

Linda Mooney

Lord of
THUNDER
Book I

LORD OF THUNDER

by

Linda Mooney

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HEARTCRYSTAL
MY STRENGTH, MY POWER, MY LOVE

Dedication

For Jim.

Chapter 1

The Marriage

The storms in Montana were often unpredictable and vicious. A pure blue sky waxing from mountain range to mountain range could darken within an hour. Clouds as inky and velvety as moldy bread would fold themselves over and over until the air became foul with the suffocating smell of ozone. And then the thunder would come.

Thunder louder than winter avalanches would growl and boom until ears were deafened by the noise. Lightning, like thin, silver knives would slash the blackness, stabbing through the heat and the sound like a lunatic hunter gone mad. Stabbing and slicing until the ground was pierced, and huge chunks of earth were rent in the soil.

During these storms, Annie Mayall would be curled up into a tight, frightened ball in the corner of the tiny one-room log cabin that had been her home for the past three years. She would press the palms of her hands to her ears as tears coated her face. With every shock wave of sound, she would jump. With every flash of light, she would squeeze her eyes tighter, all the while praying the storm would soon be over.

The storms were the only thing she ever truly hated about living in such a lonesome and isolated place. But she had to admit that afterwards, after the clouds had skipped back over the Talosota Mountains, Dry Lick Valley was more verdant and beautiful than anything out of a fairy tale dream.

Well...almost the only thing.

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Like the rest of the country, Montana in 1940 was thin on possibilities. America was trying to stay out of a war with Japan. Unemployment was high. But unlike the rest of the country, if a man owned a bit of land and had the grit to work long, hard hours, he and his family could become self-sufficient.

In Montana, it was easy to become self-sufficient. Land was cheap, especially in the more wooded places far away from populated areas. This was where Foster Mayall brought his naive young wife. This was where Foster Mayall built the tiny log cabin with its pump handle washbasin and the big stone fireplace, and then left his bride of four months to seek his fortune in the silver mines.

That was three years ago. Three long, difficult, isolated years ago.

It had only taken her a few months, however, to get accustomed to life in Dry Lick Valley. She had been raised on a small farm in rural Ohio. Her father had raised her and her two younger siblings amid fifty-two acres of corn. Being the oldest, Annie had become mother to her brother and sister. She had done the cooking, the cleaning, the washing, and the tending of both livestock and family. She had gone to school long enough so that when she had to bow out in order to help with the farm, no one questioned her decision.

Her days had been filled with hard work. Her nights had been equally filled with dreams and wishes of a better life. Saturdays were for dressing up and going to town in the family truck—all four of them ready for a movie and perhaps an ice cream afterwards.

Which was probably why she fell for Foster Mayall like a hammer on an anvil. He hadn't been much older than she was, but he already wore the ways of the world on him like a fancy coat. He talked fast and moved faster. He was from Connecticut. To a country farm girl like Annie, he was a knight in shining armor.

The night of August sixth, the Prichard family had gone into town for their usual Saturday escapade. Mabel and John Ray Junior each begged for a nickle to see the next installment of the serial showing at the Palisades. Their daddy had gone over to Ruby's Dinner to make eyes at Dorie Fines over a piece of apple pie. Rumor around town had it that John Prichard would be taking the petite, redheaded waitress to wife pretty soon, and wouldn't that be a tremendous burden off of poor Annie's shoulders?

The Bellflower Dance Hall was having a "single's only" dance, and Annie had opted to go there. That was where she met Foster Mayall, with all his high talk about silver mining in Montana. Maybe his clean-cut, pale, good looks might have been enough to sway her judgment. Yet, with all his promises about having a life "out there," away from dusty Ohio, away from the tedium and drudgery that came with running a farm, Annie realized he was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with—as long as it wasn't anywhere near Dirkins, or in Ohio.

So, a little over six weeks from the day she'd met him, Annie Prichard became Annie Mayall. They left for Billings, Montana that very afternoon, with barely enough time for her to say goodbye to her family.

Annie spent her honeymoon on the road, what honeymoon there was. Foster didn't want to waste his money on motels along the way, so they slept in the front and back seats of the car, and used gas station restrooms to take a quick spit bath before continuing their journey.

Once they reached Billings, Foster brought out the map and the title to the piece of land he'd bought through the mail. He sold the Ford, bought a wagon, a cow, a horse, and a mule, and then filled the wagon with an assortment of food and dry goods before they set out again. It took them another three days to find the exact spot, and Annie knew she'd died and gone to heaven.

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Despite its name, Dry Lick Valley was as lush and full of trees and wildlife as she'd ever seen. The overall beauty of the place was more than breathtaking. Annie found herself immediately falling in love with the place, despite its remoteness.

"We're gonna build us a place and live here the rest of our lives," Foster announced. And that night they made love for only the second time in their marriage, with just two thin blankets to keep them warm under the sparkling night sky.

And he did build them a place. Although the cabin was small compared to the farmhouse where she'd grown up, it was beautiful to her. Annie was amazed by her new husband's abilities with an ax and awl. From sunrise to sunset, she helped him select and fell the trees. She showed him how to hitch the mule she'd affectionately named Murphy to the chained logs and drag them back to the site where Foster had plotted out the groundwork for the cabin and a barn. And while Foster planed and cut the logs to fit, she cooked over an open fire.

It was the middle of summer. The days were tolerable, but the nights still grew chilly. Too often he would drop onto his bedroll and fall fast asleep, leaving her awake and aching, to watch the night sky and the moon travel through the stars, flowing from new to full and back to new over the course of the months.

As the season melted into fall, the cabin was finally finished. In two more weeks Foster cobbled together a crude but functional off-the-floor bed, a table, and two chairs. He spent another week getting a suitable barn raised.

"It'll last the winter, but not two," he told her. The wind blew through the cracks between the boards, and rain managed to sneak around the roof, but at least the animals would be able to survive in it until spring.

Now the trees were beginning to turn. Annie woke up one morning to find Dry Lick Valley spread out in a quilt of colors that

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took her breath away. She also discovered her husband and the horse gone. Left behind was a note.

I'm afraid I've spent too much time on the farm as it is. If we're gonna get rich, I need to get to the mines. I should be gone until spring. You should be fine until I get back. I left you some money to help tide you over. If you run short, you can butcher the cow. Your loving husband, Foster.

That was three years ago. Annie hadn't heard from him since.

Chapter 2

The Interim

Annie never lost faith her husband would come back. She prepared herself for the coming winter, stocking up with supplies. She hitched Murphy to the wagon and drove into the nearest town, a little one-street place called Hoonas. Although small, it had a hardware store and a gas station, a church, a school, a diner, a general store where she could get staples, and combination restaurant and inn known as Stepman's Inn. She and Foster had come here in the past when they needed to replenish supplies. They'd even treated themselves to a night at Stepman's, sleeping on a feather mattress and crisp sheets so white they could blind her in the light.

At the store she spent her dollars frugally, the same way she'd handled her daddy's money whenever times were especially tight. Mr. Baugh, the owner of the store, often inquired about Foster. She always told him he was back at the site working. She didn't want to tell him her husband had left her for the mines. It almost sounded like desertion. Like she hadn't been a good enough wife to keep him. Mr. Baugh nodded and told her to give her husband his regards. Annie smiled and said she would, then loaded up the wagon and set off.

She managed to cobble together a little shack over the spring which ran just beyond the cabin. In it she could store the provisions that needed to stay cool and out of the heat. At night, by the light of the fire or the single lantern, she taught herself to sew, and finished a quilt for the bed, using scraps from old and worn-out clothing.

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She borrowed a scythe from her nearest neighbors, the Funderburkes, who lived on the other side of Near Haven Pass. Horace Funderburke taught her how to use the tool to cut the free-growing hay. It took her nearly all the fall to cut and bundle what she thought would be enough to feed the livestock over the winter. Some nights she would go to bed so sore she could barely find a comfortable position to lie in.

When the first snow fell, its earliness caught her by surprise. It was barely the end of October, and there was enough frost on the ground to mark her footprints until nearly midday.

One morning in November she opened her front door to see a small herd of deer grazing near the well. Foster's rifle brought down a fat doe, which she cured and hung in the springhouse. A nearby grove of trees provided enough tannic acid to help her cure the hide, which she nailed to the inside wall of the cabin. Newspapers stuffed in the bigger cracks would have to suffice until the following summer when she could make up a decent clay mixture to cement between the logs more permanently.

And when the winter winds finally began to blow in earnest, Annie settled down to a series of long nights filled with boredom and longing. Deep within the valley, the crystal wave her father had given her for a wedding present didn't work. Even if it could receive any transmissions, there was no electricity this far out. Fortunately she knew her way around a needle and thread. Once she'd completed a quilt, she began working on some new clothes for herself.

Horace Funderburke came by one evening to check on her. It had been six months since Foster's disappearance, and Annie finally broke down and confessed to the grizzled old farmer that she was alone.

"It ain't right," the sixty-year-old father of three grown children said. "Leaving a young wife all alone to fend for herself. It ain't right."

She explained why her husband left, but was unable to tell him where her delinquent spouse had gone. Silver mines were scattered all over Montana—some long-abandoned, others still producing, and still more promising riches to the next miner with enough money and brawn to dig it out.

Horace had offered her a room at his place. With their own children married and moved out, he said he and his wife Elly felt like two little goldfish in a bowl the size of the ocean sometimes. “Be good for her,” the farmer offered. “Elly gets somewhat lonesome for another woman to talk to. Especially when I have to go out to the back acreage and I’m gone for several days at a time.”

“No, thank you. I do appreciate the offer, but I must stay. I have to be here when Foster comes back,” Annie explained.

If he comes back. She could see from the look on the old man’s face what he was thinking, although he’d never say it aloud.

“Well, for your sake, I’ll say a prayer for his safe return.”

Annie thanked him and offered him a cup of coffee and a biscuit left over from breakfast. Horace accepted both and promised to come by on occasion to make sure she was getting along okay.

For the first time in many weeks, Annie felt a sense of relief. She knew Horace would tell his wife about her circumstances, but she believed the woman wouldn’t go about town telling other folks about her husband running out on her. She didn’t seem like that kind of person.

And Horace kept true to his word. Once every couple of weeks, he’d drop by just to see if she needed anything from town, or if he could help her with anything around the farm.

When the biggest snowstorm of the year hit during the last week of January, the farmer traipsed over land on his snowshoes, two rabbits slung over his back. He offered them to Annie as a belated Christmas gift. She accepted them gratefully.

Yet, despite the cold and snow and short-lived blizzard which hit, Annie heard that it had been an unusually mild winter. She’d

been lucky. Spring came early, and she made the most of it. She planted a garden and began digging a root cellar. She canned vegetables and fruit, and carefully prepared every animal skin she captured and cleaned. At times it felt like she was back in Ohio. By the time fall came around again, after countless jars of huckleberries and enough stored pecans to please a squirrel, she felt more confident and secure in the knowledge she would be able to last out this next winter better prepared than she had last year.

As the months went by, and there was no word from Foster, Annie swung from moods of deep depression to weary patience. In her frequent letters to her father and family back home, she never let on about Foster's absence, but filled her missives with talk about crops and the mountains and the local town gossip Elly kept her abreast of. Most of the letters she received back were written by Mabel, who had taken on the tasks Annie had done, namely the cooking and cleaning.

Dear Annie,

Dad's fine. Got a new bull. It's a mean bugger named Rex. John Ray Junior sends his love and wonders if you could send him some of those huckleberry tarts you mentioned in your last letter. You remember Betsy Stark? She upped and eloped with some guy from New Jersey. Mister and Missus Stark had put out a police bulletin on her when she first disappeared until they got a letter from her. She's living in New York now. Not much else to talk about. We're all fine. Same old thing day after day. You know what I mean. Daddy says to tell you he misses you. Write again soon.

Love, Mabel

Thus life went on. Day after day. Week after week. By month and by year. At times Annie dreamed of Foster coming home and apologizing. Telling her he was wrong to up and leave her like that. Promising he'd never pull such a stunt again. And then he'd make love to her. Not like the other half-dozen times he'd done it, but

slow and taking care she was enjoying it the same way he seemed to.

She kept telling herself he'd be home next month. But when that month came and went, and there was no sign of hide nor hair from him, she'd make up some excuse as to why he'd been delayed. Perhaps some claim jumper had threatened to take his mine away. Or maybe there'd been a flood, which washed away his site, and he had to start up all over again.

Then there were times the darker, blacker imaginings took over. She pictured him lying dead or dying from the hand of some other jealous miner. She saw him frozen to death up there in the mountains, with little or no food. When she dreamt those dreams, Annie always woke up filled with guilt and longing. She cried many times during that first year. Fewer times the second. By the time the third fall came, she had no tears left. Foster would come back to her. She just knew it in her gut.

One day. Sooner or later.

Hopefully.

There was nothing in Ohio to go back to. Despite her loneliness and the solitude, she'd made friends in Montana. Good friends. Good neighbors. The land was her and Foster's, free and clear. Someplace she could call home. A good place to raise crops. And cattle. Chickens. Children.

Of the few times they'd made love, she hadn't been fruitful enough to become pregnant. It was something else to regret.

Breathing deeply of the fragrant air rich with pine, Annie bent back to her task of tying off bundles of hay and loading them on the trap behind Murphy.

If there was anything she didn't like about the place, if she could pick only one thing that made her stay less than perfect—other than the fact she was alone—it was the storms which rolled over the mountains. Storms terrified her, with their roar and destructive powers.

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Annie was certain nothing good, absolutely nothing positive, ever came in the wake of storms.

Chapter 3

The Discovery

She could already feel the familiar signs of her fear. Her palms were slick with sweat, unable to hold the spoon in trembling fingers. Her stomach twisted, cramping with a pain so intense it doubled her over. Her mouth felt dry, her tongue swollen. Unable to help herself, Annie slid to the floor as her legs gave way.

The rolling sound outside seemed to be approaching closer and closer to the cabin. It was a wild beast ready to pounce upon the poorly constructed home and tear it into kindling. It was a smoke-spewing locomotive about to ram into the cabin's wall and eat her beneath its powerful iron wheels. Tears began to roll down her cheeks. She whimpered softly, bowing her head, and began her litany against the force of nature.

Go away, quick! Go away, quick! Go away, quick!

A flash outside the window brightened the night into day. Like her father had shown her, she began to count...one old cow, two old cows, three o—

It wasn't thunder that cracked the sky. It was Heaven screaming in pain.

Annie screamed in response. Her fear galvanized her, and she slid across the floor to the furthest corner of the cabin. The darkest corner on the other side of the fireplace. The corner where she felt the least vulnerable, although, like her fear, she couldn't explain why.

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Huddled in the tightest ball, she shuddered when the next bolt of lightning, a double bolt, flashed outside the window. This time the eardrum-shattering thunder came before the light had a chance to fade. Annie could feel the fine, warm drip of blood coming from her nose, but she wouldn't take her hands off her ears to wipe it away.

The sky split again. And again. And again. It seemed to last for hours. Around her she could feel the walls of the tiny cabin vibrate. A violin of wood whose timber strings were being stretched beyond their capacity. For a moment she almost thought the roof had lifted itself off the posts. Almost. Maybe just a fraction of an inch.

Amid her intense fear, her weariness, and the rapid thudding of her heart, at some point during the worst of the storm, as rain pelted the outside of the cabin with drops the size of small boulders, Annie fell asleep. No, not so much asleep as unconscious. Her body melted against the floorboards, as if her bones had turned into mud. She puddled into a semblance of the tight ball she'd pulled herself into when the storm had begun to threaten.

As the wind slowly dissipated, as the rain lessened to become a gentle fall, and as the thunder finally rolled away to the other side of the mountains, silence came back to the cabin. The sun broke out far in the west, just in time to begin its descent toward the horizon.

Annie awoke.

Her entire body ached. Her muscles protested the intense strain she'd put on them as she lay paralyzed in terror. There was a smear of bright red down the front of her dress and across the back of her left hand. Blood.

Very slowly Annie got to her feet, swaying slightly. She gripped the edge of the table and managed to make it over to the sink where she pumped in water from the spring. The water was

cold and helped to ground her, giving her the ability to ground herself. She quickly cleaned herself.

This one had been very bad. Worse than most, although in her opinion, all storms were bad. Pulling on her sweater, she went outside to inspect the damage.

Once more, by the grace of the good Lord, the barn had survived. She'd done all she could to sturdy the structure, but Horace had told her this past summer it needed to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch. "Should have been done right the first time," he told her. Annie had agreed. Foster had been in too big a hurry to finish up so he could leave.

She went into the barn to check on the animals. Back in April she'd managed to barter ten jars of her preserves for two hens and a rooster. Now she had five laying hens and enough eggs to help barter for more.

Inside the barn, to her horror, a good half-dozen of the boards on the back side of the building had splintered and blown away, leaving a gaping hole. Worse, Murphy was gone. She knew the mule was just as skittish during foul weather as she was. He'd probably contributed to the problem by kicking the boards loose enough for the wind to pull away.

A slab of sunlight leaked through the roof and landed at Annie's feet. It would be dark soon. She needed to find the mule and get it back into the barn.

Muddy prints led from the back of the structure toward the heavily forested area directly north of the farm. Annie followed them, keeping her ears peeled for sounds of the animal trudging through the underbrush.

"Murphy! Murr-r-phEEEE! Where are you, boy?"

The woods quickly closed behind her, but she'd come this way before. There was a thicket of huckleberries not too far in that she picked from. With luck the mule may not be too far ahead.

"Murphy!" She stopped and whistled, then listened.

There. To her right. A low sound. It could be the mule.

The woods had not been spared from the storm's wrath. Downed limbs were everywhere, some hanging by a mere shred of bark from their mother trunk. She did her best to avoid the worst of it, although some branches managed to scrape across her arms and face, leaving red marks.

"Murphy? Come here, boy!" She whistled again and paused.

This time the sound was closer. And clearer. It definitely sounded like a grunt or a groan.

Oh, God, please let my mule be okay. She hurried toward the sound. In her mind she imagined the animal felled by a heavy limb, possibly lying with a broken leg, or worse, a broken back.

There was a small clearing thirty or so feet away. A pile of still-green limbs were pyramided in the middle, as if a strong gust had dumped its trash dead center. As Annie drew nearer, the pile appeared to move slightly. She heard another groan.

It couldn't be Murphy. *Then what...*

A mud-covered hand suddenly appeared at the edge of the pile, fingers reaching, grasping, scrabbling for something. She took a step back in surprise until she realized it was human.

"Oh, no!"

Frantically, she began to pull the limbs off whoever was trapped at the bottom of the pile. Worry and fear gave her extra strength to drag some of the heavier branches away.

Another hand appeared. Soon she could see bright golden yellow. Hair. Hair and...

Annie froze. Her eyes widened, and she stepped away a few paces.

No. No. Her eyes were playing tricks on her. It couldn't be. There was no way. No way in God's creation...

The figure moved again, tried to lift itself, to stand or struggle to its knees, but there were still too many limbs entwined on top, keeping it pinned.

Some of the golden yellow shifted. Turned. A face streaked with mud and blood rose to look at her. The eyes were dulled with pain. Blue, blue eyes. A man.

“Help.”

The single word was all he could manage before collapsing back against the rain-soaked earth. But it was enough to break the spell.

Annie leaped back into the pile and began hauling away the limbs as fast as she could untangle them. Behind her she heard a snort and the movement of bushes. The errant mule had found her and now stood nearby, patiently waiting to be led back home.

“There you are! Had me half-filled with worry, you flea-bitten mule! Stay put. You’re going to have to work for your supper tonight.”

The sun was low, dipping behind the western ridge of the mountains when she finally managed to get enough of the limbs cleared away so she could drag the man out from beneath the remainder. It was like trying to move dead weight, and the man wasn’t slight of build, either.

It was going to be harder than she first thought. If she went back to the barn for the wagon, it would be dark before she returned. And she wasn’t sure she’d be able to find her way back. And she definitely couldn’t leave the...man...overnight. He wore no shirt. By the looks of it, his clothing had been torn away by the tree limbs on his...way down?

She glanced up at the darkening sky. It was growing colder, too. Might get down to freezing tonight. All the hard work of clearing away the brush had kept her warm. Standing there now, trying to figure out a way to get the man back to the farm, her body was beginning to cool off. She shivered involuntarily.

Annie grabbed his wrists and dug in her heels. Slowly, very slowly, she managed to pull the man further out from under the brush. He moaned and jerked back one hand.

Kneeling down, she wiped hair and leaves from his face. His eyes fluttered.

“Are you real? You’re real, ain’t cha? Hey, Mister? Can you hear me? I can’t leave you here, but I can’t drag you back to the cabin, neither. You have to help me. I got Murphy here. He’s tame enough he’ll stand still, but you’re going to have to help me lift you up on his back. Can you do that? Can you manage to get to your feet?”

There was a slight movement. Annie could see he had heard her, but he was weak. And definitely injured. Perhaps too seriously to survive the night, much less the trek back to the cabin.

“Come on, Mister. Help me help you.”

She bent down and pulled an arm around her shoulders. She struggled, pulling, straining to lift his weight.

Somehow the man got a leg underneath him. Then both legs. He nearly fell, yet Annie barely managed to steady him, bearing most of his weight as they struggled to get him onto the mule.

She could already see getting him up into a riding position was impossible. He was three-quarters unconscious as it was. That left her only one other option.

He was a big man. Bigger than Foster. Bigger than her father. He had to have been at least six foot three or four. His legs were like pillars. His arms were heavily muscled. And his shoulders... She’d never seen shoulders that wide. But, of course, his would have to be, considering...

Considering...

His wings.

The man...the angel...slumped over Murphy’s back. Strangely enough, the animal didn’t protest the strange person. Instead, the mule seemed to realize how important it was to save the visitor, and leaned into its new load. Annie shoved against the man’s posterior pushing him further over Murphy’s back, evening the weight. The man grunted twice then passed out again. When she

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was satisfied he wouldn't slide off, she grabbed the mule's halter and led it out of the forest, through the gloom, back toward the cabin.

Chapter 4

The Recovery

It took much pleading and begging, and several attempts to get the man off Murphy and into the cabin. He was covered in mud and leaves, and there were signs of blood that alarmed Annie even more. But before she could get him into bed and tend to him, he had to be cleaned up.

While water warmed in a kettle hanging over the fire in the fireplace, she got out the porcelain bowl she used to take her baths with and set it on the hearth. Next she found the one old shirt, a long-sleeved flannel one that Foster had left behind. He'd left it and a pair of dungarees, soiled and smelling, in a pile by the fireplace. Annie believed he'd done so in case he needed them once he returned. A clean set of clothes to come home to.

Or maybe it was his way of marking his property. *These are my clothes, my woman, my home.* Well, it had been three years since they'd been worn, and she needed them now for the stranger. Although Foster had been a big man with strong arms and wide shoulders, the angel man was far larger. The pants were definitely out of the question until she could add some width to them. The shirt would more likely fit, if not tightly. Yet it would have to make do until she could alter it as well, or repair his own clothes.

She secured the mule in the barn, checking to make sure the other animals were all right for the night, then went back to the cabin. She would come back to feed them once the man was taken care of.

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By the time she got back in the cabin, the water was warm enough. She poured some into the bowl, took a washcloth and towel from the chest at the foot of the bed, and brought everything to the floor beside the stranger. First she'd have to get his own clothes off him before she could wash off the grime and tend to his injuries. Bringing the lamp nearer, she cautiously laid her hands on him. He was warm. Breathing. Alive. Annie felt relieved.

Upon closer inspection she could see he'd been wearing what looked like a long tunic-type shirt and a pair of very loose breeches. The shirt was no more than shreds now, as were the pants, and both were stained beyond cleaning. She felt the sodden, cream-colored material. It was made of a very fine cloth which seemed to glitter in the lamplight, and felt as soft as old cotton. It took mere seconds to remove the remnants from his body.

Rolling him onto his side, she began by examining the pair of enormous wings. They were feathered and soft, just like a bird's, with sculptured pinions and tips. Their color was like aged gold. Not bright, but softer, almost like the color of the aura around the sun. And they were huge. They emerged from his shoulder blades, and feathers sprouted from the smooth skin of his back. They were real and undeniable.

Annie pulled debris from between the quills, smoothing each feather back into place as best she could. The right wing was at an odd angle, which she immediately knew was wrong. She was afraid to try and move it into the correct position. Therefore her common sense told her to immobilize it as best she could to prevent him from damaging it even further.

She pulled out some old clean rags she kept stored under the sink and ripped them into strips. Holding down the oddly-tilted wing, she wrapped it with the strips, going around his left shoulder and around the waist to keep it secure. The man groaned but didn't awaken.

With that accomplished, Annie rolled him gently onto his back. The wings folded neatly underneath him, tidy as an umbrella closing. Placing the bowl beside her, she used the washcloth to bathe him with warm water and toweled him dry. He was heavily muscled, with hands larger than she'd ever seen. Long fingers and blunt nails, with few calluses. Hands which had never seen hard labor. Annie stored that bit of knowledge in the back of her mind.

A fine layer of hair also covered his legs and arms. Hair so pale it was almost invisible against his sun-bronzed skin. She cleaned his maleness as a bright flush of embarrassment tinged her face. It seemed every part of him was one shade or another of soft gold.

His chest was bare of hair except for around the darker nipples. His neck was a thick column of muscles. His face was finely chiseled. His lashes and brows and thick, shoulder-length hair were the same odd gold color as his wings.

The hair on his head, however, was going to prove to be a problem. When clean, it must have waved across his shoulders when he flew, but now it lay in wet, matted clumps. Leaves, twigs, and other debris were twisted in it. There was a bare, bloody area near his left temple where a patch must have been jerked out during his fall. She would have to take care of it later.

Other than his wing, most of the damage was to his chest and abdomen. *Like he'd hit the trees on his way down.* Annie shook herself.

There were many cuts and scratches on his chest and stomach. The worst was the deep puncture wound below his ribs on his right side. She examined it carefully. It had stopped bleeding, but there were bits of wood sticking out of the hole, which she managed to pull out. Splinters. She prayed she got them all. The wound looked ugly, and for a moment Annie wondered if she should go get the doctor. Yet, the thought of bringing someone up to her cabin to examine her...angel...frightened her. Also, what if she went to all that trouble and the angel disappeared before they got back?

Throughout the cleaning and bandaging the angel man moved only once. Otherwise his breathing was deep and regular—a sign of the healing sleep he needed. He was clean and ready to be placed in the bed, but there still was the matter of his hair to deal with.

Annie got her scissors from her sewing basket and began clipping away the worst of the mess. However, it seemed that in order to be rid of the worst, she'd have to shear off most of it. *Oh, well, it's not like it won't grow back.* The end result was a cap of close-cropped curls that framed his face nicely, in her opinion.

She immediately realized she could not put the shirt on him in the normal way. But if she slipped it on him backwards, at least his chest and stomach would be warmed, and she could lay him on his back on the bed. She debated whether she should risk laying him on the wounded wing, or on his left side. She chose to prop him on his left side, even if it meant he'd be facing the wall, away from the rest of the cabin, and where she could see when he awoke.

It took her another half-hour to get the man into the bed and rolled onto his left side. She got the shirt on him but chose not to try to struggle with pants. He would need to be closely watched for signs of a fever or anything which would signal a possible infection.

Tucking the quilt around him, Annie allowed herself to sit back on her little stool by the hearth. Now she could rest. She replenished the fire before making herself a cold sandwich from the venison left over from dinner, then used the rest of the water warmed by the fire to bathe herself. Even with the stranger's back turned, and knowing he would be unconscious at least until morning, she still felt uncomfortable washing herself with him less than ten feet away.

She kept her back to him and washed under the cover of her clothes. When she was done, she quickly pulled on a clean shirt and pants, rather than change into her usual sleep shirt. The stranger was using the only quilt. It would get very cold before morning. Pulling on an extra pair of socks, her gloves, and her coat, Annie

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laid a dry towel on the bare floor and curled up on it next to the fire. She was asleep almost instantly.

Chapter 5

The Awakening

Every joint cracked and every muscle protested when Annie rolled over onto her back. The hard flatness beneath her was unfamiliar, and for a second she wondered where she was. Until it came back to her like a bucket of cold water in the face.

She quickly opened her eyes to get her bearings then sat up to look at the stranger who was supposed to be resting in her bed. The stranger with the wings the color of aged gold.

He was still there, lying on his left side to protect the right wing and the puncture wound under his ribs. At first glance it looked like he hadn't moved all night. The first faint signs of dawn were coming through the multipaned window, the only one in the cabin. There were telltale frost chips on the glass. It had gotten cold last night.

At first she felt relieved she hadn't dreamt the whole thing. Then a horrible thought suddenly came to her. She scrambled to her feet, rushing over to the bed and pulling off her gloves. She placed trembling hands on the angel man's right arm and shoulder and gently, carefully, rolled him slightly onto his back.

His face was no longer the pasty, sweaty color it had been the night before. Instead it looked natural. Annie touched his cheek to find it dry and cool. A steady rise and fall under the quilt told her he remained asleep. That was good. Very good. So far there was no sign of infection, but she'd still need to check the wound and probably clean it and replace the bandages.

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However, her hands were stiff with cold. Even in the confines of the cabin her breath and his were wispy clouds of white. Annie quickly built a fire from the coals left from the night before. She filled the kettle from the pump in the sink and set it on the hook, swinging the arm around so that the water would heat over the flames.

As she waited, she warmed her hands by rubbing them together and blowing on them before she began to tear some more bandages. She never heard the rustle behind her above the sound of the ripping material.

For a moment she sensed something...different. Not frightening. Not unusual. Just...different.

Then she knew.

Slowly she turned around from where she was kneeling over her sewing basket. The angel man was awake. He had rolled over and managed to sit up in bed. His strong legs and bare feet hung over the edge. His hands braced himself up.

He was staring at her with those blue, clear open Montana sky blue eyes. His aged gold hair stuck out in all directions, but his mussed appearance made him seem all the more otherworldly.

Annie got up and hurried over to him.

“How do you feel?” were her first words out of her mouth, although she had a hundred, no, a thousand questions to ask of him. Who was he? What was his name? How did he get here? What kind of person was he? Was he really an angel? Was he one of those Heavenly creatures who had lost his way? Could he really fly? Was there a Heaven? Did he come from Heaven? Did he know God? Why was he here? Was he here for her? Did someone send him?

It wasn't that Annie was an overly religious person. When Mamma had been alive, she'd take the children with her to Our Savior Methodist Church in Joleah. They hadn't gone every Sunday; Papa needed them to help with chores, and taking even one morning off meant working past dark to get the essentials done.

But Annie had learned of the Bible, learned to love the stories, and believed enough to be baptized. It was after Momma had died that all church going came to halt. In fact, it wasn't until a couple of months after the funeral that Annie realized they hadn't been going anymore. That getting out of the habit was not as difficult as she'd first imagined.

She hadn't stepped foot in a tabernacle since.

With the angel man staring at her, pain and confusion rampant in his eyes and on his face, she wondered if she was long overdue another visit.

She had so many questions jumbled up inside her it was like they were pushing up into her throat like liquid trying to gush its way up a narrow pipe. She felt like she would just burst with the need to ask.

But his health was her primary concern now. If he got sick and died on her from an infection, or even from a simple cold turned nasty, all her questions wouldn't amount to a hill of beans.

She went over to the sink and pumped him a glass of water, which she took over to the bed. She helped him as he held the glass with a trembling hand and drank. However, he refused to lie back down, preferring to remain sitting up.

Annie fetched a chair on the other side of the bed and dragged it back to the wall between the door and the bed, then set the half-empty glass on it, making it an impromptu side table. She noticed the angel man was staring at the backwards flannel shirt fitted over his chest and arms and loosely buttoned in the back below his shoulder blades. He reached for a cuff and tugged on it, but Annie stopped him.

"Leave that alone. Keep this shirt on; it'll keep you warm."

He looked back up at her, remaining mute.

Annie was adamant. "Your other clothes, the ones I found you in, they're pretty much useless. I'm going to wash them pretty

good, but they're no good anymore except for cleaning rags or bandages. Speaking of, I need to check your wound."

Pressing him gently on the chest, she was able to coerce him into leaning slowly back upon the mattress. As his weight landed on his injured wing, he jerked, hissing as pain flashed across his face. Annie shushed him and smiled, trying to reassure him.

"I think you pulled or strained it. It doesn't look broken. Just twisted. Now, lie still and let me look at your bandages."

The angel man remained motionless, his eyes following her hands as she lifted the shirt and began undoing the makeshift bandage. In daylight she could see the damage more clearly. So far there was no sign of pus or further bleeding. No sense taking any chances, though. She got a rag and some soap, and cleaned the wound again before wrapping it in clean bandages.

"Bet it hurts like a son of a gun, doesn't it?" she murmured.

Once she was finished, she reached out to check the damage over his ear. Instead, a large hand snatched hers before it reached his face. His hand was warm, but not overly so. The strength in his fingers was undeniable. His eyes bore into hers, but she saw no threat in them. Just curiosity. And pain. And something else she couldn't quite make out. A plea?

"You hurt your head," she told him in a soft yet firm voice. "I'm not going to hurt you. You ought to know that. You're so much bigger and stronger than me, it wouldn't be a fair match to begin with anyway, now would it? Now, are you going to let me help you get better? 'Cause if you are, you'd better let me do my job and let go of my hand."

The angel man took a moment to let her words sink in. Finally he released her hand, his own sinking to lie on his abdomen.

"There. That's better. Now, hold still."

She lifted the hair away from his temple to see a nice scab already formed above his ear. Annie smiled. There was no fever, and

the wounds already looked to be on their way to healing. A couple more days would make it definite.

His hand trailed up to the spot she'd touched. He immediately realized his hair had been cropped close to the skull. He gave her an accusing stare.

Annie shrugged with her apology. "I'm sorry, but I had to cut it. It was sopping wet and tangled with dirt and twigs; there was no way I could get it all out without doing too much damage. So I cut it to avoid the mess. Sorry. But it isn't like it won't grow back."

Straightening up from where she'd been sitting on the edge of the bed, Annie gave the man a bright smile. "I'd say you're looking a whole lot better than you did when I first found you. Oh, you looked terrible, let me tell you. Like something the dog forgot to bury. Are you hungry? I sure am. But first I need to visit the little shack out back. If you need to use the facilities, there's a night jar under the bed."

She walked around to the other side of the bed and bent down to retrieve the chamber pot from underneath. "I use this myself when it's too cold to go outside. It shouldn't be too bad outside. I won't be but a second, then I'll come back and whip us up something to eat." That being said, Annie hurried out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

What on earth was wrong with her? Here she was foaming at the mouth like some rabid dog. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. If the man plugged his ears with his fingers, she wouldn't blame him a bit.

The cold was nipping at her, turning her nose and cheeks red, and making her breath come out in warm, white clouds. It was the wind, though, which made the freezing temperatures less tolerable.

When she got back to the cabin, it appeared the angel man had not moved, but the chamber pot was back under the bed. She dropped her coat over a peg on the wall by the door then went over to prod the fire.

Foster had promised her a stove. That had never appeared. But she had the tin kitchen that used to be her mamma's, and her grandmother's before her. Papa had let her have it as a wedding present, saying it was supposed to be passed down. It was a round, barrel-shaped contraption, which appeared to be lying on its side. A door in the front hinged upward, and she could cook on the racks inside, or remove the racks and use the spit for grilling a chicken. The tin kitchen was made to sit in a fireplace.

This morning Annie quickly made some biscuits while trying not to accompany her actions with an endless stream of chatter. She fried up her last three eggs and added a slab of backstrap. She also pulled out one of her precious jars of huckleberry jam. Sugar was getting scarce at the store in Hoonas, what with the war effort starting to take its toll, so she'd gotten to where she would hoard it whenever she could afford some, saving most of it for her canning. Early on she'd learned to sweeten her cakes and coffee with honey.

After setting the table, Annie went over to the bed and offered him her help. "You might be a bit stiff and sore from your fall. Here. Lean on me. You need to be getting up and moving around to keep your muscles from cramping up on you."

The angel man looked at her, glanced at the table set with their breakfast, then back at her. Slowly he raised his arm, and Annie wrapped it around her shoulders to give him support. He placed most of his own weight and burden on himself as he arose from the mattress and managed to walk over to the table where he landed heavily in the nearest chair. Annie could see him fingering the bandage.

"There's nothing wrong with your legs, thank goodness. I don't know what you eat where you're from, but I know you can't be from around here, or anywhere near here. These are biscuits. And these are eggs. And meat. And I have fresh coffee, and I also have some milk to put in it. I like my coffee sweet and with milk. I have more milk down at the springhouse if you want some. Of

course, it might be frozen over and I'd have to thaw it out by the fire. Anyway, you got to eat. So try everything. Just a little. Just taste it and see if you like it."

Darn. She was doing it again.

She placed a biscuit on his plate, opening it up and smearing jam on both sides as the steam rose from the bread. She fixed him a little coffee with honey and milk, the way she liked it. Then she added a little fried egg and cut up some of the venison on his plate. That being done, she took a seat in the chair opposite and did the same for herself.

"Now, before we take a bite, we have to say grace," she instructed. Normally she never said grace. In fact, after the first year with Foster gone, she'd gotten out of the habit of praying as well. Somehow, though, having this angel man sitting across from her made her feel like she needed to get back into both routines. She laced her fingers and bowed her head.

"Thank you for this food and thank you for our health. Amen."

"Ah-man."

Annie started. Wide-eyed she looked up at the angel man who was examining the half biscuit in his hand. "You spoke," she gasped.

He glanced at her and took a tentative bite. Another bite, and the biscuit half was gone.

"You can speak?" Annie tried again.

"Yes."

His voice resonated deep. A baritone, as her mamma, a music teacher, would have said.

"How do you feel?"

Again the stupid questions. First she ran off at the mouth, and then she said the first thing to pop into her head instead of thinking first. You got the smarts, her papa often told her, you just don't know when to use them.

"I am...unsure," the angel man answered. He took a hesitant sip of coffee, and made a face.

"I take it there's no coffee where you come from?" she asked, nearly kicking herself. *Ask him about Heaven.*

The angel man shook his head. Annie reached over and took his cup, taking a sip herself.

"Well, no wonder. I forgot to stir the honey!" She gave the liquid a good stirring and sipped again. "Okay. Now taste it."

He did, and nodded.

"Better?"

"Yes." He put down the cup and reached for another biscuit. "Who are you?"

Annie nearly choked. Why hadn't she asked him his name first? Maybe her papa was wrong. She had the brains of a chicken.

She wiped her mouth, knowing her face was red with embarrassment. "My name is Annie Mayall. What's yours?"

"I am Rion, the..." He stopped, almost as if he was listening to his own inner voice. "I am Rion."

"Oh, like R-y-a-n?"

He shook his head. The muscles in his thick neck stood out as he chewed. "R-i-o-n. It's my father's spelling."

His father? That meant he also had a mother. Did they both have wings? Were they angels, too? Did angels have angel babies?

More questions. She had more questions than she could possibly ask him, and more than likely she would forget most of them before she could get around to asking.

"Where are you from, Rion?" There, finally, a halfway intelligent question.

It didn't surprise her when he looked upward, as if he could see through the roof and into the sky above. "Another place. Far away. Far away up there."

Annie sighed loudly. Why didn't that surprise her? "Well, until your wing heals, you're stuck here with me. And fall's coming on with a bang."

