

Chapter 1

ANGEL OR DEMON

Nightmares again. Will rolled over and ignored the rooster's "cockle-doodle-doo." The morning call to action only made things worse. It served as a herald to proclaim yet another failure. An overwhelming feeling of fear rendered him powerless to get out of bed. His ability to remember every detail of the dream fueled the flames of the fear that burned his soul.

Will held his breath and tried to tear away the layers of water-soaked clothing dragging him towards the bottom of the pond. His pulse beat loud in his ears as he fought the urge to take a breath underwater. Will hoped that shedding his winter coat would make him buoyant again and stopped paddling his feet to concentrate on removing it.

One arm came free as he continued to descend. A second arm broke free but a single button still trapped his body in the coat. Will brought his knees up and managed to push the coat down around them. One final kick popped the button. The heavy outer layer fell away, but a second and third layer remained.

Will tried to swim up but made no progress towards the surface of the water. He knew his coveralls must go next and started with the clasps and buttons. The piercing cold stiffened his fingers and made it difficult. Seconds ticked away and his vision began to tunnel. Half the buttons were undone but it seemed an impossible task. He considered giving up.

A dark shape cast a shadow from above. Will looked up and could see someone swimming towards him. Renewed hope came with a shot of adrenaline allowing him to undo the

last remaining buttons. Out of breath and almost free of his second layer his toes sunk into the muddy bottom of the pond.

Will's vision went dark. No longer able to focus on anything but holding his breath, he awaited his fate. He felt someone wrap their arms around him. At the edge of consciousness, he could barely perceive time and movement. It seemed to be an eternity of pain and darkness. Overcome with a mad desire to breathe, he opened his mouth. Instead of water, he drew in a lungful of air.

The surge of oxygen to brain and body gave Will a jolt of energy. His sight returned, and he swam for the safety of land. It only took a minute to reach the shallows. Will stood with his head just above water. He spun around scanning the water for whomever carried out the daring rescue. The silence and flat surface of the water made Will grow even colder.

Realization sunk in and a darkness erupted inside him. It felt like a demon sucked the life right out of his soul. A primordial fear that someone died to save him—overwhelmed Will's senses. He felt all the air vanish from his lungs and his vision began to darken again. As he lost consciousness, Will awoke from his dream.

For the last several weeks, Will woke every morning in a cold sweat. Today was no different. The thick patchwork quilt covering his head muffled the sounds of the outside world but did not protect him from the demon inside. It felt like an angel and demon waged a war over Will. Most days the angel's voice won, but lately, the lack of sleep fed the hungry demon. He hid under the covers until he could bring his fear under control. Each day it took longer and longer. When he failed to emerge out of bed with the cock's crow, his pet dragon Razor started chattering overhead.

Will's animals needed him. He loved them. It reminded Will of everything good that happened over the last month and helped him forget the horror of what happened a year ago. He embraced memories of his renewed friendship with Jade, using them as a tool to fight off the demon and the clutches of its fear. Studying in the library with her, walking home, their first kiss. His stomach fluttered. In the presence of love, the demon, and the fear it brought— withdrew to the dark corners of Will's mind.

In response to the change in Will's mood, Razor stopped chittering and began churring. The strength of their bond and the proximity allowed them to sense each other's emotions. Will raised a hand and stroked the head of the black and green mottled dragon perched over his bed. Will could feel the little dragon's concern over his wellbeing. It felt like love.

With renewed courage, Will flung off the covers. Placing his feet on the cold wood floor meant the steam heaters had gone dry in the night. He quickly put on several layers of thick leather over handspun cotton underclothes. He donned boots, pants, shirt, vest, long coat, gloves, and top hat all made of leather from their own farm. Even the brass goggles he strapped to his hat were made by his own father. He bent over and made sure his long hair fell into the hat before placing it firmly on his head.

Will snapped his fingers and Razor leapt from the perch and followed. Razor's small size still allowed him to fly inside the house. They grabbed a quick bite of homemade bread and jam then stepped outside with a pocket full of apples. The cold mountain air rushed past Will's freckles and still managed to pierce his many layers of clothing. He felt the prick of goosebumps dot his arms as he began his chores.

