

The Healer

The Healer Series: Book 1

By
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The Healer

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Chapter One

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.

Chapter Two

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.

Chapter Three

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 considered 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."

"Whaaaat?"

"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.

Chapter Four

Click click. 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. HOOOOOOOOPE!"

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 Brisngamen, 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 brokered 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.

Chapter Five

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?”

Chapter Six

“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!”

Nathan’s fist dropped. His attention turned from Tie and landed squarely on me. Everyone’s eyes were on me. Had I been the one screaming at Nathan to stop? Without considering the possible consequences of my actions, I rushed around the table and sprinted toward Tie’s prone figure. I dropped to my knees once I reached him and put my hands on either side of his bloody face. I thought I might immediately connect with his life force, but nothing happened. I’d been connecting with people all day, but not with him.

And not with Victor either.

It didn’t take any kind of connection to know that Tie’s nose had been pulverized. It looked like it had been relocated to the left side of his face. The sight of it made me want to cry. His eyes were closed, and I panicked, thinking he might have a concussion or worse.

“Tie, can you hear me?”

My inability to connect with his life force in the same way I had with every other student that day saved me from slipping up in a very big way. As I adjusted my hands on either side of his head, that strange little hint of a smile he’d given me just before he let Nathan hit him appeared on his now bloodied lips. His eyes opened and closed quickly, and in that instant I realized that Tie knew what was coming. He knew I was getting ready to heal him. He was waiting for it.

My first instinct was to get up and bolt for the cafeteria doors. Fortunately, I managed to stay in a kneeling position next to him while I pretended to be helpless and pitiful in an effort to get someone to help me. I searched behind me for Victor, knowing he’d be watching for my reaction.

“Victor,” I yelled as my eyes met his. “You’ve got to help me get Tie to the nurse’s station.”

His eyes narrowed, and then he glared at Tie with something close to reproach. From the look on his face it was obvious I wasn’t reacting the way he’d expected.

I felt a hand grab me roughly on my shoulder.

“Stay outta this Fairmont,” Nathan said practically growling at me. “I’m not finished schooling the new guy.”

Victor’s powerful fist pummeling into Nathan’s jaw was more than a little unexpected. Nathan hit the ground hard.

“You will never touch Hope again,” Victor said softly.

Nathan nodded in quick agreement and slowly backed away.

I gave Victor a surprised look and a nod of thanks before focusing my attention back to Tie, doing my best to fight the need to heal him.

“Tie, can you talk to me? Can you hear me?” I tried again, gently shaking his shoulder.

“I can hear you,” he said. His voice sounded muffled. It was like his nasal passage had collapsed. I felt sick inside.

“Victor and I are going to take you to the nurse’s station and get you some help, okay?”

“Victor’s going to help too? Now isn’t that cozy.” He opened his eyes and scowled up at us. At least I think it was a scowl. There was so much blood on his face I really couldn’t tell.

“Hey, I’m not thrilled about this either, cousin. I can’t think of anything more nauseating than helping you get to the nurse’s station looking like that.” Victor’s cheerful voice suggested otherwise.

He was clearly enjoying this.

I motioned for Victor to get on Tie’s other side. His cheerful look disappeared, replaced with some serious disappointment. He wasn’t happy with the outcome of this little experiment.

“Okay, on the count of three we’re going to lift you to your feet,” I said.

We slowly brought Tie to his feet, making sure he could stand with our support.

“Angie?”

“I’m here,” she said arriving next to me. She took one look at Tie and grunted in dismay. “I’ll get in front of you and open some doors or something.”

We took slow steps, while Tie leaned heavily on both of us. He was hurting, but I knew I had to do everything I could to avoid healing him. The sounds of students getting back to their lunches, their gossip, their normal everyday lives taunted me as Victor and I slowly walked Tie’s shaky frame out the door.

“You’re insane,” Angie said once we were halfway down the hall. “What exactly were you trying to accomplish in there?”

“Victor dared me to grab some random girl and kiss her in front of everybody. I never back away from a dare,” Tie said in his now muffled, almost mushy sounding voice.

Victor was trying and failing to stifle his laughter.

I didn’t believe his explanation for a second. These two were in cahoots together, intent on forcing my hand, playing on my sympathies and searching for a confirmation of their own suspicions. They posed a threat to me and my perfect charade of normalcy, but they had no idea who they were messing with.

“You mean the ten cheerleaders sitting on your lap didn’t seem like much of an option for you?” I asked sourly.

“Not much of a challenge, really. Victor and I like ‘em when they’re already taken. Isn’t that right, Vicky?” There was an edge to Tie’s voice that hadn’t been there before.

I looked at Victor to see what he would say, but all he did was tighten his jaw and stare straight ahead.

“So you just thought a guy like Nathan would sit there and watch you kiss his girlfriend without beating the living crap out of you?” Angie said.

“I was pretty sure I’d survive the encounter.”

“Yeah, well your face didn’t. It’s not like your nose is going to magically heal itself within the next couple of hours.”

Angie’s last comment hung in the air, tempting me to prove it wrong. I noticed Tie and Victor glance at me expectantly, and I gave them a bland smile.

“I hear Hope works at the hospital. Maybe she could use her mad skills and heal me right now,” Tie pushed.

I could feel my face getting warm again. I tried to steady myself. As long as they had no idea I was on to them I could buy myself a little more time. I could play dumb. Maybe not convincingly, but I still needed to try.

“I refuse to heal anyone who sustains injuries through reckless behavior and pure stupidity.” I mentally congratulated myself on how normal my voice sounded.

“That’s you on both counts, man,” Victor said barking out another laugh.

I was weak with relief when we finally managed to make it to the nurse’s station. Angie opened the door to let us all in, and we slowly eased Tie into a nice soft chair. I grabbed some Kleenex from the counter.

“That nose needs some professional attention. Unfortunately, all we can offer here is our extremely high strung school nurse. Victor and I will go get her for you,” Angie obligingly volunteered.

“We will?” Victor looked out of sorts with the strange turn of events.

I knew what Angie was doing. She thought she was being sneaky, trying to get me and Tie alone. How could she want that after eavesdropping on that alarming conversation between he and Ms. Mori? She should have been more concerned about my welfare rather than my love life.

Victor didn’t appear to like the situation any more than I did, but someone had to go get the nurse. He left in a hurry while Angie slowly sauntered toward the door and gave me a wink just before she walked out. I looked at Tie and let out a resigned sigh.

“Don’t act like you’re upset,” he said. “There are millions of women

in this world who would love to be alone with me in a nurse's station." His smile was more of a grimace.

"Looking the way you do right now? I think not."

I knelt down in front of him and raised a tissue toward his face. In a flash he had me by my wrist.

"What are you doing?"

His suspicion of me made me want to laugh. It was so ironic.

"I'm cleaning the blood off your face. Believe me, it needs to be done."

"It hurts too much for you to touch it." He released my wrist.

"You'll survive."

I reached my hand up to his face and slowly began to wipe the blood from his chin and then his lips. I cupped the side of his face in my other hand to keep his head steady.

"Alone at last," he whispered.

"Was it everything you hoped for?" I asked breezily.

His gaze studied me as if searching for something lost that needed to be uncovered. "No, but it's about what I expected. It's ridiculous for me to wish for more, especially from you."

Tie reached out and brushed a strand of hair away from my face. The light contact on my cheek gave me goose bumps. I puzzled at his cryptic remarks.

"What is it that you wish for?"

His gaze softened as he took me in, staring into the depths of my eyes, almost inviting me to know the answer to my own question.

"What I've always wished for. Something I can never have."

In that moment I felt as if there was far more about my life and my own secrets that I'd never fully grasped. My life could be compared to a ballet filled with stumbling movements and incomplete choreography.

Was Tie capable of leading me across the dance floor?

"I think your name suits you," he said, changing the subject and bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Thank you. My parents didn't actually come up with it themselves. Someone else gave them the idea."

"Is that so?"

"Yep."

"Did your parents mention who gave them the suggestion?" He behaved as if my answer didn't matter, but he was too nonchalant in his delivery.

"No. Just some friend from their past. Someone they must have trusted, I suppose."

A knowing smile briefly graced his lips, and then it was gone, replaced with an earnestness I wasn't expecting.

"You could do it, you know." His soft voice broke me out of my thoughts.

"Do what?"

"You could heal me." He said it without any hesitation.

I stopped wiping the blood from his face and gave him a steady look. My face was only a few inches from his, but I couldn't work up the energy to put more distance between us. His confidence and knowledge about my gift made me feel nervous and happy all at the same time. I wanted to pour out my heart to him and tell him everything. I wanted to show him what I could do. I wanted to heal him.

Then I remembered who he was and why he was here. If I healed him there would be no going back.

"I should take you to the hospital and have my father set your nose. It's leaning toward the left side of your face, and I'm fairly certain it wasn't like that when we first met."

"Don't do that. Don't play dumb with me."

He grabbed both my hands in his. His beautiful blue eyes searched mine intently. I felt my world shift.

"I know who you are. I know it's you. So heal me, Hope."

His sincerity nearly compelled me to do exactly what he wanted. I was no longer positive his intentions toward me were malicious, but I still didn't know enough about him. I didn't know enough about Victor either.

I reached my hand up and touched his cheek as gently as I could.

"Tie, I think you have a concussion. You're talking crazy here. As soon as you feel better you'll remember that people like me can't work miracles. I can't heal you the way you want me to. I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry."

His face went from warm and sincere to cold and cocky. It made me feel like his sweet and possibly caring attitude had been an act. Maybe he was just trying to get me to reveal who I was by charming me.

"I didn't realize you could be so unfeeling. All this power to heal and you're going to sit back and watch me suffer for no good reason?" He gave me an appalled look.

So he was going to throw some guilt my way. I wondered what approach he'd take after this one failed. I shook my head and continued to wipe the blood from his face.

"If you're expecting me to feel so overcome by your not-so-silent suffering that I magically become endowed with powers of healing and take away all of your pain, you're in for a very long wait," I said.

"I know a little something about waiting."

The tissue was saturated in blood. I threw it in the waste basket and grabbed another one. At this point I was just trying to stay busy and distract myself. He may have had a nasty bloody nose, but his lips were deliciously tempting. It was like having a snickers bar sitting right in front of me, irresistible, even with his face smashed.

“You better tilt your head back a little. This nosebleed is only getting worse.”

I lifted his chin less gently this time. The tension was getting to me.

“If you’re so worried about the blood then why don’t you stop it?”

“Maybe you should tell me how you and your cousin know who I am. I certainly don’t remember seeing you two before.”

“Don’t you?” He lowered his head and tried to look at me again.

I quickly tilted his chin back and held it there.

“If you don’t keep your head back the bleeding won’t stop,” I chided. My real motivation was to avoid eye contact with him. I was a terrible liar, and I didn’t need him picking up on that. “You didn’t answer my question. How do you know who I am?”

“The real question you should be asking me is when do we go on our first date? I don’t mind an aggressive woman.” He lowered his head and lifted one eyebrow in a way I assumed was supposed to be sexy, and of course, it totally succeeded in being just that.

I sighed in annoyance.

“I should have let Nathan beat you unconscious. Silence is infinitely better than listening to you run your mouth.” I stood up and threw another tissue in the trash.

He grabbed my hand in his before I could put more distance between us. The physical contact left me tingling from head to toe. I looked down at him and felt a renewed sense of pain, and even guilt, at not healing someone who so obviously needed it.

“I guess it would’ve been better if I was unconscious.” He sounded almost repentant. “Then you could’ve healed me without anyone being the wiser.”

I watched his poor swollen face break into a mischievous smile. It was surprisingly adorable.

“Why do you and Victor hate each other so much?”

His brows rose in surprise. I guess he expected me to continue denying his accurate claims. His face darkened a bit, and his hands released mine, balling into fists at his sides. This was a touchy subject, which made me feel even more curious.

“There’s some bad blood between us,” Tie finally managed to spit out.

“Yeah, I figured that one out for myself, but why? What happened between you two?”

“Oh, just a little fight over a girl.” He shrugged like it was no big deal.

“You two fought over a girl?”

I couldn’t stop the laughter from bubbling up.

“Sure. Guys do that all the time, right?”

“I guess they do, but to be honest, that kind of behavior seems a bit beneath both of you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, for one thing, Victor seems like the type of person who’d sacrifice his own interests for the sake of others.” I ignored the strange gurgling sound coming from the back of Tie’s throat. “And as for you, it’s just so high school. You don’t strike me as someone who could work up enough energy to care. In fact, I don’t think you’d ever fight for a girl at all. If she isn’t coming to you, it probably isn’t worth your time.”

My response had angered him, but he did a decent job of controlling it as he slowly stood up.

“You honestly think I don’t have it in me to care? You don’t even know me.”

“And yet somehow *you* know *me*.”

Tie placed his hands at my waist and pulled me closer to him. That much physical contact almost did me in. I put my hands against his chest and pushed away. It had absolutely no effect. He remained uncomfortably close to me. Fortunately for both of us, his nose-bleed had stopped.

Tie’s anger slowly faded as he took in my open, honest expression. I really wasn’t trying to be rude. I was just trying to explain to him how ridiculous it was to picture Victor being petty and Tie actually caring enough to put up a fight. He lifted his fingers and traced the outline of my face, looking at me like he was discovering something for the first time. I fought to keep myself from savoring the moment. How could I fight a mounting attraction to someone who had no concept of personal space?

“I wish things were different,” he said with regret. “You’re just as fierce and argumentative as I remember you.”

I wrinkled my brow in confusion. “That doesn’t make any sense, Tie.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied waving away his last comment like it was some big joke. “You’re just lucky I don’t have a caring bone in my body. If I did, you’d be putty in my hands.”

“Well, looks like you’re back to being your old obnoxious self.” I quirked an eyebrow at him.

Tie still had his hands at my waist, and it was very distracting. “You can let go of me now,” I said pointedly.

“I’ll let go of you as soon as you agree to heal me.” He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in.

Hello! This feels amazing.

I almost allowed myself to lean into him.

Think of something else, anything else. Broken ribs, gunshot wounds, head trauma...

I continued my morbid mantra in my head as I tried to push myself away from him, but his arms felt like iron. I craned my neck back a bit to meet his gaze, which ended up being a mistake. His eyes were so compelling. I couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to have those eyes light up with love.

Lacerated wrists, compound fractures, urinary tract infections... It wasn’t working. I couldn’t think properly when he was touching me. Why was he touching me?

Tie was the most confusing guy I’d ever met. He was snarky and indifferent one moment, and then behaved as if he cared for me the next. The thought that everything he did was just an act to trick me into revealing what I was really capable of made this a very dangerous situation, especially because I was so drawn to him. In the back of my mind I was hoping it wasn’t an act. I actually wanted him to care for me.

Where the heck is that nurse?

I didn’t want to stay wrapped up in his embrace for one more minute, but I couldn’t just leave him injured like this. There had to be a way to help him without letting him know I was doing it. I couldn’t heal his face, but maybe I could ease his pain in a way that wouldn’t be immediately noticeable.

“Okay,” I agreed.

“Okay?”

He was clearly caught off guard.

“There’s no use denying it another minute. You’ve unearthed my superhero power, and I can no longer sit here and watch such terrible human suffering without using my powers for good.”

I was rambling, but I was also desperate to get out of there.

My abrupt willingness to help him, and my less than serious attitude left him looking a little lost. I decided to take advantage of this one moment where he seemed less than sure of himself. Moving out of his vice-like grip became easier. I grabbed his hand and pulled him forward, directing him to follow me into a side area that looked like the inside of a doctor’s examining room. It was even equipped with an examining bed for sick students waiting for their parents to come and pick them up.

“Stretch out lengthwise on here, please,” I said.

“If you wanted to snuggle you could have told me sooner.” The cockiness in his voice sounded a bit forced to me.

“I’ll need absolute quiet in order to call upon the spirits of those superheroes who have gone before me.”

Tie rolled his eyes and then casually draped himself on the bed.

“I wasn’t kidding about the snuggling. It’ll do us both some good.” He lowered himself down and let his arms fall loosely to his sides, acting as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

My thoughts were whirling ahead of me. I knew this idea of mine wasn’t completely foolproof. I’d never gradually healed someone before. Healings were an instantaneous sort of thing. Once I showed someone’s life force what it needed to do, it was eager to comply. Somehow, I needed his life force to slow down the healing process in a way that made it look as if I’d had nothing to do with it. Easing his pain needed to happen gradually as well. If I couldn’t get Tie’s spirit to understand my intentions, then this impulsive plan of mine was going to backfire in a most unpleasant way.

Chapter Seven

I walked over to the top of the examining bed and gently placed my hands on either side of his head. I needed to focus. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and then began humming a single note like some weird religious monk might.

“Hummm.” I was very proud of myself for not laughing.

“Seriously?” Tie muttered under his breath.

“I call on the spirits of superheroes past, present, and future. Give me focus and purity of heart, and wisdom to use my gift in a way that is pleasing to you all.”

“I get it, Hope. You’re mocking me. Your message is coming in loud and clear.” He sounded irritated, which made me smile.

“I would also like to take this time to give a shout out to my most favorite superhero of all. Wolverine, I always loved your cartoons, but you truly came to life for me when Hugh Jackman represented your iconic image in the unforgettable movie X-Men. May you live long and prosper, and may Hugh Jackman’s jeans always give you the best hind end a superhero could ever ask for.”

“You finished?”

“Hummmmmmm.”

I hesitated before connecting with Tie. I wasn’t sure how difficult it would be, but once I actually focused it didn’t take more than a few moments. I wasn’t prepared for the way he responded to me, though. I could feel him inviting me in, almost pulling me forward as if he wanted me to stay forever and never let him go. A person’s life force was always something I felt and never saw, but the minute I connected with Tie’s, bright images of gold and orange burst forth within my mind. I felt their warmth as they enveloped me in a joyful embrace.

It took me several precious seconds to overcome my surprise. Once I

did, I was able to feel not only the warmth radiating from his life force, but also the pain Tie felt due to his injury. It surprised me when an aching, latent agony sent tendrils of misery through our connection. My soul took a direct hit, distracting me from my original goal. I pinpointed the source of his suffering at the very center of his heart. I failed to discern the cause, but sensed it was an old kind of hurt, something intangible that couldn't be fixed with a few instructions. It puzzled and intrigued me, but I couldn't waste time on something I didn't fully understand. I decided to ignore the injury and turn my attention to the pain brought on by Tie's broken nose.

I tentatively sent thoughts, impressions, and images of the pain gradually ebbing away, instructing his life force to imitate a diminishing of the pain in the same manner pain killers do. It always took time for pain killers to actually kick in.

I waited anxiously for some kind of response. To my surprise, I began receiving more images. I was astounded when it showed me the best way to accomplish the instructions it had received, and then waited for me to give it permission to proceed. I gave my permission and waited as it began its slow methodical process.

My annoying hum continued in order to keep Tie distracted, and then I decided to communicate with his life force again by sending images of his nose gradually healing within a couple of days. Once again, his life force showed me step-by-step details of exactly how to accomplish such a task.

Amazing. In all the years I'd been healing people, I'd never come across someone whose life force was actually capable of healing itself. At the same time, it puzzled me. If Tie's body could heal itself, why had it waited to do so? I was still connected to Tie, and I still hadn't given permission for his life force to proceed. Instead, I posed my question. Why had it waited until now to heal itself? The answer I received shocked me to my very core. It showed me that it had begun the healing process, but Tie made it stop.

Why?

But somehow I already knew. He was waiting for me to do it. He wanted me to reveal my powers.

My head began throbbing again. I had no idea what to do. It was clear that Tie's body could heal itself. The pain could be taken away in an instant or not at all. If I told his body to heal gradually, I'd give myself away because Tie's body, under normal conditions, would always heal as quickly as possible, but if I healed him instantly he'd know it was me who had accomplished the task.

After a few agonizing moments of indecision, I eventually concluded that I should do nothing. I no longer felt guilty for an injury that could

easily be taken care of without my help. I'd simply instruct Tie's life force to ignore the images I'd sent to it, and wait for instructions from Tie himself. That way his life force wouldn't respond to me at all, and once I failed to heal him he'd be able to heal himself later.

I set my plan in motion, and then pulled my hands away and stepped back. I stopped my humming and peered down over Tie's face, pretending to be curious.

"Did it work?" I asked with feigned excitement.

"What do you think?"

His annoyance was surprisingly satisfying.

"I think you look awful. My superhero ancestors must not have been impressed with my sincere and heartfelt supplications. I wonder if I should have also paid homage to the impressive size of Wolverine's biceps."

"All hail the modern woman. I'll admit you were a tad bit stubborn and argumentative before, but this witty sarcasm is new."

"Seriously, what the hell is that supposed to mean? You keep behaving as if we already know one another. As if we've shared some past history together." I moved to the side of the examining table and gave him my best intimidating glare. "This mind game of yours is useless. You can't trick me into anything by making me second guess my own memories."

He sat up and opened his mouth to argue. I cut him off before he had the chance, feeling a bit reckless as I allowed myself one brief, terrifying moment of honesty. I locked gazes with him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Besides, you and I both know you're just as capable of healing your injury as I am. Maybe next time you should allow your life force to do its job instead of waiting around for me to do it. It would save you some pain in the long run."

Tie startled at my words for a moment then a slow smile of triumph lit his features.

"I've missed you, Hope."

The truthfulness of that comment frightened me to death. He really believed he knew me. He was either completely certifiable or an absolute genius when it came to psychological warfare. He had definitely gotten under my skin.

The school bell rang startling both of us and signaling the end of yet another fantastic lunch hour.

I shook my head at him and headed toward the door.

"Hey, where are you going?" he asked in surprise.

"To class," was my curt reply.

"You can't leave me by myself. Victor and your friend haven't come

back with the nurse yet.”

He was actually whining.

“Since you’ve decided to pretend you can’t heal yourself, I would suggest you get to the doctor and have that nose set. We wouldn’t want that pretty little face of yours permanently disfigured.”

“I knew you thought I was hot,” he shouted after me.

I was anxious to get out of there. I may have behaved in a cool and collected manner—okay, semi-cool and collected— but connecting to Tie had brought with it a flood of emotions that belonged solely to him, yet they were fiercely clinging to me. The emotions were much stronger than I’d ever felt after breaking off a connection with someone. They barreled into me one right after the other. Confusion, anger, pain, guilt, longing and a debilitating bitterness submerged in betrayal, all of them merging together, forming strange patterns of words in my head.

The urge to emotionally expel everything from my system was much more pressing than I was used to. I needed my journal and some alone time to work it all out.

Plus, I’d completely outed myself. All of that careful planning to avoid healing him, and I just *had* to open my big mouth and have the last word. My father was going to kill me.

No. This is still salvageable. It’s not like he recorded our conversation.

As long as I didn’t use my powers in his presence there was no way he could prove I had them.

I ran into Victor and Angie followed by a frazzled looking school nurse.

“Where are you going?” Angie asked. “You’re supposed to be looking after the patient.”

“Oh, believe me, the patient is doing just fine,” I said. I moved out of the nurse’s way as she bustled past me and into her office.

“Just fine?” Angie shook her head in disbelief. “His nose didn’t look ‘just fine’ to me.” She punctuated her response with air quotes.

“Well, there’s certainly nothing wrong with his mouth,” I said.

Victor and Angie looked at me in stunned silence. I didn’t realize the kind of conclusions they’d jumped to until Angie started doing a very obnoxious victory dance, and Victor’s face began to pale. He looked like he was going to throw up. They probably thought we’d been making out the entire time they’d been gone.

“Okay, that came out wrong.” I held up my hands to stop Angie’s excited bouncing. “I just meant the guy never shuts up, and everything he says is laced with sarcasm. It was getting on my nerves.”

Angie frowned in obvious disapproval, and Victor’s muscular frame

nearly sagged with relief.

It was unbelievable how completely useless Angie had been this afternoon. She hadn't helped me avoid anyone. Thanks to her, I'd spent almost my entire lunch hour with both cousins, and some unfortunate alone time with Tie.

"Let's get to class," I said to her. I turned to Victor and plastered a pleasant smile on my face. "We'll see you later. Thanks for your help, by the way."

He reached for my arm and pulled me over to his side.

"Would it be okay if we talk after school today? There are some things I need to discuss with you."

I swallowed hard. After what I'd just discovered, there was absolutely no way I would ever allow myself to be alone with Victor or Tie again. I didn't know what they were up to, but this cat and mouse game was far from over, and I had no intention of playing the mouse.

Strategy. I needed a working strategy, starting with some sleuthing into their sordid backgrounds. Ange's penchant for sniffing out intrigue and scandal was going to come in handy within the next few days.

Victor's mouth was set in a firm line. He wasn't going to take no for an answer so I plastered on a fake smile and nodded in agreement.

"I'll meet you in front of the school," I said and moved to walk away. He reluctantly released me and walked back into the nurse's station. I assumed he was going to help his "cousin", which I thought was strange considering how much he hated him. Maybe they were going to continue plotting and planning some new "reveal" tactic.

Angie grabbed my arm and mercilessly pinched it.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"That was for completely sabotaging all of that sweet alone time I managed to give you and Tie," she said in frustration.

"You were supposed to be helping me avoid Tie. You are so dead to me right now."

"Well, at least you've got a hot little rendezvous with Victor after school." She began her victory dance again before I could stop her. I decided not to squelch her matchmaking hopes and dreams by revealing to her I had no intention of meeting with Victor after school. In fact, I had no intention of finishing the rest of the school day.

"Hey, I gotta get to Biology, okay?" I pointed up toward the second floor.

"Right. Call me as soon as you get home or I'll be pissed."

Angie continued her dance all the way down the hall. I chuckled under my breath when she danced her way into a group of unsuspecting freshmen and refrained from having a hissy fit at the unexpected physical

contact.

I waited until she rounded the corner before I turned and headed in the other direction. I needed to sort through my own game plan, but my mind was full of the day's events, leaving me with all sorts of questions. I had to talk this out with someone who understood me completely.

It was time to go see Kirby, but Tie's emotions were still silently pounding words and phrases within my head.

I ran through the high school doors toward the parking lot as fast as my feet would carry me. I didn't have my journal with me, but the emotions I needed to unload wouldn't keep. I jumped into my truck, ripped my backpack open, and grabbed a pen and a piece of paper. I had to get it out, write it all down now or I would never be able to focus on my visit with Kirby.

The words were never mine in these types of situations, but it usually took a little time for me to get the gist of what a person was feeling or experiencing. With Tie, the words flowed so easily it was as if I'd memorized them.

With my hand slightly cramping, I looked down at my shaky handwriting and read what Tie's emotions had to say.

Your actions don't match your words
One day you're in love with me
And then it's "we'll wait and see"

It seems like you're over me
And then we can't be apart
You just won't release my heart

I live for those moments in your arms
The way your eyes take me in
But I'm wondering as those moments start
Will this happen again?

If you're already leaving
Why don't you get on with it
Just get on with it
Cause I'm already bleeding
Oh please just get on with it
Get on with it
Take me or leave me
Figure it out

If you're gonna be gone anyhow
Go now

Holy crap! This guy had some major issues. I wondered if the girl he and Victor had fought over had something to do with this very jaded you-done-me-wrong song. There were more lyrics left to read, but I was feeling a sudden urgency to get to the hospital. I wondered if Kirby was okay. I hurriedly added the chord progression of the song at the top of the page and then I folded it up and stuck it in my back pocket. Feeling infinitely better after getting rid of all that negativity, I started my truck, threw the engine in reverse and pulled out of my parking space.

I was almost out of the parking lot when something black and hairy flew across the hood of my truck.

Chapter Eight

I slammed on my brakes and jumped out, certain I'd run over something or someone. I checked the front of my Chevy and even underneath it, but nothing was there.

So strange.

I guess I should have been grateful I hadn't killed any local persons or pets, but my elevated heart rate didn't register the false alarm.

Standing alone in the parking lot made me feel vulnerable. I was easy prey for anyone interested.

What a morbid thought!

I shivered and jumped back into my truck, cursing my overactive imagination.

* * *

After arriving at the hospital, I made way to the elevator and pushed the neon green, up arrow button. It took its pretty little time answering my summons. Once it finally graced me with its presence it took forever for the doors to shut. I kept pressing the "close doors" button in rapid succession, but the elevator refused to obey my command until I stopped my frantic button pushing.

Typical.

As it slowly ascended I had to fight the urge to impatiently tap my foot.

Longest elevator ride ever.

I was so caught up in counting how many seconds it took for the elevator to get me to the third floor that I was totally unprepared to see my father waiting on the other side of its doors when they opened.

"Dad? What are you doing here?" I stepped out of the elevator before

it got the chance to swallow me whole.

His eyebrows rose.

“I could ask you the same question. A little early for school to be out, don’t you think?”

I racked my brain for an excuse, but my thoughts became jumbled. If I’d had any idea my dad had started to feel better I would have had an explanation rehearsed for him. Unfortunately, I was no good at improvising, and my deer-in-the-headlights look was all it took for him to notice something was wrong.

“Come with me.”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me back into the waiting elevator. I swear I could hear the ancient machinery laughing at my predicament.

“But I’m going to see Kirby,” I protested.

“He’s fine.” His voice was curt. “I just finished checking up on him.”

The minute the words left his lips, he looked like he regretted it. I picked up on it immediately.

“What’s wrong with Kirby? Why would you need to check up on him?” I didn’t want to hear any bad news, but a sense of foreboding permeated the cramped little rectangle we were in.

“Wait until we get to my office. This conversation can’t happen here.”

I recognized the steel in my father’s voice and knew that pressing him at this point would be absolutely useless. The elevator ride dragged out even longer than the first one did. When we finally reached the second floor my father hurriedly ushered me over to his spacious office, shutting the door behind him.

I sat down and impatiently waited for him to do the same.

“What’s going on with Kirby?” I asked.

He looked down at the table, not willing to meet my gaze. “There’s been a complication,” he finally offered.

I waited, almost hoping he wouldn’t get around to telling me even though I wanted and needed to know.

“His immune system is just so beaten down, Hope.”

“He has an infection?” I blinked a couple of times to clear up the moisture obscuring my vision. I was so ready to cry.

“This morning his nanny called in one of the nurses to check his temperature. It was one-hundred-four degrees.”

I leaned forward and rested my head on his large oak desk. Tears formed beneath my closed lids. As I thought through what he’d just told me, I realized something I hadn’t caught before. I lifted my head and met my father’s gaze.

“You found out this morning?”

“Yes.” His voice was steady enough, but he had a hard time looking me in the eye.

It was well past one in the afternoon, and I was just now hearing about this? He hadn’t called me. I couldn’t believe he hadn’t called me. Anger and frustration nearly blindsided me. I sucked in my breath and held it. I knew he wasn’t finished.

“I examined him, ran some tests, and found fluid in his lungs. I’ve got him on antibiotics. His fever is at one-hundred-one now, but doesn’t seem to be getting any lower. I’m not sure his body is going to respond to treatment.”

The anger inside me kept building.

“Why didn’t you call me the moment you realized what was going on?” I asked as calmly as I could.

“My staff is very capable of handling this situation.”

“You should have called me. Your staff has no idea how to help him.” My voice grew in volume, but I couldn’t seem to control it.

“Let them do their job, Hope.” His tone sounded much more controlled than mine. “Everyone on my staff has had the proper training. They know what they’re doing.”

“Really? Their training trumps what I’m capable of?” I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation.

“I’m not going to call you out of school every time a patient might benefit from your abilities.”

“A patient? Are you serious, Dad? This isn’t just any patient we’re talking about here, it’s Kirby. It’s a boy I’ve been trying to heal for months and months now. I know his background, his favorite color, how much he loves chili dogs, and Scooby Doo reruns, and how much he wants to visit Disneyland before he dies.” I was yelling, but I couldn’t stop. It was like all of the stress from the day had boiled over into this one moment of release, and I was using it to emotionally vomit all over my father. “I know every detail about his medical history, the way he responds to treatments, the way his body functions. I’m trying to keep him alive as long as possible, and you’re worried about calling me out of school early?”

“I just want your life to be normal!” He yelled, finally losing his cool. “I’m tired of watching you worry. I’m tired of seeing you so wound up all the time. You’ve been showing signs of exhaustion for months now, and I hate that I can’t help you, but most of all I’m tired of watching you heal everyone but yourself.”

I stared at him in stunned silence. When I finally found my voice I realized I had no idea what to say.

“You need to forgive yourself for what happened to your mother and move on. This world, with all of its problems and everyone else’s baggage, is too much for your young shoulders to carry.”

Tears slid down my cheeks, but I refused to respond to my father’s attempts at psychoanalyzing me. There was nothing wrong with the way I lived my life. There was nothing wrong with wanting to help people, to save people. If I wanted to make it my mission in life to heal everyone I possibly could then that was my choice and a darn good one. All that mattered right now was Kirby’s health.

“I want to see Kirby as soon as possible.”

It wasn’t the response my father had been hoping for, but he didn’t seem surprised.

“You can see him as soon as we finish discussing why you’re here. You don’t even work today. Is school so boring that all you can think about is cleaning out hospital rooms?” He was trying to lighten the mood, but I was still upset about Kirby and the fact that he hadn’t called me.

“You never cut school. What happened? Did you have another hallucination?”

“No, Dad. I didn’t have another hallucination.” I took a deep breath and tried to cover how ill at ease I felt. “Some weird stuff just happened at school today, and I wanted to talk to Kirby about it.”

“Talk to Kirby,” he repeated. “Some weird stuff happened at school today, and you wanted to run it by the ten-year-old?”

“Dad...”

“When I saw your face in the elevator it was clear you were worried and possibly scared about something. If you want to talk to Kirby about it then fine, but you *will* tell me first.”

My plan to hide the day’s events from my father had tanked big time. I’m not sure why I thought it would even be possible. I’d never been good at hiding things from him. Of course, up to this point I’d never really had a reason to. My father continued looking at me expectantly, and since both of us knew how difficult it was for me to lie in a convincing manner, I decided to just dive right in and tell him everything.

“There are two new guys at school. They claim to be cousins, and I have a class with each of them.”

My dad studied me, clearly puzzled.

“Please tell me this subject isn’t going to turn into you being interested in both of them and not being able to choose between the two.”

“What? No! Geez, Dad, just let me finish here.” I almost laughed at how relieved he looked. That is, until I remembered what I had to tell him.

“I don’t know how else to say this so I’ll just rip the Band-Aid off

real fast. They know about my ability to heal. They know what I'm capable of." I spoke lightly, hoping it might lessen the severity of my news.

My father sat back in his chair, never taking his eyes off me. "What do you mean? What..." He licked his lips. "They know you can heal people?"

"Yes." I let the word hang in the air between us. I wasn't sure what my father would do with this bit of information. I mean, we'd talked about possible contingency plans if anyone ever found out, but we had never really made a solid plan.

"Okay, from the beginning. I need you to tell me everything. Don't leave a single thing out."

I did as I was told. I started from the very first moment I walked into the school building. I described to him the panic I felt at being able to connect, instantaneously, to everyone's life force. I told him about Tie and the unusual things he'd said to me during mythology. Then, I went right into my class with Victor and my reasons for suspecting he wasn't who he pretended to be.

By the time I finished describing the cafeteria scene and the alone time I'd spent with Tie in the nurse's station, my father was gripping his fountain pen so hard his knuckles had turned white. He was probably ready to snatch me up and bolt for the door in the same way that I'd been ready to escape that stupid cafeteria. I was glad I hadn't shared with him my strange waking dreams.

He sat in silence for some time. I waited, knowing he needed to work it all out in his head. He finally looked up at me and gave me a grim smile.

"I was always afraid something like this might happen, but I thought it would come in the form of some government agent or a journalist following up on a lead from a patient you healed." My father shook his head looking troubled. "This doesn't make any sense. I was led to believe you would be the only person able to heal yourself and others. I'm completely unsure about what is really going on here."

"You knew I would have healing powers?" I nearly jumped out of my seat with this alarming revelation. He must have realized his slip because he closed his eyes and swore under his breath.

"There are details surrounding your birth that your mother and I decided to keep to ourselves."

"You weren't going to tell me?"

"Not unless it became absolutely necessary."

"Something tells me we've arrived at that particular juncture."

He let out a frustrated sigh and shook his head.

"I can't go into it right now. I'm hoping this isn't what I think it is,

and that we'll have more time to figure out who Victor and Tie are."

I was nearly choking on my own curiosity and outrage at the idea that my father had been keeping important information from me, but I knew better than to push him when it came to my powers. I'd have to patiently wait for an explanation that I most definitely deserved to hear.

"Maybe Tie and Victor are government agents," I offered.

"How could government agents pass for high school kids? College kids, maybe, but not high school, and you said Tie is capable of healing himself without your help. What if he can not only heal himself, but other people as well? What if he and Victor have been sent here to find other people who are just like them?" He rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands.

I considered the possibility for a moment.

"That might not be so bad. If there are other people who are capable of doing what I can do, then I want to know who they are and why we share the same gift."

"Tie and Victor have gone to great lengths to find out if you really can heal people. If their intentions are honorable, why the charade? Why this cat and mouse game?"

I shook my head, knowing I didn't have any answers that would make this situation less alarming.

"Look, we don't need to freak out about this just yet, okay?"

My father started to laugh and rubbed his eyes more vigorously.

"No, I'm serious. Tie and Victor aren't positive I'm the person they're looking for." *So glad I didn't tell him about my intended slip-up in front of Tie.* "If they were certain I could heal people, they never would've staged that fight. I don't know much about Tie, but he doesn't seem like the type of guy who would let someone nail him in the face like that. They need proof, and as long as they don't have it, there's nothing they can do."

My father shook his head, already disagreeing with me.

"The fact that these two guys are actually manipulating events to bring about a situation where you'd feel compelled to heal them is worrisome. It's bad enough they suspect you, and how do they know about your compulsive need to always fix things that are broken? What made them think you'd heal Tie right then and there in front of everyone?"

I didn't like where this conversation was headed. My father's line of thinking was most likely leading him toward a moving van and an unknown destination where no one would be able to find us.

"Maybe they *do* know me, Dad," I ventured.

"How? Do you think they've been watching you for a while now?"

"That's not what I'm talking about." I would need to be careful about how I worded my next sentence. "I feel like I've seen Tie before. Even

Victor seems slightly familiar to me.”

“How is that possible?”

“I think we might have known each other when we were kids. Maybe I healed them when we were playing together, and they somehow remembered it.” I doubted it, but I couldn’t tell my dad about the out-of-body experiences I’d had or that Tie had shown up in one of them. It scared me to think that his claims of knowing me were spot on. I mean, how could I have no memories of Tie? How could I possibly forget someone like him? “All I’m saying is we have no idea who they really are or what their intentions are, and as long as they have doubts about who I really am then that buys us some time.”

