



In the Nick of Time
Christine DePetrillo

Warning

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Christine DePetrillo

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Christine DePetrillo

Dedication

*To the elves, who know where to sprinkle their
Christmas magic...*

Chapter One

Ivy Garrow fidgeted in her short, apple green sheath dress. The more she perspired, the more the suffocating material stuck to her flesh. She was certain her sister, Clarice, had picked the skimpiest piece of fabric she could find for the maid of honor ensemble. Anything to further ruin Ivy's Christmas.

First the December 25th wedding invitation, then the announcement that the ceremony would take place in Hawaii. How was a person supposed to let Jack Frost nip at her nose when she was sweating under a beaming sun, surrounded by sand and surf? Roasting pig by a luau fire was definitely not the same as roasting chestnuts on an open fire. Not that Ivy had ever roasted a chestnut, but that was beside the point.

And this poor excuse for a dress? Just another heap of coal on Ivy's holiday.

Christmas was not supposed to be in Hawaii. Period. Sure, people in Hawaii were celebrating the season, but there needed to be snow and stockings and evergreen trees. Cookies, cakes, candy canes. Ice skating, snowman building, caroling.

Presents. How Ivy loved to unwrap presents.

Instead, she stood at the altar encircled by palm trees with way too much of her skin exposed while she waited for her sister, The Bride, to arrive. The Palm Grove outside The Majestic Hawaiian Resort at Waikiki Beach had been decorated with white lilies and round silver globes. If Ivy really tried, she could imagine the globes as ornaments, but the image only lasted a few seconds before a flower-scented Hawaiian breeze blew the yuletide vision away.

"She's late," Ivy said to her mother, who sat in the front row of white folding chairs. "As usual."

“Iverna, please. She’s making an entrance. Be patient.” Her mother, Sabrina Garrow, frowned, warning Ivy to behave.

What else could Ivy do but behave? Her entire family was in the chairs surrounding her mother. Ivy was on stage. Even a slight eye roll would be seen. She was certain Damon Lattimere’s family—her future brother-in-law’s kin—picked up on every detail. They’d probably counted every salty bead of sweat on her forehead by now, every weight shift from right to left foot, every tug at the hem of the impossibly short dress. They missed nothing.

On the other side of the altar, Damon waited in his gray linen pants, white button-down shirt, and sandals. His blond hair was styled as if he’d just stepped off a sailboat, windblown and sun-streaked. His eyes competed with the sky, an endless blue. He looked as if he’d be happy whether Clarice showed up in the next five minutes or the next five hours.

Of course, Damon wasn’t concerned that back home in Rhode Island, people were having hot cocoa and kissing under mistletoe, throwing snowballs and cuddling under thick flannel blankets, tearing into wrapping paper and watching Chevy Chase lose his mind in *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

No, Damon’s eyes were focused on the water, where The Bride would be paddled in by outrigger canoe and escorted down the aisle. To be honest, Ivy wasn’t sure if she was more upset at missing Christmas back in Rhode Island or at the fact no one waited for her as Damon waited for Clarice.

Her sister was a major brat princess, but she’d landed herself a successful man, who thought she was the world’s greatest treasure. Ivy knew there weren’t too many men like that left on the planet, and she was happy her sister had found one. Probably meant Ivy wouldn’t find one. Hadn’t she read in some women’s magazine that one in two men were assholes? If Clarice got the non-asshole, Ivy was

bound to get stuck with the biggest dickhead in creation. She'd always hated statistics.

Ivy squinted down the aisle and caught her father's eye. He gave her a wink, and Ivy smiled back. Her father, Henry, was the only one who understood her displeasure at having to hike all the way to Hawaii for this wedding. He wasn't so much bothered by the missing Christmas part as he was by the missing work part. Henry Garrow, owner of Garrow Electric, rarely missed a day of wiring. The man lived to bring electricity to the people. Ivy teased him about having a god complex, as if he thought he wielded the power of lightning like Zeus himself.

She understood the feeling. Ivy was an electrician as well and part owner of Garrow Electric with her father. It was supposed to be Garrow and Sons Electric, as it had been between Henry and Ivy's grandfather, but when Clarice and Ivy were born, Henry had all his signs, uniforms, and promotional materials changed. He never dreamed Ivy would be interested in following in his footsteps, but electricity had fascinated her ever since her grandfather helped her build a circuit for a science fair project in elementary school.

"Electricity is shocking!" her grandfather had said. He'd laughed heartily at his silly joke, but the thought had stayed with Ivy. When she'd told her father she wanted to be in the business, the man cried and hugged her as if he'd never let her go. The two of them had been working together ever since and loving every minute of it.

Christmas could be a busy time of year for them too. Lots of blown circuits, power overloads, and fried panels as folks hung up their lights and decorated trees. Ivy always liked going on calls during the holidays. She enjoyed these little peeks into people's homes. It was like traveling through Christmas cards full of charming decorations and festive wishes.

The only thing she peeked at now was the sun glinting off several bald heads on the Lattimere side.

Ivy sucked in a breath but couldn't go deep enough to shed her foul mood. Her damned dress bound her like sausage casing.

Where is Clarice?

Ivy closed her eyes and listened to the ukulele music playing beside her. Some love song she couldn't identify. She tried to enjoy the lilting tune, but she missed "Silent Night" and "Jingle Bells" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." She'd petitioned to have a Christmas celebration after the wedding ceremony because the entire family was already assembled. It would be a half-hearted attempt without the snow and frigid temperatures, but Ivy was willing to suck it up and make do. Clarice, however, was dead against the notion.

"This day is about Damon and me. The focus is on us," she'd said.

Ivy had wanted to slap Clarice. Only her sister would try to steal the Messiah's thunder.

