

A Christmas Haunting
Hunt for Christmas
Legacy in Paradise

By

Kathi Daley

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Note to the Reader

Saying goodbye can be difficult, especially saying goodbye to characters we've come to know on an almost personal level. As a reader, I understand how difficult it is when a much-loved series comes to an end, but as an author, I realize that it is only through these endings that new beginnings are possible.

This year, I decided to write short Christmas stories as an epilogue of sorts to three series that have recently ended. All three stories are around twenty-five printed pages, and all three stories take place approximately a year after the last regular book in the series took place. Readers who have read the series that these stories were designed to wrap up will enjoy them the most, but anyone who might want to read the stories independently should enjoy them as well.

A Christmas Haunting - A Haunting by the Sea Christmas Short Story

Faced with a life-altering decision, Amanda is visited by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. Of course, in this case, all three ghosts are played by her alter ego, Alyson, who has a vested interest in ensuring that the decision Amanda makes will be the one which will allow them both to live their happily ever after.

Hunt for Christmas - A Sand and Sea Mystery Christmas Short Story

It's just a week until Christmas, and things are slow at Pope Investigations. Lani has been having a hard time finding the Christmas spirit until Kekoa brings her one last case before they break for the holidays. A woman wants to hire Pope Investigations to find an angel tree topper that was mistakenly donated to the local church five years ago. The angel was a gift to the woman's grandmother when she fled Germany nearly eighty years ago. At first, Lani is conflicted about taking on a case that appears to be impossible to solve, but then she realizes that a mystery such as this might very well provide the distraction she needs from her tangled emotions relating to the oh so sexy cowboy she's tried to forget but can't seem to live without.

Legacy in Paradise - A Tj Jensen Christmas Short Story

With Christmas just around the corner, Tj is faced with the task of finding the perfect gift for her rich husband, who already has everything. After a bit of thought, she comes up with the idea of a scrapbook chronicling the Collins family history. Kyle hadn't known he was a Collins until after Zachary Collins passed away and left him his entire estate. Being the sort of guy who's all about roots and family, Tj realizes that a gift of "family" really might turn out to be the best gift of all.

Enjoy and Merry Christmas,

Kathi

A Christmas Haunting

A Haunting by the Sea Christmas Short Story

I wasn't surprised when I opened my eyes and saw her hovering above me. I'd actually been expecting her for weeks. The time had come for Amanda Parker and Alyson Prescott to merge for the final time, and we both knew it. I'd considered bringing it up the last time she'd visited, but, in the end, I decided to wait until she took the initiative and reached out to me. I wasn't surprised she finally had, but what did surprise me was the fact that she'd come to me in the early morning hours of Christmas Eve.

"Alyson?" I said, sitting up, noticing for the first time that she wore an elf's costume and hat.

"It's time," she said, floating down toward the bed.

"I figured." I clicked the bedside lamp on. "You do realize it's the middle of the night, don't you? It's twelve forty-five a.m. on December twenty-fourth, to be exact. Today is Christmas Eve. It's going to be a busy day. I'm really not sure why you felt we needed to do this now."

She shrugged. "Now is the time I've been waiting for."

I slid my legs to the side of the bed, being careful not to disturb my two dogs, Tucker and Sunny, who were sleeping in dog beds placed in front of the gas fireplace. Using the remote, I clicked the flame on, being careful not to wake my cat, Shadow, who was sleeping on the pillow next to mine.

"Okay," I yawned. "I'll play along. Why have you been waiting 'for now' to come to me?"

She giggled, twirling around the room like a ballerina in one of those old fashion music boxes. I realized at that moment how very much I was going to miss her spontaneity once we merged for the final time. I continued to watch and wait until she eventually settled onto the bed next to Shadow and began to speak. "I know this is going to sound corny and totally cliché, but tonight you are going to be visited by three ghosts."

I rolled my eyes. "You're kidding. Right? Tell me you're kidding."

“Fraid not, big sister.” She floated across the room and looked out the window. “I know that ‘traditionally’ we’d do this early on Christmas morning, but I also know you’ll be busy tonight, so I figured we’d get this out of the way now.”

“Okay. If you insist,” I said with hesitation. “What do you want me to do?”

“It’s cold out. It might even snow. You should grab a sweater.”

“Sweater?” I asked, glancing toward the window where Alyson was still hovering. “Where are we going?”

“I think the appropriate question really should be: when are we going?”

“When?”

She left the window and floated over to the Christmas tree my boyfriend, Trevor, had helped me set up in the corner of the room. As if by magic, the lights clicked on, providing a warmth and color that complimented the candles and evergreens on the mantel quite nicely. “Like I said,” she eventually answered, “tonight you will be visited by three ghosts. Of course, the twist to this particular haunting is that all three ghosts will be played by me.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “One ghost playing three roles is more efficient, but we do have quite a few years to visit, so we really should get going.”

I looked down at the leggings and tank-top I slept in. “If we have to do this, I’ll need to get dressed.”

Alyson sat down on the floor between the two dogs who’d awakened and were looking at me with questions in their eyes. I knew they couldn’t see Alyson and was sure the dogs were wondering why I was up and talking to myself in the middle of the night.

“Take all the time you need,” Alyson replied, “as long as you’re ready to go by the strike of one. That’s the way it works, you know. The clock strikes one, and we take a magical journey into your past.”

“Oh, good grief,” I said, pulling on jeans, a long sleeve t-shirt, a heavy sweatshirt, shoes, and socks. “I should have known you wouldn’t keep it simple. I’d hoped you’d just pop in and suggest a bottle of champagne to toast our permanent union, and that would be that.”

Her look grew serious. “I would do that, but I can’t go until I know.”

“Know what?” I asked.

She shrugged. “You’ll see.” She held out a hand. “Grab on.”

“I can’t take your hand. You’re a ghost, or at least you have a ghostlike body.”

“You can take my hand this one time,” she insisted.

I reached out and took the hand that felt warm and solid. “Are you human?”

“Sort of. Well, not really.” She blew out a breath. “Just hang on.”

“Okay. I’m hanging on.”

“Now, close your eyes. This next part is tricky.”

I closed my eyes and felt the warmth of the room fall away from me. When I dared to open my eyes, I was standing right back in the same bedroom we'd just left; only the bedroom I stood in was the bedroom that had existed before the renovation.

I looked at my teenage self, sleeping in a new bed placed in the center of a room dominated by scuffed floors and faded wallpaper. I remembered the frightened girl who'd lived in the dilapidated house on the bluff and felt myself cringe.

"That's me," I whispered. "Mom and I had just moved into the house after arriving in Cutter's Cove. It was such a strange time in my life. My best friend had been murdered, I'd been forced into witness protection, and the life I'd known in New York had been completely stripped away." I watched as the girl who'd been going by the name Alyson continued to sleep. "I'd been terrified about what life had in store for me. Everything was different. Nothing was the same. I really didn't know how I'd make it through even a single day."

"Until this night," Alyson said.

"Until this night," I whispered as the girl in the bed sat up and looked around. I waited as teenage Alyson called out for Barkley, who was the ghost she'd been certain, I'd been certain, was haunting the house. I watched as she got up, pulled on a robe, and slipped into the hallway, softly calling out to him so as not to disturb her mother, who was sleeping in the next room. I could remember every heartbeat, every shallow breath as I'd followed the gossamer image to the room at the top of the stairs. It was this night that my life had changed forever. I'd gone from being a terrified teenager whose life had been totally torn apart to a fascinated teenager who could not only see ghosts but could communicate with them as well.

"After Barkley showed you the secrets held within the attic, everything changed for us," Alyson said.

"Yes. That did seem to be the turning point. Or at least it was one of them. I remember how I could feel this sense of the continuation of all things. The past merged with the present that seemed to flow endlessly into the future. For the first time since Tiffany had died, I somehow knew in my soul that everything was as it was meant to be. I knew I'd find a way to go on, and I knew my life, even as it was then, was worth living."

"Barkley opened a door for you. A door that only you were meant to pass through." Alyson grabbed my hand, and suddenly, I was standing in the hallway of the local high school, looking into the science room through the window in the door.

"This is the day I met Mac and Trevor," I said.

"This was the day that everything that had been fragmented in our lives began to come together and really make sense," she added.

I remembered how I'd stood at that door, looking in through that window, studying all the students in the room as I tried to figure out where to sit. I knew that the choice I made at that moment might very well define my life in Cutter's Cove from that point forward. I figured that whoever I sat next to would most likely become my lab partner, which meant we'd spend time together, which hopefully meant we'd become friends. Looking back, I thanked the powers that be that I'd ended up sitting in the empty seat next to Mackenzie Reynolds, who happened to be sitting in front of her best friend, Trevor Johnson.

“We were right to choose them,” Alyson said. “The three of us were a team from that first day. We went through a lot together. We met with hardship and faced tragedy and pain. We solved crimes and never, ever forgot that the power of the triad is so much stronger than the power any one person might have. We were there for each other. For always and forever.”

“It was the best choice we ever made,” I agreed.

I felt my breath catch. It was so strange to go back to that first day and relive everything again. “It’s really awesome to have the chance to revisit this critical moment in my life. If I’d chosen to sit anywhere else, who knows how things would have worked out. But again, I have to ask, why are we doing this?”

“I told you. Before I go, I need to know.”

“Know what?” I asked, yet again.

Alyson didn’t answer. She simply grabbed my hand and pulled me forward to that first Halloween I’d spent in the small town by the sea. Mac, Trevor, and I were at Dooley’s Pumpkin Farm, gathering pumpkins for the annual haunted hayride.

I smiled. “Now, that was a fun day.”

Alyson hugged my arm. “It was a fun day. We hiked up and down that hill looking for the perfect pumpkins for the hayride. It was exhausting but rewarding. Do you remember how much fun the three of us had carving all those pumpkins?”

My smile softened. “I do remember. Trevor picked out a bunch of pumpkins in really odd shapes, and we had the hardest time trying to figure out how to bring them to life. That was such a fun Halloween despite the gypsy curse.”

“And almost dying,” Alyson reminded me.

“Well, yes, there was that.”

“The reality is that while your life improved tenfold once you met Mac and Trev, becoming friends with them also seemed to be the catalyst that led us into some pretty dicey situations.”

“True. But, I think we both know it was us who drug them into danger and not the other way around.”

“I suppose.”

Again, I found myself being propelled through time. This time, I found myself in the damp cave where my friends and I had gone searching for an ancient relic. “I wonder if it’s still there,” I said aloud. “On the altar where we left it.”

“I can say with certainty that it’s still there all these years later. We did a good thing returning it to the place in time and space where it was always meant to be.”

“Yeah,” I said, laughing as I watched teenage Trevor place the football he’d brought on the altar with the other items we’d chosen to leave as an offering. “I think that might have been my favorite mystery.”

“It certainly was one of the trickiest to solve.”

“Can we go back to the library? To Booker?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I miss him too, but we have a lot of ground to cover. I think we really need to go.”

I looked Alyson in the eye. “Why do we need to go? I know you keep saying that you need to know, but I really don’t understand what it is you need to know.”

“All in good time.” She grabbed my hand again, and this time when we landed, we were standing in the middle of a field of snow.

