

Chapter 1 – *The Last Recruit*

It was not a good day. Twice second-guessed by her husband, a near collision with a milk truck, and she was heading for the third bookstore. Megan was on a mission. She raced her little Toyota as she weaved her way down the interstate—the same interstate that connected her little town with the municipality of Brighton. This would be the last stop. There were no more bookstores left in this less than bustling city. In fact, there would only be the first two before long. The store, Reader’s Dream, opened its doors a few months ago, yet just last week, it advertised “Going out of Business.” True, the economy of Brighton wasn’t booming, however, it was fairly stable. No, Reader’s Dream made the mistake of opening a bookstore in a town where two stores were ample and where the literacy levels of the general population left much to be desired.

Megan held onto her hope. This store once boasted mass selections. She had to find the book her daughter, Jessah, asked for. It was tough shopping for her little girl this year. The darling didn’t ask for much, and she deserved every bit. For a seven year old, her selflessness and caring were remarkable. If the child had a flaw, her parents were unable to see it. Megan frowned at the thought. This mother had a flaw, which was to assume she could find such a popular book at the end of the holiday season. So, today—the last day before the stores closed—Megan made her a gallant attempt to fulfill Jessah’s wishes.

Pulling up to the stand alone store, Megan’s heart dropped. There was not one car parked in the parking lot and she feared the shop was closed. Closing signs were plastered on almost every window. This mother wouldn’t give up. She haphazardly parked, ran to the store’s entrance, and tried the door. A promising “Yes!” came from under her breath. It was unlocked.

Inside, Megan was surprised to see that there were a sizable number of books left. The shelves were half full in most sections. She assumed the children's section was in the back, and headed straight for it. She sighed. Why couldn't the book just jump out at her? Megan scanned the shelves, shifting and pulling books as she did so. "Where are you?" she muttered. There seemed to be no set order—clearly left unattended by the staff. The classical music that piped from the ceiling did little to hamper her frustration.

"Can I help you find something?"

Megan jumped. The droning like voice came out of nowhere. She turned to find a young man standing only a few feet away. He looked agitated. He was a good head taller than she, and his overall appearance lacked order—much like the store itself. His light blue oxford shirt and khaki pants didn't fit, leaving plenty of room. The only thing that seemed to work was his brown leather belt which was doing a fine job of keeping his pants from falling down. His flaxen hair was pulled back in a pony tail, and he sported a small diamond earring in one ear. Megan stared at his eyes, as if looking into shallow water. The blue-gray orbs were out of place. They looked older than the rest of him. Was it wisdom she saw, or was it just the disparaging outlook of today's rebellious youth?

The impatient young man stiffened and rephrased the question, "What are you looking for?"

"Uh, a children's book—Singing the Breeze."

It seemed this sales assistant wasn't interested in helping. "You're kidding, right? What makes you think we would still have it in stock?"

Megan's brow narrowed in on his name tag. The incredulous young man had just pushed her to the end of her rope. "Look, Michael. I need this book. Can't you check your stock or something?"

"Ma'am, we are going out of business. What we have is on the floor." A look of surprise flashed across his face when he noticed Megan balling her fists. He smiled and pointed to some tables over to the left. "Don't get your hopes up, but you might find it in those bins over there."

Megan replied with a curt, "Thank you," then resumed her search where the clerk had suggested. The young man must have found this amusing because he didn't move. She glanced his way, then went back to looking. "You know, help would be nice," she grumbled. An eyebrow raised but he remained where he stood. Megan threw down a handful of books in protest. "Don't you have an inventory log somewhere you can check?" The sales assistant looked as if he were contemplating something. He smirked, cynically nodded, then walked to the cashier station at the front of the store. Pulling out a large book from underneath, he slapped it down on the counter, rested his chin on a propped hand, and absently flipped through the pages. Megan shook her head and murmured, "Unbelievable," and went back to the pile of books. It might have been easier had she seen the cover of the book, but as it was, she only knew the title.

Michael only acted like he was looking at the log. He continued to roll the idea over in his head as he glanced at the lady. What harm would it cause? She may even shake up things. She certainly didn't fit the criteria, but that was a good thing. Neither did the others for this group. The problem was that this woman was on a mission for another. He knew who the book was for without asking. This spelled out commitment and dedication. This also meant attachments, and her whole being smelled of countless emotions. Michael smiled. "Perfect."

“What are you doing?” a wary voice asked accusingly. Michael looked up to find his coworker standing next to him.

“Hey, man. I got our last recruit.” He nodded towards the woman.

The other man looked up and studied Megan, then grunted before walking over to get a better look. “Excuse me, could you let me know what the name of the book is? I want to make sure we’re looking for the right one.”

