

The Crystal Ball

A Micki Michaels
Mystery

JOYCE MASON

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THE GRYSTAL BALL
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For my fathers



The Immortalists on Planet Earth Association
requests the honor of your presence
at our costume gala

The Grystal Ball
on December 31st
8:00 PM until dawn

The Moonlight Ballroom
144 Pacific Shore Drive
San Francisco, California

Celebrate the New Year and the
Silver Anniversary of IOPEA's
25 years of accomplishments.

Theme with prize for the best costume,
"Come as you will be in the future."

Please RSVP to IOPEA
by December 15th

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"Love is the reason for longevity."

~ *The Immortalist's Handbook*

Chapter 1

My Tibetan chime alarm clock pulsed soothing tones throughout my Victorian bedroom. Soft vibes resonated in all directions, slowly increasing in volume, as if someone had thrown a pebble into a sweet sound pool. Creatures were stirring—dust mites, humans—cat. Then my clock started talking.

"Good morning, Micki. This is Cosma, your multi-dimensional music, sleep, and information center. This is your 7:30 AM wake-up call. Coming up in two minutes is your musical selection, 'Let's Have a Party' by Elvis Presley. The time at the tone is 7:30 AM and 55 seconds, Pacific Standard Time. Today is December 31st. Happy New Year's Eve!"

A louder, single chime sounded as Cosma continued. Her electronic voice was sexy and soothing—almost too mellow for a wake-up call, especially since I'm a night owl. I think mornings are for the birds—any other kind.

"It's time for Planet Watch. The planetary positions at this moment are:

Sun: 9 degrees Capricorn, 32 minutes.

Moon: 23 degrees Aries, 15 minutes ...

One of my wacky inventor friends created Cosma for me as a birthday gift, a prototype clock of the future, when everyone will know, understand, and care about astrology. Astrologer is my past profession, some-

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times my current one. Once an astrologer, always an astrologer like “once a Catholic.” I was both to the core, even when I practiced neither.

When Cosma got to “Saturn: 9 degrees Cancer, 47 minutes Retrograde,” exactly opposite the Sun, my eyes popped. I was awake now. This unsettling astrological aspect triggered the memory of my ugly dream. I saw a man with a bullet right between his eyes. He was on a stage of some sort. People around him were dressed funny. I suspected they were wearing era costumes, but I couldn’t place the period.

At its absolute worst, Saturn can bring death. But isn’t Death just Father Time? A guy whose passing we applaud with noisemakers every New Year’s Eve, then celebrate the Baby New Year at midnight with kisses and confetti? Maybe my subconscious was just beating Cosma to the punch, telling me, *Hey, Micki. It’s New Year’s Eve. Wake up and smell the coffee! Organic French Roast. It’ll hit you right between the eyes!*

Maybe it was just a bad pizza dream. One of my favorite dreamwork authors says they’re common—and meaningless. A bad trip on acid indigestion. With might-mean-nothing as an option, I tucked the dream in the back of my mind to ponder later.

When I first got Cosma in the mid-1990s, she was way ahead of her time. It didn’t take long for her to worm her way into my heart, like a family pet. Even better, a pet with no food or vet bills—and no fleas. I hate fleas.

But I love children. Unfortunately, I don’t have any—not from lack of wanting them. It just never worked out that way. My name is Michelle Nichole Michaels. Micki’s my nickname.

Now for my most unusual characteristic. Years ago, my landlady was giving me the lowdown on the elderly woman who lived upstairs. She said, “The years have not been kind to her.” You could say just the opposite about me. I’m 50, but I look 30. The reason’s easy. I’m an immortalist.

Before you roll your eyes and lump me in with all the other nut cases you have ever known, let me explain. We’re called the Immortalists on Planet Earth Association or IOPEA, pronounced *eye-OH-pea-uh*. The proximity in sound to eye-opener is intentional. The headquarters of our

organization is in San Francisco—where you see it all and hear it all—Capital of the Left Coast. Some call it Babylon by the Bay. Others say Sodom and Gomorrah. I like to think of it simply as the most original and beautiful place on earth. I'm IOPEA's president.

