



Hawaiian Sunrise

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

Leaving is always hard.

Maddy Morton glanced around the decrepit, empty apartment one more time. She stared at a familiar crack in the wall and listened for the continuous drip in the kitchen sink. The management, if you could call their landlord that, hadn't fixed anything in the two years they'd been there. No, leaving this shabby place wasn't hard, but friends ... friends were a different matter.

But you never left your memories. Memories, both good and bad, came along whether you wanted them to or not.

"Come on, Nicholas, it's time."

"I don't want to go and you can't make me."

She stared at her ten-year-old son. Right now Nicholas reminded her so much of his father, she could scream in frustration. Instead, she clamped her jaw shut and anchored her hands on her hips. She leaned forward, looking him square in the eye. And waited.

Her teeth ached from the clenched jaw.

Nicholas stared right back, his jaw a miniature of her own. Gray eyes that matched hers flashed to storm-cloud hue, and a lock of dark hair flopped forward over his left eye.

She started to brush it back and stopped. In the last few weeks, he'd avoided her touch. Gone, too, was the merry laugh that made her life worthwhile. In its place slunk this sullen caricature of her son.

Fear sucked the moisture from her throat. Would he turn out like his father in spite of her efforts? Gabino, better known as Gabe, Hernandez now occupied a cell in the state penitentiary for spousal abuse and illegal possession and sale of drugs. She and Nicholas were safe for ten years, according to the judge. At that time Gabe would be up for parole, if he could behave himself in the interim.

Since the notion of Gabe controlling his temper had yet to be even a possibility, Maddy was counting on her ex-husband's inability to change. She only let his threat to "get them when he got out" intrude on her mind in moments of utter despair. This wasn't one of them—yet.

She waited.

First Nicholas's shoulders drooped. The motion was so faint she'd have missed it were she not looking for that reaction.

"Why can't we stay in Honolulu? All my friends are here." His voice transformed from defiance to a plaintive whine.

She knew she'd won. Accepting his defeat gracefully, she went down on one knee so they could be eye-to-eye. "Nicholas, you know why. I can't pay the rent and—"

"We could move in with Juan. His mom said it was okay." He switched to reasoning mode.

Oh, to gather him in the shelter of both arms and heart! But the skinny arms he locked across his chest still kept her at bay.

"Rita didn't mean permanently, just for a night or two." Maddy waited again. It seemed like she'd spent half her life waiting. Waiting had never been her strong suit. Getting in and getting it done was more her style, no matter what "it" was.

"I hate you." His eyes narrowed to slits. "You're the meanest ..." He then used a local word that she had forbidden. His lashes flickered and he sniffed, fighting to maintain his tough-boy facade.

Maddy debated between throwing him over her shoulder or paddling his behind. She knew how badly he needed a hug just now but feared he would resent it all the more. Inside she wasn't sure who needed the hug more—she or Nicholas.

If only she could hold on to her own temper long enough. "Sorry about that, son, but right now I'm not liking your behavior too well either. So you just go get your backpack and help me carry these last things down to the truck—Rita's waiting. We'll be on our way before they come and kick us out." She stood and looked down at him, shaking her head.

"It's going to be all right, Nicholas, I promise." Her voice had dropped to a whisper.

He shot her a look that told her quite clearly what he thought of her promises and stamped off to the bedroom.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Another skirmish done. The language he'd used was just one more reason to be leaving Honolulu; the gang he'd taken to running with, another.

Life on the Big Island, living on her father's ranch, would be much slower and would give her renegade son enough to do to keep out of trouble. The cows would be calving now, and there was always at least one calf that needed bottle feeding, a good job for Nicholas.

If Pop would let them stay.

She brushed a lock of dishwater blond hair back from the corner of her eye and put that thought as far out of her mind as she had others. At least there they would be safe. She'd taken back her maiden name after the divorce was final, and neither Gabe nor his "friends" would look for them there ... she hoped. He knew how she despised anyone running home with her tail between her legs. He also believed she was *his* property, to knock around when he wanted, divorce or no. Thinking of others was as foreign to Gabe's nature as the sun rising in the west.

What Gabe didn't understand was that she'd do anything to save her son, even broaching her father—something she'd sworn never to do.

Nicholas stomped by her, his pack slung over one shoulder, eyes averted. The long, furry ear of Mr. Mops hung out from the pack. The rabbit had been his constant bed companion since the Easter he turned three. Like the Velveteen Rabbit, Mr. Mops wore the patina of love.

With only a cursory glance around the place that had been their home for two years, Maddy closed the door and followed her son down the two flights of stairs. She felt like stamping her feet as he did, but that took far more energy than she had at the moment.

If only she hadn't dumped that man's drink in his lap, she'd still have a job. But he'd been trying to pick her up all night, and when he pinched her rear as she carried a tray of orders out, the camel's back had broken. Even though her boss had shaken his head sadly, she'd known a parting of ways was coming.

She slung her pack into the back of the pickup and climbed in the passenger side.

"You sure about this?" Rita asked for the umpteenth time.

