

## DEVIANT STARS

I was convinced that God just plain-ass didn't like me. Of course He never made mistakes, but I always felt that on the day He created me, He wasn't at his absolute best. He was reminded of that fact with every breath I hauled in and I was certain that it irked Him no end.

The definition of trifecta is a run of three wins or grand events. I embodied that weird-ass triad—senses beyond the five and a genius intellect. I tasted color, observed music, listened to emotions. Impending doom held my soul in a death grip. While my Romani family referred to my queer senses as gifts, I often cried foul on God.

His magnum opus, was to saddle me with the strangest of guardian angels ever to be bestowed upon a child. At least I assumed he was an angel, one every bit as strange as his charge. He emitted no colors, no aura. Only I could see him, which told me he was either a hallucination or my sentinel. I chose to believe the latter. If asked to describe him, I couldn't. His face was a mosaic mess—a scattering of jigsaw puzzle pieces. The only features close to being in their proper perspective were his eyes—his insanely beautiful green eyes. I eventually dubbed him Picasso.

The fact that he wasn't female confused me, but after much reflection, I decided that oddball cherubic caretakers were probably paired with equally peculiar little kids, making it necessary to mix and match. Then again, I was a handful. Maybe he was being punished for some heavenly transgression, grasped that short straw or simply lost a celestial bet.

Mom's first clue that something was a bit off with her youngest, was the ever-so-slight hum that thrummed through my body. As I aged, the vibrations morphed into more of a purr-like drone. Friends and family grew accustomed to my energy, while strangers (some strangers) pulled away from my touch.

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## DEVIANT STARS

Some people called me crazy, some called me magical—my family called me Vittoria. Born in 1951, I was the last of Theresa and Carl Polta's five children. According to Mom, my convulsions began immediately after clearing her birth canal. That terrifying complication caused my Italian/Catholic mother to join the League of St. Gerard. She embarked upon a prayer blitz to that great patron saint of babies in distress, pleading for his intercession on my behalf. The pact—if I survived—was to christen me in his name.

In celebration of my victory, I was given the first name of Vittoria (the Italian form of Victoria) and the middle name of Gerarda (the "G" is soft). Although never thrilled with my handle, I was forever grateful that Mom hadn't reversed their order.

As soon as word of my seizures spread, Mom's Rossi clan filled the pews of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, praying collective novenas for my survival and later for my normalcy. Conversely, Daddy's Romani tribe went into immediate celebratory mode, convinced that my struggles were a sign that God was loading me up with the little something extras those fun-filled gypsies so appreciated.

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I'd taught myself to read by three, inhaling the encyclopedia by five. I solved calculus and physics problems with my two oldest brothers' at six and, thanks to their efforts in school, spoke fluent German and Latin by seven. It was effortless. I saw the words, listened for just a moment, then watched them come together to make perfect sense. Once my sister started high school, I added French and Spanish to my repertoire. Polish I learned from the nun who taught me piano, Italian from my Grandma, Romani from my Godmother. Not sure why, but along with my brains came the essential sense to keep my intellect to myself.

## DEVIANT STARS

School was a purely social outlet for me and I loved it. My parents never knew exactly how to react when I brought home my report cards loaded with straight A's as well as every conceivable behavioral box checked for improvement (shows no self-control, talks excessively, challenges teachers, questions religious tenets, giggles in church) and the list went on and on.

As a minority of one, I had to be careful. Always on the lookout for hidden agendas, I never followed blindly and only gave respect to those who earned it. I tried not to disobey my parents and, contrary to what the checkmarks purported, made a concerted effort to follow the rules at school. When it came to authority, I was not a sheep.

Even though everyone recognized me as the family peacemaker and playground mediator, if all else failed, I never backed away from a fight, verbal or physical. I blew through my childhood a tough dare-devil tomboy.

