

Starstruck By Anne V. Cooke

Helen heard the clacking of heels on the patio tiles. She looked up from her menu and smiled.

"Wow, you look amazing," she said to her friend as she rose for a hug. "Is that a new lipstick?"

Dora beamed. "It's called *Cherry Serious*."

"Look at *you*," Helen teased.

"What do you think?" Dora laughed and twirled once, her short, ruffled skirt catching the breeze before she sat down.

"Bold—but fun," Helen nodded. "What's the occasion?"

"Just ready for a change. I wouldn't have had the guts if it wasn't for Clara."

"Who's Clara?" Helen said, sipping her sangria.

"My new life coach."

"*Ooh*, this sounds good. Let's order first. Then tell me everything."

Helen scooped the last dollop of guacamole onto a corn chip. "I still don't get it," she admitted. "So, it's like an online horoscope?"

"That's just for starters," Dora said. "You enter as much information about yourself as you can. Every day. Almost like a diary. Over time she's able to give you advice, counsel you—even make predictions."

"No way," Helen said, emptying her glass. "What's it told you so far?"

"*She*," Dora corrected. "Not 'it.' I'm paying for the premium service."

"Sorry," Helen said. "How did she get the name, 'Clara,' anyway?"

"I got to name her—my best friend in kindergarten." Dora leaned forward and practically whispered, "You want to read the transcript from my latest session?"

Eyes wide, Helen nodded. Dora slid her phone across the table. Helen scrolled the page as she read:

I warned you, didn't I? You can't trust Leslie. She's jealous of you—of your potential, your looks, of your relationship with me. You should drop her. Quite honestly, you won't miss her at all. And she's likely expecting it. Try calling Helen. She's been supportive of you in the past. Lunch on the bay could be fortuitous. Show her the 'new you' and see how she reacts. I believe it will be a positive encounter.

As for Roger, he feels threatened by your newfound sense of independence. It's still too soon to tell if he's 'the one'. Show him a little more attention to boost his ego. Then tell me how it goes.

Helen felt the color drain a bit from her face. She didn't care for being part of Clara's analysis. "That's pretty incredible," she murmured.

"She's amazing," Dora chirped.

"Are you really going to un-friend Leslie?"

Dora finished the rest of her margarita in one sip. "I'm pretty sure she sabotaged my chances at that promotion—and you know how badly I wanted that. She's definitely the jealous type. Not like *you*," she said with a smile. "By the way, how's David?" she asked, reapplying her lipstick.

Helen shifted in her seat.

"I'm sorry—I should have asked sooner," Dora said. "Are you still worried about him?"

"I always worry," Helen said. "He almost got himself expelled for hacking into the school's server. He's lucky the principal loves him. She gave him one more chance."

"Oh, I didn't realize the time," Dora said, glancing at her watch. "I want to get a flan and some churros for Roger."

"Is it getting serious?"

"You saw what Clara said. Too soon to tell," she admitted. "But I have to give him a chance."

After a quick hug goodbye, Helen sat alone, gazing at her sweaty water glass. Suddenly, the waitress rushed up, breaking her out of her reverie.

"Your friend was in such a hurry," she said, waving a credit card. "She left this at the register."

"It's okay," Helen said, taking the plastic. "I'll see she gets it." She looked at the card, puzzled.

"Anything wrong?" the waitress asked.

"I've known her a long time. But I never knew 'Dora' was short for something."

"For what?"

"Pandora."

That morning the toaster broke, she couldn't find her car keys, and a sneezing fit prompted her to gulp a handful of vitamins. Helen wondered if Mercury was in retrograde. She'd been reading up on astrology since her last meeting with Dora. To her surprise she found it

interesting. And she thought it might help her better understand her friend's fascination with Clara.

While carrying two large coffees, Helen navigated the twigs and fat pinecones strewn across the path. A park seemed like an odd choice for a rendezvous, as did the time. Dora was a night owl. Eight-thirty on a Saturday morning practically defied logic. No doubt Clara picked the time and place. Dora's silver Kia sat in the empty parking lot, so Helen knew her friend was there—somewhere. She almost considered calling out when she spotted a figure clad in white jeans and a white poncho in front of a gnarled oak tree. The figure swayed gently and gracefully, like a swan paddling across a pond.

"Hey!" Helen shouted.

The figure stared for several moments before idly waving.

"We've got a chilly morning," Helen said as they lightly embraced. She handed one of the coffees to her friend.

"Thanks," Dora said. "Have some grapes."

Helen glanced at the small bag of fruit on the bench. "Those look good," she said, sitting down. "Were they out of chocolate croissants?"

Dora shrugged, saying "Croissants aren't fortuitous."

"Ah, but this," Dora said, holding a grape, "This is fruit-u-itous!" She popped the grape in her mouth and chuckled. Dora cast a withering look.

"Kidding!" Helen said. She studied her friend surreptitiously. At first glance Dora looked great. Fit and well dressed. She knew the poncho cost an arm and a leg and the boots looked brand new. But despite the makeup, Dora's cheeks were grey and hollow and her eyes were sunken.