"Sure as I'll ever be." Maddy reached to tousle Nicholas's hair as he hunkered in the narrow space between them, but he ducked away. "We'll miss our flight if we don't get a move on."

"There's always another." Rita shifted into first gear and the pickup whined its way down the steep grade.

Maddy didn't have much to say as they drove out to the Honolulu airport. While she watched the passing palm trees and gigantic hibiscus blossoms, she felt nothing. Honolulu had never been home.

“Where will you go if he won’t let you stay?”

Rita voiced the thought that had kept Maddy awake more nights than she cared to count.

“He’ll let us.” Maddy knew that in spite of himself, her father wanted to see his only grandson. She was counting on that being enough incentive. How could she ask Nicholas to put on a happy face if only to gain them a home where they weren’t wanted? Anyone, including her father, would be able to tell that her son didn’t want to be there. It was a shame she hadn’t told Nicholas more about the ranch and his family, but whoever dreamed *she’d* be skulking back home?

She shook her head at the memory of her arrogant answer to her father’s threat of cutting her out of his will if she ran off with Gabe Hernandez. As if she were leaving that much behind. Besides, the baby she was carrying made staying impossible.

She shook her head. Why did her father always have to be right? He’d said Gabe would end up in jail one day.

It was only unfortunate it hadn’t been a whole lot sooner. She was now finally gaining back the strength in the arm he’d broken the last time he got mad at her, just before his trial. One lesson she’d learned with impeccable success through all this mess was there’d be no man in her life from now on. Men were far more trouble than they were worth. And to top it off, they always left.

“Here we are, then.” Rita swung the truck into an empty space in front of the airline’s open-air ticket counter. “You call if you need me?”

Maddy nodded. “Come on, Nicky, let’s get our gear.”

“Don’t call me that.” He shoved out the door and slung his pack on his shoulder again.

“Thanks, Rita, we’d never have made it without you.” Maddy lifted their four boxes from the pickup bed and set them on the sidewalk. “Get me a cart, Nick, please.”

He snagged one of the luggage carriers some departing guest had left loose and trundled it over.

After stacking the boxes on the cart, Maddy gave Rita a hug and, with promises to write or call, pushed all their worldly belongings up to the check-in counter. The horn honked and she waved. Looking down, Maddy saw her son’s lip quiver. Rita had been like another mother as the two women swapped baby-sitting, meals, and anything else one had that the other needed, including a shoulder to cry on if necessary. Rita’s son, Juan, had been Nicholas’s best friend.

Once the scramble to board the plane was over, Maddy lapsed into memories again. She hadn’t been home since her mother’s funeral. If her mother had still been alive, there

would be no doubt as to their welcome home. In fact, she'd probably have come for them if the news of Gabe's trial had made the Hilo paper. What would it be like without her waiting at the door? What if Pop really didn't let them stay?

Maddy stared at Mauna Kea, the highest peak on the island of Hawaii, as the plane circled to land at the Kona airport. The ranch lay on the eastern slopes, the leeward side of the island. A cloud hid the mountaintop and cottoned its flanks. Most likely it was raining in Waimea, the town nearest the ranch.

Maddy knew she didn't need to count the bills in her wallet again—hiring a driver to take them to the ranch would empty it completely. Why, oh *why* hadn't she kept in contact with any of the people she'd grown up with?

Get over it, she told herself. *The milk is all spilt and crying over it won't do any good.* She took a deep breath. *God, let him take us in.*

Her sigh was loud enough to make Nicholas turn from staring out the window and look at her with both questions and fear in his eyes. She'd given up on praying a long time ago and never planned on going back.

That one had sneaked up on her.

Once on the ground a short time later, with their packs and boxes around them, she shook her head at the man offering to drive her to the ranch.

"But I don't have that much." She raised her hands in defeat. So close and yet so far. Should she call her father to come get them?

That would happen the day a snowball rolled down the new lava flow. As the man walked back to his van, she glanced up to see a tall, familiar-looking Hawaiian looking her way. His broad smile invited one in return, but right now she was fresh out of smiles. In fact, she had been for quite some time, but he wouldn't know that.

She turned away when he began threading his way between the luggage and passengers toward them. Surely she'd known him from high school, though he was older. What was his name?

He didn't take the hint. "I heard you ask about Waimea. I'm going to Hilo and can drop you off in Waimea on my way."

Maddy stared at his scuffed cowboy boots, then followed creased khaki pants up to a turquoise shirt with peach hibiscus that covered a wide chest. Her perusal stopped at his smile. Wide and warm, just like the look in his eyes.

"I don't have much money." The words sounded flat, even to her ears. Who was he?
Come on, brain, what's left of you?

“No matter. My name’s Kam Waiano.” He waited, the smile never leaving his face. It broadened when he looked down at Nicholas.

“I know! You played football.” *But you wouldn’t know me.*

“That was a long time ago.”

Maddy understood Hawaiian courtesy. She’d been raised by it. He wouldn’t take anything for the extra effort. She gestured to herself. “I’m Maddy, and this is Nicholas.”

