

# winging it!

*Confessions  
of an Angel-in-  
Training*

SHEL DELISLE

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# **dedication**

For Judy Rice, who gave me angels every Christmas until I  
could no longer deny their existence.



# acknowledgments

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# chapter 1

**H**ave you ever decided to do something that seemed like a good idea—maybe even an *inspired* idea—and in the second before there’s no turning back, you think, *I musta been totally mental when I came up with this?* And then, *Oh well, here goes.*

Confession: That was exactly what ran through my mind when Gabriel sounded his trumpet and I took my leap of faith.

}}

In the enormous circular room at the center of the Temple, Archangels stand against the walls. Everything in the room is made of white marble—walls, floor ceiling,

columns—which makes for a hard, chilly atmosphere. What I wouldn't give for a shaggy rug, a comfy chair or a space heater. Strangely, even though someone has the AC set to frigid, my palms are sweating, so I wipe them on the plaid skirt of my Catholic school uniform.

I ditched the traditional white linen robe we're supposed to wear in the hope that dressing memorably would show The Big Kahuna I'm different from all the other Angels-in-Training. Independent. Non-conformist. Holy, hip, and human.

That kind of thing.

Confession: I'm not human, and don't want to be, but I gotta play the part for this whole thing to work, you know?

Today is Declaration Day. Or as I call it: D-Day. After our first three years of general schooling at the *L'académie de Divinté*, a.k.a. Angel School, it's time to specialize and pick our eternal vocation. Then, we'll study that for the next three years. Finally, after that—and *if* we pass—we'll receive our wings. In between, we get other junk like a scepter, scales or flaming swords. Some can't wait to get their chariots, but I'm all about the wings. Who needs wheels when you can fly?



Three more years feels like for-*e*-ver.

As I wait, sweating it, Gabriel sounds his trumpet. A bright, multi-colored pulsing light spirals into the room through a doorway and glides toward me.

Is that Him?

Seraphim fly over the light all *holy, holy, holy*. As they soar, the Archangels and I bow our heads.

Seraphs, in case you didn't know, are at the top of the Celestial Being hierarchy, and it takes eons to get one of those jobs. Everyone thinks they're such a big deal, but I don't get it. All they do is fly around Our Head Honcho, non-stop. I mean, c'mon. The job seems pretty repetitious and not highly skilled, if you ask me. The best thing—no, the *only* thing—about Seraphim are those awesome wings, which almost makes me think about aspiring to their job. *Almost.*

As the glowing ball of light approaches, I shield my eyes. Sheesh, that's bright!

A fiery hand emerges from the orb, holding out a pair of sunglasses. I don't believe it, they're glam. Gingerly, I take them and put them on.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." The ball of light constricts, shifts,

and then Santa emerges: chubby, red suit, a sack of gifts tossed over his shoulder. “It’s time to declare your vocation, Grace.”

Of course, I *already* know this. That’s why we’re here.

“I have an inkling of what you’d like to do.” Santa becomes the light, which shifts again, and now He is a ginormous computer, whirring softly. How much memory does He have? Oh yeah—

Omniscient.

Which can get on someone’s nerves, because if you know, just *tell* me.

Archangel Michael bows his head in the direction of the computer then steps away from the wall, bearing his flaming sword. “Declare your vocation, Grace.” He sheathes the sword and looks annoyed, crossing his super-sized wings over his arms.

My stomach knots. Michael’s always intimidated me because, well, first of all he towers over me with his very muscular build. I’m sure that’s useful as he leads the army of Angels against doers of evil, but it can be a teeny bit intimidating. But to be honest, the thing that really makes me rubber-kneed is that he’s never liked me. Not since his guest lecture in my first year at Angel School during *Celestial*

*Structure 101.*

After about a month of classes, Professor Truesday announced, “We have a very special guest speaker today. Please welcome the Archangel Michael.”

Near the front of the room a huge, stony-faced Angel stood stiffly with the most incredible, feathered, iridescent, elegant wings I’d ever seen.

Professor Truesday normally didn’t exhibit his wings, keeping them concealed while teaching. But this new guy had no problem flaunting his. Mr. Gigantic Wings turned his back to the class, wrote ORDER on the blackboard and said, “In the day-to-day management of the Universe...”

*Blah, blah, drone, drone. How will I take this for the next six years?* I didn’t really tune in to much of what he said because I couldn’t stop admiring his wings. Behind a cupped hand, I whispered to my roommate, Mercy, “I gotta get a pair of those.”

The Archangel stopped droning, pointed his flaming sword at me and boomed, “You...with the curls. What’s your name?”

I pointed to my chest, my heart already migrated north to my throat. “Me?” I asked in a small voice.

“Yes. You.”

“Grace Lightbourne.”

“Well Grace, did you have a question?”

