

An excerpt from

Annie Clark and the Pearls of Wisdom

by Laura Browne

Chapter 1 - The Flying W Ranch

Cousin Shelby quickly strapped the training saddle on her neighfly, Tornado, as he stamped his feet and tossed his mane impatiently. He had a white patch between his wild eyes and the rest of him was inky black.

Some of the other neighflies in the hayviary looked much calmer, and I timidly mentioned that to Shelby. She brushed her short-cropped black hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand and said, “Do you want to ride or not?”

“Sure, it’s just that...”

“Well, Tornado’s my neighfly. Some of those others are so slow, you might as well walk.” I silently thought that would be just fine with me, but I didn’t say anything.

Tornado’s training saddle had two small seats. Shelby hopped onto the front seat in a quick fluid motion, slipping her feet neatly into the stirrups.

“Let’s go,” she barked at me as I awkwardly tried to copy her movements and settle into the second seat. As I strapped myself in, Shelby nudged the neighfly with her heels, and he

started to trot and unfurl his massive wings. My fingers clutched the saddle horn in front of me as though they were glued to it. My eyes were tightly shut and I wondered if riding Tornado was a good idea. I'd never ridden a neighfly before. I hadn't even believed in them until that morning.

Tornado galloped and flapped his wings. Then with a leap, as though clearing a fence, he left the ground. I felt as though my stomach hadn't come with us. I forced myself to open my eyes and concentrated on not looking down. Shelby shouted back at me, "You okay?"

"Great," I lied.

Once I got used to the rhythmic beating of the neighfly's wings and decided I probably wasn't going to fall, I began to enjoy it. I forced myself to look down as we circled over the ranch. I saw the main house and several buildings including the hayviary next to the pasture covered with an enormous net to keep the neighflies in. The wind rushed past my cheeks and blew my hair back.

My muscles slowly relaxed and I realized I was no longer gripping the saddle as tightly. I shifted carefully in my seat. Shelby glanced back at me and flicked the reins. Tornado rushed forward and I stiffened. With a quick kick of her heels, Shelby urged the neighfly to fly up and over in a loop. Roller coasters would never seem the same. After leveling off, Shelby called back to me, "How was that?"

"Wow," I said through gritted teeth, torn between the desire to get my feet back on the ground and wanting to show my cousin I wasn't afraid.

She laughed and nudged Tornado to do another loop.

I guess she thought I'd had enough because after she pulled out of the second loop, she steered Tornado in a steady path over nearby fields towards a small mountain. We soared over a

winding river and I imagined what the ride would be like without Shelby. After a few minutes, we circled back and landed where we had started. I was a little disappointed. While the loops made me afraid I'd lose my breakfast, the rest of the flying was wonderful.

"Thanks," I said trying to look as steady on my feet as possible. "When can we go again?"

She tipped her head to the side and almost smiled as she said, "You're all right. Maybe we'll see before you leave." I felt as though I'd passed some test.

I walked back to the house, looking at aunts and uncles and cousins that I'd never seen before. The air was noisy with their talk and I felt out of place. The only familiar face was Grandma Rose. Grandma Rose was tall and thin with long wavy black hair with silver streaks framing her face. Her blood red lipstick contrasted with the wide bands of dark green eyeshadow and thick black eyeliner above her brown eyes. She wore a tight zebra-striped dress and matching spiky boots. She didn't look like any of my friends' grandmothers. Of course, none of them had a witch for a grandmother.

I hadn't known she was a witch until she had arrived unexpectedly at my house two days earlier. Until then, I had just been plain old Annie Clark, looking forward to a hot, sticky summer like every other bored 13-year-old in Middleton, New Jersey. After lots of whispering and hushed arguing, Grandma Rose announced I was going away with her for the summer.

Even though leaving would mean I wouldn't have to spend time with my bratty little sisters, I wasn't sure I wanted to go until she told me she was a witch. I thought she was kidding until I saw the looks on my parents' faces. My father was red-faced and strangely quiet as though he had a cork stuck in his mouth preventing him from saying anything. My mother was so white I thought she was going to faint.

