

## CHAPTER 1



# The Angel's Visitation

**I**T FIRST APPEARED as a gentle glow, almost like a child's night-light. Heavy shadows filled the room as the boy lay face up, covers tucked neatly under his arms. A slight smile on his face hinted that he was in the midst of a pleasant dream.

Ryann Watters, who had just celebrated his twelfth birthday, rolled lazily onto his side, his blond hair matted into the pillow, unaware of the glow as it began to intensify. Shadows searched for hiding places throughout the room as the glow transformed from a pale yellow hue to brilliant white.

Ryann's eyelids fluttered briefly and then flickered at the glare reflecting off his pale blue bedroom walls. Drowsily, he turned toward the light expecting to see one of his parents coming in to check on him. "What's going on?" his voice cracked as he reached up to rub the crusty sleep from his eyes.



Under a pale half-moon, Drake Dunfellow's house looked just like any other. A closer inspection, however, would reveal its failing condition. Water oaks lining the side of the curved driveway hunched over haggardly, like old men struggling on canes. The lawn, which should have been a lively green for early spring, was withered and sandy. A few patches of grass were sprinkled here and there. Rust lines streaked down the one jagged peak atop the tin-roof house. The flimsy clapboard sides were outlined by fading white trim speckled with dried paint curls. Hanging baskets containing a variety of plants and weeds all struggling to stay alive shared the crowded front porch with two mildew-covered rocking chairs. Inside, magazines and newspaper clippings both old and new were carelessly strewn about. Encrusted dishes from the previous day's meals battled each other for space in the bulging kitchen sink. In the garage, away from the usual living areas, was a boy's room. Dull paneling outlined the bedroom, while equally dreary brown linoleum covered the floor. The bedroom must have been an afterthought because not much consideration had been given to the details. A bookcase cut from rough planks sat atop an old garage sale dresser.

Moonlight pressing through the dust-covered metal blinds tried to provide a sense of peacefulness. Instead it revealed bristly red hair atop a young boy's head poking out from beneath a mushy feather pillow. His heavy breathing provided the only movement in the quiet room. Tiny droplets of perspiration lined his brow as he began jerking about under the thin cotton sheets.

Starting at the edge of the window, the blackness spread downward, transforming all traces of light to an oily dinginess. Drake was slowly surrounded and remained the only thing not saturated in the darkness. Bolting upright to a stiff-seated atten-

tion, Drake's bloodshot eyes darted back and forth. He stared into the black nothingness shuddering and aware that the only thing visible in the room was his bed.

"Who...who's there?" Drake cried out, puzzled by the hollow sound that didn't seem to travel beyond the edge of his mattress. Beads of sweat trickled down his neck, connecting his numerous freckled dots. He strained, slightly tilting his head, ears perked. There was no reply.



Neatly manicured streets wandered through the Watters's sleepy, rolling neighborhood. If someone had been walking along in the wee morning hours of March 15, they would have noticed the brilliant white light peeking out from around Ryann's shade. Below his second-story window the normally darkened bed of pink, red, and white impatiens was lit up as in the noonday sun.

Ryann was fully awake now and quite positive that the dazzling aura facing him from in front of his window was not the hall light from his parents entering the bedroom. Golden hues flowed out of the whiteness, showering itself on everything in the room. It reminded Ryann of sprinkles of pixie dust in some of his favorite childhood books. His blue eyes grew wide trying to capture the unbelievable event unfolding before him.

"Fear not, Ryann," a confident, yet kind, voice began. "I have come to do the bidding of one much greater than I and who you have found favor with."

Rapid pulses in his chest gripped Ryann as he struggled to understand what was happening. Instinctively he grasped his navy blue bed sheets and pulled them up so that only his eyes and the top of his head peeked out from his self-made cocoon. Squinting to reduce the brilliance before him, Ryann stared into the light, trying to detect a form while questions scrambled around his mind. What had the voice meant by "finding favor,"