

## **Prologue**

Mahin spent a good deal of her time believing that life was made up of choices. Each choice she made decided her future. Fate held little sway in her belief system. In many ways, fate was simply the outer structure of the universe. Her destiny, and that of her clients, was in each of their own hands. Good choices equaled good outcome.

In spite of the many twists and turns that her life had taken up to this point, she maintained that belief. She could see, in retrospect, how each decision had led to the ensuing events. It all made perfect sense.

At some point in one's life, we are faced with a chance to create our future or to follow the winds of fate. However, there may come a time when the two become so intertwined that one becomes another and the lines that separate the two are eradicated.

Were life ever so simple, we might find ourselves bored with the lack of possibilities.

## I

She sat against the retaining wall. The undulating waters of the lake began to take on a cartoon-like quality. He stood against a clear sky, a waxing moon created an eerie outline of his shadowy form. The world was not spinning, but it was definitely rocking. She reached for the wine glass, nearly knocking it over in the process. She tried to line up her hands with the motion of her mind, to and fro, and finally grasped the glass. Pleased to find another swallow left in the bottom, she put it to her lips and tipped it nearly vertical. A slight moan of pleasure left her lips as she smacked them and licked the remaining drops from the corner of her mouth. She felt like she was floating and dropped the glass into the sand beside her.

He watched. He was a vulture waiting for the death of his quarry. He dared not move until she was still. Soon, she felt as if her body held no weight. Slowly she drifted upward, toward a brightening light. As she departed, she looked down on the man as he began his work on her now still and empty body. It was only a brief glance. She felt drawn and invited, following the light up and away. All of the events that led up to this night faded away with each movement forward, until all that remained was a wisp of what she had been in that body.

One last look revealed something familiar. She had seen this before, but it no longer mattered. She was away to better things. He could have the body, but her spirit was singularly hers.

## II

Mahin laid the cards as she did every now and again. Sometimes it was more out of habit than in response to anything in particular. This day she shuffled the cards and felt like laying out two. Dealing from the top, Mahin turned over a card, from side to side rather than flipping it top to bottom. The High Priestess lay before her. A woman in a flowing gown, between contrasting pillars, holding a scroll that spoke of secret knowledge, adorned this card. She tried to grasp any fleeting notions about the card, but nothing came, so she added the second card, Death.

It was common knowledge among tarot readers that the Death card seldom meant actual death. This was not always the case when Mahin met this card and she felt a twinge in her stomach at coming face to face with this dark figure. Mahin mulled over this combination, but did not seem to grasp their meanings for this day. She made note of the cards in her journal, writing some accompanying thoughts next to each entry. She then placed the two cards back in the deck, gave it a short shuffle, and returned the deck to its wooden box.

Mahin had errands to run, but put them off. She did not like going out into the world. She always felt dirty afterwards, like something was sticking to her soul. She checked the cupboards one more time, no cat food. Jespa, her white, sleek, cat, who donned a black tail and two asymmetrical spots on his head, would not appreciate an empty bowl. With a sigh, Mahin chose a pair of mirrored sunglasses and a straw hat. The weather was unseasonably warm today. She checked her image in the mirror. Her dark hair looked more wild than normal. She tucked in some loose strands, made sure that her reflection could not see her eyes, and grabbed her keys and a man's wallet off the antique humidior. This humidior looked like a simple chest on four legs, but the doors opened up to reveal a tin lining, that is, when she could get the doors open. Because of its age, the doors would occasionally stick so tightly that the only way to open it was with a pry bar. Mahin always took care not to mar the wood or to damage the oriental painting that spanned the double doors when she was forced to use this method. It was one of the few things that she had managed to keep after the sale. The house was nearly empty now. So many of the things that they had collected were sold to pay for the remaining bills.

A chirp jarred her from her memories and Mahin turned to find Jespa looking up at her.

"I know. I'm sorry, sweet boy. I'm going to go get your food right now. I'll even get a can of that stinky stuff you like so much." He answered her with a soft meow. Mahin kneeled down on the floor and Jespa climbed onto her lap, placed his front paws on her shoulders, and lowered his head to bump against her forehead. Mahin rubbed both sides of his head with her hands, ruffling his fur. She then kissed his head, got up off the floor, and told Jespa to keep an eye on things. Mahin locked the door behind her and, once she was on the outside, tested the lock twice; first to make sure that she had locked it and then to make sure that the first time she

was not imagining that it was locked. This ritual had become more elaborate with time. Living alone made her ever more aware of the dangers the outside world had to fling at her. That ritual complete, Mahin pulled her hat down a little lower over her eyes and started walking for the grocery store.