I didn't believe it until she turned the couch into a horse, a real mane-tossing, hoof-stomping horse. Then she turned the chairs into ducks and the lamp into a lizard. Mom stopped her before the rest of the house looked like a zoo. Dad's cheeks turned so purple, I was afraid he was going to burst.

After that, I packed as fast as I could.

Their words tumbled around in my head like clothes in a dryer. Grandma Rose didn't really live in California, she lived in a magical kingdom called Wistmera. Mom was a witch too, but not Dad. And then there was the other thing they told me, but I pushed that into the back of my mind. I couldn't quite believe it, so I decided to ignore it for as long as I could. I'd have time to deal with it later.

As I considered which clothes to bring, I was torn between being furious at Mom and Dad for never telling me and excited about the prospect of spending the summer away. I critically looked at my clothes and wondered how people dressed in Wistmera. I couldn't decide if jeans or skirts would be better, so I tossed them all in my suitcases.

When we were ready to leave, Grandma, my parents, and I stuffed ourselves into the upstairs bathroom. Grandma Rose waved her hand and an ordinary-looking door appeared by the bathtub. This was not how I expected to travel to a magical land, I thought, as I stood wedged between the sink and toilet. I expected a lovely horse-drawn carriage, a magic carpet, or at least a door that didn't look like we had stuck it in the bathroom while we were remodeling. When I asked Grandma Rose about it, she shrugged and said that's where the closest entrance was.

My parents gave me a list of do's and don'ts. As usual, there was a heavy emphasis on the don'ts. It was obvious that Dad was not happy about the trip and even Mom seemed a little

worried. After they ran out of things to lecture me about, I was ready to go.

Grandma Rose and I walked through the door and into a grand front hall with an elephant-sized crystal chandelier hanging heavily from the ceiling. The door closed behind us and disappeared with a soft pop. Grandma Rose picked something up from the ground and handed me the door that had shrunk to the size of a coin.

“Here, take it with you in case you ever need a way back home. Just put it on the ground, say, ‘home please’ and snap your fingers.” She looked at me seriously. “Think of that as an emergency exit. I want you to know that you can always use it if you need to go home in a hurry.” She paused and said, “Not that we expect any trouble of course. You’ll be just fine.”

She hurried me upstairs and told me to put away my things so we could get to a party at my Aunt Gwendolyn and Uncle Philip’s ranch. Mom never mentioned her side of the family before and I’d assumed Mom was an only child.

So I ended up at The Flying W Ranch later that day. That’s where I met my sulky cousin Shelby as well as many other cousins, aunts, uncles and people I wasn’t sure if I was related to or not. After arriving, Grandma thought I’d enjoy a ride on a neighfly.

After my ride, Grandma Rose called me over. “Annie, dear,” she called. “Have you met Mrs. F. yet?”

I saw an extremely short, round woman enthusiastically waving her arms like a conductor. With her wand held high in the air, she led a line of plates filled with sandwich meats, salads, cups, and drinks to nearby tables. She looked wider than she was tall, and if you pushed her over, she would roll away.

She heard Grandma Rose and turned so I could see her pointed, baseball mitt-sized ears poking through a tall tower of blonde curls that seemed to defy gravity. Grandma Rose had told me elves are short with large pointy ears but I was still startled.

“Can this be little Annie?” she shrieked when she saw me. She whipped her wand around quickly and the food and plates raced to the table and dropped on them with loud clunks. She hurried over to us, and I was surprised to see how quickly she could move. She squished me in a hug so tight I could barely breathe as though she was determined to make up for years without hugs. “Annie, we’ve been waitin’ so long,” she said with a lilt. She let me go and stared into my face. Up close, her blonde curls looked even larger. They added almost a full foot to her height so the top of her hair was almost level with the top of mine. I wondered what sort of magical hairspray could keep up so much hair.

“What a big girl.” Then she shrieked again, “Och! Your ears. What ‘appened to your beautiful ears?”

