



KATHLEEN
BRANDT

FEAR AND
Desire

LIT.ICAL PRESS, INC.

Fear and Desire
by Kathleen Brandt

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Cassie's been touched by an angel—and found it terrifying.

When she moved to the tallest building in town, Cassie was trying to defy her fear of heights. Now a thunderstorm blows an angel through her balcony window and into her life.

Nursing the wounded angel back to health teaches Cassie a lot more than she expected about fear. And about desire.

Highlight

She couldn't deny the evidence of her eyes: he was part man, part bird—an angel. He tossed his head to clear the tousled hair from his eyes and spoke to her in some language she didn't recognize. She didn't understand a word, but heard clearly the pain and pleading in the breathless voice.

She turned around and stumbled away. She meant to go into the bedroom and slam the door, but instead ended up in the kitchen, leaning her forehead against the cabinet door. The stench was awful. She thought fixedly about whether the smoke alarm would go off, to clear her head.

Behind her, she heard him grunt and struggle, feathers rustling, glass tinkling. He was still there, then; he was real. She turned off the heat under the soup and moved the pan to another burner. There. That was done.

When the winged man called out, Cassie shivered. There was no avoiding this. He wasn't going away on his own. She opened the top drawer next to the kitchen sink and pulled out a hammer. With it in her hand, she walked back toward the angel.

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Dedication

I always listen to music while I write. During the course of a piece, certain songs associate themselves with the ideas and concepts behind the story, forming an unofficial soundtrack. I thought I would share this with you.

Duran Duran—Ordinary World

Nik Kershaw—Find Me an Angel

Blue October—18th Floor Balcony

Redgum—Just Another Moment On Your Own

Vanessa Mae—White Bird

Black Velvet Band—As You Go Down

Alan Parsons Project—Closer to Heaven

Avril Lavigne—I'm With You

Social Distortion—Angel's Wings

Chris de Burgh—This Silent World

TATU—We Shout

Imogen Heap—Can't Take It In

Vienna Teng—Harbor

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Chapter 1

Cassie's last good day was on a Friday in October. She came home in a state of pleasant weariness. Her job, only two years old now, offered things her previous life never had: talking to co-workers, shaking hands, occasionally being smiled at. She got out of the carpool vehicle outside her apartment tower to a chorus of farewells, aware of the things she had escaped by going in to the office, the fear and desire she must now return to.

The foyer of her building was lushly decorated with potted plants and small trees in heavy copper tubs, like an indoor jungle. Cassie stood in front of the elevator doors, waiting for the courage to push the button. At the front desk, Mr. Gordon, the manager, watched her incuriously through the foliage. He was used to seeing Cassie come home.

At last Cassie pushed the button. She clutched her legal-assistant briefcase, crushing the lapels of her prim suit dress against her small breasts. When the doors opened, she stepped in quickly. The doors shut. Committed now, Cassie relaxed, concentrating on her breathing.

The back of the elevator was a mirror, painted with veins of copper to make it look like marble. Two ferns occupied the elevator's rear corners. Cassie's petite shape and big-eyed elfin face made her look like a decaying statue in the painted mirror. She automatically patted her shoulder-length straight hair, which was blonde but dyed auburn brown. Then she grabbed the rail, her stomach dropping, and the elevator

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surged upward. She had a love-hate relationship with the elevator. It represented home and sleep, and the veined mirror always made her chuckle, but it took her so far up, so fast.

The button reading 24 in calligraphy lit up. The doors opened on a quiet, windowless hallway with green carpet and ivy-patterned walls. Cassie's floor. The top floor.

She prodded the floor outside the elevator with one toe, as always, to see if it were firm enough to keep her from falling, then stepped out. Her apartment was 2408. She rattled open the door with her key.

The apartment had come furnished. Cassie had made few changes, and they were mostly in the bedroom. Directly across from the front door, past the peach and turquoise living room, was a pair of sliding glass doors opening onto a small concrete balcony.

Cassie gave it one glance and then looked away.

"You chose this," she said to herself. "And it's working. Only two minutes in front of the elevator today." She dropped her briefcase on the kitchenette counter and went to change clothes, shutting the door firmly on the living room and the sliding glass doors.

Through the gauze curtains, she could see that the sky was dull and stormy, so she flipped on the bedroom light. When she had gotten here, the bed was a monstrosity of sagging wood with drawers underneath and shelves above, so tall she would have needed a stool to get up on it. She'd had that carted out first thing, replacing it with a low pedestal bed in subdued colors. It was still unmade from this morning. Mr.

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Gordon employed a cleaning person—or spy—for each floor, but she didn't come in till Wednesday. Cassie was sure the report would be the same this week as always: *Cassie Michaels still lives alone, has broken no appliances, keeps the place neat enough, has acquired no illicit goldfish.*

What she did have were plants. There were two of them, neatly potted on a shelf above the bed, across from the windows where they could get light. They were an eccentric pair, unmatched to each other. She picked up the watering can from the nightstand and looked them over for spots or dust.

On the left side of the shelf was a big fern, its uncurling fronds heavy with seed. Many of its leaves were browned; the air was too dry for it, really. She watered it thoroughly. This one was only a few months old, but it looked like it was dying already. She would go out and get a new one, then. You could do that with plants. When her mother had died, Cassie had been a child, and there had been nothing she could do. She stared blankly at the fern for a minute, thinking about that. On balance, she decided, she was still more angry than sad about it. Her mother had died in an avoidable car crash, and abandoned Cassie to her father.

The other plant was a round barrel cactus, untouchable behind its armor of spikes. There was juice and life in there somewhere, presumably, but the prickly exterior hid it well. Whether Cassie's father had been afraid to touch her, afraid to show love of any kind, for reasons of his own, or had simply disliked his child mattered little to Cassie at ten years

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old. She sneered at the cactus and put the watering can down, leaving it dry for another day.

After changing into shorts and a big baggy t-shirt with a faded teddy bear on the front, she went back out to the kitchenette. Standing with her back to the glass doors, she put a pot of soup on the burner to heat. Then, resolute, she turned around. Better to get this over with before she ate, in case of vomiting.

As she did every day, she considered the notion of skipping it, just this once.

"No," she said, lifting her chin. "If I skip it one time, it'll be too easy to skip it the next. And it's working. It's working."

Cassie took three steps toward the double glass doors. Outside, she could see the heavy cloud cover, the cityscape, the roof of the building across the street. She forced herself to think about the oncoming storm. The blue-gray bodies of the clouds muttered among themselves with lightning.

Another step. She was coming out of the bright aura of the kitchen's overhead fluorescent. Maybe she'd better go back and stir the soup. "No. That's an excuse. Take some more steps."

She wrapped her arms forlornly around herself, pulling the t-shirt fabric tight over her breasts. With a measured tread, she crossed the boundary from tile to living room carpet. Five steps. Ten, and she stood right in front of the sliding glass doors. She should have felt triumph, but instead it felt like she'd left her stomach in the kitchenette, replaced with a tangled ball of squirming snakes.

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Now the apartment wasn't visible at all, only the balcony, the open sky, the city below. The drop, the hideous fall. She swayed forward, her panting breath fogging the glass, feeling a dizzy sweep of fear and desire. Cassie Michaels had been afraid of heights since she was six. Her fear was accompanied by a twinge of wanting. She wasn't suicidal; she had not been a depressed child. Knives, guns or poison had zero appeal. But this giddy terror and hunger plagued her when she looked down, as if the drop were alive, as if the possibility of falling spoke her name.

Choosing the tallest apartment building in the city, and living on the top floor, represented her first attempt to take charge of her life. She'd floated, disinterested, through her youth and law school, taking the path her father laid out for her. She breathed loneliness like air, immersive and unnoticed. At thirty, she was still a woman who paid someone to dust the top shelves and change the light bulbs because she couldn't get onto a step stool. At that benchmark, some slight and subtle sea change had come over her.

On its mild tide, she had reached a decision. She must take hold of her fear, force it to her hand. If it was the only thing about her life of silence she could change, then she would change it. That determination had brought her here, to this high place and this daily ritual.

She reached out and slid aside the glass door, running it all the way open until it bumped on the end of its track. Now she could hear the low grumble of thunder. The breeze striking her face smelled of water and ozone. Gripping the doorway edges till her knuckles hurt, she faced the outside.

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If she let go, would she rush at the balcony rail, fling herself over it, the call of terror too strong to deny? Suddenly she didn't trust her feet. She commanded her leg to lift, to set one foot on the concrete balcony. At first it resisted. Then she felt the cold hard surface under one bare toe. She inched out, her arms spread behind her, her knuckles white as her fingers clung to the doorway. This was as far as she'd ever gone, as far as her courage would take her.

Slowly she lifted her foot. The chill breeze shifted to blow directly at her, whipping tendrils of her hair around her cheekbones. Her foot came down. Cassie leaned forward and took the step. Her fingers pulled free of the doorway and she stood, perfectly balanced between throwing herself backward and running forward to hurl herself at the rail.

Her wide blue eyes stared blindly into the storm system, a steel blue wall of clouds. Almost directly ahead, a bird struggled with the wind, so far away it was barely a tossing vee in the air. Fat drops of rain splattered the rail, the concrete, the top of her head. On the far side of the storm system, the lower trailing hem of cloud rotated the other way, slowly circling. The wind picked up.

Cassie swayed on the balls of her feet. A cold trail of wetness ran down behind her ears. She could hear her breathing, harsh and quick, and made herself focus on anything visible outside, anything but the drop. The bird was quite large, nearing as it lost its struggle with the prevailing winds.

A jagged bar of electric white stood straight up from the city, an instant's stark tear in the fabric of the sky. Even as it

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vanished, leaving its ghost on her blinking eyes, thunder snapped a colossal whip. Cassie swore she felt the balcony quiver under her feet. She jerked backward, tripping over the edge of the door and falling. She scrambled away from the door, panting and coughing, the grip of fear and desire slowly easing on her pounding heart.

Crouching on the floor, water dripping through her hair, she saw the bird again through the open door. It was too big, moving too fast, its widespread gray wings flapping helplessly. It was going to hit!

Then a flash of lightning lit up the whole world. The cracking, rolling snap of thunder mingled with the sound of glass crashing, a piercing cry and a clattering crunch. When Cassie opened her eyes, there were feathers and glass everywhere.

The bird was huge, bigger than any bird she'd ever seen. Its wings, as tall as she, were thrust through the glass door, fluttering weakly and caught in the shattered pieces. It was raining now in earnest, a cold wind blowing past the bird, bringing a chilly spray to Cassie's face. She struggled to her feet, brushing bits of safety glass from her t-shirt, and stepped closer.

