

A romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing on a beach. Both are wearing red and white Santa hats. The man is seen from the back, wearing a white shirt, with his arms around the woman. The woman is also wearing a white top. The background is a soft-focus view of the ocean and sky at sunset or sunrise.

# Christmas *by the* Sea

Free  
*Surf's Up*  
Short Story

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# *Christmas by the Sea*

*Galveston, Texas . . .*

Parker squeezed his eyes closed, the pain in his left leg unbearable, but it was the rising water that slung his mortality around like a slingshot with no aim. Murky floodwaters swirled and collided in organized unison atop his chest. Another three or four inches and the water would be up to his chin.

As rain pelted against his face like rounds of ammunition, Parker gasped for breath in shallow gulps, his faith teetering. He'd been a good Christian his entire life, but as he faced death now, fear and apprehension ruled. Had he really lived as good a life as he could have?

He tried again to move his trapped leg, only to cry out into a weather event that had no mercy, a tropical storm turned hurricane within the past few hours. His sales meeting had run long, and he wondered if his coworkers and friends had managed to get off the island safely. After his car stalled near the cruise terminal, he'd tried to wade to higher ground, but branches

and dead tree limbs shared the water with him, and now he was lodged against a concrete pillar, held firmly by a tree branch that crushed his leg in a way that left it feeling numb and detached from his body.

*Is this how I will go, God?* As a lifelong resident of Galveston Island, the Texas Gulf Coast was as familiar to Parker McIntyre as breathing the briny air. He'd been stung by jellyfish eight times, surfed the tide during past hurricanes, and pulled in a shark on his rod and reel fishing from the jetties. He knew the Historic Strand District by heart and which restaurants were worthy of his hard-earned dollars. And his wife, Cecelia, had birthed their child at John Sealy Hospital four years ago. *Spencer*. His heart ached at the thought of never seeing his son again.

He closed his eyes in prayer again, but even as he tried to focus on communion with God, fear wrapped around him like a serpent squeezing the life out of him. Wondering what it would feel like to drown, he prayed that God would send an angel to help him make the journey. Maybe even Cecelia.

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Alex put her car in park on high ground and dialed 9-1-1. She had seen someone's head barely above the water, leaning against a concrete pillar in the distance, as the water rose around the guy. Her heart hammered in her chest as a recorded message played on her cell phone—*all circuits busy*. She knew better than to wade out in water to her chest with all the debris swirling in fast currents around him. Dialing again, she got the same message. As the rain

slowed down, she glimpsed the Christmas wreaths in the distance, lit by the grace of God only, since almost every other area had gone dark from the storm. Each year, decorations seemed to go up earlier. It wasn't even Thanksgiving yet. Clenching her cell phone, she blasted herself for not leaving Galveston sooner. Authorities had given ample warnings to vacate the island, but a hurricane in November? She couldn't recall a storm like this in her lifetime so late in the season.

She'd stayed at the hospital longer than she'd intended, knowing it might be the last time she would see her father. But she had felt that way every day for the past two months after a visit. Sometimes she stayed in her father's room, but she'd forgotten her heart medicine this morning, so she had opted to go home. Missing the meds wouldn't put her health at risk, but her elevated pulse would cause her heart to pound like a base drum in her chest.

Glancing at the man in the water, she walked around to the trunk of her car and searched for a tie strap or bungee cord. She needed something to tie to her car so she could hold onto the other end. If she was going to walk into the floodwaters, she wanted to be able to get back to her car. She wasn't a strong swimmer, and even if she was, the current looked strong enough to sweep her away, a thought that caused her bottom lip to tremble. She wasn't adventuresome by nature, so this potential rescue sent her heart racing even more as she realized the bungee cord she'd found wouldn't be nearly long enough. She tossed it back in the trunk and called 9-1-1 again and jumped when she heard a voice.

"9-1-1. What is your emergency?"

"I'm on Harborside Drive near the cruise terminal, and a man is trapped in the water. It looks like he's pinned against a concrete pillar."

"What is your name, please?"

Alex scowled. "Alex Hansen. Please hurry."

She paced the length of her car as she detailed her exact location, not taking her eyes off of the man, the water rising to within a few feet of her Honda. If she didn't move her car soon, she was going to be trapped as well. But she couldn't leave a man to drown.

As the winds picked up, more branches floated atop the rushing water that separated her and the stranger, and within a few seconds, the downpour resumed. Water was up to the guy's chin.

*Dear Lord, please. What do I do?*

After the 9-1-1 operator came back on the line and said someone was on the way, Alex hit End, tossed the phone on her seat, and locked the car. She opened the door to the gas tank and put her keys inside the compartment before closing it again. Then she took a hesitant step into the water, thankful she'd worn tennis shoes today. The force of the unwelcome seawater gyrated around her ankles, and as she eased forward, it wasn't long before the water was up to her thighs. *Stupid, stupid.* Keeping her eye on the man, while also scanning the area around her, her stomach churned when she thought she saw a snake, but it was only a stick.

With slow steps and sheer will forcing her feet forward, she got within shouting distance of the man, but no matter how much she cried out to him, the wind slammed against her voice, abducting the sound into its wrath. As the guy moved his mouth, she couldn't hear anything he said, but she was within a few yards now, the water to her waist. If she lost her footing, she was going to be swept away. She thought about her father and the irony of the situation if she went before him.

*Slow and steady.*

The rain eased up again, but the winds fiercely tugged at her, first one way, then the other. She'd lived in Galveston long enough to know how fast the water could rise, so she picked up her pace, trembling but determined.

Her father's strong will and perseverance leapt into the forefront of her mind as she tried to funnel his determination. Richard Hanson believed a person could do anything if their commitment to the task was strong enough. *If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.* It was something she'd heard her father recite many times, a quote by Martin Luther King, Jr.

"You shouldn't have come," the man said when she finally reached him, his face pale, his eyes wide. "My leg is pinned. You need to go back."

"Too late!" she yelled above the roar of the wind. *Stay with me, Lord.* She stuck her head underneath the water, but it was thick as Texas fog, and she couldn't see anything. When she lifted her head, the sting of mascara in her eyes distracted her for a few moments as she blinked and dabbed at her eyes with her wet ZZ Top T-shirt. She jumped when she felt something brush against her foot, an unidentifiable object that stung as it passed by her. A branch, maybe. It felt like a deep paper cut. "I called 9-1-1, but who knows how long it will take for them to get here, or if they can even get through. We need to get you to my car somehow."

He shook his head. "I can't get my leg free. The higher the water got, the harder I've tried."

Alex glanced around as the skies spit a light trickle of rain, but the wind was like a dozen tornadoes funneling around them. As two large branches drifted by, she silently asked God for help again.

"Do you have any idea what has you pinned? A branch or something?" She ran her fingers underneath her eyes, hoping to clear the blackness she was sure the mascara had left. It seemed an odd time to notice the man's square jaw, intense blue eyes, and a dimple on one side only. She wondered what the rest of him looked like beneath the water. Was he tall? He was crouched in the water, so it was hard to tell. If she didn't clear her mind, he was going to drown.

