Praise for Lesley Choyce

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–QUILL AND QUIRE

NO MORE FRIDAYS

A NOVEL BY

LESLEY CHOYCE

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ONE

SPECIAL ABILITIES

My mom had insisted I had some kind of special ability to read other people's thoughts, see into the future, or perhaps even perform other psychic feats if I would only hone my skills like my ancient ancestors had. Sometimes, I wish I had taken her more seriously. After she was gone, I missed her little lectures even more.

Now I hate the very idea of celebrating birthdays — mine or anyone else's. You see, my mother died on my birthday. It was my last year of high school. Your mother is not supposed to die during your last year of high school. Or on your birthday. But there was nothing I could do about that.

I suppose I should tell you about her and the thing that killed her. But not right away. This is my story and she's a big part of it. Or was, at least. She told me many things about myself. Some I believed and some I didn't. My mother said that I was a "free spirit" like her. But I never felt that way. She was a big believer in what she always called "possibilities." That included things like past lives, fate, angels, aliens, ghosts, psychic abilities, and auras. Before she lost her voice, she told me stories about all those things, some that, she said, were just stories and some that she said she believed were true and so I should believe them to be true as well. When I was young, she told me stories every night. There were stories from history (mostly ancient times) and others she just made up.

"Your father doesn't like me telling you these things," she said to me more than once growing up. "He's a very practical man and has a very narrow view of reality." Despite my father's narrow view of

reality, however, she loved him very much. And he loved her. We were sort of a very happy family, if a bit odd. I also have a little brother, Nathaniel, known usually as Nate, who didn't handle the death of my mother very well. He was already addicted to video games when Mom was dying. Then, it seemed, he was lost to them altogether. My father kept saying he would grow out of it once he got over her dying. But it didn't seem that way to me.

And my father? Well, he was, and is, an accountant. A very expensive one. Presumably, a very good one. Mom called him a bean counter. A no-nonsense sort of guy. I was probably no older than four when I realized how different my mother and father were. Like night and day. Like fire and ice. But like my mom would often say to him at the dinner table when he was making fun of her latest notions about the spirit world — "You're just a silly bean counter, Freddy. But you're *my* bean counter."

"And you are my goddess," he would reply. The bean counter's goddess, I suppose.

My mother saw the world differently from most normal people. And I loved her for that. When the ALS began to kick in, she kept trying to put a good spin on it for us. Imagine trying to put a good spin on a debilitating disease that would take away your ability to control your arms and legs and eventually even your ability to speak. But I won't get going on that now. I know more than I'd like to know about all the particulars of that terrible affliction. And, by the way, it's hereditary. So someday me or my brother might succumb to it too.

My mother would not want me to write so much about grief. As a kid, I was coached by Mom to read all the classic fantasy novels. So, I did. I read Tolkien when I was only eleven years old. Then she moved me through C.S. Lewis, Roald Dahl, and Ursula Le Guin but told me to stay away from contemporary fantasy fiction.

By the time I was twelve, she started telling me she believed I had certain psychic abilities. "My grandmother had them," she told me. "I'm sorry you never got to know her before she was taken by the

angels. They say it skips a generation or two, so I wasn't so lucky. But you, Elliott, I think you have it."

It got me thinking: Maybe I did.

I often felt that I knew what people were about to say before they said it. Maybe that doesn't sound like much. Maybe everyone could do this sometimes. People tend to say very predictable things. But Mom was adamant. "Pick the number that I am thinking about," she would say to me out of the blue. If I said "eighty-seven" she'd say, "That's amazing. That's exactly right." She never did this when my dad was around, and I don't think she did this with my little brother. Only me.

By the time I was thirteen, I was convinced I truly did have what she simply called "special abilities."

TWO

THE POSSIBILITIES

A young boy, even one in his early teens, likes to have his mother's attention. The number thing — my ability to guess which number she was thinking of — she said, "was only the tip of the iceberg." I kept asking what else about my iceberg was beneath the surface, but she'd say I "just had to wait and find out."