My father didn’t look at all pleased. He might see the logic in what I said, but he probably didn’t like it.

“I’m not sure I want us to wait around wondering if this is simply going to disappear. We have to figure out who these boys are. More importantly, we need to figure out what they want with you.”

“Agreed,” I said quickly. “I’ll do my absolute best to get to know them at school.” I cringed inwardly at how happy the thought made me feel. I wasn’t supposed to like either one of them.

“That’s not necessary. I’ll figure out who they are, and you’ll avoid them like you would a fatal disease.” It wasn’t a request. “If you spend too much time with these two, they may find another way to trick you into revealing yourself. That can’t happen, Hope. We need to know who they are first.”

I nodded, even though I knew avoiding them would make me look more suspicious in the long run. I was going to have to acknowledge them at the very least. Plus, the thought of never speaking with Tie again depressed me. Clearly, there was something wrong with me.

“Is it okay if I go see Kirby now?”

He didn’t say anything. I could tell he was torn between allowing me to heal Kirby and actually putting his foot down in the name of normalcy.

“I’ll help him heal faster than any antibiotics you could possibly give him, and you know it.”

He nodded his assent, running his fingers through his hair in mild frustration. I stood up and quickly headed for the door before he could change his mind. A thought occurred to me, and I stopped just before the door and turned around.

“Dad, why did you end up coming back to work today? You told me you were sick.” I returned to stand in front of his desk.

His eyebrows narrowed. “I never said I was sick.”

“You don’t remember? This morning you told me you weren’t feeling well. You even asked me to heal you, which I thought was strange because

the only time you've ever asked me to do that was when you had food poisoning from that weird taco joint we ate at during one of our vacations."

My father's baffled look made me nervous.

"Hope, didn't you get my note? I was already at the hospital by the time you woke up."

"I read the note, but right after that I heard a noise from the living room. I went to check it out, and when I turned around you were right behind me. You scared me to death. Then you told me you weren't feeling well and asked me to heal you. You seemed a little different, and I..." my voice trailed off. The look of alarm on my father's face was enough to make me break out into a cold sweat. "You weren't at the house this morning, were you?" I whispered my question. It seemed less scary.

"No." He stood up and walked around his desk. He lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. "Your pupils are dilated, and you feel a little warm. Do you think you had another hallucination?"

He tried questioning me like a doctor instead of a concerned father, but his attempt at being impartial and detached failed miserably. His hands and voice trembled a bit. Knowing my father's tendency to lean towards the extreme side of overprotectiveness, I figured he was fighting the urge to hospitalize me and run as many tests on me as possible.

"Hallucinations cannot be your 'go to' diagnosis for every weird thing I say or do, Dad. You were there. You were standing in our house, right there in the hallway, looking at me as if you thought I might be able to heal you. I swear it." To my own ears, I sounded a bit desperate. I needed him to believe me. I needed something in my day to go right for me.

His eyes scrunched in concern. I didn't think he knew what to believe.

"Well, I was definitely here while you were getting ready for school, and I have the patient files to prove it. So the way I see it, there are only two scenarios that are even remotely possible at this point. One, you're having some very strange lapses in reality or two, someone broke into the house posing as me. The resemblance had to have been uncanny in order to fool you. And why bother? What would be the purpose?"

I could feel my heart drop in disappointment as I realized that the first scenario seemed the more likely of the two.

"I can't imagine what the purpose would be. All you asked me to do was heal you."

I nearly jumped out of my skin as my father grabbed me by my shoulders and pushed me back into my chair. He knelt down at eye level and grabbed both my hands in his.

“You didn’t do it, did you, Hope? You didn’t heal me or act as if you actually *could* heal me, did you?” His eyes looked pleadingly into mine, and it dawned on me what he was getting at.

“You think the person in our house was testing me, trying to see if I was capable of healing him,” I said completely horrified.

He nodded, his own expression registering a healthy amount of fear.

“You’ve already had two classmates at school attempt to trick you into revealing what you can do. What if this other guy was doing the same thing?”

“Why? Are Tie and Victor working with other people? How in the world could that man have looked so much like you? He even sounded like you.”

As I considered the possibility that I’d actually been in my own home with a complete and total stranger, a stranger whose sole purpose was unearthing my well-guarded secret, my breathing became labored.

Yet I wasn’t convinced that Tie and Victor were working with this impostor. The man posing as my father had left me feeling uneasy. I hadn’t taken the time to examine my feelings because I’d believed the person in my home to be someone I loved and trusted, but looking back on it now, I realized I’d sensed some very dark vibes coming from him. It was completely different from how I’d felt around the two cousins.

My train of thought broke as my father stood up and began opening and closing filing cabinets in quick succession.

“Dad, what are you doing?”

“I’m looking for a key,” he said, continuing his frantic rummaging.

“A key to what?” I was totally confused. It wasn’t exactly the kind of response I’d been expecting from him.

“A key to a safety deposit box. Inside it there are fake passports, ID’s, and birth certificates so no one can track us. It’ll be like Hope and James Fairmont never existed. I’ve also got a very large sum of money that should keep us comfortable until we’re settled in our new home.”

He was dead serious.

Okay, this was the kind of response I was expecting from him.

“We can’t just leave!”

My father stopped digging in his desk to gap at me in surprise. “Are you kidding me? There’s someone waltzing around this town looking so much like me not even my own daughter can tell the difference. There are at least three people we know of who are doing their very best to prove you’re not exactly the most average of teenagers.” He slammed a drawer and opened another. “We don’t know who they are. We don’t know if they’ll hurt you, but breaking into our house is crossing a line that is hell and gone from my comfort zone. We’re leaving just as soon as I book the

next flight to Germany.”

“Germany? Are you insane?” I ran over and slammed the latest drawer he’d been searching through, nearly smashing his fingers in the process. “We don’t speak German. The only experience I’ve had with a foreign language was two years of Spanish, and that isn’t even remotely close to German. If you’re going to completely uproot us from everything we’ve ever known and all the people we’ve ever loved, you could have at least picked a European country where my Spanish might have come in handy. Was Italy too expensive for you?”

“Italy? They don’t speak Spanish in Italy.”

“Well, they don’t speak Spanish in Germany either. There is no way I’m moving to a country so totally devoid of nice, handsome looking Latinos.”

“What are you talking about? I’m sure there are plenty of good looking Latinos in Germany. People are migrating everywhere these days.” My father stopped what he was doing and stared at me. Pinching the bridge of his nose he said, “I can’t believe I just let you suck me into such a ridiculous argument.”

We stood there in silence for a few moments, neither one of us willing to back down.

“We’re not leaving. We’re not running away. I want to know who these people are and why they’re looking for me.” My father started to say something, but I quickly held up my hand to stop him. “I won’t leave Angie. Can you imagine what the fallout from leaving her behind would be like? I won’t leave Kirby, either. So unless you plan on flying a very sick cancer patient and my wacky best friend to Germany, you can forget your relocation plan, for now, anyway.”

My father shook his head in frustration. He knew I wasn’t going to allow him to ship me off to some foreign destination.

“There’s too much we don’t know yet. Let’s just wait this out and see what happens,” I said, attempting to appeal to his sense of reason.

“I’m not happy about this, but I’ll agree to it on one condition. The minute I think your life is being threatened in any way, the minute this becomes dangerous, we take what’s in that safety deposit box, and we don’t stop running until we know it’s safe.”

“That sounds fair,” I replied grudgingly.

My father sank into his desk chair and placed his shaking hands on the table.

“You better go heal Kirby.”

I walked over to where he was sitting and wrapped my arms around his drooping shoulders.

“I just want you safe,” he whispered.

“I promise I will be.”

I gave him a kiss on his cheek and squeezed his shoulders. Then I walked determinedly out of his office toward Kirby’s room, where I hoped I wouldn’t be too late.

Chapter Nine

“Your birthday is coming up soon,” I reminded Kirby. “How are we going to celebrate?”

He gave me a tired smile. I was surprised by how much his condition had worsened since last night. There were deep smudges under his eyes, his skin was a sick, waxy color, and his already bony frame looked more frail than ever. I gave him a cheerful smile. What I really wanted to do was wrap him in my arms and cry like a baby.

“My birthday isn’t for another two weeks.” He lowered his gaze and pulled at the fabric of his hospital gown. “Besides, we don’t really know how much longer I’m going to be here. No need to plan for something that may not even happen.”

I’d never told Kirby when he would die. It would’ve been the worst possible news to share with anyone, and I didn’t want him to give up. I sat down next to him and cradled him in my arms.

“None of that, you hear me?” I scolded. “You’ll be here for your birthday. I promise you that.” My eyes began to fill with tears. Cursed waterworks! I was grateful Kirby rested his head against my shoulder. I had to be strong for him. I couldn’t let him see me fall apart.

“I just don’t see the point. I just...” His stopped speaking and took in a deep breath, letting it out in a slow hiss. I hugged him even closer to me and wondered at the very depressed mood he was in. It was so unlike him.

Dispensing with my surprise, I reminded myself that even though Kirby acted like a mature adult, he was only ten years old. He was just a boy, and his mother’s absence was painfully noticeable.

When I’d first arrived at Kirby’s door, I sensed how much this latest infection had frightened him. His eyes had taken me in almost desperately, and his need for human contact with someone who really cared radiated off him in waves. Talking to Kirby about my insanely sucky day had been

forefront on my agenda, but after finding out about his pneumonia, the first thing I did upon entering his room was plant myself on his bed and place both hands on either side of his head.

His body slumped next to me as I instructed his life force to quickly and efficiently handle the infection that had taken root in his system. Once his fever broke and the infection healed, the poor thing had wrapped his arms around me and softly sobbed into my shoulder. We'd been snuggling on his bed ever since.

"It's especially important that we celebrate your birthday this year," I said in a firm voice.

"Why?"

"Well, it's one more opportunity to be grateful that you're still here with me. You're still alive, sweetheart. You've fought so hard for so long." I swallowed a lump forming in my throat before continuing. "Don't give up on me now, Kirby."

"Hope, do you think my mom is going to miss me when I'm gone?" His voice sounded small and unsure.

I silently cursed his mother. I'd suspected he was more upset by her pathetic attempts at parenting than he'd let on.

"You're not going anywhere."

"You're right. I still need to visit Disneyland." He sounded more upbeat this time, more like himself.

"And I need to let you rest." I moved to lay his head on the pillow, but Kirby clutched at my arms.

"Can you just stay with me for a little bit? I don't want to fall asleep without you." His large brown eyes looked sad and defeated.

"Of course I can. I'll even tuck you into bed."

I set about covering his tiny frame with his white, hospital blanket. I tucked both edges under either side of him, and then sat down, rubbing his arms softly as his eyelids reluctantly lowered. Within minutes he was fast asleep.

I sat there and watched him, wondering at the unfairness of such a sweet young boy being given such a debilitating disease. Bad things happen to good people. My father reminded me of this almost daily. It builds character, makes us grow.

One thing was certain. If I'd been God, I think I would've come to the conclusion long ago that Kirby's character and maturity had been tested long enough. It was time for him to be whole.

I was frustrated that his life force allowed me to help heal his infection, but it wouldn't allow me to heal his leukemia. On an impulse I put my hands on either side of his head and connected with him. I sensed the overwhelming amount of mutated white blood cells being produced

within the bone marrow and tried to show his life force how to relay the appropriate signals that would prevent his body from producing so many white blood cells.

I received no response. I tried again and still nothing happened.

I was so sick and tired of being blocked at every turn. I decided to attack it from a different angle. Instead of sending instructions to slow down the white blood count production, I wanted to show his life force how to heal the mutated white blood cells from the inside out. The images I sent were detailed and vivid. I wanted to make sure my intentions, rather, my demands at this point, were being understood.

My desperation would've been hard to miss and might have had an effect on an entity capable of feeling compassion, but a life force wasn't concerned with a person's wants. It was solely concerned with what was meant to be. I knew this. I already knew *all* of this. For reasons beyond my ability to understand, Kirby's time on this earth would soon be coming to an end, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Still, I tried, and I waited.

And nothing happened.

This whole scenario was unacceptable. I was no longer willing to sit there and let unseen forces dictate who I could and couldn't save. Taking a deep breath, I tuned out all of the hospital noises, the monitors, the occasional intercom messages, the traffic of nurses and doctors just outside the doors, and focused on the sounds of Kirby's heartbeat, his easy breathing, and the pumping of blood throughout his system. If his life force wouldn't relay my instructions, then I'd do it myself.

Instead of communicating with Kirby's spirit, I tried sending messages directly to the mutated, white blood cells. I was mentally jerked backwards as my mind hit an invisible wall. The impact was so jarring, I actually felt pressure build inside my head.

Instead of conceding defeat, I became even more determined to succeed. My anger and desperation fueled me forward, and I pushed against the unknown obstacle before me. The more mental power I threw at it the more it wavered, and the more my head felt ready to explode. I thrust my will forward, looking for any weakness, any opening. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to continue this particular course of action. My mind was feeling a bit combustible, for lack of a better word. I worried I might pass out. To my relief, the wall started thinning out and became more pliable. Pushing against it now felt like pushing against the plastic wrap on bottled water cases.

I continued my efforts, barely noticing the sweat dripping down the sides of my temples or the way my body shook. After several seconds of literally forcing my mental energy through the weakening barrier, I broke

through with an abrupt snap. The snapping noise vibrated through every inch of my body, but the pressure in my head immediately ceased. Though my breathing was shaky and uneven, I wasn't about to give up now. After getting past that mysterious barrier, I focused all of my mental energy on convincing Kirby's mutated blood cells to heal from within.

And then I waited.

I wanted to pound my fists into the bed when, for the first ten seconds, nothing happened.

Then something did happen.

One random, microscopic blood cell began to heal. I nearly cried out with excitement, but instead, I mentally held my breath and waited to see if anything else would happen...and it did. Several white blood cells were beginning to change, to morph into healthy contributing members of Kirby's body.

Tears slowly slipped from my closed lids as more and more immature cells responded to me. I sensed his life force in the background, a silent observer to the events taking place. I was certain this form of healing was completely unorthodox, and his life force knew it. Yet this slight uneasiness concerning the method I used became overshadowed by the simple fact that I had succeeded.

I am healing Kirby's body!

I continued to give specific instructions to as many mutated blood cells as I could, but I was definitely getting tired. I wanted to keep going, but my strength was swiftly ebbing away. Once my instructions halted, I waited to see if any other white blood cells would jump on board even though I was no longer showing them how to do it. His body continued its slow transformation with more mutated blood cells catching on and some cells being eradicated altogether.

Elation coursed through me. His life force had managed to remember the instructions and healed his body without my supervision. I couldn't believe it had worked. I'd been able to show over one thousand mutated cells how to heal themselves. Another thousand cells had actually terminated themselves, lowering his white blood count considerably, and now the rest of his disease might be completely eradicated within the next few days.

I took my hands away from Kirby's head and opened my eyes, intending to rush to my father's office and share with him my amazing news. The harsh hospital lighting made me wince, and my headache returned in full force. My body would heal itself soon, but I wasn't interested in sticking around until it did. I needed a bed, and I needed it now.

Kirby had a private room, so finding an extra bed next to him wasn't

an option. I weakly stood and immediately grabbed my head with both hands as a brilliant streak of white light shot behind my eyes and hammered into the back of my skull. I managed to make it out the door, but practically dragged myself to the elevator. My vision blurred, and the pain increased with every step I took.

By the time I hit the elevator button and lurched past its quivering doors, the pain became unbearable and leveled me to the floor. I wasn't sure how the elevator made it to the first floor, and I didn't care. As soon as the doors opened a loud commotion greeted me, and then a warm hand touched my forehead. I winced and cried out in pain.

"Hope, what happened? Are you all right? Did someone hurt you?" The voice sounded familiar.

"Vict...?" I tried to say his name, but forming small noises let alone complete words overwhelmed me.

"Move over, Vicky," said another familiar voice. Two sets of hands were placed against either side of my head. "This shouldn't be happening. We have to fix this now."

"We can't fix it in front of all these people, Tie."

"She doesn't have much time left!"

Their voices sounded distant, muffled, and laced with panic. I might have been able to reassure them that I was okay if my tongue hadn't felt so swollen. All I really wanted them to do, at this point, was beat me unconscious with a sledgehammer.

They lifted me off the ground, producing an agonized scream from me. The next few minutes were a blur of head shattering noises, jarring movements, and an occasional person talking so loudly it sounded as if they were yelling through a microphone inside my head. I registered the panicked tones of my dad's voice at one point, but my uncontrollable screaming soon overshadowed everything else.

After a few more minutes of endless noise, pain, movement, and shouting, they lowered me onto something warm and soft. It was terribly painful. Tie's hands—I thought they were Tie's—landed on my head again, and bright flashes of gold and orange soothed the pain away. Something pricked my shoulder and then a warm sensation spread up my arm, toward my head, down my spine, and out through my toes.

I wanted to stay awake. I needed to figure out why my body hadn't healed itself. My life force had never allowed me to experience debilitating pain. I tried to open my eyes and take in my surroundings, but they refused to cooperate. All I could see in front of me was blessed, pain-free oblivion. I stopped fighting and wholeheartedly embraced it.

* * *

I wasn't sure how long I'd been walking, but I felt strangely serene considering how lost I'd become. There was a white path before me, rolling green hills on either side of me, and all around red cherry blossoms fell from the sky. I reached my hands out to catch the falling petals, never for one minute thinking it strange that blossoms fell from heaven. As I did so, I noticed my arms were enveloped in white, silky sleeves that draped from my wrists to the porcelain looking floor beneath me. I wore a white, silk kimono with a long train billowing out the back. I stopped my trance-like gliding in order to observe more closely the swirling floral designs stitched into the fabric of the silken gown. Every flower resembled the flowing lines of a cherry blossom. I picked up the folds of my dress and continued my walk down the white, winding path.

In a detached sort of way I wondered why I wore such an outfit. Of course, I wasn't sure where I was going or why I continued to walk down the path that twisted before me, but I felt as if my destiny awaited me just beyond the sharp bend ahead. The blossoms continued to rain down upon me, and my eagerness to reach this unknown destination made my earlier graceful movements choppy and slightly less coordinated, especially with my long silken kimono tangling around my wedged shoes. I finally kicked them off and gathered the front of my gown into a large mound. I lifted the beautiful material to knee level and ran as fast as I could toward what I hoped would be the end of this mystery.

Upon reaching the bend in the path, I followed it right and continued on. I'd moved several yards forward when another person rose up before me in the distance. My heart nearly leaped from my chest, but I couldn't account for the cause. My body seemed to be responding to the stranger. My feet propelled me forward until I stood a few feet away from him.

I couldn't believe it was Tie. His smug smile beamed brightly through the onslaught of blossoms that fell at a much more rapid pace. His golden hair had an otherworldly glow to it, and his clothes were bright white and silken as well.

He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

I wanted to speak to him, ask him what was happening and demand he tell me why we were here, but before I could do so he lifted his empty hand out invitingly and a cherry blossom the color of ebony suddenly appeared, hovering above his proffered hand. Its black hue took on the darkest shades of midnight. It was a startling contrast against the white of our apparel and the red blossoms falling all around us.

"Take it," he said softly.

"Why?" I felt mesmerized by his crystal blue eyes.

"It belongs to you. It always has, and it always will."

The blossom's ebony petals glistened enticingly within my reach. I stepped forward hesitantly and reached out my hand to take it.

"Wait," said a commanding voice.

I turned around, surprised to see Victor a few feet behind me. His jet black hair matched the blackness of his own attire, and his striking features were shrouded in angry shadows, dark and foreboding. His presence agitated everything. A strong gust of wind whipped the folds of my kimono. My long, dark tresses blew haphazardly around me. I pulled them back in frustration so I could better see and understand the look of anger—or maybe it was betrayal—radiating from the depths of Victor's eyes.

The cherry blossoms showering down upon us changed from blood red to midnight black. I turned to my left as a statue of a kneeling woman with her arms outstretched materialized out of thin air. I looked down and stared at my apparel in amazement. It was no longer white, but red as well.

My focus shifted between Tie and Victor. The black blossoms swirled around us all, creating a dark blanket which shut out every shred of light. The darkness pulled me under, leaving me feeling hollow, empty, and hopeless.

Chapter Ten

“You say you found her passed out in the elevator?”

My father’s voice echoed from a great distance.

“Yes, sir. She really had us frightened. When I saw her this morning at school she seemed perfectly fine to me.”

I recognized Victor’s deep voice almost immediately, and then I wondered if my father knew who he was actually talking to. After what he knew about Victor and Tie, I was pretty sure he would be less than anxious to have a conversation with either one of them.

“Does she usually get migraines like this? I mean, with the way she was screaming, I thought she was going to die.” Victor’s voice shook when he spoke.

I was touched he actually seemed to care about me. I wondered if he was also trying to fish for some information that might help him prove his theories concerning my powers. I hoped my dad would play it safe and be cautious about what he said.

“Never,” my father replied. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen Hope in that much pain.”

Wow. He is obviously clueless.

I became frantic, trying to pull myself up and out of the sleep induced fog surrounding my mental state. I did my best to open my eyes and move my arms which were resting limply on either side of my body.

I soon realized that any attempt at arm movement would be futile. I was now willing to settle for finger flexing and some possible toe wiggling.

“Hey, I think she’s waking up,” Victor said.

Someone grabbed my hand and squeezed it a few times.

“Hope, honey? Can you hear me?” my father asked.

I had to lick my lips and swallow. It felt like a small desert had

taken up residence within my mouth.

“What in the world did you give me?” I croaked out.

“She’s fine,” my dad said.

I opened my eyes a little more and squinted, afraid another blinding streak of light would hit me and the pain would start all over again. The room was mostly dark; however, and the only light I noticed came from the hallway.

Did I miss the rest of the afternoon, somehow?

“Dad, how long have I been out?” I asked feeling totally confused.

“Not long. Maybe twenty minutes. Which is surprising when you consider the amount of drugs I gave you would have knocked a small elephant out for a decade.”

I cringed, knowing Victor probably thought any normal human being would still be unconscious right now. I worried about how I had missed half the day. Healing Kirby must have taken up the entire afternoon. I turned my head slowly to the right and took in Victor’s strained features and mussed up hair. He looked like he needed to sit down.

“Victor, what brings you to the hospital?” I asked, making sure I emphasized his name for my father’s benefit. I felt my father’s hand stiffen on mine and then relax imperceptibly.

“When I couldn’t find you after school let out, I asked your friend Angie if she knew where you might be. She said I’d probably find you at the hospital.” He looked a little sheepish for having followed me here.

His expression might have been cute if I hadn’t been distracted by the huge lecture I was already forming inside my drug addled brain when next I saw Angie. She was more than dead to me.

She was *extra* dead to me.

“I also had to drive Tie over here because the nurse at the school eventually decided her stomach was too delicate for the type of nose job he required. We were kind of hoping your dad could fix him up,” he finished.

So they’d decided to continue this charade even though Tie could have healed himself by now. Granted his overnight healing might have looked suspicious, but who really wants to be in that much pain any longer than they have to? I knew I didn’t.

Tie’s presence here at the hospital made Victor’s face sour at the thought. It had become easier to read people’s emotions over the last two days, and I didn’t know what to think about it. From the nervous look on my father’s face it was obvious he wasn’t too thrilled either.

“So where is Tie?” I asked, surprised he wasn’t in the room with us.

“He was the one who picked you up in the elevator, actually.” Victor’s admission came out grudgingly. “When we got to this floor, a nurse took one look at Tie’s face and attempted to make him wait in one of the other hospital rooms. He put up quite a fight.”

The small smile tugging at the corner of Victor’s mouth made me want to laugh a little. These boys were so petty with each other. They really could’ve been brothers.

“Is Tie the guy I saw getting dragged out of this room by three security personnel and Betty?” my dad asked in startled amusement.

Victor’s grin broadened big time.

“Yes, sir. He wasn’t leaving Hope’s side without a fight.” Victor sounded annoyed. “The only reason he’s not here is because those security guards weren’t messing around.”

“Neither was Betty.”

Both Victor and my father were silent for like a second, and then they busted up laughing. I was dumbfounded. They seemed like unlikely allies, all things considered.

I thought about Tie and his concern over my well-being. I didn’t know if his worry for me had to do with his assignment or if my condition affected him on a more personal level. Everything he did was tinged with various shades of indifference one moment and then a focused intensity the next. To think he was worried enough about me to take on three security guards and Betty made my heart warm in a truly alarming way.

I gingerly moved my head to clear it and pushed myself up into a sitting position.

“Hope, maybe you shouldn’t sit up just yet,” my father said, placing a restraining hand on my arm.

“I’m fine. Really, I am. My migraine has completely vanished. How did you know that was the problem in the first place? I could have been screaming due to a number of different aches and pains.”

“Well, you were grabbing your head and begging me repeatedly to cut it off for you. I didn’t need to go to medical school to divine that diagnosis.”

“It was pretty scary,” Victor added.

I noticed the deep lines around Victor’s mouth and eyes. They hadn’t been there earlier today. I must have completely lost it in front of everyone.

“Thank you for helping me. I’m really sorry you had to see me like that.”

“I’m just glad I was here. I do wonder why your head began to hurt at all. Were you doing something different from your regular routine?”

Victor eyed me with suspicion.

Was he trying to find out if I'd been healing someone? If I really was the girl he'd been looking for, I wouldn't have had such an incredibly painful headache or been shrieking at the top of my lungs for someone to stop it. Victor probably wanted to know what caused me so much pain, and why my life force hadn't corrected it?

"Hey Victor, why don't you go check on your cousin and see how he's doing? I'll go talk to Betty and take a look at her notes." my dad said, interrupting Victor's sneaky interrogation attempt.

"Uh, yeah. Sure thing." Victor continued eyeing me suspiciously.

"Would you please tell Tie thank you for me?" I asked sinking back down on the bed.

He gave me a small smile and took my hand gently in his.

"I'll tell him. Just get to feeling better, okay?"

"Okay," I nodded. I looked up at my father and couldn't help but feel my face getting a bit warm. He was watching the exchange between Victor and myself with a measured look.

"Come on, Victor," he said placing a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go see if we can fix your cousin's face."

"You might be able to fix his face, but don't feel too bad if he still looks ugly. There's no fixing that."

My father chuckled and followed Victor out the door.

And then I waited.

My father would return just as soon as he finished helping Tie. I figured I had about fifteen minutes tops before I had to tell him what I'd done. On the one hand, he would be very interested in learning how I'd managed to bypass Kirby's life force. The scientific part of his brain intrigued and even elated that such a thing might be possible. It was certainly something I'd never been able to do before. I'd never even thought about doing it before. I guess desperation can be a real breeding ground for ingenuity and, let's face it, dumb luck. On the other hand, I was going to get a lecture on all the many things we don't understand concerning my healing capabilities, and how could I be so stupid to attempt something that could have (and apparently did have) such awful side effects for me.

I really wasn't in the mood for defending my latest rash decision. It wasn't that I was tired after such an excruciating ordeal. I was back to my old perfect self—health-wise anyway—and I didn't feel any other side effects from my unorthodox healing method, but I didn't have an explanation as to why I was able to bypass Kirby's life force, and I was frustrated that I couldn't get back to his room and try it again. I didn't know if I'd be able to break through that strange, invisible barrier for a

second time or if I'd even need to.

The only thing I knew with certainty: I *would* be trying again. I didn't care how many headaches I incurred over the next few months or even how long it took. I was going to continue on until every mutated, white blood cell in his body was either eradicated or made whole.

I needed to be very careful about what I said to my father. He'd probably ban me from both Kirby and the hospital for a very long time, and time wasn't something I could spare. Now that I saw a light at the end of this previously dismal tunnel, I was going to continue on until there was nothing left but that light, with Kirby waiting for me happy and healthy on the other side. My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of pounding footsteps outside my door.

My father came barreling in and quickly shut the door behind him. He sat down in a nearby chair looking rushed and ready to throttle me.

What in the world? He'd seemed so composed earlier. I couldn't imagine what had brought on this alarming mood swing.

"Look, I don't have as much time as I wanted to pick your brain and figure out exactly what happened to you."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We just got a call about a car pile-up along the highway. The ambulance is going to be bringing in trauma patients within the next ten minutes, so I'll need to get going here pretty soon." My father shook his head in frustration. "What I really want to do is take you home and watch over you for the rest of the night, but we're short on staff, and I can't see any way out of this."

"I can help. Just let me stay and..."

My father held up his hand to silence me. From the look on his face it was clear he thought my suggestion to be absolutely ludicrous.

"Also, we have exactly five minutes before Angie gets here and monopolizes your time and attention."

Angie. I smiled to myself. How incredibly predictable.

"So, the first thing I want to say is, I'm more than relieved that you're okay, and if you ever scare me like that again, I'll place you inside a cell with steel walls and never let you leave it."

I sensed the turbulent emotions my father attempted to bat away, which made me feel guilty for all of the amazing lies I'd been thinking up in response to the inevitable questions he'd been prepared to ask.

"Why is Angie here?" I felt a bit smothered by all of the company. I just wanted to get back to Kirby.

"I'm not finished lecturing you, Hope. As a single parent and one seriously freaked out father, I have the right to yell at you for as long as I possibly can before Angie takes you home and puts you to bed."

He tried to yell, anyway, but I was certain he didn't like the idea of anyone else hearing the details of our conversation.

"You're letting Angie take me home?" I choked back a laugh. This whole situation had become borderline hysterical.

"I'll get to that in a minute." He took my hand in his, looking me straight in the eyes. "Whatever you did, don't do it again. Do you hear me? Don't you ever do it again. I've never seen you like that before. I didn't think it was possible to see you like that, and I can't handle it. I've always felt some comfort in letting you out into this crazy world knowing that no matter what happened you'd be able to heal yourself. You'd never feel that kind of physical pain, but tonight..." my father had to swallow hard before he could continue.

I fought back my own tears threatening to surface.

"I do my best to help the people that come into this hospital. I do the best I can to treat them in my own clumsy, western medicine kind of way, but I will not sit by helpless and watch you suffer just like the rest of them. I don't know what brought this on, and as of right now I don't have the time to find out. So, until we can discuss this further, you have to promise me you will stop healing, go home, and go to bed. Okay?"

I resisted the automatic urge to argue, but my father was probably contemplating buying two, one-way tickets to Germany.

"Okay, Dad. I'll go home, and we'll talk about this later. I'm sorry I scared you."

My father rested his head on my shoulder and pulled me in for a hug.

"Dad, I can't breathe," I wheezed out.

"Sorry," he laughed. "I'm not even sure I want to send you home with Angie. I'd rather lock you up in that cell right now. At the very least, I'd like to keep you here for another night, but we're going to need the extra bed for the trauma patients coming in."

"Why is Angie here, and why are you so buddy-buddy with Victor? You were ready to fly us out of the country a few hours ago." I looked down at my hand and noticed an IV. I stared at it like it was some kind of alien life form. Never in my life had I ever needed to use an IV.

"Your other half is here because her mother happened to be in the hospital visiting a relative at the exact moment you had that rather unfortunate episode. Angie's phone was off so her mother left a message. I'm assuming she received said message because she came running into the examining room reserved for Tie and threatened to maim someone if she wasn't told where her best friend was within two point five seconds."

I chuckled at the thought of Angie actually clocking one of the security guards or possibly getting into an altercation with Betty. Not many people were able to stand up to the wiry nurse, but if anyone could

do it, it'd be Angie.

“Okay, so why didn't you throw Victor out of my hospital room the moment I revealed his identity? You told me to avoid them like the plague.”

“After today, I'm convinced those boys would never in a million years hurt you.” He stood up, running a hand through his slightly graying hair. “It was amazing to see how upset they were. Not that I think you and I should be inviting them over for dinner anytime soon. I don't know their real reason for being here, but it certainly isn't a malevolent one. I'm even wondering if Tie and Victor somehow managed to heal you.”

“What?” I dropped the IV cord I'd been tugging on.

“When I rushed into the room, they were leaning over you with their hands on your head. Tie said something about it being necessary that they both try since they still didn't know who you were tethered to, whatever that's supposed to mean. We'll have them clarify that later. Anyway, they closed their eyes and stayed still as statues for a few moments. It was the same position you usually take when healing a patient.” My father looked a little shaken at the thought. “I didn't register this as significant at the time. I just grabbed your arm and gave you a shot of morphine. I'm sure what I did was helpful, but until you stopped screaming completely, I was positive something inside your brain had been damaged. I thought maybe it had been damaged so badly that your life force was incapable of communicating with it or receiving a response in return.”

I was shocked my dad had come to that conclusion so quickly. I hadn't even begun to make sense of what had happened, but the scenario my dad suggested made quite a bit of sense.

The brain plays a huge part in the healing process. It's like a large electrical enhancer. Like a command center for a life force to operate. It tells all of the intelligences within the molecules and cells how to react, and they do it on a microscopic level and beyond. That's why brain-waves have so much to tell about the way a person is functioning and why most life forces are not able to operate correctly when the brain is damaged in any way. The life force is there, intelligent, waiting to help the body continue on, but any problems with the command center creates a huge obstacle it can't overcome.

If my brain had been damaged by healing Kirby then it definitely explained why I hadn't been able to heal myself. It also gave me cause for concern. If I healed Kirby again, would I damage my brain again? If that did happen, would Victor or Tie need to be present in order to deal with the aftermath of my reckless behavior? I'd have to tell both of them the truth, and I wasn't sure I was ready for that kind of conversation with either one of them.

Although, if what my father said was correct, and Tie and Victor did in fact heal me, then I owed them a very big thank you, and they owed me a very thorough explanation.

“Anyway, it wasn’t my idea to send you home with Angie, but she seemed to think it was the only logical solution available. I told her having you sleeping in a hospital bed, with me monitoring you all night long, was a much better idea, but she threatened to stay and help me.” He tilted his eyes heavenward as if he were asking God for a little warning next time.

“I’m fine. I really don’t need anybody taking care of me. Walking home by myself wouldn’t have been out of the question.” I felt a little miffed being treated like an invalid. I’d never been an invalid before. I didn’t care for it much.

“Tell that to Angie,” he said with a smirk. “Even though the obsessive compulsive parent in me is frantic to keep you under forty-eight hour surveillance, the doctor in me has to admit you are one hundred percent better. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you right now. I’m willing to send you home with Angie under two conditions.”

“Okaaaaay.”

“You go straight home. No late night visits to Dairy Queen or McDonald’s or some other equally disgusting fast food establishment.”

“Hey, I love Dairy Queen and McDonald’s,” I protested.

“Condition number two: you and Angie are to go straight to bed. No TV, no girl talk, no pillow fights, and no mani-pedis.”

“Please, Dad. We’re more into chocolate and chick flicks.”

My dad gave me a tired look.

Angie must have known we were talking about her because she came bustling into the room looking worried, angry, and completely put out.

“What the hell?” she yelled as she marched her way over to the opposite side of where my father stood and slapped her hand on my forehead. “You’re hardly ever sick, and my mother calls me out of the blue to tell me you’re dying?”

Her gaze went out of focus for a moment as she felt my forehead. Then she sagged in relief at whatever conclusion she’d come to.

I reached up to grab the hand she held firmly glued to my forehead. “Angie, I’m not dying. I just had a headache.”

“Do I look stupid to you? If all you had was a headache your father would’ve sent you home with a couple of Percocet, and I would’ve made you share them with me,” she hollered.

“You can take your hand off my forehead now.” I continued tugging on her hand without accomplishing anything. “For heaven’s sake, Ang, what are you doing?”

“I’m checking your temperature, of course. You could be dying from

some unknown tropical disease. I never should have taken you to that burrito joint last week. The cooks over there were probably filled with lice.”

I didn't possess the mental energy required to explain to Angie how tropical diseases were actually transmitted. I noticed my dad rubbing his eyes and biting the insides of his cheeks to prevent himself from letting out what I'm sure would have been a great big belly laugh.

I finally gave up trying to remove her hand from my forehead. Giving Angie a Percocet, at this point, wasn't such an awful idea.

“She feels warm. Dr. Fairmont, she's definitely feverish,” she continued to holler as she took her hand off my forehead and replaced it with my father's.

“Her temperature is just fine. I promise you, she isn't going to die anytime soon,” he said in a reassuring tone.

“You doctors are notorious for tiptoeing around bad news. Would you really tell me if she was?” She pointed an accusing finger in his direction.

My dad was fighting a losing battle. I could already see his mouth morphing into a broad grin.

The hospital intercom paged him.

“Hope, I'm going to go sign you out so Angie can get you home.” He made a beeline for the door. I heard him laughing once he reached the hallway.

Angie sent a glare in my father's direction and then pulled out some wet wipes from a gigantic pink purse hanging over her shoulder.

“What are you...?”

“Please, don't speak just yet. I'm going to clean your sweet little sweaty face off and fix the damage that your near death experience managed to do to your complexion.” She was all business now.

“I didn't have a near death exper—,” I tried to spit out.

I was rudely interrupted by an onslaught of wet wipes as Angie rubbed my face down with some fairly amazing force.

“I told you to stop talking. Tie and Victor will arrive any minute, and here you are looking like you just stepped out of a sauna.” She grumbled under her breath as she continued to use wet wipe after wet wipe.

“What do you mean?” I raised my arms in a defensive gesture, hoping to ward off another attack. “I think you've managed to scrape off at least five layers of skin.” I reached up to scratch my itching forehead.

“Don't you dare,” she shrieked slapping my hand back down. “Seriously, I'm not a miracle worker here. Some cooperation would be greatly appreciated right about now.”

I sighed heavily, knowing that arguing with Angie was, as usual,

completely pointless.

“Those heavenly hotties are making sure I get you to my car in one piece. If you pass out on me, I won’t have the upper body strength necessary to prevent you from face-planting it. It is, therefore, imperative that you avoid looking ugly in the presence of such fine members of the opposite sex. I’m merely considering your welfare.”

“Does my dad know about this?”

“Don’t trouble me with bothersome questions.” She deftly avoided my gaze and took a vicious swipe at my chin.

I smiled when she finally shoved the wet wipes back in her purse. My happiness was short lived. She pulled out a large container of mineral foundation and began liberally applying it all over my face. I spluttered and nearly sneezed when some of the powder landed inside my nose and mouth.

“So, how does Tie’s face look now that it’s fixed?” I asked.

“Well, his nose is back where it’s supposed to be.” She threw the foundation into her purse and pulled out some eyeshadow and mascara.

“Angie, I never even wear this stuff,” I complained.

“Usually you don’t need to, but your olive complexion is a very ugly, pasty color, and your eyes look like they’ve sunk into the back of your head.” She took her index finger and began applying various shades of powder to my eyelids. “You’ll thank me later. Look up please.”

I did as I was told while she applied several coats of mascara. She threw her makeup back in her bag and pulled out some lipstick, lip gloss, and a hair brush.