“I don’t know. I thought it was a branch, but I’m not really sure.” His voice was gargled, like maybe he’d already swallowed water, and there was an urgency in his tone that caused a jolt of adrenaline to rush through Alex’s veins and slam against her chest.

“I’m guessing you are in a lot of pain?” She flinched when he did.

He latched onto her arm. “Listen . . .” He spoke loudly, against the roar of the wind. “You must get back to your car and get out of here. Go now, while you can. I’m sure someone will show up soon, and they’ll have equipment to get me out.”

Alex eyed the water that was now up to his bottom lip as she stood towering above him. Swallowing hard, she took a deep breath. If she left him, she’d see his face in her dreams—nightmares—for the rest of her life. “I’m not leaving you here. What’s your name?” He was breathing faster as he struggled to hold his head higher.

“Parker. Listen . . .” he said again, breathing hard. “I have a son, Spencer. Please find him, and you tell him that Daddy went to be with Mommy, and tell him . . . tell him I love him with everything I am, and—”

“Stop! You’re not going to die. I’ll get you out of here.” Alex heard the shakiness in her voice. In the corner of her eyes she saw the street lights go out, along with the festive strings of Christmas lights connecting them. The wreaths dangling from the middle of the display shone brightly, which seemed odd to Alex.

Parker shook his head. “No. I’m stuck.” He was still clutching her arm. “Please promise me that you’ll find my son. His aunt got him safely off the island earlier today, but when it’s safe, please find him, tell him . . .” His voice trailed off as he let go of her arm. A wave slammed into his face, filling his mouth with water, and the more he sputtered, the more he choked. He was

breathing way too hard. Alex hadn't had more than basic first-aid classes, but she could tell he was panicking.

"How old is Spencer?" She bent at the waist and put her face closer to his until he finally locked eyes with her, a rhythmic set of mini rapids swooshing between and around them.

"Four," he said barely loud enough for Alex to hear as he lifted his chin higher. "Dear, God . . ." he whispered, closing his eyes. His hand found Alex's and he squeezed. "Will you pray with me?"

Alex had been praying since she took her first step into the rushing river of saltwater that was rising. "Yes," she said as she cupped his cheek with her other hand. "Dear Lord, please give us the courage and strength to free Parker from whatever is holding him in the water. Please, God . . ."

"No . . . I need to . . ." More water found its way into Parker's mouth, followed by more choking. Alex waited while he caught his breath again. "I—I ask you God to forgive my trespasses, my sins . . ."

Alex scanned the area as best she could. Not a soul in sight. Floodwater had risen halfway up the tires of her Honda. She was wise enough to know that if Parker went completely underwater, he would likely grab onto her in a panic, possibly taking her underwater also. She'd no sooner had the thought when the rains began to subside. There was still a fierce wind, but maybe they were buying some time. *Thank you, God.* She also thought she heard a siren in the distance.

"Tell me your name," Parker said as his teeth chattered. It wasn't cold, so she wasn't sure what was happening. These first couple of weeks in November had been unseasonably warm.

"Alex. Short for Alexandria."



The hint of a smile played across his lips. “You’re a brave woman, Alexandria.”

“No one calls me that, except for my father.” She thought again about the man she loved most in the world. “And I’m not really brave, but I’m not leaving you.”

Parker held her gaze. “Yes, you will. And you *should*. You should go now.”

Alex shook her head. “No. We aren’t giving up. Help is on the way.”

Parker smiled a little again. “If you can’t fly, then run. If you can’t run, then walk. If you can’t walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.”

Alex froze, stopped breathing for a few seconds. “Martin Luther King, Jr.”

“Yes.” He let out a long, controlled sigh. “A good man.”

Alex’s eyes filled with tears. There was no doubt in her mind that her father had died. She didn’t know how she knew, but she did. *He was another good man.*

“What’s wrong?” Parker waved an arm atop the rapids around them. “Besides the obvious?”

“My father just died.” She wasn’t sure why she blurted it out to a stranger, but she was confident in her statement, and within seconds, she was crying.

Parker’s fingers brushed against hers beneath the water and found her palm, intertwining his fingers with hers. “I’m so sorry. When? Recently?”

*Just now.* She couldn’t tell him that. “Yes.”

He squeezed her hand. “Alexandria, I am very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

They were quiet for a few moments, and there was actually a trickle of sunlight peeking through the clouds.

“The eye of the storm,” Parker said, a tinge of hope in his voice. “It’s not even that big of a hurricane.”

Alex swiped at her eyes, drawing back black fingertips. “Mascara. I probably look like a raccoon.”

Parker was still holding her hand. “You are the most beautiful raccoon I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, I’m sure I am,” she said, trying to smile, needing to lighten the fear and strengthen her resolve.

Alex had noticed how handsome he was earlier. She’d learned a long time ago to never get too attracted to someone who was sitting down, or in Parker’s case—hunched over in dangerous floodwaters. Alex was five-foot-ten. She recalled meeting Jimmy Strasburg on a blind date in college. He had arrived at the agreed upon meeting place before she did, and he was already seated. They talked for two hours, got along wonderfully. Then Jimmy stood up. He couldn’t have been an inch over five-foot-two, and with her heels on, Alex had towered over him like an island palm tree when they’d left the restaurant. It was silly. Height certainly shouldn’t define a person, but she supposed everyone had dating requirements. Five-ten or taller was one of hers.

A gust of wind sent a rushing surge of water over Parker’s face, and when his face was visible again, his wide eyes revealed his panic as he coughed water, straining to raise his chin higher. It started to rain again, and Alex’s stomach lurched. But she needed him still and calm.

“Do you have plans for the holidays? Thanksgiving isn’t far away.” She hoped her voice sounded steadier than it felt.

“I know you’re trying to make small talk so I won’t panic.” He took in a gulp of air before water splashed across his face again.

Alex winced as he squeezed her hand underwater. “Is it working?”

His expression stilled. “What are the chances that I would be here, in this predicament, with you, and that you’ll be the last person I’ll see on this earth?”

“Do. Not. Give. Up.” She turned in every direction, but didn’t see anyone, and the siren she’d thought she heard earlier was either gone or she’d imagined it. “Help is coming.”

“My son lost his mother, and it seems unfair that he’s going to lose me, too, without getting to know either one of us very well.”

Parker seemed to be settling in on the fact that he was going to die. Only once had Alex ever faced death head on. She’d had a severe reaction to an antibiotic that had left her covered from head to toe with a nasty rash that would eventually take months to recover from. But it was the threat of Stevens-Johnson syndrome that had terrified her at the time. She could still recall the look on the doctor’s face when she’d asked, “Can this kill me?” The female dermatologist had nodded. Up until that point, she’d always thought her faith was solid, but when faced with her own demise, she’d been terrified. The way Parker was now.

The rain pounded them now with a relentless vengeance, large pellets battering and bouncing off their heads like dull needles against a pincushion. Waves were pushing forward with a force that could only come with a rising tide, and as Alex saw a large sheet of plywood float by in the water, she wondered how much more dangerous and heavy debris was floating by beneath the surface of the tenebrous waters.

