

Dream Runner



Joe Beine

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One: The Light of an Archangel

“Why did you come to me, Jessica? Why not Michael or Raphael?”

“Because, um. You’re just so much easier to talk to about these sorts of things.”

“So you think I’m a pushover, eh?”

“Well, Michael’s always all wrapped up in his archangel star trip thing.” Jessi thought she saw Gabriel smile at this, just a hint of a smile, knowing the way others spoke of his brother. “He’s not much good at dealing with the problems of tiny angels like me.”

“And Raphael?”

“He just spends all day fishing. ‘Don’t bother me, little angel girl. I’ve got fish to catch. You’re scaring them away.’”

“So you come to me yet again.”

“You’re like a dad to us, Gabe. You know that.”

Jessi saw another of Gabriel’s furtive smiles. Everyone knew he liked being thought of as the father figure of the angelic realm.

“So what do you need that is of such great importance, Jessica? What do you need that Raphael and Michael can’t be bothered with?”

“I want to go back to the world of people,” Jessi replied. “I miss it terribly. Um. Maybe I could just go for short trips. Would that be okay?”

Unlike Michael, who was majestic and tall, Gabriel had a soft, almost effeminate demeanor. And this was reflected in the silken radiance that always surrounded him. Jessi’s dark hair shone a rich mahogany hue in this light. The feathers of her alabaster wings shimmered until they became diaphanous. Even her midnight-blue clothes seemed to glisten. Sometimes Jessi felt as though she could get lost in Gabriel’s spiritual glow. It wouldn’t be such a bad place to be lost, she decided, in the light of an archangel.

“You travel so well in the world of dreams, Jessica. Isn’t that enough for you?”

“Um, no,” Jessi stammered. She suddenly felt like a human child who wanted a toy. “It’s not the same at all. The feelings just aren’t there.”

“So you miss the emotions you experienced?”

“I miss the connection to people and the natural world. I miss things like...” She paused, thinking. “Opening a window to let the sounds and smells from outside in. Or the magic in people’s eyes. I miss the delirious sensation of being alive.”

Gabriel’s light seemed to stir. “But it’s not your true purpose. Your duty is to chronicle the angels transforming, not play in the world of people.”

Jessi sighed. "I know, Gabe. I just miss it so much." She paused, basking in the glow. "I only want short trips. Little breaks from my chronicles. That's all I'm asking. This angel girl needs a life." Jessi smiled at herself, but Gabriel didn't. This was serious business to him.

He remained silent for a moment as if contemplating something, then said, "Okay, Jessica. I will allow you occasional moments in the world of people. But don't abuse the privilege. And don't neglect your angelic duties."

"Oh, I won't. Thank you, Gabriel." Jessi looked into the archangel's glow, feeling a rush of excitement. She wanted to hug him, but decided against it. "Where shall I go first?" she asked, wondering if she needed permission. Or perhaps she was looking for guidance.

Gabriel's light stirred again. "You decide," he said. Then he added: "The feather you lost before... Perhaps you could search for it."

Two: Navajo Earth

Dream Runner heard nothing. Not the wind. Not a car sputtering past. Not a whisper from the drying grass. Far ahead a dust devil danced across the road, but it made no sound. It twisted clockwise through the red earth in a brown streak, reaching for the sky. It wanted nothing more than to unite the two.

It was terribly hot, but Dream Runner had soaked her t-shirt in water before leaving on her walk so she would stay cool. At least until it dried. Even then the summer sun didn't bother her much—she had been raised in it. Its light battled with the darkness of her long braid and glistened in her raven eyes.

It was almost too quiet. Where was the wind? None today. Except for the dust devil, which didn't count as wind, was made of something else it seemed, a ghost maybe. Dream Runner couldn't see it anymore, anyway. It had worn itself out, leaving a phantom shell somewhere near the rocks, waiting to be reborn.

Despite its strange beauty, Dream Runner wanted to leave this place someday. She wanted to go away to college and live among every kind of people, not just Indians, as much as she loved her tribe. She wanted away from the dust and the desolate landscape.

But Dream Runner knew she would return. This place was her home. The red earth was part of her being. She felt mysteriously connected to it. She crouched down and touched the ground around her. She could feel the soft heat pounded into it by the delirious sun. She could feel its spirit.