Helen felt a slight chill at the back of her neck. She shivered.

Dora removed her ear bud.

"What were you listening to?" Helen asked.

"My theme music."

"Oh?"

"Clara said truly special people need to meditate to our own music. It helps us thrive."

"That's interesting," Helen said, cautiously.

"Clara composed it," Dora added. "It's part of the premium service."

Helen thought about mentioning Mercury in retrograde, but sensed the situation had catapulted far beyond astrology. She took a sip of strong coffee, and noticed Dora's earrings.

"Wow, are those—real?" she asked, regretting the question as soon as it fell out of her mouth.

"You think I would wear fake diamonds?"

"No, of course not," Helen said, fumbling. "That was rude, I apologize. I'm glad you're doing so well. Things must be great at work."

"A new position opened up—Assistant Director of Marketing. *Regional* Assistant."

"Dora, that's great! Congratulations." Helen's hopes rose. At least Dora was still sharp at the office, she thought.

"Clara knew it was going to happen. I just had to follow her advice."

Helen's stomach tightened as Dora recounted Clara's instructions—which included her having an affair with the Regional Director. It was intense but brief, Dora explained, her face registering a flicker of distress when she said, 'intense.' Helen's apprehension turned to alarm.

"Does Roger know?"

Dora shook her head. "He trusts me," she said.

Helen sat quietly as Dora spoke, but her mind raced. Dora wasn't perfect. But this wasn't Dora. This was a husk. This was Clara's leftovers.

A crow lit on a branch of the oak tree.

"Mother's going to die soon," Dora said flatly.

"What?" Helen exclaimed, almost spilling her coffee. "When?"

"Next year. Probably by the summer."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know she was ill."

"She isn't—yet."

Caw, caw. The crow fluttered its wings.

"I don't understand," Helen said. She had a million questions, all of which were potential landmines.

"Clara sees it happening," Dora insisted, a hint of sadness coating her voice.

"But if your mom isn't sick—"

Dora pulled a mirror out of her purse. "Maybe there'll be an accident," she said, swiping lipstick across her lips.

The crow flew away.

"Does your mom still live alone at home?" Helen asked.

Dora tucked the mirror back in her purse. She pulled her shoulders back, looked directly at Helen and said, "You ask a lot of questions."

Helen felt Dora's lifeless gaze bore into her.

"Clara has always liked you," Dora said. "That's why we've stayed friends."

Helen wondered at the implication of being liked by Clara. She felt a slight urge to vomit.

"As I said, Clara has liked you—*so far*," Dora warned, leaning in. "But she has big plans for me. And she said you might try to get in the way."

If Helen knew a prayer she would have prayed. As it was, her mind froze. All she could do was silently scream, *STOP THIS* over and over. But who could stop Clara?

Suddenly, she knew.

She hoped it wasn't too late.

And then, out of nowhere, a branch snapped loudly behind them and several voices rose out of the brambles. Both women turned around.

Helen read the text half a dozen times and still couldn't believe it:

Hey, there. Sorry it's been so long. I can't remember much about that day at the park, but I probably owe you an apology. Get this—Roger broke up with me. But it's ok. I'm in Hawaii! Just for the week. You know how I've always wanted to go. Turns out Clara gave me the best advice yet. Here's the highlight: "Your chance for personal growth—and success at both work and love—is at an apex. But you've got to rely on your own instincts to make it happen. Go offline. A total electronic detox. Including with me. For good! You're ready to fly, Little Bird."

Is that crazy, or what? I KNEW I was ready. But hearing it from Clara made all the difference! She's so AMAZING! I almost regret not needing her anymore, LOL!

Anyway...Aloha!

Helen put the phone in her pocket. Seeing the door ajar an inch, she gave it three light raps and slowly pushed it open. The darkness of the room would have overwhelmed her were it not for a single whitish glow. She moved forward. The soft tapping of computer keys filled the otherwise silent room. The slouched figure at the desk removed his headphones.

Helen clasped her hands. “It worked,” she announced, beaming.

“Really?” the figure said. “Cool.”

“You did it,” Helen said. “I still have no idea how.”

“It’s better that you don’t,” the voice said, slightly amused.

“But did you actually get *into* Clara? Or did you bypass her?”

“I told you—“

“*Okay*, I’ll stop asking,” Helen said.

“What you wrote was good. You made it sound like Clara.”

“I guess we make a good team,” Helen smiled.

He let out a small grunt. Then he changed the subject. “You know, you got really lucky that day. If those bird watchers hadn’t shown up and distracted your friend—“

“I know,” Helen nodded. “I shouldn’t have made it sound scary. I don’t want you to worry about me.”

“Well, I do.”

“Ditto,” Helen said. “Now, how about some chili fries?”

“Chili fries?” he repeated, eyebrows raised.

“Come on, it’s ready.” She tousled the teen’s hair and boldly kissed his forehead. “My little hacker.”

“Oh, *Mom*.”

The End