The bent joint, high on the half-folded wing, was caught in the glass door. The other wing, a little more free because it had entered on the open side, flexed and stretched. They both shook like a leaf from shock and stress. There was a foot and leg underneath the open wing. A man's foot and leg.

Cassie clapped both hands to her mouth. There was a man mixed up with the bird somehow. She could see tanned legs

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and a blood-streaked arm with clenched fingers. She could see a curly gray-haired head and hear a torn, exhausted weeping. Had he been somehow riding the bird, or what? She stood uncomfortably, pieces of semisharp safety glass underneath her bare feet.

There was a terrible smell of burning soup, now that the breeze had lessened and the rain was steady. Burning soup, ozone and water, and under it a wild, tangy sweat-and-blood scent. Then the man lifted his head and stared at her.

His eyes were big and round and wide as a bird's, the same stormy color as his windblown hair and the great wings arching up from his shoulder blades. He had a man's face, twisted with agony. He also had a man's body, crumpled feet first in her balcony doorway, wearing nothing but the wings. They were as big as himself, feathered in gray and running with blood.

She couldn't deny the evidence of her eyes: he was part man, part bird—an angel. He tossed his head to clear the tousled hair from his eyes and spoke to her in some language she didn't recognize. She didn't understand a word, but heard clearly the pain and pleading in the breathless voice.

She turned around and stumbled away. She meant to go into the bedroom and slam the door, but instead ended up in the kitchen, leaning her forehead against the cabinet door. The stench was awful. She thought fixedly about whether the smoke alarm would go off, to clear her head.

Behind her, she heard him grunt and struggle, feathers rustling, glass tinkling. He was still there, then; he was real.

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She turned off the heat under the soup and moved the pan to another burner. There. That was done.

When the winged man called out, Cassie shivered. There was no avoiding this. He wasn't going away on his own. She opened the top drawer next to the kitchen sink and pulled out a hammer. With it in her hand, she walked back toward the storm angel.

He had made it to one knee, at the cost of a bleeding tear in the muscle of his wing. He clutched the doorframe hard to keep himself from moving too much and shredding it. He looked over his shoulder at her, saying nothing, his hawk-nosed face twisted with pain. She avoided his eyes, hating this entire situation and its strangeness. With effort, she stepped forward, toward the trapped wing. The drop beyond him, beyond the rail, and the wall of rain falling out there, drew and repelled her. She stepped over a long wing tip and held onto the doorway with one hand.

The doors were safety glass, so there were no big sharp jagged pieces. His right wing had smashed through two layers of the glass. The wing was cut here and there, and had left areas of glass in the door panel shattered, but still holding together. As she watched, more bits fell with a tiny tinkling noise. She reached forward with the hammer and tapped one of the remaining sheets of cracked glass. It fell in a glittering rain. She breathed deeply of the wet, chill air and tapped again, breaking out the imprisoning shards. All around her, the wing shuddered spastically like that of a dying bird.

She cut her arm as she reached around to the outer glass panel. She drew her arm back with a hiss, her blood smearing

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in the rain. The storm angel said something, this time without raising his head. Grimly, she reached in again and tapped out the crackled glass, one shard after another until they all had fallen. There were a thousand bits of sparkling glass caught in the gray feathers, some stuck with blood, some trapped under the pinions.

The angel had been blown in backward and had landed crouched and twisted in the doorway. His body faced out toward the storm, but most of him was inside. His right wing had been thrust through the glass panes tip first. She couldn't simply pull him back; the wing would break. Someone must go out onto the balcony, pull the wing through and fold it, bend him into the doorway and bring him in.

Couldn't she could call Mr. Gordon to come do it? The idea of standing out there, her back to the drop, in the rain and wind, made her stomach clench and twist, her heart hammer. She would do a terrible job anyway. There was no way a person with acrophobia could be expected to do this task.

Cassie pictured herself telling Mr. Gordon, a perfectly ordinary rabbity little man except for a somewhat extreme fondness for potted plants, that there was an angel in the apartment and could he come free it from the door, then call the glass replacement people?

The storm was easing, the wind changing, blowing veils of rain into the apartment. The water slicked down her hair, soaking the angel's, washing the blood off her arm. Lightning trembled at the edge of her vision, followed slowly by a low mutter of thunder. She looked down. The storm angel was looking up at her, his breathing fast and ragged, his face pale

beneath its tan. He was covered in gooseflesh, soaking wet, and as pitiable as a draggled kitten.

If she were to do this, she mustn't allow herself to think about the long fall below the balcony. She hurried past his head, bumping it with her knee in her desperate speed. She landed against the doorway, throwing both arms around the metal frame. Glass cut her forearms in two places. More fell in a little bright shower from the frame. She clung there for a long time, her forehead pressed against the chilly metal.

The arching wing shuddered and rattled. Feathers drummed against the frame. She peeked under her arm and saw the winged man's eyes roll up. He collapsed with a groaning sigh onto the metal boundary between soaked carpet and damp concrete.

Suddenly she was angry. How dare he faint and leave her to deal with all this, without even his bizarre company? She studied his sprawled wing. It was meant to bend there, at its central joint. There was obviously a lot of flexibility. If it were anything like a bird's wing, it would be light and fragile. Clinging to the framework with one arm, she reached the other through and wrapped her fingers around the long leading edge, below the joint, and pressed. The wing folded easily. A startling warmth came through the feathers, which were soft as fur to her cold fingers. She tugged gently, and lowered the joint as much as she could so it would come out under the doorframe. It bent with a sliding, slithering rustle and a shower of glass fragments. She stopped there. To draw the rest of the wing out, she would have to step back. At least two steps.

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She put her head against the doorframe again and waited, but there was no one to help. Nor did more courage come to her.

Finally, her stomach so twisted she was glad she hadn't touched the soup, she reached up to the arch of gray-feathered wing above her head, below the joint this time. Her hand was weak and could not get a grip. She had to swing around the pivot of her arm. Bits of safety glass caught in the edge cut her forearm in shallow scratches, and she didn't even notice. Her fingers closed on the long muscle of the wing. Cassie tugged and pulled. She could not step back onto the balcony, but unless she did, she couldn't get the wing out.

She fought the wing, heavy and useless thanks to its owner's unconsciousness, until most of it was out onto her head, nearly smothering her. Terror, rage and weeping made her blind. She struggled to reach through the feathers and pull back more of the wing, again, again. The rain had slowed to a few scattered drops. Breezes flirted with the smaller feathers. Her own panting pulled the loose pinions underneath the wing's surface back and forth. She couldn't draw it forth any more.

She swung around, stepping over the man's slender body and on some of the feathers. She fled through the living room on shaky legs, then fell to her knees before the couch and pressed her face against the peach-colored cushions, sobbing.

A weak shaft of sun entered the room. She raised her head after a time. She felt better, curiously hollowed out. When she got to her feet, her legs held her up. Only a foot and a half or so of the wing tip was still caught. For the rest, he lay

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lax and soaking wet, one wing in, one wing out. Cassie rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. Her scratched forearms had left blood on the couch. It didn't matter.

She walked to the doorway again, shivering as she approached it. Leaning down, she put her hands under the armpits of the storm angel and pulled. He was light, far too light for his height, though he was slender as a girl. She tugged. He came up easily, as if his bones were made of balsa wood and his muscles of papier-mache. There was a wiry rustling all around her. With a surge of relief, she saw the wing slip forward on its own.

The instant it was free, both wings snapped open and she dropped him in shock. As she backed up, the wings slowly folded along his body. The joints, fully closed on one side, mostly closed on the wounded side, were above his head. The final long feathers at the tip trailed to his ankles. As she watched, a shiver passed through him. She bent again, put her hands on his shoulders, and pulled back. He groaned, a muddy sound, and Cassie realized she was dragging him over a scattering of broken glass. She pulled her hands back.

Dimly burning anger—at herself, at him, at the whole bizarre situation—lent her strength. She hoisted him around the waist this time, the wings compressing in her grip, not caring that the lacerated and broken edge of the right one was being pressed to him. She hauled him up. He flopped limply over her shoulder.

Halfway down the hall, he made a sound of confused pain and terror and began to struggle weakly. As a result, she thumped his shoulder and damaged wing against the doorway

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as she pushed open the bedroom door. She cursed him in words she didn't usually use. She dropped him full length on her bed and collapsed against the wall, panting and coughing. Her t-shirt was soaked and streaked here and there with his blood and her own. The couch and the bed would never be the same, and of course she would have to get the balcony door replaced.

Despite that, it was good to see him out of the window and on the bed, coming to no more harm.

She got to her feet and looked him over. He lay breathing hard, the wings shuddering again, looking up at her with fear and hope on his narrow face. He was slim and rangy, his feet and hands slender. The gray hair had fooled her; he had the unlined face of a boy of twenty. In the dim light, she saw big round eyes, fine wavy shoulder-length hair, and tall shuddering structures of feathers arching from his back. They were all the same dark cloud color.

He was built like a man in every other way, and she reached down hurriedly to gather up the sheet and pull it up over him. Uncircumcised, his...his...she made herself think it: his penis, then, was as long and slender and deeply tanned as the rest of him. He rested one hand over the top of the sheet at his waist. He looked a bit reassured; bringing him to bed and covering him up were not the acts of a person who meant him harm. He spoke again, his voice shaky with pain, and she listened closely.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Don't you speak English? It's...I don't even know what you're speaking."

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He reached out, setting two fingers to her wrist, watching her face intently. He said something formal, like an announcement.

"Is that your name?" Cassie asked, taken aback. "It's too long. I can't say it." She touched her chest to indicate herself, suddenly aware that the cold and wet made her nipples stand out like an entry in the world's most inappropriately timed wet t-shirt contest. "Cassie," she said. "My name's Cassie."

He blinked at her, as unhappy with her name as she with his. "Caasiel?"

"Cassie."

"Caasi." He let his hand drop to his own hairless chest, and said his unpronounceable name again.

"I can't handle that," she said, shaking her head, spreading her hands helplessly. "Can't I just call you Storm Angel? Or Storm?"

He blinked at her, a long slow blink of human lids across those bird's...those angel's eyes.

"Storm," she said again, touching two fingers to the hot flesh of his chest. "Storm."

The angel shook his head, disapproving but not denying. He closed his eyes, and wrapped his fingers loosely around her wrist. She felt his chest rise and fall in a long sigh. When it ended, he was already asleep. She sat on the bed beside him until he was fully out, before she pulled her hand away and tiptoed into the bathroom.

Once showered, dressed and fed, Cassie felt much better. It was nine o'clock in the evening. She couldn't sleep on the

couch with the open balcony facing her. But there was an angel in her bed.

