


SWEET SANCTUARY



Kim Vogel
A Novel by
Sawyer



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For *Kaisyn Faith*

Right now you are so at peace in your little world.
As you grow, and your “world” becomes larger,
may you always find your peace and security
in the arms of Jesus.

*“From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”*

Psalm 61:2, NIV

1

QUEENS, NEW YORK
JULY 1944

Micah Hatcher scanned the letter a second time, his pulse beating at twice its normal rhythm. *A joke . . . This has to be a joke.* Yet there was nothing funny about it.

Someone bumped him from behind, and he apologized, moving away from the rows of mail cubbies to lean against the opposite wall, where he wouldn't block the foot traffic. Half the population of Queens seemed to be retrieving mail right now. He scratched his head, trying to understand why this letter had come to him.

He checked the signature. *N. Allan Eldredge.* Scowling, he pressed his memory. Eldredge . . . Eldredge . . . The name seemed familiar. Then he slapped his forehead, remembrance hitting like a wave.

Lydia Eldredge. The nurse from Schofield Station Hospital. The one who had left Oahu early because of a mysterious emergency. An emergency that was no longer a mystery, thanks to the letter.

Micah's gaze dropped to the letter again. Yes, now he understood. Small wonder Lydia had been in such a hurry to get back to the States—halfway through her tour of duty, as he recalled. He released a huff of disgust. He knew Lydia had been rather . . . well, flighty . . . and somewhat self-centered. But despite Lydia's faults, he would never have taken her for a liar. How could she make up such drivel about him? He didn't have time for this kind of nonsense now—not with Jeremiah depending on his help.

Tucking his other mail into his jacket pocket, Micah left the crowded lobby and plunked down on a wrought-iron bench outside the post office. With the noonday sun heating his head, he flattened the letter against his pant leg and read it once more. Slowly. Concentrating on every word and searching for hidden meaning between the lines.

Dr. Hatcher,

I am sure by now you feel certain that your responsibility has been fully avoided, and this letter has come as a surprise. It has taken me some time to locate you. But this is a matter of extreme importance. A child's life has been impacted. As the child's grandfather, I cannot allow him to grow up wondering why his father has chosen to abandon him.

Therefore I request that you honor your responsibility toward your child. He and his mother are living with me in Boston. I will allow you two weeks to contact me. If by the end of that time, you have not chosen to honor your duty to your son, I shall be forced to take legal action. I assure you I have the wealth and influence to see that you do not continue to neglect your responsibility. I encourage—no, I

insist—that you come with all due haste to Boston to settle this matter in an honorable fashion.

N. Allan Eldredge

“My son?” Micah muttered, his frustration growing. He had no son—it was impossible! Why on earth would Lydia tell her parents he had fathered her child? He folded the letter and shoved it roughly back into its envelope.

Going to Boston wasn’t out of the question, he realized. It would be at least another three weeks before his brother’s package arrived in New York. He could spend some of his hard-earned money on a train ticket and be there in less than two days. But to go might acknowledge the accusation held merit, which was ridiculous. Still, could he allow this farce to continue? And what of this boy—Lydia’s son? He must be between three and four years old, certainly old enough to understand a father’s absence. What had the child been told?

The questions tumbled in Micah’s head as haphazardly as a tumbleweed blowing across the Texas prairie of his childhood. And then another childhood remembrance—a welcome one—intruded. His mother’s voice tiptoed through his mind: “*Son, whatever comes your way, the good Lord knew it was comin’ and has a solution in mind. Trust Him to guide you.*” The letter might have caught Micah by surprise, but nothing came as a surprise to God.

Right there on the bench in the open, he closed his eyes and communicated silently with his Heavenly Father. He offered the situation into God’s keeping, and a feeling of peace settled in his heart. “Thank You,” he whispered, opening his eyes and focusing once more on the busy noonday traffic. He’d made his decision, and he trusted it was the right one. He would travel

to Boston, confront Lydia and her parents, and insist that she tell the truth. Micah was not the father of this child. A twinge of sympathy pinched his conscience for the little boy, but it was not his responsibility no matter what Lydia's father might think. The sooner the man realized it, the better off they would all be. Especially Micah. Being caught up in his brother's travails was responsibility enough.

He pressed his hands against his thighs, pushing himself to his feet like an old man. The situation left him feeling much older than his thirty-six years. But hadn't the burden he and Jeremiah carried aged them at least ten years for each of the past two? Another deep sigh set him in motion toward his small, lonely apartment. He'd make a couple of phone calls and arrange for a temporary replacement at the clinic. He couldn't hand off the other responsibility. He'd have to be back to take care of Jeremiah's package himself. But as soon as possible he'd knock on Lydia Eldredge's door and bring an immediate end to this nonsense.



Micah thanked the taxi driver with a generous tip and a smile before slamming the door. The taxi departed, leaving him standing on the cobblestone street of Boston's prestigious Back Bay neighborhood outside a tall, narrow, ostentatious brownstone crunched side-by-side with several other tall, narrow, ostentatious brownstones. Micah whistled through his teeth—apparently Mr. Eldredge had been accurate in his description of his wealth.

