

"Maybe if he forgives me, everyone will forget about what I did and I can get out of this pit faster."

Garvey stood to leave. "Forgiving isn't forgetting. *Chump!*"

CHAPTER 4



BY THE TIME Cole paused to catch his breath, he found himself outside the bay, angling toward the next island, maybe a mile away. The icy water numbed him deeper with each breath. He gulped at the air. He had to make it before he froze to death. His arms ached, but he continued stroking, even as his mind wandered.

Following Cole's acceptance for Circle Justice, preparation meetings, called Circles of Understanding, took place. Each meeting was considered a Healing Circle but had a different name, depending on what was being discussed and who attended. There were Talking Circles, Peacemaking Circles, and Community Circles. Eventually there would be Bail Circles and Sentencing Circles.

"Is everything always in a circle?" Cole had asked Garvey.

"Why not?" Garvey said. "Life is a circle."

"Do I have to go to all these meetings?"

Garvey shook his head. "The organizers of the Circles are called Keepers. When the Keepers meet with people like Peter and his family, you're not allowed."

"Why do they meet with them?"

"If the Driscals realize that the Circle allows them to have a voice in decisions, and that forgiveness can help Peter to heal, they may also join the Circle."

"You mean they might help decide my sentence?"

Garvey nodded. "Maybe."

"They'll hang me," Cole said. "I'm dead."

"I think you've already hung yourself," Garvey answered.

Once preparations were ready for the first Hearing Circle, notices were sent out and meetings were held in the basement of the public library. Cole scratched nervously at his stomach as he entered the library the first night. He didn't know what to expect as the guard removed his handcuffs outside the meeting room and let him walk in alone. The guard remained in the hallway.

The woman who called herself the Keeper met Cole and shook his hand. "Thanks for coming tonight," she said pleasantly. She wore

blue jeans and a flannel shirt, even though she was old enough to be Cole's grandmother.

"I didn't have much choice," Cole mumbled, as he seated himself. He picked at the edge of his chair as he watched complete strangers file in and choose seats. The number of chairs made it obvious the Hearing Circle involved a lot more people than the other meetings. To make matters worse, Cole knew that tonight he might see Peter for the first time since the beating.

Each new arrival greeted him and all the others warmly. Everybody acted as if they were friends. Cole played their game and nodded politely, but he noticed that nobody sat beside him. Several kept eyeing him curiously.

He recognized one man as Judge Tanner. The last time Cole had seen him, the judge had been wearing a black robe at the arraignment hearing in juvenile court when Cole first pleaded guilty. Tonight Judge Tanner wore no robe and was dressed in blue jeans and a sweater.

Cole's father and their lawyer, Nathaniel Blackwood, entered together, wearing dark three-piece suits and ties. They looked completely out of place. The lawyer looked as if he'd been dipped in plastic. The two nodded to Cole and seated themselves on his immediate left. Cole ignored them.

Cole's mother arrived alone and seated herself on his right. She wore a party dress. Not a single hair on her head was out of place. That's all this was, Cole thought bitterly. This was just another social event. She had probably spent a couple of hours getting ready. Nothing, however, could cover up the frightened look in her eyes. Cole guessed she had probably downed a few drinks before coming, something to calm her nerves. Cole squirmed in his seat. His parents hadn't even acknowledged each other.

When Garvey arrived, he sat nearby. Shifting nervously in his chair, Cole nodded to Garvey as he watched more strangers enter and be seated. It seemed like the whole world was showing up. And why not? The Keepers had posted a notice on the library bulletin board with an open invitation to anybody who wanted to participate.

Cole tapped his shoe against the leg of the chair. Why hadn't they just gone out in the street and hollered, "Hey, everybody, come help make fun of Cole Matthews!" At least none of his classmates had shown up, Cole thought. They probably knew what he'd do to them if they did. Then Cole heard more people come in, and turned, to see Peter walk in with his parents and their lawyer.

Peter walked awkwardly, shuffling his feet and

glancing timidly around the room. His lawyer looked the same age as Cole's mom but walked with her head up and shoulders squared. Almost immediately, she picked Cole out of the Circle and eyed him. He glanced down.

