

Affinity

Dianne J. Wilson

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Dedication

To my three

May you find your gifting early and
wield it with great courage and grace.

I love you.

Spirit Walker Series

Affinity
Resonance
Cadence

What People are Saying

Written with genuine, vivid characters, beautiful words and a strong message, *Affinity* is one of the most stirring and heartfelt books I've had the privilege of reading.

~Pippa Harrison, 16.

Affinity

uh-fin-i-tee

~ *A supernatural tendency or ability*

A fly buzzed against the classroom window. It thumped into the glass, over and over, stopping long enough to shake out its wings before having another go. It wanted out and Kai sympathized. He checked the wall clock, another fifty-eight minutes of History before he could leave this room. St. Gregory's prided itself on its fine teachers, but listening to Ms. Pudulski grind on, Kai figured part of each teacher's interview was a droning competition with a fly. Out-buzz one of those and you're in.

Pudulski was a round, grey woman, always miserable, but today she seemed worse and Kai knew why. Her bad knee was playing up again; he could see it lit up green like a traffic light. It wasn't that he had x-ray vision. That would be weird. He saw her flesh shoved into grey support hose like everybody else. But super-imposed over that shone a glowing green image of what was going on beneath the skin—that which needed fixing. The closest thing he'd been able to compare it with were 3-D hologram images he'd seen in sci-fi movies.

As a little boy, he thought this *seeing* was normal. It was only when the kids at school started calling him *freak* and *weirdo* that he'd realized he was different. It didn't take long to learn that the ability he had was a

thing to avoid, to fear. It even had a name.

Affinity.

And he had it in bucket-loads. Not only could he see what was broken, he often knew how to fix it too. So he shut his mouth and lived with knowing all sorts of things that he could do nothing about. As for Pudulski, if he thought for a moment that she'd listen to him, he would tell her to see a doctor to remove the broken bits of cartilage that were causing the trouble. The chances of her paying any attention were equal to a spaceship full of Martians landing on the sport field and demanding to be fed school boys.

A thump under his chair brought him back. He swung around to see Pete packing up.

"You twit. What was that for?" Pudulski seemed a bit deafer each year, but Kai whispered anyway.

"They called us on the intercom. Didn't you hear?"

"No, for what?"

Pete's eyes gleamed and he tilted his head at the window. Kai stretched his neck and could just see the top of the Recruiters van parked in the road outside the school's fence. The fly slammed into the window and fell back on the window sill. Its legs gave one final twitch and it stopped buzzing. Kai shifted his sight, using his gift. Nothing glowed green on the fly; it was thoroughly dead. There was nothing he could do for it. Not a good sign.

Pudulski cleared her throat and tapped the desk with a crooked nail, "Boys, I'm not happy about you being called out like this. History is far more important than anything those people could ever teach you." She stared pointedly out the window down the slope of her nose. "But if you must leave, please do so quickly and without distracting the others. Off you go, then." She

waited until they were out the door before carrying on.

Kai swung his schoolbag onto his back. Somehow sitting through the rest of History seemed better than what they faced now. "Oh, man, I don't know about this Zapster. Can't we just hide in the loo and pretend we went?" Their steps echoed down the deserted corridor.

Pete Zappiro, AKA Zapster, friend, ally, and instigator of all things worthy of detention, shrugged, "Anything is better than Puddle-duck. Anyway, aren't you curious?" He swung around and walked backwards, his hands waving as he spoke, "Think about it. Of all the kids who've tested positive, can you name a single one who has come back to St. Gregs? Where do they go? What happens to them?"

"Watch it." Kai gripped his friend's arm to stop him falling down the stairs. "But that's my point. Doesn't it bother you? We could end up as, I dunno, fish food. Slave labor for some maniac despot."

"Ha! And they call *me* the drama queen. Have you listened to yourself? Come on, man. It will be an adventure. Maybe we've got it too. This thing, what do they call it?"

"Affinity."

Pete's eyes spread wide until white showed all around the blue, "Affinity. I say superpowers. That's what it is. I want me some of that."

"Stop it, Pete. You look mental. Anyway, I think if you had it, you'd know it."