I grinned as a sleigh with three passengers came into view. “That’s Trev, Mac, and me on our very first Christmas together. Trev wanted to make it special for me, so he rented a sleigh.” I watched as I clung to Trevor’s arm, my head resting on his shoulder. “It was freezing cold, but the three of us had so much fun. That whole Christmas was so much fun. It was my first Christmas in witness protection, and I was feeling sort of blue, but it turned out to be one of the best Christmases of my life.”

“Remember that ridiculous elf outfit we had to wear?” Alyson giggled.

I laughed. “I do remember. I was horrified when I was asked to fill in for the girl who was out sick, but Tucker got to be a reindeer, which he loved doing, and it was fun to volunteer with Santa Trevor. Looking back, wearing that ridiculous costume was totally worth it.”

“Although, if you remember, that particular Christmas didn’t start out quite so good,” Alyson reminded me.

“I remember.” I closed my eyes and remembered back. “The Ferris wheel the three of us were riding broke down, and I almost fell to my death.”

“But Trevor saved us.”

“He did.” I hung on as Alyson took us to that horrifying moment. “I still don’t know where he found the strength to do the impossible, but he pulled us back into the broken car and hung onto us until we got back down to the bottom. We really should have died that day.”

“But we didn’t,” Alyson said.

I smiled. “No, we didn’t. You know, I think I knew even back then.”

“We did know,” Alyson said with conviction. “We knew we loved him, but we weren’t ready to admit it. We were hiding from our past and scared to commit to anyone. We were young and on the run, and had a reason to be wary, but now... now the reasons to avoid a commitment, which we clung to in the past no longer exist.”

I turned away from the memory of that perfect Christmas and looked directly at my alter ego. “I can tell that you are building up to something. Something big. Why don’t you just tell me what you’re after?”

“Like I said, all in good time.”

With that, Alyson grabbed my hand, and once again, we were propelled through time.

“Where are we?” I asked once we’d stopped moving.

“I know you must recognize the memory.”

A tear slid down my cheek. “This was the last time the three of us were together before I left Cutter’s Cove to return to New York.”

“Trevor and Mac were so upset that you were leaving, and you promised to call every day, but you didn’t. You promised to come back and visit all the time, but you didn’t. Not even once. You promised never ever to forget them no matter what, and yet you did.”

“I didn’t forget them,” I choked out. “It was just easier to get on with my life in New York rather than clinging to a past I was no longer a part of.” I glanced at Alyson, who really was the best part of me. “I didn’t mean to cut them out entirely. I really did plan to come back.”

“He mourned for you.” Alyson drug me through time again to an empty beach on a foggy day. I’d never been privy to this scene before. Trevor stood, staring out toward the dark sea, tears streaming down his face. “He mourned for you for much longer than anyone should have,” she whispered. “He loved you before you realized you loved him. You owned his heart, and when you left, you took it with you.”

“I didn’t know,” I whispered in return.

“You didn’t care. Not really. Not once you got back to the life that you’d left behind. You didn’t mourn for Trevor, you didn’t mourn for Mac, and you didn’t mourn for me.”

Tears began to flow freely down my face. “I knew I had to move on, so I tried not to think about Mac and Trevor. I honestly didn’t know that I’d left you behind.” I took an unsteady breath. “How could I? I guess I knew that I felt different after I left, but it never entered my mind that I might have literally left part of myself behind.”

“I knew, and I missed us every day.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Any of you.”

“And yet, the legacy continues.”

I frowned. “What do you mean by that? I’m not going anywhere. I know that the fact that the two of us must merge for the final time is going to take some getting used to, but you will be part of me. Forever,” I emphasized. “I’m not abandoning you.”

“I’m not talking about me.”

“Who then?”

“All in good time.”

This time when Alyson pulled me through time, she brought us to the first time I’d run into Trevor after coming back to Cutter’s Cove to help solve my good friend, Booker’s, murder. I watched as I walked into Pirates Pizza, never expecting in a million years that I’d find Trevor there. I watched as his face lit up when he saw me. I watched as he hugged me tight, and I watched his expression change from joy to relief as he squeezed me even tighter. Had he really been waiting for me all along?

“Do you remember that first antiquing trip?” Alyson asked as she dragged me to the antique store where Trevor helped me pick out a bed.

“I do remember. I was so surprised to find out that Trevor had grown into a man while I’d been away. He owned his own business and a home on the beach. He knew about antiques and refurbishing furniture. The boy who’d been such a good friend to me had grown into a man I could love.” I paused. “A man I do love,” I emphasized.

“Keep that thought in mind,” Alyson said as the elf costume and hat she’d been wearing turned into a Santa costume and hat, almost as if by magic.

“The Ghost of Christmas Present, I presume.”

She nodded. “This part won’t be as easy, so hang on tight.”

Once again, she pulled me through time. This time, I found myself in a jewelry store, watching an adult Trevor talking to the jeweler. It appeared he was having the perfect ring designed for the woman he loved. He looked so happy. So determined. He’d put a lot of thought into exactly what he wanted, and when he couldn’t find what he’d dreamed of, he’d had it custom made. I watched as his bright blue eyes mirrored the love he felt as he described every detail to the man who he’d selected to make the ring. I watched as he insisted on being involved and having input into every step of the process. And then I watched when he picked the ring up and held it like a newborn baby. As he held it up to the light, the love in his eyes spoke of permanence, of family, of destiny long in coming that would finally be fulfilled.

“He’s going to propose,” I whispered.

“You’ve suspected as much for months,” Alyson pointed out.

“Yes, I guess I have. I just hoped Trevor wasn’t this far along in the process.” I glanced at Alyson. “This is why we’re here. You think I’m going to say no.”

“Are you?”

I paused. “I honestly don’t know. I love Trevor. I do. But we’ve only been officially dating a year. I’m not sure I’m ready to make that sort of commitment yet.”

“He’ll ask, and you’ll answer. That answer will make all the difference.”

“Do you know what I’ll say?”

She shook her head. “The future is fluid. He won’t ask until tonight, and you won’t answer until tonight, so I can’t know until tonight how it will all turn out.”

“You think I should say yes.”

“I think you should understand that you are standing at a crossroads. The decision you make will affect us for the rest of our lives. I think you should take a minute and really consider what you are being asked and who is doing the asking.”

I was about to answer when Alyson pulled me forward through time to the florist, the grocer, and my favorite coastal winery. I watched as Trevor made each decision with thought and precision. It almost seemed as if his life depended on the outcome of each choice. I was getting dizzy with the speed at which Alyson was showing me these things when we finally landed in Trevor’s workshop. Based on the clothes he was wearing, I was willing to bet that the scene I was watching had taken place after he’d left my house earlier this evening. I’d asked him to stay, but Trevor had said there were a few last-minute things he needed to take care of. I supposed this was what he meant.

“That’s my Christmas gift, isn’t it?” I asked as he polished what looked to be a hope chest.

“It would be wrong to tell and spoil the fun, but I think you know.”

I watched as Trevor continued to polish the wood until it gleamed. Once the shine was absolutely perfect, he opened the lid and began setting items he was taking from a box inside the hope chest.

“That’s the stuffed bear he won at the carnival that first Christmas we knew each other,” I whispered as he tied a new red bow around its neck and gently placed it in the hope chest. “I slept with that bear every night until I moved back to New York.” I felt my chest tighten. “I’d forgotten that I’d left it behind.”

“It seems to me that I remember you leaving pretty much everything behind,” Alyson pointed out. “I don’t seem to remember you even taking your clothes.”

“No, I guess I didn’t,” I agreed, as I watched Trevor fold his letterman jacket and set it inside the hope chest. If there was one thing about teenage Trevor, he’d excelled at every sport.

“Oh look, the elf hat I wore and the reindeer antlers Tucker wore when we volunteered with Trevor at the Santa House.”

“Isn’t that the map we found that first Thanksgiving that had led to a lost treasure?” Alyson asked.

“I had no idea he’d kept all this stuff.” My heart ached as I watched him pull each item out of the box, pause to really look at it, and then lovingly set it inside the hope chest. While I’d taken nothing with me when I left, Trevor had saved a lifetime of memories, our memories, from the first day we’d met.

“It looks like even if you aren’t sure now after all these years, Trevor was sure even back then.”

Alyson was right. How was it that I’d had no idea how he felt?

I watched as he added mementos from our time together since my return, which included the pumpkin headband he’d bought for me this past Halloween and the complimentary t-shirt from the cruise from hell we’d taken together a year ago. Trevor had kept the first collar we’d bought for Sunny after we’d found her and was now lovingly placing it in the hope chest with the other items he’d been hanging onto. I couldn’t believe that he’d kept it. I wondered if he had Tucker and Coop’s old collars as well.

I watched as he continued his task with reverence and determination before finally shutting the lid and topping the whole thing off with a giant red bow.

“I guess that concludes our tour of Christmas present,” Alyson said.

“So, are you going to show me Christmas future now?” I asked, not even sure that I wanted to see it.

“I am.” Her Santa outfit and hat changed to an angel gown and halo. “As I mentioned before, the future is not fixed, so the images I will share are variations of what could be.”

In an instant, we were in Trevor’s beach house. Since Mac was spending Christmas Eve with her fiancé, Tyson, in Portland, and my mom and her new husband, Donovan, didn’t plan to come to Cutter’s Cove until the week after Christmas, Trevor and I would be celebrating the night before Christmas on our own this year. The scene Alyson transported me into was Trevor cooking what I was sure would be the best meal I would ever eat.

“I guess I must have decided to just meet him at his house,” I said. “We discussed options this past evening, but we never did decide.”

“This version of the future meeting at the beach house is exactly what you decided to do.”

I watched as Trevor took his time arranging the flowers and candles. I wasn't sure that I'd ever done anything with the same determination and attention to detail as he brought to the simple acts of lighting candles, selecting music, and adjusting the ornaments on the tree just so. There was a large object covered with a blanket under the tree that I assumed was the hope chest.

Trevor whistled as he worked on both the setting and the meal. Every few minutes, he'd take the ring out of his pocket, hold it up, and smile.

“He looks so happy,” I whispered.

“Of course, he's happy. He's on the verge of asking the woman he's loved from the moment he met her to finally make the commitment to spend the rest of her life with him.”

I watched as I arrived, still having no idea how I was going to answer. I watched as Trevor greeted me with a kiss, poured me a glass of wine, and then served me the most delicious meal anyone had ever made in the history of all romantic dinners. I watched as he took me into his arms after we enjoyed the dessert he'd prepared, and I watched as he got down on one knee and asked me to be his wife. I watched as tears flowed down my face as I hesitated. I didn't say no, but I didn't say yes either. I watched the light fade from his eyes as I said something about needing time to think things over. He slipped the ring he held back into his pocket as I made an excuse and left.

“I can't watch this,” I said.

“You must. You need to know before you decide.”

Alyson forced me to watch as Trevor stood alone on the deck and watched me drive away. He stood for the longest time, staring at the empty space that my car had occupied before turning and walking out onto the beach. For what seemed like hours, he just stood there, staring at the sea as a river of tears rolled down his cheeks.

“That's enough,” I said. “I don't need to see any more. If this is what I did or will do or whatever, then I messed up. I need to figure out how to fix this.”

