

Amethyst

by Heather Bowhay



BOOK ONE OF THE GUARDIAN SERIES

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By Heather Bowhay

Published by Heather Bowhay at Smashwords

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~To my wonderful husband Dan,
For sharing life, laughter, children, mountains, and waterfalls,
And for loving me when I couldn't stop writing and we had to eat pizza,
Again!
~H.L.B~

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CHAPTER 1 – BURDENS

Lashing out, I jerked the power cord out of the wall, but it was too late. The table saw's high-pitched screeching had already triggered horrific images, reminding me that a man was dead, and I was responsible. I yanked off the safety goggles and hucked them across the shed. After grabbing the tattered board, my third failed attempt at a curved cut, I slammed it against the workbench but gained little satisfaction as it split into pieces.

Still, the memories persisted. Poignant. Taunting. I felt like I was there again...I could even smell the burning rubber and hear the metal bicycle parts grinding into the pavement.

Guilt swept over me like an angry flame devouring a trail of gasoline. I'd just stood there and watched as the city bus had crushed the cyclist beneath those massive wheels. Afterward, I'd raced to the cyclist's side, but he was already dead. Numbing blue eyes from his lifeless body had cast an accusatory glare straight into my soul. Even now, a bitter chill swept through my veins freezing my heart with shame. It was as if, even in death, he'd known I could have saved his life.

What's worse, he would have been right.

Saw dust stung my eyes and burned my nose snapping me back to the present. As the saw blade finally whined its way to a stop, my shaky legs gave way, and I collapsed onto the stool. Woodworking no longer offered refuge from my burdens; instead it reminded me of my sins. I grabbed a wood shard and ran my finger along the splintery edge until it pierced my skin and drew blood, momentarily sustaining a need for self-inflicted punishment.

Trance-like, I stared as bright red droplets trickled off my hand and blotted the concrete floor. I wiped my bloody finger on my jeans and allowed the tears to stream down my face. My foot slipped off the edge of the stool, and I grabbed the edge of the work bench and leaned my head back. A large spider glided effortlessly through an intricate set of webs in the corner, and I wondered if I'd ever move through my life with such ease again. But more importantly, I wondered if I was worthy, let alone capable, of saving people anymore.

Exhausted, I eventually turned off the shop lights and made my way back to the house. I hoped sleep might come easier tonight.

It did not.

Hours later, I still lay tossing and turning when a sharp pain pierced my head and was followed by an explosion of bright colors and scattered black dots. They filled the recesses of my mind and distorted my vision. Clutching the folds of my blanket, I shot into an upright position.

They were back. And they were back with a vengeance.

Irregular heartbeats hammered my chest like flying shrapnel. Closing my eyes, I wrapped my arms around my trembling body. The fragmented colors pulled together and formed images. I'd been dreading this moment, wondering if it would come. Wondering if I could handle it.

In a flash, the snapshots invaded my mind:

A girl jogging along the sidewalk in the rain

The girl, a look of terror on her face, backing into a dark alleyway

A massive dog with long, sharp canines, cornering her

The dog attacking the girl as she lay struggling on the pavement

The images ended, the colors dispersed, and my eyes shot open. The sudden loss of equilibrium was expected; the continued blurred vision was not. Regardless, I had no time for uncertainty this time around – only the burden of acting in time. No matter how much I wanted the snapshots gone, I'd vowed never to ignore them again.

Adrenaline pumped through my body forcing me out of bed. In a mad dash, I stumbled for the closet and glanced at the clock. What was the jogger thinking? No one in their right mind went running all alone at eleven o'clock at night.

My stomach muscles tightened; I would not be responsible for another death. I scrambled into an old pair of Levi's, tucked my long, honey-blond hair under the hood of my rain jacket, and grabbed my sneakers. Frowning, I glanced at the popcorn ceiling. Showers pounded the roof like a stampede of wild horses escaping captivity.

Lucky for the jogger, she was only facing a wild dog and not some psycho-maniac, serial killer.

Get a grip Lexi! Stop freakin' yourself out.

All I knew for sure was that the jogger was either about to be seriously injured or about to be killed. The thought of her being mauled to death by a massive dog had bile rising in the back of my throat. With my best friend Ally, the only one who knew about my *ability*, out of town for a couple days, I was on my own. There was no time for doubt or hesitation, only commitment.

Slapping my forehead, I refocused my train of thought. I might need a weapon. I glanced around. But what? Damn, if I'd only ordered that taser off Amazon. Of course, I'd been too afraid I might shock myself with it, so I'd wimped out and opted for pepper spray instead. Disgusted, I grabbed the pepper spray out of my dresser drawer, shoved it in my pocket, and darted through the house.

Another idea presented itself, and I stopped short in the living room. Wincing guiltily, I whispered a silent apology to Ben, as I grabbed his beloved baseball bat, the one with Griffey's signature, out of its special holder. Ben was my other roommate and Ally's fiancé. His parting words, which had been intended as a joke, jabbed at my conscience. "Now Lexi, don't let anyone mess with my bat while I'm gone."

Yeah well, apparently, I couldn't be trusted.

A transformer "popped" in the distance and darkness encompassed the room. Muttering profanities under my breath, I fumbled my way to the front door and charged outside. Raindrops assaulted me, and I pulled the drawstrings on my hood a little tighter. Despite the humidity and warmth of the dark June night, the rain was relentless. My shoes slapped the pavement as I headed towards Fairhaven – the small business district only a few blocks away.

Somehow, after a premonition, I always knew which way to go.

Breathing hard, I rounded a corner and scoped out the streets before me. Solar-powered lamps flickered dimly in the darkness; the absence of cars and people was disconcerting. Of course, anyone with any sense at all was snuggled up inside, like I would be if I was just an average, ordinary girl. But I wasn't.

It wasn't long before I caught sight of movement between two brick buildings. Quickening my pace, I could see I was still too far away to make my move (whatever that was going to be). I watched as two bulky figures advanced towards a much smaller one. Suddenly, one of the bulky figures lunged, seemingly growing in size as he knocked the smaller figure to the ground. In fact, the bulky figure didn't look like a person at all. Well, not anymore at least; instead, he looked like a massive...four-legged beast?

No. Couldn't be. Tripping over my thoughts, and literally over my own feet, I barely avoided a face plant. I staggered forward just as a woman's screams pierced the night. Shock waves ripped through my body, and my heart exploded like a sonic boom.

Determined not to lose another life, I raced across the street. As I entered the alley, I spotted the girl from my snapshots. She was lying on the ground a few

yards away from the dog, who was now pinning a struggling, bare-chested guy to the pavement. How had I missed that bit of action?

I vaulted forward, and as much as I hated to hurt an animal, I swung the bat with all my might at its glistening orange fur. The element of surprise was on my side, and I hit my target dead-on.

Well, not really. If I'm being honest, it was a pretty haphazard swing, and I hit the beast's hind leg. The dog yelped, jumped off the guy, and spun towards me. Staring at me with wide-set, amber eyes, the tan-colored dog raised one paw into the air and growled.

"Crap," I muttered, grinding my teeth. Not only was the dog ugly and completely intimidating, he was the largest beast I'd ever seen. In fact, he looked like a Mastiff, only twice the normal size. My eyes widened when his lips curled back. He appeared to be grinning.

Defensively, I held out the bat, swinging it slowly side to side. I took a few steps backwards but bumped into the building. Running one hand over the rough bricks, I edged my way towards the girl. Since my eyes were locked on the Mastiff, I wasn't overly surprised when I banged into a garbage can and sent the lid clattering to the ground. Pungent odors of rotting fish wafted under my nose, and I gagged but hurried on. When I reached the girl, the Mastiff snarled. Standing strangely balanced on his two hind legs, he scrutinized me with a predatory stare. I knelt in front of the whimpering girl and reached for her shoulder. In a glance, I noticed her short hair was plastered to the side of her muddy face, and her eyes were closed.

"H-help me," she rasped between ragged breaths, her eyes fluttering. "Those g-guys were attacking me, but then all of a sudden a d-dog..." she gasped, not finishing her sentence.

"What guys?" I asked, glancing around. There was only one guy, one dog, and the two of us girls in the alley.

A belligerent voice cut through the pounding rain. "Fearless but foolish. And not much of a designated hitter are ya?" A low, guttural laugh followed.

The hairs on my neck stood on end. I glanced up at the speaker, and found myself in a stare down with the bare-chested guy. He'd regained his feet and was standing next to the dog, running one hand down his long, slick pony-tail.

"But that's okay," he added snidely. "I enjoy a good game. And honey, I'm good at battin' in home runs."

My eyes widened and my stomach churned as images of his threat played through my mind. My thoughts were cut short when all at once he rushed us. To

my amazement, the dog intervened and pounced on the guy, which sent him spiraling into a puddle. Lightning streaked across the sky as the guy slammed his fists into the pavement and bounced right back to his feet like he'd hit a springboard. He turned and faced the dog but received a vicious snarl.

The guy put his hands up and backed away. "Fine, you take 'em both," he spat. "You always do. But I want my share when it comes time for their..." Thunder boomed, cutting off his last words.

And here I thought I was the mental case. This guy was having a one-sided argument with a dog, and the dog was winning. Apparently they were together; although, not on the friendliest of terms. And strangely enough, the dog was the Alpha.

As if things weren't bad enough, the Mastiff turned his attention and bounded for us. Behind me, the girl gripped my legs and let out another blood-curdling scream as lightning lit up the sky. Chilled to the bone, sopping wet, and shivering uncontrollably, it finally dawned on me that we were screwed. This was no longer a rescue attempt on my part. In fact, we were both probably going to die. I clutched the bat and wondered if being mauled by a Mastiff was my payback for ignoring a premonition – one in which a man was smashed under a bus.

All I'd wanted was to begin my freshman year like any *normal* college student – excited about my newfound freedom and overwhelmed with ordinary things. Unfortunately, being *normal* would never happen while I was prisoner to the premonitions. That's why I'd made the decision to disregard one. I'd thought it might not come to fruition and I'd be done with them for good.

How wrong I'd been. And now they were back; only this time I wouldn't be able to save anyone, not even myself.

A calm resolve swept over me as I realized death offered an escape from the pain, the guilt, and a lifetime of responsibility. Dying wasn't so scary; it was retribution. But the thought of experiencing the bloody assault on my body was horrifying. Not to mention, I'd be responsible for another death – the poor girl at my feet.

I closed my eyes and imagined being somewhere safe – swimming laps in the warm, chlorinated waters of my old high school pool.

That's why I don't know exactly what happened next. A predatory howl preceded an explosion of barks that reverberated around the alley. My eyes shot open, and I gasped at the sight of the Mastiff intertwined with a smaller, but still good-sized, gray dog. They rolled across the pavement, biting at each other. Just

past them, in the shadowy mist, the bare-chested guy was engaged in a serious physical battle with what appeared to be a very capable female opponent.

What was this craziness? Kung fu night? Still possessing some of my wits, I realized this was my chance to save the girl, so I grabbed her elbow and yelled, “Get up, let’s go!”

“I can’t,” she said in a panic. “Something’s wrong with me. I feel so...so drained, like I have no energy.” She slumped forward, her head drooping.

“We gotta move,” I cried and hauled her to her feet, all but dragging her to the back of the alley. Empty buckets blocked our path, so I kicked them out of the way and leaned her against the chain link fence. Thoughts I’d had of climbing over the top diminished when I caught sight of barbed wire encircling the upper bar. The girl slouched over again, so I propped her against my legs. Readying myself, I gripped Ben’s bat in one hand and clutched the pepper spray in the other. If this wasn’t my day to die, then so be it. But I wasn’t going to let the girl from my snapshots die either. Clinging to me, she buried her face against my sopping wet jeans.

I directed my attention towards the dog fight. The powerful Mastiff had the scruffier gray dog pinned down on the asphalt. I cringed as he sunk his teeth into the poor dog’s jugular. But with a sudden burst of strength, the gray dog thrust the Mastiff off, rolled over, and stood on all fours. He might be scruffy, but the gray dog was tough and looked a lot like my aunt’s Irish Wolfhound – tall and fearless. Growling, with tails whipping, they attacked each other again. Savagely, they tore at each other, spewing clumps of wet fur into the air. The stench of blood infested the alley.

I wiped my face and peered through the rain, trying to discern who was winning the other battle. Both humans were unbelievably fast, but maybe that was just an illusion created by the mist. Dancing around each other, they threw punches and kicks from all angles like they were at a martial arts competition. The girl swooped in and delivered a swift upper cut to the bare-chested guy’s face. His lip split and began spraying a fountain of blood. Staggering back, he eventually regained his balance and launched himself forward, kicking her mid-drift. The force of impact sent her hurtling to the ground. She landed flat on her butt.

“Now you’ve really pissed me off!” she yelled, rising to her feet. All at once, buckets flew through the air, one right after another, clobbering him from all directions. I knew she was quick, but how was she...? I rubbed my eyes and watched as she hurled those buckets faster than I could blink. In fact, I don’t

know how her arms could move that fast. One of the dogs yelped, causing me to glance away for an instant, so I missed how she executed her next move. But when I looked back, the bare-chested guy was sailing backwards through the air. He slammed into the brick sidewall, and his head snapped forward.

At that moment, another cloaked person entered the alley, dashed past the dogs, and rushed towards us. I held out the bat, but the person said, "We're here to help. Are you all right?" The voice was soft and definitely female.

Before I could respond, the whimpering girl at my side sputtered, "I don't think I can..." but suddenly her voice morphed into a shriek, and she pointed in front of us.

I looked up. The Mastiff had broken away and was bolting our direction. His droopy jowls lurched side to side. Raising my hand in the air, I fired a jet-stream of mace into his face and then swung the bat. The bat never made contact though, because unbelievably, the Mastiff stopped dead in his tracks, like he'd just run into a brick wall. His amber eyes sealed shut, and his face twisted in pain. My jaw dropped, and I looked at the pepper spray with new respect.

Who needed a taser? Right? Talk about overrated.

Taking advantage of the situation, the Wolfhound attacked and tore a bloody chunk of flesh from the Mastiff's hind leg. Howling, the Mastiff's strange yellow eyes popped open. He leaped several feet in the air, glided over the Wolfhound, and tore from the alley. How he did that, I don't know, but the Wolfhound followed in hot pursuit.

That's when I noticed the bare-chested guy had disappeared as well. His impressive opponent yelled urgently, "Let's go." She didn't come any closer, just brushed her hands together at a task well done. I couldn't make out her facial features, but long, drenched hair clung to her back.

Stepping forward, I found my voice. "That was insane! How did you throw those buckets?"

Her head tilted slightly upwards, and light glistened on her wet face. "Just one of my many talents. Now, let's get out of here," she said haughtily,

"Where did you come from?" I persisted, feeling like I'd been played in some way.

"From our car, obviously" she said, taking several steps forward and placing her hands on her hips. "The dog needed a pit stop. When he ran off, we chased him here." She swept an arm around the alley. "No more questions. We don't have time to stand around and chat."

"I hadn't realized the Wolfhound was yours," I said, piecing it all together in

my mind.

She gave a low, throaty laugh, and her white teeth glimmered. “Oh, that beast is not mine. He belongs to her.” She pointed at the soft-spoken girl, who was assisting the whimpering jogger to her feet.

The soft-spoken girl nodded. “She’s right; we need to go. We’ll get you both to the hospital.”

“Not me,” I said adamantly. “I’m fine, and I’m going home. I live across the street and can get there by myself, but she’ll need a lift.” I nodded at the jogger.

“You should stick with us,” the soft-spoken girl said, her tone that of a concerned mother.

“No, I’ll be okay.”

“Let’s go already,” her friend shouted. “We don’t want to be here if they come back, and we need to call the police.”

She nodded and glanced my way. Rain dripped off her hood, obscuring her face. Gently, she pushed the jogger forward and turned to me. “Glad you had that pepper spray.”

I frowned and looked at her suspiciously. Something wasn’t adding up with these two. Actually, nothing was adding up, but I replied, “Yeah well, this stuff costs a fortune, but it’s supposed to hit hot, like a blowtorch. Guess it really does.”

The jogger looked over at me, and I asked if she was all right. She nodded and thanked me. I was just relieved she was safe and I hadn’t gotten her killed. Gripping Ben’s bat, I shook my head and wondered if the rain had ruined Griffey’s signature.

The girls hurried us out of the alley and we parted ways before I could get their names. It was almost like they didn’t want to be known. If that was true, I didn’t care; I had secrets and problems enough of my own.

The power was still out at home, so I changed out of my wet clothes and towel dried my hair by candle-light. After climbing into bed, I clung to my pillow and pressed a damp washcloth against my pounding forehead. A cinnamon-spiced candle burned tall and bright, casting forlorn shadows on the wall.

Cold and shaky, I was emotionally and physically drained. At least the jogger was alive; that’s all that mattered. Not once in all my years of saving people had I ever been hurt or felt like I was in danger, but tonight I’d been sure it was the end. I doubted the jogger or I would have survived the night without help – help that arrived from two very unlikely strangers.

Complete madness.

It now appeared psychopaths were on the loose, and mysterious heroes patrolled the streets of my small town. The real question was which category did I fall under?

Burdened since childhood with premonitions of impending tragedy, my sole existence had always centered on saving people. While that had been rewarding when I was younger, it hadn't been for a long, long time. The snapshots of disaster, as I called them, crashed through my life like colossal waves, throwing me off balance and commanding me with no mercy. I never knew when they'd strike or where they'd take me, but always, I was forced to drop whatever I was doing and race off to help. My strangely erratic behavior had made me an outsider at school and had earned me nicknames like, "crazy chick" and "freak girl."

All I knew is that I didn't want to deal with the snapshots, the guilt, or the burden of saving people anymore. I wanted out.

CHAPTER 2 – A CLOSE CALL

I was sitting on a green plastic tub, one I'd strategically wedged onto the small balcony off my bedroom, when I heard Ally calling my name. Rising, I went inside to greet her.

With a concerned look and a frown she hurried into the room and gave me a big hug. "Are you all right? I'm so sorry I wasn't here." She held me at arm's length and scrutinized my face with her big blue eyes. "I want to know what happened." Taking a couple steps back, she kicked the door shut with her foot.

"I'm glad you weren't here," I said adamantly. "I wouldn't have wanted you in that alley. Things were crazy out of control...like it's never been before. If something had happened to you...well, I don't even want to think about that."

"I can take care of myself." She pulled me over to the bed so we could sit down. "I've been worried sick about you. Tell me exactly what happened, and don't leave anything out."

A half hour later, after I'd finished a full recount of the night before, she said, "How insane! I can't believe I missed all that action. So much for moving to a small town without any drama." She pounded her feet on the floor. "Thank God you're okay. *And* you saved the jogger, too."

I rolled my eyes. "I wouldn't say she's alive because of me."

"You might have had some help, but you got there and did your thing." Thinking hard, she tapped her chin. "I don't like how your life was in danger. That's something totally new."

"After what happened with the cyclist, I deserve—"

"You have to stop blaming yourself for that," she interrupted in a furious tone. Her face turned several shades of red. "You can't be everywhere all the time. You know that. Besides, you've helped so many people. I ought to know, because I've been right there with you. We've saved a lot of lives, so let's just keep things in perspective here."

My frown deepened. "The cyclist dying...that *was* my fault," I said adamantly.

Taking a deep breath, she stared at the ceiling. "You have to let that go and forgive yourself, especially now that the premonitions are back." She bit her lip contemplatively. "I promise I'll be here next time. I shouldn't have gone home for the weekend – not with how emotionally screwed up you've been lately."

“Oh thanks.”

“Well sorry, but you are.”

I sighed because it was true. “Ally, you know you can’t be with me all the time. Besides, you need to live your own life. I won’t have my premonitions dictating your every move like they do mine.”

She shook her head. “Sorry, but I’m here for the long haul.”

I sighed and we exchanged sidelong glances. “Can we please talk about something else for awhile?”

“Okay, fine” she said and glanced around the room. Soon she was making a loud tisking sound. “Tell me this.” She raised a brow. “When are you ever gonna finish unpacking? I don’t know how you can live with such clutter when your brain works with such precision.”

“Procrastination is my friend,” I said, relieved to have moved on to such a mundane topic.

“Yeah well, you need to be an *anticrastinator* and find the rest of your summer clothes. Those denim cutoffs are so outdated.” She smacked my leg.

“Who cares? I’m comfortable,” I said, completely familiar with her lectures.

She made a sour face and ran a hand through her auburn hair. “Whatever. Hey, I know. We could take a walk. Maybe check out that bookstore we’ve been talkin’ about. What do ya say?”

“Sure, sounds better than sitting around here.”

She stood up and placed her hands on her hips. “I’ll let you change clothes and wash up.”

“Why would I want to do that?” I asked just to be antagonistic.

She snorted. “The number of eligible bachelors in this town must be phenomenal. And you,” she jabbed a finger into my chest, “are most likely to find *your type* with his nose stuck in a book.”

“Doubtful.”

“In my opinion,” she continued in a bossy tone as if she hadn’t heard me, “this little trip we’re taking to the book store is exactly when you should dress to impress.” Vogue as always in her navy Capri’s and white, ruffled blouse, she was the die-hard fashion expert. Not me. “And you should clean up the paint you’ve splattered all over your face and arms.” I gave her the evil eye, but she smiled sweetly in return and said, “By the way, the finishing touches you did on the trim work looks really good.”

“Sweet talkin’ will get you nowhere,” I said, dragging her out of my room and down the hallway. “I refuse to change or wash up. I mean really, who cares

about a few paint specks? If you're so concerned with appearances you can always walk a few steps ahead," I teased.

"I just might do that," she countered, but her eyes twinkled with mischief.

Fresh paint still lingered in the tiny kitchen. We'd tackled the mustard yellow walls with a tranquil sage green a couple weeks before, and I'd finished painting the trim just that morning before she and Ben had gotten back. I'd done whatever I could to stay busy.

"We're off to the bookstore to find a good man," Ally called to Ben as we entered the living room, which boasted a shockingly red accent wall. Of course, what did I know? Ally was the color master and she said it created a "vibrant statement" and gave the room "color punch."

Ben was planted on the edge of the leather sofa, wearing his beloved Ichiro t-shirt and watching the game. I elbowed her, and she smiled slyly. "Oops, I mean a good book."

Ben's dark eyes darted her way. "You," he said gruffly, "may only look at books, and you," he directed his gaze at me, "already have too many books and should only look at guys."

Laughing, Ally walked over and gave him a hug. They were perfect for each other. I was envious of the love they'd found. Ben had proposed on stage in front of the whole graduating class when we'd received our diplomas. Ally had been shocked but totally delighted. Loud cheers had erupted from the student body as he'd placed the engagement ring on her finger. It had been one of those memorable moments they'd tell their kids about some day.

"Books are more reliable," I said.

"Hey," Ben said, frowning, "who messed with my bat? It wasn't sitting right in the holder."

Sticking out my tongue in hopes of covering my anxiety, I raised my hand and said, "Guilty." Not great at making up stories, I went with the truth. "I um... I might have used it to fight off wild dogs in the night while you were gone." Thank goodness Griffey's signature was still intact.

"Yeah right," he laughed. "You're such a liar! You probably ran into it when the power went out." With a dismissive wave he added, "Get outta here. I'm trying to watch the game."

I stepped into the afternoon sunlight, and the over-powering scent of roses reminded me of my mother's flower gardens.

"If he only knew the half of it," Ally said in a low voice as she followed me out.

“I know, right?”

We’d all graduated from high school at the end of May and had immediately moved to Bellingham. The small Pacific Northwest town was in the state of Washington and was home to Western Washington University, where we were all set to start classes in the fall. Moving immediately after graduation had been more about strategy than freedom. That’s what we’d told our parents, anyways. We’d convinced them that the majority of students would arrive in August, and we wanted to avoid the mad dash for decent jobs and good house rentals. The mention of “slum lords” had proven very effective.

Ally and I trekked along the maple-lined sidewalks in comfortable silence. Light blue skies stretched forever, eventually meeting up with the frigid blue waters of Bellingham Bay. We were only a few blocks walk from the main hub of Old Fairhaven. Specialty shops, restaurants, and coffeehouses made it a popular area. Beautifully maintained historic buildings along with outdoor cafes contributed to its European flair. I glanced across the street and shuddered; the infamous alley wasn’t very far away.

As Ally began talking about a shoe store she wanted to investigate along the way, a sudden wave of nausea swept over me and a sharp pain exploded inside my head. Bending over, I rested my hands on my knees and inhaled deeply. Apparently there was no rest for the wicked.

“Oh crap, another one already,” Ally groaned and rested a hand on my back. “You just can’t catch a break these days. Hold on Lex. At least I’m here to help this time.”

I nodded just as the snapshots shattered the darkness behind my eyelids:

a lady with toddlers in a double jogger stroller

a green walk signal

the lady stopped in the middle of a crosswalk

a red truck skidding down the road towards the lady and her toddlers

Once the snapshots ended, I stayed hunched over, breathing erratically.

“What did you see?” Ally yanked me to my feet. Sun glinted off her auburn hair, and her blue eyes narrowed as her brows pulled together.

Trying my best to ignore the pain in my head, I opened my mouth to speak, but out of nowhere, someone smacked hard into my side. The impact sent me crashing into Ally, and she fell to the pavement. Her purse flew open, scattering things all about. Somehow I managed to keep myself upright. While Ally hastily

threw things back in her purse, I glanced up at the maniac runner. He'd stopped dead in his tracks, like he'd forgotten why he'd been running in the first place. Before he spun fully around, I had enough time to take in tan legs, black shorts, and muscular arms in a faded yellow t-shirt.

Standing warily only a few feet away, he had some nerve...He stared at my legs and slowly worked his gaze upwards. How dare he examine me like that? Heat ripped through my cheeks and burned my ears as he blatantly checked me out. Then again, I probably looked quite a sight all covered in paint splatters with my blonde hair sticking out in all directions from under my Nike hat. I'd neglected to put on any make-up other than mascara, and my eyes were still blood-shot from lack of sleep. Still, I didn't think that warranted this kind of scrutinization.

Wait, hold everything... As our eyes locked, a burst of pure energy surged through my body. His striking aqua-marine eyes drew me in, stealing my breath away. They were exceptional – more so than the swirling blues and greens of the Northern Lights dancing across an Alaskan sky. His face was perfectly symmetrical with the exception of a small crescent-shaped scar nestled in his left eyebrow. With short, sun-bleached blonde hair, golden bronze skin, and an athletically-sculpted body, he was gorgeous! And he'd just rocked my world!

A horn honked, and he took a step back. With a shake of his head, he blinked hard, and his lips parted. "Who are you?" he said harshly.

I felt like a doe standing in the forest, eye to eye with a cougar. Me the prey, he the predator. Only I wasn't worried about losing my life. I was worried about losing my heart. Under his gaze, I felt more alive than I had in months. Unfortunately, I was speechless. "I um...I am..."

With a puzzled expression he cocked his head sideways, and for a brief instant the corners of his mouth curled slightly upwards. "Never mind. You do know you have something all over your face?"

Heat flushed my cheeks. Before I could think of a snappy reply, Ally, whom I'd completely forgotten about, yelled, "Hey! Excuse us, but we need to get going."

After muttering something under his breath, he shook his head, smacked his hands together, and then bolted in the same direction he'd been racing only moments before. The whole incident lasted about 15 seconds but felt more like 15 minutes.

"What was that all about?" Ally huffed and grimaced at her scraped-up elbow. "Well, whatever. Tell me what you saw in your snapshots."

Shame flooded my cheeks. I had a job to do. Glancing down the block, I spotted the lady I was looking for. No way could she die. Pointing, I said resolutely, “See that lady with the double jogger?” Ally shielded her eyes with her hand and nodded. “We need to reach her before she gets hit by a truck!” Immediately, we broke into a run.

Up ahead, the walk signal beeped loudly, indicating it was time to cross. A couple holding hands ambled into the crosswalk, followed by a man walking his golden retriever. The mother with the stroller started across. Something made me glance backwards, and I saw the red truck only a couple blocks away. Fear flowed through my veins. We were too late; we weren’t going to make it in time.

I looked back at the lady and choked down a scream. She’d simply stopped in the middle of the crosswalk, her arms pumping madly as she tried to propel the stroller forward. It didn’t budge. She tried nudging it with her foot until she was all but kicking it. Still, it didn’t move.

The walk signal stopped beeping, and the red *Don’t Walk* message flashed. Other pedestrians on the sidewalk were oblivious to the lady having trouble in the middle of the road. She looked over her shoulder in a panic, and terror transformed her face. The truck was sliding out of control. Brakes slammed and squealed and burning rubber soon polluted the air.

“Oh, dear God! We’re too late. Lexi, we’re too late!” Ally cried, clinging to me.

Every part of my body shut down. She was right. And I was responsible. Again.

Out of nowhere, a familiar yellow blur raced into the street. It was the maniac runner who’d smacked into me. After loosening something down by the tire, he stood up and shoved the stroller forward. It cruised to safety where an onlooker secured the precious cargo. Then he pushed the petrified mother in the same direction.

That was the last I saw of him before the truck barreled over him. My heart ripped in two. I couldn’t comprehend a world in which I would never stare into those aqua-marine eyes again. A bone-deep chill coursed through my veins and encircled my heart. I didn’t need Satan to show me the way to hell; I was already there.

As the truck careened sideways through the intersection, chaos exploded around us. Horns honked, cars screeched to a stop, and people dodged for cover. The impact of the red truck smashing into a parked van on the other side of the intersection caused a terrible clashing of metal and steel. Pedestrians hit the

pavement, and Ally and I huddled close together.

After the collision, more mayhem ensued. Gray smoke rose steadily from the wreckage, and large streams of water spewed wildly from a broken fire hydrant. Some people raced to get away, while others hurried towards the accident scene. I cast my eyes towards the road. My stomach rumbled, and I knew I was going to be sick when I spied *him* lying motionless about 15 feet away from the spot of impact.

Waving her hand under my nose, Ally said, “Snap out of it, Lexi. Right now. Let’s get down there and see what we can do.” She clenched my arm, and we sprinted. By the time we reached him, bystanders swarmed like bees. Ally shoved us through to the front and knelt beside him. Calm and collected, she’s always a quick thinker in emergency situations.

“I can’t find his pulse, and I don’t think he’s breathing,” said a big burly man. Once he lifted a full head of black, curly hair out of the way, I was able to assess the maniac runner. He looked lifeless. His yellow shirt was ripped, and one sneaker was missing. Bright red scratches marked his arms and face, and his right eye was swelling. A muffled scream escaped my mouth when I spotted blood oozing from a nasty gash on his leg.

“Do you know CPR?” the burly man asked, wiping his dampened brow on his sleeve.

“Yes, we do,” Ally said confidently, looking into my eyes, which were brimming with fresh tears. She glanced at the big man. “Sir, keep pressure on that leg wound, and Lexi be ready,” she commanded as she began hard, fast chest compressions.

“Got it,” the man said as I sank to my knees.

“Lexi, get ready for two breaths,” Ally ordered. She never wavered; she was always certain of her abilities, and mine.

After pulling off my Nike cap, I leaned down and tried not to think about the blood, his unmoving body, and the people watching – leaning in, crowding us. I shut out everything else. I needed to revive him. This time I had a chance; he wasn’t dead yet. I focused on him with the same intensity he’d focused on me earlier, but I did it with determination and compassion, not hostility.

“Go,” Ally commanded, lifting her hands from his chest.

Trembling, I placed my left hand under his chin and tilted his head back to open his airway; my right hand pinched his nose – a very straight, masculine nose. A sweet, woody scent emanated from his skin. My mouth closed over his, and I gave him two deep breaths; although, I felt more like I was giving him my

heart and soul. I willed him to breathe with every part of my being. My lips tingled slightly after coming into contact with his.

Ally counted aloud as she began compressions again; her facial muscles stringent. With hands linked and arms locked straight, she pushed heavily onto his chest. The time it took to do 30 compressions seemed to drag on forever. “15...16...17...” Ally continued on.

Sirens blasted in the distance. Music to my ears. The paramedics would arrive within seconds and take over. I studied his scratched up face and realized I was running my hand over his cheek, comforting him with my touch, just like my mom had done when I was a kid. I didn’t know him, but I felt like I did. I knew he’d just saved three people – people who were mine to save. If nothing else, we had one connection – saving lives. I didn’t want him to die.

“29 and 30,” Ally finished counting. “Lexi, any sign of breathing yet?”

I leaned down and placed my ear next to his mouth. “No,” I said sharply.

“Okay, two more breaths,” she ordered.

I crossed my fingers under his chin. Willing my strength and energy into him, I whispered *please, please, please...* in my mind. Strangely, my fingers tingled this time. All at once he started sputtering and coughing, and I gasped. His head bobbed as he did some sort of rapid eye movement thing, and then his eyes flew open and bore into mine with such ferocity, I accidentally whipped my hand away, and his head thudded to the pavement.

“They did it! He’s breathing!” someone in the crowd shouted.

“He’s alive and moving!” someone else called out, and cheers went up all around us.

“Thank God you’re all right,” I whispered.

“Nice job ladies,” the burly man congratulated us, his hand still pressing on the wound.

“Please step out of the way. Bellingham EMT’s coming through,” an authoritative voice sent onlookers scattering left and right. “Please step aside; make room for the stretcher.” Four paramedics rushed in, and I barely had time to give *him* a final look of encouragement. His expression hardened as I rose, and his eyes followed me until our view of each other was cut off.

“What’s the situation here?” asked one EMT. After Ally offered a quick account of the accident, he voiced his gratitude and helped rush the stretcher to the ambulance. Once the doors slammed behind them, the sirens blared and the vehicle tore out of the intersection – fleeing with my...my what? My maniac runner? My predator? My hero?

Half an hour later, after we'd given statements to a police officer, we learned that the driver of the truck had died. That's when I lost it. The officer thought maybe I was injured and wanted to check me out, but Ally assured him I was just emotionally distraught and needed to get away from the accident scene. Hurriedly, she pulled me through the yellow tape that cordoned off most of the intersection. Strobe lights flashed from atop police cars. The broken fire hydrant, which looked like a giant sprinkler gone berserk, was still spraying massive amounts of water everywhere. Hoards of people continued to flock to the area, but I wanted nothing more than to run away. The guilt was intolerable. Another man was dead, and if I'd been quicker I might have prevented it.

On the way home, Ally wrapped her arm securely around my shoulders for support. "Lexi, the mother and children are safe, and so is that crazy guy who ran into you. I know you're feeling responsible for the driver's death, but you couldn't have prevented that. Your premonition was for the mother and children, right?" I nodded. "See...and they are safe."

I groaned. "I took too long to react. Maybe I could have saved the driver."

Ally seized my face. "Lexi! The driver was not part of your premonitions. You are in no way responsible for his death. You're not meant to save everyone. You know that, and you know that we did everything we could. Now let's just get out of here and get home."

Ally, bless her bossy heart, didn't let me out of her sight the rest of the day.

CHAPTER 3 – WORK

An early morning phone call had me scrambling out of bed and heading for work. Since I was wide awake and needed a diversion from my so-called life, I readily agreed to cover a sick shift. After arriving at work, I shoved my purse and cell phone into a metal locker and slid my badge through the time clock at exactly 6:59 a.m.

I'd recently started working for a family owned grocery chain and was relieved to have a job – one with benefits and flexible hours. Many of the other employees were college students as well, and I hoped to make some new friends. Actually, I was surprised I'd gotten hired at all. I figured my previous employer Mr. Olson would have told them I was great with customer service but that my behavior was erratic and he wouldn't recommend me for rehire.

When I was a senior in high school, Mr. Olson, a friend of my parents, had offered me a job at his burger joint: Angus Burger Bistro. But after a month on the job I had a premonition during my shift and went AWOL from the drive-up window during a Saturday night rush hour. Apparently, when no one could explain my absence, Mr. Olson's clean, Christian mouth had transformed into a polluted fountain of profanities. I think it was his lack of control, rather than my desertion that really sent him over the edge. Needless to say, he fired me, and my parents lectured me for days about work ethics. In my heart I knew I'd done the right thing, because I'd stopped a toddler from wandering onto the busy highway. Of course, no one knew that bit of info. I'd learned early on that premonitions did not gel well with steady employment.

I glanced around the store, feeling lucky to have this job. Things were unusually quiet, and I could hear the soft music playing overhead and the buzzing ceiling lights. Several check stand lanes were cordoned off with spiraling, black cords. I walked on my tip-toes to get a better visual advantage of the aisles and spotted a couple night crew workers throwing freight in the freezer section. The only other activity came from the coffee shop up front where a small line of caffeine addicts waited patiently for their morning fix.

Jessica Nelson, the PIC (person in charge), was standing in check stand #9 intently studying the front end sheet. The front end sheet denoted every checker's scheduled shift, break, and lunch. The person holding it was the supreme ruler for the day and was responsible for happy customers.

Although petite and shorter than me by a couple inches, Jessica's attire

looked much the same as mine. With our black slacks, white blouses, and colorful scarves, we epitomized standard dress code. Her shoulder length brown hair, although much shorter than mine, was also pulled back into a ponytail. She was chewing on a pencil eraser.

“Hi Jessica,” I called out, so I didn’t startle her.

“Lexi!” Her face brightened as she glanced up. “Thanks so much for coming in. Nothing like the CSM calling in sick and leaving me with all her duties. Lucky for me, you were up early.” She flashed a grateful smile and tucked a few wispy strands behind her ear.

As I approached, I tripped over a shopping basket and fell to the floor. She reached down to help me up and said with exasperation, “Customers are always leaving baskets everywhere, except where they belong, of course.”

When our hands locked, her fingers tightened around mine, and her emerald eyes rounded. Gasping, her mouth opened wide and her eyes lit up like Christmas lights. She looked like she’d just found out Santa Claus was real and was heading her way with a sleigh full of loot. Pulling me to my feet, she smothered me with a huge hug. Just to make things even weirder, she started giggling – louder and louder, tears pooling in her eyes.

“Lexi,” she managed to say in between laughs, “I’m so glad I found you. I just can’t believe it. What are the odds?” She clapped her hands together once. “It’s gotta be fate.”

I stepped back puzzled at her bizarre behavior. “Jessica, what are you talking about?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” She grabbed a tissue off the check stand, dabbed the tears at the corners of her eyes, and blew her nose loudly. “What I meant was – oh, never mind. Can you forgive me?”

“No worries. I’m glad you got a laugh out of it. I’m sure I looked like a total idiot.”

“Oh, no, it’s not you,” she said, “I’m the idiot. Sometimes the littlest things set me off, and I can’t stop laughing. I can so relate with the Energizer Bunny.” I bit my lower lip to suppress a smile. Grabbing my hands, she added, “I feel like we’re long lost friends, and now that we’ve found each other we’re destined for many adventures.” She lifted her hands and waved them in the air. “Reminds me of when Anne of Green Gables met Diana for the first time and knew she’d found her kindred spirit.”

I couldn’t help but shake my head and chuckle. The girl was totally bizarre. “How much coffee have you had?”

“None. Nada. Zilch. You’ll learn quick enough that not only do I laugh a lot, but I’m also a little bit crazy and a lot scatter-brained. It doesn’t take caffeine to get me going. Ask anyone who knows me, like my cousin Shelby, who works back in the bakery. She’s seriously serious, but you’ll love her. She’s gonna be *shocked* when she meets you.” I gave her a funny look, and she waved her hand. “Oh don’t worry, I mean it in a good way.”

I frowned but nodded. “Okay. Well, I’d like to meet her. I don’t know many people here yet – other than you and my roommate, Ben, who just started working in produce.”

“I know Ben,” she said delightedly. “He’s hilarious. I didn’t know he was your roommate. Are you a couple?”

“No,” I laughed. “He’s engaged to my best friend, Ally.”

“Oh, got it. That’s cool.” She swung around, picked up the front end sheet, and put one hand on her hip. “Well, we better get to work. Lots to do and I still have to set up the produce test.”

As she paused for a breath, I said, “P-produce test?”

“Oh, don’t stress out about that,” she said, smacking the clipboard. “I’ve seen you carrying around your produce codes; you’ll do fine. I’ll make it easy this week. Speaking of which, have you ever eaten a cherimoya?”

“A what?” I said with a shake of my head.

“You know, that green Peruvian that has funny little indentations on the skin.” She winked and handed me the front end schedule. “You should try it sometime; it’s *really* sweet.” She pointed at me with her pencil, looked at it oddly, and giggled before handing it to me. “I’ll gather items for the produce test. You’re on check stand #8. If you could clean check stands in between customers, I’d love ya forever. But page me if you need back up.” She scooped up the green basket and bounced towards the produce department, only pausing long enough to slam-dunk the basket onto a tall stack by the front entrance.

I signed on to my computer and was greeted with an array of beeps as the receipt tape advanced in the printer. Sporadic small orders consisting mostly of muffins, doughnuts, and fruit kept me busy. During lag times I disinfected the check stands and thought about Jessica. She was a riot – one of those people who made you feel good no matter what your mood. She’d probably been voted *Most likely to make people laugh* in high school.

A customer approached and banged his green basket onto the belt. He narrowed his pale brown eyes accusingly through his glasses and scowled. I knew the signs of an irate customer when I saw one, so I braced myself for the

onslaught.

“Listen here Missy,” he said gruffly, wagging his crooked finger in the air. “I don’t know why you people have to saturate the produce with water. That sprinkler system needs to be shut down. I’m sopping wet.” He stretched his arm under my nose.

My first irascible old crank of the day had arrived, and it was my responsibility to set things straight. First, I would shock him by being agreeable; then I’d apologize and find a solution. Not that I’d admit it publicly, but I’d actually read the entire employee manual front to back. I felt confident in my conflict resolution abilities and launched into a “the customer is always right” counter attack.

Moments later, he scratched his chin and studied me as I rang up his order. “Little lady, one thing you are, is perceptive, and you have more spirit than half the employees in this store.” After he paid, he assured me he’d see me again and shuffled away.

“Wow!” Jessica commented behind me. “You handled old Dr. Fisher really well.” She glanced over her shoulder. “He’s known as the store grump, but we love him. Besides that,” she winked, “he’s related to the owners.” Her pony tail flipped around as she gazed at me again. “Looks like you can handle the best of ‘em, or the worst of ‘em,” she giggled.

“Thanks a lot,” I said sarcastically. “But seriously, if you’d grown up around some of my uncles, you’d think old Dr. Fisher was a kitten in comparison.”

“Sounds like you’ve got some stories to tell,” she said, picking up the clipboard. “All the more reason we need to hang out. Sooner rather than later.”

“Sure,” I replied, thinking that probably wasn’t the best idea because that’s exactly when the snapshots would strike. And then what?

“Great,” she said, not picking up on my lackluster tone. “The produce test is on the first check stand. Good Luck. I’m sure you’ll pass with flying colors.” Merrily, she shooed me away.

“Wonderful,” I muttered in an undertone.

Almost all the test items were easily identifiable until I reached the last one. Strangest looking thing I’d ever seen with spoon-sized indentations... Shaking my head, I looked towards Jessica and held it in the air. As soon as she saw me, she tilted her head back and laughed uproariously. What a riot.

The next couple hours passed quickly. At one point a man with a screaming toddler hurried into Jessica’s lane. Pointing to a goose egg on the girl’s head, the man explained how she’d tripped and banged herself on a display rack. He

wasn't sure if he should take her to the doctor or not, because she wouldn't stop wailing.

Explaining she had first aid training, Jessica took the little girl's hand and spoke in a soft, soothing voice. Gently, she rubbed her other hand over the girl's forehead. Almost instantly, the little girl stopped crying and started smiling. Totally impressed, the father and I exchanged amazed looks.

Jessica peered into the girl's eyes and said warmly, "She looks like she's going to be just fine. Her eyes aren't dilated, and that's a good sign. I don't think you have anything to worry about. However, you should watch for drowsiness or abnormal behavior over the next few hours." Jessica offered him a reassuring glance then pulled a sticker out of her check stand drawer and gave it to the little girl.

After expressing his gratitude, the man and his blissful toddler went on their way. I was commending Jessica on her uncanny ability to calm the little girl when our third checker, Tori, arrived. Her eyelids were heavily coated with sparkly shades of gold, and her fruity perfume blasted through the front end like a bad air freshener. Jessica immediately sent Tori down to take the produce test.

"She'll drive you nuts," Jessica warned under her breath. "She'll talk continuously about make-up, fashion, and her secret admirers."

"Secret admirers?" I gave her a funny look.

She nodded vigorously. "Female checkers receive flowers all the time. In fact, a couple weeks after a new checker starts, male shoppers go into a buying frenzy. It's a bizarre grocery store phenomenon. Just you wait and see. Your time is coming." With a sparkle in her eye she added, "You might want to consider wearing a ring on your left hand; that helps a little."

"That's crazy," I said dubiously.

"You're telling me, but back to Tori." She turned her head slightly, as if trying to avoid a rotten smell. "She doesn't let anyone forget that she's received the *most* flowers of all the girls in the front end."

I laughed. "I can't imagine she's really that bad—"

"Oh, she is. She'll make you feel like you never left high school."

"Okay, well thanks for the heads up then," I said and diverted my attention to a lady whose cart was chalked full of groceries. After she left, I noticed Jessica drumming her fingers on the credit card machine. She was staring at me with a mischievous grin.

"Jessica, I don't like that look..."

She rubbed her hands together and said in a hushed voice, "I've just devised

the perfect plan.” She smacked her lips together. “I’ll send you flowers once a week and sign the cards from, *Your Secret Admirer*.” She winked and giggled. “Of course, I’ll plan it for the days you and Tori are both working. Ohhh, this could be hilariously fun. Maybe that would shut her up for awhile...”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I scolded and threw my pen at her.

She caught it and laughed, “Sorry Lexi, but I’m onto something here.” Regaining some composure, she stood tall and said dismissively, “We’ll talk more later.”

“Jessica...” I threatened, but a throng of customers bombarded the front end and we went to work. I listened in as an older couple discussed the headlines of the Herald, but the topic soon turned morbid.

“Oh, how awful!” exclaimed the lady holding the newspaper.

“What?” her husband asked.

Without looking up she said, “You know that man they found in the alley in Fairhaven yesterday morning?” The words *Fairhaven* and *alley* immediately caught my attention.

“Yes.”

“Well, he never regained consciousness, and now he’s slipped into a coma. He’s been identified as a Western student, but they won’t publish his name until his family has been notified.” She looked up and caught my horrified expression. “Oh dear, hadn’t you heard?” Another wave of apprehension swept over me, and I shook my head. “Oh, it’s really awful. It looks like this young man was outside in the rain all night – you know, the night of the terrible thunderstorm.”

With my mouth hanging open, I nodded and listened in stunned silence, finding it difficult to scan their items.

She pointed to the article and kept on talking. “Anyways, they aren’t releasing a lot of information, but it says here there was no evidence of foul play; although, they did find two empty bottles of Safire in the alley.”

“Outrageous,” her husband said angrily, shaking his head. “That Safire crap is fused with enough malt liquor, vitamins, and caffeine to wake a dead person.” He banged a few cans onto the belt. “If you ask me, I think these new energy drinks are responsible for all the strange illnesses surfacing across college campuses.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Tell me you don’t drink that stuff.”

“Uh, no sir,” I said, wide-eyed.

“Good, and don’t start.” Emphatically, he waved a box of pasta in the air.

The woman grabbed the pasta box. “Honey, there hasn’t been any link between those drinks and the hospitalizations. It’s more likely it is some new

strain of human influenza.”

I didn't follow the news very closely, but it would have been near impossible not to have heard about the incidents they were referring to. Over the last few years, an alarming number of people, mostly students, were being treated for mysterious medical conditions, like severe disorientation or complete memory loss. A few had even died. Experts didn't have any answers, which made it that much more terrifying and perplexing. But nothing like that had occurred in Western Washington. Until now.

