

Chapter One

Sometimes the responsibility of being saved by an angel was almost more than Lily Anderson could bear. On the twenty-fourth anniversary of the miracle—also her birthday—Lily hopped into her beat-up Geo Metro and turned the key. The engine sputtered once, then quit.

“Dang!” she said aloud, flipping back her curly blond hair in frustration. She tried to start the car again and then noticed that the gas gauge showed empty. She was confused, since she’d just filled up on her way home from her job at the hospital the day before. Lily got out of the car, spotted a rubber tube on the ground, and realized someone had siphoned and stolen her gas. Her face flushed with annoyance as she bent down to pick up the hose. With the high cost of gasoline, there had been a rash of gas thefts. Just one more reason why Paradise didn’t live up to its name, she thought. An angel might have saved her when she was four, but things were certainly less than heavenly in the small Cache Valley town now.

Lily opened the garage door and slid the cover off her grandmother’s white Chrysler LeBaron. It had been a while since anyone had driven the car. Grandma Petersen had been too sick to drive it herself, but occasionally when she felt up to it, Lily would drive her around town. They’d head up to the cemetery and pause at the family plot, where Grandma would unsnap her large black handbag, fish out a lacy handkerchief, and blow her nose—an eruption that sounded like a goose honking. Last fall, Lily had driven Grandma Petersen up to Porcupine Dam while the leaves were golden, crimson, and orange. Lily had prayed her grandmother would live to see the leaves change, and she did. She died the day before Halloween.

Lily scooped the key out of the ashtray and after a few false starts, the LeBaron's engine roared. As she backed the large car out of the driveway, she noticed the faint odor of camphor oil, which her grandmother had always rubbed on her arthritic joints. Tears sprang to Lily's eyes when she slid her hand along the tan leather upholstery. Driving the car now felt like a betrayal, even though her grandmother had wanted her to have it.

First, Lily drove to the post office. No sooner had she arrived than she realized she'd forgotten her post-office-box key, so she'd have to go inside and ask for her mail. When she stepped out of her car, Lily heard someone take a sharp intake of breath. "Heavens to Betsy, it's just you." Doris Davenport's hair was cut short, dyed blond, and defied her age of near eighty.

"Just me," Lily said as she realized that Doris, who was coming out of the post office with her mail in hand, must have been startled to see Grandma's car again. "My car wouldn't start—the gas was siphoned out."

"Well, well, doesn't that beat all?" Doris exclaimed. "First the bishop and now you."

Lily glanced at her watch without even noticing what time it was. "His gas was stolen too?"

"Not that I know of, but someone dropped a load of manure on his lawn the other night. They propped up a cardboard sign that said, 'Since you're so full of crap we thought you'd enjoy this.'" Doris whispered the word "crap." Now she leaned in and held her mail in front of her mouth, apparently trying to shield her words from prying lip readers, who Lily could only assume were looking out of their upstairs windows a good block away. "And the Williams had a pipe bomb in their mailbox. Blew that beautiful

box to kingdom come. You know Brother Williams hand-painted an especially lovely little scene on the side of it. Now they've resorted to just a plain old metal box. I hate to say it, but Paradise just isn't Paradise anymore. Newcomers—they change everything. If I've said it once I've said it a thousand times to your grandmother Esther. I'd say, 'Esther, we're strangers in Paradise.'" Doris eyed Lily closely and then smiled. "Of course, even though you haven't lived here long, you're not a stranger, being Paradise's own miracle."

Lily inwardly groaned at the mention of the miracle. Small towns never forget. Doris got into her car and stuck her head out the window. "So are you seeing anyone?"

"Not really. See you later, Doris." Lily turned on her heel and strode into the post office. Lily smiled, keeping her secret to herself. She had Rob, but she hadn't even told her mother about their relationship, because she still mulled over the reality—the dream that had finally come true. Even though they hadn't even held hands yet, she believed he was the one. She could feel it deep within her, much the way Grandma had always felt something good happening. "Something good is brewing," she would say, and then she'd tap her heart and add, "I can feel it."

Lily asked Mrs. Nielsen, the Paradise postmaster, for her mail while doing her relaxation breathing, focusing on the tiles on the floor instead of Mrs. Nielsen. Lily was in therapy for social anxiety, and even asking for mail was a challenge.

"Happy birthday," Mrs. Nielsen said. "Looks like a card from your brother. How's he doing with his new job?"

"Fine, thanks."

Lily was surprised her brother Daniel had sent her a card, since he'd almost forgotten the

birthday celebration the year before.

Mrs. Nielsen handed Lily a stack of envelopes. “How many children do they have by now?”

“Five,” Lily answered while thumbing through her mail.

“Are you dating anyone, dear?”

Lily felt an anxious tightness in her chest. She would love to tell someone about Rob, but not the postmaster. Someday soon, when it was official, she would be able to spread the news. “Gotta go. Thanks.”

She hurried to the car, jumped in, and drove faster than usual through town, her mind swimming with angels, miracles, and the new love of her life. She was thinking about Rob when she heard the whine of the siren. She’d forgotten that one of the favorite hiding places for the highway patrol was in the Car Service parking lot, where they blended in with the broken-down vehicles. Lily pulled off the side of the road, feeling her heart race and her brow begin to perspire. The uniformed officer sauntered up to the window.

“License and registration, please.”

Lily peered up at his mirrored sunglasses, her bright blue eyes reflecting back at her. With a sigh, she thumbed through her wallet and pulled out her driver’s license. Her hands trembled, her heart pounded, and her face reddened as she located the car registration papers in the glove compartment. She handed them to the officer. *Breathe, two, three, four. Breathe.*

“Sorry about your grandma. Fine lady. And hey, it looks like today’s your birthday. Happy birthday.”

Lily felt calmer. The officer didn't look familiar but was so nice; surely he wouldn't give her a ticket. He strolled back to his patrol car. Passersby strained their necks as they drove by, trying to glimpse the unfortunate person who had been pulled over. Humiliated, Lily slouched in the seat. When the officer came back he handed her a ticket for going six miles over the speed limit. "Slow down."

"Some birthday present," she whispered, feeling insulted and cheated. After the officer drove away, she glanced in her mirror and could see red splotches forming on her neck. Lily deliberately replaced her negative thoughts with affirming ones, taking care to breathe slowly. "It's my twenty-eighth birthday. I will have a great day. The ticket doesn't matter." She continued to recite this as she slowly drove down the steep grade to the Petersen riverside property. "I will have a great day."