

# 1/Deadly encounter

Stephanie Richardson never saw what hit her. Whatever it was, it struck like a rogue wave, rising from a calm sea. Her routine morning jog was violently interrupted, her free spirit stolen. Had she seen the onslaught coming, she might have been able to brace herself. Standing as she was, however, the impact was inescapable, its intent deadly.

She was at the southern edge of Prescott Estate, where gardeners and employees seldom ventured. Alone and jogging the path she followed every day, the attack startled her and sent her tumbling over a small retaining wall that separated the higher ground from a steep embankment.

The ambush took the 26-year-old's breath away. She doubled over as two ribs cracked and her backward fall began. Her calves scraped across the stone retaining wall that warned of the chasm below. Her cries of pain went unheard by anyone who cared.

How could this be? What was happening?

There was nothing she could do to stop the inevitable. Her fingers clawed at the air, searching for something to grab that would prevent her from catapulting down the 200-foot, rocky ravine.

Who would want to hurt her?

Despite her athletic training, her body was out of control. Arms and legs flailed in every direction as she fell backward. She tried to reach back with her hands to protect her head from the rocky terrain, but she was too late. The back of her skull struck something hard and her world went blank.

“Oh my,” she thought as her spirit emerged from the dirt and dust to watch the spectacle unfold. The body was tossed from rock to boulder, twisting and turning like a severed branch in a violent windstorm. It came to rest against a giant oak tree at the base of the ravine. Ribs and spine were smashed when the lifeless body wrapped around the base of the oak's massive trunk. The birds stopped singing and the crickets ended their relentless chant as life's last fluids stained a white running suit and turned blonde hair pink.

Stephanie was shocked and unsure of what she had witnessed. Could that be her at the bottom of the ravine? It looked like the woman was wearing her favorite all-weather windbreaker and pants outfit.

What happened?

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a bright light approached from afar and a gentle voice called her name.

“Stephanie, do not be afraid,” the voice said in a way that was so soft and gentle she could not ignore it. “Step into the light and you will find a new world, one without pain or sorrow. All is ready, my dear. A place has been prepared for you in the next world.”

“Who are you?” Stephanie asked as she put a hand over her eyes to protect them for the bright light that was now in front of her. “I have no need for another world; my world is just fine.”

“I am Miakota, Jefferson’s mother,” the voice said. “I have come to help my son’s fiancé begin a new journey. Come. Many of your friends and family await your arrival.”

“Jefferson has talked in great detail about his mother, Mary,” Stephanie explained. “He told me nothing of a woman named Miakota. Why should I believe you?”

“Mary was my human name; Miakota is my spiritual name. The Holy Ones allow me to travel between the human and the spiritual worlds in order to help lost spirits like you find your destination.

“Do not worry. No harm will come to you; you were chosen to be the future bride of my only son, W. Jefferson Prescott III. So, too, you are loved by me and you will forever have a place of honor at my side in the spirit world.”

“What is this spirit world?” she asked.

“It is where we go when we have taken our last breath in the human world. Your grandmother, Sarah, is here. She awaits you, as do I.”

“Oh, no! Are you telling me I am dead, that the body at the bottom of the ravine really is mine? It cannot be. I am to be married next month.”

“One day you will be reunited with my son, Stephanie. Not today or next month, but at a time in the future when destiny decides your time has come. Now, join me, and I will show you a world that you have never imagined.”

“Are you sure I can’t go back and be with Jefferson? He will be distraught. Let me go back to say goodbye. It will ease his pain.”

“I am sorry, Stephanie, but you cannot go back; you must go forward.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You must!”

“Why?”

“It is in accordance with the Holy Ones’ prophecy.”

“Who are these Holy Ones you speak of so fondly?”

“They sit above and oversee all of the human and animal worlds. They are called many things — God, Jehovah, Yahweh, Allah, Great Spirit and

Holy Ones. They are whichever Supreme Being you pray to; they are all things to all people.

“I watched the love grow between you and my son, but I could not stop the chain of events put in place by others. I am here only to make your final journey smooth.”

“I am an educated woman, Miakota. Why should I believe you?”

“I have no reason to lie.”

“That is easy for you to say. How can I be sure? Someone might have drugged me; all of this could be a bad dream.” Stephanie said.

“Remove the engagement ring from your finger, my child,” the spirit voice replied. “Inside it you will find a word I instructed Jefferson to place there just for this reason. Look and tell me what you see.”

Stephanie slowly slipped the engagement ring from her finger and inspected the inside edge. Unknown to her and engraved on the inside of the gold band was the letters M-I-Z-P-A-H.

“How did you know that? What does it mean?”

“The word is from your Christian Bible, my dear. It appears in the first book of Old Testament, Genesis 31:49. It means ‘May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.’”

“But..”

“No, Jefferson did not know what would happen on this hillside today. He put it there because he loves you so deeply that no matter where you go he wanted you to be safe. I am here to fulfill his wishes and those of the Holy Ones.

“Come with me now, my child. Jefferson’s journey begins soon. He will need to move forward carefully. Together, we can ensure his path is true.”

Stephanie raised the ring to her mouth and kissed it. When she did, she felt her anxiety vanish and a surge of contentment fill her soul.