“Well Louise,” the man rolled a cantaloupe onto the belt and put the grocery divider down, “I hope that's not the case.” He took a deep breath and pulled his wallet out of his pocket. “At least the young man is not dead. Whatever the cause, let's just hope it wasn't foul play. We don't want a serial killer on the loose here like they've got across the border.” He looked at me and shook his head.

“Mmm hmm,” I murmured, with a nod. I hadn't heard anything about a serial killer in Canada.

“That's for sure,” the lady agreed. She pointed at the newspaper again. “It says here it will be a few weeks until the toxicology reports come in. I just hope the dear boy wakes up from the coma before then.” She stretched the paper out. “Strange. It says he was covered with muddy paw prints, and they don't know what to make of that.”

My eyes popped open at that bit of information, and I tried to remain calm. I was relieved when they finally left, but I couldn't help wondering if there was a connection between the Mastiff and the comatose student. The fact that he'd been out during the same storm as me and the jogger and had been covered with paw prints seemed way too coincidental. And I didn't believe in coincidences. What bothered me most, though, was that I still hadn't been able to figure out what the Mastiff and the bare-chested guy had been after that night in the alley.

Three o'clock rolled around before I knew it. Jessica and I clocked out together and she said, “Thanks for all your help today. Let's do lunch...like this week.” I nodded and she added, “Perfect. I gotta run now, but I'll call ya tomorrow and we'll compare schedules.” She paused and her eyes widened. “This is so amazing; I can't wait. There's so much for us to talk about. More than you know,” she said, slapping me on the back.

I had no idea what she was talking about but said, “Oh, I'm sure we do.” As she hurried away I shook my head. The girl was strange. In fact, everything about my life and this town was getting stranger by the minute. I groaned

inwardly; I really didn't need more drama or intrigue.

Light raindrops fell as I walked through the employee parking lot. All at once a queasy feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. "Oh no," I moaned, leaning against my car. I was so not ready for more snapshots. As I closed my eyes, the images rushed forth with a vengeance:

**Two mountain lions seizing and slashing each other with fierce brutality
Myself, watching the battle in a sun-streaked forest
The tawny mountain lion, spotting me and springing forth from an
evergreen bough
The reddish mountain lion, looking at me hungrily with evil, golden eyes
then leaping towards me with claws extended**

My eyes shot open, and I gasped for air. This was unreal! This was the first time *I'd* ever been depicted in my snapshots. What was going on?

Shuddering, I realized I had insight into my own death. I opened the car door and slid behind the wheel. All my life premonitions had commanded me to act instantly and save someone. Only this time, I appeared to be the one who needed saving, and I'd looked like I did now at age 18, except I'd been in a sun-lit forest.

Raindrops splattered against my windshield just confirming sun was not part of today's forecast. And I had no intention of going near the woods anyways. So when?

For some reason, I wasn't terrified; although, I knew I should be. Not normal. Then again, nothing about me was normal. Gripping the steering wheel, I remembered that momentary sense of relief in the alley when I'd known the end was near. Knowing there would be no more guilt, responsibility, or loneliness had been liberating. How ironic was it that I would escape the premonitions by dying myself? So simple.

How my death would impact my family and friends was not so simple.

One thing was certain – my snapshots always came true. But how I chose to respond had always been up to me.

CHAPTER 4 – MORE THAN JUST A MERE WALK IN THE PARK

“It’s time you found you a man. Preferably, Mr. Right. That way you could share your secret with him, and I wouldn’t have to worry about you all the time,” Ally said.

We were relaxing on the living room couch, chatting about life in general, i.e. premonitions and people dying. Since Ben was at work we had no reason to filter our conversation, but now that she’d brought up men, I couldn’t wait for our one on one time to end. Luckily, she had to go to work, and I had plans to meet up with Jessica.

“Absolutely not,” I replied. “Mr. Right will just think I’m some crazy paranormal chick, or he’ll think I’m completely psychotic, therefore making him Mr. Wrong.”

“No he wouldn’t.” She crossed her arms. “The right guy will think you’re wonderful, and he’ll be completely enthralled by your *gift*.”

“You mean curse,” I huffed. “Besides, you know I can’t get involved with someone. It’s too risky.” I didn’t mention the fact that I wouldn’t be around long enough to find a man anyways. While I normally told Ally everything, I hadn’t told her about the premonition of my own death; she’d totally freak.

She smoothed out her skirt. “Well, I worry about you being alone so much, especially since they found that college student. Everyone in this town is on edge, including me. I know this sounds horrible,” she said, crinkling her nose, “but I’m hoping he OD’d or something. That would be much better than the alternatives – like he was attacked by that same psycho guy and dog that you met up with in the alley,” she shivered, “or that maybe that viral thing has finally made its way here to our campus.” She clutched the new, bright red throw pillow. “And worst of all, I don’t even *want* to think about the possibility there’s some connection between him and the murders in B.C.” She shivered. “You know...where all the victims have been college students.”

My stomach churned. “Unfortunately, I do. And another thing I know is it that all we ever talk about these days is people dying.” I checked the time on my cell phone and stood up. “Luckily, we both have places to be right now.”

Standing, she shrugged and tossed the pillow over her head. “You’re right. That’s enough morbidity for one day.” She grabbed her purse off the table and dug for her keys. “Hey, I still want to meet Jessica; Ben’s had nothing but good

things to say about her. You could invite her over sometime or we could go to dinner or something.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said as we locked up the house.

A short time later, I arrived at Jessica’s house. She lived with her parents in a huge white Victorian home that overlooked the city and bay. A water garden trickled with miniature waterfalls, and the grounds burst with colors: red begonias, purple hydrangeas, and beautiful yellow dahlias to name a few. Silently, I acknowledged my mother for passing her gardening knowledge on to me. Or maybe it was when I’d weeded her flower beds that I’d learned so many plant names. One thing was for certain, this yard was professionally maintained; there wasn’t a weed in sight.

Jessica ushered me into a grand foyer and lead me into an impressive, recently remodeled kitchen. When she answered a phone call, I wandered onto the massive wrap around deck. The view was incredible. Sun reflected brightly off the bay, and the snow-capped Canadian Rockies sparkled on the northern horizon. As I sat down on a wicker rocking chair my phone beeped with a text from my dad. As usual he addressed me with his special pet name.

Alex – miss u. The house is 2 quiet w/out u. I wanted u to know I’m really proud of u getting a job and working so hard. don’t get mad but I transferred \$200 in2 your account. buy some new books and go out 2 dinner. Don’t tell your mom. J LYL - dad

I sent a quick thank you and reassured him that he was equally missed. Blades of guilt sliced through my heart as I thought of his and mom’s reactions when they learned I’d died in a brutal mountain lion attack.

The screen door opened. “Let’s burn off some calories,” Jessica called out, looking stylish in her black and red activewear. A few minutes later she whistled and raised her eyebrows as we hopped into my high school graduation present, a white, 2010 Nissan 350z. “Wow! I wouldn’t have pegged you for the sports car type.”

“Yeah, you and my parents both.” I clicked on my seatbelt. “This baby caused quite an argument between them and my very wealthy aunt and uncle – who also happen to be my Godparents, and who have no kids of their own.” Jessica was still shaking her head, so I added, “I, of course, saw no problem with the gift.”

“I’ll bet.”

As was expected for any hot July day, Lake Padden was bursting with people. On the ball fields and in the playground area children laughed and screamed with delight. Burning briquettes and BBQ’d ribs drifted on the breeze as we accessed the trail along the south end of the lake. A group of crows cawed

overhead as we walked along a gravel path of hilly terrain. After a few minutes, we emerged into a forested area.

A chill coursed down my spine, and I stopped walking. “Jessica, are there mountain lions around here?” Accepting my fate was one thing, but dying today was not.

She rolled her eyes. “Not in the middle of the day, silly. We’re perfectly safe. Besides, there’s tons of people on the trail, all making lots of noise.”

I tried to relax as we resumed our pace. Sun streaks seeped through the massive cedar and fir trees, and birds flitted from branch to branch. Bikers passed us by as Jessica chattered on about a customer who’d spent over a thousand dollars on their grocery order.

After we’d been walking for awhile, I thought I heard someone yelling deep in the woods. Stopping abruptly, I looked over at Jessica. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah,” she said with a frown. “Let’s check it out.” We left the trail and waded through thick brush. Eventually, we came upon a young boy in bright red shorts who was standing at the base of a tall cedar.

Gazing upwards, with hands cupping his mouth, he yelled. “Come on Blake. Let’s go. If I’m late again my dad will ground me and take away my PS3.”

A loud snort resonated high in the tree branches. “Oh, suck it up,” Blake retorted as his yellow shorts disappeared from view.

“Whatever dude. I’m outta here,” Seth said. But he stopped short when he turned around and spotted us.

“Oh fine ya big wuss. Wait up,” Blake yelled angrily as his yellow shorts reappeared. Scrambling swiftly, his feet barely touched the branches. He sailed from one level to the next barely gripping the limbs for support. I was about to yell at him to slow down, when he raised his arms in the air and shouted, “Hey look, no hands.”

In the middle of all his glory, he lost his footing, and his body came flailing downwards. Speechless, we could do nothing but watch as he free-fell through the air, smacking into spindly branches on his descent. Screaming, he landed with a “thud” on the hard-packed ground, one arm cracking as it made contact with an exposed tree root. We rushed to his side.

“Ohhh,” he moaned, clutching his elbow, which was bent unnaturally, like it was broken. “Oh man, my arm hurts really bad.”

“Everything’s going to be just fine,” Jessica said soothingly. As she grasped his arm, she told me to look for other injuries. Humming, she moved her hands in circular motions around his elbow and all up and down his arm. Blake

whimpered a little at first, but eventually his tears diminished, and he closed his eyes while smiling like he was having a pleasant dream. I stared in fascination as Jessica massaged his arm. The woods were still and heavy with the scent of evergreens and musty earth. The effect was tranquilizing.

A pinecone fell from a tree and landed with a “plunk,” breaking the peaceful moment. Opening his honey colored eyes, Blake looked at Jessica and said, “You made it feel better just like my mom always does. Are you a mom, too?”

Jessica laughed heartily. “Goodness no! Not yet.”

I tapped his leg. “I think you’ll survive. Just a few scrapes. You’re lucky... and tough,” I added.

He stood up and examined his arm. “Wow! I feel really good. I mean, like my arm doesn’t hurt *at all*.” He twisted it left and right and stretched it out a few times. I was shocked because his arm looked perfectly normal now. As we escorted the boys back to the trail, I wondered what the heck had just happened. We’d intended on walking them to the main section of the park, but Blake insisted he was fine. He said he’d get band-aids for his cuts when he got home. With the spirit and buoyancy only young boys possess, they bolted down the path, racing to see who was the fastest.

I grabbed Jessica’s hand. “Do you want to explain exactly what you did back there?”

Shrugging, she crinkled her nose. “My mom is an ER doctor at the hospital, and she makes me attend all kinds of safety and emergency training classes.”

“Jessica,” I said, my tone laced with exasperation, “that was a lot more than simple first aid. I’ve been to a few of those classes myself, and that training had nothing to do with what you just did.”

“Okay,” she said furtively and twisted her hands together, “I’ve been wanting to talk to you about this anyways. Let me ask you a question first. It’s gonna sound bizarre, but I’m totally serious here.” She spoke with unusual candor, and her emerald green eyes pierced right through me. “Do you believe in the power of touch? The healing power of touch, I mean?”

Frowning, I said, “Well...I don’t know. I guess I do now.”

“What about before today?”

“I’ve never really thought about it that much. But what Blake said about his mom always making him feel better, I can relate with that. I remember getting bad headaches when I was a kid, and whenever my mom held my hand, I always felt better.” I glanced out at the lake where a man and boy were fishing from a rowboat. All was quiet for a moment, except for our shoes crunching on the

gravel.

“Good,” Jessica said, breaking the silence.” I believe that when people touch there are unseen positive forces at work. Literally. Did you know medical experts say touch also lowers blood pressure and relaxes people?”

“Makes sense,” I said a little bewildered at our conversation and a lot nervous about where she was headed. A bicycle bell rang behind us, so we crowded closer together. Shadows of tree branches danced on the gravel path as if they were waving us forward.

She glanced at me, and I noticed she was chewing on her bottom lip. “I also believe in the power of touch as a way to heal or...to restore someone back to health.” I narrowed my eyes, but she didn’t notice and kept talking. “Like with your mom’s touch, I think you instantly felt better because she was passing her energy onto you.”

“So you’re saying her touch gave me positive energy and relieved my headache?” I said hesitantly.

“Exactly.” She wound her hair around the tip of her finger, like she was nervous. “But I also believe that some people can *knowingly* heal another person – a person who is seriously injured.”

Slowing my pace, I rubbed my forehead. My sweaty palms and spiked heart rate were not from any physical exertion but rather from an eerie feeling threatening to sweep me off my feet. I halted in the middle of the trail and turned to face her. She stopped and looked at me expectantly. “You’re talking about your own special abilities?” I asked, swallowing hard.

She busied her foot moving it around in a circular pattern in the gravel.

“Yes,” she said. Her hand shot to my arm, and she propelled me into a steady gait again. “Blake was hurt, and I knew I could heal him on the inside, where he might have—”

“Broken bones?” I suggested with an edgy tone.

She nodded warily. “I go into this meditative frame of mind and focus solely on transferring my healthy energy through touch.” She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “You’re probably flipping out right now – thinking I’m totally crazy, huh?”

Kicking a large rock to the side of the path, I said, “No, I don’t think that. I’m just trying to take it all in. I mean, yes, I’m shocked. It would all seem so unbelievable if I hadn’t just witnessed what you did with Blake. I definitely want to know more, though.” I glanced into the woods and collected my thoughts. I knew I should be appalled, but with my own ability to see the future, none of this

seemed that unreasonable. “If I’m hearing you right, you’re saying you have an ability to heal people, and this incident with Blake was not the first time?”

“Yes,” she said with conviction.

I suddenly remembered an incident at the store. “What about that toddler with the goose egg on her head a couple weeks ago? The one who was screaming when her dad brought her up front.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Yes, her too. She actually did have a concussion at first...”

“But you took care of that,” I finished for her. She nodded, and we remained silent. I realized my heart was pounding more from having met someone else with a unique ability, rather than from learning about the actual ability.

After reaching the north end of the lake, we emerged from the protective cover of the trees and stepped into the hot sun. Along the east shore, people picnicked in grassy spots. Kids played along the shore and in the shallow water. Ripples of relaxation and playfulness rolled across the lake as children jumped through the water, but waves of turmoil crashed through my mind.

“Let’s find a spot here in the grass and stick our feet in the water for a few minutes. Do you mind?” I asked.

“Good idea. This will be easier if you just ask me some questions.”

We stomped through the grasses, pressed down an area where so we could sit, and then slipped out of our socks and shoes. I stuck my feet in the lake and welcomed the cold that nipped my toes. “Jessica, watching you with Blake was amazing. Can you explain *how* you did that?”

She took a deep breath and smiled. “Lexi, I knew you would believe me, and you wouldn’t laugh in my face. This whole healing through touch thing seems outrageous. I know. But for me it’s real, and I’ve been wanting to tell you about it.” She splashed her feet in the water.

Wrapping my arms around my knees, I rocked back and forth. “Okay then. How long have you had this ability?”

“My first experience with healing came when I was about 10 years old.” She played with a long blade of grass, bending and twisting it around her finger as she continued. During the next hour or so, she shared many stories. For the most part, her healing abilities remained imperceptible to others. Usually the victim was unconscious and didn’t even know the extent of their injuries. Bystanders tended to attribute a victim’s recovery to Jessica’s CPR and first aid training.

In some ways I didn’t want to believe her. If all these absurdities were true, the existence of supernatural possibilities in this world were increasing by the

second. In another way, I was eager to believe her. The idea that someone else on this planet was *unique* like me – that was consoling. Our abilities placed us both in a different dimension, one that separated us from the general population.

“Okay,” I said, “I have another question for you.”

“Shoot.” She dug her fingers into the ground, prying loose a rock.

“Why can *you* heal people?”

“That,” she grunted as she pulled the rock loose and threw it into the lake, “is the million dollar question.” Out of the blue, but so characteristic of her personality, she rolled back into the grass and started giggling. She gazed up at the sky and stomped her feet on the ground.

“What?” I asked, lying back. Scratchy grasses poked through my t-shirt, and I wriggled around to get comfortable. A white plume of airplane exhaust was the only mark on an otherwise infinite blue sky.

“Now listen, I’ll try to explain my theory.” She sighed. “But I guarantee that this time, you’re really gonna think I’ve gone mad.” She glanced at me.

“Jessica, with you, I’m learning *always* to take everything in stride. I won’t be judgmental.”

She pulled out her ponytail holder and slipped it onto her wrist. “Here goes then,” she said definitively and turned my way. “I think we’re all born with a good energy – a life force that is with us at all times. It acts like a booster, rejuvenating our bodies and keeping us healthy, helping us heal when we get sick. I call this energy *Essence*.”

“Hmm...Essence,” I repeated. “Kind of like the Chinese concept of Ch’i?”

“Sort of...in a way, but not really,” she stammered. “Ch’i is considered to be a life force that flows throughout the entire universe. And there are many types of Ch’i. Essence is simply the revitalizing energy a person is born with.”

“Okay. But how does Essence help you heal others? And why don’t we all have that ability?”

She nodded firmly like I’d asked exactly the right follow-up question. “I think everyone is born with Essence, but I think people are born with varying degrees of it. Only a few people are born with a sort of dynamic Essence, more like a gift...if you will.” She grabbed my arm, pressing her fingers into my skin. “Do you agree that some people are born with the raw, natural talent necessary to become exceptional musicians or athletes?” I nodded and she continued, “For example, we can all sing right?”

“Well, that’s debatable.”

“Exactly my point. We can all sing, but most of us sound pretty crappy. Only

a few individuals, the ones born with innate talent and great lung capacity, are able to stay on tune, harmonize, and belt out lyrics that move people. Essence works the same way.” She sat up excitedly.

“Makes sense; I guess,” I said and pulled myself into a sitting position as well.

She balled one hand into a fist and began pummeling it into her other hand. After a deep breath, she said, “Let’s take this a step further. Imagine Essence passing freely between two people when they touch.” She raised a brow. “Touch becomes very powerful! Essence rushes from the strongest person to the weakest, like when your mom eased your headaches by holding your hand. So in some ways, anyone’s touch can soothe, comfort, or even heal on a basic level. But,” she munched on a piece of grass and gazed at me, “some people, like me, have the ability to intentionally direct it at will. Does that make sense?”

“Don’t be afraid to lay it all on the line at once.”

She giggled. “I’m sorry. It’s that Energizer Bunny in me.”

I grinned but said in a serious tone, “Does anyone else know about your ability to heal or your theory on Essence?”

“Oh yes! My whole family does. But my mom is the only one like me.”

I nodded. “Explains why she became a doctor. Didn’t you say you had a brother and sister that are twins? Why do you think they don’t have the ability?”

Jessica stretched out her legs. “Yeah, Max and Madison. They have strong Essence, just nothing like my mom and I, but I’m not exactly sure why.” She waved her finger. “The ability is rare and usually skips several generations. I was the lucky one.”

“How do you know it’s rare and skips generations?” I asked confused.

“Well, mostly through documented family history. We don’t know of anyone else who has passed it directly on to their kids, either.”

“Are you implying there are others, not in your family, who have these same abilities?”

Her eyes widened. “Yes.”

“Where are these other people like you and your mom?”

“They’re spread out all around the world. They use their Essence to help people or heal the injured, just like my mom and I do here in Bellingham.” I listened attentively as she talked about how she and her mom kept in close contact with this network of people. “Healers didn’t want to be viewed as abnormalities, subjected to public scrutiny, or possible governmental testing, so they use their abilities covertly to save others.”

“So...you call yourselves Healers then?” I mused aloud. I watched enviously as kids splashed in the lake, their only care in the world – to have fun.

She let out a derisive snort. “We don’t exactly sit around and refer to ourselves as Healers.” She crinkled her nose. “Actually, we use the word Amethyst.”

Plucking a purple wildflower, I said, “That’s logical, I suppose. In fantasy books the gemstone most often associated with healing or energy is the amethyst. Really though,” I drawled, lowering my voice, “it’s so obvious it’s almost comical.”

All of a sudden, I wiped the smirk off my face and remembered her shocked reaction when she’d pulled me off the floor at work. My brain went into overdrive. Had she sensed something about my Essence? Was it seriously low? Because with the recent hallucinations and migraines, I felt crappy all the time. Maybe I had some disease. Of course, that wouldn’t really matter if the mountain lions got me first.

Jessica didn’t miss the wave of emotions flashing across my face. She touched my arm. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I gathered my courage. “Jessica, I want you to be honest, and don’t hold anything back when I ask you this next question. Okay?” Wide-eyed, she agreed with a nod. “That morning when I tripped and you helped me up – you looked shocked and you started acting all weird. Was that because you could feel my...I guess my lack of Essence. Am I sick or something? Are you able to sense that? Because I’m thinking you did and have been too afraid to tell me.”

Her jaw dropped so low she looked like she was waiting for the dentist to pull out a tooth. “I’m so sorry. I—” She broke off and sat gaping at me before pulling me into one of her vice-grip hugs. “Oh Lexi,” she gasped for air and looked at me, “I’m super sorry I made you think that. You’re not sick. Your Essence is soooo prevalent it’s...it’s transcendent! I’ve never felt such powerful Essence in anyone before. You could probably heal yourself and a hundred other people all at the same time.”

“What?” I said, staring at her in disbelief, everything in my body shutting down.

CHAPTER 5 – AN AMETHYST IN THE ROUGH

“When you tripped and I grabbed your arm, you were radiating incredible energy flow.” Looking at me intently, she said, “Lexi, *you* are an Amethyst in the rough. I think you have the ability to be a Healer, just like me and my mom. All you need is training and guidance...”

My ears cleared, and I could hear her incredible words. The noise level from children shouting and playing in the water suddenly became deafening. I was on sensory overload and too astounded with Jessica’s news to utter any kind of intelligible response.

“It’s okay.” She flashed a reassuring smile. “Please believe me when I say it’s true. Very true. And I can teach you how to use your Essence and help people. Lots of people. You’ll be able to help them all the time.” She spoke with confidence, her face serious.

“Th-this must be a m-mistake,” I faltered.

“No,” she said with certainty, “I promise this is no mistake. You have a gift, just like mine. If you let me teach you how, you can save a lot of people, too.” She looked at me expectantly.

I was too numb to respond. She thought she could teach me to save people. Ha! If she only knew that’s what I’d been doing all my life – or more recently, that’s what I’d been failing to do. And now...now she lays this on me. Staring at her dumbly, I felt like the fates were playing tug-of-war with my soul.

Unable to wait any longer for my response, she said breathlessly, “You and I together could work so many miracles. You know that college student who just came out of his coma, the one who was found unconscious in Fairhaven?” I managed a nod. “Well, there’s a reason he came out of his coma,” she said, lowering her voice. My eyes widened to saucers as she continued. “I snuck into his hospital room and shared my Essence.” My jaw dropped, and she nodded furiously. “Lexi, imagine the good you could do; your Essence is extraordinary. And,” she said desperately, “If my suspicions about what happened to him are correct, there will be a lot more people turning up in the same condition. You becoming an Amethyst is imperative to our cause. With both of us working as a team we can stop the people responsible for...well, stop so many people from dying unnecessarily.”

She rambled on about her cause or something but nothing registered. I was

lost, shutting out reality. I didn't know what she talking about and I didn't care. My curiosity was muted, because I was absorbed in my own despair and denial. Now that she'd involved me, I needed breathing room – time to think. Hastily, I started pulling on my socks and shoes. I could feel the fury building in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to scream. What was she talking about? Here I was trying to escape the premonitions, and now I was being told I could heal people, as well. This was completely insane. I was done with responsibility; I didn't want any more.

“Lexi, you look shaken. I didn't mean to frighten you. I thought you were okay with all of this.” She looked frazzled.

“Jessica I'm fine,” I said, but a little voice inside my head was shouting, “Not true.” I took a deep breath. “Okay, honestly, I'm freaked out. Everything that's happened today...and everything you've told me...well, it's mind-boggling. But now that you've involved me, it's impossible. Not to mention terrifying. It's not every day you learn your friend is actually a gifted healer and thinks you could be one too.” Scrambling to my feet, I busied myself stretching from side to side. I reached for my toes, and my back popped loudly.

She tied her shoes and said, “This is a lot to take in at one time. I'm sorry. Let's head back, and we can talk more tomorrow.” I gave her a faraway look and turned towards the trail. “Or in a couple days,” she amended. “But,” she grabbed hold of my hand from behind as she followed me through the tall grasses, “we have to talk soon. This is very important. Lives depend on it, and there's so much I need to teach you.” She squeezed my hand.

I twitched involuntarily and looked down at our hands. In a shaky voice, I said, “Well, I can see where you'd think I might need your touch for a little energy boost right about now. You're probably passing your Essence along so I don't faint right here on the trail.”

Her eyes darted down. “Honestly, that's not what I was doing. Besides, your Essence is so strong, I think it's flowing the other way right now.”

“Scary thought,” I muttered. I was quiet as we walked to the car. Even though I had a million questions for her, I couldn't ask them – my thoughts were in complete chaos. I was afraid that if I acknowledged everything she'd told me, it would alter my plans. I'd be accepting a double life sentence which made me responsible for saving people *all* the time – only I'd probably make more mistakes and more people would die.

This couldn't be happening. She had to be wrong about my Essence. When we hit the parking lot, I tried to act casual. “Well, I gotta call Ally. We're

supposed to go out for dinner tonight; Ben's shift isn't over until eleven, so it's just us."

Jessica smiled thoughtfully. "Sounds nice. I'm supposed to have dinner with Max and Madison tonight." She tapped her watch, her eyes lighting up. "Hey, we haven't made any plans yet, what if we all went somewhere together? You could meet my infamous twin siblings, and I could meet Ally."

"Umm, I don't think..." I said hesitantly, racking my brain for an excuse.

"Lexi, don't worry," she said tilting her head sideways, "I won't bring up Essence again. Not until you're ready. I promise."

"Okay," I uttered. Unfortunately, she took that to mean that dinner was on.

"All right then. Dinner will be fun, and I promise Essence is off limits."

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An hour later Ally and I were driving towards downtown, but I was deep in thought. I gripped the steering wheel like it was a zip line and I was holding on for dear life. Emotionally, I was still reeling.

"Okay, what gives?" Ally asked.

Knowing she wouldn't give up until I talked, I finally broke down and told her about Essence and Amethysts. Having witnessed and experienced all the craziness of my premonitions over the years, she thought the idea of healing through touch wasn't preposterous at all. She was enthralled with the possibilities. Impatient and curious, she asked a ton of questions, but with my limited knowledge, I didn't have many answers.

"Lexi!" she said with disbelief. "I can't believe you didn't drill Jessica for more info. When she says healing, what's the extent of her abilities? Like can she cure cancer? And when will you be able to use your Essence to heal people?"

I shrugged my shoulders, keeping my eyes on the road. "I don't know. I was so shocked; I was freakin' out and I couldn't think straight," I said, sounding more cross than I'd intended. Guilt tugged at my conscience. I understood why she expected me to be delighted with the idea of becoming an Amethyst; my secret from Ally was complicating things. Still, I had no intention of telling her about the mountain lions. She'd do everything she could to prevent the inevitable from happening; even if that meant following me around 24/7 with her dad's hunting rifle in hand.

She sighed. "Okay, I'm sorry. It just seems like you should be ecstatic instead of upset." As I shrugged she added sympathetically, "You know I've never been

very patient. And I know I can't truly understand how you're feeling, so I'm sorry. I'll just chill for awhile."

As I waited for a red light to change, I turned to offer an apologetic smile, but she was busy looking in the mirror, so I said quietly, "You're too good to me."

"Yeah, but I'm kind of a bossy...and nosy," she said as she finished applying lipstick. After flipping the visor back into place, she said, "Why is it that you're always such a magnet for paranormal excitement? My life would be dull without all your drama." She chuckled, and I relaxed a little as the tension in the car seeped out the open windows.

We walked into the pizza place and found ourselves in a huge, open room with about 20 tables, all with red checkered tablecloths. Jessica wasn't there yet, but we went ahead and ordered. I paid with my debit card, informing Ally it was on my dad since he'd transferred money into my account earlier in the day. After going through the salad bar we found a long table next to the wall. As we started eating, Jessica came bouncing into the restaurant. She came over and greeted us, while the other three in her party walked back to order. Once I'd introduced her to Ally, she bounded off to place her order.

While they stood in line, Ally and I scoped them out from a distance. "Wow!" Ally exclaimed. "Jessica's sister is gorgeous. Long thick jet black hair and a body with extra curves in all the right places...you sure she's not related to Angelina Jolie?" Without waiting for an answer she continued, "I can certainly appreciate her taste in clothing – expensive and contemporary. She's a natural when it comes to fashion. I'm gonna have to find out where she shops in Bellingham."

"Those stilettos are absurd," I commented.

"No," Ally said with admiration, "they're impressive."

"She looks like she should be at a cocktail party."

"Maybe she just came from work."

"Her name is Madison," I said, poking at a tomato. "And her twin brother there is Max."

They chose that exact moment to turn around and glance our way, as if they knew we were talking about them. "He's a hottie," Ally said. "They both have an exotic air about them."

"I choose to reserve my opinion until I see them up close," I said, popping a crouton in my mouth. "I don't know who the blonde girl is. Oh, shhh...here they come." Once everyone was seated, Jessica made introductions, and I wondered if

she'd told them about our earlier conversation. I was relieved we didn't shake hands, because if they could sense a person's Essence, too, I certainly didn't want them gaping at me.

"You three have the same incredible green eyes," I said to break the ice. "Do you get them from your mom or your dad?" I directed my question towards Madison.

"Actually," Madison said, flipping her hair, "both our parents have amazing green eyes, but ours definitely come from our mom. Your brown eyes are...nice, though." From her tone, I couldn't tell if she was being facetious or not.

Max joined the conversation. "So how do you like Bellingham? Jessica said you'd both recently moved here from Tacoma."

"We've settled in; although, some of us still have boxes to unpack," Ally responded, giving me a sideways glance. "But everyone we meet seems really friendly."

"We've got a great mix of people in this town," said Laci, who we'd learned was a long time family friend and appeared to be Max's girlfriend. "Lots of retired folks, young families, and of course you can't forget all us college students who keep the town rockin' when classes are in session." She spoke with her hands, and her natural blonde curls bounced around, sometimes covering her sparkling, blue eyes. "We enroll around 13,000 students at Western each year."

"Laci works at the Viking Union up on Western's campus, so she's a great resource if you have any questions," Madison jumped in, like she didn't want to be left out of the conversation.

"That's great, what do you do up there?" Ally asked.

"She does all kinds of things, like..." Madison started to say.

Max stopped her. "Madison, I think Laci can speak for herself."

"Sorry," she said nonchalantly, examining her white-tipped nails.

"No worries," Laci said with a wave of her hand. Swiping a couple loose curls away from her face, she told us all about her job. Not long after, all our pizzas arrived. They looked gourmet and the white sauce smelled wonderful.

"This is really good pizza," Ally said after a couple bites.

"I told Lexi this place was great," Jessica said.

"I prefer La Fiamma myself." Madison announced with a sigh. "Very upscale."

"Maybe when mom and dad are buying, but this place is my favorite," Jessica said good-naturedly, taking a sip of her soda.

Ally and I exchanged glances. Suppressing a smile, Ally changed the subject.

“I’m surprised at the number of Canadian shoppers we have at the mall. I’m still trying to get accustomed to this exchange rate stuff and how it fluctuates from day to day.”

Max smiled knowingly and seemed genuinely interested. “The Canadians are great for our small economy, especially when the exchange rate favors their dollar.” He was full of information and offered Ally all kinds of tidbits as she questioned him about Canadian currency.

“So Ally works at Macy’s, and Lexi you work at the store with Jessica, right?” Laci’s big eyes flashed my way, and I nodded in affirmation.

Madison dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “And now Max will be there, too.”

I looked curiously at Max and said, “You work in grocery chain? Are you transferring?”

He nodded slightly, and I studied his solemn face. In a business-like tone, he said, “After much deliberation, I’ve decided to accept the Assistant Manager position at the Sehome store. So yes, I will be working with you and Jessica soon.” His traditional crew cut fit his serious demeanor perfectly.

Jessica reached over and patted him on the shoulder. With the adoration of a younger sister, she said, “I’ll be soooo glad to have you around.”

A family next to us began singing happy birthday to a young girl with pigtails. She blushed brightly, shrinking back in her chair.

“What about you Madison?” I said when the song was over. “Do you work at one of the stores?”

“Are you kidding?” She rolled her eyes and grunted, like I’d just asked her if she worked at the garbage dump. “I’m a real estate agent. I also attend Western where I’m pursuing a degree in Business Administration and Management.” She nodded her head once and looked expectantly at Ally and me.

Ally did not disappoint. “Wow! That’s great. You must have had a clear vision of your career path at a young age. I can relate with that.”

“Definitely,” Madison said, tilting her sharp nose upwards. She proceeded to tell us all about her clients and current listings. Afterwards, we spent some time sharing stories with Madison dominating most of the conversation.

Dusk settled heavily around us as we stood outside on the sidewalk and said our good-byes. All at once, a sharp pain shot through my head and I knew the snapshots were coming. Pretending I needed to tie my shoe, I leaned down and closed my eyes. I didn’t know how I was going to escape this group and run off without arousing suspicion, but I wouldn’t hesitate. Never again. For as long as I

lived. However long that might be. The snapshots came spiraling out of the black abyss:

An apartment building in flames
People running from the building
A woman trapped under a large beam
A door with the number 406

Unnerved, I shot to my feet and bumped into Ally. After we made eye contact, understanding dawned on her face, and she grabbed my arm.

“What is that smell?” Laci asked, crinkling her nose and sniffing the air. “I think...oh no look over there,” she said urgently, pointing at plumes of black smoke rising steadily into the air only a couple blocks away.

“Something big is on fire,” Max said impatiently. Sirens wailed in the distance. “We better check it out. Maybe we can help.” He seized Laci’s hand, and they took off in a sprint. After slipping out of her heels, Madison shot off, hot on their trail.

Ally, Jessica, and I followed in their wake, but they pounded the pavement hard. The distance between us grew significantly. “Damn they’re fast,” I called out.

Running at my side, Jessica puffed, “Track stars in high school.”

All of them? Moments later we rounded a corner and located the source of the smoke. Ally and Jessica cried out in horror, and even though I’d been expecting it, I was overwhelmed. Hot flames shot from the roof and burst through the top floor windows of a six story apartment building. Glass popped and shattered to the ground as windows blew out from the heat. Screaming people ran out the front entrance, while others climbed through ground floor windows and accepted help from strangers. A crowd was gathering.

“Listen Lexi,” Jessica said, glancing at me nervously and clasping my shoulder, “There are going to be people who need my help. I know you won’t be able to heal in the same capacity as me, but your touch will still be soothing. It will be beneficial to anyone who is suffering from smoke inhalation or minor burns. If you stick by my side, I’ll show you how to help.”

“Of course I will,” I said hurriedly. “But first I need to see if I can get people out of the building.” I gave Ally a hard look and shoved her towards Jessica. “Ally will work with you until I get back.” Before Jessica could speak, I turned and sprinted away.

That didn't stop her from yelling hysterically behind me, "Stop Lexi! You can't run into a burning building."

I ignored her and made a beeline for the entrance. Fire trucks roared around the corner with sirens blaring. Once inside, I struggled up a narrow stairwell against a steady stream of hysterical residents. Some were barefoot and wearing pajamas. Many carried whimpering children, frightened pets, or personal belongings. The higher I went, the smokier the air became. I pulled my t-shirt over my mouth and breathed through it like it was a mask.

Once I reached the fourth floor, I stopped and touched the heavy door with the back of my hand. Finding it cool, I opened it, but reeled back in surprise when a warm blast smacked me in the face. Cautiously, I peered down the hallway. The smoke was thick and visibility was limited. What worried me most were the loud crackles traveling on the hot, dry air. Blood coursed through my veins, and I questioned my sanity as I slowly progressed down the vacant corridor.

I was reading the numbers on the doors when one flew open. A big man, wearing only a white t-shirt and boxers, almost plowed over me. A white poodle yelped madly in his arms. The man grabbed my shoulder and shouted, "Lady, you're going the wrong direction. The stairs are that way." He pointed and started dragging me with him, his dog nipping at my arm. "This whole place could go up in flames."

"Sir," I yelled and snatched my arm away, "There's someone trapped down there, and they need me. You go ahead."

"You're crazy, and you're gonna get yourself killed. You need to come with me now!" he bellowed and swiped at me, but I ducked and dodged away. Coughing and gasping, he said, "Whatever. If you wanna get yourself killed, that's your problem." He staggered down the hallway, hollering vulgar words.

I hurried the opposite direction through coiling gray smoke. The air sizzled, and I dropped to the floor. At the far end of the hallway, orange flames snapped across the ceiling, and my nerves tingled. I said a silent prayer that room 406 wasn't already engulfed in flames.

Luckily it wasn't, but I did find it locked. Screaming in frustration, I sat down and kicked at the door like a crazed person. I was sweaty, winded, and worn down when it finally flew open, but I crawled inside and slammed it shut behind me. The apartment was dark, and the air was smoky but not as bad as the hallway. Screams from another room boosted my adrenaline another notch, and I jumped to my feet and ran to investigate. Shock stopped me short at the bedroom

entrance. Part of the ceiling had collapsed, and furniture from the upper floor had slid down and scattered all over the room. But worst of all, a huge ceiling beam held the lady from my snapshots pinned to the ground.

“Help me! Please help me!” she cried when she spotted me. Drenched in sweat, with her nightgown clinging to her body and her black hair pasted to her head, she looked to be in pain.

Quickly, I climbed through the mess of overturned furniture. “It’s going to be okay,” I assured her but cringed when I glimpsed her crushed legs.

“Hurry,” she said. “I can’t move my legs, and the smoke is getting thicker.” I nodded, and she said, “Can you lift the beam?”

“I’ll try.” But no matter how hard I heaved, it wouldn’t budge. We looked at each other in despair.

“Now what?” she asked, hacking away.

Coughing uncontrollably myself, I said, “First, I get us wet towels to breathe through. Then if I can find a flashlight, I’ll signal for help through the window.”

Once we had wet washcloths and I had a flashlight in hand, I opened the window in the other room. I shot the beam of light downwards and screamed at the top of my lungs. The street was a mass of people, fire engines, and flashing lights. I prayed someone would see my distress signal.

Something crashed back in the bedroom, and the lady hollered, “More of the ceiling is falling. Oh my God! I can see the fire burning in the room above.”

Totally flustered, I hunched over and rushed to her side. I worked for a long time tugging and shoving on the beam.

“Save yourself,” she cried. “You still have time.”

I couldn’t believe it. I was trying my best, and yet, it looked like I wasn’t going to be able to save her. One thing I did know, there was no way I was walking away. If this lady was going to die, then so was I. “No, I’m staying with you,” I said and held her hand. Not long afterwards, she passed into unconsciousness. I covered her with more wet towels and even placed one over my own head. Engulfed by dense, gray smoke, my eyes stung, but I continued to tug at the board while burning ashes drifted through the room and the heat intensified.

I’d all but given up hope, when out of nowhere, a fireman burst into the bedroom. While I took a couple breaths from his oxygen mask, I watched in disbelief as he lifted the beam off her legs like it was a simple two by four. He hoisted the lady over his shoulder and dragged me out of the room as chunks of burning debris rained down on us. Upon exiting the room, something whistled

and popped, and then the rest of the ceiling collapsed. I heaved a sigh of relief at the open window where I found another fireman at the top of a long, fire truck ladder.

Our descent dragged on forever. I didn't breathe a sigh of relief until I was standing safely on the ground and the woman was placed in an ambulance. I barely had time to whisper words of gratitude to the fireman, who was looking at me rather severely, when Ally almost plowed over me. Jessica joined in, and they hugged and scolded me as an EMT placed an oxygen mask over my head. Luckily, I didn't have to wear it long. I didn't have any shortness of breath, and I felt fine. Jessica whispered something about how I could attribute my abundance of oxygen to my Essence.

Once the paramedics deemed me fit to go, Ally and I hung around awhile longer, assisting where we could. When it looked like the fire department and paramedics had everything under control, we said our good-byes to Jessica for a second time. With a meaningful glance, Jessica said we'd talk soon. Max, Madison, and Laci showed up just as we were leaving. They looked disheveled, but not nearly as sooty as I did. On the way home, Ally informed me those three had carried people out of the building, while she and Jessica tended to the victims. Ally marveled at their speed and aptitude and was clearly impressed at having witnessed Jessica's skills firsthand.

Once we were finally home, we collapsed onto the couch. As Ally thumbed through the mail she said, "That was crazy insane! Talk about an adrenaline rush." She paused and frowned. "Oh yuk. It looks like we've gotten our first official bill – from the power company. Hey, here's *another* letter from your mom. Should we call and tell her about the fire?"

"Absolutely not. No need to scare her." I leaned over and grabbed the letter. "She's upset enough about that comatose college student." Rubbing my eyes, I said, "I can't believe this whole day. First, Essence and Amethysts. Then epic apartment fires. I can't take much more. What I need is a long hot shower to get rid of this filth and maybe this headache, too."

"Lexi, what you need is a day without a premonition."

"Tell me about it," I mumbled, ripping open the envelope from my mom. Something green fell into my lap as I pulled out the letter. I read it aloud to Ally and shook my head at the postscript. "P.S. I've enclosed \$150 spending money. Please give \$50 to Ally, and keep the rest for yourself. Spend it on something fun. Please don't tell your dad as we had some kind of silly agreement. It will be our little secret."

“Your parents crack me up.” Ally laughed. “Didn’t you say your dad transferred money into your checking account today, and that’s how you paid for our dinner?”

“Yes.” I sighed. “Two hundred dollars and he made me promise not to tell mom because they had some kind of *agreement*. Secrets,” I muttered. “Here’s your fifty bucks; spend it wisely.” I tossed it in her lap.

“I’m going to write a nice thank you letter to your mom. Snail mail, of course. Do you think she’ll ever convert to e-mail or texting?” Ally asked.

“Not in this lifetime.” Looking at my hundred dollar bill, I shook my head. “But I love her anyways.” I leaned over and hugged Ally. “You too. Thanks for adapting to the last minute plans. And thanks for covering when I ran into the apartment building.”

“No problem, I knew you were on a premonition mission.” She giggled at her rhyme. “But I’m still curious about all this Essence stuff. Sure would have come in handy tonight. I’ll be expecting you to get a full report and find out what exactly an Amethyst can do. What *you* can do.” She leaned against my shoulder.

Suddenly solemn, I rose from the couch and said, “I’ll talk with Jessica soon. Promise. But right now, all I want is that hot shower and a bottle of Excedrin.”

“Can’t wait...Ms. Amethyst,” she shouted after me.

I shook my head warily and kept on walking. Once I was in the shower, scalding water washed the soot from my body and the smoke from my hair. I only wished it would wash away my frustration and anger as well. Here I’d accepted my fate, an invitation to end it all, granted it was via mountain lions – not the best way to go, but now, unexpectedly, an invitation to fight against my fate had arrived, via Jessica. Only this one came with another gift – the extraordinary ability to heal.

Even though I didn’t want to consider it, I couldn’t seem to stop myself. If I accepted her belief, that I too, could become an Amethyst, was there a chance I could survive the mountain lion attack by utilizing my Essence? If I did, I’d have to come to terms with the life I’d been trying so desperately to escape – a life that would always be dominated by premonitions and the ability to heal people.

At least I wouldn’t be completely alone, because I’d have Jessica. And she’d said there was a network of others like us. Maybe my Mr. Right was an Amethyst, and my premonitions wouldn’t scare him away. At that thought, aquamarine eyes popped into my mind, and I felt a tug on my heart. Unwanted complications.

Feeling disconcerted and more confused than ever, I turned off the water and huddled inside my towel. I had a lot to think about. I collapsed into bed and, for once, fell right asleep.

CHAPTER 6 – A CHANCE MEETING

“What ya up to?” Ally asked, poking her head into the bathroom.

I grabbed a wide-tooth comb off the counter. “Attempting to do something with my hair,” I replied. “Four days in a row at work where I have to wear my hair pulled back, and I’m wondering if that has contributed to my headaches. So I thought I’d wear it down today.” After spending a couple days at home with my parents in Tacoma, I’d spent the rest of the week at the store.

“Want some Advil?”

“Already took something.” Turning to inspect her outfit, I waved the comb in the air. “Fancy dress. You must be heading off to work?” I asked.

She held her head high. “Yes, I am. And for your information, there is a direct correlation between wearing dresses and higher sales.”

“No way,” I said, picking up the flat iron.

“Really. Besides,” she said, smoothing out non-existent wrinkles, “a man is more attracted to a woman in a dress.” I snorted, and she added, “Not that I’m on the market anymore. But you still are. Hint. Hint.”

“I’m tuning out now.”

“Fine. But hey, serious for a minute. What’s going on with you? It’s been almost a week since Jessica told you about Amethysts, and it’s like you’re avoiding her. What’s up with that?”

“Nothing. Just busy,” I lied. I’d been evading Jessica all right. I’d decided I didn’t want anything to do with becoming an Amethyst – didn’t want the added responsibility. Jessica was making me nervous, too. In passing she kept alluding to how she was going to *need* me. I didn’t even want to know where she was going with that.

“Lexi, are you sure it’s not something else? It’s not like you to be so...so apathetic?”

I snapped to attention and mustered a smile. “Honestly, I just needed a breather. It seems like the premonitions have been non-stop lately, and on top of that, I’ve had this never-ending migraine. That’s it, really. I’ll be fine,” I assured her, dropping the straight iron on the counter. “There hasn’t been time to meet with Jessica. We’ve been working opposite shifts, and she volunteers at the hospital all the time. She is trying to set something up for this Friday, though. So, we’ll see. I’m just feeling overwhelmed,” I admitted.

“Oh Lex.” She hugged me. “If you need help with anything, let me know, but I don’t think you have anything to worry about.” As we parted, she grabbed the straight iron and started in on the back side of my head. “Besides, being an Amethyst would be a good thing for you. And I think this Essence stuff is exciting – even more so than your premonitional abilities.”

“Premonitional?”

“You use fancy words all the time. Why can’t I?”

“I use real words,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Oh bother. Anyways, Jessica’s got me believing anything is possible.” A couple minutes later she stopped fussing with my hair. “Looks great. You’re so lucky you can change it up from curly to straight. A little advice though, scrap the Chap Stick, and go with my red velvet lipstick.” She glanced at her watch. “Gotta head out, cuz there is a big two for one deal at work today, and I plan on makin’ the highest sales. You just gonna hang here today, or what?”

“Since I’m tired of waiting for you,” I teased, “I’m heading to the bookstore all by my lonesome.”

“Good for you.” She put her hands on her hips. “Hope you find something good. And by that, I mean a hottie with a naughty body.” She winked. “Maybe then you’ll be smiling again.”

I paid no heed to her comment. “By the way, thanks for organizing my closet. I can’t promise it’ll stay that way. You’re the only person I know who puts jeans on hangers.”

“You’re welcome. That was my return favor for you putting my desk together. But do you realize,” she said sharply, “you currently have 26 pairs of jeans hanging in that closet? 23 of which are designer denim. So the next time you complain about my binge shopping, I’m going to remind you about your obsessive compulsive jeans disorder.” Sizing me up, she shook her head disgustedly. “Tennis shoes and a sweatshirt. Scary! I hate to imagine what kind of guy you’d attract today. Please feel free to raid *my* closet.”

