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*Angel  
Without Wings*

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## DEDICATIONS &amp; ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to several people who have in one way or another been instrumental in its being written, regardless of whether it will ever be published.

First, it is dedicated to Ellen Geer Sangster, who was headmistress and founder of Buxton School, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Mrs. S. was one of those extraordinary people who changed the lives of many, not just those who were lucky enough to be her students. She had a knack for finding within them possibilities and capabilities they—and frequently those about them—were unaware of. Not everyone went on to fulfill those potentials—I among such, but while I’ve had more than my share of fumbles and flops in one way or another, I believe she would not have counted me as a failure, either. I only regret that she never had the opportunity to read even an early draft of this book.

Then there are some within the science–fantasy and SF fan community who encouraged me in the pursuit of this particular endeavor, at various stages—Two among these are Ted White, a friend now of many years, who was editor of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* for a period and has authored a few published books, who read a very early draft of it, and Jim Frenkel, who has edited or was otherwise instrumental in the publishing of a number of substantial works in the field, who read a subsequent

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Included in and in addition to the above, there are a number of folk who appear one way or another within these pages, mixed and matched and substantially altered in detail so that the legal disclaimer—THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION; ALL CHARACTERS AND EVENTS PORTRAYED IN THIS BOOK ARE FICTIONAL, AND ANY RESEMBLANCE TO REAL PEOPLE OR EVENTS IS COINCIDENTAL—retains its validity. Should anyone believe they recognize an aspect of themselves in any character in this novel, congratulations (or commiserations, as the case may be)—but please, don’t take it personally! Anyone finding a presumed ‘Tuckerization’ or appearance of a recognizable name is cautioned that it will have little if any application to the character or characters portrayed under that name. Nevertheless, I am grateful for their inspirational existence.

Ross Chamberlain, Las Vegas, NV — 2006

*Man has no Body distinct from his Soul  
for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul  
discern'd by the five Senses...*

— William Blake, *The Marriage of  
Heaven and Hell*

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## ANGEL WITHOUT WINGS

By Ross Chamberlain

## PROLOGUE

FROM PIN-SHARP STARS and brilliant, moonlit canyon walls of cloud she fell, cascading into sudden darkness. Her hair tugged and snapped against her back. The air, frigid with altitude, barely cooled her tingling skin. Something within her thrummed like hummingbird's wings.

The flicker of a damp tongue of mist swept along her skin. Abruptly she slowed her descent. No need for suddenly dropping into a cloud-hidden hillside or a misplaced mountain top.

Her eyes, adjusting to the relative darkness beneath the towering cumulus, first glimpsed delicate tracings of light, meeting in a multicolored web: the distant streetlights and neon of a sprawling little town.

Apart from this angular island nebula a few golden stars winked or shone steadily. Some were still, where an early-rising farmer labored, or a late-studying scholar dozed before a dulled monitor. Or perhaps an indulgent parent let her afraid-of-the-dark child sleep secure in the presence of its room.

Other lights moved, inward toward the town or away from it, sometimes in seeming orbit around it: cars or trucks pushing tiny comet tails ahead of them. They might be pre-dawn ten-wheelers on their way to one of the larger galaxies almost discernable on the horizon, or small-town commuters on their way to or from odd-houred jobs—or possibly an errant spouse returning to some still and shuttered domicile.

Gradually, as she dropped clear of the cloudy underlevels, great silver areas, away from the light-haze of the town, resolved into patterns like a giant corrugated crazy-quilt, rumped and tossed where the moon illuminated farmlands, pastures, cultivated fields and fallow land. Where these were not bunched up almost to her own level, they were crossed by long dark lines where the tiny traffic occasionally inched. Other, darker, twisted lines followed wooded streams. Across all, ponderously, implacably, moon-cast shadows from the clouds above her crept across the silver-etched land.

For a moment a hint of chill from the high, frigid atmosphere almost penetrated that inner, vibrating warmth. She faltered, her stomach shrinking, her lungs clutching for air—and, for a sliding, panicky moment, her support was gone and she was truly falling.

But it had happened before, though rarely since the early days. She had control back in moments; the warmth returned in a surge across her goose-prickled skin, and she laughed—at first faintly, a touch of hysteria choking out a high note, then fully, in relief and exaltation as she resumed her spiral path homeward. Though the sound of her laughter dissolved instantly into the vastness, she did not grudge it. It was her gift to the friendly night, and there was more where that came from.

To the west, near by, the silver gathered itself into cotton-highlighted darkness, the forest stretching away until it

merged with the dark horizon. Below, a curving, sometimes glistening snake browsed across the land, emerging from the bunched hills and losing itself in the cross-hatching that darkened and dimmed toward the misty east. Closer, it edged by a concentrated spatter of blue and gold illumination, speckled here and there with a ruby twinkle.

