

Chapter one.

The fierce wind swept across the parched, faded green sage bending brittle branches and tugging roots from the parched earth. It pushed ruthlessly at the skeletal leaves of the sycamores in the dry riverbed as it threw its vicious weight against the arid hills of Angeles Crest.

Every year it came, sweeping the heat in from the desert to Los Angeles with punishing, dehydrating gusts. After almost six months without a drop of rain it came, turning the arid landscape into acres of kindling, vast swatches of dry brush leading to heartier fuel: drought weakened trees and countless homes.

Greer Sands stood at the window watching the wind blasting the distressed foliage. In the room behind her, friends were celebrating the expected birth of a new child, laughing and sharing their wisdom. Greer felt drawn away from them, pulled instead toward the unstable weather outside. It was impossible for anyone who lived in fear of fire to ignore the threat of those winds, but for Greer it was something more.

All her life, she had seen glimpses of the future. She had felt the undulations of the natural world playing through her body, and these winds strummed a melody both forlorn and ominous. She was filled with a feeling of vulnerability. Greer bowed her head in acknowledgment of the power and fury she perceived and then exhaled the shakiness that had possessed her.

"Greer," called her friend Whitney's voice behind her, "are you okay?"

Whitney and Greer had met nine months before when Greer moved into a home pocketed in the national forest above Los Angeles in the ranch community of Shadow Hills. Whitney was a full-bodied, dark haired beauty of forty, who was half Native American. As a Cree Indian she was given a name with each stage of life, and looking at her glowing smile now, Greer thought again that the Elder who had bestowed on Whitney the name Shiny Girl, had captured her very essence with those two words.

When they'd met, Whitney had accepted Greer's sixth sense without question and she could see that Greer was awash with something now. Greer smiled back at Whitney and hastened to reassure her. "I'm fine. It's just this wind, it's hard for me not to listen to it."

Whitney nodded, easily understanding the submerged meaning beneath her friend's surface explanation. She moved closer and asked in a quiet voice, "Everything copasetic?"

Focusing on the question brought a quiver to Greer's breastbone, she placed a palm flat against it and half-closed her eyes, letting the quiver expand until she could read it, see it as a color or a shape. It glowed in her mind's eye, like a huge cloud of light, multicolored, with dark impenetrable sections. "I don't know," Greer said slowly, "I can feel something huge..."

"Oh my God, how cute is that!" came a voice from the sofa behind them, it was accompanied by oohs and ahs, in a range of soprano notes.

Happily distracted, Greer and Whitney turned to admire the blue sleeper that their friend Jenny was holding up over her swelled stomach. Even seven months pregnant, Jenny looked sexy. Her Hispanic heritage was serving her well through her pregnancy, her golden skin glowed with a sunny flush, and her extra weight only served to flatter her natural curves.

"Oh," she beamed, "Louis is going to love this, he so wants it to be a boy." She smiled a little sadly. "I wish he was here."

"When's he coming back?" asked Mindy, the party's hostess. She was a small energetic woman whose life-long association with horses had given her that happy weathered look that comes to those who experience much of their life from the back of a horse under an open sky, laughing heartily all the while.

The creases on her face were fixed in a smile.

"Three weeks, I hope," Jenny said wistfully. "The building should be finished by then, but they just keep having delays with the permits. Every time they finish a stage, they have to wait for the inspector to sign off, and he takes days to get out there." She sighed again. "He wouldn't be there at all, but he couldn't turn down this huge contract." After a few years of struggling, her husband Louis had finally hit the big time with his contracting business and though Jenny was enjoying the financial fruits of his labors, she wasn't too keen on the cost of his absences.

"Has Louis built an apartment building before?" Mindy asked.

"No, condos yes, but this is the first multi-story building he's contracted. He hated going away right now, but it's a three complex deal and the next two are back in L.A. county."

"Score!" Mindy laughed. "Pretty soon I'll be lodging horses at *your* ranch!"

"Let me get used to having one horse first. I always promised myself I would get one when I could afford it, so I let you talk me into taking him, but King is a good bit more time-consuming than I expected. Especially with Louis gone."