To me it was all a game, but she set in motion — and kept in motion — the idea that I was special and had special abilities. "You just have to keep honing those skills," she'd say. But, as I grew older (and a bit more like my father), I began to get skeptical. How did I know what number she was really thinking? I told her about my doubts. She took a piece of paper and wrote down a word, folded the paper and set it in front of me. "What animal name did I just write down?"

"I don't know," I said. "Cat."

She opened the folded piece of paper. *CAT*, it said.

"Bullshit," I snapped. "It was a lucky guess."

This really seemed to hurt her feelings. "Don't use that word. People who don't believe in anything use it all the time to deny the possibilities."

For her it was all about *the possibilities*.

But now that I've introduced you to my mother and the word she hated most, it seems fitting that I tell you about my best friend, perhaps my only friend, Riley. Riley's known me since we were both

little. I knew that Riley was smarter than everyone else in my class when we were both eight years old. She was probably smarter than all our elementary school teachers combined. She confided to me more than once on the playground that she was "cursed with intelligence." And I had finally and reluctantly confided in her that my mother had told me I was "blessed with special abilities."

"Like what?" she asked.

"I can read people's thoughts," I said.

"Bullshit," she said.

"I think sometimes I can predict what someone will say before they say it."

"So, you can also predict the future."

"Sort of."

"Bullshit."

"Can we still be friends?" I asked. I was desperate for a friend. My special abilities didn't include any usable social skills.

"Yes," she said. "We can just agree to disagree about some things. Okay?"

"Okay." It was the first time I'd heard that very adult statement but not the last. It sealed our friendship.

My mother's mystical training and my mining of hundreds of pages of fantasy literature had not prepared me for an ongoing bond with a girl who was all hard science, logic, and critical thinking.

"I have what Ernest Hemingway once called a 'bullshit detector,'" she told me.

"That word again. Who's Ernest Hemingway?"

"It's not important."

"What is important?"

"You are," she said.

It was maybe the nicest thing anyone other than my mother had ever said to me.

THREE

DAMAGED GOODS

During the time of my mother's decline and after her death, I had many dark thoughts. My father, the bean counter, eventually decided to send me to a counsellor. I mentioned something about my supposed special abilities, and the shrink went all weird on me and made me take a range of tests that I suspected were to determine if I was mentally ill. Somehow damaged psychologically by the death of a parent.

Of course I was damaged. So was my brother. So was my father. So, I fudged all the tests. The counsellor was a smart professional and decided to change his tactics to what I later learned was called narrative therapy. He asked a range of questions and I answered. Only, I discovered I could predict most of his questions before they left his mouth. I could hear them in my head and when he said them out loud it was like a really delayed echo. My answers to his questions were mostly lies because the more he asked, the more I realized I needed to keep some things — some very important things — secret.

When I started to answer one of his questions before he even asked it, he grew frustrated. "How did you know I was going to ask that?"

I wanted to tell the truth. But instead, I lied. "You're pretty predictable, really. I don't think you are very good at your job."

"And you're an egotistical little bastard," he snapped, his frustration with me boiling to the surface.

That shut him up. No more questions. No more counselling sessions. Better for me to deal with my grief in my own way.

When I told Riley about what I'd done, she called me a nincompoop. I'd never heard anyone other than someone on TV use that word.

"It comes from Latin — *non compos mentis* — meaning not of sound mind."

"How does the poop get in there then?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask Samuel Johnson and he's been dead for over two hundred years. He put the word in a dictionary back then."

"How would you know this?"

"I have an inquiring mind," she said. This was one of her pat responses that ended any number of conversations.

Riley, true to her self-definition, did have an enormously inquiring mind. And her intelligence and curiosity, strangely, did not serve her well in school. Teachers disliked her because she corrected them in front of the class when they said something that she believed to be incorrect or false. I think teachers said unkind things about her in the staff room. It's really hard on a kid being smarter than most of her teachers and having a brain that lodged facts like an online *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

But even though she was a hard-nosed, hard-headed person of facts, she tolerated my mother-induced belief that forms of magic existed in the world. She made fun of my supposed psychic abilities as hogwash (another one of her favourite words — originally meaning kitchen scraps mixed with water to feed pigs).