My stomach started to grumble. I’d neglected it for far too long, and it was now getting ready to punish me. “You wouldn’t by any chance have a candy bar hiding in that bag would you?” I was only half joking.

It shouldn’t have surprised me when Angie reached in and pulled out a very tempting looking Snickers bar, but it did.

“You must think I’m some kind of amateur. Of course I have a candy bar. I think I even have a can of Coke in there somewhere.”

I winced as she roughly ran the brush through my hair at a rapid rate, fluffing it out here and there. I finished half my candy bar and would have completely devoured the rest, but it was whisked away by Angie’s unnaturally long fingers, and a breath mint was returned in its place.

“You’ll thank me later.” She gave me a sweet smile.

I was getting tired of her saying that. I popped the mint in my mouth and let Angie smear lipstick all over my sulking lips.

“Blot,” she commanded pulling out a paper towel.

I did as I was told and waited for further instructions.

“Chin up.”

I lifted my chin and allowed her to slather my now berry red lips with some shiny looking lip gloss.

Angie threw everything back into her purse and then studied me for several seconds.

“Man, I’m good. Stinkin’ magnificent. Now then, put this on.” She pulled out a denim skirt, a white low-cut blouse, and some crazy gold stilettos from the endless cavity of her purse.

I looked down at myself and realized I was draped in an ugly hospital gown. “Wait. What happened to the clothes I was wearing?”

“I think you threw up on them or had some vicious nose bleed or something.”

I cringed, thinking I might have actually thrown up in front of Tie. Angie thrust the clothes at me.

“Those are not my clothes!”

“Of course they’re not. I didn’t exactly have time to run over to your house and inspect your wardrobe after I checked the message from my mom. I grabbed what I could out of my closet and headed over here as fast as my very snazzy car could carry me.”

“Angie, my house is only a few minutes from yours. You could’ve grabbed some of my clothes.” I was horrified at the thought of walking in stilettos for even a small fraction of a second.

“Oh, I’m sorry. The next time my mother calls and tells me you’re *dying*, I’ll be sure to pack your whole wardrobe, pick out the most perfect set of heels, and stop at the nearest Starbucks to grab you a cappuccino that’s sure to warm up your cold, dead body.” Angie huffed and folded her arms across her chest.

“What do I need clothes for if I’m dying?”

“Have you seen the kind of lighting they have in the morgue? Nobody looks good, dead, in that kind of lighting. I’d give up my most favorite pair of Gucci shoes before allowing my best friend to be found lying on some metal slab, bathed in fluorescent lighting, wearing nothing but a backless, green, hospital gown. I wouldn’t even be able to claim you as my own!”

“Fine!” I held out my hand in resignation. “Hand over the hooker ensemble, and go stand guard by the door. I don’t want anybody walking in on me while I change.”

Angie’s mask of anger was quickly replaced by a triumphant grin. “I knew you’d see it my way!” She skipped over to the door and looked out the small, rectangular window.

Putting Angie’s clothes on was like taking on a completely different personality, and as much as I loved hers, it simply wasn’t me. However, everything Angie did, she did from the heart. I decided I could wear the

outfit she'd so kindly packed on my behalf and suffer silently through it until I was taken home. The only thing preventing me from throwing her ridiculous heels out the window was the thought that I'd be wearing them for less than twenty minutes.

"Let me see," Angie said excitedly as I finished strapping on her shoes.

I slowly stood up and wobbled a bit as I tried to find my balance. My butt felt like it had been raised ten inches. A surprisingly empowering experience.

"You look like a goddess. I really am wasting my time attending high school. I should be a very high paid fashion consultant for every single celebrity on this planet."

I reached out for something to hold on to as I took my first few steps toward my traitorous best friend.

"Okay. I can see your boyfriends coming. You ready to knock their socks off?" she asked with repressed excitement.

"I don't have a boyfriend." She was making an awfully huge fuss over a two-minute car ride.

Angie opened the door with a flourish.

"The invalid is ready to go," she announced.

Chapter Eleven

Victor marched in, seeming full of purpose, while Tie slowly sauntered in looking bored out of his mind. It made me wonder if he really had displayed any kind of concern on my behalf. They both stopped short when their eyes rested on me. Tie let out a low whistle.

“I thought you said she looked like death warmed over. She looks all right to me.” He gave Victor a wicked smile.

Victor glared back at him while looking slightly embarrassed.

“All right? You think she looks all right?” Angie was outraged.

I felt extremely uncomfortable being stared at, mostly by Tie. His gaze traveled from my head to my toes and back again. I wanted to hide myself inside the nearest hospital closet, anything to escape the delightful tingling his gaze evoked.

Considering how messed up his face had been before my dad set his nose, he looked amazing now. I suspected he’d allowed his body to begin repairing itself because his nose was bone straight. I wasn’t sure my dad could have gotten it that straight. The bruises surrounding his eyes were a nasty purple color, but I liked it. It made him look a little dangerous. He continued his appraising stare. A delicious sensation rippled down my spine. I abruptly broke eye contact.

“I’m not sure why it’s going to take all three of you to get me to Angie’s car in one piece, but could we get going please? Her clothes are about two sizes too small, and I’m finding it hard to breathe, not to mention stand. The sooner I get home the better.” I pushed past them and out the door.

“I thought we were going to get something to eat. Ouch,” Tie cried.

I looked back at Angie in amazement. She gave me a sheepish grin.

“That’s why you dressed me up like this? You planned a dinner date when you thought I was dying?” I was incredulous.

“In my defense, I did bring a second outfit for you in the unlikely

event that you'd perished by the time I arrived." Her face was all innocence.

She left me completely speechless. This matchmaking side to Angie was a whole different ball of wax, and I was so not used to it. "There's no way my dad sanctioned this."

"Of course he didn't. I wasn't dumb enough to tell him." She made me sound foolish for even bringing my father up.

"If this is a date, which one of you lovely ladies is paying for my food?" Tie asked in a sweet voice.

Angie smacked him on the back of the head and walked toward the elevator. Victor rushed to my side and offered me his arm.

"Just in case you feel lightheaded," he said giving me a small smile. I could hear Tie making gagging noises behind us.

"You know, Tie, I'm just as capable of breaking your nose as Nathan is," I threw over my shoulder as the elevator doors opened.

"I'd probably enjoy it more, too," he replied.

I could feel Victor's arm tense as we boarded the rickety box and rode it to the first floor. I figured he liked elevators about as much as I did.

I was grateful his arm was at my disposal. My heels were becoming hazardous to my health, and the walk from the hospital doors to Angie's car might have seemed short to anyone wearing a decent pair of shoes, but felt like a mile or two for me.

While Angie prattled on about the lack of hospital valet parking, Tie and Victor became quiet and watchful. The closer we got to her car the more nervous I began to feel. Something wasn't right and the guys seemed to know it. I searched the surrounding area, wondering if what I sensed might erupt from the night's shadows and launch an attack.

Despite their obvious unease, and my growing desire to run away from all of them as fast as my treacherous stiletto heels would allow, we made it to the car without incident.

Angie drove a purple PT Cruiser and was incredibly proud of it. I preferred my Chevy.

I was about to get in the front seat, my usual place inside the PT, when Angie bumped me with her hip.

"Victor, we haven't had a chance to get to know one another. Why don't you sit up front with me? You don't mind sitting in the back do you, Hope?"

I glared at her, wishing I were back in my hospital bed instead of out with a best friend who's unpredictable behavior was no longer predictable for me. I had absolutely no idea what to expect.

"After you," Tie said beckoning me toward the back.

Victor slung himself into the passenger seat mumbling something under his breath.

I placed my foot in the car, but felt slightly dizzy. I must have swayed noticeably because Tie's yummy arms came to my rescue as he pulled me close to him. I closed my eyes and leaned my head on his shoulder.

Just this once.

"You okay?" he asked.

I shook my head and looked up into his icy blue eyes. "Just got dizzy for a second," I said. "I'm good now."

He searched my face, concern giving rise to tiny wrinkles around his eyes, and then he shook his head like he was trying to snap himself out of something. The same snooty mask he'd worn in Ms. Chinatsu's class took over, and I wondered why the Tie from the nurse's room had disappeared.

I stepped out of his embrace, feeling reluctant to do so, and slipped gingerly into the back seat. Once Tie made sure I was situated, he closed the door and rounded the back, getting in on the other side.

"We ready?" Angie asked.

"Dinner can't come fast enough," I heard Victor grunt.

"That's the spirit!" She patted his arm happily and then froze, her eyebrows rising to her forehead. Her gaze went out of focus again. I feared that Angie's dark period might be creeping up on us soon.

She released his arm. "Unbelievable," she said under her breath. "Now there's three of them in the car."

Victor turned to me looking for some explanation as to Angie's behavior. I offered him a helpless shrug. If Angie wanted to share her thoughts with us she'd do it in her own time.

"Where are we going?" I asked as she pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

"Oh, just a little old place I like to call Espresso," she purred.

"What's Espresso? Sounds like something you'd order from a Starbucks," Victor said.

While Angie explained the significance of the café's name and the activities associated with it, little alarm bells sounded off inside my head. I smelled a not-so-subtle rat, and that rat was Angie. I sincerely hoped she hadn't signed me up to read or possibly sing one of my songs tonight.

"So people will be giving us live entertainment?" asked Tie.

For one brief moment, I'd actually forgotten Tie was sitting next to me. A clear indication of how badly Angie's announcement had shaken me.

"It'll be live, all right, and some of it will be entertaining," she laughed.

I waited, thinking Angie might mention my many stage performances at the café, but for once she remained blessedly silent. I let out a shaky breath.

As much as I loved getting up to sing, I was loathe to do it in front of Tie. Not only was I feeling a bit wobbly on my feet—the stilettos were sure to aggravate that particular problem—but the thought of singing in front of Tie made me nervous. I liked him way too much, and his opinion of me mattered in a way it shouldn't have, especially if he was here under false pretenses.

I shifted in my seat, accidentally brushing my hand against his.

“Sorry,” I said automatically.

“I'm not opposed to getting cozy in the back seat.” He grabbed my hand and pulled it to his chest.

My pulse quickened and my breath seized in my the back of my throat. I tried pulling it back, but Tie wasn't ready to relinquish it just yet. He began rubbing his thumb lightly over the back of it, sending lightning flashes of heat down my arm. I clamped down on my bottom lip in order to avoid letting out a startled gasp and wrenched my hand from his.

“What, no sparks?” he asked innocently.

I hated that he was capable of making my body feel something I didn't want to feel, and I hated that he knew it, like he thought it was inevitable.

“Tie, what are you doing back there?” Victor asked.

“I'm merely trying to convince Hope we would make a magnificent couple. Isn't this cozy, Victor?”

Tie was baiting him. The irreverent sneer on his face made it very clear to me that getting under Victor's skin was foremost on his mind, and flirting with me somehow managed to accomplish that. It ticked me off to be used, my emotions disregarded. He'd been so sweet before. What exactly was going on with him now?

“Watch yourself, Tie,” Victor said. His words were simple, but the threat was clear enough.

Angie grabbed his attention before Tie could respond.

“Tie,” I whispered, “what are you trying to accomplish here? If you're trying to prove I have the same powers that you do then what's with the ridiculous ribbing between you and Victor?”

Tie turned his startled gaze on me.

“So you're admitting it, huh?”

“I admit nothing. I'm just trying to understand why you and Victor are behaving as if you're rivals and I'm the prize.”

He gave me a sad smile and ran a finger along the side of my cheek.

“It’s not much of a rivalry when you’ve never been mine, Hope.”

I swallowed hard at that. “I’ve never been anyone’s.”

His face twisted in pain at my response, and then he placed the palm of his hand against my cheek and touched his forehead to mine.

“I can’t tell you how much I wish that were true. At least I might have had a chance.”

I trembled at this candid yet heartfelt declaration. To consider that he actually wanted me was mind boggling, but he implied that a relationship between us could never be, as if we had already explored that option and the outcome was not in our favor. Yet it appeared that Victor had something to do with that outcome. Some choice concerning my future had been determined without me, and it made absolutely no sense. None of it did, but the pain and heartbreak Tie felt were real enough. It penetrated my core and wrapped itself around my life force, begging me to take the hurt away.

Victor let out a loud laugh at something Angie said, and I ripped myself away from Tie’s caress, grateful for the distraction.

She pulled into the café’s parking lot. There were cars everywhere. It wasn’t unusual for Espresso to be busy, but I was surprised Angie found a place to park.

I let myself out of the PT in a rush. I didn’t feel like waiting around for Tie to open my door for me and risk any other physical contact with him.

Walking into the café’s small waiting area was like visiting an old, comfortable friend.

“Hey, Sandy,” I said, waving to a cute little blond waitress who passed by.

“Hope, I’m so glad you came tonight. I haven’t seen you here in a while.” Sandy adjusted a wobbly plate in her hand. I felt a little wobbly myself. “Just grab whatever table you want, and I’ll be there to take your order in a minute.”

I nodded and peeked into the dining area. Almost every booth was taken. I started weaving my way around tables, waitresses, and patrons until I spotted a nice circular booth in the corner. I turned and waved to Angie who was a few tables behind me. She nodded and guided our dates over.

Sitting down quickly, I surveyed the area and noticed that most of the kids from our high school were there. I usually enjoyed the crowded café, but tonight I felt anxious and uneasy, especially after that brief, yet emotionally charged, conversation with Tie. I noticed Espresso’s band had already set up on the stage. Jackson, the lead guitarist, spotted me and gave me a head nod. I pasted on a fake smile and nodded in return.

I'd placed myself at one end of the booth, fully believing that Angie would scoot in next to me and momentarily forgetting that she was in matchmaker mode. Victor approached the table and was about to slide in when Tie tapped him on his left shoulder and moved swiftly around his right, sitting down next to me and flashing me a pleased grin.

I couldn't deny my joy at having him seated next to me, but his actions sparked more discord between him and Victor who gave him a pointed glare. It made me feel like a pawn again. Did Tie truly care for me or was he displaying feigned interest to get a rise out of Victor? He wasn't even giving me any breathing space. His shoulder and leg were pressed against mine, leaving me little room for escape. Sliding away from him would've left me spilling out of my seat and onto the floor. I looked around for Angie, hoping she'd save me. I finally spotted her talking to Jackson. Once again, she was absolutely no help.

"After all that cuddling in the backseat of Angie's car I thought I was your date for this evening, Hope. Were you just going to sit there and let Vicky take my spot?" he asked. He played his comments off as teasing and lighthearted, but the tension underlying his words and the way Victor's jaw clenched made me realize two crucial things.

Tie fully believed that I was meant for Victor, and he didn't like it one bit.

The government had absolutely nothing to do with why they were here.

His words sparked a memory of warm lips embracing mine. I stood in a grassy forest surrounded by unfamiliar trees and foliage, but the arms that held me close and the hands that stroked the contours of my back were familiar and comforting, demanding and possessive.

As I pulled back and focused in on the man holding me, my heart leaped in my throat. His hair was longer, and his garb was definitely outdated, but there was no mistaking those crystal blue eyes that gazed at me with so much love and affection.

I blinked my eyes and shook my head to dispel the strange images my mind had produced. The table came into focus and the white noise of Espresso assaulted my senses.

"Hope, are you okay?" Tie's hand grasped my own and gave it a squeeze. His hand was just as warm and comforting as I remembered. The thought startled me, and I ripped away from his touch, clenching my fists on my lap and letting out a shaky breath.

His eyes betrayed the hurt my actions caused, but he brushed it away just as fast as it appeared, replacing it with a blank stare.

I hadn't meant to be rude and might have apologized if I hadn't been searching for some believable explanation for all of these strange

memories assaulting me. When had I kissed Tie? Where? How could I not remember any of this until now? If Victor was supposed to be a part of my life, why didn't I have any memories of him? Of course, given time, my mind would probably resurface something involving Victor.

It terrified me to think that I might remember more, and that my father might be involved in hiding this other life from me.

"I think Hope would rather sit by me," Victor said. His tone was barely civil.

"But I want to sit in between both of you handsome devils," Angie chimed in as she slid into the booth next to Tie and motioned for Victor to sit on her other side. He hesitated for a second, but she gave him a flirtatious wink of encouragement. His face broke out into a silly grin. I had to hide a grin of my own, watching him sit down like an obedient puppy.

"Anything good here?" Tie asked. He reached under the table and squeezed my knee. I smacked his hand as hard as I could, and he let out a soft chuckle.

"You've still got amazing reflexes," he mumbled.

I struggled to get my warring emotions under control. Whether I wanted him to touch me or not, this entire situation was spiraling out of control, and I needed answers, not Tie's distracting advances. Sandy approached our table with a cheerful smile.

"Hello, everyone! This looks like a cozy little double date," she said.

"Oh, it's definitely getting cozy," Tie agreed. He placed his arm around my shoulders and gave me a playful squeeze.

It would've been rude to shove his arm away in front of Sandy, so I sat there pretending not to notice. On the inside, I was burning with the need to escape his nicely muscled arm before I started liking it too much.

I could see Victor's eyes bulging from their sockets. He really needed to start ignoring Tie before he developed an ulcer.

"What'll ya have, you guys? The usual for you and Angie?"

"Yes, please," I answered for both of us.

Angie and I never wavered from our intense obsession with cheeseburgers, cheese fries, and Oreo malts.

"And for the good looking new guys?"

"I don't know what the usual is, but if my date is having it then so am I," Tie said.

"I guess that goes for me as well," Victor said. He seemed to be making a half-hearted attempt at enjoying himself.

Sandy nodded and gave Victor a flirtatious wink. He gave her a bashful smile. He didn't seem to realize how attractive he was. It made me like him more. Sandy moved her attention back to me.

“So, what have you got for us this visit?”

“Huh?” was my dumb response.

“Your song for tonight. Are you entertaining us with something bluesy or maybe a nice up-tempo rock song?” she pressed.

Realization came crashing down around me.

“Oh, no. I’m not doing anything tonight. I’ve been a little busy, and I don’t really have anything ready.” I kept my eyes locked on Sandy’s and silently begged her to read the panic in them.

“That’s not true, Hope,” Angie said.

My head flipped around, and I watched her hold up a folded piece of paper.

“What’s that?” asked Victor.

“The song Hope wrote today. At least I think you wrote it today.”

“Where in the world did you get that?” It was the song I’d written in my car before I’d left to see Kirby. The one helping me release all of Tie’s emotions from my system.

“I found it in your pants pocket at the hospital. The lyrics are pretty good. I can’t wait to hear you sing it.”

Her comment was given innocently enough, but her eyes gleamed wickedly, and full comprehension of her intentions for tonight became crystal clear.

That little minx had set me up. She’d found the song and orchestrated this date to *Expresso* to get me to showcase my singing capabilities in front of our dates.

Oh, we are so having a talk about this.

“I didn’t know you wrote music, Hope,” Tie commented. “You seem to be endowed with several amazing talents.”

My discomfort grew under the intensity of his infuriating smile.

“Are you going to sing for us tonight?” asked Victor who seemed genuinely interested.

“Not a chance.” My reply came out sharper than I intended. “That song isn’t finished yet, and I haven’t run the music by the band. They’d need a couple of practice runs before getting it right.”

“Oh, come on, Hope. You’ve done a lot of impromptu performances without practicing beforehand, and the band is always able to follow you,” Sandy argued.

“No worries. I made copies of Hope’s song at the hospital and already passed them out to the band. Nice of you to add those chord progressions, Hope. They should be good to go,” Angie said, giving me a triumphant grin. Sandy’s eyes lit with happiness.

“I’ll go tell Jackson you’ll be singing next,” she said, jumping up

quickly and heading toward the lead guitarist.

I wanted to leap up and run out the door—right after I choked Angie, of course.

This date had been a mistake. Beads of sweat formed along my hairline. I could hear Tie chuckling softly. I gave him an icy glare and then turned the full force of it onto Angie.

“You are by far the worst best friend I’ve ever had,” I said.

“You’ll thank me later.” She reached across the table and gave me my lyrics.

I ripped them from her hand and did my very best to hold back the biting remarks floating in my head.

There was some tapping on the microphone and a bit of feedback as Jackson cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, everyone. Our next performance will be by one of our most popular musicians tonight. Please give it up for Hope Fairmont.”

The applause started and my pulse skyrocketed. I hadn’t even had time to form an escape plan. I stood up, wishing with all my heart that I was simply having a nightmare. I’d wake up the minute my feet touched the stage.

Of course, that never happened. Within seconds—seconds that felt like hours—I gingerly climbed up the side steps to the small stage, barely avoiding a large wobble due to my treacherous footwear, and placed myself in front of the microphone. For the first time in my life, the mic no longer felt like an old friend. More like a threatening viper ready to strike.

I looked out at the sea of familiar, smiling faces and my muscles slightly unwound. Maybe I could pretend Tie wasn’t present. There were so many friends from school waiting for me to succeed. Tie was just one guy, right?

I looked over at my table and met his gaze. He sat there staring at me, taking in my less than confident appearance. I waited for him to give me another teasing smirk. Instead, he mouthed the words “you can do this” and gave me a supportive nod. I couldn’t help but give him an answering smile, feeling bolstered by his attitude.

Jackson’s group and I had spent a good three years getting to know each other’s styles. We knew what worked and what didn’t, but I was always amazed at how quickly they could pick up my music and make it a reality for me.

The baseline and percussion gave me a quick adrenaline rush, and I closed my eyes as the first chords to the song washed over me. With the warmth of the spotlight bearing down upon me and the music filling up all the empty spaces within, I forgot about my fears, I forgot about my worries, and I started to sing the song that Tie had given me.

I could hear my voice ringing out true and clear through the monitors. My confidence grew, and by the time I reached the second verse I was completely at ease and in my element. It had to be the best kind of freedom I'd ever experienced. It always felt that way when I sang.

You use words like Maybe now
It keeps me from moving on
When all your emotion's gone

I locked my eyes with Tie's, as if they were a lifeline and the only thing anchoring me to this moment. To my surprise his face remained open and vulnerable. Gone was the overconfident smile. There wasn't even a hint of a teasing expression.

You like to say If a lot
There isn't one single string
To keep you here next to me

I guess it's my own fault I can't stop
You're so easy to believe
And even when my hope seems to drop
I still want to breathe you in

The chorus was coming again, and my eyes never wavered from Tie's. His were also glued to mine, but I got the impression he wanted more than anything to break the strange connection we were experiencing, to be rid of the sadness burrowing a hole in his chest.

If you're already leaving
Why don't you get on with it
Just get on with it
Cause I'm already bleeding
Oh please just get on with it
Get on with it
Take me or leave me
Figure it out
If you're gonna be gone anyhow
Go now

I switched to the bridge with the band easily following me.

My words would beg you to stay
 But your words would throw me away
 My heart keeps beating while your hearts retreating
 and soon I'm losing you

I repeated the chorus one last time. It felt sad to let the moment go and have the song end. Tie wasn't the easiest person to read, but this song opened a crack in his armor, and I was anxious to understand as much as possible. The more I sang, the more I might see, but the song finally ended and the last chords of my music faded out into the silence. The applause that followed managed to break the connection I'd shared with Tie. I smiled and took an exaggerated bow.

Tie's mouth was strained, his body rigid. I wondered at the intense emotions my song had unearthed for him. Whoever this girl had been, she'd certainly put Tie through the ringer.

I stopped short at the thought that it might have been me. Brushing off that troubling idea, I stepped off the stage and made my way over to our booth. Tie's rigid posture made me nervous. He stared down at the table without really focusing on anything, and I wondered if it had been a mistake to sing his song in front of him.

I sat down close to him and brushed my leg against his. Placing my hand on his arm I chirped, "How'd I do, date?"

He gave me a rueful smile, like he'd decided to concede defeat, but his eyes still contained that awful look of longing. His silence went unnoticed, due to the fact that Angie, Victor, and everyone else in the restaurant were tripping over each other to tell me how much they loved the song. From the corner of my eye I saw him slowly recover himself. His icy façade slipped tightly into place.

"I think there were some Hollywood talent scouts here tonight. When you're rich and famous don't forget the little people who dressed you up and gave you gold stilettos," Angie said. She gave me a satisfied smile and turned her attention to Victor.

I couldn't help but give Tie a surreptitious glance as I took another bite of my burger. I'd thrown him off balance a bit, but I didn't feel too guilty about it. I'd been off balance since the moment he'd waltzed into mythology.

"Tell me, Hope, was that song about someone in particular or have you had a lot of practice being dumped?" he asked. I was startled by his abrupt change in demeanor.

First he's hinting at his interest in me, and now he's getting nasty with me? What is his deal?

I did my best to hide the anger I felt with this unexpected verbal dig.

“You should stop talking, Tie,” Victor said in a tired voice. “No one has the energy to keep up with your tactless commentary.”

“Hope has never been dumped,” Angie defended.

“So she’s the one doing all the dumping, huh? Some things never change,” Tie said.

I had no idea what he was talking about. He didn’t know me at all, but the way he sometimes interacted with me suggested this had all been done before.

“So Angie, how long have you and Hope been friends?” Victor interrupted.

“Since we were babies. My mom and her mom were pretty tight.”

“Your mothers aren’t tight anymore?”

Angie’s eyes turned to me. It was obvious she was regretting bringing my mom up as a conversational piece.

“My mom died when I was ten,” I stated bluntly. My small talk really needed some work.

There was an awkward silence that filled the space between us all. Not even Tie had a nasty comment to offer up. They both seemed taken aback by the sad news.

I found it interesting that this aspect of my life was a complete and total mystery to them. I mean, they’d gone to great lengths to determine who I was and what I could do. I’d just assumed they’d have some kind of file documenting the events in my life. Surely something as major as the death of a parent would have made it into that file.

Maybe I’d perceived them as more threatening than they really were and given them far more credit than they deserved.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” Victor said sounding a bit embarrassed. “I’m also sorry for asking about it. I’m sure this is the last thing you want to talk about.” Victor gave Tie a very confused look.

“It’s okay,” I lied, feeling a little more exposed than I was used to. “It was a long time ago.”

“How did it happen?” Tie asked; his question more urgent than intrusive. I’d been waiting for more snide commentary or some tactless joke, but he looked like he was trying to put some pieces of a puzzle into place, something that had been eluding him for quite some time. He placed his hand on mine and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

“Tie, we should really change the subject,” Angie said showing some obvious remorse for having opened her big mouth.

She knew how touchy this subject was for me. I mean, I talked about it once with Angie right after it happened, and then I refused to talk about it any further, and she was the one I told everything to. Well, almost everything.

Tie ignored her and continued to stare at me. I surprised myself with the desire to finally talk about what really happened that night. Not even my own father knew everything I knew. He didn't know I'd seen my mother's killer.

Yet here, in this crowded café, with my best friend and two guys I'd met this morning, I was ready and willing to share a part of my history I'd refused to talk about for years. The noise of the café faded away into the background, and our tiny little booth in the corner felt like the most private, ideal location for soul bearing if there ever was one. I wasn't sure if Tie's mesmerizing gaze had created that illusion for me or if I was just so desperate to finally get everything off my chest that I'd created it for myself. Either way, I needed and wanted to talk about it.

"It happened on a Saturday," I said. My voice caught in my throat, and I had to swallow and start again. I may have wanted to talk about it, but my voice felt weak and shaky. "It was my tenth birthday, and my mom was making my birthday cake. She always made my birthday cakes for me," I smiled happily to myself. "There was a knock at the door, and she sent me to open it. A very old looking man was standing there in the entryway smiling down at me. He asked if he could see my parents."

I swallowed hard as I tried to collect my thoughts. I looked up to see Angie staring at me. She seemed surprised by my willingness to talk about a subject I'd so studiously avoided all these years. She nodded at me to continue.

"My mom came to the door when she heard the older man's voice. She recognized who he was and seemed a bit concerned, almost upset, but she didn't act like she felt threatened by him in any way. She called for my dad to come downstairs, and then sent me to the neighbors to borrow some eggs. I was curious about the stranger, but figured I'd have time to ask my mom about it later. I was kind of focused on my birthday cake." I shook my head, wishing I'd paid more attention to the dynamics of the situation. "I was only gone a few minutes, and when I came back, the man was still standing at the front door. I couldn't understand why my mom hadn't invited him in. When I walked past him I saw her lying on the floor in a pool of her own blood with my dad hovering over her. He was on the phone with a 911 operator and had his hands over her chest trying to stop the bleeding. I guess while I'd been gone, the stranger had pulled out a gun and shot her right there in the doorway."

I heard Angie gasp, but I continued on, afraid if I stopped I'd never be able to start again.

"My mom didn't die right away. I was on the floor next to her trying to help my dad stop the bleeding, and that man was still standing in the doorway. He wasn't looking at my mother, though, he was looking at me.

You'd think after shooting someone in the chest you'd want to get as far away from the scene of the crime as possible, but he just stood there totally unconcerned, like he was waiting for something."

"Hope, you never told me you saw the guy who shot your mom," Angie said horrified. "Did you tell that to the police?"

"No," I said flatly.

"Why in the world would you keep that to yourself?"

I hesitated, not sure how to respond to her question.

"She was the only one who could see him," said Tie. "He was standing right there in the doorway, but your dad never noticed. He didn't even see her get shot. Isn't that right, Hope?" I stared at him suspiciously.

"How on earth could you know something like that?" I demanded.

"You said your mom recognized the man who shot her," Victor said. "Did she ever say his name?"

"No. She just mumbled something funny before she passed away."

Their interest in this story was beginning to make me nervous. I had this awful feeling that they knew more about my mom's murder than I did.

"What did she say?" Tie asked insistently.

"Hachiman," I replied. "She said Hachiman."

Victor sucked in his breath sharply.

"Not a chance. There's no way he would've done that to Hope's mother," Victor hissed turning to his cousin.

"I'm not an idiot. I know he wouldn't do that," Tie responded. "Clearly they've known about Hope much longer than we have. The question is, why did they leave Hope alive if they knew who she was?"

"Wait, what are you guys talking about? Is Hachiman an actual person?" I asked.

"How could you two possibly know anything about her mother or her mother's murderer, and what do you mean they knew about Hope?" Angie asked.

Her tone suggested she felt as nervous about this situation as I did. I looked at her from across the table and watched her slide slowly away from Victor's side. She shot her eyes toward the entrance to the restaurant and back to me. Her signals were coming in loud and clear, but I had no intention of leaving until I got more answers.

"Hope, you said the man was waiting at the door. He didn't take off right away. How long did he stay there?" Victor asked.

"He left the moment my mother's heart stopped beating," I said.

My response seemed to support whatever conclusions Tie and Victor had come to.

"They weren't sure then," Tie said. "When she failed to heal her

mother, the assassin assumed he had the wrong girl.”

“When she failed to heal her mother? What are you guys talking about?” Angie asked.

The word ‘failed’ rang loudly in my ears. I’d never been able to understand why I’d failed to save my mom. I could remember rushing to her side and seeing relief sweep over my father’s face when he realized I was there. He thought everything would be okay. He’d firmly believed I would save my mom and heal the wound. I’d connected to her and assessed the damage in a matter of seconds. Healing her should have been simple. She wasn’t supposed to die, and I knew I’d be able to save her, but as I began willing blood vessels and tissues to knit back together, I felt her life force slip quickly from my mind.

Then nothing.

I couldn’t connect to anything, and her body was completely unresponsive. I remembered trying over and over again to make some kind of connection with her. It was unthinkable to me that she’d slipped from my grasp. It was almost as if she’d retreated from me on purpose.

“We need to get them out of here and get Hope somewhere safe. Our interest in her has clearly drawn the assassin’s attention,” Victor said.

Tie stood, grabbed my arm, and pulled me to my feet. He threw some money on the table and pushed me out of the booth.

“What’s going on?” I whispered.

“We’re leaving,” Tie stated.

“Absolutely not,” Angie replied. “This date is beginning to remind me of every slasher movie I’ve ever had the stupidity to sit through.

“Angie, you need to lead us to your car,” Victor said. He turned to Tie. “I wish this could’ve been avoided, but we’re taking Hope back with us now. She should have been found the moment her mother was murdered.”

I instinctively stepped closer to Tie.

“We didn’t know, Victor. How could we have known?” Tie said.

“I’ll be taking charge of Hope now. She’s my responsibility, after all, and you can follow up behind us.”

“We still don’t know who she belongs to.”

Victor barely contained his rage as he said, “Regardless of what you did in the past, whether it’s still relevant or not, you know the prophecy as well as I do. She belongs to me.”

Victor held out his hand waiting for Tie to comply with his orders. Tie’s reluctance was obvious, but the anger and defiance that flitted across his features were soon overpowered by a depressing look of defeat. It seemed like up until this moment Victor had been patient with Tie’s antics and digging comments, but now it was time for Victor to pull rank, and

Tie knew he was expected to fall in line.

The smart thing to do would have been to grab Angie and make a mad dash to her car without our male companions. We had no reason to trust these guys, and all of their cryptic remarks concerning the events surrounding my mother's death made it seem like they were involved in it somehow.

I couldn't move though. Not when Tie was standing so close to me. Not when all I wanted to do was lean into him and let his warmth spread through every inch of my body. I didn't know if he was good for me or bad, and I didn't care. I needed him, and that need kept my feet firmly planted next to his.

My realization shocked the hell out of me. I wondered if the thought of being handed over to Victor had given me a reason to consciously acknowledge what my subconscious had already decided.

"You promised you wouldn't get in the way, and when the time came you'd help fix the mess you made. Are you going to help me fix this, or is it time for you to leave?" Victor's voice was uncharacteristically cold.

Tie took my hand in his and slowly offered it to Victor, who acknowledged him with a grateful look and then wrapped his own hand around mine. It was a very strange moment for me. It felt like Tie was reluctantly allowing Victor to take my hand in marriage. It had a final and binding feel to it. I looked to Tie, feeling betrayed. I didn't want to be handed over. If I was going to be anyone's responsibility I wanted to be his.

"Let's go," Victor said, motioning for Angie to lead the way.

Angie was rarely caught off balance in any kind of social situation, but I could tell she had absolutely no idea what she was supposed to do. Her eyes pleaded with mine for some kind of hint as to what she should do.

"It's okay. I think we need to trust these guys." I was surprised by how right that felt.

Angie glanced at my hand entwined in Victor's. A flash of confusion crossed her features before she turned around and headed for the exit.

Outside, the frosty night air immediately penetrated my clothing. I looked around the quiet parking lot, my unease escalating with every step we took. I shivered, not necessarily from the cold air clawing at me, but from the increasing certainty I felt that someone was watching our little party as we walked the short distance from the café to the PT.

Angie pulled out the keys from her purse. They made a soft tinkling noise that amplified in the dense quiet of the parking lot. Tie's footsteps quickened, and Victor wrapped a protective arm around my shoulder, hurrying me along.

Then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Twelve

Tie ran up behind us shouting something to Victor while diving toward Angie, tackling her to the gravelly floor. I didn't have time to form a single question before Victor yanked me to the ground, covering my body with his. A fireball flew directly over us and pummeled into Angie's car, causing it to roll backward before crashing into a pick-up truck.

"Are you okay?" Victor asked in a panic.

I couldn't answer. I was too busy spitting gravel out of my mouth. Honestly, I was just glad I hadn't been the only one to see bright balls of fire being launched out of nowhere.

"Tie?" Victor shouted in concern.

"We're good," he yelled back, "but we need to get out of here before he's able to work up another fireball."

"Agreed. Follow me."

Victor swept me up in his arms and ran without seeming the least bit affected by how much I weighed. I was pretty sure Tie and Angie were following right behind us, but I felt an enormous sense of relief when I heard Angie screaming, "Tie, put me down. I've gotta go back and find out who torched my car!"

"That purple monstrosity? Someone just did you a favor, Angie. Besides, what would you do if you actually found the culprit?" Tie shouted.

"I'd kill him slowly with the pointy tips of my fingernails," she screeched.

Victor's pace picked up more speed, something I didn't think was possible. I wasn't sure where he intended to go until I saw the lighted walls of the high school in the distance. I couldn't believe we'd reached it so fast. It was a good two miles from the café. It wasn't humanly possible for us to have arrived at the school as fast as we did. We were almost to

the front steps when I looked to my left and saw movement from across the street.

“Victor! Down,” Tie yelled.

I shut my eyes and held tight to Victor as he dove on his side with me cradled in his arms. The school’s immaculate lawn erupted into flame a few feet behind us and to the left. I looked for Tie and Angie. They’d landed to our right. Victor shot up fast, still managing to carry me, and broke through the front doors with an insane amount of force. Looking back, I saw the front doors barely hanging on their hinges. Tie stepped through them with Angie thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

She still yelled at him to put her down.

We rounded a corner of the hallway and waited for Tie and Angie to catch up.

“Where to now, oh fearless leader?” Tie asked.

It amazed me that in a life or death situation he was still capable of achieving such a mocking attitude.

Victor ignored him and continued forward, racing toward the end of the hall and turning left. I knew where he was headed now, but I couldn’t figure out why. I didn’t see how the cafeteria would provide the kind of cover we needed. I heard a loud whooshing noise as Victor threw us both against the wall. Another fireball went sailing down the hallway and crashed into some lockers. We moved forward a few feet then took a left, rushing through the doors of the cafeteria. I really hoped we weren’t going to hide in there. In my mind, a high school kitchen in the middle of the night was the perfect setting for a mass murder.

The kitchen was exactly where Victor went.

“Are these ovens gas or electric?” he asked, setting me down next to him.

“Are you serious? I have no idea.” All I could think about was when the next fireball was going to hit.

He didn’t seem to be listening to me, though. Tie still held Angie over his shoulder while she continued to squawk.

“Electric,” Victor muttered. “That’s not gonna work.”

“Burning it wouldn’t have killed it, Vicky”

“It would have slowed it down.”

“Guys, shut up and listen,” Angie shouted, smacking Tie on the back to emphasize the urgency in her tone. “Do you hear that?”

The immediate silence that followed was deafening. Then... *Click click. Click click.*

The sound originated directly above us.

“What was that?” she asked.

Click click. Click click.

I had no idea what it was, but it sounded horrifically familiar. I looked up at the ceiling and waited for the sound to come again.

Click cl...

Victor pushed me to the floor while simultaneously pulling out a strange looking crossbow.

Where had *that* thing been hiding?

He aimed for the ceiling and shot with practiced precision before the clicking sound had even finished. The arrow ripped through the ceiling, and a loud, pain-filled screech erupted immediately afterward. A scorched, mega-sized paw with huge claws reached through the hole above us.

Victor scooped me up again, and we were running back the way we'd come.

"All you did was piss it off, you know," Tie yelled from behind us. "And slowed it down. It won't be able to track us for a while now."

Claws.

That thing had claws, and they were nasty looking. I was freaking out.

We were down the hallway, past the broken high school entrance, and across the street before I could blink an eye. I wondered where we were headed next when my house suddenly appeared in the distance. We were traveling so fast. How was it even possible?

