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PERFECT
HARMONY

BARBARA
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To Linda, dear friend, with much love
(Lucy and Ethel forever!)

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Love to you all!

PERFECT HARMONY

**PART
ONE**

6:00 P.M.—Palm Springs, California

The phone jarred Charlotte out of a deep sleep.

As she reached to answer it, she looked at her bedside clock. Six P.M. She hadn't slept well the past few nights, so she had come home from the lab and stretched out for a short nap. To her surprise, she had slept through the rainy afternoon.

The caller was Desmond. His words dropped like bombshells: "Charlotte, you'd better get down here right away. There's been another one."

She was instantly awake. "A *third*?" The room was dark; she turned on the bedside lamp. "How bad?"

"Like the others. The victim died."

She closed her eyes. *Dear God*. "I'm on my way."

"Charlie. One more thing. There are picketers out front."

She squinted at her rain-washed window. "In this weather?"

"Some of them are holding up the Chalk Hill picture."

Her stomach did a somersault. "Oh no, Des," she whispered.

"I just wanted to warn you so it didn't come as a shock."

She hung up the phone and hurried into the bathroom, as if trying to run from Desmond's shocking announcement. They had the picture. The Chalk Hill Research Lab incident. Charlotte's waking nightmare.

As she stood beneath the coldest shower she could tolerate, the spray set on full force, Charlotte pushed thoughts of Chalk Hill from her mind — *the picture had come back to*

haunt her, as she had feared that someday it would — and tried to analyze the strange dream that had visited her during the nap: her grandmother saying, “We descend from a long line of motherless daughters. Always, at one time in our lives, our mothers guide us from Beyond. Someday, Charlotte-ah, you will hear your mother’s voice speak to you, as I once heard mine.”

“But how will I recognize it?” Charlotte had asked in the dream. “My mother died when I was a baby. I’ve never heard her speak.”

“You will recognize her with your heart, not with your ears.”

“And when will this happen?”

“When the time comes.”

It hadn’t been only a dream; it was also a memory. Charlotte’s grandmother had spoken those prophetic words over ten years ago. Charlotte was still waiting to hear her mother’s voice.

As she dressed hastily but with care, choosing a cream wool suit, white silk blouse, and modest pumps and drawing her long black hair into a gold clip, Charlotte looked out the window at the desert valley spread before her, barely visible in the dying day. A demonic rain fell from a sky black with thunderclouds; in the west, explosions of lightning illuminated the horizon in brief, sulfuric bursts. She thought: If Grandmother were alive, she would be able to read the signs. She would say, “Those clouds, like cranes, urgently flying home. A happy omen. It means good luck is coming.”

Charlotte had never learned to read the signs well, although her grandmother had certainly tried to teach her. Maybe I am too American, Charlotte thought. Just as Grandmother was too Chinese.

As she shielded her eyes from a flash of lightning, she thought: *Palm Springs has three hundred and thirty days of*

sunshine in a year. How can this tempest be considered a good omen?

It was a bad omen. Three deaths caused by Harmony products within one week. It *had* to be product tampering, like the Tylenol case, because Harmony Biotech manufactured herbals under the strictest quality control. But if it was product tampering, then were the deaths related, or had only one of them been the intended target and the other two innocent victims? Or was Harmony House the target?

She clicked on her bedside radio and caught the evening news: flash flood warnings in the low deserts . . . power outages in Pomona, Manhattan Beach, and areas of the San Fernando Valley . . . mudslides in Malibu. . . .

She turned it off. Not good omens at all. . . .

Suddenly something her best friend had once quipped popped into her mind: "A good omen is when your blind date shows up with a pulse."

Charlotte was mortified at herself. How could she think humorous thoughts at a time like this? "Self-defense," Naomi would say. "Humor is chocolate cake for the soul. Without humor we might as well live in Tarzana."

Naomi! Charlotte looked at her watch. She had forgotten. Tonight was Naomi's séance.

Picking up the bedside phone, she quickly dialed her friend's number. Although Charlotte wasn't sure she believed in contact with the dead, she always attended Naomi's séances because, as Naomi had put it, the spirits were drawn irresistibly to Charlotte's rich Chinese vibes. "You're a ghost magnet," Naomi had said with a grin.

She got the answering machine. "Hi," sang Naomi's cheerful voice. "You have reached *the* psychic friend. No network, just me! I can't come to the phone right now because I'm attending a reunion with my past lives. You don't have to leave your name and number. Just press the phone to your forehead and I'll get back to you."

Charlotte didn't like the long beep at the end of the recording because it meant the message machine was almost full. Naomi was very popular. "Naomi? It's me. About tonight —"

The machine cut her off.

Deciding to try again from the car phone, Charlotte hurried through her spacious hillside house and into the kitchen, where the live-in housekeeper was preparing dinner. Retrieving her oversized leather handbag that served as a briefcase and a tote, Charlotte grabbed her keys, and said, "I have to get to the plant, Yolanda. There's an emergency. I don't know how late I will be."

"Pedro should drive you," the housekeeper said, referring to her husband, who worked as a handyman on Charlotte's thirteen-acre desert estate. "The storm is bad."

