

Always

a

Sunrise

by

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The Shepherd Series:
Seasons of Change
A Gilded Sky
After the Storm
Always a Sunrise

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Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:8-12

This book is dedicated to my children, Abe, Cari and Robert. God is pursuing you with intense love. He will never let you go. May you always allow the trials of life to take you into a deeper relationship with God. May you learn to see him a little better every day.

This is the fourth book in a series of five. While each novel can theoretically be read as a stand alone book, you will enjoy them much more if you read them in order. If you haven't already done so, I strongly recommend you read *Seasons of Change, A Gilded Sky* and *After the Storm* before reading this book.

Chapter 1

Home is where the heart is. That's so cliché, but clichés become so because many people affirm them. Joshua Wolfe was one of the people who could now affirm that particular cliché. Home *is* where the heart is.

Until a few years ago, Joshua hadn't even known he had a heart, not until it broke. Broken heart, that was another cliché that was all too true. He had once thought his heart had shattered into a million pieces and been swept up into the rubbish, never to be seen again, but then it had broken again. He didn't know if it was because he'd been older and wiser or if he'd just finally hit bottom, but when his heart broke that last time, Joshua turned to his Creator for healing. God had put him back together. The glory of the presence of his heavenly Father had fulfilled Joshua's yearning for a family and for love. When Joshua had finally been content with his heavenly home for his heart, God had given him an earthly home too.

That home was on the island he was rapidly approaching. Joshua grinned to himself as Oahu appeared on the horizon. Almost there!

"Oahu off the starboard bow," Joshua announced to the passengers in his Gulfstream.

"It's about time!" Steve Jeremiah grumbled. "I could've sworn you'd decided to turn around and head back to Chicago."

"Oahu?" Pete Kalaau asked. As a kamaaina, he had made this trip many more times than either of the other two men. "What happened to Maui and Molokai?"

"Looks like they're shrouded in clouds today." Joshua, 'the Colonel' to his passengers and their ohana, decided to tease the younger men. "Would you like me to do a flyover so you can confirm they're still there?"

"Don't you dare!" Steve half-rose from his seat while Pete growled almost angrily.

"Just get us to Honolulu!"

Joshua laughed, more than happy to comply. He was almost as eager to arrive as Steve and Pete. All three of their heart-homes were down there in the place that was called 'paradise' by so many people. It had only been in the last few months that Joshua had come to see Hawaii as Paradise, but it had less to

do with the beauty of the place and more to do with the wonder of the people who'd given the phrase 'island paradise' a different meaning for him.

He'd made many trips to Oahu in his adult life. The great majority of them had been in the last seven months. One of the most blessed decisions he'd ever made was to hang around the airport on his very lonely Thanksgiving evening last year. Steve Jeremiah of the Chicago Grizzlies had shown up looking for a ride to Honolulu. Joshua had given him that ride and received a new lease on life.

Steve had talked a lot on that first flight, explaining that he was going to Honolulu to get back his sweetheart, Heather Shepherd, because he'd been a fool and lost her. Steve had talked about Heather's family and Joshua had been intrigued. Then he'd met that family and he'd been blown away. He hadn't known that families could be so close, so loving, so generous, but the Shepherds were all that and more. They were what they were in no small part because of the woman they all called Mom.

Gloria Shepherd was an incredible woman of God. Joshua had known that even before he met her. On the long flight from Chicago, Steve had told him much about the woman who had so readily accepted a man without a family, making sure he knew he had one now. Gloria's acceptance of Steve wasn't a surprise considering her history. She was still young when she'd stepped up and helped her cousin's widowed husband care for his three motherless children. She'd loved those children as her own and soon the father loved her too. Even after she had two boys from her own womb, she didn't love her older children any less. Steve had told Joshua how Gloria had influenced her children. Their father had gifted them with great size and a passion for life. Their mother had taught them to face life's challenges head on and not give in to fear.

The daughter had learned the lesson well. On the very day Congress voted to grant her the Medal of Honor she'd earned in the desert war, Heather Shepherd had faced down a school shooter in Honolulu and averted a tragedy.

By the time he had landed in Honolulu with Steve last November, Joshua was captivated by the family that had produced a Medal of Honor recipient, the only living recipient of the Iraqi war. He'd told Steve that if he got to meet Heather Shepherd, he would consider that more than sufficient payment for the flight. It turned out he got way more than sufficient payment.

The Medal of Honor was only the tip of the iceberg for the Shepherds. Heather's older brother Luke had been a decorated police officer who'd recently become a lawyer. Her younger brother Greg was a brilliant young man with a passion for the word of God and an uncanny ability to know how to reach hurting people. Though still in high school, Heather's younger half brothers, Tim and Robert, were tall, strong young men with a rare confidence and compassion. Then there was 'Mom.' Gloria Shepherd was an incredible woman, as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside.

At first it was the entire family that kept Joshua willingly coming back to

Hawaii with Steve, but the mother soon became the highlight of each trip. The more time Joshua spent with Gloria, the more he wanted to be with her.

This flight Joshua was coming in with Steve and with Pete Kalaau, Steve's friend and teammate. On Saturday Pete would be marrying Steve's sister Jenni.

Joshua laughed to himself as he taxied up to the private plane terminal. It looked like Pete wouldn't be waiting very long to see his fiancée, nor would Steve have to wait to see his bride of almost four months. Neither man had been happy about the decision to whisk Jenni off to Hawaii immediately after her engagement to Pete almost two weeks ago, but considering Jenni's and Pete's backgrounds it was a good idea. They both had been very sexually active in their past, before they'd come to know God, but now they wanted to obey him and start their marriage right. That meant not falling into habits of the past and since the air sizzled around them, putting the Pacific between them was probably the best way to ensure they would be able to wait until their honeymoon.

Since he controlled when the door opened, Joshua was tempted to have a little fun with his passengers. But Steve and Pete were both considerably larger than his five foot eleven, one hundred seventy-five pounds, and he wasn't sure how much their respect for 'the Colonel' would restrain them.

Pete had seen Jenni through the windows and he barely waited for the door to open before he was out of the plane and down the stairs. Steve was right behind him.

