

Angels Fall

Nora Roberts

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SIGNPOSTS

Everywhere is nowhere.

ENECA

Chapter One

Reece Gilmore smoked through the tough knuckles of Angel's Fist in an overheating Chevy Cavalier. She had two hundred forty-three dollars and change in her pocket, which might be enough to cure the Chevy, fuel it and herself. If luck was on her side, and the car wasn't seriously ill, she'd have enough to pay for a room for the night.

Then, even by the most optimistic calculations, she'd be broke.

She took the plumes of steam puffing out of the hood as a sign it was time to stop traveling for a while and find a job.

No worries, no problem, she told herself. The little Wyoming town huddled around the cold blue waters of a lake was as good as anywhere else. Maybe better. It had the openness she needed – all that sky with the snow-dipped peaks of the Tetons rising into it like sober, and somehow aloof, gods.

She'd been meandering her way toward them, through the Ansel Adams photograph of peaks and plains for hours. She hadn't had a clue where she'd end up when she started out that day before dawn, but she'd bypassed Cody, zipped through Dubois, and though she'd toyed with veering into Jackson, she dipped south instead.

So something must have been pulling her to this spot.

Over the past eight months, she'd developed a strong

belief in following signs, and impulses. Dangerous Curves, Slippery When Wet. It was nice that someone took the time and effort to post those kinds of warnings. Other signs might be a peculiar slant of sunlight aimed down a back road, or a weather vane pointing south.

If she liked the look of the light or the weather vane, she'd follow, until she found what seemed like the right place at the right time. She might settle in for a few weeks, or, like she had in South Dakota, a few months. Pick up some work, scout the area, then move on when those signs, those impulses, pointed in a new direction.

There was a freedom in the system she'd developed, and often – more often now – a lessening of the constant hum of anxiety in the back of her mind. These past months of living with herself, essentially by herself, had done more to smooth her out than the full year of therapy.

To be fair, she supposed the therapy had given her the base to face herself every single day. Every night. And all the hours between.

And here was another fresh start, another blank slate in the bunched fingers of Angel's Fist.

If nothing else, she'd take a few days to enjoy the lake, the mountains, and pick up enough money to get back on the road again. A place like this – the signpost had said the population was 623 – probably ran to tourism, exploiting the scenery and the proximity to the national park.

There'd be at least one hotel, likely a couple of B and B's, maybe a dude ranch within a few miles. It might be fun to work at a dude ranch. All those places would need someone to fetch and carry and clean, especially now that the spring thaw was dulling the sharpest edge of winter.

But since her car was now sending out thicker, more desperate smoke signals, the first priority was a mechanic.

She eased her way along the road that ribboned around the long, wide lake. Patches of snow made dull white pools in the shade. The trees were still their wintering brown, but there were a few boats on the water. She could see a couple

guys in windbreakers and caps in a white canoe, rowing right through the reflection of the mountains.

Across from the lake was what she decided was the business district. Gift shop, a little gallery. Bank, post office, she noted. Sheriff's office.

She angled away from the lake to pull the laboring car up to what looked like a big barn of a general store. There were a couple men in flannel shirts sitting out front in stout chairs that gave them a good view of the lake.

They nodded to her as she cut the engine and stepped out, then the one on the right tapped the brim of his blue cap that bore the name of the store – Mac's Mercantile and Grocery – across the crown.

'Looks like you got some trouble there, young lady.'

'Sure does. Do you know anyone who can give me a hand with it?'

He laid his hands on his thighs and pushed out of the chair. He was burly in build, ruddy in face, with lines fanning out from the corners of friendly brown eyes. When he spoke, his voice was a slow, meandering drawl.

'Why don't we just pop the hood and take a look-see?'

'Appreciate it.' When she released the latch, he tossed the hood up and stepped back from the clouds of smoke. For reasons she couldn't name, the plumes and the fuss caused Reece more embarrassment than anxiety. 'It started up on me about ten miles east, I guess. I wasn't paying enough attention. Got caught up in the scenery.'

'Easy to do. You heading into the park?'