"Maybe and maybe not. What if it's buried deep? Some of us might need help to find it. Besides there's got to be more to life than living under you on a bunk bed. Besides, maybe they'll feed you enough to put some meat on those skinny bones of yours."

Zapster had a point. It was not a very good point, but it was a point. "Fine. Whatever. But if we end up fish food, you're going first."

"Wait, you dropped something." Pete bent down and picked up a worn white envelope that had slipped from Kai's bag. He turned it over, eyes flitting across Kai's name written in cursive. The whites were back all around his irises, "What is this? Genuine snail-mail! When last?!" He held it to his nose and sniffed deeply, "Who sent this? What are you not telling me?"

"Give it back, it's nothing." Kai snatched it and stuffed it in his blazer pocket. They walked out the main entrance to the school, a sweeping archway painted maroon bearing the school's motto in yellow letters: *Quoquo Modo Interceptum, Sucedunt*. By Whatever Means, Succeed. Weird motto for a school. With the building behind, there was only a broad expanse of lawn between them and the van. Kai felt reluctance grow with every step. The feeling was exactly the same as the urge to throw up.

"You've been holding out on me. You've got yourself a girlfriend." Shock and awe fought over Pete's face. "Granted a weird, retro, pen-pal-type girlfriend, but still!"

Kai smacked his arm, "Shut it. It's not like that. Anyway the doors are opening. They're ready for us."

1

Kai sat cross-legged on the narrow bed, holding a ginger kitten in one hand and trying to wrap a bandage around its leg with the other. The creature squirmed in his grip, kicked the bandage out of Kai's hand. It unrolled across the floor of his room—the top level of an abandoned, condemned building that had slipped through a crack in the system and had been forgotten in a tangled mess of zoning disagreements and red tape. Kai called it home. It was broken and dirty, yet to Kai, it was more home than the cold hostel at St. Gregory's would ever be. When the term ended and others went home to loving families, he came here. This kitten and its sister were currently his only loving family.

“Gah, hold still.” He hooked the bandage with his toes and foot-walked the end close enough to pick up with his free hand. The kitten's leg felt normal, but Kai knew otherwise. He could *see* the problem, a hairline fracture in one of Riff's leg bones. It needed to be strapped. Getting the kitten to agree was another matter altogether. There were no glowing tips on how to do that.

He hoped that fixing the kitten might dilute some of the guilt he felt at letting Zapster get taken from school yesterday. Kai had been tested first and somehow managed to throw the test. He was nearly back through the school gates when he saw Zapster

being pushed into a second van, painted black with windows tinted too dark to see through. Zap had caught his eye for a moment, grinned, and shown him a double thumbs-up. The door slid shut and the van had left. So Pete had it and they were taking him, and it was too late to go back and change their minds.

Kai tucked the cat upside down between his legs, holding firm but gentle, long enough to wrap and tie off the bandage. The glowing image turned gold then winked out, and he knew the fracture was on its way to being fixed.

This Affinity, seeing the invisible—it worked on inanimate things as well. He'd diagnosed a broken microwave once when he was nine. He could see the faulty diode glowing like a Christmas tree and mentioned it to Phil, the caretaker at St. Gregory's School. The man was amazed but Kai called it a lucky guess. By then he knew better than to tell anyone how he knew things. So he'd quietly high-fived himself and left it at that.

Kai picked up his guitar and played a chord, looking for distraction from beating himself up. Seconds later Riff was on his lap, purring and catching his fingers each time he plucked a string. With feline accompaniment, the song, which sounded good in his head, came out of his guitar like some reggae/country mash-up. Charming. The tune had been teasing him for weeks, lurking in his mind just beyond where he could grab it and connect it to strings and fingers. The kitten was not helping. Neither was the thought of Pete.

Kai set the guitar on its stand. One at a time, he took down the boards covering a wall of windows. Pale morning dipped into the room. Light warmed his

face. He closed his eyes and felt it seep into him.

He hadn't told Pete, but yesterday wasn't his first testing at St. Gregory's. It was his third. After his first positive, they'd taken him aside, dangling a carrot of advanced education, all sponsored. As much as it made sense logically, he had declined their offer. He was the only one ever known to show up at school after testing positive.

