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Opening Extract from...

Day Four

Written by Sarah Lotz

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For my dad, Alan Walters

(aka The Doc)

Welcome on Board *The Beautiful Dreamer!*

Congratulations on choosing a Foveros Cruise,
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Start your Holiday of a Lifetime by treating yourself to a cocktail at one of our many sun-drenched bars while our musicians delight with their signature sounds. Then cool down in the pool and take a spin on Foveros's WaterWonder™ slides. Hungry? No problem! Our dining room and buffets will provide feasts galore, from five-star fare to yummy comfort food like momma used to make! And hey, don't forget to pamper yourself at our superb spa – you deserve it! Our cabaret performances will delight, so settle into your seats and prepare to be entertained like never before! Soak up the sun during one of our many exciting excursions, where you can shop till you drop at our many concessions, snorkel in turquoise seas, horse-ride along beautiful beaches, and enjoy al fresco dining on our fabulous private island. And why not take a spin in the Delectable Dreamer Casino? Who knows? It could be your lucky day!

DAYS 1, 2, 3

Cruise is relatively uneventful.

DAY 4

The Witch's Assistant

Maddie waited until Celine was midway into her opening monologue, then threaded her way through the capsule chairs, making for the empty area at the back of the Starlight Dreamer Lounge. She'd almost made it when the cruise director's voice boomed over the PA system, drowning out Celine's patter with his reminder that the New Year's festivities would kick off in 'T minus two hours'.

'Voices from above,' Celine quipped, but Maddie wasn't fooled by this show of good humour. Celine had been like a Rottweiler with a sore tooth all day, sniping at the backstage tech after he'd snagged her dress attaching the microphone's transmitter to her wheelchair, and complaining that the spotlight wasn't in the correct position to halo her hair.

'Know this,' Celine continued once the announcement had petered away. 'When you all return home, rested and suntanned and maybe a few pounds heavier,' – she waited for a ripple of laughter to die down – 'you won't be alone. Friends, in all my years of helping people connect with those who've crossed over, there are two things I can tell you for sure. One: there is no death; and two: the souls of those who've left the physical world are always with us . . .'

With Celine back on track, Maddie allowed herself to relax. She leaned against a pillar and massaged her neck, trying and failing to dissolve the headache that had dogged her since day one of the cruise. It was probably just a side effect of the anti-nausea medication she was taking, but the garish environment wasn't helping. Whoever had designed the ship's decor had a hard-on for Vegas-inspired neon and naked male angels; you couldn't go anywhere without being blinded by an illuminated palm tree or leered at by

a cherub. Still – just one more night to get through and she'd be free of this floating hellhole. The first thing she was going to do when she got back to her apartment was run a bath and scrub the ship off her skin. Then she'd treat herself to a takeout from Jujubee's – splurge on the crab special with glass noodles and extra garlic. She could afford the calories; she must have lost at least five pounds this week.

'Hey, baby,' a voice stage-whispered in her ear. She turned to see Ray, his eyes fixed to her breasts. He'd jettisoned his usual shorts and navy T-shirt combo in favour of Levis and a flimsy cream shirt, which gave him the appearance of a seedy lounge singer.

'Shouldn't you be on the door, Ray?' Tonight's event was strictly for 'Friends of Celine' only – the select group who'd paid through the nose to cruise with 'America's Number One Psychic Medium' – and Ray knew as well as she did that Celine would flip if a non-paying passenger wandered in.

He shrugged. 'Yeah, yeah. So listen – you know when we stopped at Cozumel yesterday?'

'So?'

'So I got one of the waiters to smuggle me in a bottle of high-end tequila. The good stuff.'

A Friend sitting on the outskirts of the group scrunched around in her chair and shushed them. Maddie shot her an apologetic smile, and hissed at Ray to keep his voice down.

'Whatever. So, hey – party later, my cabin. You in?'

More heads were turning in their direction. 'Seriously, Ray, shut the—'

'Think about it,' he smirked. 'Going to grab a frosty while the boss does her *thang*.' Maddie watched him saunter off towards the bar, checking out a waitress en route.

Arsehole.

The atmosphere grew taut as Celine moved on to the highlight of the evening. She licked her lips, touched her chest and said: 'I'm getting . . . Who's Caroline? No, wait . . . Katherine? Someone with . . . it's a C or a K. Nope . . . it's definitely Katherine. Kathy, maybe.'

