

IMMORAL
TELEPATHY

Also by Stefon Mears

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Confronting Legends (Spells & Swords Vol. 1)

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IMMORAL TELEPATHY

Book Two of *The Telepath Trilogy*

Stefon Mears

Thousand Faces Publishing

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Published by Thousand Faces Publishing, Portland, Oregon

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ISBN: 0692287310

ISBN-13: 978-0692287316

for the old crew from Clark Kerr

Author's Note

The Berkeley portrayed in this novel is not the University, or the city, as you would find them today. To focus on the emotional truth of Rick's story, I fictionalized the Berkeley I remember from my days as a student there (Class of '92) rather than dwell on what has changed since I left.

I shot pool in the Bear's Lair, went to free Friday concerts on Lower Sproul, shopped on Telegraph, and went to movie marathons at the U.C. Theater. I wanted Rick to have a chance to do these things too.

Prologue

I'M PRAYING FOR THE seventh time since childhood. Four years now I've known Tony Gottschalk, and he's never once had an accident or a ticket. But the way he drives it only has to happen once...

Just like five of the six other prayers, I'm in the ketchup-stained passenger seat of Storm Warning, Tony's ancient Rambler. The vent fan blows hard against the early September heat, adding hints of exhaust fumes to the scent war between our lingering French fries from lunch and Tony's pine air freshener, firing back from its ashtray foxhole.

My white-knuckled grip on the after-market sissy bar is a fixture of my riding in his car. Like a second seat belt.

Berkeley's Ashby Avenue is busier than Camino Grande — one of our main streets back home — and I swear one of the lanes has cars parked in it. Not that I can get a good look with Tony gunning his engine. He grins at me under his growing muss of black curls, eyes off the road as he slips across the

double-yellow to whip around a pickup truck at close to Mach three.

I decide that prayer isn't enough. I should have had him install a racing harness for me. Why didn't I get a parking pass for my Valkyrie?

"Jesus, Tony, at least get me to my dorm alive."

"Wuss. Now, remember. You're entering a whole new dating pool. And you won't have to worry about competing with me because I'll be down at U.C.L.A. So, I expect you to go out with *at least* three new girls this semester. Clear?"

"What if I really like the first... Dude! That was a red light!"

Car horns blare at us, drawing a reflexive single-fingered salute from Tony.

"It didn't turn 'til I was halfway across. And the answer is no. You are not bouncing from Jenna to fall hard for the first girl who bats her eyes at you."

"Jenna and I agreed to date others."

This is true. We did. And it's also true that Jenna Lindholme and I have only kissed twice, although those kisses stand high and above all the other kisses I've ever had. We have strong feelings for each other and we both know it. But now I'm off to Berkeley to study Sociology and she's off to Arizona for Geology. So we agreed to do the smart thing. We promised we'd date other people, then talk next summer and see how we feel.

Assuming I can find anyone who measures up to...

"That's right. Others." Tony fishtails around a Taurus in the middle of its turn onto Telegraph Avenue, downshifting into fourth. The Taurus' tires screech a protest, but Tony leaves the driver in his dust. Wider street now, but getting narrower and funkier as we get closer to campus. We move from office buildings and appliance stores to bars and coffee shops to book stores, vintage clothing stores, and even a haberdasher.

“That’s plural. No girlfriends until you’ve dated at least three different hotties.” He switches to the fake cardinal voice we use sometimes. “Go thou forth, my son, and spread thy seed widely.”

I try to make a wry comment about the fact that he’s still with his “summer fling” Sabrina, but he cuts me off like a slow driver.

“Exception,” Tony says in his normal voice. “Candi Sayer. If the goddess calls, you must answer.”

Jenna may have been our prom queen and my big high school crush, but Candi Sayer looks like the Hollywood ideal of an eighteen-year-old. Flawless skin, pale blue eyes, long blond hair that always looks salon-fresh, and a body that commands attention like an air raid siren. Everyone expected her to go to U.C.L.A. and major in Drama, but instead she’s here in Berkeley to study Psychology.

“Candi doesn’t—”

“Please. Even I can see her interest, and *you’re* the telepath...”

Tony goes on from there, but I’m not listening. *The* telepath. Am I? Yes, I’m the only telepath in our hometown, Long Pine City. At least, I’m the only telepath I’ve found. But then, I’ve only had the power about two months now.

