



AUTUMN UNBOUND

By Billie Milholland

“Oh, quit whining! Smite the cheeky wench and conjure another.” So spoke ox-eyed Hera, Zeus’s long suffering, but loyal, third wife.

Prometheus: “I can’t make another, most gracious cow-faced lady. Your irrepressible husband ordered she be the most beautiful woman ever created. If I smite her, I have to replace her with the *second* most beautiful woman ever made. I don’t settle for seconds.”

Hera picked her teeth with a cricket leg. “Of course you don’t. You’re a Titan’s spawn.” She reached for a goblet of wine. “And there’s a reason why the most beautiful woman shuns you?”

Prometheus contorted his handsome face just enough to express his displeasure, but stopped short of creating an actual wrinkle. “Zeus forced her to promise my fish-brained brother she would stand by him until his love grew cold.”

Hera yawned. “Epimetheus, the fool, abandoned her. Isn’t that cold enough?”

“But first he took the blame for her when she opened Zeus’s stupid chest. Maybe she thinks that means something.”

Hera watched Prometheus over the rim of the goblet until she saw him begin to squirm. She narrowed her eyes. “Did you actually see her open the chest?”

He crossed his arms and glared at her. "Nobody saw her do it. That's not the point. We all know she did it. I designed her with so much curiosity, she had to open that forbidden chest."

Hera leaned back on her throne. "Why do I have the feeling you're telling me only part of the story?"

Prometheus looked away. "The story is the story. That's how it's told. My point is: Epi doesn't love her. She doesn't love him. So why can't I have her now that he's gone?"

"Because you told her Epi loved her, you titanic moron."

"That was when Zeus tried to foist her on *me*. I had to lie."

"So. Tell her the truth."

"I did, but now she'd rather believe my lie. Obstinate woman."

Hera snapped her fingers and a curtain lifted, revealing a woman so beautiful it was said *angels wept as she passed*.

Hera smiled. "Pandora, Prometheus seeks your hand. I want to hear your response with my own ears."

The stunning woman raised her eyes to the foot of the throne. "Prometheus lies," she said, her voice honey smooth. "He has no interest in my hand. His quest is for something lower. I decline."

Prometheus stepped forward and shook a fist at Pandora. "You can't decline. You have to obey."

"Why?" Pandora turned her back to him.

Hera rose from her throne and kicked Prometheus in the shin. "Why, indeed." She linked her arm with Pandora's. "Walk with me, girl."

They strolled through Hera's apple orchard, neither speaking until they reached the lair of Ladon, Hera's hundred-headed dragon. Hera tossed a golden apple into the cave.

"Wake up, lazy one. I need your council."

Two or three dozen heads emerged, blinking and frowning. A half-dozen peered at Pandora.

"She seeks mortality," said one.

"Give it to her. You've got nothing to lose," said another.

"She'll come back soon enough," said a third.

Hera folded her arms across her chest. "Epi's down there wandering the mortal realm and he hasn't returned."

The dragon's big claw dragged back all his writhing heads but one. "Epi didn't relinquish his immortality. That lot never does. But she would have to, wouldn't she? She exists at your whim. Toss her in. Make her mortal. She'll only last a decade or so."

Hera patted Pandora's perfect cheek. "What do you say, girl?"

"Mortality can't be worse than what I have here. I'm despised, Lady. They all believe I opened the chest. They think I *let* Epi take the blame."

Hera sighed. "I know. They're addicted to intrigue, silly twits."

"I need to find Epi."

"Why? Epimetheus doesn't love you. Surely you know that."

"I'm not allowed to know that until he tells me directly. Zeus bound me to him until he declares his love cold."

"Zeus has a dim sense of humor." Hera tossed another apple to her dragon. "Go back to sleep my pet." She fixed her large cow-brown eyes on Pandora. "The mortal realm is dirty, noisy and dangerous."

Pandora shrugged. "The immortal realm is noisy and dangerous for one like me. And, if you don't mind me saying so, clean is over-rated."

Hera nodded. "I know, but the others seem to like it." She gazed out at cloud tipped mountain ranges. "I've never sent a minion down into mortal territory before. I'm sure Zeus has some ordinance against it." She smiled. "But, it might be amusing."