Chapter Two

Nick Huntley let the smooth wooden oars cut into the water. The shush of ocean running past the paddles was music to him. He inhaled a deep breath of salted Pacific air and turned his face toward the sun.

“Doesn’t this thing go any faster?”

The outrigger canoe wobbled as Nick’s passenger, Clarice Garrow, soon to be Mrs. Clarice Lattimere, stomped her high-heeled foot at the bow. She was gorgeous in her wedding dress, all flowing white and lace, but as soon as she opened her pink glossed lips, Nick wanted to tie her to an anchor and heave her over the side. She’d been a problem since she’d walked into his office near The Majestic Hawaiian Resort and demanded his services. If she hadn’t looked as if she had money to blow, Nick would have marched her right out of his office.

“This craft wasn’t built for speed, Ms. Garrow,” Nick said. “It’s supposed to be graceful.”

“Yeah, well, Damon is waiting.” Clarice turned around to face Nick. “Row faster.” She brushed auburn curls from her shoulder and adjusted the white, wide-brimmed hat shading her green eyes. The scent of the fresh lily on the hat reached Nick at the stern. How could someone who smelled so wonderful and looked like a princess be such a bitch?

“You’re riding in a boat shaped like a swan. It was built for ambiance, not speed.” Nick pointed an oar at the carved swan head at the bow of the canoe. He’d made the boat especially for wedding jobs. The entire wooden canoe was white with individually carved feathers. The floats extending out on either side of the small vessel had been fashioned to resemble wings that opened up toward the aft

section. A garland of fresh, white lilies encircled the neck of the swan just above the water line.

Every bride Nick had carted had been more than satisfied with the canoe, its speed, and his captaining. Until now.

"For every minute I'm late, I'm deducting fifty dollars from your fee, Mr. Huntley." Clarice turned back toward the swan's head and curled a hand around its neck for support as she stood.

"I'd gladly give you back fifty dollars if you would shut the hell up."

Clarice whirled around, a look of pure shock on her meticulously made-up face. She narrowed her eyes at Nick. "Do you talk this way to all your customers?"

Nick shook his head. "Nope. Just the ones that annoy the shit out of me. If you wanted to churn up a wake getting to your wedding, you should have rented a motorboat."

"What I should have done was rent a boat with a captain that had manners."

"Well, right now, I'm the only captain you have." Nick pulled the oars in slightly, and the canoe drifted to almost a standstill.

"You put those oars in the water right now, Mr. Huntley!"

"As you wish." Nick lowered the oars, but rowed in reverse, sending the canoe backwards.

Clarice's hat almost blew off her head, but she clamped her hand down just in time. "My husband will not be happy about the way you're treating me."

"He's not your husband yet." *And if he's lucky, he'll run while he can.* Nick couldn't imagine marrying a woman like Clarice. He'd kill her before the honeymoon was over. He didn't care for gals that operated under the misguided notion that the universe revolved around them.

"I don't know who's worse," Clarice said. "You or my sister."

“What’s wrong with your sister?” Nick lowered the oars and rowed forward. Better to get this chick to her destination and make her someone else’s problem.

“She’s pissed that I ruined her Christmas by getting married. Like another Christmas won’t roll around next year at the same time.” Clarice focused on the resort’s dock, now coming into view ahead.

“Why did you choose December 25th anyway?” If Nick had any family himself, he wouldn’t have accepted this job on a major holiday, but he was alone in Hawaii. Had been for the last four years.

“I chose December 25th to ruin Ivy’s Christmas, of course. She’s Daddy’s little favorite, but I’ll finally have something she doesn’t. A husband.” Clarice tossed Nick a smirk that was very Meryl Streep. It made Nick shiver. “Besides, Ivy’s always so pathetically jolly around the holidays. Loves all the tacky decorations and grazes like a cow on Christmas cookies.”

Nick pictured Jabba the Hutt in a Santa’s hat and shook his head. Not a pretty vision at all. Poor sister. Not only did she have to deal with Clarice as a sibling, but she was also a dog. Some people had no luck whatsoever.

The canoe glided to the dock, and Nick was aware of all the eyes on Clarice. Quite a group assembled for the wedding of this woman to some poor bastard waiting in The Palm Grove. What a relief that Nick could row away and never have to lay eyes on Clarice again.

Nick secured the canoe, stepped onto the dock, and helped Clarice out of the boat. He smoothed his khaki dress pants and cream-colored button down shirt as his boat shoes gripped the dock. This was as dressed up as he ever got. He’d thrown suits out a long time ago when he left the constant rain of Seattle, Washington to live in Hawaii. Best move he ever made, even if he still felt slightly out of place among the vacationers and natives. What did it

matter? His canoeing business was successful, he had a cozy cottage by Diamond Head Mountain, and he woke up to sunshine almost every morning.

People would kill for Nick's life.

He guided Clarice along the dock while cameras clicked and hissed. When they reached the end of the dock, an older gentleman in a gray suit met them.

"You're beautiful, Clarice," the man said. "Isn't my daughter beautiful?"

"A goddess, Mr. Garrow, truly." *She's as beautiful as a rattlesnake. Interesting to look at but not worth the bite.*

Nick stepped back and indicated that Clarice's father should stand beside the bride to escort her down the lily-lined aisle. Satisfied that they'd take it from there, Nick said, "Congratulations." He turned to walk back to the canoe, but stopped when a hand tugged at his arm.

"Stay, Mister..." Clarice's father paused.

"Huntley." Nick extended his hand. "Nick Huntley."

"Well, Nick, stay for the wedding. Going to be one hell of a party afterward." Mr. Garrow elbowed Nick and raised his eyebrows.

