



ANNIVERSARY WALTZ

By

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Chapter One

Celestial Spheres' Life and Death Transition Central Office, 2007 C.E.

Despite the perpetually blue sky, rainbows and soothing harp music that formed the backdrop for the Celestial Spheres' Life and Death Central Office, the atmosphere inside that office felt decidedly dark. Apprentice Transition Angel Second Class Astreluna braced herself for Lecture Number Forty-Eight, delivered in impassioned tones by Astreluna's immediate superior, Venussuna.

Since Astreluna had heard the same lecture three times in the past three moon cycles, she already knew it by heart and could tune out, not focusing on Venussuna's words until the older angel came to her concluding words. "So, Astreluna, I'll overlook your peculiar ideas one last time and give you one more chance."

Thinking the lecture was over, Astreluna grinned at her hopefully. However, Venussuna had more to say.

"But you've got to take the nature of our office seriously and stop giving people options. Once you arrive, their transition fate is sealed. Their time on the Earthly plane is over, and your duty is to escort them to the Celestial Spheres for their next phase. Death cannot claim them if you refuse to escort them. He's been complaining to the higher-ups that you've ruined several missions by offering people options."

"We're supposed to take them on the transition even if they are young and

still have much to keep them on Earth? That seems wrong.” Astreluna wished she had the gift of persuasive words, that she could find a way to move Venussuna. The other woman remained stony faced. When Astreluna started to point out her excellent reasons for bending the rules each time, the warning look in Venussana’s eyes convinced her to remain quiet. But, molten moonbeams, it was just plain wrong to transition people before their time! Death was even harder to deal with on this subject than Venussuna. Astreluna just had to change the system.

“You will complete the assignment as I will present it in a short time, or it will be your last. I am merely waiting for confirmation before I’ll tell you the exact details. Do you understand?”

Understanding wasn’t the problem. Disagreeing with management was. But Astreluna figured the only way to bring about the changes she envisioned was to keep her assignment and rise from her lowly position to one of more authority. Despite disappointments, Astreluna held on to her natural optimism. She would take this assignment and try her best to use it as a stepping stone to the fulfillment of her dreams. She knew, deep down inside, that her instincts would guide her if only she listened to them with her whole heart.

Dismissed, Astreluna returned to her home cloud to prepare for her next assignment. Since her arrival in the Celestial Spheres, after a too-short and less than satisfactory life on Earth, Astreluna had been in search of her niche and her bliss. With Eternity and all the resources of the supernatural at hand, she’d expected to at last achieve the success that had eluded her during her terrestrial life. She’d quickly won her wings, large white and gold feathery appendages that glowed when she flew. Far from a beauty on Earth, now she had porcelain skin, sky blue eyes and spun gold hair--not unusual in the angel population, but still thrilling to her. But in one major area, that of her heavenly work, Astreluna continued to fail, just as she had on Earth. She hadn’t needed Venussuna’s

reminder to realize the dire consequences she faced if she didn't upgrade her performance record quickly.

Astreluna took a few moments to savor the sweetness of flying among white fluffy clouds in the blue, blue sky. It felt like swimming without having to remember to breathe or worry about the fit of the bathing suit. But she couldn't fully indulge in her distraction with her assignment hanging over her.

Convinced that her life on Earth would have been better if she could have postponed death until she'd achieved her dreams, Astreluna had committed herself to working in the Death sector to ensure that people were not transported from the Earthly plane before their time. But before she could be in a policy-making position, she had to work her way up the ranks. Currently she was an Apprentice Transition Angel Second Class. In reality, this meant she often had to follow orders she might not agree with--even when her reasons for disagreeing were excellent, which they always were. As an Apprentice Transition Angel Second Class, she had to escort people who were transitioning--who died--from Earth to the Celestial Spheres. She was supposed to welcome them, to ease any fears they might have and to make the transition as seamless as possible.

Sparing her charges, as she thought of them--allowing them to remain on the Earthly plane longer--was not supposed to be part of her job description. She did, however, have the power to allow people summoned after too short a life (such as she'd experienced) to remain on Earth--though she exceeded her authority any time she used that power--which she'd done whenever her charges appealed to her in any way. Actually, so far they'd appealed to her each time.

In fact, after messing up her last two assignments by allowing the charges she was due to escort to postpone their fate, Astreluna learned she was in serious danger of permanent reassignment--to the Celestial Spheres' central filing division. Having spent too much time in jobs centered on filing on the Earthly plane,

Astreluna resolved to avoid a similar assignment in the Spheres. Determined to plan strategy, Astreluna settled on her cloud. She hadn't been meditating for long when Venussuna summoned her again, "I have the details of your next assignment."

Astreluna rushed back to her office, where she found Venussuna looking very pleased with herself. "Here is your next assignment. I'm going to spend extra time with you on outlining your specific duties because I want you to get it right this time. If you make any mistakes, they will be your fault, not mine. You *must*, I repeat *must*, complete the mission assigned, or I will no longer be able to overlook your ... irregularities."

"Understood." Knowing Venussana had no sense of humor, Astreluna resisted saluting.

Venussuna watched Astreluna very closely as if she suspected the younger angel had some subterfuge in mind. After several moments of silence, Venussuna began to speak again. "Your current task is to escort two married couples from Earth to the Spheres."

"Two couples? Are they friends or relatives? Are they to die in some sort of accident?"

Venussuna nodded minutely. "In a manner of speaking. Both couples go on a weekend excursion to a ski resort. There is a freak storm and avalanche which traps them in a cave. Alas, rescue will arrive too late to save them."

Astreluna gasped. "But that's terrible. They expected to go for an enjoyable holiday and will instead die a slow painful death."

Venussuna shook her head. "That kind of thinking is what gets you in trouble. Astreluna, they will have had their lovely weekends before they are trapped in the cave. But I will not enter into a discussion with you. You're to escort the four of them here, where they'll be together after their wonderful

holiday. That's all there is to it."

Though numerous arguments sprang to mind, Astreluna knew Venussuna wouldn't listen, not really. Already trying to steel herself for the chore, Astreluna asked, "Who are the couples?"

"The first are two business people celebrating their first wedding anniversary--Beth Bartel and Todd Lanigan."

"Beth and Todd?" Astreluna echoed. "They've only been married one year? They're probably young and adorable and madly in love."

"None of that is your concern. They can be cuter than two little puppies with gift ribbons 'round their neck—their time is up." She glared at Astreluna, who swallowed back her protests.

"Who is the other couple?"

Venussuna looked down at some notes. "Another couple celebrating their wedding anniversary—their eighteenth. Natalia Semarova and Rafael Volar are both artists who've managed to live together all these years."

"Artists?" Astreluna adored artists. Her reflexive question had popped out before she'd thought. She could already, sight unseen, think up dozens of arguments to spare both these couples. As assignments went, this one would challenge her--which was probably one of Venussuna's motivations for giving it to her. Rambling rainbows, this wasn't an assignment--it was an ordeal, a test.

Astreluna took a deep breath. She wanted to share her concerns with Venussuna, maybe get the other angel to be more helpful than she'd ever been before. "I will find this assignment a huge challenge."

Venussuna narrowed her eyes. "Are you giving up, Astreluna? Should I bring in another apprentice to complete this escort?"

That was the last thing Astreluna wanted for many reasons, including that a request for a substitute would be tallied as a failure and thus allow Venussuna to

transfer her. “Not at all. Just, in light of this being such a challenge for me, perhaps I should have a strategy before I go to Earth.”

Venussuna nodded approvingly. Astreluna waited to the other angel to offer to help her come up with this strategy, but Venussuna appeared to be waiting to hear what Astreluna would say next.

Astreluna took her leave and flew back to her cloud to meditate. And when she’d come up with a strategy, she returned to explain it to Venussuna.

The senior angel looked up from a file. “So what is your plan?”

Astreluna smiled. “Since I have more than usual advance notice this time, I will get to know my charges before their fatal accident.”

Venussuna looked puzzled, which didn’t happen often. “Why do you want to get to know them?”

Astreluna figured that was clear, but she’d explain. “Through familiarity, I will become immune to any last minute stories or pleas because I’ll know what to expect.”

“You really think so?” Venussuna looked unconvinced.

Astreluna nodded.

Venussuna started to say something, then evidently changed her mind and shrugged. “All right. We’ll give this a try. Though I have my doubts, I grant you leave to become familiar with the charges before the avalanche. Just remember one thing, Astreluna. I’ll be watching you--and I won’t be the only one.”

Determined to complete the assignment so she could complete her apprenticeship and rise in the ranks of Transition Angels, Astreluna set off to San Francisco, where Beth Bartel and Todd Lanigan lived.

Chapter Two

“Wmmmfff,” Beth moaned. Beth being Beth, Todd figured that, even at this most erotic moment, he could translate her moan to mean, “we have serious matters to discuss.” As it was impossible, even for her, to enunciate clearly with his tongue ravaging her mouth and his cock buried deep inside her, he could delay paying attention to her message for the moment. Knowing this could very well be the last time he ever made love with his wife, Todd intended the pleasure to be forever unforgettable--just like Beth. Despite all the recent tension between them, as always when they became intimate, she’d grown hot and wet at his touch. She’d opened her legs to his hardness, and her body, unlike her words, welcomed him. Savoring the slick heat of her feminine sheath, Todd forced himself to remain aware--a huge challenge.

With a pang of regret, he ended the kiss before he really wanted to and raised his face to regard her. Lying on the pillow with her beautiful, wheat blonde hair arrayed around her, with her big, chocolate brown eyes closed, the lashes shadowing her creamy skin--she held him mesmerized. He wanted to lick every inch of her perfect face and commit each detail to memory. But he held back and, instead of following his instincts, forced himself to stop at a precarious point, his hips mid-arch. Judging from her groan, that move was not what she most desired either at that particularly critical moment. “What’s wrong?”

The changing expressions that lit Beth’s face seemed to reflect efforts to grapple with conflicting desire. “Oh, Todd, it’s just so damn confusing. I mean,

when we're together like this, it's easy to forget anything but how amazing the two of us are together in bed. If only ... mmm ..."

If only. Todd knew those two damning words could sum up half of what went wrong between people. From the deepest recess of his heart, Todd sent a wish heavenward. If only Beth could realize that their marriage was most truly defined by the consummate pleasure of these fantastic intimacies, and not by the quarrels that tore them apart. And if only the sensual perfection of sex could extend to the rest. "Our differences don't have to tear us apart. People change and accommodate. They grow. We have so much going for us."

She stiffened, and for a moment he wondered if he'd turned her off. Much as he wanted their intimacy right now, he'd be willing to give up even that if they could fix what was broken. He refused to believe it was too late for them. "You know, Beth, it doesn't have to be a contest between us. Not the lovemaking, not our lives."

"That's easy for you to say. Men always have the edge, run the show. I've had to fight for everything I have." To prove her point, she increased the rhythm of their thrusts.

Though Todd wanted to slow her down, he knew she'd view any such move on his part as an effort to seize control from her. She had to be a better lover than he. No matter how much he tried to convince her there was no contest, she always appeared to keep a part of herself a bit detached--as if she was judging, measuring, weighing--and finding him definitely short of the mark. None of which stopped him from trying to please her. Hell, that had been their way from the first, only she never realized the control she exerted without any effort on her part. "Maybe it's time to stop fighting, just go with the flow for a while."

She snorted. "Right. And while I'm busy going with the flow, who's going to look out for my ass?"

He stroked her beautiful ass and groaned. “Nothing more I’d love to do for life than look out for your butt and all the rest of you, just like I signed up to do. If only you’d let me.”

She snorted again, and it sounded even rougher this time than the first. “Right. You’re going to give up--Mmm--your great, high-paying job so you can go back to freakin’ school for the next five freakin’ years--Mmm--and you call that looking after me. Well, that’s not my idea of how I want to be taken care of.”

“Beth, it’s not like we’re going to be destitute while I go to med school. We’re still young enough to make all our dreams come true.” Despite his successful rise in marketing, Todd had never found the kind of satisfaction in his work he’d discovered as a medic in the Army. Beth, on the other hand, thrived on the kinds of challenges marketing provided. Working for a rival company, she tried to bring workplace competition into their home. Who could get the most promotions, make the most money? He quickly tired of this game and wanted their lives to proceed differently.

He realized his dilemma was a lot his fault. When he got out of the Army, he’d been so happy to get back together with her, he’d allowed her to convince him to forget a medical career, which required years of education, and, like her, go for a career in business. But, right after they married, he realized his career path choice had been a mistake, one he planned to rectify. When he first told her of these feelings, she’d refused to believe him. Confident that the reality of acceptance to medical school would convince her, he’d applied. When he showed her his letter of acceptance and said he was going, she demanded a divorce. Nothing he said or did changed her mind. Faced with this horrendous choice, he’d reluctantly decided he could no longer suppress his dreams to follow hers. And somewhere inside, he held on to the belief that they’d work things out.

These reflections melted into the flow of their lovemaking. When Todd felt

Beth's pussy start to vibrate with the contractions of a quickly approaching climax, he responded by moving faster, harder, and with more urgency. "Oh, baby," she cried out, hitting high notes that told him she was barely holding on. She stopped them both cold to make their intimate moment last. He loved it. He loved her.

* * * *

"We'll talk later." She sighed and tightened her grip around his ass and pulled him tighter into her. "Resume. Harder," she ordered, looking gorgeous and, at the same time, tantalizingly vulnerable. That was just the redirection that Todd had hoped for.

"Show me where you want it." During the brief interlude, he felt as if his cock had grown even larger, harder, and more erect. Everything about Beth turned him on and kept him at a razor's edge of excitement. Now he filled her completely, absorbing the sheer sensuous pleasure of their total intimacy. With the little corner of his mind that still operated, he happily registered Beth's ecstasy. Knowing her so well, he realized he must be touching all her most sensitive spots because his lovely wife couldn't breathe, let alone talk. She ran her foot along the back of Todd's leg, raising delicious goose bumps with every contact, and squeezed him harder when he moaned his pleasure inside her mouth.

* * * *

Todd ran his fingers down her side and could feel how her temperature soared everywhere he touched. Even after all their time together--including their extensive bed play--they were like honeymooners--heck, like the horny high-schoolers they'd been fifteen years before, enjoying the thrill of their first backseat grapple, becoming lovers the night of her senior prom. When Beth shed her customary armor and got lost in their lovemaking, she whispered about wanting to touch him everywhere, needing to know she excited him as much as he excited her--that she turned him on even more than he turned her on.

Todd was more than happy to assure her on all counts, honestly swearing she drove him wild and made him want to swing from the chandeliers to get to her.

