

Fallen Angel

SHARON SHINN

THE first time an angel kissed me, I was too young to remember. The Archangel Raphael had come to visit my parents, for he was a great friend of my grandfather Karsh, and he kissed me as I lay sleeping in my cradle.

The second time an angel kissed me, I was fourteen, and the Archangel Gabriel was complimenting me for a solo I had just sung at the Gloria. I was one of a handful of Manadawi girls who had been chosen to sing that year, and Gabriel had given each of us a chaste kiss on the cheek after we performed.

The third time an angel kissed me, he was not an Archangel at all. He was a fatherless wanderer, the wildest of wild young men, and he kissed me as he suffered in exile for having killed a mortal man.

What made it worse was that the man he had killed was my father.

Actually, if I were telling the truth, I would have to admit that that was not the first time Jesse had kissed me, when I was eighteen and he was twenty-one, and I had come to find him shackled to a mountaintop. He had kissed me twice before, on a single autumn day, when it was clear he was only flirting and it was equally clear I had no business flirting back. I was a Manadawi woman and he was a wayward, reckless, sullen boy completely without prospects. Manadawi women were not permitted to love men like that—and we were certainly not allowed to marry them.

My grandfather Karsh was one of the richest men in Samaria. He owned so much property in the fertile northern plains of Gaza that, the story went, he could not walk from one end of it to the other in a single day. His house was so huge that it could accommodate a hundred overnight guests. He had more servants than family members, more money than love, and he hated the Archangel Gabriel. His entire life was spent scheming—how to make more money, how to acquire more property, how to outmaneuver his neighbor and best friend Ebenezer Harth. The Harths and the Karshes and the Leshes and the Garones and a smattering of other families made up the people collectively known as the Manadawi, the wealthy elite in the country we called Samaria. For me, until I sang at my first Gloria at the age of fourteen, they made up the entire world.

"A Manadawi woman owes a debt to the family and to the property," my mother told me more often than I cared to count. "You will marry a man your father or your grandfather chooses. He will be a Harth, perhaps, or a Lesh, or possibly a merchant's son. But only a merchant from Semorra or Castelana. He must be respectable."

"Could I marry an angel?" I asked her one time when I was thirteen.

My mother frowned, as if considering. "Possibly," she said. "Not just any angel, of course. If he was to be the next Archangel, then, yes, you could marry him. Or if he had been chosen to lead the host at one of the holds. He would have to be an angel of some distinction."

This particular conversation was taking place a few days before we were *to* hold a very large dinner party. We had just gone through every single item of clothing in my wardrobe to determine which pieces might be appropriate for me to wear at the afternoon tea and the morning breakfast that would bracket the main event. To wear at the dinner itself, of course, new gowns had been commissioned for both of us. Now we were looking through my jewelry case to see if I had the right necklaces, earrings, bracelets and rings to complement the outfits we had already chosen.

"But how will I know?" I asked, pulling off a short opal necklace and trying on a strand of pearls instead.

"How will you know what?"

"If the angel will be Archangel? No one has been chosen yet to succeed Gabriel."

"Gabriel has served a little over half his term, silly girl. The god will not need to choose another Archangel for seven or eight years."

"But then how will I know if the angel I fall in love with is good enough?" I asked.

She laughed a little, the merest sound of exhaled breath. "Silly," she said again, her voice soft and affectionate. "You won't be *in love with* this man you marry. He will be chosen for you because he is a proper husband."

"But I want to fall in love," I argued.

"Love comes after marriage for a Manadawi woman," she said firmly. She began picking through my jewelry box to search for a suitable ring.

I looked in the mirror to try to read the expression on her face. She was looking downward and all I could see were her slanted cheekbones and the perfect fall of her loose, fine, honey-colored hair. "So you didn't love my father the day you married him?" I asked.

"Oh, I was quite pleased at the idea of marrying him," she said, her face still tilted downward. "Quite a handsome man was Joseph Karsh when he was only twenty-five! He still has that dark hair and those dark eyes, and his face was even more handsome when he was young." She glanced up, meeting my eyes in the mirror, and smiled. "You have the shape of his mouth and the color of his eyes, but you have my cheeks and my hair," she said. "Your grandfather said you took the best of us both when you were born."

I was frowning at her in the mirror. "But when did you fall in love with him?" I insisted.

She laughed. "I've had *life* with him," she said. "Three children and fourteen years of running his house. That's what a marriage is, Eden. It's not this sweet romance you seem to have concocted in your head."

"I want romance," I said. "I want to fall in love. I don't want to marry a Manadawi or some other man just because he's rich."

She put her hands on either side of my head and turned me back to face the mirror. "Let me give you a little piece of advice," she said. "Never say that to your father."

IN fact, I rarely said anything to my father at all. He was as my mother had described—a handsome, dark-haired man, with intent brown eyes and a restless energy. As my grandfather was always scheming, my father was always striding— off to look over the fields of whatever crop was due to ripen, off to inspect some new shipment from Luminaux merchants, off to argue with the angels at the nearby hold of Monteverde. He was impatient, intelligent and frequently ill-tempered. The only time he seemed truly happy was when he had just completed some business deal that was extravagantly advantageous to the Karshes. He was impossible to like and—I finally realized after this conversation with my mother—impossible to love.

It had never occurred to me that others might hate my father as much as I did. Not that there was anyone else to ask. My brother Evan, five years younger than I was, looked like a smaller, angrier version of my father. *He* was only happy when my father allowed him to trail behind him through the fields or to the negotiating table, absorbing every word, every gesture that my father used. The rest of the time he was throwing tantrums and engaging in displays of temper. I avoided him whenever I could—easier now that I was almost a young lady. I spent less time in the schoolroom with my brothers, more time with my mother being groomed for my entrance into society.

My youngest brother, Paul, was only two, and so had no opinion on anything other than the food he wanted to eat and the times he did *not* want to go to sleep. He looked more like my mother than Evan did and had a much sunnier disposition. I admit I spent more time with him than I did with Evan, but I did not make much effort to interact with either of my brothers. We were not a close family. The five of us did not sit down to intimate meals; the children did not visit with the parents at the close of day to recount our adventures and lessons. The very patterns of our lives separated us—and once I turned thirteen, I had even less time to spend with my brothers.

From that time on, I was required to take part in the social events that regularly occurred at my grandfather's house. We often had other Manadawi over to dine, for instance, and many river merchants were considered respectable enough to be included in the Karsh hospitality. Ariel—the leader of the host at Monteverde—was a frequent guest, and despite the fact that my father and grandfather would just as soon do away with all angels and their interference in Manadawi schemes, she was always treated with the greatest respect. I met her for the first time at a small dinner held at our house shortly after I turned fourteen.

"So you're Joseph Karsh's little girl," Ariel said when my mother introduced me to her. Ariel was tall, energetic and full of laughter, and I liked her at once. "You're very pretty."

"Thank you, angela," I said politely.

She tilted her head as if to inspect me, taking in the shape of my face, perhaps, and whatever stamp of personality had laid itself over my youthful features. "Yes, I would think you would do quite well," she decided. "I'm surprised your father hasn't sent you off to one of the angel holds already to see what conquests you might make there."

"I believe my husband expects her to marry for property and not prestige," my mother interposed.

Ariel laughed, "Oh, so then he's looking to Semorrah, not Monteverde," she said, seeming not at all offended. "Well, I wish you good luck getting her to conform to your wishes. I tried very hard to steer my sister in a proper direction and she fell in love where it was most disastrous, so I am no longer quite so sure about the wisdom of arranging marriages. But perhaps you will have more success than I did."

"My husband almost always achieves his goals."

Ariel's eyes strayed across the room, where my father was locked in a combative conversation with someone I didn't know. The other man was well-dressed and haughty, so I assumed he was a Harth or a Garone who just hadn't

come my way yet. "Yes, it is what one most admires about him," the angel said. Her voice was solemn but her face was still amused, and I thought, *Here is someone else who doesn't like my father*. But I was hardly in a position to ask her if I was right.

At dinner that night, I sat in the very middle of the company, away from all the most interesting conversation at the head of the table, where my father sat, and the foot, where Ariel was placed. I could catch a few phrases here and there; I could tell that the people sitting nearest Ariel were enjoying themselves immensely, while the people sitting by my father appeared to be engaged in heated argument. Those around me were the less important members of the group, the younger brother of a landowner or the third daughter of a merchant. We spoke to each other politely but mostly concentrated on our food.

Conversation only became general once, when a sudden lull across the table allowed my father's words to be carried across the room. "We'd sort it out quickly enough if the angels didn't stick their fingers into business that had nothing to do with them," he said.

All eyes immediately went to Ariel, who was smiling. "Ah, Joseph, without the constant supervision of the angels, the Manadawi would impose repression upon the whole of Samaria," she said easily. "You would re-enslave the Edori, you would cheat the Jansai, you would require tithes and concessions from the river cities, and turn the entire world into a feudal state, with yourselves as lords over all. The angels exist merely to keep some balance in the three regions, and we do not care that you hate us for it."

My father seemed not at all discomfited to be caught out saying something so highly uncomplimentary to an invited—and powerful—guest. He leaned forward across the table, as if he could somehow annihilate the thirty feet of polished wood that separated them, and spit his words directly into her face. "The angels ceased to care about balance when Raphael was lost," he said intensely. "Gabriel cares nothing about the accepted order of the world. He cares nothing about traditions and natural hierarchies. He is a sloppy egalitarian who would rather watch the whole world fall to ruin than to see true leaders come to power."

"Gabriel is the wisest man I know," Ariel said simply.

"He saved us all from the destruction that Raphael would have loosed upon Samaria. I would follow Gabriel into a thicket of thunderbolts—and so would any other angel, and so would most of the other citizens of Samaria. You will not overthrow Gabriel, Joseph, no matter how much you hate him. If you ever hope to have any power in this alliance, you had better learn to work with the Archangel."

My father's eyes narrowed with real hatred. "If he expects an easy time of the last years of his tenure," my father said quietly, "he had better learn to work with me."

There was silence at the table a moment, and then someone near Ariel asked a question, and the conversation split into halves once again. This time, by concentrating more closely, I was able to catch whole, long segments of conversation between Ariel and her tablemates. Rather quickly they seemed to lose interest in my father's incendiary words and turned instead to gossip about matters in the angel hold.

"But tell me if the rumors are true," said one well-dressed woman who seemed to be a Harth matriarch. "That boy is in trouble again—the one who created such a stir last year at the Gloria."

Ariel grimaced. "I have no idea what to do with him next," she said. "I sent him to Gabriel after last year's disasters, but he wouldn't stay at the Eyrie. So he's back with me, and I'm completely at a loss. I don't know how to discipline an angel who doesn't seem to care about any of the punishments I might devise. I cannot come up with a dire enough consequence. I don't know how to control him."

"But who are you talking about?" another woman demanded. "I don't know these stories."

Now Ariel sighed. "His name is Jesse. His parentage is—murky. His mother was a young woman who showed up at Monteverde when the baby was an infant. None of my angels admitted to having any dealings with her, and she would never tell me who his father was."

"That's odd," said the Harth woman. "Most angel-seekers are only too proud to talk of all the angels they've ensnared."

"That's just it," Ariel said. "I'm not sure she was an angel-seeker. I had the impression—but I could be wrong—that she was a well-brought-up young woman, perhaps a farmer's daughter, who had caught the attention of an angel without intending to. She was quite lovely in a rather dark, exotic way. She may have been part Edori, in fact. At any rate, it occurred to me more than once that this angel may have forced himself upon her, and that she was too embarrassed or too enraged to go to him when she discovered she was pregnant. And once she had the child, and it was angelic, she came to me."

"But—" Now it was an older, patrician man who joined the interrogation. "But surely angels do not go about raping young women in the countryside? I mean, I know that not everyone holds angels in high esteem"—and here he glanced at my father—"but that is not the sort of behavior that I have ever heard attributed to them."

Ariel nodded emphatically. "No. You're right. I am the first to admit that angels have their flaws, but it is generally so easy for them to find a willing partner that they do not engage in such acts of violence. But if it is true—well—" She shrugged, and her wings shimmered and fell behind her. "I have a guess or two as to who might have shamed her in such a way."

The others sitting near her exchanged glances. "Not— not Raphael?" the Harth woman asked.

Ariel shrugged again, causing candlelight to dance down her feathers. "Possibly. Or an angel named Saul, who was his closest companion, and a despicable, loathsome creature. I was afraid of Saul myself—and generally, you know, I have no reason to fear anyone."

"So, this young man, what has he done that's so terrible?" asked the older man. I was glad he'd asked, for I wanted to know the answer myself.

Ariel laughed a little. "What hasn't he done? He is constantly fighting—with angels and mortals—bloody fist-fights that always end up with someone being severely injured. Once it was a *knife* fight! But it wasn't Jesse who pulled the weapon. And—oh, he gambles, he drinks. If I send him off on a weather intercession, he's gone for four days and I never have any idea what he's been up to until some merchant or farmer writes me to complain. There doesn't seem to be any great malice in him, just this— this—restlessness. This uncontainability. Life is too tame for him, I think. He wants worlds to conquer and enemies to overcome. And instead we live in a peaceful, prosperous country in which the only malcontents are wealthy landowners who have too much to lose to really descend to anarchy. I don't know what will become of him. He's only seventeen and he's already wreaked havoc in two holds. What will he do next? What isn't he capable of? That's what keeps me awake at night, once I stop worrying about the Manadawi and how to accommodate them."

She was laughing again, and she had effectively turned the subject. I stopped listening to her conversation and started meditating on the words she had just spoken. I had limited experience of angels and no experience at all of restless young men, angel *or* mortal. But I thought this wild uncontainable Jesse sounded more interesting and exciting than anyone I'd ever encountered in my grandfather's house. I wished enviously that I might meet him someday, while he was still wild and untamed, and I wished still more that I was the kind of woman who would attract the notice of a man like that. I had no idea what kind of woman that would be, but I was pretty certain that a placid, docile, highly mannered Manadawi girl was not the sort who would draw his attention.

It was two years before I actually did meet Jesse, and in the interim, my life had expanded greatly. By the age of sixteen, I had become a fixture on the Manadawi social scene. I had learned what colors to wear to flatter my dark eyes and pale hair; I had memorized all the names of the wealthy men in the three provinces, and their family histories and genealogical trees; I had attended dinners in Semorrah and theatre performances in Luminoux. I had spent one whole summer in Monteverde, one of many young men and women invited to the hold to cement allegiances and watch firsthand some of the political maneuvering that went on between the purveyors of power in Samaria. I had sung at two Glorias. I had been introduced to the Archangel Gabriel. I had danced with his oldest son. I had made friends with Ariel's daughter. I was highly polished, perfectly well-bred and totally bored.

I didn't realize it, of course. I thought I was happy. I thought I was living the life that poorer girls would envy as they married inferior men and lived in small houses and took no part in the great events of the day.

I never forgot Ariel's description of Jesse, though, and any time I was going to be at a gathering that included angels, I always looked for him. But he was not the sort of angel who would be invited to attend weddings in Semorrah or to sing a solo at the Gloria. He must have been there on the Plain of Sharon during both of those Glorias that I attended, but I did not meet him. He was not at Monteverde the summer that I lived there, for he had been sent to Cedar Hills as a punishment for some infraction. I heard his name often— young girls told stories about him and giggled behind their hands; older women whispered of his misdeeds and warned each other to keep him away from the girls in their charge. There were a number of tales about women who been led astray by his charms—he was nineteen now and had apparently added seduction to his other vices—but I never met anyone who claimed to have been his lover. I caught the echoes of his name in every hold and mansion that I visited, and the very syllables gave me a delicious set of shivers. *He was still wild. He was still untamed.* The more refined and artificial my own world became, the more I reveled at the news that someone else was still quite free.

And then I attended a summer fete in northern Gaza, and I met him, and my world changed.

We were all there to celebrate the wedding of Emmanuel Lesh's daughter to Luke Avalone, the son of a Castelana merchant. Emmanuel Lesh was not as wealthy as the Karshes or the Harths, but he had a better relationship with Monteverde and Ariel trusted him above all the Manadawi. Any affair at his house was attended by all the elite of the three provinces, and it was no different for his daughter Abigail's wedding. Every Manadawi in the country, or so it seemed, had been invited, as well as representatives from all the angel holds, and rich river merchants, and a few cultured Luminauzi, and even a Jansai or two. Someone said that five hundred people were attending the event, and I had no reason to dispute it.

My family arrived a few days early, as did many of the angels and the other honored guests. There were to be many events to entertain us—dinners, dances, theatrical performances, hunts and games. Present were Ariel with her daughter; Gabriel with his wife, Rachel, and his sons; angels from the hold of Cedar Hills; the Harths, the Garones, the Semorran merchants—everyone that anyone cared about.

