

Winter Wonders

Delia Latham

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Prologue

The angel bowed at the feet of the Father. He trembled—not with fear, but with unspeakable joy at being in the presence of the one and only God...his Father, who loved him with a pure, unconditional, never-ending love.

The Father's hand stroked the messenger's white hair. "Rise, faithful one. We have much to discuss."

The angel stood. "Autumn and Russ..."

"Are together, just as they should be. They've found that I am Love, and I never fail, even when others do. You did well, Messenger."

"I could do nothing without You, Father. And, of course, our busy blue joy was of immense help." The angel smiled.

"Ah, yes. He did well." The simple voice of approval breathed warmth and life into the messenger's being. "Together, we brought the intended hearts together. You have a special touch with my children. Their response to you is always favorable." A wide smile lit the Father's face, making it a beacon of light...and wonder...and immense joy. "Even the most headstrong of them."

"Only because You are my inspiration, my Lord. I simply follow Your lead."

Deep, wonderful laughter from the Father's lips sent a low rumble, like the comforting, ever-present roll of an ocean, through the heavens. "I will always lead those who want to be led. Now it is time to prepare for your next assignment."

The messenger's white eyebrows drew together. "I've not felt Your direction to accept any of the humans who seek to fill that space, Father."

"You won't, Messenger. Not this time. One half of our next couple will come to you from the sky."

"From the sky?" The messenger's vivid blue eyes widened. "I don't understand."

"You will know her when you see her." The Father's smile eased

any uncertainty the angel might have experienced. "The man she is meant to love is familiar to you, and loved by many in Cambria."

"May I know who, my Lord?"

"Both of the humans in this assignment use names not given them at birth. The man does so to protect himself from unfavorable elements in his past. The woman's new name was taken on for the sake of vanity and public favor."

The messenger remained silent for a long time, and the Father allowed him to mull over the information.

Finally, the angel raised a troubled gaze. "They are deceitful?"

"Yes and no, Messenger. Their relationship will bring the hidden to light and heal old wounds in both hearts."

"Yes, Father." It was not his to question, but to obey. "I will do my best."

"You will do well, as you always do."

"You will not give me names?"

"Names are not the most reliable of components in this mission, but when the time comes, you will recognize them." The Father smiled, and peace flooded the messenger's heart. "Trust Me, dear one, as you always have. I will not fail."

"Of course not, Father. I will rest in that assurance."

"One more thing." The Father gently touched the angel's hand, piercing his heart with deep, fierce love and utter devotion. "This time, you will have some impact on another binding of hearts as well."

The messenger gasped. "Two couples?"

"Your focus will be on the couple I've outlined already, but you will influence another pairing as well—and one of them will also come to you from the sky." The Father pulled the messenger close and wrapped loving arms around him. "Trust me, faithful Messenger. You will recognize my human children when the time is right. You will see My hand and feel My direction."

When the Father opened His arms and stepped away, the angel felt the absence of His touch deep inside. But he nodded, subservient and submissive to God's will.

"I will follow Your lead, Father."

"You always do. Just never forget that they are human...all of them. Mistakes on their part do not make them bad, nor does it cancel My plan for their lives."

"What a blessing, since even Your angels are capable of error."

“You’ll need to keep that in mind throughout this mission.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Now go, Messenger.” A touch of urgency deepened the Father’s melodic voice. “And look to the sky. They come to you, even now.”

The messenger opened his mouth to speak but didn’t. Nothing mattered except what God willed. He nodded and found himself once again in the human form the Father had given him to use while at his earthly location.

Home, sweet temporary home.

1

What had ever possessed her to climb into this jelly-bean-sized airplane?

Winter could have driven the five hours from Cornelius Cove to Santa Barbara, but her editor was antsy for the story she'd be bringing back. Using the rental plane pared several hours off her time away from the anchor desk at CoastNews, a television news channel covering California's Central Coast.

She had jumped at the opportunity for a bit of alone time with her twin brother, who piloted the C-Cove Flying Taxi planes. They were both busy climbing unstable ladders to success in fledgling careers, and opportunities for visits of any length came along all too seldom.

