

Chapter One

“This is gonna be the best three weeks of my whole summer.”

Mae Martin looked down at the twin girls’ tangled brown hair. Their skinny arms bobbed in rhythm with hers as they walked hand in hand to the baggage claim in the Albuquerque airport. Autumn Brook and Summer Stream, Mae’s seven-year-old stepdaughters from her second marriage, had traveled from North Carolina to visit her for the first time since March, while their father was on his honeymoon with his third wife.

“It’s gonna be *our* best three weeks, too,” Brook agreed, giving Stream a meaningful look.

Stream nodded emphatically. “For sure.”

Mae caught the subtext. “Aren’t you having a good summer?”

“Yeah.” Stream’s grip tightened on Mae’s hand. “But when we go back, Daddy will bring Jen home with him.”

Brook added with dramatic gloom, “She’ll live with us.”

Mae was stunned. “I thought you liked Jen.”

“As Daddy’s *girlfriend*.” Stream glanced at her sister.

Brook declared, “*You’re* our mama.”

A crowd of people interrupted them, flowing so fast on either side that the girls had to duck in closer to Mae. Tall and athletic with carrot-red hair, she was impossible to overlook, but her girls were like little wrens. Mae warned a woman with a swinging carry-on that almost clobbered Brook to watch where she was going and steered the twins to walk in front of her.

They took the escalator down to the baggage claim area. While the carousel crept past, Mae tried to sort out the situation. When she’d first separated from the girls’ father, she had worried she might lose her place as their mother, but she hadn’t. Hubert’s first marriage had been so short the twins had no memory of it. Though they understood that Mae was their stepmother, she was the only mother they’d ever known. According to Hubert, he’d asked for the girls’ approval of his third marriage. Their sudden objection might be their final struggle with the fact that Mae and Hubert would never get back together.

“You want to know something funny?” Mae said. “When I was thirteen, I was so mad at my mama for breaking up with my daddy that I didn’t like my stepfather at first. I thought she married him way too quick. But now I just love him to death. She left him and I kept him. It’s like I’ve got *two* daddies.”

Stream stared at the passing luggage. “It’s not the same. People *should* divorce *her*.”

At this, both girls burst into half-suppressed spitting giggles. Mae wanted to laugh with them but didn’t let herself. “Look at me.” She paused until they gave her their solemn attention. “You may not like my mama, but you have to respect her. The point is that it all worked out. It just took time. Y’all are going to be a good family together.”

The twins turned tense, thin, dark-eyed faces up to her, silently questioning.

Mae continued. “Jen *likes* living in Tylerton, and I’m better off where I am. Think of the good times you’ve already had with her. She doesn’t have to be your mama to love you.”

Stream looked away and dragged her pink suitcase covered with NASCAR stickers from the carousel. Brook grabbed a similarly decorated purple case. As Mae took their bags, the girls looked at each other in the way Mae thought of as twin-talk, a moment they shared in their minds

without needing to speak. As usual, Brook was the spokesperson after such an exchange. “We don’t want Jen to act like she’s our mother. She’s not good at it.”

Stream added, suddenly pitiful, “She can’t move into *your room* with Daddy.”

Brook let loose her own flood of distress. “And what if Daddy and Jen get divorced? Everybody gets divorced.”

“Oh, my goodness.” Mae let go of the luggage and dropped to her knees to hug them. No wonder the upcoming marriage troubled them. “Not *everybody* gets divorced. Look at your daddy’s parents. They’ve been together forever.”

Another silent twin-talk exchange, after which Stream spoke. “But Jen still can’t move into your room. It’s not right.”

Mae smoothed their hair and kissed each girl on the forehead. “You didn’t want to tell Daddy, did you? But maybe Jen would like it better if she could move into a room that hadn’t been mine.” A stab of pain ambushed Mae, as she pictured the old bungalow where she had lived with the children and the room where she had slept with Hubert. She pushed the hurt back down to its hiding place. “And we’ll call your grandparents tonight and you can explain it to them. They can talk to Daddy after he has a few days of honeymoon. He might like the idea.”

The twins nodded. Brook said, “But Jen still won’t be our mama.”

“No. But maybe she’ll be your best friend.”

Stream frowned, glanced at Brook, and then sighed. “*Maybe.*”

Once the girls had settled in at Mae’s pea-soup green converted trailer in Truth or Consequences, they asked her to turn on her laptop so they could show her a surprise. Mae sat back in an armchair while they huddled at the coffee table, blocking the screen from her while they navigated.

“Okay,” Brook announced, grinning with excitement. “We’re ready.”

Stream bounced up and down. “It’s a song we really like. Jen helped us a little, but we made up most of the dance ourselves.”

Good. They’d enjoyed something with Jen.

Brook started a YouTube video with the volume all the way up. Mae was startled to hear her boyfriend, Jamie Ellerbe’s, clear light tenor and Australian accent, rambling in his usual drifts manner of introducing songs in live performances. He performed under the stage name Jangarrai, his Aboriginal skin name, and was known for his eclectic blend of world music styles, his dance improvisations, and his extraordinary voice. He wasn’t a big star, but he had a following, and it included Jen.

“Dunno where this came from,” he said. “Just get silly sometimes, y’know?” He wore a parrot-print Aloha shirt and a straw fedora, his collar-length ash-blond hair puffing out from under it, a striking contrast with his chocolate-brown skin. His wide smile flashed, a gold tooth gleaming. “If you ever make faces in the mirror, this song’s for you.”

Though delighted that Jen had shared Jamie’s music with the girls, Mae wondered if they would like him in person. Eccentric and moody, he was an acquired taste. Mae hadn’t known what to make of him at first, but his thoughtfulness and humor, even in the midst of his crises and neuroses, had turned her initial skepticism into tenderness and eventually love.

