

Soul Loss

Prologue

Nearly midnight, March 15, Elephant Butte State Park, New Mexico

The full moon was the only glitch in the plan. Too much visibility against the desert and the lake. He'd have to wait 'til he was sure the other campers were sleeping.

Jamie stared down the slope from his tent to the shore. Depression grabbed him like a weighted net. He'd felt lighter after making the decision, but now the delay dragged him back down. It was the first time he'd had a plan, not just a desperate impulse. It was a good plan: the largest body of water in the state, at a time of year few people would go camping. He had hoped there'd be no one. He wanted to be done.

The endless sand-blasting spring wind hissed grit against his tent and blew his hair across his face. He ducked into the ultralight one-man bubble and opened his backpack. It had nothing in it but his cell phone, his steel water bottle, and his wallet. He'd have to take the wallet with him. It would look suspicious to go off and leave it. Phones were polluting, though. He shouldn't go under with the electronics.

Both the phone and the car, of course, would be traced once people started looking for him. It wouldn't take long. Jamie was memorable. The woman at the entrance gate who'd rented him the campsite would remember a tall Aussie blackfella with wild blond hair. He should have worn a hat, disguised his accent.

No one would have to know what happened to him, though. This being New Mexico, a man could vanish in the desert for all sorts of reasons. It could be an alien abduction. The faint remnant of his sense of humor surprised him.

He sipped water as he checked messages one last time. He wasn't expecting any calls. His landlady was taking care of his cat while he was supposedly camping for a few days, and she would only call if Gasser was sick. He hoped she wouldn't. He felt guilty, deeply heartsick guilty, about abandoning the cat.

But he'd be doing everyone else a favor. His parents' burden of nearly twenty-nine years would be lifted. They loved him and would do anything for him, but he was a drain on them. The loss would be painful, but not as much as his continued presence. After his self-imposed isolation of the past three months, they wouldn't notice right away if they didn't hear from him. Tonight, they hadn't called, and he was grateful for that. It made the exit easier.

The only message was from the one other person he sometimes talked to, his psychologist, reminding him he had missed another appointment. This time the doctor himself had called, not the receptionist. "Jamie, this is Carl Gorman. When you don't show up, it's a bad sign. Are you suicidal? I need to know the gravity of your situation."

Gravity. That was it. Gravity had been turned up, was double, triple its normal power. That was why he couldn't leave his apartment most days, could barely get out of bed or lift a finger to the phone. He didn't feel this heavy just from feeding his misery. It was gravity. The laws of physics had been broken, not him. The idea might have been funny if it hadn't felt half-true.

Six years ago when he'd been in therapy with Dr. G the first time, the depression and the weight had melted away like ice in spring. Gravity had let go easily and he'd stayed light for years—neurotic years, granted, but light years nonetheless. *Light years*. The pun was painfully apt. It was all so far away now.

Jamie crawled out of the tent, picked up a rock, and put it in the pack. Gravity would be his friend. In his college PE swimming class he'd been like a cork, a marshmallow. He wasn't that fat now, and more fit. But he wasn't the trim rock-climbing athlete he'd once been, either. His mother had recently teased him that he looked like he was wearing a life preserver. *How much do I float? How far can a fit but fat man swim with rocks? How many rocks?*

He had to get this exactly right to be able to swim but also to go down, a long way from the shore. The lake got low in the summer, and washing up would wash up the whole plan. *Jesus. I keep making jokes about it.*

Another rock. Maybe his strategy was perfect. He wasn't a lean, hard sinker—he'd get out to the deep center. He wasn't the old marshmallow, either. He'd go down.

Jamie listened for sounds from the other camps, looked for lights. Nothing. He picked up another rock, added it to the pack, and half-jogged, half-slid barefoot down the unstable slope, not bothering to use a trail. Finally. He was about to be free.

He took the first step. The water was freezing. Then the strangest thing—there was a song in his head, new and yet complete. A bossa nova, of all things—upbeat, light, and danceable.

*“I might be the stars in the deep of the night
Might be the sun on your face at noon
If you go into the Dreamtime
You will see me soon.”*

As he sang, he could feel his voice outliving him, becoming part of the water and the sky. Not a ghost but a vibration, the soaring sweet tenor voice that had been his gift.

*“I’ll be the beat of your feet when you walk down the street
A snatch of song from a passing car
We can meet deep in the Dreamtime
Right where you are
If you go into the Dreamtime
I won’t be far.”*

Perfect. Another step. His song floated into the night as the goodbye note he’d never written. The deeper he got, the lighter his legs and hips felt, gravity letting go. He walked on.