A car drifted past on the road near where the dust devil had been. It made coughing sounds. She didn't recognize it, but she knew it was an Indian's car. The cars driven by the tourists weren't as noisy. And theirs gleamed brightly in the sun. Moments later another car followed it, even louder. Then all was silent again. Tourists didn't come up this way much unless they were lost. The two cars had stirred up the dust, which hovered lazily in the unmoving air, then finally settled.

The wind came then, a surprise, and brought with it a tiny glow of white. Dream Runner watched it land in the red, cushioned by the earth. She reached over and picked it up, a feather, whiter than bone. She wondered where it had come from. No birds around here were this white. She stared at it, still wondering.

Her t-shirt was nearly dry, but the light breeze cooled her as she walked back to her house, bringing the feather to her father, a craftsman. She already knew what he would make out of it. Something for the tourists. Even though she knew they didn't understand the real purpose of her father's work.

Three: To Be an Angel

Jessi felt a tug on her spiritual umbilical cord, sensed a familiar presence behind her.

“So whatcha doin’, Angelgirl?” It was Ari’s voice. Jessi turned, saw her friend standing in the doorway, downy wings aglow, cobalt eyes beaming, her dark hair a contrast with her pale features and, unusual for her, pastel clothes.

“Um. Just painting.”

“That’s all you do, it seems.”

Jessi smiled.

“Something’s bothering you, I think.”

Since Ari’s death and her coming here, she and Jessi shared a connection that drew them together even when they were in separate realms. Like they were spiritual twins.

“I’ve been wondering,” Jessi said. She paused. “I think I would like to have been born a person instead of an angel.”

“You really like it in the world of people, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s weird how so many people want to be like us. And you want the opposite.”

“I know.”

“Gabriel said you could return to the world of people,” Ari said.

“Yes, but only for short trips. And just once in awhile.”

“Will that help?”

“I think so, yes. But I really want to experience it from the start like you did. You know, be a child, grow up, live—” Jessi cut herself off, thinking this might upset her friend.

“Live,” Ari repeated.

“I’m sorry, Ari.”

“No, don’t worry, Jess. I had my chance. You know I’d love to have the whole thing back to do it right.”

“But you can’t.” Jessi thought she was sounding harsh, but maybe she needed to be.

“I know.” Ari looked down at the dark wooden floor of Jessi’s studio. It was splattered with different shades of fallen drops of paint.

“I think the little glimpses I’ve been given will work for me,” Jessi said. “I will use them to learn more about being alive like I did before. But I really just want to have that connection to people again.”

“That’s why I sent you to Gabriel,” Ari said. “I knew you needed something more. And he’s such a pushover. All you have to do is act all sweet and angelic and he’ll go for just about anything.”

“We’re terrible,” Jessi said.

“I know.”

Jessi watched her friend, noticing her appearance. Ari was wearing a lilac jacket over a light gray lacy top, a short lavender skirt over gray tights, and her usual Monkey Boots, which were untied.

“You’re wearing such different clothes today,” Jessi said.

“I’ve decided to let go of the darkness. I’m going more light these days. Plus I love all shades of purple.”

“It makes you look so different.”

“Really?”

“The contrast has changed. In your outlook too. You seem happier, more settled.”

“Yeah? I have been feeling more comfortable in this world. In my place in this world.”

“Gabriel once asked me about our tendency toward wearing dark clothes,” Jessi said. “He was like, ‘why do you and the Angel Arianne always dress in such dark outfits?’”

“I didn’t even know he noticed things like that,” Ari said.

“He thinks we’re odd.”

“And I’m a bad influence on you. So what did you tell him?”

“I said, ‘dark clothes are for hiding.’ For me it’s a coy confidence thing.”

“I like that,” Ari said. “But for me it’s strictly a Velvet Underground thing. I lived in a Lou Reed world.”

“I don’t think Gabriel would get that.”

“No.” A smile danced through the spiritual umbilical cord.

Ari moved closer to study the painting Jessi was currently working on.

“This is a beautiful painting, Jess.”

Jessi looked at the canvas behind her. It was perched on an easel and nearly dwarfed her. The painting initially seemed like nothing but a shimmering field of powder blue pigment. But a more careful examination revealed an uneven row of overlapping feathers that curved into a blur of emerald and aged copper on the right side.