Joshua was surprised by the stab of envy he felt when the young men pulled their women into intimate embraces. He longed to share a similar intimacy with Gloria. He was pretty sure that Gloria knew his feelings for her had gone well beyond platonic, but he had never declared his affection in so many words. There were too many things still left undone in his life for him to catch the matrimonial bug that had infected the young people, but he wanted it, more than he had thought possible.

The two couples walked across the tarmac to Pete's waiting SAV without a backward glance. Joshua was surprised and more than a little hurt. Even the first time he'd flown in with Steve, the young man had thanked him for the flight before leaving to make up with Heather. Never before had either of the younger men walked off without even acknowledging Joshua. He always insisted that they not wait for him since he had to do post-flight checks and secure the plane before he left, but they always gave him cheerful good-byes and thank yous then confirmed when they would meet up again.

Almost an hour later, Joshua was even more disgruntled when Pete's dad, Pika finally arrived. It had been many months since anyone but Gloria had picked him up. Before Joshua had met the Shepherds, when he'd come for his biannual vacations in Hawaii he'd always taken a taxi to his condo down in Waikiki. He had appreciated the more personal service from the Shepherds

when he'd begun to get it, but he really enjoyed the rides with Gloria. He had been looking forward to seeing her, apparently more than he should have.

Joshua was as courteous as always to Pika. Twenty-five years in the military had honed the poker face he'd learned as a boy, so Pika never suspected Joshua's pain, but he was hurt. Though he hid them well, his feelings were as intense as any man's. It cut deeply to be deserted by the only ones he could truly call family.

He toyed with the idea of asking Pika to drop him off at his condo, but he doubted Pete's dad would yield to his request. The big man was very excited about his son's wedding and the granddaughters he was gaining in three days. He rattled on about all the family who would be gathered at Pete's house that night for the party. Naturally he assumed the Colonel wanted to be there too. All the Shepherds were going to be there.

As they passed the Likelike exit, the Punchbowl came into view. For the first time since early spring, Joshua's thoughts immediately went to Patricia, buried up in the National Cemetery seven years ago. He had loved her deeply, but she had been second to the military, first the Marines where they had met, then the Air Force after he had transferred to fly jets. Patricia's second place position hadn't bothered her much because he had also come in second to her, her first love being the Marines.

Since her death, Joshua had discovered how messed up their priorities had been. Though they'd both been Christians for many years, Patricia since middle school and him in his senior year of high school, neither of them had ever really tried to live for Christ. Without good role models for marriage, they hadn't put much effort into theirs. They had enjoyed each other when they were together but they hadn't hesitated to accept assignments that separated them.

After Patricia died and Joshua's life slowly fell apart, the decorated colonel, flying high over all the turmoil of war, was finally forced for the first time to really look at what his life had become. He didn't like it. He ended up flat on his face, humbled before God. When he'd gotten back up, he picked up his bible. For a full year, he had immersed himself in learning how to become a true man of God. He had come far, but he still had a long way to go. He had unfinished business that haunted him everyday.

Joshua suddenly realized that they were on Kalaniana'ole Highway. If he was going to get through this evening without falling apart, he needed to bring his thoughts back to safer ground. He fully tuned in to what Pika was saying.

"Sometimes it still amazes me that Pete's turned out so good," the other man shook his head in wonder, "and that he's forgiven me."

Joshua knew just enough of Pete's past to guess what Pika was talking about.

"God has a way of working things out despite our best efforts to mess them up," he said dryly. Pika had no idea how well he knew that, nor how much he longed to see God work out some things out that were still messed up in his

life. None of the Shepherds knew either, not even Gloria. He'd never had the courage to admit his past failures to them. He would barely admit them in the privacy of his own heart. It just hurt too much.

"Well, my boy certainly got a winner in Jenni," Pika grinned.

"She's the perfect woman for him," with the smallest of smiles Joshua nodded in agreement. "She can stand toe to toe with him and not back down when he gets stupid, but she understands his past."

"The things that girl's been through," Pika shook his head sadly. "It purely is a miracle from the good Lord Almighty that she's as full of sunshine and light as she is."

"You won't get any arguments from me," Joshua kept his sigh to himself. He was literally old enough to be Jenni's father but he still hadn't learned to live as openly and honestly as Jenni seemed to do so effortlessly.

Pika slowed to make the turn into a beachfront estate. Joshua realized that he didn't even know where Pete lived.

"Don't you and Sarah live around here too?" he asked Pika.

"Not around," Pika nodded at the house. "Here. My boy insisted after he bought the place. Said we had a lot of lost time to make up for, so when he's here in Hawaii he wants us close."

Joshua felt another unfamiliar stab of envy. Why not him? Why couldn't he rebuild his life as easily as they had? As Pika pulled into the garage, Joshua forced his renegade emotions back down where they were easy to hide. He had long been uncomfortable with showing emotions and he wasn't in the mood to start today. He had to get himself back under control before he joined Pete's party.

Pika led him into the house and Joshua was surprised to see how dark it was.

"It's usually not this dark in here," Pika explained without him even asking, "but on hot days like this, we like to close the makai window shades even before the sun hits them. It can get downright hot, but we don't like air conditioning unless we're dying."

"Seems logical to me," Joshua agreed as he followed Pika past the big kitchen and across the living room. He assumed the sliding doors they were heading for led to a lanai.

Pika slid the door back and his big body filled the opening for a moment. Joshua followed him out onto the lanai. Pika stepped to his right and many voices called out, "Surprise!"

It took a moment for the 'Happy 50th Birthday' banner to register. Joshua stared at it and blinked once. It was real. It was a birthday party. For him. He hadn't thought they even knew.

Those emotions hadn't been tucked away far enough. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Once. Twice. Again.

"You didn't think I wouldn't find out, did you?" Gloria slipped her hand in his and squeezed gently.

Joshua looked down at Gloria and his eyes shimmered with tears for a moment. He blinked again and they were gone, but not before she had seen them. She was surprised.

"I was hoping," Joshua said wryly, "that I could go my whole life without the goons throwing a party for me."

"Goons!" Greg howled. "Mom, he called you a goon."