The girls rocked back and forth, making faces to the beat as Jamie played a hand drum and sang a fast-paced nonsense song.

“*Nk-a-dada mp-a-wada hey wo ho*

*Climb a ladda whatsamatta I don't know.
Nk-a-dada mp-a-wada hee nah hey
Looka betta eata lotta chocolay
Ump-a-lala woop-a walla
Don't go way
Ahhhhh ... make that face!"*

He put on a ludicrous expression, jutting out his chin and wagging his braided goatee, and gestured an invitation to the audience. "Every time we sing that line, give it your best face."

No wonder the children liked this song. It had taken him a while to win Mae's affection, but maybe he would charm the girls more quickly than she'd thought.

Once he had the audience singing the melody, he put his drum down, scuffed a rhythm on the stage with his feet, and cut loose with wild semi-operatic multi-octave wails that rolled up and down around the simple tune. A big man, close to six feet tall and two-hundred pounds, he moved with fluidity and power, hips and shoulders pulsing, his body as agile as his voice.

The twins, more energetic than graceful, twirled and hopped, dropped to the floor, spun on their bottoms, and jumped back up to sing along. They finished with a final set of silly faces that followed the rhythm. On the small screen, Jamie made more faces, encouraging the audience to do the same and cracking up at what he saw. He ended with an explosion of drumming and took a bow. Brook and Stream took their bows backwards, wiggling their little butts.

Mae applauded, wiped the tears of laughter from her cheeks, and thanked them. "That was the best show I've ever seen."

Brook stamped her feet with delight, squeezing Stream's hand. "Want us to do it again?"
"Not yet. I laughed so hard I can barely breathe."

The twins scurried over and climbed onto her lap, one child per thigh, their legs dangling and kicking. Stream said, "We'll do it for Jangarrai when we meet him."

Brook said, "Jen told us to tell him to make a children's album. When do we get to meet him?"

"Next week when we go to Santa Fe." Mae stroked their backs. "I'm sure he'll love your dance."

"Next week? Jen said he's your boyfriend. Y'all don't see each other for a *week*?"

"We live in different cities. It's a three-hour drive."

Stream cuddled up, leaning her head on Mae's shoulder. "Good. We get you to ourselves."

Brook leaned on the other shoulder. "I like it when it's just us and you. You won't marry him, will you?"

"I don't know. I love him, but it's too soon to know if we should get married."

Brook raised her head. "Then why isn't it too soon for Daddy and Jen?"

"I just met Jamie last summer, but your daddy's known Jen for years. We all went to high school together."

After a moment, Stream asked, "Did you go to school with our ...?" She paused and then pronounced carefully, "biological mother?"

"I did. She was a year ahead of me." Mae watched the girls' expressions, wondering what was brewing in their minds. They appeared to be deep in thought. So far, they'd shown little interest in their birth mother, resentfully dismissing Edie as the bad woman who didn't want them. Mae and Hubert had tried to explain that Edie wasn't a bad person, just not a good mother

or wife, but it had been too complex an idea for the twins at the time, and still might be. “How come you want to know about her now?”

“Because . . .” Stream fidgeted, playing with Mae’s hair. “Daddy keeps *marrying people*.”

“He’s a loving guy. He married your birth mother because he wanted you. She wasn’t ready to have babies, but he was. He wanted to be a father, even when he knew she wouldn’t stick around. And then I fell in love with all of you, your daddy and his baby girls. With me, he found someone who wanted to be your mama. He’s still my friend and I’m still your mama, so he got better at marrying the second time, right?”

“He didn’t get better at it the third time. We like you better than Jen.”

Mae felt ashamed of how much this pleased her. It was probably all normal, though, her feelings and the twins’ feelings, if anything about coping with her family’s marital patterns could be normal. “You don’t have to compare us or choose.” Seeing the girls’ confused looks, Mae said, “It’s complicated. Our family is complicated.”

“Like Grampa Marty having a boyfriend?”

“We call Niall his partner. They’ve lived together for fifteen years. It’s more like being married. Come on, let’s go see ’em. I bet Grampa Marty will take us fishing.”

Excitement erased the twins’ anxiety, at least for the time being. They jumped from Mae’s lap and scurried to the door. She was glad she’d planned the outing. She hadn’t been ready for much else.

After dinner that evening, Mae Skyped her former in-laws and let the girls talk to them for a long time. She made sure the children aired their worries after they told their grandparents about fishing on the Rio Grande and seeing lizards and a snake. Jim and Sallie took a moment with Mae afterwards and thanked her for getting the children to open up. “I know we had our problems,” Sallie said, “but you’re a good mother to Brook and Stream. We’re glad you’re in their lives.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

While the girls were supposed to be getting ready for bed, Mae heard them exclaiming over something and went to see what was inspiring all the *wows*. Brook was standing on a chair, taking things off the top shelf of the guest room closet and handing them down to Stream, who placed them on their bed. A chunk of rose quartz. An amethyst geode the size of a golf ball.

These were the crystals too large for Mae to carry with her, and too powerful to use much. Some of the smallest and easiest to lose were in the closet, too, chips of emerald and ruby that had been her grandmother’s.

“What are you two doing?” Mae asked. “If I put things up where you can’t reach them—”

“But it’s *our room*,” Stream replied. “We were exploring it.”

Mae nodded. She couldn’t fault their logic. When they visited, it *was* their room.

“Mama, these are such cool rocks.” Brook jumped down from the chair, her hands full of the small crystals. She sprinkled them on the bed, letting them trickle between her fingers.