Before his sister left the farm, chores only took an hour. Now it took over two hours, and his father rarely helped. Will decided to tackle the steam engines first and approached the one next to the farmhouse. He gave the metal of its frame a good hearty kick. *Stupid machine. Broken again. You always quit when I need you the most.*

After filling the boiler with water, he lit the coal fire, but the engine did not hum to life. He turned a couple of dials and checked the pressure gauge. Nothing seemed to work. With an ear pressed to the side of the gear box, he opened and closed several valves. The rush of water through the pipes sounded like music missing a few notes. Will perceived a stuck butterfly valve inside the main water pipe

He checked all the fittings and ran his hands over the pipes running into the house. No leaks. *Good. Just need to free the stuck valve.* Will placed both hands on the pipe near the location of the valve inside the pipe and closed his eyes. He pictured the valve in his mind. Using his magic, he transferred intelligence into it and gave the command to rotate. A “click” noise confirmed it worked. Will twisted the main valve open and watched the gauge indicate the main tank started to refill. He fired up the automatic coal feeder after relighting the fire. A roar and a hiss from the steam engine proclaimed a victory for Will.

Now it's time for my other friends. Razor accompanied him while he fed, cleaned, and milked. They had horses, cows, chickens, pigs, and sheep. He finished with his favorite chore at the horse barn. Will's horse, Bastion, whinnied as he approached the door. He threw it wide open and said, “Good morning gorgeous! Are you happy to see me?”

Bastion pawed the ground with his hoof then moved his head up and down in reply. Will could feel his eagerness through their bond. He held out an apple in his open hand. Bastion took

a bite, cutting it in half with his teeth. After chomping and swallowing the first half, he took the other half gently with his lips. While he ate, Will scratched Bastion's ears. When he finished, Will wrapped his arms around Bastion's enormous head and kissed him on the nose, "Don't worry about Jade stealing kisses, you *both* can have them."

Bastion stood nearly twice Will's height, a fifteen-hand bay stallion. He should have been too much for Will to handle but his training, and a little bit of magic, created a special bond. Will started riding at age six, entered formal riding lessons at age eight and quickly worked his way up from sheep, to ponies, and then to thoroughbreds. He received Bastion from his father on his twelfth birthday. It was the second-best day of his life. Number one on that list was his eighth birthday when he received his first crossbow.

After finishing the horses, Will turned his attention to the remaining steam engines. They had four that ran their farm. He refilled all the water tanks and restarted the fires. The remaining ones hummed back to life. Steam power ran most of planet Titan and he knew machines were the future, but that knowledge only increased his affection for animals.

Will ended his chores at their pond. He shivered standing at the edge of the water and pulled his coat tighter. The fish disturbed the surface as he tossed food into the murky depths. Ripples making their way across the water had a mesmerizing effect. Will stared. He had a love-hate relationship with water, especially *this* pond. His recent nightmares only heightened the perception of a threat looming underneath its clouded surface.

Will focused on his reflection. The uneven water altered the shape of his nose and mouth. His frown looked more like a grimace. Will focused on his face and wondered what Jade saw in him. *Why does she even like me? If I told her I wanted to run away—what would she think?*

Jade made him feel like life was worth living. Both the angel and the demon raged inside Will. First, the dutiful son who took care of his father; and second, the 16-year-old boy who believed he caused the death of his mother. Before Will walked away from the pond and back into the house, he looked over at his mother's headstone and said, "Is it OK for me to fall in love for the first time? Is it OK for me to be happy for once?"

Chapter 2

GOOD DAY OR BAD?

Will had been thinking about running away for the last several months—but the farm needed him, his father needed him—Will's stomach growled. He looked at his mother's grave and chose to be the angel today.

Will hurried back to the house, and Razor flew off to hunt for more breakfast. Once inside the kitchen, Will put eggs and vegetables he had gathered onto the wood countertop, threw more coal into the potbellied stove, and stoked the embers. While it heated, Will went to his father's room. Jove sat awake and upright. Will gave him a kiss on the forehead, helped him get out of bed, and get dressed. Throughout the morning routine Jove remained silent with a vacant look on his face.

Lending him an elbow, Will assisted his father to a rocking chair in the kitchen. He placed a heavy hand-made quilt over Jove's lap then returned to cooking. An insulated cold box held fresh cut bacon. Will pumped water into the sink and washed the food. He chopped onions,

potatoes and carrots while looking out a window over the herb garden then placed everything in a skillet onto the stove.

Will this be a good or bad day? He wondered while the bacon popped and cracked. Will prepared tea for his dad and waited. The smell of eggs, onions and bacon usually provoked a response from his father. If he asked for the songbird, it would be a good day. Will twisted his long hair around a finger in anticipation. When he put the cooked food out on the table his father spoke.

“I love the sound of songbirds in the morning,” Jove said.

Will breathed a sigh of relief and handed his father the tea.

