

# **Summer on Moonlight Bay**

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**Excerpt**

# Chapter One

Lia DiPalma stomped on the brakes. Her ten-year-old Chevy Trailblazer fishtailed as she yanked the wheel to avoid the obstacle in the middle of her lane. What the hell?

She screeched to a stop, spraying gravel on the road's shoulder. That wasn't a piece of rubber. It was a dog.

Oh my God. It was a dog, lying in the middle of the road. Dead?

"Shit, shit, shit, shit." She pounded her fists on the steering wheel. Life was unfair and then you died. She didn't need any more death in her life. And anyway, who hits a dog and doesn't stop? Who the hell does a thing like that?

Unwanted tears filled her eyes.

"Please don't be dead," she whispered.

She pushed the car door open and hopped down onto the two-lane road that spooled through the middle of nowhere, South Carolina. Chaplain Micah St. Pierre, her former commanding officer, had told a lot of stories about his hometown on one of South Carolina's sea islands. Lia had always pictured the place with white sand beaches and a pounding surf, not a

forest of Spanish-moss-draped oaks on either side of a long, narrow road. Her GPS insisted this road would take her to Magnolia Harbor, a little tourist town on picturesque Moonlight Bay.

Instead it had led her right to death's doorstep. Again.

She rounded the SUV's back fender with her heart pounding in her ears, just as the dog whined and struggled to get up.

Thank you, God. The dog wasn't dead in the middle of the road. But he was hurt. Real bad. Something was wrong with his left hind leg, or maybe his pelvis. "I'm so sorry," she said as she approached the animal, even though it wasn't her fault. But it felt that way.

The dog didn't growl, although he should have. Oh God, the dog was only a puppy. A scrawny puppy.

She reached out her hand to let the dog sniff. He laid his head down on the pavement, his eyes sad and unfocused as another mournful whine escaped him. "Don't die on me. Please. You're just a baby." She looked up at the bright blue June sky. "Please God. Not again. Okay?"

She got up, popped the tailgate, and rummaged through her stuff. She'd always been a rolling stone, so she'd never gathered much in the way of belongings. The SUV was just big enough to hold them.

She reached for her plywood footlocker. Painted navy blue with her name and one-time rank stenciled on the front in yellow, it was the perfect size for the puppy. She hauled it out of the back and into the middle of the road.

She pulled out a big bath towel and gently rolled the pup onto it, trying not to disturb the injured leg. The dog didn't weigh all that much, but he whined when she used the towel as a sling to pick him up. His right hip was upbraided where the bumper had connected with it but

there wasn't any blood on the pavement, thank God. Maybe it was just a broken bone. Maybe there weren't massive internal injuries.

"You're going to be okay," she said, her voice trembling. If only she could believe it the way the dog seemed to. He gave her a soulful look out of his big brown eyes, and her heart lurched sideways. She'd always wanted a dog as a kid, but Mom had moved around a lot and then Lia joined the navy, which had been her home for the last fifteen years.

But she wasn't in the navy now. Every time that thought crossed her mind it made the bottom of her stomach drop. Without the navy she was homeless. Just a waif on the road, the way Mom had been. Or like this homeless, hurt dog.

Damn. She could take him to an animal hospital but she had no business adopting a dog. She didn't have any home herself. And besides, she didn't deserve a dog.

"You shouldn't put your trust in me," she said as her throat closed up. "I'm a screwup."

The puppy continued to stare at her with trusting eyes.

She settled the pup into her sea chest, which contained a couple more towels and a GO NAVY fleece blanket she'd picked up at an Army-Navy game years ago, all of which made a nice bed for him.

She had to rearrange a few cardboard boxes to create a space for the open sea chest in the back. In the end, she unloaded a box containing miscellaneous kitchen items of no particular value. If she was lucky, she'd come back and pick up the box later. If not, she could always find what she needed at the local Salvation Army. She had thirty-three years of practice letting things go.

The poor dog was infested with fleas, and half-starved. His little ribs stood out from his chest, and he was missing the usual fat puppy belly. Was he a stray, or had some a-hole abandoned him out here in the middle of nowhere?

