

CHAPTER I

Some Kind of Actress

The first Tuesday of November, it hit ninety-six degrees. The woman in the silk racer-back sundress in front of me in line at the Shell station on Fairfax that morning told the weary, sweaty kid working the register that it was okay, even good, because it was a dry heat. That it would cool off at night, that we're lucky to live in Los Angeles instead of someplace that has to deal with snow and ice for Thanksgiving. I don't know who that woman was, but I know her home has air conditioning.

My clinic was stuffy and stifling and, I was aware, a little smelly. The blue nylon carpet hadn't looked new at the start of my lease six years ago, and while I ran a handheld carpet sweeper over the floor each morning, it'd been three years, maybe four, since I'd rented a professional steamer to deep-clean all the accumulated grime and stink away. As the small room heated up, the sour funk grew more pungent. It smelled like failed hopes, or the unventilated fitness center in an airport hotel geared toward business travelers on a budget. If I'd had any clients scheduled for the afternoon, I'd have lighted some incense to cover it up.

No one was scheduled. I sat at my little table, my tarot deck resting on the white plastic surface, hoping for walk-ins while trying to ignore the smell.

The woman who entered my clinic looked like the type who'd have strong opinions about the odor. She stood in the doorway and stared at me with what looked like surprised annoyance, as though she'd arrived home to find a despised ex-lover sitting in her living room.

"Hello," I called out to her, smiling and professionally pleasant. "Care for a reading?" I gestured at the tarot deck.

She stared at me a moment longer, then closed the door behind her and stepped into the room. She glanced around the clinic. She looked first at the three-foot plastic statue of Kali I kept in the corner. It had been dark brown when I'd picked it up at a yard sale, but I'd spray-painted it copper, and from a few feet away it looked like it could be made of hammered metal. It was surrounded by clean white pillar candles. Those had come from the 99 Cents Only store; the glass holders had been emblazoned with shrink-wrapped images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Olaf from *Frozen*, but I'd sliced off the shrink-wrap with a razor, and now, arranged in a cluster, they looked tasteful, like I'd paid seventeen bucks apiece for them at the kind of store that sold hand-woven yoga mats and water bottles made of marble.

When she spoke at last, her tone was just a hair shy of hostile. "I don't have an appointment."

"I can squeeze you in," I said. "What can I help you with?"

She pulled out the chair opposite me and sat. Her skin was deep brown, and it glowed like she'd just come from an afternoon at a spa. She kept her hair in glossy box braids pulled back and secured at the nape of her neck in a twist. She wore a well-cut navy suit, not expensive but not cheap, over a button-down shirt the color of fresh cream. She folded her hands on the clean white plastic tabletop and leaned forward slightly. She locked

her eyes with mine. "My mother passed on six months ago. I'd like to see how she's doing."

I was shaking my head before she'd finished her sentence. "Sorry. I don't talk to the dead."

"Don't, or can't?"

"It's not a service I offer. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"I thought all you people talked to spirits." It was antagonistic. After a pause, the woman smiled. She smiled like she'd learned the basics from observing people, but had never understood there was more to it than just the coordinated movement of a group of facial muscles. It didn't touch her eyes.

"Some do. It's not in my particular bag of tricks." I tried to look serene and composed, though I was sweating too much. My indigo linen tunic, selected off the Goodwill racks because I thought it looked like the kind of shirt someone effortlessly chic and in possession of a lot of disposable income would wear, clung to the wet space between my breasts. I shifted in my chair and tried to discreetly pull the fabric away from my body.

"I'm an intuitive counselor. Think of me as a life coach, one who can give you insights into your past, present, and future." It sounded smooth and well-rehearsed. A variation on that speech was on the homepage of my business website, for which I paid \$12.98 per month in hosting fees.

The woman nodded. "Okay, I get that, I want that," she said. "What do you charge to tell me about myself?"

"For an initial half-hour consultation, that's fifty dollars. Beyond that, it depends. Every client's needs are different."

She stared at me again, and I felt an almost visceral contempt radiating from her. Some people can't stand psychics, though I didn't see that too often with my clients; by the time someone walked into my clinic, their mind was at least open to the possibility we aren't all total frauds.

This woman, though. She knew I was a fraud, which made

it interesting when she placed her pebbled leather shoulder bag on her lap, removed her billfold, and counted out two crisp twenty-dollar bills and a pair of fives, which she placed on the table between us.

I didn't touch it. "You can pay me afterward at the register. There will be sales tax, too." In truth, I was generally happy to skip the tax and pocket the cash, but warning bells were telling me to tread carefully.