“A bang?” He tried the eggs. She’d forgotten to salt and pepper them, and quickly remedied that problem. He still didn’t like the eggs, or the meat, but he was definitely smitten with the jam-covered biscuits. She let him have the rest.

“Like gangbusters. With a vengeance. Last winter was easy, or so I’ve been told. But this winter is not going to be so nice. Look, you need to get back to bed and I’ve got chores to do. I’ll clean the kitchen when I come back to fix lunch. Are you going to be all right while I’m gone?” She got up from her chair and took her plate over to the sink.

Rion nodded. Rion. R-i-o-n. Odd how the name seemed to suit him. “Let me help,” he offered.

“No.” Annie took a stance before him and wagged a forefinger in his face. “If you’re going to get any better, you’re going to need lots of bed rest. No work until your side heals up. And no flying until you know your wing’s up to it. Understand?”

For the first time he smiled at her. Annie stared at him with pleasant bewilderment. *The man is beautiful!* His smile was like a ray of bright sunlight all by itself, and the feeling of happiness which filled her started at the center of her being and seemed to spread out in all directions. It took her a full minute to collect herself.

“Oh, dear,” she sighed softly. What was this angel man doing to her? And what was he capable of doing?

And if he did, would she mind him doing it?

Chapter 6

The Healing

The animals seemed happy to see her. Annie went to work, hoping to keep her mind off the angel man sleeping in the cabin. It was easier said than done.

Rion. It was a short, strong name. Sort of exotic, too. Then again, real honest-to-God angels were exotic, weren't they?

She mucked out the stalls and spread out fresh hay for Murphy and the cow.

Next she milked Ginger, the Guernsey so named because of her coloring. The milk, with its soft gold warmth, reminded Annie again of the stranger

There were some extra planks left over from when Foster had built the barn. He'd stored them in one cobwebby corner. Annie pulled a half-dozen boards from the pile, grabbed the hammer and bucket of nails from the storage bin by the door, and managed to repair the hole left by Murphy during his getaway from the storm.

She shook her head and gave herself a talking-to. *He's going to get better and then he'll be going back up to where he's from. That'll take, what? A couple of weeks? So you'd better enjoy his company while you can. It's going to be a very long winter after he's gone.*

And maybe that was part of the reason why she was already feeling depressed. He wasn't just a bright star during the dark nights. He was more than just an ordinary man.

He was an angel, for goodness sake!

Here she was, alone and pretty much deserted by her husband—

Husband. That knowledge froze around her heart with a coldness that left her shivering. She was a married woman, for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.

Annie stood stock still in shock. *Until death...*

Desperately, she closed her eyes and whispered, "Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me." Until death. Why had that phrase suddenly popped up in her head? Was it because her heart was trying to tell her something? Remember what Mamma always told her. *From your mouth to God's ear.*

Until now she hadn't really thought about it. So many months and years had passed. She'd gone on to make a home for them, so that when he did return he'd find it a better place than when he'd left it. That was what she was supposed to do, right?

Then again, maybe Foster hadn't come back to her because he was dead? Maybe the reason Foster hadn't sent her a letter or a postcard or nothing for the last three years was because he was already buried somewhere? And unless he'd told someone he had a wife waiting for him back in the Montana mountains, who would have known to send word of his passing? Foster didn't wear a wedding ring; they couldn't afford one. So who would have known she even existed?

Annie glanced down at her hands. Through the well-worn rawhide gloves she could see in her mind's eye the slender little gold band around the third finger of her left hand. She sighed. *Well, no sense dwelling on it.* It wasn't like she was going to do anything against her marriage vows, now, was she?

She drew the wooden lid over the bucket of milk and lugged it to the cabin. To her surprise the angel man was sitting in the doorway. He'd wrapped the quilt around his waist for warmth, but his feet still stuck out.

"You're going to catch your death if you don't go back inside," she commented. Damn, there she was again, going on about death.

"I like the outside," Rion replied.

"Well, if you're going to sit there, you'll need to cover up your feet. I have a pair of socks that might fit you."

He moved aside a bit to let her go past. Annie placed the bucket in the sink then went to the trunk sitting at the foot of the bed. Inside she found a clean, balled-up pair and handed the socks to him.

"Can you manage? Or do you need me to do it?"

The angel man unrolled the socks, crossed one ankle over his other knee, and grunted. Annie knew that sound.

"You're stiffening up, and your ribs can't take it yet," she said, taking the socks from him. She quickly slipped them over his feet then watched him wriggle his toes. "Better?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"How on earth did you manage to make your way to the door? Here. Give me your arm and I'll get you back to the bed."

"I would rather sit, thank you."

"Then you're going to take a lot longer to heal," she berated him gently, adding a smile to take the sting out of her words. "Rest is the best thing for you right now."

"I am not ready to sleep," Rion protested weakly.

"Then you can sit up and watch me. I don't mind. Give me your arm. Ready? On the count of three. One...two...three."

The angel man's face paled suddenly as Annie helped him to his feet. He grimaced, gritting his teeth, but made no sound as she guided him back to the bed.

The bandage around his ribs sprouted a red rose of blood. *Not good.*

Quickly doffing her coat and gloves, she fetched water to clean the wound. Fortunately she had enough fresh bandages for another wrapping.

"I'm going to have to do laundry today," she said, more to herself than to him.

“Laundry?”

“Clean the clothes. Especially your old bandages. Blood’s hard to get out, but if you take cold water and soap to it before it dries, you have a better chance of getting it out.”

Fortunately the wound was flowing freely. She could see no signs of infection, but he wasn’t out of the woods yet. She packed it again with clean cloths before wrapping it with the last of the bandage strips. By the time she’d finished Rion was ready to rest.

She tucked him in, laying a hand on his forehead to check his temperature. He felt warm, but she was certain it had nothing to do with a fever. His eyes were drooping as he fought to remain awake.

“Quit fighting it,” she murmured then chuckled. She lifted the quilt around his shoulders and ran her fingers through his hair. “I’ll be here when you wake up. You should be hungry then.”

He would be resting for a while. That gave her a chance to eat a light lunch of bread and jam before tackling the load of dirty clothes.

The bandages rinsed out easily. She hung them on the iron rod over the fire so they would dry quickly in case she needed them when the angel man awoke. Next she worked on the shredded clothing she’d removed from him.

It was strange material, even more strangely woven, and felt like nothing she’d ever known. Lightweight, it was almost furry in texture. In the sunlight coming through the window she could see it was not quite snow white in color. More slightly grayish, or silverish.

She squeezed soap suds from the pants with her fingers. Webbing her hand inside one leg, she peered more closely. They were torn, but salvageable. Definitely in need of some patching, but he should be able to wear them again. With winter coming on, though, she knew they wouldn’t be enough to keep him warm when he went outside.

She glanced back at where the angel man slept.

Funny, how she wasn't afraid of him. Here was a miracle—a creature whom she never questioned existed before now. Then again, she'd never questioned the teachings of preachers and traveling evangelists. She wasn't allowed to. Angels were in the Bible. She wasn't allowed to wonder if the stories in the Bible were true or not because they were. Period. And she'd better not argue.

Okay, so angels were real. But only back then, long, long, long ago. Like unicorns and dinosaurs. She could go to a church and see pictures of angels. Somehow, though, Rion didn't quite look like the ones she'd seen painted on the walls or depicted in the stained glass windows.

Where had he come from? Were there more like him? Were there...girl angels?

Another thought suddenly came to her. In response her stomach tightened, and she nearly dropped the wash.

Was he married? Did he have a family waiting for him back where he came from?

Her eyes narrowed. He didn't have a wedding band on, but that didn't mean anything. Foster didn't wear one, either.

Annie snorted softly. All these questions. A girl could drive herself to the loony bin with all these ifs and maybes. She rubbed the shirt across the washboard with more force than usual. If she was going to get everything cleaned and hung before dark, she'd have to stop her daydreaming and put her nose to the grindstone.

It was twilight when he awoke. She had started supper, having finished the washing and making sure the animals were bedded down for the night.

It was a light supper. She'd scrambled some eggs in butter and wrapped them inside slices of bread she'd toasted over the fire. Rion had two helpings before leaning back in the bed and waving off her offer of a third.

By the time she'd cleaned up the dishes it had grown dark outside. In addition, the wind had picked up. She could hear it moan its way around the sides of the cabin. The sound was enough to make her shiver. Grabbing her sewing basket, she moved it and the single lantern closer to the fireplace. Once she found a comfortable spot near the hearth, she proceeded to try and patch the angel man's pants. Rion watched with fascination at her ministrations.

"What are you doing?" he inquired.

"Trying to mend your britches. You must've hit quite a few limbs on your way down. Tore lots of holes in these things."

Her intentions, though, were better said than done. The material would not hold the thread and patch she tried to place on it. For some reason the weave was too loose to keep a knot in place. Annie sighed with exasperation.

"Damn."

"You sound concerned."

She glanced over at him. He appeared equally concerned about her.

"It's this material, whatever your clothes are made from. I don't think I'm going to be able to patch them."

"This is a problem?"

She gave him a funny look. "Well, you sure can't go walking around with that quilt wrapped around your waist all the time!" Inspiration struck. "Wait!"

Scrambling to her feet, Annie went over to the chest at the foot of the bed and dug through it for the only pair of pants Foster had left behind. The shirt had been too small, but it was enough to keep his arms and chest covered until she could make a new one. Rion was built much larger than her husband, yet there was a chance she could do something with the jeans to make them more usable.

"They're going to look strange when I get finished, but I think they'll fit," she told him, holding up the pair once she'd found

them. Taking them back to the fire, she sat down, crossed her legs, and began to rip out the side seams.

She worked in silence as the angel man watched. A couple of times she caught him yawning, which produced an answering yawn from her. She had to shake herself to keep from nodding off, but her inactivity, combined with her weariness and the warmth of the fire, was beginning to take its toll.

Her eyes began to water, making it difficult to keep her stitches small and tight. Pausing, she rolled her head around her shoulders then checked on her guest. He had fallen asleep sitting up in the bed.

Annie got to her feet, her knees cracking from the cramped position of the past few hours. She hobbled over to the bed and managed to draw the man down to a more horizontal position. She could see he was still favoring his right wing as he settled onto his side. Once she was sure he was good for the night, she tucked the quilt around him before going back to the fire.

The pants would have to wait to be finished tomorrow. In the meantime the fire had died down considerably and the kerosene in the lamp was low. No telling how late it was. Her daddy had given her a Westclox alarm clock when she'd left home. It needed to be wound every night in order to keep time during the day. After a couple of weeks she'd gotten to where it no longer seemed necessary to wind it anymore. Her and Foster's lives had grown into a hard but comfortable routine—up at sunrise, work until the sun was overhead, stop for dinner, work until it got too dark to see your hand in front of your face, stop for supper, go to bed. One day melted into another. A new week felt like the one just gone by. It wasn't until the seasons began to change that they really noticed how different Dry Lick Valley appeared month after month.

When Foster left, the geese could be seen and heard flying south in their wide V formations. The air took on the smell of pending snow. Soon, the trees began to shed their leaves as heavily

as the animals took on their winter pelts. Annie's life no longer felt like one she could control. There was no more marking the calendar and saying, "Next Saturday we're going to get to go into town and see what's new at the Palisades."

Or Daddy remarking that, "I promised Sid Bishop I'd help him with his pumpkins on the third."

No clocks. No calendars. Just day...by day...after day...where the passing of time was noted less and less by the sun, and more and more by the seasons.

Annie's gaze stopped at the trunk at the foot of the bed. The Westclox was in there, still in prime shape, but there was no sense in her taking it out now and winding it. There was no way she knew what time it actually was so she could set it. And she hadn't seen a calendar in years. If she had to guess, however, she'd venture it was around November some time. She'd recently seen deer rutting up in the hills.

She refreshed the fire, noting that the woodbin was getting low. She made herself a pallet with some of her clothing and a couple of towels. Finally wrapping herself in her coat, she used a stick of wood for a makeshift pillow. Come winter, when it got too cold to do little more than keep the animals tended, she'd have time to make another quilt. By then the floor would be too cold to sleep on without one.

And maybe by then, she'd be used to the floor enough to get a decent night's rest on it.

Chapter 7

The Reason

At some point during the night three inches of snow fell. It crunched underneath Annie's boots as she trekked to the barn to feed and care for the animals. By the time she got back to the cabin with a bucket of milk and four eggs safely stashed in her coat pocket, the sun was glistening off the fresh powder.

"Prettier than any diamonds," her mamma used to say. Diamonds were for people who had no sense about what to do with their money. One couldn't eat diamonds. And if they were worn, people either stole them, or shot a person dead so they could take them for themselves.

Which was why Annie stopped to gaze at the wide blanket covering everything for as far as she could see. Despite how hard it was to live here, no matter how much difficulty she had trying to make it by herself, she never tired of the beauty of the place. If anything, she found herself growing more and more in love with Dry Lick with every passing year.

Inside the cabin, she felt a moment of alarm to see the bed empty, until she spotted him prodding the fire in the fireplace with the poker. Sunlight streamed through the window and reflected off the golden sheen of his wings, turning them nearly ivory in color. For a moment they almost seemed to be made of the same delicate flakes as the ones outside.

"Good morning!" Stamping the snow off her feet, she shrugged out of her boots and carried the milk and eggs over to the sink. She double-checked the larder as Rion added another log.

“Why is your world like this?” he asked her innocently.

Annie turned to look at him. His puzzled expression appeared as honest as his tone of voice.

“What do you mean, why is my world like this? Haven’t you ever seen snow?”

“Snow?”

“Yeah. The white stuff. Frozen water. Came from the sky, like you.”

At his silent reply, she wiped her hands on a towel. Opening the front door, she scooped a pristine handful from beside the steps, then took it over for him to examine.

She watched as he stared at it and tentatively took a sniff. Giving him a small smile, Annie took a pinch and placed it on her tongue. Rion watched, fascinated.

“Go ahead. You try it. Go on. It won’t hurt you. It’s just cold water, is all.”

Following her example, the angel man took some on his finger and stuck it in his mouth. He smiled from the sensation.

Annie stared at him, taking in the structure of his face, the contour of his cheek to his jaw. The curve of his mouth. He looked so ethereal, but she knew he was very, very real. It was almost as if he could vanish at a moment’s notice and never leave a trace, except for the pile of clothes and quilt where he’d sat. Yet she knew that if she reached out, she would find the bronzed skin to be warm and viable. The muscles under his wings were real and hard and solid, as were his arms and legs. When he moved around on the bed, she could hear the ropes squeak a little, the sheets rustle, and the legs of the wooden frame scrape a tiny bit on the plank flooring. It was a double bed, but he nearly took up the entire thing.

His presence was mesmerizing. If she wasn’t careful, she could lose herself in his nearness.

“Snow.”

“Yep.” She nodded, jerking out of what could have been a trance. She took a deep breath. “Of course, this is just the beginning. Once winter really sets in, it might go two, three days without letting up. Last winter I had snow so deep outside, it buried half the north wall of the cabin. What we have today will mostly be gone by this afternoon if the sun stays out.”

There she went again, babbling away like someone had taken out her stopper. She threw the snow into the fireplace before getting to her feet and walking back over to the sink. Rion watched and listened as the snow hissed and melted away.

“So...you don’t get snow where you come from?” she reiterated. Breakfast would have to be something simple until she could restock. She checked over her shoulder to see if he was watching her. He was.

“No. We do not get snow.” He shook his head slowly. The firelight glanced off his shorn curls, making them look like the color of butter.

“Does it get cold at all where you’re from?”

“Cold?”

“I mean, like it is outside. You know...brrrr!”

Rion’s gaze traveled to the door. “No. It does not get this cold.” He looked back at her. “Do you like it when it is cold?”

“Like it?” She shrugged. “Not really. But what else can you do, except maybe move to Africa where it doesn’t get cold? Or—” Or to where you’re from, she almost said.

Where you’re from.

He’d mentioned before he wasn’t from this world. That his home was “up there”. At first she’d just accepted what he’d said without much thought. Now she had plenty to think about, and a whole winter to chew on it.

She took the eggs out of her pocket and laid them carefully on a towel by the sink. Drawing water from the pump, she filled the

coffee pot and started to set it on the iron arm over the fire. Instead, Rion took the pot from her and did it himself.

"I must help you," he said softly. "You are having to do all the work while I languish about."

"Nonsense. You had a hole poked in you the size of a silver dollar. It's a miracle you didn't bleed out."

From the corner of her eye she could see the angel man slowly shake his head.

"Yes, but it was my pride and stupidity which led to my injuries."

Annie paused to stare at him. Most of their conversations up until now had been short-lived and centered mostly on what they were doing. Or on questions about the farm, how it was run, and what her day-to-day work consisted of.

It seemed that he was finally going to open up and tell her more about himself, about his world. About why he was here. She strained to hear him.

"You? Stupid? I can't imagine you being stupid," she commented, hoping it sounded matter-of-factly. "As to pride, I didn't know angels had pride."

She heard him snort softly before he poked the fire.

"Angels. Your history. My history."

"You're not an angel?" she cautiously asked. She broke two of the eggs into her batter and stirred vigorously. Walking over to the fire, she pulled the heavy cast iron griddle from where it sat propped against the wall by the fireplace, wiped it off then began pouring neat circles onto the tray. That done, she hung the griddle on the hooks directly over the fire. Now it was just a matter of watching to make sure the flapjacks didn't burn, and flipping them when it was time.

Meanwhile, Rion watched as she cooked. Her question still remained to be answered.

"Rion?"

The sound of his name seemed to draw him from his reverie. He turned to her. Annie repeated the question.

“You’re not an angel?” For emphasis, she looked at his wings, then back to him.

“Where I am from, that is not what we call ourselves.”

“There’s more people like you where you’re from? People with wings?”

Her innocent inquiries made him smile.

“Everyone from my land, my world, we are all born with wings. We are all born to fly. It is you, your kind, who are strange to us.”

“There’s more of your people here on earth?” Annie wondered. She stopped to flip the pancakes before continuing. “Are there others like you here in Montana?”

Rion’s face showed his confusion. “Montana?”

“Yeah. Here. This place. Well, not this place, but this state. We’re in Montana, in the United States of America. Surely you know about the states, right?”

She stopped again to check on the pancakes. Finding they were done, she lifted them off the griddle and piled them onto a plate. The last of the batter went onto the tray.

Rion continued the conversation as she finished getting breakfast ready.

“We know of your world and about your people, but we have not taken it upon ourselves to be aware of your customs and the like. We know your world exists. That a race of beings without wings thrives here. That sometimes our people can be treated with cruelty and harshness. Which is why traveling here is not only dangerous, but forbidden to all except a special few.”

“Special few? Who’s that? Are you one of them?”

Rion nodded. “You could say I was given clearance to come here, yes.”

Annie sighed. "You are one exasperating person, you know that? The more questions I ask, the fewer answers I can understand. Anyhow, breakfast is ready. Can you bring the coffee?"

Rion got to his feet without her help and carried the coffee pot over to the table, holding the handle with a dish towel to protect his fingers, the way he'd seen her do it. Annie sat a tin of syrup on the table and took her own seat.

"You realize, of course, that I'm going to ask you all the questions I feel I need to in order to understand what's going on here, don't you?"

"I am a stranger in your world. I would probably do the same if you had entered my world instead," he conceded.

"Okay, then. The big question. Why did you come to my world?"

His answer was immediate and honest. "To spy on it."

Annie froze, staring at him. "You're... a spy?" Images of war sprang to mind, of the bloodshed and carnage caused by nations fighting nations—all things she'd grown up on. Her own father had fought in the First World War. He'd lost a rib and all the toes on one foot in Cantigny, and walked with a limp ever since.

And now there was talk about the U. S. entering another world war against Germany. It was all anyone spoke of these days, especially in town. Which was another reason why Annie loved being so far from such talk. The distance between Dry Lick Valley and the madness in other parts of the world was immeasurable.

Rion must have seen the look on Annie's face and correctly guessed her worry. "We...my people, we have been spying on your people for thousands of years."

"For how long?" she asked, just to make sure she'd heard him correctly.

"For thousands of years."

Annie laid her fork down on the edge of her plate. "Thousands?"

Well, it could explain the presence of angels mentioned in the Bible. It could also explain the pictures of winged people drawn on the walls of ancient buildings. The paintings. The books. Lots of things.

“Your people, did they make contact with our people before? I mean, in the past, years ago?”

“We try to avoid it at all cost, but sometimes accidents occur. Things happen. The storms are very unpredictable.”

“I don’t get it. What do you mean, the storms are unpredictable?”

“We travel through the storms. The storms open the sky, allowing us to pass from one world to the other.”

Annie shook her head. “I still don’t get it. What do storms have to do with your people spying on us?”

“I wish I could explain better,” admitted Rion. “All we know is that something happens when the storms come. We get them in my world, too. Thundering, shrieking, rentng the air and the very sky, until a gap appears. When it storms on my world, it is storming in this one as well.

“There are a few of us, specially chosen, specially trained to go into the storms, through the gaps. We look in on your world, then come back and keep records on what we’ve seen and heard.”

“The same night?”

“Sometimes. There have been times the storms have dissipated before we could return. In that case, we’ve been forced to seek shelter until the next one.”

“You go into hiding?”

“Yes,” Rion answered.

“Where?”

“Wherever it is safe. With whoever will keep us safe.” He gave her a long look before adding, “Too many of us have been killed for choosing unwisely.”

“Oh, God,” Annie breathed. She felt numb, knowing now that she hadn’t just saved his life when she’d found him in the woods. She was still saving it. “I bet you’ve hidden in churches in the past,” she managed to say.

Rion nodded. “Many times. It seems to be our best chance for refuge.”

They ate in quiet for several more minutes before Annie spoke again.

“Have you...do your people go all over the world? I mean, have you been to other places?”

“Yes, I have. We have been all over your world. We have seen the differences and changes that have taken place.”

“Where else have you been?” she wondered. To her surprise, Rion shook his head.

“I cannot tell you because I do not know what all those places were named. Only in the rare circumstances, when I have been grounded and unable to return, have I learned what they have been called.”

“You’ve been stranded before?”

“Yes. Just one other time. In Moem.”

Annie’s eyebrows knitted together. “Where’s Moem?”

For the first time she heard the angel man chuckle. “I could no more tell you now than I could then. I simply reported the fact when I returned.”

“Well, that just doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

Rion smiled. “What? That I have been stranded before? Or that I did not know where I had been?” They had finished breakfast long ago, and sat now enjoying their coffee over the dishes.

“Why go check out and spy on people and places if you don’t know where they live? What’s the point in what you do? Where does all that information go? Who uses it? Why do they use it?”

Leaning over the table, his elbows straddling his empty plate, Rion explained. “Because one day we are certain your people will

discover the gaps left by the storm. And once these portals between our worlds are known, your people will use them to reach us. That could be disastrous for my world, and for my people.”

“You really think my world could harm yours?”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, Annie realized her mistake. Of course her world would devour his. Of course her people could possibly kill every one of his, if enough people and weapons could make it through. Her world’s history was nothing but stories about man’s inhumanity against man. And man’s inhumanity against the lesser creatures was even greater. Given Rion’s uniqueness, and the uniqueness of his people, her people would definitely kill for dominance.

Rion seemed to realize she had come to that conclusion without his help. He watched as she got up to clear the table, taking the plates to the sink. After several minutes, she spoke again.

“Rion? How many times have you come to my world?”

“This is my sixth visit.”

“Sixth? Is that all?”

“The last time I came, I was stranded for four weeks.”

“In Moem?”

He smiled. “Actually outside of Moem. Away from the center of the village.”

“In what country? Do you know where?”

He smiled again. Annie sighed.

“How in the world can you be stranded for four weeks in a place and never know where it is? Were you hurt?”

The smile faded. “No. I have never been hurt until now.”

“Did someone take care of you when you were stranded?”

“Yes. A man called Vincente Bellarie. He had a vineyard and a small winery, but he made his living as a tailor. He was a good man.”

“And you wrote about him when you went back? You mentioned him in your report?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I mean, why write reports? I can understand your people keeping an eye on us, watching to see if and when we discover the gaps in the storms like you said. But why the reports?”

“*To keep a record of who we can and cannot trust,*” Rion immediately answered.

Annie pondered on this. “Am I...someone you can trust? Are you going to mention me in your report when you...when you go back?”

Rion leaned over and laid a hand over her reddened and calloused one as she reached over the table. His touch sent a shiver up her arm, which then spread like a warm quilt over her entire body. Impulsively she turned her palm over, and he responded by lacing his fingers in hers. She had to grasp the table with her other hand to keep herself steady.

“You have saved my life,” he whispered. “My debt to you is great.”

They remained that way, hand in hand, for long seconds. A log fell in the fireplace and rolled onto the hearth. Reluctantly Annie let go when the angel man arose to tend to it.

“What do you plan to do today?” Rion asked. Their previous conversation seemed to be shelved by mute mutual agreement.

“I’m going to have to make one more trip into Hoonas for supplies before the big winter storm hits. If I don’t stock up now, it may be weeks before I can make it through the snow again.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’ve been to my world six times and never saw snow before now?”

“When the storms come, there is no way to predict what the following weather here will be. I came one other time when it was very cold, but usually the storms occur during warmer days.”

That was true for Montana. Spring storms were bad, but summer storms were worse. This last one would probably be the last big thunder boomer until the new year.

“I need to chop more wood for the fireplace, too. Pile’s starting to get low, and I don’t want to have to trudge through the snow for more.”

“What can I do to help?” Rion asked.

She tilted her head, thinking. “I don’t want to risk you opening that hole in your side. By the way, how’s your wing?”

He glanced at it, making it arch above his head. He kept them so neatly folded against his back she hardly noticed them anymore, despite the fact that they rose a good foot above his head, almost brushing the ceiling beams, and the lower feathers tended to sweep the floor.

“Better. I should be able to stretch it before long.”

“Don’t push yourself.”

“I must, or risk having it atrophy on me.”

“Then be careful.”

Rion waved to get her attention back when she reached for her coat. “Please. Put me to work. Make me earn my stay. If anything, help me put my mind to something more substantial than counting the number of knotholes in the walls.”

“Getting tired of being cooped up in here?” Annie smiled. Rion sat back.

“You do not do that often enough,” he commented, smiling back.

“Do what?”

“Smile.”

Unconsciously, she raised her fingers to her lips. She could feel her cheeks burning. Turning her back to him, she began to lace up her boots.

“If you feel up to it, you could come with me and I’ll show you around the place. I need to go to the root cellar. You should know where it is so that when we need something from it you can fetch it for me. Same for the springhouse and the barn.” She glanced over at him. “Put on another couple pairs of socks and

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wrap that quilt tight. We won't be gone long. I promise to work some more on your pants tonight."

"Are the socks in the trunk?"

"Yeah. Help yourself. I'll be outside waiting on you."

Chapter 8

The Accident

She went ahead, excusing herself to visit the outhouse before he joined her. Stepping outside the tiny shack, she stopped to survey the area as she pulled her gloves back on. The skies were lake water blue. *No clouds tonight. Temperature's going to drop like a lead weight.*

Knowing Rion would be waiting for her, she headed back toward the front of the cabin and readied herself for the brisk wind she knew would be coming around the corner, when a sound made her halt in her tracks.

"Hallooooo!"

Shielding her eyes from the glare coming off the snow, she saw the figure in the distance. A wagon. A horse. The dappled gray was instantly recognizable.

"Halloooo! Missus Mayall!"

She waved in return to let him know she'd heard him and began walking toward the stretch of patchy grass that passed for a road. It snaked up to turn around a few yards beyond her front door, then looped back onto itself, sloping for another hundred plus yards, then widened into a ruttier version for the next six and a half miles. It eventually met another, more distinguishable road a mile or so past the Funderburke's farm, and from that intersection headed due west into Hoonas. As the farm was virtually at the end of Dry Lick Valley, there was nowhere else for the road to go but into the woods or up the mountainside. Annie liked that Foster had bought land that no one could build next to, although sometimes

the isolation and knowledge that she lived on a dead end made her wish for someone who lived closer that she could visit every now and then. Someone she could talk to. And maybe trade recipes with.

Foster had been wise to trade in their car, even if she'd disagreed with him at first. The road was barely passable with a wagon and horse. Once the winter snows thawed, many sections were left sodden, muddy, and often dangerous.

Annie began to run toward the road where it did a u-turn. Suddenly she halted, turned, and glanced back at the front of the cabin. The door was still shut, but what if Rion came outside when Mister Funderburke was here? What would the man do? What would he say?

A phrase of their breakfast conversation floated back.

To keep a record of who we can and cannot trust.

Deep in her heart Annie knew she could trust Horace Funderburke with the knowledge that an honest-to-goodness angel was healing under her roof. The man would not hurt Rion, or do anything to cause him hurt. No, the question wasn't whether he was a trustworthy man, but whether he could keep her secret solely to himself and not go around Hoonas spreading the news.

For a second she debated whether to go back to the cabin and warn Rion not to come out. A small voice inside her told her not to worry. After all, he and his kind had spent years trying to avoid contact with the people of her world at all costs. He trusted her with his life. He'd said as much. She was certain that trust was not automatically extended to other people she knew or came in contact with.

"Halloooo, Missus Mayall!"

"Good day, Mister Funderburke!" she called back.

Horace Funderburke pulled the wagon around the loop and stopped directly beside her. He tipped his hat from where he sat.

"Just checking in. Hope all's well with you."

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Annie smiled. She was sincerely glad to see him, despite the quivering fear in her stomach.

“All is well, thank you. Are you ready for the winter?”

“As much as we can be. And you? I haven’t seen you pass by recently.”

“I’m planning on going tomorrow to get my winter supplies,” she told him. “I have several hides I hope will fetch a good price.”

“Yeah. The furrier will be in town until next Tuesday, I hear.”

“Tuesday? What’s today?” She’d totally lost all track of time.

“Friday. Better hurry. Elly says the signs are all pointing to us getting socked in with a bad snowstorm sometime soon. Doesn’t look like winter will be so kind to us this year. How’s the livestock?”

Annie nodded. “Well. That last storm we had got to Murphy. He kicked a hole in the barn’s back wall large enough to get away, but I found him without a problem. He wasn’t hurt.”

“Need help mending that hole?”

“Thank you, but no. There was enough lumber left in the barn for me to patch it. This past summer I was able to strengthen the north wall. Made the structure real cozy.”

“You sure you won’t need anything?”

“I’m sure. Thank you for the offer, though.”

“Remember, we’re just a few miles down the road if you need us. If the snow gets too deep, slap on those snowshoes we gave you last Christmas and hightail it over.”

She graced him with another smile. “You never know. I just might take you up on that.”

“Well, I’ll be off. Oh! Before I forget. Elly sent this basket over. We had a fine crop this fall and ended up with more than we could handle.” He handed her a large covered basket from beneath the rumble board. Annie accepted the gift with small protest.

“Mister Funderburke, you are too generous.”

“Nonsense. Just being a good neighbor.”

“But I have nothing to offer in return.”

“Is as does, Missus Mayall. Don’t worry about it. If we ever need anything, we’ll be sure to pop over and ask.”

“Then do. I’ll be happy to oblige.”

She stepped back as Horace slapped the reins. Tootsie the mare started out at a trot.

“See you in a few weeks!” the old farmer called out, waving his arm.

Annie waved in return and remained watching until the wagon carrying her nearest neighbor was just a speck in the distance. A soft rustle to her right alerted her. She turned her head to see a doe cautiously step into the clearing. The animal stared at her for a long minute, then lowered her head and began grazing on the dry grass.

“Who was that man?” a soft voice whispered at her left elbow.

Annie started. She turned to see Rion, wrapped tightly in the quilt, standing beside her. She glanced back at the doe not fifty feet away. The animal continued to eat. Annie looked back at the angel man. “How’d you do that?” she whispered.

“Do what?”

Motioning toward the deer with a nod of her head, she said, “How could you come out here and stand next to me, and not scare away the doe?”

Rion glanced at the animal. “Animals are not frightened of my people.”

Annie gave a soft hurumph. “No. I guess not. You probably look like a giant chicken to them.”

“What is in the basket?”

“This? I don’t know. Let’s go inside and find out.”

“Want me to help carry it? It appears to be heavy.”

“It is,” she agreed, “but you don’t need to be lifting anything this heavy right now. Anyway, I can manage.”

Despite her assurance, she found the basket to be heavier and more cumbersome than she’d expected. Fortunately it was a short

distance back to the cabin. Once inside, she dumped it on the table. Rion lifted the flour sack covering that had been converted into a dish towel. Annie's eyes widened. "Looks like Christmas came early!"

There were several jars of foodstuffs from the Funderburke's garden, including squash, carrots, corn, and beets. A new loaf of pumpkin bread had been wrapped in wax paper. At the bottom of the basket lay a sweet potato pie. Annie quickly loaded the jars back into the basket, leaving out the pie and bread.

"What are you going to do with those?" Rion asked.

"I'm taking them down into the root cellar. The contents will stay fresher down there until we're ready to eat them." She paused, then added, "Why don't you come with me? I'll show you what all I have stored."

Rion followed her outside and around the back of the cabin. At the northeast end she had dug the root cellar. Makeshift doors made of barn wood covered it. Opening one of the doors revealed a short ladder leading down.

By most standards it was short in height; she had to stoop over slightly once she got inside it. But because of its short depth there was enough natural light coming in to not need a lantern, unless it was nighttime. What the cellar lacked in depth, it made up for in its width. Annie had lined all four walls with shelving, again using leftover barn wood, and almost every inch of space was packed. While she was down there, she traded out the jars for some potatoes and a half-dozen overly ripe apples.

Rion examined the many different staples. Many of them had a scrap of material tied around the necks of the jars. He looked at Annie, catching her attention, and fingered one red checkered bow.

"That? That's my labeling system. I didn't have anything to write on. I mean, I have paper and a few pencils, but you can't write on glass with a pencil, and paper doesn't stick well by itself

to a jar. So I used some scraps from some fat quarters and use them to help me keep track.”

She walked over to where he stood and picked up the jar in question. Inside Rion could see red roundish objects floating in a reddish liquid.

“Crab apples. Anything marked with a red cloth is a fruit. More likely a jam, or something I can bake into a pie. Those green ones over there, those are vegetables. Mostly peas and beans, but there are a few pickles left. Any other color besides red and green, you have to look in the jar to see what it is.”

To emphasize her point, she picked another jar from a nearby lower shelf. The lid sported a bright orange bow. She held it up for Rion to look at. “Want to guess what’s in here?”

“I cannot begin to fathom.”

“Pickled eggs. From when my hens were laying fools. You can’t afford to let good eggs go bad. And you never know when they’ll stop laying.”

She replaced the jar and turned back to him. “Let’s go check out the barn. I want to see this thing you do up close.”

“The thing I do?”

“Yeah. No fear from the animals. Murphy won’t let anyone but me touch him. He hated Foster, and he won’t tolerate Mister Funderburke. I’m curious to see how far you can get.”

“Mister Funderburke?”

“Yeah. Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t answer your original question. Mister Funderburke and his wife live about six miles down the road. They’re what you would call my closest neighbors. When I go into town, I have to pass by their place. They’re nice people. You can trust them.”

Rion followed her into the barn where, to her surprise, Murphy showed neither his teeth nor his disgust when the angel man casually walked over to pat the animal on the neck. The mule didn’t even lower his ears.

“Will wonders never cease?” she breathed.

“Any other requests?” Rion teased.

“This is a first, I got to admit. Maybe he accepts you because I made him drag you back here that night we found you.”

“That is a possibility. Or maybe he tolerates me because he instinctively knows I am not a threat to him.” Rion glanced around the barn. “What do you do in here in the mornings?”

Annie shoved her hands into her coat pocket. “Well, first I have to feed and water the livestock. Murphy.” She nodded in the direction of each animal as she named them. “The chickens. The cow. Her name’s Ginger. Then I have to muck out their stalls.”

“Muck?”

“Yeah. Take out the old hay and replace it with clean bedding. Then I have to milk the old girl. Check the nests for eggs.” She shrugged. “The usual. It has to be done every day. Back home in Ohio we had fifteen cows. Took me and my brother and sister most of the morning to milk them all, process the milk, and get it ready for Papa to take to town. Having just the two head of livestock here is a breeze compared to that job.”

A sudden gust of wind shuddered against the barn. The animals didn’t seem to notice and continued with what they were doing, which was either dozing or eating.

“Come on. I’ll show you the springhouse.”

In the summer the little building kept the more perishable items cool. Not much bigger than an outhouse, it was built straddling the stream which ran past the north side of the farm. A grove of birch shaded it, keeping the area even cooler. Annie opened the door to show him the cured meats she had hanging.

“See that rope over there? It’s tied to a box containing some big aluminum jugs. I got the box half-submerged in the water. The box keeps the jugs from tipping over or getting washed away if the stream swells from the runoff.”

“What is in the jugs?”

“Depends. I usually keep milk in one of them. Butter. Butter-milk. Cider. Once I had lemonade.”

Closing the door, Annie pointed to the small building directly behind the cabin.

“That’s the outhouse. You do your business in there when you can get out of the cabin.” Giving the angel man a good look, she added, “You don’t need to be out here in just a quilt. You need to go back inside while I go chop some wood.”

“Give me something to do.”

“All right. Can you peel potatoes?”

Rion nodded. “That I have mastered, thanks to Vincente.”

“Great. That’ll save me time when I’m ready to start dinner. Just don’t overdo it. If you start to feel tired, go lay down.”

They parted company. Rion picked up the basket where it sat on the ground by the root cellar. Annie headed back to the barn to fetch the ax.

Her mind was in a turmoil. What was wrong with her? Here she was, treating this angel man as if he were kinfolk there for a visit, although some other emotions had begun to make themselves known of late.

She knew that eventually Rion would leave and go back to his own world. Heck, she didn’t even know if he already had a wife or family back there waiting for him. Who worried about him?

And when he left, where would she be? Alone again, just like when Foster left. Only this time she dreaded Rion’s leaving more than anything she’d ever experienced before. Maybe it was because she knew he would have to go. Then again, Foster had been telling her about how he wanted to work the mines, and what it would mean for them both. Deep down she’d known her husband wouldn’t take her with him, and it had hurt when she’d found him gone. Yet this time...this time it was different. How or why, she couldn’t say, only that it did. Knowing that Rion would go away

and never be back twisted her up so badly inside she almost couldn't breathe.

After so long, she knew eventually Foster would return. So why didn't that comfort her?

Her vision blurred, and Annie realized she was crying. Angrily she wiped her eyes. No need to be going on about something she had no control over. As her Papa often said, no sense crying over spilt milk. Or, in this case, no sense getting all misty-eyed over something that was going to happen whether she wanted it to or not.

The scent of wood smoke came to her. Annie looked up from the edge of the woods where she'd dragged a couple of dead trees to chop. She could see a gray curl emerge from the chimney. It meant Rion was stoking the fire.

Foster never stoked the fire. He never volunteered to help with anything. Never even peeled a potato in his life, she was also willing to bet. *You can't fault him. He built this cabin, didn't he? Bought the property and the animals and all with his own hard-earned money, didn't he?*

Rion.

Annie paused. Why was she getting so worked up? Maybe she needed to ask him. Yeah, that would be the right thing to do. Instead of getting her insides all balled up, she needed to ask him about what his life was like on his world. Maybe that would help make his leaving easier to bear if she knew more about his world and what he did over there. Did he have any brothers or sisters? Were his parents still alive?

And did he have someone over there waiting for him to return?

Shhunk!

The physical labor felt good. A nice, full swing with the ax always seemed to give her peace of mind.