"Thank you, sir, but I should be getting back." Nick wanted to keep it all business. He didn't need to party with these people. Especially Clarice. He'd had enough of her to last a lifetime.

"Nonsense," Mr. Garrow said. "We've got plenty of food, wine, music."

"Daddy, if he doesn't want to come, he doesn't want to come." Clarice adjusted the lilies in her bouquet and took a few steps closer to the start of the aisle into The Palm Grove.

"I suppose you're right, Cla—"

"Are you going to chat down here all day, or can we please get on with it?" a voice interrupted.

Nick looked up and squinted at the bright green dress wrapped around a curvy waist. A curvy waist exactly like the one in the wedding dress, in fact. As

his gaze traveled farther up, a face identical to the bride's--only not as buried under make-up--presented itself. Only shimmery, silver shadow glittered above deep green eyes, and a peachy shine defined a set of full lips. Curls the color of gingerbread fell about her shoulders while her hands rested on her hips.

Holy shit. There's two of them! Nick was equal parts horrified and aroused. He had recurring dreams about twins. Twins and a naked swim in the cove by his cottage.

"I mean, seriously, Clarice," the woman in the green dress said. "Nobody wants this to go on for decades."

"You just want to run off somewhere and chug eggnog, Ivy." Clarice maneuvered her father back into position beside her and looped her arm through his, trying it in a few positions before she seemed comfortable.

"I would love nothing more than to run off and chug eggnog. At home. Where it's snowing as it's supposed to be. But I'm here. Because of you." Ivy dropped her hands from her hips. "Let's get it done."

"Zap, please," Mr. Garrow said.

Zap? Nick watched as some of the fire faded from Ivy's eyes. Clarice might be a witch, but she was right. Ivy definitely occupied a special spot in Mr. Garrow's heart.

"Sorry, Daddy." Clarice patted her father's arm.

"You should be apologizing to the guy waiting at the altar," Nick said. "Remember him?"

All three Garrows turned to look at Nick, and he backed up a couple steps. He did not want to get involved with these twins. One was getting married and the other one appeared to be easily irritated.

"He's right," Mr. Garrow said.

"Who is he?" Ivy turned the full force of her gaze to Nick, and a sudden flash of heat whipped through his body. Easily irritated or not, her legs went on forever in that dress. Zap indeed.

Nick squeezed his eyes closed to stop his mind from wandering into Dangerous Territory. Yes, Ivy was as gorgeous as Clarice and probably twice as bitchy. No thank you. Nick was all set with that. One row through hell was enough for today.

"Canoe captain," Nick said. "And I was just leaving." He gave the Garrows a salute and swiveled on his boat shoes to head down the dock.

"I'll pay you an extra hundred dollars, Nick," Mr. Garrow said, "if you stay."

Nick turned around. "Why would you do that, sir?"

Mr. Garrow subtly glanced at Ivy and angled his head toward her. *Does he think he can pawn that one off on me?* No way. Not going to happen. Nick actually shook his head.

"Mr. Huntley wasn't polite to me on that canoe, Daddy. He told me to shut the hell up." Clarice raised a nose to the sky.

Ivy burst into laughter loud enough to catch the attention of the assembled friends and relatives. She pushed past her father and sister and extended a hand to Nick.

"Ivy Garrow." She shook his hand, a lovely smile blossoming on her lips. "You just made my day. Did she shut the hell up?"

"No." Nick liked the feel of Ivy's hand in his. Not soft, as he'd imagined it would be. He actually opened his hand to look at hers. Calluses lined her palms, and the skin at the tips of two of her fingers was shiny pink.

Ivy slid her hand from his and hid it behind her. "We'd better get to that altar."

"Whenever you're ready," Clarice said.

"Me?" Ivy stepped in front of her father and Clarice. "I've been hanging out up there with Damon for..." She checked her watch. "For almost an hour now."

“Easy, Zap,” Mr. Garrow said. “Nick, sit there.” He pointed to an empty seat on the fringe of the gathered crowd.

The music started, and Clarice positioned Ivy in front of her. She gave her a slight shove and said, “Go.”

Ivy let out a huff, but started the walk down the aisle. Mr. Garrow winked at Nick and motioned to the seat again. Clarice tugged her father along after Ivy, and again the cameras beeped and hummed.

Nick glanced back at his canoe. The swan bobbed in the water. Elegant. Quiet. Lonely.

The music stopped, and Nick watched Mr. Garrow hand Clarice off to her husband-to-be. Ivy stood to the side, looking like a pretty Christmas ornament in that green dress.

Maybe sticking around for a little while wouldn’t be so bad.

Chapter Three

Ivy imagined herself sitting on the old swing in her parents' yard back in Rhode Island. She was bundled in her winter coat, gloves, hat, and the cute fluffy scarf she'd knitted last year. The December night air whispered around her. It jingled the sleigh bells her mother had hung above the porch door and dusted Ivy's hair with glittery snowflakes.

She rocked slowly back and forth on the swing, her stomach full of Christmas sweets. Laughter sifted out from the house as her family goofed around after dinner. Presents would be next, and Ivy knew her father had gotten her a new toolbox—the one she coveted with separate little trays for wire nuts of varying sizes, a round section for electrical tape, and a deep bottom for screwdrivers, pliers, and wire cutters. She couldn't wait to reorganize her work tools.

Looking up at the night sky in her imagined vision, Ivy did what she did every Christmas. She picked out one star among the cold blackness and made a wish. When she was a little girl, she'd wish for toys, puppies, a spaceship. As she got older, she wished for things like popularity, good grades, a date for the prom. When she rounded the corner into her thirties, she wished for health, work success, world peace.

Last year, she wished for a husband. Foolish, but she was tired of being alone.