The second positive round had been conducted by a higher ranking recruiter, a striking woman persuasive in speech and manner, sophisticated and charming. The offer she'd made had been tempting: a home and food. Kai's resolve had nearly cracked. Yet in the pit of his belly, demanding to be heard over the hungry growls, there remained a stubborn ball of *no* that simply wouldn't dissolve.

It was after his third positive test that their gloves had come off and the Recruiters grew teeth, demanding his acquiescence. That was the cracking point that made leaving school easy. The raw patches in the crease of his arm still stung, skin torn by their sticky, taped-on monitors being ripped off. Most kids were tested once, but with him they kept trying.

They suspected he had Affinity, but he wouldn't let them find it. Affinity or not, he would not be recruited.

But now they had Pete. His chest stung. If Pete had gone first, would he have allowed himself to be taken so that he could try to help his friend? He'd never know. There were only two things he knew for sure—he'd wouldn't see Pete again and he couldn't go back to St. Greg's and pretend everything was normal. Monday was two days away, but he'd already made up his mind.

As the sun rose, the brightness increased, filling the room with light. He pulled the crumpled envelope out of his pocket, the same one he'd wrestled from Pete. Smoothing it on his chest, he hesitated before taking the note out and letting the envelope drop. He knew it word-for-word, each period and comma. His steel-string-calloused fingers felt for the thin folds anyway. He'd read it so often, the words blurred and lost meaning. He found himself absorbing the graceful slant of the *l*'s, the deep curve of the *y*'s. Few wrote in cursive these days, and fewer took such obvious care. His fingers traced the lines as if he could uncover the identity of the writer. *Who are you?*

It was nearly time.

He refolded the pages and returned them to the pocket of his jeans. The reflection looking back at him from the shard of mirror hanging from a nail in the wall looked tired. Old-running-shoe tired. And skinny. His bones had outgrown his muscles the last few months in a spurt that left his sleeves dangling an inch above his wrist bones.

"What will she think? Hey, Riff?"

Riff said nothing to make Kai feel better, so he put the kitten down and ran his hands over the stubborn tips of his spiked hairs. Would gel flatten them? Probably not. The bristles poked through his fingers all over his scalp like miniature soldiers. Not that he had gel anyway. A smudge of purple paint stained his T-shirt. It had been three weeks since he'd painted the walls downstairs and after three washes, he'd given up trying to budge the stain. Maybe he should change. A tinge of rebellion sparked in his belly. *For what?* Purple was a good colour for a new rebel movement. At least the shirt was clean.

Whatever. It didn't matter.

One last finger-run through his prickles and he eyed himself grimly in the mirror.

If he had gone back to de-hedgehog, things might have been different. But he didn't.

As always, the front door stuck part way to closing. He kicked it and jerked the handle up without a second thought. It clicked into place, and he padlocked it. All the way down three flights of stairs, his mind churned around the letter in his pocket. Thumbing earphones into place, he selected "random" and let fate decide the soundtrack for the day. *Sisters of Mercy, Flood.*

Brooding swirls of grey music filled his head as he stepped off the pavement, and then saw the bus. Too late to turn back. It rammed into him.

An avalanche of blinding agony smacked through his body and he crumpled to the pavement like a bag of bones.

He floated in heavy blackness. Fiery pain punched through in flashes.

Screaming sirens.

Morphine.

Silence.

2

Kai's toes stung. Over and over. As if he was at the mercy of some giant seamstress intent on stitching his toes together. He kicked and felt the breeze of wings flapping. The pain stopped.

Forcing himself up on one elbow, he squinted. A threadbare crow eyed him. As big as a turkey. The black monster hopped closer and stretched toward his bleeding bare feet for another nibble.

He kicked at its soccer-ball body in disgust. Foot met feathers and it rolled through the sand. The bird regained its stance, squawking. It glared at him, beady eyes twitching.

Heat baked all around him like a giant oven, cooking his insides, yet there was no sign of the sun. Just thick blackness pushed back by a fiery glow in the distance. Strength sapped, he cranked himself upright. The horizon tilted at a crazy angle and his head spun. He'd had weird dreams before, but this one...

