

Shaman's Blues

Prologue

May 2010, Santa Fe, New Mexico

"Lisa, love, no, you can't, not yet—give me another week. A month. Something." Jamie Ellerbee parked his bicycle against the side of the coffee shop, phone in hand, as he undid the clip that kept his jeans out of the chain. He couldn't see a place to park in view of the window, and he'd lost or misplaced the lock as well as the helmet—the clutter in his place was unmanageable. After five months he still couldn't bring himself to unpack much. Maybe he could take the front wheel in with him.

"I told you last month, this is it." His ex-girlfriend's voice took on a firm, teacherly tone. The one she no doubt used when a physics project was late or a test had been failed. They had met as high school teachers, music and physics respectively, and parted over his decision to leave the job. That, and the consequences. "I'm not managing your career any more. That was just to get you through the—the transition."

The transition from being a teacher to being a full-time musician, as well as the adjustment to no longer living with her. That was one long year, half of it without her. The year he fell off another rock.

"You've done it so well, love." He knelt to try to undo the quick release wheel with one hand while holding the phone with the other, and tipped the bicycle into an elderly man. "Oh Jesus, I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

"Jamie?" Lisa sounded puzzled.

"Hit some poor old—Sir?"

The man glared, slapped a hand across his crisp white pants as if swatting off a fly, smearing the bicycle grease. His dry, pale face creased and furrowed, his jaw worked. Something dark and jagged in the man, something wounded and bitter, seemed to grow.

"Here. For the cleaners." Jamie pulled out his wallet, handed the man a twenty. The man with the elegant but injured pants stuffed the money into his no-doubt money-filled pocket. Jamie returned his empty wallet to his worn-out jeans. "Lisa? Still with me?"

"On the phone, yes. In life, no. I told you, I'm with someone new now. I need to have a life with him, and I can't be putting in fifteen hours a week working for free. It's not a hobby. And I'm not your girlfriend. You're on your own. Time's up."

He felt his heart race, and anxiety rose up like a flock of birds. "You've been brilliant. You've helped so much."

"Thank you. But—"

The world grew narrow, darkness rising up from the sidewalk to wrap around him. "Just teach me how you've done it. Can we do that?"

"I already tried. You should have been paying attention."

Bloody prim and proper teacher again. "I wasn't. Sorry. I fucked up." The birds in his chest began to swirl and flap their wings. "Can you teach me?"

"No. Hire someone. Get a professional manager if you can't do it yourself."

"I'm broke."

"That's your problem."

"Lisa! Please, not yet."

"You're the one that quit his job, spent all his money on camping and climbing and biking gear and God knows what else. I'm done. Goodbye. You're a grown man. Act like one."

Act like one. It hurt, but she was right. He was almost thirty now, ought to be able to take care of himself. As Jamie turned off his phone, it dropped from his hand. Shaking. He couldn't go in and meet his friends in this shape. He had to get away before something broke, before his soul flew out the top of his head.

Still holding the wheel, he started to bolt, the crowd closing in on him, tourists as thick as a dust storm. One of them approached, a fat woman in pink shorts, holding his phone.

"Are you all right?"

She looked kind. Kind, worried, and even a little frightened, tiny chips and fractures in her field, the rosy glow pulsing and then breaking.

“Thanks.” He took the phone, amazed that he could speak, as half a voice creaked out of him.
“Yeah. I’ll be all right.”

“You sure?”

How bad was he acting? What had he done? The birds rose again as he nodded a silent *yes* to her and ran, half-blind, down an alley to the parking lot. No one around, just cars. Quiet. Leaning against the rough adobe wall of the back of a shop, he closed his eyes and let himself take a gritty slide into a squat on the ground, dropping the wheel. With a last, desperate trace of vision and strength he pulled up Lisa’s number over and over without dialing it, finally deleted it, and dropped the phone again. Time fell into a hole, a shaking, sweat-drenched void.

Abandoned. Cut loose. Hanging over What Next Canyon without a harness, looking at the next big fall.

Chapter One

On the second floor of the Healing Balance Store in Virginia Beach, Mae Martin-Ridley worked with a client in a small room with green tree shadows painted on the walls. The store was a sprawling emporium that encompassed a health food store, an organic foods café, and a New Age bookstore downstairs, with yoga classes, energy healing, and psychic services upstairs. Mae provided the latter two. Holding a plastic, feather-topped stick in one hand, and a quartz point in the other, the tall red-haired young psychic held still, eyes closed, while a sturdy woman of around sixty sat in the chair opposite, her face taut with worry.

Opening her eyes, Mae said in her soft Carolina accent, “Seen her, Ms. Harris. Got a real good look. She’s all right. Hiding under a big ol’ wrap-around porch with white stairs.”