"Sounds like a bad country song," she said. Her habit of talking to herself at home was long ingrained. The angel obviously couldn't understand a single word she might say, so there was no reason to stop now. She curled up on the couch, pressed into the unbloodied corner, her eyes on the gaping wound in her house. Strewn feathers and glass lay everywhere. She'd have to clean that up at some point, but she didn't feel equal to it just now.

She looked toward her bedroom door. He would wake up at some point. "Then what? I can't call him a doctor," she said. The sun had set. The smell of the night was pleasant, coming in the open doorway. She wondered uneasily about bats or owls, or some kind of bug, getting in.

She got up and padded down the hall, peeked in the door, and checked if the angel was still real. He lay flat on his back, the wings mostly folded, the right one half-extended across the edge of her double bed. They still trembled every now and then, like a cat's paws moving as it dreamed. What did he dream?

This time she went in. She laid her wrist lightly across his forehead. With her own temperature evened out, she could tell his was close to normal. If he were too hot, it wasn't by much. She sighed with relief. No fever. She wouldn't have to see if anyone still did house calls. Or perhaps she would have needed to call a vet? She shook her head, her hair falling out of the towel wrapped around it. She tossed the towel into the

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bathroom. A single drop of water fell from her hair onto the angel's shoulder. He opened his eyes, and Cassie drew back.

He asked a question she couldn't understand. She smiled and patted his shoulder. "It's all right," she said. "You're safe. If you're awake, I guess I'd better see what I can do about that wing."

It was a long and excruciating process. She didn't feel she could bandage the feathers with any kind of sticky bandage like the ones on the worst scratches on her own forearm. Most of her first aid consisted of shaking the rest of the glass fragments out of the wings, and cleaning the lacerations. In the end, with her wrists and fingers aching, she wasn't entirely sure she'd even found them all. The angel himself helped her pull straight the broken leading edge of his wing and splint it, though he went pale under his tan. She expressed anxious sympathy as best she could, patting his shoulder, stroking the gray hair back from his forehead, finding its texture as perfectly silky as the trailing feathers. It made her want to pet him, like a chinchilla, something soft and animal. Instead, she put her hands on her thighs.

He said something that might have been thank you, in a voice exhausted and pained. She smiled hesitantly. The angel blinked, wonder crossing his features. He lifted one hand as if to touch her face. Cassie sprang to her feet. "You need something to eat," she said and backed out of the room. His hand still in the air, he watched her go.

She made him soup in her unscorched pot, but when she came back he was asleep. She left it on the side table, and rolled up to sleep in a blanket on the floor next to the bed. At

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some point the rustling half-woke her as he came back to bed, presumably from the bathroom. He slept on his stomach this time, with the sheet tangled around his ankles. That was how she found him when she woke up. The wings were closed along his back, and slightly lifted, forming a canopy above him. The wounded one was still not fully closed, but she thought it looked better with the broken edge fixed, and hoped it would heal well. He would want to fly again.

He arched his back and his rear stuck up slightly. She saw how tanned it was, lean as the rest of him. He must never wear clothing, and spend a lot of time in the sun. She reached out to draw the sheet up over him, and then stopped. Why not keep looking?

She had never been on many dates as a girl. This sight, and the one she had glimpsed yesterday, were nothing she had seen in the...in the flesh, before. Not up close and personal like this. But she found her eye straying more to his shoulders, to the broad bases of muscle and feather beginning there. Those feathers became smaller and smaller until they were like soft fluff blending into his skin. As she watched, his breathing made them quiver. His wings flexed slightly, drawing closer together in their slim bundles over his back. More than anything, she wanted to set her hand there lightly, where the wings began. Would it wake him?

He was already waking. She was struck again by his apparent youth when he turned his head and pulled his gummy eyelids apart. When the pain dropped back into his consciousness, she winced. He said something in a conciliatory tone, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand.

Cassie was relieved to see that the long slash on his shoulder, held closed by three small sticky bandages she'd put there last night, didn't break open and bleed again.

He tucked the left wing deftly underneath himself and rolled over, sitting up in the same motion. Now his wings were spread out, cupped around him. Cassie reared back from the wall of feathers. With a motion as natural as turning his head, he flipped the left one back, along the side of the bed, the feathers at the tip rustling against the wall. He held out a hand to her. Cassie set hers in it and he drew her down beside him. In an instant the wing flipped forward again, wrapping around her this time. The tiny feathers tickled her cheek. Nervous, she twisted her hands together and inched away, glad of the sheet around his waist.

He spoke to her earnestly. She stared at his feet at the end of the bed. She couldn't understand him; surely he knew that by now, so why was he still talking? He took her hand and held it against her chest, making her flush, stiff and awkward in the light embrace of the wing. With his free hand, he gestured at his broken wing and at the door of the room, then pointed out the window.

"I have no idea," she said. "I can't tell what you're saying. Let me go." She tried to draw her hand back. When he didn't relinquish it, she pulled away completely. The angel flipped his wing back again, silenced. He looked at her, puzzled and hurt.

"I'm sorry," Cassie said. "I'm sorry, Storm."

The angel sighed, dropping his penetrating eyes from hers at last, and pulled his right wing toward himself to inspect it.

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He felt along the break, wincing, his face paling again. Not wanting to look at his pain, she backed out of the room. In the kitchen, she brushed a couple of tears off her cheeks and turned to cooking breakfast.

He would not eat anything she cooked. He looked puzzled at the plate she gave him, as if unaware it was food at all, then sniffed at it carefully. Apologetic, he set it down beside the untouched soup and waved his hands. For the rest of Saturday morning, she brought him things in the hope he would eat them. He almost showed interest in plain bread, nibbling a piece. He dropped the rest with an expression of distaste. She went back to the kitchen. There wasn't much; she tended to shop lightly and frequently.

By the time she hit on the salad, there was a pile on the kitchen counter of various microwave meals, a different flavor of soup, a bottle of mayonnaise, a tuna sandwich and a bacon omelet. She came in with the bag of premixed, precut lettuce and carrots and his eyes positively lit up. He reached for it, briefly puzzled by the bag. She popped it open. He drew back, startled at the sound, but then pulled a piece out and tasted it eagerly.

She was absurdly pleased to see him munching away at the lettuce, nibbling like a rabbit at the strips of carrot and green pepper. She sat at the edge of the bed to watch, her next offering in her hand, a boiled egg. It was the only one she still had from the egg salad she'd fixed a week ago. She wasn't sure it was still good, but boiled eggs kept for a long time, she hoped. The angel ate the entire bag of salad and

then smiled at her gratefully. His color looked better, she thought.

He plucked the egg from her hand in his long slim fingers and looked at it, delighted. He lifted it, shell and all, and bit in. Next moment he was spluttering, spitting it out, fortunately mostly aiming at the empty salad bag. He looked at her with betrayed astonishment. She had to laugh, though she covered her mouth guiltily with one hand. Of course he'd expected a raw one. She trotted into the kitchen to get it. He bit into it distrustfully and blinked, surprised probably at its coldness, but then sucked the goopy thing down his throat with evident enjoyment.

She pointed questioningly at the kitchen and he shook his head, wanting no more. He squirmed around, lying on his stomach with his head toward her, leaving the sheet under him. Cassie could see how that would be easier than the wing-folding turn he'd done earlier, but it made her nervous. Especially when he looped an arm over her thigh and set his head on her knee, as if to make sure she didn't go anywhere.

"You're entirely too touchy-feely for an angel," Cassie told him, slightly ashamed of herself, but too nervous to care. He snuggled closer against her knee and closed his big gray eyes.

So she sat there and watched him go to sleep. After a while, she relaxed enough to touch his temple, wanting only to feel his silky hair again. It slid under her fingers, fine as fur, a delight to touch. She followed it down his shoulder. He sighed and his lips curled in a smile, though his eyes remained closed.

Cassie thought she'd better not touch him any more, but her hand wasn't listening to her. Her fingers slid along the tautly muscled cordage of his shoulder blade, where tiny feathers began. Hypnotized, she watched them ruffle under her hand, flipping back to their positions between her fingers. His back lifted to her touch with his breath. His arm, thrown casually across her lap, tightened and wrapped instead around both her thighs. She looked down and saw his eyes open.

She ran her hand lightly up the musculature of his left wing, finding it wiry and strong and warm, a living thing. The storm angel drew a deep shuddering breath of unmistakable pleasure and desire. Cassie's fear awoke. She stiffened under his languorous grip. He released her reluctantly. She slid out from under his head as gently as she could.

"I'm sorry," she said again to his bowed head. He didn't open his eyes, and she felt the reproach. "I don't mean to reject you, Storm. I just...I just can't..." Waving her hands, unable to explain, she bumped against the door, whacking her head on the door jamb. Lifting one hand to the back of her head, she shut the door behind her. She went back to the couch, where she sat for a long time with her face in her hands, until the wild heat in her cheeks finally dissipated.

When she looked up, he was standing in the kitchen.

Naked as a newborn, he was looking with an air of mild curiosity at everything he saw. The microwave and a spoon left in the sink held equal fascination for him. He poked the water tap with one finger, and when nothing happened, patted it with his fingertips, apparently interested in its

coldness. He exclaimed with delight when he managed to open the refrigerator door. He left his head stuck in there for quite a long time. Cassie looked on in astonishment. The image of the naked angel, his head vanishing into the refrigerator, his wings standing up above the level of the freezer top, would be with her for life.

When he came out of the fridge, brushing his hand over his eyes in reaction to the chill in there, he looked over at her, on the couch, and said something conversational. She shrugged. It wasn't French, she'd had that in high school, or the Latin she'd taken during law school. Wouldn't a Germanic language be harsher? This was a flowing, lilting song of words. Maybe it was Gaelic; she'd never heard anyone speak it. He didn't look Irish, but then the more she looked at him, the less human he looked, despite the superficial similarities. His face had the narrow, delicate beauty of a greyhound's muzzle, wing-arched eyebrows, and those huge stormy eyes that were too round to be human.

He limped through the living room toward her, his shoulders thrown back, wings rustling softly behind him. In his hand was a carton of half-and-half she kept for her coffee. He handed it to her gravely and she took it and set it down on the coffee table beside her.

She peeked upward and he was looking down at her, slightly puzzled as to why her face was averted. He seemed completely without modesty or concern for his nakedness. She fiddled with the carton, aligning it precisely with the corner of the coffee table. After a moment, she said, "Sit down please, Storm." He didn't move, not understanding. She

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tugged his hand. When he wouldn't sit she stood up instead. He was too close, but he failed to take a step back and mend that. She looked up at him in mild irritation.

He took hold of her head. His thumbs slid into place behind her ears, his fingers slipped through her hair, and he tilted her face up. Startled, she raised her arms and set her hands on his arms below the shoulder. He winced at the touch on his cuts, but did not draw back. She was too surprised to stop him, and they kissed as innocently as children.

