



ERIN
STEVENSON

FLY ME
HOME
FOR
Christmas



Fly Me Home for Christmas

Erin Stevenson

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2025

Electronic Edition 978-1-5223-0526-2

Published in the United States of America

Books by Erin Stevenson

Christmas Novellas

A New Hope for Christmas

Eight Cats of Christmas

A Dream of Christmas

The Lodge at Christmas Lake

Fly Me Home for Christmas

Standalone Titles

Meet Me on the Porch

Dr. Mallory and the Undercover Dog-Dad

Under the August Sky

PROLOGUE

Sara Quinn gazed over her sister's shoulder and out the airplane window. This was their first flight—well, technically their second. The first leg of their long journey took them from Boston to Los Angeles. After a night at a hotel, they boarded this flight to Honolulu.

Gabby grabbed her hand. "Sis, look at the water. Have you ever seen such gorgeous colors? Is that Diamond Head?" She leaned in front of Sara and called across the aisle. "Mom, Dad, what do you see on your side?"

Their father laughed. "I've never been out of New England until now. How would I know?"

Mom tucked her long auburn hair over one shoulder. "I have no idea, but it's beautiful." Her eyes sparkled with the spirit of adventure that Sara's younger sister shared. "What will we do first, Gabby? Parasailing or wakeboarding?"

"Parasailing, for sure," Gabby replied.

Sara shuddered. "My priority is a good hike through the forest."

Gabby frowned. "Wouldn't it be the jungle?"

"Hawaii has both," Sara replied.

"After we get off this plane, my feet won't leave the ground," Dad said. "I'm content to sit by the beach

with a good book, but we have some fantastic tours lined up."

Sara nodded. "The pineapple plantation one sounds good."

"Dad, you're going on the boat excursion, right?" Gabby asked.

"Wouldn't miss it."

"No, I'm not going." Before anyone could ask, Sara answered the unspoken question. "And I'm fine with that, really. You'll have more fun without having to worry about my seasickness."

Mom sent her a sympathetic smile. "Maybe someday they'll come up with something that will work for you."

"Don't worry about it." Sara waved her hand. "Mom and Dad, if we haven't said it enough, thank you so much for this trip."

Mom smiled. "It's not every day that our daughters graduate from college and high school. We're so proud of you."

"You're the first college graduate in our family, Sara Bear," Dad said.

"And I'll be the second." Gabby clapped her hands.

Sara elbowed her. "Whoa there, missy. You have a lot of mountains to climb in the next four years."

"And I'm ready for it." Gabby grinned. "Pre-law, then law school and eventually, governor of our great state of Vermont."

Sara shook her head. "Why stop there? You could be the first female president of the United States."

Gabby lifted her chin. "Maybe I will. Just make sure there are no skeletons in your closet that will cast a shadow on my political career." Her eyes twinkled.

Sara let out a soft snort. "I think I lost a library book once."

Gabby giggled and squeezed Sara's arm. "You can be my Chief of Staff. The power behind the scenes to ensure my success."

"Right," Sara drawled. "Because everyone with a Forestry degree ends up working at the White House."

The sisters collapsed on one another in fits of giggles.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we'll be landing in Honolulu soon. Please ensure that your seat belts are securely fastened, and seats and tray tables are in their fully upright and locked positions. Flight attendants will come through the cabin one more time to collect service items."

As the flight attendant passed the Quinn family's row, the plane rocked. To this point, it had been a smooth trip. Sara's gaze found her father's. "It's OK," he mouthed.

In the next seconds, an alarm sounded.

Sara and Gabby covered their ears.

The flight attendant dashed to the front of the plane, which rocked again and then shuddered.

Sara's heart thundered, and bile rose in her throat.

Gabby grabbed her hand, eyes wide with fright.

The PA crackled as the plane shook. "Brace, brace, brace," a voice called out.

Sara looked at her parents, their arms locked

around one another. "Grab your ankles, girls," their father shouted.

Sara bent, her head touching Gabby's.

"What's happening?" Gabby's terrified voice was close to Sara's ear.

Fear strangled Sara's voice. She shook all over.

An ear-splitting screech surrounded them. People screamed, and a deafening explosion shook the plane. Sara tried to breathe, but acrid smoke choked her. Then, her world went black.

There hadn't even been time to pray.

CHAPTER 1

Five and a half years later

Beck Sutherland rolled his shoulders and suppressed a yawn. They'd be on the ground soon.

"I'm ready for a break," Danny Smith, his First Officer said. "These long-haul flights really take a toll."

"Especially the red-eyes," Beck answered.

"Five days of sun, surfing, and girls." Danny rubbed his hands together. "What are your plans?"

