

NORTHERN PINES  
SUSPENSE

# THE HOLIDAY PUPPY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ROXANNE RUSTAND



# THE HOLIDAY PUPPY

Northern Pines series, Volume 4

Roxanne Rustand

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THE HOLIDAY PUPPY

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Written by Roxanne Rustand.

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Any errors are mine alone.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Watching the final remnants of a stunning sunset on Waikiki Beach was a dream come true.

The ominous storm clouds building overhead and the lightning zipping across the sky, not so much.

Lucy turned to head back to her Airbnb, surprised to find that the crowd along the beach behind her had dispersed. When had that happened?

Only a few stragglers remained and most were scurrying across the sand toward busy Kalakaua Avenue, where the evening traffic was jammed bumper to bumper. Raindrops pelted her bare arms and she started walking faster.

Something damp, soft, and furry brushed against her ankle. And then it whined.

Startled, she halted and looked down into the face of a bedraggled puppy pawing at her leg. “You poor baby,” she crooned. “Who left you behind?”

The rain grew heavier as she scanned the beach for anyone who might be searching for their dog. But now everyone was gone.

“Will you let me pick you up?” She leaned down to let the pup sniff her hand and it practically launched into her arms, a shivering, sodden mass trying to press itself closer to her chest when she lifted him—or her.

“Why don’t you have a collar, buddy? Are you chipped?”

Her first guess was no.

The poor little thing was thin, with a dirty, badly matted coat. Whether it was gray, white, or a combination, she couldn’t tell in the dim light, but he needed help and she definitely couldn’t leave him alone on the beach.

Lucy picked up her pace on a sidewalk leading toward the bright lights of the vibrant waterfront shopping area just ahead, where she could hear a street musician playing a banjo

and see tourists huddled in the store doorways to escape the rain. Would someone notice the pup in her arms and joyously reclaim him?

She jerked to a halt at a sudden commotion to her left. A shadowy figure shouted. Another figure rammed into him.

A flash of silver.

*Gunfire.*

The man on his feet spun towards her. She couldn't make out his features, but she sensed his malevolent stare. A frigid blast of fear shot through her.

*Oh, Lord, please—please help me!* She ran for her life toward the impossibly cheerful, welcoming colors of the upscale shop windows along the avenue.

Toward the people oblivious to what had happened in the dark shadows not fifty feet away.

A hand grabbed her hair and hauled her backward, slamming her against his chest. The puppy launched out of her arms as the man closed his hands around her throat before she could scream.

She tried to pull away from his grasp. Clawed at his hands as her vision blurred.

The puppy barked and barked and barked.

Her attacker cried out in pain. He wobbled—then shrieked even louder, his body jerking away from her.

For a split second he lost his grip on her throat.

Twisting away from him, she spun back and used the momentum to ram her elbow into his face. She heard a satisfying crunch as it connected with his nose.

The pup was fiercely gnawing at his bloodied ankle even as he tried to kick it away. Her throat raw, she drew in raspy breath and ran for her life—

And collided into a solid wall of muscle.



Terrified, she screamed as he reached out to steady her shoulders.

“Easy, now—are you okay?”

She struggled to escape, her heart pounding.

“I heard a lot of noise, and I just want to help.”

His calm, soothing voice finally registered. Her entire body shaking, she blinked up at him, then shot a glance over her shoulder expecting to see her attacker right behind her.

But nothing moved in the shadows except for her new best friend, who was trotting up to her with his tail wagging. She reached down to pick him up and hug him close.

She gestured toward the beach. “I—I heard an argument and gunfire. I think someone might be injured or dead. Please, call 911. I need to go back—”

He shook his head. “Not a good idea.”

“But I’m a *nurse*. He could be bleeding out. I need to go —”

“It’s not safe. The Honolulu Waikiki Police Department is just a block or two away and they maintain a very strong presence in this area. They’ll have someone here in no time.”

He pulled a cell phone from his back pocket and called 911, then led her closer to the bright street lights on Kalakaua Avenue. The brief storm had already faded.

“I’m Nick Jackson, by the way.” He was tall, with a strong jaw, and dark hair threaded with a few strands of silver at his temples. His warm brown eyes were filled with concern. “Sounds like you’ve had quite a night.”

A police officer appeared a minute later, with three more at his heels.

“Please hurry,” she pleaded. “I think someone has been shot—just over there. I heard gunfire and a big scuffle.”

Three of the officers headed in that direction. The first one to arrive—D. Lee, according to his badge—stayed and gave

her a measured look from head to toe. “Looks like you were caught up in that altercation, ma’am. Are you okay?”

She could see the suspicion in his eyes. Did he think she could be involved somehow? Maybe a drug buy gone wrong?

A good ten pounds overweight and with winter pale skin, she was dressed in her brand-new, perky peach beachwear, and if she looked even the least bit suspect, she’d eat her new flip-flops.

“I was assaulted, Officer. I just arrived from Minnesota this morning. I have no idea who those people were, but at least one of them is probably injured. Or worse.”

The officer frowned. “Do you need medical assistance? Do you need to be seen at the hospital?”

She knew what he was tactfully asking.

“My only physical contact was after I heard gunfire and started to run. One of them came after me. He didn’t try to steal my little shoulder purse. He grabbed my hair, pulled me backward, and tried to strangle me. I don’t think he wanted to leave any witnesses behind.”

“Could you identify him?”

“No.” Frustrated, she shoved her drenched hair out of her eyes. “He was behind me.”

Nick’s presence next her was comforting, but this whole situation seemed so unbelievable that she felt completely off balance.

She raised a hand to her neck. It was too tender to touch, and every breath hurt. By tomorrow she’d have dark bruises.

“If it wasn’t for this dog, I would be dead,” she added. “He barked like crazy, and I think he nailed my attacker in both ankles. I caught a glimpse of an awful lot of blood. And I’m pretty sure I broke the man’s nose with my elbow while trying to escape.”

One of the other officers called out from somewhere in the distance.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Stay right here, both of you.”

She snuggled the pup closer, then drew back in alarm at the red smears on her arm. “Oh, my word. He has blood all over his muzzle.”

Nick lifted the puppy’s head and nodded. “The emergency rooms in the area should be alerted. The perpetrator might eventually show up with infected dog bites and possibly a broken nose.”

“But rabies—” She looked up at him in alarm. “I just found this puppy on the beach, and from the looks of him, he hasn’t had any veterinary care. What if—”

“Hawaii is the only rabies-free state. But if you’re going to hang onto him, he certainly needs to be checked over by a vet and have his vaccinations done.”

She stilled at the wail of ambulance sirens approaching fast. Then silence fell abruptly. “That doesn’t sound good. If I could have helped somehow...”

“Then you might be dead.” Nick draped a comforting arm around her shoulders and drew her close. “It wasn’t your fault, uh...”

“Lucy. Lucy Brookes.” She stiffened at the brief flash of unexpected sensation at his touch and stepped away as footsteps approached.

Officer Lee reappeared, his face grim. “We’re going to need statements from both of you. The station is just a short walk away. Would you follow me, please?”

He wasn’t just asking, and Lucy’s heart fell. “Did one of those men die?”

The officer’s mouth pressed into a grim line. “Let’s go.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Her “statement” had felt more like an interrogation by the time she and Nick walked out of the police station at eight o’clock.

No one had answered her questions about the man who had been shot, but she was pretty sure he was either critically wounded or dead.

Everything about her story had checked out, of course. Her flight arrival information on her cell phone. Her steady answers. The darkening red finger marks around her neck.

They’d probably checked a criminal database to see if she had a criminal record, but that would have been clean.

“I just wish I could’ve given the officers a description of the guy who came after me. Unless they find enough evidence to arrest him, he’ll still be out on the streets.” She shivered. “And if he identifies me...”

“But if you couldn’t see his face at a distance, he couldn’t see yours. And it was dark when he came up behind you.” Nick looked down at her as they walked along Kalakaua Avenue. “So he probably didn’t get a good look at you then, either.”

“Maybe when I twisted around to jam my elbow into his nose, but he doubled over right away. It all happened so fast.”

“You and the pup are a formidable team.” A quarter-smile deepened the long slash of a dimple in his tanned cheek. “I imagine you two could hold your own, but do you mind if I walk you to your door? I’d feel better if I did.”

Grateful for his offer, she nodded. “I would, too. From just a lightning-fast glance before I took off running, I think both of the man’s ankles were bloody, but what if he still tries to follow me?”

“It sounds like you and your dog disabled him for a while, but he might have had buddies close by. I think we should take a meandering route to wherever you’re staying, and lose

ourselves in the crowd, if that's okay. Just look relaxed. I don't want to lead anyone straight to your door."

She drew in a shaky breath. "Absolutely not."

They strolled down the avenue in the opposite direction of her Airbnb, past one high-end shop after another. Rolex. Tiffany. Gucci. Yves Saint Laurent. Chanel. Tod's. Prada.

At any other time she would have enjoyed looking at the luxury items. Now, she studied the large, plate glass windows for the reflections of anyone behind her who might seem out of place. Anyone too...intent.

She paused at the front window of the Coach store. "I do see something I need right now. Could you hold the dog for a minute?"

She hurried inside and made her purchase, then came back outside with an exquisitely stitched leather dog collar and leash. "At least now I won't need to carry him. But now I suppose he needs a name."

Nick watched as she quickly put the collar on and set the pup down on the sidewalk. "You have quite a protector there. Bodyguard comes to mind. Bruiser. Shark. Sniper. Or Tank."

"For this little thing? He couldn't weigh more than ten pounds." She thought for a moment. "I guess I like Sniper best. It's cute."

She looked up at Nick and thought she caught him rolling his eyes. "Well, super tough, then. Crazy, isn't it? He went after that man on the beach with a vengeance. Yet we're total strangers and he accepts the two of us without question."

"Dogs can sense who the good guys are." A corner of Nick's mouth lifted in a wry grin. "Thank goodness. I'd like my ankles in one piece, thank you."

Keeping a surreptitious eye on the people around them, she tried to relax as they continued wandering through the crowds.

Whenever she glanced over her shoulder there were just families and couples sightseeing along the crowded sidewalk. Teenagers jostling each other and laughing too loudly. People

exuding wealth and carrying shopping bags with exclusive labels.

Even with her new little bodyguard on a leash, she felt on edge every step of the way.

But now, after they turned right onto a quiet street away from the bright lights and busy traffic, there didn't seem to be anyone following them after all. Maybe she'd been worried over nothing.

A number of food trucks sat parked on a brightly lit corner ahead. Each of them looked clean and inviting, and the aromas made her mouth water.

Nick slowed and looked down at her. "Have you had anything to eat tonight?"

"I guess I haven't. With the time change and long flight, and—well, other things, I haven't even thought about it."

"I highly recommend the coconut shrimp from the truck on the left, and rolled ice cream from the one on the right. I stop here way too often."

She insisted on paying. After they ordered, he headed for one of the bright red picnic tables in the back corner, where he took the side facing the street.

She led Sniper to a stainless steel dog water bowl at the edge of the green Astroturf carpet covering the entire area, then joined him.

Their eyes met across the table.

"I can't thank you enough for taking me under your wing tonight."

"I was an Eagle Scout," he said gravely. "It's a lifetime commitment."

"And I'm beyond grateful for that. I never expected my first night in Waikiki to end up like this."

When a server brought out their food, she stared at her golden, perfectly done coconut shrimp in awe.

At her first bite, she closed her eyes to savor the moment. “Oh, my. I order this whenever I see it on a menu. But this is the best I’ve ever had, bar none.”

“I’d guess anything would be wonderful after the danger and adrenaline high you experienced.” Nick watched her with gentle amusement. “Maybe it just feels like a return to normalcy. Except I totally agree about the food here.”

“Do think it would be safe to give the puppy some shrimp?”

“If he’s the stray we think he is, he’s been scavenging on every unhealthy thing you can imagine. But best to remove the coating. You’d hate to be dealing with him losing his lunch in the middle of the night.”

“Enough said.” She removed the coating from two pieces of shrimp and offered them to the pup at her feet. He wolfed them down and begged for more. “Are you vacationing, or do you live in the area?”

He gave her a wry smile. “I came to the Islands for a vacation six months ago, and I’m still here.”

“*Wow.*” A six-month vacation. Who had that kind of money?

He caught her expression. “I don’t own a place in Waikiki. Property is way too expensive for average folks like me. I’m leasing a little bungalow here on Oahu, but now and then I go island-hopping just to explore.”

She glanced at his ring finger. *Married.*

Of course he was.

A man this handsome, who had his warm personality, wouldn’t be out on his own for a minute before some gal tried to snatch him up. “So how does your family like being here?”

His expression grew pensive, and a long silence lengthened between them. She wished she hadn’t asked. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

He lifted a shoulder. “My wife passed away two years ago from breast cancer, then our only child married and moved



away. I guess there's not a lot to go home to."

"I'm so sorry about your loss," she said quietly.

She knew only too well how devastating a loss could be. He was clearly a kind and caring person and appeared well-dressed in his crisp slacks and a well-cut polo shirt. But was he just a drifter now—a sad and lonely soul?

"Have you thought about what you're going to do about your little friend?"

She blinked at his change of topic. "Locate a vet and find out if he's chipped. And if he isn't, then I guess I don't know. Maybe I'll put up some signs in the area and post notices on Facebook Marketplace. I've got three weeks before I leave for home."

"The Hawaiian Humane Society is just a couple miles from here if you want to turn him in. They have a good reputation, or so I've heard."

It might be the best place for finding him a home, but then Sniper clambered onto her lap and curled up as if he'd always belonged to her. His complete trust touched her heart.

"I—I guess I'd rather hang onto him for now and try to find out if he has an owner." She fought back a yawn. "This little guy probably saved my life."

"You must be exhausted. Want some ice cream for the road?"

After dropping their trash in a waste barrel, they went over to the sparkling clean food truck offering rolled ice cream to order. They watched the attendant expertly slather ice cream mix across a freezing cold slab, spread it into a thin sheet, roll it up, then cut it into sections.

Dropping the rolls into a paper cup, he handed it to Lucy, and then created a second flavor for Nick.

Before they started walking down the sidewalk again, she scanned the street. The shadows. Watching for anything out of place. Had she truly managed to escape—or was someone lurking like a specter of death just out of sight?

She shuddered, grateful for Nick's presence.

Several blocks to the west she stopped at a gated, six-story building and lifted Sniper into her arms.

“Well, this is it. Not fancy on the outside, but there are lovely Airbnb rentals here, plus long-term apartments. When I arrived I saw several people with dogs, so Sniper will...oh, no.” Her heart fell. “I wasn't even thinking about dog food.”

The thought of going out into the night again sent unease crawling up her spine. “I'll hunt for a pet supply store on my phone and call an Uber. No worries.”

Nick reached for his cell and tapped in a search. “There are quite a few pet supply stores within three miles of here. It looks like Petco is still open.”

“Thanks for checking. I'll just call for that Uber, and—”

“No, this evening was far more stress than you even realize right now. Why don't you get settled? I'll go grab some things and be right back. I'll call when I arrive and hand it to you at this gate.”

“You don't need to bother. I—”

“I can take care of it.” His eyes twinkled. “After all, you did buy me supper.”

“Do you know what kind of dog food to buy?”

He took a quick look inside Sniper's mouth. “I'd guess he's around seven months old or so. No problem.”

The puppy stirred in her arms and reached up to lick her chin as they exchanged cell numbers.

She looked up at Nick with a grateful smile. “Thanks again for being so kind to a total stranger today. I really appreciate the escort home.”

She used her key card, punched in the code to open the perimeter gate, and then used her keycard alone to activate the elevator inside the lobby.

Once she got into her room, she sank against the door in relief, grateful for the building's multiple security measures

and the video surveillance cameras both outside the building and in the lobby downstairs.

But how safe was she, really?

Whether she'd witnessed an assault or a murder tonight, the perpetrator clearly thought she could identify him.

And if he ever caught sight of her, she might be praying for her life.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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As promised, Nick had dropped off a bag of small-breed puppy kibble last night. He also brought chew toys, dog shampoo, and something called a self-cleaning slicker brush for dealing with a tangled and matted coat.