His wings drew forward, folding around them both. His lips were warm on hers, pressed there firmly, dismissing her lack of response as unimportant. He cradled her head and tilted it up to his. Cassie felt something bloom in her mind, felt some kind of flow, some kind of deep and previously unknowable pull, soundless, painless, incomprehensible. She shoved against him, stumbling back and falling onto the couch, drawing a short cry of pain from him as she pushed on his wounded shoulder. His wings fluttered backward as if to aid in his balance, his manhood bobbing distractingly. She thought his feathers caught the light in an odd way, a ripple of color passing over them.

Cassie clapped both her hands to her forehead, as if to close a door in her skull. She knew things, as if they had always been there, about the angel. He had flown a long time to be caught by the storm, blown into this insane place that hurt and cut and starved him at every moment. He had come through some rip, some tear in the nature of things, across a distance he couldn't understand. He thought she was beautiful when she smiled, the only kindness he had seen for

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days on end. He wanted more than anything to understand her, and that tempted him to this violation of her mind.

"Rape," she said in a toneless whisper. "It's like rape. You keep out of my head."

He looked at her, his eyes wide, hurt, puzzled. Cassie wondered if this flow of, of whatever it was, went both ways. If he now possessed information about her that he had absolutely no right to. If he'd stolen an understanding of her, robbed her of intimacy and privacy and selfness. He spoke at length, baffled sympathy on his face, urgently explaining something, gesturing at the glass on the living room floor, the broken doors, the balcony—the drop.

So he had taken as well as given.

Cassie turned away, curling up into a ball in the corner of the couch. She stayed there until he ran out of his strange words and fell silent, until he walked back into the bedroom.

Last night, she had only wanted to get him and his pain out of her doorway. This morning, she had awoken thinking in vague terms of nursing him back to health so he could fly away again and her life would return to normal. Now she burned to get rid of this thing at any price. Her native gentleness made the ugly thoughts—thoughts of kitchen knives, makeshift clubs, or hauling him out to the balcony and shoving him till he got the point—seem to ravage her heart. She couldn't do anything like that, and she knew it. For the first time she regretted being so nice, a nice girl, a girl who wouldn't do those things.

Over and over her mind returned to the feel of his long fingers taking hold of her, his mouth on hers, the horrifying

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transfer of information. Impatiently, she got up and grabbed the broom. She swept in short, angry strokes, the glass pieces bouncing across the carpet. She looked away as much as she could when she neared the balcony door. spurts of terror went through her as she did. She swept the harder for it, whimpering as her feet came near the opening.

Vacuuming was better, because she could push the business end forward. It rattled badly as it sucked up the glass her broom hadn't been able to get. When she finished, the carpet was stained with blood, but no longer glittered.

Cassie put the vacuum back in the hall closet and peeked in at the angel. He was either asleep or pretending, his head turned away, naked as always, the sheet underneath him. His wings, again lifted slightly off his back, moved slightly with his breathing. The broken one still wouldn't fold all the way in, and looked bedraggled.

She went as quietly as she could to her bedroom closet and got some clean clothes, casual enough for Saturday. She took them to the bathroom to change. The angel hadn't moved when she came back out and tossed her nightgown in the dirty clothes hamper. She left the apartment, locking up. She took her usual minute to get up the nerve to ride the elevator, the last of her anger draining out of her as, white-faced, she confronted the opening doors.

She stuck her leg in and toed the floor hard. The box swayed a little and she gulped. The doors began to close. She elbowed them open severely from outside. She muttered fierce little orders to herself, "Now. Get in the elevator now. Get in. Now. Now. Now." At last she stepped in and gripped

the rail, turning to face the numbers over the button pad, clicking off the descending levels.

Getting out of the elevator was much better. The ground floor didn't frighten her at all. She brushed aside a trailing fern frond and nodded to Mr. Gordon's prim niece, who was working the front desk this morning. Cassie set off down the street for the corner grocery.

"That's a lot of salad," the counter girl said when she came up to check out. "You having a party?"

"I'm turning into a rabbit," Cassie said.

"Um. Oh." The girl passed another bag of precut lettuce over the beeping laser reader.

"Well, I could have told you I have a vegetarian angel in my room," Cassie said.

The girl laughed nervously and beeped faster. Cassie sighed.

Toting two bags of fruit, salad, eggs, and a quiche for herself, she stopped at the front desk to borrow the niece's Yellow Pages. She scribbled the number of a glass window replacement firm down on her grocery receipt. Angel or no angel, she couldn't leave those doors the way they were. Maybe the presence of strangers would frighten the creature and he would fly away. Maybe his wing wasn't as badly hurt as it looked.

After another minor ordeal with the elevator, she closed her apartment door and leaned on it, panting. At length, she felt strong enough to put her bags on the counter. She picked up the cordless phone. Tucking it between shoulder and ear, she opened the grocery bags absently with both hands.

"A-One Glass Company, this is Sandra, how may I help you?"

"Hello, Sandra. My name is Cassie Michaels. I've got a blown-out sliding glass door, two of them. I need replacements right away." She opened the refrigerator and began stuffing in the bags of salad.

The receptionist took down her phone number, credit card number and address, then flipped pages, presumably in an appointment book. "We can send someone out this afternoon, if you don't mind paying the weekend surcharge. Otherwise I'm afraid it would be Tuesday."

"Today, please," Cassie said. She turned at a rustle. The angel, drawn by the sound of her voice, stood in the hallway, leaning against the opening to the kitchen.

"That'll be fine then," Sandra said in her ear. "Will you be home between the hours of three and five?"

Cassie scooped the last bag of salad out of the grocery bag and threw it at the angel. It smacked against his chest, his wings gave a startled flutter, but he caught it in both hands. Cassie turned away. "I'll be here," she promised. She heard, behind her, the angel turn and walk back into the bedroom.

After hanging up the phone, she contemplated the quiche. No. She wasn't hungry. Her stomach roiled with anger and fear and agitation. She stuck the quiche in the fridge and tidied the grocery bags. After that, there was no excuse not to return to the bedroom.

He sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed, his wings half-unfolded and spread across the bed. He gazed at the window,

one big hand holding the air-puffed pack of salad leaves. He didn't look at her when she came in.

"Now this is too much," she said. His big round eyes were wet, tears running down his lean cheekbones, though his face was impassive. "At least don't cry." She folded her arms under her breasts, looking at him sternly. It was wasted; he didn't look at her.

"Look, I'm sorry," she said. "It was...it was a shock. One I never want to have again, by the way."

At last he looked up at her. A human male, at least one raised in any culture Cassie was familiar with, would be angry at crying in front of a woman, if he were to cry at all. There was nothing in his face but sorrow. No sense that his pride was wounded, or that he knew what pride was, any more than a cat does. He was only lost and hurt, and uncertain of his welcome.

"I have people coming over to fix the window in a couple of hours," she said, knowing he wouldn't understand a word. "At least, they said between three and five, so I'm sure we'll see them at least by six-thirty. They're not going to be happy to see you. If you..." she faltered. She'd had a real image, if not an intention, of taking his hand and leading him to the open balcony, pointing out into the sky until he understood she meant him to fly away. But now, looking at his gray eyes, seeing the slight bend in the line of his wing, the pain in every wincing shudder of those feathers, she knew that wasn't going to happen. "You'll have to stay in here. With the door closed. I hope you'll understand."

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He said something quiet back to her and looked away again, his head drooping. That mental violation hadn't happened when she touched him earlier, or when he put his head in her lap. Only when he had kissed her. Maybe it was safe to just lay hands on him. Touch was the only way she could make him understand that she really was going to forgive him.

With some trepidation she reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. His skin was still warmer than her own, but only a little. She patted him awkwardly. The angel looked up, hope making his big eyes even bigger. "Yes," she said, "it's okay. Don't do it again, but it's okay."

He shifted on the edge of the bed, setting the bag of salad aside. Cassie stood quietly and let him reach out to her waist, his hands as tentative as hers. He shifted one knee. Now she stood between his long thighs, with his arms around her waist.

"Hey." She put her hands on both his shoulders now, not pushing him away but letting him know she was prepared to. He looked up, his head at the level of her breastbone, and drew her closer. Mostly unwilling, she took the half-step toward him. He settled his long torso against her, put his head on her breast and sighed, his warm breath on her arm mixed with the rattling, wiry rustle of his wings. She lifted her hands from his shoulders and put them on his head. She felt no violation now, no pull at her mind, no insidious knowledge. She leaned against him.

His wings spread and came forward, wrapping around her, enclosing her in a faintly spice-smelling cocoon of soft

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feathers. Her fingers trailed through the exceedingly fine strands of his hair. She stood for a long time in the embrace of the angel, surprised to find a deep, welling comfort in it. She didn't feel she deserved that comfort, but greedily she took it in anyway.

Cassie's knees shook as they parted. The angel smiled at her, his eyes shining in the diffuse light coming in through her curtains. He popped open the bag of salad and began to eat it. Cassie went into the kitchen to heat up some quiche. Making up with the angel had settled her stomach right down.

They ate together in companionable silence in the bedroom. Later, she curled up at the foot of the bed with some legal briefs. The paperwork failed to distract her from the storm angel, although he was doing nothing more interesting than pacing. He kept lifting the curtains to look outside, shaking out his feathers, tossing back his head. Eventually he sat down, his eyes on the window, the length of the bed between them. Before Cassie knew it, she had dozed off.

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Chapter 2

She woke up slowly, disoriented and puzzled. She was muzzy from sleeping during the day. The quiche crumbs were still on the plate she was looking at, on the floor. Something warm had slipped away, wakening her. She lay across the bed, her feet numb from hanging off the edge. She sat up and a bolt of pain in her head made her wince. Kneading her forehead with her fingers eased it a little. Cassie looked around, bewildered. The east window was dimmer now, the south one brighter. The bedside clock read almost three. Good, at least she hadn't slept through the arrival of the window people.

She felt better. She was used to a life of emotional whiplash, with fear a constant companion, but lately things had been much more so. Sorrow and hurt and betrayal had been piercingly strong in the last few hours, on top of the shock of utter strangeness. The comfort she had experienced in the close embrace of the storm angel had gone a long way toward healing her. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and got up, brushing at her wrinkled blouse and skirt.

She used the bathroom. The angel had figured out what it was for, but didn't know about flushing. He wasn't in the kitchen, although the remains of an apple lay on the counter. He wasn't in the living room either. Hobbled on her tingling feet, she went to the living room couch to rub them. A breeze from the smashed windows made her look up.