The song left as it had come, mysterious and beyond his will. He started swimming with the rocks. When the chilly water hit his chest, it stopped his breath for several floundering strokes. Gravity came back. The pack and his clothes were shockingly heavy. He was less fit than he’d thought. Shoulder, arm, and hand muscles, injured in December, rebelled. The last two fingers on his right hand curled in a useless cramp. He pushed on, kicking hard.

As he struggled further out into the lake, he didn’t know what to do with his last thoughts. A line from “Waltzing Matilda” popped up, rowdy Aussie whitefellas singing as if it were a happy song. A song about a bloke who drowned himself. *You can still hear his ghost as you pass by that billabong. Who’ll go a-waltzing Matilda with me?* Jamie didn’t want to be a ghost. He tried to shut off the song, but the same line kept playing. If he needed music about death, why not the Mozart Requiem? What was the matter with his mind, coughing up this musical hairball as a final set of brainwaves? *You can still hear his ghost as you pass by that billabong...*

Then it hit him. *Bloody hell—this is a reservoir. I’m in Mae’s water supply.* He’d said he’d see her again when he’d had time to get well. The time was half-up and he’d spent it getting worse. The only way she’d see him now was because she was psychic. She picked up images from things a person had touched. *She’ll wonder how I’m doing, and see me drowning in her morning coffee. See my fucking corpse in her bath.*

In the middle of that strange doubt he had to let go. Exhausted by cold and effort, his limbs couldn’t move any more. Total muscle failure. The moon’s face blurred as he went under.

This was the plan, yet he found himself holding his breath. His heart pounded. He’d never been so close to death with a clear head before. He’d thought drowning would be like the drift of an overdose of drugs, but this was nothing like that sickly slumber. A wide-awake passage into *what?*

His lungs burned and his body panicked for air. Had he changed his mind? Too late. It was a perfect plan. No one was going to find him and call the rescue squad this time.

Chapter One

Katelina Radescu's service dog turned toward the street beyond the garden and growled, his fluffy yellow back hairs rising around his harness. Something had to be seriously wrong to get this kind of rise out of him. By nature and occupation, he was a calm animal.

"Lobo, what is it?" Kate stopped, backed her wheelchair, and turned on the narrow path so she faced the gate, avoiding the rocks that her boyfriend, Tim, had arranged along the borders of the flowerbeds. Until Lobo's growl, she'd been taking her first real break of the day. A red dirt wind twirled tiny dust devils in the garden, bowing the spring flowers over the faint traces of a late March snowfall. Santa Fe spring. Kate had just started to enjoy it. Now she peered over the low adobe wall, seeking the cause of Lobo's rare growl.

A graceful young woman walked from a dark blue Mini Cooper parked on the street and approached Kate's house. Kate, who was a few months short of thirty, guessed the visitor to be at least ten years her junior. The girl's gleaming brown hair rolled in waves down to her slender hips, and her flowing dress revealed sharp white elbows in petal-like sleeves, and perfect knees below a handkerchief hem. She was underdressed for the weather. Apparently fashion mattered more than comfort.

"Hi." She waved as she reached for the gate handle. Her alto voice rang out clear but colorless. "I'm here for a reading."

Kate was sure she didn't have anyone scheduled this early. She started her psychic readings late on days she had demanding sign language interpretation jobs, even later on days she put in hours as director of the Psychic Fair. The client must have the wrong date. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No. I just saw your sign." The young woman read it aloud with a touch of irony. "*Gypsy Kate. Tarot, Palm Readings, and Crystal Ball.* It's so classic."

Kate looked at her watch. She had half an hour before her appointments started. There would be several back to back, and she needed to get something to eat first. This girl was taking up the ten minutes allotted to the flowers. "I don't have time right now. Come in, and I can put you on the books for later today, or tomorrow."

She wheeled toward the gate and told Lobo to open it. He pressed the handle with a paw.

"Oh, he's lovely." The visitor's voice was cooler than her actions, as if she were playing the role of someone who liked dogs. She bent down, her hand about to ruffle Lobo's fur. The golden retriever turned away, looking to Kate for permission.

"Good dog, Lobo. You know you're at work." She attached his lead to her chair and explained, "If you've never been around service dogs, you may not know this, but you don't pet them or play with them when they're in harness."

The young woman moved her head in a slight suggestion of acknowledgement, but not apology.

The dog went ahead of Kate up the ramp. Indoors, she freed him from his harness. He rolled over, bounced to his feet, and grabbed a tennis ball from his toy basket, tossed it for himself and chased it.

"Lobo." The young woman's smile didn't crinkle her eyes and barely curved her mouth. "Isn't that like Spanish for wolf or something?"