“I love Jefferson more than anything. If I come with you will I see him again, mother?” she whispered.

“Yes! Just step into the light, daughter. My arms await you.”

As Stephanie moved faithfully forward, the light grew brighter, the air warmer and a scent of jasmine filled a gentle breeze. She felt the arms of Miakota wrap around her as she became one with the prophecy.

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When the future wife of W. Jefferson Prescott III did not return to the estate for her 2 p.m. appointment with Mallory Kirby, the Midwest’s most prestigious wedding planner, the staff began to worry. Stephanie, like her fiancé, always was punctual. She would never miss an appointment.

Search parties immediately were dispatched to find her. Perhaps she had been injured during her morning jog.

Her lifeless body was found at approximately 4 p.m. Although paramedics were called to the scene, there was nothing they could do. The Manitowoc County Sheriff's Department investigated and ruled the death of Stephanie Richardson accidental. The sudden and accidental fatality shocked the social world and everyone at Prescott Estate.

The young head of Prescott Holdings Ltd., Jefferson, 28, was devastated by the news. He had lost both of his parents in a five-year span and was just beginning to embrace his new role as caretaker of Prescott Estate when he met and fell in love with the vivacious Richardson. After a whirlwind courtship, they became engaged and the couple's pending wedding was predicted to be one of the region's social highlights of the year.

In fact, Jefferson had been abroad at the time of the accident, choosing Italian marble for the bathroom in the master suite of his family's massive mansion. Stephanie had hated the old-style bathroom and the facelift was an engagement gift to her. This was to be the first stop in their lifelong partnership that included transforming Prescott Estate into a more modern home for the family they both wanted and for generations to come.

His dreams were shattered on a warm August morning when she tumbled down Amanda's Ridge, so named after his great-great-great grandmother, who urged her husband to build the retaining wall to warn of the dangerous ravine below.

Thomas Wooley, Property Manager of Prescott Estate, notified Jefferson by telephone the minute Stephanie was discovered missing. His boss was not concerned, though.

"She's running, Thomas," he said. "You know how she loves to run; it is not unusual for her to be gone for hours."

"Yes, but she never misses appointments. She was scheduled to meet with the wedding planner today. I'm worried, Jefferson," he replied.

"Don't be. She'll be diving into the pool to cool off before you know it. Give her a hug for me and tell her not to be so inconsiderate of others. I should be wrapping up business here today and will return tomorrow."

When Stephanie's lifeless body was discovered, Thomas' second phone call to his friend and employer was the most difficult he had ever made.

"What's wrong now, Thomas? Did Stephanie scold you for tipping me off about missing that appointment?" Jefferson jibed.

"No, sir, she didn't." Thomas replied soberly.

"Why are you calling me then? What else could be wrong, Thomas?"

“I have unfortunate news, Jefferson,” Thomas replied.

“What could possibly be wrong? I just purchased the marble for the bathroom. Stephanie will be overjoyed.”

“I am sorry to inform you, Jefferson, there has been an accident.”

“Is she okay? How badly was she hurt?”

“It appears Stephanie lost her balance along the trail on the south end of the property, and tumbled down Amanda’s Ridge.”

“Oh, no! Is she okay, Thomas?”

“No, she is not, Jefferson.”

“How bad is it? I’ll be home immediately.”

“I think that is wise, sir.”

“Can I talk to her? Where is she? Put her on the telephone, Thomas!”

“I am afraid I cannot do that, sir.”

“Why? Damn it! Spit it out, Thomas!”

“Stephanie did not survive the fall, Jefferson.”

“What?” Jefferson asked, falling into a nearby chair.

“I am so sorry I have to tell you this. By the time we located her, it was too late. She had passed away from her injuries. I am so sorry, Jefferson.”

“No-o-o-o-!” he screamed at the top of his lungs and the telephone connection went dead.

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Jefferson rushed back to Wisconsin on a private jet. Thomas was waiting for him when he stepped off the plane at just after midnight. Neither of the men said a word as Jefferson climbed into the back seat of a Lincoln Navigator and Thomas collected his bags. As they sped off, Jefferson’s only instruction was: “Take me to her!”

In his boss’s absence, Thomas had handled all of the details pertaining to Stephanie’s remains. As with, Jefferson’s father and mother, the Porter Funeral Home collected the body and prepared it for a private showing. Thomas called ahead to inform the caretaker his boss was en route.

Jason Porter Jr. was waiting at the door of the funeral home when the Navigator arrived. He ushered Thomas and Jefferson to a small room at the back of the spacious funeral home. A tiny card opened the door and Jefferson entered without a word or a nod to the longtime family friend.

Four hours later, Jason and Thomas were standing outside the door when it opened without a sound and Jefferson exited, stoic and morose. His eyes were swollen and red, his complexion pale and his shoulders slumped from more than 40 hours without sleep.

“Thank you, Jason,” he said. “I leave her in your trusted care.”

As the Lincoln Navigator pulled out into afternoon traffic, Thomas broke the silence. “Are you okay, Jefferson?” he asked.

“No, I’m not okay! I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay, Thomas!” he replied, staring aimlessly out the SUV’s side window.