The client gasped, and her hand flew to her heart. “That’s under my neighbor’s porch. My goodness. Two doors down. Poor kitty’s probably been there for days.”

Mae handed the cat’s toy back to the owner, and stood and shook her hand as Ms. Harris prepared to leave. “They do that, run close to home. You may have to crawl under and get her.”

Ms. Harris pressed Mae’s hand again. “Thank you so much.”

Mae watched her go, and smiled. She’d made this woman happy. The final client at Healing Balance.

The final night on the East Coast. The end of what felt like a life. The beginning of the next. Mae wasn’t really about to be reincarnated, but as she took a last look at her healing room, she felt she was getting close to it in one lifetime.

Sort of fitting to end up with a lost cat. Her first realization that she had a psychic gift had come with finding her mother’s runaway cat. People were harder, but she could find them as well. She could find diseases and past secrets, too, see all sorts of things most folks couldn’t. Her husband—soon to be ex-husband—hadn’t been able to make peace with this change in her when she accepted and began to use what her mountain Granma had called “the sight.”

A year ago, Mae had not expected to be a psychic, to be single, or to be moving again. Yet here she was. She said goodbye to the room, hoping someone else would make good use of it, locked it, and brought the keys down the hall to her boss’s office.

Deborah, a light-skinned, freckled African American woman, dressed as always in colorful batiks that flattered her statuesque figure, rose from behind her desk and walked around to hug Mae. “We’ll miss you here, Breda.” Deborah made the psychics use working names that had more color and ethnic flavor. She’d given Mae an Irish-sounding name to go with her Celtic looks. “Never had anyone like you.” She released the hug, accepted the key Mae gave her, and set it on her desk. “Will you be doing this kind of work in New Mexico?”

“I don’t know. I’ll be in college full time.”

“How did I miss that? I thought you were moving to be near your father.”

“I am. I get free tuition at the place where he coaches.”

“That’s wonderful. Studying—religion? Philosophy? Psychology? Anthropology? I imagine a healer could do all of that and learn from it.”

“Exercise science, actually.” Mae felt she was disappointing Deborah, but she loved her fitness work, loved sports and exercise, and wasn’t a very spiritual or religious person in spite of her psychic abilities. “I’m gonna try to get some part-time work as a personal trainer, or in group fitness—”

“Mae.” Deborah sat on the edge of her desk and sighed. “I’m sure you’re very good at all that, but what a waste of your talents. Take some classes in these other fields, at least. You need to keep on as a healer and intuitive. You *have* to.”

“I’ll take some classes like that, sure. I promise I’ll get back to the work. I just don’t know when.”

“You’d better. You’ll be in a great place to do it. Lots of alternative healing going on out there. Where are you going to be in New Mexico?”

“Truth or Consequences.”

“Oh, that’s the little spa town, isn’t it? With the hot springs?”

Mae nodded, and Deborah asked, “How far is it from Santa Fe?”

“I’m not sure. Looks like a long way on the map.”

Deborah rose and went behind her desk, reached into a drawer, and brought out a lavender gift bag. It matched the walls of her office. “This is a goodbye present, to thank you for all you’ve done here,

and to wish you a great trip, and to inspire you as a healer when you get there. A little music made in New Mexico.”

She brought Mae the bag. Mae set it on the edge of the desk, reached in, and took out two CDs. Each cover had a picture of rock art in bare, awe-inspiring red desert land—petroglyphs of a flute player. One also showed a rock with ancient handprints on it towering above the hunch-backed flutist. The musician’s name: Jangarraí.

“It’s healing music,” Deborah said. “A lot of our massage therapists and yoga teachers like to use it. I think you’ll like it.”

“Thank you.” Touched, Mae put the CDs back in the bag and hugged Deborah again. “You’re sweet to do this. But you’ve treated me so well here I don’t need a gift.”

“You might not think I’m so sweet in a minute. I hope you don’t have to rush out.”

Mae had so few things, packing was easy. Only her clothes and books. All the furniture was her roommate’s. “No, I can stay.”

Deborah perched on her desk again, and Mae took a seat in one of the pastel armchairs.

“I have a little ulterior motive with my gift. We used to sell a lot of Jangarraí’s music here. Our buyer in the bookstore says she can’t order any more. He’s supposed to live in Santa Fe, but he’s coming up blank when we try to get hold of him. Web site’s down, phone number doesn’t work, mailing address doesn’t work. Google him and all you get is old stuff, nothing more recent than April, and here it is August. It’s like he dropped off the face of the earth. No new recordings for a long time. I hope he hasn’t quit the music business—or died. I thought maybe you could locate him while you’re out there. Your first piece of psychic work out West.”