And, bless his heart, he'd insisted on walking with her to a vet clinic this morning.

Apparently, Sniper had been given some house training along the way because he waited until she took him outside first thing in the morning to do his business.

And then she got to work.

By the time she finished working on Sniper's coat and giving him a bath—involving two rounds of shampoo and lengthy rinsing—most of his dirt was on her, and the bathroom was a complete disaster.

But two fluffy white bath towels later, he was mostly dry and looked nothing like the pup he'd been yesterday, even if the white towels were a lost cause.

He was shaggy and badly needed a trim. But instead of solid, dingy gray, he was pristine white with silver splotches here and there, though his ears, tail, and part of his head were charcoal.

He looked up at her with adoring eyes as she put his collar back on. "Who are you, little guy? You're far too handsome to be a stray."

Had he been lost or stolen?

A text chimed into her cell phone and she felt a twinge in her heart. Nick had arrived to come with her to the vet, so the answer might come far too soon.

And she already knew it would be hard to give this puppy up.

••••

“THAT CAN’T BE THE SAME dog,” Nick drawled when Lucy and Sniper met him on the sidewalk. “I think you traded him in for a new model.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you could see the state of my bathroom. But he sure cleaned up well. I wonder what kind of dog he is?”

“A small breed mix.” Nick ran a hand over Sniper’s back. “Maybe a broken-coat Jack Russell with some wire-hair doxie or border terrier in the mix. Possibly some Yorkie. But without a DNA test you won’t know for sure.”

“How big will he get, do you think?”

“Given his age, probably a few more pounds. Small breeds mature faster than the larger ones.”

She fell in step with him as they walked the six blocks to a vet clinic in the area. “You sure seem to know a lot about dogs.”

“I’m a vet—or I was.”

“Really?” She gave him a wistful smile. “That was my dream. But my fiancé pointed out that I needed to be practical. So I went into nursing and put him through law school.”

And she had regretted it ever since. “Where did you practice?”

He walked in silence for a few moments. “I had several clinics in the St. Paul suburbs, but the last couple years have been sort of tough. I finally sold out to a veterinary management corporation just to get away.”

Escape from the memories of losing his wife, she supposed. “Early retirement, then?”

“Maybe. At least for now. What about you?”

“Same state, but I’m from the opposite side of the Twin Cities, out in Minnetonka.”

She had her own difficult memories and ongoing family challenges that weighed heavily on her heart, but she wasn’t going to share them with a man she barely knew.

“I’ve been widowed ten years. I was a neonatal intensive care nurse until I hit complete burn-out. That’s why I decided to come here—for a chance to step back, catch my breath, and decide what to do next. I applied for some jobs before I left, though.”

They walked the rest of the way in companionable silence until they reached the vet clinic. “Thanks for the escort. In the bright light of day, everything seems fine. But would you like to come in? If Sniper isn’t chipped, I should talk to them about vaccinations and such. But after this, I promise I won’t be a bother again.”

“It’s no bother at all.” He winked. “This is my chance to see a clinic in Hawaii, in case I decide to start practicing again.”

After a brief wait, a veterinary assistant brought them back to an exam room and lifted Sniper onto the stainless steel exam table, where she scanned him for a chip. “Nope. No chip. Did you just find him?”

“Yesterday on the beach. But no one seemed to be looking for a dog or calling out its name.”

“I’ll get the doc. You’ll be seeing Dr. Bailey today. She just finished with another client.”

The assistant zipped away and a stocky, middle-aged vet appeared a minute later.

She greeted them both, then her gaze returned to Nick, and she cocked her head. “You look really familiar. Have we met before? Maybe at church. Or are you an old client, maybe?”

“Perhaps we met at the continuing education program on feline oncology a couple months ago. I’m not practicing in Hawaii, but I’ve been taking a long break and thought I’d pick up some CEUs since I had the time.”

Dr. Bailey nodded and she reached out to shake his hand. “Great to see you again. So this is a stray you found?”

He tipped his head towards Lucy. “She did, but she and I met shortly afterward during an altercation along the beach.”

“I wanted to find out if he’d been chipped. He was terribly matted and dirty when I found him, and he seems awfully thin. I don’t know how long he’s been a stray or if he’s ever had any vaccinations.”

Frowning, the vet ran her hands over Sniper’s flanks and belly. Checked his teeth and eyes, then held a stethoscope at each side. “He’s markedly underweight and looks like he’s been fending for himself for a long time. Dogs are closely regulated in Hawaii, so finding a stray in the Waikiki area is rare.”

Lucy nodded. “I’ll be leaving in three weeks and I want to make sure he ends up in the right hands.”

“Good.” Dr. Bailey leaned back and called out to her assistant, then smiled. “Kathy can give you a handout. There are a number of animal rescue organizations in Hawaii, and there’s at least one Hawaiian “lost pets” group on Facebook. There’s also the Hawaiian Humane Society here in town.”

Lucy felt her shoulders relax a little. “That’s all good to hear.”

The vet idly rubbed Sniper behind his ears. “Very few vacationers bring their dogs from the Mainland because our quarantine laws are so strict here. So this one is probably local. But if he’s been lost a long while, the owners might have given up.”

“When I stopped at Petco last night I asked about finding lost pets,” Nick said. “They told me about their Petco Love Lost program and said it could help.”

Lucy frowned. “Would I need to leave him there?”

Nick shook his head. “It’s a nationwide database. You could post Sniper’s photo for free. If his owner has already posted a photo of him as being lost—or does so in the future, image recognition software will show close matches.”

“Several of my clients located their dogs through that very database.” Dr. Bailey smiled. “I wish more people knew about it. But there are other good websites, as well.”

“What vet care does he need right now?”



The vet pursed her lips. “Many of the rescue groups provide some veterinary services. So if he is given to one of them...”

“But they’re all probably run on donations, right? So I will consider this mine.”

“Alrighty, then. Before doing anything, we need to run some baseline bloodwork to make sure there’s not an underlying disease causing him to be malnourished.”

*A disease?* Lucy bit her lower lip.

“He also needs a heartworm test because it’s so prevalent here. If he has heartworm, I’m afraid the treatment is quite expensive. If he doesn’t, then he needs to start a prevention protocol right away.”

“Of...of course.”

“Kathy will be back in just a minute to get started, if you’re onboard?”

“Absolutely. Right?” Lucy looked up at Nick for confirmation, and he nodded.

“Since he’s a stray, he also needs to be dewormed and started on flea and tick protection,” the vet added. “I always give a discount to rescue groups, so I’ll give it to you as well.”

“What about vaccinations? He must be behind on everything a dog should have.”

“His immune system might already be dealing with a lot, but I’ll check his labs. As soon as he’s a bit stronger and healthier, we’ll get those vaccinations started.”

She started out the door and then turned and looked at Nick. “If you ever get tired of vacation and would like to get back to work, we desperately need more vets in this clinic. Just give me a call.”

••••

BACK AT THE GATE TO her Airbnb complex, Lucy shifted Sniper’s leash to her left hand and offered Nick a handshake.

“Thank you for being such an incredible friend. I might not even *be* here if not for you.”

“I—” Nick hesitated, as if wanting to say something more, then reluctantly accepted her hand. “Glad to help. Are you going to be all right?”

She nodded. “There hasn’t been any more trouble, so I’ve probably worried over nothing.”

“Do you have plans for the rest of your stay?”

“I’ve got an SUV reserved for some day trips to explore the island. Now I need to check on places that are dog-friendly.”

“You can always find that out online. If you need a temporary place for him, I’m in a rental not far away and it has a small fenced backyard. Just let me know.”

“That’s such a kind offer.”

“By the way, I thought you were amazing back at the vet clinic.” A slash of dimple deepened in his cheek as he gave her a quarter smile. “Most folks wouldn’t want to be bothered with a stray dog while on vacation. They’d drop it off at the first opportunity. But you have gone above and beyond.”

“I’m just glad his heartworm test was negative and that the labwork shows he’s relatively healthy. She said he could come back to start his vaccinations in about a week.”

She felt a warm glow settle over her as she watched Nick wave farewell and start down the sidewalk. But she felt a measure of regret, as well.

Her late husband had been a successful lawyer, but he’d spared little time for the kids’ activities, and he’d had no tolerance for any sort of house pets. He’d refused to let either child have so much as a hamster.

After his death, she had tried her hardest to parent well on her own.. Sunday school. Help with homework every night. Encouragement. Trips to the zoo, to plays, and the symphony. Cheering the kids on at their sports events. Piles of bedtime

storybooks. Lots of laughter and silliness, too. And *lots* of pets.

It did no good to dwell on the past and imagine what could have been. After being married to Jason, she treasured her independence and never wanted to be married again.

But whenever she met someone as caring and thoughtful as Nick, she sometimes wondered.

Would everything have turned out better for her son if his father had truly cared?

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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Nick settled into a wicker chair out in his lanai and opened his laptop. But instead of trying to make himself work on his neglected book manuscript, he dropped his hands onto the arms of the chair and stared out at the lush green foliage surrounding the backyard.

Though this was the first week of December, some crimson hibiscus flowers were still blooming, and the towering wall of plumeria along the back fence still held an array of pink-tinged yellow blossoms. The sweet scent of jasmine filled the air.

Carrie would have loved the endless beauty here in Hawaii. The unique and vibrant flowers. The stunning white sand beaches.

She would have been the first one in the water to snorkel and look for the spectacular tropical fish that abounded in these crystal clear, turquoise waters. She would have loved to tackle the most challenging trails—and he would have been right behind her, always captivated by her joy in the simplest things.

Yet here he was. Alone.

The sharp edge of grief had faded into an ever-present, quiet ache. But even after two years, he longed to talk with her over supper about every event of the day. To hear her delighted laughter and see the amusement sparkling in her big green eyes.

Because she was gone, the years ahead had seemed to stretch out into a vast, lonely, and never-ending wasteland. And so he'd immersed himself in the dream of being a writer that he'd had long before vet school.

At least in the fictional world unfolding for his characters, he could lose himself in other lives. In a place where he had control.

But inadvertently meeting Lucy had given him a jolt of awareness beyond his own insular existence.

It couldn't have been a glimmer of attraction—he was far beyond that now. He would never try to find anyone else, because no one else could ever measure up to Carrie.

Maybe he just needed to get out more and work less.

With a sigh, he clicked on the Internet to look at his email, then clicked over to check the local news.

The headline sent a shockwave down his spine. And when a text chimed into his phone, he took one look, launched to his feet, and headed out the door.

••••

“I WASN'T EXPECTING to ever see you again,” Lucy said quietly. “But I was told the officers wanted to talk to you as well, so I gave them your number. Apparently they didn't write it down correctly.”

“Have they seen you yet?” Nick took a seat next to hers in the waiting area of the police station. Beyond a plate glass window he could see a female officer at the front desk talking to an officer behind her.

“Nope. A very inebriated woman was just taken to the back and she was quite a handful. Do they have holding cells in a station this size?”

Nick shrugged. “Probably. Did you see the headlines about the man who was murdered on the beach?”

She nodded. “I still feel so bad. Maybe I could have saved his life.”

“There were still some families leaving the beach when it happened. If anyone had tried to intervene, there could've been a lot more gunfire and more people might have been hurt.” Nick rested a comforting hand on hers. “You did the right thing.”

“I read that it was a drug deal that went south,” she said. Her hand felt cold and shaky beneath his, and her face turned even more pale. “The killer is considered armed and dangerous, obviously. And he's still at large.”

“Do you need a blanket? Some hot coffee?”

She shook her head. “I just want to get this over with. An officer said they need me—us—to look at photos of possible suspects. I’m not sure how I can help. But you were facing in the opposite direction when I ran into your chest. Maybe you did?”

“I’ve already told them. I just saw you running toward me and a glimpse of a man who disappeared into the shadows a split second later.”

She shivered. “I’m starting to think that my quiet life at home sounds pretty good.”

“This will be over soon. I’m sure they’re questioning a lot of people who were on or near the beach. They’ve probably already collected evidence at the crime scene, and video surveillance cameras are everywhere these days. With facial recognition software the guy will be identified and captured in no time.”

“I hope it’s that easy. And fast.” She gave him a wry smile. “I can just hear my friends asking about my Hawaiian vacation. Did I enjoy the lovely beaches? No, I spent my time at a police station and had a wonderful time.”

“Maybe we can make this day better. What would you say to some lunch and a drive to a beautiful beach? You could bring your little bodyguard along.”

At that she gave him a sideways glance and laughed. “He would probably love that. Do you know of any dog-friendly trails and beaches?”

“Definitely. I—”

An officer beckoned to Lucy, and she stood. “Thanks for making this morning a little brighter, Nick.”

••••

LUCY STARED AT THE photos on the computer screen, one after another, then asked to see them again. Mug shots, she supposed, though maybe that term wasn’t used any longer.

Several of them looked like aging surfers with their dark tans, weathered faces, and sun-bleached, dirty blond hair. A

few made her think of gang members she'd seen on the nightly news programs back home.

The officer next to her watched her closely for any reaction. "Do you recognize any of these photos?"

"I—I just don't know. Maybe like this last guy? I can't be sure."

She stared at the last photo of a burly Caucasian man with shoulder-length black, stringy hair, a dark tan, and a thin scar on his cheek. His blue eyes held an eerie, piercing glare that made her shudder.

But he was so over-the-top threatening that she guessed he might have been added to the photo selection as a red herring. An all too obvious—and wrong—choice to trip up an uncertain witness?

"All I know for sure is that he has dog bites on his ankles and that I rammed my elbow into his nose. So that still has to hurt. Yet—" She fell silent as that split second of impact flashed through her memory and a hazy image formed.

"The light was too dim to be sure, but I think he was Caucasian with a deep tan, not native Hawaiian. Dark hair. And his eyes were—" She closed her eyes. *Please, Lord, help me remember.* "I think they were light gray or blue."

Unless she'd been completely influenced by that final photo.

The officer gave her an encouraging smile as she switched the view on the computer screen to show all of the photos at once. "So, given those details, can you identify the man you saw?"

"I can't be sure." Lucy bit her lip. "Maybe the final photo swayed my memory. Just looking at that face gave me a chill."

The officer handed Lucy a business card as she stood. "Thank you for coming in. If you think of anything else, call me at this number."

"I will. But can you tell me if you have any strong leads on who the guy is?"



“Three investigators are working on it, ma’am. We hope to have this man in custody soon.”

That wasn’t exactly encouraging. Lucy headed for the door, then turned back. “About those photos I just looked at—were some of them random, or were they all definite possibilities?”

“That I can’t say, ma’am. But we’ll be in touch. We might need to talk to you again.”

Nick was waiting for Lucy out in the reception area.

“Has anyone talked to you yet?”

He nodded. “But I didn’t have much to offer. So are you ready to get away from all of this for an afternoon? My SUV is parked close by. We can swing by your place and pick up Sniper.”

“Perfect. Finally, this trip is going to feel like a vacation.” She followed him outside and grinned at him as they settled into his SUV and fastened their seatbelts. “I can’t wait to see more of the island—especially with a personal guide.”

A frisson of unease crawled up her spine. She glanced over her shoulder.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Back on the sidewalk, a man stared intently at Nick’s SUV as he eased out of his parking space and pulled into traffic.

With a baseball cap pulled low on his forehead and dark sunglasses, his features were hidden. But the scowl on his face had been all too real.

Maybe it had nothing to do with her at all. Maybe the guy had a migraine. Or he’d been waiting for someone who was running an hour late.

But with the images she’d just seen at the police station burned into her brain, she would probably start seeing suspicious characters at every turn, and that made her stomach clench.

Maybe it was time to rearrange her return flight and head back home.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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After they picked up Sniper at her Airbnb, Nick headed up Highway 61, cutting across the island toward Kailua. The peaceful beauty surrounding them and the perfectly sunny, balmy day seemed to seep into her bones.

“I can see why you decided to stay here,” she said. “Is it always this nice out?”

“It has been since I arrived. Six months of balmy weather in the 80s.”

“While those of us in Minnesota...brrr.” She shook her head. “No wonder so many folks vacation here during the winter.”