"How do you know where I live?" I shouted.

Victor ignored my question and raced toward the front door of my house. He kicked it open with his foot and rushed inside with Tie following right behind us. Tie unceremoniously dropped Angie to the ground and slammed the door shut.

"This is insane," she yelled. She didn't even bother to stand up.

"Did you really think I was gonna let you go back there and get yourself killed?" he asked in exasperation.

Angie shot up faster than I thought possible.

"Do you have any idea how long it took me to save up enough money to buy that car?" She placed her hands on her hips and jutted out her chin.

Full battle mode.

"Oh dear," I mumbled under my breath.

"What was that?" Victor asked.

I looked at him and felt slightly embarrassed. I was still being held in his arms, and my arms were encircling his very broad shoulders. Victor, this up close and personal, was more than a little mind-numbing. I randomly wondered what it'd be like to kiss him, then I shook my head as I tuned back in to the argument between Tie and Angie.

“Yeah, right. Your daddy bought you that car, and I’m sure he can buy you another one.” Tie already looked bored with the conversation.

He’d just managed to tread on very dangerous ground. I knew I needed to intercede before Angie completely lost it.

“You better put me down,” I said to Victor.

He complied somewhat grudgingly. I tried to put myself between Tie and Angie as fast as I could, but my gold stilettos impeded my progress.

“Tie, Angie’s father has been out of the picture for awhile now. She bought her own car.”

He had the decency to look embarrassed.

“Angie, I’m sorry about your car. I really am, but we have a few pressing problems here that need to be dealt with first,” I insisted.

Angie still looked ready to throw a few good punches, but she finally relaxed her stance and gave me a nod, signaling to me she was willing to play nice for now.

“We’ll be safe here,” Victor said in a comforting voice. “I stunned that thing with several thousand volts of electricity. It won’t wake up for at least three hours. Just long enough for us to make our escape.”

“Escape?” I asked.

“Yes, and don’t worry about your home. The nemokata can’t send their fireballs through here.”

“Nekomata? What...?”

“The fireballs can’t penetrate the walls in which living beings dwell,” Victor continued, interrupting my question.

“My car begs to differ,” Angie argued.

“Your car is fine,” Tie said. “Their fire only destroys human flesh. We could go back to the café right now and there’d be absolutely nothing wrong with your car, okay? It was just an illusion.”

I thought about the tree in Mrs. Simmons’ yard.

Mystery solved.

The bickering continued until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Whoa, wait!” I yelled. “What are nekomata, why are they throwing balls of fire at us, and how in the world do you two even know about them in the first place?” My little outburst seemed to surprise everyone. “Who are you really, because you certainly aren’t high school kids, and you definitely didn’t move here with the intention of staying for any real length of time.”

Tie and Victor looked at each other, communicating in that strange way only guys can.

“Do they know this has happened before?” Angie asked, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean, this has happened before?” Victor gave Angie a scowl, which she ignored as she turned to address Tie.

“When Hope was walking home from the hospital yesterday she thought someone was following her, and then this branch knocked her over and a huge fireball lit up the tree she’d been standing in front of.”

Victor’s angry scowl moved to his cousin.

“You knew about this?”

“I made sure she got home safely.” Tie raised a placating hand. “She hit the ground before the flames came near her.”

“Why didn’t you tell me there’d already been an attack?” Victor looked about ready to explode.

“I didn’t think you were even coming. You made it very clear that you didn’t believe me despite my insistence.”

“Can you blame me?” Victor shouted. “I couldn’t sense her, Tie. She’s standing right here, and I *still* can’t get a read on her ki or the way it touches the veil.”

“I had it under control, Vicky. Nothing was going to happen to her on my watch.”

“But it isn’t your watch, is it, Tie? It’s mine. She’s my responsibility, and you agreed to that before you were allowed to help us.”

“Someone better tell me what’s going on before I begin screaming at the top of my very operatic lungs,” Angie cried out.

“You were there when I got attacked last night, and you didn’t talk to me, or help me up...or explain what was going on?” I spluttered. I was still reeling from their comments, but my anger at his involvement yesterday took precedence.

“What was I supposed to do? Introduce myself and tell you I was there to find out if you could heal people by connecting with their life force, and oh, by the way, there are other people who aren’t so nice, and they would like to kill you?”

“Heal people? Hope, what on earth is he talking about?” Angie asked.

“I don’t know, Angie.” I tried to sound clueless. “For some reason these two both think I’m some kind of miracle worker.”

“We aren’t the only ones. How do you explain that everyone, good and bad, has managed to zero in on you Ms. Fairmont,” Tie asked, driving his point home.

“You still haven’t told me what nekomata are or who you two are for that matter.” I needed to steer the conversation away from my healing powers.

“We’ll talk about what nekomata are later,” Victor said in a weary

voice. “Right now we need some kind of game plan. We need to get Hope out of town without you-know-who being the wiser.”

“Who is you-know-who?” I fairly screamed.

“We’ll need Chinatsu to help us out with that,” Tie said completely ignoring me.

“Our mythology teacher?” Angie asked. “What in the world does she have to do with any of this?”

“I’m not leaving,” I interrupted before anyone could answer Angie’s question. “I don’t know who you people are, and I have no idea what’s going on. Do you really think I’d go anywhere with either one of you?”

“You’re not safe here, Hope,” Victor said.

“I’m not safe because you two are here. None of this started until you two came into town. Am I right?” Their silence only confirmed my suspicions. “Tell me what’s going on right now!”

“There’s really only so much we can tell you. The rest you have to remember on your own.” Victor placed a calming hand on my shoulder.

“She should have remembered all the ugly, sordid details by now,” Tie said bitingly, “but I think she’s healing too much. She’s been using her powers to heal everyone but herself.”

I felt like I was going to hyperventilate. I didn’t want Angie finding out like this.

“Crazy,” Angie muttered to no one in particular. “I’m surrounded by good looking guys who are absolutely nuts. I don’t suppose either one of you is up for a really long make-out session?”

Angie threw herself on the living room couch and pulled out a nail file from her monstrous purse. I was surprised she still *had* her purse.

“I’m going to say this one more time, so pay attention,” I said, raising my voice. “I don’t know how to heal people. I don’t have magical powers that allow me to fix injuries, seal cuts, or bring people back from the dead. I don’t even own a broomstick.”

“Well, now you’re just being silly.” Tie gave me a flirtatious wink.

The sarcastic remark forming in my mind never got past my lips. I heard the back door open and slam and then my father’s concerned voice boomed from the kitchen.

“Hope? Angie? Are you here?” He sounded terrified.

“Dad, we’re in here,” I shouted. “You got home fast.” He was also home safe. I felt relieved knowing he hadn’t been attacked by whatever was out there.

My dad hurried down the hallway.

“Someone came into the hospital screaming about a purple PT exploding,” he called out. “You weren’t answering your phones so I came home to see if everything was okay.” He reached the end of the hallway

and came into view. When he caught sight of us he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “Thank heavens you guys are all right.”

“No one should have been able to see any kind of damage to the car,” Victor muttered to himself.

My father opened his arms and walked over to me. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet, and he smelled like he’d been sitting by a campfire.

I hurried forward, thinking he’d been injured somehow.

“Hope. No!” Tie screamed just as my father reached behind himself and pulled out the longest, wickedest looking sword I’d ever seen.

He charged at me, yelling something in a language I couldn’t understand and thrust his sword forward aiming for my chest. Everything happened slowly after that. Victor ran toward my father, reaching behind himself and unveiling an incredible looking sword of his own. More steel gleamed on my other side as Tie produced another nasty looking weapon out of thin air.

I randomly wondered where everyone had been hiding their swords.

My brain felt a little fuzzy, and the entire moment took on a surreal almost dream-like quality.

My father intended to kill me. I felt a strange sense of loss knowing my last moments on this earth were so near, and I couldn’t be alone with Tie.

I looked into my father’s eyes as the sharp end of his weapon continued its downward thrust toward my heart. They were cold, black, and empty; completely devoid of any human emotion. In the back of my mind, I was able to acknowledge that the man before me really wasn’t my father, but I couldn’t help feeling betrayed all the same. He wanted to end my life. Destroy me.

I saw a streak of gold coming at me from my left and felt myself being shoved backward as Tie threw himself in front of me. I roughly landed on the floor and watched as my fake father’s sword plunged through Tie’s chest and out his back.

Tie screamed in agony and dropped to his knees trying to pull the sword from his chest. Victor let out a deafening battle cry and sailed through the air with his sword raised high above him. He brought it down swiftly, severing my father’s head from his body where it rolled noisily and came to a stop near the front door.

Then there was silence.

Everyone stayed frozen in their various positions until Tie, with one long, gut-wrenching scream, pulled the gleaming sword from his chest and collapsed the rest of the way to the floor.

Chapter Thirteen

Angie and I jumped forward toward his outstretched body, but Victor managed to get there before we did, placing his hands on either side of Tie's head and closing his eyes.

"I can't believe this. Your dad tried to kill you...he ...he killed Tie," Angie screamed hysterically. There were tears already streaming down her face. She looked up at Victor and pointed an accusing finger at him. "You killed Dr. Fairmont! I didn't see it. How did I not see this coming?"

I grabbed Angie's shoulders and shook her hard until she was looking at me instead of the gaping hole in Tie's chest.

"Angie, that man wasn't my father, okay?" I spoke as calmly as I could. Angie's eyes were bright with more unshed tears. "I know a lot is happening you don't understand. I don't really understand it either, but I need you to get a hold of yourself here. I'll try to explain what I can as soon as we help Tie."

One thing I loved about Angie, she could adapt to any crazy, unbelievable situation. I watched her take a deep breath and suck back the quiet sobs shaking her body. I knew I could count on her to hold it together a little while longer.

Having averted that crisis, I turned my attention back to Tie. His bruised face was wet with sweat, and the bloody stab wound was oozing so badly I couldn't even imagine how much blood he'd already lost. His eyes met mine and pulled me in. I couldn't look away, and I didn't want to. He lifted his hand and weakly grabbed mine. I squeezed it to let him know I was there. He wasn't alone. His warm smile was the only response he was able to give me.

"Why aren't we calling an ambulance for him? We need to get him back to the hospital," Angie urged.

"There's nothing they can do that Tie and Victor can't do

themselves,” I said, never breaking eye contact with the broken boy in front of me. “He’ll be fine, just give it a minute.”

“I’m not going to sit here and do nothing,” she yelled, reaching into her back pocket to pull out her cell phone.

“Stop!” I batted the phone from her hand, sending it flying to the other side of the room. “You try getting anyone involved right now it will interrupt the process, and Tie will die.”

Tie shook his head and opened his mouth as if to say something, but all that came out was a wheezing noise and then an alarming amount of blood. I looked at the gaping hole in his chest and began to panic, feeling certain Tie should have repaired what he could, and Victor should have been able to heal him by now.

“Victor, why isn’t he healing himself?” I asked.

“He can’t,” he said.

Victor opened his eyes and sat back in defeat.

“Then you do it,” I cried out. My voice was beginning to shake. I was about two seconds away from becoming as unhinged as Angie.

“I can’t do it. I can’t heal him.” He buried his face in his hands.

“Quit telling me what can’t be done, and tell me what can!”

Nothing can be done, okay?” The look he gave me was awful. “There is absolutely nothing that anyone can do. The sword that stabbed him was forged in the land of the dead, and I only have so much power at my disposal. What little power I did have, I used to heal you when we were at the hospital.”

I swallowed down the lump of guilt forming in my throat and let out a trembling breath.

“Even if I hadn’t healed you tonight, I still wouldn’t be able to help him. You can’t heal a stab wound inflicted by that kind of sword,” he whispered. “Tie is going to die.”

I couldn’t accept his assessment of Tie’s condition. The idea that Tie was dying right before my eyes was completely incomprehensible. I watched the barely detectable rise and fall of Tie’s chest and felt my own grow hollow and cold. I didn’t have time to analyze the overwhelming wave of emotions that threatened to swallow me whole. A strange kind of energy buzzed inside of me, building, like it was getting ready to explode. I didn’t know who Tie was, and I didn’t know how we were connected. All I knew for certain was if Tie died, I wouldn’t be able to face tomorrow or the next day or the next.

“Get out of my way,” I commanded.

“Hope, there’s nothing you can do,” Victor said.

“Get out of my way!”

I didn't wait for him to comply. Moving forward, I pulled Tie's head onto my lap and held it between my hands. Just before I closed my eyes I looked down into his and felt his steady gaze strengthening me.

My connection with Tie was just as warm and inviting as it had been the first time, but the colors were fading. He was barely receiving any oxygen due to the blood that rapidly filled his lungs. I searched his body, trying to ascertain the extent of the damage and nearly screamed in pain as his life force sent me very fuzzy images of torn flesh, punctured lungs, and a strange sort of blackness surrounding his heart. The images were gruesome to be sure, but I'd healed much worse and failed to understand why Tie's life force hadn't started its own healing process the minute the wound was inflicted.

I did my best to communicate with it, but I received nothing in return. I sent instructions, commands, and even began begging, but his life force remained silent, slipping from my mind the same way my mother's had. I wondered if Tie's life force was damaged as well. The black mass surrounding his heart seemed to be the source of the problem. I panicked, thinking I was losing him, that his warmth would simply cease to exist and I'd be alone, connected to nothing.

That's when pure instinct kicked in. I gently pushed his life force into the background and began communicating with his cells directly. I waited for that invisible barrier to stop my progress, but the mental wall I'd been expecting melted into the background, and I was surrounded by thousands of bright lights, tiny intelligences waiting for me to tell them how to proceed.

And so I did.

I walked them through healing process after healing process, starting with cell regeneration, blood production, tissue repair. Veins that had been severed were knit together. Ribs cracked by the force of the blow were bound and strengthened. Intelligences within the blood quickly drained the dark liquid from Tie's punctured lungs and sent it flowing back to its rightful place within the body. The images swirled through my head with intelligences seeking approval, asking questions, and following every instruction I gave them. Everywhere around me Tie's body was slowly being put back together. Everywhere except for one area, the most important area.

Tie's heart.

It seemed impossible to me, but despite the healing taking place within his body, he was still very close to dying. I zeroed in on the inky darkness and felt my own life force shrink away. It was squeezing his heart with a strange vice-like grip. I tried to communicate with the heart directly, but all lines of communication had been severed. The

intelligences were unresponsive. I felt nothing but death.

I needed to understand what was happening inside the blackness, and the only way I could accomplish that was to plant myself mentally inside the heart. I did it quickly before I could reconsider and nearly threw myself back out the minute my mind touched it. My senses became overloaded with the need to run, to flee the darkness before me. The fear it instilled within me made it impossible to react, or even think. My senses shut down, my life force losing light. My body was freezing and my hands and feet felt numb. I realized that the darkness didn't cause death, it was Death.

It was doing the exact opposite of what I could do. I was able to take a life force and give it light and knowledge. Intelligences were activated and educated. They were given life and shown how to give life in return. The blackness did everything in reverse. It took that light and knowledge away. It shut everything off.

It made everything disappear.

Tie's heart wasn't pumping blood anymore. It didn't know how to, incapable of functioning surrounded by the darkness that closed in.

I had to break it apart. I had to make it disappear, but what weapons did I have at my disposal? Pushing against its barriers only served to weaken me, and there was nothing truly tangible in its form that I could latch onto. I could feel myself getting smaller as the darkness stealthily slid its way in.

Darkness. Find its weakness. Find its...

The idea came to me in an instant. I could overpower it with light. I could penetrate the endless night with all the things it could never be. I sent images to the tiny intelligences within the tissues of Tie's heart. They surrounded me, drawn forward by the idea of being something rather than nothing. I showed them how to pump blood in and out of the heart.

In and out. In and out.

The more they moved, the more brightly they shone. In and out. In and out.

Other intelligences began to catch on, and soon, not only were Tie's cells shining brightly with light and knowledge, but his tissues, his muscles, and the whole of his heart were beginning to create a light that burned so bright it melted through the darkness. The muscles of his heart began to move on their own again. The pressure surrounding it lessened as the darkness dissolved into the background. Brighter and brighter it burned, until finally the only thing that did eventually disappear was Death and the darkness it brought with it.

I waited and watched, making sure his heart would continue to beat even if I couldn't be there to help it. I didn't want to leave. The longer I

stayed, the more I sensed an awful pain trapped within the chambers of Tie's heart. It was the same pain I'd felt with him at the nurse's station. I couldn't see where the problem came from. Everything was functioning properly, but the pain was there like an old, hurtful memory, and I couldn't find its source.

I decided to leave it for now and investigate it later. Tie would live, and that was what mattered.

I reluctantly disconnected, wishing I could stay wrapped within the confines of Tie's spirit forever.

Beautiful, ice blue eyes were there to greet me.

I couldn't contain my relief. I pulled him into a sitting position where I promptly wrapped my arms around his bloody body and crushed him to my chest. His warm arms enfolded me, holding me just as tightly to him. I pulled back to examine him; to reassure myself he was okay. He moved some hair away from my face and softly caressed my cheek.

If I'd thought a brush with death would've been enough to forever wipe that smug, almost challenging grin off his handsome face, I would've been dead wrong. There it was, shining at me like it'd never be darkened again. Even his face had completely healed. He looked amazing.

"You know, for someone who has no idea how to heal people, you sure are a quick study," Tie said as he playfully tugged on my hair. "Don't you think she catches on awfully quick, Vicky?"

"Don't call me Vicky," Victor said, but the look of relief on his face softened the delivery of his words.

As Tie's remarks sank in, I felt my heart speed up a little. I stared at him, knowing full well my little masquerade was truly over. There was no talking myself out of that big reveal. I slowly disengaged myself from Tie's arms and put a little distance between us. Tie sat there looking healthy, whole, and annoyingly triumphant.

My father was going to kill me.

Victor's reaction came out of left field. His eyes were big and bright with unshed tears, and the smile on his lips lit up his entire face. I'd heard of people glowing before, but Victor's smile illuminated the entire room.

"It's you, Hope. It really is you." He reached forward and pulled me up into a standing position.

I thought I heard an angry grunt from Tie.

Victor's eyes hungrily took me in. I should've seen what was coming, but his kiss took me by surprise. He wasn't timid at all, and there was nothing soft about the way he caught my lips with his own. He kissed me as if he'd been waiting hundreds of years to do so, crushing me to him, no longer polite and reserved as he had been earlier. This was a completely different Victor.

I always thought my first kiss would be kind of anticlimactic. Everyone in school talked about it like it was just a practice run, a way to get your feet wet. With Victor's arms holding me close and his lips pulling me in I felt completely submerged.

It wasn't a bad feeling or a bad first kiss, but I couldn't help it when Tie's face flashed through my mind. I couldn't help, but compare it to the memory of Tie and I kissing—whenever that may have been.

Someone in the room cleared their throat, interrupting the exchange. Victor backed up and gave me a sheepish grin.

"I'm...uh...sorry about that." He cleared his throat. "I don't know what came over me. I don't usually...um..."

I tried to nod like I understood, even though I didn't.

Awkward.

I turned to our audience.

Tie and Angie were sitting side by side on the floor. Tie surprised me by looking extremely annoyed, angry even. The look Angie gave me could have melted iron.

"Normally, I'd be performing a highly entertaining victory dance to Will Smith's 'Gettin' Jiggy Wit It' in honor of this very momentous occasion, you receiving your first kiss and all, but I'm a little preoccupied with exploding cars, Dr. Fairmont's head getting chopped off, and my best friend sealing up a gaping, bloody wound on a guy that may or may not be on a date with me tonight. Your thoughts?" she asked politely, turning to Tie and holding an invisible microphone up toward his mouth.

Tie obligingly spoke into it.

"I don't care who claims me as their date so long as they buy me dinner and feed me chocolate cherry bon bons while giving me a much needed neck massage. Getting stabbed in the chest has left me feeling slightly famished and incredibly sore. Although, I am very interested in watching you get jiggy with it."

He quirked a naughty eyebrow in her direction. Then he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave me a defiant look. It was like he was flirting with Angie to get under my skin. It was definitely working. I tried not to let it bother me. After all, I'd just kissed Victor. Maybe that had bothered Tie a little. I secretly hoped so.

I sighed heavily and tried to put even more distance between Victor and myself.

"I guess we have a few things to talk about, huh?" I gave Angie a fat grin, testing the waters.

"Ya think?"

Chapter Fourteen

“You’re not supposed to be able to do that,” Tie said.

He and Angie were still sitting side by side on the floor. I felt an unreasonable twinge of jealousy and tried to shake it off. I knew it was silly, but I had this crazy urge to plant myself in between them.

“Do what?” I sank to the floor in front of them, completely exhausted.

“Heal me like that. Nobody has ever survived a wound from a sword forged in the land of the dead.”

“That’s because the residue the sword leaves behind is able to turn your life force off. All communication between your brain, your life force, and the rest of your body is broken. After that, it’s simply a matter of time.”

Tie studied me, looking more than a little intrigued.

“I don’t understand any of this. What is a life force?” Angie asked.

“It’s like a person’s spirit or soul. It exists throughout the body giving every organ, every cell, every molecule a chance to live and function properly. It’s also the essence of that person. Like a personality, only more than that. It’s absolutely aware of everything that’s happening within the body because it controls everything that’s happening within the body,” Victor tried to explain.

Angie held up her hand in protest.

“Okay, pretending I even understood any of that, what do you mean it controls everything? How?”

“Let me ask you this first,” I interjected. “Do you have any idea what makes your heart beat? Has science figured out exactly why a heart starts beating and doesn’t stop? In our physical world where anything that functions does so because of some man-made invention, how do we

explain a heart that beats without the help of batteries, or solar power?"

Angie shook her head, looking a little overwhelmed. It was a lot to take in, and there were already so many other things for her to process right now, but I tried to explain it anyway.

"It has intelligence. Your heart, and all the cells and molecules that make that particular organ what it is have intelligence. These intelligences dictate how that organ functions, and that intelligence comes from a person's life force. Once a life force enters a physical body those intelligences come to life. They're given instructions and they listen and obey." I paused for a second trying to gauge Angie's reaction.

"Is that it, or is there more to this stimulating conversation?"

Sarcasm, for Angie, was a defense mechanism. I was so not her favorite person right now.

"Once I connect with a person's life force, I know what it knows, and I take on its role by treating it like my own command center in order to heal the body properly. I can show the life force how to heal injuries by giving it access to my computer." I tapped my temple lightly. "Does that make any sense at all?"

"Oh, sure. Intelligences, life forces, strange healing powers, the fact that you've kept this from me for who knows how long. It's all makin' sense to me now." She shook her head like the whole world had gone crazy.

Yep. She was totally mad at me.

"So where's the land of the dead? Is that in Arizona or something?" she asked, shifting gears.

"That's very funny," said Tie. "No. The land of the dead is the underworld. It's where all men go to pay for the crimes they committed in this life. Highly unsavory sort of place if you ask me."

I felt like my reality and my imagination had suddenly nose-dived into one another. "This all sounds a little far-fetched," I said.

"Says the girl who talks to life forces." Victor sat down next to me and gave my shoulder a squeeze.

Tie rolled his eyes and continued talking, obviously bothered by any kind of interaction between Victor and me.

"While this is all very touching, it still doesn't address how you managed to break through the barrier between life and death and act as my life force," Tie said in an attempt to bring us back to the situation at hand.

"She couldn't have broken the barrier," Victor argued. "It would've killed her. At the very least her brain would have hemorrhaged and..." Victor trailed off looking completely horrified.

"No, Hope. Tell me you didn't break through the veil when you were

at the hospital tonight.”

“One again, some things never change,” Tie muttered.

I chose to ignore him. “I was healing a friend. I had to break through something in order to get his cells to listen to me. His life force wasn’t willing to do it.”

“That’s because it wasn’t meant to.” He shook his head in amazement. “You really haven’t changed much, despite all the time that’s past. Always healing people who were meant to pass on.”

“Why do you and Tie keep behaving as if you know me?”

“We’ll get into that in a minute. You need to understand something first. You can’t mess with the line between life and death. You can’t heal people that are supposed to pass on. Playing that kind of role is not only dangerous for everyone involved, but it hurts you. Forcing a healing prevents you from healing yourself, and it weakens that part of the veil you’re pushing through.”

“I don’t need to heal myself. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with me.”

“Well,” Tie began.

“Watch it,” I warned.

“If you divert all of your healing power toward something that isn’t meant to be then you’ll never become immortal, and you’ll never fulfill your destiny. When we found you screaming in that elevator you were already starting to die. The forces of life and death are not meant for us to control, and trying to control them could get you killed,” Victor lectured.

“Immortal? What are you talking about?” I felt ready to explode. “Kirby has leukemia. He’s dying. I had to do something. I couldn’t sit there and allow him to waste away.”

“I don’t know who Kirby is, but if his life force isn’t willing to heal his body then it isn’t supposed to. I think you already know that.”

“But I’m not willing to accept it. Was Tie supposed to die?”

“That was different,” he said. “Tie isn’t meant to die. Not ever. I’m not certain, but I think the only reason you were able to bypass his life force without damaging yourself is because there was no barrier for you to break.”

“What are you saying? No one lives forever. It’s ridiculous!” Angie said.

Victor held up a hand before she could say anything else.

“There’s no line between life and death for people like Tie and myself because our purpose is continuous and eternal.”

Angie’s eyes lit up with understanding. “Well, that certainly explains a few things.”

Seriously? Angie had found some clarity here?

Unbelievable!

“Hope merely fixed what was never meant to be broken.” He turned and addressed me. “Which, by the way, was also incredibly risky. Your spirit could have shut down just as easily as Tie’s.” Victor gave his cousin a hard look. “It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve placed her life in jeopardy.”

“I didn’t ask for her to heal me,” Tie shrugged. “I was a little preoccupied with bleeding to death.”

His words stung me more than I wanted to admit.

“Wow. Ungrateful much? Next time you’re bleeding out, I’ll just let you die.” I quickly stood, disgusting myself with an embarrassing need to cry.

Tie jumped up and walked over to me. He placed his hands on my shoulders and forced me to look him in the eye.

“Tie,” Victor warned.

“Keep your shirt on, Vicky. I’m only going to apologize.” He turned back to me, looking a bit uncomfortable. Actually, there were all sorts of emotions flashing across his features, but the one that stood out was this look of wonder, like he couldn’t possibly comprehend why I’d even bothered to save his life. “I’m sorry. What you did was brave, albeit incredibly foolish, and I’m grateful to you for saving my life. Thank you.”

His backhanded apology sounded a little forced, but his eyes actually held a small hint of warmth in them.

“I owed you one.” I gave him a tentative smile. “After all, you did kind of throw yourself between me and a lethal looking sword. You saved my life too you know.”

He shrugged off the compliment.

“Oh, I know. I’m a regular hero these days. My bad boy image is really starting to crumble.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I think you’re a creep, and you can buy your own dinner,” Angie threw in.

His lips quirked in amusement, and then his face took on a serious cast. “To be honest, Hope, I owed you one first. Whether you remember it or not, you once sacrificed yourself for me, and I never had the opportunity to thank you.”

“You have exactly two seconds to explain yourself,” I said. I was done with being left in the dark.

“That’s enough, Tie.” Victor’s growl of anger was uncalled for, but I didn’t understand the dynamics of what I’d been thrown into so maybe it was perfectly called for. Anxious for me to recollect something important,

Tie kept dropping hints to jar my memory, and Victor appeared ready to throttle him for it.

Tie rolled his eyes. “Anyway, I wasn’t about to stand on the sidelines and allow a nekomata to take your life.” He released my shoulders from his warm grip and walked over to the recliner in the corner.

“As much as I’m enjoying this heartwarming moment,” Angie said, “I’m afraid it’s absolutely necessary that I address the elephant in the room. Or should I say the great, monstrous cat lying dead in the corner.” She pointed to where my headless father used to be. She was fighting hard to keep her voice steady, but Angie was on the verge of a very noisy breakdown.

And who could blame her?

I looked to where she pointed and caught my breath. Instead of a headless Dr. Fairmont lying motionless on the living room floor, there was a gigantic, headless, black cat with two very long tails.

“What is that thing?” I asked.

“*That* is a nekomata,” Victor said. He sounded like he was hosting an episode of Animal Planet. “They’re servants of the underworld and extremely dangerous assassins.”

“I gathered that thing was dangerous. How many more are out there?” Angie wondered.

“This is the only one we’ve traced to this location. Though I doubt it was sent by the demon god.”

“You’re right. Amatsu wants her alive,” Tie said. “This thing definitely wanted her dead, but who knows how long it will be before he sends his own lackeys. I hope he’s still only able to send them one at a time.

“I thought you said it wouldn’t be able to track us for a while. It certainly found us a lot faster than you anticipated,” I said.

“I can’t account for that. With the amount of voltage it received, it shouldn’t have recovered so quickly, and it must have assumed we’d go here first. I didn’t think that far ahead.”

Tie made a snorting noise and said, “Coming here first would have been obvious to a fifth grader let alone a demon cat from the underworld.”

“I thought we would have more time!”

“Demon cats and gods, huh?” Angie asked, letting out a little giggle. “Since I can’t claim to know the difference between reality and fiction anymore, I’m gonna go with the flow here and pretend this conversation is the most normal thing that’s happened all day.”

I took in Angie’s mask of calm and knew it was only a matter of time before it cracked wide open.

“Let’s pretend for one second I believe you. Why does this demon

god only send one assassin at a time?” I asked, watching Angie from the corner of my eye.

“One assassin is all it takes,” he said. “Nekomata are dangerous because they can take the form of any human they wish. This is how they gain your trust, and then they strike.”

“And the fireballs?”

“Nekomata breathe fire,” Tie said.

“Of course they do,” Angie replied. “Cats the size of my refrigerator, are always pretending to be human while coughing up deadly hair balls of fire.”

“Angie?” I asked.

“I’ll be over here having a psychotic episode if anybody needs me.” She stood and made her way to the couch on the opposite side of the room, picking up her phone in the process. She quickly curled herself into a ball and remained motionless.

I walked over to her. Besides needing some space from Tie and Victor, I was seriously worried about my best friend. I sat down next to her and began rubbing her back, hoping to comfort her and avoid another one of her dark periods. She’d been focusing in and out quite a bit lately. It was always the prelude to a melt down. For the millionth time I wished I knew why.

“Don’t think a back rub is getting you off the hook. My level of displeasure with you has skyrocketed to the point where I’m not sure I actually know who you are. Not only has this double date turned into a complete and total disaster, but I think my hair got singed when that first fireball hit my car. I’m not going to be happy until we get a chance to talk this out.”

“We’ve got to get out of here, first,” said Victor, getting serious again. “They know who Hope is now, and the demon god is not going to stop until she’s dead.”

“I’ve got about a million questions on that subject as well, but before we go anywhere we have to call my father. I’m not doing anything until he knows what I know.” I wasn’t about to budge on that one.

“Your father,” Victor said. He looked at Tie in alarm. “The nekomata was in the form of her father!”

“Victor,” Tie warned, “don’t say anything else. Let’s just get them out of here.”

“Don’t say what?” I asked.

“Hope, if the nekomata was in the form of your father that means your father is dead!”

Maybe Victor thought he was being gentle in his delivery of such an

awful factoid, but what normal human being could receive that kind of news without feeling like their world had broken in two.

“Victor, stop!” Tie jumped up from the recliner and grabbed him by the collar. “I’m all for tough love, but news that devastating is going to take a while to process. We don’t have time for that.”

“You’re lying,” I squeaked out. I felt the walls closing in on me. My surroundings were shrinking, and I was tripling in size. The dead cat in my living room appeared to grow larger with every painful breath I took. Victor shrugged himself out of Tie’s grip and took a step toward me.

“Hope, I’m sorry, but I’m not lying. You need to know. Nekomata take on a human form by killing what they become. They don’t want to risk an encounter with the human they’re impersonating, and they need to absorb that human’s energy to sustain the illusion for longer periods of time.”

“Shut up,” Tie yelled. “Is this really helping? We’ll have to tranquilize both of these girls just to get them out the door!”

“I suppose improving the truth would be better?”

“It’d be a hell of a lot more kind!”

“Quiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiet!”

Angie’s voice broke me from my racing thoughts and effectively shut everyone up.

“I can’t hear a thing with you guys screeching at the top of your lungs.” She turned her focus back to the cell phone in her hand and spoke into it.

“Dr. Fairmont? Hey, it’s Angie. Just calling to make sure you’re not dead. I was thinking it would be real sweet of you to drop everything you’re doing and come on home because some psycho who looks exactly like you just tried to kill Hope, and Victor cut his head off, and...hello?”

Angie paused, listening to nothing but silence on the other end of the line while Tie, Victor and I gaped at her in disbelief.

She put her phone in her pocket.

“I guess that means he’s on his way.” She let out a great big yawn and curled back into the fetal position.

I started laughing so hard I began to cry. I was usually the logical one in a crisis, but emotional, high-strung Angie was the only one who’d actually had the presence of mind to call my dad. I continued to alternate between laughter and tears while rocking myself back and forth on the couch.

I felt Angie rub my back, and then two powerful arms surrounded me and held me tight.

“You see that, Hope?” Tie whispered into my ear. “Nothing to worry about.”

He cradled me in his arms while I bawled like a baby.

“I don’t understand,” Victor said dumbfounded. “He should be dead. Why isn’t he dead?”

“The nekomata wasn’t sure it was me,” I managed to get out. “He was here this morning before I went to school. He tried to get me to heal him.”

I heard Tie let out several expletives and almost started in on more hysterical giggles.

“I didn’t know that thing wasn’t really my father until I asked my dad about it when I went to the hospital. He thought whoever was impersonating him was working with you.”

“So your dad knows about us then?” Tie asked sounding amused.

“I told him how you guys staged that fight in the cafeteria, trying to trick me into healing you. It’s a shame you battered up your face for nothing, by the way.”

Tie let out a big belly laugh.

“She’s smart, Vicky. I think you’re gonna have your hands full with this one. You better hand her over to me.”

Tie was still holding me in a possessive manner, and even though he was joking, there was a serious edge to his words.

Victor glared at him, but didn’t say anything. I slowly slipped out of Tie’s embrace, feeling cold as I did so. I gave him a smile tinged with embarrassment. I really needed to get a grip on my emotions. In a matter of just a few minutes I’d found myself in both Tie’s and Victor’s arms, and I was feeling very confused by it all.

“Hope,” I heard my dad yell from the back. He burst into the room and came to an abrupt halt once he spotted the dead cat on the floor.

“What is *that*?”

“Dad,” I cried. I jumped up from the couch and raced over to him, launching myself at him and wrapping my arms around his waist. He held me tightly and kissed me on the forehead.

“Why are Tie and Victor here? What in the world are you wearing?” he pulled me away from him and studied me from head to toe. “Why are you covered in blood?” With each new question my father’s voice became frantic.

I looked down at Angie’s white blouse and mini skirt drenched in Tie’s blood. I hadn’t even noticed what a mess I was until now.

“Explanations are going to have to wait. Hope’s safety is the main concern right now,” said Tie.

My father released his grip on me and turned to Tie. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped in disbelief.

“It’s you,” my dad whispered.

Tie gave my father a wary look.

“What are you talking about, Dad?”

“I didn’t recognize you at the hospital because your face was so messed up. You were there when it happened.”

Tie nodded his head in acknowledgment, but said nothing. He didn’t look bored or indifferent or even smug. He just looked sad.

“How do you know Tie?” I asked. Seriously, the world had gone absolutely nuts in less than twenty-four hours.

“He was standing not ten feet from us when you were born, Hope. He was there.”

I looked at Tie and waited for him to deny it, but he didn’t. He simply folded his arms across his chest and gave my dad a warning look.

“Dad, that’s impossible. He’d be at least as old as you, and he’s clearly closer to my age.”

My father must have been suffering from shock or post-traumatic stress. It wasn’t easy seeing a human-sized cat lying dead in your front room.

“That isn’t entirely true, Hope.” Tie finally spoke up. “I’m actually thousands of years old.”

Chapter Fifteen

Thousands of years old? I couldn't possibly have heard him right. Angie uncurled herself from her position on the couch and rolled over, studying him.

"You look fabulous," she finally said. "You'll have to tell me what kind of moisturizer you've been using."

"I don't understand any of this," I shouted. I think I was about ready to join Angie on the couch.

I looked at my father, waiting for an explanation. He glanced at Tie and some significant, non-verbal exchange passed between them. I couldn't tell if Tie was giving my father permission to speak or if he was warning my father to watch what he said. Either way, it was bizarre he'd be taking his cues from a high school student.

Correction: a high school student several thousand years old.

"Your mother and I were living in Okinawa, Japan when you were born," he started.

Okay, I hadn't expected that.

"You told me I was born here."

"I lied."

Punching me in the face couldn't have hurt more than listening to that kind of a confession. He didn't even look like he felt guilty for feeding me such a bold-faced lie for so long.

"What were you and mom doing in Japan of all places?"

"I had an internship there, studying under Dr. Yong. He's a very talented surgeon, and the experience, not to mention the extra foreign study, looked good on my college transcripts and resume."

This was definitely news to me.

"There was a cherry blossom festival going on the day of your birth.

You know how much your mom loved stuff like that.”

I nodded. I couldn't believe we were talking about her so openly now.

“We went to the festival, but after a while the crowds became too much for your mom and we wandered over to an area where there weren't so many people. We stumbled upon a Shinto temple and shrine, and met a man by the name of Hachiman.”

I nearly choked on my own spit when he mentioned that name.

“It wasn't the same person, Hope,” Tie said, referring to my mother's killer.

My father looked at both of us questioningly, but Tie merely shook his head. I refrained from commenting. I wanted to hear the rest of my father's story first.

“We knew we were in Okinawa, but Hachiman stated we were in an entirely different province called Kagami. It didn't make any sense. Then Julia went into early labor, and you were born. After that, things got worse. Hachiman informed us that it was no coincidence we'd somehow wandered into their sphere of existence and had our baby in Kagami. He said you were a special child of prophecy who possessed god-like powers of healing. He wanted us to leave you with him so he and others like him could train and prepare you for your destiny.”

“Why didn't you leave her?” Victor sounded outraged.

“Are you kidding me?” My dad was incredulous. “At the time, I thought that guy was insane. Everything that came out of his mouth made absolutely no sense, and no parent in their right mind would have willingly left their newborn with a stranger.”

My thoughts were tripping ahead of themselves, and I couldn't figure out which question I wanted to pose next. I finally chose the most obvious.

“So you knew I could heal?”

He shook his head. “All we knew when you were born was that we were surrounded by some kind of religious cult who believed—mistakenly, we thought—that you were some kind of miracle child, and we needed to keep you safe. Your powers didn't surface until you were seven.”

“How do you know Tie?”