With the contingent from the Eyrie came the angel Jesse.

I did not know who he was at first. I had been there a day and I had just heard the commotion of new arrivals, so I had wandered down the wide white marble staircase to investigate. Gabriel and Rachel were standing near a heap of luggage, talking seriously with Emmanuel and his son. Just out through the great double doors I could spot a knot of younger angels, all teenaged boys, laughing and joking. One was Gabriel's oldest son, Gideon, with whom I had become friendly. I didn't know the other two, but I had long ago lost any shyness of angels. I pushed through the doors and stepped out into the bright light of a summer noon.

"Hello, Gideon," I greeted him. "Have you come for the wedding? It's so good to see you."

Gideon turned immediately at the sound of his name. He was a thin and awkward thirteen, too tall and still unsure of himself, but you just had to look at him *to* see the man he would become. He had his father's blue eyes and his mother's golden hair, and the bones of his body seemed to have been stretched too far, so that it was clear he would one day grow to an imposing height. His wings, though, were glorious— a vivid white that spilled so far in both directions that you thought he could fill a ballroom with them. "Eden," he said, breaking into a genuine smile. His voice trembled a little between the high register and the low. "I didn't know you would be here."

I made him an exaggerated curtsy. "You can always find me at the most elegant events of the season," I said in a haughty voice. "Naturally, I can be found anywhere the elite of Samaria congregate."

Two of the other boys turned away to discuss some topic that could only be dissected by men. The fourth angel remained standing to one side of Gideon and regarded me with a stranger's half-caught attention. He was clearly older than Gideon, with the solid build and effortless stance of a man used to his body, not a boy growing into his. His hair was black and thick, tangled by the wind of flight and a little too long for his narrow face. His eyes were a brooding green and his expression was sullen. I thought he was one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen, even before I learned his name.

"Do you know Jesse?" Gideon asked. "He lives at the Eyrie. Sometimes."

"Jesse?" I repeated, and I heard the squeak in my voice, which embarrassed me no end. "You live at the Eyrie?"

Jesse laughed, and Gideon laughed with him as if at some private joke. "Sometimes I do," Jesse said. "When I haven't been sent off somewhere less dangerous."

"I can't think of too many places that are less dangerous than the Eyrie," I said without thinking. My heart was still repeating his name—*Jesse? Jesse?*—and my mind was trying to come up with something interesting to say. I could tell already nothing was likely to occur to me.

Both the boys laughed again, even harder. "Yes, maybe I said it wrong," Jesse replied. "Sometimes I get sent off when I'm the one who's too dangerous for the Eyrie."

"But my father likes you," Gideon said. "He always lets you come back."

Jesse shook his head. "Your father wants me to fly away to the other side of the world and never return."

Gideon was grinning. "My father wants you where he can watch you every minute of the day. That's why you're here at the wedding and not back at the hold."

I spared a moment to think that the Archangel Gabriel probably would not be best-pleased to learn that his oldest son and the most incorrigible young angel of Samaria had apparently formed a fast friendship, despite differences in age, parentage and general expectations.

"I think it'll be a fun wedding, though," I said, still unable to come up with any but the most inane conversation. I could talk to a Manadawi lordling for three straight hours and never once seem stupid, but I didn't know how to converse with a handsome young angel of questionable character.

Jesse laughed and looked away. Gideon rolled his eyes. "If you like balls and formal dinners and pointless conversation," the Archangel's son said.

"Well, I do," I said.

Jesse turned his eyes back our way. "We're not far, though," he said to Gideon. "We can go to the water's edge tonight or tomorrow. You'll see."

"See what?" I demanded.

Now Jesse looked at me. "The ocean. Gideon's only seen the water off the western coast. But it's so calm there. You can't appreciate the ocean until you've seen it off the northern edge of the continent. It's so beautiful, it's scary."

Gideon grunted, as if to convey his doubts, but the phrasing caught my attention. *It's so beautiful, it's scary.* I thought the same words might be applied to Jesse himself—though he had not done anything particularly scary yet. It just seemed possible that, at any moment, he might.

"I'd like to see the ocean," I said.

Jesse's dark eyebrows rose. He was still looking at me, but I couldn't tell what he was seeing. A spoiled, silly daughter of privilege? A pretty blond girl with a dimpled smile? Someone intriguing, someone annoying? A stranger who interested him not in the slightest?

"Would you?" he said. "Then you can come with us when we go."

AND that was how I ended up going on an expedition that would surely have enraged my father and disturbed my mother, had they known about it, as we headed out to view the sea. Gabriel's son and Ariel's daughter were respectable enough to please both of my parents, and my mother and father could have had no objection to the other two mortals who accompanied us, a girl and a boy about my age, siblings in one of the extended Harth clans. But they would not have been pleased to know that the troubled young angel Jesse was one of our number, or that he was the one who carried me from the Lesh house to a slaty gray cliff overlooking the northern ocean.

The flight took half an hour, for we were only about twenty miles from the sea. In deference to the summer clothes of the mortals, the three angels flew low to the ground, seeking out warmer air, but it was still a cold flight. I had been carried in an angel's arms before, many times, while I stayed at Monteverde and visited the Eyrie, but I didn't remember any flight being quite like this. Jesse held me close to his body, so that I was always aware of the heat of his skin and the tireless, effortless, almost automatic working of his wings. He didn't bother to speak to me, so most of the way I fretted that he was sorry he had invited me on the trip, sorry he had drawn me as a passenger—but as we landed and he set me carefully on my feet, he gave me a dazzling smile. It was full of mischief and pure uncomplicated pleasure, and I smiled back for all I was worth.

"Thank you," I said.

"I enjoyed it," he replied and turned away to greet the others.

We had come to rest on a high, rocky promontory attached to Gaza by a rough and nearly impassable strip of land. A few scrubby trees and dispirited flowers poked their way up through the hard soil, but for the most part, the cliff was hard, flat and unadorned. Its only claim to beauty lay in the view.

For it overlooked the ocean, and the ocean, from this place, was magnificent. It lashed and foamed against the cliffs with no buffer of beach to impede its headlong motion. The water seemed to snarl against the rock, and then claw upward in white fists of foam. Farther out, the vast surface of the ocean seemed to boil with a perpetual internal rage; it sent up great jagged plates of water to war with oncoming waves and create a clashing of white-edged fury.

I was mesmerized. I could only stare out at the fierce continual combat and wonder at the forces that drove the water to such senseless passion. Why did it not lie calm, like the water in the ponds on my grandfather's estate? Why did it not roll in on slow, leisurely waves, as it did off the western coast? There, the ocean was an impressive but hardly fearful sight. This was nature in a much more raw and frenzied state. I would not be desirous of setting off in a boat to cross these treacherous waters.

"It's pretty," the Harth girl said, casting one cursory look over the sea. "But I'm hungry. Gideon, do you have the basket of food?"

Gideon had come to stand beside me, silent as I. He nodded and pointed to a level stretch of rock where the angels had laid down their various burdens—some blankets, a satchel of food, a few canteens of water. He didn't answer her in words, though, and after waiting a moment, she tossed her head and stomped off to where the provisions were piled.

Ariel's daughter Persis swept up to stand beside me. She was about my age, thin, brown-haired and bossy. It was clear she would be leader of the host at Monteverde once her mother stepped down. "Marvelous, isn't it?" she said to Gideon and me. "It doesn't really look this way anywhere else."

"It does if you fly out from the coast a ways," Jesse said. He had drifted back toward us, as if irresistibly drawn by the call of the ocean. "Miles and miles, I mean—so far you can't see the land behind you. Then the water almost always looks like this. So powerful and so vast it makes you feel helpless and small."

Persis glanced at him. "Then why fly out that far?" she demanded. "I'd be afraid. What if I lost my way? What if I got caught in a storm and couldn't fly back? What if I fell into the ocean?"

"Then you'd drown," Jesse said.

There was a short silence after that.

Gideon was the first to turn away. "I agree with Persis. I don't need to go courting reminders of death. If I flew out

that far, the whole time I'd be worrying that I would drop in the ocean and die. I can think of a lot of other things I'd rather be doing."

He and Persis joined the mortals sorting through our provisions. I stood beside Jesse for another five minutes and watched the raging restlessness of the sea. "Thank you," I said again, finally breaking the silence. He smiled again, watching me, and he nodded. He didn't say anything else. We turned back to join the others.

We had left the Lesh compound in early afternoon, promising our parents and other guardians that we would be back in time for the evening's festivities—a dinner and a ball. I had to concentrate to remember what activity we were missing during our outing—a hunt, I decided, organized to catch some of the wild boar that were plentiful in this part of the country. I couldn't begin to say how much happier I was to be here, with this group of people, rather than off on such a ride.

"I'm hungry," said the Harth girl. "Let's eat something."

"I'm cold," said her brother. "Can anyone build a fire?"

There was general laughter at this. "What do you think we are, Edori?" asked Gideon. "We don't spend our lives traveling across the country and camping out every night. I don't think there's an angel in the three provinces who knows how to build a fire."

"I do," Jesse said, and knelt on the hard ground. "But we'll need some fuel."

I agreed with the Harths; I was both cold and hungry. Angels, with their higher body temperatures and general indifference to weather, might feel perfectly comfortable on this windy cliff, but I was beginning to shiver. "What kind of fuel?" I asked. "I'll help look for it."

So Jesse sent us off to find dry dead branches and spindly twigs—rather a search in this inhospitable place—and finally we had gathered enough wood to satisfy him. He had told the truth: he knew how to start a fire, a skill I had never seen practiced by anyone in my social circle. Within minutes, we had a welcome blaze dancing away within a circle of rocks. The girls spread the blankets around the fire, and we all settled down before it.

"Now food," said Persis, opening the satchel and distributing its contents. No one had thought to pack plates and silver, so we handed around loaves of bread and chunks of cheese, tearing or biting off suitable portions, and passed them to our neighbors. The water containers were similarly shared. Usually I'm a fastidious eater and don't even like one of my little brothers to sip from my glass, but this afternoon I was so grateful for heat and food and water that I didn't mind the communal style of the meal. I bit off a large mouthful of cheese and handed it over to Gideon.

He grinned at me. "Never thought anything could taste so good, did you?" he asked, in his pleasant, uncertain voice.

"Wait till sometime when you're really hungry," Jesse said, breaking off a chunk of bread. "If you haven't eaten for a whole day, or two, and finally you come across a place with food. Then you'll eat anything—carrot scrapings, beef fat, stale bread, old wine—and think it tastes like a feast."

We all looked at him. "When did you ever go two days without food?" Persis demanded.

Jesse grinned, chewed his bread, and swallowed. "Lots of times," he said. "When I was off wandering."

"Away from the holds and the cities?" the Harth girl asked, as if she could not imagine that any land existed between these points of civilization. "Where did you *get* the food, then?"

Jesse shrugged. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground and his wings bunched out behind him, bulky and muscular. "At a farmhouse sometimes. At an Edori campsite sometimes. I've eaten with the Jansai now and then, but I like the Edori better. The Jansai are—" He shrugged again.

"My father hates the Jansai," Gideon remarked.

"Well, *my* father thinks they're the key to Samarian wealth and commerce," the Harth boy shot back. "And that *your* father has set out to ruin all the trading alliances of the three provinces with his attitude toward the Jansai."

My father had expressed much the same opinion, but I was not about to say so now. Anyway, Persis took immediate and competent control of the conversation. "Well, we're not going to sit here and ruin a lovely day by arguing our parents' politics," she said. "Let's talk about something else."

"I'm still cold," the Harth girl said and held her hands out to the fire.

She was sitting between Jesse and Persis, facing the ocean. My guess was that Jesse had chosen his spot for the view, and she had chosen hers for the company. It made me dislike her, suddenly and strongly, though up until this point I had had no opinion of her one way or another.

Persis shook her head. "You thin-blooded mortals," she said, teasing. "You're troublesome no matter where we take you."

"I'll give you my coat," her brother said, though he looked chilly, too.

But Jesse shook his head and lifted one glossy wing to lay it across her back. I was sitting across from them and saw the look of sleek gratification that crossed her face. "It's breezy," Jesse said. "They're probably all cold. We should put up a windbreak for as long as we're sitting here."

And the other angels nodded, and suddenly an amazing thing occurred. We had haphazardly settled ourselves around the fire but had happened to arrange ourselves with mortals interspersed between angels. Now all the angels lifted their wings and interlaced them; suddenly, the whole circle was contained in an overlapping basket of satin-smooth feathers. I felt Gideon's wings across my shoulders and against my cheek, and, over his, Persis's adding a layer of warmth and silk. Instantly, the force of the wind was cut; the fire's heat bounced off those quilled white surfaces and pooled before us with redoubled strength. I felt warm, I felt protected—but even more, I felt ever so slightly decadent. There was something sinful about the touch of

those luxurious wings, something seductive and alluring. Gideon and Persis were my friends, and I had no romantic interest in either of them, and yet there was something about the play of feather across skin that made me shiver and grow giddy in silent delight. It had never been a secret that mortals were easily infatuated with angels, though I had never been particularly susceptible before. But that day, on that remote cliff-top, beside the primitive passion of the ocean and the elemental beauty of the fire, for the first time I realized what power angels exerted over mortals and that I would happily succumb to it under the right circumstances. Maybe it was the hunger, maybe it was the cold, maybe it was being sixteen and among people both more beautiful and exotic than I, but at that moment I felt completely helpless and completely besotted with the angels in our circle. It was like being drunk; it was like losing volition in a dream. I closed my eyes and leaned my shoulders ever so slightly into that caress of velvet, and I shivered again when a wing feather kissed my cheek.

"It's getting late," Persis observed, her pragmatic voice breaking a long silence. "I don't know how much longer we can stay if we're going to get back on time."

"If we want to get back on time," Jesse said.

"Well, I do!" the Harth girl exclaimed. "If I miss the ball tonight, my mother will—well, I don't know what she'll do, but I think I'd be a lost girl roaming the fields of Gaza before night's end."

Jesse gave her a lazy smile. "You might like the life better than you think."

She smiled back up at him as if she couldn't help herself. "Only if someone were taking care of me."

"We can stay another half hour or so," Gideon said. "They won't be back from the hunt yet."

"I'm still cold," the Harth boy said.

Gideon nodded. "It's the wind. It never stops."

Persis shrugged; I could feel her feathers slide and tangle against Gideon's across my back. "Oh, well, we can stop the *wind*" she said carelessly, and Gideon laughed.

"I'll start," he said, and without another word he launched into song. Within a few measures, Persis had come in on a descant line and Jesse on a bass harmony. The music was sublime, eerie, a complicated three-part paean to the god. I listened in open-mouthed silence. I knew, of course, that the angels used musical prayers to control the weather, singing *to* the god to beg for rain, or sun, or calm, or storm, but I had never heard the prayers performed. I had never sat so close to any angels, wrapped in a coverlet of living down, while they sang these unearthly and sacred passages of supplication. I felt as if I were standing on the god's doorstep, listening to the divine music of his door chime, asking for entrance into heaven. I shut my eyes, and I felt the wind die down, and I shivered with cold ecstasy even as the world grew warmer.

"That's done it," Jesse said, abruptly breaking off the song. "Even the waves have grown quiet."

"That was pretty," the Harth girl said. I remembered that she had used the same word to describe the wild ocean, and I wondered at her complete and unredeemed vacuity.

Gideon laughed. "We don't usually call the sacred songs *pretty*," he said. "They're just necessary. They're just songs we know."

"I prefer the masses," said Persis. "They're so thunderous."

"I prefer the prayers that call down lightning bolts," said Jesse.

Gideon and Persis cried out against that.

"You can't sing those! Not straight through!" Ariel's daughter exclaimed. "They're too dangerous."

Jesse hunched his shoulders; I saw the movement cause his wingfeathers to tickle the back of the Harth girl's neck. "I suppose," he said.

"If you've been praying for lightning—" Gideon said.

Jesse gave him that brilliant smile. "Not lately."

"I never heard any of the prayers before," I said. "I thought this one was—so beautiful." Like the Harth girl, I found my vocabulary failing me. "I've been to the Gloria, and I've heard Rachel and Gabriel sing the masses, and that was splendid, but this was—I can't describe it."

"And are you warmer?" Gideon asked.

"Yes, I am, thank you."

"Then the prayer has achieved its goal."

"Not that it matters," Persis said. "We really do have to leave."

I don't want to go, I wanted to say, and unless I missed my guess, the same sentiment was written on Jesse's face. But he remained silent and so did I. The Harths jumped to their feet and began smacking dirt off their clothes. Gideon and Persis more slowly stood up and began packing up the items we had brought with us. Jesse and I were left facing each other across the fire. Neither of us had moved. He tilted his head a little, watching me again, and a small smile began to play around his mouth.