He slanted a sideways glance at her. “We’ll be in Kailua in a few minutes. What sort of restaurants do you prefer? This is your vacation, so you should choose.”

“Anything local. Do you have any favorites up here?”

“I know just the place. Fresh Hawaiian cuisine and the food is great.”

“What about Sniper?” She glanced at the back seat, where the pup was snoozing. “I don’t want to leave him in the car.”

“They welcome dogs in the outside seating area, so he’ll be fine. Or, we could do take-out and go to the beach.”

“That would be perfect.” She bit her lower lip. “I’d like to have some nice memories of Oahu if I go home early.”

He fell silent for a long moment. “I know it’s been tough on you. But for that moment of wrong place, wrong time, you would be enjoying every minute here.”

“I...I’m uneasy, even at my Airbnb,” she admitted. “And outside, instead of feeling free to explore the beauty of the island, I find myself looking over my shoulder to see if I’m being stalked.” She laughed. “Not quite the magical experience I expected after dreaming of this trip for years.”

He tipped his head in silent acknowledgment. “What were you looking forward to most?”

“I’ve dreamed of seeing the beautiful beaches I’ve read about, like Lanikai. Snorkeling at Hanauma Bay. Driving up into the rain forests. I’d love to see the big waves along the north shore...” she raised her hands in a helpless gesture. “And so much more. But even if I stayed my full three weeks, there wouldn’t be enough time.”

“The island is only forty-four miles long and thirty miles wide. In a car, you can drive it in a day. Traffic permitting.”

“But that must be driving straight through without stopping to explore. Or hike. Or enjoy the waves. Sort of like the trip to Door County our family took years ago. I wanted to stop at every roadside produce stand, quaint little shop, and scenic view. Jason’s goal was to make it straight up and down the peninsula and return to our hotel in time for his cocktails in the hospitality suite.”

“We should talk about your plans over lunch. Maybe you don’t need to rush away so fast.”

Well, of course she could stay.

But would she feel like a sitting duck?

She couldn’t identify the killer. She had no idea if he knew who she was, much less if he wanted to eliminate a potential witness.

But he could be standing right next to her, and she’d never know it until it was too late.

Her stomach clenched at the thought. She’d arrived just two days ago, but returning to her quiet home in Minnesota sounded better all the time.

Nick slowed the SUV as he approached the center of town, then pulled into a parking spot and pointed out a restaurant across the street. “If you look up their menu on your phone, we can order take-out and be on our way.”

“What are you ordering?”

“It’s a tough decision every time. The red curry, Kahlua pig, and garlic chicken are excellent. But everything else on the menu is great, too.”

“Garlic chicken for me, then. With a Coke.”

“And the red curry for me.” She tried to hand him her credit card, but he waved it away. “This day is on me. It’s just nice having company.”

He tapped the order into his phone, waited for the confirmation, then leaned against his seat. “So tell me, what did you want to do *most* while you’re here?”

“Whatever I can,” she said with a little shrug. “The kids were young when their father died, so I held a full-time job and raised them on my own. I could never afford this kind of trip back then. But this is my chance. Bree is a college student in Chicago, and Adam—”

Nick looked over at her when she hesitated over the right words. “He’s your son?”

She nodded. “He’s...had more than his share of troubles.”

“I’m so sorry,” Nick said quietly.

He didn’t press for anything more. But it had been such a long time since she’d talked about Adam with anyone that it felt as if a dam had finally broken free and her words just began to flow.

“Jason always demanded perfection, and Adam struggled with that. A lot. When I tried to intervene, he just grew more rebellious, and by late high school, he was running with the wrong crowd. He’s been in counseling. In and out of drug rehab. Now he lives with various buddies who are on that same path, and nothing I’ve tried has changed anything.”

“I can’t imagine what that was like.”

“He’s legally an adult now and has cut off all contact with me. I still pray for him every single night.” She sighed wearily. “It was a challenge to my faith when nothing ever got better over the years. Now, I pray and try to just hand everything over to God. He’s in control. Not me. But...I still worry.”

From his expression, Nick seemed to know exactly what she was talking about. “It’s a hard lesson.”

The compassion and understanding in his voice felt like a gentle balm. “Will you be seeing family over the holidays?”

“No, but that’s all right. My daughter Jenna and her husband are expecting in late January and they don’t want to travel here. They’d rather have me come back to St. Paul after their baby is born.”

She smiled. “I think you’ll be a wonderful grandfather.”

“Inside, I feel more like a young man than a grandpa.” He flicked an amused glance at her. “I have friends who feel life is slipping away from them and want to be called anything *except* grandpa. But I think it will be great. The cycle of life, and all that. What about your Christmas?”

“This is it. Bree is spending Christmas break with her boyfriend and his family at Stowe Mountain Ski Resort in Vermont. Adam hasn’t come home for Christmas in three years, and I’m lucky if he talks to me on the phone. So rather than sitting home alone, I figured this trip would be my celebration.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t doubt for a minute that you did the best job you could with him. But he made his own choices. And he doesn’t yet understand how precious every moment is with the ones you love.”

Nick’s phone chimed. He glanced at the screen, then opened his door. “The food is ready. I’ll be right back, and then we can head to the beach. It’s only a few minutes away.”

When he returned, he handed her the two take-out boxes and dropped the bottles of soda in the console cup holders. The aroma was unbelievable, and even Sniper sat up in the backseat and took notice.

The food was still hot when they parked in the beach parking lot, grabbed a couple of beach chairs and a big umbrella from the back of the SUV, and traversed across soft white sand to a spot near the gently lapping waves.

Sniper romped at the end of his leash, frolicking in the sand and trying to reach the water's edge.

“This is so beyond what I imagined.” Lucy breathed in the crisp ocean breeze as she settled into a chair and dug her toes into the powdery sand. “I could just sit here for days trying to take it all in.”

Way out in the water she could see colorful windsurfers rising into the air and jet skiers zipping across the cerulean-blue waves. Wakeboarders were closer in, trying to catch the small waves.

Along the shore, families were playing in the water, sunbathing, or building sandcastles with their little ones.

Nick positioned the umbrella so they'd have shade and handed over her take-out box of garlic chicken and her Coke, then settled down beside her.

At her first taste, she had to suppress a moan of pure delight. “This is *amazing*. Thank you so much for the recommendation.”

He raised an eyebrow. “If you love this, then I *definitely* know of another place you need to visit before you go home.”

“Yes, please!” Sitting on this white sand beach with the glittering azure waves stretching out to the horizon and Nick beside her, going home early no longer had much appeal.

It was just so peaceful here, with the lulling sound of the gentle waves coming to shore. Several couples strolled along the beach with their leashed dogs. A man jogged by with a golden retriever gaily waving its flag of a tail.

Sniper gave the passersby a cursory glance, then rested a paw on her lap. The hopeful expression in his eyes was impossible to resist. She broke off a small piece of chicken, dusted off the coating, and gave it to him.

“Would you like to walk along the shoreline? It's about two miles long. But the Maunawili Falls trail is close, too. It winds through tropical foliage and leads to a beautiful waterfall with a great swimming hole below.”



“Where people can jump in?”

“Some climb up even higher to make a bigger splash. But that hike takes around five hours. If you want, I can check the website to see if the trail is open.”

“I’d love that. But five hours is a long way for a little dog. How about staying here on the beach?”

After disposing their trash, they walked along the warm, damp sand until they could go no farther to the north, then turned back toward the far end of the beach.

Sniper barked and pounced on the waves as they rolled in, then gleefully rolled in the sand and was right back at it.

Lucy laughed. “Just watching that pup makes *me* tired. Have you seen any shells? I’ve been watching for them, but all I see are fragments.”

“I haven’t seen much on Oahu, but then I’m not really looking. You could find some good beaches using Google, though.” He surveyed the sand in front of them. “Maybe next time you come to Hawaii, you could do some island-hopping. I’ve heard Tunnels Beach on Kauai is good for shells.”

“Maybe.” If there *was* a next time.

But when she got home, she needed to take stock of her life and figure out her next move. Her nursing degree and experience could be used in so many ways, yet right now it was hard to imagine going back to it at all.

She’d always done everything in her power to provide the best possible care.

But she’d failed at maintaining a protective, professional distance. She’d cared too much. Felt deep sorrow over the little ones struggling in the NICU who didn’t make it. She’d comforted and grieved with every parent. Her last patient had completely torn her heart in two.

Glancing over, she realized Nick had halted and he was eyeing her with concern.

“Is there something wrong?”

“I was just thinking about the future.” Drawing in a long breath, she stared out at the horizon. “This island feels like a taste of paradise. But I just realized that it might be a very long time before I can get back here again.”

*If ever.*

A darker thought slithered into her thoughts as she and Nick continued walking.

When she’d gone to the police station this morning to look at photos of possible suspects, she’d asked one of the cops if they had any leads on the killer. He’d been non-committal.

So did that mean they already knew who he was? Maybe they were tracking him down by now. Or had even arrested him. Maybe she’d only imagined that someone had been staring at her when she and Nick drove away from the station.

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket, looked at her recent incoming calls for the number, and called the police station. The person who answered forwarded her call to a detective’s desk. But then her call ended up in voice mail.

With a sigh, she left a voice message and tucked her cell phone away. “I wonder if he, or she will call me back.”

“I couldn’t help but overhear what you said. If the detective doesn’t call back, just keep calling. He’s probably got a lot on his plate.”

“I suppose.”

Nick reached over to give her hand a quick squeeze, sending a tingle of awareness up her arm. “If it’s any consolation, I’ve heard Oahu is expecting around 400,000 visitors this month.”

She looked at him in surprise. “Except for at Waikiki Beach, it hasn’t seemed crowded at all.”

“That’s because there are so many beautiful places to explore. With thousands of visitors dispersed all over the island, it would be hard for someone to find you.”

Unless that *someone* came across her by chance, and not only recognized her but considered any evidence or testimony

she might remember to be a case of life or death. His.

And if that was the case, maybe she'd better start packing her bags.

*Lord, please watch over both me and Nick so none of that happens.*

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## CHAPTER SIX

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When Nick dropped Lucy and Sniper off at her Airbnb last night he hadn't suggested any plans for the next morning, and she definitely hadn't wanted to ask.

He'd talked about being a writer. Maybe she'd interrupted his schedule too much already and he was impatient to get back to work.

Or, since he was such a personable guy, maybe he had plans with friends. She could hardly blame him for wanting to do other things besides serving as her pro tem tour guide.

He probably even had a girlfriend, though the thought gave her an unexpected twinge of longing.

Which was ridiculous.

She barely knew him. And it didn't matter anyway, because she hadn't sought a relationship with anyone since Jason died.

And she would be *leaving* Oahu in three weeks at the latest, so she should only wish Nick well and hope he found happiness. He certainly deserved it after losing his wife.

But still...every now and then she glanced at her text messages in case one had slipped in without her hearing the chime.

After taking some photos of Sniper with her cell phone, she chose the best one, powered up her computer, and went online to Petco Love Lost. After searching the database, she uploaded a photo of Sniper and signed up to receive alerts. Then she searched for other sites online and did the same.

"So, little buddy..." Sniper looked up at her expectantly. "Now you're on the internet, and I've searched for your photo on all of the Hawaiian rescue sites I can find. Should we go for a walk?"

He ran to the door and wagged his tail. "You sure are a little smarty-pants. You knew those words?"

He spun around, wagging his tail while she put on her swimsuit and a beach cover-up. After stuffing some dog waste bags in her little shoulder bag, she led Sniper down the hall towards the elevator.

A retriever mix and its owner were already inside. The woman nodded to her. “Beautiful day to be outside, isn’t it?”

“Back home it’s below zero with thirty miles an hour winds today, according to my phone.” Lucy shivered. “I’ll take this any day. Where are you from?”

“I came from Illinois for a job ten years ago and never went back. I’ve been renting a place in this building ever since.”

Sort of like what Nick was doing, she supposed. He’d already been here six months, and now he’d probably never want to move back to the Upper Midwest. “Are there any safe dog parks in this area?”

“There’s one about two miles away. But I usually just go jogging along the beach.” The woman waved when she stepped out of the elevator. “Have fun.”

Lucy headed down the quiet avenue in front of the building, letting Sniper sniff everything at his leisure.

Each cross street leading toward the beach was filled with people carrying beach chairs and towels, families with children, and couples with their arms slung around each other’s shoulders.

Many were carrying colorful surfboards, bodyboards, or stand-up paddleboards—which were apparently not as heavy as they looked, because a tiny woman in a bikini trotted by with a paddle and a bright yellow paddleboard twice her size.

The whole scene was so festive and filled with such vibrant energy that Lucy stopped to watch.

“Hey, there!”

She turned at the familiar male voice and saw Nick weaving through the crowd with a surfboard under his arm. Water glistened on his broad shoulders.

With his deep tan, dark sunglasses, and wind-tossed hair, he looked like a movie star from the pages of People Magazine come to life. “Looks like you’ve been having fun.”

“Always, when I can be in the water.” He took off his sunglasses. The dimples bracketing the side of his cheeks deepened when he smiled. “The waves here are pretty consistent and great for beginners, but a lot of surfers come here because it’s close. If you’re interested, I can recommend some good surf instructors.”

Over his shoulder, she could see a small crowd of people in the water. They were laying on surfboards close to a man who seemed to be helping each of them catch a wave, one by one.

In quick succession, three of them tried to stand, wobbled, and toppled over.

She shuddered. “Um...maybe not.”

“Are you a strong swimmer?”

“I try to get to the Y for laps several times a week,” she said cautiously. “But I really don’t think—”

“Then you should be good. You can tie Sniper just over there, by the surfboard rental stand. I know the gal who’s working today. Then come with me and I’ll give you a start.”

“Okay, but you might be sorry. I’m not the most coordinated person you’ll ever meet.” Lucy took Sniper over to the woman at the surfboard place and asked her permission, then tied Sniper in a shady spot.

Nick looked over his shoulder at her as they started toward the beach and winked, then put his sunglasses on again. “Don’t worry. I’ll stay right with you. I promise you will be safe.”

*Safe.* His words seemed to wrap around her like a protective, immutable force. After seeing the sculpted muscling of his upper back and shoulders, she believed it.

But did he have any idea of just how compelling that wink and the flash of his smile could be? If not for that, she would

be sitting safely on the beach.

Despite her doubts, she found herself following him into the warm water until it was shoulder-high.

He stood beside her and steadied both the board and her upper arm. “Okay, now hop on, lay on your stomach and center yourself lengthwise on the board. If you’re too far over to the left or the right, you’ll tip over.”

She awkwardly clambered up onto the surfboard and nearly went off the other side before righting herself. “Here?”

“Scoot back a little.”

She wiggled back a few inches. “Here?”

“Good. If you’re too far forward on the board, the nose will dip under the water and you won’t be able to catch a wave. Too far back and the nose will point way up and you’ll flip.”

*None* of that sounded good.

“Maybe I should just stand right here and watch everyone else. Better yet, you take the board and I can enjoy watching *you*.”

Laughing, he studied the gentle waves rolling in. “Nope. You shouldn’t miss your chance to do this. You’re going to head straight for the beach to make this first time easier. Get on your hands and knees when you’re ready.”

She almost fell in when the board wobbled, but Nick held tight.

“Good. When I give you a little push, find your balance and then try to rise to a crouch low over the board. If you can, slowly stand—your left foot ahead of the other, your left arm extended, and your knees slightly bent.”

She felt a flicker of excitement. There were *little* kids out here doing exactly that, so it couldn’t be as overwhelming as it seemed. “Then what?”

“If you can, ride it toward the shore until the wave dies. The board will sink a little, and you can hop off. Then bring



the board back out here. Get ready...”

She felt the board rise with the next wave and a gentle push that propelled her forward. She shakily managed to crouch, wobbled, then rose and tentatively slid one foot forward.

A feeling of exhilaration shot through her. “This is so cool!”

This was nothing like the surfing she’d seen on TV, where surfers battled towering, dangerous waves.

But the propulsion of the wave and the smooth, effortless glide of the board toward the shore reminded her of downhill skiing in the mountains and that incredible feeling of flying. Freedom.