"Hang on, Sis."

Winter heard the string-tight tension in Kai's warning only because she knew him so well. The crease in his brow didn't make for a warm, fuzzy feeling either. "I'm gonna have to take 'er down, and the landing'll be about as smooth as an over-aged pineapple's skin."

The little puddle jumper dipped in a sickening cant to one side, and Winter's eyes widened at sight of the ground, way too far below. She gasped and balled her hands into tight fists, but managed a shaky smile at her brother's terminology.

Born to a Navy dad from Northern California and an island mother, Winter and Kai had been raised in Oahu, Hawaii. Even now, after a decade in California, they often thought and spoke in terms influenced by Hawaiian culture.

"We've survived rough stuff before, Kai. Just do your best. It's always good enough."

Kai struggled to right the wavering aircraft, but glanced her way for half a second. "*Aloha wau iā 'oe*. I love you, Kalani. You know that, don't you?"

Oh, yeah...they were in serious trouble. Under normal

circumstances, he would never risk the sharp end of her tongue by using the name her parents gave her. She'd taken on a "stage name" when she went on the air for KCCN and insisted her family use it. When her parents had balked, she reminded them that she'd kept the family surname. Although Kai didn't see the need for a name change, he'd stepped in to support her choice, and their parents eventually acquiesced—although they clearly considered it a ridiculous and unnecessary move on her part.

So Kalani became Winter Wonder. A name that sizzled and sang with much more dramatic punch and memorability than her given name. This was a moniker fit for a celebrity—and that's what she intended to be.

And now Kai had called her Kalani. He did so now and then, but usually with tongue in cheek, a deliberate ploy to raise her dander. She wished he was being a tease of a brother right now, but his voice and expression wrecked any hope of that. Her heart clenched, even as the plane took a sharp nose dive toward the ground.

"*Aloha wau iā 'oe.* I love you too, brother mine." She made a noisy show of checking her seat belt. "Now shut up and cut the rough stuff off that ancient pineapple."



Pastor Brady Merckle crossed to a nearby faucet to rinse his paint roller. As water sluiced through the nape, pale yellow turned to white and gradually cleared. He watched, a grin teasing at the corners of his lips.

When Miss Angie had approached him about sprucing up the place and doing a few repairs, he'd been surprised. The lodge always appeared pristine and welcoming.

In all his visits to Paradise Pines, he'd never noticed a need for a facelift. "I'd be glad to help, but honestly, Miss Angie, I don't recall a single thing looking less than perfect out there."

"Well, it certainly doesn't look perfect now, dear." Tall, elegant, and soft-spoken, the white-haired lady patted his arm. "Come on out and take a look. When you can, of course. I know you're busy with the church and Chrysalis and a hundred other things."

"I always have time for you." He kissed a soft, gently lined cheek and gave her a one-armed hug. "I'll be out as soon as I can."

Two days later, he'd stood scratching his head outside the lodge

before knocking on the door. When had the place gotten so run down? He wracked his brain, trying to dredge up a mental picture of what it had looked like on his last visit. Surely he'd have noticed such a blatant lack of upkeep. The place definitely needed a bit of cosmetic attention.

The large, two-story structure had once been a fishing lodge, owned by an old guy everyone in Cambria knew only as Preacher. He hadn't actually been a preacher, unless one counted the life he lived, in which he'd delivered outstanding sermons without having to speak a word. When old Preacher died—out on his boat with his line in the water, doing what he loved to do—the lodge sat empty for a good, long time.

Then Miss Angelina Love showed up, keys in hand, and had the place completely renovated. Now it housed two separate dwellings—her downstairs unit, and a large, two-bedroom apartment on the upper floor. Miss Angie rented that one to seasonal guests, and she was immoveable about the season-long lease. Guests stayed three months or not at all at Paradise Pines.