“Ha, ha. Thanks a lot. And binge shopping? Are you kidding?” I laughed. “You suffer from full blown shopaholicism.”

She threw her hands in the air. “What. Ever. I’m outta here. Have fun at the book store, and remember, bring home nothing unless he’s tall, dark, and handsome.”

After she left, I sighed at my reflection. Hanging halfway down my back, my hair looked nice for once. The summer sun had lightened it, and it was now a shiny golden color. My face was still pale, but that was normal since I never

tanned very well. At least my long eyelashes helped distract from the circles under my eyes. The small mole under my right eye caught my attention, probably because I'd always been self-conscious about it. I glanced at my rather Bohemian attire and wondered if it really mattered?

The girl in the mirror stared back at me, looking tired and...haunted. "Crap," I said aloud. "I'm not dead yet." Acting on Ally's advice, I slapped on lipstick and a bit of blush. Then I rummaged through her closet and found a stylish, purple blouse that still had the REI tag in it. Ha! That will teach her. After sliding my cell phone, debit card, and some cash into my pocket, I headed out the door.

Once inside Village Books, I sighed with relief at having arrived without any *premonitional* diversions this time. Vaulted ceilings offered a good view of the upper floor balcony, and a spectacular piece of red, twisting blown-glass artwork hung suspended from the ceiling. Closing my eyes, I inhaled the scent of old books, new books, and a tinge of espresso drifting down from the upstairs coffee bar.

Walking slowly, I enjoyed the creaking of the wooden floor boards while gazing at several featured books. The first few tables displayed new arrivals and novels by local authors. I flipped through a *Whatcom County Best Hikes Guidebook* for a few minutes. Finally, I wandered up the squeaky staircase to the fantasy section. I didn't think much about the guy standing with his back to me, until I noticed he was thumbing through a Robert Jordan book I'd already read.

Impulsively, I reached out and touched his shoulder. "That's a great series," I said. "But I have to tell you, the author died before writing the final book in the series. Luckily, his wife is collaborating with..." I broke off, because a curious heat rushed through my hand. Immediately the warmth saturated my arm and began spreading throughout my entire body. I was so caught up in the sensations; it took a moment before I realized I was holding the guy's shoulder rather forcefully. An odd sense of familiarity flickered down my spine, and my eyes darted from the book to his face.

I'm not sure if my jaw hit the floor before, or after, my eyebrows brushed the ceiling, but my heart lurched and lodged itself somewhere in my throat. Our eyes locked, and neither one of us moved for several heartbeats. Gazing into those aquamarine eyes, I lost all cognitive and motor skills.

For the second time in my life, *he* rocked my world!

If I hadn't been holding onto him, I might have toppled over. Somehow this mystery guy, who was the source of my internal earthquake, was also the solid

ground keeping me from tumbling over the edge. My first thought was expected: thank God I found you again – alive and well! My second thought was ridiculous: mental note to thank Ally for fashion advice.

He glanced at my hand, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply, but when his eyes popped open his look was severe. Instantly, I dropped my hand and opened my mouth to say something. Anything. But nothing came out. Well nothing coherent; I think I made some kind of gurgling sound.

Angling himself until he was standing squarely in front of me, he spoke first and saved me from further embarrassing myself. His voice was deep. “So...the fates must be at work.” Light reflected off a thin silver chain which hung around his neck. “Looks like they’re giving me the opportunity to thank you – the *Good Samaritan* who wasn’t afraid to step in and perform CPR on a complete stranger.” His brows arched as his eyes dropped to my lips.

For a second time, I could feel the heat spreading over my body, but this time the flames licked across my face. Still, all I could do was stare.

Standing several inches taller than me, he said, “So, thank you.” He sounded upset, like he blamed me for something. A white t-shirt with the words *Hit the Trails* accentuated his incredible biceps. His blonde hair was short, even slightly shorter on the sides than it was on the top where it was a bit messier. The style reminded me of a David Beckham short faux hawk haircut, only it was way sexier on this guy.

“Umm...you’re welcome,” I said, assuming I’d misread his chilly tone. “I’m glad to see you’re alive.” Could I sound like any more of an idiot?

His lips curled into an amused smile. “No worries, I’m tough. My injuries were pretty minor. I was lucky the corner of the truck kind of picked me up and threw me off to the side.” He shook his head at the memory. A couple faint scratches were visible underneath a few days worth of stubble – stubble which made him even more rugged; although, the snug-fitting, faded Levi’s were an even bigger distraction.

“That...” I took a deep breath and calmed my nerves. “That was incredibly brave of you to run out and help that lady and her kids. I was so grateful.”

His brows furrowed. “Why would you be grateful? It wasn’t your fault they were out in the middle of the road.”

My eyes widened as I was once again tongue-twisted. I could feel a second wildfire raging across my cheeks – flames of shame burning brightly. Oh, I was more than responsible, and it had almost cost all of them their lives. But I couldn’t let him know any of that.

But wait just a minute here. He'd played a part in detaining me when he'd rudely rammed into me. Feeling defensive, I decided to throw it back at him. It wasn't exactly fair to smack the ball of blame onto his side of the court. But what else could I do? Admit my guilt when I couldn't even explain why I was guilty?

"What was your deal, running down the sidewalk like a maniac knocking into people? Care to explain your...your boorish behavior?" I said and shifted my stance as I eyed him skeptically. Whenever my nerves were shot, I spoke before my brain had a chance to catch up – usually resulting in the use of strange vocabulary words. Drove Ben and Ally crazy.

His eyes grew a little wider, and I could tell he was taken aback. The gritty espresso machine roiled in the background, and his lips twitched, but I stared pointedly at him. "Boorish, huh?" he said, smacking his lips together. "This is no excuse, but I was late...late for something very important. Not that that dismisses my behavior in any way. But I am sorry I ran into you." He smiled sincerely.

Yeah, he knew how to score a touchdown when the heat was on. Still, I persisted, "Even if you were in a hurry, why, after crashing into me, did you stare at me like I was the crazy one? And what was so important you didn't have time to utter an apology?"

In a low voice, he said, "Look, I'd rather not say, and I did just apologize for bumping into you. And I did say 'thank you' for helping me after the accident." He dropped his head and studied the floor. When he looked at me again he said in a cool voice, "I really have nothing else to add."

"Oh, that's convenient," I said, increasing the volume of my voice. He might be sexy, and I might be completely in the wrong, but dang, his attitude was monstrous. Books crashed to the floor behind me, and I jumped. Despite my mood, I found it within myself to smile at the poor, frazzled lady who'd just knocked over a display stand.

"Look," he sighed and tapped the book against his leg, "I was just as surprised as you when I bumped into you. That doesn't make much sense; I know, but I can't really explain it to you."

I exhaled loudly and shook my head. "You're right about that. You're not making much sense. Do you mean you can't explain it, or you won't?"

He scowled and said furtively, "Would you believe me if I said that cute little mole under your right eye and your stunning, dark eyes had me transfixed." He nodded wide-eyed and added, "Simply put, you rendered me speechless." His

expression was unreadable. I honestly couldn't tell if he was being playful or trying to incite my dark side.

"Right," I said sarcastically, inadvertently touching the cursed mole.

"It was worth a try."

"You're impossible."

"True." His smile faded away. "For your own sake, I must warn you that I'm argumentative by nature, and most people find my company intolerable.

"Obviously," I said, but found I was biting back a grin.

He studied me momentarily and said in a softer voice, "I should have thought of something more original, huh? I'm sure you get compliments on your eyes all the time."

What was he up to now? With a hint of cynicism, I said tiredly, "No, but thanks...I think."

"For some reason you compel me to say more than I usually would."

I put my hand on my forehead and shook my head. He hadn't shared much of anything so far. I couldn't help but chuckle. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm serious." He looked over at the bookshelves and back again. "If I'm being honest, after I collided with you on the sidewalk...I forgot everything else around me. It was like the rest of the world had stopped, and there was just us." He scratched his head.

Was he blushing? Seeing him flustered was rather endearing after his impertinence. He'd just gained extra points for a successful two point conversion. Okay, why was I comparing his every move to football? As a die-hard fan, I found the sport exciting and addictive. Is that how I felt about him?

Strange folk music played over the speakers, and he finally broke the silence. "By now you probably think I'm a complete ass."

Stifling a grin, I crossed my arms. "You said it, not me." I didn't really think that at all; although, he was somewhat exasperating. Even so, he was easy on the eyes, and I was indebted to him for saving the lady and her toddlers.

He glanced at his watch like he was nervous. "I should be going..." he started to say.

My cell phone went off, playing my dad's favorite Tim McGraw song, and by accident, I turned on speaker mode in my rush to answer it.

"Hello. Alex?" My dad's voice echoed clearly through the store.

"Hi dad, I..." I dropped the phone and it went skidding across the floor. Heat rushed up my neck as I chased it down.

"Alex? Alex? Are you there? Can you hear me?" my dad called out.

Actually, anybody within a 20 foot radius could hear him. I grabbed my phone off the floor, silencing the speaker. A couple customers were looking my way with displeasure, and a lady with stark white hair rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Hi dad,” I said in a hushed voice. “Sorry. I dropped the phone. I’m here now, but I need to talk quietly; I’m in the book store.” My dad understood right away. Loud people in bookstores were a pet peeve of his, and he promised to be quick. I glanced up at my mystery man. His lips parted, and his eyes sparkled. I had a hard time focusing on my dad’s voice with those eyes watching me.

“Okay dad. I can do that. I’ll be on the lookout for the box.” My dad rattled on a bit longer, and I studied the floor so I could concentrate on his words. I nodded. “Sure thing. Tell mom I’ll do it, and I’ll send a note to Aunt Louise, too. Yes, I’ll let you both know what I find. Love you too – bye.” I tucked the phone back into my pocket and looked up. “My dad, obviously,” I said.

He flashed a disconcerting grin. “Yeah, I got that much. As did everyone else,” he said in a flagrant tone – the tone, I realized, he used when he was teasing.

“Very funny,” I said. “Anyways, my Aunt Louise, who still lives in my grandparent’s house, that’s where she and my mom grew up, is having the roof redone. I guess the workers found an old box of books hidden in the attic. Since my aunt is an allergy magnet and rarely opens a book, she didn’t want them.” When he nodded and grinned, I almost lost my train of thought, so I blinked hard and focused on the scar in his eyebrow – anywhere away from his lips. “She sent them to my mom, who is super busy and has decided I should go through them.”

Rubbing his chin, he looked at me curiously for a few seconds. “Sounds like it could be interesting. You never know what you might find. Rare books, hidden treasures, ancient family history…” his voice drifted off, and he pointed at me. “From that one phone call I’ve learned quite a bit about you. Most importantly, though, is that your name is Alex.”

I regarded him steadily and said with a dab of irritation, “Well, Alex is not really—”

“Alex fits you perfectly,” he cut in. “I like it.”

I was going to correct him, but for some reason, I didn’t. I liked the way he said it, and not that I’d admit it, but it seemed more intimate. For some reason, I welcomed that closeness. The music changed completely, and a rough and tumbling Celtic song started up. “You have me at a disadvantage,” I said, tilting my head to one side. “You now know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

He leaned in close until we were at eye level and said in a low, lingering voice, “Why do you want to know? Is it simple courtesy?” He bit his lower lip. “Or do you find me charming?”

Oh brother! If that’s how he wanted to play the game – fine; let’s see if he could catch a long ball. I reached out and poked my finger against his chest. He took a quick, jagged breath, and his pupils grew larger. Good to see I could fluster him. “You wish,” I said suggestively. Unable to resist the temptation any longer, I reached up and touched his chin. His mouth parted, and I pulled my hand away. “But really,” I said sweetly, “I was just being polite.”

He gave me that women can be so confusing look, shook his head, and said, “Good. Because I’m not looking for any type of relationship.”

I almost laughed aloud at the absurdity of that comment. “Don’t worry. Neither am I,” I said hotly. As if premonitions, Amethysts, and mortality weren’t enough to deal with, the last thing I needed was an exasperating, yet wickedly handsome man to complicate things. “Besides, you’re hardly my type,” I said brusquely.

He scratched his head and replied just as tersely, “Fine then. My name is Jason.”

I nodded slowly but didn’t break eye contact. Perfect, I thought.

A somber expression returned to his face, and he said, “Well Alex, thanks again for coming to my rescue the other day. I’ll let you get back to browsing. Maybe I’ll catch you around some time.” With a quick nod, and without even waiting for me to respond, he simply turned and walked away.

Having been so abruptly dismissed, I stood for several seconds in absolute confusion. Why did my heart suddenly feel so heavy? Since he didn’t bother to glance back over his shoulder, I turned and made a bee-line for the stairs. After a few steps, I stopped and wondered when I’d become so gutless. Why let him scare me off? I had just as much right to peruse the fantasy section as he did. My time might be limited, but there were still some books I wanted to read.

Gathering my gumption, I marched back up the stairs and didn’t stop until I reached the Katherine Kerr books. More than aware that Jason’s gaze flickered my way, I refused to acknowledge him. That didn’t slow my pounding heart or stop the dampness forming on the nape of my neck.

Someone stepped between us and grabbed a book off the shelf, so I looked up to see who was in the way. A guy with dark hair, dark eyes, and an over abundance of men’s cologne peered back at me and smiled brightly. “Hi,” he said, leaving me wondering when exactly the bookstore had become such a man

haven.

I could see Jason sizing him up from behind, and when his eyes met mine, he gave me a cold stare. Tilting my chin in the air, I shot him a dirty look. Assertively, I made eye contact with the newcomer and responded with a friendly, "Hello."

Stepping towards me with his arm outstretched, he said, "I'm Tyson. What's your name brown eyes?" With a cheesy grin, he stood waiting for me to shake his hand, and Jason snorted from behind him. Even if I'd wanted to shake hands, which I didn't, I couldn't, because I sneezed four times and launched into a coughing fit. His cologne was overpowering, like a nasty bug repellent.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Doubled over, I gasped for breath as tears began streaming down my face; it was all I could do to hold up my index finger.

"Alex," Jason said in an imposing voice, stepping forward, "it's time we took off. I'm ready for lunch." My head snapped up, but all I could do was nod.

After catching a glimpse of Jason, the guy put his hands up defensively and backed away. "Sorry man," he muttered. He set his book on the shelf and bolted towards the stairs.

"Thanks for saving me," I said, wiping my eyes.

Jason shook his head disgustedly. "Come on, I'll buy you lunch."

I couldn't tell if he was asking out of obligation or not, so I decided to let him off the hook. "Oh that's not necessary..." I started to say.

He cut in, "I won't take no for an answer, and I can't leave you here. You might die from an allergic reaction if that guy gets within a ten foot radius. I won't be responsible for an innocent person's death. Besides, I've recently discovered what a rush it is to save people," he added cheerfully. "I wouldn't pass up another opportunity to rescue someone, especially a damsel in distress. In fact, I might make it a full time job."

His words struck me like a bolt of lightning, and my head snapped up. With an expression of total disbelief, I stared at him. Suddenly, I felt paralyzed; even my heart stopped beating. A wave of nausea overtook me; my temperature spiked at least ten degrees.

Jason looked at me funny. "Hey, are you okay? Did I say something wrong? I wasn't trying to make light of the accident a couple weeks ago. I might be joking around with you right now, but saving that woman and her kids was a serious matter. On a personal level, it was also very rewarding." He smiled. "You rescued me, so you should understand how gratifying it is to save someone."

Right?” His eyebrows shot up.

I felt like I'd been slapped in the face a thousand times over. The weight of his words made me dizzy. Made me feel even guiltier. Yes, I knew how good it could feel to save people, but I also knew how all-encompassing and exhausting it was. Still, hearing those words from him hit me hard and sparked something within me, a feeling I couldn't identify.

Having been silent too long, I knew I needed to respond. He made me feel alive, in a way I hadn't felt for ages. It felt good. A smile passed over my lips. “You're right. Helping you was amazing, but you're the hero who saved three lives. I should buy you lunch.”

He gave me a puzzled look and said, “Alex, you perplex me. But lunch is definitely on me.”

“Okay,” I said. “And thanks – that guy was toxic.” I brushed the tip of my nose.

“Does trouble find you, or do you find it?” he said, placing the book back on the shelf.

“That depends,” I said. “Did you find me, or did I find you?”

“Very funny,” he said, but his eyes were sparkling. “Do you like fish-n-chips?”

“Of course,” I said and sneezed again, “but let's get going, I need some fresh air.” I didn't want to be face to face any more. He stole my breath away, and I was already short on oxygen. Furthermore, I needed a moment to collect my thoughts. I'd walked into the bookstore with a different perspective on life than I was walking out with – all because of Jason, the maniac runner.

CHAPTER 7 – LUNCH

Despite boundless white clouds, the afternoon was warm and humid. “So, where we headed?” I asked.

“Just down the block.” He pointed. “Have you eaten at the fish bus?”

“Nope, I’m new to Bellingham.”

“You’ll love it. Great food, fun outdoor atmosphere, and a million different ice cream flavors.”

“Uh oh, you’ve found my weakness,” I admitted.

“Good.”

Feeling like a dizzy, 15 year old girl, I looked away and wondered what the heck was wrong with me. Guys just did not affect me this way. All of a sudden, a couple kids on skateboards zipped past, and I fell against Jason.

“I...I...I’ve got ya,” he stuttered and caught me. For a brief instant, time stopped as he held me half suspended in the air.

My first reaction was to laugh at the irony of the whole situation, but then I felt it. Again. That incredible warmth radiating between his hands and my arms. I felt like I’d just reached the summit of Mt. Rainier and was experiencing a euphoric high. With Jessica’s *Essence* theory running rampant through my mind, I realized I’d progressed from imagining the energy flowing to actually feeling it. I was crazier than she was. Once I met his eyes, I could see something was wrong. He looked like he’d been overtaken by altitude sickness. With his jaw set tight, he winced and shoved me back to my feet.

“Are you okay?” I asked as he shook his hands madly in front of him.

“I’m fine,” he answered gruffly. “Crazy kids. They should be more careful.”

I shot him a look of disapproval but tried to lighten the mood by saying, “No harm done.”

“I suppose,” he said gruffly.

Feeling rather offended, I said, “You’re obviously upset, and I get the feeling I’ve made you uncomfortable. Maybe we should just skip lunch...”

At that suggestion his head snapped up, and he took a step closer. “Alex, I’m fine. We’re doing fish & chips today.” My jaw dropped, and he said in a more controlled voice, “Sorry.” He sighed and took a deep breath. “And I’m sorry how I reacted. I just don’t do well when my personal space is invaded. It has nothing to do with you, so don’t take it the wrong way.”

Yeah right, I thought. “Sure, whatever,” I said, taking a step back. I was surprised when he flinched. He seemed agitated no matter what I did. He was tough to read, and I certainly didn’t need more turmoil. “I’ll just take a rain check—”

“No!” he said firmly, and my eyes widened. Softening his expression, he said, “I mean, please don’t abandon me. I’d really like to buy you lunch.”

Leery of his Jekyll and Hyde personality but inexplicably drawn to him, I finally agreed. As we walked along, he talked about his favorite places in Fairhaven. The guy in front of us kept yelling into his cell phone and stopping abruptly, so we maneuvered around him. Jason swore by the African Peanut Soup at the Colophon Café. He teased that the next time I saved him he’d take me there for lunch. Playing along, I vowed I’d hold him to that promise.

When we arrived at the red, double-decker bus, which had apparently been converted into a small kitchen with deep fryers, Jason said, “You find a spot, and I’ll go order.”

“Okay. A regular fish and chips works for me,” I called after him.

He whipped around. “What? Do you have something against halibut?” He looked almost hurt.

“Well, no,” I said hesitantly, “but that’s gotta be a lot more expensive.”

He shook his head disgustedly. “So, two halibut and chips. What to drink?”

“Water is fine.”

“What? Are you trying to save me money again,” he accused.

“No,” I laughed. “Really, I always drink water.”

“Okay, but you better like ketchup and tartar. I’d hate to find out you douse your fish in vinegar or something.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Tons and tons of tartar and ketchup. And no vinegar. Are you happy now?”

“Very,” he said as he strode away. I sat down at the only empty picnic table. Enclosed behind a wrought iron fence, the courtyard allowed unobstructed views of the sidewalks, streets, and businesses. People window shopped at leisurely paces, while others scurried along, seemingly intent upon a destination.

Jason returned after a couple minutes and handed me a cup with ice water.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Hey,” I accused with a chuckle and tapped his cup of ice water, “were you trying to save *yourself* some money?”

“I know I gave you a bad time, but I’m not big on soda. Too much sugar and

horrible for your teeth.” He grinned, showing off a perfect set of straight white teeth, and I couldn’t help but thinking how much my dad would like him. “So what’s your vice?” he asked curiously. “Wait. Let me guess. Coffee?”

“Nope, can’t stand the bitter taste.” I made a face and stuck out my tongue.

“No coffee and no soda. Juice?”

I made a sour face.

He chuckled. “Must be tea.”

“Love the smell but I don’t really like hot drinks.”

He squinted. “That leaves nothing but an ice cold beer.”

“Sorry, try again.”

“Okay, I’m running out of ideas.” He shrugged. “Wait,” he held a finger in the air, “I’ve got it. You’re a chocoholic and if you’re not drinking water you’re downing chocolate milkshakes.”

“Unbelievable.” I snorted. “For your information Mr. Nosy, I’m allergic to chocolate.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” I tapped my fingers against the picnic table.

“Wild. Allergic to chocolate. And is it that you don’t like beer or that you just don’t drink?”

“I don’t drink. Period.”

“You say that like there’s a story to tell,” he said, looking at me expectantly.

I swallowed hard. “A long story. Maybe I’ll tell ya about it sometime.” He looked at me funny, so I added, “No, it’s not what you’re thinking. I wasn’t in a drunk driving accident or anything like that.”

“That’s not what I was thinking.” He rested his arms on the table and continued with another inquisition. “So, how old are you?”

“Why?”

“Just curious.”

“I’m 18. How about you?”

“Can’t reveal that information,” he said with a devilish grin. “But I’m older than you.”

I gave him a dirty look. “Do you enjoy being infuriating?”

“All part of my charm,” he said with a wink. He changed the subject and talked about music and his favorite local bands. Deep and rich, his voice was soothing and held me captivated. His oval-shaped face was perfectly balanced, and his classic square jaw and strong chin made him even more appealing. My heart rate quickened, and I scolded myself for being susceptible to his physical

attributes.

“So, the Up & Up is popular with the college crowd, and The Fairhaven hosts great live music, but you’re gonna have to wait a few years...” he was saying.

“Jason, your order’s up. Jason,” a lady called from behind the bus counter. I noticed she smiled broadly when she caught his eye.

As I started to rise, he shook his head and gestured for me to sit back down. He returned carrying two fish baskets and an obscene amount of tartar and ketchup. My eyes widened, and I said, “Are you nuts?”

He chuckled. “You said you liked your condiments. I’m just trying to please the lady.”

I smiled broadly. Another touchdown; he was good. An image of him performing a crazy celebration dance in the end zone formed in my head, and I started laughing.

Looking totally bewildered, he asked, “What’s so funny? Did I miss something?”

“Sorry.” I bit my lip. “Inside joke.”

“Let me in on it,” he said. I pressed my lips together and shook my head. “Oh, come on.”

I exhaled loudly and said, “Fine. You asked for it. Can you dance?”

He looked confused. “I guess. Why?”

“Well, you scored a touchdown for being such a gentleman. And of course, bringing all the tartar sauce gave you extra points, too. I was cracking up at the thought of you performing a crazy, touchdown dance.”

He looked at me doubtfully. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope.” I shook my head popped a French fry in my mouth. “I never kid when it comes to football. So,” I pointed at him, “are you gonna get up and dance for me or what?” He raised a brow, but shocked me when he jumped up and actually danced next to our table.

I almost choked on my food; he certainly wasn’t lacking in charisma. “Nicely done.” I clapped my hands as he took a bow. “You appear to have another fan,” I said and nodded towards a little girl who was jumping up and down, pointing at him.

He spun around, but she dodged behind her mother’s skirt. “You a big Seahawk fan?” he asked breathlessly as he sat back down.

I made a horrible face and shook my head. “Absolutely not. I’m a Denver Bronco fan all the way; although, if the Seahawks are playing I’ll root for them

by default, unless of course, they're playing the Broncos. Do you like football?"

"Yeah, I enjoy football. And yes, I'm a Seahawks fan. I'm probably a bigger soccer fan, though. I like the Seattle Sounders and have been to a few games."

"They've had some close and exciting matches," I agreed, swirling two fries in ketchup. "Kasey Keller is an awesome goalkeeper. My older brother played goalie in high school, and I always enjoyed his games. Looks like we agree on the Sounders. Now I'll have to convert you into a Bronco fan."

He dunked his fish in tartar sauce and took a bite. "We'll see about that." After swallowing, he asked, "So, why are you a Bronco fan? Did you grow up in Denver or something?"

"I wish, but no," I laughed. "I was watching a football game between the Broncos and the Raiders with my dad when I was like eight years old. He was trying to explain the rules when a Bronco player ran up to a Raider receiver and snatched the ball out of his hands. Seconds later, he was in the end zone, celebrating a Denver touchdown with a crazy little dance. I remember being so shocked. I thought it was going to a penalty or something, but my dad assured me it was good. I've been a devoted Bronco fan ever since."

"Good story." He wiped his face with a napkin.

"And you know what?" He simply shook his head and raised his shoulders, because he'd just shoved several fries in his mouth. "The Broncos won the Super Bowl that year."

He swallowed. "No wonder you're such a die-hard. Have you ever been to Denver?"

"No," I said wistfully, "but I always wanted to watch a game from Mile High. It was on my list of things to do." I paused and took a bite. Glancing up, I caught him studying me. "What?" I asked.

"You said it was on your list of things to do."

"I mean *is*," I said and busied myself with my fish basket.

He scratched his head. "Tell me about your pinky ring, the ankh." He pointed at my hand.

I finished chewing and looked at him in surprise. "Not many people even know what this is," I said, holding my hand up.

"Oh, I'm an expert in Egyptian hieroglyphics," he said earnestly, his eyes twinkling.

"Right," I said with a smirk. Fiddling with my gold ring, I explained, "My dad made it for me a few years ago. It's the only ring I ever wear. Well, that's because it's the only ring I own. Probably," I took a deep breath and smiled

guiltily, “because I spend all my money on books and jeans.”

“So you have a fetish for jeans and your dad’s a jeweler?”

Coughing, I tapped my chest. “Yes, I have a weakness for jeans, and *no*,” I corrected him, “my dad is not a jeweler; he’s a dentist. Well, actually he’s a dental implantologist.”

“A what?” He lifted a brow.

“People who need a tooth replaced or even a full set of upper or lower teeth can choose to have implants instead of dentures. The implants are small metal rods that are placed through the gums and into the jaw bone. Then strong porcelain-like teeth are placed on the rods. They’re permanent.”

“Interesting. Metal rods with permanent teeth and a dentist who makes jewelry. So why did he make you an ankh?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said thoughtfully. “I guess because it always symbolized that whole ‘zest’ for life thing. You know that whole idea that every moment should be lived to the fullest, and you should take no regrets with you.” I could feel my cheeks flushing. It sounded funny saying such a thing when it had been so long since I felt that way.

He’d stopped chewing and was looking at me incisively. “You say that like you don’t believe it anymore.”

I licked my lips. “I don’t know how I feel...”

“Well, you should. You’re right you know. Life is meant to be lived, because every day is a miracle. You shouldn’t let a single day go by wasted. Actually,” he paused, “that brings one of my favorite quotes to mind.”

“Yeah?” I said, slightly shaken. It seemed like every few minutes he surprised me and even had me re-examining my attitude towards...well, towards living.

Looking straight at me, he said, “Live your life each day as you would climb a mountain. An occasional glance towards the summit keeps the goal in mind, but many beautiful scenes are to be observed from each new vantage point.” Absently, he tapped his water cup. “It’s so true, too. I love hiking the trails and mountains around Bellingham.” He stopped. “What? Why are *you* looking at *me* like that?”

“I’m impressed,” I said.

“Good, you like to hike then.” He said it more as a statement than a question.

I nodded, happy to be off on a new tangent. “Growing up we did some hiking and camping around Mt. Rainier, but not entirely enough. For vacations my parents sought R+R on the beaches of Maui.”

“Sandy beaches are nice, but I’d rather hike Mt. Baker any day. After hiking all day, I like to find a nice spot next to a river and make my own campsite. Nothing beats a day in the mountains.” He talked about different places he’d hiked, and I shared a few of my own experiences.

“So, what’s your favorite -----?” he asked, opening more ketchup packets.

“My what – huh? Sorry, I didn’t catch that.” Mmm-hmm, I’d been focusing on his lips and totally missed his last word.

He looked at me strangely, repeating each word slowly, “What’s...your... favorite...book?”

“Oh right, sorry.” I smiled. “That’s a loaded question, because I have several.” Good, my voice was strong, indicating I was clearly back in the game.

“Your top three or four then,” he prompted.

“Inquisitive aren’t you?” I squinted, and he nodded. “Okay,” I began, “*Pride and Prejudice* well, anything by Jane Austen, *The Odyssey*, *Lord of the Rings*, and...probably *Les Miserables*. But I only stop there, because otherwise we’d be here all day.”

He laughed, appearing completely at ease. “I’d listen, but of course I’d be prepared to make excuses for a quick getaway if things got too dull,” he said.

“Very funny.” I tossed a French fry at him. He caught it and popped it in his mouth. “How about *your* favorite book?” I asked.

“Like you, I have several.” Scanning the courtyard, he appeared to be giving some thought to his answer. We both watched as three guys pounced on the table next to us even before the two teen lovebirds could clear out of the way. Jason laughed and looked at me. “I’d have to say *The Great Gatsby*, *The Call of the Wild*, *1984*, and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. And like you, I could go on and on and on...” He winked.

My heart melted. Well-read, literate men were scarce. Well-read, literate men that were also wickedly sexy were a rarity, indeed. Add in a wink, and we’re talking a field goal from 50 yards out. For the first time in a long, long time I found myself completely taken in. He was intriguing and intelligent, and he made my pulse race. This relaxed and conversational side of his was enjoyable.

“You mentioned you’re new to Bellingham. Here to attend Western?” When I nodded in affirmation, he said, “Have you been here long or chosen a major yet?” He pushed his empty basket aside and rested his elbows on the table.

“I moved from Tacoma more than a month ago with my best friend Ally and her fiancé Ben. Ally always wanted to be a teacher like her mom, and we’ve both been accepted into the Education program but...”

“Wait,” he interrupted, “you didn’t say that *you* always wanted to be a teacher.”

I looked at him with a frown. “Yes. No. Oh, I don’t know,” I said with exasperation and pressed my hands against my cheeks. “I guess Ally has always been the driving force. Once she knows what she wants, she goes after it. Her future is all mapped out, and while I do admire her tenacity, I’m more indecisive. When she insisted we fill out applications together for Woodring College of Education, I figured I’d let fate decide. She was ecstatic when we got the news.”

“But you weren’t?”

“I wouldn’t say that exactly. I just...now that I’ve had more time to think about it, I’m not certain of anything anymore.”

“Hmm. Sounds like maybe you need to have this discussion with Ally. If she’s your best friend, I’m sure she’ll understand that you might want to consider other career options. Like maybe you should be a doctor; you’re good at saving people.” He reached for my basket. “Are you gonna share these, or what?”

My eyes widened but I nodded. What was it with this guy? It was like he’d suddenly appeared in my life to remind me of my ability to help people. He grabbed a couple fries and dipped them in my ketchup before swirling them around in my tartar sauce – just the way I did. Weird; he had personal space issues but wasn’t afraid of double dipping from my plate? “Why don’t you tell me about you since I’ve divulged more than enough about myself,” I suggested and shoved the basket towards him.

“Fine, I’ll be fair and share.” Drumming his fingers on the table, he launched into a couple stories about growing up in Bellingham and discussed his last couple years attending Western. He’d decided to focus on a dual major of Environmental Studies and Business Science.

When I noticed he’d stopped talking, I said, “Tell me about your family.”

“Well, I have an older sister and brother. My sister works for the San Juan County Sheriff’s Office. She and her husband are expecting their first baby in a few months. She had to take an early leave from work due to a few complications, but thank goodness she’s fine now. They live out in the islands. Last year my brother moved to Bangor, Maine where he’s attending Husson University. And my mom and dad still live here in Bellingham. Dad’s a firefighter and mom works for the Bellingham PD.” A strange expression crossed his face, and he shook his head slightly.

“Wow! Quite the family. Sounds like they’re all in the business of saving people – for real.” He offered a winning smile and nodded, which prompted me

to ask another question before I lost my train of thought. “Are you working and going to school?”

“Yes...” He closed his eyes and rubbed them. “I’m working...” He stopped and started blinking his eyes. “I’m working right up the street at the grocery store...”

“What?” I said, totally surprised. The store down the street was part of the local chain I worked for. Noticing that he was massaging his temples, I asked him if he was okay, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

His cell phone started ringing, and he grabbed it out of his pocket. “Hello?” he said gruffly. After listening for a few seconds he said impatiently, “Fine, fine. I’m coming. Give me five.” He stood up, his eyes darting nervously between me and the street like he was expecting something big to happen. “Alex, I need to go. I need to go right now.” His tone was solemn, and he winced again. “I’m sorry. I’m not...I’m always on the go and not very reliable...”

“Is everything okay?”

“We probably shouldn’t have...” he started to say, but cringed and jerked his head again. “Goodbye, Alex.” He bit his lower lip, and after one last pensive glance, he dashed out to the sidewalk and raced down the street.

I sat there in stunned silence for several minutes. I couldn’t believe it. Just when he was showing his potential as a first rate receiver he’d fumbled the ball in the final seconds and lost the game. When I noticed a family searching for a table, I offered mine and walked up to the bus to throw away the trash.

“Thank you sweetie,” the lady behind the counter said and motioned me towards her.

“You’re welcome,” I said, as I approached the empty counter.

“Now darlin’,” she drawled, “I want you to know that Jason is a really nice young man. He’s been a regular here for a long time. Nevertheless,” she tapped her cheek, “he is peculiar at times. Anyways, I couldn’t help but notice how he up and disappeared on you. Well, truth be told, I’m kinda nosy, but I just thought you should know I think he’s a great catch.” She laughed at her own joke. “You might be interested in knowing you’re the first girl he’s ever brought here. In my opinion, I think that says a lot about his feelings for you.” She gave me one big nod and tapped my hand.

I didn’t feel any heat from her touch, and she didn’t act like I had some kind of disease, so I automatically warmed to her. “Thank you,” I said as someone inside the kitchen called her away.

As I walked home, I wondered about Jason’s abrupt departure and then

instantly scolded myself for getting involved in the first place. On the other hand, there was just something about him...

More than that, he had me rethinking why I'd surrendered so easily – why I was willing to give up on life and just let go? He believed every day was a miracle, and at one time I'd thought the same thing. Could I again?

I was certain about one thing – I definitely wanted to see him again.

CHAPTER 8 – ASH

Pulling into my parking spot alongside Ally's car, I slammed on the brakes just in time to avoid hitting the florescent green motorcycle parked horizontally across the front of my spot. "What the heck?" I muttered to myself. Backing up a bit, I left the tail end of my car hanging in the street. Not overly happy, I cursed under my breath.

We had company, and by the looks of the tricked out bike, this company had a flashy ego to match. The word *Ninja* jumped out at me in bold black letters. This machine had male testosterone written all over it and all but screamed, "I am a speed demon." I shook my head, half with disgust and half with admiration.

I grabbed the bouquets of flowers out of my front passenger seat and carefully made my way to the front door. I jiggled the handle, but my hands were so full I couldn't get enough leverage to open it. Suddenly, it flew open, and I tumbled across the threshold right into a guy I'd never seen before.

He peered at me through all the flowers and greenery and laughed loudly. "Great entrance," he said. "I've been looking for a cute girl, and here one just falls into my arms like this. Coincidence or fate? What do ya think?" Beneath arched eyebrows, a pair of strangely iridescent, greenish eyes danced with amusement.

"I...um," I was speechless.

Ben came to my rescue. Sort of. From over on the couch he called out, "Hey Lexi, meet Ash. Ash, that's Lexi."

"Hmm...Lexi. That should do; although, since you're easy on the eyes, your name doesn't really matter," he teased.

"Ash?" I repeated, rolling it around on my tongue like a bitter taste. I couldn't believe his audacity and found myself responding rather snidely, "What kind of name is that?"

"A damn good one," he replied arrogantly. "And Lexi would be short for...?" He cocked his head sideways.

"Alexandria," I shot back. Tilting my nose in the air, I added, "Literally, it means defender of mankind. Back in ancient times Alexandria was a famous city in Egypt founded by Alexander the Great. It was also home to the Great Library, thus making Alexandria an intellectual capital of the world. A bit more

interesting than being named after a tree, wouldn't you say?"

"Ouch! Break it up already. The sparks are likely to catch the carpet on fire." Ben laughed.

Grabbing a bouquet of flowers from my hands, Ally said pleasantly to Ash, "Don't let her scare you. She'll use big words and historical knowledge to make you feel inferior. It's not intentional. It's just a social skill she needs to work on."

"Excuse me, I happen to..." I retorted but was drowned out by Ash's laughter.

"Oh, I'm not scared," he said haughtily. "I'm amused."

Burying her face in the red roses, Ally said, "Wow, what's the deal with all the flowers? And what are those beauties you're carrying?" she asked before turning and making her way to the kitchen.

"Calla Lilies," I said. Stepping back from Ash, I found myself unable to look away from his strange eyes. An abundance of hazel spots clustered around the center, and the hues of green seemed to change depending on the angle from which I viewed them.

With a look of pure mischief, he smiled at Ally and had the effrontery to say, "She's obviously smart, but what's even better is the way she can't seem to take her eyes off me." Turning towards me, he winked playfully. My mouth fell open and I stomped around him, ignoring him altogether. Ben and another guy, who looked vaguely familiar, were actively engaged with the PS3 in the living room.

Ben said, "Hey Lexi, do you remember Kai? He graduated a couple years before us."

Kai put his controller on the coffee table and walked towards me with a friendly smile before politely shaking my hand. "Hi, Lexi. I think we met at one of Ben's famous parties back in high school." His tone was a good deal more respectful than his friend's.

"That's right I remember now, but it's been a long time." I shook his hand warmly. His hazel eyes stood out against his darker skin and crew-cut, jet black hair. Now it was coming back...he was Hawaiian, just like Ben, and some where back in the day their grandmothers had known each other or something.

"You'll have to ignore my roommate's obnoxious behavior," Kai said, scowling at Ash who'd just walked up to us. "He's rather blunt and tends to speak before thinking..."

"Yeah, yeah," Ash said. "I call it like it is, and I'm honest to a fault, but I'm a good guy."

I rolled my eyes, as Kai added, "True. Once you get used to his outright

frankness, he's not so bad. I keep him around for the entertainment value." Ash blew on his knuckles and rubbed them on his chest. I couldn't help but grunt. Kai continued, "Lexi, it's good to see ya or meet ya again." He glanced over at Ben and pointed. "I was surprised when I ran into Ben tossin' apples around in the produce department. I hear you're working at the store, too?" When I nodded, he added, "That's cool. I work at the Starbucks in that same center."

I smiled and shifted the flowers to my other hand. "Are you up here going to Western?"

He nodded and sighed. "Yeah. Two years now, and I still haven't picked a major, but..."

"See Ally," Ben interrupted jovially from across the room, "not *everyone* has their life all planned out when they're 12 years old. Some of us just don't know what we want to be when we grow up. We need time to consider the possibilities before jumping into a career we might not like."

"Ben," Ally said as she stepped out of the kitchen and placed her hands on her hips, "that's the whole point. You haven't grown up yet, and you don't seem to have any plans of doing so anytime soon. I don't expect you to necessarily have your career all figured out, but a little maturity would be nice once in awhile." With a shake of her head, she walked back over to the stove. The aroma of taco seasoning drifted into the room.

Ben shrugged and rolled his eyes. "Kai, get back over here. I need help." Glancing at me, he added, "I told Kai he could stop by and borrow some of my CD's."

"Uh huh, the thousands of CD's," Ally interrupted, banging a pan loudly on the counter. "That's why you're always so poor and can't afford to take me out on a real date."

"Ally's awesome," Kai politely interjected. "She told us to stick around and she'd feed us."

"Oh yes, nachos – real gourmet," she said, fussing with the cheese grater.

"Smells great," Ash said, patting his stomach.

"Got awhile on the hamburger," she said, attacking the meat with a spatula. "At least Ash here," she nodded her head his direction and flashed him a look of approval, "was kind enough to run down to the store and grab guacamole and sour cream for the rest of you gluttons."

Ash sent her a smile oozing with flattery – one he'd obviously practiced in the mirror a few hundred times. When he asked her if there was any other way he could be of assistance, I almost gagged at the sound of his syrupy, thick voice.

What a kiss-ass.

With his attention focused solely on Ally, I found myself, regrettably, unable to resist the urge to look him over. His brown hair hung in longer layers, about shoulder length. His extremely white teeth made his smile all the more provocative. Well built, he walked with a swagger, which only heightened his overbearing self-confidence. Unfortunately, he was downright sexy. But worse than that, he was well aware of it. Not my type – at all. And while his eyes were an interesting and fascinating green, they were not like a certain pair of aquamarine eyes I hadn't been able to forget about.

Wait a minute...was he actually wearing a pair of boot cut, 7 For All Mankind, premium jeans? Yep, and fitting into them rather nicely, too. This guy knew his designer denim and didn't mind spending a pretty penny either. Of course, who was I to talk?

His eyes spiraled my way, and he raised one brow flirtatiously. "So, once you're done checkin' me out – you gonna tell us about all the flowers and break open that box of chocolate?"

Great. Cocky and rude. My face sweltered. "For your information, I'm allergic to chocolate and..."

"Really? That's great. Then you won't mind handing over that box."

"What?" Ally said, scurrying out of the kitchen. Laughing, she grabbed the box. "Oh yum! Godiva's." She hugged the box and prompted, "So, fill us in. Where did all the goodies come from?" She plopped down at our green tiled table, one of our many great garage sale finds, and ripped open the box. After plucking one out for herself, she motioned for Ash to sit down and join her. Instead, he walked around the table and pulled a chair out for me.

"Humph," I uttered, clearly not impressed. I sat down anyways and scowled as he bowed and winked. Beaming, he settled into the chair on my left. Under my breath, I mumbled, "Sorry buddy, fourth down is over."

"What? I didn't catch that," he remarked. Placing one elbow on the table, he rested his chin on his hand like he was posing for a photo shoot. Then he focused his compelling eyes on me, like I was the camera.

I puffed out my cheeks. "Don't worry about it. You weren't supposed to." Ally kicked me under the table and launched a dirty look my way. "What?" I asked wide-eyed.

With a final warning look, she held her half-eaten piece of dark chocolate in the air and sighed, "Mmm...this is perfection." Peering into the box, she pulled out a white star. "Lexi – details now, and hurry up already." She slid the box

across to Ash, and he dove in with gusto.

“All right.” I sighed but looked warily over at Ash.

“Don’t mind me. I love a good story,” he said, dropping two chocolate squares into his mouth.

Shaking my head, I directed my conversation towards Ally. “Okay, so the whole day was total drama grocery store.”

“Talk louder. I don’t want to miss any details either,” Ben called out.

Exasperated, I raised my hands in the air. “Fine. Around eleven o’clock this morning, a girl in the floral department brings the dozen red roses and box of chocolates to my check stand. She couldn’t give me any information other than I was to read the attached card.” I pointed to the partially hidden paper in the middle of the roses, and Ally reached for it.

I peeked over at Ash only to find his eyes glued on the card. “Okay, you’re gonna find the note hilarious but kind of disturbing, too. Jessica thinks the same weird guy might be sporadically sending flowers to different checkers, because all the cards have the same creepiness factor to them.”

“Jessica who? And what weird guy?” Ash asked. His black shirt was unbuttoned a notch too low for my liking, but that didn’t stop my pulse from quickening. There was something illicit about how the rectangular silver pendant, hanging from a thin, black cord around his neck, rested against his chest.

Ally took a couple minutes and explained to Ash and Kai about the flower phenomenon involving new checkers. Clearing her throat, she said, “So...the card reads: Sweetest Angel...”

“*Sweetest Angel?* You’ve got to be kidding,” Ash interjected.

Ally laughed and started again, “Sweetest Angel. The other day our eyes locked from a distance, and you graced me with your heavenly smile. I knew we’d made a divine connection. Lost in your eyes, I found myself enchanted. You are one of heaven’s little blessings – a truly celestial being, beautiful and innocent, like a cherub...” At that point, Ally started to lose it, and Ben and Kai went into hysterics in the living room. Turning bright shades of pink, I covered my face with my hands.

“Di-vine con-nec-tion...” Ben said, barely getting the syllables out between laughter.

“What a whacko,” Kai added.

“A cherub?” Ash said disdainfully. “Obviously, he doesn’t know that cherubs are chubby, plump-cheeked, little angels.” He tugged my hands apart and

grinned. “Not the way I’d describe you in the least. Are you okay?”

I nodded, but tears were streaming down my face. Pulling myself together, I dabbed my cheeks with the sleeve of my blouse.

Ally pointed at me, on the verge of hysterics herself. “Let’s see if I can finish this. “Umm, okay...like a cherub. Although your beauty far surpasses any flower, please enjoy the roses and chocolates. The time shall come when we may speak openly with one another. I only count the days. Ours will be a match made in heaven. Yours truly, --S.” Looking at me in disbelief, Ally convulsed into another fit of laughter. She drummed her hands against the table and pounded her feet on the floor. “Hilarious!”

“Do you think you’d recognize him?” Ash said, tilting back in his chair.

“Hardly.”

“Well, he sounds like a psychopath to me,” he replied. Then in a voice of reason, he added, “You need to be extra careful when you walk out to your car, especially late at night.”

“He’s right, Lexi,” Ben said. “If I’m ever working at the same time, come find me, and I’ll walk you out. I can’t believe Jessica said that is normal.”

“So was Tori working today?” Ally asked.

“Yes. And you know Jessica; as soon as she saw the roses, she gave me a wicked grin and went about her diabolical mischief.”

“She sent you the lilies, didn’t she?” Ally jumped up and ran into the kitchen, obviously remembering she had taco meat to stir.

“Oh, not only did she send me the lilies, but she somehow managed to place Tori in the check stand right next to mine. When that second flower bouquet arrived, Jessica came over and made a big fuss. Tori looked thoroughly annoyed, and I was dying of embarrassment.”

Ash nodded approvingly. “I like this Jessica girl; sounds like she knows how to play a good joke.” He rested his arms on the table, exposing several leather wrist bands. His fingers were long, and he wore a couple plain, silver rings at the knuckles.

“That’s Jessica all right.” Ally spooned the meat from the frying pan onto the chips and proceeded to cover them with cheese.

“Yep,” Ben added, “she’s got a warped sense of humor.”

“Such excitement. We never have this much fun in the clothing department. Maybe I should work at the grocery store...all that attention might make Ben jealous again.” Ally winked at me.

“Don’t even think about it,” Ben said.

“Sounds safer where you are,” Kai added.

In a solemn tone, Ash said, “You need to be careful. There are a lot of creeps running around these days. I’ll give you my number in case you ever need help in a hurry.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” I said, surprised at his seemingly genuine concern. He stared me down, and I conceded. “Fine, fine. Jot it down for me...”

“No. Just hand me your cell,” he demanded, “and I’ll program it in for you.”

