

# Fateful Fall

Erin Unger

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### **Fateful Fall**

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## *Dedication*

To Heather Gray, the most amazing writing friend in the world, who has guided and encouraged me on this long journey to publication.

Psalms 27:13 I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

*Worthington Investigations*

Fateful Fall  
Summer Flash Burn (coming soon)

# 1

*Ava*

Worthington Detective Agency might die before it really had a chance to breathe if I got trampled by deer or eaten by a bear out in the middle of nowhere on my first real murder case. By nowhere, I mean deep country—mountains straight ahead. They touched the rolling hills where I stood. Why had I ever let one of my best friends and business partners take charge of this trip?

My stomach soured as the dream of working our first big case in a comfy lodge also crumbled. At least I could appreciate the fluttering orange foliage of the Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains in contrast to the purple of the dying sky above.

Once the awe of the awful moment dissipated, I found my voice but clenched my teeth in an effort to control my tone. “What. Is. That?”

Shauna strutted in front of me and my other business partner, Jillian Rory. She tossed her glossy black hair over her shoulder as her brown eyes twinkled. “It’s a yurt, you know? A round tent. Semi-permanent. Bigger than a hotel room. See, I thought we’d be able to stay under cover better out here.”

The yurt's ripped screen door hung ajar. The corner of my eye started to twitch. "So you changed our accommodations to this?"

Jillian touched my arm with light fingers. "Umm, she might be right. This is a little secluded. Might make things easier."

How was I supposed to relax when not working the case? I'd been dreaming of my own suite since we'd gotten the job.

I never was good at keeping my opinions to myself. "I can't imagine this thing has indoor plumbing," my words torpedoed out. "And the walls look awfully thin. How do you propose keeping wildlife out of it?" Shauna expected me to walk across the mountain to use the restroom, where wild animals could snack on me? In the middle of the night? I didn't manage to stop a groan. "How far away is the bathhouse?"

Shauna ducked her head. "Umm, it's over that hill but...there's an outhouse real close." Her last words rushed out. "I get first dibs." She headed past me and winked. "But we could share if it's a two-seater like my grandmas."

"A what? Are you kidding me? Eww."

She lifted her hands. "Just joking."

Shauna's military background made her less shy than most women, but still. That was way gross—no matter how bad I had to go. I spun in a circle and squinted into the distance. No building in sight. No real bathroom. Ugh. The outhouse it was.

As I sprinted up to her, my boots crunched on the withering yellow and orange leaves covering most of the ground. A long ride coupled with a ginormous sweet tea was doing its work on my bladder. "Not if I

get there first.”

I scanned the rising hill then jogged past Shauna. Except for the thought of sleeping in the wild, it was perfect up here, cool breezes and all. But perfect wouldn't fix my problems. Not now. Not after... No use rehashing the past.

Shauna used to be a runner in high school. My chances of doing the potty dance while I waited for her to finish were highly in my favor.

A low growl rumbled nearby. Wincing, I stopped in my tracks as my heart rate jumped to ninety miles an hour. Oh, it couldn't be. Not my worst fear. “Did you hear that?”

Jillian and Shauna took a step back.

Shauna yelped. “Yeah. Bear?”

Hands tingling, I skipped back a few steps. Maybe the damaged yurt door wasn't simply poor maintenance. The SUV seemed miles away, too far to jump into fast enough.

A high-pitched snarl emanated from the yurt. Yep, the bear was in my temporary home probably eating my bed right now. Racing back, heart pounding, I grabbed Jillian's arm and whispered, “Come on, you two.”

“Let me get a look. It might not be as bad as you think.” Shauna switched directions and headed to the yurt door.

Curse her for being so outdoorsy and fearless. “Let's get out of here.” In retreat, I pulled Jillian along. “Please, God, let us get back to the SUV before that animal comes out of the tent thingy.”

The yurt shifted, and something wooden splintered inside. I couldn't hold in the girly scream as it blew past my lips. I broke into a full run, Jillian at my

side. "Shauna, run. Jillian, take out the keys. Unlock. Unlock. Now."