Tie's shoulders tensed at the mention of his name. My father looked like he was ready to give an explanation, but he hesitated.

“Tie was one of the monks at the temple. He was present at your birth,” my father finally offered.

There was more to this story, but he wasn't going to elaborate any further.

“How did you even get out of there?” Victor asked still fuming.

I couldn’t understand why he was so upset.

“The monks at the temple weren’t going to let us leave unless we left Hope behind. We pretended to accept their hospitality, and in the middle of the night we escaped. We packed our few belongings from our humble little home in Okinawa and left Japan as soon as we could.”

“You shouldn’t have been able to do that. I don’t understand—”

“That’s kind of the least of our problems right now, Vicky,” said Tie with a dismissive gesture. “We need to get to Chinatsu and figure out what our next step is going to be. Our main concern, now, is Hope’s safety.”

“I don’t know what’s been going on here,” my father said, looking at the floor to where the giant cat lay, “but I agree with Tie. Hope’s safety is all that matters.”

“Could we squeeze a light snack in on our way to visit Ms. Mori?” Angie voiced from the sofa. “I need chocolate.”

I couldn’t have agreed more.

The car ride to Ms. Mori’s house was dead quiet. There was so much thinking going on by every person seated within. I could hear their thoughts thundering through me as loudly as if everyone were yelling all at once.

We’d tried explaining recent events to my father while we packed some clothes and snacks for the night. I had to change my blood-soaked clothes anyway.

It surprised me at how well he handled each new detail. It wasn’t like him to bypass the overprotective knee-jerk reaction I was so used to. It was almost as if he’d been expecting something like this to happen, and maybe he had. He’d all but admitted he and my mother had been hiding me from Japanese zealots for seventeen years.

His behavior around Tie was a bit baffling. They clearly knew each other and even shared some secret understanding concerning me, but I had no idea what that understanding might be. It was difficult enough to come to terms with my father’s deceit. I didn’t know how to process anything else.

Ms. Mori’s house was located in a more forested area outside Eureka’s city limits between Arcata and Mckinleyville. Beautiful redwoods surrounded us on either side, but I was too preoccupied to appreciate it.

I’d wanted to send Angie home. I knew she’d be safer if her involvement ended here and now, but the fit she threatened to throw would

have been epic. I'll admit, a part of me was selfishly happy she'd insisted on coming with us.

My dad drove, while I sat in the passenger's seat. Angie was sandwiched between Tie and Victor in the back. Under normal circumstances, she would have been ecstatic. As it was, I kept looking in the rear view mirror waiting for her to pass out.

"I'm fine, Hope," she said, sounding a bit keyed up. "I'm no longer in danger of having a psychotic break."

"Comforting," Tie spoke up in a lazy voice. "I think we'll reserve some kind of sedative for you, just in case."

"You said Ms. Mori lives outside the city?" my father asked.

"Yeah. She likes her privacy," Victor answered. "It's this next turnoff here. You'll follow it around this winding road to the only house at the end."

"How is it that you know Ms. Mori?" I asked.

"She's kind of like us," Victor said.

"Immortal?" Angie said.

"Yes, but she also has a vested interest in Hope's safety." He sounded hesitant to elaborate any further, which meant Ms. Mori had her own part to play in my mysterious history; a history I still couldn't remember.

I was tired of the cryptic remarks and the answers that weren't really answers. Sharing riddles with each other would have been just as worthless.

The road wound its way down a steep incline and opened up into a long gravelly driveway. A two-story, red brick house rose up in the distance. It looked pretty ordinary from where I sat. I was kind of disappointed. I'm not really sure what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't something so nondescript.

A small feminine figure waited for us in the front yard. My father pulled in and parked, and we unloaded ourselves and our possessions from the car.

Ms. Mori instructed us to take our shoes off at the front door, and then herded us inside and down a hallway that opened up into a large, cozy den. The walls were lined with hundreds of ancient looking books, and there were large brown mats that covered the entire floor. They felt cool on my bare feet. Two rocking chairs sat in either corner of the room and two large brown sofas faced one another in the middle. I could smell incense burning in the corner. It had a nice lived in feeling, and I got the impression Ms. Mori spent a lot of her free time in this particular room.

She directed us to sit down. My father, Angie, and I sat on one sofa,

while Tie, Victor, and Ms. Mori sat across from us. This felt very much like an “us vs. them” scenario.

“Tell me what has happened,” she said in her slightly accented voice.

Victor, always ready to take charge, shared the events of the night starting with his and Tie’s visit to the hospital and ending with our decision to come here. Ms. Mori appeared to be taking it all in stride, but I noticed her hands gripped tightly in her lap.

“The nekomata should not have found Hope so quickly,” she said once Victor was finished. “I’ve been teaching Hope for several weeks, and even *I* wasn’t sure we had found the right girl.”

“Why doesn’t anyone ever take me seriously? I’ve been telling you it’s Hope for months now.” Tie leaned forward in his seat and glared at Victor as if he was to blame for Ms. Mori’s uncertainty.

“What do you people want with my daughter? She may have healing powers, but she’s still none of your business,” my father said.

“She isn’t your daughter, Dr. Fairmont. At least her spirit doesn’t belong to you,” she replied in a gentle tone.

I grabbed my father’s hand and held it tight. This was not what I’d expected to hear.

“What are you talking about?”

“Look, I need to start from the beginning, and in order to do that I’ll need to explain to you who we are,” she said in a patient voice.

I’d changed my mind. I didn’t want to hear any of this.

“Tie, Victor, and I are called kami. Our origins date back to the very beginning of creation, and therefore, must be discussed at another time. Our first parents, Izanami and Izagami, went on to give birth to a large number of gods called kami. There exist various legends, religions, and folklore all doing their best to pin down exactly what we are, but the simplest explanation is this: kami are deities of substance, and each kami has a specific role to perform.”

“Stop right there,” I said. “You’re telling me you three are gods? Am I supposed to bow down and worship you or something?”

“I’m not buying this,” Angie cut in. “At least not in Tie’s case. He doesn’t have a spiritual bone in his body. There’s no way a real god could ever be capable of such spot on sarcasm. Gods are supposed to be serious, pious, and perfect, right?”

“I thought I *was* perfect. Hope, don’t I look perfect to you?” Tie grinned and gave me a flirtatious wink.

I involuntarily shivered, which must have been the reaction he’d been going for. His satisfied smirk said it all.

Ms. Mori gave him a frown. “Now is not the time for frivolous behavior, Tie. This is serious.”

He nodded to her with respect, something I wouldn’t have been able to imagine him showing if I hadn’t seen it for myself.

Ms. Mori started again. “We are not the kind of gods you pray to for salvation. The only reason we are considered gods is because we are immortal and have been given various assignments and responsibilities by our first parents to take care of the heavens, the earth, and all life that dwells within it.”

“So, you’re like Japanese guardian angels?” Angie asked. Victor and Tie broke out into amused chuckles.

I glared at them, thinking Angie’s question had been perfectly reasonable. I wondered it myself.

“We aren’t assigned to specific people. More like specific groups of people, places, and things. Victor, for example, is a kami warrior. He descends from a long line of warrior gods created by Bishamonten, one of the seven gods of fortune and *the* god of warriors,” Ms. Mori explained.

“Are you in charge of creating war or something?” I asked, feeling a quick flash of revulsion.

“No, not at all,” he reassured. “Most warrior gods champion those who fight evil. We keep the forces of good and evil balanced.”

“What is it that you do to balance the forces of good and evil?”

“I’m the keeper of the Grass Cutter Sword.” He referred to the sword in reverent tones.

I, on the other hand, almost started laughing. Seriously? Grass Cutter Sword? I had this mental image of Victor wielding an oversized weed-wacker while seated atop a driving lawn mower. I was totally losing it.

“Well, I’m completely lost,” Angie announced.

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with Hope,” my father cut in.

My father’s frustration and impatience was palpable. He was sick of the entire situation. I didn’t think he even believed what Ms. Mori shared with us, but if my father was anything, he was thorough. He wouldn’t leave now until he learned everything there was to learn about the dangers we faced.

“I’m getting to that, Dr. Fairmont. I understand your impatience, but this bit of history really is necessary in order for you to understand why Hope is so important, not only to us, but to the demon god Amatsu-Mikaboshi.”

“What an awful name. Doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue, does it?”

Angie quipped, folding her arms and looking up at the ceiling.

“Not every kami was pleased with the assignment given them,” Ms. Mori said, ignoring Angie. “Some rebelled against our creators and lost their human forms, becoming something unnatural and evil. Amatsu was one of those who became angered with his role in this universe.”

“What was he supposed to do?” I asked.

“He was to welcome the souls of those gone from this earth back into the folds of heaven. What he really wanted was what our First Parents possess. He wanted to create life, worlds, galaxies. Simply put, he wanted power. His rebellion cost him his original position and split the heavens in two. It was the first time anyone had ever rebelled against the gods, and as a result, the seed of evil was planted within the hearts of men. Instead of welcoming those souls who are to return to a place of rest and peace with our creators, he welcomes the souls of those he’s managed to poison into the land of the dead.”

“Well, that sucks,” said Angie.

The corners of Ms. Mori’s mouth twitched upward.

“Okay,” my father said, “so we have the main gods, we have lesser gods called kami, and kami have roles to play and rules to follow. Now we have the first signs of evil from a rebellious kami who doesn’t play nice with others.”

“Correct, Dr. Fairmont. Amatsu’s behavior instilled such evil in the hearts of men it was imperative this evil be contained. Our First Parents placed a veil between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Amatsu was banished there, never to be released. The kami that followed him were turned into nekomata by the evil they so willingly served. Those spirits who live lives of evil on this earth are sent to the land of the dead, and Amatsu is given dominion over them.”

“So, what does the Grass Cutter Sword do?” I asked. I stifled back a snort when I said it.

Victor gave me a strange look, taking note of my poorly hidden amusement.

“It’s the power behind the veil’s strength. Whoever wields it is in charge of protecting the veil. Unfortunately, the veil has become weaker over the ages. Men are more easily persuaded to do evil instead of good, and the more followers Amatsu receives into the land of the dead the more powerful he becomes. He’d love nothing more than to break the veil entirely and steal the Grass Cutter Sword from those that oppose evil. With the sword, he’d have the power to banish all of us for good, and the earth would be his to do with as he pleases.”

“Is that why the nekomata are able to leave the land of the dead? This veil is getting weaker?” my father asked a little hoarsely.

“Yes, that is why the nekomata are able to come into our world,” she replied.

“If they can come, why can’t Amatsu?” I asked.

“His banishment is much more powerful because he has dominion there. As the kami of the underworld, he cannot leave unless the veil is broken,” Victor said, giving me a meaningful look.

My thoughts raced back to the moment I’d broken through that strange barrier to heal Kirby. Had I inadvertently weakened the veil?

“Why doesn’t this demon god come after you?” I asked him. “You’re the one with the Grass Cutter Sword.”

“He isn’t worried about me because he knows the veil is failing. His main concern is capturing the one person who can help strengthen it.”

“It’s Hope,” my father said dumbfounded.

“What’s Hope?” Angie asked.

“She’s the one who can help keep the veil from breaking.” My father glanced at me and his lips pursed into a thin line. He was about to go into full overprotective parent mode.

This time I did laugh. I knew it was probably inappropriate, but I just couldn’t help myself. All my life I’d been doing everything I could to keep people healthy and happy, healing anyone who needed me. It was something I felt so passionate about. I assumed my role on this earth was important and meaningful, and I knew someday I’d understand the reasons behind my abilities. Finding out my real purpose in this life was to heal some invisible veil that kept a demon god and his minions at bay felt like one big let-down.

“You find this funny, Hope?” Ms. Mori asked. She raised a disapproving eyebrow.

“Incredibly,” I replied, wiping excess moisture from my eyes. “This has to be a joke. I heal people, not invisible veils meant to keep out rebellious deities. I connect with life forces and give them instructions. Nothing I do translates into healing something that doesn’t live and breathe.”

Ms. Mori exchanged a look with Victor. I noticed Tie watching me with a guarded look on his face. He didn’t seem very happy, but trying to figure out what was annoying him this time seemed pointless and time consuming. I had other things to worry about.

“Why me?” I asked them all. “Why am I the one who’s supposed to be able to do this? Tie is capable of healing himself, and Victor has some healing powers as well. Why can’t one of them do it?”

“All kami are capable of healing themselves, Hope. This is how we remain immortal. Our life forces instinctively know how to keep us living

forever. We are in a constant state of healing. Victor diverts some of his power between himself and the Grass Cutter Sword in order to maintain the veil's strength, but he cannot continue on like this without help."

"So let Tie help him," I said, pointing at the infuriating kami.

"He can't. Every kami has a specific role they must play, and they cannot perform any other role without throwing the heavens and earth out of balance."

"How long has this veil been weakening?" my father asked.

"It started about a thousand years ago," Tie stated.

"Then why wasn't there someone like Hope, ready and waiting to help strengthen it when that happened?"

"There was someone," Ms. Mori said. "The gods knew that the veil would eventually become weaker as the centuries passed. They found a way to solve that problem, and a prophecy was given concerning the birth of a baby girl to a specific deity and a human empress. It was vital that the girl be half mortal and half immortal in order for her to be endowed with specific gifts and powers. Her immortal father is Fukurokuju." Ms. Mori paused after saying this name, seeming to need a moment to collect herself. I got the impression she wasn't too fond of this particular deity. "His role included bestowing special blessings of health and longevity. The mortal mother was an imperial princess and then an empress of Japan. Her noble bloodline and her humanity were key elements in producing a child who had healing powers."

"Why couldn't two kami with healing powers have produced a child capable of strengthening the veil?" my father asked.

"Kami are immortal and cannot have children. At least, the female kami can't. It diverts their power to heal and begins the aging process. Also, the child had to have mortal blood in her bloodline. She had to be able to learn how to heal others and heal herself. Without this kind of knowledge, connecting with the veil and strengthening it is impossible."

"There seem to have been quite a few stipulations for such a desperate situation," Angie piped in.

"Angie," Victor started.

She held up her hands to ward off an argument. "All I'm saying is when push comes to shove beggars can't be choosers. It just seems ridiculously complicated to me. You crazy deities are always making these life or death situations so *impossible* to overcome. If I were you, I'd be exhausted."

I was getting annoyed by all the interruptions, even from my best friend. I just wanted them to get to the point so I could lie down and pass out somewhere. With any luck, I'd wake up in Germany with my father, in search of tasty German foods and a handsome looking Latino.

“Okay, so once the child was born and grew up learning how to heal, then what?” I asked, failing to mask my impatience.

“She’d heal the veil and take her rightful place alongside Victor. If ever the veil needed strengthening, it would be her job to do so. This situation was also unique because she was betrothed to Victor before her birth. Most kami never have a companion and must perform their calling in solitude.”

I thought I heard Tie give a disgruntled snort. I looked over to see him glowering angrily at the floor. His mood swings were so puzzling. I never had any idea what he was thinking, even when I thought I knew what he was feeling.

“Why do you need Hope if you have this half mortal girl?” my father asked.

“Hope *is* that half mortal girl,” she said evenly.

I let out the breath I’d been holding. I think I’d known all along what Ms. Mori had been leading up to, but denial was a much easier road to travel down than acceptance. This past I shared with Tie, but failed to remember had happened in a previous life. I had a million thoughts forming in my head, all of which amounted to one general idea. I was no deity, and I wouldn’t be fulfilling some crazy prophecy anytime soon. I was just a simple girl who happened to be smarter than the average heart surgeon. That was it. Just some obscure nobody with a random gift that came in handy whenever someone was on the verge of a stroke or possible heart attack.

“Do you even hear what you’re saying?” my father argued. “Hope was not fathered by an immortal God. I’m as mortal as they come.”

“Please calm down, Dr. Fairmont, and let me continue. The young girl was born around the time the veil began to weaken. Over a thousand years ago. When she came of age and was ready to take her role at Victor’s side...an unfortunate event occurred, and she was killed.” Ms. Mori stopped talking, her tone hinting at some raw grief. She swallowed and spoke again. “Her spirit was then entombed in a stone statue.”

Ms. Mori stared at my father, willing him to make some kind of connection.

By the way his eyes grew wider, it was apparent that he had. “The statue was of a Japanese woman kneeling before a cherry tree. Her arms were stretched forward like she was reaching for something,” he said flatly.

I stared at my father in surprise. How could he possibly know anything about that statue? His description of it was so detailed. It was like he’d seen it.

I glanced at Tie.

He did his best to appear unaffected by my father's last sentence but some strange emotion flickered across his face and disappeared quickly. I thought it looked like a mix between anger and guilt, but I couldn't be sure. I studied Victor next, wondering if his demeanor might reveal something—anything—to help me understand this underlying tension. It was surprisingly blank. His eyes looked a bit unfocused. He seemed lost in his thoughts, remembering something that had happened in another time and place.

“How do you know about that statue, Dad?” I asked.

“You were born in Kagami right next to that statue and a huge cherry tree.” He barked out a rough laugh, no doubt thinking how crazy that statement sounded.

I rose to my feet.

My dad looked up at me, and there was real fear in his eyes.

“When you were born you weren't breathing. The umbilical cord was wrapped around your neck, and I thought you were dead. I unwrapped it, but I couldn't do anything to save you. Then this strange, thunderous noise hit. It was so deafening it broke the statue of that Japanese woman right down the middle. When it cracked open you started crying. The whole thing terrified me and your mother, and yet we were so relieved you were breathing we barely paid attention to anything else afterward.”

“You kept this from me. Why did you and Mom lie to me?”

“We were scared, Hope. Hachiman told us you'd have a gift for healing. He had no intention of allowing your mother and I to take you with us when we left. We thought it best to tell no one about the incident. I've been hiding you from them ever since, keeping you safe from them.”

“The safest place for Hope is Kagami. You were supposed to leave the baby there. She was to be held at the temple under the watchful tutelage of the monks until I could arrive and raise her myself, but you disappeared from the temple in the middle of the night,” Ms. Mori said.

I watched Ms. Mori's features and noted her barely suppressed rage.

“You're damn right I did.” My father stood up next to me. “There was no way Julia and I were going to hand over our daughter to a bunch of monks just because they said to. We left, and our daughter left with us.”

“You had no right!” Victor shouted. “We waited hundreds of years for her to be reborn, and for what? To have her disappear without a trace? We've been looking for her for seventeen years. It shouldn't have taken us so long to find her. It was like you guys were wearing some kind of protective shield or something. I can find anybody I want just by thinking about them, but I couldn't find you. None of us could.”

Tie found me. Or was it possible that he knew where I'd been all along?

Now everyone stood. Tie looked like he was ready to get in between Victor and my father if necessary. Ms. Mori kept looking at me like she couldn't wait to get her hands on me, and Angie held her purse out in front of her, no doubt ready to render someone unconscious if they took even one step toward me.

"She's my daughter," my father yelled. "If you kami were capable of loving anything you'd understand why leaving Hope behind was absolutely unthinkable. No decent mother or father would have ever considered it."

"How did you even get out of there? Kagami is enchanted. You shouldn't have been able to leave with Hope in your possession." Victor folded his arms across his chest fully expecting an explanation.

My father hesitated and cast a furtive look at Tie. No one noticed it though because almost everyone was looking at me. Nor did they see the almost imperceptible shake of the head Tie sent my father.

"Let's just say a desperate father has his ways. Julia and I took Hope from that awful place and left Japan as soon as we could. We never talked about it again."

"Dr. Fairmont, Hope isn't your daughter," Ms. Mori said in exasperation. "Your real daughter did, in fact, die in her mother's womb. Her death and subsequent stillbirth allowed the statue that Hope had been trapped in for over a millennium to break open, releasing her spirit into the body of your baby girl, giving her a second chance at life. Although Hope may not remember it at this moment, she lived once before in an age and place now long forgotten by almost everyone."

An unfamiliar feeling of rage shot through me. Finding out you're a major player in a prophecy involving a battle between the forces of good and evil is one thing. I think I was actually capable of eventually accepting that kind of bad news. Being told my father wasn't really my father was enough to break me where I stood.

He was everything to me. Never once in my entire life did I ever feel he didn't belong to me or I to him. We were family. Our bond was tighter than most families. That had to mean something, didn't it? It had to mean I was his daughter.

I placed my trembling hand on my father's shoulder and prayed he wouldn't push it away. Instead of rejecting me he pulled me close and held me as tight as he could.

"I don't care who Hope's spirit belongs to," he said vehemently. "She's my daughter, and as far as I'm concerned this conversation is over. I've heard enough."

He grabbed my hand, pulling me toward the door. Within seconds Ms. Mori and Victor stood in front of us.

“Dr. Fairmont, I know this is a lot to take in, but you must understand the danger she now faces. Amatsu knows where she is. We have to keep Hope safe until she’s ready to take her place beside Victor,” she said in a placating tone.

My father visibly bristled and moved me behind him. I accidentally backed up into Angie who gave me a fierce grin. I could have sworn she was enjoying this.

I peeked out from behind my father to look at Victor and for the first time realized that if everything Ms. Mori said was true, I was supposed to live the rest of my life as Victor’s wife. No wonder he’d been so annoyed with Tie’s flirtatious advances. It explained many things, including the hungry kiss he’d given me earlier. How long had he been waiting to do it? Centuries? A full millennium? Even now, the look he gave me was filled with yearning, but all I could think about was Tie.

“I will protect my daughter,” my father emphatically stated. “I’ve managed to keep her hidden from you people all these years, and I can do it again if I have to. As far as healing the veil is concerned, I’m afraid your kami friends are going to have to think of some other solution to their problem. It’s no longer Hope’s concern. Come on sweetheart. We’re getting out of here. Angie, let’s get going.”

“You got it doc,” Angie said with a bright smile.

“You can’t do this. You have no right to do this,” Ms. Mori cried out. “She belongs to us.”

“She belongs to herself,” my father roared. “She will determine her own destiny and decide her own fate. You’ve already messed up one of her lives, and you are not going to mess up this one. You people are immortal! You’ve had a thousand years to work on some other contingency plan. If you haven’t done that by now, there’s no one to blame but yourselves. You are not going to lay this problem at my daughter’s feet. We’re done here.”

“What is Tie’s role in this?” I said.

My question caught everyone off guard. Ms. Mori looked at Tie—who still stood behind all of us—and tried to say something, but for the first time since I’d known her she seemed at a loss for words.

Tie’s gaze captured me, pleading with me to remember something profoundly important—as if I already held the answer to that question and many others I hadn’t yet voiced.

Victor finally spoke into the silence. “Tie is the god of love and marriage. He unites couples together through his blessing and the gift of a cherry blossom. He’s merely here to bless our happy union.”

My father stiffened at my side. I’d never even dated a boy let alone talked about marrying one. The subject couldn’t have come up at a more

inopportune time.

There was more to it than that, though. The room positively itched with secrets left unspoken, but no one seemed willing to reveal the truth. I was only being told so much. Clearly, I needed to find out the rest on my own.

“Musubi-no-kami,” I said, addressing Tie.

“At your service, my lady.” He gave me a gallant bow.

“No wonder you argued with me in class. I criticized your very existence.”

“It was a bit offensive, but I can’t expect you to accept what you don’t understand. I have an important role to play, and I take it very seriously.”

“Yes, you force people to fall in love with each other by giving them magic flowers. Is that what you’re here to do? Give me a flower, and all your problems are solved?”

How galling. The very idea infuriated me. I rebelled at the thought of anyone, especially Tie, making me feel something I wasn’t sure I wanted to feel.

“No, of course not,” Victor protested. “He’s simply here to help protect you and give our union his blessing.”

Tie opened his mouth to say something, but Victor sent him a warning look.

“We are leaving now,” my father said.

Angie and I followed my dad out of the den and down the hallway toward the front door.

“Dr. Fairmont, I beg you to reconsider. Think of what you’re doing. Hope’s life will be placed in jeopardy because you can’t accept what is meant to be,” Ms. Mori cried out.

“Don’t stand there and pretend you actually care about my daughter. All you care about is strengthening your precious veil.” He rounded on her and pointed an accusing finger at her face.

“I care about Hope just as much as you do,” she cried out, close to tears.

“It’s not the same thing. She’s not your child,” he shot back.

“She *is* my child!”

That stopped everyone in their tracks.

“I’m the empress who gave birth to her over a thousand years ago.” That admission cost her emotionally. I sensed a maelstrom of turbulence within her system.

“Wow,” Angie said. “I feel like I’m watching an episode of Jerry Springer. My money’s on Dr. Fairmont. Pretty sure his paternity test will

prove positive.”

Ms. Mori’s announcement took the fight right out of my father. He had absolutely no idea how to respond to her startling revelation.

I couldn’t help but feel completely detached from Ms. Mori’s statement. How was she still alive if she’d been mortal when she gave birth to me a thousand years ago? It was quite the bombshell to unload. Maybe a person who’d never had a mother like Julia Fairmont might have felt some kind of connection to this woman’s claim of motherhood, but all I felt was annoyance that she’d even dared to try. Nobody could take the place of my mom. Ms. Mori may have birthed me a thousand years ago, but she was most definitely not my mother.

My father was still standing there silent; no doubt trying to figure out what his next move should be.

I didn’t know what was supposed to come next, but the thought of leaving without getting any rest made me want to cry.

“Look,” I said wearily, “let’s just stay here tonight. You’re tired. I’m tired. Angie looks like she’s about ready to face plant into the nearest couch cushion.”

Angie nodded in agreement.

“Let’s take a break, get a good night’s sleep, and talk about this in the morning,” I said. “Ms. Mori, do you have room for all of us?”

She couldn’t have looked more delighted.

“Of course I do, dear. You’ll be safe here with Victor and Tie watching over you. Tomorrow, we can straighten everything out. Okay?” She directed her question at my father.

I was expecting another argument from him. Instead, he gave Ms. Mori a tired nod, and then grudgingly followed her out of the study. He’d agreed to this new arrangement far too quickly, considering his previous rage and uncertainty regarding our current company. I wondered what he had up his sleeve.

What was he was planning?

Chapter Sixteen

One thing my father insisted on was a tour of the house. I assumed he wanted to locate any and all available exits for future reference. The absence of Ms. Mori and my father left behind an uncomfortable silence. I had no idea what to say to Victor and did my best to avoid eye contact as much as possible. Tie didn't seem to notice the awkwardness of the situation, or if he did, he most likely couldn't have cared less.

"This is great," he said. "I've always wanted to attend a slumber party." He waltzed over to me and threw a casual arm around my shoulder, causing it to tingle all over. "So, do we have a tickle fight first or are we kicking the night off with some mani-pedis?"

"As if," Angie responded. "We're more into chocolate and chick flicks."

"Tie, can I speak to you in private?" Victor growled.

He stood a few feet in front of us, looking displeased with the physical contact between Tie and myself.

I wanted to tell him to back off. I wasn't his property. I wasn't his wife.

Tie gave Victor a dark look and released me, following the kami warrior out of Ms. Mori's study.

"Why is your dad agreeing to this?" Angie asked before I could say anything.

I looked over at the entrance to the study, making sure no one would hear us.

"I don't think my dad really intends for us to stay here tonight, but we need to be able to communicate with him without the other kami listening in."

"You don't think they'll force us to stay, do you?"

“I’m almost positive they will. To be honest, I’m surprised Ms. Mori was sitting there trying to reason with us. Victor and Tie have can easily overpower and force us to go wherever they want.” I noticed Angie’s nervous glance past me. I turned, but didn’t see anyone there. When I looked back she was pulling a can of mace from her resilient, pink purse. I shook my head, knowing it was going to take much more than a can of mace to take out three gods. “I think the initial argument was just a formality. Ms. Mori is trying to see what she’s up against, and she’s up against an extremely pissed off father. ”

“Not to mention an extremely pissed off best friend. She’d best not mess with me, Hope. I’ve got serious rage issues.”

I smirked at that. Angie could inflict some damage if she wanted to, but we were dealing with a situation we didn’t perfectly comprehend. There was no telling what would happen if getting out of here involved a face-to-face confrontation with Ms. Mori, Victor and—

“What about Tie?” she asked.

I thought about the way Tie and my father had silently communicated with each other throughout the evening.

“I’ve got a funny feeling he might be on our side. My parents were hiding me for a reason, and I’m beginning to think they had some help.” Soft footfalls down the hall alerted us to someone’s presence.

“So if Ms. Mori used to be mortal, how did she end up a kami?”

“Hachiman allowed me to ascend so I could raise Hope to be The Healer,” Ms. Mori said as she entered the study.

“Oh,” Angie said. “I...didn’t know that was possible.”

Ms. Mori scrutinized us for an uncomfortable moment like she was trying to read our minds and remain one step ahead of us. It wouldn’t have surprised me if that’s exactly what she was doing.

“Girls, your room is ready. I assume you want to share?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you,” I mumbled.

We stood in awkward silence.

Hello! I’d just found out she was my mother. Was I supposed to ask her how she’d been doing over the past one thousand years?

“We’ll just hop right into bed then,” Angie said, grabbing my arm and hurrying me past Ms. Mori and down the hallway.

The woman made me nervous.

* * *

“You shouldn’t be out here by yourself. It’s not safe.”

I reluctantly turned around and watched Victor’s tall, sturdy frame

take on a surreal appearance as wisps of foggy moonlight clung to his nicely shaped body.

After getting settled into our respective bedrooms, I'd made a break for the car, hoping to get a minute to myself. Being told you lived once before, and that your powers for healing were supposed to be used for an entirely different purpose than the one you originally believed in for most of your life merited some alone time.

In the midst of all this drama were my feelings of unease regarding Kirby. I was extremely worried about him and wondered if his body had continued healing after I left, or rather, collapsed in the elevator. Knowing my life was in danger and that I'd come close to dying tonight, made me want to sneak back to the hospital the minute an opportunity presented itself. I wanted to heal Kirby completely before another nekomata launched an attack.

I mean, who was going to take care of Kirby if I died?

"I don't think another nekomata is going to find me anytime soon," I answered.

"Can I at least talk to you for a minute?"

I wasn't sure I wanted to be alone with Victor. There was a full moon out tonight, and the soft breeze blowing through the trees made a peaceful rustling noise that intertwined harmonically with the sounds of the ocean in the distance. Far too romantic a setting for my taste

"What's up?" I asked as Victor slipped in front of me.

The way he walked usually reminded me of a sleek, black panther, but at the moment he shifted uncomfortably from side to side.

"I just thought that we could, you know, talk about...about us," he said.

"About us?"

I didn't mean to sound so brain-dead, but I was still trying to process the last twenty-four hours. My clueless expression gave him pause.

"You know what, forget it. We can talk about it another time." He took a step back.

I automatically reached for his hand to stop him. His fingers folded around mine, gripping them like they were a lifeline. He stared at our entwined hands with a bit of reverence and awe.

I didn't know what to say or do, but holding his hand didn't feel bad either so I decided to wait instead.

"Look, I know you weren't expecting any of this. Finding out you were meant to heal the veil is a lot to take in, and being told you've been engaged to me your entire existence probably didn't help either."

Victor waited for me to say something, but I wasn't sure he'd

want to hear the truth. So I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head.

“You kissed me tonight.”

His serious expression lightened a bit.

Could I have been more spastic?

“Yeah, I probably should’ve asked you first, huh?”

Now that I knew Victor was a god, a warrior god no less, I had a hard time picturing him asking for anything. He was here to give orders, and basically ruin my life. I was actually feeling pretty darn angry.

Why in the world was I even talking to him? I’d just been told that my life was no longer my own. It belonged to him. I guess my first life had never been my own either, but at least in that era I’d been raised to believe the garbage I’d been fed not thirty minutes earlier. Not to mention an ample amount of time to prepare for it.

In my current life, my parents taught me you were what your choices made you, and I’d felt confident knowing I was the main player in charge of my own fate, my own destiny. Ms. Mori’s little bombshell had reduced me from player to pawn, and that’s exactly how I was feeling right now, a tiny little chess piece waiting to be moved by someone other than myself.

“I think you’re probably used to doing whatever you want,” I said, pulling my hand out of his. “You and Tie have certainly been doing exactly that since you showed up at my school this morning.”

Victor’s expression became guarded

“You’re different, you know. You weren’t quite so...outspoken in your other life,” he said.

“Yeah well, women’s lib and all that. Phrases like ‘If I only had a brain’ are now things of the past...for most of us anyway.” I thought about a few unfortunate girls in my math class.

“I’m sorry for all this cloak and dagger business. I should have taken Tie’s word for it and believed it was really you. If I’d been upfront with you from the beginning, we could have avoided the nekomata attacks.” He held his hand out toward me as a kind of peace offering.

It suddenly occurred to me that Tie had been my watcher, looking out for me all of this time and never approaching until the day after that first attack. I didn’t know whether to be angry or pleased. A head’s up certainly would have been helpful.

“A handshake? Gee, that’s sure to make everything better.”

He pulled his hand back and stuck it in his pocket, looking a little miserable in the process. I felt a perverse sense of satisfaction even though my anger was misplaced. Victor had never been anything but nice to me.

He’d saved my life at least twice tonight, but I was insecure,

confused, worried and missing my sweet little Kirby. The only person standing in front of me was a warrior god with rippling pectorals and thunderous looking arms, the kind of arms I could have easily fallen into and found comfort in, which made me feel even more insecure and confused.

Verbally abusing him was clearly my only option.

“Tie knew my identity?” I asked.

“I don’t know how he figured it out, but he did. He told Ms. Mori about it several months ago, and that’s when she stepped in as a new teacher at your school.”

This bit of information confused me since I was almost positive Tie had somehow helped my mother and father escape Kagami seventeen years earlier. Why did he alert everyone to my whereabouts now if he’d been willing to help my parents so long ago?

“So that little charade in the school cafeteria was for your benefit? He tried to prove I was your prophesied princess?”

“Yeah. I was afraid to get my hopes up. We’ve been looking for you for seventeen years, and he’s played some cruel jokes on me in the past. I didn’t want to believe anything until Ms. Mori gave me the okay.” He moved in closer and leaned against my father’s car. “Look, about that kiss...I was almost positive it was you, but when you healed Tie like that...I don’t know...it just became so real for me. The waiting, the worrying, the...missing you.” He swallowed hard. “I’ve reviewed the events leading up to your death in my mind for a thousand years, lived with the guilt of it, and had a million conversations with you in my head.”

His eyes glinted in the moonlight. He reached his hand out, this time hesitantly, and held it open palm up. I knew placing my hand in his would form some kind of truce or possibly fulfill some kind of promise, and I couldn’t promise him anything. I couldn’t agree to any of this with so little information and hardly any memories of my former life. I couldn’t love a man I didn’t know.

“I messed it all up, Hope, but I’ve been waiting for centuries to make it up to you.” He lifted his proffered hand and gently caressed the side of my face. “I won’t let you down this time.”

I had no idea what Victor could have possibly felt guilty for, and I had about a million questions that needed answering, but I honestly couldn’t form a single sentence. Not with him staring at me like that, like his whole world revolved around these moments when he could look at me and talk to me.

And touch me.

I stepped away from him, knowing if I didn’t I wouldn’t be able to form another coherent thought for the rest of the evening. He seemed

terribly disappointed, but allowed me to slip from his grasp anyway. I didn't know how long he'd continue to do that. He'd waited a very long time for someone who meant everything to him.

"I know you loved this girl, this princess...."

"Mikomi," he offered.

"...Mikomi." It felt strange saying a name that used to be mine. "I'm sure whatever it was that happened to her...to me...to that girl wasn't your fault, but you have to look at this from my perspective." I stared at him with an open and honest expression. "I don't know you. I don't remember any of this. I'm not some submissive, Japanese princess who's been raised to accept a marriage arranged by the gods, which, by the way, sounds so stupid when I say it out loud like that."

"I think a marriage arranged by the gods sounds fairly poetic."

He offered me a sad smile. I looked down at the ground and focused on my feet. I've heard about wearing your heart on your sleeve before, but Victor's heart was in his eyes, and the pain my words caused him was obvious. I felt like I was whipping an adorable English Mastiff.

"You may remember me or at least the person I used to be, but you're going to have to accept the fact that I'm not that person any longer. I'm not the woman you're in love with, but someone very different."

"You're only different on the outside." He closed the short distance between us and lifted my chin. "You're a little taller this time around, and your eyes are blue instead of brown. Your hair is no longer below your waist and your clothing includes denim skirts and gold stilettos."

I couldn't help but grin at that. He returned my smile with one of his own.

"You're not Japanese, and you look a man straight in the eyes instead of staring at the ground and bowing from the waist." He raised his hand and tucked a rebel strand of hair behind my ear. "You may be packaged a bit differently, but you're still strong, loving, self-sacrificing, and absolutely beautiful." His lips were inching closer to mine.

Wait! Am I ready for this?

I wanted to have an honest conversation here. I had a choice. I had a mind of my own. What was happening to my steely resolve? I couldn't figure out how Victor had managed to get past my defenses so fast. I was trying to let him down easy, and here he was moving in for another kiss.

"But most important of all," he said softly, "you're still mine."

His last statement sent an angry spark of outrage coursing through me. I think he saw it in my eyes because he didn't wait for me to react to how I felt. Instead, he closed the few inches left between us and embraced

my lips with his.

I think there must be some kind of “stupid” chemical that’s released within a girl’s brain the moment a Greek god, or in this case a Japanese god, begins kissing her in a possessive/assertive sort of way.

Despite my fierce desire to be my own person and to have a say in who I married, and despite the fact that Victor’s assumptions of ownership irritated the hell out of me, a completely different desire trumped all others. I actually enjoyed being pursued by this guy. In a day and age where most women made absolute fools of themselves while chasing guys who really weren’t worth it, I found myself loving this awesome role reversal. There was something so intimate about being held in arms that were powerful enough to slice a giant cat’s head off!

Victor surprised me by holding back a little. He wasn’t quite as forceful as he’d been the first time we kissed, but I didn’t want him to be gentle. I mean, he’d been waiting a long time for this, right? If he had the nerve to tell me I belonged to him and then push through my confusion to kiss me despite my reservations, I wanted this to be worth it. I wanted to see how far he was willing to chase me, dang it!

I felt like I was channeling Angie.

His kisses were soft and warm, and I answered back just as softly, sliding my palms up his chest. Then I pulled my lips back ever so slightly and pushed away from him. I wanted to see how he’d react to that kind of setback. For any normal guy, I’m sure this would have been a signal that it was time for the kiss to end.

Victor’s hands, which had previously been resting lightly on either side of my waist, slid round to the curve of my spine which brought our lips nicely back into position. He was holding me more firmly, but his kisses were still coming soft and slow.

I decided to try something else. I pulled my lips away completely and looked down, but I didn’t try to step away from him. Instead, I reached behind me and made a very half-hearted attempt at pulling his arms from around my waist. He surprised and delighted me by grabbing my hands with his, pinning them gently behind me and pulling me flush with his chest. I avoided looking him in the eye. I was afraid he’d see how much fun I was having.

