

## The Disappearance of Persephone Reid

The first ghost she summoned was her grandmother. It had been just hours after Nana's funeral, and Persephone had been longing for the feeling of curling up on Nana's couch, fingers carding gently through her hair, hot chocolate steaming on the coffee table, Billy Joel playing in the background. Nana had loved Billy Joel. So, she had turned on her playlist and curled up in her bed, clutching the stuffed animal she had been given for her third birthday. As she focused on thoughts of Nana and the times she had spent with her, nimble but light fingers started to pull on her hair, untangling the unwashed mess she had let fester for days now.

"Oh Seph, my beautiful flower," Nana's voice whispered during the instrumental break in Vienna. Persephone hadn't thought much of it, thinking she was just remembering her Nana, and the comfort she brought, convinced it wasn't really happening at the moment. Until her arm had gone sore, and she turned around to face the other wall and a hazy vision of Nana was watching her sadly, hand still outstretched towards her.

That had been five years ago. Five years since Persephone had watched her beloved Nana be lowered into the ground and tossed her favorite flower onto the coffin before the fresh dirt was piled on top, since she had learned that she could summon ghosts.

Though it had only been three years since she learned that it wasn't only her grandmother that she could call back from her resting place. Until she had stumbled onto a crime scene in her freshman year, she thought Nana was the only ghost she would ever see. It had been an accident, her untied shoelaces sending her tumbling to the ground just outside an alleyway and coming face to face with blank staring eyes. Persephone had screamed at the sight, the person's neck bent at an unnatural angle, blood slowly oozing from a gash on their head. Frozen in place, she had stared as the ghost of the dead stranger came to life, a hazy apparition of the body on the

ground in front of her. They looked like they were made of smoke, body just translucent enough that Persephone could see through them to the alley beyond. As she gawked at them, they had opened their mouth and let out a gut-wrenching sob, moaning a name as they stared right into Persephone's eyes. She had relayed the name to the police as she sat in the back of an ambulance, a blanket around her shoulders and shaking hands folded in her lap. That was when they had found out what she could do, the weird girl that could talk to ghosts and help them solve crimes.

When they offered her an unpaid internship, it felt like a slap in the face. They wanted her to spend hours a week solving crimes for them, for free. Even at eighteen she knew that was a load of bullshit. So, she had refused unless they paid her. The next day she had a desk, a work schedule, and a case file to start on.

Now her ability was being utilized for the good of others. Right?

That was what she told herself every time a text came through on her phone. Every time she solved a case and heard "Good job, kid" followed by a pat on the back, like she had just won a little league baseball game, not solved a murder. So why did it feel so wrong to watch every paycheck show up in her bank account? To see her coworkers celebrating another job well done, not acknowledging her work, just happy to do something. It hurt, knowing she was the only one that had done anything of substance but watching everyone else take pride in it. Her name was never mentioned in the articles that emerged a few days later, and every new case left a sinking feeling in her stomach. Profiting off people who died felt more wrong every time she did it, and the harsh reality of the fact that she was being used as a steppingstone to boost the reputation of the police left her feeling dirty.

She always pushed the thoughts away when she was at work though. After all, she was being paid to help people. It was what she had always wanted; when she had been sitting in those law classrooms, wishing she could have done something to help the innocent people she was learning about, or watching the news and seeing another murderer get off on a crime the whole world knew they had committed. All she had wanted then was to help, so shouldn't she be happy for the opportunity that had been presented to her?

As she was leafing through her newest case file, examining the photo enclosed, Persephone turned her thoughts to her grandmother. Every new case reminded her of Nana. The serene smile on the photographed woman's face and the wrinkles by her eyes made the memory even more painful today.

"Reid, any progress on this one?" Detective Saunders, her balding middle-aged boss who wore the same tweed jacket every day, stopped next to her desk, and tapped a finger on the edge of the folder. Persephone looked up, banishing thoughts of Nana to the back of her head for later. "I have another I'd like you to get in before the end of this week, so if you could..."

"Oh, yeah. I should be ready for this one by tomorrow." A lie.

"Great, keep up the good work kid." Saunders tapped the desk again, gave a satisfied nod, and walked away, on to bother his next lackey. Persephone watched him, waiting until he had turned the corner to look down again.