Brady frowned, trying to think how long the lodge had been open for business. How long since Preacher died? He couldn't seem to put his finger on time when it came to Paradise Pines, and trying to think about it gave him a headache.

"Brady?"

He shut off the water, gave the brush a hefty shake, and turned to see Miss Angie making a fast path across the lawn. He quickly closed the distance between them. "Miss Angie? Is something wrong?"

A rare frown creased the woman's normally smooth brow. She shaded her eyes with one hand and raised her head to scan the sky. "Do you hear that? Something doesn't sound right."

Puzzled, Brady followed her gaze.

A small plane dipped to one side and the other, and then took a sudden dive toward the ground.

Brady caught his breath.

Beside him, Miss Angie whispered a prayer.

Now he heard what the lodge hostess had already picked up on. Something wasn't right. The engine sputtered and spit. Instead of the smooth drone usually heard when small planes passed over, an inconsistent cough and hiccup erupted from the craft now conducting an awkward, lurching sky dance.

"They're in trouble."

Miss Angie whirled toward the front of the lodge. “Come with me. The people in that plane will need help.”

“Whoa, whoa!” He was also concerned for the occupants of the small airplane. But why did the woman think the two of them would be involved in its landing—successful or otherwise? “Even if that plane comes down, it probably won’t be anywhere near here.”

She turned toward him, the picture of grace. A long, white sheath drifted around her ankles as her whirling movement displaced the air, and she seemed to float. Brady caught his breath. Something about the way the sun hit her eyes made them glow golden, and they pierced him to the soul.

She lifted one arm and pointed a long, slim finger toward a wooded area on the south side of the lodge. “They’ll crash into the woods, right over there. I’m going for blankets and water.” One more turn, and she was off again, faster than he’d ever seen her move. Miss Angie was ever and always the picture of grace and beauty. Her next words drifted over her shoulder. “Are you coming?”

Brady’s jaw dropped, and he stood frozen—but only for a few seconds. Her sense of urgency took hold in his own heart. Long legs carried him swiftly around the corner. He reached the front door ahead of her and held it open. “I’ll put everything you think we might need in the back of my truck.”

A tourniquet and a strong, flat board.

Brady caught his breath as he waited in the small entryway. He was a minister. He believed in talking *with* God, not just *to* Him. But this had been more than a gentle nudge of the Spirit. Those words were almost audible.

“Miss Angie, do you have an old sheet, or something to use as a—”

She shoved a worn sheet and a couple of old leather belts into his hands. “In case we need a tourniquet. There’s a case of water in the pantry. Will you grab that while I get a couple of blankets?” She turned and hurried toward the bedrooms, and then she stopped. “After you put those in your truck, you should probably find some kind of board...something flat and strong. Big enough to carry a person, if need be.” Then she was gone.

Brady forced air in and out of his lungs but didn’t pause to wonder how they’d both arrived at the same mental destination. He’d been around Miss Angie enough to know the lady had a connection to Heaven that went beyond description.

He headed for the storage shed in search of a sheet of plywood.



Winter stirred and then groaned. Pain roared through her head, and her stomach lurched.

“Relax, dear. You’ll be just fine.”

She stilled. Had she ever heard a voice so sweet, so musical? A voice like that could almost convince her that angels really existed. *Angels!* Was she dead? Was she in Heaven? Had she been more herself, she’d have laughed. *If* she were dead, and *if* Heaven were real, its gates wouldn’t swing open for the likes of Kalani Wonder. She hadn’t exactly been a role model for all things right and good and...well, heavenly.

She tried to open her eyes, but they were too heavy. Maybe she was dreaming. But the pain...did one feel pain in a dream? She didn’t know. Couldn’t think. Where was she anyway? Unable to open her eyes, she tried to focus on her sense of hearing. She’d heard that beautiful voice...maybe there were other sounds to be taken in, sounds that might explain what was happening to her. She concentrated but heard little, save a bit of bird song and a distant, rolling roar. That sound...she almost knew it, but her head was so foggy.

“How is our young man doing, Brady, dear?” That was the angel-voice again.

