

SURVIVING TELEPATHY

Book One of *The Telepath Trilogy*

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Thousand Faces Publishing

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Published by Thousand Faces Publishing, Portland, Oregon

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ISBN: 0615891500

ISBN-13: 978-0615891507

I would like to thank the following people:

My wife, Melissa Mears

The class that commented on early drafts:

Carmen Bernier-Grand, Jodi Dahlke, Lara Dunning, Leone Fogle-Hechler, Deborah Nedelman, Genevieve Nine, Clark Parsons

My crew of beta readers:

Rob Allard, Bill Howard, Wendy Lo, Lori Priebe

Chris Baty, for founding National Novel Writing

Month, without which the first draft of this novel might never have been written, back in 2007

Thank you all so much.

Chapter 1

“**P**ROM QUEEN, SIX O’CLOCK. And she’s on a mission.”

I follow Tony’s gaze behind me and there’s Jenna Lindholme, the prom queen, striding toward us across the deck and smiling as though she wants me on a dance committee. Jenna looks beautiful under any lighting, but for the grad night cruise she’s wearing a pink gown with her hair down, blond curls framing her bare shoulders. She looks like she walked out of a dream, the kind you don’t talk about.

Tony whistles, soft and low. “I’ll catch you later, Rick. Good luck.”

I don’t get a chance to ask what he means before Jenna says, “Dance with me, Rick!” and grabs my hand.

“Aren’t you and Andre together?” I ask as she drags me onto the dance floor in front of the main cabin where everyone can see us. Jenna and Andre had started dating as freshmen and stayed together all through high school. He’s a wrestler, water polo player, and generally considered the toughest guy

in school. Not even the football players mess with Andre Valchek.

“We broke up last night.” She shimmies and does a rhythmic bouncing step. I gulp and try to keep up. She twirls, then says, “I found out he was banging a cheerleader.”

“What an asshole!”

“That’s what I said.”

When the song ends, a slow song replaces it. I lift my eyebrows in invitation. She smiles and spreads her arms. We sway together and she feels so good I wonder if this is one of those dreams you don’t talk about. Her perfume is sweet and subtle, a stark contrast to the tang of the bay, but her hair smells like vanilla and green apples. As the song’s final notes fade, I try what I’d wanted to do for four years: I kiss her. She meets me with lips that are soft, warm and yielding. Eyes closed, nothing exists but the feel of her body pressed against me, the taste of her last cup of cherry-citrus punch still on her lips.

I could die a happy man right now.

A sledgehammer crushes the left side of my jaw and knocks me to the ground. People start yelling, but I can’t understand them. My world won’t cohere. There is only my heartbeat and the deck and the pain in my cheek. After some time I can’t gauge, I look up to see Jenna jabbing her finger in Andre’s face. I almost laugh because they’re the same height. He has so many muscles I forget he’s short. A crowd surrounds us, their voices a dull roar. Andre rubs his knuckles. I touch my lips and come away with blood. My tongue finds a couple of loose teeth.

So much noise. So much confusion. Scarlet blood on my fingers, so bright. Why can I taste it? Is there more in my mouth? Why is there blood on my fingers? Bright blood.

Tony crouches in front of me. Where did he come from? Poor skinny Tony in his cheap suit. I should’ve lent him something. Tonight’s important. Tony grabs my shoulders and

helps me to my feet. I manage to get my knees steady under me. Andre and Jenna yelling at each other. He rubs his knuckles again and it clicks in my head: sledgehammer, jaw, pain, blood. I feel like I should do something.

Andre notices that I'm standing. "Stay the fuck away from her, Blackhall."

"Get it through your head, Andre," screams Jenna. "We're done! Over! Go back to your sluts."

"I did not cheat on you," he says, then points his finger at the deck and says to me, "Get back down there or I'll put you back down."

"You leave him alone."

"Dude," Tony whispers in my ear. "You gotta do something. Everyone's watching."

He's right. I can see our whole graduating class gathered around, eyes locked on us like rubberneckers at an accident. Chaperons are somewhere behind them, unable to get through the crowd.

How do I know that?