Beck suppressed a scoff at his friend's exuberance. They were close in age, but Danny was single, and Beck had adult responsibilities. "Just spending time with my boys. We'll have our Christmas tomorrow."

Danny's levity faded. "Oh, that's right. The divorce is final." He consulted their landing checklist. "Did you find a place to live?"

Beck nodded. "Yeah, a stacked duplex in Lanikai Village."

"Stacked duplex? What's that?"

"Duplexes are usually side by side, but this one is two-story. I'm on the top floor."

"What's it like?"

"It's a big complex." Beck shrugged. "I took possession right before this trip. It came furnished, so

all I had to do was dump my personal stuff there, pack my bags, and take off."

Air traffic control issued a final heading, and after complying, Beck glanced at his First Officer. "Time for the final announcement." He cleared his throat and activated the mic. "Ladies and gentlemen, from the flight deck, we're on our final descent into Honolulu, where it's just another day in paradise, sunny and 82 degrees." Beck imagined the contented sighs rippling through the cabin. "Your Honolulu-based flight crew thanks you for flying Aloha Skies, and we wish you a delightful stay on the islands."

The two pilots spent the remainder of the flight focused on everything required for a smooth landing. They taxied to the gate, rolled to a stop, and powered down the engines. Then they exited the cockpit.

"Mornin', crew." Danny grinned at the three female flight attendants, and Beck nodded.

"Oh, it's good to be home," the tallest one said. "You ready?" The pilots' presence was all the answer she needed, and after ensuring the jet bridge was locked on, she opened the cabin door.

Beck and Danny exited the aircraft. Danny had grabbed a Santa hat from his bag and slapped it on. Beck chuckled. "You're such a dork."

"Ho, ho, ho." Danny's grin encompassed his entire face.

"Aloha," the gate agent greeted them.

"Aloha, Kono," Beck said.

"Smooth flight?"

Beck grinned. "Always." He and Danny stationed

themselves on the jet bridge on either side of the door. A year earlier, Aloha Skies had tested a program in which the pilots greeted the exiting passengers after each flight. The response was so great it was now permanent, and other airlines envied the successful public relations effort.

Beck enjoyed meeting the passengers and seeing the delighted expressions from those experiencing the ritual for the first time. He graciously accepted their thanks and offered various replies.

"Thanks for flying with us." To the Hawaiians who flew regularly, he added *mahalo*.

"Hope we'll see you again."

"Aloha. Enjoy Hawaii. Merry Christmas."

A heavily made-up platinum blonde batted her eyelashes and offered her hand to Beck. "You're based here? I'm staying at the Island Jewel Resort. Maybe I'll see you on the beach." She winked at him.

"Thanks for flying with us." Beck turned to the next person in line. Once everyone was off the plane, he and Danny returned to the cockpit and completed their post-flight duties.

Danny pulled on his jacket. "You know, that blonde might be waiting for you in the terminal."

"Hope not," Beck murmured. The last thing he needed right now was a woman complicating his life. He still had enough of that with Kiele.

"Maybe I'll look her up." Danny grinned.

Beck smiled. "Be my guest." He shook Danny's hand. "Get some rest, and I'll see you soon." He pointed to Danny's hat.

Danny rolled his eyes. "Thanks. Some airline uniform police will no doubt be roving the terminal." He stowed the Santa hat and replaced it with his uniform cap. "Later, man."

Beck donned his jacket and cap. Aloha Skies pilots were expected to be in full uniform inside the terminal. Once there, he pulled his crew bags behind him and took out his cell. Kiele was still his first contact on speed dial. Even though she was no longer first in his heart, they were co-parenting, and Beck was determined to make it work.

She answered on the second ring. "When are you coming for the boys?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Had a good flight. I've been off the plane for—oh, I don't know—about fifteen seconds."

His ex-wife huffed into the phone. "I have a tennis date at 3:00 PM. I need you to pick them up now."

Good heavens. It wasn't even noon. Beck held his temper in check. It was always about Kiele. The house was on the way from the airport to his new place, but she wasn't in charge of his schedule anymore. "I'm on my way home. I'll ditch my uniform, go for a run, then a shower, and I'll be there by 2:30 PM."

She clicked off.

Beck sighed and slid his cell into his pocket. Time to begin his new life as a single dad.

CHAPTER 2

Sara opened her eyes and looked at the clock. How had she slept so late? She stretched and yawned. *Easy to do when you work from home.* She reached for her phone and checked the forecast. Why did she even bother? The weather on Oahu was the same day in and day out, even during the Christmas season. She tried not to think about what would happen throughout much of the country over the next few weeks as winter blossomed into spring, when white gave way to green, the birds awoke, and filling one's lungs with fresh air gave birth to the hope of new life. Sara missed the change of seasons and most of all a white Christmas. Now, she never put up a tree. The decorations in the local stores were the only painful reminders of the holiday.