Standing at the altar now, while Clarice and Damon vowed to love each other until death did they part—or at least until Clarice drove Damon insane—Ivy berated herself for not being more specific with that husband Christmas wish. She never expected Clarice to find a man before she did.

"You may now kiss the bride."

Clarice and Damon smooched while the guests clapped, and Ivy's craving for her mother's holiday macaroons grew to gargantuan proportions. She glanced away as the official kiss slipped into the rated R zone, and her eyes connected with a pair of hazel ones in the back row.

The boat captain. Nick. He'd actually stayed. Who stayed at a wedding for someone they didn't know on Christmas? Didn't he have somewhere more festive to be? Sad if he didn't.

Ivy took a moment to study Nick. The cream-colored shirt he wore made his skin look golden. His floppy black hair and dark eyelashes added to the mystery, and those green-brown eyes made Ivy think of walking in the woods behind her house.

Nick raised his eyebrows and offered her a smile. His eyes shot to the aisle then back to Ivy, his head angling to the line of people making their way toward the reception ballroom.

Shit. She'd missed her cue to follow the wedding party into the hotel. That's what she got for daydreaming about being home and inspecting a stranger in the crowd.

As soon as Clarice and Damon entered the ballroom, Hawaiian music from a six-piece luau band welcomed them. How hard would it be to convince those guys to play a little Christmas music? Ivy put that on her "to do" list for the evening.

Unfortunately, it was the only thing on her "to do" list. Clarice had made it abundantly clear that there were to be no silly wedding traditions or games. She wanted sophisticated and ritzy. Ivy concluded that meant she wanted boredom and a complete absence of fun.

She'd never felt so stuck. How she wished for her fuzzy fleece pajamas with the smiling reindeer chasing each other along the pant legs.

Ivy pulled the edge of her dress down so it at least reached the freckle on her thigh. Her mother had warned her as a teenager never to let that

freckle show. That rule had been tossed out the window, however, in the name of keeping The Bride happy.

Sighing, Ivy circulated and caught up with several aunts, uncles, and cousins she hadn't seen in a while.

"Now tell me," Aunt Carol said, "why are you here alone, Ivy?"

Here we go. "It's difficult to get a date on Christmas day, Auntie." Ivy searched the dance floor and found her father eating hors d'oeuvres by one of the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the water. If she could just catch his eye, he'd come save her.

Aunt Carol waved a hand and shook her head. "You don't need a date, honey. A gal your age needs a husband. What about that guy who came around on Thanksgiving? He was nice. Cute too."

"Eric and I are just friends." Ivy had tried to convince her best friend to accompany her to the wedding, but his new girlfriend insisted he go to New York for the holiday to meet her family. Ivy could have pitched a Clarice-style fit, and Eric probably would have caved, but he seemed pretty happy with this new chick. Ivy didn't want to be the cause of a breakup. Especially over something as stupid as her self-centered sister's ridiculous notion of getting married on Christmas day in Hawaii.

"Far as I know, Santa doesn't leave men under Christmas trees for good little girls," Aunt Carol said. "You have to go out there and get one, sweetheart." With a pat on the shoulder, Aunt Carol left Ivy to find Uncle Phil.

Looking out over the crowd of mostly couples, Ivy tried to rub away the hollow feeling in her stomach.

"Why is it that weddings have the capacity to make you feel like shit?"

Ivy turned around to find Nick standing behind her with his hands buried in his pants' pockets. Her gaze settled on the smooth skin showing from the open collar of his button-down shirt.

“How did you know I feel like shit right now?” Ivy leaned against the wall next to Nick. “And why are you still at this stupid wedding?”

“I overheard your conversation just now. That why-aren’t-you-married discussion always makes me feel like shit, so I figured the same was true for you.” Nick pointed to Ivy’s Aunt Carol, who was currently gossiping with Ivy’s mother. Uncle Phil was circling them like a shark on the hunt waiting for his chance to dance with his wife.

“And I tried leaving this stupid wedding twice, but your father keeps insisting I stay.” He shrugged, and Ivy liked how he rocked back on his heels a bit. His shirt pressed against his torso causing Ivy to wonder what was hiding underneath.

“Don’t you have family to celebrate Christmas with?”

“Nope.” Nick rocked forward this time. “My parents are gone. It’s just me and my canoes at home.” He glanced down at his shoes then out over the crowd.

“I remember Clarice saying that you make your canoes. Is that true?”

“Yeah. They’re not all as pompous as the swan out there.” He pointed out the window of the ballroom facing the dock.

Ivy leaned over to get a look. As she neared Nick, she got a whiff of salted air and wood stain. Made her think of the time she wired a yacht in Newport with her father. The owner was an ancient man. Nothing at all like the man standing next to her now.

“It may be pompous, but it’s beautiful. I’m sure the brides love it.”

“Every bride except that one.” Nick gestured toward Clarice sitting at the head table. Damon whispered something into her ear, and she planted a Hollywood-style kiss on his lips.

“Oh, you can’t please Clarice. Nothing is ever right. Except maybe Damon.” Ivy grabbed two glasses

of champagne as a waitress passed. She handed one to Nick. "To Clarice, who is now Damon's problem."

Nick laughed and clinked his glass against Ivy's. "Has she been your problem all this time?"

"Basically." Ivy took a sip of her champagne and led Nick back outside to where the ceremony had taken place. "We may look the same, but we're as opposite as two people can be. Always have been."

"She bugs you, but you love her." Nick sat on one of the folding chairs, and Ivy lowered next to him. "You wouldn't be her maid of honor otherwise, right?"

"She's my sister. Loving her is mandatory. Who else would Clarice have gotten to be her maid of honor? She doesn't have many friends, and what person would willingly give up their Christmas to be here? I'm supposed to be having a snowball fight right now." Ivy tapped the watch on her wrist. "Not sweating in this hideous dress so far away from a wonderful New England winter."