Even though my face was moon round, my nose still seemed a mite too big for it. I had a crooked smile and prominent brows. My eyes were big and round, always having the look of a frightened white-tailed deer, or perhaps a simpleton. I was a homely little kid and knew it. My only exceptional feature was the unruly shock of golden-blonde curls that framed my face.

Sixth grade is when I entered my *really* awkward stage and about the time I began to care about my looks. When I emerged, I wasn't bad—not exactly pretty, but not ugly either. By the time I started high school, I was five-two and a hundred pounds of muscle. I captained the swim team, excelled at gymnastics and attracted boys like crazy.

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Daddy's Gypsy clan lived in the small town of Two Rivers, eighty miles north of my Bay View home along the shores of Lake Michigan. As a child, I loved visiting our Romani tribe. Daddy's cousin Elzena was my Godmother in the truest sense of the word.

## DEVIANT STARS

Grandpa Polta had twenty-three brothers and sisters, one dad, two moms. That made for a shitload of first cousins, none of whom inherited any special aptitudes. As they married and began families of their own, collective breaths paused with the arrival of each little chavi or chava, hoping to get word of a red-letter occasion. Prior to my entrance into this world, it had been a long drought.

Grandma Polta and her two sisters were strong psychics. Although I didn't possess their particular talents, mine certainly excited them. According to them, my gifts were rare and far superior to any they'd ever seen. They were convinced that other skills lay dormant within me, flairs that would surely manifest as I matured. When with my Romani kin, I felt exceptionally normal.

Although she hadn't been gifted, Elzena was trusted with all of my Grandmother's and Great Aunts' secrets. She guided me through my strange life, schooled me on the reading of the auras, deconstructed my apparent telepathic connection to animals and comforted me the first time I took on the suffering of another. When people touched me, most people, I owned their pain at the expense of my own angst. It was only emotional pain that I healed. Had I owned the ability to cure physical ailments, I would have saved my mother.

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My mother, my heart, died of ovarian cancer in March of 1968. My three oldest siblings were married, out of the house—wrapped up in the care of their own families. Luca, my closest brother, got engaged to his high school sweetheart shortly before Mom's death and was busy with late summer wedding plans. Daddy was so steeped in his own grief, he didn't have space in his heart or his head to consider what his teenage daughter might be going through. So I filled

the space where my heart had been with boys, booze, pot and parties—not necessarily in that order.

My long range plan was to finish up my senior year of high school followed by college and the Peace Corp. But, as Robert Burns' so eloquently maintains in his poem "To a Mouse,"

*"The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, Gang aft agley, An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promis'd joy!"*

2

The beach party at South Shore Park was in full swing when I caught my boyfriend in a hot make-out session with a girl named Dana. Not really caring, I shrugged my shoulders and slunk off along the dark lakeshore toward home. *Guys, the hell with them.* I did *not* need a man to validate *my* life!

I climbed the small hill to an area of the park we called "the rocks", looked up to the night sky and missed my Mom. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the flash of a falling star as well as the stinging slap of a premonition so strong, I immediately understood the cold certainty that my life was about to change, and once again, not for the better.

I'd left myself without much of an escape route. The dark choppy waters of Lake Michigan churned to my right, on my other side a steep wooded hill loomed.

My heart boomed like the hammer of the Milwaukee Drop Forge as an eerily familiar intonation carried in off the lake, freezing my heart and croaking at my sanity. The voice fingering around in my head, murmuring odd words of affection was that of Picasso. He hadn't made an appearance in quite some time, making me believe that he had, after all, been imaginary.

I sprinted toward the bluff that separated me from the safety of my neighborhood streets and clambered up through the tangle of trees, tripping over rocks and backsliding in the loose dirt. The incline eventually flattened into a grassy clearing bordered by well-lit sidewalks. No sooner had I hit the concrete when I spotted three guys approaching. Without breaking stride, I darted across the street, hoping to avoid more trouble. They also crossed

I slowed down, groaned, tried to figure out my next move. A boogeyman behind me and three punks in front of me—that night couldn't have gotten any worse—or so I thought. The three of them stopped, effectively blocking me. When I moved, they shifted. One of them recognized me as Tim's girlfriend.