We hurtled against the trunk door of the SUV.

The door locks were still down.

"Jillian, hit unlock," I screeched.

The growls no longer sounded muffled. They seemed to ricochet off the mountains.

Another unauthorized squeal broke free from me before the door handle yielded in my white-knuckled grip. I threw myself into the backseat.

Jillian landed against my thigh. "Move. I can't close the door."

Shauna smacked into the front passenger door but then managed to climb in and slam it. She turned in her seat and weaved like a cobra as she tried to see past me and Jillian to the back window. "That bear isn't as big as I imagined."

Even if her voice hadn't been trembling, she couldn't have sold that idea. I grabbed my thundering chest. "Someone better be driving this thing out of here, like now. Who cares if it's the smallest bear in these mountains?"

"Shauna's not touching my baby." Jillian pushed herself out of the backseat and braced her feet, one in front and one behind the middle console. Her hands shook as her knobby elbows caught the two front seats and she propelled her thin body into the driver seat. Fire-red-dyed hair clung to her face as she swiped at it with minimal success.

I swung around and watched as the bear loped out the door. "He's leaving?" Yeah, it came out more as a question. "Wait."

The bear turned in our direction and parked itself on the dirt path in front of us. Dirt clung to the locks of

its shaggy black coat. It roared and swatted at a piece of material and some feathers wrapped over one shoulder. Was that what was left of a down comforter?

I held in a shudder as the SUV engine turned over. Jillian jettisoned down the drive. "I don't know where I'm going. GPS lost signal."

Shauna ran her hands through her hair. "Yeah, and we have no phone service out here either. But I studied the map of this place. Stay on this road. The lodge should be on the left, past the river, where the main reception area is."

I looked over my shoulder. No bear following.

No way was I going back. I squeezed my eyes closed. "You better hope Mr. Connell has our original rooms available, Shauna. You know they're pretty much booked this whole week. If we'd gone to check in first, maybe we wouldn't have been face to face with a killer."

Shauna frowned. "Well, I thought it'd be nice to see our accommodations before we got immersed in the case, so shoot me."

*Don't tempt me.* "Right."

"Well, why'd you pick the festival weekend to investigate?"

"I. Need. The. Money. You know that." I worked the tightness out of my jaw. Arguing wasn't fixing anything. Right now, I needed to focus on the case and prepare myself for our initial visit with Mr. Connell, father of the murder victim.

"Sorry." Shauna pulled down the visor and stared at me through the built-in mini mirror. "I didn't think. It was...well, you know I like roughing it." She averted her eyes a moment. "But if you hadn't quit—"

I put up my hand. "Let's not talk about it now."

As the silence stretched between us, Jillian glanced back at me in the rearview mirror but said nothing. She had to be thinking about the monumental mess I'd made with my father last week, but I just wanted to forget about it and work my case.

I looked out the driver side window. The trees opened to a wide field that angled up the mountain. A few lampposts illuminated a rocky river and swinging footbridge that swayed in the wind. A timbered lodge sat stark and beautiful against the steep incline. Now that was my idea of a good vacation. Shauna was more than welcome to stay out in the wild if she wanted.

After Jillian parked, I jumped out and pushed the door closed a little too hard. A quick peek at Jillian's flying hands said it all. "Sorry. I'll go let them know about the bear."

I didn't wait for Shauna. At the front desk, I fought the urge to drum my fingers on the hardwood desktop as the reception guy turned away to finish a conversation on the phone—one I was sure involved some hot college girl and not a customer needing fresh linens.

Shauna was only doing what she thought was best. I better lay off her.

When he set down the phone and faced me, his expression shifted from a smirking smile to straight-faced business. What a professional look he wore for such a young guy, all pressed and perfect in his polo and khaki pants. "Hello. Welcome to Stone Ridge Lodge and Farms."

"Hello, we," I pulled back. "—umm, we just had a bear attack—"

"What?" He almost came over the counter, dislocating the hard-center folds of his pants. "How

bad?"