My hands involuntarily went to touch the tips of my ears. I wondered briefly if they had disappeared. “What’s the matter with my ears?”

She shook her head as if she had remembered something and not a hair moved out of place. “Nothin’ dearie, pay no attention. It’s just so wonderful to see you. The last time I saw you, you were just a tiny little babe.” She paused. “Ow is your dear mum?” She stroked the tip of one of her enormous ears absently with a sausage-like finger.

“Do you know my mom?”

She chuckled, “Of course, dearie, I know ‘em all.”

I started to ask her another question when she said, “Och, what am I thinkin’ dearie? I’ve got to finish gettin’ lunch.” She gave me another python-like hug and ran off toward the house.

Grandma Rose called me back over and sighed to herself. “What would we do without Mrs. F?” Then she turned to me and said, “Annie, did you have fun with Shelby?” She smiled, “It’s so nice to see you playing with your cousins.”

I thought to myself I would have much more fun with a cousin that wasn’t trying to dump me out of the sky, but I just smiled.

“Aunt Gwendolyn and I were just talking about the ball,” said Grandma Rose. She indicated a smiling woman sitting next to her who had been introduced to me as my mother’s older sister. She was tall and dark with dark brown eyes and she sounded like Mom when she laughed.

Aunt Gwendolyn smiled at me and said, “Annie, you’re going to have so much fun! It’s so thrilling! I remember when I went to my first ball. And then after the ball, you’ll…”

“Annie’s going to have plenty to do this summer,” interrupted Grandma Rose.

My aunt looked at her and said, “I was just going to say…”

“We’ll talk about what else she’s going to do when the time comes,” said Grandma Rose a little too loudly, with a significant look at Aunt Gwendolyn.

“So what’d you tell her she’d be doing this summer?” We were interrupted by Grandma’s black and white cat, Xevos, who lightly jumped onto the table. I still hadn’t gotten used to the idea he could talk. He was all black with white patches on his toes and under his chin. Back where I came from, he’d probably be called Boots or Socks, but I didn’t think he’d ever answer to anything that ordinary, though he might come if you called him Emperor or King of the Cats.

“Well, I told her she’d have a few weeks of tutoring at summer school where she would learn some magic basics, then she’d go to the ball.”

“That’s it?” said Xevos, curling his tail into a question mark.

“That’s it,” said Grandma Rose simply. There was a pause as Xevos stared at her with wide orange eyes, his body still except for his tail swishing quickly back and forth.

Aunt Gwendolyn jumped up and said to me, “Annie, you’ve never seen a neighfly foal. One was born just a few days ago. Why don’t you help Chloe with the feeding?” She steered me to the red barn. Inside, the barn was bright, with sun peeking through the cracks in the wooden walls and the windows above the doors. There was a strong earthy animal smell mixed with manure that made me wrinkle my nose.

Chloe looked a lot like her sister Shelby, but Chloe’s black hair was long, past her shoulders. She was much friendlier than her sister and seemed pleased to show me around. I looked in the stalls to see the neighflies. Shelby crouched in one of the stalls with her back to us. When she turned around, I saw she was sitting with a small chestnut neighfly. It was huddled on the ground with its wings pulled in tightly.

“How is she?” Chloe asked, kneeling down next to Shelby.

Shelby shrugged.

“Not any better?” said Chloe.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

Shelby explained that the mare was too sick to nurse her. They were trying to feed her, but it wasn’t going very well. She indicated an oversized baby bottle and a bowl of applesauce next to her.

I stared at the little neighfly. She was so cute. I wanted to pet her just to make sure she really existed.

Chloe looked at me and said, “Would you like to try feeding her?” She pointed to a bowl on the floor of the stall.

Shelby scowled but moved out of the way. I sat down next to the neighfly and offered her the applesauce. She didn’t look interested. She didn’t move at all.

Chloe and Shelby walked a few steps away. “Has she taken anything yet?” asked Chloe. Shelby shook her head and looked worried. “I don’t think she’s going to make it,” she said in a low tone.

