

# Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble, H.P. Mallory

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## ONE

It's not every day you see a ghost.

On this particular day, I'd been minding my own business, tidying up the shop for the night while listening to *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* (guilty as charged). It was late—maybe nine p.m. A light bulb had burnt out in my tarot reading room a few days ago, and I still hadn't changed it. I have a tendency to overlook the menial details of life. Now, a small red bulb fought against the otherwise pitch darkness of the room, lending it a certain macabre feel.

In search of a replacement bulb, I attempted to sort through my "if it doesn't have a home, put it in here" box when I heard the front door open. Odd—I could've sworn I'd locked it.

"We're closed," I yelled.

I didn't hear the door closing, so I put Cyndi Lauper on mute and strolled out to inquire. The streetlamps reflected through the shop windows, the glare so intense, I had to remind myself they were just lights and not some alien spacecraft come to whisk me away.

The room was empty.

Considering the possibility that someone might be hiding, I swallowed the dread climbing up my throat. Glancing around, I searched for something to protect myself with in case said breaker-and-enterer decided to attack. My eyes rested on a solitary broom standing in the corner of the Spartan room. The broom was maybe two steps from me. That might not sound like much, but my fear had me by the ankles and wouldn't let go.

*Jolie, get the damned broom.*

Thank God for that little internal voice of sensibility that always seems to visit at just the right time.

Freeing my feet from the fear tar, I grabbed the broom and neared my desk. It was a good place for someone to hide—well, really, the only place to hide. When it comes to furnishings, I'm a minimalist.

I jammed the broom under the desk and swept vociferously.

Nothing. The hairs on my neck stood to attention as a shiver of unease coursed through me. I couldn't shake the feeling and after deciding no one was in the room, I persuaded myself it must've been kids. But kids or not, I would've heard the door close.

I didn't discard the broom.

Like a breath from the arctic, a chill crept up the back of my neck.

I glanced up and there he was, floating a foot or so above me. Stunned, I took a step back, my heart beating like a frantic bird in a small cage.

"Holy crap."

The ghost drifted toward me until he and I were eye level. My mind was such a muddle, I wasn't sure if I wanted to run or bat at him with the broom. Fear cemented me in place, and I did neither, just stood gaping at him.

Thinking the Mexican standoff couldn't last forever, I replayed every fact I'd ever learned about ghosts: they have unfinished business, they're stuck on a different plane of existence, they're here to tell us something, and most importantly, they're just energy.

Energy couldn't hurt me.

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My heartbeat started regulating, and I returned my gaze to the ectoplasm before me. There was no emotion on his face; he just watched me as if waiting for me to come to my senses.

“Hello,” I said, thinking how stupid I sounded—treating him like every Tom, Dick or Harry who ventured through my door. Then I felt stupid that I felt stupid—what was wrong with greeting a ghost? Even the dead deserve standard propriety.

He wavered a bit, as if someone had turned a blow dryer on him, but didn’t say anything. He was young, maybe in his twenties. His double-breasted suit looked like it was right out of *The Untouchables*, from the 1930s if I had to guess.

His hair was on the blond side, sort of an ash blond. It was hard to tell because he was standing, er floating, in front of a wooden door that showed through him. Wooden door or not, his face was broad, and he had a crooked nose—maybe it’d been broken in a fight. He was a good-looking ghost as ghosts go.

“Can you speak?” I asked, still in disbelief that I was attempting to converse with the dead. Well, I’d never thought I could, and I guess the day had come to prove me wrong. Still he said nothing, so I decided to continue my line of questioning.

“Do you have a message from someone?”

He shook his head.

“No.” His voice sounded like someone talking underwater.

Hmm. Well, I imagined he wasn’t here to get his future told—seeing as how he didn’t have a future. Maybe he was passing through? Going toward the light? Come to haunt my shop?

“Are you on your way somewhere?” I had so many questions for this spirit but didn’t know where to start, so all the stupid ones came out first.