Nearly two dozen people had joined the Circle by the time the Keeper stood to begin. She smiled pleasantly. "Everybody please stand and hold hands," she said.

Cole didn't like holding hands with his parents, one on each side. His hands were clammy, and he found himself comparing his mother's frightened, weak squeeze to his father's iron-hard grip.

As the Keeper bowed her head, Cole peeked and caught Peter peeking back. He narrowed his eyes threateningly, and Peter looked away. Cole grinned until he realized Peter's lawyer was watching him.

"Great Maker and Healer, hear this prayer," began the Keeper in a soft voice. "Tonight we gather because our community has been hurt. Grant wisdom and patience as we search for wellness. Amen."

As the Circle sat down, the Keeper drew in a deep slow breath, looking around to acknowledge each person. Still smiling, she said, "Well, I see many new faces here tonight." She glanced

directly at the two lawyers and Judge Tanner. "Let me remind *everybody*, we are not here to win or lose. Justice often fails because it seeks to punish, not to heal. Jails and fines harden people."

Cole found himself nodding.

The Keeper paused. "We call this Circle Justice, but we really seek wellness. We try to meet the needs of both the offender and the victim." The Keeper looked directly at Cole and his family, then at Peter and his family. "Circle Justice is for those ready for healing. It's not an easy way out. In fact, a healing path is often much harder."

The Keeper held up a feather. "This feather symbolizes respect and responsibility. No one must speak without this feather. When you hold this feather in your hand, speak honestly from your heart." She chuckled. "I hope I'm not being long-winded, because talking too long tells others that you don't respect their right to speak. Respect others as much as yourself. When the feather comes to you, speak only if you wish to. This circle carries only two obligations—honesty and respect."

The Keeper fixed her gaze on Cole. "Cole Matthews, you have a long history of anger, growing more violent until you severely injured Peter Driscall. Even now, Peter continues therapy for injuries."

Cole squirmed in his chair. He didn't like being talked to with a bunch of people staring at him.

The Keeper raised her voice slightly and turned to the group. "Our challenge is to return wellness, not only to Peter Driscall, but also to Cole Matthews and to our community. We'll pass the feather several times tonight, introducing ourselves, expressing concerns, and offering ideas for healing and repairing the harm." The Keeper handed the feather to the first person seated on her left side.

"I'm Gladys Swanson, and I'm the mother of four children here in Minneapolis," the lady began. "I want to help make our community better because this is the community where I'm raising my own children."

"I'm Frank Schaffer," the next person said. "This is the first real opportunity I've had to help change the violence in our city."

One by one, the people around the circle held the feather and spoke.

Cole's mother fingered the feather nervously during her turn. "I'm Cindy Matthews, Cole's mom," she said. "I'm here because I don't know what to do anymore. It's gotten so hard." She paused, her bottom lip trembling, then handed the feather to Cole.

family, not a jail cell." The lawyer handed the feather on.

As the feather moved from person to person, Cole kept glancing at Peter. The thin red-haired boy stared at the floor. When he was handed the feather, Peter looked up fearfully and mumbled, "I'm Peter Driscal, and I'm here 'cause I got beat up." His speech was slow and halting. His eyes darted around the Circle as he passed the feather quickly to his mother.

Cole studied Peter. Peter hadn't sounded like this before. Cole wiped his sweaty hands on his pants. It wasn't like he had meant to hurt anyone. Besides, this wouldn't have happened if Peter had kept his mouth shut.

The room grew extra quiet, and Cole's face warmed. Squeaking chairs and shuffling shoes broke the anxious silence. Cole coughed to clear his throat. A lot depended on his next words. "Uh, I'm Cole Matthews, and I'm here because I really screwed up," he said. "I know what I did was wrong, and I want Peter to know I'm sorry for everything." Cole sniffled purposely, rubbing at his nose for effect. "I want to ask this Circle to help me get over my anger."

Cole handed the feather to his father as he glanced around the group. He liked the reactions he saw. People heard what they wanted to hear. Tonight the group wanted to believe he was sorry—he could see it in their eyes.

Cole's father sat up taller in his chair. "I'm William Matthews," he announced importantly. "I'm here to make sure that my son never causes problems again." He turned and glared at Cole. "This is all going to end now."