Enough. She transferred into her wheelchair and rolled into the bathroom. After completing her morning routine, she gathered her thick hair into a high ponytail. Once back in her bedroom, she dressed. A scoop neck tank, track pants, and tennis shoes. Though the shoes were a few years old, they looked almost new.

She rolled into the kitchen. Sun streamed through the high, narrow windows and caught her sun catcher,

splashing tiny, shimmering rainbows across the floor. *There is always, always, always something to be thankful for.*

Sara's breath caught. Her mother's words, her mother's mantra. The pain of longing to hear them once again pressed on her chest, and tears threatened. She grabbed an orange from the bowl on the counter and wheeled as quickly as she could to the front door. She couldn't stay inside a moment longer.

When she opened the door, a shroud of humid air pressed into her with an invisible weight. *This is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it.* The many scriptures Sara had memorized in her childhood were deeply rooted in her heart and blossomed when she needed their strength most.

After punching the code into the keyless entry to lock the door, she rolled down the concrete path to the sidewalk. Right or left? She'd gone left yesterday, so today she would go right. When she reached the crossing, she waited for traffic to clear and made her way across. Now she was on the asphalt path that wove around and through Lanikai Park, one of the city's largest. It was wide enough for cyclists and pedestrians, crumbling a bit on some of the edges, but otherwise fine.

Sara's wheelchair had a battery-powered mode, but she liked to operate it manually as often as possible to burn calories and maintain her upper body strength. She enjoyed getting a workout and feeling the endorphins flow through her veins. Playing volleyball and tennis were long-ago forgotten memories.

Soon she rounded a bend and pushed her way up an incline to a straightaway that ran along one edge of the park. At the end, there was a hairpin turn, a sharp decline, and then the path continued back parallel to itself, but a good eight or ten feet lower. The path was flanked on one side by lush foliage and a grassy area on the other.

Once she was on the straightaway, Sara shifted to battery power and reached for her water bottle. In her haste to leave, she'd left it behind. She sighed. Oh, well, at least she had something to eat.

Fewer people were out this morning than usual, which Sara preferred. From the upper trail, the ocean was visible. She never went near the water but loved looking at it. Her attention was riveted on the beautiful scenery when movement on her left startled her. A group of teens on roller blades approached at a high rate of speed, laughing and talking. Sara moved as far to the right as she dared. Her right wheel wobbled off the pavement and in an instant, the wheelchair tumbled over the edge.

~*~

Nothing relaxed Beck more after a long flight than a good run. When he contacted a rental agent for a place to live, he made only two requests: that it was within a half hour of the airport and had a good running trail close by. The second request was easier than the first. Hiking and biking trails abounded on Oahu.

On his first morning at the apartment, Beck was happy to discover that Lanikai Park was literally out his front door. He had a great view from his second-story windows and couldn't wait to explore. Unpacking could wait. Within moments he was out of his uniform and into running gear.

He ran around the perimeter of the park and when he approached a bend, noticed that a second trail joined it from above. He decided to check that out later and kept running. Soon he encountered heavy foliage on both sides that gave way to a grassy area on the right side. There, Beck spied a pile of clothes. As he neared, a sense of alarm rocked him.

Was it a body?

As he approached, he realized it was a woman, curled on her side. He knelt and touched her shoulder. "Hello, are you OK? Are you hurt?" She could be under the influence of something, sick, or injured. He reached for his cell.

The woman moaned. "I—fell."

Beck looked around. That didn't make sense. If she was running on the path and fell, how did she end up over here?

She opened her eyes and pointed. "From up there."

Beck's gaze followed to where her slender finger indicated. "You mean—the path, up there?"

She nodded and propped herself up on her elbows.

"I'll call 911," Beck said.

The woman shook her head. "I'm fine, really.

Please, don't."

Beck hesitated.

She twisted her torso and sat up fully. It was only then that Beck took in her copper auburn hair and brown eyes.

"I'm sure. Believe me, I've been through worse." She looked around. "I, um, just need to..."

Beck extended his hand. "Oh. Here, let me help you."

Instead of accepting his offer, the woman shook her head. "No. I mean, I can't." She swallowed and pursed her lips. "I need to find my wheelchair."

Wheelchair? Beck rushed to apologize. "Oh, I'm so sorry." He looked up to where she had pointed and scanned the brush below. "It's probably in those bushes." He sprinted through the foliage and quickly discovered the conveyance. It took a moment to disengage it from the brush.

"Is it OK?" The woman's voice, tinged with worry, floated over to him.