"Look," she explained, "I read somewhere that some people have an innate intuitive way of reading other people — predicting how they will answer questions, being able to sense subtle eye and facial movements — so it seems they are reading their minds. I believe you are one of them. So, you should consider going into show business. Become one of those fake psychics that advertise on the internet and fill auditoriums."

"I don't think that's the way it works. My mother said my great-grandmother had it."

"And how did that turn out for her?"

"She died young."

"See. You're better off ignoring all that garbage your mother drilled into your brain. Be realistic."

"I hate that word."

"What word?"

"Realistic. My father often used it as a put-down of my mother."

"Realistic is not a put-down. It's a very good word."

"I don't want to hear the origin of it."

"I wasn't about to tell you the origin of it. Is that the end of our argument?"

She could tell that she had hurt my feelings. Things always got a little messed up whenever we talked about the "garbage" my mother had drilled into my head.

"Okay, fine. It's the end of our argument. But it's not garbage."

"I'm sorry. Do you want to go to the cabin?" she asked.

"Yeah, let's go to the cabin."

FOUR

THE CABIN

Men used to hunt deer and rabbits around here until a new bylaw came into effect and hunting in the area went the way of the dodo bird (which was presumably wiped out because of hunting).

The cabin was deep in the forest just like in those fairy tales Mom read to me when I was young. But there was no big bad wolf, no evil spirits, nothing particularly spooky or evil about it. The old dirt road leading through the tangle of brush and trees had become overgrown so no one could drive there anymore, and the place seemed to have been left alone for the most part, although we occasionally found some empty beer bottles there or a condom or two that I had to pick up with a long stick and bury outside in the dirt. Riley and I both found this embarrassing but never talked about it.

I guess, at this point, I need to say that although Riley was a girl and my friend, she wasn't what would be traditionally known as my girlfriend. It wasn't quite like that. She was more like the sister I never had. The super intellectual, sometimes intellectually annoying, critical thinking genius of a sister that would never have been raised in my family.

But she was the best kind of friend to have when a boy's mother leaves this world.

We had fixed up the cabin a number of times. Our makeshift door didn't quite keep the squirrels and raccoons out, but we could live with that. We had packed in some roofing tar and sealed up the ancient asphalt shingle roof so it didn't leak, and the fireplace and

chimney were miraculously intact so we would sometimes light up a fire on chilly days. We knew other people — mostly other teens — came here sometimes, but, aside from the leftover party items, no one had really trashed the place. It was our refuge.

When one of us was going dark or off the deep end, the other would say the word "cabin" and we would retreat from the so-called civilized world until we talked each other out of whatever negative dangerous thoughts were ruling the day.

Our cabin time was mostly about talking. Or just sitting quietly. I'd sometimes quote what Mom used to say about the need for quiet time: "Don't just do something, sit there."

And sometimes, we'd do just that. Cell phones off. Brains on idle. Emotions neutral. A pretty fine trick on the days we could pull it off.

Other times, when Riley was feeling down in the dumps, I would simply let her talk herself back to normality.

Which is to say that the mental problems in our small little twosome world were not all mine. Like my father, Riley suffered from depression. When you are a teenager, and you really are smarter than 99.9% of your classmates (and your teachers) you just get so frustrated with the world that you want to find an escape.

Cabin talk was part of Riley's escape. She, of course, was highly analytical, even with her own self-analysis. One of our classic cabin conversations went like this:

Riley: I don't think I can take another day of the idiocy at school.

Me: What do you mean?

R: Trivial concerns, small-mindedness, cruelty, selfishness, meanness, etcetera, etcetera.

M: Etcetera. etcetera. It does wear a person down after a while.

R: I need something to make it go away.

M: What are you thinking about?

R: I ruled out drugs.

M: That's wise.

R: I don't think sex would work.

M: I didn't think so. What else?

R: I ruled out almost everything else.

M: That's probably just as well.

I didn't know if these were suicidal thoughts, but it occurred to me I needed to keep an eye on her.

