

The book cover features a vibrant sunset or sunrise sky with shades of orange, pink, and purple. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of leafy branches on the left and right sides. The background shows a range of blue mountains under the colorful sky.

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A Novel

ANGEL FALLS

"A tearjerker . . . about the triumph of family."

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ANGEL FALLS

“An all-night reading affair ... you won’t be able to put it down ... [will] make you laugh and cry.”

—*New York Post*

“A tearjerker ... about the triumph of family ... perfect reading for hopeless romantics.”

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SUMMER ISLAND

“Hannah is superb at delving into the characters’ psyches and delineating nuances of feeling.”

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By Kristin Hannah

(published by The Random House Publishing Group)

A HANDFUL OF HEAVEN

THE ENCHANTMENT

ONCE IN EVERY LIFETIME

IF YOU BELIEVE

WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES

WAITING FOR THE MOON

HOME AGAIN

ON MYSTIC LAKE

ANGEL FALLS

SUMMER ISLAND

DISTANT SHORES

BETWEEN SISTERS

THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE

COMFORT & JOY

ANGEL FALLS

A Novel

Kristin Hannah



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

For Benjamin and Tucker

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Part One



What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened ...

—T. S. ELIOT, FROM “BURNT NORTON”

Chapter One



In northwest Washington state, jagged granite mountains reach for the misty sky, their peaks inaccessible even in this age of helicopters and high-tech adventurers. The trees in this part of the country grow thick as an old man's beard and block out all but the hardest rays of the sun. Only in the brightest months of summer can hikers find their way back to the cars they park along the sides of the road.

Deep in the black-and-green darkness of this old-growth forest lies the tiny town of Last Bend. To visitors—there are no strangers here—it is the kind of place they'd thought to encounter only in the winding tracks of their own imaginations. When they first walk down the streets, folks swear they hear a noise that can only be described as laughter. Then come the memories, some real, some manufactured images from old movies and *Life* magazine. They recall how their grandmother's lemonade tasted ... or the creaky sound of a porch swing gliding quietly back and forth, back and forth, on the tail end of a muggy summer's night.

Last Bend was founded fifty years ago, when a big, broad-shouldered Scotsman named Ian Campbell gave up his crumbling ancestral home in Edinburgh and set off in search of adventure. Somewhere along the way—family legend attributed it to Wyoming—he took up rock climbing, and spent the next ten years wandering from mountain to mountain, looking for two things: the ultimate climb and a place to leave his mark.

He found what he was looking for in Washington's North Cascade mountain range. In this place where Sasquatches were more than a campfire myth and glaciers flowed year round in ice-blue rivers, he staked his claim. He drove as close to the mighty Mt. Baker as he could and bought a hundred acres of prime pastureland, then he bought a corner lot on a gravel road that would someday mature into the Mount Baker Highway. He built his town along the pebbly, pristine shores of Angel Lake and christened it Last Bend, because he thought the only home worth having was worth searching for, and he'd found his at the last turn in the road.

It took him some time to find a woman willing to live in a moss-chinked log cabin without electricity or running water, but find her he did—a fiery Irish lass with dreams that matched his own. Together they fashioned the town of their combined imagination; she planted Japanese maple saplings along Main Street and started a dozen traditions—Glacier Days, the Sasquatch race, and the Halloween haunted house on the corner of Cascade and Main.

In the same year the Righteous Brothers lost that lovin' feeling, Ian and Fiona began to build their dream home, a huge, semicircular log house that sat on a small rise in the middle of their property. On some days, when the sky was steel blue, the glaciated mountain peaks seemed close enough to touch. Towering Douglas firs and cedars rimmed the carefully mowed lawn, protected the orchard from winter's frozen breath. Bordering the west end of their land was Angel Creek, a torrent in the still gloaming of the year, a quiet gurgling creek when the sun shone high and hot in the summer months. In the wintertime, they could step onto their front porch and hear the echo of Angel Falls, only a few miles away.

Now the third generation of Campbells lived in that house. Tucked tightly under the sharply sloped roofline was a young boy's bedroom. It was not unlike other little boys' rooms in this media-driven age—Corvette bed,

Batman posters tacked to the uneven log walls, *Goosebumps* books strewn across the shag-carpeted floor, piles of plastic dinosaurs and fake snakes and *Star Wars* action figures.