I knew I had to make her eat something. “Please eat,” I said to her, “Please be okay.” I talked to her and gently stroked her neck. “C’mon, you need to eat something. It’s good. Really.” She watched me closely as if she understood, but she didn’t open her mouth to take the spoon.

“Just taste it,” I repeated. Then slowly, very slowly, a small pink tongue came out and licked the applesauce.

“See, it’s good. I told you.” I got another spoonful and she licked it off a little more quickly. The third time she tried to bite the spoon before I got it to her lips. She whinnied softly and I put the bowl up to her tiny head. She hungrily ate it.

“Look,” I called behind me. “She’s eating.”

By the time Chloe and Shelby had walked back, the neighfly had cleaned the bowl and was nudging my arm.

Shelby looked surprised and said grudgingly, “Well, you certainly have a way with neighflies. She wouldn’t eat anything for me.”

The neighfly continued to nudge me harder.

“We’d better get her some more applesauce,” said Shelby, heading for the house.

“What should I do until then?” I called to her.

Shelby shot back, “Try giving her some milk.”

Chloe got the bottle for me so I wouldn't have to get up. I raised it to the neighfly's mouth and she started to drink it noisily. Chloe watched me as I petted the little neighfly with one hand and held the bottle with the other.

“Good girl,” I murmured

“You're a natural with neighflies,” said Chloe.

“That's news to me. I don't even have a pet at home. My dad won't let me have one.

Shelby came back with another bowl and gave it to me. The neighfly eagerly took it.

When I tried to leave a few minutes later, the neighfly struggled to get up and follow me.

Chloe laughed. “It looks like you have a job.”

“What?” I said, petting the neighfly's warm fur.

“You can be a nursemaid to this little one. You've been elected.”

“Fine with me,” I said quickly.

We heard a bell and Chloe said, “Lunch. Let's go.” I reluctantly followed them though I would have been happy to stay in the barn all day. As long as I was there, I didn't have to try to remember all these strangers' names, make pleasant conversation, or think about the thing that was making my stomach feel like there was a big stone in it.

Chapter 2 - The Centaur Ballet

Lunch was a wonderful, noisy affair with people eating at tables set up outside. The trays were piled high with every kind of sandwich filling I could imagine and some I couldn't. There was potato salad, macaroni salad, and something cousin Chloe told me was tunipera salad. I decided to stick to the things I was most familiar with and filled my plate.

After lunch, Aunt Gwendolyn flicked her wand and made the dirty dishes march back into the kitchen. I followed them and found Mrs. F. and her pile of blonde curls conducting the dishes to wash themselves.

Mrs. F. told me she had taken care of Grandma when she was growing up, and then she took care of Grandma's kids, and then my aunt's kids. I wondered how old she was but I was pretty sure it wouldn't be polite to ask.

"Your mum, she was a regular spitfire, she was," said Mrs F. She was always playin' tricks on 'er poor sister. And I'd have to punish 'er though I'd just as likely be laughin' into my 'and because the things she did were so funny. There was the time she turned Gwenny's teddy bear into a real bear. It roared and scared Gwenny somethin' terrible..."

I stared at her ears as I listened to her stories. I tried not to, but they were so large it was hard not to look at them.

Finally, I mustered up my courage when Mrs. F. paused to send a pot back to the sink that hadn't quite finished washing itself.

"Mrs. F." I started, "I like your earrings."

"Thank you dearie," she said, fingering gold earrings that were the size of a baseball with squiggly black markings on them. She looked at me shrewdly and said, "Is there somethin' you want to ask?"

I didn't know if I could say it. I had pushed it in the back of my head as soon as Grandma Rose had told me and I hoped to keep it back there for as long as possible. I wanted to ignore it, but it came tumbling out of my mouth. "Well, your ears... I mean they're ... Grandma Rose said I'm..." I stammered, too afraid to go on, but realizing it was too late to stop. "Is that what my ears used to look like?" I finally asked.