He was panting hard now, his little pink tongue hanging out of his mouth. She ground her teeth as she rolled down her window. The poor thing was already hot, and the damn AC had failed somewhere between Birmingham and Atlanta during her five-day, three-thousand-mile odyssey from the Naval Air Station in Lemoore, California—her last duty station. “Don’t worry, I’ll find a vet,” she said as if the dog understood. Then she gently closed the door.

She climbed into the Trailblazer and used her navigation system to search for animal hospitals. They were all at least thirty miles back the way she’d come.

“Damn.” She hadn’t updated the on-board GPS system in forever, so she fumbled with her phone. Her Google search produced an article from Magnolia Harbor’s local newspaper about the new Moonlight Bay Animal Hospital opening this month. Some rich lady had donated the money for it, and the paper said it was a big deal for year-round residents and tourists alike, because without the clinic everyone had to travel back to the mainland to find a vet. Best of all, the article provided an address, which she plugged into her GPS. The hospital was five miles down this road.

Thank you, Jesus, and rich animal lovers everywhere. She fired up the engine.

She stepped on the gas and flew down the two-lane. A few minutes later, civilization reappeared in the form of several one-story brick ranch homes with sandy front yards shaded by pines and covered with golden-brown pine needles. The scent of pine wafted in through the Chevy’s open window. It was cooler here than it had been traveling down the interstates from Alabama. She glanced in the rear view. The puppy was still panting. Damn the broken AC.

A white sign on the right side of the road, sandwiched between two gigantic Magnolia trees dripping with fat white blossoms announced the corporate limits of Magnolia Harbor. She hit the brake and slowed to the thirty-five-mile speed limit. The ranch houses gave way to older buildings with tin roofs and wide screened verandas, and on the right side of the street stood a fire department that looked practically brand new. There were palm trees here, which made up for the missing white sand beaches.

And then, right where Google said it would be stood a boxy, brick building that might have been a hardware store once, or some other retail establishment with a parking lot to one side. A sign above the storefront identified it as the MOONLIGHT BAY ANIMAL HOSPITAL. A yellow and black plastic GRAND OPENING banner hung over the front window.

She pulled the Trailblazer into the parking lot, which looked semi-abandoned. One other car—a silver Ford Focus—occupied the handicapped spot. But otherwise Lia had her pick of more than a dozen spaces. She pulled next to the Ford, killed the engine, and hopped out. The dog was still alive. Still panting. And still gazing up at her with the saddest brown eyes she'd ever seen in her life. Damn it. He couldn't die on her. He wouldn't die on her.

She pulled the footlocker out and rushed to the door.

Which was locked.

What the hell? How could the door be locked? The business hours listed on the front window said the clinic was open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. She checked her watch. It was precisely 2:38 p.m. on a Monday afternoon.

She put the sea chest down and started banging on the door like a crazy woman, punctuating every drumbeat with a profanity-laced plea for help. She might have once been a

Religious Program Specialist in the United States Navy, but hanging around sailors for the last fifteen years had given her a wide range of profanity to choose from.

She only cursed when she was emotionally distraught, and never within hearing of any chaplain under her care and protection. Besides, she rarely became emotionally distraught, priding herself on her emotional control. But that control had sort of flown the coop the last few months. She really needed to find it again.

She was good and angry when an older woman wearing one of those tentlike shirts in a wild purple and fuchsia jungle print appeared at the glass door. She had a round, friendly face and green eyes nestled in laugh lines and crow's feet. She gave Lia a sympathetic look and said, "I'm so sorry. We're closed."

"How can you be? This dog was just hit by a car. I need help."

The woman shifted her gaze from Lia to the puppy and back again. Something changed in her gaze, and her shoulders sagged a little. "Poor thing," she said, leaning over the puppy.

"Why aren't you open? There was an article in the newspaper."

The woman sighed. "Unfortunately, Dr. Westin, the vet we hired, reneged on his employment contract just a week before he was scheduled to show up. He got a better offer, it seems, so now we're without a doctor or staff."

The bottom fell out of Lia's stomach. "I found him lying in the middle of the road. Someone just left him..." "Her voice broke. "Isn't there anyone who can help?"

The woman straightened. "Oh my word."