They'd always known each other. They'd been together since junior high. They, their families and their friends--everyone had always known Beth plus Todd equaled forever. Their wedding one year before--after they'd each reached well-paid status in their respective business careers--had come as the next logical step.

"Let me have it all, darlin'," he whispered. "Give it all up."

She thrashed back and forth, coming to her release with a piercing cry filled with her pain, confusion, and longing. Todd couldn't completely believe this might be the last time they ever made love--though that poignant possibility saturated every move and sensation they shared. Once they formally separated, according to Beth, they'd probably never even see each other again. Their lovemaking would be a historical artifact like their defunct love story. That was certainly how Beth viewed it.

His lips tightly clenched, Todd followed Beth's climax very closely with his own teeth-rattling orgasm. For moments he pumped his cum into her, and, could it possibly be for the last time ever?, she accepted all he had to give. Memorable, spectacular. A last time to remember for years. *No*. Somehow, there had to be a way for them to continue together--each one completely fulfilled in bed *and* in the rest of their lives.

After his final spasm, the two of them lay together, spent. Todd wouldn't have minded dozing mindlessly in her arms and cuddling. But, once they got past afterglow, nothing that had happened between them seemed to be enough to keep her demons at bay. All too soon she got that look in her eye that warned him she was about to get "serious." She brushed a lock of his hair back from his forehead, and he wished she'd leave her hand there, prolonging the touch. "We really do have to talk." This time, her words came out clearly and distinctly.

“Mmm. Talk.” He stroked the side of her face, savoring the feel of her skin against his fingertips.

“I can’t talk when you and I are entangled like this,” she fussed.

“Then don’t talk.” He nuzzled her face and breathed in her strawberry and cream scent.

She took a deep breath, and he braced himself. “The lawyers have arranged everything. All our assets have been divided according to plan. You’ll move out tomorrow. We’ll sell the condo and split the proceeds. Of course my rent for the extra days I’ll stay here will come out of my half of the proceeds.”

Todd shrugged, but felt far from nonchalant. “I don’t care about that. You know I don’t want this, Beth. Whatever the lawyers have done or said, we don’t have to go through with the divorce. We can still stop this steamroller.”

Her brows came together. “*No*, Todd. We’ve been through this. You promised you wouldn’t do this to me anymore, that you would accept the inevitable.”

“Nothing’s inevitable but death and taxes.”

She rolled her eyes. “Subject closed. We’re going to proceed as it’s been laid out.” The feel of her skin molded against his told him otherwise, but for now, he’d let her set the rules of their conversation.

“One thing, Beth. Okay with you if I don’t move out until after I come back from Aspen?”

She frowned. “You’re going to Aspen now?”

He lazily moved his fingers to the top of her arm. “Yeah. That long weekend there we got as a wedding gift from my brother Tim is going to expire soon. I figure I might as well use it rather than lose it. Haven’t had much time for skiing this year ...”

Beth pushed off his hand and sat bolt upright. “What do you mean you’re

getting the weekend in Aspen?”

Now Todd frowned and, more slowly than she, sat up. “I thought we decided I should get it, what with it being a gift from my brother and all.”

“A wedding gift for *both* of us,” she reminded him.

“That hardly seems relevant now that we’re breaking up. As you’ve said, repeatedly, there is no more us.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Who are you taking with you?”

He shrugged. “Just figured I’d see if Tim or any of my buddies are available on such short notice. I’m sure I’ll be able to come up with somebody who’d be willing to rearrange his schedule for an all-expense paid weekend in a resort in Aspen.”

“I have not given up my claim for that weekend.”

Huh? Every time he’d suggested they go to Aspen, she’d found a million reasons not to. “But I thought you said we’d divided everything and there’s nothing left.”

She snorted. “Well, the Aspen weekend must have slipped beneath my radar. That doesn’t mean you can take advantage and deprive me of it.”

He held up both hands. “I don’t now and never have wanted to deprive you of anything.”

“Then I should get the weekend, what with how stressful these last few months have been for me.”

Jeez. Beth’s competitive and control freak streaks struck again. He knew she didn’t especially want the weekend, didn’t find skiing especially relaxing, but she wouldn’t give an inch. The hours they’d recently spent in lawyers’ offices had proven that.

He frowned and folded his arms in front of his chest. “Hasn’t been exactly a romp in the park for me either. Look, Beth, I’m willing to give you most of the

stuff we got for the wedding, but I want the weekend.”

Just when things were going so smoothly. “I’m not giving in on this, Todd Lanigan.”

“Neither am I. So, as you said before, let’s talk.”

* * * *

When Astreluna first arrived and found Beth and Todd making love, she, who’d always been a sucker for a love story, had been concerned about having to escort them for their transition. But after a most impressive climax and the warm closeness of afterglow, Beth and Todd had quickly not only lost their mood but begun fighting. Astreluna felt as if at a tennis match, watching the volleys cross the net faster and faster as Beth and Todd’s argument about Aspen accelerated. Theirs was not just a lover’s spat to be made up with another round of lovemaking. Lawyers, division of property, and anger. How sad that these should be the context of the glorious coupling she’d just witnessed.

Knowing Beth and Todd were not living the love story Astreluna had first imagined simplified her mission. Though they were both attractive, they certainly didn’t remind her of cute frisky puppies. Rambling rainbows, if these two weren’t in love, maybe she wouldn’t feel so bad about ushering them from Earth to the Celestial Spheres. Astreluna adored love stories. Maybe they’d even be able to enjoy the blessings of love after they made their transition.

According to the schedule Astreluna was supposed to follow, she was slated to pick Beth and Todd up in Aspen--the very place they were arguing about, the place where an avalanche would trap them in a cave. Following her established itinerary meant they *both* somehow would have to go there. Astreluna refocused on their conversation just in time to hear them agree rather testily to share the weekend accommodations. She sighed, relieved everything was following the plan she knew about.

Now it was time to become acquainted with the other couple on her list-- Natalia Semarova and Rafael Volar, who'd been married eighteen years and were also supposed to celebrate their anniversary in Aspen. Same scenario as Beth and Todd. To meet Natalia and Rafael before the avalanche struck, Astreluna would have to fly north and east to the small town of Twain Harte in California's Sierra Nevada mountains. Bidding a silent farewell for now to Beth and Todd, Astreluna ascended and flew off. For just a moment, she thought longingly of the clear blue sky in the Celestial Spheres. Certainly, flying in the sky over the Earth was less aesthetically pleasing. On the other hand, such drawbacks would mean nothing to people who still had years to live before they rightfully experienced the Celestial Spheres. Realizing such thoughts would not be helpful in the accomplishment of her assignment, Astreluna focused on clearing her mind and flying to her next destination.

* * * *

"The gallery just called," Rafael said. "It looks like they have sold all my sculptures from the recent show--for, would you believe, one point one million dollars. In fact, there is now a waiting list of people who want my next sculptures."

Natalia raised a brow. "You sound surprised. Is this not exactly what I predicted?"

"Querida. You've always believed in me." He hugged her into a deep, passionate kiss which it was far too early in the morning for. She pulled away and regretted the instant hurt that flashed in his dark eyes.

"Of course." She smiled to soften the rejection. "As you have believed in me. Perhaps some day my paintings will produce such a great pay day."

"As soon as the public wakes up and realizes what a treasure you are."

She could tell he wanted to resume the embrace she'd wriggled away from,

and she chose not to. She yawned and went to pour herself another cup of coffee. These mornings, padding around their house in her tattered, faded terry cloth robe, Natalia felt comfortable--too comfortable. Heaven forbid, she strongly suspected she was becoming what she held most in contempt--a frumpy woman teetering on the edge of old age, practically a hag. Though her wardrobe fairly burst with long silk robes in all the jewel colors so flattering to a woman with her coloring--raven hair and ivory skin--she felt unworthy to cover her aging body with them.

Pouring a steaming mug of the strong, dark brew, Natalia shook her head. What had become of the self who wouldn't deign to appear anywhere outside her bedroom without full makeup and carefully styled hair? Alas, she felt as if that woman was becoming an old crone that no amount of cosmetic enhancement could transform. She ran a hand through the rat's nest a restless night left her hair tangled in. She drank a long swallow of the morning elixir and waited for its warmth to energize her. In the past, she'd viewed herself with the same critical eye as she viewed her paintings. Now, she'd destroy any canvas that looked as hopeless as she did.

Just then she felt something behind her. Startled, she just barely managed not to spill her drink. Rafael, who evidently didn't realize how revolting she was or how dangerous it was to sneak up on her, had begun to nuzzle the back of her neck, nibbling her sensitive spot and raising goose bumps. He was not a man to be discouraged, which she usually appreciated.

"Mmm, *querida*. Let us go celebrate this good news. We can start our day in the best possible way." He licked her tender nape, then firmly cradled both breasts in his large, powerful hands.

Natalia bit back the rush of lust that rose up from her clit and made her nipples swell. After all this time with him, Natalia could swear her desire for Rafael kept growing stronger. But how could he continue to desire the old beast

she was becoming?

“Don’t you have anything better to do with your time than diddle it away?” She plunked her cup down on the counter to punctuate her point.

“No, nothing better I can think of, *mi amor*.” He ran a long, calloused finger down the side of her face and ground his impressive erection against the top of her left buttock.

Despite her stubborn morning crabbiness, her pussy began to tingle with anticipation. But she couldn’t just melt into submission, for pity’s sake. If she let down her defenses, Rafael would become even more insufferable than he was. Let him grovel. “I have a very crammed morning planned,” she muttered as icily as she could.

“Ah, but there’s cramming and then again there’s cramming,” he whispered, running his cock down the crack of her butt with a provocative wiggle she could feel through the terry cloth. Perhaps she might have to rethink her lofty pose. “Besides, I have a surprise for you.”

Shit. She was such a sucker for surprises. Triple damn his skill at manipulating her. If only he could make her forget what a crone she was turning into. Now that he was through the anticipation and worry for his current show, he’d open his eyes wide and see how she disastrously she was aging. Men became sophisticated and polished, women saggy and old. She stiffened at the thought of impending rejection--the withdrawal she’d read in his dark eyes.

But Rafael, who kept nudging her with his burgeoning erection, didn’t seem to realize how undesirable she’d grown--yet. So she might as well enjoy him while he was still interested. Only she wasn’t going to just coo and surrender. He’d have her all right, but she’d make him strive for that pleasure. And, later, when he did, inevitably, lose interest, she’d at least have the comfort of knowing he’d had to put effort into having her.

“Okay,” she said, trying to look bored instead of so turned on she had to press her legs together to contain her pussy juices. Hell, it was all she could do not to grab him and ride his cock for all she was worth.

He leaned away from her for a moment and, a slight smile quirking his full, sensuous lips, asked, “Okay? *Querida*, making love with you this morning is as far from merely okay as the Venus de Milo is from a piece of coal.”

She looked up defiantly and was about to make a disparaging remark when he scooped her up in his arms with a whoop--as if they were both young people. Instead of carrying her to their bedroom, he took her to his large, airy studio. Natural wood paneled the small stretches of wall space between the huge picture windows. A large rectangular skylight dominated the high white stucco ceiling. Two leather couches and sand-colored carpeting provided the sole comfort among the blocks of granite and marble, various tools, crowded bookshelves and shelves of other materials. “I’ve always wanted to make love to you here,” he growled. “The time has come.”

“But there are so many windows. The whole world will watch,” she protested.

“Isn’t it wonderful that we have no neighbors within a two-mile radius? Come, *mi amor*.”

Giving herself up to the pleasure of his touch, Natalia allowed herself to forget the five pounds she’d gained recently and concentrate on Rafael. His beautiful penis bulged appealingly beneath the raggedy old jeans he’d soon shed. This lovemaking came like a reprieve to her, showing that he still loved her, found her appealing. Though he’d never actually neglect her--and she’d never tolerate anything of the sort, even if he were so inclined by dint of temporary insanity--he’d been at less than optimal level of attentiveness to her the past few weeks while he prepared for his show. Despite her trying to put a brave face on his behavior, at

this time in her life, Natalia admitted to herself that she required lots of reinforcement and TLC.

The quintessential diva in the eyes of the world, she'd stood by her man, supported him during his triumphs and his rare times of special need such as the time prior to his opening. Such apparent sacrifice of the spotlight did not come easy to her. But she knew he'd make it up to her--and credit her with her role in his success.

This morning it pleased her to see he was acting like a young man, hormonally driven and so anxious for completion--unusual for this mature, experienced lover. And yes, she loved the polished aspect of his lovemaking, too. As he formed hearts and circles around her nipples, his fingers seemed to respond immediately to her reactions. His cock pulsed with urgency, which resonated through her. Caught up, she gasped and pressed her breast harder against the palm of his hand.

He often claimed her magnificent body inspired him on every level--as artist and man. Wasn't it, after all, his rendering of her torso--perfection in flesh translated into perfection in marble--that had started off his career? Though he said the man in him cringed at sharing her uniqueness with the world, the artist had won that round. Who was he to hoard such a treasure for himself?

But, Natalia realized, now his purely male needs claimed precedence over the artist's. She adored these intimate moments. His lips greedily drank of hers before he lowered his mouth to trace the contours of her breasts and then downwards along the path to her feminine core.

"Rafael," Natasha moaned, opening her legs to his questing lips. He raised his head for just a moment, then looked back at the thick dark curls adorning her mound. "Could even the most talented sculptor be able to capture the perfection of your pussy?" he whispered, giving her goose bumps.

He lowered his head for the intimate kiss that pleased her so much. His first glancing lick of her clitoris set Natasha to moaning softly and rotating her hips.

Natasha sighed with pleasure. She loved the way her husband moved, ensuring the most complete contact. She held him, one hand on each side of his head, so Rafael tasted fully of what he called “her delights.” Now he slipped one finger, then two, into her, all the while continuing to lick and nibble at her fleshy folds. She nearly jumped when, first with the tip of a finger, then the tip of his tongue, he set up a rhythm of alternating between entering her and teasing her clit.

Natasha ran her toes slowly up and down his butt crease, which she could count on to raise his level of excitement to unbearable. But she knew he wouldn’t seek satisfaction until she’d come. Groaning, he reached behind him and stilled her foot. Just for now.

She wasn’t one to lay passive, receiving pleasure. After he’d stilled one foot, she substituted the other. When she felt him grow tense and moan the way he did when he was close to coming, he became even more attentive, speeding up the flicks of his tongue, his forays deep inside her. He must have realized that attempting to slow her down would be futile, would only inspire her to pleasure him more, so he just let her have her way. She loved that he knew her so well.