U.C. Berkeley has about forty thousand students.

I wonder if I’ll meet any other telepaths....

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Chapter 1

SHE'S KISSING ME, BUT she's thinking of someone else. This is my third date with Erna, the tall, pretty redhead from my Calculus section, and following our lasagna dinner in her dorm cafeteria — in Unit Three, one of the high-rises that provide most of the campus housing — and some flirtatious backgammon in the common room, we've gone back to her room. Pretty casual for a third date, but it's a Wednesday night, and neither one of us is bursting with spending money.

Anyway, Erna has a triple here on the ninth floor, though her triple is smaller than my own double in Clark Kerr. Three tiny beds, three tiny desks, all crammed into one tiny room. At least, it all seems small compared to what I'm used to. But there's a reason the Clark Kerr dormitory is referred to as The Country Club.

Her roommates are out for the evening, and they obviously cleaned up before they left. This is the first time I've seen her place when there were no clothes draped across someone's

bed. And the room smells like lavender potpourri instead of the usual trail mix and lemon something.

We're standing one step inside the closed room door, dim lighting coming from a table lamp on her desk, draped with a gauzy black shawl. Our arms are wrapped around each other. Our lips and tongues dance together, both of us grateful for those breath mints a few minutes ago. This would not be a moment to taste that lasagna again.

I can sense Erna's plans for the evening, swirling through her mind. Make out for a while, stripping to the waist as we go. More making out on her bed, eventually leading to her going down on me.

Further than we've gone before, and I admit, I like this plan. Except that she's not thinking of me.

Erna imagines that the arms around her waist and the lips kissing her belong to our T.A., Carlos. It might be me in her bed tonight, but it's Carlos she wants.

This is new. On our first couple of dates she felt excited to go out with me. The Hammer Film marathon at the U.C. Theater, our hike through the trails on northern Berkeley. She seemed to enjoy herself, and looked forward to our opportunities to touch, to kiss.

But apparently something has changed. Along the surface of her mind, it seems that the button-up shirt and tight jeans Carlos wore in class yesterday got to her, more than my own Three Coyotes concert tee shirt and looser fitting jeans.

I could go deeper into her head for details, but frankly, what I'm picking up on the surface here is more than enough to put me off what we're doing. I mean, I don't mind that she thought about him sometimes during dinner tonight, or even during our backgammon games. It's not like I didn't notice the other girls who passed through the common area. Of course we notice attractive people. It's natural. Heck, I still keep in touch with Jenna by text message almost daily, and it's not as

though all my thoughts about her are platonic.

But here in Erna's room my focus is on the girl I'm with. And this girl wants to fool around with me and pretend she's fooling around with Carlos?

No thanks.

I pull back from the kiss.

"Look," I say, "if you're not into this..."

"Don't I feel into this?" Honest surprise in her voice, but for a good reason. She gave that kiss every bit as much attention as she has every other kiss. She emphasizes her point by pressing her hips against me.

"Oh, your lips and tongue are into it, but you feel a million miles away. Like maybe I'm not the one you want here in your room with you."

There's the shocked look I've been expecting. It reverberates all through the fog of surface thoughts that surround her. Her pretty red lips part in an "o" shape, eyelids fluttering as she wonders what I could possibly know, and how. I don't give her time to recover.

"I like you, Erna, but I don't want to play surrogate. If there's some other guy you want, go for him."

"Rick Blackhall, are you jealous?" She smiles, now, seductive. "You don't need to be. You're the one I brought back to my room." Her voice drops to just above a whisper. "You'll like what I have in mind tonight. Trust me."

She spreads her arms, posing to emphasize the fit of her blouse and jeans. Her attention's on me now. I can feel it, almost touching my skin. Strong enough that I'm glad my own jeans are loose.

But there's an undercurrent of Carlos to her thoughts. Waiting.

Tony would tell me to go for it. He would say it doesn't matter who she imagines playing with as long as I'm the beneficiary. But that's easy to say when you don't have images of

some other guy battering at your mind during an intimate moment.

Erna waits for my move, her cute dimples forming an appealing contrast with her sexy pose.

I try anyway.

I take Erna in my arms. Swift. Decisive. A slight dip to the way I hold her like this is the inevitable end of a tango. One arm supports her back. One hand in her lush red hair, cradling her head.