“You’re not going to die,” she said with as much conviction as she could, but as the water rose higher and higher, Parker could barely fend off the swells pushing into his mouth. *Please, God.*

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Parker stared into Alex's eyes, longing to see his soul in the reflection, wondering if it would be an easy trip to the other side, and praying he would be going in the right direction. He'd heard stories about people seeing loved ones right before they passed to the next life, whispering their names as they drifted over. He searched this woman's eyes again, looking for Cecelia, but all he saw was the terror in Alex's eyes. He owed this stranger more than he'd ever be able to give her.

"The moment my nose and mouth are underwater, turn and look away. Go quickly . . ." He paused, holding his mouth closed as a wave of water lapped all the way to his forehead before receding. "Go quickly to your car. Don't let my drowning be the very last thing you see." He paused again. "You really should go now."

She shook her head. "No. Help will come."

*Bless her for staying, but . . .* "Do you have children?" He spoke louder than before so she could hear him above the fierce winds encircling them.

"Nope. Not married, no children. I haven't found the right man yet."

"I find that hard to believe."

She smiled a little. "True story." Her bottom lip trembled as she squeezed his hand.

"What will you do for the holidays?" It was small talk, but Parker's heart was beating way too fast, and if he didn't drown soon, he feared he would have a heart attack. Maybe that would be the lesser of the two evils he faced. A few hours ago, Christmas lights had flickered on the Strand, even though merchants were busy boarding up their windows. Now everything had gone dark. Even the Christmas wreaths that had stayed lit longer than anything else.

"I don't know."

He didn't say anything, took a deep breath, and waited as the water rose above his mouth. He tried to wiggle free of Alex's hold on his hand, but she just clung tighter. He didn't know it was possible to breathe so fast through his nose, and he waited for Cecelia to make herself known. But once again, the water receded to his chin as the wind stilled, which would only be temporary, until the next surge. Parker figured he wouldn't outlast more than a couple more waves.

"It's just been me and my dad for a long time," Alex said. "My mom died when I was young. We spent nearly every holiday at the beach, and always on Christmas day." She was almost screaming now since the winds had picked up, and probably because she was scared. "My house is on Crystal Beach, a little east of Galveston on the Bolivar Peninsula. My dad helped me get it after Hurricane Ike hit in 2008 and we got a really great deal. Everything was kind of a mess for a while, but we both knew it was the only way I'd ever be able to afford a house right on the beach." She shrugged, shaking. "Anyway, we always set up a small table by the sea and ate fish tacos. It might sound silly to some people, but it was our thing. We even wore goofy Christmas hats." Black streaks of mascara trailed down her cheeks. She recalled her father always calling their holiday Christmas by the Sea. "My dad always wanted to be a boat captain, but he worked as a carpenter instead, giving up his own dreams so I would have a normal and happy life." She paused, recalling her idyllic childhood, wondering how she was going to live without her father. Hopefully, her parents were dancing in heaven and would be sharing fish tacos on Christmas day. "It will be my first time to eat tacos on Christmas day by myself."

"I'm sorry about your father." Parker wasn't sure he'd ever felt a connection to another human being the way he did to this woman now. Except maybe his son. And Cecelia. Maybe it

was because he was going to die holding her hand. He knew she wouldn't leave until he'd gone still in the water. Even though she should.

Dirty water rushed by them carrying everything from dead fish to floating bags of trash. Two large branches swam atop the rapids, followed by a Burger King bag, an empty toilet paper roll, and a couple of empty cups with straws protruding from the lids. The pain in his leg had subsided to a dull ache, but his chest had tightened to the point he almost couldn't breathe. Then it happened.

A big rush of water.

He clamped his mouth closed, but when it receded, it only receded to just below his nostrils. The next surge would be it. Alex was crying as she held his hand, but then she jerked away from him, turned, and started struggling against the current to get to her car. He couldn't say a word because she was doing exactly what he'd told her to do. But if he'd been able to talk, he would have begged her to stay. He closed his eyes and prayed.

Seconds later, her hand was on his arm, and she was holding a paper cup that had floated by. One ear remained barely above the water, and Parker heard sirens. Or was he imagining it? Glancing to his left, he thought he'd seen movement. *Cecelia*? He thought he heard Christmas music.

"I know you can hear me, but can't speak, so listen." Alex spoke firmly, as if this was the most important thing she was ever going to say in her life. "Your nose is going to go underwater soon, but you can breath through this straw as long as the other end stays above the water. I hear sirens. Help is close. So, don't panic." She lowered the straw into the water, her finger plugging the end that Parker eased into his mouth, wrapping his lips around it and her finger before she slowly took her hand away. He filled his lungs with a long breath of air, trying hard not to panic.

Parker heard the sirens. *They're coming.* He did his best to force himself calm, and just as she'd said, the water rose above his nose. Clamping his nostrils closed with one hand, he clung to her other hand as he breathed through the straw. Too big of a wave would cause him to intake water, panic, and she'd never get the straw back in his mouth. It seemed odd that he would have such a rational thought, but as Spencer's face flashed in his mind's eye, he prayed for God to keep his breathing steady.

As the tide that engulfed them continued to rise, only a couple of inches of the straw cleared the water. His new friend was going to lose this heroic battle.

When the straw slipped from his mouth, he held his breath, but it was only seconds before he gagged and water began to fill his lungs. The space around him went black, and finally . . . there was Cecelia. Smiling. Floating nearby. Her arms open. But Spencer's face bounced around his mind, the reminder of all that he was leaving behind. Parker felt like he was crying, but it was hard to tell. His body was going limp. Total darkness. *Where is the light? Why is there no light? Where did Cecelia go? Where is Alex?* She'd seen him die, or so she thought, so she'd fled. *Good.* Maybe she'd left before all the thrashing started. *Did I thrash?* He wasn't sure.

Then a surge of horrific pain engulfed his lower leg, and he was sure his foot was being sawed off with a dull, serrated knife. But he was too tired to struggle. *Too dead,* he assumed.

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Alex cringed as she ducked below the dirty water and wrapped both arms around Parker's legs, pulling with all her might as blood circled and swooshed around them like the scene of a shark attack. She eventually tugged hard enough to get him loose and was able to get his head above water, but his body was limp, heavy like dead weight. *Is he dead?*

As she struggled to hold onto him from behind and keep his head above water, she repeatedly lost her footing, twice almost losing them both to the wrath of the current. The sirens were getting closer, but she wasn't sure she could hold him for much longer. Ferocious winds churned the fast-moving water into a sea of rapids carrying even more debris. Tears, mixed with mascara and saltwater, burned her eyes as long strands of hair whipped across her face in every direction. *Please God, help me to hold onto him.* When her legs began to tremble, she didn't think she had enough energy left to fight the current, and there was a burning sensation below her knee, along with eddies of blood. *His or hers,* she wondered?