"In his case, it's short for lobotomized. When he's not at work he's dumb as a stick." Kate rolled into her office and reading room and opened a leather-bound appointment book. "I have time tonight at six. And tomorrow at three."

"You can't do a reading for me now?" The young woman's violet eyes fixed on Kate with blank steadiness like a mannequin's. "I'm here."

"I have to take care of a few personal needs before I work." Kate impressed herself. She had never said no to work before. Even as a drunk, she'd been the high-functioning kind who got more done in one day with a killer hangover than most people could accomplish in two. It had been a way of earning her presumed right to get smashed every night. *I worked so hard, I deserve a drink. Or ten.* Not anymore. Especially not for this chick. "Tonight, or tomorrow?"

"You know, I expect spiritual people to be a lot nicer. All the others I've met here have been really kind and flexible."

"Fine. If you don't like me, you don't have to make an appointment."

The girl sighed and looked around the room. A crystal ball in a carved wooden stand and a deck of tarot cards sat on a table that was draped in a dark, fringed shawl. She said, "You really do the old-fashioned gypsy act."

“My grandmother was Romani.” Kate was thin and golden-skinned, with long black hair and a strong nose. She wore heavy eyeliner and an armful of bangle bracelets that made her look like her customers’ expectations of a Gypsy, a term she used for marketing, but she was also proud of her heritage. “I’m the real thing.”

“Oh.” The young woman’s bored expression didn’t change. “All right. Tonight at six. You don’t have anything later?”

“No. Your name and phone number?”

“Dahlia. 505, well, of course it is—”

“Dahlia who?”

“Oh, I stopped using a last name. I’m complete in and of myself.” She gave the rest of her number. Lobo chased his ball into the hallway. Dahlia stopped on her way out the door with a cold look at Kate and tossed the slimy thing for him. Lobo hesitated before he chased it. *He doesn’t like her any more than I do.*

Kate scheduled downtime between readings to clear her mind, but as soon as her front door closed on the departing five o’clock client, it opened again. Dahlia flowed in, smiling her lower-face smile that didn’t touch her eyes. *If she weren’t so young she’d look botoxed.* Lobo rose from a nap and stood braced and guarded. Kate patted his shoulder and told him to sit, but he didn’t relax, rumbling in a way that Kate felt through her hand more than she heard it, a kind of sub-growl. *Weird.* Lobo normally liked people.

Ignoring Kate’s glare of annoyance, Dahlia offered her hand and spoke with a breathy, false warmth. “It’s so good to be here.”

“You’re fifteen minutes early.”

“I saw your last client leave, so I saved you and Lobo coming to the door.”

“The door is no problem. We can open it. I intentionally give myself a break between sessions.”

The girl almost smiled. “So you really work, then.”

She drifted though Kate’s psychic reading room, examining the bookshelves, the old prints on the wall, the stained glass lamps. Kate asked, “Did you think it was an act?”

“I don’t know.” Dahlia tilted her head sideways. “We’ll find out.”

Kate didn’t look forward to doing a reading on this woman. She could do it, but it helped to feel compassion and respect for her clients—and for Dahlia, she couldn’t. Still, she had to do her job. Kate wheeled to her table. She handed Dahlia the tarot deck. Lobo remained alert beside her.

“Pick three cards.”

Dahlia took a seat and made a show of feeling the cards before she selected three. “Now what?”

“Lay them face up in the order in which you selected them. The first card closest to you, the third one closest to me.”

First was Strength, a young woman forcing open the jaws of a lion. Second was the Hierophant, a holy man on a throne. Third was the Tower, a solitary fortification being struck by lightning that cracked its thick stone walls.

Kate touched the first card. “This is your past, still influencing the present.” She tapped the second. “This is your present.” Her finger moved to the third card. “And this is how the present will unfold in the near future.”

“These are all really powerful cards.” Dahlia’s voice caressed the word *powerful* in a spacey, affected manner.

And cold, when collected in this sequence. “Strength, the first card, is without compassion. She doesn’t nurture or care. She takes and controls. The Hierophant is the possessor of secret or forbidden knowledge. The Tower is something that must come down for change to take place. It’s an obstruction, a defense that must be breached.”

Dahlia’s face stayed neutral. “So?”

“These may be aspects of yourself, or they may be people in your life. If this is you, your mind is strong. Your will is extraordinary. Your perception is sharp—superior. But your heart and soul...” Kate hesitated, looking for a positive way to phrase it. “They may recover. When all that your mind has built is shaken.”