“It’s a seraph’s wing, isn’t it?” Ari said.

“Yes.”

“You’ve captured their light so well. It’s almost mesmerizing.”

“Oh, um. Thanks.”

“I love the seraphim,” Ari said. “So much warmth.”

Jessi felt a small breeze begin to filter into the studio through an open window behind her easel. She looked at her friend, saw Ari's dusk-blue eyes gazing at the painting, then at her. "Ari, um..." Jessi started to say, then hesitated. "Before... When I was in the world of people..."

"Teaching me..."

"Well, showing you..." Jessi saw Ari smile. "Did it bother you to watch me?"

"A little." She paused. "You know it did."

"Then why did you send me to Gabriel?"

"Because it seemed so important to you. Because I felt I could see a bit more of what I lost through you. Maybe find a new perspective. A different one this time."

"But you can watch other people."

"Yes, but I have a connection with you that I don't have with anyone else. So I feel more deeply when I'm watching you. It hurts more, it hits harder, but it helps me continue to work everything out."

The breeze ruffled Ari's feathers slightly. Pale blue light from the windows caught them and they glimmered.

"When you took all the pills," Jessi said. "What did you think would happen?"

Ari looked at the floor again. It was almost like a painting itself. Splashes of color everywhere. Like an Abstract Expressionist had swept through the room. She glanced back at Jessi. "I thought my hurt would finally be over. I was kind of worried that everything might just fade to black, and I didn't really want that. Then I saw you and the others. Your wings seemed so warm. And I knew I'd found home. But I still miss my life terribly." Ari stopped talking and a small silence surrounded them. The breeze let go of Ari's wings. "But I get to be an angel," she said. More silence. Ari smiled, just a little. "You want to be alive and I wanted so much to be dead. That's so weird."

"I think that's why they put us together," Jessi said.

Ari laughed. "Those clever archangels."

Four: A Spider's Web

Jessi watched the girl with the ebony braid as she sat near the back of a wooden booth, looking out at the sun-drenched parking lot that was crowded with tourists. The girl's eyes were darker than her braid and her skin was imbued with an enchanting chestnut glow. Her affable features were delicately carved as if shaped by the sun. She was wearing a violet t-shirt and shorts. Jessi felt the girl was about fifteen. She carried a teenager's nonchalance and restless energy.

The girl's gaze wandered over toward Jessi, who glanced down at the silver jewelry laid out across the front of the booth. All of it was exquisitely made and Jessi thought of how different it seemed from other jewelry she had seen in stores. These rings and bracelets and necklaces had a hand-crafted quality to them. More necklaces and some crescent shaped pendants dangled from a cord above her. Jessi also saw a row of beaded things with feathers she didn't recognize.

"What are these?" Jessi asked the girl, who seemed almost comfortable in the dry heat.

"They're called dream catchers," the girl replied. "If you hang one near your bed when you sleep you won't have bad dreams."

A small boy, who looked to be six or seven years old, wandered over from the next booth, where his parents were seriously studying some silver jewelry. He had a tangle of blond hair and light, restless eyes. He gazed at the girl behind the booth, then at Jessi.

"How do they work?" Jessi said.

"Dreams are messages sent to you from the spirit world. They are caught in the web at the center of the dream catcher. The bad dreams get stuck in the web where the sun burns them off in the morning. Poof! Gone." The girl smiled at herself, then added, "I like saying that. Poof! Gone."

"I don't like bad dreams," the boy said.

The girl smiled at him. "Poof! Gone," she repeated again.

"What happens to the good dreams?" Jessi asked.

"They trickle down to the feathers where they stay until they are released to you."

"Oh," the boy said. "Looks like a spiderweb."

"Yeah, that's the idea," the girl replied. "The bad dreams get caught in the spiderweb."

Jessi looked across the parking lot at the surrounding landscape. She expected shifting haze, but instead saw clear red earth and silent sky, a richer blue than she had ever encountered. She looked back at the girl, who had gotten up from her chair and was now leaning on her side of the booth, watching Jessi and the boy.

"Who made these dream catchers?" Jessi asked.