Herkimer, New York, was not a big town, but it had changed a great deal since she had gone to high school there. One end kept acquiring businesses, restaurants, and chain stores while the other had health services and business offices. In amongst all of this were homes. Homes that were houses, homes that were duplexes, homes that were apartments, and some homes that were houses converted to apartments. Mahin liked to think about each residence as a home. The word was comforting. Fortunately, the grocery store was only a five-minute walk from her home. She set a medium pace before realizing that she had not taken her inhaler before leaving. Rather than turn back, Mahin decided to slow her pace a little, instead. It was an early spring day but the weather was warm for the area; 69 degrees last time she had checked. The sun was shining and a few clouds interrupted the otherwise continuous blue of the sky. Trees still wore their skeletal garments from winter, with the small accessories of varying colored buds on the tips of their branches. Old leaves, left over from fall, lined the streets, and gave Mahin's walk a distinct spring-like smell. It was that smell that reminded her that life was beginning again from the life that had ended. Normally, this scent would have given bounce to her step. Since he had been gone, her step lacked that bounce and today's weather did not change that.

Route 28, though normally a busy road, was only lightly trafficked this day. It was ten o'clock in the morning. Mahin realized that the general population was working, which explained the lack of cars on the road. Rather than waiting for the crossing signal, she walked against the light. The back road into the grocery store had no sidewalk, so Mahin crossed to the left side to walk against the traffic until the corner of the store where the walkway began. Mahin walked into the store, ignoring the whine of the automatic doors and side stepping an elderly woman who was meticulously replacing her cart. Mahin grabbed a hand basket. If it did not fit in here, she would not be able to carry it home.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized that there were very few shoppers today. Mahin started in the pet aisle. She found two boxes of food for Jespa and then carefully looked through the gourmet cat food, trying to find the sliced version, rather than the mushy kind. Once found, she put one can into the basket. Thinking for a moment, she set the basket on the floor and withdrew the man's wallet from the back pocket of her jeans. Opening it up, she counted the money. Realizing that she would not be able to dine with her feline friend if she did not adjust the contents of the basket, she removed one of the boxes and replaced it on the shelf in the exact spot from whence it came. Mahin thought it very inconsiderate to leave things haphazardly throughout the store and upon seeing the cast offs from other shoppers in improper places, she would shake her head in distaste.

She left the little can of overpriced cat food in the basket; after all, she had promised it to Jespa. She then went to the meat department and bought the smallest package of the leanest ground beef she could find, three quarters of a pound. The store sold other meat in single servings to accommodate the various widowed seniors who shopped there, but they rarely seemed to have single servings of ground beef. Mahin headed for the produce department. She stopped short when she saw someone she thought that she recognized. Inside, she felt a knot in her stomach. It made her nauseous. She looked around quickly and then stepped into a bread aisle. Once she realized that she still had on her hat and sunglasses, the panic eased a bit. Small talk was painful. Questions about her current well being were even more so. Mahin glanced at

the prices of the different breads. She said a secret “thank you” that she was not a “sandwich person”. When she noticed the person leaving, Mahin went quickly to the potatoes and picked out one, well-shaped russet. After calculating the impending total in the basket. Mahin chose a cashier that she had not gone to for some time. Her items were bagged, one for the cat food and one for the people food. Mahin walked home the way that she had come. Her legs ached before she crossed the street. Will power was what she used to finish her journey home. It was what she had used to get through many journeys in her life.

As she turned the key in the lock, Jespa gave a loud meow to greet his housemate. Mahin knelt down and bumped heads with him after setting the bags on the table.

“How’s my boy? Did ya miss me?” After inspecting the bags, Jespa chirped his reply and proceeded to weave around Mahin’s legs once she was up and attempting to put away the groceries. Mahin put the meat in the refrigerator and the cat food in the cupboard. She left the potato out on the table so that she would remember to make dinner for herself. There was little need to cook when alone, but her noted weight loss was causing her doctor to question her. She had no desire to explain anything to anyone, let alone her physician.

Mahin was tired now. The short walk had drained her. She wondered how many years it had been since her diagnosis. Certainly, if she had to have an illness, this one at least was not fatal. Briefly, Mahin let her mind wander into the dark place; the place where she wished that she could go. Almost on cue, Jespa jumped up onto Mahin’s shoulders and wrapped himself around her neck. Of course, she could not leave, who would take care of Jespa? She scratched his ears with her left hand. He always laid himself across her shoulders the same way; tail to the right, ears to the left. Having a very sensitive nature, Jespa did not overstay his welcome and carefully slid off his perch and went about the important business of grooming. Mahin checked the time. It was eleven-fifteen. She had a client coming around lunch hour. That gave her almost an hour to change and to prepare.