“So, if this is to be your future, would you wish to do things differently?”

I hesitated.

“You still aren't sure,” she accused.

“I'm still not sure if I should marry Trevor, but I am sure that the Amanda in the scene we just witnessed handled things badly.”

“I see.”

“Don't look at me like that. Marrying someone is a huge decision. Taking time to really think things through makes sense.”

She just stared at me. I really didn't want to talk about this any longer, but I supposed if you couldn't be honest with yourself, then who could you be honest with?

“I’m scared,” I finally said. “I love Trevor, and I want to spend my life with him, but what if something unexpected happens?”

“I can guarantee you that something unexpected will happen,” she answered. “A lot of unexpected things happen during the course of a lifetime.”

“I don’t mean something little. I mean something big.”

“Like witnessing a murder and being thrust into witness protection?” Alyson asked.

“Yes, something exactly like that.”

“Then you’ll deal with it together. That’s what married couples do.”

“Our dad didn’t,” I reminded her. “When he found out that we had to leave New York, he chose his old life over us. He chose to stay behind even though it meant never seeing us again.”

Alyson took my hand in hers. “Trevor isn’t Dad. Our dad was shallow and self-absorbed. He cared about Mom’s money and the prestige that came from being married to her more than he ever cared about her. We know that. We also know that Trevor would follow us to the moon and back.”

I supposed I did know that.

“Can you show me my Christmas future? Far into the future. Not just tomorrow, but maybe ten years from now?”

“Which future would you like to see? The one where you say yes, or the one where you say no?”

“Show me what will happen if I say yes. I already know what a future where I say no will look like. I don’t need to see a lonely old woman with seventeen cats who never found happiness because she let her one chance at love slip away. I want to see how it will all turn out if I take a chance and say yes.”

Alyson furrowed her brow. “No. I think I’ll show you your future if you say no.” She held out a hand. I closed my eyes, took a breath, and hung on for dear life.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself back in New York. I wasn’t a lonely old woman with seventeen cats. In fact, based on the clothes I wore and the office I was sitting in, I’d say I was a successful businesswoman. I didn’t look miserable and lonely. In fact, it appeared as if I was pretty darn busy.

“Ms. Parker, you have a call on line one,” a voice said over the intercom.

“Thanks. This call might take a while. Please call Jason and tell him I’ll need to push our lunch back an hour.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Confirm my flight and hotel reservation for Paris. Based on the conversation I had with my new client this morning, it looks like the trip and the deal are on.”

“Okay. I’m on it.”

I picked the telephone receiver up. “Paul, how are you?”

I looked at Alyson. “That’s me?”

She nodded. "This is your future if you tell Trevor no. You'll find it awkward to live in the same town as the man you try to be friends with, so you decide to sell the house and return to New York. It will be hard at first. You'll move in with your mother, but as time goes by, you'll realize you need to move on, so you'll throw yourself into your work. As you can see, it all seems to work out."

"Yes," I said. "I can see that." I continued to watch the future me. "Am I happy?"

"As happy as someone with half a soul can be."

"So, I'm not happy."

She shrugged. "You're content. You have a full life. You have friends and a pretty wonderful guy in your life. But you don't have Trevor, and you don't have me."

My gaze narrowed. "I don't have you?"

"Never forget that the part of you who is based in magic can never leave Cutter's Cove. When you eventually choose to leave, you will be choosing to leave me behind as well."

I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths. If anything, I felt more confused and conflicted than I had when this journey began. I thought Alyson was here to help me decide. "Okay, so show me my future if I say yes," I eventually said.

She hesitated.

"Fair is fair," I argued. "So far, you've only shown me one outcome. Show me what will happen if I say yes."

She crossed her arms across her chest. "Before I do, why don't you tell me what you think our future will look like if we say yes."

"How would I know that? If I knew how things would turn out, I wouldn't be so conflicted."

"You know." Alyson pulled me close and hugged me tightly. "Deep down in your soul, you know. We both do. If you want to know how your life will turn out, then you simply need to allow yourself to know. Just close your eyes and let yourself see. Let the future play out in your imagination."

"Are you sure that will work?"

"I'm sure." She squeezed me even tighter, so tightly, in fact, that it felt as if she'd never let go. "It's time for me to go," she eventually said.

"But I'm not sure I'm ready for you to go. I still have so many questions. I need to know what to do."

"I know this is cliché, but follow your heart. Follow our heart," Alyson corrected, and with that, she was gone.

I glanced at the clock. It was three a.m. I guess Alyson really did try to stick to the script and timeline she'd shown up with.

Just close your eyes and let yourself see.

I let her words filter through my mind as I laid down on the bed, snuggled up with Shadow, and closed my eyes. I willed my body and mind to relax, and I willed the future I wanted so

much to experience to unfold. At first, the images in my mind were blurry, but the longer I laid there, the clearer the images became.

“Is Santa real?” A little girl with long blond ringlets asked as we sat on the floor together in front of a tall, brightly lit tree.

“Do you believe in magic?” I asked as we sorted through the boxes we were artfully arranging underneath the Christmas tree.

“I do,” the girl’s bright blue eyes seemed to dance with merriment as she answered. “You know I can see ghosts the same as you. But Santa isn’t a ghost. He’s a man.” She paused. “Or maybe an angel. I’m not really clear on that. Hunter and Haden said that Santa is made up. They said he isn’t real and that only babies believe in him.”

I tucked a lock of Alyson’s long hair behind her ear. She looked just like me... just like us. “Hunter and Haden are special. Very, very special, each in their own way, but they don’t have the magic in their souls that we have. They don’t believe because they can’t, but we will never lose that ability.”

My beautiful daughter smiled. “Thanks, Mom. I do believe in Santa. I’m sorry the boys can’t. They really are missing out on a lot.”

I laughed. “Yes, they are, but like Daddy, the sun rises and sets around football in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball in the spring for them. Sports might not be magic in the same way as seeing ghosts is magic, but I suspect the twins are pretty happy with their lot in life.” I glanced at the clock. “I need to finish dinner. Mac and Ty will be here with Jessica at any minute.”

Alyson smiled. “She’s so cute. All that red hair just like her mommy.”

“She is pretty cute,” I agreed. “Do you want to help me in the kitchen?”

“I do.”

“That’s good because you not only inherited my ability to see ghosts but Daddy’s knack with a recipe.”

“Why isn’t he cooking?” She slipped her hand into mine.

“I guess the boys had some last-minute Christmas shopping to take care of, so Daddy took them to the mall in Portland. They’re going to pick Grandma and Donovan up at the airport, but they’ll be home in plenty of time for dinner.”

“Are Grandma and Donovan staying through Christmas?”

“They’ll be here for two whole weeks.”

“Oh, good! I want them to meet the new puppy. Grandma is going to love him.”

“She is,” I agreed. “She’ll think it’s very cool that we named the puppy Tucker after the first Tucker who lived in this house all those years ago.”

“I wish that I could have met that Tucker.” She climbed up on a stool at the counter. “He sounds like the best dog ever.”

“He was the best dog ever. He was my first dog, and I loved him very much. But at least you got to meet Shadow, and he’s a pretty awesome cat.”

She smiled. "I'm really happy that magical cats live forever."

I guess I must have fallen asleep at some point since the sun was high in the sky when I next opened my eyes. I slipped out of bed and hugged both dogs as Shadow, my magical cat, jumped on my head in an apparent attempt to let me know he was looking for his breakfast.

"Okay, I'm up," I said as I pulled on a robe. "It is Christmas Eve, you know. People sleep in on Christmas Eve."

"Meow." Shadow trotted out the door and down the stairs. I followed behind so I could let the dogs out, feed the cat and dogs, and make coffee.

Once the animals were settled, I picked my phone up and looked at my messages. I smiled as I read a text from Trevor letting me know he was looking forward to our evening together and that after thinking about it, he'd decided it might be easier if I just came to his place rather than him picking me up. I texted him back to let him know his plan was fine with me and that I looked forward to our night together too.

"Thank you," I whispered to Alyson after hitting send. She might not be visible, but she wasn't gone. She always had been and always would be a part of me. "I know what to do," I assured her as I let my mind wander back to my dream about the perfect little girl who'd been waiting for me to finally commit to the man who I knew, in my heart, I'd always loved as much as he'd always loved me.

The End

Hunt for Christmas

A Sand and Sea Christmas Short Story

“Naia Makena’s teenage daughter has been located and returned to her family. It appears that all our cases have been closed in time for Christmas,” my father, Keanu Pope, announced as he began gathering his belongings to leave for the day.

“Actually,” I said, “we did have a woman call and inquire about our willingness to track down an antique angel that has gone missing.”

“Antique angel?” Dad asked.

“Lani is talking about a tree topper,” my roommate, best friend, cousin, and business associate, Kekoa, explained. “I know that finding lost objects isn’t normally the sort of thing we do, but this particular case seems important, so I told the woman I’d talk to you both about it.”

Personally, when Kekoa had mentioned that we had a case in need of solving, I’d been thrilled. I was having a hard time getting into Christmas this year, no matter how hard I tried. Having a case to focus on, even if it was a missing object and not a murder or missing person case, seemed much like a godsend.

“Halia Oliana, the woman requesting our services, seems to have a good reason for going to so much trouble to track down this item,” I jumped in. “According to Halia, this will be her grandmother, Olga’s, one-hundredth Christmas, and because of Olga’s declining health, it will most likely be her last. Halia wanted to make this a special holiday for her grandmother. I guess she was forced to move into an assisted living facility five years ago and hasn’t really been happy since. After a bit of negotiation, Halia was able to get permission to have an artificial Christmas tree in her grandmother’s room. She brought a box of her grandmother’s old ornaments to the care facility so she could pick out the items she wanted to display. Unfortunately, when they sorted through the box, the Christmas ornament her grandmother most wanted to display was missing.”

“The angel,” Dad said.

Kekoa picked up the conversational thread. “The angel is actually a tree topper that Olga brought with her from Germany when she fled the country as World War II was just getting underway. She was nineteen at the time, and except for her grandmother, she was completely alone in the world. Her family was killed in a random act of violence and her grandmother could see that things were deteriorating, so she searched for and found passage for Olga from Germany to the United States. On the day Olga boarded the ship, her grandmother gave her the angel. She told Olga she would most likely never see her again, but that she loved her, and she was giving her the angel to keep her safe on her journey. She told her she needed to be brave and strong and never to look back, and according to Halia, that’s exactly what her grandmother did.”

“I guess that is pretty special,” Dad admitted.

“It really is,” I agreed. “According to Halia, Olga kept the angel close at hand, and every year, she would place her in a position of honor atop the family Christmas tree. When the family decided that Olga could no longer live on her own five years ago, they had her admitted to an assisted care facility. Until then, this tradition had never been broken.”

“The facility has a community Christmas tree in the gathering area, but having trees in the resident’s rooms is frowned upon,” Kekoa jumped in. “Halia pulled some strings and convinced the staff to make an exception. In hindsight, doing so has only brought to light the fact that the angel was not in the box with the other tree ornaments as Halia believed.”

“So she wants us to find it,” Dad said. “Does she have any idea what might have happened to it?”

