



They've been coming here for thousands of years, using Earth as a sanctuary to escape threats from their own kind. Mankind knows them as angels, and one of them left a child upon her death to be raised as a human.

Raea is now a high school senior and her life as a human is about to end. The crystal shard she bears is not a pretty pendant; it's a collective of powerful entities who chose her as their Keeper, a protector of one of the four shards that power a machine capable of destroying whole worlds. Those who desire the Starfire's power have sent an agent to find her, but she's too busy evading a nosy reporter ready to exploit her secret and dating a hot new foreign student to notice. Nevermind learning what she really is.

Only one person on Earth can help her, the last person she ever expected. But he's not from Earth. Life as a human would be so much easier.

"Melanie Nilles creates a story that not only young adults can enjoy but I believe any age will get some delight from this read. It definitely gives thought if one wakes to discover they are far from being normal and need to find a way to be accepted by all." - *Coffee Time Romance*

**Starfire Angels**  
**By**  
**Melanie Nilles**

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Cover Art  
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Published by Prairie Star Publishing; Bismarck, North Dakota.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank all my friends who have supported me throughout the years and new readers who have yet to dabble in my worlds. You know who you are.

Thank you!

## Dark Descends

Raea gasped and scanned the shadows around her. Her crystal pendant glowed faintly like the aquamarine splotches on the backs and palms of her hands, but it all faded to nothing before she could blink. Impossible. She couldn't have seen what she thought she saw.

Familiarity chased away the fire and darkness. Her room. She sat in her room in Debbie and Mike Logan's, her aunt's and uncle's, house, but her covers stuck to her.

Yuck. In the dark of her room, she threw back her wet sheet and comforter and picked off her brown hair sticking to her neck and shoulders. Much better. The cold March night made her shiver, but after dreaming of fire and waking up soaked in sweat, she welcomed the cold. She'd welcome a hot shower in the morning even more.

It must have been a dream. That's all it was. One more annoying dream to forget.

She closed her eyes. Tomorrow would come too soon.

\* \* \*

"Watch out!" Linds' voice called over the noise of various conversations in the crowded second floor hall of McClarron High School.

Too late. Josh met Raea with a newspaper clipping held aloft in his hand. With his other hand, he swiped strands of dark brown hair away from blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Raea, you gotta see this!"

Not another one. The first story had piqued her interest and the second confirmed it, but after five reports shoved in her face about a mysterious black-winged angel helping local residents, she had no desire to see another. Small town news. Why did she have to live in little McClarron, North Dakota? Why couldn't her aunt and uncle live in a city, or even Fargo with several high schools? That was big enough to hide from news like this and still be close to Debbie's family.

But she wouldn't have her friends, including Josh, shortest guy in the senior class—her height—a total geek, and a just plain nice guy. He should've found a girlfriend already. Instead, he pestered her and the others with his obsession.

What did Josh have—sensors or tracking devices planted on each of them? He moved too quickly for her to avoid in the locker-lined halls without hurting his feelings. The least she could do was humor him. Josh might be obsessive about this, but he'd been a good friend since first grade.

She took the clipping he shoved into her hands and glanced down. Yup, another one. This time the angel had stopped a family from crashing on Highway 200 heading west to Washburn. She finished skimming the article and handed the clipping back to him. Her dreams about her mother with wings returned in vivid detail.

"Kay...So...Anything?"

Raea shook off her thoughts and focused on Josh. That pleading gaze waited in expectance of her to get excited. As much as she wanted to for his sake, she couldn't. "What do you want me to say?"

"What do you think?"

In answer, the bell rang. The squeak of sneakers and stampede with the slams of metal lockers around them made talking difficult. Saved by the bell. Josh was cool, but she and the others tired of hearing about their small town hero.

"I think we better get our butts into Biology," she said.

"Forget Biology. Don't you get it? They made the name official. They're calling him 'Dark Angel' for sure." He followed to her locker. Why her? "It's just wicked! I love it!"

She didn't care about his "Dark Angel." Why did they have to assign a name? Now that's all she'd hear from him.

"Oh, and there was another article."

"Josh, we don't have time." Hadn't he heard the warning bell?

"It just said a film crew from the Xplorer Channel is coming next week to interview people and try to catch a glimpse of the Dark Angel. Anyway, see ya in class."

*Thank you*, she mouthed and turned the dial for the lock on her green locker door. At least she wouldn't have to hear about it for a while. But a film crew? She could just see the madhouse with everyone wanting their

moment of fame. Still, it would liven up their small town for a while. It would be interesting, to say the least.

With her books in her arms, Raea slammed her locker and hurried to her first class of the day.

The only thing she wanted to think about at the present was Linds's birthday party that weekend. Eighteen. Her friend would be an official adult, even if they were still in high school.

If only Raea's mother could have been there to see *her* reach adulthood. That would have been perfect. Her whole life would have been perfect if Padina had lived all those years. At least then Raea wouldn't have only her dreams. After her mother's and stepfather's deaths in the tornado thirteen years ago, Raea had come to live with her aunt and uncle and cousins.

Every day she wished she could speak to her mother one more time, so she could ask questions like the one that plagued her since waking last night. Had Raea really seen the marks on her hands glow last night? Like her mother's marks, the aquamarine blotches in her palms also showed on the backs of her hands, so she couldn't hide them by closing her fists. Worse still, jagged lines sprayed out from the center to her fingertips and beyond her wrists. The bullies liked them, as a reason to tease her.

Somebody bumped against her from behind, but she caught her balance with a step.

*A moonlit vista of a large valley clustered with trees and dotted with a couple of rocky waterfalls stretched to the horizon.*

*"I don't care what you are, Padina," Scott said. "You're still the world to me. I want you to stay. Don't leave me, not like this."*

*Padina hesitated and the scene blurred a moment. It stopped on Scott in the wan glow of moonlight, his trim figure crossed with shadows from the trees rising high around him.*

"Careful."

Raea blinked away the brief vision of her mother and stepdad and looked up at the last sight she expected. Elis Jasheir? No way. Disheveled black hair and gloves with the fingertips exposed—that was him. Deep purple eyes behind black locks made her look twice. Sure enough—purple. An odd color but attractive on him. Warmth rose to her face. What was she thinking? She wasn't, but when she turned away, she caught the smirk on Chad Cooper's face. Oh, no. She'd never live this down.

She pulled away from Elis. The creepiest guy in her class had caught her, and she blushed. This was *not* happening.

Elis left her to take his seat near the back of the room, near the shelves of jars of preserved samples of odd creatures Mr. Maviar collected for their study. He never said anything, just sat quietly and did his work. She almost felt sorry for him.

*Not now.* What was she thinking?

She hurried to join Josh at their lab table at the front and slumped down to hide. The worst was yet to come. She knew it. Chad always found time to harass her. Unlike other guys in her class, he and Joey had never grown up, and probably never would.

"Woo!" Chuckles erupted from Chad, and the other voice was probably Joey, who sat one table back and one row closer to the door. Two of the worst bullies in school.

Raea hunched down and hid her face in her hands. *Please, just leave me alone this once.*

*"Freaky and Creeper sittin' in a tree..."*

It was too much to hope. Twelve years of torture were almost over. If she could just hold out two more months, she would graduate and never have to see or hear him again.

"Don't listen to them," Josh said. "They just have to find some way to cause trouble."

"Yeah. For me." Why couldn't it be someone else?

Before the bell rang to start the class, she breathed easier. The handsome, young science teacher, Mister Maviar, had only to give Chad "the look" to silence him. It paid to be on a teacher's good side, although she could live without being called a teacher's pet. After all, she didn't fawn over him, not like the rest of the girls, or dress scantily to get his attention. She didn't have to. Her perfect grades gave her enough attention.

A familiar sound caught her ears. She recognized the clack of heels growing louder down the hall outside the open classroom door and waited expectantly.

Mrs. McKeen, the principal, entered the room. A thin smile cracked the rigid lines of her face. A few

whispers circulated while she spoke to Mister Maviar.

From her place near the front of the classroom, Raea had a clear line to the door and saw the reason for the principal's visit. Whoa! Her breath froze in her lungs at the face peaking in. Were they getting a new student? She hoped so. Man, was he cute, and she didn't usually go for that look—golden blonde hair to the shoulders. A bit on the preppy side for clothes, but the red and black crewneck fit him. Fit him *very* well. His eyes scanned the room with an intense precision that made her heart flutter.

*I'm free.* If only she was one of the pretty girls. Then again, he'd probably never be interested in her, like most of the guys in that school.

She couldn't wait to get out of that small town. None of the guys were worth going with—the good ones were taken and the rest were too stupid on so many levels. Only Josh had anything going for him, but he was a friend.

Why would a new guy have any interest in her? Oh, well. She could dream. Besides, he carried himself with that rich, snobby air, like some show-off, jock. He'd fit in well with most of the guys in McClarron.

"A new student?" Josh asked.

When Mrs. McKeen finished, Mr. Maviar stepped forward. Mrs. McKeen waved the new boy inside. Nope. Not a boy. Definitely a man. Oh, *man*. She couldn't be the only girl staring either.

"It has been brought to my attention by Mrs. McKeen that an exchange student will be attending McClarron High for a few weeks. I hope you'll make him feel welcome."

Mrs. McKeen stepped forward with the new guy. He looked older than most of the guys in the senior class, but so did Elis. Perhaps he had started school a year later in his country.

"This is Pallin Montran." Mrs. McKeen looked up to him. He was tall. And the toothpick-thin principal was in high heels. A moment of confusion passed across her face. "He'll be here temporarily, after spending most of his life in—"

"Small place," he said, his hands clasped behind his back and his feet shoulder-width apart. He stood like some marine from bootcamp, like on those shows her uncle Mike liked to watch. "It is not important."

Raea looked to Josh, but he shrugged. Where had she heard that accent before? It rang with familiarity, but she couldn't place it. Did anyone else know? She glanced around the room, but everyone looked to one another, shaking their heads and whispering. Elis was the only one who said nothing, but beneath the wild, black hair sprayed over his eyes, his expression darkened.

"Very well. I leave you with Mister Maviar's Advanced Biology class. You have your schedule. Let me know if you need any help."

Pallin smiled. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Ma'am?" Josh murmured.

No kidding. Raea choked on a restrained giggle, while others snickered. He sounded like he was in the military, too.

Mrs. McKeen marched across the room, her heels ringing with each step until she closed the door behind her.

"There's an empty chair next to Leo Kowalski." Mister Maviar handed him a textbook and pointed down the aisle to the table where Leo sat alone. "Please take a seat so we can begin."

Pallin made his way past the other tables, the eyes of most of the girls following, Raea included. For a second after he sat down, his amber eyes caught hers. Was that a smile? That was a smile. He smiled at her. *Ohmygod!* Raea turned around, her heart pounding a race. He was cute, no matter what her impressions of his attitude had been.

It was all she could do to pay attention in class. He couldn't have smiled at her, but she swore he had. Had he? He must have. But he couldn't have, not her.

When the bell rang after class, Raea gathered her books. She kept her eyes down when Pallin passed her, unable to look up. What would she say? She couldn't. Her tongue stuck.

She waited for the room to empty, glad for the break before English to recover her speaking ability.

"Wha'd'ya think?" Josh wove through the crowded locker-lined halls with her like a fish in water.

"The class or the new guy?"

"Pallin."

She stopped to turn to the commotion they had left. Behind them, the subject of the conversation managed

to keep his feet going amid a group of students offering to help him to his next class. He never noticed her. She must have imagined that spark.

"We'll see. He's definitely easy on the eyes."

"You would say that. He's a poser."

"Whatever." Josh was so jealous. She didn't have time to stroke his ego, though. "I have to go. I'll see you in English."



## Miracles and Memories

The rest of the day filled with rumors and talk about the new foreign student.

When the last bell rang, Raea was happy just to make it through without any more trouble. Thank old man time the day had to end. Although she wouldn't have minded watching Pallin more, seeing the other girls hanging on him made her sick. So what if he was a senior and foreign *and* the best looking guy now in McClarron?

Why was she worrying about it? She shouldn't even care.

"So, like, what happened this morning?" Josh asked a block from school. The sounds of that prison faded as they walked the few quiet blocks, passing houses with small sections of fenced and tree-lined yards until they reached the street where they parted ways. "You looked ready to faint when Elis caught you."

Did he really have to bring that up? The most embarrassing moment of her day and she hadn't been left to forget it. It's not like she would anyway—every memory stayed with her perfectly. Why did Elis have to bump into her? Why did she have to fall into another vision of her mother? Really. She literally *fell*. But Elis caught her, of all the people. That moment she looked up flashed through her mind—those eyes. Who had purple eyes? She must have imagined it.

Raea glanced behind and shivered inside her blue and gray jacket—she should've worn a heavier coat, or maybe spring should hurry up and chase away winter. Elis walked alone about twenty feet back, like every day, saying nothing and practically hiding from any attention. What did he think?

He didn't say anything about what happened. In fact, he had gone about his day as if nothing happened.

"Don't remind me." If only Pallin had caught her. Now, that would have been something.

"Why? Really. I won't say anything. You almost fainted, Raea. I'm a little concerned is all. It's not like you."

Why couldn't Josh drop the subject?

Because he cared. He always concerned himself with other people's problems. She supposed she could answer his question, provided he swore to say nothing to anyone. These visions were so unusual, but with his Dark Angel obsession, he'd probably love to hear about her strange dreams of good and bad angels, especially when her mother appeared as one of them. Or maybe his obsession triggered those dreams.

"I don't want to think about it." What bothered her most was that she didn't mind Elis catching her at the time. Sure, it felt odd since she had always avoided him, like most of her classmates, but he hadn't actually done anything wrong.

"Why?"

"It's just...Oh, nevermind. You wouldn't understand." She didn't really understand what made her feel weird. Elis had never done anything to anyone. In fact, he started their junior year at MHS with rumors that he fled his homeland. Someone said he came to their small town as a refugee after the death of his family in a war no one knew much about, probably because he never said what country he was from. Her mother had also been a refugee and alone when she arrived in Minneapolis and met Scott.

But her mother was *her mother*. Elis was quiet and somber. A loner. He never talked to anyone. He simply existed, but at the same time not, like a shadow. Yet the widow, Mrs. Johnson, had taken him in. Okay, so maybe he couldn't be too bad if Mrs. Johnson always smiled at church with him at her side. Still, his quietness bothered Raea. What went on in his head?

"Try me."

When would Josh give up? Never.

"Oh, all right. How can I expect you to understand when you're not a girl?" She sighed heavily. "It's simple. Some guys are outgoing and easy to talk to—like you. Others are, let's just say, odd, like they're thinking something they shouldn't." That didn't seem right about Elis. He wasn't creepy in that way. What was it about him?

Josh glanced back and shrugged. "Just because someone doesn't talk much doesn't mean they have a dirty mind. Besides, Raea, all guys have dirty minds."

She so did *not* need to hear that from him. Josh was a good person. How could he have a dirty mind? Thinking of him thinking of girls in that way just seemed...weird. He was her friend, not a boyfriend, but a close friend she trusted.

"I didn't hear that," she said.

"At least I'm honest, but not every guy you know thinks about it all the time or sees women as just an object for their own gratification."

"Okay. I don't need to hear anymore." Why were they talking about this?

He chuckled. "Whatever. You don't even know him. None of us know him."

"Yeah, because he. Never. Talks." That didn't bother her. It was just...something.

"All right. Fine. Believe what you want. What about almost fainting? What happened?"

"When he bumped me, I had this flash of my mom and Scott." She lowered her voice to keep Elis from hearing her. Hopefully he took the hint, if he had overheard anything before then, and stayed away from her. "But in my sleep, I've been having the same dream over and over for a few weeks now. Not every night, but often enough. It's always the exact same. You're gonna love it—it's about angels."

That smirk on Josh's face made his thoughts clear. He looked far too self-satisfied.

"Don't go telling me about your 'Dark Angel' either. This is about mom. She's an angel in my dream and flying with a man who gets killed by the bad angels. She makes some sort of hole in the sky and disappears. Then I always wake up." That should satisfy him.

"Always the same?"

"Yeah. Exactly. Every detail." What happened to the gloating about angels?

"Angels, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I have no idea what it means—"

Raea almost smacked him for that. *Thanks, Josh. Lotta help you are.*

"But if you're having fainting spells and visions about your mom *and* dreaming about her as an angel, I'd guess you're looking at your grief and maybe anger. I don't know. Try lucid dreaming."

Cool. He didn't actually go into a spiel about angels, for once.

"Take control of the dream."

What good would that do? She was an observer in it, not a participant.

"It's cool that you see your mom as an angel. I'd guess I was rubbing off on you." He grinned.

If he only knew how close she was to kicking his butt back into smugville. Lucky for him, his corner came up. "Dream on," she said.

"That's what I should be saying to you."

All right. He won that round. Raea smiled and punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Smart ass. I'll see you tomorrow."

He glanced back and leaned close to her, keeping his voice down. "Don't let it bother you. You don't even *know* him. Maybe you should try actually, like, *talking* to him."

"Go." She didn't want to hear it any more. The day was done. The embarrassment was past.

"Tomorrow," he said and strode away.

She didn't want to think about tomorrow, and hearing all the stuff about Pallin, although it took Chad's attention off her.

She could almost feel Elis breathing down her neck and hurried the last block home. Josh was wrong. So, *so* wrong.

But she didn't have to be around Elis or talk to him at home. Only at school.

Home never looked more inviting, the blue house standing alone at the end of the last block on the edge of McClarron. And her cousin Dave was gone to basketball practice, a major relief. No Dave to annoy her, for a while anyway.

One good thing came that day. Or was it two? It had ended, and the sun shone bright. Yeah. She'd call that two good things. A bright ending on a gloomy start.

Better yet, Raea found a third positive moment. It might have been freezing, but the ice crystals sparkled in the air around her like magic dust.

She liked that.

Now, to get inside before Elis caught up to her. She wanted to run, but not when she might hit a patch of ice. One wrong step was all it would take to break an ankle. She had never been to a doctor or in the hospital and didn't want to start.

Raea took a misstep and gasped...

*Scott moved close, a smile on his narrow face. He pulled off his glasses and laid his head on something. "There it is. Wow. That's quite a kick."*

*"Yes, it was." Padina's accent was heavy still. She stroked Scott's short, reddish brown hair.*

*"She'll be beautiful." Scott lifted his head.*

*"How do you know?"*

*"Because I know her mother is."*

*Padina blushed. "You are too good man for me."*

*"Not good enough." He kissed her.*

*"I am lucky woman. You accept us, but this is not your child. We cannot have...together any more. Only this." She rubbed the bulge of her belly.*

*He shrugged. "She'll be our child."*

*"Why 'she'?"*

*"I don't know. Maybe I always wanted a little girl to spoil. I can hope."*

*Padina laughed.*

Raea shook away the image. Again. It happened again. These scenes of her parents couldn't be dreams. They were real scenes. She had never been there and wouldn't have imagined them on her own. Why did she see these images? The people she loved were dead. Although she wished with all her heart for both of them to be there, nothing could bring Scott and her mom back. Her chest ached to see them as vividly as if they had been there.