Grabbing the board, she headed back to Nick and impulsively threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek. “That was the best thing ever!”

He steadied her in his arms and looked down at her, his eyes dark and compelling. Everything around her seemed to fade away as time stood still.

Then he cleared his throat and stepped back to steady the board. “Few first-timers make it to shore like you did, so that was a great start. Ready to go again?”

“You bet!” She *definitely* was.

They stayed in the water for an hour while he coached her until her confidence grew. It would take a lot of practice to be capable of more challenging waves.

But now she was going to sign up for surfing lessons and keep at it until she flew home.

Excitement still thrummed through her veins when she and Nick headed across the beach to collect Sniper. “What a gift you’ve given me. I wonder what my kids would think of me now?”

“They probably already know you’re competitive and determined,” he said dryly. “I don’t think they’d be surprised at all.”

“I’d wish you’d let me pay you, though. An hour of private lessons must be worth a lot.”

He reached over and casually took her hand as they headed away from the beach. “How about dinner instead? Around eight?”

“You’ve got it. And this time it’s *my* treat.”

The surfing had been an unexpected delight. Having dinner together would be wonderful.

But all she could think about on the way home was that moment in Nick’s arms, and the way his eyes had darkened with leashed emotion. His troubled expression when he looked down at her before he stepped away.

He was content here. Still grieving his beloved wife.

While she had to return home to her staid life of responsibility and try to find a new career. And try even harder to salvage her damaged son’s life.

She and Nick were shooting stars heading in opposite directions, and now she’d upended their gentle, growing friendship with that foolish and impulsive kiss.

What on earth had she done?

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Lucy had figured Nick would tactfully back out of his suggestion for dinner tonight and that he'd avoid her from now on.

Though it had been at a moment of exhilaration and joy, it had been a mistake to throw herself into his arms and cross the boundaries of casual friendship.

She'd *kissed* him, no less. Like some middle-aged, desperate woman hungry for a meaningless holiday fling. And now she was part of a cast of thousands.

Well—hundreds, maybe. He undoubtedly had to fend off all sorts of bikini cuties on the beach, vying for his attention. And no wonder.

He had a grandchild coming in March. But with his tall, lean, and muscular frame and that thick black hair, he could be mistaken for far younger...unless the sun caught those random strands of silver at his temples.

But all regrets aside, she still couldn't forget that moment in his arms. The feeling of completion that had swept through her. Maybe even of destiny.

Her phone chimed.

She cringed and almost didn't look at it. She could already see the polite message. *Sorry—I just remembered that I have other plans. For the entire duration of your stay, at least.*

Instead, the text told her to dress very casually, that Sniper should come along, and that he'd be parked outside in an hour.

After taking Sniper for a last walk outside, she stuffed a single credit card, her driver's license, and some cash into the zipper pocket inside her purse and locked her billfold in the room safe, like always.

Better safe than sorry, she muttered to herself as she changed into trim white slacks, strappy sandals, and a crimson, sleeveless top before heading out to the street.

Nick was already there, leaning against the front fender of his SUV with his ankles crossed. “Are you ready for an adventure?”

She looked down at her white slacks and city sandals. “Do I need shorts and flip-flops?”

“Nope.” He opened her door and closed it after she got inside, then he put Sniper in the backseat. “But you might wish you had a bib.”

She skated a startled look at him when he slid in behind the steering wheel. “A *what?*”

“We’re heading out toward the Windward—eastern—side of the island to a very casual place involving lots of butter and garlic.”

She laughed. “Can’t go wrong with that.”

“And shrimp, if that sounds all right.”

“Does it ever!” She rested easier in her seat, grateful for their easy camaraderie. Maybe she hadn’t ruined everything after all.

Nick drove along the Kalaniana’ole highway that followed the coastline and then merged into Highway 72.

“There are beautiful views of the ocean along here, and you’ll be seeing signs for beaches and trails—all worth exploring. There’s a sign coming up for Hanauma Bay. Did you say you wanted to go snorkeling there?”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed. “I’ve seen so many gorgeous photos. I’ve only snorkeled once in my life and that didn’t go very well. But I’d like to try again.”

“What went wrong?”

“My mask kept filling with water, and the fins were so awkward that I panicked trying to keep them under control. I was flopping around like a dying fish until the captain of the boat hauled me out of the water. He said I was so inept that I was about to drown.”

Nick snorted. “Snorkeling should be a serene, otherworldly experience. I think your *captain* was too inept to fit your equipment properly and too lazy to give you a little training. We can go together if you’d like. This time, I’ll make sure you rent equipment that *fits*.”

She remembered her keen embarrassment in front of the other people on that boat who had signed up for the afternoon, and hoped she wouldn’t make a complete fool of herself a second time.

“Would you mind?” She bit her lower lip. “I’d feel so much safer if I didn’t go alone. But you must be busy with your writing, friends, and everything else in your life. I don’t want to keep interrupting you.”

And there it was again—his irresistible smile. “I can’t think of anything I’d rather do.”

••••

A WEEK AGO HE’D BEEN following his normal routine. Surfing. Writing. Hanging out somewhere along the coast at a deserted beach with a good book and the primal sound of the waves and the ocean breeze washing over him. Letting him mourn. Giving him peace.

It was going to be his life for as far in the future as he could see, and he’d been content.

But then a petite brunette with wild eyes had slammed into his chest and screamed.

Adrenaline surging, his heart had lurched like a crazy thing in his chest until he managed to calm her down, and he was pretty sure his heart hadn’t been the same since.

When she had impulsively thrown herself into his arms and kissed his cheek in gratitude, it had taken all of his will power to not wrap her in an embrace and kiss her right back.

He glanced over at her as he drove up the coast, still taking it all in. What were the chances that she had run into him instead of the other people who were escaping the rain?

He wasn't ready for another relationship and might never be. But this new, tentative connection had started to make him feel human again, and God bless her for that.

She looked at him over the top of her sunglasses, her hazel eyes sparkling. "So about the snorkeling. Can we just show up? Is it crowded?"

"Back in the day you could just go whenever, but the crowds put a lot of stress on the fish and their numbers were dropping. Now, you need to go online to make reservations."

"Have you been there recently?"

"Not for a..." Not since he'd been to Oahu on that last vacation with Carrie, six months before she died. He stilled, expecting a wave of grief to hit him, but instead felt a lingering, sweet sadness at what he'd lost. "It's been a while."

"And was it as beautiful as everyone says?"

The wistful tone in her voice pulled him from his thoughts. "Definitely. It's an experience you shouldn't miss."

She started tapping her phone screen as he drove, then looked up. "I don't see any open time slots until next Wednesday at nine. Is that all right with you?"

"Sounds good." If he had anything else planned it didn't matter. He wanted to be there to see her enjoy the spectacular fish and crystal clear water. To be part of a memory she would never forget.

The thought was sobering.

She'd literally burst into his life and knocked him off balance, upending his solitary existence and making him think.

And now her time on the island was slipping away.

••••

NICK STOPPED AT ONE beautiful spot after another during their drive, pointing out stunning white sand beaches for her to visit. Good places to snorkel in addition to Hanauma Bay. One trail after another that offered spectacular views.

Now and then he pulled over so she could take Sniper for a short potty walk, though the pup had slept all the way.

Lucy rifled through her purse and withdrew a small guidebook, then flipped to a page with its corner folded. “Do you ever look for whales? I read that they come back to Hawaii from December to April to calve.”

“The turnout for the Makapu’u Lighthouse Trail is just ahead on the right. It’s about a two-hour hike, but the views are supposed to be incredible. I hear it’s a good place for whale watching without needing to go out on a boat tour.”

“I’d love to hike up there one of these days.”

“Let’s do it, then. Plan for an early start. We could pick up lunch at one of the food trucks around here and make it a day.

“We’ve already passed some other places where you might be able to see whales, though. You don’t need a long hike for the Halona Blowhole or the Diamond Head overlook.”

“Have you been to any of them?”

“No. There’s a lot of good whale watching around the Hawaiian Islands, though. I’ve seen whales along the North Shore when I’ve gone up there to surf. You can even see them off Waikiki Beach, sometimes.”

She stared at him, awestruck. “You surf the North Shore? Isn’t that where it’s really dangerous?”

“Shark’s Cove and Waimea Bay can be, but I’d never attempt surfing there when it’s rough. Any waves over four feet and I pack up to go home.”

Just the thought of the power of those waves was frightening. “And I suppose there are sharks and jellyfish and other creatures out there that I’d rather not meet?”

“It’s possible.”

She shuddered, imagining all sorts of terrible things that could happen to him. Surprised by how much she cared. “I loved my taste of surfing at Waikiki Beach, and I’d love to do it again. But I can’t imagine ever tackling anything more.”



“Do you snow ski?”

“Cross country and downhill, but only in the Midwest, and no Black Diamond runs for me. I go often, but I’m just not that good.” She thought for a moment, then gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I guess I’m not very impressive.”

“Really?” He shot an amused look at her. “There are many ways to be impressive. But in my book, recklessness isn’t one of them. And knowing your limits is just plain smart.”

“Why, thank you. I’m definitely a know-my-limits kind of gal.”

They drove further north in companionable silence until she spied a huddle of food trucks parked on a grassy lot facing the road. Cars and SUVs were jammed into the neighboring parking area. The overflow was parked on both sides of the road for as far as she could see, given the next curve in the road.

Nick parked on the shoulder. “Needless to say, this place is no secret. I hope you’re willing to wait.”

The wonderful aroma of garlic, butter, and seafood drew her forward after she lifted Sniper out of the backseat of Nick’s SUV. “You said this was a great place to stop, and now I believe it.”

A long line of customers had queued around the perimeter of the lot and seemed to be solely interested in a single white truck at the back. By the time Nick and Lucy ordered and received their food, just as many folks were lined up behind them.

Nick led her across the highway and down a shady, grassy slope ending at a broad, white sand beach, where they nabbed one of the empty picnic tables.

He slid in next to her so they both could look out over the sparkling waves. “So what do you think?”

“The view is stunning.” She picked up a second piece of buttery shrimp heavily laden with fresh minced garlic and closed her eyes in pure bliss. “And the shrimp is amazing. I would fly to Oahu again just for this.”

“Maybe you should,” he said easily. “Come back for the shrimp, that is.”

His words and the teasing glint in his eyes made her laugh. But they also made her wonder if he was feeling the same glimmer of something deeper between them. Something worth exploring.

But that was beyond imagining.

Coming back to Oahu wouldn't happen anytime soon—if ever. She needed to find a new job with benefits and a future, and that would mean working a good year before earning a vacation.

This wonderful shrimp might still be available, but not the man beside her.

Once he made peace with his loss and found himself able to move on, he would easily find someone new.

And then he wouldn't remember her at all.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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The next week passed in a blur.

They'd gone to travel up the leeward side of the island exploring beaches, though they only managed a few stops each day because each was too beautiful for them to rush away.

Today, they'd gone back to explore even more of the leeward side of the island, and ended up on an eight-hour hike up to Mount Ka'ala—with Nick carrying Sniper most of the way.

With every day they spent together, she'd learned something new about Nick that intrigued her all the more.

“Another day, another adventure,” she said when he pulled up in front of her Airbnb at ten o'clock. “I can't thank you enough for everything. I never would have seen so many places on my own, and I know your time is valuable.”

Draping his left hand over the steering wheel, he turned to face her. “I couldn't be spending it in a better way.”

Her heart lifted. “Really?”

“I've been drifting since Carrie died. Nothing seemed to matter.” He blew out a long breath. “So I've been meaning to thank you for your company, as well.”

It wasn't exactly what she'd expected him to say—something about her being wonderful, *charming* company would have been nice. But after knowing each other for just nine days, at least they'd proven to be compatible travel buddies.

And that's all she should expect. She'd hardly come here looking for romance.

She stepped out of the SUV before he could bother to come around and open her door, hung the strap of her purse over her shoulder, and reached into the backseat for Sniper. “Are we still on for snorkeling at Hanauma Bay tomorrow morn—”

Something—*someone*—powerful slammed into her, sending searing pain through her left shoulder and knocking her sideways against the open door.

Something silver glittered as he clenched a meaty, tattooed fist, drew it back, and aimed at her face—then jerked away when Sniper erupted into furious barking, his sharp teeth flashing.

“Hey!” Nick shouted as he launched out of the SUV.

But the stranger was faster. He grabbed her other arm and wrenched it to snag her shoulder purse. Then he took off running.

Before she could collapse into a puddle on the street, Nick was there to catch her fall.

“It—it all happened so fast,” she moaned. “Who *was* that?”

“Too dark out to tell, and he was here and gone in the blink of an eye.” He eased her to the sidewalk curb. “Are you okay?”

She gingerly hunched her shoulder. “I...I...think so.”

“What about your other arm?”

She cautiously lifted it a few inches. “Right now, everything hurts. But—” Panic raced through her as she searched the concrete around her and then lifted her chin to peer into the backseat of the SUV. “He stole my *purse!*”

Nick punched 911 into his phone and spoke to someone at length, then shoved it into his back pocket. “Someone will be here within five or ten minutes. You stay right where you are until the paramedics arrive.”

“I’m okay, really. I’d rather sit in your SUV if I can get up there.”

She managed to get her feet underneath her and tried to rise, but dropped back down in frustration. “Can you help me? Both of my shoulders hurt right now, but I don’t think anything is broken.”

“I think you should wait.”

“Please?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “Did anyone ever tell you that you might be a bit stubborn?”

She managed a weak smile. “Of course not.”

“Let’s see if this works. Tell me the second that you have any pain.”

He crouched next to her, looped an arm under her knees and the other arm behind her back, then slowly, gently lifted her until she was cradled against his chest as if she were made of the most precious, fragile glass.

She could feel his strong heart beating against her as he stood and carefully settled her in the front seat. “Did anyone ever tell you that you are incredibly strong?”

“Nope. It must be all the adrenaline. If only I could have reached that guy sooner—”

“He was so fast even I barely had time to react.”

A silent patrol car eased down the shadowy street toward them, the bright blue light bar on its roof cutting through the darkness.

The officer parked at a distance, probably running Nick’s plates, then climbed out of his car and strode forward. “Nick Jackson?”

Nick nodded. “And this is Lucy Brookes. She’s staying in the building behind us while on vacation. I was just dropping her off when some guy came out of the darkness, assaulted her, and stole her purse.”

The police officer looked strangely familiar, and he seemed to be studying her as well.

“I think we met on the Waikiki beach a week or two ago. Didn’t you witness a murder?”

“I didn’t witness anything—it was dark. But I heard men fighting and then heard a gunshot.”

“But then one of them came after you, right? I was one of the responding officers.”

She nodded wearily. “I barely got a glimpse of him then, either. I was called into the police station to talk about it several times, for all the good that it did. Last I heard, he hadn’t been caught. Do you know?”

“The prime suspect was apprehended a few days ago while trying to flee the island.”

Relief flooded through her. “So tonight I met up with just a *random* purse snatcher? What are the chances that anyone else would be relieved to hear that?”

“Could you identify him?”

“No.” She heaved a sigh. “He was burley and really strong. There was some sort of dark tattoo on the back of his hand. Dark clothes, dark ball cap. But that could describe hundreds of men around here.”

The cop took notes as she spoke. “Anything else?”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance of tracking him down, using all of the surveillance cameras around these buildings? He stole my driver’s license, a credit card, and my phone.”

“I can look into it. But by now the thief is probably on a local buying frenzy. Or he handed off your purse to someone else so he can’t be caught with the evidence.”

A buying frenzy. Just what she needed.

“Call your cell phone company to block the phone and start a claim for receiving a replacement. Cancel that credit card and anything that could lead to identity theft. Sometimes thieves rush off to buy big-ticket items. So report any fraudulent activity to those card companies and to the police.”

“I will.”

“Your friend’s 911 call mentioned injuries and requested EMTs, but they’re all involved in a major accident up on the H1 freeway. Do you need them to come?”

“Not at all. The guy wrenched my arm so he could grab my purse, but I’ll probably just have some bruises for a while.”