“Yes, dad, I agree. Please drink some tea while I get the bird.”

Will walked into the family room and retrieved a clockwork songbird. Winding it until it clicked, he raised the kitchen window a few inches and placed it on the sill. It played a melodious tune as a soft breeze blew through the open window. Jove hummed along. Will smiled while he moved Jove to the table. *He should be fine by himself today.*

Jove ate breakfast while Will got ready for school. He said goodbye to his father and headed to school. Classes started late and ended early, four hours every day. Most farmers in the community believed school to be a waste of time. Will dreamed of escaping the demanding farm life and pushed himself hard. Learning came easy with his gifted mind.

After school, Will spent two hours at the library studying and doing research. In the late afternoon, Will spent time with Razor. They practiced dozens of verbal and non-verbal commands every day. His sister Belle became a Ranger and moved off-world two years ago. She

taught Will how to tame and train a wild animal like Razor. Her Ranger training included bonding with a Familiar. Will tried unsuccessfully to tame a cougar that had eaten some of their sheep. Belle liked to tease him about the scars he got from that "education" using his second favorite nickname. She called him CB, short for cougar bait.

Right before making dinner, Will practiced his marksmanship and horsemanship for an hour. He customized the design of his beloved crossbow by adding a gas piston that could draw the string. One trigger fired the weapon, and a second trigger started a chemical reaction that released pressurized gas into a piston chamber. The crossbow could be cocked and fired within a second. He also added a top loading stack of bolts to turn it into an auto-loading rapid-fire crossbow. Will's first invention. He loved it as much as he loved Razor and Bastion.

Belle had designed a training course around their farm and encouraged Will to develop his combat skills. The trees around the farmhouse and across their property contained targets of different sizes mounted at various heights. Razor and Bastion participated in his training and practice. He gave Razor a small target, turned his back, and signaled for the dragon to take flight. Razor took off in a random direction flying high in the air and screeched the instant he dropped the target. Will whipped around and shot a hail of bolts. Only one struck true.

After ten minutes of practice with Razor, Bastion pawed the ground, eager to go next. As Will approached, Bastion dropped onto his front knees to allow Will to vault onto his back. With a soft kick of both legs, Bastion sprang up and began to trot. With gentle pressure from Will's legs, he guided Bastion to the targets. As the first one peeked out from behind a tree, he fired another hail of bolts but again only hit the target once with a satisfying "thump."

Bastion and Will became one while they practiced. It only took a small mental urge to go *faster*, for Bastion to lurch into a canter. With his long hair whipping in the wind, three new targets appeared. He aimed and fired a final volley. None of them hit their mark.

Will brought Bastion to a halt. No matter how much he practiced, his marksmanship still was not improving. *Practice doesn't make perfect in my case.* Will groaned. Touched the next set of bolts inserted into the top of the crossbow, projected a mental picture in his mind of which targets to hit, pointed it in the general direction of the last three targets, then pulled the trigger three times. All three bolts struck each target dead center. *I hate that! With or without practicing, magic works every time. Why do I even bother doing it without magic?*

Chapter 3

THE INCIDENT

One month ago, before rekindling their friendship, Will and Jade had not spoken for two years. One afternoon at school, Jade's blues eyes scanned the lunchroom and zeroed in on Will, who noticed the dagger like stare. Jade's leather boots made a rhythmic clicking noise as she marched straight towards him, like a soldier reporting for duty. Their knees touched as she sat down across from him. The fresh red apple from Will's farm made a crisp "thawk" sound as he bit into it. Unfortunately, Jade's proximity triggered a spike of anxiety. Will swallowed hard without chewing sufficiently and the apple chunk lodged sideways in his throat. His eyes watered and he coughed trying to dislodge it.

Jade leaned in to help, but Will raised his arm and stopped her, putting the palm of his hand on her forehead. With his other hand, he beat his chest. He thought, *dammit, not today of all days. I don't need her help.* With one final forceful cough, he managed to free the apple chunk. Tensing all the muscles in his body, he prepared himself for what might come next. Growing up, Will had been teased and bullied by other classmates, but Jade had done the most enduring damage.

Will recalled with perfect clarity the "incident" that happened two years previous.

Some of his classmates whispered, one or two jeered as he walked onto the field to join the soccer game. He wasn't an athlete and they all knew it. Will removed his worn leather cap and long sandy brown hair fell to his shoulders. He gathered it up into a ponytail that revealed

the shaved sides of his head. Will tied it off with a strap of leather then removed the dark goggles that hid his eyes.