"Are you all right?" Elis helped her balance.

"What?" She blinked away the moisture in her eyes. "Um...Yeah. I have to get home." Before she broke down in front of him. This truly was the worst day of her life, second to the day her mom and Scott died. What was happening to her?

Despite her best efforts, the tears flowed cold on her cheeks by the time she entered the house on the end of the block. Raea kicked off her shoes and ran across the wood laminate main floor and up the stairs to slam the door of her room behind her.

It wasn't fair. Why did they have to die? Raea was only five; no more than a child.

It had taken all those years to let go and now these scenes rushed in on her. It wasn't fair. Remembering and seeing happy times that she had never been present to see tore open her grief. She had cursed the storm every day since the tornado destroyed only their house while she was at a sleepover. Life was so unfair and cruel.

She let the tears flow, soaking her pillow. Only the ringing of her phone succeeded in interrupting the flood of grief and tears, damming it for a while.

The caller ID displayed a welcome number. He had the best timing.

"Hey, Josh." She wiped her eyes with the pink sleeve of her shirt and sniffed.

After a couple seconds of silence, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"It's nothing." Nothing she wanted to think about it again.

"Sure?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Okay. I'm gonna be on national TV! You know that special on Dark Angel the Xplorer Channel wants to do?"

"Yeah. The one you mentioned this morning." She sniffed and wiped her eyes dry. If he hadn't called, she'd probably still be sobbing from the scenes burned in her memories now. She loved seeing them, but it hurt too much.

"Uh, huh. They heard about my interest in our angel and want me to help them."

"I'm happy for you." At least he'd have someone who would listen to all his stories and speculations, and in that light she could be happy for him.

"Oh, man! I'm shaking. I don't know what to do. I had to call someone. Actually, I have to call everyone. I get to help out and maybe be on TV!"

A laugh escaped her at the mental picture of Josh shaking in excitement. Just what she needed. "That's cool.

Maybe some of your fame will rub off on the rest of us."

"This is going to be way more than cool. It's the *sickest!* I can't believe it!"

Neither could she, but she hoped for his sake that it didn't blow up in his face. "Be careful, though. Don't let them make fun of you." Like some kids did.

"No. It's not like that. This is *Miracles and Other Wonders*, the show that looks for credibility in what can't be scientifically proven."

"Then I guess you're set. It's right up your alley."

"Oh, yes, it is! I'm nervous and excited all at the same time. It's just...Wow! I don't know what to think."

She wouldn't either, but she didn't have his obsession with the McClarron angel. "Settle down and chill a bit. You said they won't be here for a week, so you have some time to put things together."

"That's just it. The assistant left a message and wants me to call them back ASAP with everything I've considered and any observations I've had. I haven't even tried watching for our angel. How can I give any credibility?"

"It's winter, Josh. It's cold. Who's gonna sit out and watch for an angel to fly over, let alone a senior in high school with tests to study for and papers due? I'm surprised they expect that much from you, or anyone."

"I'll have to ask who gave them the info. In the meantime, I gotta call Grandma. Oh, and Paul. Maybe he's the one they contacted."

His parish priest had been his closest ally in swapping stories and speculations, or at least based on the reports he brought back to them. She and the others had learned to steer him away from the topic. That could stay between him and Father Davison. She and the others preferred the old Josh, the geek who hung out with them and joked around and who wasn't constantly obsessed about every real or imagined appearance of their black-winged angel.

"Probably," she said. Anything to get him off the line so she didn't have to hear him go into the insights he had gathered, again. If only this angel would disappear. Life could go back to the way it was before that first sighting, and maybe her dreams or visions would end. "I'm sure your Grandma will be excited for you."

"I know she will. Thanks, Raea, and I hope you figure out your dream."

"Thanks."

"Kay. See ya tomorrow."

"Bye." She clicked the phone off. Wow. Josh had the full attention of a whole television crew. He was right—it was the sickest, minus the Dark Angel part.

## The Magic Touch

*"You trust her with it?"*

*"It is necessary. They'll look for me, not her. No one knew I was pregnant."*

*Scott stroked Padina's light brown hair from her face. "But she's only a child. She's likely to lose it."*

*"Better lost than in their hands."*

*Raea watched from the crack of their open bedroom door. Her parents sat up in bed, her mother with her head on Scott's shoulder.*

*"But if the wrong person finds it—"*

*"It will react. Unfortunate for them."*

*"If it's really as powerful as you've described, it shouldn't be in the hands of a child."*

*"Raea is my child." Padina's tone admonished him. "Never forget that. Do not forget what we are, Scott. We may look human sometimes—"*

*He gently tilted her head back and kissed her lips. "You'll always be my angels."*

*Padina smiled. "That's not what I meant."*

The scene faded to the deep recesses of Raea's dreams. Faint voices in unison whispered from afar. Raea strained to listen but they vanished. *"Who are you?"* she called into the dream. *"I can't hear you. Speak up!"* Nothing.

\* \* \*

Raea yawned as she sat down at the dining table, where Debbie sat with her morning coffee and toast, already dressed and made-up for work.

"Did you sleep well?"

"No. I've been having these weird dreams of...of Mom." Debbie didn't need to know details, but Debbie had known her mom well. She said she had helped with the birth. Padina had to be a saint to have a baby at home without any medication. Maybe her aunt could tell her something or give her some insight about her mother she hadn't considered.

"What kind of dreams?"

"The weird kind."

Debbie gave her the stop-messing-with-me look. No skirting the issue.

"For a while now I've had the same dream over and over. It never changes. But yesterday..." This was going to sound stupid, but Raea wanted answers. At least the boys weren't in sight or sound. Still, she didn't want to risk Dave and Eric overhearing and lowered her voice. Sound carried too far under the vaulted ceilings. "Yesterday, when Elis bumped me at school, and when I slipped on the way home from school, I saw scenes. It's like I was there but not. Like a fly on the wall."

"Hmm."

What did that mean? Debbie said nothing more but took another bit of her toast. Didn't she care?

"They were like scenes from *her* life. And last night, I dreamed of something I actually remember."

"Probably just déjà vu. But I'm concerned if you're falling into dreams in the middle of the day. I'll check with a specialist and see what they advise."

"Whatever." Raea shrugged and finished off her cereal. If that was all Debbie would say, what else could she do? See a neurologist?

Eric tromped down the stairs looking for food. The skinny sixth-grader was always hungry. If Raea ate like either of her cousins, she'd look like a blimp. Where did they put it?

Dave followed Eric and gave her a dirty look. Too bad. She had beaten him to the shower that morning. He'd live.

So far that day started out as the polar opposite of yesterday. Just what she needed to cheer up: A nice long, hot shower, annoying Dave, a bowl of cereal...Yup, major improvement over yesterday. Just in time for Linds' party coming up in two more days.

Why did the best days always follow the worst, though? It never failed, but she suspected that if she ever solved that riddle, her life would end or the world would collapse into nothing. At least she could enjoy the day and any further improvements that came her way.

On the way to school, even the sun seemed to shine brighter that morning. She didn't see Elis on the walk to school, a relief and—in an odd way—a disappointment. Yesterday was totally weird around him. She didn't want to repeat it, but she wanted answers.

And no one would ever know. She wouldn't tell them. Elis didn't have a reason to say anything, a big relief. She did *not* need to invite any more mocking from Chad. Yesterday was bad enough, except he had teased her all her life. Avoiding any situations even hinting of fuel for his amusement was her daily goal. Now with Pallin distracting everyone, maybe that would end, for a while at least.

Only one other thing could have made the day better—not having to listen to Josh talk almost non-stop about the television program he was going to be on. On the bright side, it was better than Chad's teasing.

Josh shut up during class, but lunch was another matter. At their own round table near one of the windows, he had a captive audience of friends.

"O-kay, Josh!" Linds' slumped back in her chair, shaking her head to throw her blonde-streaked hair back over her shoulders. "We get it. I was excited when I first heard, but you're wearing my patience thin. I don't suggest pushing it during calving season. Chill for a bit. Talk about something else."

Leave it to Linds to say it bluntly. Her farm girl toughness kept them all sane. Raea suspected what had her cranky. "Your dad make you go out and check cows?"

"Yes. I'm so tired. I don't need to listen to all the details of Dark Angel this and Dark Angel that. No offense, but it gets old *real* fast."

Yes, it did. Better that Linds said it and not her. Raea hated being the one to criticize her friends. Sure, it came easy with her cousin Dave, but he was like the most annoying pest on the planet. Let someone else say what they all thought when it came to Josh.

"Why can't he just make Terry or Jim do all the work?" Raea asked.

"Equal load. It was *my* turn to go out...at freakin' two AM!"

"How many calves left?" Jess stabbed at her salad.

"Too many. I don't know. We're just hitting the peak."

Raea tuned out Linds's rant about calving, her curiosity drawn to something else. And there he sat, alone and minding his own business. Both daytime visions had happened when Elis touched her. There had to be a connection, but she'd be damned if she would ask him. What a crackhead she'd sound like: "*Yeah, Elis, why is it whenever you touch me, I have visions of my mom?*" Before, she could watch from a distance and occasionally wonder if he liked being alone. Now, she didn't want anything to do with Elis. She hoped he stayed as far from her as possible.

At a sudden pressure that built up in her head, Raea blinked and rubbed her temples. She never had headaches. Why now? Not only did Elis cause problems when he touched her, but now he could curse her from a distance?

Under the drone of lunchroom conversations, numerous voices whispered in discord too low to understand. "What?"

"Huh?" Josh frowned.

"Not you."

"What's wrong?" Jess's hand rubbed her shoulder. Ordinarily, the concern of her friend would have helped, but not this time.

Not with this. The strange voices split her head with pain while no one else reacted. Didn't the others hear?

They watched her with concerned looks. "I'm fine. Just a headache." And strange voices, which, apparently, only she heard. Not exactly something she wanted the world to know.

The whispers grew louder but the words jumbled together. *Who are you and what do you want? Speak up. I can't understand.* Her head hurt. The fluorescent lights made it worse, along with the noise in the lunchroom. She had to lie down.

After shoving her unfinished tray of food aside, Raea laid her head on her arms. Good enough for now. She probably couldn't even walk home to reach her bed.

"Raea, are you all right?" Linds asked.

"No—My. Head. *Hurts.*"

"This is sudden. You look terrible."

*Thanks, Jess.* Raea groaned. The pain worsened every second, and the voices didn't help. She still couldn't

make them out through the dissonance.

The tap of steps stopped behind her. A gentle rubbing on her neck massaged the aching away. "Mmm...Keep that up." She put her forehead to the table, exposing her neck to the pleasant massage parting her hair into a curtain on each side of her face. Tingles of pleasant relaxation flowed down her neck.

"Ah...Of course," Josh said.

With each second, the voices and headache faded. She could have let him massage her neck all day like that. What a relief. Too bad he stopped, just when she really enjoyed it too.

"Miss Dahlrich?"

Raea lifted her head. No pain. Man, that felt better. Josh sat down fast again. She didn't even hear him slide his chair.

Or was it him? No. Mrs. MacRabb did not just massage her neck.

"Are you all right?" the old teacher asked. With her wide thighs and cheeks that sagged like melted wax, there was no mistaking the old English teacher, the last person Raea wanted to see. *No. Please, not her.* She'd never live down the teasing to the end of the year. "I'm fine. Thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yes." *Just leave me alone and let me crawl under a rock to die.* She dropped her head back to the table.

"You let someone know if you're not well."

"I will. Thanks."

Jess took her place again and Mrs. MacRabb walked away.

"He must have the magic touch," Linds said.

He? Then, not the old English teacher? But... "Who? Josh?"

"Um...No."

Raea lifted her head. Who else had relieved her headache?

Josh's eyebrows lifted and his eyes slipped away. "Not me. Him."

Raea turned and saw Elis leaving the lunchroom. Impossible. Why did he do it? How had he done it? Her headache and the voices disappeared. She couldn't believe it, especially when it contradicted what happened yesterday. "You can't be serious."

Josh's nod said he was serious.

"Why didn't you say something?" Josh of all people. He knew how she felt about what happened yesterday.

"He asked us to keep quiet." He put a finger to his lips.

"And you let him, after what we talked about? Josh, how could you?"

He shrugged. "It looked like he knew what he was doing. You needed something."

And what was Linds doing while this was going on? She could have said something.

"Don't look at me. I agree with both of you. He is kinda creepy, but you have to admit that whatever he did, it made you feel better." She shrugged.

"I know, but...you know?" Linds knew what she meant.

"Yeah. But it's done."

"I think I'd rather have the headache," Raea mumbled. In spite of her words, she felt some gratitude. Linds and Josh were both right. Maybe Elis was just trying to make up for bumping her yesterday morning. If that was the case, she accepted it. But the payback had been done. He didn't need to try any more. "I'll be sure to thank him."

"You looked like you enjoyed it." Linds grinned and crossed her arms over the UND logo on her sweatshirt.

Warmth rose from under Raea's collar. That was the last thing she needed anyone thinking. Sure, she had enjoyed it, but no one needed to know. Had it been that obvious? But she only liked it because it took away the headache. That was it. Nothing more.

But no one else would see it that way. This was worse than if a teacher had touched her. *Hurry up, graduation.*

"Hey." Jess poked her in the ribs.

"Ow." Raea rubbed her side. Jess didn't have to nudge her that hard. "What?"

"Look what just entered the cafeteria."

Raea turned to where Jess pointed, and her heart stopped. Pallin. Hottest thing since...well...no one else. Who cared about that gray turtleneck and gray pants formal preppy look? He looked right at her—*her*—and

smiled. The heat rose to her cheeks and she turned away. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

"Did you see the look he gave you?"

Could Jess whisper any louder? Honestly. What was the point of whispering?

"Yes." She was going to be sick from anxiety. Why did she have to look?

Linds chuckled. "What's wrong?"

"I... Why me? I can't talk to him."

"We're here," Josh said. "You're not alone. Right, ladies?"

Linds gulped down a mouthful of food. "Right."

"Yeah," Jess said. That's *all* she could say? Jess, the talker?

"Just take a deep breath... That's it. Now another."

Easy for Josh to say. He wasn't the one under the microscope. Still, the breathing calmed her, if only a little.

"What's he doing?" She couldn't look up. What if he looked at her again? Her stomach twisted into knots.

"Ah..." Linds stared past her, her spoon frozen before her gaping mouth.

"Hello."

Raea jumped as if shocked, unable to look up.

"I may join you?"

That accent and funny English made her giddy while triggering a nagging sense of familiarity. Where had she heard it before? She'd heard it recently too, but in her flustered brain, couldn't pin it down.

"It's Pallin, right?" Josh asked.

A tray scraped on the tabletop. *Oh, no. Not here.* Her appetite vanished.

"Yes. I am not remembering names."

"I'm Josh. These lovely ladies are Lindsey, Jessica, and Raea. To what do we owe this honor?"

"I have chance to speak to Raea."

He *was* interested in her. She couldn't avoid it any longer. Raea took a deep breath and turned to face him. She'd be damned if she could speak, though. Her mouth went dry when he smiled, and her thoughts jumbled.

"You are pretty girl," he said.

Did he just say she was pretty? *Ohmygod.* "Thanks." *Good one, idiot. That's all you can say?*

"You are welcome."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"How do you like it here, so far?" Linds asked.

*Thank you, Linds.* Sooner or later, Raea would have to overcome the disconnect between her brain and her mouth and speak for herself.

"It is nice place, much peace but cold."

"McClarron is a happy little community." Josh's sarcasm passed for perkiness. She was going to hurl if he did it again.

"Yes. Many good people I meet. I would like to know more about you." Pallin's amber eyes studied Raea all the while he spoke.

The temperature in the lunchroom rose to unbearably warm, and she couldn't even look him in the eyes. The intensity of his gaze when she did sent her collapsing into herself. He wasn't like anyone she knew. Rather, he possessed the confidence of someone much older and she saw it in those eyes.

"You speak?" Pallin asked.

"Um... Yeah." Although her mouth seemed to quit working the last few minutes.

"Then we can having time together?"

Okay. No one had ever asked her out before, but Pallin, who could have had any girl in school, asked her? Hell must have frozen over, which was quite likely after that winter, but she wouldn't argue. "Yeah. I'd like that."

\* \* \*

For the rest of the night, Raea could think of nothing but Pallin. He had been in two of her afternoon classes and they talked between. After school, she gave him her number to call her at home. He said he stayed at the local hotel, so he had a phone available.

She paced in her room, unable to focus on her homework. After ten and he hadn't called yet. Didn't he know how to use a phone? Had something happened?



No. She couldn't think that. He might be foreign, but he didn't seem stupid. In fact, he sounded pretty sharp for someone having difficulty speaking English. He was going to school while the others—parents, she guessed—had business in McClarron. He traveled with them, experiencing the military life, which explained his behavior. That she understood. Others had passed in and out of their school. But what would the military want in a small town of four thousand?

She couldn't wait to see him in school tomorrow.

Her anxiety turned to fidgeting. Enough sitting in her room. She had to do something, *anything*. Even watching the news with Debbie would be better than laying in bed waiting and wondering.

Raea wandered down to the open main floor, where the furniture divided the living room from the dining room and foyer.

"You better get to bed." Debbie looked up from the couch, where she sat alone. Mike must have worked on the computer in another room.

"I can't sleep." Thoughts of Pallin circled through her head. She wanted to see him again. School wasn't good enough—too many people listening or watching. She needed a chance to go on a date, a *real* date. Why hadn't he called?

"Is something wrong?"

"No, just excited." Raea fell onto the chair to watch the news. Some television might help her get her mind off her anxieties.

The local anchor wore a somber expression on her pretty face. "Ryan Lake found his parents dead in their McClarron home when he arrived to visit for the weekend. Local authorities have reported no bullets found in their initial investigation, although the couple had both clearly been shot in their chests. No suspects have yet been considered, but police are continuing to investigate."

"That's depressing." Why couldn't the news report something upbeat? Then again, there wasn't much else to talk about in a small town, even if the station was out of Bismarck. Murder rarely happened there, so it was big news. She didn't want to hear about it though, especially when she remembered Ryan before he graduated and how fair he treated everyone.

"I can't believe it. That's Linda and Dean. I work with her older sister, Sheri. Poor Ryan. I'll bet he's having a hard time."

Debbie knew them? Then again, who didn't Debbie know? "Yeah." Raea could relate to losing one's parents. She sympathized with the guy.

"I can't believe this. They're good people. Who would want to murder them? I thought the cold was supposed to keep the riffraff out," Debbie said.

"Yeah. You'd think." Why were her parents in the storm thirteen years ago? That's what Raea wanted to know, but the only answer she would ever have was a tornado. No "riffraff" as Debbie put it, just bad luck and weather.

"I know it's not easy. I miss Scott too."

Raea missed them every day, but now wasn't the time to think about it. That made her think of the visions and the dreams. Raea didn't want to fall into that grief. Not now. Now, she wanted a distraction. She wanted to think about Pallin.

Raea jumped from the chair and curled up next to Debbie on the couch. The warmth felt good in the chilly room, but Debbie's arm around her felt better. "I'm glad I have you."

