

The Healer Series-Box Set Books 1-3: A Young Adult Romantic Fantasy

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The Healer The Healer Series: Book 1 By C.J. ANAYA This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental. The Healer Copyright ©2014 C.J. Anaya All rights reserved. Third Edition February 2016 Published by C.J. Anaya Publishing LLC Print Cover by JRA Stevens ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author / publisher. GRAB YOUR FREE COPY [HERE](#).

It was annoying, really, this feeling of being watched, wondering if I was going crazy or if the strange presence I'd felt over the past two weeks was more than just a figment of my imagination. I guess it was possible I was imagining the whole thing. Considering the level of paranoia my father operated under on a daily basis—and the fact that I had a tendency to absorb other people's emotions as if they were my own—there was a distinct possibility I was losing it. I didn't fear my watcher, even though fear would have been a healthy response. I simply understood I was capable of the impossible, possessing skills that were valuable to people both good and bad. The thought of someone spying on me seemed inevitable at this point. My father did everything he could to keep my particular skill set a secret. For all intents and purposes, I was your average seventeen-year-old who lived her life just like any other teenager. I dealt with normal teenage problems and had normal teenage experiences. *Oh yeah, I'm totally normal.* I think I was just ready for something to finally happen and sick to death of hiding who I was and what I was capable of. Instead of ignoring my stalker, I was tempted to turn around and confront this faceless observer. That's it! That's exactly what I would do. I would turn around, throw my hands up in the air and scream, "Okay, you got me. You've finally figured it out. Take me to whatever freaky

government lab you want and start dissecting my brain for answers. Then maybe you will be able to tell me why I do what I do." I understood my powers. I just couldn't figure out why I was the only person who had them; the only person on this planet capable of healing illnesses and injuries in ten seconds or less. I almost laughed at that last thought. Ten seconds or less...it could have been a catchy business slogan if miraculous healings were something the general public accepted as totally within the realm of normal. I was so not normal. My father and I pondered the "why" for years, but we'd never been able to find any answers. He now refused to dig deeper and tended to avoid the topic whenever I brought it up. I couldn't tell if this was some form of denial or maybe some kind of coping mechanism for raising a daughter with supernatural abilities. On the other hand, I always felt like he knew more than he was willing to discuss, and I never pushed him to open up about it because I was scared he might actually tell me. I wanted answers, and I was afraid of what those answers might reveal. Back to my strange stalker issue. The presence I felt wasn't necessarily malicious or threatening in any way. It felt more watchful. I had no way of knowing if that was good or bad; hence my irritation. I decided the best thing to do was to continue on my way to the hospital and think about it later. I had more important things on my mind. My father had called me not five minutes earlier to let me know he needed me at the hospital. *Needed me!* My father rarely called me back to the hospital after I'd finished a shift. He didn't like to encourage my natural propensity for healing anything broken. He hadn't given me any more details, and I knew better than to ask. We never talked about my abilities over the phone. I had the errant thought that grabbing my truck and driving the two blocks over would have been faster, but I'd been so surprised by my father's phone call, I'd failed to consider it. I entered the hospital through a side entrance and ran up the stairs rather than taking the elevator. I wanted to avoid as many people as possible. My father met me in the stairwell on the second floor. He looked awful. My stomach clenched at the thought that someone was injured. "Dad, what's happened?" He grabbed my hand and pulled me through the door. In a lowered voice he stated, "A little girl; eight years old. Ambulance brought her in about fifteen minutes ago. She was in an awful car accident and has suffered some major head trauma." "Head trauma?" My eyes shot to his face. "Dad, you know if her brain is too damaged to communicate with—" My father glanced around, agitation written all over his face. "Hope, lower your voice. It's bad enough I've brought you back here. I've already cleared out everyone in the ICU. As long as she's unconscious there's really nothing they can do, which is convenient for both of us." I stared at him in amazement. "Nothing they can do? I find it hard to believe your team of doctors and nurses aren't running more tests just because she's unconscious." "I did the preliminary exam and told them she was dealing with a minor concussion and a broken arm." I nearly stopped dead in my tracks. "If I can't heal her your preliminary exam is going to have several holes in it. How could they have possibly bought that?" My father's jaw tightened momentarily, a sign he was about to tell me something he was uncomfortable with. "I may have lied and stated any other tests were strictly against the parent's religion." Now I did stop dead in my tracks. Anxiety descended like an unwelcome in-law. "You could lose your job. If her brain is beyond repair you could—" My father's grip tightened on my arm, and he continued pulling me forward. "I know, Hope. Just take a look at her, okay?" I couldn't understand this. My father was no risk taker, especially when it came to my powers. This was terribly out of character for him. We were almost there. A few feet later we reached the entrance and rushed inside. I sucked in some air and let it out slowly, recognizing the little girl lying in the hospital bed. It all made sense now. "Eve?" I spun around in a panic. "You didn't tell me it was Eve." "You know I couldn't talk about this over the phone considering how high-profile she is." "Forget the fact she's the mayor's daughter, she's a family friend." I wasn't sure I could do this. I'd babysat Eve on numerous occasions, and it was always harder to heal people I cared about. I was so afraid I'd fail. There was also the possibility Eve was supposed to die. If it was her time to go, I wouldn't be able to heal anything, and my father would most likely be called into question for not reporting the severity of Eve's injuries. "Hope, we can't let her die. Her father would never survive it." His voice shook with barely suppressed emotion. He was just as upset about this as me. Now I understood. My father would never risk discovery if it were anyone else but Eve. He'd never put me under this kind of pressure, either. He wanted my life to be just as

normal as I did. If I failed to do this it would devastate me more than he could possibly imagine, and he knew it, but Eve's parents had been close to mine since before either she or I had been born. We had to save her. I had to save her. "Is she meant to die, Hope?" I blinked; startled he'd spoken those words out loud. He was slipping. He wasn't being as careful or as guarded as usual. I pushed those thoughts from my mind and turned around to face my sweet little Eve. I studied her for a moment and waited for that sinking feeling to settle in, but it didn't. That was a good sign, but there was only one way to be sure. I walked over to her bed and reached out, gently holding her head between my hands. I closed my eyes and searched for her life force, connecting with it instantly. It was strong and welcoming, ready to receive instructions. "She's not supposed to die," I whispered. My father's heavy sigh of relief echoed my own, but I knew the injuries she'd sustained would most likely take her life if I didn't concentrate and proceed with great care. The process of healing was something I never treated lightly. It required complete focus and careful attention to detail, otherwise, I could actually make things worse. Each healing was very different from the other. A person's life force was as one-of-a-kind as a fingerprint and sometimes difficult to connect to. Not this one, though. Eve possessed a spirit that was pure, innocent, and incredibly trusting. Connecting to Eve's life force enabled me to determine what was happening within her body, but if I couldn't do that I wouldn't be able to save her. I cringed, grateful she wasn't conscious enough to experience the pain her injuries caused. The first problem I encountered was damage to her skull and brain tissue. I choked back a small sob. I'd spent so many hours with Eve and her vibrant personality. She was a spunky little eight-year-old, and I loved her. I did not like seeing her injuries or feeling her pain. I found damage to the cerebral cortex, severe swelling in the brain, and a blood clot in the anterior cerebral artery. My concern escalated to a whole new level. The anterior cerebral artery supplied blood to the inner regions of the brain. There was a chance she'd have a stroke, or worse, if I didn't dissolve the blood clot as soon as possible, but if the head trauma proved worse than this, her life force wouldn't be able to send healing instructions to the brain. At least, none that it would be able to recognize or understand. I took two deep breaths to calm my emotions and then focused on the blood clot, showing Eve's life force what had to be done. I wanted the blood clot to dissipate slowly and morph into a very thin line. I offered up images from my mind and visualized this rather complex process, giving mental pictures and step-by-step instructions with as much detail as possible. I saw the intelligences within the blood cells begin to respond as her life force relayed my instructions to the brain. It responded immediately; a very good sign. The blood clot thinned out gradually and then completely disappeared. I wanted to hold her in my arms and cry happy tears of relief. Instead, I let out a shaky sigh and moved on to the next injury. The brain tissue and veins surrounding the cerebral artery needed repairing, as well as the fracture to her skull. I continued relaying instructions which were received and implemented with quick efficiency. Turning my attention to the rest of her body, I balked when I discovered a kidney had been punctured, causing severe internal bleeding. I felt certain she was supposed to live, but it was amazing the poor child had lasted this long. I gently stroked her cheek and sent images of healing, knowing they'd be followed and obeyed. Once I was satisfied with the condition of her kidney I focused on the rest of the damage. She had a broken arm and some superficial injuries, but they were in no way life threatening. I reluctantly left those injuries alone, knowing her body would take care of them on its own without my help. It wouldn't do for the girl to have nothing wrong with her after being in such a terrible car accident. I couldn't raise suspicion or bring unwanted attention to the hospital. I left the cuts, bruises, and broken arm alone despite an overwhelming desire to do the exact opposite. I settled for teaching Eve's body how to speed up the healing process, instructing her life force to send certain signals to her sensory nerves—mainly the nociceptors—that no injuries had been sustained. If the signals could prevent her nerves from recognizing the remaining injuries, she wouldn't feel any pain while her body healed. Pain is an important and crucial part of healing, but with me there to monitor the healing taking place, there was simply no need for it. I wanted her body well-rested from its ordeal, and easing her pain was the one last kindness I could give her. Exhausted, I gently released Eve's small head, severing my connection with the sweet little girl. She no longer had to fight for her life. A tired happiness engulfed my entire being. "Hope,"

my dad whispered. He laid a warm, supportive hand on my shoulder and rubbed it gently. I'd been so absorbed in the healing, I'd completely forgotten my father was sitting in the room with us. I glanced up at him and was struck by how exhausted he looked. "Will she make it?" His voice was laced with worry. I gave him an encouraging smile. "She'll make it. She had a blood clot in her brain and some internal bleeding due to a damaged kidney, but that's all better now." I rubbed my tired eyes and felt the residue of the little girl's life force slowly ebbing away from me. My father still looked worried even though Eve was fine. His graying sideburns and the shadows under his eyes made him look much older than his forty-three years. "I healed her easily," I continued, hoping he'd stop looking so somber. I turned to watch the even rise and fall of Eve's chest as she slumbered on; unfettered by the very serious condition her body had been in not ten minutes earlier. "She was very receptive." Children were always easier to connect with. They had less baggage and a more trusting nature unless their parents were monsters. Connecting with the life force of a child who'd dealt with years of abuse was nearly impossible. Fortunately, I hadn't had much experience in that department. "I knew about the head injury and the blood clot, but not the punctured kidney. I'm relieved I got you in here when I did." I gave him a hard look and wondered why he didn't sound relieved. "What would I do without you?" He sounded sincere, but appeared a little distracted. "Well, your life would be pathetically boring considering the fact you never do anything but work at this hospital. Glad I can provide some excitement around here every once in a while." I needed him to joke around with me or crack a smile. He mussed up my long, dark hair in a way that made me certain I looked as if I'd just rolled out of bed. I pushed his hand back and managed a look of annoyance as I attempted to smooth out the damage he'd inflicted. The tension we'd felt before I healed Eve was finally beginning to lessen, and my fun-loving, albeit overprotective, father started to resurface. "You kept Eve's lab results a secret then?" I asked. My father nodded. "The only injuries recorded in her file will be the ones you didn't heal." His face looked troubled. "It's not the most ethical thing I've ever done, but I felt it necessary that we intercede like this, for John's sake." That's what he was worried about. It's what he was always worried about; being discovered. "We saved her life, Dad." "If anyone finds out I fixed the results..." "They won't," I interrupted. "No one will. Just look at what we've accomplished!" I turned back to Eve. I was glad I'd had a shift at the hospital earlier. If anyone did see me in the area they'd probably assume I was just working late. I did the cleaning and janitorial work on the third floor. It wasn't a glamorous job, but it gave me some extra pocket money, and allowed me to pursue my main reason for being here. I wanted to help the patients who needed me. In my mind that was everyone, but my father was big on keeping a low profile. I stuck to healing children, and only if their injuries were life-threatening. Sometimes I helped teenagers and adults when they'd accept me, but many wouldn't allow me to connect with them. There were so many resistant and distrustful people out there. I would have liked to have worked as a doctor myself and helped in a more official capacity, especially since I knew more about the human body than any other doctor I'd ever encountered, including my own father. Being a high school senior wasn't the same as being a college graduate with an MD, so I had to settle for janitorial work. At the start of each shift, my father would bring me into his office on the second floor and discuss the condition of any patient he felt might benefit from my gift. He didn't like having me here healing people and would have avoided it altogether, but considered it a necessary evil after learning the first three months of my job had been spent dodging various hospital personnel in order to sneak into patient's rooms and heal as many children as I possibly could. When a twelve-year-old autistic boy with a broken leg was miraculously healed from not only the break, but the autism as well, it caused such an uproar amongst the staff and the boy's parents that my father nearly fired me. Oops! I had to suffer through a huge lecture about remaining discreet and avoiding attention, but secretly I was congratulating myself on the young boy's condition. He was an awesome kid and had so much to offer. After that, my father began monitoring all extra-curricular activities during my shifts. It annoyed me, but I guess I could see the wisdom in it. There was a Pediatric Oncology Unit that took up the entire third floor. It was funded by some wealthy congressman whose teenage boy had been saved from a fatal gunshot wound by my father. I'd played a major role in that particular miracle, but no one could know that. When I wasn't cleaning the hospital rooms or making beds I

spent the majority of my time with the oncology patients. The children seemed so excited for the visits, and for me, that was all that mattered. I tried not to get too attached to them, though. I knew there were many who'd eventually pass on, and I wouldn't be able to prevent it from happening. That being said, I'd grown very fond of a ten-year-old boy named Kirby and visited him as often as I could in order to ease his pain and attempt to heal him. The healing never took, though, and each attempt became a bit more heartbreaking for both Kirby and myself. I kept at it anyway. I wasn't going to stop trying until I figured out what was preventing me from being successful. My attention snapped to the present when my father suggested I call it a night and head for home. I nodded, getting ready to walk my weary frame out the door when a thought hit me. "Were there any other people hurt in the accident?" He looked at the floor and swallowed. "Dad?" I moved directly in front of him so he couldn't avoid my gaze. He let out a loud sigh and sat down in one of the chairs. "John's office aid, Sarah. She was in the car with them." I looked down at the floor feeling unreasonably angry. "You were just going to let me go home without even allowing me to assess her situation? She's the closest thing to a mother that Eve's got." "Hope, just walk away from this one," he pleaded a bit desperately. "She's an adult. It will be too difficult for you to connect with her, and there's nothing you can do. I don't want you internalizing that. I don't want you comparing this situation to what you've already been through with..." he stopped talking before the thought could be vocalized. My father rarely touched on the subject of my mother. All it ever did was leave an uncomfortable silence in its wake. Then he'd be withdrawn and pensive for the rest of the day. "Just let this one go, okay?" I shook my head, refusing to look at his pained expression. I didn't want him suffering due to my decisions, but I couldn't walk away from anyone. Not if there was a chance I could help. Being acquainted with Sarah didn't make the situation any easier. I wasn't close to her, but I knew Eve couldn't lose another mother. "You know I can't do that. I have to at least try. For Eve's sake, I have to try." "I promise there's absolutely nothing you can do, and I didn't get access to her records in time. Her situation is known amongst all applicable staff. There's really no changing this one, Hope." "Can I just see her?" He ran his hands through his hair and let out a frustrated sigh. "Only if Betty's working this shift. I won't be able to sneak you in if the nurse on call is anyone else." Betty was the head nurse at the hospital. She tended to turn a blind eye to my sporadic interference because she respected my father and she was religious enough to believe that my "healing influence" was a direct gift from god. That's what she said, anyway. If she suspected what I was really capable of she never let on. Even though my father was Chief Surgeon at the hospital, he still needed to be careful and follow protocol as much as possible, but his status made it much easier for me to maneuver my way around, healing whomever he allowed me to heal. "Thanks, Dad." "Don't thank me yet," he grumbled as he reluctantly stood up. "I still think this is a bad idea." I pushed my overprotective father out the door and followed him down the hallway. Betty, a slender, middle-aged, black woman, turned from her work and met me with a sad smile. "Hello, Betty," I said. "How's the patient doing?" "She's in a coma. Not sure there's anything we can do except make her as comfortable as possible and pray to the Lord Jesus that some kinda crazy miracle takes place." She grabbed the tiny gold cross around her neck and kissed it quickly. She was always tugging and kissing on that thing. I found it endearing. "Sometimes, though, your presence seems to be all people need, girl. Maybe you could work your crazy mojo on this one and everything will turn out just fine." Her smile brightened a bit. I smiled back, feeling a special kinship with the wiry woman. "Has her condition changed at all?" my father asked. The nurse shook her head. She had thick black hair that looked as if someone had sprinkled powdered sugar on it. It was pulled back into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. I'd always thought she was a natural beauty. The light graying in her hair managed to make her look younger rather than older. "No, Dr. Fairmont, nothing has changed. I'm hoping she'll pull through, though. It's gonna be hard on the mayor if she doesn't." I didn't respond. I was too busy studying Sarah and pushing away that familiar sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, the feeling I always get when I recognize there's nothing I can do. My father must have noticed my distress. "Betty," he said, "might I have a word with you outside?" He gave me an encouraging smile, knowing that I needed to be alone for this one, and quickly guided her out of the room. I sat down next to Sarah and placed my hands on either side of her head. My heart