Because this woman was a cop. She didn't look like a cop, but she had the body language of one, that aggressive yet hyper-wary confidence that characterized every police officer I've ever encountered. Not that my experience was extensive; I'd never run into any legal trouble, probably because I'd flown beneath all possible radars. Psychics do get arrested sometimes, but usually that's because someone's been cheated in an egregious way, their life savings drained, their bank accounts closed, their property deeds signed over.

I hadn't taken anyone's life savings, just small nibbles of their cash. Nothing anyone didn't have to spare, and I always gave clients good value for their money. Good enough, at least.

I thought about turning the woman away by telling her I didn't like her aura, but that might not be enough to get her out of my hair, and besides, I was curious. "What do you want to know about yourself?"

"Whatever you can tell me. You're the psychic. Tell me who I am. Tell me what I came here for." The corner of her mouth pulled in a faint sarcastic quirk.

"You got it." I reached my hand across the table. She hesitated, then extended hers, palm up. I took it lightly and examined it. Her skin was cool and dry to the touch. By comparison, my hand was a sweaty, meaty paw.

There were certain trappings of the psychic trade I avoided. No crystal balls, no astrology, absolutely no chats with spirits. I tried to exist in a nebulous zone between clinical and New-Agey, aiming for a clientele of upwardly mobile women

who were too pragmatic to *really* believe in the occult, but who, as they liked to tell their friends over glasses of sulfite-free wine, kept their minds open to all possibilities.

Palm reading existed on the border of acceptability. Early on, when I'd started this endeavor, I'd checked out a bunch of dusty books on palmistry from the library and had been unconvinced by all of them. But clients expected me to look at their hands, so I'd trained myself to go through the motions.

I raised my eyes and met the woman's stare. "Your mother is very much alive. You were setting a trap for me, because you love your mother and feel protective of her, and if I'd claimed to be in contact with her spirit, it would have validated your belief that I'm a fraud."

Her face was immobile. You'd swear I hadn't spoken at all. I continued.

"As for who you are, you consider yourself a star in your field. You're arrogant about your abilities and your accomplishments, but you have reason to be. Your coworkers don't like you much, but you don't lose sleep over that, because you don't like them either. You don't fit in; you're smarter than them. You dress better than them. Your worldview is uncompromising, but with reason, because you see the worst of humanity on a daily basis. The spirit realm doesn't exist for you. Under usual circumstances, you'd never bother with someone like me, but today you're here in your professional capacity with the LAPD." I released her palm and sat back. "Will that do?"

"You messed it up at the end," she said. She seemed calm and unruffled, but I'd felt the tingle of wary excitement coming through her hand as I'd told her about herself. "Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Other than that, good guesses. Though maybe you had reason to suspect a visit from the police."

"Can't say I did. The psychic realm is hazy as to why you're here."

She reached into her suit coat, extracted a wallet, opened it, and held it out to me. I stared at her badge and license. Detective Toni Moreau.

"Nice to meet you, Detective Moreau," I said. "I'm Jenny St. John. Maybe you knew that already."

She didn't acknowledge me. "How long have you been in the psychic business?"

"If you're asking how long I've been a psychic? Since birth. If you're asking how long I've been making a living from it, six years."

"Before that, you were some kind of actress." It wasn't a question.

"Some kind, yeah. A long time ago. Twenty-five years ago, I starred in an independent film. That's my only credit."

"*The Divide*," Moreau said.

My brows raised. "Right, *The Divide*, exactly. You've seen it?"

I felt a twinge of disappointment when Moreau shook her head. I shrugged. "That's no surprise, I guess. You're just about the first person I've met who has even heard of it. It never made it into theaters. A couple months before it was supposed to be released, the production company went bankrupt and shelved it."

"The director got pretty famous later on though, didn't he?" Moreau's tone was very dry.

"Yeah. It was Serge Grumet's first film." I blinked. "Oh! Are you here about Serge?"

She nodded. "I'm investigating his murder. You heard about that?"

"I read about it online yesterday," I said. I'd gone blank upon seeing the headline on a news site, my brain unable to make sense of the words on the screen, and then I'd spent the afternoon feeling bewildered and adrift, like I was no longer certain who or where I was. "He was a cool guy, and I feel crappy that someone shot him. Why are you asking me, though? I haven't seen him for more than two decades. If you're going back

through all of his known acquaintances, I can tell you right now you've gone too far."

"Did you know his ex-wife?"

"He was unmarried when we did that film together. I don't know anything about his life now."

"His ex-wife has disappeared. She hasn't been seen since Sunday, the night Grumet was shot at his home in Malibu." Moreau stared at me, her expression unreadable, and the mild electric buzz of warning I'd felt since she walked through my door exploded into a full-on sizzle of danger. "Genevieve Santos. She's a painter. Pretty famous in the art world. You absolutely certain you don't know her?"

