

A Promise of Fireflies companion

SUSAN HAUGHT

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the men and women who serve our country



Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow.

To those whose hearts belong to a soldier, may peace be yours until your hearts beat as one once more.

God bless you always.

In all ways.

FOREWARD

Dear Reader:

My son has a big mouth.

Nothing is sacred if Evan's mind is made up to carry out some crazy scheme he's cooked up, which usually means I take it in the shorts in some way. Secrets? Forget it. If there's a "story", he'll find it and make something of it. It's the journalist in him, and I guess I'm partially to blame. That particular trait he inherited from me. I'm curious to a fault, but unlike me, Evan isn't a wimp when it comes to acting on instinct, and his instincts for sniffing out a story are proving to be quite insightful. This time though, my mother's intuition tells me his partner in crime was a beautiful brunette he met in Los Angeles. A Cali Girl. Together they make a fearsome team and delightful couple. Together, they figured out a way to sneak my manuscript to the editor his girlfriend works for at Prestwood Publishing. I don't know how they accomplished this, nor do I want to know, but Evan and Demi's crazy plan proved the catalyst that made my dream of publishing "Firefly Pond" a reality. Fortunately neither one of them was fired. And I still haven't ruled out writing them into my next novel and wringing both their necks in some unspeakable manner. Never piss off a writer —we hold grudges and revenge is sweet, even if it ends in a fictional demise.

In all seriousness, I'm extremely grateful for the resourceful nature of both those kids. Without them, I doubt I would have had the courage to let my manuscript go. It's been a crazy journey and "Firefly Pond" has gone on to do quite well. Along the way, the sister company Evan had been interning for found out about the letters and a journal I had in my possession dating back to the Vietnam War. (That kid truly can't keep his mouth shut to save his sneaky soul.)

The letters are a part of my past, a piece of my heritage I knew nothing about until my mother passed away. The letters, exchanged between my mother and father in 1967 at the height of the Vietnam campaign, bear the love, happiness and pain of a once in a lifetime love. When Prestwood Prime asked for the rights to reprint them, I couldn't find it in my heart to allow that special

side of my parents to be made public. I hadn't fully embraced it myself, and somehow felt it would be a violation of their privacy. The letters had remained hidden for over forty years, so I chose to keep them to myself. At least for now.

The journal is another story. Ryan's words are spellbinding and written as love (fear/destiny/anger/loneliness/death) letters for my mother and legacy for his baby daughter, given as a promise they would meet again some day. The small, blood-stained journal holds Ryan's innermost thoughts the weeks and days before deployment, and then those written in the mud, rain, and blood twelve thousand miles from home on a battlefield where every minute offered the promise of death. The journal is another piece of my past, and without the compelling and sometimes devastating stories Ambrose shared with me, I would still be in the dark about those pieces of my past my mother never shared. I wanted to run, to disregard everything he told me, but despite it all I came to truly love the old Mark Twain look-alike, though at times he's downright creepy. I swear Ambrose is older than love itself, and sees more with one eye than most do with two and the old guy knows things he couldn't possibly know. How does he do that? Maybe it's one of those things better left to the imagination. And I have a sneaking suspicion we haven't seen the last of him.

The editor at Prestwood Prime understood my reluctance to reprint the letters, but was insistent the poems in the journal needed to be shared with the world. I wanted my father's legacy to live on in his words, so I agreed. But when she pushed me to publish my own work alongside Ryan's, I hesitated. Why? Because I'm putting myself out there again, and it's a hard thing to do. And I didn't know if I wanted my words—my love letters to Logan—to be shared with the world. To be truthful, releasing them for strangers to read made me queasy to the point of nearly throwing up. With Evan's encouragement, my editor's insistence, and Logan's relentless goading, I reluctantly agreed. Of course Logan wanted my poetry in print. After all, the poems were written about him, and he was entirely certain the world should know it. I do so love that crazy man, but he truly is a smart-ass.

