

CHAPTER ONE

ELEVEN CANDLES

Bobby had lost consciousness at the birthday party, and paramedics rushed him to Providence.

What if it's a seizure? The way Rachel choked out what happened over the phone ... it might be. Blasted damn traffic lights!

“Learn to drive, you fools,” cursed Doctor Graywood, from Elmendorf Air Force Base to Glenn Highway. He broke speed limits big. If pulled over, he'd pressure the patrolman for an escort and pay the tickets later.

Passing out or having a seizure denoted only symptoms. Biting his lip, Graywood flashed through possible causes for an eleven-year-old: infection, expanding tumor, ruptured blood vessel, new onset diabetes, idiopathic ... or something wrong with the heart.

Screw it.

He ran two more red lights. No sirens. Not yet.

Children's Hospital shined as a jewel in the silver-taupe tiara of Providence Regional Medical Center, adjacent to the University of Alaska Anchorage. It shared a front loop of road with the Medical Arts Pharmacy. A faded ring of shrubs tucked in the circle's apex surrounded a statue of Jesus Christ, arms halfway raised, starting to signal a touchdown in the garden's end zone.

Summer construction had closed the facility's main entrance. Loathing the obstruction, Graywood parked in the staff lot and blew past Admitting Registration and the descending escalator to the cafeteria. The pediatrics ward occupied the third floor.

"Hi, Doctor Graywood," said a pert pharmacy tech, stepping with him into the elevator. She clutched a basket of intravenous chemotherapy solutions.

"Hello, Julia," Graywood acknowledged. Mortified by what he'd find above, he peered at the seven IV bags.

"You gave a fabulous speech at your retirement party."

"Thanks," Graywood uttered. Odd she'd mentioned the event five weeks ago. He'd quit the Public Health Service to work for the Department of Justice.

"We don't see you here too often. You miss us?"

"Sure," he said, suppressing the knots kinking inside from prostate to windpipe. He'd come only to discover what had happened to his son.

A synthetic grey rock formation with a stuffed cloth walrus plus a half-dozen wooden seagulls greeted those who entered floor three. Graywood checked the nurse's station for his child's room. He'd been taken to radiology.

"We were expecting you," said Helen, the charge nurse. "Here's what we've done for Bobby so far."

Cocking her head, she keyed the medical record's blood and ECG results. "He's getting a CT scan, but they're running a bit behind. Doctor Timm wants to observe overnight and prep for an EEG tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, Helen," Graywood said, taking over the monitor. He scrolled the screen into catalogs of data waiting assembly to where one life might crash and burn. Others marred.

ECG—normal sinus rhythm. Oxygen Sat—99%. CBC—normal. Liver/Kidney Panel—pending.

What's wrong with him?

Helen interrupted, "If all goes well, he'll be discharged tomorrow afternoon."

"Is Doctor Timm here?"

“Called to ER. But there’s a woman in the waiting room who came with Bobby.”

Graywood joined her.

“Gary, I’m so sorry what’s happened,” she said, voice tight with tears. Petite Rachel and staunch Graywood held each other. Both vulnerable.

The waiting room depicted a Gold Rush theme of an old mining claim. A play cabin commanded one corner for preschool children to duck in and out. A mountain mural of a sluicing operation with a sourdough prospector on horseback leading two pack mules colored the adjacent walls. One row of seats appeared as painted mine tailings. A massive fake rock ruled the room’s center with one copper and three yellow-colored nuggets half-exposed for young, would-be prospectors to excavate. A plastic ore cart for pulling kids tilted on its side from a broken wheel.

“Rachel, what happened? They told me Bobby went for a CT scan.”

“He just passed out watching TV before the party,” she answered. “I couldn’t get him to move. It seemed like ages, Gary. I made sure he was breathing and called 911.”

“Does Doctor Timm know what happened?”

“I’m pretty sure,” she quavered and forced a cough to cover it.

Anxiety waves gripped Graywood down to his marrow. Doctor Timm had ordered a medical workup for non-traumatic, sudden loss of consciousness that centered on the heart, metabolism, and brain. Jaw muscles pulsed over his grinding teeth. “Thanks, Raych, for taking care of my boy.” He swallowed twice to wet his throat. “I’ll wait it out now. You can go home.”

She seized his hand. “I’m going for Cub and coming straight back.”

His thankful eyes affirmed her caring intent. Cub, her son, was Bobby’s best friend.

Bobby’s mother, Maren, worked in Baltimore or New York whenever determined by her strict deadlines. Graywood resolved to gather everything about their son’s medical workup before emailing her. That’s how she’d want it—concise, complete, and distant—if she wanted it at all.

He joined Bobby in radiology. Three patients were triaged ahead. For some reason, the second machine remained offline.

Bobby had fallen asleep on the gurney. *Let him rest.* Graywood stared at his beautiful boy under the lights coloring his blond hair like the sun had done on the beaches at Kauai four years ago.

He retreated into memories of their island adventure ... as far away as a father and son could get from here.