Shhunk!

Lord of Thunder

The dead wood split cleanly, but it wasn't the best wood for keeping warm. Dead wood worked well for cooking fires, burning hot and quick. For winter fires she needed greener wood. Thicker logs. Wood that took longer to burn.

Shhunk!

There's a stand of stripped pine back there. Some of that would make good firewood.

Shhunk! Shhunk! Crack!

The work was keeping her warm, and she was tempted to shed her coat. Meanwhile she let the pieces of cord wood lay where they fell or rolled. She could pile them up later. Maybe get Rion to help.

Shhunk!

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of her face. Annie realized she would have to bathe that evening after all this work.

She readjusted her grip on the ax handle. Bathe with Rion in the room? She would definitely have to make him turn his back. She might even have to hide under the quilt to do it.

A vision suddenly flashed in her mind, a memory she'd pushed away and kept away until now.

His arms were muscular, yet his hands were relatively callous free. What kind of work did he do that kept him in such great condition, yet didn't reflect in his hands?

His legs were long. That's where he got his height, from his legs. Long, muscular legs. Strong calves. Rion was not a stranger to exercise.

His chest was wide. And also muscular. His neck and shoulders were like oak trees.

She ran the rag over his ribs, near his waist, washing away the blood. The sides of his pants bore a wide bloodstain. She'd had to remove the pants to make sure he had no other wounds. Underneath, his maleness, even when he was unconscious, was massive. Annie had backed away, unsure of what to do. The one time she

had seen Foster without his pants on, even when he'd been all bothered and wanting to have "a roll in the hay" as he put it, he could not compare to the angel man.

Rion was taller and heavier, and more formidably built than Foster. It appeared he was bigger than Foster in all ways, mentally and physically.

The memory refused to go away. Angrily, Annie bent her back into her work.

Her lack of attention was fatal.

Her left boot was keeping the tree limb steady. The ax came down, but at the last second the snow beneath the branch shifted. The wood moved forward, and Annie's swing went inward. Had her mind been clear and concentrating on what she'd been doing, she might have been able to stop the swing, or at least deflect it downward.

The ax head bit through the top of the boot, through the double layer of socks, and into the inside of her left calf.

Annie screamed, falling to the ground. Hands shaking, she managed to pull the blade out of her leg. By then she could feel her foot growing warm as blood began to fill up the boot.

"Rion!"

She tried to get to her feet but the lower half of her body wouldn't obey. She could crawl, she found. Inch by agonizing inch, bit by bit, as a scarlet trail followed her.

Her leg felt unattached unless she tried to move it. Then the pain blossomed like an exploding stick of dynamite, nearly making her faint. She screamed his name again, and began crying.

She didn't know when he found her, stooping to stop her from scrabbling over the mud and snow. She felt him pick her up, and at the last moment realized he shouldn't be doing it. *He's wounded. He'll open up and start bleeding again.*

She tried to protest, beating on his arms and shoulders to make him put her down. Instead he held her tighter, whispering her name.

“Annie. Oh, Annie.”

He got her into the cabin and laid her on the bed. He managed to get her boot off, pulled up the leg of her jeans then peeled off her socks. Blood began to soak into the sheets and mattress.

The room swam around her. Half-conscious, Annie tried to sit up. Rion pushed her firmly back down.

“Stop...the blood,” she mumbled through numb lips.

“I am trying,” Rion answered. His voice was tinged with worry.

She could feel pressure on her leg as he tried to wrap her calf. She felt light-headed.

“Rion...”

“You are going to be all right,” he tried to reassure her. He brushed back her hair from her face. His hands, stained with her blood, left traces on her cheek and temple. “Hold on, Annie. Stay with me.”

Dimly she was aware of him getting one of her mixing bowls and placing it beneath her leg.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

Rion patted her arm. “What I must to save you,” he replied enigmatically.

Annie tried to make fists with her hands, but her body no longer obeyed her. She took a deep breath and expelled it, shuddering.

“...cold.”

In the dimness she saw Rion raise a knife, the same knife she’d used countless times in the past to cut up meat. Her first thought was that he was going to cut off her leg. The thought didn’t bother her.

The angel man sliced into his own wrist. Annie cried out. “Rion! No!”

The angel man shushed her, reaching out with his undamaged hand to hold her still.

“What are you...doing?” She had to know why he would cut himself, but it was getting harder and harder to form her thoughts into words.

“Trying to save your life.”

The hand pressing on her chest was warm. Comforting.

“What are—your...hand?”

“I am giving you my blood,” Rion told her. “Do not try to stop me.” His voice wavered. Broke. Was he crying?

“Blood? Where? Rion...”

“Stay with me, Annie. Listen to my voice. Can you feel my hand?”

“Yes.”

“I can feel your heart beating. It is weak. Stay with me, Annie.”

Yes, he was crying. It was in his voice. But it was getting almost impossible to hear anything any longer. There was a vast warmth beneath her as the blood pooled. She must have hit a vein or artery, or something like that. It wouldn't stop bleeding.

“Rion.” Her voice was weak and barely audible.

“Do not leave me, Annie,” Rion told her again, this time with anger trembling in his voice. “My blood is mixing with yours. Just hold on. I need more time.” He lifted his hand from her chest to touch her cheek. “You are cold.”

No, she wasn't. She was warm. There was no pain. She was also very tired. All that chopping. She hadn't done it in a while. She was probably out of practice.

Her left hand spasmed. Rion caught it, bringing it to his lips. “Talk to me, Annie. Say something.”

She wanted to. She honestly wanted to say something. But words were not coming to her. Everything was getting faint. Misty. Foggy. In addition, she was starting to feel cold, just like he said she was.

“Mm...”

Rion released her hand. He lifted his cut wrist from where he'd held it over her open wound and wrapped it with the flour sack dish towel. Next he extended his left wing and began jerking out handfuls of the smaller, downier feathers from the underside to stuff into the cut. When he had sufficiently plugged up the gaping wound, he bandaged it tightly with some of the cleaned strips she'd left drying by the fireplace.

Annie watched in horror at his self-mutilation. She would have stopped him if she could.

“Uu—”

“Annie, talk to me.”

She tried. She really tried. She wanted to chew him out for hurting himself like that. Why would he do such a thing? What was the point of it? He'd lost so much blood already. Why would he risk losing more?

The room was growing colder. Before too long he would need to put another log on the fire.

Rion reached over, this time with both hands, and cupped her face. He brought his own face closer. “Annie, do not die. Please. Stay with me. Stay with me here. I need you, Annie.”

“...c—”

“Are you cold?”

She felt him moving her over slightly then sliding into bed behind her. His body was warm and solid and comforting. The room was getting darker and colder. He needed to be tending the fire.

Strong arms encircled her. He placed her head on his arm.

Lord of Thunder

“I will take care of you, the same way you cared for me,” he promised her, although he seemed to be getting farther away. “You cannot die on me.” Now he was angry at her. Angry and crying.

She tried to say something. Her eyes were heavy. She was so tired. It was so cold.

“Annie! Do not leave me!”

It was growing dark. Already? She hadn’t even fixed dinner yet.

“Annie? Annie! Come back to me! Don’t leave me! Annie!”

Her? Leave? Not her. It was he who had left her and gone away. Far, far away. So far, his voice sounded like he was calling to her from down the road.

“Annie!”

It was so cold.

Chapter 9

The Fear

An hour passed. Then another. And another.

Rion sat up in the chair he had moved next to the bed and leaned over to check her. To make sure she still breathed. To prove to himself she was still among the living.

“Annie.”

A faint, warm puff of air moved the tiny feather he held beneath her nose. At the sight of movement, hot tears scalded his eyes, and he allowed himself to weep.

It had been years since he'd succumbed to his fears. Years since he had grieved this hard or prayed so fervently.

Now it was all he could do while he waited for that moment when Annie either remained with him, or walked over that fine threshold into death's arms.

A fourth hour passed. With the fire almost out, he was forced to go outside to get more wood. Annie had to stay warm, and he would make sure she did.

He stared into the brightening blaze as the fresh logs caught. These past few days had been a miracle in more ways than he could count. He had survived being struck by lightning. He had survived a fall of untold feet into the middle of a forest.

Then to be found by this woman, like an angel herself, only wingless.

Rion turned around to stare at the pale figure lying so still on the blood-soaked bed.

Annie was nothing like the women on his world. She looked nothing like them, either, with her blacker than midnight hair and eyes of pure green. They reminded him of perillion blooms, and of all the times he had picked those same flowers as a child to carry to his mother.

More than that, she was strong and self-reliant. She faced life with a zeal and determination that amazed him, and she never complained. How many women on his world could survive in a place like this?

Rion tried to take a deep breath, but it caught in his chest. He felt a sudden warmth near his ribs. He had to be careful and not overdo things. Annie needed him now, and he would be of no use to her if he let himself grow weak.

He turned back to the fire, listlessly poking it with the iron.

His Annie had to live...

His Annie.

She is not your Annie. She cannot be yours.

Unconsciously, his eyes were drawn to the small chest at the foot of the bed. Another man's clothes were in that chest, and that knowledge alone kept him from doing what his dreams allowed him. Another man lived here, and until Rion found out who that man was, he could not hold her. He could not taste her sweetness. Or even declare this strange, unbelievable feeling that filled him every day he was with her.

Do the clothes belong to a brother? Please, please do not tell me they are your husband's. Do not tell me another man has claimed you, and I am left to grieve again for the one person who has found her way into my heart, only to break it once more.

A soft sigh alerted him. Rising, Rion went over to sit next to the bed. In the firelight he watched the play of shadows across her face, across her delicate features. Laying his palm over her cheek and ear, he could tell there was no fever. If he had been lucky enough, and quick enough, there wouldn't be. Not with his blood

in her system now. Yes, he had taken a huge risk, bleeding into her like that, but what other choice did he have? She was dying before his eyes. Her life had been fading away. He couldn't lose her. Not now. Not ever. Even if she had a husband who might return any day now, Rion knew he couldn't lose Annie. Not this way. Not because of some damned freakish accident.

Annie gave a little cry. Rion leaned over and pressed a kiss to her hairline. On the cool skin he wanted to keep kissing until he reached her lips. Then further down to her throat. And from there...

"Get well for me, Annie," he murmured softly, although he knew she could not hear him, much less understand him or be able to answer. "Stay with me. Let me stay with you. When you are better, tell me about this man you already have in your life. Let me know if I have a chance to tell you how much I am beginning to love you. Annie...Annie...let me love you."

The tears came back, rolling down his cheeks, but he ignored them. If another hour passed, and she continued to breathe, the worst would be over. After another hour she would be on the long road to recovery, and he would be here to greet her when she finally awakened.

And when she did, they would talk.

Rion took a shaky breath. Yes, they would talk. He would find out the truth about the man in her life, and if there was the slightest chance in the world for Rion to love her, he would declare himself.

Chapter 10

The Dreams

She dreamt she was flying. The sun was warm and shining on her face. The only breeze was the one fanning her from the wings.

She wore a white dress made of the same material as Rion's clothes. They were soft and felt incredible. Why hadn't she worn this dress before? Why had she waited so long?

The giant bird's wings came up, then back and down. With each stroke he lifted her higher into the sky the color of turquoise. Lying against his back, her arms around his neck and her breasts pressed to his downy coat, Annie could feel the power and majesty of the bird's muscles beneath the feather-covered skin.

She opened her eyes slightly. The room was dark. Light from the fireplace flickered, throwing shadows on the cabin walls.

She was warm. Detached. Everything seemed surreal.

I had a nightmare, Papa. I dreamed I'd run away with this man and he took me to Montana. He built me a cabin and a barn, then he abandoned me. Then one day, after a terrible storm, I found a winged man. He was an angel. He had been hurt in the storm, so I took him home and healed him. But then I did a terrible thing. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing. I was chopping wood and I accidentally hit myself with the ax. It hurt, Papa. It hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt before in my life.

And then I dreamt I'd died.

In the faint light she could see a hand and part of an arm. The arm wore red flannel. The hand had amber gold hairs on the back of it. The firelight played with the gold color. It was pretty.

Lord of Thunder

She was still very, very tired. The warmth felt good. She was in her own bed, and she didn't realize how much she'd missed it until now. Sleeping on the floor had not been easy.

The hand moved. It tucked itself around her waist and stopped. A deep sigh rumbled against her back. The sound was deep. Breath tickled her hair. Someone kissed the top of her head.

Annie fell back asleep.

* * * *

And then it was lighter. The first thing she noticed was that there wasn't a solid shape against her back anymore. She missed it.

She could smell coffee. Her stomach reacted to the smell before rumbling. She was hungry.

How long had she slept? Was it morning or afternoon?

She lifted a hand and began to turn onto her back. The pain in her leg erupted, making her cry out softly in anguish. She heard the scrape of a chair, and someone hurried over to the bed.

"Annie?"

The sunlight coming through the window threw a halo of gold behind his head. His Montana sky blue eyes were so sad. He even had worry lines in his forehead.

"Annie? How do you feel? Can you talk?"

"Coffee?"

Rion grinned widely and chuckled. "One cup, coming up." He quickly poured her a cup, brought it back to the bed, and helped her up enough so she could drink it without spilling it on herself. She took two sips then he laid her back down.

She could feel the quilt covering her, and beneath that the familiar heavy cotton nightgown she wore on colder nights.

Nightgown? That meant he had to have changed her. That meant he took her clothes off, which meant...

"How do you feel?" he asked again. He was stroking her face. His hand was warm. Strong. Annie reached it and looked at it. His right hand. No, it was the left one he'd slashed.

As if he was reading her mind, Rion held up his left hand. To her astonishment, the cut in the middle of his wrist had closed. It was there, a barely visible pink line against the amber skin, proving she hadn't imagined it. But there should be a bandage on it. It couldn't be healed yet, unless...

She tried to speak. Her voice sounded hoarse, rusty. "Your wrist?"

"Better. How does your leg feel?"

He had moved close to her, right next to the bed. There were droplets clinging to his hair. Diamonds of water. He'd either just washed his face or his hair.

"It hurts," she admitted. She tried to give him a weak smile. "Why?"

"Why what?" Rion said.

"Why...cut?"

"It was all I could think of to save you. You were bleeding too much, too fast."

Her brows knitted. "Don't...under—"

Rion shushed her. "Let us say it is one of those things I do. My blood can heal your blood. Do not ask me to explain further because I do not understand how, either."

"Thank you."

He seemed surprised to hear her say it. "I told you, my debt to you is greater than I can repay."

"No. Now we're even."

Talking was wearing her out. Her stomach was craving something to eat, yet her mind was growing fuzzy. She needed more sleep.

Her eyelids drooped. She felt Rion lean over the bed. Warm lips pressed against her cheek.

"Sleep, Annie. You need it to heal. I will be here when you awaken again."

Lord of Thunder

She smiled just before she dropped off. That little bit of affection was nice. But why couldn't he have kissed her on the lips?

* * * *

She was flying again. Only this time Rion was holding her, cradling her against his chest as his powerful wings shoved the wind aside like giant oars in an ocean of sky.

He was talking to her. Telling her how beautiful his world was, and how much more beautiful it would be with her in it. Sharing it with him.

He was promising her he would never leave her, or never allow her to spend another cold or lonely night in isolation. He was promising her that her life would be different now. Different in more ways than she could ever imagine.

"It will take some getting used to, Annie. My people will have to get used to you. Get used to the fact that you are without wings and cannot move around like they can. But they will love you. They will love you as much as I do, but never more. They could never love you more."

It was thundering. Lightning was plowing through the black velvet clouds like white-hot knives. The sound was deafening. Yet, for the first time in her life she was not afraid. Rion had told her how he would find the rift between their worlds, and how he would slip between the torn fragments without harm. It was only coming into her world that was dangerous. When they emerged from the dark and terrifying storm from her world into his, she would be greeted by the crimson rays of his world's two suns.

He promised he would take her to his world, then to his home. There, she would live the life she deserved. She belonged to his world. She belonged to him.

She belonged to this lord of the thunder.

* * * *

It was dark again. There was a steady wind blowing around the corner of the cabin. It made howling noises like a pack of stray dogs.

There was a hearty fire going in the fireplace. Something smelled good, too. Something that was cooking in the pot over the fire.

She found she could turn her head without awakening the demon that dwelled in her leg. A golden form was hunched over the table. He was cutting bread. The moment she spoke his name, he was at her side.

“You are looking better,” he told her, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“How long have I been out?”

“Three days. There is a storm blowing in tonight.”

“I didn’t get to town. We might not have enough to last us through the winter.”

To her surprise, Rion just smiled. “We will endure,” he promised. “Are you hungry?”

“You cooked?”

“Potato soup. I am not as talented as you, but Vincente taught me well. I will get you a bowl.”

She tried to lift herself up a bit with her arms. Her left leg felt like a rock, heavy and awkward. She was afraid to move it. She was more afraid to look at what it might look like beneath its wrappings.

Rion brought her a bowl of soup. Setting it down on the table, he helped her to sit up in bed. “It does not look good at this point, but it will get better.”

“You’re sure? There’s not the chance I could lose my leg?”

He shook his head. “You cut it deep and hit the bone, but it will heal.” His face grew grim. “You were almost lost to me.”

“Lost.” The gravity of what he said came to her. She paled at the realization. Closing her eyes, ghosts of her dreams came back to

her. She felt an overwhelming sense of fear and relief. She hadn't died. More importantly, Rion was here, waiting for her, just as he'd promised.

"You were almost lost to me." *To me.*

To me? Did he really say that?

Opening her eyes, Annie saw the spoon full and poised in front of her face. Montana sky blue eyes were smiling at her.

"You must eat," he insisted. "You will not get better unless you do."

Annie stared at him for a moment longer, then opened her mouth and allowed him to feed her. She tasted the potato soup like a gourmet chef testing his apprentice. "You could use a dab more pepper."

"Otherwise it is edible?"

"It's good, yeah."

He continued to feed her until she begged off. "You're making me feel guilty," she said softly.

"How?"

"I never spoon fed you like this."

"I would not have let you had you tried."

"In fact, I didn't treat you half as well as you're taking care of me."

"I did not attempt to cut my foot off, either," he half-teased. "I do not understand you, Annie. You are a wise and sensible woman. How could you be so careless?" Again, his face grew somber, and the smile on his face disappeared. Leaning forward on the bed, he reached out and tucked a strand of her hair behind an ear. "The damage you did to yourself was almost too great."

She closed her eyes to savor the tenderness in his touch. His remark brought more memories back to her. Annie reached down to touch the mattress where it lay beneath her leg. Her hand encountered heavy padding. She glanced up questioningly.

Rion nodded. "I had to use all the towels to soak up your blood. The mattress may be ruined, despite my attempts."

She pulled at the sheet, determined to see how badly it looked. In the dim firelight the large, dark pool underneath the layers of towels was readily evident. "The sheet, too?"

"You might be able to clean the sheet, but I believe a stain will remain," he told her.

"Damn." It was the only set of sheets she owned.

Getting to his feet, the angel man placed the near-empty bowl on the table. "You need to get your rest."

"I'm not sleepy. I've been sleeping for three days already."

"Then if you plan to stay awake for a while longer, I would enjoy having conversation. The silence of this place when you were unconscious was beginning to grow intolerable." He looked over his shoulder at her, adding in a gentler tone of voice, "How could you live up here so alone?"

Annie shrugged. "You just do," she confessed. "At least you try. You find things to occupy you. You keep busy. You don't stop long enough to start thinking about it. But I really wasn't alone."

"No?"

For a second she thought she saw a flash of fear in his eyes. Or maybe not. Her mind was still fuzzy.

"I mean, I had Murphy to yell at. And the other animals." She smiled, thinking back. "You hold conversations with the livestock. You talk to the trees. You talk to the fire in the fireplace. To the dinner cooking. When it got to be too much to tolerate, I went over to the Funderburkes or into town and hung around until the noise and all got to be a bit too loud, and I'd come home. After a year or so, it kind of turned around. Instead of needing the hustle and bustle, I found I enjoyed the quiet. Of course, there was always the Funderburkes if I needed someone to come over here to keep me company."

She yawned, surprised by her actions. It was then she noticed the pants he was wearing. The seams she had ripped out of the sides of her husband's jeans had been sewn back together with added strips from a pair of Foster's worn out corduroy pants, making the waist and legs wider. Although the dark brown material looked funny, contrasted to the blue denim, at least the pants fit now. Annie motioned toward his new attire. "Don't tell me Vincente taught you how to sew."

"I learned much in the time I was with him."

Annie leaned back against the pillows while Rion tended the fire. Another yawn caught her off-guard, and she responded noisily. "You put something in that soup to make me sleepy, didn't you?" she accused in a halfway teasing tone.

"More like something to help with your healing."

"Really?" She cocked her head, glancing back down at the lump in the quilt which was her left leg. "Rion?"

"Yes?"

"Come talk to me."

Rion leaned the poker against the side of the fireplace and walked back over to the bed to sit on the edge. "What do you want me to talk about?"

The wind seemed to have picked up in intensity. No telling if there would be ice or snow on the ground come morning.

"Tell me about your world. Where you're from."

He tucked the quilt around her the same way she'd once tucked him in. "Anything in particular?"

"Yeah. Like, do you have trees where you're from? Do you have houses? If it doesn't get cold there, or snow, do you have a sun? Is your sky blue? Is everyone on your world the color of amber and gold? Are the women beautiful? Do they have wings? Do the—"

Rion laid two fingers horizontally across her lips. He was chuckling.

“I pride myself on having a great memory, but I am not certain I can remember all your questions. Ask me one at a time and I will answer as best as I can. Now, let me see...trees. I guess you can call them trees. They are not tall and sharp as the ones you have here. They do not have leaves. And they are not all green. You could probably call them bushes. Many are dark blue in color. Some are yellow, some are red.

“Houses. Yes, we have dwellings, but not like this one. They are more crystalline. Glassy. Shiny, like crystals.”

“Crystals?”

“And tall. Very tall. We have tall buildings with landing pathways leading to the doors.”

Annie burst out laughing. She had gotten a very vivid mental image of a big diamond-colored birdhouse with a perch outside the door. Seeing Rion’s confusion, she shook her head, still smiling at him.

“Never mind me. I was just picturing your people flying into your bir—... houses.”

“Um,” he acknowledged. “Very well. You were asking...oh, yes. Our sun. We have two suns, actually. Aerilius and Besarius. Aerilius rises first, and when it is overhead, Besarius rises. They both travel across our sky, which is also blue, like it is here, until Aerilius sets. When Besarius sets, we have night.”

Annie lay in stunned silence. Did she hear him right? “What?”

Rion paused. “Beg pardon?”

“Did you say...two suns?”

“Yes, two. Why?”

His puzzled expression was so honest, Annie began to wonder if maybe he had mentioned the fact before and she just hadn’t paid close enough attention the first time. She waved a hand, signaling

him to continue. "Bet they cast a lot of light," she commented, even though her mind was racing.

When did he tell her before that his world had two suns? Or did she dream it? How could she have known if she'd dreamt it? Something like that, a world with two suns, that just wasn't something she thought of every day. So how could she have known about them already? Before he'd said anything about them?

Another idea flashed. How much of what she'd dreamt really happened? What if what she dreamt... was going to happen?

"No more than your one sun does," Rion answered her. "However, Aerilius is a red star, while Besarius is a yellow sun like yours. When Aerilius rises, our skies momentarily turn crimson, then pink. When Besarius rises, they turn orange." He looked at her closely. "Are you feeling well?"

Orange? Did he say orange? Didn't he say orange in my dream?

Annie tried to hide her confusion and doubt by taking a drink from her cup. The simple act seemed to help calm her nerves. "How about your people? Are they all the same amber gold color like you?"

He tilted his head, his face taking on the look of someone lost in thought, and glanced down at his hands. "I suppose you could say we are all the same. We are different, though. We have our own differences. You, however, you look nothing like the women of my world. You are nothing like them, either."

"That better be a compliment," she half-teased, and softened her faux threat further with a smile. The smile turned into a yawn.

Rion smiled in return. "It could be nothing but," he said. "I was astonished the first time I saw you, with your hair the color of storm clouds, and your eyes a shade of green I have never seen on a person."

Annie reached up to run her fingers through the black hair falling over her shoulders. Normally she wore it in braids or in a ponytail. With her extended recuperation, it now lay matted and

oily, and in need of a good washing. "Yeah, well, blame my mother and father. They gave me all of their Irish traits, including this hair and these eyes. Momma said I have Grandpapa's eyes. She said they were the shade of Erin green."

"There I was, awakening in a place that, for all I knew, could mean my death. I was cold and wet, with such agony piercing my side and wing. Unable to move, unable to speak, unable to do anything but hope my end or redemption would come soon. I opened my eyes, and there stood a figure strong against the wind. Your hair was flying about you like a cape, wild and untamed. You looked like a storm spirit."

Annie smiled at his description. "Some storm spirit. I had enough mud on me to plant peanuts."

"You were...menacing...until you spoke. Do you remember the first words you said to me?"

Annie tried to recall but failed. "No. My mind's fuzzy. What did I say?"

"You wanted to know if I was real. Do you know what my answer to you would have been if I had the ability to speak right then?"

She shook her head.

"I would have asked you the same thing. Are you real? Are you here to help me? Are you here to save me? Or are you here to..."

He stopped unexpectedly and turned away from her. A few moments passed, then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, turning his back to her. His manner suddenly seemed more abrupt than usual.

"You need to rest. I will make a deal with you. Get some sleep, and I will tell you all you want to know next time you awaken."

"Everything?"

"Yes." He looked over his shoulder and stared back at her. "I will explain why I was here. Why I had fled. Why I no longer cared

what happened to me. Why I did not fear if you were going to save me or kill me.”

“You fled? Why would you flee? What were you trying to get away from? I mean, if your world is as beautiful as you say it is—”

Rion interrupted her by getting to his feet and walking back over to the fire. “Go to sleep, Annie,” he asked in a gentler tone of voice. “Please. Rest. And get well. There is much I wish to share with you.”

Sleep was overtaking her, even though she wanted to stay awake and hear more. Her leg remained a painless extension of herself, to her relief, but it kept her from assuming her favorite sleep position.

Sighing, she managed to roll onto her left side and find a comfortable arrangement. She was asleep before she knew it.

Chapter 11

The Realization

“Annie. Annie, awaken. Annie.”

She went from full sleep to instant alertness at the sound of his voice. Rolling over in the bed, she saw Rion staring out the window. It was daylight, and the sunshine etched every worry line on his golden face.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered back, squinting against the brightness. She held a hand to her brow to shield her eyes. Funny how people tended to whisper when something appears to be out of place, even when there’s not a chance of anyone else hearing them.

He remained watching out the window, but his hand motioned for her to stay where she was. Which was silly, in Annie’s opinion. How was she going to get about anyway, with her leg injured like it was?

She quickly glanced around the room. The fire burned brightly; the coffee pot was sitting to one side of the hearth. A small, wrapped lump on the table was probably the last of the bread. For the umpteenth time Annie cursed herself for her clumsiness which had prevented her from going into town for her winter stores.

“You have a visitor,” Rion finally voiced.

“Who?”

For a split second her heart leapt. Foster? Had Foster finally come home?

“That old man who came the other day in a wagon. Funderburke, was it?”

Incredibly, Annie felt a sense of relief. The emotion both surprised and piqued her curiosity. Why was she glad it wasn't Foster? Shouldn't she be elated at his homecoming?

Rion motioned again, which raised an eyebrow.

“Is he driving a dappled gray mare?”

This time Rion turned to look at her. “A what?”

“A horse. A dark gray horse with white splotches on the hide.”

“A horse? Yes. A dark gray horse. Why did you not call it that in the first place?”

Annie sighed. “What is he doing?”

“It would appear he is coming to see you.”

In the wagon? “Did we have a snowfall last night?”

“Yes, but not much. I was able to get out to the barn without much trouble,” he said.

“You've already had time to muck out and feed the animals? Good golly, how late in the day is it?”

“Daylight came not long ago,” he continued to whisper.

“So you got up while it was still dark and took to the barn? Rion, didn't you get any sleep last night?”

The look he gave her was one she wasn't familiar with. “I got some sleep.”

“Hallooooo! Missus Mayall! Halloooo!”

She could hear her neighbor's call coming faintly into the cabin. Annie threw back her covers and proceeded to swing her legs over the edge of the bed. The floor was ice cold under her feet. Rion saw her movement and reacted. “What are you doing?”

“I have to go talk to Mister Funderburke.”

She started to say more when the towels covering her wounded leg fell away, revealing a long, pink, puckered scar about six inches long running around the inside of her calf. She couldn't help but stare at it, totally astounded by what she saw.

The ax had buried itself deep into her leg, chopping muscle like so much kindling. The blade had hit the bone, according to Rion. If that was so, her leg should look much worse than this. Annie gave Rion an accusing stare. "I thought you said it had been a bad wound?"

"It had."

"You call this bad? I've had burns that looked worse than this."

"You nearly bled to death, Annie."

"It's only been a week!"

"I will never lie to you."

She glanced down at the bed, jerking back the quilt and sheet. A pile of towels lay beneath where her leg had rested. Pulling them off, she gasped at the huge brownish stain underneath. A stain that was easily a foot in width.

"He's here," Rion said.

From outside Annie could catch the restless jingling of harness and reins as her neighbor pulled up close to the doorway. She grabbed the quilt to wrap around herself and carefully, slowly, got to her feet. She felt a little unsure as she put her weight on her bad leg. It twinged a little, but no major pain presented itself.

She was nearly healed. It was nothing short of a miracle.

"Do you need me?" he offered.

"No! No. Stay here. Let me talk to him."

She hobbled over to the door, glad for once that the cabin was so small that distance was not a problem. She opened the door and gingerly stepped out, barefoot, onto the short stoop. The weather was definitely nippy.

Horace Funderburke walked around the wagon, pulling off his gloves. His breath puffed from him like a steam engine train. He looked worried and concerned, and more than a bit frightened.

"Missus Mayall." He dipped his head, his eyes taking in her nightgown and quilt, and surmising like a Pinkerton. "We was worried, Elly and me. You said last week you was heading to town

for your winter stores, yet we never saw you go by. Elly, she said something had to be wrong. She said you wouldn't miss the fur trader. And I told her that you'd never go back on your word. That when you said you'd do something, it got done. But we never saw hide nor hair of you passing our place. So that's why I'm here, to make sure you're all right, and that nothing's happened."

"Thank you, Mr. Funderburke. Actually, something did happen to me, and it wasn't so much an accident as just plain stupidity and carelessness on my fault. I was chopping firewood that evening after you left and I mistook my leg for a bundle of oak." She gave him a weak smile and hoped he would see she was trying to make light of it.

"Are you all right? Is there anything me and the missus can do?"

"Well, yes, there is, but I feel like a fool for asking."

"That's what neighbors are for, Missus Mayall. Just ask. I'll do what I can," the old farmer promised. His gaze suddenly dipped downward, and Annie knew he could see the partially-healed scar on her leg. Looking back up at her, Funderburke squinted his eyes. "That cut looks bad," he said. "Did it bleed much?"

Bleeding would mean less of a chance of infection, Annie knew. Less of a chance because any germs or debris would have most likely been bled out. On the other hand, a good bleed could also mean a quick death from shock due to loss of blood. She nodded in affirmation.

"Quite a bit, I'm afraid. I'm going to need to replace my mattress, as well as my sheets."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Would you like for me to get Doctor Thedford to come look at it?"

"Thank you, but, no. I've weathered the worst of it. I'll be all right now." She gave him another half-hearted smile. "Might be a bit wobbly for a few more days, though."

"What can I do for you in the meantime?"

“Like you mentioned, I didn’t get to go into town to get my stores, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to make do with what I have. I don’t have but a few dollars left, and the trader’s probably already gone on to Iron Flats by now...”

For some unexplainable reason, Annie felt hot tears starting to roll down her cheeks. She hadn’t realized how worried she’d been about her supplies until she had started to talk about her plight and the dilemma she’d placed herself in. On top of that was the worry that she’d have to get through what was predicted to be a very bad winter with an extra mouth to feed. And to put the cherry on the whole mess was that the war the U. S. was waging overseas now had put an extra squeeze on certain supplies. Some items were rationed, and others like salt and sugar had become almost nonexistent. So even if she could make it in to town, there was the definite possibility she couldn’t get half the things she needed, money or no.

“Hey, hey, Missus Mayall. Hey, there’s no need for that,” Funderburke spoke up. His voice wavered. It was obvious the man was torn between being the civil gentleman he prided himself in being, and giving the young woman a grandfatherly bear hug to help ease her mind. He opted for the former.

“Like I told you last week, Elly and me had an overabundant crop. We got more than we need, and then some. You don’t have to worry about having enough to eat this winter, you hear me? And about your livestock—”

Annie held up a hand. “Don’t worry about the livestock, Mister Funderburke. I managed to get enough hay stockpiled for the winter. And they’re not gonna die by having to go an extra couple of days or so in the same bedding before I can get out there and muck them out.”

She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and wished she had a hanky. She must look a mess, what with her stringy, greasy-looking hair.

Horace Funderburke bobbed his head again, then turned and climbed back into his wagon. "I'm going to fetch a little something from the house and bring it right back. Don't you dare turn down our offer, you hear me?"

"I think I have about seven dollars and a few pennies. You're welcome to it."

"Your money's no good with me," the old farmer told her with a wink. Clicking his tongue, he slapped the mare across the back with the reins. Annie watched him go with a mixture of relief and regret. A voice behind was quick to remind her about standing outside in the freezing cold.

Back inside, she found herself shivering. Rion quickly led her over to the fire and began to rub her down with the quilt. Annie closed her eyes and let him rub some warmth back into her limbs.

"Is he bringing you some supplies?" he asked.

Sighing, Annie shuddered. "We're so remote out here, neighbors look after neighbors. Don't your people do the same? Look out for each other? Take care of one another?"

"Some do. Some do not," Rion replied cryptically.

He continued to massage feeling and warmth back into her thinner body to increase her circulation. Annie let her head loll forward until her forehead rested against his chest. He felt good. He felt warm and safe, and all those things she'd thought she would have once she married Foster.

Here was a man who was strong and compassionate. A man who did not fear this strange world that held both danger and promise.

A man who did not belong here.

She moaned softly, unaware her hands were sliding up his hips to his waistline, and then around to his back where she could spread her fingers across solid muscle. She moved closer to him until her body lightly touched his. He continued to slowly rub her shoulders, arms, and neck.

She knew she had no business touching him. Even less business having him here in her cabin. Her, a married woman... what was she thinking? Furthermore, what would the Funderburkes think if they knew she harbored this golden man with wings?

Would they believe her if they saw him for themselves?

Annie turned her head to press her cheek against his flannel-covered chest. He smelled so good. Fresh, like snow. But there was another scent, a clean scent that had to be just his. She'd smelled it before every time she touched him when she was tending his wounds.

By now Rion's arms were around her as well. His hands soothed and stroked her back, over her shoulder blades and down to her waist, stopping short of her hips. She could feel him rest his chin on the top of her head, and it reminded her of her unwashed appearance.

"I need a bath," she managed to murmur.

"Hush. Do not worry about it," he whispered.

His fingertips began to knead the small of her back, and waves of relaxation rippled to all parts of her body. She was unaware of her knees giving way until his arms tightened around her to support her. In response, Annie pressed herself totally against him. She felt him sigh.

The world was reduced to a fragment of time where there was only the two of them, enclosed within the womb-like comfort and safety of the cabin, with a gentle fire to warm the areas of their bodies that weren't being warmed by each other. The weather could grow cold and despondent outside, but it would never intrude on what they had at that moment—the companionship...the trust...the intimacy...

The promise of something more.

Faintly, Annie wondered if what she was feeling was a result of her injury. *Loss of blood and extended bed rest often left people light-headed, didn't it?*

Lord of Thunder

His hands had ceased their ministrations. Now they pressed lightly against the middle of her back. No, they were holding her more firmly against him. He was holding her as she was meant to be held. Cherished. Loved.

She was molded to him, hip to thigh, and she felt no shame or remorse. She belonged there. There was no arguing the fact. She wished she could stay like this forever. This... this feeling of happiness, she wanted to keep it. Can it. Bottle it. Preserve it. Whatever it took so that it would never go away and she would never, ever lose it. There would never be a more perfect moment, and it was all because Rion made her feel like this.

Was he holding her tightly because he was worried she would fall to the floor? Why did he touch her like he did? Was it another kind of healing his people could perform?

So many questions, yet she didn't care if any of them were answered. Not if it meant he would never let her go. Not if it meant he would never leave her.

Oh, God. Leave her.

A cold hand seized her heart inside her chest and squeezed. She shuddered from the thought. "Rion..." She lifted her face to ask him. He shushed her and guided her head back to his chest with one hand. "Rion," she tried again. "Please. I want to ask—"

"Hush. Your question can wait," he interrupted again.

Knowing he wouldn't give her time or the opportunity to ask, Annie tried again by asking outright. "Will you be leaving me?"

His hands released her to cradle the sides of her face, lifting her gaze until her eyes met his. In the firelight he seemed more golden than the sun. "Why must you ask at a time like this?" he demanded softly.

"Because I know you'll have to, sooner or later. At the next storm, or whenever the next biggest thunder boomer comes. You will, won't you? You'll have to."

Hot tears filled her eyes, and this sign of her weakness embarrassed her. How could she act any more foolish to him? Now he would think she was some whiney, backwoods woman. And look at her! Could she look any less appealing?

Mortified, Annie bit her lip and lowered her head. He didn't need to see her all sappy-eyed, on top of being filthy. Add to the fact she must smell atrocious.

Rion lifted her face once more as her tears overflowed and rolled down the backs of her cheeks. He watched one drop pass her earlobe. "Why are you afraid of my leaving?"

"Because..." Her throat was caving in on her, making it difficult, if not impossible, to speak. She swallowed hard, dry, and tried again. "Because I don't want you to leave."

"Why?"

"Because...I'll miss you."

Lowering his face closer to hers, Rion repeated, "Why?"

"Because...because you're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"I have placed an unnecessary burden on you. I have eaten your food and created an even greater hardship on you, especially now that you have not been able to go into town and get more supplies to last you through the winter."

Annie tried to shake her head. "You saved my life," she insisted.

"As you saved mine," he reminded her.

He looked deep into her eyes with eyes which had seen sights she would never experience. Eyes which reflected the wisdom of countless ages and told her the inevitable would come. Sooner or later, it would come. He did not belong on her world; he was only a visitor, and always would be. He would not stay.

He could not stay.

"Then come back to me," Annie whispered as tears began to fall fast and warm. *Come back to me.* The same words he had used to

bring her back to the living. The exact phrase he'd spoken to reach her in the darkness and draw her into his amber light. "Come back to—"

His mouth came down on hers with a gentleness that took her breath away. His lips found hers, took them, and Annie found herself drowning in his kiss. His arms enveloped her; his hands touched her in ways that was both soothing and exciting.

Briefly he broke the kiss to taste her cheeks and her temples. "Annie..."

"Don't go," she pleaded. A soft sob escaped her. She pressed her face into the hollow of his throat.

"My Annie..."

He lifted her off her feet, holding her as her whole body matched his, curve to curve. As his wings began to swing around and enfold them both within their feathery soft confines, Annie lifted her arms to encircle his neck and surrendered to his kisses.

He spoke her name and she cried softly, almost silently, as his hands worked miracles on her body. Before she was aware of it, his hands were underneath her nightgown, touching, stroking, bringing every nerve alive in her skin. He cupped her breasts, and when his thumbs rubbed over her responsive nipples, a shudder shook her to the core.

