two on the other.”

I didn’t quite know what she meant by that. “There are only two people in my family,” I said. “Just me and my mom. Unless you count Bob. My mom and Bob are getting married pretty soon.”

“Bob is your mother’s fiancé?” Madame Madeline asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

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Madame Madeline frowned. “I do feel that connection. But there’s another connection, too. A deeper one. Another man has been important to your mother. And another child, too. Was your mother married before? Do you, perhaps, have a sister?”

My jaw dropped. How did she know that? “I *had* a sister,” I admitted. “She died.”

Madame Madeline looked confused. “Then there must be another one. Another child that your mother is connected to. And you, too. I feel these connections very strongly. There’s something that separates this child from you, but it isn’t death. This connection is so strong that the other child must be alive.”

I shook my head. “Sarah died when we were three. We were twins.”

“Ah, twins. That’s why the connection is so strong.”

“Could we please talk about my dad?” I asked. “I haven’t heard from him since I was, like, six years old and well, that’s sort of why I’m here—”

“I need to hear more about your sister,” Madame Madeline interrupted. “Would you mind telling me how she died?”

“She drowned.”

“I don’t think so.” Madeline frowned again.

I blinked in surprise. “Yes, she did. I remember.”

“You were there?”

“Well, no. But I remember.”

Madame Madeline shook her head. “I don’t think you do. And I don’t think your sister is dead, Samantha. I think she’s very much alive.”