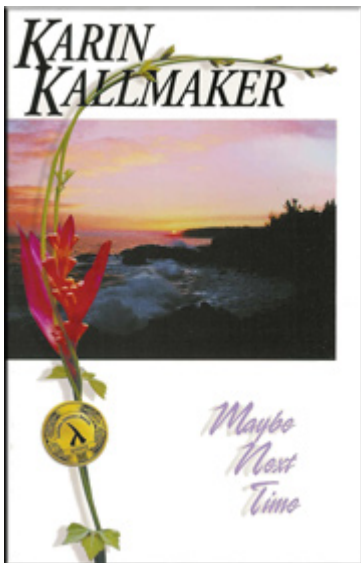


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## Excerpt from *Maybe Next Time*



*MAYBE NEXT TIME* IS A  
CONTEMPORARY  
LESBIAN ROMANCE BY  
KARIN KALLMAKER.

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## CHAPTER ONE

"Ms. Starling, you've got six claim checks, but I've only got five bags. What's missing?"

Bree stared fixedly at the skycap but could still see the bag in question out of the corner of her eye, circling on the baggage claim conveyor. The violin case was soon going to be the only unclaimed item.

Walk away, she told herself. It's that easy.

She'd never checked her instrument through the regular baggage service before, but this time she had hoped for fate's intervention. Luggage went missing all the time. Items could be crushed beyond recognition. But the violin had survived. Even the fates wouldn't take pity on her, not that there was any reason that they should.

She could have left it behind, she told herself. It would be as easy as, say, leaving her skin behind.

"Oh." The round face split into a wide smile. "The violin, of course. I'll take good care of it."

He held it out, but she gestured at the cart. She would not touch it herself. If she didn't touch it she could pretend the pain wasn't there.

The skycap escorted her to the rental kiosk, then waited while a utilitarian white sedan was brought around. It wasn't until after she had tipped him and settled into the car that she realized he had set the violin case on the passenger seat. He'd even fixed the seatbelt around it.

The car was an inferno in spite of the air conditioner on full blast. She shrugged off the jacket that had kept the airplane's chill at bay and sat for a moment in the swelter. Her back broke into a sweat against the hot seat. It was one of the most alive sensations she'd felt in a very long time. It was not particularly welcome.

Her sunglasses were nowhere to be found. The glare was so bright she had to close her eyes halfway, leaving her no strength or inclination to look at the violin. She didn't have to look at it. She had other things to worry about.

She turned south onto the Queen Kaahumanu Highway and idly punched on the radio. She quickly switched away from music, searching out news. Voices drowned out the crooning of the violin. She didn't

really listen, but the cadence was a kind of white noise.

Rock, island, punk, country, rock, classical.

No, she thought. Not classical.

She swerved into a dead end near a new subdivision and marina at Wawahiwaa Point. It was the fourteenth minute of the Tallis Fantasia. The bass line rose, in came the viola. She could see Osawa's upraised hand, signaling her...

She was out of the car, standing in the dirt, with no recollection of having opened the door. The voice of her own violin poured over her body like lava. When she forgot her injury she called it Stupid Pain. When others forgot she called it Thoughtless Pain. She had nearly as many words for pain as her ancestors did for the wind, but there was no word for this agony, to hear the way it had been...

When the final note faded under the roar of a rising aircraft, she felt the tears on her cheeks and tasted iron in her mouth. The radio spilled out voices now, in measured tones.

"And welcome back to those of you listening today to the KUOH tribute on this fortieth birthday of the internationally known local girl made good, Sabrina Starling. That was the Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis, composed by Ralph Vaughn Williams, and recorded with the Stuttgarter Kammerorchester under the direction of..."

Bree backed away from the car, and only stopped when she stumbled. She'd reached the lava field. The

voice was very far away. Soon there would be music, more unbearable music.

Dr. Sheridan told her to lose herself in the physical world when her head felt as if it would burst open from the waves of remembered music. All the gods, she wasn't prepared for this trip, what would be required of her, how she would have to act. Not here, not with all the pain that had made the journey with her.

"Happy birthday," she muttered. Forty was even less fun than thirty-nine had been. That the day was the thirty-third anniversary of her arrival on the island was completely unimportant, at least right now.

Look around. White car, black lava, blue sky, brown dirt. Any detail will do, Dr. Sheridan had said. She inhaled deeply and opened her eyes wide, trying to dampen the inner anguish with her external senses. The late afternoon air was heavy, damp, and stank of jet fuel. But underneath was the sea, the mountains, and the undeniable, almost electrical smell of sunlight on the lava field.

The air traffic above her quieted and the sound of her name unwillingly drew her attention back to the car.

"...Starling's considerable and diverse body of work speaks for her past accomplishments. Though she hasn't performed in public since a mainland concert two years ago..."

She forced air into her lungs, consciously making

herself breathe. The sparkles behind her eyes gradually faded away. Look at anything but the violin, she told herself.

Beyond the black rubble was the orange-gold sun, arcing downward toward the alania sea, smooth, without swells or breaks. The breeze blowing in was as soft as the touch of a petal to her burning cheeks. She turned from the ocean to gaze at green-cruled Mauna Kea, which was wreathed in ao pua'a at its top, over 13,000 feet above her. The mist clung in defiance of what had been a warm day, and the singing blue sky was deepening into evening.

The breathtaking splendor was merely an average afternoon for the Kona coast. Tomorrow would be just like it. Yesterday probably had been.

Anake Lani hadn't seen yesterday's sun, nor the one before. Aunt Lani was gone. She wasn't even Bree's real aunt, and so couldn't join the ranks of Bree's ancestors. If Aunt Lani's voice could have joined them she might almost welcome their words, but she suspected she'd gone so far from them that even Aunt Lani could not have brought her back.

The cooling evening breeze swept over her again, briefly lifting her short black hair from her neck. There was music from the car, but it fell to such low tones she wasn't able to identify the piece. A small mercy, one she could barely appreciate.

She could sit here, just like this, for a week. She knew she was expected, but now that she was here, she

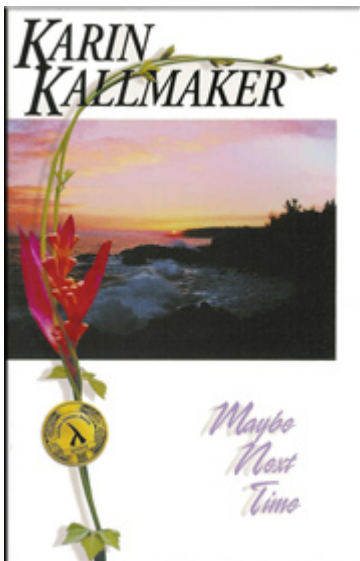
did not know if she was strong enough to drive to Aunt Lani's house and not find her there.

There is nothing you can't do, Bree, Aunt Lani said, from the past.

Perhaps it had been true then, but it was a lie now. There was so much she could no longer do. Her left hand twitched and she recognized the urge. A crystal theme rose over the rumble of a launch leaving the marina, a line from the Goldberg Variations. It set off the recording in her head where every sterling note vibrated. Her left index finger twitched--it remembered. She tried to coil her hand as if it caressed the neck of her instrument, but it didn't obey her.

In paradise, standing on the shore of the fire and ocean that had made the land, she'd hoped for more healing than this.

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