Reluctantly, I handed him my phone. “Thanks,” I muttered.

“No problem. But...a better way to thank me would be to cook me dinner sometime.”

Loud booms of laughter erupted from both sides of me. “Ash,” Ally said as she slapped the kitchen counter, “Lexi doesn’t cook, and believe me; you wouldn’t want her to try.”

“I second that,” Ben said. “Not a good idea...unless you want to die young.”

“Thanks a lot guys.” I gritted my teeth. “Just because I can’t cook...”

Ally walked out of the kitchen and put her arm around me. “This girl took wood and metal shop in high school. Completely refused to sign up for Home Ec. She might not cook or sew, but if you want her to impress you, she could always build you...a house or something.” Cracking up, she patted my back.

“That’s enough from you two traitors,” I said half teasing, half serious. “How come everyone’s a comedian today?”

“What’s worse,” Kai chimed in, “is that Ash can’t cook either.” He looked at Ash and shook his head sadly. “Maybe you’re not meant to be together after all. Sorry man.”

“No worries,” Ash said. “I have plenty of money; we’ll just eat out.”

Since he looked serious, I decided to exit the room before he extended a dinner invitation. “I can’t take this humiliation any more. I’m off to change my clothes.”

“Need any help?” Ash smiled slyly.

My mouth dropped. “Absolutely not.” As he winked, I added, “You pestiferous...”

“That’s not a word!” he exclaimed.

“Oh yes it is,” I said smugly, whipping my scarf through the air.

“Ash, you better get yourself a dictionary App if you’re gonna take her on,” Ally suggested with a big smile and added, “Nachos are ready.”

As I walked towards my bedroom, Ash called out, “Well, at least wear jeans and grab a windbreaker. You’ll want to be warm when I take you out for a ride

on my bike.”

Whipping around, I regarded him hotly and said, “Not a chance.”

He walked towards me, deliberately slow, until he was intentionally invading my personal space. He was probably about six inches taller than me, but that didn’t intimidate me in the least. It was the proximity of his face to mine and his musky, masculine scent that had me breathing heavy.

“Scared of the adrenaline rush, honey?” he taunted.

“First of all, I’m not your honey,” I said spitefully, “and second of all, I’m not afraid of a little speed. Motorcycles don’t scare me,” I lied. A couple years before, my premonitions had sent me on a mission where I was soon yanking a young girl out of the way just before a motorcycle went skidding across her path. She was unhurt, but the rider had died. Speed was fine, but I’d been leery of motorcycles ever since.

He bit his lower lip and said in a velvety voice, “I’m not so sure about that. But I wasn’t referring to the motorcycle...”

It took me a minute to realize he was talking about himself. “You are arrogant and insolent and...and...” I broke off, suddenly at a rare loss for words.

“Maybe,” he said simply. “Too bad you’re intimidated by a little adventure. Might be too dangerous for you after all.”

“I think *you* think you’re more dangerous than you really are,” I snapped.

He chuckled at my dirty look and said, “But I’m more than willing to do whatever it takes to please...” He let his voice drift off as his eyes traveled down my body.

I didn’t know why I was so unnerved, why I couldn’t just turn and walk away. Maybe I was ready to live on the edge – have a little excitement before I died. Maybe in some weird way it was my revenge on Jason for running out on me. But whatever it was, the words that escaped my mouth surprised me. “Well then, let’s see what you’ve got. Bring it on, if you can – which, I seriously doubt.” I swung my hip out and smacked my lips together. “It’s gonna take everything you’ve got to impress me.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ally almost drop the nacho tray.

Ash never flinched; he just kept smiling. Reaching his hand out, he gently tilted my chin upwards. His touch was warm and exhilarating. It was a different kind of warmth than the strange heat I’d felt with Jason, but still more than enough to make me shudder.

“Oh, I will. Believe me, I will. And I promise you’ll be begging for more.” Brazenly, he glanced down at my lips, where his eyes lingered way too long.

After what felt like an eternity, he raised his gaze and winked. Then he strolled into the kitchen and said to Ally, “Those nachos smell great. Let’s eat.”

My heart lurched unexpectedly. Ally nodded her head towards Ash and her blue eyes sparkled with admiration. Unbelievable!

Once the guys had crowded around the table and were devouring the nachos, she turned to me and hissed quietly, “Forget Jason. Ash is deliciously sexy. And Alex, I know you saw his Seven jeans. What a pair you’d make! No pun intended.” She giggled.

“Ha, ha. Very funny. And they aren’t just Seven jeans,” I informed her, slapping her gently on the shoulder. “They’re 7 For All Mankind. Why in the world does he have you so...so...bamboozled?” I said, frustrated at my inability to procure a better word. I didn’t give her time to respond before adding, “All I can say is *callow*.”

She shook her head incredulously. “What does that mean?”

I glanced at the guys, all of whom were totally engrossed in eating. “It’s the word of the day.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, of course it is,” she said disgustedly. “Live a little. You might enjoy yourself more.”

“It means immature,” I called over my shoulder.

“Yeah, whatever,” she yelled back.

CHAPTER 9 – A LITTLE ADVENTURE AND A LOT OF DANGER

A few minutes later, I stepped out of my bedroom feeling comfortable and confident in my triangle pocket, boot cut, stretch Hudson jeans. Ha! That would show him he wasn't the only one with an eye for expensive jeans. Against my better judgment, I'd determined there was no way I could renege on his offer, or his demand rather, that I go for a ride, so I'd slipped into my green windbreaker as well. As I entered the room, they were cleaning up the last of the nachos and enjoying another round of laughter while re-reading the note.

Noticing my approach, Kai said, "Lexi, this card is so corny. Too bad Ash wasn't the one who sent you flowers. He probably would have included a nice melodic love song, and I can promise you, it would have been worth reading."

Skeptically, I looked over at Ash. "Somehow, I doubt that very much."

Kai shoved a couple broken chips into his mouth and shook his head adamantly. Still chewing, he said, "No seriously, Ash is a great writer. We have a band with my brother and a couple of his friends, and Ash writes all our original stuff."

"No way. That's cool!" Ben interjected.

"Oh yeah. We're not serious or anything, but we have a good time and play at parties – our parties mostly," Kai said. "We're hoping to get a couple gigs at the local bars this year."

I glanced at Ash who seemed unusually quiet. Drinking a Coke, he appeared to be studying the can rather intently. "What instrument do you play?" I asked Kai.

"Oh, I play the drums." He made a few quick hand strokes like he was beating on some real drums. "Ash sings and also plays the guitar. My brother Noa plays bass, and our other roommates, Matt and Patrick, take lead guitar and keyboards."

"What kind of music do you guys play?" Ally asked.

Kai raised his shoulders. "Mostly rock – a little bit of classic, hard, and modern. We have several originals," he nodded, "thanks to Ash's brilliant writing."

Ash shrugged and said indifferently, "I don't know about brilliant, but some of its okay." In a respectful tone he added, "All the guys have talent. That's what makes the band sound good. All the singer really needs is attitude." He laughed

at himself and pulled me towards the doorway. “And we all know I have plenty of that. Later guys. I promised Lexi a little danger and a lot of adventure.”

I gave Ally a desperate look, but she just smiled and said, “Have a good time. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She and Ben snickered.

Grabbing two helmets off the floor, Ash handed me the royal blue one. “By the way,” he said snidely, “nice jeans. Bet they cost you a pretty penny.”

“Not nearly as much as yours,” I snapped and hurried outside.

“Touché’ – Miss Feisty.”

I shook my head with resignation. “So, where we headed?”

“You’ll see,” he said, pulling on his helmet, a perfect color match to his bike. Then he whistled. “Wow! Sweet ride. Is this yours,” he asked pointing at my Nissan.

“Yeah. So what?”

“So, the more I learn about you, the more I like. You’re my kind of woman.”

“Whatever.” I bit my lip. “Why a motorcycle?”

“Sports bike,” he corrected. “A Kawasaki ZX-6R to be exact.” He ran his hand along the sleek body. “Lots of reasons really: fun, precision, grace, danger, and freedom. Freedom to think and explore. Of course, experiencing the elements can be a rush too. I compose a lot of my songs while riding this baby.”

At least he was gaining some yardage. “Nice,” I said. “But didn’t you forget speed?”

He pulled on his gloves and said, “That’s a given. This is the fastest and most impressive 600 in existence.” Climbing on board, he motioned for me to sit behind him. “Keep your arms wrapped tightly around me,” he commanded.

“Great. I’m at the mercy of a maniac driver,” I mumbled but almost laughed. No guys in my life for a year and now I had a maniac runner and a maniac driver. What were the odds?

Obviously, he had great hearing even with his helmet on, because he turned in the seat. “Lexi, I assure you, I’m a safe driver. I only handle this bike with the utmost precision,” he said earnestly before his lips curved into a wicked smile. “I suggested you wrap your arms around me simply so I could enjoy your touch. It had nothing to do with safety.”

I prayed he couldn’t see me blushing under my helmet. He turned and cranked the engine. A loud roar permeated my eardrums, and vibrations shook my body. He surprised me by heading into the historic district of Fairhaven rather than straight out to I-5. After a few minutes, I realized he was taking us along scenic Chuckanut Drive – a slow and windy road that connected

Bellingham to Skagit Valley.

Immediately, I relaxed and let the wind carry my fears away. What did I really have to worry about? My dance with death didn't involve a motorcycle. No, it was set to take place sometime in the near future...if I let it. I'd been thinking about that. Ever since my encounter with Jason, I'd found myself reconsidering my options. Dying was the easy way out; everything else was complicated. If I became an Amethyst and was able to survive the encounter with the mountain lions, maybe living with the snapshots would be bearable. Especially since I'd have Jessica in my life, and maybe Jason...or Ash?

We zipped over a bump in the road, and I flew a few inches off the seat. Startled by my sudden movement, I inadvertently leaned deeper into Ash and gained instant security from his solid body. With my arms encircled around his waist it was hard not to think about his imperious and flirtatious nature. It was even more difficult not to compare him with Jason. All too thrilling Ash, with his giant ego, thrived on pushing the boundaries and seemed keen on physical contact. Gorgeous and elusive Jason refused to share his personal space, but when he temporarily let his guard down, I found myself yearning for more. Even though he was shrouded in a veil of secrets, I wanted nothing more than to unravel each and every one of them.

Getting nowhere with my thoughts, I focused on the scenery. Evergreen trees intertwined with colorful maples on one side of the winding seaside road, and on the other side, views of coastal waterways and the San Juan Islands stole my breath away. After driving for several miles, Ash pulled into a designated viewpoint and cut the motor. Immediately, I withdrew my arms.

He pulled off his helmet, shook out his hair, and sighed. "Puget Sound is awesome."

"Beautiful," I agreed, tucking my helmet under my arm. "We're really spoiled living here. We always get a bad rap for all the rain, but if ya ask me, I think we have perfect balance." I put my hand on his shoulder. "Ash?"

He smiled broadly. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for the slow-paced, scenic ride. I was sure you were gonna have us out setting new speed records on the freeway, and I was wrong."

He tapped my leg with his hand. "If I expect you to go out with me again, I first have to show you my softer side. What better way than a leisurely, romantic drive?"

I rolled my eyes and shoved his hand off my leg. "This does not remotely qualify as any kind of romantic rendezvous. Besides, how do you know I don't

have a boyfriend?”

He grinned slyly. “While you were changing into your tight fitting jeans, I asked Ally.”

“Oh great,” I moaned. “What did she say?”

“She told me you were a fanatic and currently owned around 30 pairs – mostly designer.” I whacked him in the back. “Okay, okay, she said you were sort of interested in some guy, but it wasn’t serious yet. I informed her it wouldn’t be serious if I have anything to say about it.” He looked at me with brash certainty.

“Which you don’t,” I retorted. “And for your information, Ally doesn’t know everything.”

He looked out at the panoramic view again and said in a witty voice, “Don’t worry, I’m patient. Besides, once you realize what a catch I am, you won’t be able to keep your hands off me. You’ll be begging me to take you out on my bike again. First, you’ll just want a quick spin around town, then a leisurely picnic in the park.” His eyes sparkled. “Finally, you’ll be pleading for a romantic road trip. You’ll force me into a secluded area where we can...” Pausing, he looked at me suggestively and wet his lips.

“Okay stop! Stop right there. Right now,” I ordered and knocked my knee into him. “You are totally delusional.” I kept my expression neutral for all of about two seconds before I started cracking up. He joined me and luckily let the topic drop.

“Have you ever been up to Blanchard Mountain?” he asked and motioned south.

I gazed that way and said, “Nope, can’t say I’ve even heard of it.”

He nodded. “It’s just down the road a ways. It’s one of the best places to hike, mountain bike, or paraglide. The views are unmatched. Not only can you see all the way to Vancouver Island on a clear day, but Mount Baker and the Twin Sisters are visible in the east.”

“Do you hike it?”

“Oh I’ve hiked it and biked it, but paragliding from the top is incredible.”

“You paraglide?” I asked incredulously; although, I shouldn’t have been surprised. His every word and movement indicated he was an adrenaline junkie.

“Oh yeah, I could teach you how.” He laughed and explained the basics. Eventually, he put his helmet on, signaling it was time to go. I followed suit and instinctively draped my arms around him. “Lexi?” he said. I squeezed him once. “You’re aware that I have a dangerous side?”

I nodded, feeling the heavy weight of my helmet.

“Do you think you’re ready for a rush?”

With a flash of uncertainty, I took a deep breath. “Sure. Bring it on.” Deep down, I trusted him. It was also time to take Ally’s advice and live a little. I hadn’t been doing enough of that lately, and I was curious if I’d like a fast bike as much as a fast car.

“That’s my girl.”

“I’m not your girl.”

“We’ll see about that,” he quipped. “When we hit the freeway, keep your arms wrapped tightly around me. Not just because I enjoy the feel of your body next to mine,” he winked and flipped down his visor, “but because I’m also gonna show you why this machine is famous for speed.” With that, the thunderous engine ignited and our conversation ended.

To be honest, I enjoyed every minute of the ride. I was surprised when we got back to town and he drove past my street. Soon after, we arrived at Marine Park, a small tract of land with a long stretch of grass and a rocky, saltwater beach. After hopping off the bike, he led me to the southwest corner of the park. The railroad tracks were not part of the park, but they could be accessed by climbing the fence and crossing the trestle. A big sign stated: NO TRESPASSING ALLOWED.

“Ash, I don’t think we should walk down the tracks. It might be dangerous,” I said hesitantly.

He squeezed my hand and said, “Oh come on, Lexi. Just a little ways down is a great little spot with a view of some awesome rock formations and...”

As he was talking, I felt my shoulders tighten up just as a sharp pain shot through my head. I knelt down and pretended to examine a rock. I closed my eyes, and the snapshots came on strong:

**the “NO TRESPASSING ALLOWED” sign
two teenagers bent over the tracks
a train barreling towards them**

My eyes snapped open. Ash was still talking and pointing along the coastline, trying to convince me that the views were better on the other side of the trestle. He didn’t seem to have noticed my momentary black out.

“Fine,” I said hurriedly. “You’ve made me a believer. Let’s go.” He stopped talking, and I was able to enjoy the look of complete astonishment that passed

over his face. “Well, what are you waiting for?” I asked, happy for once that my head had stopped throbbing as soon as the snapshots dispersed. He mumbled something about unpredictable females, and I hurried him along. Off in the distance, a short time later, I spotted what I’d been looking for – two bodies huddled over the steel rails. Pointing, I said, “What do you think they’re doing?”

He muttered, “I don’t know, but I think we’d better investigate. Probably some teenagers showing off, or to be more precise, doing something totally stupid.” We quickened our pace, and when we came within shouting distance he called out, “Hey, what’s going on?”

A young girl, somewhere in her mid-teens, with a long ponytail, looked up at the sound of his voice. “I dropped my ring, and he’s trying to reach it,” she said and motioned to the boy. He was lying on the ground poking something in the space under the rails.

“I’ve almost got it...so close,” he said excitedly.

That’s when I heard the train whistle – loud and distinct. I could even feel the tracks vibrating. We all looked north simultaneously.

“No more time buddy; off the tracks,” Ash commanded. Glancing at me, he let go of my hand and gently shoved me away. Without thinking, I grabbed hold of the girl’s arm and took her with me. Clumsily, we ran over the rocks. Once we were several paces away I turned, expecting Ash and the boy to be close behind, but they were still on the tracks.

“Look kid, I said you need to move. NOW!” Ash yelled at the boy.

The boy looked up in fear and astonishment, but I couldn’t hear what he said. Ash shook his head furiously and leaned over the boy. That’s when I became aware the boy’s hand was caught under the steel rails.

“Oh no!” the girl exclaimed. “He’s stuck. They’ve got to get out of the way. The train is coming. I’m going back—”

I grabbed her. “Oh no you’re not! They’ll make it,” I shouted but was equally worried. The train was smoking, steaming, and approaching fast, and Ash and the boy were directly in its path. The train whistle blew profusely, like it was screaming profanities at them to get out of the way. Ash worked with determination, trying to shake the boy’s arm loose. As the girl sank to her knees, I dropped down with her, our bodies trembling together.

My eyes shot between the racing train and the guys spread out over the tracks. Ash’s mouth was moving, but I couldn’t read his lips. I suspected he was screaming the same words the train was unable to voice. He shook his head furiously and glanced my way, resignation frightfully evident on his face. A

sudden sickness swept over my body. As I held his gaze, I read only anguish and hopelessness in his expression.

“Stay here,” I shouted at the girl and took off for the tracks. When I appeared at Ash’s side, he yelled at me to get back, but I ignored him. Leaning down, I worked frantically to loosen the boy’s hand, but it was wedged good, already looking red and mangled.

My eyes darted up at the train. We had 15 seconds – maybe, before the train plowed over us. I glanced at Ash. He shook his head and mouthed the word “sorry” before pulling me to my feet and shoving me off the tracks. Caught off guard, and totally pissed, I rolled down the gravel, screaming all the way. When I came to a stop, I stood up and looked back in time to see Ash give the boy one last gigantic heave. Miraculously, that tug wrenched the boy’s hand free, but the momentum sent them both flying backwards over the other side of the bank. The train rolled loudly and supremely over the exact spot they’d been standing.

The powerful wind created by the rumbling train hit me like a small twister. I slipped my feet deeper into the rocks and stood, bracing myself against the forceful airstream. I welcomed the blast – accepted it as a challenge; nothing could uproot me. My windbreaker fluttered madly as my hair whipped wildly around my face. I felt invincible.

That’s when the realization hit me hard and fast. I didn’t want to die. I felt so alive. My decision to act upon the snapshots and Ash’s persistence had allowed the boy to live. Together we’d cheated death. And really, it felt extraordinary. Jason was right. Every day lived was a miracle. My future flashed before my eyes. If I could build my life and career around the premonitions, I could give the quiet gift of miracles for the rest of my life.

Fear suddenly overtook me as I remembered my days were numbered. I still had to deal with the mountain lions. I was going to have to fight for my life. Literally.

The last of the tankers and box cars zipped past. Still standing, I was cold and covered in goose bumps. But more importantly, after months of despair and self-pity, I suddenly felt resolute and in control. I pulled the girl, who’d crawled up next to me, onto her feet. Immediately, she found her own resolve and bolted forward, clamoring over the rocks.

Ash’s head appeared over the top of the rails, and he flashed me a cocky grin. Never imagining I’d welcome that grin, I found myself completely taken in. I offered him a genuine smile in return. He’d earned it. He dragged the boy up behind him just as the girl reached them and flung herself at the boy.

I walked up to Ash and encircled him in a huge hug. My cheeks brushed against the rough stubble on his cheek as he lifted me off my feet in an even tighter hold. With the winning touchdown in the final seconds of the game, who wouldn't want to hug the hero? His virile scent exuded self-confidence and courage, and for a moment I closed my eyes and indulged in the pleasure of his embrace.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "I thought saving a life from a speeding train was an adrenaline rush, but it doesn't even come close to the rush I'm getting from having you wrapped around me. I'm gonna want you around every time I save someone." He set me down and kissed my forehead.

I released him and punched him in the shoulder. "Let's hope you don't have to make saving people a full time job," I rebuked. Although, having someone around all the time to help would be awesome. Could he be the right one?

He leaned in close. "If you consent to hugging me a little more often, I won't have to."

"Ash," I scolded with a laugh. I certainly didn't want to think about hugging him all the time. I could already feel the flush of heat crossing my body.

"Hey man, thanks a lot," the boy said, his brown eyes open wide. "That was the scariest thing ever – having that train blasting towards us and not being able to get out of the way. Thanks for sticking with me."

"Look at your hand," the girl said with revulsion.

We inspected the grease stains and red marks as he held out a fist. He was still shaking from the experience. "Crap! It looks gnarly, huh? Doesn't feel so great either, probably sprained."

My eyes popped open a little wider. This was definitely why fate had brought Jessica into my life. If she really could teach me how to utilize my Essence, and I'd be able to help people with these kinds of injuries, I'd be unstoppable. I just had to let go of the guilt and pull myself together.

Rotating his hand, the boy slowly uncurled his fingers. A simple silver ring lay in the palm of his hand. "Next time, screw the ring," he said as he slid it back on her finger. "We should take off," he added.

"You should have that hand looked at," Ash said. "And listen; don't hang out on the tracks. I know that feeling – the one where you think you're invincible. Next time, think about this day and remember you're not."

"Got it," the boy said, flipping his long bangs out of his eyes.

"Do you need help getting home?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm not hurting that bad, and I only live a couple blocks from the

park.” Holding his injured hand close to his body, he tugged the girl forward with the other.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes still brimming with tears. With a final wave they set off. Only this time they hiked along the rocky beach, as far from the tracks as possible.

“Do you think he’s okay?” I asked Ash.

“Of course. His hand is a little banged up, but mostly he’s scared, and he should be. I’d guess he’s about 15 years old and this was the first time in his life he experienced real fear. He’s lucky to be alive.” Ash’s tone was solemn and his brows were bunched. Emotions washed over his face in waves: anguish, sadness, and what appeared to be downright anger. His rigid body and blank stare had me wondering if he was reminiscing about a tragedy from his past.

Worried, I gently touched his arm. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Obviously surprised by my question, he snapped out of his trance and gazed down at me with a grave frown. Gruffly, he said, “I don’t talk about it, Lexi. Not with anyone.”

Letting go of his arm, I nodded. Instinctively, I took a step back. “Sorry,” I said.

He gazed west over the horizon. “This is a great spot to watch the sun set, but we should jam, too.” We trekked along the shore, and he held my hand. If Jessica was right about me, maybe my Essence was easing some of his pain.

When we pulled into the driveway, Ally came running out. “I was getting worried,” she spoke with an elevated voice over the hum of the bike. “Next time take your cell phone, will ya?” She looked at me pointedly.

“No worries. We’re fine,” I said as I pulled off my helmet and handed it back to Ash. We exchanged solemn looks, but I smiled at him gratefully. “You were amazing by the way.”

“Thanks,” he said.

Ally’s jaw dropped. “Amazing how?”

Kai and Ben came strolling out the door. “How was the ride?” Kai asked.

“Actually, *the ride* was awesome,” I replied.

“I don’t know how he does it?” Kai shrugged. “He’s totally obnoxious, but then after some one on one time, the ladies always fall victim to some mysterious, hidden charm.”

I tapped Kai’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about me Kai, I’m not his victim.”

Kai looked suspiciously from me to Ash but threw his hands in the air and said, “There’s no insight to be gained from those faces. So...good for you guys, I

guess.” He turned back to Ben. “Don’t forget next Friday night. Come on over and listen to our band practice.” He grabbed my arm. “Lexi, of course you’re invited too.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But I don’t know...” I paused and looked over at Ash.

“Oh, he loves an audience,” Kai said. “You gotta come; then I can introduce you to my girlfriend Laney. Oh and Ben, thanks for the CD’s. I’ll get ‘em back to you then.”

Ben nodded. “No problem, man.”

Kai hopped on the motorcycle and grabbed his helmet from Ash. “Later guys.”

Ash looked over at me with piercing eyes. “Remember, Lexi – any suspicious guys hanging out in the parking lot at work, go back in the store and call me.”

Crossing my arms, I shook my head but promised I would. After they’d gone Ally, Ben, and I settled into the living room. Ben turned off the TV, stretched back, and plopped his feet onto the coffee table. Ally sat directly next to me, practically in my lap, like she was afraid if she sat too far away she might miss something exciting.

For the next hour, I filled them in on my adventures with Ash. I omitted the part about the snapshots, but Ally caught on immediately. Ben had tons of questions about the train incident, and he seemed to gain new respect for Ash after my recount.

Ally had also learned a few details about Ash from Kai while I’d been gone. I wasn’t surprised to find out that he liked living on the edge and participated in tons of extreme sports. Apparently, he wasn’t always the most dependable person. He’d disappear for days without telling any of his roommates where he was going or when he’d be back. Reluctantly, Kai had told Ally that when Ash was younger, like 10 years old or something, his parents and older brother had been killed in a car crash. For some reason, Ash felt responsible, but he wouldn’t talk about any of the details. Kai didn’t know much more than that.

Ash had lived in Bellingham for a couple years. He’d moved to the area so he could attend Western, but he didn’t seem dedicated to his classes, nor had he chosen a major. Kai said he’d never seen Ash work or apply for a job, but that was because he’d inherited a huge trust fund and was financially set for life. Kai thought Ash was basically a good guy who just hadn’t found his purpose in life yet. I could relate – only now, I felt confident I had one.

“But more importantly,” Ally burst out, “is that he’s single.”

“Not for long,” Ben teased and tossed a pillow at me.

I just shook my head but wondered how, in only a matter of days, I’d managed to find two totally different but equally intriguing guys. My team had two, hot new rookies. And now that I was back in the game, it was going to be interesting to see if either of them could take my heart all the way to the Super Bowl. Of course, I had to get myself there, too.

Over the next few days, I thought a lot about saving people. If that truly was my calling, then I needed to view the premonitions as a gift not a punishment. I needed to stop trying to escape them, and instead, start molding my life and future around them. I had to stop worrying about making mistakes and know that giving my best was enough. The daily disruptions would always be a challenge, but the victories would be momentous. They would always mean life instead of death – especially if I was an Amethyst. Of course, everything hinged upon me becoming an Amethyst. As an Amethyst, I had a chance...a chance to fight fate and possibly survive a mountain lion attack.

CHAPTER 10 – DISCOVERIES

Jumping to my feet, I stomped around in the grass. “This is never gonna happen,” I complained.

“Lexi,” Jessica laughed lightheartedly, “Give yourself a chance here. You weren’t born talking and walking, were ya?”

I stopped moving and shot her a dirty look before slumping back down beside her.

“Of course, not,” she answered for me. “And what you’re trying to accomplish here will take time – weeks, maybe even months, so give yourself a break. Or at least give me one, because you’re driving me nuts with all the theatrics.” She whacked my leg with her orange juice bottle.

We were sitting on the grassy bluff, a good 10 feet above the abrupt, rocky shoreline at Boulevard Park. The park stretched along the waterfront overlooking the marina and the islands. Walkers and joggers utilized the paved boardwalk behind us. Frisbees and soccer balls flew through the air in the open expanses of grass beyond that. Sitting in the shade of scattered trees, people picnicked while kids ran freely in play.

My training had officially begun. The goal was for me to recognize, and then tap into, my own personal Essence, which was proving near impossible. Jessica couldn’t understand my frustration or my sense of urgency, either. I’d told her I was anxious to start helping people as soon as possible, and while that was true enough, I had to be alive in order to do that. Therefore, surviving my upcoming encounter with the mountain lions was paramount.

Unfortunately for me, unless I could acquire the healing abilities of an Amethyst before then, I was likely to be mauled to death. That, in and of itself, was highly motivating, and for the first time in ages, fear hovered over me like ominous, thunder clouds. On a more positive note, at least I was experiencing fear at the thought of my own death instead feeling relief. Conveniently, the hallucinations from the bus accident had stopped and the headaches weren’t quite as bad, so I had to be doing something right. While I was resolute in my decision to spend the rest of my life devoted to protecting others, I was still working on forgiving myself for ignoring a premonition. I needed to release my inner demons and focus on the future, as well as gear up for the fight of my life.

Not to mention, there had been more strange occurrences in our town. Two

more college students had been taken to the hospital, but lucky for them Jessica had paid them a discreet visit and shared her Essence. I regretted taking so long in making my decision to become an Amethyst, because maybe I could have learned something from her sooner. At least I was here now, one hundred percent dedicated. And Jessica was still willing to teach me. In order to have a chance though, time was of the essence – literally. I'd been trying for hours but hadn't sensed a thing.

“Weeks, months, years...that's too long. I need this to happen today,” I said, releasing a monster sigh. “Are you sure about my Essence?” I asked dejectedly.

She shook her head and smiled. “Positive! You're perfect Amethyst material.” Leaning back, she added, “Accepting yourself as more than just a physical being is hard, but this self-doubt stuff will destroy your chances of success. Take a couple deep breaths and chill.”

I swallowed hard and nodded. Several times I'd been on the verge of telling her about my premonitions. I wanted to know if she thought I could heal myself after the cougar attack. But it was the strangest thing; every time I opened my mouth, I had to close it again, because a sudden wave of apprehension tore through my body. It was like some inner instinct prevented me from telling her about my ability. I figured I just needed more time.

She cleared her throat. “I wish I could say I know how you feel, but I don't. Since the day I was born my mother was there to guide me every step of the way. I had explanations even before I had questions. She taught me how to focus, how to share my Essence, and how to heal others with it.” She paused, tucking her hair behind her ears. “Lexi, your gift has always been a part of you too; you just didn't know it. I promise you can do this.”

Plucking a handful of grass, I threw it into the air and watched the pieces flutter onto my lap and over the blanket. “So the only thing delaying my becoming an Amethyst is awareness of my own Essence?”

She nodded, wrapping her arms around her legs she rocked back and forth. “Yes. You need to sense it within yourself. For example, you don't always think about your heart beat, but right now if you concentrate, can you feel it beating in your chest?”

I closed my eyes and blocked out the noises around me. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Okay good. Now you need to focus on becoming aware of everything your body is doing: swallowing, breathing, blinking...” she stopped herself. “Sorry, you know how easily I get carried away.”

“And once I gain this insight into my own Essence, I'll be able to heal people

like you do?” I said my tone skeptical.

“Of course!” She sat straight up and clapped her hands together. “Once you understand how it feels and how it flows, not only will you be able to sense Essence in others, you’ll also be able to direct yours and heal them. Not to mention heal yourself, if need be. You’ll never get sick anymore either. You’ll feel so absolutely, amazingly incredible. But,” she frowned, “self-awareness, the first step, is by far the trickiest.”

“Hmm,” I mused, excited to hear I could heal myself if need be. “Well, how long did it take you? Or were you born aware?” I asked critically.

She laughed good-naturedly. “Oh, I wish. I mean, my mother told me I had it, but...” she leaned closer and whispered, “I hate to admit this, but it took me a long, long time.”

“How long?”

“Well, I’m sure it won’t take you that long...”

“Jessica, quit stalling.”

“A year,” she admitted meekly.

“What? A year?” I gnawed on my lower lip. I knew I had to get this figured out sooner than that. I had probably three months – tops. A ball of anxiety rolled around in the pit of my stomach. “And you think I’m going to grasp my own Essence in a few weeks when I’ve gone 18 years and never known it was there in the first place?” I asked incredulously. Panic caused the hairs on my arms to stand on end. “You’re insane!”

“No. No, I’m not.” She looked at my wide-eyed. “I have complete faith in my teaching abilities and in your Essence.” Silence ensued. Then she giggled and pointed at two kids who were tackling a huge granite boulder like it was a mountain. The boulder was cut and polished at the top, creating a flat edge perfect for sliding down.

A guy with short blonde hair walked by, reminding me of Jason. I hadn’t seen him since he’d abandoned me at lunch, but I’d been contemplating tracking him down at work. A new thought popped into my head when I remembered the heat that sometimes emanated from him. “Hey,” I said excitedly, “what does it feel like when you become aware of, or recognize, another person’s Essence? I mean does it feel hot or something?”

Jessica looked at me strangely and then said with a sharp edge in her voice, “Not usually.” She continued staring me down like she was contemplating what direction she wanted to go with this discussion. “Lexi, it’s hard to describe. I could try to give you some sort of analogy, but I don’t know how helpful or

accurate it would be.”

“Great! Go for it. I’ll take whatever I can get.”

She sighed and thought about it for a long time. “Okay, imagine it’s a blistering hot summer day. Lucky for you, you’re hanging out next to a river, so you jump in and cool down. As the refreshing, cold waters rush around your body, you relax and enjoy the flowing sensations.” She looked at me and tilted her head.

“Got it,” I said eagerly.

“When someone’s Essence is normal, that’s what it feels like.” She rubbed her hands together. “Satisfying and refreshing.” She paused, so I nodded and motioned for her to continue. “Now imagine it’s that same hot afternoon, except there is no river. Your only option is to plunge your feet into a bucket of lukewarm, stagnant water. No flowing currents.” She crinkled her nose and frowned. “That’s what it’s like when you touch someone who is hurt or really depleted of Essence; his or her energy is so low it’s actually distressing to touch them.”

“Oh,” I said with a frown.

She nodded. “Now, let me explain how *your* Essence feels.” She reached out and grabbed my arm. “When I touch you, your Essence rushes, like Niagara Falls. Unstoppable! What’s amazing is that *yours* makes *me* feel energized, and I don’t even need energizing. That’s what it’s like.”

“Really?” I said quietly, and she nodded emphatically.

A loud bark caused us both to turn around at the same time. A black lab with slobber dripping from his jowls was bounding straight for us. Every bone in my body tensed. All I could think about was the Mastiff from the alley. The friendly lab jumped on Jessica, licking her face. His owner ran over and apologized profusely, before scolding the dog and leading him back to the boardwalk.

Jessica just laughed and hollered back, “No worries.”

“Yuck, how can you be so mellow?”

“Oh, I love animals. Besides, a little drooling love never hurt anyone,” she said wiping her face on the edge of the blanket.

An interesting question popped into my mind. “Jess, do animals have Essence too?”

A funny look crossed her face, and her jaw locked. “Well, yes, but it’s different from human Essence.”

“How?”

She bit her lip. “Oh, I don’t know; it’s savage...more carnal, I guess.”

“Weird,” I said. “So have you ever healed an animal?”

She gave me a chilly look and shook her head. “No. We don’t mix human and animal Essence; that can be very dangerous.” Her forehead creased with worry lines. “We can talk more about that later, but now you need to focus on human Essence.” Rarely did she speak in a tone that signaled the conversation was over, but there was definite finality in her voice now.

I nodded. “Okay, no biggie. Just curious.” Finding a small pebble next to the blanket, I tossed it towards the water, but it fell short and bounced across the rocks. “Hey,” I said excitedly and clasped my knees, “do Amethysts have any other abilities?”

She gave me a tight-lipped smile. “What would make you ask something like that?”

Again, I contemplated telling her about my snapshots, but thought better of it when my skin prickled. I sighed and gazed into the bay. “Oh, I don’t know; it seemed like a good idea. Characters in books always do.”

She relaxed and let out a deep breath. Laughing she said, “Lexi, you’re a fiction nut. No, we don’t have any other abilities. We’re extremely fortunate, though; saving lives is not a gift to be taken lightly.”

I nodded in agreement but had the feeling she was trying to convince herself, not me. Secretly, I was disappointed. That would have explained a lot. “Do you ever feel overwhelmed with responsibility because of your ability to heal people? I mean, do you ever wish you were just – normal?” I asked quietly.

She sighed and looked at me thoughtfully. “Oh Lexi, I suppose there are times when I wish my life was simpler. But,” she shook her head slightly, “I stop and realize how lucky I am to have such an extraordinary gift. I’m able to affect so many lives in positive ways...even if most of the time people don’t realize it.” She stopped and pointed to herself. “I know, though, and that’s rewarding.”

“I hear ya,” I said.

She nodded vigorously. “Besides, I don’t even like the word ‘normal.’ It’s overrated and shouldn’t be applied to people. We all have different strengths, weaknesses, faults, and of course problems. Yes, my life is different from others, but it’s wonderful. I’m healthy, happy, and I have an amazing family and great friends. I might be different, but I feel like I’ve been blessed, especially now that I’ve found you.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully, bumping shoulders with her. What she’d said meant more to me than she could ever know. I sat up straight. “You can’t bring someone back from the dead...can you?”

She chuckled. “I wish, but no. I can’t cure terminal illnesses either. My Essence is strong enough to give a person that extra boost in the right direction, like someone who’s going through chemo treatment.”

“Or like someone who’s in a coma?” I asked. With a grim face, she nodded slowly, and I continued, “You’d mentioned something about more people turning up in the same condition, and you were going to need my help. What is that all about?”

Taking a deep breath, she looked down, and fiddled with her bracelet. “Lexi, there’s so much more for me to tell you and teach you. I’m afraid if I get too detailed right now it will overwhelm you and distract you from becoming an Amethyst. I shouldn’t have said all those things when I did.” She glanced up at me pleadingly. Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

She nodded, but I noticed her clenched fists. “The college student that was comatose, he was like that because his Essence was all but gone. Fortunately, a little of my Essence was all it took to get his flowing again – his and the other two more recent victims.” She eyed me warily. “I think we’ll see more incidents in the future, and I have suspicions about what happened to his Essence,” she glanced away, “but I’m not at liberty to talk about it yet. Can you accept that vague explanation for the time being if I promise to give you more details when you’re further along in your training?”

“I guess.” She’d totally piqued my curiosity, and I wondered why she wasn’t at liberty to say anything, but I, of all people, understood the necessity of keeping *some* secrets.

Relief washed over her face, and she draped an arm around me. “Thanks. I promise there will come a time soon when I can tell you everything, and I will need your help.” Drawing away, she smiled and said, “Now, no more questions. It’s time to get back to work. You need to focus.”

Eventually, the sun sank lower in the sky, and we headed home. She dropped me off at my house saying she’d call soon for an update on my progress. I promised to work diligently. Little did she know my life depended on it.

Once inside, I was surprised to find it was already seven thirty. Ally would be begging for an update on the day’s episode of her favorite, real life soap opera: *The Essence of our Lives*. I found a good-sized box waiting for me next to the kitchen table with a note from Ally:

Lexi~

Looks like your aunt's box has arrived. Ben and I will be home after the movie. Don't know what we're seeing yet. I'm all about a chick-flick and he's dead-set on some shoot-em-up action show. (I should have sent U with him). Chicken enchiladas in the oven. U R so lucky to have a best friend that takes care of U! J But U R on dish duty!! Have fun sifting through old books. I'll expect a full report when I get home! Luv ya, Ally

After eating, I spent some time sitting quietly in the middle of the floor, meditating. But still, I had no success in detecting any of the so-called Niagara Falls-like Essence of mine. Frustrated, I took a break and began unpacking the box. A short time later, dust balls were hopping all over my blue and orange bedroom – a Denver Bronco haven. Posters of my favorite players, pennants, bumper stickers, and jerseys pretty much plastered one wall.

I'd uncovered several great books from the box, and most everything was in good condition. In fact, they looked like they hadn't been touched in years. I'd carefully wiped layers of dust away from *The Hobbit*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Dr. Zhivago*. I was now holding a copy of Jason's favorite novel, *The Great Gatsby*. I felt like Christmas morning had arrived early.

Curious to see if the novel had any real value, I spent a few minutes googling and found a couple similar copies had sold between \$4000 and \$8000. I kissed the cover and called my parents with the news, letting them know I had just found tuition coverage. They'd laughed and said ownership of the book would be up for debate. After a discussion about the other books I'd found, and a few questions regarding my job, we finally hung up. Sitting down next to the pile of books on my bed, I reached into the box again and pulled out a couple more novels before pulling out the last item – a primitive, wooden box.

I unhooked the clasp and inspected what I thought might be a sewing box but blew my lips in disappointment at turning up nada. Not even a needle or safety pin lay wedged in the corner. Upon closer examination, I realized the lower section of the box was actually a drawer, which was wedged shut. Nothing I couldn't solve, though. After grabbing a table knife, I gently pried the edges of the drawer loose and gasped in surprise when two thin diaries appeared.

They were both covered with a brownish cloth. I opened the one on the top and found in elegant, cursive writing the words:

This Diary belongs to Rose Mary Campbell 1924 – 1925

I thought back to what I could remember about my mother's side of the

family. Her mom was Grace, and her grandmother had been Lucy. And that's right, she'd never met her great-grandmother Rose.

How incredible was this? In my hands I held the diary of my great-great-grandmother Rose. Goose bumps materialized on my arms. Not sure if I was chilled from the breeze seeping through my screens or a little freaked out from holding someone else's private thoughts in the palm of my hands, I rummaged through my dresser and found my old gray hoodie.

Nestling into the hoard of pillows on my bed, I held the old journal up to my nose and inhaled the musty scent. Running my hand along the spine, I prepared myself for an escape into the world of an ancestor who'd lived in the mid 1920's. After reading several pages, I discovered that for the most part, Grandma Rose was concise and to the point, often writing only two or three sentences. All the entries started with the date and were written in elegant penmanship. Mostly, she described things like the weather, chores, school, birthdays and deaths, or short trips to town.

Yawning through numerous entries, I finally found one that formed a whole paragraph.

October 3rd, 1924

The weather is changing. The winds are strong and the days are cold. Worried about my birthday. Almost 19 and Mama is very upset that I haven't settled down and started a family yet. I know she thinks I'm a burden even though she hasn't said as much. She says I should be nicer to Stewart. She thinks he might propose, and he'd be a good husband. I'm sure he would, but I don't love him. Besides, I can't focus on him right now. The visions won't stop. They come all the time. I don't know what to do or who to tell. Why am I so different from everyone else? It scares me. I always thought eventually they would go away, but they're coming more frequently. I think I'm going crazy!

My jaw dropped and my heart stopped when I read the word *visions*. Sitting straight up, I gripped the edges of the diary. This was incredible! She'd had premonitions too? I'd been lost at sea in a turbulent storm my whole life, and for the first time the beacon shone brightly from the lighthouse.

Hungrily, I turned page after page but found nothing useful. Reading about ironing and mending just wasn't cutting it any more. Occasionally, she'd refer to an incident in which she'd been lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time and had saved someone. Lucky? Ha! I knew exactly how that felt, and there was no luck involved whatsoever. For the next 45 minutes I scanned the whole diary, and much to my chagrin, found nothing useful.

Sirens sounded in the distance, interrupting my thoughts. Soon, they wailed

right outside the house, and red lights reflected across my walls. I wondered what was happening and why my premonitions hadn't triggered for this emergency. So many questions but never any answers.

"Please, please, please," I whispered to myself as I grabbed the second diary along with my water bottle. I curled up in the sphere chair I'd crammed into corner of my room. The first page read:

This Diary belongs to Rose Mary Campbell 1925

"Come on Grandma Rose; give me something good."

Perusing the first several pages, I found nothing helpful; although, she did mention meeting a boy named Gilbert. As I read on, I found that she was dedicating more and more of her time to Gilbert – sounded like she was falling in love. With exasperation, I flipped through a third of the whole journal until I came across a really long entry. My heart beat accelerated, and I smacked my lips together. I knew this was the one I'd been looking for. Grabbing my football pillow off the floor, I hugged it between me and the diary.

April 26, 1925

I am overwhelmed beyond belief. Gilbert is definitely the one for me. Yesterday he took me to the drive-in to see "The Lost World" and we had such a nice time together. But tonight he started talking about premonitions and saving people. I was so surprised that I accidentally spilled soda all over the place. We went down to the lake and talked for hours while the sun set.

What we talked about was even more fascinating. He already knew I was having premonitions, even though I'd never told him so. More importantly, he said there were others like me, and he is one of them. They call themselves Guardians. They see future accidents or deaths, and they are able to change fate and save people. They live their lives like everyone else as far as working and raising children, but they use their gifted sight to protect people from unnecessary death.

Gilbert said I am not a Guardian yet. He called me a Seer. He said I am nearing the time in my life when my body will stop changing – it will reach the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. That is why my premonitions are so frequent. It's part of the progression, and soon I'll need to become a Guardian.

Now this is where it gets confusing. He said that at some point a Seer reaches the point where the visions flow continuously, almost out of control. The visions drain the person of their energy and good judgment is thrown to the wayside. The Seer will start hallucinating and can sometimes even die. This is the crucial time when the person must "link" with a Guardian in order to have the support and strength needed as they transition from being a Seer to a Guardian. If the Seer doesn't link, death quite often follows.

I had so many questions for him. Like, what is linking and how do you do it? And, who are the other Guardians? Or, why me? But it was late, and he'd promised Mama and Papa to have me home. He said I'd learned enough for one night, and he'd explain the rest in due time. I don't have a lot of patience, so I hope he plans on giving me more information right away. For now, I feel so happy I've found someone like me. Even though it all sounds so unbelievable, I've lived with the visions, so I know what he says must be true.

My hands were shaking badly, and I inadvertently dropped the diary in my lap. Why did I feel like I was leaving the real world and entering the twilight zone? I reached for my water bottle and took a long sip. The cold water trickled down my throat and helped ground me to this world. This was crazier than crazy. My Grandma Rose was a Seer, soon to be a Guardian.

So...was I a Seer?

I grabbed the journal, found the page I'd just read, and flipped impatiently to the next passage.

April 27, 1925

Life is amazing. I insisted Gilbert explain things more thoroughly today. He finally agreed and told me all about linking and becoming a Guardian. This is all rather secretive, so I'm keeping it to myself. Besides, with my luck, one of the twins will find my diary and start reading it aloud to Mama.

“Oh crap!” I swore aloud. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Just when it’s getting good.” I kept on reading.

I will be linking with Gilbert eventually. Linking sounds so intimidating, but he said it will be remarkable and that I will gain other special abilities too. Those abilities sound unbelievable, but he assured me they are real. They are what separate the Seers from the Guardians. Once I'm a Guardian, I will be fully committed to saving lives for the rest of my life. Using my visions and abilities will become a priority – more like a need, but thankfully, he will be with me every step of the way.

April 29, 1925

I'm getting married! Gilbert proposed and Mama and Papa approved. We don't want to wait. With my visions becoming increasingly incessant, Gilbert said we will probably need to link within the next couple months. He said he loves me and wants me to be his wife. So it just makes sense to get married and then link. The ceremony is set for June 26th. I know Papa thinks it is too soon, but Mama is overjoyed.

May 2, 1925

I've decided to wear Mama's wedding dress. We are working together to create a new, silk tulle headdress, which will look delightful with my new bobbed haircut, styled just like Louise Brooks. I'm excited about marrying Gilbert. My nerves get the better of me when I think about linking with him. Other than clasping hands, he said linking is less physical and more mental – we'll be using our subconscious – whatever that means.

May 28, 1925

I'm very worried. I don't know what is going on. Gilbert said he will be gone for a couple weeks. He told me to stay close to home and not go wandering around town by myself. He was very anxious. I'm not sure who the Ray-pacs are, but he said they are very dangerous enemies of the Guardians. Apparently, there is much for me to learn, and he promised to share more when he comes back. For now, I will focus on the wedding and pray for his safe return.

Turning the pages rapidly, I was greeted with nothing but emptiness. I'd finally found someone I could relate with, only she was dead, and I was out of entries. I slammed the journal against my leg. Did Guardians still exist? If so, it sounded like I needed to find one soon. What would happen if I didn't link? Then it dawned on me – maybe that's why I'd had visions of my own death, because I would never find someone to link with and was doomed to die.