"I'll be okay. Don't worry." The Sanchezes had been with Charlotte for eight years. They had followed her down from San Francisco "when the medicines moved," Mrs. Sanchez liked to tell the cashier at the grocery checkout at Ralph's. "We could not leave the *señorita* alone. She needs looking after. Except she does not know it."

"But what about your dinner?" Yolanda asked, sweeping her arm over the bubbling pots and pans, the countertops strewn with vegetables and spices.

"I'll grab something in the cafeteria," Charlotte said, and she vanished through the door that connected to the garage.

Cafeteria! Yolanda thought in sudden alarm. This must be a very big emergency indeed for the *señorita* not to care about what she ate. Yolanda knew better than anyone the strange eating habits of her employer.

Tonight, at Miss Lee's instructions, Yolanda was preparing lotus root salad. She was making it not because Miss Lee liked the taste of lotus root but because, as she had once explained to Yolanda, the Chinese words for lotus root and the expression "achieve more each year" sounded almost iden-

tical, and so it was considered helpful to one's finances to eat a lot of lotus root. Yolanda had long ago gotten used to her employer's eating habits, which were governed less by rules of taste than by curious rules such as "sounds like" — Miss Lee ate a lot of long rice because it sounded like "long life" — and selecting good luck food, like bok choy, and avoiding bad luck food, such as corn.

So many rules! Yolanda thought as she went back to her cooking. As far as she was concerned, if you felt like tamales, you ate tamales.

Charlotte used the remote to raise the massive garage door, the motor grinding as overhead lights went on. She slipped behind the wheel of her Corvette — a gift she had bought for herself the year before, when she had turned thirty-eight — and started the engine. As she reached for the car phone and pressed a single button that auto-dialed Naomi's number at the college, she contemplated the formidable storm that was turning her driveway into a river.

She always backed into her garage so that, in an emergency, she could drive out quickly. She was facing the driveway and thinking: Flash floods in the low deserts . . .

When she heard the busy signal at the other end, indicating that Naomi was still at the school — besides being a licensed psychic, she was also a professor of paranormal studies at a desert college — Charlotte cut the connection and regarded the driving rain. She went everywhere in the Corvette; it was her baby. But now she felt vulnerable and at the mercy of the elements in such a small, low-slung car.

Giving the other car in the garage a quick glance — a monster Chevy Suburban she had bought for rare forays into the mountains when pressures at the lab got to be too much — she made a snap decision. Slipping out of the Corvette, she hurried around the utility vehicle and climbed into the driver's seat. The keys were tucked in the sun visor; Pedro

started the motor occasionally to keep the battery charged and washed and waxed the onyx paint job.

Charlotte felt strange in such a big car. She couldn't remember when she had driven it last. Turning the key, she was pleased to hear the engine jump instantly to life — Pedro was a very reliable handyman. She gripped the wheel with confidence. This tank with its mammoth wheels would get her through the worst flooded intersection Palm Springs could throw her way.

With the headlights turning the rain into a curtain of diamonds, Charlotte shifted into gear and eased the Suburban forward.

The crash was sudden and deafening. Charlotte screamed as the windshield exploded in a galaxy of shattered glass, just a split second after a deafening jolt rocked the vehicle and plunged everything into darkness.

2

Voices . . . from far away. "*Dios mio!*"

"What has happened?"

"*Señorita?* Hurry, Pedro!"

As Charlotte felt herself float up from a dark place, she saw two pale faces — the housekeeper and her husband, their eyes big and frightened, their mouths twisted in shock and fear. Charlotte wondered for a moment where she was, but then, as the couple's feet crunched over broken glass and as she saw their shaking hands reaching for her, she remembered that she was in the Suburban and that she had been about to leave for the lab. When her eyes focused on the caved-in windshield, just inches from her face, she cried out.

The garage door was protruding through the shattered glass.

“Are you okay?” Pedro said anxiously as he pulled the driver’s door open. “We heard a noise, *Dios mio!*” He crossed himself.

“What . . .” Charlotte could hardly find breath. “What happened?”

“The door, it fell!” It crashed down on the car. Are you okay? Shall we call a doctor?”

“No. . . .” She raised a hand to her forehead, shards of safety glass cascading from her arm. She looked down at herself. She was covered in glass. “How did it happen?” Accepting Pedro’s offered hand, she tried to slide out of the seat. But there was no strength in her body. Charlotte realized she must be in shock.

“I do not know,” Pedro said, with worry etching deep wrinkles in his leathery face.

“I need . . . I need to change my clothes.”

“You need a doctor!” Yolanda protested, wringing her hands and biting her lip. “Holy Mother of God, we heard the sound. We thought it was thunder!”

Charlotte twisted in the seat, her head clearing, her eyes coming into focus. The garage door rested on the Suburban, leaving enough room for the Guatemalan couple to have walked under if they stooped. Charlotte frowned. Wasn’t the electronic safety, which she had had installed a few months ago, supposed to prevent this very thing from happening?

She put trembling fingertips to her face. Had she been cut? Was she bleeding? But her hands came away clean. By some miracle she had escaped being injured by flying glass.

“I’m all right,” she said as she let Pedro assist her from the car. But as soon as her feet touched the cement floor, her knees gave way. Supporting her around the waist, the elderly handyman helped Charlotte over the broken glass and