

Winter Wonders

PARADISE
PINES
#4



Delia
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SERIES: PARADISE PINES

SERIES NUMBER: 4

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Unless noted, Scripture references are from the New International Version (NIV).

Publisher:

Pelican Book Group, LLC

www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Publishing History:

First Edition, 2017

Published in the United States of America

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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 a good many hours off her time away from the anchor desk at CoastNews, a television news channel covering California's Central Coast.

She had jumped on 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 often 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, she 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. "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 and learn to think of her by that name. When her parents balked, she reminded them that she had kept the family surname. Although Kai didn't see the need for a name change, he 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 zipped and zinged, sizzled and sang with so much more dramatic punch and memorability than did her given name. This was a moniker fit for a celebrity—and that's what she intended to be. A celebrity.

And now Kai had called her Kalani. He did so now and then, but usually with tongue in cheek, a deliberate ploy to get her dander up. 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.

"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'd approached him about sprucing the place up 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

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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, which delivered outstanding sermons with never a word spoken. 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.

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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 Miss Angie 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 one 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 are going to 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 back toward him, the picture of grace. A long, white sheath drifted around her ankles as her movement displaced the air, and she seemed almost 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.

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

She shoved a worn sheet and a couple of old, worn 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 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 on, 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.

If you enjoyed your peek into WINTER WONDERS (Paradise Pines, Book 4), perhaps you’ll want to [pre-order your copy now](#), so you won’t forget. It’ll be delivered to your reading device on release day (tentatively Nov. 10, 2017). Thank you!

[The Paradise Pines Series](#)