She had judged well. That was the Cushman-Masters plant, straddling the Davies River downstream from where it emerged from Ararat National Forest. No doubt the paper and plastics manufacturing facility was at the very moment polluting the river for the folks on down toward the coast two hundred miles away, despite the efforts of state and federal agencies—not to mention local Crosswood County authorities. Jerry was constantly on about it, even though he worked there—indeed, he should be on the graveyard shift right now. But she had rarely known her brother to do more than rant about anything, especially since taking up with the Seekers.

A brief upsurge of ecological consciousness in '01 and '02 when she was still in grade school seemed to have submerged again, holding little real meaning for anyone any more. At least, that was what Maryanne had been complaining about before she left for New York City last fall. Maryanne's father, despite being the sheriff, seemed to have little support as a leader in the community's ecological conservation efforts.

Near the edge of the forest, halfway between the plant and the outskirts of Beverton, a dim light marked home. She entered a leisurely glide toward it, acknowledging the beckoning glimmer, but still wishing to bask for a while longer in the open moonlight and cloudshadow. The familiar landmarks resolved themselves out of the darkness—the bulky blot of the old barn, close to the welcome fat-L shape of the house itself, and the irregular dark lines of the pasture and barnyard fences, blurred here and there with disrepair.

At this hour all were still sharper to her mind than to her eyes. Nonetheless, with the ease of long practice, a final swoop brought her through the dark square of her open bedroom window, directly above the lighted one that had been her beacon.

She landed with the barest whisper of her naked feet against the coolness of the hardwood floor. Consciously she kept her weight low, so that no boards might squeak nor any footfall be heard below. Her mother had probably drifted to sleep over a book or a magazine—but that could never be wholly counted on. The light was always on, every night, all night, and had been since ...well, for as long as she had any reason to remember.

She did not close the window. A breeze was swimming in after her, and the exertion of the flight, such as it was, suddenly discontinued, left her perspiring and a little out of breath.

Yet, too, the exultation of flying was still with her, and in the pale and changing light that slipped in and out of her room, through one window and another, she pirouetted, glancing at herself in her dressing-table mirror as she turned, knowing she was beautiful.

Then, as the thrumming vibration within her dwindled away and her weight began to settle, she stopped her dance and stood still, before the mirror, gazing at herself. With the passing of airy lightness, with the return of gravity's clutch, there returned also something that shadowed her eyes and perhaps bent her shoulders a little, even as her breasts settled across her chest and her hair drifted to drape her like a misty dark shawl.

She lifted her breasts a little to ease the fold, then ran her palms and the tips of her fingers lightly over them and down, pleased with the firmness of her skin and the muscles be-

neath; down her sides and over the flare of her hips, until her arms hung at her sides.

With a flick or two of her head, she tossed her hair back over her shoulders. A deep auburn in the sun, it now seemed black in the dim light. Already it was trying to plaster itself to a sudden perspiration that brought highlights to her mirror image, although the protective warmth that came to her in flight was giving way to the cool night air. Shortly she would have to either shut the window or climb in to bed. The latter, she thought, would be the most desirable choice.

Yes, mixed with her exultation in flight was a sense of loneliness, of loss. Who could she tell of her nearly nightly jaunts into the sky, far above the rooftops and hills and forests of her homeland? How could she tell anyone?

For over five years, Judy Rowe had often flown across the forest and beyond, southward as the Blue Ridge stretched itself into South Carolina or northward over and beyond the Blue Ridge Parkway to where Asheville nestled, gleaming in the night. Now and then she had flown west until she knew she must be over the Great Smokies, beyond the Tennessee border. And other times she traced her way east to where the land lay comparatively flat and still, as far as the commercial lights of Charlotte.

From near the beginning she had mostly flown nude, the passage of the wind at speed snapping and trying to rip apart any loose clothing, while the inner heat that protected her against the low temperatures of the upper air and evaporative losses from the wind, became far too much for her in anything form-fitting. This alone, she was determined, prevented any confidences in anyone concerning her power to fly. But there were other considerations...

One day, almost two years ago, on her sixteenth birthday, Jerry had been especially obnoxious and her mother more

withdrawn. The evening had passed with no special marking for the occasion, save a half-hearted attempt by her mother to serve a dish she had once liked as a child. The last straw had come with an obscene phone call in some snickering adolescent voice, and she had not even waited until after her bedtime, but ran to her bedroom, stripped and took off toward the east.

It had been a half-thought-out thing at best. Now and then she had looked at the battered old Rand-McNally Road Atlas in the back of Jerry's ancient gas-guzzler and had some idea of how to go. She'd had no idea at all how far 400 miles would be.

She climbed the winds eastward, fast and blind, passing over Charlotte and edging northward, sweeping past the next great set of lights—it might have been Greensborough, Durham or even Raleigh. She was certain it was too far east for it to have been Winston-Salem. The real earth at night bore little resemblance to Jerry's roadmaps...