Micah stepped onto the ridiculously tiny yard fronting the house, and not until he was nearly to the steps leading up to double front doors did he see the small boy, crouching in the shadows next to a bush under an overhanging bay window.

Micah stopped, staring. This, then, must be the child in question—the one Lydia had said was his son.

Micah froze in place, observing the silent child. The little boy hunkered on his heels, his bottom hovering above the neatly trimmed grass, his elbows tight against his ribs and his hands clasped in front of him. His hair—dark and soft-looking—curled upward at his collar and around his ears. He was obviously intent on something in the grass, his face studious even in shadow.

Curiosity overwhelmed Micah, and instead of climbing the stairs he crouched beside the boy. “Whatcha lookin’ at?”

In slow motion, the child placed one finger against his own lips. “Shhh. Bug.”

Micah peered into the sparse blades and spotted what held the child’s attention. A shiny black beetle dug busily in the dirt between the boy’s feet. Micah’s lips twitched.

The child peeked sideways at Micah, his thick lashes nearly shielding his brown eyes from view. With a stubby finger, he pointed at the beetle. “I named him Buggy. I’m gonna keep him for a pet, if Mama will let me.”

“Buggy is a good name.” Micah looked the boy over. He was a handsome lad, small but sturdy, with soft features and expressive eyes. Micah recalled Lydia had brown eyes, but other than that he didn’t see much resemblance between the child and his mother.

“Think he’d be happy in a shoebox? That’s all I got to put him in.” The little boy turned his gaze fully upward.

Somehow it pleased Micah that the child trusted him enough to ask his opinion. He scratched his head thoughtfully, considering the boy’s question. “We-e-e-ell,” he finally answered while the child waited patiently, still unmoving from his position, “seems to me that bugs are happier when they’ve got some

grass an' dirt to scurry in. A shoebox seems a rather gloomy place to live."

The child's face fell. "You mean he'd be sad in a box?" He looked wistfully at the beetle, his fingers working up and down against his knuckles. "I don't want to make him sad. It's not fun to be sad."

Micah wondered briefly what sadness the child had experienced to make him so empathetic to a simple beetle. "Most creatures are happier in their natural environments."

The little boy wrinkled his forehead. "Nat'ral en—en—what?"

Micah stifled a chuckle. "Natural environment," he repeated, enjoying this exchange more than he could understand. "You know, the place where God planned for them to live."

The child nodded with a serious expression, then stated, "You talk funny."

Micah laughed. "I do?"

The little boy nodded, making the lock of hair falling across his forehead bounce. "Yes. Your voice goes like this—*lee-uv*. How come you don't say 'live' like I do?"

Again, Micah scratched his head. He exaggerated his southern twang just for the boy. "Well, I reckon because my natural environment was Texas when I was growin' up. Most ever'body there talked just like me."

The boy's eyes danced with glee. "Lahke," he repeated, mimicking Micah's accent. "Lahke tha-et." He grinned, dimples appearing in his apple cheeks. "I *lahke* the way you talk."

Micah felt smitten. What a charming little boy. Whoever his father was, the man was certainly missing out, not being a part of the child's life. Micah stuck out his hand. "I'm Micah. What's your name?"

The boy placed his moist, grubby hand into Micah's. "Nicho-

las Allan Eldredge the Third. Mama calls me Nicky.” He leaned toward Micah, cupping his hand next to his mouth as if telling a secret. “I’m small for my age.”

Micah struggled against a chuckle. He forced a serious look. “Hmm, let’s see. Stand up for me, partner.”

The boy straightened, revealing one untied Oxford and two sagging socks. Micah looked him up and down, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “Well, now, Nicky, ’pears to me you’re just about right. Your feet reach the ground an’ everything. That’s about all a boy could want.”

Nicky laughed, his face crinkled with delight. “I like you.”

The compliment warmed Micah right down to the soles of his feet. *Whoa, be careful. This one could grow on you.* Micah straightened, too, his height much greater than young Nicky’s. The little boy tipped his head back and looked up at Micah, a grin still dimpling his cheeks.

Micah realized he needed to get down to business. “So, partner, is your mama inside?”

Nicky nodded. “Uh-huh. And Grammy and Poppy.”

Micah assumed those must be Lydia’s parents. It was good they were all here—he could get this situation righted with everyone all at once. “Could you show me?”

Suddenly Nicky’s mouth dropped open and he clapped a hand to his cheek. “My bug!” He fell to his knees, his fingers parting the grass blades in a frantic search.

Micah dropped to one knee to search, too, but the beetle was gone. He looked at the bereft child. Two plump tears hovered on Nicky’s lashes. They nearly broke Micah’s heart.

“He left.” The boy’s chin quivered. “And I was gonna make him my pet. Not in a shoebox.” He placed one dirty hand on Micah’s upraised knee. “I was gonna build him a little fence out here so he could be in his nat’ral en—envire—” He huffed.