“I’m pretty sure his right leg is broken in at least one place. I’m more concerned about his head injury though.” That was a male voice—deep, pleasantly modulated, and oozing concern. Who was he so worried about?

“The ambulance should be here soon. I’d like to sit with him a moment before they arrive. Will you keep a watch on this poor child?”

Winter heard the swish of air movement, the rustle of clothing. Someone else took the place of the angel-voiced person. Gentle fingers stroked her forehead, as if pushing hair out of her face. Rough with callouses, that touch, but something about it calmed her, stilled the feverish anxiety in her soul.

The male voice she’d heard earlier spoke soft and low—and apparently close against her face. “Father, please touch this child of Yours. I don’t know her name, but she’s so lovely...so tiny...so

delicate." His warm breath feathered her skin. Until then, she hadn't known she was cold. Now she did, and even recognized the softness of a blanket tucked around her, right up to her chin. "She came here straight out of the sky, and I know You do nothing without a reason. Please, Lord...bring her back to us, so we can explore Your purpose in her life." His voice grew raspy, and Winter wasn't sure she actually heard the next slightly questioning words. "And her purpose in mine."

Who was this strange man, who spoke such odd words, almost as if in *prayer*! In a moment of sudden clarity, she knew she was right. He was praying. The pleasant voice that sent shivers through her soul, despite the pain in her head and the ache in every muscle, was praying—*for her*. Such an antiquated notion in today's world, and yet...what a sweet, warm sense of peace flowed over and through her at the gesture.

She had to see him, to know what kind of man possessed such a tender touch and spoke in a voice that sent tremors through her being...and yet prayed as if he believed Someone somewhere heard his quiet petitions.

Winter made a determined effort to raise her eyelids and was rewarded with relentless waves of nausea. But her eyelashes fluttered. Dim light burned her eyes, fresh agony pounded at her head, and she groaned.

"Shhh. Relax, sweetheart. Don't try to move. Help is on the way."

Sweetheart? Was this man someone important to her, someone to whom she mattered enough to be called by such an endearment?

"Miss Angie! What are you...?" The man's voice trailed off.

Winter lay in darkness, wracked with pain and utterly confused. Still, a ripple of something unidentifiable made its way up her spine when he spoke again. Reverence and awe lent his pleasant baritone voice a whole new appeal.

"Sweet Father in Heaven, she really is an angel!"

2

Brady didn't even breathe.

Across the clearing into which the small plane had crashed with terrifying force and noise, Miss Angie knelt at the feet of the unconscious man whose leg was bent at a disturbing angle. She slipped one hand beneath the injured extremity, laid the other atop it, and bowed her head. A golden-white light surrounded her, and Brady's heart set up a racing rhythm when translucent wings, bright with the same ethereal glow, swayed in graceful waves behind her.

"Sweet Father in Heaven, she really is an angel!"

Miss Angie's gentle voice and manner, paired with a tendency to quote scripture as if every word in the Good Book were etched in her memory, often drew teasing suggestions that she'd come to Cambria straight from Heaven. She also possessed a quiet wisdom that had benefitted more than one lodge guest and any number of parishioners at Cambria House of Praise.

But this...

Unable to look away, Brady watched, although his soul whispered his unworthiness to witness the scene unfolding before him.

Miss Angie closed her eyes, took hold of the twisted limb, and then slowly stood and backed away, pulling the injured man's leg along with her. The same golden glow that surrounded the woman emanated from the leg she held in her hands.

An instant later, Brady blinked, and the young man's limb lay straight and unharmed.

The glow faded as sirens approached.

Miss Angie raised her gaze to Brady's, sent him one of her beautiful, trademark smiles, and placed a finger against her lips.

He managed a single, slow dip of his chin. No one would believe what he'd seen, even if he tried to share it. He wasn't sure he believed it himself.

A groan from the young woman at his side drew his attention,

and he glanced down, only to be sucker-punched by a pair of stunning gray-green eyes. Even the hazy cloud of pain in their depths failed to detract from their beauty. Framed by lush eyelashes—surprisingly dark, given the woman’s golden blonde hair—those eyes fell easily into the “unforgettable” category.