lurched as I connected with her more quickly than I'd anticipated. That kind of thing didn't usually happen. It tended to take much longer for a connection to occur with an adult. The intense pain her body suffered caught me off guard. A different kind of emotion gripped me as I realized, with certainty, there was nothing I'd be able to do for her. Sarah was meant to die. No matter how hard I tried, and I would try, her life force would be unable to respond to any instructions I gave it. Tears formed quickly, tracking silent paths down my cheeks. A tiny spark of anger rippled through me. *No! Your life force must stay. Do you understand? I can save you. I can keep you here.* I sent image after image, begging and pleading with Sarah's life force to begin the healing process. I focused on the cells that were most badly damaged within the brain and showed them what needed to be done. I focused on the broken bones, the damaged tissues, anything that might elicit a response from her. Over and over again I tried with dogged determination, but I could feel no response from the woman's spirit other than the overwhelming feeling that it would be departing soon. *Let me go, Hope.* I was so startled by the voice sounding within me, I nearly dropped her head and lost the connection altogether. In all the years I'd been healing, I'd never actually had anyone communicate with me. *Let me go, Sarah* said again. I recovered from my surprise. *I can't save you unless you fight. You must try harder.* I was frantic for her to understand the seriousness of her situation. Something was different this time. If I could actually communicate back and forth with her, instead of simply sending images and instructions, then maybe Sarah could be saved despite how sure I felt that she had to depart. *You were never meant to save me, Hope. My death will not be your fault any more than your mother's.* My confusion grew at the mention of my mother. *Sarah, I don't understand what you're talking about. What do you know about my mother?* I'd always blamed myself for my mother's death, but no one other than my father knew anything about that. *You grow more powerful every day, she continued. You'll have the answers you're looking for. Now please, Hope. Let me go.* The feeling became more urgent. I nodded and tried to ignore my own heartbreak. Salty tears continued to slowly travel down my stricken face. I released Sarah's head and broke off the connection between us. The hospital monitor beeped slow and deliberate. I watched as Sarah's heartbeats grew fewer and farther between until nothing remained but one long, uninterrupted line. * * * I sat in the hallway outside the intensive care unit thinking how unusual it had been to actually talk with Sarah. I had no idea what it meant or how it was possible. The life force of a person acted as more of a conduit to the human subconscious. It was always aware of what happened within the body and sent me images of exactly what needed to be fixed. I could usually feel a person's pain, but beyond that there was no other connection that might have led to a two-way conversation. Deep in thought, I didn't sense my father's presence until I felt him wrap an arm around my shoulder. I only hoped my eyes weren't too puffy. I knew he'd worry and tell me I should quit my job at the hospital or something equally ridiculous. "I'm so sorry, Hope," he said as he eased back in his seat and rested his head on the wall. "I really wanted to spare you the heartache." "I know, but I'm glad I did it. Something different happened this time." I kept my voice lowered. "What? What do you mean?" He sat up and leaned forward. "I mean, Sarah's life force actually spoke to me." Shock spread across his face. My dad may not have understood exactly how I managed the things that I did, but even *he* knew that kind of communication was unusual. He looked around carefully and whispered, "You better not tell me about this right now. Why don't you get home and get dinner started, and I'll be there in about an hour. We can talk about what this might mean then." For some reason I had this crazy desire to continue talking about my powers as loudly as I possibly could. Keeping everything a secret had always been difficult, but right now it felt stifling. I wanted to talk about who I was and what I could do without constantly looking over my shoulder. I knew anonymity was a frustrating must when it came to the amazing miracles that occasionally happened at the hospital. I understood that, but my father wanted me to remain anonymous in almost every way imaginable. I couldn't have a Facebook, Twitter or email account. I couldn't blog, and I was barely allowed a cell phone. He didn't want any of my personal information on the Internet. A year ago, I'd gone online to order a copy of my birth certificate so I could get my driver's license, and I couldn't find anything. No record of my birth anywhere. I mentioned it to my father and he told me he'd take care of it. Eventually he did, but it felt like we were hiding from someone specific instead of the whole world in general. It still felt

that way. "Do you want lasagna or meatloaf?" I asked a little louder. "Lasagna will be fine. Be sure to go straight home, Hope. It's already dark out." "Dad, we live two blocks away. It'll be fine." Sometimes my father's overprotective nature felt like incessant nagging. He just smiled at me and shook his head. I stood up, gave him a big hug, and then walked down the hall toward the elevators. I waited for the dilapidated machinery to make its way to the second floor. The elevator and I had a love-hate relationship. I hated that it made me wait longer than was necessary, and I was convinced it loved making me wait. I had plenty of time to think about Sarah again. Not only was I confused about the strange way in which I'd managed to communicate with her, but the remarks she'd made about my mother left me feeling unsettled and anxious. I don't know at what exact moment I decided to go visit Kirby, but I found myself getting off the shaky elevator onto the third floor and hanging a right toward the children's cancer wing. Turning into the first room on the left, I found Kirby lying on his bed reading *The Maze Runner*. His level of reading was exceptional for a boy his age. His vocabulary wasn't half bad either. He immediately dropped his book on the bed as soon as I entered the room. "I was wondering if you'd get a chance to visit me today," he said, smiling brightly. "That desperate for entertainment, are we?" I gave him a big grin and sat down on the bed next to him. He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed tight. I hugged him back, sensing there was something bothering him. "The TV's boring, and I've read all of these books at least ten times. The most exciting thing that's happened to me all day was the card I got in the mail from my mom." Ah ha. His mother was definitely a sore spot for him. "You're kidding!" My eyebrows rose in disbelief. "She sent you a card?" "I kid you not. I even saved it just in case you came by so we could both have a moment of silence to commemorate this rare, almost nonexistent occasion." He slowly reached under his mattress, creating a moment of unbearable suspense before unveiling the object of interest. "Pause for dramatic effect and voila!" he said as he produced the card and proceeded to open it with an equally dramatic flourish. I chuckled softly. "The card reads, and I quote, 'Dear son, so sorry I missed our little visit last week. Busy making millions. Please let me know if anything changes. Warmest wishes. Sincerely, your loving and devoted mother, Sylvia. P.S. Please tell Nanny May to go buy you whatever your heart desires for your birthday this year.'" "Oh, Kirby! I can't believe that woman isn't even going to be here for your birthday! She is absolutely heinous." "And yet, so predictable. I kind of like knowing where I stand with that pariah. Wouldn't you?" Kirby's smile was infectious, but I could see the hurt in his eyes despite the brave face he wore. Sylvia Herrington was a successful actress who'd never had much time for Kirby to begin with, but pulled away from him entirely when he was diagnosed with leukemia two years ago. When I'd first met Kirby, I found him to be wary and distant, unwilling to trust anyone or let anyone in. I'd also sensed his pain and heartbreak as if it were my own, and continued to visit him daily, reading to him some of his favorite books and short stories. Kirby's tastes in literature were pretty surprising for a ten-year-old. He loved *Tom Sawyer* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* but his favorite book was *Treasure Island*. He eventually began to thaw toward me, and within a couple of weeks we were good friends. My desire to heal him was inevitable, but I knew from the beginning I'd never be able to do so. It didn't stop me from attempting to heal his broken heart, however. At least in that I felt like I'd been somewhat successful. Kirby had grown up very independent for such a young child. With a mother like Sylvia, he absolutely had to. His sweet brown eyes may have held pain, but they also held maturity and a surprisingly positive outlook on life even though he didn't have much of it left to live. "Something's wrong, Hope," he said. Kirby read my moods as well as my own father. "It's nothing. I think I'm just tired and overloaded with homework from all of my antisocial school teachers." He shook his head and grabbed my hand. "You don't get to do that you know. It's me." He held my hand in his frail, tiny fist. His gaze locked with mine and he gave me an encouraging smile. "It's just me." His skin was paper thin and translucent. The tiny bones in his hand felt fragile in mine. I held it gently, afraid to break him. "My father called me in to help with Eve. She'd been in a car accident." "You couldn't save her?" he asked in a small voice. Kirby didn't know Eve personally, but he knew how upset I got when I failed to heal someone. Telling him about my healing capabilities had been unintentional. The first time I ever tried to heal him happened about a week after I began visiting him. It was late at night and he was sleeping, or so I thought. I'd sat down next to him on the bed, connected with his life force,

and decided to ease his pain since there was nothing more that I could do. His joints were aching and his stomach was upset from the chemotherapy he'd received earlier that day. The minute I finished, Kirby's dark brown eyes opened slowly, and the smile he gave me seemed to brighten the darkness of his hospital room. He wanted to know how I'd been able to make him feel so much better, and for some reason I decided to tell him. It was the first time in my life I'd ever discussed my gift with anyone other than my father. I'd never even told my best friend, Angie, about it, and she was the first person I'd ever healed. She was the reason I'd discovered my abilities in the first place. I'd told Kirby, though, and had felt good doing it. "No, I was able to save her. I just couldn't save Sarah." Kirby grabbed my other hand and made me look at him. "The mayor's office aid?" I nodded. "I know you feel responsible, but there was nothing you could do. You know this. When it's a person's time to go, you can't save them." He spoke quietly now, knowing that no one else should hear this conversation. "There are so many good and wonderful people in this world who deserve to live. They deserve to stay." I lowered my eyes and whispered, "You deserve to stay." "This is really about me, isn't it?" he asked. I bit my lip, struggling to choke back so many unwanted emotions. "Hope, you've been trying to heal me at least three times a week for a while now. It sucks that it isn't meant to be, but there must be a reason for it. Instead of fighting it, just be happy that you got the chance to try. Being told no doesn't have to be so sad. Dying doesn't have to be so final." Kirby shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just moving on to the next phase of my journey a little earlier than most people do." "First of all, what ten-year-old talks about his death as if he were Gandhi or Obi Wan Kenobi, and who says I have to sit back and accept it?" Tears began their slow descent down my cheeks. He pulled my hands to either side of his face. His eyes were filled with love and concern. Concern for me. He was dying from leukemia, and instead of feeling sorry for himself he was trying to console me. *Typical Kirby*, I thought. "Check again, and tell me whether or not you can heal me." He closed his eyes and waited for me to try. I breathed in deeply to steady my emotions and reached out for Kirby's life force. It wasn't hard to find. Connecting to it was even easier, but I knew the answer even before I saw it. Abnormal blood cells were deep in the bone marrow and multiplying at a rate that not even chemo or a bone marrow transplant could prevent. Kirby was supposed to die. "Well?" he whispered as I continued to go through all the images his life force showed me. "I can't." I could barely get the words out. They felt awful passing through my lips. "Then stop blaming yourself and start accepting what is meant to be." He brought his hands up to cover mine. "I'm not afraid to die, big sister. Plus, I'm totally jazzed to meet Elvis when I get to the other side." His smile was bright and contagious. I focused again as I sensed more of his emotions. "You're in pain. Why didn't you tell me it was so bad when I came in?" "You're tired. It's just my joints acting up again. All the doctors have pretty much given up on chemo. You can help me some other night." I stubbornly shook my head. "No, just relax, and I'll take care of this so you can sleep tonight." "Hope, you're tired," Kirby repeated as he tried to push my hands away. "You've had to do this a lot tonight. You won't be able to walk home." He looked out the window and narrowed his eyes. "The fog is rolling in thick." We lived in a small city along the northern coast of California called Eureka. It was beautiful country. You had the ocean to the left and redwoods to the right. The only downside this far north was the weather. It was either chilly or freezing, and it rained all the time. The fog wasn't my favorite thing to deal with. Driving in it at night was a pain, but walking in it didn't worry me. "I'll manage." I closed my eyes and began the process of easing Kirby's pain before he could voice another protest. I sensed his body relaxing as I lowered him back on his bed and pulled the covers over him. "Thanks, big sis," he said. He reached for my hand as his eyelids closed. "You're welcome, little bro." "You'll stay 'til I fall asleep?" "Of course I will, Kirby." I kissed his pale cheek and waited until he drifted off to sleep; waited until his breathing evened out before getting up and making my way to the door. Pausing in the doorway, I felt reluctant to leave him. He didn't have much time left. Just a few weeks. Some of his emotions flooded through me as a direct result of our connection, and I gasped in surprise at the awful sorrow he harbored in his heart due to his mother's absence. Well, his mother may have been absolutely worthless, but I was here for him. Always. I'd never let him die alone. I looked back at him one last time and blew a silent kiss his way before walking into the hallway and heading for the exit. I wasn't up for another battle of wills with the annoying, elevator so I took the

stairs. I made it to the first floor and out the door in record time. No doubt the elevator would have held me captive for an extra ten minutes. It was the prickling feeling on the back of my neck that first made me suspect I was being watched again. No, not just watched. This time I was being followed.

