

PROLOGUE

Most of you are probably familiar with the fact that San Francisco is a foggy city. What few people know is the real reason for the fog. San Francisco's weather, despite what the nightly news might say, is controlled by a powerful spell. This spell conjures up the cool, wet fog to keep people from seeing what is really going on around them. The fog tumbles across the hills and mountains like a great gray-white wave, pressing inward until it erases San Francisco from view. On the most foggy days and nights, people can barely see more than the hand in front of their face, and it can be difficult to know if what you are seeing is real. That's when the city's Others—fairies, witches, vampires, and werewolves—can meet. They attend to their business in the darkness of night, the light muted, the air damp and gray.

The Others leave behind no trace of themselves or their activities. The fog is their eraser, a privacy screen to shield humans from an unsettling truth: they are not alone in this world, and they are not in control.

San Francisco is also known for its colorful residents. It's no accident that so many outlandish people live there. The city is home to an enormous population of Others, alive and undead. That the Beat poets, the Free Speech Movement, the Summer of Love, the sexual revolution, and the gay rights movement all originated in San Francisco is no coincidence. Amid the tattooed, pierced, and corseted, the Others are free to live their lives. In San Francisco, it is easy to hide in plain sight.

CHAPTER 1

My grandmother used to tell me stories, when I was a child, of the time-walkers who visited her village in Scotland. In her tales, they brought news of dead loved ones and warned of impending dangers. Free to move between the past and the future, these witches were welcomed cautiously by the villagers and warmly by women like my grandmother, who had their own gifts. I always thought the stories were charming folklore, the stuff packed into books in the library.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I woke up one day and discovered that the legends might hold some truth.

It was an early morning in August. As I came into consciousness on my kitchen floor—my head thudding from a terrible hangover—the first thing I realized is that I'd been plagued by the dream again. The sleek black panther with the green eyes always walked near me yet never blocked my way. The creature always stayed close, as if it wanted to communicate.

As I woke up more fully, blinking in the light, I began to move my cold, stiff limbs gingerly. Why had I failed to make it into my bed? Slowly, I remembered the details of the previous night—and the previous week. Losing another big client to my competitor, the political consultant Stoner Halbert. Picking a fight with my best friend, Lily, while she was at work. Skipping work. Going on a totally uncharacteristic drinking binge.

I opened one eye, steeling myself to stand up, when I heard a voice speak.

“Let me help you,” a woman’s voice said.

“Lily?” I asked aloud. How had she gotten in? Maybe I had let her in last night, or maybe I had called her and she had used her key. Either way, I was glad that she was there.

“It’s not Lily.” Now I realized that the voice had a hint of a foreign accent I couldn’t place. “Get up, Olivia.”

I did as I was told and promptly let out a scream as I staggered up and spotted a strange woman standing on the other side of the kitchen. It was someone I’d never seen before.

“Who are you, and how did you get into my house?” I asked, wondering if I had managed to leave the door open. Maybe some deranged person had walked in off the street. I did live in a city, after all. I began calculating how quickly I could get to the phone and call the police. But as I looked at her more closely, I saw that she didn’t look homeless. She seemed about my age and was tall, slightly more so than Lily. She also had long black hair, but it seemed almost darker than black, like the color of a raven’s wing or, say, maybe a panther. She was wearing skintight leather pants and a dark sweater. The fingers on her hands were long and slender and adorned with several silver rings. She wore a small silver hoop through one of her eyebrows, which framed green eyes that almost glowed like a cat’s. I was beginning to see a pattern that unnerved me.

“Are you the panther?” I asked, shocked at the absurdity of my question.

The woman nodded. “You did invite me here, Olivia. You asked me to come and tell you what I had to say.”

Too stunned for words, I began to question whether I was losing my mind. For so many years, I'd worried that my artistic, substance-abusing mother would be the one to go off the deep end. But now it seemed I had it backward. I sat motionless and stared.

"This is your problem, Olivia," she said. "I've been watching you for several weeks, and you haven't lifted a finger to help yourself. So here I am. At last, we meet face-to-face."

The woman offered me her hand. I grabbed it and felt the warm flesh of a human being against my palm.

"How is this possible?" I murmured, staring into her extraordinary eyes. "Are you really here? I'm not hallucinating?"

"I'm real," she said. "As real as Stoner Halbert, only I have come to help you."

"How do you know about him?" I asked. "How do you know about me?"

"Your grandmother sent me," she said. "Bella chose me to watch over you when you were born. When you ran into trouble with Stoner, I expected you to summon me, but it seems you don't practice the old ways of your family. I've been forced to appear in your dreams to get your attention."