Desert sand stretched away from him on all sides as far as his eyes could see into the gloom, an endless shimmering monotony broken only by the crow. If he dreamed of falling into a giant oven that cooked his insides, would he die in real life? Kai snorted, he had no desire to find out. Better move now or become a desert omelette. Swallowing back bile, he got to his feet and tried to find his bearings.

A scream sliced through the silence.

The sound of it snaked goose bumps down his spine. More voices joined. An agonizing swell of howling to his left, building in intensity, rolling toward him. It assaulted his eardrums—ceaseless and hypnotic, an endless cacophony of agony. It irritated him.

“Shut up already!”

He stumbled on jelly legs across the wasteland in the direction of the sound. Each step sizzled as his bare, crow-nibbled feet pressed into the sand. Where were his shoes? He felt heavy, as if someone had cranked up the pull of gravity. If not for the pain in his soles, he’d be laughing. Trust his brain to cook up such drama.

This doesn’t even feel like my body. What a stupid dream.

Scrambled thoughts ran amok in his heat-baked mind.

This is not real.

If it’s not real, why is sweat running down my back?

Keep moving, maybe there’s a cliff to fall off. That will wake me up.

Gotta keep moving.

A dark patch in the distance. He quickened his pace. The sand sucked at his feet, tiring his legs. The patch grew as he got closer and he squinted to make out details. Smoke poured off a midnight-black structure as tall as four houses. He was close enough to smell the burning.

Black gates.

Burning black gates.

Detached, somewhat mesmerized, Kai kept going. Smokey clouds billowed thick, so dense they soon blocked off his view. A moment’s relief from the

crimson glare, then suffocating closeness.

This is so messed up. He couldn't stop himself, he kept walking. Burning blackness filled his mind and heart. Sing-song death filled his ears. Rancid smoke clung to his taste-buds.

There was no turning back now. He was drawn like a dog on a leash.

She came out of nowhere—a girl shimmering in a light that shook him from his daze.

"You fool! What are you thinking? It's not your time."

She grabbed his tender arm with a fury that made him wince. Torn between the hypnosis of the flames and this all too real bully-of-a-female, Kai froze.

As if triggered by their presence, the black gate cracked open and thick smoke rolled out. Tendrils of it curled toward them, slow but deliberate. Living, hungry. Screams from inside clawed at his eardrums.

"DarKounds are coming. We've got to get to the river. Come on!" Something in the girl's voice turned his belly to water.

Then the howling began.

His blood turned to ice. *You can't run with ice in your veins.* He stared, perplexed. The tiny, shiny girl turned back to him and swung her arm. The back of her hand connected with his face, rattling his teeth.

"There's no time. Move." Her slap and the fear in her eyes unlocked his legs. He ran.

Thick tendrils of blackness kept pace alongside them. He heard the pounding of clawed feet. Heightened senses picked up snarling, breathing, whining. It all sounded doggish enough to be the darKound things the girl was so scared of. Pain danced across his cheek where she'd slapped him. She pulled

ahead of him now. The blackness edged ahead, hemming him in, cutting him off from her, from escape.

Kai wanted to laugh, but adrenalin pumped through his veins and the girl's fear was rubbing off on him. He ran, feet bleeding, burning.

You can never run fast enough.

Nimble and quick, the shiny girl was moving further away.

Give up.

Leg muscles screaming, chest heaving, and desperate for oxygen, he ran.

Give in.

Surrender.

Don't fight what is stronger than you.

There was no way he could outrun the blackness.

Accept it.

Running is futile.

He slowed, time to stop this running away nonsense.

Then a shimmery silver thought: You'll let a *girl* outrun you?

"No! Heck no!"

Energy pulsed through his thighs, his feet flew. As if sensing his burst, the darKounds ran faster. He heard it in the rhythm of their footfall.

What was a darKound anyway? Curiosity nearly made him stop. Kai shoved it aside and focused on the girl. Every step took him closer and then he was alongside. Running apace—the blackness matching every step.

A silver sliver slashed through the barren terrain—the river! A thick bank of trees lined the opposite side. They hit the water running. Icy cold seared his burnt