'I was. More or less.' Not sure, never sure, she thought and tried to concentrate on the moment rather than the before or after. 'I think the car had other ideas.'

His companion came over to join them, and both men looked under the hood the way Reece knew men did. With sober eyes and knowing frowns. She looked with them, though she accepted that she was as much of a cliché. The female to whom what lurked under the hood of a car was as foreign as the terrain of Pluto.

‘Got yourself a split radiator hose,’ he told her. ‘Gonna need to replace that.’

Didn’t sound so bad, not too bad. Not too expensive. ‘Anywhere in town I can make that happen?’

‘Lynt’s Garage’ll fix you up. Why don’t I give him a call for you?’

‘Lifesaver.’ She offered a smile and her hand, a gesture that had come to be much easier for her with strangers. ‘I’m Reece, Reece Gilmore.’

‘Mac Drubber. This here’s Carl Sampson.’

‘Back East, aren’t you?’ Carl asked. He looked a fit fifty-something to Reece, and with some Native American blood mixed in once upon a time.

‘Yeah. Way back. Boston area. I really appreciate the help.’

‘Nothing but a phone call,’ Mac said. ‘You can come on in out of the breeze if you want, or take a walk around. Might take Lynt a few to get here.’

‘I wouldn’t mind a walk, if that’s okay. Maybe you could tell me a good place to stay in town. Nothing fancy.’

‘Got the Lakeview Hotel just down a ways. The Teton House, other side of the lake’s some homier. More a B and B. Some cabins along the lake, and others outside of town rent by the week or the month.’

She didn’t think in months any longer. A day was enough of a challenge. And *homier* sounded too intimate. ‘Maybe I’ll walk down and take a look at the hotel.’

‘It’s a long walk. Could give you a ride on down.’

‘I’ve been driving all day. I could use the stretch. But thanks, Mr. Drubber.’

‘No problem.’ He stood another moment as she wandered down the wooden sidewalk. ‘Pretty thing,’ he commented.

‘No meat on her.’ Carl shook his head. ‘Women today starve off all the curves.’

She hadn’t starved them off, and was, in fact, making a concerted effort to gain back the weight that had fallen off

in the past couple of years. She'd gone from health club fit to scrawny and had worked her way back to what she thought of as gawky. Too many angles and points, too many bones. Every time she undressed, her body was like that of a stranger to her.

She wouldn't have agreed with Mac's *pretty thing*. Not anymore. Once she'd thought of herself that way, as a pretty woman – stylish, sexy when she wanted to be. But her face seemed too hard now, the cheekbones too prominent, the hollows too deep. The restless nights were fewer, but when they came, they left her dark eyes heavily shadowed, and cast a pallor, pasty and gray, over her skin.

She wanted to recognize herself again.

She let herself stroll, her worn-out Keds nearly soundless on the sidewalk. She'd learned not to hurry – had taught herself not to push, not to rush, but to take things as they came. And in a very real way to embrace every single moment.

The cool breeze blew across her face, wound through the long brown hair she'd tied back in a tail. She liked the feel of it, the smell of it, clean and fresh, and the hard light that poured over the Tetons and sparked on the water.

She could see some of the cabins Mac had spoken of, through the bare branches of the willows and the cottonwoods. They squatted behind the trees, log and glass, wide porches – and, she assumed, stunning views.

It might be nice to sit on one of those porches and study the lake or the mountains, to watch whatever visited the marsh where cattails speared up out of the bog. To have that room around, and the quiet.

One day maybe, she thought. But not today.

She spotted green spears of daffodils in a half whiskey barrel next to the entrance to a restaurant. They might have trembled a bit in the chilly breeze, but they made her think spring. Everything was new in spring. Maybe this spring, she'd be new, too.

She stopped to admire the tender sprouts. It was comfort-

ing to see spring making its way back after the long winter. There would be other signs of it soon. Her guidebook boasted of miles of wildflowers on the sage flats, and more along the area's lakes and ponds.

She was ready for flowering, Reece thought. Ready for blooming.

