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Angel

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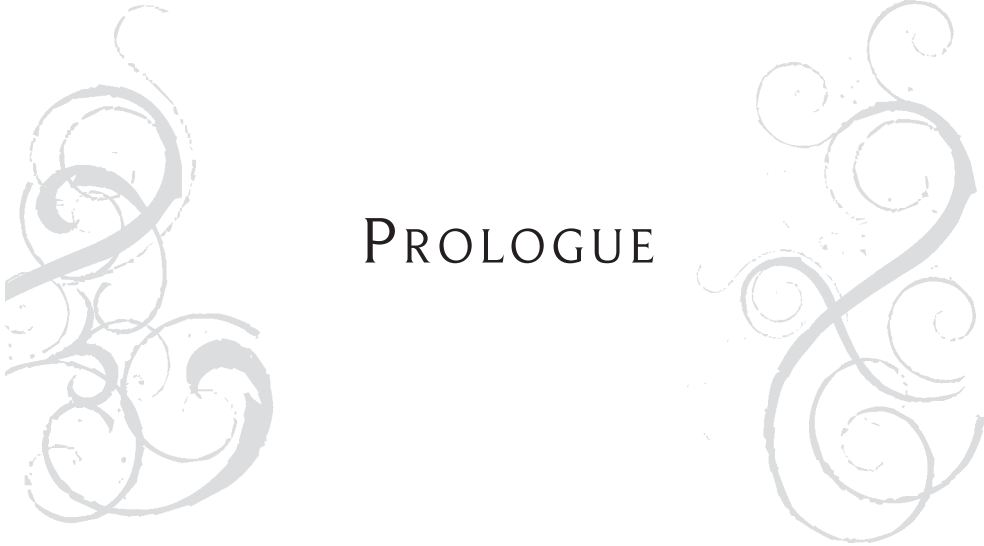
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To my husband, with love



PROLOGUE

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“IS THAT YOUR CAR?” ASKED the girl at the 7-Eleven
checkout counter. “The shiny black one?”

Alex nodded as he put a Big Gulp coffee down in front
of her.

“Cool,” breathed the girl, gazing out at it. It was a
Porsche Carrera, and the sunshine was glistening off it
like liquid onyx. “We don’t see cars like *that* around here
very often.”

No, I bet you don’t, thought Alex, trying to remember
where *here* was. Cattle Chute, Oklahoma, or some such
dismal place. *Home of the rootin’-tootin’ Cowboys!* the

bullet-ridden sign outside of town had proclaimed.

“Pump three,” he told her.

The girl smiled at him, widening her brown eyes as she rang up his coffee and the gas. “So, are you new in town?” she asked. *VICKY*, said her name tag. She was almost as tall as he was – which wasn’t that tall; he was just over fifteen – and her brown hair had been ironed so straight that you could get a paper cut from it.

Saturday job, he thought, pulling out his wallet. *Sixteen or so. She probably goes to that giant high school that I passed just outside of town.*

The thought irritated and amused him in equal measure. He had only seen high school on TV: jocks in their letter jackets, cheerleaders jumping around the field, couples hanging onto each other at the Senior Prom. It was another world, one so stupidly innocent that it was frightening. High school students were old enough to be fighting, only none of them were.

Because hardly anyone actually knew that there was a war on.

“Nah, just passing through,” he said. He handed her a couple of twenties.

Vicky’s face fell. “Oh. I was just wondering if you’d be going to our high school...but I guess you’re sort of old for that. What are you – twenty-one or something?”

“Or something,” he said with a slight grin. He was

actually seventeen, but she was right in a way. In all the ways that mattered, he was old.

She took her time getting his change. “How long are you here for? Because, you know – if you’re looking for something to do, or maybe someone to show you around—”

There was a beeping sound from his jeans pocket as his cellphone announced a text. Alex’s heart leaped. Turning away slightly, he pulled the phone out and flipped it open.

Enemy sighted, Aspen CO. Residence 1124 Tyler St.

Yes! Immediately, Alex felt the fierce buzz sweep over him that he always got when there’d been a sighting. Finally – it had been over a week; he’d been going insane. Putting his phone back in his pocket, he smiled at Vicky. Why not? He’d never see her again anyway.

“Maybe next time,” he said, picking up his coffee. “Thanks, though.”

“Sure,” she said, trying to smile back. “Well...have a good trip.”

As Alex pushed open the swinging door, the too-cold air conditioning abruptly gave way to a flat, burning September. He slid into the Porsche. It was low to the ground, and its black leather seats wrapped around him in a dark embrace. It was comfortable as hell, actually, which was good, since he practically lived in it. *Aspen CO*, he

punched into the GPS. Estimated time of arrival, 2.47 a.m. Almost nine hours. He'd drive straight through, he decided, taking a gulp of coffee. He didn't need sleep – god, all he'd been *doing* since his last prey was resting.

Pulling out of the parking lot, Alex turned onto Highway 34, heading north out of town. If you could call it a town: there were a few dozen grids of streets with clapboard houses, and a couple of long, brightly-lit shopping strips, where the *rootin'-tootin'* teenagers probably cruised up and down on Saturday night, drinking Bud Lights and shouting at each other. Just outside the town limits it all ended, and became dust and grain silos and oil pumps. Setting the cruise control to seventy, Alex turned on the radio. The Eagles came on, warbling about the Hotel California, and he grimaced. Switching to his iPod instead, he put on some indie rock as the Porsche began to smoothly eat the miles.

And, briefly, he wondered what Vicky would think if she knew he had a semi-automatic rifle in his trunk.