“Nick.” Her son hadn’t left his shoulder chip on the plane.

“Aloha, Nick and Maddy. Welcome back to the Big Island.” He took a box under either arm, making Maddy feel petite. At five feet eight, she never felt petite. She picked up one of the remaining boxes, refusing to grunt in the process. All of them were heavy. Books and personal things weighed up quickly, but she found she couldn’t leave all of her life behind. Just the hurtful parts.

After depositing the first boxes in the bed of the white pickup, he took hers and lifted up the rest. “I have to swing by Holuakoa.”

When neither answered, Kam showed them in to the pickup cab and slammed the door behind them. “How long since you been here?” He turned the ignition as he asked.

The warmth in his voice and its musical tone made Maddy want to answer. He was only being his friendly Hawaiian self, she reasoned. Aloha was a way of life among the Hawaiians, not just a polite greeting. After all, she wasn’t a *haole*, a visitor from the mainland. She’d grown up on the island. And left.

“Ummm. Long time.” She looked out the window, doing all in her power to discourage small talk. Nicholas had retreated into the shell he’d become so expert at closing around himself. She could tell the man was trying to place her.

Kam hummed a tune as he drove, glancing at her frequently but honoring her silence. Even though she stared out the window, she felt each of his glances as if he brushed every nerve end she owned with the tip of an ostrich feather.

“I’ll just be a minute,” he said, getting out of the truck in front of a weathered building that looked like a giant had put a foot on one side and lightly pushed. He was whistling when he returned.

Maddy brought herself back from the land of *what if* and nodded at his greeting.

“You want a cup of coffee?” Kam pointed to a ramshackle restaurant off to the right.

“No, thanks.” *One more cup of coffee and I might shatter*, she thought, trying to still her already shaking fingers. *Hurry up and go. Take your time and wait.* The two contradicting schools of thought warred in her head.

By the time they’d stopped at one of the shrimp farms and started up Highway 19, the sun had disappeared beyond the horizon banked by dark masses of clouds.

They drove right into the rain cloud, huge drops pummeling the windshield and creating rivers of red beside the highway. Nicholas slumped against her side, his backpack on his lap, his mouth slightly open in sleep. By the time they drove through Waimea, dusk was drowning in night.

The huge eucalyptus tree that marked the ranch turnoff was nearly undecipherable in the torrent. The headlights glistened briefly on the silvery bark.

“Up there.” Maddy indicated the road they had to follow. When the truck stopped in front of a picket fence that had certainly seen better days, Maddy dug in her purse.

“Don’t even think about it.” The firm tone in his voice left no room for argument. “Hey, you aren’t Mark Morton’s baby sister, are you?”

She ignored the question. After all, it was none of his business.

“Thank you for the ride.” Maddy stepped out into the downpour, studying what she could see of her father’s place by the headlights. The gate hung off one hinge and the rose arbor, her mother’s pride and joy, tilted to one side, propped up by two sticks rammed in the red clay soil. A light shone faintly at the window.

“C-come on, Nicholas, we’re home.” She shook him awake with one hand and pushed a soaked strand of hair back from her eyes. She pointed her son toward the front door and, ignoring the sheeting rain, hoisted one of her boxes out of the truck bed. Kam came around and helped her carry them to the lanai that circled the front of the low building. Like other houses on the islands, posts held the floor up off the ground to allow both air circulation and the water to run by.

At their arrival a dog had crawled from under the porch and stood barking.

“Amos?” Maddy asked softly.

The barks turned to a whine of welcome, the stiff stance to a dance of delight. The mottled gray, tan, black, and white cattle dog yipped and wriggled, spattering Maddy’s sodden clothes with red mud. She set the boxes down and, using both hands, rubbed the dog’s ears and whatever part of him she could grab on to.

“Nicholas, this is Amos—and he obviously remembers me.” She glanced up to see her son standing just under the porch roof, arms again across his chest.

“He ’bout bit me.”

“Oh, he was just doing his job, weren’t you, fella?” More wriggles and yips, plus a flashing tongue that tried to clear the rain from her cheeks.

Kam cleared his throat. “You sure you’ll be all right?”

“Yes, thank you.” Maddy stood from her tussle with the dog. When Kam turned to leave, she almost reached out a hand to draw him back. *What’s with you, girl?* she silently questioned. *First man who’s nice to you, and you want to keep him near? Where’s your backbone?* She resolutely turned toward the house again and began petting the dog, who put muddy paws up on her leg to reach her hand better. She waited until she heard the truck slosh out the lane.

Maddy flung her dripping braid over her shoulder and straightened to her fullest height, hoping the action would put some steel in her reluctant backbone. “Well, here goes nothing.” She mounted the stairs and, with one hand on Nicholas’s shoulder, walked to the door.

“Who in tarnation... ?”

She heard him muttering even before she could knock. The door opened before her hand struck it. “Hi, Pop, we’ve come home.”

Only her foot in the door kept it from closing in their faces.

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