"My father makes them," the girl said. "But I helped. I'm learning his craft. Little pieces of it, anyway."

"What are they made out of?" Jessi found herself feeling uncomfortable in the heat, but the girl looked so cool. They were both standing in the same shade created by the booth's overhanging roof.

"The web is from a deer. The ring around it is leather. The beads are made from bone. And those are duck feathers. They're tied to the ring with horsehair."

A slight breeze came up, but Jessi didn't feel any cooler. She glanced at the boy. He seemed just as miserable as she did.

"Once," the girl said, "my father told my mother that her hair was as strong and thick as horsehair. He was working on some things and had run out of horsehair. So he went up to my mother with a pair of scissors."

"So he cut her hair?" Jessi said, alarmed.

"No, he was just teasing."

The boy laughed. "Does the horsehair come from the tail?" he said.

"My father uses both mane and tail hair," the girl replied. "But I don't think you should ever approach a horse from behind with scissors. Very bad manners." She smiled.

Jessi touched one of the dream catchers. It seemed ancient like it had been made long ago. She found it sturdy despite its delicate appearance. Then she noticed that one of the dream catchers was slightly different. It had a single feather dangling from the web, while the others had three. And the feather was white, unlike the gray duck feathers of the others. She let the white feather float into her hand, then smiled in recognition. A spark lit up her features briefly.

"Why is this one so different from the rest?"

"Oh, I found that white feather once on a walk," the girl replied. "I only had one so my father made a different design for it. It's a beautiful feather, isn't it?"

"It looks like it came from an angel's wing," the boy said.

The girl gazed at him. "I don't believe in angels," she said.

"Why not?" Jessi asked.

"The Christian missionaries who come around here try to teach us about stuff like that. They don't make much sense to me."

Jessi looked at the white-feathered dream catcher, pondering something. "Do you believe there is a spirit world along with the earth world?" she asked the girl.

"Yes."

"And what travels between them?"

"Spirit helpers. They carry messages from the Holy Ones to the earth people."

"Just like angels," Jessi said. "Same thing really."

The girl seemed surprised. Her dark eyes brightened into a smile. “I never thought about it like that,” she said. “But I don’t think that feather came from a spirit helper. I think it’s from a very white bird.”

“Or,” Jessi said, “a spirit helper in the form of a bird.”

“Maybe,” the girl said.

“Do spirit helpers have wings like angels?” the boy asked.

“Maybe,” the girl said again.

Jessi bought the dream catcher with the white feather and gave it to the boy, who seemed delighted to have it. He thanked Jessi then took it over to show his parents at the next booth. Jessi and the girl heard him say, “Look what an angel gave me.” Then he added, “An Indian made this out of a horse and a duck.”

“He thinks you’re an angel,” the girl said to Jessi.

“I think maybe,” Jessi replied, “it’s you who’s really the angel.”

Five: Painting by Candlelight

Michael's light cast a haughty glow. It burned with a wild intensity, but still lacked the kind of warmth that surrounded Gabriel and the other archangels. Human artists often depicted Michael with his sword drawn, standing triumphantly over a serpent. He had conquered the fallen one and this was eternally reflected in his demeanor. He was the hero of stories and paintings, and the vanquisher of evil. But his light lacked warmth.

Jessi usually avoided Michael as much as she could. She found him arrogant and aloof. But she respected him for his candor, as well as his place in the realm of spiritual beings. Michael always seemed to ignore Jessi, but she didn't mind. She didn't care for his cold light or his serpent slaying stories. She felt more in touch with Gabriel's warmer glow or Raphael's calm.

So she found it odd when she sensed Michael's light beginning to fill her small candlelit studio where she sat painting her chronicle of angels. Then she felt Michael's cold gaze on her wings, ruffling her feathers. She turned to look at him, noticing how much taller he seemed than usual, towering over her and filling the small studio space with his arrogant wings. She noticed him staring at her paint-splattered t-shirt and the bold letters printed across the front. "Blessed are the peacemakers," it said. Michael seemed to stare at these words for a long time before he finally spoke.

"Gabriel tells me you have sought more time in the world of people," he said in a voice that was much too loud and nearly startled Jessi.

"Um, yes," she replied meekly.

"I find people to be a very strange lot," Michael said. "Always fighting over us. So tell me then, tiny angel girl, why do you seek more time with them?"

