

Chapter 1

No one had shot at Luke Johnson in three months. He had been careful this time. Few people in Port Arthur gave him a passing glance.

But tonight a man in a suit had shouted his name—his real name, not the one on his janitor uniform—chased him into an alley and pointed a gun at his chest.

“You don’t have to,” Luke said.

The windows in nearby buildings had gone dark hours ago. Two overfilled dumpsters and a tower of cardboard boxes decorated the alley. A security lamp spotlighted the gunman’s Astros baseball cap. Everything else was a black silhouette.

The man stepped forward. “It’s my job.”

“You kill for her?”

“Among other things.”

Ten feet separated them. A chain link fence blocked his only escape. Luke’s pulse surged through his eardrums, creating a rush of white noise.

“Tell her I forgive her,” he said.

The gunman adjusted the brim of his cap. “You what?”

“Tell her she doesn’t have to worry. I’m the last person who wants to hurt her.”

“She needs to make sure.”

A rustling sound erupted from behind the stack of boxes. The gunman glanced toward the noise. Luke saw his opening and charged. The man’s shoulders lifted, and his gun wavered. Luke closed half the distance between them before the gunman fired.

The crack of the silencer quickened his nerves. A bullet tore into his shoulder, bringing a flash of pain. The blast knocked him off-balance. He struggled to stay upright, but kept running.

Another shot punctured his right lung, stealing his breath. He lunged forward, grabbed the barrel, and pushed it aside as it fired again. His momentum crashed him into the gunman's chest, driving them both to the ground.

Heat from the silencer seared his palm, but he didn't let go. The gunman turned him over and tried to pin him down. Luke's adrenaline surged. He fought through the pain, forced his strength into his hands, and twisted the gun away.

Black spots dotted his vision. He couldn't catch a breath. His fingers searched for the trigger. His shoulder and chest burned. A hard punch landed on his jaw, rattling his teeth. For a moment his eyes couldn't focus.

He found the trigger and shoved the gun forward until it met resistance. He fired two quick rounds. The gunman hovered weightless for a moment, then slumped to the pavement beside him, facedown and unmoving.

Silence flooded the alley. Luke rested his head against the warm asphalt, stared into the night sky, and wondered if these were the last stars he'd ever see.

As the adrenaline left his body, so did his strength. The gun tumbled from his fingers. He struggled to move his arm. Darkness tugged at him. He felt himself slipping away. With one last surge of effort, he swung his hand to his chest.

He covered the hole in his ribcage with his fingertips.

Closed his eyes and concentrated, letting the power flow through him.

His collapsed lung filled with warmth, but not the same kind that came from the bullets. Its tissues flared and vibrated. Capillaries repaired themselves. New flesh grew from the fissures

the slug had torn open. He coughed. Fluid from his lung shot through his windpipe and sprayed across the asphalt.

The bullet retraced its path through his chest, inch by inch as if pulled by a magnet. The flesh around it closed and healed. He inhaled a deep breath. The bullet broke through his skin. He pinched the tip and pulled it free. The hole behind it disappeared.

His fingers crawled toward his opposite shoulder. The bullet worked its way out of his muscle and into his hand, leaving no scar and no internal trauma, only healthy and rejuvenated flesh.

He climbed to his feet, then turned and faced his attacker. He rolled the gunman onto his back. The man's injuries looked fatal, and definitely well-deserved.

God, this one was just a kid, no older than twenty-five. He'd probably taken this job to prove his bravery. Luke wondered if the attacker's boss had warned about his special ability. Probably not. That was just like her, sending others to do what she couldn't do herself.

Others, he reminded himself. Sometimes she sent more than one.

He grabbed the man's wrist and found a pulse—faint, but still there. He covered the man's wounds with each hand. Closed his eyes and concentrated.

“How'd you do that?”

He turned. A wrinkled old man with huge eyes stared at him from beside the stack of cardboard boxes. “You an angel or something?”

Luke touched a finger to his lips. He turned toward the unconscious gunman and closed his eyes again.

After he finished, he snatched the Astros cap and fit it on his own head. He walked toward the man by the boxes. “Don't talk about this.”

The old man, clearly a frequent visitor to this dark alley, backed away.

Luke held out his fist and opened his hand, showing a collection of four bloodstained slugs. "I'd find another place to sleep tonight." He dropped the bullets and pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "When that guy wakes up, he won't be happy."