“Actually, she does,” Kekoa answered. “Halia told me that she donated a lot of her grandmother’s stuff to the local church when she sold her house. Halia called the church to inquire about the angel, but the woman she spoke to was new. She told Halia that a lot of the items donated were sold at the yard sales the church holds several times a year in order to raise funds for special programs. She didn’t know for certain that the angel had been sold in this manner, but she did say that if the person accepting the donation at the time had decided to keep the angel, she would be stored with all the other keepsakes in the church attic. Halia hasn’t had time to look, but she said we were free to do so.”

“So, is this woman willing to pay us to look through boxes?” Dad asked.

“She is,” Kekoa answered. “I quoted her our regular hourly rate, which she agreed to. This seems to be very important to her.”

Dad looked at me. “I told your mother that I’d take some time off over the holidays, and I really think it’s important to keep my word and do so. However, if the two of you want to look for this angel, you have my blessing.” Dad picked his briefcase up. “Will I be seeing you both for Christmas Eve dinner?”

“We’ll be there,” I promised as he walked out the front door and into the already dark parking lot.

“So, what do you think?” Kekoa asked. “Should I call the woman back and tell her we’ll take the case? It’s just five days until Christmas, so time is of the essence.”

“I’m willing. I can even start this evening if the woman is available to be interviewed.”

“I’ll call her and set it up. I’ll even go with you.”

“I thought you had a date with Brad.”

Brad was Kekoa’s boyfriend. He worked with my brother, Jason, at the Honolulu Police Department, and it seemed as if the two of them had gotten serious over the past few months. In fact, the last time we spoke about it, Kekoa had mentioned that the two of them had plans for every evening until Christmas.

“I did, but I guess there’s some sort of flu going around, so a lot of the officers at HPD have called in sick. Brad is working double shifts the next few days, so if you want to take on this case, I’m totally in to help out.”

“Okay. Call Halia and set up an interview. We don’t have a lot of time, and it doesn’t sound like we have a lot to go on, but we’ll do what we can.” I sighed as I looked out the window at the clear, dark night. “At least someone should have their Christmas wish come true,” I whispered so quietly that there was no way Kekoa could hear me.

Kekoa called Halia, who agreed to meet us in an hour. We decided to run back to the condo we shared to grab a bite to eat since neither of us had gotten around to having lunch that day. When we arrived, the lights were on in condo number four, which had been empty for months and months.

“It looks like we’re getting a new neighbor,” I said.

“Yeah,” Kekoa agreed, smiling, while at the same time seeming to struggle to contain the smile. “Elva told me that there was someone new moving in.”

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

Kekoa slipped her key in the lock of unit one, which was the unit we shared.

“Nothing is going on,” she said, opening the door.

“I’ve known you my whole life, and I can tell when something’s going on.” I turned the light on.

Kekoa tossed her purse on the dining table. “What could possibly be going on?”

I opened the refrigerator. “I’m not sure, but I recognize that half-smile of yours.” I pulled out the ingredients for sandwiches. “If I had to guess, this new neighbor is good looking and single, and you and Elva have cooked up some sort of matchmaking scheme even though I’ve told you a million times that I’m not interested in being matched.”

“There’s no matchmaking going on, I promise.” Kekoa held both hands up. “I know that you’ve been struggling with the way things were left with Luke and that you need time to reconcile all those feelings before moving on.”

Luke Austin, the love of my life, was supposed to marry me this past summer, but he got stuck in Texas, helping with the family ranch after his father passed away. I hadn’t seen him in almost a year and hadn’t spoken to him in months. When he’d first gone home, he called every day, but as time wore on, and it became more and more apparent that his short trip would most likely become permanent, we’d basically drifted further and further apart. I knew Luke loved me, and I loved him, but there was no way our relationship could survive with us living on different landmasses, so my only option, it seemed, was to let him go. Of course, knowing that letting him go was the right thing to do and actually doing it were two different things.

“I totally understand that dealing with complex feelings can take time,” she added.

“I know you do.” After Kekoa’s boyfriend, Cam, had decided to move to LA, she’d been a total wreck, but then she met Brad and had been happier than I’d ever see her. Maybe there was hope for happiness in my future as well, but unlike Kekoa, who’d made the decision to move on, I wasn’t quite there yet. “It looks like we’re out of spicy mustard. Is regular okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Why don’t you take Sandy out, and I’ll make the sandwiches,” Kekoa suggested. “We can eat them on the way. I don’t want to be late.”

I did as Kekoa suggested and took my dog, Sandy, out for a short run along the beach. I usually took him to work with me, but today had been an odd day with a lot of running around, so I’d left him at home. As we passed condo number four, Sandy began yipping and wagging his tail.

“Does the new neighbor have a dog?” I asked, suspecting as much based on Sandy’s happy wiggle.

The unit was dark, and the blinds were pulled, but it seemed as if someone had begun the moving in process. Maybe I’d have the chance to meet them the following day.

By the time I returned to the condo, Kekoa was ready to go. I turned the TV on for Sandy and promised not to be any longer than need be. I really did feel bad about leaving him home alone, but there were times when leaving him at home was really the only option.

“Where does our new client live?” I asked as we headed west and then south.

“Wahiawa. I have the address if you want to punch it into the GPS on your phone.”

I did as Kekoa suggested since she was driving.

“I guess we’ll get as much information as we can this evening and then plan to dedicate the entire day tomorrow following up on leads. Hopefully, they’ll take us where we need to go.”

“I know it’s a longshot, but this seems important,” Kekoa said. “I’m glad you agreed to take on the case.”

I shrugged. “It does seem like a worthwhile case, and I suppose I do need a distraction. I guess you can tell that I haven’t been in the Christmas spirit this year.”

“I’ve noticed,” Kekoa said. “Maybe finding the angel will help with that as well.”

After we arrived at the address our new client had given Kekoa, we parked at the curb and walked up to the house. A middle-aged woman answered the door and invited us in. Her home was lovely, as were many of the homes in this area. She showed us into a room that appeared to be a family room and asked us to take a seat, then offered us iced tea and thanked us for coming.

“I know that tracking down a Christmas tree topper isn’t the type of case you usually take on, so I appreciate your willingness to do so,” she began. “I really want this Christmas to be special for Grandma, and I know it won’t be if I can’t find the angel.”

“You said that you believe that the angel was last stored in the attic with the other tree ornaments,” I said.

She nodded. “Grandma is a bit of a packrat. After we decided that she really needed to be in assisted living, my cousin and I went through the attic. I thought I saved all the Christmas

decorations, but I didn't sort through each and every box to make certain I had them all. When I had the idea to set up the tree in Grandma's room, I decided to use her old ornaments, but the angel wasn't in the Christmas boxes. I looked and looked for her, but she just isn't in the stuff we kept."

"Does your grandmother remember where she last left the angel?" I asked.

"She swears the angel was in one of the boxes in the attic, but as I said, I didn't find her, so now I'm worried that she was in one of the boxes I donated." The woman looked genuinely distressed. "I know that I should have taken the time to look through every box, but there was just so much, and I was in a hurry. I'm afraid all I really did was pop the top off of each box, took a peek at the contents on top, and then sorted the boxes into those to keep and those to donate."

"That's understandable," Kekoa said. "I called and spoke to a woman down at the church, and she said we could stop by and look through the decorations left in the storeroom. It will be somewhat easier since most of the church's decorations are on display. Lani and I plan to head over to the church the first thing in the morning."

"Do you have a photo of the angel?" I asked.

"Several." She got up, walked over to a table, and picked an envelope up. "I made copies of the photos I have featuring the angel on the top of the tree. Grandma took a photo of her tree every year, so I had a lot, although the older photos were slides. I picked out the four where the angel shows up the most clearly."

I opened the envelope and looked inside. The angel really was gorgeous. This wasn't a cheap tree topper like the ones you'd find at the local big box store. If I had to guess, an angel tree topper of this quality and age would be worth a lot of money if she was sold as an antique.

"Okay. Is there anything else you can tell us that might help us narrow down our search?" I asked.

"Not really," the woman said. "I just feel so bad. I'm afraid if I can't find that angel, Grandma's last Christmas will be a sad rather than a joyful one. I know finding her at this point is a longshot, but anything you can do will be appreciated."

"What time did you tell the woman from the church we'd be by tomorrow?" I asked Kekoa as we drove back toward our condo.

"Eight a.m. I figured we'd want an early start in the event the angel isn't at the church, and we are somehow able to pick up a new clue."

"Eight works for me." I turned and looked out the window at the clear, starry night. "There's something about that angel that seems familiar."

Kekoa turned her head slightly. "I agree. I feel like I've seen her before, but I'm not sure where."

"I've never visited the church Halia donated the items from her grandma's attic to, so I couldn't have seen her there. Maybe on one of the trees set up around the island."

"Maybe. If that's the case, there are going to be a lot of trees to check."

Kekoa was right. If someone from one of the dozens of resorts, malls, or community centers on the island bought the angel from the church to use for their display, it was going to take a whole lot of Christmas magic to track down the right tree out of the hundreds on display.

As planned, Kekoa and I were on the road early the following day. Since it was likely we'd be gone for a good part of the day, I didn't want Sandy to have to stay home alone for such an extended period, so I'd taken him to Jason's house this morning. Besides, I knew he'd have a lot of fun playing with Jason's children while we were away, and if Sandy was happy, I was happy.

When we first arrived at the church, we took a tour just to make certain that the angel wasn't on display. I hoped it would be that easy, but, of course, it wasn't. We showed the woman who worked in the office a photo of the angel and told her the story. She made a copy of the photo and volunteered to ask around. Once we'd looked through the boxes in the attic where the decorations that hadn't been used this year were stored, we thanked the woman and prepared to leave.

"You know," she said, "I work most of the yard sales, and I do remember a woman donating a lot of boxes from her grandmother's attic. I don't remember the angel specifically, but I do remember that a woman named Beatrice bought several boxes of Christmas decorations before the sale to the public even started. She said she volunteered at the teen center, and the group planned to implement a community service project that included groups who planned to decorate trees in the area. I don't know for certain that any of the boxes she purchased came from the attic of the woman whose angel you are hoping to find, but you might want to talk to her."

"We'll do that. Do you happen to have a phone number for her?" I asked.

She nodded. "Hang on, and I'll get it for you."

Once we had the number, we called Beatrice and explained our mission to find the angel. She responded by saying that the group had gathered up a bunch of used ornaments from donations and yard sales when the Christmas Lights program was founded five years ago. She also said that quite a few tree toppers were included in those donations and purchases. When she offered to look at our photos and to give us a list of the locations where the trees the groups had decorated this year were so we could look at them to see if any of them featured our angel, we headed in that direction.

Just as we arrived at the teen center, Kekoa got a call. She looked at the caller ID.

"I need to take this," she said. "I'll meet you inside." With that, she trotted far enough away so as not to be overheard.

"It's probably Brad," I whispered to myself and then headed toward the front of the building. "Beatrice?" I inquired after entering the center through the front door.

"You must be Lani."

I nodded and stuck out a hand. "It's nice to meet you. I really appreciate you taking the time to help us."

"No problem. You said you had a photo of the angel you're looking for."

