

Autumn Falls

PARADISE
PINES
#3



Delia
Latham

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Prologue

“Messenger.”

The beloved voice thrilled the angel. He adored the Father—his Creator—above all others. Pure joy shook his entire being, and he fell to his knees in reverence. “Father!”

A gentle hand stroked one wing and then touched his shoulder. “Rise, faithful one. We have much to discuss.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

The angel rose, and the Father drew him close to his side. “Walk with me.”

In an instant, a lovely forest took shape around them. They strolled together while birdsong trilled from the trees. Forest creatures, big and small, walked along, unafraid of the two divine beings.

“Beautiful,” the Father murmured. “I never tire of this location.”

“Your creativity at its best.”

The Father chuckled. “I cannot deny this is good. Now, my faithful messenger, let us talk about the woman, your newest charge.”

“She arrives today—she and a friend.”

“Ah, yes...the friend. Something wonderful awaits her, as well. But my heart yearns toward your special charge. If she’ll let me, I will heal her broken spirit.”

“She is broken?”

“Broken...yes, but not destroyed. I long to save her from her distorted views, but of course it must be

her choice.”

“I will try to help her see clearly and make the right decision.”

“I know you will, Messenger.” The Creator waved a hand, and a large log bench appeared, tucked between two ancient trees as if it had been there forever.

They sat, and the Father took the messenger’s hand.

“You’ll need an arsenal of love,” he said. “Both male and female in this mission must be healed by the very thing they most want to avoid. They must become willing to take a step of faith.”

The angel often found it hard to understand the human mind. “Why would anyone not want love in their lives?”

“Because they’ve witnessed or experienced false love. It rips and tears, leaving pain and emptiness in its wake. After having endured the hurt of untrue affection, my children are hesitant to take a risk on love. They do not trust that it is real.”

“I see.”

“And the man. You have set the plan into motion with him?”

“Yes, my Lord. The two will make contact before the sun sets on this day.”

“Excellent work, Messenger.” The Father rose. “Be watchful for one of my smaller winged creatures, who will be a tremendous asset to your mission. Now come.”

He held the messenger close to His heart for some time, whispering blessed assurance and immeasurable peace into his heart, and then the Father departed. The angel remained in the forest a long while, quietly

gathering strength and wisdom for his task.

Working with humans—the chosen children of the Father—always presented a challenge. But broken humans...

The angel raised his face to the skies. “I can do all things through Christ, Who strengthens me.”

One last glance at the heavens, a final soft petition for guidance. Then the messenger’s beautiful wings spread wide, and he soared toward his assignment.

1

Autumn Warren covered both ears with her hands and gave her head a vehement shake. Bright auburn hair went wild, wrapping long tendrils around her neck and over her face. She swept it out of her eyes with an impatient flick of one wrist. "Take it back, Ceci!" She stomped one booted foot and crossed her arms like a pouty child.

Cecily Adams rolled a pair of stunning violet eyes. "Honey, you can be so dramatic sometimes."

Autumn dropped backward into the cushy softness of her sofa. Her rear hit the cushion and sank in. She wished for an old-fashioned couch with springs. In moments like this, she needed to bounce when she landed.

With characteristic grace, Cecily sat down on a wingback chair.

Autumn's best friend since kindergarten, partner in all manner of crime, her soul sister, with whom she'd made a solemn pact to never be suckered into the whole love-and-marriage fiasco. "You can't be serious, Ceci! 'Fess up. You're kidding, right?"

"Autumn. Why would I kid about this? I love Gabe. I'm going to marry him, and move to his family's estate in Italy. I'm ecstatic, and I refuse to apologize for having found my soul mate. Honey, won't you just try to be happy for us? Please?"

"But—" Autumn pounded the cushion with one fist. "Ceci, you and I, we're...we're not getting

married. Ever. Love is a crock, remember? It isn't real."

Her friend got up, kicked off her expensive heels and joined Autumn on the sofa, where she pulled both bare feet up under her. Wrapping one arm around Autumn's stiff shoulders, she tugged her closer and nestled their heads together, mixing shiny, coal-black strands with vibrant auburn ones. "Life hasn't been easy on us, has it, Autie? I don't know what would have become of me if you hadn't been there."

Autumn relaxed against her friend and blinked back tears. She couldn't decide whether those would-be tears were more angry or scared-to-bits, but whichever they were; she refused to let them fall.

Ceci's two-hundred-dollar perfume tickled her senses, and Autumn breathed it in, relishing the soft hints of jasmine and lotus, completely forgetting to pull her usual gagging pretense. Gabe-The-Italian-Hunk was stealing Ceci away, taking her halfway around the world, where she'd become part of a whole new culture. Autumn might not enjoy teasing Ceci about her perfume for years and years...and years.