"I don't know current artists," I said. "And like I said earlier, I've been out of touch with Serge for years. I wouldn't know how to get in contact with him if I wanted to."

"Try the astral plane. Isn't that where the spirits live?"

I stared at her. "Seriously, though," I said. "I don't know why you'd expect me to know anything about Serge's death, or his wife."

"Ex-wife." The correction was automatic; Detective Moreau obviously prized accuracy. "Something you should see."

She took out her phone from her purse, tapped on the screen, and passed it to me. I found myself looking at a *Los Angeles Times* piece on Serge's murder. "What am I looking for? You want me to read the whole thing?"

"Just the part I scrolled to. Read it out loud."

I read. "Early on, Santos dabbled in acting, with a starring role in Grumet's directorial debut, the little-seen experimental feature *The Divide*. Their paths crossed again a few years later when he visited a gallery featuring her works, and romance soon followed."

I looked up from the phone. "They got that wrong," I said. "She wasn't in *The Divide*, unless she was a background extra or something. There were only, like, eight people in the cast, and unless she changed her name, she wasn't one of us."

"She did change her name." Moreau almost sounded amused. "From Jenny St. John to Genevieve Santos."

My brain tried its best to track what she was saying. "I'm Jenny St. John," I said.

She took her phone and scrolled some more, then wordlessly passed it back.

I found myself looking at the professional photo of Genevieve Santos that accompanied the article. She was seated on a backless stool in front of a gigantic canvas featuring what was presumably one of her own paintings. It was dramatic and abstract; I thought I could make out a cityscape lurking beneath the dark swirls of paint, spectral fragments of buildings jabbing up at an ominous sky.

Genevieve Santos wore a baggy sleeveless moss-colored jumpsuit, her pale hands clasped together in her lap. Her hair was long and hung in tangled waves on either side of her face. It looked dark brown in the photo; I'm a sunshine blonde after monthly maintenance, but my roots are the color of sandy dirt.

Her face, though. Her face was mine. I felt that shock of recognition you get upon coming across a photo of yourself you didn't know existed. Her eyebrows were thinner and darker than mine, but her eyes, her small nose, her jutting chin, her thin lips, which were curved in a smile that showed no teeth . . .

all of that was mine. I always flashed my teeth when I smiled, but it took a long time to train myself to do that, because when I was younger I wanted to disguise my slight overbite. Santos smiled like someone who was still hiding her overbite.

A moment of dizzy confusion, and the spell broke. "That's not me," I said. I felt a surge of relief I couldn't quite explain, like the photo of Genevieve Santos had knocked me out of my usual orbit, and now I was sliding back into my correct place in the universe.

"Sure looks like you," Moreau said. She sounded light, even flippant, and yet I was aware of a new intensity. "And she was in that movie you said you were in."

"No, she wasn't." It was sharp; Moreau's eyebrows twitched up at my tone before her face settled back into implacability. "This article got that wrong, or she lied about it. I was in that film. I can prove it "

I trailed off. I *could* prove it, surely, though at the moment I didn't know how. I'd been close to my small cluster of costars at the time, Ronnie and Annika and Dave, and we'd stayed in loose contact for a bit, but now, I had no idea how to track them down. Annika was on some Hulu series, but I'd lost her phone number years ago. I didn't have any photos from the production, no stolen props or wardrobe, no tangible evidence I had spent the happiest eight weeks of my life on the set of *The Divide*, taking what I'd hoped and expected would be the first big step in a long and successful film career.

"Are you Genevieve Santos?"

The directness of the question caught me by surprise. "Obviously not."

"It's not obvious at all." Moreau settled back in her chair. "Santos is on the run. Or in any case, she disappeared the night her ex was found dead. We got a call this morning from a client of yours. She'd read about Santos being in that film, and she confirmed that photo of Santos as being a photo of a psychic she sometimes visited, a psychic who'd once mentioned she'd starred in that very same film. So that led all of us down at the LASD to suspect Genevieve Santos leads a separate life as a low-rent psychic named Jenny St. John."

"But she doesn't," I said. It sounded feeble. "That's not me. That's an entirely different person."

Moreau stared at me for a long, long time. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking, but I had a faint hope that she realized, upon saying it out loud, how absolutely crazy this sounded. "Let's start with some identification," she said at last.

I got up from the table. She looked wary at that and stood as well. She followed me as I opened the door leading into the clinic's small back room to get my purse. She'd unbuttoned her

suit coat at some point, and one of her hands hovered near the waistband of her pants. The idea that she thought I might grab a weapon sent a spike of shaky adrenaline through me.