He left the alley before the man could answer.

Time to get out of Port Arthur.

Chapter 2

Annamaria grabbed her Fendi purse, adjusted her D&G sunglasses, and climbed out from the rear passenger seat of a black Audi SUV. She told the driver to wait, then shut the door. After a pause, she opened the door and grabbed the tiny yellow stuffed bear she'd left on the seat. She tucked it into her purse and shut the door again. Then she paced down the sidewalk of the strip center, toward the most unlikely place she thought she'd ever visit.

A nail salon and a dry cleaner sandwiched the business on either side, but no one could miss the neon signs blazing from behind the windows of Psychic Readings by Nick. The largest panel featured a Capricorn goat, a horned Taurus, and a long-fingered hand with an eye in the center. Other signs boasted the services Psychic Nick offered: Spiritual Advisor, Tarot Cards, Healings, Readings, Connecting with Lost Loved Ones.

Jackpot. She hurried inside.

When she crossed the threshold her anxiety level spiked, but she forced it down with a deep breath. She dug a fingernail into the top of her blond wig and scratched. She could pull this off, no problem.

"You must be Diana." A twentysomething woman looked up from a magazine resting in her lap. She closed the pages and stood.

Annamaria removed her sunglasses. "Where's Nick?"

"He's finishing a call with a client." The woman motioned toward a couch on the opposite wall of the lobby. Every surface looked covered with a blanket of grime. "I'll let him know you're here." The woman disappeared behind the only door in the office.

Annamaria picked out the cleanest looking section of couch, sat, crossed her legs, and tried to look calm. She opened her purse and slid her hand inside. She found the tiny bear and stroked its well-worn fur. This was it—the moment she’d dreamt about since she was thirteen. Answers which had eluded her would soon come within her grasp, but only if she kept it together.

The door opened. A large man strode into the lobby. Despite his size he looked smaller than she’d imagined, even wrapped in a Tibetan robe. His grey-streaked hair ran from the center of his scalp to the edge of his shoulders, nearly masking the crow’s feet etched into the corners of his eyes. But what a set of eyes—so deep, so green, so electrifying, they explained how he could draw a steady stream of customers to such a hellhole of an office.

“Diana, please come with me.”

Another deep breath.

He led her to a room with dark violet curtains lining each wall. A shelf to her right held a collection of crystals. They sat at opposite ends of a small round table situated beneath a globe-shaped glass chandelier. A set of Tarot cards lay spread in an arc in front of Nick. She had to hand it to him. Even though he was surely a fake, this room held the pulse of a genuine psychic energy.

As if there were such a thing.

Nick struck a match and lit a votive candle, then placed it on the table between them.

“What kind of reading are we doing?”

“What do most customers ask for?”

“I’m a Tarot specialist.” He scooped the deck into his left hand and flipped the bottom card to the top like a skilled poker dealer.

“When you say ‘specialist’ does that mean you’re good?”

“Best in Greater Memphis, honey.”

Annamaria’s stomach clenched. No one called her honey and got away with it, especially not this guy. She swallowed and forced a smile. The prosthetic latex covering her nose tickled against her skin. It felt unnatural and smelled like toxic chemicals, but she worked to suppress her reaction. Instead of cringing, she focused on the bright side—the wig and fake nose must be working. Psychic Nick definitely didn’t recognize her.

“It works best if you have a specific question,” he said.

She leaned forward. “I’m trying to find my parents.”

“I see.” He pushed the stack of cards toward her. “Did they pass away recently?”

“You tell me.”

Those charming green eyes twinkled as he laughed. “I’m happy to do that. But we need to cover something first. I have a policy of receiving payment up front. I’m sure you understand.”

“I have a policy of seeing what I pay for.”

“I’ll show you plenty. But not for free.”

Dammit. Just like she’d expected, Nick was a disciplined con artist. He’d probably danced these same steps a thousand times. No use fighting it. The money didn’t matter. She opened her purse. Her toy bear stared up at her. She gave it a gentle squeeze, then pulled a hundred dollar bill from her wallet and passed it across the table.

“Okay.” Nick swept up the money and tucked it inside his robe. A tuft of white chest hair poked through the opening he created. “To get started, mix the cards any way you like.”