Rion mouthed her neck, finding sensitive areas she never realized she had. Small areas of skin that burned when he tongued them, mouthed, and nibbled them. She was literally melting to the point where she could feel herself running slick between her thighs.

She couldn't think, couldn't move, couldn't do anything but let him take her. This moment would never repeat itself, and she surrendered totally to it.

Now they were on the floor before the fire, feeling their own heat transporting them. He pressed himself between her legs, and Annie felt herself respond by wrapping her legs around his thighs. She wanted him as much as he was wanting her, maybe more. The

hard length trying to inch its way inside her was leading her to the brink of insanity. Annie reached down, trying to find it, to guide it, but the back of her hand met a wall of abdominal muscle.

His mouth was everywhere. It found the cleft between her breasts where the moistness of his mouth turned the cotton flannel nightgown wet. He found the tips of her breasts, and her nipples strained against the material. He lightly bit them to tease her until a low, primal groan rolled through her.

Over and over she said his name as she clung to him, afraid this moment would disappear like a dream. Suddenly she was terrified she would wake up at any moment to find she was by herself once again, alone and deserted, and miserably trying to make one day flow into the next while she waited for her husband's return.

...her husband's return.

Foster.

It was as if an enormous black pall descended over her. Mamma's face suddenly loomed over her with that expression of disappointment and condemnation she knew too well. With a voice like the rumbling of thunder, Annie heard her say, *How dare you, you little tart! You! A married woman! Going against the teachings of the Bible and the church! How dare you! Have you no sanctity for marriage?*

Annie whimpered. She wanted Rion in a way she'd never felt with Foster. Where Foster satisfied himself with little regard to her own gratification, she knew Rion wanted her to rejoice in their joining as equally as he. Rion wooed her with a gentle touch more loving than the hurried, heavy-handed way Foster did.

Foster gave her no love play. No chance to prepare herself for him. Worse, copulation never lasted long enough for her to feel any sense of completion.

You're going to burn in hell! her momma yelled. *You're going to go to the place that God sends whores and other tramps like you! How could you, Annabel Lee? How could you betray your husband? How could you disgrace God and your family with this inhuman creature?*

“He’s not inhuman!” she managed to faintly cry out. “It’s not fair! It’s not fair!”

She pulled away, pushing Rion off of her, as racking sobs consumed her. With shaking fingers she gathered her nightgown around her breasts and pushed herself backwards, away from him, until she met the wall on the far side. There, she turned her back to him and curled up into a ball, burying her face in her hands, complete in her misery. She couldn’t bear to look at him. She couldn’t bear for him to look at her.

Dimly she heard the door open and close. Lifting her eyes, she saw she was alone. Totally alone. He had gone. He had left, even though he had promised not to.

Her first impulse was to go after him, but what good would it do? Like her momma said, bless her departed soul, she was a married woman, and married women who fornicated outside of their vows were no better than the whores on the street. For several long minutes Annie dwelled in her misery, until she felt she could no longer stay in her little corner.

Wiping her face and nose on her nightgown, she slowly got to her feet and went over to the window. The light dusting of snow that had fallen the night before was fast melting in the morning sun. Rion was nowhere to be seen.

Pressing her forehead against the cool glass pane, she wondered where he might be. How would he be feeling right now? Angry? Was he angry and disappointed with her because she had turned away from him? Foster was often furious with her whenever she spurned his advances. When he wanted sex, he wanted it then, whether she wanted to or not. Besides, it was her duty now as a wife, he yelled at her. The Good Book said so, and so did the judge who married them. A wife had to obey her husband. That included all her wifely chores like cooking, cleaning, and lifting up her skirt when he said to. When he ordered her to.

Perhaps he has flown away. The idea brought a fresh torrent of tears. *No, no, please.* The image of him, with his great wings extended like some golden mythological bird, filled her mind. She could just imagine him, high in the air, a bright star against the blue Montana sky.

Her ears caught a faint sound. She felt her heart leap into her throat as she quickly looked back out the window.

“Rion!”

Horace Funderburke was bringing the wagon back around to the cabin. Annie then remembered the man had promised to return.

She quickly wiped her face, hoping there weren't any evident traces of her breakdown, although deep down she knew it was probably a hopeless cause. Rewrapping the quilt about her, she greeted the man at the doorway with what she hoped was a sincere smile.

“Halloooo, Missus Mayall!” Her neighbor touched the brim of his hat to her. Instantly his face grew grim. “What's the matter?”

“What do you mean?”

“You look like you've been having a good cry. I'm sorry. I know it's none of my business,” he apologized. He climbed out of the wagon and fetched a box of goods from the back of the conveyance. Walking up to the front door, he motioned for her to step aside. Annie allowed him in.

Funderburke looked carefully around the interior of the cabin before setting the box on the table. Once he'd gotten a good look-see, he turned back to where Annie stood near the window.

“I was beginning to wonder if you were hiding something in here,” he spoke quietly. “You always invite me in for a cup of coffee when I come by, but when you didn't ask me in last week, I pondered on that fact. Elly said it wasn't any of my business what you did in your cabin, so I want to say I'm sorry for thinking such things,” the old farmer told her.

Annie shook her head. "You have nothing to apologize for, Mister Funderburke. I'm sorry I didn't ask you to stay, but things were somewhat in disarray, being right after that big storm we had and all."

The farmer dipped his head. "I understand. You sure you're going to be all right with a game leg and all?"

She flashed him an honest smile. He was a good, good man. "I can manage now, thank you."

"Well, I brought you some things that should help you make it through the winter. I was going to slaughter that old boar next week before the cold gets to him. Don't think he'll make it through another snow. If you are of a mind to take some of the meat, Elly and me would appreciate it."

"I would very obliging to take some, Mister Funderburke. You just let me know how I can make it up to you."

The old farmer trudged back outside and got into his wagon. Giving her another nod, he promised to return in about a couple of weeks, as soon as the first slabs of bacon came out of the smoke-house.

"You hop on that old mule you got and come down to see us when you can," he added.

Annie promised him, waved, then stood in the doorway to watch him retreat back down the road. As the wagon cleared the trees around the bend, she closed the door and went back inside where it was warmer.

It was several minutes before Annie could rouse herself off the edge of the bed where she sat. She looked around the interior of the cabin and saw pretty much what Horace Funderburke had seen.

The place was unkept. The floors were dirty. The fire was nearly out. The bed was a rumpled, blood-soaked ruin. But she had to admit it looked like a place where an injured, bedridden woman had spent the last couple of weeks trying to recuperate.

Lord of Thunder

She rubbed her face and felt how oily it was. Her hair was nothing but strands of thick, greasy rope. Papa had often teased her when she braided it, remarking that it looked like a rope of licorice candy.

Sighing, Annie went over to the sink and pumped a kettle of water to hang over the fire and heat. She needed a bath. After a good cleaning and a little food, she would go looking for Rion.

And she would not stop until she found him.

Chapter 12

The Confession

She was rinsing the soap from her hair when she felt, rather than heard, the cabin door open. A rush of freezing cold air came in, blowing against the back of her legs. She had removed her nightgown so that she could step into the washbowl right after doing her hair, tying one of her lesser soiled towels about her for warmth until then.

She paused and waited, her hands buried within the thick black strands. She wanted to turn around to see who it was, but that would mean trailing water over the floor. Not that they couldn't use a good mopping anyway.

The door closed. A moment later two amber-hued hands dove into her tresses and continued to pour water over her hair to remove the suds. They batted away her hands when she tried to help. Annie remained bent over the enamel bowl until he was finished.

She wrapped the other usable towel around her hair, then straightened and turned around to face him. Bits of debris and twigs were caught in his clothing and wings. Reaching out, she pulled a section of evergreen from between the feathers. Holding it to her nose, she sniffed its aroma.

"Tell me what I must do to make you love me," his rich voice asked softly.

Keeping her eyes downward, she confessed the truth to him. "I'm not allowed. I'm a married woman."

"If that is true, where is your husband? I have been here for many days and he has not come to check on you? To see if you are well? Or if the farm is doing well?"

"He...he went to see if he could make a living working in the silver mines," she tried to explain. Funny, but it sounded like such a feeble excuse now.

"Where are these mines?"

Annie shrugged. "Far away." She didn't have the courage to look him in the face. Not only had she betrayed Foster, she had betrayed the one man she now knew she loved more than anything else in the world.

There was a moment of quiet. "How long has he been gone?"

"A little over three years."

The moment of quiet came again. Making a noise to show his exasperation, Rion walked over to stand by the fire. From the corner of her eye, Annie could see him run a hand through his wavy locks. His hair was starting to grow out. It wasn't as short and curly as before.

"Has he written to you? Has he contacted you since he left?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Do you know if he is still alive?"

It was a question she had asked herself a hundred times. "I don't know anything. I wish I did, but there's no way I can even go look for him. I have no idea which way he headed. I just know I haven't seen him since we were married and he moved me here."

Rion stared at her. "I knew there was a man in your life," he confessed. "Where else would you have gotten the pants and shirt you gave me to wear? I watched and I waited for him to walk through the door, but after a while I stopped watching. Soon after that, I stopped waiting. You never seemed to be anticipating him. It looked to me that you had settled into living in this place by yourself, struggling to cope from day to day, however you could, with whatever you could."

He bent down to grab the poker and work on the fire. "It was when you hurt yourself that I realized what you had come to mean to me. To be honest, Annie, it frightened me."

"I'm sorry."

"No. Do not be sorry." He turned back around to face her. "Tell me about him."

"His name is Foster Mayall. I lived on a farm in Ohio with my father, brother, and sister when I met him. He seemed like the kind of man I could fall in love with. He had so many dreams and ideas about life, and I was shocked when he said he was willing to take me along to share them with him. It was the perfect chance to finally get away from the farm. Away from the tedium and boredom of what it took to run a farm...every day." She laughed humorlessly. "He brought me here. He built this cabin and the barn. Then, when I least expected it, he left before morning, without waking me to say goodbye. I think that's what hurt the most, him not telling me goodbye. Or even having the decency to let me see him off."

She was shredding the pine leaves off the evergreen shoot, dropping the needles to the floor. She sniffed her fingers. They smelled of pine.

"Do you expect him to return?"

She shrugged again. "I did at first. But as time went on...I don't know anymore."

"Do you believe he is still alive?"

"I don't know."

"Then what is keeping you here?"

Annie looked up at him. "I don't know. But I don't want to go back to Ohio. I can't. I can't let my family know that he...that he upped and abandoned me."

"Do you still love him?"

This time there was no mistaking the emotion in his voice. Or the pain that shadowed his face. She dropped her eyes.

“I don’t know if I ever did love him. Maybe I was in love with the idea of being in love.” She snorted softly. “Boy does that ever sound confusing. For me, though, he was a fresh face. A handsome face. Someone who had seen places and been places where I’d dreamt of going. He was someone who knew how to sweet-talk. Best of all, he wanted me. Of all the girls, he chose me. So what else was I supposed to do? When would I ever get another chance to get away? He promised me excitement and mystery and faraway places.” She held out her arms. “Well, I got my faraway place. And, in a way, I got my mystery as well. The mystery of the vanished husband.”

“You still have not answered my last question,” Rion reminded her.

“Do I still love him? At this moment, I can honestly admit I never really loved him. Not...not like the way I feel now. Not like this. Not the way I feel when you’re here, or when you touch me. You see, I think I had to find out the hard way that love isn’t about owning something like Foster did with me. He treated me no differently than he treated Murphy and the cow and the rest of this farm. He owned me, bought and paid for in full, thanks to the Lewis County Justice of the Peace. And then he brought me here to this land he’d bought. He set us up, and then he went away, fully expecting me to be right here when he returned. Right where he left me.”

Annie shook her head, her lips pressed tightly together so her chin wouldn’t quiver. “That’s not love, Rion. That’s possession. That’s ownership. It might even be slavery. But it was never love. And, you know?” Her voice was quavering, and the hot tears were beginning to blur her vision again. “You know? I found out I could not love a man who cared no more for me than he did his favorite boots. You know what I mean? He doesn’t even know if I’m alive. Or if I’m still here.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks and fell in warm drops on her arms and hands. She was starting to grow chilled, standing there in just a couple of towels.

“Then why did you turn me away?”

This was probably the hardest question to answer. Why?

“Because I believe in the sanctity of marriage. I believe in keeping my vows. I believe in love everlasting, and in faith, and in what my heart tells me.” She clutched her arms and drew a shuddering breath. It became too much. Annie began to sob. Immediately Rion was before her, reaching for her, and offering her his embrace. She went into it without hesitation.

She felt no recriminations coming from him. No blame. But she could tell he remained hesitant and fearful. And very sad. Annie buried her face in the flannel shirt and tried to memorize every detail of him, believing their time together would soon be ending.

“Would you be willing to accept me as your husband?” he asked gently.

She gasped. Rion’s arms immediately drew her closer. “I can’t. Not until I find out about Foster.”

“What would you do if you found him? Or discovered where he was?”

“I would ask for an annulment. Or a divorce.” His shirt was warm against her cheek. It smelled faintly of the barn. She glanced up at him and weakly grinned. “You’ve been in the barn all this time, haven’t you?”

“I just came from there, yes. Earlier, though, I went out to the fields to exercise.”

“Exercise?”

“My wings. I have to keep them limber, for when I need them for flying.”

“Can you fly now?” she asked.

Rion nodded as he smiled at her. He drew the towel off her head. Her damp hair tumbled around her shoulders as he pressed a kiss to her crown and sniffed. "Your hair smells good."

"I still need a bath," Annie said. "Not to mention the cabin needs a good sweeping, and the sheets might need to be burned. I don't think that dried blood will come out."

Rion motioned toward the table where a box of goods lay on one of the chairs. "Is that what Mister Funderburke brought with him today?"

"It's enough to get us through the winter," she told him. She pulled away from him enough to look up into his face. "I want you to stay. At least until the next storm. I know you have to go back to your world. But until that happens, please stay, Rion. Stay with me. Here."

Rion lowered his head, closing his eyes. He appeared to be gathering his thoughts, finally looking back at her. "I have been thinking about that. That is why I went to stretch my wings. Flying frees my mind, so I can think clearly. If I have to leave and go elsewhere, and find somewhere else to stay until the next storm, I will not hesitate. All that keeps me here is you, Annie. Holding you in my arms and in my heart has brought me more joy than I can explain. Even when it has also brought me untold grief and trouble."

Annie stared at him in shock. *Grief and trouble?* "H-how?"

He shook his head. "I cannot stay here without you agreeing to one condition."

"Name it."

"Not yet. It is not that simple. You see, you have managed to create a major dilemma for me." He reached up with a hand to run his fingers through her drying hair, combing it slowly.

The sensation soothed her. "I want to stay with you, but not just through the winter. I want to stay through this winter. And the next winter. And the winter after that. And during that time I want to love you. I want to make love to you. I want to take you into the

skies and become one with you there. I want to awaken each morning with you beside me, and every evening know that you and I have made the day ours.”

Annie buried her face in his shirt, squeezing her arms around him tighter.

“Let me stay and be your husband, Annie. In all ways your husband. Let me be the husband you should have. That you were meant to have. That is my condition. I will not...I cannot stay otherwise.”

“What if Foster returns?”

“When he returns...if he returns...we will face it together. Until then...” Taking her by the arms, he pulled her away from him until he could look onto her face. “I need your answer.”

Lacing her arms around his neck, she guided his face downward so she could reach his lips. Could she replace Foster with this angel man who offered his heart? Could she accept him in her life and her bed without reservation? Without any qualms or pangs of conscience?

Ghostly voices in the back of her mind loomed, but their cries were quickly silenced. They hadn't spent three years in terrible solitude. They hadn't experienced her misery. They hadn't been given the second chance at happiness she was being offered now.

She drew down his face to kiss him. He responded hesitantly. Reaching for her towel, she untied it and let it drop.

Sometimes words were not needed.

Rion gathered her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed. Now his hands could touch her without reservation, and Annie responded to him willingly. All her demons had vanished. All her doubts were laid to rest. For the first time the little cabin out in the middle of nowhere was a refuge. A safe hideout. A sanctuary where they could love and live without interference or detection.

He quickly shed his clothes before climbing into the bed and kneeling over her. Annie gulped loudly as she stared at the golden

figure gazing down at her. At the wall of sculpted flesh, like a living statue. His wings were spread above his head, reminding her of a giant bird of prey getting ready to swoop down for the kill.

Her eyes followed the thin trail of corn silk hair down to the root of his erection jutting in the air, stiff and proud. She lifted a trembling hand to touch it, but paused an inch away, mesmerized by its appearance. Rion reached down, taking her hand and guiding her fingers around its thick girth. As her hand tried to close unsuccessfully around it, she saw him wince, and she watched as a river of gooseflesh crawled over his body.

“Does that hurt?” she whispered.

“No.” He groaned softly and swallowed. “No, it doesn’t.”

“What do I do now?”

His blue eyes snapped open, and Rion stared at her in confusion. “What do you mean?”

She could tell he wasn’t angry, which gave her enough confidence to reply. “I mean, what do you want me to do now?”

He still seemed confused by her question. “I want you to enjoy this.” Tilting his head to one side, Rion softly asked, “Annie, do you enjoy sex?”

Annie bit her lips and tried to find the right words to answer him. Praying he wouldn’t get angry. “Not yet.”

He leaned over her, supporting his weight with one heavily-muscled arm on the mattress. Annie let go of his erection and watched as his free hand slowly descended until the large, warm palm cupped her right breast.

“Do you like this?” he whispered.

His thumb twirled playfully around her nipple until it stretched toward his hand. She stared in disbelief as his fingers gently tweaked her. A primal shiver ran the length of her body, and she arched her neck at the pleasure she felt. Before she could answer, she heard him chuckle. “I guess you do.”

He ran his hand down her side, over her hip, and across a thigh. Gently skimming, barely grazing over her skin. Annie wriggled, aware of what he was doing. Acutely aware that he was setting small fires every place he touched.

“Has no man ever brought you to your climax?”

His voice was warm soda fizzing all over her. Tingling and tickling. Somehow she managed to respond. “You’re...only...my second man.”

She heard him descending a heartbeat before his warm body covered hers. His rock-hard chest brushed her aching nipples, making her cry out.

“He never pleased you before himself, did he?” a velvet voice breathed in her ear. Annie could only shake her head. This was all so strange and new to her, but her soul professed that this was the way it was supposed to be. This tenderness and sharing was what true physical love was all about. The physical love that came from real love. From honest to God in heaven love.

A kiss pressed along her temple. Against her cheek. At the corner of her mouth. Annie opened her lips, and Rion accepted her invitation.

Now when he pressed himself between her legs, she helped to guide him in, amazed by his gentleness. She clutched him, wanting more, wanting it to last, as the flash fires under her skin began heating her blood.

He moved slowly, pushing his thick erection deeper into her, not pausing or stopping until he was all the way inside. Several seconds passed as they remained that way, trapped by each other. Sensing the tiniest muscular reactions as their breathing grew faster.

“I promise you, my Annie. Your pleasure will come before mine.”

Not waiting for her to respond, Rion drew himself out as her body reacted. Annie clawed at him, wanting him back inside. A sudden searing plunge into her fragile channel, and she shrieked.

He kept moving inside her, pumping her, giving her body the chance to accept his invasion. Annie writhed beneath him, not knowing what was really happening to her, but fully trusting him and believing in his promise.

He was bringing them both closer and closer to their fulfillment. Annie felt tears running down her temples and into her hair, and she wondered when she had ever felt this happy. She glanced up to see him watching her and waiting for that moment when she succumbed to their passion.

She cried out when he increased his pace. She was soaring, even without flight. Unlike him, she had no need for wings—her soul already wore them.

Without warning, her body convulsed, sending her over the edge. Rion crushed her to him, wanting to meld into her, and together their breaths expelled in cries of release. The roar of flames consumed her, leaving her brittle and shaking. Sweat rolled off her body and his, but the peacefulness that oozed through her was a feeling she prayed would last forever.

Rion continued to move slower and slower until their bodies shuddered to a stop. He collapsed across her right arm and leg, but remained wrapped within her limbs. As he rolled to the side, she turned her hips to follow, until they lay facing each other, still joined as one. Annie placed little kisses across his face.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I love you.”

“I cannot...I cannot find all the words to express what I feel for you,” he managed to say in a low voice. Opening his eyes, he smiled into her soft expression. “Are you well?”

The question made her chuckle. “I will definitely need a bath now.”

“Allow me to bathe you?” He smiled.

She gave him a surprised look. "You would do that?"

"Why not? Give me the chance to look at every part of you in the light. I want to see how beautiful you are. But know this. You have been warned. I plan to learn every curve and secret you hold before morning."

Surprised, Annie glanced around the cabin to discover the sun had gone down. Where had the day gone?

A small fluttering deep inside her brought her back to look at the man lying against her. The fluttering was growing, filling her, bringing back a heat that was both familiar and devouring.

"Love me again," she said through gritted teeth. It was a request and a demand.

Rion clutched her backside and guided himself further into her. In this position he had full control, and Annie arched her back in ecstasy, exposing her breasts to his mouth. Eagerly he clamped his lips over the puckered tips and suckled hard and deep as he maneuvered her hips over him. Ramming himself through her tight heat until she nearly blacked out.

Dimly in the back of her mind she couldn't believe the sensations overtaking her, exploding over and inside her body. Foster had not done this with her. He had never made her feel this alive. It was almost as if he had kept that much a secret from her. Like a private little joke he shared with just himself.

The half-dozen times her husband had performed sex with her no longer counted. Tonight, in Rion's arms, against Rion's body, with Rion's massive erection pounding into her and filling her and drawing her further and further away from herself, she was a virgin. She was a virgin on her wedding night, with the man she loved with every ounce of her being.

Her second climax took her by surprise. She cried out, gasping for air, then laughed from sheer happiness. Rion returned her laughter with his own, drawing her down so he could kiss her lips before smothering her face and neck with more kisses.

They were panting and their bodies were slick with sweat. Rion lay on one wing; the other arched over them like a silken coverlet, protecting them from becoming chilled.

“I love you,” she whispered again. “I want to be your wife.”

Rion sighed. Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed her fingers. “Here it be known. I, Rion, Lord of the House of Thunder, take you, Annie, as my equal. My other soul. My wife. Despite all transgressions, without reservation, for the rest of my life.”

“Here it be known. I, Annie Prichard, take you, Rion, as my husband in all aspects. Through sickness and in health. For richer or poorer. For better or for worse. Until death do us part.” She raised her head, adding, “There was more to the vow but I forgot what it was.”

“What you said was perfect,” he assured her.

“Now this is the part where we’re supposed to exchange rings,” she told him. At the same time she held up her left hand to see the tiny gold band Foster had placed there. The symbol no longer meant anything to her, and she tugged on it until it came off. Throwing the ring over by the fireplace gave her a sense of relief.

“Why rings?” Rion asked.

“To show you’re married. You don’t exchange rings where you’re from?”

He shook his head. “Once we announce ourselves, there is no need to parade anything about to remind others.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “Would you like for me to get you a ring?”

“No. I want you to do for me what you would do on your world. So, what do you do after you announce yourself?”

“Umm... then we go away to create a life together.”

“Like a honeymoon?”

“Honeymoon?”

“Yeah. Just you and me. Alone. With nobody around to bother us.”

Lord of Thunder

“Are we not doing just that right now?” Rion smiled.

Annie smiled back. “Oh, yeah. We are.”

“Your turn. Rings. Then what?”

“Then...umm...we kiss to seal our vows, and we go off together to create a life together.”

He bent down to kiss her, tenderly and fully. Annie realized his mouth was capable of many things.

“Now, how about that bath?” he breathed against her mouth.

“Then will you make love to me again?” she asked.

“All night long, if you wish,” he promised.

“I’m holding you to that promise,” Annie told him. A second later she shrieked with glee as he pulled her off the bed, tumbling among the sheet and quilt, onto the floor.

The night was only beginning.

Chapter 13

The Winter

“Annie, wake up.”

The bed was a warm cocoon, too comfortable to leave. Besides, she was still tired. Her body was deliciously sore from their lovemaking throughout the night. Murmuring a little protest, Annie curled her naked body closer to his, only to find the indentation in the bed empty. Opening her eyes, she spied Rion standing by the window, looking out at a soft peach-colored morning.

“What?”

“We might have a problem.”

“What? Rion, come back to bed and keep me warm. It’s too cold to get up.”

He padded back over to the bed and crawled in under the covers. “There is a mountain of snow outside. An enormous amount!”

She sighed, resting her head on his shoulder. “It does that. I heard that a few years ago the drifts were up to the roofs.”

“How do you take care of the animals when it is that much?”

“I gave them plenty of food yesterday. They’ll be all right for another day or so.”

“What if it snows again?”

“Then I’ll get out the snowshoes and hike over there. Quit being such a worrywart.” She kissed his collar bone and snuggled close to him. Rion leaned over to kiss her forehead.

It was mid-December, and until then the snows had been limited to less than a foot every two to three days, giving the sun

enough time to melt much of the excess before the next line of gray clouds moved in to dump more.

Rion had taken over as many of the outside chores as he could. More often than not that included chopping firewood and stacking it along the south side of the cabin. However, it wasn't unusual for Annie to go outside, curious as to why she no longer could hear the familiar sound of ax hitting wood, to find him soaring above her, gliding over the tops of the trees, his enormous wings beating against the blue Montana sky, until he looked like a miniature golden sun.

A golden sun in red flannel. She'd smiled. Her golden sun. Her husband.

He stayed north and west of the cabin, avoiding the areas where anyone might see him. Sometimes Annie felt she could sit and watch him fly like that forever. Sometimes, she did. Behind the cabin, the dead tree stump she used as a chopping block was the perfect seat for her to rest on, allowing her to follow him as he dipped and tumbled like one of those circus performers she'd seen as a child back in Ohio. Several times her breath caught in her throat when he appeared to have lost control and was falling head-first to the ground. At the last second he'd flip over to land on his feet, knees bent, wings fully extended, and a sheepish grin on his face.

He did it deliberately, just to scare her. Annie wondered if he'd tried that same stunt on his mother when he was growing up.

In the evenings, while Rion read from one of the several books she'd brought with her to Dry Lick, she liked to sit before the fire and work on her sewing. Horace Funderburke had come by twice more to check on her. The second time he'd brought her a basket of fabric scraps from Elly's work. Missus Funderburke was an expert seamstress. And while Annie was not as adept at making shirts or pants or dresses, she found she loved solving imaginary puzzles with the material—matching and blending and piecing together

odd colors and patterns to make quilts and coverlets. Or, in this case, another shirt, a pair of pants, and a coat for Rion.

The bloodstained sheet had been impossible to clean. Although she couldn't bear the thought of putting it back on the bed, Annie couldn't see throwing away a perfectly serviceable length of material either. So the sheet went to the barn where it was nailed up to serve as a wind breaker against the north wall. Until she was able to piece together a coverlet for the mattress, she used the top sheet for the bottom.

Then there was the mattress. That had been another problem, but one quickly solved. Rion had stared down at the stain then he smiled at her. Reaching down, he grabbed the heavy down-filled mattress, lifted it up on end, and flipped it over so the stain was facing the floor. As they'd suspected, the other side was pristine. For Annie, the turning became symbolic of her new life with him. The bloodstained side of the mattress was the side she and Foster had slept on. It was a side she no longer cared to look at, and no longer wished to think about.

Now the morning was dawning cold and heavily laden with at least thirty inches of fresh powder. A large, warm hand slowly crept between her legs. Finding her mound, he cupped his palm over her. "Sore?" he murmured along her neck. He liked to nibble on her, and she found she rather enjoyed it.

"A little."

A finger slipped between her folds, finding the reddened nub. Very gently, very lightly, the finger began to stroke her. Teasing. Arousing her. Annie shifted her hips and spread her thighs.

"Not interested?" Rion whispered with a touch of humor.

She couldn't see his face, but she could definitely read his mind. "Interested in what?" She innocently tried to make it sound as if she had no idea where this conversation was headed. He snorted in disbelief. Guess he could read her mind, as well.

“I offer you three options.” Raising his face to look into hers, Rion grinned mischievously. It was so boyishly appealing Annie couldn’t help but smile back.

“Three options? Like three wishes? Hmm... that sounds interesting. What are they?”

The hand between her legs paused. A second later she felt one finger slip deep inside her.

“First option, that we make love the way we did the last time, with you on top.”

Annie giggled. The finger definitely knew what it was doing, and option one was very tempting. “Maybe. What’s number two?”

A second finger joined the first, moving in tandem. Annie could feel herself growing wetter. She licked her lips.

“Second option is I show you how to make long, slow love that can last as long as you want it to.”

As long as she wanted it to? Oh, dear God, did he mean for hours?

“And what’s my third choice?”

Just as she expected, Rion slipped a third finger within her. Annie never had to chance to make her decision. Melting under his touch, she wrapped her arms around his neck as Rion climbed on top of her.

He made slow, tender love to her without the thunderous rush. No climax, no explosive ending—just the movements and intimacy which made her tingle inside, warmed her, stretched her muscles and awakened her senses.

She’d lost count of how many times they had coupled, and all of them had been spontaneous. That fact alone surprised her, not to mention how many times she’d been caught unaware of his need for her, or hers for him. Take yesterday...

* * * *

The early afternoon breeze felt good. Annie had spent the last couple of hours in the woods, seeking and dragging dead tree limbs

back to the cabin for him to chop into firewood. Emerging from the undergrowth, she stopped to watch him from a distance. He'd removed his shirt, and the sunlight painted him an almost unearthly milky white, making his wings and his hair glow.

His pants were snug and outlined his thighs and buttocks. She often wondered how he'd gotten that body. What kind of exercise regime he pursued so that he looked like he could tangle with a wildcat and come out the winner without a scratch on him.

As he hefted the ax, his muscles rippled under his skin, and the sight sent a powerful bolt of lust pulsing through her. The intensity and wetness of her desire stunned her, leaving Annie to wonder how she could tell him she wanted him. This instant. Immediately. Now. Wanted him to love her hard and furiously and repeatedly.

It was as if he read her mind. Turning around, Rion saw her staring at him with her raw hunger plainly evident on her face and in her eyes. He lowered the ax and held out his arms. Annie dropped the limbs and ran to him, unable to wait a moment longer to feel him inside her.

To her astonishment, he turned her around and bent her over the tree stump, unbuckling her belt and unbuttoning her pants with shaking hands, then pulling them down around her ankles. She heard him panting behind her. A second later he was entering her, smoothly, carefully, and with extreme tenderness. She lowered her face to the stump and raised her hips. Her hunger was insatiable. Rion responded in kind.

Holding her hips he bore into her, pounding and filling her with his every inch. The wet, slapping sound of her butt cheeks hitting his groin was unusually loud, punctuated by their combined grunts as he increased his speed.

It was as though her appetite had poured into him, and he needed to assuage both their needs. He continued to ram himself into her, until they were both covered in a fine sheen of sweat. And

when that miraculous moment came, and he stopped to grind himself inside her, it was enough for now. Just for now.

Afterwards, Rion dropped, exhausted and breathing heavily, on top of her. He was pungent with sweat and his own unique musky scent. If she had the strength, she would have licked the salty moisture off his chest. Especially around his nipples where she'd discovered he was very sensitive.

Slowly he reached around to turn her over and kiss her. "Why was I like that?" she whispered. "What have you done to me? I... I felt like I was aching for you to love me. It was almost like some strange rutting desire. Like we were no better than animals."

"Hush, my Annie. Deep down we are still animals, and sometimes our needs overcome us. Your body is finally awakening to what you were born to do, to make and receive love. You are just now finding out how hungry you have been, how deprived you have been."

He kissed her again then helped her redress. She went back to finding firewood, and no more was said of the incident. Yet her body continued to tingle, her breasts straining taut against the rough fabric of her flannel shirt where the material brushed and teased their tips.

She could never get enough of him. It made the future both exciting and full of forthcoming despair.

* * * *

Rion got up from their bed again, this time for a while. He always seemed to gain strength every time they made love. Like gasoline for an engine, or firewood to a flame. Sighing loudly, Annie crawled out of bed and reached for the washbasin and rag before she grabbed some clean clothes from the trunk. Rion, already dressed, pulled open the door to find a wall of white covering half the doorway. Like a child, he pushed at the snow, making handprints against the packing. Annie smiled at his obvious enchantment.

“Does it do this often?”

“After a while you start to get aggravated at it. Just you wait,” she told him. Cursing the cold water, she realized she should have warmed it over the fire first before trying to freshen up. *Too late now.* She grinned again.

He proceeded to clear the way as she began breakfast. The foodstuffs Horace continued to bring them was more than enough, although she suffered from guilty pangs whenever she thought about her debt to the old man and his wife.

Sometimes she felt she was living on love. She and Rion seemed to have little appetite for anything outside of each other. Instead of scheduling their days around three meals, now she cooked only when they felt hungry. As a result their stores were more than adequate.

It was midmorning when Rion managed to get enough of the snow shoveled away to give them a path from the cabin to the barn. When he brought back a pail of steaming milk and six eggs, she kissed his red nose.

“Come inside before you freeze to death.”

“Warm me up?” he half-teased.

“Put them icy cold fingers on me and I’ll slap you so hard you’ll end up halfway between here and Hoonas.” She laughed.

She took the milk and eggs from him so he could fetch another couple armloads of wood for the fire. It was several minutes later that she realized he hadn’t returned from the trip just around the corner of the cabin. Her first thought was that he’d taken the chance to stretch his wings, having been cooped up so long inside. Laughing, she grabbed her jacket and gloves, and opened the door to go out and watch him.

Horace Funderburke stood less than twenty feet away. The expression on his face made her stomach turn over.

She knew Rion was standing somewhere around the corner of the cabin where she couldn’t see him. He was out of sight from

her, but in plain view of the old farmer. It took her a second to figure out what had happened. Funderburke had trudged up the lane on his snowshoes to check on her, bless the man's heart. His coming had been as silent as the snowfall the night before. They had not expected him to brave the deep drifts, nor had they seen or heard him coming.

"Mister Funderburke," Annie said.

The old man turned toward her, but he was unable to keep his eyes from taking in what must have been an awesome and frightening sight.

"Missus Mayall."

"Won't you come inside?" She stood aside, gesturing for him to come in. Horace raised a hand to point. "It's all right, Mister Funderburke. Please...it's cold out."

"Please, Mister Funderburke. No need to catch your death." It was Rion's voice. Hearing him repeat an old saw she frequently used at first touched her. Then she realized it was Rion's way of making himself seem more human and less ethereal to the man.

It also helped to break the spell. Horace turned to look at Annie, nodded, and bent down to remove his gear. He stepped into the cabin, tucking his gloves into his pockets, and allowed Annie to take his coat. He then walked over to the fireplace to stretch out his hands, keeping his eyes on the angel man who followed him inside.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee, Mister Funderburke?" Annie asked. Not waiting for a reply, she went ahead and poured him a cup, handed it to him, then poured one for Rion. They only had the two mugs; she never thought she would need more.

Shrugging off his jacket, Rion took the cup, giving her a smile in thanks. Horace turned to Annie.

"We was worried about you, me and Elly. That's why I came up here. But I see... Care to tell me what's going on?"

It was Rion who stepped forward. "My name is Rion," he told the old farmer. "Several weeks ago I fell during a thunderstorm and injured myself."

"Several weeks ago?" Horace echoed.

Rion pulled up his shirt to show the silver dollar-size puckered scar. "Annie found me and nursed me back to health."

"Then why didn't you go home?" the old man asked.

"Because I live in a world that is accessible only when it storms. I know that is hard to understand. It is harder for me to try and explain it. But until the next storm comes, I am stuck here."

"It needs to be a storm with thunder and lightning," Annie said. "We won't get any more of those until the spring thaw."

Horace gestured toward Rion's wings which rose behind him almost as tall and as wide as the cabin itself. "You're an angel, ain't cha?"

"My people have been called that."

"Your people? There's more of you?"

"A whole world full, Mister Funderburke," Rion admitted with a small smile.

Diverting his attention to Annie, Horace asked, "Are you all right here with him? I mean, he isn't...you know..." Another thought suddenly dawned on him, and the old farmer's face turned red. "And you a married woman? Living up here alone with a strange man? Mister Rion, or whatever you call yourself, if you have besmirched this lady's character or shown any improprieties toward—"

Annie placed a hand on the farmer's arm, drawing his attention to herself and his ire away from Rion. "Please. Sit down. I want to tell you something."

Horace obliged, sitting heavily on the chair she provided. Rion settled in the opposite chair, flipping the back around to the front and straddling the seat to keep his wings unrestricted.

“Mister Funderburke, more than three years ago my husband brought me here. Within a couple of months he left me to go seek his fortune in the silver mines. You know that.”

The old man nodded, but his gaze never wavered from the angel man.

“*Three years ago.* I haven’t gotten a letter or a message down at the general store that there had been a telephone call for me, or nothing to let me know how he’s doing. Nothing to tell me where he is, or if he’s even alive. Three years.” She spoke the words slowly, emphasizing each one. Any moment now she knew she would begin crying again, not because of her husband’s desertion, but because she no longer wanted to think about it. Or about Foster. Since Rion had taken her into his heart, she rarely if ever thought of the man who’d brought her to Montana.

“You’ve given up on him,” Horace intoned. Annie nodded. The old farmer sighed. “We knew you was unhappy here. We knew you were suffering. Made us madder than hell to think about what your husband had done to you, and you not being from here and not knowing how to survive out in the middle of nowhere in a place like this. Like that time you borrowed my scythe. It almost broke Elly’s heart to see you out there doing a man’s labor. But I told her it was none of our business to interfere. Didn’t stop us from worrying, though.”

He finally broke his gaze away to look at her. “When you hurt yourself and couldn’t go into town, did he do it?” He motioned with his head at Rion.

“No. Rion has never hurt me. It was my own fault. I was chopping wood and wasn’t paying enough attention. It was an accident. In fact, Rion was the one who saved my life. I would have bled to death if he hadn’t taken care of me.”

“You saved her?” Horace asked the angel man. Rion nodded. “Thank you. And you, Missus Mayall, you’re all right now?”

"I would prefer if you didn't call me that anymore," Annie admitted somewhat shyly. "I no longer consider Mister Mayall a part of my life. I...no longer consider him to be my husband."

"Don't tell me you've taken the angel man to be your husband," Horace asked. "Forgive my bluntness, Missus...Annie."

Annie had never been a good liar. Horace Funderburke's question had hit the target dead-on. Her answer was the deep red coloring that stained her whole face. Horace glanced from her to Rion and back.

"Well, I can tell you're happy. These last couple of times I've come up here, there was something about you I couldn't figure out. Elly was the one who guessed you had another man in your life, but I just couldn't agree with her. But now that I look at you, I can't help but admit you're glowing. And smiling. There's a calmness about you that makes you just plumb beautiful, you know that?" He turned to Rion. "You love her?"

Again, Rion nodded. "With every breath, every passing hour."

"When you go back to where you came from, you're taking her with you?"

A dark cloud passed over Rion's face. "Eventually I will."

"Eventually?" Horace got to his feet. "What the hell blazes do you mean by eventually? Good God in heaven, do you understand what this poor woman has had to endure with her husband abandoning her like he did? And you sitting there giving me the impression you're going to do the same thing?"

"The storms in the spring are frequent. I will not be gone any longer than a few days, a couple of weeks, at the most," Rion told him. "But I must go back first to let my people know what I have done and what I intend to do. Then I will come back to take her with me."