I handed her a copy of one of our photos that the woman from the church had been kind enough to make for Kekoa and me to take with us.

The woman frowned as she considered the photo. "This angel really is quite stunning, and she does look familiar."

"Do you think the angel is here at the center?"

She slowly shook her head. "No, I don't think she's featured on any of the trees here at the center, although you're welcome to take a look around. There are some boxes in the storeroom with overflow items not used this year. You can look through those as well, although I doubt you'll find the angel there. Something this gorgeous would have been used by one of our groups."

"You said you have a list of sites where the trees your groups decorated are located."

She nodded. "We did fifty trees this year."

"Fifty?" Checking out fifty trees was going to require a whole lot of running around, but if there was even a small chance of finding the angel tree topper, it would be worth the effort.

"Don't worry, many of the trees are grouped," the woman explained. "There are four trees at the recreation center, three at the park, several in each neighborhood shopping area, and a half dozen at the mall. Still, unless you luck out and find the angel right away, I predict you will have a long day ahead of you."

"We've planned for a long day." I turned and looked out the front window of the building. Kekoa was still on the phone. "Let's have a look at the trees you have on display here, and then we'll tackle the boxes in storage." I looked down at the list in my hand. "I think as long as we approach this strategically, we can get a look at the other trees in the area today as well."

"I'll send out an email to all my contacts with a photo of the angel. Maybe someone will recognize her," the woman offered.

Kekoa was just ending her call by the time I'd looked through everything the woman from the center had on hand. She was grinning like a cat who'd knocked over the cream, so I supposed her conversation was a happy one.

"Are you finished with your call?" I asked as I walked toward her.

She nodded. "Val is having a party the night after tomorrow. I told her we'd be there."

"We will?"

"I know you've been in a sour mood lately, but it is Christmas. It's the time of year to be happy and jolly and all of that. Any luck with the angel?"

"No, but I have a list of locations where we can find the decorated trees. Beatrice is going to send out an email to all her contacts, including a copy of the photo. She seems to think that the angel looked familiar too. Maybe we'll find her sitting atop one of the fifty trees on this list."

"Fifty?" Kekoa's smile faded a bit.

I nodded. "Afraid so."

She took the list from my outstretched hand and looked it over. "I guess we should get going. The park is closest, so we should start there."

“That’s what I thought as well. From the park, we can head to the business center and then out to the boys and girls club. As long as we attack this in some sort of logical order, I think we can visit all these locations today.”

“Yeah,” Kekoa said. She tossed me her keys. “Why don’t you drive, and I’ll start feeding all these addresses into the GPS. Once we have everything mapped out, it should be easier to come up with a plan.”

Our plan to strategically visit each of the sites on the list was a good one. Unfortunately, after eight hours of driving and a full tank of gas, we still hadn’t found the elusive item we were after.

“We’ll start again tomorrow,” Kekoa said as we headed toward the condo.

“I can’t believe we drove all over this island and didn’t find the dang thing. I was so sure we would.”

“There are a lot of trees on the island that are decorated by someone other than the teens that we can still look at,” Kekoa reminded me.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I know you’re right. I just really want to find this angel for Halia. If we had an unlimited amount of time, I’d be more optimistic, but we only have a few days, and there are a lot of Christmas trees on this island.”

“We both think the angel looks familiar, so maybe it’s displayed on a tree we see on a regular basis,” Kekoa suggested.

“Maybe it’s on one of the trees at the Dolphin Bay Resort. Halia sold the angel five years ago. If someone in charge of decorating the resort bought the angel five years ago and started using her, we both would have worked there when she was on display. Chances are we would have seen the angel almost every day during the holiday season, which could explain why she seems familiar to both of us.”

“You make a good point. Do you want to go by there now?”

“Yes, I do. I really feel that this particular angel has been gracing a tree we’ve seen on a regular basis, and the resort feels like as good a place as any to check.”

Of course, there were dozens and dozens of decorated trees at the resort. Some were inside, while others were outside, but the more elaborate decorations, such as the angel, tended to be displayed on the indoor trees.

“Let’s start with the hotel lobby,” Kekoa suggested. “We can show the photo to whoever is working. Maybe someone will recognize the angel.”

I guess I should have anticipated that the lobby would be packed with holiday visitors. It was the resort’s busiest season. Kekoa flagged down a woman she’d worked with when the two of us had worked at the resort before quitting to work with my dad at the detective agency. She motioned that she’d take a break to talk to us once she finished helping the customer she was with, so we used the time while we waited to look at all the trees in the lobby and entry. Unfortunately, none of them featured the angel we were looking for.

“Hey, guys. What are you doing here?” the desk clerk asked once she’d freed herself up.

“We’re looking for this angel.” Kekoa handed her a photo of the angel. “We thought the angel might be featured on one of the trees here at the resort.”

She narrowed her gaze as she looked at the photo of the angel tree topper. “This angel does look familiar.” She looked around the room. “I don’t think she’s in here. Did you try the conference room or the restaurants?”

“Not yet, but we will,” Kekoa answered. “Maybe you can keep the photo and ask other employees that pass through if they might have seen this particular angel tree topper. It’s super important that we find her before Christmas. A hundred-year-old woman’s Christmas wish depends on it.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Wow. Really? I sense a story.”

Kekoa quickly filled her in.

“It will be so sad if you can’t find the angel,” the clerk agreed. “I’ll show the photo around. If someone knows something, I’ll text you.” She looked over her shoulder at the long lines. “I wish I had longer to catch up, but I need to get back.”

“I understand,” Kekoa said. “Lani and I are going to look around the rest of the resort. If you think of anything, give us a holler.”

While Kekoa and I totally struck out in terms of finding the angel, it was sort of fun to be back at the resort where we’d once worked. Kekoa had worked at the hotel desk, and I’d worked as a water safety officer for a lot of years. The turnover for the Dolphin Bay Resort had always been pretty high, so although we’d been gone for less than a year, there were actually quite a few new faces. By the time we’d looked at every tree on the property, we were hungry, so we decided to have dinner at the beach bar. As we settled onto stools at the bar, I had to admit that of all the things I missed about my time working at the resort, settling in for a drink at the end of the day with my friends and coworkers was one of the things I missed the most.

“Long time no see,” the bartender said.

“It has been a while,” I admitted. “I guess we’ve been busy.”

“But we’re here for dinner tonight,” Kekoa added. “Assuming you can find a table for us.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Give me a few minutes.”

“Before you go, can you take a look at this photo?” I slipped the photo of the angel across the bar. “Do you remember seeing her anywhere?”

“She does look familiar.” He hesitated. “Let me think about it a bit. Right now, I’ll try to slip you in for a table.”

Kekoa and I had a glass of wine while we waited, and then she had a second glass with our meal. I figured I could drive if need be, and Kekoa was more of a wine drinker than I was. Just as we were finishing our meal, the bartender made his way across the room.

“I think this angel is on the tree in the lobby of our sister resort in Waikiki. I called a friend of mine who works there, and he’s going to grab the angel and hang onto her until you can come by to look at her.”

“That’s wonderful,” I smiled. “Did your friend send a photo?”

The bartender showed me a photo on his phone.

“That does look like her,” I said.

Kekoa agreed.

“We can head over there the first thing in the morning,” I said. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“Antonio. I’ll give you his cell number so you can work out the details with him directly.”

I thanked the bartender and then called Halia to let her know we’d picked up a lead. I forwarded her the photo that the bartender had forwarded to me, and she agreed that the angel in the photo looked exactly like her grandma’s. I promised to call her after we picked the angel up the following day, and then Kekoa and I headed home.

“Do you want to stop and pick Sandy up from Jason’s?” Kekoa asked after we left the resort.

“No. It looks like we’re going to be away from the condo again tomorrow, so I’ll just call Jason and ask him to keep Sandy overnight. I’ll pick him up tomorrow.”

“I guess that might be a good idea,” she said as we headed east along the coastline. “Will all your brothers be home for Christmas this year?”

“Actually, they will be,” I answered. In all, I had five biological brothers plus a younger brother who my parents fostered. I was the only girl in the family, so when we all got together, I felt totally overpowered. Of course, Jason was married with two children, a boy and a girl, and two of my other brothers were married as well, so I supposed things were beginning to level out a bit. “I told Mom that we would bring a dessert for Christmas Eve dinner. Any ideas?”

“Maybe guava cake and haupia pie. That would provide options.”

“I think having a selection is a great idea. There will be a lot of people there.”

“It does seem as if the family grows with each year that passes,” Kekoa agreed.

“Are you bringing Brad this year?” I wondered.

She hesitated. “I wasn’t going to, but then Jason invited him.”

I raised a brow. “You didn’t invite Brad? Why not?”

She didn’t answer.

“You didn’t want me to be the odd woman out.”

“Now that John is married, all your adult brothers are paired up. I guess I just figured…” she let the sentence trail off.

“Don’t worry. I’m a big girl. I’m glad Jason invited Brad. It wouldn’t have been nearly as much fun for you if he wasn’t there.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Maybe you’ll have someone to bring next year.”

“Maybe, I will.”

Once we arrived at the condo, I parked in the lot, and then we headed to our unit only to find a box lying in front of the door.

“What do you think that is?” I asked.

“It looks like flowers.” Kekoa bent over and picked the box up. She pulled the small card that was taped to the front of the box away from the packaging. “And it looks like they are for you.”

“Me?” I asked. “Who would send me flowers?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go inside and see.”

After we let ourselves into the condo, Kekoa turned the light on. I set the box on the table and opened the lid. “They’re gorgeous,” I said as I looked down at a huge Christmas bouquet with red roses, white carnations, evergreen boughs, baby’s breath, and Christmas bells.

“They really are,” Kekoa said. “Who sent them?”

I looked at the card, and my smile faded.

“What’s wrong?” Kekoa asked.

“They’re from Luke.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

I set the card on the table and put the lid back on the box. “I think I’m going to go for a run.”

“But it’s pitch black out there.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said as I headed toward the bedroom to change into my running clothes and shoes.

I felt bad for Kekoa. The poor thing looked to be more confused than I was. I supposed that my reaction wasn’t the typical reaction a person might have after receiving such a beautiful bouquet of flowers, but I found that the tiny flicker of happiness I felt when I realized that Luke had been thinking of me had been drowned out by the huge wave of confusion that had me asking why now?

I sped up a bit as my feet hit the hard-packed sand. My situation with Luke was a complicated one. We’d been in love and planning a life here in Hawaii, and then his father had gotten sick. Luke had flown to Texas to help with the ranch his father owned while he recuperated, but then his father passed away, and Luke seemed to have gotten stuck there. That was over a year ago. In the beginning, we’d stayed in touch. We’d talk on the phone every day, and I even went to Texas to visit last Christmas. But Texas and I simply didn’t mix, and I knew that I’d never want to move there, and Luke’s situation seemed to get more and more complicated as time went by. After some time passed without a resolution, it became apparent that short of totally bailing on his family, who really did seem to need him, he’d never be returning to Hawaii. Eventually, he sold his horse ranch here on the island, and our relationship settled into a state of permanent uncertainty. While we never formally broke up, all talk of marriage had been permanently tabled, and the frequency with which we spoke seemed to decrease with each month that passed. I knew the talk about a permanent break up was on the horizon and had even prepared for just that, but flowers? Did men usually buy the woman they planned to break up with such elaborate displays? I hadn’t broken up with anyone as rich as Luke up to this point in my life, but given the circumstances, the flowers seemed ostentatious even for him.

