

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 someone had finally found him. Someone shouted his name—his real name, not the one stitched on his janitor uniform—chased him into a low-lit alley and pointed a gun at his face.

“You don’t have to,” Luke said.

A security lamp spotlighted the gunman’s Astros baseball cap. Everything else was a dark silhouette. “It’s my job.”

“You kill for her?”

“Among other things.”

Ten feet separated them. A chain link fence blocked his only escape. One head shot and he’d be finished. His pulse surged through his eardrum, a rush of white noise.

“Tell her I forgive her,” Luke said.

The gunman pulled on the brim of his cap. Something about the way he moved said he wasn’t used to wearing one. “You what?”

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

“She needs to make sure.” The man straightened his arm and pointed the barrel at the tip of Luke’s nose.

No time to weigh options. He ducked and charged. The man’s shoulders lifted, the barrel wavered. Luke closed half the distance between them before the gunman fired.

The crack of the silencer quickened his nerves. The slug that tore into his abdomen set them on fire. The blast tipped his balance. He struggled to stay upright. But he kept running. No matter how many times the gunman pulled the trigger, he'd never stop running.

Another shot punctured his right lung, stealing his breath. One more step. He lunged forward, grabbed the barrel, pushed it aside as it fired again. He slammed his shoulder into the gunman's chest, knocked them both to the ground.

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

His fingers searched for the trigger. Black spots dotted his vision. His insides burned. He knew the gunman was on him, but he couldn't get a bearing.

He found the trigger. A fist appeared out of the darkness. He tracked a line toward the man's body, aimed and fired two quick rounds. The gunman hovered weightless for a moment, then slumped to the pavement beside him, facedown and unmoving.

Everything went fuzzy. Luke couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Pain from his wounds dominated his senses—two slugs lodged in his flesh, radiating an unbearable heat, draining his energy, his life. The gun tumbled from his fingers. He struggled to move his arm. It wouldn't budge, like it had fallen asleep. Darkness tugged at him, but he resisted. 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 bullet. Its tissues flared and vibrated. Severed 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. Reached through the buttons of his shirt. The bullet broke through his skin. He pinched the tip and pulled it free. The hole behind it disappeared.

His fingers crawled toward his abdomen and covered his original wound. The bullet snaked its way out of his body and into his hand, leaving no scar and no internal trauma, only healthy and rejuvenated flesh.

He climbed to his feet. Turned and faced his attacker. The man's injuries looked fatal, and definitely well-deserved.

He rolled the gunman onto his back. 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 the dirty work she couldn't do herself.

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

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

“How'd you do that?”

He turned. A wrinkled old man with huge eyes stared at him from beside a dumpster twenty feet away. “You an angel or something?”

He touched a finger to his lips. 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 dumpster. "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 Q7. She told the driver to wait, then slammed the door. Paused. Opened the door, grabbed the tiny yellow stuffed bear she'd left on the seat. Tucked it into her purse and slammed the door again. She stomped along the sidewalk, toward the most unlikely place she thought she'd ever visit.

A nail salon and a same-day 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 scowl transformed into a smile. Her shoulders relaxed, her steps lightened. 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. Found the tiny bear and stroked its well-worn fur. This was it—the moment she’d dreamt about since she was thirteen. Answers that had eluded her would soon float 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.”

Deep breaths.

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 across a felt mat 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.”

Her stomach clenched. No one called her honey and got away with it. Especially not this guy. She swallowed and forced a smile. Tried to see the bright side—the wig 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 as she’d imagined, 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 anyway. She leaned over and unzipped her purse. Her toy bear stared up at her. She gave it a gentle squeeze. Pulled a hundred dollar bill from her wallet and flung 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.”

She 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, the people you want to reconnect with. 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 have been 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 cards 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 into 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?”

This was such bullshit. Who didn't think their father had screwed them at some point during their childhood?

"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 that 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 flipped 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 card.”

“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 rest of the deck in a line across the table. Ran her fingers along the edges. Plucked one out of line and flipped 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.”

Adrenaline raced through her body. 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 their 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, became my own guardian, 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 overnight 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, 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.”