"I'm glad to have you too. What's with the sudden buttering up?"

"I never ever want you to die."

Debbie laughed. "I hope not."

"I love you, Debbie." Raea planted a big kiss on her aunt's cheek and laid her head on her shoulder. See what she thought of that.

"You're in a good mood suddenly."

"Yup." She didn't want to think of her parents, not with Pallin to look forward to seeing.

"Must be feeling better."

"Mm. Hmm."

"Something happen today?" The suspicious voice.

Uh, oh. Raea had gone too far. But part of her wanted to tell Debbie. The excitement ate through her desire

to keep it secret. She couldn't stop herself. "We have this new guy at school. He's totally hot and is into me. *Me*. For once in my life, a guy likes me." Her, the "freak" of McClarron with the strange hands. Most of her classmates had grown up, but the underclassmen always whispered.

"Well...That explains this giddiness. No wonder you can't sit still."

"Nope." Raea hugged her aunt's arm and snuggled close. Debbie had to be on her side. She just had to. Debbie usually played devil's advocate and tried to scare her from decisions that thrilled her. This time had to be different.

"New kid at school, huh? So..."

"So..." Raea's tongue loosened. She went into all the details about Pallin, and when she finished, Debbie focused on the TV.

Not good. That somber mood meant devil's advocate. "Just don't lose your head over this guy. He may move on to someone else when he leaves."

That was the last thing Raea wanted to hear. Her enthusiasm shriveled like a deflated balloon.

"Or he could be planning to use you."

Oh, no. Here it came—the lecture. Why did Debbie always have to see the negative? Why couldn't she be happy about Raea's life, just once?

"Just be careful."

That was it? *Yes!* "I will. But if Pallin calls, please don't let Dave talk to him?"

Debbie smiled. "I'll be sure to hand the phone to him immediately."

"Debbie."

Of course, her aunt wouldn't. The wink she gave and the kiss on Raea's forehead confirmed that she was teasing.

"He'll never know."

"Thanks, Debbie." Raea stayed up until she dozed off next to her aunt, who nudged her and told her to go to bed.

Raea yawned and said, "Good night." The stairs must have grown, or the house had. Her bedroom had moved too far away, along with the soft bed inside it.

She finally arrived and crashed not long after her head hit the pillow. One last thought passed through her mind—*was* Pallin too good to be true?

## Angel Wings

*Black-clad figures approached from a distance. They cast a dark shadow that sent others fleeing.*

*Padina stood on a balcony looking out over a bustling city brushed by the sun, her open-front skirt flapping around her light blue leggings. Entire structures floated at different levels, rounded towers dozens of floors high unattached to anything else. Hundreds of angels flew through the skies.*

*But the black-clad group stood out in their threat.*

*["Jerantis!"] The scene blurred and finally stopped, looking into a simple apartment.*

*The man came running from inside and gazed beyond the scene. ["Larantan forces should have stopped them, unless..."] He gasped. ["Go!"]*

*They dropped from the balcony and spread their wings. A crash sounded from behind.*

*Black-clad figures rushed from the apartment balcony they vacated moments ago.*

*["Fly! Don't look back."]*

*They soared over the city and beyond the outer towers. Ocean stretched below. An island floated serenely in the distance among the clouds.*

*["Where are we going?"] Padina shouted.*

*["The safest place we can. Open a portal."]*

*The dreaded black clad figures closed in fast.*

*Padina spread her brown and white speckled wings and called forth a power that set the marks on her hands aglow. In the sky above, lightening crackled and snapped around a growing ball of light.*

*She slowed her flight, her eyes fixed on the ball, which darkened into a black nothingness not far from her and exploded outward into a spiraling black hole. Her hands glowed yet.*

*["Hurry!"] Jerantis shouted.*

*Padina focused on the void until it grew in diameter to three times her height. There it ceased its growth.*

*["It's done. The portal is ready. Let's go."]*

*["You go. I'll be right behind."]*

*She hesitated and flew close to him. The black formation split apart. Some held back while the others moved around them.*

*["Go. Now,"] he said.*

*["I won't leave you!"]*

*He flew close and kissed her. ["Padina. You are the one they seek. You must protect the Starfire. It's your duty as a Crystal Keeper."] He glanced around them at the closing circle of soldiers. ["Go on. I'll make sure the portal is closing before I go through, so they can't follow. Hurry."] He pushed her away.*

*She flew to the portal but hesitated at the brink and turned.*

*Shots flashed from two of the flyers.*

*["Jerantis!"] For a moment, she fell with the stiffening of her wings.*

*After recovering from the plummeting of the man, she turned and fled into the darkness.*

The dream again. Raea tried to take control as Josh had suggested, but the voices admonished her, or seemed to. They forced her to watch. She could change nothing. When her mother disappeared into the void, or portal, she gasped.

The voices roared in her head like a crowd at a concert. *I can't understand you. Stop shouting at the same time!*

In answer, a burning pain shot through her, ripping out her back. Raea screamed in agony. Tears of pain stung her eyes. *What are you doing to me? What do you want?*

The voices lowered, whispering among themselves as the pain subsided.

Raea blinked at the dark of night and wiped her eyes. Wetness cooled her fingertips. Tears. Then it hadn't been a dream. She had really been crying.

What about the pain? She shifted but something blocked her from rolling over. She was stuck, but not completely. A dark shape hovered over her, blocking out the faint light from her window.

In the dimness, she made out the outline of a large wing. Where'd that come from?

Suspicions drove through her mind. It couldn't be real. "It was only a dream. It had to be." Wasn't it?

To be sure, she reached around her side. Fingertips brushed soft feathers from a bulk of muscles on her back. The wings came out of *her*. This was impossible!

What would Debbie—

Debbie couldn't see this. No one could.

Raea jumped up, intending to lock her bedroom door, and staggered back. The wings added some weight to her back, though she'd manage. On a second try, she reached the door and pressed the button. The lock clicked. There. Now, she could keep everyone from seeing what a freak she really was while she tried to make sense of this.

But what could she do? She couldn't go to school like this.

She'd have to stay home sick and wait for everyone to leave before she could go out. Then what? She couldn't stay in her bedroom the rest of her life. What kind of existence was that?

It wasn't. She had to figure out a way to undo this.

She had no idea. Nothing.

Her life was over.

But there had to be a way. She just had to figure something out. Raea sat down on her bed. If she went out in public, she'd be a spectacle. She didn't want that. Everyone would make fun of her. Oh, Josh would love it, but he'd be the only one.

What about Pallin? Why now? She was so close to the possibility of a real boyfriend. After all this time being teased as a freak, now she really was one.

She buried her face in her hands. The wings shifted behind her. She hated this. *Damn voices. Whoever you are, I hope you're happy now for making my life miserable.*

She laid down and pulled the comforter over the wings and her head. Maybe she could go back to sleep and they would disappear. How had these wings sprouted from her back in the middle of a dream in the first place?

The answer hid within her, with those voices. She wished they would speak clearly. Who were they? What were they?

What the hell—or heaven—was happening to her?

Maybe Chad was right—she really was a freak. No. She couldn't think like that. There was a reasonable explanation; she just had to find it.

Reason? What reason was there for growing wings?

If she cleared her head, maybe the voices would come back. *Calm.* She needed that. *Deep breaths...Focus.* Each breath pulled her further away from the anxiety. The quiet invading her mind coaxed her to the peace of sleep.

A knock jerked her awake.

"Raea! Time to get up."

"Huh?" What time was it? A check of her clock told her—time to get up for school.

Debbie tried the door handle but it only jiggled. "Why's your door locked?"

Door locked? Oh, yeah. She'd locked it. Then, that meant...

Raea reached around her back, and her fingers brushed the soft feathers. Oh, no. It hadn't been a dream.

"Are you all right?"

*No! I have wings.* Yeah, right. As if she could say that, but she had to say something to satisfy Debbie or her aunt would never leave. "I...I don't feel good. Don't come in."

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Um...I'm not myself this morning. I can't go to school." She certainly didn't lie about not being herself. But what was she?

"Can you unlock the door?"

"That's not a good idea." What would Debbie think if she saw her like this? What would anyone think, besides that she belonged in some circus side show?

"What's wrong? It can't be that bad."

"Oh, yes, it can!" If Debbie only knew. But she never would.

After a pause, Debbie spoke in a tone of defeat. "All right. I hope you feel better soon."

"Me too." Good. Debbie gave up. Now what could she do? Raea couldn't hide in her room forever. Sooner or later Debbie—or worse, Mike—would find a way to unlock that door.

Raea's stomach rumbled, and she groaned. She needed something to eat. She couldn't stay there all day, but at least after everyone left, she could sneak out to the kitchen.

The morning passed slower than ever. For once, she didn't care when Dave called out that she could have the shower and all the cold water.

The voices and clatter of flatware on plates from everyone eating echoed up from the main floor. Her stomach grumbled in protest. *Easy. Soon they'll be gone. Then the kitchen is ours, stomach.*

When the phone rang, her heart leapt from her chest. What if Pallin called? Raea groaned. The hottest guy to ever show an interest in her would get away. The *only* guy to express any interest in being with her. Someone somewhere was having a good laugh at her expense. Why did this have to happen now?

What did the wings look like, though? Could she actually fly? Sure, and she hated heights. What good were wings? Still, she might as well look.

Raea crawled out of bed and hesitated. Curiosity had a cruel way of revealing unpleasant surprises. Maybe she should stay away from the mirror.

Could she move her wings?

They weren't as heavy as she thought. And moving them only took a thought. Like wiggling her fingers or walking. But the wings didn't do exactly what she wanted.

Could she stretch? How far would they go?

She tried, but her room blocked her from what she thought would be a full stretch. Her bedroom barely measured fifteen feet long. The wings had to be huge to support her and still bend with each wingtip out.

*I wonder...* Raea sat at the wall near the head of her bed and concentrated on making one brown wing flatten out in the morning light. Both stretched, one to the side and the other back, knocking into her dresser and bumping it into the wall behind her.

Stupid wings!

She took a deep breath and tried again. The one wing easily pressed into the glass of the window and the feather tips could have gone farther. How big were they?

A knock on the door startled her. She turned, forgetting about the inconvenience behind her. Her corkboard crashed to the ground.

"Raea, are you all right?"

"I'm... Yeah. Just knocked my board down. That's all."

Stupid, *stupid* wings. If she couldn't control them, how would she ever hide them?

"The boys and Mike left. It's just me here. Are you sure I can't come in?"

"No!" She sounded panicky. That wouldn't help matters.

"I can stay home and help you."

"No. Don't worry about me. I just need a day to rest." And figure out how to get rid of or hide those wings. Running away was always an option. But where would she go?

She was stuck.

"Really. There's nothing I haven't dealt with."

"I can take care of myself. Thanks anyway."

"All right." Debbie's footsteps faded from the hallway outside her door. Finally!

Soon, the house would be hers. Raea could sneak out, clean up, and grab something to eat. She listened for the click of the door and the hum of the garage that would mean Debbie left.

While she waited, she decided to finally see for herself what she had become. Raea swallowed her hesitation and approached the full-length mirror in the corner of her room. After a moment, she took a deep breath and stepped in front of it.

No doubt about it—she had wings. Dark brown feathered wings that matched her hair and eyes. She twisted to see where they came out and noted the tears through her nightgown in back. What had she become? She looked like...like her mother in her dreams.

Raea gasped.

Her dreams...and the voices. What had she been seeing? Her mother wasn't human. That was obvious now. She was something else. But what was her mother? What was *she*?

A light knock on her door made her jump. Raea put a hand over her racing heart.

"Raea, open up, please."

Debbie wasn't going to give up. Raea should have expected that of her aunt.

*Okay...Deep breath...* Raea grabbed her flower-print comforter and threw it over her back to hide the wings. Sooner or later she had to face her aunt. *Might as well get it over with.* If she could trust anyone, it would be Debbie.

The door handle might have been set to bite her for all the apprehension restraining her from opening it. She unlocked it though and opened it only a crack.

Debbie couldn't have worn deeper furrows in her forehead. They smoothed out a moment later. "Thank God you're all right. Can I come in?"

"It's not a good idea."

"Please, Raea. I heard you scream early this morning. I'm worried."

"You did? I mean, I did?"

"Yes. You sounded hurt."

Debbie had good ears. But had Raea really screamed out loud?

"Are you okay?"

"Not really." Raea looked out beyond her aunt. Debbie was alone.

She didn't have much of a choice now and needed to trust someone. Better Debbie, she supposed, than anyone else.

Raea stepped away from the door and threw the comforter off. "Not if this is all right."

Debbie didn't look surprised or worried in the least. Okay. That was odd.

"This happened last night?" Debbie motioned for her to turn. "Was this why you screamed?"

Raea stepped around on the spot. "Yes. It hurt. And I can't go out like this." Why didn't Debbie act more surprised?

"No, you can't." Debbie sighed. "We'll have to do something about it."

"What can we do? I can't hide them. I can't even *control* these wings. What am I supposed to do? My life is ruined."

The smile on Debbie's face said otherwise. Oh, please, let her aunt have a plan.

"I know someone who can help."

Someone else? "What? No. No, no, no. No one can know about this. I'll be picked apart." She could just imagine the doctors and scientists. If Chad wasn't bad enough, being examined would really make her feel like a freak, if she survived. She wouldn't have any part of that. No one else could know.

"Relax, Raea."

Relax? How the hell was she supposed to relax about this?

Debbie's hands on Raea's face stopped her from panicking, her calm, motherly touch the one Raea wished had come from her real mother. "Your mother hid your wings when you were three."

What? She had *not* just heard that. Anger flew through Raea and she backed away from Debbie. "You *knew* about this? And you didn't tell me?"

"Your mother wanted you to live a normal *human* life. I promised to obey her wishes."

"I don't believe this. You lied to me?" Tears moistened her eyes. Emotions flared strong inside. "You—you *lied* to me? How could you?"

"Please, Raea. I didn't mean to hurt you. Your mother wasn't from this world. She came here to protect you."

"You should have told me...before...*this*." She threw up her hands, trembling in anger.

"Believe me, I wanted to, but Padina made me promise that if something happened to her—"

"Shut up!" No excuses. Nothing could make up for what had happened to her. "Leave me alone! GET OUT!" The wings lifted behind her and bumped the light globe on the ceiling.

As soon as Debbie backed out, Raea slammed the door. How could her aunt have lied to her? Debbie knew all along that she was supposed to have wings? Was she an angel or something else? She didn't feel unusual, though she wouldn't know what to expect. Why didn't Debbie rip out her heart and stomp on it while she was at it? Someone she loved had purposely lied to her about who she was, or rather, *what* she was. She wasn't even normal. Not human.

She didn't try to stop the tears but buried them in her pillow. Debbie's words cut through her heart. Why

would they do this to her? And who, besides her mother, could possibly help her now?

Why did she have to be different?

*["I'm sorry, Raea. No more flying. Someday, maybe we can return home and you can fly all over, but now we must be human."] Padina gripped the girl's hands in hers, the marks on both their hands glowing with a faint light.*

*The topless child cried as her brown wings shrank to nothing. Her shrieks rang through the room. Tears streaked down Padina's cheeks also.*

*When the wings disappeared, Padina held the girl close and wept with her. Soon the child quieted and wiggled to run free, but Padina held her, until Scott entered the room and embraced her and the child raced off.*

*"It had to be done," he said.*

*"I know. I can't hide her forever. What kind of life would that be?"*

*"None at all."*

Raea wiped away her tears with the backs of her hands. The marks. Those strange marks were the key. How did her mother make them glow? If she could tap into whatever power her mother had used, maybe she could return to normal.

She had no idea how.

"Raea." Debbie poked her head in the door. "There's someone here to help you."

"I don't need help." Least of all from Debbie or anyone Debbie knew. Debbie had known all along and didn't tell her or prepare her in any way. She, Raea, would figure this out by herself, somehow. It might take a while, but one way or another, she'd solve the problem and reclaim her life.

Debbie slipped out and closed the door. "Maybe you should come back later. She's upset, and I can't say I blame her." The door didn't muffle her voice much—she stood just outside.

"This is the best time. Now that she knows of this, she should know everything. I've waited long enough to teach her." By the pitch of that other voice, it was a man. Who else could possibly know?

"It was her mother's wishes."

"I understand, but now the Starfire forced it on her. The sooner she learns to control its power, the better she'll be at protecting herself if the Shirukan come." Determination hardened his voice.

"I did what Padina asked."

"It doesn't matter. I was sent to teach Padina's child to master the Starfire's power. Now that she knows the truth, nothing else matters."

After a moment, Debbie's voice lowered. "You're right. But she's not going to listen."

"I've gotten used to being ignored."

"All right. Good luck."

Debbie opened the door and stepped aside.

No way! No. Effing. Way. Raea didn't believe it. A moment later, anger seethed inside her. "You! You made this happen."

Elis shook his head.

How dare he deny it! "When you rubbed my neck yesterday, you must have done something."

"I only told the Starfire not to bother you." He said that way too calmly.

"How do I know you didn't tell it—this Starfire—to do this to me?"

"Please, Raea, just listen to what he has to say."

Raea ignored her aunt's pleading and crossed her arms.

"That's why I'm here," Elis said. "I'm surprised by this too. It takes a lot of effort to change form. The Starfire must have had a reason for forcing it."

"How would you know?" He sure acted all confident of himself suddenly. He'd never been that way any other time.

He pulled the gloves off.

What the hell! His hands bore the same marks as hers, but smaller. Okay, now everything was too weird. *Wake up, Raea. This is all just a dream, a very, very weird dream.*

"I know, because I also bear the Starburst marks. We're called Keepers, a symbiosis of Inari and Starfire to keep it safe. Your mother's shard chose you to bear it, just as my father was chosen."

Her mother's shard, as in a crystal shard? Her crystal? Raea lifted the pendant. All this time she wondered why her mother had said not to remove it for anything. Had this caused her wings to grow out? It couldn't have. It was just a crystal. Wasn't it?

"When I heard you tell Josh about your dreams, I knew they were trying to communicate."

She grimaced in shame; he had overheard. She had been rude to him, especially when he said nothing about it. At the time, though, she didn't know any better. "They? This crystal?" He was joking. Right? Crystals didn't communicate.

"The crystal is an intelligent collective of entities. They came to explore our universe, but can only survive in this form, this crystal we call the Starfire. They observe and store those observations. From what I've been told, they can project them into the bearer's mind, which is what I suspect your dreams are."

"No, this can't be real. This is all some big joke on me." Debbie could jump in any time to agree...Anytime. Much to Raea's disappointment, her aunt shook her head.

"It's no joke," Elis said. "You are Inari. Our kind come from another world, another galaxy."

"Right. Maybe you are, but I was born *here*. This world—Earth—is my home." She couldn't believe it; refused to believe it. No way was she an alien or angel or whatever excuse they made, despite the proof on her back.

["Your parents came from Inar'Ahben. You are the daughter of Cattalon Jerantis and Shartrael Padina. Both were Keepers, but Padina was also one of four Crystal Keepers. They fled when the Shirukan invaded their city, but Jerantis died protecting Padina's escape to Earth."] He spoke in her mother's language, making it hard to deny his story.