“Where did you get them? How come we never saw them before?”

Stream held up the geode. “I wish I was small enough to crawl in this little cave. What lives in it?”

“Slow down, sweeties. I can’t answer all your questions at once.” Mae sat on the bed.

“I’ll start with the little cave. Nothing lives in it. When rocks like that are in the ground, the hole is like the inside of a ball. And crystals grow in the hole.”

The twins sat beside her, asking in unison, “They *grow*?”

Brook added, "How? I thought things had to be alive to grow."

"I'm not sure. Something to do with water and minerals. We can look it up tomorrow. How about I answer your other questions?" Looking up the growth process of rocks might have been easier. Mae and Hubert had simplified the story of their divorce for the girls, leaving out their fights about her psychic gift. Though amicable, the breakup had been heartrending for all of them, and there had been no point in making it even harder for the girls to understand. Sooner or later, however, they were bound to find out she had the Sight. Better they should hear it from Mae than from some Tylerton gossip. "Some of these rocks belonged to your great-granma. They came out of the mountains in North Carolina where she lived, back where I grew up."

Mae placed one of the unpolished gemstones in each girl's hand. "They don't look like jewels, but those are an emerald and a ruby. She used crystals to help her as a seer and a healer. She laid hands on people to make them feel better, and she could see what was happening in other places. Like, if some kid got lost in the woods, she could hold a crystal and a piece of his clothes and see where he was."

"Mama. Are you making that up?" Stream sat up taller with her know-it-all look, the same look she and Brook had gotten when they'd figured out there was no Santa Claus. "That's like a fairy story. She holds a magic rock and she can find him?"

"I know it sounds like magic, but scientists have studied this stuff. Not with crystals, but with people being able to see at a distance, even in another country. It's called remote viewing. And shamans—they're like Indian medicine people or like priests in old religions—a lot of them use crystals to have visions and to heal people. My granma on my mother's side was like that. All the women in her family had that gift."

Brook handled the rose quartz carefully. "All of them? Like forever?"

"Not every single one, but as far as I know, somebody in every generation was a seer."

"How come you never told us?"

"A lot of people in Tylerton thought it was spooky." *And your daddy thinks it's wrong, and your grandparents think it's nonsense.* "And some folks get mad at me for finding out stuff they'd rather hide."

"But that would be so *fun*. Finding out secrets." Stream gazed down at the stones in her hand. "Could we do it if we used your rocks?"

"I don't know." Would their "twintuition" make them natural psychics? "You're kinda young to be messing around with it. Anyway, it's not that easy, and it's not something I do for fun."

"But it *would* be fun." Brook held a crystal to either side of her head and closed her eyes. "We could do stuff like ... We could Skype with our heads."

Stream nodded. "Any time we wanted, we could just see Mama."

"That's why some people think the Sight is bad. I don't use it to pop in on people. That would be like opening the bathroom door on 'em or listening in on their conversations. I have to have a really good reason, and then be careful what I'm looking for."

"Could you find us? What if we hid?"

"I could find you if you were lost. At least I'd try." Mae gathered the crystals. "But don't start hiding to make me find you. Having the Sight is serious. It's not a toy. I'm putting these away in my room and I don't want y'all going in there looking for them."

The girls scowled.

"I'll be back in a minute to tuck you in."

Mae put the crystals in the dresser inside her walk-in closet. When she came back to the children's room, they were gone. She held still and listened, undecided if she was annoyed with them or charmed by their persistence. Maybe she hadn't explained the issue well enough, but she didn't want to distress them with the secrets she'd uncovered with her gift, from crimes to witchcraft. They would learn in time how badly adults behaved.

A stifled giggle came from the closet. Mae turned down the bed and did the routine Jamie had insisted she learn as part of life in New Mexico, checking for scorpions.

"Okay, you can come out now. I know you're in the closet."

The girls emerged. Brook asked, "Did you do that with your rocks?"

"I did it with my ears. Now get in bed."

After she kissed them goodnight and closed their door, she heard a whisper. "That was too easy. We'll have to hide better next time."

"No, you won't." Mae put on her sternest mama voice. "Don't even think about it."

The next day, Mae left the girls with her father while she went for an interview at one of the spas in the historic district of Truth or Consequences. Though she had little time to devote to working as a psychic and healer, an enthusiastic client was talking her up and she was getting requests. She needed a location to do the work.

Entering the Charles Motel and Spa, Mae warmed to the place in spite of her pre-interview jitters. The spacious lobby and gift shop of the old building smelled faintly of essential oils and was filled with soft Native flute music and the cheeping of a pair of parakeets. A startlingly handsome man, slender and dark-eyed with touches of gray at the temples of his short-cropped hair, rose from the desk behind the counter with a warm smile. "Hello. How can I help you?"

Mae's voice, not loud to begin with, came out even smaller than usual. "I'm Mae Martin. I have an appointment with the manager."

"That's me. I'm Derek." He came out from the office and shook her hand. "Let me show you the energy room while we talk. You come well recommended. One of our regulars, Daphne Brady, says you're a great healer. She claims you helped her quit smoking. Got her hooked on hot spring soaks and massages instead."

Derek led her to a small room to the right of the office, and Mae fell in love with the space. A bright, striped cotton blanket in oranges and browns covered the table where clients would recline, and a stylized portrait of a Native woman, someone Mae sensed was a medicine woman, hung on the wall beside it.

Turning on a row of salt crystal and selenite lamps on shelves near the door, Derek said, "It's painted to look like a healing cave." He indicated the ceiling, where an artist had rendered golden-brown rocks with an opening to blue sky. "That's what clients see when they're on the table."