Then she shifted her eyes up to the wide front window of the restaurant. More diner than restaurant, she corrected. Counter service, two- and four-tops, booths, all in faded red and white. Pies and cakes on display, and the kitchen open to the counter. A couple waitresses bustled around with trays and coffeepots.

Lunch crowd, she realized. She'd forgotten lunch. As soon as she'd taken a look at the hotel, she'd . . .

Then she saw it in the window, the sign, hand-lettered.

COOK WANTED INQUIRE WITHIN

Signs, she thought again, though she'd taken a step back before she caught herself. She stood where she was, making a careful study of the setup from outside the glass. Open kitchen, she reminded herself, that was key. Diner food, she could handle that in her sleep. Or would have been able to, once.

Maybe it was time to find out, time to take another step forward. If she couldn't handle it, she'd know, and wouldn't be any worse off than she was now.

The hotel was probably hiring, in anticipation of the summer season. Or Mr. Drubber might need another clerk at his store.

But the sign was right there, and her car had aimed toward this town, and her steps had brought her to this spot, where daffodil shoots pushed out of the dirt into the first hesitant breaths of spring.

She backtracked to the door, took a long, long breath in, then opened it.

Fried onions, grilling meat – on the gamey side – strong coffee, a jukebox on country and a buzz of table chatter.

Clean red floors, she noted, scrubbed white counter. The few empty tables had their lunch setups. There were photographs on the walls – good ones to her eye. Black-and-whites of the lake, of white water, of the mountains in every season.

She was still getting her bearings, gathering her courage when one of the waitresses swung by her. ‘Afternoon. You’re looking for lunch you’ve got your choice of a table or the counter.’

‘Actually, I’m looking for the manager. Or owner. Ah, about the sign in the window. The position of cook.’

The waitress stopped, still balancing a tray. ‘You’re a cook?’

There’d been a time Reece would have sniffed at the term good-naturedly, but she’d have sniffed nonetheless. ‘Yes.’

‘That’s handy, ’cause Joanie fired one a couple of days ago.’ The waitress curled her free hand, brought it up to her lips in the mime for drinking.

‘Oh.’

‘Gave him the job in February when he came through town looking for work. Said he’d found Jesus and was spreading his word across the land.’

She cocked her head and her hip and gave Reece a sunny smile out of a pretty face. ‘He preached the Word, all right, like a disciple on crack, so you wanted to stuff a rag in his mouth. Then I guess he found the bottle, and that was that. So. Why don’t you go right on and sit up at the counter. I’ll see if Joanie can get out of the kitchen for a minute. How about some coffee?’

‘Tea, if you don’t mind.’

‘Coming up.’

Didn’t have to take the job, Reece reminded herself as she slid onto a chrome-and-leather stool and rubbed her damp palms dry on the thighs of her jeans. Even if it was

offered, she didn't have to take it. She could stick with cleaning hotel rooms, or head out and find that dude ranch.

The juke switched numbers, and Shania Twain announced joyfully she felt like a woman.

The waitress walked back to the grill and tapped a short sturdy woman on the shoulder, leaned in. After a moment, the woman shot a glance over her shoulder, met Reece's eyes, then nodded. The waitress came back to the counter with a white cup of hot water, with a Lipton tea bag in the saucer.

'Joanie'll be right along. You want to order some lunch? Meat loaf's house special today. Comes with mashed potatoes and green beans and a biscuit.'

'No, thanks, no, tea's fine.' She'd never be able to hold anything more down, not with the nerves bouncing around in her belly. The panic wanted to come with it, that smothering wet weight in the chest.

She should just go, Reece thought. Go right now and walk back to her car. Get the hose fixed and head out. Signs be damned.

Joanie had a fluff of blond hair on her head, a white butcher's apron splattered with grease stains tied around her middle and high-topped red Converse sneakers on her feet. She walked out from the kitchen wiping her hands on a dishcloth.

And she measured Reece out of steely eyes that were more gray than blue.

'You cook?' A smoker's rasp made the brisk question oddly sensual.

'Yes.'

'For a living, or just to put something in your mouth?'

'It's what I did back in Boston – for a living.' Fighting nerves, Reece ripped open the cover on the tea bag.

