

The Angel of St. Thomas vs. the Galactic Good Guys

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CARIBBEAN ANGEL SERIES: CARLITA

The Angel of St. Thomas
Vs. the Galactic Good Guys
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Chapter One

Midnight Angel

A beautiful night. Starlit skies above, crystal waters below, showing their blue color beneath a full moon. A light breeze played across St. Thomas harbor, teasing the reflection of Charlotte Amalie's skyline into a late night dance. It should have been a night of romance, happiness and of bright colors and sounds. Not a night of sadness, fear and evil.

I was moving across the harbor at about twenty miles an hour, having come from the Havensight docks on the eastern side. My feet were less than two feet above the short waves, my head only three feet. Normally I "stood" when flying, but I didn't want the kidnapper to see me, so I flattened out.

Lieutenant Lewis' bulletproof vest was bulky and hot. I wished he hadn't talked me into wearing it. Still, he wouldn't let me go in unless I wore it, so I adapted. I was still sleepy when the call came through and in my rush to get here, I'd forgotten to bring the one made for me. Next time I'd remember.

The comlink crackled.

"You're coming in fine, Carlita," Lt. Lewis reassured me. Himself, more like, I smiled to myself. I'd been helping the police for ten years now—the last two as a member of the force—but he was still nervous when I went into action.

"Thanks, Lieutenant. I'm at the beach and turning west."

I reached the sharp white line of the shore waves and cut west, toward Trompeter Gade. The burglar had taken the little girl into Samson's Auto Repair around midnight. He hadn't intended on kidnapping her, just robbing her family's home. She happened to catch him in the act and things got out of hand. For a six-year-old girl, I could think of nothing scarier. I was going on eighteen and it scared me.

There'd been a determined but brief chase by the police down to the harbor before he fled here. He didn't have any demands; he just didn't know what to do. I was supposed to keep him from doing anything.

The second floor window was open, so I went up to it and quietly lifted it just enough to squeeze through.

"I'm entering at the second floor," I whispered into the mic. "I'm going off-line now."

"Roger," he replied. "We're outside and in position. Good luck, Carlita."

"Thanks. Over and out." I clicked off the headset and stored it in the vest. I needed to look just right. Not for vanity, but for safety.

A storeroom. Good. Nice and quiet. I almost landed then, but decided not to. It was risky to stay in the air—especially if this guy knew anything about me. But if I landed, I wouldn't be able to go airborne again while in the building. Staying aloft offered more choices for me and more chances for the girl.

It was very dark. I increased the amount of sparkles that were a side effect of my flying. The room brightened, and I waited. Sooner or later one of us would make a sound, and I wanted it to be him.

It wasn't him. It was Liza, the little girl. I heard a stirring noise, followed by a small whimper of fear. The burn of anger flared inside me but I reined it in.

"Quiet down!" He had a hissing, desperate voice. This was bad. There was almost no chance of talking our way out of this. I continued listening, but floated slowly toward the door and into the hallway. The voices were coming from downstairs.

"Are you going to let me go?" she asked in a trembling voice that made me want to race down there and protect her. "Please!" she pleaded. "Let me go!" I located the stairs and drifted down them, into a neatly kept repair shop that smelled of oil and fresh tires.

"Shut up!" he growled. "You're not getting out of here unless I do. You better hope they let me go, too. Whatever happens to me, it'll be worse for you."

"There is nothing worse than what's going to happen to you," I said in a haunting voice. I'd practiced that for a long time. I didn't have the voice to sound intimidating, so I tried to spook them. "Release her and you'll have mercy." I flew into a shaft of moonlight coming from a window, flying upright about three feet above the floor and trailing a shower of sparkles.

"The Angel!" Liza gasped. She was in her jammies and was tightly clutching her doll. But her eyes lit up even in the dim garage when she saw me. I smiled gently at her.

"Hello, Liza," I said in a voice very different than the one I'd just used. "Don't worry, little one. The police are outside and I'm here with you."

I glanced back at the kidnapper, giving him a very different kind of look, the kind that freezes the soul. He was of medium height but very thin. His emaciated looks told many stories about the drugs he used. Sad stories all, but no excuse for this.

"If you want to be a free man before you're an old man, let me have the girl now. I'll take her outside and tell the police you let her go. They'll be a lot nicer to you that way."

He had been staring at the space between my feet and the ground. He wasn't from the islands, or he'd know me. That could work for us or against us.

"Wh ... What are you?" he stuttered.

"She's the Angel of St. Thomas," Liza told him in the matter-of-fact tone children have about what they believe in. Much of her fear was gone. "An' you gotta do what she says or you'll be very very sad you didn't do it."

"I'm a messenger, come to give you one chance," I said, keeping a ghostly lilt in my voice. It might still work without violence. "But one chance only."

"No!" he shouted, pulling a knife and yanking Liza in front of him. "This is some kind of a trick! You can't be flying! It's impossible!"

"Not for our angel!" Liza said, worried but still calm. "You gotta b'lieve her, mister, cause she always tells the truth! An' even if you're a bad man, she can still help you! But she watches all us kids an' you been bad, taking me away from my mom 'n dad!"

"This is crazy!" He moved the knife to Liza's throat. Enough. I drifted in slowly. "Stay back! I'll kill her!"

I looked into his eyes. Fear. Desperation. Confusion. Evil.

"I believe you," I told him gently. "But I can't let you."

"Get out of here! Now! Tell the cops if they want to see her alive again, then clear out!"

I smiled at Liza. Inside, my heart was racing.

"Do you trust me, Liza?"

"Course I do!" she said in a small voice. She must have been terrified of the knife at her throat, but her eyes were completely trusting. "You're the Angel!"

"Clear out or I'll kill her! Now!"

I looked up at him. My smile faded and I shook my head. "Didn't you hear me? I said I believed you."

I was tempted to move back a little, to ease his desperation. But to do so would only scare Liza. I raised my hands to my shoulders and moved them out. Fireflies of light danced around my hands, making a swath of gleaming sparkles in front of me.

"Stop it!"

I ignored him, instead looking at Liza. She was wide-eyed at the "magic" lights dancing about me. I was careful to keep them close. Any approach to this madman would start something very bad. For him. He didn't know that Liza was already safe.

Suddenly, he gave a wail and pulled the knife across Liza's throat. Nothing happened. It couldn't because I'd put an impenetrable gravity field between blade and flesh.

He went from desperate to maniacal and raised his knife to stab Liza. She was safe, but I wanted her to feel safe, too. I shifted movement of the forces that pulled on us from all over, and his grasping hand yanked free of her. I quickly put a pillow of sparkles under her and whisked her behind me.

"No!" he screamed. He shifted the grip on his knife and came at us. Liza gave a scream; I reacted harshly and quickly. I pointed my left hand at the floor of the garage, seized the air and pulled up, hard.

Concrete snapped and growled and shot up six feet toward the ceiling. Unable to stop, the man slammed into it full force, his knife flying free. He staggered back, but he was unconscious. One step, two, then he fell to the ground.

Liza grabbed me around the waist and squeezed hard.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you!" She was laughing and crying with relief. I was, too. We floated over so I could check on the kidnapper. He'd keep until they got him to the hospital. Too bad, I suppose, to have to be so violent with him. The loving hugs from Liza, though, told me I'd made the right decision.

I put my arm around her.

"How 'bout we go out and see your mom and dad?"

"They're here?" she asked, happy and surprised.

"Of course they are, Liza. There's a whole bunch of people who wanted to see you safe." I hugged her. "Including me." I smiled and winked at her. "Why don't we fly out? Give them something really cool to see."

She gasped with a wide-open mouth and nodded vigorously. I couldn't erase tonight completely for her, but maybe I could make it tolerable.

I moved us toward the front door and called out.

"Hey, Lieutenant!"

"Carlita?" he called back. "Is everything okay in there?"

"Yep! Liza and I are coming out now."

"What about Williams?"

"Who?"

"The kidnapper."

"Oh. He's..."

"He's sleeping!" Liza yelled out, causing chuckles among the police, reporters and even her parents.

We came out then, showering lights and reflective rainbows. Much more than needed, but it was for Liza.

I delivered her to her parents, floating her into her father's arms. He was crying in relief and hugged her close. I gave them their privacy and floated over to Lieutenant Lewis, finally landing.

"Here you go, Lieutenant," I said, handing him his vest. "Thanks, but that thing's scratchy! I need to remember mine next time."

He chuckled. "It would make all of us feel a little better, yes. I think there's enough money in the budget to have another one made for you, one we'll keep for when you're forgetful."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

"It's the least we can do for our angel." He waved his arm toward the building, and five officers entered the building to put Williams into custody. And probably traction.

"If I were a real angel," I pointed out, "I wouldn't need a vest at all." I made a face. "And I wouldn't have to fill out all those picky reports at the precinct."

"You're a different kind of angel," he admitted. "Flesh and blood like us, but an angel nonetheless, even if you do have to fill out reports." He nodded toward Liza and her family. "Try telling them different."

Liza saw us looking at them and she ran to me, her parents right behind her.

"Carlita!" she shouted, jumping into my arms and almost knocking me over. "Thank you for saving me! And for the really neat flying!" She hugged me again.

"Yes. Thank you so very much," her mother said, also hugging me. "We were so worried about our Liza. I still can't believe she's safe!" She began weeping and took Liza.

"You're welcome," I said simply. What else was there to say?

Liza gave me her doll.

"Miss Jenny is still a little scared. Could you watch her 'til the bad man's in jail?"

I stroked the doll's hair gently, then handed Miss Jenny back to Liza.

"You don't have to worry about Miss Jenny, Liza. Your parents will keep you and her safe. You mom and dad are very good, very brave people."

Reassured, Liza hugged Miss Jenny, then me again.

A soft puff of wind broke passed by us, calling to me. Time to go. I backed up and waved.

"I'll see you at the precinct, Lieutenant. G'bye, Liza!"

I turned and ran into the breeze, laughing at its touch. I jumped into the air and felt it pulling me up. It caressed me once, then released me. I soared back out over the harbor until the small crowd of people looked like another small light that shone on the water.

Chapter Two

Daylight Angel

The phone rang. And rang. And rang. I rolled over in bed, refused to admit it was daylight, and let it ring. So it rang. And rang. And rang. Couldn't Francis get it for me? He knew I worked late last night. Beating up the bad guys.

It still rang. Would the caller give up? No, I decided six rings later, all the while wishing I had enough money for an answering machine. Defeated by the telephone, I opened my eyes and reached for it.

"Hello?" I said in groggy voice, just a little mad. The bright, hot sun poured in through my open window, and the chirping birds and street noise told me noon had arrived. Unless it was noon tomorrow, it was too early for me.

"Good morning, Carlita!" the cheerful voice answered. Robert Dobbins, my boss at the St. Thomas Construction company. He always woke me up, sometimes like this on the phone, sometimes at work with his smiles and laughter.

"Hey, Bobby Dobbie," I said, losing my mad. "It's only noon! Don't you read the papers? Can you read?"

"I can read well enough to sign your paychecks," he countered with a laugh. "Yeah, I saw the papers. Front page again. You okay?"

I yawned and stretched, then stood. My bed was a mat on the floor. It was the only way to sleep.

"Oh! Excuse me!" I said, finishing a loud yawn. I carried the cordless to the closet and selected a top and skirt for the day. And shorts. Always shorts. "I'm fine. Just a little tired. Rookie at the station kept me forever."

"Say no more," he said, understanding. "Listen, I hate to call you after the night you had, but we need your help at the mansion site."

"I figured. Hang on a second." I entered the bathroom and turned on the shower. Satisfied it was cool enough, I went to Francis' room and pounded on the door. "Up and at 'em, little bro'!" I put the phone to my ear. "Give me half an hour, Bobby?"

"Thanks, Carlita! See you in thirty! And make sure to go *around* the ball park this time, okay?" A click and the line went dead.

"Hey, little bro'!" I shouted, banging on his door again. "I have to go to work! Can you make me breakfast, please?"

The door opened slowly and my little brother stood there, rubbing sleepy eyes.

"Work?" he asked sleepily. He always stayed up when I was out late at night. "I left a message last night that you'd need today off."

"I know, but it's a special job. Out at the mansion site."

Francis walked to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Did they say what?" he asked while pulling out eggs, cheese and vegetables.

"No, but you know the drill," I said with a shrug. I waved at him and ducked into the bathroom.
"Thanks!"

Twenty too fast minutes later, I was sorta clean and sorta dry and sorta dressed. I ran my brush through my long black hair, tied it back with Mom's bandana, put on my earrings, necklace and bracelets, then dashed to the kitchen. We had the upstairs apartment of a two-apartment building in the snug but friendly Staari section of Charlotte Amalie. It wasn't a big apartment, but there were only two of us.

"Omelet and juice!" he announced, placing the plate on the counter. I sniffed the wonderful aroma then dug in. Francis was only eleven, but he already had a cook's touch.

"Great omelet, runt!" I said between bites. I had to hurry. The mansion site was way out on Cabrita Hill, and twenty-five of my thirty minutes was gone.

"What time will you be home?" he yelled after me as I raced out the door, slinging my purse over my head and shoulder. I hated dropping my purse. Especially from several hundred feet.

"Hopefully in a couple of hours!" I shouted back. "Hit those books while I'm gone!"

He shouted a feeble protest. It was summer, and the salt was in the air. But if we were going to make something of ourselves, it would be through books and study and hard work.

And a little something special.

I jumped off the last couple steps and into the bustling street. Plenty of tourists today, which was unusual for a Tuesday. I would be forced to wait a few minutes. Bobby Dobbie understood, but if the client was from the States, well...

"Morning, Carlita!" Big Marie had the street cart with the brightest objects and tastiest fruits. She watched over the entire neighborhood, but especially Francis and me since we were orphaned years ago. Because of that, I called her Momma.

"Good morning, Momma! A nice breeze today!" She smiled and nodded. It was our little code. Reaching up, she began ringing an old, ornate bell hanging from her cart. It rang with the beauty of a nightingale and all the persistence of a telephone.

"Big Marie got the best in town! All on sale! You got five minutes! Hurry up! All half off!" She kept ringing the bell.

Many of the tourists stopped and looked. When they saw the locals rushing to the cart, they followed, thinking they'd found a truly great chance to buy authentic Caribbean goods. Which was true. They just wouldn't have a lot of luck getting the half price; our neighbors knew the routine and were the first to gather round, "buying" things they would later return. We watched after our own in the Virgin Islands.

Seeing no one was looking at me, I picked up my pace, then jumped into the air. The gentle breeze caught me in its arms and lifted me up. Inside me awoke my special something. The breeze released me gently and I was flying.

Picking up speed slowly, I went higher. My wonderful home lay before me, mountains and sea and beautiful, beautiful forest. I turned and headed northeast, ascending as the mountains rose. I was leaning slightly forward, the normal way I flew. This was why I always wore shorts under my skirt.

Lee Hill crested beneath me, so I turned east, using Highway 40 as a guide. When I was twelve I discovered it was easier to remain "hidden" by flying directly over a busy road. Lee Hill was eight

hundred feet above sea level, as was the mountain ridge highway, so I went up an extra thousand feet. I'd look pretty small from here. Besides, only we natives knew what to look for.

It was a quick and wonderful flight. Of my special abilities, flight was my favorite. I could fly pretty fast, limited only by the need to see and breathe—about sixty miles an hour. I suppose if I had the right goggles and goggles and breathing gear, there'd be no limit. It was the same for altitude. I could fly as high as I wanted, until the cold or lack of air stopped me. Normally, I stayed under 5,000 feet. Though on really bright days when only a few puffy clouds dotted the sky, I'd play for hours at higher altitudes.

The neatest thing about flying is the view. And what a view! The sparkle of the water, the shine of the town at night, the motionless glide of birds flying above, beneath and around me. Stunning! Most hearts raced just thinking about it, and here I was *doing* it!

The ridge dropped off after Wintberg Peak and the highway turned north, but I kept a straight line. I was less than four miles from the mansion site and flew for it. I didn't go down, though. Not yet.

Tutu was almost beneath me. I waited until I reached the Garden Arts Center, then went south for a couple minutes before heading back toward the mansion site. This way the ballpark was way off to my left.

I descended slowly while still moving toward the mansion site. I could make out a group of people gathered in a small field on the north side of the site. As I looked, I saw Bobby glance into the sky and spot me. Hurriedly, he turned his back to me and took the arm of another man. Probably the client. I knew he was from the States, too, and so wasn't privy to St. Thomas' long-kept secret. I stopped forward motion and looked for the right place to land. Bobby was walking the man toward the sea to the east, pointing at something, covering for me.

Most of the crew were working in the mansion. It was little more than a frame, so I made for the second floor. About ten feet up, I released my power and the breeze again cradled me. I...

"What in the world is *that*!" a woman suddenly shouted. Yipes! The client's wife was on the second floor and staring right at me!

My concentration broke and I fell the last two feet onto the flooring, giving out an "Uff!" Jeff Newton, our foreman, was helping me up even before I'd finished falling down.

"What was what?" Jeff asked her innocently.

"That ... that girl!" she accused, pointing at me. "I saw it! She just floated down from the sky and landed right there!"

"Huh?" Jeff looked at me, considering, then back to the lady. "This is Carlita, our office manager. She's a great office manager, but *flying*?" He stared at the woman in doubt.

"Sorry, ma'am," I said, brushing off sawdust. "I tripped and fell."

"No, you didn't!" she exclaimed. "You were *flying*!"

"Hey, guys!" Jeff called out. Manny, Betts and Big Wally stopped working and looked at him. "Any of you see Carlita fly recently?"

"Oh, yeah!" Betts said with a laugh. "She's always flying around the island." Betts snorted, making the woman blush. "If Carlita could fly, Jeff, d'you think she'd hang around here?" They all laughed and went back to work.

"Well ... maybe I was mistaken," the woman admitted slowly.

"Doesn't bother me one way or the other, Mrs. Williams. You're the client, so you're always right." She looked at him suspiciously, but Jeff was all honesty and friendliness. No act, either.

"I suppose I did see it wrong," she decided at last. She looked at me. "Are you all right, young lady?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Williams. Thanks for asking." She went back to inspecting the work and Jeff led me downstairs.

"Close one!" he said, breathing out.

"Sorry. I thought it was clear."

"Not your fault, Carlita. I should have watched for you. I had no idea she was even up there with us." We headed downstairs, the pleasant whirl of saws and pounding of hammers filling the air. I loved my job!

"Do you know what Bobby wants?"

"Nah. Just that he'd sent for you."

"Okay. I saw him out on the field." I snatched up a hard hat, having forgotten mine at home. "See ya!" I said and ran off.

"Are you here all day?" he yelled after me.

"Don't know. I'm still tired from last night!"

"Well, when you head home, just make sure you avoid..."

"The ballpark! I know! Thanks!" I ran to the construction trailer and snatched up my clipboard, the one with the punchlist for the mansion on the front and the angel wings painted on the back.

Bobby was with Mr. Williams, and they were standing back where I'd first seen them. Bobby saw me and waved me over.

"We have a special job, Carlita. Mr. and Mrs. Williams want a thirty foot berm between their mansion and the Zimmermans." The Zimmermans were the closest homeowners, about a quarter-mile to the north.

I made a note on the punchlist, then gave them my doubtful look.

"I dunno, Bobby," I said hesitantly. "When does it need to be done?"

"As soon as possible," Mr. Williams replied crisply.

"Uhhh ... does that mean as soon as reasonably possible, Mr. Williams?" I asked. "Or as soon as absolutely possible?"

"What's the difference?" he replied.

"Reasonable means ... two weeks." He started huffing some and I quickly added. "I can cut it to a week, but I'd have to pull most of the crew off the mansion."

"And the other option?"

I looked at Bobby, and he nodded. "I know someone who can get it done by tomorrow," I offered slowly. "But their company is backed up with projects and would only do it as a favor for Bobby. And the fee would be very high."

"Fine. I'll pay the fee."

"But, Mr. Williams," Bobby said. "Why? The Zimmermans are gone for the next month. There's no point in rushing..."

"Yes, there is, Mr. Dobbins," he said sternly. "The point is that *I* want it done. By tomorrow."

"Bobby?" I asked. He looked back on me. His black eyes reflected the same feelings I'm sure my bright blue ones did. Mr. Williams was pushy. But he was willing to pay for being pushy.

"Can you see to it, Carlita?" he asked, knowing perfectly well I'd be seeing to it personally.

"Right away." I made a couple more phony notations, then smiled at Mr. Williams. "You'll have your berm and invoice by tomorrow morning, Mr. Williams."

"Thank you, miss." I started walking back to the trailer. I still heard Mr. Williams murmur to Bobby, "She seems young. Especially for her position."

"There's none better at detail and office work than our Carlita, Mr. Williams," Bobby reassured him. "She's our own personal angel."

Chapter Three

"Carlita Time! Carlita Time!"

"Hey, sleepy head! Wake up!"

Bobby was shaking me gently by the shoulder. I was lying down on the cot in the trailer.

"Hey yourself, Bobby Dobbie," I said with a sleepy grin. "What time is it?"

"About eight," he said.

Eight! I promised myself I'd only take a one-hour nap, and set the alarm. That was at three. I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

"Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

"Two reasons. Here's one," he replied and tossed a newspaper on my lap. It was the *Virgin Islands Daily News*. I hadn't seen today's edition yet, so I started flipping through it. Bobby kept talking while I looked for the article on me.

"The second reason is that our clients didn't leave until just now, so there wasn't anything you could do."

"How 'bout my job?"

"Nah." He waved a careless hand. "You put things in perfect order yesterday. Nothing for you to do today. Remember, we're used to your ... heh ... odd hours."

"Front page? Not!" I suddenly accused.

"Well, front page of the local section. You don't really want to be the *front* front page anyway, do you?"

"Not really," I admitted. "Still, the idea sounded nice at the time. Whoa. Get a load of this:

"Local youth stops kidnapper; Six-year-old hostage safe. So on and so on and so on ... Here ... Although the teen failed to identify herself ..."

"Thank you, *Daily News*!" Bobby interrupted gratefully.

"Quiet, you," I scolded and continued, "The young hostage—whose name is being withheld due to age—was very happy and excited about being rescued and shared her doll's feelings as well. 'Miss Jenny is glad the bad man is in jail', she said."

"Aww!" Bobby sighed with a stupid grin. I threw the paper at him and he caught it before it hit his face.

"I thought it was kinda nice," I said defiantly. "Girls like to have friends who think like they do when things are scary, and Miss Jenny is her friend. Don't make fun, I'd be the same way. That guy was one nasty sicko."

"So what did you make him do?" he asked.

I shook my head. "That didn't work. It was too dark in the garage for him to clearly see my eyes and I didn't want to chance it. He kept Liza in front of..."

"Liza?"

"Yeah. The girl, dummy. He kept her in front of him. Too bad for him. I had to get rough."

I didn't say any more and Bobby didn't press. The whole gang at Tom Con—our company's nickname—had known all about me for years, since I was little. Pretty much everyone on St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John knew about me. I was everyone's closely guarded open secret. It was hard to explain.

I grabbed my hard hat and followed Bobby out to the site where the berm was supposed to be. We spent the next hour working out design and exact location. There weren't any buried power or sewer lines, so that made it easy.

By now it was nine o'clock. The sun was down, but the sky still burned deep red over the mountains. Perfect light.