Mae's attraction to the room deepened. "I love it."

An enormous amethyst cluster on the shelf above the lamps drew her attention. There had been a display case of smaller crystals in the gift shop. It was like she was meant to work at The Charles. "I use crystals in my healing. And as a psychic, too." Had that been awkward? Being psychic was always so hard to explain, but she had meant to bring it up at some point in the interview.

Derek frowned. “Daphne mentioned that about you, but I would prefer you only do energy healing here.”

“I used to do both in Virginia Beach before I moved here. I can give you references.” Mae *had* to hang out her shingle as a psychic and be a professional again. The last time she’d used the Sight as a favor to a friend, the results had strained that friendship. But if being a psychic was her job, it would have built-in limits. No one close to her would ask her to use it for them again, no more than they’d ask a psychologist friend for free therapy. “I expect most people would want energy healing. But sometimes people need me for things like finding lost pets or missing people.”

“The police find missing people, not psychics. Lost pets, yes, I can see that’s a valuable service. But is it worth my offering a psychic? It’s going to put some people off.”

“I can use the Sight for medical intuition. I’m studying with Mary Kay Dieffenbacher in Santa Fe next week. Have you heard of her?”

“Of course. Anyone interested in healing has.” Derek turned off the crystal lamps and led the way back to the gift shop and lobby. “We carry her books.”

“It’s a joint workshop with Fiona McCloud on energy healing. Do you carry her books, too?”

Derek nodded and walked to the bookshelf. “The energy worker we have here now studied with her.” He bypassed Fiona’s books and took Mary Kay’s *Seeing the Illness in the Aura* and *Origins of Disease in the Spirit* back to his desk, where he sat and flipped through them.

“I’m looking for her ethical guidelines. How she handles what she finds as a medical intuitive. I know they’re in one of the books. I want to make sure you’d follow them.”

“Of course I would.”

Derek paused, read some back pages, then marked his place with a slip of paper. “I’ll think about it. Tell me more about your work as a healer. Is everything you do like helping Daphne quit smoking?”

“No. Well, in a way, yes.” Mae stood straighter and reminded herself to be calm and confident. “I don’t cure illnesses or anything. I help people change and move on. But it can be anything where they’re stuck, not just a bad habit.”

“And your training?”

“I . . . I come from a family of healers and seers, but I don’t really have formal training yet.”

After studying the planner on his desk, Derek asked, “How many hours would you be available?”

Was this an offer of work? Mae thought about her schedule. “I’m in college, and classes start again at the end of August, and I work part-time at the college fitness center. And my stepdaughters are visiting until school starts. Gosh, I guess not a lot of hours.” She blushed at how unprofessional she sounded. “But I really do want to do this. Maybe three or four hours a week? Mostly weekends.”

Derek wrote something in his planner. “Can you do Saturdays? We need a weekend person who can be flexible—mornings, afternoons, depending on what the clients ask for.”

“Does this mean you want me to work here?”

“After I get your references from Virginia Beach and after you finish that workshop, yes. Daphne raves about you, but I want to see a certificate from the training before I promote your services.”

“You’ll do the marketing?”

“That’s my job. You do the healing. Come see me again when you’ve finished the training and we’ll work out the details.”

Mae gave Derek her former employer’s contact information, thanked him a few too many times, and left.

Broadway, one of T or C’s two main streets, was almost deserted, typical for an off-season weekday. The sign on the Bank of the Southwest read ninety-six degrees, hot enough to keep most people indoors. It didn’t bother Mae. If she hadn’t already run a few miles in the desert that morning, she might have run all the way to her father’s house to share the good news.

When she arrived after a brisk walk, she found him in his yard with the girls, pitching a ball to Brook. He was a coach, on a short break between summer softball camps and the brief autumn softball season at College of the Rio Grande in Las Cruces. Brook missed his pitch with a wild whiff and put the bat down.

“I struck out.”

“It doesn’t count in practice,” Marty assured her. “It’s just for fun.”

“Can we watch Mama hit?” Stream asked.

“Not in the yard, baby. She’d break a window. Maybe the neighbors’ window. Your mama’s one strong lady.”

He’d taught Mae hitting and pitching and fielding as soon as she was old enough to swing a bat, and she’d been a top player on her high school team.

Stream picked up the bat and gave it a lackluster swing. “We’re not strong.” She put it down, losing interest. “Can we go in Niall’s studio, please? I want to watch him make the rabbits.”

Brook’s face lit up. “Yeah. Can we?”

Marty strolled over to the corrugated metal outbuilding. He was tall and rangy, with freckles and sandy brown hair touched with gray, and a way of moving that suggested nothing could hurry him. He knocked and called out, “Niall. The young’uns miss you.”

Niall’s gruff, Maine-accented voice replied, “They can watch. *If* they stay out of the way,” and the twins scurried in.

Mae and Marty sat across from each other at the picnic table. He said, “He’s making bunnies from old garden tools. It’s a commission for some garden center.”

“I’m so tickled the girls like Niall. I never thought he’d be good with kids.”

“Not most kids. Brook and Stream just happen to fit.”

“Is he welding with them in there?”

“Don’t worry. He makes them stay back. I think they like watching him better than playing sports.”

“I’m not surprised. They like helping Hubert fix stuff and watching him work on cars. Funny how I keep expecting them to take after me, like they were my flesh and blood.”

Marty rubbed a chipped place in the paint on the table. “So do they. They’ve been trying to be psychic all afternoon.” He smiled. “So far it looks like they’re not, except for that twin business where they say the same thing at the same time.”

“What did they do to test it?”

“First they had me hiding pennies and they’d try to tell where I put them. And then they hid from each other and tried to guess. They had fun trying, but they couldn’t do it.”