Joanie had a soft mouth, almost a Cupid's bow, in contrast to those hard eyes. And an old, faded scar, Reece noted, that ran along her jawline from her left ear nearly to her chin.

‘Boston.’ In an absent move, Joanie tucked the dishrag in the belt of her apron. ‘Long ways.’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know as I want some East Coast cook who can’t keep her mouth shut for five minutes.’

Reece’s opened in surprise, then closed again on the barest curve of a smile. ‘I’m an awful chatterbox when I’m nervous.’

‘What’re you doing around here?’

‘Traveling. My car broke down. I need a job.’

‘Got references?’

Her heart tightened, a sweaty fist of silent pain. ‘I can get them.’

Joanie sniffed, frowned back toward the kitchen. ‘Go on back, put on an apron. Next order up’s a steak sandwich, med-well, onion roll, fried onions and mushrooms, fries and slaw. Dick don’t drop dead after eating what you cook, you probably got the job.’

‘All right.’ Reece pushed off the stool and, keeping her breath slow and even, went through the swinging door at the far end of the counter.

She didn’t notice, but Joanie did, that she’d torn the tea bag cover into tiny pieces.

It was a simple setup, she decided, and efficient enough. Large grill, restaurant-style stove, refrigerator, freezer. Holding bins, sinks, work counters, double fryer, heat suppression system. As she tied on an apron, Joanie set out the ingredients she’d need.

‘Thanks.’ Reece scrubbed her hands, then got to work.

Don’t think, she told herself. Just let it come. She set the steak sizzling on the grill while she chopped onions and mushrooms. She put the precut potatoes in the fry basket, set the timer.

Her hands didn’t shake, and though her chest stayed tight, she didn’t allow herself to dart glances over her shoulder to make sure a wall hadn’t appeared to close her in.

She listened to the music, from the juke, from the grill, from the fryer.

Joanie tugged the next order from the clip on the round and slapped it down. ‘Bowl of three-bean soup – that kettle there – goes with crackers.’

Reece simply nodded, tossed the mushrooms and onions on the grill, then filled the second order while they fried.

‘Order up!’ Joanie called out, and yanked another ticket. ‘Reuben, club san, two side salads.’

Reece moved from order to order, and just let it happen. The atmosphere, the orders might be different, but the rhythm was the same. Keep working, keep moving.

She plated the original order, turned to hand it to Joanie for inspection.

‘Put it in line,’ she was told. ‘Start the next ticket. We don’t call the doctor in the next thirty minutes, you’re hired. We’ll talk money and hours later.’

‘I need to—’

‘Get that next ticket,’ Joanie finished. ‘I’m going to go have a smoke.’

She worked another ninety minutes before it slowed enough for Reece to step back from the heat and guzzle down a bottle of water. When she turned, Joanie was sitting at the counter, drinking coffee.

‘Nobody died,’ she said.

‘Whew. Is it always that busy?’

‘Saturday lunch crowd. We do okay. You get eight dollars an hour to start. You still look good in two weeks, I bump in another buck an hour. That’s you and me and a part-timer on the grill, seven days a week. You get two days, or the best part of two off during that week. I do the schedule a week in advance. We open at six-thirty so that means first shift is here at six. You can order breakfast all day, lunch menu from eleven to closing, dinner, five to ten. You want forty hours a week, I can work you that. I don’t pay any overtime, so you get stuck behind the grill and go over, we’ll take it off your next week’s hours. Any problem with that?’

‘No.’

‘You drink on the job, you’re fired on the spot.’

‘Understood.’

‘You get all the coffee, water or tea you want. You hit the soft drinks, you pay for them. Same with the food. Around here, there ain’t no free lunch. Not that it looks like you’ll be packing it away while my back’s turned. You’re skinny as a stick.’

‘I guess I am.’

‘Last shift cook cleans the grill, the stove, does the lock down.’

‘I can’t do that,’ Reece interrupted. ‘I can’t close for you. I can open, I can work any shift you want me to work. I’ll work doubles when you need it, split shifts. I can flex time when you need me over forty. But I can’t close for you. I’m sorry.’