The same way she kept an eye on me when the days grew frighteningly dark, and my mind filled with such grief that my head was shoved very far up my own ass and I couldn't see any way out.

Fortunately for Riley, she was a fan of theories. Yes, theories. Her internal world of *possibilities,* which, to her, involved science, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, economics, and much more, was based on her voluminous and encyclopedic study of the history of theories. She had memorized hundreds of theories. And all I had to do was ask.

"What's your latest favourite theory?" I asked on one of her most dismal of dismal days.

After a moment's reflection, she told me. "It's called the no-ownership theory."

"Like communism, right? No private ownership. All for the communal good, right?"

"Wrong. Not communism. Completely different. Clearly you *can't* read my mind, can you?"

It was a put-down, but I could take it.

"Enlighten me." I said, which is what I always said at a moment like this.

"It's called the no-ownership theory of the mind."

"Oh, the mind."

"This theory suggests that consciousness exists in its own right and need not be possessed by any body or brain."

"That's a bit of a brain teaser right there," I said, not really understanding what this could mean.

"You don't get it, do you?"

"No."

"It means we don't need to be here at all for consciousness to continue to exist."

"Is that a good thing?" I asked.

She seemed puzzled and thought about it. "I think it can have some very negative implications," she said. But then she squinched up her forehead and a frown turned into a half smile. She looked most seriously straight into my eyes and added, "But I think maybe that it *can* be a very good thing." She smiled — fully smiled like her face would crack — just then. This was a fairly rare thing for a person like Riley who had such a staggering IQ and a whip-smart mind that questioned just about everything under the sun.

The funny thing is, sitting there on the old wooden floor of the cabin, our cabin, with the door open, a cool clean air filtering in, and a small twig fire in the fireplace, I realized that Riley's latest pet theory — sussed from whatever obscure textual source — sounded pretty similar to some of my own mother's observations about the nature of the mysterious universe we humans inhabited.

FIVE

NO MORE FRIDAYS

My mother coined the phrase first.

"Looks like there'll be no more Fridays," she said.

And it was my father who repeated it to my brother and me at the point in my mother's decline that we all had to admit was pretty bad. You see, Fridays, for our family (before the ALS got really bad), had always been a particularly happy time. Friday afternoon, at least, and into the evening. It seemed like the only time of the week when my father would really "cut loose" as my mother called it.

My father was a man who, I suspected, was an extremely good accountant. He took his job seriously (although the rest of us in the family did not). He made good money — I noticed that other families were struggling while we were well off. He rarely talked about his job and, if he did, my mother would playfully chastise him and make him change the subject. She did this less often as ALS continued to take her away from us, even as she continued to be in our home. I clearly remember one of the good Fridays before Friday was no longer Friday.

"How many beans did you count this week?" Mom would ask him over dinner. Dinner, I should explain, was always takeout, always — and I mean always — something ethnic and often something very unusual and surprising. "Never the same stew twice," the old bean counter would say sometimes, even though it was never actually stew to my recollection. My father claimed to be a very knowledgeable person about international cuisine. At first, he would find food sources quite close to our suburban home: predictable generic Chinese,

Italian, or Mexican. But then he ran out of local ethnic restaurants and began driving further and further afield each Friday afternoon in rush hour traffic to bring home more specialized meals — Szechuan, Vietnamese, Thai, Jamaican, Indian, or Turkish. We were eating Mongolian traditional fare the night he announced the impending end to our traditional Fridays.

"How many beans did you count this week?" she asked as was her wont.

"Oh, I reckon about a million. Possibly two million."

"That's a lot of beans," she said. And smiled. Yes, I do remember — oh so well — how nice of a smile she had, a really really wonderful Mom smile, before the disease took even that away from her when she lost the ability to move the muscles in her face.

"Yes, a lot of beans, I admit. But you don't want to spill the beans if you can help it." My father's version of humour. And that was the great part of Friday meals. My father would stop being the serious, competent, cool, and collected, probably brilliant accountant that he was, and would become this goofy middle-aged guy who tried to be funny and entertain his family.