Guilt like a hot poker lanced Lia's insides. Maybe she wasn't responsible for this dog, but damned if he would die on her. She would. Not. Allow. It. She couldn't handle one more death.

“He can’t die on me. He just can’t. But...” Her throat closed up, and it became hard to breathe.

“Oh honey, come on. Don’t cry. There might just be someone close by who can help him.”

“Really?” Hope blossomed in Lia’s tight chest

“There’s a vet in town visiting,” the woman said. “Bring the dog in and let me make a phone call to see if he’s available.”

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Noah Cuthbert sat on his mother’s porch staring at the paint peeling away from the front railing. What was it about this house on Redbud Street that Momma clung to? It wasn’t as if the run-down cottage was her old homeplace or anything. She hadn’t grown up here. She’d moved here nineteen years ago, when she’d left Daddy.

But then she’d stayed with Daddy way longer than she should have, proving that Momma had a big problem with change. She clung to this old, rundown place as if it had been in her family forever, when, in reality, she didn’t even own the place. She’d been renting it from Arthur Moore all these years. Art had done a halfway decent job of maintaining his many rental properties on Jonquil Island until he’d died five years ago. Then his son had taken over the business, and things had gone downhill ever since.

Well, it was time for a change, and Momma would have to get used to it. Noah wanted her back on the mainland, in his modern, one-level, walker/wheelchair-friendly house, where he could take care of her.

She’d been battling MS for years, but the disease was winning. She refused to admit it, but as the years rolled by, she depended on his little sister Abby more than ever. And that had to



stop. Abby had a chance to go to college this September, and Noah aimed to make sure she had every opportunity to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor.

His cell phone vibrated against his thigh. He pulled it out of the pocket of his board shorts.

Granny.

He stared at her picture for a long moment. Granny was Daddy's mother but she and Momma were still pretty good friends despite the divorce. Unfortunately, that meant both of them believed they could solve the "Abby wants to go to college and Momma needs someone to look after her" problem by convincing him to stay here and take over the new animal hospital.

Not gonna happen.

Noah loved his job as chief surgeon at the Charleston Animal Referral Center. He might not run his own practice, but he got to do complex surgeries and apply state-of-the-art veterinary science. And besides, he'd made a vow when he was eighteen and left home for the first time.

He was never coming back here to live. Ever.

He'd kept that promise. He'd come back to visit on an annual basis, but never for more than a week at a time.

He let the call go to voice mail and put the phone back in his pocket. He didn't feel like arguing with Granny again. She was a member of the non-profit board that had set up the new clinic, and a true animal lover. He appreciated what she was trying to do. But he wasn't about to get sucked into that trap.

His cell vibrated again.

Granny was persistent. He'd give her that.

He reluctantly pulled the phone from his pocket and punched the connect button.

“Granny,” he said in his take-no-prisoners voice, “I told you before. I’m here for exactly one week packing up Momma to take her back to Charleston. I don’t have time to volunteer. And when I leave on Saturday, Momma and Abby are coming with me. So the answer is still no.”

“There’s a dog here that needs the kind of fancy surgery you do all the time. He was hit by a car. I’m no expert but it looks like a broken pelvis.”

Noah ground his teeth. It had been easy to ignore Granny the last few days when the cases she’d called about were non-emergencies. But a dog who’d had a run-in with a car could have internal injuries as well as broken bones.

He couldn’t say no this time.

Granny pressed on. “Oh, and did I mention that the dog is a black puppy? Looks a lot like Duke. I’m guessing he’s some kind of Labrador mix, maybe twelve weeks old. Looks half starved.”

He expelled the breath he’d been holding. “I’m on my way.”

“I’ll leave the side door open.” There was no mistaking the smug tone in Granny’s voice.

The clinic on Magnolia Boulevard was only two short blocks from Momma’s house, so he sprinted the distance and jogged through the new facility’s door five minutes later. Jenna St. Pierre had invested beaucoup money in the place, buying only new equipment and the latest technology. In all likelihood, this small clinic wouldn’t need all this fancy equipment. That’s what referral centers like the one in Charleston were all about.

But the good news for the dog in question was that this facility could theoretically handle just about any kind of emergency.