She choked back a giggle at her own over-the-top exaggeration. This was not a time for laughter. This was a time to make Ceci feel guilty. Maybe even guilty enough to change her mind and stay here in the good old USA, where she belonged.

Autumn enacted an elaborate mental eye roll. *What's so great about living in stupid Italy, anyway? Italian food, Italian this and that and the other thing. And what's the big deal about catching the attention of a disgustingly perfect man who treats the woman he looooooves like some kind of royalty? Hmph!*

She and Ceci had been each other's lifelines. How could her friend forget that?

Both sets of parents had gone through ugly divorces while the girls were in elementary school. Cecily's dad married again the next year and left his new, younger wife just before their second anniversary—this time for a woman-child, barely out of high school. Autumn's mother followed pretty much the same pattern through two more husbands. Thank goodness her dad kept his sanity. She'd have gone bonkers if both parents went over the edge.

Through it all, Cecily and Autumn, crushed and confused, leaned on each other. They processed their parents' shenanigans through bright, active, developing little brains. And they learned.

Other than a brief attachment here and there, both girls made it through high school without a major broken heart. Few of the immature young males who tried and failed to gain their attention could compete with the bond that had developed by then...a bond of shared sorrows, joys, heartaches and happiness. An unwavering attachment created in the proverbial "school of hard knocks."

During college, they were bridesmaids at the weddings of several mutual friends. Beautiful, showcase nuptials that cost thousands of dollars each. Despite the exorbitant monetary investment, not one of those unions lasted much longer than the elaborate ceremonies that never should have happened. Another friend's marriage dissolved, leaving their college pal expecting a baby and drowning in tears and heartache.

Autumn and Cecily had met at a favorite restaurant, clinked their glasses together and vowed to never let themselves believe in love and never to allow that fickle emotion to break their hearts and ruin their futures. There'd be no little rug rats playing around

their feet with no one to call “daddy.” They’d be smarter than their friends, wiser than their parents. Men, love, marriage, and heartbreak—they’d be fine without any of those things.

That was six years ago, and up until now they’d both stuck to their anti-matrimonial guns and kept themselves clear of the fallout that always followed emotional commitments.

But Autumn saw the writing on the wall the first time she laid eyes on Gabriel Brett—or rather, the first time he and Ceci laid eyes on each other.

On a weekend getaway to Napa Valley, Autumn and Ceci had stopped in at a wine-tasting room. Autumn wasn’t a wine lover, but Ceci had a genuine taste for “the good stuff.” In Ceci-speak, “good stuff” meant expensive.

The facility was hosting a celebrity *vigneron*—a man whose family owned the most lucrative vineyards and wineries in Italy. The Vineyard Room put on an impressive public shindig for their guest of honor.

Ceci sampled a couple of chardonnays, while Autumn enjoyed a nice white grape sparkling cider. They’d wandered through the gift shop and then carried their glasses to a small table in a back corner, where they could people-watch.

When Gabriel Brett entered the room, he made no attempt to showcase himself. The man possessed the kind of presence that demanded attention. He’d smiled and nodded to one wine-lover and then another as he strolled across the floor. And then his gaze locked on Ceci’s.

For Autumn, as an unwilling and decidedly antagonistic observer, it was like something out of those sappy old movies she hated—the ones where the

hero and heroine gravitate toward one another, their hearts in their eyes and hopelessly lost in each other before a single word is spoken.

Unbelievable. Unrealistic. Unadvised and unwanted.

That Napa getaway was the beginning of the end for Autumn and Cecily's pact to never marry.

Ceci might be the princess of propriety and the goddess of grace, but she was also the sultana of stubborn. Once she decided to give Gabe a chance, nothing short of a tornado could've stopped her.

"We said we wouldn't do this," Autumn whined against her friend's shoulder. "Love never lasts, remember? Ceci! He's a man. He'll break your heart."

"Oh, Autie. He won't. I *know* he will never hurt me. As much as I doubted it before, I believe it now. This is real, honey. I love Gabe with all my heart. I'm not even *me* when I'm not with him. And he loves me in that same crazy, makes-no-sense, unbelievable manner." She gave Autumn's hand a warm squeeze. "You're my best friend in the whole world, sweetie. My sister—the best one I never had. Can't you...please...try to be happy for us?"

Be happy for them? No. She couldn't. She wouldn't.

Gabe's perfect good looks were lethal to any woman within a country mile, but Cecily was supposed to be smart enough to see through all that, and to withstand his all-too-potent Italian charisma.