"*Summon you?* I have no idea how to do that," I said, my tongue still slightly swollen in my mouth. "I had no idea my grandmother could do that sort of thing. I was drunk and angry last night. If I did have an outburst, well, I had no idea that it would result . . . well, that it would bring *you* here."

The woman laughed. "There is a lot about this world you don't know, Olivia, and that has put you in harm's way."

I walked slowly to a stool and sat down. It was too much. My head was pounding, and I was exhausted. Now, there was a strange woman in my house claiming to be my guardian angel. I couldn't imagine what would happen next. I decided to make an espresso and find out.

"Do you drink coffee, . . . ?" I trailed off in a way that made it clear I was hoping to learn her name.

"It's Elsa," she said. "And tea, please."

"Elsa," I said back to her. "I have Earl Grey and green tea."

"Earl Grey," she said, and I began to fix our drinks.

I set two warm mugs on the counter. Elsa took the stool across from mine and sipped her tea. She seemed to savor it more than a normal person would.

"Don't they have tea where you're from?"

"It's been a while since I've been called to your world. I remember now how nice it is to visit."

"What do you mean *my* world? Are you dead?"

"No, not dead . . . Unable to move on," she said without a trace of sarcasm. "As you may have guessed, I'm not from this time. But I do live in your century regularly now."

Perhaps it was the combination of fear and a raging hangover, but keeping up the light banter felt impossible. I had questions, and I wanted answers. "Why are you here? What were you trying to tell me when you appeared in my dreams these last few weeks?"

Elsa put down her cup and saucer and turned to face me. "I came because your grandmother feared what would happen if you continued to block your gift. Before her death, she summoned me and told me she had seen a vision in which you were in danger. She asked me to visit you periodically and ensure that you remain unharmed. For many months, I watched and saw nothing out of the ordinary."

"And now?"

“Now? You’re in danger. It may have seemed wise to avoid using your powers, Olivia, but turning off your instincts has made you vulnerable. You’re not even trying to sense when you’re in danger. It’s why Stoner Halbert’s demon picked you.”

This remark caused me to drop my coffee mug on the marble counter, where it promptly broke into several pieces.

“I’m sorry, did you say *demon*?”

Elsa sighed. “I can see we will have to start at the beginning. Your friend Mr. Halbert has been dabbling in black magic ever since his wife ruined him.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “I think I would have noticed if the former chief of staff to a prominent California state senator had morphed into the Wicked Witch of the West.”

“Are you sure?” Elsa’s voice sounded almost like a purr.

I wasn’t. I’d built a successful consulting firm that catered to individuals and companies with political problems. As the head of Olivia Shepherd Consulting, I’d learned all about the depths that others would sink to in order to get ahead.

Stoner Halbert was a case in point. He’d lived the golden life: successful in politics, married to a beautiful woman who also happened to be the head of a successful investment firm, and invited to every function held by California’s political and wealthy elite. Then one day, the FBI charged Amber Halbert with insider trading and embezzlement. The ensuing news coverage detailing how she had stolen and defrauded some of the state’s biggest names in politics and business became too much for Stoner to bear. He’d resigned from his post to shield his boss from further embarrassment. Amber pled guilty to avoid a more stringent jail sentence, and the two had quietly divorced. Yet somehow, Stoner had come back from the dead—over the last year he’d built up a brand-new and hugely successful consulting firm in San Francisco. Successful enough to steal several of my clients.

“Yes, he fell from a great height,” Elsa said, as if reading my thoughts. “Is it really any wonder that he sought revenge and became interested in the occult? He has managed to make it work for him. He was able to conjure up a minor demon that promised him great wealth. The demon has given him an advantage, a sort of influence . . . and he is using it against you and others.”

“Why me?”

Elsa seemed to pause for a moment. “What’s the expression . . . *You are a sitting duck*? The Others can see that you have intentionally blocked off your senses. It makes you an easy target for their mischief. Halbert’s demon has gone in search of the most vulnerable. An empath who refuses to listen her instincts? That is an easy mark.”

“Why should I believe any of this is real, or true?” I asked, feeling frightened beyond measure. To cover my feelings, I leaned down to clean up my mess.

Either I was having a complete mental breakdown or there was a spirit guide in my kitchen discussing a demon.

Elsa smiled and put down her teacup. “It’s nice to see you get angry, Olivia. It’s long overdue but welcome. Who do you think I am then, if not someone sent here to help you? I could have killed you while you were passed out in your kitchen. And yet, here I am and you’re still alive.”

“That’s my point,” I said. “You could be anyone. You could be some con artist off the street. Why should I believe you?”