“No, not really.”

“A comment then?”

His eyes were locked on me as I squirmed in my seat. Could he at least put the sword down? “I said to my roommate that I wanted a pair of wings like yours.”

A few of the other Angels in Training, a.k.a. AITs, snickered. Mercy slouched down and held a hand to her forehead, trying to hide.

He smirked and gave them a mighty flap. Papers flew off desks, scattering everywhere. The AITs in the front rows had to scurry around collecting everything. “You like them, then?”

“Who wouldn’t?” I gushed.

One student barked a laugh.

“Then I suggest you pay better attention in class so you don’t end up a Wingless One. Oh, and meet me after school today to serve a Detention for speaking out in class.”

He gave out three more Detentions that day to other AITs. For me, it was the first of countless I’ve received from him over the years. Once, I told Mercy if he’d been

around in the beginning, Michael probably would have given The Big Guy, Himself, a detention for Creation taking six days instead of four or five.

I don't think he can give one during a Declaration. Still, I don't want to risk it.

"Hi." I wave weakly at Michael.

Naturally, he doesn't smile. His expression amps up the tension in the room. Just when I think I couldn't possibly be any more nervous, scenes from Earth are projected onto the walls surrounding us like two-second clips from movies.

Faster and faster. A beautiful field of wildflowers, a traffic jam, a bowling ball knocking down pins, a bustling city street, a scorpion scuttling across the sand. It's totally unnerving.

It's impossible to decide what to focus on—the kaleidoscope of images or God's shifting appearance. Now he's morphed into an oversized owl. I finally lose my balance completely.

"What dooooo you choooooose?" asks The Owl-God.

I fidget a little. "Um, well, I have this *idea*."

"I know you dooooo," the owl says. See what I mean about the omniscient-thing? The Owl-God offers me a

sliver of advice. “We need you to state your wishes. Take your time. Be sure it’s...appropriate.”

“Lord, she just needs to declare.” Michael’s wings tremble a little. Like he has a nervous tic.

“Okay,” He says. “Grace, what will it be?”

I scratch my temple. “I watch Earth. On HVEN TV. A lot—”

Now, Michael’s wings shudder. “Just declare,” he cuts me off with a clipped tone.

“And I was thinking it seems like they could use my help. I know, I know.” I shake my head. “This has probably never been done with an Angel-in-Training, but I’m not really a school-type person. Just ask Archangel Michael. I’m probably more like, uh, Michelangelo.”

The Archangels along the wall titter, and muffled voices leak out behind hands held to their mouths.

But I keep going. “You know who I mean, right? The guy who painted the Sistine Chapel. Anyway, I ran into him at The Hall of Records the other day, and he told me he skipped school and trained as an apprentice. Like, on-the-job-training. And that turned out pretty good, I think.”

Michael’s wings are totally shaking. It’s like a six or seven on the Richter scale. My knees want to buckle, but

I'm too far in. *Just keep going.*

"I just think it would be better for everyone—" I steal a glance at Michael, "—if I went straight to an Assignment. Say, as a Guardian." I figure he must be as tired of giving me Detentions as I am of getting them.

"This is ridiculous," Michael bellows. *Ridiculous* echoes off the walls. "She's comparing herself to a human who painted Your masterpiece. She can't skip training."

At this point, Gabriel steps forward, trumpet in hand, and flaps his wings. "If I may say something. Perhaps I can offer a solution."

The Owl transforms into a Traffic Light. The green light is glowing brightly. "Certainly, Gabriel. Speak your mind."

It's funny how things work out. Like this morning, I took a long time picking my outfit, which made me late, so I was the last in line, which seemed bad but now seems good, because this is taking quite a bit longer than I thought. When Michael made us practice Declarations a thousand times last week, it was much quicker.

"Grace has a beautiful voice," Gabriel croons. He's shorter and slighter than Michael. Plus, his trumpet is not nearly as intimidating as the whole flaming-sword thing.

“An assignment in the choir would suit her gifts.”

“Um,” I pipe up. “See. I have to disagree. Sorry, Gabe.”

He shoots me a harsh look and one wing does a little flap. The Traffic Light turns yellow.

“I mean, Gabriel. I don’t like the choir. In fact, I *really* dread singing glory, glory all day long. It’s—” I hold my thumb and forefinger a hair’s width apart, “—a teeny bit boring.”

Gabriel’s mouth drops open, and The Traffic Light changes to bright red.

*Yikes. Was that too much honesty?* I turn to Him, feeling plain silly speaking to a gadget. It’s worse than the owl. “Sorry.” Then to Gabriel, “You’re a great teacher and everything.”

Gabriel smiles and the Light flashes yellow.

“But back to this Guardian idea, okay? Humans, their lives are such a mess,” I ramble. “I just think, how hard could it be to make them a little better? I mean, I couldn’t make them worse.”