“You know, where God planned him to be. Right out here in the grass and dirt.” A huge sigh heaved Nicky’s narrow shoulders. “But now he’s gone.”

“Aw, don’t be sad.” Micah wrapped his broad hand around Nicky’s sweaty neck. “You know, Buggy probably went on home to his mama. He’s probably tellin’ her right now, ‘I met me a boy who was real nice an’ let me come home again.’”

Nicky tipped his head, considering this. “You think so, Micah?”

Micah liked the way his name sounded on the child’s lips. “I do.”

Nicky stuck out his lower lip, his eyes on the grass. Then he nodded and stood up. “I want him to happy. He’s prob’ly happier with his mama than he would be in a little fence all by himself.”

“Good boy.”

Lydia had done a fine job with Nicky. He was articulate, obviously bright, polite, and kindhearted—a wonderful little boy. For the second time Micah warned himself: *Be careful.*

Nicky reached out and grabbed Micah’s hand, tugging. “Come on, Micah. I’ll take you to Grammy and Poppy.”

Micah rose slowly, his knees popping.

Nicky smirked. “Poppy’s legs do that, too. But you’re not old like Poppy.”

Micah certainly felt old some days. But somehow this child had lightened his heart, taking years away. He smiled, sending Nicky a wink. “Let me give you a word of advice there, partner,” he said as the boy led him toward the stairs. “Don’t tell your poppy he’s old. Most folks don’t like to be reminded of that.”

Nicky’s shoulders lifted in a carefree shrug. “Okay.” He released Micah’s hand to scamper up the steps. Micah followed more slowly, using the hand rail. Nicky waited beside the door, clutching the door handle and bouncing on his toes while he

waited for Micah to catch up. But before Nicky could turn the knob, the door was pulled open from the inside, and framed in the doorway stood Nicky's mother.

Micah stopped, one foot on the last riser and one on the porch floor, as Lydia's gaze met his. She scowled momentarily, as if trying to place something, and then her jaw dropped in shock. Her hand flew to her chest and color climbed her cheeks.

Micah took the final step onto the porch, pushing his hands into his pockets. "Hello, Lydia."

2

M-Micah?” Lydia stared, unable to believe she wasn’t imagining his presence. On the island of Oahu four years ago, this man had flooded her dreams, but when she’d left the army base she’d assumed she would never see him again. What brought him to Boston? How had he found her?

“That’s right,” Nicky chirped, swinging his arms and smiling up at his mother. “He’s Micah. And he’s my friend. Micah-my-friend. And he talks lahke thee-us.”

Though aware of Nicky’s words, Lydia felt strangely distanced from them. She placed a trembling hand on her son’s head, her gaze never wavering from Micah’s. “That’s nice, Nicky.”

Micah took another step forward. “May I come in?”

“What? Oh! Yes, certainly.” Lydia stepped back, heat searing her face. She gestured jerkily for him to enter. “Please . . . come in.”

Nicky darted through the long corridor, calling, “Grammy! Poppy! We have comp’ny!” The child disappeared around a bend, and Micah looked after him, a smile playing at the corners of his lips.

Lydia used two hands to close the door and stood with her

palms pressed against the solid wood, hoping to gain strength from the sturdy oak. If she were to make a list of the people least likely to show up on her doorstep, Dr. Micah Hatcher would top the list. Having him so near, after the years that had passed since they'd worked together at Schofield Station Hospital, completely disoriented her. Her knees quaked. Her body tingled with awareness. And her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Which was just as well, because she had no idea what to say.

She turned to find Micah waiting patiently behind her, hands still in his pockets, his face expressionless. "I suppose you knew I'd come."

Lydia frowned. What did he mean? Before she could phrase a response, her father appeared at the end of the corridor and strode quickly toward them, his hand extended to Micah.

"Dr. Hatcher?"

Father's bearing—chin raised, shoulders square, eyes slightly narrowed and gleaming with arrogance—cowed most people. But Micah didn't shrink. He grasped Father's hand. "That's correct."

"I am Allan Eldredge, Lydia's father. It was good of you to come." He kept his chin raised, peering at Micah in the superior manner Lydia knew well.

Micah raised one sardonic eyebrow. "You didn't give me much choice."

Lydia looked from one man to the other, questions racing through her mind. Choice? What was Micah intimating?

"Let's step into my den." Her father glanced at her. "Lydia, have your mother prepare some tea." He turned back to Micah. "Or do you prefer something stronger?"

Micah shook his head. "Don't bother on my account. I don't need anything, thank you."

“Very well.” Father lifted a hand, indicating a wide doorway to the left of the corridor. “Then let’s get better acquainted.”

Lydia tried to follow, but her father abruptly closed the pocket doors in her face. She considered opening them, demanding to be included, but she decided she wasn’t up to an argument. Sighing, she turned and headed to the kitchen, where she found Nicky at the table, swinging his feet and chomping an oatmeal cookie. Her mother hovered uncertainly behind him, a glass of milk in her hand. When Lydia entered, Lavinia Eldredge placed the milk on the table in front of Nicky and busied herself with some cut flowers on the dry sink. Lydia knew she’d get no information from her mother, assuming she knew anything.