There. It was finally out in the open between them. She knew eventually Rion would have to leave her, and she prayed he would come back for her as he promised. He just hadn't spelled it out so

clearly until now. Annie watched Rion's and the farmer's faces with anticipation. To her surprise, Horace slowly sat back down and finished his coffee in two gulps. He then turned to her. "Do you love him?"

The question brought tears to her eyes. Not trusting her voice, she nodded.

"It's good between you? I mean, is he a good man? A hard worker? Trustworthy?"

This time she did speak. "Yes. He's all that. He's become...everything to me." She looked up to see Rion watching her. There was no questioning his love for her in his Montana sky blue eyes. Although Rion rarely expressed his love verbally, everything he did, every gesture and every look silently proved how deeply he cared for her.

"Well, that's good enough for me, then." Horace swatted his knee for emphasis and stood. "I best be going before Elly starts to worry. One thing, though, angel man. Before you leave, you better tell us, understand? It's going to be rougher on her this time, and she's going to need someone who knows your secret to help her get by until you get back, you hear me?"

"I hear you."

He hesitated for a second then stuck out his hand toward Rion. Rion took the hand and shook it. Horace Funderburke was the kind of man who judged another by his handshake. It was clear on the old farmer's face he approved of this one.

"I'd kind of like for the missus to see you up in the air, angel man. I was out hunting two days ago and caught a glimpse of you. Thought at first you were a giant hawk or something until that red flannel shirt caught my eye. That's what made me suspicious. That, and Missus Annie's behavior these past couple of times I come up here. Follow me outside for a bit. I want to say a few more things to you while I lace up my snowshoes."

Rion grabbed both their coats, shot Annie a glance that clearly showed he was curious as to what the old man had left to say, and followed Funderburke outside. Annie went over to the window to watch.

Horace seemed to be explaining something to Rion, who nodded several times but didn't respond back. Once he was finished, the old farmer straightened up and clapped a hand on the angel man's shoulder. A few more words, another handshake, and Horace began his trek back to his own cabin down the road. Instead of coming back inside, however, Rion disappeared around to the south side of the cabin. Annie walked back to the fire to stoke it. A short while later her new husband returned with an armload of wood.

"What did he say to you?"

"That he would keep our secret and not to fear. He thinks of you as a daughter, and he still harbors a great amount of anger toward your other husband. Annie, what does 'shirking his responsibilities to his country' mean?"

The comment rankled. "I have no other husband," she reminded him curtly. "I've put that part of my life behind me. All that matters now is you. You are my present and my future. You and only you. And as for his responsibilities, Horace is probably right. Our country is at war right now with another country. If Foster is still alive, he's probably gone into hiding so he won't be called into service."

"Into service? To join your country's army to help defend it?" Rion shook his head. "On my world, every man would not hesitate to defend his homeland, especially the lives of his family."

Annie turned around and bent down to retrieve the coffee pot to clean it when a pair of icy cold hands reached under her shirt and encircled her waist. She shrieked upon contact, breaking into giggles. "Rion! Ohhh, you're going to pay for that!" she cried, swinging the dishtowel she was using as a hot pad at him.

Rion ducked, chuckling, and pulled her down on top of him. Seconds later they were wrestling on the floor, laughing and gasping for air. Annie ended up on top of him, straddling his waist and pinning his arms to his side with her thighs.

“Say ‘uncle’.”

“Why?”

She leaned over him, grasping his upper scapulars to keep his wings flat on the floor. The tips of her breasts dipped perilously close to his face. “Say ‘uncle’.”

“I will do no such thing.” Instead, he began to rotate his thumbs which were trapped near her feet. The movement tickled despite the two pairs of socks she wore.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” She tried to move her feet out of reach. Unfortunately it gave him just enough leeway to pull his arms out from under her thighs. But instead of using his new freedom to reverse their positions, Rion reached up between her legs and began to rub his hands at their juncture. Annie melted. Her heat and wetness were betraying her, but what a sweet betrayal.

He began to use his thumbs, pressing into her then rubbing. Press and rub, press and rub, simulating lovemaking. She could feel her body turning rubbery. Beneath her hands his wings felt like satin. She groaned softly from his ministrations.

Rion leaned upward to capture her breasts with his mouth. His tongue began to tease her nipples through her shirt as his thumbs increased their urgency. Press and rub, press and rub. She gasped his name. She wouldn’t be able to take much more of his foreplay, but she was curious to know what else he would do to her.

She was dimly aware of him undoing her belt and buttons. His mouth was performing incredible things to her breasts. Unable to take any more, Annie released his wings to unbutton her shirt and begged him to take her breasts bare. Rion eagerly accepted her offer.

His hips lifted as he dragged his pants off himself. She felt his hands on her waist; she leaned over to let him pull her pants off also. With both of them naked from the waist down, Rion guided her over him until his thick length pierced her. Moaning, Annie continued to slide down his length until she had fully sheathed him. She shuddered.

“Am I hurting you?” he whispered, his voice thick with desire.

She managed to shake her head. She pulled off the bit of cotton she used to tie her hair back, letting the black tresses fall to where they lay teasingly atop her breasts. She heard Rion gasp.

“You are too beautiful for words.”

“Hush and make love to me,” she whispered with her eyes tightly closed.

Clasping her thighs, he proceeded to do just that. He showed her how to use her knees to lift herself, then bring herself down, keeping the stroke and the pace nice and slow...or increasing it. Annie let her most primal instincts take over. Rion released her thighs, freeing his hands to bring her pleasure in other ways.

She pumped him, gradually making the stroke longer and harder. Rion played with her breasts with one hand, while he used his other thumb to return to the small nub of passion between her legs. Press and rub, press and rub.

Their build-up grew like an overflowing stream. Only this time the water was gushing to the point of flooding.

Annie threw back her head and screamed her climax. Her body shuddered, coming to a sudden halt. Rion grasped her hips and continued to pump her, banging her with ferocity against him, over him, engulfing him, until his own release came. The intensity of him continuing their fusing caused her climax to continue. Every nerve sparked white hot. Every inch of skin contracted, inflamed. Annie cried out again as all thought was erased from her mind. All except for the exquisite torture which permeated her body. She

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was a mindless inferno of satiated lust. Sweaty and gasping for air, she fell across her lover as her muscles quivered in the aftermath.

Minutes passed. Neither of them spoke or moved from the delicious torment. She could feel him breathing beneath her arm that lay across his chest. His heart was still beating wildly.

The fire in the fireplace crackled. A log snapped and hissed. The world outside was quiet.

Annie closed her eyes and slept.

Chapter 14

The Truth

“Rion?”

He sleepily rolled over and peeked out from beneath heavy lids. “What?”

The fire in the fireplace still sent out a faint light. In the near darkness, Annie could see her shadow in his eyes. Tenderly she laid a kiss on the edge of his mouth.

Odd, but she wasn’t sleepy. Of course, she had gone to bed before him and had been too sound asleep to know when he had finally come to join her.

Since the head of the bed was against the same wall as their only window, she couldn’t easily look out to see if the moon was up or not, or if any snow was falling. Not that it mattered anyway. She was warm and happier than she could ever imagine.

“What?” her husband repeated.

She shook her head, her black hair falling over her shoulder to cover her bared breast. She never wore bedclothes anymore. She didn’t need to. Rion’s body was like a small furnace, generating enough heat for them both. Besides, nightgowns got in the way of any spontaneous foreplay.

“Nothing. I couldn’t sleep. So I’ve been thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” He yawned as he reached over to bring his arm about her waist, drawing her closer. The hairs on his arms tickled when they lightly brushed her skin.

“About some things you’ve said to me. Things you still haven’t explained.”

“Like what?” he drowsily murmured, and promptly buried his face in the valley between her breasts.

Annie smiled. She let her fingers flow through his hair, brushing back the slightly shorter tuft which had grown out of the wound he’d received that night she’d first found him. The scab had long ago fallen away to become a patch of fresh pink skin. She bent down and kissed his temple, too.

Rion began to nuzzle her breasts. When his mouth closed over one rose-colored nipple, he began to suckle it. Immediately Annie felt her blood racing in response.

“Rion.”

Instead of answering, he pressed her closer to his own body. Already Annie could feel his penis growing and stiffening between her legs.

“I want to talk, and you know I can’t resist you when you do this to me,” she protested feebly.

“Very well. I will compromise. You can ask me whatever is uppermost on your mind, and I will answer you.” He gave her a playful grin, then gently teathed her nipple. Annie gasped from the jolt of desire that raced through her.

“What must I do to win this compromise?” she breathed.

“Ask me while I make deep love to you.”

“I can’t do that. I won’t be able to concentrate on what I’m asking.”

“Very well. No loving, no questions.” He made a show of releasing her and rolling back over onto his other side, facing away from her. But she knew as well as he did that once he had aroused her, she would not leave him alone until he had satisfied her. Which could take hours.

“Rion!” She swatted his shoulder, then shook it. Well, two could play this game, so she slowly began to rub her breasts along the back of his arm and side. She teased him with the tips of her nipples, lightly tracing rings over his skin with their pebbly tips.

She placed tiny kisses over his waist, interspersed with the use of her tongue, until she noticed goose bumps rising on the back of his neck. Reaching over his hip, she grasped his swollen erection to start stroking it the way he had taught her.

Without warning, Rion rolled over with a growl. "Uncle!"

Annie burst out laughing as he playfully assaulted her with his own hands and mouth. They tussled a bit, alternating between bouts of wrestling and tickling. Finally tired of it, Rion grabbed her wrists and pressed them over her head into the covers.

He kissed her and forced her legs apart with his. He then entered her with one deep, long, slow thrust. Annie climaxed immediately.

"No fair. My turn," he whispered, nose to nose.

"Go ahead," she challenged him. "Make me come again."

Rion proved he took her challenge seriously.

Much later, as they lay spent and satiated, Rion gathered her against him, laying her head on his shoulder. "What did you want to ask me?" he reminded her, adding a kiss to her forehead.

"Hmm?"

"You had some questions you needed answering?"

"Oh, yeah." She took a deep breath and readjusted her position. One leg draped across his thigh, brushing along his sagging member. An arm encircled his chest. Breasts pressed firmly against his side. She was comfortable, but she knew eventually his body would start to react to hers. She grinned at the thought.

"When we spoke our vows to each other, you called yourself the Lord of the House of Thunder. What does that mean?"

"It is who I am."

"That still doesn't explain what you meant. What house? What does it have to do with thunder?" She moved her leg a tiny fraction. She was rewarded with a tightening in his groin.

"Have mercy on me, Annie. Let me explain. On my world, every person is born into a house. A calling, you could say."

“Like, say, if a carpenter has a child, that child would be expected to become a carpenter as well?” she offered.

He nodded. “You understand perfectly. Well, I was born in the House of Thunder. My father, his father, and his father before him were all warriors.”

“There you go again. What does thunder have to do with warriors? Warriors fight wars. They don’t have nothing to do with the weather.”

“On my world, it has everything to do with the weather. A warrior is what we call one of our own who takes the missions to travel through the gaps in the storms into your world.”

Annie looked up at him. “You’re a warrior?”

“Why do you sound surprised?”

“Where’s your sword or weapon or whatever?”

“They cannot pass through the gaps. Metal attracts the lightning. Anything outside of our bodies will not pass without great difficulty. Even the clothing we wear must withstand the ordeal.”

Suddenly, everything was becoming very clear to her. Everything he had told her, how he had to go back and find...find...

“What?” She sat up on one arm and shook him. “What did you say you had to find out before you could take me back to your world?”

“There are precautions I must learn about before I come back for you. Otherwise, there could be disastrous consequences.”

“You mean one of us could die during the trip?”

Rion lifted himself up on his elbows. Reaching out to her, he cupped her chin in one strong hand. “You will not die. I will not die. I promise you.”

Annie searched his face. Moonlight broke through the clouds to shine into their cabin, yet it was hard to read his eyes. Nevertheless, she believed him.

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“If you’re a warrior, and you can’t carry a weapon, how do you fight? What do you defend yourself with?”

“My intensive training has taught me how to use my hands to fight. How to make a weapon with what I find around me.”

Subconsciously, Annie ran a hand up his heavily-muscled arm. No wonder his hands bore none of the callouses associated with heavy manual labor. At least, not then, not when she’d initially found him. This past month, though, had changed that.

With every word he spoke, more pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place.

“Then where does the Lord part come in?”

This time she watched him throw his head back onto his pillow and sigh loudly. “I am the first son. Therefore it is my destiny to become a warrior.”

“First son? You have a brother?”

He nodded. “Vadon.”

“He’s not a Lord?”

“Only the first son is allowed the honor, and only after the father has relinquished it to him.”

“So your father gave you the honor? When?”

“When he died.”

The blunt statement stunned her. Several seconds went by as she thought about it. “I’m so sorry. Is your mother still alive?”

“No. She died when I was young.”

“How did she die?”

“Perrin’s disease. Do not worry that you might catch it. It affects the wings first.”

“When...when your father died, then, he was the warrior for your house?”

“Yes.”

“But it wasn’t until he died and gave you the name that you could go on these missions into our world.”

“Yes.”

“How many missions did he go on?”

Rion shook his head slowly. “Many. Perhaps a hundred. Maybe more.”

“Did he die because of a mission?”

“Someone on your world shot him with a gun. He died soon after he crossed back over.”

She stroked his face tenderly, brushing the amber hair away from his face. She was not surprised when a warm wetness met her hand.

“That’s why you’ve only come to my world six times. You’re just beginning to fulfill your duties as the new Lord. Your brother, Vadon, since he’s not the firstborn, he isn’t a warrior, is he?”

“No, and he can never be. But because he is of the House of Thunder, he is a messenger of the first order.”

“Now you’re trying to confuse me again,” she accused him gently.

Rion chuckled and sniffed. “Those who are not firstborn are allowed positions equal to their houses. A messenger is one who escorts a warrior to and from the gaps. In many cases, when a warrior re-enters injured or in need of help, the messengers are their first line of aid and defense. Otherwise, they are the ones who transport the warriors to the council and relay the news of their return to their families.”

“Will Vadon meet you when you go back?”

“If it is his time to be on duty, yes. If it is not his time to be working when I return, the council will alert him.”

Annie slid back down into the covers. “I’m sorry I brought back so many unhappy memories. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. You needed to know. Vadon will rejoice in my finding you.”

“You think so? He won’t find me...you know...not normal?”

She was taken aback when Rion sat up without warning and leaned over to look at her. "Do you remember when I was healing you what I told you?" he asked her.

She thought back. "Something about you had fled your world. And that you didn't care anymore if you lived or died."

"That is true. I had, and I truly felt that way."

"Why?"

"My father and I, despite his frequent missions, were very close. His death tore me apart. I took to my missions with a single-mindedness to prove to him I was worthy to fill his shadow."

"What was his name?" she whispered.

"Dramon."

"Go on."

"I went on four missions. Four missions where I learned little and could relate even less once I returned. It was on my fifth mission that I was stranded."

"In Moem."

"Vincete saw my grief that I continued to wear like a cloak. He tried to tell me I was every bit as worthy as my father, perhaps more so."

"Why would you think you weren't worthy? You'd only gone on five missions! He'd been on twenty times as many."

Rion looked downward and shook his head. "I guess I never believed I could do as much or as well as he had. You will understand more when I take you back. You will see the plaque erected in his name."

Annie leaned up to kiss him. "Sounds to me like your father left a legacy that was too great to bear."

"More than that, Annie, I was lonely. I had no one to share my life with. Women shunned me."

"Shunned you?"

"The wife of a warrior must be equally strong, equally brave, equally determined. Yes, there were a few whom I thought I loved,

but in the end they all left. That left my work, where the best I could hope for was to take the most dangerous, the most feared missions, and hope that somehow, someway I could redeem myself in the eyes of the spirit of my father.”

“Your brother doesn’t live with you?”

“Not since I became a warrior. He has his own home. I live where my parents lived.”

“Why...why couldn’t you find someone to share your life with? I’m sure the women on your world are beautiful. With wings! They have wings and can fly like you can!”

Rion drew her against him, kissing her long and slow. “Because I have discovered my destiny was to find you on this world. You see, this place, with its storms so powerful they can shred the skin off your bones, this is one of the most dangerous missions a warrior can take. I took that challenge. I took that chance. And see where it got me? It got me you.”

“Are you still angry? Are you still wanting to take the most dangerous missions?”

“I am not the man I was when I left this last time,” he admitted. “Until my landing here, I was an entirely different person. Sul- len. Brash. Ill-tempered. Very headstrong.”

“You’re still headstrong,” she told him laughingly.

“Enough interruptions! Do it again, and I will punish you for your insubordination!” He growled playfully.

Annie screamed with laughter as his hands found her most ticklish spots and waged war. “Uncle! Uncle!”

The tickling immediately ceased. Rion rolled over, kissing her shoulder. “Are there any more questions before I fall asleep out of total exhaustion?”

“Just one. Do your people speak English? Or did you have to learn it? Or what? I seriously doubt a man with the name of ‘Vin- chen-tay’ spoke English.”

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“That is three questions, not one,” he teased. “But the answers are yes, we speak this language where I am from, but it is not universal. Our native language died out long ago. We have trained ourselves to be fluent in almost every tongue our missions have encountered. When you come back with me, you will hear hundreds of languages spoken, but we all speak this one. No, Vincente did not speak...English. Now can we get some rest?”

“I’m not that sleepy,” she admitted.

“What will you need to help you get to sleep? Some warm milk?”

Grinning wickedly, she reached down amid the bedclothes to entice him. And, of course, one thing led to another.

It was a wonder they got any rest at all.

Chapter 15

The Hope

“Don’t stand there gawking all day. Haul that cute ass out here and give me a hand with this fencepost, would you, please?”

Chuckling, Rion pulled on the doeskin gloves Annie had finished for him last night and closed the cabin door behind him. They were a perfect fit, but he knew they would be. Annie was meticulous about everything she did.

As he strode past the drifts of snow still dotting the ground, he eyed the sky for any sign of gathering clouds. Winter was almost over. Already bits and pieces of bright color dotted the surrounding fields and mountainsides.

Today Annie had gotten it into her head to fix the small corral adjacent to the barn. The animals needed a place where they could freely graze, she explained to him. If Murphy and the cow were released into the corral, she wouldn’t have to worry about the animals wandering away from the farm.

“Rion!”

“Change that tone of voice, woman, or else you will find yourself completely at my mercy,” he threatened her, grinning.

Annie made a rude sound with her tongue and showed him which side of the railing to pick up. He hefted his end, and together they quickly slid the log into place. Annie perched herself on a bare spot on the ground and began to nail the railing to the post to sturdy it.

Rion stood to the side, watching her. As it always did, his heart pounded a bit faster whenever he looked at her. She was incredible. And intelligent. Passionate. Inquisitive. Fun.

How much more ironic could things become? Just when he had reached a point in his life where he was about to throw away everything, even risking death, she appeared to save him from making that mistake.

At first he had refused to believe it. Fate was not a kind mistress. And the heavens knew his life had never held much joy. Or hope.

But there she was, beating at a nail that refused to go in straight, and cursing it as if it could hear her.

“Here, let me have that,” he said, taking the hammer from her to finish the job. “Give me the nails. I will finish this side.”

Annie didn’t argue with him. She handed over the little can of nails and got to her feet dusting off the back of her pants.

He was acutely aware of her watching him as he secured the post, but he suspected she wasn’t so much paying attention to what he was doing as what she was thinking.

“Got your feathers raised?” he inquired.

“Huh? Got my what?”

He turned to grin at her. “You were thinking of something. On my world when we notice that look like you have on your face, we ask if the person has their feathers raised.”

She snorted. Coming from her, it was appealing. “Here we say, ‘Penny for your thoughts.’”

A full minute went by without her continuing. Rion stood and checked the post to make sure it was sturdy. When he turned back around, he could tell she was deeply disturbed by something. His happiness disappeared behind the wall where he had kept it shielded for so long.

“Annie, tell me what is troubling you.”

Green eyes lifted for him to see the tears limning her bottom lashes. Her chin trembled slightly. "How?"

"How what?" Rion lowered his voice and hoped she didn't detect his worry.

"How can you take me back...to where you're from? I'm not like you. I can't fly."

Slowly he pulled off his gloves and stuffed them into the coat's pockets. They hadn't touched upon the subject of his leaving very much. They hadn't broached the possibility, nor discussed it in any detail, although they both knew it was inevitable. He had been waiting for the right moment when she was ready to listen and ready to hear the words he knew would break her heart, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

It appeared that now was the moment.

He perched himself on the railing and opened his arms. However, Annie remained where she stood. Her posture told him she needed to be separated from him in order to keep her mind clear. To give herself room to breathe.

"It is time I told you everything," he said. "You must believe every word I tell you, Annie, because it is the truth. I am not Foster. I am not from this world. So do not judge me by what has happened to you in the past."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and waited.

"You will not be the first woman from this world to cross over into mine," he told her.

The news fell like a boulder, stunning her when it struck. "I'm not? I mean, I won't?"

Rion shook his head. "There have been others. But it was so long ago. I cannot tell you when it was, but they have been written into our archives. That is one reason why I must go back first. To find out more about them. I need to know if anything happened to them when they were brought back."

He watched her eyes widen. "Happen? Like a disease or something?"

Rion barely lifted his shoulders in answer. "All I know is that it has been done before, but it gives me hope we can have a life together. I will ask our historians to give me a full report when I return. Until I hear back from them, I will be waiting for the next storm that develops in this area. Annie..."

At the mention of a storm, her attention diverted to the clouds overhead. He remained patient. "Your brother," she finally said after a while, "how do you think he'll react when you tell him about me?"

A little laugh escaped him. Annie gave him a puzzled look. "Did I say something funny?"

Rion laughed again, louder. "Forgive me, Annie. In a way, yes, you said something funny. You see, Vadon has been praying for someone like you to overcome his obstinate brother and shake some sense into him before it was too late."

She managed a small smile. "I meant someone without wings."

"I know what you meant, Annie. Wings or no, he will love you. I am a changed man. You have no idea how changed, or how much of that is because of you."

Walking over to her, he lifted her chin with one hand. Her eyes were the purest green jewels. Framed by her black lashes, he often found himself mesmerized by them.

"I will have to go through the motions of asking permission to bring you over. Our laws are very strict about outworlders." He quickly shushed her before she could ask. "I am coming back for you, regardless."

"But what if they don't give you permission?"

Rion grinned. "Well, it will not be the first time I have gone against the council's ruling."

"But won't you get into trouble for bringing me to your world? Could they throw you into jail?" she asked.

“They would not dare. Oh, I could get a serious reprimand, but it would not undo what I have done.” He suddenly grew serious, and he hardened his voice to make sure Annie understood what he had to say next. “Annie, once I take you over, it is permanent. You can never come back to Montana, or to Dry Lick Valley. Do you fully grasp what I am saying?”

“Never?”

“Never,” he repeated with a quick shake of his head. “This would be for the rest of your life.” He had to stop to get a firm grip on himself, then added, “Parra is a totally different world from this one, with strange, unfamiliar people, and food, and customs. Nothing on my world resembles anything on this one. It will be...it will take great courage and patience in order to adjust to a life there. You have to be willing to throw away the old Annie and embrace a whole new Annie. Can you...do you think you can accept such a challenge?”

Rion watched for any sign of doubt or hesitation on her lovely face. Life with him would not be easy. But he knew that any life without his Annie would not be worth breath or blood. He had spent many nights lying awake, thinking while Annie slept in his arms. The question of whether or not he could live on this world with her, here in this remote area of Montana, was one he turned over repeatedly in his mind. He already decided that if the council strictly forbade him from bringing her over, he would catch the next storm to return anyway.

He simply wouldn't return to Parra.

Yes, the repercussions would be intense. Vadon would suffer, and that thought alone caused Rion intense pain, both physical and emotional. He asked himself if he could surrender his House for this woman. And the same answer kept coming back to him.

Until he found Annie, his life was in a downward spiral. Death was not too far away. Annie had saved him in more ways than she would ever know. Rion knew he could not live without this mira-

culous woman. He would not live without her. Be it on his world, or on this one, Rion had to have her with him for the rest of their days.

If the challenge to live on Parra was too great, Rion would make arrangements to remain here. To hell with the council. To hell with their rules and laws.

He could only pray he would not be discovered by those on her world who would do them harm.

Annie reached up to take his hand. She linked her fingers with his and gave him a sincere smile. "I don't care where we live. I can't survive without you now. Go back to your world and do what you have to do, then get your butt back here as soon as you can." She gave the corral a once-over. "Think it's all right to let the livestock out?"

Glancing over his shoulder at the fence, Rion said, "Looks it to me."

"Good," she said, tugging on his hand. An impish smile lit up her face. "Come on."

"What now?"

She was leading him toward the cabin. "You said something earlier about me being completely at your mercy. Time to put your money where your mouth is, big boy." She giggled. Letting go of his hand, she dashed for the door.

One of these days she would learn that a man with wings is also quite fast on his feet.

Chapter 16

The Spring

“Annie, come here!” Rion waved at her from the door to come outside. She held up both hands that were coated in flour.

“I’m in the middle of kneading this bread.”

“The bread can wait,” he told her. “Come here! Quickly!”

Annie made a little sound of exasperation, grabbed a dish towel, and followed him outside. He led her around to the back side of the cabin. There in the small meadow a blanket of yellow flowers were blooming close to the ground. Just beyond that, standing at the edge of the woods, a doe and two dappled fawns stood watching them. Annie smiled. “They can’t be more than a couple of weeks old,” she whispered.

“Would you like to see more?” he asked her.

“More?”

“Would you like to go for a ride?”

She stared at him in stunned silence. “You’re well enough to carry me?” she finally managed to ask.

Rion lifted her effortlessly in his arms, bent his knees, spread his wings so that they almost filled the sky, and leaped into the air. The enormous appendages swooped downward, thrusting them higher and higher into the bright spring sky. Annie shivered and buried her face in his neck.

“I will not let you fall.” He laughed. Burrowing his nose in her shoulder, he said, “Look at your world the way I see it.”

Tentatively, she peeked out from the strangling hold she'd placed around his neck. They were climbing higher and higher, until their cabin below was no more than the size of a child's toy.

Rion circled the farm a couple of times. The animals looked up then went back to eating the fresh green grass cropping up. They had long ago grown used to this winged man flying overhead, and knew he posed no danger.

"Let's see where our neighbors live," he commented, banking to the south.

Annie found herself in the perfect predicament. She couldn't decide what to watch—the passing panorama beneath them, or the powerful beating of her husband's wings. From her vantage point she could see his tremendously large shoulders and the muscles which rose from them to the wings. With every downward stroke they flowed and rippled beneath the skin. With each upward stroke, they pulled back and tightened. It was mesmerizing.

He jiggled her in his arms to get her attention. Annie turned her head back around to look down.

The Funderburke farm was just ahead. Ever since that day several weeks ago when Horace Funderburke had learned about Rion's existence, they had not seen the old farmer again. Today they spotted him walking through his back meadow, a dog following faithfully along. As they watched, the dog sensed their presence and started barking at them. Mister Funderburke paused to look up. He waved his arm in greeting then motioned for them to join him.

"Care to go down and be neighborly?" Rion asked.

"You do like your dramatic entrances, don't you?" Annie teased.

As she expected, Rion began their descent head-first. This time, though, instead of waiting until the last possible moment to right himself, he flipped over early enough so that the last thirty or so feet down was upright. Annie watched his wings beating furious-

ly to slow their way. Once they were both on the ground, Rion folded them behind his back as usual.

Horace Funderburke stared back in awe. "Still don't believe it, even when I see it," he commented. "How you doing, Missus Annie? Mister Rion? Come on in. I can't wait to see the look on my Elly's face when she sees you."

They entered the old man's house, which was built along the same lines as Annie's, but on a much bigger scale. There were four rooms and a loft, and the smell of fresh baked cinnamon wafted over them from the kitchen.

"Elly! Annie's here!"

Where Horace was tall and gangly, Elly was diminutive and on the plump side. She hurried from the separate kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. Seeing Rion, she froze, her mouth opened in a little O. It took her a few seconds to come to her senses. When she did, she led them back into the kitchen, apologizing for her rudeness.

"Oh my, Annie, you are looking radiant! I take it you made it all right through the winter? How about some of my cinnamon cake and a cup of coffee? Just took it out of the oven." She paused to look at Rion then glanced back at Annie. "Does he drink coffee?"

Rion graced the older woman with his warmest smile. "Yes, I drink coffee. With milk, if you have some."

Elly Funderburke laid her hand over her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry. That was rude of me, wasn't it?" She stepped up to the angel man, the top of her head barely reaching his chest, and held out her hand. "My name's Elly."

"I am Rion." He took her hand and gently squeezed it.

Elly blushed a bright pink. "Oh, my, you are enough to take one's breath away. Horace told me about you. Of course, it took me a while to understand what he was saying. How old are you, Mister Rion?"

Annie glanced up from spooning honey in her coffee. The question took her aback. She'd never asked Rion his age. It hadn't occurred to her to ask. To her, he was young in appearance, although he seemed more mature and wiser in many other ways.

"That is a hard question to answer, Missus Funderburke. We do not denote the passing of time the same way you do. Neither do we celebrate our birth days individually. We celebrate as one, on one specified day."

"You mean everyone on your world has the same birthday?" Elly gasped. She handed Rion his cup, which he thanked her for.

"We are all born at different times. However, we share a single day of festivity. Myself, I have celebrated thirty days of rejoicing, but I cannot tell you if that is equivalent to thirty of your world's cycles. After so many days and nights here, I would hazard to guess that your year passes more slowly." He shook his head, his golden hair flowing freely over his shoulders and down his back. It was almost back to the length it had been before Annie had initially cut it off last fall.

They sat at the table in the center of the room. Annie noticed that Elly's gaze kept going back to the pair of amber-hued wings. She smiled and remembered how enthralled she'd been with them in the beginning as well.

"Missus Funderburke? Would you like to touch Rion's wings?"

The older woman jumped as if Annie had read her mind. "Oh, my goodness. I'm sorry. Was I staring?"

Rion leaned over so the woman could touch one. She reached out with trembling fingers and stroked the edge of one feather, much the same way one would pet a dog. Leaning back, Rion stretched his wing out further, spreading the pinions. Elly ran the palm of her hand over their softness. She let out the air she'd been holding.

“Oh, my, they are so soft. Like a baby chick. Downy. And what a beautiful color. You are the only man I know, Mister Rion, who is the color of old gold.”

The color of aged gold. That had been Annie’s first thought, too, when she had seen him up close.

“Did the snow give you much trouble?” Horace asked. He’d stayed quiet and finished his cake and coffee as he’d watched his wife’s reaction to the angel man.

“It was fascinating to experience,” Rion replied honestly. “My world does not grow this cold. Neither do we have snow. And the few times I have come here—”

“You’ve been here before?” Elly interrupted.

Rion nodded. “My people have been watching over your world for generations. Many, many, many years.”

“I think it could be the reason we have stories of angels and seraphim in the Bible,” noted Annie.

Elly looked back at Rion. “Horace said you injured yourself.”

“I was caught in the rough weather. Lightning clipped my wing, and I plummeted to the ground. I landed on a sharp piece of wood that pierced me just under my ribs.” He patted his side where he would bear a scar the rest of his life. “Annie found me and took me to her cabin. She took care of me...she showed tremendous courage to take me in and tend to me.”

“What other choice did she have?” Elly said. “She couldn’t very well leave you there to suffer and die.”

“Still, it took courage, considering how strange and frightening I must have appeared. Very few women on my world would have taken the chance.”

“What are your women like, then?” Horace asked. “They got wings like you do?”

Rion smiled. “Yes. They are quiet spoken. We are equal, yet they choose to let those who are stronger perform the more dangerous tasks.” He looked at Elly. “There are some who will wield

the sword. Many who will sit at council.” He turned to look at Annie. “But I have never met one who embodied all of those traits. Not like Annie. On my world, she will make them look like tarnished brass.”

Annie tried to hide her embarrassment behind her coffee. Rion had told her as much, but now, for some reason, what he was actually saying was sinking in. How could she be so different? It just didn’t register.

“Well, I must say, my husband was right about you,” Elly told him. “Before you came Annie was a pitiful little thing. A total wreck.”

“Now, Elly,” Horace interceded.

“Hush yourself, old man,” his wife smiled back. “Are you two going to get hitched?”

“Hitched?”

“We, umm...” Annie realized at that moment she should have remained quiet. However she couldn’t do anything now since she’d gotten their attention. She bowed her head. “We have pledged ourselves to each other, without the benefit of a minister, since I don’t know if Foster is still alive or not.”

“Do not blame her,” Rion interjected. “I could not bear to see her so miserable.”

“So when are you leaving?” the old farmer piped up.

Elly glared at her husband. “Horace William!”

“Well, it’s not like I didn’t tell you what they told me. The thaw’s here. We should be getting some pretty strong rains soon.”

Rion pushed his cup toward the center of the table. “I am leaving at the first storm that gives me a passageway. I will return on the next one after that. How long that will take, or how far apart they may be, I cannot tell you. But I will return.” He looked directly at Annie, determined to make her believe him no matter how many times it took him to say it. “I will return.”

“Why can’t you take her with you that first time?” asked Elly.

“Because what I am about to do has been done less than a handful of times before, yet never in recent memory.”

“Are you telling us other women from our world have been taken to yours?” Horace questioned him in disbelief.

“Yes, but it was so long ago, none of us alive today remember when. I will have to go to our historians to find out what must be done, or what special allotments must be given. I will need to get permission. That is why I must leave then return. If I take Annie with me before being granted permission, we could be separated. I could be banned. And there is another problem that has to be considered as well.”

“What’s that?” asked Elly.

“No woman from this world has ever been brought back here.” Rion looked to see her reaction to what he was about to say. “If we are granted permission, and if I am able to take Annie to my world, she cannot return. This is permanent, Annie. It would be for the rest of your life.”

“And I already told you I have no life except with you,” she told him softly. “I’m not afraid.”

“Why can’t you just stay here?” Elly once again spoke up.

For once, Annie had the answer to that question. “Can you imagine what this world would do to him if others knew he existed? Our lives would no longer be ours. He would be treated as a freak.”

“Or a holy relic,” Horace muttered. “Get yourself involved in religion, angel man, and there’s no telling what they’ll put you through.”

“You two are the only ones who know about Rion,” Annie said. “We trust you, but knowledge of him cannot go outside this valley.”

Elly tilted her head toward Annie and squinted. “You said you two had committed yourselves to each other? Or something like

that?" Annie nodded. "That like taking a vow of marriage, isn't it? You didn't want to bring a minister in because of Rion?"

"That, and because I still don't know about Foster."

"Isn't there some kind of law or something that says if a spouse is gone for more than so many years, he can be declared dead? Or at least nullify the marriage?" Elly turned to her husband for verification. Horace shrugged. She looked at Annie. "Have you taken him for your husband?"

"And would do so again in an instant," Annie told her. For once she didn't blush.

Elly turned to Rion. "You weren't hitched on your world, were you? I mean, your people don't take more than one wife, do they?"

Shaking his head, Rion assured her. "We take one mate for life. No, there was no one on my world to whom I had pledged myself. I have given my life to Annie."

"Well, that pretty much sums it up, don't it?" Elly smiled. She got to her feet to serve them more coffee. As she walked around behind Rion, she gingerly fingered the patchwork shirt he wore that Annie had made for him. Annie saw her reaction.

"The clothes he had been wearing the night I found him were too shredded and stained. There was no way I could mend them."

"Looks like you need a good Sunday-go-to-meeting shirt then, don't you?" Elly observed. "Annie, why don't you come with me to my sewing room and pick one out you think would fit him."

"Missus Funderburke, I—"

"Elly. You call me Elly."

"Elly." Annie smiled shyly. "You have done too much for us already. If it weren't for you and Mister Funderburke—"

"His name's Horace."

Laughing softly, Annie nodded. "Very well. You and Horace were too gracious to us this past winter. We could not have survived without your aid."

“Nonsense,” Horace muttered. “Is as does. Just being a good neighbor. And look at what it got us...your trust and the knowledge we’re the only people on this earth to ever really get to know an honest-to-God angel.”

“Come on, Annie. Pick out a shirt. We’ll call it your wedding present from us.”

Annie looked at Rion, who gave her an encouraging smile. Horace saw their exchange.

“Go on. You two women do your women thing, and Rion and I will fight over who gets the last piece of cake.”

Annie laughed as Elly grabbed her shirt sleeve and tugged her into the next room.

The spare bedroom also served as a sewing room, now that all of the Funderburke children had grown up and left home to start their own families. Walking over to a chest, Elly threw back the lid and began to lift out several white cotton men’s shirts. A piece of paper pinned to the collar had the size printed on it.

“What do you think he is? A sixteen neck? No, he’s got to have at least a seventeen and a half, don’t you think?”

“The first shirt I had him wear, he had to button on backwards,” Annie admitted to her, thinking of the red flannel.

“That’s right. Got to make allowances for those wings. That won’t be a problem. We’ll have him try one on and do the alterations later. Ah, here’s a nice one. It’ll look good on him.” She tossed a shirt onto the bed, then turned and went to another trunk that contained dresses. “What’s your favorite color? Never mind. With your coloring, you would look good in a bright blue, don’t you agree?”

“Elly, I don’t need a dress. Especially out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yes, you do, child. You listen to me.” She whirled around and grasped both of Annie’s hands. “You have survived something that would have devastated most any other woman. For showing

such courage, the good Lord has sent you someone who is giving you the kind of life you were meant to have. I don't care if he's an angel. He's also a man. And every man I know just puffs out his chest with pride when the woman he loves comes out all dolled up and looking like a sparkling new penny. Now, I have a dress in here that was special ordered but never paid for. It's too small for me but I'm betting it would fit you perfectly. At least for the time being."

Annie gave her a puzzled look. "For the time being?"

Elly straightened up. She looked at Annie and the perplexed look on the young woman's face, and smiled. "You know what I mean."

"Know what?"

"You're with child, Annie. Didn't you know? How could you not know?"

Annie felt her legs buckle beneath her. Her mind was racing. Elly reached for her, guiding her to the edge of the bed.

"You didn't know," the older woman whispered. Annie could only shake her head slowly.

"So you don't even know how far along?"

Annie tried to think but her mind refused to cooperate. When did she have her last menses? Could she even remember having any of the symptoms or signs she'd heard expecting mothers had?

"Any morning sickness? Nausea?"

Again, Annie shook her head. "No. Nothing. You're probably wrong."

"I'm never wrong about these things," Elly flatly stated. "You're glowing. There's a fullness about your face and a sparkle in your eye that's a dead giveaway. How do you feel?"

Feel? "I feel...great! I'm happier than I ever thought was possible."

“Bless you for those words, child. It does my poor heart a world of good to know how happy he’s made you. And now, with a little one on the way…”

Annie grabbed her hand. “Please, don’t say anything just yet. At least not until Rion and I leave. I want to be the one to tell him.”

Elly nodded. “I understand. You have my word.”

“Are you sure you couldn’t be wrong?”

“Maybe pregnancies are different on his world. Maybe you may never have morning sickness or difficulties like we do. That may be another blessing. Well, you’re not showing hardly at all, but my cousin over in Michigan, she didn’t start to pooch out until her seventh month.” Elly paused, considering. Annie saw her distant look.

“What?”