"Ready?" Bobby asked. I nodded, and he backed off about a hundred feet.

Kneeling on the ground, I put my hands on it and closed my eyes. I imagined peeling the ground apart, layer by layer, down two hundred feet. Three hundred. Drat. Still not the right base. I went deeper. Four hundred. Five. Eight layers down and at nearly six hundred feet, I found what I wanted. With a base, I started working my way up, examining each layer. This was good ground.

"Whoa," Bobby said, adding a whistle. "You must have gone pretty deep this time. That's quite a show!"

Opening my eyes, I looked above me.

The air was sparkling with countless tiny bursts of colored light. This always happened whenever I used this power, but since I was moving a whole bunch of island, the light show was most excellent.

I felt my hands tingle, telling me I'd reached the surface. Other than the light show, which was sparking and glittering wildly now, there was still nothing different about the ground. Or so it seemed.

Stepping back to Bobby's side, I picked the right direction to make the oh-so perfect form, then turned off all movement and gravity inside my waterfall of lights.

A loud rumble came from underneath the ground in front of us, but there was no shaking. I'd gotten lots better in the past couple years.

The fireworks of light began swirling and popping. Thousands more appeared and slowly a berm formed, two hundred feet long and thirty feet high. The surface of the berm rippled like a pond, harmlessly moving all the trees down on our side of the earthen wall. Finally, hard granite appeared along the ridge and I was finished. The lights faded and winked out, the rumble drifted away on the trade breeze, and then it was just Bobby, the berm and me in the gathering darkness.

I stretched my aching muscles. Moving that much that carefully always left my muscles tired and sore.

"Good enough?" I asked Bobby.

"Good enough! Payment to the Angel Fund as usual?" I nodded. It wasn't right to make money from my abilities, so the island government had set up a fund for anything I was paid. It was used for disaster relief, to aid destitute families and see to the healthcare of the Virgin Islands children.

"I can't wait to see the looks on the Williams' faces tomorrow!" He laughed. "I love my job!"

"Me, too," I said, and handed him my hard hat. "Tell me how they look. I'm heading home and crashing until Thursday."

"Today's Tuesday," he corrected.

"Yes, it is." I smiled and gave him a hug. "See ya' Thursday, Bobby Dobbie!"

Out here on the edge of St. Thomas there was always a brisk wind. From the south right now. I ran three steps toward the berm and jumped into the wind's arms. Red, yellow, white and green sparkles danced on a gentle puff of air that swirled around my feet and ankles, then what was inside took over and I rose on my own power. Just for fun, I landed on the top of the berm and ran along its bank before again catching a breeze. I was super tired, but this was always fun. I went up a hundred or so feet and took off to the west. I waved back at Bobby, even though I couldn't see him, then picked up speed. My bed called for me, and that was one call I intended to answer.

It was a gorgeous night. A night for being alive. Five or so miles to the southwest, Charlotte Amalie was lit up like the exciting Caribbean port that it was. I couldn't actually hear the celebration, but I could imagine it well enough. I drifted slightly toward the lights, but decided against it. Francis would be looking for me. And I was really, really tired. Time to go home. I glanced straight down to orient myself.

I was over Tutu, and approaching the ball field, brightly lit for a Little League night game. Just as I looked, the batter swung at a pitch and sent the ball to deep cen...

A ball! A ball!

I dove at the ball, picking up speed. There was a boy trying to get the ball, too! I would beat him! I went even faster.

He got the ball and threw it. Wow! I chased after it, low enough to get the ball! I passed by the boy who'd thrown it, and flew straight at the boy who was waiting to catch it, his hand outstretched.

He saw me coming and yelled. He put his hands down, and the ball went past him, on to another boy. Laughing, I went after it.

"Carlita Time!" everyone was shouting. "Carlita Time!" A man in black was waving his arms. Did he want the ball? But it was *my* ball!

It bounced on the ground near a boy, but he didn't get it. Instead, he moved out of my way, laughing and shouting, "Carlita Time!"

I caught up to the ball and grabbed it, but it slipped out of my hands. It bounced on the grass and then it was on the dirt. I was going to get it! I was so happy!

The ball rolled past the man in black and bounced against a fence. I went into the fence fast, but the ball wasn't going to get away from me! Still in the air, I jumped off the fence and at the ball, which must have been tired, because it was rolling to a stop on a piece of plastic on the dirt. All around me, people were laughing and having fun. They wanted me to have the ball!

I landed on the ball, making sure it wouldn't slip out of my hands. I snatched it up, dirt flying everywhere. Mine! My ball! I...

A fog lifted from my mind and I looked around. I was on the Tutu baseball field? How did I get here? Everyone was laughing and smiling and shouting, "Carlita Time!"

In my hand was the culprit. A baseball. Embarrassed, I looked up at the umpire. He was laughing, but it wasn't a mean laugh. The shouts of "Carlita Time!" were fading as everyone realized I'd come to my senses. The umpire held out his hand, a huge grin on his face.

"Sorry," I said weakly, handing it to him. Both teams were crowding around me, hats and gloves and pens sprouting from a sea of young, eager arms.

"Never apologize!" the umpire said. "You're always a welcome timeout, Carlita. We'll stop our play anytime for a visit from the Angel!" He, too, handed me a pen and booklet.

I spent the next half-hour signing gloves, hats, paper, and as always, the ball that brought me in. Then I spent another twenty minutes signing more autographs in the stands while the game restarted. And *then* I stayed another half hour to watch the rest of the game. When it ended I was more than ready to go. By now I was completely exhausted.

I walked out onto the field after the teams went to the sidelines. Shouts went up to not throw any balls.

The crowd went silent as they watched me. I'd gotten used to all the attention. Shoot, if *I* could watch a person fly, I would stare, too.

A steady breeze was still coming from the south, so I walked between first and second, then ran to the pitcher's mound, jumping when I reached it, trailing sparks of light as I went. Okay, I was showing off. But it was for the kids. Honest.

I soared up over the crowd and everyone shouted. I gave them a huge smile and waved.

My street was still filled with tourists, so I swung around to an alley that was deserted and landed there. Yawning, I stretched, then went out onto the street.

The party was going full steam. Tourists were our main income, and we were a friendly people, so street parties were always breaking out. I loved the festivity and was again tempted to enjoy the night. *No*, I said.

"No, what?" Big Marie was at her cart and looking at me while dealing with a customer.

"Did I say that out loud?" I asked her.

"Yep." She glanced at my clothes. "Oh, girl," she said with a shake of her large head. "You've been chasing balls again."

I smiled sheepishly and nodded.

"I didn't mean to," was all I could say with tourists so close. "Especially today. Tonight." I corrected myself. I gave her a hug and a kiss. "Well, I'm off to bed! G'nite, Momma!"

"Good night, Carlita," she said gently, kissing me on the forehead. "Pleasant dreams."

I dashed up the stairs to our apartment. The wild and exciting noise didn't diminish much, but I'd gotten used to it. I'd sleep like a ... something. I was too sleepy for even that thought.

Francis was fast asleep on the living room floor, his math book doubling as a pillow. Like me, it took more than festival noise to wake him.

I went to our kitchen—really just a small dent in our living room—and checked to see if he'd made me dinner.

He had. Chicken breast with a sauce on it. Beside the plate was a note, telling me how to heat it in the microwave. I followed the instructions; there were three temperatures, times and positions, but I trusted him. A forkful of the chicken told me he'd made another masterpiece. I poured a glass of milk and sat at the counter.

I ate silently, appreciating by brother, my friends, my job, and my life. It was certainly an unusual life. And not without its challenges and hardships. But I would not trade it with anyone. About the only thing I lacked was a boyfriend. Maybe after school started in September.

I finished my meal and washed the dishes. Francis had cleaned everything else. As a little brother, he couldn't be beat.

By now, I was almost stumbling. So I woke up Francis enough to get him standing and helped him to bed, kissing him goodnight. Five minutes later, just long enough to crawl out of my day clothes and into my nightclothes, I was in bed and fast asleep.

All in all, a good day.

Chapter Four

Mrs. Williams

Wednesday started out far more normally. For us, that is. I was up first, dressed and out the door before Francis had stirred from his room. I let him sleep; he was the housekeeper and cook in our twosome and deserved any shuteye he could get.

I was the breadwinner, after a fashion. I made enough to keep the apartment, afford decent meals, and live our lives. We even saved a little, though not enough for college for either of us. And I was going to be a junior at the high school this year.

But it was far too nice a day to worry! Bright sun soaked my worries with joy and the brisk ocean breeze swept them away to sea. A perfect day to run errands. Today it was the market, the bank, and the police station.

Walking downhill to the market, I thought about my family.

For the last eleven generations, each child in our family had something special about him or her. Francis and I were the twelfth generation. The gifts were passed on by the oldest child, but all the children in a family had them. So Francis had gifts, but only my kids would carry on the family abilities.

We all had different gifts, and nobody knew what they would be until the age of six or so. I was lucky; my powers showed up when I was four. I was also lucky that I had multiple powers, especially flight. The last "Angel of St. Thomas" that could fly had been my great-grandmother, almost eighty years ago. My parents weren't so lucky, having to keep tabs on a four-year-old who could fly. The island as a family kept me safe until I'd grown a little and knew how to behave myself.

Without exception, all of us had a quirk or two. Almost like booby prizes. My mom's had been the need to eat something every time she stopped using a gift. My grandpa Samuel could only use his gift of invisibility within twenty feet of seawater. He used to carry a glass of it with him, which worked fine except it always leaked. Auntie Mona had to sing when looking through objects or she'd go deaf for an hour.

According to Mom, my quirk was the weirdest. When flying, I had an uncontrollable urge to chase thrown or hit balls. Nothing else mattered except that I get the ball. If I wasn't flying, or if it was something other than a ball, there was no problem. That's why I could watch the baseball game last night. *After* I'd landed. But when I flew like a bird, I was something of a birdbrain when it came to balls. On a tropical island populated by an active, sports-loving people, I chased a lot of balls. So many, in fact, that "Carlita Time" was an official timeout, with the play going dead from the moment it was called. Soccer, baseball, volleyball, basketball, even golf; I was always a surprise moment at the wrong time.

To my people's credit, they took it all in stride and even enjoyed the "timeouts". My family had been serving them for 300 years, and they had taken care of us during that time. Everybody knew about us, but nobody talked. They protected our identities and privacy while we kept them safe.

Sometimes there was a price. Francis and I lost our parents in a hurricane while still young. Dad had been in the merchant marine. Mom had the ability to calm any waters she was in. She'd saved our harbor lots of times in the past. But this time she went far out to sea in order to save four ships caught in a hurricane when it took an unexpected turn. She'd saved three of them, but was lost trying to save the fourth. Dad had been on that fourth ship.

I missed them both. Ten years now. The sad was wiped away, leaving only my love for them. Mom had prepared me for this.

"Do not weep overly long for me, Carlita, if the time comes that I die saving my people," she would say to me, especially after a time when she'd been hurt. "It is the risk our family has taken for generations. If it comes to me, I will have gladly done my duty to our people. And you will take my place."

I had prepared Francis, in the same way, for my death. He didn't remember Mom and Dad, but he heard the pride in my voice when I talked about them, and he listened seriously. Fortunately, death in the line of duty didn't visit often. Eleven in 300 years. But it did happen. Not that the danger would stop me. Or Francis.

I'd walked a half-mile lost in my thoughts; it took the hustle-bustle of the marketplace and all its delicious scents to bring me back to earth, as it were.

The market was a living thing, filled with people, produce, sundries, music, laughter and loud, cheerful talking. A wide street—almost a plaza—the marketplace was stuffed to overflowing with carts, booths and brightly colored ground blankets, all selling every fruit, candy or clothing imaginable. Tables of T-shirts and other touristy apparel. Fine paintings and etchings. Crafts so varied as to seem countless.

And food. Plenty of food. Bushels of rice, corn, barley and beans. Fruit by the bunch, bag or bushel. Fish from the morning's catch. Even a pen filled with live chickens, raised by Sir Hector, the Englishman, on his estate. He was my first stop.

"A good morn to you, Miss Carlita," he said with a crisp bow. I laughed and curtsied. Sir Hector was always very formal, whether entertaining at his estate or selling chickens. He took enormous pride in being trusted with the Angel's Secret, as my identity was referred to.

"Good morning, Sir Hector!" I extended my hand, knowing he'd want to kiss it, which he did. Talk about feeling like royalty! "Would you perhaps have two hens for us this morning? And a dozen eggs?"

"Always, my dear!" He waved a hand at the large chicken wired corral. "Do you see any you'd prefer?"

I looked them over and found two plump ones. I pointed my hand, increasing the pull on each. They turned and trotted toward Sir Hector, going "downhill".

"You have my grateful thanks, Miss Carlita," he said as he scooped up the chickens and tied their feet. "Remember, young lady, you always have a job with me if you want it."

"Thanks, Sir Hector, but I'm pretty busy. I do like helping you out when I can, though." Sometimes, on slow days, I did come down and help him. "I just LOVE the market!" I twirled to soak it all in, then stopped halfway, almost stumbling in surprise.

Standing right behind me, less than three feet away, was a woman. She had platinum hair and a firm face. Beautiful, but under control. She wore a pants suit that clashed with the gaiety of the market, but somehow complemented her perfectly. Oddly, she wore sneakers instead of sandals or heeled shoes. She was staring at me, her hard eyes neither friendly nor angry.

It was Mrs. Williams, the lady who owned the mansion we were building.

"Uh, Mrs. Williams!" I said "G ... Good morning! I didn't see you behind me. Let me introduce you to Sir Hector of Covingdale."

"How did you do that?" she demanded of me, ignoring both the introduction and Sir Hector's bow.

"Do what?" I asked as innocently as I could. "The twirl? It's pretty easy, though I'm normally bet..."

"I meant the chickens," she interrupted. "You motioned to them and they immediately came."

"I ... I ... don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. Williams, I didn't really—"

"Madam," Sir Hector interrupted. I didn't mind. The less I said, the better. "Miss Carlita did nothing of the sort. She merely indicted that she'd like two chickens. I simply selected the two that were closest."

"I saw them come to you!" she insisted. There was something about her attitude and her certainty that worried me. She looked at me. Her eyes were still hard, but now they seemed a little angry. "I was sure I saw you flying into our home yesterday and now I clearly saw you control those animals!" Her hard blue eyes narrowed.

"Are you the Angel of St. Thomas?" she demanded to know, stepping even closer and making me back up to the chicken wire.

"The Angel is a myth, madam!" Sir Hector scoffed. "A fairy tale told to soothe frightened children. A very *old* fairy tale, I might add. The natives talk of the Angel as much as three centuries ago."

"Carlita is a pleasant young woman, Mrs. Williams," he continued, putting his hands on my shoulders as he stood behind me. "I myself consider her an angel. But *the* Angel?" He laughed again. "Forgive my rudeness, madam, but balderdash! There is no Angel of St. Thomas, and there never has been."

"Please, Mrs. Williams," I said in a small voice, trying to sound as powerless as possible, "I'm flattered that you think I could be the Angel. Honest. But if I were the Angel of St. Thomas, what would I be doing here, buying chickens? Wouldn't the Angel have enough money to afford servants for herself?"

"Don't you mean 'he or she', Carlita? Unless the Angel is real and you know her to be a woman," Mrs. Williams said with a nasty tone of victory. "Or young woman," she added, her tone becoming more accusing.

"My mother told me stories of the Angel, and the Angel was always a woman," I replied quickly, covering my slip.

She considered me for a long moment. I was able to stand a little straighter with Sir Hector backing me up, but it was hard.

Suddenly her face relaxed and she smiled.

"I'm sure you're right, Carlita," she said. "And it does sound silly, thinking there really is an Angel of St. Thomas." She stepped back. "Sorry to have bothered you," she said, then turned and disappeared into the thickening crowd.

It was thirty seconds before Sir Hector let go of my shoulders, and sixty before my heart stopped beating so hard.

"That woman means you harm, Carlita," Sir Hector said in a serious voice I'd never heard from him before. "You must be on your guard while she is on the island."

I nodded in agreement. There was something about her that made me nervous. She wasn't just curious. And she wasn't just suspicious. She was trying to find out.

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Williams and her husband are clients of ours. We're building a mansion for them

over on the eastern shore. I don't think I can avoid her."

"Is that how she saw you flying?" he asked.

I nodded. "Normally, I'm very careful about being seen by off-islanders. And everyone protects me. But when I landed on the second floor, she saw me. The others didn't even know she was there. She seemed to appear from nowhere, looking for me. Or someone like me."

"Perhaps you would be best to curtail yourself for the duration of their stay," he offered.

"I can't, Sir Hector," I answered firmly. "It's my responsibility to protect the island and the people, no matter what the cost!" He put a hand back on my shoulder and I squeezed it with my hand.

"I understand, my dear," he said softly. "We'll just have to be extra diligent in protecting our Angel. I'll spread the word."

"Thanks, Sir Hector."

"Pah!" he dismissed with a wave. "Our efforts, though done with all our hearts, are nothing compared to what you do for us." He bowed. "I will always be your humble servant, m'lady."

I smiled and thanked him again, paid for the chickens and continued with my errands.

* * * *

It was deep evening when I was finally able to get home. My whole day had been slowed down, looking for Mrs. Williams. I saw her several times, too. Twice more in the market, once at the bank. Fortunately, I was able to slip off to the police station without her seeing me and give my report of the kidnapping. She'd been delayed by a sudden group of islanders who held her up to sing a series of ballads.

I absolutely couldn't let her see me at the station; I had good reason to be at market and the bank, but no excuse for being at the police station. If she saw me there, I'd never get rid of her.

The guys let me hang out in the restricted area until late, late afternoon, then snuck me out in a squad car at shift change. Officer Kent dropped me off a half-mile west of home and I walked the rest of the way, still looking for her.

Finally I reached the safety of my street. My friends were all there, carrying on as normal, but with a very watchful look in their eyes. I spoke to Big Marie, telling her of my day, then went up the stairs to home. I got to our porch and reached for the doorknob. A glimmer of something caught my eye.

On the porch, hovering in midair, was a black rectangle of nothing. Short tendrils of black splayed out from the edges, looking like they provided the grip allowing the apparition to defy gravity. Concerned, I went inside and closed the door.

Francis was waiting for me, a sketchbook in one hand and a pen in the other. He was sitting in the shadows, with the lights of the apartment turned off. What light there was from the street drew harsh lines on the wall that cut sharp angles and passed over Francis' face. He was scared.

"I'm glad you're back, Sis," he said in a voice not at all like him. "Mrs. Williams was here, looking for you. She asked a lot of questions that I didn't want to answer. Questions about us, our parents, and the Angel of St. Thomas. I think we're in trouble, Carlita."

He stepped to the front window and checked his rectangles, then looked at me.

"Bad trouble."

Chapter Five

An Angel's Fight

"Carlita, are you *sure* you have to do this?"

Bobby Dobbie was worried. I'd called him up to talk about my plan to confront Mrs. Williams, and he was understandably nervous. I'd never been in this spot before.

"Yes, Bobby, I am. She knows where I live. She's seen me use my gifts twice now, and I'm positive she was sent here by someone to discover my identity."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm not sure, I just am." Which was true. I didn't have any ability to divine the future, like great-great Uncle Paul. But the way she was acting—and reacting—made me positive. And her eyes. Her eyes convinced me. I told Bobby as much.

"Okay, then," he said, committing to my decision. "We'll go with your plan. Just be careful, okay?"

I laughed, even though I didn't feel like it. "I always am, Bobby. If everything goes well, I'll see you at the mansion in an hour."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Bye, Bobby," I replied, ignoring the question and its answer. "See you in an hour." I hung up.

I left my room and walked to the living room. It was fully night now, but we still hadn't turned on our lights. Francis was standing by the window, peering out.

"Still there?" I asked.

"Uh-huh," he replied. Murray O'Kiefe, our downstairs neighbor, stood at the cart, facing somewhat to the left, and talking to Big Marie. That was the tipoff as to where Mrs. Williams was.

"Okay." I put my hand on the doorknob. "I suppose I'd better go."

"Carlita," Francis said. He came and gave me a big hug. The kid was almost as strong as I was. He kissed me on the cheek and looked into my blue eyes, his own dark eyes misty. "Be careful, please, big sister."

"Hey, runt" I smiled, wiping his tears away. "This is probably nothing. Just a rude, nosey lady from the States. I'll get this straightened up and everything will be fine."

He wiped his own eyes. "Then how come..."

"Just in case," I said, tapping his chest with my finger. "Just in case only. You got that, little bro'?" He nodded and smiled. He was a good kid. I kissed him on the forehead, then left.

The night's festival was in full swing, but anyone who'd been to festival could feel an undercurrent of tension in tonight's celebration. I wished my friends only good, and it was so reassuring to have them now.

I passed by Big Marie's cart, not saying a word. We'd talked about this earlier, before I went home. I'd take flight and lead Mrs. Williams away to a quiet spot where we could talk. Hopefully, that's all it would be. I hated using my abilities to harm or manipulate innocent people.

I'd walked about half a block when there came a series of loud pops. Murray had lit a dozen strings of firecrackers and the crowd was gathering around, led by the locals.

I jogged through the rushing people, and got free. That instant was the best, before anyone had a chance to think about anything except the firecrackers. The breeze was in my face. Behind me, smoke would be blowing into the eyes of those looking my way. Pops and snaps of light trailed at my feet and I jumped into the air.

Exhilaration washed over me as I became weightless. A moment only, or I would be blown backward. I wrested control from the puff of wind and rose into the air. But not too fast, nor too high. Tonight I had an audience. An audience of one.

I lifted to one hundred feet, continuing to let my trail sparkle slightly. Otherwise I'd be too difficult to see even at that low altitude.

Swinging northward, I faced the hills rearing up in front of me. I ascended them, carelessly neglecting to account for the rising ground. Within a minute, my altitude was a mere fifty feet.

Coming to a stop in midair, I acted as though I was lost or undecided as to where to go. Finally, I went back up to one hundred feet and flew quickly up the street I was positive Mrs. Williams was following me.

I flew quickly for a few seconds, then released myself to the breeze. Instantly, I became weightless and could change direction without having to slow down. I did an about face, took back my flight, and dove at the street.

And there she was.

I flew straight at her, but came out of my flat position and went back to my standing position. It was less threatening, I'd discovered. I didn't want to terrify Mrs. Williams, even though that's what she was doing to Francis and me. I just wanted to give her something long and hard to think about before she talked about this night to anyone.

Caught, she came to a stop and bent over. She'd been running uphill to stay with me, just like I'd planned. I closed in, less than two hundred feet from and fifty feet above her. She gave a couple more puffs, stood quickly, then raised her right arm, her palm facing toward me.

Instant knowledge flooded me and I swerved. A bright blue bolt of energy erupted from her hand and thundered past me!

I picked up speed and altitude, dodging as I went, not daring to look behind me. The sparkles that marked my flight path stopped, something I could do when concentrating. I'd always worried something like this would happen. For twelve generations my family had enjoyed our gifts. It seemed impossible we were the only ones to be so blessed. That everyone would use their abilities for good also seemed impossible.

I reached 500 feet, snapped north, and looked back at the ground. Just as I did, another bolt of blue shot up at me. I didn't even have to dodge. Apparently, Mrs. Williams didn't have night vision. And despite the nearly full moon, I was hard to see. That was the good news.