“What...happened?” Shaky and faint, her voice nevertheless spoke straight into Brady’s heart. “Am I...dead?”

He bent close so she could hear him over the shrill scream of the sirens. Based on the piercing volume, they were on the lodge grounds.

Miss Angie hurried toward the clamor. She’d guide the EMTs to the site.

He returned his attention to the bewildered woman. “Your plane crashed in the woods near Cambria, but you’re going to be OK. Try to relax. The ambulance just arrived.”

“My...plane?” Puzzlement shadowed her face for a second or two, and then her eyes—still glazed and confused—widened. She struggled to rise but couldn’t find the strength. “My brother! Where’s my brother?”

Brady heaved a sigh of relief and then administered a quick mental kick to the seat of his pants. Why should he be glad the man lying unconscious a few feet away wasn’t the woman’s boyfriend or husband? He had no reason to care one way or the other.

Besides, he should have figured it out on his own. The strong resemblance between the two passengers went beyond mere familial similarities. They had to be twins. But everything happened so fast after the puddle jumper crashed through the trees to land in a crumpled pile right where Miss Angie had said it would. His observational skills must’ve been wiped out in all the excitement.

“Your brother is unconscious, but he’s breathing easily.” He didn’t mention the deep, eight-inch laceration on the young man’s thigh, far too close to the femoral artery. Thank God they’d brought supplies to create a tourniquet! “Try to relax, OK? You’ll both be all right, but you had a pretty rough landing. We’ll get you to the hospital for an examination.”

“The...hospital?” She spoke as though she’d never heard the word before.

Brady sighed. He’d been worried about head injury from the moment he saw her lying there, crumpled and white, like a castaway doll. Now that flicker of concern blossomed into a fire of worry. “I’m sure the doctors will want to run some tests in case you have injuries

we can't see."

"Oh." She blinked...once, twice, and then again. "My head...it hurts so bad."

"Well, it took a pretty good blow. It's..." His heart clenched at the sight of her hair, matted with blood, and tangled around a laceration behind her left ear. Brady had applied a tourniquet above a cut on her upper arm, but that injury didn't give him the same jolt of fear as the one on her head. "It's not a huge cut, but I'm not surprised you have a headache."

She pulled in a deep breath and closed her eyes, as if that bit of conversation had exhausted her.

Miss Angie re-entered the glade, trailed by a couple of EMTs carrying a stretcher.

Brady stepped away so they could take over, but after what seemed to be a cursory examination of the young woman, the female EMT—whose name badge read 'Elyse'—joined her partner to work over her brother. They slid the stretcher beneath him and made their way toward the tree line.

"We'll be back in a few minutes. Just keep her quiet until we return." Elyse sent Brady a reassuring smile, and then they disappeared.

Miss Angie followed, explaining what little she knew about the crash—time of impact, what she and Brady had done for the victims, and whatever else the EMTs wanted to know.

Brady's gaze returned to the wan beauty on the ground, and he sucked in a startled breath, unable to believe what he saw. First Miss Angie's mesmerizing show and now this. He must be standing on holy ground, here in this glade tucked into the surrounding woods.

The girl lay with her eyes closed, but a male cardinal perched on her shoulder, his plumage a bright splash of red against her pale face. The bird bent his head close to her ear, opened an orange-red beak and emitted a soft, sweet song that ended in a quiet *churr...churr*.

Brady blinked. Surely he was dreaming. Maybe this entire experience was a dream. That glow around Miss Angie, her healing of the injured man's twisted leg, the shushing gesture she'd made...and now this. Cardinals didn't just make themselves at home with humans, did they? He'd never seen one behave in such a manner. The little creature seemed to be singing a song of comfort.

Did the woman hear it, or was she asleep?

Brady wanted to step closer, but awe froze him in place. He stood

where he was, unable to tear his gaze from the scene.