Cole ignored his father.

Next, Nathaniel Blackwood received the feather. He held it loosely in his fingers as if it were a cigarette and cleared his throat loudly.

"Yes, what Cole did was wrong, but kids will be kids. Considering Cole's detention to date, we feel he should be released to parole and to the supervision of one of his parents. He needs a

CHAPTER 5



ONCE CLEAR OF the bay, Cole swam even harder. Misty rain roughed the water as waves washed over his head. When he stopped to rest, his breath came in ragged gasps. His numb limbs felt wooden and stiff, moving awkwardly as if disconnected from his body. Cole turned to look back.

At first his mind rejected what he saw—he was still at the mouth of the bay. He shook his head to clear the illusion, but it was no illusion. This was the same spot he had been at a thousand strokes earlier. But how could it be? The wind and waves hadn't been that strong, yet even as he struggled to tread water with his numb limbs, he found himself drifting back toward the shoreline.

In that instant, Cole realized his mistake. His anger had so clouded his thinking, he hadn't considered the incoming tide. With every stroke forward, a giant invisible hand had pushed him two

strokes backward into the bay, returning him toward the shore.

A sharp cramp gripped Cole's leg, then his other leg started cramping. He gasped for breath and panicked. He had to make it back to land. Any land. Frantically he flailed at the water.

Struggling did little to affect Cole's movement, but on the incoming tide he steadily drifted closer to shore. He fought only to keep his head above water. When the rocky bottom bumped against his feet, he kept thrashing his lifeless limbs. Again and again his feet struck the rocky bottom, and pain shot up his legs. Finally he quit fighting and let the waves push his body into shallow water.

A wave broke over his head, and he came up gagging and spitting salt water. He tried to lift himself, but his arms collapsed. Finally, using only his elbows, he squirmed and crawled his way over the slippery rocks and up onto the grassy ground above the tide line. There he lay spent and shivering, his body bruised, his cold skull throbbing in rhythm with his heartbeat.

Cole had lost all track of time and struggled to think. All he could conjure up were fleeting notions: He couldn't stand up. He needed warmth. It was almost dark. He felt pain. One thought repeated: He needed warmth. He knew there was

no warmth, and yet he remembered flames. Where were the flames? He had to find them.

Cole tried to stand up, but his legs collapsed under him. Imagining a fire, he dragged his way forward again on his belly. His legs pulled behind him like worthless anchors. It was hard in the gathering darkness to make out shapes. The waves, the shoreline, the trees, the bay, all existed like parts of a puzzle.

Cole rested again until the throbbing in his head had disappeared. His head felt hollow, his mind empty. One detached thought kept coming back to him: There had been flames. But where? Night had come quickly, and Cole scanned the dark shadows around him, sensing a vague familiarity. Again he tried to stand but couldn't. He dragged himself forward one last time, then collapsed.

Slowly the cold disappeared. Lying belly down in the darkness, Cole felt his legs and chest sting as if they were on fire. Then he became aware of another feeling. Stronger than any burning in his arms and belly, more haunting than the darkness that surrounded him, was the realization that he was alone, totally alone with himself. And it scared him.

Sometime during the night, Cole drifted into a fitful sleep. When he awoke, darkness still hid the island. His first conscious sense was pain. His

toes, hands, elbows, chest, legs, all ached. What had happened? Vaguely he remembered burning the supplies and the shelter, and then trying to escape by swimming. After that he remembered the tide and crawling up the rocky shore. There had been terrible cold, then more crawling. Then he recalled his skin burning. After that, a damning loneliness.

Cole breathed in the cold, damp night air. Where was he now? The air smelled of salt, seaweed, and something burnt. Then he slept again. When he awoke the next time, dawn had crept into the sky. Lifting one arm, he found it covered with black ash. He was lying nearly naked, squarely in the ashes of the burned shelter.

He gathered his strength and struggled to his feet. The world seemed to tilt and spin. In the dawn light, billowy clouds mounded against the far horizon like a snowdrift. The warm ash stuck to the raw scrapes on Cole's chest and legs. Blood crusted his elbows and knees, and his dry mouth kept him from swallowing. Every joint in his body ached.