Megan stopped what she was doing. *Are these people for real?* She looked up and scanned the dark skinned individual. This one was older but not much, maybe mid twenties. His wiry black hair was also pulled back in a pony tail. The dark face was flawless except for the diamond stud in his nose. He wore the same outfit as the other one, but his fit very well over a toned body. This man was taller too, at least six feet. Those dark brown eyes were intense, they drilled right into her soul. Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, she read his name tag and thought, Michael and Angelo? That’s just creepy. She went back to looking for Jessah’s book while she answered, “Singing the Breeze.”

Angelo took a deep breath through his nose, “An excellent book (exhaling). Well liked by the young and old. Let’s see if we can accommodate you.” He went back to the front counter. Megan looked up, blinking, with a tinge of hope renewed.

Angelo put his finger on the open log and started running it down the page. When he was sure the woman had resumed her searching, he jerked Michael up by the arm. In a low voice he hissed, “No way, Michael. She won’t have a chance in hell. A homemaker! What about her family? Dude, you are going too far with this one. She reeks of emotion.”

Michael smirked. “Exactly. Aw, man, this is just too good to pass up. Besides, we haven’t seen another soul since lunch. It’s over Angelo, I’m done.” He looked at his counterpart,

“Come on, let’s close shop.” Michael closed the log book and focused on its front, gingerly stroking the cover before returning it below the counter.

Angelo sighed as he bent to reach under the same counter. “Damn, I just know we’re going to regret this.”

“As if that were possible,” sneered Michael under his breath.

Angelo pulled out another book without looking at it. He took it to Megan and held it out. “Is this it, miss?”

First glancing then staring at the hardback, Megan read the title, “Singing the Breeze. That’s it! I don’t believe it. You don’t know how happy you’ve made someone! Thank you. Thank you!” She followed him over to the counter with mixed emotions of relief, appreciation, and excitement.

Angelo rolled his eyes at Michael before coming around to face the petite woman. Visions of flickering flames at his feet made him shift his weight as he rang up the purchase and took her money. He bagged the book and reached for the receipt. Megan went to take the package, but Angelo stopped her by grabbing her wrist. He smiled, “Don’t forget your receipt.”

Megan looked at him funny, “Why?” Something washed over her, a pulse, a weak charge, something indescribable, yet undeniable, then it was gone. The sales assistant let go. She gave both men a weak smile and muttered, “Thank you, again,” before rushing out of the store.

Michael glared at Angelo, “Hey, no fair!”

“Look, just remember she was your choice.” Angelo looked through the one window that was not covered with signs and grumbled, “Anyway, she still has to pass the test.”

Megan quickly unlocked her car and swung the door open. She half noticed it making an unusual creaking sound. Jumping in, she pulled the door shut with a slam, causing the car to rock slightly. She chalked it up as the result of the adrenaline rush from finding the book.

Heading home, Megan noticed occasional flakes of snow falling from the sky. The forecast didn't call for any accumulation, but she wished they would wake up tomorrow to a blanket of white. This would fulfill all of Jessah's wishes. Streaming rays of gold and crimson came from the sun as it dipped below the cloud line. Megan sighed. All was right with the world—for Megan's world could not be more perfect. She was married to an adoring man. They had an endearing daughter. They lived in the country in a beautiful home. And Megan felt a real sense of being. She had wonderful life, she could not ask for more. God, she appreciated those stunning sunsets. It occurred to her that they were much more frequent than she remembered. Maybe it was because she didn't notice them as much before. She couldn't help but smile with grateful eyes.

Megan started to sing along with the Christmas melody on the radio as she turned down the last road that would lead to her neighborhood. The scent of smoke permeated the car's interior. Was it her car? Maybe today would not be so perfect after all. She eyed the car's hood then looked in her rearview mirror. Then she saw. There was a fire...a lone trailer never noticed, passed by every day.

Smoke was billowing out of an open door of the mobile home. The dwelling stood back from the road in the middle of a field, yet she could clearly see flames dancing in one of the windows. Pulling into the driveway, she called 911 on her cell phone. Not knowing why, she got out of her car and cautiously walked towards the home. Then Megan heard it—a child screaming. Dread came over her. The woman didn't know what to do. The fire trucks were

nowhere in sight. Frantically, she looked around. The place was isolated. The snowfall intensified. She ran back to the car to go for help. The child's screaming turned to crying. It tore her apart. She leaned against her car and began to cry. The car was cold, unyielding, and...wet! If only the snow would put out the fire. It suddenly came clear to her. Megan dropped and rolled to wet her clothes. It wasn't much, but it was something. Resigned to try, she jumped up and ran to the open door yelling, "Hold on, honey!"

