

Zodiac-Attempted Redemption

Chapter One

“The Chronicle”

Clara St. Cloud loved her job at the San Francisco Chronicle.

There was something sacred about working for a newspaper that had been chasing the truth—and sometimes catching it—for over a hundred and fifty years. It made her feel part of something larger. She reminded friends and coworkers of that often. And, if she were being completely honest, she’d whispered it to her reflection once or twice. Like a prayer. Or a reminder not to give up.

The *Chronicle* was still a relevant voice in the Bay Area, even in a digital world where everyone screamed at once. There was something nostalgic—almost romantic—about a newspaper landing on your doorstep in the morning, folded crisp, smelling like ink and effort.

Clara had earned her place here. It hadn’t started that way. She’d been young, idealistic, and maybe a little naïve when she walked through the front doors holding a freshly printed résumé and asked to speak with someone about any openings. The receptionist gave her the usual line—Thank you, we’ll pass it along—but Clara didn’t leave. She kept talking. About her punctuality, her love of learning, and most of all, her passion for the written word.

Nancy McSimmons, secretary to the sports editor, happened to be walking by on her way to lunch when she overheard that line—*love for the written word*. She stopped. Introduced herself. Walked Clara straight to her boss’s office and made the introductions. Then she went to lunch like nothing had happened.

Nancy would go on to tell that story for the next eight years, right up until the day she retired.

Now, Clara did a little of everything. Her title no longer mattered. She had the corner office, the respect of her peers, and the quiet knowledge that her time was winding down. There were younger journalists waiting in the wings, eyes full of fire. She remembered that feeling well. She would make space for them soon.

She had plans. A podcast, maybe. A novel—something meaningful. Travel, perhaps. Rescue a special-needs dog or cat from the SPCA. The list was started and getting longer. She was still young, but it was time, her heart had been telling her for a while.

That morning, she was listening to a podcast called *Great Women Artists*. It wasn't life-changing, but it was pleasant. Her daily routine had become sacred: arrive early, start the coffee, leave the overhead lights off, and sit in her office with only the soft glow of her laptop while the sun climbed over the skyline. Some days she listened to music. Other days, a podcast. It depended on her mood. The first hour of her day belonged to her.

Then the building would lurch from silence to chaos, and her time would be gone.

She was half-listening to the podcaster's voice when she noticed the envelope on the corner of her desk.

Had it been there the night before? She didn't remember seeing it.

The handwriting was messy—below average, even—but her name and the *Chronicle's* address were spelled correctly. A faded stamp marked it from Vallejo, California.

She smiled faintly. It wasn't unusual. Over the years, she'd made countless friends and contacts in and out of the business. People sent her postcards, articles, little mementos. It was no secret Clara loved butterflies. Everyone knew it. People sent her anything with wings—facts, events, stickers. Once, even a fossil.

She picked up her butterfly-handled letter opener, carefully sliced the top of the envelope, and slid out the folded pages. Two of them. Plain white. Standard printer paper.

She unfolded the first one.

And read the line that would change everything.

this is the zodiac speaking

Chapter Two

“Michael”

78 Days Earlier

Michael was counting his blessings. It wasn't something he did often—at least not out loud—but today felt like one of those days.

Sunshine, the hum of spring just around the corner, and Nicky leaning against the bumper of the Monte Carlo like a scene from an old movie.

They'd grown up in the same little town. Known each other since third grade. Had crushes on other people, drifted apart, come back together. It wasn't dramatic—it was just life, unfolding the way it does when you stick around long enough.

And somehow, in all the ways that mattered, they'd found their way to each other.

She was studying to be a dental assistant—a goal she'd talked about since high school and never once wavered from. Michael had taken a different path. Still working through business courses, figuring things out one semester at a time.

Today, they were going to visit his grandmother.

She'd been at The Carlisle for a few months now, and his parents had been nudging him to go. Nicky had promised they would. So, today, they would.

Michael loved his grandmother. He really did. But he'd loved his grandfather more.

They'd fished together. Hunted. Rebuilt the Monte Carlo from nothing. When Michael drove it now, it felt like a small piece of that time was still alive.

Sometimes, in the quiet moments, he could almost hear his grandfather's voice again. Just a word or two. Just enough to confuse the silence. Nicky knew today would be hard. So, she'd stopped at his favorite sub shop. Steak and cheese, cut in half. One sandwich. One soda. Root beer, of course.

She worked part-time at the pet store. Her name tag still said "trainee," even after two years—but everyone there knew she could run the place if they asked her to. Officially, she managed the fish tanks. Unofficially, she did whatever needed doing.

Splurging on that sandwich and soda meant something. And Michael knew it. He didn't say much, but the gesture stayed with him.

His parents liked to remind him he didn't deserve her. Last night had been one of those moments—another guilt trip dressed up as concern. That's when Nicky said it. "We'll go see your grandma tomorrow." Just like that. End of argument.

He didn't care. He loved her. She loved him.
The rest would work itself out. *Right?*

Just before they left town, Nicky had reminded him about Sunday. "Don't forget we're on for the early service," she'd said as he grabbed his keys. "You promised. "" I didn't forget," Michael had replied, half-smiling.

They'd been attending a small nondenominational church together for a few months now—her idea originally. A quiet place on the edge of town, where the pastor wore jeans, and the music leaned acoustic. Nothing flashy. But it felt right.

He didn't talk much about what he believed. Not even to Nicky. But the calm of it all—the order, the prayers, the hymns—it settled something in him.

Today, he had Nicky. The car. A sandwich.
And for now, that was settling enough.