Annamaria stared at the chandelier and shuffled, trying not to think about the hundreds of desperate people who'd touched these cards before her.

“Let the cards absorb your energy, your questions, your future, your past.”

Psychic Nick wasn't helping, not one bit.

“Think about your parents. Concentrate on what you remember about them.”

She twisted the deck so violently a few cards snapped loose and flew from her hands.

Two landed facedown to her side. A third flipped over and leaned against the votive candle.

“Ah, the Magus,” Nick said. “The Magician. You must be thinking about your father.”

Dumb luck, of course. She decided to go with it. “What do you see?”

Nick touched the card with his index finger. “A man who is powerful, adept. A master of many skills. Incredibly charismatic.”

She blinked. Her father was all those things and more.

Nick reached for the pile of cards she'd abandoned. “The next two will tell us about your past.”

“I already know my past.”

“Maybe they can show you something you missed, something you didn't realize at the time.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. No wonder his tacky office doors stayed open. Nick spoke in such a way that she found herself wanting to believe his words were true. Of course, she knew better. But the draw of his voice was unmistakable.

He flipped the top card. The picture showed a man in a long cape, his head down, his shoulders turned away from the artist who drew him. Three overturned goblets lay scattered near his feet. Two more stood upright nearby.

“The Five of Cups,” he said. “Also known as the Lord of Disappointment. Your father must have let you down in some way. Or maybe it was you who disappointed him?”

Annamaria looked away. This was such bullshit. Millions of people probably believed their father had screwed them at some point during their childhood. Her past wasn't that unique. She folded her arms. If she was going to play this game, she'd make him earn his money.

“Does any of this resonate with you, Diana?”

“Not really.”

The next card revealed a profile of a woman sitting up in bed with her head buried in her hands. Mounted on the wall behind her were nine swords, each with gleaming sharp points.

“Oh, dear.” Nick ran his fingers through his hair.

“What is it?”

“Now I see why you want to talk to him. He hurt you. He hurt you so deeply you're still feeling it.”

“Is that what the card says?”

He held it up for her. “The Nine of Swords is never easy to discuss. It's a catalyst, an intensifier to the cards around it. When paired with the Five of Cups, it suggests you suffered a disappointment that was particularly intense.” He reached across the table and grabbed her hand. His touch sent a chill through her. “This wrong was inflicted on you by someone who lacks compassion.”

She leaned back, pulling herself from his reach. “My father left when I was a kid.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Yeah.”

“The important thing is you survived.” Nick glanced at her purse. “You persevered and overcame, made yourself into a successful woman.”

This man had no idea.

“But you didn’t come here to understand your past.” He covered the Tarot deck with his massive hand. “Your question is about the future.”

He was right, in a sense. But she’d never leave something this important to the draw of a card. Psychic Nick might try to find meaning in the random selection of miniature painted pictures, but she stayed more focused on his every movement, on each inflection of his voice. The key to her future couldn’t be read from any card. It lived inside the man sitting opposite her.

“Here we go.” He pointed to the image on the next card. A large and powerful hand surged from a puffy cloud. Its fingers gripped a long, straight branch of wood still green with sprigs and leaves. “The Ace of Wands represents the beginning of a new life. It signals a rush of energy—a raw and powerful energy.” He grinned. “Soon you’ll become a force to be reckoned with.”

She allowed herself a smile. Again, he had no idea.

Nick moved faster, as if he could sense her patience waning. “This one’s called the Tower, one of the Major Arcana. A sudden change is coming. Something big—something connected to the energy revealed by the Ace of Wands. Does that make any sense?”

She leaned forward. “New energy? A sudden change? That’s so specific. You really are the best in Greater Memphis.”

Nick pursed his lips. “You’re free to believe them or not. But I promise these cards never lie.” He pushed the deck in front of her. “I want you to pick the last one.”

“Why?”

“To prove I’m not manipulating this. I’m a proud man, Diana. My reputation means everything to me. I can’t let you leave thinking I’m a fraud.”

His stare pierced her so deeply she felt it in her chest. “Any card I want?”

“As long as you don’t look at it first.”

She spread the deck in a line across the table. Nick probably had a lecture prepared for each card. She ran her fingers along the edges, then plucked one out of line and turned it over.

This card easily held the busiest image yet. Several figures suspended in unnatural poses formed a scene too complicated for her to decipher.