“Nothing. Maybe you won’t go the whole nine months before this one is born. How much do you know about his people anyway? Do they get constipation? Do they catch colds? How much different is their anatomy than ours?”

Too late, Elly caught her gaff, and both she and Annie blushed profusely. “Oh, I am bad, aren’t I? Of course their anatomy couldn’t be too much different from ours, not if you ended up in this condition.” Patting Annie’s knee, she reached back to the trunk lying open and pulled out the dress she intended for her to have. It was a deep robin’s egg blue. Holding it up to her, Elly smiled her approval. “It brings out the green in your eyes. Go on. Take it and the shirt. You could probably do the alterations much better yourself.” Leaning closer, she whispered, “And if that little cherub makes his debut before you go off to his world, I have a whole slew of clothes left from when my own babies were born. You’re welcome to them.”

“Thank you, Elly.” Annie hugged the woman.

“Now, you come fetch me if anything happens and you need another woman nearby.”

“I promise.”

“Good. Now let’s go see what those two menfolk of ours have been up to.”

As they entered the kitchen, Rion and Horace got to their feet. Annie held up the clothing. “Elly has given us some new clothes as a wedding present.”

“Thank you.” He hugged the older woman, who blushed in delight.

“Oh, go on. I know you’re wanting to get back home, and I’d like to see you take off with them big old wings.” Elly swatted his arm playfully. Rion turned to offer his hand to Horace.

“How can we ever repay you?”

“Be happy,” the old farmer said sternly. There was no teasing in his voice. He was as serious as he could muster. “Treat her as the most valuable thing in the world.”

“I already do.” He turned to Annie. “Ready?”

She gave the old farmer and his wife each a hug before following her new husband outside. Rion lifted her effortlessly into his arms. With a final wave from Annie, he bent his knees and leaped upward, wings exploding downward in a gust of wind that scoured the ground beneath them.

“Come visit us again soon!” Annie heard from below. She saw the couple waving goodbye, then disappear back inside their home.

“What did you and Horace talk about while we were gone?” she asked. She had to speak louder than usual. His wings made great swooshing sounds that drowned out normal speech.

“What do men normally talk about?” he replied cryptically, adding a smile.

She gave him a surprised stare. “You’re keeping a secret from me!” she accused.

“Not in the least. I will tell you later when the time is right.” He kissed her, lips lingering a moment longer than usual.

Lord of Thunder

“Don’t you need to keep an eye on where you’re going?” she asked, smiling.

“We are a hundred feet in the air. What else is up here except for a few birds?”

Annie’s eyes widened. His intent had become very clear to her. “Rion! No! Someone will see us!”

“What if I went a little lower? Say...treetop level?”

“You have got to be joking!”

“Very well. You decide.”

Annie laughed. “Okay! I give up! How do you make love while flying? It’s got to be impossible.”

“Not impossible, but it does present a very different set of problems.”

Annie laughed again as Rion soared higher and higher. She couldn’t wait to find out.

Chapter 17

The Storm

Two weeks later Annie woke up to the sound of distant thunder. Her first instinctive reaction was to cringe. Then panic set in.

Rion was not in the cabin.

“Rion!”

She managed to remember to grab the coverlet and wrap it around her as she ran to the door, throwing it open and hurrying outside. She saw Rion standing a few feet away. His feet were planted wide apart as he stared at the gathering storm clouds. He wore his new white shirt Elly had given him and Annie had altered to fit around his wings.

The wind was starting to gust as the clouds raced across the sky, turning it from blue to dirty gray, then to inky black. He had tied his hair back to keep his vision clear, but the feathers on his wings flowed in crazy crisscross patterns.

Annie ran over to him. Rion put his arm about her waist and drew her close.

“You were going to leave without telling me goodbye?” she yelled above the wind.

“Never. I knew the storm would awaken you.”

“This is it, isn’t it?” she asked. Already she could feel her tears turning cold on her cheeks. This would be harder than she had ever believed it would be.

Instead of answering her, he pointed toward a bank of clouds. Annie looked to where he gestured just as a bolt of lightning

spear the mountainside below. Thunder boomed in its wake, and Annie covered her ears, turning her face to bury herself in his shoulder.

“That is where I must go,” he told her, raising his voice to be heard above the wailing winds. “I can already see an opening.”

“Rion...”

She couldn't stop the sobs that were hitching in her throat. The tightness in her chest was threatening to cut off all the air to her lungs. Clutching him, she pressed her body tightly against his. She felt as if she were dying inside, and the storm only intensified her heartache. Gently he pushed her away.

“I will return for you, Annie. You must believe me. I will return to bring you back with me. I have never lied to you, and I never will. I love you!”

“I love you, Rion!”

He kissed her. Hard. Burning her mouth with his as his hands cupped her face for what she couldn't help but believe would be the last time.

Stepping away, he spread his wings to catch the growing gale force winds. They lifted him with little effort.

Annie swiped the tears from her eyes so she could watch him leave. With every downward stroke of his wings, she could feel her heart breaking. “Rion!” she screamed.

Smaller and smaller he grew as he rose, until he was a tiny white speck in the distance. Another flash of lightning temporarily blinded her. By the time her vision cleared, the clouds had swallowed him up.

She never heard the thunder roar overhead.

* * * *

Elly found her still unconscious, lying in the muddy grass in front of the cabin. Quickly she had Horace carry the young woman back inside the cabin and lay her on the bed as she pumped some

water onto a towel, which she placed over Annie's forehead. A few minutes later, Annie came awake with a start.

"Rion!"

Elly captured her hands, clasping them in her own. "It's us, child."

"Where's Rion? Whe—"

It suddenly all came back to her. Curling into a little ball, Annie rolled over onto her side and sobbed. Elly remained with her while Horace went outside to check on the animals in the barn.

Long minutes passed. Annie crawled up into the older woman's lap where she fell into an emotionally exhausted sleep.

It was hours later when she awoke again. The rays of the setting sun were painting the interior of the cabin a blood red. Elly sat by the fire, darning socks from a basket in her lap.

Slowly she rose up on one elbow. "Elly?"

The older woman glanced up and graced her with a smile. "Goodness, Annie. You had us worried there for a while. How you feeling? Hungry?"

Incredibly, she did feel a bit famished. "Yes. A little."

"Good. That's a good sign. I have some leftover stew I had Horace bring over from the house. I'll dip you a bowl. While I'm at it, you might want to put on some clothes. You were a mess, lying outside in the mud. Might want to think about a sponge bath later on."

Annie glanced down to see she was still wearing the quilt from that morning. Wordlessly she pulled a shirt and a pair of pants from the trunk and pulled them on. Elly watched from the corner of her eye.

"You're getting a little belly on you," the woman said gently.

Annie nodded. These past two weeks there had been no way she could deny the truth from herself. She was carrying Rion's child. The knowledge both elated her and depressed her.

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

Fresh tears welled in her eyes. Slowly Annie shook her head as her hand instinctively went to rest on her stomach. "I couldn't."

"He deserved to know."

"He wouldn't have left if I had told him," Annie said. "And you and I both know he couldn't stay here. Not on this world."

"Well...he'll be back. And when he does, there'll be no way you can keep it a secret from him then." She plopped a bowl of stew on the table and gestured to Annie with the spoon to come eat. Slowly Annie got to her feet and went over to the table.

"You came looking for me?"

Elly sat back on her chair and resumed her darning. "Horace and me saw the storm. Horace, he said that had to be what Rion had been waiting for. Then he said as soon as it blew over we had to come over here to see how you were doing. We knew this would be your most difficult time, and you probably needed some support."

"Thank you." She spooned the stew into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. It was all mechanical, but she knew she had to keep alive that small bit of Rion that was growing in her womb.

It would probably be all she had left to remember him by.

"If you need, I can spend the night," the older woman offered. Amazingly, Annie accepted her offer. The first night alone without him would be the hardest to endure. Having Elly near would at least help get her through those blackest hours.

"Do you think he made it?" she voiced aloud.

Elly glanced up. "He knows what he's doing. He's done it before, hasn't he?"

Annie nodded, but without conviction. "When do you think it'll storm again?"

"Ohhh, I don't know rightly. Sometimes we can get through a whole month without one, and then a full week won't go by without a gullywasher racing through the valley every day. Have patience, Annie. He'll be back. I'll bet my life on it."

Lord of Thunder

Annie nodded, but she didn't tell the woman she'd thought the same thing about Foster. And he had never returned.

Chapter 18

The Return

Somehow, one day left and another day arrived. Then another day, and another, until one week had passed. That was soon followed by a second week, and then a third. While she waited, Annie tried to find ways to make them more tolerable.

She worked in her garden. She canned. She made another quilt, which she planned to take to town and sell.

She took the patchwork shirt she'd made for him and wore it every night, his pillow with his scent still clinging to it crushed in her arms. It was the only way she could fall asleep.

At least once every evening she pulled down one of her books off the rough shelving Rion had made, opening it to a poem she had marked. Her mother had named her Annabel Lee in honor of the work by Edgar Allan Poe. When Rion had discovered the poem and learned of its significance, the piece had become his favorite. Many were the nights when she would momentarily lift herself from the dark mists of sleep to feel his arms about her and hear him whispering his three favorite passages against her hair.

*It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee.
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.*

I was a child and she was a child,

Lord of Thunder

*In this kingdom by the sea:
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee,
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me.*

*But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.*

Whenever she read it aloud, she could almost hear his voice. Its nightly reading quickly became a ritual.

It was nearly a month later that she finally gathered up her courage and went into town, wearing her biggest pants and loosest-fitting shirts to hide the child that was quickly growing inside her, even though the pants were becoming too tight around her waist. Soon she would have to break down and accept the full skirt and big top Elly had made for her.

At the post office there was a letter from her sister waiting for her. She waited until she got back in the wagon to go home before she opened it to read.

Dearest Annie,

I hope this letter finds you well. Unfortunately, we have not been so lucky. Papa caught the croup in November. He died December first. It made for a sad Christmas for us.

Annie remembered how she and Rion had shared Christmas. The Funderburkes had sent her a whole box of chocolate bars. In return she had made them a coverlet for their bed with the furs she'd meant to sell to the fur trader. It was almost too pretty to give away, but she owed them so much. Later that night she'd

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made hot cocoa for Rion, his first taste. The melted chocolate in milk rich in butterfat was almost too sinful. Afterward he had lifted up her shirt and smeared some of the chocolate on her stomach and thighs, and then proceeded to lick it off.

She shook herself. Memories could only bring her pain. She continued to read.

We sold the farm to Mister Arnstead. He's looking forward to adding the land and barn to his acreage. He gave us a good price. John Ray Junior is leaving for Westfall on Friday anyway. He wants to join the army and fight the krauts. I'll use the money to buy a small house in town. I've been seeing Ernest O'Reilly recently. You remember him, don't you? I think it might turn serious. You never know! If it does, I hope you might be able to come to the wedding.

Wedding. Annie had been married twice, and neither time had she been able to wear a white gown and walk down a church aisle. Strange, but she never regretted it, especially with regard to Rion.

I, Rion, Lord of the House of Thunder, take you, Annie, as my equal. My other soul. My wife. Despite all transgressions, without reservation, for the rest of my life.

She could remember every word he spoke, every breath he took, every look he ever gave her with those Montana sky blue eyes.

Every look. Every touch. Every moment of passion and joy.

A teardrop fell onto the letter she held in her lap. It smeared one of the words. Annie sniffed, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, and continued reading.

I won't take up any more of your time prattling on about things that don't interest you. Besides, I have to start packing up everything for the move. But if you'd like to hear more about what's spreading around the town as gossip, just let me know. I look forward to your letters. I'm just sorry Papa couldn't hold

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on long enough for us to reach you. One of his last requests was that he hoped you were happy. So do we.

Much love,

Mabel

Annie folded the letter and shoved it back inside the envelope. She had told her family about Foster leaving her, but she always made it seem as if he'd kept in contact. That she really wasn't alone. And that everything up in Montana was all lollipops and roses. She couldn't bear to tell them the truth. Anyway, she figured with Ohio being so far away, there was never the chance they'd come up to visit and learn for themselves.

Coming to Hoonas was good for her, even with everything that had happened while she'd been secluded away with Rion. The war had brought a whole new façade to the town. Men in starched uniforms now walked the streets. There seemed to be more cars parked in front of the stores than there were horses and wagons. Word was the rutted dirt road between Hoonas and Billings had finally gotten paved.

A movement inside her made her pause. Automatically she placed a hand on her stomach. This would have to be her last trip into town for a while. A few of the townspeople knew her husband had left her years before. If they caught sight of her enlarged belly, it would not be easy to explain.

"Good to see you out and about, Annie." Horace Funderburke laid his hands on the side of the wagon and gave her a big smile. Annie calmed her startled heart at his sudden appearance.

"Hello, Horace. I didn't know you were coming into town."

"I didn't either until I discovered that I was completely out of salt for my cows. How are you doing for a lick?"

She nodded, glad for the interruption, glad for the conversation. "I have one block left, but I only have the one head. She and Murphy can lick on it for most of the summer."

Horace nodded. His eyes darted around, observing the comings and goings of those nearby. Turning back to her, he lowered his voice. "How are you and the baby?"

"Doing fine, although he's starting to give me fits at times." For some reason she'd started calling the baby a he. She couldn't explain why, other than the fact that she couldn't see Rion fathering anything but a male child.

"Fits?"

"You know. Kicking and being overly active. Sometimes he keeps me up nights."

"How well I remember. Well, if you need Elly over to keep you company, you just yell."

She nodded, smiling. "I will. Thank you."

"Are you on your way home?" he inquired. "Looks like you've got a few heavy sacks in the back you're going to need help unloading."

"I have one more stop first."

"Then I won't keep you." He slapped Murphy's rump and gave her a wave. "We'll see you back at the farm."

She waved back and flicked the reins to head the mule over to the bank. Mabel had included a bank draft with her letter. Annie's portion from the sale of the farm. She planned to cash it before heading back to the farm. With the war effort going on, and many things quickly becoming in short supply, she was leery about leaving the money in the bank by itself.

A half-hour later, Annie climbed back into the wagon and slapped the reins, giving Murphy his head to take them back home. She held on to her stomach as the wagon rumbled over the rough roads. The baby inside her continued to squirm restlessly. Yet despite the inconvenience, she blessed every movement. He was created from her and Rion's love, and proof Rion existed.

Overhead a cloudless sky shined down on her. She found herself glancing at the mountains several times a day, watching for any

sign of a dark cloud gathering on the peaks. Her ears strained for any sound of distant thunder. Storms no longer terrified her. Instead, they had become harbingers of hope.

A few days ago she'd mentioned to Elly that she wished there was a way to tell whether a storm was brewing, before it turned the sky black as coal.

"I want to be ready when he comes back. I don't want him to find me unprepared."

"Unprepared? Goodness, Annie, it ain't like you're going to get to take a suitcase with you." Elly laughed.

"I know. What I meant was, I want to be looking pretty. You know. Maybe tie up my hair so it has a little extra curl in it. I still have some powder and lipstick in the trunk that should still be good."

"Child, he's going to find you more radiantly beautiful even if you wore a gunny sack. You know that."

She smiled. Somehow she imagined Rion might have something else on his mind when he finally managed to make his way back. Then she wondered if it was safe to make love in her condition. Amazingly, Elly seemed to read her mind. Patting her hand, the older woman added, "You know, it's perfectly safe to have marital relations right up to your final month."

When Annie blushed a bright red, Elly laughed softly. "Goodness, Annie, you act as if you two are the only ones who've thrived doing what the good Lord created them to do."

The older woman then steered the topic onto babies, and gave Annie pointers she felt new mothers needed to know. But the thought of their reunion when Rion returned was never too far from Annie's mind.

She must have dozed off on her way home. When she awoke, Murphy had pulled the wagon past the Funderburke homestead and was just clearing the trees around the bend, leading to the cabin.

The figure that appeared in the doorway was a ghost returned from the dead.

Annie drew up the reins with hands ice cold from the shock. Already she could feel the rush of blood sluicing downward toward her feet as the figure moved into the sunlight, his hair glistening from the gel he preferred to use. Four years had done little to fade his boyish good looks. He looked almost exactly the same as the day she married him.

“Ah! There you are,” Foster greeted her, but not with a smile. No, he wouldn’t waste a smile on her. Not anymore. Not since he’d gotten what he’d wanted when he married her—a farmhand, a housekeeper, and a brood mare, and all at a relatively cheap price. No, smiling at her would be like putting a bow tie on a cow. “Where in hell have you been? Aren’t you going to get off that wagon and come say hello to your husband?”

A thousand thoughts of dread tied themselves end-on-end, until the string wound and wound itself around her brain and began to tighten. It was a matter of mere seconds before he would find out about the baby. Her baby. Rion’s baby. Not his. Subconsciously her hand went to her belly where the infant was unusually quiet. Foster’s eyes were immediately drawn to her movement.

“What’s going on, Annie?” His face began to darken. “What are you hiding from me?”

“Where have you been, Foster?” she managed to ask without her voice betraying too much of her growing apprehension.

“None of your damn business where I’ve been,” he snapped, and motioned toward her midsection. “Have you gained weight since I’ve been gone?”

“You’ve been gone for nearly four years,” Annie reminded him. “I think that, as your wife, I deserve a little explanation. Why didn’t you write and tell me you were all right? If you didn’t want me to know where you were, why couldn’t you at least let me know you were still alive?”

Foster squinted at her. His lips were pursed into two thin lines. The once handsome face that had attracted her no longer seemed devilishly appealing. Instead it took on the ominous mask of evil itself. A mask meant to be worn to help snare the hapless victim, only to be dropped once all hope of escape had been taken away.

Foster has ensnared her with his looks, his flashy smile, his soft-spoken promises, and her desire to get away from the dead-end future she faced in Ohio.

She stared wide-eyed at him as he advanced toward her.

“Why don’t you come off that wagon? What are you trying to hide?” Reaching up, Foster grabbed her arm. Annie jerked it away from his grasp. His hand managed to snag the edge of her loose shirt and pulled. Several buttons popped off; one fell into the back of the wagon with a dry rattle. With a gasp, he stared wide-eyed at her distended belly. A second later he let out a roar.

“Whore!”

He grabbed her leg and arm and pulled her out of the wagon, almost throwing her out of it. Annie screamed and instinctively cradled her stomach as she landed heavily on her right shoulder. The pain was intense to the point the world flashed white and red, and she almost blacked out. At the same time, the steel toe of a boot connected with her hip. She cried out.

“Foster, stop! No! Please! Please, stop!”

“Whose bastard child are you carrying?” her ex-husband yelled. He kicked her again, then again, each time aiming for the swollen mound of her stomach. Annie kept herself curled into a ball for protection, but his assault was relentless.

Unable to dislodge her from her position, Foster shifted tactics. He wrapped her hair around his hand, grabbed the back of her shirt with the other, and dragged her to the door of the cabin.

“Get in there, you thankless, no-good tramp!” He kicked her again, his heavy mining boot leaving an indentation in her thigh.

Semiconscious and terrified, Annie scrambled through the doorway on her hands and knees, collapsing past the threshold. Foster followed her inside as he pulled off his heavy, studded belt.

“Here I go, slaving day after day, working the mines to make enough money to build us a comfortable life to live on, and you go spreading your legs like a ten...dollar...*whore!*” He emphasized each word with a downward stroke as he lashed at her with the belt. Annie shrieked from the torture. Her legs jerked and spasmed as the blunt force of the beating landed on her back and sides. She tried to roll away but the bedpost barred her way.

Faintly in the back of her mind, she saw herself and Rion making love in that bed. She remembered the funny smile he’d had on his face, right before he turned over the mattress to reveal its unsoiled side. She reached out with bloody fingers to touch the bedpost, when Foster grabbed her by the ankles and pulled her further into the room.

He straddled her and proceeded to rip the shirt apart, popping off the last of the buttons. He grunted as he pulled on the brassiere, finally managing to remove it and free her breasts.

“You couldn’t wait for me to be gone before you started putting out, huh? So what did you do? Take your customers here? Or rent a little room at the hotel in town? Huh? Answer me, bitch!” He backhanded her across the mouth. Annie gasped from the pain.

“What do you want from me, Foster? Why did you come back, really?”

Leaning down close to her ear, he grinned. “That’s a pretty stupid question, don’t you think? After all, you’re my wife. I own you and this land. What kind of man would I be if I didn’t look in on my investment every now and then?”

“Don’t you think every four years is a rather long time between inspections?” she spat at him. Her fear was gone now. Hot anger burned in her chest.

The second the words were out of her mouth, she realized the question was the wrong one to ask. Foster grabbed her around her throat and squeezed. Annie struggled. She grabbed his arm and hand, and tried to pry his fingers from pressing on the artery under her chin. It was becoming harder and harder to breathe, to concentrate, to accept what was real and what was a dream. Foster must have seen he was bearing down too hard and released her. She gasped loud and hard, starved for air. Little black motes danced before her eyes.

“Can’t have you passing out on me, dear little wife. Not until I’ve had a piece of what you’ve been making a living off of.”

“I...never...”

“Never what?” He grasped both of her breasts and squeezed. His brutal force on her swollen and tender flesh was worse pain than the kicks and slaps he’d administered earlier. Tears poured from her eyes; Annie cried for mercy.

“You don’t deserve mercy,” Foster growled. He swung a leg back over to the other side and began to unbutton her pants.

“Foster, please, don’t.”

“Shut up, bitch.”

“Foster, please. Don’t hurt my baby.”

A low, malicious chuckle answered her. “Your baby is the least of your worries, Annie my dear, dear, precious wife. When I finally get through with you, you just might be back to your old skinny self. Looking like the woman I married, all sweet and naive and itching to run away from home and her worthless future.” He pulled off her pants and panties, then stood and began to undo his own jeans.

Annie closed her eyes, willing herself away from the cabin, away from Foster’s brutal hands, away from any knowledge of what he was doing to her, and away from what he would do to her in the end. In her mind, she went back to that past winter when she

and Rion had felt like they were the only people alive on their mountain island.

* * * *

She was tired, having spent most of the day deep into her needlework. She wanted to get the quilt finished before the weather chose to dip below the zero degree mark. Her eyes were burning from concentrating on the tight stitches she had to make so that the quilt would withstand the steady wear and tear. Fighting against the declining natural light, she found herself hosting a headache that was gradually becoming stronger and more blinding. Closing her eyes helped a little. She rubbed her eyelids and forehead, but found no relief.

She heard Rion come into the cabin. He stamped the snow off his boots and unloaded his armload of firewood next to the fireplace. She heard him pause. She knew he was looking at her sitting there, not moving, with her eyes shut.

“What is wrong?”

“I have a headache.” She managed a small smile, but even that much hurt.

“I can help you.”

Again, another attempt to smile. “You cured me of an ax wound. Why am I not surprised you can do something about this headache?” She had to speak softly, but even that much was painful.

He moved closer to her. She heard a tiny sound, one she couldn’t identify. Then, to her amazement, a tickling feeling traveled across her cheek. The tickling wound around her jaw and over her nose, slowing to a caress over her lips. A feather’s kiss.

“I thought you were going to bleed on my head or something. Not tickle me into good health.”

“Hush. Let me show you. Keep your eyes closed,” he ordered.

Annie’s attention centered on the tip of the feather as it stroked her face, her temples, and her neck. Sometimes its touch was so light she could barely tell where he was using it. At other

times he would wave it over her skin like a fan, circulating the air, creating a cool draft.

She had no idea how long he played with her. All she knew was that it was over when he stuck the rounded end of the feather down the front of her blouse. Annie cringed, giggling. She opened her eyes to see him watching her less than a foot away. Impulsively, she leaned over to kiss him. His lips were still warming up from his working outdoors. She helped to warm them faster.

When she straightened up, he grinned. "Do you still suffer?"

She opened her mouth...and paused. Her headache was gone. Amazingly, her eyes, although they were watering, no longer burned.

"Don't tell me they teach you that trick in warrior school."

He sat back on his knees, his back to the fireplace. Holding the feather in front of her face, he twirled it one way then the other between his fingers.

"I had forgotten what all can be done with one. I guess my mind has been preoccupied by other things," he said cryptically.

"What do you mean other things?"

He never answered her question outright. Instead, later that night, after they had retired for bed, he demonstrated how intense her pleasure could be when he used the feather on her most intimate areas.

* * * *

Foster was brutal, grunting and pushing and trying to shove himself into her, unconcerned as to whether he was hurting her or not. In fact, the more she whimpered, the more it seemed to rejuvenate him.

After several minutes he gave up, got to his feet, and buttoned his pants back up. Striding back to the door, he looked back around at her beaten and bruised figure, and spit at her. "I should have known you couldn't be trusted. I should have known you would be like all the rest of them. You'd better be here when I get back,

'cause if you aren't, when I catch you, and I will catch you, you're going to live just long enough to watch me carve that bastard right out of your belly!"

He slammed the door, leaving her coughing and spitting up blood. She heard the jingling of a harness, and Murphy's steady clop-clop-clop growing fainter and fainter in the distance. Foster was heading into town. For how long, she couldn't begin to guess.

Annie closed her eyes and began praying. She ran her palms over her stomach, looking for some sign of life, but the baby was unusually still. Her fear intensified.

Please, please... I have sinned and I am so very sorry. But please don't let Rion's son die. Please. I will take whatever Foster does to me if you'll just let my baby live through this.

She was unable to cry. Her body was a mass of contusions. The leather belt with its brass studs had bitten into her skin, splitting it open in several places. Annie watched, unfazed, her cheek pressed to the rough floor, as a slow trickle of blood meandered across the wood planking and disappeared into the seam between two boards.

There was no way she could get to her feet, much less reach the door and leave the cabin. For the first time in her life she wished Dry Lick Valley wasn't such a remote place. She wished there was a phone connecting her and the Funderburkes...or the police...or the hospital. The hospital would have been a better choice. The hospital would take care of her baby and notify the police, who would catch Foster as he walked in through the doors with the big carving knife in his hand, the knife she used to slice the meat off the bone down at the springhouse.

I can't think straight. She'd taken several blows to the head when she'd tried to duck out of range. Neither could she move her right arm. She might have dislocated it when she'd fallen out of the wagon. Or maybe she'd broken it. She tried to flex her fingers on that hand. Her hand refused to cooperate.

Slowly, Annie lifted her face until she had a clear line of sight to the door. Foster would kill her. There was no argument. He had come home, finally, come home, and found his wife pregnant by another man. What man would not demand retribution?

And she deserved it. She had committed an unpardonable sin. Momma would be extremely peeved with her. They might not let her into heaven because of it, either.

My little son, what would you have looked like if you had lived? Would you look like your father? Or would you have had my licorice-colored hair? Would you have wings?

Something small and pale wavered just beyond her view. Underneath the bed, up against the wall, trapped by one of the bedposts, she could barely make out something moving. The sun was going down, lessening the amount of light coming into the room. Annie continued to stare at the object.

Another brief puff of wind seeped through one of the many cracks between the boards, making the object tremble again. Annie's eyes widened. It was a feather. A pale, gold-colored feather. The sight of it was enough to give her one last modicum of strength.

It took her nearly an hour to drag herself the few feet to the head of the bed. Finally, though, she was able to grasp the small feather and free it from its entrapment. Tenderly, she brought the bit of down to her lips and kissed it. It was tangible proof that Rion had been there. He hadn't been a figment of her imagination, or the confused ravings of a woman condemned to live her own version of solitary confinement. He was real. He had survived. Just as she had to survive. Just as their son had to survive.

Clutching the feather, Annie closed her eyes to rest. By now Foster must have discovered the several hundred dollars she'd collected from the bank. He was probably spending it like crazy at the bars. It was only right. After all, he was her husband, and husbands were the sole proprietors of all of their wife's possessions, right?

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She slept fitfully. She was so very, very cold. Her naked body continued to spasm and jerk from the attack. She knew there were not many more hours left until he returned.

She prayed that when he did kill her, it would be quick.

Chapter 19

The Redemption

Something woke her. It took several seconds before Annie remembered where she was. The room was completely dark.

Something had awakened her. She held her breath, straining her ears to hear what had brought her out of her semiconscious state.

At first she imagined the sound of Murphy drawing the wagon back up to the cabin. She imagined she heard arguing, but that couldn't be right. Who would be arguing?

A sudden gust of wind hit the side of the cabin, making it quiver. A heartbeat later another gust rocked the cabin.

Then...in the far distance...unmistakably...

Thunder.

Annie felt her heart rush the blood to her head so quickly she nearly passed out again. She had to get out of the cabin. She had to find shelter, had to find someplace safe, somewhere she could hide. She had to get out of there, now!

She tried to get to her knees but her right side refused to cooperate. Her right arm hung limp. *One step at a time, Annie. First your right foot. Put your right foot under you. That's it. Now the other. Come on, you can do it. Grab the side of the bed with your left hand. Don't fall! Now, up! Up! Come on! You don't have to stand up straight, just enough to put one foot in front of the other so you can reach the door.*

"Oh, God, it hurts!" she cried out and gritted her teeth. But she'd managed it. Somehow. It was a miracle.

No, the miracle would come when she got out of the cabin.

Lord of Thunder

The door was a mere three, maybe four steps away, but it meant letting go of the side of the bed.

Come back to me, Annie!

She froze and looked around. Her mind was playing tricks on her. She could hear voices. Arguing. They were men's voices. And they were outside.

She whimpered. "Rion?"

A strong gust tore the cabin door from her grasp and slammed it against the wall. She had to use the doorframe for support, or risk falling down the short set of steps.

The wind was picking up, gathering dust and leaves and other debris, and hurling them everywhere. She began to shiver violently from the coldness, feeling as if her bare skin was shrinking against her bones. What little moon was left was quickly being swallowed up by the clouds, until every star disappeared from sight. The night was growing darker than the bowels of hell.

She heard the arguing again, just before another roll of thunder drowned out the sound. Dimly she realized the storm was coming from the northwest. "It's going to be a big 'un," her papa would have said.

A pinpoint of light swung wildly from side to side, looming larger and brighter as it got closer to the cabin. It seemed to be following along the road. Now she could tell there definitely were two voices. Two men's voices. Annie peered into the night, hoping to make out who it was.

A crack of lightning raced horizontally across the bottom of the clouds. Another bank of clouds responded, flashing white and gold within their interiors. The split second of light seared her eyesight. She nearly lost her grip on the doorframe when she realized that one of the men was Foster. The other was Horace Funderburke.

Looks like you've got a few heavy sacks in the back you're going to need help unloading.

“Oh, dear Lord!” The old farmer had encountered Foster on his way home. Either that, or Foster had run into him. Didn’t matter. She knew what they were arguing about. She also knew who would win if push came to shove.

Annie looked down to where she knew the three stone steps should be. She could try to make it down them, but then what would she do? Where would she go? There was no way she could find any place to hide before Foster found her.

But you have to try! For the baby’s sake, try!

In the distance the lantern was drawing closer. Another peal of thunder scraped its way through the air, and a fork of lightning with two tines pierced the mountainside. Annie clearly saw a flash of fire start in its wake.

“—dammit, old man! I want you off this property, right now!”

“Then let me take Annie back with me! You don’t love her! You’ve never loved anyone in your whole, miserable life!”

Her left foot touched the top first step. When she managed to get her balance, she followed it with her right foot. Something grated in her back, right where her shoulder blade would be. She had to bite her lips to keep from crying out from the pain.

“Just go back to your cabin! You have no business here!”

“I have every right to be here! More than you do! You abandoned her! Left her to fend for herself. Did you ever once try to contact her? Or send her a letter to let her know where you were? Where do you get the right to march back here after nearly four years of neglecting her, and decide things are going to be just as if nothing happened?”

“I’m warning you, old man!”

She reached the second step. She had to let go of the door-frame. For a moment she thought it might work. That she might actually be able to get down all three steps without falling.

The thunder boomed so loudly, the whole valley shook. Annie fell hard onto the ground. At the last instant she turned to keep from landing directly on her stomach. For once she gave thanks that the next flash of lightning covered her fall. But if Foster and Horace kept coming her way, the lantern would soon seek her out. The words they were screaming at each other, trying to be heard over the quickening wind, were very clear to her.

“Did she spread her legs for you, too, old man?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Oh, yeah? Then whose bastard is she carrying around in her belly, huh? Who’s the son of a bitch who’s going to pay for fucking my wife? *My wife!*”

“What are you going to do?”

“Do? I’m going to show her what happens to whores who betray their husbands! Then I’m going to remove that festering sore breeding inside her and throw it into the creek!”

“You can’t do that!”

“Watch me, old man! What are you going to do, stop me?”

She managed to roll a few feet away from the steps, until she met up with a small mound of earth and grass. It was enough to put her out of their direct path, but not far enough if Foster turned the lantern in her direction.

She saw Horace grab for Foster’s arm. The old farmer was pushed away as if he was no more than an annoying fly.

The storm was nearly upon them. Small, thin droplets of rain began to patter the ground.

“You’ve been drinking. You’re not thinking straight. Why not wait until morning when you can think a little clearer?”

“Why not go back to your own bitch and think about me having the cops come and arrest you for trespassing!”

“You can’t hurt her!”

“I own her, you crazy old man! I can do any damn thing I want to her!”

“Damn you! She isn’t the one who made a mistake!”

“Screw you! Who are you to lecture me?”

They’d reached the cabin to find it open, the door wildly swinging open and close in the nearly hurricane-force winds. Foster lifted the lantern to throw some light into the tiny space. Horace gasped in horror.

“Dearest God in heaven! What have you done?”

“Quit your simpering. She can’t have gone too far.”

“That’s blood all over the floor!”

“Yeah? Well, she had it coming. And I’m not through with her yet. She still hasn’t learned her lesson, in my opin—”

The lightning bolt that broke the sky left them all momentarily blind. Annie felt the hair on her head and along her arms start to singe.

The answering thunder roared, then roared louder. It rose to shriek from an unholy, unearthly moan into something that quickly grew more terrifying.

The lantern had been dropped to the ground. She saw Horace give Foster a shove, as if to push him out of the doorway. It was then she realized the old farmer believed she was still inside, and he intended to get her out and away from the farm, away from Foster, by all means possible.

Her voice froze inside her when she saw the silver gleam emerge from inside Foster’s shirt. The two shots he fired at Horace could barely be heard over the banshee wind.

When Horace fell face-first into the grass, Annie knew there was no way she was going to live through this. Neither would her baby. Amazingly, a sense of calmness unexpectedly washed over her.

Maybe there was a heaven. Maybe there was such a thing as Happily Ever After. Either way, at that final moment of life, before Foster discovered her and drew his gun in her direction, she believed that what she and Rion had shared, had endured, and had

created was somehow, someway, preordained to endure. There was no way such a love as they'd had could exist and then just vanish forever without some kind of consequence.

Maybe...just maybe...they would be united in the afterlife. Her, Rion, and their baby. It would mean eternity together. Eternity.

She smiled through the pain of her damaged cheek.

The gun glinted in the lantern light. Foster peered around the perimeter of the doorway. She wasn't inside, but he knew she was too badly beaten to make it very far outside. Besides, she was bare-ass naked. She couldn't have gone far.

He took a step in her direction. Behind him the body of Horace Funderburke lay totally still.

An immense wall of wind thundered its way past them. It was enough to knock him off-balance.

"I'm going to kill you, you bitch! Where are you!"

Annie lay, paralyzed. It was like watching one of those picture shows at the Palisades. She were there, watching the whole thing happen. She just didn't know whether she was a part of the story or not.

Foster bent against the wind. The storm began to pelt them both with more rain. He raised his hand to shield his face then turned. The lantern made her face glow in its dim yellow light.

He smiled. He was drunk, no doubt about it. He would kill her and have no remorse about it whatsoever. After all, she deserved it. She had betrayed him.

He raised the gun and pointed it directly at her. "First I'm going to shoot your little bun right out of the oven. And then I'm going to put this last bullet right between your lying eyes." His aim shifted lower until the barrel pointed at her stomach. She spread her fingers as best she could over her belly, even though she knew it was a useless gesture.

It was as if a bolt of pure, relentless lightning carved itself out of the black tar clouds to crush him. He was slammed to the ground without warning.

Foster went tumbling head over heels for several yards, but managed to get back to his feet a split second later. The gun had sailed out of his hand upon contact, landing somewhere in the blackness beyond the pool of light cast by the lantern.

“What the hell?”

She couldn't see his face, just the enormous pair of amber-gold wings, fully extended, intimidating, making him appear ten times bigger as he got to his feet. He was wearing another white tunic top and another pair of those loose-legged pants, but this time his clothing was intact.

The rain was beginning to come down harder. His other-worldly clothing clung to his chest and legs, and there was no denying the muscle revealed beneath the material.

“Who the hell are you?” Foster yelled.

“I am taking Annie with me,” Rion said in a voice that echoed the storm itself.

“The hell you are!”

“Do not try to stop me.”

“Like hell I won't!”

Foster fainted and tried to throw a quick punch. Rion caught the hand and simply turned it around. Foster screamed as he dropped to his knees. A split second later, he raised the gun from where he'd found it on the grass.

“Rion!” Her scream of warning came not from her throat, but from some well of life left inside her.

Rion whirled just as the gun went off. He fell, rolling, and Annie believed he'd been hit. A moment later he rose to his knees, directly in front of Foster. He swung one arm, putting much of his strength into the one punch. It caught the man squarely in the stomach. A second punch knocked his head back. Again the gun disap-

peared into the mud and grass as Foster dropped to the dirt, stunned but still conscious.

“Do not make me hurt you. But if you do not cease this instant, I will not hesitate to kill you,” Rion said menacingly, his voice carrying over the roaring winds. He stood. In the lantern light he looked every bit like an avenging archangel. Despite the huge forces of the wind buffeting him, he stood his ground, legs planted firmly apart, his arms at his side, fists clenched.

“He shot Horace!” Annie screamed. She saw Rion turn at the sound of her voice. It was then he saw the old farmer lying a short distance away. He started to go to him when Foster managed to get to his feet and take a running jump, aiming for his back. Thunder pounded the sky, masking his attack as Foster landed against his upper right wing. Grabbing it with both hands, he pulled as hard as he could.

Rion cried out, falling to one knee, and reached for his shoulder. Annie realized the old injury had not healed enough. Foster had caused more damage.

Rion needed her. He needed her help. She couldn't allow Foster to win, not when there was an ounce of strength left in her body.

By some miracle she managed to get up on her knees. Slowly she concentrated on making it over to the side of the cabin. If she could make it over there... If there was something she could find to use...

The rifle. The old .30 she used to hunt game with. Where had she left it? Dimly she recalled Foster snatching it off the peg rack on the wall before leaving her to bleed all over the floor. There was no telling where it was now.

Another inch, another foot.

Foster was on his feet but he was hunched over. The gut punch had nearly taken him down for the count.

Rion was standing, but there was no masking the pain going through him with his wrenched wing.

“So...you want to take Annie with you, huh? Are you the son of a bitch who shoved his cock up my wife and got her pregnant? Huh?” He coughed, bringing up blood.

Rion stared at him.

“What’s the matter? Didn’t know the fornicating little whore was carrying around your bastard?”

Rion looked around to where he had heard Annie’s voice, but the ground was bare. He turned to see her crawling toward the cabin. Even in the dim light he could see the extent of her beatings. As understanding dawned on him, his face turned pale and stony. The muscles under his tunic rippled, and he turned back to face Foster.

A flash of silver reflected off the barrel of the gun Foster had pointing straight at Rion.

“Go ahead, Mister Birdie Man. Try to save her now. Let’s see who’s the better man.” He motioned for Rion to come for him. “Come on. Let’s go. I want to see if you bleed red like a human being.”