"No Son," Gloria smiled up at Joshua, "he called you a goon. You and the other stooges."

"Musketeers!" Luke, Steve, Pete and Greg all corrected her.

"Please tell me you had much, much more to do with this than they did." Joshua hadn't taken his eyes off Gloria since she took his hand.

"I was in charge of everything," she sighed, "except the entertainment."

Joshua dropped her hand, executed an about-face and started for the door.

"Oh no you don't!" Gloria grabbed his arm, laughing. "After what you did to Steve, how could you even consider running away?"

"It's called a strategic withdrawal," Joshua said haughtily, "and Steve's birthday was not my fault."

"Hah!" Greg disagreed vehemently. "Luke and I were thinking a simple Milli Vanilli thing."

"Then we talked to the Colonel," Luke agreed with his brother.

"I'll verify that." Pete waved his hand in the air.

Joshua's eyes twinkled as he looked solemnly down at Gloria.

"I wish I could lie as easily as they do," he said sadly.

Gloria looked at him with a puzzled frown, then her merry laugh pealed out.

"Try wait," Greg scratched his head. "Did he just say we lied about him being a major instigator?"

"I think he confessed," Steve was equally unsure of his assessment.

"Oh no," Luke grinned. "He did neither. He simply made a statement and let us draw our own conclusions. Colonel, I'm glad I won't ever have to cross-examine you on the stand."

"We gonna play games?" Ana put her hands on her hips and glared around at the adults. "Or you guys gonna yack all day?"

"Well Sunshine," Pete picked up his four year old soon-to-be-daughter. "The birthday boy hasn't said he's staying."

"Course he is," she frowned at Pete then at the Colonel. "Why wouldn't he? It's his *birthday!*"

"Yes, why wouldn't he?" Gloria smiled at Joshua.

"Why not indeed?" Joshua turned back toward the yard, put one hand on Gloria's back and with the other motioned for her to go before him.

As he walked past Steve, the younger man stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Sorry about the cold shoulder earlier, sir,” he said with a rueful smile. “Pete and I couldn’t figure out any other way to avoid rousing your suspicions about this afternoon and prompting an interrogation.”

“Yeah,” Pete said sadly as he stepped up next to his teammate. “We don’t lie as well as they do either.”

“Now that,” Greg said hotly to Luke, “was an insult!”

“Sounded like an observation of the truth,” Jenni stepped up between her brother and fiancé, putting her arms around their waists. Steve and Pete crossed their arms over her shoulders and grinned smugly at Greg.

“Technically, however,” Luke held up a cautionary finger. “Pete didn’t say the same thing as the Colonel. Pete said they don’t lie as *well*. The Colonel said he doesn’t lie as *easily*.”

The Colonel stepped up quickly and took Ana from Pete. “You’re right, chicklet. It’s time to play some games.”

Chapter 2

The first order of business for the party was games. Joshua wasn't surprised. He'd been to a few Shepherd birthday parties in addition to the infamous birthday party in April when, as the Backyard Braddahs, he, Pete and the Shepherd brothers had roasted Steve. Joshua strongly suspected he'd receive similar treatment today, but that would be after dinner which would come after the games.

They started with an old standard from Joshua's childhood, Capture the Flag, but there were a few new twists, of course. The 'flags' were the team 'generals,' Joshua and Heather. They each had a ten-by-ten square on either end of Pete's large yard. They couldn't leave those squares unless they were bodily removed by the other team who then won. Additionally, Gloria had found washable, hypoallergenic paint for water balloons. Joshua's team had red, Heather's green. A person was 'dead' if they were hit on their torso or head. If a limb was hit, they could no longer use it.

They chose the teams so that the wide range of sizes in the group was evenly distributed. Sarah was sitting out with the babies, Luke and Nalani's ten month old Naomi and Pena and Connie's eighteen month old Leilani. Everyone else lined up by height. Gloria's son Tim, a senior in high school, was tickled to discover that he was almost as tall as Steve. Robert, who was a year younger than his brother, tried to stand next to him, but Greg and Pete insisted that he wasn't taller than them yet. As tall, sure, but since he was younger, he was the last of the three. Heather and Joshua, the line judges, agreed.

The rest of the crew was much easier to line up. With the whole Shepherd ohana, including Gloria's brothers, Kenji and Pena and their families, and Pete and his dad, they made a very long line. They counted off by twos, with a minor blip when Greg tried to be a three, but they easily straightened things out and got the teams fairly divided.

When Joshua was told to pick his team, he didn't have to think twice. He picked the one Gloria was on.

"Didn't see that one coming," Greg whispered loudly to Luke who grinned at their mother.

"It's only logical," Joshua said solemnly. "Steve just spent a whole week

away from his wife. He's going to want to get his hands on her again. They can't stop him."

"Oh yeah!" Steve leered at his wife. She smiled coyly.

Pena laughed. "Good choice Joshua."

Each team had five minutes to strategize. Joshua quickly sketched out a plan.

"Our best bet is to get them to expend the bulk of their ammunition on a first wave of attack. We know they have thirty rounds, just like we do. We need to get them to expend most of that while we preserve ours. Greg, Robert, Gloria and Danny, you'll protect headquarters and be our reserve force. Anyone who gets past our attacking force you must hit with a kill shot. You'll keep half the ammo.

"Steve, you take Malia, Linc, Brianna and Alyssa. Jenni, your squad is Pena, Connie, Alex and Jeremy. When the opening bell rings, move fast to catch them on their side. Save your ammo until you're assured of a kill shot. Try to catch any enemy round that's launched at you. If you don't succeed and it bursts, it'll only take out your hands. If you do succeed, you now have an extra round. Launch it immediately at the closest enemy force.

"Munchkins, it is essential for you to protect the big people. They'll need to carry off our enemy's flag. You are critical to this mission. If you die, you will receive great honor.

"If things aren't going our way, I'll sound the retreat. Do not leave behind any fallen comrades. Any questions?"

"Just one," Steve looked very serious. "When I get the enemy general, do I have to bring her back here?"

"Absolutely not son," Joshua said with equal seriousness. "You can take her anywhere you want."

"Oh yeah!" Robert grinned and high-fived Greg. "We're winnin' this one!"