"I can take you back later," he said. "We don't have to go just yet."

I was tempted. So tempted. For a moment I was willing to trade every luxury of my life for one evening on a cold clifftop with this handsome and dangerous angel. But it was the certain knowledge that my life would be irretrievably thrown away if I did such a thing that made me sigh and shake my head.

"My father," I said, and nothing else. Jesse nodded and pushed himself to his knees. With a few quick motions, he put out the fire and scattered the stones. By the time I stood up and looked around to see if there was anything I could do to help, there was almost no trace left of our visit to this place.

"Jesse. I want you to carry me back," the Harth girl was saying in that imperious way most Manadawi cultivated, as if they knew their wishes were always paramount. I waited for him to tell her we would all fly back paired as we had been on the outbound journey, but he merely gave her that devastating smile and nodded.

"Are we all ready, then?" Persis said. "Gid, I guess you've got Eden. Let's be on our way."

And a moment later, Gideon had taken me into his thin arms and leapt into the chilly air. He was so much frailer than Jesse that for a moment I thought my weight would pull us down from the sky, and I clutched his neck with a little squeal. But almost immediately he found his rhythm and his altitude, and we were soaring southward, back toward the Lesh house, toward fertile land and elegant civilization. I would have been happy enough to fly in silence, thinking over everything I had heard and felt that afternoon, but Gideon asked me a question about my grandfather, and I responded, and we ended up conversing idly for the whole flight back. We arrived just as late summer twilight was beginning to paint the Lesh mansion with a fiery gold, and those of us who cared about such things noted in some apprehension that we would barely have enough time to dress for dinner. Five of us scattered through the main corridors of the grand house. Jesse released his burden, watched us all scurry off, and then disappeared back through the double doors of the front hall. I was fairly certain that I would not see him that night at either the feast or the ball, and I was conscious of a bitter disappointment that almost entirely swallowed my fear of encountering my father before I had dressed for the evening's events.

THE dinner was lavish and impossibly dull. I would have been bored almost beyond endurance except for the fact that I was so hungry—a consequence, I supposed, of brisk sea air and illicit excitement. So I ate a great deal of every dish offered to me, ignoring my mother's scandalized look, and made inconsequential conversation with the young men seated on either side of me. One was a Fairwen heir from Semorrah, supercilious and instantly unlikable; the other was from a minor Manadawi family and not really worth my time, though he was far more pleasant. I didn't give either of them much attention.

Once the feasting ended, the dancing began. I stayed close to my mother at first so that she could direct or approve of my choice of partners, but I could see her relax her usual vigilance after the first hour in the ballroom. Here we were, among the most exclusive set of people imaginable, at a private ball in a Manadawi mansion; what was there to guard against? So, as soon as I returned from a waltz with the Harth boy, she took me aside to whisper in my ear. "I think I'm going to join some of the other women in that little anteroom by the dessert table. Come find me if you need me. Otherwise, dance with whomever you please. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful evening."

I was less sure of that, though I wasn't sorry to be relieved of her attention for the rest of the night. My father had already disappeared, off to argue politics with his Manadawi cronies. But, as she had surmised, there was little chance I would get in trouble with any of the remaining guests. I had already searched and searched the crowd with my eyes. Jesse was not among the dancers on the floor.

In fact, only a handful of angels were. I had been informed before that dancing—like swimming, horseback riding, and any number of other pursuits—was an almost impossible feat for an angel to perform. Wings were all very well for skimming across the sky and even for standing about looking gorgeous, but they got in the way during ordinary athletic pursuits. Still, I would have given up riding and dancing if I could have grown wings.

Gideon, one of those few angels in the ballroom, materialized at my side moments after my mother left. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you don't want to dance," he said.

I grinned at him. During the flight home, for some reason, he had seemed to shed the magic he'd acquired as we sat around the fire, and now he was just Gideon again—awkward, kind, thirteen years old. "Has your mother insisted that you invite *every* mortal girl onto the dance floor at least once?" I teased.

He nodded glumly. "My mother's not very interested in pomp and rank," he said, "but she very much believes in being fair. If I dance with one girl, I have to dance with all of them. She doesn't want anyone to feel left out."

"That's kind of her."

"So I have to *ask* all of them, but they don't have to say yes," he added in a hopeful voice.

I laughed. "But I do want to dance with you. I want to see how an angel manages such a thing."

He sighed and held out his arms to take me into a very chaste embrace. We stepped onto the dance floor and into a waltz. "The secret is to hold your wings very, very tightly to your body," he said.

I wrinkled my nose. "Does that hurt?"

"No, but it takes a lot of concentration. It's as if you're trying to hold your stomach in all night. Sometimes you forget. And you're pretty tired by night's end."

"You're a very good dancer, though. You must have been practicing since you were quite young."

He sighed a second time. "And you wouldn't think so," he said. "Since my father doesn't care about impressing the wealthy families, and my mother doesn't have any social graces at all. But both of them have insisted that we learn all sorts of boring accomplishments. My mother says that learning to dance is like learning to use a sword—it's a weapon when you're dealing with certain members of society, and you always need to know the weapons of your opponents." He shook his head. "Sometimes my mother talks like a lunatic."

I laughed again. "No, she's right. If you're going to deal with Harths and Karshes and Fairwens and Garones, you're going to have to participate in activities they consider important. But I never thought of my social skills as an arsenal."

We talked more as we twirled and paraded around the dance floor. I caught a number of jealous looks tossed my way by the young women of the company, and I couldn't keep myself from responding by laughing even more often and smiling at Gideon with an entirely feigned possessiveness. He was an angel; he was the Archangel's son; he was acceptable by any Manadawi measure. Despite his youth-fulness, no doubt many a scheming mother had dragged her daughter here simply to make sure she had a chance to meet Gideon. There was no mistaking Gideon's strength of character and seriousness of nature. He was much too young to be named Archangel when his father's term ended in three years, but he would doubtless become leader of the host at the Eyrie, a position of considerable prestige and power. A girl could do far worse than to ensnare Gideon while he was still young.

As the music came to an end, he gave me a courtly bow and I responded with an extravagant curtsy. "That wasn't so bad," he confessed. "Maybe you'll dance with me again later unless my mother lets me leave the ballroom."

"I will," I said. "I wish Jesse was here so I could dance with him, too."

He shot me a look that I couldn't read, though it seemed troubled. Because I was foolish enough to pine after Jesse, or because Jesse's behavior always filled his friends with worry?

"I don't think Jesse dances," he said. "He's probably outside somewhere, prowling the grounds. He doesn't like to be cooped up inside big houses like this. He hates—" He waved his hand to indicate the whole of our surroundings.

"Ostentation," I suggested.

Gideon nodded. "Exactly."

"Well, I won't look for him, then. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening."

He grimaced. "I'll try."

I didn't know if he would be able to obey my admonition, but I did know that I spoke a lie to him: I did plan to look for Jesse. I just didn't plan to do it inside the ballroom.

I edged toward the doorway that led to the main hall, glancing around casually to see if my mother or father had reentered the room. But no, I appeared to be quite unsupervised. Two more steps and I was at the doorway; a pause,

another glance around, and I had ducked outside.

The hallways of the Lesh manor were long, shadowy, lit with elaborate but inadequate sconces, and made of the smoothest marble imaginable. I felt myself gliding along those shiny, polished surfaces like a sailboat along calm waters. Where might Jesse be? If the stories told about him were true, he could be down in the wine cellars, getting drunk with the butler, or over in the kitchens, gambling with the servants. Or out back in the orchards, seducing a Manadawi heiress. I shivered a little in the corridor and asked myself what, by the love of Jovah, I really thought I was doing. But I kept moving forward, my thin slippers sliding soundlessly along the expensive floors. I paused in the conservatory, thick with the heavy green smell of plant life; no one there. I checked the library, where a solitary old man read before a snapping fire; Jesse was not in sight. I glanced inside salons and music rooms and billiard halls. Jesse was nowhere.

But he was not a tame indoor creature. More likely he would be strolling the grounds, circling a decorative pool, or fluttering like a trapped moth inside one of the gazebos set up across the lawn. It was too dark, and these attractions were too far, for me to attempt to find them alone. Instead I went to the roof, to see how much of the grounds might be visible from this vantage point.

Jesse was there.

He was perched like a gargoyle on the brass railing that ran around the upper level of the mansion. His wings were spread to aid his balance, but he seemed to have achieved the perfect equipoise, for not a muscle, not a feather, quivered in the silver light of a high full moon. His feet were flat on the railing, his knees drawn up in a crouch; his arms were folded on his knees, and his chin rested on his wrists. For a moment, as he sat there so thoughtful and so still, I thought I was mistaken. I thought he was indeed a statue, an angel of onyx and alabaster, commissioned by Emmanuel Lesh and set here to guard over his house and his fertile lands.

I stopped a full ten feet away. I didn't speak, just in case he was real and my words startled him into tumbling off the railing. He didn't move. Moonlight fell on us like sheets of ethereal rain.

Then he spoke without even glancing in my direction. "Tired of dancing so soon?"

A silly laugh trembled in my throat. "I—the dancing was—I decided to come out for some fresh air," I said, garbling my sentences.

He leaned his head back as if to consider the sky. "It's a beautiful night," he agreed. "Everyone should be out on a night like this."

I came a step closer. "It was a beautiful day, too," I said. "The flight to the ocean—I really enjoyed it. I wanted to thank you for letting me come along."

Now he turned his head to look at me, though nothing else in his pose changed. "Always happy to take a pretty girl on an outing," he said.

"I'd like to go back sometime," I said I was talking to put words out into the air between us, to keep the conversation going. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to say to him, what I wanted to hear from him. I just knew that I wanted to be next to him, included in his circle, touched by his dark aura. "To see the ocean."

He raised his brows. "It's even more beautiful at night," he said, "when you're so far from land that the whole world looks black, above you and below you. Except for the stars, which seem as thick as rain. And the thunderbolts, which light up everything."

I swallowed. "The thunderbolts?"

One quick movement and he had jumped from the railing to the roof. His wings swept behind him like luminous shadows. "Want to go see? Now?"

"See? See the ocean? Now?" I repeated, my voice a little faint.

He nodded. "There and back in a couple of hours. Who will miss you?"

Potentially, anyone. My mother, my father, Gideon, my host or hostess, or any of the strangers these people might want me to meet. But in reality, probably no one. I was supposed to be safe in the ballroom of a Manadawi stronghold, where I could come to no harm. Who would worry about me tonight?

"I—I suppose no one would notice if I was gone."

"Then let's do it," he said. "Let's go."

I felt a shiver pass over me and attributed it to the night air, warm as it was. "Dressed like this?" I said, indicating my sheer ballgown with its low neckline and lace sleeves.

He nodded to the far edge of the railing. I could just make out a dark, shapeless form lying across it, like a bolt of fabric carelessly laid aside. "Put that on," he said. "It'll keep you warm."

I stepped over to the shadow and picked it up. A woman's cloak, decorated with a jeweled clasp at the shoulder and smelling still of the owner's citrus perfume. "Who left it behind?" I asked.

Jesse grinned. "Could have been anyone, I suppose."

So one of my first guesses had been right: he had eschewed the pleasures of the ballroom for the much greater pleasures of dalliance. I wondered which of the women in residence at the mansion had enjoyed his attention this night, though by the cut and fabric of the cloak, I could see it was not a serving maid who had been meeting Jesse out in the moon-kissed dark. I was not so eager to be his second—or third or fourth—conquest of the evening, and I hesitated, the cloak trailing from my hands to the marble beneath my feet.

He misread my indecision. "We don't have to go. Not if you're afraid of what your father might say."

I tightened my hold on the cloak and slung it over my shoulders. The smell of lemon was very strong. "How will he find out?" I said, tossing my head and pretending I was very bold. "No one will see us go, and no one will miss me while I'm gone."

"Excellent," he said, and came to stand beside me while I was still basking in my own bravery. "Then let's be off."

And without another word he scooped me up in his arms and leapt over the railing.

I smothered a scream and clung to him, feeling the pull of the earth trying to drag us down in the moment before his wings found purchase in the air. The long edges of the cloak trailed behind in the wind; the lights of the mansion fell away. Below, the upraised arms of the trees chastised us for foolishness, and the scattered ornamental ponds, reflecting the moon, winked in complicity. Within a few minutes, we were so high above the dark ground that I could see nothing at all.

Nothing below and nothing but a radiant net of stars above. I had never before taken flight with an angel after dark, and I would not have expected the experience to be anything like this. I wrapped my arms more tightly around Jesse's neck and felt a combination of terror and exhilaration wipe my mind clean of any coherent thought. The world was wind and darkness and a whirl of constellations.

And Jesse.

We didn't speak during that short flight, but I was aware of every shift of his muscles, every beat and upsweep of his wings. His arms around my body seemed absolutely sure; I felt as safe as I ever had standing in the middle of one of my grandfather's limitless fields. He was the only point of motion in a stark and frozen world of black ether and spangled light. He was the only sentient creature, the source of all change and all life and all desire.

Even with the cloak on, I was cool, though I could feel the heat of Jesse's body through my thin dress. By the time we reached the sea, I was so attuned to the currents around us that I could sense the change in the consistency of the air—now thick, damp, and heavy with the scent of salt. I stirred in his arms. "We're here?" I whispered, as if someone could hear me if I spoke aloud.

He nodded. "At the water's edge. But we're going farther out."

He continued flying without pausing. I lifted my head and peered down. It was almost impossible to see the ocean below us, opaque and mysterious, but here and there moonlight glinted off the slanted surface of a restless wave. There was such a sense of grandeur surrounding us—of vastness—of so much space and air and water that I could not calculate it all. I felt tiny and frightened and delighted all at the same time.

And then Jesse began to sing.

I did not recognize the song, a haunting, minor prayer decorated with sharp and urgent staccato phrases. His voice seemed as dark as the night, as untamable as the sea; it seemed to fit in this wild landscape like the cry of the gulls and the hiss of spray. I felt his chest rise and fall as he gathered more air and expelled it in even more beautiful song. I felt the strain in his shoulders as he held me before him like an offering to Jovah or some more foreign and barbaric god. I saw his wings move behind him as if they were sweeping darkness away from us, or brushing it more densely over our heads.

The sky split with a sizzle of white. It shocked the world into a phosphorescent beauty, then dove into the ocean like a hand clutching for treasures. Utter darkness again, even blacker in contrast to the light. Another dazzle of lightning—then another. Jesse continued to sing. Darkness alternated with mystical light in a terrifying show of might and destruction. Each streak of light plunged far under the surface of the water, illuminating the blackness with a bloom of pure opal, and in an instant disappearing. Thunder rolled with a continual menace across the louring sky.

We hung suspended in that circle of dangerous light as thunderbolts danced around us and fell like calamity into the sea.

I don't know how long that display went on—it felt like hours—but suddenly Jesse abruptly stopped his singing. The last lightning bolt shivered into the water and evaporated. The sky ceased its grumbling and the curtains of the night seemed to draw closer around us, darker and more impenetrable. The air smelled like chemicals I could not

identify, wild and full of fire. I heard the patter of rain moving across the water.

"I'm freezing," I whispered, suddenly aware that every inch of my skin was numb.

"It's late," he whispered back. "I better get you home."

That was it. We did not speak again. I felt his arms tighten around me as if he would lend me more of his body heat, and then he wheeled around and headed for land. Or I hoped he headed for land—at this point I could not have told if we were flying east or west, heavenward or seaward. My mind was so full of patterns of light and darkness that I could not distinguish shapes or directions. I assumed that Jesse, more innured to marvels, would be able to find his way home.

It was a couple hours past midnight by the time we landed back on the roof of the Lesh mansion. Jesse set me carefully on my feet, keeping one hand on my shoulder in case I should find myself too dizzy to stand. For a moment we stood there face-to-face, watching each other in the dark, each waiting for the other to speak. I felt as if we had witnessed a great tragedy or the most profound event in human experience; I felt that we had both been so changed by this occurrence that we would be forever linked by the power of its memory. I did not know how to express any of my thoughts.

"No one else has ever seen that," he said, his face and his words so solemn that I knew he was feeling at least some of the devastation and elation that were flooding me.

"Thank you," I said at last—the third or fourth time I had said those words to him. His face relaxed in a smile.

"That's the best I have," he said. "Nothing else I could ever show you would impress you so much."

"I think you're wrong," I said. "Everywhere you go, you seem to be trailing thunderbolts."

He laughed aloud at that. "Doesn't that frighten you?"

"Oh, yes," I breathed. "A little."

He shook his head, smiling now. "Girls like you are meant to make brilliant marriages with respectable and very wealthy men. What are you doing out on a rooftop with me?"

I shook my head. I wasn't sure I could answer that question even to my own satisfaction. "Men like you make girls like me forget all the lessons they've learned," I said at last.

