

THE
PHANTOM
CIRCUIT

AUSTIN FARMER

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The Phantom Circuit
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Printed in the United States of America
First Printing 2022
First Edition 2022

ISBN: 978-0-578-25719-8

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Chapter One

Erica

For years, I prepared myself to hear the worst. I imagined every possibility about the very moment I would receive the news—where I would be, who I would be with, how I would feel. I felt guilty for thinking about death and the afterlife so often. It scared me, because nobody really knew. In the end, it didn't make it any easier.

Dianne was gone.

I was heartbroken. And then I became numb, vulnerable to the invisible, malevolent forces surrounding me. I used social media as a way to connect, to forget. Some nights, I experienced an underwater sensation, as though watching the world from below, distant and kaleidoscopic. I was sinking behind the horizon, waiting for somebody to pull me through to the other side.

On my timeline, people were having kids. Friends of friends were dying. Old high school classmates were buying their first houses. Celebratory posts and obituary posts scrolled by. It was almost impossible for me to comprehend the pandemic.

Meanwhile, I was broke. There was so much happening in the world, and yet, it was hard enough to process the things happening within my own world, my own timeline. I hadn't posted on my rideshare blog for about a year before things shut down. I tried to update my profile, but I didn't know what to say. Now, I couldn't say anything. I couldn't even look at my screen.

Healing is never linear. I kept reminding myself that. Though I compartmentalized my life into different moments, chapters, and memories, it was truly difficult to cherish the good ones when I didn't even

want to think about her. I couldn't intervene again. Two interventions were already too many. I needed to pull myself out of this limbo. I needed to learn how to accept the things I couldn't control. Sometimes, it felt as though I was thrown into a world full of ghosts, and I had no choice but to hide from them.

I tried expressing these things to Mom on our Facetime call as I sat alone in a Carl's Junior parking lot, waiting for my next passenger to pop up in the Lyft app. Sometimes the waiting period between passengers could take an hour, if I was lucky enough to get a passenger at all. Nobody was going out. I didn't even want to drive, but I had to make some money before unemployment kicked in.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" Mom's voice was comforting in the dead silence outside. In my rearview mirror, a broken streetlight strobed on and off, creating weird fractals of a broken world I wished to run from. I tried not to look into the mirror lately. Only when I had to.

"I'm not sure, Mom. I honestly don't know how to answer that."

"Is it something else?"

I nodded. "Kind of."

I took a deep breath, shook my head, and tried to smile. I liked to pretend that things weren't as bad as they were, but my imagination only went so far. I could see Mom's instant frown. She knew what I was thinking, and I didn't have to say anything, really, because she already knew. On Facetime, I couldn't hide anything. I hated looking at myself in the screen. My mind played tricks on me. I looked like someone else.

"She's not your responsibility, Erica."

"Yeah, I know. But last night, she sent me these messages—"

"She's not supposed to text you. Did you do what we talked about?"

"Yes. And, no. I couldn't help it, Mom. I didn't mean to read them. But I couldn't *not* read them. I tried to watch TV after I came home but I kept rereading them because they were right there in front of me."

"It's okay. It doesn't matter what she said."

"But it seemed different, Mom. This time, something's really wrong. I'm scared. I'm sorry."

I fought back tears. I had already cried myself to sleep many nights when I found out that I had lost all of my gigs. I felt melodramatic, sensitive,

and slightly out of control. But I guess that was just a natural response to everything happening in the world. I didn't have the strength to cry again.

Outside, the bells of San Diego's trolley echoed throughout the streets. I jumped, half expecting to see Dianne in the mirror. I was definitely losing it and I needed my sister to comfort me.

"Sorry, for what?"

"Because I keep making things worse. Like those times when I saw her when I wasn't supposed to, and she looked different. I could barely recognize her. She barely remembered my name."

"We've already been through this many times with her. If she needs to come back home, she will come back to our place, and hopefully this time, she'll stay. Have you been talking with your friends? Have you asked to schedule some fun Zoom calls? Maybe that'll help to take your mind off things."

"A few. I don't know, Mom. Everyone's in their own bubbles right now. I don't want to bother them. Sometimes it feels like I have no one. I know that's not true but it feels that way a lot of times. I just don't know what to think anymore."

"You've been so strong throughout all of this. I'm so proud of you, Erica. This will all come to pass. You have to focus on yourself now. You can't let Dianne stop you from living your life, okay? Do what you need to do to get through this and call me anytime."