By the time the cop finished taking his notes, Sniper was pulling on his leash toward the building. She felt more tired than she had in a long time.

Her muscles were stiff and sore when she rose to her feet and closed the SUV door behind her.

Nick eyed her with concern. “Can I help you upstairs?”

“No, I—” Alarm shot through her as she reached into her pockets. “My keycard. It was in my purse.”

She searched the floor of the vehicle, then scanned the sidewalk, praying that it had fallen out of her purse somehow, then crossed the sidewalk to the heavy iron gate into the property and read the after-hours sign. “Can you call this number? I’m going to need someone to let me in.”

Nick punched the number into his cell and handed it to her. It rang a dozen times before rolling into voice mail. She left a message and handed the phone back. “Now what? That message might not be answered for hours.”

“I’m not so sure you should stay in your room now, anyway. I doubt anyone can take care of changing your room key code this late at night. It needs to be changed first, or you could wake up to find that guy in your room.”

The thought made her shudder.

“I can google nearby hotels if you want me to. Most would be full and probably expensive, but I could lend you the money. Do you want me to try?”

Stifling a yawn, she nodded. “Thanks. I’m sorry to be such a bother.”

“You certainly aren’t a bother. I’m just sorry that you’ve had such bad experiences. The police presence is strong around here. I haven’t heard of any violent crime in the area since moving here.”



They settled on a bench along the sidewalk. She googled her credit card company and reported her card stolen, then contacted her cell phone provider and had her old phone blocked and a replacement ordered before handing Nick's phone back.

He looked up lodging options and tried one after another. After the fifteenth call, he looked over at her. "Keep trying?"

"What else can I do?"

"You could stay the night at my place if you want. I've got two extra bedrooms and a fenced backyard for Sniper if you want to let him out now and then."

"I...um..."

"I know. It's awkward. But I promise you'll be perfectly safe. By noon tomorrow, the Airbnb management should have your lock changed so you can go back."

Her other option was sitting on this bench all night. The nights here were warm and balmy, but she would be alone and in the dark.

She held his gaze for a long moment, seeing only genuine concern in his warm brown eyes. She knew she could trust him.

She just wasn't so sure about herself.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Lucy expected a cluttered bachelor's place with dishes piled in the sink and clothes kicked into a corner. Much like the one time she'd seen an apartment where Adam had crashed with friends.

She'd started second-guessing herself on the drive over here, about whether or not the neighborhood would be safe.

Expecting to walk in and then feel too uneasy about this whole situation to stay.

She was certainly wrong.

Nick's place was on a nice, quiet, and well-kept street; a small, neat bungalow tucked among towering bushes that probably bloomed riotously with glorious color all summer.

Even now, she could see some random red and yellow flowers on the higher branches.

And this far from her Airbnb and that encounter with a thief, she felt *safe*.

"Thank you," she murmured when he reached past her to unlock the front door and usher her inside.

"It's—it's lovely," she breathed.

"I was lucky to find it." He flipped on the lights, bathing the great room in a soft glow. "Most rental housing is incredibly expensive around here."

Subtle, tropical-themed rattan furniture in soothing blues and greens filled the living area, while a hallway at the back appeared to lead to the bedrooms and bath.

At the left, she could see a small kitchen and eating area through a wide arched doorway.

"It came furnished, down to the kitchenware and linens, so I can't take any credit. All of my things are in storage back in St. Paul."

But everything was spotless, down to the kitchen sink, with no clutter in sight. “How long will you stay here?”

“There’s six months left on my one-year lease, with an option to extend it. Now and then I fly to another island for a few days or fly home to see my daughter, but I’m always happy to be back here. At this point, I think I’ll stay here for good.”

“I can see why.”

He grinned. “Let me give you a thirty-second tour. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen—sodas and juice are in the fridge, with deli meats and cheese in one of the drawers. Fresh fruit is in the other. The Keurig pods are in the drawer beneath it.”

“Do you mind if I let Sniper out into the backyard?”

He unlocked the back door and Sniper eagerly rushed outside, his tail wagging.

“He’ll be fine. The fence is solid and the only gate out there is padlocked.”

He led Lucy through the living area, pointing out the full bath, with his office and a guest bedroom to the right and his own bedroom and a linen closet to the left.

She lingered at the door to his office—the smallest bedroom—where he’d set up a desk and floor lamp in front of the window. A low bookshelf held a variety of books and a box of files. “So is this where the magic happens?”

He snorted. “That would be nice. But it’s actually a lot of work. Self doubt. Research. Second-guessing, and then sometimes starting scenes all over again.”

“That doesn’t sound like much fun.”

A corner of his mouth lifted with amusement. “No one could ever pay me enough to do it, if it wasn’t something I love. But I do. I’ve wanted to be a writer since I was a little boy.”

“And now you finally have time,” she said softly. “It must be wonderful to have this chance to follow your dreams. What

are you writing?”

“A World War II suspense. It’s almost half done. I wrote another one while still running my practice that will need considerable editing.”

“That’s so impressive. Back in college, I belonged to a little critique group and started writing a romantic suspense novel, but drifted away when I had to increase my class load to graduate early.”

“Did you ever get back to it?”

“No. After that, raising kids and twelve-hour shifts at the hospital took all my time.”

She took a step into his office and tipped her head to read the titles of the books on the shelves. “You must be a history buff.”

“European and British history, mostly.” He shrugged a little. “But also fiction and non-fiction in almost any genre. I can’t walk past a bookstore without buying something. Are you a reader?”

She laughed. “I try to never leave home without my Kindle in my purse. It’s filled with biographies, autobiographies, history, romantic suspense, thrillers—you name it. I love reading about European and British history, too.

“Was your Kindle stolen?”

“No, thank goodness. My flight home would be interminable without it. I left it, my iPad and my billfold in the room safe.”

A quarter-smile deepened the long slash of a dimple in his left cheek. “I know the feeling.”

“Tomorrow I need to see if my cell provider has a store here. And I need to figure out how I can fly home without showing my driver’s license.”

“A friend of mine visited a few months ago. He had his driver’s license in his cargo pants, and it disappeared somewhere along the Mount Ka’ala Trail. But he was still able to fly. Was your boarding pass on paper or in your phone?”

“Paper. It’s still in my carry-on luggage.”

“Good, since your phone is gone. You still have proof you were cleared to fly here.”

“But surely that isn’t enough.”

“The airline told him to show up a couple of hours early. He had a long talk with TSA, then the local police department cleared him for travel. But he did have a Costco card with his photo on it, the boarding pass for his flight here, some credit cards, and other things in his billfold with his name on them. And I think he had to go through an extra screening.”

“Then maybe I’ll be okay. I do have a Costco card with my photo on it. And surely I can get a police report about my purse being stolen.”

Sniper started barking at the back door and Nick went to let him in.

After putting a bowl of water on the floor for him, he returned to the hallway and pulled a set of sheets, a blanket, and fresh towels from the linen closet. “It’ll take me just a minute to get your room ready.”

She held out her arms for the stack of linens. “Let me. You’ve already been so kind.”

He handed her the linens, then went into his own bedroom and came out with a new gray XL T-shirt still in its plastic packaging. “I don’t have anything else here to offer, but maybe this will work for you tonight.”

She stilled when her fingertips brushed his hand, sending a little tingle of warmth up her arm. “Um...thanks.”

“There are some new toothbrushes in the bathroom vanity drawers if you want one. Help yourself to anything you need.”

Flustered now, she felt her cheeks warm. “I just don’t know what to say.”

“Then just say goodnight and rest well.” He gave her an easy, reassuring smile. “I’m going to spend an hour or two on my computer, so feel free to freshen up if you want. We can decide on snorkeling tomorrow, depending on how you feel.”

His office door clicked shut behind him.

The guest room was painted in soft yellow, with several prints of Hawaiian landscapes on the wall.

It was clean and inviting, but when she walked in, she set the linens aside and dropped onto the side of the bed to take a deep, shaky breath.

With everything she learned about this man, she came to care for him more. Wished there was more time to see where this relationship might go.

What would it be like to dance in his arms? To wake up every morning and know even more adventures were ahead?

But she would soon be leaving and he would stay. And these wonderful, magical days would be in the past.

••••

NICK STARED AT HIS computer, his fingers motionless on the keyboard.

He'd heard the bathroom door open twenty minutes ago and the guest bedroom door quietly shut. She was probably fast asleep, but still, he couldn't dredge up a single coherent thought to add to his manuscript.

Instead, images from this week kept drifting through his consciousness.

Her big heart, taking in a little stray and insisting on making sure Sniper was safe, and footing whatever vet bills he incurred.

During Nick's years as a practicing vet, he'd seen the worst in people—those who demanded euthanasia for a healthy pet who had become inconvenient rather than bothering to make any effort at rehoming it or even finding a good shelter.

Those who could afford it but still refused to bother with the cost of basic veterinary care.

He found himself smiling at his blank computer screen as he recalled Lucy's initial fear, then absolute determination to

stand on that surfboard for the first time. Her radiant joy when she was still standing when it coasted to shore.

And her brave resilience despite being the target of not one but *two* men who had accosted her. His two younger sisters would have cut and run for the airport that first day.

But Lucy was still here, pursuing her dream of being in Hawaii.

He could only imagine how much she thought about the dangers she'd encountered. Would she even be able to sleep, or would nightmares keep her awake?

With a sigh, he shut down his laptop and grabbed a Robert Ludlum from the shelf. Maybe losing himself in a novel would help pass the time.

Because he knew he wouldn't be falling asleep.



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## CHAPTER TEN

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Lucy awakened to a pair of big brown eyes staring down at her.

Big brown eyes and a very *fluffy* face. Startled, she blinked and jerked backwards against the headboard, then started laughing. “Were you on this bed all night?”

Sniper licked her chin, his tail wagging.

“I assume that means yes?” She rubbed him behind his ears, then cuddled him close. “You were definitely someone’s beloved pet. How did you end up on the street?”

He launched out of her arms and whined at the bedroom door.

“Well, I know what *that* means.” Wishing she had clean clothes, she donned what she’d worn the day before, folded Nick’s T-shirt—which had reached her knees and fit her like a loose Hawaiian muumuu—and quietly moved through the great room to let Sniper out the back door.

“Good morning.”

Startled for the second time in five minutes, she turned and saw Nick in the kitchen making a cup of coffee with the Keurig. “And good morning to you as well.”

“Are you a coffee drinker? I can make you a cup. All I’ve got is Columbian, though.”

“That would be wonderful.”

“There’s also iced tea and juice in the fridge.” He tipped his head toward a bright pink box on the kitchen table. “I slipped out earlier to pick up some malasadas at a bakery. But if you’d like an omelet, scrambled eggs, and bacon, or something else, I can whip it up in a few minutes.”

She hadn’t seriously dated anyone since Jason died. Just a few long friendships here and there, and she’d never been interested in anything more.

But seriously, were there any other men out there who were as kind and thoughtful as Nick?

She peeked into the box. “They look wonderful. What are they?”

“Portuguese doughnuts, but without the hole in the center. One is coated with cinnamon, but the other three have either custard, chocolate, or macadamia nut filling. Everything that bakery makes is delicious.”

“Oh, my. How does one ever choose?”

“Cut them all in half.” His eyes twinkled. “Then you’ll know what to order if you ever go there.”

“You are *definitely* a man after my own heart.”

He brought over two plates, forks, napkins, and a knife. Then he handed her a cup of coffee and joined her at the kitchen table.

After cutting the malasadas in half, she lifted sections of the custard and macadamia pastries to her plate. At the first bite she closed her eyes and savored the perfect creaminess of the one with custard filling. “After yesterday, I felt so safe being here overnight. And now these pastries are like a dream come true. I just can’t thank you enough.”

A text chimed into Nick’s phone. He glanced at it and handed the phone over to her. “It’s for you.”

“Whew. The Airbnb manager says my keycard has been changed. It’s waiting in a lock box by the outside gate.”

She lifted her coffee cup for a sip and their eyes met, sending a frisson of awareness curling around her heart. It had been so long since she’d kissed anyone that she probably didn’t even remember how.

Yet something about this man made her want to shake off her solitary existence and try for the kind of happiness that had always eluded her. Maybe—

What was Nick saying? She jerked her attention from her wayward thoughts.

“...but are you sure you’re up to snorkeling today? It wouldn’t be a problem to reschedule.”

She tentatively rotated her shoulders and flexed her arms. “I should be fine. I just need to pick up my swimsuit and I’ll be set.”

They lingered over coffee and pastries for another twenty minutes, bantering over everything from books to favorite types of restaurants. Then Lucy went back to strip the sheets from her bed and folded them neatly before joining Nick at the front door.

In fifteen minutes they were parked at the curb of her Airbnb.

“Sniper and I can stay downstairs, unless you want me to come up.”

He’d never offered to come upstairs before. And she’d never invited. But as she looked up toward the third floor of the building, an uneasy sensation started to build in her midsection.

At Nick’s place she’d been exhausted and grateful for a secure haven. She’d fallen into a dreamless sleep of sheer relief.

But now that she was back here, fear started to claw at her. Something dark and terrifying lurked at the edges of her memory—something that she couldn’t quite reach.

“Yes. I—I think I would like that. Just to make sure...well, it’s probably nothing.”

He draped a comforting arm around her shoulders when she went to the lockbox to punch in the code and retrieve her new key card, then followed her up to her room.

He waited outside her door with Sniper when she slipped in to grab her swim suit. She made it just two steps into the room.

And then she screamed.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Nick dropped Sniper's leash and bolted into the room, ready to take on *anyone* who dared hurt his Lucy.

The place was a shambles.

Drawers had been pulled from the dresser and dumped. Clothes had been ripped off hangers. Linens had been torn from the queen bed and the mattress now hung askew off one end of the frame.

Even the kitchen had been senselessly torn apart.

But the one thing Lucy was staring at was in the bedroom closet.

Someone had tried to bash in the safe door with a hammer. The sheetrock around it was battered and hung in chunks.

"I can't believe anyone would do this. It would take pure rage," Lucy whispered. She looked over her shoulder at Nick, her face ghostly white and stricken. "Did you see the message on the bathroom mirror? If I had been here..."

Nick glanced into the bathroom and clenched his teeth. Then he turned back and pulled Lucy into his arms and tucked her head beneath his chin. "I don't believe in coincidences. The police apprehended the wrong man."

She nodded. "Maybe it was the shock—or pure disbelief, but I've been trying and trying to recall something about last night. I think I saw a glint of silver in that man's hand—a knife. I think he planned to kill me." She swallowed hard. "If not for you and Sniper scaring him off, I would be dead."

Nick called 911, then led her over to the sofa and sat next to her, holding one of her hands in his. "He obviously thinks you can identify him and figures he'll go down for life without parole if you testify."

"But I don't *know* what he looks like. Not exactly." She stilled for a long moment. "But like I told the cops, I'm pretty sure he's Caucasian. Really stocky. And after last night, I know he has a big tattoo on the back of his...um...left hand."

“What worries me is that the guy must have slipped through the outside gate here. Maybe he got in behind some folks who politely held it open for him, then used your keycard so he could lie in wait for you. When you didn’t show up he must have torn the place apart, trying to figure out where you’d gone.”

At a sharp rap on the door, Lucy jumped.

“Police. Are you able to open the door?”

“Just stay here. I’ll get it.” Nick gave Lucy’s hand a reassuring squeeze and went to usher the officer inside.

Portly, with graying hair, he wearily surveyed the damage and shook his head. “The crime rate here is low. But this looks like a simple break-in and vandalism to me. Is anything missing?”

She glanced at his name above his right pocket. Miller. “I don’t know. My iPad and my billfold are still in the locked safe. I didn’t bring any jewelry or camera equipment.”

“I’ll file a report. If you realize any valuables are missing, let us know. It will help with your insurance claim. Have you contacted the building manager?”

“Not yet. But aren’t you—”

“I understand. You want this person found, arrested, and charged. But if he—or she—had any sense at all, gloves were worn and there wouldn’t be any prints. Even on the Mainland, there’s not enough manpower to track down every single vandal who comes along.”