"Please, Lady. Nobody will miss me."

"Prometheus seems to think you might favor him if you weren't bound by your promise."

"Prometheus is a donkey's pizzle."

"Agreed. I like you. It will be fun to see how you fare down there."

"Can you get permission?"

"Permission? I never ask permission. I'll give you thirty years. A tedious long time in the tiresome lives of mortals, but a few moments up here. Of course, I don't know where in that veil of tears the silly coward is hiding. Talk to Iapetos. For reasons lost on me he continues to keep track of his worthless son."

She plucked an apple and shined it on her gown. "I think I'll start you out as an infant. That may save some of your sanity in that slimy place."

Prometheus was not pleased, of course, and he pouted while Hera, Aphrodite and Iapetos made the arrangements. In the mortals' dreary afterlife they found three spirits willing to return briefly to mortality to become guardians. Prometheus reluctantly relinquished a portion of his god silver to keep Pandora mortal for the duration.

"Just as long as I get it all back," he said, his generous lower lip trembling.

Aphrodite blew a raspberry. "Send a couple of Fayal to guard it. Send a whole tribe if you're that paranoid."

"Don't worry," Prometheus called to Pandora as she faded from sight. "When your time is up, I'll be there to bring you back home."

A lingering guilt clung to me after I left Peter. I couldn't shake it, but I expected it to lessen when I walked into the welcoming home of my three aunts. They kept my old room and office ready for my inevitable breakups. Permanent, temporary digs. I expected hugs and their standard assurances: "He really wasn't your type, dear. We saw it right from the start, didn't we girls?"

Not this time. The moment I entered the kitchen the aunts were at me like crows on carrion.

Absentminded Aunt May snapped to attention, shoving aside her Suduko puzzle. "You said Peter was the one. Now you're giving him up?"

"I thought he was the one, I..."

Gentle Aunt June talked over me, her voice pitched high with irritation. "You didn't give him a chance, that's what you didn't do." She slapped a pair of oven mitts against the counter.

Aunt April, usually the queen of glass-half-full, had a frown so deep I could hardly see her eyes. "Autumn Bailey, this is unacceptable." She stretched her short frame until the finger she shook grazed my nose. "You go right back there and say you're sorry to that poor, young man."

I waved my arms. "Hey. Whoa. Ladies!"

Aunt April yanked a chair away from the table, shoved it at me and jabbed with her still pointing finger. "Sit."

Too astonished to resist, I sat. Aunt June set a mug of tea in front of me. I wrapped my hands around it and studied my aunts as they settled at the other end of the table. I waited. My break-up with Peter rankled them. Why? They had never taken an interest in the guys I dated. They always accepted my inevitable break-ups with little reaction. I was surprised they knew Peter's name.

Finally Aunt May leaned forward. "We feel it's time you settled down, dear."

“Why?”

Aunt May cleared her throat. “Well.” She sighed. “Oh. You tell her, June.”

Aunt June stared into her cup for a moment. Then she drained it in several long swallows and dropped it into her saucer. If the crash of china against china had been a gunshot, I couldn’t have been more surprised. Aunt June steepled her hands and tapped her mouth with her pointing fingers.

“To put it bluntly, dear, your reputation is at stake.”

I raised both hands. “Shut the front door! I don’t have a reputation. Good, bad or indifferent.” I squinted hard, trying to get them back into focus. “My reputation for what?”

“Fickleness.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

Aunt April fluttered her fingers. “It’s not good for your career to be seen as fickle.”

“I’m a journalist. Nobody cares about my personal life. Why would they? You three have never cared about my personal life. Why now?”

Aunt May, in a rush, “You’ll be thirty this year.”

Aunt April, pressing her palm against her cheek: “Our time is running out.”

Aunt June swatted Aunt April with an oven mitt. “Hush, Rilla.” She swung around and glared at me. “What Rilla means is: *Your* time is running out — we think you need some permanence.”

I stood up. “Permanence? Are you demented?” I tried to stare down their disapproval, but failed. “You know what? I’m going out on the porch. I’m taking a few deep breaths and then I’m coming back in. When I do, I expect to see my real aunts at the table, not spooks in aunts’ clothing.”