The Rocky Mountains cradled Aspen deep within them, like a giant's palm lightly cupping a handful of diamonds. The road twisted and turned down the mountain as Alex approached the city, his headlights sweeping the dark asphalt in front of him. Startled rabbits froze on the side

of the road, their eyes wide, and once he disturbed a buck, sending it crashing and leaping into the woods.

2.51, read his car clock as he crossed into the Aspen city limits. Not bad. The GPS directed him to Tyler Street, a quiet, tree-lined avenue not far from downtown. One of the streetlights was flickering; the rest glowed silently, showing a row of houses with large bay windows and immaculate front lawns. No house lights were on. Everyone was asleep.

Alex parked his car a few doors down from number 1124. Propping his elbows against the steering wheel, he surveyed the house, his dark eyebrows drawn together thoughtfully. Sometimes you could see a sign of them if you knew what to look for, but there was nothing here. It was just an ordinary house, though the front lawn wasn't quite as pristine as the others. A few weeds grew here and there, spiking rebelliously up through the grass.

Letting down the neighbourhood – tsk, tsk, thought Alex.

He'd transferred his rifle to the front seat before he began the descent into Aspen, and now he clicked the magazine into place and sighted along the rifle's length, squinting through the infrared lens at the house. The front door snapped into an eerie reddish focus. He could even read the name on the wrought-iron mailbox that was affixed to the front porch wall: *T. Goodman*.

Goodman. Alex snorted despite himself. The creatures often took human last names to help them blend in; nice to see that some of them had a sense of humour. He screwed the silencer onto the rifle's muzzle. It was state of the art, as sleek and gleaming as the rifle itself. Now all he had to do was wait. He settled back in his seat, gazing at the house. Back in the days when they'd gone out in teams, the other AKs had always hated stakeouts, but they were part of the hunt to Alex. Part of the buzz. Your senses had to be on alert; you couldn't relax for a moment.

Almost an hour later, the front door opened. He had the rifle in place in less than a second, watching carefully through the lens. The tall man on the front porch paused to lock the door, and then jogged briskly down the steps and strode off down the street, his footsteps echoing with purpose.

Alex lowered the rifle, unsurprised that T. Goodman was in his human form – they normally only showed their true nature when they were feeding. He waited until the man had turned the corner, heading towards downtown, and then he got out of his car and softly opened the trunk. Pulling on a black trench coat, he eased the trunk closed again and set off, the rifle safely hidden beneath the coat's long folds.

As he turned the corner he could see his quarry about a block away, crossing the street. He slowed for a moment,

letting his gaze drift out of focus. An aura swam into view around the dark figure: pale silver, with a faint blue light flickering feebly at its edges.

Alex quickened his step. The creature hadn't fed in days – which meant that he must be on the hunt now.

Sure enough, the man led him to a bar downtown. *Spurs*, flashed the sign in front. A yellow and pink neon figure of a cowgirl wearing shorts and a tiny leather vest flashed on and off, waving her hat. There was the heavy pulse of music, and a chorus of raucous male cheers.

Recognizing the sign, Alex shook his head in grudging admiration. *Spurs* was one of those places where the female waitstaff wore sexy clothes and danced on the bar. The men staggering out at this hour would be drunk and rowdy, not paying much attention to their surroundings – ideal if you were on the hunt. It was just the sort of place that he'd have chosen himself, in fact.

A pair of bored-looking bouncers flanked the front door. T. Goodman melted into the shadows nearby, attracting no attention from either of them. Half a street away, Alex took up a position behind a parked Subaru, mentally calculating the fallout distance. He'd be fine, he decided; he'd gone for much closer than this in his time. The bouncers might catch a bit of flak, though.

Just then *Spurs's* heavy metal door swung open, and a man wearing a dishevelled business suit stumbled out.

“Excellent night, my man,” he said, slapping one of the bouncers on the shoulder. “Those ladies are *goo-od*.” He shook his head in wonder, as if the power to describe just how good was beyond him.

“Yeah, they’re real hot,” said the bouncer, looking amused.

“Hope you’re not planning on driving, Eddie,” said the other one. “Why don’t you let us call you a cab?”

Eddie made no reply. He wove off down the street, humming tunelessly to himself. One of his stumbling feet caught an empty beer can, and the sound of it echoed through the night. The bouncers glanced at each other and shrugged. Not their problem.

Alex straightened as T. Goodman detached himself from the gloom and trailed off after the man, a tall, silent shadow. Pulling out his rifle, Alex began to track. It would be any moment now, he was sure of it. They didn’t need privacy, just a relatively clear field. Without taking his eyes off Goodman, Alex drew a deep breath to centre himself and then swiftly moved the focus of his energy up through his chakra points, until it hovered somewhere above his crown.

Immediately, he felt a slight shudder pass through him as the creature locked minds with its prey. He had been right – this was it. Wavering, Eddie stopped in his tracks, looking uncertain. Slowly, he turned around.

With a dark ripple, Goodman’s human body melted away. A blinding, glorious light grew in its place, until it was like a beacon that shone up and down the street, illuminating everything – the bar, the other buildings, Eddie’s small, frightened face. And at the centre of the light was a glowing being, seven feet tall, whose giant, spreading wings were such a pure white that they looked almost blue.

“This...this can’t be...” stammered Eddie as the angel drew towards him.

Half a street away, Alex could hear the bouncers laughing with a woman who’d stopped to ask them for a light. If any of them glanced this way, all they’d see would be Eddie standing on his own, wobbling drunkenly on the dark street.