She smiled, "Dearie, when you first came to us, you had the most beautiful ears with dainty little points on the end."

"But then Mom changed them."

"It was a terrible shame, that. She had to y' know. You couldn't live in the 'uman world with lovely big ears like that."

"So, I really am an elf?" I whispered.

"O' course, dearie. And you should be proud to be an elf. And don't you let anyone tell you different. We elves have a fine 'istory," she said, shaking her helmet of hair threateningly.

"No, no... I didn't mean to... I'm just... I'm just confused. I mean one minute I'm just Annie," I said raising my voice, "and then Grandma Rose shows up and she says she and Mom are witches and then she says ..." I paused.

"What, dearie?" she prompted.

"She says I'm really an elf and I was adopted. It's just all so... so... unexpected," I finished up vaguely.

"Well dearie, that's true but you know your family loves you very much. I'll never forget the first time Lyssa held you..."

I pounced on her statement. "You were there the night Mom... uh... adopted me?"

"O' course I was."

“What happened?” I asked, barely able to breathe.

“Och,” she cried, “I’ll never forgit it s’long as I live. It was after dinner and I was in the kitchen when I ‘eard the bell ring, and then I ‘eard screamin’. I rushed in. I thought for sure someone was dyin’, and there was your mum ‘oldin’ a baby. I just ‘bout fell over. I did. But there you were, and you were such a pretty little one.”

“Someone just left me there?”

Her voice softened, “Dearie, you weren’t just left. You were tucked in all careful in a basket with a little ‘andmade blanket and the sweetest little outfit. There was a note sayin’ you needed a good ‘ome. It said your name was Anyssa.” She noticed my surprised look and said, “Your mum shortened it to Annie.” She continued, “Whoever wrote the note asked Lyssa to adopt you because she’d take good care o’ you.”

Mrs. F. turned to the dishes, which had started to stack themselves in the cabinets. I looked down at my shoes and silently twisted my fingers.

“You okay, dearie?” Mrs. F. asked after a few minutes.

“I was just wondering... just wondering... why?” The last word squeezed out of me as I looked into Mrs. F.’s kind eyes.

“Dearie,” she said softly, “we wondered too. And we checked all the records of babies born but we never could figure it out.” She paused. “It doesn’t matter where you came from. Your folks love you more than anythin’.”

“I know. I just wish I knew more. And why didn’t they tell me?” I said, louder than I had planned.

“Yeh, well, they should’a told you, no doubt, but don’t be too ‘ard on ‘em. Mebbe they thought you’d be upset if you knew,” said Mrs. F., with her eyes glittering.

“I s’pose so,” I muttered, but the stone I felt in my stomach seemed even larger. Finding out I was adopted was like going down the stairs in the dark and missing the bottom step. I felt... I didn’t know how I felt.

It’s true I didn’t look like anyone else in my family. I had red hair and green eyes and the rest of my family had dark hair and brown eyes. Grandma Rose said elves were short and I certainly was short. In fact, I was the shortest person in my class at school. But it was all so strange. And I was furious at Mom and Dad, I mean my adopted mom and dad. I couldn’t believe that there was never a good time to tell me all this.

Mrs. F. had turned back to the sink. As the towels dried the glasses and the food put itself back in the refrigerator, Mrs. F. hummed softly. After a few minutes, she asked me how I liked the ranch. I happily told her of my ride with Shelby, leaving out the part where she tried to make me throw up. Then I told her about the neighfly. Mrs. F. suggested it might be time to check on the foal again.

I saw Chloe on the way out and we headed to the barn. The neighfly foal struggled to get up when she saw us. I gave her some more milk and applesauce, which she ate noisily. I softly stroked her warm back and neck as I whispered to her. The silence in the barn was occasionally broken by the sound of a neighfly swishing its tail or munching some food. The barn was cool and I wished I could stay right there for the rest of the day.

Grandma said we would spend the night at the ranch, and I got to share a room with Shelby and Chloe. Shelby was gruff but she wasn’t unfriendly, and when the conversation turned to riding, she became very animated. She was captain of her school’s Leepchase team, a sport played on neighflies.