Heather was not quite the strategist that Colonel Joshua was. Her team immediately launched a volley of one third of their total ammunition. Only one round was a 'kill' shot, taking out Connie. Linc lost his left arm which was not a big deal since he was right handed. Malia lost her right foot. Two bombs fell harmlessly to the ground. Five rounds were caught and returned, inflicting major casualties. Pete, Hannah and Nick were all 'dead' while Luke lost his right arm and Kenji his right leg. The odds were seriously in favor of Team Joshua, especially since they'd inflicted major damage but still possessed thirty rounds.

In the flurry of activity that followed, Team Heather lost five more teammates while only taking out one more of their enemy. Kara and Ana were distraught when Pete fell and they rushed to his side. Their mother was able to take them both out with one round. Beth was nailed by Brianna and Steve took out Pika just as he launched a round at Jeremy. In what turned out to be the play of the game, Jeremy caught Pika's balloon and immediately launched himself at his dad, ensuring that Luke was taken down with a direct hit to his chest.

Sarah ruled that Jeremy was ‘dead’ too since the balloon had sprayed paint on both his head and chest, but his heroic action left only one man on Team Heather who could possibly take out General Colonel Joshua by himself, Tim.

With strict orders to take out Tim, Greg, Robert and Danny were sent into the fray with eight rounds. Sitting on his daddy’s shoulders, Danny was tall enough to rain fire down on Team Heather. Robert alternated between feeding Danny rounds and protecting the Greg-Danny gun from counterattack. He had a lot of help from the original combat squads. Pena and Alex took out Kenji. Little Alyssa slipped past everyone and followed Jeremy’s lead, throwing herself at Auntie Nalani’s legs and crippling her.

With two rounds still left, Danny finally got a direct hit on Uncle Tim. The last champion for Team Heather was down. At that point who was dead, alive or injured became moot because Steve hurdled over two bodies to get to General Heather. His right arm was useless, so he slung her over his left shoulder and took off running toward the beach.

Between the two teams, there were thirteen rounds remaining. Team Joshua celebrated their victory by decorating their ‘general’ like a Christmas tree.

The next two games were also water balloon games, but these balloons were filled with fresh clear water. By the time the balloon toss and triple tag were over, most shades of red and green had been washed away from the parties, but everyone was thoroughly soaked, even Steve and Heather who reappeared halfway through the balloon toss.

After they policed the yard of broken bits of balloon, the family calmed down the action, settling down to enjoy some improvisation. Sarah had selected scenarios to be acted out. They were in one bowl while everyone’s name was in another and a variety of emotions in a third. Sarah picked a scenario then drew the first player’s name.

Tim was the first one chosen. He came up and drew an emotion but kept it to himself, then he drew the name of his partner. Connie only drew her emotion since there were only two players for this scenario.

Tim was a police officer who was giving a ticket to Connie. It was quickly obvious to their audience that he was ‘angry’ while Connie was ‘cheerful.’ She was surprisingly good at the game, especially when she decided to show Officer Tim how to be happy.

“Stay in the car!” Tim stepped back and reached for an imaginary gun when Connie opened her ‘door.’

“Oh son, you don’t need that!” Connie quickly covered Tim’s hand before he could pull it from his hip. She threw his ‘gun’ over her shoulder. “You don’t need a gun. The only weapon you need is a song.”

Tim glared at her too bright and cheerful tone. “I’m gonna arrest you for assaulting an officer. Turn around and put your hands on the car.”

“Turn around bright eyes,” Connie began to sing the chorus from Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” She whirled around with her hands in the air as she sang gaily. She didn’t stop and put her hands on the ‘car.’ Instead she continued to turn slowly and sing.

“You’re crazy lady,” Tim was trying to hold onto his anger but his aunt was beyond bizarre.

“I’m crazy,” Connie fell back into Tim’s arms and crooned the Pasty Cline classic. “Crazy for feeling”

“Have you been drinking ma’am?” Tim pushed Connie up on her feet and took a few steps away from her. “Turn around and put your arms out to your side, shoulder high. Walk toward me without looking down. Let’s see if you can walk a straight line.”

“Because you’re mine,” Connie dropped her voice to a gravelly imitation of Johnny Cash, “I walk the line.”

By this time everyone was laughing except the actors, but it was getting very hard for Tim to keep a straight face.

“You’re definitely under the influence of something,” he choked out in what he managed to make sound like an angry growl. “I need to take the keys to your car.”

“She’ll have fun, fun, fun,” Connie chirped some Beach Boys, “‘Til her daddy takes the T-Bird awa-ay.”

“You down here from Pasadena?” Tim was no longer concerned with being angry. He was just looking for lines to feed his aunty another song.

She obliged by breaking out some more Beach Boys.

“You’re killing me,” Heather gasped, holding her side.

“Killing me softly with his song,” Connie’s way too appropriate choice of the Aretha Franklin classic set everyone off, especially when Tim joined her.

“Lord,” Greg whined, looking to the heavens as his brother and aunty were singing up a storm, “I so don’t belong to this family. Why’d you do this to me?”

Tim was the one who broke out a new song, Taylor Swift’s “You Belong to Me.” Connie was right there with him, belting out the lyrics like she was also seventeen.

“Which one of them is in high school?” Gloria collapsed against Joshua.

“High school is like” Connie and Tim immediately jumped into the Superchick song. Malia bounded up and joined them.

“Stop,” Pika groaned.

“Stop, oh yes, Mr. Postman,” Connie whipped out some Carpenters. This time she started dancing. Tim and Malia boldly joined her.

Pena finally corralled his wife. He shut her up by whispering something in her ear. She bounced happily after him.

Tim watched his partner in crime being led away. He wiped an imaginary tear from his cheek. “Without his lifelong friend” Tim began at the end of

the Peter, Paul and Mary classic. He cried as he slunk over to hide under the patio table, just like Puff the Magic Dragon, slipping into his cave.

“On that note –”

Sarah held up another slip of paper from the scenario bowl and grinned at the hisses and boos for her pun. She reached into the bowl and announced, “Greg.”