“Hi, Mama!” Nicky’s cupid’s mouth was ringed with crumbs. “Do you lahke Micah, too?”

Oh yes, at one time she’d liked Micah. To the point of infatuation. But she wouldn’t admit it. She seated herself next to Nicky and reached for his foot, bringing it up to rest on her knee and tying the loose shoelace. “So you made a friend, huh?”

Nicky nodded, a grin lighting his sweet face. “Micah-my-friend. He’s nice, Mama. He said I’m just right ’cause my feet reach the ground. And Buggy is prob’ly with his mama being glad I didn’t put him in a shoebox.”

Nicky and his whims of imagination. Lydia couldn’t follow the little boy’s line of talk, but she nodded anyway. She rested her chin in her hand, watching fondly as Nicky finished his snack. Her mind carried her backward to the last time she’d seen Dr. Micah Hatcher.

Under the sun on idyllic Oahu, standing beside the Pineapple Express . . . He hadn’t spoken to her as she’d waited to board the train. She hadn’t spoken either, caught up in worry about Eleanor. As much as she’d admired Micah and wanted his attention, she hadn’t sought it that day. And she wasn’t

certain she should seek it now, even though he was only a few yards away.

Voices exploded from the den. Mother turned from the sink, her fingers covering her mouth. Nicky sat up straight. His head turned toward the sound. Then he gave Lydia a worried look. “Mama, Poppy is yelling at Micah-my-friend.”

How odd Nicky would express loyalty to a man he’d only just met rather than the grandfather who had helped raise him, but then Lydia listened again and understood. It wasn’t angry *voices* they were hearing, but only *one* angry voice—Allan Eldredge’s.

Nicky jumped up as if to run to the hall, but Lydia caught him and eased him back into the chair. “Stay here, Nicky.”

Mother crossed to the table and placed her hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Yes, Nicky, stay here with Grammy. Finish your milk. Micah and Poppy will be fine—men are just noisy sometimes.”

Nicky looked up at his grandmother, his expression innocent. “Like boys are noisy, Grammy?”

“Yes, my little noisemaker, like boys are noisy.” Mother smiled and bestowed a kiss on the crown of Nicky’s head. “Your mama will make sure they quiet down,” she added, giving Lydia a meaningful look.

Lydia rose and hurried to the pocket doors, but she jumped back as they burst open and Father charged into the corridor. His neck and cheeks were mottled, his jaw clenched. The question on Lydia’s lips remained unasked in light of the rage on her father’s face. She swung her gaze to Micah, who looked equally grim. Father kept his back to Micah, his arms crossed, the anger palpable.

Micah spoke to Father’s stiff back. “Mr. Eldredge, I appreciate your concern. But you must understand this situation is between Lydia and me. She and I will need to be allowed to find the solution.”

Lydia looked from one man to the other, hoping for a clue. What kind of situation existed between Micah and herself? She hadn't seen the man for over three years.

Father whirled, his finger pointing at Micah, but before he could speak, Nicky came racing down the corridor with Mother on his heels. He slid to a stop and wrapped his arms around his grandfather's knees. Nicky's bangs flopped across his forehead as he peered upward. "Poppy, I heard you yelling. Why were you being so noisy?"

Father looked down at the boy, and his expression softened. He cupped the back of Nicky's head with a tender hand. "Did I frighten you?"

Nicky nodded, his little forehead puckered. "You yelled at Micah."

A brief look passed between the men. They seemed to reach a silent agreement to do whatever necessary to prevent upsetting the little boy. Father stroked Nicky's tousled hair. "I'm sorry, Nicky. Poppy is a big man, and sometimes big men make big sounds. But I won't yell anymore."

Micah crouched to Nicky's level, a warm smile lighting his eyes. He was obviously touched by Nicky's concern, and Lydia's heart lifted as she watched him interact with her son. Placing a hand on Nicky's small back, Micah said, "I won't yell either, partner. Deal?"

"Deal." Nicky grinned and then released Father's knees to turn and lean backward against his poppy's sturdy frame.

Micah rose, his gaze on Lydia. The warmth in his expression drained away. "We need to talk." The quiet tone seemed ominous.

A prickle of trepidation made the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She swung her confused gaze on her father.

Father, his hands now on Nicky's shoulders, jerked his head in the direction of the door. "I suggest you take a walk."

Nicky angled his head nearly upside down as he tried to see his grandfather's face. "Can I go, too?"

"No, you stay with me," Father said.

"But I want to take a walk with Micah-my-friend."

Micah reached out and lightly tapped the end of Nicky's nose with one finger. "Tell you what, partner. I'll take a walk with your mama first, and then when I get back, I'll take a walk with you. Sound good?"

"You and me take a walk alone?" Nicky's wide brown eyes begged.

Micah glanced at Lydia, and she nodded her approval, her heart turning strangely in her chest at Micah's kindness to Nicky.

"Yep, just you an' me, partner."