Natasha allowed herself to let go. She began to thrash with her excitement and pressed her foot even harder against his rear end. How lovely when his balls and erection hardened and tightened. He nibbled on her clit, blew on her there with his hot breath, and sent her over the top.

“Rafael,” she called out, stretching his name across a multitude of syllables in a futile attempt to hold on.

He kept up the pressure and speed, and she slid into a climax that literally left her teeth chattering.

“Te amo, mi corazon,” he murmured.

Grasping her firmly on both sides, he rolled them over so she straddled him. He lifted his knees to support her as she sat up fully, her pussy surrounding his engorged cock. At last.

Pleasure flowed everywhere in her body. She wanted to watch him as they made love, but the power of the sensations overwhelmed her--and she had to close her eyes. She ran her manicured crimson fingertips down his chest, pausing to tweak his nipples and reawaken erotic sensation there.

Now that he had his cock buried deep inside her, Natalia appreciated how Rafael struggled to resist the impulse to let it all go and come with a whoop. He whispered that he wanted this pleasure to last as long as humanly possible--and then longer--for both their sakes. They deserved it.

But he told her--in English, in Spanish, and in words of the unspoken intimate language only the two of them shared--the smooth, muscular caress of her tight, hot sheath challenged him not to explode. With her knees clamped on either side of his hips, Natalia rode him with erotic abandon. Uttering a groan, he told her of how the lips of her vulva kissed the tender skin around the base of his penis. She raised her hips, nearly extending herself off his erection, prompting him to park his large powerful hands on her ass to slow her down a bit.

She smiled. That smile he always told her got to him. The smile, her throaty laugh, and the dance of her pussy as she rode him. "*Querida*," he cried out as he came. A moment later she gave herself up to her second climax.

And then, still holding him inside her, she lay down fully on top of him.

"Darling one, I want to thank you for all your help and support ..." he whispered.

"Shh," she whispered back. "We talk later. Much later."

'But we've got to get ready for our trip to Aspen before it gets too much later ...'

“Aspen?” She sat bolt upright, letting a current of cold air snake between them. “What are you talking about?”

“We’re going there as part of my surprise for you.”

Her mind was reeling. In the past, Rafael had gone along reluctantly on skiing jaunts. “But you hate Aspen. You hate snow. You always want to go to a beach where it’s hot.”

He stroked her back. “But you love Aspen. My way to thank you for dealing with me before the exhibit. And my gift to you for our eighteenth wedding anniversary.”

She hopped out of bed. “So when do we leave?”

* * * *

Unlike Beth and Todd, Natalia and Rafael seemed to be living a passionate on-going love story. Astreluna’s initial reaction was to sigh with contentment as her heart went out to these two sensitive, committed people. An uninvited image of Venussuna popped into Astreluna’s mind, shattering the joy of the moment. She could hear Venussuna warning her. Astreluna would have to be on her guard, harden herself. Tempted as she felt to spare Natalia and Rafael so they could continue their love story on Earth, Astreluna felt that temptation deepen because both were fine artists. The kind whose work she’d have been willing to give up meals and rent money to buy.

Even without Venussuna’s warnings in her ears, Astreluna already realized she’d have a hard time removing Natalia and Rafael from the Earth to escort them to the Celestial Spheres. She’d be a soft and yielding target for any protests and pleas after the avalanche trapped them and Death approached. Phew, lucky she was taking this extra time to get to know what challenges they’d present. This way, she’d be able to rehearse how to accomplish her assignment.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to start hardening her heart and making herself

impervious to their plight at this moment. In the extra time allotted her, now that she'd formed an initial impression of Natalia and Rafael, she could allow herself to enjoy their artistic creations. Still, no matter how much their art moved her, Astreluna had to remain resolved. Too much was at stake. Death could not claim his victims if Astreluna did not cooperate in agreeing to escort them to the Celestial Spheres. And, as Venussuna had told her forcefully, if she didn't complete this assignment, her hopes for advancement in the ranks would be dashed. What was it people always said? she had to keep her eye on the big picture. Since she was in an artist's studio at the time, Astreluna allowed herself to enjoy the work play.

Astreluna found a part of the studio with works in progress and paused before the first figure--a couple dancing the tango. Though far from complete, the cool white marble seemed heated from within by the passion of the dancers. Astreluna couldn't help wondering how Rafael achieved such an effect. The dancers, though frozen in mid-step, appeared to be in motion. Amazing. If all Rafael's work was of this stellar quality, she easily understood his great success. Two more couples--one doing a waltz, the other a jitterbug--were the equal or better of the tango dancers. As for a statue of a ballet *pas de deux*--words failed her. Astreluna swallowed hard. Rafael was a magnificent artist. She'd have a formidable struggle with herself to remove him from the current plane.

Perhaps if Natalia's talent were inferior to her husband's ... knowing Rafael would not willingly be separated from Natalia, this would be an opening for Astreluna. Reluctantly, she tore herself away from his work to explore Natalia's studio. Natalia painted with oils, covering huge canvases with her interpretation of history's great lovers: Delilah and Samson, Cleopatra and Caesar, Heloise and Abelard, Juliet and Romeo, Marian and Robin, Mina and Dracula, Natalia and Rafael, and so many more. Beautiful vibrant jewel colors captured and diffused the light. As she glided from picture to picture, Astreluna's heart sped up--a rare

condition for an angel. But even without her bodily signal, Astreluna knew she was in trouble. Despite the beauty of the paintings, she might have been able to resist--if only Natalia hadn't painted herself and Rafael. When Astreluna viewed that portrait, which captured the depth of love and shared intimacy that she had just witnessed in their lovemaking, she felt a sickening weakness in her resolve for their transition.

No, she couldn't let herself be caught up in such defeatist thinking. She allowed herself one last look at the glorious paintings, and then began to draw on her reserves of strength. She knew what she faced--and the consequences of failure.

She couldn't fail. Somehow, she would prevail and avert a fate truly worse than death.

* * * *

Todd couldn't believe how quickly the weekend had flown by. Before he knew it, he and Beth were headed for their last run down the mountain--the last run of their marriage. Funny, he couldn't help thinking. Despite the initial unpleasantness between him and Beth, the weekend had been almost perfect. Great skiing, fantastic après-ski, and he and Beth together ... in bed and out, they'd been fantastic together. Much better than their honeymoon, better than old times--than all the old memories he couldn't bring himself to forget. A couple of times, he'd even seen a glimmer of possibility for them to work things out.

But Beth was sticking her to guns. The bottom line for her was that one of them would move out of their condo as soon as they got back to the city. The lawyers would proceed with dissolving their union. This was not what Todd wanted. No matter what Beth said, he wasn't ready to give up on them yet. Maybe not ever. But he was running out of time to convince her they belonged together.

"Race you to the bottom," Beth shouted, as competitive as ever. She looked

amazing in her ski attire, gleaming white like she was a snow angel. Humph, an angel she wasn't--though sometimes, when he watched her sleep, she sure looked like one. Beth was all complex woman-- part angel, part devil. She was definitely all the woman he could ever want. Right now, she focused all her energy on beating him to the lift. Recently, she'd concentrated all that energy on destroying their marriage. This weekend proved to him again that, whatever it took, he wanted to divert that power back to building on what they had.

"Make it worth my while," he hollered back. No matter how hard she tried, he was the better skier--and he knew it killed her. She rewarded him with a frozen raspberry, then took off down the mountain--but not on the marked ski trail.

Shit. Worse skier than him or not, with her head start, he'd have to hustle to catch up with her before she got seriously lost. It was damn cold on the mountain, and because neither had wanted to be the first to claim fatigue--or to see the weekend end--it was late. They needed to get back to the resort before darkness completely engulfed them.

She'd gotten a huge lead down the mountain. In her white ski gear, he could scarcely make her out against the snow. Gorgeous as she looked, he'd tried to convince her white was a poor choice. He'd lost that argument too. Where the hell--? A loud piercing shriek diverted Todd's attention. Beth had fallen and now sat huddled in the snow, her face scrunched up with pain.

Seeing her there in the snow, Todd felt his heart wrench with pain. Beth looked so beautiful and innocent in all white--a true snow angel. She looked almost dazed, a far cry from her usual appearance of confidence and control. He wanted to hug her to him, warm her and comfort her.

In usual circumstances, Beth would have picked herself up and brushed off the snow. But right now she looked incapable of deciding how to move, which leg to pick up first. He loved her even more than he had all along and thanked the

universe that he hadn't let her bully him out of being here with her this weekend.

"Are you hurt?" He was already weighing options for how to help her out here.

"I don't know," she stammered. "But I had the wind knocked out of me, and I'm getting cold."

Despite the pinched look on her face, she sounded okay, but he couldn't be sure. "Do you think you can get up if I help you?"

Beth nodded quickly. He put down his ski poles and helped her to her feet. She seemed able to stand. "Do you think you can ski down the mountain?"

Tears sprang to Beth's eyes, and she shook her head. Todd thought for a moment. He had his cell phone, which he would try the moment he got Beth to some shelter.

An initial survey of the area didn't offer much hope. On his second go-round, Todd expanded the scope of his search, and his eye snagged on a slight shadow where he wouldn't expect one. "I think there might be a cave over there." He pointed in the direction of the shadow. "Do you think you can make it over there if I help you?"

Beth looked in the direction Todd was pointing. She slowly nodded yes.

Supporting her, guiding them, moving slowly, Todd got them down to the cave--which, to his relief looked deep enough to offer some shelter. First thing, he'd try his cell, see if he could get them some help before it grew seriously dark on the mountain. Then he could use his matches and burn paper, whatever combustible material he could find, to help Beth stay warm while he examined her for injuries. He had some food and water ... they'd be all right for a while.

Though he'd considered the possibility of encountering animals in the cave, he hadn't expected to find their cave already occupied. To his shock, Todd saw another man and woman inside. Only this woman, sprawled on her back, appeared

to have some sort of injury more serious than Beth's. The man held her hand and kept speaking to her softly but appeared at a loss as to what to do for her.

Once he got over the surprise of finding these people here, Todd began to think their presence, despite the woman's apparent injury, would be good for him and Beth. They would all be able to pool resources for mutual benefit--he hoped. "I'm Todd Lanigan." He held out his hand to the other man.

"Rafael Volar." The other man shook Todd's hand as heartily as he could, considering they both wore heavy gloves. Looking at Todd's cell phone, he added, "Thank God you've arrived. My wife is hurt, and we'll need help getting down the mountain."

"What happened?" Todd asked.

"Fell wrong," Volar's wife muttered, tight-lipped. "My damn leg feels broken." Even in the reduced light of the cave's interior, Todd could see she looked pale and taut with pain. At least she was conscious. All his instincts and training as a medic sprang to full alert as he thought of ways to help this woman as well as Beth.

"How did you fall?" Todd figured maybe he could distract her from her pain by encouraging her to talk.

"I swerved to avoid a tree and managed to trip over a rock." She muttered something in a language Todd didn't understand.

"My wife is a much more experienced skier than I and got far ahead of me. When I reached her, she was down. Fortunately, the cave was close by for I had to carry her here. She is suffering. Please, let's get help here quickly."

He glanced ruefully at his cell phone, which, thankfully, showed a network connection, although a weak one. "Let's hope this works as advertised and we can get help soon. My wife is also injured and in need of medical attention, though her injury appears less serious than your wife's."

Hoping the phone's faint connection would suffice, Todd started to punch in the numbers for the resort rescue line. Suddenly an ominous rumble filled the air and the light in the cave grew fainter. A torrent of snow and ice poured past the opening, and Todd felt lost in an infinite stream, as if the flow would never stop. When it at last did, snow and ice filled the entrance to their cave, cutting them off from the world.

Todd felt the chill of more than the frozen mixture grip him. For the first time ever, he could feel death around him, a cold blast that sent him to shivering in a way mere snow and ice never could. Now it wasn't only the injured women at risk. Death became a distinct possibility. Looking at the other couple and at Beth, Todd resolved to fight. Death might claim them, but not without a battle he'd never forget.

Chapter Three

“What the hell was that?” Rafael Volar asked, starting to spring up. At his wife’s whimper he froze in mid-crouch before sinking down.

“Trouble with a capital A. Avalanche,” Todd said, his voice steady and calm.

“Avalanche?” Beth repeated, her voice and the expression on her face far from calm. “Todd, how the hell are we going to get out of here?”

“Good question.” Todd carefully surveyed the cave.

Astreluna swallowed hard. She knew the answer to Beth’s question, and she didn’t like it any more than she supposed her charges would. Death lurked in the back of the cave grinning his particular smirk. He never cared if he was welcome or not. People as full of life and vibrant as these four would not want to have to transition now. But everything about Death claiming them was proceeding according to plan--which meant she’d have to do her part, too.

“My leg really hurts,” Natalia Semarova whispered. “And I’m cold.”

“I know, *mi amor*,” Rafael whispered back. “But before we do anything else, we need to assess our situation here. What’s with the cell?” he asked Todd.

Todd’s mouth formed a grim line and he shook his head. “It’s here, but we might as well not have it. Lost what little spark it had before. How far back have you explored the cave?”

“Not very far, I’m sorry to say. Natalia can’t walk. I figured I’d get us into shelter, and then see about getting help. You arrived right after we did.”

Todd listened thoughtfully. Astreluna marveled at how calm he remained. “With the snow blocking the entrance, I’m concerned about air circulation. If the cave goes back pretty far, we might be okay for a while. But if it’s shallow, we could face problems fairly soon.” Todd peered into the darkness of the cave as if he could assess its dimensions by sight, but his eyes hadn’t yet adjusted enough to the absence of light for him to make much out.

Astreluna could have told them the cave was quite shallow, but such direct communication would violate every regulation she had to live by.

Rafael’s brow furrowed. “Maybe we should think about digging out. Could be there’s not that much snow in the entrance way.”

Todd nodded. “Digging out would make life a hell of a lot better right about now. I’ll go measure the snow.”

“How--?” Rafael asked.

As he’d talked, Todd had been working off his skis. He held one up. “This is six feet long. I’ll push it through the snow, see what measurement I get.”

“Good idea.”

The two women and Rafael tried to watch as Todd thrust the ski into the wall of snow that cut off any glimmer of sunlight, but the darkness defeated them. After he’d pulled the ski out of the snow once, he repeated his measurements twice more, grunted, then turned back to them.

“How thick is it, Todd?” Beth asked. He could dimly make out that she was clutching her arms, huddled into herself, in an effort to stay as warm as possible.

He shook his head. “It’s thicker than the length of the ski. I tried to reach the other side in several places and couldn’t.”

“Shit,” Rafael muttered almost under his breath.

“I’m freezing, and my leg hurts so much,” Natalia moaned.