“How would I know about your gifts if not for your grandmother?” Elsa asked. “You can try to pretend you’re not connected to any of this, Olivia, but your grandmother was a great seer. And your mother, Rose, is extremely receptive. The fact that you have

ignored your lineage doesn't erase the connections."

The mention of my mother sent my head spinning. How much did this woman know about the magnificent but overwhelming India Rose Shepherd? She hadn't been easy to have as a single mother, that was for sure. Not that we struggled financially—her wealthy family provided for us, until my mother established her career as a renowned landscape painter.

No, her struggle was with her gifts. Put simply, my mother can feel another person's emotions. She's an empath. Rose can read people, feel their nervousness, sense their hesitation to do something, detect their anger or sadness. She refers to it as "picking up on the energy of the universe." My mother, grandmother, and her mother before her were all empathic. All of the women on our side of the family carry the skill, including me. They call it The Gift, but I have never seen it that way.

From an early age, what I saw was my mother drinking herself to sleep at night to avoid feeling anything. She swallowed too many pills with her friends in order to maintain a barrier between the energy of the universe and herself. And then when she did focus on her painting, she would remain sequestered in her studio for weeks, inevitably collapsing in her bed for several days afterward.

As I grew older, I worried that my mother would kill herself, either through her excesses or through exhaustion. Now, at thirty-two, I understand my mother's moods and simply try to avoid her when she is on the dark side of the universe.

"Olivia." Elsa's voice drew me out of my reverie. "I'm still right here. We were having a conversation," she said crisply.

"I remember," I said slowly. "About demons. And spirit guides. Frankly, it's all a bit much."

I looked Elsa over again. I knew she wasn't a vagrant off the street. Her arrival could only be connected to my dreams, and her explanation about my grandmother was as good as any. But I wasn't ready to face her.

"I'm tired. I think you should leave and come back another time when I feel up to a discussion," I said, walking toward my front door and opening it.

Elsa stared at me, a look of fury in her eyes. "Do you really think you can avoid me like you've avoided everything else? You asked me to come!"

I nodded. "If I did, I didn't know what I was asking for. I don't know why my grandmother sent you, but I don't need your help. I'll get some rest and fix everything tomorrow."

"You cannot fight the demon without my help, Olivia. You need me."

"That's exactly my point," I said as I ushered her to the stoop. "I don't intend to fight."

I shut the door and managed to walk upstairs to my bedroom before I started to cry.

"Goddamn it," I screamed as I tossed a pillow across the room. "Goddamn it!"

Maybe I *had* asked her to come. Clearly, I did need help. But I truly meant it when I said I didn't know what I was asking for. What did I need? An exorcist? A psychiatrist?

The last time I'd seen my mother, she'd been full of warnings about this very thing.

When I'd arrived at her place in Bolinas the previous week—after I'd lost another client to Stoner but before my drinking had gone off the deep end—she'd abruptly begun scolding me as I stepped into her painting studio. "Olivia, you are *not* yourself," she'd said, turning to face me as I entered. "I can sense it. And it's time for me to say this: You haven't been yourself for many, many years. You've intentionally turned off your own sixth sense for so long I think maybe it is finally catching up with you."

Remembering how I'd stormed off and left her home abruptly, well, suddenly it all felt like too much, and I hunched over the edge of my bed, sobbing. Then my mobile phone beeped, signaling a text. I picked it up from my nightstand. There, blinking, was a message from Stoner Halbert. I glanced at his message:

Olivia, where R U? I'm only just getting started.

I threw the phone across the room. Feeling sick to my stomach. I managed to make it to my bathroom before I began to vomit. Why? Why was this happening to me? In all my life I had never harmed a soul. My only weakness, if you could call it one, was that I had refused to accept my gift. I had forsaken my emotions for logic, relying on the power of reason to solve my problems. Now, though, it seemed that logic could be easily overpowered by magic, for no reason at all.

I leaned against the edge of my toilet, wiping a cold cloth across my lips. I hadn't given Halbert my phone number. I had to suppose my ex-client had turned it over. I felt trapped inside my house like a mouse in a cage. Would I find him waiting for me outside one day? Elsa was right. For once, I couldn't fix a problem on my own. I needed help. I knew she would come again if I called her.

"Come back," I said, more quietly than I intended as I walked to my bed to lie down. "Please come back."

I awoke several hours later from a dreamless sleep. I climbed out of bed slowly and grabbed a robe from a chair nearby. I walked into the bathroom to look in the mirror. The face staring back, while worn and puffy, didn't seem any different. My long brown hair streaked with red and gold, a trademark of all the women in my family, looked exactly the same. I had no marks on my body—no bumps, no bruises or scars.

