

PARADISE
PINES
#3

Autumn Falls



Delia
Latham

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Autumn Falls

COPYRIGHT 2017 by Delia Latham

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version(R), NIV(R), Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2017

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0010-6

Published in the United States of America

Unedited copy. Not for distribution. May contain errors and omissions.

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.

Unedited copy. Not for distribution. May contain errors and omissions.

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."

Unedited copy. Not for distribution. May contain errors and omissions.

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.”

If you enjoyed this excerpt, please visit [Delia Latham’s Amazon page](#) to order your copy, and to browse through this author’s other books.