

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 Ellerbee’s, clear light tenor and Australian accent, rambling in his usual drifty 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 dark 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 Jangarraí 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.”