The overcast winter morning peered through my beveled glass window and the muffled sounds of the City sang backup to Cosma's chimes. At least the City wasn't Playing Misty for Me, as she often did on a winter's morn. I wanted it dry and pleasant for people traveling to and from the Crystal Ball. I felt a chill—but before I could shiver, the phone rang. I dove toward the nightstand to get it on the first ring, so I wouldn't wake up Curt, the man who sleeps next to me. No words came through the earpiece, just breathing—actually, *heavy* breathing. Unsettling. After three hellos, I finally hung up—hard. Damn pranksters. You'd think someone with nothing better to do than to annoy other people wouldn't get up so early to do it. This time, for whatever reason, it sent a chill up my spine that had nothing to do with the weather. It wasn't the first time I'd gotten these crank calls, but I couldn't be sure it was the same crackpot—or pots.

I demanded a change of mood, ordering Cosma, "Tell me something great today." As if on cue, my little astro-clock continued:

"Today's transits for Michele Nichole Michaels are as follows."

When she got to Saturn conjunct Ascendant Retrograde, I sat bolt upright in bed, yelled, "No. No!" then crossed my index fingers, holding my arms out, as if warding off a vampire. Saturn wasn't just in a not-so-hot position for people in general; it was in a particularly scary position for me. Pass the garlic.

"I said say something *nice*."

My outburst startled Curt awake, the lump under the covers beside me.

He cursed. I'm not sure if it was at Cosma or me.

Curt Stern has been a knot in my stomach since I was 17 years old. Let's start with his most unusual characteristic. My beloved boyfriend retired from the FBI almost a year ago, about the same time he came bopping back into my life out of nowhere, just like nothing had ever

happened—again. He was an expert at it, having done it countless times before, when we were kids. Curt did more disappearing and reappearing than Houdini, usually when I'd finally given up on him.

When he broke my heart to smithereens for the last-straw time in our early twenties, I thought I'd never see or hear from him again. For three decades, I didn't. Then in my unresolved grief, I finally tracked him down. I kept having unremitting dreams about him. I found Curt on the same day he started looking for me. I figured it just proved we were still connected at the heart in some magical way. Curt thought it was eerie. I talked about Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity—meaningful coincidence. Curt said there were "loose ends."

What an understatement.

Once he retired and was no longer wed to being near the nation's capital, Curt decided to rent out his condo, move to San Francisco, and move in with me. This arrangement is open-ended, until we figure out if it's what we want. Geographic proximity seemed like the only answer to exploring our relationship. Bi-coastal romances are nothing but a string of honeymoons with hardly any reality checks. It helps that he loves San Francisco.

The phone rang again. I didn't hurry to grab it this time, figuring it was the crackpot, not necessarily more lovely or talkative the second time around.

I was off on a cloud, musing about Curt and me. I know opposites attract, but we are ridiculous. I'm liberal; he's conservative. I'm spiritual—metaphysical with a lot of cutting-edge beliefs. He only believes what he can "see, hear, taste, touch, or ... *ravage*." He normally pauses after cleaning up the last word in his favorite catchphrase, then raises his eyebrows and leers at me. Curt's doing his best to show me he's trying to swear off swearing. It's not as if I have virgin ears. Cursing is really a puny sin in my humble opinion. I grew up in a family who expressed themselves verbally, no holds or cuss words barred. However, when the F-word starts flying like mortar fire and is used as often as *the*, it sounds angry and abrasive. It quickly morphs into chronic negativity. I'm sensitive. I have to monitor the energy in my personal space. Curt claims it's habit, how guys

talked all the time on his old job. He has certainly convinced me what the F stands for in FBI.

Our differences aside, I know there's something more than great sex that pulls Curt and me together like metal to a magnet. When I figure out what it is, I'll let you know.

I reached over to answer the phone on the cordless next to Cosma, but Curt jumped up with a start and grabbed my arm.

"Don't touch it."

"Why not?"