Greer rejoined the small group and sat down on an ottoman that had been pulled up to complete an informal circle. "Well, Bakersfield isn't that far, he can be back in, what, three hours if he needs to be."

"And he's made it back at least one day a week," Jenny said. "I know he worries about me, and I just wish he could feel every kick like I do."

Mindy's voice dropped to a sarcastic growl. "Wait 'til you go into labor, you'll wish you were the one kicking him wearing steel toed boots."

The group of women shared a laugh that cut off abruptly as the kitchen door swung open and a man entered the female population. He was large and burly under his cowboy hat and he stopped when he saw the dozen women looking at him expectantly. His eyes scanned the room and then turning his meaty palms up he asked, "What?"

The women burst into laughter again, and Mindy got up and crossed over to her husband.

"I'm sorry honey, it's not you, it's just your timing. I think everyone's met my husband Reading except you two." Mindy pointed to Leah and Greer.

"Reading, this is Whitney's new neighbor, Greer."

"You have a lovely home," Greer said, gesturing to the spacious vaulted ceiling of the ranch house before reaching out to shake hands. As her soft skin met his rough fingers, a distinctly unpleasant jolt went through her fingers. It didn't travel up her arm, as sometimes happened when she met a person intent on harm, but the jolt caused her to look more deeply at the man. His eyes were guarded, but she sensed nothing more.

"Nice to meet you too," Reading was saying. He released Greer's hand and she wondered if her reaction had been a residual effect of her overall unease.

"And this is Leah Falconer, Jenny's best friend and our local bank manager," Mindy was saying proudly, laying an affectionate hand on Leah's shoulder. The conservatively dressed, aristocratic brunette shrugged herself politely out from under it. Greetings were exchanged, and then Mindy asked Reading if he would like a glass of wine.

"No, thanks anyway, I've got to go out and hose off a couple of the horses, they get overheated in this infernal wind."

When Leah asked politely about how many horses they had at the ranch, Reading told them a total of twenty-one. Only five, he explained, belonged to him and Mindy, the rest were boarded.

"I told you about Mindy and Reading," Jenny told Leah with mock exasperation. "Remember? This is where I board King. I bought him from Mindy." Leah and Jenny's friendship had happened on them quickly because of a shared harrowing experience which had pre-empted the usual years of trust building, the result was that they seemed as though they'd known each other for far longer than a few months, but older details sometimes got lost.

Reading nodded, "She found you a real sweetheart too. You want me to give King a hose down?"

"Yes please." Jenny looked relieved. "I worry about him so much in this weather."

Leah squinted her intelligent eyes at Reading and asked, "Don't you worry about fire?"

"Don't even say it!" shrieked Mindy. "It's our worst fear. We have all kinds of evacuation plans, but it would not be easy. Basically we have friends with ranches down in the flats where we would relocate the horses if they were in danger."

Greer grimaced and said to Reading, "I don't know how *you* can stand to work outside in this dry heat.

Reading looked up at her with a glint of mean humor in his eyes as he surveyed the room full of women. "Well today, it's either heat stroke or estrogen radiation."

With that, he waved a hand at the laughing women, kissed Mindy and headed out. Greer watched him go wondering what the pain in her hand had meant when she touched him. Once or twice before she'd had a chilling sensation that traveled to her heart when she'd come across someone intent on harm, but she hadn't known that until later. She didn't read men very well, never had, and this sensation had been different, localized and quick, definitely not the pleasant, but that wasn't consistent with a person who would willingly spend time in heat like a furnace blast to make sure that horses, some of which didn't even belong to him, were more comfortable.

Greer sat back and sipped at her soda, letting the soft feeling of female company hold her in its sway, a feeling not unlike weightlessness came over her as she watched Leah and Jenny together. They were so different, Jenny with her street style and toughness with her wavy hair caught up in a casual ponytail and Leah in her perfectly pressed silk blouse and tailored gray skirt, her short dark hair, stick straight and severely styled. Yet they were so often together now. Only nine months ago, things had been very different for Leah, she had been lucky to survive that difficult time, and Greer often worried what lingering scars it would leave.