“You picked Aeon, the symbol for judgment. In Christian circles, this card represents the Final Judgment, like in the Book of Revelations. But pagans see it differently.”

“What about you?”

“See this figure?” He pointed to a small child in the center. “That’s Horus, the Egyptian god of redemption. He also suffered a tragic loss of his father at a young age. Like you, he managed to persevere and overcome. He became a wise ruler, and eventually a god.”

“So I’m like an Egyptian god?”

“You’re going to make a decision that will affect the rest of your life. You’ll make a judgment—a final judgment—that can’t be taken back. This card is warning you to weigh that decision carefully. If you choose the right path, your potential is unlimited.”

The skin on her forearms tingled. Again, he’d nailed it. But his warning came too late. She’d made her decision long ago. No way she’d turn back now. In his own way, Psychic Nick helped confirm what she already knew to be true.

“I don’t know how you saw it, but that’s exactly why I came here.”

“Not sure I believe you, Diana.”

“I know how I sound, but I really mean it this time. With that last card, you clarified things. You were right about everything—my father, the betrayal, the new energy I’ve found, and the final judgment that’s coming.”

“Really?”

She didn’t need to fake her excitement now. The words spilled out like an avalanche: “My father was a preacher, of sorts. We moved a lot when I was young. I had to keep my things in one small bag in case we needed to leave in a hurry.”

Nick narrowed his eyes. “I see.”

“Then one night my parents disappeared. They grabbed our bags and left the hotel without me. They didn’t even pay the bill. I was thirteen. I didn’t have any money. The hotel manager called the police, but it was too late. They never came back.”

His keen emerald green eyes darted left-and-right across the room, looking everywhere at once. She didn’t let it stop her.

“I promised myself I’d make them pay when I found them. I survived, earned an Ivy League education, and developed a power my father could only dream of possessing.”

Psychic Nick wouldn’t look away. The color drained from his face, and his cheeks trembled. He grabbed the arms of his chair.

“My father was a faith healer—the kind that blows into small towns, performs a few healings, takes a collection, then disappears before everyone realizes it’s just an act.”

“Annamaria, wait—”

She kicked the table across the room, sending the Tarot cards and the votive candle flying. “My father was a fake, but I’m the real thing. Here, let me show you.”

Nick bolted for the door. She lunged after him, jumped on his back, and tackled him. Turned him over and sat on his chest. She grabbed his left wrist and pulled his hand close to her face.

“Where are you going, Daddy? This reading isn’t over yet.” She pressed her thumb into his palm. “It’s my turn to read your fortune.”

Chapter 3

Another city, another uniform. Another building that needed a night janitor. Luke had started over again.

The elevator doors opened. He pushed his cart into the hallway of the seventh floor. He checked the map posted on the wall and headed toward the Critical Care Unit.

The term ‘hospital’ didn’t begin to describe MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. The main campus included a dozen buildings and spanned two zip codes. Cancer patients from around the world seemed to flock here in search of miracle cures, and the staff spared no efforts trying to provide them. The evidence was everywhere—nurses filling out patient applications for cutting-edge clinical trials, pharmacists crosschecking drug interactions while ordering the thirty different prescriptions each patient was taking, doctors staying late to explain to family members the risks of an experimental procedure. In a place permeated by constant death, it encouraged him to see so many people stay committed to the mission painted on the hospital walls: Making Cancer History.

He pushed a large stainless steel button on the wall. Two automatic doors swung open. A woman in scrubs rushed past him, chasing an alarm that sounded like a landline busy signal.

No surprise. Even in a place as massive as this, the night shift covered more patients than the day shift. Management figured with fewer doctors and visitors there’d be less to do. But cancer never slept. This new job required him to spend more time cleaning the rooms of patients who’d died than in any other place he’d worked.

This was also the most invisible job he’d ever held. Nurses and family members regularly walked through his mop strokes, sometimes even stepping on the mop head while he tried to pull

it out of their way. Doctors would carry on detailed conversations in front of him, discussing patient treatments or personal finances as if he wasn't there. Nobody ever noticed the cleaning guy, which made it the perfect job for Luke.

He pushed his cart into room 751A. All the lights were off, except for a backlight above an empty bed. It spotlighted a set of rumpled sheets and covers—mostly white with faint yellow stains near the middle. He checked the whiteboard near the door. Apparently a patient named Luis Rodriguez had fought his final battle in this room hours ago.

