

ONE

Destiny is like a boulder. Bulky and hard to move. It's easier to leave it alone than to try to change it. But that never kept anyone from trying. Trust me: I'm a professional.

Reading people is a talent. I've always been a good observer, but as with any natural ability, if you want to be any good, you've got work at it. When I talk to people, I size them up. I listen to what they say and, more important, to what they don't. I notice what they wear, what brands they choose, how they style their hair. I watch their body language to see if it matches their words. The image they work so hard to show off tells me what they're trying to hide.

I make guesses and let them lead me. It's easier than it looks. Then again, most people aren't paying that much attention when someone tells them what they want to hear.

“What do you think, Skye — will it work out?” Sara leaned forward, ignoring the rest of what was going on in our school cafeteria. She chewed her lips. There were sticky pink clots of Sephora lip gloss on her teeth. Nerves. She was worried about what I would say. She’d have been better off worrying about why she wanted to stay with a guy who was a class-A jackass. However, she wasn’t paying me for love advice; she was paying for a psychic connection to the universe.

I shuffled the cards. They were worn and faded, more like fabric than paper. My official story was that my grandmother had passed down this deck of tarot cards to me on her deathbed because she believed I’d inherited her psychic ability. This was a complete lie. The only thing my grandma believed in was bourbon. However, no one trusts a psychic who works with brand-new cards. I ordered the deck from Amazon years ago. When it arrived, I soaked each card in a weak tea bath, then put them in the oven, set on low. It wasn’t exactly a Food Channel recipe, but it worked. I’d shuffled them over and over until the cards took on the look and feel of a deck that had been in the family for generations. I held the cards out to Sara.

“Cut these,” I said. “Make three piles and then stack them.” I pulled back as she reached for the deck, holding them just out of her reach. “It’s important that you focus on your question as you do this.” I fixed her with a stare as if this were a matter of life and death. Sara nodded solemnly. Her hands shook as she cut the deck and then passed it back to me. Part of my secret was making the other person touch the cards. It made them feel complicit in whatever happened next.

I dealt six of the cards into a Celtic Cross spread on the table between us. The cafeteria wasn't the ideal place for a reading. It was hard to feel a connection to something otherworldly when the smell of greasy industrial sloppy joes and overboiled canned corn hung like a cloud in the air. On the other hand, there was no way I was inviting people back home with me. I'd take the overcrowded café and people's judgment that I was a bit of a weirdo before letting my classmates see our salvaged-from-the-dumpster furniture. No thanks. I may be a fake psychic, but I've got *some* pride.

I tapped the table. "The first card represents you and your question. The one over it is what crosses you — got it?" I waited for her to nod and then lightly touched each of the others with the tip of my finger. "This is the basis of your question, the past, what hangs over you, and the final card is the future."

Sara took a deep breath. "Okay, my question is, what's going to happen with Darren and me?"

I flipped over the first card. The queen of cups. This was going to be easy. That is, if I believed in any of this, which I don't. What no one seemed to realize was I could read the tarot any way I wanted. There was no magic. What I had was my ability to memorize the meanings of the various cards, years of watching my mom, and an ability to spin a story. "This card represents you. This is associated with women who are creative and sensitive."

Sara's forehead wrinkled. "I'm not really creative. I mean, I want to be, but . . ."

"You're in the band," I pointed out.

Her shoulders slumped. “Only because my mom made me. She thinks it’ll look good on my college apps.”

“I suspect you have a creative side that you haven’t fully explored,” I offered. “Don’t think of it as just the arts. The queen represents creativity — someone who sees things in a new way.” Her friend Kesha, who was practically seated in her lap, nodded. Her elaborate African braids bounced up and down.

“You’re totally the most creative person in cheer,” Kesha said.

“The squad always does ask me to do the posters,” Sara admitted.

I fought the urge to sigh. Sara needed to broaden her horizons beyond being a good cheerleader. “There you go,” I said, tapping the rest of the deck with confidence on the scarred and chipped table. “Now, the card crossing you is the six of swords. That often means a journey or a separation.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Like a breakup?”

Only if you’re smart enough to dump his ass.

I shrugged. “Maybe, but it could also be a journey of the mind.”

Kesha’s forehead wrinkled up like one of those shar-pei dogs. “What does that mean?”

“It means that either Sara or Darren is at a stage where their life could go in a different direction. That they’re changing. Evolving.”

“What if he changes so much that he doesn’t want me anymore?” Sara’s voice came out tiny and small. Kesha reached over and squeezed her hand. Sara’s lip quivered. “He’s going downstate for college in the fall. He says we’ll date long distance,

but . . .” She was unable to put into words what she knew was coming.

I turned over another card. “This is the seven of cups. It means opportunities and possibilities.”

“Is that good?” Sara bit her lower lip.

“It’s always good to have options.” *Like choosing a guy who doesn’t sit with his Neanderthal friends and hold up a sheet of paper with a number rating girls as they walk by in the cafeteria.* “You have choices coming up. You could see who else is out there.” I saw her expression and switched my approach. She wasn’t interested in advice about who to date. “Or another option is figuring out what changes you could make to your relationship with Darren.”

“How can I do that?”

I turned another card. Death. The skeleton held his scythe at the ready. Kesha gasped. “That looks really bad,” she said.

