

Spring Raine

PARADISE
PINES
#1



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Latham

SPRING RAINE

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Chapter 1

For a moment she couldn't breathe, and then the barest whisper passed her lips—half spontaneous praise, half simple awe. "Oh, my...I've found Paradise!"

From within her sporty little red convertible, Raine Presley peered through a misty, early March drizzle at the most beautiful piece of land she'd ever seen. Paradise Pines Lodge. Her home for the next three months.

Aside from the forest of tall Cambria pines, which she had expected to see, the grounds boasted a huge number of beautiful old sycamore trees—tall, stately, and dripping with silvery Spanish moss. Moonlight glowed through the lacy fingers of hanging flora, creating a somewhat haunting air, and a tiny shiver made its way up her spine. But not enough to make her turn and leave. The beauty far outshone the slight spookiness of moss in moonlight.

Square in the center of the surrounding forest of variegated tree species, many of which Raine found unfamiliar, the lodge itself demanded far more than a passing glance. The website had described Paradise Pines Lodge as "spacious." Raine chuckled as she pulled her car under the east carport, as she'd been directed.

Spacious was a blatant understatement. The place was huge, and yet warmth and welcome radiated from within. Lights shone from every facing window—and they were many. Two chimneys, one on each end of the lodge, sent thin plumes of smoke spiraling into the sky.

Miss Angelina Love, with whom Raine had communicated via email, had provided a bit of history on the duplex, which had once been a popular fishing lodge. The former owner, known only as Preacher, renovated the interior shortly before his death, turning each floor into a single, large apartment. The upper dwelling was available for rent on a seasonal basis. No one got to stay at Paradise Pines for a week or two...it was all season or not at all.

The online photographs did little justice to this place. Now that Raine sat, stunned and overwhelmed, staring at the old lodge, she understood why the waiting list was long, even though the site made it clear Paradise Pines would host only one guest per season—or perhaps a small family. Only the upper apartment was offered for rent, and unit had only two bedrooms. She assumed the lower level was occupied by the owner, or possibly management.

An applicant's chances of being chosen were slim, even within a few years of applying.

"Thank you, Lord!" She breathed a prayer into the silence inside her vehicle. How she'd managed to find favor with whoever granted access to this place, given her last-minute application for spring tenancy, she had no idea...but now, with her stunned gaze taking in the glorious surroundings, she had to believe God had a hand in it.

She climbed out and headed for the large entryway, pulling her suitcase behind her and trying to take in everything as she went. So much incredible beauty. Even the three months she planned to stay seemed inadequate. How would she ever make herself leave?

Pausing at the end of the walkway, she studied the log building.

Lights in a dozen windows lent the place an almost magical feel, as if she stood on the brink of a fairyland. But wasn't there something else? Some *aura* that placed a pale but luminous glow around the entire lodge?

As she stood, suitcase handle in one hand and handbag hanging off the other shoulder, a large insect flitted close and hovered a few feet in front of her. Startled for a moment, she laughed when she realized it was a gorgeous monarch butterfly.

"Well, hello there." She spoke softly, her eyes on the delicate creature. While she was by no means an expert in the ways of butterflies, it seemed odd to see one flying about in the wet weather. "Why aren't you hiding away somewhere nice and dry?"

The monarch flew closer, brushed against her cheek, and then backed away to hover a foot or two in front of her yet again.

Raine laughed. "So you came out just to welcome me? Well, thank you kindly, little one. I appreciate that."

She shook her head. Good thing no one was around to witness her talking to an insect. Her parents, in particular. They'd think she'd lost her mind.

The creature circled her body in a graceful, fluttering dance of delicate wings, and then flew off toward the woods.

In the next instant, the front door opened and Raine caught her first glimpse of Miss Angelina Love.

Snowy white hair formed a glowing nimbus around the woman's head. With the lights behind her tall, willowy figure, and the moonlight between Raine and the door, the result was a perfect halo. Miss Love's maxi-length sheath—the same pure white as her hair—only added to the startling illusion. Raine gasped when an amorphous shadow beyond the doorway moved in a soft wave, creating a massive pair of shadowy wings. She released a breath when the shadow disappeared.

"Raine! Is that you? Come in out of that drizzle!" Even Miss Angie's voice had a melodious trill that, given the impression already created by light and shadow, made Raine think of angelic song.

She shook her head at the her own fanciful imagination. In her defense, however, she'd been driving several hours, and spent most of the previous night packing, after a long, grueling argument with her parents about this trip. No wonder she was seeing things and imagining even more.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Raine Presley." She arrived at the door and found herself mesmerized by a pair of eyes the bright, clear blue of a summer sky, and a smile that surely epitomized the word "welcome." Tiny lines around Miss Love's eyes and mouth spoke to the fact that she smiled often. She wasn't exactly beautiful, and yet...something about her *was*. Raine couldn't stop staring, and felt a blush warming her cheeks at her own impolite reaction.

The moment she stepped into the large, open entry area and released her grip on the handle of her suitcase, Miss Love folded her into a gentle hug.

"Welcome, child." Her voice flowed over Raine's exhausted body and mind like warm, soothing honey, refreshing her in some inexplicable way. "Welcome to Paradise Pines. Make yourself at home, because that's where you are."

For one awful moment, Raine was sure Miss Love's kindness would open a floodgate, releasing a veritable deluge of tears.

This trip to Cambria had come at a high emotional cost for her. For the first time in the entirety of her twenty-six-year existence, she'd stood up to her parents for something she wanted. What was so wrong with taking a few months to just *be*...to simply enjoy life before launching herself into the career she'd worked hard and long to achieve?