“But this has to be connected. *All* of it.” Lucy stood and began to pace. “Check with the police station. Tell them my name. I was near a murder scene my first night here and I was assaulted. Last night my purse was stolen and I was assaulted *again*. And now this.”

He studied her closely.

“Last night, the responding officer told us that the killer had been apprehended,” Lucy continued. “But I don’t believe

it. What I *do* believe is that he thinks I can recognize him. If not for the dog and Nick, I wouldn't even be here."

"This is my first day back after sick leave. Let me do some checking." Officer Miller moved away and talked on his phone to someone at length, then turned back to her and shook his head. "They feel they have the right guy, ma'am. There were two witnesses."

Her shoulders sagged as she dropped into a chair and shook her head. "They must be wrong. Tell me—is a physical assessment done when someone is charged and held?"

"Of course."

"Then ask if the guy being held has evidence of healing dog bites on his ankles. I sure saw a lot of blood. And what about his nose? I smashed him in the face with my elbow. I felt and *heard* the cartilage give way."

Miller sighed and made another call. Fell silent while he was probably on hold. But when he started talking again, a ruddy flush climbed up his neck, and his entire demeanor changed from that of a kindly grandfather patiently placating a tourist to an officer on full alert.

"*Well?*" Lucy folded her arms.

"A unit will be coming here to investigate. They'll be searching for fingerprints and any other evidence that might have been left behind."

"Because the guy you people apprehended shows no signs of those wounds," Nick said flatly. "You got the wrong guy."

Miller hitched a shoulder, his face grim. "They'll be wanting to take statements from the two of you when they arrive. So sit tight. Don't discuss with each other anything you've seen. And don't touch anything."

Lucy nodded.

"Afterward, I'd advise you to pack up your things and stay somewhere far from this area. Maybe even a different island. Just don't come back to this Airbnb in case the suspect returns. How long is your stay?"



“My flight home leaves the day after Christmas. But...” She shot a quick look of regret at Nick. “But I’m thinking of leaving much earlier.”

Miller’s brow furrowed. “Talk about that with the officer who takes your statements.”

Nick felt a deep pang of regret over how all of this was unfolding.

He and Lucy had met purely by chance.

Yet meeting her almost seemed like a God thing—an answer to a prayer he’d never thought to ask.

The kind of heartfelt prayers he’d left behind following Carrie’s death, because God didn’t always listen to him. Or even care.

But he didn’t blame Lucy one bit for wanting to go home where she could slip back into her customary, safe life. Where she could pretend this entire trip had never happened...

And try to forget that message scrawled with lipstick on the bathroom mirror.

*You can’t run and you can’t hide. And when I find you, you’re gonna die.*

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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After Lucy finished up with the police at her Airbnb rental, she took her valuables from the room safe. She put her billfold in her purse and stowed the iPad in her carry-on bag. Nick helped pack her things and take her luggage down to his SUV.

He looked at her across the front seat. “Now what?”

“They wouldn’t elaborate, but apparently feel they have some solid leads now. They asked that I remain available here as long as I can. But I don’t want to be anywhere close to this particular building, that’s for sure. Not until the police find that guy. And maybe they won’t.”

“You’re welcome to stay at my place again for as long as you like. It was nice having some company.”

If she accepted his offer, she wouldn’t be alone with Sniper in some hotel room, jumping at every sound during the night. It sounded perfect.

And it also sounded like an awfully big imposition.

“I really don’t want to be in your way. You have your own routines, your writing...”

“I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t mean it.”

“Can I at least pay you?”

“No.” He clapped a hand over his heart as if mortally wounded. “What kind of friend would make you pay?”

*Friend.*

How long had it been since she’d taken even a single day to hang out with friends?

After years of raising kids, twelve-hour shifts, and far too much overtime, she simply hadn’t had the time or energy—especially through the worst of the pandemic.

When she got home, she was going to change that and a lot of other things in her life.

But she now found herself wishing that she and Nick might eventually become more than just friends.

A crazy, impossible thought, when they lived over 4,000 miles apart.

“So that’s settled.” He glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard touchscreen. “It looks like we missed our snorkeling reservation at Hanauma Bay. So here’s an idea. We could take a long, pretty drive up Highway 61 that cuts through the island, then follow the leeward side back down toward Waikiki so we can catch the sunset from one of the western beaches. By the time we get back, it’ll be obvious if anyone has consistently followed us.”

His caring and thoughtfulness again touched her heart. “Thank you, Nick.”

“I made a phone call while you were being interviewed. Just to be safe, on our way back we’ll stop at the place where I leased this SUV. I reserved a gray sedan instead, so it won’t be recognizable in case that guy is still looking for you. He certainly got a good look at this one.”

“That he did.” She gave him a grateful smile as her tension began to ease. “Can we stop somewhere so I can buy a cell phone? I’d like to call my daughter and make sure everything is all right back home.”

“Use my phone to ask Google if your cell service provider has a location here. If not, we can pick up a pre-paid phone almost anywhere.”

“Perfect.” She reached into the back seat and stroked Sniper’s head. “Then I can get back to calling the local rescues again. Maybe there’ll be some news about this little guy’s owner.”

She googled cell phone providers on Nick’s phone while he drove. “No luck. If my provider had a store on Oahu, they could’ve restored my backup to a new phone and I’d have all of my phone numbers reloaded. At least, I think that’s how it works.”

“Let’s swing by a store. Maybe they can help you find something.”

An hour later, she had a pre-paid phone and they were headed up the Pali Highway. “Thanks again. Nick. Now the trick will be to remember some of the phone numbers in my old one. Do you mind if I make a call?”

“Of course not.”

From memory, she punched in the numbers for her daughter’s phone and impatiently listened until the voicemail finally kicked in. “Hi, sweetie. I just wanted to check in with you and see how things are going in Vermont. It must be beautiful there.”

She reined in the wistful tone creeping into her voice. “My phone was...lost, so this one is temporary until I get home. I don’t know if you can see this number on yours, but it is—”

She grabbed the receipt in her purse and rattled off the number. “Have you heard from your brother? Please give me a call. Love you.”

She ended the call, sighed, and dropped the phone into her purse. “I know they are always in God’s hands, but I don’t suppose I’ll ever stop worrying about my kids. Do you hear from your daughter often?”

“Maybe once a week or so.” He shot a rueful glance in Lucy’s direction. “I think she worries about me more than she needs to. She insists that I’m isolating myself here and says I should come home.”

“You both have had to face such a great loss,” Lucy murmured. “I lost my mom when I was a teenager and I still think about her almost every day.”

He tipped his head in silent acknowledgment.

“She’ll miss her mom even more when the baby comes. All the milestones she’ll wish she could share. All the bonding over nurturing the little one. And she’ll miss you—” Lucy bit back her words. He hardly needed reminding.

Nick's eyes stayed focused on the road ahead. He didn't answer.

Lucy regretted her thoughtless words. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Please forgive me."

"It's okay."

But it wasn't. She could tell by the tiny muscle flicking at the side of his jaw.

Her touch of melancholy over missing her kids as Christmas approached had no place during this day with Nick, after he had been so thoughtful.

Lucy fell silent as she took in the verdant scenery and felt more awe with every passing mile.

The highway was gaining altitude now, rising into what seemed like dense, lush tropical foliage. At the left side of the road, a nearly vertical mountain range towered above them with deeply corrugated slopes and thin, jagged peaks that rose like broken glass. The tallest of them disappeared into the mist.

"Wow," Lucy breathed. "These mountains are stunning."

After a few more miles he turned off into a parking lot and stopped the SUV. "Wait 'til you see the Lookout. We'll be 1,200 feet above the ocean and there's quite a view."

He tapped something into his phone. "I can't tell for sure, but I don't think Sniper can join us here. We won't be gone long."

They walked together up the hard-surface path to the viewing place. "So what do you think, Lucy? Worth the drive?"

She stared in wonder at the panoramic view of the ocean, the Windward coastline, and the sheer Koolau cliffs. "Can you imagine being up here for a sunrise? This is breathtaking."

It had been sunny down in Waikiki, but up here a gentle mist was falling and had settled over the peaks like a soft, gray blanket. "Do people hike up here?"

“There are trails all over the island. But along the ridge line of these peaks? Some are very narrow and treacherous. It takes an extremely experienced hiker to tackle those. That won’t ever be me.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She shivered. “That would never be me, either. I can feel vertigo on an eight-foot ladder.”

“Cold?” Nick draped his arm around her shoulders as they headed down to the parking lot.

“A little.” She wasn’t really, but just the weight of his arm made her feel protected and warm all over, and she nestled closer.

She couldn’t remember her late husband, bless his soul, affecting her this way. He’d turned cool and distant once he started his law career.

And now she felt more than a little bereft when they reached Nick’s SUV and he stepped away.

••••

AFTER A LEISURELY DRIVE down the leeward coast, Nick pulled into a restaurant overlooking the water as the sun was dropping low in the sky. “I’ve been here quite a lot. Excellent seafood and steaks, if that works for you?”

Lucy had received a text soon after they’d left the scenic overlook and had been quiet most of the way back. There was a hint of sadness in her eyes when she looked over at him. “Sounds perfect.”

“Is something wrong?”

“My daughter texted me back. Apparently, she and her boyfriend had a fight and broke up. She’s trying to arrange a flight from Vermont to Minneapolis, but with all of the holiday travelers, she hasn’t found anything yet. She sounds distraught.”

“Aww, Lucy. I’m so sorry.”

“She has her own apartment in Chicago where she goes to school. But none of her friends are there over winter break, Christmas is nearly here, and she just wants to come home.

She's really upset because no one will be there, either. And I should have been."

He thought he saw the shimmer of tears in her eyes. "But you didn't know this would happen, honey."

*Honey.* She shot a quick glance at him from under her lashes. Waitstaff and store clerks tossed that endearment around all the time when talking to customers. *Hey, honey—you forgot your change.* But from Nick, the words felt entirely different.

"She also said she hadn't heard from her brother for at least three weeks. He isn't returning any of her texts. Adam ignores me most of the time, but usually he's a little better at keeping in touch with her. Bree even contacted some of the guys he hangs out with, but they don't even know where he is."

"You must be really worried."

"All the time, honestly. I'm the only one they have. And with Adam's past, I always fear that someday I'll receive the call no parent ever wants to hear." She gave a small, watery laugh. "I wish I'd never left home. Except...then I wouldn't have met you."

"Do you want to stop for dinner, or do you want to head back?"

She glanced at the horizon, where vibrant pinks and purples were starting to light up the sky. "Dinner and a beautiful sunset. How could anyone pass this up? I can't do anything else right now, anyhow."

He rounded the vehicle to open her door. When he offered his hand to help her out of the car, some unexpected but undeniable impulse took over.

He pulled her into his arms for a long, sweet kiss, wanting to offer comfort.

But when she melted against him, he kissed her again, savoring every moment. He expected a surge of guilt to hit him, or a sense of betrayal, but it didn't come.



She leaned back, her eyes wide and startled. Then she dropped her forehead against his chest. “Wow. I wasn’t expecting *that*.”

Her pliant warmth seemed to flow through him, somehow mending some of the sharpest, most broken pieces of his heart. Shards that he’d expected to feel forever after Carrie’s death.

It didn’t even seem possible.

Yet here was Lucy—brave and strong and caring to her core. And now he knew she would be leaving as soon as she could.

Unless that killer got to her first.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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On their way back to his place, Nick switched the black rental SUV for a small gray sedan, then took a winding route through Honolulu and Waikiki before heading back to his place.

*For safety*, he told himself.

In case Lucy was spotted.

But what he'd really wanted was more time with her. More time in quiet conversation. More time to enjoy her animated expressions. More time to simply be next to her in the car.

More time...to imagine.

He parked on the side street flanking his rental and unlocked the backyard gate, so they could enter through the back door of the house with her luggage.

But he insisted that she wait on the covered porch while he walked through the house and checked every room first, just in case.

Everything was just as it had been left. *Praise the Lord*.

And though he wanted to hold her in his arms again, apparently everything between them was also just as it had been before that impetuous embrace outside the restaurant.

Except now she seemed to be avoiding his eyes.

Lucy stepped into the house with Sniper on a leash. "So everything's good here?"

He nodded as he closed all of the shades, flipped on the lights in the kitchen, and put their restaurant leftover containers in the fridge.

She sent Sniper out into the backyard and came back in to pull her iPad out of her carry-on luggage. "Do you know your internet password?"

He rattled off a series of letters and numbers.

“I need to see if any of the shelters or online pet sites have come up with anything on Sniper.”

While she tapped on the keyboard attached to the iPad, Nick brought the pup back inside to feed him. Then he sat across the table from her, watching her expression change from hope to disappointment, then resignation. “No luck?”

“None.” She looked up at him with a hint of chagrin. “Though I have to admit I’m relieved, in a selfish way. He’s an awfully sweet boy. Maybe his owner isn’t a nice person and just let him run. I wish I could bring Sniper home with me.”

“If you can’t find his previous owners, there’s no reason you can’t. He’d need current health papers and a record of vaccinations, which you could get from Dr. Bailey, and you’d need a qualifying crate. But some airlines only allow a certain number of pets in the cabin, so finding an available flight could be a problem.”

Nick’s cell phone rang. He answered, then brought the phone to the table and sat down next to her. “It’s the police. They want to talk to each of us, so I told them that I’m putting this on speaker. I hope that’s all right with you.”

••••

A FRISSON OF DREAD slid down Lucy’s back as she stared at the phone and imagined that it was a snake ready to strike.

But the deputy was brief and to the point. “There were few fingerprints other than your own at the Airbnb, so the suspect must have taken off his gloves just before leaving. They match those of a small-time Honolulu drug dealer with a long criminal history.”

Hope welled up inside her.

“Fresh blood spatters were collected from the cement sidewalk where he allegedly attacked you on the night of the murder,” the deputy continued. “So after we catch him, DNA matching can be done. I’m sending you a text with his photo after we hang up. His name is Willard Peel.”

“So you haven’t caught him,” Lucy said flatly.

“Investigators are following up on a number of leads, and all inter-island, Mainland, and European flights are being monitored, ma’am. It will be only a matter of time.”

“And the two ‘witnesses’ who claimed someone else was responsible for that murder on the beach?”

“They’ve admitted that they were mistaken. It was just too dark out there to be sure.”

*Or they were paid to lie.* “I’ve already given several statements to the police and told them everything I possibly could. Now I’ve got a potential family emergency back home and need to leave as soon as I can find a flight.”

She could hear the officer conferring with someone in the background, then he spoke into the phone. “That isn’t a problem. The attorneys might ask you to look over a six-pack of mugshot photos again, possibly in the company of your local police. Or ask for another statement.”

“What if there’s a trial?”

“In some cases, a witness can testify remotely. If testimony is needed in person, there are usually victim funds that will cover expenses.”

“Remote would be my preference if I have any choice. You have my email and home address. Once I get back home and replace my stolen phone, then the number I gave will be functional.”

A moment after the call was disconnected, a text came through with a photo.

Lucy stared at it with horror as the bits and pieces of every encounter—from the mug shot at the police station to the times this man had come after her—all came together with frightening clarity.

“When I saw his photo at the police station it made my stomach twist into knots, but I couldn’t be certain. But it’s him. I’m *sure* it is.”

“At least now we know who to watch for.”

Her final decision took less than a millisecond. “Not for long.”

She focused on her keyboard, her fingers flying for one hour and then two. Then she gave up and called an airline, but waited on hold for another thirty endless minutes before someone answered.

After the call ended, she leaned back in her chair with a groan of frustration. “I can’t believe this. I found a single seat available on a flight leaving early tomorrow, with long layovers in Los Angeles and Dallas. It would take over nineteen hours to get home, and that’s if all the connections are on time. But I couldn’t take Sniper with me on that flight.”

“Did you find other options?”

“There are few seats available to the Mainland between now and Christmas. Only the flight I already booked on the 26<sup>th</sup> would allow him to fly with me. But that’s *twelve days* from now.” She twisted the birthstone ring on her finger. “And my uneasy feeling about Adam just keeps building. I feel so guilty about coming here.”

