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Opening extract from

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Written by

Susan Waggoner

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CHAPTER 2

Close Encounters



Zee didn't know what she'd find in A&E. She hoped it wasn't severed body parts. Blood always made her queasy, and a severed part made the whole body angry and difficult to work with.

Dr Morgan was waiting for her with a grim look on his face, but that didn't mean anything because Dr Morgan *always* had a grim look on his face. Except when the problem turned out to be routine. Then he looked disappointed.

'Gash to forehead,' he said, steering Zee towards A&E exam room two. 'He refused a head scan and now

wants to check out AMA.'

Against medical advice. Yes, that would certainly annoy Dr Morgan.

'Do you think he has a concussion?' she asked.

'I think he has a subdural haematoma. It could blow like Vesuvius any minute.' His eyes sparkled with anticipation as he gestured at the door of the examining room. 'See if you can keep him here.'

Zee took a clearing breath and entered the room. The young man sitting in the cubicle wasn't that much older than she was. Zee had been trained to notice the small gestures that took place in the first few minutes of an encounter, revealing the patient's state of mind and openness to non-invasive healing. She caught a blur of motion. The young man seemed to have been rubbing a small metal bar against his forehead, but it disappeared into his pocket so swiftly she couldn't be certain.

When he lifted his head, Zee felt a tug. Involuntary personal attraction. A reflex, like coughing when you walked into a dusty room. She'd felt it before with other patients, but not quite like this. When he looked at her, his deep grey eyes seemed to draw her towards him. She wanted to go on looking at him, at the way a few strands of dark hair fell across his forehead. Clearly, Piper had created more than a tiny pinprick in her calm. She'd never felt so open to someone before, and was

determined to regain her sense of calm.

'Hi,' she said, 'I'm Zee, your assigned empath.'

'I'm David Sutton, unassigning myself.' When he smiled, his eyebrows lifted, as if inviting her to share a secret joke. Then, looking at her, the smile changed into a different kind of expression. Instead of hopping off the hospital trolley, he stayed where he was. Everything about him seemed to stop and the room floated into stillness, like a leaf or a feather settling to earth. For a long moment he simply stared at her, and Zee allowed him to, without moving or closing her face to him.

It wasn't easy to let someone look at you like that, but many patients seemed to need to. 'Like someone taking a car for a road test,' their instructor had explained during training, 'only you're the car.' They'd laughed, but that didn't make it easier. Five in her class had washed out because they could not be looked at without posturing or fidgeting. It was harder than it sounded. At first, Zee had felt so naked standing before a patient she'd had to distract herself by making lists of song titles that started with certain letters of the alphabet, or by wondering why two-hundred-year-old movies like *Titanic* were often better than the hologram remakes. Now that she was more confident, she'd begun to use these small capsules of time to begin building a healing bridge to the patient.

But that wasn't happening tonight. She was having trouble re-establishing her calm, and felt as naked as she had the first time she'd been with a patient. No sooner had she dropped the foundations of the bridge into place and sent invisible blue vines twining through the air than they crumbled and vanished from her mind.

David Sutton's eyes were still on her. She felt her skin grow warm and tried to think of song titles that began with the letter A. She drew a blank, so moved on to the letter B. 'Bitter Poison', 'Borrowed Time', 'Been Around and Down', 'Boomdance'. It usually took patients less than thirty seconds to satisfy themselves, but more than a minute passed and Zee still felt his gaze.

Suddenly he smiled again. 'You're one of us,' he said.

Now what was *that* supposed to mean? Maybe Dr Morgan was right – this patient really did have a subdural haematoma, and his brain was already starting to suffer from hypoxia. Or did he mean that he was also an empath? That would explain the ribbon of energy she'd begun to feel pulsing between them.

He spoke again in a voice that was almost a whisper, the words such a quick, soft rush she could not even tell what language they might be.

This was not going according to plan at all, and she tried to steer it back. 'Dr Morgan thought we might talk for a few minutes.'

'Great. I'll just get my stuff and we can go.' He grinned. 'Your place or mine?'

Okay. He wasn't so weird after all, just flirty. She'd had lots of practice handling flirts.