In the distance, her Honda Civic was giving up the fight. Alex's heart pounded against the wall of her chest as the water lifted the car from the elevated spot where she'd parked, carrying it away—along with whatever hope she had left. But then she saw headlights, and with a burst of superpower, she tightened her grip on Parker and fought shaky legs as tears drizzled down her cheeks. Two men emerged from a pickup truck, and not far behind there was an ambulance.

“Stay where you are!” One of the men secured a belt of some type around his waist, while the other one hooked the other end to the bumper of the truck. The vehicle was much further away than where Alex had left her car; that entire area was submerged now.

The man covered the distance between the truck and Alex in less than a minute, but with slow and steady steps as the water rushed around him.



“It’s him. He’s the one really hurt.” Alex heard the shakiness in her voice and felt the rattle in her throat, but when the rescuer took over, she fought not to melt into the current.

A few minutes later, they were on high ground, and two paramedics took over, administering CPR to Parker while the original two guys, presumably volunteers, cleaned up the cut on Alex’s leg. But she never took her eyes off of Parker, praying that he’d wake up.

Finally, he sputtered water, but when he became fully conscious, his blood pressure was so high, the paramedics called the hospital, asking permission to give Parker something to ease the pain. Within a few minutes, he was comfortably sleeping in the back of the ambulance. The rain had slowed, as if God had a protective umbrella over them.

“Can I ride in the ambulance with him?” Alex touched his foot, the one that wasn’t injured and the only part of his body she could reach from where she was standing.

“We don’t have room. There’s another emergency up the road.” One of the breathless paramedics climbed inside the ambulance and sat next to Parker. “We need the room, but if you’re his wife . . . can you follow us?”

Alex shook her head. “I’m not his wife, but my car washed away while all of this was going on, and—”

“We can give you a ride to wherever you need to go.” It was the man who had braved the current to rescue Alex and Parker.

She glanced back and forth between the paramedic still standing at the back of the ambulance and the man who had saved hers and Parker’s lives. “Can we follow the ambulance to the hospital?”

“Sure.”

Alex took another long look at Parker before the doors closed. “Is he going to be okay?”

The paramedic nodded. “Yeah, I believe so. His foot is in pretty bad shape, but all of his vitals are stable. His blood pressure was probably high from the pain, but I think he will be all right.”

Alex took a long cleansing breath, then walked with the two volunteers to their truck. Water was already inching up the tires. They’d barely cleared the hazardous area when one of them took a phone call, and it was easy enough for Alex to tell from one side of the conversation that they weren’t going to the hospital.

The passenger in the front seat looked over his shoulder at Alex. “I’m sorry Ma’am, we’ve got another emergency, so we can’t follow the ambulance to Houston right now.”

Alex nodded. “I understand. I have a friend who lives nearby if you want to drop me there, or I’ll ride with you to wherever you need to go.” She shivered at the thought of being at any other accident scene. But the passenger made a quick phone call, then turned back to Alex. “Where does your friend live?”

After she’d explained, the man nodded and turned to the driver. “We should be able to avoid heavy flooding to get her to friend’s place. Jim and Marty are almost to the other emergency. Let’s drop her at her friend’s house.”

“Thank you,” she said barely above a whisper, but then she cleared her throat. “Do you know what that man’s last name was, the one they took away in the ambulance?”

One man shook his head while the other said, “No. I didn’t even hear his first name.”

Alex wished she’d asked Parker his last name, but she assumed they were taking him to a Houston hospital further inland. She’d find him later. Right now, she had another call to make.

“I hate to even ask this but . . . my father is in John Sealy Hospital, and I urgently need to call him. Would it be possible to borrow a cell phone?” Alex’s purse and belongings had been

submerged in her car. Sniffing, she couldn't stop trembling, despite the blanket she'd been given after being pulled from the rushing water.

“Sure.” The passenger reached over the seat and handed her his phone. They were both young guys, maybe late twenties, around Alex's age. “Call as many people as you need to. You've been through quite an ordeal. But click over if another call comes in.” He smiled. “You saved that guy's life.”

*While my father was dying less than a mile away.* She Googled John Sealy Hospital, and a few minutes later, she heard a familiar voice.

“Alex, we've been trying to reach you.” Nurse Karen's soft whisper confirmed what Alex already knew to be true.

Moments later, she handed the guy his phone, crying hard now.

“Wow, I'm real sorry for your loss,” the driver said, not going more than ten miles an hour, the car swaying in the wind as he did his best through high water. “You've already been through a lot today.”

Alex pulled the blanket snug around her, and it wasn't long before her quiet sobs turned to uncontrollable crying. *I'm sorry I wasn't there, Daddy.*

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Parker swam in and out of consciousness, aware that he was in an ambulance, and later knowing he was in a hospital. His eyes were closed, but the smell of ammonia and beeping machines alerted him as to where he was. Maybe he wasn't going to die after all.

As he stared at the back of his eyelids, it wasn't Cecelia he saw, but the vision of an angel who had rescued him. Her long dark hair swooped in wild strands across her face, black mascara trailing down her cheeks, the fear in her eyes. *Alex.*

He was slipping away again. *Tired. Sleep.*

When he woke up, there were three doctors standing at the foot of the bed, along with his sister—and Spencer. *Thank you, God.* His four-year-old son stood next to Angie, Parker's only sibling.

"Hey, Buddy." Parker held his arm out to his son, who rushed to him, burying his head in the nook of Parker's shoulder. "Daddy's okay," he said in a shaky whisper. He swallowed back the knot in his throat as he clung to his son's love like a life raft. "I'm okay," he repeated softly, as much for himself as for Spencer.

*But am I okay?* Something felt amiss below his left knee, hollow.

Angie came around the other side, leaned down, and kissed Parker on the cheek. "Welcome back. You've been sleeping for two days."

"Where . . .?" He scanned the room. Three male doctors who didn't look any older than Parker stood quietly. "Where is the woman, the one who helped me?"

"I don't know anything about her," the shortest of the young doctors said, as if Alex was just a random person of no consequence. "But we do need to talk to you, Mr. McIntyre." The guy—Dr. Easton, his badge read—glanced at Angie, who quickly went to the other side of the bed.

"Hey, Spence," she said softly. "Let's take a walk while the doctors talk to Daddy."

His son clung tightly to Parker's arm, but eventually let Angie take him out of the room.

*This is bad.* He waited, searching each of the three men's faces for a clue. The short doctor cleared his throat. He seemed to be the one in control. The boss.

"You're going to be fine, Parker, but the damage to your foot was extensive, and we were unable to repair the cartilage. I'm afraid we had to perform an amputation a few inches below your knee. But the good news is that you are a strong candidate for a prosthetic device once the area has healed."

Parker's heart thumped against his chest in a way that caused his vision to blur. The next thing he knew, a nurse was in the room putting a shot of something in his IV, nothing strong enough to keep him from throwing back the covers on his bed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried prior to the accident, but now he bawled like a baby. There was a huge white bandage, a stump. *I don't have a foot.*

Darkness again. *Did someone turn out the light? Or am I seeing the back of my eyelids?*

His heart stopped pounding, the heaviness lifted.

