

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

Written By

**Grace Fox**

“Last [of the Ages of Men] came the Race of Iron. In that hard age of baser vein all evil straight broke out, and honour fled and truth and loyalty, replaced by fraud, deceit and treachery and violence and wicked greed for gain . . . Honour and love lay vanquished, Astraea, virgin divine, the last of the immortals, fled away.”

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 1

“Astraea, a daughter of Zeus and Themis...During the Golden Age, this star-bright maiden lived on earth and among men, whom she blessed; but when that age passed away, Astraea, who tarried longest among men, withdrew, and was placed among the stars.”

—Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.25; *Eratosthenes, Catasterismi* 9

This cosmic kiss upon my skin

leaves a mark,

leaves a scar.

But the truth remains in my chest,

within my heart,

lingering in my eternal soul.

You can't stop the planets.

You can't burn down the stars.

Who I am will never change.

I am the light that will always remain.

# THE VIRGO PROPHECY

## Chapter 1

I screamed in silence as he pecked at my liver. A great bird, sharp beak, talons tightening, crushing my chest.

A knock on my trailer door jolted me awake. Like a tumor forcing its way out through the crevices of my mind, the knock split my head open. Each pulse throbbing behind my eyes.

My liver ached from another relentless night.

Before I even moved, I felt the nearly non-existent cushion that covered the hard slab of wood beneath me. I was on the couch again, the scratchy 1970s fabric under my arm. The fist pounded harder and louder the second time. I fought to open my eyes against the grim light leaking into my trailer, the whole place drenched in unwanted sunlight.

“Anybody home?” A man’s voice called out from the other side of the flimsy metal door.

“I have some questions for you.”

“Go away,” I mumbled, half sitting up.

“I’m looking for The Bishop.” I heard him scuffling over the rocks. “Are you in there?”

I said nothing. Maybe he would leave.

I rolled my useless body over to peek through the blinds—no badge, no familiar face.

“I can hear you in there. I’m not leaving until you open the door.”

I rubbed my temples. He wasn’t leaving.

I shuffled to the door. It opened with a painful creak. Instead of fresh air, I gagged at the smell of my own sewage line defrosting in the soggy ground, giving off that wonderful stench, reminiscent of Christmas time for me. Everything froze at night and defrosted by around noon in the New Mexico sun—perks of growing up in a travel trailer.

The outline of a man as big as a mountain filled my doorway. I blinked into the sunlight, my eyes burning. He stared at my half-dressed body. I looked down at myself and tugged at my oversized t-shirt, which barely covered the cheetah print underwear peeking out from between my cold, naked legs.

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

“You’re The Bishop?” he said with a bashful grin, his eyebrows shot up. His gold necklaces caught a glimmer of light under his leather jacket. I was too hungover to get a good look at his face, but from the look of him, he wouldn’t even fit through my door.

“Disappointed?” I yanked at my shirt with one hand, and with the other hand, I shielded my eyes from the bright light piercing my brain. He looked like a bouncer from a nightclub.

“Not at all.” He said, shaking his head, doing his best not to look directly at me. “I was told you read rocks. Not sure what the official name of that is, officially.” He shoved his large hands in his dusty black jeans. “I guess you’re some kind of psychic. Or something like that?” I couldn’t tell if I made him nervous as I stood there half naked, or if he stumbled on his words because he was embarrassed to need the help of a so-called psychic. Maybe he knew that I occasionally slept with men for money. His face when I opened the door told me he wasn’t here for that. At least, not yet.

“Something like that. I use precious stones in my readings. I’m not open right now, though.” I squeezed the fraying hem of my shirt tighter as the wind was determined to show everything off. “I’ll be at the bar later tonight.” I nodded toward the building across the highway from my soggy trailer park. *So, get the fuck off my porch*, is what I wanted to say. I closed my door, and he abruptly grabbed it.

“Wait. I’m Tom Dunam, I’m the foreman at the quarry up the street.” That explained the dust. “There’s something I think you might be able to help me with.” His British accent was the only charming thing about him, in a gangster sort of way.

“It’s a bit early for me.” I reached for my door again.

“It’s nearly noon.” He chuckled.

“I usually have a table set up in the back. You can find me there.” I slammed the door in his face.

“It’s not that kind of job.” I heard him say from outside my trailer, still standing there. I slumped back on my couch, refusing to continue the conversation, no matter what he said. When it was clear I wasn’t answering, I heard his large boots turn in the wet gravel, then stop.

“Are you going to be wearing pants?” He called out and stomped off.

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

I couldn't help but like his forwardness. I lit a cigarette, made coffee, and barely tasted either. I couldn't stop thinking about what kind of job a man from a quarry would have for me.

By the time my hangover wore off, it was time to go to work again. Even though I couldn't even remember going to bed, I'd remembered to place my stones where they belonged—lined along the windowsill, bathed in the moonlight. Each one had its place. I gathered them one by one, comforted by the warmth they'd soaked in.

