

Chapter 1

JULY SNOW

Zelda was not only physically weary, she was cold to her inner core or, as earth people would say, chilled to the bone. Her fingers and toes were ice frosty and she could barely feel them except for a dull ache. It was her choice to feel every sensation Charlie felt, whether it be temperatures, pain or emotions and she did this willingly to participate in what it was to be fully human. However, this experience was over the top even for Zelda.

She entered the Starlight Bar shivering, her wings pulled tightly around herself in a vain attempt to gather a bit of warmth. Her smile was frozen in place and her eyebrows glittering ice crystals. One look and you could see Zelda's feathers were baby blue and stiff from the cold as she lowered her frozen eight foot frame onto one of the ancient bar stools and ordered a hot chocolate, or was it a hot cup of coffee with a splash of whiskey? Both were Charlie's favorite beverages on occasions like this, so Zelda followed suit.

It didn't matter what Zelda ordered, Hank the bartender could almost read her mind. Nimble on his feet and just as quick at mixing drinks, he slid a hot steaming cup of something down the bar where she gratefully cupped her hands around the mug. The warmth crept up her arms and slowly made its way to her shoulders as she glanced down to estimate how much ice was melting puddles on Hank's freshly mopped floor. Wiggling her toes in her cowboy boots she checked if they also were thawing. Unlike Charlie, Zelda was absolutely in no danger of permanent damage at any time. For her it was a synthetic, yet realistic illusion.

What neither Charlie nor Zelda were prepared for that day was the unexpected and definitely not predicted snow storm in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Zelda stretched her wings a little in an attempt to get the circulation going and hasten her thawing as she sipped Hank's concoction. She didn't unfold them fully because they would have reached wall to wall in the narrow Starlight and would knock something over once again. You see Zelda had a few priors.

"Oh my, I've never been so cold." Zelda exclaimed to Hank and the small group of sages gathered around the table in the back.

One of the chubbier sages, the one who wasn't versed to mountain life was the first to question. "Zelda dear what now?" They were always curious about what Zelda had been up to, because it seemed as if she and her sidekicks were constantly occupied protecting and guiding Charlie throughout her earth journey. Charlie had an affinity for tumbling into one situation after another requiring an inordinate amount of time and attention from the celestials.

"Oh," Zelda shuddered taking a sip from the steaming cup, "Charlie was up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Looked like a perfectly beautiful day and there was no reason not to go, so Cowboy Dick grabbed her, they loaded up their horses Duke and Maggie, filled their packs and drove up to one of the trailheads."

Zelda rolled her eyes and shook her wing feathers again flinging some residual ice onto the floor as she continued her story. “What could go wrong? They were both experienced packers. It was a clear warm day as they rode the old blazed trails. Not a cloud in the sky and of course, we all thought everything was fine. It was late afternoon, about 13 miles in when they tethered their horses in a small canyon. The cowboy built a fire, cooked a great meal and each had a couple of shots of whiskey before turning into their tent just after twilight.

“Some hours later in the blackened night that skinny ol’ cowboy started quivering in his sleeping bag. Charlie didn’t know at first if it was another flashback or if he was sick. The temperature had dipped suddenly and Charlie’s nose told her it was below freezing. Partially pulling back the tent flap she was shocked to see snow on the ground. A freak storm had hit the high country in July!

“Charlie isn’t dumb you know, she simply finds herself in some pretty unique situations.” Zelda was warming up and getting into the telling of the story. She dabbed at her melting eyebrows with one of the bar napkins before continuing. “Charlie unzipped her sleeping bag and joined the two bags together while the man continued to shake and complain how cold he was. She curled up, wrapping her own body around him hoping to give him some additional heat. They had top of the line sleeping bags, that wasn’t the problem. The problem was it was it was bleepin’ snowing outside and they were on the ground!” Zelda loved the word bleepin’.

That is when she chuckled. “You know what my Charlie did then? The cowboy finally wakes up at dawn and asks her, ‘Why am I so cold?’ Oh boy—it wasn’t rocket science you know. She reaches out the tent and handed him a snow ball!” Zelda started to laugh and when she did the last of the ice on her face broke and she was able to smile ear to ear. “Charlie didn’t say a word—just handed him a snow ball!” And with that Zelda grabbed another napkin, wiped the remaining melted ice off the bar top then held her stomach as she leaned over laughing. “She also covered them with the sweaty horse blankets and thought she might asphyxiate from the rank pungent odor. Not the romantic scene they watch in their movies.”

“So Zelda, glad you are laughing now but how did you get completely frozen and why do you keep rubbing your legs?” an old retired sage asked.