As we all sat in the living room after dinner, I heard Aunt Gwendolyn talking to Grandma Rose.

“So, why couldn’t Dario make it?”

“Busy, as usual. He’s always doing something.”

“What’s he up to now?”

“He wouldn’t say. It’s a shame he won’t get serious. He’s so talented. Even in school, with your sister, he was always goofing-off. I don’t know how he made it through.”

Aunt Gwendolyn smiled and said, “He probably cheated off her.” They both laughed.

Then someone turned on the player piano. It looked like a regular piano except it had hands and arms and took requests. Grandpa, a tall quiet man with brown hair and a large caterpillar-shaped mustache sat on the piano bench and led the group in songs. I didn’t know any of the words but I enjoyed listening. As usual, Grandma Rose was the center of attention, her enthusiastic voice rising above the rest. She stood behind Grandpa, her heavily jeweled arms resting on his shoulders. They sang until late in the night.

The next morning at the breakfast table, Chloe announced the little neighfly was doing much better. Shelby punched me in the arm and said, “She’s got a way with them. It’s a good thing you showed up to help.” I rubbed my arm, but I was pleased she said it.

Grandma Rose walked in wearing a bright pink flowing dress. It was hardly an outfit for the farm, but it looked right on Grandma Rose. She said, “Isn’t it about time you named her?”

Shelby shoveled cereal into her mouth. “Boo Bites, a bit of magic in every bite,” proclaimed the smiling witch on the front of the cereal box.

Aunt Gwendolyn looked at me and said, “What do you think?”

“M-m-me?” I stammered.

“Yes, you can help us,” she said. “She’s a champion foal and needs a proper name. Usually we name the foals using a combination of their parents’ names. Her parents are Wind Dancer and Catch Me If You Can.”

“What about Dance Catcher?” said Shelby.

“How about Dance If You Can?” said Grandma Rose. “Or better yet, Dance With Me?”

They continued tossing out combination names. I stayed quiet. Aunt Gwendolyn finally turned to me. “Well Annie?”

“How about Catch the Wind?” I said, crossing my fingers behind my back.

They all paused.

“I like it,” said Shelby, closing her eyes briefly and raking her fingers through her short black hair. “Yeah, it has a nice feel to it. It’s a good fast name.”

Uncle Philip came in then and they told him my suggestion. They all agreed and my aunt told Shelby to register the new name. I offered to go and feed the foal.

The little neighfly stood up as soon as she saw me. She looked stronger than she had last night. I breathed in the dark moist air as I fed her milk and applesauce. I stroked her side with one hand and her soft fur tickled my fingers. “Hi there, Catch the Wind. That’s what we’re going to call you now. What do you think about that, girl?” She looked up and whinnied softly. “But I think I’ll just call you Windy. Okay with you?”

I sat quietly in her stall, thick with animal smells, and listened to the stomping and whinnying of the other neighflies nearby. My head was bulging with strange things from the past few days and I didn’t know what to think. I hugged the tiny neighfly around her neck and

felt her warm skin against my cheek. “Can I just stay here?” I whispered. I imagined Windy knew what I was saying when she rubbed her nose against my cheek as if to say “yes”.

The day was over too soon. Shelby took me riding again and laughed when I begged for more. It was wonderful and exhilarating and I never wanted to come down. She promised to take me again the next time I visited. I wanted to stay at the ranch but Grandma Rose said we needed to have time to get to the ballet that night.

“I’ve never seen a real ballet,” I told her.

She smiled. “And I can guarantee you’ve never seen a ballet like this. This is the famous Centaur Ballet. Dario got tickets for tonight. He’s going to join us. Dario is your godfather and an old friend of your mother’s,” she explained.

“Count me out,” said Xevos, the black and white cat. “I don’t need to hear all that stomping.”

“Really,” said Grandma Rose. “They’ve gotten fabulous reviews.”

“Whatever,” said Xevos, who began to carefully clean his front paw.