The bad news was that the next bolt she fired came from beneath me, and this one I *did* have to dodge. I'd come to a stop to locate her, but even still was a half-mile ahead of her. Now she'd caught up in two or three seconds. Such speed! And on the ground! I realized then that her huffing and puffing had been an act to lure me in. This was trouble. A great deal less confident than I'd been seconds earlier, I continued north.

We played this game of tag for another thirty minutes, with me working us toward the north shore. Less property to damage. And the trees blocked a lot of her shots. Once at the shore, I swung east. I could keep heading out to sea—I had no restrictions to the island or anything—but I didn't want to lose her. Tonight I wanted to find out more about her.

We worked our way east. I knew where I was going and hoped she didn't.

Sure enough. Twenty minutes later we reached the Zimmerman home, and Mrs. Williams still didn't seem oriented.

We were just south of the Zimmerman's. She ran to the top of a thirty-foot, rocky ridge, and started firing. A bolt passed by close enough to send tingles through me and I let out a burst of sparks. I dropped my power, but refused the wind's, and plummeted to the ground, directly east of her location, along the ridge.

As the ground rushed up, I suddenly surrendered to the breeze. My weight disappeared and the breeze pushed me upward. I went to flight and was skimming along the ridge, racing right at her, in less than two heartbeats.

She'd started moving toward where I'd "crashed" and but skidded to a halt. Now it was time to turn the tables. Rather, tip them over. For Mrs. Williams had no way of knowing that the ridge she now stood on had been built by me only yesterday.

Her hand came up, and I dropped the ridge ten feet. She waved her arms to gain balance and sent a bolt skyward, far away from me. I dropped the rock even lower, then arched a large piece over her head. She was now stuck in my freshly made crag, unable to use her speed. I floated over her, keeping the rock between us.

"The rock above your head, Mrs. Williams, is held in place by me. If I am killed or knocked unconscious, it will fall down on top of you. Do you understand?"

There came some quiet words—probably language inappropriate for a lady—and then she answered. "Yes" She sighed. "I understand. I won't attack you."

"Thanks. Can we talk?"

"Are you going to let me out of here?"

"No."

She sighed again. "All right. Let's talk. Can't you make it a little less tight, at any rate?"

I floated down beside her, just out of her reach, on the south side of the ridge, toward their half-built mansion.

"No."

"You know," she accused, "you don't much act like an angel."

"I'm not *your* angel."

She chuckled.

"All right. I deserved that. But you are the Angel of St. Thomas, aren't you?"

I nodded slowly.

"I am. Who are you? And why are you on my island, threatening the peace of my people?"

"*Your* island? *Your* people?" she said sarcastically. "Kind of puffed up for a kid, aren't you?"

"It is my island to protect," I replied. "They are my people to serve. As my family has for three centuries. Now answer my questions or I'll seal you up and fetch the police."

"All right! Sheez, you're pushy." I said nothing, and she continued. "My name is Wanda Overton and I'm from the States. I wanted to talk to you, but not like this. Will you set me free?"

"No."

She nodded, a hard glint to her eye. "Okay, angel. We'll do this the hard way."

Her hand slipped into her jacket, then flipped out. A blue ball flew from her hand toward the house. It hit once...

A ball! I went straight down after the ball. It was happy to see me, 'cause it bounced up high. I swooped at it with a laugh and snatched the ball out of midair. Still laughing, I soared into the sky, happy, happy, happy! I...

Something bright hit me hard in the body. It threw me at the house and I crashed into a second floor wall, the ball flying free. It was drywall and cracked when I hit it, saving me some pain. I fell to the floor, coughing and gasping for air. No act, this. When flying, I had some protection. And I could affect the gravities around me to form a shield whenever needed. But they'd hit me at the worst time; chasing a ball with my guard down.

They?

Even as I thought it, I knew it to be true. I stood up, too shaky to take flight, and looked at the ridge.

Mrs. Williams should have been crushed to death in the rock. But she wasn't. Mr. Williams was there, yanking large chunks loose and tossing them aside like beach balls. All the while, Mrs. Williams casually blasted more rock clear.

Eventually she was free, and they approached me, Mrs. Williams arriving in a blur while Mr. Williams flew over.

"Not bad for an untrained rookie," she said, looking me over. "You played me pretty well, Carlita. But you should prepare for the unexpected. Of course, you weren't to know that Caesar here also had powers."

"No," I admitted, coughing again. My breath was slowly coming back. "I didn't know that for sure. But you're wrong about a couple things."

"And what might those be, dear?" she smiled as she raised her hand toward me.

"I'm not a rookie." I took another deep breath and bent over to cough again. This time I *was* faking it; I didn't want them to notice the black rectangles forming in the air behind them.

"No?"

"No. I've been on duty for ten years. Since I was seven."

"And the other thing, Carlita?" Mr. Williams asked. He was still hovering off the edge of the unwallied second floor.

"I did come prepared." I jerked straight, and Francis released his rectangles.

Mrs. Williams fired at me, but the energy whipped back and was absorbed by the sheet of sheer black that enveloped her torso, pinning her arms to her side. I heard a heavy thump as Mr. Williams crashed to the ground. Apparently he couldn't stay aloft with ten gravities pressing down on him. Francis' black force fields zoomed down and had him tied up like a market chicken in moments. He struggled briefly, then quieted. Francis stepped from the darkness, clutching his pen and sketchpad.

"Sorry I couldn't warn you, Sis," he said. "Mrs. Williams, you'd better not fight it too much. My constructs have pretty sharp edges." She took his advice and lay quiet as well.

"Mr. Williams showed up about twenty minutes ago," he continued. "He figured out you two were coming, but not me."

"Or us," came a voice from the stairs. A few grunts followed, then Bobby, Jeff and Betts carried Mr. Williams up the stairs. They plopped him beside Mrs. Williams. Betts turned on a work light and shone it on our two prisoners.

"Hey!" she said suddenly. "I know these guys!"

"Sure," Bobby said. "Mr. and Mrs. Williams, our clients."

"No!" Betts said with excitement. "I mean, yeah. But I also recognize them from the States' papers. They're Blue Lass and Strong Man, from that group, the Galactic Good Guys! They're both superheroes!"

Chapter Six

Galactic Good Guys

"No, we don't actually defend the *entire* galaxy," Mr. Williams answered Francis after he'd released them. He smiled tolerantly, as though he'd heard the question many times before. "Just our corner of it."

"You mean, like the surrounding solar systems?" Francis asked excitedly. Being a person with special gifts—and a boy—he knew all about the Good Guys. "Is there alien life that close?"

"Umm..." Mr. Will—rather, Strong Man, hesitated. "I'm ... Not at liberty to say. You understand."

"Sure!" Francis said with a wink. "Probably a special code or something heroes have to know. Or maybe just corps members, huh?"

"Something like that," Blue Lass said before turning to me. "The reason we're here, Carlita, is because of you."

"Me?" I said, surprised.

"Yes. We've decided to accept you into the Galactic Good Guys."

I blinked.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all," Strong Man said. "Blue Lass and I were sent here to test you and to see if you were truly the heroine the rumors had claimed you were."

"Yes," Blue Lass continued with a smile. "And I'm happy to see that they were all true. The others will be pleased."

"Others?" I said weakly. "You mean *more* of you are coming?"

"Indeed," Strong Man rumbled powerfully, "Stone Man, Wind Lass, Bumble Bee. They're all coming."

"Cool!" Francis exclaimed, a grin from ear to ear.

I could see that Bobby, Jeff and Betts didn't think it was cool. Neither did I. Time to put a stop to this.

"Listen, Blue Lass. Strong Man. I'm flattered. Really, I am. But my life is dedicated to keeping St. Thomas safe. I'm the twelfth generation of my family to have this trust. I travel to St. Croix and St. John's. I even keep an eye on the British Virgin Isles. But my home and duties are here. I can't leave."

"I don't understand," Blue Lass said, her tone cooling. "Are you saying your powers are limited to here? Or just that you're afraid to leave the safety of the islands?"

"Oh, get real!" Bobby broke in. Blue Lass stared at him in surprise. "Don't you get it? There's been an Angel of St. Thomas for three centuries. Most of us know the stories, though we don't share them with outsiders. But we know there's nothing safe about these islands. Blackbeard had his home here. Bluebeard, too. We're the number one target for hurricanes every year. There's been slavery, smuggling, wars, and criminals aplenty on St. Thomas over the past three hundred years. And there's *always* been an Angel to protect the innocent and save those lost at sea."

"Carlita can no more leave us than we can live without her. Her mother died for us. Her great-aunt, too. Eleven, in all. Never question her resolve to fight for what's right!" Bobby squared off, as did Jeff, Betts and even Francis. I blushed, but stepped in front of them.

"I'm sorry you came all the way out here." I waved at the mansion. "And I'm sorry you had to spend so much money as a way to get to me, only to have me turn you down. But I'm staying."

"We don't give up easily," Blue Lass said. "Your superpowers over rock are a perfect component to add to our force. And while we don't know what your upper limits are, what you've shown so far is sufficient. So, too, your skill at flight."

"Please, Carlita," Strong Man added. "Reconsider and join us."

"No."

"Hmmm ... This is going to be harder than I thought," she admitted. "Once the others get here we'll discuss sweetening the job offer. In the meantime..."

"In the meantime, please leave us alone." I was getting tired and a little annoyed at this.

"The Galactic Good Guys *always* reach their goals," Strong Man declared. "You *will* join us, Carlita, and you will..."

I'd had enough of this. Stepping up, I looked Blue Lass square in the eye.

"What do you think you should do?" I asked her, looking deep beyond her eyes. Sparkles appeared around my own eyes. Her mouth opened, then closed. She blinked once, then stared back.

"I think I should find the best chocolate sundae on the island and eat it," she finally mumbled, sounding surprised at her own conviction. "Good bye." She turned and raced off, only a blue afterimage remaining.

"Blue Lass!" Strong Man called after her. "What's wrong?" He turned back at me, anger in his voice and eyes "What did you do to her? Where is she going?"

I stepped up to him, bright blue eyes sparkling.

"Where do you think, Strong Man?"

He frowned at me, then his face softened as he lost his train of thought. "To bowl 300 at the alley. I think I will, too. See ya!" He turned and flew off.

"That was sneaky," Bobby accused. "But funny."

I giggled. Apparently, the Good Guys didn't know about *all* my abilities. And they'd made some poor guesses at others.

"Well, they were getting kinda pushy."

"I dunno, Sis," Francis said. He sounded a little disappointed. "They're the Galactic Good Guys, after all..."

"Yeah," Betts said. "And those two are going to be plenty upset when they finish doing their little errands."

"I don't think so, Betts," I replied. "I've done this lots of times, and they all seem pretty happy after

they've had their harmless fun." I laughed. "Though it may take Strong Man a while to bowl three hundred!"

We talked a while longer, but the others soon left, leaving only Francis and me. We walked down to the rocky shore and sat on a large boulder.

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing, Carlita?" he asked wistfully. "I mean, the Galactic Good Guys! You might have a chance to go to other planets! At least you'd see the rest of the world! And just think what it would be like in their satellite headquarters? Or their New York base? Or the Los Angeles one?"

"It does sound exciting," I said, and looked up at the night sky. "Sometimes I wish I could go to the stars."

"Will you ever try?" Francis asked. "After all, you've never found an upper limit to either your speed or altitude. With the right equipment..."

"No, thanks, little bro!" I said emphatically. "The time may come when I'll *have* to try the upper limits. But why risk it when I don't need to? Besides, there's not a whole lot that's going to affect our islands from outer space."

"Maybe an alien race?" he offered, almost hopefully.

"Maybe," I said with a shrug. "If that happens, I'll call the Good Guys," I added with a wink and a grin.

"Well, they *do* protect this corner of the galaxy," Francis agreed with a laugh.

We sat quietly for a time after that, enjoying the night and the company. I looked at my little brother as he leaned back on his hands, swinging his feet over the boulder and staring out at the sea.

What was he thinking? I wondered. Was he thinking about our parents? Mom and Dad had been lost at sea ten miles north of here, not quite in sight of Tobago Island. I remembered the day so well, but Francis was only a year old. Did he miss them the way I did?

Or was he thinking about the future? Most of the time, there were a number of my family serving the island. As a family we were collectively called "the Angel", regardless of how many "angels" were serving. And there were normally several of us at a time. In fact, over the past hundred years, there'd been only one Angel twice; Mom for three months after Uncle Johnny was killed, and me since she died. Maybe that was why the people took such good care of us. But even when Francis was old enough to start his duties, his gifts would be quieter, more defensive. Did he worry he'd be lost in my flashier abilities? A sudden thought came to me.

"You know, Francis, in a few years the Good Guys might be interested in *you*. Did you think about that?"

From his surprised look I could tell he hadn't. After a few moments, though, he shook his head.

"I don't think so, Carlita. I don't have the kind of abilities that are really useful in a group. Not like yours."

So he *had* been thinking about it.

"I think you're wrong, Francis," I said, surprised at how much I believed it myself. "You're smart, stay calm under pressure, have great control over your rectangles, and you..."

"What about my teleporting? I'm lucky to survive every time I use it." He shook his head in remembrance. "Like the last time. I ended up 150 feet in the air. If you hadn't been there..." He didn't

finish.

"All right," I agreed "Control over your teleport gift is flaky. And your clairvoyance is still sporadic. But so were your rectangles once. Just give it time. I'll bet by the time you're fifteen or sixteen, you'll be a top notch rookie for the Galactic Good Guys."

"Maybe," he said. "But you know what, Sis? As excited as I am for you to think about joining them, I can't see myself leaving the island." At my half smile, he grinned. "Okay, okay, I get the point. You're not ready to leave either."

"It's not so much as 'ready to leave' as it is, 'want to stay'. I'm the Angel! How could a person want more? Except another Angel? And that's you, Francis, in a couple years."

He tossed a rock into the waves and watched it splash into the water. We didn't say anything more for a long time, and then it was time to go home. We got to our feet and brushed off.

I jumped into the breeze, caught flight, and went aloft. Circling around, I flew over Francis. He jumped up and grabbed my outstretched hands. I took away the Earth's pull on him and we rose into the air. By now, Blue Lass would be deep into her chocolate sundae and Strong Man would be bowling his head off. We could count on a safe and quiet trip home.

And so it was.

Chapter Seven

Fire at the Unity Lodge

With the mansion project suddenly canceled, there wasn't much need for me at the office. I went in, but spent only two hours calling our suppliers and subcontractors to let them know we were out of work for a while. They were disappointed but accepting; TomCon had collected our fees in advance from the "Williams", so everybody was paid up to date, including us. Good, because I needed the money. Bad, because I still hadn't saved up enough to see us through the school year, which was less than two months away. I hoped I wouldn't have to work full time when classes started. I didn't have my Aunt Beth's special gift of never needing sleep. On the other hand, neither did I have her quirk of having to be buried to the neck in sand every month.

So with nothing to do except my "other job"—the one that didn't pay—Francis and I showed up at the police station nice and early.

Officer Kent was on desk duty. The gang—there were only a dozen of them—all took turns at the desk. He gave us a big grin and friendly wave. It wasn't like he had anything to do; even the criminals on St. Thomas slept in late every morning.

"Good morning, Carlita!" he said with a huge smile. "Morning, Francis!"

"Morning, Officer Kent!" Francis said cheerfully. "Anything happen overnight?"

"Not much. We had four tourists come in complaining about a pickpocket. There was a trash fire over at the 99 Steps, but Bud and Jim had it out in just a couple minutes." Bud was the Fire Chief for the island, and Jim the only full time firefighter. Everyone else was a volunteer, including me.

"Can I fix some breakfast for everyone?" Francis asked. I sometimes wondered if his cooking ability was a gift.

"Believe me, Francis," Officer Kent said, "you *never* have to ask that!" He buzzed us through the security door.

Francis headed to the kitchen, while I walked over to the radio counter and swapped out my radio for a fresh one. Having an angel wasn't any good if you couldn't reach her, so I always carried a police radio.

"We just got in a new model, Carlita," he said helpfully. "Look in the lower drawer. The Lieutenant wanted me to make sure you got one."

Curious, I opened the drawer and inspected the new ones. Nice. The earphone and mic clung to the cheek. Three of them matched the dark brown of my Carib skin. I raised one and looked questioningly at Officer Kent.

"Yep," he said with a nod "Those were ordered special for you. We feel real uncomfortable when you shut off your radio."

"I have to," I explained, "if I'm to have any chance of spooking the bad guy. If he saw the headset, he'd know I was just another person."

"Believe me, Carlita," he said dryly, "you'll never be 'just another person!'."

"Well, maybe not". I laughed and tried it on. It used a wireless headset, so I could put the radio anywhere on me and not get caught up on the wire. I shoved it into the bottomless depths of my blue denim purse.

"How's this?" I asked Officer Kent.

He narrowed his eyes and inspected me from ten feet. He finally nodded.

"I think I can just see it. But I know to look for it. I think it'll work great, Carlita."

"Great! I don't mind telling you that *I'm* a little nervous turning off my radio. This'll make all of us feel better."

The door chimed as it opened. I looked to see who it was, then ducked down quickly when I saw it was an off-islander. There was nothing really unusual with somebody like me being behind the counter. But it was always better to avoid explanations when possible.

"Good morning, sir!" Officer Kent said cheerfully. "May I help you?"

"Yes, thank you." He had a very thick States accent. Maybe Boston or someplace like that. "I'd like to speak to the Angel of St. Thomas. Could you contact her for me, please?"

"Sir?" Officer Kent had gotten this question before. They all had. And everyone had the perfect response.

"The Angel. I wish to speak to her."

"I'm sorry, sir," he said slowly, "but there is no Angel of St. Thomas. It's an island legend that dates back..."

"Three hundred years. Yes, yes. I've heard all the surprised denials, all the colorful explanations. The people of St. Thomas seem quite determined to keep her reality their secret. But I know she exists. When you see Carlita, tell her that Benjamin Frost was looking for her. Understand, officer?"

"Sir, I'm not sure what to say. I ... Sir!" Another chime and the man was gone.

"Clear, Carlita," he said in a low tone. "Who was that guy?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. I pointed at the security monitor mounted beneath the desk. "May I see the tape?"

"Sure." Officer Kent backed up the tape and played it.

Mr. Frost was an older man, maybe in his sixties. True to his name, he had black hair that seemed frozen in place by streaks of white. He was well built and had a craggy, handsome face, and walked with a slight limp. I'd never seen him before.

I shook my head. "I don't know him or his name. Wait." I thought of something. Going to the kitchen doorway, I called out to Francis. He showed up holding a large pan and wearing an apron. I asked him about the strange man.

"Sure, I know who he is!" he said. I had a sinking feeling he might.

"Let me guess," I said. "A Galactic Good Guy."

"The Icicle," he said with a nod. "He's one of the founders. Does some pretty cool stuff with ice

formations.” He grinned. “No pun intended.”

"Wonderful," I said, turning back to Officer Kent. "The Galactic Good Guys are trying to recruit me and they won't take no for an answer."

"How do they know you, Carlita?" he asked.

"The mansion project. Our 'Mr. and Mrs. Williams' were really Strong Man and Blue Lass. I don't know how they'd gotten suspicious to begin with, but I am a pretty open secret here."

"Maybe you need to change that," he suggested. "Go more undercover."

I shook my head. "It would only make people more curious. Better to have thousands of people covering me than one mask. Besides," I added to get the mood happier, "can you just imagine what a mask would do to my tan?"

He looked at me and chuckled. Like most people on the island, I was descended from Carib, African, and Dutch blood, so my complexion was pretty "tan" to begin with. Officer Kent was no different. If anything, his skin was darker than mine.

"You're right, Carlita. And just think how tan lines would ruin the whole 'Angel' mystique." We laughed.

The emergency line sounded right then, cutting off our conversation. Officer Kent picked up the line while I fished out my radio and clipped it to my jeans.

"St. Thomas 911," he said crisply. "What is the location and nature of the emergency?"

He started scribbling in the logbook, then nodded at me. "A fire out of control at the Old Unity Lodge. Is everyone out?" He listened, then shook his head. "Three to six trapped inside? Please remain calm, Father. I'm sending the fire department right now." A pause. "Yes, I think she'll be there first."

That's all I needed to hear. Shouting to Francis, I ran up the stairs to the second floor. Three off-duty officers were there, but they weren't bothered by my sudden appearance. In fact, they cheered me on. I ran up the stairs that took me to the roof. I did this a lot. Pushing the door open, I felt the breeze on my face. I caught flight and shot straight up to 1000 feet.

The Old Unity Lodge was northwest of the station, and I had no difficulty spotting it. Smoke poured from the windows and doors. There was a small knot of people outside at a safe distance, so I made for them. Behind me, I heard the fire sirens starting up.

I was spotted—probably looked for—as I swept to them. Rather than land, I hovered about five feet up.

"Do you know where they're trapped?" I asked no one in particular.

"Yes," said one, a priest. "Down in the basement. We were working on the food drive when..."

"How many?" I interrupted. Seconds counted.

"At least three. Perhaps six. Most are elderly, but there were two or three young adults..."

I had what I needed and didn't wait for more. I'd been in most of the public buildings on the island, including the Lodge. It helped tremendously in the case of fire or late night crime.

I flew at the door and raised my gravity shields. They would keep me from getting burned too badly. I could also use the shields to protect the victims, provided I could find them. Since the door was already

burned beyond redemption, I flew straight through it.

It was pure hell inside. Flames ate every surface, sparing nothing. I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like it had been deliberately set. Not the time to worry about that, though. Once inside, I swung to my right and went down the stairs. I had maybe five minutes of air inside my shield. Less, once I included the people.

The stone staircase wound down, and I was in the basement. The fire had started here, without question. The heat was very intense, and the air was filled with smoke. The large room looked nothing like I remembered it. Then it was quaint. Now it was a nightmare.

I pushed on, looking everywhere. Seconds ticked away. Through the roar of the flames, I could hear the sirens approaching. I didn't want any of the firefighters to have to enter this inferno. I looked harder.

There were five of them, huddled together at the cellar door, either unconscious or dead. I couldn't take time to find out. Not that it mattered. I was bringing them all out.

That they were at the cellar door was good. Hovering over them, I carefully placed a skintight shield around them, one at a time, then expanded it out to join mine, giving them my relatively fresh air. Good. Now it was just a matter of blowing open the door and...

A loud crack broke through the roar, and the ceiling above our heads crashed down! I was caught completely off-guard, being intent on my charges. The beam hit me before I could remove all its weight, and I crashed to the floor, grounded.

The heat was beyond intense now, and I could feel it on my lungs. Someone started screaming, the shield's air having revived her. Rather than trying to quiet her, I instead focused on the burning beam and stonework we were trapped under.

I saw all the lines of gravity in our galaxy and how they pulled us. It was like looking through a vast web of glass strands. Some were thicker than others. The thickest was always Earth's. Everything had glass strands attached to them. The Good Guys had thought I controlled rock and had the ability to fly. I could fly, but I controlled a lot more than rock. What I did was control the forces of gravity, increasing and decreasing, eliminating, or even reversing whichever ones I wished.

No time for niceties. I removed the Earth's string and greatly enhanced the Sun's, which was in direct line of the cellar doors. No point in wasting good rubble, either. I also built a larger second shield to keep the floor above us from collapsing.