\*\*\*

Alex spent two days on her friend's couch in Galveston. Gina's apartment building had stayed high and dry, despite the continued rains and flooding. Alex focused on finding

Parker. She'd used Gina's phone to check hospitals, but she hadn't been able to find him.

*Difficult without a last name.*

When some of the roads cleared, Alex's best friend, Shelley, picked her up and took her back to her apartment in Houston since there wasn't a clear route to Alex's house yet. They stopped at Walmart on the way to pick up a cheap cell phone since Alex's had been lost when her car was washed away. Alex continued her search for Parker with no luck. She'd called every hospital on the outskirts of Galveston, most of them full and overflowing with patients who had been relocated prior to the storm. Her father had been deemed too critical to move, and he'd been taken to the safest wing of the hospital during the storm. *Only to die anyway.*

"Still no word on the guy?" Shelley Armstrong sipped on a Red Bull next to Alex on the couch, her bare feet on the coffee table while videos of the aftermath of the storm scrolled across the television. Most of the water had receded, but the devastation was massive.

Alex and Shelley had grown up together, but Shelley had made the move to Houston when she landed a job working as a paralegal for a law firm. Alex had been fortunate to find work on the island as a human resources manager for a large hotel chain.

"No. I still haven't been able to find him." Alex was desperate to learn what happened to Parker, and she'd chastised herself repeatedly for not getting his last name. She had watched the news on television since she'd been staying at Shelley's, hoping for a glimpse of her car, a mention about Parker, or anything that might help her to locate him. But nothing. No one was being let back onto the island, and Alex's father was in the morgue at John Sealy Hospital. She'd been crying on and off since she'd arrived at Shelley's apartment.

"When things calm down, I bet you'll be able to find him." Shelley put a hand on Alex's leg and patted her twice, as if everything would be okay. Alex wasn't sure things would ever be

alright. She had nightmares. Parker's wild eyes when he went underwater. Her Herculean strength as she tore his leg from whatever held it beneath the water. Keeping him upright in a current that should have swept them both away. The medical personnel intercepting him, pushing Alex out of the way. Her not being able to ride in the ambulance.

She picked up her cell phone. She had eight more hospitals to try, even though she'd already called the closest ones to Galveston, and now she was trying hospitals way on the other side of Houston. Seven calls later, and still no luck. But she dialed the number for the eighth one on the list. *Please God, I've got to find him.*

\*\*\*

**T**wo weeks later, Parker was released from the hospital, even though there would be all kinds of follow-up appointments and rehab. Angie packed his things as he stared at the wheelchair by the bed. Eventually, he would advance to crutches, and then if all went well, he'd be fitted for a prosthetic leg.

"The guy I talked to at your office—Jake—said there isn't a rush to get back to work," Angie said. "He said to take your time."

Parker nodded. He'd talked to Jake during his hospital stay, but for some reason, the phone in his room wasn't working today, and he wasn't getting good cell service either. "Thanks for calling him. Where's Spencer?" Parker sat up in bed and slung his legs over the side. His one-and-a-half legs.

“Maryanne, a nurse where I work has two children close to Spencer’s age, and she’s off today. Great people. I thought it might be good for Spencer to have some playtime while we get you settled at the condo, then I’ll pick him up.

Parker’s temporary home would be a condo in Houston. He disliked Houston. Too busy. He couldn’t smell the ocean, watch the boats come in, or walk the beach. Although he wouldn’t be walking anywhere soon.

He wondered how long it would be before he’d be back in his house. Mostly he wondered why he hadn’t been able to find a woman named Alexandria who lived at Crystal Beach. He was angry with himself for not getting her last name. And to his recollection, he hadn’t given her his full name either.

As he thought about Spencer, he knew that he would forever be in debt to a woman named Alex who had made sure he lived, at great personal risk to herself. Her face was etched into his brain forever. The fear. The determination. The . . . beauty.

They had prayed together, and he’d been sure her face would be the last one he’d see in this life. But now, he couldn’t find her, and doing so was a top priority.

“Did you tell Jake about the two files in my desk drawer?” Parker stared at the white lump of bandages a few inches below his knee. It didn’t hurt anymore. It was just a void. *I don’t have a foot anymore.* But he’d tried to keep his life organized as best he could from the hospital, and making sure his boss had two client files was a part of that effort.

“Yeah, I did.” Angie zipped a small, red suitcase she’d brought him early on. A few clothes, socks, toothbrush, and a Bible. Two hospital chaplains had been by twice each, to talk to Parker about how blessed he was, citing those who had lost their lives in the storm. Parker didn’t need convincing. He knew he was blessed. He’d lost his foot, and that was something that didn’t come



easily. He'd gone through the expected range of emotions, from sadness to anger to acceptance. But he was alive. And he was going to see his son grow into a man, good Lord willing.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay with you a while at the rental?" Angie sighed as she set the packed suitcase by the door.

"No. I'll be able to drive soon. My condo is on the first floor. And I know you're a phone call away."

"You can't drive *yet*." Angie's voice had a firm, but gentle, tone to it. She reminded him of their mother when she talked like she was now.

Their parents were on an extended vacation, or an early retirement. Parker and Angie weren't sure, but at the moment, Mom and Dad were with a tour group in Spain, not expected to be home until after the holidays. Parker had to talk his mother out of getting on the next plane home. His parents had saved money and made plans to spend this year traveling, and Parker had repeatedly explained to his mom that Angie had things under control, that they should carry on with their vacation. They could continue to Skype, and Parker promised to keep his parents updated on his progress, assuring them that he was okay and would learn to function without the lower part of one leg. *Eventually*.

He'd mostly moved past the angry phase, but those emotions still reared up occasionally. When they did, it was Parker's first instinct to lash out at God. Instead, he forced himself to stow any rage and to thank the Lord for sparing his life. Spencer was an easy reminder that Parker needed to be grateful.

Poor Spencer would probably never get to do anything exciting in his entire life, since Parker was already overprotective. Losing Cecelia had left Parker feeling like he'd never survive

if something happened to Spencer. When he thought about how close he'd come to leaving his son without any parents at all, his thoughts drifted to the woman who had saved his life.

*Alex.* Where was she?

\*\*\*

Alex lay two red roses on her father's grave. The headstone still hadn't arrived, but it had only been a couple of weeks since she'd ordered it. She'd come to visit him every day since the funeral, and now with Thanksgiving only a few days away, she still cried every time she visited. She'd still been searching for Parker, but twenty-three hospitals later, she still had no information. Maybe she was just never meant to know him. She was there, at the right time, at the right moment. *Fate? God's will that they met, never to see each other again?* With each day, she was accepting that reality, although she'd see his eyes, the look before he completely went underwater, for the rest of her life. But she could recall his square jaw and his handsome features too. She wanted to remember him forever, and she was sure she would.

"I'm off to work, Daddy." Alex kissed her fingertips, then pressed them against the dirt of her father's grave, the mound slowly flattening with each of her visits.

