

A Pennie
for
Your *Thoughts*

A Novella by

Linda Fulkerson

To my daughter, Elena, who has been my constant encourager since the day I decided to write fiction.



Never pack more than you can carry, unassisted, through a busy airport. Because statistically, those self-serve luggage cart rental racks are located an average of 17,002 steps in the opposite direction of where you need to go.

- Pennie's travel tip No. 14

Rain plinked against the lakefront cabin's windows as Pennie Vaughn slid the adding machine tape through her fingers and scrolled to the end. She stared at the final figure. That number couldn't be right. She shuffled the stack of bids and, once again, punched in estimate amounts. Before she finished re-tallying the total, her phone's ringtone blared Smash Mouth's "Road Man," interrupting the soft *clackety-clack* of the 10-key device.

She tapped the answer icon. "Hey, Cal. What's up?"

"You're in!" Her best friend Callie Jorgensen's voice squealed with excitement.

"I'm *in* a lot of things. In debt. In over my head." *In love*. Not that *that* mattered anymore. Pennie's gaze trickled toward the black velvet box, undisturbed in a cubby of the antique

secretary's desk, taunting her to lift the lid. "You'll need to be more specific."

"The contest. *Wanderblog* posted the semi-finalist list today, and you're on it!"

Pennie tucked the phone between her ear and shoulder and flipped open her laptop. A few keystrokes and clicks brought her to a site topped with the headline:

Wanderblog Award Semi-Finalists

She scanned the page until she saw it. "A Pennie for Your Thoughts." Despite the hokey title, her Dear-Abby-style travel-advice blog had grown in popularity. Not bad for someone who never went anywhere. Pennie read the tasks required by semi-finalists in order to advance.

"You there, Pen?" Callie's voice tugged Pennie back to reality.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry."

"Did you see the Grand Prize cash amount? Hefty sum!"

Hefty enough to put a major dent in the amount needed to repair Dottie's—now Pennie's—cabin. "I saw that. But the rules say I'd have to publish a travel post by mid-January. With photos."

"So?"

"So, I'd have to actually *go* somewhere—not just tell Aunt Suzie how to cope with three toddlers on a long flight."

"That was one of your most-shared posts."

Pennie smiled but her face quickly contorted into a frown. "If it weren't the dead of winter, I'd just do a piece about somewhere in Arkansas—like this lake." She peeked through a window and caught a glimpse of the usually serene surface white-capping in the wind. Lightning flashed, illuminating the sprawling waters.

"Pen-nie," Cal scolded.

"You got a better idea?"

"Duh! Use the ticket. He told you to keep it."

“I don’t know, Cal.” Her gaze returned to the desk, locking in on a thick envelope tucked beneath the ring box.

“If anyone deserves a trip to Hawaii, you do! Especially after what he—”

“Please. Don’t go there.” Pennie sucked in a deep breath. A water droplet plopped on her head. “Just a sec. Gotta get another bucket.”

She grabbed a blue mop bucket from under the sink. After positioning the container beneath the newest drip, Pennie plopped in her chair and retrieved the phone. “I’m back.”

“What did the roofer say?”

“You don’t want to know. A bunch of blah, blah, blah about the skyrocketing cost of materials, attempting to justify his ginormous bid.”

“You should go. Greg and I can watch the cabin.”

“I don’t feel right spending Jared’s money now that ... now that we’re no longer a couple.” There. She’d said it. If only those were magic words and could make three months of pain disappear.

“The money’s already spent. That package is nonrefundable, remember?”

“It was supposed to be our honeymoon trip.” The puddle of tears welling within Pennie’s eyes threatened to compete against the rainwater droplets seeping through the roof. She brushed them aside with the sleeve of her flannel shirt. “Besides, it’s almost Christmas.” The word hovered in the air like a hawk.

“Think about it.” The phone amplified Callie’s sigh. “What advice would Pennie give if someone asked her whether or not to use an all-expenses-paid gift package to Hawaii?”

Pennie knew the answer. “She’d say go for it.” Her voice’s tone slid downward like a sad trombone.

“Exactly. You need to get out and enjoy the holidays instead of moping around the house.” Callie had graciously left off the word *alone*.

“If I can’t figure out how to get these repairs done, I won’t

have a house. And I can't do that to Dottie. Not after everything she did for me."

"Oh, Pennie." Compassion filled Callie's voice.

The rain had died down to a drizzle, but a howling wind continued, whistling through the crumbling chinking and slapping branches against the back wall. *Add tree-trimming to my list of things I can't afford.*

An insistent knock rattled the front door. "Someone's here. I'll call you back."

Pennie zigzagged around a trio of buckets like a car swerving between racing cones, wondering what urgent matter compelled the knocker to brave this weather. She paused to catch her breath after maneuvering across the room, then grasped the cast iron door pull and yanked.

"Mrs. Gul—Mrs. Gulliver." She sputtered the words, stopping herself short of calling the Lakeshore Homeowners Society president Mrs. Gulch, even though the woman resembled, in both appearance and attitude, the neighbor who had tormented Dorothy and Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*. "What can I do for you?"