"Get back down there," roars Andre, taking a step toward me.

"Rick, let's get out of here," says Jenna offering her hand.

"Dude, can you even hear me?" Tony gives me a worried look.

Pressure building in my head. Everyone stares at me, begging me with their eyes. Some of them probably want me to fight. Some maybe want me to leave with Jenna. Some might even want to see me humiliate myself by lying back down on the deck. I can almost hear their pleas...

The pressure snaps.

Their emotions sweep through my mind. Toss me about like a dinghy in a storm. Anger fear love lust excitement depression self-loathing hope despair jealousy need and every

shade and flavor in between. I have no rudder, no mast. I am under the water of their wants, their urges, their experiences. I suffocate in their minds.

It gets worse. I see with their eyes, not my own, dozens and dozens of views of the same tableau: confused and shaking me, furious Andre, hopeful Jenna, hesitant Tony. I hear with their ears, not my own, murmurs and screams echoing louder and louder in my head. I smell the bay and punch and alcohol and sweat and dozens of perfumes, colognes, and aftershaves. I no longer feel my jaw, my teeth, or even my own clothes for all their aches and clenches, their clothing so tight, loose leatherwoolpolyestersatinsilk I can't tell any more.

Too much! It's all too much! There is no room left for me. I am them. I am my whole graduating class, and the chaperons, and the ship captain, and the waiters. Some cursed concoction of everyone around ... something. I don't know where I am. I ... what is this pronoun I? I am too many to be I. We are too many, but we are not we. There is no unity. No cohesion. Only chaos, scratchy white snow, white noise, white thought white.

White. White is blank. White is empty. Empty. Empty! Be empty. Pour it all out. No. Don't pour, just don't catch. They must pass through. This is a no-stopping zone. Move along. Move along!

I am not you! I am empty. I ... am ... Rick!
My world goes black.

I WAKE TO WORDS in my head. Are they mine?

Vitals still normal. I hate coma patients. Nothing to do but change their IVs and catheters, move them enough to avoid pressure sores. At least they don't take long. I might squeeze in a cig before the ten o'clock meds.

Am I really thinking that? Why?

I smell hospital, antiseptic and cleaners. I blink my eyelids open. Light brings a throb behind my eyes. I try to rub my temples, but an IV tube stops me. I taste surprise in my head and see a frumpy old nurse in green scrubs hit a call button. She says, “You’re awake!” and smiles like she’s my grandmother as she checks my vital signs. I’m in a hospital bed in a room that’s beige and blue blah. There’s an LCD TV on a swing-arm by my bed, off, and a white board on the opposite wall next to an analog clock. I can’t quite focus on reading it when the nurse speaks again. “Your mother is in the cafeteria. I’ll send for her as soon as the doctor comes in.”

This woman is shocked. She didn’t expect me to wake up, didn’t know why I was in a coma, figured I was a lifer here and that my mom was wasting time waiting for me. The old nurse had been working up a “care plan” that included getting my parents to move on. They’ve been here in shifts around the clock since I was admitted almost a week ago.

A week ago?

I don’t understand how I know any of this, but I’m sure of all of it. Just like I’m sure my head hurts, and not just my cheek. Just like I’m sure the nurse smells of old smoke. Behind my eyes is a painful ache, an earthquake in my sinus cavity. It ratchets up the Richter Scale when my mom enters the room in a hurricane of love, relief and anger. My mom’s five feet square of dramatic soprano in a custom Garavani gown.

Hurricane hits earthquake. I barely manage a weak “hi, Mom,” before I pass out again.

WHEN I WAS MAYBE six years old, Mom and Dad took me to the Smithsonian, a family visit the day before I took the big trip there with all the diplomats’ kids. I got to pick everything we

looked at, and I must have gawked at the space shuttle *Enterprise* for an hour. A real space ship, not just some CGI imitator. How cool is that?

I dream about the Smithsonian now. Huge crowds are moving through the museum, poking and prodding all the displays like you're never supposed to do. And chattering! They just don't shut up. They all ask a million questions, every one urgent like the answer is life or death.