Jessi gazed at him through the flame of his light. His wings were emerald green in color and nearly touched the ceiling of the studio. His blond curls hovered over his shoulders. The leather armor he wore made him look like an ancient warrior from a fantasy adventure story in the world of people. Jessi wondered why he still needed a sword.

"I'm trying to figure something out," she replied.

"What?" the archangel said.

It occurred to Jessi that Michael had probably never been in her studio before. She noticed him glancing around with his sly majestic stare. But his eyes kept returning to the words on her shirt.

"I'm not sure," Jessi said and she heard Michael sigh.

"Do you wish sometimes," he said, "that you could have been born a person rather than an angel?"

Jessi smiled, thinking about her conversation with Ari. "Yes. Maybe."

Jessi watched Michael walk over to a windowsill and blow out a glass encased candle that stood there. A line of smoke reached into his light.

"I want to understand the world of people better," Jessi said. "And I'm not sure that I can from my perspective."

"The perspective of being an angel and not a person?"

"Yes. I got a sense of it from my time before in the world of people."

"And that wasn't enough?"

"I guess not. No."

"You were sent there to teach something to the Angel Arianne."

"Yes, I know."

"And she learned, didn't she? You showed her what she needed, yes?"

"Yes. We both learned. Ari learned what it means to no longer be alive. And I learned the opposite."

"But still you want more time there."

"Yes."

Michael gazed at her wings, then her eyes. His were a piercing blue. "Gabriel tells me you travel well in the world of dreams."

"Yes. I love it there."

"And that doesn't give you the perspective you need?"

"Oh, no. It's just so different."

"How is it different?"

"To me the dream world is very clear and focussed. But when I wander through the world of people everything is so strange and murky. I don't get it."

"And that's what you want to figure out?" Michael walked over to the wall opposite the window and began looking through a row of some of Jessi's paintings. Jessi found his curiosity strange. She found it even stranger that Michael was here in her studio at all.

"I guess," Jessi said, "that I want to try and find the clarity of my dreams in the world of people."

"In the waking world."

"Yes."

"That's why I came here, tiny angel girl. I wanted to make sure you understood the spiritual purpose of your journeys among the people." He paused, still looking at Jessi's paintings. "I wanted you to be aware that what you are searching for is a sense of clarity." He paused again. His light seemed to brighten a bit. Jessi sensed there was warmth in it somewhere.

"These paintings," he said. "They are a chronicle of us, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"You should exhibit them in the cathedral's gallery."

Jessi was puzzled. "What gallery? The cathedral doesn't have—"

“The one I am going to build for you.”

“Oh.”

“It will be my gift for you. For the upcoming celebration, the one so many revere so much in the world of people.”

Jessi felt herself blush slightly. “Thanks.”

Michael walked back to the windowsill and lit the candle he had blown out earlier by merely touching the wick. Then, with a rustle of emerald feathers, he left the room. Jessi watched his light dissipate down the stairs beyond her door until nothing was left of it. She smiled, then went back to work painting her chronicle of the angels transforming.

Six: Seeking Freedom

The sun poured onto the crisp bright paint of a red Volkswagen sedan as it wandered down a street filled with gray houses that were indistinguishable from each other. Inside the car, a young woman downshifted and turned a corner. She stopped in front of one of the gray houses and honked her horn. Another young woman emerged from the house and got into the car on the passenger's side. They exchanged greetings, drove off.

The woman who had just gotten into the car glanced at the rear view mirror and saw a feathered circle dangling from it.

"Abby, what is this thing?" she asked her friend.

"Oh, Phillip put that there. He got it on his trip to Santa Fe. It's called a dream catcher."

"I've heard of those. It's a Native American thing, right?"

"Yeah, he bought it from some Native Americans who were selling jewelry and stuff on the sidewalk. He thought it looked cool."

"It does look cool."

"Phillip said it's good for protection or something."

"Like having St. Christopher on the dashboard."

"Who?"

"Some Catholics think St. Christopher will protect them when they drive if they put a statue of him on the dashboard."

"Yeah, like that, I guess," Abby said.

"I like the way the feathers sort of catch the sunlight."

"Yeah. Very pretty."