The protective, humming warmth—and something more that was a part of it—preserved her as her speed through the air made it crackle about her, so loud that her ears tingled. The vibration within her became almost a song, and her hair, normally loose and fluttering when she was airborne, now just clung to her back, caressing with a firm touch. Her breathing was shallow, but not labored; somehow the hum sustained her.

She was following some major highway, I-85 or maybe I-95, northward, past city and town, until the scattered lights below had gathered into a mighty and breathtaking starfield, filling the great spaces between the sparse clouds. Suddenly, far below and in front of her, at the heart of the deepest concentration of light, she recognized a narrow spire—the Washington monument. And, yes, far along the stretch of the Mall, there it was—the gleaming dome of the Capitol itself!

The myriad of lights and towns and highways that filled the world had left her confused and frightened; the long trip exhausted her. All at once, realizing where she was—the concentrated effort of getting there now gone—she panicked.

She shot away from the lights in the general direction of the nearest inland darkness, and then climbed down the air into a stand of trees on the edge of some estate or farmland.

She had sometimes wondered since then if adrenalin perhaps mixed badly with whatever it was that let her fly and created the vibration that warmed her in the upper air. She was spitting cotton; she was dehydrated, possibly seriously, but had no idea where she might safely find fresh water. Back home, she knew most of the natural springs in six counties.

For a while, she lay on the ground, clutching cool grass until it tore, holding on to Mother Earth for dear life until her heart's rapid staccato gradually slowed to a normal beat. Finally, perhaps an hour later, maybe less, she was awakened and chased away by a bounding, gruffling dog. In the darkness she thought it looked like a setter or some kind of bird dog; to it she must have appeared like some enormous flushed grouse, pounding into the sky.

She found a water fountain at a schoolyard and drank for a while, feeling exposed and starting at any sound. Soon after, in the air, she was sick, spewing the contents of her stomach into the darkness below, momentarily faltering and then recovering some altitude before the next retching convulsion. A nightmare later she arrived back home, drained and on the verge of utter exhaustion, battered and almost deafened by the screaming wind of her passage, as the sun was beginning to light the sky in preparation for rising...

She found out later, that afternoon, that her mother and Jerry had discovered her absence when—it must have been very soon after she had gone—they had tried to call her down

from her room. They had meant to surprise her—her mother with a hope chest, a beautiful red cedar chest she knew had been inherited from her maiden aunt Beth; Jerry, with an exquisitely carved picture frame he'd made himself. She used it now to hold a picture of their father.

When they gave them to her, she hugged her brother, kissing his cheek, then fell into her mother's arms and cried, broken-hearted—both wept then for the first time in years, and the last time since. Neither of them inquired about where she had been that night. But, though unasked, the question hung about them for long and long...

There was always the fear of being discovered in flight. She imagined the most bizarre results, knowing it would be in fact catastrophic, not only for her but for her mother, and no doubt awkward for Jerry as well—what would his Seeker cronies think?

Formless thoughts scrabbled through her mind, of exposition in a circus, or confinement in some laboratory while cold, white-smocked doctors and technicians poked about her and in her, trying to analyze her to see why and how she could fly. Questioning her again and again while she struggled to tell them what she had never known.

On that initially adventurous occasion, when she had “gone to see the President,” it had been the sudden thought of protective radar devices surrounding the Capitol that had triggered her panic. She had no real idea of the nature of such things, of course, but—

The Middle Eastern brush wars were still raging, and there were constant alerts against terrorist activity. What if Washington's defenses had suddenly called a red alert and sent up jets and heat-seeking missiles and started shooting at her with anti-aircraft guns? The images of sky-filling, fireworks-like green flashes of missile attacks in the filmed

reports from Baghdad and the Persian Gulf were vivid from the TV reports of the wars.

Sometimes she had visions of great searchlights, like the ones from the old World War II movies, weaving around her and pinning her against a cloud, nude and helpless, a target for bugging military eyes and guns and missiles...

Last fall's course in Psychology 101 at Crosswood County Community College in Beaverton had not been wholly necessary to inform her of some of the symbolism involved in such imaginary rape. And the melodramatics of the images later amused her, somewhat. But, in the two years since, she had not flown so far—nor so near any major urban concentration.

Even beyond the fear of discovery, there was a secret shame, a guilt, that she could never quite erase...

With but a touch of that inner vibration, she let herself lift. She floated through the shifting darkness to slip quietly down between the welcome cool sheets of her bed. Welcome— But for a few moments she found herself shivering uncontrollably. And for once she didn't reach for the usual snack cake or chocolate bar she usually craved after flight. She just pulled her sheet around her and lay until the shivering faded at last.

Still, though her eyes were closed, it seemed a long time before sleep gentled her racing mind. Outside, the moon roared silently between black and grey clouds.

*And her longing loneliness reached out, and, far away, in the tangled skeins of an unconsciously kindred mind, there was a response— of a kind.*