"I know. Thanks, Mom." A notification popped up on my phone. A passenger had requested a ride. "I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this. I have to go. I love you."

As I turned on my car, I couldn't help but notice something strange moving in the rearview mirror again, something that was not of this world. A brief pulse of light flashed across the glass, as though somewhere deep within the universe, a star had just imploded, and its fragments were being pulled into the void beyond.

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I was driving on the Interstate 5, finishing up my last ride, when I heard my passenger casually mention that the police had found Dianne's body.

I lost my grip on the wheel and tapped the breaks. The car stuttered and swerved, the front wheels skidding across the fast lane to the center divider, scraping across the cement wall. Sparks erupted in volcanic tornadoes. The sharp scent of grating metal and burning rubber swept through the vents.

"Miss, are you all right?"

I caught my breath, grasping for ten and two on the wheel, and then four and eight, seven and twelve, steadying my shaking wrists. Trying my best to refocus on switching lanes, I managed to stabilize the car before we spun out.

"Did you say *Dianne Westfield*?"

"Yeah." My passenger buckled his seatbelt a little tighter. He was a sixty-something inebriated businessman rushing home after his luxurious business conference had been suddenly cancelled due to the pandemic. If he weren't already drunk, he probably would have cancelled my ride, told me to pull over, and threatened me with a one-star rating. "It's Dianne Westfield, all right. The girl from that singing competition show. The international superstar. It's all over my timeline. Are you a fan of hers or something?"

"Something like that..." My voice trailed off as I checked the speedometer. I was nearing 85 mph. Through the windshield, the world spun around me. I eased off the gas and coasted until I hit 65, fooling everyone driving next to me that I was okay, really, I was *fine*, not having a panic attack.

"To be honest, Miss Erica, doesn't quite look like it. Oh, I know! You were her biggest fan, am I right? I could tell. I mean, who wouldn't be a fan of *Dianne*! Is that it?"

I glanced at the GPS. We were approximately one mile away from the drop-off destination. The blue arrow avatar that represented my car was flashing, alerting me in a strobing, red exclamation mark that I needed to slow the heck down. I needed to remain calm. Sane. Professional.

Looking in the rearview mirror, I checked my surroundings, trying my best to ground myself. I remembered how I had played Bloody Mary with Dianne one night. It was always on my mind, really. It had been the most terrifying moment of my life. I had seen my life flash before my eyes. I had stood there, entranced, staring into the mirror, watching my future unfold as the looking glass surrounded me, helpless to its trajectory, capable of distorting the past and the faces within.

At the other end of the mirror, I had seen Dianne.

She was floating there, sinking into a starless void. From the other side, she had spoken to me, asking for someone to pull her through the shadows. I reached out to her, but her hands only went through mine. She had become an outline of her former self, then, distorted starlight wavering through her skin, revealing the stars and the emptiness beyond. A ghost. Like she was now.

Why would the stars eat her up? I had asked myself then.

Now, I felt that terror creeping back in. What if she was still in that same mirror, caught in Bloody Mary's grasp? She was somewhere else now. Maybe even right in front of me. I needed to know where.

"Why're you so quiet?" asked my passenger.

"Please, stop."

"Stop what?"

"*Sir.*"

"Tell me if I offended you." He took off his seatbelt, slid to the middle seat, and leaned in. His breath reeked of whiskey. "Tell me."

"Sir, please keep your seatbelt buckled at all times." It was all I could do. I had to keep my eyes on the road ahead, no matter what. "And please keep your mask on."

"The fame must've been too much for her sweet little head. All the attention. Would make anyone a druggie. Must've been crazy-making."

"Please *shut the hell up!*"

I pulled up to his destination, a lonely motel on the outskirts of Old Town, San Diego. I coasted, flashed my hazards, and put the car in park.

"Lady, you're the worst driver I've ever had."

"Told you to buckle your seatbelt, *you jerk.*"

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I let him curse me out as he threatened to call Lyft headquarters. He stumbled out of the car and was barely able to close the door behind him. I followed his reflection in the rearview mirror until it became eclipsed by a shadow. Odd, since there wasn't anything casting that light. For a moment, it seemed as though something else was trying to see through the other side of the mirror. Bloody Mary, maybe. Or Dianne, floating through that starless void, reaching through the shadows, calling to me.

As he disappeared into the darkness, I parked the car. Then I turned off the app and wept.

When you look in the mirror, how can you be so sure who's staring back?

Chapter Two

Erica

My body grew hollow.