“Maybe I can do something to help you,” Todd said to her.

“You a doctor?” Rafael asked.

Todd shook his head. “No. I was a medic in the army. I can deal with simple emergencies like this until a real doctor comes along.”

Rafael nodded warily. “If you’re sure you can help her. Sometimes it’s better to leave people alone until qualified help comes, isn’t it?” He looked at Natalia, who appeared near tears, and he scowled.

“I’ve dealt with many injuries like your wife’s. At the least, if I brace that leg, she won’t be in so much pain. But before anything else, we’ve got to deal with the ventilation situation,” Todd continued.

“My God. Can this situation grow any worse?” Rafael shook his head. “What should we do? You think we should dig away some of the snow blocking the entrance?”

“Given the reduced oxygen, we have to watch our expenditure of energy or we risk passing out. With the snow so thick, it would take us too long to clear a ventilation path,” Todd said.

“I can’t believe this,” Beth muttered. She’d sunk down to the cold cave floor.

“So what in the world are we to do?” Rafael’s voice rose and sounded very loud. He seemed on the verge of panic.

Todd’s facial expression remained neutral. He started tapping the low ceiling of the cave with the tip of his ski. “First thing we need to do is keep ourselves calm so we can think. Maybe we’ll luck out and the roof here will have some holes.”

“But won’t the snow be just as thick up there as outside the entrance--or more?” Beth asked.

Todd shook his head. “I don’t know, but I’d prefer to think that’s not the case. Like I said, maybe we’ll be lucky, find a spot that was sheltered or where the

wind blew most of the snow away.”

Rafael picked up one his skis and joined Todd in the systematic tapping.

“Where are you going?” Natalia’s voice quivered.

“I won’t be far, my darling. We just have to find some ventilation holes, to keep us safe before this man takes a look at your leg. He can help you soon, but we need to do this first.”

“Hurry,” she hissed.

Both men stepped up their efforts, but they had to be thorough, to be sure not to miss any tiny crack or crevice that would open up the cave to the life-giving oxygen they might soon be short of.

Astreluna bit her lips as she watched the men struggle to find the openings she knew were there--the ones that could save their lives. But, broken harp strings, she wasn’t here to *save* their lives. If they didn’t find the holes, which she knew the exact location of, her task would be fairly simple. In a matter of a few hours, they’d suffocate and be ready to transition. Death would make his formal claim, and then she’d deliver them to their heavenly home as assigned. Unlike Death, who made no special effort to ease people’s way, she would make the transition as smooth and positive as possible. Then she’d be out of hot water, back on her chosen career track so she could advance to a rank where she could make a real difference. She continued to watch, flew back and forth restlessly, and wrung her hands. Her wings began to tingle and vibrate the same as they always did before she veered off the correct path and did things her own way--the way they did when she was once again headed toward trouble. With loud warning bells clanging in her head to guide her back to her assignment, Astreluna knew she had to ignore the tingles and vibrations that tempted her to stray.

Death was now lounging in the back of the cave, occasionally smirking at her as if he dared her to intervene and prevent him from completing his part of the

mission. She felt so claustrophobic trapped here in the cave with Death, she could only imagine how the people must feel. Both women had been injured. The men had to contend with their instincts to protect their women and with their own fears. If they did manage to overcome the obstacles and salvage the situation, surely even Death would have to realize these people should be spared.

She had to help them, even if it cost her all her ambitions ... Astreluna, picturing Venussuna's triumphant smile when she heard of Astreluna's once again "messing up" pushed away the negative image. She had to help these people, even if she had to fight Death to do so.

Cupid's butt, she couldn't even get her telepathy to function clearly and just direct the men to the nearest ventilation hole. Her telepathic power never worked right when she felt under pressure--but when else would she have any need for it?

The diminishing air in the cave grew dank as the last vestiges of daylight dwindled to nothing. Resourceful Todd had retrieved a flashlight from his backpack and, evidently trying to conserve energy here too, turned it on for short intervals to help him and Rafael conduct their search. Astreluna watched as the men got closer and closer to a place where several large cracks would be easy to clear of the ice that coated them. Just a foot more and one of them would be able to feel a significant crack with the tip of his ski. Closer, closer, closer ... clotted clouds, at the moment before he'd have touched the crack, Todd turned in another direction.

Astreluna, invisible to all but Death, began to pace the ceiling. She couldn't stand how uncomfortable and cold the cave was becoming. Despite the rising heat of her frustration, she felt the biting discomfort of the cave--or, at least, she remembered how it felt to be cold and miserable. Yes, she knew these four delightful people would leave the cave only in her charge. But she couldn't help wanting to make their last time in the earthly plane as comfortable as possible.

Leapin' lightnin' transition didn't require suffering--at least transition Astreluna style.

"Let me help," Beth called out.

"You sure you're okay?" Todd asked, pausing briefly in his tapping.

Beth shrugged. "If we don't find some air soon, I'm going to be a lot worse."

Todd looked at her with such admiration and love. How could Beth not see how he felt? The cave's darkness didn't excuse such blindness. "Good point. Why don't you try over there? But if you start to hurt, stop and rest." Todd pointed to a section of the cave neither he nor Rafael had gotten to.

Unfortunately, he directed Beth even further from the good spots than either man had tried already.

Beth limped and managed to drag her sore self over to the place Todd indicated. With great effort, she lifted a ski up to begin the search process.

Raunchy rainbows, Astreluna couldn't stand another moment. A quick peek showed that Rafael was closest of the three searchers to locating an opening. Calling forth kinetic powers she'd thought had rusted into oblivion from disuse, Astreluna surrounded Rafael's ski with an energy field and nudged him to a large crack. Between the light-seeking light that glowed within the ski and the telepathy she beamed to Rafael, she managed to get him to probe in the right place.

Not expecting success, Rafael nearly missed his ski's penetration through the cave's ceiling. He was about to pull his ski back from the crack when Astreluna actually slammed into it so it hit the side of the crack hard enough to jolt the man.

"I found one!" he shouted when reality struck. For a moment, his face lit up with a huge smile.

Todd and Beth drew down their skis and rushed over to him. "Maybe there are more of them close by," she said.

Good girl, Astreluna directed to Beth telepathically. Astreluna felt heartened at the increase in her telepathic powers as she spent time in the cave. Surely this was a sign that she was headed in the right direction after all?

In a matter of minutes, Beth, Todd, and Rafael managed to locate five substantial cracks and, with some effort, to clear them of snow and ice. Currents of frigid air gusted in from the openings.

“Brrr, now it’s freezing even more than before,” Beth complained.

“Better to freeze than to suffocate,” Rafael said.

Both Todd and Beth looked at him. “No reason to be morbid,” she said.

“You are correct, of course. Please excuse my pessimism. There are, after all, many ways to keep warm.” Rafael turned to Natalia, who moaned more loudly than before. “I must see to my wife. Lanigan, you said you could help her.”

The men went to Natalia. “Lanigan has medical training. He’ll check you out,” Rafael said softly.

“I’m so cold,” Natalia sighed.

Todd looked at her. “Maybe we’d be better off starting a fire to warm us up. We’ll be okay with it as long as we make sure we have enough ventilation. Then I’ll see what I can do to help your wife.”

“A fire?” Beth asked. “How?”

“I have matches in my backpack.” Todd retrieved a large box and held it up.

“But what will we burn?” Rafael asked. He had Natalia’s face cradled in his lap.

“I spotted some wood in a corner of the cave. Either some animals brought it in or maybe some other people spent time here and left their store. We can use that, burn any paper we have. If we have just a small fire and tend it carefully, we can make it last for a while.” As he spoke, he arranged pieces of wood and balled up pieces of paper from his backpack. “Volar, you have any paper with you?”

Rafael excused himself from Natalia and reached into his backpack. “Natalia and I brought sketchbooks.” He held up two stiff-covered pads, each eight by ten.

Todd grinned. “Great. Those will help, covers and all.”

Rafael winced. “Let me just preserve the pages we drew on.”

Beth’s face lit up. “I know you. Rafael Volar. Sculpture. Your exhibit opened recently at Gallerie Zed et Zed in San Francisco. Got a great write-up.”

“That’s right,” Rafael said. “Were you at the opening?”

“Yes. A friend of mine is an art critic, and she invited me to go along. I love your work,” Beth enthused.

“Thank you.” Rafael inclined his head slightly in acceptance of the compliment.

Natalia moaned more loudly.

“My wife is a painter who also recently had a showing. Natalia Semarova.”

Beth wrinkled her brow. “Don’t recall hearing her name.”

“Her work is often at the Bennington Fine Arts Gallery in San Francisco.”

“I’ll have to stop by there and check it out.” Beth paused. “Assuming we get out of here.”

“Of course we’ll get out,” Todd and Rafael said simultaneously.

“Natalia and I came here to celebrate my opening. This trip was my thank you to her for putting up with the temperamental artist as I prepared for the opening. Always a tense time. That and our eighteenth anniversary,” he added.

“It’s your anniversary?” Todd asked. “Ours also.”

“Really? What a coincidence. Which anniversary is it for you two?”

“First,” Todd answered. He struck a match and touched it to some of the paper and wood. The burst of light and warmth snagged all four people’s attention for a moment.

“First and last,” Beth said.

Rafael started to ask her something but was interrupted.

“Please,” Natalia whimpered. “The pain ...”

“Let me see what I can do for you.” Todd knelt down next to her.

Astreluna surveyed the cave’s interior. The small fire could easily become too smoky and overwhelm the ventilation that her charges had managed to arrange, though both Todd and Rafael were being conscientious about checking that ventilation. Here Astreluna felt no hesitation about helping. After all, every transition angel had full permission to make her charges’ last moments as comfortable as possible. She guided Todd as he used his ski to widen the ventilation opening. Actually, she didn’t have to give him much guidance. Todd would have found a way soon--maybe not quite as quickly as with Astreluna’s help, but it wouldn’t have taken him much longer. How could she not admire him?

Fortunately for this group, Todd was with them. Between his resourcefulness and his training, Astreluna was confident he’d help those she was about to transition enormously--and, thus, her. She started to feel a special pang of regret at having to transition him when he was so young in Earth terms--a man with enormous and still unfilled potential. And, with his sandy hair and blue eyes, he was cute. She had to stomp down hard on these potentially distracting emotions.

Astreluna could just hear Venussuna’s lecture, warnings against not becoming too attached to the charges. But, this far from home, it was impossible to recreate the tensions and nerves her mentor and the fear of failure inspired. So she indulged herself a bit, allowing emotions some free play for a limited time. Without much effort, she could almost imagine herself falling in love with Todd ... she sighed. Emotions were one thing, getting a crush on a charge quite another. She’d have to rein herself in. After all, angels did not have romances or any of the

emotional entanglements Earthlings did. If there was anything lacking in her life as an angel, it was the romance.

Astreluna remembered her last love story on Earth, the one that might have worked out if she'd been able to linger in that plane a bit longer. She'd been in love with Olivier, the first decent man she'd ever fallen for. Todd reminded her a lot of Olivier, maybe too much. With a sigh she reminded herself, these sorts of emotions were behind her, part of her past. She felt more determined than ever to rise in power so that no lovers were ever taken by death in the middle of their romances.

* * * *

In addition to his concern and sympathy for Natalia Semarova, who was in obvious distress, Todd couldn't help noting her great earthy beauty. As the firelight illuminated the cave's interior, he could make out her fine features and the voluptuous curves that her ski clothing did nothing to disguise.

"Where is the pain the worst?" he asked softly.

Natalia groaned. "My right ankle," she whispered through perfect white teeth.

Reminding himself to be gentle, Todd tried to determine the extent of the damage--a challenge with Natalia still wearing her ski gear. "I'm going to have to remove this boot so I can see what's going on with your ankle."

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Rafael challenged.

"Enough to make her more comfortable while we wait for help." Todd couldn't really blame Rafael for being cautious. In the wrong hands, a minor injury could become a serious health threat. "I won't touch her if you'd prefer, but I'm sure I can help alleviate her pain. I've got some first aid supplies and something I can give Natalia to numb her pain somewhat."

Natalia alternately groaned and cursed her response to that. Todd had to bite

his lip to keep from chuckling--definitely the wrong reaction in this setting. He expected that, even under normal conditions, Natalia was a handful. More than a handful. His cock pulsed at the image of taking a handful of Natalia. He sucked in a breath. Definitely an inappropriate reaction all around. To his surprise, he realized he'd never treated a woman while on assignment as a medic. Interesting detail to have overlooked. Granted he was no professional yet, he still intended to maintain professional standards. He willed his cock to settle down and not rear its head while he played doctor.

Wrong image again. He forced himself to calm down, breathe evenly, as he determined the extent of Natalia's injury.

With all the tenderness he could muster, he managed to get the boot off Natalia's foot, which, due to the cold, hadn't swollen much yet. Judging from her continuing moans and curses, he wasn't being nearly gentle enough. "Natalia, would you like me to give you a pain killer now?"

"Yes!"

"What are you intending to give her?" Rafael demanded.

"Aspirin. It's all I have. Not much, but better than nothing." Todd waited for Rafael's assent, which came after Natalia sobbingly begged for it.

"Beth, reach into my backpack for the kit," he directed. Beth did as requested, and Natalia downed two aspirin and a bit of bottled water.

He hoped the aspirin would soon take effect. There was no way she'd be able to put any weight on her ankle any time soon.

"What are you doing?" Volar asked, his voice husky with accusation and something else--probably concern.

"I'm palpating the injured area to determine exactly what the problem is," Todd said, massaging the swollen foot as he completed his exam.

"Why's it taking so long?" Volar still sounded gruff.

“I have no equipment here, and conditions are far from optimal. I’m just trying to be sure the best way I know how.”

“Is her ankle broken?” Volar’s voice had grown softer.

“I don’t think so.” Todd tried to sound both noncommittal and confident. “Just a really bad sprain.”

“Oh, so she should be able to walk on it.”

Todd shook his head. “I didn’t say that. Though it’s not as serious as a break and easier to treat, your wife won’t be able to walk on this ankle for some time.”

“What can we do to help?” Beth asked.

Todd looked at her gratefully. “How about you go to the mouth of the cave and get some snow. We can pack some around her to keep the swelling down.”

“Snow?” Beth asked, laughing. “At least you want something that’s in abundance. Uh, what should I carry it in? How much do you need?”

“Not much,” he said in response to the second question. “As to what to carry it in ...” He looked around.