“I was sent here,” he managed and in his ghostly way, I think he smiled. Yeah, not a bad looking ghost.

“Who sent you?” It seemed the logical thing to ask.

He said nothing and like that, vanished, leaving me to wonder if I’d had something bad to eat at lunch.

Indigestion can be a bitch.

#

“So, no more encounters?” Christa, my best friend and only employee, asked while leaning against the desk in our front office.

I shook my head and pooled into a chair by the door.

“Maybe if you hadn’t left early to go on your date, I wouldn’t have had a visit at all.”

“Well, one of us needs to be dating,” she said, knowing full well I hadn’t had any dates for the past six months. An image of my last date fell into my head like a bomb. Let’s just say I’d never try the Internet dating route again. It wasn’t that the guy had been bad looking—he’d looked like his photo, but what I hadn’t been betting on was that he’d get wasted and proceed to tell me how he was separated from his wife and had three kids. Not even divorced! Yeah, that hadn’t been on his *match.com* profile.

“Let’s not get into this again...”

“Jolie, you need to get out. You’re almost thirty...”

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“Two years from it, thank you very much.”

“Whatever...you’re going to end up old and alone. You’re way too pretty, and you have such a great personality, you can’t end up like that. Don’t let one bad date ruin it.” Her voice reached a crescendo. Christa has a tendency towards the dramatic.

“I’ve had a string of bad dates, Chris.” I didn’t know what else to say—I was terminally single. It came down to the fact that I’d rather spend time with my cat or Christa rather than face another stream of losers.

As for being attractive, Christa insisted I was pretty, but I wasn’t convinced. It’s one thing when your best friend says you’re pretty, but it’s entirely different when a man says it.

And I couldn’t remember the last time a man had said it.

I caught my reflection in the glass of the desk and studied myself while Christa rambled on about all the reasons I should be dating. I supposed my face was pleasant enough—a pert nose, cornflower blue eyes and plump lips. A spattering of freckles across the bridge of my nose interrupts an otherwise pale landscape of skin, and my shoulder length blond hair always finds itself drawn into a ponytail.

Head-turning doubtful, girl-next-door probable.

As for Christa, she doesn’t look like me at all. For one thing, she’s pretty tall and leggy, about five-eight and four inches taller than I am. She has dark hair the color of mahogany, green eyes and pinkish cheeks. She’s classically pretty—like cameo pretty. She’s rail skinny and has no boobs. I have a tendency to gain weight if I eat too much, I have a definite butt, and the twins are pretty ample as well. Maybe that made me sound like I’m fat—I’m not fat, but I could stand to lose five pounds.

“Are you even listening to me?” Christa asked.

Shaking my head, I entered the reading room, thinking I’d left my glasses there.

I heard the door open.

“Well, hello to you,” Christa said in a high-pitched, sickening-sweet and non-Christa voice.

“Afternoon.” The deep timbre of his voice echoed through the room, my ears mistaking his baritone for music.

“I’m here for a reading, but I don’t have an appointment...”

“Oh, that’s cool,” Christa interrupted and from the saccharin tone of her voice, it was pretty apparent this guy had to be eye candy.

Giving up on finding my reading glasses, I headed out in order to introduce myself to our stranger. Upon seeing him, I couldn’t contain the gasp that escaped my throat. It wasn’t his Greek God, Sean-Connery-would-be-jealous good looks that grabbed me first or his considerable height.

It was his aura.

I’ve been able to see auras since before I can remember, but I’d never seen anything like his. It radiated out of him as if it had a life of its own and the color! Usually auras are pinkish or violet in healthy people, yellowish or orange in those unhealthy. His was the most vibrant blue I’ve ever seen—the color of the sky after a storm when the sun’s rays bask everything in glory.

It emanated out of him like electricity.

“Hi, I’m Jolie,” I said, remembering myself.

“How do you do?” And to make me drool even more than I already was, he had an accent, a British one. Ergh.