"Come on, guys, please, just leave me alone," I pleaded. "I need to get home or my dad's going to kill me."

The biggest one of the three stepped forward, pulled my blouse out of my shorts. I slapped at his hands. He copped a feel and sneered, "Tim's a lucky guy." One of the others tugged at my belt. A hand clamped over my mouth. As they dragged me fighting and kicking back toward the park, the realization of what they were about to do enraged me.

They'd found my struggles entertaining until my head mashed the nose of the kid restraining me. A shot to the mouth split my lip and sent me sprawling to my hands and knees. I swiped at my bloodied face, peered back over my shoulder and froze.

It *was* Picasso. I'd convinced myself that he'd been a figment of my weird childhood imagination but at that moment, my erstwhile guardian angel's legitimacy became my truth. His face was a blur but his eyes conveyed humor. At that fractured moment, I realized that the creature standing before me was not only real, but profoundly decayed.

## DEVIANT STARS

I'd always feared that the fabric separating my reality from fantasy, or maybe even madness, was threadbare at best—actually suspected that it wasn't textile at all, but more akin to tissue paper. When his piercing searchlight green eyes crinkled down at me, I felt a distinct ripple shudder on through.

Picasso gripped the throat of one of the boys, dangling him high above the sidewalk. I watched in helpless horror as the kid's legs first kicked, then twitched, stiffened and finally went limp. One of the other boys lay in a contorted heap behind them.

Frozen in place, I gaped at my former caretaker as he extended his free hand to me and thundered, "Vittoria, come with me! You are almost ready. If you continue to spurn me, I will destroy all that you love!"

I was *not* a shrinking violet. Nothing much scared me. I moved through my odd life accepting dare after dangerous dare, laughing in the face of peril. But at that moment, I *was* frightened—terrified and pissed-off at the same time. Still on the ground, I scabbled backward along the sidewalk, screaming at him. "Get out of my head, you freaking asshole! I'm not going anywhere with you—ever! Am I ready? What the hell does that mean? If you touch anybody I love, I *will* kill you! That's a promise, you goddamn bully! I don't know who you are, but you picked the wrong girl, mister! If I can't kill you, I'll find someone who can and will."

The intense energy that gathered throughout my body threatened to blow right out of the top of my head—freaking me out more than the macabre vignette playing out before me. Molten heat bubbled up through my veins causing streetlamps to flicker out and then detonate—one after another. In an attempt to repel the torrent of raining glass, I flung my arms up and ran for my life. While looking back over my shoulder, I slammed smack into a rock hard body and found myself staring up into the face of Daniel—the boy who loved me.

He wrapped his arms around me, frowned, glanced over my head in the direction from which I'd come and said, "Tori? What's going on? Where's that asshole boyfriend of yours?" He pinched my chin, lifted my face to his and said, "Your cheek is bleeding and your lip. What the hell?"

"Daniel, please, take me home."

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During that same sleepless night I vacillated, first trying to convince myself that it had all been a vision and then slamming my fists into my pillow as I replayed the horrific scene in my head.

Early the next morning, Daddy crashed into my room and waved the newspaper in my face. He showed me the bold headline that screamed "Three Murdered Teens."

"And you, young lady—you were at the beach last night, weren't you? At least you had the common sense to let Daniel walk you home! Where the hell was that good-for-nothing boyfriend of yours?"

It seemed like forever since Daddy had looked at me, *really* looked at me. Right then, I needed for him to hold me, hold me tight, tell me everything was going to be okay. But I didn't say that. Instead, I simply answered his question. "Tim's not my boyfriend anymore."