They’re playing cards, I wanted to say, but I stuffed down the urge to ask if she was afraid of Monopoly or Chutes and Ladders. “The death card isn’t bad —”

“Death card?!” Sara’s voice cracked.

The effort to keep from rolling my eyes was giving me a headache. “It doesn’t mean *death*, not like physical death. It means that there’s a change coming. Something moving from one state to another. It can be a really good thing.” I flipped the next card. “Ah,” I said, and nodded knowingly.

Sara looked down and then back at me. “What does *that* mean?”

“It’s called the hanging man.”

“Oh Jesus.” Kesha’s hands twisted in her lap.

“See how he’s suspended by his feet?” I pointed to the illustration. “His card represents seeing the world from a different perspective. It’s not a bad card.”

“I don’t get it, Skye. What does that have to do with Darren and me?” Sara was leaning so far forward, her nose was practically on the table.

I smiled and spread my arms. “Don’t you see? That card gives you the possible solution.”

Sara exchanged glances with Kesha to see if it made more sense to her. Based on Kesha’s expression, it didn’t.

I sighed. “Tarot isn’t about any one card. It’s about how they work together. Look at what you have here, what cards *you* drew.” It never hurt to remind the person that if they didn’t like the outcome, they were partly to blame. “We started with you as a creative person. Then what’s opposing you at this point is that Darren is undergoing a journey. That makes sense if he’s going away in the fall. Then there are two forces — this card meaning change is coming. That tells me this can’t be avoided.”

Sara nodded. “I feel like I’m already losing him, and he hasn’t even graduated yet.”

“I understand,” I said. “But how the situation turns out will depend on your ability to make him see you in a fresh way. Maybe change your look, or do something out of character that makes him rethink your role in his life.”

“He always wants me to go camping,” she mumbled. “It’s usually not my kinda thing.”

“There you go,” I said, pointing at her chest as if she’d just solved a really tricky problem. “Doing stuff outside your comfort zone is *exactly* the kind of thing you should be doing if you want to keep him.”

Someone a few aisles over tripped and dropped a tray with a loud crash and the shatter of exploding dishes. A cheer went up from the crowd in the cafeteria. Pain and humiliation is always amusing when it happens to someone else. Other psychics never had to work with these distractions.

“So, if I reinvent myself, then Darren and I will stay together?”

I shrugged. “That’s what the cards imply. Not that he needs someone different — just that he needs to *see* you differently.” At least I was giving her good advice, regardless of Darren. Everyone benefits from shaking up their routine once in a while.

The corners of Sara’s mouth started to turn up. “You know what this means . . .”

Kesha let out a squeal. “Makeover!” The two of them hugged. “We’ll go to the mall after school. When he sees you he’ll already be planning his first visit home before he even leaves.” Kesha’s face was determined. The woman was on a retail quest to help her bestie.

“There’s another way you could read the cards,” I said, kicking myself for not just leaving it alone. “Your card is creativity and strength. You could also see this situation as change is inevitable, but you’ll be fine no matter what Darren does. That you have the inner strength to move forward in a new direction on your own.”

Her mouth pinched. “But there’s still a chance for me to work things out with him, right?”

I gave up. If she wanted to waste all that energy on a boy, it wasn’t my problem. None of their problems were mine. I had plenty of my own. “Sure.”

Sara leaned back in her chair as if all of her energy had rushed out like air from a balloon. Now that she had a plan, she was exhausted.

I shuffled the cards back into a tidy stack. I took my time. Sometimes people decided once the cards were out that they might as well ask a few more questions. Fine with me. I charge for each deal, but after a beat I could tell Sara wasn’t going to ask anything else. Now that the great Darren mystery had been put to bed, she wasn’t interested. She was too busy plotting how to remake herself into Darren’s ideal. She could do better, but that wasn’t the question she’d asked.

That was always the awkward moment — when it came time for them to pay. I hated asking for the cash. It felt slimy, but not so distasteful that I was willing to do it for free. My mom made it easy with a sign by our door noting that she accepted both cash and PayPal. I cleared my throat and turned my hand palm up.

“Oh, sorry.” Sara pulled a ten out of her wallet and slid it over as if she didn’t want to touch me. “Thanks, Skye. That was awesome.” I shoved the bill into my pocket. She watched me tuck the deck of cards into the small paisley fabric bag I kept them in. “That was pretty cool.”

“The gift chose me,” I said with a shrug. I didn’t point out that the reason she thought I was amazing was because I told

her exactly what she wanted to hear. I knew Darren well enough to know he followed his dick around like a dog on a leash. Sara wasn't done crying over him. I'd have bet money on it. No psychic ability required for that prediction.

Sara wasn't some cheerleader cliché. She was on squad, but she was also an honor student. I'd heard she was in AP chemistry and calculus, and she was only a junior. You would think someone that smart wouldn't be so stupid. But they were all like that.

She waved to me over her shoulder as she scurried across to her friends, and I smiled back. Another happy customer. With any luck, a few of those friends would decide they wanted their own readings. They tended to come in clusters.

My stomach rumbled. Even with the ten bucks, I shouldn't make a Subway run. I was still way short of my goal. I should have saved the money, but it wasn't like ten bucks was going to make a huge difference. Screw it. I could already smell that fresh-baked bread.