As he wavered on his weakened legs, Cole became aware of a presence. Not movement, only a lurking presence. Grimacing, he searched the trees and shore. At first nothing appeared different or out of place. Then something large and white

broke the smooth pattern of the shoreline. He squinted, and the image cleared.

A bear. A white bear.

Out across the water, on the point of shoreline near the opening of the bay, a massive white bear stood as motionless as a statue, facing him. Morning light glinted off its shiny white fur and made it glow. The bear stood patiently, proud, nose forward, ears alert. Cole kept blinking his eyes. Could this possibly be one of the Spirit Bears Edwin had spoken of? He had said they lived hundreds of miles to the south on a different island. And yet what else could it be?

Shivering in only his underwear, Cole crouched and picked up a rock. This Spirit Bear didn't have any right to stare at him. It didn't have pride, dignity, and honor like Edwin had said. It was just a mangy animal. Cole flung the rock, even though the bear was nearly a quarter mile away. "Keep staring, I'll kill you," he shouted.

What really angered Cole about the bear was that it stood there frozen on the shoreline without any sign of fear. It defied him. He looked around for some kind of weapon. In the ashes he spotted the charred blade of a hunting knife from one of the boxes. He picked it up and turned back toward the Spirit Bear.

It had disappeared.

Cole searched the trees, but the bear was gone. Puzzled, he tossed the knife back on the ground. "I ever see you again, you're dead," he vowed. "I'll teach you to be afraid of me."

As he turned back toward the ashes, another bright object caught his attention. Not ten feet away lay the colorful red-and-blue blanket Garvey had given him. What had he called it? At.óow? It rested near some tall grass, completely untouched by the flames. Cole picked it up and examined it with his sore fingers. Had he missed when he threw the at.óow into the flames? Shrugging, he wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. He hobbled on his bruised feet down to where he had left his shoes and clothes.

Cole felt no regret for having burned the supplies and the shelter. Nor did he regret hurting Peter. This was all somebody else's fault. If it weren't for his parents, Peter, and the stupid Healing Circle, he wouldn't even be here. Somebody would pay for what was happening. He would get revenge, especially against those who had wanted him in jail. People like Peter's lady lawyer. He hated her.

Cole remembered the first time he had seen her hold the feather in the Circle. She waved it like a wand and pointed it directly at him. "That boy is dangerous," she said. "Next time he might

kill someone. This Circle Justice has its place, but I oppose any plan that does not isolate Cole Matthews."

Cole didn't like someone accusing him. He hated sitting in a room across from the slimeball creep he had used as a punching bag. And he hated being around his parents and the high-priced lawyer they had hired for him. The room felt stuffy, and he dug at the woven fabric on his chair with his fingernail. Circle Justice stunk! Each word spoken in the Circle was like kindling added to his smoldering anger.

"Cole must go to jail and get anger counseling," somebody said. "He's proved he can't be trusted."

"Cole is a risk to our children and to our community," another person in the Circle said. "We can't risk his release."

It was the next voice that made Cole explode. His father held the feather, toying with it in his fingers. "We've always wanted the best for Cole," he said. "His mother and I have devoted our lives to him, but he—"

"That's bull!" Cole shouted suddenly, although he wasn't holding the feather. "You drink until you can't stand up, and you're gone all the time. A devoted parent doesn't whip his kid until a shirt can't hide all the bruises!"

CHAPTER 6



COLE'S CLOTHES FELT damp and stiff when he picked them up from where he'd left them on the shoreline. As he struggled to pull them on, he chuckled. He couldn't quit thinking about the Circle Justice meetings. He still remembered how surprised the group had been when he called his dad a liar. Every eye in the group had focused on his father, who turned red and stammered angrily, "We *have* devoted our lives to Cole. We—"

"All you care about is *you*!" Cole interrupted. "Look how you're dressed. Nobody else here is—"

"That's not true," protested his father. He grabbed Cole's arm roughly, but then let go. He glared at Cole and pointed the feather in his face. "You control your mouth, son, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" Cole taunted. "Beat me?" Cole's father jumped to his feet. "I don't beat you, and you know that." His face flushed red. "I've given you swats when you've deserved them."