Nine-year-old Bret Campbell lay quietly in his bed, watching the digital clock by his bed flick red numbers into the darkness. Five-thirty. Five thirty-one. Five thirty-two.

Halloween morning.

He had wanted to set the alarm for this special Saturday morning, but he didn't know how, and if he'd asked for help, his surprise would have been ruined. And so he snuggled under the Mr. Freeze comforter, waiting.

At precisely 5:45, he flipped the covers back and climbed out of bed. Careful not to make any noise, he pulled the grocery sack from underneath his bed and unpacked it.

There was no light on, but he didn't need one. He'd stared at these clothes every night for a week. His Halloween costume. A sparkly pair of hand-me-down cowboy boots that they'd picked up at the Emperor's New Clothes used-clothing shop, a fake leather vest from the Dollar-Saver thrift shop, a pair of felt chaps his mom had made, a plaid flannel shirt and brand-new Wrangler jeans from Zeke's Feed and Seed, and best of all, a shiny sheriff's star and gun belt from the toy store. His daddy had even made him a kid-sized lariat that could be strapped to the gun belt.

He stripped off his pj's and slipped into the outfit, leaving behind the gun belt, guns, chaps, lariat, and ten-gallon hat. Those he wouldn't need now.

He *felt* like a real cowboy. He grabbed the index card with the instructions on it—just in case—and went to his bedroom door, peeking out

into the shadowy hallway.

He peered down at the other two bedrooms. Both doors were closed and no light slid out from underneath. Of course his sixteen-year-old sister, Jacey, was asleep. It was Saturday, and on the day after a high-school football game, she always slept until noon. Dad had been at the hospital all night with a patient, so he'd be tired this morning, too. Only Mom would be getting up early—and she'd be in the barn, ready to go, at six o'clock.

He pushed the flash button on his Darth Maul watch. Five forty-nine.

“Yikes.” He flicked up the collar on his flannel shirt and bounded down the last set of stairs. Feeling his way through the darkened kitchen, he hit the “on” button on the coffeepot (another surprise) and headed for the front door, opening it slowly.

On the porch, he was spooked by the black shape of a man beside him, but in the second after he saw the outline, he remembered. It was the pumpkin-headed farmer he and Mom had made last night. The smell of fresh straw was strong—even a day later.

Bret picked his way past the decorations and jumped off the porch, then he ran up the driveway. At the empty guest cottage, he zagged to the right and slithered between the fence's second and third rail. Breathing hard, he clambered up the slippery grass pasture.

A single floodlight lit up the huge, two-storied barn his granddad had built. Bret had always been in awe of the famous grandfather he'd never met, the man who'd left his name on streets and buildings and mountains, the man who'd somehow known that Last Bend belonged right here.

The stories of granddad's adventures had been told and retold for as long as Bret could remember, and he wanted to be just like him. That's why he was up so early on this Halloween morning. He was going to convince his overprotective mother that he was ready to go on the Angel Falls overnight trail ride.

He grabbed the cold iron latch on the barn door and swung it open. He loved the smell of this old barn; it always made him think of his mom. Sometimes, when he was away from home, he'd smell something—hay or leather or neat's-foot oil—and he'd think of her.

Horses nickered softly and moved around in their stalls, thinking it was feeding time. He flicked on the lights and hurried down the wide cement aisle toward the tack room. He struggled to pull his mom's jumping saddle off the wooden tree. He dropped it twice before he figured out how to balance it on his arm. With the girth dragging and clanging behind him, he headed to Silver Bullet's stall.

There he stopped. Jeez, Bullet looked bigger this morning ...

Granddad would never chicken out.

Bret took a deep breath and opened the stall door.

It took him lots of tries—*lots* of tries—but he finally got the saddle up on the horse's high back. He even managed to tighten the girth. Not enough, maybe, but at least he'd buckled the strap.

He led Bullet to the center of the arena. He couldn't see his boots—they were buried in the soft dirt. The lights overhead cast weird shadows on him and Bullet, but he liked those slithering black lines. They reminded him that it was Halloween.

Bullet dropped her head and snorted, pawing at the ground.

Bret tightened his hold on the lead rope. “Whoa, girl,” he said softly, trying not to be afraid. That was the way his mom always talked to animals. She said you could talk down the craziest animal if you were patient and quiet.