Mahin went about this business like a robot; take off the clothes, put on the clothes, brush the hair, add barrette, and spray perfume. She was lost in the scent. *He liked my perfume.* Tears filled her eyes as she choked back the emotion. In her mind, she remembered the brush of his beard against her neck as he breathed in her scent. Her head tilted with the memory, allowing his lips to touch the nape of her neck. She opened her eyes and checked the reflection in the mirror. For a moment, she thought that he was there. She thought that she felt his breath on her neck. Shoving her feelings deep down into an inner vault, Mahin sniffed, brushed the escaped tears from her cheek, and went down to her front room to prepare for her client.

She sat down in the large chair at a table. Its curved, wooden arms hurt her elbows so she rested her hands in her lap. Closing her eyes, she began to breathe, slowly and methodically. She breathed in, she imagined the good energy entering her body. As she breathed out, all the negative vibes left with it. She silently asked for help from her guides and then thanked them, as she did not want to forget to do so later. She then picked up the cards and shuffled them. They were slightly larger than her hands could accommodate, but she managed to keep them under control with little effort. On the last shuffle, two cards seemed to jump out of the deck, the High Priestess, and the Death card. Mahin held her breath for a moment when she realized that these were the same two cards from earlier that morning. Her mind flashed to the last time she had been confronted with the Death card. They had been playing poker. Four cards had been drawn thus far. In his hand he held two black eights and two black aces. He told her the story of Wild Bill’s “dead man’s hand”. Mahin did not think it a very good story. Wanting to tease her, he pulled out her tarot cards and drew the fifth cards from that. The Death card completed his hand. With that, she ended their game. Now she

wondered if she had listened, if she had just taken it seriously, perhaps she could have known and done something to prevent it all.

Trying to shake off the memory, Mahin quickly pulled another card and laid it across the other two. It was the Seven of Pentacles. Mahin sat there, bewildered. She had not a clue what the cards were trying to tell her. This made no sense at all. Mahin became annoyed at her sudden inability to understand the cards. It happened, but seldom. The ringing doorbell jarred her from her intense stare at those cards. She scooped them up, quickly shuffled once, then set the deck back on the table and walked to the door. Mahin opened the door and smiled.

"How are you my friend?" asked Denise. "Ok" Mahin replied, half lying, but maintaining her smile. Mahin stepped aside so that Denise could step in and then latched the door behind her.

"Have a seat," Mahin instructed. Denise set her bag on the floor and made herself comfortable in the chair opposite Mahin's. It was a chair similar in style to the one that her hostess occupied, but the fabric and era were different. As Denise looked around, her eyes took in the few remaining knick-knacks and the empty shelves, missing pictures, and crystals and other bits and pieces of life Mahin had accumulated and then parted with. Briefly, and without drawing attention to the fact that she was doing it, Denise glanced at the silver-framed photo that always held the same place. The black scarf still draped it. Denise anguished for her friend but refrained from visiting the subject.

"How was your trip?" asked Mahin.

"Good." Denise took out some product from her bag and set it aside. "I brought you two dream pillows this time since I'm not sure if I'll be back here next month."

"That's fine, thanks." Mahin opened a drawer in the small stand next to the table and withdrew a box of wooden matches. She lit the incense that was waiting in its holder and then the candle. Once she was sure that the incense would smolder, she blew out the flame and placed the tray on the floor over the intake grate.

"So, what's up?" Mahin asked as she began to shuffle the cards.

"Well...you tell me." Denise always liked Mahin to do a reading first before she confided her deepest secrets. Mahin smiled because she knew that this would be the answer. Mahin told Denise that they would do a spread to get a grasp on how things were overall. While Denise knew exactly what they were doing from the many previous visits, she took comfort in Mahin explaining it just the same. Mahin laid out the cards at compass points, with one in the middle. As was her custom, Mahin addressed each card, one by one, before giving any overall impression and as was also her custom, Mahin would occasionally giggle at the cards that showed. Denise delighted in this behavior. She had learned to trust Mahin's readings explicitly and a giggle was a good sign. As Mahin set the rest of the deck aside, she looked to the first card and began her reading.

"In the mind position, we have the Two of Swords. You're probably trying to make a decision on something." Denise was practically biting her tongue with desire to reveal her secrets, but used a good amount of self-restraint to hold back the details.