Maddie smothered a jab of guilt as Jacob, one of the older Friends, wobbled to his feet. She had a soft spot for Jacob. She admired his sense of style (he tended to dress as if he was a guest at a gay wedding), and he wasn't as pushy as some of the others. Celine had feigned illness for much of the cruise, barely showing her face at the various meet 'n' greets and cocktail events, so Maddie had been left to pick up the slack. Part of her job was schmoozing with Celine's fan base, but there was a world of difference between trading messages with the lonely and desperate online, and contending with their neediness face to face. Listening to the Friends' hopes that Celine would connect with their loved ones, missing relatives, and in some cases, deceased pets, had worn her ragged. 'Kathy's my sister!' Jacob called.

'That's what I'm getting,' Celine nodded. 'Know this, she's stepping forward right this second. Hey . . . Why can I smell turkey?' She chuckled. 'And sweet potato pie. Good pie at that.'

Jacob gasped and wiped at his eyes. 'She disappeared in the late seventies, round about Thanksgiving. Is she . . . is she at peace?'

'Yes. Know this. She has left the physical world and has gone into the light. She wants you to know that every time you think of her, her soul is with you.'

Jacob waited for more, but Celine just smiled blandly back at him and he nodded and sat down.

Celine touched her chest again. 'I'm getting . . . It's getting harder to breathe. There's someone here who's . . . they passed before their time. I'm talking about a suicide. Yes.'

Leila Nelson, a bony woman with mild hair loss, squealed and jumped out of her chair. 'Oh my *Lord*! My husband killed himself two years ago.'

'I want you to know he's stepping forward, my darling. What's with the breathing? I'm thinking . . . did he asphyxiate? Does this make sense to you? I'm tasting carbon monoxide here.'

'Oh my *Lord*. That's how he did it! In the garage, in his Chevy.'

'In his Chevy.' Celine paused to ram this home to the Friends. 'What's the significance of April?'

'His birthday was in April.'

'So April's his birthday. Yeah, that's what I'm getting from him. A tall man, does that make sense?'

Leila hesitated. 'John was five eight.'

'That's tall if you're me, my darling,' Celine rallied. 'I'm getting that . . . Was John unhappy at work? Does that make sense to you?'

'Yes! He lost his job. He was never the same after that.'

'What's with the shoes?'

'Oh my *Lord*, he was always particular about his shoes. Always polishing them, been like that since he left the marines.'

'That's what I'm getting. A feeling like he was a very particular, precise sort of person. Know this, he wants you to know that what happened to him, the way he died, it was nothing you did. He needs you to move on with your life.'

'So he doesn't mind that I'm getting remarried?'

Shit. That was one detail Leila hadn't mentioned during last night's Friends of Celine cocktail event, but Celine didn't skip a beat. 'Know this, he's proud that you're doing so well.'

'He was such a jealous man, though. What I need to know is if he—'

'My darling, I'll have to interrupt you there, as Archie is coming through.' Celine pressed a hand to her throat. 'I can feel the weight of him. He's coming through strongly now.' Maddie suppressed a shudder. Fake or not, Archie, Celine's primary spirit guide – an urchin who'd supposedly died of consumption in late nineteenth-century London – gave her the screaming heebies. There weren't many mediums who channelled the voices of their guides these days, and secretly Maddie thought Celine sounded like Dick van Dyke gargling caustic soda whenever Archie's voice 'came through'.

Celine paused for dramatic effect. 'There's a bloke 'ere who wants a word with Juney,' Archie's voice rattled from Celine's throat.

Juanita, the Friend who'd shushed Ray, sprang to her feet. 'That's me! Juney is my nickname!'

Celine reverted to her normal voice: 'Juney, don't feel bad about leaving the insulin out of the fridge. He knows you didn't mean it.'

Goosebumps popped on Maddie's arms. Juanita hadn't said anything about insulin last night. Celine was adept at cold reading, but that was an unusually precise detail. She tended to stick to generalities.

Juanita's face creased. 'Jeffrey? Jeffrey, is that you?'

A blade of light sliced through the gloom as a man slipped through the doors on the far side of the lounge. He was two decades younger than Celine's core demographic, his legs clad in skinny jeans and boots, his arms scrawled with tattoos. Ray hadn't noticed the intruder; he was slumped on a bar stool, his back to the doors.

'Celine del Ray!' the guy shouted, striding towards the stage and pointing a camera phone in Celine's direction. 'Celine del Ray!'

Shit. The week after Celine had signed up as the cruise's guest celebrity, Maddie had heard via Twitter that there might be a blogger on board, and it looked like he'd finally decided to pitch up.

'Who is that?' Celine called, squinting into the audience.

'Any comment about the fact that Lillian Small is planning to sue you?'

A collective gasp. There were too many obstacles for Maddie to get to the guy easily, and she couldn't count on the wait staff to intervene. Thankfully Ray had realised what was going on and was hustling towards him.