Volar unzipped the hood of his jacket and held it out. “We can use this. I’ll go with your wife to get snow.” Todd bit back a chuckle at the thought of Beth requiring an escort. One of the many things that attracted him to his soon to be ex was her independence--a quality he adored even though it contributed to her determination for them to break up. Hell, everything about Beth--the woman most totally his type he’d ever met--turned him on. This made it all the stranger that he also felt so turned on by Natalia--completely Beth’s opposite--physically and, in many ways, it seemed, emotionally..

Despite the way her pain pinched her face, Natalia Semarova was an immensely attractive woman. A riotous ebony aura of long black curls surrounded her exquisite face, and even in the dim light, her large green eyes sparkled with wit

and intelligence. She had to be at least ten years his senior, maybe more, not that he'd ever been one to get hung up on a woman's age. But she was definitely not his type for about a million reasons. So why was his body reacting like he was a hormonal, sex-deprived teenager and she was the town whore about to initiate him? He could not explain the draw. Fortunately, he had plenty of motivation to resist her--including the presence of her husband and his own wife.

It didn't take Volar and Beth long to return with the snow. "Now what should we put it in to wrap around the ankle?" Todd wondered out loud.

"I'm so cold," Natalia whined. "I don't want any icy stuff wrapped around my ankle."

"*Querida*," Volar crooned. "It's for the best. We will keep you warm."

Natalia looked up at him with something akin to adoration, and Todd felt a rare and troubling flash of envy. Beth had never looked at him like that--he figured Beth would never look at anyone like that. Her adoration was reserved for the bottom line of her sales reports.

"I can use my scarf to fashion a pack for the lady," Todd said.

"its cashmere," Beth protested with a frown on her face.

Todd resisted rolling his eyes. "Like that matters now."

"I gave it to you for Christmas," Beth pointed out though. "Like you care. This is just typical of how little anything that matters to me means to you." She turned her back to him.

Strike two. More like strike two hundred. Todd hated to admit defeat, especially in a part of his life that meant as much as his marriage, but at moments like this he really wondered if he knew Beth at all. Did she even have a clue that, worst case scenario, they could all die in this cave--fairly soon? Couldn't she see beyond her own immediate needs? So many thoughts raced through Todd's head. He figured right now, the best he could do was to use his expertise to get them out

of the situation. He'd have the rest of his life--assuming they got out of this cave alive, and he refused to accept the alternative--to deal with Beth.

"It'll be all right." He folded the scarf in half and molded the icy snow so he'd be able to fasten it around Natalia's ankle with a layer of cloth to provide some insulation and keep the cold away from her. In moments he had a fairly rudimentary but acceptable ice pack fastened around her ankle. He hoped it would ease some of her discomfort as well as help reduce the swelling.

Volar had watched him like the proverbial hawk through the whole procedure. "Looks reasonable," he muttered.

"Todd's really good at playing medic," Beth pointed out, her words tinged with a sarcasm that made Todd wince.

"How are you doing?" he asked Natalia, who seemed less out of it now than she had earlier.

She frowned, her alabaster brow puckering. "It's not just my ankle. My neck and shoulders ache, and I'm so cold."

"How about a massage?" Todd offered.

Volar glared at him and growled.

Beth looked at both men and shrugged. "Todd really is a medic. Trained to be thoroughly professional. Part of that is the great massages he gives."

"Please," Natalia whispered.

Volar eyed Todd warily for a moment, then seemed to convince himself nothing inappropriate would happen. "Go ahead. But be careful. Don't hurt her."

Todd cautiously turned Natalia over so she lay on her stomach. Not a perfect position for a massage, but he figured he could still do more good than harm. The moment he touched Natalia's body, even through her clothing, her muscles, which were almost as stiff as his cock, communicated her high level of stress--and unbearably increased his.

Chapter Four

Natalia adored Rafael, had adored him since she'd first laid eyes on him twenty years before when they were both young artists just starting out. Not since she'd met him had she been so turned on by another man as she felt in this ridiculous setting with this young man kneading her knotted up muscles. His touch made her feel warm and safe, almost transported her from this freezing cave where she lay trapped by her silly injury. She had to struggle to hold on to her awareness, and to keep at bay her powerful fear that all of them would die here.

"Is that all right?" the angel of mercy with the fantastic touch asked. His voice was low-pitched, cool, confident--but heated her up as if he were reciting passionate love lyrics. Funny that she should feel so close to someone whose name she couldn't even remember.

"That's wonderful," Natalia murmured. With effort, she lifted her head. Rafael looked totally miserable watching her receive this massage. Her poor macho, possessive husband. She wanted to assure him he had nothing to worry about, that this massage had no effect on her aside from the therapeutic, but that wouldn't be quite honest, would it? Bad enough she felt this attraction. What if she were to compound this with a lie? A slippery slope, such as the one she'd just twisted her ankle on.

"Volar, are you keeping an eye on the fire?" Mr. Wonderful asked. Rafael grunted and went over to the fire to check something.

Natalia really had to learn his name, if only to stop feeling quite so decadent.

“Please,” she said, her voice sounding like a croak to her, “I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Todd. Todd Lanigan.”

In her mind, she caressed the syllables.

“And I’m Beth Bartel, Todd’s wife,” the other woman announced stridently.

If she weren’t so cold and in so much pain, Natalia might have laughed. Why did this woman find it necessary to assert her identity now? It wasn’t as if Natalia were in any position to pose a threat, even if she were so inclined. Natalia made a move to hold out her hand, but didn’t get very far. “As soon as I can get up, I’ll shake hands with you,” she mumbled. The pain must be addling her because she never mumbled.

“Stay still,” both Rafael and Todd commanded her at the same time. Two masterful men looking out for her. That helped ease some of the pain.

“I can take over from you, Lanigan,” Rafael barked, edging closer to Natalia.

Much as she adored Rafael, great as his hands were, Natalia knew Todd’s massage could help her more now. His hands felt wonderful on her. She focused on speaking clearly. “Rafael, let him be. He’s helping me.”

Rafael snorted. Natalia could feel waves of jealousy flow from him. Much as she would usually, perversely, savor this sign of his passion, now she wished she could spare him this discomfort. Though she felt attracted to Todd on many levels, deep in her gut she realized this should not be a source of jealousy for Rafael. Only, she could never have explained why.

* * * *

Jealousy. Astreluna could feel its insidious power worm its way into the chilled atmosphere of the cave. Though the small fire, fed on a regular basis, continued to burn, it accomplished little to take the bite out of the air. Even though

she felt sad to think of the suffering jealousy would inflict on the four people, she realized the negativity of this powerful emotion could help her. Once one person began to feel jealous, the destructiveness would start to affect the others. Like a house of cards, soon all would be falling down, focused on their pain instead of on ways out of their dilemma. Yes, if Astreluna had still planned to aid Death in claiming the two couples, she would have been happy at the arrival of jealousy. But she didn't and she wasn't.

Memories of when the ravenous green beast gnawed her gut stayed with her even now. Astreluna had experienced jealousy, and she'd been so wrong, when she thought her Olivier was cheating on her. He hadn't been. But Astreluna's mistaken conclusions had led her to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to catch Olivier with the woman she suspected. Astreluna confirmed Olivier's innocence and died, for by following Olivier and the woman she'd ended up in the auto accident that ended her days on Earth. How Olivier and the friend he'd taken with him to pick up Astreluna's birthday gift wept at her funeral. Astreluna had wept along with them, but they couldn't see her.

Seeing how contorted Rafael's face became when he looked at Todd massaging his wife wrenched Astreluna's heart. And hadn't Beth sounded a tad green when she introduced herself to Natalia?

Telling herself she needed these two to resolve their negative emotions before she boarded them on her wings for transition, Astreluna concentrated on an anti-jealousy tack. How could she make the air in the cave reject the arrival of destructive emotions? What could she do to really get these four to work together?

And then it came to her. If the cave grew even colder, the people would have to get closer to share their warmth, wouldn't they?

* * * *

Massaging Natalia was hard work. Between the heat of his sexual desire

and the exertion of rubbing her cold, stiff muscles, Todd actually felt quite warm. Not quite sweating, which was good, but he was definitely aware of the warmth of hard work.

But, as Beth and Rafael quickly let him know, neither of them enjoyed the same temperature rise. Stamping her feet as she paced back and forth, Beth complained, “I swear. This place feels like a refrigerator. I don’t think the fire is accomplishing anything other than filling what air we have with smoke.”

“I don’t think making the fire bigger will help,” Rafael answered. “But I agree, Beth. The cold is on the verge of becoming unbearable.”

Todd wished he could share his body heat with them. And then he realized, there was a way. “Rafael, Beth, the massage seems to be an effective way to keep temperatures up. Why don’t you both come closer? If we huddle together, maybe we can hold on to whatever heat we generate longer than if we stay apart.”

“Okay,” Beth said a bit hesitantly. When she got next to Todd, he could see and feel her shivering. For a moment, he turned from Natalia to warm up his wife—definitely not an ex—yet.

Natalia groaned. Rafael knelt next to her. “The massage has been doing Natalia some good. You shouldn’t stop.”

If their situation hadn’t been so dire, Todd would have laughed. First Rafael had been complaining about Todd massaging Natalia. Now he was complaining because Todd had stopped. Maybe later on, if they got out of this situation intact, he and Rafael could have a good chuckle over this as they drank brandy in front of a huge fireplace in a warm lodge. Instead, Todd said, “I agree that the massage is helping Natalia. Heck, massage is good for everyone. So why don’t we all continue to massage Natalia and each other?”

“What do you mean, Todd?” Beth asked.

“I mean that we should draw together. Body heat is like candlelight.

Combined, it magnifies.” His voice sounded authoritative, calm, despite his feelings.

What was it he saw in her eyes? If he hadn’t known better, he’d have sworn she was looking at him with affection, with love. It had been a hell of a long time since she’d looked at him with anything akin to such tenderness. Something in him melted at the look in her eyes, but then he pulled back. He couldn’t help wondering if any change in her attitude toward him could be chalked up solely to their extreme situation. Of course there was also her possessive streak, which his massaging Natalia seemed to have provoked.

If they did get out of this situation alive, she’d probably revert to her hard-assed pursuit of the divorce. Acknowledging this truth, he made the decision he’d been trying to put off. This time, he would resist opening himself up for her to stomp on his heart again. Been there, done that, time to move on.

However, Beth, being one of the four warm bodies in the cave, had to be regarded and treated just as the others. In order to preserve any chance for them to come out of this cave alive, they’d have to pool their dwindling resources. Her body heat definitely made her one.

Rafael didn’t have to be invited twice. He began to massage Natalia’s lower back.

“Wonderful as this feels,” Natalia said, sounding stronger and clearer than before, “the ground is getting to feel very cold and hard. I need to sit up.”

“You’re sure?” Rafael asked solicitously.

“Yes.”

Todd and Rafael, working together more smoothly than Todd would have thought possible, carefully helped Natalia roll over and sit up. She held her injured right leg out straight, bent her left leg at the knee and drew it close to her. That right leg worried Todd. They’d have to be very cautious about how they

maneuvered her not to cause her more pain.

All four of them sat closely, front to back, in a tight circle, which did help to focus their warmth. But Todd knew physical exertions would help and said so.

“What kind of exertions, Lanigan?” Rafael asked. Todd supposed the other man just couldn’t keep a challenging tone from his voice.

“First of all, we need to stand up and move around--maybe every fifteen minutes when we shift, maybe even more often.”

Natalia whimpered.

“We’ll help you, Natalia,” Todd promised. “Even hopping will be better than doing nothing so you can keep your circulation pumping.”

Rafael looked at his watch. “We just sat down. So an hour from now.”

“Okay for you and Beth. But Natalia and I haven’t been on our feet in a while, so we should move.”

Natalia whimpered again. “Let me get used to sitting, please.”

“Okay,” Todd relented. “But soon we’ll all get up and move around for at least five minutes. Trust me, you’ll be glad you did.”

Rafael muttered something, the only intelligible word of which was “trust.” “What’ll we do for the other fifty-five minutes,” he growled.

“Massage,” Todd responded. “We’ll do seated circle massages on each other, switching partners every fifteen minutes.”

“I don’t know how to massage anyone,” Beth huffed. How typical for her to overlook the power of her own touch. Todd weighed his words before responding.

“I’m not talking about anything formal here. After all, massage is simply about touch. You touch the other person in the way you like to be touched. Beth, you’re great at that.” Todd bit back a smile of gratification when he saw her blush.

“Fine. I’ll massage my wife, and you can massage yours.” Rafael wedged himself behind Natalia and put his hands into position.

“Part of the time,” Todd concurred. “What this is all about, Volar, is circulation and warmth. Nothing else. We’re all going to massage each other and switch to maximize both.”

“I’ll massage Natalia, and she can massage me.” Rafael glared defiantly.

Todd shook his head. “Good trick. Tell me how you’re going to manage that and keep the massage going.”

Rafael started to say something, and then stopped. “What do you have in mind, Lanigan?” His voice was almost too soft to hear.

“We’ll sit in a circle, back to front. Each of us will massage the person in front and be massaged by the person behind.”

The other man again took several moments to ponder. At last he said, “I don’t want you touching me, Lanigan. And I don’t want to touch you either.”

Todd had no idea where Volar was going with this, nor did he care. “Fine. We’ll each sit between Natalia and Beth for this first round. You can change your mind later.”

In moments, they were in a circle position so each person had access to one back. When they began the massages, all that could be heard at first were groans and grunts of pleasure. Todd was pleased the massages helped in the way he’d envisioned--for heat and circulation. How long this technique would continue to work for them was an unknown, but at least for now, they were keeping the wolf at bay.

* * * *

Natalia felt stiff and uncomfortable, but she was glad Todd and the others had helped her sit up. A vision of freezing to death on the floor of the cave had grown entirely too realistic. Though she had cold climate survival in her genes, Natalia swore to herself that, if they got out of here alive, she’d be with Rafael from now on--and agree to tropical beaches as the first choice for holidays.

With her right leg still stiffly out to the side, Natalia took her place in the circle near the small fire. Seated between Rafael and Todd--the only configuration possible given Rafael's refusal to touch or be touched by Todd--Natalia willed herself to focus on where she was and what she was doing. For the first fifteen minutes, she would massage Rafael's back and receive Todd's massage. Despite everything, this sounded appealing.

Todd, of course, was a masterful massager. Though she'd become accustomed to his touch earlier, she continued to enjoy the caring yet vigorous way he stroked her back, kneading the tight muscles between her shoulder blades. She would definitely add professional massage to her life once they got back home.