Dread coiled tightly around my throat, almost suffocating me. Every fiber of my being stretched tight, ready to snap. I'd finally come to terms with, and was eager about, dedicating my life to saving others and becoming an Amethyst – well...if I could survive the mountain lions. But this...this was too much. Now I had to find a Guardian to link with, as well. How was that possible? I could feel defeat mutating in my body, trying to overtake my healthy cells, like a new strain of invasive cancer.

Unable to sit still, I wrote an e-mail to Aunt Louise and asked if the roofers had discovered any more books in the attic. I wasn't about to mention the diaries. No one else in my family had ever talked about premonitions. In fact, besides Ally, my mom was the only one who knew I occasionally had a vision of some impending accident. She just didn't know the full extent to which they occurred. Just as I pushed "send," I heard Ally and Ben come in the front door.

Not more than a minute passed before Ally rushed into my room without knocking. She took one look at the books scattered about and said, "Ohhh do tell, what did you find?" Glancing up at my face, her eyes widened, and she said, "Wow! This is gonna be good. Really good."

Nodding slowly, I walked over to the bed and plopped down, trying to suppress the worry lines creasing my forehead. A swarm of dust balls swirled around me, and I flashed the brown covered journals before her eyes. She still didn't know about the mountain lions, so I didn't want her to realize how scared I was about not finding a Guardian in time. I'd have to tread carefully and keep my emotions in check. Too many secrets. Swallowing hard, and trying to sound upbeat, I said, "Apparently, my Great Grandma Rose also had *premonitions*..."

Ally's eyes became saucers. A burst of buttery theatre popcorn accompanied her as she took a step closer. Rubbing her hands together, she yelled out to Ben, "Honey, I'm gonna talk girl stuff with Lexi for awhile." She turned and winked then shouted again, "A really long while, so you might as well play your PS3." Without waiting for a response she slammed the door shut with her foot and said, "Tell me everything! And tell me now."

CHAPTER 11 – HOPE?

The summer days of late July faded quickly along with some magnificent, crimson sunsets. I spent most of my time trying to become aware of my Essence, even giving yoga a shot, which didn't help a bit. Other times, I worked diligently with Jessica. In the afternoons, we'd amble through Whatcom Falls Park or hike the trails of Sehome Hill. While we walked she was in teacher mode, persistent and supportive. Still, I wasn't sensing a thing and was beginning to fear it might never happen.

I scoured the internet for information on premonitions and Guardians but got no hits on the latter, so I shifted all my attention back on becoming an Amethyst. I figured Grandma Rose hadn't linked until she was 19 or 20, so I probably had some time before finding a Guardian was my top priority. I wished like crazy I could tell Jessica about my premonitions, but I was still experiencing unexplained bouts of anxiety about it, and that always stopped me short.

One afternoon, without warning, Ash appeared at the store about five minutes before my shift was over. Looking temptingly good in tight jeans and a t-shirt, he pointed at me and said, "You, me, and a little adventure. I'll see ya out front in ten, babe."

"What? Hey, wait. Where we goin? Maybe I have plans already. Did you ever think of that?" I yelled out.

Ignoring my string of objections, he called over his shoulder, "Watch out, a feisty woman in uniform always gets my blood racing."

Ten minutes later, I found myself unable to resist his bombastic charm and climbed onto the back of his bike. We took a ride up to Blanchard Mountain where some of his buddies were paragliding off the Samish Overlook. Watching them run and jump off the cliff was heart stopping. Ash said they could fly in the air for hours, even reaching altitudes of more than 10,000 feet. He promised that next time I'd be watching him hit the skies, and the time after that...well, he hoped to persuade me into giving the sport a shot.

"Not a chance," I said.

He regarded me with a steady gaze and said, "One day your life will flash before your eyes, Lexi. Make sure you're living it and not watching it." I wanted to tell him I completely understood what he was talking about, but I didn't. Staring into his striking green eyes, I realized how relaxed and comfortable I

always felt with him. For a minute, I even considered telling *him* about my snapshots and was surprised when I didn't feel any of that anxiety that always stopped me from telling Jessica. In the end, I thought better of that idea, because I certainly didn't want him thinking I was crazy and taking a hike. I enjoyed our casual relationship and found the more time we spent together, the more I liked him. So I kept my secrets locked inside.

A live performance at the Mount Baker Theatre, followed by a home-cooked meal at the Nelson home rounded out the last couple days of July. After dinner, I sat down with Jessica's mom and listened as she described her experiences as an Amethyst. I walked away from the conversation with a few helpful pointers and a renewed sense of hope that I'd join her ranks one day. But mostly, I felt hopeful, because I'd finally found a place where I fit in.

I was thinking about hope when I stopped dead in my tracks just outside the entrance of the Fairhaven grocery store. Grabbing onto one of the green shopping carts for support, I wondered how I'd allowed such idiocy to rule my actions.

"What's up? Are the snapshots coming?" Ally asked with concern.

Wide-eyed, I looked at her and shook my head. In a rush, I said, "No, it's not that. I...I'm not sure this is such a great idea. I know I wanted to see Jason again, but now that we're here I'm totally freakin' out."

Ally dropped her hand and laughed. "Oh that's all? Don't be a coward. You're gonna be fine. Besides, you gotta decide if you want to waste any more time daydreaming about this Jason guy," she scowled, "or start making the moves on Ash." She smiled, and I rolled my eyes. "Come on, *of course* he'll be here. Let's get this settled once and for all." She tugged me forward.

"Wait," I said crossly and dragged her back. "I recognize that tone. What do you mean by, 'Of course he'll be here?'"

"Oh," she said carelessly, twisting a strand of hair around her finger, "I might have called to make sure he was working today." I gave her a dirty look, and she hurried on, "Yep! And the lady that answered the phone even told me," she glanced at her watch, "that he has a lunch break from noon to one. Imagine that – perfect timing."

"What?" I said incredulously. "They aren't supposed to give out that information." She looked at me innocently. I crossed my arms and scolded, "You're sooo bad. No way am I going in there now."

"Oh yes you are." Seizing my arm again, she shoved me through the door. "I'm going to meander slowly through the store looking for the ingredients to

this new Italian sausage and potato recipe. That gives you plenty of time to find Mr. Aqua-Marine Eyes and chat for awhile.”

I put my finger to my lips and shushed her. “Keep your voice down and no more nicknames, please. Oh, and by the way,” I added as an afterthought, “stop being so darn bossy.”

“*Only* if you promise to introduce me once you’ve had time to gaze into his dreamy eyes.”

“You’re such a pill,” I said. “Just get going already.”

She smiled, and with a flip of her auburn hair headed down the closest grocery aisle, swinging her basket a little too jubilantly. Her striped sundress disappeared from view, and I heaved a sigh of relief. I knew the employee break room was accessible through produce, so I headed that way.

Somewhere between the Gala and Fuji apples, I caught a glimpse of Jason from behind, and my heart started pounding. Standing next to the refrigerated salad dressings, he was in a conversation with another employee who was stocking salad kits. Mustering my courage, I took a deep breath and strode towards him.

When I was about five feet away the other employee noticed me and said pleasantly, “Hi, can I help you find something?”

Jason turned around, and when he spotted me his eyes flickered, and his lips parted. He’d lost his rugged outdoorsy edge but had cleaned up well. He looked extremely handsome in a white shirt, royal blue tie, and black slacks. Butterflies overtook my stomach, and I smiled self-consciously. However, his stance suddenly straightened, and he clenched his jaw. Thick lines appeared across his forehead, and I realized he looked angry. My stomach dropped, and I knew I shouldn’t have come.

“Actually Joe,” Jason said possessively, pushing past him, “this customer is mine.” I opened my mouth to comment, but he said in a gruff voice, “Come with me.”

Shrugging, I shook my head and walked past Joe, who looked as confused as I felt. I patted his shoulder, more for my own reassurance than his, and then trailed after Jason with foreboding.

He stopped next to the pistachio bins in a secluded corner of bulk foods and said crossly, “Alex, what are you doing here?”

My shoulders stiffened at his tone. “I’m shopping with Ally,” I said defensively, “and since you’d mentioned you worked here, I thought I’d say hi.” The lines at the corners of his eyes intensified with accusation, making me feel

like a stalker. I quickly blurted out, “But obviously I’ve made a big mistake...so, I’ll take off and let you get back to work.”

“Look,” his voice was hard, “that’s not...” He stopped and raised his hands mid-air. “Is there something you want from me?”

Heat flooded my cheeks. What kind of answer could I possibly give? That I couldn’t stop thinking about him and was desperate to see him again. “I don’t *want* anything.” My lips trembled and I looked down at my ring, studying it hard. I felt like such a fool. “I just wanted to thank you for lunch the other day and make sure everything was okay. The way you bolted after getting that phone call had me worried.”

“Oh, that? That was nothing,” he said with a dismissive wave.

On the verge of tears, I lowered my head and turned away. I didn’t want him to see the hurt shattering my composure and distorting my face. I didn’t want him to stare into the pools of my dark eyes and see I wanted nothing, yet everything from him.

“Wait,” he said, and I froze in place on the hard concrete floor.

A giggling, teenage girl rounded the corner and bumped into me. “Oops, I’m sorry,” she said. Something in my face must have told her it wasn’t a good time, because her lips parted, exposing a set of silver braces, and she clasped her friend’s shirt. “Sofia, I just remembered something I need in the...bakery.” They did an about face and hastened away.

My nose started twitching, and I realized the culprit behind my sudden stuffiness was the open bin of chocolates. I blamed my watery eyes and swelling throat on allergies, but deep down I knew it was more than that. I mustered up enough courage to speak, but I still didn’t turn and face him. “Jason,” I said in a shaky voice, “I can tell when my company is unwanted. It was wrong of me to show up here. I’m sorry I misread your lunch invitation as something other than a charity invite.” When he didn’t respond I continued. “I enjoyed our lunch together, and I apologize for seeing a potential friendship between us, one that is obviously not mutually perceived.” Dang, it hurt to say that. I drew in a deep breath, trying to quell the sick feeling in the bottom of my stomach and the strange tug on my heart. No way was I going to admit I’d been contemplating more than friendship. Those darn aqua-marine eyes of his had me all screwed up.

My little soliloquy was met with dead silence. Soft music played over the speakers, and I could hear Joe talking to a customer in the produce department. After an eternity, Jason still hadn’t spoken a word, and I became increasingly

uncomfortable. Not only was I disappointed, but my pride lay splattered all over the floor. I'd have to be careful not to slip and fall in it on the way out. With no intention of looking back, I shook my head and started to walk away before tears commenced. Ally was right; I needed to get over him and focus on Ash.

I didn't even hear him move. He was fast, like an eagle swooping down to seize its prey. Having gone no more than three steps, I tensed when two hands, which felt more like talons, landed roughly on my shoulders and propelled me around so quickly I almost lost my balance. He pulled me so far into his personal space that even I felt awkward. He brought his face within inches of mine and said firmly, "You're so wrong." His breathing was erratic. Little blasts of Wintergreen brushed against my face, as his mouth, and those...those surprisingly close lips, drew uneven breaths. Unblinking, his eyes slashed through my already shattered self-esteem. Even though I felt weak in the knees, a cozy warm feeling originated where he held my shoulders and began permeating throughout my body, giving me an unusual sense of solace and...and peace. Gazing directly into his aqua-marine eyes was a mistake. Intense and stunning, they dominated my entire being.

"I am?" I asked in confusion.

"Alex," he said sternly and shook me a little bit. "I invited you to lunch, because you intrigue me, and I wanted to know more about you."

"You did?" My voice sounded funny, like it was coming from far away. He nodded and I tried to break his gaze but found I couldn't.

"I did...I do have an interest in you. It's just that I...I have a very complicated life. I cannot be more than a friend...and I wouldn't be a very good one of those, either. I don't want you thinking worse of me than you already do. It would be better if we didn't..." He broke off suddenly, released my shoulders, and with a slight shove pushed me backwards. He shook out his hands like he'd just pulled them out of a boiling pot of water.

The intense heat waves I'd been experiencing scattered abruptly, leaving behind a cold, empty feeling. At least I snapped out of my reverie, and as rational thought rebounded, I thought of how upset Ally would be with me. She'd tell me it was time to call a spade a spade.

"Well," I said haughtily, "you certainly don't have to make a bunch of excuses. I'm not so desperate that I need to beg for friends, you know."

"Of course you don't..." he started to say.

"I'm not done yet." I pointed my finger in his face. Where had this burst of energy come from? I didn't know, but I was ready to dish it out. "I enjoyed our

lunch together, right up until the part where you ditched me. Before that, I'd had a nice time. I thought we'd established a friendship. Obviously, I was wrong. Today, you've been nothing but rude and hurtful and..."

"Alex," he interrupted, "that was not my intention. I'm really sorry." At least he had the dignity to look sincere.

"Sure you are." I balled my hands into fists to keep them from shaking.

"You caught me by surprise, but I had no right to speak to you like I did. What you have to understand is that while I might personally enjoy spending time with you, for your own sake, I've decided it wouldn't be fair to you." He rubbed his hand over his cheek and across his jaw before continuing, "Like I said before, my life is complicated, and I have commitments elsewhere." His eyes pleaded with me to accept his explanation.

I crossed my arms and snorted. "So nice of you to make *my* decisions for me. And by the way, your excuses are lame. But look, if you're life is so full you don't need any more friends, or...or you have some domineering girlfriend who has you on such a short leash you can't have female friends..."

His eyes widened, and he coughed. He even looked like he was trying to suppress a chuckle. I stopped talking and looked at him in disbelief. Even though he appeared remorseful, he burst into laughter.

A girl's high-pitched voice bombarded the intercom system. "Can I get a price check on seven, please? A price check on seven. Thank you."

Even though I was irritated, the whole situation suddenly seemed humorous. I started laughing along with him. I barely knew him, yet here we were bickering like a married couple. What was wrong with us? When we both came to our senses and stood looking uncertainly at one another, I said, "What the heck was that all about?"

He caught his breath, "I don't know. Nothing. Everything. Or maybe you're just impressive when you're mad." After I gave him a condescending look, he said, "I'm sorry, and I totally deserved everything you dished out. Actually, I'm surprised you didn't utter a few other choice words. But I'm sorry, and I promise I understand."

"I wonder, do you really?" I asked, on the defensive again. Before he could respond, I said, "Look, I can make my own decisions about who I want to hang out with. The real question is this," I said tersely, "are you trying to convince me to leave you alone because you have a legitimate reason I shouldn't be around you, or is it because you'd really rather be rid of me? Give it to me straight. I can handle the truth."

He looked injured, like I'd just delivered an undeserving blow. "Alex, I think you know the answer to that. You intrigue me and provoke my mind, but you also knock me off balance." He studied me for a moment. "I do have my reasons, good, logical reasons why you should steer clear of me. If I make my decisions based on logic, then I stay in control—"

"Too bad for you," I interrupted, shaking my head. "Your black and white, logical world must be awfully stark. I, on the other hand, believe there is always a gray area..."

"No big surprise there," he muttered and looked at me cross-eyed before saying assertively, "I bet you let your emotions guide you through life and you never take into account what's rational."

"That's right," I said proudly. "And you know what?" I made a face and kept talking. "All that gray area is really very colorful; in fact, it's also quite reliable and definitely more pleasant."

He grunted. "You may think so, but people who let emotions dominate their actions get hurt easier and fall harder."

"Well, that may be so," I said, crossing my arms, "but we also bounce back quicker, forgive faster, and love deeper." Suddenly embarrassed, I stopped talking and wondered just how and why the conversation had taken such a philosophical turn.

He regarded me with that piercing gaze, the one he'd mastered so artfully. Finally, in a resigned tone he said, "What I was originally trying to say before we got off on this tangent is that I rarely allow emotions to play a role in my decision making. But for some reason, when it comes to you, I find myself tripping over them. You invade my senses and my logic, and I'm not sure how to handle that."

"That's good," I said with a slight smile, "you obviously need to be thrown off balance. Maybe you need a few more *illogical* friends in your life," I suggested. A look of amused disbelief flickered across his face. "In fact, I'm sure that's it. You're a little too tightly wound," I persisted, suppressing humor into a grin. "Do you know when I first got here today, I wasn't sure if I was hoping you *would* be here or hoping you *wouldn't* be here."

"And now that you've seen me, I hate to hear the verdict."

I raised one eyebrow. "Still out. But once I step off this emotional roller coaster and regain my balance," I smiled, "I'm sure I'll be ready for another ride."

"Definitely more forgiving than I'd be."

“Too true,” I said with a smirk. “We emotionally-driven people tend to be that way.” His lips curved into a soft smile. Feeling unsure about where we stood, I sighed and said, “I think we’ve exhausted this conversation. I should probably get going and let you get back to work.”

“Alex,” he said softly, “I can’t make any promises, and I still think you’d be better off not knowing me, what with my bad manners and all,” he said sheepishly, “but I’d like us to be friends – if you still want to, that is.” He looked at me anxiously.

Managing a casual shrug, I said, “You’re not making a lot of sense, and I don’t know what these issues are that you think you have, but don’t worry, I was born patient. And despite your abrupt good-byes and your personal space issues, I still find you interesting.” He was completely unaware that my heart was fluttering, and I wanted nothing more than to grab hold of him by the tie, pull him closer, and kiss him.

He smiled and ran his hand down his tie. “That’s a good thing, I hope.”

Tilting my head, I nodded. “Oh hey, I promised Ally I’d introduce you. Do you have a couple more minutes?”

A slow grin spread across his face. “Sure.” He bit his lip, studying me thoughtfully. “I don’t know. There’s just something about you.”

How strange, that’s what I always said about him. I gave him a funny look. “Yeah, you too.”

“Come on. Let’s go find her,” he said walking past. “Have you told her you might not want to be a teach...” As we rounded the corner he stopped, and his mouth dropped open.

I followed his stunned gaze over the top of the Walla Walla onion display and saw Ally and Jessica’s sister, Madison, talking excitedly and heading our direction. They didn’t look like they’d spotted us yet. Jason looked at me. Then his eyes darted all around, as if he was looking for an escape route. I had no idea what his problem was, but I wasn’t overly joyed about the prospect of introducing him to Madison. As usual, she was striking. A satiny green dress accentuated all her curves, and a pair of absurdly high heels emphasized her never-ending legs.

Jason whipped his head around and stared at me with a look of chagrin. “Alex, I need to explain—” Abruptly, he broke off and clasped his hands behind his blonde head.

“Just the two people I’m looking for and you happen to be right here together. Strange coincidence, don’t ya think?” Madison expelled in an agitated

voice. A pair of sunglasses, resting artfully on top of her head, held back her jet black hair, but a few loose strands hung around her face. If Aphrodite suddenly appeared next to her, there was no doubt in my mind Madison would send the Goddess spiraling back to Mount Olympus.

She glided up to Jason, wrapped an arm around his shoulder in an intimate manner, and greeted him enthusiastically. His shoulders tightened, and he moved slightly the other way, but she took no notice. I glanced at Ally, who shrugged and whose blue eyes were wide open with wonder.

“Jason,” Madison said and ran her hand over the back of his head, “I’d like you to meet my friend Ally.” She gestured in Ally’s direction, and Ally slipped the grocery basket onto her left arm then reached out with her right hand.

He seemed self composed again and smiled warmly as they shook hands. Before he could utter a greeting, Madison turned towards me and said in a smooth voice, “And I think it’s about time you met Le—”

“Yes, Alex and I have already met,” he interrupted, a forced smile upon his lips.

Instantly, Madison removed her hand from his neck, crossed her arms, and corrected him. “What are you talking about? This is *Lexi*. You know...”

“Lexi?” He frowned. His voice sounded distant when he muttered my name again. “Lexi? You mean Jessica’s Lexi?” His voice grew louder with each word.

“Well, of course I mean Jessica’s Lexi. Hello! What do you mean you’ve already met? And why are you calling her Alex?” she asked disdainfully.

They were carrying on as if Ally and I weren’t even present. I could tell Ally was way past her tolerance level, and I was completely shocked Jason and Madison knew each other. For some reason that knowledge made the knot in the pit of my stomach grow larger and pull a little tighter. My bigger concern was the intimate manner in which Madison had placed her arm around Jason. Oh, wait a minute...tell me that was not a leash I saw hanging from her handbag.

A loud male voice boomed over the intercom system, “I need a wet clean-up with glass on aisle eight please. A wet clean-up with glass on aisle eight. Thank you.”

After the announcement, Jason stepped closer to me and a little further away from Madison. My heart surged at the unexpected gesture. The lines at the corner of his mouth deepened, and he said, “Not that this is any of your concern, but I met Alex at Village Books.”

As that wasn’t exactly the truth either, my head jerked slightly and I caught Ally’s eye. Her dubious expression mimicked my feelings. Why would he omit

the truth about our original encounter on the sidewalk?

“And *Alex* is the only name I know her by. Since she’s never corrected me, I assume that is also her name.” Dark gazes abruptly shifted my direction.

Madison advanced. “Would you care to enlighten us?”

I felt as if I was being cross-examined on a witness stand for a crime I didn’t commit.

Ally all but dropped her grocery basket and sighed loudly. “Oh for heaven’s sake! It’s not a big deal. You see,” she pointed at me, “Lexi’s friends *usually* call her Lexi, but some of the people closest to her call her Alex. They are both short for Alexandria. Simple nicknames.” She proceeded to brush something off her arm, indicating there was nothing else to add. I nodded with appreciation. Of course, Ally also knew the only person who really called me Alex was my dad. I silently thanked her for not sharing that little tidbit.

Jason stood looking at me with a crazed expression, while Madison turned and faced me. “Well, I’ve never heard anyone call you that. Not even my sister who you’re supposedly such good friends with,” she complained.

Heat flushed my cheeks, but this time with anger. Before I could respond Jason said sharply, “Give it a rest Madison. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

That shut her up, and the only sound that came out of her mouth was a “Humph.” After readjusting her stance, she placed one hand on her hip and stood with renewed confidence. “Well, whatever. I suppose it’s not important what name you use.” She grabbed her sunglasses and shook out her hair. “I’m just surprised you already know each other. Jason’s heard so much about the famous *Lexi* from Jessica. Yet, he’s never even mentioned *you* before.”

“Excuse me,” a gruff voice interrupted our conversation. A series of beeps followed, and we all stepped aside, allowing an older man in an electric shopping cart to roll past us.

Madison flicked her hand my way and paused dramatically before proceeding. “I came to surprise Jason on his lunch break.” She flashed him a wide smile and said, “So when I ran into Ally and learned that Lexi was here too, I knew it was the perfect opportunity to introduce you both to my *boyfriend*.”

At the word “boyfriend” my world came crashing down. The realization that they were a couple made me feel sick and insanely jealous. I looked over at him for reassurance – a sign they weren’t really together. But his gaze was directed solely at Madison, and it was filled with cold animosity. She was smiling demurely back at him, and they appeared to be having some kind of mental

battle. Unfortunately, at that moment, she was kicking his butt.

Unable to help myself, I said incredulously, “Jason is your boyfriend?”

Madison slowly raised one brow and smiled. Giving me that, he’s mine and I’ll kill you if you so much as glance at him look, she replied smoothly, “Well, of course. We even...”

Jason cut her off and countered in a chilly tone, “Madison.”

She shrugged off his warning and lifted her chin but didn’t utter a word. His tone held daggers, and I don’t think she wanted them unleashed, because they would have been thrown directly at her heart. And I knew for a fact that he had good aim.

He turned towards me, and when our eyes locked he said in a desperate voice, “Alex, there’s more to this, and what Madison said is not entirely accurate. There is so much more you need to understand first. I told you my life is complicated, and this is part of it.” Madison snorted loudly, and he shot her a look that promised violence. She lost some of her stature and her lips trembled slightly, but she held her shoulders high.

Ally intervened and brought the whole uncomfortable exchange to a close. “We really need to finish shopping and get home. Besides, it sounds like you two have some serious issues to resolve. Might be a good idea if you do that.” She feigned a smile and seized my arm. I shouldn’t have been surprised by her blatant advice, but I was. She bid them farewell and propelled me out of the produce department before I could say good-bye.

Once we were out of earshot, I said, “What is going on with those two?”

She shrugged. “No idea, but you didn’t look so good, so I decided it was time for us to split. Are you okay?”

“I think so,” I said, concentrating on her face.

“Should we grab the last couple items on my list or get out of here?”

“I’m fine,” I assured her. “Let’s get your stuff.”

“Okay, but let me know if you change your mind,” she said as she pulled her crinkled grocery list out of the basket. While searching the spices for Savory, I began feeling sick to my stomach and made a mad dash for the bathrooms. Upon finding the public restroom occupied, I made my way up the stairwell in the backroom to the ‘Employees Only’ restroom. Being an older store, the bathroom had yet to be remodeled, but it was clean and smelled fruity. I splashed some cold water on my face and took a drink from the faucet.

How was it possible that Jason was involved with none other than Miss Ice Queen herself? Madison might look like the Goddess of Beauty on the outside,

but on the inside she was none other than Narnia's evil White Witch. Any hope of a relationship with him was diminishing fast; although...he had made it sound like he and Madison weren't really together. Well, they were either together or they weren't. But if he was with Madison, who probably utilized a ball and chain rather than a leash, what did that say about his taste in women?

Maybe he was right. Maybe I should keep my distance. I stood with the back of my head pressed against the cold, pink-tiled wall and closed my eyes. Under the florescent lights, I listened to the water running through pipes in the wall and waited for my bout of nausea to pass. After several minutes, I headed back down the stairs but heard raised voices coming from the break room. Voices I recognized.

"Just when were you planning on telling the rest of us about *Alex*? Is she some little secret you thought you could keep from everyone?" Madison's voice echoed loudly.

Jason responded in a restrained but cold tone, "Please keep your voice down Madison. Anyone walking through the back room could hear you."

"I don't care who hears me right now. I'm so pissed off, and I want answers from you."

Not usually prone to eavesdropping, I quickly decided there was no way I going to forgo this heated exchange, especially when I was the main topic of discussion. Maybe I'd learn what was going on between them. Of course, I'd ask Jessica for inside information later, but with Madison being her older sister, I didn't know how forthcoming she'd be. Besides, I didn't want to place her in an awkward situation. Tip-toeing, I eased my way along the back stock and sunk into a crouching position behind a pallet of canned vegetables.

"I was not keeping Alex a secret," Jason said in a calm voice. "I was just biding time until I had more information about her. This is a big deal. Her life will change forever once she finds out about her capabilities and learns about us. Except of course she already has, since she's Jessica's *Lexi*."

I almost fell over. My capabilities? So he knew about Amethysts. There was a pause, so I peeked around the shrink wrapped cans and found I had a partial view. Jason was shaking his head and banging his fist into his hand.

"Not to mention," he continued, "Jessica has been so excited about finding *Lexi*, I didn't want to burst her bubble." He smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I should have realized...I should have known Lexi and Alex were the same person. The odds of finding two of them at the same time are near impossible."

Now my interest was piqued. Why had he been keeping me a secret? Did he think he'd found another Amethyst, and now, as it turned out, I was the same person? This complicated mess was almost comical.

"I can't believe it," Madison said, suddenly hysterical. With her arms crossed, she drummed her fingers against her designer purse and clicked one heel pointedly against the floor. With deep malice she said, "You...you have a thing for her, don't you? That's what this is really about. You've got to be kidding me! *She* is why you've been acting so strangely lately. Now this makes more sense. This doesn't even have anything to do with her being an Amethyst, does it?"

Ah ha! I was right after all. Apparently, he was in on the Nelson family secrets. But if he knew about Amethysts, what did that say about him? There was so much more going on here, and I was the one in the dark.

Madison dug into him again. "You've been so preoccupied...so distant, and I couldn't figure out why. Tell me you weren't actually thinking you could have some kind of relationship with her." She laughed. "Not like that would be possible anyways." Sounding satisfied with her own answer, she drilled him again. "What could you possibly see in her? Other than she appears to have strong Essence..."

My ears strained to get his answer to that question.

"*Appears* to? Don't kid yourself Madison. Her Essence is *extraordinary*."

"Whatever," Madison snapped. "You're the one who's been acting *extraordinarily* strange. You still haven't told me what your deal is with her."

He growled. His face was stone cold and humorless. "I have not been acting *strange*. And how I feel about someone has nothing to do with you. Just so you know, I don't have any kind of relationship with her. And even if I did, it wouldn't be any of your business." He slammed one fist onto the table and silverware jingled.

"This is beyond belief," she hissed. "You can fool yourself, but you can't fool me. She's the reason you're blocking me out. She's why you didn't respond right away when I needed you."

What the heck was she talking about now?

She smacked the table just as forcefully and pointed at him accusingly. "I think it is my business to know about any and all of your relationships. This affects all of us, especially me. And with the recent killings in B.C., we need to be on our guard – one hundred percent focused and ready. Which you obviously are not. Not to mention, we're probably gonna need her when the time comes.

But if you've got her all lovesick over you, then she's not going to be able to..."

"Madison, this discussion is over. We both need to cool off and talk about this when you have your emotions under control."

There he went again; the voice of reason. I was totally confused. I knew four people had been murdered in B.C. the week before. Two of the bodies were a total mess and the other two had been virtually untouched. They'd died of unknown causes. But what did that have to do with Madison and Jason? Obviously, they needed me because of my Essence, but for what?

She wasn't about to let the conversation end on his terms. Pushing him further, she said with disgust, "This little...little *nobody* is why you're suddenly reading *Pride and Prejudice*."

My heart leapt. Was he really reading my favorite novel? I smiled to myself, despite the heated and baffling discussion only a few feet away, the butterflies were back in my stomach.

Through clenched teeth he said, "You are way out of line. First of all, I am more than aware of what we're facing, and I am always on guard. Secondly, what I do with my personal life is mine to decide. I do not need your input. Nor would I consider asking for your opinion, let alone your permission. You and I might be connected; we work together as a team, but beyond that my life is my own. We are no more than that, so stop parading around in public acting like we're a couple. We're not, and I don't appreciate it. You need to back off, or we aren't gonna be able to work together anymore." His body was quivering. He stepped back, pulled out a chair, and collapsed into it.

Madison's face looked crushed. Actually, she looked like she'd just had her heart ripped out. I knew without a doubt, that at that moment, I'd just become her mortal enemy. She inhaled slowly, drew her shoulders up, and said with chilly satisfaction, "Fine. So, you have some sort of silly infatuation. But you know it will never work between the two of you. It's impossible. And it wouldn't be fair to her, or the rest of us, to even consider it. But more importantly, you better not get side-tracked..." She kept talking but started drifting towards the door as she spoke.

I knew it was time to make my escape before she stormed out of the break room and caught me. Quickly, I snuck back around the pallets and headed to the front end. I found Ally in the check stand sliding her debit card through the payment machine, so I grabbed her grocery bag and bolted for the door.

"Geez, what's going on now?" she asked, following me out.

"I'll fill you in on the way home."

CHAPTER 12 – OR HOPELESS?

The brief eavesdropping stint left me with more questions than answers. During our walk home from the store, I followed Ally's suggestion and called Jessica but got her voice mail. I left a message about my awkward run-in with Madison and Jason and asked her to call me back ASAP.

"We knew Jessica had more to tell you, but who would have guessed she knew Jason or that it would involve him? Apparently, there's a whole lot more going on than we ever imagined," Ally said. "Come to think of it, it's pretty obvious there's a lot more to *all* of them. I keep thinking about how fast and proficient Max, Madison, and Laci were at that apartment fire."

"I know, right?" I said, switching the heavy grocery bag to my other hand. "They were so fast, too." I pondered for a moment. "Maybe Jessica doesn't think I can handle the whole truth. All this business about how I need to find my own Essence before she can give me any more information seems absurd. Then again, maybe she just doesn't completely trust me yet."

A convertible red Corvette sped past blaring a rap song. Ally covered her ears and shook her head. She looked at me and laughed. "Dang! That guy's gonna need hearing aids. I think that was Ludacris."

"Yeah, my eardrums are shot."

"No, silly. I mean I think the artist was Ludacris."

"Oh." I laughed and bumped into her. "What scares me is that you even know that."

"I'm just an incredible wealth of knowledge," she joked.

A short time later we made it home. The small yard surrounding our yellow house was abloom with white and yellow daisies. A few minutes later as we stepped onto our oval splotch of front lawn, which Ben kept neatly trimmed, only because Ally insisted, she stopped and looked at me nervously.

"Okay, what's bugging you?" I asked.

Ally dipped her head. "I know we can't talk about this when we go inside, because Ben is home. I know how private you are about your personal stuff, especially the premonitions, and I get that. I've never shared anything with Ben, but I know he suspects something." I nodded, and she bit her lower lip. "I mean how many times have we been in the right place at the right time and saved people from some accidental death?"

“Too many to count,” I said quietly.

Her hand moved to the gold chain at her throat, and she began twisting it. “Well, Ben has commented several times that he doesn’t believe in coincidence, especially perpetual coincidences. I don’t know, but I guess I was hoping you’d consider telling him about your premonitions.” She sighed deeply. “Oh Lex, I’m going to marry the man, and I feel so deceptive – always lying to him...” She dropped her hand and groaned.

Guilt impeded my airways. Finally, I said, “I hear what you’re saying, Ally. Asking you to keep so many secrets from him hasn’t been very fair of me. I’ve been thinking about this too, and you’re right, we should tell him. We could use his support.” I reached out and caught her hand. Her face perked up and her eyes brightened. “Give me a week or two. I’ll see if I can get some more information out of Jessica, and then you and I can sit down with Ben, and we’ll tell him everything – swearing him to secrecy, of course.”

She smiled, relief sweeping over her features as she hugged me. “Thanks, Lex. You know I love ya. And you know you can trust him. Besides,” her eyes sparkled, “watching the expression on his face once we’ve completely blown his mind away – priceless!” She laughed as we walked into the house.

We only had a few hours before the three of us were off to watch Ash and Kai at band practice. I needed something to take my mind off Jason and Madison, so I busied myself checking e-mail. According to Aunt Frances, no other books had been found in her attic. Next, I searched the web for articles pertaining to the recent killings in B.C., and that’s when Jessica called me back. She sounded completely unlike herself and said she’d practically had her head ripped off while listening to Madison’s version of the whole story. She told me not to worry about Madison though, because all she needed was time to cool down.

“Listen, Lexi, the relationship between Jason and Madison is complicated.” Her voice echoed through my cell.

“That’s what everyone keeps saying,” I said with exasperation. “I think there’s a lot more going on here. More than just Amethysts...something else that has to do with all of you. Am I right?” I said into the phone and leaned back in my chair.

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“And those four people killed in B.C., they’re connected somehow, too?”

I was greeted with dead silence, and then she finally said, “Listen, I’m making plans to straighten this all out. Can you wait a week, and I’ll explain

everything?”

“Why so long?”

“I just got out to the island. We’re having that huge family reunion of sorts, and we won’t be back until next weekend. But I promise I’ll tell you everything then. In fact, I’ll need to have Max, Madison, Jason, and Laci help me, because what I need to explain, I can’t do alone. Anyways, it’s gonna take all of us for it to make sense. Not to mention, we’ll need privacy, so I’ll come up with a good place we can meet.”

I drummed a pencil against the armrest. I’d completely forgotten about her being out of town. “Jessica, you’re making no sense here.” I was way past frustrated and didn’t want to wait another minute, but I couldn’t really demand she leave the reunion – the one her family was hosting on their very own private island in the San Juan’s.

She cleared her throat. “And just so you know, you’re right; being an Amethyst is much more involved. I’d really hoped to wait and talk through everything after you’d discovered your own Essence.” She paused and sighed deeply. “But in light of everything that’s happened, it can’t wait any longer. After we’ve given you the full story, the whole truth, then you’ll have to decide how involved you want to become and if you want to support our cause or not. We’re facing something awful...”

“Like the murders across the border?”

“Something like that, but it’s sooo much more involved. I don’t want you to worry right now. Everything’s fine; I promise. Soon enough, you’ll know everything there is to know.” I was quiet for a long time, and she said, “Lexi? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I muttered. “Just confused and honestly, a little pissed off.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” she said. “Can you wait this out?”

“It’s not like you’ve given me a lot of options here,” I said with exasperation. “And I will expect the whole truth, no sugar-coating or leaving out details.”

“Of course, and I promise it will be worth the wait and you’ll want to join us,” she said.

After our conversation, I felt completely drained. A big part of me dreaded finding out their secrets, while another part of me couldn’t wait to be part of it. While I’d been talking with Jessica, I’d received a text from Ash: Lexi – I’m expecting U at band practice 2nite. B here!

That was the first I’d heard from him since our trip to Blanchard Mountain. Unbelievable! He was so imperious! I shook my head. Despite any negative

thoughts I might have about him, at least Ash was the one person I'd met in Bellingham whom I could count on to be normal. Just the fact that I considered Ash normal seemed hysterical. Watching his band practice was just the deterrent I needed.

A couple hours later, Ally, Ben, and I found ourselves standing in front of an old Victorian house on Holly Street. The house was painted in accordance with tradition, decorated in three different colors to embellish the architectural details; deep purple, light lavender, and stark white. The house's structural design was beautiful, with high pointed peaks and shingles arranged in a decorative pattern. Cutaway bay windows and columns added to its charm, but the paint was chipping, and boards were hanging loose – a dead giveaway it was a college rental.

Climbing the steps to an elaborate front porch, we found two beat up old couches. Yet another sign it was occupied by students. Blocked with plywood, the door itself wasn't visible, but a big note tacked to one of the planks read: Use Kitchen Door. Under the words an arrow pointed left. We walked around the house, wading through giant dandelions while trying to avoid killer thistles with one inch thorns. Obviously, gardening was not a priority. Not that I'd expect as much from five guys living in a bachelor pad.

Kai greeted us eagerly at the kitchen door and ushered us into the house. The high ceilings made the room feel bigger than it was. "Sorry 'bout the mess. Just ignore it and follow me." He swiped away any worries with a wave of his hand.

Exchanging disgusted looks, Ally plugged her nose, and I screwed up my face. The sink was piled high. Every inch of countertop was plastered with milk-stained glasses, dirty silverware, scummy dishes, empty beer bottles, and old pizza boxes. I snickered and nudged Ally when I spotted a Costco sized supply of paper plates on a rickety kitchen table – a table in which one broken leg was being stabilized by a stack of magazines.

Kai showed us into a living room jam-packed with couches. Giant windows with tic-tac-toe grids allowed tons of natural light into the room but drew attention to the scratched wood floors. On our left, we found everyone gathered in another huge room at the bottom of a winding staircase. Band equipment was crowded into a tight circle at the center of the room, and a couple guys were setting up ladders.

Kai introduced us to his girlfriend Laney, his brother Noa, Noa's girlfriend Anya, his roommate Matt, Matt's girlfriend Rachel, and to his final roommate Patrick, who he informed us was currently single and on the open market.

“You’re gonna have to give us time to keep all your names straight,” I said.

“Already got ‘em down,” Ben said proudly as he pointed to each person, calling out their names.

“You’re awesome,” Rachel said wide-eyed.

“Careful, it’ll just go to his head,” Ally commented with a smile.

“Where’s Ash?” I asked, scanning their faces.

Noa positioned his ladder against the wall and said, “Not home yet.”

“As usual,” Laney griped.

“Yeah,” Kai laughed, “he rarely makes it in time to help set up, but he promised he’d be back in time for practice.”

We spent several minutes talking and joking around. The band members were pretty boisterous, and the girls much quieter, with the exception of Kai’s girlfriend Laney. She held her own and shot gibes right back at the guys. She looked of Hawaiian descent with her tanned skin, black hair, and ebony eyes. Everyone was dressed casual in jeans and t-shirts; my kind of crowd. Noa thanked us for coming early to help out.

“The idea,” Matt said motioning to both rooms, “is to soundproof all the walls before we set up for practice. Then the house will be ready for the party tomorrow night.”

“Lexi?” Laney said. “Will you help me collect pillows from upstairs while everyone else gets started down here?”

“Sure,” I said eagerly and followed her up the walnut staircase.

“We tape pillows and couch cushions to all the walls and windows in the band room and living room,” she explained. “They make perfect insulating material, and the neighbors have yet to complain about loud music. Usually,” she laughed and shot me a knowing look, “it’s the obnoxious, drunk people who hang out in the yard that the neighbors gripe about.”

We went from bedroom to bedroom collecting small rugs and pillows, while everyone else worked downstairs on assembling them against the walls with some serious duct tape. We stepped into the fifth bedroom at the back end of the upper floor, and I was surprised to find it sparkling clean.

“This is Ash’s room,” Laney said contemptuously. “You’ll find he’s very organized in his personal space. But this is about the only place he’s so orderly. In the rest of his life he’s sporadic, chaotic, and infuriating.”

“Wow, I’m amazed,” I muttered, also noting he was not high on her list of favorite people.

She smiled adroitly and reached to open a closet door in the back of his

room. “Since he has this huge bonus closet, we keep all the extra pillows we’ve picked up from Value Village and The Goodwill in here.”

While she dug pillows out of the closet and handed them to me, I surveyed his room with interest. His slanted, wood ceilings were covered with posters of music artists, like Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, and Zeppelin. A couple mattresses thrown on the floor comprised his bed, and an elaborate multi-media center sat against one wall. One corner of the room held a tall rack with hundreds of CD’s, and in another sat four different electric guitars resting safely on stands. I wondered if the spiral notebooks stacked precariously on a small desk contained his written music and lyrics.

“Okay, I think this is it,” Laney said and heaved out two more pillows before slamming the closet door. She slapped her hands together and brushed off her yellow shirt.

We made a couple trips to the top of the stairs and tossed the last of the pillows over the banister before joining everyone on the main floor. After about an hour and a half, we had the house set up. We piled most of the, now cushionless, couches on the front porch, so there would be plenty of standing room during the party. But for us current spectators, we left two couches facing the band room.

As if on cue, Ash strolled in just as the band members began tuning their instruments. He pulled off his green helmet, shook out his long hair, and inspected the sound-proofing job we’d done. He tapped his helmet with one hand and said, “Not bad, not bad. I might have done the windows a little differently, but hey, whatever works.”

“Oh, give it up pretty boy,” Kai called out.

Noa gave him a vicious smile and said, “Yeah you worthless, no good piece of s---! Go grab your guitar and let’s hit it.” Ash gave him the finger, and we all laughed at their exchange.

With a lot of hand rolling and a showy bow, Ash acknowledged all of us on the couches. “Glad I could provide you all with some pre-show entertainment.” He spotted me and ambled over in his usual confident stride. Reaching out, he tilted my chin and said, “I see you got my message.” Shaking my head loose, I shrugged, but he narrowed his eyes and continued, “Good thing too...”

I snorted and studied his stubbly face. “It’s obvious you think too highly of yourself, or you would have been here helping. My advice to you,” I jabbed him in the chest, “is to show up early and do more than your share of the work next time, because there was some talk of finding a new lead singer,” I said smugly,

trying not to crack a smile.

His eyebrows twitched, and he pressed his lips together. “Sounds like you’re on your game today. Should be fun.” He motioned towards the guys and smiled wildly. “These guys love me; they wouldn’t think of dumping me.”

Several snorts erupted from the band room. “Don’t be so sure about that,” Noa called out.

“So...you got any requests?” He looked me straight in the eye. “I’m here to please.” He smiled wickedly and winked, but I rolled my eyes to show I was not amused. “I’m talkin’ about song requests, of course.” His strange green and hazel-spotted eyes danced. He brushed a finger along my cheek before strolling casually towards the stairs, not bothering to wait for my response.

“Yo, Ash,” I said loudly when he reached the third step. I don’t know what came over me, but I felt the need to rattle him or at least to even the score. Then again, maybe I simply wanted to beat him at his own game for once. He halted in his tracks and looked at me suspiciously. I think he was surprised at my audacity to call him out in front of an audience – and we had everyone’s undivided attention. I studied my fingernails with feigned interest, just to keep him waiting a bit longer. Walking the razor’s edge with him was dangerous; understanding why I did it, was another matter completely. In my best slow and sultry voice I said, “As a matter of fact, I do have a request.”

“Yeah?” he said hesitantly, raising one brow. The way his mouth hung slightly open, I knew I had him hooked.

“While I find your black and white guitar smooth and shiny...” his eyes rounded as he came to the realization I’d been in his room long enough to study his personal possessions. “I think...” I sat down on the edge of the couch and tapped my finger against my lips, “tonight I’m feeling partial to your blood red, Fender Stratocaster. There’s just something more *pleasing*, no, more *provocative* about its sleek, sexy body...”

I let my last words hang in the air and was greatly rewarded when his jaw dropped and he grabbed the handrail. Sputtering, he was unable to generate a snappy retort and instead shook his head and tromped up the stairs. Appalled at myself, I covered my mouth and gasped. The guys were whistling and giving each other high-fives. The girls were looking at me like I was insane, and Ben and Ally were laughing their heads off.

“Way to go, Lexi,” Matt said, and I gave him a conspiratorial wink. While we’d been soundproofing the house, I’d talked with Matt quite extensively about Ash’s guitars. During our discussion, he’d given me valuable information. Little

had I known that short chat would yield such powerful ammunition. All was good though; Ash was due for a fumble.

Still, I needed to tread carefully. Our flirtatious friendship was about all I could handle with him. My emotions and feelings were so mixed up. Candid, opinionated, and adventurous Ash, who wasn't afraid to voice his opinion, always made me laugh. Fascinating and impenetrable Jason, who kept his feelings boxed away and who had some sort of big secret, one which involved Madison, always sent my heart racing...

Loud booms from the bass reverberated around the room as the amplifier kicked in, and my thoughts diverted to the music. The band started with a serious oldie: Thin Lizzy's *Jailbreak*. Listening to the band was awesome; they had great chemistry and sounded good together. They played with enthusiasm and Ash moved all over the place – standing next to Noa for awhile and then Patrick. They performed more oldies with some of my favorite's being Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*, Guns N' Roses' *Sweet Child o' Mine*, and my all time favorite, AC-DC's *You Shook Me All Night Long*.

The music was deafening, and I loved every minute of it. Ash's voice belted out the hard-core rock-n-roll songs, and he subdued his vocal cords for the time-honored slow songs. With his tight-fitting, expensive jeans, luminous eyes, and haunting voice, it was hard not to find this lead singer extremely attractive. Every time he made eye contact with me, I blushed. What girl wouldn't be mesmerized by the singer of a live band?

Listening to their original songs was exciting. The lyrics were thoughtful and the sounds their instruments made were unique, without a lot of repetitive notes. After an hour or so, they took turns entertaining us with individual solos. Matt's fingers were blazingly fast on his guitar, Kai ripped the drums apart, and Noa and Patrick performed an awesome duet with the bass guitar and keyboards. Ash just sat back and rocked out while the others played. After a few more group songs, they decided to take a break while Laney and Rachel made a pizza run. As everyone started heading towards the front porch to cool down, I rose off the couch to follow, but Ash asked me to hang out for a couple more minutes.

"I have a song I'd like to play for you; I'm positive you'll like this one," he said with a shrewd smile. Sitting casually on a barstool, with one foot resting on the ground and the other on the cross bars, he strummed a few notes on his red guitar. Glancing up, he winked and then focused on his guitar strings. Instantly, I recognized the song *Always With Me, Always With You*, a Satriani guitar solo. I stared in amazement. When no one else was home, I cranked that song on Ben's

stereo system full blast. I couldn't believe Ash had chosen it.

When he finished, he set the guitar down gently and strolled towards me. He didn't stop until he was extremely close. With his face only inches from mine, I had a hard time controlling my breathing. I finally managed to ask, "Did you know that song was one of my favorites?"

A deliberate smile parted his lips. "I guessed," he said in a low, shifty voice. Drawing in a sharp breath, I quipped, "No you didn't."

With my heart pounding and my fingers nervously tracing the edge of the couch, I could actually feel the blood pulsating through my veins. Jessica would have been proud of my inner awareness at that moment. Too bad I couldn't feel my Essence flowing. No doubt it was streaming with intensity.