I quickly turned around and glanced behind me. The hospital lights were blazing from within, and there was quite a bit of activity visible. No one other than medical personnel was within walking distance from where I stood, and yet I knew someone shadowed me. It was completely different from the feelings I'd experienced over the last two weeks. I wondered if the creepy presence I felt was coming from a hospital room window. Did I have two stalkers now? The fog rolling in muted the lights from the hospital, making everything else look smoky and a bit out of focus. It definitely upped the creep factor. I turned around and continued on my way, counting the cracks in the sidewalk like I always did. I was fairly certain I had those cracks memorized. I told myself this was slightly less pathetic than my intense dislike of social outings and my virgin lips status. Two blocks later, and I'd almost managed to distract myself from my own irrational suspicions. Then I heard the footsteps. For every step I took, I could have sworn another person took one behind me. The footsteps were soft though, almost padded it seemed, and stealthy. Taking time to look behind me was probably a bad idea. My best friend Angie had made me sit through enough horror movies to know that when the girl turns around to see who is following her, no one is there, and when she turns back she smacks right into the very thing she's running from. So I kept my focus straight ahead as I began jogging across the street and onto the next block. The footsteps kept pace with my light jogging. That's when I began to freak out a bit. I took deep breaths and continued on, wondering if it was such a good idea to lead the psychopath to my doorstep. I mean, my father wouldn't be home for another hour. I should have been running to Angie's house. I was only two houses away when I felt something hit my feet, causing me to lose my balance and slam roughly to the sidewalk. A hot wind brushed past my face as I went down, my hands and knees taking the brunt of my weight. I barely registered the pain it caused due to the loud explosion that ripped through the silence of the night. I looked up in time to see the tree ahead of me burst into a brilliant blaze of fire. *What the he-* Footsteps rushed up behind me, and I forced myself to my feet, turning in time to see...a cat. *No, wait. A cat?* The cat skidded to a halt, turned around and made a mad dash back the way it'd come. I couldn't believe a cat had made all that noise, and it certainly hadn't lit a tree on fire. I looked around the street to see if there was anyone else in the area. Hadn't anyone heard the explosion? My neighbors were old, but they weren't deaf. Not yet, anyway. I looked at the tree blazing a few feet in front of me. For a minute I stared at it, mesmerized, knowing that the bright orange flames licking the sides of the tree would've been consuming me if I hadn't tripped on...what had I tripped on? I bent my head down and searched for the hard object that had bruised me while simultaneously saving my life. A tree branch. It was thick and long, at least two feet. There was no way I wouldn't have noticed it on the sidewalk if it had been there in front of me. No, someone had definitely thrown it at my legs, but whether it was to help me or hurt me I simply didn't know. And what was up with the flame thrower? What idiot ran around chasing teenagers with fire balls? I tore my gaze away from the flaming tree and made it to my front porch without further incident. I turned around and began scanning the neighborhood again, which was probably a stupid thing to do. Someone had just attacked me. I should have been running inside the house, hiding under my bed and dialing 911 on my cell. I hadn't really expected to see anyone sticking around after that noisy explosion, so I was stupefied when I actually spotted someone standing in the shadows of the house across the street from me. I immediately felt a strange kind of magnetic pull urging me forward. I caught myself taking a step toward the stranger. The creaking of my porch step snapped me out of my trance long enough to make me realize what I was doing. Mind racing, I whirled around, opened my front door and slammed it behind me. I leaned against it, taking comfort in its sturdiness as I wondered if the events of the last ten minutes had actually happened. I could explain away the footsteps and the figure standing in the shadows. I wasn't the only one in the area who enjoyed late nights strolls. I could even talk myself into believing the tree branch I'd nearly cracked my ankle on had been there waiting for someone as clumsy as me...while I escaped a random stalker. *Okay, so how do I explain away the exploding tree?* Yeah, I had nothing. Another thing I found

difficult to wrap my brain around was the way that cat looked as it ran away from me. I was pretty sure my feline stalker had two tails. * * * "Dad, would you please come back inside? The lasagna is getting cold!" I shouted, following him to the front door. "There's no way anyone is out there now." My father had reacted rather violently when I told him some crazy person with a flame thrower had tried attacking me earlier. He'd grabbed a hammer from his set of tools and stormed out of the house, hell bent on finding the SOB who'd dared to threaten his daughter. In hindsight, blurting out the news to my father about my late-night stalker the minute he arrived home from work probably hadn't been the best way to greet him, but I'd been alone in the house for forty minutes, and I'd had all that time to obsess over it. It was probably a good thing I hadn't mentioned someone had been watching me for the past few weeks. He finally came back inside, looking disturbed. "Tell me again exactly what happened to you on your way home." As I sat across the table from him and retold my bizarre story I studied his strained features. "You're saying someone followed you, threw a tree branch at your feet, and then a fireball erupted and burned the tree in front of our neighbor's house?" "It kind of sounds stupid and rather anticlimactic when you sum it up like that, but yeah, that's exactly what happened." I waited for his response, but all I got was a disbelieving stare. "Dad, didn't you see the tree? I'm surprised Mrs. Simmons hasn't called the fire department yet." Now he looked worried. "Honey, I just checked that tree, and there was nothing wrong with it. There was no fire. No smoke. I couldn't even smell smoke. If that tree caught fire the way you said it did, it'd smell like a campfire out there." It was my turn to stare in disbelief. "That's impossible! I swear I saw the tree go up in flames. I've never been so scared in all my life. Plus, I got stalked by some ax-murderer." "I thought you said he had a flame thrower." "Which is how the tree caught on fire," I shouted. My father let out a tired sigh. "Okay, I believe you saw what you say you saw, but why did that guy bother to shoot a flame thrower at you and not attack you when you fell? It just doesn't make sense. Why isn't the tree on fire?" I sat at the table feeling like I'd stepped into the twilight zone. Was it possible I'd imagined everything? Maybe I'd been sleepwalking. Had I ever done that before? Not that I could remember. "I don't know. Maybe I'm just tired or something." I was so wishing I'd never brought it up. "Is this a side effect of healing we haven't encountered yet? Do you think the stress is getting to you and you're having hallucinations?" My father's question was innocent enough, but I felt a little insulted all the same. "You think I'm crazy," I accused. "No, that's not what I said." "You do," I insisted. "You think I've lost my mind." "Stop." My father placed a calming hand over mine. "You and I have had to navigate your abilities blindly. We've had no help, no information. There isn't a manual that can explain why you're capable of doing what you do or what the side effects and repercussions could be for you long term. Tonight, something very unusual happened with Sarah, and you managed to communicate with her." He gave me an amazed look. "An actual conversation, Hope. What if that put some strain on you? Not to mention the stressful situation I put you in by asking you to heal Eve. Maybe you just need to take a break from the hospital for a while and focus on yourself for a change." I breathed deeply through my nose instead of saying something snotty and tried to look at the situation from my father's point of view, although I was finding it hard to do. I should have known he'd somehow tie this back to my job at the hospital. "I don't know how I was able to communicate with Sarah, but why should we view this as such a negative thing?" "What was the conversation about then?" he asked pointedly. "She wanted me to let her go." I squeezed my tired eyes shut for a minute as my father processed this new development. I also didn't want him sensing I was withholding information from him. "Well, this has to mean something. Are your abilities beginning to grow? Have you felt different in any way?" He was studying me as if he were about to perform a complicated surgery that required excessive planning first. "I felt just the same as I always do after trying to heal someone...and failing miserably." I muttered that last part. "I feel perfectly normal." Normal being relative in this case. "Sarah did mention my powers are getting stronger, but I have no idea how she knew that unless her connection to me gave her that information." I felt frustrated at not having the pieces of the puzzle laid out before me. "This is really interesting, and what does it mean for you in the future? So far what you do merely makes you a little tired. You also tend to take on some rather unfortunate personality traits from the people you heal, but other than that you seem to be fine."

"I *am* fine," I replied automatically. "Physically you're fine. I'm not so sure how you are emotionally. Did she say anything else?" I considered sharing the comment Sarah made in regards to my mom, but I couldn't do it. I didn't want to see the heartbreak resurfacing on my dad's face. "Nope, that was the extent of the exchange between us." I wished I could've sounded more convincing. I knew my father would sense that I was keeping something back. Thankfully, he didn't push the subject further. "At any rate, this is something new to deal with, and maybe it's affecting your ability to tell what is real from what isn't. You should take a break from healing for a while, and we can see if anything strange—like a tree catching on fire when it really didn't—happens again." I frowned, completely annoyed by this. "I'll compromise with you," I said leveling my gaze at him. "I won't heal anyone for a whole week if you promise to quit harping about my job at the hospital. I only work there three nights a week, and it's the best job I've ever had." My father rolled his eyes. "It's the only job you've ever had. You're a janitor for heaven's sake! Don't you think you're more qualified for something else? Do you really love cleaning that much?" "You're completely missing the point. Of course I don't like to clean. I like to heal, and I'm good at it." I smashed my fork into my cold lasagna and shoved a piece into my mouth, glowering at him as I chewed. "You don't have to work at the hospital to heal people," he said, trying another tactic. "I could call you if there are any emergencies I think you should be aware of." "That's just it, Dad. They are emergencies!" I set my fork down, knowing if I didn't I might fling it across the room in frustration. "I almost didn't get to Eve in time tonight. Do you realize that?" From the solemn look on my father's face I could tell that he did. "It was crucial for me to get to her as soon as possible. Every second matters. You know this. There are some people that I just can't heal, but I'll be damned before I allow another person who can be healed to die just because I can't get there in time." My father studied me silently across the table then put his fork down and rubbed his tired eyes. "I think there are a couple of things bothering you." "The only thing bothering me is your desire to fire me." "Did you go visit Kirby again tonight?" He sat back in his chair looking as if he already knew the answer to that question. I was confused by the change in topic. "Um, yeah. I did." "He's part of what you're frustrated about, isn't he? Because you can't heal him?" I stared down at my dinner plate. I was so tired of crying, and now, not only could I not heal the people I wanted to, but I was hallucinating because I was healing too much. "You're doing it again." He looked like he was getting ready to bring up another sensitive subject. "I'm just visiting him." I swallowed hard, knowing my father wasn't buying it. I tried reasoning with him. "His mother doesn't want anything to do with him. Since he's ill he's not something she can use to further her career. He needs some support. He needs a friend, and we're friends." I looked up to see the sympathy in my father's eyes and took that as a good sign. "At the very least I can help him manage his pain, even if it's just for a little while longer." He nodded. "He doesn't have much more time?" "No." I was grateful he didn't ask for a specific date. "I think it's great that you visit Kirby. He needs someone like you to keep up his spirits, but who's keeping up yours? I'm really concerned about what this is doing to you emotionally." I remained silent. My lasagna sat cold and lumpy in front of me. "You're too attached to him, too close to the situation, and you may be trying to ease his pain, but I know you, Hope. You're trying to heal him, too. Not being able to heal someone always wears you out more than anything because of the way you beat yourself up when you can't. And yet you keep doing it when you already know what's coming. You're setting yourself up for some real heartbreak here. What happens when he's gone?" I flinched. It felt like my heart was being pulled from my chest. I raised my eyes to his and tried to remain outwardly unaffected by his question. "I'll be fine." The words sounded hollow, even to me. "I'm completely prepared for the inevitable here. It's not like I'm a stranger to death. Besides, Kirby helps me be at peace with...with things." I swallowed the lump forming in my throat and knew my father was once again not buying it. I sucked so much at lying to him. Of course it'd affect me. We both knew I'd be a total wreck once Kirby was gone, but admitting it would only further my father's convictions that not only should I not work at the hospital anymore, I shouldn't go visit Kirby anymore either. "Please stop doing this to yourself," he pleaded. "Don't you remember how bad you were after your mother died?" Wow, he really wasn't holding anything back tonight. "That was different," I managed to choke out. "She was my mother, and she wasn't supposed to die." I pushed my

lasagna around my plate slowly. "Ten seconds, Dad. That's all I needed. If I'd been there ten seconds sooner she would have been just fine. That's why I need to be there. I need to be at that hospital because ten seconds can change everything. It can change it all." He nodded his head, his suspicions confirmed. "You took too much on. Blamed yourself for what was out of your control." He had to stop abruptly and breathe a bit as a tear slowly made its way down the side of his face. "If you'll remember, I wasn't much help in saving her life either, and I'm the doctor." My father gave me a weak smile laced with self-reproach. I saw the pain he tried to mask and felt like I'd put it there. "There wasn't anything a doctor could do. The damage that bullet did to her heart was impossible for anyone to repair, anyone but me." I reached across the table for my father's hand and grasped it in my own. We both sat in silence, father and daughter thinking about Julia Fairmont's death. "You've been doing your best to make up for a situation that no ten-year-old should have had to deal with. I see you trying to be everything for everyone just in case there's a chance that you'll be too late, but Hope, honey, people die. You can't save the world." "I can try," I whispered determinedly. My father sighed in defeat. "Let's talk about something a little less...depressing." He reached for his fork and took his first bite of lasagna, then grimaced. "Too cold." He picked up his plate and walked over to the microwave. "So, let's talk about school. How are your classes going?" "I thought you said you wanted to talk about something less depressing. You've failed miserably." I gave up on any attempt at eating my lasagna. As far as I was concerned, anything you had to reheat wasn't worth eating. "You love school. Are you struggling in your classes? Why is this the first I've heard about it?" I put up a calming hand before he had an aneurysm. "Dad, everything's fine. I'm getting A's in all my classes, okay? I'm just bored with it is all. The subjects are super easy, and the only thing I find even remotely interesting is my class in folklore and mythology." "I didn't know you were taking that. You started that this semester then, or were you taking it in the fall as well?" "It's not like math. Public education only allows you to take fun classes for one semester. Math is used to torture us all year." His eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I thought you said your classes were easy." "The words 'easy' and 'torture' go hand in hand in this case. Math easily tortures me. Plus, nothing even remotely interesting ever happens to me." My dad gave me a wry look. I realized that statement must have sounded strange coming from a girl with the ability to heal people. "I'm referring to the fact that I go to my classes, I take notes, I turn in homework assignments, and I ace my tests. It's all pretty predictable." "What about guys? Isn't there someone you're interested in at school?" His fake smile hinted at his disgruntlement on the subject. "Please. The only action I'm getting around here is experienced vicariously through Angie. I swear that girl has a different boyfriend every other week." Now his smile was genuine. "Don't look so thrilled. The relief is oozing from your eyeballs." "I'm not thrilled. Who said I was thrilled? It's perfectly healthy and normal for you to be dating at this age. Kissing boys in parked cars. Getting your heart broken by some immature guy who gets drunk on the weekends and cheats on you with some bleached blond cheerleader. All part of the learning process." "What if I *did* start to date someone? Then how would you feel?" I gave my father a tiny smirk. "Completely unthrilled." "Unthrilled? Dad, that is so not a word." "I'm your father and a doctor, and that means unthrilled is most definitely a part of the English language. How is Angie doing by the way? I haven't seen her in about two days now. That's like a record for you two, isn't it?" I smiled, thinking of my crazy best friend. "She's had the flu for a couple of days now. I thought about healing her, but she enjoys whining and complaining so much I figured all the babying her mom does would make her that much more enjoyable to be around once she got back to school." Dad chuckled softly, retrieving his lasagna from the microwave and sitting back down. "I don't get you two at all. I know you're best friends, and I love having Angie over, but you're nothing like each other." I thought about that for a second. Angie and I were different in every way imaginable. Personality, clothing styles, opinions, and even right down to the way we looked... everything was different. I would have loved to look like Angie, but I'd been stuck with thick black hair, olive colored skin, and dark blue, almond shaped eyes. Not a terrible combination, but Angie's appearance leaned more toward the femme fatal variety. I broke from my musings and realized my dad was waiting for some kind of response from me. "Angie helps me loosen up a little bit here and there, and I keep her from going to jail and possibly getting herself killed. We