Without an invitation to enter, Mrs. Gulliver pushed past Pennie and crossed the threshold. "For starters," she waved her hand toward the collection of containers, "you can get your roof repaired." She cleared her throat. "In fact, I have a list of repairs you'll need to have done on this ... shack."

Pennie pointed to her desk. "I know. I've received a number of bids."

"*Bids* won't save this dilapidated structure. It's an eyesore in our community, young lady."

The tone of her words, "young lady," sounded eerily close to the Wicked Witch of the West's pet phrase, "My Little Pretty."

Before Pennie could respond, Mrs. Gulliver thrust a piece of paper toward her. "Here it is. Signed by all the officers."

"Here *what* is?"

"A 30-day notice. If the repairs listed in this letter aren't in

progress within 30 days, the Society will be forced to take measures toward having your ...” She paused and formed a menacing expression, apparently searching for the right term, “... *home* condemned.”

“C-condemned?” Pennie choked out the word.

“Condemned.” She emphasized the word with a smug nod. “Good day, Miss Vaughn.”

Pennie closed the door behind Mrs. Gulliver-Gulch’s retreating figure, punched Callie’s number into her phone, and beelined to Dottie’s old rocker for refuge. She sat with a huff and yelped when an alarming *crack* from beneath her sounded just as Callie answered.

“Hey, Pen—you okay?”

“I broke Dottie’s chair.”

The rocker now listed drunkenly on a shattered leg. That was it. There was no chance of halting the free-flowing tears at this point. “I want you to list the cabin,” Pennie sobbed. “I’d rather sell it than watch it collapse around me.” Through tear-blurred vision, she read the Society’s notice to Callie.

“You want Greg to have some of his subcontractors take a look? He might be able to work out something cheaper than the bids you got.”

Pennie sucked in a deep breath. “You know I don’t like calling in favors.”

“Stop being so hard-headed! This isn’t the end of the world. The letter said the work must be ‘in progress,’ right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ll talk to Greg. You go enjoy your trip, write your blog post, and win the contest. We’ll take care of your place while you’re gone.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“And I’ll pray about it.”

“You pray. I’ll think.”

Pennie pushed the disconnect icon and reached for the

velvet-covered case. She opened the lid slowly, as if its contents held more horror than that of Pandora's Box.

And for her, it did.



THREE DAYS LATER, Pennie followed her fellow passengers through Daniel K. Inouye International Airport's open-air walkway leading from the gate to the baggage claim area. A floral scent wafted through the air. Plumeria, she remembered from her impromptu crash course of what first-time visitors to Oahu should expect.

She stood, mesmerized by the sea of baggage floating across the conveyor belt, when a series of unexpected and unwelcomed thoughts flooded her mind. Jared should be standing next to her. She should be giddy with delight, a bride on her honeymoon. Tears fuzzed her vision, transforming the stream of colorful suitcases into a blurry blob.

Pennie dabbed her eyes. After a few blinks, she recognized her bag and yanked it toward the edge of the conveyor. One of the wheels caught on the carousel's side, and she tugged hard to free it. A loud pop echoed. She flew one way and the wheel flew the other.

"Woah there, little lady," a voice boomed behind her as a pair of arms balanced her. "You okay?"

She steadied herself and nodded, realizing her rescuer was a soldier. "Th-thanks." Pennie pointed to his uniform. "And thanks for your service."

"My pleasure." He gave a slight bow. "You here on vacation?"

"A sort of working vacation, yes."

"If it's your first time in Hawaii, I can give you a tour." The young man winked.

Pennie wondered if crashing her rear on the floor would have been a better option than being rescued. "Um. Thanks, but I'm good."

He chuckled. "I bet you are."

Heat rose up Pennie's neck. "I have to go." She spun away from him and jerked her hobbled luggage to an upright position, wishing she'd trimmed her packing list.

Pennie drug the suitcase behind her. Each *whump-whump* of the lopsided bag grated against her already frazzled nerves. After scanning the area for one of those luggage cart rental racks and finding none, she hoisted the crippled case in her arms, balancing it along with her purse, laptop case, and backpack, and waddled toward the rental car counter.

By the time she neared the area, she was huffing from hauling her bulging bag. Pennie set the suitcase down to catch her breath and noticed a man at the counter accepting a set of keys from the clerk. He brushed his hand through a head full of short-cropped curls dark enough to contrast with his well-tanned skin and rushed through the exit.

Jared?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Linda Fulkerson began her writing career as a copyeditor and typesetter at a small-town weekly newspaper. She has since been published in several magazines and newspapers, including a two-year stint as a sports writer, and is the author of two novels and several non-fiction books. In 2020, she purchased Mantle Rock Publishing's backlist and founded Scrivenings Press LLC.

She and her husband, Don, live on a ten-acre plot in central Arkansas. They have four adult children and eight grandchildren. Linda enjoys photography, RV travel, and spoiling her two dachshunds.

(Someday she hopes to slow down long enough to get a professional headshot made.)