Taking a deep breath, she got in her rental car, an ugly dark green Camry that her insurance company provided. She'd gotten a new drivers license, Social Security card, and replaced other items she'd lost during the flood. The loss of life had hit a hundred, and there were still dozens in Galveston hospitals and other facilities in Houston. Most of those killed were the ones who

hadn't left the island, the old timers who had survived many a hurricane, some as far back as Hurricanes Alicia and Carmen. Both before Alex's time.

She'd just started driving toward the cemetery exit when she heard music coming from her purse. She put her foot on the brake and dug around inside her bag until she found the phone and answered.

"You're still coming for Thanksgiving, right?" Shelley was hosting her entire family in her small apartment for the holiday. Alex wasn't sure how she'd fit even one more person. Shelley said she was expecting eighteen.

"Yeah, I'll be there. Thanks, Shelley."

Alex would have preferred to sit on the beach and eat tacos with her father, watch the boats, the waves, and inhale the briny smells of an ocean they both loved, but that wasn't going to happen this year. Shelley had been insistent that Alex spend the holiday with her and her family, and maybe it was best Alex not be alone on this first holiday without her beloved father.

Hopefully, her father had found her mother and they were both gazing upon a great ocean in heaven, eating all the fish tacos that they could consume.

And hopefully Alex would start to feel normal again some day.

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**I**t was the first week of December when Parker walked across his living room, receiving applause from his son and Angie. The prosthetic half-leg was temporary, but it gave him

mobility he hadn't had until now, and he was thankful. Eventually, he'd have a custom fit prosthesis. He was also grateful that Angie had put up a Christmas tree in his condo, decorated it, and filled it with gifts underneath. Angie didn't have a lot of money. Nurses were extremely underpaid. He realized that even more after his accident. But Angie packed every single thing individually, even if it was something small from the Dollar Store. She'd wrap it in a big box, and every year, the amount of presents under the tree grew, giving them an exaggerated vision of the amount of money she spent on gifts. But the focus had always been on family and blessings, something beautiful that their parents had passed down during their modest childhoods. Parker was glad his folks had been able to save some money over the years, enough to travel the way they'd always planned.

“Are we going to go see Santa today?” Spencer's toothy smile stretched across his precious face, his bright blue eyes anxious to experience the season. This year more than ever, Parker was excited to watch his son open presents.

“Um, I need to ask you something.” Angie took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

*What now?* She'd already helped him battle it out with the health insurance company about services that providers had deemed unnecessary. She'd also been the one to inform him that his deductible was five thousand dollars. Parker couldn't recall being sick prior to this, so he hadn't ever looked closely at his policy, which was proving to be a nightmare. But when his sister smiled, he thought he caught a twinkle in her eyes. “What?” he finally asked.

“I know we said we were going to have a quiet Christmas together, just you, me, and Spencer at my apartment, since Mom and Dad are traveling, but . . .” Yep, there was a twinkle in his sister's eyes. “Do you mind if someone else joins us?” She folded her hands in front of her, another gesture that reminded Parker of their mother. “His name is Joe.”

Parker grinned. “*Joe?*”

Angie nodded, smiling. His sister had been married before, for a total of six months. Parker recalled wanting to beat the guy to a pulp for cheating on Angie, taking the little bit of money she’d saved, and filing for divorce. But Angie had been the stronger one when they were growing up, and she still was, even during her own divorce.

“Of course, *Joe* can come.” Parker wanted his sister happy, and if Joe would brighten her holidays, Parker was all for it.

Angie sat down on the couch next to him. “Joe’s great, Parker.” Grinning like a schoolgirl, she added, “Handsome . . . and he’s a doctor.”

“Really?” Parker’s smile grew. “Not too surprising, I guess, since you’re a nurse.”

She cleared her throat as she sat taller on the couch twisting to face him. “Actually, he was one of *your* doctors when you were in the hospital. I didn’t meet him at the hospital where I work.”

“Oh.” Parker raised an eyebrow. “Which one?”

Angie smiled. “He was with the group of doctors who first told you that they’d had to amputate your foot.”

“The short guy or one of the other ones?”

“He isn’t that short.” Angie grimaced a little, but it didn’t last long. His sister wasn’t all that tall anyway, and she was giddy and glowing again within a few seconds.

“Of course you can invite your new doctor boyfriend for Christmas.” He leaned back against the couch and propped his fake leg up on the coffee table. Angie had told him repeatedly not to call it a fake leg, so the phrase was something Parker had taken up only in his mind.

She locked eyes with him, smiling. “Thanks, Parker.” She gave him a hug, then stood up. “I’m going to go.” She went to Spencer, kissed and hugged him, then headed to the door, turning to face him before she left. “I know you’ll find someone special too.”

Parker smiled. He already had. He just couldn’t locate her.

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Alex carried two folding chairs from her house to the beach. She’d tried to ignore the holiday all together, but by the end of the day, she was resolved to revisit her family tradition, if only to carry it on for a final time. She set up the chairs, then went back to the house to retrieve the small table that she’d been putting between the reclining seats for years. In Texas, Christmas was either shorts and T-shirts or down jackets. The temperature varied year to year, ranging within thirty degrees. This year, it was somewhere in between. Not cold enough for a jacket, but not warm enough for shorts. Jeans and a short-sleeve shirt, with a light jacket nearby.

She opened the bag of fish tacos, the ones from a small shack up the road. The place wasn’t open on Christmas Day, but Alex always picked up the tacos the day before for her and her father. Biting into one of the tacos, she stared out at the sea as the sun began its descent. Two boats were in the far distance, the waves were calm, and all of the beach debris from the storm had been cleared. She’d only had minor damage to her house and was able to get back in it a few days after the storm, but some homes—those not high enough and sturdy enough—were still undergoing repairs. But not today. Not on Christmas.

She closed her eyes, savoring the taste of the scrumptious taco as the light breeze carried the smell of the ocean, wafting up her nostrils like a familiar friend. She'd visited her father's grave earlier in the day, but otherwise chosen to stay home, despite Shelley's attempts to get her out of the house on Christmas. But the day had been filled with Christmas movies on TV, memories of her father, and now—the greatest fish tacos on earth.

"I miss you, Dad." She held up a champagne glass filled with sparkling grape cider. "Merry Christmas."

The beach was quiet, one of the best things about having Christmas tacos on the beach on Christmas Day. She picked up her Christmas hat, glancing at the one in the empty chair next to her. It was silly and wonderful. Alex had bought the hats during a time when her father was having chemo and had lost his hair. They'd had so much fun wearing them, that they'd worn them every year since. Alex figured she'd retire them after this year, stash the hats in her mother's cedar chest. But as a tribute to her father, she sat on the beach eating tacos and wearing her Santa hat. She set the other hat in the chair next to her. But a movement down the beach caught her eye.

"Ugh," she said through a mouthful. It was a guy. He was by himself. And he was likely going to want to make small talk, or tell her some horrific story about why he was by himself on Christmas. All of which would mess up the little bit of the day she had left. Behind him, there was another couple and a child.

She picked up an emergency book she'd brought, a habit she'd long ago adopted, even when it wasn't Christmas and she just wanted to be alone on the beach. Burying her head in it, she could feel him approaching, but she didn't look up. Until he stopped right in front of her.