The vacation unfolded within 2007's spring break for Bobby's first-grade class. Graywood wanted to take him to a warm spot. More so, he craved a time out from Bobby's school. At the last parent-teacher conference, Graywood was informed his child demonstrated signs of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Bobby had fallen behind in reading and blasted pell-mell through school like a runaway locomotive whenever permitted to leave his seat. Graywood tolerated the kinetic surges at home—rolling over furniture and whatever else got in the way—but Bobby could “do still” when ordered or be captivated with the right video game. Perhaps ADHD was overly applied to any rambunctious child. Graywood needed convincing.

The Garden Isle doubled as Kauai's other name. The oldest in the inhabited Hawaiian chain, it was born five million years ago from lava propelled through a rift in the Pacific tectonic plate. On a map, the island seemed a nibbled cookie—a rough, 553-square-mile circle enveloping several micro-climates and features including beaches, mountains, plains, desert, and rain forest. Combined, they simplified into two descriptions for tourists—wet on the windward east and north, dry on the leeward west and south. Kauai's extinct volcano, Mount Waialeale at 5,148 feet, dominated the center. High enough to condense water-laden trade winds into thick clouds, the summit collected annual moisture that averaged 451 inches. Like water exiting a giant sprinkling can, the resplendent rain ribboned off the inactive cauldron into scores of waterfalls and nourished the island's abundant flowering flora.

The Alaskan Airlines flight from Anchorage, with a Honolulu transfer, deplaned Graywood and his son at Li'hue. Both gasped from the squeezing impact of the island's humid heat.

Like his dad, Bobby rolled a carry-on down the ramp toward baggage claim. Entering the main concourse, he challenged a fellow travel mate, a boy of eight years, to a suitcase-push race along the corridor. Graywood nixed the contest and photographed the pretend drag racers instead.

Graywood had a ton of Bobby pictures. Stored on computer files, backed up to discs, and processed into six hardcover scrapbooks, they documented each year of the child's life. He'd take three hundred on Kauai and select the best for album number seven.

He'd mailed four miscellaneous, spliced sheets to Maren when Bobby was two years old but never had heard if she'd received them. One day, he hoped to show them all to her.

Graywood and Bobby drove their rental car along Highway 56 to their north-shore destination of Hanalei. Graywood had picked this location after an Internet search revealed its gentle, mile-plus beach enclosed by a reef-protected bay. No jagged rocks or shore coral to threaten injury to swimmers. Co-workers who'd visited Kauai raved about how Hanalei played out fewer knots of tourists, compared to the island's southern wedge shouldered on the Li'hue and Poipu shores.

More important, the bay was the home for the mystical "Puff, the Magic Dragon." The Peter, Paul, and Mary folksong had frolicked in Graywood's mind since he'd been Bobby's age yearning to tour Puff's domain. What better way than with Bobby to behold the spellbinding terrain through his boy's priceless eyes.

"Bobby, what year were you born?" Graywood glanced at the rearview mirror seeing the child's car-seat-strapped reflection.

"Ahhh, you know that, Dad."

"Yeah, I guess so ... sometime 2000, right?"

"My birthday's September 16, 2000," corrected Bobby.

"Did you know that 2000 on the Chinese calendar is the year of the dragon?"

"Ohhh ... really?" Bobby leaned forward as far as possible.

"Yep."

"Wow! I'm a dragon," he roared and blew pretend fire.

"That you definitely are," whispered Graywood. Louder, he added, "Does your teacher think you're a dragon?"

"I hope so."

Sensing the line of talk wouldn't lead to the behavior point he wished to make, Graywood swallowed and accepted Bobby's newfound character insight. "We're going to a place where we might find a scary, awesome-looking dragon."

Bobby jolted back and pulled up hands to cover chest and neck. Back-seat stillness held despite the traffic through Wailua and Kapa'a. "Dad," a tepid voice questioned, "is it a big dragon?"

"I really think so, the biggest in the whole world."

"Oh ... uh ... what does it eat?"

"Don't know," Graywood teased, tempted to say dragons like munching on irritating first-grade teachers and maybe little girls. But he punted, saying, "There're loads of chickens pecking away along this road. Maybe the dragon eats them."

"Just chickens?"

"Yeah, I bet only chickens. He doesn't eat little boys or girls. At least not boys."

Reassured, Bobby's bravado returned. "I hope the dragon roars real loud."

"So how do you think it roars?"

"Rarrrrhhhhh!" he boy-blasted, hands cupped like a megaphone to his mouth.

"That's a strong one. I'm pretty sure the dragon wants to roar and roar with a younger dragon just like you."

"Dad, how much longer?"

From experience Graywood gave high estimates. "Probably an hour." Audible deflation swirled the back seat. Graywood instructed, "Dragons have been around for a long, long time, Bobby, and are very patient creatures. Do you feel like a dragon?"

"Yeahhh!"

"Can you do patient like a dragon and wait an hour and watch all the scenery go by?"

"I can do it, Dad."

"Then I bet Puff will be proud of you."

Red African tulip trees, ivory plumeria buds, descending trains of purple bougainvillea, and bunched hibiscus in crimson and lemon bordered the two-lane road.