Her dreams flashed back in vivid detail, tearing through her emotions with what she knew to be the truth. Her dreams had been the last images of...her real father? "What?"

["She taught you to speak Inari?"]

["Yes."]

["Then you understand?"]

Too well. She wiped the moisture from her eyes, wishing he was wrong, that the dreams were all wrong. All this because of a stupid little pendant.

["I'm sorry, Raea."]

["What would you know?"]

His cheek twitched and his eyes dropped for a moment, his whole mood transforming into the somber darkness he usually wore at school. ["They killed my family, too. The Shirukan grabbed my sister and her mate and my parents and tortured and killed them all. My father was a Crystal Keeper, like your mother. If I hadn't been at Starfire Tower in training..."] He left the statement unfinished as a cloud settled over his mood.

What? He would have died too? So what? She hated him for having anything to do with this, but she didn't. She also regretted judging him as her classmates had now that she knew the reason for it. If all this was real, then he had lost more than she had.

["But I was sent here to find you and train you."] A smile alighted on his face, erasing the grief that had fallen over him. For a change, he actually looked pleasant. Despite the smile, sorrow lingered yet in his eyes behind the wild black locks. ["I waited only to satisfy your mother's wishes, but the entities want you to learn what you really are. We are Inari, but until you master the Starfire's power, I can help you to be *human*, to continue your hiding."]

["How?"] If she could be human again... That's all she wanted.

"Give me your hands."

He planned to touch her again. She hesitated. The last couple of times had brought on visions and the voices. What would happen this time?

"Trust me."

Trust him? She barely knew him. Still, his moment of openness washed away some of her hesitations. "What will you do?"

"Shrink your wings until you're ready to fly."

She recalled the vision right before he showed up. As a child, she had cried when her mother shrank her



wings. "It'll hurt, won't it."

"Yes, it does."

Raea looked at Debbie, who shrugged. What did she know?

"Will this happen again? Can these wings come out any time?" Raea put her hands out, palms up. If she wanted to return to her life, she had no other choice. But would the Starfire choose a more inconvenient time to make her wings grow, like when she was in public?

"It shouldn't. They usually have a purpose for what they do. I suspect in this case, they wanted you to know what you are. You've hidden too long on this world, believing you're human. I can teach you what it means to be Inari...if you'll let me." He clasped each of her hands in his. "Ready?"

"No." She would never be ready for the pain, but she wanted to be normal again. "But get it over with."

Elis closed his eyes and the marks on their hands glowed. Warmth flooded through Raea. The voices organized into one coherent thought, but the searing pain across her back stole her attention from whatever that thought was. *It hurts. It hurts. It hurts...* She breathed quickly, the mantra running through her head.

Soon, it ended, and Elis let go. She immediately reached around. Only two rips in the back of her gown remained. Her back was flat again. He did it. She could go out in public. She could see her friends. She could go to Linds' birthday.

And she could see Pallin. Was he worried that she wasn't in school?

Sweat beaded on Elis's forehead. A few of the wild, black strands stuck to his face. He looked like he had run a marathon and breathed hard too.

"Was that difficult?" she asked.

"I've only done it once before...in training. It's easier—*much* easier—changing myself."

Himself? Elis with wings. Something stuck in her head. It couldn't be. But she had to know. "Can you show me?"

"Not now." He swiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "We'll have plenty of time later, when you learn to fly."

"Fly?" She trembled at the thought, but with an excitement she hadn't expected. She had plenty of dreams of flying.

Still, the idea of learning from Elis made her uncomfortable. Ever since he arrived, he had never opened up and quietly went about his way, the reason Chad started calling him Creeper. The name stuck. Now that she understood why, it didn't feel right to think of him that way. However, while she was grateful for his help, she found it difficult to accept the idea of learning from him. She wasn't that comfortable with him.

"You need to learn. It's who you are."

Raea sighed, seeing no other choice. "All right. Fine. When I have time."

"Speaking of time."

She had forgotten about Debbie.

"Shouldn't you two be getting to school?"

Great. Raea could see the questions now. Turning up with Elis would look suspicious. What would Pallin think?

"You'll be okay?" Elis asked.

She nodded. "Just go. I still have to get cleaned up and eat. So what if I miss a couple of classes." And the sooner he left her, the better. Besides, at least if Elis showed up separately from her, it wouldn't look like they came together. She could salvage the day yet.

"Be careful on the ice." Elis smiled, his eyes sparkling—a purple that made her look twice—and he walked out.

Her cheeks warmed. No. She didn't just blush. Just because he helped her this time was no reason for her to feel embarrassed. So, she had taken a misstep yesterday and he caught her. So what?

Debbie's eyebrows lifted but she said nothing and closed the door behind them.

Life would never be normal again.

## Double Date

"So, what happened this morning? Someone said you were sick?" Linds took a bite of her hamburger. Sick? Must have been Dave who said it. What else did her bratty cousin say about her?

"Actually, I had back problems." Nothing like hiding the truth within a truth. Raea still couldn't believe she had sprouted wings, or that she wasn't human. *Or* that Elis was the same. Elis of all people. Her friends would never believe it. She hardly believed it. But she didn't intend to tell anyone.

"So, not sick then." Jess grinned and brushed aside wavy layers of brown-blond hair from her face. Raea knew what she thought. "Then you're good for a date. Speak of the devil."

She turned to follow Jess's gaze, and her heart stopped. Pallin smiled from the lunch line. Good thing she was already sitting. Her knees would have given out.

"So, has he asked you out yet?" Linds said.

"What?" Her friend's question caught up to her. "Oh. No, not yet."

"You do plan to stay in public areas, I hope?" Josh, the religious conservative of their group, always tried to keep the rest of them respectable, but sometimes he bordered on annoying.

"Of course. I'm not stupid." Her only problem now was getting away from Elis to see Pallin.

Elis didn't pay any attention to her at the moment, or at least seemed not to. He had overheard her conversation with Josh about her dreams, but that was on a quiet street. The noise in the lunchroom should keep him from hearing. He had no right to tell her what to do, any more than the Starfire, but the entities gave her no choice. If it was a part of her, a true symbiosis, she couldn't escape it.

She didn't want to think about it. She needed a distraction. "Josh, did you ever get a call back from that show?"

Jackpot. His eyes lit up like he'd won the lottery. "That's right. You weren't here this morning. They're sending someone up this weekend to check out filming locations and get things set up."

"What about my birthday tomorrow?" Linds gave Josh a dirty look.

"Oh...ah. I'm still planning to be there."

"You better. After everything I've suffered hearing about your 'Dark Angel', you owe me this." Linds's serious tone broke down into a snicker when Josh grabbed the finger she pointed at him.

Dark Angel. Her wings. Elis's wings. Raea glanced aside as the thoughts wiggled through her brain. Could it be? Now, she had to see his wings. She had to know.

"I can be sitting here?"

*Huh?* Raea blinked at the accented voice. Pallin. That was fast. Too bad Linds sat on one side of her and Jess on the other. "Um...Yeah."

He took a seat on the opposite side of the round table, in one of the two empty chairs. "I have not chance to talk today. Too much...work. I am wanting more time with you."

*Here it comes.* He was going to ask her out. She knew it. "I'd like that too." She could still live like a human, as she always had, like her mother intended.

"We may be together after school?"

Her insides flipped, kicking her heart into a race. "Dinner?" Oh, man. That smile made her stomach flutter.

"Yes. That would be good."

\* \* \*

The afternoon dragged on with the sun bright and warm outside. Snow melted in rivers down the streets. March weather. Raea couldn't wait to get out and enjoy it. She couldn't wait to go out with Pallin, but she wanted to know about Elis.

On the walk home, Josh's excitement blurred his words, but Raea only half-listened with a few "Uh, huhs" and "Goods" thrown in to sound like she listened. He knew she couldn't think of anything right now amidst the excitement of meeting Pallin in a couple hours. She gave him credit for trying though.

At the corner where she split with Josh, Raea slowed. "Let me know when you hear anything *new*. Emphasis on the 'new'." He always talked a person's ears off about his obsession with Dark Angel. If he only knew how close to the truth he was, if she was right.

"I get it. Later."

Raea didn't have to work to slow her pace after Josh left. The pools and rivers of melting snow did that for her. Elis didn't seem hindered in the least, or he didn't care about the water.

She had almost forgotten about that morning. Now, she had to know. He walked a stride behind.

"Is it you?"

His steps fell quiet. Did he realize she spoke to him? Would he understand what she meant?

Raea stopped and turned.

"What?" He frowned.

"The one causing such a fuss?" Did she have to say it? She didn't want to, not in the open. Others might overhear.

"I don't know." He walked again and gave her only a passing glance. "We'll talk about that later."

Later? As in training her later?

"We don't make ourselves known here. Our purpose is to serve, not to gather fame or fortune, or draw attention to the power we wield. It's too dangerous."

"So, play the superhero thing and live a double life?"

His smile infected her. After all this time seeing him somber and moody, his smile seemed out of place. She looked again to be sure it was real.

["Not intentionally."]

"Why do you have to use the other language?"

["So you learn."]

Right. But she had always known, so it wasn't really learning. "You mean refresh?"

["Better yet."]

["I never forgot."]

["No. Probably not. Like the crystal shard you wear, the Starfire inside you records everything. I'm sure you can recall, with very little effort, any detail of your life."]

"Just those I want to remember." And most of what she didn't, despite her attempts to forget.

"I understand."

The statement sobered her. He probably did understand. Like her, he had lost his family because of that crystal. And the Starfire was a part of him. What good was it if it only brought trouble? Why should she protect it?

["Meet me at sunset."]

["Why?"]

["Training."]

"Um...I'm kinda busy tonight."

The muscles in his jaw tightened. What bit him?

Fine. She supposed she could give him some time. She did *not* want the Starfire making those wings appear, especially while she was with Pallin.

["All right."] At least with this "training", she should figure out how to control the Starfire so it wouldn't interfere with her life. It gave her no other choice.

He left her for Mrs. Johnson's yellow-sided house, while she hurried into her aunt's and uncle's house. *Now for Pallin.* She let out a little squeal.

The second she stepped through the door, Buddy slid into her and barked. "All right. Fine. Go do your thing."

At the same instant the dog shoved past her, a thought hit in regards to the slop outside. Too late. Buddy splashed in the slush and mud. Stupid dog. Now she'd have to bring him into the garage to dry off. He could stay there until Mike came home. It was his dog. Why should she have to clean up the mess for letting him out? She had to get ready for tonight.

After rounding up the muddy chocolate lab, Raea retreated to her bedroom.

Now, if Debbie would hurry home. Raea needed the car, or at least a ride.

\* \* \*

When they neared the downtown area in the slanted light of the sinking sun, Debbie broke the silence of their ride. "Remember to stay here until I come back."

"Yes. I know. Stay to public places." Better that she say it than Debbie. Her aunt was nice, but the lectures

Raea could live without. Josh had been bad enough.

They arrived at George's Diner, the local place she and her friends had told Pallin about over lunch. She couldn't believe it. She was going on a date with Pallin. This was too good to be true.

But where was he? Through the tall windows, she saw a few people sitting in the diner, but none of them looked like Pallin. And she wasn't late.

Uh, oh. Did Pallin have trouble finding it? Maybe she should have given him directions from his hotel, not just a general location. Man, she was no good at this. She was going to blow it.

*Might as well try.* Raea opened the car door and stepped out.

"Be careful."

She smiled at her aunt and closed the door of the sedan. Here went nothing. Her aunt pulled away as Raea stepped into the warm diner.

George's maintained a bright atmosphere. A simple colorful trim ran along the top of the white walls, where paintings of bright flowers alternated with decorative sconce light fixtures. The floor was a simple black and white checkerboard tile while the tables were marble patterns in different colors on white. Georgene had transformed what a few years ago had been a dark, foreboding bar into a warm, inviting restaurant.

Where was Pallin? A foreigner new to a small town, he couldn't have gotten *too* lost. While she studied the few other faces at the small tables and the wire-framed chairs around them, a cold wind chilled her back. She twisted around—

And swore her heart leapt from her chest. "Pallin." He made it. "Where should we sit?"

"You choose."

*Okay. I choose. Right.* Raea swallowed her anxieties and headed for a cozy booth along the side, next to a tall cooler of soda. She removed all her winter gear and sat down opposite him.

"This is nice place, very simple." He brushed golden hair away from those eyes.

"I like it." Raea clasped her hands on the table. *Say something.* This was so much easier with her friends at lunch.

After a few seconds of silence, Pallin asked, "How do we get food?"

"Oh." Raea's cheeks warmed. Of course, they would need to order, or at least look at a menu to see what was available.

"I'm sorry. Here—" She pulled the menu from its holder near the wall.

His smile took her breath away. He took the folded, laminated menu when she offered it.

"If you have any questions, just ask. I've been here a lot. I know what I like." She smiled, hoping he couldn't see how nervous she was.

"I have many, but most for later. Please to helping me read. English is...hmm...not easy."

"Oh. Sure. Um...Here..." She ran through every item and gave him descriptions. Pallin's lack of understanding surprised her, but it gave her an opportunity to share her knowledge; maybe he wasn't U.S. military, but that would be odd. Too much time spent overseas, she guessed.

When the waitress came to their table, Raea helped Pallin order.

Awkward silence filled the air. Her brain stumbled over words to find a coherent thought. "What country did you say you grew up most of your life?"

"It is not well known."

"Someplace too small to make any news, I suppose?"

"Yes." He took a deep breath and clasped his hands on the table.

"What do you like to do?" She asked.

"Not do much but travel."

"Oh? Where have you been?" How exciting to see new places, although she would tire of traveling frequently. She liked being in one place, having regular friends.

"Many places, never to stay long. Never to meeting people, to keeping...friends." He smiled that charming smile that melted her insides. "Tell me more of you."

There was a topic Raea had no trouble talking about. Nevermind she wasn't human. He didn't need to know that. Besides, it could have been a dream.

In the middle of their discussion, the food arrived.

The rest of the evening proceeded in much the same way. Pallin surprised her with his lack of understanding

of some things she thought would have been common even in a small country.

When they finished their meal, the waitress took their plates and left the hand-printed bill. Raea tried to smile but played with the straw in her water, stirring the lemon slice to settle her nerves.

"I am not good at this."

She looked up at Pallin. He thought *he* was having trouble?

"I am new to customs here and being not good company."

"It's as much my fault. I'm sorry, Pallin. I'm a bit nervous. That's all. I don't want you to think I'm uncomfortable, because I'm not. I just...I just..." How could she explain it? "I've never done this before."

A sly grin crept up his face. "I am new also."

"I don't believe it. You must have a girlfriend in every town you visit." *Idiot. What kind of stupid statement is that? What if he does?*

"No."

"Really?" Raea blinked and let out a breath that left her relaxed.

"I am...being not...good with friends."

She smiled with relief. The situation took on a new light, a ridiculousness that sparked a few giggles she tried to repress. However, when Pallin caught the laughing bug, she couldn't hold back. It continued for several minutes.

When the fit died down, he held his smile as if the laughter lingered beneath the surface yet. Or was it a dark satisfaction she saw in his smile? That couldn't be right.

"I feel...much better," she admitted. And she had managed some conversation, without Jess's help. Jess never had trouble talking to people.

"Yes."

At a quick glance of the clock on the wall, she gasped. Two hours had passed already. Although she would have liked to spend more time visiting with him, she had a commitment to Elis.

She had almost forgotten her training. She had to learn to control the Starfire. No way did she want those wings sprouting again without her consent. What if it happened in the middle of school, or in front of Pallin?

"I should get going." She grabbed her coat and stood to slip it on.

When he lifted his coat, she noticed that the layer down the middle on the outside was more than decoration—she could see through when he held it loose. A strange style, but Pallin was from a different culture, or, at the least, not used to dressing for North Dakota cold.

"We go now?"

"No. I'm sorry. I have other plans and have to meet someone soon." If not for her promise to Elis, she *could* spend more time with Pallin.

"Maybe we see together another time."

"Outside of school? I'd like that."

Her insides fluttered when he smiled. She loved this. Even if it couldn't last more than a week or two, she could at least enjoy the time they had.

\* \* \*

Pallin's arrogant smirk left a bad taste in Elis's mouth. He had hated Pallin from the first moment he saw him. The accent was too familiar, too much like his own, before he learned to control it. Suspicion gnawed at him, fueling his hatred.

From the bench outside the large windows of the diner, he watched Raea and Pallin in their booth. Debbie had asked him to keep an eye on Raea for trouble, so Raea could enjoy herself but still be safe. He would have watched without Debbie asking, but this way was better. So far, this Pallin had done nothing to cause him alarm, but Elis wished he would. Any reason to keep Pallin away from Raea would suit him.

Before Elis's thoughts strayed too far, the two rose from their table. He hurried around the corner to a narrow space between buildings. He couldn't afford Raea's hostility if she knew he watched them.

A familiar sedan pulled up to the curb where he had sat. Debbie. Raea must have called.

Raea hurried to reach the car.

In his black coat and gloves Pallin smiled and waved as the car drove away. When the street emptied of traffic, the smile turned into something sinister. Pallin hurried down the sidewalk.

Something wasn't right. His appearance gave Elis chills. Elis followed at a distance, until Pallin turned into

a lonely alley. What was the man up to?

As the sun reached the horizon, Pallin stopped and turned.

Caught. Elis couldn't hide the fact that he followed this man.

"You have question for me?"

"No."

"But you follow."

Elis knew that accent. There was one way to confirm it. ["I was sent to protect the Crystal Keeper."]

A grin curved up Pallin's lips. "I am understanding not."

Maybe he was wrong. But that coat, black and thigh-length, with the black gloves and that accent combined for one terrible image. Standing face-to-face with his nightmare gave Elis shivers. He hoped he was wrong. But the other night, the Starfire called itself, as it did when a portal opened. Right before Pallin showed up in school.

["You won't have her."]

Pallin frowned. "You speak English? Or this is why you speak not in school?"

"Very well."

"Ah. Yes. I help you?"

Either Pallin played dumb, or he really had no idea. But if he was Shirukan, he could hide and fake any knowledge. With just enough Starfire in their genetics to change form but not enough to bear the Starburst marks of a Keeper, they were indistinguishable from humans. That weak connection with the Starfire was the reason such individuals were chosen for the elite forces of the Shirat Empire. And they could absorb some of the power of the Starfire.

Whether Pallin was one of them or a human from another country on Earth didn't matter. Elis didn't like him.

"Stay away from her." Elis fought back the desire to wipe that smile off the guy's face. He almost wished Pallin was Shirukan, if only for the excuse to keep Raea away from him.

"You are...friend?"

"A friend who won't tolerate anyone hurting her."

"She makes decision to be not with you?"

Pallin's words cut through Elis. His fingers balled into fists, but he restrained his temper. The guy knew exactly what he said, good or bad English notwithstanding.

"You be leaving Raea alone." Pallin turned, ending the conversation.

"I'll be watching you."

"That will be...interesting."

## Starfire Keepers

Where was Elis?