With the news of a child murderer loose on the streets of our normally safe Bay View neighborhood, the residents went out of their minds. I crept out onto the front porch and witnessed all of the neighbors gathered on their stoops and out on the front walks shouting to each other across the side yards and over the bushes. *What had I unleashed upon these good people?*

I ran back into the house only to have my last nerve shattered by the jangling telephone. I sensed the awfulness that was about to take place. Daddy rushed in from the kitchen, giving me a



quizzical look as he snatched up the receiver. He listened, visibly paled and hung up. “Tori, that was your Aunt Vi. Gary’s gone missing.”

Gary was my ten-year-old cousin. He left the house early that day, riding off on the bike he’d gotten for his birthday. He was a no-show for lunch. When he didn’t make it home for supper, Auntie Vi began to worry. I joined the cousins, aunts and uncles in the search—certain we would find him either down by the limestone caves at the lakeshore or caught up in a game of pickup baseball, oblivious of the time.

We’d gathered at the store before setting off on our search, checking in every so often to see if there was any news. My aunts and Grandma were inconsolable, suspecting the worst. Just as twilight languidly passed her baton to darkness, we got word that a couple of the older cousins had found Gary floating facedown in a tangle of weeds in the Humboldt Park Lagoon—his brand new red bicycle securely resting on its kickstand nearby.

My guts burned, my head spun—I thought I just might heave. The uncles huddled in the kitchen with their heads bowed and shoulders slumped, trying to make sense of the senseless. Several police officers arrived. I hurt them utter the word accident but I knew better.

I slipped out the side door and hurried down the alley back to my house, to my room, where I rummaged through my dresser drawers. When he was sixteen, I fourteen, Daniel presented me with the first of many valentines. Within each, he penned words professing his undying love. I found them, held the collection of red hearts to my own, curled up into the fetal position and disappeared beneath the covers.

Not long after, Daddy woke me from a fitful nap with more stunning news. They’d found my sixteen-year-old cousin Jason behind the doghouse in Aunt Rosa’s backyard. Apparently, he’d shot himself in the head. I folded my legs up into my chest, wrapped my arms

around my knees and began rocking back and forth. Daddy sat down on my bed and draped his strong arms around my shoulders.

Picasso held true to his threats. It was all my fault. I'd killed them both. The only way to keep my family safe was to lure him away. *Why* he wanted me was unclear, but I didn't stick around long enough to figure it out. This motherless freak-show called Vittoria packed up my anger, my talents, my stalker and blew town.

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*Aware of her on the day of her birth, I stressed over her struggle for survival—feared she'd be lost. But the strong souls of the heavens intervened—saving her life.*

*That is when my watch began. The more I observed, the more I desired. This one, blessed with special gifts and senses beyond the five, was perfect. Control of my cravings became difficult. I grew impatient and left my estate to become flesh when she was but an infant.*

*The first time I made my way to her cradle, I could barely contain myself. Time and again I went to her and calmed her as she struggled in the night. She rewarded me with her smiles. We are perfect creatures and the daughters have forever been attracted to us.*

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Frightened, yet empowered with the knowledge that I was protecting my family, I went about the business of separating from my family. I'd attended a private all-girls Catholic high school and paid my own way by working at the family grocery store every evening and weekends. On my way to Milwaukee's Union Station, I stopped at the bank to withdraw what would have been my senior year tuition. When I boarded the bus, I stared directly at Picasso who seated himself three rows in front of me.

## DEVIANT STARS

He followed me into the station where we continued our observations of each other until the Chicago-bound Hiawatha arrived. Once I boarded the train, the other passengers, most of whom were businessmen, shot me no more than a cursory glance. In an effort to hold myself together, I concentrated on their auras and contemplated on my predicament.

*Would this work? If he wanted to, he could just continue killing until I acquiesced. He'd already started with children, who'd be next, the elders? Grandma?* I shook it off, refused to doubt what I knew to be true. He'd killed my cousins in an effort to cull me from the herd.