I couldn’t believe I’d waited this long to kiss someone.

“Hope, please look at me,” he said in a strained voice.

I did as he asked and was shocked to see the raw emotion on his face.

“If you don’t want me to kiss you, I won’t. I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to. Just say the word and I’ll let you go, for now, anyway.”

How could I be so unfeeling?

Up until this point, kissing Victor had been a fun little game, but I was forgetting what the stakes were for both of us. I hadn't considered his emotions or how devastated he'd be if I refused to stand by his side when all was said and done. I had to take this seriously.

"Do you want me to stop? Do you...oh, please Hope don't ask me to stop," he begged.

"I don't want you to stop," I whispered, "so don't hold me and kiss me like you think I might break. You've waited a thousand years to show me how you feel...so show me."

He wrapped his arms around me faster than I thought possible and started kissing me in a way that made me feel as if my feet were no longer touching the ground. I held him to me as tightly as I could, wanting to hug and kiss away all the loneliness and guilt he'd been feeling for so long even though I wasn't entirely sure it was a good idea for me to do so. I guess that was just the healer in me.

I'm not made of stone, though. I wasn't totally unaffected by the way he held me and demanded crazy passionate kisses. In fact, I was happy to escape into the arms of someone so wholly devoted to loving me. It was much more clear cut than my situation with Tie.

Tie!

Like a cold shower keeping my hormones in check, thoughts of Tie squelched any attempts I might have made to explore this new relationship with Victor. He must have sensed my change in mood because his kisses slowed and he eventually pulled back.

His eyes swallowed me whole. I couldn't do this. I couldn't let him love me and kiss me, thinking that I might feel the same way. How could I be with him when thoughts of Tie sent my heart turning in a totally different direction? It took some effort to hold his gaze and tell him what was on my mind.

"Victor, I'm not carrying around a thousand years' worth of charged emotion in regards to this relationship, and you have to know that I'm not in love with you."

Victor nodded. I could feel his hands trembling behind me.

"That doesn't mean I can't feel that way, eventually. You have to give me time. I need to get to know you, and I think it would be very beneficial for you to get reacquainted with me."

His shoulders relaxed a little.

"I think the best way to get to know one another is through talking," I continued.

His grin brightened the contours of his face much more effectively than the moonlight did.

“I’m good with talking. Is there anything in particular you’d like to discuss?” he asked.

I thought for a second and realized there was only one thing I really wanted to talk about.

“What’s going on between you and Tie?”

Victor blinked in confusion.

“What?”

“Tie has done nothing to hide how much he hates you. I guess I just want to understand *why* he hates you. I need to know what’s going on if you and Tie will be working together to protect all of us. Why are you two so at odds with each other?”

He looked at the ground, avoiding my gaze. He took a few steps back and leaned against my father’s car.

“I wasn’t always a very nice person. I was rather full of myself and careless with other people’s emotions. Kami live forever and rarely attach themselves to anyone in particular. We’ve been known to create unions with one another, but a kami’s role in this universe is unchanging and final. To have a job requiring the union of two people would have been a blessing if I could have chosen a bride for myself. I was angry that my future wife had been chosen for me. I was angry I’d have to wait for who knew how long until she even existed. I got tired of it.” He took a deep breath.

These memories were unpleasant for him, and I asked him to remember them anyway.

“I started to mess around with mortals. These women were... convenient.” He cringed at his crude word choice. “They weren’t going to live very long, and even if they did, I didn’t usually spend more than a year with them. I got bored easily back then.”

“Wow.”

“I know. Pretty awful, right?”

I nodded.

“Tie was never like that. He and I had been friends for...well... forever. He warned me about the kind of damage I did to the women I left behind. It’s his responsibility and his calling to help people find their soul mates. My interference prevented many women from doing that. Then one day, he came to me with the same predicament. There was a mortal woman who’d caught his attention.”

I felt a dark stab of jealousy pierce me to my very core. I shook it off, knowing my reaction was silly. I’d just kissed Victor not two minutes ago.

“I was surprised by Tie’s interest in this girl. He’d never been interested in anyone. I didn’t think it possible. He wasn’t created for that,

but I guess you see all that happiness between so many couples over the centuries and you begin to want it for yourself, and he wanted this girl. Not for a year, but for eternity.”

My jealousy spiked to an unbearable level, so I asked a question to distract myself.

“Can you make a mortal immortal?”

“All Tie had to do was use a part of his life force to continually heal hers until her own life force took over, but it’s risky. There’s no guarantee a life force will ever develop such a capability, and splitting those healing powers between a god and a mortal causes a kami to age over time. We live forever because we only heal ourselves.”

“Sounds selfish.”

Thinking that there were others out there who could do what I did, but chose not to just so they could stay young and pretty forever made me want to scream a little. Pain and suffering existed everywhere, but it didn’t have to.

It didn’t have to.

“It is selfish, but it’s also our job. It’s what we do, and it has to be that way.”

He wasn’t even remotely apologetic, which bothered me.

“So, Tie was going to risk aging in order to keep this mortal girl with him forever?”

“Yes. I thought it was an awful decision. At the time, I couldn’t imagine a mortal ever being worth it, but he’d thought it through and had already asked the girl to marry him. I guess he’d been seeing her for quite some time.”

“Did this girl have a name?”

My question came out more sharply than I intended. Victor’s eyes narrowed, but he answered anyway.

“Edana,” he replied solemnly. He pronounced it ee-dah-nuh. “It means fire, and Edana was definitely that.”

“That’s very pretty,” I said a bit grudgingly. “It doesn’t sound Japanese.”

Victor smiled.

“It isn’t. It’s Gaelic. Tie travels around quite a bit. He doesn’t stay in Japan all the time, although his home is there. He works closely with other gods who have the same kind of assignments he does.”

“What, like Cupid?” I asked jokingly.

“Yes, although I’ve never liked Cupid much. Thought he was a bit femme, if you know what I mean, always wearing togas and hair pieces.”

I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to laugh or agree with him.

“I’m just joking. I do that when I’m nervous.”

“Oh, of course. That was...very funny.” I felt totally lame.

Victor’s grin spread from ear to ear.

“You’re a terrible liar, Hope. Anyway, Tie was on assignment in Ireland when he saw Edana. They courted for a while, and then he came to me. I decided to go meet this girl and discourage her from spending any more time with him. I thought I was doing him a solid, as you Americans say.”

“Did she know Tie was immortal?”

“No. He hadn’t told her. She had no idea what she was getting herself into. And then when I saw her...” Victor cut off abruptly. I could tell he was having a hard time finishing his narrative. “I wanted her for myself. I figured Tie would get over it eventually and realize what a huge mistake he’d almost made. So I introduced myself to her and began courting her unbeknownst to Tie. Told her I could make her immortal. I told her everything she wanted to hear, and she fell for it. She fell for me, and I thought Tie was in the clear. If she really loved him, she’d have sent me packing, don’t you think?”

He asked his question like he was still trying to justify his actions after all these years.

I did nothing to try and soothe his guilt. I may not have liked the idea of Tie being with anyone else, but the thought of Victor behaving that callous in his friendship with Tie made me angry. I was disappointed in him.

“I take it when Tie found out, he was not pleased?” I pressed.

“No, not at all. Told me he never wanted to see me again. Then he tried to get her back, but I already managed to turn her head. As soon as she rejected Tie, she came to find me.”

Now I was angry with Edana. How could she have turned her back on Tie so quickly?

“And did you give her everything you promised?”

Victor shook his head. There was real remorse in his eyes.

“I thought she was a fickle human being like all the rest. I was sure I’d done Tie a huge favor. I walked away from her thinking she’d go back to him begging for another chance, and he’d see what a waste of emotion she’d been. But she didn’t.” Victor closed his eyes and kept them closed. “In the area she lived there were many jagged mountains and cliffs, and we were standing next to some of them. She walked straight to the edge of one of those cliffs and jumped.”

I gasped. “That’s terrible.” I’d gone from disliking her to feeling very sorry for her. I actually wanted to cry.

“I never believed...I never dreamed she would do something like

that. I didn't know my refusal of her would be so devastating."

"You stole the only woman Tie ever cared for, rejected her, and watched her walk off a cliff?"

Victor's frame looked like it had caved in on itself. How awful to carry around that kind of guilt for so long.

"I didn't watch it. I didn't know she jumped until I heard her scream. It was the worst thing I've ever listened to. I've heard her scream in my mind ever since. It changed me. It had to, right? Having your actions drive another person to end their own life isn't something you ever want to be guilty of. Not even a selfish god like me wants something like that to happen."

I didn't know what to say to make him feel better so I asked an obvious question.

"Why didn't you heal her?"

"I couldn't. She died before I had time to give her life force the necessary instructions." He looked like he was fighting back tears. "I did care for her. I think I might have tried to make it work, but my destiny was with someone else, and I knew it. I never touched another mortal woman again, at least, not until you came along, and you were only half mortal."

"How long after that incident was I born?" I asked.

"A few hundred years. The first time I saw you was at our betrothal ceremony when you were fifteen. I didn't want to meet you, and I certainly didn't want to like you. I was still punishing myself for what I'd done to Edana."

He reached for me again, taking my hand in his.

"But when I saw you...you were so frightened by the throngs of people and by the sight of me. I wanted to whisk you away from everyone. You looked up at me from your incredibly long, dark eyelashes, squared your shoulders, and stuck your chin out. It made me love you."

"I don't remember any of this," I said in frustration.

"You may not ever remember." He looked relieved at the thought. "It really doesn't matter now, does it? You're right here in front of me, breathing in and out and looking just as beautiful as I knew you would. We can fix this now." He drew me in closer. "We can make this right."

"Make what right?"

He paused for a moment, clearly hesitant to answer my question. Then he asked one of his own.

"Hope, each time we've kissed, have you felt anything or seen anything unusual?"

My eyebrows narrowed at this bizarre question. I opened my mouth to speak, but was interrupted.

“Excuse me,” Angie yelled from the front door.

I stepped away from Victor.

“You owe me some down time, and I am seriously sleepy. We need to talk before I pass out, and I have no intention of passing out until you give me some much needed best friend attention. Honestly, how did I get bumped to the bottom of the list when I deserve so much more?”

“I’m coming,” I called back. I was actually happy Angie had interrupted our conversation. Victor had given me a lot to process, and I wasn’t ready to discuss my future, with him as a permanent fixture. “I better get inside before Angie comes out and drags me in. She’s scary when she’s pushy.”

“Of course, Hope. We can continue getting to know one another some other time.”

He raised both of my hands to his lips and kissed them. He looked like he wanted to grab hold of me and never let me go, but whatever impulse he felt he managed to resist and merely gave me one of his charming smiles. I watched him walk back to the house and disappear inside.

My conversation with Victor had answered many questions and raised several more. I had no idea what he was trying to fix or how I’d get my memories back. It troubled me that the thought of Victor with a girl like Edana didn’t bother me nearly as much as the thought of Tie with a girl like Edana did.

Was Tie’s flirtatious behavior toward me a way to get even with Victor, and nothing more? He was here to help, but was he also here to hurt? Why would he have led Victor and Ms. Mori to my hometown if he’d been helping my parents at one point?

Why did I remember kissing him?

Nothing about my life made sense anymore.

Chapter Seventeen

Ms. Mori's second floor was like an elegant looking hotel. I couldn't believe how many rooms there were. It wasn't like anybody lived with her. Everyone could have had a room to themselves, but Angie and I weren't about to be separated, although I was dreading the talk we'd have concerning my healing powers.

My father took the room right next to ours. I think if Angie hadn't been with us he might have demanded to stay in the same room with me. He may have been tired, but his parental rights were being threatened by my mythology teacher, and my life had already been endangered twice tonight.

He was very tightly wound.

I made my way up the stairs and walked down the hall toward the first door to my right. I wanted to say goodnight to my father before I faced the inevitable with Angie. I was almost to the door when I heard Tie's familiar voice floating softly from within.

What was Tie doing in my dad's room? I stood to the side of the entryway and listened.

"You have to help me get Hope away from here tonight," I heard my father hiss.

"I can't do that this time, James. I got you out of Kagami, but I can't get you out of this. Hope needs our protection now," Tie responded unhappily.

"I thought you were our friend. Why bother helping Julia and I escape if you were just going to lead Ms. Mori and Victor right to us seventeen years later?"

I held my breath, anxious for the answer.

"I knew the demon god had finally found you."

"How? How could you know that?"

“I have several unsavory connections. You wouldn’t have survived the attack and Hope would have been taken. And then there are those nekomata who simply want Hope dead. We barely got to you in time.”

There was a pause in the conversation, and I wondered if I needed to leave before I got caught.

“What do you get out of this, Tie? Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate the help. Having you on our side makes me feel like the playing field has been leveled somewhat, but why are you doing this?”

A heavy silence followed my father’s question. I waited, impatient to hear more.

“Let’s just say Hope and I share a rather complicated history, and leave it at that.”

“What does that even mean?”

I wondered the same thing.

“Look, when it comes to Hope, I’ll always do what’s best for her. Okay?”

“That still doesn’t answer my question.”

More silence followed, and I couldn’t help but feel frustrated. I was never going to get straight answers from anyone it seemed.

“I’m sorry about Julia,” Tie said, changing the subject.

It surprised me to hear Tie mention my mother’s name.

“I had no idea the nekomata suspected Hope so many years ago, and I should have known. I could have prevented that disaster if I had known.”

“Don’t,” my father interjected. His voice was laced with pain. “You say the nekomata took the form of Hachiman?”

“Yeah, it left you alone when your daughter couldn’t heal your wife. The way Hope described it, I’d swear Julia knew what was going on and left her body on purpose.”

“To save Hope.”

“To save Hope,” Tie agreed. “That’s what we all want to do, isn’t it? We just want to save Hope.” He sounded like he meant it.

I had to walk away after that. Hearing Tie talk about my mother was, in a word, devastating. It’d been awful, believing that I failed to save my mother when I had the power necessary to do so, but to think she consciously died for me made it worse. The guilt was worse. I tore into the room Angie and I were sharing and tried to forget about the conversation I’d just overheard.

There were two twin beds on opposite sides of the room. I promptly crawled into one of them and listened to Angie while she okayed our slumber party with her mom. She finished her conversation quickly, sat

down on the other bed, and stared at me, waiting for me to crack under her intense gaze.

“Go ahead, Angie. Let’s start this already,” I finally said.

“You can heal people.”

She got right to the heart of the matter. I wanted to look down, but I knew I owed her. I matched her gaze and nodded in the affirmative.

“For some reason, I’m not at all surprised. It explains a lot, actually.” She rubbed the back of her neck and stayed silent for a few seconds.

I waited for her to yell at me; get good and angry. I almost wanted her to. Anything was better than this weird, almost quiet acceptance of a secret that should have been shared with her long ago.

“How long have you been able to do this?” she asked.

“Ten years.” I had to choke back a few tears when I said it. I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to cry, but I did. I felt like crying for a good, solid week.

“Ten years. That’s a long time to keep such a huge secret from your best friend. However did you manage it?” Venom seeped into her voice.

“It was hard to keep it from you. I’ve always wanted you to know, but my father told me to keep it secret. He...we were afraid if anyone found out, something bad might happen to me.”

Angie’s eyes burned bright with anger.

“I must’ve seemed like quite the threat,” she spat out.

“Angie, it wasn’t like that.”

“You don’t get to talk right now. You don’t get to call the shots, okay? I’m your best friend, and for ten years you kept this from me when I could have been there to help you. I could have supported you. Who else knows besides your father?”

“Kirby.”

“Kirby gets to know, and I don’t?” she yelled.

I got to my feet as Angie shot to hers.

“I had to let Kirby know so I could continue healing him...er, trying anyway. His leukemia is relentless, and it’s not going away. I’ve been doing this for months now, and there was no way to keep him from knowing.”

Angie looked at the floor and started chewing the inside of her cheek. She tended to do that when she had something really nasty to say but was doing her best to hold back. It didn’t happen very often...holding back, that is.

“So you were seven when it first happened?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“What *did* happen? How did all of this craziness get started?”

I felt strangely uncomfortable. It was so hard to come to terms with the fact Angie was no longer a part of that safe haven I'd turned to for so long. She'd been wholly untouched by this part of my life I kept secret and hidden. In a world where fiction played a huge role in my reality it had been nice to have Angie on the outside of all that, representing the kind of crazy-normal I so desperately wished was mine. With Angie involved now, there really was no safe haven anymore. No person I could turn to who could help me forget, for just a little while, that I was not your average teenage girl.

"You fell out of our tree house," I said with great reluctance. "Your head hit a rock. My Dad called the paramedics, but I connected with you while we were waiting. I don't know how it happened or how I knew what to do, but I healed you immediately."

Angie looked up. She was so surprised her eyebrows were shooting into her hairline.

I held out my hands.

"You were gonna die, Ang. So I fixed you. I should have told you sooner, and I'm sorry."

She startled me by running over and wrapping her arms around me. Then she cried softly into my shoulder. My battered emotions, together with my lack of sleep, and Angie's unexpected water works began taking their toll, and before I knew it, I was sobbing right along with her. The tears cascaded down my cheeks and I nearly laughed when I considered what it took to unearth my biggest secret and get a serious moment with her.

"Are we okay, then?" I asked.

She nodded and pulled back. Her teary face took on a sheepish expression.

"In all honesty, I don't have much room to throw accusations at you. I've never really been the same since the day of that accident. No one knows that better than you do, Hope, and you've stood by me through all of the crazy times without expecting any answers. I guess we were both hiding things from one another."

"Does that mean you're going to tell me what you've been dealing with for the last ten years?"

Angie let out a shaky breath and nodded.

"I had no idea how close I came to dying that day, but it makes everything else that's happened since then more understandable. It's probably what triggered my visions."

I held my breath, fearing to show my curiosity and spook her into clamming up.

"I can see how a person is going to die if I touch them. When the

contact is skin to skin, the picture is much more detailed.”

My eyes widened. “You...Angie...you witness people’s deaths... before they even happen?”

She lowered her eyes to the floor and nodded.

“The gloves,” I said. Angie’s bizarre, eccentric behavior was so much easier to understand now. “You’re not afraid of germs, you’re afraid of touching other people’s skin.”

“I generally wear them when I can’t take the images anymore. Sometimes I need a break, but I’m constantly bumping into people, and I never know if I’ll accidentally touch a hand or a bare arm. There are other times when I can handle it just fine, and sometimes I’m able to help people who are going to die from stupid accidents. I usually find ways to interfere.”

“What happens if your interference isn’t successful?”

Her eyes took on a haunted look, and I suddenly understood her dark periods so much better.

“Do you remember that time about a year ago when I had you come stay at my house and you were there with me for the whole week?”

I nodded. “It was right around the time that awful kitchen fire took out Rosarita’s Mexican restaurant and killed Rosarita and five other employees...” I gasped as I realized what she was getting at. The anguish in Angie’s eyes made me cringe.

“I bumped into her at the grocery store earlier that day and received a vision of her dying in a fire, but I thought it was going to happen at her house. When I get these visions I see a person’s death through their eyes. I can only see what they will see, and the picture just wasn’t as forthcoming as I needed it to be. There was so much smoke. I didn’t know the fire would start in the restaurant. By the time I realized my mistake, left Rosarita’s house, and arrived at the restaurant, the building was already burning to the ground, and firemen were carrying out the people who didn’t make it.”

I swallowed hard and prayed that she would believe me as I said, “Angie, it wasn’t your fault.” I doubted she would accept that affirmation. I never accepted death with my own gift even when I knew there was nothing I could do to save people who were meant to die. The guilt always held fast and tight.

“Six people died that night. I could have warned them if I’d read the vision right. That’s on me. It was completely senseless, and that’s on me.”

For years, Angie and I had been fighting to save people with our different talents, experiencing devastation when we failed and pure euphoria when we were able to intercede on someone’s behalf. If we had confided in one another, we might have helped each other. We could have

saved more lives working together than apart. What were the odds that Angie and I both possessed different abilities that allowed us to thwart death? I didn't believe it could be a coincidence.

"No more guilt, and no more living with these powers on our own," I said "From now on, we help each other save lives and we tell each other everything."

"Agreed."

"I have to ask this, Angie. Why didn't you ever have a problem touching me?"

The corners of her mouth turned up into a soft smile. "When I touch you, all I ever see is light. There's a blank space in the place of your death. I suppose that means you're never meant to die seeing as how you'll eventually become immortal, but up until Tie and Victor came along, I'd never encountered anyone else I couldn't get a read on. You're the only person I can be around without worrying about the time, date, and circumstances surrounding your death. You've been my rock, Hope. I wouldn't have survived all of my visions without you."

"You've been mine too. I never would have survived high school without you."

She gave me a dry look like that was a given.

"I can't believe you saved my life and didn't have the decency to tell me about it." She straightened up and wiped the dripping mascara from under her eyes. "Do you have any idea the kind of mileage you had with that 'I saved your life' card? Do you have any idea how pissed I am that you made me miss my junior prom last year instead of healing me from that awful flu bug I caught?"

I felt a little bit lighter knowing I could talk to her about these things.

"For the record, you didn't have the flu. You had a very serious case of pneumonia which I partly healed so you wouldn't end up in the hospital."

"I had pneumonia? That's awful. Was it so serious that totally healing me would have weakened you?"

"Not really. I just didn't want you to go to the prom with Jathan Cox. That guy was an idiot and wholly undeserving of you." My grin was naughty.

She gave me an appraising look.

"You know, you're much more devious than you've ever let on. I think I like this side of you."

"Even if it comes with human-sized cats, demon gods, and your best friend having lived one thousand years before you were born?"

"We get to hang out with two hot deities. The glass is half full in my

opinion,” she replied. “Speaking of which, how soon are you and Victor tying the knot?”

Her excitement sounded forced.

“Angie...”

“As your best friend and soon to be maid of honor, I need to know these things. Finding the perfect dress, while evading an army of killer felines is going to be quite stressful. I’ll be needing details ASAP.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you.” I rolled onto my comfy twin bed and pulled the covers over myself. The bed sank down to my right as Angie snuggled up next to me.

“He did kiss you, you know. It may not have been the most private first kiss ever, but it looked to me like you were enjoying it.”

“I didn’t enjoy it,” I said defensively.

“You didn’t put up much of a fight,” she accused.

“That’s because he caught me off guard. I wasn’t expecting him to kiss me. We don’t even know each other.” My confusion returned tenfold. I decided not to mention my second kiss with Victor. For Angie, more really was more.

“Well, according to Ms. Mori, you guys know each other. Or your spirits do, anyway.” She pulled the covers off me. “Do you realize you were born a thousand years ago? Maybe that’s why you’ve always been so responsible. You’re like an old person trapped inside a teenager’s body. I bet it felt good to lecture me every time I did something crazy and stupid.”

“You mean potentially suicidal?”

“Whatever.” Angie waved her hand in the air like she was swatting an obnoxious fly. “I’m just saying, Victor knew you and clearly loved you in your first life, and based on what I saw tonight, I don’t think time has changed that, even if you aren’t some gorgeous looking Japanese princess.”

“Gee thanks, Ang.”

“You know what I mean. That kiss he gave you was heavy.” She sounded wistful as she carefully studied my features. “I noticed it, and so did someone else.”

“What are you talking about?”

Angie studied her cuticles like she didn’t have a care in the world.

“It was just interesting to watch Tie’s reaction, that’s all. One minute you’ve saved each other’s lives, and you’re staring into each other’s eyes like no one else is in the room, and the next minute Victor’s got you wrapped up in a passionate exchange. For a second there, I thought Tie was going to take that rather nasty looking sword of his and plunge it through Victor’s heart.”

“You did? I mean...he looked bothered watching Victor kiss me?”

I wanted to pretend that her answer wasn't particularly important to me, but Angie read me like the open book she'd pegged me for years ago. She knew exactly how much her response meant to me.

“He looked like his whole world had bottomed out. Not the reaction I was expecting from a guy so wholly indifferent to everyone and everything around him. I tell you what though, he's got a mean poker face, and he managed to slide it back into place before you finished lip locking with Victor.” She rose from the bed and ran across the room, diving under her own covers, and then letting out an obnoxious snoring sound.

“Angie! Is that it? Is that all you noticed? Is that all you're going to tell me?” I was desperate to know more.

“Ah ha!” she cried out happily. “I knew you wanted Tie. I've known it from the moment you two argued in mythology class.”

I felt transparent and vulnerable. I was so used to this conversation being reversed. I was always the one talking about Angie's latest love interest. Okay, so I was always talking her out of her latest love interest, but I had never been the boy crazy one. I didn't feel strongly one way or the other about most of the guys I met. Discussing this with Angie made me feel like I had this large open wound where my heart was supposed to be, and it was exposed for anyone and everyone to see. It was horrendous. I couldn't believe people wanted to feel this way.

“Okay, so maybe I like Tie,” I said. Angie let out a loud, disbelieving snort, which I chose to ignore. “He's slightly attractive, his brooding bad guy persona has managed to pique my interest, and he can be witty when he's not pissing me off.”

“Yeah, and he threw himself in between you and a sword forged from the land of the dead,” she added. “I guess we can add selfless and self-sacrificing to his rather short list of endearing qualities.”

“He just did that because of the veil. If I die, there's nobody else around to heal the stupid thing.” I spoke more forcefully than I intended.

“Do I detect a hint of bitterness regarding Tie's true motives?” Angie appeared more pleased with herself with every passing second.

“I'm not bitter. I'm simply stating a fact here. Tie needs me in the same way every other kami needs me. I may be slightly interested in him, but his interest in me goes as far as my involvement with the veil, and how often he can use me to get to Victor.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

I decided to share Victor's story. I didn't see why I should hide it from her. It really wasn't a secret, and she needed to be aware of the conflict between Tie and Victor as much as I did. When I finished, she

looked a little perturbed.

“Angie, are you okay?”

She shrugged her shoulders and gave me a crumbly smile.

“Sorry, I just feel a bit weird. Sounds familiar in an odd sort of way,” she said.

“You’ve heard the story before?”

Angie didn’t answer, but continued to stare straight ahead, looking troubled and confused. She shook her head and made eye contact with me again.

“So you think Tie is using you to hurt your boyfriend?” she asked.

I narrowed my eyes at her, wondering if I should press her further about what was bothering her. Her closed expression gave me pause. Just because we’d had one hell of a serious moment together, didn’t mean Angie could automatically jump into the habit of confiding in me.

“Victor is not my boyfriend, and yes, Tie is using me...I think. Wouldn’t you? He lost the only woman he’s ever loved. Victor’s intentions may have been honorable, but his methods were the exact opposite. A lot of time has passed, though. Tie needs to forgive him already.”

“Edana, isn’t the only woman Tie has ever loved,” Angie said.

“Stop. I know what you’re going to say, and it simply isn’t true.”

“You know what I think? I think you’re extremely uncomfortable with the idea of Tie having feelings for you.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Well, if you have feelings for Tie, and he has feelings for you, something could actually happen here. It’s the perfect recipe for a potential relationship.”

“There’s about as much potential for that relationship to come about as there is for an actual marriage to take place with Victor,” I argued.

“Ooooh! And wouldn’t that be an interesting group dynamic? You and Tie fighting this mounting attraction for one another, knowing you’re meant for Victor, while Victor continues on, completely intent on having you for himself.”

I couldn’t stop the eye rolling. I’d been doing it so often during this particular topic of conversation I was actually getting dizzy.

“And to top it all off, our heroine is faced with a heart-wrenching dilemma. Fulfill her destiny and save the world by taking her place at Victor’s side or turn her back on it all by choosing love, one of the most powerful forces in the known universe,” she ended dramatically.

“Merciful heavens, this is good stuff! I’m wasting my time attending high school, I tell ya. I should be a highly paid author.”

“Angie, I’m going to go to bed now. I’m going to pretend this conversation never took place and do my very best to become unconscious as quickly as humanly possible.”

“According to Ms. Mori you’re only half human. Hope, the demigoddess.” She shook her head like she was trying to wrap her brain around the idea. “Life is stranger than fiction. There’s no way I could have made this stuff up.”

I rolled over in my bed, turning my back to Angie and praying that sleep would carry me away before she was able to bring up any other subjects I wasn’t ready or willing to face just yet. Fortunately for me, it did.

* * *

This time around I knew I was dreaming. My white, silk kimono felt familiar and welcoming. The cherry blossoms raining lightly down upon me were just as I remembered. The path before me would guide me to Tie, and then Victor would stand directly behind me. I eagerly stepped forward, anxious to reach Tie before my dream ended the way it had last time, but as I took one step and then another, I felt drawn in a different direction.

I left my path completely and entered a heavily wooded area. The tall, oppressive trees shut out most of the sunlight, giving the illusion that it was much later in the day. Of course, who knew what time it was? This was a dream, after all.

There may not have been much light to guide my steps, but the fierce pull on my heart gave me all the guidance I needed. After what seemed like hours, I finally stumbled into an open field covered in green grass. On the other side of this field stood Tie. His white formal wear was now black. I broke into a run, feeling an intense sense of urgency. Tie must have sensed it too because he met me halfway and pulled me to him.

I lifted my arms to embrace him and noticed my kimono had changed from white to red. I looked into his eyes, a question forming on my lips, but he appeared ecstatic by the change. He looked over my shoulder and stared into the dense forest from which I’d come. I turned around and saw Victor. The devastated expression on his face made my heart feel as if it was being ripped apart. I didn’t understand why he was so sad, but I moved toward him, determined to find out. Before I could reach him, a nekomata emerged from the forest to my right and came at me with its sword raised high above its head.

Chapter Eighteen

I sat up in bed fully awake with my heart pounding and my breath coming in short gasps. I couldn't remember what I'd been dreaming about, but based on my elevated blood pressure it must have been one awesome nightmare. I looked across the room to see if I'd disturbed Angie. I should have known better than to worry. There wasn't a noise on earth that was capable of waking Angie up before she was good and ready.

"Bad dream?" a soft voice said from behind me.

If I hadn't been sitting down, I'm sure I'd have fallen over.

I looked behind me toward the window and saw Tie's silhouette outlined in the white moonlight. He sat in the window seat with one leg on the ground and the other bent close to his chest, his hand resting lazily on top of his knee. His easy looking manner and his ability to startle me left me feeling totally irritated.

"What are you doing in here?" I asked.

"I was checking up on you, sweetheart. Victor and I are taking turns keeping watch over you while everyone sleeps. No need to thank me. You're entirely welcome." His teasing tone never wavered.

"Is it necessary for you to be in here to do it? Can't you just open the door, look in, and get lost?" I gave him my best you-don't-have-any-effect-on-me-whatsoever look.

Tie leaned his head back against the wall. I couldn't see his facial expression very clearly, but I was pretty sure he was giving me one of his infuriating grins. Everything I did and said amused him.

"Why are you always so ready to pick a fight with me?" he asked. "You're much more mild-mannered with Victor." He said Victor's name like it was a curse word.

I stood up and walked over to the window seat so I could read his

face a little easier.

“What is the deal between you two?” I asked, deciding to play dumb. “When we were attacked by that nekomata you guys were comrades in arms. You seemed willing enough to look out for each other then, but at any other given time you’re throwing out these weird verbal digs. Makes me think you two are unwilling allies in all of this.”

I held my breath, waiting to see if I could get Tie’s side of the story.

His face became a blank mask. He didn’t look away from me, but he didn’t give me much to go on either.

I sat down inside the window seat directly in front of him, stubbornly refusing to leave until he answered my questions. The corners of his mouth turned up ever so slightly. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to let me know I’d done it again. He thought this was funny.

“Your personality is exactly as I remembered,” he finally offered.

“You’ve said that before. I take it we were friends in my first life?” I considered the brief memory of our shared kiss. I sincerely hoped it was a memory, anyway.

“You really don’t remember a thing about me, do you?” His gaze never wavered, and his eyes pleaded for a spark of recognition from me.

“Were we friends?” I repeated.

His eyes darkened and his fists clenched at his sides. “We were definitely friends, Hope.” It barely came out above a whisper.

“And I knew you were a deity?”

“Not at first, but then you weren’t very forthcoming with some rather important information either.”

“You sound angry.”

“I am angry, dammit.” He lowered his voice when Angie made a startled snorting sound in her sleep. “I am angry. I know it’s wrong of me to want this, to want...” he sighed in defeat. “After everything we went through—after what I did—I guess I hoped you would recognize me somehow. Feel some kind of pull or attachment to me.”

I did feel that. I had already experienced all of that, but those emotions were wrong, apparently. I was supposed to harbor feelings for Victor. Not that I had any intention of allowing some obscure prophecy to dictate my love life. Tie’s gaze probed my face for a reaction. Like I was really going to throw myself at him just because I was interested. I didn’t remember the time we spent together so I wasn’t about to tell him the truth when it came to my feelings, especially when I wasn’t clear about his intentions.

“I suppose you expect that reaction from all the girls you meet,” I said..

He smirked at that. The soft moonlight caressed the contours of his

beautiful face.

“Well, most girls are completely enamored with the god of love and marriage. They can’t help themselves. In all fairness to them, I am a rather attractive individual.”

That got a derisive chuckle out of me. “I don’t understand. Women who meet you fall in love with you?”

“Not necessarily. As the god of love, I’m made to look like the epitome of what a lover should look like. I’m the one that guides women to their soul mates. Stands to reason I’m one hot looking deity myself, don’t you think?” He raised his eyebrows at me, daring me to contradict him. “You; however, have always intrigued me. You’re constantly giving me attitude.”

“You thought I’d be totally enamored when I saw you?”

“Yes, though part of that has to do with what happened in the past.”

“What *did* happen?” There was no way to mistake my impatience at that point.

I think Tie must have realized he was saying too much. His mouth closed into a thin line, and he folded his arms across his chest.

“Look, if you remember the past, then great. You certainly have every right to know what happened to you, and what you’re really up against here.” He lifted his hand to my cheek, rubbing his thumb softly along my cheekbone, his expression sad and wistful.

I wanted to lean into him. I wanted to keep this side of Tie, this open, honest part of him, all to myself, but it ended all too soon. The softness in his look hardened, and he pulled back his hand like I’d burned it.

“I can’t explain any of this to you. It’s not my job. It’s dear old Vicky’s. My job involves uniting two people meant for each other. That’s it. That’s all I’ll ever do.” Resignation laced that statement.

I couldn’t help the next words that left my lips. “What if you fall in love with one of your subjects?”

Tie’s face took on a hard edge.

“It’s happened before, a very long time ago, and I actually cared enough to believe in it. Twice.” A muscle in his jaw started to twitch.

Twice?

Victor had only mentioned one woman, not two.

“Who were they?”

Tie took a deep breath through the nose and stared at me again with that look that begged me to remember something, anything at all. He must have realized that I hadn’t the foggiest idea who these women were.

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I lost them both, and there was very little I could do about it.”

I let out the breath I'd been holding. I was frustrated that Tie had avoided mentioning Edana specifically or the other girl for that matter.

"I'm sorry. I honestly can't imagine anyone not leaping at the opportunity to be with you."

His eyes widened at that, and he leaned forward, grabbing my hand in his. The elation building within him made me wonder what he could possibly be so excited about.

"Do you really mean that, Hope? Do you..." he swallowed hard, "...feel anything at all when you're near me?"

His behavior confused me. He said we were once friends, but acted as if he'd been expecting more than a friendly reaction out of me.

I hastily backpedaled. "I'm just saying you're a handsome guy. You're kind, funny, and selfless. I mean, you're willing to throw yourself between your friends and a blade from the underworld." I shrugged. "What's not to like?"

Do I have to sound so lame?

I registered the brief disappointment on Tie's face, but he covered it with more indifference.

"A glowing recommendation." He released my hand, and I was sorry for the aborted contact.

What was I supposed to say? Hey, I've known you less than a day, but I never want to be without you again? It sounded crazy and left me vulnerable and exposed. There was no way to know what his reaction might be, and I was more than a little out of my element. I decided to change the subject since I didn't have a firm grasp on what we were specifically talking about anyway.

"So do you always use a cherry blossom to make people fall in love with each other?"

"I don't force what isn't there. The blossom won't join a couple together if love doesn't already exist, but for the most part, yes, I use cherry blossoms to bind people to one another. There was one occasion in particular that stands out to me, but I can't talk about it until you remember."

I was sick of his cryptic remarks. It was all one big tease.

My annoyance showed in my next comment. "So you intend on binding me to Victor without giving me a choice in the matter?"

"Well, you certainly don't seem to mind his company. I'd just be unearthing the love that's destined to exist between the two of you." he remarked snidely.

"What are you talking about? I'm not in love with Victor." I told myself to calm down. No need to get defensive.

"I didn't say you were in love with him. I'm just saying that was one

heck of a kiss.”

Pompous, arrogant deity! As if I asked for that kiss. Though I did ask for the last one.

I threw my hands in the air and walked back to my bed. “At least Victor doesn’t think he’s god’s gift to women.”

I heard a grunt come from Tie’s general direction and decided I wasn’t done with him yet. I turned around to face his arrogant frame.

“You, however, seem to think rather highly of yourself, believing you can force me to love whoever you want. Messing with my choices as if you had the right. You’re so full of yourself, you probably think you could get me to fall in love with *you*.”

I was baiting him. I knew it was stupid, but he was so good at unnerving me. I wanted to unnerve him a little, but from what I could discern in the faint moonlight, it was having the opposite effect. His cocky smile continued to grow as he stood up and shortened the distance between us.

“Perhaps we should put your little theory to the test.”

I needed to back down and step away from him. It was obvious he knew something I didn’t. Instead of putting a little space between us, I inched myself forward until my face was just a few centimeters from his.

“Bring it,” I challenged.

His smile became dangerous as he considered me for a few moments.

He took a step back, breaking the intensity between us and tapped his finger on his chin as if he were pondering something very serious.

“But I have no intention of forcing anything. We’ll take the longer route, and get to know one another all over again. I’ve never used any of my own romantic ideas for myself. I’ve always been too busy getting other people together.” He sounded slightly bitter. “But a challenge has been issued and you’ve accepted. Victor won’t like it one bit, but it looks like we’re officially courting.” He rubbed his hands together in anticipation of the warrior god’s explosive reaction.

He sounded so delighted with himself I had to laugh.

“Courting? You really are ancient aren’t you? It sounds a little old fashioned to me.”

“Does it?” He regained that half step and then some, getting closer to me and studying me with his beautiful blue eyes. They didn’t seem as icy as they had before. “I think the old fashioned way of doing things is really what a woman wants. Chivalry. Gentlemanly behavior. Chicks seem to dig it.”

“I’m not just a chick. I’m an intelligent, independent woman who’s not easily swayed by a pretty face.” *I am so swayed by that pretty face.*

“And if you intend to court me rather than hand me a cherry blossom and be done with it then you’re going to have to figure out how to worm your way into my affections. Good luck with that.”