"For the record, you make that dress so *not* hideous." Nick finished his champagne. "And we don't generally get many complaints about being in Hawaii. Look around. It's kind of beautiful here, no?" He arced his arms out to indicate the palm trees around them and the setting sun behind them reflecting pink onto the Pacific.

"It *is* beautiful here, but not on December 25th when all I want is a rousing chorus of "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" followed by my father and Uncle Tim trying to name all Santa's reindeer in alphabetical order as fast as they can."

Nick turned to look at her, and something in his eyes reached out to Ivy like a magnet. "You want to get out of here?"

Ivy bit her bottom lip as her aunt's words echoed in her mind. *You have to go out there and get one, sweetheart.* "My family's going to kill me, but yes. Yes, I do want to get out of here."

Nick stood and offered a hand to Ivy. "You don't mind riding in a swan, do you?"

"Not at all."

Ivy took his hand, and Nick pulled her to her feet. She set their empty champagne glasses on one of the folding chairs and followed Nick toward the dock. When they reached it, Nick took her hand again to help her into the canoe.

"Sorry about my hands," Ivy said.

Nick climbed into the canoe, untied the line, and pushed off the dock. He sat across from Ivy and let the current carry the swan away from the shore. He motioned for Ivy to give him her hands. She rested them, palms up, on his knees and cringed at what a mess she'd made of them.

Scarred from poking around inside walls to snake wires. Burned from a near electrocution incident. Callused from hours of turning screwdrivers. They looked like her father's hands, even with pearly white nail polish.

"What do you do for work?" Nick rubbed his thumb and index finger along the scars on the index and middle fingers of her left hand.

"Electrician." Ivy pulled her hands out of Nick's grip, but he caught her around the wrists.

"I'll bet your sister's hands don't look like this." He closed her hands around the oars and raised a questioning brow.

Ivy rowed, loving the sound of the oars pushing through the water. "Clarice works in graphic design. Not very messy work. She works hard, but the worst her hands have seen is a paper cut." Ivy sighed as she rowed. "And if I were in Rhode Island, I'd be wearing my winter gloves, the fur lined ones, my favorite, and my man-hands would be well hidden."

"I like your man-hands." Nick took the oars from Ivy. "Makes me picture you wiring a switch. It's very sexy."

"Hey, electricians turn things on." Corny joke, but Ivy had been using it for years.

When Nick chuckled, Ivy thought maybe this trip to Hawaii just got interesting. Maybe. She wasn't ready to throw away all her hostile feelings about her candy canes being replaced by pineapple wedges. It was going to take more than a smile on a handsome man's face to turn this holiday around.

Chapter Four

The light breeze blew strands of Ivy's chestnut hair around her face, while fading sunshine glinted in her green eyes. Clarice had been a vision standing at the bow of the canoe in her wedding dress, but Ivy was a fantasy. Amazing how similar faces can look so different, depending on whether they wore a scowl or a smile. Ivy's smile cast a spell over Nick, one to which he was willing to surrender.

He rowed them along the glass-like surface of the water toward Diamond Head Mountain, now painted in purple as the sky darkened. The bright lights of the hotels lining the shore rippled in the ocean like liquid fireworks. A few couples still dotted the beaches, waiting for the moon to take over the night and set the mood.

"I'm not abandoning my complaints about not being in Rhode Island for Christmas," Ivy started, "but it's gorgeous out here right now."

"Sounds like Hawaii just scored a point." Nick angled the canoe toward the shore.

"Perhaps." Ivy folded her arms across her chest and rubbed her bare arms.

"You're cold," Nick said. "I'm going to dock over there. My house is a short walk from the beach."

Ivy's brows lowered in a way that could only mean she wasn't sure about going to his house, but Nick said, "I have Christmas cookies."

"Bait. Nice." She smiled. "Biscotti, macaroons, snickerdoodles?"

"All of the above and then some."

"This dress is so not going to fit me if I eat cookies." Ivy patted her stomach.

"I'm sure we can solve that problem."

With a grin, Nick eased the canoe toward the dock, maneuvered it around six of his other canoes

tied in place, and pulled in the oars. Ivy handed him the bow line, and Nick stepped off the boat onto the dock. After he secured the canoe, he extended a hand toward Ivy.

"Give me one of those man-hands." Nick wiggled his fingers as Ivy looked up at him.

"Real funny, Captain." She slipped her hand into his, and Nick helped her onto the dock. He didn't let go of her hand as he turned to walk toward the beach. In a few moments, his cottage came into view, a single light shining from the sliding glass door at the back of the house.

"How does a guy end up living in a cottage in Hawaii?" Ivy asked as she removed her sandals to walk across the sand.

"I'm a Seattle native," Nick said. "After my parents passed, I got sick of the rain and packed everything up to come some place sunny. I put four places—Hawaii, Florida, Bermuda, and Australia—on slips of paper and pulled one out of a hat. Hawaii won."

"Seriously?" Ivy stopped walking, so Nick stood beside her a few steps from his back door. "What if you picked Australia? Would you really have gone there?"

"Sure. I didn't much care where I ended up as long as there was water around and it wasn't Seattle." Nick walked to the door and pushed it open.

"You don't lock it?" Ivy's sandals dangled in her hand as she peeked into Nick's house.

"Nope. All my valuable stuff is in my workshop over there, which is locked." He pointed to a barn-like structure almost as big as his cottage sitting on the opposite side of the yard. "The only other possessions that mean anything to me are in the water." He entered the cottage and flicked a light on in the kitchen. "Do you lock up tight in Rhode Island?"