I didn’t make it to the mud room before they surrounded me, grabbing me; pulling me back into the kitchen.

“Don’t call us spooks!”

“Who said we were spooks? Did you hear something?”

I shrugged them off. “You’re upset. I get that. But I doubt it’s got anything to do with my reputation. Why don’t we go for a walk? See if we can stroll back to reality.”

“She thinks we’re not real!” Aunt April wailed. “Tell her we’re real, June.”

Aunt May wrapped Aunt April in her arms and rocked her back and forth. "She didn't mean it, Rilla. She was just teasing. Autumn Bailey, you tell your poor aunt you were teasing."

"I wasn't teasing. That was sarcasm. I think you're drunk. All three of you."

"Shame." Aunt May scowled. "Accusing your aunties of drunkenness. Maybe *you* should go for a walk and find your manners."

"I'd accuse you of being high if I thought that was possible. You're right. Maybe I should go for a walk."

I needed a good think and thinking required running. I ran ten blocks to the public library and sat on the steps to catch my breath. Senility? Unlikely. Group hysteria? I didn't know what to Google to find out what ailed them. The aunts were my only kin and they had always been rock-solid, unshakeable. Odd and eccentric, yes, but sturdy bricks to lean against. It worried me that they were upset by something as mundane as me messing up another relationship.

Sure, I'd been floundering in the boyfriend department. Trying out men like perfume testers. And, yes. It bothered me. A lot. But the aunts had never had an opinion before. Not once.

Drawing a serious blank about what was bugging them, I decided I'd clean up my loose ends with Peter. Generally, when I dumped a guy, I packed my essentials while he was at work, left a note on the fridge, and disappeared on an assignment for a week or three. I couldn't seem to do that to Peter.

My relationship with him was different. We were at ease together. We made each other laugh. He respected my ideas. It should have worked. He sold his place and I sold mine. We bought the condo so we could start fresh, together. New routines and patterns. I brought all my belongings with me, not just enough to camp out for a few weeks, like I used to do. I made a real commitment. At least I thought I did.

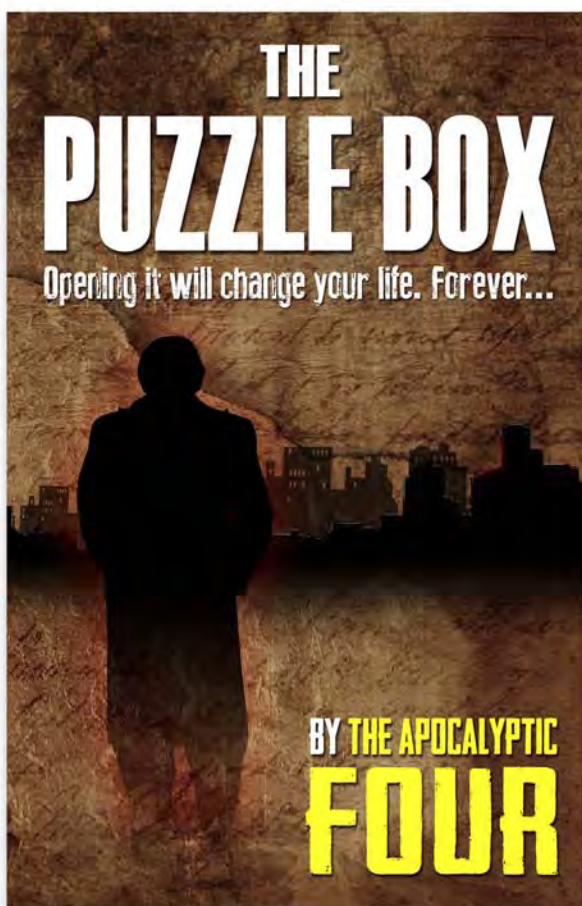
After two months of living well together we were on the balcony on a beautiful spring morning. Peter had just handed me a steaming mug of coffee. Fresh ground, fair trade, organic. It smelled great. Tasted better. I smiled at him across our bamboo table. Peter smiled back.

Then he said it. The 'M' word.

"I know you're allergic to the marriage thing, but I was..."

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