“Hello, Merry Christmas,” she said with a mouthful of taco, her head still in the book. Hopefully, he’d get the hint and just walk away.

“Merry Christmas.”

Alex’s eyes slowly lifted, her mouth stuffed with food. Her heart skipped a beat as she locked eyes with a familiar face. She dropped her taco in the sand as she slowly stood up.

“It’s you,” she said as she struggled to swallow what was in her mouth, her knees weak, her heart thudding in her chest. “It’s you,” she repeated as she walked closer to him and smiled. “I looked for you.” The words barely whispered across her lips as her eyes filled with tears. “I looked for you,” she said again softly.

“I was here Thanksgiving, but I couldn’t walk very well at the time, and I couldn’t find you. You said you and your father had shared holidays on the beach, so I took a chance.” He shrugged a little, grinning. “And I took another chance today, which certainly paid off. I’ve been looking for you too.”

Alex stood up, knowing she must look a wreck and probably had taco sauce on her chin. She gave it a quick swipe, but she couldn’t stop smiling. “You’re tall.”

Parker chuckled. “Yeah, since I was about fourteen.”

“Are you . . . did you . . . recover okay?” She looked Parker up and down. He was in jeans and a white T-shirt, wearing tennis shoes.

“Sort of.” He lifted his left pant leg, revealing a leg that wasn’t the one he was born with.

“Oh no.” Alex covered her face with her hands as she shook her head. “I’m so sorry. I’m so very sorry. I—I . . .”

Strong hands landed on top of hers. He eased them away from her face as they stood facing each other. “How could you be sorry? You saved my life.”



“But your foot.” She looked down again, his pant leg now covering the prosthetic. “It’s gone.”

“Yep. Gone.” He grinned. “It was just a foot.”

She appreciated that he was trying to make light of it, but it had to have been devastating. Rarely speechless, Alex stared into his crystal blue eyes.

He brushed back strands of her hair that had swept across her face, then straightened her Santa hat, smiling. “I almost didn’t recognize you without raccoon eyes.” Inching closer, he said, “Nothing would have ever been right in my universe if I hadn’t been able to find you, to thank you for saving my life.”

A tear trickled down Alex’s cheek, and she didn’t bother to swipe it away. She’d never given up seeing Parker again, but a surreal feeling swept over her as he stepped even closer. She leaned up, breathing in his musky scent and the smell of something minty on his breath. But instead of kissing her, he put his arms around her and pulled her head to his broad chest, hugging her tightly. “It’s you,” he said in a whisper.

“It’s you,” she repeated easing away from him to look him in the eyes again, to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. Then she reached down and picked up her father’s Santa hat and handed it to him.

“Are you sure? I know it was your dad’s.” He paused. “A special time for the two of you.”

She nodded, smiling, feeling the same bond she’d felt with him in the water. He leaned down, and she put the hat on him. “You look great,” she said, sniffing.

“So do you,” he said as he adjusted the hat on his head. “Now.” He smiled. “I’d like to know if you’d like to go out with me? On a date.”

Alex couldn't wipe the grin from her face as the wind swirled around them in a cool and comforting way, as if repaying them for the hurricane. Bursts of sunlight met with the horizon in a postcard vision of possibilities for the future. "I would like that."

He cupped her chin. "I should probably warn you. I'm not going to wait until a formal goodbye after a date to kiss you. It's going to happen right now."

Alex swallowed hard. "I'm not strong enough to fight you off," she said, grinning.

"Oh, I'm fairly sure you could run away without me being able to catch you." He glanced down at his leg, grinning.

Alex didn't wait for him to make the move. She leaned up and kissed him with everything she had, totally prepared for the entire past event to flash before her in nightmarish visions. But instead, God gifted her with something else. A flash of a future that she could have with this man. They kissed again, then she eased away, staring into his eyes again before they turned to face the ocean, his arm protectively around her. Movement to their right caused them to shift their stance. A small boy was skipping toward them ahead of two adults, his blond hair blowing in the wind as he playfully slowed his stride to kick the sand, leaning down to pick up an occasional shell.

"Awe, he's cute." Alex let her eyes soak in the innocence of youth, carefree and happy. Then she turned back to Parker, silently thanking God for this magical moment.

"He's mine," Parker said, grinning.

Alex brought a hand to her chest and gasped. "Spencer?"

"Yep. The two stragglers behind him are my sister and her new boyfriend."

"Wow." Alex eyed the small boy, his eyes bright as he swung his arms in the air. "He is so adorable."

Spencer stopped in front of them, breathing hard, with something in his hand. “Is this the lady, Daddy?”

Parker bent at the waist. “Yep. This is the pretty lady who saved me.”

Alex still had a hand on her chest, but she was certain not a soul on earth could wipe the smile from her face. “Hello, Spencer. I am so happy to meet you.” She extended her hand after a few seconds, not sure what protocol was for a boy his age. But Spencer latched on and gave her hand a firm shake, then offered her what was in his other closed hand, dangling it at arm’s length.

“What’s this?” She opened her palm, still smiling, as she glanced at Parker, then back at Spencer.

He dropped a shell into her hand. “It’s for you.”

“Thank you very much.” She examined the small conch shell. “It’s lovely.”

Spencer’s twinkling blue eyes, the same color as his father’s, met Alex’s. He blinked a few times as a questioning expression filled his sweet face.

“Are you having Christmas by the sea?”

Warmth filled Alex’s soul. She hadn’t heard anyone ever use that phrase, besides her father. “Yes, I guess you could say I am.”

Spencer scratched his nose as he found his father’s gaze. “Maybe we can have Christmas by the sea with Alex sometime.”

Parker and Alex exchanged glances, both smiling. Parker said, “I think I’d like that Spencer.”

Alex nodded, and Spencer skipped away toward Parker's sister and boyfriend. Parker put his arm around Alex and pulled her close, both of them looking out across the ocean, soaking in the majestic feel of the sea.

And somehow, without a doubt, Alex knew that there would be many more Christmases by the sea. With Parker. And Spencer.

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## AVAILABLE NOW!

Kyle loses the love of his life when girlfriend, Morgan, is whisked away by the CIA in the middle of the night. Almost six years later, two men show up at Kyle's door with news that he has a daughter who is ill. Her only chance of survival lies with Kyle, if he'll fly to an undisclosed island location in the Pacific. But reuniting with his first love and saving his daughter places his engagement to his fiancée, Lexie, at risk.

Can love bridge the troubled waters of Kyle's past and present?

# *A sample of Message in a Bottle*

## Prologue

Kyle stretched tape across another box, then lifted it from the floor and piled it on top of the others that he had ready to go.

“I can’t believe all this stuff was stashed in this small room.” Lexie lowered a stack of file folders into a box. “I don’t think I had nearly this much in my dorm room.” She grinned as she slung long brown hair over her shoulders. “And I’m a girl. We keep everything.”