He inched closer and said in a low voice, "Some of us stoop so low as to *snoop* through other people's rooms," he drew his eyebrows in, "and others of us just listen to personal iPods that happen to be lying around."

"Huh?" I murmured, because I didn't have the will power to question or challenge him at that moment. I was distracted by his nearness and the fact that I could feel his breath on my face.

In a velvet smooth voice he said, "You're still single." Even though it was more of a statement than a question, I nodded slightly and was keenly aware his lips were dangerously close to mine. I could smell him – the sweat on his body from playing and singing in the hot room mixed with an intoxicating scent, an expensive men's cologne, no doubt. It rendered me dizzy. I needed fresh air; I needed to go outside – to escape.

He tipped his head and brushed his lips against mine, lightly, barely touching, teasing me as if with a soft, silken feather. I stood completely still, and rather than closing my eyes, a normal reaction, I opened them even wider and stared directly into his gleaming hazel-green ones. Involuntarily, I shuddered, and my lips moved against his. But his mouth curled into a wicked grin, and he withdrew. The contact had been so brief; I didn't think I could even consider it a kiss.

He took a small step backwards and traced my lips with his finger, pressing harder than he had with his lips. In an edgy voice he said, "Wonder if that qualifies as *pleasing* or *provocative*?" With a shrug, he winked and started for the door.

"How about more like impertinent? Or insolent? And maybe..." I started to say with fire in my tone, but he whipped around, reached for my arm, and hauled me towards him.

“How about no more fancy words,” he said and crushed his lips against mine.

Completely taken off guard, I squirmed in his arms, but he gripped me tighter. His hands slid down my back, sending a stream of shock waves through my body. I trembled as his hands advanced down the small of my back. His fingertips stopped precariously low on my waistline. When he began nibbling on my lips, my mouth parted in astonishment, and I gasped. Warmth flooded through my body as he crushed his lips against mine. With smoldering eyes, he returned my gaze and seized the opportunity to assault my mouth with his tongue. I whimpered once, and my eyelids snapped shut.

He pushed me against the wall with his body, one hand caressing my face, the other grasping my head and tugging on my hair. Hot, flustered, and caught in the moment, I relinquished to his compelling touch and consented when his tongue connected with mine. With our lips pressed together, our tongues fought frantically as if starved for pleasure. I wrapped my arms around him and surrendered to his demands. His body was solid, strong, and pressing into mine with hot intensity. He kissed me fervently, for how long I don't know, but I responded with unabashed need. When we broke apart my body wavered. I was breathless, exhausted from being so completely dominated.

Shamefully though, when I opened my eyes and found the ones staring back at me were hazel-green, not aqua-marine, I felt a wave of disappointment. That's when guilt washed over me. Guilt because I was thinking about Jason when I'd just kissed Ash. And even though the kiss had been audacious just like Ash, and I'd thoroughly enjoyed it, I was still thinking of Jason. It's not like the excitement and energy wasn't there with Ash; he just wasn't Jason. Could I even give Ash a fair shot if Jason was in my life? I only hoped Ash couldn't read my emotions.

“That was definitely provocative,” he said, grasping my hands.

“Ash...” I said quietly, biting my lower lip, “I'm not ready...”

He placed his finger over my lips. “Shhh...Lexi, don't say anything. I know you're rebelling against a relationship right now for whatever reason. I'm not really looking for one either, but that doesn't mean we can't explore a little passion once in awhile. Besides, now you'll know what you have to look forward to when you do change your mind – if I'm not already taken by then...” He let his sentence trail off and grinned. “Let's go check on that pizza, before you throw all caution to the wind and beg me to seduce you.” He chuckled and tugged on my arm.

Tongue-tied, I fought to regain my composure as he lead me outside, where we drew several interested looks. We ate pizza and hung out for awhile before the band regrouped for the second half of their practice session. When we said our good-byes, Noa told us to come back for the party. There was no way I'd be ready for another romantic confrontation with Ash that soon. Luckily, I had a late shift at work and had to decline, but Ben and Ally said they'd drop by.

From the porch Ash threw out a few parting words of warning, "Lexi, no more snooping around, or next time, we won't stop at *provocative*."

"I wasn't..." I started to say but could see he was teasing me. "You're hopeless," I said with a chuckle, because with Ash, humor was inescapable.

With his signature cocky grin plastered on his face, he said, "I know. Plan on seeing me soon."

CHAPTER 13 – TEAMWORK

Talk about Déjà vu! Monday morning I found myself standing outside the Fairhaven store clinging to one of the green shopping carts, trying to muster up enough courage to walk through the front doors. I'd worked all weekend, but at the end of my shift the night before, Dave Wheeler, my store manager, had informed me that the Fairhaven store needed to borrow a checker for the week. I didn't know if it was by sheer coincidence or fate, but Dave decided to send me.

My nine o'clock shift started in ten minutes, and I was mentally preparing myself for the inevitable – coming face to face with Jason at some point. I'd thought a lot about my last encounter with him, and the more I'd thought about it, the more my blood boiled. His unpredictable mood swings and secrets were exhausting, and I wondered if I shouldn't heed his original warnings and steer clear of him until the weekend.

After clocking in, I returned a wave to the employee who was driving a rider pallet around the back room like it was a toy. Walking through produce, I realized the store was probably only a third the size of my home store, so the departments were much more condensed but also cozier. Lights were on in the Bellingham Credit Union, a separate business at the front of the store. The bank employee was scurrying around behind the metal bars like she was behind schedule.

Consisting of only about six check stands, the small front end appeared empty of customers and empty of a morning checker. Even though the bakery was on the other side of the store, the aroma of fresh, baked breads permeated the front end. As I approached check stand #4, a blonde head popped up, and I found myself staring into a pair of familiar, stunning eyes. My heart lurched and my pulse quickened. Shaking my head, I couldn't help from biting painfully on my lower lip. Whenever I saw him, I had no control over how my body reacted physically. It was annoying. What's worse, is that Fate was definitely amusing herself with my life.

Jason sized me up while I leaned against the counter gaping at him. Holding several empty cardboard boxes, he'd obviously been stocking the candy bars and gum. Clean shaven and dapper in his dark slacks and silky tie, he looked handsome and sophisticated. He didn't appear the least bit startled to see me at his store in my work uniform. I, on the other hand, was taken off guard. I'd

never had time to ask him which department he worked in. Now I knew. Not only that, but his gold nametag, which denoted he'd been an employee of the month, had his full name: **Jason Walker**, followed by the words: **Customer Service Manager**.

"Hi, Alex," he said smoothly, dropping the empty cardboard boxes into a blue bin.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said hotly. "Was this your crazy idea? Dragging me out of my own store and over to yours so you could mess with my head some more?" The more I thought about his games, the angrier I became.

"Alex," he said and glanced around the empty front end, "I'm not trying to mess with your head. I know I've given you no reason to believe me, and I understand your frustration. Really, I do, and I take full responsibility for all the confusion, especially all the drama with Madison."

I crossed my arms to indicate I wasn't buying it.

He sighed. "I know you're ticked off at me. I would be too, if I were you. But I promise you, this weekend we'll explain everything, and then you can decide how you feel about all of us...and about our friendship." He scratched his head.

"So, as of right now, we're friends?" I said with a chilly smile.

"Of course," he said with a wounded expression. "I thought we'd established that already. I haven't changed my mind, have you?" He actually looked taken aback, like the thought had never crossed his mind before now.

"No," I said and shifted my feet. "I just need to be clear where we stand today – in case you change your mind tomorrow," I added spitefully. I studied his intense aqua-marine eyes, which were the same color as his tie, and ironically enough, the same color as my scarf. We looked like we'd coordinated our color scheme beforehand. As usual, he stole my breath away, but I didn't relent. Breaking the silence, I said, "I'm just a bit *P.O.'d*."

He responded immediately. "I know. I can hear it in your voice and see it in your body movements. Do you think you can work alongside me all week without our relationship interfering with your job? Or is this too much to handle?"

I pursed my lips. Relationship? He had some nerve.

"I'll understand if you can't stay, though. I can find some way to switch you with another checker from your store. Then you could avoid me altogether." He dropped his hands in dismay.

My heart softened, and as I pondered what to do, I surveyed the colorful floral department off to my right. As John Denver's version of *Leaving on a Jet*

Plane flowed from the speakers, all I could focus on were the words, “Oh babe, I hate to go.” My conscience told me the smartest thing to do would be to keep my distance, but my emotions were begging me not to walk away. Even though Jason was totally infuriating, my feelings were already deeply vested, and I wanted to be near him.

“As far as I’m concerned,” I said with determination, “what’s done is done. Dave and Merrick have already gone to enough trouble switching schedules around and making this work. The least I can do is stick around and be a team player *for their sakes*,” I emphasized. “I want them to know I’m reliable, so just send me to my check stand and I’ll get to work.” Trying my best to act indifferent, I studied an end display of Campbell’s Soup with interest.

His lips vibrated, like he’d been holding his breath under water for a long time. “Thanks. It means a lot to hear you say that.”

“Don’t push it.”

He acquiesced with a quick salute. “How about check stand #3?”

“Fine,” I said, as a sudden surge of customers emerged from the aisles. When we were standing alone in a desolate front end again, I turned to him, and said, “So we work together all week, acting like everything is perfectly normal, but this weekend I ask all the questions and you promise to be forthcoming with straight answers?”

His nod was slight, and he looked worried, but he said candidly, “Yes. Believe me, it will be a relief for both of us. I’m anxious to explain; I don’t like secrets any more than you do.”

Pressing my hands together, I said softly, “Jason, I’d feel a whole lot better if you’d answer a couple questions right now...and answer them honestly,” I added.

He hesitated, looked me straight in the eyes, and said quietly, “I’ve been asked not to talk about any of this with you until we’re all together this weekend.”

“Oh, by whom? Madison?” I sneered and shook my head angrily.

“Actually, by Max’s parents and my own,” he said calmly.

“Huh?” That surprised me. What did his parents have to do with this?

Exiting his check stand, he came and leaned over mine. In a low, husky voice he said, “But if you really need me to, I will.”

My heart beat quickened, and I said imploringly, “Please, just a couple.”

He nodded once, frown lines overtaking his smooth forehead. “Okay.”

I regarded his perfectly balanced face, which in my opinion was flawless.

Keeping my voice neutral, I said, “The first one is easy. Are you dating Madison?”

He looked relieved. “What? No! We have a strong...friendship of sorts, but we are not a couple. Never have been and never will be.”

Nervously locking my hands together behind my back, I nodded. “Jessica thinks I’m an Amethyst, do you?”

He raised his eyebrows this time but answered calmly, “Yes, I do.”

I’d expected that response since I’d overheard his discussion with Madison, but I needed to start with that question so I could ask the next one. I touched his shoulder, and he blinked hard. In the most normal tone I could muster, I said, “Is that the only reason you’ve shown an interest in me?”

His irises flared. “No, Alex. It’s not.” He glanced at my hand on his shoulder. “You being an Amethyst is...well, it’s...it’s just part of who you are, and it makes...it makes our relationship complicated.”

“Why?” I asked. He gave me a desperate look and shook his head slowly, so I acquiesced. “Okay...I’ll wait, but that’s the first question I’ll be expecting you to answer.” I dropped my hand and turned my head at voices drifting towards us, signaling it was time to get to work.

A steady stream of customers continued throughout the entire day, and intermittently Jason and I would chat – always keeping the topics neutral. The next couple days brought much of the same, and during down times I engaged in simple, non-committal conversations with him and the other checkers. Despite remaining low-key, I was counting down the days. Now that I knew his family was also involved, I was dying to know what their involvement was.

Wednesday afternoon proved interesting. While Jason was on his lunch break, Ash sauntered into the store. Once he spotted me, he marched right over and demanded to know why I’d switched stores without bothering to tell him. Conveniently, I was customerless. After I’d filled him in on the short-term changes in my work schedule he mellowed out.

After finding out my shift ended at seven o’clock, he announced, “You’ll want to run home and change, because I’ll be picking you up a half hour after that.”

Remembering the steamy moment in his living room brought a rush of heat to my cheeks. “Why?” I asked and scanned the front end. It suddenly struck me that I didn’t want to introduce Jason and Ash to each other – could get awkward in a hurry.

Giving me a hard look, he said, “Just be ready.” In a saucy tone he added,

“Motorcycles, picnics, and sunsets – ring any bells?”

He turned slightly and threw a flashy smile Kendra’s way. Standing in the check stand next to mine, she’d been ogling him with her big brown eyes. Rather pallid and plain looking, I imagined she wasn’t used to a lot of male attention, because after he smiled at her, she turned beet red and almost keeled over.

With a wink, Ash turned on his heel and called, “See ya ladies.” He strutted out the door in his Diesel jeans.

A couple minutes later, when we were in between customers, Kendra said excitedly, “Wow, your boyfriend is a hottie! And how romantic – a motorcycle, a picnic, and a sunset. You are soooooo lucky.”

“Wait a minute,” I interjected. “He is not my boyfriend.”

“Who’s not your boyfriend?” asked a deep voice from behind, and I whipped my head around to find Jason gazing at me with a puzzled expression.

Beating me to the punch, Kendra burst into an overzealous, detailed account of Ash’s visit. Listening to her, anyone would have thought Ash and I were seriously involved, and that he was the most romantic guy on earth. As she sprayed orange-scented sanitizer all over the conveyer belt, she gushed over Ash’s physical attributes. She stopped cleaning, held the bottle in midair, and asked dreamily, “Where did you find him?”

Luckily, a squeaky cart rolled into her check stand, and I was spared a response. “You’ll have to give me all the details later,” she whispered.

Shaking my head with disbelief, I glanced at Jason who was now banging his pencil against the front end clipboard. Looking extremely agitated, he demanded, “So how about I ask you a couple questions?”

Lightly tugging on my silver drop earring, I responded with a weak, “Okay.”

“Are you dating this Ash guy?”

“No,” I said slowly. “He’s a friend, who...”

“Who wants to be more than a friend?” Jason supplied, looking at me crossways.

“Probably,” I said, as he looked at me skeptically and grunted. “Okay, I would say yes, but he knows I’m not ready for a relationship just yet.”

“Mmm-hmm, and what do you mean by *just yet*?”

“Just that,” I countered with a pretentious smile.

“Are you interested in him?”

“As a friend, yes. More than that, I don’t know. My interests might lie elsewhere.” I bit my tongue at that confession, but he still didn’t seem satisfied. Hurriedly, I said, “Aren’t I due for a ten minute break?”

“Alex.”

“Well, aren’t I?” I persisted, and he nodded. “Great!” I gave him a triumphant smile and logged off my computer.

“But Alex...” he said, and I thought I could hear his teeth grinding.

“Hmm?” I mumbled as I grabbed my water bottle.

With a very solemn expression, he said, “This discussion is not over by a long shot. I don’t like being in the dark.”

I let out a derisive snort. “Ha! Welcome to my world.” Turning on my heels, I headed for the break room. Abruptly, I stopped mid-stride, turned back, and added, “Of course, you’ll only be in the dark for another week. By then my feelings might be clearer, and maybe I’ll even share them with you.” I spun around and sped off, but I thought I heard him muttering something about motorcycles being heavily overrated.

Thursday morning I was deep in the middle of an order when my customer ran back to grab a bottle of dish soap. Monotonously scanning items, I tuned out the repetitive beeps and worried about Ash’s strange behavior the night before. He’d seemed extremely preoccupied during our picnic dinner. Not only had he kept his distance, he’d also had a hard time finishing his sentences or talking coherently. When I’d called him on it, he’d apologized and explained he was having trouble sleeping at night and wasn’t feeling “physically right.” Another word he’d used was “stifled.” When I’d suggested a visit to the doctor, he’d rejected that idea immediately. He’d taken me by surprise when he’d said he was leaving town to take care of some financial matters. He’d also said I wouldn’t see him for a couple weeks, because he was going camping with some friends after his trip. Without any romantic advances other than a hug that lasted several minutes, he’d made me promise to take care of myself and told me he’d call me when he got back. Speechless and dismayed, I’d watched him ride away.

Of course, I didn’t have much time to worry about Ash. In between work and concentrating on finding my own Essence, I was busy devoting my thoughts to Jason and his mysteries. During our intermittent conversations, I’d learned a lot about him. Besides being an avid reader and hiker, he enjoyed boating, and he played on a soccer team. I was most impressed to learn he’d been training in the martial arts for 13 years and was a brown belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Apparently, that was only one step away from black belt. He said it normally took 16 years to reach that stage. Adventurous and accomplished, it sounded like he lived a very full life.

He riddled me with questions until he found out that I’d been on the swim

team in high school and that I enjoyed woodworking. He was surprised I'd been a red belt in Tae Kwon Do but had chosen to quit.

"You should really consider starting up again. The benefits are phenomenal," he said, as we restocked the standing cashew displays at the ends of our check stands. "Self-defense, mental clarity, and physical fitness just to name a few," he said with a show of three fingers.

"Great," I said and shoved several bags onto the bottom rack. "Are you saying I need to get in shape?"

"Of course not." He frowned. "You look..." His eyes caught mine. "You look...I just meant..." He stuttered, all tongue-tied.

Chuckling, I said, "Don't worry about it. I know what you meant."

"Oh, okay. Well good," he said uncertainly.

"One thing's for sure. I'm a master black belt at burning toast," I admitted.

He laughed. "You don't cook?"

"You wouldn't want me to," I said honestly.

"Well, I'm a great cook," he said proudly.

"Why am I not surprised?"

A short time later, he blocked off my check stand with the Sorry this Lane is Closed sign and told me to take my 10 minute break. I stepped outside for some fresh air where forget-me-not blue skies and scattered cotton ball clouds greeted me. Rays of sun soaked into my skin as I readjusted my hair clip. When I turned to walk back inside the store, I was struck with a sudden wave of dizziness and a pain in my head. I closed my eyes as I felt the snapshots coming on strong. A swirling of colors appeared behind my eyelids, colors forming into images:

two shady looking men wearing baseball caps

a gun in the hands of the man with the green baseball cap

a crying child in a blue shirt

the gun pointed at the child in the blue shirt

the Credit Union sign above the bank inside the store

Panic seized my heart. An armed robbery was going down in the bank, and a child was going to be in the line of fire. I dashed through the front door and charged towards the bank. Fortunately, I still had time. There were three customers awaiting service but no children or men with baseball caps were in sight. Heaving a sigh of relief, I played with the possibility of telling Jason about my premonition. Maybe he'd believe me. Why not? He already thought I was an

Amethyst, and that seemed more implausible than an ability to see the future.

As I turned to leave, a lady carrying a screaming toddler, who was having a full blown tantrum, entered the bank behind me. My mouth dropped in alarm, because the blue-shirted toddler was the one from my snapshots. I must have looked sympathetic, because the mother walked up behind me and started rambling on about the terrible twos. While listening to her, I started playing peek-a-boo with the little boy, and he stopped screaming. Meanwhile, in my head, I was trying to formulate a plan. The little boy seemed to be enjoying sticking his tongue out at me, and I contemplated how I was going to get them out of the bank.

Thankfully, the little guy solved that problem for me when a minor blast exploded in his pants. Instantly, it was like a stink bomb had gone off in the bank. Exasperated, the mother asked, “Do you know if the store has a changing station?”

“Sure does,” I replied with relief and gave her directions to the bathroom. “You might stop by the bakery afterwards, and they’ll give your little boy a free cookie,” I suggested.

Her nose crinkled, and she waved her hand in front of her face. “Thank you so much,” she said and hurried out of the bank.

Happy to have them out of harm’s way, I plopped down on a soft, red chair and buried my face in my hands. A couple minutes later, my head popped up, and I carefully studied my surroundings. By normal standards, the bank was small. The waiting area was only about 16 feet across by 12 feet deep. One blonde teller was working the desk, and her line held two customers besides the one she was waiting on. Grasping a mustard yellow purse, the little old lady at the front of the line tapped her walking cane against the flat weave carpet. The second customer, an older gentleman with a big pot belly kept checking his watch. Neither one looked like they’d be of any assistance in an armed robbery; I could only hope they’d be gone by then.

Uncertain about my next move, I rose from the chair and stopped to readjust my hairclip again. Mumbling to myself, I nearly choked on my own breath when a man with a black windbreaker and green baseball cap walked right into the bank and stood directly behind me. Every muscle in my body went rigid. His thick, bushy eyebrows narrowed and touched together in the center of his forehead and his beady, black eyes sized me up. Immediately, I turned and faced forward. Compelled to maintain a place in line, I hoped to be a buffer between the man and the people in front of me in case he pulled out his gun.

Since I hadn't seen myself in the snapshots, I determined I wasn't in danger of dying – I hoped. With my hands clasped together, tapping incessantly against my chin, I looked around for a possible weapon but was quickly discouraged. I didn't think jabbing an ink pen into Mr. Beady's eyes or shoving deposit slips down his throat would stop him; the gun was likely to misfire in that situation.

My whole body jerked when an arm slid around my shoulder and a raspy voice said in my ear, "Don't make a sound and don't move, or," I felt something jab into my left side, "this here gun is likely to go off. Do ya understand?" I nodded, and he said roughly in my ear, "You just keep facing forward. Act normal, and follow my directions. Any funny business and I pull the trigger. You cooperate and do what I say, and I'll let you walk away. Now nod your head if you understand." I was trembling but managed to bob my head up and down again. His rancid breath clung to my nose, and I gag-coughed as he pushed the barrel of the gun a little deeper into my side and said, "Good."

Beads of sweat dripped down the small of my back, and blood coursed through my veins. I was trying hard to remain calm, and even though my body was totally paralyzed, random thoughts zipped through my head a mile a minute. First, I glanced up at the bank clock and realized my 10 minute break was over. Would Jason start paging me to the front end when I didn't return? Second, I wondered where the guy with the red baseball cap was. Lastly, there was the question of whether or not *he* also carried a weapon. The customer at the counter said good-bye to the teller, and we moved forward one spot in line.

I heard Jason's voice calling me from the entrance of the bank, and I almost cried out a warning. Tilting my head, I said in a low, wavering voice, "My boss is calling me."

Mr. Beady Eyes said roughly, "Turn around and answer him, but make it good. If he comes in here I'm taking you out first and him second."

With a shaky smile, I turned and made direct eye contact with Jason. As airily and as sweetly as I could, I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Walker." Jason's head snapped back a few inches, and his eyes narrowed, so I said hurriedly, "I needed to deposit my paycheck, and I ran into my...uncle here." I smiled and glanced up at my captor, or rather, my would be uncle.

He gave Jason a brief nod and a muffled, "Hi."

Then I added, "I shouldn't be much longer. Can you just give me a couple more m-minutes." My jaw dropped open, and I stuttered, because my eyes landed on a red baseball cap. A bearded monster of a man had just walked into the bank; he was maybe 6' 5" or taller. As the gun poked into my rib cage with

increased pressure, my eyes drifted back to Jason.

Perceiving my failed attempt at a smile, Jason took one step forward like he was about to pounce. Calmly, I pursed my lips together and shot my eyes downwards where the gun was settled against my hip, hoping to send him a message.

Jaw set rigid, Jason gave the barest of nods and blinked hard, twice. In a fiery but unwavering tone, like the one he'd used on Madison when he'd been furious with her, he said, "Lexi, you have five minutes." He gazed at the bank's clock and nodded. "I'm glad you ran into your uncle, but I need you back in the check stand ASAP. Max is off in five minutes and needs to get to his Dojo, so hurry it up." With that he nodded, turned on his heel, and exited the bank.

Okay, he definitely knew something was up. Not only had he called me Lexi, which he never did, but he'd also said I'd be replacing Max, who didn't work at this store. Besides that, he'd used the word Dojo. My adrenaline raced into hyper-speed as I glanced at the clock; it was exactly 9:30 a.m. Jason was up to something, and I figured whatever it was would become apparent in another five minutes.

"Good job, *Lexi*," a patronizing voice leered into my ear. Smoker's breath inundated me, and I tried not to retch. "Let's just hope for your sake," he snorted, "I don't have to take you as a hostage." His body shook with laughter next to mine, and I prayed he didn't accidentally pull the trigger.

After what felt like an eternity, the old lady ambled away from the counter, fiddling with the clasp on her old-fashioned purse. The pot-bellied man stepped forward. We were next.

Mr. Beady Eyes shoved a folded piece of paper and a reusable, cloth grocery bag into my hands. "When we get up there you hand this note to the teller. After she reads it I want you to put the bag up there too. Got it Lexi?"

"Y-yes," I choked out. We stood in silence for several minutes. Eventually, I looked at the clock which read 9:34 am. If I was right, in one minute the... That's when I heard little footsteps pounding across the floor behind me.

I whipped around as a loud, squealing toddler shouted, "Peek-a-boo, peek-a-boo."

My captor and I watched, as the toddler in the blue shirt, dodged away from his mother and ran towards us with his little fingers pointing directly at me. I was astonished to see them already back inside the bank. That diaper mess should have taken days to clean up. How could they be marching straight into danger once again? Fearing for his little life, I knew it was time to act.

Mr. Beady Eyes jerked, and I felt the gun shift against my side. Seizing the opportunity, I jumped away from him while swinging the grocery bag into his face. Momentarily stunned, he clawed at his face with his free hand. I tried to kick his arm so he'd drop the gun, but I missed and kicked him in the groin. I'd never had good aim. A loud roar burst forth from his mouth as he doubled over in pain, but his gun-wielding hand whipped into the air. I lunged sideways, taking the toddler down with me.

The gun went off, and all pandemonium broke loose. Everyone in the bank hit the ground. People in the store started screaming, their footsteps slapping the tile floor as they ran in all directions. The toddler's mother fell to the floor screaming, "My baby! My baby!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the man with the red baseball cap pull out a gun. Swinging his arm wildly around the bank, he seemed undecided on a target. Before he could take aim, a body in a white shirt knocked him over with some sort of spinning roundhouse kick. The force of impact knocked the gun loose and sent it spiraling all the way over to the pot-bellied man who was lying face down on the floor by the teller's window. He lifted his head, grabbed the gun, and slid it under his belly before resuming his defensive position. Okay, I'd judged wrong; that man had great instincts.

The criminal with the red cap was trying to stand up, but Jason thrust his knee into the man's back and pinned him down. The little toddler was squirming underneath my body and crying loudly. His mother managed to slide her way over to me, and I passed him into her protective arms. With her back towards the gunmen, she covered her child with the rest of her body.

I rolled over in time to see Mr. Beady Eyes stagger his way to a standing position. He held his groin area with one hand, his red face contorted in pain. When we made eye contact his thin lips curled into an evil grin. Growling, he raised his shaky hand and aimed directly at me.

Jason yelled loudly, "Alex, move!"

The sound of his voice propelled me into action. Tucking my head under my arm, I managed to slide a couple feet towards the front of the bank and further away from the mother and child. I heard the bullet whistle by and "thunk" loudly as it lodged itself in the wall above me. Fear rose sharply from my gut, and my teeth slammed together. I whipped my head around and Mr. Beady Eyes shot me a venomous look and aimed again.

Splitting his lips apart, he snarled, "Say good-bye to Lexi."

My mouth dropped in horror, and my eyes sought out Jason. In a split

second, he rendered the red capped man unconscious with a lethal blow to the neck. I watched in shock as he came hurtling towards Mr. Beady Eyes with incredible speed. Flying through the air in another kicking position, his foot made contact with Mr. Beady Eyes' upper torso, but not before the gun fired.

I didn't know where the bullet landed, but no one screamed in pain. Jason's fist connected with Mr. Beady Eyes' face, knocking the low-life flat on his back with blood spurting from his nose. Petrified, I watched as Jason landed next to him in a rough heap.

Sirens screamed from afar and people continued shouting and running around in a panic. I crawled over to Jason and cried out in alarm. His white shirt was blotched with bright red spots and his sleeve was absorbing blood faster than the Magic Sponge. I almost fainted in relief when he moved. Reaching over with his right hand, he applied pressure to his left shoulder where the last bullet had found a home.

He opened his brilliant eyes, flashed me a grin, and said breathlessly, "Thank God you're okay, Alex. Where's the gun?"

Hurriedly, I searched the area and spotted it on the floor next to the circular table. "There," I said and pointed.

"Good," he said. "Go get it, and bring it to me." Following his instructions, I lifted the gun off the floor like it was a rattlesnake ready to strike. I'd never held one before, and it felt vile. Carefully, I carried it back to Jason. He opened the chamber with obvious know how, took out the bullets, and crammed them into his pocket.

"We make a good team." Wincing, he covered his shoulder and closed his eyes.

"Jason," I cried out, and grabbed his face. "You've been shot, and there's blood everywhere." I rested one hand under his chin and gripped his leg with the other. Loose hair hung in my face as I'd lost my clip somewhere along the way. "That bullet was meant for me, not you."

Flinching, he said, "Alex, just calm down and look at me." Tearfully, I looked into his eyes. Through gritted teeth, he said, "Listen, you've healed me before with your touch; you just didn't know it. After the truck hit me--"

"What?" I interrupted, backing away. "No, no. Ally and I gave you CPR and..."

"No, Alex. *You* saved me with the power of your touch that day – your Essence. And you can heal my wound now, before the paramedics arrive."

I shook my head fiercely in disagreement. "No, that's not possible." My

voice quavered.

“Listen. I think the bullet went all the way through my shoulder, because the back of my shirt feels wet. Can you reach back and check?”

Chewing my bottom lip almost raw, I reached my hand around and found that his shirt felt soggy. When I pulled my hand away it was covered in his blood. Tears pooled in my eyes, clouding my vision.

“Alex!” He demanded my attention. Quickly undoing the top buttons, he pulled his shirt away from his shoulder, exposing the wound. “Place your hands on my shoulder and focus on healing. I know you can do it.”

Compelled to obey him, I carefully placed one hand over the point of entry and the other over the exit wound. Closing my eyes, I shut out the world around me: the yelling, the blaring sirens, the footsteps racing around the store, and the scent of gun powder mixed with fresh blood. I focused solely on Jason. My fingertips started to tingle, and my palms felt warmer. I willed my body to pass along its energy so I could heal his injured shoulder.

My heart pounded wildly, battering my chest as if trying to break free. Blood pumped madly through my veins, sending my pulse into an erratic, unpredictable tempo. Completely in tune with my vitals, I suddenly became aware of another streaming current – only this one was stronger, much more formidable. Gasping in surprise, I jerked and almost toppled over backwards. I could feel my Essence flowing – strong, like a tidal wave emanating, gushing through, yet also around my body! My eyes opened wide with shock, and excitement tore through me as I gazed into Jason’s eyes.

Jessica was right, my Essence felt like an energy force to be reckoned with. It flooded throughout my entire body in a steady, vibrant rhythm. My Essence was like a natural life-force, one continuous ball of power needing no physical organ to make it produce and perform. I couldn’t believe I’d never felt it before. Now it seemed so obvious, so present, and so accessible.

Excitedly, I put a hand on Jason’s cheek and gushed, “I can feel my Essence! It’s incredible. And I think I can help...I mean, I know I can heal you.”

He smiled weakly and said, “I’m ready Alex.”

And with that, I directed the flow of my Essence into his body, flooding him with its power and regenerating capabilities. He closed his eyes and relaxed. I could feel his Essence, weak but ever present, until it began to strengthen. No more than a minute later, he opened his eyes and nodded. I withdrew my hands and saw that the bleeding had stopped, but the wound still looked nasty.

“It didn’t work,” I cried out.

He sat up, put his hand under my chin for a split second, and said, “Alex, you were awesome. It worked; I promise.”

Looking at him with confusion and frustration, I said, “No, Jason. It still looks awful.”

He chuckled and responded, “Alex, an Amethyst heals the afflictions on the inside of the body – where it matters most. The outside must heal on its own, over time. The paramedics will bandage me up, and my skin will have to go through the normal healing process with ugly scabs and bruises, but I’ll be just fine.” He paused and pulled his shirt up. “You’ve repaired the tissues, the tiny blood vessels, and any shattered bone fragments inside my shoulder. It’s like you’ve given me natural sutures that have already dissolved away. I feel good, a little sore, but whole again. You were amazing! Thank you.”

Interrupted by a team of paramedics and police officers rushing into the bank, I had no time to inspect further. I was pulled away from him and assessed for injuries along with everyone else. I watched as the red-capped criminal was carried out on a stretcher. Handcuffed and belligerent, it took a whole police escort to move Mr. Beady Eyes towards the exit. As he turned his bloody face around and caught my gaze, he hollered numerous, descriptive expletives. One officer gave him a hard shove, and that was the last I saw of him.

A short, pretty EMT determined Jason was stable but should be taken to the hospital on a stretcher. He griped and groaned, but I had to agree with her – better safe than sorry.

As he was being carried out of the bank he called out, “Alex?”

“Yeah?” I answered, pressing my red-stained hands against my pants.

“I believe I owe you a bowl of African Peanut Soup.” He smiled and added, “And please don’t call me Mr. Walker again.”

I grinned. “Fine, but I don’t want you calling me Lexi, either.”

“Deal.” A smile played upon his lips as he placed his head back down on the stretcher.

I heard someone say the store would have to close for a few hours while the officers took statements and investigated the crime scene in the bank. Meanwhile, the bank would be closed indefinitely pending an investigation. An hour later I’d given my statement to the police and had spoken with the mother of the toddler. We hugged each other tightly and then parted ways. Merrick insisted I go home, even though I argued extensively that I was fine. He said I needed to get cleaned up and recover, and even arranged a ride home for me in a police car.

I arrived to an empty house and immediately took a long, hot shower after which I collapsed on the couch. I left Jessica a message that I'd had a major breakthrough with my Essence and told her to call me immediately.

So unbelievable! I could still feel the Essence flowing through my body, rushing like giant, powerful waves hitting the surf. Wiggling my fingers, I remembered the tingling sensations when touching Jason's wound. I'd been so relieved and exalted after I'd healed him. There was a lot to learn and even more to understand, but this was one amazing gift. And for the first time, I truly believed I could survive my rendezvous with mountain lions. I felt incredible. Healing Jason had been effortless. Now, I needed to know if healing myself would be that simple.

My body trembled, and I realized I was still shaking from the whole episode. I wanted to see Jason again. Actually, I wanted his arms wrapped around me, easing away the memories of the beady-eyed man firing his gun at me. Jason had saved me too, and I'd forgotten to thank him.

Vibrations from the old, jumpy washing machine shook the floor as I curled up in a soft, yellow afghan on the couch. I'd rest for awhile and then tackle a woodworking project, or maybe, I'd just sleep and dream of Jason.

CHAPTER 14 – A CHANGE IN PLANS

The next couple days were completely frustrating. A mandate came down directly from human resources that neither Jason, nor I, could return to work for at least a week, maybe two. We were placed on paid leave while we recovered emotionally, and for Jason physically, from the shooting. Except I was going stir crazy sitting at home all alone. Ally and Ben had left for Tacoma a couple days before the whole bank incident had taken place and were to be gone for two weeks. My parents were in California visiting my brothers. Calling them was not an option anyways, because they'd fly home immediately. If they learned I'd been involved with gun-wielding bank robbers, they'd spend the next seven days fluttering around me.

The one positive: I was still flying high with the discovery of my new found ability. My Essence was a constant now – always present and easily discernible. Despite feelings of elation regarding my Essence, I still needed to funnel away my other frustrations. I tried reading Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* again. But anytime I read more than two sentences on a page I'd slip into a daydream and replay the whole, terrifying bank scene in my mind again. I'd imagine the gun going off and ripping my stomach apart, or I'd see a bullet smacking Jason right between the eyes. Trying to obliterate those images was proving difficult. I was also frustrated I hadn't heard a word from him. I contemplated contacting him but was too pissed off and stubborn to follow through.

Friday morning, Jessica finally called me back, but reception wasn't great on the island. The current plan was that her family would return early Sunday morning and we'd all head up to Nooksack Falls where we could take a hike and discuss everything. Hiking at Nooksack Falls wasn't high on my list, but since I wouldn't be alone, I doubted there was much chance we'd encounter mountain lions.

She'd already heard about the bank saga from Madison, who'd of course, heard it all from Jason. "I can't believe the whole thing!" she exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

"Don't worry. I'm fine," I said, putting my cell phone on speaker mode as I leaned over the kitchen counter and stared out at the bay.

"Well, I'm jumping into one of our speedboats and coming directly to your house. You shouldn't be alone after that harrowing experience."

“Jessica, don’t be absurd. I’ll see you in a day and a half. No worries. I have Ally and Ben looking out for me,” I lied. “Anyways, Jason’s the one who took the bullet; you should be worrying about him.”

The phone crackled. “He’s doing great, thanks to you. I’m so excited and proud of you! I knew eventually you’d discover your Essence, but that was fast. Talk about perfect timing, too. I can’t believe you were able to draw upon your Essence and direct it towards Jason immediately after finding it for the first time. That’s so sensational. How does it feel?”

“Incredible.” I smiled at her enthusiasm and fiddled with the kitchen faucet.

“I still think I should come and see you right now.”

“Absolutely not. You stay with your family and enjoy your relatives. Just come prepared to *tell all* on Sunday,” I said firmly.

“Oh, I don’t think you should...”

“Jessica, please. I’m fine.”

“Well...okay, but I can’t wait to see you. Max, Madison, Laci and I will be back at the marina early Sunday morning. We’ll meet up with you and Jason at the Sehome store.”

“Sounds good.”

“And Lexi?”

Static erupted, and I held the phone further away. “Yeah?”

“I promise we’ll tell you the whole story about us and explain all about your Amethyst capabilities. You won’t be disappointed; I’m sure. I’ll be so relieved when you know everything. I know you’ll want to help us; we need you more than ever. Promise me you won’t worry?”

After all she’d just said – I wasn’t supposed to worry? Yeah, right. But I said, “Okay.”

Sunday morning arrived none too soon, and I waited impatiently inside the Sehome food court. We were all supposed to meet up at seven o’clock. Since I was a ball of nerves, I’d arrived 15 minutes early and bought myself a huge bag of trail mix. Jessica texted that they were having boat engine problems and were going to be late. She said I should ride up to Nooksack Falls with Jason and they’d catch up in a few hours. That threw me for a loop, because now I’d be alone with Jason. Not only was I tired of small talk, I was ticked he hadn’t bothered to check on me since the bank incident.

Frustrated, I stepped outside into the sunny August morning. The weather had been beautiful over that last couple weeks, and today was no exception. I looked down at my new, waterproof Teva hiking sandals. They were full-grain

leather – made for comfort, support, and durability. My khaki hiking shorts weren't too shabby either. Rather than spend all day Saturday sulking at home alone, I'd spent the day doing something I heavily despised – shopping. But hey, if I was going to get paid not to work, I'd decided I'd spend the money on something useful. For once, I looked fashionably coordinated, thanks to the REI salesclerk. My favorite purchase was the GoLite backpack.

A horn honked, and I looked up. A dirty teal Chevy Silverado, with some serious all-terrain tires, pulled up next to the sidewalk. The front passenger window rolled down. My heart skipped a beat, and my face flushed as Jason examined me with his bright eyes.

“Him Alex. I'm glad to see you all in one piece. I was worried about you.”

“Yeah, right,” I mumbled to myself as I walked over to the truck.

As I opened the door, he let out a low whistle. “You look way too good to go hiking.”

“Shut up,” I said with dismay and climbed in. “I'm just wearing the usual gear.”

He gave me a sideways glance, “Maybe, but you wear it well.”

I decided to throw it back at him. “Well, you look like a certified hiking guide in that get-up.” In closed-toe hiking sandals, black cargo shorts, and God forbid, a snug turquoise, quarter-zip shirt that matched his eyes and accentuated his well-built upper body, he looked good enough to eat. “All you need now are contacts,” I grumbled.

His eyebrows shot up, and he turned the rearview mirror towards himself. “Why?”

Avoiding direct eye contact, I muttered, “How do you expect a girl to concentrate when you're flashing those aqua-marine eyes?”

“Ah ha! I do believe you've paid me my first compliment.” He inspected his eyes, and then twisted the mirror back into place. “I suppose they are one of my better features.”

“Oh geez, give it up already,” I said, mildly annoyed. Conversation waned, and we drove in silence for a few minutes. Emotions bubbled inside me – fear swirling like clouds of dust and debris encircling a tornado. Frustration threatening to explode. “I haven't heard a word from you in two days,” I finally said. “Can we get serious for one minute and stop pretending like the whole bank incident never happened.” Quickly, I turned my head towards the side window. Choking on my words, I added, “An event in which either one of us could have been killed. And after everything we went through, I don't hear

anything from you.” I turned and looked at him. “Maybe I needed to know how you were...if you were okay. Did you even wonder how I was doing?”

He drummed his hands on the steering wheel. “Oh man. Alex, how can you think I didn’t care about you or wonder how you were doing? You’re all I’ve thought about. I wanted to call you. Really, I did.” He pulled over to the side of the road and parked the car. Shifting his body sideways, he put his right knee on the seat and frowned. “I should’ve called. I should’ve followed my instincts. I’m sorry.” He banged the dashboard with his left fist. “This is still so new to you. I’m guessing you were still pretty shaken up from all the gun fire.”

“Do ya think?” I harped.

His jaw clenched, and he shook his head disgustedly at himself. “I was afraid if I called you, we’d get off topic. I knew you’d want an explanation about me and about you...well, before it was time.” His eyes darted over my face. “I have the deepest respect for the Nelson’s and my parents, and I didn’t want to jeopardize my relationship with any of them. They really believe you’re going to need the support of all of us, Jessica especially, when we show you who we are.”

Sincerity and frustration flooded his face, and I realized he was as emotionally screwed up as I was. My heart softened as my spirits lifted. And what did he mean about “showing” who they were? Just who the heck were they?

“Would it be helpful to talk about what happened?” he asked. Relieved and impressed that he’d taken the initiative, I nodded. For the next fifteen minutes I did most of the talking, while he listened. Turned out to be a successful therapy session.

Resolutely, I gazed into his eyes. I wanted nothing more than to spend the next couple hours enjoying his company and forgetting about all the unsaid crap that hung between us. Gathering willpower, I said, “Let’s see if we can have fun for a few hours, before...I guess, before my life changes forever. Okay?”

After examining my face thoroughly, he must have found what he was looking for, because he smiled and said, “Okay.” He started the engine and added quietly, “I think you’re amazing.”

“Thanks.”

“Music?” he asked as he pulled the truck back onto the highway.

“Loud,” I suggested.

He turned the volume insanely loud and yelled, “I love this song.” I sat back and listened to the song, *Time Stands Still* by Rush. We both sang along during different parts, and I took a few minutes to study the inside of his truck. The only

things out of place were the two empty water bottles rolling around on the floor. Sitting in the middle of the console were a couple books about hiking the Pacific Northwest and an iPod. An Atlas rested in the side pocket of my door, and a CD case sat at my feet. Curiously, I thumbed through it and found an interesting mix of music: the Beatles, Rascal Flatts, Rolling Stones, Black Eyed Peas, Kings of Leon, Def Leppard, and Santana.

As the song ended, he turned the volume down and glanced over at me suspiciously. “So...how is it a girl like you knows the lyrics to a song from an old band like Rush?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said with attitude. “A girl like what?”

He lifted his hands off the steering wheel. “I just meant because you’re young. You weren’t around when that band was popular.”

“You’re not exactly ancient.” I laughed. “Now put your hands back on the wheel, please.” I looked out the window; we were on the Mount Baker Highway, zipping past farmhouses and open fields. “You shouldn’t be so surprised. I have a much older step-brother who listens to classic rock. I grew up loving the oldies as well as the songs from my generation.”

“Really? How much older is your step-brother?”

“Brandon is fifteen years older than me. I have another brother, Greg, who’s only three years older than me. Greg’s my biological brother.”

A look of confusion crossed his face. “Oh?”

“My dad, Dr. Adams, is really my step-dad,” I explained. “He married my mom when I was three years old, and he legally adopted Greg and me about a year later. Dr. Adams was also divorced, and his son Brandon was living with him.” I glanced at his face. He seemed to be following me and appeared interested so I continued, “Luckily for us, we all got along really well and have been tight ever since. Both my brothers live in San Diego and are game designers. They can be obnoxious, but I love ‘em.”

“And Dr. Adams?”

“Dr. Adams is my dad,” I said thoughtfully, fiddling with the zipper on my backpack. “I don’t think of him as a step-dad. He raised me. He’s been good to me – always setting the bar high but offering encouragement along the way. I get my passion for reading from him.”

“Sounds like a good man,” Jason said. “No sisters then?”

“Nope, but Ally and I have been best friends since 2nd grade; she’s like my sister.”

He looked over at me with a puzzled frown and said, “You haven’t

mentioned your biological father. Is he in the picture?"

Biting my lip, I shook my head. "Nope. Long story. I'll tell ya about it another time."

He nodded and changed the subject. "All right, let's test your musical knowledge." He ejected the Rush CD and handed it to me. "Put this back and choose your favorite song from any of the CD's." I smiled and complied. Familiar with most of his selection, I chose one that suited my current mood. Def Leppard. He laughed. "I'm not surprised. The English rock band from Sheffield which became one of the top-selling bands of the 80's. They were especially popular with female listeners. Which song?"

"How 'bout number six, and turn it up."

"Animal," he said with surprise and blasted the sound system even louder than before. Even though it was still early morning and not yet warm outside, he rolled down the windows and cranked the heater. The wind and heat combination, along with the loud rhythmic pounding of the bass, were exhilarating. I felt wild and free. We took turns choosing songs and then I switched it out with a Rascal Flatts CD. Eventually, the song *Love Who You Love* filled the cab, but halfway through the song, he gave me a tight smile and ejected the CD.

I looked at him inquisitively, and he said, "This one is...well, it reminds me of...oh, I'll tell you some other time." He kind of choked on his words. His face looked strained, and I didn't want to remind him of some past girlfriend he still harbored feelings for, so even though I was curious, I kept quiet. My throat tightened at the thought of him with someone else.

I grabbed the Rolling Stones disc but turned the volume way down. "So, what's the deal with this private island Jessica's family owns in the San Juan's?"

He laughed. "I know, right? Seems crazy. There's around 170 or so named islands out there, and a handful are privately owned. The Nelson family inherited one from Jessica's grandmother, on her dad's side. It's been passed down from generation to generation. Towhead Island is several acres and offers amazing views of the islands and of Mt. Baker."

"Wow. I'm jealous."

"Me too. The island is secluded and beautifully treed. They have a huge mansion directly in the center that has like ten bedrooms and seven bathrooms with the most amazing kitchen ever. They like to spend family time out there, and it has other purposes as well," he gave me a sideways glance, "a safe haven of sorts, but you'll learn more about that later."

I tapped the leather seat and said, “Sounds like you’re pretty familiar with the mansion. I suppose you’ve been there a lot with Madison?” I asked with a slight hitch in my voice.

“Actually, my mom and Madison’s mom have always been close friends. So growing up, our families spent a lot of time together boating, camping, and spending time at their island retreat. I’ve always felt like Max was just another brother and Madison and Jessica were sisters.”

“Hmm,” I said. “But Madison doesn’t feel that way; she’s very possessive of you. Not to mention, I’m at the top of her hate list.”

“What makes you say that?” He turned his head and looked me square in the eyes.

I blushed. To come clean, or not to come clean? I decided there were far too many secrets already. Taking a deep breath, I said in a squeaky voice, “I have a confession to make.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” I nodded and tucked my hands under my legs. “I umm, well I kind of overheard you and Madison talking in the break room. But,” I continued hastily, “it wasn’t on purpose. I had to use the bathroom, and you guys were so loud. When I heard my name—”

“Alex,” he interrupted, “it’s okay. I understand. And you know what?” I shook my head, and he said, “I had my suspicions you’d overheard our conversation.”