Dragon boy grew hungry halfway to Hanalei. They stopped for taro fries and barbecued hamburgers ground from buffalo at the Ono-Char burger stand in Anahola. They ate at an outside table among the roaming feral chickens and two stray cats begging for pieces. Bobby threw crumbs to the piebald tom and cobby queen, but adroit fowl got them first.

An island without predators, concluded Graywood, and chickens owned it. Kauai had become heaven on earth for this avian race, and he mused on a pitiful flock somewhere at a Tyson's food plant praying for reincarnation here prior to their processing into parts.

Belly pangs vanquished, they motored past the Kilauea lighthouse turnoff and a group of Norfolk pines—straight enough for ship masts—marking the entrance to Princeville. Heeding the bluff's fishtail route down the gorge to a one-lane bridge spanning the Hanalei River, they waited their turn to cross. Taro fields covered the opposite lowland. Graywood had never seen so many shades of green, all tropical fresh from afternoon showers.

They arrived. Hanalei faced north at the midpoint in its sheltered bay. Three hunches of interlinked mountains sprouted rain-chiseled ridges to wall off the area's southern and western flanks. Eons of weather had sculpted cliffs, folds, and verdant valleys formed from the massive lava formations. The Bali Hai spire stood sentinel-like off the Na Pali coast wearing a flattened cloud like a beret. Gentle azure swept the lagoon to cap the palms. Farther out, an alabaster ketch sailed into an arched rainbow.

They'd found Eden.

Graywood had booked a studio apartment with full kitchen and lanai at the Hanalei Inn—a long block from the beach. The Ching Young Village stood a minute's walk away with shops, real estate offices, and grocery store. Graywood intended to cook most meals but deferred buying food until Bobby expended pent-up energy on the beach. Changing to swimming trunks, father and son raced to the waves.

Negotiating the concave shore, they aimed for the metal-roofed pier that sheltered an outer mooring. From the quay, two weathered fishermen cast lines opposite a convoy of ocean kayakers.

Bobby dashed seaward and plunged the crests with abandon. He swam with skill beyond what he'd learned at the Anchorage indoor public pool. Graywood picked up and discarded driftwood walking sticks.

Sunbathers dotted the sand reading paperbacks or slept on beach mats and blankets. Beneath a turquoise umbrella, a mother breastfed her infant. Surfers caught six-foot waves a hundred yards out, and younger daredevils boogie-boarded smaller swells. Graywood realized he'd have to buy one for his boy.

At the wharf, Bobby waded the shallow water and stroked a magenta-colored kayak, roped to a concrete pillar. Graywood leaped on the dock and approached the fishermen for the fabled location of the dragon, Puff. One opened a toothy smile to affirm fielding this query many years.

"Look 'cross the bay b'yond my line," he nodded west. "See tha' hill by the curl with tha' brown spot?"

"The one like a triangle top?" asked Graywood.

"Yah, man, that's Puff's head an' his horns some say. He's in long sleep now. Tha' brown spot you see's his good eye closed." The angler reeled the hook and added, "See tha' hump an' ridge joinin' tha' head?"

"Yeah," said Graywood, scanning the expanse.

"Tha' hump's the shoulders an' both arms folded in, an' tha' ridge's the neck."

The second fisherman joined them after locking a pole into an alloy rod holder, bolted to the pier's railing.

The toothy one went on, "The middle hump's the back with wings folded, an' tha' third's his backside with the legs under. His tail go way 'hind that one, way down the river. Man, from here you can't see him all."

"He encircles over half the bay," said Graywood, head rotating the described arc.

"Yah, he's grand one. He *moo nui*," said the toothy man.

"*Moo nunui*," emphasized the other angler, face nodding.

Graywood assumed *moo nui* and *moo nunui* to be Hawaiian terms for size and determined to buy a translation dictionary. It might be fun to rattle some to the staff back in Anchorage too.

"Thanks for the info. I'll pass it on to my boy."

Both men grinned and switched to busy their lines.

Graywood spotted Bobby on the beach playing tag with an older boy and smaller girl almost his size. He made friends easily. But it'd disappoint to tell how the mighty Puff was a semi-circle of hogbacks and bulges on

the sunset side of Hanalei Bay. Instead, Graywood waved him over and conjured a story to wonder-pop the boy's eyes.

"Say there, Bobby, I just got all the news about our dragon, Puff."

"When we gonna see him?"

"I don't think we can for a while."

"Why?"

"Puff's a huge sleeping dragon who blows in the mist, and he lives beyond the great mountain in a secret cave on the wild side of the island."

"Ohhh ... Why's he's sleeping?" asked Bobby, lips pouting. He kicked an eroded sand castle.

"To build up all his magical powers."

"How big's Puff?"

"It's time to go back and fix some supper so you'll get bigger when mighty Puff wants to meet you."

"When, Dad?"

"Whenever he decides to wake up."

They sifted back to the inn, and Graywood spun out more threads of Puff's tale.

That evening on the lanai under the half-filled moon, Graywood thought of Maren.

