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Opening extract from

Angel Fire

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Published by

Usborne Publishing PLC

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ANGEL
FIRE

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L.A. WEATHERLY



USBORNE


First published in the UK in 2011 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781409522010 Printed in Great Britain.



PROLOGUE



IT TOOK THE WOMAN A long time to leave her house.

Across the street, Seb stood propped against a run-down grocery store, hidden in the dawn shadows as he watched the woman's front door. His high-cheekboned face had a light stubble on its jaw; his lean body was as simultaneously relaxed and alert as a cat's. He was sure this was the right place. It looked exactly like what he'd seen: a golden-yellow house on the main street, with a

panelled wooden door, and a small wrought-iron balcony filled with flowering plants – a jumble of red and yellow. With his hands in his jeans pockets, Seb counted the front door's panels: ten. Then he counted the flowerpots: seventeen.

Come on, chiquita, you're going to be late for work, he thought.

The door opened at last and a small, round woman wearing a business suit came out. Fussily delving into her handbag for keys, she finally found them and locked the door behind her, then teetered to her car on high-heeled shoes that looked too small for her plump feet. By the time she'd reached the car she had somehow lost her keys in her handbag again and had to stand on the sidewalk searching for almost a minute, shaking her head in irritation. Seb held back a smile. Yes, this seemed like her.

The moment the woman's car had disappeared around the corner, Seb grabbed a battered knapsack that sat at his feet and slung it over his shoulder. He'd already checked out the best way to get to the back of the house; now he took a quick second to send his other self flying, making sure the way was

clear. It was. He crossed the road, strolling through the early-morning silence. A tall wooden fence bordered the house along one side. Jumping to grasp the top of it, Seb vaulted over easily. The back of the house was just like he'd seen, too – a tidy concrete courtyard, again filled lushly with potted plants. A faded deckchair stood folded near the sliding patio door.

The window with the broken lock the woman had been worried about was up on the second floor. It was the work of a minute for Seb to climb the trellis and slide the window open, letting himself in. He dropped silently into the woman's bedroom – pale green, lots of ruffles. There was a smell of perfume, as if dousing herself had been the last thing she'd done before leaving.

And now she'd be gone for hours. Her job was so far away that she didn't have time to come home for lunch; it had been one of many niggling concerns on her mind the day before. The woman's thoughts had been like leaves in a whirlwind: none weighty in themselves, but the overall effect had left Seb with a headache from trying to focus on them. Psychic readings weren't always an easy way

to pick up a few pesos, especially when all he wanted was to get them over with quickly, so he could buy something to eat and get back to the only thing that mattered to him. Even so, he hoped what he'd told the woman had helped. She definitely needed to relax more – though he was glad she hadn't decided to start doing it today.

Leaving the scented bedroom, Seb started searching, his steps echoing on the tiled floors. Though he rarely did this kind of thing any more, there'd been a time when he'd done it all too often, with much worse motives than now. Gently, he pushed open doors, peered into rooms. His face creased into a frown. She would *have* one, wouldn't she? He hadn't seen for sure; he'd just assumed. Then on the ground floor, he found it: a computer sitting at a desk in the corner.

Perfect. Seb swung himself into the chair and hit the *on* button. The local school with its computers the public could use was closed today, and he hadn't been able to get a bed at the hostel for the last few nights, where he might have borrowed someone's laptop. He entered a few words into the search engine, typing slowly. A list

of options came up; he found the one he was looking for and selected it.

Diaz Orphanage, said the website's home page: *A haven for children*. Seb's lip curled. He'd seen many orphanages over the years; few could be described as "havens". But this was one he'd found out about only yesterday, and he needed to check it – who knew, it might turn out to be the place where he'd finally find what he was looking for. His heart beat faster at the thought, though he was all too aware by now how unlikely that was. Taking a piece of paper from the woman's desk, he carefully wrote down the address and stuck it in his knapsack; it was around a hundred miles to the east, in the foothills of the Sierra Madre.