Leaning over the top of the car, Alex squinted through the lens, his hands cool and steady as he aimed the rifle. The angel’s face came into focus, magnified several times. As a human Goodman had been as physically attractive as all angels were in that form, though Alex knew that if he’d got a good look at his face it would have seemed slightly weird – too intense, with eyes perhaps a shade too dark for comfort. But now, in his angel form, Goodman’s features had an almost otherworldly beauty: proud, fierce. The halo that framed them radiated like holy fire.

“Don’t be afraid,” soothed the angel in a voice that was

a hundred chiming bells. "I am here for a reason. I need to give you something."

Eddie dropped to his knees, eyes bulging. "I – I—"

The halo. Alex sighted on it, aiming for the deep, pure white at its heart.

"It won't hurt," continued the angel, drawing closer. It smiled then, and its radiance increased tenfold, burning the night. Trembling, Eddie moaned and ducked his head, unable to bear the beauty of it.

"In fact, you'll remember this as the most meaningful experience of your life—"

Alex pulled the trigger. As the pulsing energy of the angel's halo was disrupted by the force of the bullet, the creature burst without a sound into a million shooting fragments of light. Alex ducked behind the car as a shockwave slammed past him, the angel's scream of anguish echoing in his ears. Still in his enhanced state, he could see the energy fields of every living thing nearby affected by the aftershock: the ghostly outline of a tree, of a few stray blades of grass, all of them dancing and warping as if buffeted by a hurricane.

Slowly, everything returned to normal. There was silence. Alex brought his energy focus back to his heart chakra, and the ghostly outlines disappeared. Shoving his rifle under the car for the moment, he walked over to Eddie, who still kneeled trembling on the sidewalk.

T. Goodman was gone completely, with no sign of him left.

"Hey man, you okay?" said Alex easily, crouching beside him. The bouncers had stopped talking and were looking in their direction. Alex raised a casual hand to them. *Everything's fine, dude's just a bit drunk, is all.*

Eddie turned a tear-stained face towards him. "I – there was – I know you won't believe me, but—"

"Yeah, I know," said Alex. "Come on, let's get you up." He put an arm around Eddie and helped him to his feet. Jeez, the guy could try dieting a little.

"Oh, my head..." moaned Eddie, leaning limply against Alex's shoulder. *Angel fallout*, thought Alex. Eddie had only been a few feet away, and though most of it had blasted straight back at Alex, he'd still feel the effects for days. It was better than angel burn, though.

Anything was better than that.

"It was so beautiful," mumbled Eddie. "So beautiful..."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Yeah, real beautiful," he muttered. He started walking back towards the bar with Eddie shuffling along beside him. As usual, he felt the mix of pity and contempt that he always felt for civilians. Though he spent his life trying to save them, they were all so clueless that he didn't get much pleasure from it.

"Hey, I think our friend here needs a cab," he said when he reached the bouncers. "Found him passed out on the sidewalk over there."

One of the bouncers chuckled. "Yeah, we'll take care of it," he said, taking the businessman's weight from Alex. "Old Eddie's a regular here, aren't you, buddy?"

Eddie rolled his head, struggling to focus. "Tom...I saw an angel," he slurred.

The bouncers burst out laughing. "Yeah, you mean Amber, right?" said the other one. "She wears those really short shorts while she's dancing around on the bar." He winked at Alex. "Hey man, you wanna go in? No cover charge; our treat."

Alex had been in plenty of places like this in his time, mostly dragged along by the other AKs when he was younger. He thought they were boring as hell, to be honest. And though a drink sounded good, the thought of sitting in a Spurs with his adrenaline still pumping from the kill was a little too surreal, even for him.

He shook his head, taking a step backwards. "Nah, maybe next time. I'd better get going. Thanks, though."

"Anytime," said the first bouncer. Eddie had passed out for real by then, slumped against him like a sack of potatoes. He shifted the man's bulk impatiently. "Hey, Mike, you gonna call that cab company, or what? Sleeping Beauty here is fading fast."

"Yeah, tell him to lay off the hard stuff," said Alex, with a grin. "He'll be seeing pink elephants next."



CHAPTER *One*



"THIS IS SO EMBARRASSING," MUTTERED Nina. She was leaning against the driver's side door with her arms crossed over her chest, shaking her head in disapproval.

"Do you want it fixed, or not?" I demanded. My voice came out muffled, because my head was buried somewhere deep in her Corvette's engine. Along with most of my upper body. I was trying to replace her carburettor, only her engine was so filthy that the nuts were practically welded in place with gasket grime. Which is black and gross, in case you're wondering.

"Would you hand me that wrench? The one with the yellow handle."

Nina grumbled to herself as she crouched down to rummage through my tools. “I can’t believe you actually have a *toolbox*. I can’t believe you brought it to *school* with you.” She shoved the wrench into my hand.

“Fine – should I stop? Just say the word.” I’d already removed her air filter by then, and disconnected the fuel line and vacuum hoses. We were in the school parking lot, because I had figured it would be easier doing it there than in my garage at home, which is stuffed to the gills with old boxes and bicycles and crap that my aunt keeps meaning to throw out but hasn’t got around to doing yet. I had clearly reckoned without the embarrassment factor, though. Story of my life.

“Willow! Don’t you dare,” hissed Nina, pulling at her brown bangs. “Look, don’t get all sensitive. Yes, I want it fixed; I just didn’t know that you were going to do it *here*, that’s all.”

She glanced furtively over her shoulder at the playing field, obviously keeping an eye out for Scott Mason and his gang of swaggering football heroes. The school day was long over with, but football practice was still going strong. Meanwhile the student parking lot was like an empty grey ocean around us, with only a few stray cars dotted about here and there.

