

broken **Wings**

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Rye Woods ignored the angry shouts as she steered her flying broom down into the turning lane. She was going to be late. Holly would not be happy. Rye had made a serious mistake in risking the Rootway in rush hour traffic. Flying carpets and brooms jockeyed for every inch forward in lanes of all heights. She bumped the front of her broom handle as she squeezed in behind a large delivery carpet. Ahead, the traffic inching above the bridge across to the Eastside looked no better.

“Shit.”

Her broom spluttered, lost power, and dropped. She sprawled on the ground with the broom tangled between her legs. Scurrying pedestrians barely spared her a look. Low-flying traffic shouted at her to get out of the way. Rye grabbed her broom and dodged to the side of the flyway.

She shook her broom. The bristles quivered. She kicked it. The magic spluttered, coughed, and died.

“Fey.”

Rye glanced up at the sundial on the side of the high-rise department store tree. She had fifty minutes before the school art competition started. There was no way she could get back to the apartment to change if she were to get to the school on time. She shouldered her broom and began to walk.

She clumped along in her work boots and dirty, ragged pants. She wished she had the money to spare for a taxi. She could imagine only too well Holly’s fury at her for turning up fresh from the building site. Rye broke into a jog and spared a wistful thought for those years before Holly hit adolescence. A big sister who worked as a labourer and had no fashion sense had not been a problem then.

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Rye jostled her way through the thick stream of pedestrians on the bridge when the first fat spots of rain fell on her shoulders. That was all she needed.

Firefly green lights highlighted the imposing entrance to the school even though it was not yet dark. Rye was panting when she paused near one of the large gateposts. She wiped the mingled rain and sweat from her face. Late model carpets with their comfortable interiors brightly lit flew past her and into the parking lot. This looked like a big deal not only for Holly. All the trepidation and discomfort Rye felt at entering the upmarket school for parent-teacher conferences returned in full measure.

Rye cast a despairing look down at herself. She was damned if she went in and damned if she went home. She swore to herself and trudged into the school grounds.

A well-dressed sprite couple, with their feathery antennae bent under the protection of a shared umbrella, dashed past Rye to the dryness of the front foyer. Rye glimpsed jewellery and good tailoring.

“Good evening,” a young pixie man at the door said. His scalp ridges looked relaxed and non-threatening, and the mobile tip of his long, pointed nose barely twitched, but he ever so politely barred her entry.

“Hi,” Rye said. “Lousy night for it, isn’t it?”

She dug in her jacket pocket for her invitation. The pixie’s fixed smile faltered and the tip of his nose drooped as he accepted the damp piece of cardboard.

“Ms. Woods,” he said. “Welcome to Oak Heights High School for Young Ladies. Please go on through. Sorrel will give you a catalogue. Enjoy the exhibition.”

“Thanks. Where’s the bathroom?”

As Rye opened the door to the ladies’ room, a woman of indeterminate species, with the fern-like antennae of a sprite sticking out of a hairless brownie head, exited in a billow of expensive perfume. On seeing Rye, her antennae bristled erect and her white, angular features strained in a look of haughty disapproval. Rye’s heart sank further. This was going to be every bit as bad as she had feared.

Every quarter, when she received the bill for Holly’s tuition, Rye questioned her decision to send her sister here rather than to the local municipal school. Then she would read about another kid knifed in

the playground, an arson attack, or a teacher beaten up, and she would empty out her pitiful savings yet again.

The mirror above the hand basins reflected back a flush-faced Rye with her short blue-black hair plastered to her head. She peeled off her wet jacket and draped it on a basin. Her shirt was damp from rain seeping through her jacket. Beneath it, her tight T-shirt clung uncomfortably to her sweaty skin.

“Crap.”

Rye risked removing her baggy shirt to drape it over the heated hand dryer. The contours of her folded wings would show incriminating lumps down her back to anyone who came in. Not that she could imagine any of these snooty women thinking that their daughters shared a class with so undesirable an individual as an illegal alien, let alone a fairy. Although she and Holly were not as hairy as bogles, and Rye’s upper body was more powerfully built than any frail little brownie, the sisters could pass as having the mixed blood of those two species as long as Rye hid her wings. It helped that there were so few fairies who lived outside Fairyland. Most people simply didn’t expect to see members of that species. Still, Rye kept her back to the wall.

She hit the button to start the hot air blowing through her shirt and grabbed some paper towels. She vigorously rubbed her hair to get the worst of the wet from it.