“Yes.” Ivy stepped inside, dropped her sandals on the mat by the door, and glanced around the small kitchen.

Nick wondered how he measured up to the guys she knew in New England. He’d never been to that side of the country, but had a feeling those men took life way more seriously than he did.

“I don’t think my neighbors would steal from me,” Ivy said, “but everybody’s on top of each other back home. I think I lock up more for privacy than anything else.”

“Seattle was like that,” Nick said. “I can breathe much better here.”

“That’s because you’re not wearing this tight dress that’s capable of breaking your ribs.” Ivy winked, and Nick felt as if the sun had gotten caught in his stomach, hot and bright. She looked past him into the living room, and her eyes widened. “Oh, you have a Christmas tree!” She strode over to it, her bare feet scuffing along the hardwood floor, and fingered the branches.

“It’s fake, but I couldn’t resist. My mom used to love decorating the tree.”

Ivy turned around to look at him, a softness in her eyes that made the evergreen of them smolder. She gave the tree a final glance then came to stand next to him. Before he could stop himself, Nick’s hands were resting on Ivy’s hips, the thin material of her dress allowing him to feel the details of her body underneath.

“Got any mistletoe, Captain Nick?” Ivy raised an eyebrow, and Nick pulled her a little closer.

“Let’s pretend I do.”

Nick pressed his lips to Ivy’s, and her hands slithered up to his neck, hooked onto his shoulders, toyed with the ends of his hair. Her lips tasted like peaches, soft and ripe. As she kissed him back, his surroundings melted away. He could have been anywhere. Walking on water, flying above treetops,

nose-diving off mountains. Kissing Ivy was unlike anything he'd experienced.

"You home, Hot Stuff?" a voice rang out.

Ivy tore her lips from Nick's, and he let out a groan.

"Nicky, love you."

"Oh, my God," Ivy whispered as she rushed to the kitchen, took a step back toward Nick, then headed for the back door. "How dare you bring me over here when you have someone waiting for you? You said you were alone." Ivy picked up her sandals and ripped open the door. She fumbled out as she tried to put on her shoes and escape at the same time.

"No, Ivy, wait!" Nick followed her.

"Sexy Boy, come up and see me sometime."

Nick cringed.

"Unbelievable!" Ivy flapped her arms out to either side of her. "I can't believe I thought you were cute with your canoes and Christmas tree." She shook her head and ran around to the front of the house.

"Ivy!" Nick sprinted after her and caught her by the arm.

"Let go of me, *Hot Stuff*." Ivy shrugged him off and started walking toward the hotels up the street. "You lured me with the promise of Christmas cookies! Is that what you did to her too?" She thrust an arm toward the cottage, then stomped away.

"That's not a woman," Nick yelled after her.

Ivy whirled around. God, even furious, she was ravishing. Her eyes were green daggers, but the intensity lit Nick like a match.

"Sure sounded like a woman." Ivy crossed her arms, her long legs supporting a lethal-looking attack posture.

"I'll prove it isn't." Nick held out a hand. "Come back here. Please?"

The *please* must have done the trick, because Ivy marched over to him. She didn't take his hand, and Nick feared he wouldn't be tasting those amazing lips again this evening.

He held open his front door, indicating that Ivy should enter first. She shot him a lava-infused glare, and Nick felt it like a third degree burn.

"Second door on your right." He gestured down the hallway beyond the living room.

"You want me to go in there? To walk in on a woman waiting for you?" Ivy frowned. "You're sick."

"I told you, it's not a woman."

"Yeah, right."

"Fine, I'll go." Nick squeezed past Ivy and opened the second door.

"Hiya, Sweetie. You're so cute."

"Yeah, yeah. I know," Nick said. "Just shut it, okay?"

"Okey dokey, Hot Stuff."

Nick grumbled, grabbed what he needed, and emerged back in the hallway. Ivy was gone, and he slumped his shoulders.

"Damn you, Makana," he said.

"So sorry, Sexy."

Nick turned the corner and stopped short when he almost bumped into Ivy. Feathers struck him in the face, and an ear-splitting caw assaulted his ear.

"Is that..." Ivy's words trailed off as Makana let loose a series of cackles that pierced Nick's eardrum. He moved Makana from his shoulder to his wrist.

"A parrot, yes. A blue-and-yellow macaw, to be exact. She's the one calling me Hot Stuff." Nick ran a hand over the bird's ruffled feathers and she cooed.

"Feels good, Hot Stuff." Makana bobbed her head as if she were nodding.

Ivy approached the parrot and held out her hand. Makana bristled at first, and Nick held his breath. The bird didn't generally like company, but she eyed Ivy's hand, then let Ivy pet her head.

"Pretty girl," Makana said.

"Yes, you are." Ivy smoothed the green feathers on the top of Makana's head.

"I think she was calling *you* a pretty girl, Ivy," Nick said.

"Ivy, Ivy, Ivy, Ivy." Makana cawed and stretched out her wings, giving them a noisy flap. Her feathers hit Nick in the face again. He coaxed the parrot off his wrist and onto the back of the couch, where she pecked at the fringed blanket beneath her. "Sit with me, Sexy Nicky."

Ivy laughed and looked at Nick. "Did you teach her to say all this stuff?"

"No." Nick motioned to the couch and let out a breath when Ivy sat.

"Ivy, Ivy, Ivy," Makana screeched. She nosed her black beak around in Ivy's hair.

"Stop that," Nick said as he sat beside Ivy.

"So sorry, Hot Stuff. Love me?"

Ivy giggled, and Nick drowned in the way her eyes sparkled with amusement. "I like this bird. She's hysterical."