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The angel stood on the balcony rail, standing with ease and lightness on a surface five inches across and not particularly flat, over a drop many times his own height. He was fearless as a bird clinging to a swaying branch, knowing a fall is simply not in its future. Cassie's breath stopped in her throat. Balanced against the wind, the angel spread his wings, the left one fully, the tips brushing the concrete balcony wall. The right wing would only spread halfway. His hair flickered around his shoulders, tossed on the air currents. He gazed steadily at the blue sky, his hands opening and closing at his sides.

But after a few moments, he closed the wings slowly along his back and dropped his head. He hopped back down to the balcony floor. He ducked to let the tops of his wings slide under the doorway, fitting them in carefully. She gave him a little wave from the couch and he came to kneel on the floor beside her. He set his head in her lap, his face calm and sad, and sighed.

"You've got to heal some more, Storm," Cassie said, stroking his hair. "Just wait a few days. That's all." It caught at her heart to see him standing on the balcony. She realized that when he was healed and ready to go, she wanted to see him take off. She wanted to see him stand on the rail, lean forward, watch those incredible wings spread and flare on the wind, see them hold him up. Watch him soar. She deserved that, after everything she'd been through.

The doorbell rang. Cassie gasped sharply, jumping to her feet and dumping his head off her lap. She tried to calm herself as the angel sat back, looking bewildered. "Oh, why

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now? It's the first time in human history the workmen showed up when they said they would. Why did it have to be now?" She grabbed the storm angel by his shoulders and urged him to his feet, ignoring his wince. "Come on, you have to hide!"

He protested in his strange language. She hustled him through the hallway and to the bedroom door. "Stay!" she said sternly, pointing at the room as if he were a dog. "Stay in there! Don't come out!" He balked at the doorway, asking questions in his own language. The doorbell rang again. He looked over her shoulder at the sound, then back at her, raising his eyebrows anxiously.

"Go!" said Cassie, shoving at him. For a moment he resisted her with wiry strength, then she forced him, stumbling, into the room. She shoved a wing tip in with her knee and pointed again. "Stay in there!"

He looked vastly hurt and shocked, wrapping his arms around his chest. She imagined what a glass repairman would say if a naked angel came out of her bedroom. "If only I could lock it," she said frantically. She slammed the door as hard as she could to make her point, blotting out the sight of his unhappy face, and scurried to open the door.

"Evening, ma'am," said a large mostly-bald man in the uniform of the A-One Glass Company. His shirt nametag said his name was Jeff. Behind him, another man, younger and skinnier, held a long bundle of plastic panels over his shoulder. Farther back in the hallway, a third man managed a hand truck with two wrapped glass door panels held apart by bracers.

"Come in," Cassie murmured. She glanced at the bedroom door as they entered. It was still shut. She sat on the couch where she could see it and smiled at the glass people.

"What happened?" Jeff examined the doors.

What happened? She hadn't even thought about a cover story. Now she couldn't believe she'd been so stupid. "Um," said Cassie. "A bird. A big gray bird was blown through it during the storm."

"That explains the blood," Jeff said. The younger man wrinkled his nose.

"I cleaned up the best I could," Cassie said. "I broke out the rest of the glass so it wouldn't fall down and cut me." She wondered if that made enough sense.

Jeff nodded. He gave a shrug of his shoulder, evidently conveying something to the other men. They set down their panels and glass door parts and attacked the existing metal framework with screwdrivers. Cassie glanced at the bedroom. Shortly the old door was dismantled. The men ran a hand vacuum over the area, especially the rails the glass doors had run on. There was the occasional rattle. Cassie wondered why the storm angel, hearing all this discussion and incomprehensible noise out here, didn't at least peek out. Not that she wanted him to, but the memory of his hurt expression plagued her. She knew how curious he was, how interesting he found everything in her apartment, not least herself. Perhaps she'd hurt him worse than she had thought. Had he felt rejected enough to open her bedroom window and jump out, plummeting to his death due to the hurt wing?

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The workmen assembled the new doors, glass and all, on the living room floor and began to carefully set them in place. It involved shoving the upper surface of the vinyl door frame in place, then trying to align the wheels at the bottom on the correct rail. This process took all three of them. Cassie began to wish the angel would stick his head out, keeping the wings in the room, of course. If he did, she would wave at him to go back in, but she'd be relieved he was still there. She shook her head, contrasting this feeling with the fierceness of her earlier desire to keep him hidden in the bedroom.

"How stupid I am," she said.

"No, it could have happened to anyone," Jeff said over his shoulder. "Not much you can do if fate throws a big old seagull at you."

She hadn't meant to say that aloud. Cursing under her breath, Cassie got up and went down the hall to the bedroom door. She listened and heard nothing. She stood there, irresolute, then opened the door a crack. The storm angel stood beside the bed, his back to her, wings trembling. He didn't move when she peeked in, but at least he was still there. "Stay," she said again. His wings twitched a little higher. He didn't look at her. Cassie shut the door.

"Got a dog?" Jeff asked cheerfully, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. One of the other men slid the new doors back and forth experimentally, nodding to himself.

"No," Cassie said and went back to the couch. A tension she'd only been half aware of faded out of her now that the doors were installed. Now there was a barrier between herself

and the hideous drop, a door she could lock, so the killing fall couldn't call her name and make her answer.

"Well, you're all set," Jeff said. She shook his hand, the others gathered up their equipment with businesslike speed, Jeff left her a business card and a receipt, and they trooped out again. Cassie shut the door behind them and locked it. She sat down with her back to it, putting her head in her hands. There was complete silence in the apartment. The air didn't move through it anymore with the balcony doors closed. Nothing, in fact, was happening at all.

Finally she felt less shaky. She was almost afraid to open the bedroom door, knowing she had actually treated the angel like a dog. Would he forgive her?

He didn't look disposed to. He stood in the same spot, his wings trembling slightly, his arms across his chest protectively. She'd gotten used to his complete disregard for clothing, she realized. It was odd, looking at him again after seeing the workmen, fully dressed and part of the culture she'd grown up in, where everyone wore clothes all the time. The angel never seemed to think of himself as naked. It made her eyes stop seeing the strangeness after a time.

She'd never get used to the wings.

"Storm?" she said, edging around to where she could see his face. It was closed and intent, hurt and sorrowful and bewildered. He hadn't the slightest idea why she had suddenly shoved him and yelled at him, she realized. He couldn't understand a word she said. She despaired of telling him why, of explaining anything. How was he to know that there was danger to him, that strange men might try to

capture him, hurt him, examine him, imprison him? That for the men of her world, the path to understanding was to destroy?

The storm angel had different ways of understanding things.

She reached out and put her hand on his arm. He twitched his whole body away, an instinctive gesture of fear that struck her to the heart. "I'm sorry," she said. "I won't do it again. Nobody else will come here. If they do I'll...I'll make them go away. I'm sorry. Storm. Please."

He turned his head farther away from her.

She backed away a step, went to the bedroom door and opened it wide. "Come out. Come and see the new door."

As if she'd locked him in a cage, he shuffled a step farther away. He closed his wings and his arms around himself and refused to look at her. She left the door open and called to him from the other side. He ignored her. He did not understand. She didn't know any way to make him understand.

"One way," she said, surprising herself. "You know one way."

No.

Cassie went into the living room and stopped at the halfway point. She hadn't done her ritual yet for the day. With the doors fixed, she didn't have any excuse. She fisted her hands and walked steadily, without stopping, to the door. Her stomach clenched. She pressed her forehead against the new glass. The apartment disappeared behind her. Nothing ahead except the drop.

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She could not force herself to open the door.

After ten endless minutes, she conceded defeat. Why not? Everything else defeated her. She backed away from the door and went to the kitchen, bracing herself over the sink until the nausea faded somewhat. Today's victory: keeping lunch down. That was the best Cassie Michaels, slave of fear, had in her.

She curled up in the corner, where she couldn't see the glass doors or the one to the bedroom. There she cried in taut silence into her arm, until her sleeves were damp.

Finally, too tired to think, although the sun was only nearing the horizon, she decided to go to bed. She'd try this again tomorrow. Fear and desire won today, but she was still alive, so she had another chance. Repeating to herself these words taught to her by a high school therapist, she went to the bedroom and looked in.

She saw only wings. The angel was wrapped in a ball across the head of her bed, and the half-folded wings covered him entirely. His bare toes peeped out from underneath the left one, and the wings moved with his breathing, too quickly for sleep. Cassie groaned, too worn out to know what to do. He was miserable. She couldn't go to sleep while he still suffered. Invasive, baffling presence though he was, he had a human's feelings, or even more than a human's feelings. She could not let anyone be in pain around her. That was why she had dragged him in, she knew, in the first place. That was why she had shoved him in the room, to save him. She was burdened by the impossibility of leaving anyone who was hurting alone, even when she couldn't help.

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Perhaps she knew now why she had no close friends, had alienated herself from her family, and rejected every offer of a date since she was seventeen. She felt too responsible. She couldn't help anybody when she couldn't even help herself.

"Storm," she said. "Don't be like this. Oh, why can't you speak English?" She went to the chest of drawers and got out a nightgown, going into the bathroom to change. Maybe she could sleep on the couch, now that the doors were fixed. Then she wouldn't have to look at his unhappiness.

On the way out of the bathroom, clothes in hand, she stopped and looked at him again. His broken feathers and the lump along the right leading edge of his wing reproached her. She dropped her clothes in the hamper and went over to the bed. His breathing didn't change, including the hint of a shudder in its upper regions, as if he were getting over a bout of weeping. Cassie raised her hand and hovered uncertainly before stroking his feathers lightly, hoping to comfort him. "Storm," she said softly. "Come on. Come on out. Everything's okay."

He didn't move.

"I wish I could explain it to you," she said. The memory of his kiss, sucking information out of her like blood, made her squirm. She could explain by kissing him, if she were willing to give herself up to that vampiric act. All her life, only the idea of falling had been as terrifying—or as attractive. She stroked again, feeling the silky feathers slip past her fingers, the tremor in them unchanging. "Storm," she said again, helplessly. Was he dying?

Gently, working only with the relatively undamaged left wing, she lifted the wirelike structure that was layered with feathers. It was cool in her hands, unless she chanced to touch the musculature at the leading edge, which was warm with the heat of the blood beneath. She urged it upward. It unfolded like a canopy over her head, the long feathers at the tips automatically flexing open like fingers.

"There you are," she said. His chin rested on his knees, his arms around his legs, a ball of miserable angel. Cassie bit her lip, but it was too late. The look in those eyes gave her no choice. She could not walk on the balcony without jumping off. She could not look at his face without doing what it took to make it better. She was weak.