For a split second Annie wondered if Rion was remembering his father, and how his father had died. *Someone on your world shot him with a gun. He died soon after he crossed back over.* She wondered if Rion saw his own death from a gun...or if he was determined never to be another victim of a bullet.

“Mister Mayall, I will give you one last chance to redeem yourself. Leave this place now, or face my wrath.”

Foster stared at him in amusement. “Face your what? Your wrath? That’s funny! You’re a really funny man, you know that? What are you going to do to me, huh? Before I put a couple of slugs in you, what are you going to do?” He put a finger to his temple and rolled his eyes. “Hmm, let’s see. I gave two to the old codger who wouldn’t leave. I tried to nail you with one, but the lighting

was bad. Hahahaha! Hey! I'm a jokester, too! Lighting! Get it? Lighting? Lightning? Two plus one equals three. This little beauty holds six bullets. Hey! Guess what! I got three left! That means I can spare two for you, and save the last one for the little bastard you put in her stomach. What say? Sound like a deal? If I'm really, really lucky, I might try putting the last one in Annie's skull, and get *two* for the price of *one*!"

Was it the cold, or the rain, or the wind, or the lightning burning its way through the valley, or the thunder beating as loudly as her heart? When she reached the steps of the cabin she seemed to have a little more strength in her than she'd first thought.

Annie pulled herself up into a sitting position when her left hand struck something leaning against the wall next to the stone. Her fingers instinctively curled around the handle, and she felt the familiar round heft of the ax.

The ax.

She looked up to see Rion staring directly at her. His eyes were dark and unfathomable. Unreadable. There was less than ten feet of distance between them. With Foster aiming the gun at him, it could have been a hundred feet. She raised the ax to where he could see it.

You're a warrior. Show me what a warrior can do.

What happened next seemed to occur in slow motion. She tossed the ax to him and watched as he snatched it out of the air, blade side out. He gave her a return look that reached down in her gut. She had never seen that look on his face before, and she hoped she never would again. He was a trained, deadly, indomitable warrior. He had come back for her, and he was ready to kill if he had to.

My intensive training has taught me how to use my hands to fight. How to make a weapon with what I find around me.

Lord of Thunder

In one smooth stroke, Rion flipped the blade over and pivoted around, crouching as he swung the ax over his head, then releasing it in Foster's direction.

Foster's eyes widened until they were pools of white. His bravado shattered; his timing was too slow. He fired the gun but the bullet went harmlessly out into the night. He tried to duck but the butt of the blade caught him dead center in the middle of his breastbone. There was a muffled cracking sound. Foster grunted upon impact, stumbling backwards to fall heavily on his backside. His eyes rolled up into his head, and Foster Mayall was down.

Chapter 20

The Deliverance

Annie was still staring at the motionless figure that was her ex-husband when Rion rushed over to her.

“Annie! How badly did he hurt you?”

At first she could only stare up at him and at the shadows playing over his face. The rain had let up somewhat, leaving them both soaking wet. “Rion?” For no unexplainable reason, she was suddenly afraid that her mind was playing tricks on her. That he wasn’t really there. That she was lost inside her delusions as she lay inside the cabin, dying.

He reached for her, uncertain, not knowing how deep her injuries went. Overwhelmed, Annie burst into tears and lifted her left arm.

“Rion.”

He gathered her against him and sought her mouth. Beneath his hands that tried not to hurt her further, he could feel her bones and the tissue-thin softness of her skin. She knew she had become fragile and frighteningly vulnerable in the weeks since his departure. The woman he held in his arms was nearly lost to him.

Carefully, he lifted her up. It was then he saw her rounded belly, and she saw the look on his face as Foster’s caustic comments came back to him. A child. She carried his child.

“Annie...”

“Take me away, Rion. Take me away from here. Now.”

“We must hurry. I had planned on staying until the next storm, but that is impossible now.”

“Is he dead?”

“No, but if we stay he will hunt us down until I am forced to kill him.”

But first he sat her down long enough to pull his tunic over his head, slipping it onto her body to give her some protection. Behind them Foster moaned softly and started to move.

The storm was beginning to abate, making their departure all the more urgent.

“Take one last look, Annie. It will have to serve you for the rest of your life.”

She didn't want to look. She didn't want her last impressions of Dry Lick to be the blood-soaked ground littered with the body of her dear friend and neighbor, and the unconscious figure of the man who had never been a real husband to her. She wanted to remember the beauty of the place. The raw beauty, despite its remoteness and harsh, defeating weather that had wound its way into her heart.

Rion lifted her, spreading his wings in preparation. A hot flash of pain speared his right shoulder and reflected in his grimace. Gritting his teeth, he leaped into the air to race for the clouds. At the first downward stroke, he hissed from the agony.

“Rion...” Annie pressed her forehead against his neck. Her left arm clutched him; her fingers entwined with a deathlike grip in his long hair, while her useless right arm lay across her lap.

He fought for each foot of height, trying to catch the storm before it totally dissipated over the next mountain ridge. Their window was narrow, extremely narrow, and he would have to hurry if they were to make it through the clouds and find the gap between their worlds before it closed.

The pain was excruciating.

There was the sound of a gunshot. Something whizzed past them. Annie started, then turned her head around to look over his shoulder. Behind them, barely visible in the dying lantern light, she

saw Foster on his knees, hunched over but looking up at their departing figures.

No. He was aiming—

“Rion! He has the gun!” she cried out.

The last shot rang out before she could finish. Rion blacked out, and his entire body went stiff.

Annie screamed his name as they started to fall. “Rion!”

Somehow, miraculously, the huge, magnificent wings moved. Downstroke. Lift. Downstroke. Lift.

She felt his arms begin to lose their grip. His hands were like ice.

“Annie...” he gasped.

“You’ve been hit. Oh, God, Rion!”

“I can...not...” He could barely speak, barely keep himself focused. By sheer determination, willpower, and years of extensive training, he managed to keep them aloft, wings pounding the air as they slowly gained ground on the departing clouds. “Annie.”

“I love you,” she urgently whispered against his ear. “You came back for me. Whatever happens now, I’m with you. I’ll always be with you, my beloved.”

With each passing minute things were looking bleaker. It was obvious Rion was struggling and beginning to fail. Yet he continued to push push *push*, literally throwing them forward with each stroke.

“Hold on to me, Annie. I cannot feel my arms. Do not let me go.”

“Are we going to fall?”

She gasped, feeling a movement in her belly. The baby had moved. For the first time since the entire ordeal had begun, the child within her stretched, kicking one tiny foot against her womb. Outwardly pressing the skin over her stomach. Annie placed her lips back against his ear.

“Our son has survived. I can feel him moving! We can’t come this far and fail, Rion.”

The sky around them changed hue, changed texture. They rose, and the clouds enveloped them. A steady, uninterrupted rumbling could be heard in the distance. Rion’s arms continued to cling to her, but they no longer had any strength left in them. The bullet had done too much damage.

“Lightning,” he gasped.

“What?”

“The gap. Lightning will show us where...it is.” He shook his head in an attempt to clear it. “Watch the lightning. Look...for...the opening.”

The air was beginning to take on the heavy smell of ozone. They were inside the whirling vortexes that signaled approaching storm clouds, watching as sheets of light flashed all around them. Her husband had little strength left. The crossing was difficult enough for one. Rion was determined to bring two more living beings through the rift, regardless of the fact that he was severely injured, perhaps fatally. Annie pressed her face against his cold cheek. If she could give him any of her strength, any ounce of herself that could help him, she would, but she knew that his love for her was the only thing keeping him going.

A fork of lightning suddenly lit the cloud all around them. She felt herself tingling. Her skin crackled as if miniature fires were burning all over every exposed surface.

The relentless wings faltered, and they fell several feet.

Annie threw herself against his shoulder, clutching him. Out of the corner of her eye a strange glow hovered in the distance. It was a thin rip in the cloud, the light in its center a strange orange color. She knew without a doubt she was looking into his universe.

“Rion, look! Look! Rion!”

Somehow he heard her and opened his eyes. The rip was not very large; they were on the back side of the storm, chasing it as it drifted away from them.

Annie kept her eye on the threshold, willing them closer. As the tear in her world loomed nearer, she saw three dark spots floating around the edges. She closed her eyes then opened them again.

The rip was growing longer and thinner. The dark figures just beyond its edges were beginning to take shape.

Figures...with wings...waiting just beyond the rift.

Messenger angels.

"I see...I see your people waiting for us!" she cried. There was nothing left in him except what she could share. His face looked shrunken, nearly deathlike. The stroke of his wings wavered, not completing their beats, and she realized they would not make it.

"Rion, my husband, it's here! Look! We've made it! You've done it! You've brought me to your world! Look!"

She felt him take a deep, shaky breath. He opened his eyes to obey but they were glazed, unseeing. Pressing her lips to his cheek, she told him, "I would rather die in your arms, our hopes faded, our dreams unfulfilled, our child never to see the light of your two suns, than to face one more day on my world without you. You are my other soul. Thank you for giving it to me."

His back arched and his wings splayed forward. They stretched, reaching so far outward Annie could barely tell where their tips ended and the clouds began.

The orangish glow throbbed, almost like a heartbeat, and the two of them burst through a cloud bank to enter open sky. The rip was directly below when Rion tilted his head down and allowed gravity to pull the both of them downward. Annie shuddered as they plummeted sideways, held at an angle by the drag against his wings. They fell, gathering momentum as the rip rose to meet them.

They plunged through the tear like a body hitting the surface of water in a lake at a high rate of speed. If Rion had been holding her firmly, there might have been the chance she would not have been torn from his grasp. But as they penetrated the membrane stretched infinitesimally thin by the storm, Annie felt him lose her. She screamed and grabbed for him as he cartwheeled away.

Incredibly, another pair of arms reached and lifted her as an angel rose from below to catch her. At the same time the other two angels raced for Rion, stopping his fall by stretching a large, net below him. As soon as they caught him, they angled downward, carrying him between them.

“Where are they taking him?” Annie cried out. The angel was bearing her away, separating her and Rion. She felt her fears start to rise in her again and she lashed out at her captor, weakly beating at him with what little strength she had left, tears washing over her face. “Take me to him, damn you! Let me be with him!”

“He will be all right,” the angel told her calmly.

“No! No, you don’t understand! Don’t separate us! Rion...Rion...” she sobbed. Annie screamed and tried to wiggle free of the angel’s grasp. “Please, don’t do this to us. We’ve been through so much.”

“I have been ordered—”

“Damn your orders! Take me to him! If he dies, I have to be there with him! He has to know I was with him! Oh, please, please...” She closed her eyes and sobbed against the angel’s shoulder, even as she continued to reach out in the direction she had seen them taking Rion.

The angel slowed, hesitating. “You are...very much in love with him.”

Annie paused, surprised by the statement. “I have to stay with him, no matter what. How can I make you understand? Don’t take that away from us. Please. Don’t take me away from him.”

The angel slowed further and gradually began to turn. Annie looked up to see him staring in shock at her swollen belly. She studied the face of her rescuer fully for the first time. There was something familiar in the shape of the nose, the eyes, the cut of the jaw. Even through her tears she could see the resemblance. "You're Vadon," she said simply.

"And you...you could be no other than Annie."

She hiccuped. "You kn-know my name?"

Vadon smiled. "You do not know how much of a storm Rion created when he came back from his last mission. Our council was in turmoil."

"I-I don't understand. What storm?"

Vadon turned around and began to take them back the way they'd come. His speed increased, his wings slicing through the sky.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"To him. To the hospital where they have taken my brother."

"Won't you get into trouble for disobeying orders?"

Vadon glanced down at her. She recognized the look he gave her as one Rion often graced her with when she asked him a question that had a complicated answer.

"When Rion arrived back from his initial mission, he made me promise to place your needs above everything else. Above even him if he failed. He trusts me to safeguard you, at all costs, and I swore not to let him down. At this moment your need is to be with him. I am only following orders," he finally replied with a grin.

Moments later they slid through the cloud and out into the open sky. Annie gasped. In the distance was an immense white tower, rising taller than the others around it. Huge semicircular areas ringed the tower from base to top, and Annie could see other angels landing and taking off from those areas.

The two angels who had caught Rion were landing on one. She watched as they were met by more people, all who disappeared

inside the tower with her husband. Glancing up at Vadon, she said, "He needs a doctor."

"He is being taken to the physicians now. Do not worry, Annie. He is in the best of care."

She started to ask again for him to take her where they'd landed with Rion, but it was unnecessary. Vadon was doing just that.

When Vadon's feet touched down, Annie struggled for him to release her. Too late, she started to fall from his grasp. Vadon caught her before she hit the floor. In the orange-yellow light of the two suns, she saw him notice the open welts and bruises on her body, and the smears of dried blood.

"Annie, you need tending as well."

"No." She shook her head, looking for the doorway. "Take me to him first. I have to be with him."

"It is not permitted—"

"Dammit, Vadon! I will be with my husband even if I have to crawl on my hands and knees to get to him!"

Vadon sighed, pausing, then gave her a quick nod and helped her to her feet. Annie cried out softly when he gripped her right side.

"Annie!"

"Take me to him," she managed to gasp.

He took it slowly for her sake, guiding her through the corridors which wove through the tower. As they passed other angels emerging or exiting through other doorways, the winged people always stopped to stare at her. Their expressions were unreadable to her. Annie figured it must be something that all of Rion's people had perfected—blank expressions.

She must look like something gone terribly wrong, she figured. Like an incomplete picture. No wings. Half-naked. Smearred with blood and mud. Vadon was right; she'd need a doctor's attention soon.

“Why are they staring at me like that?” she whispered. “I know I must look a fright.”

“We all were aware of your coming,” Vadon told her.

“So, do I look that freakish? I mean, with me not having any wings?”

“No, Annie. That is not why they feel they must see you. It is knowing who you are and what you have done.”

“I still don’t understand.”

At a set of large double doors, Vadon pushed them aside and led her in. A group of angels in blood-red tunics and pants stood in a circle in the middle of the room. One glanced over his shoulder, and the look of shock on his face was clear. “Vadon!”

“I have brought Annie, as she requested.”

The angel moved to the side, and Annie saw the table within their circle. Rion was on it. She shrugged out of Vadon’s grasp and managed to reach the table where her husband lay on his stomach.

His pants had been removed, but there was no escaping the rivulets of blood staining his back and down his legs. More blood had splattered his wings in large splotches, and Annie was finally able to see how much damage the bullet had created. She also noticed these people were laying their hands directly upon Rion, rather than sticking him with needles and whatever doctors usually did. Annie opened her mouth to question them about their technique when one of the red-garbed angels turned to her.

“Do you know what happened?” the surprised physician questioned.

“He was shot trying to save me,” she whispered. She dropped to her knees at the head of the table. One of Rion’s hands lay near his face. She clutched it in her own, leaning close so he could hear her. “Rion? Rion, we made it. We’ve reached your world. You did it. You saved me. Rion? Can you hear me?”

She was faintly aware of the physicians and what they were doing. As they worked they spoke in a language she wasn’t familiar

with, which didn't bother her. If they wanted to talk about her, that was fine. It wouldn't change things. She would never let go of her husband's hand now, no matter what happened, because she realized her destiny had always been his, a fact she'd never accepted until just then. She had been destined to go to Montana, by whatever means possible, and be there when he fell. She had been destined to heal him, to love him, and to bring her love into his life as well.

"Rion, you have to come back to me, do you hear me? You have to live. You have to live so that we can be together. Dammit, Rion, you promised you would never leave me. You must live! Please..." She started to cry again, leaning her forehead against his arm. "Don't leave me alone without you. I couldn't bear it. Please...don't make our son be the next Lord of the House of Thunder before he's even born."

Within her grasp she felt his fingers move. It was a slight movement, but enough to send her heart into her throat. Annie looked over at him to see that his eyes were open. And focused on her.

"Vadon." His voice was weak, raspy, papery.

Vadon broke through the circle, bending down on one knee so that they could be eye-to-eye.

"Rion!"

"Take...care...of her. Vadon. Mark her."

Vadon nodded then started to raise Annie to her feet. She protested vehemently and jerked away from his reach. Another weak squeeze on her fingers drew her attention back to the table.

"I will live...my Annie. Go with...him."

"Rion, no. I don't want to leave you."

"Go...be healed. Vadon will see...you are cared for."

"Rion..."

"I love you."

Annie opened her mouth to protest once more, but the physician laid a hand on her right shoulder. She buckled painfully at the touch. Vadon caught her and cradled her in his arms.

She relented. If Rion said he would live, she believed him. He wanted her back, but he wanted her healed and healthy when he awoke. He was right—she was no good to him or to their son if she insisted on not accepting their help.

Giving Vadon a smile, she nodded. To her amazement, Vadon leaned over the table with one arm, then bent back over her and smeared Rion's blood over her cheek and down her neck. She stared at him, silently questioning his actions.

"He told me to mark you."

"Why?"

"Come. We will seek medical help for you."

Meekly, for once, Annie allowed him to half-carry, half-guide her out of the room and back down several corridors. She reached up to touch the blood on her face, looking down in disbelief at the smears on her fingertips.

They arrived at another set of large doors, which they went through. Annie found they'd entered another room, but this one was immense, with an interior the size of an enormous building. It was filled with hundreds of angels, all standing around talking. As she entered through the doors, their talking ceased, and they turned around to stare at her. Annie took a step back. "Vadon?"

"Do not worry. This must be done first."

"But why? Who are all these people? Why are they watching me?"

"They are here to see you."

"What?" She glanced at him, then back at the crowd. "Me? Why?"

"As is our custom, I am presenting you as the wife of my brother, since he cannot do it himself. That is why you were marked."

Lord of Thunder

“So many? Am I that much of a sideshow attraction?”

“No, Annie,” Vadon assured her. “These people came to honor you. But more than that, they came to catch a glimpse of the woman who has captured the heart of the hardest, coldest, and most driven man we have ever known.”

Then he smiled.

Chapter 21

The Ritual

Vadon took her to a small chamber which held a padded table much like the one Annie had seen Rion lying on. Inside an angel was waiting for them. He also wore the same kind of blood-red clothing she had seen Rion's angels wearing. Annie realized it must be their version of a uniform or robe of office.

Gently, Vadon helped her onto the table, guiding her head down so she lay on her back. Giving the physician a nod, he stepped back and out of her range of sight. The physician walked up and placed a warm hand on her abdomen. Instantly she could feel the pain being lifted away, leaving behind a sense of drowsiness. The healing sleep.

"You are Annie," he commented and smiled. Annie liked him immediately. He had a comforting voice and demeanor.

"How is the baby?" she asked as his hand gently followed the contours of her belly.

"He is going to be a healthy child," the angel replied.

"He?" All this time she had thought of the baby as male, but having this man confirm the fact gave her an extra boost of happiness. Something she was sorely needing at the moment. "With wings?" she added.

"Perhaps. Let me have a look at you now."

The physician carefully removed the long tunic Rion had wrapped her in during their escape. Annie lifted her arms to allow him to pull its sodden, bloodied mess over her head. Upon viewing her body, he started. Annie watched him with heavy-lidded eyes.

For some reason she couldn't explain, she knew the angel would treat her with the greatest care. Already she was feeling woozy; her weariness was growing, now that the pure adrenalin that had supported her during their escape had faded.

"I will need to bring in a colleague," he said to her.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Your wounds will need to heal rapidly in order for the child to remain healthy. An assistant will aid me in doing that."

She nodded. A moment later another red-clothed angel joined him. A woman. She took her cue from the man and walked around to the other side of the table. He said something to her in a language Annie didn't understand, but it sounded like the same one the physicians tending Rion had used. The woman bent over to speak to her.

"We are going to touch you in places that may make you uncomfortable. Please be assured we are doing so to heal you."

Annie gave her a weak smile. "Just make me better...for my husband's sake."

"We will also ask you questions about some of your injuries. The more we know about how they were created, the better we will be able to cure them. Will you help us?"

"Yes."

"Good." The woman physician smiled gently.

Annie sighed. Their hands were so warm, and they caressed her with the utmost care. They began by examining her feet, moving up her legs. The male physician fingered the puckered scar on her calf.

"A recent injury?"

"I hit myself with an ax. Rion bled into it to save me. And he stuffed some of his feathers in it, too."

The woman angel nodded. "She bears his blood in her veins," she commented to her partner cryptically.

"Make note," he told her.

They gently spread her legs. Annie heard the woman physician's sharp intake of breath.

"You have been... violated?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"My ex-husband. The man who deserted me. The man who tried to kill me and Rion and our baby."

A warm hand touched her intimate places, brushing the angry purple and black marks defacing the inside of her thighs. Annie closed her eyes to relax, no longer embarrassed or ashamed of her nakedness in front of these two people.

Two people. Rion had been ringed by at least a dozen or more, she recalled, which made her wonder. Did the number of people who were brought in to heal a person have anything to do with how badly they were hurt? She remembered what the male physician had said. *Your wounds will need to heal rapidly in order for the child to remain healthy. An assistant will aid me in doing that.*

Maybe it did.

Fingers tenderly probed her bruises, pressed against the deep lacerations left by the studded belt, and warm palms cupped her breasts. Annie explained why the wounds were there. The angels simply nodded in response. Their movements were slow, deliberate, and thorough. Soothing heat penetrated her skin and went diving down toward the center of her body, easing the tenseness and rigidity of her muscles.

The woman physician laid the back of her hand along Annie's neck. Annie sighed at the contact.

"You are bearing his mark," the woman said. It was then Annie realized she must still have Rion's dried blood on her face. The woman gave her a beautiful smile. "You have been blessed."

Again, another cryptic remark. Annie figured she might as well give up trying to make sense of everything, at least for the

time being. Maybe she would finally learn what all was going on once she'd been on this world a while longer.

"Vadon?" she murmured softly.

"I am here, Annie," Vadon answered from somewhere in the back of the room. Annie turned her head, hoping to see him, then remembered her state of undress. She also realized that he now knew the extent of her injuries, who had caused them, and how. For some reason, it felt good to let others know the truth without fear of reprisal.

"Would you go see how Rion is doing? Please?"

"My orders are to stay with you."

"Please."

The male physician turned slightly and gave a nod. She heard movement behind her.

"I will return momentarily."

"We are almost finished," the male angel told him.

There was an answering sound. The door. Their doors were so different. They kind of slid into the walls instead of moving back on hinges.

The woman physician had reached Annie's right shoulder. Placing both hands under her back, she nodded to her partner who placed his hands beneath Annie's left side.

"This will be very painful. If you feel the need to cry out, do so. Your arm was ejected from the socket and we need to replace it."

Annie gritted her teeth. She knew it was going to hurt like a son of a gun. "Go ahead."

One physician pulled as the other twisted. Annie screamed, then fell back onto the table gasping between her tears. The woman angel laid a hand over her forehead.

"The nerves in your arms were pinched. It will take a day or so for the feeling to come back. Do not be alarmed."

Breathing heavily, Annie looked up at her. "Thank you."

Lord of Thunder

The male physician reached under the table and produced a thin blanket the color of spring leaves. He opened it, and together he and the woman covered Annie, tucking the edges around her body.

“You will be taken to a room to rest,” the man explained.

“How long?” Annie questioned.

“How long what?” the woman asked.

“How long will I be in the hospital?”

The two physicians exchanged brief comments in that strange language before the woman turned back to her. “A few days. Maybe a week. No more.”

“Will I be near Rion?”

“Near? Yes, you will be nearby.”

“Can I see him?”

The male physician shook his head. “His injuries are too extensive. In time, however, you will be permitted to see him.”

“How much time?” she insisted.

The woman again brushed the back of her hand against Annie’s cheek. “We will not hide the truth from you. He has been hurt very seriously. They are still working on him.”

A deep sense of contentment was enveloping her, making it difficult to keep herself focused. It had to be part of the healing process. “Thank you again...for helping Rion...and our baby...and me,” she managed to say as her consciousness faded.

She never felt the teardrop that fell upon her cheek from the woman angel.

Chapter 22

The Renewal

It was dark when Annie awakened. Or partially dark. When she opened her eyes, she could see her shadow wavering slightly against the wall she was facing. Carefully she turned her head to look on the other side of the bed. Someone was asleep in a chair against the far corner. Beside her, on a bedside table, a candle burned steadily, brightly.

It was hard to make out who was in the chair, as the shadows kept the person hidden, but she surmised it must be Vadon.

“Vadon?” she whispered. “Vadon?”

To her surprise, the woman physician was at her side almost instantly. Annie blinked, trying to focus. The woman placed a hand on Annie’s chest, then gave her a soft smile.

“How do you feel?”

“How is Rion?”

The woman nodded. “He is healing. He has asked about you.”

“When can I see him?”

The woman laughed softly. “Have you ever once thought of your own well-being first?”

Annie gave her a puzzled look. Her own well-being? “My husband and our baby, that’s my well-being. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The woman thought about it for a moment. “I guess you are right. Would you like something to drink?”

“Please.” At the mention of something to drink, Annie’s throat felt as parched as a well gone dry, which also made her wonder

when the last time was she'd had something to eat or drink. "Tell me something?" she asked the physician.

"What is it you want to know?"

"What is your name?"

"My name is Chloe." She reached behind her into the shadows and turned back around with a glass, which she held out to Annie.

"Do you need help getting up?"

Getting up? Carefully, surprisingly, Annie lifted herself up on one elbow and was able to reach out with her right hand to grasp the glass. Chloe made certain she had a good grip on it before letting go. Annie drained the glass and handed it back. Her hand, arm, and shoulder felt as good as new. She flexed her fingers in response.

"More?"

"No. Thank you."

She watched the woman replace the glass behind her. "Where is Vadon?"

"I sent him home. It is late, Annie. He has been by your side relentlessly since your return, and he needed to be relieved."

"How long has it been?" Annie asked her. "I mean, since we got back?"

"Our time is different than it is on your world," Chloe began to explain. Annie cut her off.

"I know that. In your time, here, on this world...how long?"

"Three days in our time."

"Three days?" Annie fell back against the bedding and looked around her at the small, bare-looking room. "How am I doing?" she asked the physician.

Chloe smiled and nodded. "You are nearly healed. There are some areas, the ones most deeply cut, that will take another couple of days to completely repair, but otherwise you are doing extremely well. Can you not tell by the way you feel?"

Taking a deep breath, Annie did a mental inventory on her body. Other than the fact that her bottom was getting tired of her lying on her back for so long, she felt amazingly good.

“What time is it?”

“Sunset was four cycles ago. It is the middle of the night.”

Annie sat up. “Why are you here? I saw you sleeping over in the corner. I didn’t know physicians took such an interest in their patients.”

Chloe bit her lower lip, obviously choosing her words carefully before replying. “You might say I have a personal reason for being here.”

If Annie didn’t know better, she would have guessed the woman was blushing. “How personal?”

“You see...”

“You relieved Vadon,” Annie remembered aloud. “Are you and Vadon...” When the woman gave her a small, embarrassed smile, Annie suddenly understood. She smiled at the woman angel. “You’re in love with Vadon, aren’t you?” Her answer was Chloe’s silence. “Does he love you?”

“Yes,” Chloe replied.

“Are you two engaged?” That would explain why Vadon had left Annie alone in Chloe’s care. Other than his brother, there was probably no one else Vadon trusted to watch over her.

“Not...quite.”

“Not quite? Is that an almost yes, or a maybe no?”

“It is complicated,” Chloe admitted.

“Oh, God, when it comes to love, isn’t that the truth!” Annie snorted softly. “So what is causing a problem?”

“It does not matter. Do not worry yourself about it.”

Annie reached over and snagged Chloe’s arm. She ran her hand down the woman’s arm until she reached her hand, and pulled the woman closer. In the dim candlelight she examined the wondrous fingers and palm which had that amazing ability to cure

with a touch. Looking back up into Chloe's chocolate-colored eyes, she smiled.

"I have given my life to the brother of the man you love. In my book, that would make us sisters-in-law. You are a kind and generous woman. You have a gift of healing. How could I not worry?"

Chloe gazed at her for a long moment. "We are... we are both committed to our professions. He is a messenger of the House of Thunder. I am a physician just beginning to earn distinction."

"Just beginning to earn distinction?" Annie chuckled. She slowly sat up and swung her legs over the side the bed so she could be closer. "How could you think so little of yourself? You who just gave me a little lecture about me thinking about my own well-being." Taking both of the woman's hands, Annie placed them on Chloe's own chest. "On my world we have a saying. 'Physician, heal thyself'. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"I think I do," Chloe admitted, but she still didn't sound convinced.

"When is Vadon coming back?"

"In the first morning."

"First morning?" Annie thought back. Two suns? Two mornings? "Never mind," she quickly said before Chloe had the chance to explain. "I think I understand. And where will you go after he spells you?"

"After he what?"

"Spells you. Takes over when you're done," Annie explained.

"Oh! Home. To rest. It has been a remarkable day."

Annie cocked her head. "Can I ask you something else?"

"You may ask me anything."

"Who was that man angel who also took care of me?"

"You mean Mannion? He is my superior. My...umm...teacher."

“Mannion. All right. So tell me, how were you chosen to take care of me? I mean, who decides who gets to heal whom around here? Why weren’t you and Mannion with Rion?”

“I requested to be with you,” Chloe said simply.

Annie paused, startled. “You asked to be my physician?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Because you knew Rion had asked Vadon to watch over me should something happen to him?” *And it would put you in close contact with the man you love?*

As if reading her mind, Chloe nodded. “That. And for another reason. Your coming was probably the single most anticipated event to happen to us in many lifetimes. It was all everyone could talk about. Rion had found a mate, a wife, on the other world, and he was bringing her back here to live.”

“Everyone couldn’t wait to see the wingless wonder, huh?” Annie said softly, her smile suddenly gone.

Chloe shook her head. Her hands closed around Annie’s and squeezed them gently. “You do not understand. This was Rion. How much do you know about what he was like before he met you?”

What was it Vadon had told her before he presented her to the crowd of people waiting to see her? *“These people came to honor you. But more than that, they came to catch a glimpse of the woman who has captured the heart of the hardest, coldest, and most driven man we have ever known.”*

“Was he so hard?” Annie whispered.

“Calloused. Cold. Unforgiving of himself. Yes. All that, and more.”

“He still grieves over his father’s death. He believes he’ll never be able to live up to the man’s legacy.”

“Dramon was a great warrior. That would explain why he took the most dangerous missions to your world.”

Annie looked up at her. "Rion's trying so hard to be worthy, and I have destroyed it."

"What? How?"

"He was shot trying to save me and bring me back here." The tears were coming back, warm and silent, and threatening to overflow. "He could have died just like his father. And all because of me."

"No, Annie. Dramon's death was an accident. He was returning and was shot by accident. It was nothing like your circumstance. Why can you not see the truth?"

"What is the truth?" Annie wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I don't know your world. I'm scared I'm going to lose my husband. I'm terrified of waking up day after day after day with him gone, this time for good." Her breath hitched in her throat.

Chloe took her into her arms as Annie began to sob. She poured her special gift into the woman trembling in her arms, and shortly the crying began to taper off.

"Listen to me, Annie. Listen and take this to heart. Rion is a very special breed of man. He has no fear, or believes such. He also believed he had no need for love. No need to face each day unless he was out there trying to prove himself. We knew he would eventually destroy himself. It was simply a matter of when.

"He always appeared angry, although he never spoke harshly to anyone. He refused to take the required rest between missions. He was distant. He was..."

"Until my landing here, I was an entirely different person. Sullen. Brash. Ill-tempered. Very headstrong."

"He was trying to punish himself for a crime he never committed," Annie interjected. She felt Chloe nod.

"That is why, when he returned from this last mission, his pronouncement put us all in shock."

Annie leaned back. "What did he do? What did he say?"

Chloe took a moment to think back. "First, he refused to let any physician check him, as he knew was required. Instead, he went directly to the council."

"Breaking the rules, huh?"

"Yes, very much so. But this was Rion. Renegade. Trouble-seeker."

Annie wondered what he might have been like as a child, then mused if their son would inherit any of his father's traits.

"And then... then he said something that threw the council into absolute turmoil. He announced he had found a woman who had exchanged vows with him, and he was returning on the next mission path, regardless of what the schedule was, to bring her back here to live with him."

Annie grinned. That sounded like her Rion. "I can imagine."

"But you still do not understand," Chloe chided her gently. "It was not the fact that Rion was telling the council what he was going to do. It wasn't the fact that he was breaking any number of rules and protocol. They were accustomed to that, even though they resented his boldness and audacity. No. What astounded everyone, *everyone*, was the fact that he had fallen in love. That he had pledged himself to another." She looked into Annie's eyes. "That is why we all have to see who you are. Find out what kind of woman you are. That is why everyone is asking, 'Who is this person not of our kind who has melted the warrior without a heart?'"

"Was he truly so distant?"

"Already there is much talk about you since your arrival," Chloe informed her. "Your appearance could not be disguised. Everyone knows how badly you were injured, just not to what extent. Do not worry. Mannion and I are vowed to hold your confidence. News of how Rion was wounded also got out. Annie, do you know what astounds them even more?"

"The fact that I looked like something the cat dragged in?" Annie quipped, trying to make light of the fact. Deep down, she

couldn't believe she had done anything that no other woman would have done.

Chloe smiled. "That your first words were about Rion or your baby. Never about you. Never about us, or this world. But about them. That, on our world, is the ultimate sacrifice. Rion also showed that same sacrifice when he went back for you without permission and nearly died for it."

Without permission. "Will he be punished for his disobedience?"

"Eventually, yes, but what can the council do? There is no other warrior with the passion Rion has shown."

"Not even Dramon?"

"Dramon went on many, many missions, yes. But there are just a few places where the mission path is so dangerous that warriors draw lots to see who will tread it. Dramon never took any of those paths. Rion accepted every one."

Annie gasped and clutched her belly. Chloe was instantly attentive, laying both hands upon her.

"Your son is awake."

"Put him back to sleep," Annie asked with a smile. "I'm afraid he's going to be just like his father."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Annie laughed softly. "I like you, Chloe. Please, I don't know what is keeping you and Vadon apart, but if you both truly love each other, there are no obstacles that can't be overcome. Trust me. Rion and I have surmounted them all."

Chapter 23

The Request

Vadon walked into the recovery room just as Rion was being hoisted upward on the suspension pole. His brother's face was still deathly pale, but that determined set of his jaw was something Vadon was happy to see.

The suspension pole would keep Rion's wings outstretched to their fullest, thus preventing them from atrophying. A physician was already at his brother's side, her hands on his shoulders, to keep most of the pain at bay. Otherwise the agony would be too much for him to bear.

He walked forward until his movements caught Rion's attention. Closer to him, Vadon could see sweat beading the man's face and matting his hair to his scalp. Vadon's eyes narrowed. Was it his imagination, or was Rion's hair shorter?

"Annie?" The man's voice cracked. Even with the physician there, the pressure on his back had to be excruciating.

"Chloe says she's doing excellently. In fact, she might go home soon."

Rion winced in pain as his right wing was realigned. A minute passed before he could speak again. "The baby?"

This time Vadon could not contain his joy. "It is a son, Rion. You are going to have a son."

The look that overcame Rion was one he wished he could savor forever.

"S-son?"

“Yes.” Vadon nodded, grinning broadly. “A son! And he is doing very well, according to Mannion.”

Sitting in the back of the room while Chloe and Mannion administered to Annie, a thousand thoughts had gone through his mind. This outworlder his brother had taken to wife was nothing like he expected. In some ways she reminded him of his brother, with as much fire to her temperament as Rion. But unlike the other women Rion had allowed into his life in the past, Annie deeply cared for her husband. In every word, every gesture, she proved her devotion to Rion with a strength that surprised Vadon.

Once he heard the child Annie carried was a boy, he knew the information would be another source of healing for Rion. Vadon grew determined to be the first one to tell him. But first he had to wait a few days until Rion emerged from his medically induced coma before he could share the news.

Now he watched as Rion flinched against the suspension rod, and a tear emerged from under the dark gold lashes. It wasn't the pain that caused his older brother to weep. It was the miracle of a child.

“Vadon.”

“Yeah?”

He couldn't go up and touch his brother. Not while he was being tended to. If he tried, it would divert some of the physician's healing ability into himself, and Vadon didn't want to cause problems. But he could get near enough to see that old familiar spark in Rion's eye.

“Make sure...the house is...is ready for her. Please.”

Vadon tried not to appear shocked. His brother said please? “Do not worry. Chloe and I will make sure she is comfortable and well taken care of until you are released from here.”

The promise brought a twitch to the corner of Rion's thinned lips. “Chloe... Are you two...”

“We are, uhh, making progress,” Vadon admitted. “Slow progress, but progress all the same. Chloe requested to be Annie’s personal physician, and she has been granted that privilege.”

Rion tried to nod, but the muscles in his neck had stiffened. He gasped, and the physician shifted a hand to the back of his head. Presently his features relaxed.

“A son.”

Vadon laughed softly. “Yeah, you old *dreergad*. Imagine that. You are going to be a father. And I will have a nephew!”

“Kerr,” Rion whispered in a barely audible voice. Vadon had to lean forward to catch it.

“What?”

A hard swallow. “Kerr,” Rion repeated. “His name will . . . will be Kerr.”

“You have already checked with the historians?” Vadon asked, then realized his mistake. Of course Rion would have already conferred with the historians to make certain the name had not already been used.

Rion tried to smile in lieu of nodding. “My Annie . . . and my s-son.”

Vadon waited as another silent tear glistened on Rion’s cheek.

“Tell . . . tell her . . . I love her,” he managed.

“I will,” Vadon promised, then stepped back as the physician was relieved by a new healer, and Rion was submerged into sleep.

Giving the red-robed man a nod of appreciation, Vadon stepped out of the recovery room. But instead of heading for the next floor and Annie’s room, he detoured into a small anteroom where he couldn’t be observed.

In all the years growing up together, Vadon could only remember one other time when he had seen his older brother cry. It had been when they were informed of their father’s death. Although their mother’s death had been a blow, it was Dramon’s which grieved Rion the most.

Lord of Thunder

Annie, her love, and the impending birth of their son, was finally giving Rion a chance at humanity. For the first time in many, many cycles, Rion would be able to lead a normal life. One filled with the happiness he had denied himself since childhood.

Bowing his head, Vadon allowed himself to weep at the miracle he never expected to happen.

Chapter 24

The Release

When Annie awoke again, daylight permeated through the walls of her room. Vadon was sitting in the chair on the opposite side of the room, intent on the book he was reading, unaware of her waking. For a long minute Annie studied this man who was Rion's brother, taking in the fact that in the clear light of day he had the same coloring as Rion, and shared similar facial features, but that was where all likenesses ended. He was shorter in stature and lacked the musculature. Then again, he had not undergone the intensive training a warrior was put to as soon as he was able to walk and fly.

She cleared her throat. Vadon immediately dropped the book and hurried over to her. He seemed genuinely happy.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"How is Rion? I'm starved. What is there to eat?"

"I just came from his room. He is in suspension at the moment." Vadon walked over to the door which disappeared into the wall and stuck his head around the corner. Coming back inside, he told her, "Someone will bring you a tray."

"What do you mean, Rion is in suspension?"

"He is being suspended to give his wings a chance to stretch." He held out his arms and carefully extended his own wings to show her.

"Is it painful?"

"Not usually. It is how we are taught to fly. But with his injuries not quite healed, it is quite excruciating for him."