They went through more than a dozen scenarios ranging from disgusted Greg teaching arrogant Nalani how to make green bean casserole (“That’s so not funny!” Heather declared.) to backwards Kenji teaching klutzy Jeremy how to tie his shoes, without Kenji using his hands. Joshua had to be a defensive teenager trying to ask a giggly Pete-girl on a date. The macho Gloria was a lifeguard trying to flirt with two girls on the beach. Anguished Suzie and silly Robert were her conquests.

Joshua suspected trouble was coming when Sarah drew a Little Red Riding Hood scenario. Jenni was Little Red. She just happened to draw ‘warrior princess’ from the emotions bowl, just before she drew Jeremy as the wolf. He managed to draw ‘little wimpy’ as his emotion.

In spite of the obvious setup, Joshua kept his face impassive as the little wolf cried about being lost in the forest.

“Please help me,” six year old Jeremy actually dredged up some real tears. “The big bad shepherd boy is going to get me!”

“Hide behind my warrior princess skirt, Little Wimpy Wolf,” Jenni promised, “and I will keep you safe from the big bad shepherd boy.”

Joshua managed not to laugh as the Jeremy-wolf whined about everything, from his feet hurting to the sun’s too hot to the wind’s too cold to the warrior princess walks too fast to her skirt’s too short. He whined so much that the warrior princess finally shut him up, permanently.

Though he ached from the effort, Joshua didn’t react when the next scenario was the three menhune who were saved from the wolf by the shepherd boy. The menhune were Alyssa, Ana and Danny. The wolf was Matt. Of course the shepherd boy was Luke.

Menhune Ana ran from the wolf when he blew down her house of straw. She ran to join Menhune Alyssa in her house of hay. When it too was destroyed, they both ran to Menhune Danny, but he wasn’t concerned enough to hide in his house of brick. He just whistled for the big, bad shepherd boy who said “Boo” to the wolf who took off running.

By this time, Joshua had to hide his smile behind his hand. He couldn’t give the Shepherds the satisfaction of knowing that he was amused by their clever digs at the Wolfe in their midst. It was getting much more difficult especially when they acted out “Peter and the Wolf.”

Peter – who was played by Robert – was of course a shepherd boy. Instead of a duck, a bird and a cat, Peter’s companions were two sheep, Matt and Linc, and a goat, Kara. Pika aptly played Peter’s grandpa, and six year old Jeremiah

was the wolf who didn't get to do more than pinch the goat before he was hanging by the feet from the hands of the shepherd boy Peter.

"Now look little wolfy," Robert played his role with perfect sternness, "you shouldn't ever mess with a shepherd. You'll get spanked if you do."

"In your dreams, Shepherd boy." Joshua couldn't help himself any longer. He had to voice his opinion on that one.

"You think you can get those old bones up outta that chair," Robert said coolly, giving Joshua a very Colonel-like stare. "You go ahead and crank out the walker, old man."

"There will be no clash of the titans today!" Gloria quickly covered Joshua's arm as he started to rise. She glared at her son. "We have plenty more fun planned. Get on with your skit, Son."

Robert stalked over to Joshua and dumped Jeremiah into his lap. "I think I've taught the wolf cub his lesson."

Joshua glared at Robert. He had no doubt Robert was insinuating that the Shepherd had taught the Wolfe a lesson. Before he could decide if it was worth it to defy Gloria over that one, Jeremiah distracted him.

"Can I be a wolf with you for the rest of the day, Uncle Colonel?" Pena's son grinned up at Joshua.

"Of course you can." The Colonel set the boy properly on his lap. "It's a wise decision to stick with the side of brains instead of brawn."

"Before this degenerates further," Gloria said quickly as her children all gave Joshua stink eye, "don't we still have a story before dinner?"

"Yes we do," Beth also gave her husband stink eye. Trying to keep Greg out of trouble in the aftermath of his concussion earlier this year was a big task.

"I'll tell the story." Nalani stood at the corner of the patio and faced the small crowd. "The fine actors and actresses of this ohana will act it out."

The large grassy area to her right had been their stage during the improv, obviously it would remain so for the story.

"Our story is 'The Wolf Who Cried Boy,'" Nalani said solemnly, barely glancing at the Colonel. He groaned and dropped his head on his hand.

"Any chance they're getting it out of their system?" he whispered hopefully to Gloria.

"Entirely? No chance at all," she said sweetly, "but I'm pretty sure they're getting the worst over with today."

"Pretty sure?" Joshua sighed sadly as he redirected his attention to Nalani.

"If you're ready, sir," Nalani scolded gently. She had watched his whispered exchange with Gloria. "You *are* the guest of honor."

"Honor?" Joshua snorted a laugh.

"You better begin Nalani," Gloria cut off all other comments.

Nalani nodded her agreement then began the story.

Chapter 3

“Once upon a time,” Nalani solemnly started with the classic fairy tale opening, “there was a pack of wolves who lived up in the mountains.”

All the children except Matt jumped up and ran into the grassy area, howling at the sky. They hunched over so their arms were dangling down almost like front legs or even dropped to crawl or scuttle on all fours. They sniffed the air, snapped at each other and generally acted like they imagined wolves did.

“They didn’t live high, high up. They were only high enough to be just beyond the view of the shepherd village below.”

The adult male Shepherds and Matt assembled opposite Nalani on the front corner of the grassy stage.

“The wolves were afraid of the shepherds.” All the wolves whined anxiously and looked over at the Shepherds. “They perceived the shepherds as their mortal enemy because they didn’t know how good and brave and wise the shepherds were.”

Joshua snorted a laugh then sank down in his seat when Nalani frowned at him.

“So the wolves kept a careful guard, always on the lookout for the shepherds. They took turns. Papa Wolf” Nick leapt away from the pack and paced anxiously, hunched over with his hands barely skimming the ground.

“Papa Wolf always took the darkest, coldest, loneliest watch of the night, but all the wolves took their turns. Mama Wolf” As the biggest of the girls, Kara raced out and briefly nuzzled Nick before he raced off, turning the watch over to her.

“Uncle Wolf” Alex came out and similarly greeted and relieved Kara.

“Aunty Wolf” Suzie was next.

“Even Big Brother Wolf” Jeremy loped up to take the guard.