Luke walked to the side of the bed, placed his hand on the pillow, and bowed his head.

“What are you doing?”

He looked up. A woman with mocha skin, curly hair, and puffy reddened eyes stood in the doorway. She flipped on the lights and walked in.

He rushed to his cart and pretended to arrange his cleaning supplies.

“Were you praying?” she said.

“Cleaning. I was cleaning.”

“It's okay. I won't tell anyone.” Her tone softened as she moved closer. “Last time I checked, prayer was still legal in Texas.”

He pulled off the sheets, bundled them into a pile, and stuffed them into a laundry bag that hung from his cart. All the while he could feel the woman staring at him, watching him work.

“Thank God. There it is.” She strode past him and retrieved a leather purse resting on a recliner in the corner. Instead of leaving, she walked to his side and stared at the empty bed. She placed her hand in the center of the mattress, touching it with her delicate fingers.

After a moment, she turned to him. “You know what they say about this place? Angels roam the hallways. Some patients actually see them. Papa saw one earlier tonight.” Her eyes grew watery, but she didn’t blink them clear. “He was reaching for one when he died.”

Every part of Luke believed her. He thought about her watching her father slip away. If only he’d arrived a few hours earlier.

“I’m sorry about your dad.”

She patted his shoulder, then walked toward the door. “Remember what I said about this place.”

“I will.”

Ten minutes later he’d turned the room, making it ready for another critically ill patient. He pushed his cart into the next room.

This room’s layout was a mirror image of the previous one, but the bed wasn’t empty. An older black woman, her body emaciated by whatever version of the beast she was fighting, reclined at a forty-five-degree angle. Her right arm hung limp, taking in a yellowed mixture of the contents from four IV bags hanging next to her. The television screen on the opposite wall showed a rainbow-colored test screen. Her eyes seemed to focus on it like it was an impressionist painting.

He checked the two recliners set against the far wall. No purses, no rumpled blankets, no mobile phone chargers plugged into the outlets.

The whiteboard listed her name only as Ms. Holmes. He’d read enough of these boards to know what information typically appeared: patient name, allergies, food and medication restrictions, attending doctor names and their disciplines, and always an emergency contact with a telephone number.

Ms. Holmes's whiteboard didn't list an emergency contact.

He pushed his cart deeper into the room and pulled the door halfway closed—the most he could conceal himself without getting into trouble. He moved to the side of her bed and leaned into her field of vision.

Though her mouth hung slightly open, her cheeks looked like she was sucking them in. Her teeth were missing, and her eyes had drawn into their sockets deeper than he thought possible. He assumed she was asleep or in a trance, but then her eyes locked onto his. Her entire body stiffened, her hands grabbed at the sheets.

He placed his hand on hers. "It's okay. I won't hurt you."

"Take me quickly," she said.

"You don't understand." He lifted her hand and curled three of her fingers into her palm, forming a pointing gesture. "Show me where the cancer is."

Her finger moved in a wide circle, then paused over her forehead, sank to her neckline, stretched toward her abdomen, to her hips, down one leg, as far as her arm would reach.

"You're too late, son. It's everywhere."

"I can take it away."

She shook her head. "You mean well, I can see that. But I don't want your help."

"What about your family?"

"They're waiting for me. On the other side."

He pulled off his sanitary gloves and cradled her hand in his arms. Her skin felt so cold, so stiff. He tried to rub some warmth into it. "At least let me take the pain away."

"That's what these bags are for." She glanced toward the IV stand. "I'm comfortable now. That's the most anyone can do for me."

He stood there a minute longer, gently massaging her fingers, her palm. Sometimes the most difficult aspect of his ability was not being able to use it.

She forced her head deeper into the pillow before speaking again. “I thought of something you can do.”

He leaned in close but didn’t speak.

“Make sure my room is clean for the next person.”

He placed her hand over her heart and covered it with the blanket. “I can do that.”

“You are the janitor, right?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“But you’re not just a janitor.”

“No, I’m not.”

She graced him with a wide, toothless grin—an image he knew he’d never forget. He kissed her forehead, then grabbed his cart and pushed it into her bathroom. He needed to get busy. His shift ended in three hours, and the seventh floor CCU held dozens of rooms to clean, floors to polish, and people to see.