A position within the state forensics department was no small accomplishment, even as an apprentice. Raine was well aware that she was the envy of many of her classmates at California State University Los Angeles. But the job would be taxing and life-consuming. She'd be sacrificing her secret dream of having a home and family—even a real life outside her job. So she'd demanded this getaway to Cambria, in the face of her parents' blatant disapproval.

That disapproval had weighed on her during the entire four-hour drive from Pasadena. Her father's thunderous expression, along with her mother's disappointed one as she drove away, left her feeling like a bad daughter and a horrible human being. They'd always been wonderful, supportive parents...didn't she owe it to them to be a perfect daughter?

But she so desperately needed this time away, to be on her own for a time. No one telling her what to do, or what decisions she should make.

Miss Love's warm, open-armed welcome, and a smile that said Raine wasn't a terrible person comforted her to a ridiculous degree.

After all, the woman needed to welcome her tenants. Her pleasant demeanor was most likely good customer relations. That's all Raine could possibly be to her—a young woman who had rented the upstairs apartment for the next three months. If she didn't leave happy, the owner of this beautiful paradise in the Cambrian pines risked a bad review online. No, she shouldn't take Miss Love's sweet welcome too personally.

But she could enjoy it for the moment.

After promising to join the older woman for a get-acquainted lunch at noon the next day, Raine accepted the key from Miss Love and headed upstairs for a look at her new "home."

She fell in love, just as she'd known she would. Someone certainly knew how to paint "welcome" into the walls and furnishings. Raine felt immediately at home, as if she could stay forever.

But of course she couldn't. She had a job and two unhappy parents to get back to as soon as her springtime respite was past.

Within an hour, she'd put away everything she brought with her, and settled in to relax...alone...in "her own" place.

What a grand feeling!

She rose early the next morning. Being over-excited wasn't conducive to sleeping in late, which she'd planned to do. Instead, come 7 AM, she'd already donned sweat clothing and running shoes. After circling the lodge twice, trying to take everything in, she spotted a narrow foot trail in the wooded area at the rear of the property, and set off at a jog.

Birds called early morning greetings as sunshine peeked through the branches hanging over the path. Butterflies flitted and bees buzzed around bushes and plants the likes of which Raine had never seen, all in lush spring bloom. Their blossoms created bright splashes of color in the dim woods. A gentle breeze lifted her ponytail, and Raine pulled in a lungful of sweetly scented air.

Could Heaven be any better than this?

As she moved through the shadowy woods, in and out of bright spots of sunshine, something she could only call joy stirred from a deep slumber somewhere within her soul. Laughter bubbled from her lips, and she made no attempt to rein it in. By the time she burst into a clearing at the end of the path, Raine

thought she'd explode if she didn't release some of the exuberance and just plain happiness that filled her heart.

She bounced into the clearing, whirling like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, her feet moving in time to the song in her soul.

Throwing her head back, she laughed until her sides hurt, and then lifted her head to the glorious blue sky overhead. "Thank you, Lord!" she called into the stillness, absolutely certain God was right there, laughing with her. "Thank you!"

"What in the blue blazes are you doing on my property?"

A deep male voice, clearly not sharing Raine's "moment," crashed her happy time, sending shivers of shock and fright throughout her entire system—mind and body. She stopped whirling so quickly she stumbled, but managed to catch herself before falling flat on her face. Her heart, so full of abandon and joy the moment before, threatened to beat its way free of her chest.

Swinging toward the icy voice, Raine found herself staring into a pair of steel gray eyes beneath dark blond eyebrows pulled low in an angry frown. A matching beard and mustache, carefully maintained to look like a couple days of scruff, shadowed a face that might have been dangerously handsome—if its owner weren't trying to kill her with a series of vicious darts from a piercing, narrow gaze.

"I— I—..." She swallowed hard, and almost pushed out another attempt, but the stranger interrupted.

"Never mind. You're on private property. And thanks to your noisy arrival, I've just destroyed my wood sculpture." He held up a small piece of wood, clearly bearing signs of new marks from a carving tool...and a jagged break where it had broken off of something bigger and stronger.

"No!" Raine's horrified gaze drifted to an area behind the man, obviously a work station in a state of orderly chaos. Logs of different types and sizes lay in separate piles. Sawdust and bits of wood and chips littered the ground around a large carved piece...a bear, its maw open in a shockingly lifelike display of aggression.

An unsightly gouge in the wood left a glaring flaw on one side of the animal's head. The irate man staring her down held the missing chunk of pine—or oak, or teak, or whatever this fellow used to create his masterpieces—in his hand.

"I'm so sorry!" Heat rushed into Raine's face, even as her stomach turned a double somersault. No wonder he was angry.

"So am I—sorry you showed up." He tossed the ear onto the ground. "Just go, would you?" He whirled and strode off toward the bear. After three long strides, he turned to walk backwards.

"You're still here?"

Anger battled with embarrassment, and Raine swung back the way she'd come. She deeply regretted having caused damage to the truly stunning carving, but she certainly hadn't set out to do so. How could she have known people worked in the woods in Cambria?

She stopped just before setting off down the path she'd followed to the clearing, and swung around to face the grumpy stranger. "You're a very rude man."

He took a step toward her, his lips drawn into a tight line. "*I'm* rude? Lady, I'm not the one who barged onto someone else's property without permission." His chilly gaze narrowed to a glittering slit, and Raine's eyes widened when his hands tightened into fists that looked hard enough to do some real damage.

"Well—"

He pointed one long finger. "Not another word. Just. Go!"

Raine fled into the trees. Fast.

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