Raea sat in the sitting room with Mrs. Johnson. The house hadn't changed since she was a kid. The same faded green paint covered the living room walls and yellowed white lacy curtains hung in the front window, although the recliner and end tables in front of that window were newer. The television was brand new, too.

Before Joe's death, the old couple used to serve cookies to her and her cousins in the afternoon if they were out playing. Raea missed those days. After Joe died, Mrs. Johnson smiled less, until Elis came. Or was it? Now that she considered, that *was* about the time Evelyn Johnson smiled again.

He couldn't be too bad a person if the kind-hearted old woman took to him. Did she know about him, and her, having wings?

The old widow sat in her recliner near the front window, her cane leaning against the small table next to her. Good old Mrs. Johnson with her heart of gold and short, silvery gray hair. She was worth a mint in precious metals.

"He'll be home soon, dear."

"I hope so. I've been waiting for ten minutes." Ten minutes longer she could have spent with Pallin. Her heart pounded just thinking about him. He liked her.

Elis said to be there at sunset. Here she was. The sun had set a few minutes ago. But she saw no sign of him. If she was going to learn to control the Starfire's power—that sounded ridiculous, like some comic book superhero—she needed to practice. He insisted she do that.

So, where *was* he already?

She made sure to end her date with Pallin early enough to be there. Why couldn't he stick to it?

The door clicked.

Raea jumped to her feet. "What took you so long? You're the one who insisted I go through with this training of yours, but you can't show up on time?" Nevermind she wanted the training to keep her wings from sprouting again.

His jaw tightened as he pulled off his coat. "I'm sorry. Something came up."

Whatever. Waiting for him wore her patience thin. "So, what are we doing?" The sooner they started, the sooner they finished and she could go home and call Pallin, or wait for him to call her.

"The basics. First to find the resonance."

"What resonance?"

"Every crystal reacts to different pitches of sound, but this is something inside you. It's a part of you. You'll feel it throughout your body. That is the resonance of the Starfire in your cells. With that, you can access the power." He set his shoes in the closet and pointed up the stairs from the foyer to the second level, apparently unaffected by the fact that Mrs. Johnson could hear every word.

*She knows!*

"We'll need some quiet," he said.

"What about flying?"

"Maybe later."

All right. Upstairs. It should have felt creepy, but after that morning, actually *talking* to him, it didn't. Or, rather, it didn't feel as weird as knowing she was an alien with wings. She still had trouble believing what happened that morning was real. Then to have him, of all people, admit to being the same sounded like some fantasy Josh had dreamed up.

She climbed the stairs, noting the creaks of a couple of them. The old house had character. When Raea was young, Mrs. Johnson had babysat on more than a few occasions. Raea and Dave had played many games on those stairs, pretending at times that they led to the dragon's lair or that the two of them hunted ghosts. Those rare times they actually got along.

The memories flashed past with amazing clarity, like any memory she recalled. Until Elis told her the crystal recorded events, she thought she simply had an eidetic memory. That memory made school a breeze with a perfect GPA, and Elis matched her from day one. Not what anyone expected from a foreign student, but he was more than that.

Elis. *I wonder...* "How old are you?"

"In Earth years, twenty-one. It's about five Earth years to Six Inari."

"I *knew* you were older." She had always suspected. He seemed far too mature to be in their class.

"Why are you in high school?"

"Debbie made the arrangements so I could watch you, protect you in case of trouble." Around the top of the stairs and past the upstairs bathroom, he opened the door of the guest bedroom for her.

"Of course. And she arranged for you to live here."

"Yes."

His door opened to an immaculately clean room; not a mess in sight and everything organized. Books on various subjects packed a bookshelf on the nearest wall next to a corner desk, where a flat panel monitor glowed with power. The bed was made and not a sock littered the floor.

"Are you for real?" Raea stood in the doorway, aware of him close behind.

"Why?"

"No one is this neat." Not even her. She stepped inside, self-conscious suddenly about entering Elis's room. The room was sparse, but functional, a room for working and sleeping but little else in the way of decoration or personal touches. A few strange items lined the shelf on the back of the desk, but nothing else. The cross over the queen bed she guessed was Mrs. Johnson's, since this was probably also one of the guest rooms for when her family visited, or at least had been before Elis came.

"Are you disappointed?"

She turned from where she touched the computer desk in curiosity—not a dust speck. "No. Not at all. Just...surprised. Maybe I'm too used to Dave's and Eric's rooms being pigsties." Debbie had given up hounding the boys to keep their rooms clean. She'd flip to have Elis. For that matter, why didn't she? Except they had no room.

"You expected a mess?"

"Maybe. I didn't expect this." She was organized and kept her room clean, but she wasn't nearly as tidy. This went far beyond clean. "So, where do I begin?"

"Here." He patted the made-up bed. "Sit down on the edge with your feet on the floor."

Raea eyed the bed suspiciously but followed his directions. For all she knew, he could have intended something else, but he knelt on the floor near her. Good. He didn't assume any special familiarity. Hopefully Pallin soon would though.

"Now, let your arms hang loose and breathe deep. I want you to meditate and free your mind. Only then will you find the resonance of the crystal inside you. After some practice, you'll start recognizing it instantly. For now, though, it may take a while."

"Meditate. Okay." Raea did as he instructed. He talked her through the relaxation in a gentle voice that guided her to a place she had never been before. Within herself, she found a place of peace and openness. There, a sweet music played, like the voices that had whispered in her dreams now harmonized. It focused on a single pitch and warmed through her. Every part of her tingled faintly as the warmth increased.

"Good. Not too much. Now think of something else and let it go."

Easy—Pallin. His bright, amber eyes sparkled and perfect, sculpted jaw shifted with his grin. The way his blonde hair fell aside along his face, outlined it in a halo of gold. And those broad shoulders and trim figure... She'd bet he had a nice body under that shirt that left much to her imagination.

"That was better than anyone I've known."

"Really?" The image of Pallin blew away. Better than anyone he'd known? The compliment boosted her confidence to try again.

"Yes. But, since the Starfire has been pushing you lately, I'd guess it's also guiding you. Most Keepers train before one of the shards needs a new bearer, but it has happened the other way, like with you."

Raea lifted the crystal. That such a simple object could contain so much baffled her mind, as did finding out she had wings. It still felt odd, unreal, like she lived someone else's life. "I remember Mom saying it would guide me, but I was young. I had no idea she meant this." That crystal had opened a whole world to her that she never knew existed.

She caught his smile on her and turned away. *Don't look at me like that.* Her face warmed.

"Try again to find the resonance, but listen to the Starfire this time. It made us what we are. We serve its



purpose. Listen to what it says."

She considered that idea, but she hadn't yet been able to distinguish any words from the crowd of voices. Did he honestly think it would be any easier now? But she had to try, for her own curiosity if nothing else.

She found the resonance quicker this time and listened. The voices remained quiet, though. Now they chose to say nothing? She should have known. When she wanted to hear them, they said nothing; but when she hadn't wanted to or hadn't expected it, they wouldn't shut up. *Where are you?*

Silence.

"The voices are gone."

"Try again. Focus on the resonance. That's your connection."

"I did. There was nothing."

He stared at the crystal, the muscles along his jaw tightening and loosening. After a few seconds of silence, he put his bare left hand before her, palm open to expose the larger Starburst mark. "Take my hand."

"Why?"

"I spoke to them before when I touched you. I'd like to know what they want."

"That makes two of us," Raea mumbled. Seeing little choice and hoping he knew what he was doing, she placed her hand in his. The resonance warmed through her.

*The man, Jerantis, walked across a patch of strange brown and pink plants, his dark brown hair, like the feathers of his wings, ruffling in a breeze. He smiled and tossed a purple and orange ball to Padina. ["Davrel doesn't deserve a second thought. He's jealous that you turned him down for me."] He sat down next to her. ["I can't blame him, though."]*

*Padina smiled and dropped her eyes to the ball. Not a ball. She bit into the juicy fruit. ["He seemed so hopeful, but it wasn't right. I shouldn't feel bad, but I do."]*

*["I'm not sure why you chose me to bond with, what I did, but no matter what you decided, I would always love you."]*

*["That's why. I love you, too, and I know you'll never hurt me. You've always been kind and giving. Davrel's selfish. He's a good person, but not a mate. If I'm to share the pleasures and pains of one man, it must be someone I can trust."]*

*The scene blew away, replaced by another. In full view this time, a younger Padina stood with other Keepers of varying wing colors dressed in ceremonial-style robes of a pale blue and tied with gold. A stranger stood close to the crystal and reached toward it. In a flash of light, the Keeper collapsed from view. Two winged figures carried the unconscious individual away.*

*["Shartrael Padina."]*

*Padina hesitated, until someone nudged her to step forward. Slowly, she approached, growing larger from the crystal's viewpoint. She stood over the crystal, fear in her eyes, and looked back.*

*["You must try."] A blue-winged woman stepped near, a large shard of the crystal hanging at her chest. ["The Starfire will not hurt those who sincerely wish to understand the truth."]*

*["I understand, but I'm afraid, Keeper Saffir,"] Padina whispered. ["I don't want the trouble it brings."]*

*Saffir's eyes shone with her smile. ["And honor."]*

*["I don't care! I don't want to touch it."]*

*["Please, Padina. The others are waiting."]*

*Padina licked her lips and glanced back at the silent Keepers. ["Let someone else try."]*

*["You would prefer to give someone else a chance?"]*

*["Yes."]*

*["You're next in line and completed your training. It's your turn to be judged."]*

*Padina's eyes glossed with tears. ["I don't want to. I know I'm not worthy."]*

*["Unless you've hidden something from us, I see no reason to consider you unworthy. Is there something you haven't told me?"]*

*["No, Keeper Saffir."]*

*["Then touch the Starfire for judgment."] The gentle but firm command bordered on a tone of demand, but Saffir made no move to reprimand her charge.*

*Padina reached out to the crystal and hesitated. After a few seconds, she closed her eyes and touched it. [You do well to fear us,] voices in unison said, or implied with feelings that translated to words. [But we intend no harm. We wish to understand, and in exchange will share ourselves, so understanding may happen.]*

*Padina lifted the crystal in her hand. Behind her, all others knelt.  
[“Congratulations, Crystal Keeper Shartrael Padina. I had no doubts.”]*

Raea opened her eyes as the marks on hers and Elis's hands faded. Why did the visions always come of her mother and one of the two men in her life? What did they want her to understand?

The second vision needed no interpretation. Her mother never wanted to be a Crystal Keeper, but the Starfire wanted her.

Elis squeezed her hand and let go.

"What happened?" Raea asked.

"They showed you what you needed to know."

"Did you see it?"

His smile answered her question.

"Did you see the other times?"

"No."

"Why this time?" She looked at her hands.

"Through the Starburst marks, the energy can flow, either out as pure energy, or between Keepers."

Okay, put that way it made sense. They acted as conduits for the Starfire's energy. Something else occurred to her. "So, how did you speak to them yesterday if your gloves cover your marks?"

Elis held out his palm and traced the tapering, jagged lines of aquamarine to the last knuckles before his fingertips on the index and middle fingers of each hand. "The gloves don't cover all of it."

"But you weren't touching my hands."

He shrugged. "The energy can still pass through. I couldn't hear them but they must have recognized me. To be honest, I wasn't sure it would work."

They recognized him? That must have been why whenever he touched her, she had visions. Why? Why *him*? What were these beings trying to tell her?

"Continue working with the resonance. Find it and let it go. Learn to turn it on and off." The instant he said it, his marks glowed. They faded to normal a couple seconds later. He made it look easy. "It'll become second nature soon enough. The Starfire wants you to succeed. It needs your protection, Raea. It's all but helpless without us."

"Could've fooled me."

His smile infected her. "If not for the connection to you, the Starfire would be a decorative crystal." He sat up on the bed close to her, but not too close, a thoughtful expression on his face.

[“Our ancestors thought it was just a lifeless rock when it first appeared over six thousand years ago. They discovered it had enormous power potential, and that the energy was unlike anything else. A scientist named Heffin made the connection to another dimension. From their work, the idea for Heffin's Gate was borne. It was a noble idea, generating what humans would call 'wormholes'—holes through the Starfire's home dimension that allow instant travel between two points in our own universe.”]

[“Unfortunately, that much power tends to attract greed. Wars were fought to control it. After a thousand years, Heffin's Gate was to be turned on an opposing city, to send it into the other universe. The Starfire shattered. It broke into the four shards we have today. But, in the process, it sent out a wave of energy that touched all those within Heffin's Gate and blended its energy with their genes. That's how the Keepers came to be. The Starfire refused to be a tool of destruction. It made the Keepers as a way to facilitate communication with our kind, to further its purpose of studying our universe. That's why it grants us its gifts, as it told your mother.”]

Raea stared at him. So much, all at once. All in one day. She could hardly absorb it all.

[“Its power has been sought by many since its discovery. It still is. Twenty-five or six years ago, Shirat Marin was elected governor of Naviketan. She gained a following among the *meistal*, the descendants of Keepers without the Starburst marks. She gave them special privileges in return for their fealty to her. They

became known as the Shirukan, the honored of Shirat. With them, she went after Keepers, and swore to gather every shard of the Starfire to gain full power over Heffin's Gate, which would give her complete power over our world, and others. With it, she could even destroy Earth."

Raea lifted the crystal. Damn. One seemingly insignificant gem could cause an awful lot of trouble. No Earth. No Pallin. ["How many shards does she have?"]

["Two, with my father's."]

The sorrow in his voice pulled at her sympathy. ["I'm sorry."]

He nodded, but his throat flashed with a swallow. ["I wish I had been there to help fight off the Shirukan when they went after my family."]

["Wouldn't you be dead too?"]

He sniffed and a moment later brightened with a faint smile. ["That's what Saffir said when she told me to come here."]

["She's important, isn't she?"]

["The most honored of Crystal Keepers. The shard she bears is the largest. The others turn to her for guidance, because she's the oldest and wisest, and at least one shard has always stayed within our line."]

["That explains the vision with my mother."] Raea dropped the crystal and looked away from him. The pain on his face reminded her too much of what she felt inside. She didn't need to see it on someone else, least of all on Elis. And she was afraid of crying in sympathy. The Shirukan must have been the black-clad figures she had seen in her dreams. They killed her real father and tried to capture her mother.

"You should get back to practicing." Elis stood up and exited the room, the familiar hunch of his somber mood weighing on his shoulders.

Had she said something wrong? Was it the memory of his family? Guilt twisted her stomach. She should have said nothing more. Now, she upset him, just when he was opening up.

She shouldn't have cared, but she did.

Despite feeling bad for him, she stayed behind to practice. He would return...she hoped.

The resonance came quicker each time she found it. Recognizing that pitch inside her made all the difference.

After an hour, she noticed the clock on the stand by his bed and stood up. Her back ached from sitting without support. She'd pay for it the next day. Oh, well. That's what Saturdays were for, besides birthdays.

So, why hadn't Elis returned yet? Where had he gone? She couldn't believe she sat in his room. Weirder still—it no longer creeped her out. After all that day had brought, she actually felt sorry for him, and guilty about her behavior.

She left his room. "Elis?"

"Down here." His voice came from the sitting room.

Raea thumped down the stairs in a hurry and caught herself at the bottom. Whoa. Before she thought to slow down, he met her at the doorway, standing tall once more. "I...ah...should get home." *In case Pallin calls.*

He nodded and stepped past her to the door. "We'll practice tomorrow."

Did she have to? What about Linds's birthday?

"The sooner you control the resonance, the sooner you can fly."

"Awesome! Really?" *Calm down.* Too late. His smile returned—he knew exactly how to tempt her. "I mean, that'd be cool." What would it be like to fly? She couldn't wait to find out.

Raea slipped on her shoes without tying them and hurried out. At the bottom of the steps, she stopped and turned. "Um...Thanks, for everything; and I'm sorry about the rest."

At the open door, he waited, but said nothing. Raea ran through the ice-coated snow to her door and waved.

He peeked out the door. "Sleep well."

Yeah. For once, she just might, now that she understood what her dreams were about.

## Nina Russet

"I still can't believe this hot guy is so into you." Linds sank into her chair, a dreamy glint in her eye. Raea treasured that look. She couldn't believe all this was happening either.

"You're *so* lucky." Jess brushed her hair behind her ear and played with the silver earring dangling there.

"Yeah. Lucky that Josh isn't here to lecture me. Where is he?" Raea looked around the pizzeria. After lunch, they'd head over to The Game Spot for the afternoon. Some indoor mini-golf, maybe some air hockey—Jess owned that game—and a few video games. But that had been Josh's suggestion. Where was he to follow through?

The answer shot to the forefront. She'd been so busy with Pallin and now the Starfire that she had forgotten his big news. "No. He wouldn't."

"Yup. Stood up for some hot shot from his favorite TV show." Linds sat back from the table and folded her arms.

"Not Josh." Raea couldn't believe it, and yet she could.

"He did."

"But you can't blame him," Jess said. "I mean, who wouldn't pass up the chance for fame? And it's not like he isn't known for his Dark Angel obsession."

"True. But you'd think he'd put his friends first." Linds looked out at something and scowled. "I can't believe it."

"What?" Raea twisted in her seat. Josh and a middle-aged woman with wavy bleached-blonde hair—by the dark roots barely showing—and her leather jacket unzipped entered the restaurant. Was that the person he had expected to meet?

"Hey, guys. Sorry I'm late." Josh stopped at their table with the woman, who pushed her red sunglasses up to the top of her head like a headband to hold back the shoulder-length hair. "This is Nina Russet. She's here to check out the Dark Angel stories before the real crew comes." He introduced each of them.

The woman smiled pleasantly and offered to shake each of their hands. When she took Raea's, she stopped and stared at the marks.

Not good. That curious gaze gave Raea chills. Pull her hand away or let it go—Raea battled the urge to avoid questions with the desire to be polite. Nina let go before she could choose.

"I'd like to talk to you later."

"Uh...Sure, I suppose." What did she want? Raea glanced at Josh. What had he told this woman?

He shrugged. Did that mean he didn't understand her unspoken question or that he wouldn't talk about it in front of his guest?

"Actually," Nina said. "I'd like to talk to all of you, if you have some time." Before anyone could object, she pulled up a chair and started asking questions. They answered them, to be nice, but Raea had only to meet the eyes of Jess or Linds to know they shared her feelings—the woman was pushy and out for her story. With questions about their different religious views and how they felt, and whether this Dark Angel might have a hidden agenda that no one was willing to discuss, even Josh looked a bit off.

In the end, Raea was glad to see her leave. She didn't want to discuss her marks. A couple days ago, she could easily have feigned innocence. Now...Now she might slip up and give away the truth.

The truth... Was Elis Dark Angel? If so, why?

She'd ask him later.

In the meantime, she'd enjoy being with her friends. Nothing had changed there. She was still Raea Dahlrich, human at heart.

Yet she wasn't. With her friends, she could forget yesterday ever happened. Or, rather, she could almost forget.

Her world had changed. Why did this woman have to come at that time? Why did the Starfire choose then to force this on her?