"Hurray!" Nicky suspended himself happily from Father's hands. "Poppy, Micah and me are gonna take a walk!"

"Good." Father looked at Lydia, his expression carrying a warning. "Go on now."

Winging a quick, wordless prayer for strength heavenward, Lydia pressed her trembling palms against the hips of her trousers and raised her shoulders. "Well, let's go then."

Micah followed her out the door.



Micah's anger had been stirred in his brief encounter with Nicholas Allan Eldredge the Second. Had he ever been part of such a one-sided, accusatory conversation? The man's angry—and inaccurate—allegations still rang through Micah's head. He needed to gain full control of his temper before he asked Lydia why she had named Micah as her son's father. She walked slowly, purposefully, each step measured and stilted. Her gaze stayed straight ahead, not even acknowledging his presence. He

sensed her tension, but why should she be tense? She'd started this mess with her untruths.

Micah looked up and down the street. Square patches of grass formed emerald carpets leading from the sidewalk to the bricked faces of four-story-high houses. An abundance of flowering bushes and patches of flowers reminiscent of those his mama planted in her garden—geraniums, poppies, daisies, and bachelor buttons—created eye-catching splashes of color that helped soothe the frayed edges of his nerves.

Lydia's neighborhood was certainly different from the one where he lived in Queens. Her corner of the world seemed much more tranquil than his, few people and fewer vehicles around. A bird sang cheerfully from a snowball bush growing next to the railed stairway of one house. The lilting melody further quieted Micah's irritation.

They were well away from Lydia's home, and Micah had calmed enough to address the issue. *Help me keep my anger in check, God.* He cleared his throat to speak, and Lydia jumped at the sudden noise. She turned in his direction, her brown eyes wide and apprehensive. The expression in her eyes brought to mind little Nicky's pensive gaze, and he had to fight against a smile that threatened. He didn't want to smile at Lydia. Not yet.

"Is Nicky the reason you left Schofield?"

She looked forward again with a defensive thrust to her jaw. "Yes."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

Lydia reached out and picked a daisy from a cluster growing near the sidewalk. She twirled the bloom as they continued ambling side by side. "I didn't believe it concerned anyone else."

Micah sent her a sidelong look, irked by her indifferent response. "Your father obviously doesn't agree with your opinion." He paused, his hands clasped behind his back, lest he give in

to the temptation to throttle someone. “Why did you tell him I’m Nicky’s father?”

Lydia came to a dead halt and spun to face him, her mouth hanging open and her eyes wide. “Why did I—?” She threw down the daisy with force. “I did no such thing!” The denial was adamant and—unless Micah was a poor judge of character—truthful. He remembered her expression when she’d found him on her doorstep earlier. Her shock had seemed genuine. Could she be innocent of creating this muddle?

“Do you have any idea why your father would make that assumption?”

“Father couldn’t possibly believe such a thing.”

Her indignation was real but misguided. Micah reached inside his jacket and removed the letter he’d received from Allan Eldredge. He handed it to Lydia and watched her read it. Her face slowly drained of color as her eyes scanned the written script. Finally she raised her gaze, her dark eyes wide. She held out the letter as if it were a poisonous snake and shook her head.

“I can’t believe . . .” She swallowed, glancing once more at the letter, her face pale. “I had no idea. Oh, Micah, no wonder you came. I’m so sorry.”

Micah took the letter from her unresisting fingers, folded it, and returned it to his pocket. In the brief time he’d visited with N. Allan Eldredge, he’d been given the impression Lydia’s father was a man few people crossed. He suspected his daughter didn’t cross him, either. He gave Lydia’s arm a gentle squeeze, his anger with her completely gone in light of her very real distress. “Lydia, I’m sorry, too. I thought you knew why I was here and that you had told him to contact me.”

She shook her head, her chin-length dark hair lifting in the slight breeze. “No, he didn’t say a word to me.” She placed one hand along her jaw as if she had a toothache. “But where would

he have . . . ?” Then her shoulders slumped, comprehension dawning, the hand falling to her side. “About two months ago, I noticed my diaries had been moved. I didn’t think much about it at the time—I thought perhaps the maid had shifted them when she dusted my shelves—but now I wonder . . .”

Micah could have made a teasing remark about her writing about him in her diary, but he didn’t feel much like teasing right now. “You think he read your diary?”

She flipped her hands outward. “He must have. It’s the only explanation. I’ve never mentioned you in conversation. The only place he could have found your name would be my diaries.” She ran her hands through her hair from temples to nape, sweeping it into appealing wings away from her face. “I can’t believe he would violate my privacy this way!” She spun and stomped up the sidewalk, her heels clacking.

Micah trotted to keep up. He had no difficulty believing that her father had read through Lydia’s private thoughts. Allan El-dredge struck him as a ruthless man, intent on having his own way regardless of the cost. “Did you write about Nicky’s real father in your diaries?”

Lydia stopped again, dropped her head, and gave a slight nod. “Then he must not have read everything.”