The bird rested his bright head against the bleeding wound behind the woman's ear. *Churr...churr...churr*. Whirring its way from somewhere deep within the bird's red chest, the sound was barely audible. Brady heard it only because every nerve in his body, every cell and atom, zipped and zinged with wonder.

Had he gone stark, staring loony tunes, or...was he being treated to a glimpse of glory unlike anything he'd ever imagined?

He became aware of a deep hush in the glade. No birdsong or flutter of small wings. No whisper of the ocean breeze through the trees. No snapping of twigs beneath the feet of forest creatures. Nothing but silence.

Still resting his beautiful, crested head against the woman's, the cardinal spread his wings, and then bent them forward in a protective circle around the ugly cut on her head. He remained in that position, unmoving, for ten seconds. Twenty. Half a minute. Then, with a quiet *chip, chip, chip* and one last reverent brush of his beak against silky golden hair, the lovely bird lifted into the air and soared away.

Brady had forgotten to breathe, and his lungs felt near to bursting. He dragged in air and moved closer to the woman on the ground.

The gash above her ear—a gaping hole only moments ago—had disappeared. If not for the blood that still gummed her blonde hair, Brady would have thought he'd imagined the injury. Not even a bump remained from the blow to her head.

His gaze moved to her face and for a moment he forgot to breathe.

She was awake. Full lips curved upward in a tiny smile. She planted both elbows on the ground and tried to sit up. Her beautiful, gray-green gaze latched onto his, and she spoke in a reverent whisper. "Are you an angel?"



The man standing over Winter possessed the most gentle aura. The kindest eyes. The sweetest, most comforting overall demeanor. Ever.

Only seconds ago, she'd awakened in time to see what she thought was a cardinal taking off from somewhere close—really close. She'd most likely been dreaming, of course. But then she turned her

head—encouraged when the movement no longer sent waves of nausea through her body—and saw the man.

He epitomized perfection. His looks, his eyes...everything about him. Combined with the odd semi-vision of something flying away on pretty wings, he put her in mind of angels. Or maybe...had there been another suggestion of angels while she lay here...wherever "here" was?

She hadn't known she was smiling until a deep rumble of laughter made her smile even wider.

"I don't think I've ever been mistaken for an angel before."

"Then you're *not* one—an angel, I mean?"

"Not even close."

"Oh. Well, all you need are a couple of wings."

"Interesting. I've never seen an angel—at least, not that I'm sure of. But I never even thought to imagine they might look like me." His teasing smile crinkled the corners of his eyes and did something warm and wonderful to his voice. "I'm sorely disappointed."

"Don't be. It's a good thing." She squirmed. Where had all her strength gone? "Do you think you might help me off the ground?"

He shook his head. "No."

"No?"

He pointed his chin at a point behind her. "I'm afraid these folks wouldn't be too happy with me if I let you get up and walk around."

A man and woman in EMT uniforms appeared at her side, an empty stretcher between them. An older lady with stunning white hair moved to stand beside the angel man.

The female EMT interrupted Winter's curious intake of her surroundings. "OK, sweetie, just relax and let us do all the work."

"What work?" Winter frowned. "You don't plan on putting me on that thing, do you? I can walk."

"Not until a doctor says so, you can't." The woman smiled and knelt beside her. "Before we load you up, let's do a quick test." She held up a couple of fingers. "How many fingers?"

"Eighteen."

The woman rolled her eyes, but Winter caught the angel man's amused grin, and the white-haired woman's beautiful smile.

"Very funny. OK, I think we can skip the question-and-answer mumbo-jumbo. If you're feeling up to being difficult, you're probably all right." A firm hand landed on Winter's shoulder when she made as if to rise. "Which does not mean you can get up just yet. Come on,

Mason, let's get this one to the hospital before she makes us look bad."

Before Winter knew what was happening, they'd scooped her up and deposited her on the stretcher. With no regard whatsoever to her outraged sputtering, they marched her to the tree line, through several yards of thicker woods, and then out into a wide opening, where an ambulance waited, lights flashing.