'You know the story, right?' the man crowed to the Friends gaping at him. 'This so called *medium*, this *predator*, bombarded Mrs Small with messages saying that her daughter and grandson were alive in Florida, when DNA proves that . . .' he faltered. 'Proves that . . .' he clamped a hand to his mouth. 'Oh *fuck*.' With that, he whirled, shoved past Ray and ran out, the doors hissing closed behind him.

Ray glanced at Maddie and she gestured at him to follow.

Celine chuckled again, but it sounded forced. 'Uh. I tell you, that was . . . Give me a minute here.' She took a slug of Evian from the bottle in her wheelchair pocket. The room settled into an uneasy silence. 'You know, there are always gonna be doubters.

But I can only repeat what Spirit tells me. That situation . . . you know . . . Wait . . . I'm getting something else here. You know, sometimes the spirits come through so strong that I can taste what they're tasting, feel what they're feeling. I'm getting . . . Smoke. I can smell smoke . . . I'm hearing . . . Someone here lose a loved one in a fire? Does that make sense to anyone?'

No one spoke up. Maddie squirmed.

'It could be . . . yeah, you know, I'm smelling gas, think it might be a car accident. I'm getting . . . What is the significance of the I-90?'

A Friend called out that his second cousin had been killed in a head-on collision on that highway years earlier. Maddie allowed herself to breathe again. Ray crept back into the room and gave Maddie the A-okay sign. She checked her phone. Five minutes to go. She edged towards Celine, signalling that it was time to wrap it up. Ray had better do his bloody job and usher everyone out as fast as possible. The Friends were booked to eat at the second sitting, so they'd have to leave straight away if they didn't want a rubbery lobster tail.

Celine wished the Friends a Happy New Year and ran through her usual schtick about visiting her website where there were links to purchase her eleven books. Maddie leapt onto the stage before her boss could be engulfed in a tsunami of well-wishers. Celine's wheelchair wasn't strictly necessary (although she could propel it with the skill of a Paralympian if an over-zealous fan threatened to approach), but Maddie was glad of it this evening. Close up, Celine was really showing her age; her waxy skin had the look of an apple left too long in cold storage, her lips were the colour of old deli meat.

Maddie unplugged the mic and handed it to the tech before Celine recovered and lambasted him for the PA system screw-up.

'You okay, Celine?' she murmured.

'Get me the fuck outta here now.'

'Celine?' Leila bustled up to them before Maddie could intervene, waving a copy of part two of Celine's autobiography, *Medium*

to the Stars and Beyond. 'I meant to ask you last night at the cocktail evening, but you were there so briefly . . . could you sign this?'

Celine smiled icily. 'It'd be a pleasure, my darling.'

'Can you put, "To Leila, my biggest fan"? I've got all your books. E-editions and audio as well.'

Maddie handed Celine a pen, glancing at Leila to see if she'd noticed Celine's shaking hands; fortunately she was far too busy staring rapturously at her face. 'You've helped me so much, Celine. You and Archie of course.' Leila pressed the book to her chest. 'You've really brought me peace. John . . . he wasn't the easiest and . . . I don't know how you do it.'

'It's a God-given gift, my darling. Know this, your faith and support means a lot to me.'

'And you mean a lot to me. That awful man who burst in here doesn't have a—'

'Celine is very tired,' Maddie interrupted. 'Connecting with Spirit takes a lot out of her. I'm sure you understand.'

'Oh, I do, I do,' Leila said, bobbing and bowing and scurrying off to join the other Friends bottlenecking the exit.

Ray approached. 'Sorry about that, Celine.'

Celine's eyes – already unnaturally hooded from a screwed-up eyelift in the eighties – narrowed. 'Yeah? What the hell, Ray? I pay you for *that*?'

'How was I supposed to know he was gonna show up? I checked out everyone else.'

'You should have been at the goddamned door, Ray.'

'Celine, like I say, I fucked up. Won't happen again.'

Celine snorted. 'Damn right it won't. Where'd he go anyway?'

'Ran into the restroom. Looked like he was gonna puke.'

Maddie's stomach rolled over. After stupidly reading a *Huff Post* exposé about ship-borne viruses, she'd only been able to cope by washing her hands at every opportunity and popping probiotics like an addict. Still, that explained why they hadn't been hounded by the blogger before. He must have been holed up in his cabin praying to the porcelain god for the duration of the cruise.

'You want me to escort you back to your cabin?' Ray asked.

'It's a suite,' Celine snapped. 'And no. Get out of my sight. Madeleine can do it.'