'Dr Morgan wanted me to make sure you're all right. According to your chart, you were unconscious when they brought you in, with quite a lump on your forehead.'

He looked confused. 'Who are you again?'

Did he not see the glowing blue of her badge? 'Zee McAdams, empath. I can help you with the bump on your head.'

Suddenly there was a wrenching in the energy field. He jerked his whole torso backward, as if taking himself out of reach. The light she'd felt between them, or thought she'd felt, was gone.

'A mind reader?' He looked shaken, almost angry. 'No thanks. If I want my fortune told, there's a carnival on the other side of town.'

'I don't read minds,' she explained. She'd had this conversation too many times to count, but usually it was with older patients who thought psychic healing was a scheme to pump up their hospital bills.

'No?' he challenged.

'No. I read *bodies*.' She hadn't meant to emphasise *bodies*. Her voice had tricked her and now she felt the

warmth of slight embarrassment creeping into her cheeks. Often when she worked with a patient she laid her hands on them, palms open to facilitate the energy flow. She wondered what it would be like to feel the smooth warmth of David's body through his clothes. *Stop it!* she told herself. *Stop it, or you'll slide right out of the zone and have to go back to divesting.*

'But aren't the mind and body one?' he was asking. To her surprise, he seemed genuinely interested, no longer flirting or dismissive.

'In a way,' she answered. The mind and the body *were* one, in ways that even science didn't fully understand. But she shouldn't have said she read bodies. It wasn't technically true. What she did, both consciously and subconsciously, was make an infinite number of tiny observations and allow a pattern to emerge, a pattern that guided the healing energy she sent to the patient.

'I'm only here to help you,' she said, stepping towards him and extending her hand. 'According to your chart, we really should make sure about that bump —'

'Stay *away* from me,' he said, raising both hands, as if ready to push her back.

Zee stopped. She shouldn't have taken that last step, or extended her hand. Now she'd lost the patient. 'Sorry. It's just that you *were* brought in unconscious, and Dr Morgan wants to —'

'Have a look around inside my head. I get that. No thanks. I'm leaving now.'

Zee bit her lip. If he left and collapsed in the street, it would be her fault.

'Look,' he said, softening slightly at seeing her concern. 'I'm fine. No, really – *look*.' He gestured to his head. 'Do you see a bump on my forehead?'

'Well, not exactly, but . . .'

But there had been one there before. Hadn't there? She realised he was still staring at her. In fact, his eyes hadn't really left her since she'd entered the room. She felt the tug of attraction again. This time, in spite of the disastrous way things were going, it wasn't so easy to dismiss. When she tried, exactly the opposite happened. She felt a longing she'd never felt before and knew that, for the first time ever, she'd have to return to the unit and re-divest before she could see another patient.

And of course she'd have to write up a full report of everything that had happened, which would be tricky because she wasn't at all sure what *had* happened. Was it David Sutton's steady gaze causing her distraction? The way his arms looked strong but gentle at the same time, and made her wonder what his hand would feel like touching her? And the energy pulse she thought she'd felt between them . . . She couldn't imagine putting all those things into words for someone else to read. She couldn't

even mention her suspicion that Piper had enjoyed taking her assigned patient away from her, and deliberately tried to get her rattled. She had no proof and would only make Piper resent her more. Zee glanced at David Sutton. 'Can I ask you a question?'

'Sure.'

'Why do you keep looking at me like that? Have you seen me before? Have I done something . . . ?'

'No, nothing like that,' he said. 'It's your hair.'

'Oh.' Zee raised her hand to tuck the usual stray strands behind her ears and realised she'd lost her band and her tangle of auburn curls had come loose. So that was it. Her hair often took people by surprise, but not so much that they stared at her so long. His steady gaze set her on edge.'It's not like I'm the *only* redhead left, you know. There are almost a hundred thousand of us. It's a recessive gene, not an extinct one. Haven't you ever seen a holo of a redhead at least? Zeesh. What planet are you from?'

David Sutton stood up, a graceful unfolding that made her realise how tall he was. 'You call it Gliese 581 C,' he answered. 'We call it Omura. Or didn't Dr Morgan tell you?'