I stopped short. "What I mean is...there was a bear in our yurt. He tore it up. We're fine. But what's a bear doing out here?" Dumb question. They were in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the middle of the fall. "I mean, how safe can it be with those things roaming everywhere?"

Reception guy blew out his cheeks. "You can expect that this time of year. See this poster here? It says danger, bears—"

"Right." Sarcasm. Now I felt better. Not.

He continued, with an accusatory tone, "Well, bears don't usually tear things up unless someone leaves out food."

I sucked in a stream of air through my nostrils. The rich odor of burning logs tickled my nose. "We stopped to see our lodgings before check-in. We didn't have any food out, I can assure you."

He looked past my shoulder and straightened, his voice becoming as sweet as the tea I'd sucked down all afternoon. "Of course, ma'am."

A thick, baritone voice slid over me like sweet molasses. "Is there a problem, Parker?"

"Apparently," he couldn't have raised his nose any higher, "there's a bear in the yurt on lot...?"

It took a second to realize he was waiting for me to answer. I turned and stared at the man striding toward us but managed to throw an answer over my shoulder, even though my guts were suddenly flip-flopping at the sight of him. "Oh, thirty-seven."

Short chestnut hair. Deep brown eyes. White cowboy hat. Yep, I had the perfect view, and it didn't involve the peak of the outside fall foliage.

I shook myself. Work—and nothing else—was

happening here. But yikes. If anyone had lost a cowboy off the cover of their romance novel, they could find him here.

## 2

*Cory*

*Whew-hoo.* Where did this woman come from? Even with her flannel shirt and knee-high boots, no one would mistake her for a country girl. But I wasn't a country boy, myself. Even if I looked the part. All I wanted was to blend in. But her...she stuck out like a lock of hair after a windstorm. I couldn't help but stare at her unembellished beauty. I tried to hold in a snicker and a spark of interest. Little tendrils of brown hair, which had escaped her ponytail, crimped around her face. Teal flecks enriched her hazel eyes. The ones slanted in annoyance.

I left my hidden smile in the dust. There wasn't time for one more customer situation, but the mention of a bear had my heartburn in full flare-up mode. "Did you say bear attack? Nobody's hurt?"

"No, nothing like that. We stopped to see our lodgings, and there was a bear inside. I think it broke the tent—yurt."

Well, she shouldn't look so relieved. I stepped back and appraised her once more. That yurt had cost a small fortune to set up and furnish. My boss wasn't going to like this bad news. "And you are...?"

"Ava Worthington."

The woman here to investigate—but she'd better stay out of my secrets. They were fine right where they were. I extended a hand, imagining how her fingers would feel wrapped in mine. "Nice to meet you. I'm Cory Mortel, general manager of the farm."

I was wrong. No soft fingers met mine. Instead, callouses and a firm grip made me want to reassess every label I had planted on her in my mind. I was impressed. "Make yourself comfortable." I motioned toward the cozy couches and chairs in the ample foyer. "I need to check it out first then we can go from there."

She introduced me to her two partners, but I had a hard time concentrating for some reason.

I stretched a hand toward the dark-haired chick. Her camo shirt and pants spoke volumes. Hunter? Military?

"Shauna Pratley of—ow."

Ava had elbowed her in the ribs. They were supposed to keep quiet about the investigation. But they didn't know this place. Quiet was almost impossible. And once they started talking to the factory workers, the whole countryside would be on full alert.

The redhead didn't take my offered hand but held back behind Ava and gave a slight wave. "Jillian Rory." Ava crossed her arms. "Take a gun with you. I wish I'd had mine handy."

Surveying her with the least amount of obviousness, I didn't manage to stop my roving eyes from checking for any place she could possibly carry a concealed weapon. Not that I needed to. Her jeans weren't capable of holding anything but a little phone.

Her chin lifted and eyes squinted. "Need something?"

I stammered, "Uh...I'll be right back."

What had gotten into me? I wasn't here to check out women. I was here to stay as far away from them as I could.