As the beach narrowed and the sand gave way to rocks, I slowed my pace to a walk. The warm water from gentle waves lapped up onto the shore as I slowly walked along, distracted from the beauty surrounding me by my thoughts. I knew I loved Luke. I would always love Luke, but I knew that despite that love, I wasn’t willing to move for him. He was stuck in his life, and I was embedded in mine. The time really had come to end things. Maybe it was the

glass of wine I'd had before dinner, or perhaps it was the bittersweet pull of the Christmas season, but I found myself calling his cell. I'd thank him for the flowers and then gently suggest that perhaps it was time to make it official. I'd suggest that we remain friends, but I doubted we would. He lived thousands of miles away, so it wasn't like we were going to be running into each other.

I'm not sure if I was relieved or disappointed when my call went straight through to voicemail. It was five hours later there, so I supposed Luke had already gone to bed. I didn't want to have *the talk* via a recorded message, so I hung up, turned around, and headed back to the condo. When I arrived, I noticed the lights were on in unit four. It occurred to me to knock and introduce myself. I even raised a fisted hand to rap on the door, but then hesitated. I was sweaty from my run, and I'd hate to meet the new neighbor looking my worst, so I lowered my hand and headed back to my condo. Tomorrow would be time enough for introductions. Tonight, I'd get a good night's sleep and then hope and pray that tomorrow was a better day.

The drive to Waikiki was a long one with a lot of traffic, but based on my opinion as well as Kekoa's, it really did appear that we'd done the impossible and had actually found the angel Halia had been looking for. It hadn't even been that difficult, which was surprising as well. We'd spoken to the woman in charge of the seasonal decorations for both resorts, and she'd told us that she kept a central storage area for both resorts and mixed and matched the seasonal decorations that were used at each location every year. Since it was likely that the angel had adorned the Dolphin Bay Resort on the North Shore at some point, it really was likely that Kekoa and I had recognized her as we thought we had.

"Thank you, thank you," Halia said after hugging both Kekoa and me. "This is definitely Grandma's angel." She turned the angel over. "See this little chip at the bottom? It's been there since before I was born."

"I'm so happy we could help you bring some Christmas cheer to your grandmother," I said with genuine joy in my own heart. "The angel really is special."

"Yes, she is." She grabbed her purse. "I'm going to take this to Grandma right now. She's going to be so happy. Would you like to come with me?"

"We'd love to," Kekoa jumped in. "I love to meet the brave woman who came to a new country and started a new life when the one she'd known was in the process of being destroyed."

As it turned out, going with Halia to visit her grandmother was one of the most moving Christmas moments of my life. The look on her face when Halia placed the angel in her hands was priceless. Halia suspected that her grandmother didn't have long on this earth, but she'd lived a full life, and now that she had her angel back to keep her safe on her journey, Halia was certain she'd face her final journey in life with the same bravery and confidence as she'd faced that journey across the sea all those years ago.

"Wow," Kekoa said as we walked toward the car. "That was intense."

I squeezed her hand. "It really was. Until I listened to the woman tell her story, I guess I never really stopped to consider how much courage and determination it must have taken to get on that ship all by herself and start a new life in a new country at such a young age."

“It does seem that the leap of faith she had to take was more than most would be willing to even contemplate. She had to have known that she’d face hardship, and possibly death, and yet she did it anyway.”

I thought about the angel. “She believed in her grandmother, she believed in the angel, and she had faith it would all work out. She did what was required at that moment and didn’t overthink it. In a way, I feel different after meeting the woman. Better somehow. Focused and centered in a way I haven’t been for a very long time.”

“I know what you mean. I feel the same way. I hope Uncle Keanu isn’t mad about the fact that we decided not to charge the woman for our services.”

“He won’t be mad,” I assured her. “Let’s stop and pick Sandy up on the way home. Maybe we can decorate the naked tree we have sitting in the corner of our living room. I find that I’m suddenly in the Christmas spirit.”

Kekoa smiled. “I’m glad to hear that. I was getting worried about you.” Her smile slipped a bit. “Did you ever talk to Luke?”

“No. I’ll call him later. I think I need to focus my thoughts before I enter into such a serious discussion.”

“Yeah,” Kekoa agreed. “That might be a good idea. I’d hate to see either of you do or say anything that would permanently destroy your relationship.”

“What relationship?” I asked, suddenly feeling my sour mood reappear. “We’ll never have a relationship unless we can figure out a way to live on the same piece of real estate.”

“But if you could figure that out?” Kekoa asked, looking a lot more nervous than was warranted by a theoretical conversation. “If you could find a way to live on the same piece of real estate, would you want to work it out?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I guess I would.”

After we returned to the condo, I once again changed into my running clothes and shoes. There was something about internal angst that made me want to run. When Luke first left, I was wearing out a pair of shoes a week, but things had become less intense as time went by, and I’d been busy at work, so I’d settled into a less frantic running schedule. As Sandy and I walked along the sidewalk past the front doors of the five condos that share the space with Kekoa and me, he once again became excited. I barely knew what he was doing before my silly dog took off and began jumping against the door of unit four.

“Sandy!” I called as the door to unit four slowly opened. I was about to offer an apology when I froze. “Luke?”

“Surprise,” he said, looking more nervous than happy as he bent down to pet my very excited dog.

“What are you doing here?”

He paused, taking a moment to just look at me, and then he answered in a rush as if he wanted to say what he needed to say all at once. “I decided to move back to the island, and Kekoa told me this unit was available. Since I sold the house on the bluff, I needed a place to stay, at least temporarily. I was going to tell you that I was planning to move back, but Kekoa

thought it would be fun to surprise you.” His smile faded to concern. “I guess that might have been a bad idea.”

I looked around, expecting someone to jump out and tell me I was being punked. “You’re moving back? To Hawaii?”

He nodded.

“But how?”

“It’s a long story which I plan to share in detail, but, for now, suffice it to say, that I finally realized that as much as I loved my family and wanted to do right by them, I loved you even more. So I told them I couldn’t stay as they hoped I would, and we worked out a really complex plan which involves combining the herds my siblings already own and selling off part of the land in order to consolidate.”

My lips turned up just a bit. “So you’re really back. For good?”

He nodded. “I’m really back for good.”

I looked behind him. “Where are Duke and Dallas?” I knew if Luke was really moving back, he would have brought his dogs with him.

“They’re in mandatory quarantine, but I should be able to spring them in a few days.” Luke took a step toward me and then froze. “I suppose it might be presumptuous for me to assume that you might be willing to continue our relationship where we left off. We never did discuss the status of our relationship, but Kekoa did say that you weren’t seeing anyone and that you were missing me.”

“Kekoa should mind her own business.”

His smile faded again.

“I’m just kidding,” I said, stepping forward into his arms. “Kekoa was right. I’m not seeing anyone, and I did miss you. And,” I added, “I could use a date for this party Kekoa talked me into going to tomorrow night. As for the rest, let’s just take a few baby steps and see how it goes.”

“Do these baby steps include kissing? I’ve been dying to do that for months now.”

“I think dipping a toe into the relationship pool can include kissing,” I said as I raised my face to his.

As the sadness that had gripped me for months faded away, I felt my heart begin to expand in a way it hadn’t since he’d left. The baby steps I’d mentioned never did come into play. By the end of that long welcoming kiss, I knew we were back together, and by the end of Christmas break, I’d moved in with him. By the following summer, we were married, and by that Christmas, we were expecting the first of the four sons we were destined to have. As the years faded one into the other, I’d look back on this Christmas and remember the angel tree topper and the amazing woman who’d taken control of her life in order to ensure her own happily ever after. I suspect, in part, that it was her happy ending that allowed me to open my heart to my own happy ending, in spite of whatever obstacles Luke and I might face along the way.

The End

Legacy in Paradise

A Tj Jensen Christmas Short Story

Huge flakes of snow drifted on currents of air as they floated gently toward the Harriet Kramer Memorial Courtyard. The festive decorations brightened the seating area, which graced the entrance to the new town offices my husband, Kyle Donovan, had funded after the old town offices had been destroyed. I still felt ill whenever I thought about the explosion that occurred just over a year ago. That explosion had killed Harriet Kramer and a town council member, Lloyd Benson, and wounded four other people.

“A little to the left,” I called out to the men who were here to secure the thirty-foot Christmas tree Kyle had found for the gathering area. The white twinkle lights and fresh green garland had been strung earlier in the week, creating a warm and welcoming feel. “That’s perfect,” I called back after the men had made the adjustment. I had to admit that Christmas last year had been kind of a blur as the entire Jensen family, along with most of the town, struggled to deal with such a senseless loss of life and property. But this year, my first as a married woman, was turning out to be one of my best Christmases yet.

“I have a delivery for Tj Jensen,” a man in a blue delivery uniform said.

“I’ll take that.”

“Are you Tj Jensen?” he asked.

“I am. Or at least I used to be. I’m Tj Donovan now.” I held out my hand, which had been adorned with a set of rings that couldn’t have been any more perfect if the little girl who used to dream of such things had designed them herself.

The man seemed hesitant, but eventually, he handed me the envelope he’d been tasked to deliver.

“By the way,” I asked him as he turned to leave, “how did you know I’d be here?”

“A lady in the post office pointed me in this direction.”

“Ah. Well, thank you.”

I was about to tear the envelope open when my best friend, Jenna Elston, rounded the corner with her double-wide stroller. I paused to smile as she headed in my direction. “What a nice surprise,” I beamed. “How did you know I was here?”

“The boys had a doctor’s appointment. The main parking area is packed with holiday shoppers, so I had to park on the street. We were on our way back to the van when we saw you standing here.” She glanced toward the tree. “It’s perfect.”

“It should be. Kyle spent hours and hours walking the forest around the property, looking for the perfect tree. When he found it, he marked it and has just been waiting for the opportunity to cut it down and bring it into town.”

Jenna looked around. “So, where is Kyle?”

“Unfortunately, the State Board of Education wanted to meet before they broke for the holidays, so he had to go to Carson City. He’ll be home tomorrow.”

Jenna draped a blanket over the stroller to protect her twin sons, Kaden and Karter, from the snow that had begun to come down even harder than it had been falling before. “I have to say that this little project you and Kyle worked up while you were on your honeymoon has turned out to be quite the undertaking.”

“Tell me about it.” I adjusted the Santa hat on my head. “If we’d known then what we know now, I’m not sure we would have moved forward, but if we can get through the accreditation process, we’ll be in business.”

“Are you still looking to open next fall?”

I nodded. “We are. I know it has been a ton of work, but come hell or high water, Kyle and I are both determined that Collins Academy is going begin classes in September.”

“I hope it all works out,” Jenna said. “After everything the two of you have been through, you deserve to have things go your way for once.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

Jenna looked down at the babies, who were both fast asleep. “Dennis is working, and my girls are at the movies with your two. Do you want to get some coffee?”