“Last night, they hid and tried to make me use the Sight to find them. I told them not to, but it seemed like so much fun to them, I don’t think they understood that it’s not something I play with.”

“No, it sure isn’t.” Marty scratched his chin. “Did you find a place to do your work?”

“I did.” Mae felt lighter and warmer as she finally shared her good news. “I’ll be a professional again.”

“Congratulations.” He smiled. “Maybe if you tell the kids you do it for work, they’ll take it more seriously.”

Chapter Two

Jamie rolled over in bed to answer his phone, displacing Gasser, his obese orange cat who had been sleeping on his chest. As he’d anticipated, the call was from Mae. “G’day, love,” he said. “Be down in a second.”

Her arrival gave him a surge of vigor, an actual *eagerness* to get up. Mornings had been harder than ever lately, as if years of insomnia had finally caught up with him, but now he sprang out of bed, ready to run downstairs to greet her.

“I’m pulling in at the workshop, sugar.” Her soft, sweet voice held a puzzled note. “You sound sleepy. You’re not just waking up, are you?”

“Um, yeah, thought I’d let you be my alarm. Rather wake up to you than a clock, y’know?”

“I wish you’d told me. I’d have called sooner. There was a lane closed on 25 through Albuquerque and the trip took longer than I’d thought. I’ll bring my stuff to your place when the workshop is over today. There’s no time right now. It starts in ten minutes.”

“Bloody hell.” Jamie sat on the bed so abruptly it creaked. If she could have come up the night before, they would have woken up together, started the day with love instead of hassles. But he’d registered them for the workshop before he knew the dates of her stepdaughters’ visit, and, understandably, she’d wanted to spend as few nights apart from them as possible. He loved her for being such a devoted mum. No objections to her choice. It was himself he was annoyed with for not thinking ahead. Not setting an alarm. A sense of pressure closed in on him. “I need coffee, need food, have to brush my teeth, let the parrots out ...”

“Relax, sugar, they’ll have coffee here. You better skedaddle.”

“Yeah. Love ya. Catcha.”

Skedaddle? Was there such a thing as *skedawdle*? Jamie’s mind was awake, but his body had sunk back into morning torpor. He craved another minute of rest. Beside him, the cat lolled on his side, as curled up as his girth allowed, blinking lazily. Jamie patted the hemisphere of furry flank and started to lie down—*just thirty seconds*—then stopped. *Jesus. I’m turning into Gasser.*

Forcing himself to hurry, Jamie dressed, brushed his teeth, and went down to the living room to uncover and open the parrots’ cages.

“Only got a minute for you. Give me a pep talk, will you, mate?” Jamie offered his wrist to Placido, the green Eclectus. “Step up.”

The bird stepped up to be petted and kissed, and then climbed his owner’s arm to his shoulder. “I love you,” Placido said quietly into Jamie’s ear.

“Yeah, love ya, too. I’m doing this for you, right?”

When he’d signed up for the healing workshop, Jamie had wanted to expand beyond his current routine of giving Reiki to his pets. Medical intuition would enable him to take better care of them, and so would stronger healing skills. The challenge was going to be practicing on people. His healing and visionary gifts were hard to control, and the parrot soul, though sensitive, was peaceful compared to the human spirit. Mae could handle it, and the workshop had been a present for her. So as long as she benefitted, Jamie was happy, but he couldn’t help feeling a little anxious. On the bright side, maybe someone practicing on him would heal his lethargy. But he could be getting in over his head.

As he moved Bouquet, the hyacinth macaw, to her perch, she gazed at him with one of her enormous yellow-rimmed eyes and ruffled her blue feathers. He stroked her breast with the back of his fingers. “Don’t suppose you have any advice?”

She bowed her head. He hadn’t expected much. She knew three words, and none of them were wise.

Gasser came clumping down the stairs, his belly dragging. This was the animal Jamie worried about the most. The one who really needed what he would learn in the training. The parrots were young, healthy and happy. Gasser was not only fat but also struggling with the stress of no longer being an only pet. He had required extra love since the birds had moved in. Jamie put Placido on his perch and scooped up the twenty-pound feline to give him a hug. “You’re my best mate. Don’t tell the parrots.”

He knew he was procrastinating, but he held Gasser until he felt calm, confident and motivated. It was perverse, but being late gave him energy.

The workshop was meeting in a former dance studio on a side street off Cerrillos, a few blocks from Jamie’s apartment. He rode his bike at top speed, but still arrived after the opening talk had begun.

Out of breath, he took a seat beside Mae, dismayed to find there were no chairs, only folded blankets. Even after several months of yoga classes, his left hip objected to prolonged floor-sitting. Leaning back on his elbows in a half-slump, he kissed the middle of Mae’s back, resisting the urge to put his arm around her bum. He loved the firmness of her curves, strength rounded out with just enough feminine softness, the body of a goddess. A goddess who didn’t know she was one. Her face free of makeup, her hair straight and unstyled, she wore scuffed athletic shoes, a baggy old T-shirt, and shorts that revealed long, well-muscled, blindingly white legs.

She glanced down at him with a smile, smoothed his hair back, removing one of Placido’s tiny fur-like feathers from the tangled mess, and returned her focus to Fiona McCloud’s introduction to the class. A silent reminder to Jamie to pay attention.

Fiona, a plump, vigorous woman with short pewter-colored hair and rosy cheeks, radiated confidence and solidity despite her ethereal occupation. “None of you are beginners, according to your registrations, so the work we’ll do today will involve only a minimal review of subtle energy anatomy. We’ll spend most of our time refining and deepening our skills. Mary Kay and I came up with a mnemonic for what we want you to achieve: the five Cs. Compassion, clarity, concentration, competence, and control. Each lesson will involve all of them.”