At least for an afternoon, her life was normal. Normal for a human. What would her friends think to learn otherwise? That was something she didn't intend for them to find out. If the Shirukan could come to Earth, she certainly didn't want to stand in any spotlight as if waving her arms and yelling, "*I'm here! Come and get me!*"

Yeah, that would help.

She arrived home in time for a visit from Josh and Nina. *Go away.* Oh, how she wanted to say it. But she couldn't. Instead, she let them in the house and introduced them to her family, who sat in front of the TV on the sofa and chairs. Nina took the other free chair before Debbie had a chance to offer it.

Damn, the bitch was rude. Did she just expect everyone would welcome her?

Raea hated her already, and from the expression Josh gave her, he was having second thoughts also.

"Raea. Those marks on your hands. I've seen drawings resembling your hands, usually to depict healing hands, but I never imagined anyone would take it literally. I'm told you always had those marks. Is that true?"

Raea glanced at Debbie. What could she say? Debbie gave a slight shrug. She couldn't say anything without giving away some hint of her secret.

"Yeah. Everyone calls her a freak." Dave smirked as if he couldn't wait to say that.

That little brat. She'd make him pay for that with a lifetime of cold showers.

For a second, Raea touched the resonance inside her. *Not now. Calm down.* She took a deep breath and let it out. She could only hope everyone's attention had been on Dave.

"David Anthony Logan."

*All right, Debbie. Let him have it.* Raea waited for the rest.

"Go to your room."

"But, Mom—"

"Go."

*Yes!*

"But—"

"David!" Mike's snap of his name acted like a whip. His dad didn't usually discipline him, so when Mike spoke, Dave listened.

Dave tromped up to his room, grumbling under his breath about it being unfair and him only speaking the truth.

"So, you were born with those marks on your hands? They're not tattoos?" Nina sat forward, her eyes widening and her full attention on Raea as if the incident with Dave had never happened.

That didn't bother Raea as much as Josh's sudden interest in her hands. Had he seen the marks glow? *Had* they glowed when she accidentally touched the resonance? She hoped not.

"This is fascinating. Have you ever worked any miracles, like healing anyone?"

"No."

"Then have you ever considered studying? I've heard of individuals like you performing miracles, but none have ever come forward. I'd love to learn more about you."

"No, you wouldn't." Raea didn't want the spotlight. Not now. Maybe, before all the stuff with the Starfire, and those wings. But no more.

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Buddy barked once but stayed by Mike. Saved by the door. "I'll get it." Raea jogged across the floor to answer the door. Who would show up at that time—besides Josh and Nina—Pallin? She could only hope.

Her heart leapt at the prospect that he might be there to rescue her.

Despite the fracturing caused by the design in the oval pane of the door, she recognized the tall, dark figure. It wasn't Pallin, but at least she had a good reason to leave. Elis. What perfect timing. She opened the door, and he stepped in from the cold. He didn't give her a chance to warn him *not* to enter. Couldn't he have called first?

Why did his coat bulge?

"Are you ready?"

She hadn't even noticed the time. Her training.

"Elis." Josh sounded surprised.

Oh, no. This couldn't be happening. Raea let out her breath, her shoulders sinking in defeat. *No. Please, let us get out of here without trouble.*

"This must be your boyfriend."

How had the woman reached them so quickly? Oh, man, she was nosy.

Raea's cheeks warmed. "No. No, he's not my boyfriend. Just...ah..." Josh's questioning look raised the temperature of the room. What was she doing with Elis when she was going out with Pallin? She read it all over

his face. If he wasn't there, this would be *so* much easier. "We...are...working on a project together."

"You are?" Josh asked.

Raea gave him a look to shut up.

"Yeah, that one for Mister Maviar's class. That research project." *Take a hint, Josh.*

Josh shook his head. He didn't get it. He could be so dense sometimes. "That was a couple weeks ago."

*Don't be so literal, Josh. I'm struggling here.* Why couldn't he be on her side?

"This is a special project, for college," Elis said. "He's helping us to qualify for more advanced classes."

Impressive. Elis picked up on that quick enough.

Josh nodded, a crooked grin on his face. "Yeah. You two are way too smart. I'm sure you'll save some money and skip a year in your degrees."

"Really? Both of you are intellectually gifted?" Nina asked.

Did the woman have to pick apart *everything* they said?

"We really should be going." Elis looked about as uncomfortable as she felt.

Raea grabbed her shoes and coat. "You're right." She didn't want to stay any longer to be interrogated by the woman.

"They're co-valedictorians."

Raea cringed at Josh's affirmation, glad she had her back to them. Technically, Elis had the equivalent of a college degree already, but no one else knew he had already been educated on a more advanced world.

"While you're here, Elis, I'd like to hear your opinion of this mysterious angel. By the way, I'm Nina Russet of the Xplorer Channel. We're bringing a crew in next week for some on-location filming for our *Miracles and Other Wonders* special on this town's Dark Angel."

"I heard you were coming, but I don't believe in angels," he said.

"Oh, then you deny the reports of a person with black wings rescuing people?"

"No. They saw what they saw."

"Then you think there's a possibility of this person being real?"

"If people who saw your angel think he was real, then to them, he's real." A hint of frustration ground in his voice.

*Good answer.* He was quick on his feet.

Raea hurried to tie her shoes and zip up her coat while Nina questioned Elis. None too soon, she stood ready. "Let's go." She turned back and waved as Elis opened the door. "We gotta get some work done. Sorry to run out on you." As if. She was so, *so* glad to be out of there. "Bye."

The closing of the main door and the storm door cut off her dread. "That woman is annoying."

"Yes, she is." He descended the steps next to her, but he didn't turn to Mrs. Johnson's.

"Where're you going?"

"You wanted to learn to fly, right?"

*Oh, yes!* "Really? But—" She glanced back as they headed out to the field across the street. The snow had melted, exposing stubble and grass. Raea lowered her voice and jogged to keep up with his fast strides. "Won't growing out the wings hurt?"

"Yes."

He could have lied about that. That was one time she wouldn't mind.

"What about my clothes?"

He paused and unzipped his coat. So, that was the reason his coat bulged—he had another tucked inside. "I brought one of mine. Evelyn made some alterations for me."

And he had kept it warm. How thoughtful. "Won't it be a bit big on me? And how will I explain my shirt?"

He zipped his coat back up. "Unless you'd rather not."

"No. That'll be fine. All right. It's not like Debbie doesn't know." She had to learn, right? What was one ripped tee shirt?

One ripped tee shirt she liked. Oh, well. Too late to go back.

His smile warmed through her with her giddiness of the flying prospect, though her fear of heights turned that excitement down a notch. All her life she had wondered what it would be like to fly like a bird, before she knew that her dreams of flying as a child had been real. Now she had that chance.

She took his gloved hand when he offered it and ran alongside him to reach the other side of the hill.

\* \* \*

The girl hid something from her, and the boyfriend helped. Not the boyfriend? Nina doubted that. Something interesting lingered in that girl, and she was determined to find out. "Cute couple."

"Yeah. Weird," Josh said. "She wouldn't talk to him two days ago. I'm surprised she'd work with him. Kinda odd since she's seeing someone else."

"It was a last-minute idea from Mister Maviar," Debbie said from the couch.

"You said both are gifted?" The boy had provided her with a lot of good information about the people in this town. She hadn't even scratched the surface of the story potential. This was why she asked for a few extra days; one never knew what they would find on these assignments.

"Yeah," Josh said. "You'd never have known it when he first came. Elis could barely speak English a year and a half ago. We all thought he was slow at first, but he always pulled the highest grades. He just never talked much. I think that was the most I've ever heard him say, just now." Josh's brow furrowed. "Totally weird."

"You'd never know he was foreign." The young man's English was too perfect for a foreigner. "Where's he from?"

Josh shrugged. "I don't remember if he ever said."

"It doesn't matter." She was there to investigate Raea. She could track down Elis later. Surely the aunt and uncle could tell her more. Why was the young woman in such a hurry to get away? "I was more interested in Raea. Who are her parents?"

"Miss Russet, we don't talk about them." Josh spoke in a somber tone. "See, her mom escaped a war when she was pregnant and came here. She married Scott, Debbie's brother, but they died in a tornado thirteen years ago. Raea survived because she was at a slumber party a few blocks away."

"I'm sorry to hear that." It explained why the girl lived with her aunt and uncle, anyway.

"My brother loved her as his own. I took her in when she was five."

"Did you meet her mother?"

"Padina and I were good friends. In fact, I think I was her closest friend here."

She had struck a nerve. The emotions flowed now. She would have to tread lightly. Most people became defensive if they perceived a threat. They'd close up if that happened and answer no more questions. "Did Raea's mother—Padina—ever perform any healing miracles?"

Debbie clamped her jaw and shook her head. A moment later, she relaxed. "No, but Padina was a loving woman. The only miracle I ever saw was the birth of her baby girl."

The aunt lied. Debbie Logan knew something but refused to share that secret. Did the girl have the healing touch? It would make a bigger story than the elusive angel. She could dig that up later, though. For now, she'd play along. "Babies are miracles, aren't they?"

Debbie smiled at the young boy next to her.

"I see you have a lot of love in your heart, Mrs. Logan...Debbie. But I think I've bothered you enough. Thank you for your time."

"It was a pleasure."

And that pleasure was all Nina's. This town had a few discoveries to be made. She'd have to contact Ted tomorrow.

Nina strode to the door, eager to catch up with Raea. The boy followed but hesitated before stepping out with her.

"Thanks, Mrs. Logan."

"Anytime, Josh."

Outside in the cold North Dakota air, Nina shivered and turned to Josh as he shut the door behind him. "I'd like to talk to Raea tonight yet. Where would they have gone?"

"Oh...here." He hurried down the steps and around a soupy, slushy mess of lawn to the house next door.

How convenient. "Next door?"

"Yeah. The old widow took him in. Now, Mrs. Johnson is someone you should talk to. She never misses church and is always early for the rosaries. She prays for everyone. I'll bet she could tell you about angels."

Interesting. An old Catholic widow with strong religious faith should make for quite the conversation. Even if it wasn't the conversation she wanted right now.

After he knocked, they waited a while for the door to open. While the kid rang the bell, Nina glanced around

and shivered. How long did winter last in that area? Back home it was already pleasantly warm, and what little snow they had was long gone. She would gladly have done this in the summer, but her producer wanted the show to air during Holy Week.

When no one answered after a minute, the kid opened the door a crack. Didn't anyone lock their doors?

"Mrs. Johnson? Hello? Raea? Elis?"

"Yes. Yes. Just a minute, dear."

He stepped back and flashed a smile to Nina.

Soon, a gray-haired old woman hunched over a cane appeared in the doorway and adjusted her white cardigan. A smile lifted her sagging cheeks. "Josh. What can I do for you, dear?"

"Mrs. Johnson, this is Nina Russet of the Xplorer Channel. She's here to gather information for the Dark Angel special of *Miracles and Other Wonders*."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Johnson."

"Evelyn, dear."

An old woman boarding a lone man who escaped from a foreign country at war. Wow! She *had* only scratched the surface of stories in this town. "It's my pleasure, Evelyn. I'd like to ask you a few questions about angels, but right now I'm more interested in speaking with Raea. Can I come in?"

"She's not here. I'm surprised you didn't catch her already."

Not there? Now she knew the girl was hiding something, and mister tall, dark, and non-boyfriend boyfriend helped her. None of their stories matched. "Do you know where they might have gone?"

"Out walking, probably. You'd be better off coming back after church in the morning."

"I'd love to sit down and chat with you."

Evelyn smiled. "I'll look forward to it. I'm sorry I couldn't help you more."

"Thanks, Mrs. Johnson," Josh said.

"Okay. Good night, dear." She shut the door.

"Sorry, Miss Russet. I don't know what to say. I thought I knew Raea better. I have no idea what's going on."

"That's okay. You gave me a lot of good leads, Josh. I have some thinking to do tonight, but I'll call you tomorrow if I have any more questions." She almost felt sorry for the kid. From all he had said, Raea was one of his best friends. Tough breaks that she lied to him to hide whatever it was Nina intended to find.



## First Flight

Elis stood before her with black wings.

Raea stared, hardly believing what her eyes told her. "You *are* the 'angel' everyone's talking about."

"Yes."

"You found the little girl in the cornfield and pulled that woman from her burning home and helped that kid who crashed his motorcycle on the gravel road."

His smile in the moonlight shone with amusement. "You sound surprised."

"I am. But after yesterday, I kind of expected it. But to see you like this. It's...What's the word..." The right word didn't exist, at least not in her shock-fuzzed brain. "I'm just...That was *you*."

"I was out flying at night to avoid being seen clearly. I didn't plan to do anything." He paused and his voice dropped. "There are certain responsibilities Keepers bear. Our job is to help anyone in need."

"How do you avoid being recognized?"

"Another time. Tonight, we fly."

Excitement raced through her, along with trepidation. Again the pain. Did she want to go through that? The resounding answer was "Yes." Otherwise she wouldn't have changed coats. His hung on her like a gunny sack, but it had a faint musky/outdoors scent she would forever associate as him. She offered her hands, wishing it didn't have to be like this but anxious for the end result. "Get it over with."

"You could try yourself." He pulled off his gloves, in spite of his suggestion.

"No. I'm not ready." She could hardly tolerate the pain when she wasn't in control. How would she manage the pain *and* focusing on the resonance? Raea put her hands to his.

"All right." The warmth of the resonance passed from his hands through her and concentrated on her back. It hurt. She clenched her teeth on the scream fighting to tear out of her. Now was not the time to attract unwanted attention. The pain! How did he do it?

It ended when she thought she couldn't take it anymore. She adjusted her posture with the weight. How did he stand upright?

["Start with simple movements. Stretch and flex."]

Yeah, simple. Right. Raea had to use all her concentration to make anything happen, like in her room yesterday. She could do it, but the movements were uncoordinated.

["Good. I might think you've flown before."]

["I think I did."] Raea paused as the vision from yesterday returned, along with memories from before it. She remembered woods, the smell of pine on a gentle breeze around her. The flapping of wings...

*["You can't catch me."] Her mother's giggle came from above.*

*Raea laughed and flapped furiously to catch up to the woman with brown and white wings gliding away from her. Panic swept through her as the woman drew further away. ["Momma. Back. My want. My want momma."] Tears stung Raea's eyes. She grew tired from flapping her wings and couldn't catch up. Her mother would leave her.*

*Padina turned sharply and dove for her, sweeping her into the comfort of her arms to soothe her tears. ["Sssh. I'm here, my darling. It's all right. Oh, Raea. I wouldn't leave you."] The flap of giant wings faded as they lowered to the ground, to Scott waiting.*

The memories wrapped her heart in grief and squeezed as if to wring out her tears. Her mother had left her a couple years later. ["Yeah, I did, before she hid my wings. I thought it was a dream."]

["Do you remember how?"]

Something in her remembered. She swallowed her grief. Damned be the memories that never faded. The Starfire didn't help that matter.

Arching the wings up and straightening them to push down lifted her feet from the ground a few inches. She touched down again a second later. That was easier than she expected.

["Excellent."]

His smile filled her with confidence and chased away the grief.

It didn't take long for her to gain altitude. Elis flew close beside her and insisted on going high above to avoid attention. Avoiding attention she agreed with. The altitude she could do without. But the rush of the wind chased away her hesitations. They flew over the countryside, practicing gliding and diving. The feeling of complete freedom rushed through her, clearing out any lingering acrophobia. They flew over slushy fields and around the naked shelterbelts of farmsteads. She didn't want to quit, but the fatigue of her muscles forced her to end the night's session after less than an hour.

Elis landed near her. ["You did great."]

["Let's just hope no one saw that last dive."] When she lost the air currents and tumbled a few seconds before regaining her bearings. She swore her heart had stopped.

["It happens to practiced fliers. The winds can change unexpectedly."]

["Yeah?"] He just said that to make her feel better. It worked. She stretched her wings to loosen the ache of her back. She was going to be sore tomorrow. ["What's that smile for?"] She felt the warmth rising inside her. Why couldn't he look away? Like playing chicken, she didn't want to give up, but self-consciousness made her give first.

["Tomorrow night?"]

["Yes!"] *Don't sound so excited.* It was only Elis. ["I mean, if the weather's good."]

His marks glowed and the black wings shrank to nothing. He made it look easy, or less painful. Either way, those wings disappeared without him showing much for it.

["Ready?"]

She hated this part. ["Do it."] *Get it over with.*

He took her hands and helped her through the transformation. It hurt no less than before, but now she knew what to expect.

Afterwards, she breathed deeply and the pain faded.

Her coat hung on the fence post where she had left it. Swapping was another story. It had chilled in the winter air.

["Find the resonance. Let it warm you."] He pulled his fingerless, black gloves on, hiding the Starburst marks again.

Good idea. Her Starburst marks glowed for the few seconds it took to generate extra warmth. ["Wow. This is useful."]

["Be careful. Too much energy built up is dangerous. You'll learn to release it, though, and control what you need."]

["Oh? What can you do with it?"]

["Almost anything you can imagine. It's pure energy, Raea. That's what the Starfire entities are."]

What had Miss Russet said about healing hands? ["Can it be used to heal?"]

["That's actually one of the reasons Keepers are called on most often."]

["Really? That Nina Russet said the marks on my hands remind her of some primitive art about healing hands."]

Elis shrugged. ["I wouldn't doubt it. Keepers have been coming to Earth for thousands of years. We've been deified by many cultures...Angels?"]

["Yeah. That. All right, Mister 'Dark Angel'—"]

His laugh was exactly what she expected from her joke, from any of her friends. Coming from him was strange. He never laughed at school. She liked it on him. "Let's get home. I'm tired and sore. But promise me you'll teach me how to heal?"

"In time, you'll learn everything. With the help of the Starfire, you'll probably pass my knowledge."

Right. As if that could happen.

On the walk home, she thought back to every nuance of flying and what she had learned. The last two days were better than anything she could remember, except for her mother. Memories hurt. Now, the only thing that would make it totally better would be to see Pallin again. The phone was hers tonight.

\* \* \*

Raea frowned at the pillow of gray overhead. Great. More snow. That's all she needed on a Sunday afternoon with Pallin. At least she was with Pallin now.

And for now, she had some time away from Josh and—Ugh—Nina Russet. That woman grated on her

nerves.

*Don't think of her. She's not here.* Unfortunately, she could swoop in at any second and question her. Not what Raea needed while out walking with Pallin. What would he think?

What *did* he think? He hadn't said a word about her hands, but he also made no move to touch them. Unlike every single other person she had ever met, he acted as if he saw nothing. Maybe he was just being polite. That had to be it.

He had met her at the school, arriving by shuttle from the hotel. Debbie insisted she stick to the neighborhood, especially since Raea walked. Her back ached from last night, but not enough to keep her from seeing Pallin again. Monday would have been too long to wait.

"You like new coat?" Pallin glanced down at the black and gray nylon coat. "It is keeping me much warm."

She adored that accent and the flaws in his English. "It's very nice on you."

"Hmm...We walk in cold. I being not used to cold." He shivered.

"It's a chance to talk. How long are you staying?"