Lydia slowly brought up her chin and looked ahead, giving Micah a view of her profile. He found it just as appealing as he had the first time he’d spotted her across the mess hall at Schofield. Oh yes, he’d been interested. Until he’d discovered she had no interest in Christianity. He wouldn’t pursue a faithless woman.

She spoke, her voice flat. “Father has no need to read my diary to discover the identity of Nicky’s father. He’s known all along.”

“Then why would he—?”

Lydia turned her gaze to Micah. Her eyes appeared much

older than her years. “He’s afraid. *I’m* afraid. He did it for me—and for Nicky.”

Micah crunched his brow, completely confused. “Lydia, I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. You’d have to know the whole story. . . .” Turning away again, she sighed. A tired sigh. A sad sigh. She ran a hand through her hair once more—a thoughtless gesture—then blinked rapidly, biting down on her lower lip. “Micah, you came in answer to a letter that should have never been sent. The least I can do is tell you about Nicky. But not in the open, on the sidewalk where anyone could overhear.” Her eyes begged him to listen and understand. “Can we go somewhere private?”

Micah shrugged. “I’m new in town. You’d need to pick the place.”

“We’ll take a drive,” she said. “I have my gas ration coupons for three weeks saved up—we’ll drive to Manchester-by-the-Sea, where there’s no chance of being overheard.” Such secretiveness set Micah’s teeth on edge. “Of course, you’ll have to take a walk with Nicky first.” A small smile appeared on her face.

Micah chuckled. “I promised him. I won’t break the promise.”

Lydia nodded, giving him an approving smile. Yet her eyes still seemed sad. “Let’s head back, then.” She turned, took one step, then stopped. Her expression turned desperate as she caught hold of his arm in a surprisingly strong grip. “Micah, what I share with you this evening must stay between us. Nicky’s safety depends on it.”

A jolt of fear struck as firmly as a fist to Micah’s belly. He nodded, making a silent vow. She began walking, and he fell in step beside her. They didn’t speak, but his mind raced, his questions taking on a prayerlike quality. *God, this has got me spooked. What kind of secret does Lydia harbor?*

3

The sky had changed to a dusky pink by the time Lydia parked her Hudson at a high point overlooking a steep decline to the ocean's expanse. Micah looked out the window, whistling softly at the view. Manchester-by-the-Sea stretched behind them like a twinkling blanket, electric lights shining in countless windows. On the opposite side, stars shimmered in a clear night sky, sending dappled reflections across the gently rolling waves. God had outdone Himself when He created this corner of the world.

He cranked his window open to allow a breeze, and the sound of a cricket singing its night song intruded. The air was a bit cooler here, but certainly not cold. Sweet scents—fruits, flowers, and damp earth—drifted in, competing with the tang of sea air. He glanced at Lydia. Her gaze was turned outward, but he suspected she wasn't really seeing the view. The fingers of one hand ran idly across the steering wheel, and her puckered face indicated she was lost in thought.

"Are you ready to talk?" Although he spoke softly, she gave a start.

Slowly she faced him, her hand stilling on the steering wheel and curling around the varnished wood as if in need of security.

She released a breath, then set her jaw in a familiar, determined way. “Yes.” She shrugged slightly, the shiny fabric of her blouse rippling like the ocean waves with the movement. “But I’m not sure where to start.”

Micah shifted, bringing up one knee to prop his heel on the edge of the seat. He wrapped his arm around his knee in a casual pose he hoped would reduce the tension in the vehicle. “How about starting at Schofield, when you left.”

She tipped her head, seeming to considering this, then nodded briskly. “All right. Do you remember I asked permission to go to Honolulu?”

He nodded. He’d been given instruction to drive her to the train station, and he hadn’t been pleased. Her penchant for flirtation made him uncomfortable. But she hadn’t been flirtatious that day.

“I desperately needed to get away. You see, for weeks I had been struggling with a problem, and I just couldn’t find a solution. I had gotten a letter from a friend, Eleanor . . .” She paused again, grimacing. “Micah, I’m sorry. For all of this to make sense, I’m going to have to go farther back—to when I took the Red Cross classes and agreed to a year of army service at Schofield. Please bear with me.”

Micah reached out and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “Take your time.”

She gave him a grateful look, then continued. “Eleanor and I were lifelong friends. Our fathers worked together. Father is in crating—”

Micah frowned in confusion, and Lydia laughed softly before offering a brief explanation. “His business is to make crates. The crates are used for shipping everything from oranges to machine gun parts. It’s been a very lucrative business and the war has only made it more so.”

Micah nodded. Considering how many things were being shipped overseas these days, Eldredge had no doubt amassed a small fortune.

“Eleanor’s father was the foreman of the plant, so our relationship was multifaceted. Our parents worked together, socialized together. . . . Since we were both only children, we became like surrogate sisters. Eleanor and I practically lived together.”

She fell silent for a few moments, apparently reliving childhood memories. Micah waited, allowing her the time to sort her thoughts. Eventually, she resumed the story.