"Yeah, Makana's a real hoot." Nick stroked the parrot once more, then faced Ivy. "She was a gift. *Makana* is the Hawaiian word for gift, actually. When I first got here, I thought a good way to drum up business for my canoes, both giving rides and selling them, was to hang out at the hotels on this street. I ended up meeting someone and we dated for two years. For my birthday one year, she thought I needed a parrot, apparently. A freakishly intelligent parrot."

"Smarty pants," Makana said, fluffing her blue and yellow feathers proudly.

"Makana picks up language quickly, and my ex-girlfriend taught her a hundred and one ways to refer to me. Most of them sound like cheesy pick-up lines. It was funny when Shaina and I—"

"Shaina, bad Mommy." Makana wailed and hid her white face beneath her wing.

"Sorry, Makana." Nick reached an arm back, and Makana came out from her hiding to nuzzle his fingers. "She doesn't like when I use my ex-

girlfriend's name. Anyway, it was funny when we were together. Now, not so much."

"Why aren't you still with her?" Ivy asked.

"Shaina—"

Squaaawk.

Nick brought Makana to his lap where she sat almost cat-like on his legs. "She was a model and made frequent trips to California for jobs. One day she got her big break and was cast in a movie. Some action-adventure flick. She moved to Los Angeles and asked me to go with her, so I boxed up my shit. Two days before I was supposed to leave, she called me and said forget it. She'd found someone else." Nick shrugged. "I went to Los Angeles anyway and found out she'd been seeing some Californian guy while she was with me."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, but it allows me to rescue beautiful women from weddings they don't want to be at."

"Rescued in the nick of time too," Ivy said. "I was three ghosts shy of becoming Ebenezer Scrooge, watching my sister and Damon." Ivy slouched back on the couch.

"No sad," Makana said. "Be happy."

"When the bird is right, she's right." Nick moved the parrot to the cushion beside him. "Be right back with those cookies." He leaned over and dropped a quick kiss on Ivy's cheek. "You ladies talk amongst yourselves."

As he microwaved two cups of tea and arranged Christmas cookies on a tray in the kitchen, Nick checked the clock on the stove. 8:34 p.m. Still enough time to get on Santa's Naughty List.

Chapter Five

Ivy and Makana sat on the couch, examining each other. The bird was almost two feet long, and the bright blue and yellow of her feathers was extraordinary. She was something you'd see in a rainforest, not in someone's living room.

Glancing around the room, Ivy got up and meandered back to the Christmas tree. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine the pine smell of the real tree she'd have displayed in her own living room back home. This had been the first year since she'd been in her house a few streets over from her parents' home that she hadn't put up a tree. Something tragic about having a decorated tree when no one would be home to enjoy it.

Ivy opened her eyes and looked at Nick's tree, tastefully decorated with tiny white lights, silver star-shaped ornaments, and glittery plastic snowflakes. Simple, yet festive. When she realized Nick had done the proper thing and plugged all his lights into a power strip tucked behind the tree, Ivy mentally awarded him bonus points in the electrical safety column.

Being in the same room with the trimmed tree did wonders for Ivy's bitterness at missing Christmas. When she turned around to see Nick coming into the living room with two snowman mugs of tea and a tray full of cookies, Ivy realized that maybe she wasn't missing Christmas at all.

Nick set the goodies down on the coffee table and said, "I have a strict rule about eating Christmas cookies."

"Savor every crumb?" Ivy offered.

"Yes, there is that, but also cookies must be consumed in sweatpants. Come with me."

Nick pulled Ivy from her tree gazing and led her down the hallway to a room at the end. He flicked on a light, and Ivy was surprised by the tidy bedroom. Not one random piece of clothing on the floor. No glasses half full of week old water. No sports magazines piled high collecting dust.

Instead, a neatly made queen-sized bed lined one wall. Above it hung a framed photograph of Diamond Head Mountain at sunset. Through the two windows spanning another wall, Ivy saw the real mountain, now a darkened shadow. Two end tables flanked the bed, a dresser sat on the opposite wall, and a TV hung above it.

Ivy easily pictured Nick in his bed, watching that TV. Her cheeks grew hot with that vision. They burned even more when she allowed herself to picture herself sitting—naked—beside him in his bed. She shook her head.

You just met this guy and it's Christmas. No sex on Christmas. Wasn't that a commandment or something?

Nick had walked to the dresser and was rummaging around in the middle drawer. He held out a pair of gray sweat pants and a matching T-shirt. "These ought to fit you good enough."

Ivy took them, but Nick wouldn't let go. "I can't put them on if you don't give them to me, Nick."

"I know. I was just taking a mental picture of you in that dress. I know you hate it, but it seems to like you very much." He released the sweats, but hooked an arm around Ivy's waist, drawing her up against him. His chest was hard against her, and Ivy had the urge to call him Hot Stuff. That bird was no liar.

After dropping a kiss on her lips, Nick backed up a step and said, "Bathroom is the next door over. I'm going to change in here."

Ivy found the bathroom—another uncluttered space—and changed, hoping that all her sex appeal didn't vanish with the appearance of men's sweatpants. She almost didn't care. Being rid of that

dress was like being freed from a straitjacket. She could take a deep breath again.

So there, Clarice.

She met Nick back in the living room, where he was seated on the couch. Makana perched on a recliner on the other side of the coffee table, preening her feathers. When Ivy came around, the parrot whistled. "Pretty Ivy. See her, Sexy Nicky?"

"I see her, Makana. Thank you."

The bashful tilt of Nick's head made Ivy's insides flutter. A heat traveled through her entire body within seconds. Nick was the definition of delectable in a pair of black sweats and a light green T-shirt with a Huntley's Canoes logo on it. When he held out a biscotti and wiggled it, Ivy was a fish caught on the line.