“Just be thankful I didn’t do it at lunchtime,” I told her. “I do have some sense of decorum, you know. Oh, come

on, you—” I gritted my teeth together as I struggled to turn the wrench, putting all of my weight on it. All at once the nut gave way. “*Ha!* Success.” Spinning it free, I pulled the old carburettor out and checked it against the new one. Perfect match. Which was sort of a miracle, given that Nina’s Corvette practically belonged in the Smithsonian.

Nina wrinkled her nose. “Decorum, you? Don’t make me laugh. Like, what are you *wearing?*”

“Clothes?”

“Willow. You look like...I don’t know; I don’t think there’s even a word for it.”

“Really? Cool.” I grinned as I wiped my hands off on a bit of wadding. “That means I’m unique, right?” I was wearing a shimmering green 1950s brocade blouse with my favourite pair of battered jeans. My black velvet jacket was draped over the open hood, out of harm’s way. I’d bought most of it at Tammy’s Attic, which has to be my favourite shop ever.

Nina closed her eyes and groaned. “Unique. Yes, you could say that. Honestly, Willow, Pawntucket is *so* not ready for you.”

This was so true that it wasn’t even worth debating. Instead I took a screwdriver and started to scrape clean the area where the old carburettor had been, getting rid of all the old dirt and gasket material. Beyond gross. Picture a coal pit that’s fallen into an oil slick.

Nina opened her eyes and peered under the hood. “What are you doing now?” she asked warily.

“Getting rid all of your disgusting grime.” I showed her the screwdriver, which was now thick with black goo. “Want to help?”

“Eww, no.” She sighed and leaned against the side of the car again, twiddling a piece of hair around her finger. “Anyway, what do you have to clean it for? Can’t you just shove the new one in?”

A strand of my long blonde hair fell down as I was working, and I tucked it back behind my ear without looking up. “Good idea. Then it wouldn’t have a perfect seal, so it would start sucking in air like a dying vacuum cleaner, and—”

Suddenly Nina straightened up again with a jolt. “Oh my god! Here comes Beth Hartley!”

Beth Hartley was one of the stars of Pawntucket High – slim, beautiful, good grades, etc. She was a year older than us, almost eighteen, and a senior. Even apart from that, we didn’t exactly move in the same circles. She was on every club and committee there was, and basically lived at school. In fact, I think they’d shut the place down if she ever couldn’t come in for some reason. The teachers would all go on strike.

I poured some solvent onto a clean rag and starting swabbing it around the empty space where the

carburettor had been. “What was it today, do you think?” I said. “Cheerleading? Prom committee? Saving the world?”

“Willow, this isn’t *funny*,” moaned Nina. “She’s heading right towards us!”

“So? I’m sure she’s seen a carburettor before.” Nina stared at me. There was a beat, and then I realized what I’d said and started laughing. “Oh. Maybe not, huh?”

She huffed out a breath, looking like she couldn’t decide whether to throttle me or join in laughing. “Look, I know *you* don’t care, but most people already think you’re Queen Weird, you know – this is *not* going to help matters, believe me—” She fell abruptly silent as Beth walked up.

“Hi,” said Beth, looking uncertainly from Nina to me. She had long, honey-coloured hair, and make-up that was always so subtle and perfect that you could barely tell she had it on. Which had always seemed sort of a waste of time to me – spending hours putting on make-up that looked invisible once you were done – but there you go.

“Hi,” I said back, poking my head out from underneath the hood.

“Hi, Beth,” said Nina faintly. “Good drama club meeting?”

“Yearbook,” corrected Beth. “Yeah, great.” She was staring at the open hood, and me under it. “You’re, um...

fixing Nina's car," she said. It was halfway between a question and a statement.

I nodded. "Her carburettor."

"Carburettor. Right," echoed Beth, blinking her wide brown eyes.

There was a pause. I could see Beth mentally shaking her head to clear it, and then deciding that, actually, she didn't really want to pursue the carburettor thing. She cleared her throat. "Um, Willow...I just wondered whether you had the homework assignment for Atkinson's class? I wasn't there yesterday."

I felt my eyebrows fly up. I hadn't realized that Beth even knew we were in the same class. Or in the same school. Or on the same planet. On second thought, scratch that – we probably *weren't* on the same planet. And why was she asking me, anyway? A dozen of her perfect friends were in that class.

I shrugged. "Yeah, sure – it's in my red folder." I motioned towards my school bag, which was sitting beside the open toolbox on the ground. "Would you mind? My hands are all—" I held them up to show her, and she blanched.

"Great, thanks." She slipped the folder out of my bag, quickly opening it and scribbling down the assignment. As she put it back, she hesitated as she glanced at Nina. She started to say something and stopped. Her neck turned bright pink.

The motion of my hand with the rag slowed as I looked at her in surprise. Suddenly I knew exactly what was coming; I had seen it too many times before to mistake the signs. Nina's eyes widened as she realized the same thing. "Maybe I'll...go get a drink of water," she said, taking an ultra-casual step backwards. I could tell she was thinking the same thing I was: *Beth Hartley? Really? Miss Perfect?*

Once Nina was gone, Beth edged closer to me, lowering her voice. "Um, Willow..." She took a deep breath, running her manicured fingers through her hair. "I've, um...heard that you do...readings. Like, psychic ones," she added quickly. Her face was bonfire-red.

I nodded. "Yeah, that's right."

Beth seemed to catch her breath. Her expression was trying to be sceptical, but it was suddenly so hopeful and pleading that it was like having a puppy gaze at me. "Well – are you any good?" she blurted out.

I shrugged as I started to install the new carburettor, tightening it into the intake manifold. "I guess so. I mean, not everything I see comes true, but most things seem to. And to be honest, the stuff that doesn't is usually an alternate path."