She leaned down, first brushing the strands of hair off his forehead. She settled her hand on the slim, bony line of his jaw. Her stomach roiled and clenched, and her free hand tightened into a fist behind her. She arranged the explanation at the top of her mind. "It was to save you," she whispered intensely, "I didn't mean to hurt you, it was to keep you from being in danger. They would have captured you." She pressed her lips to his.

He startled, his body's near leap jerking their mouths apart for a moment. Then he uncurled, both his hands taking hold of her head as he had before, and kissed her more firmly.

His hurt and betrayal blew past her like dust on a breeze and were gone. She felt his relief, the huge relief of his understanding that there was a good reason for what she'd done. Forgiveness whirled around her in a warm cyclone. His tongue traced her lips. He drew her down against him, to

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kneel on the bed where he knelt, his long thighs planting themselves around her knees and gripping her as his hands gripped her. She slid her arms around his neck, fascinated and terrified, feeling the reciprocal flow of understanding rippling around her. He was so lonely, so afraid, so far from home.

This would kill her, she was certain. Part of her was willing to go, so long as she could go with this wonder. The angel was a stern teacher among his people, a teacher of flight. She felt a memory of joy, of power in the surge of his wings, and pride in those who followed and strove to keep up. There were more, other angels, a whole world of them, dwelling in some alien place beyond a tear in the universe that he had slipped through. Their world was bright, composed of sky and trees and black ice-sharp mountaintops under a lavender sky.

Overwhelmed, she tried to pull back, but her own grip on his neck, the traitorous comfort she felt in his arms, stopped her. The angel swayed forward against her. She felt his arousal clearly through the nightgown. He was as human as she in that respect. She felt him make a sound against her mouth. He was old, old, his boy's body the typical form of his people, the same until they died, centuries from their birth. She slid her hands through his hair, cradling his head as he cradled hers, as if she wanted this to continue. What did he know about her now? What embarrassment, what foolishness, what ugliness in her mind flowed into his?

That thought made her pull back at last, with a gasp. He breathed quickly against her breasts, her whole body wound into his embrace, the wings folded around her so they formed

the whole world. They were different now. In the sunlight, they rippled with colors, a muted rainbow like oil on water. The iridescence shifted and flowed with the slightest motion of breathing or trembling.

When she looked in his eyes she saw with amazement that they were different too. They changed from blue to purple to green, just in the moment she looked into them. His hair, every strand, breathed and bled with color. Cassie lifted her hand to touch, astounded. It felt the same, silky and incredibly fine, as if it were made of tiny shreds of feather itself.

The angel said something gently, in a voice gone slightly hoarse. Cassie realized suddenly how tightly she fitted against him, certainly tightly enough to feel how long and slim his penis was, like the rest of him. It lay in a firm line along her hip and stomach. She'd never considered the possibility—What exactly did she want? Having her first time be with an angel would certainly be weird enough to fit in with the rest of her weird life, yet she was absolutely certain about one thing: she didn't deserve anything like it. Not given how she'd treated the storm angel so far. It would be wrong to take advantage.

She squirmed out of his grasp, and he let her go, looking disappointed. That was much better than a curled-up ball of sorrow. He even smiled at her, patting her shoulder as she climbed off the bed. She stood there feeling stupid, looking at him. His erection was fading, but she knew if she came back into his arms, his welcome would be absolute. The sense of comfort drained out of her, leaving her cold and lonely. She

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got back on the bed again, this time at the foot, and covered herself up with a sheet. She put her head on one of the tumbled pillows and closed her eyes. Sleep would surely help.

She didn't sleep. The angel arranged himself on the rest of the bed, wings up in their accustomed position, the wounded one still unable to completely fold. She peeked at him, hearing the rustling sounds he made. He felt the lumpy place on his wing gingerly with his slender fingers, frowning. After that, he arranged himself for sleep. She heard his breathing grow deep and regular. The next time she peeked, much of the color had gone out of him, only a few swirls of deep purple or indigo remaining, fading already. Cassie told herself that rest was what she needed right now. Yet she couldn't sleep.

Over and over she replayed the way he'd felt against her body. She squirmed into a new position, but it didn't help. If she thought about it more she'd go mad, she decided by the time midnight came around. The angel was well and truly asleep, sprawled over most of the bed, leaving a corner barely big enough to hold her. His left arm touched her waist. She muttered curses at him, slid off the bed, and went out to the living room. She regarded the blank face of the television for a moment. Nothing on at this hour but informercials and news, which she didn't like to watch. She got her news from the newspaper and the discussions of it in the office.

The office. It was technically Sunday already. Tomorrow she'd have to go to work and leave the angel here alone.

Worse, Mr. Gordon's spy-housecleaner would be in on Wednesday. If Storm hadn't healed by then and flown away,

the whole thing would explode into a very messy, uncontrollable situation. She couldn't let that happen.

Now there was no hope she would sleep. Between worry, and the nagging memory of mingled comfort and sensuality when she'd been caught in his arms, Cassie was soon pacing back and forth. She took a path that veered away from the sliding glass doors toward the kitchen, and around to the bedroom door before turning to do it again. The clock struck two in the morning. She felt sure she had worn a track in the carpet. Bloodied as it was, it was probably time for new carpet anyway.

When the sun began to cast long beams of clear gold across the balcony, she stumbled out of the half-dozed state she had eventually achieved on the couch. She stood facing the glass doors. Step by step she moved closer, until she lifted one hand and set it on the brass handle, trying to make herself slide the door aside. She stared out at the dawn.

She could see the sky to the south, an unbroken cityscape leading the eye past the river to the foothills. The eastern horizon was pink and blue, chasing down an aura of darker blue and black in the west. A few roof gardens sparkled like jewels in the cool dawn light. Birds hovered, a flock of geese and a few seagulls. Like rats, seagulls lived everywhere and ate everything. As she watched, they mobbed a predatory bird, one of the midsize kestrels that lived in the tall buildings and hunted rats and kittens in the maze of streets.

She compared it to the images the angel had implanted in her mind of his own world. She had seen no buildings there, only openings in the black glassy stone that thrust up

between trees. The sky had been pale purple without sun or moon, like a high ceiling of clouds. The trees were dark, dark green, with as much variety in shape and texture as earthly ones. She wasn't sure whether the winged things she had seen from afar were birds, or others of his kind.

She slid the door aside, only an inch or two. The smell of the morning air, fresh and not too smoggy at this hour, went through her like a lance with its promise of the outside, the unbounded fall. She whimpered, stopping herself with great effort from closing it again. The balcony rail was out there, looking deceptively innocent. In the dust on it, there were two long, narrow footprints.

Cassie set her head against the vinyl doorframe, breathing the dawn breeze, waiting for the world to steady around her again. Nausea clenched her stomach, the balcony called her, and the earth and she seemed to be rotating at different speeds and directions now. She held her determination tightly, balanced between running away and sliding the door open another inch.

The storm angel asked a question behind her, his lilting voice curious and sympathetic. She gave a single dry sob and backed away blindly, leaving the door open. She ran to him and wound herself in his arms. His wings snapped forward, closing off the vision of the balcony and its rail, the fall and the terrifying hunger of gravity. She sighed with relief in the overwhelming comfort of his grasp. He leaned over her, setting his forehead against the crown of her head. She reached up, laying a hand on his neck.

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"I'm such a mess," she confided in a low voice. "I keep thinking this is working, and it's not. It's not." He explained something at length, occasionally gesturing at the glass doors, the wings flickering apart when he did so to reveal the balcony, then closing again. She shook her head. "I can't go out there, if that's what you want," she said tiredly. "I've tried, believe me."

He opened his wings, opened them wide, and released her. She turned around, amazed. For the first time she saw them fully spread, wide enough to nearly fill the living room. They were almost twice his length, if you counted from the base of the wing to the tip. The raw-looking lump along the edge of the right one was visible, but looked better. His eyes were bright, his face full of some clear, joyous thought. He opened his hands in her direction. She took his hand in one of hers, and he stepped past her, toward the doors. His wing brushed her. She ducked under, letting go of his hand. "No," she said. "Can't...can't do it. Storm?"

He reached out once more, and she backed away a step. Disappointment crossed his features. He let her go, turning back to the door. A breeze stirred his flyaway hair. Cassie crossed her arms over her chest. Was he going to leave? Was this the way he was going to fly away, without saying goodbye? Or maybe that's what he was saying, and she didn't understand.

"Don't go," she heard herself say, and wondered if she were crazy.

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He was going. He folded his wings again, stepping up to the door. He patted it a few times, feeling the glass, and cocked his head over his shoulder at her.

"Slide it aside," she said, miming the action. His fingers had already slipped into the gap, and in a moment he discovered the trick of it and slid the door all the way open. Suddenly the whole living room smelled of morning and the wild spicy scent of the angel. He stepped out, carefully ducking down, bringing the tall joints of his wings underneath the doorway. His feathers bobbed loosely in the breeze, his hair lifting and moving with it. He looked back at her, held out his hand again. This time, when she did not move, he seemed to forget her entirely.

With the light leap of a bird, he hopped up onto the balcony rail and stood there, the horizontal sunbeams shining on the bright dove-gray wings as he spread them wide. The breeze toyed with the tips. He appeared weightless, standing on his toes on the rail. Just once, a ripple of color passed over his feathers, oil on water, iridescent purples and blues following one another before disappearing again.

"Don't go," Cassie said in a tiny voice.

He didn't so much as look around. He leapt like a jungle cat, like a hawk leaving a cliff, like a salmon in a river. His wings caught the air with a hollow boom and flapped. With the first downstroke, he was already away from the balcony, arcing down before rising. His legs trailed together. His arms were crossed under his chest, the wings flaring. The right one was obviously weaker, and he tended to cant to that side.

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She could see no more. He was the size of a hang glider, the size of an eagle, the size of a seagull, gone, gone, gone.

She stood in the living room, thinking he'd left her with the job of closing the door. Then she only thought of the way he'd left her. If she could run to the balcony and look out, she might still catch a glimpse. She couldn't move.

"A day ago, two hours ago, you wanted him gone," she told herself. So why did it feel like he'd torn out her heart and taken it along for a souvenir, leaving her with shredded veins and an empty hollow? "Maybe he'll come back. How long are you going to stand in the living room and wait?"

She made her feet move and took a step toward the bedroom. Forget closing the door; it seemed disloyal. She didn't want him to get the idea she didn't want him to visit. Maybe she would never close it again, and carpet be damned. She could put out birdseed and make the place a home for itinerant sparrows. She walked away from the door, her arms tight around her torso as if to hold in the bleeding of her ripped-out heart.