He followed the sound of voices into Exam Room One where he got his first look at the dog. Granny was right; the puppy was the spitting image of Duke, Noah's beloved dog of many years ago. The pup was lying inside some kind of wooden box with the words RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS SPECIALIST (FIRST CLASS) LIA DiPALMA stenciled across the front. What in the Sam Hill was a religious programs specialist first class? Some kind of holy roller?

He shifted his gaze to the woman who was down on her knees beside the box, stroking the puppy's head, tears falling from her dark, coffee-bean eyes. "It's going to be okay," she whispered continuously, as if trying to convince herself. It wasn't clear how much the dog was taking in. He had that far-away look animals get when the pain is overwhelming.

"Hello," he said in his best veterinarian voice—heavy on the confidence with just the right amount of reassurance. "I'm Doctor Cuthbert. I'm an emergency vet down in Charleston. I'm up here visiting family this week." He made eye contact.

Wow. Her eyes were darker than the dog's but just as sad. He blinked, momentarily nonplussed. Awareness flowed through him. What the hell? The woman—Lia DiPalma, he assumed—wasn't his type at all. She was tiny and built like a bird, with long, dark hair pulled back into a tight bun. Her gray T-shirt and Levi's jeans were as no-nonsense as her hairdo.

And yet.

"I'm so glad you came," she said in a watery voice. "I'm Lia, and I...found him. You know. In the middle of the road."

He shook away the enchantment of her dark, sorrowful eyes.

"So he's not your dog?"

"Of course not. Look at him. Some a-hole abandoned him before some idiot hit him."

So clearly, she wasn't a holy roller. Not with that mouth on her. But it was still a problem. The dog was homeless then. And Noah didn't need x-rays to know that the puppy would need expensive surgery to save the leg, and possibly his life. This woman didn't need reassurance. She was just a good Samaritan with a colorful vocabulary. She wasn't the one responsible for the accident or the dog.

An ancient anger nipped at his insides. Nothing disgusted him more than having to deal with the injuries neglect and automobiles could inflict on dogs.

He lost this faux reassurance and asked, "So are you going to adopt him?"

"What?" She blinked.

"Are you going to give the dog a permanent home?"

Something hard sparked behind her tear-filled eyes. "I'm not in a position to give him a home," she said.

Of course not. That's what they all said. It irritated the crap out of him. The people who took on dogs and then neglected them. Or the ones who didn't pay attention while they were driving.

"Right," he said, letting his anger seep into his tone.

Granny pulled a tissue from the dispenser on the desk. "Here honey," she said in her best sweet-granny voice as she handed the tissue to the woman. "Don't you worry. Accidents happen, and it's not your fault that this puppy was abandoned out there in the woods." She turned and glared at Noah. "Is it?"

He glared at his grandmother but said not one word.

Granny continued giving him her best evil eye. "And since you're volunteering and we're not exactly open, this isn't going to cost anyone a dime, right?"

“No, ma’am,” he said. He knew good and well not to cross his grandmother.

However, he also knew good and well that just fixing the dog’s leg wasn’t enough. This puppy needed rehab, and for that, he needed a home. A foster home at the very least.

So this woman in front of him, with the sad brown eyes, might be a good Samaritan, but she wasn’t going to give the dog what he needed most.

And that irritated the crap out of him, even though he was painfully aware of the hypocrisy of his own feelings. If he cared so much, he could give the dog a home.

But he’d vowed never to love another dog after Duke. He would fix them and make them whole, but he wasn’t much different than the woman kneeling there by the wooden box.

He pushed that irritating thought out of his mind and began his examination. The hip was definitely broken, probably at the top of the femur. X-rays would tell how badly and whether there was any damage to the pelvis. There didn’t seem to be any other swelling in the belly that might indicate internal injuries. But the puppy probably had heartworms and parasites, which was one reason he was underweight. God alone knew what the dog had been eating recently.

“Let’s get some x-rays then.” He turned toward Granny. “Did you hire any vet techs who could come in on short notice?”

Granny shook her head. “Dr. Westin said he wanted to do the hiring, and we agreed to that in his contract. I don’t know of any vet techs living on-island.”

Great. Just great. He turned toward Lia. “I’m going to need your help,” he said.