Whatever Halbert was doing to me, it was all in my mind. I shook my head ruefully. He would drive me crazy if things continued this way. In the world of consultants, I had a reputation as the queen of calm.

That kind of poise was essential in my field, especially since I could count on one hand the number of women who did the work I did. Politics and public affairs are dominated by men. When women do show up, we often get labeled as "ballbusters" or "bitches." I had long ago lost track of the number of times I'd been complimented on "taking the bit between my teeth," or been a "real bulldog." I'd heard male consultants complimenting each other as "relentless" many times; women showing the same quality were mainly compared to racehorses or loyal pets. All this meant I'd learned not to have emotional outbursts when I was insulted. I made it a point to never show the world if I had a problem. But this much upheaval was bad for business. I would never be able to keep a poker face in public now.

I began to panic again, thinking about Halbert. I sat down on the edge of the tub to calm myself. It was at that moment, that I heard the sound of the television coming from the living room. I walked downstairs and found Elsa sitting on the couch, her shoes and socks off, watching a reality TV program that appeared to center on second marriages and Botox.

"You know, that stuff will kill you," I said, relieved that she had returned.

"It's fascinating," Elsa said, looking away from the television screen. "Do people really spend their time watching this stuff?"

"Yes. Quite a few people; these programs are very popular."

Elsa shook her head and clicked off the TV. "It's no wonder the Council is worried."

"The Council?"

"Later. It's too complicated. How are you feeling?"

“Better, but I’ve been thinking about what you said to me. I want to know what’s happening to me, and I want your help.”

“It’s the demon,” Elsa said rising from the couch. “He is a minor demon of the lowest order—Halbert is not skilled enough yet in the dark arts to conjure anything more powerful—but this one is still a force of evil. Its job is to harm the adversaries of whoever conjured them.”

“How?” I asked. “Do they use physical pain?”

Elsa shook her head. “Not this demon. He’s not designed to cause physical pain; he’s subtler. Have you been acting odd lately? Acting in ways that are unusual for you?”

I nodded. “I’ve lost my focus, my will to compete. Even my mother commented on it when I visited her recently.”

“What did she say?”

I was about to admit that my mother had been right about something, and it made me uncomfortable. “She said that as long as I ignore my gift, I would never really be myself.”

“She was right. You have cut yourself off from your true nature and the source of your power. When you do that, it is very easy for an Other to knock you off balance.”

“What is an ‘Other?’”

“An Other is someone like me, or a vampire or a demon. There are humans, and there are the *Others*.”

“What do you mean, knock me off balance?”

“You said it . . . You don’t feel like *yourself*. Have you been more argumentative? Have you been overconfident that things will be fine, when in reality they are getting worse?”

Again, I nodded.

“That’s the demon.”

It was a relief to hear someone tell me I wasn’t going crazy, or that the events of the last few weeks were not totally my fault, and yet the joy of reassurance was overshadowed by her explanation. I was being plagued by a demon? To hear it described in such dispassionate tones was unsettling.

“Am I under the control of this demon now?” I asked, afraid to hear the answer.

“Yes and no. There have been moments when the demon cast spells that made you act badly. How else do you explain walking away from your work? He’s also placing spells and charms on your clients, or why would they behave so oddly toward you? But the demon has not tried to possess you physically. Once I began to appear in your dreams, I placed a protective spell on you to limit his manipulations.”

“Why just *limit* things?” I asked. “Can you stop this?”

“It all depends on you, Olivia. You were born with abilities that should make it difficult or impossible for a demon to target you. If you’d been using your full powers, you would have known that the emotions you were dealing with were not your own. It’s even possible you would have felt the presence of the Other. We won’t know more until we open your senses and see what kind of gifts you really have.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to open my senses,” I said. “I don’t want to feel more emotion. I want your help to get rid of this demon and let me go back to work.”

Elsa picked up her shoes and socks and began to put them on.

“This time, *I’m* leaving,” she said. “It’s obvious that you’re not prepared to deal with the situation, and I can’t help someone who won’t help herself. This isn’t a school project that you can ask your parents to fix. You are a grown woman, and you’re in trouble—a

trouble only you can make disappear. If you won't help yourself, then there is nothing I can do."

"What happens if you go?"

"More of the same, only minus me in your dreams," Elsa said. "Halbert will continue to take what he wants from you until there is nothing left."

She used my pride against me, and it worked. I couldn't stand the idea of losing my business to him that way—stripped to the bone, all my clients and past successes erased.

"OK," I said, swallowing hard at what was unfolding. "What do I have to do?"

Elsa smiled. "I'm glad you asked."