When Rye paused to check her progress in the mirror, she saw that her spiky-haired reflection was not alone. A woman stood bent toward the mirror touching up her lipstick. Her lithe, curvaceous form belonged to a nymph. Green hair, shoulder-length and glossy, identified her as a tree nymph, though her skin was the pale of fine-grained maple wood rather than the reddish-browns more common to dryads. Too young to be the mother of a teenager, she must be one of the teachers. Her willowy figure showed to magnificent advantage in an elegantly simple, short grey dress. Rye’s gaze curved along her back, around her very pat-able bum, and down the most amazing pair of legs. Something that had lain dormant inside Rye for many years stirred.

Rye’s gaze flicked up to the mirror. The dryad stared at Rye’s reflection with eyes the rich, deep brown of bark. Her beautiful face was a perfect match for her body. She made eye contact with Rye’s image and smiled. Rye blushed. She quickly looked away and was surprised to find herself holding damp paper towels.

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“It’s raining quite heavily now, isn’t it?” the woman said.

“Um. Yeah.” Rye hastily thrust the paper towels in the rubbish bin and yanked her shirt from the dryer. “I...um, I’m sorry. You can use it.”

Rye kept her back to the wall as she tugged on her shirt under the reflected brown gaze. She had never felt more self-conscious in a wet, tight T-shirt.

The dryad returned her cosmetics to her purse.

“Don’t worry, you’re not late,” she said. “The judging hasn’t started yet.”

“Right. Good. Thanks.”

The woman smiled and walked out leaving behind a subtle hint of musky perfume and the memory of gently swaying hips.

Rye blew out a breath and shoved her shirt tail into her pants. If teachers looked like that, she could not see why any kid complained about school. Although, Holly would be looking at the male teachers, not the females.

Holly. Rye grimaced at her image as she hurriedly finger-combed her damp hair. Holly was going to kill her.

“Fey,” Rye said to her reflection.

In the foyer, a red sprite woman with perky antennae offered Rye the choice of three different teas, lemon water, or non-alcoholic dew. Rye nursed a cup of manuka tea and wandered into the hall. Conversation hummed. Rows of stands held paintings, sculptures, pots, and bits of cloth. Hundreds of well-dressed people stood around talking to each other or peering at the exhibits. Rye frowned at the catalogue. She couldn’t find Holly’s name. The kid’s thing had to be here somewhere, as, indeed, did Holly herself.

Rye drifted down a row of exhibits. She avoided eye contact by devoting her attention to the works of art. Her gaze slipped across vivid daubs of paint, tortured lumps of glazed clay, and eye-bleedingly bright fabrics. She was arrested by a strange collection of things that looked like small purple toilet brushes and tampons. Rye blinked and stared. For the life of her, she couldn’t begin to imagine what it was supposed to be. Offering little help, the catalogue merely listed it as *entropy too* by Borealis Woodbine.

entropy too? What, in the name of the Almighty King and Queen of the Fey, was that supposed to mean? It was times like this that Rye

most keenly felt her own lack of education. She was prepared to bet that Borealis Woodbine was some pimply sixteen-year-old who rode a late-model broom and who received more in pocket money than Rye did working eight hours a day with a hammer and chisel.

Rye shook her head and turned her frown from *entropy too*. Her quick glance around the hall failed to locate Holly's mop of curly blue-black hair amongst the crowd of antennae, hats, bald heads, and hair of every colour.

"Excuse us." A sylph, so wispy and ethereal that only a pair of large, limpid dark green eyes set her apart from a shadow cast upon the surface of a pond, smiled at Rye. "I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, but we'd like to judge this piece."

"Oh. Um. Sorry," Rye said.

Rye stepped away. In passing, her gaze snagged on the gorgeous woman from the bathroom standing beside the sylph. She smiled at Rye. Rye couldn't help noticing how attractively she filled the front of her dress. Very nice. Much more pleasant to look at than high school art.

"Rye!" Holly squeezed her slender, broad-shouldered body through the throng. Her eyes widened toward horror and her voice dropped to an angry whisper. "You didn't change. I picked those clothes out specially for you. Everyone is staring. Earth, eat me whole."

"Look, I'm sorry," Rye said. "I didn't have time. My broom packed in again. I had to run most of the way from work."

"This is important."

"Yeah, I know. I'm here, aren't I?"

Holly bristled belligerence. "I'm living death."

"I'll go and stand in a dark corner. No one will have to know that I'm with you. Okay?"