balance each other out," I reasoned. My father's lips lifted in amusement. I stood up from the table and put my full plate of lasagna in front of him, knowing he'd be more than happy to eat it. "Well, I hope for your sake that something crazy happens at school tomorrow, even if Angie isn't there to instigate it." "Even with Angie there, I still have math class." I smiled brightly as my father's laughter followed me up the staircase and into my bedroom. My cell phone began to ring as I walked across my room and flung myself haphazardly on my ivory colored bedspread. I laughed, recognizing the ring tone as one of Angie's personal favorites. *Moves Like Jagger* blared loudly from my cell phone. "Were your ears burning?" I asked sweetly. "So you *were* talking about me," Angie said. "I can't say I'm surprised. The thought of you discussing my many virtues and accomplishments, simply delights me." Her voice came out low and throaty. Angie is, I think, the most stunning beauty to have ever graced the face of this earth, a sentiment she probably shares. No false modesty in her corner. Fiery red hair...check. Perfect porcelain skin ...check. Emerald green eyes...check and check. "You know I *do* have other friends," I said. "You didn't consider the possibility that I might have been discussing my latest love interest before you called?" "With your father? Please!" I smiled as Angie's loud gasp crackled through the receiver. "Wait, do you have someone you're crushing on? Because if you do, and you talked to your dad about it before talking with me, I will hunt you down and force you to eat an anchovy pizza...minus the pizza!" I had to smile. She always made me feel so normal. It was partly why I loved having Angie in my life. Though I'd never admit to it out loud, my father was right. The constant weight of everyone else's pain was beginning to wear on me. I always felt like I led two different lives. There was Hope, the serious healer, and Hope, the carefree, average teenager. If Angie and I had never become friends, I don't think I'd have known how to balance my secret life with my supposedly normal high school one. "Oh, yes. I can visualize you trying to pin me down while shoving slimy, miniature fish in my mouth. You'd die before laying one of your nicely manicured fingers on something so beneath you," I teased. "This is very true." Angie sounded disappointed. "It's a shame you know me so well. That threat might have held some validity with anyone less worthy." "And yet, it resembles the latest boy you broke up with: shallow and empty." "Hey, Nathan was very full of...well...he was full of something." Angie's laughter sang sweetly through my cell phone. "Full of himself, you mean?" "Too true. The last date we went on, he spent a full ten minutes looking at his reflection in his dinner spoon." I held back the urge to give her a big lecture on her awful taste in guys. "Tell me you made him pay for dinner that time." "Are you kidding? I got up and left, making sure I got a 'to go' box, of course." "Of course." I thought about Nathan Treadwell and the insane level of stupid he managed to operate under on a daily basis. "Why do you always go for guys who treat you like crap, Angie?" There was silence on her end. I waited for her to break down and actually talk to me seriously for once about this subject. "Well, they're always such fantastic kissers. Have you ever met a nice guy who actually knows how to kiss? And if you did, would he actually be good looking?" I shook my head. Clearly, her plan was total avoidance. "Angie, there are nice, handsome guys out there who are good kissers." "I'm going to have to disagree with you on that one. If a guy is a good kisser, it's because he's good looking, and because of his good looks he has various opportunities to use said good looks in the pursuit of women. Which also gives him plenty of practice with kissing, which simultaneously makes him a good kisser and a first rate jerk...or man whore...whichever term you prefer." I decided to match her light tone with my own. "Then I suppose, in order to avoid the jerks of this world, it's going to be of the utmost importance that we date only non-attractive, second rate kissers for the rest of our miserable lives." "Your words are poison to me." I let out a soft chuckle. "So," she continued, "has that magnificent melon of yours come up with fantastic songs needing debuting at Espresso?" Espresso was a very popular café/restaurant, dedicated to giving high school students a chance to "express" themselves. You could read poetry, sing songs, play your own music, and perform any other type of talent while others ate, mingled, and enjoyed the entertainment. The atmosphere was pretty awesome and laid-back. Angie and I had become regulars there, due in large part to her insistence that I take my journal full of lyrics and sing them for the "undeserving masses lucky enough to be present." Once we'd joined the ranks of high schoolers, we'd started going there every week. Over time, I'd become good friends with the members of the band who worked there on a permanent

basis. All I had to do was give them the chords and they were on board with whatever. As a rule, I don't like drawing attention to myself, but this is normal, healthy, high school attention, and for me, I really need the release. "Perhaps," I answered. "Why? Are you suggesting we head over there and check out the night life?" "Heavens, no! I'm still feeling quite overcome by this vicious flu bug," she huffed. "I need one more day to relax, recover, and enjoy my mother waiting on me hand and foot." "Sounds pleasant enough." "Oh, believe me, it is." Angie sounded extremely pleased with herself. "I just need to know when you're planning your next performance. There's this guy I want you to meet." "No guys! I can't focus on my singing when you do stuff like that." Angie's exasperated sigh crackled over the connection. "Fine, since you refuse to allow me any excitement, did anything crazy happen to you tonight...without my help? In other words, would you really have a life if I didn't insist that you live it?" I rolled my eyes, which was pointless since Angie wasn't there to see it. Then my thoughts went to recent events and my alleged hallucination. "Well, something really weird happened to me as I was walking home from work." "Ooooh. Do tell. Did you meet a handsome stranger?" "You're so optimistic, and no, I did not. I think I have a stalker, though. I'm not one for the dramatics, but I could've sworn someone was not only watching me, but following me. I could actually hear their footsteps behind me." "Hope, are you serious or do I need to be waiting for some kind of punch line here?" "No, I'm totally serious. There was someone out there. I started running, and whoever was behind me started running." "Whaaaaat?" "I know. Freaky, right? But it gets worse." I rolled to the middle of my bed and began plucking at the fringe on my throw pillow in an effort to calm my nerves. "As I'm running, something hits my legs and sends me sprawling to the cement just as this weird burst of flame shoots past me and hits the tree in front of me." I accidentally tugged too hard and broke off several wispy pieces. I frowned down at my handiwork and folded my hand underneath me. "I swear this really happened, but when I told my dad, he said he'd just walked past the tree and there was nothing wrong with it. He thinks I just imagined it." Telling the story again made me realize how crazy it did, in fact, sound. On the other hand, talking about narrowly escaping a large ball of fire made sitting alone in my room entirely too creepy. I looked toward my window and wondered if my attacker was still outside waiting for me. What if he was watching me? I stood up fast and walked over to the window. "So, someone followed you, sent a flame thrower your way, and there's no sign of any damage to the tree or any idea of who your stalker is?" Her voice had risen in volume. My window faced the front of the house, and I couldn't help but look out toward the deserted street in search of my would-be killer. Nothing. Of course, with the heavy fog encircling the entire neighborhood it was kind of difficult to make out much of anything. "No. I must be going crazy," I said. "Could I have hallucinated the whole thing?" "Hope, you're the sanest person I know. If anyone was going to hallucinate about something like that, you know it'd be me. Although, I haven't touched an illegal drug since that day in ninth grade when you found me cutting my hair off in the girl's bathroom because I thought it was full of snakes." "Yes, and what a special day that was." One of Angie's more unfortunate personality traits was a penchant for self-destructive behavior. I couldn't figure out if it had to do with her daddy issues or the problems she had as a child. When Angie was seven, she took a bad fall from my tree house and when she regained consciousness, with my help of course, she had a difficult time deciphering between reality and fantasy. It scared me, some of the things she would mutter under her breath about seeing death and preventing it from taking people she loved. I was too little to understand what was happening to her. Her mother took her away for a few months to get her some help, and when she came back she never talked about it again. I did my best to wheedle the whole story out of her, but she simply played dumb, insisted there had never been anything wrong to begin with, and never allowed me to broach the subject again. Her wild behavior took front row after that. Fortunately, her drug phase had been a one-time deal. "Your hair didn't look half bad, either." "And still you lie. You're such a good friend. No, I'm inclined to believe every crazy word you just uttered. Having said that, I'm completely freaked out. You shouldn't walk to school by yourself tomorrow." "You're sounding like my father, now." I turned my back to the window and plopped myself down on my bed. "No need to insult me. My request is a valid one considering what just happened tonight. You have your own car. You should drive it every once in a while." "The high

school is five blocks away. It'd be a waste of gas." "I've never understood this need of yours to walk everywhere. It's like you enjoy the exercise, and you and I both know that *that* is absolutely ridiculous." "Okay, you win. I'll drive to school tomorrow." "I always win. You never put up much of a fight, you know." "Would the outcome ever change if I did?" "Of course not!" "Then why prolong the inevitable?" "Too true," Angie said. I couldn't help but smile at that. "Well, since I don't have the flu or any tropical diseases preventing me from going to school tomorrow, I better get some sleep." "All right. I'll call you tomorrow so you can update me on all things high school." "Should be the shortest conversation we've ever had," I said dryly. "Please be careful." Her voice became unfamiliarly serious. "You really have got me freaked out." "I'll be careful," I promised. I hung up the phone and looked back at my window. It was morbid. I knew it was, but I just had to look outside one more time. The need to reassure myself no one was spying on me was an obvious sign of paranoia, but I jumped up from my bed and walked over to the window anyway. Gazing out across my quiet neighborhood made me want to laugh at how worked up I'd allowed myself to get. Honestly, the most dangerous thing in my neck of the woods was a potential visit from my neighbor, Mrs. Simmons, bearing homemade biscuits capable of rendering the most durable molar in two. I was so busy rolling my eyes at myself, I almost missed the dark figure standing on the only patch of unlit sidewalk in front of my house. It was definitely the same figure I'd spotted when I was on my front porch, and it was definitely a guy, but beyond that I couldn't make out any other details. I felt that same mysterious pull, making me lean forward a little. The only thing that prevented me from walking toward him in some hypnotic, trance-like state was my closed bedroom window. My forehead bumped the ledge lightly, and I was suddenly back to myself. I blinked a few times to clear my head and focused in on the guy again. The mist surrounding his body clung to him in strange and unnatural ways. It was definitely horror movie material. Then he craned his head backward, looking up at something. Was he looking at me? I glanced down at my cell phone and started dialing Angie's number, but when I looked up again the guy was gone. Vanished into the ethereal looking fog. Freaky. Setting my phone on my desk, I willed myself to calm down. I was seeing things again. I just needed to get some sleep...and possibly down a few anti-psychotics. Too bad I didn't have any. I turned out my lights and ran to my bed, still feeling like I was being watched. I wondered if going outside in search of the dark figure was smart or suicidal. It was going to be a very long night. * * * Waking up in the morning was difficult. Not only did I feel exhausted from the events of the previous evening, but my body was a little off. Maybe I should have actually eaten my lasagna. After getting showered and dressed for the day I quickly made my way down the stairs. I still hadn't heard a peep from my father and figured he'd slept through his alarm. As I entered the kitchen and pulled some cereal down from the cupboard I noticed a note taped to the refrigerator. *Got called in early this morning. Will see you later tonight. Love, Dad* I was surprised I hadn't heard him leave. I'm usually a pretty light sleeper. I poured some Wheaties into a bowl and turned toward the fridge to get some milk. That's when I heard an odd noise coming from the living room. *Click click.* I stood still for a minute, listening. *Click click.* What in the world? It sounded like acrylic nails tapping a hardwood floor. I walked slowly out of the kitchen and made my way down the hall, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise. When I approached the entrance to the living room, the clicking abruptly cut off. I stopped as well, holding my breath, listening for more. The silence that filled the house made me feel slightly uncomfortable, and for the first time I wondered if maybe I was in some kind of danger. *I'm an idiot. One psychotic delusion, and suddenly everyone is out to get me. Click click.* This time it came from the dining room to my right. Delusional or not, I was officially terrified. Getting out of the house seemed like a reasonable conclusion to come to, but fear had paralyzed me, leaving my legs frozen and unresponsive even though the need to flee had intensified two-fold. I could have been blowing things out of proportion, right? Homes made funny noises all the time. I was simply more aware of it now because...because...well, someone had tried to kill me last night. Hadn't they? The hair on the back of my neck stood up as the faint sound of footsteps sounded behind me. All of my weak attempts at thinking rationally flew out the window as panic took over, and I whirled around, sprinting for the front door. I ran into a hard, sturdy figure blocking my way, causing me to fall butt first on the hardwood floor. I let out a squeal of surprise, blindly jumped to

my feet, and lifted my fist to deck whoever threatened my safety. "Whoa, Hope. What's wrong with you?" I looked up, startled to see my dad standing there in front of me instead of the crazy ax-murderer I'd envisioned. "Dad? You scared the living poop outta me," I practically shouted. "What in the world are you doing here?" "I live here." I stared at him hard trying to figure out if he was being serious or sarcastic. "Yes, I'm well aware of that. I'm talking about the note you left saying you got called in to the hospital. What are you doing back so soon?" The look on my father's face made it abundantly clear that I'd baffled him. I thought about grabbing the note from the fridge and waving it in his face, but his expression switched from puzzlement to embarrassment. "Right. The note. Turns out they didn't need me after all." His words came out slow and hesitant. "Dad, are you all right?" Something certainly wasn't right. The hospital always needed my father. I continued staring at him, trying to pinpoint what it was about him that felt different. "Of course I am, darling. I'm just a bit tired. I'm feeling a little sick, actually. Maybe you could make it better for me?" He said it like he wasn't sure I could. "Make what better for you, and how? And since when do you call me darling? A little formal, don't you think?" Now I was really confused. I hadn't sensed my father had any health issues the night before. I had a habit of checking on him whenever I gave him a hug or a squeeze on the hand. He was all I had left, and I wasn't going to lose him. I felt certain he wasn't coming down with anything, but something was definitely off about him. He acted like he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do next. Then he gave me an awkward smile and took several steps backward. "Well, you should probably be getting to school now. Don't you think?" His backward stride picked up some momentum. I stood uncertain in the hallway, watching him continue to put distance between us. "Uh, sure, Dad. You'll be okay?" "Yeah." He turned away quickly and swung himself toward the bottom of the staircase. I listened as my father stomped up the stairs, entered his bedroom, and shut the door behind him. What the crap? I moved to the front door, grabbed my backpack from off the ground, and walked outside to my car. My beat up Chevy wasn't much, but it was mine. I climbed in and set my backpack on the passenger seat, all the while sensing someone watching me...again. It was the same awful sensation I'd felt last night on the way home from work. I looked up and saw my father staring down from his bedroom window. *What is going on with him?* I considered getting out of my truck and going back inside to figure out what was really happening here, but the idea of entering my own home made me feel nervous. Without understanding why, I quickly backed out of the driveway and pulled away from the house. I studied the tree in Mrs. Simmons' front yard as I passed by. It looked completely unscathed. I pulled over to the side of the road and quickly climbed out of my truck. I had to get a closer look. After reaching the tree in two running strides, I stared up at the perfectly browned bark with its rough and slightly weathered texture. Not a burn mark on it. There was absolutely no sign it'd been torched last night. I glanced around, still feeling like someone watched me. "I'm losing my freaking mind," I muttered under my breath. I returned to my truck and headed for the high school. As I glanced in my rear-view mirror, I could have sworn I saw another flash of that very odd looking cat, a cat with two tails. * * * I walked through the front doors of Eureka High School and gritted my teeth as a young boy with spiked hair and several rings in his face ran into me. The brief contact gave me enough time to connect with his life force. It happened instinctively, and I was shocked I'd connected to it at all. It usually took a little more time than that. He was nursing a fractured wrist and a bad sprained ankle. The injuries felt recent. I wondered if a fight broke out before I'd arrived, then noticed the skateboard in his hand. I did my best to smother the sympathetic emotions stirring within me. Now was not the time or place to heal a fellow student. Forcing myself to move away from him, I carefully made my way down the hall. Several other students managed to jar me, one right after the other. Their various aches and pains overwhelmed me. Realizing I'd managed to connect to several life forces in a matter of seconds, I froze in my tracks. I tried to hold perfectly still, not wanting to accidentally connect with anyone else. As soon as a pathway cleared, I frantically rushed down the hall and into my first class of the day. I stood in the doorway and leaned against the wall, feeling like I'd just passed through a war zone. My thoughts returned to Sarah's comments concerning my increase in power. *It's been such a lovely, abnormal morning.* I walked over to my desk and nearly slammed my knee into it when I saw Angie sitting at hers with a cat-like grin on her gorgeous face. Not only was