The central lesson of the morning was how to move one’s ego out of the way and become an open channel. Jamie was too open. As he worked with a series of partners, he kept losing his boundaries in his urgency to relieve their sufferings, seeing more of their souls and feeling more of their troubles than he could cope with.

The other workshop participants spread around the studio floor, kneeling, sitting or squatting to do their work, with the person receiving the healing lying on a blanket, but Jamie had to work standing up so he could hug people. If they were sad or wounded, it soaked into him, and he needed to hold them. Both he and the person he was healing ended up crying. His partners said they felt wonderful afterward, and he was amazed and glad he had helped them, but the process exhausted him, leaving him full of their pain. Compassion, but no control. He couldn't clear himself of what he'd taken on.

The third time he got overwhelmed with his partner's healing, Fiona took him aside and escorted him to a blanket in a corner. "You need to lie down."

Too drained to argue, he obeyed, and she laid her hands on his heart and lower belly. Though her palms were hot, her touch put something like a soft, cooling gel into him, quieting the tremors, filling the aching hollows. Once he was steady, she moved her hands to his diaphragm and forehead and sent something different, like a warm bath.

When she let go, Jamie opened his eyes. Fiona squatted back on her heels, studying him. "That's enough practice for you, for now. Rest. Learn by listening."

She crossed the room to Mae, who knelt beside a young man with flowers tattooed on his shaved scalp. Something radiated from her as she sent healing. Jamie, his inner vision still open, picked it up as a pink rose wrapping the client in its petals. *Jesus*. Even her soul was beautiful.

Fiona touched Mae's shoulder. "Pull back, do less, much less. Give the process freedom to happen."

The rose dimmed to a single petal. The young man on the floor began to glow with little teal-blue flames, and Jamie picked up a stretched sensation like blown glass being shaped. Fascinating and powerful, but not restful.

Jamie scrunched his eyes shut. He needed to close his sixth chakra. Under his breath, he chanted the Sanskrit line with which his yoga teacher opened her classes. He didn't know exactly what the words meant, but it was something about stilling the mind. It worked. The sensation of the other man's soul faded away and the pool of swirling purple behind his eyes shrank down to a manageable dot.

On the lunch break, Mae called her father while she walked to Jamie's apartment, leaving her car at the workshop site. Jamie had biked ahead to start making the meal. When Marty answered, he said the girls wanted to get on the phone first. It was hard to tell their voices apart, but Brook was more often spokes-twin when the girls were sharing a phone call.

"Hey, Mama. Can you tell where we are?"

Mae listened for background sounds. A motorboat. Distant laughter. "Elephant Butte Lake?"

"Yes! Did you use your magic rocks?"

"No, I used my ears again." Though she'd tried to discourage them, they hadn't stopped trying to make her find them or see what they were doing. "You have a good swim?"

"Yeah. Grampa Marty can swim *so* good. He taught us how to do the backstroke."

"And Niall didn't even get in the water, did he?"

Brook whispered aside to Stream, "She knows what he did. I didn't tell her that part."

“I’ve been to the lake with Daddy and Niall before. I wasn’t being psychic. We swim, and he reads a book, and once in a while he gets his feet wet.”

After a pause that Mae interpreted as disappointment, Brook said, “We’ve been practicing being psychics. Listen. Stream, what am I thinking about right now?”

Stream answered, “A polka-dotted dinosaur.”

“Am not. It was *plaid*.”

They burst into shrieks and giggles, and Marty took over the call. “They’ve been doing that off and on all day. I think they were trying seriously at first, but now they’re just being silly.”

“I hope they get over it before they go home. Hubert never liked my being psychic.”

“Don’t worry about it, baby. They’re just doing it because they love you and they want to be like you. How’s your workshop?”

“I’ve learned a lot already. Stuff I can use in my new job.”

“Glad to hear it. You get done at noon Sunday, right? Where should we meet you?”

“How about the Railyard? Make it twelve thirty so we can go back to Jamie’s place and grab something for a picnic with the girls.” Even if he prepared it all in advance, Mae expected Jamie would be double-checking and adding things, trying to make a perfect lunch to impress two un-finicky seven-year-olds. She and Marty finished details of their plans and wrapped up the call.

When Mae approached the drab gray stucco duplex, she noticed Jamie had made further improvements on his half of the yard. The lavender in his spiral garden was in bloom, and he’d added yucca plants at the back, a birdbath, two stands that looked like perches for his parrots, and a pair of Adirondack chairs painted bright turquoise. His landlady’s side of the yard was nothing but pinkish-brown dirt and piles of pebbles excavated by ants.

Mae rang the doorbell and heard an answering ding. The macaw, communicating with the bell. Jamie called, “Come in.” The birds were sharing a perch in the living room, their bright colors a complement to the rock-red walls and blue ceiling. Placido said hello. Mae returned the greeting and joined Jamie in the kitchen.

He was layering avocado onto thick slices of whole grain bread smeared with hummus, while his enormous cat rubbed on his ankles. “Almost ready. Red chile hummus. Made it last night. Got some of your nasty sweet tea in the fridge.” He added purple onions and yellow tomatoes, gently crowned each sandwich with the second slice of bread, scooped potato salad onto the plates, sprinkled a garnish of parsley, and then turned to hug Mae, giving her a deep, lingering kiss. “Need to get that in before the onions.”

They sat at the table to eat. Mae complimented his cooking, then asked, “Did you have a hard time today? I saw Fiona making you take a time-out.”