Summoning ghosts wasn't the healthiest thing for Persephone to do. She had learned that early on when she wanted to talk to Nana every day and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Dark circles under her eyes, hair hanging limply by her shoulders. Nana had warned her that to summon too often could be detrimental to her health and if she utilized too much energy, she could cease to exist just as easily as the summoned ghosts would fade away after a

conversation with them. She had stopped summoning Nana as often as she used to, but ever since she landed the job she had been using just as much energy, if not more, regularly.

It also wasn't exactly ethical. Bringing people back from their rests and asking them to relive their deaths for Persephone to record was definitely against some moral codes. Especially considering the district attorney had to find creative ways to utilize the testimony of dead people in court, often fabricating evidence and going behind the judge's back to slip new documents into submission. Though her boss didn't seem to care. Saunders insisted it was for the greater good: putting away the bad guys and letting victims enjoy a restful afterlife.

In the beginning she had believed him, a naive girl who was given a shot at a job that would put good experience on her resume. She let herself lean into the job and willingly summoned ghosts to avoid the scare she had experienced.

Over the past few years, Persephone had started to disagree with this viewpoint. Especially as the cases came more often, and she started feeling drained, and she noticed some of the ghosts looked disappointed, or even angry, at the situation they were being brought into. She particularly hated when the victims were older women, too reminiscent of her grandmother.

The thoughts of her grandmother always lead to her parents as well. She had cut contact off from them when she went off to school, slowly starting to ignore their calls and messages. Sometimes she wondered what they would think of the woman she had become. She was nothing like that little girl who played court in the living room, determined to put anyone that committed a crime behind bars. Her idea of morals had evolved since then, coming into the understanding that sometimes people had to do cruel things to survive. But she still felt like summoning ghosts and utilizing their deaths for her gain was leaning more towards the side of being fundamentally wrong, no matter how much she tried to tell herself it was fine.

She shut the folder on her desk, pushing it to the side. Seeing the story of how this woman had died was awful, and she needed a break before tomorrow. Instead, she reached for her laptop and opened a class assignment. If she was going to be stuck here for another three hours, at least she could try to catch up on her work.

Ever since she was hired, the time for schoolwork had dwindled exponentially. At first, there had been no problem, she was only summoning every other week and had plenty of time to allow herself to rest, catch up, and go to class as usual.

They had started to expect more of her though. It started with asking her to do one case per week. Persephone had been doing well, and she didn't find a problem with upping her load. But then the pain and exhaustion began to take over.

Recovery took longer than usual, and she found herself sleeping more often. Being late to class a couple times turned into missing full lectures, and then her homework was turned in later and later. She simply didn't have the energy to keep up with everything anymore. Of course, that was conveniently when Saunders decided to ask for two cases per week. Time for homework became nonexistent, and her grades started slipping faster than she ever thought they could. School became her last priority, her own wellbeing just slightly above it.

Saunders was sitting at his desk across the room now, staring intently into his computer screen. She didn't realize she was glaring until another detective walked by, obscuring her line of sight. She tore her eyes away from her boss and back to her computer.

Persephone was certain he sat there and played solitaire most of the time. Yet he was always the first to release a statement to the press on the "miracle of another solved homicide" in their county. She fought the urge to roll her eyes when she read them.

The three hours left on her shift passed faster than she expected it to, the sounds of other desk workers packing up breaking her from the spell of criminal law procedures she was reading for her class. She gathered her own things, grabbing the manila folder containing her case for tomorrow. The smiling picture of the woman fell to the ground as Persephone shifted her bag on her shoulder and she frowned down at it.

Gertrude Fleming. Death by unknown poison. It was brutal to imagine the poison seeping into this woman's veins, tearing her organs apart from the inside, leaving no trace of who could have done this. But that was Persephone's job, to solve the crime and let Gertrude rest knowing her killer was behind bars.

"Hey, you okay?" Persephone broke away from her thoughts, turning to see Hannah's concerned look. She was holding the picture of Gertrude; Persephone hadn't even seen it leave the ground, too absorbed in her own head.

"Yeah, sorry. Just thinking." She accepted the photo from Hannah's outstretched hand with a thin smile. "Thanks."

"No problem, have a good night, Persephone." Hannah put a hand on her arm as she softly brushed by her. Though she wasn't close to anyone at her job, Hannah's appearance as a student intern was certainly a bright spot. They weren't friends, per se, but the presence of another young person in the office was nice. Also, she sat perfectly within view of Persephone's desk, ideal for prolonged glances and daydreaming about made-up romantic scenarios. It wasn't unprofessional... At least she told herself it wasn't.