Joanie raised her eyebrows, sipped down the last of her coffee. ‘Afraid of the dark, little girl?’

‘Yes, I am. If closing’s part of the job description, I’ll have to find another job.’

‘We’ll work that out. We’ve got forms to fill out for the government. It can wait. Your car’s fixed, sitting up at Mac’s.’ Joanie smiled. ‘Word travels, and I’ve got my ear to the ground. You’re looking for a place, there’s a room over the diner I can rent you. Not much, but it’s got a good view and it’s clean.’

‘Thanks, but I think I’m going to try the hotel for now. We’ll both give it a couple of weeks, see how it goes.’

‘Itchy feet.’

‘Itchy something.’

‘Your choice.’ With a shrug, Joanie got up, headed to the swinging door with her coffee cup. ‘You go on, get your car, get settled. Be back at four.’

A little dazed, Reece walked out. She was back in a kitchen, and it had been all right. She’d been okay. Now that she’d gotten through it, she felt a little light-headed, but that was normal, wasn’t it? A normal reaction to snag-

ging a job, straight off the mark, doing what she was trained to do again. Doing what she hadn't been able to do for nearly two years.

She took her time walking back to her car, letting it all sink in.

When she walked into the mercantile, Mac was ringing up a sale at a short counter opposite the door. The place was what she'd expected: a little bit of everything – coolers for produce and meat, shelves of dry goods, a section for hardware, for housewares, fishing gear, ammo.

Need a gallon of milk and a box of bullets? This was the spot.

When Mac finished the transaction, she approached the counter.

'Car should run for you now,' Mac told her.

'So I hear, and thanks. How do I pay?'

'Lynt left a bill here for you. You can run on by the garage if you're going to charge it. Paying cash, you can just leave it here. I'll be seeing him later.'

'Cash is good.' She took the bill, noted with relief it was less than she'd expected. She could hear someone chatting in the rear of the store, and the beep of another cash register. 'I got a job.'

He cocked his head as she pulled out her wallet. 'That so? Quick work.'

'At the diner. I don't even know the name of it,' she realized.

'That'd be Angel Food. Locals just call it Joanie's.'

'Joanie's then. I hope you come in sometime. I'm a good cook.'

'I bet you are. Here's your change.'

'Thanks. Thanks for everything. I guess I'll go get myself a room, then go back to work.'

'If you're still looking at the hotel, you tell Brenda on the desk you want the monthly rate. You tell her you're working at Joanie's.'

'I will. I'll tell her.' She wanted to take out an ad

announcing it in the local paper. ‘Thanks, Mr. Drubber.’

The hotel was five stories of pale yellow stucco that boasted views of the lake. It harbored a minute sundry shop, a tiny coffee and muffin stand and an intimate linen tablecloth dining room.

There was, she was told, high-speed Internet connection for a small, daily fee, room service from seven a.m. to eleven p.m. and a self-service laundry in the basement.

Reece negotiated a weekly rate on a single – a week was long enough – on the third floor. Anything below the third was too accessible for her peace of mind, and anything above the third made her feel trapped.

With her wallet now effectively empty, she carted her duffel and laptop up three flights rather than use the elevator.

The view lived up to its billing, and she immediately opened the windows, then just stood looking at the sparkle of the water, the glide of boats, and the rise of the mountains that cupped this little section of valley.

This was her place today, she thought. She’d find out if it was her place tomorrow. Turning back to the room, she noted the door that adjoined the neighboring guest room. She checked the locks, then pushed, shoved, dragged the single dresser in front of it.

That was better.

She wouldn’t unpack, not exactly, but take the essentials and set them out. The travel candle, some toiletries, the cell phone charger. Since the bathroom was hardly bigger than the closet, she left the door open while she took a quick shower. While the water ran, she did the multiplication tables out loud to keep herself steady. She changed into fresh clothes, moving quickly.

New job, she reminded herself and took the time and effort to dry her hair, to put on a little makeup. Not so pale today, she decided, not so hollow-eyed.

After checking her watch, she set up her laptop, opened her daily journal and wrote a quick entry.