“You know I need to hold something the person owned or touched a lot to get their energy.”

“He wrote the music, isn’t that enough?”

“Not really. I work with feelings that I pick up through my hands. Best way I can describe it is like being a bloodhound getting a scent, except I feel their energy in what they touched. A recording or a picture doesn’t work.”

“Don’t tell me that’s it? Dead end? I’ve tried everything else. Have you ever *tried* to find a musician through his music?”

“No. But people have brought me voicemail messages, and videos and pictures, to find people or learn about them, and it didn’t work.”

Deborah stared, as if she didn’t believe Mae, and then frowned, tilting her head. “As good as you are? You really couldn’t?”

“I’m serious. It doesn’t work with recordings. Isn’t there some ordinary-world way you can find him?”

“I contacted the record label. They dropped him, he hadn’t had anything new for so long. They say they always dealt with his manager and she doesn’t answer, like her phone number changed or something.”

“Did you try her?”

“I tried to look her up. She must be unlisted, and her old number is gone. The web site he used to have was really unprofessional and homemade. No pictures, no art, no videos, no downloads, just a place to order CDs and find out his performance schedule in Santa Fe. I think she must have been his girlfriend. I found her on Facebook and she answered, ‘I’m not dealing with his stuff anymore.’ She won’t friend people who are trying to contact him. And he doesn’t have a profile. It’s gone. Like maybe she did that for him, too.”

“I guess I could just ask around if I get to Santa Fe. This is weird. You’d think he’d have to be performing somewhere. What does he look like?”

“I don’t know. Both his albums have the Kokopelli on them, the petroglyph of the flute player. Which is cool and very New Mexico and goes with the cedar flutes and all that, but I have no idea what he looks like. I guess you don’t do a YouTube video if you’ve quit the business.”

Mae rose, collected her gift, and said, “Sorry I can’t connect with him through this. But I’ll do what I can to find him while I’m there, even if I can’t do it as a psychic.”

“Thank you. We’ll keep in touch anyway, of course, but call me if you locate him. We want more of his music. Once you hear it, you’ll understand. Somebody that good can’t just quit and disappear.”

Driving west in the morning, Mae listened at first to one of the romance audio books her roommate had given her as a going-away present for the trip. The story kept her alert wondering what

would happen next, but she found it absurd and unbelievable. The characters fought so much. Broke up over and over. To Mae, couples' conflicts were not romantic. There was nothing sexy about not getting along. And then the story wrapped up with *marriage*, as if that was some kind of happy ending. Her second divorce wasn't final yet, and she knew for sure she was never getting married again. Her idea of a happy ending would be getting over the unhappy one.

When the book wore thin, Mae switched to radio, but country songs reminded her of her husband, Hubert, who loved country music, and the twin stepdaughters she had to leave behind with him. She was truly alone and on her own for the first time in her life. No husband to be responsible for or to. No roommate to talk to. No children to take care of—the most painful separation of all. The loss ripped at her.

She put in one of the new CDs from Deborah, hoping that the healing music would help.

The melody at first was carried by a flute, with a didgeridoo droning in the background. Drums then began a complex rhythm, and the flutes faded, the melody taken over by a tenor voice chanting isolated words that didn't form a coherent lyric, creating a mood of descent and grief followed by transcendent joy, as the singer soared through an extraordinary range, a powerful and evocative voice like pure light and deep darkness. The vocal faded into tones without words, and then disappeared with the drums to let the melody be taken over again by flutes, underscored with the deep pulsing drone of the didgeridoo. Amazing. A kind of journey. Mae remembered from the liner notes that Jangarraai wrote all the music, played all the instruments, and did all the vocals. What a mind he must have, what a heart.

A new song began, two flutes in harmony. It had the quality of a lullaby, sweet and tender, music that held you in its arms and made you feel safe. Then it shifted to melancholy, a new flute, solo, with a different timbre, in another key. Same song, but sad now, and still heartbreakingly sweet. When the song came back to the lullaby, its brief trip to a darker place made the warmth of its return all the more welcome, giving a sense of relief, not just comfort. With all the turmoil in Mae's life right now, this music seemed to touch the center of it, both the places that hurt and her own powers to heal. Freedom found its way into the wounds, and life renewed from the inside out.

Sometimes she listened to the romance novels for variety, but the only thing that felt reliably good on the whole drive was Jangarraai's music. It saved her from missing Hubert and her stepdaughters so badly that she wanted to pull over to the side of the road and cry. Even when the music was sad, the sadness cleansed her. When it was uplifting, her heart followed the singer's extraordinary clear voice upward, and she felt like she could fly, leaving the broken history of her life behind to reunite with her father. Deborah was right—someone who created music like this couldn't simply quit and disappear. Yet he had.