Then, on impulse, he brought up a map of Mexico, gazing at its familiar shape and mentally tracing the lines he'd travelled up and down it for years now. He'd started in Mexico City and since then had rarely spent more than a few weeks in one place. Currently he was in Presora, not far from Hermosillo, with its white beaches and throngs of tourists. Presora was quieter, though; a smaller town that had still taken him days to

search, checking out every person he passed on the street, entering every building he was able to, sending his other self into the ones he couldn't.

There'd been nothing. Nothing at all. It wasn't really surprising – in his whole life, Seb had never seen even a hint of what he hoped so much to find. But he had to keep trying. It was all he could do.

Enough of this; he'd gotten what he came for. He turned off the computer and stood up, swinging his bag over his shoulder – and then his glance fell on the woman's bookcase, and he was lost. He drifted over to it, squatting on his haunches as he gazed hungrily. A lot of the paperbacks didn't even look as if they'd been opened, and for a heartbeat Seb was tempted – he'd almost finished his current book, and didn't know when he'd next find a used bookstore to trade it for another one. He touched the cover of a thick historical novel. It would keep him going for a week.

But no. He hadn't broken in here to steal, even if in the past he wouldn't have thought twice. With a sigh, Seb straightened up.

As he started for the stairs he saw a hallway beside the kitchen, with a shower room visible.

He hesitated, then went and looked inside. The white-tiled room was almost bare: just a hand towel and a bar of dusty-looking soap, as if the shower in here was rarely used. Which was probably true – the woman lived alone; the pristine pink bathroom he'd seen upstairs was the one with all her potions and powders in it. A mischievous smile began to tug at Seb's face. Okay, *this* he couldn't resist – he hadn't been able to get really clean in days. His clothes were cleaner than he was; it had been easier to find a laundromat in this town than a bed at the hostel.

He entered the small room, locking the door behind him. There was a tube of shower gel in his knapsack; he dug it out, then stripped off and took a long shower, relishing both the hot water and the privacy. Even after so many years, it still felt as if he could never take either for granted. His body was firm and toned; as he bathed, scars he barely noticed any more gleamed from his wet skin – some white with age, others newer, puckering redly. He hated not feeling clean almost more than anything; it felt wonderful to wash away the grime of the last few days.

Afterwards, Seb dried off as best he could with the hand towel and glanced in the mirror, scraping his wet hair back. It curled when he wore it too short, irritating him, and so he kept it slightly long, shoved away from his face. A loose curl or two always fell over his forehead anyway, just to torment him.

His jeans and T-shirt clung to him when he got dressed again, but the heat of the day would soon finish drying him off. He glanced around the shower room to make sure he'd left it the way he'd found it; then he jogged back up the stairs, eager to get going towards the Sierra Madre and the address in his knapsack. In the green and frilly bedroom, Seb paused at the window, glancing around him.

"*Gracias,*" he murmured to the unseen woman with a smile, and then nimbly swung himself out.

Hitch-hiking to the orphanage took a while; it sometimes did. Towards evening, a trucker was giving Seb a lift the final stretch of the way, talking non-stop about his girlfriend. Smoking a cigarette

the man had given him, Seb leaned back against the aging vinyl seat of the cab, with one sneakered foot propped on the dash, only half-listening as he savoured the familiar taste. He didn't often have the money these days to waste on cigarettes.

“And so I told her, *chiquita*, I'm not having this, I told you twice already. You have to *listen* to me when I talk to you. Take in what I'm actually saying, you know what I mean?” The trucker glanced at Seb for confirmation; his face was broad and florid, with dark stubble.

“Yeah, you're right, man,” said Seb, blowing out a stream of smoke. “Good for you.” He'd far rather be reading than listening to this crap; unfortunately there was a sort of etiquette involved with hitchhiking. Making conversation was the price of the ride.

“But she never listens to me, does she? No, off in her own world, that one. Hopeless. Beautiful, but...” The man went on, talking and talking.

Seb watched him idly, taking in the angry red lines that had appeared in his aura, like lightning flashes. When he'd first gotten into the cab, he'd shifted the colours of his own aura so that they

matched the truck driver's blue and yellow hues. He knew the man wouldn't be able to see them or tell; it was just a habit left over from childhood, when blending his aura with those around him had made him feel safer. More hidden.