“All the way down to Little Cub. They all took their turn.”

Jeremy frowned over at Danny who was crawling in the grass, sniffing at it and looking for something interesting. He was lost in his own little world.

“Little Cub had the easiest watch of all, in the morning just before lunch, before the heat of the day really hit. But Little Cub didn’t like to be on watch

and he always forgot it was his turn. Every day Big Brother would call for him” Jeremy howled at the sky. Danny appeared unaware of the call.

“He’d howl and howl ’til finally Two Sister Wolves would hear him.” Ana and Alyssa perked up and looked toward Jeremy. “They always immediately knew what the problem was and they would race to get Little Cub.”

The girls raced to Danny and started growling and snapping at him.

“Two Sisters each took her turn in the afternoon, so they didn’t think Little Cub should be allowed to get out of his guard duty.”

Ana and Alyssa drove Danny over to where Jeremy was waiting with a fierce scowl.

“Little Cub was just so bored out there all by himself. One day he discovered something of great value to him. That day, far in the distance, he saw a shepherd boy leave the village and start toward the wolves.”

Matt left his dad and uncles and walked back and forth at the edge of the group of Shepherds.

“Little Cub was terrified.” Nalani’s voice reflected that terror. Danny began to shake in fear. “He gasped and cried and shivered and shook, pointing at the boy and trying to call out, but no sound would come. Finally, one word burst from his frightened lips, loud and clear”

“Boy!” Danny howled to the sky.

Matt slipped back into the shepherd village as all the wolves raced to Danny.

“The other wolves came to Little Cub’s aid, but the shepherd boy was already gone. False alarm,” Nalani sighed with relief. “Mama Wolf gave Little Cub a kiss and told him how brave he was, then she returned to her lunch preparations, but everyone else just frowned at Little Cub. ‘You should not,’ Papa Wolf scolded,” Nick frowned and shook his finger at Danny, “‘say boy when there is no boy.’”

“Little Cub hung his head in shame.” Danny didn’t just hang his head. He stuck out his lower lip and sniffled. All the other wolves wandered away, back to whatever they’d been doing before. “But he had learned something he would remember. If he called ‘boy,’ everyone would come and he would not be so lonely, at least for a while. The very next day, he tried it again.”

Danny threw back his head and howled, “Boy!”

“He got the same results.”

The wolf family ran out to Danny. Papa Wolf shook his finger. Mama Wolf kissed Little Cub.

“It was the same the next day, except that time Mama didn’t kiss him. The day after that, Mama was the one who shook her finger. The day after that, the aunties stayed at home because they’d just put the steak on the grill.” When Danny called out, Suzie and Brianna frowned over at Danny but stayed where they were. The other children also continued to appropriately act out Nalani’s tale. “The following day, Two Sisters stayed back in the village because they

were having too much fun with their dolls. Finally, after three more days, no one came when Little Cub called ‘boy.’

“The next day when Little Cub reported to his post, he was a very sad wolf cub. He was smart enough to know the wolf pack wouldn’t come when he called. He was going to be all alone for two long, lonely hours.

“The problem was that this day that same shepherd boy who’d started all this mess came strolling up the mountain.”

Matt began to zigzag his way toward Danny.

“Little Cub was frantic, terrified. He called desperately for his pack,” Nalani dropped her voice to a suspenseful near whisper. Danny jumped up and down, pointing at Matt and squealing, “Boy! Boy! Boy!”

“Alas, his cries sounded way too much like his false alarm calls. No one came. Little Cub was out there all by himself and the boy was coming closer ... closer ... close.”

The rest of the wolf pack ran off the grassy stage as Matt approached Danny.

“The brave shepherd boy saw Little Cub. He stopped and looked warily around. Being a shepherd, he was quite clever for a boy. He knew wolves travelled in packs and he knew they could be quite cunning. This lone cub could be a trap.” Matt looked around, scanning the field around him with one hand shielding his eyes. He looked all the way across then looked back again.

“Not another wolf in sight,” Nalani again dropped her voice to a suspenseful near-whisper. “The shepherd boy approached Little Cub, curious but cautious. Why would the pack leave such an adorable cub out here all by himself?”

Matt knelt in front of Danny. “Hey, little cub, did you get lost?”

Danny whimpered and whined and shook with fear.

“I can’t just leave you here. You’ll die all by yourself.” Matt held out his arms. “Will you come with me? I bet my daddy and uncles will know how to care for you. They are good and wise and brave. Besides, you can’t be that different from a sheepdog.”

Danny climbed into Matt’s arms. They headed down the mountain.

“The shepherd boy’s family was surprised to see what he had brought home,” Nalani resumed her narration. The Shepherd men all showed their surprise very dramatically.

“The shepherd men debated what to do with the wolf cub.”

“Wolves are dangerous,” Robert stroked his chin thoughtfully. “We should take him back to where you found him, Boy. Let his pack take care of him.”

“But he was all alone,” Tim was as thoughtful as his brother. “He’ll die if they don’t come back for him.”

“But he’s dangerous for our sheep.” Greg took Little Cub from the wolf’s rescuer. He held him up and stared into the wolf cub’s eyes. Danny squirmed and stuck out his tongue playfully. His daddy laughed. “Can he be taught to

help instead of hurt the sheep?”

Nalani resumed her narration. “The shepherd boy’s daddy was the wisest and most handsome of all the shepherds –”

“Wait a minute,” Greg tucked Danny into the crook of his arm and turned toward Nalani with a frown. “That’s not part of the story.”

“Who’s telling this story?” Nalani raised her chin and stared boldly back at her brother-in-law.

“Maybe Beth should be telling it,” Greg gave her stink eye.

“I don’t see anything wrong with what Starshine said,” Luke said innocently.

“Of course you don’t,” Robert rolled his eyes.

“I think you all should just let Nalani finish this story,” Gloria broke into what could too easily end up being a clash of the titans. “It’s time for dinner. I’m hungry.”

“The shepherd boy’s father,” Nalani smiled smugly at Greg, “was the wisest, goodest, most handsome and adorable shepherd. He was by far the best of the lot. He of course came up with the suggestion that was perfect.”