The stonework and beam rumbled, then slid off my inner shield. I hurled it at the cellar door as fast as I could. The mass slammed against the metal door and obliterated it. I immediately restored normal gravity and the rubble fell to the ground, fanning out as it hit.

"Everyone who's awake," I yelled over the flames. "Grab an unconscious person!" I stooped and picked up an elderly woman, showing the others they weighed nothing. Literally. I saw some nods, and they followed my example. One trip only. Good. I led them out through the cellar.

Once outside, I lifted off and flew around to the waiting crowd. Already ambulances had arrived and the fire department was pumping water.

"There's another four wounded people on the other side!" I shouted, lowering my passenger onto a gurney. I pointed, and the paramedics ran around the inferno. I finally dropped my shields and almost passed out from fresh air that rushed into my lungs, giving me a coughing fit.

"Let's get you seen to," the paramedic helping the elderly lady said to me. "The firefighters can handle it from here." His gaze drifted to the right.

There were tourists! Here, at a fire! Three or four were looking at me. One was pointing. What business did they...

I cut off my mental tirade and nodded, still coughing.

"I'll be fine. But put me on a gurney," I said in a low voice to the paramedic, "and take your time getting me to the ambulance, okay? I still have work to do." And with that, I collapsed to the ground.

A clatter of equipment, and then I felt strong, confident hands move me to the gurney. A blanket went over my body, and an oxygen mask over my face. I opened my eyes and saw the paramedic drawing a needle. He winked at me.

"Just saline solution, Carlita," he said quietly. "If we're going to have tourists, we may as well give them a show, hey, girl?" He flashed me a smile.

He put the needle in my arm, and injected me, then waved at another paramedic.

"I've got her sedated and stabilized, but we have to get her to the hospital, stat!"

The gurney rose up and they wheeled me around. I turned my head and looked at the Lodge. It would be impossible for the firefighters to save any of it, it was so out of control. That's why I was here. And why my family had always been here.

There were strings on the flames as well. The higher they reached, the cooler the flames became. I freed them from the Earth's pull and subjected them to the pull of a red giant some twenty lightyears away. Only I made the distance between the flame strings and the star only a million miles apart. Meanwhile, I coated the entire lodge in an invisible gravity shield that kept the air out, but let heat escape.

"Look!" someone shouted. Gasps and startled voices came from the gathering crowd.

The flames of the Lodge suddenly reached hundreds of feet into the bright blue Caribbean sky, then flashed out of existence with a "whoosh!"

The gurney clacked against the back of the ambulance and the wheels swung up as it and I slid into place. I kept the shields on the lodge for as long as possible. Without warning, sleepiness poured over me. The strings snapped back to normal, but the firefighters were in control. The paramedic who'd given me the injection got in beside me and smiled again. The doors banged shut and the ambulance moved off.

"You jerk," I mumbled, half grateful and half angry. "That really was a sedative."

"Sorry, Carlita. I wanted to tell you, but knew you'd only fight it." I nodded. "And you've some bad burns. At least, bad enough to need treatment. I was willing to wait an extra minute for you to put out the flames, but no more. You did a great job, Carlita, saving those people and what's left of the lodge. But now let us do our job and take care of you.

"You deserve it."

Chapter Eight

Benjamin Frost

I spent the next four days in the hospital, recovering from my burns. Fortunately, I was a quick healer. Not a gift, not in the way my abilities were, but something that had run in my family for generations. It was a blessing, seeing how often we stepped into places best avoided.

Francis was a constant visitor, bringing in meals for both me and the nurses in the wing. The firefighters had all chipped in some money so Francis could cook to his heart's content. Believe me, nobody complained!

By the second day, I was up and moving around, visiting people, talking to them and signing autographs. I did tricks for the kids, floating objects and showering sparkles. I even caught a breeze from an open window once and was able to fly around the children's ward. There were plenty of rods and tubes and things, and the ceiling was kinda low, so I went slowly. They loved it, though, and I was glad to have something to do.

One thing I was glad I *didn't* have to do was answer questions. Reporters always stayed away, respecting my privacy. Whenever one did want to interview me, he or she was polite, and never wrote anything that would give away my name. And *nowhere* did it ever say that there really was an Angel of St. Thomas. I knew that reporters from elsewhere were quite different. Privacy meant nothing to many of them, only the story. But on the Virgin Islands, blood and family ran far deeper than ink. Again, a blessing.

Neither was I bothered by anyone from the Good Guys. I don't know whether by choice, because they'd lost track of me, or because the hospital was good at covering up my presence. But it was a pleasant four days.

Yet all good things, as the saying goes, must come to an end. I was getting antsy, anyway. Francis and I made one more pass through the wing, saying our goodbyes, then left the hospital. I probably should have waited until nightfall, then flown home unseen, but I let my guard down. Maybe *that* was why the Good Guys had left me alone.

Sure enough, Benjamin Frost was outside the main doors, waiting for me. He was sitting on a bench, reading the *VI Daily News*. Beside him were a dozen more copies.

"Good morning, Carlita," he said pleasantly, folding his paper closed. "Hello, Francis."

"Good morning," I replied with a small smile, as if not recognizing him. "Nice day today, isn't it?"

"Very," he answered, then gave me a small smile of his own. "Before I went into the police station last week, I was at the small cafe across the street. I saw both of you enter the station that morning, about ten minutes before I followed. The time of my entrance was not by chance. I even saw you hide near the radios, Carlita. Still, formal introductions are always proper." He smiled again, stood, and gave a short bow with his head. "My name is Benjamin Frost, from Searsport, Maine, and I am requesting an audience with the Angel of St. Thomas and her brother, Francis."

What could I say? Denial was the automatic response. But it was pretty foolish to make a denial after I'd already admitted my abilities to his friends. A growl in my stomach told me the right course of action.

"Okay, Mr. Frost," I said. "Buy us lunch and I'll talk."

"Thank you," he said simply. "Shall we walk?"

To my relief, we went to the same cafe he'd watched the police station from. Nonetheless, I held Francis' hand pretty tightly. This was an unexpected tactic. For whatever reason, I hadn't thought they'd use discussion to pursue me.

The waitress gave us a big smile and seated us right away in the half-filled restaurant. As we looked over our menus, he started conversation.

"I'm surprised, but very pleased, that you came with me." He chuckled. "After the easy way you handled Wanda and Caesar, I thought I might have my hands full."

"What do you want from us, Mr. Frost?" I asked.

"A good question. Please, allow me time to give a good answer." He set his menu down and motioned to the waitress. "But first, some lunch!"

* * * *

"I've been able to put together most of your family's history, Carlita," Mr. Frost started again while we waited for dessert. "It wasn't easy. Fortunately, there are a number of islanders who know and trust me. They felt they could confide in me and know I'd keep their trust."

"And have you?"

"If by that you mean, have I kept my knowledge from others, then the answer is yes," he said. "Not even the Good Guys have been told a single word."

"Why?" I asked, very curious. Francis, too, was listening closely.

"Tell me, Carlita," he asked, seemingly ignoring my question. "How old were you when you realized you had extraordinary gifts?"

"I don't see how..."

"I was four," he said. "I'm seventy-two years old now. I have known about my heat stealing abilities for sixty-eight years."

"I'll never forget the day I discovered them. My parents, older three sisters and I were coming to America from our eastern European homeland. We came by boat, since it was the only way my father could afford passage."

"The six of us were in steerage, crammed into one cabin. I slept on the floor so my sisters could have the top bunk, while my parents shared the lower bunk." He drew a deep breath and let it out. "We were poor, but what an adventure! It was all a young boy like myself could hope for!"

His face drifted from happy to sad in the next heartbeats.

"The adventure ended three nights out. The ship caught fire. It was a nightmare! By the time I woke up, the cabin was filled with smoke and the cabin's wooden door was charred. I could see flames in the cracks where the door had warped."

Francis and I listened intently. I could feel the pain in his words, almost feel the heat of that awful night.

"I got up right away and tried to wake my parents and sisters" He broke for a moment and closed his eyes. "I couldn't. They were all dead. It was then I realized I'd been saved only because I'd slept on the

floor, where smoke hadn't reached me.

"But my salvation seemed only temporary. The door was burning now, and I had no way to escape, since we had no porthole. I sat on the floor next to the bed and stared at the door, wishing more than anything the fire would go away. How I hated it!" He took a sip of his coffee.

"I passed out shortly afterwards and don't remember much more. I awoke the next day in a lifeboat, along with twenty or so other survivors. They stared at me and made me sit in the front of the boat. They all took turns watching me. No one spoke to me, and they only grudgingly gave me food and water. I was too young to ask why they were treating me that way. It wasn't until several months later, during the inquiry, that I found out I was the one blamed for the sinking of the ship."

"You?" Francis blurted out. "I don't believe it! How could you have done something horrible like that? They were liars!"

Mr. Frost smiled at him.

"Thank you, Francis, for your confidence." Another sip of coffee. "I only wish it was true, that I hadn't sunk the ship."

"At first, I didn't believe it. Like you, Francis, I couldn't believe I was capable of such a deed. But for a different reason. You believe me unable to do such an act because of the 'hero' status I enjoy, don't you?" We both nodded. "I was no hero then. Just a scared little boy. How could I know if I were capable of evil or not?" He set down his coffee cup and folded his hands in front of his face. I could see how much it hurt him to go on. But I didn't stop him because I also felt how much he *had* to go on.

"My terror of the flames awoke my inner powers. Most people think that I have power over cold. Nonsense! There's no such thing as cold! It's all a question of molecular vibration that determines 'heat' or 'cold'. The slower the molecules of an object vibrate, the 'colder' it is. Therein lies my ability I remove heat by slowing the rate at which molecules vibrate." A flicker of a smile. "Still, it's simpler to be known as The Icicle than it is The Gentleman Who Steals Heat From Things, so I allow the inaccurate nomenclature to continue. But I digress."

"When the fire ripped through our cabin door and began eating at the bunks where my dead family lay, a burning sensation seized me. Thinking the heat was eating me as well, I gave up and surrendered to the flames."

"In doing so, I conquered them. The flames did indeed attack me. But they vanished even as they touched me! I could control heat! But I could not control the power."

"What happened?" I whispered.

He shrugged. "It was then that I passed out. But the cause of the ship's sinking was not fire. The witnesses maintained, the court of inquiry determined, and after years of personal research and soul-searching I must painfully admit, that the ship was pulled beneath the waves by the sheer weight of the ice that covered every square inch of the ship."

"But ice floats," Francis objected. "It's less dense than water."

"True enough," Mr. Frost agreed "But ice is far *more* dense than *air*. A ship remains afloat because of the amount of water it displaces with air. When that air is in turn displaced by water *or* ice, the ship will sink. And while water is denser than ice, it also flows off. Ice does not. Accumulated ice is one of the greatest dangers to ships. And because of my lack of control, the ship my family and I—and hundreds of innocent

travelers and sailors—was on, sank."

"But how could they know it was you, Mr. Frost?" I asked quietly. I had to blink away tears.

"I was saved by a brave man—a father from another family on our deck who risked his life to check all the cabins—who found me and carried me to safety." He looked away briefly, and it was obvious his thoughts drifted back to that moment. "He saved my life, and I thanked him poorly. By the time he was able to get me onto the lifeboat, his hands, arms, and left side of his face, where he held me to protect me from breathing too much smoke, were badly frostbitten. And the three people on the boat who handled me before I awoke were also frostbitten, though thankfully all three could be treated without resorting to..." He paused, then finished. "Without resorting to amputation."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Neither could Francis. We simply sat there quietly with him, hoping he would tell us a happy ending, but knowing he couldn't.

"After the investigation and their conclusions, I was sent to an orphanage, and nothing was said about that night or my powers. Or so I was told. As the years drifted by and no one adopted me, it became apparent that was not the case. Those in charge of the orphanage *had* been told, and they dared not risk allowing me to ever leave.

"I did leave, when I turned sixteen. I'd been practicing my control over my heat stealing and had reached a point where I felt it was complete." He smiled wryly. "It wasn't, but that's another story.

"Anyway, I joined the circus as 'The Living Icicle' I was in a freak show and made do for several years. It was there that I met two more 'freaks' like myself, Hank and Beth Winslow."

"Iron Works and Dream Catcher," Francis said, nodding enthusiastically. "That was the beginning of Freedom Squad. You three, and Laser later on, were a great team!"

"Laser." Mr. Frost chuckled with honest humor. I relaxed. He seemed to have come to a better time in his life. "Richard Gilmore. Did you know, Francis, that Richard hated the name Laser? Thought it was childish indulgence. He just wanted to be called Richard. It took us all our skills to convince him he needed a moniker with more ... persuasion."

"That's why my family has always used 'The Angel of St. Thomas,'" I volunteered. "Partly because that's what our people named us, but also because it both calms the innocent and makes the guilty feel weak." I smiled. "Sometimes."

"Therein lies the challenge, yes?" he agreed. "To use as little force as needed to render justice. You and I, Carlita, are—and one day you, Francis, will be—vigilantes. Citizens who appear at the scene of a crime or disaster and try to make things right."

"Well," I admitted, "I'm actually an official member of both the St. Thomas police and fire forces. My mom was, too. I also have some police training and firefighter certification. It helps a lot."

"You are a joy, young lady!" he said, laughing openly. "Never have I seen one so young with such a firm grasp of her purpose and place. Any reservations I had about you are swept away!"

"Thank you, Mr. Frost," I said, sad our conversation had to come to an end. But I could see where this was leading. "I can honestly say it would be an honor serving with you. Both Francis and I would learn so much from you. But my place is here, on the island of St. Thomas. I cannot abandon my people, any more than you could leave your family. My *soul* is here, Mr. Frost. I speak for my brother as well. At least, at this stage in his life. Like I told the others, I must decline joining the Galactic Good Guys."

"The Galactic Good Guys?" He seemed genuinely surprised. "Dear girl, why in the world would I counsel you to join that bunch of puffed shirts and pompous peacocks? They are a group of short-sighted people unable to properly grasp what you and Francis so easily do: What your purpose is.

"Join them? I should say not! *My* purpose in coming to the island, Carlita, was to make sure you and Francis were prepared for the lives you have and to convince you both to stay here!"

Chapter Nine

Trouble In Threes

"Would you care for any more chicken, Mr. Frost?" We'd spent the afternoon with Mr. Frost, and had come back to our apartment for dinner. As always, Francis cooked. He'd prepared one of his best chicken meals, using fresh fruit, a splash of rum (never mind how we got it!), and one of the chickens I'd bought from Sir Hector.

"Why, yes, Francis, I believe I will," Mr. Frost replied. Francis, beaming at serving his hero dinner, dished out another portion, then offered me a second helping.

"No thanks, little bro! If I eat anymore, I may not be able to fly!" I laughed.

"Tell me, Carlita," Mr. Frost said between bites, "how do you balance your everyday life with your superhero life?"

"It's easier for me than it was for you, Mr. Frost," I answered. "Which reminds me. I told the guys I'd be online tonight."

"The guys'?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. The precinct and firehouse." I pulled out my new radio and put it on, carefully laying the cling mike along my cheek. "There. How's that?"

"Looks good, Sis!"

"Very sophisticated, Carlita" Mr. Frost nodded. "That's a police radio, I take it?"

"Yup. When a crime or fire happens, I want to be there."

"Very commendable. And I'm sure the flying helps."

"Unless she sees a ball in play," Francis said with a grin. I rolled my eyes and giggled.

"I'm sorry?" Mr. Frost said. "I don't understand."

I explained to him my weakness for chasing balls when I was in flight. Instead of laughing, though, he became very serious.

"Carlita, how many people know of this?"

"The island people," I replied. "And I suppose all the Good Guys do now, too. Blue Lass used it against me when we fought last week."

"This can become a problem, Carlita," he said. "You're going to need to..."

"Uh, gotta wait, Mr. Frost!" I interrupted suddenly, putting a hand to my ear. Habit. The radio reception was great. I listened for a moment, nodding my head.

"Got it! I'm on my way, Lieutenant!" I looked at them. "Just got a call. There's a maniac in a rental car, racing dangerously in town."

"May I come?" Mr. Frost asked, standing.

"Sure!" I yelled over my shoulder as I raced to the door. "I can't take you, though! Takes too long for first timers to get used to it! Catch up, okay?"

"I'll be along presently," he called after me.

There was a friendly wind blowing across our porch and I didn't have any time, so I jumped off the top step and took flight, accelerating and ascending quickly. It was a small risk: off-islanders rarely looked up and anyway wouldn't believe their eyes.

"I'm airborne, Lieutenant," I said in the mike. "What's his location?"

"Westbound on Main Street, at Guttets Gade, Carlita. He's gotta be doing at least sixty. Cars Two and Three were chasing him, but stopped after the suspect clipped several merchandise carts."

"Anyone hurt?" I picked up my speed, scanning the town below. There was a flash of sunlight off glass. It was the car. "I got him!"

"Roger. Nobody hurt yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"I know. Do you know anything about the driver? How many occupants? Why he's so reckless? Anything?"

"Sorry, but no. Our first indication was when he took out a vendor's cart on Hibiscus Alley."

"Okay. I guess we'll ... Wait! He's turning onto Highway 30, still heading west." I thought a quick second, then decided. "Lieutenant, notify the airport I'm pushing the car over there. Less chance of damage and injury."

"Gotcha. Take care, Carlita. Lewis out."

I was directly over the car now, about fifty feet above it. Since I didn't want them to spot me, I was following the road. Time to stop this guy. I'd try the easy way first.

I concentrated, and the gravity lines appeared. Like a puppeteer, I only needed to pull the right ones and the car would come to a controlled stop. Tugging on the planet's strings that held the car to the road, I gently guided the vehicle slightly into the air. At the same time I increased the tug of gravity on the car's rear. The engine began straining, but the car slowed down to maybe thirty miles per hour. Good. I pulled up on the car some more. The engine went from straining to racing as the wheels left the ground. The driver quickly slowed the engine. So far, so good.

The driver's hand appeared, holding a ball! I immediately turned my head, looking north, to the mountains. A count of ten and I looked back down. The hand had withdrawn. Suddenly, a woman's head appeared from the passenger's side. Next her arms. She turned up toward me and began waving her arms.

A whap of a bullet, followed by the boom of a gun. The driver was firing at me! I pressed gravity on his gun hand, but he managed to pull it inside without dropping the gun. The woman, looking terrified, also slipped back into the car. I would have to assume she was a hostage, then.

"Lieutenant, the driver appears to have a hostage. A woman. He definitely has a gun; he fired it once at me. He also knows my weakness. I'm going to ... wait a sec." The driver's hand reappeared, without the gun, and motioned to the ground. The threat was understood. "He wants me to release the car or he'll hurt her. Advise, please." Inside, my stomach was churning.

"We've got another problem, Carlita," came the Lieutenant's grim voice. "There's another crisis, two miles out and just called in. Pleasure craft on fire, three adults, six children on board without lifeboat or vests. Sinking imminent. You have to get to them!"

"Roger," I said. I looked out over the harbor and saw smoke billowing up from a spot well beyond the breakwater.

Below was a car with a hostage. At sea, eight lives in danger of fire and drowning. Eight lives to one life, but how could I choose to abandon even the one?

"Carlita."

Not more!

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Trouble in threes. A small craft approaching King airport has called in a mayday. The pilot had a heart attack and none of the other three passengers can fly."

This was a nightmare, one in which there was no time to decide how to proceed. Whom did I save? I'd never had to deal with this much before.

"Okay," I said, making my decisions. "Notify the airport fire services. Send a car out to where I am, and move some other ships to pick up the survivors of the boat. I'll slow down the boat, drop off the car, and go for the plane. Carlita out!"

No time for finesse. I seized the strings holding the car and ripped off the roof, tossing it beside the road. The gunman, his thoughts on me, pointed the gun up. I couldn't afford the time to dodge. Instead, I jerked him from the car and tossed him to the other side of the road, into some nasty looking bushes. I made sure the gun went further than he did.

"Turn the car off!" I shouted to the woman in the car while moving it and myself to the airport. Not paying attention to her, I looked out to sea, at the column of flame. This was going to be hard. It was a good three miles from where I was.

Reaching out, I worked at the strings surrounding the boat. I had to put out the fire, and keep the boat afloat. Releasing the Earth's string from the boat, I gave it sufficient buoyancy to stay afloat. Unfortunately, I couldn't do anything about the fire right now.

I turned my attention to the plane. It was coming in too low from the west. The plane was so canted that the starboard wing would hit the ground before even the landing gear had touched. That would put it into a tumble, I was sure.

I was over the airport now. I shouted to the woman to buckle up. She'd no sooner done so than I set the car down on a grassy patch of the runway. There were several jets on taxi, and support vehicles all over the place. So much for my identity staying a secret. I'd worry about that later.

Picking up speed, I raced to the oncoming plane. Someone on board was trying to line up the plane, which helped a little. Or so I hoped.

"Carlita!" came an excited voice over my radio.

"This is Carlita," I replied, still making for the plane. It was going too slow and was now wobbling. "Who is this?"

"Jenkins, Air Control. That small plane is heading toward a departing jet!"

Great. I looked behind me. The jet was at the top of the runway. It wasn't moving, nor would it with an emergency. But if the small plane overshot the runway, they could collide on the ground.

I glanced one last time at the harbor, now four miles behind me and to my left. Smoke was still pouring out of the boat. I could keep it afloat, but only if it didn't burn to a crisp. I didn't even know what kind of fire it was. What to do?

My eyes were tearing up from frustration and I heard myself gasping, trying to hold myself together. Mother. How many times had she told me? "Carlita, you can't save every life. People are going to die. All we struggle to do is save those we can and not be destroyed by those we can't."

Okay. It was a foolish action, but it was all I had. I pushed a wave of water at the boat, while increasing the mass of the water around it. Anyone knocked overboard by the wave would...

The plane! The buzzing of the prop had become deafening, and I looked just in time to see it bearing down on me. Quickly, I dove under it, then swooped up and around the tail, coming to a landing on the overhead wing. No time to tell anyone anything. The ground was coming up fast.

The plane was near stalling speed, so I simply removed its weight. All of it. The plane pulled up sharply, and I applied gravity to the nose. Increasing the pull on the air going through the propellor, I was able to shut the engine down.

The wheels touched the runway and I braked it hard. I hope no one was hurt too badly, but the emergency vehicles were already approaching the plane. I waved at the firefighters, then took off, up and out to sea as fast as I could tolerate. Flying over the woman in the car, I could see she was safe. I glanced down the road for the man, but couldn't see him. There was a patrol car there, though.

I was approaching the boat when I saw a glorious sight. Mr. Frost had frozen the water around the boat, giving the people a safe place to run! He had joined them, having formed a walkway of ice across the harbor, and was keeping them calm. Relieved beyond words, I swept in and landed beside Mr. Frost.

"Thank you, Mr. Frost!" I started to say, but he held his hand up.

"Do you care to explain the reasons for your actions?" he demanded of the boat's occupants. It was only then that I looked at them.

It was Mr. and Mrs. Williams! Rather, Strong Man and Blue Lass. There was another man there, one I didn't recognize. The five children? Mannequins. Store dummies.

In a daze, I walked over to the dummies. I picked up a hand, then let it fall. Tricked. I should have been furious. I probably was. All I could feel, though, was a numbness wash over me. I turned to Blue Lass.

"Why?" was all I could say in a low voice.

"To demonstrate the power of teamwork, dear," Blue Lass said sweetly. "Don't you see now, Carlita? Don't you see how much you need the Galactic Good Guys as teammates? Had these three events been real, people would have died."