Though Rafael wore his heavy navy blue parka, Natalia could clearly feel his muscles as she massaged him. Her poor husband felt very tense and stiff, his muscles bunched into hard, tight knots. Hmm. How long had it been since she'd focused on Rafael's beautiful back? Lately, Natalia had been so centered on the changes in her own aging body, she'd neglected to appreciate his. Rafael was one magnificent hunk of male flesh--always had been and, with the inherent good luck of men who aged gracefully, always would be. He was hers to enjoy every day, to feast her eyes on, to run her fingers over. Never again would she let her busy life or her insecurities rob her of this pleasure.

"That feels very good," Rafael murmured. She allowed herself to assume he was referring to the massage she was giving him, not the fact that he was massaging the other woman. Natalia could easily fall into the pit of jealousy over the inevitable contact between her husband and the beautiful younger woman, but some restraint she'd never felt before held her back. Mellowness was not a usual mood for Natalia. Now she found she enjoyed it.

"It feels good to me, too," she replied ambiguously. Truth be told, both parts of her massage were delicious. As to the erotic possibilities of being massaged at

the same time by two magnificent men--though the reality they found themselves should have been far from erotic--Natalia felt as if she'd landed in the midst of a fantasy or, perhaps, some cosmic force's idea of a risqué joke. Two men and her. If she could forget the cold, her injury, the danger they were in, not to mention the other woman, maybe she could pretend she was in a fantasy. Hmm. A lot to forget.

"It's been fifteen minutes," Todd announced. "Let's stand, then swivel around to switch partners."

"Let's just swivel now," Rafael said, "and wait to stand. It'll be easier for Natalia."

Though Todd wanted them to stand, he was outvoted this time.

"I think I'll need some help with swiveling," Natalia admitted. Given her injury, switching positions was far from trivial.

"Let me help you." Rafael looked at her for a moment as if to assess how best to do this.

"I think if one of us holds Natalia's right leg while she turns on her rear end, she can move around without too much trouble," Todd said.

Natalia shook her head. "I don't know. Sounds kind of not worth the trouble. What about if you guys just change positions and I remain sitting where I am?"

Everyone looked expectantly at Todd for a response. "For a variety of reasons, I think it would be better for you to move a bit several times each hour. Look, we're really not on anyone else's time schedule here but our own. We don't have to rush through the rotation. If we find it's just not going to work, we can change our plans."

"I'll hold her leg." Rafael got on his knees and took hold of her leg by the calf. "Is this okay?" Caring and concern lit up his eyes.

“Yes,” she said, though it did hurt.

With everyone’s encouragement, she scooted around on her rear end while Rafael held her leg like a fulcrum. In a surprisingly short time, she was in position to receive Rafael’s massage and provide this service for Todd.

“That feels incredibly wonderful, Rafael,” she whispered.

Upon hearing this compliment, Rafael deepened his massage--which did feel great, though not as wonderful as Todd’s, not that she’d ever admit so.

“Todd, any place special I should rub?”

“The back of my neck, please.”

He did feel very tight there. Natalia tried to unite her thoughts, feelings, and touch to bring him comfort. Touching him while Rafael touched her, she felt a buzz of excitement that transcended her pain and cold. For her, there was something very special about this man. He attracted her in ways she’d thought she was no longer capable of feeling.

All the while he continued to stroke and rub her back, Rafael began to nibble on the bit of neck he could expose. Delicious shivers raced down Natalia’s back at the touch of his lips on her sensitive skin there. She couldn’t help wondering if Beth saw what Rafael was doing.

Most of all, she had to bite back a temptation to lay her own lips on the sexy and inviting looking nape of Todd’s neck.

* * * *

Astreluna admired intelligence and resourcefulness, both of which she saw her charges demonstrate in abundance during their massages. When she took a moment to reflect, she realized the massages would help keep the people going and thus make her assignment more difficult. But, shoot, how could she not root for people who were trying so hard to deal with harsh conditions?

Of course, Astreluna’s delaying the completion of her assignment wasn’t at

all the same thing as canceling it. Goodness, when the time came, she could use the gentleness and mellowness of the atmosphere to make the transition all the more pleasant--her goal all along.

Invisible to her charges for now, Astreluna flew around the cave to observe their behavior and actions. They all appeared focused on the massages--both giving and receiving. Astreluna's romantic heart beat faster when she spotted Rafael nuzzling Natalia. According to the group aura, at this moment, Rafael was the only completely satisfied participant. The others also wanted to nuzzle and kiss, but each had a reason for holding back.

Todd wanted to kiss Beth, but exerted great pressure to hold himself back. Too bad he didn't realize how much she would have welcomed the feel of his lips on her body. At the same time, Beth found Rafael Volar almost devastatingly attractive, and she wanted to brush the olive-hued skin of his nape with her lips. As to Natalia, poor thing was swallowing down her desire to lick Todd's skin.

Knowing how little time her charges had left, Astreluna wanted them to savor all they wished for. Part of Astreluna's unique approach to transitioning charges was to enable them to feel a full blast of earthly love joy before she took them. For this reason, she'd brought love dust. Usually only the Angels of Romance were able to distribute love dust, but she'd convinced one to share his supply. Clearly, the time for using this had arrived.

Astreluna reached into a pocket for a pinch of the powerful stuff. At just that moment, a gust of wind shook her. She realized she must have grabbed too much of the powder when she opened her hands and a stream rather than a sprinkle poured out over her four charges.

* * * *

If he ever got out of this place, Todd was more determined than ever to follow his dream and go to medical school. Helpful as he was to his fellow

disaster mates, he knew full well how much more useful he'd have been with medical training. If he were one to permit himself regrets, right now he'd rue his choosing business over medical school in the first place. But regrets were futile. All that counted was going forward.

Maybe once he went through medical training, he'd know how to keep from being turned on when he touched a beautiful woman. Hell, between the effect of Natalia on one side and Beth on the other, Todd felt like a prime candidate for a case of blue balls. All he knew was, he'd have to get over his libido insanity to practice or even study medicine. But right now, he felt like it had been years since he'd made love--not hours.

One more shift in massage partners and he'd remind everyone to stand up. Maybe if he focused on the practical aspects of getting them through this, he'd forget how turned on he felt. Once again, Rafael insisted on holding Natalia's leg while she spun around. Todd could tell Rafael was holding her leg in a less than optimal spot, but he didn't want to irritate the man by sounding critical. So poor Natalia suffered.

"Todd, it's still awfully cold in here," Beth complained.

"Yeah, no central heating is a bummer." What more did she expect him to do?

"Ha, ha."

"Beth, don't you feel any warmer now than you did before we began the circle massages?"

"A little," she admitted somewhat grudgingly. "But not enough."

"I agree," Rafael said. "Maybe we should stand up now, move around before we resume massaging."

Todd, Rafael, and Beth stood and walked around for several moments. Then Todd and Rafael helped prop Natalia upright. She held her right leg stiffly out and,

hanging on to Rafael, hopped several times. Tears filled her eyes, and Todd wanted to brush them away.

“Is the pain still so awful?” Todd asked her.

Natalia sniffled. “It’s the pain, it’s the cold, it’s everything.”

To Todd’s amazement, Beth went over to Natalia and hugged the other woman. “You poor thing. This is awful enough for the rest of us, but it must be doubly horrible for you. If you want to cry, go ahead, though the tears may freeze on your face.”

Natalia did that strange thing women can do, laughing and crying at the same time. Beth, showing more compassion for another person than Todd believed her capable of, murmured soothing words of encouragement to the other woman. Rafael hugged them both. Suddenly uncomfortably aware of being the odd man out, Todd joined the group hug. For a moment, he didn’t know exactly who his arms were around--just that he finally felt warm and as if he was exactly where he should be at that moment.

After holding the hug for what felt like ten minutes but couldn’t have been that long, the four people pulled back and looked at each other as if for the first time. “Thank you,” Natalia told them all. “I certainly don’t feel like crying any longer.”

“*Querida*. There is no reason for you to cry,” Rafael crooned. “All will be good. All will be better than ever.”

Todd looked at Rafael and Natalia, again admiring and envying them for maintaining their love for so long. Now he could see the emotion sparkle from them, and he could have sworn he saw a tangible link joining them--as if they shared an aura. He and Beth had never had any such intimate connection. How sad he would feel to die without experiencing a union and a love like this.

He turned to Beth, hoping, though he knew how impossible it was, to see

some light of love in her eyes. To his amazement and joy, the flat disappointment and scorn he'd grown used to seeing on her face had disappeared. In its place, he saw a love deeper and wider even than what they'd shared when they first came together.

With a groan, he took her in his arms.

* * * *

How beautiful the young people looked together when they embraced--the eternal allure of youth. Natalia had been regretting the passing of her own youthful beauty, even of Rafael's, for so long. But now as she also refocused on the feeling she had had of Rafael holding her, she also began to realize youth did not have a monopoly on handsome good looks and that extra dimension. Rafael had a new kind of beauty as he grew older--she and Rafael together had a new kind of beauty in this stage of life. Her heart melted as the magnificence of this truth pumped through her veins like invigorated blood. Too bad this realization hadn't come to her until too late, for surely they were fated to die in this cave.

But if that were so, then she would glory in her new found truth and beauty before she bid farewell to this world. She had to tell the others what she'd learned. How to put this into words? "You are all so beautiful," she started.

"And you also, *querida*." Rafael was, as always, her knight in shining armor.

"Yes," she said, "we are all beautiful. I want to thank you, Rafael, and you, Beth and Todd, for sharing your unique beauty with me. But now, I'm so cold, please, can we hug again."

She didn't have to ask twice. In moments, they were all sharing their body heat with her. The warmth they brought to her physically paled before the warmth she felt in her heart. At this moment, in different ways, she loved each of the people in this cave with her.

Much as she hated to be bossy and loved the hugging, even with the supporting arms holding her, Natalia could no longer remain upright on one foot. “I’m sorry, but I must sit down again. Please, everyone, continue to stand or walk around if it’s best for you.”

“We’re in this together,” Beth said. “I’ll sit down with you.”

The men joined right in. Rafael helped her to sit. She hugged him to thank him, and, next thing she knew, they were once again hugging--everyone a tangle of arms and legs, except for the leg she kept away from the crowd.

And then, someone’s lips on her, her lips on someone. Was it Rafael or Todd? How strange and wonderful that she didn’t know.

All she knew was that she wanted to make love with all of her companions--a way to make love with the life force she wanted to affirm with every iota of her being.

So she hugged and kissed and received hugs and kisses. Though the air around them grew increasingly cold, the warmth of her companions and their love kept her rosy and comfortable. But soon, she wanted more.

* * * *

The air around Astreluna vibrated, which she knew meant she should check her pager. It looked like a star and hovered delicately between her wings. She reached back to retrieve it and frowned when she saw the message was from Venussuna. Unwelcome but not unexpected.

“When do you expect to arrive back to the Celestial Spheres’ Life and Death Transition Central Office with your charges?” Ironical that the message arrived just when the four people in the cave began fully to discover the power of love. Astreluna, who never wanted to rush any aspect of the transition process, found the timing of the page--and the reminder of her duty that it represented--disconcerting. Until now, she’d allowed herself to believe she could keep Death at bay and thwart

this transition without too many complications. With Venussuna's focus on her so strongly, Astreluna should have realized her fantasy could fail.

Hmmm. Astreluna had several options, none of them appealing. She could ignore Venussuna's page request, but of course Venussuna didn't appreciate being ignored any more than anyone else. She might contact Venussuna and say she couldn't yet estimate the arrival time, in which case her mentor would want to know why Astreluna was dithering. Or she could pick some time, mention it, and argue with Venussuna over its appropriateness. Too soon, too late? Astreluna gritted her teeth as she mulled over these options.

The pager vibrated again before she'd decided. "Why didn't you answer my previous message?" Venussuna sounded considerably less serene than was her norm.

"Things have been busy here." Lane, she knew, but it beat silence.

"I expected that you would be back with the charges by now. Death says you're dragging your feet. You know how important this is for you. And giving them a fast transition is the best option. We agreed."

Yes, they had. But that was before she had a chance to become acquainted with the charges. "One of the charges has turned out to be very resourceful in handling situations like this," Astreluna pointed out. Every manual and reference she'd studied cited the possibility of resourceful charges altering circumstances. The effective Transition Angel needed to be prepared to respond to the new conditions she encountered.

"Even so, you've been there much longer than anticipated. Astreluna, have you helped them evade their fate?" Venussuna's voice had grown dark with suspicion. "You have done something to tip the balance, haven't you? That's why Death is making disgruntled noises."

Astreluna remembered the way she'd guided Todd's ski to help him find air

holes, and she cringed. No use explaining to Venussuna that Todd and the others were very close to locating the ventilation, and a gentle nudge was all they required. No use, either, repeating the stricture to provide the charges as much comfort as reasonable. Venussuna did not take well to having regulations spouted back to her. But Astreluna had to tell the truth.

“Just a bit. I helped them locate ventilation faster than they might have.”

Astreluna could just picture Venussuna shaking her head. “You know what’s at stake here. Why have you broken the rules again?”

How could Astreluna explain?

“Everyone’s on assignment, so I can’t even replace you now,” Venussuna muttered as if to herself. “Well, there’s no help for it. Complete the assignment and return with your charges. If you arrive before the next moonrise with the transition complete, I’ll personally see to it that you’re enrolled in a top-notch corrective course.”

“Thank you,” Astreluna said, though she didn’t feel grateful. “I really must go now.”

“Just one more thing, Astreluna. Please tell me that this time you didn’t shower your charges with love dust.”

“I can’t tell you that.”

An ominous silence greeted that admission. The air around Astreluna grew perceptibly cooler. “I’ve told you before, it’s not a good idea ... in fact, it’s difficult to determine which of your ideas is the worst, but scattering love dust may win that competition.” Another silence.

“Astreluna, get back here immediately with your charges, or you will face the consequences previously outlined.”

An eternity of filing. Venussuna’s eternal patronizing. Seeing other Transition Angels who showed no sensitivity or caring in the way they completed

their assignments. Astreluna swallowed hard. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place. She hadn't thought any such obstacles existed in the Celestial Spheres, but she was finding out they did.

Perhaps if she returned to the Celestial Spheres now and explained to Venussuna all the excellent reasons why she felt certain her charges shouldn't yet be transitioned, she would somehow avert those sentences. Would Venussuna go back on her threat and give Astreluna yet another chance? Or maybe this would be her last foray to the Earth. The more she thought about it, the more sure Astreluna felt this was a distinct possibility. If she would never again return to Earth, no sense departing with any love dust remaining in her pocket. As a farewell gesture, Astreluna poured the remaining powder over her four former charges and bid them her best. If she had to face the rest of forever filing because of them, she might as well go out with a big, loud boom.