"It'll be a tight squeeze with two of you in here, but we'll make it work. A half hour's ride in this thing, and then you can argue with the medical staff about taking a walk."

Two? Who else?

They slid her into the back of the transport vehicle, and she turned her head to see the other occupant. A young man, so pale his skin seemed almost translucent, lay with his eyes closed.

Memory rushed back in an overwhelming wave of terror.

"Kai!"

3

Brady lay in bed, staring into the darkness.

He'd followed the ambulance to the hospital in San Luis Obispo after calming the young woman, who'd seemed within half an inch of total hysteria when she'd realized who else was in the ambulance. Yet she hadn't gone all freaky earlier, in the glade, when she'd asked about her brother. Was it possible she'd been too disoriented from the crash at first? But the second mention of her sibling—whom Brady still felt certain was a twin—came about only moments later. She couldn't have gained that much clarity of thought between the first inquiry and the second.

Could she?

He huffed, pounded his pillow and turned to face the wall. His mind was taking him into some pretty crazy territory, but he couldn't seem to change its direction.

That cardinal had something to do with the young woman's sudden improvement. Brady wasn't blind, and he wasn't delusional. There'd been an ugly, open gash above the girl's ear before the bird wrapped its red wings around her head. And the wound was gone when it flew away.

"Oh, go to sleep," he mumbled, grumpy for any number of reasons. Sleep might clear his mind. Maybe he'd wake up and realize he'd dreamed the whole cardinal episode—not to mention Miss Angie growing wings and taking on a supernatural glow. He might even convince himself she hadn't healed the young pilot's badly bent and broken leg while Brady watched.

Even as he drifted off, he didn't really believe sleep would change a thing.

He was right. When he opened his eyes the next morning, the events of the previous day sprang to mind without a second's pause. He jumped out of bed and into the shower, determined to get back to the hospital as soon as possible.

Thank God for Miss Angie, who'd scavenged the woman's purse from the ruins of the plane and brought it with them to the hospital. Now Brady knew who to inquire about when he reached the medical center.

He looked in on Kai first, simply to prove to himself he could stay away from the man's sister a few minutes longer, even knowing she was only a few rooms away. Disheveled and pale from the crash and her injuries, Kalani Wonder had taken a hold on Brady's imagination. Without a single iota of effort—just showing him those unbelievable eyes with a color that listed somewhere between gray and green—she'd utterly captured his heart.

He chuckled as he entered Kai's room. Talk about a sap. Brady'd provided counsel and insight to a number of young lovers, and some who weren't but longed to be. He'd secretly found some of them amusing in their fervor. But never again. He was in the process of proving himself the most fervent, ridiculous, over-hopeful romanticist of them all.

A groggy voice greeted him. "Well, at least someone's in a good mood. Tell me what's funny, stranger in my hospital room. I could use something to laugh about."

Brady's head jerked up. Heat rose from somewhere below his neck and spread all the way to his hairline. No way on earth was he telling this man what he'd really been thinking.

"I'm sure you could." He offered the young man a wide smile and his hand. "Yesterday couldn't have been one of the best days of your life."

Kai shook his head. "Not even close. But I'm alive, and more importantly—so is my sister." His face blanched, and he closed his eyes for a second.

When he opened them, Brady bit back a gasp. Until that moment, he hadn't noticed the siblings shared the same unusual eye color. "True. It's good that you're seeing the positive side of things." Brady pulled a chair closer to the bed. "How are you feeling today? Your leg...?"

Kai's eyebrows drew together. He pulled his feet closer to his body, forcing both knees into the air, and then he lowered them again. "That's just a scratch—doesn't even hurt. My head, now...I thought it would explode like a ripe watermelon before they gave me something to make it bearable."

Just a scratch? Brady had wrapped a tourniquet around that cut,

and it was far more than a scratch. He chose to let it go. "What are they saying about that?"

"My head? Aw, it's nothing. Just a mild concussion, which is weird, because I don't have any kind of goose egg up there, big or small."