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I glanced at Christa as I invited him into the reading room. Her mouth dropped open like a fish.

My sentiments exactly.

His navy blue sweater stretched to its capacity while attempting to span a pair of broad shoulders and a wide chest. The broad shoulders and spacious chest in question tapered to a trim waist and finished in a finale of long legs. The white shirt peeking from underneath his sweater contrasted against his tanned complexion and made me consider my own fair skin with dismay.

The stillness of the room did nothing to allay my nerves. I took a seat, shuffled the tarot cards, and handed him the deck.

“Please choose five cards and lay them face up on the table.”

He took a seat across from me, stretching his legs and rested his hands on his thighs. I chanced a look at him and took in his chocolate hair and darker eyes. His face was angular, and his Roman nose lent him a certain Paul Newman-esque quality. The beginnings of shadow did nothing to hide the definite cleft in his strong chin.

He didn’t take the cards and instead, just smiled, revealing pearly whites and a set of grade A dimples.

“You did come for a reading?” I asked.

He nodded and covered my hand with his own. What felt like lightning ricocheted up my arm, and I swear my heart stopped for a second. The lone red bulb blinked a few times then continued to grow brighter until I thought it might explode. My gaze moved from his hand, up his arm and settled on his dark brown eyes. With the red light reflecting against him, he looked like the devil come to barter for my soul.

“I came for a reading, yes, but not with the cards. I’d like you to read...me.” His rumbling baritone was hypnotic, and I fought the need to pull my hand from his warm grip.

I set the stack of cards aside, focusing on him again. I was so nervous, I doubted if any of my visions would come. They were about as reliable as the weather anchors you see on TV.

After several long uncomfortable moments, I gave up.

“I can’t read you, I’m sorry,” I said, my voice breaking. I shifted the eucalyptus-scented incense I’d lit to the farthest corner of the table, and waved my hands in front of my face, dispersing the smoke that seemed intent on wafting directly into my eyes. It swirled and danced in the air, as if indifferent to the fact that I couldn’t help this stranger.

He removed his hand but stayed seated. I thought he’d leave, but he made no motion to do anything of the sort.

“Take your time.”

Take my time? I was a nervous wreck and had no visions whatsoever. I just wanted this handsome stranger to leave, so my habitual life could return to normal.

But it appeared that was not in the cards.

The silence pounded against the walls, echoing the pulse of blood in my veins. Still, my companion said nothing. I’d had enough.

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

He smiled again. “What do you see when you look at me?”

Adonis.

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No, I couldn't say that. Maybe he'd like to hear about his aura? I didn't have any other cards up my sleeve...

"I can see your aura," I almost whispered, fearing his ridicule.

His brows drew together.

"What does it look like?"

"It isn't like anyone's I've ever seen before. It's bright blue, and it flares out of you...almost like electricity."

His smile disappeared, and he leaned forward.

"Can you see everyone's auras?"

The incense dared to assault my eyes again, so I put it out and dumped it in the trashcan.

"Yes. Most people have much fainter glows to them—more often than not in the pink or orange family. I've never seen blue."

He chewed on that for a moment.

"What do you suppose it is you're looking at—someone's soul?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know. I do know, though, if someone's ailing, I can see it. Their aura goes a bit yellow." He nodded, and I added, "You're healthy."

He laughed, and I felt silly for saying it. He stood up, his imposing height making me feel all of three inches tall. Not enjoying the feel of him staring down at me, I stood and watched him pull out his wallet. I guess he'd heard enough and thought I was full of it. He set a one hundred dollar bill on the table in front of me. My hourly rate was fifty dollars, and we'd been maybe twenty minutes.

"I'd like to come see you for the next three Tuesdays at four p.m. Please don't schedule anyone after me. I'll compensate you for the entire afternoon."

I was shocked—what in the world would he want to come back for?

"Jolie, it was a pleasure meeting you, and I look forward to our next session." He turned to walk out of the room when I remembered myself.