Gathering her thoughts, and her files, Persephone clocked out and made the walk to her beat up Honda. The sun was still out, the remnants of winter fading away. The breeze that whipped the stray hairs from her braid across her face was cool though, reminding her that it was

still March, still enough time to turn her grades around before the end of the semester. Or make her best attempt to.

The car beeped as it unlocked and she slid into the cracked seats, tossing her bag haphazardly to the side. The manila folder though, she carefully secured in her binder with her school handouts, not wanting to crinkle the papers within.

She went about her daily routine as she returned to her apartment: toeing her shoes off by the door, hanging her jacket on the makeshift hook above them, making sure Cyrus had enough food in his bowl and his kitty litter wasn't smelling up the place, and sinking down into the armchair she had received as a gift from her Nana several years ago.

It was the only furniture she had insisted on bringing with her to school. Her mom hadn't been as excited about trying to move it cross country, but the memories contained in the chair were too strong and meaningful to let it gather dust at home. All the times she had sat there with Nana when she was younger, watching the Wheel of Fortune spin on the crackly, outdated television set, or reading Nancy Drew books and trying to solve the case before the young detective did, the smell of cookies baking in the kitchen wafting towards her. It was the chair she sat in whenever she summoned Nana now, though it was becoming more infrequent with each passing year, especially as work started to pick up.

Persephone eyed the plant on her windowsill, the blackened edges of the petals rotting despite the proper amount of light, water, and nutrients fed to it. It didn't matter how well she took care of the plant though; it was all dependent on *her*.

At first, she had been confused when Nana's ghost had conjured it. She had thought it was impossible, for an apparition to place something physically sound into the world. Then again, she was able to summon ghosts, so her range for impossible things needed to be adjusted.

“A flower for my flower,” Nana had said, her pale ghostly hand brushing a strand of Persephone’s hair back behind her ear. The narcissus flower had always been Nana’s favorite, but also the last flower the Greek goddess Persephone picked before she was brought to the Underworld. A symbol of vanity and death. It was fitting that this was the flower that her grandmother had picked to represent Persephone’s wellbeing. It also gave her a sense of unease to think about her namesake being a goddess of death walking among the living, though she supposed she did toe the line by speaking to the dead.

The narcissus had also been the flower that Persephone threw down on the day of Nana’s funeral. It was the flower that she brought to her headstone on each birthday and anniversary of her death. And now it sat on her windowsill, reminding her not only of her grandmother, but to take care of herself.

Persephone stood from the chair, relishing in the popping sound her joints made. Outside, the world had gone dark, and a glance at the clock told her four hours had passed since she had gotten home. She dragged her body to the bedroom, Cyrus looping through her legs as she walked, his black tail curling fondly around her. Her mind ran in circles until she faded out to sleep, thinking of Nana, Gertrude, the slowly dying plant sitting in her living room, and the worry of how so much time had gone by while she had been doing nothing.

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When she swiped into work the next day, her stomach was turning. It always did on the day she would be summoning, but today was more than usual. Something was bothering her. Perhaps it was the resemblance between poor poisoned Gertrude and her Nana, or maybe it was her morality getting the better of her at last. Either way, she needed to suck it up and do her job.



Saunders was pleased when she informed him that she was going down to her secondary office. Not that a cramped storage room with a crooked table and two chairs shoved into it could be called an office. But it was nicer than referring to it as the basement.

“Another crime solved! No thanks to the person who did it.” Persephone mumbled, mocking the headline that would inevitably run later on as she descended the creaky stairs. The building itself wasn’t too old, but the basement hadn’t been remodeled along with its upper floors. It had been used as a storage room until just before Persephone was hired. She suspected they cleared it out just to put her down there.

It was easy to lose herself in the routine; Persephone’s life was all about routine, and it was one of the only ways she was able to function as well as she did. It was a careful science, just as a crime scene and interrogation was. Before she had left for school, her mother had called her routines OCD, her father had called it time-consuming and pointless. But Persephone knew what it was and wasn’t afraid to call it by its name. Fear.

The fear of losing everything she had - the job she had accidentally fallen into, the ability to communicate with people and let them rest, the fear of going back to being plain old Persephone with the dead grandmother and the inability to move on, Cyrus. She should be out partying with friends, staying up late and waking up with an awful hangover. Instead, her life was driven by fear at twenty-one years old, way too young for stress lines to start forming.

So, she kept her routines.