He hunched his shoulders and turned away. For a moment he looked sullen and defensive. "For a night maybe, they forget," he said. "Not for a lifetime."

"And when's the last time you thought about spending a lifetime with a girl?" I asked.

He turned back, his eyes narrowed, parsing through the various charges in that simple question. I tilted my head up so the small moon could throw its glow on my cheekbones, catch the blond luster of my hair. I allowed my lips to part, just a little, just so they looked full and inviting in the starlight. I waited for him to want to kiss me.

A man's voice and a woman's laugh broke the night's quiet, and the door to the rooftop swung open. Before I had even had time to think, Jesse had tugged up the hood of my borrowed cloak, drawing it over my hair, and pushed my body behind the shelter of his wings. I heard booted heels and slippers hit the marble of the roof. I heard a man's exclamation and a woman's voice.

"What—who—oh, Jesse, what are you doing up here so late at night?" I didn't recognize the speaker by her voice, but she sounded sophisticated and mature. A Lesh relative perhaps, or some other well-bred matron. Why would an older woman of Manadawi lineage be on friendly terms with the wayward young angel?

"I could ask the same question of you," Jesse said, the smile in his voice sounding entirely genuine.

That laugh again, merry and a bit naughty. Whoever she was, she knew how to flirt. "Is there someone standing behind you? A young lady, perhaps? I think I see the hem of a dress beneath the shadow of a cloak."

"Someone who needed a little cool air and now needs to return to the ballroom before the last waltz is played," Jesse said.

"Then you'd best hurry her on downstairs, for the orchestra is about to pack up its instruments."

It was hard to tell in the dark, but it seemed he gave her a swift, mocking bow. "The roof is yours," he said, and shepherded me through the doorway. Not till I had hurried

down the first ten steps toward the top floor of the mansion did I pull off my hood and unclasp the cloak.

"Jesse! Who was that? Did she know who I was?" I whispered.

"She didn't recognize you and I see you didn't recognize her. Better that way," he replied, urging me down the stairwell to the next story. One more floor to go. "I can still hear the music playing. Probably best for you if someone

sees you leaving the dance floor."

"You could dance the last number with me."

A grin in the dark. "I don't think so."

"But will you—"

"Hush," he said and appeared to be listening. "Voices in the hallway. Step outside as soon as they've passed. I'll just wait here in the stairwell."

"But if you—"

"Hush," he said again. We were silent long enough to hear the voices fade away. He pushed open the landing door and nearly shoved me into the hallway. His hands, hooked in the collar of my borrowed cloak, pulled it back with him into the stairwell. "Quickly. To the ballroom. Dance with someone."

"But you—I want to—I mean, will you be around tomorrow?"

I could see his grinning face framed by the closing door. "I imagine we'll all be around till after the wedding," he said.

"But—" I said again, but I spoke to the closed, gilt-and-cream-colored door. I knew well enough that if I opened it again, Jesse would have disappeared. "But will I *see* you tomorrow?" I whispered. "Will I get my kiss then?"

No time to be standing here having one-sided conversations with doors. More voices were coming down the hall from the direction of the ballroom as people began to trickle away from the dance floor. I glided back down the marble halls, back in the direction of light and music and color. I slipped inside the doorway and made my way around the perimeter till I was deep inside the room. No one seemed to notice my arrival, just as no one had seemed to notice my departure.

Well, one person. "Eden!" Gideon's voice exclaimed in my ear, and I turned to see the Archangel's son smiling down at me. "Where've you been? I looked for you a couple of times."

"Oh I was dancing, then I was eating, then I went outside for a little bit when it got too hot in here," I said nonchalantly. "Have you been dancing all night? Have you had fun?"

"Dancing, yes. Fun, no," he said. "But I've made my mother happy, and that counts for something."

I laughed. "It counts for a lot. Are you done dancing for the night? Or do you have enough energy to do this last one with me?"

For an answer, he held out his arms, and I stepped into his very correct embrace. By now, the dance floor was only about half full, and most of the performers were tired; this final waltz was pretty languorous in pace. Gideon and I chatted happily throughout it, whispering comments about the other people on the floor and those we did and didn't like. I glanced across the room once to see my mother's eyes on me. She stood by the door, as if she had just stepped through it to look for me, and she was smiling in approval. I lifted my hand from Gideon's shoulder to give her a friendly wave, and she waved right back.

THERE was no opportunity to see Jesse for the first half of the following day. The young women were all herded off together into Abigail Lesh's quarters to spend the day with specialists imported to work on our hair and skin and nails. It was an activity I normally would have enjoyed, for I loved fashion as much as the next Manadawi girl, but today I wanted to be roaming the mansion grounds, looking for Jesse. There was no escape, though. A special lunch was brought to us, and harpers and flautists entertained us with wistful music while we ate, then it was back to beauty and self-indulgence. When we parted in mid-afternoon, many of us were commandeered by our mothers and forced to lie in our rooms for an hour or two to improve our skin tone and our dispositions. At dinner, another fancy affair, we were seated by clan and lineage, and I could not even spot Jesse's wings amid the welter of Harth finery and Fairwen ostentation. No chance that Jesse would attend the musical event in the evening; no chance my mother would allow me to skip it. I sat dutifully by her side for that whole interminable evening and spent all my energy hating every single singer, every single harpsichordist who climbed on the stage to perform.

The evening ended early, for the morning was to begin with the great event of the whole gathering—the wedding. As I lay in bed that night, unable to sleep for irritation, I reflected that it was a little odd that I had been at the Lesh mansion three days and not said a single word to Abigail. She was only a few years older than I was, a pleasant but rather unremarkable young woman, and we had been friendly enough in the past. And I was, after all, here in this house specifically to witness her marriage; I would have thought I would have found a moment to talk to her privately and wish her well. Perhaps my only chance would come at the luncheon that would follow the ceremony tomorrow, as all the guests queued up to give their congratulations to the newly weds.

As it happened, no one was able to speak to the happy couple the following day. There was no wedding. Abigail's youngest sister had risen at dawn to help the bride dress and had found Abigail locked in the arms of the angel Jesse.

Her shriek of alarm brought half the household to her sister's doorway, and the rage of Emmanuel Lesh could be felt reverberating through every slab of marble in the house. Guests hastily decamped, packing up their bags and calling for their carriages before noon had even tumbled across the meridian. I sat in my father's coach, stonily staring at the northern Gaza countryside rolling past, and wondered if Abigail Lesh wore lemon verbena perfume when she dressed for dancing and engaged in forbidden romance.

It was a year before I saw Jesse again.

I heard echoes and whispers of his name from time to time, tales carried back from friends and strangers. He had gone to live in Luminaux for a few months, taking up wood carving in one of those famous ateliers. He had traveled with an Edori clan. He had disappeared for a while, no one knew where, perhaps to camp on the ruined mountain where the old angel hold of Windy Point once had stood. It was possible that none of these tales were true. It was possible they all were.

I thought about him often, knowing full well he never thought of me. I had told no one about that night of fire and water, rage and beauty, but I could not erase its spectacular images from my mind. I could not forget the wordless sense of intimacy that had existed as we hovered over the ocean, watching lightning knife through the waves. I scarcely knew this man, and yet he haunted me like a lover renounced in bitter pain. I knew I might never see him again, and I knew I would not forget him.

That year was a busy one, for I was well and truly part of Samaria's social circle now. I was invited to every important event held at Monteverde or any of the Manadawi holdings. I even traveled to Semorrah and Luminaux and Cedar Hills for the grandest occasions, and naturally I went to the Gloria again that year, though I did not sing. I spent the spring with the Fairwens in Semorrah and flirted with the sons of merchant lords. I stayed at the Eyrie for a couple of weeks that summer and dallied with the angels. I thought, at the age of seventeen, that life offered a great many bright and careless diversions, and none of them mattered to me very much. Now I was bored, and *knew* it, but I didn't realize my life was soulless and shallow. Or rather, I thought that was what everyone's life was like—certainly the life of everyone I knew.

When I was home, and when I paid attention, I could see a shadow falling between my mother and my father. Or perhaps that shadow had always been there and I was only just beginning to discern its outlines. These days, while my brothers were still relegated to the schoolroom, I was part of every social function held on the Karsh estates, present at every formal dinner and invited on every outing. I spent more time with my parents that year than I ever had before, and I began to see how strained their relationship was. They might sit side by side at a long, elegant dinner table and not speak to each other once. They might stand at the door, greeting arrivals for a ball, and never exchange a glance or reach over to put a hand on the other's arm. The few times I saw them alone or in private, they were exchanging sharp accusations and tense denials.

It was not clear to me what their arguments were about. There could be no money worries among the Manadawi, and my father had never seemed interested in other women. Perhaps he was not interested in my mother, either, and her desire for affection, for any response at all, led her to nag at him till he rounded on her in quick anger. Three or four times I saw him knock her aside with a violent motion. Once I saw him strike her roughly on the shoulder with a closed fist. More times than I could count, that year, I came upon her in her bedroom or her sitting room, sobbing into her folded hands. The only time I tried to comfort her, she turned away from me and begged me to leave the room. After that, when I came upon her weeping, I said nothing, merely crept back out of the room.

One day in mid-summer, I was outside on the front lawn with my grandfather and my father and my mother and half the upper servants of the house. We were looking up at the facade of the centuries-old mansion and debating whether we could, as my father wanted, add a wing on the eastern hall without destroying the symmetrical beauty of the place. My mother and the steward were arguing for a wing to be added to the back, where it would be invisible from the front walkway, though it would require tearing out all the kitchens and most of the servants' quarters and cost three times what an eastern wing would cost. My grandfather was saying testily that he did not think we needed another room in the house, no, not a cellar or a broom closet. I was wondering if I would be able to move into the new wing in my own suite of rooms, so far from my brothers that I would never have to see them again.

Suddenly the housekeeper whirled around and looked up and shaded her eyes; and then the steward turned; and then the butler, and the bailiff, and my mother, and then me. My father and grandfather were still conferring, so they did not see the sight that greeted our eyes—a contingent of angels, sun-white and iridescent in the afternoon light, massed overhead and slowly drifting down to land. The bountiful spread of their overlapping wings seemed to fill the lawn; it was as if winter had come early, laden with snow. I saw the black-haired Archangel Gabriel in the lead, Ariel of Monteverde at his right shoulder. I knew before any words had been spoken that whatever news they bore could not be good.

"Joseph Karsh," Gabriel said, in the voice that could soothe the god or bring the mountain down.

My father spun around to stare at him. My grandfather, turning more slowly, glanced from the angel to my father and back to the angel again. His face looked troubled but unsurprised. My mother's expression was one of deep

apprehension.

"Angelo," my father replied, inclining his head very slightly in acknowledgement.

"Joseph Karsh, a committee of angels has convened to discuss with you infractions you have committed against the laws of Samaria," Gabriel said. He spoke with the rhythm and intonation of a herald announcing portentous tidings—disastrous tidings—and his face was unflinchingly solemn.

My father stood straighter, very tense, his hands balled at his sides. "I have committed no infractions," he said. "I have lived inside the law."

Ariel stepped around Gabriel, and her face and her voice were both more compassionate than the Archangel's. "Joseph, you have not," she said quietly. "Let us go inside and discuss these matters in private."

"I will hear any accusations leveled against my son," my grandfather said.

Gabriel's blue eyes settled on him. "Anyone may hear us and bear testimony if they wish. We have evidence I do not think you will be able to controvert."

"There is no evidence. I have done nothing wrong," my father said.

My mother turned for the house. "Go to the small dining room," she said. "I will have someone bring in refreshments."

"They won't be here very long," my father said.

"Oh, yes," Gabriel said, "I think we will."

IN fact, there were angels at the Karsh estate for the next ten months. Gabriel and Ariel did not stay so long, of course, but they were there three full days. I have never heard such shouts and recriminations as rumbled around the house during that period of time. Much of the shouting came muffled through the door of the small dining room, where the angels were holding their conference with the men of my family. Some of it came from other levels of the house—arguments between my father and his father, between my mother and my father, among all three of them at once. To escape the noise, I spent as much time as I could in the upper story of the house, actually seeking out the company of my brothers. Paul, of course, did not even realize that trouble was afoot. Evan, now twelve and a quick-witted though mean-spirited boy, understood what was going on better than I did.

"He's been making illegal deals with the Jansai," Evan explained to me. "Trading in certain goods without declaring them so he can avoid paying taxes to the angel holds."

"Then why aren't the Jansai in trouble?"

Evan shrugged. "They probably are. None of the Jansai can stand the Archangel, and they are constantly scheming to outwit him."

"Why would our father try to do such a thing?"

"Because angels levy unfair taxes against the Manadawi."

"Unfair how?"

"Too high. We are not allowed to keep a reasonable percentage of our profits. It's Manadawi money that pays for most of the upkeep of roads across Samaria, did you know that? Manadawi and river merchant money. Our father is sick of paying for the privileges of the poor."

It was clear to me that Evan shared my father's views on the inequity of the taxation system. As for myself, I had never given it any thought—could not have told you, actually, who paid taxes on what goods and what the percentages were. It had not occurred to me to wonder.

When Gabriel and Ariel departed three days later, they left behind one of the angels from Monteverde, a solemn fair-haired woman about my father's age. Evan told me that Diana was to stay for five or six months, monitoring our father's financial transactions and sitting in on every business deal he conducted. He did not have to, though he did, detail for me my father's extreme rage at the installation of this supervisor. But the message had been clear: Accept an angelic overseer, or forfeit any right to conduct business in Samaria.

I don't know if I can adequately describe the tension in the household in those following months. When my father was present in a room at all, he glowered with such a barely contained, constantly refueled fury that no one wanted to catch his attention or attempt any conversation with him. My grandfather—the only one in the household not afraid of him—would occasionally rasp out derisive comments along the lines of "If you hadn't mismanaged things so badly, we wouldn't be in this predicament now," and the two of them would begin quarreling. My mother looked more haggard and weary every day, her pale skin stretched with worry, her blond hair piled in ever thinner braids on top of her head. Three of the house servants, who had been with us ever since I could remember, gave notice. None of the

new cooks would stay. No one was hungry anyway, so all of us grew thin on a diet of kitchen scraps and grievance.

We could not possibly entertain in such a situation, and my father refused most of the invitations that came our way. I was still sent out to various balls and weddings and social functions, but I enjoyed them even less than before. Everyone knew of our disgrace, of course, and I was aware that matrons and their daughters whispered about me when they thought I did not notice. Not that their own husbands and fathers had not practiced similar deceitful tactics, which Evan assured me more than once. They had just been more discreet, or less greedy, or more conciliatory when the angels came calling.

The scandal did not ruin my social standing as much as I might have expected. I was still a Karsh, after all, the only marriageable daughter of my house, and our family was still wealthy beyond imagining. This affair might be a humiliation for a year or so—at most, a generation—but such disadvantages could be overlooked when a young man was seeking an alliance with money, land and a business network that stretched across the entire continent.

Even so, it was clear to me that I would probably not secure a bridegroom any time in the next few months, and I found the thought peculiarly liberating. My mother had been married at the age of eighteen and had borne her first child a year later. I had had every reason to expect that my own adolescence would end abruptly this year when my father informed me that he had chosen the man I was to marry. Wretched as it was in my father's house at the moment, I was not so eager to be bartered over to another imperious, foul-tempered man and assume all the responsibilities of adulthood. I was actually rather relieved to be given another year of freedom.

And it was not because I harbored any illusions of marrying for love or even continuing a doomed romance with a most ineligible suitor. During the summer and fall of that year, I hardly thought of Jesse at all.

Until he came to our house bearing messages from the Archangel.

It was a windy autumn day, and the ivy climbing to the turrets of the mansion had turned a passionate red overnight. I was up in the schoolroom with Paul, playing some tedious board game with him but happy to avoid the usual tensions in the lower reaches of the house. A movement outside caught my eye, and I glanced out the window in time to see the unmistakable glamour of angel wings dropping down.

"Visitors," I said to Paul, standing up and shaking out the folds of my gown. I had dressed rather casually that morning—I usually did, these days, since we rarely had company—but I didn't suppose this new arrival had come to see me anyway. "I'd best go down and see if Mother needs my help."

"Come back and finish the game," he commanded. "When you're done."

"If I can," I said, carelessly ruffling his hair. "Don't move any of the pieces while I'm gone."

By the time I made it downstairs, I could hear my mother's voice in my father's study. I only caught a few words—"A packet of letters, I think, from Gabriel"—before I heard his explosive reply. I hurried a few steps on to the private parlor where angelic guests were usually installed. I doubted my mother had had time to offer food or refreshment to the messenger.

When I walked in, he was standing by the tall windows, looking out at the artful scattering of autumn colors across the back lawns. I could not see his face.