"Because it might be the creeps that are trying to scare you."

"I hate this, Curt," I said, referring to whoever was harassing key members of IOPEA and sending them bizarre phone messages in coded phrases that reminded me of ransom notes by kidnappers.

I figured crackpots went with the turf on my job. Some people figured IOPEAns were messing with things they shouldn't, playing God, trying to fool Mother Nature. Still, I didn't get why we irked them. We're just people who want to live a long and productive life. I wasn't about to let such vague threats get to me.

But this Mr. Foy, as he called himself, had been the boldest. He was the only one who identified himself by name—and only to me. Foy kept implying that if I didn't cooperate in giving him the secret of immortality, he would harm someone I cared about. He was never specific, so I blew him off.

But I never blow off Curt when he uses his enforcer voice. I jump. I know he has lived in realms where I have absolutely no experience; he has lived through unspeakable dangers. During the final years of his career, Curt worked counterintelligence, a top FBI priority in our post-9/11 nation. He, too, has nightmares.

I let the phone ring through to the recorder, so we could both hear the message. I was glad I had resisted the convenience of voice mail in favor of being able to screen calls live. A sinister, high-pitched voice followed the beep. The beep felt rude after Cosma's sweet nothings masquerading as wake-up tones.

The caller's Irish brogue was so thick and stereotyped; it had to be fake. "Top o' the mornin', Ms. Michaels. This is Mr. Foy, and I know you are there. I thought you'd like to know your niece was on her way to your house, but she didn't quite make it. She didn't make it at all, at all."

I knew which niece he meant, the one who often popped in unannounced to see me on mornings she didn't have school. I tried to reach the phone to talk to this Foy, horror pounding in my ears, but Curt grabbed my wrist hard. He sneered, tightening his anger between his teeth.

"That fuckin' creep." So much for language.

Foy continued, "Know that I am serious, Ms. Michaels. I will call you back in one hour. You must negotiate with me or the little girl and your Crystal Ball will be in grave danger."

The only word I heard was *grave*.

I wrenched Curt's hand off my wrist and grabbed the receiver. "There is no secret," I told Foy. "It's all out in the open in the *Immortalist's Handbook*. Increased youthfulness and longevity don't come from a single lotion, potion or pill. They involve an attitude, a belief system—mind training with a few simple rules for preserving the body thrown in. I have nothing to give you."

"Whisht! Such lies out of your gob. You must think I'm really naïve, missy."

I rankled. I didn't understand all of his Irish expressions, but missy is a diminutive term. I objected. How disrespectful! OK, maybe I'm a little sensitive about my height, hardly 5'3" in my stocking feet. I thought my big personality made up for it.

Foy was working himself into a froth. "No one can shave 20 years off their appearance, as a matter of course, like you IOPEA people do. The last one of you to die was 101. You can't convince me you're not enhancing yourselves and hiding something. You must think me a fool."

Foy was remarkably well read on IOPEA. I thought it best not to say what I thought of him.

I can't tell you what there isn't to tell!" I knew I was wasting my breath, but I had to try to convince him.

"You'd better pick up your pencil, missy, and write down this fax number. You have one hour from right now to send me the formula or the ingredients of your product or products—or, I repeat, your big affair and your little niece are in danger. That's 8:40 AM. Get on it. And no guards. You call the police or have this call or the fax number traced? You'll find out how much Irish I have."

He slammed down the receiver. My hands shook when I wrote down the number. I had repeated it to him twice, so scared, I could barely see straight.

My stomach dove to my feet, and my heart leapt to my throat, where it was hanging on my tonsils. He had us staked out, and it sounded like he had snatched Tansy. She's only 13, my late brother's granddaughter—the only child of his only daughter, April. This was no longer an innocuous game.

Curt was spewing profanity about how the SOB knew how to get me, how to go straight for my maternal instincts. I'm normally the poster girl for Peace on Earth, but threaten someone I love, and my reactions are knee-jerk and hostile.

"I'm telling you right now; don't even think about handling this guy alone. I remember the dog, Michele."