I hope you enjoy this short journey spanning the parameters of time from the warm nights, young love and fireflies of St. Louis to the heady emotions tangled in the jungles of Vietnam as you climb into Ryan's heart and mind. Then, search your heart and memories for your "once in a lifetime" love. Remember how it felt as you read of my innermost thoughts in the majestic Rocky Mountains and peaceful little town of Hidden Falls, Arizona and I embrace the heartache of two lost souls and love lost to the ghosts of the past. ~Ryleigh

Part I

in the Shadow of Fate



Ryan

ANGEL



From Chapter One ~ A Promise of Fireflies:

Ryleigh released a long breath and straightened her legs. The journal tumbled to her lap.

Natalie turned to her. "What's this?"

She swiped a hand across the journal's cover and then wiped them on her jeans. "An old journal," Ryleigh said, brushing away the dusty handprint.

"Don't just sit there fondling it, open it."

The binding creaked. Timeworn pages fanned in a graceful arch as if her touch had resurrected them. Faded ink swirled across the unlined parchment, and the musty balm of old paper and ink tapped at a recollection, distant and unformed, yet ripe for picking—but she couldn't pluck it from her memory. Smudged and watermarked, the words danced across the aged pages. She turned each one with care.

Nat leaned in. "Well?"

Ryleigh frowned. "Looks like a collection of poetry."

"I didn't know your mother wrote poetry."

"This isn't her handwriting," Ryleigh responded without thought, "and my mother never wrote anything more literary than a grocery list."

Natalie peered over her shoulder. "Then whose?"

"Don't know. Just an 'R' at the end of the entries." The pages crackled as Ryleigh turned each one. "And the year. '66. '67 on some." A shiver feathered its way from her neck to the tips of her fingers.

* * *

The first time I read the entries in the journal, I felt as if I'd stumbled upon something I should remember, but couldn't quite make any sort of connection. I've always loved the rhythm of poetry and the images it creates in my mind. The words are clothed in an elegant cadence and the artistry of color, space, and time. They speak directly to my heart. For me, poetry speaks a different language. Most think poetry is simply odd. Natalie thinks so—she says I'm a little weird. Perhaps she's right. ~Ryleigh

You're the wind wings of butterfly tickle of hair an angel's sigh.

You're the rain tears from above comfort of warmth an angel's love.

You're the music laughter sung near melody of words an angel's whisper.

You're the sunlight blue skies blessed twilight of evening an angel's caress.

You're the rainbow an arc gentile shines joyful colors my angel's smile. ~R~ '66

It's a bit strange to think of my mother as someone's angel, especially when I think about how young she and Ryan were at the time this was written. Now that Mom is gone, she truly is an angel—the angel on my shoulder. One I miss more than I ever imagined.

I love you, Mom. ~Ryleigh

ACROSS the MILKY WAY



When Ambrose shared his story about Ryan, I couldn't imagine my mother with anyone but Ben, the only father I ever knew. But Ryan's words tell a different story.

Ryan's love for my mother bleeds through his words. His thoughts curl up and take hold inside me as if he'd written them for me to truly see the beauty that is my mother. Sorry, Ryan, you didn't have to do that. Her beauty radiated from her, inside and out, and I miss her so very much. Ryan loved my mother deeply. So did I. ~ Ryleigh

Like stars scattered across the Milky Way your smile brightens the deepest night—
Embers of fire know no more warmth and your kiss the whisper of a butterfly.

Like fingers that strum a joyful melody your laughter echoes in a chorus of song—A rainbow's arc knows no more splendor and your eyes are where the skies belong.

Like a candle's halo burning strong
your skin glows in pearls of gold—
A night of dreams knows no more pleasure

and in your arms, daydreams are sowed.

Like raindrops that tap a restful rhythm you silence the earth with your voice—

A blind touch knows no more tenderness and so to love you, I have no choice.

Ever the stars shimmer across the Milky Way
your hand ever mine through endless dreams—
Ever shall your eyes smile when I close mine
ever our paths remain one upon golden moonbeams.

~ R~ '66