“Yeah.” Jamie stuffed an errant piece of onion back in his mouth and talked around chewing. “Fucking *healing* kept making me *cry*, making my partners cry. Fiona talked to me about it later and said it was a sign I was a natural for this open-channel thing. Everything comes through me.”

“That’s beautiful. I always knew you were gifted.”

“Yeah, but I’m like people with lax ligaments, y’know? Spiritually. Knew this girl in college who was so flexible it was like she was falling apart. People who couldn’t stretch thought it was cool, but it wasn’t for her. She could dislocate *anything*.”

“What if you use your training from Gaia Greene?” Mae knew Jamie had studied briefly with a shaman, though with the intention of controlling his gift rather than using it. “Could you call in spirit helpers for healing, so it doesn’t all come through *you*?”

“Nah. Not enough control with spirits. Dunno who’ll show up, y’know?” Jamie took a gulp of water and got up for a second serving of potato salad. “You want more?”

Mae hadn’t finished what was on her plate. “No thanks.”

“I’m buggered. Feel like I climbed a mountain.” He ground coffee beans and ate standing at the counter. “You get tired from all that?”

“Not really. Psychic journeys wear me out, but I feel refreshed after this. I didn’t pick up anybody’s story, which was nice. I like it when I can do a healing that way.”

“That was because you got ’em without any baggage. I’d already sucked up all their misery.” Jamie filled the coffee maker and rejoined her at the table. “We need to remember to tell Mary Kay we don’t work with each other.”

“I don’t mind if you practice on me.”

“Nah. Can’t go there. If I practice healing you, next thing you know you’ll be trying to help me, and there we’ll go: Jamie-the-sick-person, under repair.”

He gave her a comically exaggerated frown, but she knew he meant business. He was in therapy for anxiety and depression and still struggled at times. Even a hint of trying to fix him didn’t go over well.

“I don’t see you that way. You know that.”

“Yeah, you do.” Reaching across the table, he brought her hand to his lips for a kiss. “You just love me anyway.”

He devoured several cookies and two mugs of coffee while Mae ate one cookie and finished her tea. She wanted to tell him to go easy on the caffeine and sugar—it only made him more anxious—but he would think she was nagging him about his weight as well as trying to fix him. When he took three times as long as she did for toothbrushing, she waited quietly. More practice at not nagging. Dental hygiene wasn’t the worst thing a person could be neurotic about.

They arrived a few minutes late and took a spot near the back of the room. Mary Kay, thin and sun-lined, with her fair hair pulled back in a wispy braid, stood facing the students. “I’d like three volunteers for our initial practice of seeing into the body. I need people who don’t mind waiting to do the first round on this skill, who can be the clients for the rest.”

Jamie raised his hand. A smell of mint came off him as he spoke. “I’ll do it.”

“And who don’t mind being talked about in front of everyone. I know you signed release forms about sharing with your partners, and Fiona went over confidentiality, but this will be a group exploration of how different people perceive the physical through the energy systems. To do this, we’ll need to share your medical conditions with the class.”

The young man with the floral scalp volunteered, as did a fit-looking woman of about sixty. Jamie reaffirmed his willingness. Mary Kay began her lecture. Mae squeezed Jamie’s hand and then inched away from his fidgeting in order to concentrate.

“Everything is energy,” Mary Kay said. “If you think of the *koshas*, the five sheaths, the physical body is the least subtle, but it’s still energy. When you see disturbance in the mental or emotional sheath, or even in the spiritual or bliss body, it could eventually manifest in the physical. Seeing it early this way is best. The client can take preventive steps. Oddly enough, with our subtle vision, the bliss-body is easier to access. The actual physical body is the most difficult to perceive. You may need to make inner adjustments, as if you were refocusing a telescope or a microscope.”

First, she had them practice seeing inside their own hands, with eyes open and then with eyes closed. Next, they practiced with their palms on their knees, eyes closed, seeing with the hand. Like all her psychic visions, the images that came to Mae were vivid, complete with muscle attachments, tendons, and vessels. She could look between her femur and tibia and see her menisci. *I could study this way. I wish I'd done this while I was taking human biology.* Anatomy was coming up in the fall, though.

Mary Kay ended the exploration too soon for Mae, but everyone else seemed to be finished. The instructor asked her three volunteers to lie on blankets, had the students divide into three groups, and told them to examine their practice clients, one student healer at a time. “Depending on how your reception works, you’ll have a harder or easier time with this. I see lights and sense temperatures and density, an abstract representation of the body. And then I hear voices or see words as if I’m reading a medical text. Your view of yourselves gave you a sense of how you read the body. What you pick up is unique to your receptive qualities.”

Mae’s receptive qualities were apparently scientific and realistic, though when she’d worked this way with clients in the past, she’d picked up a mix of the physical and the spiritual. Maybe the training was helping her focus better. Two of the five Cs: concentration and clarity. But of course, today’s imagery might have been uncluttered because she was looking at herself.

When Jamie had done the practice on himself, what had he seen? With his complex medical history—several rock-climbing accidents and other injuries, some self-inflicted—he’d been generous to volunteer to be studied. The students in his group would have a lot to look at.

Although Mae found no abnormalities in Josh, the floral-headed young man, she appreciated examining such a vital body as a baseline from which to make comparisons. When she’d seen diseases in the past, they had sent off strange signals, unlike the clear images from healthy tissue. If there hadn’t been other people waiting to practice on Josh, she would have spent more time studying him.

A trim young woman with yellow hair so short it stood up like a crew cut interrupted her examination of Jamie and asked, “How can you tell if what you’re seeing is in the physical body or the energy body?”