“You all speak rightly my brothers,” Luke managed to keep a solemn, wise tone even though he grinned a little too broadly. “We cannot leave this wolf cub alone. He’s much too young. Besides, even a wolf needs love and companions. And yet he is indeed dangerous. But we must give him a chance. I sense that if we love him right, he will not only stay with us, but he will also help guard over our sheep. Let us put him with the sheepdogs when it’s time to work. They will train him to love and respect the sheep. At night and when he is off duty, we shall bring the wolf into our home and love him faithfully. I feel that given time, he will become a great friend to us shepherds.”

“The wise and wonderful father of course prevailed,” Nalani smiled proudly at Luke. “Little Cub did indeed grow to be a great friend to the shepherds. Because of their love, he grew into a huge powerful wolf, bigger and more powerful than the companions he had left behind. And yet, when the day came that his old companions showed up to threaten his flock, the shepherds’ wolf did not destroy the wild wolves, but neither would he let them touch the ones he had come to love so much. Instead he gave the other wolves the choice to join him in his new life of love or return to their old ways. Only Two Sisters took him up on his initial offer, but he continues to offer the love of the shepherds to his old friends. He knows that someday they might also allow the Shepherd to give them a new nature, just as he and his sisters received their new nature.”

Joshua stared at Nalani in stunned amazement. How had they done that? How had they gone from utter silliness to a gospel message? How could they have touched his own dark past so efficiently? They couldn’t possibly know. Even if they suspected where he’d come from, they wouldn’t have the first idea where to look to know for sure, would they?

Joshua forced himself to smile at the Shepherds. If he didn't, he would end up crying.

"Bravo! Poorly started," he teased with a twinkle in his eye then nodded more seriously, "but well finished. Please tell me Greg did *not* write that end."

"Write it, no!" Beth laughed. "But the idea was his."

"Of course it was my idea," Greg said proudly. "All the best ideas this family comes up with are mine!"

"Are not!" all his siblings chorused.

"We will *not* have this argument," Gloria stood quickly. "What we will do is get dinner on the table!"

While the women moved into the kitchen and the men began to set up tables on the lanai, Joshua fled to the restroom. He had to regain his composure or he'd be blubbing like a baby. Since his parents had died so many years ago, he'd never felt so openly and boldly loved.

Joshua splashed cold water on his face and paced in the rather large main bathroom. He prayed frantically. *Oh Lord, I know you're pushing me. I know this is a safe place, but not now, please? Not during the party. Please help me hold it together; at least until the fun is done. It's one thing to sneak in a bit of the gospel story, it's a totally different matter to dump my dark past into this time of joy. Carry me through this evening and show me when the time is right.*

As he prayed, Joshua felt peace wash over him again. God would grant this request, but he was going to have to face his past, and soon.

DINNER WAS A happy affair, as it always was with this bunch. Heather took more than a little ribbing about the green bean casserole, but she also got plenty compliments too. When Sarah told Steve the barbecue chicken was perfect, he grinned broadly and pointed at his wife.

"Tell her. She did the marinade."

"Heather?" Greg looked at his sister in surprise.

"Yes, Heather," Steve said firmly, proudly wrapping his arm around his wife.

"It's really good, Boss," Greg was as quick to compliment her as he had been to tease her. "I'm impressed!"

The compliments came fast and heavy for a while, then Robert grinned slyly at Steve.

"If you're rubbing off on her in the kitchen, does this mean you can actually change your own oil?"

"We haven't gotten that radical yet," Steve laughed.

"Trust me guys," Heather sighed sadly. "It's a much bigger challenge to teach Steve mechanics than it is to teach me to cook."

Joshua was enjoying the banter so much that he lost track of time. He was surprised when Nalani started singing "Happy Birthday." Gloria and Sarah were carrying an enormous cake that Joshua swore had way more than fifty

candles on it. He should have been practicing for blowing them all out. He managed to do it in one breath, but he almost passed out in the process.

If someone had asked Joshua what he wanted for his birthday, he wouldn't have been able to come up with anything. His friends all managed to find something, and for the most part they were great presents. Some of them were silly but useful, like the sheepskin-lined denim jacket Tim gave him. It was an obvious reference to a 'wolf in sheep's clothing,' but it would come in handy back in Illinois in the winter. So would Matt's sheepskin seat covers, if he were inclined to actually put them on his car seats. Some of the presents were thoughtful like the gift certificates for different golf courses on Oahu which Pika and Sarah, Kenji and Hannah, and Nalani gave him. He was deeply touched by the homemade gift certificate from Robert – it was for private flying lessons, "taught by the Colonel to Robert." He was going to really enjoy cashing in that one!

An anonymous giver presented Joshua with a walker, complete with wheels on the back and tennis balls on the front.

"Clever," Joshua frowned sternly at Greg. Of course he denied involvement.

"Me? I know nothing about that," Greg handed him a small flat package. "This is my present."

Greg was still claiming that he had beat Joshua in the dance competition at Beth and Greg's wedding, so he presented the Colonel with an instructional dance video, "for men with two left feet." Luke and Jeremy, who helped his daddy make the gifts, gave Joshua two framed and matted pictures. One, an eight by ten was of Joshua and Greg dancing at the wedding. The other was also taken at the wedding dance, an eleven by fourteen of Joshua and Gloria.

Gloria also gave Joshua photos, but there were dozens of them in a laser-etched koa wood photo album. As he flipped through the album Joshua expected the pictures to be of the Shepherd ohana, but he didn't expect to see himself in so many. He hadn't realized he'd had his picture taken so often. Halfway through the album, the pages were empty. He looked up at Gloria with an eyebrow quirked.

"I guess you're going to have to hang around a while longer if you want it filled," Gloria suggested with a smile that was halfway between sly and shy.

"I might have to do that," Joshua smiled back. "It would be a shame to leave such a beautiful album unfinished."

As was often the case at Shepherd birthday parties, the last gift was from Heather. Joshua was surprised. From the shape of it the gift was obviously a painting, but it was probably three feet by two. If he had dreamt of receiving a Heather painting, it would have been a much smaller one.