She was watching me intently, taking in every word. "An alternate path?" she echoed. "What do you mean?"

I thought about it as I tightened the nuts a bit at a time, keeping the pressure on the carburettor even. "It's like..."

you know, you have choices in your life. And sometimes I can see several choices unfolding, and what might happen with each one. But they're not all going to happen, because you'll only choose one of them."

Beth nodded slowly. "Yeah, that's exactly what I need help with," she said, almost to herself. "Choices." She glanced back at the school. "Well – would you read me sometime?" she asked in a rush. "Like, soon?"

I blinked at the thought of Beth in my house – the two really didn't seem to go together – but then I shrugged. "Sure, okay. How about tomorrow after school? No, wait a minute – how about Thursday?" I had forgotten for a second that the carer was leaving early the next day, and I'd promised Aunt Jo I'd get home on time to take care of Mom. I gave Beth my address.

"I'll be there," said Beth fervently. Some of her yearbook committee friends had started coming out of the school building behind her by then, and hugging her bag to her chest, she moved off to join them. "And, Willow – thanks," she called softly over her shoulder.

I stared after her, feeling bemused. I guess I should know better than to pigeonhole people – if being psychic has taught me anything, it's that you *really* never know what kind of thoughts people might be thinking, bubbling away like a witch's cauldron under the surfaces of their ordinary lives – but even so...Beth Hartley.

Strange, I thought as I tightened the final nut.

Nina reappeared, her expression practically bursting with *tell me everything!* "She wants a reading," I said, to ward off the inevitable.

"I *knew* it!" exclaimed Nina. "I could just tell, the way she was acting all furtive." She shook her head, looking dazed. "Wow, I can't believe that Beth Hartley even believes in that junk."

Nina is about the least imaginative, most prosaic person in the entire world, and is convinced that anything psychic is a con. Not that she thinks *I'm* a con, necessarily. Just that I'm conning myself. Being dramatic, making things up without realizing it, getting carried away – that sort of thing. She thinks I should be an actress, because I'm obviously so in tune with my inner child. It's sort of amazing that we're even friends, really. But I've known her since I was nine, which is when Mom and I first moved to Pawntucket to live with Aunt Jo, and I guess we've just got to be a habit with each other.

Nina was peering in under the hood at me, shaking her head. "Willow, you do know that you should stop all this psychic stuff, don't you? Half the school thinks you're a witch."

My cheeks grew warm. "Well, that's not *my* fault," I muttered. I was almost finished, which was a good thing, because Nina was really starting to irritate me.

"It *is* your fault," Nina insisted. "You don't have to keep doing readings, do you? No, you don't! Just say no the next time someone asks."

I didn't say anything for a moment. Distantly, I could hear the football team still practising on the field, their shoulder pads thudding against each other like the clash of the Titans. "I *do* have to keep doing them," I said finally. Finishing the carburettor, I wiped my hands clean and started putting my tools away.

"*Why?*" screeched Nina in exasperation.

I spun to face her. "Because people have problems, Nina! All kinds of problems, and I think maybe – I think maybe I help them."

"Oh, come on, Willow, you are *seriously* deluded if you think—" Nina broke off as I grabbed my jacket and slammed her hood shut.

"Here," I said, tossing her keys at her. "You've got to prime it before you drive it again – give the gas a few pumps first." Before she could answer, I had gathered up my things and stalked off.

"Fine, be that way," she called after me. "You know I'm right, though. See you tomorrow. Thanks for fixing my car, you lunatic."

I waved at her without turning around. Getting into my own car, a battered blue Toyota, I piled my stuff in the passenger seat and started the ignition. It purred like a

kitten, of course. I might make awful grades, but I am *good* with engines.

I pushed a blues cassette into the deck as I pulled out of the parking lot – okay, so the twenty-first century hasn't quite reached my sound system yet – and headed down Highway 12 towards home. The conversation with Beth tugged at my mind, refusing to let go. What was so urgent about getting a reading done?

Choices. That's exactly what I need help with.

Unease flickered through me and I frowned, wondering why I suddenly felt so apprehensive. Being psychic isn't like everyone thinks – I'm not some all-knowing, all-seeing guru. No, I can't predict the lottery numbers, and ha, ha, yes, I get caught in the rain just the same as everyone else.

The truth is, I get flashes or feelings sometimes, but I don't tend to get anything too specific unless I have some sort of connection, like holding someone's hand. Plus I have to have the mental space to relax and clear my head. If I'm upset or excited then I don't usually get much – and anyway, it's not the kind of thing that you could go around doing all the time, at least not without going seriously insane. So in general I just live my life like the rest of the world, without really knowing how things are going to unfold.

But I do get some pretty strong intuitions at times... and I was having one now, about Beth. I bit my lip as I slowed down for a crossroad.

Whatever her choices were, I suddenly had a very bad feeling about them.

“Pancakes,” said Alex, gazing down at the menu. “And scrambled eggs and bacon, with a side of hash browns. And toast.” He was starving. It was always like this after a kill; he felt as if he hadn’t eaten for a week.

“Coffee?” asked the waitress. She was plump and bored-looking.

He nodded. “Yeah, and orange juice.”

The waitress moved off, and Alex put his menu back in the holder and stretched. After he’d left Spurs, he’d cruised around until he’d found an all-night gym downtown. He’d bought a pass and worked out for hours, pumping the weight machines like they were the enemy, doing reps until the sweat poured down his face and shoulders like rain. And slowly, he’d felt the adrenalin that was shrieking through him begin to fade, giving way to a welcome, trembling tiredness.