"Wait, what name should I put in the appointment book?"

He turned and faced me.

"Rand."

Then he walked out of the shop.

#

By the time Tuesday rolled around, I hadn't had much of a busy week. No more visits from ghosts, spirits, or whatever the PC term is for them. I'd had a few walk-ins, but that was about it. It was strange. October in Los Angeles was normally a busy time.

"Ten minutes to four," Christa said with a smile, leaning against the front desk and looking up from a stack of photos—her latest bout into photography.

"I wonder if he'll come," I mumbled.

Taking the top four photos off the stack, she arranged them against the desk as if they were puzzle pieces. I walked up behind her, only too pleased to find an outlet for my anxiety, my nerves skittish with the pending arrival of one very handsome man.

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The photo in the middle caught my attention first. It was a landscape of the Malibu coastline, the intense blue of the ocean mirrored by the sky and interrupted only by the green of the hillside.

“Wow, that’s a great one, Chris.” I picked the photo up. “Can you frame it? I’d love to hang it in the store.”

“Sure.” She nodded and continued inspecting her photos, as if trying to find a fault in the angle or maybe the subject. Christa had aspirations of being a photographer and she had the eye for it. I admired her artistic ability—I, myself, hadn’t been in line when God was handing out creativity.

She glanced at the clock again. “Five minutes to four.”

I shrugged, feigning an indifference I didn’t feel.

“I’m just glad you’re here. Rand strikes me as weird. Something’s off...”

She laughed. “Oh, Jules, you don’t trust your own mother.”

I snorted at the comment and collapsed into the chair behind her, propping my feet on the corner of our mesh waste bin. So, I didn’t trust people—I think I had a better understanding of the human condition than most people did. That reminded me, I hadn’t called my mom in at least a week. Note to self: be a better daughter.

The cuckoo clock on the wall announced it was four p.m. with a tinny rendition of Edelweiss while the two resident wooden figures did a polka. I’d never much liked the clock, but Christa wouldn’t let me get rid of it.

The door opened, and I jumped to my feet, my heart jack hammering. I wasn’t sure why I was so flustered, but as soon as I met the heat of Rand’s dark eyes, it all made sense. He was here again even though I couldn’t tell him anything important last time, and did I fail to mention he was gorgeous? His looks were enough to play with any girl’s heartstrings.

“Good afternoon,” he said, giving me a brisk nod.

He was dressed in black—black slacks, black collared shirt, and a black suit jacket. He looked like he’d just come from a funeral, but somehow I didn’t think such was the case.

“Hi, Rand,” Christa said, her gaze raking his statuesque body.

“How has your day been?” he answered as his eyes rested on me.

“Sorta slow,” Christa responded before I could. He didn’t even turn to notice her, and she frowned, obviously miffed. I smiled to myself and headed for the reading room, Rand on my heels.

I closed the door, and by the time I turned around, he’d already seated himself at the table. As I took my seat across from him, a heady scent of something unfamiliar hit me. It had notes of mint and cinnamon or maybe cardamom. The foreign scent was so captivating, I fought to refocus my attention.

“You fixed the light,” he said with a smirk. “Much better.”

I nodded and focused on my lap.

“I didn’t get a chance last time to ask you why you wanted to come back.” I figured it was best to get it out in the open. I didn’t think I’d do any better reading him this time.

“Well, I’m here for the same reason anyone else is.”

I lifted my gaze and watched him lean back in the chair. He regarded me with amusement—raised eyebrows and a slight smirk pulling at his full lips.

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I shook my head. “You aren’t interested in a card reading, and I couldn’t tell you anything...substantial in our last meeting...”

His throaty chuckle interrupted me.

“You aren’t much of a businesswoman, Jolie; it sounds like you’re trying to get rid of me and my cold, hard cash.”

Enough was enough. I’m not the type of person to beat around the bush, and he owed me an explanation.