Tie’s lighthearted mood dampened with my comment. The ice in his eyes returned, and a dangerous glint stealthily crept into them.

“I think I may have just the thing to start off this courting challenge,” he said.

Before I could get a grip on his mood swing, Tie slowly produced from behind his back a flower. It was completely black to the point of looking charcoal. It pulsed with its own life-like energy, and even though I knew I had nothing to fear from Tie, I was afraid of this. Despite the danger I sensed, I wanted to reach out and examine its dark beauty. I hesitantly lifted my hand toward it, but then I pulled back. Tie looked both disappointed and a little relieved.

How confusing.

I just couldn’t read him, but this was Tie’s game, and I wasn’t about to slip up.

“What’s that supposed to be?” I tried to sound disinterested. I failed miserably.

“This is supposed to be a flower.”

His response was like acid on my nerves. I felt anger and hatred building in his gaze. It made me nervous so I tried saying something flippant.

“You’re giving me a dead flower? You’ve really never had to work at this, have you?”

“For the record, this flower isn’t dead. It’s a very rare bloom called the Black Cherry Blossom. Women are all about tokens and symbols when they begin falling in love with someone. Isn’t giving a rare flower to the woman I’m courting a kind of symbol of how rare our love might be?”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to use a cherry blossom.”

“If you want to make your own choices then go ahead and do so. You can accept the blossom and discover if you’re independent enough to withstand its power, or you can let me court you, and we’ll see what happens.” A desperate glint in his eye clued me in to the fact that this decision I was about to make was monumentally important to him and possibly dangerous for both of us.

This had moved far beyond some ridiculous challenge. Did he really want me to choose Victor over him and compromise his precious prophecy? To what end? Why would he want me when he came solely to unite me with Victor? I ignored the intensity of the moment and tried on one of those bored looks that Tie managed so well. As if I couldn’t be bothered enough to care about whatever was happening here.

“Do you see me swooning?” I folded my arms over my chest.
“Nothing says romance like a burnt flower.”

“Make a decision, Hope. I’m giving you the opportunity to choose your own path.”

Tie’s eyes flashed one confusing emotion after another, and even though he was the one offering me such a rare and special flower, I got the distinct impression that he was silently pleading for me to refuse it.

Taking that flower would be giving him a leg up on this weird little challenge we’d struck with one another, and I had no way of knowing what kind of affect it might have on me. I didn’t want to be under its influence, but I didn’t want to give up this challenge either.

I needed to be the one setting the conditions, and I needed to make sure they were the kind of conditions that would ensure me a win. Before he had time to anticipate me, I batted the blossom away with the back of my hand and got right in his face.

He looked to the floor where the flower had landed and then watched as it disappeared. I could have sworn I heard him let out a sigh of relief.

“You seem to think one kiss from Victor was all it took to get me to fall for him,” I said pointing my finger at his chest.

“Do you deny you were into it?”

“All I’m saying is this: if you really want to prove something here, don’t hand me a withered old flower and expect me to beg for an engagement ring. Put your money where your mouth is and kiss me.”

Daring Tie to kiss me wasn’t necessarily the brightest idea I’d ever had, nor was it my normal MO. Nope. This move had Angie written all over it. However, it was a condition I could easily set without the least hope of him taking me up on it. In the back of my mind I still clung to the idea that someone like Tie would never be interested in someone like me. He just wanted to get under Victor’s skin. There was no way he planned on kissing me unless his intended audience was present.

And so I dared him to kiss me. Yep.

Taking in Tie’s expression made me think my impulsive move had actually been a good one. He had *not* been expecting this. His calm façade slipped, his eyes darting to my lips and pausing there before taking in my serious expression and weighing it against my words. I decided to press my advantage and enjoy it as much as possible.

“Uh oh. Are we out of practice, Tie? So busy finding love for other people we don’t remember how to do it for ourselves?” It was ruthless teasing, but I wasn’t about to apologize for it. “Better luck next time.”

I turned around and headed for my bed wearing my own smug little smile. I’d been right all along. He wouldn’t touch me without his oldest enemy present.

Before I'd taken two steps, I felt his arms surround me, clutching me to him in a tight embrace. I might have attempted to struggle, but I was too stunned by the sensation of his warm, moist lips slowly kissing the tender side of my neck. I should have put up some kind of resistance, but my body refused to cooperate with me.

What was happening? This hadn't been the plan at all!

Instead of pushing away from him, I couldn't help but tilt my head to the side as he continued his slow assault down the length of my neck toward my shoulder. He grabbed my waist and turned me roughly to face him. His eyes were stormy with a need I couldn't even begin to understand. He cupped the sides of my face in his hands and crushed my lips to his. A soft moan escaped my mouth. My reaction to him was explosive. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and held him as tightly as he held me.

His kisses were aggressive and demanding, filling up every lonely space I hadn't known existed. It was all so familiar and peaceful and turbulent and crazy. I could actually feel something powerful happening between us—something building that hadn't been there with Victor.

Then an amazing thing happened. Our life forces connected to one another, and my mind witnessed beautiful warm tones of yellow, gold, and orange. They invited me in, beckoning me to stay, to never part from them again. I searched his heart, looking for the old ache that had been there previously, but I couldn't find it anywhere. It seemed to have vanished along with any trace of the pain he'd been holding onto. Instead, what he *did* hold onto was me. Tie's spirit held me close and claimed me for his own. I didn't put up a fight. I didn't want to fight it anymore. I just wanted to stay warm and loved and happy.

As I accepted this connection with all of my heart he abruptly broke away, severing the joining of our spirits in the process. It was surprisingly painful. Neither one of us spoke for several seconds. I think we were both surprised by what that kiss meant to us.

Tie looked like someone had taken his whole world and turned it upside down. He began pacing the room back and forth. He stopped to look at me for one brief second, and in that second I saw fear, disbelief, worry, and even love pouring out of his piercing blue eyes. He finally stopped in front of me and grabbed my shoulders.

“That wasn't supposed to happen. Hachiman believed your death and rebirth would reset circumstances surrounding your soul mate. Victor and I have both been trying to determine if Hachiman was right.”

“Tie, what are you talking about? What's so impossible about the idea of us kissing?”

He gave me a frightened look and shook me as he spoke. “Tell

me..." he stopped talking. He looked like he was swallowing back a slew of unfamiliar emotions. "Tell me I'm not the only one who felt that, Hope. Tell me I'm not the only one who saw that." He was sounding more and more desperate.

I'd known for some time that I had feelings for Tie, but I wasn't expecting his kisses to reveal to me how strong they were. It was like everything had been magnified and now there really was no way to deny exactly how I felt about him.

"Do you mean the connection we made? The colors we created together?"

He let go of me, running his hands through his hair.

"Amazing. You did feel it. It wasn't just me. This is real. This is really happening." He looked like he didn't know whether to be ecstatic or completely freaked out.

"Of course, I felt it. I've never experienced anything like it."

I stepped toward him, afraid he was trying to put distance between us. I didn't want him to distance himself from me ever again, but he held up his hands, warding me off.

"You never felt this with Victor?" He looked like he was afraid to hear the answer. "I saw you two kissing outside earlier." He had a hard time looking at me when he said that. "Your life force didn't connect with his?"

"Absolutely not. You're the only person I've ever connected to like that. The colors were just as amazing and wonderful as they were the first time I connected to you."

Tie lowered his hands in surprise.

"This has happened before?"

"Two times before, actually. Once at the nurse's station and a second time when I was healing you from that stab wound."

Tie crossed over to me in one long stride and wrapped his arms around me.

"That can't be true. I didn't notice it before. Why didn't I see it?"

"Maybe you weren't ready to."

"What?"

"Tie, your heart was pretty damaged even before that sword did a number on it."

"What do you mean it was damaged?"

"There was an injury there. Something dark and hateful you were still holding onto. It was preventing me from healing you completely. The last few times I've connected with you I've managed to chip away at it, but I think when we kissed, our life forces were able to correct it together. It

isn't there anymore.”

He put his hand to his heart and held perfectly still.

“You're right. It isn't there anymore, and it was supposed to be permanent. Everything's changing so fast, and I have no idea what to do about it. I have no idea what to tell Victor, but his reaction will not be good. He and Ms. Mori may not allow me anywhere near you until they find a way to correct it.” He let out a defiant laugh and hugged me close to him. “But there *is* no way to correct it. You're mine, now. I know it's wrong to be happy about this. I promised myself I would let you go when the time came, but I never have to. I never want to. You're mine, Hope. Always.”

I belonged to Tie? He actually wanted this to happen?

I leaned back to look at him. I intended to ask as many questions as I could fit into one breath. Obviously, everything he'd just rattled off made absolutely no sense to me, but the joy on his face was so mesmerizing to watch. He looked so radiant and happy. I simply stared at him for just a few more moments, enjoying the happiness enshrouding his features. And how did I feel about the idea that Tie and I were somehow bound to one another forever? A warm feeling of contentment spread throughout my entire being. The rightness of his words and my own easy acceptance of it was absolutely crazy, yet there was no denying what either of us felt.

“Why is this so significant, and why was your heart supposed to be damaged permanently? I'm so sick of having absolutely no idea what you're talking about.” I moved from him and placed my hands on my hips, tapping my foot in frustration. “So help me, Tie, you're going to answer my questions, and you're going to answer them now because if you don't I'll do something absolutely deplorable.”

He wrapped his arms around me again and rested his chin on my forehead.

“You're incapable of deplorable acts.”

“I swear I'll sic Angie on you.”

His laughter made my heart feel lighter than ever.

“Connecting to someone like that hardly ever happens because most people don't use their life force the way we do. That's why I have the job that I have. I help people recognize who their soul mates are, and that's what the cherry blossoms are for. They open eyes and seal souls together. You and I don't need a cherry blossom to have our eyes opened. We already understand ourselves and our spirits. We can recognize the connection and the colors we make together.”

“Just to clarify here. You're saying we're...”

“Soul mates,” he finished. Then he pulled back, fear and uncertainty replacing his earlier elation.

“Kiss me again, Hope. I need to know this wasn’t just some cruel joke or strange fluke or...”

I didn’t let him finish his sentence. If he wanted me to kiss him, I was more than happy to oblige. I didn’t attack his lips. I wanted to enjoy this for what it was, a tender moment between two people who were just starting to discover something wonderful. I didn’t know what this meant for us in the future, but I fully believed in what was happening to us right now.

The energy I felt before began building again, and our connection was even more explosive than it’d been the first time. The warmth I experienced took hold of every cell in my body. I was awash in a quiet storm of colors, each one wrapping around my spirit and completing parts of me that hadn’t been whole in literally hundreds of years. My mind expanded and then opened. I felt memories from my previous life begin to rise to the surface, but before I could reach out and take hold of them my connection to Tie was severed again.

I pulled back and looked at him questioningly, but his focus was on something else. I turned around, and there, standing behind me, was a totally enraged Victor.

“Tie? What’s going on?” Victor asked.

Tie made eye contact with me, but his whole demeanor changed right before me. His body went rigid, his lips lifted into a cold sneer, and his eyes flashed in anger.

“Our little healer had a bit of a nightmare. She was thrashing around so much I was afraid she might do some damage to the bed frame or possibly herself. I thought I’d wake her up by giving her something pleasant to dream about.”

“And the only thing you could think of was molesting the girl I’m supposed to marry?” Victor’s voice echoed off the bedroom walls.

Tie took a side step and came up from behind me, planting himself between me and Victor while giving my hand an encouraging squeeze in the process. It was that minimal hand contact that let me know he wasn’t messing with me. He was trying to protect me.

From Victor?

“I figured it was the most enjoyable way of convincing her that there is no bogeyman,” he said in that lazy voice of his. “Then I can kill two birds with one stone by checking her response to me.”

“There may be no bogeyman, but I think a killer cat that is capable of turning itself into Mr. Fairmont is a hell of a lot scarier,” said Angie from the corner of the room. I turned to her in surprise, realizing she didn’t appear a bit sleepy.

From the smirk on her face, it was obvious she hadn’t been sleeping

for quite some time.

Fabulous.

Chapter Nineteen

Angie's comment distracted Tie and myself enough that we didn't notice Victor sliding in between us until it was too late. He immediately swept my small frame behind him.

"Thanks for all your help, but I think I can take things from here," Victor said with forced civility.

I stared at Victor's back and tried to get my breathing under control, but all I saw was red. I couldn't believe he'd just swept me behind him like I was some helpless child with little control and little choice. I was getting ready to vocalize my complete and total annoyance when I heard Tie's voice rise up out of the silence.

"You're right. I probably should have let her thrash about and wake up the rest of the household."

"That wasn't what I meant."

I peeked around Victor. Tie wore his usual cool facade, but there was definitely something slightly off about it this time. To me, it appeared as if he was barely in control of himself. Like maybe he couldn't bear seeing me standing behind Victor instead of in his arms.

In a way, I felt relieved. When Victor had barged in on us, I feared Tie had somehow orchestrated our make-out session just so Victor would see us together. If Tie really had planned to use me to get to Victor, he wouldn't be playing it off as if it meant nothing to either one of us. Right? He had to have felt that kiss straight to his core.

I *still* felt it.

I waited for him to get possessive or even break down and tell Victor the truth. Heck, I was getting ready to tell him the truth. He needed to know what had happened between Tie and myself. We had just shared something that changed everything about our current predicament.

"Victor, I think we need to straighten some things out here between all three of us," I began.

“Sorry, but I’m entirely too sleepy to sit here and attempt to make nice with either one of you,” Tie butted in. He flashed me an anxious glance.

“Tie,” I tried again.

“I think Hope is merely suggesting that we end this contention between us,” interrupted Victor.

I tried to catch Tie’s eye so he would understand my intent, but he refused to look at me. Instead, his focus was on Victor. Correction. His venomous glare of unconcealed hatred was focused on Victor.

“You’re here for a specific purpose, and I need to know you can fulfill your purpose as objectively as possible despite your feelings toward me.”

A heavy pressure began building behind my eyelids again.

Not this again.

“I’ve already told you I can handle it,” Tie said. “I know exactly what I’m here for.” That last part seemed painful for him to get out.

I couldn’t see the expression on Victor’s face, and I didn’t really want to. I just wanted to understand what was going on here. Tie looked at me and shook his head ever so slightly. Did that mean he wanted me to keep quiet? His strained expression smoothed out quickly and became as cool and serene as ever.

Why hadn’t he told Victor what had happened? What was holding him back? The pressure in my head continued to build, pushing and shoving its way through the rest of my body.

“Good,” Victor said, offering his hand to Tie.

Tie reluctantly shook it, which made me feel powerless. It was like an agreement had just been reached; something about my fate had been determined for me, and I was no longer capable of doing anything about it.

The building pressure erupted from my body, and a hot, white light shot from every inch of my skin, at least that’s how it looked and felt to me. I knew better than to fight it and simply did the very best I could to breathe through it until my eyesight cleared and my surroundings became visible again.

Tie and Victor stood in the same position, shaking hands as if they’d just struck some form of agreement. I was next to Victor instead of behind him. That wasn’t the only thing that was different. A strange woman stood behind Tie and to his left. Several other people surrounded us in a highly decorative room.

The moment we shared was serious. I sensed that immediately, but I couldn’t understand what exactly was taking place. Tie began speaking in a language that was far from English, but I caught every word like it was

my own native tongue.

“As it has been prophesied so shall it come to pass. The princess will soon take her rightful place alongside the honorable Masaru Katsu, god of warriors and keeper of the Grass Cutter Sword.”

He put some emphasis on the word honorable, causing Victor to tense at my side. Despite the formal and reverent tone being set for what I assumed was some kind of wedding ceremony, I couldn't help but notice Tie's struggle between indifference and rage. He didn't want to be here, and the look he gave me made me feel as if I had betrayed him in some way.

“As a god ordained by our first parents to give approval and blessings for unions such as these, I bestow upon this particular union a blessing of the highest order and seal it with this cherry blossom,” he said.

My right palm instinctively lifted flat to meet Victor's in the middle like some strange high five. As soon as our hands made contact, a beautiful cherry blossom grew upwards between the tips of our fingers.

“This is official. In a fortnight the princess Mikomi will forever belong to you, Masaru. Protect what is rightfully yours or someone else will.”

Tie may have been talking to Victor, but he was looking at me. His look was calculating. It actually made me shiver.

I felt powerless, knowing my fate was being decided for me, sealed to some stranger, and yet Victor wasn't a stranger really. He was kind and understanding. He'd never do anything to hurt me. All he wanted was to love and protect me.

My thoughts were chaotic and confusing. It was awful standing next to Victor with my panic mounting, forgetting what I already knew about him. It was like seeing the past as if it was my future, yet knowing the present as if it was my past.

Print that on a fortune cookie!

A mind numbing meld of contradicting emotions, opinions, and memories ignited a familiar pressure that signified the end of my vision. This time the return trip took on a more forceful impact. It felt like my spirit slammed into my body which caused me to lose my footing and crumple to the floor. Pain and nausea hit me hard.

“Hope. What's happened?”

“Are you all right?”

I tried to raise my head, but the movement made the room, and everyone surrounding me blur beyond recognition. I lowered my head to the floor, grateful for the cool, wood flooring instead of something scratchy and smelly like shag carpet.

I was still trying to get my bearings when the sound of breaking glass

silenced the concerned questions Victor, Tie, and Angie were throwing at me.

“Angie, get down,” Victor yelled.

Someone grabbed me from behind and slid me up against one of the bedroom walls. I tried opening my eyes again and noticed a marked improvement from the blurry scene I’d viewed before. I squinted in the direction of what sounded like crunching glass and saw three figures with swords drawn standing in three different types of fighting positions.

That caught my attention. The room came back into crystal clear focus with dizzying speed. The three sword bearers posing in front of the shattered bedroom windows looked like very hairy crosses between panthers and actual human beings. They were different from the nekomata Victor had killed earlier that evening. These three had shiny jet black fur, were fully clothed in some kind of ancient looking leather, and radiated pure evil. The nekomata in the middle made a strange purring/growling noise that gave my goosebumps, goosebumps.

“All we want is the girl. The rest of you can leave if you wish,” it said in the same hair-raising voice.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be a bit more specific,” came Tie’s haughty voice to the left of me. “There are, after all, three girls present.”

I gingerly lifted my head and beheld Ms. Mori standing next to Tie, wearing a fierce expression on her face. I looked to my right and there stood Victor and my father towering over me. The only two people in the room not standing were me and Angie. She knelt in front of me, facing the scary black cats from hell. I couldn’t see her face, but I imagined it looked about as angry, fierce, and protective as the rest of the group’s.

“Do not waste our time, tainted kami. You merely prolong the pain and suffering your slow death will bring.”

“Bummer,” Angie muttered.

Tainted? What in the world was this...thing talking about?

“You don’t actually believe we’ll stand aside and let you walk off with her, do you?” This from a very pissed off Victor. It looked like every muscle in his body was set to spring with the simplest of provocations.

“Ah. You still believe you can win. My face will be the last face you see, kami. My sword the last thing you ever feel. My—”

“Yeah, okay we got it. Death and destruction await those that dare oppose you. My biceps are bigger than your biceps. Blah blah blah,” Tie said. He sounded bored. He even managed to look bored. I couldn’t help but take the time to admire him for that. “Can we skip the useless dialogue and get right to the part where my sword separates your head from your freakish looking body?”

That last part must have been code for: Attack With Deadly

Swiftly because Victor, Tie and Ms. Mori flashed some very gnarly looking swords—seriously, where were they hiding these things—and crossed to the other side of the room faster than I could blink.

There were six warriors in this tiny, crowded room, swinging six ugly weapons, and not a single nekomata was able to get close to my father, Angie, or myself. The three kami sworn to protect me were engaged in the most amazing display of sword fighting I'd ever seen. Granted, I didn't have much experience with swords nor had I witnessed too many fights in my lifetime, but every movement was a seductively beautiful dance. The longer I watched, the more amazed I became. I should have felt terrified. Instead, I was anxious to be a part of it all.

I wondered why I felt such a longing for something I knew nothing about. Time slowed, and my eyes sharpened. Everyone's well-timed movements were more predictable now. The nekomata in the middle shot up Tie's left side, and flung his other arm to the right, intending to distract him while stabbing his sword into Tie's side. Tie registered the feint and adjusted his position while continuing his own thrust downward just in time to stab his opponent's sword arm. To his left, Ms. Mori ducked down, easily slipping into a crouching position as a bright flash of silver sliced over her.

Thrust up now, I thought, just as Ms. Mori did exactly that. There was an ungodly shriek of pain as the injured nekomata stumbled back, chest bleeding. How had I known what Ms. Mori should do?

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard a grunt from Victor who fought on the opposite side of the room. He was fearless and determined...and injured. It didn't matter that his opponent also bled badly because neither one of them were slowing down.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ms. Mori take a kick to the head. She went down hard and didn't move. The nekomata standing above her licked his thick whiskered snout and raised his sword high to strike. My actions were instinctive and guided by a part of me I didn't know existed.

I wasn't witnessing this battle through the eyes of Hope Fairmont, seventeen-year-old healer and run-of-the-mill high school student; I was seeing it through someone else's eyes. Strategies were forming, calculations were being made; my body moved faster than I'd ever thought possible and suddenly Ms. Mori's sword was in my hand and extending above my head, blocking the creature's downward thrust.

I felt my face break into a happy smile as I anticipated My enemies next set of moves.

And then the dance began.

It was like breathing to me. Block after block, thrust after thrust. The leg work, the upper body movements, all of it became second nature to

me. All too soon my opponent was on the ground looking just as surprised as I felt, but he wasn't dead. I'd dealt him a death blow, but he still breathed easily. I couldn't understand why this creature was still alive despite the wounds I'd just inflicted, and then I realized the sword I held in my hand wouldn't be enough to kill it. Ms. Mori's sword was different from the nekomata. If these animals wielded weapons from the underworld then could they be killed with weapons from our world?

My thoughts flicked to the Grass Cutter Sword, and suddenly my strategy shifted. My opponent was beginning to get his bearings. I moved toward Victor as quickly as possible, knowing his sword was the answer to ending all of this madness. I stopped when I saw the fighting had stopped as well. No one attempted to kill anyone anymore. Everyone was looking at me. If I hadn't been so intent on grabbing Victor's sword and using it to completely eradicate this latest threat I might have found the varying degrees of shock etched on both man and beast quite comical. The new me hesitated only briefly and then sprang toward Victor, easily grabbing the sword from his hand.

The minute I possessed it, I felt a surge of power sweep through me. A light surrounded my skin and shot out my fingers. A major boost in power shot through my connection with the sword. All three nekomata sprang into action, and I easily danced over, around, and under every threatening move they made. I found my first opportunity and sliced off the head of Victor's opponent. I used my momentum to roll to the ground and spring up, taking off the head of the nekomata who'd almost killed Ms. Mori. I motioned for the last nekomata to make his move, readying my stance, looking for an opening or weakness in his position.

"I do not have orders to kill you, Princess. You will come with me willingly or I will be forced to kill your friend and your father."

"Empty threats? Exactly how do you plan on pulling that off?"

He snarled at me, charging forward with his sword held high. He'd left his chest wide open, but instead of plunging my sword in, I lifted it up and blocked his downward swing while simultaneously placing my hand against his heart.

You're mine.

I connected with him and instructed his life force to stop his heart from beating. It complied, eager to end its own evil existence. The nekomata's eyes widened in surprise as its heartbeat began to slow. I gave him a wicked smile, thoroughly enjoying the power I held in just one hand. He couldn't fight something like this, and there was no way for him to move once I'd started.

It was a very simple process, really. One that Akane had trained me for in case my sword fighting skills weren't enough. The process of

healing gave power to the one being healed, but the process of killing someone put all of that lovely power back where it belonged...with me. I could take a life just as easily as I could give it.

Take a life! Akane?

I shook my head, trying to gain control of my thoughts and actions.

The nekomata's eyes rolled into the back of his head and his body violently convulsed. He was in agony, and I was the cause of it. I was doing it. What in the world was I doing? I released him by pushing him backward and away from me. He stumbled to the floor and took in a huge, pain-filled breath.

"I'm sorry," I said horrified at my actions. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

He looked at his slain companions and then back at me and let out a strangled chuckle, like he couldn't believe I was apologizing for hurting him when I'd already managed to kill two of his assassins. I thought he might say something or possibly surrender. Instead, he surprised me by turning around and jumping head first out the window. I heard a light thud from the ground below and then there was nothing.

I breathed heavily as sweat poured from my forehead, running down the sides of my temples. I'd never felt so powerful, so in control of my movements. My euphoria was cut short at the sight of the bloody sword in my hand. I considered what I'd just done. I'd just killed. Not once, but twice, and I hadn't hesitated for even a moment. Then I'd almost taken a life by using the same power I utilized to save lives.

It felt so disgusting.

How had I known what to do? I had a memory, one about someone training me to kill, but it flitted away, leaving me shaken and frustrated.

I studied the sword in my hand. Blood gleamed a sickening red from the wicked blade. It looked like it was winking at me. I dropped it to the floor and folded my hands under my arms, wanting to hide them from myself, from everyone in the room. The power from the sword disappeared, leaving me feeling like a dish towel that had just been wrung out.

Then I looked up.

The first face I saw was Tie's. Astounded was a good way of describing his expression. He lifted his hands in a defensive gesture and cautiously walked over to me. Once he thought I had myself under control, he put a bracing arm around my shoulder.

"I did not see that coming," he mumbled under his breath. He kept his voice low as he continued. "Out of all the things you decided to remember, your training is what kicked in for you? I don't know whether to feel elated or supremely offended."

I glanced to Victor who looked like someone had just ripped a couple thousand rugs right out from under him. Angie and Ms. Mori simply stared at me. I finally found my father's eyes and almost winced. He looked at me like he had no idea who I'd become.

I'd just taken two lives. The pain of that knowledge made me want to crawl out of my body. I didn't want to remember the way it felt to cleanly slice through another being's head. It was like cutting butter or slicing bread, hardly any resistance against the blade. It shouldn't have been that easy. Why had it been so easy? Why had I felt so triumphant afterward, reveling in my own victory? How had I known the right moves, the right positions? How was I able to kill someone just by willing it to happen? It was like I was two different people, taking on two different personalities...drawing from two different lives. I couldn't take this. I couldn't take it. I lifted my shaking hands and wondered if they were even mine.

"Chinatsu, she almost killed that thing with her bare hands," Victor wheezed out. "Her gift is for healing. How is this possible?"

Ms. Mori appraised me with cool and calculating eyes.

"It appears my daughter was much more involved in the Samurai wars than Tie ever let on. How extremely disappointing."

What was she talking about?

"There are a lot of details about my involvement with Hope that haven't been discussed," Tie shot back. "I didn't think it necessary to tell you until she regained her own memories, which would happen a hell of a lot faster if you two were willing to listen to my suggestions."

"She doesn't need to remember anything," Victor shouted. "What happened in the past isn't relevant to what we are trying to accomplish now. She doesn't need to remember who she was, she only needs to know that she's The Healer."

"Spoken like a true moron."

"Enough!" Ms. Mori said.

Ms. Mori didn't just seem disappointed, though. Her expression was borderline murderous. All it took was that one look, and I suddenly understood something vital in regards to my own survival. She may have been my mother in my previous life, but we'd been far from close, possibly even enemies.

I agreed with Tie. I had to start remembering my previous life..

I was almost certain Ms. Mori had not put me first a thousand years ago, and she wouldn't consider doing it now. It was all about healing the veil for her. Anything else was just a distraction. These little insights were like gold to me, but I had to know what I'd been fighting for in my first life so I could know who I'd be fighting against in this one.

Tie's supportive arm still held me close to him, and I was grateful for the contact. I worriedly glanced at my father. He looked absolutely devastated. I wondered if I'd lost him for good.

"Daddy?" I asked, the panic setting in. I stepped forward, but felt my strength floating away. That same hardwood floor obligingly rose up to meet me.

Chapter Twenty

Voices spoke from far away, but my mind didn't register the meanings behind the words. I was tired. So tired, and so—I don't know—something felt a little different, but I wasn't sure if the difference was physical or mental. I didn't know if I was weightless or grounded. My senses were dulled like the voices in the distance. I couldn't help thinking it'd be better to leave everything the way it was and not push for understanding. I almost liked the nothingness that whispered invitingly for me to stay wrapped in its embrace. Oblivion seemed like an easier choice to make. A safer path to choose.

“Come on, Hope.”

The voice was familiar and closer than the others. It also sounded very irritated.

“You've got to wake up. Do you hear me? There's a grand council downstairs made up of Ms. Mori, your father, and two high school boys who claim they're adults,” the voice continued.

I reluctantly focused on the little nuances and tonal quality of the person addressing me and was positive I knew her.

“They may be over a thousand years old, but I swear their social development stopped at the age of ten. I can't believe they wouldn't include me in such an important conversation. I'm warning you, if you don't wake up right now, I'm going to start screaming just to cause a distraction. Anything to stop them from making decisions with you unconscious.”

Unconscious? Was that what was wrong with me? I needed to wake up. I needed to sit up and speak out. Force them all to listen to me.

My eyes flew open as I jolted to a sitting position. I was on a comfy bed in a room that I'd never seen before. I turned to my left and saw Angie sitting next to me. She looked a bit startled.

“I’m tired of you scaring the pee out of me. I enjoyed our friendship so much more when *my* life was a complete and total train wreck and *you* were the one who was conscious all the time. I used to get so much sleep back then.”

“You were also hung over,” I said distractedly.

“Are you punishing me? All those nights as my designated driver made you bitter, am I right?”

“Angie, what are you talking about?”

I looked around the room trying to figure out where everyone else had migrated to. I needed to talk to my dad, to discuss our next move.

“I’m talking about the fact that you are like some deadly sword fighter, and you never bothered to let me know about your crazy ninja skills. I didn’t know you could heal people, I didn’t know you could kill people, and I’m almost certain you’re capable of turning water into wine which, by the way, would have been helpful during my drinking phase,” she jabbered.

“Wait a second. It was real, then? I did, in fact, kill two...beings tonight? I didn’t just dream that?”

“Yeah, and then you like Darth Vadered that other one. Slicing off his head would have been more merciful.”

“I can’t believe I did that. It goes against everything I’ve ever done. Everything I’ve ever fought for.” It all felt like a bad dream.

“I’ve never seen you move like that. I’d never in a million years think you capable of the kind of stunts you pulled. It was like you were a...”

“...completely different person,” I finished.

Angie nodded. Her eyes teared up a little, and I pulled her to me before she lost it in a loud way.

“I know you need to cry, Angie, I really do, but you’ve got to keep it together for just a little longer. Okay?”

Her head moved against my shoulder and then she pulled back.

“Do you even know what you did tonight or how you did it?” she asked.

“No,” I replied. “It was like someone else took over. Like my other self.”

“You were a Japanese princess who healed people, not some trained samurai assassin, right?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, here’s something you need to know. The minute you passed out, your father lost it. He’s been arguing with the others for the past thirty minutes about getting you out of the country as fast as possible. He wants to leave everyone but me and you behind.”

“I thought you said you were banned from the meeting.”

“I am banned. Your dad wanted someone to look after you. I wasn’t the obvious choice, but he trusts me more than our immortal friends downstairs.”

“Congratulations.”

“Epic, I know. I’ll celebrate later. I have; however, been eavesdropping, as is my right and duty, being your best friend and all, and the conversation is not panning out the way you’d want it to.”

“What are they suggesting?”

“Your father wants to leave with us tonight, but Ms. Mori has insisted she take us all to a place known only to the gods where she’s certain we’ll be safe.”

Kagami. They had mentioned it was enchanted hadn’t they? I didn’t like that idea at all. The place she described sounded more like a prison, a place where she could keep tabs on me and control me if necessary. There was no way I was going anywhere with her.

“Now they’re talking damage control,” Angie continued.

“Damage control?”

“Ms. Mori is concerned about that cat that got away. She wanted to know if you had any other family here that the nekomata might hurt in order to draw you out.”

“You know we don’t,” I said. “There’s no one here who could possibly be used to....” I stopped speaking as a thought occurred to me. I was wrong. Dead wrong. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten, for even one second, about my sweet little ten-year-old confidant.

“Kirby,” I whispered.

Angie’s face looked grim. She was one step ahead of me.

“Your father mentioned Kirby. They’re talking about it right now, which is why I was begging you to come out of your coma,” she wailed.

Those same dulled voices were still coming from the other room. We needed to investigate. Angie helped me stand, and we made our way to the edge of the room. The bedroom door was open, and from this part of the house I could easily hear the argument my dad was currently embroiled in.

“I’m telling you, if there’s even a possibility Kirby is in danger then we need to get him out of that hospital,” I heard my father say.

“Dr. Fairmont, it is highly unlikely that the nekomata would even make a connection between Hope and this young patient. She’s never been seen with him in any public setting. All of their interactions have been within the confines of his hospital room. A nekomata will be looking for family members and possibly close friends, but a young boy who has less than a month to live will not be enough to tempt it, even if it *is* aware of

Kirby's existence."

"So you're saying we should simply leave him behind totally unprotected?" my father asked.

"I'm saying the boy is meant to die, but Hope is meant to live. We have to leave now," she declared.

"Hope will never agree to this. She won't leave Kirby behind, especially if there's a chance he's in danger," my father argued.

"She'll leave if she doesn't know," Victor cut in. I felt sickened that he suggested such a thing.

"I know my daughter, and there's no way under any circumstances that she'll leave Kirby behind whether his life is being threatened or not. He either comes with us or you can kiss any cooperation you're expecting from her good-bye."

I was grateful for my father's support where Kirby was concerned. I knew he'd fight for me no matter what it took.

"This I cannot allow. The young boy cannot come with us, and if Hope won't leave without him then she'll need to remain incapacitated until we have moved her to a safer location. She may be in danger, but she's also much more dangerous than I ever gave her credit for," Ms. Mori stated firmly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" my father asked sharply.

"Ms. Mori is simply stating that Hope's latest actions and obvious abilities were not something any of us were expecting," Victor interceded. "Though it would have been nice if Tie had been a bit more forthcoming, considering what we're dealing with."

"If you're going to continually refuse to help Hope regain her memories, then there is absolutely no reason for me to reveal the details of my time spent in her company. How was I supposed to know that she would magically remember everything I taught her?"

"Everything you taught...just how much time did you two actually spend together?"

That was definitely a question I wanted answers to. I heard Tie grunt in frustration and then address my father.

"What they're really saying, Dr. Fairmont, is that Hope is not the stupid, ignorant, helpless little teenager they were hoping to find and manipulate into being the pawn she was raised to be a thousand years ago,"

I silently thanked him for his sarcastic support.

"Tie, shut your mouth," Victor yelled. "This is Hope's destiny. We're not here to force her to do anything she wasn't born to do in the first place."

"Really? Then why don't you inform her about the events leading up

to her death? Why don't you tell her who banned her spirit into that statue?"

An uncomfortable silence permeated the air.

I, for one, felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. Someone had purposely trapped me inside that statue all those years ago? Was I aware of what was happening? Had I been conscious of every painfully slow second that had passed before my rebirth?

"I don't know what to believe anymore or even if you people can be trusted. I am Hope's father. I may be the only one in this room with her best interests at heart. What makes you think I'd ever allow you to incapacitate my daughter and force her to go to a place she no longer remembers? What makes you think I'd allow you to take her without taking Kirby also?"

"Hope cannot enter our lands with someone destined to die, and I think your daughter's safety is much more important to you than her emotional attachment to a boy who won't even matter weeks from now."

I was going to kill her. I was going to rip her hair out of her perfectly shaped Japanese head and continue ripping until there was no one left telling me what I could or could not do. I wasn't leaving Kirby, and I was tired of listening to him being talked about as if he were unimportant and already dead.

"I've heard enough of this," I said in disgust. "We're getting out of here."

"Oh, thank heavens. I knew you and your father wouldn't let these crazies pack us up and take us to who knows where."

I searched the room for the nearest window. Fortunately, there was one big enough to fit us both.

"Come on, Angie." I reached toward the bottom of the window seal and pulled the glass up as high as it would go.

"Hold on there. What exactly are you planning on doing?" she asked.

"If I know my father, and I do, that argument downstairs isn't going to get resolved anytime soon, and that's the kind of distraction you and I need. We're going to the hospital."

"You don't think Ms. Mori is going to let this go?" she asked.

"No. There's too much at stake for her. I think she'll do everything she has to in order to get me safely out of here, and that includes subduing my father if she feels it's necessary, and she will. We need to get to Kirby before things become worse. You in?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

Crawling out the window proved more difficult than I'd anticipated. The drop to the grassy floor beneath us was more than ten feet, and I wasn't a big fan of heights. Angie solved this problem by reaching out and

latching on to a sturdy looking branch extending out from a giant tree. I followed her. Once we hit the ground we headed for my father's car. We ran into our first road block when I realized I didn't have the keys. I had no idea if my father had them on him or in his room.

"Crap! I forgot the keys," I hissed.

"Don't worry about it," she said.

She surprised me by running around to the driver's side of the car, opening the door, and flipping the visor down. Something popped out from the visor and fell to the seat. She reached for it and produced a single key. I hopped into the passenger's seat and took what she offered.

"How did you know about this? I didn't even know about this."

"Your father took me aside when you were out here smooching with Japanese god number one. He told me where the extra key was and to use it if it became absolutely necessary."

I threw the car into neutral.

"Why did he tell *you* and not me?" I asked in confusion as Angie and I ran to the back of the car and pushed against the trunk.

"Hello! He was looking for you, but you were outside kissing Victor. I had to lie to him and say you were having girl issues in the bathroom," she replied indignantly.

"Wow, how did that go?"

"An awkward moment I hope never to repeat," she wheezed. "He's quite the planner you know, always thinking about every possible twist and turn. It must be a nightmare trying to play chess with him."

"I don't play chess with him."

"And now we know why."

For once, I was grateful my dad was all about compact cars. If this had been a truck, we would've had one heck of a time pushing it down the road. The car was moving at a good pace, but I worried about our time frame. We needed to get away without being heard, but every second we spent pushing instead of driving took away an important lead against three powerful gods. After about five minutes of pushing, I finally felt we'd created enough distance between ourselves and Ms. Mori's house to safely start the car.

"Okay, Angie. Let's go."

We ran to the front of the car, pulled our doors open in perfect unison, and got in. I punched the key into the ignition and cringed as the engine started. I didn't wait to see if anyone heard. In moments, we were speeding down the highway, hearts pounding. It might have been exciting if I hadn't been so worried about getting to Kirby's side before Ms. Mori could stop me.

“You know something funny?” Angie asked.

I gave her a look. She couldn’t possibly be thinking of something funny in our current predicament.