"Did my mother have a chance to offer you something to eat or drink?" I asked in my politest voice. "I'll be happy to have something sent to you."

He turned swiftly, his wings brushing the curtains behind him, and we stared at each other in silence for a moment. "I thought this might be your house," he said, when it was clear I was unable to speak. "But there are so many Karshes—I wasn't sure."

I put my hand to my throat, just like the heroine in a melodrama. "Jesse," I said, "What are you—" I shook my head, not completing the question.

"I've been at the Eyrie for a few weeks," he said, his voice negligent, deliberately so, I thought. As if he did not want to admit how much it meant to him to be admitted back into the angel ranks, as if he did not want to discuss whatever exile he had undergone in the preceding months. "Gabriel asked me to carry something here."

"You've been—I've heard such stories about you," I said.

He grinned and his whole face relaxed. I was staring at him, taking in details. He was no taller than he had been last summer, but he looked bigger, sturdier, as if his body was turning its attention to muscle and bone now that it had done with height. His narrow face looked sharper and more permanently formed, as if Jovah had said, "No more experimenting with the expressions and attitudes of youth. This is your countenance, and from here on out, everything you do will be permanently engraved upon your face." I supposed he must be twenty now. A man by any standard.

"There always seem to be stories about me," he agreed. "Most of them aren't true."

"Which ones are?"

His grin widened. "Which ones do you like best?"

"I know which one I didn't like," I said.

Instantly, his face grew serious again. He glanced at the door, as if to make sure my mother had not reappeared. "I didn't bother to explain that to anybody," he said. "But I could. If you're talking about Abigail Lesh."

I stepped closer to him, though most of the room still separated us. "I am," I said. "And I'd like to hear the explanation. Because it looked very bad, indeed."

"Abigail—" he began, but then we both heard footsteps in the hall. I turned quickly, in time to see my mother step into the room.

"My husband will need some time to look over the letters," she said in a low, strained voice. "Would you—is there someplace I could put you so you can rest from your long flight? I can have a room ready for you."

"Thank you," Jesse said gravely. "I might take a walk in your garden. Do you think he'll have an answer for me before nightfall, or should I plan to find an inn for the night?"

"Oh, surely we can put you up here," my mother said. "It's not as if—Diana is here, after all, and where there is one angel, there may as well be two. I do not mean to sound unwelcoming," she added.

Jesse's solemn face lightened into a smile that caused even my anxious mother to smile back. "I am well aware that Joseph Karsh is not enamored of angels," he said. "I don't want to cause any more distress in the house. Tell me what would be best and I'll do it."

"By all means, spend the night," she said. "Join us for dinner. Diana will be glad of the company—as will we all."

Jesse inclined his head. "Then that's what I'll plan for. Can I still walk in the garden?"

"Of course you can! Eden, go with him. I'll tell the cook to expect a guest for dinner."

A few minutes later, Jesse and I were strolling through the garden, though it was not much to look at this time of year. A few hardy roses still offered their soft, saturated colors for admiration, but most of the shrubs and flowerbeds were full of bare stalks and shriveled leaves. I knew exactly how far you had to walk down each path before you were out of eyesight of someone watching from the mansion, and I led us at a fairly brisk pace to the point of privacy. We sat on a stone bench and watched a stone cherub pour imaginary water into a fountain that had been emptied for the season.

"Now," I said. "What about Abigail?"

He gazed before him, careful not to look at me. "I'd met her a few times. We were friendly. Sometimes I get along with women and they tell me things."

"You almost always seem to get along with women," I said dryly.

"She was dreading this marriage. We'd been at a party—oh, six months before—and she told me she thought her father was going to try and wed her to Luke Avalone. And that she hated him, and that she'd begged her father to look for another groom. She seemed hopeful that he would. I didn't hear from her again until I learned she was marrying Luke Avalone after all. Gabriel brought me to the wedding but I didn't have a chance to see Abigail alone until that night—the night of the ball."

"She met you on the rooftop," I said, "and left her cloak behind."

He nodded. "She begged me to come to her room that night. Said maybe between us we could think of something to stop the marriage. I told her I'd fly her away, take her to Luminaux or Semorrah or anywhere she wanted to go. And I think she considered it. I think she tried to make herself believe she could leave everything—her family, her friends, the life she knew. But when I got to her room after I left you, I could see she wouldn't go. She was too afraid. She just sat there and cried in my arms. Till her sister came in and found us."

"Surely it must have occurred to you—or to *her*—that someone was going to discover you in her room."

He shrugged. I thought I saw a small smile come to his mouth, but he was still looking straight before him and I could not be sure. "It crossed my mind," he said. "She didn't seem too worried about it. I let her make the decision about how long I should stay."

"So she got what she wanted anyway," I said, taking a deep breath. "She didn't have to marry Luke Avalone, and she didn't have to leave her home."

Now he turned to look at me, his green eyes considering. "In my experience, most Manadawi women do," he said.

I was confused. "Do what?"

"Get what they want. Even if they get it in a devious way."

I stared back at him. "They have to be devious," I said quietly. "No other ways are open to them."

"You should talk to a Jansai woman," he said. "If you want to meet someone who has no power in her life."

"No one talks to Jansai women," I said. "Their husbands and fathers keep them hidden from the world."

He shrugged and glanced away. I wondered just exactly how he had managed to meet a Jansai girl and what the outcome of that encounter had been. "So what is it you want, Eden Karsh?" he asked me, still looking in the other direction. "And how deceitful would you be to get it?"

I was silent.

He swung his head back and looked down at me. "Or don't you know yet?"

"What I want or what I'd do?"

"Both. Either."

I shook my head. "I've always been a dutiful daughter. I've always had everything I needed, everything I wanted. Someday my father will pick my husband and I'll marry, and I assume I'll be a good wife. What do I want? I want that husband to be someone who isn't cruel, someone whom I can like or at least admire. I don't expect that goal to be impossible to achieve. So far, I haven't met anyone that I would beg my father not to give me to in marriage."

He was still watching me. "That's pitiful," he said.

I bristled. "What is? What's pitiful? My life?"

"What you want from your life."

"I'm not the one causing chaos in three provinces," I said. "I'm not the one who is so restless and so unhappy that everywhere I go, trouble follows. I think by the end of it, my life will be filled with much more contentment than yours will. I don't think I need *you* to pity *me*."

"At least at the end of my life, I won't look back and say, 'Why didn't I do this? Why didn't I try that?'"

"Why didn't I go drinking with the Jansai? Why didn't I go traveling with the Edori?" I mocked. "Why didn't I kiss this girl at midnight on her wedding day and cause her to be cast off by her family?"

He looked at me sharply. "That's not what happened to Abigail."

"No," I admitted. "They sent her away to her aunt in Semorrah, where she met a Fairwen boy. They were married three months later."

His face lit with that dangerous smile. "So you see, I am not just an agent of chaos and trouble," he said.

"It's still chaos," I say, "even if it resolves in calm."

He shrugged elaborately. I felt his wings rise behind me, brush against the back of my shirt and rustle to the ground again. "If calm is what you want," he said.

I burst out laughing. Before I could answer, Paul came racing down the garden path, calling out my name. "Eden! Eden! Mother wants you both to come in for dinner. Ebenezer Harth and his wife have come, and Mother wants you to change clothes and be beautiful."

I came to my feet. "The Harths? They haven't been here in a month."

Paul nodded. "Mother's excited. So come in, please, she says, and let's all get ready."

I nodded at Jesse. "Two angels at our table for dinner tonight. It gives us consequence."

"Even though your father hates angels?"

I smiled. "Even then."

UNFORTUNATELY, even the presence of two angels and two elite Manadavvi could not turn my father into a sociable creature for the night. He had never bothered to mind his tongue around Diana, of course, and Ebenezer Harth was a long-standing ally who shared many of the same views, and apparently my father felt no compulsion to modify his behavior on Jesse's behalf. Thus, for most of the meal, we were treated to various tirades on the inefficiencies of modern taxation systems, the greed and wastefulness practiced at the angel holds, the inferiority of Luminaux workmanship, the duplicity of Semorran merchants, and the general superiority of all things Manadawi. He spoke carelessly to Ebenezer Harth, insultingly to Diana and sharply to my mother, while entirely ignoring me. Ebenezer Harth didn't seem to notice; he agreed emphatically on all the financial points and seemed bored when the topic turned in any other direction. My mother, of course, was mortified. Jesse's expression was impossible to read.

But as we all stood up after the meal, planning to move to one of the salons for another round of scintillating conversation, Jesse made his way, without seeming to plan it, across the room to where my father stood.

"And you, you're like all the angels," my father growled at him, draining his wineglass and setting it down beside his used plate. "Think you're so much better than everyone else. Think everyone in the three provinces has to bow down before you. I say you're dirt under my feet. You're supported by Manadawi dollars and dependent on Manadawi good will. I say those dollars and those days of good will have just about dried up."

Jesse smiled at him. He was only slightly taller than my father, but his body was more solid and his wings gave him additional bulk and menace. It was only just now clear to me that he was furious. "I hope the god's coffers are drained to the bottom the day you die," he said in a soft, pleasant voice.

"What? Why? What do you mean?"

"Because otherwise you won't be able to buy your way into Jovah's arms," Jesse said. While everyone stood there in stunned silence, he made a quarter turn and addressed Diana.

"I'll be at the inn just south of the Karsh property, on the main road," he told her. "Bring his letters to me in the morning, and I'll make sure they get to Gabriel."

And he nodded at the rest of us and stalked out. The room was so still that I thought I heard the slam of the front door behind him, the sweep and flutter of his wings as he took off. No one moved or spoke until my father snatched up his wineglass and flung it against the wall, where it shattered into more pieces than there were acres of land on my grandfather's estate.

TWO weeks later, Diana left us, unable to endure my father's company any longer. To replace her, Gabriel sent an angel named Adam—and instantly everything was better.

He was a slim, dark-haired man with deep-set brown eyes and an inviting smile. His wings were sharp and elegant, every quill edge seemingly honed to a knife-edge, the trailing points as long and fine as a gentlewoman's hands. His voice was mellifluous and soothing; he laughed often. To be in his company was to be instantly put at ease. Where Diana had skulked around the mansion looking gloomy and remote, Adam made friends everywhere. The servants were instantly his partisans, my brothers adored him, and my mother—who had seemed so defeated and lost in recent months—revived to sociability under his influence. Even my father, who hated all angels and particularly angels foisted on him by the Archangel, could not help responding to Adam's amiable presence.

"Angels are a parasite on the inherent structure of the social order," my father shot at Adam one night over dinner. "They don't farm, they don't mine, they don't trade, they don't labor. Yet we're forced to treat them like minor deities and support their existence with the profits of our own labor and our own trade."

"The angels are intermediaries between you and your god, but let's put that aside for a moment," Adam responded in his genial way. "Let's cite more concrete examples of their worth. Angels can control the weather on Samaria. They can pray for sun, they can pray for rain, they can extend your growing season artificially by as much as a month or two. Which improves your harvest, which improves your profit, which increases your wealth. How can you say angels are parasites when they're directly responsible for pouring coins in your hands?"

My father loved a good argument; he replied with zest. "Ha! Without the angels, I might have a shorter growing season, *but* I'd have no taxes to pay. Therefore my net profit would be higher anyway."

Adam sipped from his glass of wine and grinned. "Without the angels, there would have been no growing season at all two years ago," he said. "And without the angels, there would have been floods across lower Samaria fifteen years ago—which could have wiped out half the farms on the southern coast, *and the mines, and* washed away Luminaux. Angels prayed those storms to a standstill."

"That's true," my father said grudgingly.

"And who do you think keeps the Jansai in check? Who do you think regulates the roads and forces fair trade throughout the three provinces? Do you really think your own caravans would be unmolested if the angels didn't guarantee your safety?"

My grandfather bristled. "Jansai and Manadawi have always been partners."

My father added, "We have no cause to fear Jansai traders."

"And you have no reason to despise Gabriel as you do," Adam said gently. "The Manadawi have thrived under his rule. Even the Karsh clan is wealthier now than it was ten years ago."

Apparently this could not be disputed, for my father merely shrugged and didn't answer. My grandfather said with some energy, "And changes aren't so far off, anyway. Another two years, and Gabriel's time will be over. The next Archangel may look more favorably on our situation. We can afford to wait."

Talk turned to speculation about who the next Archangel might be, a topic that Adam seemed to find particularly intriguing. It occurred to me to wonder if he might consider himself eligible for that office. I was a little hazy on the details, but I thought an Archangel was generally between the ages of thirty and forty. He held the position for twenty years, during the prime of his life. I was not sure what qualifications the god looked for when assessing candidates—strength of character, one assumed, strength of will. Gabriel certainly had both of those. I was not so sure that Adam did.

For, oddly, I was the one person in the household who had not entirely succumbed to his spell. I couldn't have explained why. I was deeply grateful to him for the change he had wrought in the mood of the mansion, and I was pleased to see how he coaxed smiles from my mother. I had been amazed when Evan had come rushing in one day, shouting about the glorious flight he and Adam had taken over the whole of the Karsh estates. I had been amused to find my grandfather deep in discussion with him, calculating grain prices and shipping times, and of course my father's reaction to him astonished everyone. But I had never quite warmed up to him.

He had tried to win me over—might even believe he had. He had had dozens of conversations with me about the social elite of Samaria, and I had to admit he was the best gossip I'd ever met. He could tell hilarious or malicious or touching stories about every wealthy family in the three provinces, and from him I learned more about life in an angel hold than

I had discovered even during the weeks I'd lived in one. One afternoon he sat down with me and drew up a list of the twenty-five most eligible suitors to my hand, dividing them by category: merchant, landowner, river family, angel.

"How old are you again?" he asked me.

"I'll turn eighteen a few weeks before the Gloria."

He tapped his pencil against his paper. "If you were willing to wait another three or four years, you could hardly do better than Gideon."

"Gideon!" I exclaimed. "He's a boy!"

Adam cocked his head. "He's going to be a powerful and thoughtful man."

"He seems so young."

"What do you think of Joshua from Cedar Hills?"

I shrugged. "He's always friendly enough, but he's not very interested in me."

"Maybe not an angel, then. What about the merchant connections? Fairwen's oldest, or that handsome Avalone boy?"

I enjoyed the exercise and all of Adam's candid comments, though the whole conversation was just a touch disquieting. It was hard to say why. Perhaps because I found it strange that Adam would care about such things, or that he would want to talk about them with me. Or perhaps because, after we'd exhausted all the names of the eligible candidates, he tilted his head again and smiled. "Maybe you'll marry none of these fine young men," he said. "Maybe you're the type who will marry to break her parents' hearts."

I thought of Jesse and felt myself blushing. I shook my head. "I'm a good daughter, and I always obey my parents," I said.

"Too bad," he said, smiling. "The most interesting girls are the ones who don't."

Or maybe that wasn't such a strange thing to say.

At any rate, however I felt about him personally, I appreciated Adam's presence in our house. As the weeks passed and fall turned to winter, he convinced my mother to begin attending social functions again. We were at Monteverde three times that season, and she even went to Luminaux for a wedding. He mediated a meeting between my father and Gabriel—the first time the two men had spoken in five months—and though it did not go as well as Adam had hoped, it did not go as badly as my father had feared. He brought gifts to Evan and Paul and continued to take both of them on short flights around the property.

He was the first one to offer my parents congratulations when my mother, blushing, made the announcement that she was pregnant again.

My brothers and I, sitting with the rest of the family around the dinner table, merely sat there open-mouthed when she told us the news. My father, to whom this clearly was not a surprise, sat beside her looking fatuously pleased with himself. My grandfather did not look like he cared one way or another, as he continued spooning up his soup. He already had my brothers as heirs; he did not have to worry about inheritances.

Paul spoke first. "But you're too old to have another baby!" he blurted out.

My father's smile disappeared. "She's barely thirty-seven," he snapped. "Plenty of women are much older when they have children."

"But what about us?" Evan demanded. "Eden marries, I inherit the property, and I make sure provision is made for Paul—but what about this one? If it's another son? How many more brothers am I going to have to support?"

My father's scowl grew blacker. "You should be grateful if it *is* a son, more assurance that the property will never fall into hands outside of the family," he said. "And if it's a girl—well, there are plenty of alliances left to be made once we've decided where to settle Eden."

"But—how are you feeling?" I asked my mother. I did not want to reiterate Paul's ungracious words, but she *was* a little old to be bearing a child, and her health had never been robust. And she had seemed so frail in the past year or so that more than once I had wondered if she might be developing a serious illness. "Have you been sick in the mornings? You've seemed tired, but I never thought—"

"Fine," she interrupted. "I was sick a little at first, but now I'm hungry all the time." She laughed. "I'm sure I'll be as big as the mansion itself by the time the baby comes."

