

# Winter Wonders

PROMISE  
PINES  
#4



Delia  
Latham

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Delia Latham

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## **Winter Wonders**

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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 jay 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 trouble 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 immovable 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?”