“Okay, not funny, but something I noticed when Ms. Mori was arguing with your father.”

“What?” I asked.

“Tie never joined in. He never said a single thing about leaving without Kirby. Wonder if he’s on our side.” She glanced at me from the corner of her eye.

I decided to ignore her comment, hoping she wouldn’t bring up my kiss with Tie.

“Sooooooo, saw you kissing Tie. How was it?” There was a teasing lilt to her voice.

“I’m a hoochie mama.” I immediately felt grumpy and on edge.

“There’s nothing wrong with you kissing both boys....okay so maybe kissing them the same night was a bit callous, but your current situation is peculiar.”

“My current situation is impossible. I’ve been told who I’m meant to be, what I’m meant to do, and who I’m meant to do it with, and there’s apparently no time at all to prepare for it. I’m supposed to be avoiding both guys as much as possible, but I totally made out with them.”

“Hey, it wasn’t a waste of time. You found out Tie’s your soul mate, didn’t you?”

“Eavesdropping is going to bite you in the butt someday, Ang.”

“I look forward to it. In the meantime, if you’re really going to be married pretty soon, you need some answers. Where do you stand emotionally with the man you’re supposed to marry and the guy you want to marry? You need to know if they’re one and the same.”

“Geez. Sometimes your wisdom frightens me, and I am not getting married.”

Angie remained silent.

“What is it?”

“I just feel bad for Victor, that’s all.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I know it’s there for you and Tie. You two are clearly meant for each other, but Victor is just so sweet, and good, and...”

“Good for me?”

Angie nodded, looking a little sad. Her voice was quiet when she spoke next. “Yeah, he’d be good for you.”

I bit my lower lip and wondered at Angie’s somber mood.

“Or maybe, he’d be good for you,” I suggested.

Angie’s head pivoted sharply in my direction. She was silent for a

few beats, and then I heard her sigh and sink back in her seat.

“Wouldn’t that be something new to consider?”

“It would definitely be a change from the usual breed of men you date,” I agreed.

“I never really dated those guys. They were just a distraction from all of the death surrounding me, and sometimes I showed interest so I could position myself in order to help them avoid a few fatal accidents.”

“That must have been a nightmare for you. I can’t believe we never relied on each other when it came to our gifts.”

“In a way we did. I kept you from closing everyone out and becoming this major introvert, and you kept me from the brink of suicide several times throughout my life. Granted, you accomplished much more for me than I did for you, but either way it worked.”

“No one’s keeping score, here. We’re best friends. We take care of each other.”

“That we do,” Angie said. “Is Tie going to be good for you?” She turned in her seat to stare at me. “Honestly, his devil-may-care-attitude is a little more my style, don’t you think?”

“We have managed to switch it up a bit, but there’s more to him than the front he puts on, and I think there’s more to this prophecy than what has been revealed. If Tie and I are soul mates, something about the prophecy is off. Things are most likely going to be very complicated from here on out.”

“You think up until now this day has been a piece of cake?”

“How long have you cared for him?” I redirected.

“Cared for who?” Angie gave me her best clueless look.

“Don’t play dumb with me. When did you know you were into Victor?”

“When I saw him walk into the school’s puke green cafeteria earlier today, but I kept my hands off as promised.”

“Well, we’re just going to have to get Victor to notice you. It shouldn’t be too hard. You are, after all, a goddess in your own right.”

“Amen, sister. There’s just one problem with your scenario.”

“What?”

“All he sees is you.”

I was silent for a few moments and then I asked, “How does that make you feel?”

“Jealous as hell. Every time Victor looks at you, I catch myself grinding my teeth together. My jaw is pretty sore, actually.”

I burst out laughing, and Angie soon joined me.

“Good. I need to know you’re dedicated. We’ve got to convince

Victor that you two make more sense together than he and I do.”

“Love is blind, Hope. It’s gonna take some doing to get Victor to look past his future plans with you to notice me.”

I knit my eyebrows together and worried about the accuracy of that statement.

It was a weird conversation. Angie and I didn’t usually do serious. Even when I spent the night at her place during her darker periods we never did anything more than scratch the surface of whatever topic we discussed. We definitely should have, though. Tiptoeing around our issues hadn’t resolve anything. It just left us both emotionally isolated from one another.

I sensed that for her sake we needed to delve into this topic more, but we arrived at the hospital moments later, and in all honesty, I was greatly relieved to get there.

“I can’t believe we got here before Victor and Tie,” Angie said. “I seriously expected to see one of them suddenly appearing next to my window going eighty miles an hour.”

We pulled into the parking lot, and jumped out of the car, making a mad dash for the front doors. I felt sure that at any moment I’d feel Victor’s hand on my shoulder or hear Ms. Mori’s voice in my head warning me to stop. But I couldn’t stop. Not until I found Kirby.

I wasn’t interested in my ongoing war between myself and the elevator so we took the stairs and found ourselves huffing and puffing at the top of the third floor. I immediately rounded the corner and nearly slammed into Betty who was wheeling a young cancer patient down the hall. I looked to see who it was, but my view was blocked by an oversized teddy bear the child grasped.

“Betty, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to run into you like that.” I grabbed her shoulders to make sure she was all right.

She looked startled, which was to be expected. What I didn’t expect was her look of unease.

“Just be more careful next time,” she said awkwardly as she pushed the wheelchair past us.

Strange, I thought as we continued our insane run to Kirby’s room.

I skidded to a halt just inside the door and nearly panicked. His bed was empty, and a nurse stood in the corner gathering up hospital equipment.

At first I nearly lost it, thinking he’d died, and no one had called to tell me. Then I realized that was impossible. He still had a few weeks left. I was never wrong about things like that.

“Where is he?” I croaked out.

“I’m sorry?” the nurse said, looking up from her work.

“Where is Kirby?” I nearly screamed. I felt Angie place a steady hand on my shoulder.

The nurse’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, you mean our little miracle boy!” she practically sang.

I had no idea what she was talking about. The only thing I could process was that Kirby was in danger, and he wasn’t here.

“What do you mean, miracle boy?” Angie asked for me.

“The doctor on call believes he may no longer have leukemia. No more cancer! The staff can’t understand what happened to bring such an amazing transformation about. We all thought for sure the poor little thing would be passing on soon.”

Kirby was well? He wasn’t sick anymore? I glanced at my watch and noted that it was three in the morning, and I’d finished healing Kirby around five or six last evening. That was less than ten hours ago. I was scared to believe it for even one minute. All Kirby had ever been was sick, with me hoping and healing and never being sure anything would ever change for the better. It had to have been that last healing. I hadn’t thought it was complete, but his body must have continued healing itself after I left. I should have been happy with this knowledge, but something felt wrong.

Where was Kirby?

“Why didn’t anyone call me? I’m listed as the first person to call if there are any changes in Kirby’s condition.”

“Oh, you’re Hope Fairmont?”

“Yes.”

The nurse’s cheerfulness grated on my nerves.

“We did call you. Betty was moving Kirby out of the cancer wing to a different room where he could be monitored for a while. We need to run some tests to make sure the young boy will make a full recovery, but the doctor is very hopeful. Betty wanted you and your father to come and oversee everything. Didn’t she tell you?”

My stomach felt a bit hollow, and my ears started to ring.

“I never got a phone call. I never even talked to Betty. I just saw her in the hallway not thirty seconds ago, and she didn’t say anything...”

She’d hardly said anything, and Betty was always one for words. My mind replayed my brief interaction with her, and I remembered something else that had been different about her. She hadn’t been wearing her tiny gold cross. It hadn’t been around her neck when she was taking that chemo patient to... *Oh no! No.* My mind refused to process what my heart told me was true. A slow pulsing thud sounded in my head. I didn’t know where it was coming from, but I channeled all of my thoughts towards

pinpointing the source of the noise.

I ran out of the room with Angie following close behind me. I took the stairs down and hit the second floor, running toward the break room where Betty usually grabbed her coffee. I dashed inside and felt an ominous sense of dread as I took in the dark, empty room. The slow, pulsating beat grew louder.

Betty always used this particular break room at night because hardly anyone came here. It was out of the way, and the coffee machine never worked for anyone but her. I flipped the light on and held my breath. The phosphorescence cast an ugly yellow-green hue against the pale floors and wilting flowered wall paper. The pounding beat of a human heart drew me to the left. I headed straight for the supply closet in the corner and wrenched open the door, still hearing that slow, pulsing sound in my head.

Inside the closet, I discovered Betty slumped against the wall. Her head drooped forward, and her hands covered a large, gaping wound in the middle of her stomach. I rushed in and knelt down beside her, knowing from the moment I touched her she had only moments to live.

“Betty,” I said gripping one of her hands in my own. I connected to her as fast as I was capable and tried with all my might to help her body fix her injuries.

Her eyes rose up and focused on me with an enormous amount of effort.

“He wanted me to give this to you,” she wheezed.

“Who did, Betty?”

“Don’t you dare let him get away with it, baby. Beat him anyway you can.”

I felt her other hand slide something into mine and then she let go... of everything. She was gone. There hadn’t been enough time to save her, and I should have been able to save her. I looked down at Betty’s tiny frame and saw nothing but my mother.

“Hope?” Angie asked softly. She placed her hands on both my shoulders and squeezed them tight. Her hands trembled with the effort.

I continued to see my mother lying in a pool of her own blood with my hands draped across her body, unwilling to believe I’d lost her. Somehow, she’d slipped from my grasp when there should have been more time. I should have been able to save her just like I should have been able to save Betty. It was too late.

I was always too late.

Angie’s voice rose in volume and I realized she was trying to get my attention.

“Hope, please. We have to find Kirby!”

That last remark shook me. I looked down into my bloody palm and

stared at the paper Betty had given me. The tiny blood splatters on top sickened me. A sad reminder of a beautiful life ruined. I wanted to rail against the unfairness of it all. I wanted to heave huge sobs filled with anger and grief for the passing of a woman who hadn't deserved to be caught up in this complicated, dangerous mess. *My* mess. I didn't have time to grieve the way I wanted to. I'd have to cry later because there was still a chance I could save Kirby.

I fumbled with the paper and finally managed to unfold it. The writing was jagged and strangely angled. It was clear the author wasn't used to writing anything, let alone a threatening message.

High school football field. Now.

"This is bad. This is very bad. There's nothing there. It's totally deserted right now," Angie wailed in panic.

"I know." I felt an increasing need to vomit. "That's why the monster chose it." I stood up, resisting the urge to look at Betty's bleeding form. "If he's got Kirby then that's where I'm going, but you should stay here."

Angie looked at me like I'd just suggested she join the debate team.

"I'm going to assume you're in shock and overlook your stupidity," she muttered. "Let's go get Kirby. Together."

Ah, Angie.

Typical.

Chapter Twenty-One

The drive to the high school took five minutes. Walking from the car into the football field took less than two. I couldn't remember a time when seven minutes had dragged by so agonizingly slow.

Angie had forced me into attending many football games over the last three years. I was used to being here when all the lights were blazing and the stands were filled with fiercely loyal fans. The field was dimly lit now by the silvery light of the moon in the distance. Everything was quiet and motionless. As the soft turf gave beneath my feet I began to feel like I was standing inside one of those Christmas snow globes. Completely cut off from the outside world and stuck with whatever had been placed within.

"I'm freaking out!" Angie whispered.

She grabbed my arm and I winced as her nails dug into my skin. I continued moving forward, scanning the remaining field ahead of me without any idea of what to expect.

"Stop. That's far enough," said a scratchy voice several yards ahead.

Angie and I froze. I spotted a few silhouettes in the distance but had trouble making out any faces. Suddenly, the lights surrounding the stadium lit up the entire field, and what I saw next made my insides freeze. The nekomata posing as Betty stood before me with a broad grin splitting its face. Knowing this creature wasn't Betty made the sick leer on its face that much more offensive.

Standing next to it, scared and confused, was Kirby. He'd changed so completely from when I'd last seen him. I couldn't believe how full his cheeks looked. His sickly frame had metamorphosed into that of a very healthy young boy. He didn't appear ill at all. My eyes filled with tears as I made a move toward him, but Angie jerked me back.

"Hope," she hissed. "Psycho cat has a gun."

My focus on Kirby had been so intense I hadn't even registered the gun pointed at his head. I stepped back and held still. I needed Kirby to think I had everything under control.

"Kirby, are you all right?"

He gave me a shaky smile.

I reluctantly took my focus off him and stared at the hideous aberration before me.

"What do you want?"

"We want you. I thought you'd have figured that out by now." Its voice was guttural, completely unnatural. How could I have been fooled by it at the hospital?

"Fine. I'm here, and I'm not leaving, so you can let the boy go. He's served his purpose." My voice sounded stronger than I felt. In reality, I held absolutely no power in this situation. If the nekomata wanted to it could just put a bullet in all three of us and walk away.

"I still have need of him," it said, teeth gleaming.

"Why?"

My stomach had managed to twist itself into several different knots. I could feel Angie's vice-like grip on my arm grow tighter and tighter with each word spoken.

The cat's grin changed into something ugly and evil. Its teeth began to sharpen and its eyes turned to green slits as the rest of the body morphed back into its true form.

The giant, black cat from Ms. Mori's house, the one whose heart I'd almost stopped, stood before us.

I'd never seen anything more horrific in all my life. If I'd killed that thing when I had the chance, Betty wouldn't have died tonight. The thought weighed heavily upon me.

I felt a pull on my arm as Angie slid to the grass. She put her head between her knees and dry-heaved. I looked back up to Kirby to see how he was handling things. His eyes were wide with fear, but he wasn't screaming at the top of his lungs like any normal human being. I couldn't believe how still he held himself.

"Insurance," it hissed, responding to my earlier question. "I'll need your full cooperation. If you refuse to give it willingly, then death will claim this miracle child faster than his leukemia would have if you hadn't interfered."

It was cruel, really. I finally managed to save Kirby from the cancer that held him hostage for so long, and now his life was being threatened in a different way.

"Put the gun down, and I'll do whatever you want," I said.

All that mattered was Kirby. All that mattered was keeping the people I loved safe. Keeping them alive.

The nekomata eyed me suspiciously for a moment and then slowly holstered the weapon on the side of his belt. He pointed one hairy claw at me and motioned me forward.

I took one step and then one more.

I had no idea how they found us so fast, but it couldn't have happened at a more vulnerable moment.

Victor appeared from the sidelines up ahead of us and immediately dove for the nekomata. They both went down in a jumble of swords, armor, and curses. I ran forward the minute I spotted Victor, but an arm wrapped around my waist before I could get very far. The arm tugged me back.

"What are you doing? Let go of me!" I shouted. I searched for Kirby and saw him rolling away from the commotion, trying to get to a standing position.

"Not a chance, Hope," Tie grunted trying to pin my arms to my sides. "It's bad enough that you sneaked out, but there's no way I'm letting you fight another nekomata. I don't care how hot you look with a sword in your hand."

"I don't care about your stupid nekomata or your ridiculous prophecy. I'm not interested in healing an imaginary veil for an imaginary people from another lifetime ago. I just need to save Kirby!" I was shrieking at this point.

"You stay here. I'll get Kirby." He pushed me behind him and then sprinted forward before I had time to argue. Victor still fought a vicious looking battle with Kirby's captor, and Angie, to my surprise, had gotten up from the grass and migrated about fifteen feet to my right. She was involved in a fierce yelling match with Ms. Mori and my father.

When did they get here?

My father made eye contact with me and moved forward. I looked for Tie. He held Kirby in his arms and began sprinting in my direction when a second nekomata came running up from behind. I screamed a warning to Tie, but he already seemed to know it was there. He dropped Kirby to the ground and doubled back.

"Run," I shouted as Kirby pulled himself to his feet.

I tried to close the distance between us as fast as possible while keeping my eye on the chaos surrounding us. Tie spun around and pulled out a black sword, one that looked similar to the swords owned by the nekomata I'd slain. He allowed his momentum to bring him center with the ugly beast. He sliced the cat's head off as easily as if he were playing a casual game of baseball.

From the corner of my eye I saw Ms. Mori fighting a third nekomata.

I was only a few yards away from Kirby when I heard my father shout out a warning.

I looked to where my father pointed. Victor held his opponent in a choke hold, but the nekomata who'd murdered Betty had managed to free the hand holding his gun, pointing it directly at me.

"If she doesn't come with me then she dies with all of you!" His guttural cry rang out across the entire football field.

I looked to Kirby and motioned for him to stop, trying to slow myself down as well. We were about ten feet apart, but he wasn't stopping. He looked over at the nekomata and ran faster. I knew what he was doing. I tried desperately to stop moving toward him, but he kept running, closing the distance between us. Kirby flung his arms around me at the exact moment the gun went off. I fell with my back to the ground and Kirby covering me.

I held still and prayed the bullet had hit me. I wanted to feel a sudden pain slicing through me, signaling the bullet's impact. I felt nothing but Kirby lying lifeless in my arms. I held him close to me and carefully rolled him to my side so I could look into his eyes and make sure he was all right. The moment I did, blood began to pour from his back.

I didn't waste any time. I had no idea who was winning or losing in the fight against the nekomata, and I didn't care. I connected to Kirby and assessed the extent of the damage the bullet had inflicted. What I saw filled me with dread. The bullet had severed his spinal cord at the C-3 level which meant the nerves controlling his ability to breathe had been damaged. He was suffocating. Not only that, but the metal of the bullet had been forged from the land of the dead. Darkness spread like a virus through Kirby's system. I worked frantically to help his body repair his vertebrae, but his life force wouldn't respond. It told me Kirby was meant to die.

An inhuman sound rose up from the back of my throat. I began pushing through that invisible veil just as I had the first time. I wasn't going to lose him. I wasn't going to let him die, not after I'd fought so hard to give him life. He couldn't die trying to save me. It wasn't his job to save me. I used all of my mental strength to shove through that stupid, ridiculous barrier. All the while I felt Kirby's heartbeat slowing as his body failed to draw in the oxygen he so desperately needed. I was in a race against time, and my panic impaired my ability to focus. I'd get so close to ripping through it, and then the spaces between Kirby's heartbeats would become more prolonged, causing me to lose my focus again. I almost cut my way in, mentally stabbing and slicing at the invisible force before me, when Kirby slipped from me. It felt like he lovingly squeezed

me one last time and then gently let go.

A desperate wail escaped me and soon I was screaming in a way I never had before. I kept hacking away at that barrier in an attempt to follow Kirby wherever he had gone. His presence still lingered next to me, but the obstacle ahead of me prevented any contact with him. I continued screaming, cutting, clawing and fighting until the pressure and pain within me came to a boiling point, and suddenly, I broke through.

I broke through!

I pushed past the veil and moved forward, latching onto the presence I felt before me and pulling back with all the strength I had left, sending Kirby's spirit back through the veil, through this invisible entity that had, for so long, taken and taken and taken from me without giving me a choice or a chance to save what was mine.

No more.

I was making the decisions now. I was calling the shots, and to hell with anyone who thought otherwise. I kept that veil wide open as I taught Kirby exactly what he needed to do to heal the injuries done to the spine, the nerves, the blood vessels, and anything else that needed repairing. Slowly he came into focus. He breathed again. He moved a little.

He was alive.

I had no idea how long I floated like that, keeping the veil at bay while Kirby's body began healing itself, but when it was all over I found myself never wanting to leave. Then I found that I couldn't leave. Every time I tried to move through the veil and join Kirby on the other side I found it impossible to do so. After a little while longer I began to forget who I was trying to get to or even why. Then I forgot more. My thoughts grew vague and distant. I considered the possibility that another dream had taken me, and I wondered if I would wake up in a nice warm bed overlooking an amazing garden filled with beautiful cherry trees.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Tie Hart

Tie ignored the battle behind him, recognizing that determined look in Hope's eyes, the look that signified her willingness to sacrifice everything, including her own life for those she loved. She had worn that look the day she'd saved his life.

By the time he reached her, she was already connected to Kirby and bringing him back from the brink of death, but blood dripped from her nose and her entire body shook.

No. Dammit, Hope. Not again.

There was no doubt in his mind that she had breached the veil. Fortunately, he knew she was his, and he didn't have to wait for Victor to attempt a healing. As her soul mate, he was the only one capable of repairing the damage to her life force. She collapsed next to an unconscious Kirby, and Tie dove for her, catching her just before her head hit the ground.

He wrapped his arms around her and frantically fought to recall her spirit back to him. He felt her warmth, saw the vibrant golds and oranges of her life force, and held them close to his as he repaired the damage she had sustained in order to heal her little friend.

Her selflessness never ceased to amaze him. Even now, after a thousand years and an entirely different upbringing, the woman he loved was essentially the same compassionate person at her core. She had the right to know what had happened to her. She needed to remember who she was and the choices that had led her to her death so very long ago. Tie couldn't deny a selfish desire for her to remember him as well. He wanted to know if any of it had been real for her before he'd forced her hand and taken away all of her choices.

There was only one way to accomplish that, and he was the only one with the power to unlock those memories for her. He held tightly to her as the healing neared its completion and gave her life force one final

command, giving her access to her first life and instructing her body to remain in a coma until she had relived every minute detail.

Someone approached in a great rush and landed on Hope's other side.

"Hope. You have to wake up. You have to wake up," James screamed. He turned his pleading look to Tie. "What happened? Did the bullet hit her?"

"She saved Kirby, but she broke through the veil to do it."

"What?" Victor shouted behind them. He crouched low in front of Hope and Tie, placing his hands on her head. "We need to heal her then. Together."

Tie eased Hope back and away from Victor's touch. "I was able to get to her before she did any damage to her life force." A bold-faced lie, but the alternative was to admit that he had brought her back from the edge of death. Then Victor would know that Hope no longer belonged to him, and he wasn't ready for those repercussions. He'd be sent away while Victor and Ms. Mori took hope to Kagami and tried to find a way to reverse what he had done.

He knew it was selfish. The safety of the world depended upon Victor and Hope's ability to join together and heal the veil, and they couldn't do that unless they were bonded as soul mates. Yes, it was selfish, but he couldn't lose her just yet. He couldn't leave her side again until she remembered him, remembered all that they had shared together. He had to know if Hope had ever consciously chosen to love him, and he had to protect her from any other threats she might face once she awoke.

Victor and Ms. Mori would remain in the dark a little longer, for Hope's sake and for his.

"If you repaired minimal damage, then why is she still unconscious?" Victor barked.

Tie hoped the next series of lies he told would be believable enough to mislead Victor and Ms. Mori for a while.

"She damaged the veil by healing Kirby. This is the consequence that follows. She's in between our world and the next, and will need some time to regroup and recover."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ms. Mori said as she stepped up behind Victor.

"Victor warned Hope of the possible consequences for breaching the veil. This is simply one of those consequences. We'll have to wait it out until she is ready to come back to us." Tie did his best to disguise his desperation. They couldn't find out what he had done. Not yet, anyway.

"This has worked out nicely then," Ms. Mori stated. "We needed her incapacitated and now she is. Victor, grab her and let's get going."

Tie reluctantly placed Hope in his former friend's arms, but James

lunged forward.

“You’re not taking my daughter anywhere.” He reached for Hope, but Tie held him back.

“Trust me,” he whispered to James. “We’re all going with, Hope.” He stared at James, willing him to back down. In the state that Victor and Ms. Mori were in, he had no doubt that they wouldn’t hesitate to subdue everyone present and leave them all behind.

James’ stubborn look caused Tie to hold his breath, but he must have seen something in Tie’s face that gave him some modicum of peace. He capitulated and sank back to the ground.

Ms. Mori and Victor hurried forward with Hope while Tie rounded up Angie, James and an unconscious Kirby. He carried the young boy in his arms and studied his face for a moment. Something about the kid seemed familiar. He shook his head, and turned to James.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he said as they moved to follow the others. “I’ve put Hope in a coma so she can regain her memories. She won’t wake up until her first life has merged with this one, but we can’t tell Chinatsu and Victor.”

James nodded. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who doesn’t trust them.”

“They aren’t bad people, James, but if they find out what I’ve done they will send me away, and I won’t be here to protect any of you.”

“I understand.”

“Well, I sure as hell don’t,” Angie muttered. “Hope being held in Victor’s arms isn’t right, Tie, and you know it.”

Tie assessed her in surprise. “Whatever you know about my connection with Hope, you have to promise me you won’t say anything, Angie.”

“Loose lips sink ships. Got it.”

He quirked a smile at her, but it quickly faded as his eyes floated back to Hope held in Victor’s arms.

Things were going to get rough once she finally recovered her memories and awoke from the coma. He sincerely hoped they would all be ready for it, but most of all, he prayed that Hope would be able to forgive him for what he had done to her, and somehow find it in her heart to love him anyway.

Epilogue

I felt as if I traveled from a great distance, fighting to remember locations, faces and even names as the heavy sleep that enshrouded my mind threatened to steal my memories from me. Just before I burst through that hazy state between sleep and consciousness, a pair of icy blue eyes filled with longing flashed before me accompanied by a soft voice that desperately pleaded over and over again...*remember me. Remember me.*

I sat up abruptly and rubbed my eyes.

“Honestly, mistress! You were supposed to have awakened two hours ago. Your father has an important meeting he wants you to attend, and your mother has threatened me within an inch of my life if you don’t appear properly dressed in twenty minutes.”

I squinted up at the haughty looking woman frowning down upon me.

“I had the strangest dream. I just can’t remember what it was about,” I said, feeling troubled.

She rolled her eyes.

“You do test my patience, Mistress. Why can’t you be like every other ordinary girl and simply do as you’re told?”

She grumbled something under her breath as she began brushing out my hair.

“But I’m not an ordinary girl. I’m not even what you might call normal.” I felt a familiar sadness sink within me. “I’m her Imperial Highness Princess Mikomi, the girl of prophecy, the hope of our nation, the savior of our world.”

“The Healer,” my maid whispered in reverent tones.

“Yes.” I stood up and crossed over to the full length mirror on the wall next to my armoire. I stared unhappily at the girl before me. “I

suppose I am that as well.”

Author's Note

Authors depend on word of mouth to help others find their books. If you liked the story, please consider leaving a review. It doesn't have to be long either. Just one or two sentences would be so awesome. Thank you, and thanks so much for reading *The Healer*.

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Marry Your Billionaire

Continue Hope's journey as she relives her life as Princess Mikomi in *The Back Blossom, Book 2* in *The Healer Series*.

Forced into a dream-like state, Hope is reliving her life as Mikomi, Princess of the Kagami Empire and The Healer of the world. Life as an Imperial Princess is rife with danger, betrayal, and intrigue as Mikomi joins forces with a rebel group of samurai warriors in order to usurp the throne from her tyrannical father. To win this seemingly hopeless war, she must train with Musubi, a warrior in the rebel army, and learn the art of

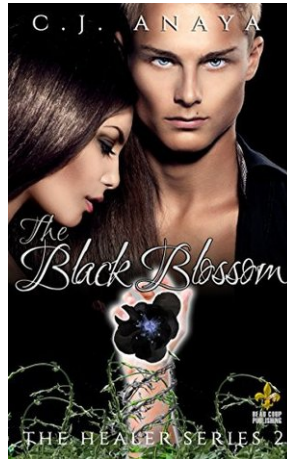
the sword without revealing her identity as The Healer.

Unbeknownst to her, Musubi harbors his own secret identity and personal agenda, both of which holds dark consequences for Mikomi's future. Neither one can afford to share their secrets, nor can they ignore the powerful chemistry building between them.

Further complications arise at the arrival of her betrothed, Katsu, who must aid her in mastering control of her own gift before she ascends as a full kami on her eighteenth birthday. Katsu is not the cold-hearted warrior god she expected, but how can she spend eternity with a deity she may never love?

Determined to avoid her destiny, she spies on her father and his generals, collecting intelligence for the rebel army in the hope that one day the empire of Kagami will be liberated and her own future will be hers to control.

Turn the page to read the first chapter of the second book in *The Healer Series: The Black Blossom*.



Prologue: The God of Love and Marriage, 700 A.D.

Musubi-no-Kami, the god of love and marriage, was preparing to make a deal with the devil...literally.

Stone steps crunched beneath his sandaled feet, and the temperature dropped with his slow yet determined descent. The path he took now was one he never would have considered a millennium ago. He never would have considered it a month ago, but Edana was gone, dead by her own hand, and someone needed to pay. That someone was Masaru Katsu, warrior god and keeper of the Grass Cutter Sword.

Musubi had done his best to curb Katsu's inappropriate relationships with human women. He'd tried thousands of times over the past centuries

to help the warrior god understand the kind of devastation he left in his wake every time a heart was broken and another girl abandoned. It left his job of helping these women find their soul mates virtually impossible. They became unwilling to ever open up and trust again.

It was selfish of Katsu. He was one of the few kami in all of creation destined to have a soul mate, destined to have the kind of love and companionship that Musubi could merely dream of and never hope to achieve. Yet the warrior god showed very little emotion whenever his future bride was mentioned. He clearly took his good fortune for granted. He didn't even care, and now he'd gone too far. Edana was gone and it was Katsu's fault.

He ground his teeth together as he continued to descend the cold, black stone steps to the underworld. His previous existence had centered solely on bringing happiness and joy to others. He'd done it for thousands of years and always assumed it would be the only thing he would ever desire. Now, the only thing he desired was revenge.

Musubi took his very last step into the underworld and waited. The nekomata, one of the demon god's trained assassins, had been very specific in their previous conversation. Musubi was to wait there until he was sent for. Wandering off and getting lost in the underworld was not only unwise but hazardous to one's health, even for an immortal being. He didn't have to wait long. Despite the dense darkness surrounding him, he was able to hear the padded approach of one of the demon god's servants. He hoped it was a servant and nothing else.

The padding came to an abrupt halt a few feet in front of him. A small flame pierced the oppressive blackness, and a torch was lit, illuminating the desolate cavern. He eyed the nekomata critically. The depraved soul had once been a kami himself, but he'd defected centuries ago, never to be heard from again.

"Musubi, it's been a long time," it hissed.

"I have a meeting with your master," was Musubi's short reply.

The nekomata's cat-like eye narrowed and then seemed to glow a deep green color.

"Of course, I shall take you to him now." He turned and motioned for Musubi to follow. "I must admit, the news of your arrival here has created quite a stir, but I for one am not surprised. It's always the best of us that falls the hardest."

Musubi suppressed an angry response and followed his guide deeper into the dark recesses of the underworld. Before long, he was led into a large opening. Lighted torches hung on black metallic posts in the air. The black stone surrounding them seemed to absorb any light the fire from the torches created. They were in some kind of dungeon, to be sure, but one that no longer resided in the world of the living. A black throne lay thirty feet ahead of them, and seated on its edge was the demon god and lord of

the underworld, Amatsu-no-kami.

He thought he was prepared for the sight of the demon god, but at that moment he doubted anyone could be completely unaffected by the pure malevolence that radiated from the god of the underworld. It was difficult to take in the fallen deity's appearance because he had the same face and form as always, and yet here he sat, horrifically different from the day Musubi witnessed him cast out of Heaven. The whiteness of his skin was just as blinding as ever, but he was and had always been, a devastatingly handsome individual with jet black hair and eyes, a strong chin and firm cheekbones. He still wore his sparkling white robe almost as if he were mocking the Parents who originally bestowed such pureness upon him.

His appearance suggested power, aggression, and absolute dominance. He was someone you might mistakenly consider as a trustworthy leader, a valuable asset, an individual you hoped to have on your side. A demon in angel's clothing. The juxtaposition was jarring.

"It's been such a very long time since I've basked in the presence of the god of love and marriage," Amatsu said. There was a mocking lilt to his tone.

"Seems like an eternity," was Musubi's clipped response. He noticed Amatsu's eyebrow rise in amusement.

"Tell me, dear Musubi, what brings you from the land of the living? Why this completely unexpected honor?"

"I think you know why I'm here." He tried his best to look unaffected as Amatsu scrutinized him with his scalding gaze.

"Revenge," Amatsu said, almost laughing. "Seems a bit beneath you, punishing Katsu for the death of your one true love."

Musubi held his tongue at Amatsu's flippant remark.

"You won't help me then?" Musubi held his ground but began to taste the bitterness of defeat. If the demon god wouldn't help him, he didn't know what path he could take next.

"I said it was beneath you. I, however, have never turned my back on the idea of giving others exactly what they deserve."

Musubi tried not to let his relief show.

"I am extremely curious as to what exactly you have in mind for our dear Katsu, and how you think I could possibly help you. I am, after all, trapped here." Amatsu's voice took on a scary edge. Signs of his displeasure with his lot in life seeped through the calm mask of indifference he held.

"Katsu has to pay for what he did to Edana. He took away the woman I love, and now I'm going to take away the woman he loves." It sounded worse saying it out loud than it had merely thinking and plotting it in his head, but thoughts of Edana steeled his resolve, and he didn't lower his eyes when Amatsu studied him again.

“Katsu loves no one. Of this I am certain. So again, I ask you, what is it that you require from me?” Amatsu’s tone was becoming less pleasant.

“Katsu loves no one at the moment, but it is prophesied that he will.” The demon god’s eyes seemed to flash with a strange green light.

“The Healer,” he whispered to no one in particular.

Musubi nodded. “I’m sure you wondered why I would take such a huge risk in coming here. I know my revenge will not only benefit me, but will also eliminate a problem you have no doubt wished to remedy since the day the prophecy of The Healer was given utterance.”

“You want to kill The Healer? The Savior of the living? The half-mortal child destined to heal the veil between the living and the dead?” Amatsu began to laugh quietly to himself, and then the laughter grew louder until it echoed against the blackness of the stone walls. “You have wasted my time and yours, Musubi. The child cannot be slain. Her immortal paternity has ensured that nothing save a sword forged from this land can kill her. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to send an assassin through the veil?”

“I didn’t say I wanted to kill her.”

“Then what—”

“I want to take her for myself. How can she heal the veil if she is never bound to Katsu?”

Amatsu raised his head, and for the first time showed some real interest in what Musubi had to say.

“An interesting proposition, but tell me how you plan to woo The Healer away from the one she is destined to love and belong to. She will be created specifically for Katsu. Denying one’s soul mate in favor of someone else? You and I know that this is as impossible as killing the child and being done with it.”

“I agree with you, which is why I need your help. I need something that will sever her connection to Katsu and make her fall in love with me.”

Amatsu looked triumphant, though nothing had been decided or resolved.

“Something that can sever the link between soul mates? Now that is an idea, and quite a nasty one if you don’t mind my saying so. Not like you at all, really.”

“And yet, here I am.”

“Indeed.” Amatsu gave Musubi an appreciative look. “I may have something capable of accomplishing exactly what you propose, but I warn you, it will come with a price.”

Musubi let out an impatient grunt. “Name your price, and I’ll pay it.”

“Well, obviously money is out of the question. What would I need that for in this place?” The demon god let out a perverse laugh. It was as

if its facetiousness was all the more macabre due to its infrequent occurrence. “And having you here serving me prevents us both from getting what we want. So here is what I propose. Once the deed is done, the girl has fallen for you and her connection to Katsu has been irrevocably severed, you will deliver her to me and walk away without a backward glance.”

“Fine,” was all Musubi had to say.

“Yes, you say that now, but I’m afraid I will need to ensure that if I grant you this favor, you don’t suddenly become consumed with a guilt-ridden conscience and go back on our deal.” “What more can I do to prove I will uphold my end of this transaction?” Amatsu merely smiled, a smile that sent rippling chills up and down Musubi’s spine. He held his hand open, palm up, and then flipped it with a flourish. When his hand came to rest palm up again, there stood, levitating above it, the blackest flower Musubi had ever seen. It pulsed with darkness. “What is that?” “This is a black cherry blossom, the solution to both our unfortunate situations.”

Musubi shook his head. “I don’t understand. How does this—”

“The black cherry blossom is an interesting piece of magic, very old magic, mind you, something I’m sure not even our First Parents are aware exists.”

“How could they not know about this?”

“Why, because I created it. This cherry blossom has the power to sever the connection between two soul mates by literally changing the destiny of the one who holds it. Come forward, please.”

Musubi walked to Amatsu slowly, never taking his eyes off the black, floating flower.

“Hold out your hand.”

He did as he was told. Amatsu moved his hand away from the blossom, but it still remained suspended in mid-air. Then it began to move toward Musubi’s outstretched hand. The blackened stem grew longer as it descended, and then wrapped itself around his wrist. He looked on in fascination as the stem continued to creep its way up his arm, under his clothing and toward his chest.

And then it struck.

The stem embedded itself within his heart, and the pain was like nothing the god had ever before felt. He let out a strangled cry and nearly staggered to the floor, but just as quickly as the pain took hold of him it let go. He closed his eyes and opened them slowly, seeing his surroundings in a new light.

He felt...different; things were different. It was as if his heart and mind had been violently disconnected. He looked at his outstretched arm and watched the cherry blossom continue to hover above his hand.

“What have you done to me?” His question came out hollow.

“Oh, that? I merely blackened your heart a little, enough to taint it. Subduing your conscience is necessary, really. You do-gooders always manage to ruin the most wonderfully laid out plans, and we can’t have that now, can we?” Amatsu gave him an evil grin. “This cherry blossom serves another purpose, however. Now that it is a part of you, it will also connect you to whomever you wish. In other words, once you give it to the young girl of prophecy and she accepts it, her connection to Katsu will be cut, and she will be bound to you forever, doing anything and everything you wish, including aligning herself with me.” Amatsu clapped his hands in utter delight.

“You just happened to have something like this on hand?”

“You’re not the only one to have had an epiphany, realizing the only way to destroy the girl of prophecy was to alter her destiny. I’ve had quite a bit of time to troubleshoot such an annoying issue. I just never realized I’d have my very own minion working out the kinks for me. It is so delightful, the kind of actions revenge and hate can produce, and to have the god of love and marriage possessing an item capable of ripping soul mates from one another?” Amatsu rubbed his hands together gleefully and let out a slow, deliberate chuckle. “Well, let’s just say the irony isn’t lost on me.”

Part of Musubi’s mind, the part holding a small remnant of the kami he used to be, wondered if maybe he’d taken things too far. The errant thought flickered like a small candle in the wind and was extinguished by another thought much more insistent and pervasive.

Revenge.

Download your copy of [The Black Blossom](#).

About the Author



I began writing short stories for family and friends when I was thirteen years old. My vivid imagination and love of mysteries and romances eventually led me to following my own dreams of becoming a published author. I also do some book review work for [Skin Deep Exposures Magazine](#) on the side.

I'm a huge fan of The Mindy Project, Hugh Jackman, and binge eating any and all things chocolate.

Who isn't?

As a mother of four awesome kids I'm usually playing beauty salon with my daughters—my four-year-old shaved my arm one time while I was helping another daughter with her homework. Yep. That happened—getting my fanny kicked in Mario Kart by my snarky little son, and making out with my deliciously handsome Latin lover, aka, my hubby.

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