"I wonder why it's called a dream catcher?"

"Maybe it holds your dreams or something," Abby said, then laughed slightly.
"You know what I just thought?"

"What?"

"The Native Americans are pretty smart, selling cool stuff like this that people can hang from their rear view mirrors."

"Yeah. They probably make them just for the tourists who come through."

The Volkswagen zipped up an on-ramp and dashed into a highway full of gleaming traffic. Abby opened her sunroof and the feathers of the dream catcher twisted wildly in the wind, seeking freedom.

Seven: Touching the Light

Her raven hair and eyes shone in the brilliant white glow. The girl didn't back away or try to shield her eyes like some did. She stood watching, curious.

"I've seen you before," Jessi heard the girl say. "You bought a dream catcher at my booth. But you didn't have wings..." She paused. "Like you do now."

Jessi smiled.

"It's yours, isn't it?" the girl said. "The white feather."

"Yes, I was sent to find it."

"I would have given it to you if I had known."

"That's okay," Jessi said. "I really just wanted to see what became of it."

"You gave it to that funny little boy."

"I thought it might help him. What your father made out of it."

"When I found it," the girl said. "The feather seemed mysterious to me. It was so dazzling. Like you."

Jessi blushed. "I don't feel very dazzling."

"But your light is so warm."

"Angelic light is the best part of being an angel. We all have our own."

"It's beautiful," the girl said. "Like a white bird in the sun. Maybe a swan."

She paused. "I've never seen a swan. Just pictures."

"Sometimes people mistake us for swans."

Jessi looked at the clear dream landscape around them and was reminded of her visit to the girl's world. She remembered the red earth and startling blue sky. It seemed no different than what she was seeing now. She thought of Michael and smiled.

"Will you get in trouble for not retrieving your feather?"

"There's a potential scolding from an archangel," Jessi replied.

"Archangel?"

"Um... The archangels... They're kinda like my dads. They're supposed to be in charge. They have rules, but we don't always follow them very well. I think they secretly like it when we get a bit rebellious. Otherwise the world of angels would be pretty boring."

The girl smiled.

"I don't know your name," Jessi said.

"Dream Runner."

"A perfect name for you."

"My father gave me that name when I was little. He said sometimes I looked so agitated when I slept that I must be running like wind through my dreams. When I was older he told me to slow down, to stop and listen carefully. And then I would be more comfortable in the dream world."

“Your father seems very perceptive.”

“I’ve learned so much from him. When I started doing what he suggested I discovered I could hear things you can’t see. When I’m awake too. Everything became more alive.” She looked at Jessi, who was smiling at her. “You don’t really seem like...” Dream Runner started to say, then hesitated. “And yet you do...” She seemed a bit perplexed. “You look just like a person and yet...”

“We are a projection of what some people need,” Jessi said. “To fill the space between the world they understand and the one they don’t.”

“Like a spirit helper,” Dream Runner said. “With swan-like wings.”

“Yes,” Jessi said. “There’s a reason you found my feather.”

“I went looking for it.”

“You went looking for something,” Jessi said.

“Without knowing...” Dream Runner smiled and watched the apparition in front of her. “I can feel your light touching me. So soft. It’s like you’re whispering to me, but not saying anything.” Dream Runner closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as though she was breathing in Jessi’s light. She opened her eyes and looked at Jessi. “I don’t know your name either,” she said.

“Jessica. Jessi for short.”

“Will we see each other again, Jessi?”

“Anytime you want. Just listen.”

Eight: Fisherman's Blues

As her foot went down through the thin layer of snow and touched the ice, Jessi heard a slight crunching sound so she pulled back, fearing she might fall through. It had looked solid enough. But she decided not to risk it. The water was sure to be cold. Jessi could sense the stream was still alive beneath the ice. She could hear it breathing. The winter hadn't stopped it, merely covered it with a protective blanket. She walked on, following the stream, letting it guide her as it wound through the sunless valley.

Jessi had been this way before, but the path of the stream seemed different each time, or perhaps it twisted and turned so much it was difficult to remember where it would go next. Soon the stream caught up with another stream, and where they met the ice broke open and water flowed and gurgled in the frozen air.