Finally he’d stopped, his head slumped against the crossbar of the abs machine. “Good workout?” asked an attendant. It was almost six in the morning by then, and the place was starting to fill up. All around Alex was the whir and clatter of the free-weight machines, and the sound of grunts, and feet pounding on treadmills.

He had lifted his head and stared at the guy, hardly knowing where he was for a second. Then he nodded, and managed a smile. “Yeah, great.”

Mopping his face with his towel, he stood up. His muscles felt like water. He used to go running after an angel encounter, but it was never enough; it didn’t exhaust him. This was good. He might actually manage to get some sleep sometime in the next day or two now.

“Man, I was watching you attack those machines,” the man said cheerfully, squirting disinfectant on the seat of a stationary bike. He wiped it down. “You were like something possessed.”

Alex had grinned suddenly. “No, that’s everyone else,” he said. “You know – the ones I *don’t* get to in time.” And leaving the bewildered assistant staring after him, he’d draped the towel around his neck and gone to take a shower.

Now he took a gulp of dishwater coffee and gazed out the plate-glass window at the Rocky Mountains. Around him, the pancake house was heaving with people – laid-back looking moms and dads wearing jeans and happy smiles, and little kids bouncing on their seats as they scribbled on their Mister Pancake colouring sheets.

He had been to Aspen several times, even before the Invasion. Angels seemed to like it here, who knew why. Maybe it was the fresh mountain air. Alex propped his

chin on his hand as he stared out at the snow-covered peaks in the distance. In a strange way, Aspen reminded him of Albuquerque, though Albuquerque was all desert and slanting light; golden stone instead of soaring mountains. It was something about the air – the way you felt so clean and reborn, just by smelling it.

His first solo kill had been in Albuquerque.

Alex's coffee cup slowed on its way to his lips as he remembered. He put it down again without drinking.

He'd been twelve years old. Out on a hunt with Cully and Jake. Martin, his father, had already started getting a bit weird by then – he spent his time stalking around the camp muttering to himself, working his jaw as if he had marbles in his mouth, and when he wasn't shouting at everyone he was obsessively cleaning the guns at all hours of the day and night. Though there'd been a time when Alex could hardly imagine anything better than being allowed to go out on a hunt with his father, now he'd felt relieved when he hadn't come along. And then he'd felt guilty for his relief. His father was a great man, everyone knew that. At least, everyone who counted.

Even so, there had been a jubilant air as their jeep had roared out of camp that time, kicking up clouds of dust ten feet high. Cully, who was from Alabama, had let out a ringing rebel yell, and Jake had punched Alex in the arm, saying, "Hey, little bro, think you can take me? Think you

can take me?" Suddenly Alex knew that they both felt the same way he did, and the guilt left him in a happy rush.

"Yeah, I can take you," he'd said, and lunged at Jake, getting him in a half nelson. Gratifyingly – his brother was two years older – it had taken Jake a few seconds to break free, and then he'd launched himself across the seat at Alex with a shout. The two of them fell into the back on top of the mountain of camping gear, scuffling and laughing.

Back then, before the CIA had taken over with their angel spotters and coldly efficient texts, a hunt might take weeks. As well as their camping supplies there were a couple of crates of tinned food in the jeep, and boxes of cartridges. Their guns lay tucked out of sight for now: dependable deer rifles that weren't very flashy, but did the job. Cully even had his crossbow with him. He claimed it gave a cleaner shot, but Alex thought he was just showing off. It was a pain, anyway; they always had to go and find his bolt after a kill.

"If either of you little jerks breaks that stove, I'll kill you," called back Cully in his Southern drawl. He spun the wheel and the jeep skidded around a curve in a shower of sand and pebbles, sending Alex and Jake banging against its side like rag dolls. Once they got into civilization, Alex knew that Cully would drive like a model citizen, but out here it was the end of the world, with only dirt and yucca

plants and lizards for company. You could do whatever the hell you liked.

“Up yours,” retorted Jake, glancing at Alex with a grin. Jake was taller and stockier than Alex, but he had the same dark hair, the same blue-grey eyes. You could tell they were brothers just by looking at them.

They both looked like Mom.

The thought brought a hard edge to the day. Alex remembered a woman who loved to sing, who used to kick off her shoes and dance along with the radio while she was cooking. When he was little, he used to tug on her jeans to get her attention, and sometimes she’d stop what she was doing and lean down to catch his hands. “Dance with me, lover-boy,” she’d laugh, spinning him around.

Mom was the reason they were doing this. She was always the reason. And Alex knew she was also the reason that his father was – maybe – going insane.

The jeep bumped and rattled over the rocky soil. Driving with one hand, Cully lit a cigar, biting off the end and spitting it over the side. He was wearing a black sleeveless shirt, and his shoulders and arms were statue-hard, rippling with muscle. He shook his head as he took a deep puff and glanced at Alex and Jake in the rear-view mirror.

“The Angel Killers, hope of the free world,” he muttered. “God help us all.”

The drive to Albuquerque took almost four hours, so that Alex felt dull with boredom long before they got there. He perked up as they entered the city limits. Living out in the desert like a bunch of pack rats, sometimes he even forgot that there was a real world out there, but now it all beckoned to him in a sparkling rush – fast food, shopping malls, movies. A billboard with someone called Will Smith on it caught his eye: a tough-looking black guy carrying a gun.

“Hey, Cull, can we go see a movie?” he asked, hanging over the front seat.

“You and Jake can,” said Cully. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, he smoothed his blond hair back with his palm and grinned. “I got me some *other* ideas, if you boys catch my drift.”