“You did say he was rarely in contact with you,” Nick said gently. “And that he hadn’t been home for Christmas in at least two years.”

She nodded. “Three. But that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“If you’re worried about Sniper, he can stay here. Maybe someone will still show up and claim him. And if not, I’ll keep him.” Sniper jumped up in his lap and licked Nick’s chin as if he understood. “Or I could bring him to you when I go back to St. Paul after Jenna’s baby is born.”

She looked over at him, taking in the warmth and compassion in his eyes as he spoke, his deep, gentle voice flowing over her and giving her the peace and comfort she needed so much.

His late wife had been so blessed to be married to him. And now Lucy had been beyond blessed to have him in her life, if only for a little while.

Being held in his arms and sharing that kiss outside of the restaurant had made her heart feel...whole, somehow. As if she could now go through the rest of her life on that sweet memory and never search for anything more.

She took a deep breath, looked at her iPad, and took the steps to buy her ticket home.

And felt only deep regret when it was done.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“Thanks for getting up this early,” Lucy said quietly as Nick stowed her luggage in the trunk of the sedan. “I should have taken an Uber so you could sleep in.”

Sniper bounced at his heels as he closed the trunk and strode up to her, his eyes dark and unfathomable. He pulled her into a long embrace. “And let Sniper and me miss taking you to the airport?”

She nestled closer, her cheek against his chest. She could feel the steady, reassuring beat of his heart. Detect the faint scent of his aftershave.

She hoped she would remember everything about this moment after she was gone.

Sniper growled. Stiffened against her leg. Then he erupted in shrill barking that had to be awakening every last person on this street.

A dark form stepped out of the shadows at the front end of the car, his face silhouetted by the high street lamp behind him. A gun glinted in his hand.

“Maybe you won’t be going to that airport after all, lady. Neither of you. Now keep that dog quiet or I’m gonna shoot him.” He waved his gun toward an alley behind them. “And don’t even think about yelling for help or I’ll shoot you both.”

Porch lights started turning on up and down the street. A door slammed and a deep voice shouted “*Quiet!*”

Farther down, someone stepped out into the street to see what was going on.

Sniper just barked louder...and God bless him for that.

“You have far too many witnesses here,” Nick said in a low voice. “Look around. People are watching at their windows. By now, at least three of them have called 911, and far more are loading their handguns, thinking there might be danger. This isn’t the O.K. Corral in some old Western, Willard. Maybe you should just leave while you can.”

Willard shot a glare at Nick. “Shut *up*.”

“It’s true.” Lucy took a shaky breath, trying to calm her racing heart. Willard had shifted into a pool of light, and now she could see the damage she had done to his nose when he’d first come after her a lifetime ago. The faint scar on face visible on his mugshot. “The cops already know who you are. If anything happens here, they’ll know exactly who did it.”

“Not if you’re both dead.” Willard’s voice took on an eerie, keening note as he aimed the gun at her heart.

“Look at all of the witnesses, Willard.” His voice low and soothing, Nick eased in front of Lucy. “*Think*. Leave now and you can still get away.”

Surely even Willard realized it was a lie.

Another door slammed a couple of houses down.

His eyes wild, Willard swung his head to take in the scene around him. The windows filled with light. The faces peering out.

The gun wobbled in his hand.

Nick grabbed it and stepped back. Willard launched after him, his fist drawn and his teeth bared with fury.

Barking furiously, still in full guard dog mode, Sniper darted closer and nailed Willard on his bare ankle. Willard tried to shake Sniper off. He careened to one side and staggered, his arms flailing wildly.

Nick shot forward, trying to catch him.

But the man’s bulk and momentum took over. He spun away on his heel. And then he fell backward.

The horrible *crack* of his head hitting the edge of the cement curb was something Lucy never, ever wanted to hear again.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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The bright blue light bars of three patrol cars converging on the scene filled Lucy with relief.

There was a crowd surrounding them now, all looking down at the body staring sightlessly at the sky. Someone's camera flashed—and then another.

Murmurs rippled up and down the street about what had happened. Many had witnessed—or heard—Willard's threats.

A few had seen Sniper's attack and were even talking about him being a ten-pound hero.

*And they were right*, Lucy thought as she held him in her arms and snuggled the puppy close. She felt her eyes burn, remembering how she'd come across the little stray that night on the beach, just by chance.

Or maybe it wasn't.

*You knew I would need him even before I did, Lord*, she whispered, *thank You for your most perfect gift.*

••••

NICK AND LUCY GAVE their statements to one of the cops at the scene, while the other officers began talking to the witnesses.

When Nick finally slid behind the wheel of his sedan, he reached over to cover her trembling hands with his. "I wish you had more time here. Leaving right after what just happened will be tough."

She'd been calm and matter-of-fact during the questioning, despite the horror of seeing a man die in front of her. He could only imagine how she'd feel once the numbness and shock faded.

"It's so different, from seeing death as a hospital nurse. No matter what that man did, I didn't want to see him die."

"I didn't either. Just focus on what could have happened. If not for folks in the neighborhood distracting him and Sniper's

determination, it might have turned out so differently. Will you be all right?”

She nodded sadly. “But what an awful way to end this trip.”

They made it to the airport with only an hour to spare. Even without her driver’s license to show, the TSA agents and law enforcement officers managed to clear her for departure just in time.

Nick rested his hands on her shoulders outside of the TSA checkpoint, then drew her close for a last embrace. “I guess you’d better get into that line,” he said with a long sigh. “You’ve got a lot waiting for you when you get home. I’ll be praying for you.”

She looked up and their eyes met. “I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you did to help me. It meant a great deal.”

Her voice sounded distant. Formal. As if she was closing the final chapter of a book she planned to store away. And already, he felt the sting of losing her.

“You can’t leave just yet.” He gently framed her head between his hands and kissed her. “Just try to remember all of the good times you had here. And forget the bad.”

They stood together for a long moment, silent and lost in the finality of saying goodbye.

Then she kissed him back and was gone.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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The flight home seemed to take forever.

During the long layover in Los Angeles, Lucy aimlessly walked the hallways filled with harried travelers dragging carry-ons and parents wrangling tired and cranky children, while trying to keep her thoughts from straying back to her last hours in Hawaii.

She found an airport restaurant where she could linger over a cheeseburger, coffee, and her Kindle to escape the melee.

Then she put in another ten thousand steps, according to her watch, before finding another place to hang out for a while.

But wherever she went, she kept seeing Nick just ahead in the crowd—a tall, broad-shouldered man with his same thick, dark hair. A man with his easy, athletic stride.

It was never him, of course.

When the stranger turned, he didn't have the twinkle in Nick's warm brown eyes or his strong jaw. His captivating, masculine smile.

She had to be more tired and stressed than she realized.

At her next layover in Dallas, she tried calling Bree for the tenth time today. She checked her e-mail on her iPad, hoping there was news about Adam. Nothing.

But just before she shut it down, her eye caught on an email address in her Inbox and her heart lifted. Relief flowed through her when she read the message.

*Thank You, Lord,* she whispered. *At least I'll have a job.*

It was from the top-notch agency she'd wanted most of all the applications she'd completed before leaving for Hawaii.

As a traveling neonatal intensive care nurse within the Twin Cities area, she would always be close enough to home. Enjoy some variety. And she would be making much more than she ever had before.

Feeling a little giddy, she picked up her phone to share the good news.

But Bree was probably in and out of airports today herself. Adam wouldn't pick up his phone. And Nick...

Nick was back in Waikiki with Sniper, loving his free and easy days and planning to live there for the rest of his life.

There was no point in calling him. He would be staying in her past because she would never move so far from home to be with him.

Her kids needed her more.

••••

LUCY DROVE HER SUV straight from the long-term parking lot at the Minneapolis airport to her condo in Minnetonka.

The icy roads and slow traffic were a fitting end to a long day of travel, and once she stepped inside her home, she flopped onto the sofa with pure relief.

At a knock on her door a few minutes later, she went to her front door, where her neighbor Harry was holding a plastic tub with her mail.

"I tried calling you first," he said gruffly. "But you didn't answer."

She rolled her eyes. "My phone was stolen in Hawaii. I'm hoping the replacement has already arrived."

"Might be in here with your mail and newspapers. The bigger boxes are still at my place." He started down the front steps, then turned. "Your son was here late one night, pounding on your door. But by the time I grabbed my shoes and jacket to come over, he'd already left."

Her breath caught. "He was *here*?"

"A couple days after you left."

"Did he...did he look okay?"



The long-retired minister and she had been neighbors for years, ever since she and the kids had moved here after Jason died, and he knew Adam very well.

His faded blue eyes filled with sympathy. “He came at dusk, so I didn’t see much. But he did seem...well, agitated. I tried to call you then, too. Now I know why you didn’t call me back.”

Guilt and worry crowded out all other thoughts. *Why* had she ever left? Just to chase a foolish dream of finally seeing Hawaii?

“If you see anything again, please let me know.”

She took the plastic tub from Harry’s hands and set it on the oak settee by the door to paw through the contents. She held up a small box and could have wept with sheer relief. “It’s here! The phone came.”

“Good. It just started sleeting outside, so I’ll bring over your other boxes in the morning. Let me know if I can help with anything. Anything at all.”

Harry paused on his way out, his hand on the doorknob. “And let me know about your boy. I’ll sure be praying that everything is all right.”

She gave him a quick hug. “Thanks. You’re the best friend I’ve got.”

She took the plastic tub to her home office, fired up her desktop computer, then opened the cell phone box and read the directions on how to set up the new phone and access her phone directory.

While that was running, she checked through her email, looked through the rest of her snail mail, then sat back in her chair, her frustration growing.

Once her new cell phone was activated it began chiming over and over as texts poured in.

Nothing from Adam. Nothing from his closest friends letting her know something was wrong—which was a relief.

None from a hospital. And none from the drug addiction center he'd been at more than once. So where could he be?

There were so many phone messages that the count had gone over the limit of what could be stored, and her heart sank as she scrolled through the final messages, listened, and deleted them. What had she missed?

She almost automatically hit the delete icon once again. Then froze, her fingertip hovering just above it. It was a message from a vaguely familiar number.

She'd never received a greater gift than the moment she heard his voice.

“Mom, I'm so sorry...I forgot where you went. But I need you...I was so bad I went to the emergency room. There was a lot of talk, then I got sent back to that addiction place again. I *wanted* to go. But *please come...*”

Lucy sat back in her chair and closed her eyes.

He must have called from a phone at the facility. The last two times, they'd taken his cell phone away.

But he was safe. He was alive. And praise the Lord, he was back in the right place where he could be helped. If only he would stay this time and see it through.

If only he would stop pushing her away.

....

SHE TRIED CALLING THE treatment center twice, then paced the floor and tried again.

The evening staff person who finally answered the phone politely turned her away. “Privacy policy, ma'am. I can't confirm whether your son is here or not unless he has signed a HIPAA waiver.”

“But he's been in your facility *twice* before this. There *was* a signed waiver. Unless my son revoked it, it should be good indefinitely. Or has the law changed?”

“No, ma'am. The law has not changed.” There was a long pause. “If the person in question is here—and I am not saying

he is or isn't—then I can promise you that there's no signed waiver in place.”

“He called and left a message for me, saying he *is* in your facility. I *know* he is.” Lucy clenched her hand around her phone. “Can someone at least *ask* him about the waiver? *Please?*”

“All of our residents are asked that at admission.”

Lucy dropped into her desk chair and rested her forehead on her clenched fist. “When he isn't doing well, he's often angry and rebellious—especially toward me because I've tried so hard to help him. But in his message, he *pleaded* with me to come. Please—just tell him I called.”

••••

LUCY PACED THE FLOOR, unable to sleep. Debated about driving to the facility right now and demanding answers.

But she knew the facility policies, and knew that lights went out at ten o'clock. After that, none of the patients could have visitors or receive a call.

And, if she remembered correctly, the mornings and early afternoons were tightly scheduled with group sessions and private counseling interspersed with doctor's visits.

She'd be lucky if she made any contact by late afternoon.

The night wore on as she second-guessed everything she'd ever done as a parent. Had she been too lenient? Too strict? Had she tried too hard to be both a mom and dad, but failed at both?

At some point she must have dozed off on the sofa, because at the zippy sound of her new ringtone, she jerked upright.

“Mom?”

“Bree!” Lucy sighed with relief. “Where are you?”

“I'm stuck in Chicago waiting for a connection to Minneapolis. I had two flights canceled already. The snow is

really picking up here, and now I wonder if I'll have to wait until morning.”

“Can you find a hotel room near the airport? Or go to your apartment?”

“No way am I leaving this airport. I don't want to miss any chance to get home.” She hesitated. “Have you heard from Adam?”

“Only a phone message. I just got my replacement phone tonight.”

“One of his buddies called me and said he was really bad this time.” Bree's voice broke. One of these days...”

“I know, sweetheart. I tried to get some information from the treatment center, but they said they couldn't even let me know if he was there. He must have revoked my HIPAA permission form.”

“Last time he was in there, he was angry at the whole world, so maybe he did it then. But this time he sounds different. Like he really wants to get away from his drugs and try to have a normal life. I hope it's true.”

Lucy gripped her phone a little tighter. “So you've been able to talk to him? Is he all right?”

“Yes, and I'm praying he will be, Mom. Hey—I hear something on the loudspeaker about my flight. Gotta go.”

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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When Adam walked into a small consultation room to meet her the next afternoon, he looked so thin that Lucy swallowed hard, taking it all in.

Bree had warned her, when she'd called to say that Adam had promised her that he'd sign the HIPAA waiver.

But Lucy still hadn't been prepared.

He was twenty now, but he looked far older with his grayish complexion, gaunt face, and unkempt, listless hair that straggled past the collar of his faded T-shirt.

Instead of the usual surly attitude she'd expected, he seemed shy, as if unsure of his welcome. "Mom?"

She wanted so much to run to him and smother him with hugs and kisses, but she forced herself to wait and watch him for cues. He'd rejected her love and affection for so long that maybe that part of him was gone.

"I'm so, so glad to see you, honey. I've missed you so much."

She stood up when he drew closer, tentative as a young deer. Would he snarl and bolt away if she tried to hug him? If she touched his hand?

"This time was bad. Real bad." He looked down at his feet. "I was so deep into drugs with my buddies that I didn't care about anything or anyone else."

"I know," she said gently.

"Then Rick OD'd and I knew I'd be next when someone hauled me into the ER. I nearly died, too."

Her heart seemed to stop. It was all she could do to keep from wrapping him in an embrace and never letting him go.

"I've made such a mess of everything, Mom. I don't even know where to begin. Except...I'm sorry."

He hadn't spoken this many words to her in three years, but each one hit her heart like a tiny dagger. She'd feared losing her son to his addictions. But he'd been the one to truly suffer.

"They say I need to be in here for the full ninety days. But this time, I'm going to stick it out. I don't want to live this way anymore."

"I'm going to love you through whatever it takes for you to heal and I'll do whatever I can. I can't bear the thought of losing you again. If you ever want to move home, even for just a while..."

Their eyes locked for a long moment.

Then his eyes filled with tears and he walked into her arms.

....

WHEN THE HEAVY SNOW in Chicago turned into a full-fledged blizzard, Bree had called to say that she would go to her apartment for a while, then drive to Minnetonka on Christmas Eve. Some of her college friends had lingered in Chicago, after all.

Lucy's spacious condo—with three bedrooms upstairs and a finished walk-out basement—had always felt like home, but with both kids grown and gone, the silence seemed to echo around her.

Even the fresh Christmas tree in the living room, the holiday music playing softly in the background, and the familiar decorations she'd placed all over the house didn't quite fill the emptiness.

Her thoughts often strayed to Nick, but she pushed those thoughts aside. Whatever she might have felt, whatever she might have dreamed, their paths would certainly never cross again.

Unless he followed through with bringing Sniper to Minnesota when his grandchild was born in January. But that was highly unlikely.

He hadn't emailed, texted, or called since she'd left Hawaii, so she hadn't, either. After all of the drama during her stay, he'd probably been relieved to see her go.

She pulled on her coat and boots, grabbed her purse and keys, and headed out to the garage, ready for another day.