Jamie was lying on his back, his hands folded on his stomach. Wide-eyed and oddly intense, he looked up at his fellow trainee with an expression that reminded Mae of a lemur. What had the woman found in him that was so puzzling? Mae had seen Josh’s bones and joints like pictures in an anatomy book, but earlier in the day she had seen his emotions as colors and fleeting images that might have been his memories. For her, the differences were clear.

Mary Kay walked over to the student who was working with Jamie. “It varies from healer to healer. It’s trial and error. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but that’s how you learn.”

“But how can I *tell*?” the blonde woman persisted.

“After everyone has done their explorations,” Fiona replied, “we’ll have a discussion. You can compare what you saw with his actual medical status. Agreed, Jamie?”

He nodded, still with the lemur look. Had he found something troubling in himself?

When all three groups had finished, Mary Kay had them sit in a circle for the discussion. “Sierra, since you were confused, let’s start with you. What did you find in Jamie that you don’t understand?”

“There was this *dead spot* in his left hip. And another in his right shin.”

Jamie snort-laughed. “Fuck. That’s metal. I’ve got screws in my hip. Got a rod in my shin.”

Several students chuckled, perhaps at his use of the f-word or his peculiar laugh. Unsmiling, Mary Kay continued, “That’s information for you, Sierra. That’s what metal in someone’s body feels like to you.”

Mae wondered if she would have seen it the way she’d seen Josh’s normal joints or if the metal would have come across differently to her.

Sierra said, “His hip is a little hot near the dead spot. Not real heat, though. It’s like if you could *feel* red.”

Jamie looked at Mae, “Pronounce it, love. Can’t remember what it’s called.”

She answered, “Femoral acetabular impingement.”

“Painful?” Mary Kay asked.

“Yeah,” Jamie said. “Used to it, though.”

“More information.” Mary Kay nodded toward Sierra. “You’re getting to know how a client’s physical pain feels to you. That’s important. Clients may not tell you everything. I suspect Jamie wouldn’t think to mention it. He says he’s used to it.”

Sierra ran a hand over her inch of hair. “Okay. So that stuff is starting to make sense. What’s the kind of half-dead, half-fiery thing in your right arm? Like along your funny bone?”

“Nerve damage.”

“Wow.” She peered at him with the kind of fascination Mae’s children directed toward bugs. “You’ve been hurt a lot.”

Jamie wriggled his shoulders and made a dismissive noise.

Sierra turned to Mary Kay. “So, here’s the thing I don’t think is physical. He’s got little lights. All over the place. Like, he’s *sparkly*. Could I have been getting his soul, not his body?”

Mary Kay asked Jamie, “Does that mean anything physical to you? Being full of sparkles?”

“Could be my fat cells lighting up. Had a really big lunch.”

Typical Jamie. Calling attention to the very thing he didn’t want people to notice. Several of his classmates showed their amusement again.

Suddenly excited, Sierra leaned eagerly toward the middle of the circle. “Could a healer detect viruses or bacteria? Would *they* be little lights?”

Was she happy to think Jamie might be sick? Or just happy to have an idea?

Mary Kay shook her head. “More likely they’d be background, or variations in the background. We’re all so full of our friendly bacteria, you might sense some quality of sickness if there were harmful bacteria, but I doubt you’d see lights. You might be reading metabolic energy, though.”

“Metabolic?” Jamie put a hand to his belly. “It *is* my fat cells.”

Laughter again.

Mae tried to figure out the images. If only she’d taken physiology. But that wouldn’t be until spring semester. She wished she knew more than the short version she’d learned for her personal training certification, but based on what she did know, she doubted fat cells would be little lights. Fat wasn’t that metabolically active; it was storage.

Sierra frowned. “So, let’s say I felt like the sparkles were *wrong*, something that shouldn’t be there. I need to tell him what I think they are, right? And then start the cure?”

“*No.*” Mary Kay looked around, making eye contact with every student in the room. “You advise a client that something needs attention, but we have a limited scope of practice. None of you should ever claim to diagnose or treat disease.”

These were the ethical guidelines Derek had wanted Mae to follow, and she was more than willing to do so.

“What if it’s my nervous system?” Jamie asked. “I’m a little anxious.”

“About this?” Mary Kay asked. “You shouldn’t have volunteered if—”

“Nah. I mean, all the time. Think it’s my nerves lighting up. That’s something that could have felt wrong with me. I don’t mean *wrong* wrong, y’know, just ... a problem. She could treat that, couldn’t she?”

Fiona, who had been observing, spoke up. “But she doesn’t know that’s what she’s seeing. And neither do you. What if it’s an infection you don’t feel sick with yet? Sierra, you would give Reiki, not try to treat or cure, and then tell him you saw something you didn’t understand and to see a doctor. You can’t go wrong with that. Reiki energy goes where it’s needed. With the more targeted energy healings like emitting *chi*, where you send specific kinds of force, healers need to know what to send. I wouldn’t want to direct an accelerating energy into something that needed to slow down, but I would want to send it to a process that needed support. If the sparkles are his immune system fighting bacteria, you’d want to support that, but if it’s his fat cells growing,” Fiona chuckled, “or his nerve cells rattling, you’d want to slow that down. When you’re not sure, let the Reiki decide. Does that make sense?”

The group murmured assent, except for Sierra, who pressed her lips together and folded her arms, shaking her head.

Jamie closed his eyes. His long lashes fluttered a few times. “Think my nerves could stand to slow down.”

Almost everyone volunteered to heal him. Mae wasn’t surprised. There were few temptations harder to resist than the urge to take care of Jamie. Sierra, however, didn’t offer. Just as well. Mae didn’t want her sending energy to him. Sierra might be a competent seer, but something was missing from her as a healer.