

PROLOGUE

Her back itched. The spot that always itched, in the center of her back, between her upper and lower wing pairs. The same spot that had driven her crazy for decades. She tried to reach the offending prickle, but her arm was too short and too muscular, as always. A girl could hope, though.

Fluttering her wings never helped either.

She sized up a small tree by the path and then rubbed her back against it, ooh-ing and ah-ing as the terry cloth robe soothed the eternal irritation.

A huge black Labrador retriever rushed up from behind, woofing a greeting as he took up the lead position twenty feet ahead, nose to the ground, sniffing.

“Hey, Shadow. Ready for a swim? Sorry you couldn’t get in the water this morning.”

The photographer hadn’t wanted ripples on the water to spoil his pictures. *Hmph!* It was her pond after all, and the only reason she let him shoot pictures at all was ... well, he was nice. And handsome. And tall. Of course, the whole world was tall to her. Something about him seemed familiar, too.

Her face and neck tingled, which brought a smile. Dust motes in the air reflected the glow of her skin. That hadn't happened for a long time.

Birds attracted by her voice gathered and circled about. Two huge blue jays lighted in a tree and watched as Shadow jumped off the path into a pile of leaves, rolled over on his back and wagged his feet in the air.

"Does your back itch, too?"

She pointed her open palm at the dog, murmuring soft words. He woofed again and sprang away toward the pond. The two jays took flight and swooped after him, following the trail, screaming their excitement. Shadow barked as they passed.

Laughter spilled from her lips, then a startled gasp. Laughing? That hadn't happened in a long time, either. What had this grey-eyed photographer done to her? She shrugged and walked on toward the pond, pulling her hood forward. The birds flew along, circling about her and singing. She hummed a tune, a favorite old Irish song.

A tremendous splash announced Shadow's arrival at the pond. She reached it soon after and watched him paddle about from the stone ledge overlooking the water. The early evening sky was beautiful, that lovely deep blue that comes just before sunset. The very tops of the trees on the east bank glowed in the last rays.

A laugh burst out again, almost a giggle. "You sure stirred things up."

Shadow paddled to the stone beach and toiled up a path cut in the rock. Once on the ledge he galloped toward her, stopped and shook snout to tail, showering her with water. She laughed again and pulled back her hood, shaking free golden blonde hair. "How's the water?" The robe was loosely tied; it soon dropped to the rock and freed her naked body. How could you stay covered when nature's beauty was all around?

The cold air was exhilarating. She stretched her arms, swiveled her hips and flexed each leg, watching her reflection dance in the water below. Cares fell away and merriment warmed her heart. A headfirst dive off the ledge left barely a ripple.

The delicious cold water streamed across her skin and tightly furled wings. She frog-kicked along just under the surface with powerful legs, searching the darkness for the perfect spot. Driving herself to the bottom, she crouched on the gravel, and then propelled upwards, powering to the bright surface overhead, bringing her wings up and forward. Just as she broke the surface, a mighty down thrust threw her into the air amidst a spray of water. A cloud of tiny droplets flew off her vibrating wings, glittering in the evening light.

Hanging ten feet over the water, she raised her arms to either side. Below her glowing palms, the water began to froth and large bubbles emerged, exploded and became shining balls. The orbs rose and spiraled about her as she slowly twirled twice around. Laughing, she pitched forward and returned to the water, swimming beneath the surface with the lights shadowing every turn. Accelerating, she burst through the surface and soared to treetop level. She hovered, surveying her forest home. Her softly buzzing wings cooled her wet skin.

Autumn colors surrounded her on every side, subdued by the evening light. The far margins of the woods sank into darkness. Here was her world: the trees, the animals, the water, and the sky.

She spun about and plummeted headfirst toward the pond, pulling up at the last moment to rush along just above the water, her body horizontal. The lights and birds rejoined her and followed her about the pond. Returning to the deep water near the ledge, she rose upright and gracefully dropped into the water. She swam on her back, murmuring to the birds, who had lighted on the ledge.

A rolling of her stomach, which had started in flight, disturbed her peace. Again, something not normal. Perhaps her snack of mushrooms didn't sit well. Her eyes fell on Shadow, who had remained on the ledge. He seemed observant, alerted, about to bark. She pulled herself erect and turned toward the bank the dog was watching, tilting her head to listen for several seconds. Not a leaf stirred.

She whistled and waved Shadow into the water. He bounded off the ledge and into the water, creating a momentary geyser.

Several minutes passed and the gloom of evening darkened while they paddled about. Her mind found its way back to the pho-

tographer and his intense grey eyes. The way he looked at her, as if he'd never seen a woman before, was unnerving.

Time to go. Email waited to be answered. She paddled to the narrow cut in the rock and climbed up, Shadow right behind. Water dripped off her wings, which glistened even in the failing light. "Ready for some supper? I'm starving." They reached the ledge and Shadow shook himself, showering her again.

"Two can play that game." She vibrated her wings for a few seconds in his direction. He barked and wagged his tail. She laughed, the sound echoing across the pond. She dried her face and hair with the robe, ambling toward the path, while Shadow bounded ahead.

She stopped and looked at the pond over her shoulder. There had been a definite sound that time, something unnatural. She leaned her head to one side, listening. Her wings rose and began to twitch.

No one could be there. She would have sensed a human. Must have imagined it. She turned back to the path and began to sing.

Her stomach growled. A Snickers bar sounded good.