Social etiquette within the small farming community dictated that boys kept their hair short or shaved their entire heads. Hats and goggles were almost always worn except when exercising. Will knew he could be an athlete but thought shaving his whole head a ridiculous tradition. "I can think of one way to change their minds", he thought marching onto the field.

Will played well and towards the end of the game broke away from the pack. Dribbling the ball downfield his heart leapt as he approached a wide-open goal. With the score tied, he felt that making the winning goal would help prove his point. As Will ran and prepared for one final kick, someone grabbed his ponytail from behind and yanked.

Will lost his footing as his head whipped back. He hit the ground hard like a sack of potatoes and with a loud "thump." He expected to hear a whistle and get a penalty kick, but Jade was the referee. She stomped onto the field and stood over Will. She asked, "Did you have a nice trip and fall?" Everyone on the field and sidelines laughed. Jade's friends gave her a knowing wink. She returned to the sideline then gave the ball to the opposite team.

Will let out a groan and sat upright on the grassy field. He checked his skinned elbows and found a few streaks of blood. The emotional pain hurt more than the physical trauma. Will put his hands on the back of his head and looked down at the ground. A tear formed in the corner of his eye. He took a few deep breaths and waited for the pain to pass. He thought, "They'll see my emotion as weakness. I won't give them the satisfaction."

Any hope that a teacher would intervene died when Will peeked out the corner of his eye and saw them ignoring the incident. Jade was the mayor's daughter—and Will, only a farmer's

son. Not everyone on planet Titan played by the same set of rules. A minute later, the game ended when a steam whistle blew, and the students filed back into their classes.

Will ignored the whistle's call and remained alone on the field looking down at the ground. He noticed a single red ant trying to drag a crust of bread across the ground. The ant struggled to make progress with its prize, but the bread outweighed the ant by a thousand times. Will took pity on the ant and decided to craft something to help.

From a small sewing kit fastened to a thick leather belt around his waist, Will took out two buttons and a needle. With concentration and a little bit of magic, he placed a button on each end of the needle and commanded them to "connect." Willing some intelligence into the makeshift axle allowed the crafted item's wheels to stay in place and move freely. After placing it under the bread crust to lift it off the ground, the ant began pulling the little makeshift cart with ease.

Will closed his eyes and imagined the ant colony celebrating around a full feast on the dinner table that night. This thought brought a warm flood of good feelings that drove away all vestiges of pain and anger. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Walking back to class Will thought, "I hate feeling powerless. I'm never going to let that happen again. I won't let bullies push me around."

With Will's gifted mind, the memory seemed like yesterday. He moved dark goggles off his hat and down over his eyes before turning around to face Jade. Resisting the urge to throw the half-eaten apple at her, he decided to hurl a verbal attack instead. It would mark the end of two years of silence between them.

“I don’t want you sitting here,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’d rather eat alone than with you.”

Jade laughed and raised her goggles up onto her hat to share a more intimate moment with Will.

“C’mon Will.” A broad smile spread across her face. “You’ve been eating alone and brooding for years. Smile at me and stop hiding your gorgeous hair under that hat.

“Leave me alone. I’m not in the mood for meaningless compliments, and don’t think for a second that I will tolerate your bullying. Remember what happened the last time we spoke?” Will made a kicking gesture with his booted foot

“What? Me?” Jade replied as she put her hands, palms up, in the air. “I like to tease and joke around, but I would never bully *you*.”

“I see. So, your overdeveloped ego and underdeveloped brain allowed you to forget that you’re a lousy, rotten, no-good, cheat?” Will looked down at the apple in his hand and considered going with his first instinct to hurl it at her.

“Ow, that hurts Will. You’re so bitter. It’s sad to see a sour look on such a good-looking face. Take those goggles off and let me get a good look at your beautiful blue eyes.”

Will felt the heat rise in his face and dreaded the flush of red that started to color his cheeks. *Does she think compliments are going to fix things between us? Why doesn’t she just walk away? Everyone is starting to stare.* He stood and threw the apple at the ground.

Will did not want anyone to confuse his anger and embarrassment for having feelings for Jade. He decided to retreat. Grabbing the rest of his lunch, he left Jade sitting alone at the table.

Jade acted like she did not care. She waved goodbye and said, “Thanks for lunch, Will. It was fun. Let’s do it again tomorrow.”

Will stormed off mumbling under his breath. *If she was the last girl on Titan, I would still let the human race die out. She's too prim and proper. Too girly. Too popular. And, soooo not my type.*