Beck set the wheelchair up and surveyed it, looking for damage. He didn't have much experience with wheelchairs, mostly the flimsy ones used to transport passengers at the airport. This one was nothing like that. It was a high-end model.

"I think so." He placed it on the path and cleared more leaves and twigs from around the wheels. He set off towards the woman, and the wheels rolled smoothly, except for one that was a little wobbly.

When he reached her, she was at the edge of the pavement. She ran her hand over the smooth chrome.

"Oh, I'm so relieved. Thank you."

Beck crouched and wiggled the questionable wheel. "This one may need a little adjustment." He opened his mouth to offer to fix it but then remembered his toolbox was at Kiele's house, not his new apartment.

"I can take care of that," she said. Then her gaze connected with his. "I'm Sara Quinn." She held out a hand. "Thank you so much for rescuing me."

"Beck Sutherland." Her hand was soft and smooth in his. He was mesmerized by those brown eyes with gold flecks. After a moment, he let go of her hand. "Um, may I help you—get back in?" His face grew warm.

Sara shook her head and deftly fingered a lever at the back of the two rear wheels. "Just need to lock the wheels." In one smooth movement, she hoisted herself into the seat.

Beck found himself taking assessment of her athletic torso. She had a deep golden tan rather than the pale, freckly skin of most redheads. Her toned arms gave testament to her upper body strength.

She punched some buttons and laid her hands on the wheels. "Fingers crossed," she said with a grin. Then she sped away from him.

Her smile set his heart pumping. Beck jogged after her.

When she was twenty feet or so ahead of him, she abruptly turned and stopped. "I think it's OK," she called out. "Now I want to test the electric function." She grabbed a lever with each hand and zoomed

toward Beck, blowing by him.

He laughed. "I'm not sure I can catch you," he called.

She turned the chair on a dime and motored back to him. "No need. Here I am." That heart-stopping grin again.

Beck blinked, at a loss for words. When he found his voice, he asked some questions about how the wheelchair operated, and she answered. There was so much more he wanted to know about her. *How long have you been in the chair? Why do you wear long pants in this heat? Do you have a boyfriend?*

He mentally shook himself. What was wrong with him? He'd been divorced for about five minutes, had a demanding career and most importantly, had to focus on how to raise his two sons while splitting time with their mother, who wasn't a good influence. He had no time for another woman and didn't want one.

But just like that, Sara Quinn had fallen into his life.

He scratched his head, unsure of how to proceed. "Well, can I—see you home? Do you live nearby? Just in case that wheel falls off or something goes wrong?" Beck sounded like a mooning fifteen-year-old boy.

"Yes, I'd appreciate that, if you have the time."

Time. Ugh. Beck fought the urge to look at his watch. "I have all the time in the world. Which way?"

She turned a hundred and eighty degrees and flicked a switch. "I'll go into manual mode so you can keep up with me. This way. It's not far."

"I just moved into one of the stacked duplexes in

Lanikai Village."

"Really? Top or bottom floor?"

"Top. 16B."

"I'm, um, 16A." She rolled to a stop and gazed up at him.

Something flipped in Beck's chest. *No way.*

Her lips formed a beguiling smile. "Hello, neighbor." There was a lovely lilt in her voice. She held out her hand.

Beck took it and squeezed. *Hello, neighbor, indeed.* Before he could form a proper response, his phone rang. Dread pooled in his stomach when he saw the time, 2:31PM.

"Where are you?" Kiele's shriek pierced his ear.

Beck tamped down his anger. "Sorry, I was delayed. One of my neighbors had an accident." He listened to more of his ex-wife's tirade and, when she took a breath, jumped in. "The longer you keep me on the phone, the longer I'll be."

"Just get here," she spat, and disconnected.

Beck slipped his phone in his pocket. "I'm sorry about that. Let's get you home."

Sara shook her head. "I can get there now. You've been more than kind, Beck."

Beck smiled. "My car's at the duplex anyway. Come on, let's go." When they arrived, he stopped at her door.

Sara shielded her eyes from the sun and craned her neck to smile at him. "Our monthly block party is this evening in the courtyard. I hope you'll come."

To his surprise, Beck was pulled between his

obligations and the desire to spend more time with her. "I wish I could, but I have to pick my boys up from their mother's. They're staying with me for a few days."

"How old are they?"

He smiled. "Four and five. Two little tornadoes."

"I love kids. Please bring them along. It'll be very casual. Everyone brings something to contribute to the meal."

Beck grimaced. "I haven't had a chance to go grocery shopping yet."

She smiled. "No worries, there's always plenty, and I'll bring a little extra."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. You'd better leave. See you at 5:30 PM."

"Great. I'll see you then, Sara."