The heat hit Megan, and she staggered back. This is crazy. Then she thought she saw something. She bent down to look below the smoke and past the wind-fueled flare-ups around the door. There was the little girl crouched under a kitchen counter, holding tightly to a singed stuffed bear. She could see her little smudged face. Her clothes were covered with soot. Oddly, her golden hair remained bright and out of place. "Come on baby, you've got to come out." The child stared blankly at her. "Come on, you can do it." The little girl's face twisted, and she buried it in the furry lump she was holding. The crying started again.

Megan reacted by taking a deep breath and dashed inside. She would not let this child die. Immediately, she was forced to drop to her knees. Squinting, she tried to focus on the child, but was blinded by the smoke and flames that were agitated by her quick entry. The heat was unbearable. Megan's breath had run out, and she gasped for air. It burned down her throat. Refusing to panic, she sprawled out to get her face as low as she possibly could. She made an attempt to call to the child, "Please we've (cough-cough) got to get out!"

There came a hissing noise from above, and she glanced up. Gaps in the black smoke revealed a blanket of flames that crossed the ceiling. Bits of hot coals began to drop, burning her exposed skin. Getting up on her hands and knees, she scrambled to where she thought the little girl was. Not there. No sound of her either. Megan prayed for the child to be safe outside as she

attempted to turn herself around. Something stopped her. She felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. Finally, the fire department must have arrived. She reached up to grab what was there and tried to see as she did so. All she felt was her own shoulder—what she saw took her breath away. A black haired woman robed in something that reflected light was standing over her. The aura that surrounded her kept the fire and smoke at bay. The being smiled with assurance and prevented Megan from getting up. No longer feeling her burns, Megan guessed what this was. She thought of her family—her husband and daughter. ‘Jessah.’ Filling with anger, she screamed at the celestial apparition. “N-NO!” Her voice was drowned by silence, and all went white.

Michael and Angelo stood in the center of the now empty store. All the books, shelving, and signs were gone. Nothing remained except the cashier counter. Next to them sat two travel bags stuffed with earthly souvenirs.

Brushing his hands against one another, Michael looked around one last time. All was quiet. He smirked to himself when he caught sight of the lighted EXIT sign above the doorway. He never noticed them until it was time to go home. “Well, that’s it then. Man, I can’t wait to get back.” He slid his bag behind him and sat down. The empty building echoed the sounds that he made. He liked it. “Don’t get me wrong, I love the visits but...”

Angelo stood with his arms crossed. Michael’s habitual gripe passed over him and continued to bounce against the walls. He was intent on staring at the door, wondering if the last recruit had passed. He watched as the street lights began to glow, signaling that night would soon be upon them. The snowfall that had begun earlier had all but stopped, leaving only a wet trace on the ground. Then he spied an image approaching outside. The door flew open. His superior entered, a striking woman with long black hair. She wore jeans, a white tee, black boots, and a

sleek, black jacket. Even in street clothes, it was hard for their boss to blend into modest societies. He mumbled to Michael, “I guess we are done.”

Scowling, the woman marched up to them, and planted her hands on her hips. “OK, which one of you morons did the honors?” Angelo jerked his head slightly towards Michael, who began to snicker. Instantly, her foot caught under his chin, and he went flying upwards, crashing into the ceiling above. Parts of ceiling tiles and dust came raining down. “You idiot! What the hell were you thinking?! The passion was just oozing out of her!” snapped Lisa.

Angelo gravely watched Michael drop down and land on his feet, saying, “I told you, man.”

Michael glanced at his superior while he brushed himself off, “Christ, Lisa, since when did you start to care?”

“She fought me, asshole.”

Both men stared at Lisa in astonishment. Michael didn’t believe it, and his brow furrowed in defiance. “Yeah, right. Nobody turns down the chance for paradise.”

“She did.” Lisa looked down at her hands, then grabbed Michael by the shirt, and hissed, “Damn you, Michael. I made her go!”

Michael smirked, “Hoohoo! Careful Lisa, some of that emotion must have rubbed off on you!” She pushed him away and turned her back on him. The blonde subordinate wouldn’t let it go, “So why didn’t you leave her?”

Lisa remained silent and walked towards the door. The men picked up their bags and quickly followed. The woman ordered over her shoulder, “Clean that mess up.” Angelo kept walking, but Michael half turned. He flicked his open hand up and everything went back into place. Then he sprinted to catch up with the others who stood by the door ready to exit.

Michael turned the lights off, and they all stepped outside. Angelo locked the door behind them, and then dropped the key through the mail slot. He sighed, “This is one trip I think we will all learn to regret.”

Lisa snorted and squatted slightly. There was no use for such a sentiment. Her aura started to glow and the air began to swirl around her feet. Each man grabbed her shoulder, one on each side, and they rocketed to the heavens, cutting through broken clouds and turning into a brief and distant stream of light that resembled a shooting star.