Ray nodded miserably and slunk away. Maddie knew very little about his personal life, but he'd mentioned something about having to pay child support to one of his exes. He may be a letch and a bullshitter, but she almost pitied him – he'd be lucky if he still had a job when they reached Miami. Celine's bodyguards never lasted long.

'Goddamned bloggers and undercover journalists,' Celine griped, twirling a hand in the air to indicate they should get going. 'Forty years I've been doing this. It's my God-given gift . . .'

Maddie let Celine ramble on as she manoeuvred the wheelchair out via the stage door exit, blinking as her eyes were blasted by the pink and gold neon signage splayed all over the Promenade Dreamz deck. Passengers streamed towards the staircase for the second dinner sitting, and twenty-somethings in tight white shorts and 'Foveros = Fun! Fun! Fun!' T-shirts flitted around, rumba-ing to the calypso music in the background and hawking plastic angel wings and devil horns for tonight's Heaven 'n' Hell themed New Year's Eve party. Maddie had no intention of going anywhere near the festivities. She planned on putting Celine to bed, ordering a grilled cheese sandwich from room service (her gut clenched at the thought of eating the mass-produced slop in the dining room and buffets) then heading up to the jogging track above the Lido deck. She hadn't yet found a gap to do her five miles today.

A trio of meaty men with fluorescent halos attached to their shaven heads made way for them as Maddie inched Celine into the elevator, which, as usual, smelled faintly of vomit. She pressed the button for the Verandah deck with her elbow and wheeled Celine as far away from the damp patch on the carpet as she could get. A reggae rendition of 'Rehab' plinked as they were propelled upwards through the atrium, the glass sides gradually revealing the lobby and cocktail bars below.

'Christ, I need a drink,' Celine said.

'Nearly there.'

Maddie dragged the wheelchair out of the elevator and headed in the direction of the VIP staterooms. A couple of giggly elderly women squeezed themselves against the corridor wall to allow them to pass. Maddie smiled brightly at them to make up for Celine's surly 'whatever' response to their Happy New Year wishes, and waved at Althea, the deck's cabin steward, who was exiting a neighbouring suite, a bunch of towels tucked under an arm.

'Good evening, Mrs del Ray and Maddie!' Althea called. 'Do you need any help?'

Celine ignored her, but Althea's smile didn't falter. Maddie had no clue how Althea remained so cheerful while mopping up after arseholes like Celine. Most of the staff exuded an exhausting (obviously fake) joviality, but Maddie was certain Althea's constant good mood wasn't a front.

After swiping the room card several times until the lock finally flashed green, Maddie hefted the wheelchair into the narrow entrance area and pushed Celine towards the balcony and her collection of booze.

Celine jabbed a talon at the TV. 'For Christ's sake change the goddamned channel. How many times have I told that goddamned woman not to touch it?'

On screen, Damien, the cruise director – an Australian with the fixed gaze of someone dangerously bipolar – was once again running through his tour of the ship. Maddie flicked past a *Saturday Night Live* parody of failed Republican nominee Mitch Reynard, and a shopping channel, where two middle-aged women were gushing over a reversible jacket, before settling on footage of the run-up to the Times Square ball drop. Without being asked, she scooped ice into a glass and poured Celine a double J&B.

Celine snatched it out of her hand and took a gulp. 'Christ, that's better. You're a good girl, Madeleine.'

Maddie rolled her eyes. 'Did I just hear you correctly?'

'Archie says you're thinking of quitting.'

'Celine, I'm always thinking of quitting. Maybe I wouldn't if you stopped calling me a useless bitch.'

'You know I don't mean it.' She gestured at the TV again. 'I

don't need reminding that another year's over. Put one of my films on.'

'Which one?'

'*Pretty Woman*.'

Maddie connected the hard drive and scrolled through the menu until she reached the Julia Roberts folder. She still couldn't reconcile Celine's hard-bitten outlook on life with her addiction to nineties romcoms; Maddie had lost count of the number of scratchy motel chairs she'd sat in, waiting for her boss to fall asleep while *When Harry Met Sally* or *French Kiss* played out to their predictable conclusions.

Celine rattled the glass for a refill. 'So. What are we gonna do about Ray?'

'You're the boss.'

'You know he's got a thing for you, Madeleine.'

'Ray's got a thing for everyone with a vagina. He's a dickhead.'

Celine sighed. 'I know. The cute ones always are. He'll have to go. But that doesn't solve your problem, does it?'

'I've got a problem?'

'You need a man in your life, Madeleine. It's about time you put your past to rest.'

'Not this again. What the hell am I going to do with a man?'

Celine cackled. 'Well, if I have to tell you . . .'

'You want to tell me how I'm supposed to maintain a relationship when I'm on the road with you nine months out of the year?'