“I’d love to, but I’m meeting with Grandpa, Doc, and Frannie in just under thirty minutes, and then I have a doctor’s appointment.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I’m just due for my annual check-up.”

“So you’re feeling better? It seemed like you were feeling uggy for a while.”

I smiled. “I’m fine. I probably just had a bug.”

“That’s good. It seems like there has been a flu going around.” She glanced at the tree. “Are you still working on your Christmas gift for Kyle?”

I nodded. “This is a good time to work on it since Kyle’s out of town. Besides, with Christmas just around the corner, I’m running out of time.”

“He’s going to love the scrapbook whether you answer all the questions you set out to answer or not,” Jenna pointed out.

“I know. But I really want to fill in all the blanks. I’m honestly not sure if doing so will be important to Kyle, but it’s important to me.”

“I understand. I hope you find your answers. If you need help, give me a holler. I’m sure Mom and Bookman would love to babysit for a few hours.”

“I will. And thanks.”

“Lunch tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, hugging Jenna. “I’d love to have lunch with you tomorrow.”

After Jenna and the boys left, I sent Kyle a text, asking him to call me when he had the time. The undertaking that had sent him to the state capital for two days was a scheme the two of us had worked up while lying on a beach on Bora Bora. The year preceding our wedding had been a hellacious one that started out with my dad becoming engaged and effectively upsetting the apple cart, as I knew it. This, in my eyes, was a total betrayal, which was closely followed by the death of a man I’d deeply cared about, which led to the breakup of my relationship with my longtime boyfriend, Hunter Hanson. In the end, I found myself fleeing to South Carolina. Living on the East Coast was a new adventure for me and really was just what I needed to move on. Of course, I didn’t run away alone since my two half-sisters, Ashley and Gracie, Kyle, my grandpa, and Grandpa’s best friend, Doc, had come with me.

Unfortunately, just as we were settling in, my father had been critically injured in an auto accident that took the life of his best friend, Mayor Harper. I flew home, and my merry band of runaways followed. The loss of such an important man in our little community had been a serious blow, but to have that followed by an explosion at the town hall that had killed two long time members of the community just a few months later was almost more than our battered hearts could take.

But life had gone on, and we, as individuals and as a community, had prevailed. Kyle had turned his attention to rebuilding the town hall and putting the necessary staff and town council members back into place. Once that was accomplished, Kyle and I had gotten married, but not before my dad had announced that he and Rosalie were moving into one of the cabins located on the resort he owns so that Kyle, Ashley, Gracie, and I could have the big house should we want it. My grandpa, Ben, had already moved into his own cabin on the property after Dad and Rosalie had gotten hitched, so with Dad and Rosalie moving, the dilemma of where to live so as not to upset the equilibrium Ashley and Gracie had settled into seemed to be answered.

While there may be those who would wonder why I would rather live with my entire extended family at the family resort than alone with Kyle in his lakeside mansion, the truth of the matter is that I’d been concerned about upsetting Ashley and Gracie, who’d already been through so much in their short lives. Dad’s plan seemed perfect, and when I’d brought it up to Kyle, he’d assured me that, in his eyes, the plan was perfect as well.

Of course, the question then became what to do with the lakeside mansion Kyle had inherited from a grandfather he’d never met. Jenna had been correct when she mentioned that it was during our honeymoon that one of us, who can really remember which one with all the kissing that was going on, had decided that it might be a worthwhile idea to turn the house into a school

for gifted teens who were pursuing a career in the software industry. Kyle was a bit of a computer nerd himself, and I knew he considered technology to be one of his main passions in life, so it seemed to fit.

“So what do you think?” the man who’d been supervising the others as they positioned the tree and hung the lights asked.

“It’s perfect. Thank you for coming out.” I handed the man one of my business cards. “If you take this over to Rob’s Pizza, he’ll give you beer and pizza on me.”

“Thank you, ma’am. That’s greatly appreciated.”

By the time I got to the library, Grandpa, Doc, and Frannie were all waiting for me. The project I was working on was a family history of the Collins family all the way back to Jeremiah Collins, the man who settled the area when he founded the first logging camp. When I started this project, I had a few pieces of information to begin with. Stories my old friend, Zachary Collins, had told about his family, historical accountings found in the library and historical society, and, of course, the books and documents that the Collins family had either left behind in the house or had donated to the library. In the beginning, Frannie had suggested I work up a set of questions to help focus my efforts. With the help of Grandpa and Doc, we’d done just that, and then Frannie had joined the team when it came time to look for the answers.

“I found something that you might find interesting,” Frannie said after I’d arrived at the library.

“Oh, and what’s that?” I asked as I responded to a text from my half-sister, Ashley.

She handed me a photo of a man I recognized as Jeremiah Collins and a beautiful young woman I was pretty sure I’d never seen before.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” Doc replied. “We’ve been discussing it, and we’re all fairly certain that this is the first time a photo of this particular woman has shown up.”

I closely looked at the black and white photo. “The woman certainly is gorgeous.” I looked up. “Do you think she might have been a romantic acquaintance?”

Grandpa laughed. “Well, this certainly isn’t Jeremiah’s wife.”

Grandpa was right. I’d seen photos of Jeremiah Collins’ wife. She was a strong and sturdy woman, who I knew from my research, had a reputation as having a strong will and decisive personality, but no one would call her a beauty. Since Jeremiah and his wife had traveled to the States together from England, and this photo was definitely taken here at Paradise Lake, it had to have been taken after Jeremiah had married Zachary’s grandmother.

“They appear to be comfortable with each other,” I said. “Familiar, if you know what I mean.”

“I suppose she could be a mistress,” Doc said.

“If Jeremiah Collins had a mistress, I doubt that he’d have been so blatant about it,” Frannie argued. “If you look at the scene behind the couple, there are all sorts of people milling around.”

“Maybe she’s someone who worked for the logging camp,” I suggested. “A bookkeeper or something.”

“Look at those shoes,” Frannie said. “And her clothes in general. Very high end. This woman wasn’t a bookkeeper.”

“Maybe she was a madam,” Doc tried. “I seem to recall reading that some of the women who got into that particular field early on did quite well.”

“Maybe,” Frannie admitted. “But I’m not getting that vibe.”

“Maybe a relative,” I said. “The Collins family was very wealthy, even before they migrated to the United States and opened the logging camp.”

“She could be a relative,” Frannie agreed. “Perhaps a cousin. Maybe even a sister. Do you know if Jeremiah had a sister?”

I frowned. “I really don’t know. I guess that might be something to add to our list of items to research.”

“It seems sort of odd that if someone as high profile as Jeremiah’s sister had lived in the area, we wouldn’t have found photos of her before this,” Doc said. “We’ve been working on this for months.”

“Just because she was here at the time the photo was taken doesn’t mean she lived here,” I pointed out. “She might have only stopped by for a short visit, which is when the photo was taken. It’s entirely possible she moved on rather quickly.” I looked at the photo again. “I have to say that a logging camp doesn’t seem to be the sort of place a woman like this would enjoy.”

“Of course, if she was only here for a short visit, and this photo is the only proof of that visit, I don’t see how we’re going to figure out who she is,” Grandpa pointed out.

“True, but I guess it won’t hurt to look.” I glanced at my watch. “I only have an hour today. I have a doctor’s appointment at three, and then I told Ashley I’d pick her and the other girls up at the theater right when the movie lets out. Is there anything important we need to go over?”

“I found the employee records from the first few years the logging camp was open,” Frannie said. “I didn’t recognize many of the names, but there were a few surnames I want to follow up on.”

“Do you think any of those long-ago residents might be related to folks currently living in the area?” I asked.

“I think a few might be, although I suppose it’s a longshot to think that Victoria Fitzpatrick down at the five and dime is in any way related to Timothy Fitzpatrick, who worked at the logging camp in the late eighteen hundreds. Still, it never hurts to ask.”

“Phillip Pennywild told me that his family is originally from Cornwall,” Doc said. “There’s a Barret Pennywild on the list of men who worked at the logging camp.”

“Tracking down everyone with the same surname as the men who worked at the logging camp will take forever,” I said.

“True, but I seem to remember Phillip mentioning that his grandfather moved to the area when he was a young man.”

“Okay,” I said to Doc. “You go ahead and talk to him, and Frannie can talk to Victoria. I was overseeing the Christmas tree delivery in the courtyard when I received the copies of the town records I put a request in for.” The original records were destroyed in the explosion, but I’d found out that the state had copies of the most significant paperwork. Unfortunately, it was too old to be digitized, so I had to wait for it to be copied and sent. “I haven’t had a chance to look at everything yet, but I plan to do so tonight.”

“Maybe we should work on what we have and meet again tomorrow,” Frannie suggested.

“Kyle will be back tomorrow evening, and I have a lunch date with Jenna tomorrow afternoon, but I’m free for lunch the following day. If that works for everyone, we can meet around noon. My treat,” I added.

After everyone agreed to the time and place for our next meeting, I said my goodbyes and hurried off for my doctor’s appointment, which I hoped would be completed by the time I needed to pick the girls up.

“Pregnant?” I gasped.

The doctor held up my chart. “It looks that way.”

“But how?”

He raised a brow.

“I know how.” I blushed. “What I mean is how can I be pregnant when we’ve been using birth control?”

The doctor shrugged. “These things happen sometimes. Am I sensing that this pregnancy could be a problem?”

“No,” I said quickly. “It’s not a problem. It’s just unexpected.” I felt like I might pass out, so I took several deep breaths. “Kyle and I talked about waiting to decide whether or not to have children of our own.” I looked the man in the eye. “You know that I’m raising my two half-sisters.”

He nodded. “Yes, I know.” He looked concerned, which I guessed I understood. I’m sure most women were thrilled to find out they were expecting.

“It’s fine,” I said, letting the idea sink in. “I’m sure everything will be fine.” I put my hand on my still very flat stomach as I tried to convince myself that was true. “I know Kyle would like a child. It’s really me who feels less certain.” I moved my hand over my stomach in a circular motion. “Do you know what I’m having? A boy or a girl?”

“It’s too early to know the sex quite yet, but we can do an ultrasound at a future appointment to take care of that. If you’d like to hear the heartbeat, we can do that today.”

I smiled and nodded. “I’d like that.”

The doctor had me lay back. He had a machine that could pick up a baby’s heartbeat. The machine had an extra stethoscope, so we could both listen. When I heard the noise that sounded more like a whoosh, I couldn’t help but smile. “That’s it? That’s my baby?”

The doctor nodded. “That’s your baby.”

I was sorry that Kyle wasn't here. He was going to love this. "Can I bring my husband in to hear this? He's out of town today, but maybe later in the week?"

"I think we can arrange that. Just call the nurse and set it up. And before you leave today, I'm going to have my nurse set you up with some literature. I'll see you back here in a month."

I thanked the doctor and then hurried off to pick the girls up. I didn't want them to have to wait. Once I had them in the car, they asked to spend the night at Jenna's, so I headed in that direction.

"So, how was the movie?" I asked, trying to sound completely normal and not at all like my world had just been turned upside down.

"It was good," Ashley said.

"Molly from school was there," Gracie informed me. "Her mom dropped her off, and they had her baby sister, Ella, with them. She sure is cute."