On my way to Old Holler, my truck, I squeezed my hands into fists and fought the urge to kick a rock. She'd picked up on my attempt to check her out. But I wasn't. Not really. Just wanted to see her gun—if she had one. It was embarrassing to be caught.

I refocused on all the other problems threatening to bury me. First a busted pipe in one of the cottages, then the horses decided to break out of their fencing and go for a joy ride through the northern field. Once they were all corralled, Josh called in with an injured hunter. Good thing the guy didn't need stitches. And now this. The bear was long gone by now for sure, but I needed to survey the damage and see if Ava and her party were going to need new sleeping arrangements.

I floored the truck out of the employee parking lot and sped around the mountain. Old Holler threatened to give up the ghost, but I rubbed the dashboard with my right hand. "If you wouldn't creak and moan like an old lady, I wouldn't have given you such a name. You aren't dying on me yet, so quit trying."

One minute of inspection was enough to condemn the torn up, broken-jointed building. This bear had it out for the yurt. And at the worst possible time. The new down comforter lay in a shredded mess, feathers all over the place. The wheeled snack bar lay on its side, chip and cracker packets torn to pieces.

I ran a hand across the back of my neck. Was there enough room at the lodge for Ava and her partners? I pulled out my radio and called on the boss's channel. "Mr. Connell, a bear did a number on the yurt on lot thirty-seven. Do we have room at the lodge for the

private investigators?"

The line crackled. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, sir."

"Check with Fran." Exasperation echoed in his voice, "There should be three rooms available, but I'm not sure if they were filled today."

"Copy. What do you want me to do about the yurt?"

Mr. Connell sighed. "Make sure there's no open food to draw that beast back. We'll have to worry about cleanup after the festival, though. I need you doing other things right now."

"Copy."

"Send the investigative team my way once you get them situated."

"Will do." I hooked the radio onto my jeans pocket and adjusted my hat.

After a quick sweep-up of all the crumbs I found and a thorough pick-up of food wrapper debris, I returned to the lodge.

I paused for a moment outside, surveying the lit lobby through the large picture windows. Ava sat rod-straight on one of the couches around the massive stone fireplace. The two other women were chatting back and forth beside her, but she didn't seem to be listening to their conversation.

Troubled. That's what I'd call the look she cast at the fire. Was it more than the bear situation? She pinched her mouth together and ran her hand over her lips.

One of the other women, Ms. Rory, I think, watched Ava as the third one talked.

I grasped the brass door handle, took a quick breath of leafy musk, and hurried to them.

Ava slid her eyes to mine with a quick flash of interest. But I couldn't afford for her to notice me. Not now. Even if she was already on my radar too. "The Bear is gone, but the yurt is out of commission. I'm going to get with our manager and arrange some new rooms for you all. You're more than welcome to have dinner on the house in our restaurant while you wait."

All three women raised their brows as they eyed each other.

Ava turned back to me. "How long do you think it'll be? We need to—get set up."

"I'm aware of your position here." I took my hat off and toyed with the curve in the top. A nervous bad habit.

They were off the couch in a heartbeat.

Ava lowered her voice. "Keep it tight, mister. No one is to know our position here."

I balked. Tough woman. But I knew my place. She didn't need to put me in it. My tone threatened to bite back at her. "I'm aware of that. Take the elevators at the end of that short hall."

As they retreated down the hall, I took a second to calm the maelstrom in my gut.

Now to deal with the office manager.

My eyes didn't cooperate when I tried to turn from the women and head to the office. Or, should I say, my brain. It was going woman-crazy—a place I'd promised never to go again. All because of Ava's hazel eyes.

### 3

*Ava*

Cowboy Cory looked like he wished he'd had a third eye on the back of his head to stare at me a little longer. But I wasn't any better. I hadn't stopped thinking about him since he left. That wasn't a good thing when it came to this investigation. I needed full absorption into this case. How was I going to get in the zone if he kept my attentions astray with his tilted cowboy hat and a flirty smirk to match it?