Stiffly, she opened the bedroom door. A few feathers lay on the bed and scattered around the sheets. She picked up the biggest one, a pinion from somewhere in the middle of his wing, and held it against her face. The smell of him pierced her like fire, maybe cauterizing the torn veins but doing no healing. Cassie lay down on the bed and closed her eyes, her fingers white-knuckled on the hollow shaft of the feather. She wasn't aware of her body's need for rest sabotaging her sorrow. Eventually she fell into an ugly, impenetrable sleep.

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In time, her troubled dreams mutated into a comforting sense of a nearby presence. Someone slid his arms underneath her, and she squirmed to a comfortable position within them. Trusting as a child, the upper-sky scent of the angel around her, she slid her arm around his neck and cuddled against his shoulder. The bed slipped away from beneath her. Mildly alarmed, she struggled to wake.

Her feet scraped past a solid edge of surface. She opened her eyes. A chill breeze touched her. Sleeping during the day always left her muddled and headachy, and she lifted her free arm to brush her hair out of her face and rub her eyes. The soft, measured tread of the angel's carpeted footsteps underneath her changed to a flat padding on concrete. She felt a leap of fear. He had picked her up out of the bed and carried her onto the balcony. Her stomach clenched so hard she wondered if something had torn in there. Spiraling horror made her tighten her arm around his neck convulsively. She tried to protest and emitted a squeak.

Above her, his face was calm, lit with joy, as if dropping her over the edge to fall to her death would be the finest thing he had ever done in his life. She squirmed wildly. If she could break his grip now, she could at least fall onto the balcony and scurry back inside. He held her tightly, shifting his arm around her thighs, his long fingers a hard vise on her leg, his other arm supporting her shoulders, gripping the outer one tightly. There was a smooth, animal surge of power underneath her. She realized with a brilliant lightning-bolt of terror that he was standing on the balcony rail. The wind was

all around her like a living thing, stroking her with its chill hands.

"Nooo!"

With a rustling snap, the wings extended, like a sailing ship's canvas filling with wind. The angel, carrying her, leapt joyously from the edge of the balcony rail and took to the air. And Cassie Michaels lost her mind.

Screaming, shrieking, wailing, she fought the angel as if it were her dearest desire to wrench herself out of his grip and fall to the city below. Swallowed at last into the belly of the monster she had struggled with all her life, Cassie barely heard herself making ugly squealing cries, over and over, becoming increasingly hoarse. The angel's flight was heavy, burdened with her, his wings working hard, a rictus of effort marking his lean face. Her nails drew blood from his arm, and she might have bitten him. She pushed mindlessly at his chest, her throat tearing with the force of her screams, her whole body taut, wildly twisting. She arced in his arms like a woman galvanized by electric current. The last thing she heard was his voice, saying something reassuring. Her vision faded out, and Cassie's consciousness fled as if bludgeoned.

She woke without opening her eyes, feeling that if she did, the world would spin. At first she wasn't sure what had happened. There was a breeze running lightly across her face. Why was she lying on the grass? Her fingers opened and closed, feeling the blades, the damp roots, the moist soil underneath. She reached farther and her fingers brushed sun-warmed feathers. They flexed lazily under her touch. She opened her eyes and looked up.

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It was a garden. The angel had flown her to paradise. There were small flowering trees everywhere, in big concrete pots glazed in shades of green and yellow. Her building manager would be happy here. She lay on perfectly manicured grass with her head in the angel's lap, his wings spread out around her, shielding her from the sun. A pathway meandered past, paved with irregular natural stone. Across the path from her, a picnic table stood, white Victorian cast iron with two matching chairs. A bird chirped happily somewhere.

She sat up slowly, wonderingly, looking around. White iron rails stood in front of rows and patterns of flowers, ivory and purple pansies, taller tulips a burgundy so deep it was almost black, and rows of daylilies encircling rounded topiary bushes. Off to the right was an outhouse-sized building, made of the same stone as the pathway, with a metal all-weather door set into it. A waist-high decorative iron fence enclosed the garden. Beyond that...

Cassie gasped, and the angel's arms came around her waist comfortingly. She shoved at the grass with her heels, pushing back at him so hard she nearly climbed into his lap. There was nothing except sky beyond the fence. Nothing except a hideous, laughing drop, waiting for her, surrounding the garden on all sides. She clapped her hands over her eyes. "No," she said.

The storm angel soothed her, petting her hair, over and over. Cassie drew deep, shuddering breaths. She sat almost at the exact center of the roof garden. It was some rich man's property that probably cost thousands per month to own and

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maintain. The door which led down to the penthouse suite of this building was doubtless heavily padlocked. The angel had bypassed that and landed on the roof. She laughed a little. "Why did you do that," she moaned. "Why did you take me here? You're going to make me crazy."

He pulled her closer against him. She heard the rustle as he brought his wings forward around her, dimming the light and hiding the sky. He said something reassuring, but she could not understand.

After a few moments, she sucked in air and lifted her head. Between her fingers, she mostly saw feathers. Her lurching stomach settled. "Don't let go," she said.

He murmured something against her hair. She swallowed uneasily, balancing this sneaking sense of absolute comfort with the unwall'd ferocity of gravity, only twenty steps away in any direction. Slowly her hands slid away from her eyes and clutched one another instead. He reached behind him, handed her a plucked flower, something pink and lush with a faint gorgeous scent. Cassie took it shakily. She twisted in his arms, looking up at him. He smiled.

She couldn't fathom it. What did it mean to him, giving her a flower? Was this a romantic gesture among his people, or was he only trying to distract her from her terror? Was this about fear, or about desire?

Tentatively, he cupped his long hand around the back of her neck, thumb sliding behind her ear in the familiar gesture. She muttered, "I have to go to work tomorrow. What's happened to my life?" His lips touched hers, and a door in her

mind opened whether she willed it or not, and the current of knowledge began to flow both ways.

Her arms twined around his neck, drawing him closer as if she longed for this. She could hardly believe herself. Her disgust frayed away in the wind moving between them, failing to survive the flood of comprehension. For his people this was communication, far greater and far more commonly used than language. She had a clear image of two angels flying near one another, unable to tangle and kiss in midair without threatening their flight, impatient with mere words tossed between them. Around this image she felt the angel's agreement, pleasure at her understanding. It was not akin to rape after all. It went both ways. This act was the simplest, purest communion.

Cassie felt his tongue flicker along her lips and parted them. His wing hurt, throbbing badly. She could feel how little that meant to him, compared to the joy of being released from the dark imprisoning room where she had kept him. Her hands slid through his feathery hair. She felt the sun on it, and on her face and arms.

His wings relaxed, drew back, leaving nothing between her and the fall except the short distance from the fence to where she lay. She stiffened and the angel clung to her, insistent. She steadied herself with difficulty, concentrating on his touch, on the way his tongue curled around hers. She wasn't quite sure when she had made the decision, but it was piercingly clear now, like a single note of music translated into a full chord, humming between them like a power line, like light, a sparkling yes.

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He shifted her off his crossed thighs and onto the grass, laying her down in it and leaning over her. He stretched out, fitting himself to her side, opening a wide canopy of feathers overhead. His lips slid down to press tenderly against the area under her ear, making her shiver, and she opened her eyes wide. He flushed with color again, the soft feathers iridescent, shifting and changing with every minute movement. She understood that the earlier gray was an effect of his wounding, of his imprisonment, of his loss and bewilderment. Now his true colors were showing, the hues of all possible skies cycling through his eyes and hair and wings. She bit her lip as he nuzzled her throat. Her hands wound in his hair, astonished by pleasure here in the midst of fear.

He had no idea how to operate the buttons and zippers of her clothing, so she had to do it for him. A momentary worry that someone would open the door in the hut and come out struck her. She shrugged it off. The storm angel watched eagerly, a luminous desire flaring around him like phosphorescence. For the first time, she was as naked in his presence as he was in hers. He remarked on something as she lay back, flushing, the cold grass tickling. She wondered if she were really going to do this. The comfort she felt in his touch answered her. The way her heart leapt after him when he flew away answered her. Soon he might fly away again. Soon she might lunge at the railing and fall away to her death. Chances might be few. For here, for now, the answer was yes.

"Storm," she said with a sigh. He rested his long hand lightly on her throat, meeting her gaze.

"Caasiel," he said, then more carefully, "Cassie." He grinned at her surprise, and bent to kiss her. Her name rang like a bell between them. The understanding flooded through them both. She was offering herself up to him. He puzzled briefly at the strange assortment of negative connotations that went with this act, and she felt a curl of pity from him. Her impatience made him chuckle, and he curled one arm around her and pulled her against him.

Her nipples, taut with the chill of the rooftop air, pressed against his skin, which was so much warmer, and made him wriggle slightly in their mutual embrace. He slid his hand down her collarbone and the slope of her breast, his spread fingers covering it completely. She arched up from the grass to his touch and felt a thrill running through him when she did. His heart pounded as fast as hers. She could hear it.

His lips pulled back from hers, leaving his tongue to trace her mouth. The sun came and went across her closed eyes as his wings moved above her. She could sense a tender amusement flowing through him. He read her eagerness, the clumsy demand of a virgin to have everything at once. One arm slid beneath her neck to complete her capture. Cassie felt the strength in his muscles, almost as hard as the ground. His free hand caressed her, making her squirm.

Timidly, she slid her own arms around his waist, pulling him against her, and felt the long slender line of his erection against her hip. It was hot, eager as the rest of him. She parted her thighs. His hand found its way there, cupping her, reflecting back her own heat from his skin. She gasped.

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The storm angel's thoughts were around her like rain, touching her with light touches, leaving knowledge behind like droplet imprints in sand. His experience with making love was vast and deep, but he had never been with a human. His people were hardly aware of humans, although a few had sighted them and brought back that vision to share among the community. He had been shocked and astounded to find out she was more than an animal, that communion with her was possible at all. Cassie felt her indignant reaction to this ripple through him, felt and heard his chuckle against her neck. It spread a tingle even among the fiery sparkling pleasure swirling through her sensitized skin.

She wondered if he felt this was nasty, like a human would feel about making love to a chimpanzee. Even as she phrased the question, she sensed the answer from him: her kindness, her strange beauty and her ability to open her mind to him this way had granted her full angel status in his thoughts.

With an exquisite silken slide, his long fingers parted her slippery lower lips. She gave a surprised, delighted cry when his fingers entered her. She tightened her grip on his waist. His tongue curled around her nipple as he stroked her, making her lift her hips to his hand, urging him into rhythm, drawing a guttural moan from her.