"I'm betting it's a girl," Whitney said. And with a pleased smile, she pulled out a small pink wrapped gift and handed it over.

Jenny looked very touched when she removed the lid of the small white box and gazed down on a child-sized silver bracelet with a single turquoise stone banded in silver.

"Oh," there were tears in Jenny's eyes as she looked up at her friend.

"You made this didn't you?"

"Yes, and I can make it bigger as she grows."

"What if it's a boy?" Leah asked Whitney.

Whitney waved a hand airily. "I'll turn it into a tie tack."

Jenny put her hand over her stomach with a small exclamation. "Oh my goodness, she didn't like that," she said with a smile. "I'm sure it's a girl. See here." Much to the other woman's surprise and consternation, Jenny took Leah's hand and guided it along her stomach, pressing down. Greer and Whitney exchanged a look of guarded amusement at Leah's scandalized face. Alarmed by familiarity in general, Leah's mouth had gone tight with discomfiture at having her hand pressed against another woman's abdomen. "See," Jenny was saying as she guided Leah's hand along, "there's her tiara, and over here, that *must* be a high heel."

"It's a pointy little thing," Leah agreed, smiling fixedly. Greer wondered if, after the trauma Leah had been through, she would ever be able to enjoy even the most innocent physical contact without a repulsive knee jerk reaction. When her hand was released, Leah pulled it back and straightened her blouse before entwining her fingers tightly in her lap as though to keep anyone else from

snatching up one of her hands again. Greer was pleased to see Jenny note this, and she watched as Jenny placed a hand momentarily on Leah's knee for a casual pat— not too long, just a short firm pat and a distinct removal— to break the barrier once more, to keep the wall of separation from strengthening. Leah's grip on her own hands relaxed, as Greer had known it would.

“I think we should ask Greer if it's a boy or a girl,” Whitney said with a sly smile.

“Oh that's right, you're psychic!” Mindy gushed.

Greer squirmed. Her ability to sometime perceive future events had never sat very comfortably on her, so she had always kept it to herself, but several months ago, when she'd first moved into Shadow Hills she had been assuaged with premonitions and when Whitney's daughter Joy had disappeared, she'd made the choice to use her gift openly to try to find the teenager. Surprisingly, her son Joshua had begun to have visions at the same time, and it was his talent, and perhaps his special connection to Joy, that had located her in the end. But Joshua had been afraid of what was happening to him, and he and his mother had kept his abilities secret from all but a few of their closest friends, pretending that it had been Greer's skill alone that had saved Joy. After that harrowing, and very public, incident, Greer had been swamped with requests and offers, some of them quite lucrative, to do readings, but Greer had never taken money for her unbidden talent. It was something that she had grown up with, come to accept, but it was interpretive at best, and she was not comfortable with

being paid to make predictions when— even when the images were clear— it was still only her best guess as to what they might mean.

“I told you before,” Greer said, “I’ve never done that and please, I don’t want you painting the nursery pink or blue based on a feeling I might get...”

“Oh please,” Jenny pleaded, cutting her off. She had asked before, but Greer had flatly refused. Now Jenny had a room full of enthusiastic women on her side.

“All right,” Greer agreed reluctantly. “But only if *everyone* in the room makes a guess. We can write them all down and see who was right later. You cannot take my impression as final.” Greer had some feelings that were vague and some that were undeniably distinct. Then there were the visions, which were as clear as watching a moving picture, but once again open to interpretation. She had no idea what she might see today.

“You said you knew Joshua was going to be a boy,” Whitney challenged.

“That was my own son! Every woman has a feeling about their own child.”

“And fifty percent of the time,” Mindy chimed in, “they’re one hundred percent right!”

“Okay, Greer goes last, everyone else make a line,” Leah, always the efficient manager, stood up and took control. “Mindy can you get me a pad of paper and a pencil? I’ll keep the list. I’ll start with me, because I already went, and I say, ‘girl.’”

The ladies all lined up and took their time rubbing Jenny's surrendered belly like a crystal ball, doing different bad impressions of stereotypical fortune-tellers. Greer pursed her full lips into a puffy moue so it resembled a round, overstuffed, pink satin cushion; this was exactly why she had never advertised her ability, though she knew this was all meant in fun.