she here a full day earlier than expected, but she was early to our mythology class. Early wasn't Angie's style. "Hey, I can't believe you're here. I thought you said you needed another day to recuperate. Are you better already?" "I still feel a bit drained and achy, but I heard there was a new guy in school and that he's totally hot. I couldn't stay home lounging around my bedroom while some slut—meaning Tanya Sedgwick—snatched him up before I did." I laughed, feeling relieved and happy to know that I had been right as far as Angie's illness was concerned. I'd begun to wonder if something was wrong with me. Maybe I was sick. It rarely happened, and I didn't usually notice since it was so easy for my body to heal itself. Sometimes, I had to force my body to stop the healing process just so I could get sick occasionally like any normal human being. Not a pleasant experience. "Hey, Hope. HOOOOOOOPE!" Angie waved her hands back and forth in my face. "Sorry," I said. "My brain damage has been especially debilitating this morning." "Wow, that word had a lot of syllables in it. I keep warning you that everyone is going to start believing you're incredibly ancient." She reached over and gave me an I-haven't-seen-you-for-two-days hug. I squeezed her back, thinking that her remarks about being ancient felt spot on. I was exhausted. My stomach grumbled loudly. Exhausted and hungry. "Crap! I forgot to eat breakfast." I sat down in my seat and pulled a three-ring binder from my backpack. "So, tell me about this new guy. Wait, why didn't you tell me about him on the phone last night?" "After you and I finished talking, I received a phone call from a very reliable source who claims that a new family has moved into town, and one of those family members just happens to be male, our age, and hawwwat!" "Angie, your reliable source wouldn't by any chance be your eighty-year-old, next door neighbor, Mrs. Potts, would it?" "Exactly!" she said as if that statement alone proved the validity of her intel. That woman's stamina amazed me. Didn't eighty-year-old women need to be in bed by a certain time? "Please, she's a nosy gossip with absolutely nothing to do all day except make up crazy stories to report to the police. Don't you remember that one time when she convinced the entire police department a bomb had been planted in her front driveway?" "That was pretty entertaining. She made like a million éclairs and kept feeding them to all the onlookers." She moved to the front of my desk. "I think she's just lonely, personally." "She's also blind as a bat." "I know. Crazy how she was able to see a hot guy across the street from her house, don't you think?" It was obvious Angie had purposely missed my point. "What's even crazier is that she'd care enough to call and tell you. Wait, that means the hot guy lives like two houses away from you," I said, finally putting the pieces together. "I know!" she squealed. I tapped my pencil to my forehead in an effort to jump-start my sluggish brain cells. I was really struggling this morning. She leaned over the front of my desk, looking ready to impart some big, juicy secret. I gave her an encouraging smile, knowing Angie enjoyed having an avid audience, even if it was just me. "Okay, these are the deets. His name is Tie and he's hot, hot, and hot." I stared at her as the shock registered on my face. "That's all you know? That's all Mrs. Potts told you? This is completely unacceptable. Your investigative skills are getting rusty, Angie. You usually have a guy's entire life history memorized within the first ten minutes of him showing up on your hot guy radar, and all you know about this one is his first name? You got a last name floating around there somewhere?" "Okay, first of all, I've been out of commission so cut me some slack here, and second, that was pretty much all Mrs. Potts knew. There really wasn't much to find, although I did happen to inadvertently get a copy of his class schedule, and I know he has folklore and mythology with us." "Ah ha. That's why you're here early. I was wondering." I wiggled my eyebrows at her. "And you got his class schedule...how?" It was Angie's turn to do some eyebrow wiggling. "For your safety and security, I feel it's imperative I keep my sleuthing skills to myself." "You totally made out with Mr. Peterson's office aide, didn't you?" Her eyes widened. She was all innocence. "It was a small price to pay for life, liberty, and the pursuit of hotness." "Well, considering the fact you probably just gave him your flu bug, I'd say the only one paying the price in this situation is the office aide." "And I know he'll think it was so worth it!" She let out a naughty little laugh. I joined in and couldn't stop as other students started filing in. The bell rang, and the last of the students fell into their chairs while Ms. Chinatsu Mori, our Folklore and Mythology teacher, stood up and addressed the class. I looked around the room expecting to see someone new and good-looking in one of the back seats, but the same old faces I'd seen since kindergarten stared vacantly past me. I looked to my left where Angie was sitting

and raised my eyebrows as if to say, *Where's the hot dude?* She just shrugged her shoulders, puzzled, and then faced forward, pretending that her faulty intel and the price she'd had to pay to get it wasn't as big a deal to her as it should have been. "All right folks, since it's February and Valentine's Day is right around the corner I thought it would be fun to discuss some folklore and mythology that centers around...love." Ms. Mori said the word love as if she were some swooning teenager. There was giggling and grumbling in equal amounts as she picked up her piece of chalk and walked over to the board. "Off the top of your head, who do you immediately think of?" she asked, chalk poised at the ready. "Cupid," yelled out a freshman. "Cupid, seriously?" Angie muttered under her breath. "Why do they let the little people in with the seniors? It hardly seems fair to the masses." "The masses, meaning us?" I inquired softly. "Of course I'm talking about us. Who else is as important?" My lips quirked into a smile, thinking Angie's statement was all the more hilarious because she was absolutely serious. Other students continued shouting out answers. "Okay, so we have Cupid, Venus, who else?" "How about Aphrodite?" Angie offered. "Wasn't she a goddess of love and beauty or something like that?" "That's correct, Ms. Bellingham." Ms. Mori wrote the name, Aphrodite, on the board in big flowing cursive. "At last. A mythological being I can finally relate to," Angie said in a relieved tone. I chuckled with the rest of the class. "Isn't Eros connected with Aphrodite?" asked another lowly freshman. "I think you students will find these figures from mythology are all connected in some way. For example, Cupid is the Roman god of love, and his name comes from the Latin term *cupido* meaning desire. He was a winged creature capable of shooting arrows at people's hearts in order to make them fall in love with whomever he wished." "Handy, that," I whispered to Angie. She scoffed. "As if you or I would ever need an arrow to make a guy fall in love with us." "I'd probably need a few," I said under my breath. "Eros, on the other hand was Cupid's Greek counterpart. He was the Greek God of love, and his legend is pretty much identical to Cupid's," Ms. Mori continued. "If Cupid means desire, what does Eros mean?" asked another student who seemed to know the answer from the lewd look on his face. Ms. Mori leveled her own look at him and continued on as if she hadn't heard his question. Ripples of laughter erupted throughout the class. "The most well-known legend of Cupid and Eros involves a beautiful woman," Ms. Mori began. "She was a mortal princess named Psyche. Psyche was so incredibly beautiful, men soon began worshipping her instead of the Goddess of love, which could be Venus or Aphrodite depending on whether we are talking about Eros or Cupid. You see how the stories and characters relate to one another?" There were mumbles of agreement and a few nods as well. "The Goddess of love and beauty was so jealous of Psyche, she instructed her son to make Psyche fall in love with the ugliest creature she could find, but when Eros tried to stick Psyche with his arrow he accidentally stuck himself, saw Psyche, and *he* fell in love with *her*. Soon they became lovers, but Eros forbade her to look upon him. He was afraid his mother would find out about the affair." "That is sooooo typical. Guys are always hiding me from their mothers," Angie said to no one in particular. "Wait, who is Eros again? I thought we were talking about Cupid!" said another freshman. "Freshmen are such a disease!" Angie muttered as she picked at her fingernails. "Cupid is Eros' counterpart, remember?" I said to the bewildered freshman in the seat beside me. He looked at me gratefully and sneaked a terrified look at Angie before sinking backward into his seat. "As I was saying, Eros, or Cupid if you will, ended up leaving Psyche after she unmasked him. Psyche went searching for him, and the Goddess of love tried to destroy her by making her accomplish dangerous tasks in order to find her lost love. Eventually, Eros discovered what was going on and rescued Psyche from a sleep induced coma brought on by an item from the underworld." "Huh? When did she go to the underworld?" asked the same clueless freshman. Angie sighed dramatically. "It was one of the tasks set forth by Venus you tiny worm." "Isn't Venus supposed to be Cupid's mother? I thought we were talking about Eros now." The look Angie gave the kid was close to apoplectic. "Are you still speaking?" she asked in disbelief. I put my hand on his arm and eased him back in his seat where he was out of Angie's line of vision. "I'll give you my notes after class," I said to the bewildered boy. He again looked at me gratefully and avoided eye contact with my best friend. I considered Angie as she daintily picked at her fingernails. She could be abrasive, but I'd learned a long time ago to cut her some slack. Though she looked put together on the surface, her sarcastic remarks and indifferent attitude hid years'

worth of repressed pain, anger, and sorrow. I didn't understand where those volatile emotions came from, and Angie was never forthcoming during her dark periods when she called me in tears and begged me to come over and spend the night with her. I was the only one who could bring her out of it, and I was the only one who Angie willingly had physical contact with during those periods of time. Both of our parents had come to an understanding long ago. Whenever Angie got like that, I stayed at her place until things were better. There were some days when she would come to school with gloves on. Her on-again, off-again germaphobic tendencies were par for the course. No one batted an eyelash at this bizarre behavior. Of course, anyone who did would be at the receiving end of Angie's quick wit and sharp tongue. She was always the last to leave a class and the last to show up for class. She didn't like the crowded halls and sweaty, unkempt bodies bumping into her so she generally waited for the halls to clear and the bell to ring. Due to her special phobias, her tardiness was brushed aside. I didn't push her or prod for information anymore. She had helped me through some of my darkest times after I lost my mother, and I knew she had my back. I didn't need to know more unless she wanted me to. When she attended my mother's funeral, I was startled by the look of guilt on her face which so perfectly mirrored my own. She stared at my mother's peaceful features and mumbled a comment about it being her fault because she never saw it coming. It made very little sense to me, but when I asked her about it she just gave me a fierce hug, told me she wouldn't let me down again, and then seated herself on the front pew of the viewing room waiting for the services to start. Our loyalty to one another was, without question, the very thing that kept us anchored to reality. She battled her demons while I battled mine, and we had this unspoken agreement to never talk about it. I blinked a few times to clear my thoughts as the classroom discussion fought for my attention. "Aphrodite was so impressed by the love that Psyche had for Eros, she made Psyche immortal, gave them her blessing, and Psyche and Eros lived happily ever after," Ms. Mori finished. "Really? I always thought these legends ended tragically," I said before I could stop myself. I must have lost my senses with that trip down memory lane. I didn't usually participate in class discussions. "Well, Ms. Fairmont, some of them do. Do you have one in particular you would like to share with us?" The intense, almost probing look Ms. Mori gave me made me feel uncomfortable. I wondered why I'd decided to participate at all. I couldn't think of one single, tragic legend with everyone giving me such expectant looks. "You said that the Roman and Greek gods and goddesses are counterparts to each other. Do other cultures have a god or goddess of love?" I asked hoping to turn the attention back to Ms. Mori. She smiled at me as if she knew something I didn't. "Let's talk about Freya, the Norse Goddess of love and beauty. She was so beautiful, in fact, that she had many suitors and an infinite amount of lovers even though the only man she truly loved was her husband Od." "That *is* odd," said a senior football player. The room once again erupted into laughter. "She loved him so much, when he was transformed into a sea monster she stood by his side and comforted him instead of turning away from his hideous form. Are you guys beginning to see a theme or pattern here?" "I'm still trying to figure out how Cupid ties in with sea monsters," whispered the freshman seated next to me. My smile grew. He was beginning to remind me of Kirby. Angie raised her hand to address the class. I wasn't sure why she bothered. She usually just blurted everything out. "Okay everyone, I think the theme we are discussing here is that love conquers all. Am I right? When you love and care about someone, you'll go anywhere, do anything to find the person you're supposed to be with, and once you have them you'll fight to the death in order to keep them with you always." Whoa! I gave Angie a puzzled look, trying to figure out how such a serious answer had found its way out of her mouth. "That's exactly right, Ms. Bellingham," Ms. Mori agreed, seeming a little taken aback by her outburst as well. But Angie wasn't finished. "I also think that love, if it's true love, is totally blind. I mean, it'd have to be if you were willing to sleep with a sea monster. That Freya chick was in need of some serious Lasik surgery." And there it was. The laughter seemed to fill up every available space in the room. "What other culture has a god or goddess of love?" asked another student in the back. "My culture does," replied Ms. Mori. "The Chinese?" asked my clueless freshman. "Idiot," Angie said to herself. "Any fool can see she's Korean." "I'm actually Japanese, and in my culture the god that is pertinent to this particular conversation is Musubi-no-kami, the god of love and marriage." My head grew heavy at the

mention of that particular deity's name. "Musubi was a god who delighted in bringing young lovers together and encouraging their happy union. Musubi's legend occurs in the province of Mimasaka in a small kingdom called Kagami where a shrine and temple exist solely to pay homage to Musubi-no-kami. If there was ever anyone who wanted a blessing placed upon their marriage, it is said these people traveled to the temple and knelt before the shrine asking blessings and favors to be poured out upon them." "What did the shrine look like?" I asked. I felt this strange desire to know every detail. Ms. Mori's eyes alighted on me with that same knowing look. "The shrine was a Holy Cherry tree. If Musubi felt it was in a person's best interest to pursue the one they pled for, then he'd appear out of thin air and hand them a single cherry blossom. This not only signified his blessing, but it also ensured that the person receiving the blossom would fall madly in love with the giver of the blossom." I felt my throat close up at the mention of cherry blossoms. They'd been my mother's favorite. My father and I had accompanied my mother to every cherry blossom event known to man. At least that was how it'd felt to me. I hadn't been to one single festival since my mother's passing. "One day, a beautiful maiden came to the Holy Cherry Tree because her father wanted her to find a husband. When she arrived, she saw a handsome man holding a cherry blossom. He disappeared quickly afterward without giving her the blossom in his hand." I felt pressure building in the back of my head. What in the world was wrong with me? "The maiden went home and found out that her father had arranged a marriage for her, but she was unable to forget the young man she'd seen earlier. She later discovered the man whom she loved was no mortal, but a god. The god of love and marriage." The pressure escalated to a hammering crescendo. Sharp, needle-like pains shot from my jaw to the roof of my skull. I was certain my head would burst if I didn't leave the room as soon as possible. "Her betrothed found out she loved another and sought to fight him, not realizing it was a god he'd challenged. He attacked Musubi when he appeared at the Holy Cherry tree again. Musubi disappeared, and the priests of the temple were angry for her betrothed's interference. The legend then goes on to say that the maiden refused to marry her father's choice of husband and dedicated herself to a life of celibacy as a nun in the temple of Musubi-no-kami. At least, that's what the text books say," Ms. Mori finished. Kind of cryptic. "You mean, that's not what really happened? Did Musubi love the maiden in return? Because if he didn't and she became a nun for him then that's totally messed up," Angie replied as she pulled out a file and began hacking away at her manicured nails. "What do you think really happened, Hope?" Ms. Mori asked. I couldn't respond. The pressure had come to a head, and all of a sudden I felt this popping movement like a bubble bursting within my cranium, and a bright, white light blinded me to everything else. I wasn't in the classroom anymore, but in an entirely different place altogether. The room I stood in was large and rectangular. It looked like some kind of receiving room, but was much more ancient in its structure. There were several different paintings strategically placed along the wooden walls. Each painting held different oriental looking men in light robes and topknot hairstyles. There were several ornate looking statues painted in shades of gold, green, and a sort of coppery color. I looked down at myself and saw folds of sea green silk encircling my body. A middle-aged Asian man entered the room and walked over to me. His air of authority was unmistakable. Without understanding why, I immediately bent forward from the hip into a reverent bow and stayed like that until I was allowed to rise. He studied me, clearly displeased with what he saw. I didn't recognize him, but my dislike for him was immediate and intense. He sniffed and then spoke to me in a language that should have been unfamiliar to me, yet I understood everything he said. "You will meet him this evening, my child. Your engagement ceremony will bring joy and happiness to our people. Of this I am certain. I am proud of you, young daughter. Fulfill your duty and your destiny." He didn't appear too proud. His look of disdain spoke volumes. All I managed to offer him was a blank stare. *What's happening to me?* A loud voice broke into my confusion, pulling me backward and away from the man standing before me. "Hope? Were you going to answer the question?" I was immediately thrown from the oriental looking room back into my hard, uncomfortable chair. I had no idea what had just happened, but the term "losing it" didn't even come close to how I felt at that very moment. "What does it matter whether it happened exactly that way? Haven't all of these legends been changed over the centuries anyway?" Angie said. I glanced around the room trying to figure