"She is a very cute baby," I agreed. "I guess Ella must be about two months old now."

Gracie shrugged. "I don't know. I guess. Molly told me that this is going to be a special Christmas with a new baby sister in the house. She talked about the red dress her mom made for Ella for services on Christmas Eve, but she didn't mention how old she is."

"Maybe we'll see them at church, and we can ask Molly's mom," I suggested.

"Molly is excited about being a big sister," Gracie added. "Now that you and Kyle are married, do you think I might be a big sister someday?"

I almost choked on my own saliva. "Maybe. I guess we'll have to wait and see." There was no way I was telling anyone about the baby before I told Kyle, and I really wanted to tell him in person, so it was going to have to wait.

"Babies are noisy," Ashley jumped in.

"So noisy," Kristi agreed. "It seems like my brothers never stop crying."

I happened to know that the twins were very content babies who rarely cried, but I supposed that when you weren't used to having a baby in the house, even a little bit of crying seemed like a lot. The girls continued to talk about the pros and cons of having a baby in the house as I drove them across town. Personally, I was too nervous to say anything, so I just listened. Initially, I'd planned to take the girls inside and chat with Jenna when I dropped them off, but I knew there was no way I'd be able to keep my secret from my best friend. I really did want Kyle to be the first to know, so I made up an excuse about expecting a call and dropped them in the driveway. Once they were safely in the house, I headed home and promptly threw up.

Later that evening, I sat on the bed that Kyle and I usually shared. My dog, Echo, and Kyle's dog, Trooper, were lying on the floor next to our bed, while my cat, Cuervo, was sitting on the extra pillow where Kyle usually slept. Grandpa had gone out for dinner with Doc, and Dad and Rosalie had gone out for a meal and then to a play this evening, so the house was a lot quieter than it usually was. At this particular moment, I was happy to have the solitude.

Not wanting to obsess about the baby until I got a bit more used to the idea, I worked on the scrapbook as I'd planned to do by sorting through the photos, old documents, public records, and

artfully drawn timelines I'd been gathering. At the time I came up with the gift idea, it had seemed the perfect solution to the question of what to get the man who was rich enough to buy anything he wanted for himself since Kyle knew very little about the grandfather who'd deserted him until the end of his life when he came to the decision to leave him the majority of his extensive estate. I'd started putting copies of some of the birth and death records I'd received today into plastic sleeves when my cell phone rang.

"Hey, Frannie, what's up?"

"I think I may have found the woman in the photo."

I sat up straighter. "Really? Who is it?"

"I think, as we suggested earlier, it might be Jeremiah's sister, Jasmine Collins Luxenberg. I did some digging around after we met this afternoon and found out that Jasmine came to the area after Jeremiah had established the logging camp, and the town had grown up somewhat. As we also theorized, Jasmine was not a fan of mud and trees, so she decided to set off on her own. I guess she headed to the South Shore and opened the first casino in the area currently known as the town of Indulgence."

"The first casino?" I paused to think about it. "Jeremiah's sister founded the Lux Casino?"

"I'm pretty sure she did. Jasmine is long dead, of course, but I spoke to a woman who lives in Indulgence and claims to be Jasmine's great-great-niece. I told her about your project, and she's willing to meet with you if you'd like."

"I would like that." Even though I had made lunch plans with Jenna, Kyle would be home tomorrow, so tomorrow would be the best time for me to meet with Jasmine's great-great-niece. "Do you have the woman's phone number?"

"I do. Her name is Tiffany, and she's expecting you to call."

"Thanks, Frannie. You're the best. I'll call her right now."

If Tiffany was descended from Jasmine, and Kyle was descended from Jeremiah, then maybe I could give him something even better than a scrapbook for Christmas. Maybe, I could give him cousins. They would be very distant cousins, to be sure, but cousins nonetheless. Of course, once he found out about the baby, none of this would really matter. If I knew Kyle and I did, I was certain that he'd consider a baby to be the best gift of all.

The following day dawned bright and sunny, although a storm was expected to blow in later in the day. On most days of the week, the Jensen/Donovan family generally gets together for breakfast. Grandpa usually comes by early to make a feast worthy of a king, while the girls get ready for school, and Kyle and I prepare for whatever task we've planned for the day. Dad and Rosalie usually come by just as Grandpa gets the meal on the table, and the entire family shares a meal and catches up before going off in our own directions.

The family generally meets for the evening meal as well, but not quite as religiously since we all have different schedules, and getting together as a group isn't always possible.

This morning, however, Kyle was out of town, and the girls were still at Jenna's house, so I'd texted both Grandpa and my dad to let them know that I would miss the family breakfast too. I

wanted to have time to drive to Indulgence, which was about an hour and a half away, meet with Tiffany, and then get back to Serenity before Kyle got home. I also wanted to avoid everyone in my family, so I wouldn't accidentally let my secret slip out before I could tell Kyle that, despite my hesitation, it looked like nature had found a way, and he was going to be a father.

Tiffany lived in a large home perched right on the shore of Paradise Lake. She'd been expecting me since we'd arranged a time to meet the previous day, so she had coffee and muffins ready and waiting in the sunroom. It was a gorgeous winter day. There was plenty of fresh snow to provide atmosphere, but plenty of sunshine as well to deliver warmth and cheerfulness.

"Thank you for meeting with me," I said as soon as I was seated on a wicker sofa.

"It's my pleasure. I'm intrigued by the idea that I might have relatives living just across the lake that I never knew about."

"You didn't know about Kyle?"

She shook her head. "I'd heard that Zachary died, but I didn't realize the man he left the house to was a blood relation. To be perfectly honest, I'd never even met Zachary. By the time I was born, he was already an old recluse who didn't have time for things such as relatives."

"He lived a difficult life, and he was hard to get to know. The two of us were friends, however, so if you're interested, I can tell you about him."

"I might just take you up on that. For today, however, I understand you're here about Jasmine."

I nodded. "Some friends and I are putting together a scrapbook for Kyle for Christmas. It's a family history of sorts. We found this photo." I handed the woman the photo of Jeremiah and the beautiful woman. "At first, we didn't know who the woman was, but our librarian did some research and thinks the woman in the photo was Jeremiah's sister."

Tiffany nodded. "Yes, this is Jasmine." She smiled. "Talk about a woman ahead of her time. She was a feisty one who was determined to live by her own rules. The story I've been told was that Jeremiah brought Jasmine here to Nevada to be a companion of sorts for his wife, who was lonely living in the isolated logging camp. Of course, once Jasmine arrived and had a look around, she quickly decided that life at the logging camp wasn't for her, so she came to the South Shore, which had been developed as a summertime resort area for folks who wanted to come up to the lake from Sacramento. She saw the potential of the mostly undeveloped area and built herself a casino. Of course, once word got out about the casino, rich folks from as far away as San Francisco began to make the journey to the lake for the summer months. Fancy homes sprung up, and other businesses settled in to support the casino. Over time, the town of Indulgence sprang up, and by the mid-nineteen hundreds, folks began living here year-round."

"So Jasmine is responsible for Indulgence being founded in much the same way as Jeremiah's logging camp allowed Serenity to grow up."

"Basically."

"I assume that at some point, Jasmine married and had children."

She nodded. “Jasmine married a man named Grover Luxenberg when she was a young woman, but he died before she even came to this area. Later, after the casino was built and doing well, she married a man named Sonny Silverman. She never took his name since she was well known as Jasmine Luxenberg by then, but they did have two sons and two daughters. Each of the four children married and had children, and so on. Some of the cousins moved away, while others stayed. I guess there are maybe six families currently living in the area who are directly descended from Jasmine, including my own.”

“I’m sure Kyle would love to meet everyone at some point. I’m afraid that Jeremiah’s side of the family has died off with the exception of Kyle, who didn’t even know he was related to the Collins family until after Zachary died.”

“I’d be happy to arrange a family reunion after the holidays. And I’m anxious to meet your young man. I’ve heard good things about the man who inherited Zachary’s estate. I would have reached out sooner if I’d known there was a family relationship. Honestly, I figured that Zachary left his estate to one of his employees or maybe someone in the community.”

“I understand. Zachary wasn’t one to share, and he wasn’t the sort to seek out relationships even if they were blood relationships.”

By the time I got back to the resort, Kyle was just pulling into the drive. When I saw his car in the drive, I turned around and headed to the parking area to greet him.

“How was your trip?” I asked after wrapping my arms around his neck and giving him a very long kiss.

“It was productive. I think we’re back on track to open in the fall. But I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” I kissed him again. “And I’m so glad you’re home.”

He nodded. “Trust me when I tell you that I’m even happier about my being home than you are. It’s been a long couple of days and a night settled in by the fire sounds just about perfect.”

I cringed.

“I’m sensing a problem.”

“I told the girls we could go into town to look at the windows tonight. They want to have pizza at Rob’s as well.”

He smiled, seeming to make a mental adjustment before brushing a snowflake from my shoulder. “Pizza and holiday windows sound perfect.” He looked up into the sky. “I’m afraid our sunny day has turned into a snowy day, however, so maybe we should do the windows first and then eat just in case the storm comes in harder as the evening progresses.”

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed Kyle again. “I like that plan.”

“Did the tree for the memorial get delivered?” he asked as we walked hand in hand from where I’d met him at his car toward the house.

“It was delivered yesterday, and I had the crew decorate it. It turned out really good. I can’t wait to show it to you.”

“I’m excited to see it. The moment I saw that tree in the forest, I knew that it would be the perfect tree to stand as a memorial for those we lost.”

“It really is a perfect tree. I think it means a lot to everyone. The whole thing — the tree, the memorial courtyard, the new town offices, and the upcoming opening of the school — means a lot. Zachary would be so proud of you. He’d be proud of what you’d done with the assets he left you, and he’d be proud of the man you’ve become.”

“He opened a lot of doors for me,” he said as we climbed the steps to the covered porch. “Without him, I would never have met you, moved to Serenity, or found the part of myself I’d always known was missing. I’m so grateful to him, but I’m also sorry that I never had the chance to meet the man. I really think I would have liked him.”

“You would have, and he would have loved you,” I assured him.

“I’m sorry he didn’t have children, other than my father, of course, who never even knew he was a Collins. I guess that after me, the Collins’ bloodline, at least the Jeremiah Collins’ bloodline, will die out.”

“Actually,” I said, pausing at the front door. “Before we head into town, I need to talk to you about something.” I wasn’t sure this was the right time, but I knew I was never going to be able to keep this secret until we got home from town tonight.

“Is something wrong?” His expression changed to concern.

“No. Not wrong.” I took his hand and led him to the swing under the covered porch. “I had a doctor’s appointment today.”

“Something is wrong,” he insisted.

“No. Nothing is wrong. In fact, everything is actually pretty perfect.” I put my hands on his cheeks, so I was looking him directly in the eyes. “Jeremiah Collins’ bloodline isn’t going to die out because, Kyle Donovan, you’re going to be a father.”

The End

USA Today best-selling author Kathi Daley lives in beautiful Lake Tahoe with her husband Ken. When she isn't writing, she likes spending time hiking the miles of desolate trails surrounding her home. She has authored more than a hundred and fifty books in thirteen series. Find out more about her books at www.kathidaley.com

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