Recording device in the center of the table, notebook directly in front of her, casefile open on the right, Gertrude Fleming’s smiling face on her left. Persephone settled into the wooden chair and closed her eyes. She focused on recalling Gertrude’s face in her mind, picturing the rest of her body. The little details of her life floated around Persephone’s mind,

calling out to the infinite black space before her for Gertrude to appear. She felt a connection take hold and focused on it, pulling on the imaginary rope to bring the presence closer to her.

Finally, the familiar sound of pure silence filled her ears, her head, her entire body. There was suddenly nothing, just the void of time and space encompassing her for a moment before her body cemented back down into the chair, her eyes flying open.

Nothing had physically shifted - the wooden table was still in the center of the room and Persephone's chair was still facing the stairs, but now Gertrude was looking at her kindly from the previously empty chair across from her. Her eyes held the depths of sadness that most ghosts tended to and a pang of guilt struck through Persephone. She forgot for a moment that she was working. All she wanted was to apologize for rousing Gertrude from wherever Persephone had summoned her. But she couldn't.

"Hi Mrs. Fleming, I'm so sorry to bother you." She started, tearing her eyes away from the way Gertrude was inspecting her transparent hands. "I've called you here today to ask you a few questions, and then I'll let you rest."

She ran through her preliminary questions, leading Gertrude to the night of her death, but Persephone couldn't kick the nagging feeling that something was wrong. The room felt colder, and the atmosphere was uncomfortable, her mind racing with questions. The connection between her and Gertrude felt weaker than it usually did when she summoned ghosts. Normally they were tethered directly to her, vanishing only when she let go of them. With Gertrude though, she felt the rope connecting them slipping away from her grasp. Determined to finish her assignment, she tried her best to push onward.

"Do you know who slipped the poison into your drink that night, Mrs. Fleming?" The question startled Gertrude, but Persephone let the silence fill the room. It usually led to this, the

victim either unwilling to name their killer or the memory being too much. She had even come to expect it.

“It was me. I put the poison in my wine.” She spoke finally, hands folded neatly before her sad eyes staring into Persephone’s again. Persephone's head shot up from the notes she had been absently writing about Gertrude’s previous answers. Gertrude’s form was already beginning to fade, and she scrambled to tether their already weak connection back together. But even as she reached into that tear in space and time she had created, she knew she had lost the link between them. Gertrude was gone, fading back to rest where she belonged. She was unreachable now, no connection taking hold.

She opened her eyes, realizing the cellar had grown colder, goosebumps raising up on her arms. The light flickered a few times as she sat by herself, a twinge of panic coursing through her. What was happening? Her hands started to shake where they were resting on the notebook in front of her, the pen in her hand stuttering against the lined page.

She tried to focus on her breathing, counting each gulp in, letting her energy revive itself as the cool air seeped into her veins. On her sixth breath, she assembled her items. On the twelfth she got up from the chair. By the time she reached the top of the stairs (her eighteenth breath), she felt like she could take on the office again and write up her report.

No one spoke to her as she trudged back to her desk, though she could feel the pitying, judgmental stares from a few people as she winced at the bright fluorescent lights burning her eyes, a stark contrast from the dark cellar she had emerged from. She set her stack of materials down, opening her notebook to fix her entry.

*Gertrude Fleming (83F)*

*Cause of Death: ~~Homicide by poison~~ Self-administered poison*

“That will make one hell of a headline,” Detective Saunders appeared behind her, peering over her shoulder at her notebook. He was close enough that Persephone could feel the hot breath from his coffee brush past her ear. She tried not to make a face at it.

“Good work today, kid. I’ll drop off your next case later after I finish typing it up.” A heavy hand on her shoulder and then he was gone. Like Gertrude.

The day dragged on, Persephone’s hands slower than usual on the keyboard as she finished the report, emailing it to Hannah for proofreading. She was rewarded with a bright smile and a thumbs up. It made her feel marginally better.

True to his word, Saunders dropped another manila folder on her desk five minutes before her shift ended. This one was thicker than Gertrude’s had been, probably more photos of the crime scene included. She just nodded and began to pack her things up for the day.

The ride home and her ensuing routine passed in a fog, and she only returned to reality after a few bites of an apple and Cyrus whirling around her legs as she stared out her small kitchen window. She hadn’t looked at her plant as she passed through the living room, too afraid of what the petals would look like, too afraid of the thoughts that would flood her brain.

Her phone buzzed from the table, and she placed the barely eaten apple down on the counter, reaching for it. A text from her mother, asking her to call when she got a chance. There were several similar texts dating back to months ago. Persephone left this one unanswered as well.