OK, so once I threw myself bodily across a Doberman Pinscher, which had wandered into my tiny back garden, cornered my cat Methuselah, and was about to go for Thusie's jugular.

How you got out of that mess without a scratch is a mystery to me. I don't know if you hexed him with one of your woo-woo spells or channeled Dr. Doolittle. But you won't expose yourself to that kind of danger as long as I'm here."

"Who died and left you Lord and Master?"

My outburst blew open the valve to my tear ducts, and I sobbed loudly for several minutes solid, while Curt went back and forth between hugging me and pacing the floor, trying to figure out what to do

next. I felt so alone, because Curt's way would be to use guns and force, against everything IOPEA and I stand for. I had to find another way.

I soon realized I had no time for hysteria. How would I get her back? What was I going to tell April?

Shaking, I grabbed my cell phone out of my purse, where I had her on speed dial.

"Micki? You sound funny."

"April, I have something difficult to tell you." I gulped. I could hardly breathe. My mouth was a desert.

"I got this frightening call about Tansy. I know this sounds goofy, but this evil man has been harassing me and other members of IOPEA. He just called and implied he grabbed Tansy."

"You're right, it does sound goofy. She's standing right here." I was so relieved; I nearly wet my pants.

Chapter 2

Thank God! Omigod! Omigod, I've gotta breathe.”
After a few rounds of deep breaths, the kind I'd learned in yoga, I continued.

April waited for me regain my composure. She was used to this behavior.

“April, the point is, if she's not in danger now, she could be any minute. Please put her on. We'll talk after I tell her.” April balked.

“Forget it. I'm not waiting even a minute to hear the details of what this is all about. I'll put you on speakerphone, so we can tell us both at once.”

I could hear April call her over. Tansy, still clueless, sounded all cheery.

“Hi, Aunt Micki!”

I figured Foy's real purpose this morning was to let me know he was watching Tansy, that he *could* grab her at any time, even though he hadn't—yet. Still, I had to confirm it.

“So, what did you do this morning?”

“Well, I was actually on my way to your house. I was almost there when I realized I forgot this thing I wanted to show you, this cool picture of grandpa I found in an old suitcase. I came back for it.”

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The image of my brother tugged at my heartstrings. It was only five years ago that Gregg died of AIDS. He was my only sibling, a year younger.

"I'd love to see that picture, Tansy, but not today. Too much happening, getting ready for the Crystal Ball and all."

"I can't wait!"

"Well, you just may have to. There's a man threatening me and some other people in IOPEA. I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to be at the party. In fact, I don't want you to leave the house without talking to me first, at least till Curt and I get a handle on what's going on with this guy."

"But Aunt Micki! My costume's great, and Brady and I have been looking forward to this forever."

I hadn't even met Brady yet; her boyfriend was so new.

"I know, Tansy, but safety first. I'll try to work things out so you can go, but I can't promise anything. Now go off and do something else while I talk to your mom alone."

I thought she was going to bawl. I could almost hear her pouting. I felt like a heel.

April pressed off the speaker button, and we talked long enough for her to promise me that she wouldn't let Tansy out of her sight without consulting me. She was a single mom, and I worried about her. I told her Curt and I would see if we could get someone to stay with them, at least until we had a better feeling for what was going on and how careful we needed to be. Maybe we could rig up a bodyguard of sorts—one of Curt's cronies from his makeshift fraternity of cops and former spies.

I hung up feeling drained. New Year's Eve had barely started, and now I had to worry: How would I protect Tansy and everyone at the Crystal Ball from some cuckoo?

Meanwhile, Foy's evil clock was ticking.

The thought made me appreciate Cosma more than ever. I pressed her audio button, just to hear her soothing voice. "The time at the tone is 7:49 AM and 45 seconds."

The time pressure triggered a memory, when I used to call Time to set my clock or watch. The alpha for the number on the phone keypad was POPCORN. Now Foy was going to call time in 50 minutes. My brain needed to start exploding ideas fast, like the kernels in a microwave bag of popcorn. It was time to turn up the heat.