Rye found a row of chairs against the wall. She dropped down beside an elderly pixie man. His long nose drooped with age and his scalp ridges looked flattened and worn as if eroded by a lifetime of having a nervous claw rubbed across them.

"You must be a sculptor," he said. "My grandson is very good at—oh. I suppose, since you're one of the judges, that I'd better not try to influence you, eh?" He smiled.

Rye merely nodded. If people chose to misinterpret her scruffy appearance as being an artist, then she didn't have to disabuse them

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of the idea. Perhaps a generous interpretation of hollowing out trees to make high-density apartments could sit at the other end of the same scale as whittling away at a lump of wood to make something that no one was quite sure what it was.

After about half an hour or so, Holly flopped in the chair beside Rye.

“Did you win?” Rye asked.

“Dunno. They’re going to announce the prizes soon. I’m glad you’re here, okay?”

“Okay.”

Holly leaped up and disappeared in the crowd. Rye grinned to herself.

A blue-haired sprite man who held his antennae stiffly upright climbed onto the stage at the front of the hall and announced the commencement of the prize-giving. The parents drained from the display rows to crowd the stage. Although she couldn’t see past the pack of spectators, Rye remained seated through the inevitable speeches. When they finally got to the prizes, she stood. Dotted amongst the teachers were some weirdly dressed people who must be the professional artist guest judges, including the wispy sylph and the beautiful dryad. Rye got a much better view of the latter when she stood to present one of the prizes. Rye thought she must be a model rather than a flaky artist. Rye had not seen a more attractive, desirable woman, even on power tool calendars.

“Holly Woods,” the dryad said.

Rye jolted into applause. Holly climbed up the steps to accept the certificate. Rye had no idea what Holly had won, or what for. To her horror, she’d been engrossed in checking out the pretty woman rather than listening to the announcement. But that didn’t stop her from being the proudest person in the hall.

Holly stood out the remainder of the ceremony with the other prize winners. When it ended, she wormed her way back to Rye. It wasn’t so long ago that Rye would’ve hugged and kissed her. She still wanted to, but knew Holly would find it embarrassing. Rye settled for a grin and patting Holly’s young, wingless back.

“Congratulations,” Rye said. “Can I see?”

Holly handed her the certificate. It said that she won first prize in

the fabric section for something called *Dazzle*. Holly offered Rye the envelope containing the prize money of fifty pieces.

“That’s yours,” Rye said.

Holly shrugged. “Everything you earn goes toward us.”

“That’s different. Keep it. Then I don’t have to spend good money on that smelly stuff you keep in the bathroom.”

Holly screwed her face up and looked like she remembered where they were just before she stuck her tongue out. Rye grinned.

Friends drew Holly away. Rye searched the catalogue until she located *Dazzle* by Holly Woods. Row 5, stand 16.

Rye eased her way through the crowd. Holly stood beside her entry deep in animated conversation with a group of her friends and their parents. Rye stopped a discreet distance away. Holly’s prize-winning creation looked like a pair of luridly coloured placemats.

Holly looked happy and, judging by the number of her friends, was popular. It was times like this that Rye knew scraping every piece to pay for a good education for Holly was worth it. Holly wasn’t going to end up sweating her guts out—come rain, snow, or sweltering sun—at some menial job. Just what she did plan to do for a career, though, she hadn’t yet discussed with Rye. That was something they probably needed to talk about soon. If Holly wanted to go to university, Rye would have to start looking for a third job. It had been Rye’s plan to have saved enough for that by this time, but it just hadn’t worked out that way. Raising a child took every piece she earned. With any luck, Rye would have some qualifications from her night courses in a year or two and be able to take a better paying job.

Seeing that Holly was in no immediate danger of being left alone, Rye wandered out into the foyer. The night looked shiny and wet. It was going to be a cold, damp walk home unless, by some miracle, her broom decided to start working again.

Rye sat on the side of a plant trough and sighed. The last time her broom had broken down, she hadn’t been able to fix it herself. Rocky put a part in for her, but he said that it was already long past its use-by date and not worth repairing. She couldn’t afford a new one. It would take the better part of an hour to walk to the building site, but walking wouldn’t kill her. She never managed to get ahead. Something always came up.

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Rye ran a hand through her hair and watched rain spattering on the windows. Outside, reflected light glittered in the wet blackness. Mirrored against the night, Rye could see back into the foyer behind her. Couples and their children came out of the hall, paused to stare at the wet night, then gathered their courage to make a dash for the parking lot.