Women. Alex and Jake grimaced at each other. There were several female AKs back at the camp, but Cully said he liked his girls sweet, not wearing combat gear and going out target practising. Women who could shoot as well as he could were a bit off-putting.

The plan was to stop off in the city for one night in comfort before they started roughing it on the long drive up to Vancouver, where Martin had heard rumours of angel activity. But as they pulled into a motel, Cully stiffened. “You know what,” he murmured, getting out of the jeep. “I think there’s something goin’ *on* here.”

That meant angels. Alex looked up sharply. The hot afternoon seemed to freeze around them, the whole world suspended.

“Where, Cull?” asked Jake. He seemed older suddenly, more serious.

“Not sure yet,” said Cully, his eyes narrowed. “I don’t think it’s very far, though.” He paused for a long moment, gazing around them at the shopping strip. Finally he shook himself. “Come on, let’s get checked in and unload. Then I think we’re going to have to take a little drive, gentlemen.”

Cully got them a room, re-parking the jeep so that it was right outside their door. The three of them worked automatically, carrying their gear in and piling it onto the floor.

They left the rifles in the jeep. When everything else had been unloaded, Cully threw a tarp over them. “Right, come on,” he said, climbing back in the driver’s seat and starting up the engine. “You both know the drill. Alex, you sit beside me. Jake, in the back.”

Alex saw Jake start to protest, and then think better of it. Cully might joke around a lot, but you didn’t question his judgement unless you wanted a black eye.

Alex slid into the front passenger seat, his skin prickling with excitement. Though he’d been on perhaps a dozen hunts by now, the thrill hadn’t lessened any. And maybe it

was petty of him, but he knew that part of the thrill was realizing how good he was. Jake might be older and bigger than him, and just as good a shot, but he couldn’t tune in as quickly as Alex, or as strongly. When it came to that side of things, Alex had taken to all the weird stuff their father had taught them just like coming home.

As Cully cruised slowly down the busy Albuquerque street, Alex closed his eyes and relaxed, moving his focus smoothly up through his chakra points. As his consciousness rose above his crown chakra, another world opened up before him. He could feel the energy fields of every living thing nearby – the woman in the car next to them; the guy standing on the kerb waiting to cross the street; his German shepherd, straining at its leash. Their energies all touched his own, and he felt them briefly and then moved on, probing in ever-widening circles.

Distantly, he heard Jake say, “Cully, are you *sure* you felt something?”

“Shut up—” Cully started to say, and then broke off as Alex’s eyes flew open and he sat straight up.

“That way!” he said urgently, pointing. “There’s a – a park or something, maybe two streets south – I could feel lots of trees. It’s in there. It’s getting ready to feed.” He shivered despite himself. Angel energy felt swamp-cold, clammy. It touched your soul and seemed to leave foul fingerprints on it.

"A park? Excellent," said Cully, turning.

In the rear-view mirror Alex could see Jake looking at him, impressed and a bit jealous. "Good one, bro," he said.

Sure enough, they came to a park a few seconds later. Cully parked the jeep under a line of trees. Glancing around them, he leaned across and opened the glovebox, taking out a pistol with a silencer on its muzzle. He checked the pistol's magazine, and then snapped it shut again and handed it to Alex.

"Go get 'em, tiger," he said.

Alex almost dropped the pistol in shock. "Do *what?*"

"He's only twelve!" burst out Jake at the same time.

"So? You were thirteen when you soloed, and he's better at the chakras than you," said Cully, twisting around to look at him. Jake sank back in his seat again, glowering.

Alex stared down at the gun. He had shot angels before, of course, but never on his own, without back-up. There were more things that could go wrong than he could count. The main one was that the angel might spot him and attack before he managed to shoot it. He'd been on a hunt where that had occurred once, to an Angel Killer named Spencer. Alex swallowed, remembering Spence's vacant stare, his mind completely and forever blistered by the angel's assault.

Or sometimes they just killed you, of course.

Cully was watching him. "Listen to me," he said roughly. "You'll never be of maximum use to us if you can't go out on your own. You can do it; I wouldn't have just handed you a loaded pistol otherwise."

From Cully, this was high praise. Alex licked dry lips. "Okay," he said. Trying to hide his shaking hands, he flicked the pistol's safety on. He wasn't wearing his holster, so he stuck the gun in the back of his jeans and pulled his T-shirt over it.

"Alex...be careful," said Jake, looking worried now.

"He'll be fine," said Cully. He slapped Alex on the shoulder. "And if you're not back in fifteen, we'll call the loony squad to come get ya."

AK humour; you just had to love it. Alex's lips felt stretched over his teeth as he smiled. Then he got out of the jeep and walked into the park.

It only took him a few minutes to find the angel. He didn't even have to open his senses to do it – the moment he saw the young woman sitting under a tree, gazing dreamily up at the clouds, he knew. She was wearing a light summer dress, and her brown hair was loose on her shoulders. Evidently she'd been reading a book; it lay forgotten by her side as she smiled upwards, lost in her own pleasant thoughts.

That was what everyone else would see. Speeding through his chakras, Alex's perception shifted abruptly as

a glorious being came into view, over seven feet tall and blinding white. Though its great wings almost blocked out the sun, the angel was far brighter than the sun could ever hope to be. It glowed with radiance, casting pure, dazzling light across the woman's beatific features.

Alex's stomach lurched. He hadn't often seen one actually feeding before. The creature had both hands buried deep in the woman's energy field, which was growing dimmer by the second, twisting feebly as if in protest. The angel had its head thrown back in gluttonous ecstasy as the woman's energy seeped away into its own, like water leaving a draining tub.