"That is odd." Brady's heart beat faster, as an impossible—and highly improbable—explanation sprang to mind. "Any lacerations?"

"Not on my head." Kai laughed and pointed a thumb at the obvious one on his left cheek. "There's this, but the doctor doesn't seem to think it would've caused a concussion. And my leg, but as I already said, it's just a scratch. Not that I've seen it, but it can't be too bad, since it doesn't hurt even a little." He grinned and widened his eyes. "Seems my sister and I crashed right into a mystery of sorts."

"Sounds like it." Brady tilted his head. "Have they let you see Kalani yet?"

"No, and I'm about ready to get up and find her myself." He frowned. "I hope they're being straight with me when they say she's OK. I couldn't live with myself if I lost her because I—" His voice roughened, and a wave of red rode into his pale face. He shot Brady a lopsided grin and hiked one eyebrow. "Besides, who told you her name is Kalani? I wouldn't call her that to her face, if I were you. Who are you, anyway?"

Brady laughed. "Name's Brady Merckle. I'm the pastor of a church in Cambria, where the pieces of your broken plane still mark your bumpy landing. I happened to be nearby the crash site. Miss Angie and I did what we could for you and your sister until the ambulance arrived." He'd done far less than Miss Angie, but he couldn't and wouldn't explain all that. Miss Angie had indicated he should keep those strange events between the two of them. "I was planning to drop in on Kalani next, but I guess I need to know what I should call her instead of...well, her name."

"Who's Miss Angie?" Kai's gaze narrowed on Brady's face. The young man clearly wasn't eager to divulge too much information about his sister.

"Miss Angelina Love. She owns Paradise Pines Lodge, a couple miles outside of town. Your plane is scattered in several rather ugly heaps of metal on a piece of her land."

"Oh." Kai heaved a hefty sigh. "I'm thankful my sister and I are alive, but I gotta admit, I'm not eager to hear what my business partner has to say about me destroying our puddle jumper. She

wasn't anything fancy, but he was proud of her. So was I. The two of us rebuilt the old girl from what was basically a shell. It was quite a process—fun, yeah, but also frustrating, time-consuming and downright discouraging now and then."

"I'm so sorry, Kai. What happened up there?"

He shook his head. "I don't even know. Frank and I checked her out, as we always do before any flight. She was in great condition. Not a single problem—at least, none that we detected." His expression turned glum. "Clearly we missed something. She just started making weird noises, dipping and diving like a stunt plane, which she'd never been and wasn't intended to be—and I'm not a stunt pilot." He sighed. "I don't even know how to explain it. It was like someone else took over, and I wasn't able to regain control."

"You, uh..." Brady hesitated. He was on touchy ground now. "You hadn't been drinking, had you?"

Kai stiffened and glowered at Brady. "Not a chance. I don't drink, and even if I did, I'd never touch the stuff before a flight—especially with my sister on board."

If he was lying, Brady saw no sign of it in the man's voice or expression. "What about meds? You're not taking anything that might have caused a reaction?"

"No, sir. And before you ask, I don't do drugs. I may not be Einstein, but I'm not stupid either."

Brady chuckled. "I believe you, Kai. No need to get all defensive. I'm just curious about what happened—as I'm sure you are."

The younger man held Brady's gaze for a long, tense moment before his shoulders relaxed and he blew out the breath he'd been holding. "I am. Not that it really matters, I guess. We're alive, and that's what counts for now." He gave Brady a shaky smile. "Course, when my parents and my partner get through with me, I may not think that's such a blessing."

Laughing, Brady stood and squeezed Kai's shoulder. "I think you'll find your family—and your business partner—will just be glad you survived." He pushed his chair back against the wall and hiked a brow at the patient. "So, you gonna tell me what I should call your sister to keep from losing my head?"

Kai's burst of laughter warmed Brady's heart. He liked the guy, and he had a good feeling about him. "Kalani changed her name to Winter when she decided to be a journalist. Said Winter Wonder sounded more like a celebrity than Kalani Wonder." He rolled his