“How ... colorful.” Dahlia sounded vaguely thoughtful, like someone debating the full tune-up versus the basic oil change. “And if these are people in my life?”

“Someone dominated you, forced you, perhaps spiritually. You may be in the process of tearing that person’s power over you down.”

“Yes, yes. What else?”

“I’ll get more from the cards after I see your hand.”

Dahlia exhaled a glassy sigh. “Right or left?”

“Both.”

Kate examined the manicured hands. Dahlia probably couldn’t open a jar. Thin as she was, her bones didn’t show much, and her skin was cool and unusually soft. The overall picture in her palms confirmed the cards. “You may not like some of what I’m about to say. The head line is deep, straight and long, the heart line short and straight. The life line is chained and strangely close to the thumb. The mound of Venus is almost flat, while the mound of the moon is oddly prominent, on both hands. This means a person both cold and imaginative, lacking vitality and intimacy. Your only need for love seems to be for sex, and there’s no passion in that. Your mind is strong and focused—”

Dahlia pulled her hands away abruptly, with a kind of snap through the wrists. Kate finished as carefully as she could without avoiding the problem she’d found. “But I can’t say what’s happened to your soul.”

Was it possible not to have one? No—but Dahlia’s had to be badly damaged or corrupted in some way to get this reading. Uneasy, Kate thought of Lobo’s growl, but resumed the customary pattern of her work. “Let’s look in the ball.”

“Yes,” the girl enunciated forcedly. “Let’s.”

Kate asked Dahlia to look into the crystal ball and to focus on it. Kate didn’t expect her client to see anything, only to send her life patterns into it. It grew smoky and then cleared to show Kate a typical New Mexico highway bordered by cliffs of red rock and bluffs of pink dirt, topped by stubby junipers. Her view was that of a driver seeing a lone hitchhiker in the distance. As she approached the hitchhiker, her car began to spin and then turned around. She tried to turn it again, but couldn’t. In the rearview mirror she saw Dahlia languidly extending her thumb. Another car came and collected the girl. Kate’s car sped away with a will of its own. She pulled off and watched the car that had collected the hitchhiker. A white owl dived at it, and the driver veered into the cliff. The smoke that signaled the end of a vision clouded the ball before Kate could see what happened in the crash.

“Do you ever hitchhike?” she asked.

“Do I look stupid? Of course not.”

“Then the story is a metaphor. Maybe you’re riding with or about to ride with someone who goes off the road in some sense. Drives into the side of a cliff.”

“Oh my god.” Dahlia crinkled her delicate nose, then abruptly relaxed her face. “So someone around me is going to crash.”

“Is that what you think?”

“See, now you’re doing what the fake psychics do, pumping me so I’ll say something you can use to pretend you know something.”

“Are you calling me a fake?”

Dahlia looked up at the ceiling, winding her liquid hands around each other. She smiled with just the edges of her lips. “Well, you are a real Gypsy.”

Kate waited, sensing a contest. When Dahlia sat back, Kate said, “I saw a white owl fly at the car. Does that mean anything to you?”

Her client betrayed a flash of an emotion so fleeting Kate couldn’t name it.

“Do you take students?”

“No. Not until I have children. I’ll teach them.”

“You can have *children*? How?”

“None of your business. Do you have other questions about your past or your future?”

“Sure.” Dahlia shook her heavy hair and asked with a flutter of her eyelashes, “Will I be rich? Will I marry a handsome man and have beautiful children?”

“Let me see your palms again.” With a teenager’s contemptuous eye-roll, Dahlia laid her hands on the table. Kate studied them. The flippant questions were going to get real answers. “Money, yes. I don’t see marriage, though. Children ... none future, one past. A miscarriage or an abortion.”

Dahlia breathed out sharply like a startled deer. Lobo, who was about to finally lie down, reversed direction and stood. Kate said, “The future I see doesn’t *have* to happen. The past is what it is. But a person can change, so the future can change.”

“Well, thanks for the insights.” Dahlia sounded a bit sarcastic again, but the tone was more subtle now. “I probably wouldn’t want to study with you anyway. You are *so* not spiritual. Honestly. You don’t *share*. You don’t *relate*. Let me pay you and get out of here.”

“By all means. Please do.”

When the door closed behind the departing client, the room felt lighter and brighter. Kate knew she’d bordered on rude, but to a rude customer who’d deserved it. Maybe Kate wasn’t all that spiritual if it meant being wide open to anyone and everyone, including snippy bitches. Kate liked being tough. She had boundaries. She was spiritual enough to stay sober and for her that was enough.

The strange thing was, Dahlia was even less spiritual than Kate. Why in the world had the girl wanted to study with her?