My jaw dropped, and I turned beat red. “Why?” I managed to say.

He looked at me and smiled. “I thought I could smell you.”

“What?”

“You always smell like vanilla. When I walked out of the break room after arguing with Madison, remnants of vanilla lingered in the air. I even walked around the backroom looking for you.”

“Great,” I mumbled. So much for being sneaky.

“Yes, you do smell great,” he said. “And I appreciate you fessin’ up.” He changed the subject, and for the next hour we listened to music and talked mostly about our childhoods. Before I knew it we’d arrived at Nooksack Falls. Absolutely magnificent and extremely loud, the falls broke into three separate segments – waters plunging almost a hundred feet. Even though it was still early, a fair number of people wandered around snapping pictures.

“The Falls are fed from the headwaters of the North Fork of the Nooksack River, but the glacial runoff originates on the slopes of Mt. Shuksan,” Jason said

in a raised voice, so his words weren't lost in the roar. He studied his watch and made several indecisive noises before saying, "I think we still have a good couple hours before they make it up here. It's probably another 12 miles of rough, gravel roads before we get to the trailhead, but about halfway up I know a place we could take a short hike to a hidden waterfall. What do ya think?" He spoke with the enthusiasm of an eight year old boy who'd just walked into Legoland. His eyes sparkled with excitement; he was definitely in his element, and I was enjoying this side of him. "I'd really like to show it to you, if you're up for it," he added.

Out here in the wilderness with the falls crashing behind him and the sun shining on his face, he was incredibly handsome; my heartbeat quickened. I reveled in the fresh scent of Evergreen trees, which reminded me of how he always smelled, naturally outdoorsy. I grinned. "Let's do it." Playfully, I added, "Race ya back to the car." I took off, but it wasn't long before his laughter and footsteps overtook me.

After driving several miles on the bumpy, gravel road Jason pulled over to the left side and pointed out his window. "That's Wells Creek Falls, offering you great views from the front seat of your car. Nice part is that it's easily accessible for anyone who can only manage a short walk or for families with small children." I gave him a funny look, and he said, "Hey, no age is too young to start exploring Mother Nature."

We started up the road again. Rolling around, I grasped the support bar above my head as we crashed over some monster potholes. "What's the name of our waterfall?" I asked.

"Sholes Creek Falls." He glanced over at me and bounced in his seat, almost hitting his head on the ceiling. "Our waterfall is much bigger than Well's Creek Falls. It's considered two-tiered; the first drop careens about 60 feet and the second plunges about 100 feet. Standing at the base of the falls, we'll only be able to see the second tier, though. You'll love it. It's stunning."

I looked at him in amazement. "How do you know so much about the waterfalls?"

He grinned and pulled a Waterfall Finders Guide Booklet out of his door pocket. "Besides this, my parents took me hiking all over Mount Baker National Forest when I was a kid. After I was old enough to explore on my own, I spent my free time studying maps and tromping through most of these mountains. I've seen some of nature's incredible hidden treasures and encountered some awesome wildlife."

“Quite the adventurer, aren’t you?” I said.
“Absolutely,” he replied.

CHAPTER 15 – THE HIKE

He parked the truck on the side of the road and pointed to the water running under a bridge. “Okay, we’re here. That’s Bar Creek, and just upstream a ways on the left it meets up with Sholes Creek. As you can see, there’s nothing but thick brush between us and our destination, so we’ll be hiking a short distance through the woods. Then we’ll drop down to Sholes creek. Any problem with getting your feet wet?”

Lifting my feet in the air, I shook my head and pointed at my new sandals. “Nope, these babies are waterproof and supposedly have great traction.”

“Good,” he said and grabbed his backpack off the floor. “Once we reach the creek, we’ll hike through the waters and up to the base of our waterfall.”

We set off, and he told me to follow close, because it would be easier to walk in his footsteps. He was right. We pushed our way through what looked like a dense jungle of vines. Sticker bushes scraped my legs, and branches smacked my face a couple times. From high above, the sun was generating comfortable warmth, but in a couple more hours the heat would be extreme. Some sort of tall, wispy weed in the high scrub was putting off a pungent odor, like decaying meat. I was delighted when we stepped out of the thicket and into the open canopy.

Jason stopped and pointed at an orange flag painted on a mighty hemlock tree. “We could take an easier route through the trees and stay dry. Up to you.” He gauged my response.

“Hiking through the creek works for me. I trust you not to let me wash down stream.”

He smiled and said, “Good. I promise to keep my eye on ya. Besides, it’s more of a rush.” He motioned for me to follow, and we set off through the forest again.

The ground was covered with pinecones, needles, and a funny layer of mustard green moss. He pointed out small blueberry plants covered in blossoms and said it was too early for the fruit. We weaved in and out of monstrous evergreen trees, and I paid close attention to my footing, because occasionally exposed tree roots crossed the path. Rushing water resonated in the distance, and a chipmunk chirped in alarm from a nearby tree top. The woods were soothingly peaceful. We walked in comfortable silence for some time. Eventually, we stopped at a flat opening alongside the trail that overlooked a canyon.

He pointed at the base of a tree just off to our right. “See how the ground is sort of smoothed away and there’s a slight impression in the earth, as if the forest floor has been disturbed?” I nodded, and he said, “That’s a deer bed.”

“Really?” I said in awe.

“Yes,” he spoke quietly. “Deer quite often use the same beds; it’s possible one was here just now but heard us coming and quickly left the area. They like to bed down alongside a trail, in a place they can easily spot danger. This ridge above the creek here offers a perfect vantage point.”

“Do you see a lot of deer while you’re out hiking in the woods?” I asked curiously.

He nodded. “More often than you’d think.” He unzipped his backpack and opened a water bottle, offering me first drink. I had my own in my pack, but his looked inviting, so I accepted. After handing it back to him, I watched him gulp down half the bottle before he said, “I’ve seen a lot of Black-tail deer in the area.”

“What other animals have you seen around here?”

Giving me a subdued expression, he said, “Before I answer, you have to promise not to go ballistic,” he shook his finger at me, “and remember, I’ve traveled far off the beaten path.”

“Oh Crap! Not mountain lions, I hope,” I blurted out, suddenly on alert.

He nodded and put his arms through his backpack straps, “Yes, I ran across a cougar a couple years ago, but I have no big story to tell. He just turned and went the other way.” I must have looked ready to run for the car, because he said, “No worries, very unlikely we’ll see anything like that in the middle of the day, especially with all the noise we’re making.”

Changing the subject, he talked about mountain goats he’d spotted on ridges and then excitedly described a black bear he’d once seen plowing through a blueberry patch. I listened and tried to calm my nerves. There was no way my snapshots were pointing to this day. I felt no sense of danger, and I wasn’t alone in the woods. Also, there had been no creek or waterfall in my snapshots. Reassured, I took a deep breath and said, “Let’s find this waterfall.”

We started down a mildly steep ravine. Bracing our feet and grabbing onto vine maple branches for support, we half walked and half slid on our rear ends down the loose bank. Once down, we had no solid ground to walk on, so we stepped into the crystal clear water.

“Yikes! This is cold,” I squealed.

“You’ll get used to it.” He laughed and pointed up the creek. I stopped and

stared in awe. Less than a quarter mile upstream, reflecting a rainbow in the spraying mist, was our waterfall. Only a small portion was visible, like a teaser beckoning us. Between us and the waterfall, the creek flowed swiftly through an obstructed canyon. Rapids dominated the ravine, surging over fallen trees, rotting logs, huge boulders, and piles of debris. A natural obstacle course lay between us and the waterfall. Our endurance and climbing abilities would soon be tested. If we succeeded we'd be rewarded by reaching the base of the falls. Feeling Jason's gaze upon me, I turned his way with wide eyes.

"Awesome, huh?" he beamed. "Think you can handle it?"

"I'm not turning back now, are you kidding?" I said with rapture.

With a nod of approval, he took the lead. From behind I admired his athletic body. As he scrambled over slippery rocks and walked swiftly along moss-covered logs, he did so with amazing agility and balance. I found myself grateful to be following in his wake. Not only did he guide me on a safer route with his sure feet, but with me bringing up the rear, he wasn't able to witness my clumsy ascent. Besides, I was enjoying two views: earth's magnificent waterfall and man's magnificent body.

After a bit, he stopped on a patchy gravel bar at the edge of the stream and waited while I caught up. We were in a secluded area of the creek, and even though we could hear the mighty waters crashing above us, a huge log jam blocked our view of the falls. Directly behind Jason, a mass of spiny ferns protruded from the bank, intermingling with the airy, delicate leaves of vine maples. As I stepped even closer, my eyes widened in wonder at the plump orange berries hanging over the bank's edge. They just looked like they were begging to be plucked.

"Are they edible?" I asked.

He gave me a funny look. "Don't you know a salmonberry when you see one?"

I reddened. "Well yes, I mean no, but I've read about them," I said with defeat. "They're huge. They look like over-sized raspberries. Well, they would if they were red," I amended, hardly containing my excitement as he reached above his head and selected the largest ones.

Bringing down a handful, he said, "Open your mouth."

I parted my lips, and he dropped one into my mouth. Slowly, I chewed the ripe fruit, savoring the sweet, juicy sensations. He watched me intently, never breaking eye contact. I was mesmerized by his close proximity and his bewitching eyes. Even after I'd finished chewing and swallowed, I found I

couldn't look away from him. His lips formed a slow smile, and he popped a couple berries into his own mouth.

"We found these at the peak of perfection," he said hoarsely. "Sweet with only a touch of tartness." He emptied the rest into my hand and reached up to pick a few more.

"They're soooo good," I said.

He turned around and laughed. "Well, you have something in common with the hummingbirds; these are a favorite of theirs as well." He handed me a few more and said, "Okay, let's keep going."

We scaled a few more huge boulders and crawled over a couple wobbly logs. After several failed attempts, we finally crawled up and over the biggest log jam of all. With the waterfall uproariously loud, I knew we were almost there. As we made our way up one monstrous slab of rock, I was unable to find a foothold and started sliding backwards. Slapping the rock in frustration, I swore to myself. I thought I heard Jason shouting my name, so I looked up.

Clinging effortlessly to the side of the slippery rock, with the same dexterity Spiderman uses when scaling skyscrapers, his expression was one of sheer amusement. He looked like he'd been chuckling to himself, but he didn't laugh aloud. Graciously, he reached down and called out, "Grab my arm; I'll pull you up."

A moment later we found ourselves standing at the base of the thunderous Sholes Falls. We looked at each other and exchanged huge grins before he pointed upwards. I gasped and gazed with pure delight at the beautiful white water streaming down over textured, brown rock cliffs. The cliffs were enhanced by vivid green moss, growing in thick clumps throughout the crevices of the sheer surface. The vibrant moss looked soft and spongy against the sheen precipice. The grace and beauty of the showering white falls captured my soul.

After plunging gracefully from high above, the water crashed and bounced wildly into a giant pool, splashing in different directions with optimal force. The waterfall raged in my ears. Sprinkling my arms, legs, and face in a scattered frenzy, tiny droplets tickled my skin and revitalized my senses. Rocks and small pebbles sparkled like diamonds, while ferns and other greenery glistened like emeralds in the fine mist that embellished the basin.

Jason stepped closer and said loudly over the roar, "There's something magical about encountering nature's voice in a magnificent waterfall."

I leaned in close to his ear. "It's breathtaking. It's like a well-kept secret hidden away from the rest of the world, and once you find it, you don't want

anyone else to know about it.”

“Well maybe one other person,” he said with a meaningful look.

I smiled, bit my lower lip, and mouthed, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I could stare at the falls for hours and never get bored.”

“Yeah, it has that mesmerizing effect.”

“The deep, green pool is beautiful,” I said. “I’d love to just jump in and play, like a little kid without a care in the world.”

“We’ll do it sometime,” he promised. Then he grabbed my backpack and set both our packs on a dry boulder several feet away. On his way back he bent down and reached into the shallows of the pool. “Check out this cool rock,” he called out. Holding it up to the light, he said, “Looks like quartz.”

While he was talking, I spotted something sparkling under the pristine surface. I dipped my hand into the chilly water and pulled out a rough, jagged rock. Smiling to myself, I approached him. He was completely absorbed, digging around in the rocks. I nudged him with my elbow and said, “How ‘bout this one?”

He opened his hand, and I placed it in his palm. “Nice,” he said. “I like how it’s two sided. One side dark and mysterious with tiny glimmers of hope, and the other side light and pure with obvious beauty.” Rolling it around in his hand, he looked up and said, “Definitely a keeper.” With a grin, he stuck it in his pocket.

“Hey,” I cried out.

“What?” he asked innocently. “You handed it to me. You’re not gonna take back a gift, are you?”

I shook my head, made a face, and said, “Your audacity astounds me.” He seemed to like that comment, so I waved him away and searched some more. For awhile, we tried to outdo each other by finding the most unique rocks. Like children, we couldn’t resist picking up larger stones and throwing them into the pool, watching them “ker-plunk” before disappearing into the depths. Eventually though, he determined we should head back down so we’d have plenty of time to catch up with the Nelson siblings and Laci.

After a final, wistful look at Sholes Creek Falls, we turned and clambered back down the gargantuan boulder and into the masses of fallen logs. For the most part, the hike down was much of the same, only more treacherous. I slipped a couple times and managed to get my shorts fairly wet, but Jason bribed me with more salmonberries around every turn.

At one point he stopped and pointed at what he termed “the perfect fishing

hole.” The current ran gently through a quiet, little tide pool off to the side of the creek. “Fish are probably hiding over in that corner. That collapsed tree offers great cover for them,” he said.

“What kind of fish are you talking about, and how big?”

His eyes lit up. “This creek would have small trout, maybe six to eight inches.” He scratched his chin. “Not very big really, but fun to catch.”

I teased him. “You’re obviously overwrought with knowledge. Wouldn’t be surprised if you could build a fishing pole out of a long, thin branch and a fern.” He rolled his eyes and chuckled. I continued, “Yeah, something tells me you could survive out here for weeks in the dead of winter. Don’t suppose you carry a hatchet in that backpack of yours,” I added with mirth.

“Ah ha,” he mused. “You’re familiar with Gary Paulsen?” As I nodded, he said, “I like a woman whose well read and comes with a sense of humor.”

Looking at him with uncertainty, I said, “My dad did read aloud to me and my brothers when we were little – even when we were older,” I admitted.

“I’d like to meet him sometime.” He looked at me with unwavering eyes. “Your mom and brothers, too.”

Suddenly shy, I said, “I’d like that.”

Reaching over, he pulled a twig out of my hair. His eyes penetrated mine, and he said in all seriousness, “Alex, no matter how the rest of this day goes or what you think about me, about all of us by the end of it – I want you to know I really enjoyed being with you today.” Speechless, I stared at him as he continued talking. “I like your sense of humor, your curiosity, your optimism, and the way you draw upon things you’ve read and bring them into your life.”

By now I’d gone completely still. I figured my face was brighter than if it had been sunburned, because I could feel the heat scorching my cheeks. I looked down into the quiet pool. “Umm...”

“Alex, look at me,” he insisted. “I’m not trying to embarrass you. I just want to be honest, for once.” Hesitantly, I raised my eyes and gave him a slight nod. “Better,” he continued. “Mostly, I appreciate how you let me be myself.”

I was tongue-tied. He’d never been so openly forthright. Knowing I couldn’t say any words as meaningful as his, I smiled and whispered, “Thanks.”

He nodded, but his smile seemed almost melancholy. He tapped his watch. “Let’s get going. This is where we leave the creek and head back through the forest. We should be back to the truck in about 20 minutes.”

We’d been hiking in peaceful silence for about five minutes when I thought I heard voices. I was completely surprised since we weren’t on a main trail. In

fact, we weren't on any designated trail at all. "Jason? Did you hear someone talking?" I asked, accidentally bumping into him.

He'd stopped and was standing absolutely still, like a statue. His arms were out in a defensive position, and he looked ready to execute a few Jiu-Jitsu moves. Every muscle in his body appeared tense, and the veins on the side of his neck pulsed. He never answered me, just turned and put a finger over his lips.

We stood there not moving for about a minute. I strained as hard as I could to hear a voice, or footsteps, or some kind of rustling in the trees but heard nothing. The woods were eerily silent. I had no idea why he was acting so strangely, but since he'd proven to be an experienced outdoorsman, I followed his lead without question. Something was definitely wrong, and I had reason to be concerned.

Suddenly, he whipped around with his finger still upon his lips, grabbed my arm forcefully, and pulled me the other way. Eventually, he hauled me to the far side of a thick Douglas fir tree. I had the distinct feeling he was trying to hide me. He pulled his hands away and shook them with frustration. Then he wrapped his arms around me, without really touching me, and placed the palms of his hands against the bark of the tree. He encircled me like I was in his protection.

Leaning in close to my face, his expression was even more deadly serious than when he'd attacked Mr. Beady Eyes. I couldn't read his thoughts, but his face indicated he was feeling something between total panic and raw violence. His unrelenting countenance and rigid body had me completely terrified. With my body producing extra doses of adrenaline and my heartbeat racing uncontrollably, I tried to imagine what could possibly be worse than Mr. Beady Eyes pointing a gun at everyone.

In a strained, chilled voice, Jason said as quietly as possible, "Alex, you will not understand what is about to happen. But I need you to trust me. Do you trust me?"

With my lips trembling and my eyes round with horror, I nodded sharply and said, "Yes."

"Good. I need you to follow my instructions. I want you to stay hidden behind this tree, and don't make a sound. Do not come out and reveal yourself unless I specifically tell you to do so. You are going to hear and see some things that don't make any sense. You need to open your mind to new possibilities, just like you did when Jessica told you about your Essence. Picture yourself in one of your fantasy books where the supernatural exists, and try to find some comfort there. What you see might scare you, but I don't want you to interfere." He stopped and waited.

“Okay,” I whispered, frightened beyond belief.

“You know how we keep referring to you as an Amethyst?” I bobbed my head once, and he continued, “There are others like you, but different. They have unusual abilities, and there are small groups who abuse those abilities and use them against Innocents, I mean ordinary humans. These people are dangerous, Alex, more so than the men in the bank. They are evil. So I need you to stay hidden; it’s imperative they don’t find you. I will try to hold them off until Max and the others get here. No matter what happens to me, promise you’ll stay hidden.”

I’m sure my face drained of any remaining color, and I said, “I can’t--”

Shoving his finger against my lips, he said angrily, “You will.” He removed his hand and said, “I have to go now. Stay here and stay quiet.”

I felt like my heart was being ripped out through my throat, and I had no idea why. As he withdrew his arms and started to move away, I grabbed him. I pulled him towards me and crushed my lips against his. His eyes widened in total shock, and his irises flared, but I persisted. Claspng his face firmly, I slowed my movements and traced every inch of his soft, supple lips with my own. Daringly, I nibbled on his upper lip, savoring the sweetness I found there – traces of salmonberry. His eyes fluttered closed, like I’d rendered him helpless. A flame ignited in my belly – spreading outward in a rush of heat waves until my fingertips tingled. The world ceased to exist; there was only him and me.

My mouth on his mouth was fiery hot. I’d never felt more sure of anything in my entire life. Abandoning the slow, leisurely kiss, I tilted my head and forced his lips open. When I found his tongue, I ravaged it with my own. I demanded his surrender, yet begged for his acceptance. Deepening my kiss, I devastated him with weeks of pent up passion and longing. I provoked him until his body was shaking. With my hands clasped around his neck, I held on for dear life.

Our kiss became even more frenzied and urgent, like we needed it, depended on it for sustenance, for survival. His velvet-soft lips and hot, moist mouth almost undid me. His Essence was intimately familiar – the heat between us sweltering. Rapturous. I felt like I was on fire in a way I’d never been before. I wanted to consume him, and I wanted him to consume me. I pressed myself against his strong, sturdy body until I could feel his heart beating. Still, I couldn’t get close enough, so I ran my hands through his hair, down his arms, and over his face. Shock waves of desire surged through my entire being as my tongue danced with his.

Suddenly, he jerked, and a moan escaped his mouth. He gasped for breath,

wrenched away from me, and staggered backwards. My eyes shot open, still burning with need. His aqua-marine eyes stared at me, completely stunned. He backed away slowly, shaking his head unhappily.

In a whisper, barely audible, he said, “Oh, Alex...you shouldn’t have done that.” Then he stepped into the sunlight and walked several paces away from my hiding spot.

Trembling, I touched my lips and drew a shaky breath. I’d never experienced a kiss like that before – one that invaded my senses and my logic, and consumed my soul. I placed my hand over my heart like that would stop it from pounding so loudly. Crouched down at the base of the tree, I pulled myself together as best I could. Eventually, I peeked through spiky sword ferns and listened intently. I didn’t see anyone except Jason. His very still figure stood alone in a circular clearing under the tree branches. Streaks of sunlight shot down sporadically over the forest floor all around him. Everything was quiet. Then I heard a voice – an unforgiving voice that left me panicked and horrified.

Maliciously deep, it leered, “Well, well, it looks like we’ve found ourselves a *Guardian* out here in the woods. Guess we’re in for some fun and games after all. What do ya say guys?”

Guardian? What the... As I strained to see who was talking, I dug my fingers into the dirt to stop myself from tumbling into plain sight.

“You got it Kieran,” responded a raspy voice. “Let’s see how long this fool can hold his own before he becomes lunch.”

Loud, sinister laughter followed by piercing shrieks erupted through the woods and echoed harshly through the timber.

CHAPTER 16 – RAY-PACS

Raucous laughter claimed the surrounding forest, chilling me to the bones. But that was nothing compared to the shock waves ripping through my body as I stared at the back of Jason’s unyielding form. I realized, with unmistakable clarity, that they were talking about him. My Jason was a *Guardian*! And he’d been right in front of my face the whole entire time!

The big secret, the big reveal, was out of the bag. I was momentarily overjoyed. I closed my eyes. My friends were not vampires or psychotic closet killers; they were Guardians who had visions of the future like me. Except, I was still a Seer. Only now, I’d be able to link, and I could get their help with the mountain lions. Tidal waves of relief flooded over me, carrying my worries back out to sea – until I remembered Jason was standing out there alone, facing... facing who?

My eyes shot open. What had Grandma Rose written in her journal? Stewart had called them enemies of Guardians. Oh no! The Ray-pacs.

Scratchy ferns brushed against my face as I strained for a better look. I shuddered as three menacing figures, two guys and one girl, stepped into view only about 15 yards away from Jason. Why did they want him? And what had they meant about him being lunch?

“Don’t you know it’s not safe to wander the woods on your own these days? You really should listen to the news out of B.C.,” taunted a shirtless guy whose long black hair was pulled back in a braid. His dark olive skin and massive upper chest seemed disproportionate to the rest of his body. Some sort of tribal tattoo, with simplistic but bold designs, covered exactly one half of his chest and all of one arm.

At that moment, memories came flooding back in a snarled mass of images: the thunderstorm, the Mastiff, and the tall guy with a ponytail. My heart froze over as I realized this bare-chested guy was none other than the psycho-maniac from the dark alley. And he was connected to the B.C. killings?

“Andrew asked you a question. I suggest you answer,” said the shorter muscular guy, who had an Adam Levine buzz cut and a black goatee. D-rings hung from the belt loops of his punk-looking bondage pants. Each one came equipped with a long, dangling rope chain.

When Jason still didn’t say anything, the tall skinny girl said snidely, “Maybe

he's deaf and dumb."

"He's obviously dumb," Andrew jeered, baring his teeth, "Otherwise, he wouldn't be out here by himself with no protection." As he shook his head, his long braid whipped around.

I was startled when Jason responded in a smooth, confident voice, "I might be alone now, but my friends are due to arrive any time. We will have you outnumbered, so I suggest you consider leaving before they show up, or things are going to get ugly for you."

Andrew laughed loudly. The girl joined in, but the short guy continued to stare at Jason with a bored expression. I glanced around nervously expecting to find the Mastiff hiding in the trees. Abruptly, Andrew stopped laughing and twisted his face into a massive frown. Kicking the dirt, he said in a whiny voice, "Kieran, I want permission to take him out. He's a liar. And you know what, I plain don't like the cocky son of a—"

"His Essence belongs to me, Andrew," Kieran said in a dangerously sharp tone. Without moving an inch he added, "But, I will give you first shot at him. If you succeed, I will share some of his Essence. If not, *I'll* step in and finish him off, at which point his Essence is *all* mine. Understood?"

I couldn't tell if Andrew was satisfied with that answer or not. He nodded curtly, balled one hand into a fist, and smacked it into the palm of his other hand. "I got it," he said roughly. Kieran and the black-haired girl took a few steps back, out of my line of vision. Jason took up a defensive stance with his arms out and his knees bent.

What were they talking about? Could they really take Jason's Essence from him? I waited with anticipation and worry as Andrew dug one foot deep into the ground and let out a snarl. I wasn't at all prepared for his method of attack. With his palms facing out, he flicked his wrists and sent some kind of blast flying through the air. The clear, blue-fringed, two-foot sphere was almost invisible and traveled rapidly, about four feet off the ground, straight for Jason.

Right before the sphere reached him, Jason dodged to his left – moving so quickly his body blurred before my eyes. He stopped about 20 feet from where he'd been standing and remained in a crouched position.

Hitting the ground with enormous force and emitting a loud "boom," the obscure ball sent pine needles and dirt blasting through the air. Instantly, a dust plume materialized. When the cloudy haze lifted, a huge crater remained in the ground. It looked like a mini-meteorite had just struck the earth.

Momentarily stunned by the blast, I hugged myself and slid across the hard

earth. My heart pounded in my chest as I sat with my back against the tree trunk. I held my arm over my mouth, trying to suppress the cries threatening to escape. Mentally, I questioned what I'd just witnessed. Clearly, Andrew had some sort of crazy blasting ability. Splintering wood cracked through the air, and I swung around for another look.

A huge branch hurtled downwards and crashed to the ground. On the move again, Jason's body flashed through the forest, darting quickly left and right. He took me by surprise when he raised his hands the same way Andrew had done and loosed several small energy spheres of his own. Enraptured, I watched the action with sick fascination. Andrew dodged in and out of the trees to avoid being struck, all while throwing multiple blasts back at Jason.

The once quiet forest was total havoc. Small craters erupted across the ground like a string of explosions. Entire tree tops rained down from above. Covering my ears, I squirmed in my hiding spot and pressed my cheek against the rough bark. A rouge blast hurtled towards my tree, so I grabbed my knees and curled into a tight ball. The shrubbery on my left blew to smithereens as sticks and mossy chunks pelted my body.

Peeking under my arm, I gasped at the gaping, 10-foot-wide hole that stretched almost to the base of my tree. The earth had been obliterated, along with the surrounding brush that had been my camouflage. My fingers dug into the crevices of the old growth. I had a hard time keeping my eyes on Jason as he darted to avoid Andrew's explosive assault.

Two simultaneous booms, accompanied by loud wails and a couple of dull thuds, brought me to my feet. The forest took on a spectral silence. The haze cleared and revealed both Jason and his rival lying a good distance apart, flat on their backs. Neither one of them was moving. Without a second thought, and forgetting my original promise, I sprang from my hiding spot and rushed towards Jason. Jumping over broken branches, I ran at full speed, dashing around craters. When I reached him, he looked unconscious, but he didn't appear to be bleeding.

Once I placed my hands on his forehead, I instantly yanked them away. His restricted flow of Essence startled me, but maybe that was normal after using his extraordinary abilities. Calmly, I touched his face again. I drew from my own energy and directed it into him with confidence. As a familiar tingling reached my fingertips, I could feel the strength of my Essence fortifying his, returning the energy to his body.

His eyes popped open, and he sat up immediately. "Damn it, Alex!" he said furiously. "I specifically told you to stay hidden. You didn't listen to a thing I

said.” He bounced to his feet, grabbed my arm, and shoved me behind him. Turning his head, he gazed at me with hard eyes. “Now stand behind me, and keep your hands on my back.” Stunned at his hostility, I nodded.

“Well now, isn’t this interesting,” a voice drawled from across the desolated forest. Peering over Jason’s shoulder, I saw it was Kieran who had spoken. He was standing next to the girl, and she was kneeling beside Andrew, who was still on the ground. Kieran’s eyes bored through to the core of my being, burning me with malicious intent. Then he looked back at Jason with an amused expression. “Looks like you were trying to hide something from us after all. Got yourself an *Innocent*, and you’re not too anxious to share, are you?” His laugh rattled my bones.

“Told ya he wasn’t very smart.” Andrew seethed with anger.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” Jason said in a clear voice. “You let her go, and I will surrender to you willingly. She’s hardly of any use to you. Once I’m sure she’s safe, I will yield and allow you to take my Essence freely.”

“What?” I huffed and gave him a shove. “I’m not leaving you,” I said angrily.

“Alex, shut up! You’ll do as I say,” Jason said in his dagger-like tone.

Completely bewildered, I shut my mouth. But I wanted to whack him over the head.

“How very touching,” Kieran uttered. Looking down, he spoke quietly to the girl, ignoring us for the moment.

That’s when I heard something that took me completely off guard.

“Jason? Jason? What’s happening now? We’re probably 20 minutes away. Are you okay? Please answer me.”

Okay, that freaked me out! That sounded like Madison. Was I imagining voices now?

“Madison. I need you guys now! Alex ran out and now they’ve seen her, but they don’t know she’s an Amethyst; they think she’s an Innocent. I’m trying to make a deal that...”

I let go of Jason’s back so fast, I almost fell backwards. Shaking my head, I slapped my hands against my face. The voices disappeared.

In a low, barely audible voice Jason said, “Alex, put your hands on my back and don’t move again.” Following his command, I stepped closer. Only this time, I placed my hands on his shoulders and pressed my trembling body into his. He didn’t give me any more orders. In fact, he basically ignored me, so I stayed that way – close to him, where I felt a little bit safer. His Essence felt

strong again, flowing with forceful vigor. My heart leapt. I'd been responsible for his quick recovery. No matter how mad he was at me, I'd been right to act.

Madison's angry voice started up again. *"I can't believe you're in this mess. You never should have gone so far into the woods without us. How stupid!"*

"Madison, I don't have time for this right now. Just tell Max to hurry. The tall guy with the braid is Andrew; he's an Energy Handler. The short guy, Kieran, I don't know what his ability is. They have a girl with them who's not linked, so I don't know her status. But listen, I'll do what I can to keep Alex's identity safe. They have no idea that her Essence is responsible for my quick recovery. I'm trying to convince them into letting her go in exchange for me."

"No, Jason! She's not worth it."

"Madison, you know she is – a hundred times over, so hurry up."

"What do you say? Do you accept my offer?" Jason shouted to Kieran.

In that instant, everything clicked. Jason had been speaking telepathically with Madison. But why I could hear their conversation was a mystery. They were probably...of course, they were linked. That was the connection between them. This...this was the complicated working relationship nobody wanted to talk about. And now, for some reason, he thought because I was an Amethyst, my life was more valuable than his?

"Here's the deal," Kieran shouted with a bemused expression. "And I'm only gonna offer it once, so listen up. Melanie here," he nodded in the girl's direction and grinned ruthlessly, "would like to get in some much needed exercise. As you can tell, she's not linked, so the playing field would be even between her and your *Innocent*," he chuckled. "Melanie is willing to give your girl a head start. Say 30 seconds or so. And then...well, I guess we'll have to wait and see who's still standing in the end. Meanwhile, I deal with you one on one. None of this surrendering stuff. I like to work for my kill, and ya never know, maybe you'll take me down."

"Not a chance," Andrew sneered.

Kieran shrugged and continued, "It's either that or the three of us go for your girl right here in front of you. You'll try to protect her, but we have the advantage, and I can guarantee it won't be pretty." He unhooked one of his chains and whipped it around in wide circular motions. "So...what do you say?" Folding the chain in half, he smacked it hard against his hand.

Jason's next breath was as sharp and instantaneous as mine. His body shuddered, and despair seeped into my bones. If he was feeling defeated, we were surely sunk. Melanie rubbed her hands together, her eyes large with

anticipation. Andrew, who'd finally made it to his feet, was leaning against her for support. Kieran watched us with undeniable interest.

"One second," Jason mumbled and held up his hand. Turning slightly, so he could talk to me but still keep them in sight, he said, "Alex, you have to do this." He sounded determined, but I detected the anxiety in his tone. "It's our only chance."

"No!" I breathed, shaking my head adamantly.

"Yes!" he said angrily. "You'll have a much better shot. She has no special abilities for you to worry about. You're tough and you're a fighter; I know you can take her down. When you do, I want you to run to the creek, get in the water, and stay hidden until Max or Madison finds you."

In a shrilly voice, Melanie sang out, "Will she stay or will she run now?" The melody was that of the classic Clash song.

I glanced at her nervously and then back at Jason. "I don't think I can," my voice wavered. "I don't want to leave you. Besides," I pointed, "I'm sure that long-haired dude has a big-ass Mastiff around here somewhere."

Jason's mouth dropped open at that comment. "I don't have time to ask why you think that. I need you to go. I'll have a much better chance if you're not here to distract me. If nothing else, do this for *me*," he said impatiently, his face rigid. He squeezed my arm once and shoved me towards the creek. "Now run!" He bellowed.

Involuntarily, my legs started moving, and I found myself running at full speed. My feet ignored my brain, which was commanding them to stop. Fear propelled me forward. Covering ground quickly, I dodged around trees, hopped over shrubs, and scrambled over fallen logs. In time, the relentless laughter faded away, and all I could hear was rushing water.

I stopped behind a huge tree stump and caught my breath. I needed to be prepared for Melanie. But how? She might not be linked or whatever, but if she'd ever been in a fight before, and by the company she kept, I'd say she'd been in many, she was more than capable of kicking my butt up and down the ravine. I didn't have time to think about that, because it was imperative I get back to Jason. Once Kieran knocked him around, he might need my Essence again. And if Andrew joined the fight...well, I didn't want to think about Jason's chances then.

Scouring the forest floor, I found the perfect weapon – a good-sized, forked branch. I stood perfectly still, clutching it tightly and barely breathing. The hot sun beat down on me; beads of sweat clung to my forehead. My lips tasted salty

from the sporadic tears that had fallen during my flight through the woods.

I surveyed my surroundings. I was on a sunny hillside, and the trees were sparsely scattered. There were several old, rotting logs which could really mess up my footing if I wasn't careful. On the other hand, if I could maneuver Melanie in the right direction, I might be able to force her backwards, down the steep bank.

"Yoo-hoo! Oh Alex," she called in a sugary voice. "I know you're around here somewhere. Your footsteps weren't too hard to follow, you know." Her voice sounded amused and excited. "You must be more careful in the future." Her voice was getting closer. "Oh, wait." She laughed loudly. "What am I saying? You won't have a future when I get through with you."

She had to be only a few feet away. A twig splintered under her foot, and I knew the moment had arrived. Leaping out, I swung my forked branch like I was trying to hit a home run. Lucky for me, she was completely unprepared. The branch slapped across her face before she could shield herself. Her head snapped back as the sharp tips of the limb scraped across her cheek, leaving two wide blood trails in their wake. I dropped the branch on the ground and advanced. With survival instincts I didn't know I had, my leg shot out to kick her in the stomach. I accidentally closed my eyes at the last second and lost sight of my mark. Even though I made contact, it wasn't with enough force to knock her down.

Glowing, she lifted her head and wiped her cheek with the backside of her hand. She groaned at the sight of her bloody hand and rubbed it back and forth on her jeans. Seething with rage, she snarled, "You're gonna pay for that."

I started backing up, but she lunged forward and took me down. We rolled around on the ground launching cheap shots at each other. Everything was so surreal. She was trying to punch me, and I was clawing back, hoping to gouge her eyes. My head smashed against a jagged rock, and as we rolled sideways, it sliced through my scalp and I yelled loudly.

Gaining an advantage, she pummeled me good. Sadly, I was beginning to doubt if I'd make it past a first round knockout. Her fist connected with my jaw, and the pain sent me reeling. Crying out, I started gagging as blood filled my mouth. My reflexes went to work, and I spit out the metallic tasting glob. As luck would have it, the bloody wad of saliva hit her smack in the eye. Screaming, she loosened her grip, so I jabbed her hard with my knee and rotated sideways.

We jumped to our feet at the same time. With only a few paces separating us,

we circled each other as if in a boxing ring. Exhausted, and needing a reprieve before another strike, we came to a dead stop, glaring at each other with open animosity.

Blood trickled down her face, and pine needles poked out of her stringy, black hair. Several inches taller than me, she was also extremely skinny. With heavy black make-up smeared around her eyes, she looked like a witch whose spell had just backfired in her face. Except she wasn't wearing a long black dress; she wore tight jeans and a short, yellow tank top which exposed her silver-hooped belly button ring.

Even though her face remained rock-solid, her shoulders twitched. That subtle movement indicated she'd made a decision to act, so I wasn't surprised when she finally lunged. She swung her right arm, but the swing was high. By tipping my head, I avoided her fist easily. She immediately followed that attempt with a low jab aimed at my stomach. My reaction time was sufficient, because I slid out of the way just in time. Obviously frustrated with her failure to hit me, she stared viciously. Taking full advantage of her hesitation, I sprang a momentum filled roundhouse kick and sent her stumbling backwards.

Her equilibrium was impressive, because she didn't lose her balance. Not even when she staggered back over a dead log. But she didn't stand a chance when I launched another blow – a front snap kick from my days of Tae Kwon Do training. My foot connected with her exposed stomach, tearing away the silver hoop in her belly button.

Screeching, she fell backwards and shoved her hands out to soften the impact, but she wasn't fast enough. Her butt hit the dirt with a loud "thump." While she was down, I kicked her again. Frantically, I sought another weapon. When my eyes landed on a sharp rock, I grabbed it and turned back towards her. She was trying to regain her feet.

"Hey," I yelled, hoping to distract her. At the sound of my voice, she raised her head and set her fuming gaze upon me. Once she caught sight of the stone hoisted over my head, her jaw dropped, and she grunted loudly. Disturbed at committing violence by my own hands, I allowed self-survival instincts to kick in and heaved the rock towards her cowering body. As usual, I executed my dim-witted signature move – an attack with eyes closed. At least I was consistent.

As she howled in pain my eyes flew open, and I winced. Blood oozed from a huge gash in her forehead, and her crooked nose looked broken. Repulsed, I grabbed my stomach, doubled over, and spewed partially digested salmonberries all over a wild blueberry plant. Holding my stomach, I staggered to a full stance

and glanced up at the blue sky. Realization of what I'd done washed over me as I breathed unevenly. Reluctantly, I reached down and touched her arm. Relief swept over me when I felt her Essence still flowing. At least she wasn't dead.

Looking in the direction of the creek, I listened to the comforting sounds of the racing waters and thought of Jason's last orders. However, the creek held no interest to me without him by my side. I turned and tore back through the woods towards where I'd last left him facing not one, but two Ray-pacs and possibly a Mastiff.

My momentum carried me swiftly through the woods. Hammering against my chest like a sledge hammer, my heart throbbed painfully. My lungs expanded rapidly as I swallowed big gulps of air, and I was all too aware of the pain emanating from the open wound in my head. My body was the least of my worries, so I didn't stop to see if I could heal myself. Finding Jason was all that mattered.

Loud grunts guided me to the right place. I snuck up and hid behind a wall of about six dead trees that looked like they'd been laying on the ground for ages. They were stacked together like they'd all fallen over at the same time, maybe during a big windstorm. They were topped with a spongy, yellow moss, and strange fungi clung to the undersides. As a whole, the logs made a great protective wall and vantage point.

Noiselessly, I climbed up and crouched on my knees. Sinking my fingers into the springy moss, I peered over the top of the highest log. In the center of a fairly open area, about half the size of a football field, Jason and Kieran were engaged in a serious physical battle. Only they fought with abnormal strength and speed.

Rapt in wonder, I watched wide-eyed as they flew through the air with super-human force and crashed thunderously to the ground. They appeared equally formidable. Impressively strong, and extremely swift, they utilized several different moves: unmerciful punches, flying kicks, elbow jabs, and everything in between. Bruised and bloodied, it was obvious they'd already inflicted significant damage to one another. Stepping onto their playing field would be tantamount to placing a kitten between two wild dogs – I'd be ripped apart in seconds.

Upon perusing the surrounding timber, I found no sign of Andrew. It was like he'd disappeared. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Glancing back, I shook my fists in a silent cheer as Jason leveled a punch straight into Kieran's cheekbone. Kieran's head snapped back, and he sailed through the air several feet. He managed to tuck himself into a ball at precisely the right moment and

roll to a stop before smacking into a tree.

Vaulting to his feet, he roared, “I’ve had enough of these little sparring games. Now, let’s see what your ability really is.” With a cold, unblinking stare, he offered one vicious laugh and then stood perfectly still. I wasn’t sure what was coming, but I knew it wasn’t going to be pretty because Jason flew back several paces. He watched Kieran with anticipation. Keenly aware of Jason’s location, I diverted my attention to Kieran and watched with the same intensity.

I did a double-take when Kieran’s skin began rippling – sprouting short, light reddish fur at a rapid rate. His splitting clothes sounded like old towels being shredded into rags. Growing in length and size by the millisecond, Kieran’s body expanded, becoming slender and elongated, until eventually, he was standing on four legs – the hind legs longer than the front, each with big, soft-padded paws. A black-tipped tail, more than half the length of his body, swished powerfully behind him.

The world as I knew it came crashing in around me, unhinging every fiber of my being, and sucking the oxygen right out of my lungs – almost stopping the flow of my Essence. Kieran had inexplicably changed shape from human to animal. And he was not a giant, scary Mastiff. He was an enormous, probably close to eight foot long, ferocious mountain lion – the reddish one from my snapshots. I pressed my mouth into the log and allowed the spongy lichen to absorb my cries of horror. Clinging to the trees like they were my own iron curtain, I quivered as a high-pitched, throaty yowl echoed through the woods.

CHAPTER 17 – DOOMED TO DIE OR DESTINED TO LIVE

I started hyperventilating. This was the day I was either doomed to die or destined to live.

Either way, I wasn't about to let Jason die. My heart missed several beats at the thought of Jason, who was really a Guardian, lying buried in the hard, cold earth. His life was more important to me than my own. That's why fear clawed relentlessly at my insides. Maybe I could distract the mountain lion long enough for Jason to escape. Shaking, as if I was eternally ensnared in a Clonic seizure, I peeked over the log again and spied the wild cat. His head was small, his face short, and his ears rounded. Long, two inch canine teeth, designed for slashing, flashed as his jaw widened. His glowing amber eyes stole my breath away. They were the eyes of the Mastiff.

In the flash of an instant, the huge animal charged straight for Jason with incredible speed. Fear and horror pierced my heart. I was too late! I was going to watch Jason die at the paws of a mountain lion – the one animal that sat deepest in my fears, haunted my dreams, and had dominated my thoughts for months.

It was too much. I couldn't watch the bloody assault. Before I could react, I witnessed something even more shocking than anything else I'd already seen. Something I'd never even considered. Jason, my Jason, leaped straight up in the air and transformed into a muscular mountain lion. The underside of his body was white, and although he was lean, he was also a blend of stealth and power. He landed gracefully on large paws directly behind Kieran. When he turned and faced my direction, there was no doubt in my mind that it was really him. The cougar's eyes were aqua-marine. He opened his mouth and hissed. I stopped breathing. He was the tawny brown mountain lion from my snapshots. Only, rather than being terrified, I found myself captivated by his fierce beauty.

Maybe my snapshots were about more than just me. Could it be that I was here to save a Guardian? Or, with his brawn and my Essence, could it be we were destined to save each other?

All at once, the mountain lions pounced and came together with a loud "thwack" in mid-air. Falling through the air a good 15 feet, they landed with walloping "thumps" on a bed of compact pine needles. A temporary veil of dirt obscured my vision, but outlines of their huge bodies were evident as they rolled conjointly, grappling with each other. The air cleared, and I could see right down

to the reddish mountain lion's forepaws. His exposed claws were attempting to tear into Jason.

I'd read up on these wild animals and their hunting techniques in advance; I'd wanted to be prepared. This predator was trying to catch his prey in a death grip. He'd use his powerful neck and jaw to grasp Jason, before sinking his teeth into Jason's neck, crushing it and suffocating him.

Deafening hisses and growls filled the woods like human screams of suffering. The tawny brown cougar flipped over backwards but managed to escape, and then the race was on. After awhile, I couldn't tell which mountain lion was which; they were a massive red and brown blur, streaking across the forest and slamming into trees. Branches cracked and logs snapped. At one point, they shot off in powerful sprints and vanished into the undergrowth.

For awhile the woods were unequivocally quiet, and I dared not breathe or move. Eventually, the tawny cougar poked his face through some ferns. After furtively scouring the whole area, he ran full force towards a huge evergreen tree, which stood only about nine feet away from my hiding spot. He climbed with amazing grace and quickly sprawled out on a high branch. I had a clear view of his face and could tell he was watching vigilantly for his enemy. Light brown fur dominated from his nose to his forehead. White patches popped above his eyes, surrounded his lips, and covered his chin and throat. The white was offset by a few black markings on his face, but white whiskers poked out around his muzzle and above his eyes. Despite his beauty, he looked extremely dangerous. While I was admiring his savage beauty, he turned, looked directly at me, and hissed faintly. I sucked in a shocked breath and froze, unable to blink even an eye. Surrounded by a silence that rang loud, we stared at each other for what seemed an eternity.

A branch snapped, and his head whipped the other way just as the reddish mountain lion returned with a hasty entrance. Hurdling through the air into the center of the clearing, he came to a stop on top of an old, cracked stump. Sunlight coursed through the treetops, and one huge stream of light settled directly on his face. He stared into the sky and began releasing strange, low amplitude sounds. "Woh, woh, woh." I knew mountain lions didn't roar, but this sounded so unnatural.

With the absolute worst timing of anything that had ever happened in my life, I sneezed. Three times. The reddish mountain lion's head jerked my direction. His eyes lit up, and he purred. Loudly. He looked at me hungrily with those evil golden eyes and suddenly vaulted off the stump directly towards me. Shocked to

be experiencing my snapshots live, my heart banged against my chest, trying to pound its way out. I screamed just as the tawny cougar sprang forth from the evergreen bough. Colliding mid-air, they dropped and landed in a tangled mass on the hard ground. I sunk my face into the moss and whispered words of thanks to Jason for saving me. Again.

Desperate to catch the action, my head snapped up, and I followed their every move as they fought viciously for several minutes. Spiraling over logs and tree roots, they hissed and clawed at each other, tearing clumps of fur from each other's bodies. Covered with bloody splotches and breathing heavy, they seized each other and began slashing away with raw brutality. A loud "Rowww, rowww, rowww," rose between them. The savagery and ferociousness of the onslaught was traumatizing, but I couldn't take my eyes away.

Sinking his jaws into my tawny mountain lion's neck, the reddish one flung my beautiful cougar through the air. He landed in a heap at the base of my protective wall where I couldn't see him. The reddish cat celebrated his victory with ear-shattering screams. It was all I could do not to jump out and run to my fallen cougar – Jason. I was numb. My hope had been crushed and lay dispersed among the dead needles.

The screaming stopped, and the cougar's body transformed, very quickly, back into the human form of Kieran. Leaning his head back, he drew in a deep breath and let it all out again in an eruption of depraved laughter. With an expression of superiority he strut, but with a definite limp, towards Jason. I panicked at having neither one of them in my sight. Worried sick, I knew I needed to get to Jason – if it wasn't too late.

It couldn't be too late. I also needed to get to him before Kieran came after me. Grabbing two short sticks, I stretched out on my stomach and assessed the situation below me.