The barn door shuddered, then let out a long, slow creaking sound. Wood scraped on cement, and the door opened.

Mom stood in the doorway. Behind her, the rising sun was a beautiful purplish color and it seemed to set her hair on pink fire. He couldn’t quite see her face, but he could see her silhouette, black against the brightness, and he could hear the steady *click-click-click* of her boot heels on the concrete. Then she paused, tented one hand across her eyes. “Bret? Honey, is that you?”

Bret led Bullet toward Mom, who stood at the edge of the arena with her hands planted on her hips. She was wearing a long brown sweater and black riding pants; her boots were already dusty. She was staring at him—one of those Mommy looks—and he sure wished she’d smile.

He yanked hard on the rope and brought the mare to a sudden stop, just the way they’d taught him in 4-H. “I saddled her myself, Mom.” He stroked Bullet’s velvet-soft muzzle. “I couldn’t get her to take the bit, but I cinched up the saddle just like I’m s’posed to.”

“You got up early—on Halloween, your third favorite holiday—and saddled my horse for me. Well, well.” She bent down and tousled his hair. “Hate to let me be alone for too long, eh, Bretster?”

“I know how lonely you get.”

She laughed, then knelt down in the dirt. She was like that, his mom, she never worried about getting dirty—and she liked to look her kids in the eyes. At least that’s what she said. She pulled the worn, black leather glove off her right hand and let it fall. It landed on her thigh, but she didn’t seem to notice as she reached out and smoothed the hair from Bret’s face. “So, young Mr. Horseman, what’s on your mind?”

That was another thing about his mom. You could *never* fool her. It was sorta like she had X-ray vision. “I want to go on the overnight ride to Angel Falls with you this year. Last year you said maybe later, when I was older. Well, now I’m a whole year older, and I did really good at the fair this year—I mean, hardly *any* nine-year-olds got blue ribbons—and I kept my stall clean and kept Scotty brushed all down. And now I can saddle a big old Thoroughbred by myself. If I was at Disneyland, I would *definitely* reach Mickey’s hand.”

Mom sat back on her heels. Some dirt must have gotten in her face, because her eyes were watering. “You’re not my baby boy anymore, are you?”

He plopped onto her bent legs, pretending that he was little enough to still be held in her arms. She gently took the lead rope from him, and he wrapped his arms around her neck.

She kissed his forehead and held him tightly. It was his favorite kind of kiss, the kind she gave him every morning at the breakfast table.

He loved it when she held him like this. Lately (since he’d started fourth grade) he’d had to become a big boy. Like he couldn’t let Mom hold his hand as they walked down the school corridors ... and she definitely couldn’t kiss him good-bye. So now they only had times like this when he could be a little boy.

“Well, I guess any kid big enough to saddle this horse is ready to go on an overnight ride. I’m proud of you, kiddo.”

He let out a loud *Whoopee!* and hugged her. “Thanks, Mom.”

“No problema.” She gently eased away from him and got to her feet. As they stood there together, she let her gloved hand sort of hang there in the space between them, and Bret slipped his hand in hers.

She squeezed his hand. “Now I’ve got to work Bullet for an hour or so before Jeanine gets here to worm the horses. I’ve got a zillion things to do today before trick-or-treating.”

“Is she giving any shots?”

“Not this time.” She ruffled his hair again, then reached down for her glove.

“Can I stay and watch you ride?”

“You remember the rules?”

“Gee, no, Mom.”

“Okay, but no talking and no getting off the fence.”

He grinned. “You just *have* to tell me the rules again, don’t you?”

She laughed. “Sit down, Jim Carrey.” Turning her back to him, she tightened the girth and bridled the mare. “Go and get me my helmet, will you, Bretster?”

He ran to the tack room. At the chest marked *Mike's stuff*, he bent down and lifted the lid, rummaging through the fly sprays, brushes, lead ropes, buckets, and hoof picks until he found the dusty black velvet-covered helmet. Tucking it under his arm, he let the lid drop shut and ran back into the arena.

Mom was on Bullet now, her gloved hands resting lightly on the horse's withers. "Thanks, sweetie." She leaned down and took the helmet.