I kiss her.

She kisses Carlos.

I straighten up and let go. "And we're done," I say, arms out and shaking my head.

"What?"

I turn for the door, speaking without looking back. "If you want Carlos, go for him. Though you may have to wait until the end of the semester." I open the door and now I do look back at her slack-jawed amazement. "But if you decide you want to try giving us a sincere shot, give me a call."

I close the door behind me when I leave.

DISAPPOINTMENT MAKES MY EVENING walk up Dwight Way back to Clark Kerr Campus a trek. It's uphill all the way, but quieter and greener the closer I get. Short, spreading trees around me still hanging on to their summer leaves. Chubby bushes and hedges marking property lines, as though the cracked, dirty sidewalk failed to do the job. I even smell more nature now than street grime. Behind me are the tall, boxy apartment buildings and Units on my left, and the shorter, funkier houses and apartments on my right.

I think they're funky anyway. Older construction. Places built in the Sixties and Seventies, I think. At least, they were the product of an era when some corners got rounded instead of squared, and balconies were inset above a garage instead of

hanging off the side of a building. They're all two or three stories high, and most of them have garages that don't look like they could hold more than a bicycle.

But still, they have driveways that could accommodate a single car, alleviating the need to take up any of the already scant street parking. Plus, I'm pretty sure those apartments — the ones behind me on my right, I mean — are all rent-controlled. The kinds of places that get handed down from one student to the next, if you have the right connections, so that your rent costs less than your monthly groceries.

That's the kind of place I may move into next year. I'm sure that persuading a graduating senior to leave me his huge rent-controlled apartment falls under the category of "pressing personal need." More than enough reason to use a little mental persuasion.

I suppose, by the same logic (or at least similar logic), I could have persuaded Erna to keep her focus on me tonight. After all, she did invite me to her room, and she did plan to engage in lascivious acts of carnal pleasure with my body. Not a big stretch then to ask her mind to pay attention to me while her body ... paid attention to me.

But was I there because she wanted to perform those acts with me? Or because she wanted to perform those acts with someone not available?

I could have probed through her mind for the answer. That would have been a reasonable use of deeper probing. Section 1.4 of the rules spells that out in almost so many words.

The rules. My rules. The rules Tony and I came up with to make sure I don't start abusing people. And I love those rules. They're a big help. Whenever I go into someone's head, that person's whole self is right there, laid out in a vast web of thoughts and memories, wishes and hopes and fears and so on. Anything I could ever want to know. And the key to anything I might want to make them do.

That's a lot of temptation when you're eighteen and alone with a hot girl.

But even getting the answer to my question — and whether or not Erna wants to mess around with me seems like a reasonable question to me — has its own problems. Because once I look, I *know*. No doubts. No questions. No uncertainty. Pure, unadulterated truth, mine for the asking.

And how could I lie to myself if I know the truth beyond doubt? Right now I could pretend Erna wants *me*, and that imagining I'm an authority figure is some kind of kink for her. A kink that would work just fine with almost any guy she meets. I just happen to be the one guy it doesn't work for.

But what if I find out that the only reason Erna decided to ... up the ante tonight was her desire for Carlos in those tight jeans?

Too depressing to contemplate.

So naturally I contemplate it all the way back to my room, on the second floor of Building Four, at the western edge of the dorm campus, up where Dwight meets College.

Unlike the Units, Clark Kerr is a series of three-story buildings surrounded by grass and trees. A world away, only minutes' walk from downtown. We don't get much of the city noise, our rooms are larger, our cafeteria is better ... all of which makes more sense when you find out that many of the school athletes live here. At least the ones without their own apartments.

When I open the door to my room, Karif is flopped on his bed. Engineering books surround him, open but forgotten. His attention is all about a design he's working on, some kind of street plan he's sketching in a big notebook.

I like Karif. He's a nice guy, and he's driven, which keeps his thoughts in neat, organized patterns, flowing all around him. Here his Civil Engineering studies, there his next basketball practice. That sort of thing. Whatever Karif turns his

attention to gets all of his attention. Makes his thoughts easy to tune out. Except when he cuts loose.

I choose not to interrupt his work, and stroll across the room to flop on my own bed.