And because of angel burn, she'd actually remember the angel as *good and kind*. Just like his mother had, before she'd been killed. Shoving his feelings away, Alex glanced around him. They were in a section of the park away from any paths; the nearest people were a couple of teenage boys about a hundred yards away, throwing a Frisbee around. Shielding himself from view behind a tree, Alex reached behind him and pulled out the gun. Steadying the weapon with both hands, he took aim.

Now that it came down to it, he felt very calm, with a quick excitement throbbing away somewhere underneath. His first solo kill. Cully was right; he could do it. What had he been worried about? He had lived his whole life, just waiting for this moment.

The angel looked up and saw him.

Fear pounded through Alex as he and the angel locked eyes. The creature knew instantly what he was, and it screamed in pure fury, ripping its hands away from the woman's energy field. Useless and forgotten, she slumped to the ground, the peaceful smile still on her face.

Screeching, the angel sped towards him. Alex had a blurred impression of a great rushing and flapping of wings, and of wind tearing at his hair, as if the whole world was whipping past. The pistol began to shake in his hands. *Shoot!* he screamed at himself. But its eyes were so beautiful, even in its rage. He could only stare into them, and know that he was about to die.

No! With the greatest effort of his life, Alex tore his attention away from the angel's eyes and focused on its halo instead. *That's the angel's heart*, his father always said. *Go for the centre*. Alex's hands were so unsteady he could hardly take aim. The angel was shrieking in triumph, its terrible, awesome voice slicing through him. Its halo was the size of a saucer...now a dinner plate...now a ...

Alex shot. The world exploded into shards of light as the force from the fallout blew him backwards, off his feet. He landed in the grass a dozen feet away and for a moment just lay there stunned, the wind knocked out of him.

"Man, if *that* wasn't just about the messiest kill I ever did see," observed a drawling voice. "I was just about to

shoot the damn thing myself.” Suddenly there was a strong arm around his shoulders, helping him to his feet. Alex staggered, and stared at Cully in confusion. He tried to speak, but the power seemed to have left him for the moment. His head was throbbing as if an anvil had been dropped onto it.

“You’re going to feel terrible for a good week, probably,” said Cully conversationally, putting away his own gun. “Don’t believe in doing things speedily, do you? I thought you were waiting for the son of a gun to fly *into* you.”

Alex laughed shakily. Now that it was over, he felt almost giddy with relief – and then his emotions swung to the other extreme, so that he had to clench his fists to keep from bursting into hysterical tears. It had almost got him. It had really almost got him.

Cully squeezed his shoulder. “You did good,” he said seriously, dropping the banter. “It’s tough when they see you. Stay here, I’m just gonna go check on our lady friend.”

He jogged towards the woman, stopping only to pick up Alex’s pistol and shove it in the back of his own jeans first. Alex leaned weakly against a tree as their voices floated towards him.

“You okay, ma’am? You look sort of peaked.”

“Oh...oh, I’m fine. You won’t believe me, but I’ve just seen the most – the most beautiful, amazing thing...”

Alex closed his eyes. The angel was gone now; he had

killed it – but the woman’s words chilled him anyway. Yes, the most beautiful, amazing thing. She’d have a cherished memory now for the rest of her life, and at what cost? Insanity, perhaps? That happened a lot – schizophrenia taking over her life, until she was screaming back at the voices in her head. Or how about cancer? That was always a good one: the angel’s feeding touch causing the very cells inside of her to wither up and die. Or MS, so that she’d eventually lose the use of her limbs and end up in a wheelchair, until finally she died of it. Or Parkinson’s, or AIDS, or any other ailment you could think of – there was no telling with angel burn; the only certainty was that she’d been inexorably poisoned, and no matter what form the damage would take, the quality of her life would go firmly downhill from now on. And ironically, she would never see the connection between this and the angel. In fact, she’d probably think that the angel had been sent to *help* her, in her time of need.

Cully reappeared. “She’s on her way home, happy as a clam – for now, anyway. Come on,” he went on, dropping his hand on Alex’s arm. “Let’s go find your brother, so you can brag you got your first solo kill. Might even brag on you a little myself.”

“Why?” Alex asked raggedly. The words felt like sand in his throat. “I did everything wrong! I waited too long to shoot – I looked into its eyes – I—”

His headache threatened to blind him as Cully lightly cuffed the back of his head. “None of that, boy,” he said. He draped an arm around Alex’s neck as they started walking back to the jeep. “Didn’t I just tell you, it’s hard when they look at you? You did good. You did good.”

Now, five years later in Aspen, Alex stared out the window at the Rocky Mountains, seeing the dry, rugged hills of New Mexico instead. As it turned out, only a handful of angels had ever seen him again; it had just been sheer bad luck that it had happened his first time on his own. But it hadn’t mattered. He’d got over his nerves and now he had brought down more angels than he could count – especially since he had long ago stopped bothering to keep track. There hadn’t seemed much point any more once Jake was gone, taking with him the friendly competition between the two brothers.

The thought winced through Alex before he could stop it. No. Don’t go there.

“Here you are,” said the waitress, appearing with his breakfast. The plates clinked against the table as she set them down in front of him. She produced fork, knife and spoon from her apron, and clattered those down as well. “Would you like some more coffee?”

“Thanks,” said Alex. She refilled his cup and bustled off, and he eyed the food tiredly, wondering why he had wanted so much. But he needed to eat for the fuel, if

nothing else. He might get another text any minute, sending him off to god knew where. Or it could be as long as a week from now. A week full of long, pointless hours that he’d somehow have to fill – which usually meant boxy motel rooms and crap TV shows.

Ignoring the happy families sitting all around him, Alex lifted his fork and began to eat.