She smiled, her spirits lifting as she thought about the ways her prayers had been answered.

She would be able to visit Adam at the treatment center a few evenings a week, and already she could see a change in his demeanor. He was even allowed—and eager—to come home for Christmas Day dinner, praise the Lord. Bree would be driving home tomorrow so their little family could be together again.

Family was *everything*.

And Lucy also loved her new career.

She had always been fulfilled by the challenges of working in a NICU. Providing the best possible care during high-risk deliveries. Newborns in distress had always filled her with a deep sense of purpose.

She'd begun to feel burnout after years at her last hospital, but going to a new location was invigorating. Her current eight-week commitment in the neonatal intensive care unit at a children's hospital in St. Paul felt like a new chapter in her life.

Knowing she would eventually be moving on to wherever she was needed next had erased her burn-out.

Even though she was scheduled to work tomorrow. On Christmas Eve.



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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Lucy stared at the computer screen in the nurse's station with a cup of strong coffee at her side as she typed up progress notes for the Nelson baby in room 534.

She had always thrived in the high-stress, high-stakes environment of a NICU. But now she was in the fourteenth hour of her twelve-hour Christmas Eve shift, and she was exhausted.

One nurse due to arrive at eleven o'clock had called in sick. Another had fallen on the ice and fractured her arm while leaving for work.

She and the rest of the team were working nonstop with the fourteen babies already here—and two more infants had just been admitted. One at 36 weeks with unstable vital signs, and one born with respiratory distress syndrome.

It was going to be a long night.

“How are you doing?” Brandy, the charge nurse for the eleven pm to eleven am shift, gave her a sympathetic smile. “It must be hard coming into an unfamiliar place and dealing with all of this.”

“This has been my life since I was twenty. It's nothing new. But I have to admit that I'm getting a little tired.”

“I've got good news. I finally heard back from one of our off-duty nurses, and she'll be here in twenty minutes. And we're pulling a nurse from the pediatric ICU who should be up here in five.”

Lucy felt the tension in her shoulders ease. With Adam's favorite sparkling raspberry gelatin salad and Bree's favorite Swedish creamy rice dessert left to make and get into the refrigerator yet tonight, her day wasn't over.

And she still needed to wrap the last remaining gifts. “I'll stay as long as you need me, of course.”

“Fiona will be here any minute, so you can leave. But thanks for offering. We all really appreciate you. Merry

Christmas!”

Relieved, Lucy went to retrieve her things from a locker in the break room and donned her snow boots and coat.

She glanced up when a tall man walked past the door. It had been weeks now, and she still found herself taking a second glance when she saw someone like Nick from afar. *Utter madness*, she chided herself.

But when she stepped out in the hallway to head for the elevator, she couldn't help but take a second look.

The man drew to a stop and looked over his shoulder. His jaw dropped. “*Lucy?*”

She stared at him in shock. “*Nick?*”

He didn't answer. But he turned and walked back to her, searching her face as if she were a ghost.

“What are you doing here?” From the instant she'd recognized him, her heart started an uneven gallop in her chest and the room started to spin. This wasn't just a coincidence. It was *impossible*.

“Jenna's baby started showing signs of distress at thirty-seven weeks, so the docs had to do a C-section three days ago.”

“I'm so sorry,” she said quietly.

“I took the first flight I could find and arrived a couple of hours ago. I had to beg security to let me come up so late at night for a quick visit.”

“So the baby is here in the NICU?” Still dazed at seeing Nick standing in front of her, Lucy bit her lower lip as she mentally scrolled through the infants she'd cared for during the past three days. “I didn't realize.”

“The last name is Jansen.”

“A sweet little girl with blonde hair?”

He nodded, a weary smile touching his lips.

“She hasn’t been in my care, but at the last shift report I heard that she’s doing well.”

“That’s what we’ve all been praying for. Her husband has been beside himself with worry.” He tipped his head toward the elevator. “Are you going down? I can walk you to your car.”

He wasn’t the tanned, relaxed man she’d met on the beach in Hawaii. He looked stressed and worried, and tired to his core. Yet here he was, still her chivalrous protector, offering safe conduct through a dark parking lot at night.

She wondered if he even remembered their last kiss at the airport in Hawaii...or the other times. He seemed like a stranger now.

“Thank you. I’d appreciate it.”

“You never got to snorkel at Hanauma Bay,” he said as they walked across the snowy parking lot to her car. “Or drive through the Ho’omaluhia Botanical Gardens. Do you think you’ll ever go back?”

She sensed a deeper layer to his question and shook her head. “There were a lot of other things on my list as well. But probably not. My life is here. A job I love. My family. I don’t suppose I’ll be taking any more big vacations for quite some time. Do you still have Sniper?”

“Of course I do.” His smile deepened the crinkles at the corners of his eyes. “I think he misses you. He’ll sit on the furniture so he can stare outside, or he’ll sit at the door and wait. Any word about his owners?”

“None. I still keep checking the online pet location websites, though. And I called the rescues on Oahu yesterday.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t bring him to you on this trip. I just couldn’t arrange it for such a short-notice flight.”

“Maybe another time.” She stopped at her car and clicked the key fob to unlock it.

Light snow started falling, dancing through the security lights overhead. It was Christmas Eve—yet since seeing Nick

tonight she hadn't given it a thought.

The thought of him spending Christmas alone in a hotel room made her heart shift uncomfortably. "Um...would you like to join us for Christmas dinner tomorrow? It won't be a crowd—just my kids and an elderly neighbor."

"Your son, too?"

"I can hardly believe it, but yes. I can't tell you how much it means to me that he's coming home."

"Then you need to spend that time with them alone." Nick hitched a shoulder toward the hallway behind him. "I'll just hang around here."

She pulled an old receipt from her purse and wrote down her address and cell number. "I'll tell everyone you're coming, so we'll all be disappointed if you don't. You can't spend Christmas alone."

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

Lucy surveyed her dining room table, then reached forward to adjust a candle that was slightly off-kilter.

Bree and Adam were downstairs playing an old video game Adam had left behind years ago. At hearing their laughter and playfully heated sparring over the game, Lucy thought her heart might just burst with happiness.

As usual, Harry had brought over a beautiful centerpiece early this morning when Lucy and the kids got home from the Christmas Day service at church—this year, one with lush sprigs of evergreen, red roses, and loops of glittery gold ribbon.

But then he'd texted an hour ago to say he wasn't feeling well enough to come over—just one of his headaches again. Poor man. The kids would miss him, and she would, too.

She would send platters of food over to him as soon as they finished eating.

With her late mother's Christmas china and cut glass water goblets gleaming in the candlelight, it was all festive yet not *too* overboard.

Would this bring back happy memories of Christmases past for Adam? She was still treading lightly with him, trying not to push. Trying to show him how much he was loved and supported.

Her thoughts strayed to Nick again, wondering if he would actually show up.

The chiming notes of her front doorbell tinkled and she froze for a moment as a million questions welled up inside her.

She opened the door and there he was, as tall and elegant as ever in a long black wool coat scattered with snowflakes. Her heart began tap-dancing when his gaze searched her face.

Had he leaned a little forward for a kiss? Had she?

“Merry Christmas.” He held out a slim, rectangular gift wrapped in gold with a deep maroon ribbon on top. “I’m afraid this isn’t much, but the stores closed early last night and there weren’t many options. I hope your family likes chocolates.”

“Of course they will.” She ushered him inside and hung his coat in the front coat closet.

At the sound of laughter wafting up the stairs, he stepped forward and drew her close for a swift, sweet kiss. “Your kids?”

“Nothing could make me happier than hearing them having fun together. It’s been so very long. I...um...told them I met a friend at the hospital who would be alone on Christmas, so I invited you.” She rolled her eyes. “Adam didn’t care, but I’m afraid Bree is more than a little curious.”

“That’s what we are, though. Just friends, right?” His voice was light, but there were questions in his eyes she couldn’t quite interpret.

At the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs, he stepped back.

“Adam and Bree, I’d like you to meet our dinner guest, Nick Jackson. I ran into him at the hospital, where he was visiting his daughter and new grandchild.”

Adam started to awkwardly extend his hand, then pulled it back and just nodded.

Bree cocked her head and looked back and forth between them before giving him a long, searching look.

No wonder.

No Minnesotan had such a deep tan in December unless they’d gone somewhere else. The South. The West Coast. Pricey tanning beds at a salon. *Or Hawaii.*

“I don’t think Mom has ever mentioned you before. Where are you from?”

“The northern suburbs of St. Paul, actually. Though I’ve been traveling for a while.”



“And where did—”

Lucy gave her a quelling look. “Bree and Adam, come help me put the food on the table. It’s time to eat.”

••••

NICK SAT BACK IN HIS chair, awed and grateful for this wonderful Christmas dinner.

Carrie had been the perfect companion, but her culinary skills had ended at frozen dinners and simple meats on the grill.

She would have been overwhelmed at the thought of making these incredible Swedish meatballs nestled in a savory, creamy gravy. The perfectly poached dilled salmon. Mashed potatoes like he’d never had them before. Butter sauteed fresh green beans.

And oh, my goodness—the light-as-air golden popovers that begged for a generous addition of softened butter.

“If I die tomorrow, I’ll die knowing I had the best Christmas dinner ever,” he exclaimed as he helped clear away plates and serving dishes. “Bar none. Is this your usual menu each year, Adam?”

The boy nodded and turned away. He’d been silent through most of the meal, though Nick had seen him wolf down two servings of everything and then go back for more.

“Mom does this every year.” Bree looked up from the plate she was scraping. “My friends were always mad because their parents wouldn’t let them eat here instead of at their own houses at Christmas.”

When the kitchen was clean, Lucy dusted off her hands and propped them on her hips. “Alrighty, everyone. Ready for dessert? Let’s go!”

Adam picked up a platter of colorful Christmas cookies and took them to the dining room table.

Bree carried in a platter of fragile, cylindrical Scandinavian krumkake and a heart-shaped creamy rice pudding with raspberry sauce, while Lucy followed with a

coconut cake covered with a cloud of fluffy frosting dusted with coconut.

She looked up at Nick and nodded toward the Keurig sitting on the counter. “Can you make a couple of cups of decaff for you and me?”

Once they were all at the table, she reached out to her left and right to take Adam and Bree’s hands, and Bree reached out to Nick.

“I know we all said grace before our meal, but I just want to add something more because I feel beyond blessed to have each one of you here.”

When they all bowed their heads, she started. “Thank you, Lord, for the food you have provided and for keeping us all safe and healthy despite adversity...and for helping us keep this family together no matter what happens. Amen.”

Nick caught Lucy’s eye across the table and knew she hadn’t just been referring to her own little family.

She was including him because of all that had happened in Hawaii and all that could have gone so terribly wrong.

That time with her still ran through his thoughts like a never-ending movie.

Seeing her joy and laughter over the smallest things. Her stubborn determination. Her awe over the endless beauty of the island that he’d been seeing for over six months without ever fully appreciating it.

He sometimes walked along the shore and thought he saw her just ahead in her gauzy pink beach coverup and flip-flops, but it never was her and he knew it never would be.

She’d made it clear that she was leaving and there was nothing further to discuss.

••••

WHEN THE KIDS WENT back downstairs to watch a re-run of A Christmas Story on TV, Lucy lifted her coffee cup and tipped her head toward the living room.

Lit only by burning logs in the fireplace and the sparkling lights on the Christmas tree, the room was warm and welcoming.

It cast a warm glow over them both as Nick settled on the leather sofa next to her and hooked an ankle over his opposite knee.

His gaze fell on the pile of opened gifts still under the tree. “It looks like you had a great Christmas.”

“We did. But those gifts are just a small part of it. The greatest blessing was having my kids together again like this to talk about all of our good memories from Christmases past, and about all of the love we share. I was afraid it had been lost.”

Nick rolled the back of his head against the sofa to look at her. “I wasn’t even going to celebrate Christmas. I figured it didn’t matter if I was in Hawaii alone. With Carrie gone, what was the point?”

“Oh, Nick, that’s so sad. I just can’t imagine.”

“Yeah. But then you came along and turned my thinking upside down.”

“I did?” she felt her pulse flutter.

“You woke up my heart.”

“*What?*”

He shifted his gaze back to the fire. “Dr. Bailey offered to sell me her vet clinic right after you left. A sweet deal impossible to pass up.”

Now, she felt her heart drop. “Oh.”

“But you once told me that Jenna would miss her mother forever. That she would deeply miss all of those wonderful bonding times she could have had with her mom, as a new mother herself.”

“It’s true.”

“I need to move back here, Lucy. I can’t replace the mother she lost. But I want to be a part of my daughter’s life

*and* my granddaughter's." His gaze locked on hers. "And I'm praying that I can have a chance to be a part of yours. What do you think? Can we give us another chance?"

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## EPILOGUE

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*Six months later*

Nick had moved back to Minnesota within a month after Christmas, bringing Sniper with him this time.

The pup had now grown to his full size, Nick said, at just eleven pounds, and he had leaped and twirled when he first saw Lucy again. He rarely let her out of his sight.

Now he was at her feet with a big, lopsided satin bow tied to his collar and a look of extreme embarrassment on his furry face.

Lucy watched Bree cuddle Jenna's six-month-old girl in her arms.

Even from across the small meadow, she could hear Bree singing sweet lullabies and see her swaying gently, as if she had soothed babies all her life.

Ever the guardian, Nick stood next to Bree, smiling down at his granddaughter's face. Then he looked at Lucy and strode toward her.

Lucy's heart overflowed whenever she saw what a wonderful, loving dad and grandfather he was.

And what a wonderful husband he would be.

"Did I tell you the good news?" Lucy linked her hand with his. "I got a message through that Petfinder Love Lost program. I finally heard about Sniper's owner."

"They don't want him back, do they?"

"The man who responded said Sniper belonged to his late mother. The day she died he ran out of the house and never came back. They've been worried about him ever since, hoping he was safe and well-fed. I told him Sniper has a good home with us. The very best. And he agreed."

Nick slid an arm around her waist and pulled her close. "That's wonderful news."

The wedding ceremony would be starting at sunset on this quiet beach along Lake Minnetonka, and the sun was already slipping low in the sky. Lucy could detect the wonderful aromas coming from the caterer's van parked nearby.

Just a few people would be here—Bree and Adam, Nick, his daughter's little family, and sweet old Harry. As a long-retired minister, he'd been delighted at the chance to officiate the wedding.

A harpist began playing off to one side. And then everyone gathered at the water's edge.

••••

LONG AFTER THE FOOD had been cleared away and everyone else had gone home, Nick stood with Lucy on the beach, listening to the gentle waves lapping against the shore.

“Not quite your big waves in Hawaii,” she teased.

“But these are a lot more familiar. This is where I grew up. Blazing autumn colors, heavy snow, spring flowers, lush summer grass. This is home.”

“Look!”

They both looked up at a meteor streaking across the sky past a heavy blanket of stars. A handful of them were far brighter, far more spectacular than the others.

“Seeing those stars feels like a blessing,” he said quietly. “When Carrie died, I was so angry at God because he hadn't saved her. It seemed like my prayers didn't matter. Yet now I can look back and see the way the prayers throughout my life *were* answered, but in God's perfect timing. And now he has brought me you.”

Lucy nodded, then turned into his arms and pulled him down to her level for a long, sweet kiss filled with love and hope for a future as bright as those stars.

••••

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Blessings,

Roxanne





## About the Author

Roxanne Rustand is the USA Today Bestselling, award-winning author of forty romantic suspense and heart-warming, emotional relationship novels for Superromance, Heartwarming, Everlasting, Love Inspired, Love Inspired Suspense, and sweet (Clean & Wholesome) romance for the e-book market.

At <https://www.roxannerustand.com/> you can read her blog, find links to buy books, and sign up for her monthly newsletter, which offers a chance at monthly prize drawings.

She's living her childhood dream on an acreage in the country with her husband, three horses, a golden retriever rescue, and six fluffy barn cats—a *much* smaller menagerie than when their three kids were still at home. Ranches, animals, and small-town life frequently find their way into her books.

Read more at [Roxanne Rustand's site](#).