Once the train pulled into Chicago, I roamed around for a couple of hours feeling sorry for myself and fighting the urge to turn right around and head back home. Finally, I boarded the "L" into the city and unbeknownst to me, began a bumpy ride to misery.

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While sipping a cup of coffee at a corner diner, I glanced up at the opening door. A blonde blue eyed and dewy skinned young woman entered. The baby's breath that wended through the inoffensive flower child's hair brought a smile to my face. She toted a pail bursting with blooms. I jumped when the Polish man behind the counter bellowed at her to get out. "Go sell that shit someplace else and leave my paying customers alone. Go!"

She smiled, turned around and left without argument. I followed, immediately drawn to her pretty pink aura which screamed positivity, harmony and love. It was no wonder she followed the hippy movement. At that moment however, I could see that she struggled. We shared a bus-stop bench and our life stories. Carrie hailed from a farm in Northern Wisconsin—had dropped out of school the prior year. Her initial destination was San Francisco, but she made it no further than the Windy City. We quickly discovered that our souls ran parallel. She missed her family, her real family, but felt she'd let too much time pass to make amends.

## DEVIANT STARS

With the red/orange blush of the setting sun roughing Carrie's pale cheeks, we joined hands and strolled the several blocks to the place she currently called home. It was an urban crash pad in Chicago's Old Town. I didn't embrace the hippy movement because it angered me. I had no problem with civil disobedience, hell, my Uncle, Father Anthony, led the civil rights charge back in Milwaukee and I'd marched with him many times. It was the treatment our brave soldiers received when they returned from combat that was appalling. Hate the war all you wanted, those guys, my own brothers and cousins included, didn't deserve the blame.

And the women who bought into that BS, all they were doing was blasting themselves back into the prior century, wanting nothing more than to be barefoot, pregnant and working in the fields of some stupid commune. *No thanks!*

Still, I was curiously drawn to the denizens of that wannabe co-op. Even though this group was a far cry from those I'd left behind, I felt a little safer in a crowd.

Aside from finding Carrie, the first few weeks on my own were miserable. I feared constantly for my loved ones—prayed they'd trust my decision to bolt—that they'd somehow understand and forgive me.

I spent weeks at that run-down house dissecting the artists, communitarians, pacifists, users, abusers, students, poets and the mentally ill that lived among us. Their auras intrigued me and I readily shared with them what I knew to be factual about their true selves.

Inhibition didn't exist within that crash pad. One never knew when a couple was going to stop, drop and screw. The minute Carrie introduced me around; every hairy horn dog in the place craved my innocence. After Mom died, I pretty much went off the rails, always up for trying anything once. But when it came to sex, the Catholic moral compass instilled within me was indeed stalwart.

## DEVIANT STARS

Keith was one of the more disturbing guys. Although handsome as hell, his indigo aura screamed psychopath. Initially, he contented himself to constantly sniff after me. He'd follow Carrie and me everywhere—always mumbling something about protecting me from the others. One night, drunk and high, he crawled up to me on his hands and knees and said, "You, little virgin, are a butterfly upon a wheel. If you don't fly away, you'll be crushed."

"Don't threaten me, you sick prick. Touch me and I'll cut off your business while you sleep." He wasn't as dumb as he looked, scabbled back across the room, rooted himself on one of the greasy couches and glared back at me.

Despite the love beads, there wasn't much amity in that commune. The only thing that came close to affection was the constant meaningless sex and it hadn't taken me long to figure out that "do your own thing" equated to "every man for himself." Because of the bad people haunting that space who didn't fit into conventional society, I urged Carrie to go home—finish school—even offered her money for a bus ticket. She accepted.

I'd planned to bolt the morning following Carrie's departure. My destination was an isolated farm in Kansas where the spirit of the "movement" was supposedly a little more pure and gentle. I intended to hide out there for a bit, while continuing my systematic studies of that illogical society and the very human individuals involved—those seekers of meaning and value.