Chapter Five

For a moment, the air in the cave appeared to quiver, vibrate, and spark as if their little fire had gone berserk. They broke their group nuzzle and hug to gape at the magical currents filling the atmosphere around them. An unusually sparkling powder that appeared to shower them with rainbows of never-before-seen combinations of colors exploded over them and swirled through the air in every direction. Golden blues whirled with silvery oranges in a constantly changing kaleidoscope that took their breath away.

“What’s that?” Beth asked.

Todd shook his head. “Damned if I know, but I feel as if we’re being treated to our very own fireworks celebration.”

“It’s stunning, beyond anything I’ve ever seen or imagined. If I ever get out of here, I’d love to try to paint the design and the colors. If only it produced heat as well as light,” Natalia sighed.

“I suspect we have to continue to produce our own heat,” Todd said. “Just as we’ve been doing with our little fire and our body warmth.”

“How?” Beth asked.

“Like this,” Rafael answered. He hugged Beth and kissed her so hard, for a moment it looked as if they’d become one person. Watching them, Todd initially wanted to grab Beth from the other man’s clutches and punch him out. But then, a strange, new feeling came over Todd--if he had to give it a name, he’d call it comfort--and with it a warm acceptance of what he’d just seen. In addition, his

desire for Natalia grew more intense.

When Rafael separated from Beth, apparently with great reluctance, he looked from Natalia to Todd. “This is the weirdest feeling I’ve ever had. Common sense tells me I should say I’m sorry, to both of you. But I’ve wanted to kiss Beth for the longest time. *Querida*, can you forgive me?”

Natalia was wearing a Mona Lisa smile. “If you can forgive me for what I’m about to do.” She turned to Todd, grasped his head, and lowered his face to hers so their lips met. Her lips were shockingly cold and hot at the same time. Though he adored Beth and never for a single moment stopped thinking of her, Todd spiraled into another reality as he and Natalia kissed. She tasted like sinfully rich, dark chocolate, enveloping him in a sensuous mystery. With one simple kiss, she changed his life. He knew he had to make love with her here and now. All this in the space of a short, but potent moment.

When Natalia drew back from him, he could read in her eyes that the magic of their contact also touched her.

Now, in the blink of an eye, it was as if the couples shifted--as if Beth were with Rafael and Todd with Natalia in accord with some cosmic ordering. Todd felt almost as if he were playing a game of optical illusions where, with a slight visual shift, one reality melted into another. Just as he took Natalia in his arms, Rafael and Beth moved closer to them. Without any real consciousness of how it was happening, he realized the four of them were locked in an embrace. His lips were firmly mated with Natalia’s, but he felt the heat Beth and Rafael generated together. At this moment, he felt completely in love with Natalia--and, more than ever before, with his wife.

* * * *

When Astreluna arrived at the celestial departure pad, Venussuna was waiting--and she looked more displeased than Astreluna thought angels could look.

The pad, usually buzzing with angels coming and going, now appeared deserted except for the harp player hovering above them. The pad, a huge golden structure atop a cloud, seemed to gleam less brilliantly than usual. But perhaps that was a reflection of Astreluna's attitude.

"Where are your charges?" Venussuna's multi-colored eyes--a strange blend of green and purple--flashed violently though her bright red curls drooped. Even her wings appeared droopy today.

"In the cave on Earth where I left them." Even before Astreluna finished saying the words, she felt sure Venussuna knew exactly where the charges were.

"I had a feeling this would happen, but I hoped you'd repair your errors before coming up here. Of course you haven't. This is a worse mess than even your previous ones," Venussuna complained. Her wings were fluttering in what appeared to be a nervous tic and a frown distorted half her face.

Astreluna exhaled hard. The trip up had been extremely arduous because she'd been bracing herself for this lecture. Ready as she'd considered herself to hear Venussuna's words, they still hurt.

Venussuna clucked and shook her head. "I am tired of your excuses, and our governing council is past distressed with your failure to complete assignments. You do know this was your last chance?"

Astreluna knew only too well. She'd made her decision, and she was completely prepared to face the consequences, which she informed her mentor.

"At least that part's admirable," Venussuna grumped. "But we still have to accomplish the transition of the charges. That's problem one. Problem two is that you dosed them with love dust. Clearly, you've left the situation in a muddle."

Astreluna began to run out of the hope she'd been nurturing deep inside--that Venussuna would let things slide this one last time and allow the charges to avert their fate. But focused as Venussuna was on Astreluna's transgression, the

apprentice angel had to concede there was little hope of sliding by on this one.

“Do you want me to go back to Earth and complete the transition?” As a matter of honor, Astreluna would have to make up for her mistake--difficult as this would be for her.

Compared with the expression on Venussuna’s face, the snow and ice entrapping Astreluna’s charges seemed like a warm cozy blanket. She sniffed regally.

“There is no way I would trust you to go back there alone again to correct the situation. This time, I’m going with you. Not that you’ll ever have an assignment like this again, but at least you’ll have the opportunity to see how you should have handled your charges.”

This was the darkest moment Astreluna had ever experienced. All her efforts and the risks she took on this last assignment--all for naught. Venussuna never willingly went back to participate in matters on Earth. Having the mentor angel accompany her was like having her wings stuck together with astral goo.

* * * *

Natalia felt as one with the three beautiful people locked in tight embrace with her. She’d always regarded Rafael as a stunning man, every inch of his face and body finely sculpted viewed from no matter which angle. Even as he aged, he retained the perfection of his form, now combined with a ripeness that charmed.

In contrast, Todd still had the firmness and leanness of youth. She prayed that one day she would be able to properly look at his body, to savor his complete physical beauty. Maybe she’d even be able to paint him. The bits of his skin that were exposed glowed with an inner light, as if a secret source of sunshine shone from his deepest core. He drank her in with his eyes and his kiss, making her feel like the queen of the universe and blessing her with a heat that was completely essential to life.

Though a small inner voice warned that every person on the brink of breaking sacred vows probably told himself or herself the same thing, she found it took little effort to still that voice and listen to a deeper, older, wiser one. Yes, as carnally aroused as she felt at this totally inappropriate moment, a more profound emotion pulled at her. Love surrounded her, filled her, and drew her onward. She loved her husband more than life itself, enough even to consent to his making love with Beth. And though she burned to make love with Todd, her inner voice assured her by doing so, she would increase the love they all shared.

So when Todd pressed his strong, hard erection against her belly, through the thick layers of both his clothes and hers, she amazed herself at how quickly she grew wet with her desire to open herself up to him. Here, in this frozen, dark place, where death nipped at them like a vicious mad dog, she felt vibrantly alive. Here, where her middle-aged bones creaked from the extreme cold and her ankle throbbed from an injury, she sensed herself the personification of desire fulfilled. With her artist's eye and her sense of the absurd, she could picture her bundled-up body with her leg stuck out at an odd angle. Hardly anyone's image of a seductive lover, but she felt sexier and more desirable than any sex goddess.

"I want you," Todd whispered, his voice low and hoarse with urgency. He didn't have to say the words. She knew what he was thinking, almost as if they were one being. The same as she knew what Rafael was thinking. Lying on top of Beth, the two of them so close to Todd and her that their legs and hips touched, Rafael was with her also every moment, every step of the way. The cold was like a living creature poised to engulf them and shred them to pieces with cruel, sharp teeth. But here, in the cocoon made up of the four of them, Natalia experienced a sensation of safety. She and the others would be more than all right, would survive and flourish--if they could sustain the magical love that kept them warm and whole this night.

“And I want you,” she whispered back, the words in the musical Russian of her early childhood.

At the same time, she heard Rafael declare his desire to Beth in Spanish, the words sounding romantic, rich and dark in husky whisper.

As clearly and definitely as if she were reciting a well-established vow, Beth murmured her reply to Rafael. In the chill silence of the cave, all their words took wing, blended in perfect harmony, and soared high up, through the rock walls of the cave and the barrier of ice and snow that threatened to bury them.

Natalia was at once participant and observer, lover and beloved. Pressed hard and tight against her, Todd covered her face with kisses before fiercely laying claim to her lips with his. With his hands, so powerful in the earlier massage, he now explored her body with a completely different motive--that of the lover who wants only to please his lady. Natalia yearned for the intimate contact of Todd's skin on hers. Besotted as she was, she couldn't let herself forget where they were or their relentless enemy, the cold. For now, she and Todd would have to enjoy themselves as they were, bundled in life-saving layers of clothing. Even through the barriers of layers of cloth and insulation, her nipples hardened at his touch. She longed to have him kiss her sensitive breasts and watch his head as he sucked and licked her there. For now, she had to settle for the feel of his fingers, his head burrowing between her breasts, his longing manifest in his burgeoning, demanding erection nestled against her yielding softness.

Lost as she was in Todd's strong embrace, Natalia never lost sight of Rafael and Beth sharing their own love dance close by.

The fire the men had created continued to burn, providing the only light in the cave. As to heat, Natalia realized, amazed, that she no longer felt the cold. She refused to believe the warmth comforting her body now was an illusion heralding the approach of death. Rather, she understood that the four of them together were

creating life-sustaining warmth.

“You are so beautiful to me,” Todd moaned.

“And you to me,” she responded, riding the wave of beauty and sensation that enveloped them.

He lowered his hand to her feminine mound and, through all the clothes, caressed her hungering core. Feeling no self-consciousness, no inhibition, only desire, Natalia arched her hips upward. His finger pressed all around the clit, and Natalia nearly levitated through the cave’s cover.

“I long to taste you, to lick you long and feel every inch of your loveliness,” Todd whispered to her, thrilling her with the sound of his words and the pressure of his touch.

“Yes, oh yes,” she whispered back. Then she wound her good leg around him and drew him as close as was possible.

His cock touched her most intimate spot, and she nearly came with an explosion of sound and energy from the sweet friction of him being exactly there.

* * * *

Logically, Todd knew he should have been drowning in cold, but logic had no place in what was happening to him. The sheer physical pleasure of his contact with Natalia nearly overwhelmed him, pulling him into a vortex of sensation that set his teeth on edge as he grappled with taking it all in.

With Natalia’s one good leg around him, he remained conscious of the fact that she held her right leg out stiffly. Her injury prevented them from entering into the more complete intimacy of her enfolding him with both legs. Much as he longed for that added touch, he welcomed the reminder that he should move with care to spare her any additional pain.

That remained one of his few rational thoughts as he gave himself fully to the trance he was in. Completely aware that Beth and Volar were intimately

entwined mere inches from him and Natalia, rather than objecting on any level, he found himself marveling at how both couples moved in rhythm with each other.

Nearly buried under layers of clothes, Todd hadn't imagined his cock could possibly be as sensitized as it seemed to him. He felt practically naked, and his cock huge with arousal--as if he were frozen at the moment before bursting into a thundering, hungered-for climax. Natalia looked like a Gypsy angel beneath him, her pale skin now pink with her excitement. He loved that she was a vocal partner, telling him with little sounds and foreign words how into what they were doing she was at every moment.

"You'll tell me if I'm hurting you in any way," he whispered to Natalia.

Her groan in response was definitely not one of pain. Hampered as she was with her clothing and the awareness of her injured right leg, she nonetheless arched her hips and rotated her bottom to position her sensual core just where she wanted it--just where he wanted her to be. He prayed that one day--soon--they would have the chance to be naked together. He'd bury his face in her hot, sweet mound and finally get to see, taste, and smell the lovely body that was now giving him so much pleasure.

His cock felt as if it had frozen into a permanent erection. But the sensations racing up and down his spinal cord and through his veins to warm him everywhere proved his cock was far from frozen. His erection had now become his personal center of gravity and the center of his entire universe. Poised as he was at the brink of orgasm, he was torn between wanting the release of his much anticipated climax and wanting the sensation of rubbing himself against Natalia to last forever.

Through all his gyrations and his acute responsiveness to Natalia, Todd continued to be totally aware that Beth and Volar were next to them, moving in tandem, making their own noises of pleasure, sharing the mutual heat. He felt such tenderness to his three companions, his heart had to grow larger to accommodate

the sentiment. With the swirl of emotions playing counterpoint to his intense physical excitement, Todd sensed himself to have become a much larger man to accommodate all that was happening inside him and without.

Unbidden, thoughts of Beth and their marriage forced their way into his consciousness. He loved Beth, always would. What a thought to come to him in another woman's arms! But, far from wanting to push the thought away, he welcomed every aspect of his life that came up now.

Natalia tightened her leg around him. Her breathing grew more shallow and rapid, her movements wilder and more demanding. Todd knew she was on the brink of her climax. That realization excited him even more, and he bit his lip to hold back his own orgasm until Natalia was fully satisfied.

Beth, alas, would never be fully satisfied--by him. Sexually, yes, that had never been the question. But she'd told him definitively that she didn't want him to take the time out of his working life for medical school, internship, residency. It would be years until he'd have a chance to make an income comparable to what he currently earned. He was willing to wait those years, but she wasn't.

With a pang of regret, he finally and completely resigned himself to letting Beth go. He would never be complete as a man if he didn't follow the career of his heart. Painful as this letting go felt, Todd knew his decision would someday bring him peace.

Natalia's movements below him sped up. Now she was rocking both of them in her concentrated effort to get over the line. Crooning something that sounded like a lullaby, crying, and, occasionally screaming, Natalia poured herself into a majestic climax. Alongside them, almost in syncopated rhythm, Beth did the same.

Burning with the fire of his physical pleasure, the sounds of the women coming, and, he was sure, the scent of musk heavy in the air, Todd roared with the

glory of the climax taking shape deep within him.

* * * *

When Venussuna and Astreluna arrived at the cave, Astreluna didn't know what to expect. Despite all her efforts, had the charges frozen to death? Were they now awaiting their transition and suffering because of the delay she'd caused?

Venussuna looked around her and sniffed regally. "What is all this?"

Astreluna smiled to herself. The little fire was still bringing some heat and light to the freezing cave. But, far more amazingly, she saw the two couples locked in erotic embraces, making the most passionate love they could considering all the clothes they wore--and poor Natalia's leg injury. Despite how cold the air in the cave had grown, they all appeared amazingly warm and alive. The love dust had certainly done the trick. She'd remember this wonderful moment and draw comfort from it as she undertook her eternity of filing. "I guess the love dust was especially effective."

Venussuna frowned at her. "I will see to it that that ... *substance* is permanently banned."

"Pity," Astreluna opined out loud before she realized the word had come out.

"Hardly that," Venussuna responded, her face pinched into a sour expression. "With the unfortunate loss of control that substance produces among humans, we should have banned it long ago."