My wardrobe was a carefully curated collection from second-hand stores—the kind that sold turn-of-the-century toys and vintage estate jewelry alongside potty chairs for old people. I slipped on a fur jacket from my small closet over my Woodstock-era top and dug through the bottom of my closet for the right boots. Every piece was a patchwork of rare, one-of-a-kind scores. Pulling it all together, I managed a look that let me channel Gwen Stefani with a twist of Patsy Cline.

It got dark early in December. Almost everyone in the nearly empty trailer park had Christmas lawn ornaments up, but in a lazy sort of way. I walked to the bar under the creeping dusk as strings of colored lights twinkled to life on homes that didn't have wheels. I passed a sad, deflated Santa collapsed in my neighbor's yard like a used maxi pad, soaked in slush from the melted snow. Her artificial grass was lined with Christmas lights, tripped over one drunken night—never picked back up, never turned on.

I didn't care about decorating. I was never anywhere long enough to see the point. Besides, it was almost New Year's 1999. Who knew what was going to happen? Some people said it would be the end of the world. I couldn't think of a better place to spend the apocalypse.

I'd been working the regulars at the sleazy bar outside the local quarry in San Miguel, New Mexico, for nearly a week. The Alamo was the kind of place that collected outcasts—the mom who forgets to pick up her kids, the dad always “looking for work,” and misfits like me, just passing through.

With Y2K hanging in the air, it gave my readings an added sense of urgency, as if the turn of the millennium might unravel the very fabric of their already wasted lives. Each sad soul was more than willing to part with their cash for a dose of opportunistic advice and a glimpse of destiny.

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

Mostly, they wanted to see if they were going to die at the stroke of midnight just over a week away. It didn't take much in hopeless places like the Alamo to know what people wanted. Money. A job. Someone to love them. A second chance.

Everyone wanted to believe their suffering was unique, but from town to town it never was. Everyone faced the same problems, harbored the same secrets, and shared the same failed dreams. My own humanity hung on me like extra skin—unwanted pain, addictions, memories that wouldn't leave me alone. All I've ever known was that hot asphalt stretched out in front of me, yellow lines repeating themselves over and over, blurring into the distance. A life of travel since the day I was born. I told myself that was all life was. A road that led to nowhere.

Believing in destiny was just a device we used to comfort ourselves. And in the end, when you think you're about to reach your destination, you always wind up on some runaway truck ramp—dangling off the edge.

\*\*\*

I walked in and found Rick bartending again. His smile twisted quickly as he saw me swing open the door; his eyes branded me. I watched my back closer on nights he was there. He seemed harmless enough, but something behind his eyes I clocked early on. He had the kind of nice-guy face that could turn ugly fast, as soon as I said no.

I was comfortable in bars like this. My father was a singer—neither famous nor popular—, but I grew up drifting from bar to bar, from one small town to the next. We usually avoided big cities, where it was harder for him to compete for a night on stage. Sometimes he booked a gig a month out. Sometimes, when we were out of money, we just showed up and hoped someone would pay him.

These were my kind of people.

I followed the neon lights to the back, where I made my magic. For twenty bucks, I would read your lucky fortune and whisper your deepest desires in dark corners. And for some of the lucky bastards, I'd let them try to tame my wayward heart for some extra cash.

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

I floated through the bar in my faux black panther coat like hope, sparkling through the smoky air. The regulars raised their glasses in silent acknowledgement as I passed, clinging to the promise that at any moment their life could change for the better. It wasn't hard to give them what they wanted. I was exceptionally good at reading people. I had met hundreds of the same type of personalities by the time I was thirteen. I could understand people better than they knew themselves. It was an easy scheme to keep up.

Someone was already waiting at my table. I assumed it was the over-eager quarry manager. My breasts felt alert as his eyes watched me the whole way as I made my way back to the dark corner. I wondered what he was thinking of me now, with my clothes on.

I stomped across the grimy bar floor, leather halter top swaying under my jacket, its strings brushing over my stomach, concealing the odd-shaped birthmark that curved across my belly. I had several such marks, strategically hidden. I had six, to be exact. One on my stomach, one on my back, one hidden under my scalp, one on the top of my hand, one over my heart, and another tucked behind my left ear. They were things no one would notice unless my clothes came off, and by that time, no one ever seemed to care.

As I got closer to my table, to my surprise, it was not the quarry manager but a house of a man I had frequently seen at the bar that week. One of the few regulars I hadn't yet had the chance to sit down with yet. All week, he had watched me. He was obviously curious but never had the guts to come sit down.

"Hi," he said in a deep voice but with the confidence of a toddler. He scooted over in the booth and then got up to let me in the seat.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He just looked at me shyly. A gentle, simple-minded man who didn't seem to realize his own strength.

"It's Gary, right?" I smiled through my chalky red lipstick like I was humoring a kid. He nodded. "Would you like a reading tonight, Gary?"