'Yeah, yeah, guilt-trip the old woman. You should go to the party tonight. See if you can snag yourself one of those cute crew members in their tight white pants. How long has it been? You know, since you last . . .'

'None of your business.'

'That's not an answer. You want me to ask Archie what he—'

'Enough with the personal stuff, Celine.'

'Just saying, you deserve better outta life.'

'Okay if I use your bathroom?' If she took her time in there, with any luck Celine would pass out in front of the movie and she'd be able to slip away without too much of an ear-bashing.

'Go right ahead.'

Maddie fled inside it and locked the door. It was three times the size of the one in her cabin, with a whirlpool bath and a pyramid of rolled white towels. She sat on the toilet lid and rubbed her temples. Thanks to that hipster guy, Celine would be in funk for the next week at least. And no doubt the footage he'd taken would already be all over YouTube. Celine had only signed up for the cruise to get away from the heat after the Lillian Small debacle, but they'd both known it could backfire on them.

After it had all blown up, Maddie had never said 'I told you so'. She'd warned Celine not to go on Eric Kavanaugh's *Black Thursday Remembrance Show*; the shock-jock was notorious for skewering psychics, scientologists and spiritualists. Plus, Celine had been one of the much-maligned 'Circle of Psychics' who'd joined together to 'use their combined energy' to ascertain the apparently mysterious causes of the four plane crashes that had occurred back in 2012. Kavanaugh had gleefully ripped the psychics a new one when the NTSB released its findings and it transpired that the psychics had struck out on all counts. To be fair, Celine had been holding her own until the subject of the Florida crash had come up. Maddie still had no clue what had possessed her boss to insist that Lori Small and her son Bobby, two of the passengers aboard the aircraft that had plummeted into the Everglades, were alive. Even when Bobby and Lori's DNA was discovered amongst the wreckage, Celine continued to proclaim that the mother and son were out there somewhere, wandering the streets of Miami, suffering from amnesia. She'd gone too far to back down. Tragically, Lori's mother, Lillian Small, had spent all her savings hiring private detectives to follow this dubious lead, and now an enterprising lawyer had taken on her case and was gunning for Celine.

It wasn't the first time Celine had got it wrong – but it was certainly the most high-profile of her blunders. But then . . . Maddie wasn't being entirely fair, was she? Celine *had* occasionally been right, hadn't she? There was tonight's insulin revelation for a start (but it was possible Ray had passed on that

nugget – she'd have to check). She knew that statistically Celine had to hit on some facts that weren't fed to her by Maddie or whichever hapless ex-cop she'd hired to play the part of her bodyguard, but it still made her feel uneasy. And the guilt she usually managed to keep at bay was getting to her. Needling at her. It was a mistake getting to know the Friends. Maybe she should just quit. *And do what?* A shitty minimum wage job was the best she could hope for with her record. She could always move back to the UK, slink back with her tail between her legs. Her sister would love that: *I told you so, Maddie, I told you it would all end in tears*.

'You fallen in?' Celine shouted.

'Coming!' Maddie called. So much for Celine passing out. She was about to get up, when the floor lurched, forcing her to grab onto the toilet-roll holder. Her knees began juddering, a strong vibration hummed under her feet. The lights flickered, there was a long mechanical yawning sound and then . . . silence.

Pulse thumping in her throat, Maddie unlocked the door and hurried into the suite. 'Celine? I think there's something wrong with the ship.'

Maddie was expecting Celine to say something along the lines of: 'You're goddamned right something's wrong with the ship, it's a shithole,' but her head was slumped forward; her arms hung listlessly over the chair's sides. The glass lay on the carpet where it must have slipped from her fingers.

On screen, Richard Gere rolled down Hollywood Boulevard. Then the television blinked off.

'Celine? Celine, are you okay?'

No answer.

Maddie crept forward and touched the crepey skin on Celine's forearm. No response. She moved around to face her and sank to her knees. 'Celine?' Without lifting her head, Celine sucked in a breath, then began humming a jaunty, jazzy tune that reminded Maddie of Lizzie Bean, another (albeit less vocal) of Celine's spirit guides. 'Celine?' It was becoming difficult to swallow. 'Hey . . . Come on, Celine.'

Celine raised her head, a look of such raw terror in her eyes that Maddie yipped and fell back on her haunches. 'Jesus!'

Maddie leapt to her feet, meaning to lunge for the phone, but then the lights went out again, and she stumbled as the ship listed to the left. She fought to control her breathing, had almost done so when a voice cut through the silence. 'Ho-hum, me old ducky,' Archie cackled. 'This is going to be fun.'