“About six months before I left, Eleanor’s father hired a new worker—a man named Nicolai Pankin. He was missing one arm—the result of an auger accident when he was a teen—but his remaining arm had more strength than most men possess in two good arms. Oh, he was handsome.” Lydia’s eyes slid shut, and she drew in a deep breath, as if savoring something sweet. Then she fixed him with a serious look once more. “Despite his handicap, he was very rugged and roguish, which only added to his masculinity. And charming. . . . He could coax an apple tree to bear orange blossoms. I found him very attractive, and the first time Eleanor spotted him, she was instantly besotted. But, unlike me, Eleanor was shy. She was too afraid to approach Nic.”

Although the dim light made it difficult to make out Lydia’s features, Micah heard a change in her voice. A tightness, an underlying anguish.

“One time when Eleanor and I went to visit with her father, I saw Nic following her with his eyes. It bothered me at first—I liked him, too. But I realized that after I completed my Red Cross training, I would leave for nursing duty somewhere. Time with Nic would be short-lived. Additionally, I knew Nic was below my station—no matter how attractive I found him, my parents would never approve.”

She lifted one shoulder, a flippant gesture that fell short of being convincing. “So I thought, if I can’t have him, then my best friend should.” She sighed, crossing her arms across her stomach. “I dragged Eleanor over to where he was working and introduced them. It was my only attempt at playing matchmaker, and it proved to be one time too many. They had a whirlwind romance, and I stood up as Eleanor’s maid of honor four months before leaving for Schofield.”

She dropped her chin. “Of course, we didn’t know until after the wedding that Nic was addicted to morphine. Apparently, when he’d had his accident, the doctor had prescribed it for the pain, and he grew dependent on it. He’d hidden it well, and afterward, it was too late. When Eleanor got pregnant, Nic was furious. He didn’t want the worry and burden of children, he said. He found someone who would terminate Eleanor’s pregnancy.”

Micah grimaced. Although he knew only a bit about Nicolai Pankin, he held no respect for the man.

Lydia continued her story. “Eleanor ran away from him. She went to her parents, but they refused to help her. They hadn’t been pleased with her marrying a common laborer, and they told her she’d have to deal with the problem herself. So Eleanor wrote to me, begging for help. She didn’t know where else to turn. Besides, I had linked her with Nic, which made me partly responsible. It was her letter that created my emergency.

“I wrote and told her to go to my parents and I would be home as soon as I could. My parents were afraid of taking Eleanor in—they didn’t know what Nic might do, and they knew it would create a serious rift in their friendship with her parents, which would also affect Father’s business. So they arranged sanctuary with a midwife, and they paid for Eleanor’s keep until her baby was born.”

Lydia paused, and Micah, now certain he knew Lydia's secret, interjected with a gentle question. "Lydia, Nicky isn't really your son, is he?"

"Not my son?" Lydia choked out a single sob. She pressed a fist against her mouth, gaining control. "Nicky has been mine from the moment the midwife placed him in my arms." The fervency in her tone pierced Micah. "He couldn't possibly be more mine if I'd given birth to him. He *is* my son, in every way that counts."

Micah contemplated her answer. He understood Lydia's love for the boy. He'd only just met Nicky, and he already felt the stirrings of fondness. "Why isn't Eleanor raising Nicky?"

"Eleanor died three days before I got back from Schofield." Deep sadness colored her tone. "Nicky came early. The midwife said there were complications—there wasn't anything she could do because Eleanor refused to go to the hospital. Eleanor had instructed the midwife to give Nicky to me—she trusted me to come. The moment I held him, I knew I would keep him and raise him as my own. With God's help, and the support of my parents, I've been Nicky's mama ever since."

Micah shook his head in wonder. It seemed the self-centered Lydia had changed a great deal since her time at Schofield. And it was hard to think of that hardheaded man he'd just met assuming responsibility for someone else's baby. "How did you convince your parents to take Nicky in?"

Lydia raised her chin. "I didn't give them much choice. If they wanted me, they had to accept Nicky, too. I was stubborn." Then she shrugged, her tone softening. "And I was lucky my parents were much more accepting than Eleanor's parents had been. Of course, it didn't take long before they loved Nicky as much as I do. We all think of him as my baby."

"And where is Nicky's father?"

While Lydia talked, the moon had sneaked high into the sky, painting a golden pathway across the water and sending a soft glow into the car, illuminating Lydia's silhouette. Her chin began to quiver. "Nicky's father is hanging over our heads like a hangman's noose."

A chill eased down Micah's spine.

"Shortly after Nicky's birth, he somehow found out where Eleanor had been hiding. He visited the midwife, demanding the baby. The midwife told him the baby had died with Eleanor. But Nic didn't believe her. He told her he'd found a family that wanted the baby—a family willing to pay for the baby—and he wanted 'the kid.' That's what he called Nicky—'the kid.' Not 'my son' or 'Eleanor's child,' just 'the kid,' like Nicky was nothing." Lydia's voice quivered with indignation, and anger swelled in Micah's chest toward the unfeeling man. How could anyone see his own child as merchandise to be placed on an auction block?