As she waited her turn, Greer's grass green eyes floated around the handsome room. The rough pine beams of the ceiling and the comfortable mission style furniture all pleased her esthetically. Her eyes landed on a lovely landscape painting over the stone fireplace, a peaceful mountainous view, it looked vaguely familiar.

"Mindy," Greer asked the smaller woman who had just proclaimed Jenny's child a bucking-bronco-riding cowboy and come to sit near her, "Is that a painting of one of the canyons near here?"

Mindy's eyes followed Greer's gaze. "Oh yeah, that's one of R.J. River's paintings. I'm surprised you haven't met him, he's a friend of Whitney's, a local Native American artist. Very active in the conservation scene. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Very," Greer agreed. "Which canyon is it?"

"It's a view from up above the dam, I don't know the name of it, but I just love his work, I own three of his paintings." She smiled proudly.

Greer stood and leaving the group to their fun, she went to stand in front of the painting. She imagined that she did know where it was. It had that

luminous feeling when the artist captures the light just before dusk that makes it so easy to fall into the feeling of the place. Greer relaxed her eyes and let her mind wander over the sensation of the picture rather than observing the paint and the artist's technique.

It happened before she could even sense it was coming. Without warning, the picture before her became real, the greens and golds leapt to life and then, in a flash that Greer could actually feel on her face, they burst into flames. She stepped back suddenly from the painting, raising one hand protectively to block the heat, but the image had cooled to green again and only the canvas hanging on the wall in front of her was there. Or, no, there was something else, even with her eyes open, something lingered, an image, like a ring from a flashbulb.

Trying to steady her breathing, Greer leaned against the back of an armchair, and closed her eyes. There was imprinted image, as though burned on her retina, a distinct object, an old fashioned key, blackened by fire.

Greer searched through her body for a feeling connected to that image to give her a clue what it meant. But before she could locate anything Jenny's voice called out from behind her. "Greer, your turn!" and the image faded as suddenly as it had come.

Greer spun around; she had forgotten that she was in a room filled with women who saw only the objects struck by light in the field of their vision. She tried to smile, to recover quickly, but she saw Whitney's face tighten in concern at her own expression.

"You okay?" Jenny asked.

All the women were looking at her quizzically. Greer took a deep breath and smiled. "Oh sure, it's just the heat, I felt a little light headed for a minute," she lied.

Whitney frowned. She had not bought it.

Throwing Whitney a glance, that she hoped would read as, "I'll tell you later," Greer crossed over to where Jenny was laying back on the sofa with her tummy exposed like the back of a baby whale cresting the sea. Greer sat down on the coffee table facing her and, closing her eyes, she took three deep cleansing breaths, willing the shock that she had felt at the vision of fire to calm and leave her body so that she could get a clear reading, if one came.

Rubbing her hands together to make sure they were warm, Greer placed them flat on Jenny's belly and closed her eyes.

Immediately an image came to mind. A girl, definitely a girl, with dark hair and shining eyes, was walking toward her with sunlight glinting off her thick long hair. The picture was so stunning and charming that Greer laughed out loud. "She's going to be a beauty," said Greer and most of the women clapped their hands and cheered. Only Mindy and another woman who had guessed male boo-hoo-ed. "It's funny," Greer went on when they quieted, "I see her grown up, about fourteen. I think..."

But Greer forgot entirely what she was about to say. Over the image, so beautiful and blissful that she held in her mind, had come another. It was

Jenny's face that leapt into Greer's mind, and her expression was as far from happy and sunny as was possible. In Greer's vision Jenny's face held a look of sheer terror, her eyes darted everywhere as though looking for some way of escape, and over her, blotting out all else, hovered dark black wings.

Greer had seen those wings before, she was sure of it. What did they mean to her? Where had she seen them? She forced herself to focus on the feeling they gave her and remember it. Yes! She had seen them before in another work of art, been struck by their perfection as a metaphor. They had been on an angel. Huge black wings on an angel of terrible, and final beauty.

The angel of death.