That last night, somebody brought home a couple cases of cold beer. When wine and drugs were added to the mix, their already depleted inhibitions dwindled down to nothing. I hung back in our soon to be vacated room, arranging my pack, re-counting my money and enjoying a quiet moment to myself.

## DEVIANT STARS

The minute he entered the room, I bolted for the door. Keith blocked me, slammed it closed and locked it. The overwhelming stench of his colors burned my eyes. His oily smile scared the living shit out of me. My heart hammered. My ears buzzed.

“Cool it, Butterfly. I’m not going to hurt you. What I’m going to do is free you from whatever or whoever restrains you. Dig it? Wanna’ talk? Get to know each other?” He put his finger tip to the scar on my left cheek and asked, “How’d you get that?”

“From the last guy who tried to fuck with me—just before I killed him.”

For just a moment, I saw the doubt in his eyes, but then he smiled and produced a joint, forced me back into the corner, ran his grimy fingers through my hair and said, “Here, toke on this. Come on butterfly, go with the flow. Get your groove on—you’ve got a right, baby.”

When I lunged for the door again, he caught my wrist in a cruel grip. The reek of his hot sour breath moving across my face made me gag. That pissed him off. He pulled a knife, held the blade tight up against my throat and pushed me to the floor.

The pain was immediate and intense. My screaming insides twisted and turned. *Oh my God, he's splitting me in two!* None of my gifts could help me at that moment, so I willed my strong mind to flee, shrouded myself amid and among kinder people and safer places.

His hold on the knife loosened the moment his heated obscene semen flowed into and across my body. He passed out. Unfortunately for him, a sudden violent change of potential energy exploded within my brain. Carefully, I reached for the weapon. He moaned, shifted his weight. I froze, waited for what seemed like forever. Finally, holding tight to the knife, I pushed out from under him and plunged it into his back, amazed at how difficult it was to punch through.

## DEVIANT STARS

The comical little dance Keith performed while trying to extricate the blade brought a weak smile to my lips. He hitched up his jeans, then ripped through the door with the weapon still protruding from between his shoulder blades—his high-pitched keening echoed through the house.

Alone and broken, I crawled to a corner, pulled my legs up to my chest and folded in on myself. I'd never felt more lost and confused. I whispered to Mom, apologizing, begging her forgiveness for having put myself in that situation, then deliberately began the process of packing away this, my latest cross to bear, understanding that the profound blow to my body and my psyche would affect me for years, maybe forever.

Not sure exactly how I was supposed to react, I allowed my freakish brain free rein. Psyche—that word always intrigued me. It comes from the ancient Greek, meaning soul or butterfly. How ironic, the filth who'd just altered my life forever had called me a butterfly and then managed to crush my thorax, pin me to the floor and steal my very essence.

I crawled to the door and staggered down the empty hallway toward the bathroom—clutching at the walls for support. Prior to that moment, I never dared to place a toe inside of the blackened mudslide of filthy soap-scum that surrounded the inside and bottom of the rust-stained tub. After the hot water was long depleted, I continued to scrub my skin raw, but was unable to remove his stench.

A virgin bleeds after her first time. I understood that, but I wasn't so sure that the amount of blood flowing from me was normal. After rooting around, I found a box of pads stashed in a rusty metal cabinet perched on top of the lidless toilet tank. *Small favors.*

The agonizing pain was soon replaced by the loss of all physical and emotional sensation, not a good sign. When I pushed my way back into the hallway, I ran right into a burly Chicago

## DEVIANT STARS

cop. Our den of iniquity had been busted when the police knocked on the door looking for witnesses to what appeared to be a murder out in the street. They called for a paddy wagon and gathered us into a group. I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest of the “family,” wondering how many of them knew. That’s when I spotted the form lying face down in the middle of the road. It was my rapist; the knife still protruded from his back.