"Yes," he said, flat and awkward.

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

“Please, sit back down.”

He sat down across from me as I set up my table. Out of my bag, I grabbed a delicate, sparkling black tablecloth, my special pouch of precious stones, and a stack of tarot cards. Gary watched closely as I lit a tall candle between us.

“Why do you always wear fingerless gloves?” he asked.

Gary was more twelve-year old than a grown man. Tom Hanks in *BIG*, a kid shoved inside a lumbering adult’s body.

I tugged at the lace, my thumb brushing against the ridge of skin hidden beneath. The black, puffy birthmark sat there like a burnt marshmallow. I’d seen the way clients’ eyes always snagged on it, their attention sliding away from the cards and onto me instead. Normally no one asked me about my gloves.

I curled my hand into a fist and dropped it to my side.

“Focus,” I muttered in a sharp tone.

I laid three stones in a line in front of him. A chunk of hematite, jagged and dark, from the day I learned to ride my bike in the Badlands. Beside it, a soft pink piece of rose quartz I picked up while dog sledding one strange summer in Alaska. And last, a plain river stone, worn smooth and round, that I pocketed the day my dad first taught me to fish on the banks of a river in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

I lit a crystal votive next to me and began my usual spiel. My voice slipped into a low, deliberate performance, half séance, half carnival trick. The sort of tone clients expected, mysterious enough to keep them in their seat.

My finger tapped on the small quarter-size piece of Earth that looked like polished steel. Its gray surface gave way to hints of deep red in the candlelight, like veins of rust threading through its cracked surface. “This is hematite. Don’t let its dull shine fool you. This one is a grounding stone. It’s going to gather all your scattered thoughts, all your wishful thinking, and pull them down into itself, giving them weight.”

I tapped the next one. “This is rose quartz. Most people call it the love stone, but what it

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

really does is listen to the things your heart says that your mouth can't." I glanced up at him. "So, if there's something in your heart that you're too afraid to ask for, now is the time to tell it all your secrets."

I then pointed down to the last one in the line. "This is not just a plain river stone. It may look ordinary—nothing shiny, nothing rare—but it's the ordinary things in life we take for granted. This little river stone will wash away the heaviest weights, the deepest deceptions, so you can finally see clearly."

Gary hung on every word.

"Now, pick them up and hold them in your hands tight. I want you to pour your deepest desires and secret longings into all three stones. Close your eyes, squeeze them tight and think as if they are wishing stones. Each one represents your most unspoken dreams. Go ahead and begin."

Gary shut his big brown eyes and concentrated. I studied him. In the background, "Fade Into You" by Mazzy Star began playing for the seventh night in a row. I didn't even need to look. The same woman I had given a reading to the first night I was there, slow dancing in front of the juke box as usual, with a different man each night. You didn't need to be psychic to read the room.

After a beat, I said, "Okay, you can open your eyes now." I held my hand open for him to return the three small smooth stones. I set them on the table in front of me and picked up one at a time. Gary watched me as if I were performing a magic trick. I closed my eyes and felt it tingle in my hand.

"I feel a deep longing. You miss home. You miss, your mother." I opened my eyes to see Gary's soft smile of confirmation.

I picked up the next. A low vibration, it hummed slightly in my palm from his energy.

"You're frustrated. Maybe frustrated at work. They don't give you responsibility. They look over you, they dismiss you. You want more responsibility. No. You want to be seen."

Gary's eyes widened. I was obviously on the right track.

As I picked up the last small stone, it pulsed differently than the others. It was soft, tender, hesitant. Lighter. I recognized the emotion immediately.

## THE VIRGO PROPHECY

“Love. You’re in love with someone.”

His face flushed in the candlelight. “You really are psychic, Miss Bishop.”

“Well, let’s see what the cards say.” I had Gary split the deck, then spread them out like a fan instead of pulling straight from the top. I needed to spot the tags; tiny marks I’d made to guide the reading. Specific cards for specific answers. A guaranteed way to steer it in the direction he wanted to hear. A way that made me appear legitimate and perhaps even worthy of a tip.

“Shall we see if this person returns your love?”

Gary nodded his head anxiously. But before I could turn over the first card, a shadowed figure appeared beside us and interrupted.

“So how does this work? Do you use a crystal ball or something?” I recognized the man who had knocked on my trailer door earlier that day, along with his distinctive accent. I had wondered when he would be showing up. His timing was as perfect as a flat tire.

“Excuse me. I’m with a client right now,” I said, scolding him with my eyes.

“You don’t mind, do you, Gary?” Gary opened his mouth, but the man didn’t give him a chance to respond.

“I didn’t properly get a chance to introduce myself earlier. I’m Tom Dunam, the foreman at the local quarry up the street.” He held out his hand for me to shake like we were at a church potluck and not some dirty dive bar. I ignored him and instead took out a cigarette from my pack and lit it on the flame from the candle on the table. I took a drag and blew it toward his face.