She walked back into the living room, tossing her phone onto the armchair before going to the windowsill. Her plant was not faring well, and she knew that meant she wasn’t either, not like she wasn’t already aware. The petals were almost fully black, just the edges closest to the center retaining a smidge of their whiteness. She reached out to touch a petal, frowning when she

thought about how disappointed Nana would be if she could see her now, always exhausted, barely able to summon a smile through her crushing mental health. Cyrus jumped up onto the windowsill, a dark shadow against the setting sun, and mewed at her until she scratched behind his ears in the way he liked.

“I know, buddy. I just don’t know what to do.” She slowly moved to the armchair across the room, recovering her phone and setting it on the coffee table face down. Her job was draining too much from her. Even sleep didn’t feel like an escape - always plagued by the upcoming tasks she needed to complete, often waking up with a jolt and remembering she couldn’t do anything until she went to work. On those nights, Cyrus came and curled closer to her, pressing against her chest, almost as if he was listening to her heartbeat. Sometimes she thought he could sense her inner turmoil. Especially now, as Cyrus crossed the room and hopped onto her lap, curling up into a ball of dark fur.

Persephone closed her eyes, her hand stroking Cyrus absently as she tried to steady her mind. She hated Saunders for how far he liked to push her sometimes. He didn’t understand how much energy it took to summon a ghost, always pushing more work onto her no matter how deep the bags beneath her eyes ran, or the amount of coffee he watched her inhale. Pushing all the work onto a college girl must make him feel like a real great boss.

Finally, she opened her eyes and reached for her phone. But her hand passed right through it, and then the coffee table beneath.

“What the fuck...” Persephone whispered, holding her hand up to her face. It looked perfectly normal to her, but as she concentrated harder, the slightest tinge of transparency made itself visible. Heart pounding in her chest, she focused as much of her remaining energy as she

could into her hand and reached for her phone again. She was able to grab it this time, tightening her grip on it just in case as she stood from the chair and walked to her room.

Cyrus followed her as usual, watching her with round green eyes. He jumped up into bed behind her as she curled onto her side. Maybe this was all just another bad dream, or maybe she was hallucinating from lack of sleep. Her dying plant, and the thoughts chasing around her head, said otherwise. Persephone let her eyes close and hoped she could gather even just a couple hours of uninterrupted sleep.

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When she woke up still feeling like she was moving in slow motion, Persephone called out of work for the first time, hanging up before Saunders could even demand an explanation from her. The day dragged on, Persephone inhaling copious amounts of caffeine in the hopes of getting her body to move just a little bit faster. She spent most of the day on Nana's old armchair, Cyrus switching from laying in her lap to plodding around and butting his head into various objects.

Unfortunately for her sanity, her inability to pick up her phone was not a one-time occurrence, though it had now spread to any physical object. Persephone watched numerous times as her hand passed through objects as she went to pick them up, her heart pounding irregularly as she panicked and tried to rationalize why this could be happening. She knew the reason though; her energy was fading.

As the breeze rustled the tree branches outside her window, Persephone glanced at her flower. The narcissus plant was almost black, the petals hanging heavily down into the soil below. A ragged sigh escaped her lips as she watched the time tick by.

Persephone stared at her hands, the way they were almost completely faded, her fingers gone from existence, her palms transparent now. There was so much she hadn't gotten to do or see. She hadn't even spoken to her parents one last time. Twenty-one was an awful age to die.

Cyrus was meowing at her feet now, begging for attention, and Persephone felt the tears welling up at the fact that she physically could not console her cat. She wondered what would happen to him. Maybe she should have left the door open so he could leave. At least the window was open, he could probably escape through there.

“Thank you, for being my best friend.” She whispered, blinking slowly, a tear rolling down her cheek and dropping through her now transparent leg. Cyrus meowed mournfully in response, trying to butt his head against her leg and hitting the armchair instead. He looked up at her with those big green eyes, and she felt like she had failed him by not opening that door before she sat down. There wasn't even enough energy in her to cry anymore, just the feelings of guilt and exhaustion.

As the rip in time and space opened for her, she heard her Nana's voice calling.

“I've got you now, sweetheart, just relax.”

A smile graced Persephone's face as the rest of her body succumbed to the loss of energy, fading from the old armchair. Just as the last of Persephone's body disappeared, a single black petal fell from the narcissus plant, and came to rest in the soil.