"And that will be when?" Evan asked. He was still pouting but, mindful of my father's eyes on him, was trying to appear more positive about the announcement.

"Six months from now," my mother said. "In the summer."

Adam, who had sat silent all this time, now stood up and swept his pointed wings behind him. "This is grand news, indeed," he said in a solemn voice, and lifted his wineglass toward the ceiling. All of us hastily snatched up our own drinks and made a toast in my mother's direction. "To you—to your health—to the child you bear. My heartfelt congratulations."

He sipped from his glass, then stepped around the table to plant a kiss on my mother's cheek. She smiled and blushed again and looked as happy as I had ever seen her. My brothers and I, recognizing a successful gesture when we saw one, also went over to give her our kisses. When I leaned in to press my lips against her cheek, I noticed that my father's hand was holding hers under the table. I kissed him as well, for good measure, which surprised him so much that for a moment he didn't know what expression to put on his face. Then he smiled at me and nodded.

"This is good news for the Karsh clan," he said, speaking to everyone but seeming to address me.

"Joyful news," I said. "I can't wait till summer."

BY the time summer came, however, none of us were quite so joyful. Adam left us in the spring, called back to the Eyrie by an Archangel who clearly did not care what made a Karsh family happy and what did not. The good news was that Adam had recommended, and Gabriel had approved, the notion that my father no longer needed angelic supervision. Thus we no longer had an outsider sitting at our family dinners and overseeing my father's business transactions. This pleased my father no end, but the rest of us found we were a little sick of each other's company. I was delighted to get away to Monteverde for a couple of weeks. Evan made his own visit outside the family walls, spending some time with the Fairwen family in Semorrah to learn the ways of river trading. When he came back, he was more insufferable than ever, going on about ship cargos, hull requirements, portage problems, and other even less interesting topics. Paul and I ignored him when we could, but my father and my grandfather seemed to find him invaluable, and the three of them could constantly be found together, discussing business.

My mother was very near the end of her term by the time Evan and I returned from our travels. No matter how healthy she had been earlier in the pregnancy, she was not doing at all well now. She had gained more than fifty pounds and always looked deeply uncomfortable; her face was invariably drawn into a slight frown, as if she was never completely out of pain. She moved slowly and awkwardly around the house, and once she sat down she was reluctant to rise again for any reason. I developed the habit of bringing a food tray to whatever room she happened to be sitting in around meal time, but this late in the pregnancy, she had started to lose her appetite. "I can't," she said more than once when I tried to convince her to eat. "I'll just—I can't."

A month before my mother was due to deliver, my father installed a midwife in the servants' quarters, and this woman didn't seem at all worried about my mother's lack of interest in food. "She'll be fine, baby'll be fine," said the midwife, who was as old as my grandfather and the most serene person I'd ever met. She seemed strong as a peasant, despite her age, and had the most capable-looking hands imaginable. I could picture her cooking, sewing, farming, woodworking—there seemed to be nothing she would not be able to accomplish with those hands. I was glad she would be there to help my mother, but I still could not help fretting, just a little, about the difficulties of the labor to come. I knew some of the damage a baby could inflict on its way into the world, and I worried every day about some new disaster that could occur in the birthing bed.

As it turned out, when the baby was born, I realized I had not worried enough—and certainly had not worried about the right things.

MY father and my grandfather were out inspecting the fields when my mother's labor pains started. The midwife

had brought in her daughter to assist her the day before, "having a feeling," she said, "that the event is coming soon and might not go so smoothly." She commandeered the services of two of the upstairs maids, not letting them into the birthing chamber, but sending them scurrying around the house to fetch water and linen and other more mysterious items. I was not allowed inside, either, but I waited as close as I could, in the room adjoining my mother's, and listened to the sounds of grunting and moaning and weeping that issued from inside. This was dreadful, worse than I'd imagined; I never wanted to have a baby if it meant going through all this. But the midwife's voice remained calm, gentle. Not by a word or inflection did she indicate that anything about the labor was frightening or even unusual.

Until, about two hours after the process had started, she emerged to find me lurking just outside the door. "Ah, you're still here," she said in her unruffled voice. "Good. I want you to do me a favor."

"Is she all right? She sounds—so horrible—"

"All women sound so when they're trying to push a baby out," she said tranquilly. "But there is a complication I wasn't expecting. Nothing for you to worry about, but I'd like you to do something for me. Raise a plague flag over the house, will you? We need to call down an angel."

I stared at her. Her wrinkled face seemed entirely peaceful, her eyes were unflecked with horror. "A plague flag," I repeated. "A *plague* flag. But—if she's all right... if nothing's wrong... I don't understand."

"It's just that I think we're going to need an angel here," she said. "The sooner the better. Do you know how to raise a plague flag?"

"There's a special pole on top of the house," I said. My heart was beating painfully fast and my mind was blank with terror. "I can—the steward can help me. Or the butler. We'll—it'll be up in a few minutes."

She nodded. "Good." She reached out to touch me on the cheek, but reassurance was one thing that capable hand could not provide. "Don't worry," she said and disappeared back into the room.

Well, of course I was worried. I raced down the steps, calling in a panic for the servants to come help me, come *now*, there was trouble, my mother was dying. As soon as he heard what was needed, the butler dispatched two of the footmen to find and hoist the plague flag. It was a huge rectangle of bright red fabric, designed to catch the attention of an angel flying overhead. It signaled anything—sickness, death, emergency—any crisis beyond the ability of mortals to solve. I could not remember a time in my life we had ever needed to fly it, but my grandfather told tales of calling down angels when illness wracked the household or rain threatened to flood the fields.

And the midwife had determined we needed an angel now.

I tore back up the stairs to see how my mother's situation had changed and found my way barred at the hall by one of the servants. "She doesn't want any of us inside," the girl said. "She said to tell you everything will be fine."

"Everything will *not* be fine," I said sharply. "Why can't I see my mother?"

"She said you should watch for angels instead."

"But—it may be hours—it could be *days*—before an angel comes flying over the house—"

"I think she doesn't want you in the room."

I protested a while longer, but the maid did not relent. Moving more slowly now, I turned down the hallway and headed to one of the unused bedrooms on this level of the house. Stepping out onto the balcony outside the windows, I leaned against the railing and watched the sky overhead. It was a fine, warm day, thick with sunlight. From this vantage, I could see the yard and gardens, lushly green. I could see the long, looping avenue that led from the main road to our front door. And I could see miles of sky overhead, empty of clouds, empty of angels. I craned my head to watch in all directions.

It was late afternoon before I saw the first movement on the horizon, and then it appeared in a less welcome direction—a cloud of dust on the road, no doubt raised by my father and my grandfather on their way home. Would the midwife allow my father in the room with my laboring mother? How could she keep him out? Would she tell him the truth about whatever danger of death or infection threatened my mother? What would he do then?

When they got close enough, I could make out the figures of my father and grandfather, bent low over the horses' necks and riding hard. They must have seen the plague flag; they knew, whatever it portended, it was trouble.

When the riders were only a few minutes away, angels descended upon the house.

My attention had been so fixed on my father that I had forgotten to keep up my constant scanning of the sky. So I was startled when the winged shadows fell over my face and I suddenly looked up to find three angelic figures suspended in the air before me. One was Ariel; two I did not know.

"Eden," Ariel called. "What's the trouble here?"

I gestured wildly as if I could sweep them inside with my hands. "My mother—she's in labor—the midwife demanded that we call down an angel, but she won't say why."

Ariel's expression altered; she exchanged quick glances with her companions. She nodded at the male angel hanging in the air beside her. "Go on downstairs," she told him. "Greet Joseph Karsh at the door. Tell him we have been called down to aid his wife. Don't tell him why."

"But why have you?" I demanded as he canted his wings and dropped down toward the ground to meet my father.

"Step back inside the window, will you?" Ariel asked, not answering my question. I backed into the house. She beat her wings with a swift, hard motion, came close enough to touch her feet to the railing, balanced for a moment, then jumped onto the balcony. The female angel with her copied her motions; in a moment, they were both inside.

"Where is the birthing chamber?" Ariel asked, all business.

"What's wrong with my mother?" I whispered.

Ariel smiled at me and, like the midwife, laid a hand against my cheek. This kind gesture reassured me no more than the midwife's had. "Nothing's wrong," she said. "But things are about to get unpleasant."

"Please," I said, still whispering.

She studied my face a moment. "I am guessing that the midwife has realized that the baby your mother is carrying is angelic. Not your father's at all."

I just stared at her. Downstairs, I could hear a commotion at the front door, the sound of my father's voice raised in argument with the third angel.

"And angel births can be very difficult for the mother. But even more—they can be, if they are unexpected, very difficult for the man who believed he was the child's father."

"Adam," I breathed.

Ariel nodded. "Most likely. He has fathered a number of children in high-ranking households across the three provinces. I am sorry for this, Eden. But the midwife did right to call us. We will protect your mother. And we will take the baby back with us to the hold. No mortal can raise an angel child. We will offer your mother the choice of coming with us or remaining here. I am afraid life at the Karsh household is about to become very strained, indeed. Now where is the birthing chamber? We must arrive there before your father."

Silently I turned and led them out of the spare room and down the hall. The servant girl guarding the door fell back in relief when she saw Ariel and her companion. "There's been screaming," the girl offered. "I've never heard anything like it."

"I have," Ariel said. And, pushing past the maid, she entered the chamber that had been forbidden to me. I heard one sharp, despairing wail from my mother, and then the door closed between us again. The noise from below was growing louder, or else my father was drawing nearer, shouting at everyone as he charged up the stairs. I leaned my head against the wall of the corridor and closed my eyes, waiting for the world to fall down around me.

* *

THERE followed the most ghastly week of my life. I cannot describe the way my father's face turned from fear to fury when Ariel emerged from the labor room and coolly told him what she had told me. I do not want to think about how he launched himself in an attack on the angels, how he was physically restrained, how he became a prisoner in his own house while my mother gave birth and recovered. I don't want to dwell on my own apprehension and confusion and rage and sadness during those days. I don't want to relive that time at all.

I was only allowed to see my mother once, for she was very weak. Even I knew how rare and difficult the birth of an angel could be; many women died during that violent passage. My mother had not died, but she had come close, and even five days after her son was born, she could scarcely speak or stand. But she had asked for me, and they had let me in. It was late afternoon, but the curtains were mostly drawn and the chamber was dark. I could barely make out her ghostly face against the white pillow. I could barely see the small, wrapped form lying beside her on the bed.

"Eden," she whispered when I tiptoed in. "Oh, I have missed you these past few days. Do you hate me? Do you forgive me? Please come kiss me and say it will be all right."

At that I stumbled the last few feet across the room and dropped onto the bed beside her. "I've been so worried," I sobbed. "I was so afraid. How could you do this? How could this happen? Did you love him? Will you leave us? Oh, Mother, I am still afraid—"

She shushed me and stroked my hair and let me cry into her shoulder. "I'm so sorry," she said, over and over. "So sorry. And yet I love my son so much already, I would do anything to keep him safe—"

When I grew calmer, I sat up and we talked for nearly an hour. She did not want to discuss Adam and the time she had spent with him. She merely said, "I do not regret it, not one hour, and I do not regret whatever turmoil comes after."

"You never loved my father," I said.

She looked at me. "I tried," she said. I nodded. He was not, in fact, a man that anyone could truly love.

"Are you going to Monteverde?" I asked.

She nodded. "I must. They will take him whether or not I go, and I have to be with him. You can come, if you like. Ariel has said so."

It was as if light blossomed inside my chest, rendering me luminous and giddy. "I can? To live with you among the angels?"

"The boys, too, except—except—I do not think that Joseph will let them go."

"He might not let me go either." I took a deep breath and forced my excitement to die away. "And I cannot come. Not just yet. Once you are gone, and your angel child with you—I must stay a while. There will be much to do in this household to set things right."

She sighed and laid her head back on the pillow. "Things will never be right in this household," she said. "They never were. Only when Adam was here."

And even then, I reflected, everything had been wrong. I did not say so; it was clear she was too weary to talk any longer. I sat beside her another few minutes, watching her eyes close and her face loosen, listening to the easy sound of her breath as she slept. Then I bent over her body to look into the small, closed face of her sleeping son. My half brother. An angel. I lifted a finger to trace the smooth, delicate skin over the tiny features of his face. Still sleeping, he frowned and twitched away. I pulled back my hand and stood up. Once I had kissed my mother on the cheek, I crept from the room. I did not see her again for two months.

Those were grim months at the Karsh house, and more than once I was sorry I had decided to stay. My father's mood was so foul that my brothers and I frequently forsook family meals and got all our food at odd hours from the kitchen. My grandfather seemed shrunken somehow, suddenly old and tired beyond description. I was the only one who seemed capable of running the household, so I gave the cooks their menus, the house servants their instructions and the gardeners their directions. I ordered household goods, paid tradesmen and answered all correspondence. The steward became my confidant and the butler my ally. Together the three of us kept the house running and the inhabitants fed. But none of us enjoyed it.

My mother wrote often, constantly renewing her offer to have me come live with her. I knew I could not forsake my father's house, but I missed my mother—and I longed for some entertainment, no matter how brief and restricted. Since my mother's disgrace and my father's violent reaction, no one came to visit us anymore, and very few invitations were sent our way. Evan did go spend another week in Semorrah, and I went to a local dinner or two, but in general we were not up to making the effort of socializing. We were too exhausted and we were too mortified. Even the Karsh family would need some time to recover its standing after this blow.

It was a nasty fight with my father that made me decide to leave, at least for a little while. I can't remember what set him off that night—the flavor of the soup, perhaps, or the spices on the meat—but he raged through dinner and then stood in front of me and shouted in my face for a good five minutes. When I tried to leave the room, he grabbed me by both shoulders and shook me until my vision failed. My grandfather finally knocked him away from me, while Evan shoved me out of the room for safety. I was shaking as I made my way upstairs to my room. I went directly to my closet to pull out my luggage, and that night I packed for a trip to Monteverde.

But life at the angel hold was just as strange in its own way.

First, my mother had changed. She was totally absorbed in the new baby, scarcely willing to leave the room if he was awake and might need her attention, and so she was distracted and weary. She did not seem unhappy, though, or even particularly penitent, and it was soon clear that the pampered life at the angel hold suited her well. Not that life as a Manadawi wife had not had its share of luxuries, but here she had no responsibilities except to care for her child. She did not have a husband to appease, a household to run, neighbors to visit, an image to maintain. She was merely a mother who had been offered unlimited resources and assistance. She was tired but content.

Second, my own status was a little unclear. All my old friends greeted me with their usual affection, but I felt awkward, as if I was the one who had committed a scandalous act. Now and then I thought I caught people gossiping about me in the halls or smirking when they introduced me to a stranger. Let me be clear, it was only mortals who behaved this way—the angels all seemed to think it was perfectly natural that my mother would have wanted *to* take an angel lover and bear an angel child, and their attitude toward me changed not at all. But I knew that I was not destined to live the rest of my life among angels, and that their values could not govern mine. I was a Manadawi woman, destined to marry a Manadawi heir, and I needed to find my place again among my peers.

Third, Adam came and went at the hold and did not seem to think I would hate him. He was stationed at the Eyrice but flew north to Monteverde every week or so on errands for the Archangel. He appeared quite friendly with my mother, though not at all devoted to her; he was more interested in his son. It did not seem as if they had resumed their relationship or that either one particularly wanted to, and neither did they seem to feel any animosity toward one another. I was the only one, it appeared, to harbor any hostility at all.

I was alone one day on one of the open plateaus of Monteverde when Adam happened to stroll by and see me. Monteverde had been built in a low, pretty series of mountains that were easily climbed and often clogged with visitors ascending to the hold. The buildings were spread out over several acres and interspersed with small parks and merchant establishments. The view down the mountainside was spectacular as the landscape shaded from green peak to variegated flatlands below. I loved to sit by myself on one of the benches overlooking the scenery, and I was not pleased to be joined by anyone—particularly Adam.

"Are you enjoying your visit to the angel hold?" he asked in his friendly way. "I know your mother is happy to have you here."

I shuttered my face and gave him a neutral look. "Yes, it is always good to spend some time at Monteverde," I said.

He leaned his elbows on the retaining wall and looked out over the countryside, rich with the reds and golds of autumn. "Will you be going to the Lesh wedding in a few weeks? Most of those young men we talked about will be there. It might be time for you to start looking for a husband."

"My father will find a husband for me," I said in a constricted voice.

He shrugged, and his wings rose and dipped around him. I felt one silky quill brush my toe. "Your father doesn't always appear to have your best interests at heart."

"My father—" I said and then stopped abruptly. "My father has a great deal on his mind at the moment," I said carefully. "And I don't know if I will be at the wedding or not. My life has not admitted of too many diversions in recent months."