None of them can touch me, though. I'm hiding in the pilot's seat of the *Enterprise*, safe and sound. Still, I'm not really free. I have this walkie-talkie so all of their questions come through loud and clear, and somehow I'm expected to answer them. All these millions of questions and I have to answer every single one. I get sick of it sometimes. I just let the walkie-talkie sit there chattering. But then the questions get frantic, and I master the art of pushing the button and grunting back just enough so they think I'm listening. Like I really care about their stupid questions.

What's important, though, is that I'm safe here in the pilot's seat.

Wait, I'm in the pilot's seat.

I throw the walkie-talkie over my shoulder and fasten the seat belts. I fire up the ignition sequence and take the joystick in my hand...

I WAKE IN NEAR darkness. Light slips in through the open door, and in the shadows I can tell I'm still in my hospital bed. I sip from a cup of water on one of those roller trays and my dry mouth soaks up so much I barely have any to swallow.

I sit up. My headache is gone. I tap my forehead just above the bridge of my nose, but my head stays pain free. I feel awake and alert. On my right past the TV is a window.

Through a crack in the curtain I can tell that the night outside is dark except for parking lot lights. The clock opposite me reads three-forty-seven. Next to it is the white board, and this time I can read it. My nurse's name is Javier and the date is ... June thirtieth. A chill sweeps across my skin and the hairs on my arms and neck stand up. The graduation night cruise had been fourteen days ago. Did Andre hit me that hard?

I poke at my cheek – a little tender but not too bad. I have no casts so I know nothing is broken. What happened to my last two weeks?

I have seven minutes before I give my report, time for one last visual check on the head cases. Back across the bridge in twenty and home to sleep, glorious sleep followed by two days in Napa with Carmela.

Wait. I don't know any Carmela. And what report?

In walks Javier, a heavy-set guy in green scrubs with a pencil mustache. He sees me sitting up, pumps his fist, and gives me a big smile. "Awake already? Eager to go home, huh? Can't blame you. Been a long week of testing, I'm sure, but you can't mess around with a coma." He checks something on my chart and says, "Yep, all your tests are negative. Even the PT guys say you're ready for a ten a.m. discharge."

Coma? I guess that explains the lost weeks. But testing? And I've had physical therapy? Should I remember any of this?

If I ask, are they going to keep me here?

Javier gives my heart and lungs a listen through his stethoscope, then pops a thermometer in my mouth. "I know your momma will be glad to have you home. You're lucky like me, man, your momma loves you very much."

I see an image of my mother, but not my mother. At least, not as I know her, but somehow it's her – the image is eight feet tall and twice as fat as real life, breathing fire and screaming at everyone until the walls start to shake. In contrast beside her stands someone else: a beatific angel of a

woman with a fist made of pure iron and boots worn thin from kicking ass.

I shake my head and the images vanish. Javier is still talking. "I hear your momma's the same way. Came down here day one and put the doctors in their place."

Another image comes to me, this time of five feet of slender Venezuelan beauty with kind eyes and wicked lopsided grin. I've never seen this woman, but I know her name is Carmela. She stands among the lush greenery in front of a Napa winery.

My nostrils flare and my eyes widen as I push back against the pillow behind me. I must be imagining this. It couldn't be. When Javier takes the thermometer out of my mouth, I say, "Javier? Do you know a Carmela?"

He smiles so wide his teeth look like piano keys, only without the black ones. "Yes, do you know her?"

"And you guys are off to Napa?"

"Now how did you know that?" His eyebrows draw together, but his brown eyes sparkle. "I didn't know myself until I got her text ten minutes ago. She tell you before she told me, or are you just a mind-reader?"

He's not bluffing. I can feel it. Carmela was supposed to take her sister Mariel, but Mariel had to cancel at the last minute.

I say the first thing that comes to mind. "I tell fortunes too. I see a lot of sex in your future."

"You have a good act, man," Javier says with a laugh. "You should do it on stage. Make yourself a lot of money." He glances at his watch and I feel pressure like I'm late for class. He says, "But me, I've got to run."

As he leaves the room that sense of time pressure lifts from me. I can tell that Javier has gone to give his report to the next shift.

Holy crap. Can I read minds?