By the time Bret reached his favorite spot on the arena fence, Mom was easing Bullet toward the path that ran along the wall. He climbed up the slats and sat on the top rail.

He watched as she went 'round and 'round. She pushed Bullet through her paces as a warm-up: walk, trot, extended trot, and then to a rocking-horse canter. Bret watched as horse and rider became a blur of motion.

He knew instantly when Mom had decided it was time to jump. He'd watched so many times, he knew the signs, although he couldn't have said what they were. He just *knew* that she was going to head for the first two-foot jump.

Just like he knew something was wrong.

He leaned forward. "Wait, Mommy. The jump is in the wrong place. Someone musta moved it ..."

But she didn't hear him. Bullet was fighting her, lunging and bucking as Mommy tried to rein the mare down to a controlled canter.

"Whoa, girl, slow down. Calm down ..."

Bret heard the words as Mom flew past him. He wanted to scramble down from his perch, but he wasn't allowed to—not when she was working a horse over jumps.

It was too late to yell anyway. Mom was already at the fence. Bret's heart was hammering in his chest.

Somethingiswrong. The words jammed together in his mind, growing bigger and uglier with every breath. He wanted to say them out loud, to yell, but he couldn't make his mouth work.

Silver Bullet bunched up and jumped over the fake brick siding with ease.

Bret heard his mom's whoop of triumph and her laugh.

He had a split second of relief.

Then Silver Bullet stopped dead.

One second Mom was laughing, and the next, she was flying off the horse. Her head cracked into the barn post so hard the whole fence shook. And then she was just lying there in the dirt, her body crumpled like an old piece of paper.

There was no sound in the big, covered arena except his own heavy breathing. Even the horse was silent, standing beside her rider as if nothing had happened.

Bret slid down the fence and ran to his mom. He dropped to his knees beside her. Blood trickled down from underneath her helmet, smearing in her short black hair.

He touched her shoulder, gave her a little shove. “Mommy?”

The bloodied hair slid away from her face. That’s when he saw that her left eye was open.

* * *

Bret’s sister, Jacey, was the first to hear his scream. She came running into the arena, holding Dad’s big down coat around her. “Bretster—” Then she saw Mommy, lying there. “Oh my God! *Don’t touch her!*” she yelled at Bret. “I’ll get Dad.”

Bret couldn’t have moved if he’d wanted to. He just sat there, staring down at his broken mommy, praying and praying for her to wake up, but the prayers had no voice; he couldn’t make himself make any sound at all.

Finally Daddy ran into the barn.

Bret popped to his feet and held his arms out, but Daddy ran right past him. Bret stumbled backward so fast, he hit the fence wall. He couldn’t breathe enough to cry. He just stood there, watching the red, red blood slither down his mommy’s face. Jacey came and stood beside him.

Daddy knelt beside her, dropping his black medical bag into the dirt. “Hang on, Mikaela,” he whispered. Gently he removed her helmet—should Bret have done that?—then Daddy opened her mouth and poked his fingers between her teeth. She coughed and sputtered, and Bret saw blood gush across his daddy’s fingers.

Daddy’s hands that were always so clean ... now Mommy’s blood was everywhere, even on the sleeves of Daddy’s flannel pajamas.

“Hang on, Mike,” his dad kept saying, over and over again, “hang on. We’re all here ... stay with us....”

Stay with us. That meant don’t die ... which meant she *could* die.

Dad looked up at Jacey. “Call nine-one-one *now*.”

It felt like hours they all stood there, frozen and silent. Finally red lights cartwheeled through the dim barn, sirens screamed; an ambulance skidded through the loose gravel alongside the horse trailer.

Blue-uniformed paramedics came running into the barn, dragging a bumping, clanking bed on wheels behind them. Bret’s heart started beating so loud he couldn’t hear.

He tried to scream *Save her!* but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was a thick black cloud. He watched the smoke turn into a bunch of tiny spiders and float away.

He clamped his mouth shut and backed away, hitting the fence so hard it knocked him dizzy. He covered his ears and shut his eyes and prayed as hard as he could.

She is dying.

Memories rush through her mind in no particular order, some tinged with the sweet scent of roses after a spring rain, some smelling of the sand at the lake where she tasted the first kiss that mattered. Some—too many—come wrapped in the iridescent, sticky web of regret.