That's what I mean about the difference between the rooms at Clark Kerr and the Units. My room has enough space to stroll across the cement floor with its thin brown carpet, even if only for a few steps. Our desks are bigger, Karif's beside his bed and mine under the huge windows that overlook a line of trees and the walled-in dorm parking lot beyond. Our desk chairs are made of solid wood, with padded seats and backs covered in polyester. You can stand on those things and lean out the window. I know. I've done it.

We even have enough wall space for me to put up two Three Coyotes posters and one Cold Skankin' Boys, and still leave enough room for Karif's cityscapes.

The room smells like curry, which means Karif got a care package from home. The spicy smell should pick me up, but it just reminds me that I settled for a second-rate lasagna dinner for my date tonight, which just sinks me deeper into my pillow.

"You're home early," Karif says without looking up. "I thought this was your third date."

"Was. But I kept getting the feeling she wished I was someone else."

"Ouch." That gets him to look up. Sympathy in his aspect and his near-black eyes. "Forget her. Come to a party with me Saturday. Meet someone new."

"You're on," I say with a smile. Karif's a second-string shooting guard for the school team, and the basketball players always get invited to the best parties.

Karif goes back to his project and I stare out the window at the night sky. Cloudy.

"Better that you're back early anyway," says Karif as he

erases something. "Don't you have a mid-term tomorrow?"

"Chemistry, yeah. But I've been studying all week. Figured a fun night out would do me good."

"So either go shoot pool or do some studying. Your moping is bringing me down."

"Sorry."

Crap.

I rein in my thoughts. I must have been letting my mood leak out. That's a new thing. Not that I can send people thoughts, but that my emotions will just seep out of me and infect someone else. I've only been doing that for a few days now, and I have to remember to watch out for it.

Guess it won't hurt me to crack the books. I'm better off ready for the test tomorrow.

I KNEW THERE WOULD be some changes, going from a small high school like mine to a huge public university like Cal. But I never expected the Physical Sciences Lecture Hall. Imagine sitting in an opera house that's mostly underground. Now take away the balconies, and make the seats uncomfortable slabs of wood with loose, slippery half-desks you have to drag out of the armrests.

Now add some two hundred fifty of your closest acquaintances, and that's where I'm taking my first Chemistry mid-term. My first of two. That doesn't seem fair. How can the term have more than one middle? We're maybe a quarter of the way through the semester. It's not enough that we have weekly quizzes? We have to have two mid-terms, plus the final?

But the unfairness of my situation does not keep me from showing up on time, sharpened pencils and blue book in hand, ready to take my test in my accustomed seat: close to the center aisle (of five, if you count the sides), about halfway back from the podium and handy lab table. Out professor has

yet to use that lab table for any demonstrations, but the hint of old chemical reactions lingers in the air, telling me that other teachers have used it plenty. The smell makes me think of a lemon deodorizer that's fermented.

Nerves try to flutter my stomach, but my generic raisins and bran flakes breakfast holds steady, as it always has for me on test days.

Seats creak and papers rustle in waves as tests get passed down the long rows of seats. The teaching assistants pace the aisles, watching for cheating with varying degrees of attention.

Mistake.

I should never have let myself notice their thoughts.

Two hundred plus minds mumble formulae and constants at me. Run through stoichiometry rules. Work over half-remembered reading. Berate themselves for parties. Dates. Sleep. Anything done except studying.

A wave of stress and anxiety crashes over me. My heart rate doubles. Sweat flash-floods my armpits and forehead. Terrified mouse breathing. Hands shake. Knees bounce. Fingers twitch on my number two pencil.

Lightheaded now. Have to breathe. Have to...

I bite my cheek. Hard. Punch my thigh. Force my focus onto my body. Away from questions of ionic versus covalent bonds. Away from oxidation numbers and organic versus inorganic reactions.

I feel my feet in socks, in shoes, jumping on the near-pavement floor. My shirt sticking to my chest. My hair matted to my forehead. The chill of gelling sweat on the back of my neck. I smell myself. Must've worn straight through my deodorant.

I can see my blue book again. My test.

All around me I hear pencils scratching, pages turning and rustling.

Crap. The test started.

A glance at my watch tells me I've lost ten minutes. I throw the whole focus of my being into the test, laser tight on every question. Every answer.

I tear through the test. The questions make it all too clear that I don't remember everything we've covered so far, but what I do recall is right there and clear when I need it.