out if anyone had noticed my brief absence. My classmates' faces exhibited a broad spectrum of expressions, ranging from slightly sleepy, bored, and comatose. It looked as if others had finally succumbed to unconsciousness. Relieved, I sunk into my seat, figuring I'd simply hallucinated again. Not that *that* particular alternative was any consolation. "That's true, Ms. Bellingham, but despite the different variations you may find in all of these myths and legends, there are similar patterns and themes connecting them all together. Don't you think?" "Well, in each situation there are gods of love who get people to love one another through different objects like arrows or cherry blossoms," Angie replied. "What about Freya, though? Did she have something that made people fall in love with each other too?" "Actually, there are some similarities there as well. Freya acquired a necklace that was made by four dwarves. This necklace was called the Brisingamen, and some have referred to the necklace as the necklace of desire. There isn't much folklore that supports my own theory on what the necklace was capable of, but I've always suspected that it symbolized Freya's abilities to bring young lovers together in much the same way that Cupid's arrows and Musubi's cherry blossoms did." "But it isn't actually bringing people together. It's forcing them to mindlessly love each other," I said. "Interesting, Ms. Fairmont. Please continue," Ms. Mori said. It really was weird how she kept waiting for me to have some kind of strange epiphany. She always tended to rub me the wrong way—nothing I could put my finger on—but today her intense scrutiny unsettled me. "Well, Cupid is shooting arrows at people to make them fall in love with each other. He wasn't even in love with Psyche until he was stupid enough to stick himself with his own arrow. And Musubi is playing with fate by handing out cherry blossoms to people who will then turn around and give them to the person they desire, forcing that person to fall in love with them. How is that love when it isn't even your choice?" "So you believe that love is a choice? Surely you've read books and watched movies where people fall in love with someone and wish they hadn't, as if they could choose to stop simply because they wished it." She looked like she didn't agree with my opinion. "I'm not talking about stopping once you've already started. I'm talking about not being forced to fall in love with someone in the first place. What if you love the wrong person? What if the person you are supposed to love isn't the person you end up with all because some stupid, over-privileged god thinks he has the right to shoot you with an arrow and completely change your fate?" I was upset, but didn't understand why. How weird to feel so passionate about something I'd never really considered before. "Do you think you could actually be forced to love someone if those feelings weren't already buried deep within you? I've always assumed that Cupid's arrows and Musubi's blossoms merely bring out the love that humans are afraid to confront and explore. They ensure a happy ending. If your destiny is your soul mate, why fight it?" "All I'm saying is this: forcing someone to love anybody isn't doing anyone any good." "So you think the arrows and cherry blossoms are actually symbols of blindness, stripping one's ability to choose." "Yeah, I guess I do." I realized the class had become very quiet during the last few minutes. "I think they symbolize second chances, personally," someone said directly behind me. At the sound of that new, distinct voice it felt as if time slowed to a halt. My insides ignited and my heart lurched within my chest, beating like it never had before, as if it had been dormant for a while, but had found a new reason to awaken. I slowly turned myself around and saw a pair of cold, calculating eyes looking at me with a surprising amount of familiarity. Not to mention an uncalled for amount of hostility. His eyes were ice blue, his hair was golden blond, and his demeanor...definitely chilly. His tanned skin deepened the color of his eyes and his square jaw jutted out proudly. He was an absolute Adonis. In all honesty, I was having trouble looking away from him, but from the way my body reacted to him it was clear that I needed to. I was hyper-aware of the affect he had on my beating heart, and the smug, knowing look on his face made it obvious that he knew it and didn't think it a big surprise. "Hello Tie," Ms. Mori said. I spun around to face my teacher, relieved her voice had managed to break the spell he'd cast. How did they know each other? "Hey, Chinatsu. I'm sorry I'm late. I had a few things to clear up concerning my class schedule." His voice gently glided across my body. I nearly relaxed into the smooth timbre of its tone, but caught myself and stiffened my spine. My reaction to him was not only completely unexpected, but entirely unwelcome. I hadn't experienced an attraction like this in years. In fact, I couldn't remember if I'd ever even crushed on anyone before. I'd always been too

busy navigating the murky waters of Angie's twisted and convoluted love life. "Class, I'd like to introduce you to our newest student, and a close friend of my family. This is Tie Hart. He'll be joining us for the remainder of his senior year." Tie Hart? What kind of a name was that? I flicked a panicked glance in Angie's direction. She was drooling just as much as the rest of the females in the room. No help in *that* corner. Crap! "Now then, what were you saying, Tie?" Ms. Mori asked. "I think the arrows and blossoms are symbols of second chances," he reiterated. "Women are always falling in love with the wrong guys. Drug addicts, wife beaters, adulterers. I'd like to think there's a god of love out there who is capable of helping people—women especially—fall in love with the right person. The guy who would actually be worth sleeping with even if he had been turned into a sea monster." All the girls in the classroom giggled vapidly. I thought I was going to hurl. "Monster, being the key word here," I muttered. "What was that?" Tie asked innocently. "If the guy is a monster on the outside he's probably a monster on the inside too." "Not necessarily," he said, shifting in his seat. I cringed inside, aware of every move he made. I fought the urge to look back as he spoke to me. "I think the sea monster is more of a reference to ugliness on the outside but beauty on the inside. You know, like beauty and the beast. It always makes me happy to see an ugly guy with a beautiful girl. Nine times out of ten she's with him because of how beautiful he is on the inside and how good he is to her." The room seemed to breathe out one huge, collective sigh as Tie weaved his mind-numbing spell over every female present. Was this a teenage boy speaking? What guy, drop dead gorgeous mind you, discussed the superiority of an ugly man dating a beautiful woman? Didn't a gorgeous and conceited teenage boy's lack of maturity forbid such adult musings? "So you think the arrows and cherry blossoms of this world are righting the wrongs of mistakes made by misguided women who aren't capable of choosing for themselves?" I asked, spinning around to face Tie. Big mistake. His cold eyes froze me with their intensity, and he actually looked a little angry. "I suppose it'd be better for someone to fall in love with a total jerk instead of having a life full of true happiness?" His tone was caustic. "That's not what I'm saying. I just think these little toys those gods are playing with take away a person's options. With no will of your own, you can't possibly be the master of your own feelings." Tie appraised me coolly. "I can think of other things that take away a person's ability to choose. For example, arranged marriages don't give anyone the opportunity for a person to love who they were meant to." "Tie," Ms. Mori warned. I glanced back at her. She appeared a little angry with that last comment, and the look they shared revealed a long history filled with tension. I knew he was referring to the maiden in the Japanese tale, but for some reason I got the feeling his words were also directed toward me. They filled me with a strange sense of *déjà vu*. I heard a buzzing in my ears and felt lightheaded. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and all the while Tie's intense glare skewered me to my seat. "There are a lot of things that could take away a person's ability to decide who they want to be with." I spoke stiffly now. I was afraid any show of emotion would lead to another show of emotion far more embarrassing. "Wouldn't you rather have a god who knows what's best for you, direct you to the one who'd give you the most happiness?" "I'd rather leave my fate in my own hands," I shot back. I was vulnerable and a bit out of sorts. I couldn't account for my own feelings and decided to blame everything on Tie since he was the only inconsistency in my very predictable high school career. This was the part of my life that was normal. I didn't want any of that turned upside down. "As if you or any other human being could choose better than a deity," Tie scoffed. *What's with this kid?* "I know if you were a god, I'd let you choose for me any day," yelled Tanya Sedgewick from the front of the class effectively breaking the tension between Tie and myself. I heard people snickering, and then the school bell rang. "We'll continue this discussion tomorrow, class. Don't forget to read chapter five for your homework. I want you to be prepared when you get in here tomorrow." Ms. Mori kept her eyes glued to me as I slowly raised myself out of my hard, cold chair. I was definitely feeling a bit dizzy, but the pressure in my head had somewhat diminished. I went to take a step forward, but must have been more lightheaded than I'd realized because my traitorous knees buckled under my own weight. An arm shot out in front of me and caught me before I hit the floor. I knew the identity of my savior and looked up with great apprehension. Tie wore an amused expression. "If you want to be in charge of your own fate, you should start by standing on your own two feet." I decided right then and there that

I did *not* like this guy. Moving forward, I brazenly closed the distance between us, and brought my face directly in front of his. Okay, so I had to look up a few inches. Still, I was pretty close. An electric buzz began where Tie's hand grasped my arm, and I panicked as it slid up toward my shoulder. I was almost certain he felt it too by the quick flicker of surprise on his face. "Thanks for catching me, Tie was it? I think I can take it from here." I moved to walk past him, but his hand on my arm prevented me from getting very far. "What? Did you need something?" The heat from his hand burned through my long-sleeved shirt. I schooled my face to show no emotion, simply polite indifference. Instead of answering my questions, he lifted his hand and rubbed a thumb along my cheekbone. His gaze greedily drank in my features, poring over every detail with such a powerful longing that I could actually sense his turbulent emotions even though I hadn't connected with him. I wanted to brush his hand away, but I stood frozen at such intimate contact. My brain refused to communicate with my body. "Tie," Ms. Chinatsu said. Without taking his gaze from mine he said, "We're supposed to determine if circumstances have changed, aren't we? I'm just testing the waters here." *What? Testing the waters?* "That's not what Katsu had in mind, and we're not even sure if your assumptions are accurate." Her tone of voice brooked no argument. His expression immediately adjusted to her response. A blank mask descended, and he released his hold on me. Though he appeared indifferent, his emotions spoke otherwise. Yep, I could still feel them, and yes, I was freaking out about it. What's worse, I was just as disappointed by the aborted contact. I shook myself a little and stepped back, wondering if the last few moments had even happened. Maybe my hallucinations were now effecting my interactions with others. "Okay, that was unusual," I said. Tie gifted me a small grin. "I was hoping for a little more encouragement than that." Though he was clearly teasing me, I noted the serious undercurrent. At a loss as to how to handle this bizarre situation, I stuck my hand out. "My name is Hope Fairmont," I said. His smile widened as he took my hand in his. I did my best to ignore my body's reaction to the contact. "I know who you are, Hope." Okay, now that was definitely bizarre. I must have stood there for a full five seconds with my mouth hanging open like an imbecile before Angie came to my rescue. "How awesome—and somewhat creepy—that you've taken the liberty of memorizing the names of your classmates before your first day of school." Angie inserted herself between us and pulled my hand away while wrapping an arm around my shoulder. "We'll let your stalkerish behavior slide since you're so nice to look at. I'm Angie." Tie let out a low chuckle and then shook her hand. "Nice to meet you." The moment their hands made contact I noticed Angie freeze. Her gaze grew distant like she was seeing something other than the hot guy standing before her. Complete and total shock registered across her face and then she was pushing me forward at a pace that practically required me to run. As we stepped out of the classroom, I heard Ms. Mori utter, "Well, that was a complete and total disaster, Tie. Are you trying to scare her?" I paused just next to the door, and Angie stopped with me. We both tilted our heads to better hear the conversation. "We don't have time to mess around with this, and I don't need to prove anything to you. It's her. I promise you, it's Hope," Tie said. The sound of his voice, even from this distance, had the power to make me shiver. Why did it sound so familiar? "How can you be sure?" "I just am." "Not good enough, Tie." "It will have to be." Angie and I waited a few more moments, but nothing else was said. The crowd had thinned enough that I felt it okay to lead Angie down the hallway. I contemplated the possible meanings behind this strange encounter, and I did not like the conclusions I came to. My breathing became ragged, and my heart rate picked up speed. They'd found me, just as I feared they might. Of course, I had no idea who "they" were, but obviously I'd been under surveillance, and now crazy people from the government were after me. Or I was reading into things and getting worked up over nothing. Maybe what Tie needed was one amazing Calculus tutor. I was definitely known for my nerd-like math skills throughout the high school. It was why I found Math so boring. Far too easy. When he said, *It's her*, he probably meant, *She's the one who's going to get me an A on my next exam*. "That entire thing was so weird," I stated, trying to pull Angie out of her unusual silence. "He's just like you," she mumbled. "I've never run into anyone else like you." I stopped walking and pulled her to face me. "Angie, what are you talking about?" Surprise blossomed across her face, as if she'd momentarily forgotten my presence. Then she mustered up a fake smile and said, "Oh, I was just thinking how into you he is. You should

definitely get to know this guy.” “Why would I want to do that? The guy was creepy and arrogant.” I hoped she might open up a little and let me know what she was actually thinking. “He was also extremely hot. Your virgin lips status is about to change,” she cheered. I’d lost her. Better luck next time. “I gotta get to class. Will you be okay or do you need me to block traffic?” Angie shook her head and gave my arm a squeeze. “The bell is about to ring so I should be fine. I’ll see you at lunch.” She headed in the other direction as I wondered what was really going on in that quirky mind of hers. Then I puzzled over the scene in Ms. Mori’s class as I made my way to Calculus.

The rest of my day continued on its abnormal path. After mythology, I navigated my way to the second floor in order to reach my math class. I’d never realized how crowded my school was. I did everything possible to avoid coming into contact with my fellow students, but found that it was nearly impossible to accomplish such a seemingly simple task. I was inches from the door to calculus when three people managed to bump into me at the same time. I felt my senses expand outward and froze as I simultaneously connected with all three students. A hot, searing pain shot from the back of my skull to the front, effectively dropping me to my knees. I grabbed my head in an attempt to keep it from falling off my neck. Logically, I knew losing my head wasn’t even a remote possibility, but the intense, throbbing pain insisted otherwise. As far as I could tell, none of the students I’d just connected with had been experiencing such a severe migraine. *Is this headache mine?* I put one hand on the floor and gingerly pushed myself up into a standing position. The movement caused the agony in my head to morph into nauseating dizziness. I could feel myself sinking to the ground again and braced for impact. It never came. Instead of hitting the hard linoleum floor, two hands grabbed me under my arms and lifted me to my feet. It wasn’t done roughly, but my nausea couldn’t tell the difference. “You all right? Are you sick?” I nodded as the dizziness ebbed away. Two more deep breaths and the nausea vanished as well. I opened my eyes and saw a fuzzy image of colors and patterns across the shirt of a nicely formed young man. I focused in on the shirt in front of me, thinking if I followed the patterns of blue and gray swirls on the guy’s chest I’d be able to look up without getting dizzy again. “I’m not sick. I never get sick,” I protested. “Well, that’s a relief. This is a new shirt, and I’d hate for you to throw up on it.” His voice was playful and soothing. It helped me gain control of myself. Slowly, the patterns on his shirt came into focus. I felt my own life force correct whatever it was that had happened to my body and nearly cried in relief. The warmth of his hands resting on either side of my waist confused me. Why didn’t contact with him allow me immediate access to his life force as it had the others? I decided to be grateful that my gift had behaved normally for a change. I looked up, feeling embarrassed for drawing so much attention to myself. The eyes that met mine were startlingly familiar. They reminded me of Tie’s, but where his were cold and intimidating, these eyes were warm and inviting. I explored the rest of his face which was open and unassuming. He had jet black hair that hung just below his ears. It was so black that parts of it looked as if it had been streaked with purple. His six foot frame towered over me. He looked like some kind of gladiator who’d decided to borrow some clothes from a high school preppy. His friendly eyes were almond shaped, and his facial features hinted of Asian ancestry. “I’ve never seen you around here before. Are you new?” I wanted to smack myself on the forehead. Out of all the things I could have said to try and fix this messy first impression I’d given him, stating the obvious wasn’t the most brilliant way to go about it. His smile spread slowly across his face and lighted his beautiful brown eyes. His grip around my waist tightened, and I could feel the strength in his hands as they continued their firm, almost possessive hold on me. I kind of liked it. “I’m new,” he agreed softly. “Oh.” Face palm. *Oh? Seriously? I am so stinking articulate.* I was definitely doing some mental cringing on my own behalf. I watched in fascination as the warm smile that had been there moments before straightened out into this strange look of longing...or was it hunger...or possibly euphoria? I couldn’t tell for sure, but I was definitely the focus of these intense emotions that flashed in quick succession across his face. “Is it really you?” he asked almost desperately. *It’s me if you’re interested.* I was so happy I hadn’t said that out loud. Not only were my thoughts a shock to me, but they were bordering on that fine line between embarrassing and humiliating. “Were you looking for someone in particular?” I asked, hoping to cover my social awkwardness. “You guys know you’re blocking the doorway, right?” a fellow student threw over his shoulder as he