Annie gave herself a little kick in the common sense department. For some reason she'd envisioned little angel babies being kicked out of the nest when their parents wanted them to learn to fly on their own, the same way birds were taught. The analogy now seemed ridiculous.

"Has he asked about me?"

Vadon rolled his eyes. "His physicians are enraged. He is pushing himself to get better. Every time I enter his room, he has to know how you are doing and what you have said. He found out you are carrying a son, and that is all he talks about, you or the babe. Look at what you have done to him!" he accused, and smiled.

Annie reached out to pat his arm. "You love your brother very much, don't you?"

Vadon suddenly grew serious. "Rion was on a path that would have killed him if he had not met you. For that you have my eternal gratitude."

A male angel entered the room with a small bundle, which he placed on the end of the bed before exiting. Vadon handed it to her. It was a shift of very fine material, light blue in color, with wide shoulder straps instead of sleeves. At Annie's questioning look, he explained.

"I was told you could go home today once you awakened. Your physicians have cleared you."

"You mean Chloe?"

At the sound of her name, Vadon dropped his eyes. Annie reached out to clutch his hand.

"Vadon, at some point in time you're going to have to talk. Look at me. If Rion and I can overcome what we had to in order to be together, what's preventing the two of you from getting together?"

"It is more complicated than that."

Lifting her arms, Annie snorted softly. "Everyone talks about complications! Goodness gracious alive, look at me!"

Vadon did, and burst out laughing. "You have a point," he finally admitted. "Here. I will see where your breakfast is while you dress."

"There's no underwear," Annie pointed out, lifting the shift so she could eye it. It appeared huge, but then again she was a bit bigger around the middle than she normally would be.

"We do not wear underwear."

"You don't wear shoes, either," she observed.

Vadon looked down at his bare feet, then up at her. "We have no need to."

Of course not. They flew everywhere. They probably didn't walk that much on the ground, either. She'd noticed the floors were so spotless she could eat off of them.

The shift fit her, with ample more room to expand. It stopped about mid-calf and felt luxuriously soft against her skin.

"I feel naughty." She grinned, blushing.

Vadon returned her grin. "How so?"

"I can't imagine running around in public without a bra and panties."

"Get used to it. In fact, be open to a lot of new things, Annie," he told her.

Nodding, she attempted to braid her hair to keep it from hanging loose. Normally she didn't care whether or not it was even or looked decent, especially when she was living alone. This morning, however, was different. She wished she had a brush or a piece of material which she could use to tie it back.

As promised, Vadon returned with a tray, which he placed beside her on the bed.

"You wouldn't happen to have a brush I could use? Or a mirror? I'm sure I look as appealing as a wart."

Sighing, Vadon walked over to the wall opposite the bed and pressed his hand against the crystal panel. It seemed to recede a bit

and take on a luminescence. Annie found herself looking back at herself.

“All right, one miracle down, one to go.”

“That one I will have to go out and get myself. Will you be all right until I return?”

She waved her hand at him in a shooing motion. “Go.”

“I will not be long.”

However, moments after he left a familiar figure entered. This time the physician was not wearing her red attire.

“Chloe! Why aren’t you at home resting?”

“I had to come up to approve your dismissal. Vadon said he had to get you a hairbrush, so I told him I would watch you until he returned.”

Annie gave her a little grin. “How is it between the two of you? Any better?”

Chloe paused before admitting, “There is a chance.”

“Good! Now, tell me what in the world is on this tray? And then tell me, how do I cook it?”

“Cook it? Why would you cook?”

Annie lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t you cook?”

“Yes, I do,” Chloe said, “but Rion always has his meals brought in. All warriors do.”

“Of course he would. It’s the bachelor thing to do. But now that I’m here, I need to learn what kinds of foods he likes and how to fix them. It would only be fair, since he had to do a lot of the cooking when I hurt my leg.”

Chloe appeared stunned. “Rion cooked?”

“Sure! Why? Did I say something so totally un-Rion?”

The woman angel shrugged. In the bright daylight her chocolate-colored hair gleamed, as did her cocoa-colored wings. With her flawless, creamy complexion, she looked beautiful. More beautiful than she did with her own flat black hair and freckles.

* * * *

“What is all over your face?” Rion asked her one night. What had started out as them having a quiet evening before the fire, her with her sewing and he with a book, had eventually resulted in them in front of the fire, making passionate love. As they lay afterward near the hearth, he had placed a finger on the tip of her nose and made the observation.

“They’re called freckles,” she told him.

“Does this mean you are dappled?” he teased, referring back to the Funderburkes’ horse.

“You’re mean.” Annie laughed. “Ugly, aren’t they?”

“No,” he said, suddenly very serious. “They are what make you incredibly beautiful to me.”

She disagreed. “I’m not beautiful. I’m plain and simple. Why you even waste your time with me, I don’t understand.” She had meant to sound playful, not necessarily self-degrading.

For the first and only time, she saw anger against her flash in his eyes as his expression darkened, and he gave her a little shake. “You have done more to change me than I can ever begin to explain. Your beauty has reshaped the way I see my life. Your courage has given me a reason to keep trying. Your grasp of goodness, in how you treat others, has helped me to rethink the way I also treat others. Never tear yourself down in front of me, Annie. Never again. Promise.”

* * * *

She had promised. And now that she thought back on it, on how he made love to her after that, maybe that was the night when she became pregnant. If that was so, it seemed fitting that she would conceive from what clearly was an act of desperation on his part.

While she ate, Chloe explained the simple meal, patiently answering her questions even though Annie had difficulty following much of what she said. It would take a while until she grew accustomed to this new world.

Another angel brought her a hairbrush and some ribbon. Chloe braided her hair and tied it for her. That done, Annie used the facilities before letting the physician lead her out the door and down the corridor where Vadon had sent word he would be waiting for her to take her home.

Several yards down the hallway, Annie stopped and looked at Chloe. "Where's Rion? Can I see him? Is he nearby?"

"He is in suspension," Chloe said.

"Yes, I know that. Is he nearby?"

The woman physician slowly shook her head. "No. He is some distance from here. But I have been told he is making great progress."

They made their way to the platform outside the tower walls. Both suns were burning brightly, forcing Annie to shade her eyes with one hand as she looked over the world that would be her new Earth.

"It's beautiful!" she breathed.

"I heard your world is equally beautiful," Vadon said.

"But in a different way," Annie told him.

"Just as you are beautiful in your own way," said Chloe. Turning to Vadon she said, "I left the draught on the table in the walkway, near the front door."

He nodded. "I know where that is."

"Be careful." She placed a hand on his arm, and for a long moment they mutely stared into each other's eyes. Then Vadon leaned over and tenderly kissed her. Their lips lingered briefly before Chloe quickly turned away. She reached out to give Annie a hug. "I will see you again soon to check on you. Until I feel you are completely recovered, I am still your physician."

Annie hugged her in return, adding a quick kiss to the woman's cheek. "You're not coming with us?"

"No. I have other patients I must look in on before I leave. Vadon will see that you have everything you need."

"I won't have everything until I am back in Rion's arms," Annie said softly.

Chloe gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Soon," she whispered. A promise.

Annie looked at Vadon. "Ready?" he asked. She nodded, and he lifted her effortlessly into his arms, despite her added weight. He then casually leaped off the platform and spread his wings.

They soared over spires and towers made of crystal and glass. Over buildings and walkways the color of spun sugar in a sky as orange as a sunset. Annie took a deep breath. It smelled like Montana. Clean and pure. It smelled like...

...like Rion.

She dipped her head as melancholy took over, and pressed herself against Vadon as he carried her to a massive spire set apart from the others. It was a rich black color, almost like obsidian, shiny and gleaming like a sparkling shadow. He landed on one of the upper platforms, smaller than the one at the hospital, but large enough to accommodate several people. Annie glanced around in wonder.

"This is home?"

"This is where we grew up. I have my own place, but Rion still lives here. Of course, he has changed most of what was inside. Come. I will show you around."

He pressed his hand against the door, which slid into the wall. Next to the entryway Annie saw a small table. A little vial of liquid sat on it. Vadon snatched it and handed it to her.

"You must take this before you go to bed tonight," he instructed. "It will aid in your recovery."

Annie remembered what Chloe had said, and nodded.

Inside, the walls, ceilings, and floor were a dark blue; the furniture was all glass and crystal. Everything was equally breathtaking in design and beauty. Vadon pointed out the kitchen, the bathroom, and finally the bedroom. Despite its awe-inspiring appear-

ance, Annie couldn't help but notice how sparse the place was. It was too bare, and hardly inviting. It was clearly the home of a warrior who took no comfort in things of beauty. Or who had no use for beauty in his life. Had she seen this place before knowing it was Rion's home, she would never have believed it. To her, it was nothing like the man who had woven flowers in her hair one bright spring morning.

Walking into what was clearly the largest room in the home, Annie gasped to see the immense bed. "Oh, my," she managed to say in a small voice. It was easily as large as Rion with his wings extended. She glanced up to see Vadon blushing. Unable to contain her own amusement, she burst out laughing.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked.

"This home is not the Rion I know," she told him honestly.

Vadon gave her a surprised look. "No?"

She smiled. "No. My Rion told me my eyes were the color of perillion. What's perillion?"

"He said that?" Vadon asked with a smile. "A perillion is a flower...of sorts. A deep green color. It glows. It is quite stunning to see at night. *Your* Rion, eh?"

"Um-hmm." Looking around, she remembered Vadon commenting on the fact that this had been his family home as well. That meant there had to be another bedroom.

Vadon nodded. "Down the hallway. Rion and I shared a room. I believe it is empty now, and kept closed off."

"It will make a nice room for our son," she said, unconsciously laying a hand on her stomach.

"Look, Annie, I do not want to do this, but I have to leave you alone for a while. I have been ordered to check in and make my reports."

"Go make your reports, then," she told him.

"I will not be long. I will return as soon as I have finished."

Lord of Thunder

“Although I’m looking forward to your company, please don’t feel obligated.” She hesitated, adding, “Were you planning on spending the night here?”

“I still am under orders to watch over you until Rion is released. Are you certain you will be all right?”

“After months and years of being alone? These next few hours will be nothing. Just do me one favor before you come back tonight.”

“What?”

“Look in on Rion. Tell him I love him. Tell him I am waiting for him,” she made a gesture outward, “in this big, enormous bed.”

Vadon bowed his head then nodded. Quietly he took his leave, and for the first time Annie felt completely isolated in what she knew would be her home for the rest of her life.

Strangely, she felt no foreboding. Her Rion was not the man he had been when he last left this place. Before long their home would reflect both worlds, as well as their love.

Annie looked forward to it.

Chapter 25

The Reunion

“Annie?”

The whisper in the room brought her awake instantly. For a moment she thought her ears were playing tricks on her until she saw the figure standing at the foot of the huge bed.

“Chloe?”

The physician was once again dressed in her dark red clothes. This was an official visit.

“Good morning, Annie. I am sorry to awaken you, but I need to check on you before I report for work. How did you sleep?”

After Vadon had left the day before, Annie had taken the time to acquaint herself with her new home. She had explored every room, every cupboard, every nook and cranny.

She'd gotten into the bureau she'd found recessed into the wall in the master bedroom, running her hands over Rion's clothing inside the crystalline chest. She'd found his white shirt Elly had made for him, the shirt he'd worn to return the first time to his world. The shirt he'd worn when he'd dismissed orders to first be checked out by a physician, and instead went straight to the council, interrupted their work, and demanded permission to go back so he could bring her here. The shirt she'd put on to sleep in.

She'd also discovered that her first impression had been correct. The home was unnaturally sterile. There were very few personal effects. No pictures. No keepsakes. No memories. It reminded Annie of motel rooms—very impersonal and therefore, to her, unwelcoming.

However, in contrast, Rion had a vast library in the second bedroom. Annie wondered if Vadon was aware of it. Many of the titles she couldn't read, but one narrow volume both shocked and warmed her. It was *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. A slip of paper marked a spot. Wondering where Rion had gotten the bound copy, she opened the book to see it fall open to her poem. The paper, she saw, was a note she'd written to Rion one afternoon when she had left to go hunting.

I will be back soon after dusk, hopefully with a deer. Or at least a turkey. I will need a bath when I return. I look forward to you helping me take it. I love you forever.

Annie

She'd spent the rest of the day reading the entire book until Vadon had arrived, bringing supper with him. Again she ate the food even though she had no idea what she was eating. She knew only that it was good and warm and filling.

Afterwards she and Vadon sat in the living room, discussing her new world and lighting the lamps after the last sun set. Annie missed the fireplace and hoped she and Rion would find some way to recreate one here.

It wasn't long before she felt drowsy. She relished the large, open, glass shower, the seemingly endless supply of hot water, and the fact that the soap was a gel one scooped from a dish. Dressed in Elly's wedding present to her husband, Annie took the draught Chloe had prescribed in a glass of water, under Vadon's watchful eye. She gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek before retiring to the massive but extremely comfortable bed.

The pillows and sheets smelled like him. Unable to contain her tears, Annie had hugged a pillow to her belly and cried silently. She had fallen asleep without knowing it and had slept throughout the entire night until Chloe woke her.

"I feel fine. What time is it?"

“Early. Just three cycles into the first morning.” The physician sat down on the edge of the bed and extended her hand to touch Annie’s stomach.

Annie shrugged. Three cycles. That was another thing she’d have to learn, how to tell time on this world. She quickly went to the bathroom first before letting the physician finish her examinations.

Chloe checked her out thoroughly before clucking her tongue and giving her a big smile. “You are doing excellently. All the bruises have disappeared, and the worst of your lacerations are almost scarred over. I would say that in another couple of days you will be back to your old self.”

Annie chuckled. “I won’t be my ‘old self’ for another three months, give or take a couple of weeks.” She patted her belly for emphasis.

Chloe got to her feet. “I have also come to bring you more news. I specifically asked to be the one to break it to you.” She took a deep breath, and Annie realized the woman was nervous.

“Rion is being released today to come home.”

“No!” Annie jumped to her feet and rushed over to give the woman a hug. Chloe hugged her tightly in return. “When? Now?”

“Soon,” Chloe assured her.

“Soon? When is ‘soon’? Dammit, Chloe, tell me everything!” Annie demanded, her voice shaking as tears covered her cheeks.

“The physicians met last evening to discuss his progress. I mentioned the fact that the reason Rion was driving himself so hard to get better was because of his need to be with you. They agreed and decided it would be better if Rion finished his recuperation at home. Here. With you. But you have to promise us one important thing.”

“Anything! Just name it!”

“Make sure he takes his medication as we prescribe it. It is critical he takes it all, and that he takes it according to our directions.”

“I promise.” Annie laughed, bouncing up and down on her tiptoes. “What do I do now? Can I go to him? Can I be with him when he’s released? Tell me!”

Chloe found herself crying as well. Annie’s joy was too infectious and too strong to be denied. “Vadon is taking you to the hospital to be there when he is released.”

“Now?”

The woman angel nodded.

Annie suddenly stopped, her eyes wide, her expression immediately serious. Chloe paused.

“What? What is wrong?”

Slowly shaking her head, Annie told her. “I have nothing to wear except for that gown I was given yesterday when I left the hospital.”

“Nonsense! What about the gowns Rion bought for you before he left to retrieve you?”

Annie gave her a confused stare. Smiling, Chloe nodded. “Vadon told me he ordered several gowns to be made for you, to be delivered before he returned. Vadon says the gowns arrived the day before Rion left to get you.”

“I looked all over this house yesterday but I didn’t see any gowns,” Annie told her.

“Did you look in the closet?”

Annie’s eyes widened. “What closet?”

“The one over there,” Chloe insisted with a nod of her head.

Annie turned to look at the wall on the opposite side of the room from where she’d found the bureau. Silently she watched as Chloe got to her feet and walked over to the wall, pressing her hand against the panels. Two doors parted, sliding into the walls.

Inside, several dresses hung from pegs arching from the inner compartment.

Slowly Annie got up from the bed and walked over to the closet. She reached inside, fingering one gown in a deep blue color. A Montana sky blue. Picking it up, she held it up to her shoulders. Chloe gave it a critical eye.

“He has excellent taste. This will look stunning on you,” she commented.

“But will it fit? I mean, when he came back the first time, he didn’t know I was carrying his child.”

Now it was Chloe’s turn to be surprised. “You did not tell him before he left?”

“I couldn’t, Chloe. He wouldn’t have left me if I had.”

The physician nodded. “You are probably right. That man is obsessed with you. Well, this gown has a high bodice. It should fit easily.”

“My breasts have grown larger, as well,” Annie reminded her. “I’ll be a cow when this baby is born.”

“Hush. Let me see how this fits you.”

Annie hurried out of the shirt she’d worn to sleep in and allowed Chloe to pull the gown over her head. As she’d expected, it fit a little snugly around her breasts, but there was plenty of room around her belly. And it felt wonderful, swirling around her bare skin, the hem just grazing the tops of her feet.

Chloe again helped her to braid her hair. When she was done, she removed a jeweled clip from her own hair and used it to secure the ends. She sighed loudly as she stepped back. “You are . . . so lovely,” the woman angel admitted.

“You sure? I mean, oh, God, it’s been almost two weeks!” Two long, nearly impossible weeks.

“Should we get you something to eat before going to the hospital?” Chloe asked, although she already knew what Annie’s answer would be.

“I couldn’t eat a thing. I’m so nervous!”

They hurried outside where Vadon was waiting for them. Annie skidded to a stop to stare at him.

He was wearing a pair of dazzling white pants cut close to the skin. He also wore a white, long-sleeved shirt beneath a deep, almost black-gray tunic with a gold slash running from his left shoulder to his right hip emblazoned on it. His amber gold hair, the same shade as Rion’s, had been clipped back, giving him a very mature and impressive visage.

“You look wonderful!” Annie smiled at him. Vadon smiled broadly back at her.

“I can see now why my brother has lost his heart to you,” he told her. “You are an incredibly beautiful woman.”

“Why are you so dressed up?” she asked as he lifted her into his arms. Vadon leaped into the air, pushing them away from the platform. Chloe followed right beside them, both pair of wings keeping a single stroke in the morning air.

“I am part of the escort,” he told her.

“Escort? What escort?”

His reply was to give her a secretive smile.

Their return to the hospital took less time than it did the day before, simply because he took a more direct route. All along the way Annie was struck by a strange sight. Tugging on Vadon’s shoulder to get his attention, she pointed to the small crowds of people gathered on platforms all along their way.

“What’s going on, Vadon?”

“They are getting ready for work,” he explained.

“Vadon, I can smell bullshit from a mile away. You’re keeping something from me.”

“And I gave my word not to tell.” He smiled again. “You will just have to wait and see.”

As they neared the tall white tower, Annie could feel her stomach starting to knot up, and she chided herself for her jitters.

Why was she suddenly acting the part of the virgin bride? Was it because he would finally be seeing her in the light of his own world? Would he have any doubts or reservations about what he'd had to go through to bring her back? Would they be able to have their life back the same way they'd made it on her world?

The crowd on the receiving platform was the largest she'd seen since Vadon had announced her in that enormous reception hall. As they approached, the people moved back to allow them enough space to land. Annie suddenly felt conspicuously vulnerable.

Without notice, an older angel stepped forward and eyed her from top to bottom. "What do you call yourself?" he asked her rather brusquely.

Annie gave him a surprised look. "My name is Annabel Lee. My friends call me Annie."

"You are from the other world, right?" This came from a second man nearby. They waited for her answer.

Annie glanced around to see that Vadon and Chloe had been swallowed up by the crowd, leaving her alone to face them on her own. She turned back to her inquisitors. "Yes, I'm from the other world. Why are you asking me that when you already know who I am? Isn't the lack of wings enough of a clue?"

"You do not belong here," a third strange voice commented, and this time there were several who agreed with him with either a grunt or nod of the head.

This line of questioning, or condemnation, or whatever it was supposed to be, was getting to be a bit too much. Placing her hands on her hips, Annie gave each of them an irritated glance. "Don't you think you're a bit late with that observation?" she asked them quietly, yet caustically. "I mean, I can't go back even if I wanted to, and I don't want to. I don't know what you gentlemen mean by saying these hurtful things to me. If you're wanting to discourage me, you'll have to do a whole lot better job of it because I've been

slandered and cussed at and stomped on by the best, and it still didn't stop me. Now, if you'll excuse me."

She tried to wend her way between them, but found herself suddenly barred from advancing toward the door.

"You have been misinformed, outworlder. You can go back. It has been arranged."

Annie froze. Her eyes darted from one angel to another, but none of them let on as to who had made that last statement. "What do you mean 'it has been arranged'? No. I'm not going back. No way." She shook her head.

"Rion has been given an ultimatum. He has agreed to have you sent back," another distant voice told her. "Preparations are being finished now. Byric will return you to where you came from at the next storm. The council has spoken. The council's word is final."

Rion? Rion had...agreed? Annie could not...would not believe such a lie. It had to be a lie. It had to be!

"You lie," she accused them, although she condemned herself for the trembling in her voice and the tears which threatened to fall. "You lie! Rion would never agree to such a thing! What are you trying to do? Why are you keeping me from him?"

Once more she tried to barge through the knot of angels, when one reached out and grabbed her arm to stop her. Instead, Annie swung her fist and punched the man squarely in the nose. He grunted, releasing her to cradle his bloody face.

The rest of the angels stepped back to stare at her in amazement. Annie glared at them.

"Go ahead," she dared them. "Go ahead and try to stop me from reaching my husband! I won't believe any of you until I hear it from his own lips. Do you understand me? So, until then, you'd better listen to me and listen good. The next one of you who lays a hand on me better be prepared to suffer the consequences, because when you do, I'll hit you so hard where your mamma made you a man, you'll wish you'd been a woman instead!"

For several long seconds the only sound she could hear was her own soft sobbing as she waited to see what would happen next. It seemed as if the whole world was holding its breath. Then, incredibly, the angels lifted their hands and began clapping.

No. Applauding.

It only lasted for a few seconds before it died away, almost as if on signal. Annie felt another touch on her arm. She whirled around, ready to punch the lights out of whoever had the audacity, when Vadon threw up his hands in self-defense.

“Annie! Whoa!”

“Oh, Vadon! Tell me it isn’t true!” She threw her arms around the angel, praying he hadn’t deserted her also.

A voice from a few feet away wryly commented, “She should have been a warrior.”

Vadon nodded. “She already is, brother.”

Puzzled, Annie turned around, wiping the tears from her face. Slowly, the knot of angels backed away until one lone figure dressed in a deep gold tunic and pants stood at the end of their manmade corridor. He held out his arms, and Annie ran to collapse in them, sobbing his name.

Rion pulled her up against him, holding her as tightly as he could without hurting the baby. He sought her mouth and they kissed, ignoring the world, ignoring the others who stood nearby and watched in amazement. He pressed his face into her neck and shoulder; Annie could feel his tears falling on her skin.

“My love, my love, my love,” she repeated, touching him, kissing him, needing him more than she had ever needed him before.

“It was a trial, Annie,” he murmured against her ear. “It was cruel, but it was necessary. They had to know. They had to see and hear for themselves. Forgive me for putting you through it. Forgive me.”

“I forgive you.” She leaned back to caress his face with her hands, smiling at him with all the tenderness she was feeling at that moment. “Are you well enough to take me home? Take me home, Rion. Take me to our home. Take me there and love me. Please!”

She’d forgotten about Vadon still standing behind her. Rion looked up at his brother, then back to her.

“I cannot carry you. Not yet. In time, yes, but for now I am still struggling. But I can come home. Vadon will bring you.”

He straightened up to face what Annie then realized was the great council she’d heard so much about. “What say you?” he asked them in his booming baritone. “What is your final decision?” Annie closed her eyes. She hadn’t realized until now how much she’d missed the sound of his voice.

The angel who had first insulted her now gave her an apologetic smile. “It is the decision of the council that your decision, although made without consent, was the right one. We welcome Annie to our world, with our thanks.” The angel gave her a little bow before stepping away.

Rion pulled her beside him. “Stand here,” he ordered her, keeping an arm about her, then turned back to the crowd. “Here it be known. I, Rion, Lord of the House of Thunder, take you, Annie, as my equal. My other soul. My wife. Despite all transgressions, without reservation, for the rest of my life.”

Annie stared at him. Those were the exact same words he had spoken to her that winter’s night when they had exchanged vows. Pretend vows, she had thought at the time. Vows she’d fervently wished were real.

Apparently she had been wrong.

Taking his hand, she placed held it between her own. “Here it be known. I, Annie, take you, Rion, as my equal. You are my other half. My soul. My husband. Forever and ever, as long as we both shall live. May nothing ever again keep us apart.”

She lifted her face to receive his kiss, both of them laughing from their overflowing happiness.

Vadon was the first to give her a congratulatory kiss. "I could not have found a more worthy woman for my brother," he whispered in her ear. Annie smiled and kissed him again.

Chloe was next to envelope her in a warm embrace. "I will be by in two days' time to see how you are faring," she whispered. "Until then, love him well."

Annie nodded in promise.

"Rion, ready when you are," Vadon said as the council members moved back to give them room. He scooped up Annie with little trouble and waited for his brother to take off first.

Rion reached over to clasp one of her hands and kiss it. "Do not be alarmed when you see me flying. I am still recuperating, but I can make it." To his brother he added, "Beside me?"

Vadon nodded. "Always."

Turning around, Rion walked over to the edge of the platform. He spread his arms out to the side, lifted his wings, and literally fell off the edge. Annie clutched Vadon in shock as the messenger angel also leaped off, diving head-first toward the ground. Amazingly, a short distance downward Rion caught an updraft which lifted him nearly all the way back even to where the platform was. Vadon also caught the updraft, and Annie realized the thermals were helping to keep them aloft, and helping to keep Rion from having to beat his wings continuously.

Vadon drew even with Rion until the three of them were parallel, gliding almost effortlessly. Annie could see the strain on her husband's face, but she knew what tremendous progress he had made, and what he had put himself through, in order to come this far in such a short amount of time.

Out of the corner of her eye, another angel pulled alongside. A moment later, a third and a fourth angel also joined them, until nearly two dozen angels all dressed in the same white pants and

shirts and black-gray tunics with the gold lightning bolt symbol were flying with them. A few seconds later, a full dozen other angels rose to accompany them, forming an enormous honor guard around them. They also wore the black-gray tunics, but their shirts and pants were black instead of white. Annie turned to give Vadon an accusing look. "An escort?"

"I was sworn to secrecy."

Before she could respond, she heard sounds rising from every platform they passed. Noisy sounds from every platform crowded with people. As if all of them were...cheering? She looked back at Vadon.

"Yes, they are cheering," he admitted.

"Why?"

"For Rion. For you. This is an honor guard of all the Houses of Thunder. We are honoring Rion as a fallen hero."

Annie could only watch the passing crowds in awe.

As they reached the platform to their home, Rion gave his brother a nod and veered off. Annie started to ask where he was going as Vadon landed, until she could see her husband catch another updraft that lifted him above the level of the landing, enabling him to angle downward feet first. As he struck the platform, Rion fell to his knees. His face was white from the strain. Annie ran over to help him to stand. He leaned on her shoulder, and together they entered their home as the honor guard dispersed.

Once inside, Rion fell heavily into one of the thickly padded, backless chairs. Vadon stood in the doorway.

"Vadon?" Annie looked up to see a melancholy look on the messenger's face.

"I will leave you now," he told them.

"Already?" Annie asked.

"I must return to duty, but I will be back in a couple of days. In the meantime, you need your rest. Rion, welcome home."

"Thank you," Rion replied, breathing heavily.

“You will be all right?”

Rion looked up at the woman standing before him. Annie couldn't tear her gaze away from the love reflecting in his Montana sky blue eyes. “Yes,” he finally answered. “Everything will be all right...from now on.”

Giving a nod, Vadon left, closing the door behind him. Rion pulled Annie into his embrace where they kissed long and deeply. Annie could sense his weariness, but she could also detect a need, an urgency, that matched her own. Pulling away from his lips, she sighed and snuggled against his neck.

“My love,” he whispered. “We are home. Welcome to your new life.”

“Rion? How well are you?” she asked him. She swore to herself it would be a month of Sundays before she would ever let him release her from his embrace.

“What do you mean?”

“Well...there's this really great big bed in the next room, and I was wondering...”

She got no further as he rose and urged her to lead him into their bedroom where they had a long time to love without interruption.

Chapter 26

The New Life

Dearest Mabel,

I hope you are happy and well and settled in at your new home. What I'm about to tell you may sound impossible, but I feel I must explain why you can no longer write to me, but I can still have letters delivered to you.

Annie paused to consider how she was going to tell her sister about her new life when a soft whimpering sound caught her ear. The tiny cry triggered some maternal switch deep within her, and she felt her breasts grow full with milk.

Laying the pen on the glassy table, she walked over to the blue lacquered cradle and lifted her son in her arms. She checked his diaper and found it dry. Walking back to the table, she placed him over her shoulder and began gently rocking him, hoping it would calm his fussiness. When that didn't work, she lowered the strap on her gown and offered him her breast. The baby boy took her nipple and immediately settled into feeding.

"What is it with you and your father?" She tenderly smiled at him. "You both have a preference for my bosom." Two miniature eyes the color of the Montana blue sky gazed up at her. A moment later, the infant sighed and closed them contentedly.

Adjusting him so she could still reach the table, Annie picked up the pen, determined to finish the letter before the next mission took place. Rion had promised the angel scheduled would take it for her and leave it surreptitiously at the closest habitat with the hope it would eventually find its way to Ohio.

Lord of Thunder

You see, I don't live in Montana anymore. I have a new husband, one who loves me and cares for me as much as I do him. He's from another country, and I have gone there with him to live. Yes, I am happy. Very, very happy. Rion is the head of a council which oversees the comings and goings of important officials. We are not rich, but we have everything we need.

And I have wonderful news! You're an aunt! Our son was born last month! His name is Kerr. He looks more like his father than he does me, with the same color hair and eyes. Rion can't stop showing him off to everyone.

Aged gold, she wanted to write. He has his father's aged gold coloring. She wished she could add a photograph. Unfortunately, there were no cameras in this world. Maybe there was someone who could draw a portrait. She'd have to make a mental note to ask Rion.

Her attention was diverted by the sound of the black obsidian doors sliding open. Smiling, she put down her pen and waited. A second later her husband strode into the room, with a big grin on his face. He walked over to her to give her a loving kiss, then reached down to caress his son's cheek.

"At it again, my son?"

"He's going to turn into a plump little pig if he doesn't stop eating." Annie laughed.

Rion dropped to one knee and reached for her. "Maybe I need to examine what interests Kerr so much," he murmured before pulling down the neckline on her gown and placing his mouth over her other nipple. The feel of her milk being drawn from her body was quickly going from pleasurable to erotic, especially with Rion's hand reaching underneath her gown to fondle her between her legs. Annie sighed.

"Rion, stop that. You know I'm already producing too much milk as it is," she protested feebly. But the sensation of two mouths working on her breasts was overwhelming. Rion was fascinated by

the changes that had occurred to her body. Especially the fullness of her figure and her ability to produce milk. Closing her eyes, she bathed in the waves of bliss that washed over her. In one arm she held her son; the other hand entwined fingers in her husband's head of golden hair.

She couldn't wait to let him know that the physician had finally released her from her temporary abstinence after giving birth, giving her the go-ahead and his blessing for her and Rion to resume lovemaking.

Rion lifted his face and replaced her strap, dropping a kiss to her shoulder. "How are you doing?" he murmured. "What did the physician say?"

"He released me from my abstinence," she replied, smiling. His reaction was what she'd expected. He gave her a long, slow, joyous kiss that tasted faintly of her. His hand cupped the breast he'd just suckled.

"Tonight," he said, a promise in his voice.

"Tonight."

Getting to his feet, he reached inside the satchel he'd dropped beside the table upon his return. The large, leathery satchel was now part of his everyday affairs. *Rion is the head of a council which oversees the comings and goings of important officials.* It was a little lie, but there was no way she could explain the hows and whys of what she meant.

The bullet Foster fired into him had permanently damaged a nerve in his back. Between it and the other damage he had incurred, Rion was left with his right wing hanging slightly off-center. It didn't deter him from flying, but every so often it would spasm, causing him great pain. Although Rion was still able to take Annie along with him, it kept him from ever again taking on another mission, or taking the dangerous pathway through the storms.

On one hand she was thankful she would never have to endure another parting from him. On the other hand, she realized what it

had cost him. Yet Rion had taken the demotion with dignity, and his people had distinguished it with all the valor of a fallen hero. Now he was part of the council which trained and selected which angels were to go on which mission, and upon each one's return, debriefed them. It was an enormous task with an enormous responsibility, but Rion seemed to thrive on the challenge.

"Here. I thought you would be interested in seeing this."

He handed her a rolled up sheet of paper. Annie switched her son to the other breast before undoing the string and opening the bundle.

It was the *Gazette*, the Billings, Montana newspaper. It was dated January 21st, 1945.

"How did you get this?" Annie looked up, astounded.

"Merrit just arrived back from his mission not two cycles ago. He landed in Wyoming and during his stay discovered this newspaper. He knew we would be interested in what was in it. Go ahead, Annie. Read it aloud. Here, let me take Kerr. I will lay him back down."

Replacing her straps on her cream-colored gown, Annie read the headline aloud.

"Guilty verdict handed down to Hoonas man. A guilty verdict was given to Foster Ray Mayall for the murder of his wife, Annabel Lee Mayall and the attempted murder of Horace William Funderburke."

She glanced over at her husband who still held their sleeping son. He was watching for her reaction. "Attempted murder? That means Horace survived!"

"Keep reading."

"Despite the lack of a body, the prosecution claimed overwhelming evidence aided in the conviction, including the blood-stained sheet and mattress police had confiscated from the Mayall farm in Dry Lick Valley."

She stopped. The sheet and mattress she had bled on when she'd cut herself with the ax had proven to be his downfall. The irony was inescapable.

"It was also claimed by the prosecution that the lack of finding Annie Mayall's body was due in part to the fact that the accused used an ax to chop up the body and dispose of it, perhaps burying the pieces throughout the twenty-eight acre property. Smears of blood determined to be Annie Mayall's was found in the cabin and on the murder weapon."

"The ax you cut yourself with," Rion addressed. He laid his son back in the cradle and rejoined her at the table.

"Twenty-eight acres? I didn't know he'd bought that much."

"Keep reading. It gets better."

"Key witness for the prosecution was Mayall's neighbor, Horace Funderburke, who testified he witnessed Mayall aiming a Colt .45 at her and screaming he was going to kill her. When Funderburke attempted to stop Mayall, the accused turned the gun on him and shot him point blank. Funderburke was found by his wife, Elly Louise Funderburke, who rushed him to Billings Mercy Hospital where he recovered from a single gunshot wound to the chest."

"We can only give thanks Foster was not a trained marksman," Rion commented.

"There was little he *was* good at," Annie said grimly, and continued reading aloud. "Mayall was apprehended two days later by Wyoming state police at a Toledo Bend motel. Continued on page two." She opened the paper to the next page where a large black and white photo of her ex-husband in handcuffs was being led into the Billings police station. The expression on his face was pure anger.

"Mayall insists on his innocence, claiming his wife was abducted by an angel, who swooped out of the sky and carried her away." That part gave her the giggles, and she struggled to finish the last paragraph. "Amos Hampstead, Mayall's attorney, has asked

the court that a full psychological evaluation be filled out on his client, to rule out any possibility of mental instability.”

She turned to her husband, who was resting his chin on his fists on the table. “Foster was found guilty of killing me, when in fact he didn’t.”

“Poetic justice. He tried to kill you. He wanted to kill Kerr. He tried to kill Horace. And he tried to kill me. He would have succeeded, too, if I had not intervened.”

“What do you think will happen to him now?”

“That is no longer your concern.” Jumping to his feet, he grabbed her hand, pulling her from her chair.

“Where are we going?” she asked, without thinking.

“Where do you think I am taking you?” He grinned, leading her toward their bedroom.

“Rion! Now? I mean, isn’t Vadon coming over later for supper? Or did you forget?”

“Time is different on my world, remember? And Vadon can play with Kerr while he waits.” He laughed, gathering her into his arms. “Besides, do you want Kerr to grow up without the benefit of a brother or sister to share his life with?”

Annie threw back her head and laughed for the sheer joy of it as he swept her into his embrace and carried her from the living room. She had already forgotten about the letter on the table she had planned to be mailed.

Regardless, it was no longer necessary.

Chapter 27

The Epilogue

Horace Funderburke stepped into the early spring afternoon in front of Mackenzie's Hardware and glanced down the street to where he knew Elly would be waiting for him in front of the fabrics and notions store if, by any stroke of luck, she'd finished her shopping before he did. Wonders of wonders, there she was. He waved at her and walked across the street to meet her. As pre-planned, they met in front of the Fine Eats Café where they always got an ice cream before heading home.

"Who do we know in Nevada?" he asked his wife as they settled into a booth with a window overlooking the main street.

"No one that I can think of," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

After they gave the waitress their order, Horace produced a small white envelope from the rear pocket of his jeans and handed it to her. There was no return address, but both their names, care of General Delivery, and Hoonas, Montana, were clearly written on the front in pen in a hand neither of them recognized. The postmark was Mountain City, Nevada.

Giving her husband a questioning eye, Elly opened it up and pulled out a single sheet of thick, ivory-colored paper. She started to read it to herself first, until her face suddenly paled. A hand flew to her mouth, and tears welled up in her eyes. Horace became alarmed.

"What? What's wrong? Elly, what's it say?"

Elly looked at him with a strange mixture of shock and happiness. She glanced around the café to see if anyone might be listen-

ing in, then leaned over the table, holding the paper before her, as she read it to him in a trembling voice.

To Horace and Elly Funderburke.

I must make this brief so that the next warrior due to leave for your world can take it with him. He will try to post it with the hope it reaches you.

Annie and I are together on my world. We have made ourselves a home, and we are content. She has blessed me with a son. We have named him Kerr.

We were informed of the fate of Foster Mayall. Our joy is immeasurable to learn that Horace survived.

Annie has asked me to send you this missive to let you know she did not die by his hand, that I did return for her as I promised, and that Elly was correct about the last month. Annie says she will write to tell you more later.

May this missive find you both in good health. We also wish it brings you news to rejoice.

Our love to you both,

Rion and Annie

By the time Elly finished reading, tears were pouring down her face. Horace reached across the table to clasp his wife's hands, still holding the letter, and gave them a gentle squeeze.

"They're together," Elly whispered. "Thank God, they're finally together."

"I guess miracles still happen," her husband said. "What did she mean about 'the last month'?"

Elly reached for a paper napkin from the dispenser at the end of the table and blew her nose, using the moment to mask her smile. "Someday I just might tell you," she answered him cryptically.

Her husband grunted and leaned back in his seat as he looked out the window again and up at the cloudless sky. It appeared he would be watching the sky a whole lot more now. The blue Mon-

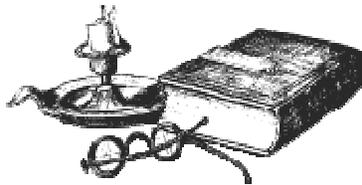
Lord of Thunder

tana sky, where the storms gather swift and fierce in the spring and summer months, and hold the promise of more Happily Ever Afters to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda loves to write romance with a fantasy or science fiction flair. Her technique is often described as being as visual as a motion picture or graphic novel. By day she is a kindergarten teacher, wife, and mother of two who lives in a small south Texas town near the Gulf Coast. But at night she delves into alternate worlds filled with daring exploits and sensual, erotic romance.

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