But the more Seb listened to this jerk, the more he really didn't want to share his aura. He shifted back to his natural colours as he got an image of the man standing in a kitchen shouting; a dark-haired woman looking frightened. Not exactly a surprise. The trucker didn't feel like he'd be a danger to Seb, though; he seemed strictly the type to bully those who were weaker. Seb knew he'd probably have sensed it if he had anything to worry about – and there was always the switchblade he carried in his pocket in case there was trouble. You didn't travel alone in Mexico without a weapon, unless you were terminally stupid.

“Now, take you for instance,” the truck driver went on. “How old are you – seventeen, eighteen?”

“Seventeen,” said Seb, blowing out another stream of smoke. He'd be eighteen in less than a month; he didn't bother volunteering this.

“Yeah, and I bet you don’t have any trouble getting the girls, do you?” The man gave a guffawing laugh; his aura chuckled along with him, flickering orange. “You look like a rock star – like all the girls would have you up on their wall. But take my advice, *amigo*, never let them...”

Mentally rolling his eyes, Seb tuned out, wishing he could snap on the radio at least. People often commented on his looks, but looks couldn’t get him the one thing he wanted.

“So where are you from?” asked the man finally, stubbing out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. “Sonora? Sinaloa?”

“El DF,” said Seb. The Distrito Federal; Mexico City. It was almost dark now; the traffic heading towards them was a series of lights swooping out of the gloom. “My mother was from Sonora.”

“Thought so,” said the man, glancing at him again. “French, I bet. Or Italian.”

Seb couldn’t resist. “Italian,” he said, keeping a straight face. “Venice, originally. My great-grandfather was a gondolier – then he immigrated here and there weren’t any canals, so he became a *ranchero*.”

The truck driver's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yeah, sure," said Seb, leaning forward to tap the ash off his cigarette. "Over ten thousand head of cattle. But I think his heart was always with the canals, you know?" He could have gone on in this vein for some time, except the guy was such an idiot that it was too easy to be much fun.

The truck driver went back to the endless subject of his girlfriend, outlining her many failings and the ways in which she was going to have to improve. A few more flashes of the woman being bullied came to Seb as he droned on, so that by the time they reached Seb's destination and pulled over to the side of the road, he could have happily choked the guy. Instead, he filched the pack of cigarettes and lighter from the truck driver's pocket as they shook hands. He hadn't picked a pocket since he was a kid on the Mexico City streets, but it gave him a certain satisfaction – though really, he should let the *cabrón* keep smoking, since it was bad for your health.

As the truck pulled away, Seb gave himself a quick shake, freeing himself of the unpleasant energy like a dog shaking itself dry of water. He

was almost in the Sierra Madre now, standing on a hill in the gathering dark with the shadowy hulk of mountains rising up from the horizon. He focused briefly to make sure there weren't any angels nearby, and then he sent his other self searching. As he soared he found the orphanage easily; it was about half a mile down the road, a sprawling building with a barren-looking playground. He pulled on a sweater from his knapsack and started walking, letting his other self keep flying as he did. The feeling of stretching his wings was nice; it had been a few days since he'd flown any distance.

Thinking of what he'd told the truck driver, Seb smiled slightly as he walked. Actually, where his mother came from was almost the only thing Seb knew about her – he hadn't seen her since he was five years old. From the few memories he had, he knew that he looked a lot like her. Light brown hair with a curl to it; high cheekbones and hazel eyes; a mouth that women sometimes called "beautiful", which made him inwardly roll his eyes even more. It was a distinctly northern face; Sonora was a state where European immigrants had mixed for generations. On the streets, *gringo*

tourists were always assuming Seb was one of them and asking for directions in English – clueless to the fact that millions of Mexicans didn't look like the ones in westerns on TV.

And as for his father, who knew? But Seb knew he couldn't have been unattractive. None of them were.

As he crested the hill, the orphanage came into view, and he stood gazing down at it for a moment, his grip tight on the strap of his knapsack. Now that he was here, he was almost afraid to look – the continuous hope, and then the inevitable letdown, was becoming so much harder to bear. Yet he had to go through with it. The last hour of his life stuck listening to that *cabrón* in the truck would have been completely wasted if he didn't do what he'd come for. And besides, this might be the place. This really might be the place where he finally found her.