Angel's Fist, Wyoming

April 15

I cooked today. I took a job as a cook in a little diner-style restaurant in this pretty valley town with its big, blue lake. I'm popping champagne in my mind, and there are streamers and balloons.

I feel like I've climbed a mountain, like I've been scaling the tough peaks that ring this place. I'm not at the top yet, I'm still on a ledge. But it's sturdy and wide, and I can rest here a little while before I start to climb again.

I'm working for a woman named Joanie. She's short, sturdy and oddly pretty. She's tough, too, and that's good. I don't want to be coddled. I think I'd smother to death that way, just run out of air the way I feel when I wake up from one of the dreams. I can breathe here, and I can be here until it's time to move on.

I've got less than ten dollars left, but whose fault is that? It's okay. I've got a room for a week with a view of the lake and the Tetons, a job and a new radiator hose.

I missed lunch, and that's a step back there. That's okay, too. I was too busy cooking to eat, and I'll make up for it.

It's a good day, April fifteenth. I'm going to work.

She shut down, then tucked her phone, her keys, driver's license and three dollars of what she had left in her pockets. Grabbing a jacket she headed for the door.

Before she opened it, Reece checked the peep, scanned the empty hall. She checked her locks twice, cursed herself and checked a third time before she went back to her kit to tear a piece of Scotch tape off her roll. She pressed it over the door, well below eye level, before she walked to the door for the stairs.

She jogged down, counting as she went. After a quick

debate, she left her car parked. Walking would save her gas money, even though it would be dark when she finished her shift.

Couple of blocks, that was all. Still, she fingered her key chain, and the panic button on it.

Maybe she should go back and get the car, just in case. Stupid, she told herself. She was nearly there. Think about now, not about later. When nerves began to bubble, she pictured herself at the grill. Good strong kitchen light, music from the jukebox, voices from the tables. Familiar sounds, smells, motion.

Maybe her palm was clammy when she reached for the door of Joanie's, but she opened it. And she went inside.

The same waitress she'd spoken to during the lunch shift spotted her, wiggled her fingers in a come-over motion. Reece stopped by the booth where the woman was refilling the condiment caddy.

'Joanie's back in the storeroom. She said I should give you a quick orientation when you came in. We got a lull, then the early birds will start coming in soon. I'm Linda-gail.'

'Reece.'

'First warning. Joanie doesn't tolerate idle hands. She catches you loitering, she'll jump straight down your back and bite your ass.' She grinned when she said it in a way that made her bright blue eyes twinkle, deepened dimples in her cheeks. She had doll-baby blond hair to go with it, worn in smooth French braids.

She had on jeans, a red shirt with white piping. Silver and turquoise earrings dangled from her ears. She looked, Reece thought, like a western milkmaid.

'I like to work.'

'You will, believe me. This being Saturday night, we'll be busy. You'll have two other wait staff working - Bebe and Juanita. Matt'll bus, and Pete's the dishwasher. You and Joanie'll be manning the kitchen, and she'll have a hawk eye on you. You need a break, you tell her, and you

take it. There's a place in the back for your coat and purse. No purse?'

'No, I didn't bring it.'

'God, I can't step a foot outside the house without mine. Come on then, I'll show you around. She's got the forms you need to fill out in the back. I guess you've done this kind of work before, the way you jumped in with both feet today.'

'Yeah, I have.'

'Restrooms. We clean the bathrooms on rotation. You've got a couple of weeks before you have that pleasure.'

'Can't wait.'

Linda-gail grinned. 'You got family around here?'

'No. I'm from back East.' Didn't want to talk about that, didn't want to think about that. 'Who handles the fountain drinks?'

'Wait staff. We get crunched, you can fill drink orders. We serve wine and beer, too. But mostly people want to drink, they do it over at Clancy's. That's about it. Anything else you want to know, just give me a holler. I've got to finish the setups or Joanie'll squawk. Welcome aboard.'

'Thanks.'

Reece moved into the kitchen, took an apron.

A good, wide solid ledge, she told herself. A good place to stand until it was time to move again.