“Oh well, I’m a little saddle sore. You see they were way up the mountain trail and obviously they had to get out. What started as a gentle snow in the night turned to a blizzard in the morning sideways, cold-blowing snow, generating a real life and death situation. Cowboy Dick and Charlie had a bit of an argument as to when to leave. He insisted he wasn’t leaving without his coffee and Charlie was rapidly losing her calm and feeling slightly panicked. He’d laugh later telling friends he had never seen someone pack and saddle so fast in his life. Funny those human beings, she considered a snow storm a bit hellish and yet they say hell is flaming hot.” Zelda chuckled again, “Anyway—I digress.” Zelda sipped her drink daintily now, raised her eyebrows to Hank and he quickly slid her a freshly filled cup.

“It had been snowing for some time by now and was about four inches deep covering the trail completely. That section of the mountain was granite rock and both horses were wearing metal horse shoes. Compare that to ice skating down a slide or staircase with four legs involved. It was

more than dicey! It was totally dangerous for all of them, horses included. And remember, they couldn't see the trail. That is where I had to, once again, save the day." Zelda smiled proudly at that thought and lifted her mug in the air saluting herself with a grin.

As Zelda thawed she became transparent. This wasn't unusual and actually it was only Hank who noticed. The sages were captivated by the story and anxiously waited to hear more.

"Charlie took the lead as always. The cowboy was a more experienced rider however his horse Duke was not. Duke had been a race horse and they teasingly called him Twinkle Toes, because before coming to live with Charlie and Dick he had only known flat, manicured horse tracks. Noise never bothered Duke but he was alarmed at the first mail box he saw and had to be trail trained to walk between trees and cross creeks.

"Duke loved Charlie's mare Maggie and would follow her anywhere. That was helpful as they were on slippery white ground, granite underneath and mildly suffering vertigo with the mesmerizing swirls of snow in their faces. Charlie was unprepared for this. No gloves, light socks and cowboy boots which were unlined. She had her hat, but a knit cap would have been better. The snow kept piling up on her thighs and although she brushed it off, in no time her blue jeans were soaked through."

"Sounds pretty stupid Zelda." Hank said as he fixed another tray of drinks for the sages seated in the back.

Zelda gave him a bit of a frown. "Hank we don't judge our people. Angels don't judge—we know better. Besides, there is a big difference between discernment and judgment. You need to put a sign over your bar to remember that."

Hank was embarrassed. He was new at the Starlight. There was so much to learn and he had forgotten that little fact about angels and was glad Zelda reminded him. He went back to polishing the glasses the whole time listening intently. The group of sages in the corner prodded Zelda to go on with her story.

Zelda moved to the wood stove by now and was warming her back side. "Well, that is when I had to take over. Honestly, Charlie was wondering if this was the day she was going to die. She felt calm about that concept but nevertheless it was heavy on her mind. She had ceased feeling her toes in those silly boots and her hands were so numb she didn't know if she was holding the reins or not. Maggie kept going the way I was leading her, but Charlie thought she wasn't moving in the right direction. That is when I decided to put on my big girl wings, be brave and mount up in Charlie's saddle behind her. I slid my arms around her and she could feel my love and calmness right through her body.

"Wow! Have you ever ridden a horse? It was one thing getting my long legs over, but I also had to swing my wings up and try not to startle the animal who knew full well who and what I was. Then there were the angel gown problems. Anyway, I got up with Charlie and we rode double for hours, one hoof at a time. With my wings encircling her she wouldn't freeze to death, and I kept whispering directions to the horse. Fortunately I speak fluent equinese and Maggie was

more than cooperative because she too wanted to be anywhere but where we were. She followed my directions well.

“Keeping to the lower part of each rock to minimize slipping we slowly inched down the mountain. Every so often Dick the cowboy would yell through the storm, ‘Are you OK, Charlie?’ She did turn around in her saddle and ask him if he thought they might die. She really asked him! He told her no, to keep moving and don’t stop. She just did that for hours, never stopping, never dismounting, huddled in the saddle cold and miserable forging ahead and never even feeling the need to pee.

“Now we all made it out safely because I’m telling you our tale and I’m sure they are home now and probably thawed out under blankets. Poor thing, her hands were frozen stiff she couldn’t even uncinch her saddle. I had to do that for her too. What made her happy later though was not needing to be rescued by the search teams combing the mountains that weekend. She never wanted her name in the local paper as rescued, and there were going to be plenty listed. Ambrose too is home sleeping even though he didn’t have as big of a role as I did.”

With the ending of her story and melted snow on the floor, Zelda walked over to the bar, grimaced slightly as she hoisted herself back on a stool, had a second thought before asking Hank for a piece of chalk.

She gave him a knowing smile before walked over to his chalk board and wrote...

*Angels Don't Judge...
They know better!
Zelda*