A loud, braying laugh drew Rye's attention across to near the entry door. A group of people were engaged in a spirited conversation. Near them, Rye saw the reflection of the beautiful woman she had met in the bathroom. She stood looking out at the night. Probably waiting for her husband to pick her up. Women who looked like that did not end their days alone. As if Rye's gaze had been a shout to attract her attention, she turned in Rye's direction. Rye hastily looked away and saw Holly approaching.

"I thought you'd vanished," Holly said.

"You had a hundred people wanting to talk to the winner, so I thought I'd wait out here." Rye stood and shouldered her work bag. "Ready to go?"

"We're going to get soaked. Especially at the speed your crappy broom flies. It'd be faster walking."

"We will be walking."

Holly scowled. "The stupid thing hasn't died again?"

"Yep. I told you that's why I was late. Got your coat to put on?"

"Shit."

"Language."

"This reeks." Holly pouted. "Really, really reeks. Can't you fix it?"

"Not here. Come on. The sooner we start, the faster we get home. Holly?"

Holly stopped a couple of paces away. "I'm going to ask Daisy if we can get a ride with them. They have a carpet that works."

Holly bolted back into the hall. Rye mentally swore, sighed, and leaned back against the window. She had no idea how people coped with raising more than one child.

"If it's any consolation, the rain is easing."

Rye turned her head and saw that the speaker was the gorgeous woman. She had moved a couple of steps closer and was looking at Rye. Rye's nerves jangled as if she'd received a low-level shock from a magical power socket.

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“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help overhearing,” the woman said. “Do you have far to go?”

“Um. Hollowberry. Lower Eastside. It’s only about half an hour. But you could be forgiven for thinking it’s on the moon.”

The woman looked even more dazzling when she smiled. “Perhaps I could give you a lift?”

“What? Oh. That’s...that’s kind of you. But...um,” Rye couldn’t think of a polite way of expressing her doubt that the Lower Eastside was anywhere on this woman’s route.

“You must be very proud of Holly.”

“Yeah. I am.”

“This is the fifth year I’ve helped judge high school competitions. In the main, we see some very ordinary offerings. But occasionally there are some kids who show real promise. Holly has a lot of talent.”

“Yeah? Thanks.”

The woman stepped even closer and offered a hand. “Flora Withe.”

“Um. Rye Woods.” Rye was pleasantly surprised to discover that she had a firm handshake.

“Pardon me if I sound rude, but you look too young to be Holly’s mother.”

“She’s my kid sister.”

Rye saw Holly approaching. Just a few feet away, Holly looked up from glaring at the ground. She stopped and stared between Rye and Flora. Her expression underwent a dramatic transformation to settle in a mixture of surprise, horror, and disbelief.

“Hello, Holly,” Flora said.

To Rye’s astonishment, Holly very politely acknowledged her in a calm, quiet voice.

“I could take you and your sister home if you haven’t managed to get a ride with your friends,” Flora said.

“Wow,” Holly said. “You will? Drop through the floor. Oh, Ms. Withe, that would be astronomical. I’ll tell Daisy’s dad to go without us.”

Rye didn’t get a chance to open her mouth before Holly darted away to where the Bark family waited.

“Um. Sorry about that,” Rye said.

Flora smiled. “I took it as a compliment. Actually, I suppose I

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should be apologising to you. You hadn't accepted my offer, had you?"

"I wouldn't dare refuse now. I'm on thin enough ice as it is. My life wouldn't be worth living if I made her walk home with me after turning down a ride. But, um, thanks. I appreciate it."

In the light drizzle, Rye grabbed her broom and trotted after Holly and Ms. Withe. The dryad pressed a button on her mobile phone to unlock the doors of a late model sporty flying carpet of the sort that usually figured in advertisements with a near-naked female draped across the front. Rye felt bad about putting her decrepit old broom in the boot. She hoped the bristles didn't leak. Holly had recovered from her shocked shyness and clearly wanted to take the front passenger seat. Rye folded herself into the back, which did not feel designed for much use. She prayed that her boots and clothes didn't stain the upholstery. The carpet smelled like it was fresh from a showroom or a groomer's hardworking hands. She also grew uncomfortably aware of Ms. Withe's perfume and a tantalising hint of pine sap.

They were moving before Rye realised the magic was running. With barely a purr, the carpet rose swiftly. While Holly chatted animatedly, Rye gripped her seat. Breaking more of Rye's stereotypes about artists, Ms. Withe flew very fast and high. The flight to the apartment took about half the time Rye would have thought possible.