Despite himself, Seb felt a stab of anticipation so sharp it was almost painful – the hope that he couldn't ever totally quench. He left the road and lay down flat in the grass on his stomach, with the orphanage in view below. Concentrating solely on

his other self, he closed his eyes.

He glided down the valley towards the run-down building, his wide wings glinting in the dusk. With barely a ripple, he passed through a wall of the orphanage and flew inside. As usual, his muscles tensed to be entering one of these places. Unwanted, the memory of the room came, with its total darkness that had pressed down on his five-year-old self like a weight. But the room had turned out to be a blessing in disguise – because it was there that he'd first realized what he really was. It was the only thing that had kept him from going insane in that place.

No one saw Seb's other self as he glided noiselessly from room to room. He saw immediately that this orphanage was one of the few that weren't too bad – it was clean, if depressingly bare. And the auras of the children and teenagers looked healthy enough, once he found them all sitting in a dining room eating their dinners with the staff – they showed signs of boredom rather than abuse. Circling overhead, Seb scanned them, noting all the colours: a dull blue, a flicker of lively pink, a gentle green. None had even a hint of silver, but

that didn't necessarily mean anything; he'd been shifting his own aura since he was a child. As he focused on each one, he opened his senses to them, checking out the feel of the energy – *listening* to them almost – his whole being craning with anticipation as he touched each person's energy with his own. They were all completely human.

He checked again, just to make sure, but his heart had gone out of it. Then he forced himself to explore the other rooms, though he knew already that he wouldn't find anyone else in them, and he didn't.

She wasn't here, either.

The disappointment tightened his throat like someone was standing on it. Opening his eyes, Seb brought his other self out of the orphanage and lay motionless, still gazing down at the stark building below.

She. He snorted slightly. He didn't even know if there were any others of his kind, much less what sex they might be. Yet somehow he'd always known that it was a girl around his own age he was looking for. He could feel her so strongly. Even though he had no idea of her name or what she looked like,

he knew *her*. For as long as he could remember, Seb had had a sense of the girl's spirit; who she was. He thought he could almost hear her laugh sometimes; catch glimpses of her smile. Not being able to actually see her, or touch her, was a constant ache inside him.

Roughly, Seb scraped his hair back with both hands. Why wasn't he used to the disappointment of not finding her by now? How many cities had he searched? How many orphanages and schools; how many miles spent walking how many streets? Suddenly he felt tired – so tired. Somehow this latest failure felt like the last straw.

It's never going to happen, thought Seb. I've only imagined her all these years, because I wanted so much for it to be true.

Rolling over onto his back, he watched his angel self as it soared against the blue-black sky, snowy wings outspread against the stars. For once, the sensation of flight didn't soothe him. He'd been searching for his half-angel girl for so long: first for years on the streets of Mexico City after he'd run away from the orphanage, checking out every aura that he passed. Then, when he was

eleven, he'd been thrown into a young offender facility; he'd broken out at thirteen and soon after had started his quest in earnest, travelling up and down the country, searching every town, every city and village. *Everywhere*, for almost five years now, without encountering a single other aura that was like his own. Without once catching even a hint of her energy, except in his thoughts.

Above, his angel wheeled against the stars; Seb felt the wind whisper past his shining wings. *Enough*, he told himself. The thought seemed to float into his mind of its own accord, but the moment it did he knew that it was true.

He couldn't do this any more; couldn't take the never-ending disappointment. Because if he had never seen another of his kind in all these years, in a country as populated as Mexico, then it was time he finally faced the truth – there *were* no others. No half-angel girl was going to miraculously appear to ease his loneliness, no matter how strongly he thought he sensed her. She didn't exist. She'd only been a figment of his imagination all this time; a beautiful phantom. By some bitter joke of nature he was alone – the only one of his

kind – and it was time to just accept that and try to get on with the rest of his life, whatever that might bring.

The decision felt right. It also felt like something had just been ripped out of his chest, leaving a jagged hole that would never be filled. Seb lay on the soft grass and watched his angel self fly, so effortlessly graceful against the stars. And he knew that what he'd been thinking wasn't quite true – as long as he had this other part of himself, he would never be completely alone.

It only felt that way.

L.A. WEATHERLY

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