“So, are you here to get a date with Christa?” I forced my gaze to hold his. He seemed taken aback, cocking his head while his shoulders bounced with surprise.

“Lovely though you both are, I’m afraid my visit leans more toward business than pleasure.”

“I don’t understand.” I hoped my cheeks weren’t as red as I imagined them. I guess I deserved it for being so bold.

He leaned forward, and I pulled back.

“All in good time. Now, why don’t you try to read me again?”

I motioned for his hands—sometimes touching the person in question helps generate my visions. As it had last time, his touch sent a jolt of electricity through me, and I had to fight not to lose my composure. There was something odd about this man.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, trying to focus while millions of bees warred with each other in my stomach. After driving my thoughts from all the questions I had regarding Rand, I was more comfortable.

At first nothing came.

I opened my eyes to find Rand staring at me. Just as I closed them again, a vision came—one that was piecemeal and none too clear.

“A man,” I said, and my voice sounded like a foghorn in the quiet room. “He has dark hair and blue eyes, and there’s something different about him. I can’t quite pinpoint it...it seems he’s hired you for something...”

My voice started to trail as the vision grew blurry. I tried to weave through the images, but they were too inconsistent. Once I got a hold of one, it wafted out of my grasp, and another indistinct one took its place.

“Go on,” Rand prodded.

The vision was gone at this point, but I was still receiving emotional feedback. Sometimes I’ll just get a vision and other times a vision with feelings.

“The job’s dangerous. I don’t think you should take it.”

And, just like that, the feeling disappeared. I knew it was all I was going to get, and I was frustrated as it hadn’t been my best work. Most of the time my feelings and visions are much clearer, but these were more like fragments—almost like short dream vignettes you can’t interpret.

I let go of Rand’s hands, and my own felt cold. I put them in my lap, hoping to warm them up again, but somehow my warmth didn’t quite compare to his.

Rand seemed to be weighing what I’d told him—he strummed his fingers against his chin and chewed on his lip.

“Can you tell me more about this man?”

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"I couldn't see him in comparison to anyone else, so as far as height goes, I don't know. Dark hair and blue eyes, the hair was a little bit longish, maybe not a stylish haircut. He's white with no facial hair. That's about all I could see. He had something otherworldly about him. Maybe he was a psychic? I'm not sure."

"Dark hair and blue eyes you say?"

"Yes. He's a handsome man. I feel as if he's very old though he looked young. Maybe in his early thirties." I shrugged. "Sometimes my visions don't make much sense." Hey, I was just the middleman. It was up to him to interpret the message.

"You like the tall, dark, and handsome types then?"

Taken aback, I didn't know how to respond.

"He had a nice face."

"You aren't receiving anything else?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not."

He stood. "Very good. I'm content with our meeting today. Do you have me scheduled for next week?"

I nodded and stood. The silence in the room pounded against me, and I fought to find something to say, but Rand beat me to it.

"Jolie, you need to have more confidence."

The closeness of the comment irritated me—who was this man who thought he could waltz into my shop and tell me I needed more confidence? Granted, he had a point, but damn it all if I were to tell him that!

Now, I was even more embarrassed, and I'm sure my face was the color of a bad sunburn.

"I don't think you're here to discuss me."

"As a matter of fact, that's precisely the reason I'm..."

Rand didn't get a chance to finish when Christa came bounding through the door.

Christa hasn't quite grasped the whole customer service thing.

"Sorry to interrupt, but there was a car accident right outside the shop! This one car totally just plowed into the other one. I think everyone's alright, but how crazy is that?"

My attention found Rand's as Christa continued to describe the accident in minute detail. I couldn't help but wonder what he'd been about to say. It had sounded like he was here to discuss me...something that settled in my stomach like a big rock.

When Christa finished her accident report, Rand made his way to the door. I was on the verge of demanding he finish what he'd been about to say, but I couldn't summon the nerve.

"Cheers," he said and walked out.