If you can believe it, we sometimes wore silly cardboard party hats while attempting to eat Pad Thai with chopsticks or steak tartare with small inadequate but environmentally friendly takeout forks and knives.

Because Riley had indoctrinated me into the world of the origin of words and phrases, I knew that the term bean counter came from Germany but, in English, later referred to someone who literally counted each bean coming into or out of a business presumably selling beans — but also anything else.

And "spill the beans" was an English version of a Greek phrase referencing a voting method involving white and dark beans for affirmative or negative. So, the phrase "spill the beans" would refer to knowing the outcome ahead of time.

But on this particular occasion, I finally asked him the question

that had been bugging me and Nate for a long time. "If beans are numbers, then those numbers must represent something, right?"

"Of course," he answered, breaking a tong on the tiny flat wooden fork the takeout place had so generously provided.

"What then does it represent?"

"Money," my mother answered. "Your father counts other people's money."

My little brother later confessed that he envisioned our father actually sitting in a room with big stacks of loot like the drug dealers and bank robbers we saw in movies on TV.

"It's not exactly counting," he countered, snapping the rubber band that held his clownish cardboard hat on his head against his chin. "It's Ac*counting*. And it's a science."

"Of sorts," my mother added. I should point out that on these happy Friday mealtime rituals, my mother would drink one or sometimes two glasses of white wine. Always white, never red. My father imbibed exactly two pint cans of some foreign beer or other with names like Heineken, Guinness, Leffe, Stella Artois, or Pilsner Urquell. They weren't heavy drinkers but when they imbibed (my father's word) they did become somewhat less restrained, letting go of their usual ways. And more talkative than usual. A bit more relaxed, less parental, you might say, as they encouraged Nate and me to join their repartee.

(In case you were wondering, my mother always encouraged me to keep expanding my vocabulary. Riley had told me this was a wonderful thing as she continued to urge me to keep looking up origins of many of these terms and especially how the meaning of so many words had changed through the centuries.)

"Science, my ass," my mother continued on this most enjoyable and memorable night. My father made a face, pretending he was offended.

"Don't show me that mug," she said. "So, explain to your offspring exactly what you actually do."

His tiny wooden fork broke just then, and he threw it over his left shoulder, then picked up a piece of meat in his hand and shoved it into his mouth. While he was earnestly chewing it, he said, "The counting part is easy enough but then there's a lot of adding and subtracting, multiplying of course, the occasional division problem, and percentages. We high-end bean counters work a lot of percentages."

"I learned about percentages in math," I added, trying to inject myself into the family conversation.

"As you should," he said. "Percentages will come in handy in life for whatever you decide you want to do."

"I want to be a fireman," Nate suddenly and surprisingly piped up, also trying to be part of the family conversation.

"Well," my dad answered, "that may be different, but I bet percentages will come in handy there so pay good attention to your math teacher when that comes around for you."

"I will," Nate promised.

But Dad was avoiding the real answer to the real question I was looking for. So, I blurted it out. "But how many beans do you count… or A*ccount*? How much money? How many dollars do you deal with?"

It was then, with a wry smile on her face, that my mother answered for him. "Millions, boys. Millions. Your father doesn't like to talk about it, but he's dealing with millions of other people's money."

"But what do you do with it?" I asked.

Suddenly, he seemed to be unable to answer such a simple question. He stared at my mother, then at Nate and finally at me. "Well, son. I guess you could say, I move it around."

Perhaps that was the first time I realized he was more than just a bean counter. Still baffled by what he had said, I didn't ask any further questions. Mom was giggling at the look on my father's face. Her laugh, her wonderful laugh that would all too soon diminish to a single syllable, echoed through our kitchen, and I felt the warm feeling inside that I had felt on so many Fridays, not then realizing what was to come.

Later, when I recounted this to Riley, she seemed strangely affected by it. She didn't find it funny. "What was it your mother said?" she asked. "Something about no more Fridays?"

"Yeah, that was it. I think she meant—"

"I know what it meant. And that's the saddest thing I ever heard."