After I say the last part, there’s silence of the complete and total variety. In the quiet, the scenes on the walls fly by us faster and faster—waves crashing on the beach, a full



moon, a palm tree. I can't stand it; I'm so dizzy.

"It really would be for the best." I sound a lot more confident than I feel.

And then, He becomes the old-man version of Himself. The one from Michelangelo's paintings.

Almost.

Because the Sistine Chapel doesn't show Him doubled up with laughter and brushing tears from his eyes. "*She is* spunky. I like that."

Michael's shoulders droop and his wings wilt. When he speaks, his voice has lost its edge. "Sir, you know this requires much more than spunk. My training program has prepared Guardians since Day One."

The Old Man steps toward Michael, His elegantly embroidered robe brushing the floor. "I remember another brash Angel-in-Training. That trait has served him quite well for a very long time." He dabs his beard with the back of his hand. "And it wasn't Day One, Michael. It was Two or Three. I can't remember which, and it's really not important."

The other Archangels whisper behind hands and wings this time.

Michael's eyes drift to the floor. "Yes. You're right, of

course.”

*What was that about?*

The room falls silent again and the scene projected onto the walls of the Temple freezes on human teens walking through a hallway, carting backpacks, laughing, jostling each other.

“This could work. The problem is not too complex,” He mutters to Himself. “And the Assignment is still malleable. All right. I’ve found a Mission that needs a Guardian. You’ll need to depart right away. Timing is critical.”

Yessssss! Ask, and ye shall receive. Isn’t that how it goes?

There’s a flurry of reactions from the Archangel peanut gallery. Some nod, some gasp and others are whispering behind their wings again. All of them are watching Michael. He simply looks resigned.

I bow my head in thanks.

The Old Man says to Michael in a distracted voice, “Is Grace the last Declaration? What do I have now?”

When I peek up from my pious stance, an agenda materializes in his hands.

“Busy, busy, busy—it’s a hectic day. Michael, would

you please take care of the details? I'm off to create a new flower then reshuffle a couple of fates and after that, there's a storm I need to set in motion."

Michael nods. "Yes, Sir."

The Old Man gazes at me, through me. "Just so you know, Grace. I prefer the first two, creation and organization. But when you have to do everything, well, that means destruction, too." His palms open. "And one more thing. You could almost say your Mission is against my better judgment. Of course, you can't say *that*, exactly, because it is my decision. Do you understand?"

I don't, but decide I'd better nod anyway.

"No. You don't understand yet. One of the only Absolutes in all of this—" his arm sweeps grandly around The Temple, "—is Free Will. For how could I be loving and enslave any Being?"

I still don't know what He's talking about, but nod again because it seems like what He's saying is super-important.

As He glides away and changes back into the pulsing light, Michael calls, "Procedure, Sir?"

With an impatient wave of His hand, back to us all, The Old Man booms, "It will be done."

## chapter 2

After God said the *It will be done* thing, He and the Archangels all floated out the door in textbook Angel-walk formation.

Perfecting *the* walk is tough. Double tough for me because it doesn't come naturally. I tend to bump into things and seriously have to question if the Big Guy knew what He was doing when He decided to name me Grace. The thing about the walk is that you need precisely the right combination of composure, kindness and *don't mess with me* confidence. It's a lot like a runway model walk—minus the haughty.

The Archangels' walks are flawless as they leave me. Alone. With Michael.

His face is stern as he says, "Follow me." Without waiting, he leaves, almost marching out the opposite door. His walk isn't as gliding as it should be. Neither is mine as I skedaddle after him.

Ahead of me, Michael turns quickly right, left, right through a maze of corridors into a section of the Temple I've never been before. We pass doors with signs that read *Celestial Conflict Mediation and Resolution*, *Decrees*, and *Chariot Inspections and Licenses*. What do they do in all these departments? I rush to keep up and, finally, he stops in an open doorway. This sign reads *Prayers—Answered and Otherwise*.

A lady with bushy, shoulder-length hair sits behind a desk heaped with paper. "Michael! How are you today?" She looks as frazzled as her hair but still forces a small smile.

"I've had better. How's the backlog?"

"We're falling behind again. Everybody on Earth wants something. Want, want, want. It's hard to prioritize the needs. Say, is that a new Dominion with you? Interested in an internship, sweetie?"

How could anyone ever mistake me for a Dominion? They're all paper-pushers with a bossy nature. Before I can give her the 411 on my Declaration, Michael says, "Grace, I'd like you to meet Destiny Goodewind. She's our resident expert on sorting out prayers. Destiny, this is Grace

Lightbourne, an AIT studying to be a Guardian. Sorry, she's not your Angel, but I'll keep my eye out for a Dominion candidate who'd be better suited to helping you."