Coming to the end and starting to double-check my work creates a mental break in the laser focus. I start getting background thoughts from my fellow students. Well, mostly from two of the T.A.'s, who aren't paying us much attention, and are instead thinking about their own course loads. For the large part, my fellow students have their attention tightly on what they're doing.

I can feel confidence all around me now as well as anxiety. Despite the myriad of pre-test jitters, a number of my classmates are well-prepared for this test. Not all of them, though, and the stress of the few echoes loud above the confidence of the many.

And one of those over-stressed minds reaches out.

Loud and clear above the background static of more than two hundred minds, I pick up someone sending a question: *What did you get for number fifty-six?*

Loose, yes. Weak, yes. But enough to snap my head up from my paper. Drop my jaw.

Someone in my class just sent a telepathic message.

And that person expects a response.

I almost answer, like hearing someone else's name called by a stranger who acts as though they're addressing me. It was a telepathic request, so obviously it's meant for me. Who else is there?

The answer to both questions comes in the form of a rapid fire coherent reply: *A ten molar solution, you idiot. You should have paid more attention during our review.*

A fawning apology follows, but doesn't get a reply.

Not just one, but two other telepaths here in my Chemistry class. One strong, skilled. One weak, sloppy. They clearly know each other, even though they're sitting on opposite sides of the room...

How do I know that?

The only answer I can come up with is triangulation, like with radar. That first sending caught me by surprise. I had no sense of where it came from. But I was watching when the next two came, and they were enough to give me a rough sense of location.

I couldn't tell you what seats those two are in, or even what row. But I have a clear sense that they're near the edges of the Physical Sciences Lecture Hall, whereas I'm near one of the middle aisles.

I feel the eyes of a T.A. burning into the back of my head, wondering what I'm looking at. Wondering if I'm cheating. I turn my attention back to my test answers, but try to keep a mental eye on the ambient thoughts around me.

Yeah. That doesn't work.

When the head T.A. calls time, I realize I haven't actually checked an answer in at least ten minutes. I have to turn in my blue book, and I have no idea how I did.

But I don't care right now. There are two other telepaths in this room, and I can't let them get away. Not without making contact.

But how?

How do I reach out, when I don't know whom I'm reaching for? I can't see them. I don't know them. Nothing felt familiar about their minds, at least not from the brief touches I had. Chances are small that either of them are in my section, which leaves about two hundred twenty possibilities.

All right. If I take into account my rough sense of location, there are only about fifty or seventy-five possibilities. Still

more that I can reach easily, and trying to do so on a person by person basis violates general rule two: keep it quiet. Don't advertise my telepathy

But people are standing now. Gathering their books and bags and preparing to leave. Some might have already slipped out. I have to do something before they vanish.

I focus on the feel of sending a thought, but without an intended recipient. Like I'm thinking loudly, like I want to be heard, but only if someone else is listening. I think of it as similar to saying a sentence aloud in a foreign language in a busy restaurant. Most of the other patrons won't notice that I've said anything. To them it sounds like more background chatter. But to someone else who speaks the language, maybe someone far from home, my words should sound like a clarion call.

That's what I'm trying for, anyway, but it's not as though there's a guidebook to tell me how all this works.

So I send, without a target, the phrase, —*Hello? Can you hear me?*—

A burst of happiness off to my right. *Hello! We hear you! Where are you?*

Idiot. This from the stronger, more organized mind. *He stands near the center of the room, toward the back. Greetings, fellow telepath. I am Stephen, and my bumbling friend here is Kelly.*

A sheepish hello from Kelly now. I can feel him blush.

—*I'm Rick, and I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you both. I was starting to think I was the only one.*—

There are a few of us here at Cal. We have something of a club. In fact, we're meeting tonight at nine, as we do every Thursday. You would be welcome to join us. A sense of a Cheshire cat smile reaches me. *You've already passed the entrance exam.*

—*I think I can make it.*— They both chuckle, but I don't

get the joke. Must be an inside reference. —*Where at?*—

It isn't a physical place. Contact me at nine and you will understand. Until then.

Good to meet you. This one from Kelly.

I say my own goodbye, but I linger in the room for a few minutes. I'm not the only telepath. I should be relieved. Excited.

So why am I scared?

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