My stomach gurgled as I tried to avoid the yummy platters passing our table on the way to others. When Shauna said she wanted to be in charge, I should have picked up on the fact that it meant we'd be doing a lot of campfire cooking. And who was I to dampen her spirits now? I'd already taken my frustrations out on her way too much. Better to let her have a little fun and do the cooking outside.

Setting my glass down, I pressed my lips together and tried to look any place but at Cory, who walked across the high-gloss hardwood floor of the Stone Ridge Restaurant where we were only to have tea.

Shauna snorted. "Nice try, Ava."

"What?" If I even dared look in her direction, Shauna would know the thoughts I was trying to keep

at bay.

Jillian wiped her mouth and set her paper napkin on the table. Her hunched back and folded arms helped her fade a little more into the dim lighting. Just the way she liked it.

A half-smile lurked on my lips as I watched my dear friend.

Cory leaned on the table. I forced my eyes to move up his wool shirt to his dark five o'clock shadow. I managed to pass his full bottom lip but stopped at his cheekbones.

"No dinner?"

Shauna sat forward and grabbed her own glass of tea. "No. We're going to grill over a fire a little later, after we talk to the boss."

I nodded and hoped I could wait that long to eat, but the gremlins in my stomach were making their hunger known. "Can't wait." Time to get to business. I trained my eyes forward. "Were you able to find a new room for us? I can imagine the imposition this is causing everyone."

Shauna smacked my arm.

"We had a family reunion cancel their reservations, so you're in luck. There're three rooms in a row on the first floor."

Luck? There was no such thing as luck. God had His fingers in everything, and I was more than glad to offer Him praise for saving me from the wild. "Oh, we don't mind sharing. That'll give you more rooms for other guests."

Cory hooked his thumb in his belt loop. "The boss insists."

Yay. I didn't bother to hide a beaming smile.

Jillian pushed her chair away from the table and

stood. "I have research to work on."

"Let me help you with your things." He handed a key to each of us. As we passed the lobby, he snagged a hotel luggage cart and followed us to the SUV.

I stood back as Cory insisted on picking up the heaviest items and arranging them in neat layers. "We can handle this—really."

"I'm sure you can."

I moved close to him as he turned to set down a computer bag. He faltered and reset his balance, widening his stance. I didn't back down. When I'd worked at my father's home repair business, I'd never let the guys baby me, and I wasn't going to let him either. "I've carried table saws, even work benches, twice the weight of the heaviest suitcase here."

"Good for you." He continued moving things.

I was close enough to punch him. I blinked. Where'd that thought come from? Would it kill me to accept his help? Well...I pulled the last bag away before he grabbed it. He narrowed his eyes but kept his mouth shut.

Muscles rippling against his rolled-up sleeves, Cory guided the cart to the entrance. I looked through the window to check the backseat. A couple of empty candy wrappers littered the corner. Jillian wouldn't like it if we left them there.

Shauna stood back and dusted her hands. "Anything else?"

"Wait." I did my best to reach over the seat and not put my derriere in too much view. Cowboy didn't need a second look. Scooping up the trash, I got out as fast as I could and deposited it in a trashcan by the front door. "Let's not keep the cowboy waiting."

## 4

*Cory*

These women were getting under my skin in more ways than one. I gritted my teeth.

"I'm *not* a cowboy," I called over my shoulder. Well, the persona fit, but still. "If you'll follow me."

Ava fell into step beside me, glancing at my hat and scrunching her lips to the side. So, she didn't believe me. And why was I saying I wasn't a cowboy when that's exactly what I wanted everyone to see?

Jillian grasped her computer bag between clenched hands.

Holding the lobby door open, Ava waited for me to enter. "Once we've met with the client, I need a tour of the farm."

I scratched my ear. Should I dress down the woman or acquiesce to her demand? I had a bunch of other things to do that did not include showing her around. I looked up to the heavens. *Please let the boss get one of the other guys to do it.*

But what could it hurt to take her for a tour? I drew up short as a child ran in front of the luggage cart. I pressed on once the little girl was a safe distance away.

Ava had been all business from the moment we