Anger burned deep in me, a small, bright flame. I clenched my fists. I stared at each in turn.

"This was a test?" I asked quietly.

"Yes," Strong Man said. "The two occupants in the car and Bumble Bee in the small plane are all Galactic Good Guys, here to see you perform."

"Perform," I repeated. I took a step toward them.

"Carlita," Mr. Frost cautioned me. "Don't. They may be bumbling fools, but they're powerful bumbling fools. And they are not evil. Just stupid."

"How dare you!" I shouted at them. "You risked the lives of my people, all for some test? How dare you!"

"We dare because we're the Galactic Good Guys," Blue Lass replied smugly.

Chapter Ten

Down Time

The tableau remained as frozen as the ice floe we stood on. Blue Lass continued staring at me, as if to challenge. Strong Man was by her side, with the third man behind them. Mr. Frost was at my left.

"Carlita," he said in a low tone, "let it go for now. We don't want to start a fight out here in the bay. There are too many innocents." He motioned around the bay, where people were looking at us. Some in boats were approaching us.

"What's the matter, Frost?" the third man said. His voice reminded me of a snake. "Your little girl can't take it?"

"Oh, she can handle it, Victor. Just ask Wanda and Caesar. They underestimated her the first time, and now they've done so a second."

"This time I am with them," Victor hissed ominously.

"And I am with her. Do you recall the last time we had a disagreement, Victor?"

It was clear from Victor's face he did recall, and it wasn't a pleasant memory.

"There will be another day," Victor said. With that, he dove into the water and disappeared.

"You did well today, Carlita," Strong Man said, trying to diffuse the mood. I guess he really was a good guy. I nodded, taking the out. There were now craft less than two hundred yards away, some with tourists. I needed to be gone.

"Don't give me anymore tests. I'm not joining." I jumped lightly and caught the trades, rising to twenty feet or so. "Please. Leave St. Thomas. All of you."

I began pushing the ice underwater to give them a hint. They got it all right. Strong Man took to the air, and Blue Lass jumped up to him to be carried.

Satisfied they were withdrawing, Mr. Frost began working his way back to shore, creating ice ramps on the water that he slid down. They melted behind him, making for an easier cleanup. I pushed the boat to the bottom of the harbor with the rest of the ice. The ice would soon melt, and I could recover the boat at night sometime.

Flying home was not a fun thing. I had to explain to Lieutenant Lewis that these were all bogus emergencies. He already knew. When the "kidnapper" had been arrested by the police, he'd flashed his Good Guy identity card and they were forced to release him.

"What? Why?" I said, loud enough that a few people looked up from the ground, even though I was a few hundred feet up.

"The team has immunity to traffic and safety laws," he replied tersely. "That's why we can't bring a single charge against them."

"Can we at least bill them for the expense of emergency services?"

"Yes, and we will. But we both know they're quite wealthy. To them, throwing cash at problems is

standard practice. Face it, Carlita, you and I are small fish in the world scheme of crime fighting."

"Tell that to the lady and three children you pulled out of the house fire last year, Lieutenant Lewis. Or any of the hundreds of people you've helped over the years."

"Oh, I didn't mean that in a negative sense. Just in a political sense."

"In that case," I said, "that's how I want it. Look, Mr. Frost is not one of them. He's staying around me for a few days. Give him the benefit of the doubt, okay?"

"Will do," he said. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"Yes," I answered, almost sure. "He's said the right things so far, and done the right things. Even got rid of the ice he used out in the harbor."

"Well, that's more than the Good Guys did. We're stuck with cleanup of a wrecked plane, a wrecked car, and a sunken boat. They didn't even offer. It's probably beneath them."

"I'll help out with the boat," I offered. "After all, I'm the one who sank it. I wrecked the plane and car, too."

"Only because of the Good Guys' actions. All right, we'll make plans to get the boat when this thing is over, okay?"

"Sounds good. Well, I'm landing at home now. I'll keep the radio on full time until these jerks are off our island."

"Do you think they'll really leave?" he asked, totally unconvinced.

"Oh, they'll leave. By themselves or when I throw them off. Carlita out."

I touched down on our back porch and went straight to my room. Closing the door, I lay down on my bed. My whole body was trembling.

Everything pent up inside me came gushing out and I started to cry. Why did they have to come? Why couldn't they just leave me and my island alone? I sobbed into my pillow, feeling anger, sorrow, frustration, and helplessness. This wasn't fair! I was only seventeen! Couldn't I have just a sliver of a normal life? Not while *they* were here.

At some point I drifted to sleep, and was finally free of my worries. At least for a little while.

* * * *

When I woke up, evening was coming on. From my bedroom window came the glow of colorful festival lights. So, too, the sounds and smells of the nightly excitement that touched the island when the sun went down. I could hear Francis talking to someone in our living room. It sounded like Mr. Frost.

I sat up, feeling much better. I stretched, gave a loud yawn. The talking stopped, and I heard movement. There came a quiet rap on my door.

"Sis?"

I stood and opened the door. Francis looked both worried and relieved. He gave me a hug, the kind a big brother would, even though I was still taller than him.

"Are you all right?" he asked me, concern in his voice. "You got home and went straight to bed. Mr.

Frost said to leave you alone, but I wasn't sure..." His voice trailed off.

"Thanks for letting me sleep, Francis. And thank Mr. Frost. I'm feeling a lot more sane right now." I ruffled his hair and was rewarded with a smile. "How 'bout I get cleaned up and we take Mr. Frost out? I'm all superheroed out for tonight."

He nodded and went back to the living room. I grabbed a towel and headed for the bathroom.

Forty-five minutes later, I felt like a normal girl. I'd put on my flowered, knee-length wrap skirt, with matching blouse that showed off my middle. I'd put on some makeup, did all my nails in red, and spritzed on my favorite tangerine body spray. Yummy! Next came my silver cross earrings and bangles for my wrists and right ankle. Finally, I tied my hair back with a bright red scarf and slipped on my sandals. I looked myself over in my full-length mirror, twirling Human again! I shoved the police radio into my large handbag, slung it over my shoulder and headed to the living room.

"Good night! And now, introducing Carlita!!" I exclaimed as I stepped into the living room, throwing my arms out and posing. "Regular girl, ready for a night on the town! Thank you! Thank you!"

Francis whistled and clapped. Benjamin smiled warmly and bowed. Both had dressed nicely, though I didn't know where Benjamin had gotten his clothes: faded jeans with a long-sleeved, pressed white shirt and soft dress shoes. He looked very distinguished.

"Shall we enjoy the evening's pleasant lure and kindly distractions?" he asked, offering me an arm.

"Absolutely!" I said, taking his arm while Francis got the door. "I want to have uninterrupted fun tonight!"

He led me out, my arm under his, and the three of us went downstairs to the street.

Big Marie was at her cart, selling and talking and laughing. Pedro and Scott, two of her "street urchins" were hanging around, eating some fried bread and chatting away. I pointed her out, and Mr. Frost—Benjamin—took us over. Marie's eyes lit up when she saw us. She shooed her customers away and held out her massive, strong arms for Francis and me. We raced for them, Francis only just beating me.

"Good night. My, my! Our Carlita has a gentleman caller this evening!" She laughed. I blushed but introduced them. Benjamin kissed her hand and she laughed again. "And such fine manners. You will take care of our favorite daughter, no?"

"Momma!" I scolded. "It's not like that! Mr. Frost and I are friends through..."

"Mutual acquaintances," he finished for me. "It is true. I know the Williams, whom Carlita's construction company was building a mansion for. As for how we met specifically..."

"Benjamin, she knows," I said softly. "Just about everyone on St. Thomas knows."

"Indeed?" Benjamin raised an eyebrow.

"Most certainly," Marie said, while Pedro and Scott nodded vigorously. "The Angel is our dearest secret." Her eyes sparkled as she smiled at me. "And our dearest treasure."

"That's right!" Pedro said. "You gotta go through us to bother the Angel."

"All of us!" Scott agreed.

"Now, get along, you two! Lead some tourists Big Marie's way, and she'll make sure you've money for

breakfast! Go!" They laughed and ran off into the crowd.

"They are homeless children?" Benjamin asked. Big Marie looked surprised, then laughed loudly.

"Oh, no! They have good families! In the summer, though, I pay them to be urchins. Tourists come more easily when led by innocent children!" She laughed again.

"An impressive woman," he said after we'd walked off. "Is it wise to have so many people know who you are?"

"It doesn't really matter," I answered, motioning to one of the vendors to send over to sugar canes. "Ever have one?"

"Sugar? Straight from the cane? No, I haven't."

"It's a real treat. Here you go," I said, handing the boy some money, then waving him off. He cracked a huge grin at the tip, then returned to the cart.

"The identity of the Angel has been known by the islanders since the beginning. It is our belief that there will always be an Angel, and we are to cherish each Angel and the Angel will protect us. With their lives, if need be."

He nodded, and we continued on. Francis excused himself to join up with a group of friends, so I had Benjamin all to myself. I sighed contentedly.

"I hope that sigh was for me, Carlita," he said.

"Yes, it was, Benjamin. May I call you that?"

"I would be honored if you did. It's been somewhat ... uncomfortable for you to call me Mr. Frost while I call you Carlita. To my embarrassment, I do not even know your surname."

"Francis and I don't have one," I replied, shaking my head. "The Angel's family never has a surname. If a woman marries into an Angel's family, she drops her last name completely. Even though she's not an Angel. Likewise, if ... when ... I marry, my husband will drop his name. When an Angel passes from a family—dies, I mean—the last name is restored."

We came to a small restaurant, tucked into a small alley. "C'mon, let's eat here. I ate here on my last birthday. You'll love it!"

"Only if you will allow me to pay," he countered.

"Of course!" I said. "That sugar cane was my whole night's allowance!"

We were seated quickly, with a couple gladly surrendering their table to us. I thanked them quietly and let Benjamin seat me.

"You expect people to treat you as special?" he asked, somewhat surprised.

"Yes, Benjamin, I do. I'm the Angel of St. Thomas."

"Forgive me, but that seems a trifle ... overbearing. And outside your lovely personality."

"Does it?" I looked at Benjamin, considering. I didn't really know him. And I didn't have the gift of reading character, like my great grand uncle Hannibal did. Fortunately, I didn't have his weakness of

needing to have bare feet his whole life, either. But I just felt ... right about this man. I returned to my menu, having made my decision for the evening's conversation. A waiter came to our table.

"Good night," he said, the common greeting on the island after sunset. "Are you ready to order, Carlita? Sir?"

I looked up from my menu and smiled at our waiter. "May I have the ravo-asado, please?"

"And to drink?" the waiter asked.

"Ice water, please. Extra lemon, please?"

"Yes, ma'am. And you, sir?"

"I'll have the same as Carlita. Only white wine, please."

"Yes, sir." He gathered the menus and left. I leaned forward.

"Benjamin? Would you like to hear a story?"

"Certainly."

"Only islanders and the most trusted off-islanders, like Sir Hector, know this story," I prefaced. "No one tells it to outsiders except an Angel. It is true, it is tragic, it is exciting, and it is very secret. It is the story of my family."

"I am honored." He bowed his head.

"Then let's eat our dinner, and I'll tell you the tale of the Angel."

Chapter Eleven

An Angel's Tale

"St. Thomas has a history reaching back countless centuries," I began. "But the history of the Angel begins in 1493. That was the year the first European landed on our island."

"Christopher Columbus."

"Yes. Before he landed, St. Thomas—not our island's real name—was a paradise. After he landed, it was the devil's paradise. Disease was the worst. My people, the Carib, were not prepared for European plagues and sicknesses. We quickly died off, and within two centuries, we were all but gone. There are no full-blooded native Carib on the islands today.

"Worse than this was the mistreatment by the whites. Disease and plague were inadvertent demons. Forced labor was not. They drove us, they beat us, they killed us. More so, they attempted to kill our spirit.

"Yet in a way, they helped us. They helped us prepare for the horrors to follow.

"We found solace from our tormentors after a while, for they left. And for nearly two centuries, the old ways returned and we were again the people. But then came the next wave of 'explorers' in the 1670s. Only these people came to stay. They were the Dutch. The Dutch are also my people. That's why my eyes are bright blue instead of black."

We ate our dinner quietly. The tables around us had emptied, and I noticed several groups of tourists had been turned away at the door. As they should be at times like this. I took a drink of ice water and continued.

"With the Dutch rule came the pirates. It was..."

"Don't you mean, despite the Dutch rule?" Benjamin softly interrupted. I shook my head.

"No, I mean 'with'. Piracy was a way of life in the Caribbean and coasts of America. The Dutch governors of that period decided that piracy would help the local economy. *Their* local economy, not ours. And so it did. Charlotte Amalie became a haven and business place for pirates, scum, and low-lives. The people of St. Thomas suffered again.

"Finally came the greatest injustice of all: Slavery. Our Dutch masters would abolish slavery in the mid-nineteenth century, but until then, we were bought and sold like so much grain, sugar or rum."

"We?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "My Carib ancestors, but also my African ancestors. They are my people, too. Even French, though they did not suffer slavery."

"This then, was the climate into which the island's people were forced at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Not just the Caribs, but the Dutch and African people as well. If ever there was a people who needed an Angel, it was the inhabitants of this devil's paradise."

"And one was provided," he said.

"And one was provided," I repeated. "The first Angel was my grandfather of ten generations, Rupert. He

was a pirate who sailed under Black Sam Ballamy and Ben Hornigold on the sloop *Mary Anne* in the early 1700's. Rupert was of Carib, Dutch and African descent, yet pillaged the very people he was descended from.

"One night, as the *Mary Anne* lay in anchor at Charlotte Amalie, Rupert was involved in a fight over a child's possession: a small necklace of little worth. Rupert lost the fight, but won the prize. Stabbed eight times in the chest, neck and head, he fell overboard, still clutching the necklace.

"He should have drowned that night. Or bled to death. But he didn't. He awoke the next morning on the beach, a small girl standing over him. She pointed at the necklace.

"'Mine', was all she said. Not a plead, not a demand. Just a statement. Without a moment's thought, though the sand was turning red from his blood, he handed the girl the necklace. She took it and kissed him on the forehead, then ran away into the trees. Again, he passed out and should have died.

"But again, he awoke. This time, he was in a small village of Carib people. At first he was terrified: Caribs were known to be cannibals. He then realized that he was *not* the night's dinner but rather, the night's honored guest. Even more incredible, his wounds were healed and he himself felt as never before. Rupert had about him a clarity of mind and insight he'd never had.

"As the days passed, he was amazed to discover that he spoke Carib. Also Dutch, English, German, French, and several other tribal tongues, including ancient Ciboney and Arawak. In addition to this, he *felt* the language, understood the peoples, and desired to protect them. Finally, to aid him with his new purpose, he now had great strength and nearly instant healing ability. As the price for his past wickedness, however, Rupert could never again touch salt water without extreme pain.

"Rupert was a wise man, though he had not known it. Now, somehow, he'd been made to understand, and he didn't waste this blessing. He immediately used his gifts to better the lives of the peoples whose blood flowed in his veins."

"And what of the girl?" Benjamin asked. "Was she an island goddess who disappeared? Did she bestow the powers on your grandfather?"

"No. There seemed nothing special about the girl. In fact, they married years later, when she had fully grown. Their first child, Amanda, also had abilities. She was the first of us able to fly. She could also start or extinguish fires at will. However, the curse of her father followed her. Amanda was unable to stay awake once the sun had set.

"And so it has been for nearly three hundred years. Every child born of an Angel is themselves an Angel, though only the oldest child can carry the line. And while every Angel has abilities, we also each have a weakness. Mine you know. I leave it to Francis to reveal his, if he chooses."

"Have all Angels protected the island?"

"Islands, really. We watch over St. John, St. Croix and Water Islands as well, though our home has always been St. Thomas. I've assisted the police and fire departments on the British Virgin Islands two or three times, too.

"But the answer is, yes, since Rupert there has always been an Angel of St. Thomas. Sometimes several, though we're referred to in the singular. Right now, I'm the only one."

"Your parents?"

"My mother died at sea, as did my father, ten years ago. My mother was the Angel, my father, merchant

marine out of St. John's."

"I am so sorry," he said in sincere sympathy. "How many Angels have died because of their calling?"

"Eleven, starting with Rupert himself. Shortly after their second son was born, Rupert was overpowered by twenty men, bound in hundreds of pounds of chains, and thrown into the harbor. He broke the chains, but the agony of the seawater overwhelmed him and he drowned. His body was found the next morning on the beach. Amanda was eight when she took over."

"And you, Carlita?"

"I was seven."

"So young," he said, his eyes moist.

"There must *always* be an Angel, Benjamin," I replied. "Always. When Mom died, it fell to me. If I die, it falls to Francis. Then, as the oldest surviving Angel, he will be able to continue the line, though while I live he cannot."

"May I ask, Carlita, what are your abilities?"

"I have the gift to control all gravity everywhere, including Earth, Sun, Moon, all the planets in our solar system, and any star I wish. I can increase, decrease, remove or even reverse it. Mom said I am probably the most powerful Angel ever."

"Incredible!" He was clearly shocked. "I take it your power of flight comes from this control?"

"No," I said with a slight shake of my head. "Though I can use gravity to simulate flight, it is an entirely separate gift. I do need a slight breeze, provided by nature, to go aloft, however. I'm also capable of igniting a person's desire for harmless activity. It causes no damage, but they are unable to do anything other than fulfill that desire." I giggled. "You wouldn't believe how many arrests are made at restaurants. A lot of people, including criminals, love a good meal. The police just follow the bad guy to the restaurant, then arrest him after he's eaten. The police pay the bill because of the trouble it saves."

Benjamin stared at me, then laughed, the first time he'd been so relaxed. His laugh warmed me deep inside.

"I'm glad I stopped you this morning, then. I *had* been worried that the three of them might have been too much, even with me assisting. I see now that I saved them deep embarrassment and a sound thrashing." He laughed again.

"No. You saved their lives," I said seriously. "There's one more ability I have." I hesitated, and Benjamin touched my hand.

"If you don't want to talk about, my dear..."

"No." I shook my head. "I mean, yes. I don't want to talk about it, but I should. I promised you the whole story." I took a deep breath. This was always the hardest.

"Every Angel has three things in common. We all have abilities and we all have one weakness. And ... we all have one special gift. A dark, horrible, wonderful gift.

"In moments of extreme crises, the Angel can reach deep and awaken this gift. It is a warping of their other abilities into an overwhelming, destructive force."

"Is it controllable?"

"Yes. And no. The Angel has control over everything except potency. That is always at full power."

"Why would an Angel use such a gift?"

"My mother did the day she died. Because of it, three ships and hundreds of people were saved."

"I understand" He nodded. "A type of supreme effort, taken to a dangerous level."

"Not really. But sorta."

"Have you used your gift? Do you know what it is?"

I took a sip of water. "I know what it is, but I haven't used it. I hope I never do. While using that gift, the Angel is no longer the Angel of St. Thomas."

He didn't press and I didn't offer. Our talk drifted to lighter things and my mood improved.

We ordered dessert. Since my story was over, some of the islanders approached us, looking for my autograph, which I gladly gave them. A newlywed couple were quite excited about meeting me, so after I signed their book, I removed the weight on her blouse. It began sparkling, trailing small blossoms of light.

"That'll last a couple hours," I told them. "Congratulations and have a happy honeymoon!" They thanked me again, then left, hand in hand, ready for a night on the town. Benjamin looked at them and nodded his head.

"I understand now," he said warmly as our dessert was served. "That's why you expect to be recognized and respected as the Angel. It's the way people express their devotion and thanks to you. Carlita, you *allow* them this as yet another way to serve them!"

I nodded shyly. "Remember, Benjamin, I may be the Angel of St. Thomas, but I'm also one of the *people* of St. Thomas. I've been saved a few times by my relatives *and* by my friends. I know what a gift it is to both be and have the Angel. I will do nothing to detract from my heritage and duty and will do anything to protect my island and my people."

We finished dessert and walked down to the harbor. It was such a wonderful evening. I felt so calm, so happy. I snuggled up to his arm and sighed.

"That's the second time I've heard you sigh, Carlita," Benjamin said quietly. "What is it, if I may ask?"

"It's just..." I paused, looking for the words. "It's just that, well, sometimes, I'm lonely. I know I have my brother. And I love Francis as a brother. But I'm also responsible for him."

"As you are responsible for your people?"

I nodded. My eyes were teary. Why were they teary?

"And with me, you know you can let your guard down. You can feel and *be* a normal young woman, no?"

Again I nodded.

"I have lots of friends, Benjamin. Big Marie, Sir Hector, my schoolmates. But I've never had a boyfriend. Sometimes, I feel like I can't. I'm..."

"The Angel," he finished for me. I nodded again and started sobbing. He held me close and let me cry. He stroked my hair.

"Go ahead and cry, Carlita. I understand the terrible loneliness that comes with terrible power. I have lived with it my entire life, as well. But I am certain you will *not* be one to have that burden forever."

I looked up from his chest and into his eyes.

"You ... you ... mean it?"

"My dear young woman," he scolded gently. "I am far too old and my days far too priceless to waste on empty reassurances. Of course you'll find a fine man! And he will be strong, and loving, and he will see you as the angel that you are, and not just the Angel of your people." He kissed me on the forehead. "And whoever does choose to court you will speak to me first."

"Benjamin?" I said, stunned. He smiled and stepped back. With a flourish, he gave a deep bow.

"If you will have me, Carlita, I wish to give my life to you. As Benjamin Frost when possible, as The Icicle when required. It is time, I think, to add a new chapter to the story of the Angel of St. Thomas. From this day on, I am, and will always be, your dedicated servant and friend."

Chapter Twelve

Bumble Bee

Benjamin spent the night at our place, making do on the futon in our living room. He had a first-rate hotel room, but preferred staying close until this Good Guys thing was over. Frankly, I was only too happy to have him.

Morning came too early, as it always does. Fortunately, I had the night off and there were no emergencies. I called Lieutenant Lewis about eight that morning and let him know I was back on duty and that I'd be around town. Next was a call to Bobby Dobbie to see if they needed me. Nope, he said. Tom Con was on a two-week vacation while our lawyers settled up the paperwork with the Galactic Good Guys. I was glad to hear it, since I got paid either way. I said goodbye and got ready.

Francis was serving Benjamin a morning baked pie of his own creation. He had a grin from ear to ear the whole time and the two were talking back and forth like lifelong friends.

"G'morning!"

Benjamin looked up at my voice and stood. He pulled out a chair for me, then reseated himself.

"Did you see that, Francis? That's what a perfect gentlemen does for a lady" I tossed my head and gave a superior grin.

"I do that," Francis said defensively. "Only you're not a lady, Carlita. You're my sister." He laughed and gave me breakfast.

"So, what's on the agenda for today, Carlita?"

"Thanks, Francis! Pretty much open, Benjamin. Normally, I'd head over to the other islands to see if there's anything they need. But until the Good Guys leave, or I throw them off, I'm staying close to town so I can keep an eye on them."

He nodded. "Wise. Well, in that case, perhaps you'd like to join me while I find a suitable home to purchase."

"So you're *really* going to stay then, Mr. Frost?" Francis still couldn't believe it.