High up on a hill, overlooking the valley, Jessi saw a cabin and she knew she was nearly at her destination. The cabin seemed deserted, and looked almost forlorn in its emptiness. Nothing moved, no smoke curled from its lone chimney. But she knew the cabin's occupant wouldn't be there anyway. He spent very little time up there. This was his stream and he had things to do.

The water froze up again for a few yards, then broke free, as if dancing with the ice. As if tempting it. As if saying, "Try and catch me." Jessi could almost hear the water laughing: "You'll never catch me, ice. I will flow onward despite you."

Further downstream Jessi saw the cabin's proprietor sitting on an outcrop of rock, holding a fishing pole, its line dangling languidly in the water. He was a humble yet majestic being with tiny wings of pure white and threadbare red robes. He seemed not the slightest bit bothered by the cold. Jessi approached him slowly, almost apprehensively, although she knew him, even considered him to be a friend.

He glanced at her and said, "Hello, Jessica."

"Hello, Raphael," she said in reply. He motioned for her to sit, then handed her a blanket which she spread out over the snow near his rocky perch.

"How was your journey?" he asked.

"Oh um, a bit cold," she said, settling down on the blanket. "But I enjoyed watching the stream play its winter game. I miss seeing the mountains, though." Jessi knew that a glorious mountain range rose up behind the valley, but she hadn't been able to see it on this journey.

"Ah, the clouds have got them today. The sun will be back tomorrow, I think."

Jessi looked back where the mountains would be, tried to imagine their snow covered majesty. "Gabriel said you wanted to see me," she said.

"Yes. I miss our little chats."

"Oh me too," Jessi said eagerly and smiled.

Where Raphael had chosen to settle in and fish, the stream had widened, and the water moved by with a gentle rhythm. Bits of snow-covered ice hovered near the opposite shore, which rose up into a tangled grove of evergreens. The trees reached into the gray sky as though they were searching for something up there.

"I understand you lost a feather," Raphael said. "And it made its way into the world of people."

Jessi suddenly feared a lecture. "Um, yes," she said timidly.

"Do you know what became of it?"

"It was found by a beggar boy in Germany who thought it was magical. But he gave it away to a homeless girl who had a sickly younger brother to look after. He thought she needed it more than him. I think the girl later gave it to a traveler. I lost track of it for awhile. The wind kept taking it. Then a Navajo girl in New Mexico found it and gave it to her father, who used it to make a dream catcher."

She saw Raphael smile as though this was where the feather truly belonged.

"So I went to the market where the girl sold her father's crafts and bought the dream catcher from her. But I gave it to a little boy who was hanging around the girl's booth. He seemed to fear nightmares and I thought it would help him."

"What do you think will become of it now?"

Jessi shrugged. "I don't know. The dream catcher hangs beside the boy's bed, capturing the evil spirits that cause bad dreams."

"The boy will grow older," Raphael said. "And forget its meaning. And lose the dream catcher or throw it away. And the feather will get caught by the wind again."

"Maybe the boy will keep it as a reminder," Jessi said. "Or give it to someone else who fears nightmares."

Jessi saw Raphael's line grow taut, bending the pole near the top, and then she watched him reel in a fish. It was larger than she expected, larger than she felt the stream could hold. It twisted rapidly in the air, then Raphael pulled it close. He removed the hook and threw the fish back into the water. Jessi watched it swim off quickly down the stream into the ice.

"It's Christmas time in the world of people, isn't it?" Raphael suddenly asked.

"Yes."

"I can tell by the weather." He baited his hook, tossed it back into the stream. Jessi heard a tiny splash and saw rings grow around Raphael's line. Then the water became calm and barely seemed to move. The ice danced peacefully around it.

"I see disturbing things," Raphael said, "in the world of people. I sense a spiritual disconnect. Tell me, Jessica, have they conquered their selfishness and greed? Have they stopped damaging their world with war and poison?"

Jessi wasn't sure how to respond. So she remained silent.

"Generosity is hibernating, it seems," he said. "I told Gabriel I wanted to see you because I am losing my motivation. I feel that what I am doing is not helping."

Jessi watched him carefully. He wasn't usually like this. Something was bothering him. Often when she came this way he wouldn't even talk to her because he was so absorbed in his fishing. He would merely shush her and send her away. But today he seemed distracted, worried almost.