"I can try," she muttered. "But seriously, Ceci...Italy?"

Cecily laughed that soft, musical trill that always brought a smile to Autumn's face.

"Come on, you had to know that if I ever fell, it

would be for someone utterly sensational...and exotic...and perfect, right? Now where, around here, would I find someone like that?"

"You wouldn't, and I wish you hadn't."

"Autumn! That's just...mean."

"I know. I'm sorry." She hugged her friend, but couldn't quite dredge up a real smile.

"Does that mean you'll be my maid of honor?"

"Maybe." Autumn pinned the other woman under a narrow-eyed gaze. "But you have to do something for me first." Ceci's eyes widened, and Autumn grinned. Ahh, sweet revenge! "You just went a shade paler than usual."

"Yeah, well, I know you. I'm almost afraid to ask, but I will. What's your condition?"

"One last hurrah."

"What does that mean?"

"Spend the summer with me, while Gabe is in Florence 'tying up loose ends.'" She rolled her eyes, she couldn't help it. "I've been checking out this place on the Central Coast, in Cambria—Paradise Pines. From what I've gathered, it used to be an old fishing lodge. Now it's kind of a quasi-inn, I guess. Someone turned the upper floor into a large rental apartment. The owner or manager or...I don't know, whoever runs the place, lives on the ground floor. They only have one guest or set of guests at a time, and they rent that upstairs apartment for the entire season or not at all." She bit at her bottom lip and gave Cecily the puppy-dog look that always worked. "Let's see if we can get it for the fall season. It's our last chance before you run off to be Italian."

Ceci shrugged. "Sounds like the place might be hard to get, especially last-minute like this. But sure, go

ahead and try. If you can make it happen, we'll go...but I have a condition too."

"What's that?" Autumn couldn't stop bouncing up and down, grinning like a fool. She really had to incorporate a couch with springs somewhere in her place.

"If we go, you'll leave all the snarky barbs—about Gabe, about love, about marriage—right here at home. I'm not going off on a season-long trip where I have to listen to your negativity all the time."

"Oh, come on, Ceci, you're being—"

Cecily raised one hand and both dark, wing-shaped eyebrows. "That's the agreement. Take it or leave it."

"Fine. I'll play nice...*if* I can get that reservation."

2

Autumn knelt on the passenger seat like a child, half her body hanging out the window. The salty tang in the air smelled heavenly, and a brisk sea breeze lent refreshing relief from the July heat.

“Oh, my. It’s truly lovely!” Ceci drove all the way around the circle driveway in front of Paradise Pines Lodge, taking in the gorgeous surroundings, and then stopped in front of a pair of double oak doors.

“It’s fantastic!” Autumn jumped out of the car before Ceci even killed the engine, and spun around in circles, auburn hair flying every direction—until she landed hard against a broad, unmoving chest. If not for the strong, tanned hand that grasped her arm and kept her upright, she would have bounced backward onto her rear end.

“Sorry, ladies. You can’t park here.” The deep, rumbling voice fit the rock-hard body. “Under the carport on the east side of the lodge. Those are Miss Angie’s rules, and I’m sure she already went over them with you. She always does.”

Autumn shook off the firm grip and placed both hands on her hips before lifting her gaze above an impressive, flannel-shirted chest to a face that might have been carved right out of stone. Even the lips, set in a hard, unrelenting line, lacked any hint of softness.

This guy needed to meditate or something.

She set her own expression in what she hoped was a fitting female comparison to the stranger’s chiseled

jaw and stubborn chin.

"I'm sorry. I was so caught up in the beautiful scenery that I forgot about Miss Angie's instructions." An underlying tension edged Cecily's voice. "We'll move right now. Come on, Autie."

Autumn didn't bother to acknowledge her friend's blatant effort to keep her from mouthing something embarrassing and regretful. Nor did she heed the silent plea to behave.

"There's no reason to be so rude, dude!" She bent her neck backwards so she could look him right smack in the eye...and *whoosh!* Her breath huffed out in a sudden exhale. She choked back a cough.

Gray, icy-cold eyes, hard as prehistoric flint.

The rock man's gaze never flinched. He didn't blink or look away. Nor did the unyielding line of his lips twitch so much as a hair—which might have indicated amusement at Autumn's bravado. Instead, a shadow of annoyance darkened the gray to almost black. If he blinked, would sparks fly from his eyes?