It came to her that there was one thing that puzzled him about her, unfathomable to his angel's spirit: her fear of heights. He had no idea why she veered from the edge with terror. She pulled her mind from the question, not wanting to spoil the pleasure that climbed higher and higher in her nerves, crackling like impending lightning around his driving

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fingers. She released her hands from the small of his back and did what she had wanted to do for a long time: she plunged her hands into the soft little feathers at the base of his wings and slid her fingers through them like they were fur. The angel gasped and arched against her, his fingers pausing just when she wanted them to continue. She felt his penis stiffen against her. Cassie made a disappointed, hungry sound and he groaned against her throat.

He slipped his hand from her, drawing a damp line up her hip, tickling and making her squirm. She whimpered in protest, then realized what he was doing. It was in the river of understanding flowing between them, his desire like a sleek rainbow fish sliding past her, echoing her own. Eagerly, she opened her thighs when his knee nudged her. He took a position above her. She looked up into his boy's face, his iridescent hair falling over his iridescent eyes, the shifting colors of his wings spreading overhead, and thought only *yes, yes, yes*. He steadied her hip with one hand, and she felt the head of his erection nudging at her opening. After a moment he found it and with breathless restraint slid into her a little way. She froze with a moment's pain, and he stopped, waiting. He didn't need to wait for her to speak, or urge him on with hand or motion; he could feel her pain, as he felt her pleasure, and knew when he could move again.

Little by little he penetrated, stretching her open for him, until he was sheathed in her completely. She gave a shuddering sigh, feeling hot tears run down from the corners of her eyes. The pain was fading now. She felt his gladness that she was both willing and undaunted.

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Quite deliberately, she slipped her hands up the arching lower curves of his wings, ruffling the feathers, and felt the unfolding bloom of pleasure take away his thoughts in a surge of eagerness. He twisted his slim hips, rolling partly out of her, back in again. Far from hurting, now it was the thing she wanted above all, an oiled-silk slide teasing a gasp from her lips.

They moved together. Cassie rocked with him, shocked and astounded by the size of her pleasure, frightened by its intensity. Some part of her mind was learning from the angel, the information coming in a greater flood than before as he stroked, his big hands cradling her head, his breath explosive and hot against her throat. The broad wings, rippling with color, rustled and trembled overhead.

Cassie clung to his shoulder blades, concentrating on lifting her hips at the right moment to answer his thrusts. He was a teacher, as she had glimpsed before, an instructor of flight to the young angels, male and female, his kiss and touch the means of communicating. Some of them were afraid, not to the extent she was, but the most dangerous time of their lives was when their wings burst from their shoulders and grew to flight size. They could not leash their wild hunger for the sky. They had no idea how to control themselves in a wind, or in a tight place, and could be hurt or killed. Young angels needed a teacher, and her storm angel was one. Perhaps there was a way for Cassie to learn what he wanted her to learn.

He cried out softly against her neck, a sound she might have thought was pain if she were not utterly certain

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otherwise. His hips moved faster and faster, driving him into her, deep and hard. She sensed some kind of peak was now inevitable for him, uncontrollable. He flooded her with himself, his being roaring through her like a waterfall. She trembled for her own identity. The roar of knowledge, wrapped in a bone-deep tenderness for her, a protective hunger to know everything about her, was almost too much, distracting her body from its own urgency. She held onto him with arms and legs, feeling the smooth, sweet flex of his long muscles along his back and thighs, no wasted energy, everything flowing into this one purpose.

Suddenly things seemed to leap to great clarity. Her hips clapped against his in a hurrying beat, a powerful sensation coursing from every limb down into the center of her, tightening her around him. She heard a shout of pleasure against her shoulder, and gasped in a huge breath. The lightning was about to strike, galvanizing the entire river.

Cassie heard herself squeal sharply, shoving herself up onto him, convulsions clenching around his shaft, a thunderous pulse. At the same moment her mind exploded, a single, separate understanding lodging deep within her, driven there like a spear. She clung to him, shaking. He held her tightly, aware of this moment, sharing it with her. As she eased back from it, he began to move again, slowly. She shook and whimpered with the increased sensitivity of her body.

She felt the question curl wordlessly through his mind, and answered it the same way. Yes, she wanted him to go on, to reach that moment himself. So he began again to stroke,

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slowly picking up the rhythm again, and she followed his excitement, the unbearable nearness of the peak, as he began to lose control. She thought he was moving fast and hard before, but now he thrust wildly at her, losing the ability to concern himself with her feelings, making use of her to answer his body's needs. It was terrifying, a sense of power flooding her, and she gave way to it. For a long moment, he plunged into her hard. She felt him shudder powerfully, groan, and twitch within her, over and over.

She held him as tight as she could, knowing from his open soul that to brush her fingers through his feathers again would be too much, too intense, and waited for him to come down from the heights. At length he did so, and like a human male, collapsed atop her, panting, his mind submerged in something similar to sleep. She stroked his hair gently. In that touch, in the strong, slow current of comprehension, she understood he was going to leave her after this, and she grieved.

When he returned to himself, he slipped from her, rearranging himself along her side, touching her tenderly. She rested one hand on his arm where it lay across her. Nakedness in his presence no longer embarrassed her. Other things had also changed. She felt different, but not in any way unhappy. There was a glow around her, though no one could see it. Her body pulsed with her heartbeat, sore, but she felt cleansed.

"Storm," she said softly, and felt his smile without having to see it. The river of understanding was slowing, becoming a trickle. She knew she could get it back whenever he kissed

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her. Until then, she was alone in her mind, and able to laugh at herself for missing what she had previously abhorred.

The single, powerful comprehension she felt near the end was still there. "I should have known," she whispered with her eyes closed, to the hot presence of the sky overhead. "The answer was there all this time."

She disentangled herself and stood up shakily. She brushed her hair back and looked down at the angel. He sat up, a curious little smile curling one side of his mouth. He nodded to her, flipping his wings behind him. The multitude of colors still flowed over him, each individual strand of feathery hair teased by the wind, his feathers blowing lightly. He watched her walk, knees trembling, a few steps toward the railing.

It was about fear, this thing he had taught her, this spear of comprehension still quivering in its target behind her eyes. Her life had been about fear. Suddenly she felt everything turned inside out. Fear had ruled her, because she hadn't understood it. Now...

She felt her stomach clench, the old dread pulling at her, worse than ever. Felt the way she expected the edge to call her name, to pull her right up to it and over.

In her mind, she was already living in a future where she was falling, already halfway down the side of the building, with death below her and no way to stop herself. In her mind, she was screaming, gravity sucking her down. In her mind, she was already crushed at the bottom of the building, a mass of broken flesh, cars honking, people shrieking, traffic

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stopping. But maybe that wasn't her future. It hadn't happened yet. She still had a choice.

She took another step. Right here, right now, her body was nude, caressed by the wind, sore and pulsing with recent pleasure. Right here, right now, the grass of this silly rooftop garden was firm and solid under her feet. Right here, right now, there was no future except what she chose. Even if she took some more steps toward the edge, she would still be on solid ground. Those steps belonged utterly to her.

Cassie waited until this idea sank in properly. Her stomach eased, although she walked closer to the railing. She forced herself to look at the rail itself. It was not something she would automatically fling herself over. Instead, it was a solid barrier between herself and any fall. Fear spoke in her, a voice she could listen to—or not. She waited until the physical symptoms eased, telling herself over and over, "Now, right here, right now, I am not falling." Desire twisted in her, the longing to go ahead and leap.

"Maybe I will."

She stepped closer. How easy it was, with fear turned upside down. She laughed at the wind, reached out and laid her fingers lightly on the cold metal of the rail. Below her, the city was a spreading field of buildings, traffic, people walking. A bird or two navigated the maze of concrete below her, and the sky arched above her like an upturned bowl of fine azure porcelain. It was beautiful, beautiful. She trembled with eagerness.

She turned her head, holding onto the rail, her hair blowing out behind her as the breeze strengthened. The angel

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got to his feet, standing arrow straight, his wings spread, their tips ruffling in the air, preparing to fly back to his home. He grinned at her. She could read his fondness and pride as easily as if he were kissing her. She could see his farewell written on his face. She turned back, gripped the rail with both hands, looking out over the cityscape, feeling as if she owned it all in her triumph.

Cassie stepped onto the cold square rail and threw herself off the roof of the building.

In the sweet, endless seconds before the angel caught her and bore her up, she understood at last. Her fear was for falling. Her desire—her lifelong desire—was for flying.

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Chapter 3

Cassie Michaels stood on her balcony, one hand holding onto the rail, the other onto a leather leash. She was two years older than when she had lost her virginity in the rooftop garden. The storm angel had flown her back to her apartment afterward. She would always wonder what happened when the owner of the garden came up to find his security unbreached, his grass rumpled and her nightgown discarded there. Perhaps even an iridescent feather or two.

Since that day, it had been her custom to stand on her apartment balcony every dawn, rain or shine, looking into the rising day. Hoping she would see a flying thing, bigger than a bird. When she stood out here, she considered jumping. She thought about that last good day before she met the angel, when it had still been hard for her to walk out on her balcony and face the wind.

"Bah," said a voice beside her.

"Don't eat the potted plants," she said, and leaned down to gather up her son. He was still as chunky and round as any child of a little over a year. He was learning to walk and had a baby's fascination with putting everything in his mouth, whether it fit or not. She extracted a green leaf and tossed it over the balcony. It spun in the wind as it went. Mother and child watched it go.

"Bah?" The baby stretched out from her grip, reaching. The leash, tied around his waist, creaked, solid leather. He

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flapped the stubby wings, perfect in shape but too small to hold him, growing from his shoulder blades.

"No, you can't go after the leaf," she said. "Not yet, anyway." She bent over the rail to see if the leaf were still visible. No.

In the wind, of the wind, a rushing sound, growing into a roar. The great canopy of multicolored wings filled her vision and he landed. Storm threw his arms around his woman and their child, burying his face in her throat, as he had done every two or three days for the last two years. She handed him his son, who was crowing excitedly, and they went into her home, the angel ducking his wings. He tossed the child in the air to watch his determined, ineffective flapping, and praised him in the language he was teaching the boy. With a kiss to the child's forehead, he transferred whatever he wished to say, received whatever the baby wanted to tell him in return. Cassie watched, smiling contentedly.

She glanced back out at the balcony. Later, when the baby went to sleep, she would jump. The angel would catch her, and she would fly with him.

Yes, that had been the last good day, before the angel came.

All the days since had been *fantastic*.

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About Kathleen Brandt

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Born the daughter of an anthropologist and a preacher/storyteller, Kathleen inherited a love of art and craft from previous generations. She is a single mother living in Colorado and handcrafter of kaleidoscopes, woodturning and jewelry, among others. Raised on fantasy, science fiction and a hugely eclectic reading base, she has a tendency to ignore genre lines, and her work includes fantasy, science fiction, horror, humor and erotica. Frequently within the same piece.

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