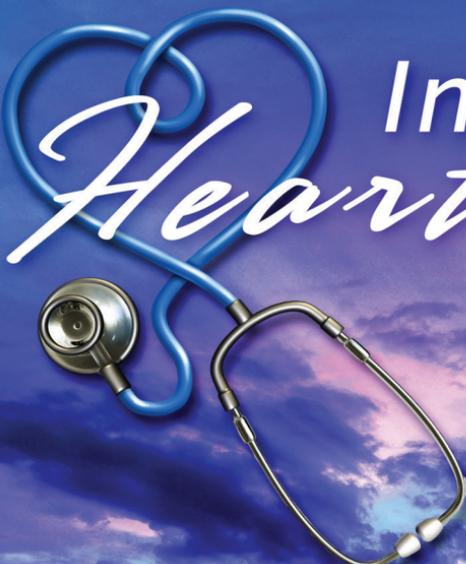


LIVES ARE CHANGED FOREVER...

In a
Heartbeat 



RJ NOLAN

Other Books In The *L.A. Metro Series*

The Wish

L.A. Metro

Two Hearts—One Mind

A Treat For Halloween Tricksters

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Dedication

To my sister, Gwenn.

No matter what separates us, be it time,
distance, or barriers of our own making, you
will always be in my heart. I miss you.

Chapter 15

...

Delighted laughter burst from Riley. “You brought Izzy for a visit.” She reached for the teddy bear.

Sam grinned. “This isn’t Izzy.”

Riley dropped her hands in mid-reach and looked more closely at the bear. While dressed the same as Izzy in a police uniform with hat and utility belt, this bear was different, its fur much lighter than Izzy’s dark sable.

“She’s Izzy’s sister,” Sam’s brow furrowed for a second, “or if you prefer, her brother.”

“Oh. You have two of them.”

“Huh? No. Riley, I got her for you.” Her smile wavered. “If you want her...”

Riley’s gaze darted between Sam and the bear. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had given her a gift. And certainly not anything like this. Emotion flooded her throat, and it took her a moment to find her voice. “Of course I want her.”

When she took the teddy bear from her hands, Sam’s smile returned, brighter than before.

Riley stroked the bear’s soft, silky fur. “What’s her name?”

“I don’t know. She’s yours. You need to give her a name.”

Riley studied the bear. *What should I name you?* Her eyes lit on something purple sticking out of the bear’s utility belt. A flashlight? It looked as if it had been an addition to the bear’s attire. She tugged the item free and realized it was a mini-mag light. “What’s this for?”

A little half smirk appeared on Sam's face. "Well, this bear is meant to be your protector. What good would she be without a bright light to scare away huge, mutant spiders? Or at least provide you with some light so you can whack them."

Riley guffawed, then slapped her hand over her mouth. *Aunt Margaret would faint dead away hearing you bray like that.* She pushed away the intrusive thought. She was having too much fun to care.

Sam met her gaze and held it for just a moment. "She's also good at keeping bad dreams at bay," she said, the humor gone from her voice.

Unexpectedly moved by the care apparent on Sam's face, Riley felt tears prickle at the corner of her eyes. She hid her face in the bear's soft fur until she had regained her composure. Hugging the bear to her chest, she looked up at Sam. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Once you give her a name, maybe we can set her and Izzy up on a play date sometime?"

Riley laughed. *What an unexpected surprise you're turning out to be.* "How about if we adults go out to dinner sometime?" She shocked herself with the spontaneous invitation. Then she reminded herself of the as yet unfulfilled promise, made months ago, to start enjoying her life. Maybe Sam was just the person to help her do that. Judging by the look on Sam's face, Riley wasn't the only one surprised.

"I'd like that. A lot," Sam said. "When?"

Suddenly nervous, Riley stroked the bear to give herself something to do with her hands. Although she had issued the invitation, it was a big step for her to allow someone into her private life. "I'm covering in-house this weekend. It would have to be next week when I'm on back-up call."

"That's fine with me." Sam smiled. "You tell me when and where, and I'll be there."

"I know a great place that has really fresh sushi," Riley said.

Sam's mouth twisted for just a second. "Ah..."

I knew it. “You don’t even like sushi—do you? Why didn’t you say anything last week?”

Two spots of red stained Sam’s cheeks. “I like it okay as an occasional thing.”

Riley arched an eyebrow. “Oh. You mean like once every five years?”

“Maybe once a year,” Sam muttered, her blush deepening. “But it was fine. Really. You were nice enough to bring lunch. And I didn’t say what I wanted.”

“I’m sorry. I should have realized that sushi isn’t everyone’s thing.” *At least she was flexible enough to eat it. You couldn’t even accept half a cookie.* Self-disgust rose up in Riley at her inability to overcome a lifetime of restrictions. She poked Sam in the shoulder. “Next time say something. Okay?”

Looking chagrined, Sam nodded. “Um... So how about Ita—” She shook her head. “Chinese food? Do you like Chinese food?”

“Chinese would be great.” The buzz of Riley’s phone sounded loud amidst the quiet setting. “Sorry.” She pulled the phone off her belt and checked the display. “I’ve got to go.”

Sam stood with the help of her cane and picked up the tray. “I’ll take this back,” she said, in a firm, don’t-argue-with-me tone.

Riley narrowed her eyes but forced herself not to protest. “Okay.”

“Oh. I wasn’t thinking about you going back to work.” Sam snagged the now empty bag from the bench. “I can keep the bear until we meet for dinner.”

Riley’s arm instinctively tightened around her bear. *You gave her to me. I’m not giving her up.* “No. That’s okay. I’ll take her with me. She’ll just have to go back into the bag for a little while until I can put her in my office.” *And hopefully no one will notice her.*

That settled, they headed for the door.

“Thanks again,” Riley said, hefting the bag in her hand as they stepped out into the hall. “See you later.”

“You’re welcome. See you.”

Several steps down the hallway, Riley remembered their dinner plans and turned back toward Sam. “I’ll call you later, and we can plan when to meet for dinner.”

Sam waved in acknowledgement and sent Riley on her way with a bright smile.

...

End Excerpt

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