She stood in the doorway. She looked around the space while I retrieved my wallet from my purse. I could see her noting the open door leading to a grubby bathroom with a toilet and an industrial sink, the yellow laminate countertop where I kept a coffeepot and a mini fridge, the mattress on the floor, the ragged stack of banker's boxes holding my books and possessions next to the back door leading to the alley, the cheap plastic rolling rack of hanging clothes. "You living here?" she asked.

"It's temporary. I got evicted from my apartment during the pandemic," I said.

"During? It was against state law to evict anyone for non-payment of rent."

"It's cute that you think that slowed landlords down. They weren't supposed to, but I wasn't in a position to fight it. I moved out. It's been easier just to stay here." "Easier" in the sense that I didn't have other options; my income level was too low to pass a background check for another apartment.

"This is a commercial building. Seems like living here would be in violation of your lease."

I turned to look at her, then decided she was making an observation, not a veiled threat. I didn't answer. I extracted my driver's license from my billfold and handed it to her.

She scrutinized it closely, then set it down on the countertop and photographed it with her phone, front and back. "Jenny's not short for Jennifer?" She handed it back to me. "Or Genevieve?"

"Nope. I thought Jenny St. John sounded like a better stage name than Jennifer St. John. I had it legally changed years ago."

"What's your birth name?"

"Sheila Bunn."

Both eyebrows raised. "Sheila?"

"Sheila. Bunn with two n's. Is it any wonder I changed it?"

"Where do you come from, Sheila Bunn?"

"Hayes, Iowa. Seventy miles from Sioux City. But I've lived here for a long time."

"So has Genevieve Santos." Again, Moreau sounded dryly amused. At least one of us was getting some entertainment out of the situation. "And nothing you've said yet proves you're not the same person."

"Fingerprints?" I said. I wagged my license in the air. "The DMV has my thumbprint on file. You could compare it to Genevieve Santos's prints, and it would show I'm a different person. That would do it, right?"

"DNA is more accurate. We can take a sample at headquarters," Moreau said. "If you're not Santos, we can get you cleared by the end of the day."

"You said Malibu, right?" I asked. "Do I have to go all that way? Can't I just give you a lock of hair right now or spit into a cup or whatever?"

"I don't work in Malibu. Homicide is in Monterey Park." Moreau sounded distracted, like she was mulling something over. "But we could clear this up fast. Genevieve Santos was diagnosed with breast cancer in late September. She's been undergoing treatment." She met my eyes, unflinching.

I didn't get it at first, and then it hit me. "She's had surgery?"

"Partial mastectomy last month. She hasn't had the reconstruction yet."

It hung in the air. I cleared my throat. "So you want me to flash you?"

"Absolutely not." Moreau sounded annoyed, and I realized irritation was her reaction to finding herself on uncertain ground. "But Santos would have fresh scars. If you're not her, you wouldn't."

"This is unquestionably the least sexy way anyone has ever asked to see my tits," I said. "And there's actually been some stiff competition for that honor."

"I'm not asking to see your tits," Moreau said. The annoy-

ance was thicker now. "I'm just saying . . ." She trailed off, ending the sentence in a tense shrug.

I closed the door leading into the clinic, because this would look weird if any prospective customers decided to pop in just then, and, without stopping to think about it, lifted the hem of the linen tunic up to my chin. Because it was such a miserably sweaty day, I hadn't bothered with a bra. "Is this proof?"

Moreau fell silent, standing motionless a few steps away. "I didn't ask you to do that," she said at last.

"I know. I just want to get this over with." I lowered my shirt and smoothed it out. I could feel my cheeks burning. "I had some work done on those a long time ago. After I made *The Divide*, a casting director suggested better tits might help me get roles, which turned out to be absolute crap advice, by the way. But in any case, it's clear I haven't had a recent mastectomy, right?"

"Yeah." Moreau looked me in the eye. "You're not Genevieve Santos."

"That's what I've been saying."

"Then we're done here for now." She was trying to hide it, but she'd been embarrassed by the request she hadn't quite made of me, and embarrassed by my acquiescence to it. It humanized her somewhat. "Thank you for your time."

She didn't say anything else until I'd walked her to the clinic door. She paused on the sidewalk, the afternoon sun reflecting off her braids like a halo. "It doesn't prove you were the one in that film. It seems to be widely accepted as fact that Santos and Grumet first met on the set while it was being made."

"I was in that film," I said. It sounded feeble and defensive, probably because I was feeling both feeble and defensive. "Look into it some more and you'll see. I don't know why she told people it was her, but it was me."

Moreau gave me a look that, for once, wasn't filled entirely with cold contempt. "Thanks for your cooperation," she said, and left.