She sat beside him and took a bite. "Yum. Tell me you made these yourself and you will have won the Man of the Year award."

"Hmm, to lie or not to lie?" Nick tapped a finger to his lips. "One shouldn't lie on Christmas. I didn't make them. I know a chef at The Majestic Hawaiian Resort. He never lets me down on the cookies, and I give his kids free canoe rides on their birthdays."

"A nice deal. I need to start bartering with my electrical skills." Ivy sipped her tea and with each cookie, everything she loved about Christmas returned. When Nick flicked on the TV and *White Christmas* was on, she totally forgot that she was in Hawaii. It was just her, Nick, Bing Crosby, and the best snickerdoodles she'd ever tasted.

When the movie was over, Nick took their empty mugs and the rest of the cookies to the kitchen. It had taken all of Ivy's will power not to devour every last cookie, but there would come a time when she had to pour herself back into that horrid dress.

Nick returned and snuggled up close to Ivy. "I know we just met, but I feel as if we've been doing this very thing for dozens of Christmases."

Ivy rested her head on his shoulder and slid her arms around his waist. "Me too. How is that possible?" She looked up at him, and his smile tightened things deep inside her.

"Christmas magic," Nick whispered. "Hawaiian-style."

"Clarice is going to be pissed that she didn't completely ruin my holiday fun." Ivy poked Nick in the stomach, and he laughed.

"Glad I could help." Nick squeezed her closer. "How long are you in Hawaii? Maybe I could make sure your New Year's Eve is a success as well."

"I could be persuaded to stay a little longer than I'd planned."

"Let the persuading begin then." Nick nibbled on her ear, then moved across her cheek to catch her lips. He tasted of cinnamon and sugar, and Ivy crawled into his lap, a leg on either side of his hips.

When Nick slid his arms around her waist then up her back, Ivy pulled his T-shirt off and dropped it on the floor behind her.

"So you're a rip the paper right off the present type of girl, huh?" Nick said, his hands already inching up Ivy's borrowed shirt.

"Only when I think abs like these are under the paper." Ivy ran her hands along Nick's well-defined chest and stomach. His skin was smooth, tan, delicious.

"Canoe rowing day after day has its benefits." Nick's muscles tightened as Ivy's fingers explored.

Ivy lifted her arms in the air, and Nick removed her T-shirt. He tossed it on top of his on the floor and studied Ivy for a silent moment. She wasn't wearing a bra because the maid of honor dress hadn't left room for one. That had pissed her off this morning when she'd had to squeeze into the dress, but now it appeared to be a huge turn-on to Nick. Ivy adored the look on his face—something between surprise and extreme delight.

Nick cupped her breasts in his hands, his flesh warm against her own. When his mouth closed over one, his tongue gently coaxing her nipple to attention, Ivy let her head drop back. He moved onto her other breast, kissing the valley between. She let out a breathy gasp as Nick brought his arms around Ivy's bottom and in one powerful movement, lifted them both off the couch.

Wrapping her legs around Nick's waist, Ivy clamped on tight. Nick's lips were pressed to her neck, and a moan rumbled in his throat as he guided them down to his bedroom. He lowered Ivy to his bed and curled his fingers around the waistband of her sweatpants.

"Sorry, the loan on these has expired. I'm going to need them back." He peeled them off her legs, along with her barely-there underwear, and again admired the view for a few seconds.

"I love the way you look at me," Ivy said.

"You're beautiful." Nick shed his sweatpants and joined Ivy on his bed.

"Even my man-hands?" Ivy held her hands out to him.

Nick kissed Ivy's palms while looking her in the eye. "Especially your man-hands."

Ivy hugged Nick close and rolled him to his back. He made no protest as Ivy teased his lips with slow, probing kisses. She surrounded his arousal with her hands, and Nick balled the quilt beneath him into his fists. She caressed him until his breath came in short bursts.

When Ivy eased herself, inch by inch, onto him, his eyes closed, and he burrowed deeper into Ivy's ready folds. Looking down at him, Ivy rocked her hips until they both slipped into an easy rhythm. Their bodies peaked and spilled over into euphoria—a euphoria Ivy had never reached with anyone else. She was dizzy with it. Drunk on it.

When they had their fill of pleasure, Ivy rolled to her side, slowly releasing her hold on Nick. His body

shuddered one final time, and he instantly turned to face Ivy.

"I have new a rule about eating Christmas cookies," he said, his voice lazy with satisfaction.

"What is it?" Ivy traced circles on Nick's chest with her index finger.

"Making love to you must follow eating Christmas cookies." He caught her hand and kissed her fingertips.

"Making love should be sandwiched between rounds of Christmas cookies."

"We're so going to need more cookies."

Nick brushed Ivy's hair off her neck and sampled the skin just below her earlobe. He reached behind Ivy and pulled the comforter around them, wrapping them together so their bodies touched in all the right places.

Though Ivy hadn't made this year's Christmas wish yet, it had come true anyway.

In the living room, Makana whistled a tune, and Ivy was sure it sounded like "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

About the Author

Christine DePetrillo spends her days teaching children to love reading and writing, and her nights writing about happily ever afters. She fell in love with writing the first time she held a crayon in her hand and realized the blank wall in her bedroom was full of possibilities. Since then, she has been mystified by the magic of words and enjoys playing with them every chance she gets.

*Christine's other works include **THE LAST STALLION, MIDNIGHT MISTLETOE, TABLE FOR TWO HEARTS,** and **ALLEY CAT**. She holds a Master's Degree in Elementary Education from Rhode Island College and belongs to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Rhode Island Romance Writers, Romance Writers of America, and the Alliance for the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature. She lives in Rhode Island with her husband, two cats, and a lizard.*

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