"For nearly two years, he periodically went to the midwife's home, badgering her for information. With Father's help, she finally moved to escape his constant visits. And it worked. For a while. It's been almost a full year, but recently he found her again. She said he acted wild and desperate. She was afraid—for herself and for us. He wants Nicky."

Micah stared at her. "Surely he can't still be hoping to sell Nicky?"

"Why not? Nicky is young. Someone would surely take him." Lydia's voice rose passionately. "Nic moves in circles we would rather didn't exist. If he didn't sell Nicky to a family, he'd find some other way to make money from him. If he didn't have a plan for selling him, he wouldn't be trying to find him. We know he doesn't want to be Nicky's father. If he legitimately loved him and would care for him, I'd probably give Nicky up.

It would be hard, but I would do it because I believe as Nicky grows older he's going to need a father. I won't be enough." She uttered the last sentence in a harsh whisper. "But I can't let Nic take him only to sell him to strangers, or—or—whatever he has planned. I can't, Micah!"

Without conscious thought, Micah pulled Lydia against his shoulder and rubbed her back. Her muscles quivered beneath his palms and he sensed she battled tears. But she didn't allow herself the privilege of completely breaking down. After a few moments, she pulled away, offering a weak smile.

Embarrassment welled. Why had he embraced her? He didn't need to give her ideas. Years ago, Lydia had harbored affection for him, he knew. It wouldn't do to encourage those old feelings to blossom. Yet, oddly enough, knowing how unselfishly she had turned her world around for her friend's baby had ignited something within his own heart. But he had no time for such thoughts. His patients and Jeremiah needed him.

Micah squared his shoulders and assumed a businesslike tone. "How many people know Nicky is really Eleanor's baby?"

"Four." Then she grimaced. "Well, five. My parents, the midwife, of course I know—and now you."

"You're sure the midwife hasn't told anyone?"

"Father pays her well to keep silent. She depends on the income. She won't tell."

"Eleanor's parents don't know?"

Lydia shook her head. "Shortly after Eleanor's death, they were in an accident. Her father was drunk and ran off the road. Both he and Eleanor's mother were killed."

So much tragedy. "And no one has ever questioned how you came to have this child?"

Lydia turned her gaze to the lights of the city glittering below. "Father said to let people believe Nicky is my child. Father is well

respected, and since I had been away, the story was plausible. I'm sure there are those who disapprove, believing I had him out of wedlock, and they no doubt whisper about me behind my back, but Father's standing in the community keeps them from being openly judgmental."

"In other words, you're living a lie."

"Only to protect Nicky."

Micah didn't respond. A lie was a lie, and someday—maybe quite soon—this one was going to trip her up. "What does it say on Nicky's birth certificate?"

"He doesn't have one."

Micah shook his head, certain he hadn't heard correctly. "Doesn't have one?"

"There hasn't been a need for one. Father thought—" She paused for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not to trust Micah with the rest. Finally she sighed, threw her hands outward, and said, "Father thought eventually I would marry, and when I did, we'd get a birth certificate made with my husband's name listed as the father. There!"

Micah blew out a breath. "Your father is really full of plans, isn't he?" He couldn't hide his sarcasm.

"I'm sure Father hoped, from what I wrote in my diaries, that the feelings I had for you were reciprocated and perhaps some affection still remained. I'm sure he also hoped once you met Nicky, you'd be taken with him. Nicky is rather hard to resist."

Micah couldn't refute that—Nicky was a very likable little boy. But he wouldn't validate what Allan Eldredge had done. "It was wrong of him to bring me here, Lydia. It was deceptive, and it only served to create another problem."

Tears trembled on Lydia's eyelashes. "Micah, what you have to understand is we've lived in fear for the past three years that somehow Nicky would be taken from us. Father should not

have dragged you into this, but his having done so only proves to me how frightened and desperate he is. He loves Nicky as his grandson. He can't bear to think of losing him. Neither can I." Her voice broke.

Instinctively Micah reached for Lydia's hand. He linked fingers with her, offering comfort. "I understand your fear and worry. But, Lydia, you can't continue to mislead everyone." Micah shifted slightly on the seat, his knee bumping against hers. "If nothing else, Nicky deserves to know the truth. Do you ever plan to tell him about Eleanor and the sacrifice she made to bring him into the world? And you're going to need help from legal authorities if you're going to protect Nicky from his father. You've got to go to the police if this man is making threats."

"I can't!" Lydia yanked her hand free. "Don't you understand? The courts will take Nicky from me if we admit I'm not his mother. I won't risk losing him."

"But all of this will eventually unravel, and you could end up losing him because of your deception."

Lydia ran both hands through her hair, then held the strands, her elbows splayed outward. "No one can find out Nicky isn't really mine. The only solution is for me to provide a father for Nicky. If I have a legal document—a birth certificate—stating I am Nicky's mother and another man is Nicky's father, then Nic will have no claim to him." She dropped her arms, clasping her hands together once more. "So I have to do this, Micah. If I don't, Father will never forgive me." She brought her hands beneath her chin in a prayerful position. "Micah, will you marry me?"