"Indeed, Francis. I am not so old that I don't hear the voice of adventure and justice calling me, but I am at a point where settling down and letting adventure come to me has great appeal. Besides..." He winked at Francis. "I'm looking forward to new friendships." Francis beamed.

We were on the streets an hour later. I introduced Benjamin to more of my people, including Sir Hector, who was most impressed with him. Benjamin seemed to be as impressed with Sir Hector. It wasn't difficult to see them becoming drinking buddies before too long.

Our first stop was the police department. Officer Dan Kent was on desk duty again. As always, he had a smile for us.

"Good morning, Carlita! Hiya, Francis! Hello, Mr. Frost."

"So you remember me?" Benjamin asked, extending his hand. "I'm honored." He gave a small smile. "I think."

Danny chuckled. "Don't worry, sir. You've got the Angel's blessing, so you're right with us. I'm glad—now—that you found her."

"As am I, Officer. As am I."

"Benjamin's going to be moving here, Danny. How 'bout that?"

Danny smiled again, but it was a weaker one.

"Umm ... It will be nice to have you, Mr. Frost," he finally said, with no enthusiasm whatsoever.

"Danny!" I scolded. "That's no way to greet a new islander!"

"But it is the way to greet another potential source of trouble, isn't it, Officer?" Benjamin said.

"Trouble?" I asked. "How could you possibly..."

"Be a cause of anguish for St. Thomas' finest?" Benjamin finished. "Officer Kent is no doubt thinking of my past years as a vigilante—albeit sanctioned by the United Nations—and the considerable Rogue's Gallery I've built over the years."

"Yes, sir," Danny replied. "That's one reason, though not a big one. I know most of those who opposed you are either in jail or retired."

"Then my association with the Galactic Good Guys?" Benjamin guessed. At Danny's nod, Benjamin said, "Please do not concern yourself, Officer. While I have a legal attachment to them, it is nothing more than a paper relationship. When it became evident twenty years ago that this—how shall I put it?—breed of hero was radically different in how they pursued their careers, the Freedom Squad broke all ties with the Good Guys. We remained on their rolls only at the request of the United Nations. In the event of a planet-wide calamity or some such, they want to be able to call on all of us. So, no, Officer. I have as little love for them as you do."

Danny seemed much relieved and gave us a tour of the station. He introduced the guys to Benjamin, and they had several tips about where to buy a home. Patti Clearwater had the best suggestion.

"You know, the McFarley home is vacant now," she pointed out. "It's tucked back up against the ridge in Agnes Fancy. It's just off the highway, but has plenty of privacy in the back for ... unusual guests." She winked at me. "My sister's a real estate agent. She could show it to you today, if you want."

Everyone thought that a good idea, so Patti went off to make the call. Now that the misunderstanding about Benjamin's connection with the Good Guys had been cleared up, my friends quickly warmed to him. I took that moment to pull Francis aside.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I'm concerned about the Good Guys. They haven't left, and I've got a bad feeling they're going to be 'testing' me some more. Testing my patience, more like," I added somewhat nastily. I shook my head to chase away my anger. "Sorry. Anyway, I think you and I should guard the other until they're gone."

"You're afraid they might use me against you?" he said, sounding a little angry himself. "Carlita, I may not have your abilities, but I don't have to be baby-sat either."

"Huh?" I said, genuinely surprised. "I'm sorry, Francis. That didn't come out right. I *meant* that since we didn't know when they were going to do something, I was going to say it's time you took on the mantle of

Angel. At least while these goons are here."

His face took on a whole different look. In that split second of time, I actually saw him shed his 'little brother' identity and become the Angel of St. Thomas. The moment passed and he was Francis again, but there was something different about him. Or something different in how I saw him.

"All right," he agreed, nodding his head. A little smile went across his face.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "It's just ... the moment finally comes and it's not as exciting as I thought it would be. It's even a little ... I don't know..."

"Scary?" I finished for him. He nodded again. "I know the feeling. I remember when Mom died, and I became the Angel. It all happened so fast that I was numb for a month. Numb from our parents' deaths, from becoming the Angel, from having to be your 'mom'. Even after the numbness wore off, it was over a year before I could start thinking about myself again. Hopefully, it'll be easier for you".

Patti came back in the room and announced that her sister could show the home and would be right over to pick us up. Benjamin seemed pleased. And very relaxed. I thought island life was going to suit him well.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Frost," Francis said, "I'm going to stay behind. I need to talk to Lieutenant Lewis."

"Very well, Francis We shall see you back at the apartment for dinner, yes?" He took my arm. I could get used to that very quickly. "Carlita and I will return about five."

Five minutes later Benjamin and I were getting into Denise Gonzales' car, and twenty minutes later we were getting out at the house.

"The owner moved out over six months ago," Denise explained, opening the front door. "Mr. McFarley was transferred back to the mainland, and Mrs. McFarley couldn't wait." Denise gave a knowing wink. "I think she had a bad case of island fever."

She gave us a tour of the two-story home, which was lovely. It even had two porches: one in the back, against the mountain, and the other in the front and looking out to the harbor. It was on the front porch that I gave a sudden yelp.

"What is it?" Benjamin asked, startled.

"I don't know," I said, rubbing my right arm. "It felt like a bug bite, but a really hard one. It was like ... Ouch!" I jumped again and spun around, looking for the stupid bug. Nothing.

"Ow!" Another, on the back of my neck. "Aahhh!" Another on my cheek.

"Get inside! Ouch!" I said, looking around the street. "Ow! I think I'm under attack! Ouch!"

"Bumble Bee," Benjamin said, taking Denise by the arm. "Another 'test', no doubt. Be careful, Carlita."

"I—ow!—will be, Benjamin. Keep an eye on Denise. Ouch!" He went inside and I took to the air. Running to the end of the porch, I—

Ow!

My concentration broken, I fell over the edge instead of taking off. The driveway came up fast. I'd have hurt myself if Bumble Bee had chosen to follow up his attack. But he must have thought I needed more control to take off. I seized the split second of respite to get airborne. Skimming along the driveway, I gave out a loud scream and hovered behind the car. With luck, my trap would work and I'd draw him out.

My trap did work, but luck had nothing to do with it. After five minutes, I saw him cautiously appear from the trees across the street. He couldn't see behind the car where I was hiding, but he had enough control of his power to affect even unseen things. I felt vicious stings on my leg, and it was all I could do to stifle my yells to moans.

Confident he'd bested me, he walked toward me. Once he was in the middle of the street, where there was no place to hide, I shot into the air quickly and approached him. I was plenty mad.

"Just what the he—ow!" He'd started in on me again. "Stop it! I—ow!—just wan—aah! Ouch!—to talk! Ow!" I instinctively slapped at unseen stingers. Welts were beginning to show on my skin.

"Stop it!" I yelled again. He merely smiled and continued, stinging me multiple times now.

The pain was getting to the intolerable point. I could see he wanted to ground me, but my flying was inborn. I couldn't be grounded unless I wished it or was forced down.

He could, however, do sufficient damage to my body that I'd be out of service for a day or two. That I couldn't allow.

"Last—ow!—chance, Bumble Bee!" I was twisting and jerking to the stinging, and was becoming lightheaded.

Forget last chance. If I didn't do something fast, this 'test' would endanger my people by incapacitating me. I ignored the pain long enough to increase Jupiter's gravity to Bumble Bee and slack off Earth's. Maybe I was sloppy. Maybe I was distracted. Either way, instead of easing him off the ground, he rocketed into the sky. The attack stopped immediately and I took off after him. Maybe I was just major ticked off.

I let him continue until he was way above the clouds. Ducking into the mist of a nearby cloud, I abruptly reversed the gravities on him. I looked at the red welts on my arms and legs. Time for a little payback.

He plummeted down, even faster than normal, since Jupiter was also pushing him. He zinged past me, fear in his eyes, and disappeared into the cloud. I counted a slow five, then reversed the gravities again. I brought him to a stop in the cloud, then lowered myself into it.

"You and I are at about 10,000 feet, Bumble Bee," I said into the cloud. I heard his gasping, but he made no attack. "My flight capabilities are so natural to me that even if you managed to sting me unconscious, I'd continue to float. My gravity powers however..." I gave him a quick drop and pick up "...don't work the same way. You'd hit the ground so hard, they'd have to vacuum you into a bag.

"So I think that ends this 'test'. Or should we go up to the next level of clouds and try again?"

"NO!" he shouted in desperation. "You've convinced me! Put me on the ground! Please!"

"Why, of course," I answered sweetly. "I live to serve. I know! Let's make a real impressive landing, okay?"

"NO!" he screamed again. Oops, too late. He was already heading to the ground as though fired from a

cannon. I dropped down at a more leisurely pace.

When he was about 1,000 feet from the ground, I angled his descent toward town. He screamed all the way. Again, I followed quietly.

In front of the police station, I left him just above the sidewalk, spinning slowly in front of the station window. Within moments, three officers rushed out. They talked to him for another moment, then one—it was Danny—looked up into the sky for me. I waved when he spotted me, then let Bumble Bee thump to the ground. They'd find something to keep him busy for a day or two. Or not busy, if they just tossed him into a cell.

Satisfied, I swung around and flew back to Benjamin's new home. He and Denise were out on the driveway.

"All taken care of?" he asked as I landed.

"All taken care of," I said. Denise appeared relieved. And happy, for Benjamin had bought the house.

"It's nice and quiet here," he said with a chuckle "I doubt anything happens in this neighborhood."

Chapter Thirteen

Wind Lass

A quiet evening. I'd spent the afternoon showing Benjamin around the island, introducing him to some more friends of mine and letting the word out that he was to be considered a "local" My people are very friendly to off-islanders, but the loyalty and affection we have for each other goes far deeper.

Francis had another terrific dinner waiting for us. We decided afterwards to walk to the beach and do some swimming. Benjamin came along, but chose to sit on the sand and read.

We had a great time. How my Grampa Rupert could stand living on an island yet not be able to touch seawater was beyond me. All Angels have a weakness, but maybe mine wasn't as bad as others.

I had duty in a couple hours, so I was enjoying my time now. I think I also had a certain amount of anonymity on the beach. I looked like every other native girl in a one-piece swimsuit. The Good Guys couldn't test me if they couldn't find me. Did I say test? I meant bother. Hopefully they wouldn't pull another one of their 'emergency' stunts.

They didn't. We passed a wonderful two hours on the beach, then made for home Behind us, the sun was setting into a burning ocean of pink and orange and yellow. The soft trade breeze blew across us, making me appreciate again what a joyful life it was on a tropical island.

Benjamin would spend the night again, it was decided. I didn't mind, not while the Good Guys were on the island. Which made me wonder about something. I sat down on our futon after a shower and change and dried my hair.

"Benjamin, what exactly is your association with the Galactic Good Guys? I can't understand why you would join them."

"It wasn't so much a case of my joining them as it was of them joining me. Us, rather."

"You mean the Freedom Squad."

"That's correct, Francis. At first, the Freedom Squad gave no thought to expanding our ranks. The Winslows and I did quite well for ourselves and, in modest honesty, for society. Even after Hank and Beth started a family, there was no pressure to expand our ranks. Neither was there anybody *to* join. It seemed there were no others on the whole planet with special abilities." He smiled at me. "Of course, we weren't to know that the Angels of St. Thomas had been around over two centuries before the Freedom Squad.

"As I said, we were content with our ranks. We did add Richard later, but he fit so well into our group that it seemed quite impossible to *not* add him. Four seemed the best number.

"Then Richard was killed in England during the hostage situation on the Liverpool Express train. We'd finally come up against a unique villain, one who had powers. Suddenly, our distinct advantage over evil was not so distinct.

"Moreover, the years were catching up to us. Our powers and control of them had greatly increased from use and time, but our bodies did not respond as well. Also, Beth was a mother of four now, and remained home for most missions, though her abilities to capture thoughts remained useful even from a distance. But on the lines, it was just Hank and myself. And two wasn't enough.

"It was then that Caesar approached us, hoping to join the Freedom Squad. He had phenomenal strength plus the ability to fly, but was untrained and, forgive me, not highly intelligent."

Benjamin sighed.

"We took him in, hoping to be able to train him properly before throwing him into the fray. Unfortunately, Hank lost his right arm a few months afterward, destroyed by yet another powered criminal. The Freedom Squad was essentially no more.

"Over the next few years, I continued training Caesar. He, in the meantime, was anxious to join in the fight. Despite my protests, he eventually did, and managed himself well. I was surprised and pleased. Perhaps the Freedom Squad could continue.

"Caesar came to me one day, having made contact with another gifted person, Wanda, who was petitioning to join Freedom Squad. Probably still optimistic from Caesar's early success, I agreed.

"From there, the door was swung wide open. Using their majority, Caesar and Wanda began accepting more applicants. I became overwhelmed and left the Squad. Almost immediately they renamed themselves the Galactic Good Guys."

"So you're a kind of mentor, then?" Francis asked. Benjamin smiled sadly.

"Perhaps at one point, Francis. Now, I am nothing more than a link to the past for them. I am also a convenience, for the immunities and authorities granted the Freedom Squad were transferred to the Good Guys."

"And what about Alchemist?" Francis asked.

"Who?" I interrupted.

"The third man at the boat site yesterday, Carlita," Benjamin answered. "Victor Spekvin, known as Alchemist. Victor, children, is someone to be avoided. His abilities approach yours, Carlita, in force. But you use your powers strictly for the preservation of life for other. Victor..." He paused, choosing his words. "At times, Victor does not cleanly fall on the side of good. I do not trust the man."

* * * *

The wind off Botany Bay was fierce. The island meteorologist had contacted me and requested I investigate a high wind on the western end of the island that was localized but close to the airport. If it shifted south, the wind sheer for aircraft would be highly dangerous and King airport would have to be shut down.

I cleared the mountains and moved out over the bay, following the terrain at 200 feet. It was around one in the morning. I yawned for the twentieth time. Night shifts were nice, but threw my schedule out of whack.

The wind abruptly increased in power, pushing me off course. *Better go higher, I thought. See if I can get above it.*

At about 300 feet, I was bowled over. A gale-force wind! I spun head over heels toward the island. I was over Botany Point before I raised my gravity shield enough to regain control. How in the world could a wind like this exist?

The answer hit me a second later. Literally. Another blast careened off my right side, sending me into another tumble. Another test! I wish I had Aunt Mildred's weakness for cursing. She had to swear

constantly whenever she passed through solid objects, and had built an impressive vocabulary of bad language.

I didn't, though, so I did the next best thing: I looked around for a Good Guy to vent my anger on.

Calming my flight, I started looking around for her. I was certain it was Wind Lass. Francis and Benjamin had briefed me that evening on the Good Guys' powers and abilities. I don't know why I hadn't asked before; it made perfect sense to understand what I was up against. Well, better late than never.

For the next five minutes, she kept hitting me with powerful blasts of wind. And I still couldn't find her. I decided to try the same trick I used to examine the strata of the ground when creating the berm.

I visualized the gravity lines. Then I went the next step and began visualizing internal gravity lines. This was a lot more difficult and caused a virtual downpour of popping lights and trailing sparkles from me. I looked fast, because I was now a sitting duck.

Sure enough, I got hit again. This time from above. It shoved me toward the ground. I was tempted to cushion my fall and fake being knocked out. But I'd done that to Bumble Bee only this morning, and they might have talked. Instead, I pulled free of the downdraft and shot up and back out to the bay. My "rock trick" had worked; I had her pegged now.

Windlass could fly, which meant there was no up-down move to use on her.

Surprisingly, she let me get close to her. In the moonlight, I could even see a smile on her face.

"Wind Lass, right?" I asked.

"Yes. And you, Carlita, are the Angel of St. Thomas."

"Was that you in the car the other day? The 'hostage'?"

"Yes. Stone Man was my 'kidnapper'."

"Uh-huh. Is he here now?"

Wind Lass laughed. "Of course not! You passed the multiple location scenario. This is the one-on-one test. You'll find I'm much more formidable than Gary."

"Gary?"

"Bumble Bee."

"Oh. Okay," I said agreeably. "I don't want this test. I don't want to join. And I don't want you people on my island. I *do* want to get back to my real life, however, so I'm ending the test. Now." I increased her weight a hundred fold. Maybe a bath in the bay would cool her down.

Nothing happened. I increased her weight to a thousand, then ten thousand. Nothing. She moved in closer, her eyes bright.

"So you've found out my other power. I can cancel out others' abilities. What are you going to do now, Carlita? You're now a normal person fighting a super-powered one." And with that she hit me with another wind gust. This one shot me high in the sky.

Again I worked my way free and reached for the water beneath her. A column of sea-water could also end this fight.

Nothing. Getting a little desperate, I zipped ahead of her next blast, and made for shore. Maybe the trees.

Again, nothing. How could she negate my abilities? Weren't they a part of me?

I heard her laughing over the howling wind. I turned back at her and flew in close. It was too dark to use my suggestion gift, but maybe I could startle her.

No go. She knocked me off course before I'd gone a hundred yards. She hit me again. And again. I used all my flying skill to avoid her blasts, but it was impossible to dodge something invisible. And her control of the wind far outstripped my flying. Without my abilities, I was helpless.

Another gust. She was pushing me to the ground, and not slowly. Four or five more and I'd hit the sand and be stuck. I didn't want to take this test, but I didn't want to fail it even more. But without my gifts...

Wait! I was still flying. Did that mean she could only negate some of a person's powers? Maybe so. I decided to try something else. Another shaft of wind. I took it full on, but didn't mind. I had her.

Glancing over the gravity lines, I reversed them. But only the ones surrounding Wind Lass. She hit me again, but I kept working. Another blast, but I was done. There were no lines of gravity attached to Wind Lass. Since she had the ability to fly, it wouldn't seem to affect her.

She hit me again, but this time the force was much less. I squirmed free of the column of air and took back control of my flying, using a similar stunt on myself. Just in time. The ground was less than thirty feet below me.

I soared up quickly, making myself a target. She obliged by hitting me, but this time there was no effect. I'd finally figured out that *I* could use the air as well. Sighting her, I approached her at an easy pace. Over and over again, she fired at me, all to no effect. It was my turn to smile.

"I think this test is at an end."

She was sweating and breathing hard, but shook her head. "Not yet! I've only used my gale-force winds. It's time to bring out my real power!"

"Um, I wouldn't do that," I offered.

"And why not?"

"Because I've found the hole in your powers, Wind Lass. You can cancel out some of my powers, but not all. And what you've left me is more than enough to defeat you."

She was gasping now, like a fish out of water. Which she was.

"What ... What have you done to me?"

I smiled, but shook a finger.

"Ah, ah!" I said. "I can't tell you that. If I did, you might try to take that gift away."

"But we've ... we've analyzed all your ... your pow ... powers." She was fighting to stay conscious, and was losing. The winds were dying down quickly.

"Really?" I asked innocently. "Well I guess I just 'grew' a new one." I took a deep breath. "My! Isn't it a great night? Such a refreshing breeze!"

She gave me a dirty look, then passed out. The last of the wind died away, and Wind Lass started falling. Apparently her flight wasn't as inborn as mine. I grabbed her with my restored gravity powers and lifted her up. I looked carefully at the gravity strings around her and decided that I could keep her unconscious but alive until I got her to the police station. As I took us back to Charlotte Amalie, I had a funny thought.

The jail for bad guys was getting full of Good Guys.

Chapter Fourteen

Stone Man

"So what *did* you do, Carlita?" Benjamin asked me as we shopped for furniture, dishes and whatnots for his new home.

"That's easy, Mr. Frost!" Francis chimed in. "Since she couldn't use her abilities to increase gravity, she instead used them to reverse the gravity around Wind Lass."

"Yes?" he prompted. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I cut off her air, Benjamin," I explained. "Earth has air only because of gravity. No gravity, no air. I created a small vacuum around her. She had only the air in her lungs to exhale and inhale. It didn't take long for her to pass out."

"And your neutralizing of her winds?" he asked. "The same, but applied to yourself?"

"Uh-huh. Though I did let in *some* air," I added. "After all, *I* didn't want to pass out. But yes, it was the same. I merely created a vacuum around myself. Anything she threw at me would only 'bounce off' the vacuum sphere, pulled away by a lack of gravity."

"Excellent!" He clapped his hands. "Though I don't know if you are helping or hurting your cause by beating them. They may be put off, having been bested repeatedly by a young woman. Or they may try even harder to get you."

"Keep your friends close," Francis said sagely, "and your enemies even closer."

"Something like that, Francis. Though I should hope the Good Guys are not so obsessed with you, Carlita, that they would step beyond all reason."

"I hope not, too," I agreed. "But they're getting close."

We continued shopping, going to a department store first. Benjamin bought furniture and furnishings, then took us out for a late lunch. Over burgers and milkshakes, Francis had an idea.

"Hey, I know! Carlita, how 'bout after lunch we show Mr. Frost our schools?"

It sounded like fun, and Benjamin was interested, so we finished up and headed over there. First was Francis' school, then mine. Benjamin was amazed and pleased that we could live normal lives. Well, sorta normal lives.

"How can the both of you cope in school, with every student knowing who you are?"

"Not all of them know, Mr. Frost," Francis piped in. We had just reached my locker and I was fiddling with the knob.

"No?" he asked, perplexed. "I thought all the islanders knew about the Angel. Angels, rather."

"There's two of us, Benjamin," I reminded him, "but only one Angel. It's always been that way."

"And that's why we can live like kids, too," I continued. My locker opened. The darn dial was still sticking, though. "Rats. I'll have to bring some oil next time."

"What Sis was saying, Mr. Frost, is that we're such a part of the island, we're treated like it. So we have friends, a few jerks, and a whole bunch of kids that don't pay us much attention. We don't use our gifts at school, so we fit right in."

"Francis' right," I agreed. "And there are students who don't know about the Angel. A few teachers, too. The ones from off-island. A person has to live here a long, long time before someone who was 'bahn here' will tell them the truth. Even Sir Hector was here for ten years before being told".

"All that you say makes perfect sense," he said with a shake of his head. "Yet don't you fear your secret—St. Thomas' secret, that is—will get out, and you'll both be exposed?"

"A little," I admitted. We were walking toward the track and soccer field now. "But everyone has worries. Ours are just a little different. They're also the same, too."

"How so, Carlita?"

"Worries become very thin and easily seen through when shared with your friends. And we've got every islander as a friend when it comes to being the Angel. Even the ones that don't really like us as people."

We walked out from under the palms of the school walkway and out onto the field.

"I take it neither of you play school sports?" he asked.

"I do," Francis said. "Soccer, though I don't practice as much as I should. Carlita makes me work too hard on my studies."

"That's right, little bro!" I said with a laugh. "You and I both know there's no future for you in sports."

"Why not?" Benjamin asked, then chuckled. "Of course. The 'away' games would remove you from your duties."

"Uh-huh," Francis grudgingly admitted. "We're on St. Thomas for life, except for short trips. It's not too bad a price to pay, though."

"And they let you compete with your powers?"

"Huh?" Francis asked. "Why would I want to use my gifts, Mr. Frost? That wouldn't be fair."

"Children, you are a delight!" Benjamin sighed and looked to the sky. "Your honesty and sense of fairness keeps my cold heart warm!"

We walked along the track and soaked up the afternoon sun. The soft breeze was kicking up, promising rain before evening.

We'd just made the turn around one end when Francis suddenly stopped.

"What is it, Francis?"

Francis didn't say anything, but I knew what it meant. I put my face close to Benjamin's.