"Look, do what you want. Take it up with Miss Angie, but—" He hefted a heavy-looking, long-handled garden instrument over his shoulder as if it weighed about two ounces. "I'm getting ready to run this edger around that piece of lawn." He jerked a square chin toward the round expanse of green inside the circle of the driveway. "I can't guarantee your paint won't get scratched, or your windshield pinged by a pebble. So you make the call."

Spinning around in a smooth, surprisingly graceful move—shouldn't a man made of stone move with a bit of rigidity?—he marched off toward the lawn, pulled some kind of gadget that started the edger's motor, and proceeded to kick up a noise that

brought with it flying grass and little bits of pebble. One bounced off Autumn's arm, and she yelped.

Cecily caught her elbow before she could storm off and try to break a chip off the stranger's hard exterior. "Let it go, Autie. I'll move the car. Miss Love did ask us to park under the carport, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." Autumn shot a baleful glare toward the source of the awful noise. "I just don't think it was necessary for that...that *hulk* to be so rude." She rubbed her arm where a red welt marked the point of impact from his electric slingshot. "And he shouldn't be running that thing with people around."

"He did warn us. Come on, let's go."

They climbed back in and pulled under the carport.

Autumn rolled her eyes at the wooden sign painted with fancy, flower-adorned letters reading, "Tenant Parking."

Within moments, they had their suitcases out of the trunk. They'd brought Cecily's car because she rarely allowed herself to be seen in Autumn's reliable but hideously unattractive rust bucket.

Needing something to work off a little steam, Autumn gave the downstairs doorbell a double punch, then turned and sent a final glare toward the stranger. He'd covered his razor-sharp eyes with safety goggles and continued to kick up a loud commotion with his gardening thingamajig.

"Welcome, ladies!" The door opened simultaneously with the pleasant greeting.

Autumn swung around, instantly enthralled by the soft voice that made her think of birdsong—yet she'd had no trouble hearing it over the stony-eyed gardener's noisy machine.

"I hope your drive from Bakersfield was pleasant. Please, come in!" A slender, older woman motioned them inside, the butterfly sleeves of her dress flowing around her arms like gently fluttering wings. "I'm Angelina Love, and I'm delighted to meet you both."

Autumn glanced at Cecily, who seemed unable to look away from the woman. Miss Love's welcoming smile coaxed answering ones, despite Autumn's lingering displeasure from her encounter with the rock gardener.

Miss Love was tall—even taller than Cecily, who stood five-foot-nine in her socks. Twisted into an elegant chignon at the nape of her neck, the lady's snow-white hair shone like a halo in the bright sunlight filtering through the doorway. Autumn's smile widened. Seriously, how else would Angelina Love wear her hair? The woman had surely been born with those beautiful white tresses already arranged in perfect place.

A pretty twinkle lit up eyes the color of the sky on the clearest spring day. "Or I suppose we could try to talk over Russ's commotion, if you really prefer to stand outside."

"Oh! No, of course not." Cecily found her voice first and even managed a throaty laugh. Good thing she'd brought Ceci along, because Autumn couldn't stop staring at their hostess, and she wasn't even sure she *could* speak. "I'm so sorry, Miss Love. You just caught me by surprise. You're—you're truly lovely!"

"Why, thank you, dear." Miss Angie drew them both inside and closed the door, blocking out most of the noise from the rock god's machine. "That's very sweet, but look at you—both of you! Beautiful young ladies."

"Thank you, ma'am." Autumn discovered she did have a voice, after all.

"Oh, please...call me Miss Angie. Everyone does."

"Yes, ma'am." Autumn resisted an eye roll in self-ridicule. Since when had she ever said "ma'am" twice in the same minute?

"Miss Angie, the lodge is breathtaking." Cecily walked around the large living room, clearly enchanted. "The pictures online don't even begin to do it justice."

"That's sweet of you, dear. It is a beautiful location, isn't it? God's creative ability never ceases to amaze me."

Autumn blinked. So the lady was religious. She hoped that didn't mean they'd have to endure constant, sneaky little messages intended to "save their eternal souls." Hopefully, as a business owner...or manager, whatever—Miss Angie's role at Paradise Pines hadn't been clear in any of their communications—the woman would know better than to openly judge them for not being "Jesus people." Otherwise, this could turn into a long, uncomfortable vacation. They were locked into three months at Paradise Pines Lodge. That could be an eternity under the wrong circumstances.

Miss Angie held out a key ring. "A key to the apartment for each of you."

Autumn stared at it, suddenly hesitant. Maybe she and Ceci should look into other options before moving in upstairs. If they never took possession, would the lodge hold them monetarily accountable for their three-month lease? "Uhm...hey, Ceci, can we talk for a minute? Outside?"

Miss Angie's white eyebrows rose the tiniest bit,