"What you do," she said, "is like a meditation, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Each fish you catch and release becomes a small vibration you are sending out to the world of people. Like a healing message."

"That's what we are, Jessica. Messengers. But I'm afraid they aren't listening."

Jessi looked up the stream from where she had come. She still couldn't make out the mountains beyond the valley. She looked at Raphael. He seemed distressed.

"Tell me something, Jessica. In your travels in the world of people have you ever encountered someone with a truly generous spirit?"

"Yes, I could tell you so many things. So many stories."

"You really believe the boy will give the dream catcher to someone who needs it rather than forgetting its meaning and throwing it out?"

"Yes."

"I'll keep fishing then. Even if it only reaches one soul, it's bound to spread."

It started to snow, just slightly, flakes gently reaching into the stream. Jessi looked across the water. The snow came harder and the branches of the pine trees beyond the opposite shore turned whiter.

"I'm afraid you must leave now, Jessica," Raphael said rather abruptly.
"You're scaring the fish away."

As soon as Jessi heard him say that she knew the old Raphael was back.

"But you are welcome to visit anytime," he added. "As long as you bring stories of generous spirits." He smiled at her. "I enjoyed our chat."

"So did I," she said.

Jessi folded and returned Raphael's blanket, then she followed the stream back from where she had come, wondering if the mountains would ever reveal themselves. When she reached the edge of Raphael's valley the snow stopped and she caught just a sliver of sunshine. She looked back at the stream filled with fish. Despite the ice, the stream continued to twist through the snow-covered land.

Jessi took a deep breath of the frozen air, gazing over Raphael's valley. It was beautiful in winter. She was glad Raphael wasn't giving up. The world of people needed his healing message. She thought about Dream Runner's scorched landscape, a place where she had found a touch of Michael's spiritual clarity. She was sure Gabriel would be pleased with her wanderings in the world of people and

the world of dreams. But it was time to go home and paint. She was a bit behind in her chronicles.

Nine: Jessi's Painting

"Michael was here recently, wasn't he?" Ari glanced around Jessi's studio, sniffed the air.

"How did you know?"

"He leaves behind a sort of greenish aura odor."

Jessi smiled.

"I think Michael has a crush on me," Ari said.

"Yeah he does."

"I would totally date him."

Jessi laughed. "You would?"

"Yeah. I mean, you know, if we did that sort of thing here. And he didn't pull any of that dragon slaying crap on me."

When their laughter faded, Jessi saw Ari grow silent and stare at the painting on Jessi's easel. The spiritual umbilical cord stirred.

"I've been watching the girl you met," Ari said.

"Dream Runner."

"She's beautiful."

"Yes," Jessi said. "The sun has shaped her."

"She's like the undamaged version of me. I hope the world is kind to her." Ari looked at Jessi briefly with her steady blue eyes, then back at the canvas.

The two angels were silent for awhile. The spiritual umbilical cord hummed.

"This painting," Ari said. "It's like something hidden being revealed. It takes me awhile to see what you're doing sometimes. When I first saw this, I thought it was a nice depiction of a seraph's wing. And now I'm seeing it as something moving... or maybe emerging... into the light?" She looked at Jessi who remained silent.

"You painted this for me, didn't you?"

"Um, yes."

"What did Michael say about it?"

"This painting was on the easel when he was here," Jessi said. "But he didn't say anything about it. He looked at some of my other paintings, though. He said he wanted to build a gallery to display them."

"Really? How unlike him."

"I felt that way too, but he was genuinely interested. But mostly he seemed concerned about why I wanted so badly to spend time in the world of people."

Still looking at the painting, Ari said, "He wanted you to find the same thing in your journeys as you search for in your chronicles."

"Yes." Jessi paused, watching Ari. "How did you know I made the painting for you?"

“Because it’s about me. Slowly emerging into the light.”

Jessi could feel the hum in the spiritual umbilical cord become a buzz. She smiled. Ari continued to stare at the painting.

“It’s really about all of us,” Jessi said.

“Is the paint dry?” Ari said. “Can I touch it?”

“Sure.”

Jessi watched as the Angel Arianne touched the subtle ridges of dried paint on the canvas, following the brush strokes, slowly moving her fingers from the blur on the right side into the clear light.