He gave me that warm, easy smile. I was astonished at how much I despised him at that moment. "A girl as pretty as you is a diversion herself," he said. "Go to the wedding. Have fun. You're too young to be mired in disasters of other people's making."

"And you're too old to be making those disasters," I said quietly. Rising to my feet, I hurried away. He didn't respond and he didn't follow.

Three days later, two much more welcome angels put in an appearance. I was outside again, this time in a small grassy square that connected two of the Monteverde buildings, and I was thinking that it was cool enough for me to want to go back inside.

"There she is," I heard a voice say, and I looked up to see a pair of angels headed my way. One dark, one fair; one a grown man, the other a boy. I jumped up, delighted to see them both.

"Jesse! Gideon! Oh, I didn't know you were coming here! How have you been? How long are you staying? Gideon, you've gotten so *tall*!"

I gave Gideon a hug and a kiss on the cheek, because I always did—and then I hugged and kissed Jesse as well, because it would have seemed strange not to. His arms took me in a closer embrace than Gideon's had; he turned into my kiss and laid his mouth ever so briefly against mine before letting me go.

"We hear you've been having rather a rough time of it," Gideon said. "None of the angels seem to realize what a scandal this is, but my mother said you'd be feeling lonely. She sent me to come see you, and Jesse wanted to come along."

"That was kind of her, and kind of both of you," I said. "Oh, it's so good to see you. Come tell me everything that's been going on."

We headed to a small restaurant tucked up against one of the hold buildings and ducked inside out of the chill. Jesse ordered drinks for all of us, and we sat and talked for hours. Laughing references of Gideon's made me think there had been some trouble on Jesse's part in recent months, but Jesse didn't explain and I didn't ask. Gideon's own life appeared to have consisted of an escalating series of commitments and responsibilities; it was clear he was being groomed for some leadership role. But the responsibilities seemed to lie easy on his shoulders, which were already wide enough to assume a heavy load of other people's cares.

We stayed out late that night, picking up a few more companions as we made our way from the restaurant to a tavern that Jesse knew of. For the first time since I had arrived at Monteverde, I felt that I was among friends, and I enjoyed myself immensely. I had a few more glasses of wine. I laughed a great deal. I sat close enough to Jesse to lean my back into his shoulder and to feel the protective satin of his wing as it curled around me. We didn't return to the hold till well past midnight, and both Jesse and Gideon escorted me down the hallway to the door of my mother's suite. Gideon bowed and kissed my hand. Jesse glanced once, mischievously, at Gideon, then kissed me on the mouth again. I giggled and waved at them both and disappeared inside the room. I fell on my bed without undressing and slept till almost noon.

At which time I discovered that my father had arrived. And he was not happy.

I only learned later what had brought him to Monteverde in the first place, for he hated the angel hold and all its inhabitants. He had received a letter from my mother, begging him to allow her to see Evan and Paul, and he had responded furiously with two letters of his own. One to her, denying her any right to ever see her other sons, and one to me, demanding that I come home. Mine mysteriously went astray, though I came to suspect that my mother had destroyed it before I had a chance to see it. When I did not reply or return, he came to Monteverde to fetch me.

I didn't know he was there until I went to the nearest dining hall, seeking breakfast or lunch or whatever they might be serving at that hour. The dining hall was one of the many large, open rooms designed to make it easy for residents to congregate, and at the moment it was about half full with a mix of mortals and angels. My mother was seated at one table, holding her baby and laughing with Adam, who stood beside her, smiling. Ariel was over by the buffet, three or four other angels in tow. Jesse was a few tables from my mother, in conversation with two mortal girls, but he gave me a grin as I walked in. I smiled in return and headed to my mother's side, deciding I would ignore Adam's presence.

"I just woke up," I said, yawning. "Is there something you need me to do?"

"Well, you could—" she said, and then shrieked in alarm. The world blurred to violence and motion as someone yanked me backward by the hair and began yelling invective in my ear. I felt blows fall on my face, on my shoulders, as I screamed and twisted and beat futilely at my attacker. My mother was crying at the top of her lungs. Adam, who had snatched the baby protectively to his chest, was shouting for help. I felt bruises blossom on my back and my neck twist so brutally that for a moment I could not breathe.

I had recognized my father's voice and I did not doubt that he would be willing to kill me.

Abruptly as the assault had started, it ended, with my father's hands being wrenched away. I fell to the floor, clutching my throat, aware of raised voices all around me and angel wings slicing between my body and my father's rage. Coughing and crying, I forced myself upright, trying to assess what was happening. At first, all I could see was the shape of white wings flung over my father's bent form as a dark-haired angel choked him to silence. *Adam*, I thought, but then I realized Adam was still beside my mother, still holding his son. Ariel, Gideon and three other angels rushed up, thrusting aside my rescuer and batting my father back to the floor when rage made him try to rise again.

Jesse, I realized then. Jesse had crossed the room and saved me before anyone else had made a move.

"Joseph! Joseph, listen! Calm yourself! This must stop! Joseph Karsh, I swear I will have you locked away if you cannot control your rage—"

That was Ariel, right in my father's face while the two other angels stood behind him, holding his arms. Jesse snaked past her to give my father a hard punch to the cheek. "If you touch her again," he said, his voice low and intense, "I swear I will kill you."

Ariel pushed him impatiently to one side. "Jesse!" she exclaimed. "You're not helping! We need *to* calm him down and sort this out."

"He practically strangled her!"

"And he will be punished for it. Get her out of here— and her mother, too. We'll talk to them later."

"You're a whore's daughter!" my father shouted at me, trying to kick his way free. I saw Gideon's strong young hands tighten mercilessly on my father's arm. "Don't try to return to my house! I disown you! I disinherit you! You *and* your faithless mother! Let me see that devil's child! I should have twisted his neck while he lay sleeping in my house—"

Jesse started forward again but Ariel blocked him. "Out! Out of here! All of you—give me some space," she commanded. "I need the senior angels here to help me. The rest of you, go."

The room cleared out pretty quickly, though no one went far. Mostly we stayed on the bright square of grass just outside the dining hall. Everyone was buzzing with excitement and retelling the story to the people in their own groups. I stood with my mother and Adam, rubbing my throat and shivering with shock.

"Eden, I'm so sorry," my mother said to me remorsefully. She held the baby in one arm and tried to cradle me with the other. "Had I known—he's angry, of course, but maybe he—"

"He's a lunatic, and he's dangerous, and I hope Ariel knows how to deal with him," Adam said darkly. "He's not only a disgrace to the Karsh name, it's clearly not safe to expose anyone to his temper. Especially the three of you."

Jesse came striding up, his wings taut behind him, still quivering with temper. "Let me see," he demanded and pried my hands away from my throat. "You'll be bruised for a week at least. You can see the finger marks."

"He's never hurt me before," I said, "not really."

"You can't go back," my mother said.

"I don't know what to do," I said unhappily.

"Ariel will take care of it," Adam said.

Jesse gave him a smoldering look. "*Somebody* will," he said.

NEITHER Ariel nor my father had emerged by the time the crowd on the square began to disperse. Still shaken by the ordeal, my mother and I returned to her suite, endlessly discussing what I should do next. Was I really disowned? Would I truly never see my father's estate again? But would I ever feel safe returning? If he refused to give me a dowry, would I be able to marry—at least as well as we had always intended? Though I was sure I *could* live at the angel hold as long as my mother did, was that where I really belonged?

There were no answers to any of these questions. I helped my mother put the baby to sleep and then suggested she lie down for a nap as well. Having slept till just a couple of hours ago, I was not tired, so I slipped out of the room and back out into the open spaces of Monteverde. The day was cool and fine, so I was not the only one strolling along the boulevards of the hold, taking in the sunshine, trying to order my thoughts.

These were still in chaos when I heard my father's voice call my name. I looked around, apprehensive, to locate him standing on an arched stone bridge that connected two of Monteverde's plateaus. "Eden!" he shouted again, waving a hand impatiently. I wondered if he had escaped from Ariel or merely convinced her of his ability to see reason.

A knot of people gathered behind me—witnesses, I suspected, to the events in the dining hall. "Eden!" my father shouted again, an edge of irritation tightening his voice. "I need to talk to you."

I hesitantly waved back. "All right," I called and took a few steps in his direction, glancing around to determine my best route to his side. In that instant, I heard an urgent shout behind me. My eyes went instantly to the bridge where my father stood—staring up at an angel swooping down on him. Someone screamed again—then everyone was screaming, running fruitlessly in the direction of the bridge. Too late, too late. The angel had snatched up my father, who writhed and twisted in his arms, and carried him over the low crags and peaks of the surrounding mountainside. Then, as everyone watched and dozens of voices took up the cries of horror, the angel released his grip and sent my father tumbling onto the rocky slopes below.

SHOUTING, screaming, running. Angels everywhere. Someone flew down to retrieve my father's body and lay it gently in the middle of one of the common squares. Ariel strode from building to building, calling a convocation of residents. Eventually we were all huddled outside in the bright but insufficient sunshine. Ariel stalked past the mortals as if we were not there, her eyes snapping from angel to angel as if she was doing physical count. I did not need to be told what she would discover when she was done surveying her host. Only Jesse was missing.

GIDEON came to my grandfather's estate to attend my father's funeral. My grandfather had made it very clear that my mother was not welcome, nor Adam, nor even Ariel, but he had not turned Gideon away when he arrived, bearing a long spray of white lilies in his hand.

"A bad business—a terrible business," my grandfather said to the Archangel's son, shaking his head and leaning his hand against a chair back for support. "Joseph was a hotheaded man—the god knows he was full of faults—but to die that way—at an angel's hands—"

"My father has punished the person responsible," Gideon said in a quiet voice.

"How?" my grandfather demanded, helpless and furious. "How does one discipline an angel? Do you lock him in a cell in one of those stone holds of yours? Starve him to death? Kill him outright? Your father would not do any of those things."

"He's been exiled."

"Exiled," my grandfather said in awful scorn. "How do you exile a man who can fly anywhere in the world he desires?"

Gideon glanced at me. Having a keen interest in this story myself, I had sidled close enough to hear. "He has been taken to one of the mountains that ring the Plain of Sharon," Gideon said reluctantly. "He has been left with food and water, and more food and water will be brought to him when his supplies run low. He cannot leave—he has been shackled on a long chain to the mountain itself."

My grandfather grunted, obviously pleased with this picture, though grief had made it almost impossible for him to be pleased with anything these past two weeks. "I hope he dies there."

"He very well might."

I thought Jesse might indeed want to die, chained to one place for days or years or the rest of his life. That wandering, restless, untamable young man, pinned to an isolated mountain on the edge of the world. I thought he might call down thunderbolts to strike him dead rather than spend more than a day or two in such a situation.

I sobbed through the ceremony, mourning I could not have told you what—not my father, whom I had not loved and did not miss, but the whole tragedy of his life, perhaps, and the disaster it had made of mine. My grandfather, at least, had not disowned me, but he told me bluntly that he was in no case to be arranging marriages for me or worrying about my place in Manadawi society. "I've got the boys to take care of now and the property," he said. "You'll have to make your own way."

But I could think of nothing, no one, except Jesse, found guilty of my father's murder and exiled to a mountaintop by the Archangel himself.

I had no chance to talk to Gideon till after the service, and after the somber dinner that followed, and after all the guests—and there were hundreds of them—found a chance to stop by Gideon's chair to make idle conversation with the Archangel's son. I had no chance to talk to him until everyone was gone and the servants had begun to clear away the mess of the meal, and I had slipped out the back door to the gardens where I had whispered for Gideon to meet me.

He was waiting not far from the house, his wings spread behind him like a hovering ghost. I walked straight up to him and he put his arms around me, and we stayed entwined for ten minutes or more.

"I'm so sorry," Gideon said. "That your father—that Jesse—I'm just so sorry."

I pulled back and studied what I could see of his face by cold moonlight. "Take me to see him," I said.

He dropped his arms in astonishment. "Take you—to see *Jesse*? No! What are you—Why would you want—He killed your *father*!"

"If you don't," I said, "I will go to him anyway. I will walk from here to the Plain of Sharon, I will climb up every single one of those mountains until I find the one where he has been chained. I will climb until my hands are bloody, until the rocks of the mountain have cut through the soles of my shoes. I will find him, or I will die trying to find him, if you don't take me to see him."

"I can't do that," he said.

I turned away from him. "Then I will leave tomorrow to begin to look for him on my own."

He remonstrated; I walked away, my arms crossed stubbornly on my chest. He caught up with me, turned me with an impatient hand on my shoulder. "Eden," he said. "Why? Why do you want to see him? To forgive him? To chastise him? What do you have to say to him? I will take the message for you."

"I want to tell him I love him," I said.

Gideon stared at me in the chilly dark. He dropped his hand. "How can you?" he whispered. "Even now?"

"You're his friend," I said. "Don't you still care about him?"

"Yes, but it's not *my* father he killed! And however much you may have hated your father, you cannot condone—you cannot believe—there is *no* justification for what he did."

I turned away again. "I'll leave for the Plain of Sharon when you're gone," I said. "If you would at least tell me which of the many mountains has been turned into his prison—"

We argued for another half hour, circling around the garden. I was adamant and Gideon was desperate. "Very well," he said at last. "I have to go to Adar Lesh's wedding. I had planned to leave tomorrow anyway. Were you invited? Did you intend to go? I'll tell your grandfather that I'll take you with me. We'll detour to the Plain of Sharon, and you may have one hour to speak with Jesse. And then you must go on with me to the wedding. I'll bring you back, but we won't go by the mountaintop again."

"We won't have to," I said. I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. I could tell he was deeply unhappy about his decision, but I didn't care. "Thank you, Gideon. I swear you will not be sorry."

He sighed. "I'm sorry already."

I stayed up most of the night packing. No formal clothes, though, not the sorts of outfits you would expect to see a young woman wearing at an elite function. Sturdy shoes, travel clothes, an assortment of toiletries, medical supplies in case Jesse had gotten sick or injured, provisions of food and water.

And the heavy black ring that held all the keys to all the locks in the Karsh mansion. I had stolen it from the steward's quarters the instant I realized Gideon had arrived for the funeral.

WE took off for the mountaintop shortly after breakfast. My grandfather had greeted with little interest the news that I was, after all, attending the Lesh wedding. "I'll be back in a week or so," I said, kissing him on the cheek, hugging my little brother, nodding at the older one who was not interested in kisses or hugs from me. "Perhaps I'll have news."

"Travel safely," he said and turned away.

It took more than half a day to travel from my grandfather's land to the Plain of Sharon. We only stopped once, to eat, and talked very little. I was dressed in my heaviest clothes, but still I was cold, even when we landed to make a meal. I didn't complain. All I could think about was what I would say to Jesse.

It was mid-afternoon when Gideon angled downward, making for the circle of mountains that sheltered the Plain of Sharon. I could see their knobby brown heads bowing over the green valley of the plain. "Which one?" I cried into Gideon's ear, hoping he could hear me over the wind and the whuffle of his wings.

"Northern peak," he called back. "Right up against the sea."

That might have pleased Jesse, if anything about this confinement could have offered him a scrap of pleasure—the nearness of the ocean. My eyes picked out the mountain Gideon had indicated, and I strained to see any sign of life on top of it as we drew nearer. There—no, a shadow. There—no, a white patch of snow, not a dejected fall of clipped wings. There—yes, yes, *there*, an angel standing with his back to the water, his head tipped up, having spotted us long before I had been able to discover him. His arms were crossed; his face showed no emotion. I could see the thick, heavy chain that ran from a post in the ground to a black shackle around his left ankle.

"Leave me here," I instructed as Gideon touched down so lightly it was almost impossible to tell the difference between earth and air. "I want to talk to him."

"One hour," he said, letting me go and stepping back. He nodded at Jesse, but did not address him. "Then I'll be back."

"I'll be ready."

I waited until Gideon had flung himself back aloft before I stepped any nearer to Jesse. I watched his face as he watched me. His expression was shuttered, his green eyes hooded. If he felt remorse or shame or anger, he was not about to show it. He had been on this mountain for about two weeks. I thought he already looked thinner, his face more gaunt, his body starting to show its bones. I could not imagine that he would last a year here. Perhaps not even a month. I had not come a day too soon.

"Jesse," I said.

"What are you doing here?"

"I made Gideon bring me."

"I see that. Why?"

I dropped all my bundles on the ground and walked forward, just like that, till I was close enough to put my hands on his shoulders. He was dressed in casual clothes, a thin cotton shirt and leather trousers, and I could feel the heat of his skin through the fabric. "I wanted to tell you that I know you didn't kill my father."

He stared down at me and the guarded expression on his face did not change. "Everyone saw a dark-haired angel drop your father into a ravine. Everyone knows that I alone went missing. Why would you think the story was not true?"