Kyle eyed the organized mess in the place he’d called home over the past four years. “Some of it probably needs to be trashed, but I’ll take a closer look at everything once I get settled in my apartment.” He handed Lexie the tape. “Just think, you’ll be right downstairs from me. No curfews or rules. We can eat pizza at three in the morning, and we won’t have to deal with crazy roommates.”

Lexie closed the distance between them and pressed her soft lips gently against his. Kyle eased his arms around her and basked in the scent of her flowery perfume. The feel of her mouth on his was a welcome distraction. They’d briefly considered moving in together, but Kyle’s Catholic upbringing kept him from choosing that option. They’d done the next best thing: rented apartments close to each other.

“Maybe we should take a break from packing,” Kyle whispered in her ear, trailing kisses down her neck.

She wiggled out of his arms. “Behave. We’ve got to get this done. You’ve got to be out of here by the end of the day.” She walked to the built-in drawers in Kyle’s room and tugged the bottom one until it inched open. “Good grief. What is all this?”

Kyle shuffled across the floor in his socks until he was beside her and staring at the massive amount of pictures, ticket stubs, receipts, and other memorabilia crammed in the top drawer. Sighing, he thumbed his way through the first layer. “Keepsakes.”

Lexie smiled as she picked up a picture. “Awe, look at you and Aiden. So handsome.”

“My mom sent me that the first week I was here, along with a bunch of other pictures.” Kyle recalled how homesick he was at that time. “I was probably seventeen in that picture. Aiden was sixteen.”

“Baseball players, I see.” Lexie brought the photo closer to her face. “You and your brother look a lot alike in this picture, but not so much in person.” She reached for a ticket stub that was folded in half and straightened it. Kyle rolled his eyes as she burst out laughing. “Lady Gaga?”

Kyle shrugged as his mind flooded with memories. “Yeah, well. I wasn’t the one who wanted to go see her, but she actually put on a great show.”

“Was this your date?” Lexie held up a photo that was right underneath the ticket. Kyle had his arm around the first girl he’d ever loved. Morgan Calhoun. And thoughts of her still caused his heart to race, even though he was sure no one could be in love as much as he and Lexie. There was no doubt in his mind that he’d marry Lexie one day.

“Yeah. That’s Morgan.” He swallowed hard. “We grew up on the same street, our families went to the same church, and our moms were best friends.” He forced a smile. “My first—and only love—before you.”

“Kyle Brossmann, do you expect me to believe that there have only been two loves in your life?”

The question made Kyle wonder how many loves had been in Lexie’s life, but it really didn’t matter. He’d be the one blessed to live with her for the rest of his days. He hoped.

Kyle nodded. “Yep. There was Morgan. And now you.” He eased the photo from her hand and studied Morgan’s face, the way her blonde hair curled under slightly below her chin, then tapered past her shoulders. She had magnificent brown eyes and a smile that made people like her before she ever uttered a word. And a body that made guys go nuts. Kyle had questioned her interest in him from day one, knowing someone as attractive as Morgan could have dated anyone she wanted.

“She’s really pretty. I’m surprised you haven’t mentioned her before.” Lexie put her head on his shoulder. “How long did you two date?”

Kyle tucked his dark hair behind his ears, knowing he’d have to shed his long locks before he started his new job. “We dated about a year, but we sort of grew into it. Since we’d known each other most of our lives, we were friends way before anything else.” He set the picture back in the drawer, forcing thoughts of Morgan away. Five years later, it was still painful to think about her. But Lexie had already found another selfie of Morgan and Kyle at the beach, the murky Gulf of Mexico in the background. Kyle remembered the cloudy day in Galveston. They’d eaten at Shrimp ‘N Stuff and walked on the beach. Kyle looked like his face was twice as big as it really was in the picture. But Morgan looked perfect in her pink bikini top and freshly applied lip-gloss.

Lexie couldn’t seem to pull her eyes away from the photo. That’s the effect Morgan had on most people.

“So what happened with you two?”

It was a conversation Kyle didn’t want to have, but if he was going to marry Lexie some day, he supposed there shouldn’t be any secrets. “It’s a crazy story.”

Lexie nudged him gently with her elbow, grinning. “I love crazy stories.”

Kyle took a deep breath as all the memories he’d fought to suppress came rushing to the surface. He lowered himself to the edge of the mattress, perching on the corner as he



began. “Back in high school, I pulled up to Morgan’s house in my truck and honked the horn. She rode with me to school every day, even though she had her own car. I waited, honked again, waited some more, then finally went to the front door and knocked. No answer.” His heart hammered against his chest, but he figured he might as well get this over with, then he’d pack up his memories for good. Seal them tight with extra tape, keepsakes his grandchildren would find some day and ask, “Who is this woman grandpa is with?” From heaven, he’d whisper, “My first love.”

“Then what?” Lexie eased her way to the bed and sat down.

“I looked in the window, and through the sheer drapes, I could see that the living room was empty. I mean, totally empty. No furniture. Nothing.” Kyle felt the sweat beads pooling on his forehead, much like five years ago. “I opened the front door, which was unlocked, and I went through the whole house yelling Morgan’s name.” He turned to face Lexie, pushed the drawer shut with the heel of one foot, then leaned against the dresser. “There was not one piece of furniture in that entire house.”

“I’m confused.” Lexie tipped her head to one side, frowning. “Did Morgan and her family just pack up in the middle of the night and disappear?”

Kyle tried to calm the churning in his stomach. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“Where’d they go?”

“No one knows. It was totally bizarre . . .

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# About the Author



Beth Wiseman is the best-selling author of the Daughters of the Promise series and the Land of Canaan series. Having sold almost two million books, her novels have held spots on the ECPA (Evangelical Christian Publishers Association) Bestseller List and the CBA (Christian Book Association) Bestseller List. She was the recipient of the prestigious Carol Award in 2011 and 2013.

She is a three-time winner of the Inspirational Readers Choice Award, and an INSPY Award winner. In 2013 she took home the coveted Holt Medallion. Her first book in the Land of Canaan series—*Seek Me With All Your Heart*—was selected as the 2011 Women of Faith Book of the Year. Beth is contracted with HarperCollins Christian Publishing into the year 2019. She and her husband are empty nesters enjoying country life in South Central Texas.

Visit [www.BethWiseman.com](http://www.BethWiseman.com) to subscribe to Beth's newsletter. Subscribers enjoy cover reveals, bonus material, free downloads, and exclusive news about future releases. Beth only sends one newsletter per month. And visit Beth at [Fans of Beth Wiseman](#) on Facebook where Beth interacts with readers and shares about her writing life.

# *Other books by Beth Wiseman*

## **The Daughters of the Promise series (Amish)**

Plain Perfect

Plain Pursuit

Plain Promise

Plain Paradise

Plain Proposal

Plain Peace

## **Land of Canaan series (Amish)**

Seek Me With All Your Heart

The Wonder of Your Love

His Love Endures Forever

## **Amish Secrets series**

Her Brother's Keeper

Love Bears All Things

Home All Along

## **Women's Fiction**

Need You Now

The House that Love Built

The Promise

## **Surf's Up Novellas**

A Tide Worth Turning

Message In A Bottle

The Shell Collector's Daughter