Mahin continued, "In the body position we have the Three of Swords. I take it you've been pushing yourself again. Is your back hurting?" Denise nodded but still pursed her lips to signal that she was waiting to hear the rest of the reading.

"In the spirit position we have the Wheel. Looks like you're experiencing some changes. For emotions, the Nine of Pentacles. Emotionally you seem to be fairly content in your new home. At the center of all this is the Chariot. I normally don't read this as such, but it seems

your move has brought a lot of things with it." Denise was grinning. Mahin took this cue to continue.

"So, I would assume that you're enjoying your new place in Vermont?" Denise nodded.

"Are you doing the planting yourself?" Denise let out a laugh. As they discussed the latest events, Jespa made his appearance. He paused on the landing, let out a loud yawn, which was to assure that everyone knew that he was there, and then casually strolled past the humans into the kitchen. Mahin noted his presence and continued with the reading.

"Ok, so we know where you are now. What do you want to talk about?" Denise explained the strange dreams that she had been having and how she adored her new home. She mentioned some out-of-season hunters trespassing and how she and her husband were going to put up the "no trespassing" signs during the coming weekend. They were also going to build the small stand so that she could sell her products along side the road.

"How is the business going to do now?" asked Denise. Mahin decided on a basic spread and laid out the cards. None of the cards seemed to say anything very important. Mahin turned to the card in the "hidden" position and explained, as usual, that this card was either something of which she was not aware or was aware of it but was not paying attention. It was the Death card. For a second, Mahin felt that jump in her spirit, but did not know why.

"It looks like there's a major change coming up." Denise suggested that it could be the new product line she had developed.

"If it is," Mahin continued, "then it might be telling you that one of your other lines may have to be discontinued. You might not be able to do both." This did not feel right to Mahin, but she could think of no other explanation, so she moved onto the next card, hoping that it would illuminate this one.

"The advice card is the Eight of Swords. Don't let yourself get backed into a corner." Mahin turned her head to the side, as if looking for something.

"What's the matter?" Denise noticed Mahin's confusion.

"I don't know. This card seems to be yelling at me and I don't know what it's saying. Are you close to water?"

"Yes."

"Ok, try to be careful around the water for a while, at least until we're sure about this card."

"Ok," Denise believed in these readings and took every piece of advice to heart.

"Well, let's see what we have for the outcome; the Seven of Pentacles." Mahin tilted her head as she realized that this card had appeared before Denise arrived, along with the Death card. There was no High Priestess, however. Mahin dismissed the coincidence and returned her attention to the cards before her.

"This card sure looks like you," Mahin continued, trying to shake off her uneasy feelings, "in your garden, tending to your herbs. Be patient, the business will ripen, and you'll be able to reap what you've sown. Just be patient." Mahin felt like she was sputtering clichés all over the place. She glanced at the Eight of Swords, feeling queasy, and then grabbed up the cards and shuffled. The remainder of the reading went as it always did. Denise shared her excitement about her new home and the growth of her business. Mahin listened and referred back to the cards as they applied. Denise explained that she had far too many errands yet to run and hugged Mahin goodbye. After letting Denise out, Mahin closed the door and latched it. She felt drained. Jespa trotted out into the room and chirped at her.

"Are you hungry, my sweet boy?" Mahin stroked Jespa from head to tail and walked into the kitchen. Checking the clock, she turned on the end of the noon news as she began her

preparations for dinner. She glanced at the empty chair next to the window. For a moment, she thought that she saw him sitting there, smiling at her as she tended to her chores. Then the chair was once again empty and she forced her attention onto her duties as she listened to the news.

“The body of a woman was found last night by New York State Police near a retaining wall in the State park at Oneida Lake. Eyewitnesses say that the woman was blindfolded and her hands were bound across her chest. Police say there is no evidence at this time to explain how she died but the matter is being treated as a homicide. An autopsy is scheduled. No name is being released pending identification of the body and notification of the family. We’ll report further when more information becomes available.”

Mahin tried to form a picture in her mind: a woman by a wall, blindfolded, hands across her chest. She wondered if this were some odd ritual when she felt a furry tail wrap around her leg. This was Jespa’s subtle way of letting her know that he was hungry. Mahin went to the tall, built-in, wooden cupboard. She looked at it and ran her hand over the wood. She remembered when they first viewed this house. She could feel her pupils dilate when she saw all the natural wood. This cupboard ran up to the ceiling and they had talked about the work it must have taken to build it. Shaking her head, Mahin opened the cupboard door.

“I can’t do this today!”

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