AIT? Studying? Is Michael in denial? I believe I just skipped those steps. And that *better suited* comment was pretty snarky.

"Oh, it's Declaration Day, isn't it?" Destiny smiles sweetly at me. "Congratulations! Guardians Angels are an important, but often overlooked, part of the fabric of Heavenly Society."

I can tell she's quoting from some official Celestial Structure manifesto and detect a snooty tone. Like *protecting* humans isn't quite as important their *prayers*. This is precisely why it took me such a long time to pick Guardian as my vocation. The job means an eternity of all the other Angels turning up their halos at me. It makes me feel so inferior. But in the end, it was the only thing that *felt* right.

I'm about to enlighten her on my views. "Actually, I think—"

"Well, we really need to get going." Michael puts his wing on my shoulder and shoves me out of the doorway. Truly. A shove with his wing.

"Me, too. Lots to do." She shuffles a few papers on her desk. "Good luck, sweetie."

Michael takes off fast-paced, saying, "You need to keep your Mission hush-hush." He doesn't speak again until we come to a glass door with an Executive Offices sign. As we bolt by a receptionist on the phone, he says, "I don't approve of this idea."

Yeah, well, as far as I know, no one died and made him Boss.

"It is my job, however, to give you the rules," he concludes as we reach a corner office.

The sign on the door reads: *Michael*, with his title—*Archangel*—underneath. A Cherub stands outside, his sword aflame. I salute. He doesn't budge, crack a smile or anything.

They never do.

Cherubim, in case you're unfamiliar, are security for all the really important places like The Pearly Gates or the Tree of Life or The Garden of Eden, et cetera. Apparently, Michael's office is a big deal. This guy, like every other Cherub, is utterly humorless. He could be a Secret Service agent or one of the guards at Buckingham Palace.

Confession: I never wanted to be one of them. One of Heaven's bouncers.

Michael nods at the Cherub, then scans his right palm on some kind of electronic key pad. There's a muffled click and the door swings open. Inside, he gestures to where I should sit.

Inside I'm practically panicked. Am I making a huge mistake? Should I have just stayed in school? But the thing is I've never done well there and even though I can't know if this is right I

resign myself to fake it 'til I make it.

Michael clears his throat and settles into an enormous chair behind his desk, wings spread wide. He slides a hard, black briefcase across to me. “This is indestructible.”

“That’s too bad,” I joke, “because it’s hideously ugly.”

No smile.

Obviously he’s too serious, which I suppose is a *good* quality to have when you battle *evil*. Still, it’d be nice if he could lighten up.

He doesn’t budge and the case isn’t going anywhere either, so I take it. Upon looking inside, I find:

- One book. *My Life as a Guardian* by Wilhelm
- Another book. *Understanding Humans* by Sophia
- And yet another. This one silver, sparkly and a little lame. *The Guardian Reference Book*
- Two folders—a silver one that matches the book and reads, “Quick Guardian Rules and Tips” and a blue one marked simply, “Identity”

- A Gateway laptop
- And last, but not least—a cell phone

Does he think I’ll have a lot of time for reading? Or that I’ll want to? Ignoring the books, I hold up the phone. “What’s this for?”

“Emergencies,” he replies. “You’ll find all the numbers you need under *Contacts*.”

Emergencies? Like anything bad is gonna happen. But I wonder if I can call Mercy. “Okay. What else?”

Michael smirks a little when I say this and his wings slowly wrap around behind him, standing at attention. He holds out a single sheet of paper. Maybe he has a sense of humor after all? I snatch the sheet and read.

## THE RULES:

1. NO HUMAN CAN KNOW YOU ARE AN ANGEL. (OR, IN YOUR CASE, AN ANGEL-IN-TRAINING)
2. YOU MUST NOT TAMPER WITH FREE WILL.
3. DO NOTHING TO UPSET THE BALANCE OF EARTH.

#### 4. WATCH FOR SIGNS.

*That's it?* Four rules? And the last one isn't even a rule. More like a tip.

And, what's with all the caps? It's like he's yelling.

Come to think of it, I should have expected yelling, but I also expected him to give me pages and pages and then make me sign something.

"This seems, well, I hate to say it...but, easy," I tell him. "Isn't there something else?"

Michael folds his hands on his desk, and his wings make what looks like an annoyed flap. His very blue eyes never leave mine. "Read your Identity File and study those books. You have a lot of catching up to do." He straightens his shoulders. "Any questions?"

I have a ton. Like, *Do those wings ever give you a backache?* But somehow I didn't think he'd answer this, so instead I ask, "Will I have super powers?"

He smirks again. "You'll have to decide how *super* they are. Go pack for departure and report at oh-three hundred hours."

Wow. That's soon. And, what the heck does his *super* comment mean?