"A couple weeks."

"Oh." That's all? Why couldn't he stay to the end of the year? Graduation was only two months away, if that. "Then you'll go somewhere else and forget about me."

"No. Not to be forgetting."

Not forgetting her? But what *would* happen? "Sure you will. You'll go to a new school, make new friends..."

"No. Not like here. Not like you." His smile made her knees weaken. She had to walk to stay on her feet.

"So, what did you do yesterday?" Did he meet anyone else? Was she only one girl of many he intended to see? *No. Don't think that way.* Besides, she would have heard rumors at school.

"I do homework at hotel...and think."

"About what?"

"About you, about other night."

He thought about her. Raea bit her lip to keep from squealing with glee.

"I wonder if not to be talking to you."

"Why?" There went her excitement like a lead brick in her gut.

"Other man say not to be seeing you?"

"Other man?"

"Special friend man."

"But I don't..." Elis wouldn't. He *couldn't*. "Know anyone."

Would he? No. He couldn't have. Why would he interfere? Why would he confront Pallin? The answer was simple—he was there to protect her. It made sense now. But she had to be sure. For all she knew, it could have been Josh. That's something he would do. Maybe. But Josh knew how much she liked Pallin, and Josh liked Pallin. It had to be Elis.

"Did he have sort of messy black hair that hung over dark eyes? Kind of on the tall, lean side?" Anger bit at the edge of her voice. Elis—no one—had any right interfering in her relationships.

"Yes. This is friend?"

"No."

Pallin's lips curved up into a smirk. "Then I should listening not of him?"

"No. It's *my* life." She would have a strict talk with Elis later about the boundaries he couldn't cross, this being one of them. "What did he say?"

"Not to hurting you. He watching will me."

"Oh. He will, will he?" She glanced behind. No one. *Was* Elis watching her with Pallin? She so wanted to catch him and give him a piece of her mind then and there.

No one was out. Well, there was that. She had her privacy for now.

"Something is not right?"

"No. Sorry. I'm a little pissed right now at him. That's all."

"I am glad not to being with not free girl. He is being not with you in school. This is good."

"Oh, I'm free...free to choose my own friends. He's not one of them, not like you think."

"Then I can be enjoying time."

"Yes, you can. Let's enjoy the time we have." And she would take out her fury later.

The late morning passed quickly. While Raea would have liked to invite Pallin for lunch, she didn't want anyone bothering him yet. She wasn't ready for him to meet her family, especially Dave. Pallin excused himself, saying he had a lot of work to finish before night anyway, which she could understand since he was playing catch up while there.

Raea walked home alone and scowled at the yellow house next door, as if she could burn Elis with her thoughts. It had been him. But he wouldn't get away with this insult. Just because she needed him to teach her how to control the Starfire didn't mean she had to like him.

Whose white car sat out front? She'd never...She *had* seen it before. Last night.

The sticker on it displayed the logo of a rental company. It was a borrowed car.

Oh, no. Not now. Which house were they in? Nina Russet would not corner her again. Raea's best bet to avoid her lay in heading straight to Evelyn's. But that thought sparked her anger. Elis would be there. Right now she was in no mood to be reasonable.

She had no choice. She hated Miss Russet more.

*Dammit, Elis.* Why did he have to go and try to scare off Pallin? He had a lot of explaining to do.

She marched up the steps. Before she lifted her hand to knock, he opened the door.

"You were watching me."

"Get in."

She hated the situation, but stepped inside quickly. He shut the door behind her.

"You bastard." The smack of her palm against his cheek gave her some satisfaction. The bewilderment on his face added to it. That felt good. "How dare you tell Pallin to stay away from me!"

"I was trying to protect you."

"Don't." *And don't give me that hurt look.*

With his left cheek reddening, he left her for the sitting room. He wasn't getting away from her that easily. She wanted an explanation; and—by God—she was going to get it. "What makes you think I need protecting?"

"Debbie." Elis sat down on the couch in front of the television.

Debbie? What did she have to do with this? Raea waited for him to explain.

"She asked me to make sure you were all right." He spoke in a calm voice, free of any anger.

Why couldn't he argue with her? *Damn it, Elis.* Why did he have to be calm about this? It cooled the anger she wanted to feel. She hated that.

"She was worried, and so was I." The look on his face begged forgiveness. Raea fought to keep her anger. "But I watched him and...there's something...I'm not sure yet."

"What? What don't you like about him?"

"I think he may be Shirukan."

"What?" Had he landed on his head? What was he thinking? "He's foreign, not alien."

"You don't know that. The Shirukan have Starfire in their genes but no Starburst marks on their hands. He acted like he didn't know what I was saying when I spoke Inari, but his accent is too much like mine was."

Pallin, Shirukan? No. Elis was paranoid. That's all it was. He had no proof.

"And his black coat...The style is like the uniform of the Shirukan."

At that, she wrapped her arms around herself and left the room. Her dreams with the black-clad figures chasing her parents—she never had a close look at their uniforms. Pallin had worn black, but so did Elis most of the time.

Hell, no. Elis was totally wrong. Pallin wasn't Shirukan. Raea couldn't believe it. It was all coincidence—*fashion* coincidence. She marched back into the sitting room to face him. "I don't want to hear any more about him. I'll see him when I want. It's *my* life, Elis. Your job is to teach me how to use the Starfire, not to run my life."

That quiet look of concern. Was that his answer to everything? She *hated* that. It made her feel guilty. "And stop giving me that look."

Had Miss Russet left her house yet? She couldn't sit here forever with Elis and Evelyn. She needed distance to stay mad. In his calm presence, she couldn't stay angry like she wanted, adding insult to injury.

She peeked out the front window. The car was still there. Why was her quiet life turning upside down now?

"You could use this time to practice," Elis said.

"Yeah. Okay." She gave a low growl in concession and started up the stairs.

"I am sorry."

She halted. "Shut up." Why did he have to be so nice about it? She wished she could go back to thinking he was creepy and stay pissed at him, but she couldn't. He wasn't creepy, just shy, maybe, and a little annoying. Or was his patient, soft-spoken manner getting to her? She did have fun last night.

Oh, no. She was *not* liking him. This was all the Starfire's fault. She wished her mother had never passed it on to her, or that it had rejected her. "Forget it. It's over. Don't talk about it anymore."

When he said nothing, she hurried up the stairs to his room. His room. Why couldn't she do this in her room?

That damned Nina Russet. That's why.

Why did the woman have to bother her? That's whose fault this situation was. Raea couldn't wait for the woman to go home. But what about the film crew she would bring back? They'd never have any peace, not for a while, anyway.

In some way this was Elis's fault too. He had played hero and caused the reports that brought attention here. Damn them both.

In her session with Elis, the resonance came easier, almost without thought. Letting it go took more effort. It warmed through her and each time grew warmer, until she couldn't quit sweating.

"Dinner's ready," Evelyn called up the stairs.

None too soon. Raea's stomach gurgled at the thought of food, especially Evelyn's cooking. When did she start thinking of Mrs. Johnson by her first name? She could blame that on Elis too. Too bad she couldn't blame him for Pallin leaving in a couple weeks.

"A good place to end. You're gonna burn yourself out if you keep trying too hard."

"Fine. Then I quit." She didn't want any of this. She wanted a normal life. Now she knew why Debbie hadn't told her.

She wanted food and shoved past Elis.

He caught her hand, stopping her at the door. How dare he—

"You're doing far better than I expected."

Damn, him. She hated him because she couldn't stay mad. She yanked her hand from his and hurried down the stairs. Not fast enough. She felt the blush warming her cheeks. How did he do that? It's like he knew exactly how to reach inside her emotions and make her feel better, which embarrassed her because of who he was.

"I mean it. You're months ahead of many Keepers." His steps thumped quickly behind her. "Raea?"

She turned and shoved him away. "Damn it, Elis. Life was so much easier when I could avoid you. But you have to be like...*nice*. I can't stay mad at you, and that's why I'm mad." He better not take that the wrong way. "But you're not off the hook about Pallin."

"I don't like him."

"Shut up. Just...stay away from him." She had to end this. Besides, it was time to eat. The scent from the dining room rushed her down the last few stairs.

"Come and eat, dear."

Once again, Evelyn had outdone herself. The old woman had set out a full course meal. How did she do it? "I could never eat that much."

"You need some meat on those bones, dear. Sit down and eat."

Why did old women always say that? All that food looked divine. Raea took a seat near Evelyn. She had made enough to feed a few Daves. But Raea wasn't like her cousin. Then again, maybe this time she could be.

Sometime during the meal, she glanced out at a wall of white. Yay! If it snowed hard enough school would be cancelled. But so would any chance to see Pallin—boo. School or Pallin? Pallin or school? The worst choice in the world. But maybe that Miss Russet would be stuck at her hotel. Okay, then Raea chose school canceling.

When the phone rang, Evelyn started to get up.

"I'll get it." Elis jumped up before the old woman could fully stand. She smiled and settled back onto her chair. "Hello? Hi, Debbie...Yes, she's here...Don't worry...No, we just sat down to eat after another lesson...I'll let her know...Bye."

He hung up the phone. "Nina Russet was there. She left a little while ago, after questioning Debbie about you and your mother."

"Did Debbie say anything?" What would her aunt say about her? Debbie had kept her secret for over

eighteen years. Raea doubted she'd give it out now. Still...What if she slipped and let out a hint of the truth? Nina Russet was sharp.

"No. She said she'll tell you when you get home. I heard Dave shouting in the background. She hasn't told any of them."

Good. Then Debbie must have said nothing. Her cousins didn't know. But Raea wanted to know what Miss Russet was asking this time. Until the woman left town with her story about Dark Angel, Raea expected nothing less than trouble.

## Dark Suspicions

"Ted." Nina leaned back at the head of the queen bed with her cell phone to her ear. And to think she had expected that hole of a town to have no cell service. Shame on her. The place didn't have much going for it, though, other than the stories she had dug up over the weekend. Now she was stuck in the hotel with a white-out of a blizzard beyond her window. This was supposed to be spring. Where was the sunshine and rain? Why snow?

At least she could check in with Ted.

"Good to hear from you, Nina. How's the story coming?"

"I'm glad you asked. It seems this town has some interesting people. I haven't seen much—okay, nothing—of any Dark Angel yet, but I've met others worth a segment unto themselves."

"But the show is a two-hour special, Nina, completely focused on angels. We need all you can dig up on this town's angel."

"You'll get it, Ted. I promise. I met that kid the priest told us about. He's been escorting me, introducing people. Met some interesting ones. But best of all, one of his friends has some bizarre marks on her hands. I swear they match the images we found in the making of that ancient rituals episode. I've never seen anything like them anywhere else. But she won't talk about it."

"Will anyone else?"

"Somewhat. I think the aunt knows something, but she's not saying much."

"See what you can find out. But focus on the *angel*, Nina. See what you can find out about *him*. Don't get sidetracked right now. We're on a deadline and a *budget*. Bad enough you're taking more than a week. Contact the people who encountered him. Get their stories. The crew will arrive at the end of the week. I want you to work with them; sit out and try to catch a glimpse of this angel. I want video. Concrete proof. You'll have less than week with them. And I want interviews with the witnesses. Visit the sites where the encounters happened. Take measurements. Everything. Remember that you're there to find *proof*."

"I know. I'll get it done."

"Good. I have faith in you, Nina. But I can't chat. I have a meeting in five. Gotta go."

He clicked off before she could get a word in. Typical Theodore Feuerstein. Always busy. Always meetings, meetings, meetings.

Wasn't it early for a meeting?

Ah, no. He was an hour ahead of her.

No wonder she was hungry. She hadn't eaten yet and it was almost nine her time. The hotel had a complimentary continental breakfast downstairs. She could take advantage of that. And, since she was stuck inside for the day, or more, she could make phone calls. Josh would have the information she needed to contact the witnesses. She couldn't meet any in person for a day or two, but she could make appointments. The day wasn't a total loss.

Her stomach grumbled. "Yes. Yes. I'm going." She slipped on her shoes and headed down the stairs, past the indoor pool and hot tub—there was another way to waste the day—and into the lobby.

It was busy already with guests. Funny; she hadn't expected the hotel would be that full.

Two of the three round tables in the lobby were full. The third had a couple of people with chairs between them. What was it with people and personal space? Why couldn't they just sit close and chat? She could never understand that.

She grabbed a bagel and a cup of coffee and took a seat. Being alone without someone to talk to wasn't her style. She always thought if she ended up overseas and was captured by some extremist faction, all they had to do to torture her was to ignore her.

A television played one of the all day news stations. No one paid any attention to it, probably because it was turned down too low to hear over the idle chatter of other guests.

"Mind if I sit here?"

The handsome young man nearest her shook his head of shoulder-length blonde hair. He looked like someone who belonged on the beach ready to surf but he was a long ways from warm sand, something she would have died for right then. "You may. It is not claimed."

"Thanks. Interesting accent. You're quite a ways from home."

"Yes. Much distance." He grinned, his amber eyes sparkling. Maybe being stuck in the hotel all day wasn't such a bad option.

"What brought you here?" She grabbed a packet of jelly from the bowl in the center of the table and smeared it on the bagel.

"I doing...important business."

"Yeah, sitting around watching the snow fly. There's important business." A few packets of sugar in her coffee ought to be enough. "Really, though. What's so special about this town?"

"I cannot be telling."

"Can't tell...Hmm...I suppose it's some secret military operation."

He turned away and sipped his orange juice. Curious. She had hit a bit close to the mark with her flippant comment. Now she had to pursue it. Her insatiable curiosity wouldn't let her quit until she had an answer.

"So, anyway, I'm Nina, from the Xplorer Channel." She wiped her crumbly hand on her jogging pants and offered it.

He shook her hand. "Pleased to meeting you. I am being called Pallin."

"Nice to meet you, Pallin. I've only been here a few days. How long have you been in town?"

"Not many days."

"How long will you be here?" In other words, how long did she have to enjoy seeing that handsome face?

He leaned towards her. "Many days more."

Behind the coffee mug she lifted to her lips, a smile formed. This could be interesting. Indeed, this town had more to offer her than she had given it credit. "What do you like to do for fun, Pallin?"

His suggestive smile sent a tingle of anticipation through her.

\* \* \*

Time to quit. If Elis was right, Raea couldn't keep this up without hurting herself. And she was way too hot. She needed a break, or she needed Elis to help her with whatever came next.

What did come next? He hadn't said. Whatever the next step was, she needed him to show her.

She hated relying on him. Having him interfere in her life like he did with Pallin was unacceptable. So what if he was her connection to what she really was? He had no right—*none*—to confront Pallin.

Maybe she could call Pallin again. She hadn't been able to reach him yesterday after their walk. Either he was too busy or he had left town. No. Not the latter. He would have told her.

Raea grabbed the phone downstairs and took it up to her room. She might have a handset in her room, but this way Dave couldn't listen in. It wouldn't matter. The brat didn't notice with his eyes glued to the game he played.

She dialed the hotel and waited on hold for them to ring his room.

"Sorry, no one's answering."

Where was he, or his family? Obviously they hadn't checked out. What else could he be doing on a day like this, snowed in at his hotel? Wasn't he interested in her? Why wouldn't he call if he was? "Thanks, anyway." She clicked off and laid back on her bed, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. This couldn't be a good sign.

What were Jess and Linds doing? What about Josh? Without Nina Russet, he was probably bored. But he hadn't looked like he exactly enjoyed escorting her. Raea had avoided confronting her yesterday by staying at Evelyn's. Unfortunately, Miss Russet had shown up after lunch to ask Evelyn about angels. Raea hid in Elis's room, bored out of her skull for a couple hours while the woman spoke with Evelyn and Elis. Then again, not totally bored. The Starfire entertained her with more visions of her mother's life before Earth.

*Just call. Josh deserves that much.* She hadn't meant to duck out with Elis and lie about it. Josh probably felt betrayed. She would too.

Great. Now she hated herself.

She dialed his number and waited. When his youngest sister answered, Raea asked for him. Tess shouted into the phone for him. *Thanks. I needed a hearing check.*

Josh picked up in seconds. "Raea. I thought you'd be working on your 'special' project."

Ouch. Okay, she deserved the lash of his tongue. "I'm sorry, Josh. I had to say something to get out of there. You have no idea how annoying that woman is. Like some vampire needing innocent blood."



Was that a sigh she heard over the phone?

"I know. I didn't realize she'd turn into such a pest for you. What's goin' on with you and Elis, though? I thought you couldn't stand him?"

He had to ask. She couldn't tell him the truth. She wasn't ready. What *could* she tell him?

"Debbie said he came from the same..." She couldn't say "world". That would give it away. Ah, yes. There was one word that fit. "The same land as my mom. He's kind of, like, showing me things from there. It's cool. He's actually pretty nice."

"That's great. See? I told you not to judge people. So, it's not a project for Mister Maviar?"

"No, but I didn't want your Miss Russet digging her claws deeper into my business."

"Sorry. Really. I didn't know she'd be like that. Honest. But I wish you could have told me sooner."

"It's not like I was expecting him to pop over like that. He kinda took me by surprise, and with her here...Not a good situation. I couldn't think of anything else."

"But when did this start?"

"Friday. I understood something he said, in his first language." Not the truthful answer to his question but part of it. Good enough for her to pass it off; she was a terrible liar. If Josh found out the full truth, he'd flip. And with him close to Nina Russet, her quiet life would turn into a circus. Raea didn't want any attention, or at least not that kind. From what she understood, Elis didn't want it either.

"So, your mom came from the same country he did? And you know the language?"

"Yeah. It's kinda like a big ice-breaker. You know?"

"No, but I can imagine. What's Pallin think?"

"He doesn't know. It's not his business." He wouldn't even be around much longer. Time to change the subject, sort of. "So...How's the Dark Angel research going?" She cringed. Oh, to be able to tell him how close he was.

His voice rang with a note of relief as he went into details about his introducing Nina Russet to a few people and their opinions on the sightings and unexplained healings. Unfortunately, that led to Miss Russet's comments about Raea's hands. Josh apologized again and jumped into mundane topics, like the snow.

In the end, Raea hung up the phone satisfied. She could always count on Josh to be reasonable, except for the truth in this case.

She checked the clock—almost lunch time. Ugh. She despised snow days. Dave shouted at his game downstairs, his curses reaching her through the door. Little Eric probably sat next to him, absorbing all his bad habits. Debbie read and Mike worked from home via the internet.

*I hate this. This house is a cage.* She wanted to go out flying again. That meant Elis.

She needed him. *No, I don't.*

But she couldn't progress with the Starfire. *Maybe they'll help.*

They hadn't reached that point. *I haven't tried. What can I do?*

It would be so much easier with his help. *Damn it.*

She had the phone. *Call already.* He was probably waiting for her.

The phone rang before she realized she had dialed. Why'd she do that?

"Hello?" he said.

She had to say something. "Uh...Hi. I need some help."

"How far did you get?"

"I get too hot."

"You need to release the energy. I can show you. You're welcome here anytime. Evelyn's words."