Rye climbed out of the carpet onto the parking pad outside her seventh floor apartment. Half of the space was hidden beneath junk because they never used it to park. Her own broom had not been able to make it up this high even on the day she'd bought it. She retrieved her sorry broom from the boot and bent to peer in the flying carpet's window.

"Thanks a lot," Rye said.

"My pleasure." Flora pulled a small black card from her purse and passed it to Rye. "Call me. Anytime."

Rye frowned at the card. She couldn't read it in the poor light.

"You couldn't tell me how to get back to Dandelion Avenue?"

Rye started to give directions, but Holly stepped in with what she claimed was a quicker way. Rye straightened and noticed faces at the neighbour's window. Not surprising. It wasn't too often a piece of hardware like this carpet made it around here without being stripped and burned.

“Nice meeting you both,” Flora said.

“Yeah. Likewise.” Rye raised a hand. “Thanks again.”

Rye watched the carpet zoom away, then followed Holly inside.

“Astronomical!” Holly flopped into a kitchen chair. “Pinch me. This must be a dream. No, it can’t be. You wouldn’t look like that in any dream of mine. Which means it must be real! Woo hoo!”

Rye put the kettle on to boil and bent to pull vegetables from the cupboard.

“I’m going to die,” Holly said. “Ms. Flora Withe. I’ve ridden in her carpet. It’s exactly what I expected her to fly. Style to the stars! I simply must tell Daisy. She’ll shrivel with envy!”

Holly leaped to her feet, grabbed the phone, and disappeared into her bedroom. Rye shrugged to herself. Holly seemed much more excited about the few minutes they’d spent in Flora Withe’s carpet than winning a prize at school. There were times when Rye wondered if she and Holly were from the same part of Infinity, let alone species.

Rye pulled the black card from her shirt pocket. The printing shimmered silver. It simply said: Flora Withe (959) 445-292.

For the first time in her life, Rye dished up steamed dock roots while preoccupied with thoughts about a woman sexy enough to star in wet dreams.

When Rye tapped on Holly’s bedroom door, Holly lay on her bed with the phone cradled against her ear. She blushed and glared spears at Rye. Pictures of music stars cut from glossy magazines covered the wall above Holly’s bed.

“My relic wants the phone,” Holly said into the receiver. “Call me again, okay?”

She hung up.

“The relic is really here to tell you that dinner is ready,” Rye said.

Holly slouched past Rye and into the kitchen. Rye followed.

“Who was that?” Rye asked.

“Just someone.”

Holly interrupted nibbling a grilled sparrow’s leg to ask, “Can I really spend my prize money on myself?”

“Yeah. Um.” Rye chased a honeysuckle flower around her plate. “Holls?”

“What?”

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“Um. About earlier.”

“What?”

“Thing is—”

“Rye! Fey, you can be annoying. It was a boy, okay? His name is Moss. He’s a friend of Daisy’s brother. We talk on the phone sometimes. What else do you want to know?”

Rye blinked. “Actually, I was going to ask you about Ms. Withe.”

“Oh. I left my body when I saw you talking with her.”

“I already apologised for the clothes.”

Holly’s fork froze midway to her mouth. She stared incredulously at Rye. “It was Flora Withe. It wouldn’t have mattered what you were wearing.”

“Really? Why not?”

Holly smacked a hand against her forehead. “Flora Withe! You can’t tell me that you’re the only person in Infinity who doesn’t know who she is.”

“Actually, I can. Who is she?”

“Only the best weaver in ShadeForest City. Probably the whole country. Maybe even the world.”

“Oh.”

During her shift that evening, Rye considered the earlier events as she sweated over the smoky, bubbling fat cauldrons at Pansy’s Fried Sandwiches. Shorn of Holly’s teenage exaggeration and enthusiasm for everything arty, Flora Withe was probably an artist of local renown. Hence her being a guest judge at the school. If her flying carpet was anything to go by, she was fairly successful.

As Rye dunked sandwiches to sizzle in the fat, she savoured memories of Flora Withe. Rye had never met a truly beautiful woman before, nor one who radiated such sensuality.

Holly was asleep by the time Rye returned home from work. From the cooler, Rye grabbed the last of the four small jars of beer she rationed herself to each week. She carried it into the lounge and made up her bed on the couch. She sat awake, sipping, staring at the little black card. *Flora Withe (959) 445-292. Call me. Anytime.*