continued on into the classroom. I glanced up at the mysterious newcomer again only to find him still watching me. It was like he was afraid I might disappear. "Well, I should probably get to class," I said, feeling a bit reluctant to leave him standing there. "Thank you for helping me. I'm not usually so fragile." I turned to enter the classroom, but stopped when I felt his hand touch my shoulder. "I'm in this class too. Do you mind if I sit by you? I don't usually make friends that easily." *I highly doubt that.* The guy looked like a well-muscled Abercrombie model, and for some strange reason he was still talking to me. "Of course you can sit by me." I caught myself grinning up at him like an idiot. I turned around and led the way into the classroom, heading for the back where it would be easier to find two empty desks next to each other. "What's your name?" "I'm Victor." He sat down in the desk next to mine and continued his unflinching stare. I was certain there was nothing that interesting about me. "I'm Hope." I reached my hand out to shake his. His warm hand closed firmly over mine, but instead of releasing it like any normal human being, he held on like I was his lifeline. "I know who you are, Hope." His statement resonated within me. Somehow, he really did know me. I got the feeling he knew more about me than I did. Just one more thing to add to my list of strange and crazy. I tried covering my surprise with some flirtatious teasing. Something I had absolutely no experience in. "You know, you're the second new guy who's said that to me today? Did you two get together and come up with the same pick-up lines?" Victor's hand tightened on mine, and his expression turned serious. "Someone else just moved here recently?" I could tell the euphoria he'd been feeling was being replaced by an emotion not nearly as pleasant. "His name is Tie," I said, trying to appear as if I hadn't noticed the change in his demeanor. "Apparently, he lives across the street from my best friend's house. He seemed to know who I was as well." With every word I spoke the look in his eyes grew more foreboding. The tension he exuded at the mention of Tie's name was palpable. Victor still had my hand in his, but it was obvious that his thoughts were somewhere else. "Victor? You okay? Do you have some kind of bad history with this guy?" My questions jarred him from his angry thoughts, but the smile he plastered on his face didn't reach his eyes. "You could say that. Tie is my cousin. I knew he intended to move here. I just didn't know he managed to do it before I did." I had no idea how to respond to such a strange statement. If I had a cousin and knew I would be moving to the same place that he was moving to, I was pretty sure I would've been thrilled. I was also pretty sure I'd know whether or not my cousin had actually made the move in the first place. And what was with the competition? Was Victor really upset about not moving here first? It was weird. This whole day had been weird. I wanted to ask him more questions about himself and his cousin, but Mr. Mathers decided that right about then was a good time to start class. I pulled my hand out of Victor's, and reached into my backpack for my Calculus book. "What did he say to you?" Although the question he asked came out soft and low, the urgency in it was unmistakable. "Who? Tie?" I sat up straight. Victor's gaze felt like a laser beam gluing me to my seat. It was obvious my answer to his question was very important to him. "To be honest, we kind of argued." The surprise on Victor's face was comical. Like arguing with Tie was unheard of. "What?" "Well, we were in mythology class talking about deities of love and beauty. These particular deities had the power to make mortals fall in love with whomever they wanted. I said that I thought those deities were irresponsible pigs, and love is an individual choice. It's not some crazy twist of fate or haphazard stab of Cupid's arrow. Tie didn't agree." "I can't imagine he would," Victor said, chuckling to himself. His comment made me feel like he knew something I didn't. That particular feeling was becoming a more common occurrence for me as of late. A very annoying occurrence. "So you argued with him? You didn't want to go out with him? He didn't ask you out?" He fired off his questions in rapid succession, but it was clear he wanted and needed to know every single answer. He was literally on the edge of his seat. I swear, if he'd been Angie he would've been biting his nails by now. I tried not to look shaken by his comments. He seemed to think that any attraction I felt for Tie was inevitable, and I didn't want the expression on my face to give me away and confirm his suspicions. Tie's presence had definitely done something to me, but for some reason Victor's opinion of me was already starting to matter, and if he didn't like Tie then I wasn't going to like him either. Nope. "Why on earth would Tie ask me out? We don't even know each other. And no, I did *not* want to go out with him. I would've liked to have grabbed him around the throat and

applied some pressure, though.” The laugh that escaped Victor’s lips was filled with relief. I may have talked a good game, but I hadn’t stopped thinking about Tie and the deliciously strange effect he’d had on me since the moment he’d sat behind me in Folklore and Mythology and boldly announced his presence. I hadn’t stopped thinking about his conversation with Ms. Mori either. This worried me. “This is amazing,” he said in disbelief. “It changes everything.” “You’re not making any sense. And why has it left you feeling so cheerful? You must really hate that guy.” “You have no idea.” He gave me another warm smile. This time it reached his eyes. It was a shame they weren’t blue like Tie’s. *Stop! You are not the kind of girl to obsess, so stop it already.* I was totally disgusted with myself. “You still haven’t explained to me how you and Tie know who I am. It’s got me a little weirded out. Then again, with all of the other strange stuff that’s been happening to me lately, I should just embrace the crazy.” “What strange stuff?” His brows furrowed in concern. His mood swings were happening so quickly I was beginning to feel a bit unbalanced. “It’s nothing I need to be boring you about. Besides, if we don’t stop talking, Mr. Mathers is probably going to kick us both out of class.” Victor tore his gaze away from mine long enough to take note of the evil look Mr. Mathers sent our way. “To be continued then?” Victor raised his eyebrows as if he was unsure of himself. Did he really think I would say no? “Absolutely.” He relaxed visibly and turned his attention toward Mr. Mathers. I wasn’t sure if Victor was actually listening to anything the teacher said. I certainly couldn’t wrap my brain around Calculus at this point. Instead, my mind focused on all of the odd things that had been occurring lately. I thought about how unusual it was to have not only one, but two new guys at the high school, and they both knew me. How? Why would they care so much? As I sat there pondering all of the likely and unlikely reasons for their presence here, one possibility took hold of me and refused to let go. The same possibility that occurred to me after eavesdropping on Ms. Mori and Tie Hart. What if they knew what I was capable of? I tried studying Victor subtly from the corner of my eye. I was pretty sure it made me look like I needed new contact lenses. Did he look like a suspicious character? I gave myself a mental eye roll. Did I even know what a suspicious character looked like? What if they knew that I could heal? What if they weren’t high school students at all, but some big time, undercover agents working for the FBI or the CIA? I stopped trying to be sneaky and openly studied his profile, deciding that he definitely looked like he was in his early twenties. He was just trying to pass for a high school student. Or maybe he and Tie were independent contractors working for other countries. Someone had discovered I was healing people, and that someone wanted to study me in order to figure out how to cure diseases like cancer or diabetes. I was the target, the new lab rat. All of my father’s fear and paranoia about what the government would do to me if they knew about my abilities began to take over. I’d always felt like he was being way too overprotective, but now I questioned my own skepticism. Of course, that didn’t explain why Victor would be worried about whether or not I had agreed to date Tie. Did agents date the people they were supposed to kidnap? Did Tie use seduction as his way to get closer to his targets? Why couldn’t I stop thinking about him? I sat there replaying our intense conversation about gods and cherry blossoms over and over in my head. In all honesty, he’d made some valid points. Angie was exactly the kind of girl who would’ve benefited from a cherry blossom, or at the very least, an ugly guy who loved her and made her feel beautiful. I could’ve let down my guard a bit and not been quite so confrontational, but it had felt good sparring with him like that. It had made me feel alive. There had been a kind of exciting chemistry building between us, and I realized that pushing his buttons had not only been thoroughly enjoyable, but comfortably familiar. I was a freak! I hadn’t realized that I’d begun to hyperventilate from the panic setting in until Victor’s hand closed over mine, reminding me I should try to breathe normally. “Are you okay, Hope?” His quiet voice and gentle manner broke the frantic thoughts running through my head. I took one long look at Victor’s face, so full of concern, and figured there was no way this guy was untrustworthy. I was being ridiculous. I squeezed his hand back and gave him a tired smile. Even though I knew he wasn’t some kind of crazy government agent out to exploit my gift for his own evil purposes, I still felt like I needed to go lie down somewhere and hide for the rest of the day. Feeling this weighted down wasn’t normal for me, and as much as I wanted to bask in Victor’s presence for a little while longer, I needed to get out of there, and I needed to stop thinking about Tie. “It’s been a long morning, and I had a

late night. I think maybe I just need to go to the nurse's station and see if I can grab some Tylenol or something." I was lying, of course. I'd never taken Tylenol in my life. "First your dizziness, and now you have a headache?" Victor asked sounding disturbed. I nodded as I reached for my bag and my Calculus book. "I didn't know that kind of thing could happen to you," he muttered to himself. "Excuse me?" My senses prickled at this. How could he know that? "You are Hope Fairmont, right?" Victor's confusion mirrored my own as I stood up, getting ready to bolt for the doorway. "Ms. Fairmont, were you planning on going somewhere?" Mr. Mathers asked. I looked toward the front of the class and felt my face flush as all of the students in the room turned in their seats and rested their curious stares on me. I cleared my throat. "I was hoping I could go to the nurse's station. Headache." I pointed to my head in case Mr. Mathers wasn't aware of where headaches tended to reside. He nodded in resignation, like a trip to the nurse's station was an everyday occurrence for me. I did my best to avoid eye contact with Victor since it was obvious he knew more about me than was reasonably safe. I slid past him, feeling his eyes boring holes in my back as I made my way to the front of the classroom and out the door. I walked a bit unsteadily toward the girl's bathroom, grateful that everyone else was in class and there was no one in the hallway to bump into. Upon reaching the bathroom, I plopped myself down on the filthy tile floor and tried to decide what my options were. I wondered if Victor was going to give up his high school student act and come looking for me. I wanted to call my dad, but I wasn't sure if this situation warranted worrying him. I mean, what did I know for certain? Victor's remark could have meant a number of different things. He might have been joking. He didn't ever actually come out and say, "Hey, I think you're lying. You and I both know you never get headaches, and when you do, your body heals itself so quickly it's like the headache was never there to begin with." I was just overreacting. My imagination had taken over, and I had willingly let it in an attempt to explain away the interest Victor had shown me. I wasn't comfortable with the idea of someone being interested in me. I led a double life in my friendship with Angie, and a boyfriend would complicate matters even further. How did he already know so much about me? I still wanted to talk to somebody, but getting Angie involved was out of the question. Trying to explain my gift to her after all this time wasn't something I felt I could face. Talking to my father was a disaster in the making. My only other option involved visiting Kirby, but I hated telling him anything that might make him or his condition worse. Still, the thought of being able to have Kirby's take on things and my need to check up on him ended up making my decision for me. The best course of action would be to get through the rest of the day as smoothly as possible and then high tail my hind end over to the hospital. My growling stomach reminded me that lunch was still a class away. I figured if I could find Angie she could give me Tie's schedule, and I'd know whether or not I had any more classes with him. *Hmmm. Tie.* I had to shake myself. I kept picturing his nicely shaped lips forming a smug little smile. *Okay, back to my brainstorming.* As far as Victor was concerned I just didn't know. Asking Angie to make out with the office aide one last time in order to avoid Victor for the rest of the day seemed a bit much. Not that Angie wouldn't be up for it. In fact, I was fairly certain she'd do it if it meant investigating yet another hot new guy. I could just picture the look on Angie's face once I told her about Victor wandering around the high school without her knowledge. I waited in agony as the minutes slowly ticked by, reviewing over and over again the conversations I'd had with Tie and Victor that day. The class bell rang, and I hid in one of the stalls while teenage girls with less important things on their minds came in to freshen their makeup and talk about their latest frenemies. Once they all left, there was only one more class to wait through, but the extra time it gave me to think about my predicament only made my worries multiply. By the time the lunch bell finally rang, my anxiety had thrown me into a panic. I grabbed my cell phone out of my bag and dialed Angie's number. I wasn't about to wander the halls in search of her, only to bump into Tie or Victor, or anyone else for that matter. Not with the way this day had gone. "Miss me already?" Angie asked in greeting. I took in a deep breath, feeling a certain sense of comfort in hearing her voice. "Angie, I need you to meet me in the girl's bathroom on the second floor." "Clandestine meetings, eh? Is this the part where you tell me you're really a spy and our friendship has been nothing but a cover for some deeper purpose?" "Let's just say I'm definitely going to need your sleuthing skills to aid me in my next covert operation." "Excellent.