Yeah. She could imagine Mrs. Johnson saying that. In fact, she probably had at some point, and Raea had forgotten. But Raea didn't want to go out in that snow. On the other hand, having him there would incite Dave's taunting. The brat had already done that, though. *School's gonna suck tomorrow.* She could just imagine Chad. No. She did *not* want to imagine what Chad would say. Worse, what Pallin would say, which made her cringe.

*Why me?*

*Oh, hell. The damage is done. Elis did that last night.* No getting out of it now. Elis might as well show up there again. At least she could avoid the snow.

"Just come over here, if you really want to help me."

There. She said it.

"Give me a few minutes."

Why couldn't he refuse? "All right. See ya in a few."

"Bye."

She clicked off the phone. Well, he was coming. No use denying it to the others. *Might as well get this over with.* Besides, she had to take the phone back to charge.

Raea made her way to the main floor, passing Debbie with the newspaper at the dinner table. Wait—newspaper? "Don't tell me the paper boy delivered in this mess."

"No. Of course not. I didn't get a chance to read yesterday's," Debbie said.

That made sense.

The paper rustled as Raea set the phone on the charger. "So, you decided to come down?"

"It's only temporary. Elis is coming over." Hopefully Dave was too busy to have heard.

"I see. Then I should expect an extra mouth for lunch?"

Raea grimaced. She hadn't thought of the time. "Sorry."

"Not a problem. Don't worry. I'm just happy that the three of us can talk now."

There was that. "Yeah. About talking. Why did you ask Elis to snoop for you?"

Debbie frowned and folded the section of the paper she read. "He told you?"

"Yes, but Pallin told me first."

"Pallin? How did he know?"

"Elis confronted him."

Debbie opened another section of the paper. "Well, what's done is done. I'm sorry, but I can't let you be alone. Who knows what he might do to you?"

"I'm eighteen. Can't I live my own life?" Raea growled and hurried away to the front door. Just in time. A dark shape materialized from the white blur, and she opened the door, sweeping aside a bank of snow in the process. "Come in." She snapped the words in her frustration. The two of them—Debbie and him—tried to run her life. Three, if one counted the Starfire.

Elis stepped in and stopped on the door mat, where a pile of snow fell off his lower legs. The white stuff on his head and shoulders quickly melted to leave glistening drops weighing down the thick, black mess. ["We never see this at home. This is why the others all live in milder climates."]

["Others? Here? I mean, on Earth?"]

He nodded and pulled off his winter gloves, leaving the usual gloves on, which he wore underneath. ["They came by ship six years ago, I believe it was."]

["Why?"]

"Hey. What's with the —" Dave's game went silent. "Woo. Couldn't wait to see him again, Raea?"

"Shut up, Dave."

"You *are* seeing Elis. Wait 'til everyone hears about this. *And Pallin.* Holy shit!"

"David!"

He cringed at Debbie's scolding and returned to his game, mumbling about Raea and Pallin *and* Elis.

*No.* Raea smacked her hand to her face. Why did this have to happen to her? She knew Dave would torture her, but that didn't make it any more tolerable.

["He's like a little brother."]

Huh? The smile on Elis's face washed away some of her embarrassment. Did he understand?

["He'll grow out of it."]

She hoped so, and the sooner, the better.

Elis finished brushing the snow off his jeans and left his shoes to thaw on the mat.

["Up stairs. First door on the left,"] she said. The sooner they escaped to the privacy of her room, the sooner she could close out any taunting by Dave.

"Hi, Elis." Debbie looked up from her paper. "Oh, Raea, can you babysit Thursday evening for a couple hours?"

"Yeah, I suppose. Why?"

"The wake is that day. I want to go see how Sheri's doing. She's been out all week making funeral arrangements."

"Okay." Ryan Lake's parents. Raea remembered him—three years older, tall and lanky, bad acne, but nice to

everyone. A shame it had to be his parents. "Did they figure out who killed them?"

"Nothing yet. According to Sheri, there were no bullets, just holes burned in their chests. She said it looked like something from a science fiction movie."

"Were there feathers?"

*What?* Raea turned to Elis. No. He couldn't be thinking what she thought he was thinking. Why couldn't he let it go?

The hard line of his mouth said he was serious.

"She didn't say. There isn't anything in the paper either."

["You don't still think Pallin is Shirukan. Do you?"]

["Very much."]

["He's not. I'll bet on it. In fact, I'll prove it."]

["If not him, someone else is."]

Her insides went cold. ["Let's go practice."] If he was right, she'd never be ready to protect the Starfire. Now she really didn't want any attention from Miss Russet.

What if he was wrong? What if it was someone else? She hoped he was wrong, but something inside her felt that he might be right.

## Angels Rising

It didn't happen in the morning, but Raea dreaded the day progressing. By lunchtime Tuesday, she wanted to hide, from Pallin too. She was going to kill Dave.

Passing Chad and his on and off girlfriend, Brittany, was torture. The mocking started by them was picked up by others around them. Everyone else turned to stare as she walked by with her tray in the lunch room. *Oh, God. Just kill me and get it over with.*

"Ignore them, Raea," Linds said from behind.

Easy for her to say. She wasn't the subject of humiliation.

A group of students vacated a table. She aimed straight for it. *Sit down and hide.* Embarrassment warmed through her. Or was it? A quick glance at her hands relieved her. No loss of control there. Thank goodness. What a pain it was to have to worry about displaying her special talents. Her whole world had changed in one weekend, one very *busy* weekend.

"Don't worry about it." Josh sat between her and Linds.

"Yeah," Jess said from her other side. "But what *is* going on with you two?"

"Nothing. I don't want to talk about it."

"Actually, it's pretty cool," Josh said.

"What is?"

"*Nothing.*" *Don't say another word. Everyone's listening.* Well, not everyone, but it felt like the whole cafeteria listened.

"But you have someone who can teach you about your mom's life—her culture—before she came here. What a way to get to know her."

"Through Elis? You've *got* to be kidding." Linds looked from Josh to Raea. "You are kidding...right?"

If Josh had kept his mouth shut... Too late. "No. He's from the same land as my mom."

"Shut up. Are you serious?"

"Yes, Jess." Raea sighed, picking at the food on her plate since her appetite had waned. *God, please don't let Pallin see me.*

"Wow. Who'dathunk?" Linds said.

"I know. It's weird, but..." *But what?* Her life was so different, she couldn't begin to describe it to them. Elis was nothing like what she had expected. In fact, he was the total opposite, and he was the town's Dark Angel, the hero in hiding. That was pretty cool. But the mystery had been interesting.

"Well?"

"Um...Just, he can be kind of...maybe...nice. I wouldn't have thought. He's just shy." Oh, no. Why did she just say that? She sounded like—

"You make it sound like you do like him," Linds said.

"I do not." Three days and a lot of time learning from someone didn't make them more than friends. "I like Pallin."

"Okay, this is too weird," Jess said.

"Can we talk about someone else? Anything? Maybe Josh's weekend?" There. That should shift the balance, and maybe her appetite would come back.

"Yeah. What happened with the lady from your favorite show?" Linds sounded more than a little upset.

"She's not what I expected." Josh dropped his eyes and picked at his food. "Once she saw Raea's hands, that's all she wanted to know about."

They turned to Raea. "Why?"

"She thinks Raea has the power to heal." He said it like he wanted an answer from her.

"No, I can't. End of story." *Move on.*

Silence circled over them like a vulture as they ate their lunch.

After a few minutes, Jess swallowed her last bite of sandwich. "So, Raea. How'd it go with Pallin?"

She should have known Jess would ask. At least that topic she didn't feel the need to shy from. Raea told them about her dinner and their walk and the awkwardness of meeting him outside of school. "I haven't been able to talk to him this morning since Dave opened his big mouth."

"I'm sorry. Maybe you'll have your chance." Jess motioned with her chin towards the front of the cafeteria.

So much for her appetite. Raea forced a smile when Pallin looked at her, but he didn't return it. Great. What did he think of this mess? Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if Elis was right. Defiance rose up like a cornered beast. No. Elis had to be wrong. He just had to be. Pallin was not a threat to her. Elis was jealous.

Yet he sat a couple tables away eating quietly as if nothing were amiss. God, she hated him. He might have seriously screwed up her chances of a normal relationship with a very hot guy.

Conversation shifted, but Raea knew her friends didn't look at her the same. They wondered about her and Elis—she saw it in their eyes.

Pallin joined them, but sat opposite her, not in the empty chair next to her. A bad feeling gnawed in the pit of her stomach. "Hi, Pallin."

Her friends said nothing. *Speak up. Someone help me here.*

"We must be talking. I hear...things."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's my stupid cousin. He totally twists everything to make fun of me."

"Is this true you work with him?" Pallin pointed to Elis, who peered aside at them through the black strands in his face.

"Only work. That's all. We're not...you know...a couple or anything. I'm not two-timing you. There's no way I'd ever be interested in him like that."

"This is good to hear. I would not like that."

"I can't blame you," she mumbled, picking at her food with her fork.

"We should like time together?"

What? She looked up. Had he just asked for another date? "Sure. Yes. I'd like that."

"I also. I will call later, but have much work."

"I'm looking forward to it."

He smiled, but something dark passed across his face. He looked down and the moment passed. Had she seen it? Impossible. She had imagined it.

\* \* \*

The day wore on with the usual load of work, but at least Pallin talked to her. On the walk home, Josh glanced back at Elis behind them and to Raea in question. She understood. Fine. They could wait for him to catch up, but Pallin wouldn't hear about this. If she didn't need Elis's help, she wouldn't even bother with him.

Elis hesitated to pass them.

Josh put a hand out to stop him. "Hold up. We were waiting for you."

Raea answered the questioning look. "Yes. You."

"So, all right..." Josh looked up at Elis.

Seeing them facing each other made her picture Elis with his black wings. *Oh. My. God. Josh.* His obsession stood right before him, hidden in plain sight.

Giggles pressed for release at the irony. After her day, she needed it.

"So, you're teaching Raea about— What's so funny?"

"Nothing." Oh, the irony. She couldn't contain herself.

A hint of a smile from Elis broke any control she had. He knew. Oh, he knew, without a doubt, what set her off. And he enjoyed it. Drank it up.

"What is so funny here?"

"Nothing. I'm okay. Really, it's noth—" She couldn't help it.

"Elis?"

He shook his head, a grin on his face. "Private joke."

"Oh. Care to explain?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Fine. You two leave me out of your little joke. I'm glad you can be friends. Really. I mean, it's not like I wasn't your friend first or anything...*Raea*. No, I'm just a ghost." He sighed away the last statement, cutting Raea's giggles.

*Always so melodramatic.* "Josh. I'm sorry. It's not like that. I'd tell you if I could, but you really wouldn't understand right now."

"All right. I get it. You two have your fun, *at my expense*." Despite his words, the curve of his mouth betrayed the playfulness.

"Idiot. That won't work; I know you too well. Just keep your friend Miss Russet off my back and I promise someday I'll go into the whole long story." That someday would probably be a long time down the road.

"Deal."

They walked together the last half block to where Josh had to leave, Raea a step ahead of the other two. Elis answered Josh's questions about teaching her about the homeland she didn't know. Josh had no prejudices and seemed at ease talking with Elis. Why did she feel so self-conscious around him? Was it because she knew the truth? No. She had always been a little uncomfortable. Then what was it?

After Josh left, Elis stayed in step beside her. ["You would tell him?"]

["Maybe, years from now."] She glanced back, but Josh continued through the snow on the sidewalk.

["You don't trust him?"]

["I trust Josh, but right now, he's too close to Nina Russet."] She and Josh had been friends since first grade. He might not be popular, even dorky in some ways, but he was a good person. She might trust him, but she didn't want anyone to know about this. Not yet.

["I think he'd be a good ally."]

What? Raea halted in front of Elis. He had to be joking.

No. By the calm on his face, she knew he meant it.

["Raea, you don't have to live in complete secrecy. Look at Evelyn and Debbie, and Scott. They wouldn't tell anyone. And I think you underestimate Josh's good intentions."]

["No. I can't. Not now. If he slipped up and said something with Miss Russet listening...No."]

Elis sighed heavily. ["All right...Someday. But he deserves to know."]

Maybe someday, but that day wasn't today. She didn't want to be paraded on display like some freak in a sideshow. Bad enough knowing she was alien without being gawked at and hearing whispers. The whispers that cropped up since last week's teasing were bad enough without this latest news. No. She wanted her friends to treat her as a normal *human* being, as they always had.

At the walk to his door, they stopped.

["Are you still mad at me?"]

She looked up at the dark purple of his eyes. Such a unique color and vibrant, in spite of the sorrow she saw. Damn it. Why couldn't he be mean, so she *would* have a good reason to dislike him? But, no. Elis was trying to protect her, and teach her.

["No."]

["Then we'll fly later?"] he said.

Her heart thumped against her chest. She couldn't wait.

He chuckled. ["I knew you'd like that. You are Inari. Flying's a part of what you are. Come over later. We'll go out to practice releasing the energy, and fly afterwards."]

["Sounds good."] She contained the excitement inside. She hated that he could get her excited when she *so* wanted to hate him for causing problems with Pallin.

Flying *was* a part of who she was. From the visions she had of her mother, she knew Padina had felt the same. Scott had taken them out on frequent camping trips, not only to spend time with them, but also so her mother could spread her wings and fly. And sometimes she took Raea with her before she shrank Raea's wings for the last time. Raea remembered now. None of it had been dreams, as Debbie had suggested in the past to hide the truth. It had all been real. She had loved flying with her mother.

Now she flew with Elis.

Too weird. But she couldn't wait for later.

["I'll see you later?"]

"Oh, you can bet on it." She rolled up on her toes. Nothing could fully contain her impatience. She needed an outlet. She wanted to fly *now*.

He wasn't bad looking when she saw him eye-to-eye.

*Stop it.* Raea whirled and hurried away. God, if he saw that she blushed—she felt it warm all the way up to her cheeks—he'd never say anything. What was she thinking? What was she feeling? This couldn't be right. She liked Pallin...didn't she? Not Elis. Pallin.

Speaking of him... Would he call?

She rushed up the stairs to the house. *Please let there be a message from him.* It would make her feel better. What about Elis? *No, no, no, no, no. Forget Elis. You. Do. Not. Like. Elis. Get your head straight.*

She unlocked the door and slipped her shoes off on the mat. Two seconds later she stood at the answering machine in the kitchen. No messages. Not yet. He might call later.

\* \* \*

Well, there was a man who *really* couldn't hold his liquor. Half a glass of wine and he mumbled incoherently in his own language. She'd never believe it if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes.

Nina frowned at Pallin sprawled on the floor at the foot of the bed. He looked up, his amber eyes glazed. His wine glass lay on its side, wine splattered across the maroon hotel carpet. At least it would hide the stain. Or had they put in the color for a reason? Clever of them to think ahead.

But it shouldn't have been necessary, not in this case.

"Pallin..." She snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Come on. Stay with me here."

He flopped his head back to look up. A cold menace flashed across his face and he grabbed her fingers. "What...do?" His hand dropped to his side.

"Nothing. It was just wine. Honest. A little alcohol shouldn't do this." She had only thought it would loosen them both up. Yesterday had been fun. He was good, a bit painful, but good. She wanted more. With the streets cleared that morning, she had run her errands, met a couple of the Dark Angel witnesses, and stopped at a bottle shop on the way back to the hotel. Sure, she could have drugged him, but it would have gotten her nowhere, least of all where he had taken her in her room yesterday.

"Help me."

"You need a doctor?"

"No. Bed...Rest."

"All right, but you look terrible."

"Bed."

She pulled his arms. His legs made some effort to get under him but failed. After an awkward struggle, she got him on the bed and tucked the pillows under his head. "Better?"

"Hmm." He looked around, but his eyes fixed on nothing.

*I guess that's a yes. So much for a little adult entertainment.* How was she to know he couldn't drink? She had a full glass gone before he collapsed, and she felt no effect. It couldn't be the wine.

There went her night. But maybe she could still make something of it. That Dahlrich girl had avoided her Sunday. Maybe she could catch her at home tonight. Raea couldn't hide out at her boyfriend's all night. Okay, maybe she could, but from what the aunt had said, that wasn't likely to happen, not in the old woman's house.

"I guess you won't be wanting this." She grabbed the bottle.

"Wha' is?" His words slurred worse than a drunk's. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was on drugs.

"Cheap wine."

"Hmm." His eyes closed.

Nina grimaced and hoped she hadn't killed him. It had to be an allergic reaction, but she'd never heard of such a thing. This town got weirder and weirder. Talk about "Other Wonders". There was another idea for a story.

She closed the door of his room and returned to hers. Well, she still had her Dark Angel to find, the crew would be there in a few days, and she could spend her evening talking to Raea. Not a total waste. By tomorrow, Pallin should be recovered. If he still spoke to her, maybe they could get together again, alcohol-free. And she could get some information about his sensitivity for a new story. How many other people suffered in silence or weren't aware of the possibility?

Nina hurried to make some notes. Yes, a good idea for a story, but probably more in line with a medical program.

Before she could stake out the Logan house, she needed food. What better way to gather intel than to eat in a local diner, where she could observe, listen, and perhaps ask a few questions? Perfect.

By the time she finished, the sun set in the west. She walked out of the diner with a few opinions about the local angel, a recipe for green tomato pie, some advice on bottle-feeding calves—seemed it was calving season for the local ranchers—and a lot of local gossip. Not bad for a couple hours work, although she could have done

without the calving details.

Now, for Raea Dahlrich. *What are you hiding?* She drove up the darkening street at the edge of town and parked across from the two houses where Raea might be. Lights shone from both houses. If Raea was next door, she had to come out sometime.

Nina debated knocking on one door or the other. Which one first?

A flash of light stole her attention. It came from over the hill. Against the white of the snow, the shadows of two sets of tracks broke the smoothness of the hill. Curiosity tugged at her to investigate, but her desire to speak with Raea struggled to keep her in place.

What would a quick jaunt through the snow hurt? It wasn't far, and she could be back in a few minutes.

Hell. She couldn't argue against that logic *and* her curiosity.

Nina stepped out onto the snow-packed street and shivered. After snatching her hat from the rental car, she followed the tracks towards the hill. They weren't animal tracks but human footprints. Another flash of light and the sound of voices carried on the breeze startled her. What was going on? Kids?

She listened but couldn't make sense of what they said, especially since the wind blew away from her, muffling the voices. They quieted.

They must have heard her. Nina stopped and waited. Should she run? She had nowhere to hide in the open. What if poachers were out? They wouldn't hunt this close to town, though, and risk being seen. Would they?

Who was it?

A few seconds later, a steady beat of air came from over the hill. Two dark figures rose up on wings.

Nina stared in awe. "*Two* angels."

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### **About the Author**

Melanie Nilles (aka M. A. Nilles) grew up on a western North Dakota cattle ranch and farm and graduated from North Dakota State University with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. She currently resides in central North Dakota. Her published works include the *Starfire Angels* series. As M. A. Nilles, she writes dark fantasy and science fiction, including the *Legend of the White Dragon* epic and *Tiger Born*. For updates, visit her website at [www.melanienilles.com](http://www.melanienilles.com).

**Thank you for reading!**