"I wouldn't call people abandoning themselves to pleasure an unfortunate loss of control," Astreluna, feeling surprisingly assertive, stated. "After all, what greater pleasure is there for humans than to enjoy love--both the physical and emotional bonds?"

Venussuna nodded to where both couples writhed with an amazing level of abandon. The women apparently reached their peaks of satisfaction, followed very quickly by the men. The sounds of pleasure they emitted could rival those of

their heavenly counterparts, whose noises, admittedly, resulted from far different stimuli. Astreluna sighed with nostalgia.

“They are not with their proper partners,” Venussuna hissed.

Astreluna, who hadn’t even considered this possibility, looked hard at the two couples on the ground. Just as Venussuna had pronounced, the couples were mixed up. Todd was with Natalia, Rafael with Beth. Despite this confusion, the love that surrounded the four shone pure and true. “Could it be the love dust?” she wondered aloud.

That earned her another dirty look from Venussuna, whose lip had curled and whose eyes glowed dark with anger. “Even worse. Now we’ll have to sort them out to effect the transition, which we’d planned to have them complete as couples!”

Astreluna thought quickly. “Well, Venussuna, I see the problem. If they’re supposed to complete the transition as couples and they’re now all mixed up, clearly they will have to postpone the transition until this confusion gets straightened out.”

Venussuna opened her mouth to protest, then, for once, apparently could find nothing to say. “That seals it.” She looked around with contempt. “You’ve failed miserably again. In fact, this is the worst muddle ever.”

Trying not to look smug, Astreluna cast her eyes downward. “I guess I have. Especially because I hear a rescue team approaching. With the warmth the people, uh, the charges, have generated with their lovemaking, there’s no way they’ll freeze to death before the team arrives.”

Venussuna’s lip curled further with additional contempt. “I’m going back up. I’ll leave you to clean up all traces of our visit from this cave. Don’t dawdle. There’s a lot of filing just waiting for you.” A smirk raised the corners of Venussuna’s large mouth as she muttered the last words. With a whoosh of wings

and silk, she ascended.

Not that she was happy to see the last of Venussuna, but Astreluna smiled. Leapin' lightnin', she'd broken so many rules already and was in so much trouble for her transgressions, she figured she could now do whatever she pleased. What worse could happen to her than her sentence to the central filing system?

So Astreluna prepared to break the biggest rule of all. She took on form and sound so she could tell the couples exactly what just happened.

* * * *

Todd came and came and came in spasms of abundant pleasure. By the time he stopped releasing his cum, he'd have sworn there was nothing left inside him. Never before had he felt such complete satisfaction--or peace. If this was heaven, its glory surpassed anything he'd ever experienced before.

Rafael seemed to mirror Todd's experience. The two couples lay in warm afterglow, savoring the sensations that united them in profound mutual pleasure. But Todd realized that, delicious as the momentary lassitude felt, they'd all have to resume movement soon or risk losing the benefits of their shared heat. They'd have to postpone the pleasure of their languor for another time.

"We need to move again," he said, his voice slicing through the silence that enveloped them.

Rafael groaned. "You're right, but being like this is too wonderful to end."

With great effort, Todd moved off Natalia. He hated the stricken look in her eyes and mentally promised to make it up to her. He took her hands in his and helped her to a seated position. Moving stiffly, the others followed. They all slid closer to the fire which, amazingly, kept burning at the same steady level. He didn't understand how that was possible. Much as he'd come to understand, he realized a lot about all he'd experienced was a mystery.

He was about to say some words to this effect, when Beth spoke. "Todd, I

understand you now.”

Her words shocked him much as they heartened him. He knew their parting was inevitable, but at least they’d separate on good terms.

“Thank you for saying that, Beth. It means a lot that there won’t be any bitterness between us. Maybe someday, we can be friends.”

“Friends? No, Todd, I want so much more than that. I want to be your wife again, for always.”

Todd couldn’t get his mind around what she was saying, though these were the words he’d hoped for--and then lost hope for. “I’m going to medical school,” he said, then wished he’d taken the moment to express his emotions.

A tear formed at the corner of her eye. “And I want you to go. I support you completely in this. Most of all, I want to say how sorry I’ve been for being such a b--”

Todd’s heart about turned over in him. “Beth, I can’t get my head around this. It’s such a change.”

She nodded. “I’ve learned a lot in this cave. Now if we manage to survive ... well, I intend never to repeat my mistakes.”

“Oh, we’ll survive all right,” Todd said. And then he took her in his arms. “Happy Anniversary, darling.”

“The first of many,” she said, before he covered her lips with his.

* * * *

“If we survive,” Natalia said, picking up Beth’s mantra.

Rafael took her in his arms. “How can we not? Happy Anniversary to you, *mi querida*,” he whispered, his face buried in her hair.

Natalia’s native pessimism took over. Warm and happy as she felt at this moment, she couldn’t fool herself into believing these wonderful moments could last--much as she longed for them to.

“You are so beautiful, *querida*. I’m the luckiest man in the universe to have spent these eighteen years with you--and I look forward to many more.” Rafael’s sunny optimism was such a contrast to her.

She was about to dispute his words, but what came out was, “Yes, thank you. I am beautiful, just as you are. Just as we all are.”

With a shock she realized she wasn’t just saying these words, she’d really come to believe them with all her heart. Her beauty, their beauty, was not only the fleeting gift of youth. Her heart brimmed over with sentiment and felt near to bursting. Before she could find the words to express this, a blinding flash of white light exploded before them, leaving in its wake a strange creature that resembled an angel.

A voice, sweet as a chorus of harps, called them all by name and Natalia’s heart dropped. After all that had happened, they would now die. Just as she’d always heard, a condensed version of her life raced before her eyes. With poignancy and regret she wished she could touch the people from her family, childhood friends. So many paintings still undone. So many places to see. But what stood out most for her was the love she and Rafael had shared. If she were to die now, her biggest regret would be the time she didn’t get to spend with Rafael. Her biggest joy would be the love they’d known together. Perhaps they’d have the gift of eternity ... she hoped they wouldn’t find out too soon.

* * * *

“I am Astreluna, apprentice Transition Angel Second-Class,” she announced. All four of her charges watched her with open-mouthed fascination. Well she remembered her days on Earth, when she’d have reacted even more goggle-eyed to the appearance of an angel.

“Why are you here?” Todd asked. He had one arm around Beth and the other around Natalia. “Are we ...?”

“You have been in great peril. It pleases me to tell you that peril is drawing to a close. In fact, as I speak, a team of rescuers is very close.”

All four began to buzz at once with mixed expressions of disbelief, shock, elation, and confusion. Knowing that she would not be able to stay with them much longer, Astreluna used her waning influence with them to establish a hypnotic trance that would prepare them to believe all the strange things she had to tell them.

“You really are about to be rescued by an excellent team who will provide all you need.”

After a moment’s hesitation while they digested her words, Astreluna realized they’d understood when she heard a collective sigh of relief.

Trying her best to emulate Venussuna’s lecture-mode expression, Astreluna began, “Before your rescue, I want to point out something very special has happened in this cave. Something I want to be sure you never forget.”

Each human then thought of the special changes that had happened to her or him during this interlude. “I do not have much time,” she continued. “There are two lessons I want you to take away from this cave. One is that the power of love saved you.”

“But we each made love to someone who isn’t our spouse,” Beth pointed out.

“You can blame that on the love dust I spread in the cave,” Astreluna announced.

More sighs of relief, and the release of some guilt feelings.

“The love dust and the fact that your fates are entwined,” she finished.

“I accept that love has saved us,” Todd said. “What is the second?”

“I want you to remember this time and the things you have learned about yourselves and each other.”

“There’s no danger that we’ll ever forget.” Beth looked tenderly at Todd.

Astreluna smiled and nodded. “Good. You will remember inside your heads. But I also want you to remember with an outward gesture. “You two couples are to meet every year going forward on your shared anniversary and celebrate with love, as you have in this cave, to commemorate this time.”

Rafael raised his brow. “You mean on our future anniversaries, I’m to make love with Beth and Todd with Natalia?”

“Yes, if you want to put it that way. But you might prefer to view this as a shared couples’ love. Remember this always--your capacity for love saved you and gave you your lives. As long as you never forget either lesson, you will live many more long, happy years and celebrate many more anniversaries.”

The four looked at each other and then began asking many questions, but Astreluna knew she’d told them enough for the time being. “Now I must leave.”

“But we’ll see you again, many years from now, won’t we?” asked Todd.

“Perhaps you’ll visit me, wherever I’m assigned when your time comes.”

As Astreluna said the words, she’d already begun to journey homeward that cut her off from them.

* * * *

After Astreluna’s departure, they all talked at once, trying to sort out what they’d just experienced and remaining mystified, but convinced they’d lived through a miracle. The couples vowed to stay in touch.

The rescuers promptly determined that Natalia’s injury was the most serious, so she and Rafael were attended to first. As she was being taken from the cave on a stretcher, Natalia held Rafael’s hand. Never had his eyes been filled with so much love, the expression on his face so tender. Using a last bit of strength, she sat up to take a final look at Todd and Beth, who were engrossed in each other. She’d never forget the intensity of their bond.

“Da-sveedanya!” she called, waving to them. “Until we see each other again.”

They waved and blew kisses back.

Content in the knowledge that they would meet again, Natalia settled back on the stretcher. Her next task was to do whatever she had to so her ankle would be fixed. She needed to be in top shape now so she could resume her painting, doing her best to show in oils the incredible experience of their anniversary ski trip.

* * * *

Though he wouldn’t have believed it possible to think so, Todd felt their rescue team arrived too soon. He almost didn’t want to leave the cave, though his life was so much riper with promise on the way out than it had been on the way in.

As the med-evac helicopter rose with Todd and Beth, they held hands. Wonderful as this moment felt, though, Todd couldn’t help wondering if Beth’s change of heart had more to do with the adrenaline rush of danger than with a real shift. “Beth, I’m thrilled to spend our first anniversary knowing there will be more. I may be sorry I’ve asked, but what made you change?”

Beth did that tears and smile thing again, which tugged at Todd’s heart. “I came to realize a lot in that cave. First, the beauty of being alive and healthy. Second, I really saw you for the first time ever. Todd, you’re my knight in shining armor, my everything. If you want to be a doctor, or a gourmet chef, or make mosaics from the shells you pick up at a seashore, I support you in that--just as you’ve always supported me in my dreams. Can you ever forgive me for being blind to all that?”

Todd decided this was a moment for showing rather than telling, and he could best show Beth how he felt with a kiss.

Epilogue

Happy that the two couples would be all right and continue on to enjoy long, fruitful lives, Astreluna pushed on to her dreaded return home. An eternity of filing. She swallowed hard. Still, she'd decided that fate would be worth it because she'd accomplished so much good for the people she'd come to care about.

When she arrived to check in with Venussuna at the Celestial Spheres' Life and Death Transition Central Office, Astreluna was surprised to hear voices that sounded angry--as angry as any voices ever sounded in the Celestial Spheres. She almost convinced herself the presence of company equaled a reprieve from facing Venussuna. After all, she shouldn't interrupt a personal conversation, right? Especially one with angry spirits and angels.

"Come in, Astreluna," Venussuna called out sharply. Of course her mentor had the ability to sense she was there.

Holding her head up high, Astreluna glided into Venussuna's office. Two Supervising Angels, Venussuna's superiors, were with her along with a very chastised appearing Death. Astreluna hadn't expected this. Then she realized she would receive her demotion in the presence of all four--which made it even harder to take.

The Supervisor Angels, Death and Venussuna looked hard at Astreluna. Then the Supervisor with dark hair and the largest wings Astreluna had ever seen

smiled. Well, at least they'd treat her gently and show some sensitivity. Astreluna appreciated that.

"We understand there was some confusion about the completion of your most recent transition assignment, Apprentice Transition Angel Second-Class Astreluna," she said.

Astreluna wanted to tell them how wonderful these people were, how magical and transformative their experience in the cave. But she figured she wouldn't be able to convince the supervisors of anything, so she might as well hold on to her dignity--and her tongue. She nodded to acknowledge what the senior angel said.

"You've done well," the other supervisor said. "You see, it turns out the assignment was incorrect, not your handling of it."

Astreluna almost couldn't believe what she was hearing. "It was incorrect?" she repeated.

The black-haired angel confirmed that. Astreluna noticed that Venussuna and Death were staring down at where their feet would have been if they had any.

"It seems Venussuna, Transition Supervisor Angel, has been confusing instructions and giving you inaccurate assignments. You've done well not to transition people before their proper time. Especially because not even Death caught her errors."

Astreluna wasn't positive, but she suspected the angel was telling her good news. But, evidently, he wasn't finished.

"We are pleased to inform you, Astreluna, that you are henceforth a Transition Angel First-Class. We're confident that you are ready for the big promotion, successfully ending your apprenticeship." She smiled.

Astreluna smiled back. Her heart beat with joy as she realized that the future looked bright. "Thank you," she said, her voice as soft as a gentle breeze. "I

promise I will do a great job.”

“We’re confident of that. You’ve done so well already, despite the difficult circumstances you were placed in.” She turned and nodded to Venussuna, who still kept her eyes cast downward.

“We also want you to have this chance to bid farewell to Venussuna,” the supervisor continued.

“Good-bye?” Astreluna once again didn’t understand.

“Yes.”

“Where is Venussuna going?” Astreluna asked.

Now Venussuna looked up. “To central filing for an assignment of indefinite length,” she spat out.

Astreluna knew now wasn’t the time to smile with her own happiness because Venussuna would surely misunderstand. Remembering how good the love in the cave felt, Astreluna wished Venussuna the best and waved good-bye as her escorts guided her out.

* * * *

Dr. Todd Lanigan had had to call in favors and promise his colleagues to cover for them for the next six months to get the weekend of his and Beth’s anniversary off. Fortunately, his folks had been available to stay with the kids.

But the minute he and Beth met up with Natalia and Rafael, he knew whatever they’d had to do was worth it.

“I’ve heard Tobago is where people from Trinidad vacation,” Rafael said.

“Then it’s worth all the time it took to fly from the West Coast,” Beth said. “I figure if there’s anywhere I can forget about the business deal I’m in the middle of, it’s here.”

“Rafael and I are planning a joint opening. It’s been crazy.” Natalia looked more beautiful than ever--once again making Todd suspect she’d tapped into a

fountain of youth.

As the couples settled into their remembered intimacy, they spoke again of their anniversary meetings. In the twelve years since their avalanche, no matter what came up, they hadn't missed one. They'd all early agreed that they'd give priority to meeting every year to celebrate their lives and their love. They chose a different meeting place every year with and insisted on only one stipulation--they'd meet always and only in places where it never snowed.

The End