What's the job?" "How do you feel about getting a hold of another very good looking guy's class schedule?" Her laughter carried clearly through the phone, and seemed to buoy my confidence. "I'm feeling like it's about time for another make-out session with my most favorite office aide." * * * "You're telling me the hot guy you want me to investigate is also new?" Angie's face was a mixture of excitement and disappointment. I assumed the disappointment had something to do with her total ignorance where Victor was concerned. "Yep. Your hot guy radar seems to be on the fritz as of late." "Most disturbing," Angie said as she tapped her fingernails on the bathroom sink. "Something equally disturbing is you wanting me to get you Victor's class schedule in order to avoid him rather than purposely run into him." She studied my impassive face. I said nothing, knowing she was on the verge of giving me another lecture about my permanent single status. "You know, Hope, I've thought for years the reason you've never had a boyfriend was simply because you were too clueless to notice any of the signals guys sent your way. You've all but admitted to me you think Victor is interested in you, and instead of letting him do all the work to sweep you off your feet you want to avoid him by employing the kind of illegal measures that only I am crazy enough to think up." I tried to maintain eye contact, but my gaze wavered in the face of her speculative stare. I didn't want to have this discussion with her right now. She was always so game for anything. Why did she decide at this very moment to have a serious heart-to-heart about my non-existent love life? "Now I'm wondering if there isn't a completely different reason for your indifference here. Don't you think it's about time you told me the truth?" I shook my head and decided to try for a joke, anything to make her back off from this line of questioning. "Angie," I said impatiently, "I am not a lesbian. Don't you know me at all?" She rolled her eyes at me in annoyance. "Of course you're not. There's no way you could have resisted me for all these years if you were." The corners of her lips turned up into a flirtatious smile. I tried for a slightly outraged look in response to her cocky attitude. "You are so full of yourself, Angie. I'm not the least bit attracted to redheads." There was a full beat of total silence as I glowered and Angie gave me a seductive smile. Unable to hold it back any longer, we both burst out laughing until tears seeped from the corners of my eyes. The tension I'd been feeling ever since I'd entered the high school began to lift as I continued to laugh. "All right," Angie said as she swiped at her eyes with the tips of her dainty fingers. "I'll let this go for now, but eventually we're going to have a serious conversation about your single status." "Fair enough." I stood back up and leaned against the bathroom wall. "So you'll get me Victor's schedule?" "You know I will, but I want to know why you need Tie's schedule too." She pulled a folded piece of paper from her back pocket and held it out to me. "It was obvious the guy was into you, but is avoiding both Victor and Tie really necessary?" I reached for Tie's class schedule. Just as I was about to grab it, Angie pulled the paper back out of my reach and shook her head as if she couldn't believe she was actually going to humor me. "This is insane. You have two gorgeous guys who want you. Why are you running from this?" "Angie, Tie's behavior around me wasn't exactly normal. Did we not overhear the same conversation once we left mythology? He behaved as if he already knew me. Why are you pushing this when you're usually so protective?" Angie lowered her gaze to the bathroom floor and hesitated before responding. "I get the feeling that he's safe." "How?" I studied her, waiting for some real answers. "I can't explain it, Hope. I just need you to trust me like you always have." "I trust you, but I want you to let this go. I don't want to deal with either one of them any more than is necessary." I reached my hand out for Tie's schedule again, doing my best to hide my frustration. She handed it to me grudgingly and then folded her arms across her chest. "Besides, once Tie and Victor have an opportunity to talk to you they won't even remember my name," I added cheerfully. Angie shook her head at me and narrowed her eyes. "I know I've pretty much chased after anything male and good looking for the entire span of our teenage years, but if I'd thought for even one second you held some interest in any of those guys, I would've toned it down a bit and given you the wheel for a while. Not only are both of them showing some interest in you, but you seem to be noticing it. That in itself is huge." I knew I should have told her the truth and shared my fears and suspicions with her like any normal best friend would. I should have told her that their interest in me was suspect. My ability to heal was what was really on their agenda. At least that's what I thought Victor's agenda was, but Tie's connection to Victor made his motives look

suspicious also. I should have told her the real reason behind my need to avoid them, but I didn't. I'd kept her out of the loop for so long, and I wasn't about to change that any time soon, especially if things got dangerous. My thoughts went back to the previous night when I'd sensed someone following me. That tree had been torched, the fire meant for me. I knew it didn't make any sense, but the idea that I'd imagined the whole thing was becoming more and more ludicrous as the day went on. I longed to tell Angie everything, but I was suddenly very scared about what kind of position that would put her in. Would she be a target? Would anyone assume she knew my secret? I couldn't do that to her. Not to Angie. "Look, Tie is Victor's cousin, he's kind of unpleasant, and I'd rather not run into him if I can help it. That's all." I was lying through my teeth, and Angie knew it. She raised an eyebrow and smirked at me in disbelief. "I saw the way you and Tie looked at each other. You were very affected by his presence. It was refreshing to watch, now that I think about it." Her smirk became more pronounced. "If lying to yourself is going to help you avoid these feelings you so obviously have, then I will allow it, for now." She leaned over the bathroom sink and studied her flawless reflection in the mirror. "But for the record, I'm officially handing over the steering wheel to you. Those boys are off limits for me, and I will not make one single move toward either one of them." "Angie," I started in a warning tone. She held up her finger, effectively cutting me off. "I'll let you avoid them for now, but we are going to talk this out, Hope. I won't let you ruin a great chance for some real happiness just because you're not willing to talk about what happened to your mother or why you spend so much of your time at the hospital." My jaw nearly hit the floor in surprise. Angie and I were never this direct with one another when it came to issues we avoided like the plague. It was understood that my mother and her dark periods were two subjects we never talked about. And for her to call me out on the way I buried myself at the hospital was especially disconcerting. She seemed so lost in her own world most of the time, it surprised me that she had noticed. As if reading my thoughts, Angie smiled and said, "I see more than you think I do. That's why I'm your best friend." She turned around and walked toward the bathroom door. "Man, I'm so hungry the prospect of cafeteria food actually sounds appealing to me. You coming?" "I thought you were going to get Victor's schedule for me," I whined as we walked into the cafeteria. "I need protein before embarking on such a dangerous assignment. Besides, real women eat real food," my best friend replied. "I'm not so sure the cafeteria food actually qualifies." My nose wrinkled of its own accord as we stepped into the lunch line. "Would you at least keep your eyes peeled, please? I don't want to run into either one of our targets." "Targets? You do realize I was joking about that secret agent thing, right?" Angie held out her tray and accepted a very unappetizing assortment of cantaloupe and honey dew. I accepted my own dried out fruit and looked over my shoulder, hoping to spot an available table against the ugly, green cafeteria wall. I felt something hit my tray and looked down to see that the lunch lady had been especially considerate by giving me a generous portion of what appeared to be lasagna. "I had lasagna last night," I said feeling disappointed. I followed Angie to a small table in the back corner. "Is that what this is? I thought it was either fat ravioli or a pitiful attempt at spaghetti and meatballs, and I was so hoping for pigs in a blanket." We took our seats with our backs against the wall. From our viewpoint I was sure I'd be able to spot either Victor or Tie if they decided to eat with those of us who couldn't afford fast food. "See anything?" I asked. I tried to stick my plastic fork into a piece of honey dew. It bent under the force of my stab and the fruit went careening off my plate. "I see my ex getting all cuddly with that Tanya chick." I looked over at a table directly across from us on the other side of the cafeteria. Nathan's bulky arm was wrapped possessively around Tanya's shoulder. "Tanya Sedgwick? Really? Nathan is so predictable," Angie griped. "Your comments are dripping with jealousy, and that gives me cause for concern." Angie's serial dating was another subject I rarely touched on. She just bounced from one guy to the next, breaking hearts as she went. I did think it strange that one of the guys she dated approached me and asked why Angie pretended to be interested in him one moment and then avoided him the next. Okay, that wasn't the strange part. He mentioned that she refused to kiss him during the week they spent together, but it felt as if she was watching out for him until some unknown threat had passed. I had no idea what to tell him, and bringing it up with Angie elicited a flippant comment about the trials of dating high school guys. Message received. I never

asked her about it again after that. I couldn't begrudge her her secrets. It's not as if I'd been very forthcoming about my own earth-shattering secrets. Angie reached her hand under the table and grabbed my knee. "Looks like one of the targets has been here for a while, and he's made friends quickly." She nodded toward a table in the center of the room. I looked up to see Tie sitting in the middle of a table surrounded by a host of swooning females. I couldn't believe the crowd he'd managed to gather for himself. I couldn't believe I'd missed him. "Angie, he not only has the entire cheerleading squad watching his every move, but it looks like some of the girls from the debate team are throwing themselves at him." "I thought those chicks were supposed to be smart," she said in disgust. "Who? The cheerleaders?" Angie snorted. "I was most definitely not talking about the cheerleaders. I'm fairly certain their IQ's combined would still be less than my current age." I smiled a bit distractedly and looked back at the pack of heavily mascaraed females. "Why are they staring at Tie with those strange, vacant expressions on their faces?" I wondered. "There's nothing strange about it. That's just generally how they look." I pushed Angie's shoulder playfully. "Give them some credit. After all, they did manage to dress themselves and make it to school today." "Clothes do seem to be their one redeeming quality." I let out a laugh. "Wow. Tie doesn't waste any time. He's probably the first guy I've ever known who's managed to start a fan club made up of the brightest and the most brain dead girls at this school," she continued. "Well, that's good news for me. Maybe those girls will keep him busy, and I'll make it out of here without him being the wiser." I tried and failed to spear another piece of fruit onto my fork. The lasagna noodles were so crunchy it was impossible to cut them with my knife. Eating with my hands was becoming inevitable. Angie squeezed my knee harder. "Think again, girlfriend." I finally moved my attention to Tie's face and felt my mouth go dry. He may have been surrounded by the most popular girls at my school, but he was looking directly at me. The minute our eyes met I felt the same pull I had before. My body went warm all over. Embarrassed at my response to him, I willed myself to look away and miserably failed in my efforts. He just sat there staring at me like no one else was in the room. It looked as if the girl next to him was asking him a question while simultaneously giving him a neck massage, but he seemed totally oblivious to her attentions. His eyes gave me that same look of longing coupled with a sad touch of resignation as if it pained him to be near me, but forces out of his control demanded he be here...in this very place...close to me. Some dark thought must have taken hold of him because his look of longing was erased with a sardonic smile. His features hardened and became a blank mask of indifference so convincing I believed my original reading of him was an error. Angie was completely off base in her assumptions. There was no way this guy liked me. Sure, he seemed to be paying a lot of attention to me, someone he viewed as nothing more than a science experiment, but I was clearly the lab rat he'd been sent for so what else was he supposed to focus on? She'd been right about one thing, though. I was responding to Tie in a way I never had with anyone else. I think that worried me more than the thought of him knowing my secrets. "Target number two has entered the cafeteria. I repeat target number two has arrived. Over." Angie was whispering into a hand I assumed was holding an imaginary walkie-talkie. It bugged me that she wasn't taking any of this seriously, but my attention was soon drawn to my immediate right. Victor had just walked through the back double doors of the cafeteria. "How did you know he was Victor? You said you hadn't seen him yet," I whispered. "I *hadn't* seen him yet, but when a hot, new guy who I've never seen before walks into the cafeteria it stands to reason he just might be Victor." She gave him a measuring look. "Hmm, eye candy. I beg you to reconsider your current game plan." I couldn't respond. Victor stood there scanning the room with an air of determination, and somehow I knew he was looking for me. I just hoped he wouldn't look to his left because he was literally three feet away from me. It was obvious when Victor's eyes landed on his cousin. I saw his body tense and his jaw tighten. My eyes swiveled toward Tie. Had he noticed Victor enter the room? Yep. Tie was now in a standing position with his fists clenched and glued to his sides. The muscles in his face morphed his expression into one ugly, venomous glare. Pure hatred was clearly on his agenda. He was no longer looking at me, and I was grateful. The glare he'd given me was bad enough, but the one he gave Victor was downright scary. "I thought you said they were cousins," Angie whispered to me. "That's what Victor said." "Then why does it look like they're getting ready to throw down?" I

watched in fascination while Tie and Victor walked toward each other like they were stalking their own prey. I was sure a fight was about to erupt between the two of them, but instead of throwing punches they merely stood about a foot apart facing one another. Then they started talking to each other. They were just talking, and I couldn't hear a word they were saying. *Frustration!* "Well, that was anticlimactic," Angie muttered. "We should leave." I felt certain the subject of their conversation centered solely on me. My suspicions were confirmed in the next instant when Tie nodded in my direction. Victor's head sharply swiveled to his left, and I lowered my gaze in order to avoid both of theirs. "So, they're both staring at you." Angie nonchalantly reached for her fork. "Well don't stare back at them," I hissed. "There's no reason to encourage a possible encounter with either one of them." "You can stop hiding now. They seem to be having a very heated discussion." I looked up carefully. They were definitely arguing, and then they were glaring at each other. Victor nodded his head over his shoulder like he was sending Tie some kind of agreed upon signal. At first, I thought Tie was going to head in my direction, but to my surprise he turned and sauntered lazily over to the table that Nathan and Tanya were seated at. My curiosity piqued, I let my eyes follow his athletic frame as he stopped directly in front of Tanya who seemed overjoyed to have someone like him giving her any kind of attention. "What's he doing?" Angie asked. "I have no idea. You'd think Nathan would have chased him off by now." "Nah. Nathan is focused on stuffing his face with food. He won't notice anything until his plate is clean. He's freaking lucky I was present when he choked on some chicken last week." "Huh?" "Nothing." An uncomfortable tension underscored her comment. Under normal circumstances I might have considered pursuing the topic, but I couldn't focus on anything other than Tie. I kept my eyes locked on him and wondered at his sudden focus on Tanya. In the next instant he pulled Tanya to her feet, grabbed her by the shoulders, and kissed her right on the lips. Watching Tie kiss someone like Tanya Sedgwick made my heart feel like it'd been placed in a vice. I was unreasonably crushed by his actions. I took several quick breaths to alleviate the strange pressure building in my chest, and continued to watch, disbelievingly, while Tie delivered a kiss—the kind of kiss I'd generally watch on a movie screen—to someone other than me. "No way," Angie hissed. "Does this kid have a death wish?" Nathan stood up as soon as he realized what was going on. Unfortunately for me, it took him five agonizingly long seconds to notice anything at all. A record for him, all things considered. Nathan roughly pulled Tanya back and away from Tie. "Dude, are you freaking kidding me? What the hell do you think you're doing?" The cafeteria went dead quiet. My classmate's bored expressions transformed into varying degrees of interest, trepidation, and outright glee. Clearly, nothing was more entertaining than a fight in the middle of lunch hour. "I was just giving your girlfriend here the best kiss she's ever had. Something you're clearly incapable of handling," Tie responded in a lazy voice. Nathan's eyes bulged from their sockets, and his face turned a spectacular shade of crimson. "Here it comes," I choked out. I anxiously waited for Tie to get into some kind of defensive stance. Instead, he turned his head to the side and stared in my direction. His eyes locked with mine. What in the world was he thinking? He was about to receive the beating of his life. *Look back. For heaven's sake look back!* Nathan's large, meaty fist seemed to rise up and draw back in slow motion. Tie kept his gaze resolutely on my face, and a hint of a smile lifted the corners of his lips. In that moment I knew exactly what Tie was doing. He had absolutely no intention of defending himself. He wanted this to happen. He wanted to get hurt! Where in the world were all of the teachers? Wasn't someone going to intervene here? He gave me one last look, a look I can only describe as challenging, before he turned his head around just in time for his face to meet Nathan's fist. The crunching sound it made was so disturbing it literally brought me to my feet. My hands gripped the table before me. The complete and total silence that followed was almost oppressive. Pressure built inside my head as I watched Tie crumple to the floor. I felt another strange sense of *déjà vu* and had to shake myself to throw off the dizziness that threatened to drop me to the floor. I'd seen this before. Where had I seen this before? The pressure continued to build until I thought my head would explode, and then suddenly it did. Light erupted all around me. I no longer stood in the cafeteria surrounded by its depressing green walls. The beautiful grassy green I could now see rolled out before me in all directions. The sky was a stormy grey, and large droplets of water pelted fiercely down upon the deep green below. I

couldn't feel it, though. I couldn't even feel the wind pounding the rain down in a sharp diagonal direction. I lifted my arms out, thinking I'd be able to feel the droplets, but to my surprise my arms were already raised up before me. A strange cry to the right of me caught my attention, and I flashed my eyes in that direction. I was in another place and time watching Tie crumple to the floor as his assailant—someone who looked vaguely familiar—stood over him ready to attack. My need to save Tie became overwhelming, but I couldn't move toward him no matter how hard I tried. I screamed in frustration, but my screams didn't make a single sound. I watched helplessly with my arms outstretched while Tie's assailant continued his attack. There was a loud popping noise that rang in my ears as white light engulfed me again. I was almost relieved to see it, as it signaled my return to a place and time to which I knew I actually belonged. I found myself standing in the cafeteria, my hands clutching the edge of the table, watching as Nathan began to lift his fist again. A loud, nearly hysterical voice rose up from the silence and screamed out, "Stop!"

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So I can heal people. Sounds cool in theory. Feels great when I can actually swing it. Unfortunately, my dad is all about keeping a low profile and healing folks only when it's absolutely necessary. I suppose that's best even though I'm super sick of hiding what I can do, especially from my best friend Angie.

I think I might have royally screwed up, though. Someone has been following me for weeks, and there are two new guys at my school who act like they know me, asking me pointed questions about my work at the hospital and how I "help" people. Tie and Victor may say they're seniors in high school, but they don't play the part so well.

I should stay away from them. It would be the safe thing to do.

But if I play it safe, I'll never find the answers I'm looking for...
...and I'll never understand this connection I feel to Tie.

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