When he saw the painting, Joshua was beyond stunned. In the foreground a great winged serpent was coiled and ready to strike with his fangs bared. He was so lifelike Joshua could almost hear him hiss. On the left, a man who looked like a composite of Heather's brothers was swinging a sword with all

his might, his muscles bulging out of the sheepskin doublet that he wore over leather leggings. A thong was tied around his hair, holding back long, dark curly hair. In the center of the thong was a silver signet with a wolf head. The signet was repeated in the circle at the tip of the hilt of his broadsword and running wolves were etched in the blade.

The man was clearly going to behead the serpent because the beast was distracted by the snarling wolf on the right. He had launched himself at the serpent's jaws, trusting the man to take out the villainous creature even if it meant his own death.

Most wolves are gray with an occasional white or black one, but this wolf was blond. He was powerful, still in his prime in spite of the faint hint of gray around his muzzle. His eyes were a brilliant emerald green. They were obviously human eyes, as were the eyes of the she-wolf in the background. Her eyes were exotic brown, just like Gloria's, her fur almost coal black. She crouched and snarled at the feet of a woman, obviously protecting her. The woman was dressed like the man except she had a short leather skirt over her leggings and long-bladed twin daggers instead of a broadsword. She was a clever composite of the Shepherd women – Heather, Nalani and Beth.

The sky behind the scene was storm-tossed, with black, purple and green clouds rolling furiously, but in the upper right corner, a bit of Pacific blue sky broke through the clouds. The sky was pierced by a ray of sun that fragmented slightly so that it kissed the heads of the four companions but left the serpent in the dark.

"I ... I don't know what to say Heather," Joshua whispered. "It's"

"Stunning!" Gloria helped him out. He sensed that she knew he was once again blown away. It took every ounce of fortitude he possessed to keep from bursting into tears right there. He couldn't do that. They would know that the tears were for much more than Heather's masterful expression of her not-so-secret desire to see her mother become a Wolfe.

Everyone crowded behind Joshua to see the painting. He couldn't flee to the restroom this time, so as he listened to the others express praise for Heather's masterpiece, he focused on the details to keep from seeing the message. He examined the thongs of the man's and the woman's laced sandals, the veins in the wings of the serpent, the grass that bloomed with tiny white star-shaped flowers. He saw that tall, dark, jagged mountains pierced the clouds in the background and a tiny castle nestled high in the mountains, on the right, white and gleaming in the ray of sun.

"You truly have a gift, Heather," Joshua finally stood, handed the painting to Steve and stepped over to give Heather a hug. "I will treasure it always."

"Dang Heather," Greg complained. "The entertainment's going to be anticlimactic after this."

"Then why don't we just forget it?" Joshua turned toward Greg with one arm still around Heather. He strongly suspected that he was in for a 'treat' from

the Backyard Braddahs.

“Not a chance, old man,” Steve said cheerfully as he carefully carried the painting toward the house. “I gotta get some payback.”

“For what?” Joshua asked innocently.

“I wonder?” Heather muttered. “Let’s get your loot inside while the Braddahs get ready.”

In ten minutes, Joshua was once again enthroned before the stage. He roared with laughter when Luke, Greg, Robert, Steve and Pete came out in costume. They all wore wolf heads without the lower jaw, the upper part of the muzzle and the eyes peeking out from under sheep heads that were still attached to sheep skins.

“A public service announcement,” Robert intoned importantly. “No animals were harmed in the making of these costumes.”

“That’s good to know,” Kenji sighed with relief. “Isn’t the wolf an endangered species?”

“I think it still is,” Gloria said brightly, “but it’s thriving and might be taken off the list.”

“Does that mean it’ll be open season on Wolfes?” Malia asked slyly.

Joshua hadn’t missed the subtle difference in pronunciation. He pointed to himself. “This kine Wolfe will still be an endangered species, at least until the males in the next generation find their mates.”

“Please people,” Greg whined. “You’re interrupting the show!”

“Can we make it a permanent interruption?” Joshua allowed a whine to creep into his voice too.

“No!” It seemed everyone was in agreement but him.

Joshua wasn’t sure if it was a relief or a curse to see a karaoke machine on the lanai. Tim wondered out into the grassy area all by himself, looking lonely. Steve and Pete stood on the edge of the lanai and Luke, Greg, and Robert stood together in the back with their arms over each other’s shoulders.

“We tried this without the background music,” Heather grinned wickedly. “Trust me, it’s much better with the karaoke machine!”

“Hopefully, you’ll recognize the tune from *The Little Mermaid*,” Steve explained, “but as you’ll quickly see, the words are ours.”

Pete and Steve sang the song with the Shepherds providing backup and counterpoint. As they began the song, Steve and Pete both pointed sadly at Tim who played his role to the hilt.

There he standin’
Watchin’ the fun go by
He don’t know the way to play
’Cause he-a lonely shepherd boy
He hang out with sheep

So dumb he wanna weep
He wanna play someday

Joshua hadn't seen this coming! They weren't going to pick on the poor wolves this time?

Oh he wanna play
Sit on hill watch the wolf play
What he gotta do ta join
De only way be ask one

He just gotta howl
Though there be no moon
He gonna be a wolf

It was a good thing that Steve's deep voice provided a wonderful harmony with Pete's tenor because the Shepherd boys' forte was obviously the howl. Instead of the "Sha la la la" of "Kiss the Girl," they howled vigorously at the sky.

Oow oow oow oow oow oow
Is boy gonna be a sheep
Or gonna be a wolf
Oow oow oow oow oow oow
Ain't so hard figger out
He gotta sing like wolf

Wolf be better
Den bein' a shepherd boy
'Cause even when dey go work
Dey do it together
Is he gonna howl
Run wit' the pack today
Become a braddah wolf

As the younger men continued to howl through varied choruses of "Be a Wolf," Joshua had to focus on the off-key howls and the silliness. How had they put so much love into such absurdity? It was especially poignant for Joshua because he didn't expect it after being harassed during the skits. Between "The Wolf Who Cried Boy," Heather's painting and "Be a Wolf," Joshua knew that his time had come. God was calling him to take on that last great hurdle, but he had given him people to love him and walk with him as he faced the dark secrets of his past.