It was as though someone had carved out my core, removing my warmth like a jack-o-lantern stripped of its candle. I had experienced depression before, but nothing quite like this. It crept instantly through me, a thick sludge pumping through my veins. It fossilized and pressed its weight against my chest. Once I got back to my apartment, a compulsion overcame me to sit and do nothing.

I opened my laptop and pulled up Facebook. I didn't post about it online, not at first. Everyone else was already doing that. I didn't even have a chance to catch up. My inbox was inundated with strangers. I read as many messages as I could and left them on **SEEN**, not because I didn't appreciate them, but because they felt like they were meant for someone else.

My timeline was filled with avatars grieving for Dianne.

It was a ghost town, really. I didn't know at least half of these people anymore. Nobody referred to what had actually happened, how she'd died, because nobody really knew what to say. It put me into some bizarre, surreal state. Sure, everybody had good intentions, but it was all so overwhelming. The pandemic was enough to begin with. Did everyone expect me to respond to every single message? There was no way these people really cared as much as they put off. Why would somebody from my second-grade class—someone I hadn't spoken to for over two decades—all of a sudden pretend to know the recently famous Dianne?

Hindsight is a kind of superpower.

You can perceive time, and your relationships, in a special way. Being alive not only meant that I possessed memories, but also I could *reline* them, too. I could be in two places at once—the past and the present, living among ghosts.

It was a bad time to live alone. My mind swept to dark places, brimming with thoughts I reckoned people would shudder at if they knew what I was thinking. My profile picture displayed someone who looked happy, but I couldn't even remember the last time I had taken a smiling selfie in real life. If the computer monitor was a mirror, too, then there was something within it that knew the truth, something that could see through the looking glass and straight into my soul. Perhaps it was an algorithm, deeply embedded in my profile, making it increasingly more difficult to post anything at all. Or maybe it wasn't something, but someone, who had been there all along.

It was Bloody Mary, waiting to pull me back through to the other side of her mirror.

I needed to sleep and find a way to crawl out of this black hole. But before that, I needed to post something, anything, so people wouldn't start to worry about me.

I scrolled my mouse over to the status update. **WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND, ERICA?**

I stared into the void. It stared back at me.

I started typing something. It didn't feel quite right. I deleted what I wrote and typed again. I felt like I was writing a get-well-soon card to someone I didn't know. I entered Hallmark-Land in my head. It was sort of manic, I guess. The doors were always open if you knew how to get there. All you had to do was put the words in the right order, unlocking the secret door at the end of the hallway in your mind, where the words were always hovering on the edges of comprehension. Everything I wrote felt disposable. I was in a thrift store of discarded cards, faded glitter pouring through their spines, scratch-and-sniff stickers plastered across their bodies.

It was kind of funny, seeing myself in the laptop screen writing the words in real time. I was laughing, deleting them, shaking my head, nodding in agreement, as I hid behind my profile, pixels bursting through my

fingertips. The tip of my tongue danced with possibilities. Finally, a sentence floated to the forefront of my mind, almost as though the words were already written.

I wish I could see you again, Dianne, the real you.

And then I clicked **ENTER**.

Because it was true. So true. As much as I'd grown to hate her, I hated her because I loved her. But she had become somebody else.

I waited.

The edge of my mouth lifted into a smile as the *likes* started pouring in. Every notification made my body buzz. Maybe I was experiencing what she felt like when she was high, strolling through fast food drive-thrus, begging for money, living off protein bars and prayers. She was my blood and it ran in my blood, too, this thing that possessed her and controlled her and became her.

The computer speakers chimed.

I couldn't stop staring at myself in the computer screen. I licked the corners of my lips in an inevitable Pavlovian fashion. The metallic flavor on my tongue reminded me of a taste I encountered once in a dream where I met God, or the outline of it, a face shining through the fog. Maybe that omniscient being was lying dormant, waiting for the right moment to intervene.

I had tried intervening. Interventions didn't work, unless they *did*.

I stared at myself for so long that I started to look like a stranger. A reflection is like a memory. The person you see is a person who existed a moment ago. In my reflection, my eyes started blending in with the pixels. It was only a moment, but it was all I needed to know something was wrong.

I shouldn't have posted anything.

I should have waited. But for what?

I was about to delete my post when something popped up on my screen.

A notification. A new message, in my inbox.

I hovered the mouse over the **MESSENGER** cloud icon.

Part of me already knew who it was from. I should have just gone to sleep and never checked my messages ever again.

It was from Dianne.

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