"Because you wouldn't do it," I said.

He looked away. "Oh, yes, I would."

"But you didn't."

For a long time he didn't answer, but kept his eyes focused on that distant view. I wondered if he was looking at the ocean or the sky, or backward at that day in Monteverde. After a long silence, he sighed. "But I didn't," he said.

"It was Adam," I said.

He nodded, still looking away from me. "That was my guess as well. He released your father, then circled back, joined the others on the mountain peak. It took them all a while to gather, I would suppose—no one would notice who was there all along, who came running up afterward. I was the only one who didn't make an appearance at all."

"Where were you?"

He shrugged, his bones rising and falling beneath my hands. "I'd gone down to one of the little taverns near the foot of the mountain. Too angry to stay at Monteverde. Too angry to think. By the time Ariel found me—the story had been set. There was no way to change it."

Now I tried to shake him, but he was too tall and too strong for me to really influence. "No way to change it! You could have said—you could have told the truth! People must have seen you in the tavern—someone would have remembered you—"

"Yes, there was a woman in the tavern who saw me there. We talked all afternoon. But no one would believe her."

"Why? Why wouldn't they listen to her?"

His mouth twisted. "Because she's an angel-seeker with some reason to dislike Adam. She bore his daughter two years ago—a mortal child, not an angel—and Adam would have nothing to do with her. You can imagine how bitterly she speaks of your mother, who has been ensconced in Monteverde with all honor. And how much she hates Adam. Anyone would expect her to lie about me if it meant disaster might come to him."

"Someone else, then," I said impatiently. "The tavern owner, the men drinking at the next table—"

Humor flashed through his green eyes. "There was a man there who recognized me, but he'd as soon see me chained to this mountain for the rest of my life. I don't think he'd speak up on my behalf."

"But you could ask him! You could ask this—this angel-seeker! If you raise enough questions, if you create enough doubt, Gabriel will have to listen to you. He will have to consider that you were not the one who killed my father—"

"It doesn't matter," he said in a low voice. He shook himself free of me and paced away to the limit of the chain. "I would have done it. I should have done it. I hated your father and I was afraid for you. If he was going to die at someone's hands, it should have been mine. So if an angel had to be punished for the crime, why not me?"

"If an—but—but that doesn't make any sense! Why should you suffer for what Adam did? Why would you lie for him? Answer me, Jesse!"

He turned to look at me, and now his face showed so many emotions that I could not sort them out. Fury, self-loathing, despair. "What else have I ever done that made any difference?" he demanded. "When have I not hurt someone—or shamed someone—or created disasters in my wake? Why not take the blame for this and let Adam go free? He's the better angel. He's the one who would be missed. What is my life worth next to his?"

"*He's* the better angel?" I breathed. "Adam? He fathered a child on a married woman. He abandoned his own daughter because she was not angelic. He *killed* a man—and he let another man take the blame! That's the sort of man you'd protect? That's the sort of angel you think is better than you? I never trusted Adam, but I'm terrified of him now. What else might he do, now that he has succeeded at such a crime? What might he do to my mother, if she ever guesses the truth? Once an angel has murdered one mortal, what's to stop him from murdering again?"

As I spoke, Jesse's face changed again, growing darker, angrier, full of its customary defiance. "Yes, I did think of it that way, but I—then I thought this was better—"

"You cannot throw away your own life for someone so dangerous," I said. "So many people are not safe if you are here and he is free."

"But what can I do now?" he burst out. "Trapped here like a hawk on a jess. Gabriel will not release me, Eden. He will not even hear me out. He wouldn't come here to listen to my words."

"You'll have to go to him," I said.

A slight laugh of disbelief. "And how will I manage that?"

"He's on his way to the Lesh wedding. Meet him there. Tell him everything. Give him the names of those who saw you in the tavern. He'll give you a hearing—he has to."

He lifted his left leg and shook it till the metal links rattled together. "It seems too obvious to have to say it out loud, but—"

I turned back to my bundles on the ground. "I brought the steward's key ring. There are a hundred keys on it, and one of them is bound to fit."

He stayed standing exactly where he was as I pawed through my bags, emerged triumphantly with the key ring, and hurried over to his side. I knelt beside him on the rocky ground and tried key after key on the hard black shackle. I was maybe a quarter of the way through the ring when a thin gold key slipped inside the eyehole of the lock and made a small, satisfying click. The fetter snapped in two. Jesse yanked his foot free and then stood for a moment staring down at it, or at me.

"Thank you," he said at last, reaching down a hand to pull me to my feet. "I don't know why you would do so much for me."

I gave him the answer I had given Gideon. "Because I love you."

His answer was to pull me against him and give me one hard, dizzying kiss. I reached up to put my arms around him but he drew back, stepped away. "First, let me fix this," he said. Two steps, a purposeful beating of his wings, and he had taken off, soaring away from the mountaintop like a falcon that had gnawed its way free from restraint.

When Gideon returned a few minutes later, he stared around him with astonishment at the mountain peak that held only me, my luggage and an unlocked manacle. "Where's Jesse?" he said blankly.

"On his way to Adar Lesh's wedding."

It was impossible to make it all the way from the Plain of Sharon to the northern edge of Manadawi country in what remained of the day, but Gideon tried. He was so furious that for a moment I thought he might abandon me there on the mountaintop and head north alone. He didn't—but he didn't speak to me at all as we flew, faster than I had really thought possible, into the oncoming night. Even when it was full dark, we continued on—Gideon navigating, I had to suppose, by moonlight and constellation. I could not remember a time in my life I had ever been so cold.

Around midnight, spotting lights below us, we dropped into the welcome haven of a small town and took a room for the night. By dawn, we were on our way again. Gideon still wasn't speaking to me, and I gave up after offering two attempts at conversation and one apology. I just lay in his arms, trying to make my body as light as possible, and watched the autumn country scroll by below us.

It was close to noon when I realized we were almost at the Lesh property. This was a place I had seen from the air once or twice before, after all; I should recognize it from this vantage point. I straightened in Gideon's arms and peered down, noting that the roads converging on the mansion were crowded with horses and carriages.

"It's *today*?" I demanded, appalled. "The wedding?"

Gideon nodded. "This afternoon. A few hours from now."

Another Lesh wedding to be ruined by Jesse. I could not bear to think about that. "Is he here yet?"

"How would I know?" Gideon replied irritably. "He may have flown all night. And he may have flown faster. But I hope we've beaten him."

When, a few minutes later, we arrived at the Lesh property, we saw no sign of the errant angel. Gideon came to rest in one of the wide, flat lawns that sloped gently away from the main house. Just now it was laid out with rows of chairs and festive white tents, and well-dressed people were milling about holding fruit-colored drinks. An outdoor wedding, it would appear, despite the coolness of the season. I glanced down at my bulky jacket and hideous brown trousers, borrowed from Evan. Obviously, I was not dressed for the event.

"There's my father," Gideon said, waving someone over.

"Oh—no—" I stammered. I was not nearly ready to face the Archangel.

"You have to tell him what you've done," Gideon said. I turned and saw, to my horror, that it was not only Gabriel headed our way, but also Ariel and two or three other angels, curious about our odd late arrival.

Adam was among them. He was smiling at me, his eyebrows raised in a question, wondering, no doubt, what could have sent me here in such a fashion and in such an ensemble.

"I can't talk to them," I said in a low voice. "Jesse has to explain."

"You can start the explanation," he said.

They had arrived at our side before I had time to formulate my thoughts, and suddenly I was surrounded by a white wall of feathers, regal and impenetrable. "Eden, we never thought to see you here," Ariel exclaimed in her warm voice. "Is something wrong? Has something happened to your grandfather?"

"No, everything is—I didn't plan to—"

"She has something to tell you," Gideon said darkly.

Gabriel looked at me, his eyes so blue they challenged the sky. "Not bad news, I hope," he said seriously.

"It's about Jesse," I said.

"Jesse!" Adam exclaimed. "Eden, I know you have a fondness for him, but you must realize—surely—"

The words tumbled out. "He didn't kill my father," I said.

Gabriel's black eyebrows rose. "That seems very unlikely," he said.

Gideon was staring at me. This was the first time I had said the words aloud to him. "If you don't think Jesse did," he said slowly, "who do you think it was?"

"Nonsense," Ariel said briskly. "Eden, I'm sorry for you. I'm sure you are very distraught. There are many young girls who fell in love with Jesse only to find out he was not what they thought he was. But so many people saw him with your father—and he never once said he did not commit the act—"

"He didn't do it," I said fiercely.

Adam laid a hand on my arm. "Dear Eden," he said softly, "don't let him break your heart."

Gabriel still seemed serious and entirely calm. "Let's ask him," he said.

Which was the first any of the rest of us realized that Jesse had arrived.

He was hovering over the back lawn, spiraling slowly down, and he appeared to be looking for someone—Gabriel, Adam, perhaps even me. Even from this distance, I could see that his face looked haggard, tired from the long journey, but creased with stubbornness. He knew that I was the only person in the world who believed him. He had come here burdened with almost no hope.

I pulled free from Adam's touch and waved wildly. "Jesse!" I called. "Over here!"

He pulled in his wings and slanted in our direction. "How did he get loose?" Ariel demanded. "And why come here? Why not fly somewhere to freedom?"

"I released him," I said. "So he could tell the truth."

Gabriel, who should have been watching the supposed criminal land three feet away, instead still had his eyes on me. "And who do you think killed your father?" he asked.

Jesse answered. "It was Adam," he said.

There was a moment of absolute silence.

There was a moment when everyone spoke at once. Ariel said, "No, he didn't," just as I said, "Adam killed him," just as Jesse added, "I can prove I didn't do it." Gabriel held up his hands to enjoin silence, and everyone subsided.

"This is a grave accusation," Gabriel said, his eyes now on Jesse. "Why should I believe you have not manufactured a charge against another angel just to abate your own punishment?"

"There were people who saw me—that day—who know I could not have been up on the mountaintop when Eden's father was thrown to his death," Jesse said.

"Yes, but Adam would not have done such a thing!" Ariel exclaimed. "To even suggest it—"

"He hated my father," I said. "He was afraid my father would harm the baby."

"And he was probably right!" Ariel replied in a heated voice. "The way your father talked—"

Gabriel silenced her with a gesture. "Am I to understand Joseph Karsh actually threatened the child?"

"Yes," I said. "My father said he wished he'd strangled him when he was first born."

Now Gabriel turned his icy blue eyes in Adam's direction. "You heard him say this?"

For a moment it appeared that Adam could not decide whether to respond with easy laughter or outraged anger. "Yes, I heard him say it," he finally replied, choosing to shrug carelessly and speak lightly. "I was furious at the moment, but was I really afraid of Joseph Karsh? Not at all. And I certainly didn't snatch him from a Monteverde bridge and throw him into a canyon."

There was something false in the timbre of his voice, something in his words that did not ring true. Whatever it was, Gabriel heard it, too. His blue eyes narrowed and the lines of his face grew more severe. "I do not think we have reached the bottom of this," he said coldly. "When this wedding is over, we must all return to Monteverde and conduct a proper investigation. I do not want the wrong man to be left chained to the mountaintop."

"That man should not be me," Jesse said.

Adam made a quick, violent movement, so unexpected that no one could avoid him. "It will not be me, either!" he cried, snatching me against his body and holding me hard. As the angels stared at him, stupefied, he snarled, "Stand back! Stand back, all of you!" I was too astonished to fight as he dragged me a few paces away, and the others appeared too surprised to move. "I will kill her too if you try to stop me," he hissed. "Don't follow me."

And he pulled me closer against his chest and leapt into the air.

For a moment I was sure we would plunge back to the earth, and I screamed as his grip tightened around my body. His wings beat the air furiously—the sky whirled around my head—the lawn spun dangerously close. And then we were aloft, racing away from the beribboned white tents and the gracious lawns and the crowds of people staring up at us, their drinks still in their hands. The ground fell away alarmingly fast; the cold sky enveloped us in a malicious, eternal wind.

I crushed down my impulse to continue screaming, to wrench my arms free and start beating him around the face and chest. We were so high now that if his grip loosened, I would fall to my death; the less I did to anger him, the better my chance of survival. Which seemed very, very slim in any case. I had no idea where we were flying at such a rapid pace that my lungs hurt and my cheeks were scratched red by the wind. I couldn't imagine that we were bound for any place that would be particularly comfortable for me.

We had been flying for maybe ten minutes when I became aware of a phalanx of angels all around us. I wriggled against Adam's hold to try to get a better look, hope burning painfully in my chest. Yes—to the right of us, Ariel; to the left of us, Gideon. I could barely see Gabriel behind us and Jesse below. Gabriel I knew could outdistance any angel from the three holds, and I thought Gideon, too, could fly faster than Adam. But they could not knock him from the sky, or try to crowd him off his course, for fear of the harm he might do to me. So they paced beside him, silent, implacable escorts, ready to follow him to the very edge of the world.

Which, I soon realized, was exactly where we were heading.

I smelled the salt breeze before I saw the ocean, wild and wind-whipped here at the northern tip of Samaria. I couldn't control a small shriek as Adam passed over the last promontory of land and kept on flying, heading out into the infinite, unmarked territory of the sea. Dearest god, sweetest Jovah, he was going to fling me into the ocean, from which no angel could rescue me; he was going to cast me into the raging and boundless sea. Now I did begin struggling, panic making me stupid, whimpering against his chest. He merely clutched me so tightly that I could not breathe and continued flying.

We were miles and miles over the ocean, so far that I could not believe there was still land behind us. There was only water, icy and black, and sky, remote and blue. He flew so far that there was nothing in the world but ocean, and then he opened his arms and let me fall.

I screamed and fell into an angel's arms. Still falling, down and down, the water rushing up so fast that it seemed to be lunging for us. We fell so far that his wingfeathers tore through the waves, lashing up a spray of foam. I screamed again, and saltwater spit across my tongue.

And then we were rising, slowly, agonizingly, breaking free of the sucking hunger of the sea. I sobbed and flung my arms around the angel's neck. I felt him press a kiss into my hair as he reached a safe altitude above the rocking sea.

"Look," he said, but I had not needed to hear his voice to know that the angel who held me was Jesse. "Watch now."

I lifted my head and followed his gaze. There were still four angels flying farther out to sea, but the one in the forefront had increased both his lead and his altitude. Indeed, now he seemed to be climbing higher and higher, as if he had given up his race across the water and instead had decided to flee toward the sun. The three trailing angels had slowed down, pulled back, refused to follow his ascension. "Watch," Jesse whispered against my ear.

And as I watched, Adam folded his wings back, angled his head down and made a sharp, graceful, perfect dive into the sea. The water washed over him and left no trace. No one, not even the scolding gulls, could wring out a cry of horror.

WE found, when we returned to the Lesh property, that the wedding had been postponed. I think even Adar Lesh felt the events unfolding around her were more exciting than the vows she was about to take. Gabriel brushed past the bride's father and the clamoring crowd of Manadawi and escorted Jesse and Ariel and Gideon and me into a private room inside the house.

"Now," he said, in a voice there was no gainsaying, "the entire story, please."

It was quickly told and soberly received. "You're a fool," Gabriel commented when Jesse explained why he had not defended himself to begin with.

Jesse shrugged. "I didn't expect to be believed. Least of all by Eden."

Gabriel's eyes, blue and inescapable, once again were turned on me. "Yes, her part in this is most extraordinary. I suppose she has found a way to explain to you why she trusted you when no one else did."

Jesse was grinning. "Yes, angelo."

Gabriel nodded. "You will come to the Eyrie, both of you, for a time," he said. "Eden, it is clear you will be spending more of your days with angels in the future, so you must get more used to us. Jesse—I know no other way to apologize than by making every effort to get to know you now, to learn about strengths that I have heretofore failed to see."

"I have managed to conceal them from almost everyone," Jesse said wryly.

"That time is past," the Archangel said. "Gideon, tell our host that we will be ready to see this wedding go forward in a matter of moments. Ariel, do you own something more appropriate that Eden could wear? Allow me to be the one to tell the story of today's events. The rest of you"—and here he actually smiled as if amused—"drink a few glasses of wine and try to enjoy the day."

Jesse put his arms around me, and then, like a waft of enchantment, his wings. "That, angelo, will be easy to do."

Gabriel was still smiling. "A few moments," he warned. "And the wedding proceeds."

At that, he escorted Ariel and his grinning son from the room. I turned into Jesse's embrace and we explained, in gestures more detailed than words, what sort of terror we had endured that day. He had saved my life, and the only coin I had to pay him with was a kiss; I had rescued him from ignominy and disgrace, and a kiss was what he used to settle his debt. Paid in full—the account most satisfactorily settled.

That day, when an angel kissed me, I didn't know exactly what my future held, but I knew that my life had changed forever.