"Not a bad fight for an *Imitator*," Kieran said snidely and kicked Jason's beat up human body. "But we Shapeshifters are stronger, especially when we've been feeding on Essence. Especially Guardian Essence. Those B.C. Guardians were easy prey; they didn't put up half the fight you did. Of course, they didn't know we were coming." Kieran might be stronger, but he hadn't escaped completely unscathed. Blood dribbled down the side of his face, and large hideous abrasions covered his body.

To stop myself from crying out at the sight of Jason's limple form, I bit down hard on the stick in my hand. This was the worst I'd ever seen him. His face was scratched up, but my eyes were immediately drawn to his neck, where a

deep red laceration bled profusely. Some of his body parts looked displaced, and I imagined he had several broken bones. He'd be black and blue from head to toe in a few days, but that was the least of my worries. I needed to close the neck wound, stop the bleeding, and heal any broken bones so he'd still *be* alive in a few days.

"Hey, pretty boy," Kieran shouted and kicked Jason.

"Mmm," Jason groaned and rolled slightly to one side.

"What a waste! If you Guardians would just feast on human Essence you'd be strong like us." He turned sideways and spat blood. "Of course, your loss is my gain. There's nothing that satiates my hunger better than the Essence of another Guardian. Pity it won't be as strong to start off, but once I've drained you of every last bit, and you take your last breath, my strength will be more impressive than it was before." He rubbed his dirty hands together. "Then of course, I'll feast on your little Innocent who's hiding around here somewhere – a nice tasty treat after all my hard work."

Jason moaned again, and I fought to maintain my strength of mind. Even though I was rigid with terror, anger propelled me into a standing position. As Kieran leaned over Jason with his hands outstretched, I jumped. Plunging downwards, I refused to close my eyes and lose sight of my target this time. I jabbed the sticks straight into Kieran's back and landed feet first on the ground. A surprise attack gone right. Finally!

Howling like a madman, he fell face forward onto Jason. Hatred commanded my every move. Without hesitation I kicked Kieran in the face like my foot was made of steel. The force behind my kick sent him spiraling backwards. Rage consumed me when I looked down at Jason's damaged body. I clenched my fists and advanced on Kieran again, slamming him with another powerful kick to the head. His face wrenched sideways, and he stopped moving.

Immediately, I turned my attention to Jason. His breath was shallow and his face pale. I knelt down beside him and placed my hands on his neck. I knew he was at his weakest, so I mentally prepared myself for nothing more than a trickling of Essence. But when I didn't feel any flow at all, my body started quivering, and I fought back tears. If I hadn't seen him roll over moments before, I would have thought he was dead. What I felt wasn't physically painful; it was more shocking. For some reason, this time I could feel his suffering. Closing my eyes, I focused and ignored his pain. I shared with him my strength and energy. As my fingers tingled, I could feel my Essence surging into him fast and unyielding.

“Jason, Jason! What’s happening? Answer me please!” Madison was trying to contact him telepathically again.

“Come on Jason. You need to answer,” I whispered. His eyelids started fluttering just as brutal hands clamped onto my shoulders. Flinching, I lifted my hands away from Jason’s bloody neck.

“Owww, what the…” Kieran yelled. Shocked that he was up again, I whipped around. Kieran gazed back and forth between his hands and my face several times before his lips formed a slow smile. “How fascinating,” his voice cracked as he looked at me sideways. Although not much taller than me, his build was definitely more muscular and stocky. His small eyes were a vibrant hazel. From far away he might have looked like Adam Levine, but up close he was greasy-looking and intimidating. Either his facial hair grew in clumps, or he’d shaved hastily around his goatee. His predatory stare, profoundly unwanted, made me extremely nervous. He glanced down at Jason, and I instinctively moved to block his view.

“Get back,” I growled. Not that I was going to be a lot of protection when this crazy dude morphed back into a mountain lion, but I was prepared to take whatever measures necessary to protect Jason.

“This just gets more stimulating by the minute,” Kieran said with a chuckle. “I do believe I have one very genuine and powerful Amethyst standing before me. This makes my trip to the Northwest a total success.” Smirking, he cupped his chin and shook his head. I didn’t know what to make of his odd behavior, but when he took a step towards me, I instantly put my hands out to stop him.

“Don’t touch him,” Jason said in a raspy voice. Glancing down, I shot him a surprised look. He was talking; that was good.

“Ha, ha, ha. Oh no! Don’t listen to him. Please, go ahead. Touch me – anywhere you want.” Kieran reached his arms out and wiggled his fingers before me. Trembling, I looked at my hands, now covered in blood – Jason’s blood. Apparently, I didn’t have control over who I healed. If I touched him, I’d heal his injuries. Talk about screwed! How was I going to defend myself if my touch only enabled him?

“I wouldn’t consider touching you…you filthy…vile creature,” I said venomously. Then I had a random thought, well probably not so random. It was more like I’d just fit the last missing pieces into a puzzle, one that I’d been working on for weeks. Now that I could see the whole picture, everything made sense, and it wasn’t very pretty. “Why don’t you touch me instead,” I said hesitantly, waving my hands in front of his face like he’d done to me. If my

suspicions were right, I had one defense after all.

“Oh, I like it! She still has a sense of humor. How intriguing.” He laughed mirthlessly but made no attempt to reach for me. Looking me in the eye, he said scornfully, “I don’t feel like playing with fire right now.”

A strange, queasy feeling overtook the pit of my stomach. So that was it. If I touched him, I healed him. If he touched me, it hurt. A lump formed in my throat, and I looked down at Jason with a sick feeling. His aqua-marine eyes flickered back at me with a measuring look, and I knew. I knew the heat that had always been between us had been real. I just hadn’t known that for him it was hot. Painfully hot.

“So, we’re at an impasse,” I said uncertainly to Kieran. Shifting my stance, I waited. I didn’t have a special ability like everyone else. Apparently, my own best defense was myself. This was getting complicated.

“Actually,” Kieran said, taking a step closer to Jason, “you have a choice to make now.”

My face hardened, and my shoulders stiffened. “I don’t know what you mean,” I said with a hint of alarm.

“You see your boyfriend here...” He pointed, and I noticed several silver rings on his stubby fingers. One was an especially large snake head wrapped around his thumb joint. Scratching his goatee, he silently contemplated for a moment. “Well actually, he’s probably not your boyfriend, because a relationship between an Amethyst and a Guardian is *flaming* impossible, isn’t it?” He laughed.

My chest tightened. With all this new information, I still had a lot to sort out. Unfortunately, things were not looking too good for me at the moment. “Just get on with it.” I grimaced.

“Like I was saying before I so rudely got off track – you have a choice. I can reach down and draw the Essence from him until he’s dead,” he smiled impishly, “while you watch helpless and virtually defenseless. I mean you can try to pull me off of him or whatever. But you know as well as I do, the minute you touch me, it only makes me stronger.”

“I won’t let you near him,” I seethed. I would die before I let him touch Jason again.

“Or,” he winked, ignoring my outburst, “you can choose to share your Essence freely with me. You can heal the inconsequential injuries I sustained during my recreational bout with your friend here. It would be like a really good fix. Just might satisfy my craving for a couple days...and then I wouldn’t need to

bother with him. What do you say?" He looked pleased with his offer.

Jason moaned and tried to sit up. "Alex. No."

"Hmm...Alex," Kieran purred. "It's decision time. You have five seconds: 5...4...3...2..."

"Fine," I said angrily.

"Fine, what?"

"Fine, I'll heal you. But I have a condition of my own."

"Of course you do. But that's okay, I admire a shrewd mind. What's the condition?"

"We move away from him," I said and looked at Jason, who was staring at me with despair and shaking his head. Gazing up at Kieran again, I said, "I don't want to be anywhere near him when we do this. He needs to be out of sight."

"Ohh, I get it. Out of sight; out of mind."

"Not quite," I snarled. "But if we're in agreement, let's go. I'll follow you." The sooner I got him away from Jason, the better.

"Sure thing my little peddler." Kieran snorted and started walking. He stopped almost immediately. Glancing back at Jason, as if he was an afterthought, he remarked, "It was fun. Let's do it again sometime. Actually, I'm sure we will, and I'll be looking forward to it because next time I won't let you live." With that he started whistling and scrambled up and over a dead tree.

"Alex, please don't do this," Jason choked out. He flinched and tried his best to get up, but he wasn't strong enough yet. "Don't taint yourself with his Essence; he's pure evil."

I leaned down and touched his forehead. "Jason, I'll come back. I promise. Keep your eyes open for Andrew."

"Alex, let's go," Kieran called out obnoxiously. "Deal was that you heal me, not him."

I whispered to Jason, "Talk to Madison. How long until she gets here?" I stood up.

His eyes narrowed and his mouth opened in surprise. Giving me a very funny look, he whispered, "Five minutes tops; stall him, but don't touch him."

"I'll try," I mouthed back and turned to follow Kieran, who continued whistling loudly as he led me into the dense forest. We waded through thick, low-growing shrubs, the only sound coming from branches snapping under our feet. Eventually, he stopped. The chains hanging from the belt loops of his torn black jeans rattled as he jumped straight up. That giant leap landed him square on his feet, about six feet up, on top of a big old stump that had a huckleberry

bush growing out of it.

He turned around and looked down at me. “Must suck being an Amethyst sometimes. Can’t jump great heights. Can’t run with super speed. And no experimenting with new abilities every time you link with a different person.”

Looking at him with new perspective, I tried hard to look bored. In actuality, I was soaking up all this new information like a sponge. “Being an Amethyst has its advantages,” I said snidely and wondered what they were because I could really use them right about now.

“Yeah, like being able to heal yourself almost instantaneously while the rest of us take days if left on our own. And of course, there’s no advantage to me killing you since your Essence all but dissipates when you die, leaving me with nothing. No, I need a different strategy with you. I just don’t know what it is,” he muttered as if it was an afterthought.

What? I could heal myself. And why couldn’t he strip me of my Essence like he could a Guardian? Jessica had a lot to teach me if I made it out of this mess. “Mmm hmm,” I mumbled, hoping he’d keep rambling. The more time I bought, the better my chances. I was sure he had some trick, some way to capture me and take me with him in the end, but I wasn’t giving up hope.

“Then again, there’s something to be said for stealing an ordinary human’s Essence,” he said with a gleam in his amber eyes. “The hunt that leads up to the kill...oh, it’s such a rush. And the power we gain and sustain when we extract all of someone’s Essence. I don’t think your Guardians will ever wise up. They’re so weak – so concerned about human life.”

The more he talked the more disgusted and horrified I became. They were murderers, killing people for their Essence. Suddenly, I felt chilled to the bone even though we stood in the dark shadows of the trees and the temperature was probably around 85 degrees. In fact, not only did I feel colder than a block of ice, I felt like he was chipping away at me with an ice pick, and I might shatter at any moment. I certainly didn’t want to touch him and pollute myself with his tainted Essence.

He hopped down landing only inches away. “Well Alex, it’s time to hold up your end of the bargain.” He smiled, baring dingy, yellow teeth. A mix of blood, animal fur, and cigarette smoke permeated from his body. Foul and disgusting. I hated the way he called me Alex. More than that, I just plain hated that he knew my name at all.

He stood unbearably close now. Blood crusted around the scratches on his face and torn skin hung from his neck. Jason had inflicted some damage, but this

guy was obviously strong. Sighing with resignation, I pursed my lips and reached out to touch him. But at that exact moment something crashed through the forest in the distance. We both turned our heads in haste. Blazing through the thicket and cornering trees at full speed, a golden-colored animal raced towards us, making loud chirping noises. I gaped in surprise when a cheetah came into view.

Quick in his own right, Kieran swore under his breath and spat out, “Our time together has been most rewarding, Alex.” His gaze was intense and his smile wicked. “And while its good-bye for now, have no doubts – I will find you again.” With that he leaped straight up in the air, and when he landed a good 30 feet away, he was once again the lean, mean reddish mountain lion. Using his long tail like a rudder, he turned sharply through the trees and disappeared with a burst of speed.

I’d been surprised to see a cheetah. I was even more astonished when, as it dashed past me, it transformed into a huge shaggy black bear and continued running with a fast shuffling gait. Watching his massive and powerful body was fascinating. His legs on one side moved swiftly together rather than alternating like most four-legged animals. He stampeded over a couple logs, squashing them easily, and followed the mountain lion into the thicket.

I didn’t have time to wait around and see what happened next because I had to get back to Jason. Tearing through the forest as quietly as possible, I found him in the same place I’d left him – at the bottom of my protective wall. I whispered a silent prayer when I saw he was still alone. Sitting in the middle of a dark green bush and leaning against the log, he didn’t look overly comfortable. But at least he was part way up. His color looked better, but he was still a mess.

“Alex, thank God!” he exclaimed. In a worried voice he asked, “Did he touch you?” I frowned at him and he amended his question, “I mean, did you touch him?”

“No,” I said softly.

“How?”

“Shhhh.” I held my finger against my lips and shook my head suppressing tears that were trying to spring forth. I placed my hands on his neck, and he flinched but nodded. His eyes held a significant amount of gold spots. Not normal. Looking at him distracted me, so I closed my eyes and concentrated. His Essence felt stronger, and that eased my worries.

“Quick,” he broke the silence after another minute, and I looked up, “we need to move behind the trees.”

“Why?” I asked impatiently, knowing he needed more of my Essence “We need to heal you before they come back. You need to be able to protect yourself,” I said with exasperation.

“No, they’re coming – right now.” Just as he said that the forest erupted into a thunderous cacophony, like numerous trees were being felled simultaneously.

“Madison?” I asked but already knew the answer to that one. I knew how loud she was when she was pissed off, and from the sounds of the mass destruction heading our way, I’d say her name was written all over it. Only this was decibels higher than her usual rumblings.

He nodded and said, “Her and Andrew.”

“Tattoo guy with the energy spheres,” I clarified.

Nodding, he rose to his feet and motioned for me to follow. “Let’s go.”

Just before rounding the log barrier, I stopped and watched Andrew fly backwards into the clearing. His hands were out and he was throwing energy blasts everywhere. Smaller trees split and toppled over, and large potholes blasted the forest floor to pieces.

Madison rushed into the now cluttered clearing with her long hair whipping in the breeze, a breeze she’d created with her own anger. With her hands out in front of her, she appeared to be lifting things off the ground and hurtling them through the air. Huge branches, logs, and even boulders flew towards Andrew, like pre-programmed missiles. She tilted her head slightly, and I knew...I knew she’d been the long-haired girl in the alley who’d been launching buckets.

All Andrew could do was counter with his energy blasts. Loud “booms” erupted as things collided overhead, decimating treetops. Shattering into millions of particles, the rock shards and huge chunks of timber scattered in all directions. One Guardian and one Ray-pac together had created a war zone, and it was spectacular.

Tight black shorts and a form-fitting, ultra blue tank top highlighted Madison’s long lean legs and toned upper body. She was beautiful, and she was deadly. Andrew didn’t stand a chance this time.

“Alex, get over here now,” Jason roared.

At that moment, a rogue sphere flew over my head and blasted off the top three logs in the wall. I dropped to the ground and scrambled on my hands and knees to get away from the falling chunks, but splintery pieces sprayed my back. When I glanced up, I saw a huge tree section, about five feet long and two feet across, hurtling straight towards me. As I cried out, the massive log smashed into my head.

And my world went dark.

CHAPTER 18 – GUARDIAN EXPLANATIONS

I knew my eyes were closed, but I wasn't ready to open them. My whole body ached, and my head was throbbing something terrible. I felt weightless like I was on a swing. I thought maybe I was dreaming until a hand touched my shoulder. Jessica's hand for sure, because I could feel her Essence pouring into me. Her Essence was good. Strong.

"She's waking up. Step back you guys; give her a little room. She's going to be freaked out enough as it is." At the sound of Jessica's voice, I opened my eyes and found five anxious faces peering into mine. Well, Jessica, Jason, Max, and Laci looked anxious; Madison appeared more put out than anything else.

"How are you feeling?" Jessica asked. She was sitting next to me on an L-shaped couch, holding my shoulder with one hand and tugging nervously on her ponytail with the other.

"Crappy," I answered groggily. "But better and better with every second you share your Essence." I smiled but shuddered when I touched a clump of matted hair on the back of my head.

Leaving some space between us, Laci dropped down on my other side. "We're so glad you're okay. We knew you would be, but that didn't stop us from worrying."

"Speak for yourself," Madison muttered under her breath and plopped herself into a large, comfy-looking chair across from me.

"Madison," Max scolded, shaking his head. He and Jason remained standing.

"Where are we?" I asked, looking around for the first time. The modest-sized room was snug but cozy. Cream colored carpets offset by cherry cabinets and matching end tables brought a certain amount of luxuriousness to the space, while black trim and glossy finishes added a touch of elegance. Nestled in one corner was a small kitchen; the other corner held two short sets of stairs, one leading up and one down. Large, slightly angled windows stretched all the way around us. Everything beyond the windows was blue. The light blue sky extended forever until it came down and met up with a deep, dark blue. Water!

"We're on Jason's boat out in the middle of Bellingham Bay," Max said.

"Oh." I turned and stared out the window behind me at the waves rippling across the ocean. The boat was rocking gently; that explained the swinging sensations.

“Well, technically it’s everybody’s boat. I just happen to be the one who lives on it,” Jason said and leaned back against the counter.

“What? You live on a boat?” I asked, looking at him incredulously. As my eyes swept over his white t-shirt, jeans, and the huge red marks on his neck, I suddenly remembered everything. The sunlit forest, the mountain lions, the Ray-pacs, the falling tree...

“Yes,” he said quietly.

I covered my face with my hands and moaned. “It’s all coming back. Oh crap! Everything is coming back.” My head shot up. I pointed at him and stuttered, “You...you turned into a...a mountain lion.” Panicking, I started breathing hard, and Jessica wrapped an arm around me. He nodded slowly with a pained expression, and I continued in a shaky voice. “That was insane...” I covered my face with my hands and then glanced back up at him, “but amazing.”

Tilting his head forward, he narrowed his eyes and he jabbed a finger my direction. “You didn’t listen to a word I said. I told you to stay hidden. But oh no, you jumped right in at the first opportunity. You put yourself in the worst kind of danger.”

Livid, I glared at him. He sure knew how to push my buttons. Startling Jessica and Laci, I pushed off the couch and shook my finger at him. “You were lying there helpless, and the odds were not in your favor. You’re lucky I didn’t listen to you. Or, or – you’d look worse off than you do right now.” Advancing into his personal space, I smacked my hand against his chest.

“Calm down you two,” Max said sternly and stepped between us. Looking at me, he said, “Lexi, you’re right. He is lucky you acted, because you saved his life.” Jason snorted and Max looked at him severely. “Lexi’s stronger than you give her credit for. You should be grateful.”

Shamefully, Jason studied the floor. Eventually he gazed at me with unwavering eyes, and said, “I am grateful.” In a strained voice he said softly, “I’m only angry because I was terrified. I didn’t know what they would do to you, and I knew I was powerless.” He looked intently at Max and said with frustration, “Now they know about her being an Amethyst, and they won’t stop until...”

“Jason stop!” Jessica interrupted. She seized my hand and dragged me back to the couch.

Meanwhile, Max veered Jason over to the empty chair by Madison and shoved him into it. “You sit down and be quiet for awhile. Let me do the talking.” Jason nodded and slumped into the chair, refusing to meet my eyes.

Max exhaled loudly, drummed a hand against the counter, and ran the other through his jet black hair. Standing before us in a red button down shirt, he gazed out the sliding glass door towards the back of the boat. “Lexi, today has no doubt been shocking and probably frightening as well.” I nodded and listened intently as he continued, “It’s time we told you everything, but I’d like to start from the beginning and work our way up to today. I think a more chronological telling of events will give you a better understanding of who we are and what we do. Afterwards, you can ask as many questions as you want. Does that work?”

“Yes,” I said thankfully, sitting down and sinking back into the cushions. “Some history would be helpful, and I’m way past ready for explanations.”

For the next 15 minutes he talked and everyone else kept quiet. Some of what he said I’d already learned from Grandma Rose’s journals and some from Kieran. Basically, their kind had existed for centuries. They called themselves Seers until they linked and became Guardians. Linking took place anywhere between the ages of 16 and 23. Because they’d been gifted with special abilities, they believed their main purpose in life was to act upon their visions and protect the general population, the *Innocents*, from accidents and tragic deaths. Innocents, for the most part, were unaware Guardians even existed.

I wanted to tell them all, right then and there, about my premonitions and that I was a Seer, but I was afraid to interrupt. I decided to wait until I’d heard everything they had to say first. That way I’d receive unbiased information and wouldn’t be drilled with a bunch of questions before I’d asked mine.

Max cleared his throat. “Others, like us, exist all around the world. Basically, there’s a huge network of Guardians. The ability to have premonitions is hereditary, and while immediate offspring tend to inherit the ability, there is no guarantee they will. In fact, in many cases the gift of prescience skips several generations.”

“Which is why,” Laci broke in excitedly, “A college town like Bellingham is a good place to come across unknowing Seers – young people entering adulthood who’ve had visions all their lives but don’t know why and no one else in their family has them. We are always on the lookout and when we find a Seer, we bring them into our Circle and reassure them they’re not alone.”

Madison yawned and interjected, “What they really need is to *link* and become Guardians; they just don’t know it.” She reached over and grasped Jason’s arm.

Clearly irritated, Max jumped in again. “Wait, wait. We’re getting ahead of ourselves here. Come on guys, let me continue. It will make more sense.”

“Good idea,” Jason snapped, glaring at Madison. He pulled his arm away and jumped out of his seat. “Anyone want something to drink?” he asked, looking directly at me.

“Some water,” I said appreciatively, and everyone else chimed in as well. “Nice kitchen,” I commented.

“Galley,” five voices corrected.

“Looks like we’ll have to enlighten you on proper maritime terminology as well,” Madison said, brushing her brow and stifling a yawn. “Just so you know, this is the Salon.”

I didn’t dignify that comment with a response, and Max gave her a sideways glance before starting up again. Jason tossed water bottles around the room, and rather than sit down in the chair again, he leaned against the Galley counters next to Max and stared out the side windows. His neck looked horrible, and his face was scratched up and a bit swollen, but he was alive. That’s all I cared about. As if he could read my thoughts, he diverted his attention away from the windows and bored his eyes into mine. My heart skipped several beats.

“Lexi, are you listening?” Max asked.

Flushing, I looked guiltily at Max. “Yes. Of course I am. Keep going.”

“As I was saying,” Max pressed his hands together, “when a Seer’s body reaches full maturity, the visions become more frequent – almost spinning out of control. The Seer usually develops flu-like symptoms, but regardless of whether they do or not – they must link.”

“Why?” I asked, deciding I wanted more clarification than what I’d read in Grandma Rose’s journal.

Max shifted his weight and gave me a dismal look. “Different people have different reactions. That’s what makes it so unpredictable. A few Seers have lost their ability to have premonitions, and therefore, never become Guardians and instead live normal lives as *Innocents*. Some Seers develop really high fevers which results in brain damage. But the majority of Seers who don’t link, die within days.” He wiped his brow. “*Linking* is paramount.”

Wide-eyed, I whispered, “Oh, okay.”

“Linking is not gender specific; although, the majority of links tend to be male-female because they’re usually stronger. The actual process of linking is really quite simple.”

Laci jumped to her feet, faced Max, and held out her hands. Their fingers interlaced, and they tilted their heads forward until their foreheads were touching.

“They’re already linked,” Jason remarked for my benefit. “They’re just showing you what it would look like. They’d search for each other’s thoughts until they found them on the same metaphysical plane. Almost instantaneous, the process takes no more than a matter of seconds.”

“Once linked, are you linked forever?” I asked.

Biting his lower lip and wringing his hands together, Jason said, “Whenever there is a full moon, all links break. Guardians can choose to re-link with the same person or a different person anytime that day or over the next several days. But if a Guardian waits too long to re-link, he or she will face those same consequences Max mentioned a minute ago. The ones a Seer faces if they don’t link. So rather than face an uncertain future or the possibility of death, we typically re-link within a couple days.”

Sitting up straighter, I said, “So linking is crucial to your survival; I get that. You don’t really want to remain unlinked and gamble with your life. What about the special abilities you have? Do those come with linking?” I asked, thinking about Grandma Rose’s journal again and about what I’d witnessed in the forest.

“Yes,” Max said. “Upon linking, all Guardians gain extreme strength and speed, as well as telepathy with the person to whom they are linked.”

“Oh yeah, I knew that,” I said excitedly. “It was really weird. I was standing behind Jason—”

Cutting me off sharply, Jason said, “And I told her I’d spoken with Madison telepathically. I let her know you’d be arriving in a matter of minutes.” He sent me a weighty look, and I closed my mouth. Shocked to hear him lie so blatantly in front of everyone, I decided to follow his lead and ask him about it later.

“Okay good,” Max said. “So when linked, our bodies are able to heal themselves, but it’s a slow process. If we are injured bad enough it takes several days. In addition, using our abilities drains our Essence.”

“That’s where Amethysts and our powerful Essence come in handy,” Jessica said proudly. “We step in, and after a few seconds or minutes, we can have them restored to health.” She smiled and smacked me lightly on the back.

“The most unique ability that linking presents us with differs from Guardian to Guardian and changes based upon who we link with,” Max said. “We call that ability our Flair.”

“Flair,” I repeated, tapping my fingertips together. Turning my attention to Jason, I said, “Kieran called you...”

“An Imitator,” he replied and crossed his arms. “Any time another Guardian uses their Flair, I can copy it.”

“Amazing,” I said in awe. “First you copied Andrew with his wild spheres —”

“He’s an Energy Manipulator,” Jason supplied, “and Kieran is a Shapeshifter.”

“Are you saying he can change into any animal he wants?”

Max stepped forward. “Yes. But usually there is one form that feels most natural, therefore lending itself as the best option.”

Looking at Max in a new light, I suddenly realized he was also a Shapeshifter. “Ah ha, like you arriving as a cheetah because it’s the fastest animal, but changing back into a bear immediately after Kieran disappeared into the woods?”

“Yes,” he said and stretched his arms behind his back. “Once I saw you were safe, I immediately changed back into the form I’m most comfortable with – a black bear.”

“Extraordinary,” I said breathlessly. “And thank you; you arrived just in time.” He nodded, and I pointed at Laci.

“I’m a Shield—”

“A Shield?” I thought about that and a wild thought crossed my mind. Excited, I jumped to my feet. “That was you in the alley that night! The Mastiff smacked into your shield; he wasn’t repelled by the pepper spray.” Biting my lip, my eyes darted to Max. “And you were the Wolfhound.”

“That was you?” Laci and Madison said in unison.

“Yes,” I answered and listened as Madison recounted that night in the dark alley. Afterwards, I looked at Laci and said, “But I didn’t see you in the forest today.”

“Jessica and I drove the car. We couldn’t reach you as fast as Madison and Max could on foot. I needed to stay with Jessica and shield her – keep her identity protected.” I gave her a funny look as she rubbed her hands together. “Amethysts are rare, and we don’t take any chances that might reveal Jessica’s identity.”

Pondering that comment, I thought about the flying buckets and tree branches. I looked at Madison. “You’re telekinetic.”

She smiled, brushed her hair away from her face, and said smugly. “I can move any object with my mind and manipulate it to my will.” My water bottle lifted off the coffee table and fell into my lap. Leave it to Madison to show off.

“We should eat,” Laci announced and walked into the galley. As a pleasure craft whipped past, she grabbed the counter and said, “Madison, will you help?”

“Oh fine,” Madison huffed but hopped out of her chair. As they began preparations, Max and Jason sat down in the two empty chairs. Behind them, the sun appeared to be dropping rapidly in the sky; nightfall would be upon us soon. I wondered how long I’d been unconscious.

“This brings us to the Ray-pacs,” Max said. “Also known as the Rapacious ___”

“Rapacious?” I repeated loudly. “I know that word. I think it was in my daily calendar, but...” Max was looking at me cross-eyed, so I frowned and mumbled, “Sorry. Never mind. What’s it mean?”

“It means living on prey or taking by force,” he said gruffly.

“Oh,” I said and shut my mouth so he could finish.

Pressing his lips together, he fixated on his hands. “As with every aspect of life, greed and the lust for power can corrupt even the most pure of hearts. As Guardians, we use our visions to act in the interest of saving the Innocents, but we must be careful in our interactions with them. When we are linked we have the ability to draw Essence away from people through touch.” I arched my eyebrows, but he kept talking. “Essence is powerful and energizing. It gives us more strength, as well as greater potential in our abilities. As we sleep it regenerates, but if we need it badly enough we can get it from others.” Max stood up and paced back and forth. Stopping, he looked at me and said, “A long time ago, a few Guardians started experimenting with drawing Essence from animals. They were rewarded when it made their abilities more prolific and recharged their Essence as well. Eventually, that need for instant gratification became innate. Those Guardians began stealing Essence from animals. Often the animals died.”

Shuddering, I whispered, “That’s so cruel.”

The creases at the corner of his mouth deepened. “Well prepare yourself; it gets much worse.” His hands balled into fists at his sides, and I sunk lower into the couch. I already had a good idea where this conversation was heading. “After some time, those Guardians became like addicts who needed a fix. They also gained the characteristics of a well-fed housecat, one which will pursue wildlife not because of hunger, but because of the natural instinct to hunt and kill. With their linked talents of speed and athleticism, they were skilled predators.”

Gripping the edges of my shorts, I kept my eyes glued on Max and mumbled, “Like Kieran.”

He nodded, a dark fury raged in his eyes. “Feral and savage, they were condemned as outcasts and became known as the Rapacious.” He paused and

drew in a deep breath. “Then the unthinkable happened,” he said and stared right at me. “They began preying on Innocents. More recently they’ve been stealing all of a person’s Essence, leaving them dead.”

I sat straight up. “That’s it, isn’t it?” I said aloud. “The Ray-pacs are responsible for all the bizarre things happening across the nation. It’s not some strange new virus. Those people had their Essence stolen.” Max and the others nodded at my understanding. “And the mysterious deaths...that’s when a Ray-pac has completely drained a person of all their Essence. That’s why there’s nothing in the toxicology reports that points to a cause of death.”

The room was silent. I looked from one stark face to another. “And now they’re here.” Looking at Laci, I added, “That’s what they wanted from the girl in the alley.” She nodded and I said, “And you happened along just at the right time?”

“I had a premonition of the jogger and the dog,” Madison interjected.

My mouth hung open. Interesting...so she and I must have had similar premonitions. Not yet ready to come clean, I diverted my gaze to Jessica. “The college students?”

She nodded. “Yes, and luckily they were still alive. If the victims are still alive, I can help. And so can you. That’s the main reason we need your help. We need you to become an Amethyst and help save people who’ve been left almost Essence-less by the Ray-pacs.”

I nodded but continued with a frown, “Kieran was gloating about the B.C. killings.”

“I bet he was,” Max said in a deadly voice. “The four victims in B.C. last week were not Innocents; they were all Guardians. It was a great loss. Guardians have become a target because their Essence is more gratifying. And we believe they are searching for Amethysts as well.”

No one said a word as water lapped against the side of the boat, and an engine rumbled in the distance. I looked at Jason. “You would have died immediately after Kieran had stolen all your Essence?”

Jason nodded slowly. “Yes. If you hadn’t stopped him, I wouldn’t be here.”

I swallowed hard. “Then I’m glad I didn’t listen to you.”

He frowned but glanced over at Max and said, “Kieran’s strength was incredible; he must have taken most of the Essence from the B.C. Guardians for himself rather than sharing.” He slammed his fist into his hand. “I just wish we’d tracked them and destroyed them after your first meeting in the alley.”

“That was a big mistake,” Max agreed angrily. We should have searched

harder after the trail went cold. Instead we assumed they were drifters and wouldn't return."

I looked at Max and asked, "Did Kieran get away again?"

"Yes." He shifted his feet.

"Andrew?" I asked.

"No!" Madison responded furiously from the galley. A knife lifted itself off the counter like a jet plane, flew across the room, and lodged itself in the wall.

"Madison!" Jessica yelled. "Control yourself."

"I won't apologize for my Flair," Madison said rebelliously.

I started trembling, and Jessica tightened her hold on my shoulder. "What about Melanie? Did I kill her?" I asked in revulsion.

"No," Jason said, bending down on the other side of the coffee table so he was eye level with me. "You did not kill her. Max searched the woods and couldn't find her. But even if you had, it would have been in self-defense. Remember that." He grasped the table. "I'm sorry I couldn't get to you before the tree fell on you."

I must have looked pale because Laci called out, "You need some food Lexi. We're almost done with sandwiches. Drink some water."

Jessica handed me my water bottle, and I took a small sip. After placing it on the narrow table in front of me, I looked down at my dirty clothes. "How many Ray-pacs are there?" I asked.

"We don't know for sure," Max replied. "They tend to travel in packs – anywhere from six to twelve in a group, and now we're thinking this new pack has set up a home base in B.C. Today's Ray-pacs are part of that group, and Kieran is probably the leader."

I raised my chin. "Are you expecting another confrontation with them?"

"Sometime, yes," Max answered.

"Thought so," I said, biting my lip. I thought about everything they'd told me so far and said, "So an Amethyst's role is to supply the Guardians with extra Essence when they need it, as well as to heal Innocents when necessary." I received several nods and then exhaled slowly. "It's time I tell you about my grandmother's journals, because I think I have an ancestor who was a Guardian." That brought a lot of interested looks, so I told them about Grandma Rose and Gilbert. But when the opportunity came to tell them about my premonitions, I didn't take it. For some reason, I still felt compelled to keep that secret, which was frustrating but felt right.

Jessica hugged me. "You definitely belong with us. Amethysts are so rare,"

she added, “not many Circles have them, and now we have two.”

“I still have a couple questions,” I said, wiping my forehead. “First, what’s the deal with an Amethyst being able to touch a Guardian and it doesn’t hurt? But then,” I glanced at Jason, “when it’s the other way around, it’s painful.”

“That,” said Jessica, “is thankfully our one defense! But it’s also our nemesis because it makes living among Guardians lonely at times.”

“When I first touch you,” Laci said, handing me a ham sandwich and apple slices, “it’s extremely warm. After only a few seconds it’s burning hot, like I’ve just scorched my hand on the stove. The longer I stay in contact, the more painful it becomes until it’s unbearable. Unless we are unlinked, then there’s no pain. But,” she smiled brightly, “you can touch us and share your Essence anytime, and we’ll never cringe or turn away. It’s soothing and exhilarating.”

Jason, who’d been watching me solemnly, bit his lip and averted his eyes. Knots formed in the bottom of my stomach, but it was my aching heart that hurt the worst. Now I understood why Madison had said a relationship between him and I was impossible. The walls began closing in around me, squeezing, until eventually I knew they would crush my heart.

“So you see,” Jessica was saying, oblivious to my emotional devastation, “we are very valuable to our Circle of Guardians. But what’s troubling is that we’ve heard reports of a few Amethysts disappearing from Circles on the East Coast. We’re not sure if the Ray-pacs have finally found some way to steal their Essence...” her voice trailed off as she took notice of my distressed face.

Only she had no idea, that at that moment, I didn’t care what the Ray-pacs could do to an Amethyst. I didn’t care if they’d found a way to steal the Essence from an Amethyst and leave her for dead, because that’s how I already felt – dead. A life in which I couldn’t be with Jason would be like living in an empty void.

“Oh Lexi,” Jessica said and hugged me, “don’t worry. We’ll protect you. You’re one of us now. We’ll work together, and you and I will supply our Guardians with enough Essence to fight off the Ray-pacs when they come back...”

“Or when we attack,” Max interjected angrily. “They have to be destroyed. I have a hunch there was another Ray-pac in the woods – with a Flair for tracking. That’s how they found you both. Probably picked up Jason’s link at Nooksack Falls and then later escaped with Melanie.” He looked from Jason to me and back again. “If I’m right, they’ll be tracking him again.”

“Why him and not me?” I asked with renewed panic, remembering Kieran’s

threat that he wouldn't allow Jason to live the next time.

"Because they can't track Amethysts, only Guardians because of our link," Max answered and looked at us. "You two will need to lie low this next week. I'm sure our parents will want you to stay out at the Retreat where you'll be safer—"

"Why will we be safer there?" I asked crossly.

"What you don't know," he said, setting his sandwich down, "is that the Ray-pacs are susceptible to water; it is their biggest weakness. Their abilities lessen when around water, but their Flair is completely lost when in the water."

"With the exception of Kieran, however," Madison blurted out. "For some reason he's immune, which is why he was able to shapeshift in the thunderstorm."

"Yes, Kieran is a rare exception," Max said. "With all the rain in the Pacific Northwest, this is not a Ray-pac destination hot spot. However, lately our summers have been very dry and warm. They've obviously perceived the nice weather as an invitation to explore the region."

"That's why you told me to run and hide in the creek," I said, glancing at Jason, who nodded.

"Anyways," Max carried on, "After some down time at the Retreat, we'll need to keep you both separated when you get back to town. That way if they find Jason he won't lead them straight to you. Their Tracker might look intently for the next few days but won't have much luck with both of you on the island. Knowing this is our stronghold, they'll need time to gather reinforcements and formulate an air tight plan before making any serious strikes against us. I would imagine they'll be back, and if the rumors are true from the East Coast, they might really be more interested in capturing Lexi. We'll need to be better prepared."

"Staying at the Retreat works perfectly," Jessica added. "They've been placed on mandatory leave at work because of the bank robbery incident." She picked at her sandwich.

My mind couldn't keep up with their plans. I was confused and irritated that my screwed up life wasn't even mine to control. Again. I didn't want the Ray-pacs anywhere near Jason, but I wasn't too keen on being separated from him either. At least I'd have a week with him at the Retreat first. They could count me in on taking out the Ray-pacs, though. I'd do whatever it took to get them out of Jason's and everyone else's lives. Suddenly, the storm around my brain cleared, and I realized all might not be lost.

Walking to the back of the boat, I gazed through the sliding doors at a crimson sun sinking into the horizon. Exactly one half of the sun sat perfectly balanced on the edge of the ocean. Without turning around, I took a deep breath and said nervously into the glass, “Do Guardians ever have strong enough Essence to be Healers as well?”

I was surprised by the stone cold silence that followed. Finally, Jason said curtly, “Why would you ask that?”

The tone of his voice caught me off guard, and before I could respond, Madison put in her two cents worth. “Isn’t it obvious?” she said impatiently.

“No,” Jason and Max both said at the same time.

For some reason I didn’t want to turn around and face them. The strange warning feeling I got when I wanted to reveal my secret, was sharper than ever.

“You’ve just told her it’s impossible for her to have any kind of relationship with a Guardian because her touch is physically painful. You’ve basically said, ‘You can heal us, but we won’t be coming near you anytime soon.’ Don’t you see? She’s searching for other possibilities. How do you think she feels right now?”

“Oh,” Max mumbled apologetically.

“I am sorry,” Madison said in a softer, almost sincere voice. “I know how confused you must be. I talk a lot with Jessica about how isolated she feels.”

Without turning around, I said loudly enough for everyone to hear, “You’re right Madison. I was just trying to cover all the bases. Make sure I wasn’t missing anything. Sorry if I upset anyone.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Laci said. “You’re not exactly off track in your thought process.” My muscles tensed, and I waited for her to carry on. “Fortunately we’ve never known anyone like that in our lifetime, but we know a few Guardians with Amethyst abilities have existed, right Max?”

“Ages ago, according to historical accounts,” Max said, his voice a gentle protest.

“Historical accounts?” I asked in confusion.

“Yes, we have volumes of records and personal accounts that previous Guardians have collected and written down during the course of their lifetimes. These volumes give us the knowledge and details of our ancestors. All Guardian Circles keep current records, so they can be passed along through the generations. Ours are kept at the Retreat if you’d like to read them.”

“I would,” I said. Tapping the glass gently with my knuckles, I added, “Why is it fortunate you’ve never known one?” I waited breathlessly. My heartbeat

hammered in my ears.

“Well, I just meant because the life of a Dentelle is so tragic; it would be really sad to witness something like that,” Laci said.

I went completely still. I was a Dentelle. I had the ability to heal, yet I also had premonitions. That set my wheels in motion. Now we were getting somewhere. I just didn’t know where. Opening the slider a few inches, I let the sea breeze wash over me. The salty air heightened my senses. In an interested but not overly demanding voice, I said, “Something like what?”

“Our historical accounts only make reference to a few different Dentelles ever existing,” Max jumped in. “But in two of the cases we’ve read about, the Dentelle and Guardian died when trying to link. For some reason,” Max added, “the linking process kills them both – the Guardian immediately and the Dentelle within hours of the attempt. In one instance, the Dentelle tried linking with several different Guardians, but all of them died as well. Despite their formidable Essence, no Dentelle has ever survived linking that we’ve heard of. And the ones who didn’t try linking still died in the end. No one understands why.”

“Like a freak of nature,” Madison added.

Mentally, I should have been passed being surprised anymore. But I wasn’t. At one time, when I’d first had the snapshots of myself being attacked by the mountain lions, I’d actually welcomed thoughts of my own mortality. I’d seen it as an escape from a life I wanted no part of. But Jason and Jessica changed that. Jason made me realize, made me remember, life is a precious gift not to be taken for granted. Jessica helped me understand that there is no such thing as a “normal” person. Everyone is different, each with his or her own strengths, weaknesses, and problems. I’d been grasping for an ideal that didn’t even exist. Once I realized that and embraced the special talents I’d been gifted with, I’d gotten my life back on track. And even though I was devastated I couldn’t be with Jason, I wasn’t ready to say good-bye forever. Dying was not high on my list of things to do anytime soon, but this time it appeared inevitable.

All of a sudden, I felt the snapshots bursting from the recesses of my mind. I gripped the sliding door and closed my eyes as the swirling colors shattered the darkness behind my eyelids:

Glowing amber eyes staring straight at me

A wood cabin on fire in the middle of a snow-covered forest

Kieran clasping hands with me and leaning forward until our foreheads

touched – all in an attempt to link

Myself and another person, maybe Kieran, slipping through the cracks of an icy lake

My eyes shot open, and I stared at myself in the glass. My reflection was clear, just like my snapshots had been.

I was destined to link with Kieran. I would destroy him before dying myself, but in the end I'd save my friends. Instantly, a plan began formulating. There was no reason I couldn't link with multiple Ray-pacs and take several of them down with me. When the time was right, I'd allow them to capture me. Kieran would be coming after me anyways, so I just needed to remain elusive until it was my time to link. Then I'd take them all by surprise.

Max interrupted my thoughts with a question, and I masked the shakiness in my voice as best I could. I couldn't reveal my plan to my friends, or let them know I was a Dentelle. They'd be devastated, too. And they'd never go for it. So keeping my premonitions a secret was paramount. This would be my way of joining them, protecting them...

A short time later our discussion wound down. They officially welcomed me into the Bellingham Circle of Guardians and Amethysts, and we headed back towards Squaticum Harbor. We'd only be on land long enough that I could pack a few things for my stay on Towhead Island. Jason and I would remain all week, with everyone else joining us on the weekend.

Excusing myself from the salon, I found my way to the upper deck where Jason stood alone manning the helm. Darkness loomed on the horizon, but deep, red hues still radiated across the sky – beautiful and dramatic. They were not nearly as heart-stopping as his stunning aqua-marine eyes which suddenly dipped and gazed right at me.

“Hi,” he said quietly.

“Hi yourself,” I murmured back.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his chest expanding as he took a deep breath.

I gazed at him with a confidence I didn't feel. If anyone could see through me or ferret out my secrets, it would be him. His bright eyes studied me as he fiddled with the silver chain around his neck. “I am now that I'm with you,” I said softly.

He sighed and stared into the gentle waves just beyond the bow. “Alex, you and I, we're not meant to be together. Not now and not–”

“Shhh,” I said, moving to his side. I pressed my finger against his lips and

rested one hand on his shoulder. “Please don’t say it. I can’t handle any more tonight.” He nodded slowly and looked at me with such sadness that my heart broke in two. “I know that my touch soothes you, and I understand now why you can’t touch me. But right now, I need to touch you and feel your warmth. And I need to share my Essence, because I know you could use it...”

Briefly his eyes closed, and he sighed inwardly. With his hands once again clutching the steering wheel, he said, “Alex, your touch is so much more than soothing. No one’s touch feels like yours. That’s what scares me. I think you’re...well I think a lot of things, but that doesn’t make them right.”

I touched his cheek. “Jason, from that very first moment when you ran into me on the sidewalk, I knew you were someone exceptional. Exasperating, but exceptional.” I gave him a lop-sided grin and paused. “I couldn’t have handled losing you then, and I couldn’t have taken the loss today, especially if I’d lost you because of Kieran.” I shuddered.

“No Alex, you’re the one who’s extraordinary. We’ll protect you from the Ray-pacs. I’ll keep you safe. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Crinkling my nose, I sighed. “Don’t worry; I’ll keep you safe too,” I responded. His eyes cut through to my heart, and I offered him an unwavering smile. Bravely, I leaned into his body, and even though he didn’t reciprocate, he didn’t refuse me either. I stayed there with my arm wrapped around him, sharing my Essence but gaining strength from his solid body, as well.

Yes, I would do whatever it took to keep him safe. When the time came, I would die trying. Literally. But for now, I needed to live in the present – grab hold of every moment. And the present was currently offering me one week alone with Jason on a private island. The cool breeze whipped through my hair, and I breathed in the salty, sea air. I smiled to myself at an interesting passing thought. He might not be able to lay a single hand on me, but nothing could stop me from loving him...

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Read the following pages for a synopsis of book two, *Linked*, which is also available in eBook format.

Brief Synopsis for *Linked*, book two in the Guardian series

Leading a double life as an Amethyst and a Dentelle is difficult, loving two men is tragic, but for Lexi Adams, planning her own death is totally insane. After narrowly escaping the Ray-Pacs in *Amethyst*, Lexi and Jason are now headed to the safe haven on Towhead Island. Heart-broken, she understands why a Guardian-Amethyst relationship is forbidden, but that won't stop her from trying. Unfortunately, another problem demands her immediate attention – one which could destroy her standing among the Bellingham Circle of Guardians.

They do not know about her premonitions; if they did, they would realize she was a Dentelle – destined to die at linking. Telling the truth is not an option, because her friends must be focused on annihilating the Ray-pacs, not worrying about her rendezvous with death. Buried in deceptions of her own making, Lexi doesn't think she can sink any deeper, until a shocking confession from Ash forces her to take sides. Choosing to protect Ash, she betrays the Guardians, again.

As Lexi and Ash grow closer, they devise their own plan for infiltrating and destroying the Ray-pacs. Even though Lexi will die too, her Guardian friends will be safe. In an epic battle against the Ray-pacs, Lexi discovers she has awesome powers and a chance at love after all. But her lies, regardless of her good intentions, are about to destroy everyone she has worked so hard to protect. Is it too late to live and love?

Dear reader,

Thanks for reading my first novel *Amethyst*. I hope you enjoyed this urban fantasy and the cast of characters as much as I enjoyed creating and writing about them. If you have a moment and wouldn't mind, I'd love if you could leave feedback as well as recommend this free eBook to any friends you think might enjoy it.

If you have questions or comments for me, I'd love to respond, so please visit my blog at <http://www.amethystatheatherbowhay.blogspot.com/>

Sincerely,
Heather Bowhay

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Bowhay lives in Bellingham, Washington with her husband, Dan, their two children, Dawson and Laci, and their three cats, Lyon, Maci, and Tyger. She graduated from Western with her teaching certificate and has found that substitute teaching gives her the best balance: time for family, exercising, cooking, reading, writing, and of course time to guest teach in several different classrooms, promoting a fun learning environment but without the lesson planning. *Amethyst* is her first novel in the Guardian series, followed by the sequel, *Linked*, which is now available in eBook format. She is currently working on book three.