"Francis can occasionally sense when an extraordinary event is going to happen," I whispered. "He doesn't get them all the time, but when he does, he's always right."

"A gift?" Benjamin whispered back.

I nodded. "His abilities aren't as refined or as fancy as mine, but they're quite powerful."

"There," Francis said suddenly, pointing toward the far end of the field, at the locker rooms. "Carlita! Get airborne! Now!"

"Head for the bleachers, you two," I said, taking to the air. At Benjamin's hesitation, I added, "Please, Benjamin. This is probably another Good Guy 'test', and I'm just about fed up with them. But if you or Francis help me, they might consider it 'cheating' and test me again." Movement came from the locker room. "Go!"

They went. I flew slowly out to the middle of the field.

The movement turned into a shape, which turned into a man. He was huge, as though made out of granite. Just his size made me shiver, and he hadn't done anything. He approached to within thirty feet, then stopped and looked up. His eyes were under deep brows and seemed to burn. His hair, as black as mine, had slashes of white at the temples.

"Carlita," he said with a voice like gravel. "It's my turn now."

"And you are?"

"William Ridder. Stone Man. I was the driver of the car the other day. You threw me out of it." I nodded.

"Can I please ask you to not test me, Mr. Ridder?" I asked, coming down, almost to the ground. "I'm really getting tired of this." I smiled hopefully. "Please?"

"Maybe you're getting tired because you haven't been challenged enough. Sorry, kid." He raised a hand.

My whole body tightened. Going aloft, I tried to get out of his range. But my muscles refused to budge. I could only just gain altitude. He smiled and took out a ball.

"This is going to be easier than I thought," he said and drew back his arm to throw the ball. Somehow I knew that if I touched the ground, his power would overwhelm me. And if he threw that ball, I'd be grounded.

Quickly, I visualized the strings to the ball. Not wasting an instant, I increased the Earth's hold on it five thousand times, bringing its weight to over six hundred pounds.

"Uh!" Stone Man grunted, dropping the ball. Since he didn't throw it, I was unaffected. He went to pick it up, but I'd increased the weight by half a million. Weighing over thirty tons, it sank into the ground. Stone Man turned and looked at me.

"So, you don't need to gesture. Shows you have command. That's good. But how much constriction can you take?" He waved and my body tightened further. I remembered what Benjamin had told me. Stone Man could 'petrify' opponents as though turning them to stone.

It was getting difficult to breathe. I needed to gain more altitude. Then even if I passed out, he couldn't reach me.

I made several more feet, but that was it. The tightening was making my legs and arms cramp up now. I began bending over as my stomach muscles seized up. Time to try something else.

The lines appeared, and I reversed gravity on him. I'd done this to Bumble Bee yesterday, but it should

still work.

It didn't. Stone Man was now using his other ability: immovability. I increased the pull on him, joining in several other stars. Nothing. I risked even more, and the ground started to rumble, my gravity field warping nearby objects.

"Ahhhhh!!" I cried out. Looking toward the bleachers with pain-filled eyes, I saw Francis standing, his fists clenched. If I didn't end this soon, he—and probably Benjamin—would join in.

Abruptly, I reversed gravity on Stone Man, and I tried pushing him into the ground. Nothing. Immovable really meant immovable.

"Give it up, girl," he said in a quiet tone. "We were interested in you mainly because we thought your power was over rock, and would complement mine. But it's over gravity, I see, and no amount of force can move me."

"If I give up?" I choked out. "You'll leave me alone?"

"Of course not!" he said. "Failing means we'll petition the United Nations to have you removed from your role as protector of this island. You'd be considered too weak."

"No!" I yelled. "You can't do that! My family has been here for three hundred years!"

"And it'll end with you." He clenched his hand, and I felt a stabbing pain in my bones. "Just surrender and I'll let you go."

"You would reveal my identity to the world?" I gasped. "And then what? Who will protect my people?"

"The Good Guys, of course," he said. "And when your brother became old enough, we'd train and test him to see if he could continue where you failed."

"I hate you!" I screamed, and ripped the ground out from under him. A canyon forty feet wide, 200 feet long and at least 100 feet deep opened up and Stone Man fell in. Immovable didn't apply in thin air.

His concentration broken, his hold on me vanished. I'd like to say I made a miraculous comeback, but if anything, I felt worse. All my compressed muscles relaxed suddenly, the blood rushed into my arms and legs, and I blacked out.

It must have been for a moment only, because when I came to, Stone Man was still at the bottom of the ditch. Francis and Benjamin were underneath me, yelling at me to wake up.

I righted myself in the air and shook my head. Dizzy, I drifted closer to the crevasse. Peering down, I saw nothing but black.

"Can you see anything, Sis?" Francis shouted. They'd backed off to the track in case the fight resumed.

"No," I gasped out, still recovering. "If he's alive, he's unconscious or some—"

The crushing grip was back on me. But now I had no interest in playing. This was for keeps. Without a moment's hesitation, I slammed the ground shut, trapping Stone Man a hundred feet down.

"What have you *done*?" Benjamin shouted, running toward me.

"Just wait," I croaked, holding out a hand. Stone Man still had me in his grip.

Slowly over the next minute, his grip eased. Finally, it stopped altogether. That was my cue to open the ground. Lifting the bottom of the crevasse up, I soon had a mound of rock and dirt where the rent had been. A dirt-encrusted Stone Man lay on top of it, gasping for breath. I went close to him, but kept my advantage in the air.

"We can do this over and over," I said, my throat raw and painful. "Sooner or later you'll either give up or be buried alive. Which is it?" I moved the ground slightly, and the pile of dirt dropped three feet.

"Enough," he wheezed out. "You pass the test. I suppose ... I suppose you're going to throw me in jail, too?"

"I thought about it," I said in agreement. "But after what you told me, I want you to deliver a message for me. Tell your partners that the Good Guys have gone from being a pain in my butt to being a dangerous enemy for St. Thomas. I may have to try something very different next time."

"You'd be willing to kill?" he asked, not really believing it. "You'd step outside the law to protect your position?"

"You still don't get it, do you? The Angel is above the law. I am by birthright what your group is by United Nations' approval. Kill? If it is to save my people, yes, I would kill."

"You're a monster," he said with an ugly, flat tone.

"To those who threaten my people, I'm worse than any monster," I replied. "Remember that the next time you want to test me. I may decide it's a final exam."

Chapter Fifteen

Ultimatum

I managed to hold out until Stone Man left the school, looking at him sternly the whole way. As soon as he was out of sight, though, I went straight to the ground and lay down. I hurt all over. Francis and Benjamin were at my side at once.

"Are you okay, Sis?" Francis asked anxiously. He started checking me for broken bones while Benjamin held my hand. I winced at a few places Francis touched, especially my ribs, but he finally he shook his head, relieved.

Benjamin was equally relieved.

"You are quite fortunate, and very resilient, Carlita, to have withstood his attack and not have any bones broken. Not many can say that."

"I don't feel very fortunate," I replied, trying to sit up. I made it on the third try with their help.

"You sounded seriously pissed," Francis said. "I thought you were going to kill him."

"Nonsense, Francis! It is outside the code of ethics for a hero to kill. No matter what the circumstances."

"We're not heroes," Francis said simply.

"Francis!"

"He's right, Benjamin. We're not heroes. We're protectors. If it was absolutely required, both of us would kill. Most Angels have. I fully expect to myself one day."

Benjamin stood up, looking at us with disapproving eyes.

"How can you say that, Carlita? Don't you realize that all life is sacred?"

"Of course it is, Benjamin," I replied. "But life *stops* being sacred when it is misused to the point of threatening others' lives. Then it becomes an evil thing."

"I don't believe it," he said, shaking his head. "Everything I've seen, done, everything, has shown me you two are incapable of killing."

"If that's true," Francis said, "then neither of us should be an Angel. If I have to choose between my people and someone who's going to kill them, I'll kill the bad guy." He looked away. "Even if I have to summon the Carib Angel."

"The Carib Angel?"

"Uh-huh. That one gift that every Angel has. When we call it, we stop being the Angel of St. Thomas and become the Carib Angel."

"This is nonsense," Benjamin said, growing angry. "Dangerous nonsense. I wonder if you should have the privilege to be guardians of this island."

"It is a privilege. But it is also a right," I said, getting a little angry. "And as a right, it is something that

nobody; not our people, not the government, not even the United Nations, has control over. We *are* the Angel, as natural as the island itself."

"No!"

"Please, Benjamin! You have to understand! We're not the Good Guys. We're not the Freedom Squad. We're beyond that."

"Beyond what? Justice? Freedom? Respect of human life?" He shook his head. "I cannot be party to such a misguided sense of duty."

"Benjamin!"

He snapped straight and bowed at the waist.

"I'm sorry. I felt I had found kindred spirits in the two of you. I see now that I was mistaken. Take care of yourselves. Good-bye, Francis. Farewell, Carlita."

With that, he straightened from his bow, turned his back on us, and walked away.

* * * *

"There! All finished!"

Doctor Grant tugged at the wrapping around my ribs one last time, and stepped back. "You're going to be sore for a few days, Carlita, but I can give you some pain medication for that."

"Will it slow me down?" I asked, carefully pulling my top back on.

"The bandages, probably not too much. The medication, somewhat."

"Then no medication. Not until I've gotten the Good Guys off St. Thomas for good."

"We have total faith in you, Carlita," he said without hesitancy. "I'm the sixth generation of my family here, and the Angel has *never* let us down."

I nodded my thanks for his support and left. One benefit Francis and I had was free medical. Good thing, too. The bills I accumulated as the Angel were many times higher than my income.

Once outside, I caught a breeze and went airborne. *Much better!* I thought to myself. I'd also cut down my own weight by two-thirds on doctor's orders. It took a big burden off my bruised but unbroken bones.

The trip home was thankfully uneventful. Landing on my back porch, I went into the living room and carefully lay down on the futon. Francis was at market, getting our daily bread. I had the place to myself for the first time in days. Rolling to my back, I reviewed the past week. Was that all it had been?

The Galactic Good Guys wanted me in their ranks. I didn't want to join. They began testing me, fooling or forcing me to get involved. I passed every test and none of my people had been harmed. I'd made a good friend in Benjamin Frost, then lost him. Looking back on it, things hadn't really changed. Except for two things. I had badly bruised ribs, and the Good Guys were going to bring political force against me and expose the truth and identity of the Angel of St. Thomas. The ribs would heal, but what could be done about the other?

Needing a break, I pulled out my history book for next year and began studying. Our teachers gave Francis and me our books and assignments in advance, knowing our "excused absences" were naturally

much higher than other students'.

The next few hours passed quietly and pleasantly. I finished four chapters, did the essays, and answered the questions. Somewhere along the line, during the French Revolution, I drifted off to sleep.

When I woke up, it was night. The lights were on, and Francis was lying on the floor beside me, doing math problems. Dinner had been prepared and smelled wonderful. Francis looked at me, and I smiled back.

"Good night, little bro'," I said, stretching ... Ow! I forgot. My ribs reminded me.

"Good night, Sis," he answered, stretching as well. "Up for a little dinner?"

"Am I ever!" I sniffed appreciatively. "Fish! Yummy!"

It was a nice dinner, for both of us. I was sorry that Benjamin had deserted us, and I missed him terribly. But it was also comfortable just being a family of two again. Francis felt the same, I think.

"Do you think they've finally left?" he asked.

"I wish. Pass the lemon, please. Thanks. No, this isn't going to end until they are convinced I'm not going to join them."

"What about Stone Man's threat to tell the world about us and get the UN to go after us?"

"I don't know" I shrugged. Inside, I was very worried. But I didn't want to betray that to Francis. He needed reassurance now. "I've been thinking it over. If they tell the world who we are, it might be hard for a while, but really, how different would it be?"

"For one thing, we'd be megastars, the way the Good Guys are." He made a face. "I thought that might have been neat, but now I don't. They'd never leave us alone."

"Not only that, but off-island newspapers and magazines wouldn't care about protecting us, the way *Virgin Island Daily News* and the other papers do. It'd be awful."

"And what about the UN?"

"Francis, I just don't know!" I snapped, then was immediately sorry. He read my thoughts, figuratively if not literally.

"You're holding back on me again, aren't you, Sis?" he asked softly. I nodded. "Trying to protect me as always, right?" I nodded again and wiped away a tear. He came over and stood behind me. He was growing up. He put his hands on my shoulders.

"Thanks. I know you're my sister, but you've also been my mother. It's gotta be tough on you. I really like the feeling I get when I know my big sister—the Angel—is watching over me.

"But no, thanks, Carlita. Remember, *I'm* the Angel, too. And the Good Guys are attacking *us* I like being protected, but I have a duty to *my* people, and to *my* island. You gotta tell me how we're going to fix this."

I sniffed and gave him a small smile.

"You're right, Francis. I'm sorry."

"Good!" he said and took his seat. "Now, tell me what we should do, and I'll help out."

So I told him.

* * * *

Thankfully, the next few days passed along quietly. I spent two of the days at Tom Con, getting the next job set up and catching up on all the office work. It was so good to just forget myself that I worked late both days.

The evenings and nights were equally routine. I spent one night on regular patrol and a second one walking the docks at Havensight, cutting down on the pickpockets and purse-snatchers. I only caught about five—tripping them up by making one of their legs much heavier than the other—but that was because word got around the under-community I was there and they avoided the area. Hey, as long as crime was stopped and my people safe—even the tourists were my people when on my island—I was happy.

Like I said, it was a much-needed break from the Good Guys, who remained unseen and unheard from. Francis and I even spent a day on St. Croix, compliments of Air Carlita. Flying had its perks.

After the fourth day of worry-free living, I was finally beginning to relax. I probably should have put out word that I wanted to find the Good Guys. I'd know within the hour where they were staying. But I chose not to. Francis, my ribs, and I needed the time off. Let it lie, I told myself. Maybe they'd lick their wounds and leave. The only thing I missed was Benjamin's company. He'd given me the feeling of safety that I tried to give Francis.

We were home the evening of the fourth day, slaving over our homework, when a knock came at the door. Assuming it was the Chinese dinner that we'd ordered, I jumped to my feet and answered the door.

It was Victor Spekvin. The Alchemist. The one who hadn't tested me. The one Benjamin had warned us about.

I reacted immediately by slamming him to the porch. He lifted his head slightly, so I increased the pull.

He looked at me briefly.

"Not bad," he said. "Good reflexes. But the wrong action."

The floor underneath him suddenly disappeared, and he slipped through. The porch reappeared behind him.

Racing down the stairs, I saw him standing on the street, his hands held out. I reached the bottom step and approached him slowly. All around us, the street festivities jarred to a stop; a large open space developed around us as the people gave me room.

"No, this is not a test, Carlita," he said, smiling an evil smile.

"Good," I said. "I'm tired of your tests. But then why are you here, Mr. Spekvin? Have the Good Guys finally decided to leave me alone?"

"Unfortunately, no," he replied, lowering his hands. I didn't like him. "Rather, we have made a decision to report your actions and attitudes to the United Nations. The next time you see us, it will be as protectors of these islands and to relieve you of that responsibility."

"Or?" I asked. "There's always an 'or' Otherwise you would have not bothered telling me. You'd have just carried out your threat."

"Very clever, girl," he hissed. "There *is* an alternative. Join us. We will then be able to train you correctly while taking responsibility for your actions."

"You mean guard me."

He shrugged.

"That's what I would do," he said truthfully. "But I do not make the final decisions. Strong Man and Wanda do."

He slipped back toward the people, the street shifting and flowing under his feet.

"I have delivered my message. Deliver your answer tomorrow, at the mansion site, at noon. Do not make us come after you." He gave a last smile. "And do not force us to *make* you come after us." He slid from sight, causing a ripple of panic in the crowd.

I stood there, looking after him. I knew a veiled threat when I heard one. Make me come after them. They'd crossed the line and were willing to put innocent lives at stake to achieve their goal of my joining them.

And I'd use all my power to prevent it.

All of it.

Chapter Sixteen

Showdown

"You're sure then, Judge?" I sat in Judge Winslow's private office. Whenever I had a question about law, I went to him.

"I'm sorry, Carlita" He sighed, hanging up the phone. "My contact at the UN just confirmed what I feared: as a legal entity, we have absolutely no jurisdiction over the Galactic Good Guys. The freedoms granted them by the World Court are alarmingly expansive. They even include the peculiar clause of non-sovereign intervention."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that individual nations cannot negate the Good Guys' freedom of movement and action. Technically, *we* were breaking the law by detaining two of them in our jail."

"So you're saying we can't do anything until they actually break the law?"

"In fact, we may not even be able to intervene then. They can justify any and all damage as 'necessary to maintain global justice'. It's much the same as wartime powers. A nation is not held liable for collateral damage that occurs during an attack. The Good Guys have that same type of immunity."

"What about lives?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"You're saying innocent lives could be lost—that they could be murdered by the Good Guys—and we cannot prevent it?" He nodded, and I stood.

"I cannot allow that. I will not allow that. Thank you, Judge. I was hoping we could prevent this. I see now that we can't."

"Carlita, if there was something I could do, you know I would." I nodded. He walked me to the door. "I wish to avoid bloodshed as much as you. But unfortunately, it only takes one to make war."

"Not on my island, Judge. Not on my people. Not while I live."

He smiled. "You are your mother, Carlita. The same burning dedication, the same unshakable resolve. I know I speak for all the people of St. Thomas when I say we trust you completely. Be careful, Carlita, and go with our love." He hugged me.

Taking to the air, I swung around toward the east, where the mansion was. It was ten in the morning. Two hours until their deadline. Perhaps I should get there early and...

And what? I saw only one option, and I did not like it. Not at all. And I did not like that I would use it. But what else was there? I'd never come across something so potentially devastating and yet so vague. Storms, hurricanes, even earthquakes, all had a way that they acted, a pattern to their destruction. But they were mercifully short. What the Good Guys were planning would harm my people and my family for countless years. It was like the diseases and slavery of the Europeans and the cruelty of the pirates were all coming at once upon us.

My path was clear, but unbearable. I had told Benjamin I could and would kill. I'd told Stone Man as

well. I thought I could. I ... I knew I could kill. That did not make it any easier. The damage to my soul would be irreparable. Once done, there would be no going back.

Mother understood and tried to explain it to me. I was five when she came back from duty, crying. It was several days before she talked to me about it. She'd been forced to kill a smuggler who was going to kill several Coast Guard seamen.

"It hurt more than I thought it could, Carlita," she said. "But I need to share it with you, because you'll face it one day yourself. I still hurt on the inside, but I have to go on. The Angel isn't allowed to stop being the protector. I—I *can't!* The Angel is what I am—what you will be—above everything else. And while it is our birthright to act as we need to protect our island and our people, it was to them I turned for comfort. It is *our* island. They are *our* people. Go to them when the day comes that you must take a life."

And today was the day. Certainty so complete, it had to be a gift. I made up my mind. Agnes Fancy was coming up on my left. I swung north and started to descend.

* * * *

"Benjamin, I need your help."

I stood at his front door, my hands folded in front of me. He towered over me, a look in his eyes that made me turn my head.

"I'm sorry, Carlita. I cannot help you."

I looked at him, angry, heartbroken, terrified and helpless. With tears in my eyes, I glared and took a deep breath.

"Can't? Or won't?" I accused.

"You may choose whichever. I will not be a party to your kind of justice." He closed the door.

"Benjamin! Please!" Sobbing, I pounded on the door. "Don't you understand? I need your help to save lives! I've been forced into having to choose who lives and who dies! Please! I don't want to kill anyone! And I hate myself knowing that I will!" Crying uncontrollably now, I sank to the ground.

There came a quiet click, and the door opened again. I looked up and saw Benjamin looking down at me. His own eyes were moist. He gave me a slow smile.

"Carlita. Child. Please come in and share a cup of tea with an old, foolish man."

* * * *

"So I have no other choice." I finished my story and my tea. I glanced at the kitchen clock. Ten-thirty. Ninety minutes.

"And I have no solution, Carlita." Benjamin stood up from the table and gathered my cup and his. "I have been thinking over the past days about the unique relationship the Angel has with her people. I failed to understand just how deep the love went. Love both ways. You hover over your people as so many other Angels have, and you know them; you are a part of them; you love all of them and each of them as a mother does her children. What you do affects all of them. No other super-powered hero—and I call you a hero—has such ultimate responsibility, love, and commitment. I ... I see now that the justice, the protection, you bring these islanders is total. That you are willing to do even the unthinkable in order to save them. I was a fool to think you less of a hero when you spoke of taking life. It is because you are *more* of a hero that you are capable of anything, because you place their needs above yours, their lives above yours. Please, forgive me."

Crying, I nodded my head and went into his arms. The safety he had provided me before rushed back and I was calm.

In the end, that was all I needed. We talked a little longer, but he'd done more than I could ever dream. He'd given me a reason to trust in myself. To make the hard decision. I still hoped it wouldn't come to it, but if it did, I would be ready.

* * * *

"Right on time." Blue Lass, predictably, was the first one to speak. I had just landed in front of them at the mansion site. It stood like an unfinished sphinx behind them, almost eerie in its silence.

"Have you arrived at a decision?" Power Man asked, wasting no time.

"I have," I replied. Taking my time, I looked each of them in the eye, letting them see the anger in mine. I noticed Stone Man was not among them. Probably still recovering.

"I will join the Good Guys under two conditions."

"It doesn't work that way," Victor said. He was in the back of the group and was prepared for a fight. Maybe hoping for a fight.

"It does for me," I said. "You will not allow me to refuse the invitation. Not without consequences that will harm my people. Therefore, I get to choose the conditions under which I will join."

"I'm not saying we will accept your conditions," Blue Lass said, "but what are they?"

"First: Regardless of what happens, you will leave St. Thomas and the Virgin Islands. You will never return or interfere with them again."

"Easy enough," she replied. "We don't come here anyway. Nor would we. These islands are not politically significant, and the people here too few. What's the second condition?"

I felt my soul freeze at their callousness, but I continued.

"That you defeat me, as a group. There is a small island west of here named Dutchcap Cay. It is uninhabited but of sufficient size to allow freedom of movement. Meet me there at sundown."

"Why not now?"

"Because, Blue Lass, while you may not place value on my people's lives, I do. I want the area to be completely clear of civilians and all air traffic diverted. If I lose, I will join the Galactic Good Guys. But if I win, you will guard my secrets and never bother me again."

She nodded. "Agreed. You run your little errands, and we'll meet you on the island."

She raised an arm and the Galactic Good Guys prepared to leave. She gave me a small, superior smile. The kind I hated.

"Be sure that you are there on time, Carlita." She closed her hand, and the group moved off. Within ten seconds, the last one was gone.

* * * *

I returned home late in the afternoon. I'd told Benjamin what had gone on at the meeting, then flown over to the police station and airport to arrange for Dutchcap Cay to be isolated from all air and sea traffic. Before three o'clock, the whole island knew the Angel would be in the fight of her life. Perhaps their lives,

too.

When I reached Staari, I landed and walked the last few blocks home, trying to clear my thoughts.

Was I doing the right thing? Could I defeat them as a group? Individually, each of them had been beatable. But how about as a team? The only team-up I'd seen so far was Strong Man and Blue Lass, and I'd won that round only with help from Francis, Bobby Dobbie and the gang at Tom Con. This time, I was going alone, because I couldn't risk their lives, knowing what I was up against, and knowing what the Galactic Good Guys thought of my people.

And what happened if I lost? I didn't like that thought. Not one tiny bit. I'd do as promised. I would give up being the Angel, leave St. Thomas, and join the Good Guys. Francis would be the only Angel left, a hard thing to be, I knew from experience.

And I would never come back. How could I, after abandoning my people and rejecting my Angel duties? The answer was easy and stark: I couldn't come back. To look into the eyes of those I'd betrayed would kill my soul. I must not fail!

I stopped at the corner store and bought a soda. Mr. Graines, the owner, quietly accepted my money and wished me well. I thanked him and left. His were the eyes I would have to look into if I failed. I opened my soda and continued home.

Victor. Of them all, Victor was the one I feared the most. I'd only seen his power once, and it had caught me off guard. He was called the Alchemist for good reason. He was able to alter any inorganic material into whatever element he wished. Benjamin had told me that while Victor couldn't make complex things, that inability had angered and frustrated him to the point that he used the ability he had with ruthlessness. It was a chilling thought.

I turned up my street and almost immediately saw there was something wrong. People stood around Marie's cart, but I couldn't see the cart. And instead of laughter, I heard crying. Dropping my soda, I ran up to them.

Pushing my way through, I saw the destroyed remains of Big Marie's cart, with Marie herself wailing and inconsolable. I turned to one of my neighbors, Amelia.

"Get the tourists out of here," I said in a low tone. "They don't belong here right now." She nodded and passed the word. I knelt beside Marie and hugged her.

"Marie?" I said quietly. She kept crying. "Momma? What happened? Who did this?"

She couldn't answer so someone else did.

"It was one of those stupid Good Guys, Carlita," he said with anger and frustration. "He went up to Big Marie and wrecked everything, shouting, 'Where's your Angel now?' over and over."

I kept hugging her. Amelia came back and said all the tourists were off our Gade. I nodded calmly, but inside was the burning feel of hatred. Hatred for the Good Guys. And I might end up being one.

"Momma! I'm so sorry! I wish I could have been here to help you!" She pushed me off and took me by the arms.

"I do not blame you, Carlita," she said, trying to get control of herself. "I blame myself. I cry for me."

"Don't worry, Momma," I said. "We'll build you a better cart, and make you new things to sell. It will

take—"

"No!" she exclaimed "My cart is nothing! Some wood and paint. Knickknacks and baubles to sell to off-islanders. What is my fault is that I have failed you, Carlita! I have failed the Angel of St. Thomas!"

"Don't say that, Momma!" I said, getting scared. "You've taken care of Francis and me for years. We love you as our mother! You could never..."

"But I did, sweet child," she mourned. "That hideous creature that destroyed my cart did so only to lure Francis out. And when Francis came to save me, that ... that ... criminal! Waved his hand and the boy went into a seizure." Marie broke down into sobs again.

The burning hatred went ice cold as my soul froze.

"Where is he?" I asked, my voice wavering. "Where's my brother?"

"We don't know, Carlita," came the quiet reply from somewhere in the crowd. "After he attacked Francis, he took him."

Chapter Seventeen

An Angel Departs

The red buoy just off Rupert Rock, where I lay, flashed over and over, an ever-vigilant watchman, warning ships that there was danger nearby. Warning them to follow the lights and be safe.

Rupert Rock was very small, unable to hold a dozen people, and bare. Yet I would come here at times to be alone and think my thoughts. The story was that the Rock had been named for Prince Rupert, who'd lived the life of a buccaneer centuries ago. The truth was that it had been named for my ancestor, Rupert, also a buccaneer, but who'd been given another chance and a special charge: to be the Angel of St. Thomas.

Less than a quarter-mile away were the Havensight docks. A cruise ship was passing by, heading out to sea, full of carefree tourists and vigilant crew, devoted to the happiness and safety of those passengers. A number of them waved at me, surprised, I think, to see me there. I was in no mood to wave back. Undoubtedly, someone would notify the Captain and he would assure them that all was well; that I was a frequent visitor to the rock. Why? he would be asked. He'd shrug his shoulders and say that knowing the mind of an islander was not possible. I would be forgotten, nothing more than a photograph, and then they'd turn away and look forward to the next island of their lovely tour. And wasn't St. Thomas a nice little island? So carefree! How lucky the natives were to live there, free from danger and worry and things unfortunate.

Sunset. It was time. I stood and looked toward Charlotte Amalie. The lights were on now, from Frenchtown to Havensight. The harbor itself was alight, a nightly celebration of life and joy and peace and fellowship.

One of the lights was a small boat making its way toward me. There was still plenty of daylight left, more than enough to see it was a police launch, piloted by Lt. Lewis.

He pulled up close to Rupert Rock and expertly threw the launch into reverse, then idle, leaving it motionless in the water. He didn't get out—nobody went on Rupert Rock except Angels—and gave me a grim smile.

"Time," he said. I nodded.

"The area is cordoned off. You'll have free reign tonight, Carlita." I nodded again. Lt. Lewis sighed and leaned on the wheel, looking at the sunset.

"I was a sergeant the day your mom last went to sea ten years ago. I'll never forget that day. We were taking a pounding from the storm, despite your mother's constant efforts. It's often overlooked when the story is told that Constance had saved hundreds of lives here, on the island, before she went after the four ships."

I watched him and listened.

"The distress calls started coming in at noon. Four in two hours. As soon as she heard, even though she was exhausted after two nonstop days of using her gifts, Constance radioed in and said she was off to save them. Able to glide on water and calming it around her, she was the only hope they had. So she went out. After three hours, the first came into harbor. She went out again. This time it was five hours before she returned, with two ships. She went out again, even though it was almost dark." He paused.

"We never knew for certain whether she had known the fourth ship was the one your father was on. Did she put that one off for last, putting the needs of others above hers? Even above her children's? Or did she wait to save it because it had the fewest lives on board? Or did she even know that?"

"It didn't matter to us, Carlita. All we knew was that hundreds—thousands—of people were alive, and the Angel was gone. The Angel and her husband. We grieved for them and for you as a family grieves. Constance was our own."

He turned back at me and smiled. The grimness was gone, replaced by a more relaxed look.

"And I remember the very next day when you, seven years old, hair in pigtails and your eyes still red from crying, showed up at the police station and announced that you were now our Angel.

"Ten years since then. Ten years of joy, despite those who would force their evil on us. What I'm saying, Carlita, is that regardless of what happens tonight, I will always be proud and grateful that I know you. Come back safe, Carlita. Come back to your people, Angel of St. Thomas."

I nodded again and spread my arms. Sparkles of lights poured from them.

"Thank you, Lieut ... thank you, Eric." I caught the breeze and lifted off. "I'll not let you down."

Rising to several hundred feet, I kept my arms wide and lit the twilight with a blanket of sparkles. Trailing a carpet of white, blue, green and red, I moved off northwest over Charlotte Amalie. Looking behind me, I could still see the lieutenant below, looking up after me.

I swung my gaze ahead and gasped.

There, standing on rooftops, on ship decks, and crowded in the streets, were my people, all looking up in silence. They had come out to wish me well, to tell me they would always trust and be with me. I felt a lump in my throat. To be protector of a people like this ... I would not fail!

I maintained the light display all the way to the tip of St. Thomas and beyond. Two miles out, past Salt and West cays, was Dutchcap Cay. From my altitude, now over a thousand feet, I could just see the tip of the sunset.

Descending to just over a hundred feet, I flew in toward the cay. The Galactic Good Guys were waiting for me. With them, still held stiff by Stone Man's power, was Francis. I looked at Blue Lass, their true leader.

"Release my brother."

"We won't harm him, Carlita. But we're going keep him a little longer, just to make sure you haven't brought others with you."

"Others?" I laughed at them. "Why would I need others? I've beaten you all once, I can beat you again. But release my brother first."

She shook her head.

"All right" I sighed. "Francis, I need you to get out of here when I say, okay?"

Bumble Bee laughed. "Didn't you hear Blue Lass, Carlita? *We* decide when he goes free!"

"Always the cur to your Mistress's feet, eh, Bumble Bee?" came a voice behind them. "And never a very intelligent one, either."

The Good Guys swung around and saw Benjamin standing there. Behind him, a path of ice covered the sea.

"Benjamin!" Power Man exclaimed. Benjamin shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Walter. You do not get to use my name. I am Benjamin to my friends. To the Galactic Good Guys, I'm The Icicle."

"But you're a Good Guy!" Wind Lass said. She hovered over the group, looking at Benjamin nervously. I had a sudden knowledge that she, like Victor, had come out second best in a fight with him.

"I was never more than a convenience to you," he countered. "A Good Guy in name only. I have severed even that tie." He looked at Blue Lass. "I have contacted the UN and reported to them what I have witnessed these past weeks here. Even as we speak, the council is meeting to seriously reconsider the immunities the Galactic Good Guys have used and abused over the years. The Hague has also been made aware."

They were flabbergasted. Caught off-guard, it was the perfect time to make a move.

"Now!" I shouted, drawing attention to me. Benjamin ran to Francis and held on tight. Instantly, they disappeared. I made a small prayer, hoping Francis' teleport went safely.

I pulled off my radio and tossed it aside. Blue Lass stared at it for a moment, then gave me a dirty look.

"You planned this all."

"That's right," I said. "Though Benjamin helped out considerably." I went aloft. "He's done his job and rescued my brother. Now it's time for me to do my job."

At my beckoning, rock shot up in their midst and I increased its gravity a billion-fold. They jerked like puppets and slammed into the rock as though magnetized.

Stings—much more powerful than before—shot all over my skin, breaking my concentration. At the same time, a blast of wind slammed me from above, forcing me down and into Strong Man's arms. He seized me and laughed.

"That was easy," he bragged. "Hit her now, Blue Lass! I can hold her—wha?" His feet kicked in mid air as I lifted us. He grunted as Blue Lass's bolt, intended for me, nailed him in the back. He released me and took to the air himself. For a moment only, though. I increased the Earth's pull and he descended.

Another gust hit me again, and I quickly raised my gravity shield. It would be impossible for her...

Stings! All over my body! Again my concentration broke and again the wind pushed me where it would. Only this time it was toward the rock I'd raised up.

Instead of resisting, I allowed it to take me. Just before hitting it, I sent the rock back into the ground and continued on to a surprised Stone Man. I increased my weight and slammed into him.

Big mistake. He'd already gone immovable. I struck him and bounced off, again hitting the ground. He laughed.

"Got you!" he shouted.

Instantly my insides seized up. I'd been right; being in the air was far better than fighting him on the ground. His power was far more effective there.

Unable to move, I could not prevent Bumble Bee hitting me again. Stings all over my body, and I couldn't get to them!

A breeze went across my face, and I went airborne.

"Fool!" came a nasty hiss.

It was the Alchemist. He was holding a ball. Giving an evil smile, he tossed it.

A ball! I had to get the ball! I was stiff, but now I wasn't. Happy! Get the ball!

It bounced and bounced and bounced, playing with all the rocks. I almost got to it, but a wind blew it some more, making it more fun to catch. Fun! I was having fun!

The ball moved again from the wind. Laughing, I went after it! This was great!

There were people on the rocks, too. Maybe it was their ball. No! My ball! It was my ball! I went after it some more!

A big wind came and slammed me into the ground, breaking the spell. The rock changed to steel and wrapped itself around me, holding me on my back, spread-eagled. Stings hit me again, and my insides were on fire as my muscles tightened. Grounded and unable to concentrate from the constant stinging, they had me.

They gathered around, grim and victorious. Blue Lass knelt beside me.

"That's it then, Carlita," she said with deep satisfaction. "You are now a Galactic Good Guy. The first thing you'll do is convince Frost to recant his testimony so we can keep our immune status. After that, you'll leave St. Thomas and join us at our base in New York, to begin your proper training."

"No."

"No?" She fired a bolt into me, a hundred times worse than Bumble Bee's continuous stinging. "Get a clue, Carlita! You've lost!" Her voice was becoming mean as she fired another bolt into me. "We own you."

"I'm sorry," I said, my eyes filling with tears. Tears of pain and of sorrow. Sorrow for them.

"Sorry for what?" she asked.

"Sorry I'm forced to do this," I answered. My body started burning, but not from the attacks. It was burning with power. Looking her straight in the eye, I said, "I did everything I could to convince you to leave. Now it's too late."

The pain subsided. I continued to stare at Blue Lass.

"I've lost my hold on her!" Stone Man shouted.

"My stings aren't working, either!"

Blue Lass stood quickly and backed up. My steel shackles disintegrated. The power had nearly consumed me. I now wanted it to. Mostly. Slowly, I stood. Wind Lass hit me with a gust of wind, to no effect.

"What is this?" Blue Lass shouted. "Everyone, prepare for full assault!" She turned to me. "I see the

Angel of St. Thomas has another power."

"I am not the Angel of St. Thomas," I boomed in a voice not my own. I had no control now. "There is no Angel of St. Thomas. I am your death. I am your everlasting agony. You are looking now upon the instrument of your despair!"

"I am the Carib Angel."

Chapter Eighteen

The Carib Angel

They would not escape. A simple gesture. Raising my arms, I called the waters to rise up. Instantly, a wall of seawater, hundreds of feet high and a hundred feet thick, surrounded the cay. The walls glowed a greenish white from bioluminescence, casting an eerie light over the startled group of humans.

"You have threatened my people," I rumbled. The words were not spoken by me, but came from my soul and were spoken by another inside me. Beside me. With me. A part of me. "You have forced your will upon my Angel of St. Thomas and I will not forgive that!"

"But ... but *you're* the Angel of St. Thomas," Strong Man stammered.

"Off-islander!" I spat out at him. "Outsider! You know nothing! She who I live in, and who I have chosen to be, is the Angel of St. Thomas. Who you speak to now is the Carib Angel! The Nameless Dread! The Spirit of the People! I have lived for countless millennia and have counseled my peoples, given them life, and brought them death. I chose the first Angel, and I shall choose the last. This beloved child is not the last. Nor her children. Nor theirs, for many generations yet to come."

"But she needs training!" Wind Lass said. "We can offer her training."

"Your lies are worthless to me," I replied. "This girl and I can see through them as a ray of sunlight on shallow tide pools. You do not intend to train her. You intend to control her, and use her power—my power!—for your own, loathsome purposes."

"We defeated your precious Angel," Blue Lass said, raising her hand at me. "And we can defeat you, monster! You occupy Carlita's body. That makes you vulnerable! Destroy her and we destroy you!"

"Are you still blind, mortal? I have spoken! Life is mine to give and take! I have taken eleven Angels. One day I will take my hundredth. And each of them is worth far more than all of you!"

Mother! As the Carib Angel, had I killed my own mother?

No, came the soothing, rumbling answer inside me. This is beyond you, beloved child, Loving Angel. We are one. We are together. But it is I who declares what is right and when. One day, you shall understand. For today, what I have said is enough.

Yes, I answered. It was enough. My soul went calm and I heard myself speaking again.

"This, then, is the power you so foolishly tried to contain!" I opened my arms again.

"Look!" Stone Man shouted. "The ground underneath her!"

My sparkles had turned into stabs of black. They rained to the ground, forming a veil of void, a beautiful pair of wings that took everything in and let nothing out. Even over the roar of the water walls it was possible to hear the crackling of the rock as it was obliterated.

"Strong Man!" Blue Lass barked. She fired into my body, but I merely absorbed it. Ignoring her, I spread my veil across the cay, from water wall to water wall.

A whooshing sound made me look up calmly. Strong Man had pulled a boulder from the ground and thrown it into the air. Wind Lass seized the boulder with her winds and fired it at me. Just before it hit,

Alchemist changed it into iron. The iron projectile, three times my size, slammed into me.

And ceased to be.

Tiny little pricks, less than goose bumps, touched my arms, legs, face and body. I looked down at Bumble Bee and laughed.

"An insect!" I sneered. "For you, an insect's punishment!"

I picked him up with my gravity, then slammed him to the ground, knocking him unconscious. I jerked up a huge boulder and hovered it over him, intent on crushing him to a lifeless smear.

No! I shouted. *You should not kill! You must not!*

Do not command me, Angel, came the reply, patient and gentle. *I can end anything that I wish.*

But you mustn't, I pleaded. *Not when it is not required! My people are safe! These off-islanders are defeated! What will killing them accomplish?*

I care not what it will accomplish. It is what I have decided.

No! I repeated. *You will not! If you do, I ... I will give up being the Angel.* I wanted to cry, saying that, but I had to hold true to what I knew was right.

The Carib Angel should have been angry with me. I was defying the very nature of the source of my gifts. Yet he remained loving and understanding.

You are truly your mother, Angel. You have her foolishness. She thought she defied me, too, just as you do now. You cannot defy me, child. You are me. Nor can you surrender your gift. It is impossible.

The moment is passed and you have not failed me. You have learned the first lesson of many. You know yourself, and in doing so, begin to know me. Their lives will be spared.

Overjoyed, I took the boulder hovering over a now conscious and terrified Bumble Bee and tossed it into the water wall. It crumbled instantly into gravel and was swept to the bottom of the sea.

Despite my inward struggles, only a moment had gone by. Good. It was time to end this. I moved slowly toward them. My wings of oblivion had now become a backdrop, spreading upwards into the night sky, beyond sight. As I moved, the water hissed and scarred wherever the tip of my veil touched.

"Do not test me further." This time it was not just the Carib Angel speaking, it was also me. Our voices swirled around each other, adding an eerie, non-human echo.

"My beloved child has chosen life for you, and I will grant her desire. You will leave now, and never return." This time it was the Carib Angel alone speaking.

"We will tell everyone who she is!" Alchemist yelled.

"Then you will die," came our answer.

With just my own voice, I spoke to Blue Lass. "Blue Lass. Wanda. Please. This is over. If you push it any further, lives will be lost."

"No!" she screamed. "Destroy it!"

They assaulted me again, and I wailed.

"I am the Carib Angel!" I shouted in double voice above the roar of water. "You have known my mercy. Now feel my wrath!"

I swept toward them and released my water walls. They crashed down from dizzying heights onto the cay. Only one wall, the wall protecting my island and my people to the east, remained up.

As quickly as the attack started, it ended. All of them pulled back and yelled for help as the waters crashed into them.

All except Blue Lass and Alchemist. With an abandon born of evil, they charged me, Alchemist turning the waters into air, and Blue Lass firing bolt after bolt into my body.

There would be no mercy.

* * * *

The peak of Dutchcap, almost 300 feet in altitude, showed first. Seething, sated, hissing waters poured down the slope. To the east, the final wall of water melted gently into the sea, revealing a newly risen moon gently lighting the Salt Cay Passage.

A shout from below and I looked down, smiling. Encased in a gravity bubble that the receding waters slowly uncovered were the Galactic Good Guys. A more terrified and subdued bunch of people I'd never seen.

"You ... you saved us!" Wind Lass, her hair matted down like so much seaweed, exclaimed in wonder.

"Of course I did, silly," I replied in my own voice. In just my own voice. The Carib Angel was gone. Or rather, returned to watching. "I give mercy to anyone who asks for it. As well as to anyone who doesn't ask for it."

"Wanda!" Strong Man yelled. I'd forgotten he and Blue Lass were married. "Where's my wife?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Overton, but she and Mr. Spekvin rejected the mercy I'd offered them, choosing instead to be eaten alive by their hatred and evil."

"Where is she?" he yelled again.

"She's dead, Mr. Overton. She ran into my veil and ceased to be. In time, both she and Mr. Spekvin will be forgotten; unknown faces in faded pictures. They will have never existed. I'm sorry."

He slumped to his knees in the bubble, sobbing.

"What's to become of us?" Stone Man asked. He was much humbler than before. It was a pleasant change.

"That's not really up to me, Mr. Ridder. My guess is that your immunity to prosecution has been revoked, though, meaning we can try, convict and imprison all of you." They exchanged nervous looks. Now that they were to be responsible for their actions, a cool wind of caution prevailed. Good.

"I will speak on your behalf, however," I added. "You have caused me nothing but grief, but Benjamin was right about you. The Good Guys are not evil, just stupid. Maybe today has made you all a little wiser. I will petition that you take your wisdom and leave my island." I looked each one in the eye. "Forever."

They nodded in agreement.

"May I ask one question?" Strong Man asked. Already I could see the pain of his wife's loss fading. I think he, too, knew she'd had an evil soul.

"Of course," I replied.

"From the very beginning you had no interest in becoming part of our group. What was it about the Galactic Good Guys that made you reject us?"

"As a group? Nothing, really. My brother has told me quite a bit about you, and I think you've the makings of a force for good. Most superheroes would be proud to join your ranks."

They straightened slightly. I was glad. After all, I didn't want to destroy them as a group. Especially now that the bad had been weeded out.

"But?" Stone Man prompted.

"But you need to understand the difference between you and me. I do not live a double life. I do not pick and choose my fights, worry about politics or wonder what it is like to defend people I do not know and care about. My home, my family, my duty, my very life—everything that comes together to make me the person I am—all are the same thing.

"We are two very different kinds of beings. You fight for justice. For what is right. That is what a good superhero will do. I'm not a superhero. I don't fight for such things. Not in the way you think of them. In fact, I don't fight at all. I live. I live for the safety of my people. I live for the peace of my islands. I live to protect them all—the guilty as well as the innocent—from those who would attack us.

"I am the holder of the soul of the people. I am the wall against which men's evil and nature's wrath must crash if they wish to harm my people. I am the one chosen to give her life to their safety. And, if called upon, I am the one chosen to surrender her life so all is not lost.

"I am the Angel of St. Thomas."

Epilogue

An End to the Beginning

It all ended on a Tuesday. I don't know why I remember that. Maybe because it had all started on a Tuesday. Though I didn't know why I remembered *that*, either.

The private jet accelerated down the runway and went airborne. It waggled its wings in salute, then banked to the north, toward New York. The Galactic Good Guys were gone.

"Finally!" Francis said.

"What, little bro'?" I said, mussing his hair as we walked away from the terminal. Benjamin was beside us. I think he would always be beside us. "I thought you had an incurable case of hero worship."

"I kinda got over it, Sis," he said, dodging my hair rub. "They're a pretty neat bunch, but they're not what I thought they were."

"A deep truth for all of us, Francis," Benjamin said. "I think the Good Guys also learned they were not who they thought they were. Reason now tempers their eagerness for combat."

"That's a little weak, Mr. Frost!" Francis accused. "We both saw they way Carlita mopped the floor with them." He laughed. "I mean, the whole cay!"

"Francis!" I scolded. Unknown to me at the time, Francis' rectangles had taken on another aspect shortly after teleporting himself and Benjamin to Salt Cay. He could now observe things through the black portals. They had seen—and heard—everything that happened that night inside the walls of water.

"It's true, Carlita. You have demonstrated beyond doubt that the Angel is far stronger than them. And much purer of heart."

I blushed and changed the subject.

"Well, you can still join them later, bro'," I teased. "Explore the galaxy. At least a corner of it."

"Nah. Strong Man told me the truth. They've never left the planet. They just thought adding the word 'Galactic' made them sound more powerful."

I laughed.

"Well, hopefully they've learned something."

"They learned, Carlita," Benjamin assured me as we got into his car, a classic, bright blue—ice blue?—convertible.

"And they will be a long time forgetting the lesson."

Benjamin started the car up with a roar and we left the airport. I took out my bandana and let my hair blow in the wind.

It was a glorious day!

END